

TWISTED DEVILS



BISHOP

ZAHRA GIRARD

BISHOP

Book 19 in the Twisted Devils MC

Zahra Girard

Copyright © 2024 Zahra Girard

All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Gratitude](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty- Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Epilogue](#)

GRATITUDE

I am grateful for you. As a reader, both of my books and as a supporter of independent authors. You matter. You support arts. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart. I would so appreciate it if you could join my mailing list, to stay updated on my (and other author's) new releases: <http://www.subscribepage.com/d9p6y8>

You can check out my Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/zahragirardromance/>

Or you can find me on BookBub!
<https://www.bookbub.com/authors/zahra-girard>

If you want to become a member of my review team, you can find me on Booksprout!
<https://booksprout.co/reviewer/team/3903/zahra-girards-review-team>

If you enjoy any of my books, I sincerely invite you to leave a review. Reviews are so important to self-published authors (like me). They let us hear from our fans, and they help others discover our work. Please, if

you enjoyed this story, I invite you to leave a review.

Thank you,

-Zahra

CHAPTER ONE

Bishop

"Do you think Martha Stewart's sexy?"

I look down from the stars and over at Mayhem. He's got his pistol in his hands and a far-away look in his eyes. "Do I think she's sexy?"

"I'm not asking if you think she's hot, because we all know she is. I'm asking if you think she's sexy. There's a big difference."

"We're supposed to be on watch for the incoming shipment, not daydreaming about Martha Stewart."

"Is it even daydreaming if it's nighttime?" He says. "Besides, why are you dodging the question?"

I shrug, and start to think of an answer. Often, the easiest way to deal with Mayhem is to just give him what he wants. That, or smack him with a rolled up newspaper like a dog. "Yes. Even at her age. Not just because of the cooking, either; she has this aura of casual, composed sexiness."

"I think so, too." Another pause. "If Martha were in an MC, what rank do you think she'd have?"

Mayhem's question floats through the humid night air on this lonely stretch of asphalt — an abandoned truck stop an hour south of Ironwood Falls where the only reminders that this place once was a truck stop are the slabs in the ground that were the truck scales, and the ruins of a concession stand from which run a handful of rats the size of house cats. The humidity's a rarity for this time of year, late fall about to hit winter; Mayhem's question, however, is not.

Chains grunts, looks up from his cellphone. There are pictures of his daughter, Charlotte, on the screen — she's in the costume of some pale, 1950s schoolgirl. "Obviously she'd be an enforcer. She knows how to handle business. She's been to prison, and that look in her eyes? Stone-cold killer. I'll bet she's even got teardrops tattooed somewhere on her body. Why do you even need to ask?"

"Been thinking about her a lot lately. Bishop, what do you think?"

I grunt, wish I were back home, and look up at the stars; we're far enough away from Ironwood Falls that I've got a clear view of those shimmering specks of light in the sky that denote solar systems so very far from here and, even better, far from Mayhem's question. I wish I were there, too. *Anywhere*. Even if it were some planet where the air is sulfuric acid and the only other inhabitants are participants in multi-level marketing programs, like Amway, Mary Kay, and CutCo.

Fuck, I'd buy Mary goddamn Kay just to get away from Mayhem.

"President."

"Why?"

"Because she runs a massive corporation, because she reshaped an entire industry in her image, because I'm just picking something at fucking random because I don't give a shit what position Martha Stewart would have in an MC. Why do you? And why the hell have you been thinking about her so much? You're one weird guy, Mayhem."

"Because Stacy got contacted by Martha. Martha's releasing some cookbook about regional desserts and wants to include a few of Stacy's recipes."

"You serious?" Chains says, looking up from his phone. "Martha wants her recipes?"

"I am. Martha was in Seattle for some TV segment she was shooting, and Stacy and I rode up there and met her. It was an experience. Martha's got this presence, like she could be your best friend and cook you the best meal you've ever had in your life, or she could wipe you and your entire family off the map without even batting an eye. She's been on my mind ever since."

"In what way?" I say.

"Mostly curiosity. But I had a sex dream about her, too. It wasn't just her and me, though that would've been fun — Stacy was involved, too. Martha was directing us to have sex like she was reading a recipe. You know, saying things like: lick that at medium pressure for ten minutes, smack that at a firm velocity twice, ride that for fifteen minutes while bent at a forty-five-degree angle. Oh, and when we finished, she said that thing that she always says... you know, that phrase."

"It's so good?"

"That. *It's so good*. Heard it in her voice just as Stacy and I climaxed. One of the best orgasms I've ever had in my life. When I woke up, I was

covered in — ”

“You need to stop talking. Right now,” I say.

“Does Stacy know?” Chains says, which is entirely the wrong thing to say, because it just gives Mayhem more room to babble.

“Of course. When I woke up, I wrote the entire dream down in my dream journal. She’s going to help me re-enact it later. I’ve got this app on my phone with sound clips of Martha, and you can get it to say whatever you want her to say. It uses AI. Isn’t technology amazing?”

“This is what humanity is advancing towards? Getting a lunatic like you an app so he can get fucking directions from Martha fucking Stewart?”

“Life is beautiful, isn’t it?”

Chains coughs and we meet eyes for a second. Someone has to stop him, or else Mayhem will talk all night about fucking Martha Stewart.

"Did I tell you guys that Charlotte's in her school play? They're doing The Addams Family, and she's playing Wednesday. Want to see some pictures? Since this shipment seems to be taking forever, we got time."

I don't want to see the photos; the last thing I want is a slap-in-the-face reminder of what I can never let myself have again — a connection deeper than this life of bullets and chrome. I’ve learned my lesson. I know how that kind of connection ends. But if I don't, Mayhem will tell us more about how Martha Stewart taught him how to have sex in a dream and I will end up doing something rash, like cutting my own ears off, just to make it stop.

"Yeah. Let’s see them."

This damn shipment better get here soon.

As Chains pulls out his phone to show us pictures of Charlotte in her school play, I glance at Mayhem, who seems lost in thought. There's a vulnerability in his eyes. Sincerity, too. It's rare to see him so contemplative, and I can't help but wonder what exactly is going on in his mind.

No, on second thought, I'm pretty sure I know what's going on in his head and I want no damn part of it.

"Check this out. See how great her makeup is? Look how she changes," Chains says.

Photographs of Charlotte fill the screen, showing her transformation into Wednesday Addams. Her eyes sparkle with excitement, and every other picture is of her smiling in a very un-Wednesday-like way. Even though I know I shouldn't, I can't help but feel a pang of envy for Chains.; he has something in his life that brings him joy, something that keeps him grounded

amidst the chaos and uncertainty of our existence. It's something I had once, something I can't put myself through again.

"I'm proud of her," Chains says. "But I'll be damned if she isn't growing up so fast."

Mayhem nods absentmindedly, his gaze still fixed on some distant point. I can almost see the cogs turning in his mind, as if he's searching for something beyond the truck stop and this life we lead. He whispers, "Martha..."

"She's my damn world. Her and Aurora both," Chains says.

I shake my head, my teeth grinding. It was a mistake to let Chains show off his pictures. "How can both of you be out here like this when you've both them waiting at home for you? How can you put them through this?"

"It's because of them I'm out here. I've got to provide. They deserve good lives, Bishop."

"What happens on the day you finally take a bullet? What happens to them when you die?"

"I don't like your line of thinking."

"Someday, this life is going to catch up to you. Or it'll catch up to them. What happens to you, Chains, if Charlotte or Aurora get killed? Or to you, Mayhem, if Stacy dies? Do either of you even think about the pain that'll come with that?"

"What the fuck's gotten into you?" Chains snaps.

"All the time," Mayhem says. "Most of it's fun, though. Explosions, Scarface-style gunfights, you know, the good stuff."

"Chains, I'm talking about the cost of this life." Pain shakes my voice. These two are so fucking ignorant about the real cost this life will rip from them. "I can't believe you two haven't considered the real consequences. That you haven't actually prepared yourselves or the people you care about for what will happen. How fucking reckless can you be?"

"Bishop, I like you more than most people in the club like you, which means I only mildly hate your guts, but you're doing a damn good job at changing my mind right now," Chains says. "Take a fucking breather, clear your head, and — "

I hold up a silencing finger; there's a rumble in the distance.

It's coming from the south, and no sooner does it register as the roar of a semi's screaming engine I hear the sounding of a semi's giant horn — that same blaring blast that every kid riding in their parent's car gestures out the

window to make every passing truck driver honk at them.

We reach for our guns.

"You think it's trouble?" Mayhem says, hopefully.

"No one honks like that unless something bad is happening," Chains says.

"I would. If I had a horn like that, I'd honk it all the time. It's a fun sound."

I peer down the empty stretch of road, scanning for any lights or approaching vehicles. Nothing. The truck's still too far away to see. Maybe it's not our contact, maybe it's just some other semi truck barreling down the road at midnight in the middle of nowhere, honking their horn and making their engine work itself to death.

"Fun? It sounds like Godzilla's dying moan. It's awful."

"It sounds nothing like that. Do you even know what a dying kaiju sounds like, Bishop?" Mayhem says. "If you want one, I can build you one, but it'll be legit."

A trio of lights appears on the horizon — one large, and two smaller ones belonging to sedans that zip and weave around the big rig, like wasps buzzing a bear.

"Looks like this will not be the peaceful ride-along that Rabid said it would be," I say. "You guys ready? We have about thirty seconds before they're in range."

Mayhem doesn't wait; he starts his bike and burns rubber out of the lot, barreling toward the approaching vehicles. He screams. "This is for you, Martha."

Chains and I trade a look.

"Should we go after him?" I say.

"Stacy might get upset with us if we don't. Rabid might, too."

"You think she'd still sell us cupcakes?"

"Probably not."

"Fuck me. Fine, let's save that dumbass."

Our bikes scream as we race to catch up to Mayhem, who already is firing his pistol at the onrushing cars like he's in the world's deadliest — and dumbest — game of chicken. How he survived beyond infancy is a mystery to me; how he continues to survive is like the universe giving a giant middle finger to the concept of sanity.

A sudden eruption of smoke and flame springs from the front of one of the approaching cars. It swerves off the road and crashes into the trunk of a

tree. Flames erupt from beneath its hood and, moments later, a roar splits the dark as the car explodes.

Mayhem whoops.

The other car speeds up, breaks away from the semi and steers right toward us. There's no space, no time to dodge it — it's coming at eighty-miles-per-hour; two tons of steel, about to make impact.

The semi honks its horn again and the driver's side window rolls down.

Out the window leans a man bigger than any man has a right to be; he's grinning, he gives a shockingly effeminate wave, and then aims a heavy pistol right at the back of the car. There's a crack; the back windshield shatters and the driver slumps over in his seat, jerking the wheel and sending the car careening into the woods.

The big man honks his truck's horn again and waves at us as he speeds by.

Mayhem, Chains, and I trade a look and then return to the rendezvous point at the truck stop, where the big rig is already waiting. Just as we arrive, the driver's door flies open and the giant man behind the wheel springs down with all the grace of a ballerina. He's wearing a Hawaiian shirt, swimming trunks, flip-flops, and a baseball cap with the words 'Wicked' and the silhouette of a witch on it.

"You three must be the guys Rabid told me about. Bishop, Chains, and Mayhem, right? I'm Moose. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Hi Moose, I'm Mayhem. Where'd you learn to shoot like that? And where'd you get that gun? That's a Desert Eagle, right?" Mayhem says, a childlike tone of wonder in his voice.

Moose lets out a belly laugh big enough to register on the Richter scale. "I like your enthusiasm, brother. I learned to shoot in Wyoming. I was dating this rodeo cowboy who was the great-great-grandson, or maybe he was the great-great-great-grandson, of Annie Oakley. Honestly, I forget how many 'great's there were with him, though the sex was definitely one of them. That man was hung like a stallion and had the endurance of a marathoner."

"Sounds like a nice guy," Mayhem says.

Chains nudges me and I nudge him back. Do we interrupt? Or do we listen to Moose's story because he can drive a big rig like no one else on earth and his driving may have saved our lives?

"Oh, he was. Most of the time. Except when you didn't want him to be a sweetheart. Then, well, he was a demon with a riding crop — he'd pin you

down, wrap you up in horse's tack, put a bit in your mouth, and whip you until you neighed for mercy. Now, owing to his illustrious heritage, he was also a crack shot. The man could shoot an apple off an erect cock at a hundred yards without even tickling your pubes."

"You can hold an apple on your cock?"

"Apple, a peach, a pear, once even a cantaloupe. But that's beside the point. My point is my former lover, thanks to his heritage, was in line to become King of the Rodeo. That's not just a title, it's an actual position within the rodeo subculture. As king, you control the rotation and the calendar of every true rodeo in North America, you preside over every championship, and all the rodeo clowns are your loyal servants. To be king of the rodeo, you need to win a series of contests — one of which is a team shooting event. We trained together for months, because to lose the trials means you are executed and disappear. It's what happened to Jimmy Hoffa. See, it wasn't the mob that did Jimmy in; Jimmy was actually the bastard child of Buffalo Bill. He had ambitions to leave the Teamster life behind, but he was a poor hand with the rope and could only rope five of the eight mustangs in the naked lasso competition..."

I cut in. "Moose, you're driving some valuable cargo for the MC and several people did just try to kill us to get to it. Maybe we should get moving?"

"Sorry, yeah, you're right. I'm just so used to it. People try to kill me out all the time."

It's a fast hour back to the clubhouse, where Rabid, Goldie, and Havoc are waiting in the large lot behind The Noble Fir. The lot is empty except for us.

Rabid has his arms crossed and a scowl on his face when we arrive. "You're late. Dawn is in less than an hour."

"So?" Chains says.

"So that's when people wake up, that's when they might notice a semi-truck with a biker escort driving down routes that semi-trucks definitely rarely drive. That raises questions, and questions are problems, because this cargo is too valuable to be fucking around with it."

Moose steps forward, completely undeterred by Rabid's angry face.

"You must be Rabid. I'm Moose. Let me tell you that, other than the little dust-up we had about an hour back, nobody's seen a darn thing. I know how to drive a rig under the radar."

"Moose, I don't doubt your driving prowess. Rook speaks highly of you,

and Rook never speaks highly of anyone. Your driving isn't the thing in question. What is in question is that someone knew exactly the route you'd be taking and when you'd be taking it. This cargo is too important to the future of our clubs to allow for any risks."

"Just what am I transporting, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I do. All you need to know is it is important, that buyers will soon come for it, and that the profit from the sale could affect the future of three different MCs: the Twisted Devils MC, the Steel Reapers MC, and the Iron Savages MC, all of whom will gather here shortly." Rabid pauses, then turns to Goldie. "You know that abandoned storage yard out by the Route 6 turnoff?"

Goldie nods. "It's near my favorite waterfall. The acoustics and the rhythm of the falling water make it the best meditation spot."

"Take it there. Then I want you to organize guard shifts. Nobody gets near the cargo without my clearance. Nobody smokes near it, either."

"What about a joint?" Goldie says.

"No smoking period. This isn't a tobacco vs. pot thing, this is a 'holy shit, the cargo will blow you the fuck up' thing."

"Got it, bro. No smoking near the cargo."

Rabid turns to Havoc, who has been silent since we arrived.

"Havoc, I want you to oversee the security of the storage yard. Set up a perimeter and don't hesitate to use force if necessary. We can't afford any slip-ups."

"Consider it done, Rabid."

With their assignments clear, Goldie and Havoc climb onto their motorcycles and motion for Moose to follow them. The rumble of the engines fills the air as they speed off towards the abandoned storage yard.

Rabid turns back to the rest of us. "The rest of you, stay on high alert. We don't know who was behind the attack earlier, but we can't take any chances. Keep your guard up. Now, go get some rest, all of you. Goldie and Havoc will contact you about your shifts and times."

Rabid's words have barely left his mouth before I'm on my bike.

While Chains and Mayhem will probably head off to rest, the best I can count on is a couple hours of sleep before the most important work of my day begins. I get home and grab two hours of sleep before I'm back behind the wheel of my truck.

It's a short drive to the Ironwood Falls Community Center, a large complex near the center of town. Half of the center hosts the town's youth

center, and the other half hosts the senior center, where I spend a good portion of my time. Showing up here is the highlight of any day for me; when I'm here, doing genuine good for people who appreciate even the smallest bit of kindness, it makes the aching emptiness in my heart hurt a little less; the pain never goes away, I'll never forget what I've lost, but some days, it doesn't hurt so bad.

As I park my truck and sip the bitter black coffee in my mug, I take a deep breath to steel myself for a long volunteer shift on almost no sleep. It's going to be hell, even though it's worth it.

That, and there's another benefit to this work — *her*.

She sits at a desk that's just in view through the clear glass doors leading into the youth center. I don't know her name; I don't know her hobbies; I don't know how she likes her coffee, but I know I enjoy seeing her there every day. With curly brown hair, blue eyes that are beacon bright, and a smile as soft as a cloud, she captures my eyes.

Most mornings, the sight of her makes me wonder, and I wonder about that same thing this morning, too. *What if?*

But I know where this life leads for anyone you dare to love — to an early grave and a broken heart. I keep my head down and my eyes focused on the doors to the senior center, because I've already been down that road once.

I'll never go down it again.

Though, as the doors open before me, I can almost swear I feel a set of eyes watching me. Staring. If I looked over, I'm sure I'd see it's her.

But I can't.

I shake my head. Chase those thoughts and feelings away.

Never again.

CHAPTER TWO

Eden

"Eden, he's checking you out again."

Sandra says it like it's supposed to be encouraging, like I should do what they do in *Hallmark* land and set down my work and charge out there to blush and smile at the big man with the haunted eyes, chiseled chin, and burly shoulders.

I did that once before. It didn't work out so well.

In fact, it's the entire reason I'm here, at this desk, working at this job in this small town, bearing a new name that barely tickles my ears enough that I recognize people are talking to me instead of someone else.

She also says it as if I haven't noticed him checking me out — I've noticed. Noticed, and strained every bit of my willpower in forcing myself to stay away.

"Look at that butt," Sandra says, whistling. "That's a butt that would look good even in baggy sweatpants. But in those jeans, me oh my."

Another thing she says aloud, like I haven't been paying attention. But no one with eyes wouldn't notice that butt in those jeans.

If there were other people in our office, she wouldn't be talking like this.

Of course, if there were other people in our office, it'd mean the youth center had adequate funding. And, for any sort of publicly funded social enterprise, that's an idea straight out of fiction.

"I'm well aware of his butt," I say, with only one eye on the paperwork in front of me. The other eye is occupied with making myself better aware of the glowering man's backside, just in case anything has changed since yesterday. It hasn't. It's still perfect.

But there's something different about him today.

Maybe it's the pronounced lines etched into his forehead, or the way he carries himself with a heaviness that wasn't there before; it's as if the weight of the world has settled on his broad shoulders, causing him to sag with each

step.

"Hey, Sandra," I say, my voice softer than usual. "Do you think something happened to him?"

I shouldn't be interested in him. I swore I'd never get involved with any man who leads a lifestyle like his. But Bishop — *I think that's his name* — isn't like other men in that life. Because I can't think of any other bikers I've seen volunteer at a senior center.

Sandra leans back in her chair and squints at him through her glasses. "Well, something definitely doesn't seem right. Maybe we should check on him. Do you want to, or shall I?" After less than a second, she continues, "Since you're not volunteering, I guess the responsibility falls to me."

Before I can protest, she's already on her feet, patting down her blazer as if preparing for a mission. Sandra is like that—always ready to help, even when it might be easier to turn a blind eye.

As if she could turn her eyes away from the big biker who volunteers at the senior center.

I watch in shocked horror from my desk as Sandra approaches him, her vibrant red hair swaying with purpose. She waves and calls out his name, but he barely acknowledges her presence. His gaze is distant, lost in some internal struggle, but it darkens as Sandra gets closer. She calls out something again, and he shakes his head and gives her a scowl so cold I pull my jacket off the back of my chair and onto my shoulders.

Second later, Sandra is back in her desk, frowning.

"He is full-on King Grump this morning. Growled at me like an angry pit bull. If he got any closer, I'd have to go in for rabies shots."

"What is with him?"

"Something, definitely. He had this look in his eyes. Still sexy, but angry sexy. Like the kind of sexy that would tie you to the bedpost, break out a whip, and punish you just for looking at him the wrong way. I think I'm going to go back out there and check on him again."

"Any idea what's bothering him?" I say.

Not like I really expect Sandra to know, but then, she's been working at the youth center a lot longer than I have. Maybe she knows more about the mystery man who shows up, does his time, and leaves without saying a word to anybody.

"The unbearable weight of being so damn handsome is finally getting to him, I'll bet," she says.

Sandra stops talking as the front door opens and Mr. Davidson, the head manager of the youth center, enters.

"Morning, ladies," he mumbles with a harried look on his face as he makes a beeline right to his office.

"Morning, Al," we both intone. There's no enthusiasm in our voices. Why say anything more than the most perfunctory of greetings to someone you only see once a week and for fifteen minutes at a time, if that?

"Busy day today," he says as he stops at the coffeemaker and makes himself a cup that's half coffee, half cream and sugar. "Busy, busy day."

"What conference is it now?" Sandra says.

"Got a meeting with my friend, the mayor, first. Out on the links, which is where all real business gets handled, and then there's a conference down in Salem for the next two days that they're sending me to. With any luck, I'll be getting some nice grant money for the youth center." He chuckles. "And even without any luck, well, it's two days in Salem at a nice hotel."

"Must be rough, being friends with the mayor and having to go to all these conferences, put in all these appearances, stay at all these hotels," Sandra says.

"It's worth the sacrifice when you find a job you love. Especially when you're giving back to the community."

"You're so selfless, Al. I wish more people had your spirit. What hotel is the city putting you up in?" I say.

"There's a new Hilton there. It's four stars, I think. But they have one of those lounges where they serve free cocktails in the evening for an hour or two. I should be able to land a few deals for the city there. Maybe. You know, it's more about the journey than the destination." He's smiling as he says it, as if he's totally unaware that he's a leech on two legs. "Anyway, I have to get on the road. Only came in to grab some files and check my email. If you need my approval for anything, text me on my personal number. I won't be checking emails or other stuff like that for the next few days. No, wait, make that a week; I'll be too busy."

"Bye, Al," I say as he heads to the door, briefcase and laptop in hand.

"Have a nice trip, Al," Sandra says. Then, as the door shuts, she adds, "Asshole."

"How much does Al Davidson cost the city?"

"The Mayor ended up cutting a sizeable chunk of the road maintenance budget just to supplement Al's crap. He pitched it as an investment in fund

raising and in the city's youth, so of course it went through."

"So Al is literally the reason we have potholes? He's, like, a human pothole?"

"Pretty much. A big human pothole with a leech's mouth to suck the city dry."

"I hope a giant pothole swallows him up, and the city uses the money that'd be wasted on him to actually hire, you know, staff to work here. Can you imagine what we could do if we had more than one tutor and one counselor?"

Sandra sighs and sips her coffee. "That would be the day. Probably the same day I win the lottery and read in the news that my ex-husband got run over by a monster truck." She smiles, sips her coffee, and stares off into space; I give her the moment to enjoy the fantasy — I know what it's like to wish death by monster truck on an ex.

Just as Sandra's fantasy pulls me in — different ex, same fate — the white and blue of Ironwood Falls PD pulls into the parking lot. Both Sandra and I perk up in our chairs, ready to perform at our best, as sometimes the police will bring in special cases of kids who need extra care — kids taken from broken homes, kids found on the run, kids whose parents are going to jail — and, as much as Sandra and I joke about our work, we both love it and give our everything for these kids. It's my way of putting children on the right path, so they don't make the same mistakes I did when I was younger.

But the police officer who gets out of the car does so alone.

"Good morning," Officer Maya Alvarado says as she enters the office. Her voice is chipper, bright, and polite, as she almost always is.

"Morning Officer Alvarado," Sandra says. "What brings you this way today?"

"Morning, Sandra. I'm here to see Eden. Eden, you got a second?"

My heart quivers in my chest. I set aside the stack of papers in front of me, reports from the staff counselor, mostly, and a couple of budget memos from the city council. "Of course, Maya, what's up?"

Her voice goes a notch lower, and she nods her head toward the door.

"Maybe we should do this outside. It's kind of private."

I swallow and release a sigh. "Sure. Of course."

Outside, she leads me away from the door and from the windows into the youth center's office, until we're somewhere she's sure we won't be overheard.

"What's this about, Maya?"

"Your name came up in a search."

"My name?" I know what name she's talking about, but I still have to ask, have to hope, that maybe she's made a mistake.

"Your old name."

"How?"

"I have a few friends in the state patrol, and a few people that work at the different background check companies that owe me a few favors. They're keeping an eye out as a favor to me and they're running some creative interference. They told me that whoever's digging into you is doing so really persistently. Nothing about you has gotten out, I don't think, but I wanted you to be aware, and maybe be ready. "

"Ready?" My heart's in my throat, it's hard to speak, and my palms feel sweaty. "Ready for what?"

"You know, Eden. Someone's looking for you and they're determined to find you."

"Are you sure?"

"Nothing's sure, but I don't want to see you get hurt again. He's looking for you, and I'm going to do everything I can to keep him from getting information about you, but I can't guarantee anything. I've got my hands full already, and I don't know if there's anyone else I can really trust to handle this for you."

"Hands full? What else is going on, Maya? Do I need to worry about it?" My eyes on their own drift to the truck the grumpy man drove in earlier. Despite everything I know about him and what he's involved in, thinking about him gives me a small sense of comfort against the terror and instability that threatens to come roaring out of my past and swallow me whole.

Maya follows my eyes. "I'm sure he could tell you all about it. Bishop, that is."

"Bishop?" The way that name rings on my tongue chills my blood. "Is that his real name?"

"No, it's a road name."

"Road name? You mean he's..."

"Bishop's in an MC." Her voice is gentle. She puts a hand on my shoulder. Maya knows the effect the subject has on me. She's the reason I escaped the mess I was in before, and she's the reason I'm standing here today. "He's the club doctor for the Twisted Devils MC, Ironwood Falls's

local MC. He's a good man, if a bit of a jerk. Still, I won't speak too much ill of him, because he's been helping at the senior center for about as long as he's been in town, and that's longer than most any paid staff has actually stuck around at the place. If you need someone to watch your back, he might be a good person to know."

"Except he's a biker."

It doesn't matter how much he helps around the senior center; a zebra can't change its stripes. What I really want is to get in my car and drive as far away from here as I can get. I can't believe I've been working so close to one of *them*. After all that I've been through, have I learned nothing?

"He's one of the good ones. You don't need to worry about him in that way. Unless you want friendly conversation, in which case, do yourself a favor and give him a wide berth," Maya sighs. "But that's beside the point. The point is, you need to be prepared. Alert. But there's one other thing, too, Eden."

"What?"

"Something big may be happening in town. Some kind of business deal, maybe. I'm not sure. My sources aren't always the best, but they are certain that it's going to involve several MCs and will happen in Ironwood Falls soon."

"Here? In town?"

"In town. Within the next week, maybe two, there will be multiple MCs riding the streets. You're going to want to keep a low profile, because even though I don't know what clubs will be around, there's always a chance that someone in one of them could know your..."

I cut her off.

I can't even stomach the possibility.

Instead, I whirl on my heel and race to the office door. My breath comes in quick gasps and I can feel rough, calloused fingers crawling over my skin, pulling my hair, gripping my throat. What Maya's given me isn't just a friendly warning, it's my worst nightmare come to life.

"I don't just need to keep my head down, Maya. I need to leave. *Now*."

CHAPTER THREE

Eden

Maya follows on my heels as I run back into the youth center. When I push through the door, Sandra leaps to her feet. If she can't tell by the look on my face that something is seriously wrong, then she and I haven't worked together for the handful of months that I've been in Ironwood Falls.

"Eden, what's happening?" She says.

Maya's voice comes from behind me. "Just think about this a moment, OK? Don't act rash."

I whirl to face her. There's a vein in my neck that throbs with each beat of my heart. It's pulsing so hard right now that I can feel it move in my neck. "Rash? You know some of what I went through. How can you even say that to me?"

"Because making an unplanned move like this could be exactly what he wants you to do. It might make things worse and put you in danger. And besides, you have me, Eden. I'm watching out for you," Maya says. Her voice is like a sedative and my nerves quiet just listening to her. "Be patient, be alert, be ready, but don't go jumping at shadows. That's a surefire way to wind up back where you don't want to be."

"Eden, I may not know exactly what you and Officer Alvarado are talking about, in fact, if I'm being honest, I'm very confused but also feel like it's not my business, so I'm just going to move on, but I know that I, personally, don't want you to leave. We need you here. If you were gone, it'd just be me and Al to run the front office and, well, you know how that would go."

I know; Sandra would be stuck doing everything while Al took trips on the city's dime or sat around with his thumb up his ass. Eventually, probably in about two weeks, the work would overwhelm Sandra, she'd quit, and then the lives of those kids would depend on the talents of the astoundingly inept Mr. Davidson, who would be more than happy to tell the kids about his cozy relationship with the mayor, or about which golf courses in Oregon are the

best, or just where they can stick their problems if they want him to do any actual work.

I care for the kids who depend on us. There's no way I can abandon them to Al Davidson's incompetence.

"You're sure that you've got everything under control? That I don't need to worry about... *him*?" My eyes probe Maya's for some answer, for reassurance that, this time, my trust isn't in the wrong person.

She doesn't even blink.

"You can depend on me. I'm not without my tricks, Eden. Plus, it's not like it takes a lot of finesse to send a request to a governmental agency down a black hole of bureaucracy," she says. She puts both hands on my shoulders and looks directly into my eyes. "I came by as a warning. A courtesy. But you have nothing to worry about, really. Stay here, do the good work you do, and know that I've got your back."

Moments pass. It's hard. The world around me feels different just knowing that *he* might be getting close. Will I even be able to sleep tonight? Or will the hours pass by with me jumping at shadows, with every itch and tickle on my skin a phantom touch from his bloodstained hands?

As much as I want to, I know I can't just leave. My work is important, my coworkers depend on me, and I do like my job. No, not just like it — I love it; there's something deeply satisfying in knowing I just helped turn a kid onto a path that'll make them so much happier and a better person.

"Fine. I'll stay."

* * * * *

"Sometimes I really hate my job." I look up from my desk at the youth center's counselor, Trent, who stands opposite me with his hands clasped behind his back and a frown on his face. "Are you sure about this, Trent?"

"I'm sure."

"It couldn't be anyone else? You didn't make a mistake?"

"It's hard to mistake someone telling you to your face that they have oxy for sale and can hook you up if you want it."

I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. "Is he still here?"

"Charlie? Yeah. I locked him in the supply closet so he wouldn't run away while I came to talk to you."

"You locked him in a closet?" That isn't anything close to the correct procedure.

"He got a little rough when I told him we'd have to have a chat. Tried to punch me a few times before I wrestled him down. You want me to call the cops and let them handle this?"

"Did you search him? Find any drugs on him or in his locker?" I say. Trent nods and I sigh. "Bring him here. We have to deal with this now. If it gets difficult, we'll call the cops, but I'd prefer not to put any drug charges on this kid's record if we can help it."

Trent nods, understanding the gravity of the situation. He quickly retrieves Charlie from the supply closet and brings him to my office. The boy in front of me is cocky, with a slant to his chin and a look in his eyes like he may be using. He snort-laughes upon seeing me.

It's not even mid-day and I have to play the heavy. For once, I wish Al were here. If he was, this would be his job. Instead, the privilege is mine.

"Charlie, we need to talk," I say, my voice steady but firm. "Trent here tells me you've been involved in selling drugs. Is this true?"

"What, you want some?" He says. His eyes go up and down my body in a way I definitely don't like. "Tell you what: I can get you some of the good stuff and you wouldn't even have to pay me in cash. What do you think about that? You give me something, I give you something, we both leave happy."

Trent shoves Charlie's shoulder. "You watch your mouth. Talk to Ms. Mercer with respect. She's trying to help you, numbnuts."

I give Trent a look that's both grateful and a warning. We can't go shoving kids around, even when they're asshats like Charlie. "This is serious, Charlie."

"My offer's serious, too, Ms. Eden."

"Would you prefer I just stop giving you chances and get right to calling the cops on you?" Even as I speak, the kid's cocky smile grows worse. He's only seventeen, he has his whole life ahead of him, and he's making all the wrong choices. "I know this wouldn't be the first time they've picked you up. How do you think things will go for you if you get arrested? With your record, you'd probably wind up facing some very adult punishments, Charlie. You want that?"

Defiant eyes turn downward, along with his cocky smile. "No, ma'am. I don't want that."

"We're still going to punish you, Charlie. There will be some mandatory counseling sessions, I'll have to — "

The smile returns, and he stands up. "I don't want that, either. You know

what I want? For you to suck my..."

"Get out. Get the hell out," I snap. I've had it with him, with his attitude, with the monsters I keep seeing in shadows; all of it can go right to hell. "No more chances. You are banned from the property immediately."

"Fine. Whatever. Fuck if I care. I need to go to my locker first, get my stuff, then I'll leave this terrible fucking place behind. Bunch of fucking pussies."

I look at Trent. "Before he does anything, clear out his locker and the lockers of his friends. Anything illegal — anything even borderline — confiscate it, and report it to the police."

Something whips by my face before my mouth even closes.

It's my coffee cup, thrown from Charlie's now-clenched fists, and it shatters against the wall behind me.

Before I can act, he leaps across my desk right at me. I fall backward, knocking over my chair, while he hollers. "You fucking bitch! You can't take my shit. I'll kill you. Me, my dad, my brother, we'll fucking find you and we'll fucking — "

His ugly words die in his throat as Trent puts him in a headlock and rips him away from me, wrestling him to the ground and pinning the kid beneath his knee.

I breathe. Once, twice, but it feels like it's not doing any good. In that angry young man's face, I see shades of the man I never want to see again. The memories flood back, consuming me like a tsunami crashing against the shore. The scent of alcohol mixed with anger fills my nostrils, and I can almost feel the weight of his presence bearing down on me. Crushing me. My heart races, and I struggle to regain control of myself, struggle to fill my lungs with enough air that my head stops swimming.

Trent's voice cuts through the turmoil. "Are you OK, Ms. Mercer? Should I call someone? Bishop's next door. He's a doc. He could check you out."

There's that name again.

The last thing I need right now is another reminder of the life I left behind.

I shake my head, force myself to take deep breaths. "No, Trent. I'll be fine. Just give me a moment."

"I'm going to call him, anyway. Could use an extra hand with this little punk here." Trent levers his knee into Charlie's back, making the kid gasp in pain. "You want to supervise, Eden?"

I shake my head in a way that I hope isn't too quick. The idea of Bishop

coming into our side of the community center twists my stomach in knots in a way that's not all bad. As much as he scares me, there's something that draws me to him, too. That butt ain't bad, either. Still, the last thing I need is that handsome, hulking reminder of everything wrong in my life to go stomping grumpily through my building.

But Trent has a point: Charlie's a menace and he could use a hand keeping the kid in line.

Instead of answering right away, I do the prudent thing and get up from my desk and head into Al Davidson's office, the door halfway shut before I answer.

"Go get Bishop. I'll be in here, writing up the report in peace. Will you let me know when it's all handled, Trent?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And Trent?"

"Yes?"

"Don't knock on my door until *after* Bishop is gone, OK?"

Because if that scary biker is coming over here, I want as little to do with him as possible. The last thing I need is another man messing up my emotions.

Especially one as handsome as Bishop.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eden

Charlie still makes a scene like a little shit as he leaves. It's a scene so loud that the water in my glass vibrates like the T-Rex from *Jurassic Park* is stomping by. But once Bishop shows up, things go eerily quiet, and the only sound is the thunder-beat of my heart sounding my ears. I may breathe the time he's here, I may not, I don't remember — I lose myself in the paperwork, keep my head down and pretend to be so busy that I don't have the time to even look up from the forms in front of me to see just how good Bishop's butt looks in those jeans or how his fearsome scowl is enough on its own to tame the rebellious Charlie.

Once he's gone, I let out a long sigh.

Then I let a few more minutes pass, just to make sure the Grumpy Green Giant isn't lingering around, before I leave Al Davidson's office and head back into the front room to take my usual desk behind Sandra.

"Did you see him?" She says. "His butt was even better than this morning. He must've done squats or something with the seniors, because it was just popping. There was this point where Charlie fell over, and Bishop just leaned over to pick him up — with just one arm, too — and his jeans hugged his booty just right. I swear, it's like he's smuggling a blimp in those jeans."

"Sandra, how old are you?" I say.

"Fifty-eight. Why?"

"Aren't you a little old to be lusting over a man half your age?"

"I'm old, not dead. Things still work down there, you know."

"Oh my god, I wish I hadn't asked."

"I wish he would. I'd show him."

"Stop. Please."

"He's hot, and you know it. I'd love to find out what I'd have to do to put a smile on his grumpy face. Oh, I'd bet I'd work up more of a sweat than a Richard Simmons tape."

"I'm going to be sick," I say.

"And I'm going to buy a bottle of chardonnay on the way home, lock my cat in another room, and sip that wine while my imagination runs wild."

"Stop it." When she winks at me, I add, "As your supervisor, I'm telling you to stop. As a human being, I am begging you for mercy."

"Yes, boss." She says, then she returns to her work, preparing some endless Excel spreadsheet for one of the many reports that we have to file as a publicly funded agency.

But she hums as she does it.

Hums, and lightly bobs her head in a way that I know exactly what action she's thinking about performing and exactly who she's imagining performing it on: the man I want to stay as far away from as humanly possible... who is also the man who is in the building on the other side of the parking lot, and who I see practically every morning before work, and every night after work, too.

At least he's grumpy and obviously hates talking to other people, so I'll never have to actually worry about spending time with him or even having a conversation; there is nothing that could ever bring that to come about.

Although, if we were to talk, what would we talk about?

That's a question I ponder for a while. He'd be surprised that I could probably handle my own in a debate about which motorcycle company is the best, I'm sure of that. His eyebrows would shoot sky high when I tell him that my favorite motorcycle maker is Honda and that I have a soft spot for the Super Cub, not just for its durability, but also for its old advertising campaign and the slogan: "You meet the nicest people on a Honda." And also that I'm a sucker for its old-style magazine ads that show off an idealized version of America, where everyone gets along with everyone, everyone's smiling, and happy people zip around on motor scooters while wearing shirts and ties.

"What the hell am I doing?" I say aloud. Why am I even thinking about talking to that monster, Bishop? He doesn't care about my opinions and I sure as hell want nothing to do with him. So why am I thinking about his smile or his deep and troubled green eyes that shine so perplexingly bright that I wonder if he's got an actual light bulb inside his skull?

"What'd you say, Eden?" Sandra says.

She's still humming, still imagining — I'm sure of it.

"I said I'm going into Al's office. I'll be there until the end of the day."

"You miss that lazy jerk that much?"

"Peace and quiet is what I miss. Both of which I need if I'm going to finish this writeup about Charlie. Can you please not disturb me unless it's an emergency? All this stuff with him earlier freaked me out, and I'm not having the best day to begin with."

Seriousness settles on Sandra's face. "Don't worry, Eden. I'll make sure you can work in peace. If anything comes up, I'll handle it."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it." At least one person in the office understands how unsettling Bishop's presence is to me.

As I make my way back to the office, my mind races with thoughts of how to finish the writeup and put this chaotic mess of a day behind me.

I close the door and take in my peaceful surroundings. Al Davidson's office is dimly lit, with stacks of papers and files scattered across every available surface. The air is heavy with the scent of the old coffee in a mug that looks like it's just a few days away from turning into a ceramic planter for a fungus garden. The leather desk chair is worn, and I try not to think about Al working a butt groove into this thing, though even warning myself not to think about it sends my brain on a three-minute diversion imagining Al shimmying his butt into this thing. *Ugh.*

But as I focus on writing up Charlie's incident report, all thoughts of Bishop fade into the background; the weight of his presence dissipates as I immerse myself in the details of Charlie's case. Each word I type becomes a shield against the distractions of the outside world. Hours pass in a blur as I lose myself in my work, moving from the incident report into a budget proposal for more funding to hire another counselor and a handful of tutors to help keep the troubled kids we serve from falling down the black hole that is failing out of school. We have just one tutor at the youth center currently — a young woman named Marcy who is on loan from Portland University for some credit toward her Social Services program; she's a lifesaver with an expiration date.

I want six more of her to help this place reach its true potential. Six more Marcy's. Six more people with endless patience and a cunning mind able to anticipate all their students' problems and head them off before they blossom into frustrated feelings and failing grades.

What are we going to do when the semester's up and she has to go back to college?

I sigh.

There's a tap at the door. Looking up, I see Sandra there. I motion for her

to come in.

"How are you feeling now?"

Looking down at the elegantly composed budget request I have on my screen, I smile. Sure, it'll inevitably be rejected by the city council so that Al can continue to go on his golfing trips and so that the council doesn't have to raise taxes and risk their re-election, but it feels good to at least be trying to make the world a better place.

"Better," I say. "A lot better."

I'm doing good here. Not as much as I'd like, and with far fewer resources than I care to even think about, but it's still something. It's progress.

"Good, I'm glad," she says. "It's closing time, so I'm going to go home. Unless you'd like me to hang around a while?"

"I appreciate the offer, Sandra, but I can handle locking up. Honest. You get out of here. I'll just be a few more minutes while I wrap up this thing."

Nodding, she turns and leaves the office.

No sooner does the door close behind her than it opens again.

And he bursts through — The man I absolutely do not want to see while I'm all alone in a dark office with no one around to hear my screams.

Bishop.

His eyes are fiery, wide, and there's a snarl on his face.

Instantly, I spring from my chair and run to the office door to lock it, but he gets there first. He shoves his big foot in the door to keep it open.

I think about screaming, but don't, because it'd just trigger his predator instincts; the same way you're not supposed to run if you encounter a bear in the woods.

With a forceful push, he opens the door, and the strength of his shove sends me stumbling backward into the desk.

He stands in the doorway, chest heaving, eyes wide, and he points at me.

His words come growled, a snarling command that sends shivers down my spine. "You. Come with me."

"Me? For what? Why?" I say. I wish I hadn't sent Sandra home.

Maybe I should scream.

Maybe it'll surprise him enough that I can fight my way free. I've done it before, I can do it again... even if the monster I did it to before wasn't nearly as big as Bishop.

Bishop doesn't answer; he acts. With shocking speed, he snatches me by the wrist and pulls me through the door with irresistible force.

Though I fight to plant my heels, to slow our pace, I realize it's useless —
I'm entirely at his mercy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Eden

Into the night we go, me twisting, turning, struggling, and Bishop thwarting my every move with his impossible strength. One time, I nearly wriggle free, but then he twists my arm behind my back and marches me forward like I'm a prisoner.

Which, I suppose I am. There's a far-away part of my mind that's coolly observing my abduction, like a piece of me has just checked out from the kidnapping. It's a trick I learned the hard way, to detach myself from the trauma, so that whoever's hurting me can't hurt all of me. It's so that there will be a piece of me watching, waiting, maybe even capable of escaping or striking back.

Except there's no fighting back against Bishop.

The chill, but muggy, night air caresses my body as we burst through the office doors and out into the parking lot.

The lot on this side of the community center is entirely empty; the nearest people, the nearest light, are all the way on the other side of the lot in the senior center. Screaming is futile. Because what would any of the residents there do if I were to scream? Totter out and smack Bishop with their canes?

Yeah, no one's helping me.

He's going to drag me into the woods and have his way with me.

Or worse.

Wake up, Eden. Don't you see that opportunity that's right in front of your face? You've been in a situation like this before; you've told yourself over and over exactly what to do — so do it.

I raise my foot, and then bring it crashing down on his with all the force in my body.

"Oh, fuck, what the hell?" He says and releases me.

For one beautiful moment, I'm free. I run.

Just like I've rehearsed in my head so many times, I run toward my car,

my right hand fishing in my pocket for my keys. I always keep my keys in my right pocket — it's always better to have something on you that you can use as a weapon, and to always keep it in the same place. Muscle memory guides my hand to my keys, but this time, my keys aren't a weapon, even though I slip the longest key between my knuckles as a force of habit.

This time, my keys are my escape.

In my head, I play out what will happen next: I'll get in my car, drive straight to the police station, and then Maya and the others on Ironwood Falls PD will arrest Bishop for attempted kidnapping. As soon as he's in cuffs, I'll pack my things and leave this town behind. I'll start over somewhere quiet and sane. Like Vermont. Nothing bad ever happens in Vermont because nothing ever happens in Vermont.

It'll be perfect.

I make it three steps, and then my Vermont fantasy dissipates as Bishop puts another hand on me.

"Leave me alone."

I scream and whirl at him, my key between my fingers, slashing and stabbing like a little knife.

He effortlessly grabs my wrist and twists it just enough to force my hand behind my back.

"Drop them. I don't want to hurt you, but I don't want to be stabbed, either."

"You don't want to hurt me? Then why are you kidnapping me?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You literally dragged me out of my office and into a dark and empty parking lot. This is textbook kidnapping."

"I'm not kidnapping you. I just need your help."

"My help? That is the lamest excuse I've ever heard in my life. And trust me, I've heard a lot of them. Might as well ask me to help you with the puppies you keep in the back of a windowless van."

"It's not an excuse. This is important, and there's no one else I can count on. If I let you go, do you promise not to attack me?"

He must not be experienced with kidnapping, because I'm definitely going to attack him again at the first chance I get.

"Eden? Will you behave if I let you go?"

A chill tickles the back of my neck. We've never talked. "How do you know my name?"

"Maya spoke to me earlier today. That doesn't matter. What matters is that you answer my question: will you behave if I let you go? I don't want to wrap you up like this again, but I will if you step out of line."

"Fine. I won't stab you."

Clearly, I will the second I get the chance, but who is ever honest with the person trying to kidnap them?

"I know you're lying, but whatever, I don't have time to screw around," he says, then he lets me go. The second I'm free, I spin and try to get at his eyes with the keys. I miss by a mile. Bishop leans back, and he's so tall that all I do is slash through the air about six inches from his chest. My momentum carries me around in another circle, all the way until I'm facing him again, and this time, he grabs me from the front and pins my arms down at my sides. We're so close, he could lean down and kiss me if he wanted.

Or I could tip my head up, rise on my tiptoes, grow six inches taller, and kiss him, too.

Wait, why am I even thinking that?

"I knew you'd do that," he says. "I hoped you'd have more sense and make this easy, but I don't have a choice. I need your help with something."

We're so close, I'm aware of every muscle in his body; how hard and firm he is; how powerful he is. My senses leave me and I stop struggling. All I can do is look up into his eyes and give in.

"What do you need from me?"

"Bingo."

"What?"

"They're doing a bingo night at the senior center. I need your help."

"Am I having a stroke? Or a heart attack or something? Are you really asking me to help you play bingo?"

"You're not showing any of the signs. I'd know. Look, there is some virus going around, and the volunteers who normally run the bingo night are all sick. There's just me. I can't run it all by myself, especially not that calling out the numbers and being talkative stuff. I need your help to do that."

"You've basically kidnapped me to help you run a bingo night for old people?" There's a mix of confusion and laughter in my voice, and the laughter only grows at the look of consternation and chagrin on his face. "You really did, didn't you? That's why you came over."

"Might be I have an issue with being up there, reading the cards, all those eyes on me. Crowds and me, we don't get along."

I fight back the giggle in my throat. A big, fearsome man like him has a problem with reading off letters and numbers and putting the little chips on the card? Did I fall into some bizarro dimension?

"You're serious."

"You think I'd joke about this?"

"I didn't think it'd be possible for someone like you to feel that way. What's going on, Bishop? Why so scared?"

A profoundly pained look crosses his face and drives regret into my heart; I'm being way too hard on him.

"Will you help me willingly, or do I need to drag you in there? This is important. Maybe it doesn't seem that way to you, but most of the residents don't have anyone in their lives. Either they've lost them all, or the people who are supposed to look out for them have abandoned them. Silly games like this make them happy for a little while, and when you don't have that many days left, a little bit of happiness goes a long way."

Damn, now I really feel like an asshole.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to make fun of whatever it is..." I stop, sigh, can't believe I'm about to say what I'm going to say. "Yes, I'll help you."

"Great. Come with me."

Bishop takes off through the parking lot, heading right to the doors of the senior center, leaving me to blink in surprise and then hurriedly follow in his wake. Am I really doing this? The man scares the crap out of me, drags me into the dark, and now I'm going to help him run a bingo game for old people? I swore I'd stay out of this life, avoid Bishop and everyone like him, and yet... there's no one like him. Even when he grabbed me and dragged me out of the office, there was a thrill that ran through me, like a part of me hoped maybe he wanted something more than for me to read letters and numbers off of little chips.

Why am I doing this to myself when I know better?

Inside the senior center, I feel like I've just stepped into my grandmother's house — even the furniture has that same vibe of being ripped right out of the 1960s. There's even a plastic cover on the big couch in the lobby.

"Come on, they're waiting," Bishop says.

He leads me down a long hallway, past multiple open doors that reveal modest rooms for the residents, some of which have medical equipment in them quietly beeping away. At the end of the hall there's a door, and opening it reveals a large common room. Everything's an overwhelming shade of

beige, like I've stepped into a sepia-toned world. There are several folding tables set up, and they're occupied by chatty groups of the center's residents. Two men in nurses' outfits stand against the wall, hands behind their backs, watching everything like they're guards at a prison. They look about as friendly as prison guards, too.

"Why didn't you ask them?" I say, catching up to Bishop and nodding toward the two nurses.

"This place doesn't pay well, and they're short-staffed as it is. The people working here, they do the minimum that's required. If I had to talk to either of those guys to convince them, it'd get... rough... and then the center would have another set of vacancies that would take them forever to fill. I can't do that to the residents — they need the nursing staff."

"So you came to me?"

"You were the first person I thought of."

"Me? Why?"

My question makes him blink. He opens his mouth as if about to say something, then closes it again. Finally, he says, "People around here talk. Some of the staff, the residents, everyone talks about how you're doing a good job. Like you care. And you seem like a good person..." He frowns, as if me asking why I was the first person he picked to kidnap has offended him. "Listen, if you actually want to help, stop asking questions and take a seat at the table at the front of the room. I'll pass out the cards."

This is lunacy. I should leave right now. Go home, forget about tonight, and just try even harder to avoid Bishop from now on. Maybe buy mace, too.

But I sit down at that table.

Because I'm curious as all hell about why a biker like him would be so dedicated to these old people that he'd literally kidnap someone just to help him hold bingo night.

Across from me, a woman with shining blue eyes and a big poof of gray hair smiles at me. "So glad you could join us tonight, dear. We were worried that bingo wouldn't happen. I'm Charlene, and this is Doris." She nods at the woman next to her.

"He really wouldn't read the numbers himself?" I say.

Charlene nods. "We wouldn't even ask it of him. We'd just cancel bingo night instead. Bishop does so much for us already that we couldn't make him do that. The staff here, they care as much as they get paid to care, which isn't much. Bishop's here all the time, and he isn't even paid for it."

Doris, who has on a red sweater with a cat clumsily embroidered on it, nods in agreement. "Even if we asked, old Elroy wouldn't let us. He'd raise all hell before he'd let that happen."

"Who's Elroy?"

Doris nods towards an older man across the room. He's in a wheelchair, with a skinny face and a gray tint to his complexion. A few scraps of hair cling to his otherwise bald head and there's an oxygen tank and a breathing tube winding its way up to his nose.

"That's Elroy. He was in Vietnam, and he wasn't young when they sent him over, either. He'd enlisted early on. Elroy likes to say he was one of the lucky ones — a prognosticator who saw what was coming and got into it at the right time, before it all went to hell. But he's got nobody to look after him. No one except for Bishop. They're thick as thieves, those two. So if we even thought about putting Bishop on the spot, well, old Elroy would get out of his chair and tell us otherwise."

As the room fills with more residents, the atmosphere becomes charged with anticipation. I can sense the loneliness that lingers in the air, but there's also a palpable sense of camaraderie among the bingo players. Tonight means something to them.

Bishop takes his position at the front of the room, his towering presence commanding attention. He clears his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for joining us tonight. We have a special guest here who will be calling out the numbers. Please give a warm welcome to our helper of the night — Eden."

I stand up from my seat and give a small wave to the room full of expectant faces. It's strange to be in this position, being the center of attention for a group of people I barely know. But there's something about the way the residents speak about Bishop, and the way he acts around them, especially Elroy, that tugs at my heart. There's more to this bingo game than just numbers and chips.

"Thank you all for having me tonight. Let's get this game started, shall we?" I say.

The game begins.

With each number I call out, anticipation grows; the residents hunch over their bingo cards, their eyes scanning for matches. Occasionally, no, often, they call out for me to repeat a chip. They laugh and cheer whenever someone gets closer to winning. For this moment, they get to forget about

their ailments, their isolation, and bask in the joy of the game as a community.

As the game goes on, I notice the connections between the residents. They share stories and memories while waiting for their numbers to be called. Their laughter seems contagious, spreading from one table to another. And amidst it all, Bishop stands at the back of the room, next to Elroy's table, his usually stoic expression replaced by a soft smile. He's enjoying this as much as any of them, if not more, though he's doing his best not to show it.

With each number, Bishop glances over to Elroy's card. And every time a number matches to the old man's card, Bishop's there to make sure he gets the chip in the right spot. Most of the time, the old man waves him away, determined to do it himself, but once or twice, Bishop's there to pick a dropped chip up off the floor and put it in its rightful place.

Despite myself, I'm having a good time. I might even be in a position where I can forgive Bishop for scaring the crap out of me earlier. I've been running and hiding for so long that I haven't had a night like this — a night with connections, with people who are warm and welcoming — in so long.

Then the lounge door opens and my next letter — *I-26* — freezes on my lips.

Two men wearing leather and motorcycle club patches walk into the room. They're large. Menacing. Everything that turns my blood cold. I can hardly see their features, hardly see the room. Everything is a blur of terror and memories that rush over me like a raging river.

There are now three bikers in the room with me.

Three living, frightening reminders of all my nightmares.

They head right to Bishop, hug him, and take seats next to him and Elroy.

Their eyes turn to me. Expectant. Waiting.

I have to do something, but I can hardly breathe. My skin is crawling with memories, my heart shaking, old bruises re-awakening on my ribs, my legs, my face. I have to act, but what can I do? My tongue is dead in my mouth.

"Honey, are you OK?" Doris says. She reaches for me and I pull back from her hand.

"Bishop's a doctor. Maybe we should call him over," Charlene says.

She turns in her chair to beckon Bishop. That motion shocks me back to alertness; the last thing I want are his bloody biker hands anywhere near me.

Clearing my throat, I say. "Next letter: I... I... I go."

The chip falls from my fingers and I run to the door, knocking over my

chair as I flee. The world around me is a pulsing blur as I push the door open, sprint through the lobby, and out into the parking lot. My mind races, frantically chastising me. How could I be so foolish? How could I let myself be sucked in by Bishop and think it would work out any differently than it's going right now?

I should know better. Did I learn nothing?

I have to be more careful. Carelessness could get me killed.

My unsteady feet take me toward my car, my fidgety fingers fish out my keys. I'm so wrapped up in my thoughts that I don't register the strange truck parked right next to my car.

Or the trio of shadows that step out from behind.

Not until one of them approaches me. Charlie. His smile shines menacingly in the moonlight and he cracks his knuckles.

"Hey, Ms. Mercer. Told you I'd be back for you."

CHAPTER SIX

Bishop

"I-Go? That isn't on my card," Havoc says, frowning at the sheet of paper in front of him.

"It is on mine," Mayhem says, carefully sliding a chip into the 'I' column and doing his best to hide his card with his hand. "One more anywhere in the 'O' column, and I'll win. Looks like I'm going to kick your ass, brother."

"You're cheating."

"I am not. It's a totally legitimate spot. Do you think that lady calling out the letters and numbers would lie? She doesn't look like the lying type. She's way too pretty for that. Not that I'm judging someone's worth by their looks — pretty people can lie, too, but probably not Martha — anyway, the point is: I'm going to kick your ass, brother."

"Will not. You're cheating. If you won't play fair on your own, I'll make you." Havoc is out of his chair and on his brother in a moment, tackling him and throwing fists as the two of them devolve into a swirling vortex of violent sibling energy.

"Why the fuck did you two nitwits even come here?" I say. My eyes are stuck on the swinging door through which Eden fled moments before. Something's wrong with her, and I need to know what.

But I also can't leave, because then the hurricane that is Havoc and Mayhem will destroy the senior center.

"Rabid sent us to check on you and let you know the schedule for the guard rotations," Mayhem mumbles, his words coming out garbled because of Havoc's hands being locked around his throat. Spit dribbles down his chin and there's a bruise forming around his right eye.

"He couldn't have sent a text?"

"Has to be in person. He's worried maybe someone's comms are compromised. You know him," Havoc adds, cocking his fist back and unloading a right hand into his brother's face. Spit flies, and a tooth. "He's

going old school.”

I know how Rabid is. But, what I don't know, is how Havoc and Mayhem are how they are.

Some days, I wonder how those two made it to adulthood without killing each other or dying in one of their ridiculous experiments. Just the other day, Mayhem came to the clubhouse with a welding torch, an industrial-sized barrel of Vaseline, and a gigantic fan that looked like it had been ripped off one of those boats they use to cruise the Everglades. He said he was going to revolutionize urban transportation. Ten minutes later, there was nothing but a smoking crater in the back parking lot. Mayhem came back into the bar, ordered a beer, and said the world just wasn't ready for the revolution.

I have to check on Eden; I don't like that look that came over her face. Most people — no, *all people* — I'm happier when they're gone. But her? It's different. I can feel her absence already. When she's around, the room's a brighter and all those things I wish I could forget are pushed just far enough away that I feel like I can breathe.

I've never felt that way before.

"I need to go check on Eden. Can I trust you two to behave while I'm gone? Or do I need to call Stacy and Valeria to come down here?"

"Stacy's working... she's baking a cake for some rich guy's wedding. You wouldn't call her off work, would you?" Mayhem says, eyes going wide and fist stopping just inches from his brother's face. "She'd be so upset."

"Val's grading papers. She'd be pissed, too," Havoc says, breathlessly.

"They'd probably kill you. You both know I'd call them. So calm the fuck down and stay in your seats, all right?"

"Yes, Bishop," they both intone like toddlers who've just been grounded.

The fighting stops and the two brothers return to their seats, adjusting themselves as if there were any actual way to disguise the fact that they were willing to kill each other over a bingo chip.

"Be good," I say. Then I head outside.

Thoughts about Eden and what's set her off flood my mind. I hate the idea of her being scared, and that look on her face was definitely fear. It's just another reason I should keep away from her as much as I can, no matter how much the idea of staying away from her hurts. Hell, I shouldn't have brought her over to run the bingo game to begin with. Whatever's made her afraid, I'll deal with it, make sure it never threatens her again, and then I'll keep a whole hell of a lot of distance between us, because I can not go through the pain of

getting close to someone, only to lose them to this violent life.

Not again.

Then I reach the parking lot.

Then I see the three shadows looming over Eden; I see their clenched fists; I hear her shout in terror; I forget about everything else except for one thing: I am going to kill whoever dares touch her.

I charge.

As I get closer, those shadows become shapes I can see.

It's Charlie and his gutterspawn family.

"Are you really that fucking stupid, Charlie?" I shout as I get closer. "Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you?" The darkened faces whirl to me, and I see a flicker of doubt cross Charlie's face. Doubt, but he doesn't back down. Poor, dumb kid. He's about to learn a hard lesson. I raise my hands. "I warned you about what would happen, but it looks like you are too stupid to understand. Time for consequences, Charlie."

I hit the group of them like a hurricane.

No hesitation, no holding back, no mercy; my fists collide with flesh and bone, the sound of heavy blows fills the night air. Charlie first, then his fucking brother and father. The men stumble back, surprised by my sudden assault. Eden huddles on the ground, her eyes wide with fear as she watches the chaos unfold.

The terror on her eyes propels me forward. Kills the last traces of mercy in my heart.

I'm not just going to teach Charlie a lesson. I'm going to eliminate him.

It'll make the world a better place.

"Stay down," I growl at her. She nods, clutching her arms around herself like a shield as I turn my attention back to the assailants.

Charlie charges at me, his face contorted in anger. A wild punch sails through the air, but I dodge it with a swift step to the side. He tips off-balance, and I move in on the attack. Adrenaline and rage surge through my body, heightening my senses and sharpening my instincts. With a growl, I strike back with a powerful right hook that connects solidly with Charlie's jaw, sending him tumbling to the ground in a heap.

He tries to sit up, plants his hands on the ground for support, then collapses as I uncork a kick that hits him right in the side of his head.

He slumps.

His companions hesitate for a moment, trade a wary look between

themselves, but then they rush towards me at once, determined to defend their fallen family member.

I laugh.

Dodge their clumsy attacks and fire back. Years of training and honing my skills have prepared me for this exact moment. Blow after blow lands with bone-crushing force as I unleash all of my pent-up anger and frustration on these thugs. The night becomes a blur of fists, fills with the sound of shouts of pain, and the metallic scent of blood fills the air. One by one, I batter them. I beat them to the ground and then rain down blows upon their fallen forms; they've threatened Eden, now, they'll pay the price.

At last, the final one — Charlie's hick-looking father — falls to the cold asphalt, broken.

I stand over him. "Unless you want your sons to watch their daddy die tonight, you and your fucking children will get the hell out of here right now."

He mumbles something. It might be a response, it might just be his battered brain misfiring.

"What was that?"

"We will..."

Broken, they crawl toward their beat-up truck.

Then I see Charlie's face in the moonlight. There's still determination in his eyes. It's dampened by the beating he's just received, but it's still there. I don't like the look of it.

So I do something about it.

Surging forward, I grab him by the ear, drawing him to a howling stop. "Apologize to Ms. Mercer."

"What?" He mewls. "Ow, that hurts. Please, stop."

I twist his ear harder. "You heard me. Now, you're going to do what I say or else you will not hear out of this ear ever again. Do you understand?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Ms. Mercer. Please forgive me."

"Good. Now get the fuck out of here before I change my mind about letting you live."

Satisfied, I release his ear.

Then I turn my back on them; they've had their asses kicked, learned their lesson, and if they even dare to try anything, I'll kill them.

I offer Eden my hand.

Her eyes are wide, so wide they could drink me in and I could die

blissfully in their bright blue depths.

"Are you OK?"

But she doesn't take my hand.

Instead, she slaps it away. And, with all the air in her lungs, she screams.

"Get away from me, you monster."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eden

I scream so loud my throat hurts, and then I scream some more.

Scream with that same terrified voice I haven't used since *he* had his claws in me. It's one I'd hoped I'd never have to use again.

Yet, here I am, witnessing a terrifying biker destroy three other men who just tried to kill me and I can feel myself slipping back into being that person I was before. A scared victim.

But my second scream only lasts a moment before Bishop clamps his hand over my mouth and pulls me until his face is only an inch from mine. In the dark depths of his eyes there's an intoxicating, fiery mix of rage and protectiveness — the mark of a man who would burn to the ground anyone who dared to touch me.

But why? Why does he care so much for me?

And why do I like it?

Time and again, I remind myself of the very obvious fact that he is an incredibly dangerous man, with dangerous friends, who lives a dangerous life, and the only thing I would get out of being anywhere close to him is exposure to a whole heck of a lot of danger. Danger, danger, danger.

Yet I'm like a moth to flame; I should run, I should scream, I should hit him, but the second he pulls me toward his face, I get quiet like a docile dove.

"Be still," he growls. The fire in his voice melts me. "Be still and be quiet. You're safe now. I'd never let anyone hurt you."

I nod. I'd say something, but his hand is still clamped over my mouth.

"I'm going to let you go, but I want you to promise that you'll be calm, OK?"

I nod again.

Then take my first breath in almost a minute once he lets go of my face.

"You were on the ground. Did they hit you? Did they hurt you?"

I'm unable to speak; I just shake my head. Gently, he runs his hand down

my cheek and then takes me by the wrist, looking over my hands. They're scraped from falling, but it's nothing.

"Wash and bandage them. You'll be fine. They're just mild abrasions. Can you take a deep breath for me? Breathe deep and release it slow. Then do it several more times. Focus on calming your heartbeat. I'm sure you're shaken up and feeling all sorts of adrenaline, but you're safe now. I'm here. I won't let anyone hurt you."

I do as he says. It might be his instructions that help calm me down, but I think it's mostly just him. Having him close, knowing that he can protect me. He's both terrifying and comforting; security in one breath, a ferocious force in the next; everything I want, everything I know I shouldn't have.

"I'm better. Really. You don't need to worry yourself. I'm going to go home.."

"No." He shakes his head. "When did you last eat?"

"Lunch. Why?" My stomach rumbles. Lunch was a long time ago. And lunch was... I don't even remember. I was in such a hazy state of mind, focusing on work to keep my mind off Charlie's threats... Did I even eat?

"Do you drink?"

"I do. I'll ask again: why?"

"You're pale, your pulse is elevated, you've got sweat on your forehead, your breathing is shallow, and you were just attacked. You need something to eat, and you need a drink, otherwise the adrenaline you're feeling right now is going to work itself out of your system and you are going to have a major crash. It'll feel like a hangover, but worse. There's a nice dive bar close to here. It's called The Wagon Wheel. Simple food, strong drinks. You're coming with me."

He talks like it's a foregone conclusion, like I'm just going to go with him because he's commanding it.

And even as I think about how ridiculous it is that he'd assume such a thing, I stand and follow him to his truck.

I stop, shake my head. "Wait, what about bingo?"

That's my excuse?

I should slap myself. Out of all the reasons I could come up with for resisting this man's command to have a drink with him, I have to pick the senior center's bingo night? Not, oh, the fact that I swore I would never in a million years get involved with anyone even remotely connected to an MC?

Did I hit my head when I fell?

Did Charlie and those other creepy guys actually beat me up and I'm in a coma right now, hallucinating this whole thing?

That has to be the reason I'm acting so dumb — severe brain trauma.

No, actually, with how I'm acting, it has to be brain death.

Bishop chuckles. "Havoc and Mayhem will manage it. I'll text them. Hell, it'll be the most memorable bingo night those seniors have ever had. Assuming those two don't burn the place down."

"Havoc and Mayhem?"

"The other two. We're in the same MC — the Twisted Devils."

I hesitate at the door to his truck.

If there was one thing that could snap me out of the spell he has cast over me, it's mentioning an MC; familiar fear bubbles in my gut and I think I might be sick.

"Eden, I'm concerned about you. With what you've been through, I'm not letting you drive without getting you something to eat. If you don't want to talk, fine. If you don't want to even sit at the same table, fine — I hate people and I hate talking, too, so that's a win for me. But I will not be satisfied until I'm sure that you're safe, and that you're going to make it home OK. For that, you need some rest, a drink, and some food. That's all I care about."

Of all the hard lessons I've learned, one of the most important ones is how to tell when someone's lying to me. It's not foolproof. I'm not some human lie detector, but I have a pretty good nose for bullshit, and all I smell from Bishop right now is clean honesty. A look in his eyes tells me the same thing — he genuinely cares about me. We might not have spoken a single word to each other before today, but he honestly cares.

And I just might feel something for him, too, as strange as it seems. Even now. Even terrified, there's a part of me that feels safe with him next to me. Like he's the monster that could keep other monsters in my past away.

Because it's like that old saying: better the devil you know, especially if his butt looks great in denim.

"Fine. A burger and a beer, but that's it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eden

The Wagon Wheel is a typical dive bar. The music's loud, the crowd looks rough — but friendly — and kitschy crap covers the walls from floor to ceiling. Here, the kitsch reflects Ironwood Falls's past as a logging town, where timber cut in the mountains outside the city was hauled down and then trucked up north to Portland, where it was loaded on barges and shipped up and down the Columbia River and even to the other side of the Pacific Ocean. It's a welcoming place, where no one gives me more than a second glance.

Bishop finds a quiet booth in the corner. I take a seat, and he stands at the edge of the table, waiting.

I give him a funny look. "What?"

"Am I sitting with you or not?"

He's actually giving me a choice.

Though it doesn't feel like much of a choice, because some patrons are looking at us strangely, probably wondering why some big guy like him is looking at me like he actually needs my permission to sit down. The looks I'm getting make me feel like a real bitch, and I haven't even done anything.

"Please, sit."

It feels weird just saying that.

He sits. "Good. This is the last booth. All the other open tables are next to people, and I do not feel like people tonight."

"Why are you so grumpy all the time?"

"Because people are people, and people are awful. Most of them, anyway."

"And me?"

He regards me for a moment, his eyes scanning my face as if trying to decipher something hidden within my features.

"You... you're different," he finally says, his voice laced with both curiosity and caution. "I haven't quite figured you out yet, Eden."

Yet.

Meaning he wants to spend more time with me. A flush creeps up my cheeks, and I fidget with the corner of a paper napkin.

But I can't let him get too close, to pry too much into who I am. I worked hard to come up with this mystery, to keep who I am secret. As tempting as Bishop is, I can't forget who he is and the life he belongs to. That life and I don't mix — been there, done that, have the scars to prove it.

"What'll it be? Burger and a beer?"

His question snaps me back to reality, reminding me I'm still shaken from the events of earlier tonight. A faint smile tugs at the corners of my lips as I realize he's doing his best to distract me from the chaos that has become my life.

"A burger and a beer sounds perfect."

Bishop flags down a passing server and places our order. As we wait for our food, an uneasy tension hovers in the air. It's as though there's something unsaid between us, something waiting to break free from the confines of our silence.

"What brought you to the youth center?"

"It's just a job."

"There are better jobs in town. Higher-paying ones, and safer ones, too."

"Says the man who works for free at the senior center."

"Free is all that place can afford. If I charged them any kind of rate for what I do, they wouldn't be able to afford any of the meager staff they already have."

"But what do you get out of it? Why there? Why them?"

He heaves a sigh, leans in.

I search his eyes for some hint of reason, but all I see is a depth that consumes me and a pain that I know all too well.

"So many of the residents there, they don't have anybody. There's no one watching their back, taking care of them. They're alone. And some of them, they've seen so much, been through so much... It's times like that you need a friend." The way he says it, I can't tell if he's talking about them or about himself.

"A friend? Since when do you want to be anyone's friend?"

Before he says anything more, our burgers and beers arrive. He takes shelter in a bite and a drink of beer. But he doesn't relent. It's just a pause. This subject is too close to what passes for his heart that he can't lie. Or, if he

is lying, he's the best liar I've ever met.

"I can't just let them suffer, you know? It's the right thing to do to help. To talk to them, to make them feel like they're human, like they're not alone, like people care about them." He takes another bite and a drink of beer, then gives me a look that pierces me. "What about you? What do you get out of helping ungrateful shits like Charlie that try to murder you the first chance they get?"

I flinch. That hits way too close to home for me to even answer. So I just ignore him. A few more drinks follow, and maybe it's the adrenaline and the alcohol mixed, but I'm already feeling it. *I am such a lightweight.*

Bishop clears his throat. "That came out harsher than I meant it to. You do a lot for that place. Everyone knows it wouldn't run without you. What does working for the youth center give you?"

"Fulfillment. When things are going well, when it's been a good day, I go home knowing that I helped a kid so they don't grow up to be..."

"Someone like me?"

I blush. "Yes, and no. I mean, I don't want them to wear a cut. Or beat people up in parking lots. But if they grew up to volunteer and help the community, maybe that wouldn't be so bad."

"You're not wrong. You're also way too good to be stuck just running the front desk at that place. And you popped up out of nowhere just a couple months ago. Ironwood Falls is a small town, and the number of people who actually try to improve this place is even smaller. How did I not notice you before?" He says. There's a momentary pause where he looks at me — no, he looks *into* me — and I blush at how intense and probing his gaze is. It's like he's reading every secret I've ever had, and they're all written on the inside of my skull, just behind my eyeballs. A sense of worry that he's suddenly going to blurt out my deepest secrets, including a name that I've tried so hard to bury, surges through me.

I have to change the subject.

"I never thought I'd be out here with you."

"What do you mean?" He gives me a look that's both confused and intrigued. To hide from the intensity of his eyes, I take another drink. My fingers are tingling; I should slow down my drinking, but I can't — everything that happened earlier is still so fresh and Bishop is doing nothing to help calm my nerves. No, he's *frying* them with the heat in his eyes and in his voice.

I take another drink.

"You're always such a grumpy asshole. Why are you the way that you are? Sandra thinks something happened to you, but I think being an asshole is just something ingrained in who you are." It's rude, it's harsh, but I'm half drunk and nervous, so subtlety isn't exactly my strong suit right now.

"Seems like you and Sandra spend a lot of time talking about me."

"In the mornings. I try not to. I'd rather not. But usually, she'll mention your..."

"My what?"

I'm buzzed. No, it's more than that. And I never was that good at lying to begin with. Which is probably why I'm good at my job and enjoy it so much — I don't hesitate delivering a wake-up call to people when it's called for. Sometimes it gets me in trouble. And, with one particular person, it led to a lot of pain. I often wish I was better at lying. To myself, especially. If I were, I might've had the courage to do what I needed to do a long time ago if I could've lied to myself enough to believe that leaving and living on the run from *him* wouldn't be as hard or as lonely as it actually is. It's better, sure — not being screamed at, not being beaten, not having a knife held to my throat while he... but there's still terror. It's just different; it's strange being afraid of shadows and memories, of immaterial things that seem so potent that they hit with all the force of a lover's fist. I might not go to sleep with bruises, but I still get them in my nightmares — my constant, choking nightmares — and I still wake up with tears in my eyes and no one to help me dry them because I'm so afraid that I can't allow myself to get close to anyone.

It's terror, it's isolation, and, so often, it feels unending.

I shake my head clear. Look at Bishop and see a hint of teasing in his eyes. There might even be something that passes for a smile on his face.

My heart feels safe looking at him.

"Your butt. She talks about your butt. A lot."

"My butt?"

"Yes. Your butt is basically her morning ritual. Well, that and a cup of coffee. She sits by the window, she watches you arrive, she talks and thinks about your butt, and she gets her glasses all steamy because of it. She thinks it looks great in jeans."

"What do you think?"

Is he toying with me? Or is he punishing me? It wouldn't be beyond him, based on my experience with other men like Bishop — vicious men with big muscles and fragile egos.

I look at him again, deep. No, he's not toying with me.

He's amused, and he's curious, but he has a heart, which means he wouldn't mess with a drunk woman who just had a traumatic encounter with death.

Plus, the corners of his kissable lips are quivering.

"I... Agree with her, even if I don't observe it as constantly."

"That's a very diplomatic way to talk about my butt."

"Well, I, uh... You know, this whole thing is making me very uncomfortable right now. I need another beer."

One comes.

"You're uncomfortable? I'm the one who's being ogled by a pair of perverts every morning."

There's laughter in his voice and a smile on his face. He thinks he's won, but I won't just let him sit there, stewing in his victory.

I clear my throat and look him in the eye. Hold him there. "Oh yeah? Why do you always check me out before you go into the senior center?"

He blinks. Maybe he even blushes. Is he embarrassed?

"What are you talking about?"

"Every morning, I see you looking at me."

"You're imagining things."

"I am not. I notice."

He shakes his head like a wild animal trying to shake itself free of a trap. It's cute to see someone so unflappable embarrassed. Suddenly, the last thing I'm thinking about is the terror I was feeling earlier. If I put my tingling fingers to my face, I think I might even feel a smile. "No. You're misinterpreting. I always check my surroundings. It's a habit. I was in the Army — a doctor, but there are some things you pick up and you learn never to forget. It's just a habit."

"You're lying."

"You're frustrating. And misguided."

"It's OK that you're looking. I can't control your eyeballs. Just as long as you know there will never be anything between us."

"What makes you think I'd want anything? I have enough problems as it is without having to babysit some naïve, frustrating, beau — " He stops short.

"Wait... were you going to call me beautiful?"

Is he hitting on me?

The thought both flatters and scares me. He did just beat up a bunch of

people in a parking lot and looked like a feral beast man while doing it, but he also did it to protect me. Then he took me here, sat with me, talked with me — even though I know talking to people is clearly not his favorite thing to do — all to help me feel better.

And I can't forget how he looked around those old people. He doted on them.

"You're memorable, Eden. How could I not notice you?"

He is hitting on me.

And I'm blushing, damn it.

Blushing and smiling and already thinking of something to say to encourage him to flirt with me more, because I like the way it sounds when he says my name; his voice drops just a tad deeper, gets hotter, and I wonder what it'd sound like for him to growl it at me as we're in bed.

No. I have to stop myself. No more thinking about Bishop.

I can't let this happen.

It's flattering, it's tempting, and it's exactly the wrong thing for me; I swore I'd leave this life and everything even remotely associated with it behind me.

Far, far behind me.

Just that thought alone is enough to make me feel like the walls are closing in; the room gets darker; the air gets thicker. A dozen sets of eyes — every person in this dive bar — paws over my body and I feel *him. Him.* The monstrous man I left in my nightmares. The man I fight with all my heart to forget. He's looming over my shoulder, his hot breath against the back of my neck. I can feel his hands clench, can sense the blows that are about to batter my body.

He's out there, and if I'm not careful, he's going to find me and he's going to beat every ounce of humanity out of me.

I have to get out of here.

Now.

"Eden?" Bishop says, quietly.

So fast that it would impress a frat boy, I finish my beer and devour my burger. Without a word, without even making eye contact with Bishop, because I'm scared the act of doing so will make me talk to him.

Instead, I silently gorge myself in a frantic attempt to clean my plate, satiate my appetite, and get the hell out of there.

No talking, no looking, just eating.

The burger goes down so quickly that I'm shocked the server doesn't come

by with a crappy Polaroid camera to ask to take my picture for the wall. Nothing matters except getting out of here as quickly as possible.

"Eden, are you OK? You're going to choke if you don't chew," Bishop says, once he collects himself. Which happens *after* I've guzzled my entire beer, let out an unseemly belch, and shoved a handful of fries into my mouth, storing them in my cheeks like I'm a squirrel preparing itself for winter.

My stomach hurts. I'm going to be sick in about twenty minutes, but I force myself to lock eyes with Bishop.

"I want to go. *Now*. And if you will not take me out of here, I will walk home."

A flash of curiosity shimmers in his eyes, but his only reaction is to take out his wallet and a handful of bills, which he slaps on the table.

That warmth that I saw earlier, that feeling that drew me out and made me feel safe around him, fades into the background behind his general grumpiness and his unfocused malevolence towards anyone and everyone in the room.

"This was a mistake. Let's get you home."

Minutes later, I'm back at the youth center and sitting in my car, my knuckles white as I grip the steering wheel and fight to breathe. I didn't want to act that way back in the restaurant — deep down, I have this sense that Bishop might be different — but I can't take the risk. I took it once before and I barely got out with my life.

No, actually, I didn't.

What I escaped with isn't my life. It's just this *thing* cobbled together from a handful of lies and held together thanks to the pity of a few kind strangers. I'm not alive, I'm not me. I'm just existing.

I start my car and pull out of the lot, my brain on autopilot as I steer toward home.

It isn't until I get to my driveway that I notice he's following me.

As I exit my car, he exits his truck.

"Eden. Wait a second."

If it were anyone else, I wouldn't stop.

But somehow, he has this hold over me.

Why? Why do I let myself feel anything for a man I know is so wrong for me?

He strides toward me and his hand reaches into his pocket in a motion that fills me with dread. I've seen men do it countless times, and every time, it's to

draw some kind of weapon.

Is he going to kill me for turning down his conversation on our pseudo-date?

It wouldn't surprise me.

I wouldn't be the first woman to be killed for slighting a man.

Just as my heart ramps up to riot speed, he takes his hand out of his pocket. He's holding a knife. A large knife. A flick of his wrist brings the blade out to glint in the dim dark and he extends it toward me. Tunnel vision takes over, and the only thing I hear is the pounding of my pulse in my ears. Bishop's lips are moving, but I can't hear a word he's saying. What is it? An insult? A warning?

I take a step backward and raise my hands defensively.

I can already imagine the feeling of the knife entering my flesh. It's an easy memory to conjure up. It's one that happened to me so many times before. And when I'm done with that memory, I think about how it will feel to have his fists pound my ribs, my stomach, my face — I imagine, and I remember.

A scream forms in my throat.

It won't save my life if he tries to kill me, but at least it might get someone to call the cops in time to get Bishop arrested for my murder.

"Eden?" There's concern on his face. His voice is surprisingly warm for a murderer. "Eden, you look like you're going to have a heart attack. Talk to me. Please."

He's not stabbing me, just holding that knife out toward me. Handle first. "What?"

"I asked if you had protection. I wanted to give this to you. Take it, please."

What killer says please?

In a daze, I take the knife from him and put the blade back in the handle. I don't want it, but I'm too rattled to turn him down.

"Thanks," I mumble, not feeling thankful at all.

"Go inside. Get some sleep. I'm going to wait around for a while, just in case they come back."

"You'll wait around?"

"I'll keep watch. I'll keep my distance, but I want you to sleep knowing that no one is going to hurt you, Eden. You're safe, now."

I stare at Bishop, my mind whirling with conflicting emotions. I want to

believe him, but years of trauma and betrayal have taught me to be wary of anyone who claims they want to protect me. Yet Bishop and his words touch a deep part of me that longs for safety and security.

It'd be so nice to trust someone that says they want to protect me.

Reluctantly, I nod.

"OK. Just for tonight."

Bishop gives me a small, reassuring smile before he retreats to his truck and settles himself inside, keeping a watchful eye on my house. As I turn towards my front door, a mix of trepidation and gratitude fills my chest. Inside my house, the air is heavy with memories. The darkness that envelops me feels suffocating, and I quickly switch on every light to dispel the shadows.

With trembling hands, I lock the doors and draw the curtains shut. Though Bishop's presence outside brings a measure of comfort, I can't shake off the nagging doubts that plague my mind. What if this is just another trap? Another manipulative act designed to lure me into a false sense of security?

I go upstairs and collapse on my bed.

I want to forget about this entire day. About everything.

Except for one thing: that I can never, ever again allow myself to get close to a man in an MC.

No matter how much I want to.

No matter how handsome he is.

No matter how good his butt looks in jeans.

CHAPTER NINE

Bishop

At one in the morning, a text from Goldie pulls me away from my post outside Eden's house. It's a simple text comprising a location pin, some names — Mayhem, Ranger, Moose and Rook — and orders that I'll be guarding with them until just before sunrise. He ends his text the same way he always does, and I roll my eyes.

Namaste.

My ass.

Even with the orders, I linger in front of Eden's for a while. I don't want her to wake up and not see me there keeping watch, just as much as I don't want to go to guard duty and be forced to spend a few hours with people who aren't named Eden. Especially Rook. That man is as surly as a wolverine with testicular torsion.

When I pull up to the guard site, the rest of the crew is already waiting. Also, there are some of the other out-of-towners — two other guys from the Steel Reapers MC named Bullet and Thunder. They're far too chatty and even try to shake my hand. I keep my arms crossed. This deal might be to the benefit of the club, but there's nothing requiring me to be friendly with people I don't know.

Once they're gone, I pick a post on the perimeter of this old storage yard and keep my eyes on the tree-line, the way you're supposed to do on guard duty. It's welcome work. It gives me time to think about Eden, and how to get her to change her mind about me keeping an eye on her. Not that I particularly want to — I've got enough going on in my life as it is, and none of it is made better by having a trouble-magnet like her around — but I can't bear the idea of the world making a punching bag out of a beautiful woman who just wants to make life better for some kids in this city.

I can't just stand aside and let that happen. I have to act.

So I have to find a balance.

But first, I need to find a way to make her to let me help her.

"You look distracted," Mayhem says from behind me.

"I'm doing my job."

"No, you're staring off into space."

"Am not."

"Really? So that bear that's hanging right out by the trees in front of you is something you're totally aware of and absolutely fine with?"

I shake my head, squint. "Bear?"

Mayhem points, and I follow his finger. "Right there."

"Oh, fuck."

"Yeah, you might want to have your gun out. Not that I think you have much to worry about. That bear would probably get one sniff of you and decide you're too sour, but you never know."

"You guys all checking out that bear?" Says another voice.

I turn, see Moose not ten feet away.

How does a man that big move so quietly?

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"My job. Patrolling the perimeter. Then I saw you checking out that bear and I thought I'd join in. You planning to wrestle it? If so, I got a tub of vaseline in my ride. You can't get into some good ol' fashion bear wrasslin' without being greased up."

"Bear wrestling, huh?" Mayhem says, sounding far too tempted. "Tell me more."

"No. We are not wrestling bears," I say. This isn't my job. I'm supposed to just watch the trees and keep the cargo secure from whatever degenerates are trying to steal it, not keep the degenerates in the club from wrestling wild animals. Especially because, if Mayhem gets wounded, it'll be my job to fix him up, and I just do not feel up to stitching up his crazy ass. "Not tonight. Do it on your own time."

Moose grunts something that sounds assenting.

"It's not a good time for it, anyway. Best time of year to do it is around rutting season. The bears got extra fight, then."

"What about if we shot the bear up with some Viagra?" Mayhem says. "Would that work?"

"Might. You got a guy?"

"I got a guy."

I snap. "I swear to fucking Christ, I will call Rabid if you don't give up this

bear wrestling idea and get back to patrolling."

"What's got your goat, buddy?" Moose says.

"He's always like this," Mayhem says.

"He is?"

"I am," I say.

"Why?" Moose says.

"Because I'm always fixing other people's mistakes. They get shot, I patch 'em up. Over and over. It's just an endless cycle of cleaning up after a bunch of fucking idiots."

Mayhem clucks his tongue. "That's kind of true, Moose, but that isn't the whole truth. See, he's extra grumpy tonight."

"What's got you down, buddy?"

"You two."

"That line ain't working on me. I see a man in pain, I go in and give him a hug," Moose says, approaching way too quickly. His arms are nearly around me before I manage a step backward to safety.

"Stop it."

Then Mayhem comes up behind me, his arms outstretched, too.

"This could be a group thing."

"Oh, fuck me, no."

Their hands meet around me, the fingers interlink; I'm trapped in the hellish prison that is a group hug.

"The only way you're getting out of the love trap is if you tell us the truth," Moose says. "Now, we can either squeeze the truth out of you with a hug, or you can give it up of your own accord, mister. And let me tell you this before you even think of struggling — I can go for hours. You won't outlast me. Hugging, listening, whatever you need, whatever it takes, I'm in it for the duration."

"I hate you so much."

They squeeze. Then squeeze some more.

"You going to talk, brother?" Mayhem says.

I'm trapped, and there's no way out of it except to dive into the thick of things and hope I die quickly. My only other option is slow suffocation by bro-hug, and I can think of nothing closer to hell than that. Especially since Mayhem smells like he hasn't bathed in a week.

How the hell does Stacy put up with him?

"Fine. I'll talk. Just don't touch me anymore."

"Boundaries, got it," Moose says. "But I'll apologize in advance if I forget them. I'm just a big ol' hugger and it's hard to fight the urge sometimes."

"Tell you what: I'll punch you if you get too close."

"Point taken. Time to talk, Mr. Grump."

I breathe in the chill night air. The sweet scent of pine and recent rain tastes like ash on my tongue. "There's someone I'm trying to help — "

"Lies," Mayhem says. "You'd never willingly help anyone. Because you hate everyone."

"Not everyone."

"Oh shit, is it a girl?" Mayhem says. His eyes go wide and his smile does, too.

"Shut up. It's not a girl. Girls are young, they wear ponytails and backpacks and..."

"Oh, so it's an old lady? Is it someone from the senior center? Is that why you volunteer there all the time? For the sex? If I had known that someone *of that age* is what you were looking for, Stacy's mom is actually..."

"No. Shut up about Stacy's mom. I'm not dating a geriatric, and I'm not dating a child. She's a woman about my age. A little younger. And we're not dating. Fuck you both for fucking with my train of thought," I say. It takes several breaths to get my brain back on track. "She needs my help, but she's stubborn as fuck and doesn't want it, even though she's in danger. I need to figure out a way to convince her."

"And you've tried just talking to her?" Moose says.

"That'd never work with Bishop," Mayhem says. "If he got honest with someone, he'd just end up telling them how much he hates them and how he'd rather be... You know, I don't know what he does on his free time... Maybe sitting at home, in his basement, naked, eating lemons and getting into scowling matches with himself in the mirror while listening to *Phantom of the Opera*."

I ignore Mayhem. It's the only way to deal with him. "Moose, she knows the reality of her situation and that she needs my help."

Eden has to. It's hard to deny your problem when they literally ambush you in a parking lot and try to kill you.

Yet she still keeps rebuffing me.

Which should be perfect for me. It means I'm absolved of all responsibilities — she told me to leave her alone — and it means I can focus on dealing with all the other dangers threatening the club right now. Yet I

can't let her go. Leaving her alone is not an option. I have to be sure she's safe.

"But she's still saying no?" Moose says. "Lack of consent is never a good thing, buddy."

"I'm not your buddy. But you're right."

"You thought about bribing her with treats? Rabid does it with Sheila sometimes. And Stacy does it with me. It's effective for both humans and animals."

"This woman is not a dog."

"But she is a person. She might enjoy some cupcakes."

"Mayhem, I don't think Bishop is the type to buy a woman gifts to win his way into her heart."

I shake my head. "That's not what I'm trying to do. I just don't want to see her murdered."

"Love expresses itself in many ways. For some, it comes as wanting to see the person we care about be safe. For others, it comes in the form of ball gags, harnesses, and riding crops..."

"I was an idiot for even thinking you two could help me. Fuck this. I'm going to go hug that bear and hope he finishes the job quickly." I stalk toward where I last saw the wild animal. It's a brown bear, which means it's the larger, stronger, and more aggressive of the North American bear species. It shouldn't take much work to provoke it to rip my throat out.

"Wait, Bishop. I have an idea: what if you used psychology?"

I turn. "What do you know about psychology, Mayhem?"

Actually, now that I think about it, he probably knows quite a lot. It's easy to picture him having spent much of his youth surrounded by psychologists trying to figure out how someone can be so disturbed.

"It's a trick I learned when I went to a timeshare presentation," Mayhem says.

"Oh, dear fucking god, no."

"Don't be so quick to write him off, Bishop. Those salesmen know their shit," Moose says.

"It's true. This guy, he had all these tricks. One of his best tricks was to offer what he wanted to sell to you to someone else instead. It raises the perceived value of the thing, and it makes them want it even more, because it's scarce. So you just keep dangling it in front of them just out of reach, and then, the next thing you know, they've bought three weeks in a timeshare, and

they're having a very uncomfortable conversation with their ol' lady when she gets home from work."

I blink. "Mayhem, did you get tricked into buying three weeks in a timeshare?"

Mayhem scratches his scruffy beard and avoids eye contact. "Well, technically, what I bought is three weeks of guaranteed vacation. And, considering how valuable time is — more valuable than money — the rest and relaxation means I've already made a profit on my investment. But, the point is, Claire is helping me write a letter claiming lack of competency for signing the contract, and she's pretty confident it'll negate the deal. The sales trick really works, though. You should try it."

I sigh. "Fine. Tell me more about this trick. How do I use it on this person?"

"So, here's what you do: you make her believe that you're offering your help to someone else instead. You're not giving your time to her, you're giving it to someone else. Make her think that someone else needs you and values your assistance. It'll trigger her fear of missing out and create a sense of urgency for her to accept your help."

Moose nods enthusiastically. "It's like reverse psychology. Humans are weird like that."

I consider their suggestion. Maybe this could be the breakthrough I need to get through to Eden. "Alright, let's say I give it a shot. How do I even go about implementing this thing?"

Mayhem rubs his hands together eagerly. "First things first, you need to find a suitable person who appears to desperately need your help. Someone who really wants you around and will play along with the act."

Moose raises his hand, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "What about me? I can pretend to be whatever you want me to be, Bishop."

"No. No chance in hell," I say.

"Then who else do you have?" Mayhem says.

I think for a moment. I need someone so desperate to have me they'll enthusiastically believe whatever lie I tell them and they'll help sell it to Eden. It's a dirty trick, I feel slimy considering it, but it's necessary to get Eden to change her mind. I refuse to stand aside while some drug-dealing dickhead tries to kill her again.

But the moment that the name of the perfect person for this scheme pops into my head, I can't suppress a groan of regret.

No, it's not regret.
It's pain.

CHAPTER TEN

Eden

To call what I got the night before 'sleep' would be an insult to the word; I wake up after a night of nightmares playing behind my eyelids, my body beaten, groggy, stiff. The first thing I do upon waking up is lay in bed for half an hour, summoning up the courage to get out of bed and do what I need to do: check every door and window while clutching the knife that Bishop gave me.

My dog, Comet, follows at my feet as I do.

Comet's hungry, which is why he's extra close this morning. That, and he can sense my anxiety. Though that isn't a new sensation for him; most mornings I am anxious, but he can tell it's stronger this morning. Each window checked, each door examined, yields a few licks and nuzzles at my legs, as if to say that it's all right, that I'm doing great, that today will be another day where I'm safe, where he protects me, and maybe it'll also be that longed-for day where I forget what I went through.

This morning, though, I know that it'd be a lie to believe that.

After I check the doors and windows, and feed Comet and let him out onto the front yard to sniff everything and pee on a few things, I start a shower.

It's a long shower. I have the time, because I always wake up early for work; I know I'll always need the extra time to go through all the rituals required to start my day feeling safe. It takes time and effort to build a new life, and these exercises give me some small semblance of control after living so long in fear. They're essential. Maybe, someday, they'll no longer be necessary for me to feel like I'm me; maybe someday I'll be able to wake up, race through a morning on the way to work without having to check my locks, the closets, the windows, ready to scream my heart out; today's not that day.

It's a long shower.

After I get dressed, and grab a leash and go outside to walk Comet. But

only after a quick loop of the downstairs to confirm that everything is still locked as it should be. Comet's never far. This morning — as is usual — he's on the doorstep waiting for me. We do a lap of the neighborhood and he sniffs every bush and tree thoroughly, which I know he's not just sniffing for his benefit, but for mine, too, as if to say, "I've checked everywhere. There's no one that's going to sneak up on you. I have made you safe."

I love him for it.

Back home, I give him a few treats, some pets and kisses, and then I finish getting ready for the day and pour myself a mug of coffee for the road. On the way out the door, I call to him, "See you at lunch."

He *woofs*.

I'm almost feeling normal by the time I'm halfway to work. My morning routine does just enough to pull my mind away from thoughts about last night. Instead, I think about the usual things, like chatting with Sandra, filling in for Al, and making little bits of good happen for the kids served by the youth center. It's not much, but it's something. Even big trees start as small seeds, so why can't I grow a fulfilling, happy life for myself from what little bits of joy I have?

It's a beautiful lie, so believable it might actually be true someday.

But not today.

As soon as I pull into my parking spot at the youth center, a truck pulls in beside me. Bishop's truck. Its arrival is so closely timed, it can't have been an accident — we even cut our engines at the same time.

"Are you following me?" I say as I get out.

He crosses his arms and leans against his truck, face stern, like it's me who should be ashamed instead of him.

"Following you? Of course I was. Someone has to watch your back, and that you even had to ask that question tells me you weren't."

"I have enough to worry about in my life without having another stalker," I snap and take my coffee mug and hurl it at his head. Whatever goodwill he earned from saving me the night before evaporated the second he put on that smirk and talked like it's normal for him to follow me around everywhere.

"Another stalker?"

His gaze pierces me to my core and sinks its hooks into the truth, as if it can pull it right out through my mouth.

"Yeah. Charlie," I say, but even I can't put enough enthusiasm on it to sell the lie. Not that I was ever good at lying to begin with, but I am so tired, so

worn down.

"You're lying."

"Bishop, I'm not in need of a bodyguard. Or a lecture."

"I didn't realize it was such a bad thing that I was trying to keep you safe. There's clearly something bothering you, and I'll bet it's more than a moronic teenager who got pissed you took his stash away."

I grit my teeth. Why does he even think it's his business? Why can't he go back to being the grumpy, silent man he was even just yesterday?

"Yeah, it's a moronic biker who can't even take a hint that I don't need a bodyguard."

"What's it going to take for you to learn the lesson that you need my help?"

"The same thing it's going to take you I'm not interested. That I will *never* be interested."

"I can't believe I'm even wasting the time. I have better things to do than argue with some stubborn girl."

"Go play bingo," I say. Anger propels the words from my lips, and I regret them the moment I say them. I tell myself I hate Bishop. I know I have to stay away from him, but he does real good for the people in the senior center and I shouldn't make fun of him for that.

"Do you at least have that knife I gave you?"

"I left it back at home. In my junk drawer."

He rolls his eyes. "Do you want some advice?"

"About as much as I want herpes."

"Well then, just like most people, you're going to get it: quit your job."

"Excuse me?" I wish I had another coffee cup to throw at him. Also, did he just imply he has herpes?

"First, I can see in your eyes you're wondering, and no, I don't have it. Second, it's safer for you that way. What happened last night should've woken you up, made you more cautious, but it looks like it hasn't — you're still being reckless. You're going to get yourself hurt, Eden. I don't want that."

So his answer is to tell me to quit and move? As if I have that kind of money? As if I didn't blow through most of my savings — what little savings they were, everything I managed to scrimp and hide from *him* — to get where I am?

As if I don't love my job and the impact I have on the community.

"No. No way. They need me here. If I quit, that'd just leave Sandra, Trent, and Marcy to do all the work, because even then, Al wouldn't step up and it'd take forever for them to find someone to fill my shoes. Plus, I like the work. It's rewarding to actually make a difference. How many jobs can you actually say that about?"

Then I blush for just a second, because I realize I'm talking to a guy who was a doctor and actually has probably saved many lives. My 'making a difference' doesn't feel like much compared to that, but it's still something, at least.

"It sounds like they'd be screwed without you."

"They would."

"Also, sounds like you don't want to leave."

"Accurate."

"And you don't really want to carry around that knife, either. Even though you know things are dangerous for you right now."

"No, I don't want to carry that knife. I'd prefer not to live a life where I have to go around stabbing people."

"But you'd like to be safe, right?"

"Do you think that to be safe, I have to stab people?"

"No. Obviously. I'm asking if you don't want to worry about people like Charlie or whoever else it is that's threatening you."

It's such an offensively straightforward and dumb question that I turn and head to the offices of the youth center. Of course I want to be safe. Does he think I want to live my life in fear?

I get into the office and Sandra perks up in her chair the second she sees Bishop is trailing right behind me.

"Oh, Bishop, are you volunteering on our side today?" She says. "Would you like coffee? Or a doughnut? We've got them in the break room. If you don't like the flavors, I can go out and get you one. Just tell me what you like..."

It's almost gross how much she is drooling over him and completely ignoring me. As if the sight of a handsome mound of muscle and grumpiness with a nice butt is enough to make her write off the sight of her distressed friend.

"I'm fine, too, Sandra, thanks," I say.

"Oh, good," she says, not even looking away from Bishop. The only reason she even knows I'm here is that Bishop is standing right next to me.

"That's nice."

"You want to be safe, right? For me not to have to worry about what might happen to you? Talk to me, Eden. Don't think you can just shut me out and I'll go away."

"I wish you would. But, just like herpes, you keep popping up at the worst times."

"I told you: I don't have herpes. That was just a poor analogy. Now, are you going to answer my question, or are you going to be childish?"

"You're a poor analogy," I spit back.

"I don't care if you have herpes, Bishop," Sandra says suggestively.

"For the last time: I do not have herpes," he says. "Stop with that talk. I'm serious."

"And I'm serious, too — go away."

He shakes his head and crosses his arms and plants himself like a giant asshole of an oak tree right in front of my desk.

"I won't leave until I'm sure that you're safe. And, since you're not doing what you need to do to protect yourself, that means I have to step in and keep a watch on you. This is important, Eden."

I cross my arms and give him a look that clearly says, '*Go away.*'

"You don't believe me?" He says.

"I don't like having men think they can control me."

"This isn't about control. This is about protecting someone is important. What can I do to prove that to you?"

"I don't think you can."

The office goes dead silent as he glares at me — Sandra even stops panting, and settles into just openly staring at Bishop and the way his jeans hug his crotch. I wait, patient, secure because there is nothing Bishop can do to prove to me he doesn't just want to control me. It's what men like him have done repeatedly. They might say they are doing it for my own good, but their words and their intentions never match up. It's always about power, about control.

But this time, I won't give him any.

I run my life. I control it.

In fact, I'll give him nothing but a cold 'fuck off' stare and eventually even Bishop, as hardheaded as he is, will have to give up and admit defeat.

Because I will not *never again* be under the thumb of a man from an MC.

Bishop takes a step back and I smile, sensing this stupid standoff is about

to end. He has to give up — there's nothing he can do to sway me away from the fact that I know he just wants to run my life.

It will not happen. Because, if you give an inch, they'll keep taking and taking until you're six feet under.

Then Bishop sits down on Sandra's desk.

He sighs, shakes his head, runs his hand through his hair, and his demeanor changes. It burns, and he smiles at Sandra. Several things happen then in quick succession: first, Sandra gasps; second, her eyes get so wide that her eyes might literally pop out — this moment is her Christmas, her birthday, her Valentine's day, from now until the end of time; third, she moans his name beneath her breath.

Then Bishop shifts on the desk. It looks as if he's doing it just to get comfortable, but I can't be sure, because there's a look in his eyes like he's daring me to say something. It's almost... mirthful. Is he doing this for Sandra's benefit?

Is he just rubbing his butt on her desk for show?

Then he turns until he's looking right into Sandra's insanely wide eyes. His voice drops to a deep, seductive burn. "Sandra, I need your help."

"Anything," she gasps. "Oh god, I'll do anything. I'll give you my social security number, the deed to my house, I'll kill someone... whatever you want."

"This is a big ask, though. It's important. I need someone to keep an eye on Eden for me. As you know, there are some hostiles out there who have made some threats against her."

"I know. I remember. Charlie, right?"

Bishop nods, makes a deep *mmmhmm* noise that, even several desks away, is enough of a sumptuous vibration that my nerves tingle just hearing it.

Sandra emits an audible gasp and then coos.

"Charlie. Right. So, here's what I'm proposing: I'm going to give you my phone number, and I'm going to ask you to watch Eden's back. I want you to call me, or text me, or even video chat with me if you see anything that might be threatening, OK?"

"Your phone number?"

"My phone number. Now, I'm going to want regular reports, too. You'll have to keep me updated with anything you think might be important. Even if there's nothing outright threatening Eden that you've noticed, I'm still going to want a SitRep from time to time. Those we will do in person," he says.

“Face to face.”

My eyes go wide.

Is this some sort of mind game? A manipulation tactic? Or is he just making a total end-run around me and looping me out of controlling how I’m protected? The diabolical bastard.

Sandra's hands shake like she's suffering a seizure. "In person?"

"You and me, sitting down somewhere of your choosing. Drinks, dinner, coffee, whatever works for you. My treat."

I want to say something. To speak up. Bishop can't know the torrent he's about to unleash — the endless calls, texts, video chats, that he'll receive every moment of every day from now until the end of time.

"Like, a date?"

Bishop rolls his muscular shoulders. "If that's what you want to call it, yeah. I mean, I'll be treating you to these drinks or whatever, and if you need someone to pick you up or bring you home, I'll be doing that, too."

"So, a date," she says.

"A date. As many dates as it takes to keep Eden safe. Because that's important to me, which means your help is going to be important to me, too. I'll be in your debt, Sandra. So, tell me: do we have a deal?"

"Anything you want, Bishop," she moans. There are sweat stains under the armpits of her shirt and her hands are tapping an ecstatic rhythm against her desk.

"I'm going to hand you my phone now." He reaches into his pocket, holds it out in front of Sandra's trembling hands. "I'm going to want you to put your number in it and text yourself from my phone, so that way, you have my number and can reach me any time you want, OK?"

"Please... I'll do anything..." Her words are nothing more than a whisper on a lustful wind.

Bishop places his phone in Sandra's hands, and her fingers slide across the screen. He's really doing it; he's going to give up control over his life to my thirsty coworker just to make sure I stay safe. She will consume every moment of his existence, and I can only imagine the photos she'll send him after she's had a glass of wine, or two, or none; it'll be endless, relentless, and clothes-less.

He is serious.

That's how much he cares about me.

Whether he'll say that out loud is beside the point. Actions speak louder

than words and his actions right now are about as loud as a nuclear explosion.

"Wait," I call out loud enough to shock Sandra before she has the chance to finish putting her number in Bishop's phone. "Hold on a second, Bishop."

In the blink of an eye, he plucks the phone from Sandra's foiled fingers. "Yes, Eden?"

"You were really going to, weren't you?"

"He still can," Sandra says.

"I still might," he says. "It's that important."

"Even knowing all that will happen?"

"So much could happen, Bishop," Sandra says. "You can't even imagine."

Bishop nods. "Even knowing all that."

His voice is utter sincerity — he'd take everything Sandra could throw at him, day in and day out, buy her drinks, dinner, take her out and take her home, all just to keep an eye on me.

It's complete insanity.

I take out my phone. I can't believe I'm doing this.

"Fine, Bishop. You win. I'll give you my number."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Eden

"Tell me everything you know about Bishop."

Sandra's face lights up and she sets aside the paperwork in front of her to swivel around in her chair.

"Finally. I can't believe it's taken you this long to come to your senses."

"Finally?" I say, taken aback by her enthusiasm. "What do you mean?"

"Because ever since he left here this morning, you've been ignoring him — I mean, I don't know how you haven't even texted him yet; it's been hours, and you have his phone number on your phone, just waiting for you — but I went over there to the senior center on my lunch break. He wasn't there. They said he told them he'd be out a lot of the morning, but I did some talking to some of the residents, and I learned a lot."

"You went snooping?"

"Investigating."

"You're a PI now?"

"I'm someone who takes an interest in the man who is going to be watching over my co-worker. It's called being responsible, Eden."

As if it's not blatantly obvious that she's hoping that somehow I'll decide that I don't want Bishop's number anymore, and she'll be ready, waiting in the wings, salivating, to take over and get his number.

"Sure. Call it whatever you want."

Outside, one of the senior center's residents is walking through the parking lot toward the youth center's offices. He's quite old, slow, but his posture is so straight he reminds me of one of those guards with the funny hats who protect the King of England. I wonder if he's supposed to be outside like this? Should I call someone from the senior center? The way he's walking, it's like he's on patrol. He's even waving his arms at things in the parking lot I can't see.

"I learned some really interesting things."

"Like what?" I lean toward Sandra. If Bishop is going to be protecting me, I want to know everything about him so I can determine just how big of a mistake I've made in swapping contact information with him and agreeing to his ridiculous plan. That, and maybe I'll find out something I can use to make sure I keep control in this relationship. He says it's only about protecting me, but why should I trust a man in an MC?

Outside, the old man in the parking lot is drawing closer. His gestures are the same — they're practiced, precise, and with each arm movement, he opens his mouth and says something that I can't hear because of the windows and the distance between us. It looks like he's shouting. Or even, and it feels weird to even think this, but he might even be barking. The movements are that abrupt.

"Well, for one thing, this one older woman said that she heard Bishop and this one old man talking together about their times in the Army. Well, the old guy wasn't in the Army, he was in the Navy. He was on one of those river boats they sent way up into enemy territory on some scary secret missions. It sounded dangerous. And difficult."

"Uh-huh," I say. My attention is only half on Sandra at this point. The other half is on the old man, who's now a lot closer. His arm gestures are more dramatic now. More forced. And his eyes are wide, focused on something that I can't see; maybe on something that only he can see. He's still shouting, only it's more striking, and there's something clenched in his fist.

"Which, I suppose those missions aren't so secret anymore if this old man was willing to talk all about them. I wonder if he's breaking some law by doing that? Do you think they're still classified? Could I get in trouble by talking about what I heard?"

"I doubt it."

The old man's much closer. His eyes are wild, and they look almost angry. And what's that in his hand? It's shiny, metallic. His gestures are precise, matched with his shouts, and they're almost a slashing motion. What is he doing? "Tell me what you heard, Sandra."

"Well, this one woman, Charlene, she was nice, but she's also someone you have to keep your eye on because she has her eye on both Bishop and the old man. She might be competition, Eden."

"Competition?"

"For Bishop."

"That's a competition I'm more than happy to lose. Get back to the story."

"I don't understand how you can write off a man who's both handsome, just the right kind of bad, and looks so good in jeans."

"That's three things. You can't say 'both' with three things. It doesn't work grammatically."

"English is a malleable language, Eden; I'll say it how I want to say it. Anyway, she said that the old man and Bishop were talking about loss the other night, and he was telling Bishop about this one mission in Vietnam. They were going way up some river that sounded like King Kong, but not, and they went into Cambodia, and they came under enemy fire. They got trapped behind enemy lines, and they were surrounded. It sounded so scary, and he almost died several times. A lot of his men did; they had to fight their way to get back to safety. It took weeks of going through the jungle, but on the trip, he and one man in his unit, they ended up falling in love. I guess they'd both felt something before the mission, but as they got so close to death, they couldn't hold back their feelings. They had this deep relationship; they fought through swamps and jungle, they held each other every night, they crossed rivers, they survived ambushes and outran an entire battalion of the enemy. One time, while taking fire, his lover got hurt, but the old man, Elroy, he carried him along on his back until finally, they — "

"Sandra, stop. There's an old man with a knife, and he's coming in here."

The front door to the offices open and the old man, holding a large kitchen knife, steps in. Now that he's close, I recognize his face from the other night. It's Elroy.

I put myself between Sandra and the old man; I'm the one in charge. It's my job to keep her safe. I hold my hands wide in a calming gesture.

"Easy, Elroy," I say. "Why don't you put the knife down?"

"Two hostiles. Stay back, Keith, I'll handle them."

He lunges at me with a speed that surprises me, and I barely sidestep his strike.

"Stop it. I'm not an enemy. My name is Eden."

The old man swings again and I shriek as I fall sideways into a desk and narrowly escape his knife.

Sandra screams. "What should I do, Eden?"

"Get my phone off my desk," I reply as I scramble along the floor while Elroy lumbers toward me, stabbing at the air just inches from my legs. "Get Bishop."

For once, I wish that muscular stalker of mine was somewhere nearby,

because with every swing and every stab, the old man gets closer to catching me with his knife, and I don't know how much longer I can keep scrambling. I think about fighting back, but I worry about hurting the old man. He's angry, but he looks fragile, like one hard blow could knock him down for good, and I don't know if I could live with that on my conscience.

As I desperately crawl towards my desk, I hear Sandra fumbling around, panic clear in her voice.

"I can't find your phone, Eden! What do I do?"

"Just keep looking!" I shout back, my heart pounding in my chest. Elroy inches closer. His haggard face is twisted with fury, and the glint of the knife in his hand sends a chill down my spine. I need to buy some time until Bishop arrives.

Summoning every ounce of courage, I push myself up from the floor and lock eyes with Elroy.

"Elroy, please! We're not your enemies. We want to help you."

His wild gaze darts between me and Sandra, but his grip on the knife remains unwavering.

"Lies! You're just like them! They took him away from me!"

He advances toward me, and I step backward until my back hits the wall; I'm running out of room, out of time.

"Found it," Sandra says. With a few swipes of her finger, she makes a call. I hear Bishop's muffled voice come through the speaker, and all Sandra does is yell, "We need you now. It's serious. Eden is in danger."

I leap over a desk just as old Elroy takes another swing. My foot catches on a chair, and I hit the floor, hard.

Crawling forward, I turn and see Elroy clambering over the desk at elder speed. The moment he's over, he lunges again, and I shriek as the blade nearly hits me.

Then he swings again, and I roll under a desk to take shelter.

The blade descends, and just as I feel the icy touch of sharpened steel graze against my ankle, the office door bursts open with a loud crash. Bishop storms in, his eyes scanning the room, assessing the situation in an instant. The tattoos that snake up his arms seem to come alive as adrenaline courses through his veins.

Fire in his eyes, he marches forward and stands at attention at the head of the desk I'm sheltering beneath.

"Captain Elroy Dean, at attention," he barks like a general.

Elroy freezes and raises his arm in a rigid salute. Old commands trigger old memories. "Sir, yes, sir."

"You are relieved of patrol duty. Leave your weapon upon the desk, and follow me outside," he says, his voice commanding, yet warm. The moment the old man's knife is on the table, Bishop steps forward, puts his arm around the old man's shoulders, and says, "Let's take a walk, my friend."

The old man's attitude changes, the ferocity leaves his eyes, replaced by a sense of loss. In a moment, he's no longer a young man lost in the jungle — he's aged, he's in a body that feels all the ravages of the fifty years of loss.

"Bishop? A walk sounds nice. Can we have some tea?"

"Anything you want, Elroy. Tea sounds nice. Your legs seem a little shaky, buddy. You feeling all right? Have you eaten anything today?"

"I want to sit down. That bench out in front of the senior center would be nice. I can see the birds there."

"I'll get you there. You been taking your meds, Elroy?" Bishop leads the old man to the front door at turtle speed. Over his shoulder, he calls, "Can you please bring us two cups of tea? He likes black tea. English breakfast, if you have it, Earl Grey if you don't."

Elroy nods. "They changed my pills. They're not as good."

Bishop's face darkens. "They changed your meds?"

"The insurance said they were too expensive. My new ones are all I can get. But I don't like them. They make it hard to sleep."

"I'll figure something out for you, Elroy. I promise. But can you promise me you'll keep taking your meds for the time being?"

Elroy raises his hand in a shaking salute.

The office door closes behind them, and I watch the two of them totter away. Sandra and I trade a long look.

"What the hell just happened?" I say.

"Charlene talked about this. Elroy has spells sometimes, especially if he doesn't take his pills. He goes into old memories. Mostly from the war. Do you want me to make the tea?"

"No, I'll do it and bring it to them."

One minute later, I have the two steaming mugs in my hands and I'm walking across the parking lot toward the bench in front of the senior center. The bench faces a small park, with a small area of hedges, flowers, and trees. Their backs are to me, their faces toward a pair of sparrows sitting in a small crabapple tree that's nearly lost all its leaves because of the changing season.

Bishop has his arm around the old man's shoulders. The old man has his hand outstretched, pointing toward the pair of sparrows.

"You miss him, don't you?" Bishop says.

"Every day."

"I know. It hurts, doesn't it?"

"I got shot once. Did I tell you? Happened two days before we made it to safety. A sniper got me. Then I got him. When Keith and I made it back to safety, they had us in the same hospital. Those were some good days, despite the malaria and the wounds in my leg that I had from some VC bamboo trap. We had time to be together, he and I. Even if it was a secret. But when we recovered, they knew, and they separated us. I was bereft, Bishop."

"I'm sorry, Elroy."

"They sent him somewhere, and they sent me on this mission to clear out some base the enemy was setting up in Cambodia that they were using to launch strikes down in the Saigon area. I got shot. And the moment of that hot lead piercing my body and setting every nerve on fire, it was the most poignant, potent pain I've ever felt in my life... except for the moment they split Keith and me up. They split us up, they never told us where the other went, and I've spent my entire life wondering what if..."

The old man's talking breaks into sobs.

Bishop tightens his hug around the old man's shoulders. "It's OK, Elroy, I've got you, and I'm not going anywhere."

"I tried to find him when I got back, you know. I knew his story, where he was from, so I went there. Found his house. But he wasn't there. I even checked the casualty records, and he was never reported as KIA. The man I loved just disappeared. Sometimes I wonder if he came back broken, just slipped through the cracks like so many of us vets did, or if he died unrecorded in some jungle somewhere, lost and taken by the muck. I don't know which hurts more. He was the love of my life, Bishop, and it's like he ceased to exist. Sometimes I wonder if he ever really existed at all, or if he was just some figment of my imagination, cooked up by my brain to give me something to hold on to in the face of certain death. Fuck, what cruel torture love is." Elroy shudders twice, sobs, then stills. "That motherfucker Tennyson — better to have loved and lost, my ass."

"Fuck Tennyson. He doesn't know, Elroy. But I do. I do, and I'm sorry." Bishop pauses for a moment, the two of them watching the birds. I can't help it. I come closer, drawn in by the pain in his voice, the sincerity of his words;

I see him differently, and I want to see and hear more. This is a man so different from his appearance. There's a beating, wounded heart in his chest, and his voice is full of such surprising emotion compared to the man who spends most of his day glowering at everyone and everything. "We need to talk about your walking around, Elroy. About what you did with that knife."

"I know, Bishop. I'm sorry. And I lied to you, earlier. I've been skipping my meds a bit."

"Why?"

"Because when it happens, when I lose it like that, I get him back. I saw him, Bishop — I saw Keith. He was there beside me. I saw him, I felt him, I held him, and even though I know that my mind's cracking up, when he was there, I felt whole."

"Fuck. Really, Elroy?"

"Sometimes, when my head's clear, I have trouble remembering him. Remembering his face, his voice. But when I don't take my pills, god, it's like he's right beside me. How can that be bad?"

"You have to take your pills, Elroy."

"I will." A pause, a sigh. "Do you think he's waiting for me?"

"I do. I have to."

I come closer.

One step, then another.

Their voices are lower now. Lower, and flooded with profound pain. I want to hear every word; I feel like I'm just a few syllables away from unlocking something important about Bishop and his past. Maybe it'll give me a way to keep control in our weird relationship, or maybe it'll just let me figure him out. Either way, I need to hear what he's going to say next.

"You sound sure."

"Sometimes it's the memory that's the only thing that keeps me going." Bishop's voice is so stricken with suffering that, though I fight with all my strength, I can't suppress a quiet gasp.

The wind shifts, and Bishop stiffens.

He turns, sees me, and I walk forward, trying to pretend like I wasn't just eavesdropping, like I didn't just hear his voice nearly break with agony, in the way that's only possible when you know what it's like to be haunted by remembrance.

But I'm sure he knows; there's a flicker of suspicion in his eyes.

And something else, too. He has this way of doing more than just looking

at me, but inside me instead. There's something deeper than suspicion in his eyes.

Does he know about me?

"I've got your tea," I say. "Two Earl Grey." I hand them over and then I add, "I hope they make you both feel better."

"Just seeing you makes me feel better," Elroy says, beaming with disarming charm. "I feel like I should tip such a pretty waitress. But I have to say, I think the only thing I've got in my pockets are hard candies."

"Thank you, Eden," Bishop says simply.

Elroy turns to Bishop, frowning. "Is that all you're going to do for her? Just because I don't have any money is no excuse for you. Get out your wallet, Bishop. This pretty lady deserves something for taking such good care of us."

Bishop blinks at first, but then Elroy nudges him with his elbow, so Bishop takes out his wallet. First, he grabs a single bill, but then, after Elroy makes a growling noise in his throat, he pulls out a couple more. He hands over seven dollars.

"This really isn't necessary," I say.

"It is. Beautiful woman like you taking care of two sour old geezers, of course you deserve a tip. Isn't she beautiful, Bishop?" Elroy says.

"You don't have to — "I start. My cheeks are beet red and I'm already backing away.

"She is," Bishop says. Those two words set my cheeks aflame and my tongue ties itself in knots in my mouth. Repeatedly, this man messes me up; he scares me, he inflames me, he looks so damn good in jeans, and now, he thinks I'm beautiful. "And I insist: take it. Thank you, Eden. The tea's great."

"Yeah. I make great tea. For you," I stammer some more nonsense while backing away, *I think I say something about the sparrows and the crabapple tree looking especially effulgent today*, then I turn and walk so quickly back to the youth center's offices that I'm nearly running.

Every step of the way, I feel Bishop's eyes on my back; he knows I was listening to him, but he doesn't know that I didn't just hear him. I've understood him on a level more than just hearing. It's deeper.

As I go through the doors into the office, the embarrassment burns off my cheeks, leaving just a smile behind.

"What happened out there? I saw you three talking," Sandra says.

"We did."

"And?"

I smile. "And I'm starting to figure him out."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bishop

My breath's a mist that turns into snow. There's an icicle hanging from my nose. Not a minute's walk away, there's a warm living room, a soft couch, probably a hot cup of coffee — none of which I can have, because they'd be a distraction. I have to stay here, outside, alert, in my truck.

For a moment, I switch on the engine to run the heat.

The radio turns on, a weather report, and the numbskull coming through the speakers warns of snow and black ice tonight, besides the flurries of sleet and hail that intermittently batter the landscape. In other words, it's cold. Big surprise.

Warmed just enough from the heaters, I switch off the truck and scan the road, eyes peeled.

The same car circled the block around the youth center three times today. Both Eden and Sandra saw it; Sandra said it looked really menacing. Eden believes they may have just been lost — people get lost on the roads near the youth center, sometimes. I think whoever was the city planner at the time the center was built must've been a fan of the story of Theseus and the Minotaur — but I learned long ago you don't leave these things to chance. Leaving things to chance is how you wind up surrounded by Charlie and his shitty family, or ambushed by whoever's trying to steal the club's cargo.

Still, for all my vigilance, I didn't see this supposed car.

That's a failing on my part. Which means I need to be more alert than ever.

I shiver, then slap my face. It's been over twenty-four hours since I've slept; a long shift guarding cargo, then a hard day watching Elroy. I'm still not sure he's taking his meds all the time, and even if he is, I'm sure as hell they're not the best meds for him, but his government insurance sure as hell isn't willing to pay for the right ones. He gave everything — years of his life, his blood, his love — and now he's being left alone to rot in some crappy bed

to piss and shit himself while his illness eats him up from the inside.

A knock at the window startles me. I snarl as I bump my head on the roof of my truck.

When did I fall asleep?

Some guard I am. Dereliction of duty. If Charlie had come along and gotten the drop on me, I'd deserve to have the club find out and give me shit for the rest of my life for such a failure.

Turning, I see Eden standing at the window holding a steaming mug; her smile enough to heat me on its own.

I roll the window down. "You're supposed to be inside."

"Why are you scowling at me when I'm trying to bring you coffee?"

"It's safer inside. You're less exposed."

"Trust me, there's not an inch of me that's exposed," she says, tightening the hood opening of her coat. "You'd have to be a total fool to stay outside in this cold."

"Or just someone who's prepared and cares about making sure a careless someone isn't ambushed."

"You think all of life is just a war zone, don't you?"

I frown, thinking of the several times in the last few days the club has spotted raiders circling different club properties — the clubhouse, Claire's offices, and even Hotcakes, though that last one may have just been because that bakery has the gravitational pull of a black hole, drawing everyone in with promises of all the deliciousness that sugar and fat can deliver — and nod my head. "That's because it is."

"You have to learn to move on, accept that life is about more than that, and try to, you know, find happiness. That's what I'm doing," she says, with a little too much force in it, like she's not just trying to convince me, but herself, too. I let it lie because I don't have the energy to call her out. That, and maybe I know a little something about trying to find happiness after darkness: it's futile, and I don't have the heart to break her down with the truth.

Instead, I reach out through the window and take the mug from her hands.

"Thanks for the coffee."

"You know, that coffee might warm you and perk you up a little, but it can't work miracles."

"What are you saying?"

"If Frosty the Snowman went on a bender, you'd be the 'after' photo. I'm

fine in my house. I'm safe, the doors and windows are locked, and I've got Comet to keep an eye on me. Go home, get some sleep."

"Comet?"

"My dog."

"What breed is he?"

"Why?"

"What breed is he? Is he a Doberman? A German Shepherd? A Rottweiler?"

"He's a mutt and a sweetheart. Why?"

"So, he wouldn't rip someone's throat out if they tried to hurt you."

"Don't know. It's never come up." She pauses, smiles with snark. "Want to come inside and try an experiment?"

"He'd probably just lick my face," I say. Not that I'd mind. Sure, I might hate most people, bordering on *all* people, but dogs? Dogs are perfect, because dogs aren't people.

"With your attitude, that's probably exactly what you need."

"What I need is to drink this coffee in peace while you go back inside, where it's safe. You and Sandra saw the same car circling the youth center. This has to happen."

"I don't want you to turn into a popsicle in my driveway. Come inside. Check if my dog's a good guard dog. Though I can definitely tell you he's a good boy."

"Of course he's a good boy. But I'm fine here."

I sip the coffee. It's warm, it's delicious, and definitely not the cheap stuff. Did she brew this up just for me? Why?

"You're set on this?"

"I am."

Then she turns, looks at her house with her arms crossed. "You know, you can't really see my back yard from here."

"No, but I do a perimeter walk from time to time. Your back door's pretty solid, and the windows you have looking into the backyard are pretty small. Neither presents a good entry opportunity, and I'd hear if anyone tried anything."

"I see." She huffs a cloud of steam into the air. "And you really, really don't want to come inside?"

"I don't."

"Fine. I think I'm going to go inside and open up my back door and back

windows."

"What?" I blink a few times, not sure I've heard her correctly. "Repeat that."

"I am going to open up my doors and windows around back. Let some fresh air in. Maybe I'll leave them open."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. That's just asking for an intruder or hypothermia."

"I thought you said you're fine with the cold out here, yet now you're talking about hypothermia."

"Shut up. Don't leave your windows open. Regardless of the cold, it's still a security risk."

"It wouldn't be if you were actually inside the place you were guarding instead of sitting in a truck across the street from it like some snow-covered stalker."

I take a moment, thinking. How do I tell her it's better for both of us if I'm out here? If I'm out here, I can just focus on keeping her house secure. If I'm in there, I'll be thinking about her. About how her smile heats me in a way I never thought I'd feel again. About how talking to her is pleasant in a way that almost frightens me in how familiar it feels to a time in my life that I've tried so hard to move past, even though I know I'll never leave it behind.

About how the way she makes me feel, even at a distance, is enough to scare me.

If I were to get too close to someone, it might open up doors inside me that are best kept closed. With everyone else, I don't have to worry about anyone even jiggling the handle on those doors. Either my reputation keeps them away, or they just don't bother.

But with her, it's like she's got a battering ram in her hands.

How do I tell her I'm not coming in?

"No."

She nods, and I sigh inwardly in relief. "Fine."

"Good, I'm glad we understand each other."

"But if you change your mind, I'll leave the back door and all the windows open for you. Feel free to just come on in whenever you want. They'll be open all night."

Eden says nothing more than that. She simply turns and walks back toward her house, her feet crunching on the ice that's forming on the sidewalk.

Damn her.

I call after her. "Eden, you aren't really going to open the windows, are you?"

She answers by raising a gloved hand in a thumbs up gesture. I don't even know what that means.

"Eden?"

No answer this time.

Uncertain, I open the door and follow her.

"God damn it."

I catch up to Eden just as she reaches her front porch; the snow falling lightly around us.

She turns to face me, a mischievous smile playing on her lips.

"What took you so long?"

"Seriously, Eden, you can't be this reckless."

She shrugs, her eyes sparkling with defiance. "Sometimes you have to take risks, even if they seem foolish. Besides, I have faith in Comet. He's an excellent judge of character. And very alert."

I raise an eyebrow at her. "So, your plan is to let your dog handle any potential threats?"

Eden chuckles softly and opens the door to her house, inviting me inside with a nod of her head.

"Not just Comet," she says cryptically.

Curiosity getting the better of me, I step inside her home and follow her into the living room. The warmth hits me like a comforting embrace, chasing away the chill that had settled deep within my bones. As I take in my surroundings, I notice various trinkets and photographs scattered around the room. It's clear that Eden has poured her heart and soul into making this place feel like a home. It feels inviting, even if, oddly enough, I see all the photos around are just of her and her dog. There's no family, no friends, nothing except her and Comet. She's alone; a feeling I share, except I don't even have a dog. Not that I'd be much good with one. Life in an MC is not pet-friendly.

Then, in the corner, sleeping on a large pillow bed, I spy Comet; he looks part lab, part shepherd, with a curliness to his fur that suggests some poodle, as well. Sensing that there's someone new in the living room with him, he opens one eye, yawns at me, sniffs, licks himself, and goes back to sleep.

What a ferocious animal.

"See, he's already figured out that you're not a threat," Eden says, smiling.

"All that from a look and a sniff, huh?"

"He's a very smart boy."

"I'll bet."

"Why don't you take a seat on the couch instead of standing around like some kind of doofus?"

"What is this, Eden?"

"It's me, trying to save you from embarrassing yourself by acting like a weirdo."

I sit, if only to stop her from needling me anymore. There's something disarming about her smile and her playfulness, as if she knows something secret. What is it? I hate the idea of anyone having anything over me. It creates an obligation, a bond, and the less I have to do with other people, the better.

Even if Eden's couch is comfortable, her dog is cute, and her smile might not be so bad.

I suppose there are worse people to be obligated to.

"Fine. I'm sitting."

"Wow, how declarative. Sit here for a second while I get us some hot cocoa, marshmallows, and cookies."

What in the hell is this? She's in and out of the kitchen so quickly it's like she already had all this stuff ready.

"I already have coffee." I hold up my mug. "I don't need cocoa."

"You're my guest, and I'm going to take care of you. Now, do you really want to put marshmallows in your coffee when there's perfectly good homemade cocoa available? I'm pretty sure that's illegal, and I know you biker types like to break the law and all, but for that one, I'm sure Maya would lock you up for that offense."

"Maya? You mean Officer Alvarado?" I say. No one calls Officer Alvarado just 'Maya.' Several members in the club have made that mistake and she's always corrected them. Always. Sometimes with the actual threat of arrest for harassing a police officer.

"Right." She hands me the mug of cocoa, and I set my coffee aside. The cup's empty, anyway, because you sure as hell don't waste warm coffee when it's below freezing outside. "Her. She's nice."

"How do you know her?"

She takes a long drink. "Through the youth center. She brings people by. Sometimes she intervenes when there's a situation. We've worked together a

lot, and she's always been so supportive."

I nod, but I'm still suspicious; if Officer Alvarado had met Eden in any professional capacity, she'd insist on her title. What's she hiding?

"She is. She really knows this town and cares about protecting it. Does she check in on you? Do you have someone other than me watching your back? Family, friends? Because, I'll be honest, I just see you and your dog in all these pictures you've got here."

Eden goes quiet for a while. A long while. I can't stand the silence — this uncomfortable communication thing never was something I was good at. My bedside manner sucked when I was practicing in the Army; I preferred to just rip the bandage off, tell them they have cancer, they've lost their leg, they're going to die, whatever, the truth is the truth; more than once, I found myself decked after telling someone bluntly that they'll never walk again, and no amount of hope or good intentions would change that; you just can't fucking wish yourself a new set of legs.

"Forget I said anything," I say.

"Oh, just like that?" She says. "I don't have pictures of anyone else up because everyone else has really let me down. Except for Comet. And I've had to move around a lot, so why bring along pictures of people who have hurt me?"

"I know what you mean."

"Oh, do you?"

"I don't keep much, either. Sometimes, memories are things you'd rather not keep with you." I drink some cocoa and chew a marshmallow. They're green and red for the holiday season, but they all taste the same — way too sweet. Or maybe I've just spent too long with a bitter taste in my mouth. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Eden's expression softens, and she reaches out to place a comforting hand on mine.

"You didn't upset me, Bishop. I just... I haven't met many people I can trust, you know? But you're different. There's something about you that feels real."

Shaking my head because I can't believe I'm even here, in this conversation, I still find myself drawn back to looking into her eyes, the vulnerability in her gaze mirroring my own. Maybe it's the cocoa or the warmth of her home, but I find myself opening up to her in a way I haven't with anyone else.

"I know what it's like to be disappointed by people, to have your trust shattered. It makes it hard to let others in again. It's safer not to."

She nods, her thumb stroking circles on the back of my hand. To my surprise, I don't pull away. I know I should. This life is too dangerous to allow her to get close to me, yet so much of me wants that connection, that closeness, to have someone to share my burden with who might understand what I've been through.

"But sometimes, taking that risk is worth it. Sometimes, there are people who come into our lives and change everything."

Her words strike a chord within me, one that resonates with longing and hope. We've both been through our fair share of heartache and disappointment... But I've learned from mine. Why should I open up old scars? What desire do I have to bleed from my heart again? If I do that, I might never staunch the bleeding.

Yet the pull is tempting, overwhelming; she's here, I'm here, and her touch is like fire on my doubts.

But though those doubts burn, they're still there and they need to be satisfied; I can't forget why I'm here. I can't be reckless, because I know what the cost is for that, and I can't pay that price again.

"Do you still have that knife I gave you?"

A slow blink. "Bishop, that is not what I thought you were going to ask."

"It's important. Do you have that knife I gave you?"

So far, all I've seen is that she has no one except Officer Alvarado, me, and a cute, but sleepy, dog, to look after her and I can't be around her all the time. Not with all the demands of the club and everything else. I can't let someone in to lose them again, especially if they're going to be so careless with their safety.

"Yes, I have it. It's in the kitchen sink. I used it earlier to peel a carrot and some cucumbers to make a salad."

"It's not for cooking, it's for self-defense."

"Well, if someone had come at me while I was making my salad, I would've stabbed them and then probably gone out for a cheeseburger, because stabbing people works up an appetite that a salad just can't satisfy."

"You're way too reckless. You're not taking this nearly as serious as you need to, Eden."

"I'm not entirely helpless, you know."

"Oh yeah? Because everything I've seen so far would tell me you're not

only incapable of defending yourself, but you're practically asking to get attacked."

Something in her face changes as I say those words; the lightness, the smile, the cheer in her tantalizing blue eyes, disappears. Darkens.

"I'm asking for it?" Her words come out raw, venomous. "You want to see how I'd defend myself, Bishop? Is that what you really want? Fine. Here we go."

In one swift movement, Eden stands, clenches her fists, and punches me square in the face. There's a crack that I feel somewhere in my face — my nose, I think — and blood bursts out of my right nostril in a torrent of crimson, splattering the front of my shirt.

With her eyes wild and my blood on her raised fists, Eden stands opposite me, chest heaving.

"How's that? Was that good enough, or do you want me to hit for real this time?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Eden

My fist is ringing; vibrations bounce and zip up my forearm all the way through my chest. There is an enormous difference between punching someone in a boxing class and hitting them bare-handed in the face. Bones are hard, and when they hit other bones, it hurts. There's blood pouring from Bishop's nose and he has a look on his face that I can't read — his eyes are wide and his lips are twitching like he's about to rip me a new one. He asked me to show him, but was punching his face too much? Is he angry? Furious? I don't know if I could take it if he yelled at me — this is my home, the place where I hope to feel safe, and having a big man like him scream at me might break me.

But he provoked me. How can he say that I was asking for it? That's never, *ever*, the right thing to say to someone.

Still, in the interest of not starting an actual fight with him, there's an apology on my lips when he opens his mouth... and starts laughing.

"Holy shit, Eden."

"Wait... what? I'm sorry, was that too much?"

It has to have been. He's bleeding, I hit him — hard, but not as hard as I know I can, because my boxing coach said that my form is great for a beginner and I didn't put all my strength into my rotation — and now he's going to be angry with me; he'll yell, he'll throw things, Comet will get involved, I'll get hurt, and, if I survive, I'll have to move again because I don't think I'll ever feel safe in Ironwood Falls after.

But he keeps laughing.

"That was perfect."

"You're not mad?"

I expect him to be mad. Even if he's laughing. I've seen it happen before — the initial laughter meant to get your hopes up, to dangle the prospect of

forgiveness, or even just letting something slide, only to have them pull the rug out from under you and hit you when you're down.

"Surprised, sore, shocked, yes, but not mad. Where did you learn to do that?"

"I took a couple of classes a while ago." More than just a couple. For months. After I left where I came from, I was on the run for a while, but I would go to these classes in secret, preparing, because I needed to make myself feel stronger. Less helpless. The classes gave me the confidence that, if I needed to, I'd at least be able to hurt my attacker. That might not seem like much in the grand scheme of things, but being capable of hurting someone who has controlled your entire life and dominated you through fear and violence is empowering. I wouldn't be here, free, if I didn't think I could at least fight back a little when it counted.

"They taught you well. Can you get me a towel so I don't bleed on your couch?"

I blink at Bishop, still processing his unexpected reaction. My mind races with a mix of relief and confusion, unsure of how to navigate this unfamiliar territory. Slowly, I nod and rush to retrieve a towel from the linen closet. As I hand it to him, our fingers graze, and a gentle warmth spreads through me. I quickly pull away, trying to conceal the blush that creeps onto my cheeks.

Bishop presses the towel against his bleeding nose, wincing slightly.

"Thanks," he says, his voice muffled by the fabric.

I hover uncertainly beside him, unsure of what to say or do next. The aftermath of my punch hangs in the air, tangling with the tension that had existed between us since we first met.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," I blurt out softly. "I hope your nose isn't broken."

He removes the towel from his face and looks at me, his eyes filled with a strange mix of amusement and something else I can't quite decipher.

"Eden," he says slowly, his tone gentle yet firm. "My nose isn't broken, and you didn't hurt me. You surprised me, that's all. And, well, you impressed me, too."

Relief floods over me in waves, washing away the fear and anxiety that had been building up inside me. I let out a shaky breath, finally allowing myself to relax.

"I'm really glad," I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

Bishop flashes me a reassuring smile, which is startling in both how much

I enjoy seeing him smile and in how I don't know if I've ever seen him smile like this before. Or ever.

"You don't have to worry. You did great. In fact, your punch was one of the best I've ever seen for a beginner."

My eyes widen in surprise at his words, a mix of gratitude and disbelief swirling within me. It's hard to fathom that someone like Bishop, with his intimidating presence and incredible strength, would find my feeble attempt at self-defense impressive.

"You really mean that?" I ask hesitantly, studying his face for any sign of deception.

"Absolutely. Your technique was solid, and you packed quite a punch. I didn't see it coming at all. I really am impressed."

A sense of pride blooms within me, replacing the remnants of doubt that lingered in my mind. It feels foreign, yet exhilarating to be acknowledged for something other than what I do at the youth center. Especially from a man that I just punched in the face.

"Thank you," I say, meeting Bishop's gaze with newfound confidence. "It means a lot to hear you say that."

Maybe I'm not so defenseless. If Bishop — a man who never compliments anyone and chases other people away — tells me my punch is good, maybe it actually is. Maybe I can defend myself when it really counts. Or at least not feel so helpless.

Bishop's expression softens as he watches me. "What made you decide to take those classes?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

Bishop takes a long look around the room again, silent. His eyes drift over my photographs and then settle on Comet before returning to me. There's an understanding that I don't like in his eyes, and before he can open his mouth to say anything that might change things between us — because I like how things are and I might even like where they might be going, but once someone says out loud that they know what you *survived*, and you hear that pity in their voice, that *'oh, you're so brave'* that always gets said in some way or another, your relationship is irrevocably damaged; I don't want my past nightmares to ruin my present — I say, "Listen, since we've established that I know how to throw a punch and am tougher than I look, why don't we call it a night? I'll be fine, Bishop, and you look like you need the rest."

Bishop's quiet for a second and I hope that he'll get the hint and keep what

he was going to say to himself. I don't want things between us to change. I don't want him to see me as someone to be pitied.

He takes a last drink of his hot cocoa and then sets the mug on the coffee table and stands.

He smiles at me again. It's brief, but warming.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Eden."

Though I'm relieved that he's leaving and didn't say what I'm sure he was going to say, when the door shuts behind him and I watch him walk down my driveway, there's a part of me that's sad to see him go. A big part of me.

Bishop's so much different than I thought he was. Better. There's a kind heart in his chest, and sometimes, he even lets it show.

I'm so glad I let Sandra convince me to say that I saw some car. Normally, I prefer to tell the truth, but this time, I'm happy I didn't.

I might just be looking forward to tomorrow.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Eden

There's a box with the Sweetcakes logo sitting on my desk when I come into work. It's filled with some of the usual flavors, and a note calling out some that I've never heard of — chestnut praline, Belgian ganache with hazelnut brittle, tres leches, and salted caramel popcorn. The moment I arrive, Sandra circles like a shark. Even Comet is more subtle, and he will literally sit and drool on my foot when I'm cooking.

"Good morning, Eden," she says in a singsong voice that's about three levels more cheerful than her usual. It's nearly as saccharine as the cupcakes on the box in front of me.

"Good morning, Sandra. Thank you for the cupcakes," I say.

"Oh, they aren't from me."

"Did Al bring them by? What does he want now? Someone to caddy for him while he golfs with the mayor?"

"It wasn't Al. You know he doesn't give gifts, just orders and excuses."

"The old man? Or someone in his family to apologize for him nearly stabbing me?"

"Not him. He's taken a turn for the worst, I've heard, and he also doesn't have any family."

"Oh. Right." *Damn, I feel terrible just bringing that up.* I pause. A sneaking suspicion about where the cupcakes came from comes over me, but it can't be true. There's no way. "Who brought them?"

"You know who."

"Sandra, obviously, I don't know who brought them. That's why I'm asking."

"Bishop brought them by first thing this morning."

"Wait, *Bishop* brought me cupcakes?"

"Yes. He dropped them off with me, told me not to touch them until you'd opened them, and then said that he hoped we both had a good morning. He

even smiled."

"He smiled? Like, that thing where you move your lips up?"

Sandra nods and does a decent approximation of one of Bishop's rare smiles. "Like this."

"Did he say why?" A man like Bishop doesn't just bring a gift for no reason. It's not like we're that close — even though I hope to be closer — and besides, our last interaction was me punching him in the face, making him bleed, and then nearly having him figure out my darkest secret; if he'd asked me directly, I'm not sure I could've lied to him — it's impossible for me to lie to the people I care about. To me, if you care about someone, it means you tell them the truth. Lies are poison to a relationship... even if what Bishop and I have is only a relationship in the barest sense of the word, not like we've slept together or anything.

Though now that I've thought of that, I can't help but play *that* entire scenario out in my head.

"Eden, are you OK? Your cheeks just got really red all of a sudden."

"I'm fine. Tell me about Bishop and these cupcakes."

"All he said is for you to call him when you got in and he'd explain. You know, if you don't feel like calling him, you could always give me his number and I could call him for you. You look like you might want to sit down and have a cupcake instead."

"I am going to sit, have a coffee, a cupcake, but I'm also not going to give you Bishop's phone number. Nice try, though."

She shrugs. "Worth a shot."

I open the box and hold it out to her, letting her take her pick. She grabs one of the two world famous red velvet cupcakes and then returns to her desk. I grab two cupcakes — one triple chocolate topped with popcorn, and one peanut brittle cupcake. The chocolate one goes down in three bites, and normally I'd feel embarrassed about inhaling a cupcake like that in public, but Sandra does the same thing with her red velvet cupcake, and she even has a dollop of the cream cheese frosting on the tip of her nose, so I feel no shame in scarfing my cupcake so fast and then guilt-chomping the second one even quicker, because my mind is still circling the all-important question: what would compel Bishop to bring me a gift?

It has to be something serious, right?

Something bad?

There's no other reason a man like that — a biker, a criminal, even if he

has a kind heart hidden beneath his glowering exterior and his surly attitude — would do something so... thoughtful.

Is he going to ask me to help him hide a body? Or provide an alibi for some unspeakable crime?

It must be something terrible like that.

There's no other possibility.

I knew he was too good to be true; he's going to ask for some favor, and then I'll have to turn him down, and then we'll become enemies... until fear makes me move. Probably to another country. I'll bet I'd be safe from Bishop in Uruguay. I've seen pictures — Montevideo is beautiful, and it's also just a short ferry ride away to Buenos Aires, which sounds exciting. I'll have to learn Spanish.

I have my entire second — no, third — life constructed in my head when I pick up my phone and call Bishop.

"Eden?"

"You brought me cupcakes. Why?"

"I need a huge favor." He sounds reluctant. Almost nervous. Which makes my heart skip a beat, because what could make a man like Bishop nervous? It has to be truly terrible. Not just one dead body, probably. Three, maybe. Or four. Did he leave my house and go on a murder spree?

I sigh. Here it comes: the moment where we become enemies.

Time to get ready for Uruguay. How does that phrase go? *¿Dónde está la biblioteca?* That sounds about right. I'm Uruguay-ready already.

"I will not help commit or cover up any crimes," I say. "Especially not any murders."

He chuckles. "That's not what I'm going to ask you. Besides, if I were going to use cupcakes to bribe someone into helping me commit a crime, I wouldn't be sending them to you. There's a reason the club keeps Mayhem around."

"I don't even know how to begin to approach that."

"Mayhem's a special case. I sent you those cupcakes because I need your help with Elroy."

"The old veteran? Bishop, I'm not a doctor or a nurse. I'm willing to help. He clearly needs it, but what can I do?"

"I need you to be my secretary."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Eden

"Why am I wearing my job interview clothes and what am I doing here in this smelly office?"

Here is what used to be an accounting office, formerly abandoned, now filled with some rental furniture, some cardboard boxes, some filing cabinets, a handful of men who look like they're from Bishop's MC, except they're wearing street clothes, and a smell that, though I didn't think accounting offices had a smell, now, I know, they do — it's old ink, musty paper, and the depressing funk of math that lingers in the air like mold, waiting to infect the unfortunate and sprout its spores within them until they no longer shudder at the sight of tax forms. I'm tempted to lift the collar of my shirt to cover my mouth and nose to protect myself from such an awful fate.

"Right now, you're going to help Havoc, Rook, and Chains clean this place up. They'll move all those old boxes into one of the back offices. When they're done, I need you to help direct them in organizing the furniture, so this place looks like a doctor's office," Bishop says. He's wearing clothes like I've never even pictured him wearing — slacks, a button-up shirt, and, over that, a doctor's lab coat — and he's pulling it off.

As he gives me instructions, he's fiddling with an air purifier, working the plug into and out of an old outlet that looks like it last worked when I was finishing high school.

"And after that?"

"A-ha," he says, as the purifier kicks to life and hums. "After that is about the time that Sage and Aurora should get here. They run an animal rescue, which means they have some serious cleaning equipment. When they arrive, we're all going to grab something — a mop, a vacuum cleaner, a carpet cleaner — and we're going to de-funk this place. There's a box of face masks on the desk over there. I suggest you put one on when they get here, because I asked them to bring the heavy-duty cleaning sprays and you do not want to

inhale any of those fumes."

"How is this going to help Elroy?" I say, more curious than anything, even though I probably should be put off by the fact that I've had to take a day off to put on my best clothes and play maid and secretary in a dirty office with a bunch of bikers; it sounds like the setup to a terrible porno movie.

A van pulls up out front and two people — a man and a woman, whom I assume are Aurora and Sage, though they look less like hippies, which I'd picture based on their names, and more like regular people — get out and start unloading cleaning equipment.

"Shit, I told them to be here at nine. Either they're early or..." Bishop pauses, takes out his phone, and swears under his breath. "We're running late. Guys, we need to get this place organized stat. We have an hour to make this mess look like a functioning doctor's office."

A flurry of activity erupts; furniture is moved, re-moved, moved once again, walls and carpet are cleaned, floors are mopped, everything is dusted and wiped down. In the end, after an hour's worth of work, the place looks — and smells — halfway respectable for a doctor's office. Not like somewhere I'd personally go for medical care, because the city provides employees with a decent insurance plan, but somewhere I'd go if I were desperate and could only pay cash.

Bishop then throws open the doors and windows, sending a fresh breeze through the building to air out the smell of industrial cleansers.

"Leave this open until ten-thirty, then close it. That should be long enough. Then, at exactly ten-thirty, I want you to open the top box next to the front desk, and I want you to take out a handful of the files inside there and spread them on the desk as if you're working on them. I also want you to take the desk phone out of the box and plug it in — there's a phone outlet right at the base of the desk — and answer every call with, 'Dr. Shaw's office.'"

"Who's Dr. Shaw?" I say.

"I am. Ethan Shaw."

"Is that your real name?"

"Yes. The title and the name are mine. The people on the other end of the line are some friends of the club and some of the club's ol' ladies. They'll be asking you random questions, and you're to respond as if you're actually my secretary. Rook, Havoc, Chains, Aurora, and Sage will occupy chairs in the front lobby as if they are patients in waiting. If anything should happen that throws you off, or if you need help, just signal Aurora or Sage by telling

either of them that the doctor is ready for them. That's the code phrase, and they'll step in to help."

I blink. It's a lot of instruction and I still have no idea what's going on, other than the fact that me playing Bishop's secretary is not the covert sex game that I thought it would be when he originally proposed it. When I was putting on my outfit this morning, I thought I'd be coming here to find Bishop alone, wanting to bend his disobedient secretary over her desk and teach her why he's the boss; as we've spent more time together, as I've learned there's a beating heart within his chest that does its best to take care of others in the best way he knows how, and after he gave me those decadent cupcakes, I'd thought this might actually be a date... But I never imagined it'd be this.

"What will you be doing, Dr. Shaw?"

"I have to finish organizing my office and hanging my degree." He checks the time again, grunts. "I have to go. We have five minutes. When they get here, have them wait for a couple minutes and then send them back. Thank you, Eden."

"I... what... you're welcome," I say, baffled. Bishop's sudden movement as he practically runs to the back room that's to be his office spurs me to turn around and sit down at my fake-secretary desk.

Then I start my fake work and the fake lobby springs to life in front of me; Rook crosses his arms and becomes a statue with a scowl. Havoc and Chains get into a conversation about some talent show that's happening at the local elementary school that Chains's daughter is taking part in, and Aurora and Sage talk about dogs. My phone rings from time to time with calls from two different women, one named Yolanda and one named Valeria, and I answer their random questions while spreading the papers from the box on my desk.

Then, right on time, a man in a finely cut suit comes in the door carrying a laptop bag and a dragging a rolling suitcase behind him.

He approaches me with a smile that oozes charm and money.

"I'm here for an appointment with Dr. Shaw," he says, disregarding the fact that I'm currently on the phone with Valeria, nodding my head and making scribble-notes on a scratchpad while she goes over a ranking of her top favorite characters from *The Office*.

I hold up a finger, signaling to Mr. Douche to wait. Anyone who would interrupt someone's phone conversation with that much smarm does not deserve the respect of a prompt response.

Finally, I close out the call by saying, "I'll give all that information to Dr.

Shaw. Thank you." Then I turn to the man with the oozing personality. "How may I help you?"

"Bryce Reynolds, from Sigma Pharmaceuticals. I'm here for my meeting with Dr. Shaw."

"Oh yes, just one moment. Why don't you have a seat over there next to the gentleman with the shaved head and the neck tattoo?" I say, gesturing to one of Bishop's biker brothers. Havoc, I think.

The man blanches. "I think I'll just stand."

"He's entirely harmless. And, contrary to his appearance, he does not have rabies."

Havoc nods and beckons to Bryce. "It's true. They tested me. I just look like this. Scout's honor, I won't hurt you, buddy. I only look like I've been to prison for murder, but the truth is, I've never been convicted of anything."

"Wait? Does that mean...?"

"It means, in the eyes of the law, I've never committed murder." He then winks and pats the open chair next to him. "Why don't you sit down?"

Bryce hesitates, his eyes darting between Havoc and the vacant chair. With a tight-lipped smile, he cautiously takes a seat beside the biker, desperately trying to maintain an air of composure.

Havoc leans back, crosses his arms over his chest as if settling in for a long conversation.

"So, Sigma Pharmaceuticals, huh?" Havoc says as he raises an eyebrow. "What brings you to Dr. Shaw's office today?"

Bryce clears his throat, adjusts his tie. "Well, we have some new medications that we think could be beneficial for patients here. I thought it would be an excellent opportunity to discuss potential partnerships and collaborations."

Havoc's lips curl into a slow smirk. "Partnerships and collaborations, huh? Sounds fancy. But let me ask you something, Bryce." He leans in closer, lowering his voice to a dangerous whisper. "Are you open to any other partnerships and collaborations? See, you and your company sell drugs, and me, well, maybe I like sales, too. How about we partner up?"

There's sweat on Bryce's brow, and he shifts in his seat, leaning as far away from Havoc as possible without tipping the chair.

"Not interested," he says.

"How about just making a sale to me? You got any Oxy? Or what about some methaqualone?"

"Methaqualone?"

"Also known as 'quaaludes'?"

"I'm not selling you any quaaludes."

"I notice you haven't said 'no' to me asking about the Oxy."

"I'm not a drug dealer..." Bryce says, only half-heartedly.

He knows what he is.

We all do, which is why I haven't interrupted the little fun that Havoc is having with him.

"We both know that's not true," Havoc says, leaning closer, while a river of sweat forms on Bryce's forehead and runs down his neck to soak the collar of his shirt. "We both know the things you people have done in the name of shareholder profits."

Deciding that Bryce has had enough, I stand up and come around my desk toward him.

"Dr. Shaw is ready for you. Right this way, please."

"Oh, thank God," he whispers as he stands suddenly and strides toward me, then past me, back to Bishop's office all on his own, without so much as a nod. Havoc and I trade a look — *what an asshole*. Still, to play the part of a dutiful secretary, I walk back after him and get there just in time to hear him say, "Dr. Shaw, I'm Bryce Reynolds from Sigma Pharmaceuticals," and then he closes the door right in my face.

My only sight, just before the door closes, is a momentary flash of anger that burns across Bishop's face.

Stunned, I return to my desk.

Where I wait.

And wait.

And wait some more.

Nearly two hours pass while I sit at the front desk before Bryce leaves Bishop's office with Bishop right on his heels, his face looking gray and his eyes sunken with deep bags beneath them. The two trade business cards, Bryce hands Bishop a shrink-wrapped set of boxes labeled 'Vectrapazine' and then heads for the door.

Only to be stopped by Bishop's hand landing hard on his shoulder.

"What the hell?" Bryce says, lips curling.

"I got what I wanted from you, Bryce, but she hasn't. You disrespected my secretary earlier, and I won't have that. Now, give her what you owe."

"Excuse me?" He says, tone and eyebrow both rising in contempt.

Bishop cracks his knuckles and looms over the salesman, seeming to grow taller with menace and threat.

"You heard me. And if I don't hear you apologize to her, and sound like you mean it, then the next thing everyone in this lobby is going to hear is you begging for mercy as I break both your arms."

"You can't be serious..."

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

Bryce swallows hard, his confidence visibly deflating. Realizing he has no other choice, he reluctantly turns to me, his voice strained with annoyance.

"I... apologize for interrupting your call earlier and for the other things I did. It was rude of me."

I smirk at the sight of the once-smug Bryce now forced into submission; it feels good to have a jerk who thinks he can just walk all over me held to account for his actions. It's a novel feeling.

"Thank you for the apology, Mr. Reynolds."

"Are you satisfied, Eden?" Bishop says, maintaining his grip on Bryce. His tone and the look he gives me tells me everything: I'm what matters, not the words from Bryce's mouth. All Bishop cares about is that I feel I have the apology and the respect I deserve.

I smile at Bishop. I want to do more; I want to reach out, put my hand on his arm, and tell him how truly thankful I am to have him stick up for me.

But I can't.

"I am."

Bishop's hand releases its grip on Bryce's shoulder, and he takes a step back, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Good. Now get out of here before I change my mind about letting you leave in one piece. You do not get to come into my office and disrespect anyone I care about, Mr. Reynolds. It doesn't matter if you're selling pharmaceuticals or fucking girl scout cookies — my people mean more to me than anything."

Without saying another word, Bryce hurries toward the exit, his face a mixture of embarrassment and relief.

As soon as the door closes behind him, a collective sigh seems to ripple through the room.

"Damn, Bishop, that was fun to watch," Havoc says.

Bishop smirks and runs a hand through his hair. "Sometimes people need a reminder that respect goes both ways."

"Thank you," I say to him. "Thank you for standing up for me."

"I know you can handle yourself, but I thought I'd intervene before you had to punch his lights out," Bishop says, grinning.

"So, what did we just do? What is Vectrapazine?"

"Medication for Elroy. His insurance has him on something else because this stuff is too expensive. It's cutting edge, nearly experimental, and should make what little time he has left actually be good enough where he can live. Where he can enjoy it. He needs this stuff — no, he *deserves* this medication for all he's suffered and given up for others — and this was the only way to get it for him."

"You set this all up? You put together a fake doctor's office and spent two hours listening to a drug rep just for a couple of sample bottles of pills?"

"During that two hours, that asswipe Bryce didn't even take a breath. It was hell. I fucking hate talking to people. But Elroy doesn't have much time left and the last thing he deserves is to spend his remaining days stuck in bed, in agony, pissing himself while he gibbers away into violent hallucinations. This way, at least he can have some dignity."

"You're a good man, Bishop," Rook says. It's the first words he's said all morning.

Bishop shakes his head. "No, I'm not. But Elroy has lost enough already. If this can give him back a little something of himself before the end, it's worth doing. Besides, he's told me there are a few things he wants to do before he passes, and he can't do any of them in the current state he's in."

Though Bishop won't accept it, I know what kind of man he is. What fear I once felt at being around a man in an MC, I don't feel when I'm close to him. Instead, I'm drawn closer. Maybe I can find out what hurt him, and if there's something I can do to help him; I want to help take Bishop's pain away. I want to see the side of him he keeps shut behind lock and key.

"One of these things that Elroy wants to do, it doesn't have anything to do with the flyers I've seen advertising the dance at the senior center this weekend, does it?"

Bishop nods. "It does. Elroy and Keith had a song — I'm going to make sure they play it at the dance."

"So, you're going to be there?" I say. My eyes are on Bishop and, beyond that, my goal of getting closer to him.

"Yes. I have to be there to make sure it all goes well with the old guy. These meds are really going to help him feel better, but it will not change his

underlying condition. He's still frail, still dying."

Even those words cause Bishop pain.

Yes, he tries to hide it, but I can see it. See it, and want to help him with it. It's time for the man who takes care of everyone else to have someone take care of him for a change.

"Since you're going to this dance, you'll probably want a date. You don't want to be alone, right?" I say. "I'll be your date."

He blinks, bewildered in a way that's uniquely Bishop — looking both startled and insanely irritated at the same time. "What did you just say?"

I will not leave him an opening to shut me down; I know he cares for me, because no one else would protect me the way he has, and I care for him. In bits and pieces, I've seen the man he really is, the man he tries to hide between scowls and snarls, and that man makes me feel safe in a way I never thought I'd feel again.

"I said that you're not going to this dance alone. You can't. You can pick me up for it at six. And before you even think about turning me down, you should know that I also saw on the flyers that they're looking for volunteer chaperones, so one way or another, I will be there, Bishop. It's up for you to decide how awkward you want this to be."

"Are you blackmailing me?"

"I will if I have to."

Bishop smiles, but shakes his head. "Not a chance."

My heart falls faster than the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs. Am I really going to have to get dressed up and be a volunteer chaperone at a senior dance until I can badger Bishop into spending time with me?

"What? Why not?"

"Because this is a dance for seniors, Eden — by six o'clock it'll be half over. I'll pick you up at four."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bishop

The woman who meets me at the door pierces my heart with the sweetest pain — Eden; in a red, backless dress, with her hair falling in cascading curls around her shoulders, her eyes wider than the ocean, and her lips glistening with lipstick as red as a freshly picked rose. She is my sweetest destruction. My breath catches in my throat as I try to summon the words to greet her; lust, awe, guilt, they all compete to kill every word that tries to birth itself from my lips. I swore that I'd never look at another woman again, not in that way, but how could I have known I'd ever see a woman who looked like Eden Mercer?

She smiles, a gentle curve of her lips that ignites a thousand fires within me and sends a thousand knives into my heart.

"Well, well, Bishop," she says, her voice like a delicate melody. "Four o'clock. Right on time."

"You look..." I freeze again, guilt squeezing my throat. "Like you're ready."

Her smile grows. "I am ready."

"Then we should go."

"You look nice, by the way."

I grunt. I'm wearing some old suit I last wore to the funeral of someone in my old unit. "Thanks."

It's a quiet ride in my truck to the senior center. I would've preferred to ride my motorcycle — the fresh air, the open road, the opportunity to crank the accelerator, run wild, and maybe even die in a fiery crash and spare myself this miserable, beautiful betrayal of *her* memory, the one I both try to forget and know I never will — but it'd be a crime to ruin all the work Eden put into getting ready, doing her hair, her makeup, to have it all messed up by riding on my bike.

Elegant, she slides into the seat of my truck, a rusted old bucket

inadequate to drive around a beauty like her. As if she knows what I'm thinking, she reaches across the seat and puts her hand on mine.

"I can see something's bothering you. If this is too much, I can drive myself. I can just be a chaperone tonight."

She's too damn good for me.

Too damn good for my life.

I swore I'd never put myself through this again. But how often do you come across a woman like Eden?

I grip the steering wheel tight, feeling the weight of my guilt heavy in my chest. How could I let myself be tempted by another woman so soon after losing what I had? It's been years since then, but even a lifetime feels too soon; I can still hear her voice, see her smile, feel the touch of her skin on mine. But there's something about Eden that draws me to her like a moth to a flame. Something that makes those memories feel like they're just a part of my past, not something that controls my future. Maybe it's her kind eyes or the way she carries herself with grace and strength. Or maybe it's the way she understands my pain without even needing to say a word.

"No," I croak out, my voice rough with emotion. "I want you... with me."

Eden's hand squeezes mine gently, offering comfort and reassurance. It's as if she knows the battle raging inside me, the war between honoring a sacred memory and allowing myself to find happiness again. That happiness — that moving on — doesn't happen right away. It's day by day, year by year, with pain and tears and anger in between.

"It's hard. I know. But I want to be here, too," she says. "With you."

Then she smiles, gently. Squeezes my hand again. And I realize, in that moment, sitting side by side in my old truck, that Eden has become more than just a temptation. She is a beacon in the darkness that has consumed me for so long.

As we arrive at the senior center, her presence fills every corner of the room, and the elderly residents all smile seeing her enter at my side. Charlene wiggles her eyebrows at me and then winks at me. Doris laughs aloud and says, "I knew it. I knew it," with triumph in her voice.

And then I see Elroy.

He's in the lounge's corner in his wheelchair with his cane propped against it. There's a bottle of the medication in his hand. A small, knowing smile blooms on his face when he sees Eden and me together.

No sooner do we get there than the music begins — old songs, standards

from the fifties, sixties, and seventies, mostly, to help take the residents back to when they were young.

I approach Elroy with Eden at my side and he stands as we get close, using his cane for support. He raises his hand in a shaky salute.

"Never thought I'd salute an Army man, but these pills, Bishop, these pills... I can't remember the last time I could walk and not feel like a mule was kicking my ass. I took one earlier and walked three laps around the entire center, including the parking lot, without feeling even a twinge. I'm going to take another. Once it kicks in, you better watch out on the dance floor." He laughs and snaps his fingers. "I've still got my moves." Then he swivels his hips just a little. "Oh yes, I still got it."

"I expect to see you show up everyone on the dance floor," I say, smiling.

Elroy swallows a pill and smiles. I can't remember the last time I've seen him this happy.

"Any minute now," he says. "I've told them, once I get up and on that floor, that they better play Elvis's 'Are you Lonesome Tonight?' because that was our song, you see. Keith and me." Elroy swallows again, his Adam's apple working and his voice breaks momentarily. "It wasn't our favorite song, but when we were recovering, after we'd escaped... Well, you see, one day, I'd snuck into his hospital room and this song was on the radio, and I asked him to dance. It was only one song, then the doctor came in and we had to pretend we were just two guys having a gag... But for that one song, it was just us. It was the only time we ever danced together, and I hold on to that memory with everything I got. I'm going to think of him out there tonight when I'm dancing. Maybe I'll even feel him with me."

"I'm sure he's watching, wherever he is," Eden says.

Elroy gestures to the orderly who's working the senior center's small stereo system, and the man nods in reply.

"It's time," Elroy says. "Thank you, Bishop. You've done so much for me."

"Happy to help, Elroy."

Elroy reaches the cleared space of the lobby that doubles as the dance floor, and the first chords of that old song begin. The old man doesn't dance much at first, just a slow sway with his eyes closed. But as the song stretches on, his face changes — from a loving smile to a frown — and even his swaying stutters and slows until it's the smallest of movements.

"Bishop...?" Eden says, her eyes stuck on Elroy. "What's happening?"

I grunt and shake my head. I'd worried about this. Even cautioned Elroy to keep his expectations in check.

"The meds will help with the pain, but they can't work miracles. They can't undo all the damage that's been done to his body."

"Elroy needs our help. This moment matters."

I pause. What more can I do? I've already put together an entire fake medical office and sat through hours of some pharma rep's bullshit just to acquire the pills that are allowing Elroy to do his best attempt at a dance. There's no surgery, no medical procedure that can give him back the full use of his body. There's nothing I can do.

But Eden doesn't wait for me to speak. She moves. Because only she can see the solution — she steps onto the dance floor and offers Elroy her hand and a smile.

He takes both.

And then, gently, the two of them dance.

I watch as he leads her through each step of the dance that he and his long-dead love once shared over fifty years ago. What Eden's doing for Elroy is something I couldn't do. Something I wouldn't even know how to do. She feels — she understands — things that I don't. Don't, or can't, because I've kept myself shut off for so damn long.

When the song ends, there are tears in Elroy's eyes. He hugs her tight. In the quiet space between one song and the next, I hear him sob into her shoulder. "Thank you."

Eden hugs him in return, a loving light in her eyes. She gives me a gentle wave, and as they so often do when I feel myself start to accept happiness, my thoughts go back to the past as if they want to rebel against the moment. My thoughts go back to *her*. To Michelle. Even when I think of her, I rarely use her name because it hurts too much. It makes her ghost more real; gives it form, body, and gives me pain.

But this time, thinking of her doesn't hurt as much.

This time, I wonder, would it really dishonor her memory to open myself up to someone new? Especially someone who seems to understand and respect that some people may have a ghost that they carry with them — whether that ghost is named Keith or Michelle?

Maybe it's time I opened up.

Just a little more.

I make a decision — small, yet frightening in its importance.

When Eden returns, I hold out my hand, which she looks at with wary surprise.

"Bishop, what's this?"

"It's our turn to dance."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Eden

A handful of songs is all I get; three, maybe four. I don't count them, couldn't if I tried, because every part of me is occupied with experiencing this moment. It's not just the emotional fire that ignites within me at having him close, at feeling him present in this moment with me, it's the war that I feel going on within both of us; within me, doubt and fear — *should I really allow myself to feel the way I feel about Bishop, knowing that he's in an MC, knowing my past?* Within him, it's something deeper, something profound, something forlorn.

We both feel something pulling us away, the hand of someone else on our shoulders, trying to drag us away from this moment, yet we both cling to each other for as long as we can stand the pain; we dance, slow; hold the other tight; carry one another through each bar and line, every chord and chorus with gentle determination.

I want something better than the fear I feel every day. I want something more. Something that stirs my heart.

And I think he wants it, too.

During our dance, there's the flash of a Polaroid camera, and I look to the side to see Elroy smiling. He takes a few more while I return to being lost in the moment with Bishop. At the end of the last song, I look up into Bishop's eyes — they are immense, full of a lifetime's worth of pain lit by a single spark of happiness.

This is our moment.

But just as quick, that spark is extinguished.

Extinguished by something so much stronger than I could have imagined; whatever it is has its hooks into the deepest part of his soul, and every moment more that we sway together to the melody of long-ago love songs rips furrows into the scars on his heart. I can't continue to hurt him like this.

I stop.

"Thank you for the dance, Bishop," I whisper and rise on tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. His scruff is rough against my lips, deliciously so, and my body tingles alive as I kiss him. His hand, strong and calloused, cups the side of my face gently, as if he's afraid I might crumble under a heavier touch.

"Eden," he starts, his voice a low rumble that reverberates through me. It's almost a plea, and it fractures something in my soul. The music has stopped now, leaving an echoing silence in its wake. The hum of conversation from other people feels miles away as we stand there on our own island of quiet intensity. His thumb brushes my cheekbone in a way that sends shivers down my spine. "You don't have to go."

It's in that instant, with the echo of music fading into silence and the dim lights casting soft shadows across his face, that I understand Bishop's pain more clearly than ever before. It's not just about the loss he suffered; it's about his struggle to balance the possibility of new love against the ache of an old wound.

Just as he's afraid, I'm afraid, too. We're both holding back, still, afraid of ourselves, our pasts, and what our own brokenness would do to the other. We are two people, each shattered in our own way, fearful of letting those fractures align lest we shatter altogether.

Yet we both ache for something more.

"I'm not leaving," I whisper, my hand finding its way to rest over his heart — a heart that beats too fast, much like my own. "I'm just stepping back... because you're hurting. Even though I want more, I'm willing to wait for you."

I don't want to, but I will; my heart and body have both been broken in the past by love gone wrong, but Bishop may be the one to finally heal me. With him, I feel understood. With him, I feel like there's a future beyond fear.

I turn and I leave the dance behind, seeking fresh air outside. I find myself seated on the bench just outside the doors, looking at the small garden built to provide the seniors a small glimpse of nature.

On that bench, I sit, my head in my hands.

Opening up again is hard.

That dance, that kiss, those moments where I was just *me* with a man that I cared for, a man that I want to be *my man* was like ripping open my heart to reveal who I truly am. Sweetness, kindness, maybe even love — none of it comes without pain, without walking the old ground that I first traveled with a man who I gave my heart to, a man who then tore it and my life to pieces.

Each scar I carry is because of him. Every time I open them up again, I'm left to wonder, to fear, whether I'm just setting myself up to be hurt again.

With Bishop, it's worth the risk.

With him, I want it.

I seek that pain and the healing that comes beyond it.

And it is the worst, most agonizing irony that the man I hope might heal my heart is carrying a wounded heart as well.

Confused, agonized, I sit on the bench, watch the tree that's slowly turning into a skeleton as the autumn grows older, and I wonder just what the hell it is that I'm doing with my life and why I'm so insistent on torturing myself when I should know better.

"It's not you, it's me," says Bishop.

I turn.

He's standing right behind me, his hands folded in behind him, like a soldier standing at ease.

"No, it's us. Unless you're doing the 'it's not you, it's me' routine as a break-up thing. In which case, that's a little premature, since we both know we weren't anything."

Yet.

"My life isn't easy. Or safe. With the club, with some of the stuff I've had to see as a doc, with... other things... It makes the idea of opening up again difficult."

"Life being difficult is just life."

"And your life is a lot less difficult without me in it."

"Don't you think I considered all of that before I kissed you?"

"I do."

"Then why are you here?" I say, standing and turning to face him. If he's going to end our not-relationship right now, I want him to be looking me in the eye when he does it. "Tell me, Bishop."

"Because when I saw you go, I knew I couldn't let you leave." He comes around the bench to stand right in front of me, his eyes full of intensity and passion. "Not when there's so much more that we both want. Like this."

He leans down to kiss me, and I rise to meet him, our lips crashing together in a fierce, desperate union that speaks of longing and fear and the thousand unspoken words that have been trapped between us.

I wrap my arms around his neck, anchor myself to the only thing that feels solid in a world that's constantly shifting under my feet.

For a moment, nothing else exists but the taste of him, the heat of his body against mine, and the rapid beating of our hearts. It's a kind of raw honesty that can't be faked or forced — it just is. In this moment, we are not our pasts or our potential futures — we are just Eden and Bishop, two souls entwined in the undeniable now.

He pulls back breathless and searching my face for signs of regret or hesitation. But there's none to find. Instead, he finds determination and a spark of something like hope — a fragile flame that he's fanned into being.

"I'm not saying it will be easy," he says in a voice rough with emotion. "I'm not even saying we'll always get it right. But Eden, I don't want to look back years from now and wonder what could've been if we'd been brave enough to try."

"And if we crash and burn?"

"I'd burn a hundred times over just to kiss you again."

I leap at him.

My lips crash into his with a ferocity I thought I'd lost long ago — a vivacity beaten out of me by all of life's terrors — now burning again, thanks to him. Every nerve, every inch of my body simmers with desire as I devour him, as his hands slide down my back to cup my ass, as I grind my hips into him. I yearn, I want, I ache, I desire, I am alive.

In that electric moment, the world spins away and all the noise, the pain, and the fear dissolve into the shared heat of our bodies. The autumn wind carries away the whispers of our troubled pasts as we cling to each other like wreckage in a stormy sea.

His hands are firm but gentle, filled with a yearning that mirrors my own.

"At least if we crash," I murmur against his lips, "we'll have known what it's like to fly."

Then I kiss him again. Hungry, desperate, full of yearning for feelings that so long seemed out of my reach.

It's a wild, intoxicating thing, this dance of lips and tongues, the way his grip tightens just enough to make me feel wanted. I'm dizzy with it — the rush of being wanted not just for my body, but for the storm of emotions that makes me who I am.

As we break apart once more for air, the world comes crashing back, a cacophony of realization that we're standing outside a senior home, the night air crisp and watching.

This is no place to do what we need to do.

Bishop's eyes are ablaze with an intensity that matches my own. His breath is ragged, but his voice is steady when he speaks again.

"Let's find somewhere more private," he murmurs against my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

I nod, unable to trust my voice, caught in the pull of his gaze. Together, we walk past the garden and its skeletal tree until we reach his truck parked at the curb.

"Your place or mine?" He says as he opens the door for me and helps me in.

"Yours."

With what I want to do with Bishop, and the noises I know I'm going to make, I'm not sure that my dog, Comet, won't believe that Bishop is murdering me.

"My place it is."

It's a short drive, but too long, and on the way there, I tease him. Tentative at first, it's hard to open up, to accept that we're really going where we're going, that we're really going to do what we're going to do, but soon, I have my hands roaming up his thigh, teasing his hard cock through his jeans.

He shoots me a look that's part shock, part raw desire. "Eden," he warns, his voice strangled as he tries to maintain control over the vehicle.

"I'm just getting started," I whisper with a devilish grin, enjoying the power I have over him — the way his hands grip the steering wheel just a bit too tightly, the way his jaw clenches.

I touch him more. Grip him through his jeans for a moment, then I put my fingers on his zipper and give it a gentle tug.

He swears under his breath, eyes fixed on the road ahead but the muscle in his jaw working overtime.

"Eden," he growls, a warning that's also a plea.

I smirk, feeling more alive than I have in years.

"What's wrong, Bishop? Can't handle a little pressure?"

He shoots me a look — one that's all fire and need rolled into a promise.

"You keep that up, and we're not gonna make it to my place."

"Sounds like a challenge. I'll see if I can rise to the occasion," I say, then, looking pointedly at his crotch, I add, "Because I can see you've definitely risen to it."

Then I pull his zipper down and undo the buttons of his jeans.

I hesitate for a moment, allow us both a chance to speak up, to say

something. This is new, this is more of a connection than either of us has had in so long, that I know I need to be cautious. But after that spare moment, I take his cock in hand and slither across the seat to take it into my mouth.

He moans. "Oh, fuck, Eden."

The truck swerves for a moment as the sense of me sucking his cock overwhelms him, then he regains control.

The road ahead blurs into a ribbon of tarmac, and streetlights streak past like falling stars as Bishop struggles to keep his focus. Each touch of my lips, the teasing drag of my tongue, sends another shudder through him. His hand finds its way to the back of my head, not pushing or guiding, just resting there in a silent communion of desperation and want.

"Eden," he breathes out, a ragged edge to his voice that tells me he's close to breaking. "We need to stop."

I pull back reluctantly, tasting him still on my lips, and sit up to look at him. His eyes are dark with desire, his breaths coming in shallow bursts as if he has been running for miles instead of sitting behind the wheel.

"Almost there," he says, a promise wrapped in urgency.

We pull into his driveway minutes later, his motorcycle resting silently under the porch light like a slumbering beast that had brought us together in ways neither of us could have predicted. We tumble from the truck in a tangle of limbs and hurried touches. The front door barely closes behind us before we're fumbling with each other's clothes again, shedding layers and barriers alike.

His house reflects him — neat, lived in, yet so much hidden; no pictures on the walls, no personal decorations of any kind. Something alive, yet so much concealed.

I barely catch more than that simple glimpse before my lips are on him again, before I drop to my knees in front of him and take his cock in my mouth once more. The taste of him in the truck still burns in my memory, desire still inflames all of me, and, though I want to fuck him, I want to ride him; I want to feel his hands roam my body and his tongue on my pussy. First, of all things, I want to make him cum in my mouth.

"Oh fuck, you're too damn good," he moans as I suck him once more.

My tongue dances along his shaft, my lips wrap tightly around his head, I can feel the tension in his body ease. The grip he has on my hair loosens as he loses himself in the pleasure I'm giving him. This is what I want for him, this release, this surrender to the moment. As his hips move on their own

accord, thrusting forward into my mouth, I know he's getting close.

With a growl, he grabs my hair, pulling my head back just enough to look into my eyes.

"Fuck, Eden," he gasps, his voice hoarse with desire. "You're gonna make me cum."

"Do you want me to stop?" I ask, looking up at him with a teasing smile.

He shakes his head, his eyes dark with lust. "No. Don't stop."

And so I don't.

Instead, I relax my throat, taking more of him inside, sucking harder as he pulses in my mouth. His grip tightens in my hair, and his hips jerk violently, driving his cock deeper into my throat as he comes.

I swallow every drop.

His come is barely down my throat when he kneels and scoops me in his arms, lifting me like I weigh nothing. I yelp in surprise.

"I want you upstairs, in bed, while I eat your pussy."

The bedroom is dimly lit by a single bedside lamp, casting shadows on the wall that dance with the desire in our hearts. He kicks the door shut behind us, then tosses me on his bed. His cock, hard again, pulses and I watch as he strips off his shirt, revealing a chest covered in tattoos that tell stories of pain and loss and survival.

By the time he reaches the bed, my dress and my panties are on the floor, and my body is alive in vibrant anticipation. He crawls onto the bed beside me, his lips finding mine again, his hands wandering every inch of me. I moan into his mouth as he slips one hand between my legs, his fingers finding my wetness.

"You're ready for me," he whispers against my ear.

I am. I want it. Want him. Need him with every spark of desire that flares within me.

I arch into his touch, my body begging for him. I want him to fuck me so badly, to feel him inside me, to feel whole again.

Bishop takes his time, fingers toying with me, teasing me, while our lips and tongues entwine in desperate hunger. Then he pulls back. His lips travel down my neck, leaving a trail of heat and tingling sensations in their wake. My skin hums with anticipation as his tongue flicks against my pulse point, sending sparks of electricity through my body.

"I want to taste you," he whispers, his breath hot against my skin. "I need to feel your sweet pussy under my tongue."

My heart races as I nod eagerly, unable to form words. With careful movements, he positions his head between my legs, the anticipation building within me. His tongue darts out, teasing and exploring every inch of me, igniting a fire deep inside. I moan softly as he tastes me for the first time, sending waves of pleasure through me.

"Fuck," he breathes out. "You taste so good."

His words send shivers down my spine as he continues to lap at my folds, his tongue delving deeper. His fingers find their way inside me, thrusting in time with his tongue's movements. I grip the sheets, biting back moans as the pleasure builds within me. I tangle my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer as he devours me. His lips find my clit, suckling gently while his fingers thrust in and out of me. I cry out as my body quakes with pleasure.

"Bishop," I moan, "I'm going to cum. Bishop..."

His name is a plea and a prayer, and it's all I can manage as I feel the build-up of tension within me, the impending release. His fingers stroke me in a rhythm that sends me spiraling over the edge.

"Now," he commands, his voice rough with desire. "Come for me, Eden."
I do.

My body tenses, and I scream into the pillow as I come, waves of pleasure washing over me. I ride those waves for what feels like hours, but may only be moments, and when I come down to my body again, I feel freer of my past than I've ever felt before. I feel safe, comfortable, and laughter breaks out of my mouth.

"Eden?"

"That was... that was exactly what I needed," I say. But those words only hang in the air for a moment, then I look down, see Bishop still between my legs, look lower, see his hard cock, and smile. "Well, for a start... Because now I really want you to fuck me."

"Are you sure?"

It's a simple moment of consideration, but I appreciate it; my answer comes as a smile, a kiss, and leaning up to grab his hard cock. "I want this."

He kisses me more, long, languid kisses that stretch through moments and make my heart skip multiple beats. They tease me; they make me pulse my hips against him and moan in urgent expressions of the need that just grows and grows within me. I feel free of so much, thanks to him, and want to give him everything in return.

"Fuck me, Bishop. I want to feel your cock inside me. I want to look into

your eyes when you come."

He positions himself between my legs. "I can give you that, baby."

He guides his length into me, slowly, so slowly it feels like torture. But the pleasure that shoots through me as he fills me is unlike anything I've ever felt before. He stops, his hips locked against mine, and I quake with anticipation.

"Tell me what you want," he breathes.

"I want you to fuck me," I whisper, eyes locked on his.

He groans, then moves, thrusting into me with a rhythm that matches our breaths. His hands roam over my body, finding the most sensitive spots and driving me wild.

I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer as we move together. Our bodies slide against each other, creating a sensation that's hot and electrifying. His lips find my neck, his teeth nipping at my skin, sending shivers down my spine.

"Bishop," I moan, arching into him. "I'm close. Again."

That's never happened before, not unless my hands have been involved.

But then, Bishop isn't like anyone I've been with before, either.

"Mmmhmm... I can't wait to watch you come on my cock."

I can barely form words, my mind consumed by the pleasure radiating from my core. But I manage a gasping plea: "Yes. Keep going, just like this."

He presses his lips to mine as he thrusts into me, fucking me in rhythm with the moans that I release into his mouth, each one a testament to how close I am to shattering to a million pieces beneath him.

Then it happens.

It starts as a tingling, electric sensation that forms in my core, it grows, spirals, outward until it feels as if I'm trapped in the center of a lightning bolt — my entire body comes undone, clenching, releasing, cries of ecstasy form in my throat and I release them toward the ceiling of Bishop's bedroom while he kisses my neck and fucks me senseless. My mind is gone, my body broken, but reformed. Every part of me feels alive and new. I laugh again.

Then I see the look he gives me — part questioning, part confused, part him: grumpy.

"I feel so good, I can't help it," I say. "Now, I want to make you feel good. Lie back."

He withdraws, then does as I ask and lies on his back, and I mount him without hesitation. Hungry, despite my body feeling as solid as a cloud. When he fills me again, it's as good as the first time. I shut my eyes, slap my

hands to his chest, and moan.

"Fuck, I love your cock."

"And I — "

"Shh," I say, cutting him off with my finger to his lips. It feels so refreshing to be on top, to be in control for once, and I want to relish every moment of this. "The only thing I want to hear from your mouth are your moans when I make you come."

A smile spreads across his lips and his eyes burn his reply: *yes*.

Then, with a vengeance, I ride him, exulting in my control, exuberant in the feeling of his cock inside me. His hands roam over my body, holding me close and guiding me as I move on top of him. His lips find my ear and he whispers, "You're driving me crazy."

I laugh softly; the sound vibrating against his chest.

"Good," I say. "Because I want you to lose control, Bishop."

He groans, his hips pushing up to meet my downward thrusts. The rhythm we create is intoxicating, a dance that leaves us both breathless. As I see his pupils dilate and a flush spread across his cheeks, I slump down over him, my breasts grazing his chest. His hands cup my ass, pulling me closer as he thrusts into me with a newfound urgency. Our eyes lock, and there's something in his gaze that sends shivers down my spine. It's a look of raw desire and need, mixed with an emotion close to one that I'm too scared to name.

"Eden, I'm going to come," he says.

"Do it. Let me feel it," I say. Placing my hands on his cheeks, I hold his gaze to mine as I pulse my hips into him, riding and grinding him into me.

Then I see it — that moment of blissful nonexistence that burns through his eyes as he shatters. I smile, press my lips to his, and ride him through his climax as he gasps and moans beneath me.

We stay like that for a long time after he finishes. Still. Our skin touching, our lips silent, our hearts and minds racing with what we've just unlocked between us — something old, once lost, made new again. Once my legs begin to tingle from my position, I roll beside him and rest my cheek on his chest. My eyes, I lift toward him. He watches me move and settle, a smile on his face and something unreadable in his eyes.

"Eden... I never expected I'd... that we'd..." He murmurs, his words as lost as he sounds. It makes me chuckle to see him so off-base.

"Surprise," I say.

His answer is a kiss on my forehead that is as passionate and soul-consuming as anything we've done in the hour before. Walls between us have broken, shattered to pieces, and here I lay in his arms, listening to his heartbeat, listening to the air fill his lungs, and both of us smiling and open and vulnerable and wanting more. I want to show more of who I am to the grumpy man that I never expected to even like, much less get into bed with.

"I want to tell you something," I say.

"Let's not move too fast," Bishop says.

I shake my head. "I'm not some moonstruck teenager. It's not those three words. It's something secret, something you can't tell anyone."

"What is it?"

"Before I tell you, I want to hear you promise you won't tell anyone."

"I promise."

"My name isn't Eden Mercer."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Bishop

I sit up, alarmed, because apparently, I didn't just have sex with Eden. Just goes to show me what opening up to anyone, in any way, gets me. "What are you saying?"

"I'm telling you this because honesty is vital to me in a relationship, and after what we've done..."

"You're talking about it like we've just committed a crime."

"It's not that. It's just been a while since I've... with anyone... And I still have to sort out how I feel about it. In a good way," she says. "But what I want to tell you is something that needs to stay between us. There's only one other person who knows my secret. Honesty means a lot to me, and it also didn't feel the best hearing a name that isn't mine coming from your lips when we..."

I brush my hand against her cheek. This isn't easy for her, and hell, it isn't easy for me, either, opening up like we just did. My reputation exists for a reason. I cultivate it because it's the only thing I know how. The only way I can protect myself is to keep everyone away. Except it feels comfortable being here with her. It feels right. Yet there's still a part of me that itches at being close to her, and there's that always-present sense of guilt that's still wrapped around me like a body bag. "Take your time."

"My real name is Alice Langham. I changed it to Eden because I needed to change my life in a big way. Who I was then, what my life was... It was awful, and I needed out. A fresh start."

She looks at me, wide-eyed, as if I'm supposed to ask a question, as if I'm supposed to pry or say something. What is she expecting from me?

I kiss her on the forehead, then the lips.

"Alice, Eden, I'll call you whatever name you want to be called."

A sigh. "Eden. Call me Eden. I moved on from being Alice for a reason. I just thought you might have questions, or something of your own to..."

It's my turn to sigh. The last thing I want in this moment is to have her pry into the life I have, the one that's too dangerous for someone like her; does she want to know about where I spend my time outside of the senior center? Does she want to know about the men trying to kill me and everyone associated with the Twisted Devils? Her prying is just another unwelcome reminder of how she doesn't belong with someone like me, how things will inevitably end if I get too close. I don't want that right now. Give me a short while of illusion, at least. "You know the life that I'm involved in, Eden. You can see the bike out front; you can see the cut I have; you know there are things I can't tell you."

"I understand. There's only so much that an ol' lady can know."

"How do you know that term?"

"It's common knowledge. Especially in a town like Ironwood Falls."

"Fair enough." I grunt in understanding.

"Bishop, the point I'm trying to make is that I feel safe with you. When I'm with you, everything else that would worry me seems less important. This is a new feeling for me. It's scary. But I want to make sure we start our relationship right, from a place of honesty, so we each know who we're really sleeping with."

I kiss her again. "You know who I am. You know what I do. Maybe later, down the line, I can tell you more, but for right now, all I can tell you is that for the first time in a long time, I feel something close to happy."

Eden relaxes in my arms, rests her head on my chest and releases a deep sigh. This is all I need from her; closeness, her touch, those ephemeral things that make the pain inside me just a little less agonizing. When I hold her, I can see, someday, the hope that I might be free of them. It's a long way off that it feels frighteningly close to an illusion, but it's novel, it's welcome, and even if it's an illusion, I'll cling to it with all my strength.

I'll protect her with all my strength, too. Which won't be easy, since she already seems set on prying into my life with the MC.

"I like that. It's what I want, too, Bishop. Or should I call you doctor?"

"Only if you're wearing a nurse outfit when you do it."

"Play your cards right, and that could be arranged." She laughs and kisses me, then returns her head to my chest. "Goodnight."

Though her breathing becomes deep and easy, it's a long time before her body relaxes enough that I'm sure she's asleep. It's even longer before I relax. I need to be careful around Eden. Protect her. Keep her away from those parts

of my life that could hurt her. She thinks she has a secret, but she has no idea. With her secret, a slip-up could mean someone calls her the wrong name; with my secrets, a slip-up will get her killed.

As if to remind me, my phone vibrates on my nightstand.

I pick it up. There's a text from Rabid.

All the clubs are in town. Report to the clubhouse at 8am. The deal is happening soon. We need to be ready.

I set the phone down and put my arm around Eden. Even asleep, she sighs and nuzzles her chin into my chest. If the deal is happening soon, that means whoever has been raiding our club is going to step up their efforts; small ambushes will turn into larger, more brazen attacks as they get desperate.

A desperate enemy is the worst kind — they'll go after friends, family, whatever it takes.

I've picked the worst time to bring Eden into my life.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Bishop

"What is that aberrant thing on your face?" Alessia snaps the second I step through the doors at The Noble Fir. She's seated at the front desk, her usual pleasant frown on her face. Where she's seated is unusual, but her attitude isn't. "I don't like it."

Molly's beside her, a cup of coffee in her hand, with a bored look on her face. "That's just his face."

"I know that's his face. It's what he's doing with it that's bothering me."

"It's a smile. Lighten up, he's obviously not very practiced at it."

"Where's Rabid?" I say, letting their joking around slide off my shoulders because I am in a good mood this morning. It's hard not to be when I wake up next to Eden. Even with all the concerns in my life, her presence is enough to make me as close to happy as I've been in a long time.

"Church. Along with the representatives from the Iron Savages MC, and the Steel Reapers MC. It's a closed meeting. Only those with patches are allowed inside," says Alessia, which explains her attitude. Usually, because of her mob connections and the fact that she's Goldie's ol' lady, she has at least a tangential part in club business. But since we're reaching out to other clubs, where they may not be as open-minded as the Twisted Devils, she's taking a back seat, and it's killing her.

"Fix this before you go in there," Molly says, gesturing to her face. Then, with a wink, she adds, "What's her name?"

"Eden," I answer without hesitation.

"She real, or is that the name of a new antidepressant?" Molly says.

I reach into my wallet and take out a folded picture. It's from the dance, one of the ones that Elroy took while Eden and I were together. I feel ridiculous carrying the damn thing around, yet I've already looked at it three times this morning on the ride in. What the hell is happening to me? "Here."

Molly takes the picture and then passes it to Alessia.

"I think I've seen her around," she says.

"Youth Center. She runs it."

"I'm happy for you, Bishop," Molly says. "But you better take your photo and get in there. You know how Rabid is with punctuality."

Grunting, I retrieve the photo and stick it back in my wallet. They're right, Rabid still has a few habits left over from his military days, and keeping accurate time is one of them. I have a minute, maybe less, to get into that meeting or else he'll rip my head off.

"Ladies," I say as I leave.

Inside, it's the most packed church has ever been; every member of the Twisted Devils MC is present, along with Rook, Bullet, and Thunder from the Steel Reapers MC, the trucker, Moose, and five unfamiliar faces who must be from the Iron Savages MC. Both their president and vice president have hardened, roadworn looks to them. Their president has short-shaved gray hair, a gray goatee, a scar over his left eye, and a craggy chin like a cinderblock that's been hit with a sledgehammer. Their VP has swept-back dark hair that's gray at the temples, piercing brown eyes, he's missing a piece of his right ear, and he has a mole on his neck that he really should have a dermatologist look at. I make a note to myself to tell him about it, providing he doesn't turn out to be an asshole.

Rabid sits at the head of the table and he rises as I enter the room. "You saved your life by twenty seconds, Bishop."

"Morning to you, too, prez," I respond.

He blinks. "Did you just fucking wish me good morning?"

Chains lets out a low whistle. "Someone got some last night."

Goldie smiles. "Right on, brother. Way to finally tap that cosmic energy."

"He was tapping something, I'll bet, but it wasn't cosmic," Chains says.

"That woman from the youth center?"

The president of the Iron Savages MC gives Rabid a strange look. "We really going to hold up this meeting to talk about one of your club members getting laid?"

"If you knew him, you'd understand," Rabid says.

"He's smiling. Bishop is smiling," Mayhem says, awestruck. "This can't be real. It feels like the time I met George Miller at a KFC in Oakland."

Havoc punches him. "That wasn't George Miller, you psycho."

"How did he know every line of *Fury Road*, then?"

"Because he was clearly tweaking on meth. And he didn't know every

line, he just kept repeating 'Shiny and chrome,' over and over."

"That's practically all the movie's dialogue. And did you ever think that maybe George Miller likes meth, too? Have you seen *Fury Road*? All those warboys huffing that chrome paint? Miller clearly enjoys his illicit substances."

Havoc stands, fists clenched, eyes on fire like the California forest every summer. "Are you really saying that to my face right now? That I haven't seen *Fury Road*? Of course I've seen *Fury Road*. I should kick your ass out of fucking principle."

Seeing the two of them stand up, toe to toe, about to rip each other's throats open over a movie — even though it is a damn fine movie — makes me laugh.

Out loud.

The room goes so quiet that you could hear a pin drop.

I feel every eye in the room on me, the weight of their stares like a physical blow. It's as if I've done something more outrageous than the impending brawl over a film director's suspected drug habits.

Rabid's mouth twitches, and for a moment, I wonder if he's going to scold me for breaking the silence, but then he does something that surprises us all — he laughs, too. A deep, hearty laugh that seems to shake the dust from the rafters.

"Alright," he says once he recovers, his voice still laced with humor. "Let's settle down and get this meeting started."

Havoc and Mayhem reluctantly back off, casting each other wary glances as they retake their seats. The tension in the room dissipates like smoke, allowing a semblance of normalcy to return.

"As much as I'd love to keep discussing Bishop's newfound happiness, though we will come back to it, because what the fuck?" Rabid says, laughing, then he continues, "We have serious matters to address today."

I take my spot at the table, feeling the lingering effects of my unexpected bout of laughter fade away. There's a part of me that wants to hold on to it — this lightness I haven't felt in ages — but I know duty calls. The faces around me are solemn now; we are closer than ever to the deal that will reshape the future of multiple clubs.

"We have the product in hand, we have all three clubs present, and I've sent word to the buyers, they'll be arriving within days to take possession. As participants in this deal, with the Steel Reapers providing incoming

transportation of the product, us providing storage and brokering the deal, and the Iron Savages providing security for the final leg and product delivery, you'll each receive a fair cut: a third, each, minus expenses."

"How long until these buyers get here?" Says the prez of the Iron Savages. The patch on his cut declares his road name to be Grinder.

"Expenses? What fucking expenses?" Their VP, Fury, says.

"They're minimal, and they'll be split three ways. We've spent blood and bullets guarding this shipment — several of my men have sustained injuries as, somehow, there's a group out there that is aware of our business arrangement, and is looking to either take the cargo for themselves or prevent the deal entirely. They've staged several attacks so far."

"You have a fucking leak? This is ridiculous," says the VP. He stands, runs a hand through his hair, and looks ready to spit in Rabid's face. "What kind of fucking two-bit operation are you running here?"

"Watch your fucking tongue," Rabid snarls. "Unless you want me to cut it out."

To my left, beneath the sounds of the argument between Rabid and the VP of the Iron Savages, Fury, I barely make out the sound of Mayhem and Havoc whispering.

"They're going to fight," Havoc says.

"Seriously. Want to make a bet on how quickly that douche dies if he tries to throw hands with Rabid?" Mayhem says.

"What's the over-under?"

"The time it takes Casey Becker to die in *Scream*."

"What? She dies in, like, the first thirty seconds of that movie."

"You're misremembering, brother. That whole delicious scene, from phone call to murder, is almost ten minutes of terror. It only feels like it goes by so quickly because of how well they manage the tension."

"Rabid would totally kill this Fury guy in less than ten minutes."

"I'm not talking about how long it takes for him to stab him. I'm talking about the literal time of death. Meaning we'll need to feel when his pulse stops."

"Oh, sweet. That makes things interesting. Animals and people can go on for a while after a fatal blow. Like a chicken with its head cut off. Fine, I'm in."

"Terms?"

"Five hundred."

"You're on."

The president of the Iron Savages is standing now, and has his arm on the VP's shoulder, restraining him.

"The expenses that you've called out are acceptable. They fucking suck, but that's the cost of doing business and we want this deal to go through as much as anyone. Once the money's changed hands, we'll want a full accounting and we still reserve the right to raise hell if shit should stink."

"Fair enough," Rabid says. "But remind your VP to keep his wild accusations off his fucking tongue unless he wants it removed from his mouth."

With a shove, the president of the Iron Savages puts the club's VP back in his seat. "Noted."

"Any other issues?" Rabid says, giving a pointed look toward the Steel Reapers.

"No. I like having my tongue attached to my mouth, and my ol' lady prefers it that way, too," the one called Thunder says.

"No comment," Rook grunts. "We done here?"

Rabid bangs the table and the out-of-town clubs rise and general club chatter breaks out. Rabid then motions for me to come over, and I do so, standing at his shoulder, just between him and the president and VP of the Iron Savages.

"Who is she?" He says.

"Why do you need to know?"

"Two reasons: any newcomers into club life need to be investigated, considering the major fucking deal we are on the precipice of, and there's the fact that, despite all your fucking efforts to be a gaping asshole bigger than the Grand fucking Canyon, we all give a shit about you and seeing you actually fucking happy is fucking noteworthy. So, who is the woman who has pulled off this fucking miracle?"

"Eden," I say, and I take the picture out of my wallet, because I sure as fuck know where this conversation is going. "Here."

Rabid takes the photo from my hand, his eyes scanning over the image of Eden carefully. I can almost hear the gears turning in his head, can almost see him filing away every detail of her face. When he finally looks up at me, there's a glint of approval. Or maybe it's concern. It's hard to tell with Rabid. Either way, he doesn't look like he wants to cut my tongue out, so he is at least marginally pleased.

"She's beautiful," he states matter-of-factly. "Treat her right, Bishop."

The president of the Iron Savages cranes his neck to glimpse the photo.

"Nice catch. She's sexy as hell," he says with an appreciative nod.

But it's the VP who holds onto the photo just a bit too long, who looks at Eden with eyes that aren't just seeing her, but searching for something in her face. Weird vibes radiate off of him like heat waves from sun-scorched asphalt.

"Nice," he finally says, but there's an odd edge to his voice that makes me uneasy. He hands back the picture with a smirk that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Congratulations on fucking such a fine piece of ass."

Rabid seems to pick up on the tension too; his lips press into a thin line as he gives the VP a measured look.

"Keep her close," he says beneath his breath. Then, louder, he says, "Since we've set all the terms of this business, there's no more reason to be hanging out in fucking church. First round at the bar is on Bishop, in light of his newfound happiness. Can't let you be too happy, Bishop. Don't want to ruin your reputation."

"Fuck you, Rabid."

"Cry all you want. You're still paying," he answers. Then he bangs his gavel on the table. "See? Hitting the table with this fucking thing makes it law. Go get me a whiskey, Bishop."

Everyone gradually files out to the bar, and Molly's waiting, glasses and shot glasses ready to fill with enough liquor to satisfy all three MC's and completely wipe out my fucking wallet. Lucky me.

"Water," I call out to her when it's my turn. She raises an eyebrow and I answer, "This first round's on me. For everyone."

"Oh fuck, Bishop. Did I not tell you we no longer have water for free? It's ten bucks a glass. Extra, if you want ice."

"Are you trying to kill my happiness, Molly? If so, you are doing a damn fine job of it."

"Pardon me if it weirs me out seeing anything other than your usual frown on your face. Maybe I just want things back to normal," she says. "Or maybe I'm just messing with you." Molly leans in, her elbows propped against the polished wood of the bar, a sly grin playing at her lips. "So, when do we get to meet this Eden? Is she gonna grace us with her presence, or are you keeping her tucked away?"

"I'm not 'tucking her' anywhere," I reply, leaning in so only Molly can hear

me over the din. "She's got her own shit to deal with right now."

"Ah," Molly nods slowly, sympathy creeping into her voice. "You've got a wounded bird on your hands, huh? Just be careful, Bishop. This life..." She sweeps her hand through the air, indicating the rowdy atmosphere of bikers and booze that makes up our everyday existence. "...it ain't for everyone."

I look away for a moment, feeling that familiar sting at the back of my eyes when I think about what Eden's already been through. And what I know of her past is probably not even the half of it. Whatever it was, it was enough to make her change her name and start over somewhere new. I have to be careful with her. I have to protect her, not just for her sake, but for mine; I can't go through that kind of loss again.

"She's tougher than she looks."

Molly chuckles, reaching out to pat my hand. "Just don't let this world chew her up and spit her out, alright?"

"Not planning on letting those two cross paths anytime soon."

While things are as dangerous as they are right now, I'll need to walk a fine line with Eden. Which means keeping just the right amount of distance between us. Things are too dangerous right now.

Just then, my phone rings. I take it out, ready to send whoever is calling to voicemail, when I see it's the senior center on the caller ID screen. I frown.

"Something wrong, Bishop?" Molly says.

"Not sure. They rarely call me on my time off, not unless it's an emergency."

I pick up the phone and answer, my hand slightly trembling. The voice on the other end is familiar, but I can't quite place it — it's one of the nurses from the senior center, but I don't know his name. He's new. Still, as he speaks, his words barely register in my mind before my heart drops to my feet, causing a heavy thud that echoes through my body.

Across the bar, Molly reaches out for me with a look of concern etched across her face. Her words reach me like a distant echo. "Bishop, what is it?"

But I'm already moving, my feet carrying me towards the door. My pulse pounds in my ears, drowning out any other sound.

The day that I've feared for so long is upon me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Eden

I'm alone when I wake up. With nothing but cold sheets beside me, his absence long enough that even the mattress and his pillow has lost much of his indentation. There's enough light coming in through the window that my heart jumps for a moment and I reach for my phone to find out I have just the time I need to get ready for work and make it, but only if I hurry.

I throw on last night's clothes, and as I do so, I find a note, some cash, and a spare key on the nightstand. It's from Bishop. *Club business, had to leave early. Money's for a cab, key's for you to lock up when you leave.* It's signed simply with his club name.

As I flip the note over, as if expecting more to be hidden on the back, a small sigh escapes me. The cash sits there, impersonally crisp, and though I appreciate the gesture, it's his absence that gnaws at me. With a deep breath, I push my feet into my shoes and grab the spare key, tucking it into my pocket like a talisman.

Bishop's house is still a labyrinth to me — halls and rooms that hold the echoes of his life without giving away any real secrets. But as I hustle through the hallway, trying to remember where he said extra towels and toiletries were stashed, I come across a door. It's right next to his bedroom, unassuming except for the heavy padlock that secures it firmly shut.

My heartbeat quickens, its rhythm thumping hard against my rib cage as I stare at that lock — a stark symbol of things unspoken and spaces forbidden. It's not just steel; it's a barrier between Bishop's past and our potential future. It might as well be a sign that reads "Here Be Dragons," warning off would-be adventurers.

As far as relationship red flags go, this one's about the size of those giant flags they hang over used car dealerships.

I trace my fingers over the cold metal, half-tempted to rattle it, shake loose whatever mysteries Bishop has clamped away so tightly. Yet fear coils in my

stomach — the same fear that whispers his secrets might be darker than my own, that perhaps some doors are better left closed.

With a shuddering breath, I draw my hand back, turning away from the padlocked door. It's not my secret to unearth, not my story to tell. Bishop has his reasons, and if there's one thing I've learned about life among bikers, it's that trust is a currency more precious than any paper bill.

Then again, trust might be worth more than currency, but being too trusting and not keeping my eyes open could cost me my life.

I turn back to the door and give the padlock a cautious tug. It doesn't give.

Moving on, I make my way through the rest of his house, picking up a few necessities along the way. The silence presses in on me like a thick fog, and as I step out into the morning air, I pocket the cab money, but opt to walk. The movement helps, each step pushing back against the tide of uncertainty threatening to pull me under.

The walk to work is longer than I expected, especially since I have to detour home to swap clothes, but it gives me time to think — that dangerous pastime. Doubts and questions circle me. What am I doing? Why am I so quickly diving back into this life that I've tried so hard to leave behind? What I'm doing means facing down fears and forging something new with a man who rides with Death as his partner. Yet, no matter how good his heart is, no matter what he makes me feel, I can't forget who Bishop is: a dangerous biker. But walking away... could I even do that if I wanted to? Bishop is a gravitational pull all his own, and for better or worse, I'm caught in his orbit.

The youth center greets me with its usual cacophony of sounds, and something new. There's a police cruiser out front, and Maya is leaning against her front door, with a cup of coffee in her hand and another resting on top of her car.

My heart, already confusedly swirling in my chest, sinks down so low it might just be touching the earth's core.

What's gone wrong now?

As much as I count Maya a friend — until recently the only person in Ironwood Falls that I'd consider myself close to, aside from Sandra, who is more of a work friend than anything else — it's rarely a good sign when she pops in for a visit.

"Morning, Eden. Thought you might want a coffee."

"That sounds like heaven," I say. Which isn't a lie. I didn't have time to make coffee at Bishop's and I wasn't exactly looking forward to the bitter,

chalky stuff that the youth center provides. City budgets account little for creature comforts. "But you also have a look like this coffee is the only thing I'm going to enjoy about your visit."

"I really hate being the bearer of bad news, and I know this isn't how you want to start your day, but I thought it best you hear this from me, Eden."

"Hear what?"

"The streets around Ironwood Falls are going to be crowded with more motorcycles than usual for a while. There's something going on with the MC, some conference, some business, I don't know. It's not like they tell me that much, but there are a couple of other MCs in town for the time being. One's a newer club from down south, the Steel Reapers MC, and another, well... Maybe you should sit down."

"I'm fine standing."

"The other is the Iron Savages MC."

I don't hear her words. It's as if my body knows what's coming and shuts down my ears; I read those syllables on her lips and feel my knees buckle beneath me. Maya reacts quickly, catching me under my arm and holding me upright. Grunting, she leans me against her car and I keep myself standing. Barely.

It's several deep breaths before I can speak again, though my heart feels like nothing more than a dead organ sitting listless in my chest.

"I have to leave."

"Eden, that's the wrong move. I know the feeling you have about them, but they don't know you're here. They're on business, they'll be gone soon. As long as you keep your head down and avoid anyone tied to an MC, you'll be fine." Something on my face must give it away, because Maya blinks and says something under her breath that might be profanity. Maybe. She's never so much as cursed for as long as I've known her, even when she was helping me unravel the mess that was my life and start over. "Oh no. You and Bishop... did you?"

"We did." Maybe there's a smile on my face; thinking about Bishop would do that to me, but I'm too numbed and messed up to tell; Bishop might be a light, or maybe he's a fire that will consume me, but the sparks of our early relationship are no match for the darkness that is closing in around me. The fresh, open air becomes musty, moldy, rancid in my mouth; my wrists feel the cold weight of iron; my ears the dead silence of the basement, the closet, those pits that *he* so often kept me in, locked away, a prisoner, a captive, a

dirty secret locked in the dark, a *thing* for him to use when he wanted and throw back in a hole when he was done; my worst nightmare is within minutes of me, could snatch me up at any moment, and I cannot stay here.

I cannot go back to *that*.

Maya's grip on me turns from supportive to restraint. Each of her fingers a shackle that keeps me in place. "You can't act rash right now."

"Rash? Do you have any idea what I went through?"

"Only what was in your report. But if you want to talk about it, I'm ready to listen."

"Oh, you're ready to listen about how he kept me in a hole, how he used me, beat me, treated me like I was worse than dirt? About how everyone thought I was dead or a runaway because, once he got his hooks in me, once he seduced me — because I was some fucking stupid girl who thought she was just having some fun fling with a biker — I didn't see the world outside of his house for months? Not even his club knew about me. All I was to him was a thing in a hole." My skin crawls, slithers and slimes over my skeleton like some wet blanket of fungus. In my head, I hear his voice. *You are nothing. Nothing. Will always be nothing. Mine to use whenever I want, however I want.*

I feel his hands as they touch me, caress me, beat me, fuck me; last night's dinner stirs in my stomach and then spills from my mouth to splatter on the pavement.

He's close. I can feel it in the air. Smell it. A rot that slips into my nostrils, fills my lungs with decay.

"I'm so sorry, Eden."

"I need to leave."

"You can't just run. That's what he wants, to keep you scared and running. Bishop can help protect you," she says quietly. Her voice carries the weight of a promise.

Bishop. His name is a balm and a torment all at once. I look up; the nausea ebbing away, replaced by a fierce resolve.

"Bishop has his own demons," I say, my voice steadier now. "I won't drag him into this hell. This is my fight, Maya."

"You think he hasn't already chosen to stand by your side? Bishop is not like your ex. He's not like any man you've ever known. In the all the time I've known him, he's never taken an interest in anyone. He's never cared. *But he cares about you.* You have no idea how far he'll go to protect you."

The memory of Bishop's touch, gentle yet powerful, flashes through my mind. How he held me as if I were something precious, not something to be used and discarded. The thought that he could be hurt because of me tightens the vise around my heart.

"I can't..."

"Just because he rides a bike doesn't make him your enemy," Maya insists, her grip softening but still firm. "You have him. And you have me. We will both do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

"Whatever it takes?" I say. She doesn't know the depths that *he* will sink to in order to get me back. To reassert the perverted control he had over me.

Maya's voice hardens, drops low. "I'm telling you that not just as a police officer, but also as a person with a gun who is sick of seeing her friend live in fear."

"Thank you."

"You're building a life here, Eden. Seeing you, after everything you've come through, actually starting to not only make it, but make a difference with everything you do for the youth center, is not only inspiring, but something that I am so determined to protect that I will break any laws I have to."

"You think I'm making a difference?" I say, those dark voices in my head still urging me to fight her, to run. They make me laugh in her face at the absurdity of thinking I make a difference, that I have value. "You know how much of a difference I'm going to make today, being one of only two people in that front office, being one of only four, sometimes five, full-time staff at the center? No, I'm not counting Albert, despite the fact that he lends such great importance to us all, being that he's a friend of the mayor's, don't you know? What I am doing today includes Albert's paperwork, my paperwork — some of which is because of that lovely kid, Charlie, trying to kill me — answering the phones, setting the schedules for Trent and Marcy, our only staff counselor and our only staff tutor, and coordinating our volunteer tutors. Of which we sometimes have two, but usually just one. I'm a fucking secretary, Maya. A secretary who gets attacked every once in a while, and does work that a piece of software and a fucking phone system could probably handle automatically."

"You're wrong."

"I'm not wrong, Maya. You're lying. And you're in denial about how dangerous this all is."

"Let me give you another reason to stay: look through that window, Eden, and tell me what you see," she says, pointing toward the youth center's office.

"I see a man sitting, waiting. Probably for me. Which means I should go in, tell him he's wasting his time, and then I can get the hell out of Ironwood Falls."

"That man is Noah Lucas. I saw him pull up while I was waiting for you. He's waiting for you, too."

"Great. Why should I care another guy wants a piece of me? He's just one of many. Add him to the fucking list."

"Because he's on the city council, and he's running for mayor."

"So?"

"So, you say that you're not making a difference, and I say that's crap. That man in there wants to meet with you, because people who know you may have put a bug in his ear that you have the passion and potential to make this youth center great," Maya says. "He wants to talk with you, and listen to you, because, if he wins, he wants to invest in this city and the programs that serve its residents. Like the youth center."

There are so many reasons for me to leave, reasons written in the faded scars on my body, in the scars on my heart that feel like they will never fade, in the terror I feel at such innocuous things like loud noises, shadows, and the roar of an engine; fear that inhabits me so deeply that I sometimes wake from dreams of screeching tires and looming figures to find the sheets soaked with the sweat of my panic.

But Maya's words find purchase in a corner of my mind that still, somehow, yearns for more than just survival.

No matter how much dark I suffer, there's always a piece of me that wants to crawl to the light. To feel alive, to feel loved. And here, in Ironwood Falls, here with Bishop, that light doesn't seem like an illusion.

Even if the darkness looms so close, I can feel it crawl over my body.

"Okay," I say, and my voice is no longer just a whisper, lost in the tumultuous winds of my fear. It's stronger. "Okay, I'll talk to him."

As I push open the door to the youth center, that sanctuary of possibility and new beginnings, I can feel the tremble in my hands and the ghost of Bishop's touch again. It's as if he's there, just out of sight, his presence an anchor in this churning sea.

In the waiting area sits the man Maya spoke about — Noah Lucas — with a look of patience that feels too rare in this world. He has kind eyes that seem

to take me in without judgment as I approach, and he stands to offer a hand as a colleague, an ally.

"Ms. Mercer, my name's Noah Lucas. If you have a minute, I'd love to talk with you about the youth center and what this city could do to support you in the important work you do here, because I think it's people like you who are key to making this city a better place to live."

* * * * *

What started as a terrible day has turned into one that has me envisioning a future here beyond just surviving. There are people that believe in me, that want to protect me, to support me, to watch me thrive. It's a feeling so far away from what I'm used to; to go from who I was — beaten, broken, nothing — to where I am now, much less where I might be in the future, seems so far-fetched that it doesn't feel real.

But here I am, faced with the overwhelming evidence, and even I have to admit that I want to stay. Want to grow. In my career, in my community, in my relationship with Bishop, in myself.

After a morning meeting with Noah Lucas, I spend the rest of the day buzzing through paperwork and taking charge at every other meeting I have, both on-site and off.

It's stunning what some self-confidence will do.

When I return to the youth center and spy Bishop's motorcycle in the parking lot, that same confidence carries me to the resolution that he and I need to talk. About us, about his club, about how I can fit into his world without living in fear. He needs to know about who I am and the wounds I carry with me, because I want us to be together, and I am sick of terror forcing my every action.

I'm taking control of my life.

I stride through the senior center, purpose etched in each step I take. The usual bustle and chatter of the place is muted today, replaced by a somber hush that drapes over the hallways like a pall. Narrowing my eyes, I scan each room for Bishop's unmistakable form, but he is not in any of his usual haunts; not in the lobby, not in the game room, not even in the main office.

Where is he?

The resolve in my chest doesn't waver, though confusion tangles within it as I pass faces marked by sorrow and concern. Something has clearly happened here, something that has sapped the vitality of this place. My heart

clenches with worry — worry for Bishop, and worry for all the lives that intersect in this haven.

Then I see him.

Bishop sits in a chair pulled close to a bed where Elroy Dean lies motionless, his wrinkled face lax and peaceful in what might be slumber or... I can't even finish the thought. Anguish emanates from Bishop in waves, his head bowed low, fingers interlaced as if in prayer or to hold himself together.

It strikes me like a slap in the face.

Hesitant, I stay in the doorway for a moment, my body a rigid line of tension. Elroy's unconscious figure is hooked up to a heart monitor, its rhythmic beeping the only sound that cuts through the thick silence hanging in the room. An oxygen tube snakes beneath his nose, a stark reminder of the frailty of life. Bishop is oblivious to my presence, his body hunched over, his breaths coming in ragged shudders that match the uneasy cadence of my heart.

I watch him wrestling with an internal storm. The despair that clings to him also seeps into me, rooting me in place as I waver on the threshold. Is this the right time to talk? Should I just leave him alone with his pain? My mind races with doubt and hesitation, but it's overpowered by the undeniable pull of my heart — a fierce, protective tug that draws me towards Bishop despite the uncertainties.

I care about him. Care more deeply than I've previously allowed myself to acknowledge; his presence has become a comfort amidst my turmoil, and I realize now that he deserves that same solace from me.

There's no more retreating. I will step forward for the man I care about.

Now might not be the time for all the things I want to say — for us to unravel our complicated pasts, or navigate the potential of a future together — but it is the time to simply be there, to offer whatever comfort my presence could bring Bishop in this moment of grief.

With a gentle rap of my knuckles on the door frame, I break the silence.

"May I come in?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Bishop

The sterile scent of antiseptic wraps around me, a cruel mockery of purity in a room shadowed by death. I sit, elbows on my knees, hands clasped together, staring at Elroy's pallid face. The beeps of the machines are a constant reminder that time is thief I can't fight. Elroy's breaths are shallow gusts of wind, fluttering through the silence of the room, and I'm clutching onto every single one as if they're my lifeline. On his nightstand sit several pictures taken from the dance the other night. There's one of him and me, my arm around his shoulder, smiling; there's one of me and Eden, taken while we danced, our eyes locked on each other. Elroy is more than a friend — he's a brother in arms, a counselor, an anchor. As his chest rises and falls with a fragile rhythm, memories crash into me with the force of a relentless tide.

Suddenly, Eden's voice cuts through the hush like a beacon.

"May I come in?"

I look up to see her hesitating at the doorway, silhouetted by the dim light from the hallway.

"Yeah," I say hoarsely. Her presence is unexpected comfort in this sterile place of dying. "Yeah, please."

She steps inside tentatively, shutting out the world behind her with a soft click of the door. Eden's eyes make their way to Elroy and then back to me, filled with an understanding that needs no words. She pulls up a chair and sits beside me, her warmth an odd contrast to the chilled room. Her presence is both a comfort and a reminder of what's at stake — of all that can be lost in an instant. She reaches over, her hand tentatively finding mine, and the touch sends a jolt through my grief-stricken frame.

"He's been mostly comatose since sometime late last night or early in the morning," I say. "He didn't come down for breakfast, so they sent someone to check on him. They found him like this."

She squeezes my hand, and I squeeze hers back. Touch — *her touch* — is

something I cling to while the world around me seems to crash and roar, threatening to sweep me away.

"I'm so sorry. I know he meant a lot to you."

"Meant?" I squeeze her hand again, but my voice comes out harsh. "He's not dead. Don't talk about him like he's dead."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Bishop."

"You didn't hurt me. It just... it wasn't correct to say what you said," I say, unable to even put together the words suggesting that one of my closest friends is about to die.

"I'm sorry."

Silence descends between us. There's nothing but the steady beeping of the machines and Elroy's shaky breathing. I can't stand the silence. As old as he was, as frail as he was, he was so full of life — this still body in front of me is everything Elroy is not.

Another squeeze of my hand.

When I look to my left, I see Eden, watching Elroy with eyes that mirror the turmoil and pain that roils my heart.

"Don't apologize," I say. "You have nothing to apologize for. I've been in this situation so many times, watching someone..." Still, my voice chokes, but I move on. "I know how I should act, what I should say. I've been the one to break the news so many times, but there's just something about this time that hurts." A shuddering sigh comes from me. I can feel my heart, my lungs, convulse with the grief that sits, waiting for that soon-to-be moment where it will consume me. "He and I shared a lot."

"You were... *are* his friend."

"More than that. We understood each other, Eden. Because we'd shared things that even most friends haven't. He knew. He knew what it was like, what I'd been through, what I'd..."

I can't bring myself to say that word right now — *lost*. It sticks in my throat, choking me. It won't be long before I lose another person I care about. More loss. And this time, I won't have an Elroy to help talk me through it. To give me an ear that understands the heartache, the deep, soul-sundering pain that comes with true loss.

When does it end?

When does life become more than a succession of painful takings? Of being given a taste of happiness, only to have it ripped away, leaving nothing but vicious, painful emptiness in its wake?

"You don't need to say anything, Bishop. I lost someone, once. She and I were close, very close, but she made the worst choices and she fell in love with a man who was terrible for her, who beat her, who tortured her, and in the end, he killed her. That was a while ago, but losing her hurt me so bad that it wasn't until recently that I've even been able to talk about it. So, if you want to just sit together, to be here for Elroy in silence, that's fine. I'm here for you either way."

I nod, my throat tight with the pain.

"He was the only one I felt I could really talk to. He listened. Really listened, you know? And I like to think that maybe I helped him through his grief, too."

Eden's eyes are gentle, filled with a profound sadness that recognizes my own. The air between us is heavy with shared understanding, a bond born of loss and suffering. In this room, where the veil between past and present is as thin as Elroy's breaths, our histories intertwine even more.

"Elroy didn't have any family," I say, my voice barely louder than a whisper. "No one except the guys from his Navy riverboat unit in Vietnam. And after the war... well, life happens. People drift apart. The brotherhood they shared during those times couldn't quite break through the years that followed. All he's got is me, but now I can't do anything for him. I feel like I'm letting him down."

My hand tightens around Eden's as if by holding her, I can keep from being pulled under by the flood of memories threatening to drown me.

"He was my family," I say, and it feels like my heart might crack open with the weight of those words. "The closest thing to it I've had in years."

"You're not alone, Bishop. There are people who care about you."

"That means more than you know."

A warm silence falls between us, a bond of shared understanding of loss, of suffering, of the determination to move on. Together. Hours pass, some in silence, sometimes broken by stories I share about Elroy, sometimes not. It's a cruel waiting game, made less cruel by the woman beside me. Alone, I don't know how I would deal with the inevitable that is only hours, maybe days, away, but with her, I know I will make it through.

Then, around four in the morning, Elroy's shallow breathing turns deeper. A great, surprising sigh bursts from his lips. His eyes flutter. He stirs and turns his head toward me, blinking. His pupils are dilated, unfocused at first, but then his usual perceptive gaze finds mine, and a spark of the old fire

lights up his eyes.

"Bishop," he wheezes, his voice like paper rustling in the wind. "God damn, you look like hell."

A laugh bubbles up from deep within me, surprising me with its lightness in the heavy room.

"You're not exactly a picture of health yourself, Elroy."

Eden's grip on my hand tightens, and I can feel the tension release from her in waves. She's been holding her breath right along with me.

Elroy's lips curve into a weak smile.

"Never was much for pictures," he says.

I watch as Eden leans forward, concern and relief sit etched into her face.

"Hey there, Elroy. You gave us quite a scare," she says.

His eyes shift to her, the recognition slow but apparent as he nods slightly. "Well, well, if it isn't the girl who's got Bishop quiet as a church mouse."

"He talks plenty," Eden replies, her voice warm and teasing right back.

"Not about what matters." Elroy's gaze is sharp on me now, seeing too much as he always did. "Were you two really going to sit here by my bed the whole time?"

"I wanted to be here for you," I say.

"That creeps me out. Don't you two have jobs? Places to be? There has to be something more important in your lives than hanging out like a pair of vultures waiting for some old man to die."

"I have sick days saved, and I'll use them however I see fit, old man," Eden says, winking. "And if you want to argue about that with me, why don't you get your old butt out of bed and come say that to my face over at the youth center?"

"I like her, Bishop," Elroy says. "I like you, too. Don't worry, don't be jealous, and don't go making that pouty face. But, as much as I like you two, you both have better things to do than hover over some old fart while he loafs around in bed like a lazy ass."

"Are you sure?" I say.

"Sure as shit, I'm not dying yet. When I was out, I saw the ol' Grim Reaper skulking around, but I told him to go take a hike and shove that scythe up his ass. Maybe later Keith and I will have our reunion, but it's not in the cards for now. You two need to get out of here, go take some showers — you, especially, Bishop — you two need to live a little. Let us old folks worry about the dying part."

I hug him, just glad to see he's still got his old fire in him. "You better not be lying to me about that whole not dying thing."

"And you better take a shower before you come in here the next time. You smell worse than I did that time I spent weeks wandering the jungle around the Mekong."

Eden hugs him and gives him a kiss on the forehead. "Goodbye, Elroy."

Together, we leave Elroy's room and head down the hallway to the parking lot. As we walk, Eden slips her hand into mine, and I look over at her and am greeted by a smile that shines back at me.

"Thank you for all that back there. For joining me, for sitting with me... I didn't want to do that alone."

"You don't have to. Not while I'm around."

"What brought you into the senior center? Why'd you come looking for me?"

"To talk." She looks up at the sky. It's dark, but fast turning light — black giving way to the radiant hues of a sunrise — and the cool air puffs with our breaths. "There's a lot going on. Some good, some bad, but we need to talk." Then she glances at me, like she's both asking and answering her own question with a look. "But later."

I grunt. Between Elroy's health situation and everything going on with the club, I'm grateful for that word. *Later*. The exhaustion of sitting bedside for hours is creeping over me, and it won't be long before I'm ready to pass out.

"Later's good."

I watch the sky blush with the promise of dawn, its beauty not lost on me even though every inch of my body is crying out for rest. And there she is, Eden, standing beside me like a pillar of strength when I felt like I was crumbling. A sense of gratitude washes over me — a warm tide in the chilly morning air.

I turn to her, take both her hands in mine.

"Eden," I say, feeling a sudden tightness in my chest, "I can't thank you enough. For sitting with me back there, for showing up when I didn't even know I needed someone. It means..." I shake my head slightly because words seem too small to hold the enormity of what I feel. Her eyes meet mine, soft but fierce, and they draw something out of me that's been lingering just beneath the surface — a truth waiting for its moment. "There's something important I've realized tonight."

"What is it?"

"While we were sitting together, all that time... Eden, I felt peace. Peace in one of my darkest hours." I breathe in, take in fresh air and strength to say the words that I haven't said to anyone else in a very long time. Words that I never imagined I'd say again but feel so absolutely necessary to sum up how I feel about the woman in front of me.

"Bishop...?" Her voice is so quiet, touched, her eyes look into mine with depths greater than the ocean. "You can tell me anything."

Maybe she plans to say more, but she can see in my eyes that I need to speak.

But these words...

They cling to my throat. Held there by hesitation, by a fear of opening myself up once more; held there by lessons learned in scars on my heart. But it's time to open those scars and unlearn those lessons, because the woman in front of me is worth it.

I clear my throat and prepare myself to bare my soul to her and say those words that will change things between us forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Eden

"Eden, I love you."

His words reach my ears and I gasp. Audibly. I'd come here with questions, seeking answers, and instead sat mostly silent beside Bishop while he watched his close friend come close to dying. We'd hardly talked, and yet, standing in the parking lot as the dawning sun bathes us in radiance, he delivers one of the answers I've been looking for. What are we? Though I'm not exactly sure, I know something truly important — he loves me.

As I look back at him, I know something else, too.

"I love you, too."

Those words slip as naturally as breath from my lips. No hesitation, no reluctance, none of the fear that I felt before, when I'd utter those terrible, gaslit words to a different biker, words that I said simply as a matter of survival, spoken hoping they'd buy me another day free of violence, a day free of terror, that maybe they'd buy me enough freedom that he'd let his guard down and I could escape.

"You do?" He says. It's like he doubts.

Like he doesn't believe that he could be loved.

Like he didn't just work himself to the bone, bare his heart to a friend, all in the name of making that man's eventual passage into the afterlife easier.

Like he didn't just do everything he could to show Elroy that he has at least one person who cares for him. That he isn't alone, he isn't unloved, and when he goes into the afterlife and reunites with his love, Keith, he'll go knowing that there are people left behind who miss him, who will honor his memory, and that he'll live on through us.

"Why do you sound so surprised that I love you?"

"I'm not an easy man to love, Eden. The life I lead, the things I do, hell, even the thing that I call volunteering, they're all things that can rip your heart out. What I did there for Elroy... what I'll have to do again... it isn't the first

time I've sat there for someone at the senior center. How can you love and want to share your life with someone who chooses, over and over, to do this to themselves? Why would you want that curse in your life?"

"Why wouldn't I love someone who cares so much about others? Who would choose to accept pain in order to make other's lives so much easier? It's not a curse, Bishop. It's something admirable. Incredible."

He snorts, but there's a pleased curve to the corners of his lips.

"If you say so. Still feels like a curse to me."

I shake my head and kiss him on the cheek. He really has no idea what a curse is. A curse isn't caring so deeply for others that you'd spend your time with them, that you'd share yourself with them when they need it most; a curse is being so afraid of who you were and where you came from that you spend every waking moment of your life terrified that something or someone will come along to drag you back.

A curse is being haunted by your own life.

"I love you, Bishop. Cursed or not. And you know what I think? I think I'm still going to call in sick to the youth center today — because, what, they open in only a few hours, anyway, right? — and I think I'm going to go take that shower that Elroy was recommending for the both of us," I say, then I take a deep breath, let it out, and kiss him, "And I think that, when I do, I don't want to be alone."

"You mean?"

He must be tired for there to be any doubt about what I mean.

As an answer, I kiss him on the lips, deep, with my tongue in his mouth, and I reach around behind him, running my hands down his back to grab his butt.

"I mean, I love you and I want you to take a shower with me because I feel like having sex with you. And then a nice, long nap."

When his lips find mine again, and his hands find their way to my ass, I moan and know that he's clearly understood the message.

"Your place or mine?"

"Yours," I say. After how draining the night must've been for him, I want him to be comfortable, and he'll likely be more comfortable at his place. Then, after he's had some time to rest, I can ask him the other questions I want to ask him. "Definitely yours. But I want to stop by my place on the way and get a few things and feed and walk Comet. I can't show up to work in last night's clothes two times in a row."

Another kiss, and then I hop behind Bishop on his motorcycle, without a bit of trepidation, despite all the potentially painful memories this simple machine could stir inside me.

With him, it's different.

With him, despite my past, I feel safe.

It seems like no time at all before we're pulling into the driveway at Bishop's house. Our lips meet the second we're both standing. A long, groping, moaning kiss that stretches up his driveway, through his front door, up the stairs of his house and into the shower.

Hot water bathes us as we ravish each other, our bodies forgetting all the exhaustion of the last forty-eight hours in the face of the fury of our desire and the burning heat of our open declarations of love.

I love this man, I remind myself as I kiss his pectorals.

And I know it's not just because he's a biker, or that he has this rugged exterior that masks the depths of his caring heart. That's all part of the allure, sure, but it's the layers beneath — the way he opens himself up to the pain of saying goodbye, the way he embraces his ghosts instead of running from them — that draws me to him. In Bishop, I see a strength and vulnerability that are intertwined in an intricate dance of life's harsh realities.

I want this man, I say to myself as my kisses venture down his muscular body, as my tongue traces the muscular lines of his abs, as my lips devote their attention to the base of his abdominals, his hard cock pulsing in time with his heartbeat just inches from my face.

"Eden..." he moans as I reach behind him to grab his butt, to pull him closer to my open mouth, to swallow his hard cock deep down my throat.

Steam and water lash at me as I suck him.

He moans louder, his hands finding their way to my hair, gripping it tightly as he thrusts his hips forward, meeting my every move with passion and desire. The heat of the water, the scent of our bodies, the taste of his essence on my tongue — it all combines to create a sensual cacophony that sends shivers down my spine.

"I love you," I gasp between licks and sucks. "Whatever happens, I'm here for you."

The water cascades over us, washing away the grime and sweat of the past few days, cleansing us both of the demons that haunt us.

"Eden," he says again when I pull back, his voice thick with desire and emotion. "I don't know what to say, other than I love you."

I smile up at him.

"You don't have to say anything. Just feel. Let go, Bishop. I've got you."

Mouth open, I take his cock again, caressing his body as I swallow his pulsing heat. He moans, lower, deeper, the force of his passion building in his chest as I worship his cock with my tongue. It hardens, stiffens with each time he thrusts himself into my mouth, down my throat. I fondle his balls, coaxing them, aching to feel them tense and release down my willing throat. I love this man, and I want to swallow every drop of his cum.

Bishop's hands tighten in my hair as I suck him, his hips rocking into my mouth with primal need. The way he holds me, as if I am the only thing anchoring him to this world, makes me feel wanted and needed in a way I've never felt before. I moan around his cock, the vibrations shooting straight to his core, judging by the way he bucks his hips forward with renewed vigor.

"Eden," he groans out, his voice raw with desire. "God, baby, you're going to make me cum."

I moan again in agreement, and that is all it takes.

Bishop's cock swells in my mouth, thickening as he comes, shooting hot jets of salty cum down my throat. I swallow each drop greedily, savoring the taste of him on my tongue.

When he finally finishes, panting and spent, he pulls me upwards for a messy kiss that tasted of him and all the pent-up longing between us.

"Christ, Eden," he gasped against my lips. "You're going to be the death of me."

I shake my head. "No. Never. Especially not now, because there's something more I need from you."

"Oh?" He says, and before I can answer, he presses me back against the tile wall of the shower. All I can muster is a gasp before he drops to his knees, his tongue finding its way to my wet pussy. I moan as his tongue explores the folds of me, gently at first, slow, circling and teasing until it isn't; until his tongue devotes itself to my clit, and his fingers, which he wets quickly in his mouth, slide into me, making my eyes roll back and my hips rock with insatiable need.

"Oh God, Bishop," I moan, arching my back against the wall as his expert tongue and fingers work their magic on me. The combination of sensations is electrifying, and I can feel my climax building inside me like a storm gathering in the distance. "Harder, baby, I'm so close."

Bishop doesn't disappoint. He picks up the pace, his tongue flicking and

sucking at my clit while his fingers plunder me deeper and faster. My nails claw at the shower wall, skittering over the tile as I feel myself teetering on the edge of pleasure.

"Yes, like that," I say, grinding my hips against his face. "Don't stop."

And then it hits me, a wave of bliss so intense it feels like lightning shooting through my entire body. "Bishop!" I cry out, my toes curling as my orgasm washes over me in endless, shuddering waves. The water sluices over us as our breathing slows, our bodies still entwined in the aftermath of our passionate union.

One breath, then two, then a voice touches my ears. "Bed."

"Bed?" I say.

"Now."

I'm not given the opportunity to speak. He picks me up and carries me — still wet and dripping — out of his bathroom. I'm thrown upon the bed and he climbs atop me, showering my wet body with kisses. Bishop's lips find my breasts, his tongue lapping at my nipples, sending jolts of electricity straight to my core. I arch upwards to meet him, aching for more of his touch, for this man who has somehow breached the walls I'd built so high around my heart. He suckles on one nipple while his hand caresses the other, and I can't help but moan as he teases me mercilessly. My hands find their way into his damp hair, gripping it as if my life depended on it.

"Bishop," I moan, unable to form coherent sentences in the face of such overwhelming desire. His name is a prayer on my lips, a plea for more of this closeness, this connection.

He looks at me, his eyes a stormy sea of unspoken emotions, before he leans in and kisses me hard, with a hunger that matches my own. Tongues entwine and bodies grind against each other, the dampness between our legs adding to the friction as we writhe together on the bed. We are lost in each other's arms, two souls taking shelter in the other.

"I need to fuck you now," he says.

"And I need you to fuck me," I answer, just as quickly.

He positions himself between my legs, and I feel the heat and hardness of him against my pussy. The sensation of him sliding into me is so ecstatically perfect that I arch my hips upwards, craving more of him. Bishop doesn't disappoint. Inch by agonizing inch, he sinks into me, stretching and filling me completely. The tightness between my legs pulses around him, a reminder of the desire I'd missed for so long.

"You feel so good, Eden," he whispers into my ear, his hot breath sending chills down my spine. "God, I fucking needed this." He pulls out just slightly before thrusting back in, harder this time. "I fucking need you."

"Me too," I pant out, clutching the sheets to tether myself to reality as the sensations overwhelm me. "I want you, Bishop. Want you, need you, love you."

He groans, as if the words are a trigger for him as well, because his thrusts become more urgent now, more primal.

"Eden," he grunts through clenched teeth as he picks up the pace. His hips rocking against mine with a force that threatens to send us both over. "I've wanted you for so long."

"Yes, oh, fuck, yes. I want it," I moan in agreement, my climax building again, making my voice urgent, desperate. "Bishop, yes! Harder! Fuck me harder. I want to feel you cum inside me."

The bed screams out for mercy as he fucks me with relentless desire, driven on by my moaning screams for more. I want to lose myself in the force of his passion, to leave behind the world for the ecstasy of giving myself wholly to him.

"I'm so close."

Frantic, urgent, he fucks me, every muscle in his body flexing, standing out with power on his frame as he puts all of himself into me. His grunts, his moans rising in a crescendo of lust, his mouth open, his eyes clenched shut in pleasure. I can feel him, can feel his cock throb inside me, pulsing with every desperate, delicious thrust. I'm close — *so close* — to the edge myself when, suddenly, he stiffens, his entire body tense against mine as he groans my name like a prayer into the darkened room. Warmth fills me, a reminder of the intimacy we've just shared. That blooming heat pushes me over the edge and I reach around him, sinking my fingers into his back, clutching him to me as I climax. My lips find his ear. I kiss it; I nibble it; I moan his name into it as I break into pieces beneath him.

We stay like that for a moment, panting and spent. Our breaths mingling in the air between us, our bodies still joined as one. Slowly, Bishop pulls out and collapses next to me on the bed, pulling me into his arms. I can feel his heart hammering just as hard as mine as he strokes my damp hair from my face.

"Eden," he whispers. "I..."

"Shh," I say, placing a finger against his lips. "No words needed. It's

enough for now."

And for now, it is enough.

For now, all that matters is this connection — this fleeting moment of passion between two people who have found solace in each other's arms. He loves me; I love him, unequivocally, and that's what matters. The world and all its dangers might close in, but what's more important to me is this love that we share.

Everything else can wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Eden

The air is sharp with the scent of autumn, and I stand outside the youth center, my fingers tracing the edges of my keys as time trickles by. The world around me fades, blurring into the background as my heart throbs in anticipation. I'm waiting for him — for Bishop — and with each thump of my pulse, his image grows clearer in my mind. It's been a long day, and several days since he and I confessed our love for each other, and the thought of Bishop's arrival is a soothing balm to my weariness. With each day that's gone by, my feelings for him have only gotten stronger. Each morning, I wake up next to him. Each night, I fall asleep in his arms, and I sleep feeling more safe and loved than I have at any other point in my life.

The rumble of his motorcycle cuts through the quiet evening like a promise, and my heart leaps inside my chest. The sight of him — protective, powerful, mine — makes me forget the shadows of my past, even though my past is threatening once more to become a part of my present. When I'm around Bishop, I don't jump at shadows. I don't flinch at sudden sounds, real or imagined.

Best of all, I don't have nightmares about *him*.

Bishop pulls up, engine growling softly as he cuts the ignition. I drink in the sight of him — leather jacket hugging his broad shoulders, rugged jeans molded to his legs... and his butt. He is danger and safety wrapped in one irresistible package.

"Hey," I say, my voice a shy murmur against the gentle breeze. As much as he strengthens me, he makes certain parts of me feel weak. My knees, in particular. And my voice? I lose it all the time when I look at him. So many times I wonder how I found myself falling in love with a man in an MC, then I look at Bishop and I find the answer.

"Hey yourself," he says, his voice rolling over me like velvet. "Got a little surprise for you tonight."

He dismounts, a smile stretching across his face that lights up the waning day.

"You know I'm not great with surprises," I tease, but there's no bite behind my words.

"You'll like this one. I promise," he says.

Curiosity piques within me, intertwining with the tendrils of affection that have rooted themselves deep within my soul. He extends a hand to me, calloused and warm, and I place mine within it without hesitation. There is no room for fear when he's near — not even with a certain someone lurking about.

With Bishop, I'm safe.

He helps me onto his motorcycle. It's an action that still sends a flush of fear through me. Seated behind him, with my legs against his, with my hands on his waist, I'm smiling into his back.

"Where are we going?"

"A date."

"A date?" The last few days have flown by in a flurry of sex and work, which isn't a bad way to pass the time — I love my job, especially now that there's a possibility it may grow into something more, thanks to the help of councilman Noah Lucas, and I love Bishop, and I love sex with Bishop — but in all that time, we haven't been on anything close to a real date. Other than the dance at the senior center, which I'm not sure actually qualifies as a date, considering he and I were both chaperones, and the time he took me out for drinks after Charlie attacked me, which I am sure doesn't really count as a date, we've spent our time appreciating each other — and each other's bodies — at either his place or mine... And a few times in each other's vehicles.

"Yes, a date. I thought we'd go out and get drinks. Dinner, too."

The suggestion sends both a chill and a thrill through me. On one hand, I'm excited to actually go out with Bishop and spend time in public with the man I love. On the other, it's a risk. The people that I definitely do not want to be seen by could see me, and the very idea of being taken back to the terror I left behind has me so nauseous that I feel faint.

"I..." I say, about ready to call off the idea of a date, but the sight of Bishop's face falling makes me stop; I can't hurt him like that. Maybe he'll surprise me, maybe it won't be a biker bar like I'm suspecting. "Where are we going? Somewhere nice?"

"I hope," he says, which is an answer that doesn't exactly fill me with

confidence.

"You hope?"

"I trust it is. I've never been to this place myself. It's called 'Dram & Cask.' A couple of the ol' ladies in the club recommended it to me."

He's talking about me with the club beyond that little heist we did with the pharmacy rep? I don't know if I should feel flattered or afraid. Mentioning me to his brothers in the MC is a big step, it means I'm more than just some side piece — a fact which I already knew, considering he told me he loved me, but which is even more real now that the MC knows of me — but it's also a risk. The more people that know about us, the more likely the wrong person will find out about me.

"Is it a biker bar?" I say. It doesn't sound like a biker bar, but it's becoming harder to tell nowadays. Trendy bars will give themselves rough names, rough bars will give themselves fancy names. There's a famous biker bar in Arizona called The Hideaway Grill, which to me sounds more like a trendy place where your bartender would have a weird twirly mustache and make you a drink infused with something from the bar's backyard garden.

"No. Claire and Alessia both recommended it. Their tastes go much more toward the higher end."

I sigh, relieved. "Sounds perfect."

The ride to Dram & Cask passes in a blink, my heart hammering delightedly in my chest as I cling to Bishop, as the world speeds by, as the wind whips my hair. Soon, we're surrounded by the upscale downtown of Elmsburg, Ironwood Fall's more well-to-do neighbor. Perfectly trimmed trees line the downtown sidewalks, shopfronts display designer goods, and the air has the faint, crisp smell of baking bread and pumpkin spice, though there isn't a bakery or a coffee shop anywhere nearby that I can see. Which makes me wonder, are the rich people in Elmsburg literally pumping the air downtown full of designer scents?

"You smell that, right?" I say, sniffing.

Bishop's chuckle rumbles through his chest, a vibration I can feel against my body as we pull into a parking spot near the restaurant.

"I do," he says, turning off the motorcycle and swinging his leg over to dismount. "Guess money can buy you any kind of air you want."

His hand finds mine again, fingers intertwining naturally, as though they were crafted just for this fit. Together we walk toward Dram & Cask, its exterior elegantly understated with polished wood and frosted glass. As we

step inside, the transition is seamless — from the artisanal aroma of fall to a warm embrace of ambient lighting and the soft clinking of glassware.

"This place work for you?" Bishop asks, eyes searching my face for approval.

"It does," I say, unable to keep my eyes from dancing around the room, taking in the sophisticated decor. It stands in stark contrast to the rough interiors of biker bars — no neon signs or peeling paint here. Instead, there's an air of refinement that suits my desire for normalcy, an evening that doesn't remind me of past dangers or present fears. This is perfect. A way to shut out the world, and have it just be me and Bishop and a few drinks.

The host greets us with a warm smile and leads us to a cozy table draped in crisp linen. It's next to the front windows and has a perfect view of the street outside, with the people passing by and the autumn-colored trees that look ready to drop their leaves in a flood of yellow, orange, and red.

We slide into our seats, a world away from leather and chrome.

It's just us.

Us.

Not him and his ghosts, not me and mine — just us.

I'd forgotten what it feels like.

Even before our drinks arrive — his old fashioned and my lemon drop martini, because I can't help myself, even though ordering it in front of Bishop makes him playfully roll his eyes — a weight that I hadn't even known I was carrying lifts itself from my shoulders and I smile in a way that feels foreign on my face. In this bar, surrounded by these people, he and I are alone in the best way.

"How did you wind up in Ironwood Falls?" I say.

It's a basic question, it's probably one of the first things you ask in a date alongside the usuals like 'do you have any siblings?' or 'what's your favorite music?' and I am excited to dive into the mundanity of it. It's so *basic*, so *normal*, that I could laugh out loud for the joy of finally getting to experience it.

Me, on a normal date for once. With a man that I already know that I love.

"I rode my motorcycle."

I snort and nudge him under the table. "That's not what I meant."

"That's how I got here."

"Don't be a taciturn ass. Be the man I'm on a date with."

"Maybe the man you're on a date with is a bit of an ass." He chuckles. The

drinks arrive and he takes a long sip that turns into a longer drink that drains the glass before the server's even left our table. "I'll have another," he says, handing them back the empty glass. Then he turns to me. "You really want to know?"

"Yes, I want to know the man that I love," I say. "But if there are things that are too much to talk about, well, I can ask you about something else."

"It's all a lot, but it's all me." He chuckles, picks up the second glass the moment our server sets it down, and passes them a couple of twenties. "One's for you, one's for the bartender. Keep them coming, OK? No empty glasses."

"Yes, sir," the server says before pocketing the bill and leaving.

"When I got out of the Army, I was a wreck. It ain't too much to say that being a surgeon on deployment meant I saw some of the worst that humanity can do to itself, and in a lot of cases, it was my job to clean up that mess so that the people who got hurt could go on out and hurt other people. And that's the best case for the people who wound up on my operating table. There were plenty where the best they could hope for is that they'd survive and go home with their humanity intact, much less minor details like the use of the limbs or being able to go to the bathroom without emptying a bag. There were some days I felt like a butcher on an assembly line, just carving up order after order. When I was over there, I learned to compartmentalize, to lose myself in the work itself and keep my conscience at bay with simple fucking exhaustion. But when I got out, I didn't have that. I didn't have the relentless demand of the military, and I didn't have..." He stops, my hand finds his across the table.

"It's OK, we can move on. Tell me about your favorite music," I say. I want to learn about him, true, but the last thing I really want is to make him relive his pain.

"Oh, fuck, that's a more painful question than the one you just asked." He laughs, empties his glass, and another arrives beside it. I laugh, too, at ease seeing him open, for once. When has he ever been forthcoming? When have either of us felt free to talk about ourselves? Never. But there's something freeing about finally admitting you love someone. Just as there's something freeing about these drinks — my lemon drop martini tastes like candy in the best way, and I finish my drink and barely keep myself from letting out a grateful gasp as a fresh one lands right in front of me.

"What about siblings?"

"Only my brothers in the MC. But I'm not letting you hijack this. You

asked, I'll answer. I got out of the Army, and I drifted a while. Found myself in the MC life because I had the misfortune of winding up in a useless therapy group for veterans where the kid who was supposed to be the group's therapist was fresh out of college and looked like he couldn't even grow a damn mustache, much less understand what any of us had been through. A couple of the guys in my group recruited me into their MC, but I don't play well with others, especially those guys, so I left them after a while and went nomad. Then I got sick of that, ditched their patch all together, and just drifted. But being alone... it didn't suit me, either. I needed something to believe in, and people that I could believe in, too."

"And then you came here?"

"Not right away. There were some misfires on the journey to get here. But when I made it to the Twisted Devils, when I'd talked to the prez, Rabid, and met some of the other guys, I knew that here in Ironwood Falls was a place where maybe I could put things back together. I still may not play well with others, and I might've been missing a certain something until you came along, but here's home. And... I like it."

"I like it here, too," I say. My eyes go back out the window. There's something special about this part of the country; being surrounded by mountains, by green, by people who treat you with kindness, with compassion, with interest, yet don't pry — it's a special place.

"Your turn," he says.

"Oh, so you want to know my favorite music?" I say, hoping to dodge his question. It might've not been that painful for him to admit how he got here — though so much of his journey sounds like it wasn't pleasant — but it would be physically painful for me to recount the how and why of my arrival in Ironwood Falls. "I like dance music, late 2000s and early 2010s pop, and I have a secret soft spot for 90s Ska..."

"I thought we agreed on no painful questions or answers?"

"We did."

"Well, your answer physically pains me. Ska? Seriously?"

"Maybe I threw that one in there to see whether you were paying attention to me or to your drink."

"It is a damn fine drink." He twirls his now-empty glass in his hand, admiring the last bits of beverage that cling like lace to the glass. "But I'm more interested in how someone like you just seemed to show up out of nowhere and suddenly take the youth center by storm. I know you had that

meeting with the councilman the other day. You're making a real impact over there, Eden. You should be proud."

I smile, then my smile disappears as a rumbling noise sends ripples through my drink and I look out the window to see a trio of motorcycles go by, and on the backs of the bikers there's a logo that turns my blood to ice. In an instant, every scar on my body, every wound on my heart, feels open again — bleeding and fresh. I shut my eyes as pain suffuses me, pushes a sharp gasp from my lips. It's no longer just Bishop and me in this booth. Every nightmare I've ever had has just taken a seat beside me and wrapped their spindly fingers around my throat.

Mindful of Bishop's presence, I swallow once, force down the fear and myself to smile at him. Just then, beyond the sound of motorcycles, another sound draws my attention: a woman's voice.

"Thank you all for coming tonight. We are Silken Melody, and we are so excited to play for you."

Looking to my right, I see a small stage at the end of the bar, and a trio of musicians — a guitarist, a drummer, a singer — setting up. Moments later, the bar fills with music and I finish my drink in a hurry and extend my hand.

"That's a long story. And one for a different time," I say. "Let's dance."

Tonight is about our future together, and I can think of no better way to avoid dredging up old nightmares than to lose myself in the arms of the man I love. Bishop takes my hand, his fingers wrapping around mine with a warmth that counters the chill of fear that had briefly settled over me. He leads me to the small dance floor near the stage, where a few other couples are swaying to the music. The band, Silken Melody, kicks into their first set with an energy that feels both vibrant and soothing.

As we move together, Bishop's hand rests gently on my lower back, guiding me across the polished wooden planks. His eyes never leave mine, and in them, I find a safe harbor from the storm that always seems to chase me. The singer's voice is like velvet in the air — powerful and tender all at once — as she croons a song about love lost and found.

I let myself be carried away.

For once, I feel like I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

Bishop leans in close enough that I can feel his breath on my neck as he whispers. "Don't think about anything else right now. Just be here with me."

I nod against his shoulder, feeling the tension ebb away as we dance. The melody wraps around us like a cocoon, making this moment feel separate

from the rest of the world.

I nestle closer to him, my head on his chest, moving in time with the music and his steady heartbeat. We dance for what feels like an eternity and an instant all at once, until the last chord of the song fades away into applause. My lips find his in a sudden urge, a kiss that says more than words could — gratitude, affection, need.

Pulling back slightly, I gaze into Bishop's eyes and find a reflection of my longing.

"Let's go back to your place," I suggest softly, craving the privacy and the quiet intimacy of being alone with him.

He smiles down at me, his eyes alight with a spark that sends shivers down my spine.

"Your wish is my command."

Once outside, the cool night air wraps itself around us like a shawl. Bishop leads me to where his bike is parked. He hands me a helmet and I strap it on.

His motorcycle roars to life beneath us, but as we pull out onto the street, another sound ripples through the air — the ominous echo of other bikes in the distance. That sound sends an icy thread of fear weaving through my veins. That thread pulls my heart and soul back to a time when I lived beneath a bloody mountain of terror.

And as we ride, I notice something else about that sound...

It follows us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Eden

The faraway sound of motorcycles follows us all the way back to Ironwood Falls. It feels like wolves circling their prey. Bishop seems indifferent to it — but then, why would he be anything but? He's used to it, lives with it. Every person he's close to — *except for me* — is probably associated with motorcycles. I keep my mouth shut about it, because to give voice to my fear is to both make it real and admit to Bishop the terrible secret I've kept from him.

But, when I step off his motorcycle and his lips capture mine, I forget about my fear.

There's only us.

Us, and my urge to explore his body.

"I love you," I whisper as I run my hands down his chest and clutch at his belt. We're still in his driveway, but I don't give a damn. I want this man as much as a drowning person wants air.

Bishop's hands roam my back, pull me closer to the heat radiating from his body. His kiss deepens as if he's drawing the truth right out of my soul. It's intoxicating, the way he consumes me until nothing else remains but the searing connection between our melding hearts.

"I love you too, Eden," he breathes between fervent kisses that scatter my thoughts like leaves in a storm. The raw admission makes my heart swell to the point of aching—something inside me shifts irreversibly. We barely make it inside the house before our passion overcomes us. Clothes become unnecessary, shed like autumn leaves in the hallway.

Up every step of the staircase, each inch along the hallway, we devour each other with passion; we explore one another's bodies with fingers, with tongues; I learn what it feels like to kneel on the hardwood floor of his hallway, to look up at his face as I take his hard cock in my mouth.

Because I don't have the patience to wait for the bedroom before I suck

him. I want to escape my fears, and the promise his body offers is exactly what I crave — escape, followed by sublime safety wrapped in his arms. "Let me suck you."

A groan is his reply as I take him in my mouth, as my hands work his hard shaft into my mouth. I savor the taste of him, the feel of his cock throbbing against my tongue. I use my hands to stroke his thighs, to pull him deeper, feeling his balls tighten against my lips.

Moan after moan breaks from his mouth.

With just my tongue, my lips, a delicate twist of my wrist, I can bring this powerful man to his knees.

Bishop's grip on my hair tightens, and I know he's close. Releasing him, I crawl up his body, my heart racing with anticipation. Our lips lock again, our tongues tangling as I press myself against his hardness.

"I want you inside me."

My voice is hoarse from our passionate kiss, and I feel the desire in his touch as he guides his swollen cock towards my entrance.

"Bend over."

Against the wall, I bend, arch my backs and release a breath as he takes a position behind me, and then he takes me. With one deep thrust, he possesses me. I gasp at the sensation of being filled so completely, my entire body trembles with the overwhelming feeling of it.

"Harder," I say. "Don't fuck me like you love me. Fuck me like you hate me."

I want him to obliterate me. To consume my body, to possess every thought I have and turn it toward enjoying the pure sensation of my man fucking my brains out.

Bishop's hips jerk forward, meeting my momentum, and we move together like we're made for each other. His fingers sink into my hips, grip me tight, pull me into him as he fucks me so hard and deep that my eyes roll back in my head and a feral, inhuman moan escapes my quivering lips.

"Fuck me harder, Bishop."

The room around us disappears as we lose ourselves in our passion. The only thing that matters is this primal connection, the beat of our hearts in perfect rhythm, the ragged breathing that echoes in the otherwise silent room.

Bishop's sturdy arms wrap around me, pulling me even closer as he plunges deeper, each thrust sending earthquakes of pleasure through my body. I can feel his need for release growing, the tension building in his

muscles as he pushes himself to the edge.

"I'm close," he growls in my ear, his hot breath sending shivers down my spine. "Cum with me, Eden."

Then he finds that sweet spot inside me, a thrust that makes me gasp and my knees go weak. He reaches around me, reaches low, and gently strokes my clit, and the combination of sensation sends me exploding into a thousand stars. My body arches, my nails dig into his shoulders as I scream his name and feel my orgasm wash over me in a wave of staggering pleasure.

His own release follows, filling me with his warmth and strength, and I know in that moment that he truly is mine. Into my ear, he whispers the words: "I love you."

We collapse together, panting, hearts racing. His arms tighten around me as he kisses my neck, my shoulder, my chest. Eventually, we find our way to his bed, and I wrap myself in him and his blankets. This matters. This. Not some phantom sounds or illusions about my past. The present and the future with Bishop are what's important.

It's in his arms that I drift to sleep, a deep sleep that's only interrupted a couple times as he stirs in bed. Vaguely, there's the sense of him leaving the bed and coming back later, but who doesn't have to get up once or twice at night?

At some point, I wake up with Bishop asleep beside me.

He snores, but gently, in a way that's endearing and not annoying.

Bleary-eyed and nearly blind, I stumble out of bed and down the hallway. After I finish in the bathroom, I make my way back to his bedroom. But along the way, something shiny catches my eye: the padlock on the hallway door that Bishop always keeps closed dangles open from its latch.

I pause, look at it.

Why is it open?

Was he in here earlier?

Did he sneak out of bed in the middle of the night to come into this room?

He must have.

And he must have forgotten to lock up after doing so.

Curiosity claws at my insides, a cat sharpening its claws on the tender fibers of my resolve. The open padlock seems to whisper my name, a siren's call too potent to resist. I know I should leave it alone, that Bishop's privacy is not mine to invade. Yet, the need to understand the man I love, to know whether his past hides dangers that could reach out to me, is overwhelming.

I push the door open with a trembling hand.

It creaks softly, protesting in the night's stillness.

The air inside is thick with dust and secrets, and as I step in, my heart flutters like a trapped bird against my ribs. The room is dimly lit by the silver glow of moonlight streaming through a small window. I blink as my eyes adjust, taking in the sight before me: walls adorned with pictures of Bishop, but he's not alone. In each one, he stands close to another woman — a pretty brunette with laughing eyes and an army uniform that matches Bishop's own. They look happy. So very happy and in love.

Jealousy stabs at me sharply, an unexpected intruder in this quiet room filled with memories. Who is she? Why does Bishop keep these pictures hidden away? My thoughts race as I grapple with the surge of emotions — anger, shock, and profound jealousy; Bishop looks so much happier and more in love than I've ever seen him. What is she to him? Who is she that she gets to see such deep happiness in the man I love?

I feel the telltale sting of tears threatening to betray my presence in this room, the sobs that want to burst from my throat and wake Bishop from his slumber, but I push them back. This isn't the time for sorrow or self-pity. I need to understand who this woman is and what she means to Bishop. My gaze wanders over the room, stopping at an open journal on a table caught in a slice of moonlight streaming through the room's small window that seems to highlight it for my attention.

My feet carry me closer, as if they aren't mine to command. Each step feels laden with a gravity that's more than just the pull of the earth. The journal's pages are worn, each word tinged with an emotion so raw I can almost feel it pulsing from the paper, like a heartbeat within each letter.

Today's date is scrawled above the open page.

There's a name there — *Michelle*.

My fingers hesitate before they graze the page, tracing the contours of a truth I'm not sure I'm ready to face. And then I see it, written in Bishop's heavy scrawl, stark against the pale backdrop of the paper.

An entry. The truth. The terrible truth.

"I can never forget that I'm the one who killed Michelle. She died by my hand. *Mine*. And if I'm not careful with Eden, I'll kill her, too."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Bishop

When I wake up, everything feels right in the world. She's sleeping beside me, the sun gently caressing her, highlighting every perfection on her face. I love her. I know that, as sure as my heart beats in my chest, Eden Mercer is the one it beats for. Those words — I love you — weren't the easiest to say, but they were true.

Saying those words necessitated doing some things. Especially saying them outside that room. That room holds all that I have left of Michelle, my lost love. After Eden fell asleep, I went into that room, was drawn into it, and I looked over those photos — of me, of Michelle, of us in love — and I knew that, someday soon, I'll be able to say goodbye to those photos for good. I'll take the lock off that door and open up that last, closed-off part of me.

Before I left that room, I wrote something that I cannot forget: my life is dangerous, and I cannot lose Eden to it.

I have to keep her safe.

For her sake, and for mine — because I couldn't survive losing my heart again.

After putting those thoughts down to paper, I crawled back into bed beside Eden and I slept as peacefully as I have in years.

I stir and I carefully leave the bed, making sure not to wake her. After everything she's been through, she can use the extra sleep. Something's troubling her, probably something to do with Charlie, and I make a note to myself that, as soon as this business with the Iron Savages and the Steel Reapers is over, I'll track that punk kid down and make sure he never threatens anyone again.

Until then, I'll be vigilant. And I'll show her she is safe while I'm around.

I head downstairs and I start up a pot of coffee. Then I raid the fridge, gather eggs, chives, cheese, yellow onions, bell peppers, and butter. I don't cook often, but I know how; the Army taught me that. Or, rather, the crap

they'd serve in the mess tent inspired me to learn how to cook, so I didn't have to survive on slop day in and day out. That, and cooking's not so hard. There's science and chemistry to it; mix ingredients in certain quantities, heat to a particular temperature for a certain time, and so on. Same for baking, which I also do from time to time. Not that I let anyone else in the MC know that, because I'd receive no end of shit if the club found out that every once in a while I like to whip up some biscuits or a good loaf of sourdough.

It's as I'm whisking the eggs for the omelets while the sound of sizzling butter tickles my ears that I realize I'm humming.

Me.

Humming.

And I realize that it's not just love that's filling my chest, but genuine happiness, too.

I honestly can't remember the last time I've felt this way. They say that grief is like a wound that might never heal. Day after day, it'll pain you, it'll follow you, it'll taint everything you do... except, one day, you'll wake up, you'll go about your day, and suddenly, you'll realize that you haven't thought about your pain at all. It might come back after that, but as time goes on, you'll have more and more days where that pain isn't taking up all the room in your chest.

By the time I pour those whisked eggs into the hot pan, I'm smiling from ear to ear.

Because of her.

Her, and her love.

When Eden comes down the stairs, she stops, surprised.

"Are you making breakfast?" She says. And then, "Why are you smiling at me like that?"

"I am making breakfast. And I'm smiling because you make me feel good."

"Huh," she mumbles, and her eyes drop to the floor for a moment, dodging mine. "Thanks."

One word, one syllable is enough to make that happiness in my chest waver. There are still barriers between us, but it's nothing we can't handle. Someday soon, I'll sit down with Eden and tell her about Michelle, about my time in the Army, about why I know so well the pain that Elroy has lived with for all these years. Maybe Eden has a sense of that already — that I'm holding something back, keeping something from her. It wouldn't surprise

me. With all the work she does at the youth center, she's certainly proven herself to be perceptive.

I set the omelet in front of her, then sprinkle diced chives over the top.

"Wow. All out, huh?" She says. Her voice is still cold, withdrawn, but then she hasn't even taken her first sip of coffee. I'd hoped for more from her, but I'm still happy to have any of her.

"Yes, I can cook. Had to learn. Back when I was in the Army, the food they served was a war crime."

She mumbles a response, then buries herself in her omelet. Despite her being so taciturn, she still releases a delighted moan after the first bite.

"OK, damn, that's good."

I watch her as she eats, analyzing every micro-expression, every little twitch in her face. It's clear that she's still carrying a heavy burden, and my gut tightens at the sight of it. The stress from the recent attack must be festering inside her, mingling with fears inflamed by the Iron Savages and Steel Reapers being in town. It's a volatile mixture that could be set off at any trigger, and I'm determined to make sure that doesn't happen.

My vigilance has to be unwavering now. I'll need to protect her from the dangers lurking in the shadows of my world, as well as from the demons haunting our pasts.

"Did you sleep OK?" I say, cutting through the silence that has settled between us.

"Yeah," she replies with a nod, but I hear the hesitancy in her voice. "Just a lot on my mind with everything going on."

"You know you can talk to me about anything," I say, tipping my chin up to meet her gaze. "If there's something or someone bothering you, I can protect you."

"I know." She offers me a faint smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

"Eden, if there's anything more I can do to make you feel safe here, you'd tell me, right?"

She pauses mid-bite and meets my gaze. There's a vulnerability there that she quickly covers up with a small shake of her head. "I'm fine, Bishop. It's just... everything happening at once, you know?"

My heart aches, wanting to reach out and erase all the shadows that cloud her gaze. I want to take her pain away, but I know it's not so simple. She's been through hell, and she's still clawing her way back.

I get that.

I get that, and I've never been good at this conversing thing to begin with.

The conversation limps along, each of us dancing around the things we should say while pushing food around our plate. This isn't how I wanted this morning to go. After being so close to her last night, now it feels like she's further away than ever.

"I'm heading in early today," she finally says as she pushes her plate away, only half finished despite her earlier praise. "Noah Lucas wants to see some proposals for expanding support for the center. It could mean more funding, more programs... more hope for these kids."

I nod, impressed despite my worries. "That's great news. You're doing amazing work there. I can't wait to see what will happen when they finally let you run that place, instead of letting Albert milk the center for all it's worth just because he's the mayor's golf buddy."

Her eyes light up for just a moment — *there's that passion* — but then it dims again as she stands up and collects her dishes.

"Thanks," she says. "I just want to make a difference, you know?"

I stand too, taking the dishes from her hands gently and setting them aside. My phone then beeps at me and there's a text from Rabid, reminding me in code that I have guard duty coming up. The deal is going down in just a couple days, and I can't wait for it to be over so that Eden and I can finally have the talk that we need to have without worrying about whoever's trying to ambush the club or whatever punk kids want to hurt her for shutting down their drug dealing at the youth center.

In just a few days, she'll be safe. We'll talk and tear down these walls between us.

No sooner do I have the dishes washed than I turn around to find her dressed for work and ready to leave. She has her phone in her hand, her eyes on the screen.

"I've got a ride. My driver will be here in just a minute."

"You know I could drive you."

"I'm sure you've got stuff of your own to do."

What happened to her? It might be true what she's saying, but it seems like the woman standing in front of me is far different from the woman who fell asleep in my bed last night. Has she decided she can't handle life with me? With a man in an MC?

Maybe that's it.

Maybe what we both thought was love is nothing more than the short-

lived rush of attraction, a flame that'll burn bright, but die out at the slightest breeze. It's been a long time for either of us since we've found someone we're attracted to. It's no wonder we both were caught up in our feelings, but now she's decided that this isn't really love.

Her phone beeps, letting her know the ride is here. With a kiss and a whispered, "I love you," she leaves my kitchen, and me more confused than ever.

I finish cleaning up once she's gone. Dishes done, I grab the trash and head outside to put it in the can. My head is still spinning about Eden. It could be the better thing that's she's already drawing away from me. With everything she's lived through, with everything I've done — the blood on my hands, including Michelle's — and everything going on with the club, it's definitely safer for her.

Sure, I can protect her, but only to a point. I can't be around her every minute of every day, and if something were to happen to Eden, I'd never forgive myself. Likely wouldn't survive it, either. What point would there be in living if I had to carry her blood on my hands, too?

I toss the trash bag into the can, and then I freeze.

There's something wicked hanging out of my mailbox — fleshy, spindly, and red.

The hair on the back of my neck rises as I approach, my eyes quickly scan my surroundings — they're clear, there's nothing more threatening than my neighbor, Dottie, who's pushing eighty and is watching me through her living room window like a knitting gargoyle.

I open mailbox and curse.

There's a rat inside.

A rat with a hunting knife shoved into it so roughly that its head and upper half are split open, spilling blood and viscera all over the inside of my mailbox.

Next to the rat is a note.

Though it's bloodstained, the message on it is still legible: *You're next.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Bishop

The rat goes in the trash, along with the knife and the note. The blood, I leave where it is. If the mailman wants to bitch me out later about my mailbox being dirty when he's trying to stuff it full of Pottery Barn catalogs and grocery store mailers, he can go fuck himself. I don't give a damn, and I sure as fuck don't need any more coupons for Bed, Bath & Beyond. Those don't matter. What matters is that I just got slapped in the face with a fucking reminder that the enemy knows where I live, which means it sure as shit isn't safe for Eden to be around me. It hurts to think that, but it's true. I love her. The last thing I want is for her to get hurt because of me.

I grab my cut, my gun, and get on my bike. I have to focus. Everything else can wait — it's nearly time for my shift, and the sooner I get that over with, the sooner the club's deal is done, the sooner I can do what I need to do to protect Eden.

The engine purrs between my legs like a beast in its own right, echoing the turmoil that's churning in my chest. The rat. That damn message. They're not just threats to me, they're warnings that everyone I care about could be caught in the crossfire. And there's Eden, her face this morning shadowed by something I can't quite decipher — fear, maybe, or doubt? It was like she wasn't there with me, not really.

I love her. God, I love her more than I thought possible after everything that went down with Michelle. With Eden, it's like the world isn't so damn gray anymore. There's color and light and... hope. But what kind of future can I give her? One where she's always looking over her shoulder because of me and the choices I've made?

The leather of my cut creases with every movement, a second skin that marks me as much as the ink etched into my flesh. The gun at my side is cold, a stark reminder of the life I'm living — a life that Eden walked into without knowing all the shadows it casts.

I'm so caught up in this inner battle that the sudden flare of red and blue lights takes a few seconds to register. Shit.

Instantly, I check my rearview mirror and see an Ironwood Falls police cruiser right on my tail. Sure, I'm speeding, but I'm surprised as hell the cops would dare to pull me over — they rarely give a damn if any member of the club speeds on the roads outside of town. This route to the storage site is so remote I haven't seen another person for miles. *Who the hell am I going to hurt out here if I get into a wreck? A pine tree?*

I pull over and Officer Maya Alvarado exits her vehicle and storms toward me, which kills the friendly greeting I had on my lips. Out of all the cops I've come across in my life, she's one of the few that's actually a good one and a good person, too. She actually gives a damn about this town and everyone in it.

"What the hell are you trying to pull, Bishop?" She snarls. She never snarls. Never swears, either. Both those things put me on high alert, stirring the wariness and unease that were already sitting in my stomach after everything that's gone on with Eden this morning into a disturbing froth.

"Is speeding that much of an offense? I was going twenty over, at most."

"I'm talking about you and your whole damn club. Your club, and the other two clubs that you Twisted Devils have brought into town; the Iron Savages and the Steel Reapers. Just what the hell is going on and why have you brought Eden into this mess?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about looking out for my friend. Do you have any idea what she's been through?"

"Some."

"No, you don't. If you did, you wouldn't be giving me any of this shitty attitude."

"Educate me, then, officer."

She sighs, and her lips — which are set in a stern look that seems so foreign on her face — quiver slightly. "It's not my story to tell. But, since she cares about you, and I think you care about her, I can tell you a little because you have to help me keep her safe. Eden's a *survivor*," she says, giving that word an incredible weight. "What she made it through, it would make you sick just hearing about it. She and I met because of a friend of mine who works with women who've escaped situations like hers. I've been helping her start over and keeping an eye out for her."

"I'd thought something like that," I say. Or something close enough. I won't pry any further with Officer Alvarado, even though my curiosity is more than piqued, not just out of morbidity, but because knowing more about Eden's past would help me help her. Though Eden will tell me when, and if, she's ready. Until then, it really is none of my damn business. "But what does that have to do with pulling me over out in the middle of nowhere?"

"I was out here already, and had a feeling you'd be coming this way, so I decided to wait around."

"Why? To yell at me?"

"Because you and your club are not only doing a terrible job at protecting Eden, you're putting her in even more danger."

"Explain yourself," I say. It's a war just to keep my voice steady, but the last thing I need to do is start a fight with Officer Alvarado, who has proven herself repeatedly to be a friend of the MC. Something dangerous is circling this town, and whatever moments of peace Eden and I have had are just those spare seconds in the eye of a hurricane. Eventually, the storm is going to sweep over us and tear our lives to pieces.

"There's been an attack," she starts. My mind goes to the note, and the rat left in my mailbox, and it takes all the willpower I have not to draw my gun right there.

"An attack?"

"Let me make one thing clear to you, Bishop: I know your club is up to something. There are two other MCs in town, and I know that you're all guarding that abandoned storage facility not too far from here. I know about it. I've kept my nose out of it because I trust Rabid, and I trust Claire to keep him from doing anything too crazy, but I know, and I know it may not be something that's all that good and clean. Because just this morning, at the truck stop that's about fourteen miles down the road from that same storage yard, something brutal happened."

"Something brutal? Officer Alvarado, don't dance around the truth. I've seen men die. With the Army and otherwise."

"Five civilians were murdered, Bishop. Five innocent lives were taken just before dawn. Four truckers and the overnight truck stop employee. It's got the markings of a hit. Each victim was shot once in the head and once in the chest. All their vehicles had been ransacked, like whoever did it was looking for something. There would've been six murders, but the sixth victim, he survived, somehow. He has a bullet lodged in his ribs and another that

ricocheted off his skull. Apparently, he's got a thick head. Lucky him. He's in the ICU. He may not make it through surgery, but he made it long enough to survive until the morning truck stop employee came in to find him face down in the parking lot in a pool of his own blood."

"Fucking shit, that's awful. Did the survivor say anything about who did this?"

She nods and gives me a look that freezes my blood. "He did. Which is why I came to find you."

"Maya..."

"He said the men who shot him wore masks. They kept their faces covered, and they kept their voices muffled. They were professionals, and they knew what they were hunting for. But for all the lack of information he gave us about what these men looked like, there was one defining feature that stood out: they all rode motorcycles."

I freeze, staring.

Eden is in far more danger than I realized. How much longer until these enemies who are circling the club decide to make her one of their victims?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Eden

"He has a secret. It's a big one, and I think it means it's over between us."

I blurt this all out the second I come through the front office doors at the youth center. There's no point in trying to hide it from Sandra. For one thing, she knows me well enough that she'd be able to tell immediately, just from the look on my face, that I had something big that was bothering me. For another, I need someone to talk to, and she's the closest person around. Other than Sandra, the only other friend I have in this town so far is Maya, and it's not like I can call her when she's probably on duty and ask her to come by the youth center and talk me through my breakup with the biker that she warned me about.

Sandra leaps up from her desk, scattering papers and muffin crumbs everywhere. "What the flying fuckity fuck did you just say?"

"Bishop. I'm talking about Bishop and something I found at his place. But first," I stop, rub the side of my head with a knuckle, where I can feel a major stress headache forming; it feels like a wrecking ball is bouncing around inside my skull. "First, I need some coffee. Is it ready, or do I need to make a pot?"

"It's ready, and I have something extra for you, since the situation seems to call for it," she says, and she opens the bottom drawer of her desk and takes out a small bottle of whiskey. "This is left over from the time before you got hired on. There was about a month where it was just me and Albert running this place." I set my coffee cup down and she tops it off with some whiskey. "The worst days weren't the ones you'd expect. It wasn't so bad running this office on my own while he went off golfing. It was exhausting, sure, but not impossible. The worst days were when he was here and he thought he'd try to 'help.' Most of the time, he'd just prattle in my ear about his latest golf game, which was bad enough, but sometimes he'd actually do work, and Eden, let me tell you: never let that man near anything important. I spent hours in here

after he went home, just fixing the messes he'd make. That man is so fantastically stupid that I am amazed that he has not drowned in a rain puddle on the sidewalk."

I take my first sip of the whiskey and coffee. The combination is pure heaven on my tongue and in my tummy. The headache bouncing around inside my skull recedes to a dull, manageable ache.

"You're a lifesaver."

"And you owe me some information. What's this you're saying about ending things with Mr. Looks-so-good-in-jeans?"

I take a sigh and realize I'm not ready to spill everything just yet. Instead, I drain my cup, fill it again with coffee and whiskey, and then, just as the boozy brew flows into me, the truth flows out.

"I spent the night at his place last night."

"I like this, and I'd like some more details, please."

The memories, still fresh, make me smile. "He took me out on a date. An actual date. To this nice place in Elmsburg. We talked, we had drinks, we danced, it was just perfect. Then we went back to his place, and, well..."

"Just saying 'well will not cut it if you want any more of my whiskey."

"We made out all the way from his driveway into his upstairs hallway, and then we did it there because the bedroom was too far away. It was good, very good. My brain might have melted a little from how hard he made me..."

"So far, none of this is suggesting to me that a breakup makes any sense. If I was in your shoes, instead of thinking 'break up with the man who treats me right and gives me mind-melting orgasms,' I'd be wanting to marry him. Or, you know, at least have a few... thousand... more of those orgasms before I dump him."

I chuckle at Sandra's candidness, a nervous laugh that betrays the gravity of what I'm feeling.

"It's not that simple."

She raises an eyebrow in question. "So spit it out. What turned Mr. Amazing Orgasm into Mr. Dump Me overnight?"

Taking a deep breath, I look down at my hands, the heat of the coffee cup comforting against my skin.

"It's not him," I confess. "I mean, it is, but... there's more to it. Bishop, he's got this... aura about him. Like he's carrying something heavy. He never talks about his past, not really. But..."

"And you found out something?" Sandra leans in, her eyes searching mine

for answers.

"I did. I woke up in the middle of the night and stumbled on something when I was coming back from the bathroom."

"A diary? Old love letters? A body wrapped up in a carpet?" Sandra says. "Because those wouldn't discourage me. A guy can have his thoughts and his exes, and if he's taking me out and giving me orgasms that turn me into Jell-O, there's a lot that I can forgive. Or help him bury."

"You really need to get laid, don't you?"

"You have no idea." She takes a swig straight from the whiskey bottle. "If I had a dollar for every time I'd... Well, I'd be retired."

"Gross."

"So, what did you find?"

"He has this room in his house that he usually keeps locked. With a padlock. Which is strange enough on its own, but last night the lock was undone, like he'd been in there and forgotten to close it properly."

"And you snooped."

"It wasn't intentional. But yes, I saw what was inside."

"Was it a kill room? Did you fall asleep while watching *Saw*? Was this all just a weird dream, Eden?"

I wish it was.

I wish that this was all some fevered nightmare bleeding into my waking life.

That'd make it so much easier than the truth. Instead, the entire scene plays out in my head, recreating itself in vivid detail, from the photos on the walls, to the journal, to the feelings that ripped through my heart as I saw Bishop with this other woman, looking happier than I've ever seen him — envy, anger, betrayal; without even being there, he's hurt me just as deeply as that monster in my past ever had, because nothing hurts as deeply as a wound from a loved one.

"More like a nightmare. There were photos, Sandra. Photos of Bishop with this other woman, and they both looked so happy. Happier than I've ever seen him."

"That bastard. He has someone else on the side?" Sandra says, then pauses, thinking. "How? I mean, he volunteers, and he also doesn't seem like a people person, so how could he manage having two people in his life?"

"He doesn't. I'm the only one."

Sandra gives me a quizzical look. "So, what's the problem, Eden? Are you

upset that the man you are dating and having incredible sex with has an ex he hasn't told you about? There's nothing wrong with it. I'm sure he'll tell you, eventually. Besides, we all have exes, some of which we never want to talk about again."

Oh, don't I know it? Some of us have exes we hope never to even think about again for as long as we live, and that'd still be too soon.

"That isn't all, Sandra. There was a journal."

"A journal? So he's introspective. Keeps track of his thoughts. That's a sign of self-awareness and that he cares about his own mental health. You can't mean to tell me that, just because he has some pictures of himself with an ex and a journal, that you mean to break up with him, and his cute butt, and his ability to deliver earth-shattering orgasms? Have you lost your damn mind?"

"He killed her."

"Still, don't get too hasty. Was it intentional or accidental? And was she a bitch?"

"Oh my god, I can't believe you."

"I'm just suggesting discretion."

"Sandra, his journal was open. I read it, and he said that he'd killed his ex and that he had to be careful or else he'd kill me, too."

A silence so thick it could be sliced with a knife seems to settle over the kitchen.

Sandra's hand, which had been casually reaching for the whiskey bottle again, freezes mid-air.

"Eden..." Her voice is so hushed it barely registers in my ears. "That's not... that can't be real. Are you sure you read that right?"

I nod, the chill from the recollection seeping into my bones. The certainty of those words scrawled in ink haunts me.

"Yes, I'm sure. It was his handwriting, his journal. He confessed to it. He killed her, and he might kill me, too."

"But Bishop?" Sandra finally retrieves her hand, forgetting about the whiskey entirely now. She appears to be wrestling with the same disbelief that has been gnawing at me since I read those damning words. "He's always been so... I don't know: not the murdering type?"

I think back to every moment spent with Bishop, every touch and smile, searching for any trace of the darkness I'd uncovered in those pages. But all I find is a stark juxtaposition — a man capable of such tenderness and caring

for others, yet harboring a self-professed past drenched in shadows and blood.

"I know," I say, my throat tightening around the words. "And now I do not know what in the hell I need to do."

Sandra's face changes, hardens. She takes a long drink of whiskey, and when she sets the bottle down, she seems even more resolute. It's inspiring, almost. That I could confess something so terrible about Bishop and she could look like she has the answer to my problems. My fear fades, and hope grows in my chest.

"I know exactly what we need to do."

"Which is?"

"After we close up today, and after we've finished this whiskey, you need to confront him. Go over to his house, face him, and really let him have it."

"Confront him? Confront my sorta-boyfriend who confessed to murdering his ex and thinks he might also murder me?" As I say it out loud, it sounds terrible. Insane. As I take another drink of my whiskey-coffee, it doesn't sound so bad. Another, longer drink, and it almost sounds... right.

"You deserve to hear the truth from his lying mouth. I can't believe you didn't call him out right then for deceiving you, for literally lying to your face and building your entire relationship on a bedrock of deception and orgasms. Where's your anger, Eden? Where's your rage? He's using you."

"He is. But confront him? Even though he's a killer? What if he snaps?"

"He won't. This is the only way to do it. You need to look into his eyes and make him tell you the truth. Then you kick his ass to the curb." There's a clattering noise as she takes a long drink of whiskey and slams the bottle down with authority. "But don't worry, Eden, because you won't be doing this alone. You'll have backup. Backup that's just as angry as you are."

"What?"

"That's right: I'm coming with you. We are going to confront your murderous boyfriend together."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Bishop

To my right, two squirrels are doing something that's either a vicious attempt to murder each other, or sex between squirrels is far kinkier than I've ever imagined. Either answer wouldn't surprise me, because nature doesn't mess around. While I watch those two bushy-tailed animals try to send each other to death — either the big one, or the little one the French are always talking about, *le petit mort* — I think about Eden. For reasons entirely unrelated to two fucking squirrels.

The murder at the truck stop looms large in my thoughts next to her, along with the hatred of myself for bringing another beautiful woman into a situation that's going to get her killed.

This is what love gets me. Nothing but worry and heartache.

"I need you focused, Bishop," Rabid says. "We're on guard duty, not watching animal porn."

"Is it even porn if the two animals are doing it for entirely natural reasons and they're not being recorded? Wouldn't it just be exhibitionism? Or even just nature?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does. Because, in one scenario, you've called me someone who watches animal porn. In another, I'm just someone who saw two squirrels having sex. There's a big difference."

Rabid snorts and rolls his eyes. "Just patrol the perimeter. We have to keep our eyes peeled. Especially now."

"You heard about the thing at the truck stop?"

Rabid nods. "Officer Alvarado called me." He then looks over his shoulder at a point thirty feet away, where the president of the Iron Savages MC, Grinder, is standing with one hand in his pocket and the other holding a cigarette. Rabid calls out to him. "When's that VP of yours supposed to get here?"

"It's not like Fury to be late," Grinder answers, the furrow in his brow deepening. He takes a long drag of his cigarette. "He might be an asshole, but he's a punctual one."

"You call him?" Rabid says.

"Goes straight to voicemail. Couple of my other guys haven't checked in this morning, either."

I trade a look with Rabid. "You think it's related to what happened to those truckers?"

"No way that Fury would willingly skip out on his duty with this deal. His cut of the club's share is motivation enough for any man to keep his nose clean."

"Fuck." Rabid bites the word and reaches for his phone. "With the deal this close, these fuckers are going to get even more desperate. In less than forty-eight hours, the buyers will be here. We just have to hold on till then. I'm calling some more of the guys in. We're doubling the guard until this is over with."

Grinder spits and then blows a puff of smoke, nonplussed about the absence of his VP and several of his men. Maybe Fury is as much of an asshole as Grinder says.

In less than half an hour, Rook and Mayhem arrive at the storage site. Mayhem has a grin on his face and two shotguns slung over his shoulder. This is probably a field day for him — another chance at combat, a chance to blow someone's head off and have another story to tell. Rook looks, as always, pissed off.

"Can't believe I was the first one you called. I was fucking busy," he grumps.

"What were you doing that was so important you got to bitch about being called in to protect your share of a big fucking payday?" Rabid says.

"Doesn't matter. Forget about it," Rook says.

"I don't think I can. You brought it up, so now I need to know," Mayhem says.

"Your chipmunk brain will forget about it before I even finish this fucking sentence."

"Nuh-uh," Mayhem says, in a tone that suggests he's an iota away from sticking out his tongue. "Spill it."

"I was about to go hang out with Moose, OK?"

"Does Eliza know you're spending so much time with him?"

"She's cool with it. Teases me sometimes, that's all," Rook says.

"So, what were you two going to do? And, keep in mind, Rook, I can just call Moose and ask him, and you know he won't hold anything back," Rabid says, smiling. It's a rare sight on him, and it looks somewhat forced — he's clearly leaning into teasing Rook to forget about all the dangers circling to derail this big weapons deal.

Rook mumbles something that's about as quiet as a hummingbird's whisper.

"What was that?" Mayhem says.

"Manis and pedis," Rook says. Quicker, and defensively, he adds, "It was Moose's idea. All his. He says it's a little thing that just makes every day better, plus, apparently, nail care is important. It's a sign of health and self-respect."

"Sure, it is," Mayhem says.

Even though he's right. Nail care, skin care, it's all important, and little things can add years to your life. Rook doesn't seem ready to acknowledge just how right Mayhem is, though. He snarls and his rage spills out, rapid-fire. "I will rip your intestines out and use them to strangle you to death, you empty-headed, circus clown prick."

"Are you saying I'm a circus clown's penis?" Mayhem says. "Commas matter, asshole."

"I'm saying I'm going to kill you," Rook says.

Rabid steps between the two of them and adopts a tone like a father chastising two disobedient children, which isn't too far off as far as Mayhem is concerned. "Separate corners, both of you. Mayhem, you go take the northeast corner. Rook, take the southwest. And if I catch either of you two giving the other shit, so help me god..."

Rabid's growl is pure authority, and the bickering falls silent.

The two men split off without another word, leaving a heavy tension hanging in the air.

Rabid turns back to Grinder, who takes another drag from his cigarette with the indifference of a man who has seen too many fights to bother intervening in another. "We need to keep our heads on a swivel. These disappearances, the attack at the truck stop... someone's making a play against us."

Grinder nods and flicks the butt of his cigarette into the dirt, grinding it out beneath his boot. "Either way, weakness can't be what they see. Keep

your men sharp. I'll keep trying to get ahold of mine. Fucking Fury. This isn't like him at all. He's an asshole. I hate his guts most of the time — sometimes his temper's so hot it could run a fucking nuclear reactor — but he knew this was important. He was committed. And a tough son of a bitch, too. I can't picture whoever the fuck these pricks are that are trying to derail our deal actually getting the drop on him."

I tune Grinder and Rabid out. I've got more important things to worry about than some absentee biker with an anger problem. Eden dominates my mind, and she does for the hours that I spend on duty, patrolling the perimeter of that derelict storage yard.

Then, speak of the devil, my phone vibrates. It's her. Despite everything going on between us — secrets unsaid, ghosts that refuse to let us go — I smile to see her name on the screen.

I answer. "Hey."

"Bishop? That you? Your voice is so faint."

"It's me. I'm out... somewhere. The reception's crap out here. But I'm glad you called. We need to talk tonight."

"That's great and all, but I really need you to come over to your house now."

"You're at my house?"

"I am. I'm here with Sandra."

I pause, look at my phone, perplexed. Did I hear her right?

"What are you doing at my house, and why are you there with Sandra?"

"I came over to talk to you."

"Wait... with Sandra? Why?"

"Yes, with Sandra. We let ourselves in — I still have that key you gave me. She's here for support. It's a serious talk."

"About us?" I say. I know her tone, and I can tell she's likely got the same thing on her mind that I've had on mine all day; there's still too that we need to figure out. That, or we need to end it, because I sure as hell won't let this MC life claim her as another casualty. I've spent years carrying around one woman's ghost. I don't have the strength to carry another.

"Yes, but that's not important right now."

"We're not important?"

"Not at this moment, no," she says. Her voice is hurried, frantic. Somewhere in the background, I hear a heavy crashing sound. Wood splinters, and someone — Sandra, probably — lets out a quiet scream.

I grip the phone tighter.

"What's going on, Eden? Tell me."

"Well, Bishop, I called you because some men on motorcycles just pulled into your driveway. They're wearing ski masks, they've got weapons, and they're here to kill me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Bishop

"Get to the bathroom, lock the door, and lay down in the bathtub. I'm on my way," I shout into the phone.

Then I run.

"Bishop, where the hell are you going?" Rabid's words follow me as I leap atop my bike. I don't answer. I barely hear him over the pounding of fear and rage that riots in my head. Eden's in trouble because of me. She could die because of me. This is all my fault.

The engine screams between my legs and I ride that machine harder and faster than I ever have before; trees fly by in a blur. Every bump and ripple in the road is like an earthquake ripping through my body, and as I approach the outskirts of Ironwood Falls, I whip and weave through traffic.

I have to get there before they get to her.

No matter what it costs me, no matter what it takes, I have to save her.

Save her and kill every one of those men who thought they could raise a hand to her.

Smoke burns my nostrils as I push my bike to its breaking point. It chugs, screams, writhes and beneath me like a living thing. Then grinds to a slow halt as I reach my block. Officer Alvarado is already here, her patrol car parked a few houses away from mine, her face set like it's carved from stone, and her gun held in a ready position.

"The fuck are you doing here?" I shout.

"Eden called me right after she called you. I was closer."

"You buddies in blue on the way?"

"No, not yet. I don't want her name showing up in any records if I can help it."

"Which means?"

"I'm handling this one off the books, Bishop. At least until we make so much noise that others on the force get called in."

I draw my gun and then restart my engine. "Good enough for me. Come on."

I fly that last distance to my driveway. Stealth doesn't matter. What matters is that the men inside — three of them, judging by the other motorcycles parked in front of my house — know that their death is just moments away. Gun in hand, I storm through my front door with Officer Maya Alvarado on my heels.

Gunfire ruptures the silence as we step in; wood splinters, peppers me with shrapnel. I dive to the side. Officer Alvarado mirrors me. The cacophony of a shotgun blast echoes through my house, deafening me for a split second. I kick over my coffee table and take shelter behind the heavy wood, gun clutched in a vice grip.

"Alvarado!" I bark out, but she's already moving, a shadow against the wall, swift and silent.

Another boom. Buckshot sprays where I was seconds ago. Plaster rains down like grit from the heavens. My heart's a jackhammer in my chest, every beat screaming survival.

"Cover me!" Officer Alvarado shouts, and I pop up. Squeeze the trigger twice. The attacker stumbles back, but it's a glancing shot, and he raises his gun to return fire, only to stop short when another crack erupts — this time from Officer Alvarado's gun — and the bullet catches him in the side of his head, sending him and his shotgun to the floor.

We don't have time to celebrate; screams pierce through from above — Eden's and Sandra's. The sound sears through my veins, hotter than lead.

The staircase lies ahead.

We bound upwards two steps at a time, my every sense dialed to eleven, ready to react. Ready to kill. Nothing matters more than Eden.

We clear the landing and something fiery bites me on the shoulder. Blood run downs my left arm, a hot, scarlet stream. I bellow in pain, duck for cover, and return fire. There's two of them — one kicking away at the bathroom door, another with a handgun shooting right at us.

I hit the floor, roll, and come up shooting.

Alvarado flanks left, squeezing off rounds with the precision of a sculptor chipping away at marble, every shot designed to disable, to maim.

The one at the door turns, distracted by her gunfire; my bullet finds his knee. He howls and blood erupts from the back of his leg. The man tries to stand, to spin, but his leg bends in the wrong direction, and he collapses like a

marionette with its strings cut. Another crack, and I put a bullet through the side of his head, sending his brains to splatter on my bathroom door.

Gunman two is more cautious; he ducks behind a wall, plays peek-a-boo with death as he fires off potshots trying to hold us at bay. But it's inevitable — he's going to die, and I've got no time for games when Eden is involved; my blood paints the carpet, but it's fuel for my fury.

I fire several rounds in his direction, but he ducks for cover and they miss. From in my bathroom, I hear another desperate scream. Eden.

"Eden!" I roar, my voice a battle cry that cleaves through the chaos. "I'm here, Eden."

Terror and wood muffle her response. I can't see her, but I can feel her fear like a living thing in my throat.

There's a heavy crack as Officer Alvarado scores a hit — the gunman stumbles back with a grunt. His grip loosens on his weapon, and in that sliver of opportunity, I lunge forward. I want more than to just snuff out his life with a pull of my trigger. The furious fire that burns inside me won't be satisfied with anything other than making this unfortunate prick — this last surviving member of his group — learn just what a terrible mistake he made by attacking the woman I love.

I reach him just as he recovers himself. Attack him with everything I have. My fist hits the side of his face just as he raises his gun, sending the pistol flying. He grunts. I advance, hit him twice more in the face, once in the gut, bending him over, and then I grab the back of his head, hold it still as I bring my knee up to smash in his face. Blood gushes, forms a thick, congealing puddle on the floor.

I release his head and he crumples, but I'm not done with him yet. Pouncing on him like a predator on its wounded prey, I grab him by the throat, squeezing, while I lift his head off the ground and then slam it back onto the hardwood floor. Again and again, until bone cracks, blood sprays, and the man beneath me releases his last gasp in a gurgle of thick and bloody mucus.

I stand. Spit on his body, kick it once for good measure, and then turn to more important things — Eden.

"Eden, it's safe now," I call out.

"We're here. You can come out," Officer Alvarado says.

Officer Alvarado warily approaches me, her gun still held in the ready position, her eyes locked on me. Maybe I went too far with killing that other

man, but she doesn't know the depths of my love for Eden. Hell, I didn't truly understand it until faced with the prospect of truly losing her. In that moment, when faced with a life without her, I realized I might as well try to live without my heart.

It isn't happening.

Eden Mercer belongs with me, and there's nothing that can change that.

No obstacle that will stand in my way, no men I won't kill to make that woman mine forever.

The bathroom door opens slowly, the hinges grinding and the frame groaning at the damage inflicted by the attackers. Then Eden's there. With terror on her face, in her eyes, her body shaking — it draws me to her like a magnet. I embrace her, and everything else is forgotten. She is what matters.

"Are you OK?"

She blinks, looks at my shoulder, which is still oozing blood. "I am. Are you?"

"It's just a flesh wound," I say. "Nothing to worry about."

"We got three of them. Did you see any others?" Officer Alvarado says.

Behind Eden, Sandra answers. "I think there were just those three. But it's not like we stopped for a headcount while running for our lives."

"I'll check the perimeter," Officer Alvarado says before jogging back down the stairs, her gun still at the ready.

I look Eden over as she stands in front of me, checking her with both the eyes of a medical professional and a man in love. Is she hurt? Is she keeping any injuries from me? It doesn't look like it. Other than being shaken up, she seems fine. But there's something troubling in her eyes.

"What's going on?" I say.

"We still need to talk."

"There's whiskey in the kitchen. Can you walk?"

She nods, and I lead her downstairs. Set two glasses on the kitchen table, and fill them to the brim. Sandra stands in the background, arms clutched across her chest, still shaking.

"Eden..." I start, then stop. Words sit uneasily on my tongue as I grapple with how to explain to her everything she's just experienced. Three gunmen who broke into my house as part of some rival's attempt to derail the MC's business deal nearly murdered her; clearly, she has a right to know something. But just what I can tell her about why she was almost murdered is where I'm at a loss. With that, and with why Sandra is still here, giving me

the evil eye to end all evil eyes.

But in my moment of hesitation, Eden seizes the initiative.

Her words come sharp as a scalpel and slice right into my heart.

"Bishop, I know about your locked room. I know about the fiancé you murdered. We're through."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Eden

Anger burns volcanic in his eyes, in his voice. Instinctively, I flinch and look to the door. I've been in front of men like him when they're as angry as he is now. I know where this goes.

"You went into that room?"

His voice burns, yet I shiver. Then I feel Sandra's hand on my shoulder. I take a breath, and I compose myself. What I came here for is closure, to end things between Bishop and me and to prove to myself that I can stand up to a man like him. I didn't expect this to be easy, but I know I'm strong enough to do it.

"You left the door open the other night. It was late, I was going down the hallway, and, yes, I looked inside. I'm sorry about the intrusion into your privacy, but I'm not sorry about what I found out. In fact, I'm grateful, because I refuse to be another victim."

"You have no fucking clue, *no fucking clue*, what you're talking about," he says. His voice is alive with anger. A vein throbs in his forehead, and his fists clench so tight I can see the whites of his knuckles.

I expected this reaction. Prepared for it. Hell, I *survived* this kind of reaction. Because that's who I am — a survivor. Though the rage simmering in his voice might send shivers down my spine, my spine's also made of sterner stuff than he knows, and I will not bend or break from my aim: to break things off with him.

I am stronger, now.

Stronger, and I'm not alone. I have Sandra beside me, and Maya is near, too. I can do this.

"No clue? You wrote it out as clear as day that you killed her. And you two looked so happy, too. Happier than I've ever seen you," I say. My voice picks up speed as I talk, speed and intensity, as I finally have the chance to say all the things I've wanted to say to a man like him; a man who hurts

women, a man who deserves to suffer some righteous wrath. "What'd she do to finally set you off, huh? Did she mouth off one too many times? Did she mess up dinner? I've been with men in an MC before. I know what they're like. Savages, fucking Neanderthals who think that the fact that there's a dick swinging between their legs gives them the right to use women however they fucking please. Give me a break. You did a good job at hiding it at first, but I found the fucking skeleton in your closet, Bishop. Your secret is out. It's out, and it's a fucking disgrace that you continue to even think of yourself as anything even close to a doctor. What kind of doctor murders a woman like Michelle — "

"Don't you dare say her name," he says.

"You shut up and sit down. Don't you talk that way to my friend ever again, or else I'll kick your ass, and the only thing that'll save you from getting beat to death is if Officer Alvarado gets in here before I finish the job," Sandra says. Faced with Bishop's rage, she's as cold as ice. I smile at her, and she pats me on the back. Who would've known an older cat lady like Sandra would have it in her? Just having her next to me makes me feel stronger. "Go on, Eden. You're not alone. And not even the fact that his butt looks so good in jeans can excuse him from being a vile murderer."

"Bishop, you make me sick. And you fill me with such hate. Not just for you, but for myself. To think that, for a moment, I trusted you and felt safe with you, even told you I loved you... it disgusts me." My voice trembles and a storm of emotions so powerful surges through me, so much so that I have to hit myself in the thigh several times just to keep from swinging at his face. "I am sick of the lies, and I am sick of being used and abused by monsters like you. I came here today to give you back your key and to break it off with you face to face. You need to know that I'll leave you alone after this, there won't be any trouble from me, because I respect the work that you do with the senior center, but if I see you even look at me funny, or if any threats come my way, it won't just be me that comes after you, it'll be Sandra, and it'll be Maya, too. I'm not alone, and I'm not your victim. Not anymore."

He absorbs every syllable of my verbal beating in silence, a hurricane playing out behind his eyes — rage, regret, heartbreak. They all circle inside his dark brown eyes. Those eyes once drank me in with the kindness they were so elegantly capable of faking, but as much as it hurts to break up with him, I am so glad I did before he could completely sink his hooks into me and do to me what he did to Michelle.

No more.

Beneath his breath, he mutters, in a voice so low it's almost as if he's talking to himself instead of me. "You went into that room. Looked through my things, through her things, violated it all with your fucking impudent curiosity, and now you fucking dare to spit it all back in my face? You think you have it all figured out? You want to end things between us? Fine. Get out." Then his voice rises to a roar that reverberates with anger through my chest. "Get the fuck out of my house."

I slam the door behind me with a force that echoes off the walls of Bishop's house. Every cell in my body vibrates with a cocktail of anger and relief. I did it. Oh, my god, I did it. I smile, shut my eyes and allow myself a moment to relish the sensations — the hot anger coursing through my veins is a live wire, crackling with a power I've never let myself feel before. My skin is prickling with it, every cell alight as the crisp autumn air bathes my body.

This is what freedom feels like.

This is empowerment.

"Are you OK, Eden?" Sandra's voice cuts through my reverie as we race down the porch steps.

"I'm better than OK," I assert, feeling my spine straighten with a sense of pride that flows through me, warm and invigorating, like the first rays of sunrise. "Let's go."

We get into my car, and as I slip behind the wheel, I feel a fierce surge of pride for standing up to him, for asserting myself. The roar of the engine is a battle cry that matches the pounding in my chest. We pull away from the curb with a screech of tires. I even stick my hand to the window, flipping the bird to the man who thought he could deceive me. Pulling away from Bishop's house, I feel something within me shift; the old Eden would have cowered in fear, but she is no more. This Eden dug her heels into the dirt and stood her ground.

"I can't believe you did that. Just let him have it. It was... awesome," Sandra says.

"It was awesome," I say. I breathe out. "It felt amazing."

I will never let another man walk all over me for as long as I live. Starting now, I am someone who will fight for herself, tooth and nail.

"Drinks?" Sandra says.

"Oh, definitely. I feel like drinking this town dry tonight to celebrate."

My hands grip the steering wheel as we head down the street, one turn,

then another. The blocks pass by like a blur until Sandra's voice again pierces the calm.

"Eden, someone's following us."

A chill skims my spine as I peek at the rearview mirror to see headlights mirroring our every move. A black car with tinted windows and dark intentions. It doesn't matter that they're not on motorcycles; whoever is driving that vehicle is no friend of mine.

"Just keep watching," I instruct her, fighting to keep my voice steady while turning down another street. "I'm going to try to lose them."

I slam my foot on the gas and jerk the wheel abruptly as I whip us around a turn. Tires screech behind us as the black car fights to maintain pursuit.

"Left here," Sandra says. "I know a shortcut. If we can get downtown, we'll be safe. There's no way they'll try anything with so many people around."

We zigzag through unfamiliar roads, burning rubber and pushing the limits of my old car. Sandra screams at every turn, urging me to drive faster, faster, faster. My hands are steady on the wheel despite the tremors that threaten to erupt through my body. I am the new me — Eden, strong and unbreakable — and I will not be beaten today. I will make it downtown, I will survive.

A black van suddenly appears in front of us, its abrupt entrance to the road blocking our escape. Red brake lights fill my vision and I slam on the brakes, the sound of screeching tires assaulting my ears as we skid to a halt inches from impact.

Then there's a crack, followed by a crunch and the scream of steel as the van backs into my car. Glass explodes around us; Sandra screams — a sound that stabs at my heart. Time slows, fragments of glass dancing like lethal snowflakes in the air. My mind reels, but I refuse to let fear cripple me.

Two men leap from the van, ghostly shapes behind ski masks, their guns gleaming with malice and pointed right at us. Short, controlled breaths escape me as I plan our escape, futile though it seems.

"Run," I scream to Sandra as I reach for the door release.

One man approaches, his steps deliberate. His gun is trained on me, a silent arbiter of death that holds me in place as effectively as iron chains. I can't move; I can't run. The windshield shatters as a shot rings out; Sandra screams and her body slumps forward against her seatbelt — limp, bleeding.

I scream.

My driver's side window breaks to a million pieces as the man cracks it open with the butt of his gun. Glass covers me, then a thick hand seizes me, his grip vice-like and unyielding. He yanks me from the car as if I weigh nothing, a rag doll in his monstrous hands.

But, somehow, I find something inside of myself. A small core of iron. I am a survivor.

"Get your fucking hands off me," I scream, and I smash my right hand into his face, hitting him as hard and sudden as I hit Bishop what feels like a lifetime ago.

"Bitch," he snarls, and he drops me. Blood drips from his ski mask.

But I have no time to savor the satisfaction of hurting him. I run.

Screaming, I run with every strength in every fiber of my being; I will make it; I will not be taken again — I refuse.

The driver's side door of the van opens and a blur of movement erupts to my right. A familiar shape that steps right out of my nightmares burns my retinas just before a blow strikes me on the side of my head and sends me to my knees.

A dark hood descends over my head — my world swallowed by night, and the last thing I see before blackness overtakes me is the grinning face of my ex: Fury, the Vice President of the Iron Savages MC.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Bishop

I need work. Something to take my mind off of the fact that Eden not only ripped my heart out in front of her friend, but she violated my trust and went poking around in *that room*. That she went through my things, through *all that I have left of Michelle*, with her greedy little fingers makes my insides boil.

This was not only a breakup, this was a betrayal by the woman I thought I loved.

The second that Officer Alvarado leaves, I send a message to Rabid.

I need someone to handle cleanup at my house. Three bodies. They'll be in my downstairs bathtub. Send Chase, and tell him to bring a mop. I'm going to the storage site. Need something to keep my mind busy.

Rabid's response comes nearly instantaneously. *Noted. Keep your eyes peeled on the way to storage. Mayhem and Moose are both there, along with a few of the Iron Savages. Mayhem was supposed to check in ten minutes ago, but hasn't. Kick his ass for tardiness when you get there.*

It doesn't take long to leave my bullet-riddled and bloody house behind and get to the storage yard. It takes even less time to notice that something is seriously not right; the yard is deathly quiet, the chain-link fence is broken to pieces, and the air smells like gunshot and blood. Mayhem's motorcycle lies overturned not far inside, with the shaved-headed lunatic laying on his back beside it, blood pooling on the concrete beneath him. Not far away is the truck driver, Moose, who is face down, a nasty looking wound on the back of his head. His truck is missing. As is the cargo.

"Mayhem? Moose? What the fuck happened?" I call out as I get off my bike and run toward Mayhem. Of the two of them, Mayhem's wounds seem the most serious and I immediately begin assessing him.

His breaths are shallow, and a quick inspection reveals that the gunshot wound is at a dangerous spot in his abdomen. Blood flows freely, and my

years of combat first aid kick in as I apply pressure to the wound with a grimace. Mayhem's eyes flutter open, pain etched deeply into his features.

"Bishop..." he coughs weakly, blood trickling down the corner of his mouth. "Ambush... Iron Savages turned..."

The information hits me like a runaway freight train. The Iron Savages were supposed to be our allies, but in this life, loyalty can be as thin as water, and just as quick to spill. I glance around, immediately on high alert for any sign of further danger. My fingers are slick with Mayhem's blood as I pull out my phone with my other hand and call for backup.

Rabid answers immediately. "What excuse did that fucking lunatic give you?"

"I'd let him tell you himself, except he's got a bullet in his gut."

"What the fuck?"

"The Iron Savages turned on us."

There's a pause. "Grinder's right here at the clubhouse, having a beer. Sure as fuck doesn't look like what a traitor would do in this situation."

"Are any other Iron Savages there with him?"

A pause. "No."

"Then consider it a fucking coup or whatever those fancy French would say. I need help over here. I can keep Mayhem stable — he should make it, but Moose is down, too, and I can't assess his injuries, because if I take the pressure off Mayhem's wound, he may not survive."

"Fucking hell. I'll get help your way. Hang on, Bishop."

Rabid ends the call and I return both hands to Mayhem's wound. He grins at me.

"Saw the afterlife," he says.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, I think I was dead for a minute. Saw my daddy. He was up there, stealing cars. Elvis was there, too. He and my daddy were in a gang. They drove around in Elvis's pink Cadillac, stealing cars and breaking into people's houses."

"You numbskull, your dad is not in heaven and running a criminal gang with Elvis."

"How do you know? You ever been there?"

"Touche."

A stirring noise momentarily pulls my eyes away from Mayhem's wound - it's deep, nasty, and it's going to take most of my focus to keep him alive. I

wish I had my surgical supplies with me. Hell, I'd kill for some fucking sterile bandages. I wanted a distraction coming here, but this is a little fucking much. I look up to see Moose staggering toward me, a giant hand clutched to the back of his head.

"I'll be fine. I've had worse," he says. "Dated a linebacker for the Chicago Bears once. His two favorite movies were *Fifty Shades of Grey* and that bareknuckle boxing scene from *Fight Club*. Not the movie, just the scene. He said the rest of it was too philosophical for him. Anyway, when we made love, it was like two Roman gladiators going at each other with double-headed dildos and wearing fetish gear for armor." He sighs. "I miss him, sometimes. His big laugh, his beautiful smile, and the loving way he would wreck my ass."

Moose's confession hangs in the air like the last note of a funeral dirge, raw and unexpectedly tender amidst the chaos and bloodshed. I blink away the surprise of his words — there's no time for shock or sentimentality.

"Focus, man," I snap. "We need to secure the perimeter. Can you handle that, or should I be expecting your ghost to join Mayhem's phantom car-theft ring?"

Moose scowls and straightens up as much as his injury allows. The fight in him is clear; despite his colorful past, he's not one to back down. "I'll secure it," he says, his voice a gravelly testament to his resolve. "Lock it down just like my ex used to lock my..."

"Moose?"

"Yes, Bishop?"

"Just do it."

"Yes, sir."

I nod, appreciating the commitment despite the absurdity that seems to cling to us today. "Good. And watch yourself."

"Will do."

He moves off, wobbly but determined, while I turn my attention back to Mayhem. The man's pallor is worsening by the second, and his attempts at bravado are fading as fast as his strength.

"Hang in there," I mutter, more to myself than to him.

I'm not just fighting for Mayhem now; I'm fighting for some semblance of sanity in a world that seems hellbent on dragging me through every imaginable hellfire; Eden's betrayal and Michelle's ever-present ghost loom large in the corners of my vision, just as the rest of me focuses on the slick

red reality between my fingers.

Time stretches and tightens like the string of a bow drawn back too far — waiting, waiting for that moment of release or snapping. Every muscle in my body is tensed against what's coming next, but it's not until I hear the club arrive in full force. Even Ranger is here, with his truck and, as he leaps from it, he carries my medical supplies in a large duffel bag with one hand and a long rifle in the other.

"Figured you'd want this," he says, tossing the bag beside me.

"You just saved Mayhem's life," I say.

"We'll hang out later, Ranger. You and me. I'll buy you some beers..."
Mayhem gasps.

"No good deed goes unpunished, huh?" Ranger replies.

I tune out their banter and set to work. Sterilizing, staunching the flow of blood, doing the quick and dirty work I did more than a few times on the battlefield. Amidst the commotion, I'm a surgeon once again — a warrior with a scalpel instead of a blade. Memories flash through my mind's eye like a movie reel stuck on fast forward: my time overseas, cold metal tables, the feel of lives slipping through my fingers like so many grains of sand.

Michelle. I push them all back, focusing instead on the vibrancy of Mayhem's spirit, refusing to let another life fade on my watch. *Not like her.*

I can hear the members of the club securing the area outside, their voices a chaotic commotion that beats against the walls of my concentration. Rubber hits gravel as more backup rolls in; more bodies, more guns; we're a brotherhood united by crisis, each man prepared to defend this patch of bloodstained earth as if it were sacred ground.

As I work on Mayhem, his breathing steadies — a hopeful sign. I don't let it distract me. Every second counts when death is lingering, waiting for an opportunity to swoop in and claim its prize. The thought sends a shiver down my spine. Not today. Today is not Mayhem's day to die.

The minutes tick by, marked only by the sound of my tools and the low moans escaping from between Mayhem's gritted teeth. Then, suddenly, he goes silent. My heart seizes in panic before I realize he's passed out from the pain — a small mercy for him but a worrying sign for his condition.

I work on. I refuse to lose anyone more. Not after Eden, not after Michelle. No, no more of the people I care about will be taken from me.

Not even Mayhem.

Even if there are plenty of days where I've practically prayed for someone

or something to actually take him away.

The bleeding slows.

He steadies.

Stabilizes. I breathe, and I look over at Ranger, who has been watching me this entire time.

"Fucking hell, that was close," he says.

"Pretty much always is. There's no good place to get shot, Ranger. Only bad places and worse ones." I survey my work, grunt in satisfaction. It'll do what it has to do. "Help me with him. We need to get him in your truck, and you need to get him to a hospital."

We lift him gingerly and load him into the back seat of Ranger's truck. Ranger shuts the door and takes off. I watch him drive away, hoping that he makes it to the hospital in time, that Mayhem pulls through. He should; if there's anyone out there that can cheat death, it's Mayhem — likely because no one in heaven or hell would want to have his crazy ass around — even so, I worry; I'm a doctor, he's my patient, and I'll be damned if I lose another.

It's as I'm watching them burn rubber down the road that Rabid comes up beside me, a grim look on his face.

"Cargo's gone," he says.

"Fuck."

"Fuck, indeed." He sighs, slaps me on the back. "Good work on saving Mayhem. With anyone else, it feels premature to say that, but that son of a bitch is too crazy to die. Now, I'm afraid I have more to ask of you."

"What's that?"

"Chase is still at your place cleaning up that mess. It's clear that the guys who hit you are tied up in all this. We need clues, we need information, anything we can get on them."

"I'm not so good of a doctor that I can bring any of these dead guys back so we can interrogate them. Why don't you ask Grinder what the fuck is going on with his MC?"

"Grinder is now a president without a club. If I had to venture an educated fucking guess, Fury bought out all of his men, killed the few who wouldn't go along, and brought in muscle from outside, too. Their objective all along has been to steal this cargo, sell it for themselves. Yet, somehow, something also drew them to your house. Something took them away from their main objective enough that they'd risk pulling off a squad from their primary force to break in your front door."

"Fuck."

"Yeah, now you get it," he says. He spits, draws one of the knives he always keeps on him, and begins twirling the blade idly in his hand. "We need to know why. So I need you to get over there and work with Chase. Find out whatever we can about these people. I don't care if you have to rip out teeth to check dental records or fucking cut them open to see if any of them have fucking hip or knee replacements with serial numbers that we can trace. I want to know everything."

I push all other thoughts from my mind as I get on my bike and speed toward home. As crazy as it sounds, I'm glad to have another task — even one as potentially gruesome as cutting open the three bodies in my house in a search for clues — to keep my mind off Eden. With a scalpel in my hand and a body on the examination table, I'll be able to keep myself busy enough that I can keep her out of my thoughts.

I hope.

Because even as I ride, I feel thoughts about her waiting in the wings with a potent mix of punishing emotions. Part of me urges me to call her, to warn her about the attacks going down throughout town, and to tell her to get as far away from Ironwood Falls as she can. The rest of me riots at even thinking of her name — anger, furious, righteous anger, and stinging betrayal suffuse me for just picturing her. She not only broke my trust, she misunderstood it and spit those misinterpretations — no, those fucking *lies* — back in my face like they were the fucking gospel and she did it all with a sick sense of pride in her voice.

I was wrong to ever think I could open my heart to someone again.

Wrong to let her in.

Love is a farce and a weakness.

Then, not more than a mile from my house, black smoke rises in the sky and I'm pulled to it. By instinct, maybe. Or curiosity. Or the restless urge in my heart to find one of these unfortunate Iron Savages to vent my anger upon. Not enough men have died today to assuage my anger.

What I find brings me to a screeching halt.

Eden's car. Totaled. Broken windshield, bullet holes, smoke coming from beneath the hood that says it's moments away from catching ablaze.

And Sandra's bloody body lying motionless in the front seat.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Eden

"Out. Now." A shove follows Fury's orders and I land crash from the back of the van, hit hard gravel and dirt, get a sharp stone in my palm, and still am completely blind. Another command follows, "Up." Then I'm ripped to my feet, shoved again, and the hood is ripped off my head. He's smiling at me. The same way he used to smile before he'd tie me up and do things to me, back when he owned me, back when I was nothing more than the dirty secret he kept captive in his home. "There's that pretty face."

But I'm not that woman anymore.

Even bound, my wrists held together by handcuffs, I take a swing at him. It's not a good swing — some awkward, two-fisted punch that hits him with barely enough force to topple a toddler — but it's something. Then I follow it up by spitting right in his face.

Fuck him, fuck his face. I will not go down without a fight.

"Oh, so you're going to struggle now, huh?" He says, laughing. With one thick, tattooed finger — tiny skulls wrap themselves around the sausage-like base of his ring finger — he swipes the spit from his forehead and pops it into his mouth. "I miss your taste, Alice."

That name... it's like it has some power over me; I hear it — hear it in *his* monstrous voice — and my knees wobble. I can feel myself becoming that woman again. All because of his voice and the way he looks at me.

"Please, don't."

A laugh. He grabs me by the shoulder and rips me in close to him, so close I can smell the iron and alcohol on his breath, a fetid stench that makes me flinch. "I will. Over and over, until you remember who you really are, *Alice*: you are mine."

Then he shoves me backward, and I land on my butt. Unable to catch myself because my hands are cuffed in front of me, I fall further backward and my head smacks into the dirt.

"I hate you. I hate you, Ellis," I say. I use his real name because I know he prefers his road name, and I refuse to give him any satisfaction. "You'll never take me back like that. Someone will come for me. Bishop, or the other men in his MC."

Ellis laughs. Deep, booming, the roar of his derision bounces through the thick forest around us. "Like fuck they will. They're running around right now like chickens with their heads cut off. Well, the ones we left alive are. And once those fucking idiots get their act together, how the fuck are they going to find us here?"

With a wide gesture, he draws my attention to just where *here* is. We're in the woods somewhere. Surrounded by forest, with a small paved road, clearings, fire pits — we're in a campground. Several eerily quiet RVs and trailers sit in some campsites. I give Ellis a confused look.

He smiles at me. "We had to do a little prep work to get this place ready as a staging ground. Don't worry, there's no one else around but you, me, the boys in my MC, and some of our hired help. Well, no one living, that is. And we'll be gone before any of the former occupants of those RVs stink up the place."

"You killed them all?"

"Well, not just me, though I did partake. It was a group effort."

"You're sick."

"Sure, whatever. I'm about to be rich, too, once we get our cargo to the buyers out east." He gestures to his right. There's a semi truck and trailer there. "But you don't really need to know any more than that. You won't survive that long."

I take a trembling step back from him, scanning around for some kind of escape. Maybe I can run through the forest, something, anything, to get away from him. The look in his eyes and the chill in his smile are different, darker than I've ever seen, and I've seen Ellis when he was at his darkest, when his actions made the unlit depths of his basement seem bright in comparison. "Ellis, what are you talking about..."

His smile grows, becomes more empty, darker, reflecting the depths of the absence inside him where others would have a soul. "I have neither the time nor inclination to bring your pathetic, whining ass across the country to where the deal is taking place. This deal represents a new start for all of us — enough money that we can set ourselves up wherever the fuck we want, however the fuck we want. With any new start, though, you need to put the

past behind you. You need to bury those skeletons, kill those ghosts, and Alice, well, you're my ghost. You're not leaving this campground alive."

Ellis looks like he has more to say, but I won't give him the opportunity. I turn and run, with every ounce of desperate determination fueling my legs. Into the underbrush I leap, the weeds and shrubs clawing at me with their gnarled branches, and Ellis's laughter chases at my heels.

"Oh, I love this fighting side of you, Alice," he calls out. I hear his footsteps behind me, already closing the distance. "It's going to make breaking you so much more fun." A branch cracks behind me; I run faster; he's closing in. I can feel his breath right at my shoulder, hear every hungry rasp. "I'm going to wipe your bloody tears from your face with my cock and use them as lube to fuck your ass into submission."

"Stop it," I scream over my shoulder.

Ducking, I barely dodge a branch that just whips over my head. My legs ache, my lungs burn, my heart thrums in terror — I can feel his hands upon me, can already feel myself breaking beneath his brutal ministrations.

A laugh hits my ears.

"Oh, eventually I'll stop, Alice. I'll stop when your tear ducts are dry, when your bones have busted through your skin, when I've fucked you until there's no more blood in your body." He's just feet from me. Every harrowing gasp sends terror snaking through my veins. "When I'm done with you, Alice, you won't be human anymore. You'll be some cum-and-blood covered thing, begging for me to murder them."

Something that isn't a branch touches my shoulder just long enough to spark adrenaline in my body, to inflame my fears and force me forward with its icy touch.

He laughs. Dark promises in every breath that brush the back of my neck with evil intent.

The forest seems to conspire with Ellis; the trees morphing into sinister shapes, their gnarled fingers reaching out as if to slow me, to betray my flight to the demon breathing down my neck. His voice slithers through the leaves like a serpent, hissing threats that pluck at the sanity I'm desperately clinging onto. "You know, Alice, there's a beauty in breaking bones, an artistry. I can't wait to sculpt you into a masterpiece."

Still, I run.

"I'm going to flay the skin from your fingers, Alice, so that you'll be able to watch as I break every bone inside them. Every knuckle, every bone, every

joint, I'm going to crack them all open," his venomous voice promises from somewhere uncomfortably near.

I fight to ignore him, but his words wrap around my mind, constricting like a noose. I push harder, feet slipping on the damp earth as I barrel through the underbrush, my heart a relentless drummer pushing me forward to escape, to survive. I cannot slow down, I cannot stop. The second I do, he wins — he will catch me, he will beat me, he will rape me, he will ruin me.

"Alice! I wonder which will break first — your spirit, or every bone in your feet?" His breath is hot on my neck now, and I feel his presence looming over me, a dark angel of destruction. "Do you want to find out? Shall we discover it together?"

Another brush at my shoulder. His fingers toy with my hair as I sprint for all I'm worth.

Then it hits me, a revelation so solid that it makes me gasp aloud, although every breath is a precious gift; he's toying with me.

"Alice... Oh, Alice, I can't wait to..."

I tune him out.

My name is not Alice. It's Eden. And it's more than a name — it's who I've reshaped myself to be. A survivor. A person reborn from the ashes of her past life. No longer a victim, but a woman sculpted by trials and resolve. With every threat that Ellis hurls at me, something inside me hardens, crystallizes. Fear has governed me for too long; it will not claim me now. My breaths come in ragged pulses, ragged but determined.

"I'll carve that pretty face of yours until no man will ever look upon you without disgust, Alice," he snarls, closer now. "They'll find your body and wonder if you ever were human."

I stumble over an unseen root, catching myself before I fall. He's right on my heels; I can almost feel the heat of his rageful breath on my neck. But his twisted words ignite an ember of defiance within me.

I'm Eden now. Eden, who has seen hell and clawed her way back out.

No more running.

No more fleeing from the monsters of my past or the specters of who I once was.

I pivot suddenly, catching Ellis off guard. His own momentum sends him staggering forward as he misses grabbing hold of me by mere inches. My cuffed hands are a hindrance, but they will not stop me. Not today.

"You think that I'm just going to give up? You think I'm still that woman?"

Fuck you, Ellis," I say. Then I snarl like an animal and launch myself at him while he's still off balance. Every ounce of rage, of fear, of regret, pushes me forward with one singular purpose: to hurt the man who hurt me.

My fists fly, driven by years of pent-up fury. The first strike lands solidly against Ellis's jaw, the impact jarring up my arms. Pain flares, but it's distant, unimportant. His head snaps to the side and for a moment, I see shock in his eyes.

I'm a whirlwind of aggression — every kick, every punch, fueled by nightmares and fear I've harbored since he marked my life with his shadow. My cuffed hands are a bludgeon; they find his ribs with a satisfying thud.

He grunts, the sound thick with both surprise and pain. He fights back, his own fists crude but powerful. They brush past me; I'm not there anymore, I'm elsewhere — everywhere. Dodging, weaving. A dance of desperation. Leaves rustle beneath our feet as we struggle for dominance. My breath is harsh in my ears, my vision tunneled to just him and the next opportunity to strike. He swings; I duck low and ram my shoulder into his gut.

He stumbles back, cursing.

I press on, relentless. Every cell cries for revenge as I throw myself at him again, hammering at any part of him within reach.

"Is this what you wanted, you worthless, rotten-cocked chrome jockey?" I scream between clenched teeth. With each syllable, I strike him with every ounce of pain and fear in my body. With every blow that lands, I purge myself more and more of the woman I used to be and become who I want to be — Eden, the survivor.

One blow catches him particularly well. A two-handed punch that sends my nails skittering across his face, leaving a bloody furrow above his forehead that drips crimson into his eye.

He snarls and swings for me. A punch catches me on the side of the head and makes my world waver. I stumble. He swings again, and a glancing blow sends me falling into the bushes. As he approaches to leap on me, I kick up at him from the ground, my heel striking him directly in his crotch.

Ellis howls, a raw, primal sound that makes the woods go silent around us. I scramble to my feet, using the momentary respite to suck in a lungful of air. My head throbs where he struck me, but it doesn't matter. Survival matters. Ending this matters.

He's doubled over, hands cradling his assaulted manhood, and I know this is my chance. I rush at him again; no finesse this time, just a wild burst of

energy aiming for maximum damage. My knee rises to meet his face as he straightens up.

A sickening crunch and his nose bursts like a ripe berry, blood spraying outwards.

I step back, watching him stagger with a grotesque sense of satisfaction — until I see it. That glazed look in his eyes pulls away to reveal a burning fury deeper than any pain.

He surges forward with a growl that chills my blood. There's no dodging now; Ellis's hands clamp onto my wrists like iron shackles. We're locked in a twisted dance as he tries to wrestle me down. His strength is terrifying; mine is desperate.

"Fight all you want," he spits through bloodied teeth. "I always win."

Not today, Ellis.

We tussle like animals, slipping and shoving — neither of us giving ground easily. His knee drives into my stomach and I can feel the air whooshing out of me with a grunt.

I gasp for breath, claw at his face — anything to get him off me. But he's relentless now — singularly focused on proving his domination over me. With an inhuman snarl, he hurls me to the ground and leaps atop me. His blood drips in my face, my open, gasping mouth, my eyes. His hands find my throat and squeeze so hard my world contracts to a single pinpoint of black light.

I kick, I thrash under him, veins throbbing against the pressure of his hands. No oxygen reaches my lungs; black spots dance before my eyes. This isn't how I go. Not here. Not by his hands.

But I don't have the strength.

He lowers his face, dripping menace and blood all over me. His lips find mine, steal a bloody kiss. I bite at him, sink my teeth into his lip, and receive an elbow to the face that makes me mewl like a broken animal. He chuckles, then spits in my face. "I like this fighting side of you, Alice."

That grip on my throat becomes tighter; I can feel capillaries in my eyes pop like fireworks on the Fourth of July. My world wavers, weakens, sight gives out, except for my view of the grinning, blood-dripping face of my nightmares looming over me, though even that is turning to black. A mercy, maybe.

That ghoulish visage lowers. His blood soaks my face, his saliva drips into my open, screaming mouth; he licks me, the corrosive touch of his tongue

like sandpaper on my skin.

"You're going to pass out now. When you wake up, the fun will start, and I'll do to you all those things that I've been dreaming about ever since you left me. Goodnight, Alice."

CHAPTER THIRTY- THREE

Bishop

Every time I'm forced to put my medical skills to the test, I hope it's for the last time. The last time blood soaks my hands. The last time someone's life depends on my split-second thinking.

Every time, it takes me back. To her. Michelle.

The soldier I fell in love with on deployment. We were stationed at the same base overseas. Under the threat of enemy fire, we found comfort in each other's arms. I'd never opened up to anyone before the way that I opened up to her. Despite all my better judgment, I fell in love with someone whose job it was to step into the jaws of death. Then, even worse, I proposed. Worse still, she accepted. Then it all went to hell.

An opportunity came up for Michelle. A mission. She couldn't tell me much about it, except that it was high risk, high reward, with the opportunity to not only distinguish herself, but put herself at the front of the line for advancement.

I begged her not to go; she went anyway.

It went sideways, and the unit she volunteered for was ambushed; a flood of wounded came back to base. Then she wound up on my operating table.

I begged her not to go; she went anyway.

In this scene of carnage, with Sandra bleeding out before my eyes, with shattered glass and other reminders of all the danger that Eden is in, tears burn in the corners of my eyelids, and through their prism, I see myself back in that time. A friend of Eden's sits lies unconscious before me, dying, reminding me of all the women I've let down before.

"Don't you fucking die on me," I scream at her body as I fight with all my might to stem the bleeding. It swells between my fingers, coating them, slicking them. Red lights swamp my vision. A gentle hand taps me on the back.

"Bishop... Bishop, we're here, now," Officer Alvarado says. Persistent, yet

caring. It pulls me back from that place, just a little. I look over my shoulder to see her and two others of Ironwood Falls' finest, along with a pair of paramedics.

"She's Eden's friend. I have to keep going, ma'am," I mutter, then return to the work, an Army surgeon doing his best to save a civilian.

Her hand returns to my shoulder. "I know that. I know it's Sandra, Bishop. Stand aside, the paramedics will take care of her." I debate telling her to shove off; I know I can take care of her as well as any paramedic. But then her hand squeezes my shoulder. "You need to come with me, Bishop."

"Why, Officer Alvarado?" I say, the Army still in my voice.

"Because a witness reported seeing the driver of the vehicle being pulled into a van by some masked men. She gave us a description of the vehicle, even got a license plate. I've run it through all the traffic cams in town. We have the general direction they're taking her. Eden's alive, and we can find her, but only if we go right now."

"Where are they taking her, Officer Alvarado?"

"Call me Maya."

I blink at that. "Maya, where are they taking her?"

"You can follow me, Bishop. I'll take you there. But only if you follow my lead."

My lips curl, my teeth bare themselves. "I'm not going to just sit back and go for some by-the-book police bullshit, Maya."

"I'm not either. This is personal." She taps her weapon and then glances back at the other officers. "Those men are here to handle the cleanup of this mess. We'll have a few minutes at where they're taking her before any of my coworkers show up, which should give us some time to do what we need to do."

"How is this personal, Maya? What's going on here?"

"The man who took Eden matches the description of her ex, who also is the VP of the Iron Savages. The creep kept her prisoner for months. He beat her, he raped her, he tortured her, but she escaped. A friend who works with victims of domestic abuse connected her with me. We got her a new name, a new identity, and I swore I'd keep her safe. I let her down. Now, I'm going to make it so she never has to fear that disgusting monster ever again."

Every one of Maya's words hits me like a thunderbolt. I feel such rage suffuse me — at myself, at Fury, at whatever Higher Power is up there that could allow women like Eden to suffer such cruel fates at the hands of such

pathetic men. If only I had been better, more open, told her the truth she needed from me, none of this would have happened. This is all my fault.

No wonder she had such reservations about us.

No wonder she reacted the way she did back at my house.

She deserves so much better than the hand she's been dealt. When all this is over and she's safe and sound, she deserves the truth and the opportunity to choose her own destiny. Life owes her that much.

"Stop it, Bishop," Maya says.

"Stop what?"

"You're putting this on yourself. Save that bullshit for later, when Eden's life isn't hanging in the balance. All I need from you is your gun, for you to call your club and tell them to follow us with every weapon they have, and for you to promise to do everything you can to keep Eden safe. Can you do that for me?"

I step away from Sandra and let the paramedics take over.

"Let's go get her back."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Eden

I come to in my ex's arms.

Or close enough — really, I'm thrown over his shoulder like I'm nothing more than a sack of meat to him. Which is probably true. Maybe I'm even overestimating my importance to him.

I shudder and squirm; I'd been having a nightmare while I was unconscious — I was back in his basement, a prisoner once more, and he was coming down the stairs to do horrible things to me in the dark — but in this moment, I'd take living in the nightmare's reality compared to what's waiting for me back at the campground. We're close to it. I can hear the commotion that all men make when they get out in nature. It's like the woods taps into something that makes those Neanderthals even more primitive, devolves them until they're nothing more than grunting, ass-scratching savages.

"Thanks for that fun back there, Alice," he says as we bounce along through the forest. "I'll have some scars from that. Once I've left your body for the scavengers to pick over what pieces I decide not to take with me, I'll touch the scars and I'll think of your bloody face while I stroke my cock."

"Why don't you put me down and I can give you some more?" I twist and squirm in his grip. Maybe I can angle myself just enough to get my teeth in him. Maybe even his neck or an ear. I bet if I can gnaw on either of those, he'll be forced to drop me. Then I can try again. I have to try. Because with every step I can feel the sensation wash over me — I am going to die.

"Oh, you rebellious little bitch," he chuckles. Still chuckling — I can picture the twisted smile on his bloody face — he grabs my foot and twists and twists and something pops in my ankle, filling my head with a blinding flash of pain. I scream, and his laughter grows. "Would you like me to put you down now? Let you dance around on your fucking busted foot while you take another crack at me?"

I bite back a sob; pain radiates from my ankle and rises to meet the dread

that constricts my heart. My vision blurs with unshed tears as I try desperately to think of a way out, of a plan — any plan — that could save me from the grisly fate he promises.

"Thought so," he sneers, his grip on me tightening like a vise. The darkness ahead seems to grow thicker, as if it's alive and reaching out to swallow me whole.

"Fuck you, Ellis," I say, my voice half a sob, half a snarl.

He laughs. "Oh, you will. After I break your hands and feet."

Each bounce is agony for my mangled foot as we finish the walk back to the campground. The forest opens up and I see a flurry of activity around me, men in Iron Savages cuts and other men in unmarked clothes checking cargo and establishing a perimeter around the campground. I feel every jolt as if Ellis is hammering nails of pain into my body with each step, my mind frantically clawing for an escape that isn't there. The world tilts as we enter the camp, the stench of smoke and sweat mingling with the fear that clings to my skin. I'm nothing more than prey being carried back to the predator's den — an offering to the brutality of these men who live outside society's laws. It hits me then that there's no escape. It doesn't matter what name I call myself — Alice, Eden — I'm not a survivor; the best I've done is prolong my suffering.

I am going to die a horrible death, and worst of all, there's no one who's going to miss me. Sandra's dead, shot to death in front of me, because of me; Bishop's happy to see me gone, because I broke his trust and put my nose where it didn't belong; maybe Albert will miss me momentarily when he comes back to the office to find there's no one to do his work, but then he'll just fuck off to go play golf with the Mayor and hire some other unlucky lackey to handle his business.

Ellis throws me into the back of the van, a malevolent smile on his face. I don't even bother kicking at him. What would be the point of fighting? I can't beat him, and there is no one coming to save me.

"You have no idea how much I have dreamed of this moment, Alice," he whispers as he climbs into the van beside me. Rough, bloody fingers brush my cheek and twirl themselves in my dirty, blood-caked hair. I flinch from his touch and he chuckles. He reaches back and pulls shut the doors of the van. They close with a heavy slam and a metallic click; I am trapped with a nightmare, surrounded by the steel and glass that will be my tomb. "Oh, the fun we are going to have getting reacquainted. You know, it's been so long

I've almost forgotten the sound of your scream."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Eden

Blood trickles down from my split lip, the metallic taste of fear and iron heavy on my tongue. The van reeks of sweat and violence. Ellis's breathing is ragged, manic, as he hovers above me, each blow he delivers a promise of never-ending torment. My body aches with the memory of every punch. A dull throb pulses in my abdomen, a sharp sting across my ribs, staccato bursts of pain that tell me I'm still alive despite wishing for the sweet release of darkness. My face feels swollen beneath his knuckles' imprint. Each hit a cruel reminder of how easily flesh yields to brutality.

And then there's the knife.

It glints like a treacherous beacon in his hands, a sleek harbinger of agony. The blade is polished to a seductive shine, its edge lethal and precise. It's the kind of knife that doesn't just cut you; it carves pieces away from your soul, leaving scars too deep to heal. The cold steel catches the dim light inside the van, and my heart constricts in terror.

Ellis leans closer — the blade inches from my skin — and I can almost feel its kiss, colder than any embrace I've ever known. His eyes are wild with sadistic pleasure; they see me not as a person, but as an object of blood and meat meant to suffer under his control.

"I'm going to break you," he whispers, and I believe him.

The fear is paralyzing — it chills me in ways I never thought possible, even when I was suffering the darkest, most twisted tortures when I was his prisoner; none of what he did then came close to what I know he's going to do now. Despair grips me, an icy hand around my heart. Hopelessness has a weight, pressing down until breathing feels like drowning. My thoughts scatter, but one remains — I am going to die here.

But then... gunfire.

The sound pierces through the horror, a staccato rhythm that races with my pulse. The shots ring out from beyond the metal walls — sharp, urgent,

salvation in every burst.

Ellis stops.

Confusion creases his cruel features. The sounds jar him from the sick fantasy he's playing out. His head snaps towards the door, eyes wide, the knife's trajectory halted. My lungs seize the moment to drag in a desperate breath, as if the air were charged with a chance at life.

Gunfire — again. Closer, louder, a cacophony of defiance against my impending doom.

Hope flickers inside me, frail but fierce. It fights through the fog of pain, a stubborn flame in an overwhelming darkness. My pulse hammers in my ears, drowning out Ellis's curses as he stands and staggers to the window.

Another volley of shots. A shout from outside — a voice I know, but dare not believe.

Bishop.

"Eden. Eden, I'm here for you. Where are you?"

My chest tightens at the thought of him here, at the terror that he might walk into a trap. But there's no mistaking the raw determination in that cry; it carries all his rage and all his promise.

"Keep your fucking mouth shut," Ellis snarls. He turns back to me, knife still clutched in his hand — but there's hesitation now. Doubt has crept into his once certain game. He takes a step back, torn between the threat outside and his prey within.

More gunfire. Shouting, screams, and Bishop's voice again. "Eden? Eden? Answer me."

Hope stirs in my chest. Then soars, as I hear another voice. Maya's. "We're coming for you, Eden. We're going to get you out of here."

I have to fight back.

I will survive this.

My eyes dart around the cramped space, searching for anything that I could use to defend myself. My fingers graze the cold metal floor beneath me as I inch backward, scraping against unforgiving ridges and bolts.

And then it happens.

The door is wrenched open with violent force, sunlight streaming in to cut the hopeless dark to pieces — blinding Ellis for just a second. But a second is all Bishop needs.

He grabs Ellis by the leg, pulling with all his might to rip him out of the van. "Get the fuck away from her."

Then Bishop attacks. A bloody, brutal assault with all the fury of a man defending his heart. I'm gasping, disoriented, as sunlight and shadows dance violently around the van's interior. Bishop's fury is a force of nature, his strength erupting in every strike against Ellis. I can see the muscles in Bishop's arms tense with each blow, the grim set of his jaw speaking volumes about his resolve. He is vengeance personified, a storm of retribution that has been unleashed.

Ellis roars, countering with sheer savagery. His knife flashes in chaotic movements, a silver streak seeking blood. I scream — a warning or plea; I don't know — but my voice is lost in the commotion.

Bishop dodges a lethal arc, a dance with death where one misstep could end everything. His fist connects with Ellis's jaw, a satisfying crack resonating. But Ellis rebounds, pushing Bishop back with an animalistic snarl. They are locked in battle, two forces colliding with bone-jarring intensity.

Panic claws up my throat as I watch them tangle and twist, each man battling not just for victory but for survival. Their grunts and shouts fill the air, punctuated by the sound of flesh against flesh. Bishop lands another hit, and blood sprays from Ellis's busted mouth — a gash splitting his upper lip in half, turning it into two fleshy flaps.

"I won't let you hurt her," Bishop says as he follows the punch with another, then another, each blow snapping Ellis's head back and staggering the monster who once dominated my life. "You're done, you fucking coward."

Ellis falls to the ground and Bishop towers over him, ready to end the miserable monster's life.

But then, in a flurry of motion, Ellis whips around and throws a thick handful of dirt into Bishop's face, blinding him. Bishop staggers backward, and Ellis seizes the opportunity. He lunges forward, knife aimed straight for Bishop's heart, a desperate and vicious attempt to regain control. Bishop's hands fly up, catching Ellis's wrist just in time, the blade inches from his chest. They struggle, muscles straining, teeth bared in snarls of effort and rage.

Bishop's face is a mask of determination and pain, his eyes screwed shut as he tries to clear the dirt from them. I push my terror down and crawl forward, my hands shaking as I reach for something, anything, that could help.

But there are no other weapons at hand.

There's just me.

Wounded, broken me.

I must help him.

Once more, I fight Ellis, because I must survive. The resolution pumps adrenaline through my veins and deadens the pain in my ankle. I slump out of the back of the van on unsteady legs, every muscle in my body crying out; bones bruised, skin split, bleeding. I'm in no shape to do anything but lie down, but I have to help. Bishop has risked everything to save me, despite everything I said to him. He cares, and deep within me, there's a spark of caring for him. I have to help him. While the two men grapple, their attentions focused entirely on the other, I take a deep breath, gather what strength I have, clench my two fists together, and put every bit of hate, every bit of fear, every bit of pain this man has ever caused me into a single swing aimed at the back of Ellis's head.

It connects.

A heavy vibration surges up my arms, pain that shakes me to my core, as my fists meet that monster's head with the force of my anguish; I cry out in pain.

Ellis slumps, stunned.

Bishop surges, snarling.

They clash with savage force. Bishop snatches Ellis's wrist and rams it into the side of the van, the impact against the steel causing a loud snap to ring out, and Ellis screams and the blade goes flying. Punches follow, blows that rain down with unimaginable fury upon Ellis with all the force of Bishop's protective rage; each one hits home with malice, bruising flesh, breaking bone, leaving gashes and blood in their wake.

I see the scene of savagery in front of me and then, with a scream that comes from the deepest depths of my wounded soul, I join in.

Side by side with Bishop, I hammer the man who inflicted such terror on me. We beat him until he's a bloody, blubbering mess at my feet, until he's scrambling and crawling, seeking sanctuary with scared cries for mercy that fall on our deaf ears.

With every blow I land, I scream; with every scream, I beat him with all the force that exists in my body; this is catharsis, release, born in blood and vented upon the monster who has haunted every shadow in my life. For so long, I've waited for this moment — to show this monster that he will never

hurt me again.

"Eden, *Eden*, you need to stop now," comes a calm voice behind me. When I don't stop, it repeats itself. "*Eden*, you need to stop, or I'll have to stop you. I will not let you make yourself into a murderer. You're better than that."

I turn, hands still clenched into fists. There's blood on my fists, on my feet, on my face, blood everywhere. A part of me wants more. But the look on Maya's face — one of such deep compassion and empathy — stops me in my tracks. I look around me and it's as if a veil has been pulled from my eyes; the campground is full of the men from the Twisted Devils and the Steel Reapers MC, along with the president of the Iron Savages, and every one of Ellis's men is dead or subdued; the fighting is over.

"Maya?" I whisper.

"You're safe now, Eden," she says. With no hesitation, even though I am soaked in blood, she hugs me. I squeeze her as tight as I can, my body crying in pain at the effort and my heart sighing in joy; it's over. It's finally over.

"I am?"

"You are."

I pull back just a moment, look from the monster sprawled out on the ground and into the endless depths of Maya's compassionate eyes. "What about him?"

I need to know. Not just want, need. Need to know that I'm making the right decision by leaving that monster alive. What if he escapes from prison? What if he comes after me again? I can't live my life wondering *what if* every single time I pass a shadow.

Maya looks down at Ellis momentarily, then something like a smile tugs up the corners of her lips. "You don't need to worry about him anymore. The cops will be here soon. He'll be arrested, tried, convicted, and then he'll be put in prison for the rest of his life."

"Just prison?" It sounds so unsatisfactory. So inconsequential a punishment for what the man did to me.

Maya's smile comes back again for just a moment, and she raises an eyebrow at me. Her words are cold, but mirthful. "Eden, think: he just pissed off three MCs, not to mention whoever he was going to sell the cargo to. How long do you think he'll last in prison with no protection and with so many enemies?"

The truth sinks in.

It is over.

"He's... he's done... He can't hurt me anymore." I look down at Ellis and realize this is the last time I will ever see him alive. The monster is as good as dead, and he'll never bother me again. I survived. I am free.

There's a crackle from Maya's police radio. The cops are just minutes away and closing fast. Upon hearing it, Bishop raises his voice and calls out to Rabid.

"Prez, police incoming."

"Moose, get your semi back on the road. *Now*. I don't care where you take it, just get it as far from here as possible," Rabid barks. Moose erupts into a flurry of motion surprising for a man of his size, and in moments, the semi is trundling away down the road.

I turn my attention back to the two people beside me — Maya and Bishop.

"If he's done... what happens now?" I say. It's hard to think of a life where I am not carrying all this fear around; it's so ingrained in who I am, that I'm having trouble picturing life without it.

Bishop comes closer, and he extends his hand, a cautious, caring look in his eyes.

I eye his hand for a moment, then take it, and meet his gaze.

"First, I'd like to look you over. Medically, of course. You're still going to need to go to the hospital, but this way... we can make sure we catch anything serious before you get there," he says. "You'll need to rest and keep your strength up. Not just for you, but Sandra, too."

My eyes go wide, the world shakes a moment as my knees wobble, and Bishop puts his arms around me to hold me steady. "She's alive?"

Maya nods. There's a different smile on her face now, one that's a far cry from the one she wore earlier; this one is warm, kind, and proud. "Bishop saved her. She would have been dead if he hadn't come across her when he did." She looks at Bishop for a moment, then back at me. "The paramedics that got there after said they'd never seen someone do what he did. He was so focused on saving your friend that we had to pull him off her just so they could take her to the hospital."

Bishop looks both proud and embarrassed, almost bashful at Maya's compliments. "I just did what I could. We've lost too many people today."

I stare at Bishop, the weight of Maya's words settling in my chest. Sandra is alive because of him. It's staggering, and for a moment, the chaos around us fades away. His hands are steady despite the turmoil we've been through,

and it's in those hands I sense a haven — a future unfurling with an uncertain but hopeful cadence.

"You did all that, even though we...?" I say. My voice is a mere whisper, raspy from the shouting and fighting. "I never thought that you would..."

Bishop's eyes hold mine with an intensity I haven't seen before.

"When you care about someone, you do whatever it takes," he says quietly, almost to himself. "Sometimes you succeed... sometimes..." His voice cracks, breaks into pained pieces. *What does he mean by that?* He seems so distraught at even talking about losing someone. It seems so out of place for someone who's a self-confessed killer. "I'm just glad that, this time, I could save someone."

"Thank you," I choke out through a throat tight with emotion. "Thank you, Bishop."

"May I?"

I nod, and he looks me over, checking each wound with practice and care. The sound of sirens touches my ears, and as they grow closer, they seem to bring home to me the fact that it really is all over — Ellis is done, everyone who enabled him is gone, and I am free.

"They'll be here in any minute, Eden," Maya says. "At the hospital, you'll be asked to give a statement about what happened to you. But once that's over with and once you've rested, you'll be out on your own. Your life is yours, from now on."

Sirens arrive, police and paramedics, too, and I can't stop saying that phrase to myself, over and over: *my life is mine, now.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Eden

They put me in a room next to Sandra's.

During the first day of my several-day stay at Ironwood Falls General Hospital, Sandra isn't awake. My time passes with a bevy of tests, getting a brace fitted around my seriously wounded ankle, learning that breathing, coughing, laughing, or sneezing with broken ribs is one of the worst things imaginable, experiencing a wonderful series of painkillers, and being very thankful that the city provides its employees with an excellent health insurance plan.

On the second day, Sandra wakes up.

She's out of it for most of the day, barely more than conscious, but I spend the day by the side of her bed, and we watch a bunch of daytime television, which, thankfully, doesn't require any thought to understand — only that you be conscious enough to have your eyes and ears open some of the time. Which Sandra manages. Mostly.

I spend a lot of that day with game shows in the background, then soap operas, and I tell her many, many times that I'm so grateful that she's alive.

Sometime around my fifteenth, or maybe my fortieth, time telling her I'm so happy she didn't die that day, she turns her pale face toward me and whispers, "Thank Bishop." Then she falls back asleep.

A chill slithers down my spine at the mention of Bishop's name. My heart and mind swirl around all the facts I know about him; emotions both hot and icy cold writhe inside me as I consider the kind, terrifying man who has had such an influence on my life.

He saved Sandra's life; he saved my life; he took his fiance's life.

What do I want from him? What do I want for us? For me?

Those questions are agony. Too much, too deep for me to solve that day. Just raising them in my mind exhausts me.

But, as much as they tire me, they stay in my mind. Just like him.

By the third day, I'm antsy to leave the sterile white walls of my hospital room, to breathe air not tinged with disinfectant. But each time I think about leaving Ironwood Falls General Hospital, I think about Bishop. The idea of seeing him again sends a whirlwind of butterflies through my stomach, flipping and flapping their delicate wings against my insides.

*Do I love him? Do I hate him? Do I fear him? Do I want him?
I have no fucking clue.*

Sandra is more alert today, though still a shadow of her usual fiery self. She fusses over me like a mother hen with one chick — me — her eyes often tracing the contours of healing bruises on my face.

"You need to thank him, Eden," she insists during one of her more lucid moments, which comes as we eat limp bacon, soggy hash browns, and Jell-O for breakfast. "He pulled you out of there. He saved both of us."

I nod mechanically, but deep down there's this trepidation about facing Bishop. Not just because he's a biker, though that fact alone comes with a whole trunk load of baggage for me, but because he's been nothing but kind and protective. And that kindness is confusing and alarming in equal measure.

"I know, Sandra. But how can I face him? Knowing what he wrote about Michelle? And everything I said to him... it just makes it so hard."

"How do you face him? Eden, you just point both feet toward him, smile, and tell him, 'Thanks for rescuing me from being tortured and raped and murdered.' It's not rocket science."

"And the other stuff?"

"That's for you to figure out. And find out. *Ask him, talk to him.* Or don't. Because you can, now. It's all up to you. This is your life, and there's no fucking creep out there chasing you, making you do things. It's just you. Not that I'm trying to imply that you're a creepy asshole who's doing creepy things. I'm just... these meds and thinking do not mix. Wow."

"Get some sleep, Sandra."

"Maybe later. But you go call Bishop. Take control of your life. Meanwhile, I'm going to call the nurse, see if I can get another dose."

I hug her as gently as humanly possible, then hobble back to my room.

For an hour, I just stare at my phone, composing and erasing a message to Bishop. Finally, I decide on something simple: *Can we talk soon?*

A response doesn't come right away. Not that I expect it to. With everything that's happened with his MC, with his volunteer work, with the

sheer exertion he's been through in the last few days, I'm surprised it only takes Bishop a couple hours to answer me back. Beyond everything that's happened to him, it's clear he's doing his best to respect the distance between us.

But his response comes. *Tell me when and where.*

Mine goes back, quick: *They're releasing me at three tomorrow. Can I get a ride?*

His answer: *Whatever you need.*

I stare at those words for a long time, until my eyelids get heavy and my pillow becomes irresistible. *Just how do I feel about Bishop? And how does he feel about me?* So much has happened between us. I have no idea how I'll react when it's just him and me in his truck, nothing but us and the questions between us.

Do I have the strength to ask him what I want to ask?

Do I have the strength to follow my heart if it calls me back to him?

Do I have the strength to walk away if it doesn't?

But as I fall asleep, my doubts disappear; I know just how strong I am, and it's so much more than I gave myself credit for before.

When I wake up the next day, the morning and early afternoon pass in a flurry of activity. Of further tests, of medications, prescriptions, doctor's instructions, and then I'm fidgeting in a wheelchair in the lobby, waiting for Bishop to arrive. Anxious to talk to him, but excited, too. Right on time, he strides in, and my breath leaves me so suddenly that a passing nurse asks me if I need oxygen.

"Hey, Eden," Bishop says. The smile on his bruised face is enough to make my heart flutter. "You're looking good."

"You too. Those bruises on your face really bring out the other bruises," I say.

He chuckles. I do, too, and wince at the stabbing pain in my side.

"Let's get you out of here, shall we?"

I nod, still feeling too much pain in my side to talk. He wheels me outside and to his truck, then gingerly helps me into the front seat. When he climbs in beside me, he gives me a long look, and there's a question that lingers in his eyes.

"If you're up to it, there's something I want to show you at my house. I think it's important, and it'd mean a lot to me if you could see it before you decide anything, but it's your call."

I'm surprised by the offer, partially because I had been preparing myself for a hard conversation, one where I might have to wrest answers out of the normally taciturn Bishop. Yet, here he is, talking first. Open. And his eyes not just piercing but almost pleading. It's clear that whatever he wants to show me is significant to him; a slice of vulnerability that shines through his rough exterior.

"Okay," I hear myself say before my brain fully processes the decision. "Let's go to your place."

A hint of relief washes over Bishop's bruised features, and he gives a curt nod as he starts the truck. The drive is quiet, but not uncomfortable. Bishop seems to sense that I need some space as I brace myself against the waves of pain from my injuries and the ocean of apprehension about what lies ahead.

We park and he helps me up the driveway, through the door, and leads me up the stairs.

"It's in the room," he says, answering my unspoken question. "You deserve answers."

When he opens that door for me, the room inside looks so different than I remember; all those pictures that once adorned the wall now sit in a single stack on his desk. There's only one photo on the wall, now — us, from that dance.

"Bishop? What is this?"

He gestures to the chair at the desk. "Sit, please."

When I do, he clears his throat, once, twice, both pained and uncomfortable.

"You know her name, but you don't know the full story. See, we were stationed at the same base on deployment, her and I. I was a surgeon, she was a soldier, and we did the stupidest thing you can do when you make a connection in the middle of war — we fell in love. It was a deep connection, so deep that I even proposed. Even worse for us both, she accepted." He pauses, voice bitter, eyes burning with pain. "An opportunity came up for her, high risk, high reward, and she took it even though I tried to stop her. Oh, I fought her over it, but not hard enough. When the mission went wrong, she wound up on my operating table. It shocked me, and I tried to collect myself, tried to ask for help, but there were so many wounded that I was the only one who could operate on her. It was all on me. Though I did everything I could, she still died on my table. It was my fault. Her blood is on my hands." He sighs, a shaky sigh, and it draws me to him. "Sometimes I think if I had been

better, I could have saved her. Sometimes I think if I had only fought her harder, stopped her from going, maybe..."

His voice trails off. I sit, shocked, feeling the weight of his pain on my chest. The poor man has been carrying the weight of his dead fiance all this time. My heart hurts for him, knowing the pain he must feel.

I reach out and put my hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry, Bishop."

Another sigh from the depths of his soul.

"That's why I tried to keep you from all this... I love you, Eden, but I know all the consequences that loving someone who lives a dangerous life can bring. I couldn't survive it again, and I could never put you through it, either. You mean so much to me, and I am sorry for not being as open with you as I should have been. When I'm with you, I've been happy in a way that I never thought I'd be again. I love you, and I don't want to lose you. I want to build a new life with you, put new pictures on this wall. Of us, together."

The silence that follows is heavy, almost tangible, as if the words hanging between us have turned into a physical barrier. I can see the weight of his confession in the slope of his shoulders, and it pulls at something deep within me.

There's so much of me that wants to embrace this man, to comfort him, to hold him, to kiss him. My heart pulls me toward him with a force so significant, so soulful, that I have to grit my teeth and fight with all my might to keep from kissing him right then and there.

I love him, I do, but there's something else I need more of right now.

"I understand," I say, my voice coming out in a whisper that feels too loud for the quiet of the room. "I understand because I've been there, in my own way. And I've been haunted by my own ghosts."

His eyes find mine, and there's a flicker of hope amidst the storm clouds in them. "Eden..."

"But," I interrupt, because this is something I need to say, something that's been burning on my tongue ever since I saw his message asking me to come here. "But loving someone can also be the reason you breathe, the reason you fight harder, the reason life has color. It's scary as hell after you've been hurt, but it's not something to run from — not if it's real. You're scared of losing me because of your past, and I'm scared of being hurt by you because of mine. But here we are, both so full of fear, and yet still drawn back together."

He turns his hand under mine until our fingers entwine. "What do we do, Eden?"

This life is mine, now. And I am free to make my own choices, without worrying about my ghosts. For the first time in so long, my past isn't controlling my future. I am.

"I need time, Bishop." I pause, look into his eyes.

There's such love there, yet such pain. And I know that if I could look into a mirror right now, I'd see the same in mine. But though there's pain, there's also hope and excitement.

"Anything," he says.

"I need time, and I want it. Time to figure out me, who I am, what I really want — whether I want to stay in Ironwood Falls, whether I want *us* to be *us*, whether I want to get rid of everything I own and move to Cleveland."

He raises an eyebrow at me. There's a teasing smile on his face.

"You get the chance to start fresh and you choose Cleveland?"

I reach out and punch him lightly on the arm. Damn, does it feel good to joke around, even lightly, with someone. To have the freedom to smile without worrying if the smile on my face is the last one I'll experience before Ellis claims my life. Now, I can smile all I want. And I plan to do a lot as I revel in the fact that I control my life now.

"It was just an example. Remember, *doctor*, I'm on heavy medication and words are *really hard* when your tongue feels like a feather duster. I just... I want time to finally feel my freedom. It's been so long that I've had this feeling. I want to experience it, to live it." I hug him lightly and look into his eyes. "Thank you for telling me the truth about Michelle. You're a good man, Bishop, and you should forgive yourself for what happened. Let her ghost go."

"I will. It'll take time, but I will," he says. He gestures back to the wall, where it's just the photo of us. "I'd planned — no, *hoped* — to put photos of someone else on that wall."

"Maybe you will. In time."

"In time."

I extend my hand to him, and he takes it. His grip is perfectly gentle, yet expertly supportive; he has a surgeon's hands. Excitement shimmers in my voice, despite all the uncertainty that dominates my future. Because it's uncertainty that I control. It's *my* uncertainty, driven by me and no one else.

"Now, Bishop, will you take me home? I have a dog that's probably worried sick about me and an exciting new life to figure out."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Bishop

More time.

She needs more time.

There's that old saying that time heals all wounds. As a doctor, I haven't found that to be true. And, as time goes on apart from her, as the club closes the deal, solidifying our partnership with the Steel Reapers MC, making our futures brighter than ever thanks to the money from the sale of the cargo, and as we send Grinder on his way alone to figure out just what the hell to do now that he's a man without an MC, as I return to volunteering at the senior center, I realize that time isn't the thing that'll fix the wound in my heart — what I need is her.

But I give her time.

In only a couple of days, she returns to work at the youth center. Limping on the big boot they fitted her with at the hospital to protect her ankle. Wearing bruises and bandages with pride, like the battle scars they are. Bringing Comet in with her to the office to make up for leaving him alone and scared for a while. She carries herself with pride, without fear.

"She looks good this morning, honey," Doris says as she totters into the lounge wearing a jacket that's so tightly bundled around her it looks like she's returning from a polar expedition. "Everything's healing nicely. She was working on some other proposal for the city council when I came in, seemed really proud about it."

I look up from the card game I'm playing with Charlene — Uno — and smile. That Eden's still enthused about her chance to really make something of the youth center is a great sign. She's not just recovering from the wounds she received, she's healing. She's becoming herself again.

"You talked to her?"

"Yes. For a little while. But, like I said, she was real enthused about the thing she was working on, so she didn't have much time to spare. She asked

about you, too."

"She did?"

"Wanted to know how you were doing. Also wanted you to know that she's on to you."

"On to me?"

"Honey, you can't keep having us wander over there pretending that we're 'lost.' She's seeing right through it, especially since every time we end up asking her some very specific medical questions. I mean, I have no idea what the words 'phalanges' and 'metatarsals' mean. How the heck am I supposed to slip that into a casual question about how she's feeling? She knows it's you."

I grunt, put down an Uno 'reverse' card and ruin Charlene's morning.

"Well, what'd she say?"

"She said that her actual doctor is satisfied with how she's healing and that there should be no permanent damage. All the x-rays and whatever show that she's doing well. She also said to tell you that, if you keep sending your senior citizen spies over, she is going to give Sandra your phone number and the go-ahead to hit on you. I am also to remind you that Sandra is still laid up in her hospital bed, and has nothing but time on her hands."

Shit.

"Maybe we'll take a break from checking on her for a while."

"I think that's wise, honey. She doesn't just want time, she wants space, too."

I nod and keep my eyes on the game. I'm sure Eden wants time and space, but that's a damned difficult prescription to fill. But, then again, maybe that isn't just what she needs, maybe it's what I need, too. Not just between the two of us, but between me and Ironwood Falls, as well. Coming here to the senior center just sends my heart and mind next door to the woman I want, but can't have. And being in town and around the MC is just a reminder of all the pain and suffering that I've not only put myself through, but her as well.

As one day goes into the next, that resolution grows stronger.

Then, over a game of Gin Rummy with Doris and Charlene, I receive a tap on the shoulder. A nurse whispers five words into my ear and the cards fall from my hand.

"Bishop, I'm sorry. Elroy's dead."

It's not like I wasn't expecting it to happen at some point. I know his health as well as anyone, but losing him still hits me like a punch to the gut and the force of that blow is enough to tip me over from indecision to decision —

tomorrow, I leave Ironwood falls; day by day, I lose my connections to this town, all the people that anchor me here, and what I need is time. Time and space.

That night, I pack my bags. What few things that are important to me in this world, including a certain photograph, get loaded into the saddlebags of my bike. Tomorrow, after my shift at the senior center, I'll say my goodbyes and I'll set out on the road. There's nothing but bloody memories and heartache holding me here.

When I arrive at the center in the morning, I see her watching me through the window of the front office. Eden. Her eyes linger for a moment. There's a quizzical look on her face as she sees the loaded saddlebags, but I don't acknowledge her. Time and space are what she wants, so time and space are what she'll get. Besides, even thinking about her might be enough to make me waver in my resolve. The last thing I need is to bind myself to a town that's just going to kill me piece by piece.

The residents at the senior center know I'm leaving before I even say anything. Maybe it's the look on my face that gives it away, maybe it's something else, but every one of them wants a hug or a handshake the second they see me. It's exhausting. It both makes me question my decision and makes me ache to get the hell out of town even sooner. God damned emotional contact.

But, around midday, something changes.

People arrive at the senior center who have no place being there. Old men in Navy uniforms, mostly, and they all look to be about Elroy's age. But a few younger ones, too. Men who look like they're not much older than enlistment age. They're wearing Navy uniforms as well.

"What the hell is this?" I say to one of them. There's a Vietnam Service Medal on his chest, along with a bronze star, a purple heart, and several marksmanship honors.

"We're here for the funeral," he answers.

"What funeral?" I say.

"Elroy Dean's. I got a call last night from some woman. She said that a Navy man had died, and he had no one around to honor him. Drove down from Seattle this morning." I blink in surprise, my mouth falling agape; Seattle's a four or five-hour drive in good traffic. This old man would've had to leave at the crack of dawn to make it here. "Son, are you OK? Your mouth is open like a damn fly trap."

"What woman?"

"The woman who called me? She said her name was Eden. Said she was a friend of Elroy's." He gestures to a couple other of the men in uniform. "All of us got a call from her, or from some other woman named Sandra."

"What else did she say?" Something hopeful, something painful, stirs in my chest. There might be something like a smile on my face, but I'm so overwhelmed my body feels numb.

"Not much. Just to be here for our fallen brother, that the ceremony's at sunset." Sunset. I check my phone — I still have time. Not much, but enough to do what I need to do. I head toward the door.

"Where are you going? You aren't going to skip out on his funeral, are you? He was a hero," says another of the Navy men.

I answer over my shoulder. "No way in hell I'm missing it. I'm just not dressed for it."

At home, it takes time to put my old uniform on. Time that passes wrestling with memories, with emotions, with the flood of feelings that washes over me the moment I see it. Memories, feelings, thoughts — all of her. I've seen my fair share of combat since the Army, but the one of the hardest battles comes in simply setting out my uniform and then putting it on. It's like wrapping myself in a reminder of her, of what I've lost, but I force myself through every belt, button, and medal, until I'm looking so damn formal I don't even recognize myself. I'm even wearing a goddamn tie. It's hell, but it's for the man who was as close to me as family, the only confidante I had who really understood the loss I've carried with me for all these years.

When I arrive back at the senior center, it's nearly sunset. Nearly. She's standing outside, wearing a conservative black dress, black coat, and black scarf. She must've gone home to change, too, because these weren't the clothes she came to work in.

"You look nice," she says. "He'd be impressed to see you in uniform."

"He'd tell me I look ridiculous. He'd be right, too. But that doesn't mean I'm not going to wear this damn thing and pay him the respect he deserves." I look at her, see something close to a smile on her face. "You did all this. Why?"

"It wasn't all me. Sandra helped, and, like I told your spy, Sandra has a lot of time and is presently addicted to her phone because it's her only outlet to the outside world."

"That doesn't answer my question. Why?"

"Because I liked him. Because he was important to you. Because I care for you, Bishop." My words fail me. It doesn't matter how much time elapses, this woman will always take my breath away. "The moment I heard about Elroy, I had a feeling that you'd do what I know you're planning to do. And it's fair to run when you're hurt. Believe me, I know what that's like. Then, when I saw you come in this morning and saw your bags, I was even more glad I'd put this thing together for Elroy. Not just for him, but for you."

"For me?"

"I know what it's like to run when you're in pain. And I know I wouldn't like Ironwood Falls nearly as much if you weren't in it. We've both suffered, Bishop. Suffered more than most people should. Seeing you get ready to leave made me realize the truth — I still love you so dearly that the thought of you going away hurts me to the point of tears. Time, space, it will not change that. It can't change love, and I love you. We can help each other through the pain. We can be there for the other — with love." She extends her hand to me and I reach for it. "Will you take me back?"

My hand takes hers. A simple touch from her pushes a lifetime's worth of pain into the background. It's clear to me what I want; It's her. It's always been her. I kiss her.

"Without a doubt. I love you, Eden."

EPILOGUE

Eden

They send Elroy off with a twenty-one gun salute and Elvis's "*Are you lonesome tonight?*".

I stand beside Bishop, hold his hand through the service, shed tears beside him and see one or two of his out of the corner of my eye, and when the music ends and the last bullet rings out, I hug him.

It took time to come to this decision to stay — time to feel my feelings, time to learn that the man I wanted was what I really wanted, time to experience that emptiness in my home and in my heart and realize that Bishop is the only one who filled either space right.

But there is no doubt in my mind that I love him; truly, deeply love him.

And, in the days and weeks that follow the ceremony, something like normal life returns between us. As we spend time at his house, as we spend time at mine, sharing a bed and a ride to work in the morning. I learn what it's like to be me, truly me, without a monster breathing down my neck, and with an incredible man in my life.

I love him fearlessly.

And he loves me, too.

In those days and weeks that follow, we put more pictures of us up on that wall of his. It becomes a shrine not to someone dead, but to something alive, something that's growing, changing, filling our lives and our future — us and our love.

In quiet moments, I watch him as he tinkers with his bike — his hands moving with a craftsman's love over chrome and steel. He never presses me to go for a ride; perhaps sensing the fear that still lingers like the after-scent of gasoline. But I go on several with him, working with the man who holds my heart to dispel the last of those fears that grip me; I cling to him not out of fear, but for the joy of being close to his heart. We take sunset rides; we take dawn rides; we cut out of work and we ride to a place up in the mountains to

have a picnic and drinks in a quiet glade.

Day after day, we heal together.

It's a slow process, this unwinding of the past. Bishop's eyes still carry shadows from time to time. But with each shared sunrise and every whispered secret between midnight sheets, the ghosts seem to wane more and more — carried away on the breath of our laughter and lost in the warmth of our mutual embrace.

One day, nearly a month on from the ceremony, he drops me at work and there's a funny tone in his voice; something coy, something hidden. "Have a good day today, my love," he murmurs as he kisses me and then turns toward the senior center.

His tone makes me cock my head. My tone stops him short.

"What'd you do, Bishop?"

"Nothing. Other than love you, as usual."

"Love you, too," I say to his back as he walks away.

But no sooner do I get into the front office of the youth center and see both Sandra and Maya sitting with smiles on their faces than I hear alarm bells of the best kind inside my head.

"What is it?" I say.

"That's no way to say 'Good morning.' Do you want to try again?" Sandra says.

Maya's eyes just twinkle with her response.

"Good morning. Now, what in the heck is going on?"

Sandra and Maya both share a long look.

"Do you want to tell her, or should I?" Sandra says.

"I don't know. I'd love to tell her, but I got to bring it here, so maybe you want to do the honors?"

"Well, you are holding it. It's in your possession. Maybe you should be the one to break the news."

"But then, what part would you get to play? I'd be getting to do all the fun stuff."

"Maybe I'll record it. Oh, and I just found a new filter I could use, too," Sandra says. "It makes you look like a renaissance portrait." She then whips out her phone and holds it up. "Oh my gosh, Eden, you look just like Queen Elizabeth I, with the fluffy collar, too. And Maya... Oh, it's turned you into an old Dutch guy."

Maya rolls her eyes. "Sandra, turn that filter off. The donor requested

legitimate footage of the handover, not a meeting between some dead English queen and a weird Dutch guy."

"Tell me what is going on, or else I'm going home," I say. And I mean it. I have a dog at home, and I could probably get Bishop to leave his shift early, too. A day with my man and my dog at the park sounds infinitely better than being baffled by my friends.

Sandra nods, makes a few swipes on her phone.

"Fine. You're normal, now. Or, well, close enough."

"Now, spill it, Maya."

"There was an anonymous donation made to the youth center a few weeks ago. It was secret, anonymous, and came in not long after all that business between the MCs went down." Maya reaches into her pocket and withdraws an envelope. "It didn't get processed right away. With all that chaos that happened, and with the speed of city government, it took some time. But then the donor then dropped a line to me, and to Noah Lucas in the city council, and things got done. The money got processed. And the youth center's budget got amended, because the donor was very specific about how the money was to be used."

The more Maya speaks, the more my chest vibrates. My fingers and toes do, too. And my lips curl upward and my voice shakes.

"Maya...?" She hands the envelope over and it's an eye-popping number. "What...? This is so much money. What are the requirements?"

"The donor was very specific in that it be used according to your discretion in increasing the services available at the youth center. They were adamant that you had the talent and drive to make this place into a beacon for the community."

For a long time, I don't speak. I can't speak. I can only stare at the paper in my hand and see the means to bring into reality so many of the things I've dreamed about doing here. The change that I can effect with this money is so monumental it robs me of my voice. When I finally recover my speech, I look at Maya, open-mouthed.

"Who?"

"They were anonymous. Very anonymous," she says. Then her eyes drift to some point just over my shoulder and I turn.

There he is. Just outside the door, watching with a smile on his face. Bishop.

Before I know it, I'm running to him, throwing open the door and my arms

around him.

"You did this?" I say. Then, recalling the number on the page, I add, "Why? How? Where'd you get all that money?"

It's not like Bishop is loaded. Or at least, he's not rich enough that he could just throw around the money that I saw on that sheet of paper. That amount is life-changing, no, it's *community* changing.

He chuckles, then kisses me.

"Why? Because I love you and believe in you. How? Me and some people I know came into some money, recently. More money than we were expecting. So why not put it with someone that we know really cares about doing good for our hometown?"

"This is the club's money?"

"My share, and some of everyone's. We did a collection." He looks deep into my eyes, and I find myself transfixed by the confidence and love that I see there. It's pure, it's unwavering, it is life-changing. "It didn't take much convincing. None, really. They all know that you are fighting tooth and nail to make this place as good as it deserves to be. That alone was enough to get them to chip in. Well, that and something else."

"What?"

"They know me, and they know I love you." He chuckles. "Can't tell you how surprised they were to see how I was when we first got together. Kept asking me where the real Bishop went... among other things that I won't repeat, since it's not meant for your ears. But they're right, in a way — I've not been myself since I met you. I'm better."

Tears prick the edges of my vision, blurring Bishop's face into a watery mirage. It's overwhelming, the generosity and love in front of me. People say money can't buy happiness, but right here, right now, this money is going to bring joy to so many kids' lives.

"I don't know what to say," I finally murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. My heart is racing with gratitude and something else — something that feels like healing.

"You don't have to say anything, Eden," Bishop says. "Just use that money to make a difference. That's thanks enough."

I feel a lump forming in my throat as he speaks. It's a mixture of happiness, disbelief, and pride. I am proud of what I do, and that was before I had all this money to put my plans and ambitions into action.

"You've changed me too, Bishop," I say. "I wouldn't be who I am without

you. Without your support, without your love... When I'm with you, I'm Eden. And I'm really liking who Eden is turning out to be."

We stand there, outside the youth center, enveloped in a moment so perfect it feels like it could shatter with the slightest touch. The world outside our bubble continues on as cars honk in the distance, a dog barks somewhere down the block — but for us, time seems to stand still.

Eventually, I pull back slightly to look at him again.

"I love you," I say. "And I'm scared — the best things in my life haven't always lasted — and I don't want to lose you."

He kisses me so deep it warms me to my toes. Inside me, I feel a change, a weight lifting. It isn't just about the donation or the youth center, it's about us. It's about letting go of ghosts and discarding old fears.

"I love you, too, Eden. And I'm not going anywhere. I promise you that. You and me, we're forever."

*****Want more Romantic Action?*****

Sign up for my email newsletter to get subscribers-only content! It's also the best way to keep up on my latest releases and what's going on in the world of MC Romance: <https://www.subscribepage.com/d9p6y8>

If you enjoyed the story, please consider leaving a review. Reviews are so important to all self-published authors and we couldn't do this without the feedback from our readers! I do this for you guys; I love sharing stories with you all!

Want More Steamy Action?

The Steel Reapers MC

[Book one: Bullet](#)

[Book Two: Thunder](#)

[Book Three: Striker](#)

The Twisted Devils MC

[Book one: Razor](#)

[Book two: Rusty](#)

[Book Three: Mack](#)

[Book Four: Blaze](#)

[Book Five: Crash](#)

[Book Six: Snake](#)

[Book Seven: Axel](#)
[Book Eight: Trips](#)
[Book Nine: Brewer](#)
[Book Ten: Rabid](#)
[Book Eleven: Goldie](#)
[Book Twelve: Mayhem](#)
[Book Thirteen: Tractor](#)
[Book Fourteen: Havoc](#)
[Book Fifteen: Chains](#)
[Book Sixteen: Hammer](#)
[Book Seventeen: Bones](#)
[Book Eighteen: Rook](#)

The Rebel Riders MC:

[Book one: Thrash](#)
[Book two: Riot](#)
[Book three: Duke](#)
[Book four: Rooster](#)
[Book five: Creole](#)
[Book six: Bull](#)

The Wayward Kings MC Series:

[Book one: Bear](#)
[Book Two: Ozzy](#)
[Book Three: Hazard](#)
[Book Four: Preacher](#)

Other books by Me:

[His Captive](#)
[Liar](#)