



BREAKING

Trey

AMELIA SHEA

Breaking Trey
Reign of the Underground Book 1
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For Liz, one of my most favorite friends who I've never met! You are so incredibly creative, talented and simply fabulous. I'm in awe of you, your strength, your drive, and your ability to motor through whatever life throws at you. Strong is an understatement. Thank you so much for gifting my books with your talent and creativity. I am forever grateful, my friend.

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Chapter One

“This can’t be happening.”

Dahlia dragged her hand over her face, peering through her fingers at the commotion in her living room. Three men were moving an armchair and bookcase out of her house while her roommate, Belinda, was haphazardly tossing figurines from a shelf into a cardboard box. The scene itself wasn’t any different from most moving-out scenarios, with the exception of one major detail. Belinda hadn’t given her any notice, which meant Dahlia didn’t have a replacement roommate. It left her solely responsible for the rent due in a week.

For some people, this would be an inconvenience, but for Dahlia, it was devastating. Most months she scraped by just to come up with her own portion. She didn’t have the extra cash to cover Belinda’s half.

Shit!

Dahlia pushed off the wall, rushing to follow Belinda down the hallway leading to the bedrooms. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and Dahlia wasn’t above using any persuasive tactics if necessary.

“What’s the rush?” Dahlia blurted, and Belinda turned. “I mean, why not take the month to do a slow move-out? That way, you can make sure you don’t forget anything, and you can settle into your new place a lot easier.”

Belinda furrowed her brows. “Then I’d have to pay rent for the month.”

Exactly!

“That’s silly to pay two rents, don’t you think?”

Of course, it was. However, Belinda didn’t pay the rent. Her dad did, and she wouldn’t be paying anything for her new home courtesy of her boyfriend, Dave. Dahlia had inside information that she’d learned through thin walls. Dave’s father owned a small house on the opposite side of the city and

offered to let them stay rent-free as long as they took care of the property. *How come no one ever offers me free shit?*

Dahlia drew in a breath, choosing her words wisely. If she had any hope of reasoning with Belinda, she couldn't lose her temper. It was hard, though, knowing that Belinda and her boyfriend, who came from backgrounds wealthier than her own, seemed to have landed the perfect deal.

"I understand, but you didn't give me any notice."

Belinda cocked her head. "Sure I did. I called you."

Are you serious right now?

"Last night," Dahlia snapped, unable to control her rising anger. She reeled in her irritation and forced a smile. "I mean, it was last night when you called to tell me you were moving out today. It wasn't even twenty-four hours' notice."

Belinda squinted. "I'm not on the lease."

Fuck! Of all the stupid and idiotic things Dahlia had done in her life, and there were quite a lot, this had to be the most irresponsible. It wasn't an intentional mishap. Three years ago, it had come from necessity. When she'd originally started renting her house with her friend, Dahlia's had been the only name on the lease because Penny wouldn't have passed the credit check. It wasn't a big deal. Penny gave her the cash a few days before the rent was due, and Dahlia paid it. When Penny moved out, she'd given a month's notice, which had been plenty of time to find her new roommate, Kim. The same cycle continued without any hiccups. *Until now.*

I should've seen this coming.

There were warning signs from the very beginning that Dahlia had chosen to ignore. The first was Belinda's statement of wanting to "live like real people." It only took Dahlia a few days to discover that her roommate's definition of *real* was simply code for poor. This was further explained by who paid the bills on her behalf. Belinda's lack of a job was initially a concern, but Dahlia was assured her father would pay the rent and utilities each month. And he did. It always struck her as odd that a grown, capable, twenty-four-year-old woman still

lived off her parents' dime. But as her own father often reminded her, *everyone's different*.

They weren't a match made in heaven, but Dahlia's options were limited if she wanted to keep her house in Lawry. The only other applicants had been men. *I should've picked one of the guys*. But she hadn't. She'd chosen Belinda despite all her odd quirks and beliefs. They didn't have to be friends. They just had to live together. What could go wrong?

Everything!

Dahlia followed Belinda into the bedroom and stood near the door. Dahlia had to come up with something. She barely had enough in her savings to cover her own rent, let alone Belinda's.

"How about a good faith compromise?" Dahlia asked as Belinda started out of the room and down the hall.

"What do you mean?"

Dahlia hurried her steps until she reached the living room. "Since I think we can both agree that less than twenty-four hours isn't exactly a fair amount of notice, maybe you could pay for half the rent."

Belinda held up her hands. "You don't think it's fair, but I do. This is your place, and I appreciate you letting me stay here, but I'm not under any obligation to give you anything except for the rent, which I paid last month."

You didn't pay for it. Your daddy did! Dahlia tightened her lips, swallowing the lump in her throat and willing herself not to react to the asinine response. Belinda was spoiled, thoughtless, and self-centered. The polar opposite of Dahlia. Never in her life would Dahlia even consider screwing someone over the way Belinda was doing to her.

"Maybe you could ask your dad?"

Belinda shook her head. "I don't want to take advantage of him."

What the... *Since when?* Over the last seven months of sharing a house, it was all Belinda had done. And now she's

found moral ground on taking advantage?

Fuck me!

“I’m never going to find a replacement roommate in a week, Belinda,” Dahlia said.

Belinda smiled. “But that’s not my problem, *Dahlia*.”

Dahlia wasn’t sure what pissed her off more, Belinda’s lack of concern for Dahlia’s situation and all human decency. Or her own naivete for assuming people would do the right thing.

Kindness and trust shouldn’t be considered downfalls, but this situation was proving to be a monumental mistake. At twenty-seven, Dahlia should’ve changed her ways long ago. She hadn’t. Instead of making people earn her trust, Dahlia trusted people until they gave her a reason not to. It’d become increasingly clear that it was a very flawed way of going into relationships with others. But in this situation, she had no one to blame but herself. She could almost hear her father’s voice in the back of her head. *You’re too nice. People will take advantage of you.* He was right, and this was a prime example.

Belinda grasped Dahlia’s shoulder. “This is an opportunity of a lifetime. Dave and the band are gonna tour and make music. It’s going to be amazing. Be happy for us.”

I won’t be able to cover the rent because you screwed me over, and you want me to be happy for you?

Dahlia bit the inside of her mouth and mentally picked apart everything in Belinda’s statement. Number one, Belinda never apologized. Number two, the “tour” consisted of shitty venues around Lawry’s seediest bars. Number three, the opportunity of a lifetime? A groupie for a crappy talentless band?

It seemed judgmental on Dahlia’s part, considering her own lifestyle choices. However, she didn’t screw people over to live life on her own terms. Dahlia would have loved to point out everything, but she was at the mercy of Belinda—at least for the next few hours.

Dahlia stood quietly watching Belinda's boyfriend, Dave, and another bandmate, Chris, load some boxes into the truck. When they came back into the house, Chris stopped a few feet from her. He'd been gawking at her since the minute he'd arrived. Attention from men never fazed Dahlia, but his obvious perusal of her body, with the main focus on her breasts, was not only rude but downright creepy.

"After we unload Belinda's shit, we're going to the studio. There's room for one more in the van." Chris slapped his hands together and winked.

Dahlia snorted, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. "As enticing as that sounds, I'm gonna have to pass."

His brows dipped into a tight scowl as if offended. She doubted this was the first time Chris had been turned down and was confident it wouldn't be the last. He reached into his back pocket and handed her what looked like a postcard. "These are the list of our shows. You call me. I'll get you in without having to pay a cover. My number is at the bottom."

Classy.

Belinda stormed forward, handing Chris a box. "That's so sweet, Chris!"

Oh God.

Dahlia was beyond defeated and quickly racked her brain trying to think of a solution. Once they left, she'd immediately reach out to some friends to spread the word about the available room. It was a long shot, but anything was possible. She stayed close to the kitchen for the next half hour while they finished moving Belinda's stuff. When the last box was carried out, Belinda turned to Dahlia, and spread out her arms.

The last thing Dahlia wanted was to have to fake anything, but she did it. Dahlia was the first to step away from the hug and forced a smile.

"Well, let's keep in touch, okay?" Belinda said.

Wait, wait...

Dahlia nervously laughed and shook her head. “I’m going to see you when I return your car later.”

Belinda slowly cocked her head, and she squinted. “Return my car?”

Oh fuck, no, please don’t do this to me. Dahlia’s heartbeat spiked, and her muscles tensed.

“You said I could borrow your car for my job interview. I asked you two weeks ago, then reminded you last week, and confirmed it three days ago. Remember?” Her voice cracked on the last word, leaving no doubt of her desperation.

Belinda sighed and gave a small smile. “Oh yeah, about that.”

No, no, no. No!

“I promised Dave I’d go to the recording studio with him. He likes me there. Says I’m his muse.”

Oh fuck!

“Well, can’t you just take the van, and I’ll return the car to wherever you are after my interview?”

Dave walked over, putting his arm around Belinda’s shoulder. “With all the equipment and band members, it gets pretty chaotic, and I need time to think before I record. You understand, right?”

I understand you’re a gigantic asshole!

Dahlia ignored Dave and prepared to make a desperate plea to Belinda. She wasn’t above begging. “Please, I really need to borrow the car. I’ll gas up after and bring it straight to the studio. Otherwise, I have no ride.”

“You can take the bus. You love doing that!”

Dahlia winced and blinked, unsure she’d heard her correctly. Love the bus? No one loved the bus. People used it for convenience and financial reasons. But no one woke up in the morning gleefully skipping to the bus stop to use public transportation.

No, you moron, I don’t love it.

“Don’t do this to me,” Dahlia muttered. “Can I *please* use your car?”

Belinda stepped forward, grasping her arms. For a brief second, Dahlia allowed herself to see Belinda in a kind and understanding light. It was short-lived.

“No. But good luck with the interview. I hope you get it.”

Fucking bitch!

Dahlia had patiently waited over six months just to get an interview at the Bowery, and now it seemed the universe was punishing her. Rescheduling wasn’t an option. She could ask Sloane to pick her up, but that seemed extremely unprofessional, considering her friend would be conducting the interview. Besides, it was completely out of her way. Her friend had done enough for her, and Dahlia wouldn’t inconvenience Sloane any more than she already had.

Sloane had pretty much told her she had the job, and the interview was a small technicality, but Sloane didn’t have the final say. The owners of the Bowery would make the final decision. Even with Sloane’s encouragement, Dahlia wasn’t convinced she’d nail the position, knowing one of her bosses hadn’t taken a liking to her.

Trey.

It probably wasn’t the smartest idea working for a man she fantasized about on a nightly basis. Her obsession started months ago when he walked into the Ghosttown East clubhouse. Being around bikers, she was accustomed to rougher men with an element of danger. They were her type, or so she’d thought. Then Trey walked in. Dark blond, short hair, brown eyes, and chiseled features. Tall, dressed in a suit that shouldn’t have shown any of his build, yet it did. He was the sexiest and most beautiful man she’d ever seen. But her attraction went beyond his physical attributes. There was something in the way he carried himself—an arrogant confidence that should have been an immediate turnoff. Dahlia had dealt with plenty of men, and arrogance was never a shining trait in her eyes—except with Trey. He was so

incredibly sure of himself. It was a trait Dahlia didn't share, but she admired.

Their first interaction had been brief and lasted all of five seconds, ending with his obvious distaste. He hadn't said anything other than turning down a drink she'd offered, but his gaze traveled her body, making it clear he was not impressed. Usually, Dahlia didn't put much thought or care into how others saw her or what they thought. But Trey was different, and for reasons she couldn't explain, it had stung a bit stronger coming from him.

Her second and third run-ins with Trey hadn't been any better.

Dahlia's shoulders sagged, and she fell against the wall, pressing her head back and closing her eyes. Her nerves and anxiety were getting the best of her.

Her interview was in two hours. She needed to find a mode of transportation. A car service wasn't an option. She didn't have any extra funds except her savings, which she needed to cover the rent and utilities for the month.

The bus was her only option. It would have been fine had the forecast not called for torrential downpours all day. She pushed off the wall and peeked out the window. It was cloudy and dark but not raining. If it could just hold off for the next few hours, she'd be fine.

Dahlia closed her eyes, pressed her palms together, and drew in a deep breath. "Please, no rain."

She wasn't above begging, pleading, and manifesting.

I need this job.

The SUV pulled up in front of the secluded warehouse. Daylight hours weren't the standard for what was going down inside the building, but this was a unique situation. Trey didn't bother waiting for one of his men to open the door. He grabbed the handle, got out, and stalked toward the front of the building. Three of his men were standing at the entrance, and another four were walking two steps behind him.

Trey lifted his chin. “Everyone inside?”

“Except the driver,” Jared said.

Motherfucker, I’m going to find you.

Trey had been against this deal since his counterpart, Rogue, had made it. He’d sensed this crew didn’t have enough experience or knowledge, and certainly not the connections needed, for this type of transfer. But it was Rogue’s deal and not Trey’s place to step in. However, he was the one who’d be cleaning up the mess left behind.

This was nothing new. Everyone had their roles within the Underground. This was one of Trey’s.

Trey opened the door and walked inside. This was one of many warehouses they owned and operated in the Underground. They used strategic rotation between all the buildings. It was imperative not to have much action at any given one in a short span. They’d used this location two weeks ago and hadn’t planned on making use of it for another few months. It was too much of a risk, but these men and this job forced his hand.

As he stalked through the room, his shoes and his security’s boots tapped against the concrete floor, and it gained everyone’s attention. The already tense situation was only magnified by Trey’s presence. The five men were gathered in a line with the leader of the crew, Dornan in the center of the group. Trey had worked with them before on a much smaller scale, testing the waters with no issues. It was one of the reasons Rogue had made a deal with them.

And now, here the fuck we are.

Trey sharpened his glare, pausing briefly in front of Dornan. “You had *one* job.”

One. Fucking. Job.

Anytime stock was transferred across state lines, there was a risk, which was why they only used seasoned crews. *Usually.*

Trey walked over to the blacked-out van, peering through the open doors. Several boxes were stacked, taking up the entire back. They'd always been careful and made sure it could never be traced back to them but this much stock would put everyone in their business on the radar.

"Half a million in stock abandoned at a rest stop," Trey said, knowing he wouldn't get a response or reaction. It was smart on their part to remain silent. Nothing would rectify the situation. The only thing saving these men was the van itself. Had someone else found it before they had, Dornan's crew wouldn't be breathing. "Would someone like to tell me what the fuck happened?"

Dornan stepped forward. "My guy freaked, got scared, and ditched the van."

Trey drew in a breath, ignoring the heated blood coursing through his veins. He cupped his mouth and turned, walking back to the men lined up. It would take a few seconds to collect his patience and keep his temper in check. Trey rarely lost his composure, but it was times like these that tested his control.

"When you discovered this, why didn't you do the delivery yourself?"

Dornan shifted on his feet, looking back at one of the men who stepped up next to him.

"We have no way to move it other than the interstate."

"You knew that when you initially made the deal," Trey said.

Dornan nodded. "Yeah, but we thought we could haul *through* the state until we hit the border. We can't take that amount of stock on the highway."

The risk was certainly high for being seen and potentially pulled over. But that wasn't Trey's concern. That responsibility fell on the group of men standing before him who'd taken the deal.

"Isn't that something you should've considered when you brokered this with Rogue?"

Dornan shrugged. “We just thought with it being in Oz’s territory...”

Oh, fucking Christ!

“You didn’t make the deal with Oz. You made it with Rogue.”

There were a few misconceptions about how the Underground operated. This was one of the most popular. While the Underground was run by Trey, Rogue, and Oz, there were separate territories. Each handled different sections of the state. Negotiations happened between the three men all the time, but it was never a given. Especially when it came to Oz.

“We didn’t have any other choice, Trey.”

Trey ground his teeth. “What you’re saying is because you didn’t properly plan out the route before you took this deal, it somehow falls on Rogue and me to step in and formulate another option. Did I get anything wrong? Tell me this.” Trey stalked toward Dornan, stopped inches away, and glared. “Why the fuck are we paying you?”

Dornan’s jaw squared. “We assumed we had access to outside the city limits.”

“You assumed?” Trey growled. “We don’t fucking pay you to assume. You took this job knowing the risks and the route. You made this deal knowing the consequences.”

“How the hell were we supposed to know he’d bail?” The man at the end of the line, probably newer to this crew, was immediately scolded by Dornan.

“Tom! Shut the fuck up and don’t speak again!”

Trey could’ve let it go. He didn’t. He walked past Dornan to the man at the end.

“Tom, is it?” Trey folded his arms and arched his brow. “I would love to hear what you have to say.”

The man shifted on his feet. “I just think Oz should honor the deal Rogue made.”

Really?

“Would you like me to tell Oz what you think *he* should do?”

Their silence was an obvious answer.

No. The answer was no.

“I’ll handle this,” Dornan said.

“Yes, because you’ve done a stellar job up until now.” Trey stepped back, glancing back at his men who were spread out on the perimeter. “Where is he?”

Names were unnecessary. There was only one man they’d be looking for, and until he was found, Dornan’s crew would remain at risk. Someone would pay for this mistake.

“Don’t know.”

Trey looked over at Dornan, and he immediately stepped forward, causing a chain reaction of Trey’s security moving in. Dornan immediately halted, holding up his hands.

“I’ve got all my guys looking for him. We’ll find him.”

Trey smirked. “You better, because if you don’t, we will. And if my men have to do your job, the only ones who’ll suffer will be you and yours. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes.”

Trey glanced over to one of his men and gestured toward the van. “Check it.”

“It’s all there!”

Trey slowly turned, eyeing Tom. He stepped forward, seemingly confident on the surface, but his gaze shifted to the van quickly, and he cleared his throat. “I personally checked it and did a count. It’s all there.”

Trey looked over the men and nodded. “I have two options. I can trust you and your crew, or I can base my decision on your past indiscretions.” Trey lifted his chin to the van. “I hope for your sake *‘it’s all there.’*”

It only took fifteen minutes before Trey’s men emerged from the van. Ten minutes too long. If they’d taken that

amount of time, it meant they were counting the inventory more than once because they'd found a discrepancy.

Trey kept his gaze locked on Tom as his head of security walked over.

“Two pieces short, sir,” Jared said.

Trey slowly nodded and turned to Dornan.

“Is Tom related to the driver?”

There was a slight hesitation before he answered.

“Cousins.”

It made more sense—Tom wanted to protect his family. In any other situation, Trey would respect the move, but in this instance, he did not. Trey glanced back at Jared and gestured to Tom. One direct order without saying a word. Trey didn't even spare the man a look. He was solely focused on Dornan's eyes widening and panic flashing over his features as he stepped back and turned slightly. Dornan's face paled, and his mouth fell open just as the gunshot rang out.

“I don't tolerate liars,” Trey said.

Dornan held up his hands. “We didn't know, I swear to you. Sometimes we do that for protection, but he didn't tell any of us he lifted a piece.”

What the fuck? Trey raised his brows. “You steal stock for your own protection?”

“B-borrow. Until the transfer's done, yeah.”

It was rare that Trey was ever rendered speechless, but he had no words. Not one. It seemed Rogue's need to continue building his army had left him scraping the bottom of the barrel. There were only two ways to handle this situation. The simplest and most effective was to ensure Dornan and his men didn't leave the warehouse. Ever. Taking out the entire crew would solve half the problem. Trey had no doubt they'd find the runner and retrieve the guns in no time. It was the obvious plan and the one Rogue would have taken.

But I'm not Rogue.

Unlike his counterpart, Trey saw the bigger picture. Without having a solid plan B in effect, they had no other option to make the delivery. They needed to find someone to move the inventory, and until then, Dornan's crew would be left unscathed—for now.

“You will find the driver,” Trey said.

Dornan nodded. “I’ll personally handle it. There won’t be any more mistakes.”

“For all your sakes, I hope there isn’t.”

Trey started to the door with one of his men sidling up next to him. He walked closer than usual, which meant he had the intel Trey needed.

“Just got a text. We got the driver.”

Trey smirked, shaking his head. He wasn’t surprised.

“Not a word to Dornan. We’re going to make him work a little.”

He subtly nodded and hung back two paces behind Trey as they walked out the door.

Chapter Two

“You’ve got to be kidding me?”

Dahlia grasped tightly to the railing inside the bus as it came to a stop. She squinted, leaning closer to the window. It was as if the heavens had opened up. Downpour was an understatement. Why? It had been cloudy all day, but not a single drop until she’d gotten on the bus. She glanced down at her umbrella. It would provide some shelter, but she still had to make it two blocks to the Bowery. It figured. She’d finally gotten an interview, and it was being sabotaged.

When the doors opened, she staggered to the front of the bus and stopped, peering through the opening. *Ah hell!*

It was raining even harder now. Seconds earlier, she hadn’t thought it was possible.

“You going out in that?”

Dahlia glanced down at Muriel, the driver. They were on a first-name basis. Two years ago, Dahlia’s car had died. *In the middle of Main Street. On a Friday. In rush hour traffic. That pretty much summed up the past seven hundred and thirty days in a nutshell.* At the time, the repairs were too costly, and she’d scrapped it at the junkyard. She’d intended on purchasing another when she got her finances in order. *Still waiting.*

It wasn’t so bad. Communal transportation where she was free to sleep, read, or watch videos while being chauffeured home for less than two dollars. It was certainly cost-effective, especially in her position. But there were days, such as this one, where a slight inconvenience became an all-out issue.

“A minute out there, you’ll look like a sewer rat.”

Yep. Shit!

“I don’t have much of a choice.” Dahlia sighed.

Without a car, Dahlia’s only options were walking and public transportation. Most days, she didn’t mind the exercise,

but the club was three miles away from her house, and the weather forecast had not been in her favor. She stepped forward, but Muriel immediately closed the doors.

“Tell you what, stay on. I got two more stops, then I’ll loop back around. Hopefully, it lightens up by then.” Muriel shook her head. “It can’t get much worse.”

It probably could, and with her luck, Dahlia was sure it would. Even with that said, it was a nice offer, and unfortunately, not one Dahlia could accept.

“I can’t. I have a job interview in ten minutes.”

“How far is it?”

“Two blocks down.”

Muriel leaned forward past Dahlia, glancing down the street. It was impossible to see through the heavy rain, but the driver tried.

“They’ve got GPS on me. I take an uncharted route, they’ll nail my ass, and as you know...” Muriel’s lips twisted, and she rolled her eyes. “I’m already on probation.”

Dahlia flattened her lips to conceal her smile. She hadn’t been on the bus when the altercation happened, but she’d heard all about it. Muriel was sweet, a grandmother to seven, and two years away from retiring with a pension. She had a lot to lose if she got fired. But it hadn’t stopped her from standing her ground with an unruly passenger. *It’s hard to fire a hero.* That was what most people saw Muriel as, including Dahlia. When there were whispers that she might lose her job, a lot of people rallied for her. Muriel was able to keep her job, but it came with conditions.

“How’s anger management?”

Muriel arched her brow. “It’s bullshit is what it is. But I worked too long to lose my money. So I’ll go and do what I gotta do.”

Dahlia grasped her shoulder in a gentle squeeze. “And I won’t let you do anything to jeopardize it. Open the doors. I’m going out.”

It took a minute, but eventually, Muriel opened the doors. Dahlia walked down the two steps and pulled out her umbrella, preparing to open it and duck out. At least the top half of her body would be shielded.

“Hey!”

Dahlia glanced over her shoulder.

“Good luck!” Muriel said.

Dahlia smiled. “Thanks!”

When she turned back, she inhaled a deep breath, extended her arm, and opened her umbrella. She quickly jumped down off the step and wasted no time. She rushed down the sidewalk, dodging massive puddles while trying to maintain her direction. Crowds weren't a concern. *I'm the only idiot out in this God-forsaken hurricane.* She'd only made it one block, and her legs, straight up to mid-thigh, were soaking wet. The only saving grace was her black skirt. It may have gotten wet, but nothing would show through.

Dahlia lengthened her steps and slipped but was able to catch herself. Falling to the ground would be the absolute worst. She squinted, seeing past the bushes on the corner just as the club came into sight. There was a flash of calm. This was almost over. It would've been a quicker end if she'd been headed toward the front of the building. However, Sloane was handling her interview and had instructed her to meet her at the back entrance. Dahlia bowed her head as the rain shifted direction.

Sideways rain. *Really?* She rounded the corner of the building, hugging tightly to the wall. There was no roof and barely an overhang to provide any shelter. She looked over the back, expecting to see a door. Unfortunately, there were two, and neither one was marked for employees. *Shit!*

Dahlia walked between both access doors, noticing a key card for one and a pin pad for the other. On a whim, she tried opening it, hoping it was unlocked.

“Of course not, because that would work in my favor, and fate hates me today.” Dahlia knocked, waiting as the rain

pelted her side. She adjusted her stance, but she was only evening out being drenched. *I'm like a rotisserie chicken, only it's water, not fire.*

Between the bouts of thunder crackling and the rain, it was a miracle she even heard her phone ring. She turned, shifting the umbrella between her shoulder and cheek to stabilize it while she rummaged through her pocketbook in search of her phone. Her hands were damp, and it slipped from her hold two times before she got a firm grip and pulled it out. She didn't even bother looking at the screen.

"Hello?"

"Dahlia, it's Sloane, I'm so sorry. I left early, I swear I did, but the traffic is horrendous. They shut down Carver Road due to flooding, and I had to reroute."

Dahlia smiled, nodding. "I know, and it's totally fine. Take your time."

Please don't take your time.

"It should take me fifteen minutes at most."

Oh, God. She'd be drenched head to toe in fifteen minutes. At least Sloane would give her some leeway in assessing her appearance.

"Okay, drive safe." Dahlia paused. "Would it be okay if I stood out front under the awning?"

"Don't you want to wait in your car?"

"I actually took the bus here, so..."

There was a pained screech. "Oh my God, Dahlia, you're waiting in the rain for me? I'm so sorry! I can't believe I did this."

Dahlia started calling her name, but Sloane went off on a tangent. Half of it was incoherent. But the self-berating was loud and clear.

"Sloane!" Dahlia shouted loud enough to get her attention.

"I'm so sorry." Sloane's voice was low and regretful.

“It’s totally fine. Just drive safely.”

“You can’t wait outside. Hang on...”

Dahlia couldn’t hear much, but it sounded like Sloane was rifling through papers.

“The door on the left has a pin pad. The code is 9983. You can wait inside.”

Dahlia peered over at the other door.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, there’s no one in this early anyway. Just wait inside, please. It would make me feel better, and...” Sloane paused. “I would drive a lot safer knowing you were inside somewhere dry.”

Dahlia snickered. Sloane was known for her guilt trips, but she wouldn’t argue with her friend.

“Okay.”

“Perfect! See you in a few.”

“Bye.” Dahlia hung up and dropped her phone in her bag. She was only a few feet from the door, but a gust of wind caught the edge of her umbrella and flipped it inside out, taking away any and all shelter from the rain. She gasped as it poured down over her. She stumbled toward the door, not even bothering to fight with her umbrella. She punched in the code, ripped open the door, and ran inside.

Thank God!

She shook off her umbrella, and rested it against the wall. Dahlia wiped her arms, shaking herself in hopes of losing some of the water. Impossible. It had soaked through her clothes, sending a cool chill over her body. The air conditioner was obviously on high, making an icy combination.

Dahlia rubbed her arms, glancing around the immediate area. It was dimly lit, with one leather couch against the wall and a table at the end. She considered sitting down, but if she had to guess, the couch was authentic leather.

Dahlia paced around the room, noticing the corner opening up into a hallway. *I'm the only one here.* She walked down, eyeing the art lining the walls. She'd never been into art or anything fancy. *Give me a puppy print over this mess any day of the week.* She walked slowly, eyeing all the framed paintings. She shook her head, mentally mocking them. They had to be expensive. Somebody definitely overpaid.

She was so enamored with the art she hadn't realized how far she'd walked until she got to the stairs.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Oh, shit!

"Trey?"

He glanced up from his desk to find his head of security, Jared, standing in the doorway. Trey and Rogue had separate security, but Jared served as lead on both teams. He'd been working in the Underground for about twelve years, starting as most did running drugs. Unlike some who got stagnant in their positions, Jared worked up the ranks, impressing Trey and even Rogue, which was not an easy task.

"Are you expecting someone? A woman?"

Trey knitted his brows and scoffed. *No, but I could use one right now.*

"No."

"There's a woman downstairs. She used the code to get in."

Trey straightened in his seat. The only woman who had access to the code was Sloane, who everyone knew and wouldn't have questioned. Trey turned to his computer, tapped the keys, pulled up the security cameras, and zoomed in on the interior entrance.

From his angle, it was difficult to make out her face. Rod, a new hire to the club, towered over her and had the woman backed into the corner of the small room. Trey turned on the sound.

“Who the fuck are you? Give me your fucking name!” Rod shouted.

His tone was aggressive and menacing. It was exactly what he’d expect his men to use with anyone daring to infiltrate their club.

Trey hadn’t heard the response.

“Louder!”

“Dahlia Carter.” Her tone, even shaky and shouting, was gentle. And scared.

Trey’s back went rigid, and his muscles tightened. He knew the name, but more importantly, recognized the soft voice. It wasn’t quite high-pitched but overly feminine and sultry—usually. Now, her voice shook slightly, lacking confidence. He stared down at the screen. He didn’t have the best visual with Rod blocking her, but as his gaze drifted down to her legs, he ground his teeth. It was Dahlia. They’d only had a few interactions, but it was enough to have every inch of her body and face ingrained in his mind.

Trey balled his fists, glaring down at the screen. He’d known this day would come. After much encouragement, a bartered deal, and an egregious amount of begging from the manager, Sloane, Trey had allowed Dahlia an interview to work at the club. However, Sloane hadn’t mentioned exactly when.

“How the fuck did you get in?” Rod snapped harshly, and Trey jerked his head toward the screen. His security now had her pressed against the wall, and her hand shook as she lifted it in defense.

Fuck!

It was barely a second before he shot up from his chair. “Get me the elevator.”

“Yes, sir.” Jared disappeared down the hall, and Trey grabbed his jacket from his chair. He stalked down the hallway to the end, where the open door was waiting for him.

Dahlia Carter.

Ahhh, fuck me!

Trey knew exactly why she was at the club but wasn't sure why she'd been waiting in their personal lobby. No one was permitted access through their private entrance without his or Rogue's authority. And she didn't have it. Trey walked inside the elevator and slammed the button, waiting for the doors to close. He'd deal with her personally. Ironic since he'd done everything in his power to deliberately *not* interact with Dahlia Carter.

She'd become a secret obsession for him after he'd met her the first time at the Ghosttown East MC clubhouse. This fucking woman. A stranger. Not fully. He'd met her, heard of her, and in a few rare instances, interacted with her, though not by choice. Trey made a point of staying away from Dahlia. As he did with all women, he kept them at arm's length unless they shared his bed. Even then, it was for a few hours, and they were gone. Women were a distraction and had no place in his world. Especially this one. Dahlia may have spent time with associates within the Underground, but she wasn't the type to survive in his world. Too soft, too naïve, and too nice.

Trey's phone rang just as the doors opened. It was the call from Rogue he'd been waiting on for the past two hours. He reached for his phone, knowing this took precedence over anything else.

"I'm sorry."

Trey stilled with his hand in his chest pocket. There was something about her voice, or maybe it was her words that triggered his heart rate, and it started pumping along with his blood through his veins. While his interactions with her had been limited, Dahlia never wavered from her overly bubbly and friendly demeanor. It could have been a front, but Trey knew how to read people and find deceit in not only what they said but how they acted. It was imperative in his line of work. From everything he'd seen and heard about her, she was genuinely scared.

"Who the fuck let you in?" Rod shouted.

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," Dahlia said.

Trey dropped his hand to his side, ignored the call, and stepped out of the elevator, leaving him a few feet from Rod and Dahlia. He'd taught himself long ago to separate from everyone around him. He had allies, enemies, and employees. No one got close to him except a very select few he considered family.

It took a long time to train himself to force down any emotion, especially empathy. It was a downfall in his line of work. It was a weakness that got people killed. Trey was a master at shutting down and keeping himself and those around him guarded. However, it seemed all his restraint was no match for one dark-haired beauty.

Trey had done his research on Dahlia Carter. It was a first, actually. Aside from a reference, background, and finance check, employees weren't subjected to a deep dive into their personal lives. Dahlia had been his exception. Trey had made excuses to himself. She'd worked at the MCs. Therefore, she could have an ulterior motive, possibly even be a setup by East. It was far-fetched but not unheard of. Every reason he drummed up seemed viable and valid.

However, as he dug more into her past, a different picture emerged. A life that had its struggles and tragedy and loss. Trey himself didn't have any family to speak of, but he had people he deemed family. Losing a member would be devastating, and he'd watched others around him struggle with their own loss years later. Dahlia was no different. Knowing her past humanized her. It made him question how she could seemingly look at the world through rose-colored glasses. Again, it could've been an act on her part, but Trey would've read through it. Seen past the faux smiles. Dahlia didn't seem to shield anything in their very few interactions. She blushed, and her voice shook when they'd first met. She'd stared too long with too much interest, and even when caught, she merely smiled. *A fucking beautiful smile.*

Dahlia wasn't like other women in his world. She wasn't hardened or out to prove anything. It made her dangerous to a man like Trey, who couldn't combat his attraction or his

unrelenting need to protect her, especially watching her shudder against a man twice her size.

Fuck! He ground his teeth, clenched his fist, and drew in a deep breath.

“Rod,” Trey said, keeping his tone under control. It was another skill he’d mastered years ago.

Both Rod and Dahlia looked over at him.

“I don’t know who the fuck she is, sir.”

Trey walked into the entry, slowly nodding. Her eyes widened with droplets of water sprinkled over her face. Her usually thick, wavy brown hair was soaked and matted down. *And she’s still fucking gorgeous.*

“She’s Dahlia Carter.” Trey arched his brow and glanced over to Rod. “Back up.”

The man immediately retreated, standing a few feet away, and Trey turned his attention to Dahlia.

“How did you get in here?”

“I have an interview.”

Dahlia was noticeably shaking, and her throat bobbed as if in pure distress. Usually, it was how he enjoyed watching defiant people. But not her. Dahlia grazed her teeth over her bottom lip and shifted nervously on her feet. Her head was slightly bowed, but he caught her eyes as they quickly glanced up and then dropped down to the floor. Trey was dominant by nature or possibly nurtured to be that way. He felt powerful when others bowed down, but he didn’t get off on fear like some others.

“Dahlia.” His tone was commanding, graveled slightly. She glanced up, eyes so soft and endearing, they were almost irresistible. *Almost.* Still, Trey refused to give in and be enamored by her beauty.

“That’s not what I asked you.”

Dahlia shrunk slightly, darting her eyes from left to right, effectively avoiding eye contact. Again.

When she straightened, his gaze dropped down over her body. There'd been an effort to look her best. It was a far cry from how she'd dressed when she was spending time at the Ghosttown East MC. It seemed Dahlia had ditched her bra tops and tiny shorts for a short, tightly fitted black skirt and a semi-conservative white blouse. It probably would have been more conservative had the rain not soaked her shirt, making it almost transparent and outlining her black lacy bra. It was certainly a look he hadn't seen often outside of strip clubs. Trey was sure it wasn't the look she was going for.

"Do you need me to repeat the question?" Trey steeled his features when her lips formed an O, and she blinked incessantly.

"Sloane gave me the code so I could wait inside. She's running late and didn't want me to have to stay out in the rain."

That explained it, and it wasn't a huge concern. Sloane, who'd worked for them for years, was trustworthy enough and knew the rules. Never one to break them, he was almost impressed she did so. However, he was sure Sloane wouldn't have done that for just anyone. No, Dahlia was a friend. Even with his understanding, it didn't stop his interrogation.

"You couldn't wait in your car?"

She swallowed and shook her head. "I took the bus here."

The bus?

"Where's your car?" Trey asked.

Dahlia pressed her lips together, staring back at him. There was a distinct panic in her gaze. He raised his brows, waiting. Dahlia brushed her hair from her face. It was a stall tactic he'd seen a dozen times. It was a simple question that she seemed to be struggling with.

"It's in the shop." Her gaze immediately averted across the room, and her cheeks pinkened. She was definitely lying, though he couldn't pinpoint her reasoning. Trey folded his arms over his chest.

"The bus doesn't come down this street."

Dahlia widened her eyes. Her mascara was smudged slightly, enhancing her eyes. She pointed toward the wall. “The stop is two blocks down.”

Her response caught him off guard. He’d just driven in, and the rain had been torrential.

“You walked the two blocks?”

Her smile was shaky as she waved her hands across her body. “Obviously.”

She was trying to make light of the situation, but Trey’s focus locked on her white blouse that was now soaked and failing to conceal a dark lacy bra. Dahlia smiled, looking between him and the security.

“I swear I looked better when I left the house.”

Trey didn’t doubt it. In fact, the few times he’d seen her, she’d always looked good. Enticing, tempting, and sexy. His attraction made no sense. Sure, she was gorgeous, but Trey had been surrounded by women who’d been categorized as tens. Dahlia should’ve been no different. Yet, whenever he was around her, he’d felt a pull, a physical reaction. His blood heated, his muscles tensed, and his control wavered. He could have her. One night. Two if he wanted. He knew it. Trey just didn’t know if that would be enough.

His world was hard, cruel, deadly, and cold. It was no place for a woman like her.

“Follow me,” Trey said and turned, walking down the hall. He didn’t bother looking back. He knew she was behind him. Her heels clicked against the floor, and when he stopped at one of the doors, she immediately halted. He punched in the code and opened the door, holding it and jerking his chin for her to walk past him. Her arm brushed against his chest in the tight quarters.

There were two separate entrances divided by a wall where only a few knew the code. Trey led her down a short hall to Sloane’s office. He opened the door, turned on the light, and waited for Dahlia to walk in. She leaned in the doorway, poking her head inside before slipping past him again. Being

so close, he took in her scent. Strawberries. It was pleasant and sweet and showcased her innocence. Dahlia stepped inside but made no move to take a seat.

“How long did Sloane say she’d be?”

Dahlia spun around and widened her eyes. “Um, fifteen minutes.”

Trey slowly nodded and stepped out, grasping the door handle.

“Thanks again.”

She was twisting her hands and smiling.

“For what?”

“The job.”

Trey sharpened his gaze. “You didn’t get the job yet.”

Her face paled, realizing she’d misspoken. Trey wasn’t a fool. He was well aware Dahlia would be hired immediately by Sloane. It didn’t stop him from enjoying her nervous shudder and unmistakable uneasiness.

“Oh no.” She waved her hand and shook her head. “I meant the opportunity. The interview. Nothing else.”

Trey flattened his lips, holding back his smile. He was enjoying this too much. It wasn’t often he indulged in anything, but Dahlia was proving to be his Achilles heel. And he wasn’t quite ready for it to end.

Trey stepped out of the room, closed the door, and started down the hall, smirking. A plan had formulated in his head. One he couldn’t resist.

Chapter Three

Dahlia drew in a deep breath, finally able to settle since Trey had walked out and closed the door behind him. That was not the impression she was going for. After all the time she'd waited to get the interview, this was the worst-case scenario.

Why does he have to be so damn hot? Dahlia sunk in her chair, driving her hand through her hair. This unrelenting, juvenile crush was sabotaging her future. Trey was a bit of a mindfuck. He proved to be the only man on the planet capable of rocking her. True, she wasn't exactly comfortable in every man's presence. Still, there was something about Trey that had her reverting to an insecure, blubbering moron who couldn't form an intelligent sentence and blushing at immediate contact. *This is not me!*

But maybe it wasn't just her. It was possible all women would become inept and stuttering nonsense in his presence. Trey had an aura about him. It was commanding, dominant, and impossible to ignore. The way he spoke, how he looked and carried himself. Nothing but perfection from this man. Those facts alone confirmed he was beyond out of her league. Still, she looked, stared, blushed, and stuttered because how could she not? *Crushes are the fucking worst! Especially at twenty-seven.*

Dahlia pulled out her phone, needing a distraction. Thank God for funny memes, silly quizzes, and social media drama where she knew none of the players but was totally invested in the outcome and resolution.

True to her word, Sloane rushed in fifteen minutes later, apologizing profusely.

"I'm so sorry, Dahlia." Sloane was half-soaked herself as she tossed her bag and folded umbrella on the floor next to her desk. She swept her damp bangs across her forehead and spun around. Her smile faltered when she glanced down at Dahlia. She cupped her mouth and widened her eyes. "You're drenched!"

She was, which was not Sloane's fault, and she wouldn't allow her friend to have any guilt.

Dahlia laughed. "Sloane, it's fine. I'll dry. But if you feel that bad, you can just give me the job, and we can go out for a drink to celebrate."

Sloane grinned. "Oh, you got the job, but I still have to formally conduct the interview."

Perfect.

"Uh, just one thing, and I hope you don't get in trouble. When I was waiting in the lobby, Trey came in with another man." Dahlia paused, wondering how much she should share about the aggressive interaction with Rod.

"Trey put you in my office?"

"Yeah, and he asked how I got in the building. I didn't want to lie because people usually don't hire liars, so I told him you gave me the code. Is that okay?"

Sloane arched her brow. "Of course, I'd never expect you to lie for me or anyone else. That's Trey and Rogue's private entrance to their offices upstairs, but he can't be upset knowing the weather."

Couldn't he? Trey didn't seem exactly thrilled to see her. Then again, he'd never shown any emotion in their few interactions.

"I just didn't want to get you in trouble for giving me the code."

Sloane snickered. "Trey is always annoyed with me for one reason or another. It's not an issue, so don't worry, okay?"

"Okay."

Sloane reached into her desk drawer, pulling out a stack of papers. "I have a bunch of forms you have to sign and an interview evaluation. Just a formality, though. I have to dot all my 'i's and cross my 't's."

Dahlia's lips twitched, watching Sloane at her desk. For all her quirks and oddities, Sloane was one of her favorite

people.

Dahlia had just finished filling out all the forms when she heard a knock on the door.

Aaron walked in, sharing a look with Sloane. “Got a minute?”

Sloane shifted her gaze to Dahlia. “Not really. Dahlia has waited patiently enough for her interview, and I don’t want to take any more of her time.”

Dahlia inched up on her seat. “Sloane, it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. I should’ve left earlier, anticipated the traffic considering the weather.” Sloane nodded, making her intention clear. Aaron would have to wait. Dahlia came first. It was a respectful gesture and one Dahlia appreciated. She wouldn’t argue with Sloane, who seemed set in her ways.

Aaron cleared his throat. “Actually, it’s in regards to the interview.”

Dahlia jerked her head, staring up at Aaron. He spared her a quick glance and a tight smile but turned back to Sloane.

“Dahlia’s interview?” Sloane asked.

Aaron drew in a breath, darting his gaze between both women. “Trey said he’ll handle it himself.”

Sloane had the same reaction as Dahlia. Utter disbelief and shock.

“What?” Sloane asked.

Aaron shrugged, appearing a bit uncomfortable, which only intensified Dahlia’s anxiety.

“Does Trey handle hiring the staff?” Dahlia shifted her gaze between Sloane and Aaron.

There was a long stretch of silence. This was not good.

“Not usually,” Sloane said, continuing to stare back at Aaron. It was easy to see the connection between the two. They’d obviously worked together for a while and had a mutual respect. Maybe even a friendship.

“Is this the first time?”

Sloane glanced up and flattened her lips. That would be a yes. *Shit!* What was it with this man? Dahlia had made a point of being friendly to him and retained her smile even when it wasn't reciprocated. She'd naturally assumed Trey's standoffish nature had more to do with being at the MC clubhouse than her personally. But there were other indications he wasn't very impressed with Dahlia. She'd gone out of her way to speak to him on one occasion and went down in flames under his hard, cold demeanor.

“Technically, yes, but...” Sloane stood, rushing around her desk, stopping in front of Dahlia's chair, and bumping into her knees in the process. Sloane bent down, grabbed her leg, and squeezed. It was meant to be reassuring and put Dahlia at ease. “Maybe this is a new protocol they're introducing. You don't have anything to worry about.”

“Ah, shit,” Dahlia muttered.

Sloane waved her hand. “You've got nothing to worry about. You have a lot of experience. You're beautiful, which shouldn't matter, but unfortunately, it does here. They'd never admit it, but if you look around, all the servers and employees look like cover models.” Sloane grinned. “You'll fit right in.”

Dahlia knew what Sloane was trying to do with her reassurance. It was supposed to help. Unfortunately, it didn't. Dahlia was too far in her own head. *He's never going to hire me.*

Aaron cleared his throat. “You wouldn't happen to have an extra top, would you?”

Dahlia and Sloane looked up at Aaron, who gestured toward Dahlia.

“Oh boy,” Sloane muttered.

“What?” Dahlia said, then turned toward the mirror on the wall. From her seated position, she could only make out above her neck. Her eye makeup was a little smeared, but nothing she couldn't clean up quickly. She slowly stood and gasped, then covered her arms over her breasts.

Aside from her button coming undone and displaying a good amount of cleavage, her white shirt was soaked through, revealing her dark lace bra.

“It was laundry day, and my other bra was in the hamper. I swear it wasn’t see-through when I left the house.”

Fuck!

Sloane jerked her head to Aaron. “Do we have any extra white shirts in here?”

Aaron cocked his brow. “The only one who might have an extra would be Trey.”

Dahlia groaned, dropped into her seat, and covered her face. “I can’t believe this is my life.” She immediately felt a hand on her back, rubbing in a circular motion.

“Dahlia, it’s fine. Please don’t be upset.” Sloane was trying to soothe her, which was appreciated, but it wouldn’t fix the dilemma.

Another humiliating thought ran through her mind. Trey had obviously seen her already. *Damn!*

“Dahlia, she’s right,” Aaron said, inching closer and pointing to the outside wall. “We all got caught in this weather. It’s not a big deal. But I gotta say, the longer you keep him waiting, the more you run the risk of pissing him off. Trey doesn’t like to wait.”

Oh shit!

She jumped up from her seat, haphazardly knocking Sloane backward. Dahlia reached out to grab Sloane’s arm, and thankfully, Aaron was close enough to catch her. He let out a burly laugh and shook his head.

“Jesus, you two are the three stooges minus Curly.”

Sloane glanced over at Dahlia, smiling.

“Come on, I’ll walk you up.” Sloane offered her hand and started to the door, but Aaron stepped into her path.

“I’ll take her up. Trey said for you to stay down here.”

“Okay.” Sloane knitted her brows, seemingly confused and a bit unnerved.

Aaron shrugged. “His orders, Sloane.”

“Sure.” Sloane turned to Dahlia, smiling, though it seemed forced. “Good luck. You’re going to be great.”

“Thanks.”

Dahlia followed Aaron through the dark hall onto the floor. He made a quick left up the stairs. Dahlia sneaked a peek at the empty club. She’d only been there once, and it was strange to see it without any people. It only intensified her anxiety. Dahlia was ill-prepared for another run-in with Trey.

Oh God! Why am I like this? He was just a man. A man who held the key and cards to her potential future. She needed this job.

As they started up the stairs, Dahlia looked up into the balcony. She’d expected a luxurious layout, but nothing prepared her for the reality. It wasn’t huge, only a few tables with a bar tucked in the corner near the curtains. But it screamed money from the furniture down to the art hanging on the walls. Unlike the paintings in the lobby, the balcony walls were lined with art constructed of metal. Dahlia scanned each piece. They were interesting, unique, and beautiful. *I would trade a puppy print for one of these.*

“This way,” Aaron said and held open the curtain, letting her pass in front of him. He took the lead down the hall and made a sharp left. Dahlia eyed the men lined up along the wall. It reminded her of all the military men she’d seen in movies. None of them made eye contact, instead staring straight ahead.

Aaron stopped at the door, waving her inside. Dahlia hesitated and lowered her voice.

“Any advice?”

Aaron snorted, whispering, “Don’t piss him off.”

That’s not helpful at all, Aaron! She had no intention of pissing him off. If anything, Dahlia was looking for advice on

winning him over. Was that even possible? In her head, Trey had already made up his mind about her. *I am my own worst enemy*. Especially when it came to her private insecurities. Dahlia drew in a breath and walked inside, slowly taking in her surroundings. *Holy fuck!* She expected it to be nice, but this was another level.

Dahlia inched closer to the desk, fighting against the butterflies in her stomach. Trey was seated with his phone to his ear. *Could this man be any more gorgeous?* Her breath hitched. Heat ran through her veins. Lusting after her soon-to-be boss was a recipe for disaster.

Dahlia stood by the edge of his desk, waiting to be acknowledged.

“You did this! And I’m the one fixing it, so make the fucking call.” Trey’s harsh tone on the call meant someone was in trouble. This was not the mood she’d hoped for during her interview. She’d been around enough hotheaded, broody men to know they didn’t easily simmer down.

Trey dropped the phone on the desk, turned in his seat, and gave Dahlia his back.

“Sit down.”

She furrowed her brows, flickering her gaze to the chairs. There were two. She was sure it didn’t matter which one she sat in. After all, they were identical. But...

“Does it matter where I sit?”

He slowly turned and scowled. “Preferably a chair.”

Dahlia couldn’t help herself and chuckled, then immediately clamped her lips, noticing Trey’s joke was only funny to her.

She dropped to the seat closest to her, clasping her hands on her lap. She glanced around his office, taking it all in. She’d been on plenty of interviews, but none in an office as fancy and pristine as Trey’s. It was much larger than most offices she’d been in and seemed to have a homier vibe. Like a very wealthy home. When she turned back in her seat, her heart skipped. She wasn’t sure how long he’d been watching

her inspect his space, but he didn't seem pleased about it. His brows were dipped in a severe scowl. She offered a shaky smile, which was not returned.

"You have a very nice office." She pressed her lips together.

Trey remained silent, simply staring back at her. Any other time, she'd appreciate his attention. Now, it only compounded her anxiousness. Her mind was going in a million different directions, trying to come up with something to say. Witty, charismatic, engaging, hell, she'd settle for funny at this point. Unfortunately, she was drawing a blank and was left with only honesty.

"I'm a little nervous." Dahlia cleared her throat. "Um, I guess our past interactions are making me a bit anxious."

Trey raised his brows, clasped his hands, and settled in his chair. Did he not remember? Of course, he wouldn't. They weren't nearly as memorable for him as they were for her.

She licked her lips. "We actually met before at East. Not formally, but you were there to see Gunner. I was the one who went back and told them." She forced a smile. "I offered you a drink, and you declined?"

It was clear Trey had no recollection. Meanwhile, Dahlia had thought about it several times over the past months.

"And then, um...you were there another time, and I mentioned being on the waiting list for the position. We were standing by the door. Someone opened it, and it came flying toward my face. You grabbed it before it hit me."

That memory would forever be ingrained in her mind. It had all happened so quickly that Dahlia barely had time to react, but Trey's arm shot out before it could slam into her face. It was a hero-worship moment on her end. But from the look on his face, he had no recollection.

She waved her hand, then quickly noticed the small shake and tucked it under her thigh. "You probably don't remember me."

Trey's gaze darkened. "I remember."

Without any control, she smiled. *He remembers me.*

Trey cocked his head and squared his jaw. Obviously, he wasn't remembering as fondly as she did. "You came into the club with Ryder and specifically paid for a drink when I told you not to."

Oh shit. Why did that have to be the one time he remembered her? It wasn't one of her finer moments. She'd overreacted. Maybe. Dahlia had been triggered. After waiting months just for an interview, she'd found out another bartender had been given an interview and hired by Trey without any waiting period. She shouldn't have allowed it to bother her, but in some way, it had felt personal. She'd gotten a bit sassy with Trey and blatantly disobeyed his instructions. *Now, I'm paying the price.*

"Is defiance part of your work ethic?"

Hole, where are you—swallow me up.

"N-no, I'm sorry about that."

She wiggled in her seat. The wet fabric sticking to her thighs and chest was not helping her ease into this interview. She grabbed the collar of her shirt, trying to form some space between the damp blouse and her black bra. Too much fidgeting had gotten her the wrong kind of attention. Trey was inspecting her hands, and ultimately, her shirt. He obviously lacked any interest in her, responding with a tight scowl.

"I usually don't pair up a white shirt with a black bra." She giggled nervously, feeling the prickling heat rise from her chest to her face. "I now realize the importance of making laundry day a priority. I had a few things going on and..." Dahlia waved her hand. "Well, I'm sure you don't want to hear about that, though."

"I don't."

Cold as fucking ice. Never once in her very few interactions with Trey had she gotten a warm fuzzy feeling. Hard nipples, wet panties, and an over-eager clit, yes, but this desire or infatuation was definitely one-sided.

He looked over at his computer.

“It doesn’t list your past employers for the last three years.”

She arched her neck, glancing over at his screen. From the distance, it was hard to make out the writing, but from what she gathered, it was the resume she’d sent over to Sloane six months ago. It wouldn’t be impressive to a man like Trey. Dahlia had barely graduated high school and never made any effort to further her education. It just wasn’t for her. She’d always worked but mostly lived paycheck to paycheck. It made paying expenses a bit harder but allowed her to live her life as she chose. Being a free spirit wasn’t necessarily great for her bank account, but it fed her soul.

Dahlia scooted to the edge of her seat. “Well, I bartended at East, and before that, Satan’s Hex.”

Trey slowly glanced over at her, arching his brow. If it wasn’t so intimidating, she would’ve found it extremely sexy.

“That’s your experience?”

There was no missing the condescending tone. She swallowed the lump in her throat. This was not going how she had planned.

“No formal training?”

“No, but um, I can make any drink. Grain, he’s a member of East, taught me everything, and trust me—” She laughed lightly then sobered up, realizing Trey’s glare made it evident he was not amused nor impressed. “He knows drinks.”

“Wine?”

“Not a lot of wine drinkers at the MC except for Lil. I know what she likes.” Dahlia chuckled, hoping to break the tension in the room. She failed. *Again.* Dahlia cleared her throat. “But I can learn.”

“We have over a hundred.”

A hundred what? Wines?

Her mouth fell open. “Different kinds?”

His blank stare hardened. Wrong question. *Shit!*

Dahlia drew in a breath, inching up on the end of her seat. “I’m a fast learner. And a really hard worker. You can check my references. I take my jobs very seriously. I show up on time, almost never call out sick, and I’ll give one hundred percent, I promise.”

Her speech didn’t quite land as she’d planned. Dahlia came out sounding desperate as opposed to confident. It was no surprise to her. Dahlia knew her insecurities were her biggest enemy. It was always so easy to find the faults and flaws in herself. They somehow managed to outshine her best qualities.

Trey sighed, glancing over at her resume once again.

“We hire bartenders with a more elaborate work history.”

“Oh, well.” She frowned. “I have lots of experience.”

His gaze shifted back to her. “Not the kind we’re looking for.”

It was as if he’d struck her. It resulted in the same response. Dahlia winced, and she sunk deeper into her seat, her shoulders weighing heavy as she gripped the arms of the chair.

This was a mistake. She should have known better. *I don’t belong here.*

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that dig. Dahlia felt the burn. Felt it to her core. *Judgement.* She clasped her hands, staring down at her purple nail polish. He’d probably viewed it as trashy. Trey was definitely a subdued color of polish kind of guy.

But I like purple. It was who Dahlia was. Bold colors. But even Dahlia knew it went beyond her style choices. Trey was well aware of her past with the MCs and had clearly formed his own opinion of her choices. He hadn’t come outright and said it, but she’d gotten the same judgment from others. Spending time and partying with the clubs had never been a regret. But it didn’t come without consequences.

She bowed her head and smiled. It contradicted how she felt, but she could appreciate the irony. She’d walked in, trying

to impress Trey, but he'd made his mind up before she'd stepped through the door.

"Ya know what? As someone who's a boss, you should be judging people based on their skills and nothing else. My personal business has nothing to do with my professional life."

"Did I say any different?" Trey was beyond calm and in control, which only heightened her frustration.

"You implied it." Her voice was soft and unsure.

"How so?"

Trey's challenge only had Dahlia drawing herself inward. This was one fight she had no faith in a victory. Trey had all the answers and held all the cards. She was slated to lose any debate on her experience or even herself. People like Trey always won.

She shook her head. "I can't go head-to-head with you, Trey."

There was a flash of heat in his eyes just before his gaze hardened once again.

She stood and flattened her hands on her thighs.

"I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me personally. But we both know you aren't going to hire me. So, it's probably best to stop wasting both our time. Thanks for the interview." Dahlia turned and made it halfway across the room.

"I usually end a meeting. Not the person I'm interviewing."

Dahlia stopped a few feet away, staring at the door. She was well-aware of etiquette, and the interviewee ending the interview was not the usual protocol. *But what does it matter?* This wasn't the first time someone had based their opinion of her on superficial reasons or her lifestyle choices. And it certainly wouldn't be the last.

She could've ignored his comment and walked out. What fun would that be? At this point, she had nothing to lose. Trey made up his mind the second he saw her in the lobby. He

didn't think she was worthy of working at his club. It was probably why he'd insisted on holding the interview. *Well, Trey, I'm going to give you exactly what you expect.*

She glanced over her shoulder. "It's like my dad used to say--there's a first time for everything." Dahlia smiled and playfully shrugged. "I'm honored to have popped your cherry, Trey."

Dahlia raised her brows, getting no reaction from him. It was enough to regain some of her dignity. She walked to the door, consciously watching her speed. Her departing words would have been less effective had she rushed out. She needed to be the essence of confidence.

She continued down the hall almost to the end when a member of security stepped in front of her. Dahlia moved to the right to let him pass, but he matched her steps.

"How about I stay still, and you can pass? Otherwise, we might be dancing all day."

Her attempt at humor obviously went over his head. He motioned toward Trey's office.

"He's not done with you."

Dahlia snorted. "No, trust me, he is."

"Trey says he isn't." He pointed behind her. "He wants you back in his office."

Oh dammit. I finally get a superb final line, and this man has to call me back in.

"I'm just going to go now."

The man glared harshly. "*After* you speak with Trey."

Ah, shit!

Dahlia hesitated, but his guard wasn't going to allow her to leave, so she walked back down the hall, knowing all the men were watching her. She stepped inside the doorway and stopped.

If she'd thought Trey seemed unwelcoming and intolerable during the interview, nothing prepared her for the

harsh glare he was sending her now.

Dahlia stood in the doorway. All her confidence from a minute earlier was gone, replaced with a hint of fear and regret. Trey continued to glare, making her shift on her feet. He didn't say a word, but when he lifted his hand, her eyes followed as he pointed to the chair she'd been sitting in earlier.

Her throat bobbed as she took slow steps across the room. Her gaze veered to the floor as she took her seat, folding her hands on her lap. Her silky dark hair fell over her shoulder, forming a curtain around her face. It was longer than he remembered. She brushed the pads of her fingers on her bare knees as her skirt hiked up well past mid-thigh. Trey didn't have a specific type or preference when it came to women, but Dahlia checked off all the boxes when it came to beauty.

Trey tapped his knuckles on his desk and waited until she glanced up, meeting his stare.

"Would you like to know what I find most interesting about you?" He paused and watched as she shifted in her seat, losing her last bit of confidence. "For someone who accuses another of being judgmental, you seem to be making quite a few assumptions and judgments of your own."

Trey didn't expect her to respond, but she did.

"You blatantly insulted me." Her voice shook slightly.

Interesting.

Trey cocked his brow. "How?"

"You said my *experience* isn't what you're looking for."

"It's not."

Dahlia blinked and scoffed, shaking her head. "And you don't find that offensive?"

"No."

"Unbelievable," she muttered under her breath, but Trey heard it. She grabbed the arms of the chair, but before she could fully stand, he slammed his hand down on his desk, gaining her attention. Dahlia flinched and then froze.

“Sit down,” Trey ordered, narrowing his gaze.

Surprisingly, Dahlia followed his command.

“Correct me if I’m wrong.” Trey drew in a breath, cupping his mouth. “You worked at two bars, both MCs. From what I understand, all members drink free, which makes up more than half the attendees or clientele at their parties. Therefore, the only cash or payment exchange would be with guests. Correct?”

Trey knew he was right. He knew the way they operated.

Dahlia confirmed it with a sharp nod.

“I’m also aware that their bar is stocked primarily with specific alcohol because that’s what they drink. Bourbon, whiskey, vodka, scotch, tequila. And beer. I’m sure there aren’t many requests for an Old-Fashioned, Cosmopolitan, or a Pomegranate Martini. The MCs don’t have wine on hand, nor do they stock many mixers or liqueurs. Correct?”

Dahlia gave a small shrug, ultimately giving a small nod.

“Your *experience bartending* at the MCs doesn’t equate to working here. You’ve probably handled cash for about fifty paying customers a night at the MCs, and that’s me being generous with the estimation. A single bartender here will handle thousands over the course of a six-hour shift. They’ll also prepare all the specialty drinks, every drink imaginable. Very rarely will you get a *whiskey neat* for anyone who comes up to the bar. I’ll ask you again. Do you think *your* experience is what *my* club is looking for?”

Dahlia glanced down at the floor. She didn’t answer.

“Look at me!” His tone was harsher than he’d intended, but it got her attention. Dahlia glanced up, her lips pulled down in a severe frown. For a brief second, he considered backing off.

But he didn’t.

“That’s not what you thought when I commented about your experience. Your mind went in an entirely different direction, all because you walked in here thinking you knew

me better than you actually do. In fact, you don't know me at all, but it didn't stop *you* from making judgments, did it?"

Her cheeks pinkened, but she kept her head bowed.

"Did it?" Trey snapped, and she jerked her head up.

"No," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

There was a long stretch of silence while Trey dealt with something he usually didn't have to contend with. Guilt. He cupped his mouth, watching her shift slightly and grasp the edge of her shirt. This whole interview had been an absolute clusterfuck. He'd come at her hard, and her retaliation only fueled his fire. It was rare anyone challenged Trey. But she had and was now paying the price. Somehow, he didn't take any joy in it. His intent wasn't to embarrass her, but he wouldn't sit by allowing her to make assumptions about him. He was well aware of Dahlia's reputation in the MC, and more importantly, her title. Club whore. It was crude and offensive, though she didn't seem to see that as a problem until she thought he was holding it against her.

"I'll go back to my original statement. You don't have the experience to bartend at this club. What little you do have, however, is enough for barback. If you're interested, I'll consider you for that position."

Dahlia cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders. She'd lost every ounce of confidence she'd had when she walked in, but she was seemingly trying to muster up enough to walk out with her head held high. As she should.

"Thank you. I'd appreciate it."

"Sloane will be in touch in the next few weeks."

"Sounds good," Dahlia muttered and stood. She rounded her chair without any further eye contact. It didn't stop Trey from watching her. His gaze scanned over her ass and down her legs. She was showing more skin than most women who came in for an interview. Her skirt was tasteful but very short. Much like her shirt, it was a cheap knockoff. Trey wasn't necessarily into labels, but as he'd gotten older and increased his worth, he'd enjoyed the finer things. He'd earned it. His

time of starving for days, sleeping in dark alleys, and freezing during the winter months were long past him. But he never forgot where he'd come from and the work he'd done to get where he was. Much like Dahlia, contrary to what she might've believed, Trey hadn't had the best life, and he didn't come from money. He'd struggled and had a lot of people look down on him until he'd earned their respect.

And you just earned mine, Dahlia.

Chapter Four

“Just five more minutes,” Dahlia mumbled.

She kept her eyes closed as she massaged the heel of her foot. Ten days and nine hours...in heels. She wasn't sure what was worse, her bruised toes or the blisters. *And let's not forget my dignity.*

She pressed her thumb into the arch of her foot, vowing to soak them the next chance she got. As much as she loved heels, wearing them for a long shift at the bar wasn't pleasant. She missed the days of bartending at East in her sneakers.

Dahlia looked over at the clock in her kitchen. She'd have at least another thirty minutes to relax before it was time to get ready for work. *I hate this job.* Dahlia had major regret over giving her notice to East before she'd solidified the position at the Bowery. She could hear her father's voice in her head giving a mini-speech and words of wisdom—never leave a job unless you have another set up. No better advice was ever given. Unfortunately, she hadn't taken it. After her disastrous interview with Trey, she'd considered reaching out to Gunner and asking if she could come back. He probably would've allowed it, but it wouldn't change her predicament. Bartending at the clubhouse didn't pay enough to cover her rent and bills, especially now with all the expenses falling on her.

Dahlia was still having no luck in her search for a roommate. She again had quite a few men interested, but she was holding out for a woman. It made more sense and was what she was comfortable with. But her days were numbered with her finances. If she didn't find a female roommate soon, she'd have no other choice except to take in a man.

Dahlia grabbed her phone to set her alarm for a quick nap, and at the same time, it rang. She smiled down at the screen and immediately answered.

“Hi!”

“Hey, it's Sloane.”

“I know.” Dahlia chuckled. “How’s it going?”

“Good, a little disappointed though. I thought you were coming to the party last night at East. Karia said she tried texting you a few times but hadn’t heard back. Everything okay?”

Dahlia smiled, feeling the love to the depth of her soul. She’d always been a girl’s girl. Even with all the male attention she’d received, Dahlia loved her girlfriends, especially those she’d met through the MC. Dahlia had seen the texts last night but hadn’t gotten the chance to respond. For the second night in a row, she’d been forced to work through her break. There had to be laws against that, but she didn’t have the knowledge or the energy to fight it. She was also in no position to risk losing her job if she complained. It may not have been her first choice, but it paid more than East, and she was getting a lot of hours. So what if she had to fend off propositions every fifteen minutes and tolerate ass-grabbing every once in a while? *I need this job.*

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I meant to text her back. I crashed when I got home. I wanted to come, but I’ve been really busy.”

“Well, I have great news. Are you sitting down?”

Thankfully. “Yes.”

“Trey approved your application. Can you start tomorrow? There will be a three hour orientation, and you’ll be issued your uniforms. You get three. Probation lasts about six months, and you’ll train for the first two. I’ve matched you up with Killian. He’s great, you’ll love him.”

Dahlia barely heard anything after “Trey approved your application.” *What the...?* He was hiring her? In what world did that shitshow of an interview cultivate into getting the job? Dahlia had thought for sure when she walked out of his office that it would be the last time she’d see him. It was only slightly disappointing. While the man was a dream to look at, it was clear he was less than impressed with her. It shouldn’t have bothered her as much as it did. The only saving grace was knowing they’d never see each other again.

It would have been easy to put all the blame on Trey for his harsh demeanor had he not called her out for the obvious truth. While he hadn't been welcoming and friendly, he also hadn't been disrespectful. He was running a business, and of course he'd want the best staff to represent it. She'd allowed her insecurities to taint her perception of what he was saying.

“Dahlia?”

“Trey wants to hire me?”

“Yes! There are a few new hires, which is why the orientation will be longer than usual. But you are one of three barbacks.” Sloane cleared her throat. “All of you will start as barbacks, but I have no doubt you'll be moved up quicker than the others.”

“Why's that?”

Sloane laughed. “Because you're amazing!”

Sloane Baxter was not only good for Dahlia's ego. She was good for her soul.

“He really wants to hire me?”

“Yes!”

The money was fantastic, as were the benefits and paid time off after her trial period was over. This was exactly what she'd wanted, what she had waited for patiently for months. This was it. It made her next statement all the more painful to say.

“Actually, I was able to get another job about two weeks ago. When I didn't hear anything, I assumed I didn't get it.”

It was only partially true. She'd never expected to get a call offering the job. Leaving her interview, she'd known the obvious truth. She could never work for Trey. While not everyone would understand, Dahlia had been exposed during their meeting. It left her vulnerable, which was not an emotion she was comfortable feeling. It was better to stay where she was. *Where I fit in.*

There was a small stretch of silence.

“Didn’t Trey mention it takes a few weeks? Why wouldn’t he tell you that?” There was a spike in her tone. It was frustration, and as much as Dahlia would love nothing more than Sloane being mad at Trey, it wasn’t warranted. And she wouldn’t play into it. Trey had been forthright and had told her it would be a few weeks before they got back to her. She’d naturally assumed he was brushing her off. There was no way he was going to hire her. *Turns out I was wrong.*

“He did, Sloane. But, um... I couldn’t wait that long. So, I started somewhere else about ten days ago.”

“Where?”

Dahlia flattened her lips, hesitating. The bar had a reputation. And not a great one. The clientele leaned more toward upscale wannabe gangsters. In reality, they were nothing more than lowlife thugs who thought they were something. She’d noticed quite a few drug transactions in the back hall. On a few occasions, she’d watched some of the waitresses dip into rooms with the men, not reappearing for thirty minutes. It didn’t take a genius to know prostitution was a common occurrence. Dahlia had even been propositioned for a quick “date.” She’d declined.

“The Moon Bar downtown.”

“Really? Well...” Sloane paused. “Can I at least tell you about the benefits? Maybe working here will be a better option.”

Dahlia laughed. “You want me to work there so bad you’ve got a sales pitch ready?”

“Selfish reasons. I never see you anymore. None of us do.”

The guilt weighed heavily on Dahlia. It had been a while since she’d gotten together with the women.

“The Bowery pays more, plus the benefits. Time off too,” Sloane said.

But was it worth the risk? She was getting paid decently now. The conditions of the club weren’t desirable, but nothing

she couldn't handle. Drunk businessmen had nothing on intoxicated, rowdy bikers.

And maybe it was more. Dahlia didn't have an ego, but her confidence had taken a massive hit during her interview with Trey. That was on her, something she'd have to work through, but was it smart to put herself in a position where she didn't think she belonged? Wouldn't that hinder any and all confidence in herself? *Or am I just looking for excuses?* Dahlia drove her hand through her hair and sunk into the lumpy cushions of her couch. Self-reflection was in order, but she didn't have the mind space to go over her insecurities right now, and certainly not with anyone else.

"Is it because you'll be starting as barback? They do that with almost all the applicants for bartender."

"It's not that, Sloane. Trey explained it in detail."

It was reassuring to know she hadn't been singled out. Trey's delivery may have sucked, but it was understandable. By the Bowery standards, she wasn't experienced enough.

"Did Trey do something? Was he mean to you?" Sloane blurted, then rambled on. "Don't take it personally, Dahlia. It has nothing to do with you. He's like that with everyone, I swear."

"It's not Trey."

Liar!

"Then why won't you take the job? What if I talk to Trey, get your start date moved, and you can give notice at the bar. I can ask him right now."

Shit!

"I appreciate the opportunity, Sloane, but uh..." Dahlia bit her lip, glancing around her half-barren house. "I think I'm going to stick with The Moon Bar. I really like it." Dahlia rolled her eyes. Even she wasn't buying the bullshit she was trying to sell Sloane.

"Are you sure?" Sloane groaned. "You can take a day to think about it. How about we do that? Sleep on it and call me

in the morning.”

Dahlia wouldn't be getting any type of sleep. Her shift was slated from seven to four the next morning. They were horrible hours, and the worst type of customers, but even sleep deprivation wouldn't change the circumstances.

“I don't need another day, Sloane.”

The line was silent, but knowing Sloane, she wasn't finished.

“Can I just say one more thing?”

Dahlia smiled, nodding. It was silly since Sloane couldn't see her. “Yes.”

“I know starting a new job is super stressful, and Trey and some of the others are incredibly intimidating.” Sloane snorted. “If you'd met Rogue, you probably wouldn't even answer this call. Just kidding.” Sloane chuckled nervously, then whispered, “Kind of.”

Dahlia had heard whispers about Rogue but hadn't met him or even seen him. There'd been stories shared through the grapevine. Brash, abrasive, rude, and unpredictable. And the standout: dangerous. However, working for Trey and Rogue at the Bowery didn't connect them in any way. They were merely bosses, as Sloane explained, and Dahlia's interaction with management was limited to Sloane. That was obviously untrue, considering it was Trey who'd handled her interview.

“You'd be such an asset to the Bowery, Dahl. And you've waited patiently for so long, and now you have the job. I just don't understand why you wouldn't take it. If it's the money, I'll go back to Trey and try to get you more.”

Oh God, no.

“The Moon Bar is a better fit for me.”

“No, it's not!” Sloane snapped, and Dahlia heard a heavy sigh. “I'm sorry. I just mean you're a great fit for the Bowery, Dahlia.”

I hear you, Sloane. Her friend was telling her exactly what she needed to hear, even if it didn't change her mind.

Sloane's words were loud and clear. *You are good enough, Dahlia.*

Was she, though? It was her own demons she was fighting. Insecurity was the devil. It made her rethink everything, including her worth. It was the ultimate Catch-22. Dahlia could be as confident as the next person and go head-to-head with anyone she deemed an equal. But Trey wasn't an equal, at least not in her mind. Self-doubt had a way of wiggling inside her, making her question who she was, and ultimately prevailing.

I'm working on it. Dahlia sucked in a deep breath, the truth playing out before her eyes. *I'm just not there yet.*

"I appreciate everything, Sloane, but I'm..." Dahlia ground her teeth, forcing out the lie. "I'm happy where I am."

Sloane wouldn't understand, nor would she buy Dahlia's bullshit, but she wouldn't call her out on it.

Thank you, Sloane.

10:37 p.m.

Goddammit, Rogue.

Trey tossed his phone on his desk and raked his hands over his hair. Years in the business should have equated to a little reprieve in managing Rogue's whereabouts. *No.* Rogue was the same person he'd met at the ripe age of nine. Self-centered, narcissistic, and always late.

Two people couldn't be more different. Yet somehow, they'd been paired up and never parted. A brother. Some used it as a flippant term, but not them. There were only three people in this world Trey truly and wholeheartedly trusted, and Rogue was one of them.

"Trey?"

He glanced up to find Jared in the doorway.

"Rogue's on his way. He's about fifteen minutes out."

Trey ground his teeth, grabbed his jacket from the couch, and shrugged it on. Rogue was supposed to have been at the club an hour ago. They were meeting with Stark, the guns distributor, and at this point, they'd be late. Rogue had no concept of time, which was why it was Trey's job to keep him in line and on schedule.

Been fucking babysitting this asshole since I was twelve. The irony of it all was Trey being the younger of the two by three years. If anything, their roles should have been reversed, especially considering the positions they held. Trey was high up in the ranks of the Underground. Playing third-in-command was nothing to scoff at. There were only two men who transcended him, and he was currently waiting on one of them.

"Hi Trey, do you have a minute?"

He glanced across his office to find Sloane peeking her head in the doorway. He didn't have the time nor patience to deal with anything from this woman. Sloane Baxter was a pain in the ass without even trying. They had an odd kinship. She'd rubbed him the wrong way since the minute he'd met her, but there was history, and allowances were made for the oddball. Deep down, Trey had a fondness for her, though some days, it was very hard to find.

"No!"

Sloane inched her way past security, completely disregarding his dismissal.

"It's kind of important for next week's schedule, especially with the new hires. I thought you'd like to approve it."

New hires. He'd spent the last few days debating on whether he'd made the right decision on one in particular. Having Dahlia at the club every day meant a constant test of his control with the ultimate temptation. *What the fuck is it with this woman?* Trey had never obsessed a day in his life when it came to women. They'd never been a priority for him. He'd had a plan from very early on. It'd started out as mere survival. It had cultivated into working up the ranks and making money. Years ago, it had transitioned into something

more. And in all those years, he'd never once thought of making a deeper connection with anyone outside the realm of his closest allies.

This hadn't been a thought, a consideration, and certainly not an issue—until Dahlia.

Fuck me.

“Fine. Give me the rundown,” Trey said, followed by a stern warning. “Quickly.”

“You know what, maybe we should do this later. You're obviously on your way out. Tomorrow is probably a better option.”

I'm going to fucking kill this woman.

Trey sighed, combatting his impatience. “Fucking speak, Sloane.”

Sloane took a few steps and squinted. “Are you sure this is a good time?”

Trey balled his fists and gritted his teeth. They'd worked together long enough for her to read his moods.

She smiled awkwardly, rushing forward. “The orientation was successful, though I would like to discuss Rod's attitude.”

Rod was brought in to serve as backup security along with management to assist Sloane and Aaron.

Trey narrowed his gaze, and Sloane caught his cue immediately. She held up her hand. “At a later date, of course! I have the schedules set. The three waitresses will shadow for the first two weeks per the usual protocol. The bouncer will do the same at the door. I contacted the three new hires for barback. Two came in for the orientation, along with Keely. One declined the offer. She found other employment. Which bars would you like them at?”

Trey rarely handled anything from the floor staff unless a problem arose, but the bars, being the most lucrative for the club, always went through him. New hires were usually stationed at the smaller sidebars.

“Put Dahlia at one and the others wherever they need backup.”

Sloane widened her eyes. “You want to give Dahlia the prime spot at bar one?”

It was the prime spot. There were four bars within the club, but the main bar was the most popular and largest. It was the busiest, made the club the most money, along with the biggest tips for the bartenders and barbacks. They were also paid a higher wage.

“Yes. Adjust her pay accordingly.” Trey circled his desk, noticing Sloane staring back at him. She looked like a deer caught in headlights.

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, I just find it surprising.” Sloane rushed closer, then abruptly stopped, shifting on her feet.

I do not have time for this shit or this woman.

“I-I mean, delightfully so. Usually, you make all the new hires work the slower bars for the first six months. In fact, since I’ve been here, you’ve never given any newbie bar one.”

Sloane wasn’t saying anything that wasn’t true, but Trey recognized when he was being called out. *And I don’t fucking like it.*

“Is there a fucking point to this rant, Sloane?”

“Uh, no point.” She scrunched her nose. “But there is a problem.”

This girl is gonna be the fucking death of me. Trey folded his arms and waited. When Sloane smiled, he felt all his patience slip away.

“What’s the problem, Sloane?”

She licked her lips. “Dahlia was the one who declined the offer of employment.”

It was rare that anything shocked Trey anymore, but he definitely hadn’t seen this coming. *What the fuck?* Wasn’t this the same woman who’d been trying to get an interview for the

last few months? Hell, he'd bumped her up on the wait list for employment as a favor. *And she turned me down?*

"Why?"

Sloane shrugged. "She got another job."

Trey rolled his shoulders. "Where?"

"A bar downtown."

Fuck, Sloane. He ground his teeth, locked his jaw, and glared.

"Which. One?"

"The Moon Bar."

Trey steeled his reaction. He knew the bar well. He didn't frequent it often, but they used it as a source of distribution. The drug sales through The Moon Bar made a decent profit. The clientele were avid buyers, among other things. The bar stayed off the radar of the local police courtesy of the Underground but was notorious for its prostitution ring.

"Doing what?"

Sloane raised her brows and parted her lips, but Trey had lost his patience.

"What is she doing there, Sloane?"

It shouldn't matter. *But it fucking does.*

"Bartending, I think. She didn't go into detail." Sloane sighed, knitting her brows. "I just don't understand why she wouldn't go back to East to work. I know the pay wasn't great, but it was safer."

East?

"She got paid to bartend at East?"

Sloane gasped, widened her eyes, and rested her hand on her chest. "That's not for public knowledge."

What the fuck was she talking about? Trey raised his brows.

“East doesn’t pay the bartenders.” Sloane cleared her throat and whispered, “Usually.”

This wasn’t news to Trey. While he didn’t know all aspects of the MC, some were widely known. Their staff wasn’t paid.

“They paid Dahlia?”

Sloane blushed, and she tightened her lips.

“Sloane.”

She sighed, and her shoulders sagged. “You can’t say anything, Trey.”

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Trey couldn’t care less about the inner workings of the MC, but he was intrigued knowing Dahlia was the exception to their rules.

“Dahlia got paid. From what I understand, it wasn’t much, but Gunner paid her under the table for the hours she worked at the club.”

Interesting.

“Was she the only one?”

Sloane nodded. That made her special to the MC. It was a thought that didn’t sit well with him.

Fuck. Trey cupped his jaw. “Then why isn’t she back at East?”

As much as he didn’t like the idea of her being a valuable asset to the club, it was a safer position than working at The Moon Bar.

Sloane shrugged. “She didn’t say, but I have an idea.”

Trey stared back at the woman, waiting for her to explain. She didn’t, which only heightened his anger. Sloane was going to make him ask.

“Are you going to fucking tell me?”

Sloane widened her eyes. “Oh, um, her roommate moved out unexpectedly, so Dahlia has to cover the whole rent. Money was already tight, and I don’t think East pays enough

to cover it, plus expenses. She gave Gunner her notice a while ago but stopped working at East about two weeks ago.”

“Fuck.” Trey shouldn’t have any vested interest in this woman he barely knew. Dahlia was nothing more than a familiar stranger.

“You’re just full of surprises today.”

I’m going to fucking kill her.

“I just mean, we’ve had other people decline our offer, and you’ve never asked about where they’re working. Or shown any concern of where they ended up.” Sloane cocked her head, smiling. “This is a whole new side of you, Trey.”

Trey wasn’t sure who he was more upset with, Sloane for calling him out or himself for briefly letting his guard down. It didn’t matter. She’d take the brunt of his anger.

“Do you like your job, Sloane?”

She clasped her hands. “Yes, and I want to keep it, so I’ll shut up now.”

“Go.” His tone was low and feral.

Sloane nodded but didn’t move.

“What, Sloane?” Trey snapped, sending her back a step. Unfortunately, it wasn’t enough to shut her down.

“Can I just say one thing?”

Trey cupped his jaw, digging his fingers into his flesh. “If I knew I could get away with it, I might just kill you.”

Sloane laughed. “Sometimes I think you’re not kidding.”

“Sometimes, I’m not.”

“Okay, I hit a nerve. My apologies. But *can I* just say one more thing?”

Trey dragged his hand over his face. Never in his life had he met anyone who got under his skin the way she did. He dropped his hand and stared back at her. Waiting.

“I don’t want to be out of line, but is it possible you may have said or done something? I know Dahlia was very excited

to work here and work for you, and it just seems strange that within a matter of two weeks, she gets another job and declines our offer. And I was a bit nosy and looked up The Moon Bar. The bartenders make nine dollars less than what we pay to start. That's huge."

"And you believe I offended her?"

"Well—" Sloane smiled and snorted. "I mean, you can be intimidating, Trey. And sometimes you..."

I'm going to regret this.

"I what?"

"You come off very cold, and for someone like Dahlia, who is genuinely warm, sweet, and kind, it might make her feel inferior. You do kind of have a superior air about you."

Trey raised his brows.

Sloane leaned forward, resting her hand on her chest. "I'm sorry, did I cross the line?"

Trey clenched his hands and ground his teeth. "By about fifty fucking feet. Get out of my office, Sloane."

"Right, sorry." Sloane spun around and rushed to the door, slipping into the hall just as Jared walked into his office.

Fuck! Trey dragged his hand over his head and gripped the back of his neck as he paced around his desk. The Moon Bar. It was the last place she should be working. There was a naïveté and gullibility to Dahlia. He didn't have to know her long-term to see it in the few interactions they'd shared. With Manny's long history of turning out his staff for some side business prostitution, her employment there didn't sit well with Trey. Especially knowing her desperate financial state. Desperation made people do things they wouldn't usually do. Trey had firsthand knowledge of that.

It shouldn't have mattered. Trey was under no obligation to watch out for Dahlia. She was a grown woman with no ties to him or his world. Then, why the fuck did it matter?

"Rogue just arrived," Jared said.

Trey glanced over at Jared, who stood near the door. It was just the distraction and reprieve he needed. Even Rogue was more welcome than Sloane and the thought of Dahlia working at The Moon Bar. He walked out the door with his men falling in line. As they rounded the corner, he turned to Jared.

“Tell Manny I’m stopping in later tonight.”

Jared nodded as they continued down the hall toward the stairs.

Manny owned The Moon Bar. It was a courtesy that Trey even announced he’d be stopping by. Hopefully, for Manny’s sake, Trey didn’t take issue with anything he saw.

*

Trey rolled his neck and glanced out the side window of the car. The meeting with Stark had gone according to plan, and they’d conveniently kept silent about the current dilemma. It didn’t directly affect Stark. He’d fulfilled his end of the deal. He’d gotten paid. The gun trade was lucrative, and if done right, it resulted in a payout to everyone. *Unless you have half a million in stock sitting in a warehouse.* Trey and Rogue wouldn’t get their money until the transport was handled.

This was the sole reason for a second meeting, and not one Trey was looking forward to. Oz may be family, but this wasn’t personal. This was business.

“Why the fuck can’t he ever come to us?” Rogue snapped, tossing his cigarette out the car window.

“Do I need to remind you it’s going to be you asking him for the favor? Not the other way around.”

Rogue scoffed, shaking his head. “If Oz just allowed them fucking access, we wouldn’t be in this fucking position!”

Trey ground his teeth, slowly angling his head. “If they had done what they were supposed to do? What they said they would do? We wouldn’t have half a million in gun stock sitting in a warehouse. You know, the longer it sits there, the bigger the risk. A risk that will come down on us, Rogue. You made this deal, and they didn’t come through. The blame and

responsibility lies on them.” Trey narrowed his gaze. “And you. Not Oz.”

Rogue’s lips twisted, then he balled his fist and struck the ceiling of the SUV. “Fuck!”

Trey didn’t even flinch as he turned back around, settled into his seat, and stared out the side window. He’d been dealing with Rogue’s outbursts since he was a child. Nothing shocked or surprised him anymore.

The remainder of the ride was done in complete silence. It wasn’t common for Rogue to back down from any argument, but he knew Trey was right. There was nothing to debate or dispute. Right now, they just needed a resolution.

When the car pulled up to the back of the X-Lounge, Trey got out while Rogue waited for his security to open the door. They walked inside through the private entrance and took the elevator up to the balcony. Oz’s club was designed much like the Bowery. However, aside from the back stairs reserved for emergencies, there was only one way up via the elevator.

“Can I suggest you go into this meeting without an entitled attitude?”

Rogue scoffed. “You can suggest whatever the fuck you want, Trey.”

Fuck!

Trey had been playing referee for the brothers since the day their paths had crossed. It had been a lot different back then. With Trey being the youngest of the threesome, he didn’t have as much knowledge as the others, but he’d always been the voice of reason. Even when they were kids, Rogue three years older and Oz eight, they’d always listened to him.

They stepped out of the elevator and rounded the corner to the balcony. Nash, Oz’s second-in-command, glanced up from the table and walked over. He opened his mouth to speak but never got the chance.

“Where the fuck is he?” Rogue snapped.

Rogue's antics were nothing new and par for the course. But, considering the current predicament, Rogue was on another level, which left everyone in his path as potential victims of his wrath. Nash cleared his throat. "In his office. I'll let him know you're here."

Trey rolled his neck, bracing for what was to be another outburst. Rogue did not disappoint. He stepped up to Nash. Trey had to give credit to Oz's guy. While Nash remained silent, he didn't back down.

"We don't need a fucking announcement or permission. You need a reminder of your place and ours? Big fucking difference, Nash." Rogue shoulder-bumped Nash in true bully fashion and threw open the door leading into the back hallway where the office was located.

Always with the fucking theatrics.

Nash straightened and glanced over at Trey. "I don't know how you fucking do it, Trey."

Years and years and years of experience.

Trey smirked as he passed. "I don't let him pull that shit with me."

It wasn't a dig at Nash. As Oz's second-in-command, he had power and authority, but none close to Trey and Rogue. There was a hierarchy in how they were viewed within the Underground. Oz, Rogue, and Trey. For all outward appearances and business makeup, it was an accurate assessment. However, when it came to the three of them, there was no boss. They were equals with different levels to their positions. Each man had their strong suit and brought their best to the table. Combined, it was far more power than they'd have on their own or individually. Or that of any preceding kings of the Underground.

Rogue barreled through Oz's door, not even offering the courtesy of knocking. Though it was unnecessary. Trey knew Oz would have been informed the minute they pulled into the parking lot. If he knew Oz, and he did, the man had watched

their every move and heard the discussion with Nash. Oz didn't do surprises.

Rogue spread his arms. "What's the fucking problem?"

Oz stood at the end of the couch. "You would know better than me. It's yours, not mine."

"We got five hundred grand worth of product sitting in the fucking warehouse. They need passage, or this deal won't fucking go through."

Trey walked farther into the room, eyeing Oz. This was not Trey's fight between the blood brothers, but he'd step in if needed. Oz swirled the glass of amber liquid with complete ease. Much like Trey, Oz had been accustomed to Rogue's outbursts since they were young. Even more so for Oz.

"Then maybe you should have thought of that before you made it." Oz straightened. "You knew the risks in running it over the interstate. That didn't stop you from making the deal, correct?"

Rogue folded his arms and scowled. "Let them run it through yours."

"This isn't my deal. And I know it's not Trey's because there is no way in hell he would have signed off on it without coming to me beforehand. You want this deal to go through, then make the necessary arrangements."

Rogue's jaw squared. "They run it through your territory. I can make the call, and we unload this shit tonight."

It was like watching two alpha lions in the wild. Neither would back down.

"Not without my permission. And they don't have it." Oz paused. "Neither do you."

Rogue's gaze darkened, and his brows dipped tightly, forming a crease between his brows. Even the shade of his face brightened as his temple pulsed. "I would fucking allow it for one of your deals!"

Trey pressed his lips together. He wouldn't interject, but he knowingly glanced over at Oz. They were of one accord.

Even without verbal confirmation, Trey knew.

Rogue may have allowed it, but not without gloating. Oz would never hear the end of it. It was the sole reason he never allowed Rogue to bail him out of any deal from the beginning.

Oz took a sip of his bourbon and lowered the glass to his side, licking his lips. “That’s irrelevant since I’d never put you in that position. That’s the difference between you and me. When I make deals, they benefit the organization, not as a personal gain.”

It was an undisputed fact.

“Your holier-than-thou bullshit is getting old,” Rogue scoffed. “In fact, I’ve been over that shit for a long fucking time.”

Oh fuck! Trey folded his arms and watched.

“We all have our place, Rogue. Maybe I should ask you the same thing you asked Nash.” Oz narrowed his gaze. “Do you remember yours?”

Rogue’s face contorted, and he stepped forward, which had Trey making his way toward the brothers. It had been a long time since they’d come to physical blows, but he wouldn’t put it past Rogue, considering the tension in the room.

“Rogue.” Trey’s firm tone was similar to the one he’d always used. Sometimes it worked. Other times it didn’t.

Rogue stopped a few feet away from Oz, and the seconds felt like an eternity as the brothers stared one another down. It would be a fair and even fight if it came down to it. There was no guaranteed winner, but it was the last thing Trey wanted to see. Rogue muttered, “Fucking asshole,” before storming out of the room. Rogue wouldn’t beg for anything.

Oz walked over to the bar, completely unfazed. Trey expected nothing less. Oz had more self-control than any man he knew. It was why, for many years, Trey had idolized him, watched him, and mimicked his every move. How could he not? *Oz saved me, along with Rogue.*

Oz refilled his glass and poured another, handing it to Trey. "Let's hear it."

Trey arched his brow. "Hear what?"

Oz narrowed his gaze. "Your empathetic plea on Rogue's behalf."

Trey fought against a smile and lost. He let out a soft chuckle and looked over at Oz. "Am I that predictable?"

"Since the day I met you." Oz walked around Trey to the couch in the corner of the room. He sat, grabbed a cigar from the humidor, and reached for the lighter.

"What are your thoughts?" Oz asked.

This was the real Underground that not many people witnessed. They worked together, which was what made them stronger. But it was all behind the scenes. From any outside observation, Oz was the leader. It didn't matter to Trey, he knew his place. And he was solid and content. Rogue was a different story. Resentment was a hard emotion to set aside.

Trey rounded the chair and sat across from Oz, taking a sip from his glass.

"There's no other way around it. Taking that much stock on the interstate holds a lot of risk. They all know, which was why the original driver bailed on it. Even if they buckle down and make the trip, knowing what's at stake makes them an easy target. The odds are not in their favor for making a clear run."

"Can it be traced back to Rogue?" Oz asked.

"Not likely. They'd take the hit and the fall. We have way too many people on the inside, and they know it. Even if one flipped, he'd never make it to pre-trial. But..."

"What?"

Trey sighed. "There's a risk, Oz. And not to mention the cash."

"But it's more of a monetary loss for Rogue?"

"Yes."

The corner of Oz's mouth curled into a sinister smile. "Rogue hates to lose money. Been that way since he was a kid. This might serve as a good lesson for him. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Maybe." Trey settled into his chair. "If that's the route you want to take."

Oz smirked. "Are you suggesting an alternative?"

"Maybe he learns another lesson. You have the opportunity to bail him out. Whether you recognize it or not, it's not an easy situation for Rogue to accept. He's coming to you because he needs you. It doesn't happen often, Oz, you know that. If I came to you asking for assistance, you'd give it to me."

Oz rolled his cigar between his fingers. "Are you sure about that?"

Not a doubt in my mind.

"Yes."

Oz took a deep drag. "You're negating the obvious difference. Rogue didn't ask, he demanded."

Trey slowly nodded. "I'm asking, Oz."

Oz laughed, grasping his jaw and veering his gaze across the room. This was nostalgic. Trey was forever covering and trying to save Rogue. How could he not? It was how their friendship was initially forged. Trey rarely went back in time, thinking of his past. It was traumatic and nothing he remembered fondly. But he'd never forget.

Abandoned at two, placed in foster care, and shuffled around until he was almost nine. Some placements were better than others, but it was a constant revolving door. By the third time he was moved, Trey knew better than to unpack and lived out of his duffle bag. Almost nine years and everything he had to show for it fit into one small bag.

The last house had been the worst. The father had taken a special interest in younger boys. He'd make a point of spending one-on-one time in the yard and taking them out to

ballgames. Trey had been so eager for a father figure at nine, he'd been waiting patiently for his turn. When it finally happened, it was nothing like he'd expected. The signs were obvious when looking back as an adult. The father, Dale, worked the night shift while the mother worked during the day. All the kids in the house had left for school, but Trey was home with a fever. One day shy of his ninth birthday, he was truly introduced to the monsters of humanity. He never even saw it coming. How could he? Trey was rigid with fear. The panic and helplessness against the inevitable made it almost impossible to breathe. He had no idea what was happening, but his horror was immobilizing.

Trey had no voice. No way to fight against the man. He needed a hero to save him.

And one showed up.

To this day, Trey had no idea why or where he'd come from, but Rogue appeared, busting through the door wielding a baseball bat. Trey barely had time to react and watched in revulsion as Rogue beat the man relentlessly until he passed out. There was so much blood Trey had been frozen until Rogue grabbed the back of his shirt, pulled him out of the room, and dragged him down the hall to the last bedroom on the right.

Rogue was only twelve and had never taken a particular interest in Trey. They'd never even spoken, but Trey watched Rogue and his older brother, Oz. There was a strength and dominance the brothers shared. They kept to themselves, ignored everyone else, and constantly went head-to-head with the father, ironically always winning.

“Stay here. Don't fucking move!”

Trey simply nodded and did what Rogue said. A minute later, Rogue came back into the room with Trey's duffle bag over his shoulder, dragging Trey's mattress into the corner of the already cramped room.

“This is your room now. You hear me?”

Trey nodded.

The details were grainy, and they never spoke about it again. Trey had a slight memory of a story about an intruder, which Dale backed up as truth. Rogue's beating left Dale battered and with possible brain damage. If Dale could recall the incident, he never said. From that day forward, Trey hadn't left either of the older boys' sides. When they'd gotten pushback from the mother, it was Oz who'd insisted Trey stay.

It took him years to figure out Rogue's intention, but as he spent every day with the brothers, it became clear. Rogue looked up to Oz, felt the protection from his brother, but felt inadequate as he'd always be the little brother. Until he'd attached himself to Trey, playing the part of protector and older brother.

Trey never knew how Rogue had explained the scene or his actions to the eldest. But Oz had stayed up with him all night, prepping Trey for his police interview the following day. They went over and over the fictitious story until Trey had it locked to memory. It had worked flawlessly. A year later, Oz aged out of the system, packed up his things, and walked out the door, never looking back. And he did that with Rogue and Trey following close behind.

The future Kings of the Underground were solidified at nine, twelve, and seventeen.

Trey drew in a breath, glancing up at Oz.

"Compromise," Oz said.

"All right."

"He ends the deal and cuts ties with Dornan, and we outsource the job to another transport."

Trey furrowed his brows. "There are no others, Oz. This crew wasn't Rogue's first choice. They were the only option. No one will take this."

"Killcreek Drifters."

Trey snorted, waiting for some type of laugh or punchline from Oz. It was a few seconds before Trey realized he was serious. "Rogue will never go for it."

There was too much history and one deal that landed Rogue on the losing end. He was notorious for holding a grudge and was firm on never working with the MC.

Oz's gaze sharpened. "*Make him go for it.*"

Trey grasped the back of his neck. He may have been the king of negotiations, but Oz was asking for an impossible task.

"Why the hell does this always fall on me?" Trey asked, not expecting an answer, but he got one.

Oz smirked, arching his brow. "Sal always said you were the levelheaded mediator."

Yes, he did. Sal Caruso had called it years ago, long before their reign as kings began. Trey had always had a way of coming in between the brothers as a calming mechanism. Trey was never quite sure what he did or how he did it, but he was a clear mediator. The peacemaker.

"This can be over in two days," Oz said. "We get Killcreek on this, Rogue won't run into any issues going forward."

Trey understood and even agreed it was a good option, but convincing Rogue to go along with it was where the issue would lie. The Killcreek Drifters MC had a long standing in the Underground. They were known for taking jobs no other crew was willing to do. The risks were high, but the rewards were lucrative.

Due to the current conflict, Rogue and Trey didn't do any business with them, but Oz did. To which extent, Trey didn't know.

"How much business are you pulling with Killcreek?"

"A lot."

Trey smirked and shook his head. "Not afraid they'll burn your house down?"

Killcreek's list of criminal activities were endless, but this act deemed them notorious.

“Killcreek isn’t known for their class. That’s not why I work with them. Aligning with a strong and smart ally only gets me what I want. You and Rogue may not like them, but I trust them.”

And in the end, it was all that mattered. Trey, Rogue, and Oz all had equal value in the Underground, but there could only be one true king. And Trey’s had just spoken.

“I’ll make that happen.”

“I know you will.” Oz’s gaze hardened. “And one more thing, Trey. Next time you ask for a favor? It better be yours.”

Trey smiled, taking a sip of his drink. “I don’t need favors.”

Oz nodded. “One day, you might.”

Maybe, though Trey couldn’t imagine what for. Only time would tell.

Chapter Five

I hate this fucking job. Dahlia had worked at her fair share of shitty establishments, but this ranked fairly high on her list. Bottom-feeding misogynist assholes dressed in sharply tailored suits. They were the worst kind. *At least show your perversion instead of masking it behind wealth and faux manners.*

It wasn't the Bowery, but it had been more upscale than any other place she'd ever worked in. Or so she'd thought. That was the first among a long list of assumptions and mistakes she's made when she'd accepted the position. In fairness to Dahlia, she'd been desperate. Having to pay the full rent along with utilities left her choices limited. *Welcome to The Moon Bar. A glorified hidden brothel. Somebody save me.*

Unfortunately, there were no heroes here. Dahlia was left with saving herself and dodging solicitations on a nightly basis. She could hold her own, but it was exhausting and nauseating. This was what desperation looked like. *Fuck me!*

She'd originally been hired as a bartender but had a rude awakening on her first day when she'd been scheduled as a server. She wasn't opposed to waitressing. She'd done it in the past. But there seemed to be an underlining component and expectations she hadn't been aware of. Dahlia was quick to shut it all down with her boss, but it didn't stop the customers' advances.

The longest two weeks of my life.

Dahlia was hanging out in the back hallway, taking a much-needed break.

A group of men slipped by, and she pressed her back against the wall to make more room in the tight space. The move inadvertently hiked her chest up, and her breasts were practically on full display, which caught the attention of the second to last man in line. He was older than her, maybe mid-forties. There was nothing special about him. Thinning hair, a wrinkled suit with the tie in disarray, and a belly hanging over

his belt. He looked like half the clientele, though he took notice of her and stopped.

“You’re new?”

Dahlia forced a smile and nodded. “Yes.”

Without any type of warning, he grabbed her wrist and started hauling her down the hall. *What the...?* Dahlia tried to rip her arm from his hold, but he tightened his grip.

“Let go of me!”

“We’re gonna hang out, you and me.”

Oh, hell no. She’d dealt with handsy and forward men but none this aggressive.

“No, we’re not.”

His grip tightened as he laughed. “I’ll pay, honey. Don’t you worry.”

There wasn’t enough money on the planet.

Dahlia pulled at her arm and jumped back, slamming into the wall behind her and knocking her elbow into the brick wall. *Fuck!* Dahlia ground her teeth, trying her best to shake off the shooting pain rushing through her arm.

“Feisty. I like that.”

Fucking pig.

“Come on, I’ll pay extra.” He reached for her wrist. With his body turned sideways, she took the only shot she had. Her fist to his ribs. He gasped and fell backward, stumbling. Dahlia gave him little time to straighten, and she pushed him to the opposite wall and leaned down to eye level.

“I can get you a drink, a meal, and a check. That’s all.” Dahlia righted herself, ignoring the stare from the busboy on her left. It was probably a move he hadn’t seen often at The Moon Bar.

There was a possibility of repercussions from management, but Dahlia would deal with the scolding. She straightened her top, grabbed an empty tray, and started toward

the main dining room. The fact that she could bounce back after the altercation was a testament to the bullshit she'd had to deal with in the past.

Dahlia glanced around the room. It was a decent crowd, and she'd made enough in tips, but dealing with these men was exhausting. Her previous employment may not have been glamorous, but she'd been respected, unlike her current position.

She scanned her tables, glancing over at the bar. *I should be safely tucked behind it.* Instead, there were three men. It was obvious now that Manny had no intention of using her talents. Still, it was a job, and if she got enough hours, she'd be able to pay all her bills. *Hopefully.*

Dahlia stepped out into the room and immediately froze, her gaze locked on the entrance door. *No!*

Trey was the last person she'd expected to see standing across the room, staring directly at her. How many times had she fantasized about his eyes pinned on her? Tens, hundreds, thousands? The reality hadn't lived up to the fantasy, especially in this setting. Dahlia quickly ducked into the hallway. *What the hell is he doing here?* She pressed her back against the wall, resisting the urge to peek around the corner. This was the worst-case scenario.

“What are you doing?”

Dahlia jerked her head up at her coworker. She hadn't necessarily made friends with Gia, but she'd been more welcoming than anyone else. Dahlia had been warned not to take it personally. At The Moon Bar, they didn't see each other as coworkers. The waitresses looked at one another as competition. It was all about money.

“Nothing,” Dahlia blurted.

Gia furrowed her brows and leaned closer. “Are you hiding?”

Yes!

“No, of course not. Ummm...do me a favor? There's a guy that just walked in. He's by the door. You see him?”

Gia leaned to her right, and her eyes skimmed over the room. Dahlia knew the second she saw Trey. The corner of her mouth curved, and she jutted out her chest.

“Yeah, he’s talking to Manny. Ahhh...” She stretched her neck. “Now he’s walking to a table.”

Dahlia crossed her fingers. It was superstitious, but she did it anyway. *Please don’t put him in my section.*

“Whose section?” Dahlia asked, then held her breath.

Not mine, not mine, please, not mine.

“Yours!”

Shit!

“Damn, he’s hot. Bet he’s rich, which makes you wonder why he’s here, right?”

It could be a total coincidence. Dahlia drew in a breath and turned to Gia while maintaining her hidden status behind the wall.

“Can you take his table?”

Gia jerked her head and widened her eyes. Dahlia understood her confusion. What waitress in her right mind would turn down serving Trey?

Me!

“What? Why?” Gia asked.

Dahlia couldn’t give a plausible answer or make any sense to anyone. No one could possibly understand. Infatuation was hard to put into words.

“Please.”

Gia must have heard the desperation in her tone. Her face softened, and she reached out, grasping Dahlia’s hand in a tight squeeze. “I got it.”

Thank you.

Dahlia would still have to wait on her tables, but the room was pretty crowded. There were ways she could work around not seeing him, or at the very least hide in plain sight.

She gave herself a few more minutes to calm down. It was ridiculous getting so worked up over something that was probably more in her head than anything else. It was completely possible Trey just happened to stop in for a drink.

“Hey.”

Dahlia jumped and spun around to face Gia.

“He wants you.”

Dahlia blinked, unsure if she’d heard Gia correctly. She placed her hand over her heart. It was again beating out of her chest, and her dread set in.

Oh hell.

Trey scanned the room from his seat at the table in the corner. He was quickly reminded why he didn’t frequent The Moon Bar unless it was for business. It would fall into the dive bar category. It had enough ambiance to sucker men with a little cash into believing it was upper scale, but it wasn’t the food and drinks bringing in the predominately male clientele.

Manny’s establishment offered extra perks in the form of sexual favors for cash in the back of the restaurant. It was a well-known fact, and the Underground reaped a percentage of the income. They didn’t deal directly with the prostitution ring, but the Underground received residuals for every business occupying their territory. Trey had never thought much about it since it wasn’t high revenue, but looking around now, it didn’t sit well with him.

“I can get the chef to make you whatever you want,” Manny offered.

Trey slowly turned to Manny, seated across from him. There was no way Trey would even consider eating anything from Manny’s place. He wasn’t a snob, but he’d spent years eating crap food.

“Just in for a drink,” Trey said.

“I can get it myself.”

Not on your fucking life.

Trey smirked. “I’ll wait for *her*.”

He’d specifically asked to be seated in Dahlia’s section. Manny shifted in his seat, slyly trying to find the woman in question. Upon his arrival, Trey had made it clear that he was aware of a new batch of waitresses. Manny’s eyes seemed to glow. Trey had never paid for sex, nor would he, but Manny clearly thought the tides had turned. That is until he mentioned Dahlia’s name. Manny quickly offered two other women, but Trey declined, and he was seated in her section. From Manny’s reaction, it gave Trey a little hope in thinking Dahlia was not one willing to offer extras.

Manny furrowed his brows and leaned closer, eyeing the blonde making her way through the room and then stopping directly at his table.

“Hi, I’m Gia. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Where’s Dahlia?” Manny looked over his shoulder, clearly surprised.

Trey wasn’t. He hadn’t missed Dahlia’s quick appearance and her even faster retreat. If she thought she could hide from him, she was in for a rude awakening.

Gia smiled. “She’s overwhelmed with a larger table and asked me to pick up this one.” Gia turned to Trey. “What would you like?”

Nothing from you.

Trey didn’t say a word, simply turned to Manny and waited. He’d been dealing with the Underground long enough to know when something was demanded, everyone complied, and substitutes were unacceptable.

“Get Dahlia,” Manny said.

The command seemed to rock the waitress off her game, and she darted her gaze between both men before landing on Trey.

“Now,” Trey said.

Gia blinked and stepped away from the table, rushing toward the back again. Trey kept his eyes on her. He couldn't see Dahlia, but he knew that was who Gia was talking to. A minute later, Dahlia walked out from behind the wall and straightened her top, keeping her head bowed and walking directly to the table. He noticed a small tear in her shirt near the top button, which had been undone. He would have thought it was a purposeful move to increase tips had he not seen what appeared to be an altercation with a customer.

Trey had only seen the tail end of it. It had been enough to get his blood racing, but Dahlia had seemed to handle herself. Now, getting a better look, Trey grew increasingly angry. Maybe it had been more than he'd seen. For some unexplainable reason, Trey's animal possession came to the forefront.

She stopped at the end of the table, licked her bottom lip, and glanced up. Her smile was forced and shaky as she rocked back on her feet.

“Hi.”

This wasn't her. Even during her interview, when he knew she was nervous, Dahlia hadn't been this timid. It wasn't her nature or style. This was a beaten-down version of herself. *I don't fucking like it.*

Trey balled his fists but kept his composure and nodded, remaining silent as he watched her. Dahlia looked over at Manny and cleared her throat. “What can I get you?”

“You can start by asking the fucking customer, not me.”

Watch your fucking tone, Manny!

Dahlia glanced back at Trey, and her dark, uncertain eyes did something to him. This woman was the ultimate mindfuck. This right here had been the reason he'd kept her at arm's length and shot down every angle of hiring her at the club. Her face, her body, her voice, and the innocence in every word. This was his ultimate weakness.

“What can I get you?”

You! Naked, submissive to my every command, sprawled out on my bed, completely mine!

Trey steeled his features, regaining his control. *Barely*. “What exactly are you serving?”

Her lashes shot up, and she immediately veered her gaze to her boss as if she knew the next words out of his mouth.

Manny smiled and cocked his brow. “For you, anything you want.”

Her body stiffened, and she stared down at the table, refusing to make eye contact. The innuendo was obvious. But Dahlia didn't seem receptive. *Good!* It didn't stop Trey from testing her.

Trey arched his brow. “Is that true?”

Dahlia glanced up through her lashes, unsure as she spared a look in Manny's direction.

“Dahlia.”

She blinked, shifting her gaze to Trey. Gorgeous dark eyes pinned directly on him. It wasn't the first time, but something was different. A vulnerability he hadn't seen from her. Or maybe it was embarrassment or humiliation.

“A drink, a meal, or the check.” Dahlia scowled, glancing back at Manny. “That's all I have to offer.”

Good answer, sweetheart.

“Whiskey,” Trey said.

Dahlia turned so quick she bumped into another man who reached out to steady her. For unexplainable reasons, seeing another man with his hands hovering over her ass had Trey clenching his jaw. Dahlia ducked away from his hold and rounded a large group of men by the bar. Then she disappeared.

It didn't stop Trey from watching the area. He glanced back at one of his security, who had his eyes locked on Trey. He gestured toward the bar, and Jared moved through the crowd.

It was another few minutes before Dahlia came back and placed a napkin and his drink down, all the while avoiding eye contact.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“Look at me.”

She froze and then slowly glanced up through her lashes.

“What happened to your shirt?” Trey asked.

Dahlia cocked her head and knitted her brows. Trey remained silent, lowering his gaze to her breasts, which were now prominently on display since her shirt had shifted. He could see half of her red lace bra and a show of cleavage more suited for a strip club.

Dahlia glanced down and immediately dropped the tray to the floor, clasping the edges to cover herself.

“Shit,” she muttered. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t even…” Her cheeks shaded to red, and she whipped her head, searching for what he assumed was a path for a getaway.

Before she could formulate a plan, Trey stood, gaining her and Manny’s attention. He slipped off his jacket and circled her back, draping it over her shoulders. It hung down to her mid-thigh, reminding him of her small stature compared to him. He grasped the collar of the jacket, tugging it over her breasts. With them only a few inches apart, he could smell her perfume. It was soft but sensual. And innocent. That only fueled his fire, and he turned to Manny.

“Do you always allow your customers to get aggressive with your staff?”

Manny widened his eyes. “I didn’t know they had.”

“You would if you had proper protection in place for your employees, especially the women. And considering the cash you make off them, I would think you’d take all the necessary precautions.”

“I guess he got a little carried away.”

“A little carried away?” Trey snapped with a sharp glare. “He ripped open her shirt and had her pinned against a fucking wall.” Trey ground his teeth, knowing he’d given too much away. He only would’ve known that information if he had been watching her. “And this?” Trey held up Dahlia’s arm, showing Manny her torn sleeve and the scraped elbow visible through the tear, welling small drops of blood. “This how you run your girls, Manny?”

“No.”

“No,” Trey mocked. “It isn’t.” Trey could feel Dahlia’s eyes on him, but she remained silent. If she was surprised by his act of chivalry, he was about to shock her.

“Get her things,” Trey said to Manny. “She’s done for the night.”

Dahlia jerked around, knocked into his arm, and faced Manny.

“No, I’m fine. I can totally finish my shift. I’ll fix the shirt, and I handled the customer. It’s really not that big of a deal.”

Trey slowly turned his glare on Dahlia. *Not a big fucking deal?* She’d been attacked.

She leaned in, lowering her voice. “If I don’t finish my shift, I won’t get paid. I can’t afford that, Trey.”

Desperation carried a certain and undeniable tone. Trey hated hearing it in her voice. He’d made the decision before walking through the door, but now he’d make it known.

Trey turned back to Manny. “She’s leaving now, but you will pay her for her entire shift. Is that going to be an issue, Manny?”

“What?” Dahlia whispered.

“No, Trey, not a problem at all,” Manny said.

It should have been enough, but Trey was doubling down.

“You’re also giving her severance as this is her last day.”

Manny furrowed his brows. “She hasn’t even worked here two weeks, Trey.”

Trey narrowed his gaze. “I don’t give a fuck. Two weeks’ severance based on all the hours she’s worked.”

Manny slowly nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now get her things.”

Dahlia shot forward, bumping his chest with her gaze locked on Manny. “No-no, I’m not quitting.”

Manny stilled, shifting his gaze between Dahlia and Trey. Clearly, the man was confused. Trey folded his arms and drew in a deep breath. He’d allow Dahlia to have her say. He wouldn’t take away her voice, but he wasn’t going to allow her to continue to work here. His intention was the same as when he’d walked in before the altercation. It had only solidified his decision.

“It was fucked-up, but I can handle assholes. It wasn’t the first time, and it won’t be the last.” Dahlia nodded as if saying her piece would matter in the decision. She inched closer, and Trey tensed. Not many people got close. Most knew to keep their distance. He glanced over at his security lining the walls. They’d taken notice and moved forward, closing in on his table. Trey held up his hand, and they all immediately halted.

“I need this job,” she whispered.

Her confession did nothing to sway his next move. He glanced over at Manny, sending a clear message. Trey didn’t have to say a word.

“You’re fired,” Manny blurted.

Dahlia jerked back and spun around, knocking into Trey’s chest without warning.

“What? He attacked me, and I’m fired?” Dahlia stepped forward, and Trey immediately blocked her path. Manny rushed out the door. When Trey turned back to Dahlia, she was gripping tightly onto the edge of the jacket and staring at him wildly. “Why did you do that?”

Trey had no regrets, but as her eyes welled, he found himself in an unfamiliar position. He'd seen people cry, beg, and plead for more than a job and hadn't been affected in the least. Compassion rarely played a part in his emotions or his life. But there was something about the brightness dimming in her eyes that struck Trey.

Dahlia turned, attempting to walk away, but Trey reached out, grasping her forearm, leaving her no room to flee. He couldn't be sure if it had been intentional, but she leaned back, pressing into his chest. He glanced down, and her head was bowed, but she wasn't struggling.

Manny rushed back with a large multi-colored bag that could only be described as cheap and gaudy. He barely had time to offer it to her before she ripped it from his hands, holding it against her chest. Trey wrapped his arm around her waist, pressing his palm against her back and ushering her toward the front door. All the while, Dahlia remained silent.

Trey led her outside, and one by one, his men fell in line. He gestured them to the opposite side of the street where the SUV was parked and took a set of keys from Jared. He'd made arrangements to have his car brought to the bar earlier.

Dahlia didn't say a word as they stood on the sidewalk. When he unlocked his doors, the lights and beep caught her attention. She jerked but squinted, eyeing his car a few feet away.

“Where's your car?” Trey asked.

Dahlia kept her eyes on his car. “I don't have one.”

What the...

Trey jerked his gaze to her face. “What do you mean you don't have one?”

His question seemed to spark something in her, jerking her out of her daze. Dahlia pulled away and shouted, “Exactly what I said, Trey! I don't have one!”

Ah, there's the fire. Trey knew she had it in her, but she'd never shown her claws until now. As much as he could

appreciate it, the last thing he needed was to bring attention to either of them on the street.

“Lower your voice,” Trey demanded.

Dahlia flinched but obediently complied, though her eyes sparked. She may have done what she was told, but she didn’t like it.

“That’s not what you told me at your interview.”

“I lied.”

His gaze hardened, and he snapped, sending her back a step. “Why?”

She gasped. “Why are you yelling at me?”

“I’m not yelling. I’m inquiring.”

“Really? Because it feels like you’re yelling. Maybe you should take your own advice and *lower your voice*, Trey!”

For a woman who claimed to be unable to go head-to-head with him during her interview, she had no problem now.

“Dahlia.”

There was a small stretch of silence.

“I was embarrassed when you questioned me.” Dahlia stepped around him and started down the dark lot. “But now? After what you just did back there, I don’t care because I don’t give a shit what you think of me. I can’t believe you got me fired! Who does that?” Dahlia stormed to the end of the curb, glancing down either side of the street. Coincidentally, she stopped directly in front of his car.

“Where are you going?”

“To the bus stop.”

“Busses don’t run this late.”

“Shit,” she muttered, dragging her hand through her hair. “Then I’ll just wait for Gia’s shift to end in a few hours.”

No. “I’ll give you a ride.”

Dahlia snorted, glancing back at him. “No, thank you. Nope, absolutely not. No way. You’ve done enough for me tonight to last a lifetime.” Dahlia’s tone was laced with venom.

The bite in her tone shouldn’t have been amusing, yet somehow he liked it. Every interaction with her had shown her submissive side. Trey wouldn’t complain. He got off on it, especially with her. But there was something intriguing and sexy about her stubbornness.

Trey leaned forward, opening the car door. “Get in the car.”

“No.” She hurried her steps but only made it past the entry of the club. He grabbed her wrist, leading her back to his car.

“Dahlia,” he growled out between clenched teeth, tightening his brows in a deep scowl.

“I don’t want to get in your car, Trey, and you can’t make me.”

Trey leaned closer and heard her sharp intake of breath. “I can’t?”

“N-no,” she whispered, clearly unsure of herself.

I bet I can, sweetheart.

“Okay.” He pulled out his phone. “I’m going to call the police and report theft of my jacket. And they’ll come down here, arrest you, and you’ll spend the next two days in a holding cell until Monday morning. Then? I’ll show up, press charges, and you’ll have to post bail. Do you have that kind of money?”

Her jaw dropped, and her eyes widened. She ripped off his jacket, immediately shivering from the biting cold. She grabbed the edges of her shirt, trying to hold it together.

“Fine, take it.”

“Okay,” he said, not making a move to touch the jacket. “Now, I’ll call them and report you for solicitation. I can get at least four men on this street to say you offered them sex in exchange for cash. You’ll be taken in and held in a holding

cell until Monday. Do I need to go over the rest?” He cocked his brow, showing no emotion.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

Trey leaned closer. “Get in the car, Dahlia.”

Dahlia shook her head. “I reek like smoke, fried fish, and someone spilled a beer on me earlier. Trust me, you don’t want me in your car.”

Trey maneuvered in front of her, grasped her chin, and lifted it slightly until she was forced to peer up at him. He leaned in a fraction of an inch, watching her bottom lip fall open. “*Trust me*, I do.”

She tried to drop her chin, but he grasped it tightly, forcing her to look at him. The pads of his fingers dug into her neck. It was just enough pressure to make his demands known.

“Get in the car.”

Her throat bobbed against his palm, and her eyes softened. “Okay.”

Trey released his hold, slid his hand to her chest above her breasts, and then dropped it to his side. Dahlia’s gaze remained locked on him as he opened the door, ushering her into the passenger seat.

He shut the door, gesturing to his security to take off. Jared gave a solid chin nod and got into the SUV. It was rare that Trey traveled anywhere without his security close by, but he didn’t need any bystanders for this.

He rounded the back of the car and looked through the window just as she glanced up. Dark eyes pinned on him. This woman would be his downfall.

Chapter Six

Oh, the irony.

For months, Dahlia had fantasized about the man sitting only two feet away. Gorgeous, smooth, and some might say slick without the icky vibe. Trey was obviously smart and well-rounded. While money had never been a strong point for any man who piqued her interest, it wasn't necessarily a con. Trey seemingly worked hard for his, which was attractive, especially considering some of her previous boyfriends. *Did I mention he's gorgeous?* Everything about Trey intrigued her, and she'd taken every opportunity to talk to him. Back then...

Now? She was counting down the minutes until she could escape the prison of his ultra-rich and comfortable, yet pompous, car. First time in a Jaguar, probably the only time she'd ever be in one, and she couldn't even enjoy it. Again, the irony.

She'd given him the address, expecting him to put it into his GPS. Trey didn't, nor did he ask for directions. He probably wasn't familiar with the area, but he never questioned it, and Dahlia refused to offer anything up. There was no bragging in the lower-middle class. Dahlia snuck a few peeks at him during the ride. He drove in silence as if he'd been to her house before. The thought had Dahlia rolling her eyes. She'd bet money he'd never drifted to her side of town. As he approached the cross street, she unbuckled her seat belt.

"You can just let me out here. It's a one-way with a lot of thru traffic, and there's never any parking."

There was truth in her statement, but there was something else. Self-preservation. A protective barrier against people like Trey and their judgment. It didn't matter.

Trey silently ignored her and made a right on her street, pulling directly in front of her house. Of all the times for there to be an open spot, it had to be this one? The car barely came to a complete stop, and she opened the door and jumped out.

Everything in her gut was insisting she slam it shut, but decency wouldn't allow it.

She bent down, meeting his stare. "I'd say thank you, but that seems inappropriate considering you got me fired."

The corner of his mouth hiked slightly. *Goddamn this man.* After all he'd done, she should be cursing his name. Instead, she was having impure thoughts and wondering how vocal he was during sex. Trey was the ultimate mindfuck. Even for a woman who'd had plenty of partners and was well-versed with men, she couldn't get a read on him. Had he been any other man, she'd be able to dial into what he was thinking, the motive behind his actions. But Trey? *I got nothing.*

"Bye." She closed the door and walked across the sidewalk to her walkway. Dahlia glanced back when she heard the engine shut down. Trey got out of the car and rounded the hood.

"What are you doing?"

"Walking you to your door." Trey peered down the road and then eyed the other end.

"It's not as sketchy as it looks."

"I highly doubt that."

Fuck you, Trey. She'd think it but wouldn't dare say it. While her neighborhood wouldn't fall under the most desirable, it wasn't that bad. It was affordable, with a few friendly neighbors who looked out for one another. Dahlia found herself taking a protective stance against his judgment.

She turned and muttered under her breath. "Snob."

"Excuse me?"

Dahlia flattened her lips, ignored him, and walked up the short walkway and onto the porch.

He followed her up the stairs and watched as she pulled out a set of keys. She wasn't looking at him, but she could feel his eyes and actually sense his closeness. Her hand shook slightly, making it difficult to get it steady enough for the lock. After two attempts, Trey stepped closer and took the keys

from her. Dahlia stepped back, assuming he was going to open it for her. Trey fisted her keys, making no attempt to open her door.

“What, taking my job away wasn’t enough for you? Now you’re taking my keys? You want me to be homeless as well as jobless?”

The corner of his mouth spiked, making her all the more irritated and, oddly, turned on. *Why do all gorgeous men have to be dicks?*

“I offered you a job. Why did you turn down the position at the Bowery? As I recall, quite a few people spoke on your behalf to get you an interview. It’s a slap in the face to those who vouched for you.”

What? This was the last thing she needed tonight. But Trey didn’t seem like the type of man to accept being ignored. The quicker she answered him, the sooner he’d leave.

“I explained to Sloane...”

“I’m not talking about Sloane.” Trey paused. “Lil, Camille, and Ryder.”

Dahlia widened her eyes. What was he talking about? Had Lil, Cam, and Ryder spoken to Trey about giving her an interview? The idea tugged at her heart, and she swallowed the knot in her throat.

“They did?”

“Yes.”

Dahlia ducked her head and smiled. *My people*. They were few and far between, but she had them. Some were in the most unlikely places. But they were hers.

“Look, I appreciate everyone talking to you for me. And I will personally call each one of them tomorrow to thank them and explain the circumstances.”

“Which would be?”

“What?” Dahlia asked.

“What’s the circumstance?”

Oh shit! How could she explain it? Dahlia couldn't.

"I just can't, Trey."

He clenched his jaw when she said his name. It seemed like an odd response, but she didn't have much time to dwell on it when his gaze darkened, and his eyes narrowed.

"Why not?"

Her cheeks pinkened, and she licked her lips, glancing over at the street. Dahlia wasn't fearful of confrontation. She'd had her fair share and rarely backed down from anyone unless she knew she was wrong. Aside from that being the case, Trey made her nervous. Her best defense would be none at all. Honesty would end this and probably mark the last time she'd see Trey.

"You were right for calling me out at the interview. I let my own insecurities dictate how I took everything you were saying. And what you were saying about the position was right. I'm not qualified. But um..." Dahlia bit her lip, trying to come up with a diplomatic answer and failed miserably. She sighed and grabbed her hips, staring down at the chipped paint on the wooden porch. "I was embarrassed. I'm not ashamed of my lifestyle or choices, but they come with consequences, and I'd like to think that others' opinions don't bother me, but—" This was the most honest she'd been with anyone in a long time.

"They do," Trey said, finishing her sentence.

This was a moment. It was super brief, but she felt as though he saw her. Completely.

"Yeah," she whispered. "And I never thought in a million years you'd hire me anyway. Nothing about me impressed you."

Admitting faults to herself was hard enough, but admitting them to others, especially Trey, was beyond raw and gut-wrenching.

"I'm sure you have more important things to do than seeing me home. If I can just have my keys back, I'd appreciate it." Dahlia offered her hand and glanced up at Trey.

The man was stone-cold. No reaction or emotion. Dahlia shouldn't expect one, especially from a man like him. *Come on, Trey. Let me leave this situation with a little dignity.*

"I upset you?" he asked. Dahlia parted her lips, and without saying a word, as if Trey knew what was coming, he cocked his brow. "Don't lie."

Damn, this man was good at reading people and seeing through their bullshit. At this point, admitting having her feelings hurt would be an opening act to the shitshow she'd just unleashed on him. There was no reason to lie.

"Yes," she whispered.

Trey drew in a breath, glancing over her battered front porch. Dahlia could only imagine what was racing through his mind. The house looked as though it was one call to the city away from being condemned.

"It wasn't my intention."

"I know, I..." Dahlia didn't get the chance to finish when Trey leaned past her, brushing his chest against her arm and unlocking her door, opening it a few inches. He glanced down. They were so close she felt her breath catch in her throat. If he moved another few inches, their lips would be touching.

"I could have worded it differently." Trey glanced down at her mouth, and for a brief, head in the clouds, not in this lifetime moment, she thought he might kiss her.

Then he stepped back, setting her back to reality with his words playing over in her head. *I could have worded it differently.* Was that an apology? No. *From Trey?*

Her brows knitted, and she cocked her head with a small smile playing on her lips. "Is that an apology?"

"You can take it however you'd like. You start Friday. Be at the club by three. And don't be late."

Wait, what?

"You're still willing to offer me the job?"

"Yes."

“But I missed the orientation.”

Trey stopped, his back rigid moments before he glanced over his shoulder. No man should look this good.

“I’ll make arrangements. Be at the Bowery at three.”

This was happening too fast. Dahlia had little time to process.

“Can I have a day to think it over and make up my mind if I’m going to take it?”

“I’ve made the decision for you. You’ll take it.” Trey turned, and without a thought, she grabbed his arm.

“I don’t think I can work for you.”

It was honest and open, and she regretted it the second the words left her lips.

Trey glanced down at her hand wrapped around his forearm. She dropped it to her side and inched back toward her door, mumbling, “Sorry.”

In a move she hadn’t seen coming, Trey turned to face her, advancing toward her. Dahlia winced when her back bumped into the wall, leaving her no option but to remain in her spot. Trey stopped a foot away, towering over her and forcing Dahlia to crane her neck.

“Why not?”

Oh God, what was it with this man and his constant inquiries?

Dahlia shrugged.

“Dahlia.”

She blew out a heavy breath and swallowed the lump in her throat.

“Dahlia?”

”You make me nervous.” Her voice hitched on the last word, and heat immediately rose to her face.

The corner of his mouth slightly shifted. It wasn’t necessarily a smile. Her heart jumped when he leaned in a few

inches.

“I make everyone nervous.”

Dahlia had no doubt of that, but her situation was entirely different. Not everyone had fantasies involving Trey completely naked, pounding inside of her, pulling her hair, and making her toes tingle from coming so hard.

“You don’t have to do this,” she whispered.

“Do what?”

Dahlia shrugged, purposely avoiding his stare. “Be nice and offer me the job again.”

Trey cupped her jaw, lifting it a fraction of an inch, as the corner of his mouth curled. “I don’t do *nice*, Dahlia.”

Her throat bobbed, and she shifted her gaze nervously. She wasn’t sure what had set her body temperature off, his statement or his touch. Either way, she was burning up, and her skin prickled.

His thumb stroked her cheek, making the moment all the more intimate. Dahlia fell into a mini-trance, leaning into the palm of his hand. If ever there was a perfect moment for him to lean in and kiss her...this was it. His mouth was so close to hers that she could almost feel his breath. Her nipples beaded, and she tightened her thighs. The silence stretched between them was torturous.

Was she reading into this lustful connection? Was it just one-sided? Trey was impossible to figure out. Maybe she was putting too much stock in his actions tonight.

Trey scanned her face, pausing briefly at her lips, and his gaze softened. It was as if he knew her exact thoughts.

“Three o’clock at the Bowery. You *will* be there.”

She would, as well as anything else he suggested at the moment.

Trey straightened, dropping his hand to his side. “Have a good night.”

Dahlia fought against a smile until he got in the car. Once she knew he couldn't see her, there was no holding back. She remained frozen against the wall until he started up his car and pulled out of his parking spot. Dahlia pushed off the wall, walking to the edge of her porch with a smile plastered on her face. She followed the lights until they disappeared around the corner.

This would be a long night.

The deal would go through with the transport, courtesy of Oz, of course. Trey just had to do his part by convincing Rogue it was the best move. Rogue giving anyone a second chance was never an option. This wouldn't be an easy task.

There was a common misconception about the Underground and how most viewed it working. While Trey, Rogue, and Oz ran things and were a solid united front, their duties were separated. The idea dated back to when they first began working for Sal Caruso. All three men played different roles in the Underground, specifically designed to showcase their strong attributes and talents. The responsibility of each was what ensured everything went smoothly.

Years later, as they moved up the ranks, their roles hadn't changed, and business worked flawlessly when everyone did their part. It's what made them leaders. Unfortunately, Rogue earned his name, and sometimes took liberties and made decisions and choices not always in the best interests of the Underground. This was one of those times.

Trey rolled his shoulders, pacing around the abandoned house. As per usual, he was the first to arrive on site. The last time he'd checked his phone, Rogue was twenty minutes late. It wasn't a good look, but as usual, Rogue didn't care what others thought—unlike some people.

Trey cupped his mouth, staring off into the dark living room. His mind should've been consumed with this deal, but somehow it drifted to a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman. *Fuck me*. It had been two days since his encounter with Dahlia, and she was taking up too much headspace. His actions from the

other night had been unacceptable, unpredictable, and completely out of character. Trey was known for his self-control in all situations. He'd been up against the deadliest scenarios, went head-to-head with the most dangerous of men, and never once lost control of himself. With Dahlia? He was walking a fine line. It took everything in him to walk away.

This woman had plagued his mind a few times in the last few months. He couldn't quite pinpoint his attraction. Dahlia was beautiful, her sex appeal was potent, and for most men, he assumed, impossible to resist. Even Trey, who had an impeccable amount of control, found himself unable to ignore her when they were in close proximity. With all that said, beauty was common. Trey was surrounded by gorgeous women and didn't give most of them an afterthought. But they weren't like Dahlia. None of them. She embodied a softness, innocence, and kindness not often seen in his realm. It would have been easier to disengage had he not seen the desire in her eyes. She wanted him, and it wouldn't have taken any effort to have her had he allowed it. *Fuck!* This *thing* with Dahlia was bordering on infatuation. The smart choice would have been to keep his distance. Instead, Trey would see her every damn fucking day.

“Trey?”

Trey turned around, glancing over to the opposite side of the room where a member of his security had been stationed. The entire perimeter was encircled, but he always had one man, preferably this one, close. Some might view their extensive security as over the top for nightclub owners. It would be if that was their only title.

Jared arched his neck, peering out the front window. “Rogue’s here.”

About fucking time.

Rogue walked through the door, looked around, and spread his arms. “Where the fuck is everybody?”

“Driver is in the back, and Dornan and his crew are on their way,” Trey said.

Rogue's jaw squared. "I hate fucking waiting on these assholes."

"Did you really just say that to me?"

Rogue slapped Trey's back as he passed. "You'd think by now you'd fucking know to show up later so you don't have to wait."

Trey scowled. "*I'd* think by now you'd start showing up on time."

Rogue laughed. It was a rare sight for most people. Not many got a glimpse into the lighter side of Trey's counterpart. Rogue viewed it as a weakness but let his guard down in front of a select few.

"What's going on with Manny?"

Trey steeled his features, knowing exactly who Rogue was referencing, though he'd play indifferent to the questioning. This was Trey's weakness, and he wouldn't expose it.

While all three men of the Underground enjoyed women, none had ever settled down. They took their cue from Sal himself. Being a part of this life meant sacrificing other aspects.

Sal had warned them. "You choose this life, you forsake everything else."

The only family Trey would ever have would be Rogue and Oz. They, along with Sal, were the only people who would understand his life path and, more so, his past. Opening up and getting too close to anyone wasn't permitted in the Underground. He wouldn't get married, and he certainly wouldn't have children. Aside from physical pleasure, Trey had nothing to offer.

There had been lovers in the past for all of them. But rarely did they discuss it with each other. What was the point? It wouldn't last for any of them.

"Manny?"

“Fucking Moon Bar? You and your guys the other night.” Rogue grinned. “Only one reason to go there, and I know you well enough that you weren’t getting your dick sucked by a whore.”

“He’s pushing a lot of product through the bar. Wanted to check in and see the clientele.”

Rogue pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and took a deep drag. “And?”

“What you would expect.”

Rogue seemed to take his answer without further questions. However, it was in Trey’s best interest to change the subject.

“Oz agreed to allow passage through his territory.”

Rogue jerked his head and knitted his brows. “Are you fucking with me?”

Trey smirked. “No. He’s going to allow it.”

Rogue squinted, knowing there was a catch.

“Compromise.”

“Ah fuck! What?” Rogue shouted.

Trey cleared his throat, gearing up for the inevitable outburst. “Killcreek will do the run.”

Rogue’s lips tightened, and his face reddened. “Fuck, no!” He charged forward, but Trey stood his ground, not even flinching. This wasn’t his first time dealing with Rogue’s tantrums. He’d been doing this for years. *And it won’t be my last.*

“That’s Oz’s fucking bullshit connection, not mine!”

Trey drew in a breath. “There’s no other choice.”

“Yeah, there fucking is. Dornan’s crew will run it on the interstate.”

“We can’t trust them,” Trey said, trying to maintain his control. “And they’ll get busted. We’re taking a risk if anything they say or carry can be linked back to us. Even if the

authorities can't find anything, it's what they'll assume and add to a long list of infractions in our folder so they can neatly present enough ammo to the prosecutor until something sticks. This was a reckless deal you put into place, and this is where we're at now."

"Fuck Killcreek!"

"No, Rogue." Trey shook his head. "The only ones fucked here are us if we don't make the deal with them."

There was a long history between the Killcreek Drifters and Rogue. A deal had gone bad. It'd been years ago, but Rogue was notorious for holding a grudge.

Rogue blew out the smoke and tossed his cigarette on the floor, not bothering to put it out. Careless.

"I'll find someone else!"

Trey sighed and walked over to the edge of the room, stamping out the cigarette.

"There's no time for that. We've got all that stock sitting, people waiting on it. And Oz won't allow anyone else passage through his territory except Killcreek."

"Fuck." Rogue grabbed his hips and paced around the room like a caged animal looking to pounce. "Go ahead. Fucking say it."

I told you this would happen. Trey had warned Rogue months ago when he first brought up the deal. Dornan's crew wasn't experienced enough, and they lacked brains behind the brawn. Too many got into the Underground thinking a deadly mindset was all that was needed. It was a common fallacy. Dornan and his crew proved that.

"I have nothing to say."

Rogue knew he'd fucked up, made a poor choice, a wrong decision. He didn't need Trey to confirm it, and he wouldn't. That wasn't his role in the Underground. Trey was the Peacemaker. It might not hold as much clout or glory as Rogue and Oz's, but it was essential to running the Underground. Resolution.

The timing was perfect as Dornan and his men pulled up. Trey glanced out the front window, watching them file out of their cars.

“What are your plans?” Trey asked.

Without a deal, Dornan was nothing more than a liability. Trey could have argued against the inevitable, but he didn't trust them to go away quietly. There was no honor with these men, no code they lived by. If they couldn't be trusted, then they didn't serve a purpose to the Underground.

Rogue walked over, standing at Trey's back. “How many he got with him?”

“Four.”

Rogue scoffed. “We're doing a service to the fucking community taking these fuckers out.”

That statement was reaching, but society certainly wouldn't suffer from their loss. Trey scanned over the faces of the men walking up the stairs.

Dornan walked in with his men, stopping at the entry. “How'd you get him?”

The driver.

Trey snorted. “My men did their jobs. Can you say the same?”

“We were close.” Dornan straightened.

No, they weren't, but Trey didn't have the time, energy, or interest to argue. This would be over in five minutes.

“He's in the last room on the left.” Trey gestured down the hallway and nodded to their security to follow the men.

As they disappeared down the hall, Rogue sidled up next to Trey. “Bet Oz got fucking hard saving the fucking day, huh?”

Trey scoffed. “Gloating is your thing, not his.”

Rogue's gaze hardened, and he pushed past Trey, heading down the hallway.

Trey followed Rogue into the room. The driver was seated against the wall.

“Thought he’d be dead by now,” Dornan said.

Trey shared a look with Rogue. They were on the same page, but apparently, Dornan was not.

“We ain’t doing your fucking dirty work,” Rogue said.

Trey immediately chimed in. “We’re just here to make sure it gets done.”

Everyone had to account for their own in the Underground. They all had blood on their hands. In most cases, it was untraceable, but Trey wouldn’t be taking the risk. Dornan moved forward, closer to the driver, as his men stood at his back. Dornan’s decision to put on a grand show of ridiculing and fanfare worked in their favor as Trey and Rogue’s security subtly made their way to the wall, lining up on either side of him and Rogue.

It would be another few minutes of Dornan berating the driver and his other cohorts laughing. They had no idea what was coming.

Like a choreographed scene, Trey, Rogue, and members of their security pulled their weapons, aiming them directly at Dornan, his crew and the driver. They were unaware until Trey and the others cocked their guns, and Dornan immediately spun around.

“What the fuck?”

“I warned you what would happen if we found him first,” Trey said.

Rogue smirked. “Your services are no longer fucking needed.”

Lights out, motherfuckers!

Chapter Seven

Dahlia walked down the hall and turned into Sloane's office, spreading out her arms. "How do I look?"

Sloane glanced up and immediately grinned. "Gorgeous."

Dahlia chuckled, tossing her clothes into her open duffle bag on the floor near the chair. She'd arrived an hour earlier to the Bowery, before her training, to fill out the final paperwork, get her uniforms, and have Sloane give her a rundown of the policies. She was currently showing off her uniform. It was a lowcut, sleek black top and skintight shorts. Not everyone would feel comfortable exposing so much, but Dahlia never had an issue. The uniform wasn't too far off from her usual daily wear aside from the fact it was better material and quality than most of her wardrobe.

"So, you have any last-minute advice for me?" Dahlia's nerves had hit an all-time high. She'd take any words of wisdom.

"Come to me if you have any problems. Killian's great, so you're in good hands. And most importantly, just be you. You're gonna be amazing." Sloane's smile faltered, and she leaned forward and lowered her voice. "And if possible, avoid Rogue."

It was a strange piece of advice, but Dahlia had heard the rumors of the other owner.

"Will do. You need anything else from me?" Dahlia asked, glancing down at her phone. She was meeting Killian at the main bar in five minutes for her training and didn't want to keep him waiting.

"One more thing." Sloane slid a piece of paper in front of Dahlia along with a pen. "Just need you to sign the NDA."

Dahlia's brows shot up. "NDA?"

"Yes, it's standard and required. Everyone has to sign one in order to work here."

This was a first for Dahlia, but she didn't hesitate. She signed the bottom after glancing over the fine print. She dropped the pen on the desk and watched as Sloane slipped the paper into a folder.

"Can they sue me if I share drink recipes?" Dahlia chuckled.

Sloane lips tightened. "It covers everything from the club to the owners and their security. You can't talk about them. Ever." Sloane pointed to the filing cabinet. "That's what you just signed, Dahl. If you do, then you'll be ordered to pay one million dollars."

Dahlia widened her eyes. Sloane must have sensed her panic, and she quickly waved her hand and smiled. "It's over the top, but you have nothing to worry about. Most of the staff never come into contact with Trey and Rogue."

I did.

"I'm so glad you changed your mind," Sloane said, changing the subject.

"Well..." Dahlia felt the heat rush to her face. "Trey can be persuasive."

Sloane furrowed her brows and cocked her head. "Trey?"

Dahlia fought against a smile. "Yeah, it's kind of crazy. He happened to be at The Moon Bar two nights ago. What are the odds, right?"

Sloane opened her mouth to speak, but they were interrupted by a tall, husky, glaring man. *Oh, not you again.* Dahlia remembered Rod from their first encounter on the day of her interview.

"It's three, and Killian's waiting. Let's fucking go."

"We just finished the paperwork, so she was—" Sloane said but never got to finish.

"Yeah, well, she starts at three. She ain't getting paid to sit in your office and hang out."

What the hell?

Sloane squinted, and her face shaded to a deep red. She looked as though she was seconds away from losing her shit. That was the last thing Dahlia wanted and quickly rushed toward the door, hoping to deescalate the situation.

“I’m sorry about that.” Dahlia smiled and pointed toward the hallway. “I’ll go the bar right now.”

Rod scowled and stepped out of her way. She rushed down the long hallway, unaware she was being followed, until she reached the main floor. She was halfway to the bar when she felt a tight grip on her forearm, and she halted, spinning around. Rod was only a foot away. He released his hold but continued to send a hateful glare when he spoke.

“You missed the orientation, so let me fucking summarize it for you. Don’t talk directly to Trey, Rogue, or any of their security. If you have a problem, a concern, a complaint, or you just want to express a little gratitude—” He sharpened his gaze. “—keep it to yourself, and shut the fuck up. They don’t give a shit about you, your opinion, or your appreciation. Am I being clear, or do I need to fucking repeat it?”

This was the orientation speech? Dahlia forced a smile. “I understand.”

“Dahlia!”

She glanced over her shoulder to the man behind the bar. He smiled and waved her over. Without hesitating, she walked over, quickening her steps. She was eager to get away from Rod. Dahlia stopped opposite of the bartender.

“I’m Killian.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, you too. C’mon back.” He waved his arm, and she walked around to the side and behind the bar.

“Thanks for coming in early for me. I appreciate it.”

Killian cocked his brow and smiled playfully. “This gets me time and a half, so *thank you*.”

Dahlia chuckled. Killian was a breath of fresh air compared to Rod. He was friendly and welcoming. He gave

her a tour of the entire club, noting the stations for the bars and servers. He was extremely thorough, answering all her questions.

He walked her to the door in the corner behind the bar. Dahlia stopped when she passed through. It was a decent sized stock room hidden from the rest of the club.

“This is basically the stock room for all the bars. Liquor, glasses, condiments. Anything we use at the bar, you’ll find in here.”

It was definitely convenient and smart. Killian walked to the other end of the stock room to another door. Dahlia peeked out. There was a staircase leading to the upper level and a hallway. From her tour, she knew it was where the kitchen had been and the back exit.

“When you clear the glasses, use this way to the kitchen.” Killian glanced over at the stairs. “That leads up to Trey and Rogue’s offices. It’s off-limits to all staff.”

Dahlia glanced up. “Got it.”

Killian walked her back to the bar and gave her a rundown of her duties. It was nothing she hadn’t done at every other job.

“I know what you’re thinking, ‘It’s easy shit, probably be bored off my ass half the time.’”

That was exactly what she was thinking.

Killian smirked with a sharp nod. “Just wait. It’s fast-paced, a lot to juggle, and being the main bar, it’s always busy. But you’ll get the hang of it, I’m sure.” He glanced over her shoulder and pointed at a woman rounding the bar. “Misti, this is Dahlia. She’s working with us tonight.”

Dahlia turned and smiled. “Hey.”

Misti looked her over, and her brows knitted. “Right. Brand new barback in training is working the busiest bar in the club on her first night. Yeah, that makes sense.”

Wow, okay.

Dahlia glanced up at Killian, who seemed to be fighting against a smile.

“Hey,” Misti snapped, and Dahlia jerked her head. “I know the speech, and you’d be smart to remember what Rod said. Trey and Rogue don’t give a shit about you, your opinion, or your appreciation. I don’t know how the hell you landed this bar on your first day, but it’s a chance no one ever gets, so don’t fuck up.”

Noted. Not that she needed a full-on explanation. Misti turned without another word and walked over to the bar across the room.

“Hey.” Dahlia glanced to her left back to Killian when he spoke. “On her best day, Misti is a raving bitch. She’s like that with everyone, so don’t take it personally.” Killian chuckled, tossed the rag onto the bar, and stepped closer. “She’s good to have on your side, but she can be your worst enemy. She’s been here a long time. The unspoken lead bartender. Her delivery sucks, but she’s right. The staff never interacts with Trey and Rogue unless called in.” He raised his brows. “And trust me, you don’t want to be singled out by either of them. It never ends well.” Killian leaned his hip against the bar, inspecting her. He wasn’t gawking or perusing her body. It was as if he was trying to figure her out.

“What?”

Killian shrugged and smiled. “I’ve worked here a long time. I started out as a barback for almost nine months before I was moved to bar one.”

“Are you insinuating something? Because if you are, you should just say it.” Dahlia folded her arms.

Killian straightened and held up his hands. “No, not at all. It just never happens, and then there’s the other thing.”

Dahlia furrowed her brows. “What other thing?”

Killian grasped the back of his neck, stalling.

“What?”

Killian glanced around the large club. The others were scattered throughout the room, and no one was close enough to hear their conversation, but she noticed Killian taking caution not to be overheard. “I’m tight with Jar—” He cleared his throat. “Aaron. He mentioned you turning down the job originally. That never fucking happens here.”

“Nobody has ever declined?”

“I’m sure they have, but none have been given a second chance. People don’t come back. Once you’re out, it’s over. And I’m not talking about just here. They blackball you from all the other clubs and bars in the city. I’m talking all of them. Probably can’t even get a job cleaning the shitter at Starr’s.”

Interesting.

“You’re late.” Rod’s booming voice from across the room sent a shiver down Dahlia’s spine, reminiscent of the first time she’d met him. Dahlia had been around all types of men all her life. She considered herself a good judge of character, and she was getting a bad vibe from this man.

“Sorry.” The redheaded girl may have apologized, but it lacked sincerity and had almost a high-pitched, taunting tone. Dahlia bit back her smile and watched as the girl rushed over to the bar, slapping her hand down on the top.

“You’re new, right?”

Dahlia smiled. “Yeah, first day.”

Killian pointed to the girl. “This is my sister, Keely. Another barback.” He paused and smirked. “Well, since her demotion.”

Keely rolled her eyes and gave Killian the middle finger. The sibling banter seemed genuine and sweet, with some added snarky teasing.

Dahlia flattened her lips, resisting the urge to laugh, but failed miserably. The girl was probably a few years younger than her, but Dahlia instantly knew they’d be friends.

Keely grinned and shrugged. “I’ve been sent back to training. It could be worse. At least Trey didn’t fire me.”

Just his name sent a spike in her heart rate.

“He must like you,” Dahlia said.

Keely snorted. “Um, no. He likes Killian, which is the only reason I got the job in the first place.”

Dahlia glanced over at the brother, who didn’t dispute his sister’s claim. “I’ve been working here for years. One of the perks is getting my incapable sister a job. She’s better suited for barback, considering she’s cost the club thousands of dollars in screwed-up drinks.”

Keely scoffed. “Hundreds, not thousands.”

Dahlia inspected the girl. She looked familiar. It took Dahlia a few seconds. The setting obviously piqued her memory. Of course, when they’d met, they’d been on opposite sides of the bar. *I know you.*

“You made me a drink last month.”

Keely raised her brows. “I did?”

Killian laughed. “Did she fuck it up, Dahlia?”

Dahlia shook her head. “No.”

It was clear Keely didn’t remember her. It made sense. The night would be more memorable for Dahlia. She’d gotten a ride home from Ryder, a member of Ghosttown East, and waited while he made a stop at the club. At that point, Dahlia had been on the waiting list for an interview at the Bowery. A few months seemed excessive, but she was willing to wait. During her brief conversation with Keely that night she found out the young girl got hired immediately. Now she knew why. But at the time, Dahlia had taken it personally, as if Trey didn’t want to allow her an interview.

“You were having trouble with a Lemon Drop, and I…”

Keely grabbed her wrist, laughing. “Oh my God. Yes. You told me how to make it. I remember you.” Her eyes widened. “And then you gave me a twenty-dollar tip when Trey refused to let you pay for your drink.” She laughed, peered around the room, and lowered her voice. “He was so pissed!”

I remember, and so does he.

“Did he let you keep the twenty?” Dahlia asked.

Her face brightened. “At first, I didn’t think he would, so I went to put it in the register, but he stopped me and said it was my tip to keep.”

Undercover good guy?

They spoke another few minutes until a whole slew of staff entered the club and started setting up. Dahlia was nervous and repeated all her duties in her head, hoping her first day wouldn’t be her last. She was behind the bar, lining up the last of the glasses, when she felt an undeniable heat wash over her, and she looked up. It was beyond strange. Dahlia hadn’t even seen Trey walk in. It was as if she’d sensed him.

He was standing at the bottom landing of the balcony, speaking with a member of security. Trey nodded and said something, to which the man gave a sharp nod. Dahlia was so entranced watching him that she hadn’t even realized he looked over until it was too late. His dark eyes peered back at her, and she felt her lips twitch seconds away from smiling, but she remembered quickly she wasn’t allowed any contact with him. Dahlia dropped her chin to her chest, grabbed a handful of napkins, and spun around, walking to the other side of the bar.

She wasn’t even officially working yet, and she was already breaking the rules. Dahlia stacked the napkins and slipped out of Misti’s way when she turned. But she was careful to keep her back to the balcony. How was she supposed to work if all her thoughts were consumed by this man?

Her answer came forty minutes later. Once the club opened, she had little time to think about anything.

Killian wasn’t lying!

Trey had spent most of the night in his office and away from the club scene. It was a purposeful move. It seemed he

hadn't anticipated Dahlia invading his space to be an issue until now.

Trey rounded his desk, grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair, and slipped it on as he made his way through his office to the door. He looked down at his watch. He had about forty-five minutes to get to the location for the gun transport with Stark.

Trey walked out the door, and immediately his security fell in line, Jared walking beside him. Trey didn't trust many people, but Jared had proven his loyalty over the years.

"The car is waiting. By my estimate, we should be there ten minutes early," Jared said.

"And by your estimate, when will Rogue arrive?"

Jared cleared his throat. "Twelve minutes late."

Trey sighed. "We should be so lucky. I'd say twenty."

Jared nodded, and he noticed a small hitch in the corner of his mouth.

The Underground was a world of business relationships. There was very little personal life or commingling. Everyone had a job, a dangerous one. There was little time and no place for personal lives. However, working with people day after day, especially in their line of work, took a certain level of trust. Jared had Trey's, within reason. Unlike Rogue, who viewed almost all those under him as mere employees, Trey had a more personal connection with a select few. Jared being one of them. Trey knew some things that wouldn't be found in a background check or resume. Jared had a small circle of people in his private life that very few knew about.

Trey veered to the right, heading toward the balcony. He had his choice of three exits, and there wasn't a reason to go through the club—until tonight.

Trey walked to the balcony, scanning the floor. It was a solid night, typical for a Friday. Weekends always brought in the most cash. They were the busiest and most lucrative. Not that it really mattered for Trey. This wasn't where he made his

money. The Bowery was a mere front as a legitimate legal business to cover all their illegal entities.

Trey looked down at the main bar. Killian and Misti worked it most nights as the most seasoned bartenders. It was the most crowded and the largest. Usually, their barback had months of training in the club and had been employed for at least nine months. *Not her.*

Dahlia was moving in and around the two bartenders effortlessly as if she was anticipating their every move. When Misti spun around quickly for a glass, it was ready and waiting courtesy of Dahlia. There was a small exchange between the women. Misti, who wasn't known for her warmth, seemed to lighten and even offer a small smile to Dahlia. That was a first. Dahlia said something, rushed back to the wall of liquor, and shifted her attention between the two bartenders.

“How many are you taking?” Jared asked.

“Six.” Trey didn't travel with as much security as Rogue and Oz except during transports. He checked the time again. They'd have to leave now if they wanted to get there a little earlier. It was always best to be first at the location and watch everyone roll in to catch any potential risks.

Trey was about to turn when he noticed Rod walk up to the edge of the bar. Dahlia whipped her head toward him and immediately rushed over, leaning across the bar. When she straightened, her eyes were rounded, and she shook her head, hooking her thumb over her shoulder. Trey was good at reading people, and he was seeing distress and a bit of panic on her face.

What the fuck was going on? Trey moved closer to the banister. Rod's back was to him, so his sole focus remained on Dahlia, who appeared a little more confused with a hint of fear. Trey balled his fists, feeling an unfamiliar and unnerving heat stretch over his muscles. Rod pointed in her direction, and Dahlia took a step back.

“Find out what's happening,” Trey demanded, and Jared brushed past him.

Trey folded his arms, watching as Killian looked behind him, placed the bottle down, walked over to Dahlia, and started talking to Rod. It was impossible to grasp what was being said, but Killian's demeanor shifted, and he stepped in front of Dahlia, taking aim at Rod. Trey was seconds away from handling it himself when Jared appeared next to Rod and ordered him away from the bar.

There was a quick discussion between Jared and Killian. Dahlia stayed in the background, glancing around, unsure of herself. It lasted seconds before she rushed over to Misti. Dahlia seemed to bounce back quickly.

Trey watched Jared walk away from the bar and up the stairs. With the limited time, Trey started through the back hall again, opting for the private staircase. It was quicker. Jared sidled up next to him.

“Apparently, Rod was less than impressed with the new barback's speed. He got pretty loud with her.”

Trey angled his head, knitting his brows.

“Killian stepped in because he felt the opposite, and when he expressed that, Rod had some choice words.” Jared paused. “Have I mentioned that Killian doesn't like Rod?”

Trey snorted. “You hear about that a lot?”

Rod had been brought in initially for backup security and to help Sloane with management. Trey wasn't particularly impressed with him, but it was Rogue's call, and up until now, Trey hadn't taken an issue with the man. He was abrasive and aggressive, which worked well in security.

“Every damn night.” Jared drew in a breath. “It's settled. For now.”

Trey started down the stairs. The back exit led down to the small bar kitchen and the private back entrance. It was rare to see anyone there except a barback on occasion. *And here she fucking is...*

Seeing Dahlia from across the club in her uniform was one thing, but her close-up gave Trey an unexpected response. His gaze traveled down her back, lingering on her ass and

down her long bare legs as she bent over and grabbed the dish basin. The uniform was Rogue's design. Trey would have gone a little more conservative, erring a bit to the classy side, much like Oz's club. Rogue's vision definitely brought in the bigger tips for the staff, and no one complained.

I'm not complaining now.

Dahlia must not have heard them because when she straightened and turned toward the kitchen, she gasped, and her eyes widened. Her shock was quickly replaced when she locked eyes with him and smiled.

"Hi, Trey!" Her breath hitched, and her cheeks pinkened.

Hi, Trey. It was a phrase he rarely heard. And when he did, it didn't carry this much enthusiasm.

Most people, especially employees, knew better than to interact with him and especially Rogue and steered clear of them. It was the way they wanted it. Dahlia was completely breaking all the rules, and if he had to guess, she just realized her mistake.

She quickly lost her smile, turned to the side, and muttered. "Shit."

Trey steeled his features, not giving in to his smile. He glanced at Jared and lifted his chin, dismissing the security. As they passed, he noticed Dahlia look over, but she immediately dropped her gaze to the floor again. Trey waited until the last man had rounded the corner and disappeared before walking into the stockroom. Apparently, Dahlia had assumed he'd left with his men.

When she spun around and saw Trey standing a few feet away, she stumbled backward. His immediate response, without any thought, was to reach out, grip her arm, and steady her. It put them in closer quarters with her back pressed against the wall and the plastic carrier separating them. Trey felt her tremble under his hand. Her arm shook slightly, which could have been from the weight of the dishes or their close proximity. He grabbed the heavy plastic carrier and took it

from her hands, placing it on a shelf in the dark corner of the stock hallway.

Dahlia seemed shell-shocked and confused, still refusing to look in his direction. Even standing in front of him, her gaze darted from one side to the other.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered.

“Look at me.”

Dahlia stilled, grazed her teeth over her bottom lip, and glanced up through her lashes. *Fuck!* This was not the vision he needed in the small, confined space with her. If her flowery scent wasn’t enticing enough, towering over her by at least a foot gave him the perfect view of her cleavage practically busting from her top. Trey clenched his jaw.

“Sorry for what?”

She shook her head.

“Dahlia.”

Her lips parted, forming the perfect O as her eyes widened, and she shifted on her feet. “I don’t want to get in trouble.”

“For what?”

“Talking to you. Rod said not to speak directly to you, Rogue, or the security.”

Trey furrowed his brows. Talking to him? Very few dared to do it. It was never encouraged, but certainly not grounds for ramifications. He could’ve refuted Rod’s claim but Trey chose another route.

“Defying the rules again?”

Trey’s attempt at teasing her backfired on him.

Dahlia licked her lips, and his gaze immediately dropped to her mouth. Her lips were shiny from her gloss, almost appearing wet and flooding his mind with thoughts he didn’t need at the moment. He could envision her mouth wrapped around his cock and felt himself hardening.

“I actually take orders really well.” Dahlia glanced up through her lashes.

Oh fuck! For a man like Trey, who thrived on dominance, that statement alone had him thinking of her naked, spread out, and doing everything he ordered. He was playing with fire. Having her in his bed was quickly shifting from a want to a need.

“Shouldn’t you get back to work?”

Trey watched her shift on her feet under his stare. He made her nervous. Trey expected her to rush off or avert her eyes, but she stared back at him. Then, in a move he hadn’t even seen coming, she stepped closer.

“Thanks again for giving me the job. I promise you won’t regret it.”

Trey was already regretting it. It had nothing to do with her performance behind the bar. This had quickly and unexpectedly become personal. In this close proximity, she was hard to resist. Trey drew in a breath and walked out of the stockroom, heading down the hall. Not only was their encounter disruptive to his mindset, but he’d probably be late after taking time with her.

“Have a good night, Trey!”

His muscles tightened, but he refused to react as he turned the corner. Dahlia was fucking with his world, and he hadn’t even gotten a taste of her.

Yet.

Chapter Eight

It was after three in the morning. Her feet hurt, her back was sore, and she was pretty sure she was dehydrated. Her stomach growling was a reminder she'd skipped her break. Exhausted, hungry, and achy. *And I wouldn't change a thing!*

One week of working at the Bowery had been taxing but worth every penny. And there were a *lot* of pennies. She hadn't gotten her first paycheck yet, but she went home with cash from tips after every shift. In her first three nights of working, she'd earned enough to cover the whole rent. Dahlia had been warned that new hires started with two shifts weekly. But Sloane must have pulled some strings. Dahlia had gotten four, which included another weekend shift.

She covered her yawn, surveying the stacked glasses that had to be towel-dried before being put away. It would be another thirty minutes. At least.

"You're doing good here," Killian said.

"Well, it's only day four, probably too early to tell, but if you want to tell Trey to give me a raise, I won't stop you."

Killian laughed, tossed a rag at her, and pulled out an envelope from under the bar. He held it up before offering it to her. "Four forty."

Her stomach dropped, as well as her jaw. This marked the highest tip for the week. Dahlia bounced on her toes, unable to batten down her excitement.

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah." He laughed. "You work really well with me and Misti. Even mentioned to Sloane, we want to keep you here with us at bar one, if possible."

As if the tip hadn't completely made her night, Killian's praise had her riding high. Dahlia worked flawlessly with Killian. He made it easy. The same couldn't be said for Misti, but she seemed to have warmed up to Dahlia a bit. She

couldn't foresee them having a girls' night out, but her glare had softened through Dahlia's shift. It was toned down to a scowl.

Even drying dishes wasn't going to steal her thunder. She worked quickly, and when she finished, she moved to Killian's station, wiping down the counter.

"Fuck," Killian muttered and gripped his forehead.

"What's wrong?"

Killian glanced up to the second floor. "Forgot to get someone to clean up the balcony."

Most of the staff had left for the night, leaving only Killian and Dahlia on the floor.

"I can do it."

"I usually have one of the waitresses do it. It's no offense toward you, but they like it set up a certain way and they're very fucking meticulous. No room for error in the balcony, or you get your ass handed to you."

Dahlia chuckled. "I don't think I've ever seen Sloane ream anyone's ass."

Killian flattened his lips, obviously not finding her joke amusing.

"Not talking about Sloane." He balled his fist, clearly frustrated. "Shit."

Dahlia dropped her towel on the counter and stepped closer.

"Just tell me what to do, and I'll make sure it all gets done, I promise."

How hard could it be? Aside from clearing glasses and debris and wiping everything down, it didn't seem like a big job. Dahlia might have an ulterior motive, too. She hadn't seen Trey since her first night. Well, that wasn't true. She'd caught glimpses of him, but they never made eye contact. He'd been in the balcony a few times, and once she'd seen him walk through the club. He'd never even looked in her direction.

Dahlia hadn't seen him at all tonight, and she'd looked. It crossed her mind that he was purposely avoiding her. But that thought was fleeting. Trey had no reason since he obviously had no interest. Her crush was shifting to infatuation, which would only have her crash and burn if she didn't get control over it.

She and Trey were on different levels, different spaces in the universe. The faster she realized that, the safer her heart would be.

Killian reluctantly gave her instructions, and she walked up the steps. It was eerily silent. From the view below on the main floor, she'd only caught a glimpse of the coveted balcony. There had been a man standing at the bottom of the stairs all night. Security. She wasn't exactly sure what they were protecting the owners from, but they obviously took their jobs very seriously. The two times she'd passed by and smiled, it was met with a harsh scowl.

The balcony was grander than the club itself, which said a lot.

She was piling the glasses and ashtrays into her plastic bin when she heard a deep growl followed by a berating, loud voice booming. She straightened her back and turned to the stairs. A man she'd never seen before stalked forward, waving his hand.

"That's not what I fucking agreed to, Nash, so you tell him if he wants to change this deal, then he can fucking call me himself!"

He slapped his phone down on the table. She'd be surprised if the screen hadn't shattered. He sat down, reaching into his suit pocket. "Whiskey."

Dahlia widened her eyes. He could only be talking to one person seeing as they were the only two people there. Dahlia froze, wondering where he'd come from. She hadn't heard anyone walking up the stairs.

"Why the fuck are you still standing here?"

Dahlia winced at the harsh tone and the visceral snap. She'd spent plenty of time around burly, loud men but wasn't accustomed to the nasty, condescending edge of his voice. How was she supposed to handle a customer who wasn't even supposed to be there? It was probably best to get Killian, but she'd just spent five minutes convincing him she could handle the balcony. When in doubt, kindness went a long way. *Usually.*

"Um..." She swallowed the knot in her throat, forcing a smile. "I'm sorry, we're closed."

His brows dipped into a hard scowl, and his gaze hardened.

"What the fuck did you just say?"

Oh shit.

"We close at two."

He lit his cigarette and kept his harsh glare locked on her. She rocked on her heels, tightening her hold on the plastic tub. Under his scrutinizing stare, her hands shook slightly, and she tapped her foot. His eyes drifted down her body as he settled into his seat, showing no signs of leaving. He squinted, taking a deep drag from his cigarette, never taking his eyes off her.

This must be how weaker wildlife feels seconds before they're pounced on. It was a fair assessment, considering she felt like prey. Dahlia waited, biting her bottom lip. As the smoke billowed around his face, the corner of his mouth curled, which only amplified her tension.

"Who the fuck are you?" He seemed to have lost the slight edge of his tone. Clearly, he was still harboring a good amount of anger, but his question came out as more of an inquiry than an accusation. Pissing off the customers was not how she wanted to end her shift.

"I'm Dahlia. I'm a barback." She smiled and shivered under his inspecting perusal of her body. The uniform left little to the imagination. Not all women would be comfortable traipsing around the club in the tiny outfit. It was the one thing Dahlia felt most at ease with.

“I just started last week.” She wasn’t sure why she offered up that nugget of information. It wouldn’t matter to him, or maybe it would. Hopefully, he’d be compliant and leave.

Unfortunately, he didn’t, and they were back to a standoff. Arrogant, entitled men were the least attractive, and this man was no different. By all outward appearances, he was good-looking. *Very good looking.* A little rough, not quite as clean cut as the usual customers. In an odd sense, he kind of reminded her of Trey. By their attire alone, they were polar opposites. While they both appeared expensive, Trey’s look was crisp and muted black. This man’s burgundy shirt, two buttons undone, partnered with his dark gray suit, was flashier without being tacky. His dark hair was disheveled but suited his strong features. The lines between his brows were deep for someone she’d peg not much older than forty if that. He’d obviously taken care of himself, minus the smoking, if his body was any indication. He was bulkier than Trey but probably the same height.

Why the hell was she comparing this man to Trey? Clearly, this guy was not even in the same league as Trey. *And why the hell am I thinking of Trey?* The silence was only compounding her anxiety and interfering with her capability to think. A shiver shot up her spine when he angled his head. His eyes were too dark, too sinister and harsh.

It was time for a compromise. *And bribery.*

Dahlia cleared her throat, inhaled a cleansing breath, and smiled. “Tell ya what. I’ll get you a whiskey. But you have to leave as soon as you finish it.”

He arched his brow and cupped his mouth. The corners of his eyes crinkled, which usually was indicative of smiling. But not in this case. *I’m not sure this man even knows how to smile.*

“I have to fucking leave?”

Now we’re getting somewhere.

“Yes, as soon as you’re done.”

He dropped his hand from his face, resting his elbows on the table. “And I get that on the fucking house, huh?”

“Well, no. I can’t give free drinks, but I’ll buy it for you.” She smiled just thinking of the wad of cash she’d made tonight. While she hated to part with her money, it was a sacrifice she’d gladly make to be rid of this man.

“Let me get this straight.” The man’s gaze hardened, and he pointed directly at her. “You, a fucking barback, are gonna buy *me* a drink?”

Wow, sir. There was no missing the condescending, holier-than-thou attitude and tone. Dahlia ground her teeth, fighting against the response she wanted to give. This was all part of the job. She had to take the good with the bad. *And that includes dealing with assholes.*

“Yes. I made really good tips tonight.”

“Hold the fuck up. Who are you again?”

The man had the attention span of a six-day-old puppy.

“Dahlia.”

He smiled, eyeing her from head to toe, licking his lips. “Get me my whiskey.”

Something was off, and she had the distinct feeling she was missing something. But given his abrasive demeanor, it was best to comply. Dahlia hauled the bin downstairs and rushed around the bar. She looked around for Killian, but he must have been in the back depositing the cash for the night. Dahlia could have waited or walked down to the office to explain what happened. However, it was better to get the man his drink. The quicker he got his drink, the sooner he’d leave. *I hope.* She grabbed the bottle of whiskey and a glass, wiping the bottom of the glass, and rushed to the stairs, careful not to slosh the booze. When she reached the top, she peered around the open room. The man was gone, but two members of security were standing near the heavily draped entry. She remembered from her interview the offices were located through the hallway.

She glanced around, and seeing it was her only option, she broke another of Rod's rules. She was specifically told not to speak to security. *What other choice do I have?*

"I'm sorry to bother you, but there was a man here about two minutes ago. You wouldn't happen to know where he went, would you?"

The security guard stared down at her without saying a word.

This was a gift. He obviously left, and she'd dodged a bullet.

"I guess he left."

Dahlia turned as another man stalked toward her, his movements tense and strict. He passed by her.

"Follow me."

Oh!

Dahlia hurried her steps while balancing the glass, careful not to spill the alcohol. When they reached the end of the corridor, he made a sharp left. There were several doors lining the halls, and a sudden sense of dread wafted her body, chilling her blood. The man was leading her to the end of the hallway. An office she knew well.

Trey's office.

"Need an answer, Rogue." Trey turned in his seat behind his desk.

Rogue had arrived a few minutes ago, late and ranting, as usual. This Killcreek deal should have been an easy resolution, but Rogue was holding out.

"Yeah, well, I don't fucking have one yet."

Trey ground his teeth. "The longer you wait, the more risk we're taking. This can be resolved tonight if you just..."

Rogue jerked his head toward the door and threw his hands over his head.

“It’s about time. Thank fuck you’re not a server.”

Trey turned, looked over at the door, and stilled as Dahlia stood painfully nervous in the doorway, holding a glass. His muscles immediately tightened.

“You gonna make me come and get it?” Rogue said, and Dahlia immediately shook her head and rushed forward, carefully holding the glass. She stopped a few feet away. It was as if she didn’t want to get too close to him. If Trey had to guess, this was her first interaction with Rogue. *You’re in for a real treat, Dahlia.*

When Rogue grabbed the glass, she turned quickly but only made it halfway across the room.

“Hey!” Rogue snapped. “I didn’t fucking dismiss you.”

Trey had been dealing with Rogue’s bedside manner since the day they’d met. It was an acquired taste not many enjoyed, but most tolerated. Trey had grown accustomed to it and didn’t call him out on it. *Usually.*

“Rogue.” Trey narrowed his gaze in a firm warning.

Dahlia whipped her head toward Rogue, the realization immediately kicking in. It was interesting to watch her face pale even beyond her makeup as she slowly withdrew and shrunk deeper in her posture. Then she bowed her head slightly and closed her eyes. It was evident she had no clue it had been Rogue, but she knew of him. Trey had no doubt Sloane had given her friend a warning.

Most people had similar reactions.

“This is a fucking first. I’m getting paid to drink in my own fucking club.”

Trey watched as Dahlia pried open her eyes and glanced up. She’d regained color in her face, and it was shifting in the opposite direction, turning a dark shade of pink.

Rogue jutted his chin. “How much did you make in tips?”

“Four forty.” She let her composure slip, and she smiled. “Not bad for seven hours.”

Rogue scoffed. “Is it?”

She licked her lips and looked over at Trey. “I think so.”

It was as if she was looking to him for validation. One he didn't give. While it was decent, it wasn't anything his seasoned barbacks would brag about.

“Bartenders make over a thousand, and you're fucking satisfied with four forty? Is that before or after you bought my drink?”

“Before,” Dahlia muttered.

“So you didn't make four forty then.”

Rogue was trying to mess with her. Trey had seen this tactic a million times, and Rogue was gifted when it came to mindfucks and intimidation.

Dahlia cleared her throat. “I made four forty, and I chose to spend twenty-two of it on your drink.”

Trey cupped his mouth, concealing his smile. Dahlia may have been nervous, but she was holding her own. Or at least trying.

She hooked her thumb over her shoulder. “I have to get back downstairs. Clean up.”

“No,” Rogue snapped and pointed to the chair in front of Trey's desk. “Sit the fuck down.”

Trey ground his teeth, dropped his hands to his lap, and clasped them while keeping a watchful eye on her. Stepping in would bring too much attention to Dahlia.

Dahlia inched toward the chair and sat.

“Started last week, right?” Rogue asked.

“Yes, sir.”

Fuck! Trey balled his fists, clenched his jaw, and tore his gaze from her. It was his weak spot, though very few could pull off the submissive tone needed to get him off. But Dahlia? This woman was checking off too many boxes. Had another

man not been in the room, he'd be as hard as a fucking steel rod.

The silence lingered in the room, and he could feel the heavy gaze on him. It wasn't Dahlia. She sat in silence, clueless. Rogue, on the other hand, shared in his kink for dominance, knowing it would strike a chord in both of them. Trey drew in a breath, steeled his features, and angled his head toward Rogue, who was openly smirking.

Trey hardened his gaze, sending a clear warning that Rogue, as always, chose to ignore. He settled in his seat, turning his attention back to Dahlia.

"Where'd you work before here?"

Her eyes darted over to Trey, and she parted her lips. "Umm..."

"You don't fucking know?" Rogue straightened in his seat. "Why the fuck do you keep looking at Trey?"

Dahlia jerked her head. "I'm sorry, umm...I bartended at a few clubs."

"Which ones?"

"Ghosttown East and..."

It took less than three seconds for the tension in the room to skyrocket. Rogue had many triggers, but East was at the top of the list.

Rogue slammed his glass on Trey's desk, and by some miracle, it didn't shatter into pieces. It did, however, spill some of the whiskey.

"Fuck, no!" Rogue shouted and stood, glaring down at Dahlia. "Got enough of East's fucking leftovers working for us. We don't need more. We filled our fucking quota! You're fired."

Trey drew in a breath, clasped his hands, and stared back at Rogue. He knew Rogue, his game, and how he played it. However, Trey was about to do something he rarely did and challenge Rogue's decision.

“No, she’s not.”

Rogue spun around. “Yeah, she fucking is, Trey!”

“Why?”

Rogue’s gaze darkened, and he narrowed his stare. “MCs don’t hire fucking anyone. They got their members to do shit and—” Rogue paused, slowly turning back to Dahlia. “—their club whores. I know you ain’t a member, so that must make you one of their whores.”

Dahlia didn’t respond. She didn’t have to. Everyone knew the answer, especially from her lack of response.

“An East club whore. That’s who we’re employing now?”

“She diffused the situation by offering you a drink instead of entertaining a confrontation. She didn’t know who you were, Rogue, but she offered a resolution and compromise by buying you a drink, and she did that with her own money. Honesty is key when running a cash business, don’t you agree?”

Rogue’s brows drew down deep, and his gaze darkened. “Fire her.”

It became less about Dahlia and her affiliation and more about Trey’s loyalty to Rogue in his eyes. When Trey remained silent, Rogue’s gaze darkened, and his back straightened. His gaze quickly shifted to Dahlia, setting her in his line of fire. Trey wouldn’t allow it.

“Dahlia,” Trey said, waiting for her to look up. When she did, he lifted his chin to the door. “You can go.”

She slowly pushed up from the chair, keeping her eyes on Trey. The uncertainty was evident. “Am I fired?”

“No.”

He saw the slight ease in her features, and she quickly nodded, practically running out of the office. Trey watched her, knowing Rogue was doing the same. This was far from over.

“What the fuck, Trey?”

“I could ask you the same thing. She’s done nothing wrong.”

“Her fucking affiliation with East.”

“As you pointed out, she’s no different from Sloane.”

Rogue grabbed his drink, chugged it, and took a seat again, this time across from Trey. The long stretch of silence was a calculated move on Rogue’s part. People didn’t enjoy silence during a confrontation. It usually meant something bigger was coming. A calm before the storm. Trey knew the tactic well and used it often.

Rogue glanced at the doorway and slowly faced Trey again. The corner of his mouth curled. “She’s got a nice ass. Thinking the tits are real and big enough to fuck.” Rogue held up his hand and slowly made a fist. “Long hair, wrap it twice, maybe three times. Bet she’d beg you to yank fucking hard. Thinking that pussy has seen some miles with East, but her gag reflex control must be incredible.”

Trey wouldn’t take the bait. He smirked, angling his head. “Are you done?”

“Yeah.” Rogue snorted, shaking his head. He stood and started across the room. When he got to the doorway, he glanced back. “For now.”

Rogue walked out, and Trey silently cursed. This wasn’t over for him or for Dahlia. Rogue was like a dog with a bone and no rules. Trey could handle himself against Rogue. But he had his doubts about Dahlia.

Fuck!

Chapter Nine

Shit!

Dahlia double-timed it down the sidewalk and practically ran up the driveway to the back of the Bowery, narrowly escaping a car pulling into one of the spots. It would have been a good excuse for being late, but not one she wanted to use. She rounded the building, rushing up to the employee entrance. She knocked on the door, taking a moment to catch her breath. She'd been issued a keycard when she'd started, and somehow, with the day's events, she'd left it on the kitchen counter. Murphy's Law was in full effect.

I really need a car. It was on her list, but Dahlia was mainly focused on paying her rent and utilities and securing a roommate. The task was proving to be harder than she thought. There were very few options, and without being able to do a background check, she was wary of most applicants. Considering her previous roommate, she was overly cautious and a bit scared. While her financial situation had done a complete one-eighty since she'd started at the Bowery, paying for a two-bedroom house was a waste of her money. She had other things she needed.

She knocked again and pressed her ear to the door. It was impossible to hear anything through the heavy metal. She pounded with her fist and nervously shifted on her feet. She refused to check her phone for the time, knowing she was at least five minutes late.

She searched the lot for Sloane's car. Hopefully, one call to her friend would get her in. But instead of finding Sloane's car, she found herself staring back at her boss. *Oh shit!* He was the last person she wanted to run into showing up late to her shift. Trey stood a few feet away, staring back at her. Dahlia slowly turned, forcing a smile, though she knew her lips were too shaky to pull it off.

"Hi, Trey."

His brows dipped and skimmed over her body. She'd always been comfortable in her own skin and never shied away from showing it, but under his stare, she found herself shrinking slightly. It wasn't the first time he'd seen her in her uniform, and she hadn't changed anything about her look, but something about how his gaze heated sent a shiver over her skin.

"You're late," Trey said, glancing up at her.

Dahlia nodded her head at rapid speed, fumbling over her words. "I know. I'm so sorry. I missed my first bus, and the next one was five minutes late. And I forgot my keycard at home."

Trey arched his brow and angled his chin to the side door reserved for him and Rogue. She followed close behind and caught herself from plowing into his back when he stopped short to punch in the code. Trey grabbed the handle and stepped back, allowing her to walk ahead of him. She tightened her lips, holding her smile at bay. It was a small gesture that didn't mean anything personal, but she liked it. It was gentlemanly and something she didn't experience often.

"Thank you," she said and stepped to the side of the foyer. He passed, walking down the long hall. He stopped midway at the door leading to the opposite side of the building. *The one I'm supposed to be on.* It was controlled by a code that she didn't know.

She wasn't sure what provoked her. Maybe it was the close proximity, maybe it was his kind gesture of opening the door, or maybe it was just the truth refusing to lay low.

"I haven't seen you in a few days."

He stopped at the door, glancing down at her. "Have you been looking?"

Yes! It almost felt like flirty banter. This was where Dahlia felt most comfortable. Not necessarily flirting but the easy conversation. It put her guard down. Apparently a little too much.

“I’m not sure my answer would be appropriate, considering you’re my boss.”

The second the words left her mouth, she felt the heat shoot up to her face. *Why did I say that?* Sure, it was the truth, but not something she should be verbalizing to him! It was hard to tell how Trey had taken the comment. His eyes immediately gazed over her head. She was mildly aware of footsteps coming from behind but didn’t have the chance to look. She felt his hand wrap over her hip, his fingers digging into her flesh and shifting her closer to the wall. And essentially a few inches away from Trey. She was so close she could smell his cologne. It was a smoky, woody fragrance. To say it was intoxicating, would’ve been an understatement. Dahlia inched closer then halted, remembering, they weren’t alone. *And he’s my boss!*

She glanced over as two members of security passed them. They didn’t even spare them a look and walked out the back door. Proving again that discretion was everything at the Bowery.

“Why were you late?”

Dahlia blinked, unsure she’d heard him correctly. It was completely out of left field. He was doing the gentlemanly thing by changing the subject, and she cocked her head, smiling. He was also still touching her.

“It’s a long story. I’m sure you don’t want to hear it.”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t ask.”

Dahlia blinked, letting his statement settle in. This was a strange turn of events. *Now, he’s interested?* Dahlia cleared her throat.

“My landlord scheduled a replacement for my bedroom window. The guy was supposed to come in the morning but didn’t show up until after four.”

“What’s wrong with your window?”

“Oh umm...it rotted out a few months ago, and one day, the glass just fell out.”

Trey's fingers dug into her skin, inadvertently pulling her a little bit closer. They were on a fine line of too close by most workplace standards. *I'm not complaining.*

"You've been living with a broken window in your bedroom for a few months?" Trey scowled, and she couldn't be sure, but she thought she heard a rumbling growl.

"Well, I have plastic covering it."

His gaze hardened. "Plastic?"

"It's thick."

Trey's jaw squared, and he angled his head, turning away from her, but she sensed she was angering him. He dropped his hand from her hip, and she instantly felt the loss but didn't step away.

"They replaced it?"

His tone was even, but he seemed to be grinding his teeth. If he was the least bit annoyed with her current situation, he wouldn't be happy with her response.

"It was the wrong size. He has to reorder one, but it should only take two weeks."

Trey clearly did not appreciate that answer and stepped closer, caging her against the wall. "No. You're gonna call your landlord *tonight*. You're going to tell him you want that window replaced first thing in the morning."

Dahlia shook her head but immediately stilled when Trey moved closer, crowding her space. "Yes, you will."

"Okay, but I don't think he'll do it."

"What's his name?"

"Uh, Gerry Pruitt."

"He'll do it," Trey said with so much confidence she almost believed him.

"Okay," she whispered. He was standing too close. Dahlia could almost feel the heat of his body. This crush of hers couldn't take much more. She didn't trust herself. Trey

wasn't giving the usual signs of interest, but there was something between them. A chemistry. A desire. Or maybe it was all in *her* head. Wishful thinking? Dahlia didn't trust her ability to read Trey. He was too complex and out of her league.

Dahlia pointed to the door. "Should I go now?"

Trey's gaze lingered over her face, trailing over her lips and down to her chest.

"Don't wear your uniform on the bus."

Dahlia blinked, scanning her cleavage on display. She didn't have a problem with it, but maybe there was something about wearing it in public outside of the club. No one had told her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize that was a rule."

Trey leaned closer, and she sucked in a breath. "I don't want *you* wearing your uniform on the bus."

"Okay, I won't," she whispered, watching as he opened the door and straightened.

There was something behind his words. She expected the door to close behind her, but instead, he followed her out. Dahlia wracked her brain to come up with something else to say. Anything to prolong their conversation.

She walked two steps and jerked her head toward Sloane's office door when she heard the shouting. She glanced back but couldn't see inside.

"What the hell, Sloane? Giving your friend first dibs at the schedule?"

Dahlia clamped her lips. It wasn't hard to figure out who the woman was ranting about. While most of the staff seemed cordial to Sloane, no one went out of their way to talk to her. It could've been chalked up to her management position. But they seemed friendly with Aaron. The woman must've been referring to Dahlia. She glanced up at Trey, who was standing at the edge of the door, staring at her. He lifted his chin toward the main floor. A direct command and one she'd follow. She

forced a smile and gave a short wave. Something flashed over his hardened face. It seemed to ease for a mere second.

When Trey cocked his brow, she turned and rushed down the hallway and over to the bar. She hadn't gotten a chance to store her bag in the breakroom, so she bent over and tucked it into a bottom cabinet.

"Let's go, Dahl," Misti said, smacking her ass and passing by. It was official. She'd won Misti over. According to Killian, it was in record time. She was finding not only her place at the Bowery, but she'd found her people. They weren't super close, but Dahlia felt enough of a bond to inquire with Misti.

"Can I ask you something?"

Misti started lining up some glasses. "Sure, what?"

"Is there a rule about wearing your uniform outside the club?"

Misti stopped, turned, and knitted her brows, obviously puzzled by the question. "What do you mean?"

"Just out. Like if you went out to eat after work or had to take a cab or bus, would you have to change?"

Misti laughed. "No. It's like free advertising for the Bowery. I know plenty of servers who wear it to bars after their shifts. Apparently, it gets you some free drinks. Never heard of anyone being told they couldn't."

I was. Trey had insisted that she didn't.

Interesting.

It was rare for Trey to use the public or employee entrances. He'd had no such intentions, but when he walked Dahlia over and heard the shouting, he'd closed the door behind them, stopping a few feet away from Sloane's office door. He'd dismissed Dahlia and waited until she cleared the hallway before walking closer to the door. It seemed someone was unhappy about the schedule. And Dahlia.

Contrary to what most people believed, Sloane wasn't solely in charge of the schedule. It was true she handled most of it, with the exception of the balcony. But it was Trey who'd instructed Sloane to give Dahlia several shifts each week. It was no secret she needed the money, and she worked hard. Killian and even Misti, who didn't like anyone, had requested Dahlia. It was a smart business decision.

There may have been other reasons, but none Trey would voice to anyone.

It was Sloane and Aaron's job to handle staff disputes and complaints, but this one had him taking a special interest. *Your friend?* It could only be one person.

"This is bullshit, Sloane. She's been here two weeks, and Dahlia's worked almost every fucking day."

There it was. Confirmation.

"I didn't cut your shifts. You're still working the same as you did for the past few months, April."

"Yeah, at bar two. The tips aren't nearly as high back there. Bar one was mine, and she just shows up on her first day and gets it? That's bullshit!" April shouted. "I mean, seriously, whose dick is she sucking to get that kind of treatment?"

Trey straightened to full height as his blood started rushing through his veins. It was an unnatural and protective reaction. He shouldn't have felt it, but he did. His possession had his anger rising at a rapid speed.

There was a long stretch of silence, and Trey stepped forward, assessing the room while staying out of sight. April was standing in front of Sloane's desk where she was seated, and Aaron was standing next to his desk with his arms crossed and scowling.

"Why are you looking at me? I'm married," Aaron said.

April scoffed. "Like that matters to women like her."

"Well, it matters to me, and I don't like the insinuation. It's insulting to me, my wife, *and* Dahlia."

"I don't give a shit, and can you even insult a whore?"

That comment was a mistake. One April would feel. Trey's reach was far and wide, and he was about to show April the consequences of her words. All it would take was one call, and she'd be blackballed from finding any employment in the city. And Trey would be making that call.

Sloane sprung up from her chair and shot out her hand. "You are out of line, and I'll remind you, still on probation."

Too many people counted Sloane out as being a pushover. He knew better. The woman had her quirks. A lot of them. But one thing he respected most about her was her ability to handle a situation. However, this wasn't her fight. *It's mine.*

Trey stepped forward, making himself known, his hard glare aimed at April.

"No, she's not."

He'd gained all the attention in the small office. Sloane and Aaron seemed surprised, while the woman seemed almost relieved. April's face softened, obviously misinterpreting what he was saying. Sloane rounded the desk and stopped a few feet away. He glanced over to see her brows tight, and her lips pulled down in a severe frown.

"April still has three weeks left on her six-month probation."

"No, she doesn't." Trey paused and looked over at the woman. "April's fired."

April paled and jerked her eyes across to Sloane and Aaron. If she thought they had any type of influence on his decision, she was mistaken.

"But..."

Trey slowly turned his glare on April and squared his jaw. "I hope you have other talents." Trey motioned to Sloane. "Email me her information."

Sloane shared a look with Aaron, then immediately nodded. "I'll do it now."

April bowed her head, and he walked out of the office without another word. There was nothing else to say.

It was done.

Chapter Ten

Ah, the smell of sweat, blood, and body odor.

It wasn't exactly her vision of a good time when her friend asked her to go out. Dahlia would have preferred something a bit more lowkey. Dinner and drinks would have been perfect. Instead, she found herself on the other side of town in the shady industrial section close to midnight. Not exactly her ideal Saturday night. *But here I am.*

Dahlia and Penny bypassed the bouncer manning the door without so much as a word. Of course not. Much like nightclubs, places like this were a sausage fest. Any and all women were welcome, though very few had the stomach to watch grown men pulverize each other for money.

"So, tell me again about the window?" Penny said as they made their way to the wall on the left. The makeshift bar was barely standing but served its purpose.

The window. A week later, Dahlia was still in shock. Months of waiting, then put off another few weeks, yet with one call demanding it be fixed the next day, as per Trey's instructions, and the guy showed up the next morning at seven a.m.

"Yeah, I just called, told him he had to fix it the next day, and he did. That's weird, right?"

It was very strange. This wasn't the first maintenance request she'd called in to the landlord. She'd made plenty through the years. She'd never gotten priority service until last week.

Penny held up two fingers to the guy behind the bar. Words were unnecessary. The only beverage available was one type of beer, which came lukewarm in a disposable plastic cup. *Welcome to Saturday night fights!*

"Did you threaten him?"

Dahlia furrowed her brows. "No."

Dahlia hadn't made any threats or raised her voice. She was following through with what she'd told Trey but hadn't thought it would make a difference. She'd been wrong.

Penny tossed down a ten-dollar bill, grabbed the cups, and handed her one. "I enjoy threatening people."

Dahlia laughed, spilling some beer over the rim, and then smiled. "I know you do. And let's not forget blackmail."

Penny shrugged and led her across the room, weaving through the throngs of men. Some were gentlemanly enough to step aside and make room. Others were not, and Dahlia rolled her eyes as she skimmed past a group who were obviously hoping for some type of cheap thrill of looking down her shirt. Dahlia was relieved when they came to a clearing away from the large groups.

"I can't believe you made me come here." Dahlia scanned the room. It was a packed house.

"Oh, shut up, Dahl. You love the fights, or at least you used to."

I did. For some people, it was a turn-off watching two men pummel each other—the blood, the sweat, and sometimes tears. It was barbaric. Yet, there was something virile about it. Her tastes had changed over the years, but not her affection for the bad boys.

"Besides, with all your shifts at the Bowery, I never see you. The least you could do is hang out and watch testosterone-fused Neanderthals beat the shit out of each other for cash."

It was true. In the past few weeks since she'd started, she'd worked every shift offered. Dahlia wouldn't complain. The money was fantastic, and the job was well worth the exhaustion. There were a lot of perks to working there. Besides the income, she'd met a few other people, half of whom were nice. She'd gotten friendly with Killian and his sister, she spent her breaks with Sloane in her office, and there was no better view than the one she had from bar one, diagonal from the balcony.

She was hoping that with seeing Trey on a daily basis, the novelty obsession would wear off, but it had the opposite effect on her, especially after their last interaction. Dahlia obsessed for far too long about Trey's order not to wear her uniform on the bus. She dissected the whole conversation in her mind. *And then he touched me.* True, he was shifting her out of the way, but the moment, their closeness...it felt intimate.

"How's that going anyway?" Penny asked.

"Great," she said. "Money's fantastic."

"It should be. They're fucking loaded. By the way, that means your ass is buying the next round of beers."

"I will." Dahlia snickered. "You should see the money they bring in from the club."

Penny scoffed.

"What?" Dahlia asked.

Penny sipped her beer, perusing the room, and remained silent.

Obviously, Dahlia was missing something, and strangely, Penny seemed to be avoiding a response. Dahlia stepped in front of her and raised her brows. "What, Pen?"

"Just—" Penny sighed, glancing over her shoulder. "Work your shifts, make your money, and stay away from them."

It was a cryptic warning. Penny must have read the confusion on Dahlia's face. Her friend smiled, though it seemed forced. "People like that? They're not like us."

People like what?

"You mean rich?"

There was a long stretch of silence before she answered.

"Yeah, I mean rich." Penny stared back at her and then quickly shifted her gaze. "Wanna move up?"

Anywhere close to the cage was a dangerous spot for most women. The thrashing and outbursts had gotten her a black eye once before, and she wasn't looking for history to repeat itself.

"No way. I like my face the way it is."

Penny smirked, rising up on her toes.

"Oh look, your ex." Penny snickered. "Incoming."

Dahlia glanced over as Kyle approached, smiled, and waved.

"Is he still with Angie?" Dahlia mumbled.

"Yeah, and she's currently giving you the death stare." Penny laughed.

Oh hell!

"Giving up bikers for boxers?" Kyle asked, stopping a foot away from her.

Dahlia chuckled. "I like variety."

Kyle laughed, moving closer, crowding her space. They had dated a lifetime ago. The first guy she'd ever slept with. It was good until it wasn't. The relationship fizzled after eighteen months, as some do. It was Dahlia who had made the call to end it, much to Kyle's disappointment. They'd kept in touch, and he'd made it known a few times that if she ever wanted to rekindle what they had, he was on board.

"You look good." His gaze dropped down her body in a slow perusal as if he was taking in every inch.

Dahlia smiled, gesturing across the room. "So does your girlfriend."

His cheeks pinkened, and she cocked her brow.

"Plenty of room in my section if you wanna come over and cheer."

"Oh yeah, I'm sure Angie would love that." Penny snorted. "Kyle, you were never a douche, don't start acting like one now. It's not a good look."

Dahlia flattened her lips, holding back her smile. Her friend had a good point, and hopefully, it would serve as a reminder. Good men were few and far between, and while it hadn't worked out between her and her ex, he'd always been a decent guy.

"I'll cheer from back here, and—" She reached into her bag, pulling out a bill. "I'll even put some cash down to show my support."

Kyle grinned, then jerked his head when another guy called out to him. "Thanks, Dahl."

He hurried away, and she passed her friend.

"You betting?"

Penny scoffed. "If I did, it wouldn't be on Kyle."

"I'll be back," Dahlia said, rounding a group of men near the hallway entrance. All the bets were taken in a back room. Ritchie, who she'd known through the circuit, handled all the cash. She stood in line, shifting on her feet and peeking around the man in front of her. It would be at least a fifteen-minute wait.

Or twenty. By the time it was her turn, the line behind her had doubled.

"Hey, beautiful!" Ritchie said.

Dahlia smiled, waving her ten-dollar bill.

"Big spender," Ritchie teased.

Dahlia laughed. "It's my way of showing support. Kind of like buying cookies from the scouts. A small investment for the greater cause."

Ritchie laughed, but his eyes moved over her shoulder, and he lost his smile. He glanced up at her and gestured for her to move aside, which she did.

"Give me a minute, babe."

Dahlia looked back at the line now parted in two with a familiar man walking toward the table. She sucked in a breath. As he made his way closer, his gaze darkened, landing on her.

She'd seen him only a few times in the last week. She'd looked for him during every shift, but his appearances were sparse.

"Hi, Trey." Her voice was low and breathy, giving too much away.

Trey stared and slowly lowered his chin but remained silent. He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out an envelope she assumed was cash and a small slip of paper. Dahlia squinted but remained still so as to not be too obvious. She couldn't read much, but his bets were far larger than hers. Hell, they were probably bigger than everyone in the room combined.

"Well, that puts my bet to shame."

Trey slowly angled his head, dropping his gaze to the table with her ten-dollar bill. It wasn't even a fraction of the wad of cash he pulled out from his chest pocket. Dahlia steeled her reaction. *Sort of*. She could only control her facial response so much. Math had never been her thing, but if she had to guess, Trey was betting a few thousand.

She smiled and cocked her head, and his gaze lingered for a brief second before turning to Ritchie and listing the bets. Dahlia listened closely. Trey was betting on the bigger contenders. It made sense since that was where the real money was to win. And to lose.

"Got it." Ritchie nodded.

It was a different vibe with Trey in the room. All sense of teasing and ease was completely sucked out of the air, replaced with a rigid tension. Trey slowly turned toward Dahlia. She expected him to walk out with the three men manning the door, but he stopped, eyeing her.

"Who are you betting on?"

"Kyle Marks."

When Trey squinted, she waved her hand. "He's in the second fight. Amateur."

The only thing more pitiful than the second in the lineup was the first. The objective was to save the best fighters for last. Clearly, the same men Trey was betting on.

“Is he any good?”

Dahlia drew in a breath and smirked with a small shrug. “There’s a reason why he’s in the second fight. But...” She paused, feeling guilty for throwing Kyle under the bus. Everyone had to start somewhere, and who’s to say he wouldn’t be a headliner in years to come. *Many, many years.* “His heart is in it, and what he lacks in power, he makes up for in scrappiness. There’s something to be said for the underdog, right?”

Trey scanned her face, giving nothing away. The man was impossible to read. He reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and grabbed a hundred-dollar bill. When he placed it on the table, she widened her eyes.

“On his opponent.”

“You got it, Trey,” Ritchie said, but Trey didn’t even acknowledge him. His eyes were on her.

The corner of her mouth curled, and she leaned closer. “You know that means you just upped my payout.”

His lips twitched, and his eyes softened, showing a playful glint. “Only if he wins.”

There was no missing his taunting tone and arrogant confidence that Kyle would not be victorious. Trey turned and walked down the line. Even with a clear path of a few feet on either side, the men in line stepped back. His security followed him out without even giving her a second glance.

His security detail was odd. They were the same men she’d seen at the club. It seemed over the top for a nightclub owner to need bodyguards. True, the Bowery was a high-end, lucrative business, but was security really necessary?

“Got friends in high places, huh?” Ritchie asked.

Dahlia waved her hand, playing off the interaction. “He’s my boss.”

Ritchie furrowed his brows and shared a look with his partner.

“I work at the Bowery,” Dahlia said.

“That job comes with bodyguards?”

Dahlia laughed, waiting for Ritchie to join in. He didn't, but his gaze shifted to the doorway, and Dahlia followed it. The man standing outside the door didn't look in their direction, but she'd seen him at the Bowery and knew he was a member of security. Trey had left. There was no reason for him to stay. *Unless... No.*

“He's not waiting on me.”

Right?

Ritchie flattened his lips and nodded but remained silent. Dahlia placed her bet and walked out, noticing a few looks from the men in line. It was different from the usual attention she'd gotten. When she passed Trey's security, she smiled. It was not returned. But as she started down the hall, she heard heavy steps and slyly glanced back. Trey's security was only a few paces behind her. *What the...*

The hallway opened up to the cage, and she rose up on her toes, looking for her friend. In the sea of people, Penny would be impossible to find. Still, Dahlia tried. As she scanned the room, her gaze shifted to the far wall. It was crazy to think how many times she'd attended fights and never noticed the separated area. She'd taken note of the balcony above but hadn't paid too much attention. *Until now.* How had she missed it?

Timing, maybe. Dahlia glanced over at the elevated stands and immediately locked eyes with Trey. He was openly staring, which sent a tremble over her entire body. She needed a diversion. She glanced up at the balcony. There were several men and one in particular dressed in a suit, looking down at the cage. He was the last man she wanted to draw attention from. She averted her eyes away from Rogue and moved deeper into the crowd. She arched her neck, looking over to where Trey had been standing. He was still there with his gaze

pinned on her. *Is he watching me?* Dahlia ducked her head, moving through the crowd to an opening. At this rate, it would be impossible to find Penny until after the fight. She shifted back and walked up the side, ironically closest to the elevated section. It wasn't a purposeful move. She was just looking for a clearing. Getting caught too close to the cage often led to the rowdier crowd.

Dahlia stepped back, butting against the stand, and jerked forward. Her gaze caught Trey's, who continuously stared back at her. He looked over her head and lifted his chin, gesturing toward her. Before she could follow what was happening, a security guard gripped her forearm. His grip was firm but not painful as he guided her up.

Dahlia steadied her feet, glancing down at the crowd. She was standing at the edge of the line, and in unison, all the members of security took a step back. Her line of sight was an unobstructed view of Trey staring back at her. He lifted his hand and curled his finger. She slowly slipped past all the men and walked down the line. As she got closer to Trey, her heart pumped harder, racing to the point of erratic.

She sidled up to the open spot next to Trey and glanced over at the cage. She widened her eyes and chuckled.

"Well, this is prime seating." Dahlia glanced around, looking up at the balcony. "Only thing better is up there, huh?"

"Would you like to go upstairs?" Trey asked, but she heard the distinct tease in his tone.

Dahlia zoned in on Rogue, ducked her head, and peered up at Trey. "I'll pass."

His lips twitched, but he hadn't fully committed to a smile.

"Thanks for letting me hang here. Almost got trampled near the pit."

"Then maybe you should consider other forms of entertainment."

Dahlia bit her lip, and before she could stop herself, she glanced up at him. Trey was stone-faced, looking over at the

cage.

“Are you offering an alternative source of entertainment?”

Trey slowly angled his head, and his darkened gaze penetrated hers.

“I’m open to suggestions.”

His gaze scanned over her face, down her body. Dahlia forced herself not to shift. Trey turned back to the ring, seemingly uninterested. *Did I just shoot my shot...and miss?* If there was a handbook, surely the first rule of work etiquette was to not flirt with her boss. She had to smooth out the major faux pas. A distraction and change of subject seemed like the most plausible solution.

“My window got fixed, just as you predicted. I made the call just like you told me to, and he showed up the next day. Crazy, right?”

Trey kept his eyes on the cage, not even acknowledging her statement.

“So, um...” She racked her brain, trying to come up with anything work-related. There was something, a question, that had plagued her mind for weeks. “Can I ask you something?”

Trey seemed to hesitate before glancing down from the corner of his eyes and arching his brow. She was learning quickly. This was Trey-speak. All it took was a look.

“It took me forever to even get an interview and the job, and when I turned it down, you convinced me to take it, even getting me fired. Now, you’re giving me what everyone calls the prime spot at bar one.”

“Is there a question?”

“Why didn’t you just give me the interview when Sloane asked for it months ago?”

His gaze darkened, and he slowly turned back to the ring. She should have kept her mouth shut and just took the offer to watch in their VIP spot for exactly what it was. A nice gesture.

She'd read into it and was now left in a very awkward position.

When she saw Kyle enter the ring, a sense of relief washed over her. It was short-lived since he was knocked out two minutes into the fight. But it did provide an escape.

"Well, shit." She sighed, her shoulders sagging. "That was like giving to charity."

"He's overly confident and unskilled."

Trey nailed it, though for different reasons, but still, she saw the unintentional humor and burst out laughing. Dahlia cupped her mouth, shaking her head.

"Is that funny?"

"If you knew our backstory, you'd understand." Dahlia chuckled and turned to Trey. "We dated, so I can confirm he's overly confident and unskilled."

What was meant to be a lighthearted joke clearly didn't hit right with Trey. His jaw squared, his eyes darkened, and the lines deepened on his forehead. It only lasted a few seconds before his attention reverted back to the cages.

Shit!

Dahlia rocked back on her heels and pointed to the arena. "I guess I should go find my friend. Thanks for letting me hang out in VIP, Trey."

He never looked at her, keeping his gaze on the ring, but took a step closer behind her. The move had Dahlia frozen. He wasn't touching her, but she could feel the heat of his body. Her heart pounded, and she was unsure if she should leave. She parted her lips but felt his breath ruffle her hair.

"I didn't give you an interview because it would have been a conflict of interest." His deep voice wasn't quite a whisper but low enough only she could hear.

Conflict of interest?

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to *fuck* you."

Dahlia's breath caught in her throat, and her muscles tightened. *Did he just say...*

She slowly turned her head, glancing up. His eyes were locked on the ring in front of him, but his features were tight, and his jaw was squared and tense. If not for his demeanor, she might have second-guessed what she'd heard.

"Trey." Her breathy whisper was barely coherent.

Seconds passed, and he slowly glanced down at her. This look was different, expressing all the heat. His eyes darkened to almost black, and the tension traversed his face, evident in the two lines prominent on his brow. He'd never looked sexier than this very moment. She slowly leaned back, pressing against his chest. Was he waiting on consent? He had it tenfold.

It was confirmation she hadn't misheard him. *Oh. My. God.* What was she supposed to do with this information? Her first instinct was to kiss him, but she was too frozen in her own shock to move. This man, who she'd harbored a crush on, fantasized about for months, and did everything she could to get his attention, had just admitted to wanting her.

"Trey!"

Dahlia was so lost in her own desire she had no idea who was calling to him other than knowing it was another man. He jerked his head, and his jaw squared. She was completely unaware of the mass chaos happening around her until she took one step forward. A member of security held out his arm, blocking her just as two men started scuffling near the elevated area. They'd fallen into it with so much force Dahlia lost her footing and stumbled back. Trey gripped her waist. She should have been more concerned about her own safety than the feel of his firm grasp over her hip.

Security immediately moved in front of them, and a few jumped down. At first, she assumed they were trying to break it up, but it seemed the polar opposite. The last thing she saw was one of the men slamming his fist into a rowdy bystander.

"Oh shit," she muttered.

She felt Trey's finger loop through her belt strap, and his palm and fingers splayed over her back just above her ass. There was too much commotion, and it took her a few seconds to realize she was being ushered away. Dahlia was forced to turn and duck past a wall. It was a darker area, with only the light from the main arena illuminating the stairs.

Trey looked over her head, lifted his chin, and stepped back, making a path for her to move past the stairs and behind the wall. It was dark, with only the shadows from the main light streaming in. He hadn't let go of her as she stepped into the darkness. But she went willingly.

On her third step, he tightened his grip and maneuvered her back against the wall, stopping in front of her. She glanced up, but he was focused on the arena area. This man was beautiful. He was everything. A sculpted face with harsh lines that only accentuated his features. A square jaw, almond-shaped dark eyes, and lashes for days. There was a reason she couldn't quite shake every interaction with him. She licked her lips and inched closer, swallowing the knot in her throat with his admission playing over in her mind. *Because I wanted to fuck you.*

It wasn't the best timing, but she said it anyway.

"Do you still want to fuck me, Trey?" Dahlia reached out, placing her hands on his stomach. Even through his shirt, she felt the outline of his abs. Her hands skimmed over his stomach to his pants button. He grabbed her wrists tightly, forcing her arms over her head, pressing them against the wall. She felt one of his hands clutch both wrists together.

That move only got her wet. *Panties fucking drenched.*

His actions were saying no, but his eyes were screaming yes. Trey stepped closer, pressing his body against hers, and he angled his head just as she craned her neck. *So close.*

"Dahlia." He growled, tightening his hold.

"Trey," she whispered.

His mouth came down on hers hard, relentless, his lips sliding over hers. Kissed, like she'd never been kissed before.

There was too much passion, too much want, and beyond all that, so much need. Just from one kiss.

Dahlia struggled to move her arms. *I want to touch you.* But Trey tightened his hold, pressing her deeper against the wall, slipping his tongue past her lips and dipping into her mouth. Tasting her.

Holy fuck!

It took Dahlia a minute to comprehend what was even happening. His hand spread across her throat, his lips moved over hers, and his tongue speared into her mouth, tangling with her own. Her mind was hazy as she felt his body press up against her. She hooked her foot around his knee, urging him closer.

She'd thought of this moment a hundred times over, and not one dream lived up to the reality. Dahlia struggled against his hold on her arms, and finally he relented, releasing her. She didn't waste any time. She curled closer, testing the waters with a light touch against his chest. Again, another reality that outshined her imagination. She spread her hands over his pectorals, feeling the definition under her fingertips. The only thing better would have been no dress shirt. She wanted to touch his bare skin. Touch all of him.

"Trey," she muttered against his lips and dug her nails into his chest.

I want more.

Dahlia wanted everything, and all of him.

What the fuck am I doing?

It was a question he rarely asked himself. With good reason. Trey didn't do destructive, take unnecessary risks, and certainly never gave in to any temptation. *Until now.*

Her soft moan had him tightening his hold over her throat. Not hard enough to hurt, just keeping her exactly where he wanted her. As her hands wrapped around his waist, he regretted letting her wrists go. He should have kept them

pinned against the wall, unable to touch him. It would have been the safest move to combat his temptation. Dahlia's touch was only increasing his desire and his need to take it one step further.

Never in his life had he thrown control out the door and surrendered to exactly what he wanted. Her fingers slipped under his jacket, and her nails dug into his back, urging him closer. Distance was key if he had any hope of stopping. Rational thoughts were quickly fading, immediately replaced by his primal instinct to rip up her skirt, tear off her panties, pull down his pants, and fuck her right here.

Fuck!

Her tongue glided over his lips before sliding into his mouth once again. Trey had never been a huge fan of kissing. The intimacy was mere foreplay, and he didn't get off on it. *Until now.* Her soft lips were like kryptonite. Soft and sweet, even with the taste of stale beer, she was perfection. And he couldn't get enough. He dipped his tongue past her lips, feeling the vibrations of her moan. He knew he should pull away and end it, but he couldn't find the strength. Just one more minute. One more taste.

No!

He tore his mouth from hers, and her heavy breath tickled his ear. *End this!* There was no other option, though Trey was struggling with what he needed to do versus what he wanted. And he wanted her.

"Trey." Her voice was soft and hazy. And he got off on that, pressing his cock against her core only to hear her soft moan.

Fuck!

He was torturing himself. A few breaths were all he needed to clear his mind and return to reality. More importantly, to their surroundings. Trey brushed his face against her neck, taking in her scent. *I want her!* He groaned, pulling away slightly. He needed to regain control.

"Do you have a ride home?"

“Can you take me home?” Her breath hitched as her lips skimmed over his, proving impossible to resist. He drove his hand through the back of her hair, grasping hold and gently pulling until she looked up at him.

He was tempted. It would go against everything—rules, morals, and ethics—and still, he was contemplating it. One night. That was all he had to offer and all she would get. *No*.

“Do you need me to call a service?”

His question sobered her up, but her dazed eyes were still in a euphoric subspace. This was the biggest temptation. He could own every inch of her, and she’d give it up willingly.

Dahlia blinked, then turned her head toward the opening. Even without her looking him in the eyes, he saw her disappointment. If he had to guess, she’d be more than willing to continue their little rendezvous, possibly even move it somewhere a little more private. The thought had crossed his mind with her body pressed against his and her warm mouth so inviting and sweet. It took all his control to break away from her. Dahlia was proving impossible to stay away from. But Trey didn’t have a choice.

For all her risqué reputation and her association with East and her position there, Dahlia wasn’t a one-night stand type of woman. Maybe she’d done it in the past with others, but he had a strong sense of her desire. Although he was trying to fight it, Trey’s was just as strong. This had all the makings of an exploding disaster.

Dahlia swiped her lips with the back of her hand, clearing her throat. She’d yet to look up at him.

“I came with my friend. I should go find her.”

Trey remained silent, not moving an inch, staring down at her profile.

Fuck!

“This is between us.”

Trey had his reasons. They were all valid in his mind. But still... It was a shitty comment and a dick move. Even he

could recognize it. His purpose was for her safety, but he knew her mind would go in an entirely different direction. This was where shit got hard. They were on two different pages, different wavelengths. Perception was key, and they were on different sides of the spectrum.

“Okay,” she whispered, and for some strange reason, he was left feeling something he hadn’t felt in years. Guilt. Through her tone, she was saying more than just the words. And accepting the secrecy in a different way than intended. Trey had always coveted his privacy, as did most members of the Underground. Any connection was a weakness, something to be used against them.

Trey had seen it with others. It led to most downfalls, and even he had used it as leverage against a few enemies. Having anything with Dahlia would put a target on her back, an added responsibility he didn’t need nor want. This was a weak moment on his part. *It won’t happen again.*

She took a step forward, but he tightened his hold over her skirt. Dahlia glanced back and leaned in, and Trey met her halfway, taking her mouth again. He wrapped his hand over her neck, and her hands pressed against his chest, angling her head for deeper access. Her lips were soft, tasting of beer and something sweet and a little sticky. Lip gloss. *Hers.*

Trey broke the kiss but didn’t move away. Her heavy breath fanned over his mouth, and he smoothed his thumb over the pulse at her neck. It was racing.

“Go.”

She smiled, though it seemed forced and didn’t reach her eyes. Watching her walk away, he took his position closest to the stairs. He looked back at Jared and gestured toward the open floor.

“Make sure she finds her friend and gets in a car.”

“Yes, sir.”

Trey kept his eyes locked on Dahlia as she met up with her friend. His security stayed a few feet away, watching her. She made no move to leave, but she did look back, scanning

the deck. At this point, he'd moved, and he watched her lips pull down as she turned back to her friend.

Trey straightened with the sense he was being watched. He glanced around the room, scanned the stand, and ultimately looked up to the balcony. Rogue was standing near the railing with his eyes on the floor below. He could have been looking at anyone. He wasn't. The corner of his mouth curled, and he turned his head, looking directly at Trey with a taunting smirk.

Fuck!

Trey made his way up to the balcony overlooking the cage. His gaze may have been directed at the room, but his stare was locked on her. Trey rounded the large couch where Rogue was seated and walked to the small bar. He poured himself a drink and looked down at Dahlia, who was standing with another woman and a man.

The man could have been a mere acquaintance, but there was familiarity between them. This was her ex, who she'd put cash down on for the fight. And lost.

"You should have invited our new barback upstairs. Hell of a lot more privacy than trying to fuck her against the wall."

Trey clenched his jaw, refusing to give in to the taunting. Trey had thought he'd been discreet but underestimated Rogue's interest in him and Dahlia. Trey kept his eyes on her and the current situation as he circled around the back of the couch and took a seat next to Rogue.

"Got a dark corner right over there. Missing out, Trey. Getting your cock sucked with a hundred people in the room and a crowd cheering?" Rogue laughed. "I bet she's got a lot of experience."

Trey refused to concede. He'd been dealing with Rogue for years. Trey knew all the tricks for Rogue's mindfuck. All he needed was a little leeway, and he'd thrive off it. Trey wouldn't give him an inch.

Or so he thought.

The seat beside him shifted as Rogue sat up, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands. "A thousand

bucks says she goes home with that fucker.”

Trey jerked his gaze to Jared, who was stationed on the end of the risers. It took only seconds before the security looked up, and Trey lifted his chin, gesturing to Dahlia. Further instruction was unnecessary. Trey’s previous order of making sure she got in a car was fully understood.

“Well played.” Rogue took a long swig from his glass and settled his hand on Trey’s shoulder. “Never seen you get territorial over pussy.”

Trey ignored the harsh remark and Rogue altogether. He watched as Jared walked over, setting himself between the man and Dahlia. She seemed surprised, widened her eyes, and stepped back. This was probably the first time any of the security had spoken to her. Given strict orders from Jared, she seemed taken aback. Whatever he said, Dahlia obediently nodded, and for a brief moment, her gaze shot up to the balcony, zoning in directly on Trey. His muscles tightened, and his scowl deepened. If she wasn’t getting a clear message from Jared, then he’d send one of his own. It was time for her to leave.

Dahlia tore her gaze from Trey and pointed toward the door. With her friend by her side, Jared escorted them to the exit and out the door. Trey took a sip of his drink and settled back in his seat.

“Well, that was fucking interesting. Care to share what the fuck just went down?”

Trey sighed and looked down at the cages where the fighters were prepping for another fight.

“No.”

Trey wouldn’t entertain any discussion about her. Rogue knew him too well. He’d see through every lie Trey told. It was best to avoid any conversation, though he had a feeling Rogue wouldn’t let it go. Trey had exposed too much letting his control and guard down with Dahlia.

This would come back to haunt him.

Fuck!

Chapter Eleven

Dahlia covered her yawn, glancing up at the empty balcony. Trey and Rogue didn't usually roll into the club until well after ten. As it stood, the Bowery hadn't even opened yet and wouldn't for the next half hour. Yet, the line had started to form outside and was almost to the parking lot.

Three days without seeing him and having the memory of Saturday play over in her head on repeat. *I can't!* It was a special kind of torture. Reserved for the obsessed.

Dahlia couldn't be sure, but when she'd met up with Penny after leaving Trey, a member of security had shown up when Kyle approached them. It could have been a fluke, a mere coincidence. Maybe Trey looked out for all his employees. It didn't mean anything, at least not to her. Penny, on the other hand, was asking a million questions. She seemed extremely suspicious. Dahlia was vague with her answers. One specific question caught her totally off guard when Penny asked.

"They don't talk to you, right? I mean, you're a fucking barback. They probably don't even know who you are. Right?"

Dahlia wasn't big on lying, especially with her friends, but she'd made a promise to Trey.

"Nope." Dahlia's answer seemed to put Penny at ease. She wanted to know why Penny asked but it would only open it all up for further discussion. It was best to shut it down.

Now...here I am. Obsessing.

The table she was seated at slightly rocked as Keely sat in the chair beside her. She placed the small plate in front of her and smiled up at Dahlia.

"I love a staff meeting with snacks."

Dahlia chuckled, glancing down at the variety of meats, cheeses, and vegetables. She had to give credit where it was

due. The Bowery took care of their people. The staff meetings were mandatory, but they got paid for the extra hour, and as Keely said, they provided snacks.

Keely popped a square of cheddar in her mouth and shifted closer to Dahlia. “How was your weekend? Do anything fun?”

Made out with and dry-humped my boss in a dark corner of a dirty fight club with hundreds of people in attendance and smelled like a combination of blood, sweat, and puke. All that said, it would forever go down as one of the best nights of her life.

“Yeah, I had a good time hanging out with my friend,” Dahlia said, then quickly shifted the conversation back to Keely in hopes she wouldn’t ask for further details. “How about you?”

“I had a date.”

“How’d it go?” Dahlia asked when Keely didn’t elaborate.

Keely scrunched her nose and squinted. “He talked about himself a lot. I just felt like I left knowing everything about him, but he never asked about me. And every time I tried to share something, he did this thing where he flipped it around, and it was back to him again.”

Red fucking flag. Dahlia had dated plenty of men, a few like Keely was describing. Early on in her younger days, she ate up the confidence until she recognized it for what it really was. Narcissism in its truest form. There was no changing or getting through to that type of man. It was also easy to get sucked into their world and style of thinking. It was better to walk away now, especially for someone like Keely. Before she got a chance to express her thoughts, Keely blurted.

“And he scratched his balls a lot, too.”

Dahlia jerked in her seat, turned toward Keely, and resisted the urge to laugh. “What?”

Keely rolled her eyes and bobbed her head, staring down at her plate. “I mean, I have a brother, so I get it. Sometimes

you have to adjust. But he was really digging and going to town. It was strange.”

Fuck yeah. It was strange. And gross, and a major red flag. *Run, Keely!*

“Arrogant, conceited, and a dirty cock?” Dahlia shook her head. “Cut your losses now.”

Keely burst out laughing, which caught the attention of everyone in the room, including Killian, her brother. She avoided his stare and turned her attention to the front of the room. Two people, two reactions, and both polar opposites. Sloane smiled, looking between her and Keely. Rod glared, shifting his gaze between the two women. This was not the attention she needed. Dahlia had gotten a certain vibe from him from their first encounter. He had a superiority complex and seemed to focus on her.

“You got something you want to share, or can we fucking start this meeting?” Rod snapped with his harsh glare aimed at Dahlia.

I don't get it. She'd been nothing but agreeable, compliant, and pleasant, yet he seemed to take issue with her. And only her. She mustered up an uncomfortable smile and folded her hands on her lap.

“Yeah, I'm sorry.”

His gaze darkened. “Can you shut the fuck up now?”

Dahlia sucked in a breath, fighting against a nasty retort. Rod may not be her boss, but he was her supervisor. Dahlia clamped her lips, refusing to respond verbally. She didn't trust herself.

“Start the meeting,” he ordered, gesturing to Sloane. Her brows were dipped in a scathing and unapproving scowl directed at Rod. The seconds ticked by in silence, and she glanced around the room, watching everyone shift in their chairs. Being new, Dahlia had no idea the dynamic between these two, but it was evident it made everyone uncomfortable.

Sloane straightened her back and looked up, smiling. It was forced and didn't quite reach her eyes, but she was able to

appear convincing. *To those who don't know her.* Dahlia was a different story. She was friends with Sloane and recognized the woman's irritated shake as she clutched the single piece of paper in her hands.

"The new schedule is out. We shifted some people around, so definitely check your email." She placed a sheet on the bar and stepped back. "There's a hard copy. I'll hang it outside my door. And just so everyone knows, this is not permanent. We'll move others around."

Dahlia didn't bother looking. It would take more than a few weeks to get moved to bartender, as Sloane had explained. Most barbacks spent six months to a year before they were moved up. It didn't bother Dahlia. She had no problem working up the ranks and doing her time. Plus, she loved working with Killian and Misti.

"What the fuck, Sloane?" Mindy snapped with her sidekick Lori sidled up next to her at the bar. The harsh glares they were throwing at Sloane left no question they were not happy with the schedule changes.

Dahlia spun around, as did most of the employees at the screeching shout echoing through the club.

Sloane held up her hands. "As I said, it's not permanent."

"She's been here for a fucking minute!" Lori shouted, pointing directly at Dahlia.

Oh shit.

"It was a request," Sloane said.

What was a request, and why was she being brought into this? Dahlia watched the two women, who hadn't exactly been friendly when she started and had yet to warm up, glare back at her and walk away, whispering. *What the fuck?* She remained seated with Keely and watched carefully as other employees scanned the paper and looked back at her. Some merely smiled, while others eyed her with suspicion. *What the hell is going on?*

Dahlia waited until the group thinned, hopped off her stool, and walked up to the list with Killian and Keely close

behind her. It was a generic list, similar to the one she'd seen over the past few weeks. She scanned, looking for her name, pausing at bar one, where she noticed her name wasn't on it. She read farther to the very bottom.

Balcony—Dahlia

"The balcony?" Dahlia said and immediately fell forward when she felt a push on her back. Keely was hanging over her shoulder with her jaw dropped.

"You got the balcony!"

Keely's shock only intensified Dahlia's concern and dread. The balcony, as in where Trey and Rogue were? She glanced behind her, skimming over Keely, who seemed laser-focused on the list. Killian stood a foot behind them, and she locked eyes with him.

"That's Rogue's private section. No wonder Mindy and Lori are pissed. They usually trade off. That's a helluva jump from barback to bartending in the balcony." Killian raised his brows and smirked.

A chill ran down her spine. *This was not good.* Dahlia was all for advancement and moving up, but something didn't sit right with her. Dahlia searched the open room for Sloane and watched as she and Aaron disappeared into the back. Dahlia tried to control her speed, which probably looked like a run walk. She was halfway down the hall when Rod stepped in her path. Dahlia barely caught herself before plowing into his chest.

"Sorry."

His gaze darkened and remained silent, sending an eerie chill down her spine.

"I was just going to see Sloane."

"Sir," he snapped.

Dahlia blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"You address me as sir. Surely a club whore knows her place."

What the fuck? The last thing Dahlia needed was a confrontation with someone in power, but his anger and disgust weren't warranted. Or were they?

"Have I done something..."

He laughed mockingly. "Oh, I've seen everything you've done. Not sure what kind of barback you make, but a hell of a good little whore."

Dahlia rarely felt regret or embarrassment over any of her life decisions. Why should she? They were hers, and at any given point, they were exactly what she wanted to do. Somehow, his judging tone with his perceived underlying insight left her second-guessing, and she was on the verge of humiliation.

"Well, fucking go already," he snapped.

She sucked in a breath and slowly nodded. The vibe coming from this man, along with the utter disdain, was enough to force her into compliance. Dahlia wasn't one to take bullshit from anyone, but he was technically her manager, and in turn, her boss. The last thing she needed was to get fired.

Rod stared down at her for another few seconds until he bypassed her, nudging her arm. *Asshole*. It took Dahlia a minute to gather herself and continue down to Sloane's office. She knocked and pressed her ear against the door. Once she heard Sloane's welcome, she rushed inside, closing the door behind her.

"Sloane." Dahlia rushed to the edge of the desk, ignoring Aaron, who was standing across the room. "Why am I in the balcony?"

It didn't make any sense if this was such a coveted spot. Dahlia had worked her butt off, and those around her had told her she was doing a good job, but any advancement seemed premature. She hadn't even finished up a month at the Bowery. There was only one logical answer. Sloane had pulled some strings.

"If this is going to cause any issues, then just move me back. I've only been here a few weeks, and I know we're

friends, but I'm not looking to make enemies. And I don't want everyone upset with you for showing me special treatment."

Sloane shared a look with Aaron, which gave her the indication they'd been speaking about this very topic when she stormed their office.

"When I said it was a request, it wasn't mine." Sloane grasped her hips and rocked side to side. "I think you're doing a great job, Dahlia, and in a year, if you had come to me wanting to work the balcony, I would have gone to bat for you, but I don't make those decisions."

What? If not Sloane, then who?

"Someone requested me?" Dahlia rested her hand on her chest, riddled with disbelief. There could only be a few viable options. Sloane, who just admitted it wasn't her. Rod, who showed her nothing but disdain. And...

"Trey?"

Sloane slowly shook her head. "It was Rogue."

Rogue? The same man who'd demanded she be fired a few weeks ago was now requesting her as his personal bartender? *Oh fuck, this is not good.*

"Why?"

"I don't know. Usually, servers and bartenders are here for a minimum of eighteen months before they're even considered for the balcony."

"But I've only been here a few weeks."

Sloane tightened her lips, the corners of her eyes crinkled, and she shrugged. "I guess you made an impression on him."

A chill washed over Dahlia, along with a flipping belly and nausea setting in. This was not good. In fact, it was really bad. The last place she needed or wanted to be was anywhere near Rogue. There was only one plausible reason why he'd want direct contact with her in her position. *He's going to fuck with me until I'm fired.* Dahlia dragged her hand over her face, shaking her head. How had she not seen this coming? She was

a fool for thinking a man like him would let it go after the altercation with him and Trey.

“Is there any way I can get out of it?”

Sloane shrugged with a sympathetic smile, scrunching her face. “Quit?”

Dahlia shrank and rested her back against the wall, driving her hand through her hair. *Fuck me, I’m screwed.* She balled her hand and ground her teeth. *And fuck you, Rogue!*

“It’s not so bad. Some girls love it, and it pays ten dollars more an hour.”

Well, that explained why Mindy and Lori practically lost their shit!

Dahlia groaned. “Why me?”

“You hit his radar,” Aaron said, and Dahlia spun around to face him.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, giving her a sympathetic smile. “The fact that Trey wouldn’t fire you when he heard about your affiliation with East set something off in Rogue. Trey’s a fair boss, but he and Rogue don’t argue about menial bullshit staffing. If one of them wants you gone, you’re gone. Been working here a long time and never seen them fight over any member of the staff.”

“Wait.” Sloane furrowed her brow. “How do you know about it?”

“I was in the hallway when it all went down.”

Dahlia dropped her chin to her chest, staring at the newly vacuumed carpet. Aaron, along with most members of security, had been in the hall. If he’d heard them, that meant they all did. Dahlia fought against the rising heat racing toward her face. She’d blocked out the conversation riddled with insults. Now, it was at the forefront of her mind, and she was reliving it all over. She drew in a breath, mustered her courage, and glanced up, staring directly at Aaron.

“So he wants me to quit?”

“No.” Aaron chuckled and shook his head. “He wants *Trey* to fire you.”

As much as she hated to bow down to anyone, Dahlia saw the outcome clearly. This was Rogue and Trey’s club. If one of them wanted her gone, she was fighting a losing battle. She was only prolonging the inevitable. As much as she didn’t want to do it, she was resigned to waving her white flag.

“Well, then I’ll beat him to it and quit.”

Aaron stepped forward. “And then you’ll be blackballed from working anywhere in this city. Trust me on this, they have a reach you can’t even fathom. I’ve seen it done, Dahlia. Trey won’t do it, but Rogue will.”

What? Blackballed? Of course, she’d heard of the term but never in conjunction with her or her work. A nervous energy raced through her blood. It had been so easy for Trey to get her fired from The Moon Bar. All he had to do was say the word, and it was done. With that realization, Aaron’s words struck her hard.

Shit!

Dahlia was still in a daze when Sloane rounded her desk and grasped Dahlia’s hand. “You can go back to East. If you explain the situation to Gunner and Blade, I’m sure they can give you more money.” Sloane reached into her pocket for her phone. “I’ll call Blade now.”

It was an option but not a viable one. There was a reason she’d left East. Dahlia needed more money, and with her newly vacant roommate, finances were even tighter. Even if East was willing to let her come back, she couldn’t afford her house and expenses.

“You go back to East, and you’re handing Rogue the win. He gets to say that you’re exactly where you belong and who you are.” Aaron’s voice, more so his words, rang in her ears, and she looked up at him.

“She’s a bartender,” Sloane said.

Dahlia stared back at Aaron, who raised his brows. His comment may have gone over Sloane’s head but not Dahlia’s.

Rogue hadn't referred to her as a bartender. His voice played over in her mind.

I know you ain't a member, so that must make you one of their whores. An East club whore. That's who we're employing now?

Her days might have been numbered, but she'd be damned before she'd let Rogue label her and take the win.

Game fucking on, Rogue!

"I'll work the balcony."

Aaron smiled and nodded. It was a sense of approval that she thoroughly appreciated.

It was an endearing moment, yet she knew...*I'm so fucked.*

It was rare Trey showed up this late. *This fucking night!* He'd spent a good hour on the phone with Oz discussing Rogue and the deal with Killcreek. As per usual, Oz was demanding an answer, and Rogue was delaying out of spite. Trey walked a fine line between the brothers. In his position, it was imperative he stayed neutral. It was his job, and his duty to the Underground. If he allowed himself to dig deeper, it was something more. Trey had always played middleman, peacemaker, and problem solver. This was proving to be especially difficult with both brothers not giving in to any type of compromise.

Trey could have chosen a side, but where would that leave them? *No.* They had to come to an agreement. He needed to guide them in the right direction. *So much easier said than done.*

Trey rolled his shoulders and mentally prepped for the conversation with Rogue. He'd put it off for the past two weeks with Rogue dodging all the advances, but Trey was feeling the pressure from Oz now. The deal had to be solidified with the Killcreek Drifters in order to keep the shipments moving.

Trey had taken the employee entrance. It was more of a direct path to the balcony. That's what he'd told himself. However, once he made it to the floor from the hallway, he immediately zoned in on the main bar. He saw Killian and Misti, but there was no sign of Dahlia.

Fuck! He balled his fists, fighting against the primal urges and thoughts coming from merely saying her name. Saturday night had been a mistake. It was completely out of character and a failure of his control. What the fuck was he thinking? That was the problem. Trey hadn't thought. He acted, yielding to what he wanted without any concern for the ramifications.

He jerked his head, resisting the urge to look again. He stalked up the stairs, unprepared for the view directly in front of him and the dark eyes staring back at him. *Fuck!* Dahlia was standing ten feet away, stationed behind the bar on the balcony. It seemed someone had changed the schedule. And Trey knew exactly who.

Her lips were shaky as she raised her hand and wiggled her fingers. "Hi, Trey."

Hi, Trey. It was a simple greeting, yet coming from her, it was hitting him hard in places that were perilous to their current situation. He did the only thing he could. Trey ignored her, turning away without any type of acknowledgment and walking across the balcony to the table in the far corner. It was Rogue's usual.

There were several tables set up, but only one was used. Trey stopped at the edge of the table.

"We need to discuss Killcreek."

Rogue glanced up, settled back in his seat, and glanced past Trey. There was only one person he could be looking at, and when Rogue smiled, Trey knew exactly who was in his line of sight.

"You want a drink first?"

Motherfucker! Any reaction would be a fatal flaw. Trey knew Rogue, how he thought, how he acted, and all his tactics.

Trey wouldn't acquiesce to any of them. Not where Dahlia was involved. He pulled out the chair and sat across from Rogue, steeling his features.

"Oz needs an answer."

Rogue drew in a deep drag from his cigar. "Made some changes. What do you think, Trey?"

Trey was prepared to ignore him, but Rogue took it a step further, lifting his hand and snapping his fingers. It wasn't unusual for Rogue to use a demeaning tactic such as snapping fingers to gain someone's attention. But knowing the recipient had Trey's blood rushing through his veins. He narrowed his gaze, glaring at Rogue, who seemed unaffected. Trey heard her padded footsteps rush forward, and from the corner of his eye, he saw her bare legs at the edge of the table.

"Whiskey," Rogue demanded.

Trey kept his glare locked on Rogue until he noticed a slight shift and heard her. *Her voice*. Soft, sweet, and unsure.

"Can I get you anything, Trey?"

Rogue snorted. "Fuck, I didn't get that offer. *Anything* for Trey, huh?"

Trey glanced up at her, and Dahlia's cheeks immediately pinkened, hiding nothing. Her face was far too expressive to conceal anything. *But God...so fucking gorgeous*. She was exotically beautiful with her dark eyes, thick brows, and high cheekbones. Her heart-shaped face and pointed chin only accentuated her beauty.

When her gaze softened, he was quickly reminded that Dahlia was the last person he should've been thinking about right now.

He ground his teeth and shook his head. "I'm fine."

When she walked away, he looked over at Rogue. Clearly, he was taking joy in this scene. He was also hoping for some type of reaction. It was a game to Rogue. Unfortunately for him, Trey was an unwilling player.

Trey folded his arms. "Killcreek."

Rogue's jaw squared, and his features tightened. "I'm still fucking thinking."

"There's nothing to think about. It's as good as done. We just need to work out the details to confirm the deal."

"Making deals with fucking psycho trash? Is that where we fucking are, Trey?"

Your narcissism is showing, Rogue.

"Do you have an alternative plan?" Trey raised his brows. "If so, I'm open to hearing it. But let me remind you that the initial deal you invested in cost us over fifty grand in delays, not to mention overtime for security doing a job that should have included *you* with a shovel in *your* hand."

Rogue's glare hardened. It was the truth, and he knew it.

"Call Gunner. We'll talk to East."

Trey shook his head. "They won't take it. Too risky, and they've got too much to lose."

"How 'bout we let them make that choice, or are you their new fucking mouthpiece?"

Trey scoffed, shaking his head and turning toward the bar. Dahlia was pouring the liquor into a glass, her hair falling over her shoulder, curtaining half her face. It was still an amazing view. When she glanced up and caught him staring, she immediately blushed, and the corner of her mouth hiked. It was the wrong move if he had hopes of keeping his composure and concentration intact. He jerked his gaze back to Rogue, thankful his counterpart hadn't caught his brief slip in composure.

"Oz offered them a deal that took them out of state lines. They refused. If they didn't take a deal with Oz, they won't make it with you."

Rogue slammed his fist down on the table. Trey knew Rogue well. His frustration stemmed from knowing the obvious truth. Working with Killcreek was their only option. However, Trey's comment regarding East not working with him if they wouldn't with Oz had also struck a nerve. While

Rogue never mentioned it, Trey knew being second to Oz was always a sensitive topic, especially when it was thrown in his face.

At the worst possible time, Dahlia started walking toward the table. She must have sensed the tension and halted a few feet away. It left her as a source of contention for Rogue and his perfect victim.

“You expect me to get up and get the fucking drink, or can you bring it to me?”

Fucking asshole.

Dahlia rushed over, placing the glass in front of Rogue. The tension must have been evident to her because she seemed hellbent on rushing away. Unfortunately for her, Dahlia wasn't quick enough. Rogue grabbed her wrist, forcing her closer to the table. Trey straightened in his seat and his nostrils flared, but he batted down every emotion. This was what Rogue wanted, what he craved. Rogue was waiting for Trey to break and unleash on him. Rogue only had to wait a few seconds.

“Remind me again how much we fucking pay you to be incompetent?” Rogue asked, his knuckles whitening as his grip tightened around her wrist. When Trey heard her soft whimper, he was done! He pushed against the table, rocking Rogue's drink.

“Let her go.”

Both Dahlia and Rogue turned to him, but Trey kept his eyes locked on Rogue. It was less than two seconds before Trey leaned across the table.

“Let her fucking go. Now!” Trey growled.

Trey would only give him a few more seconds to back down.

Rogue slowly released Dahlia, who skittered away. Trey didn't even bother looking at her. He kept his eyes locked on Rogue. Trey had given away too much by that act of possession. It could have been dismissed in front of anyone else. But not Rogue. He knew Trey too well. The smile on

Rogue's face proved that. His brother would see past the armor and the stoic stance. Rogue would see it.

Trey stood and straightened his jacket.

“Make the fucking decision so I can make the call because now you're fucking with my money.”

Rogue grabbed his drink and smirked. This had nothing to do with finances or even the deal at this point, and Rogue knew it.

Trey walked across the balcony, not acknowledging anyone, including Dahlia. But he could feel her eyes on him.

Fuck!

This wasn't Trey. He didn't lose his composure. Not with anyone, even Rogue. He dragged his hand through his hair as he stalked down the hall to his office. He had to focus on the deal, keeping their business above everything else. That's where his head had to be. The Underground.

Years and years of playing referee between the brothers should have made Trey an expert on convincing either one of them of anything. Some deals were harder than others, and this was proving to be one of those times. He rounded his desk and sat, eyeing his phone. Oz was expecting a call, and Trey was stalling, knowing his answer wouldn't be received well.

The soft knock at the door had him turning in his seat, not expecting the woman in the doorway. Dahlia stood uncertain with a glass in her hand.

“Rogue said to bring you a tequila.”

A peace offering. It went back years. It was universal through all three of them. He couldn't remember who started it, but he remembered his first taste and the following day when he thought he'd die. He'd sworn off tequila, but every once in a while, when fences needed to be mended, he indulged for the sake of their brotherhood.

He dragged his hand over his face and cupped his mouth. Dahlia remained standing, waiting for him. He waved her over to his desk. She'd drop it off and be gone within seconds. Or

so he thought. Instead of walking across from his desk, she rounded it, coming next to his chair. She leaned forward only a few feet away and placed it in front of him. Her being so close was too much temptation. It was as if she had an invisible magnetic pull. Trey drew in a breath, forcing his control to solidify.

It lasted only two seconds. When she straightened and made a move to turn away, he shot out his hand, tucked his fingers into the waistband of her shorts, and pulled her toward him. The move clearly caught her off guard, and she fell forward, bracing her hands on his shoulders. With his free hand, he grasped the back of her thigh, forcing her to straddle his lap. Force was unnecessary. Dahlia came willingly, scooting closer on his lap until her breasts brushed against his chest and her mouth was an inch from his lips.

So fucking close. But apparently not close enough for her. *Or me.*

Trey slid his hand up her back, over her neck, and fisted her hair, forcing her head back. Her soft intake of breath under his control had him growing harder by the second. He slipped his hand around to her stomach, caressing over her bare skin and up to her breast. Her skin was hot, and she ground her hips against him. If he wanted, he could take her.

Trey skimmed his lips over the tops of her breasts and felt the pounding of her heart. It matched his, but he was in more control than she was. When she tried to pull from his firm grip, Trey tightened his fist. *This is where I want you.* He licked the column of her throat, grazing his teeth over her skin. Her fingers dug into his shoulders as she swiveled her hips, trying to find relief, he assumed.

“Trey,” she whispered.

If he had a weakness, he was quickly learning it was Dahlia’s voice saying his name. He loosened his hold, and she immediately fell forward. Her mouth came down on his, giving no ease or seduction. Her tongue speared past his lips, and he wrapped his arm over her waist, pulling her flat against

his chest. Her breathy moan only heightened his need as he grabbed her ass, urging her against his cock.

He'd resisted this woman far too long. Her hands dropped down to the buckle of his pants, leaving no question of her intentions.

"We can lock the door," she whispered against his lips.

Fuck!

It was the reminder he needed but didn't want to hear. With the door wide open, it was a reckless position to be in and went against all his control and responsibility. Dahlia was testing all his boundaries. When she pulled away, he knew exactly what her intentions were. She'd get up, lock the door, and within twenty seconds flat, he'd be deep inside her. It was what they both wanted.

But...

Trey wouldn't let it happen. *Not now and not here.* He tightened his hold over her back, sliding his lips over hers and finally pulling away. When Dahlia lunged closer, he dug his hands into her ass, giving a strict warning to stop. Some women wouldn't have heeded his warning. They wouldn't understand it. Dahlia did, and she stilled, glancing up through her lashes.

Trey gritted his teeth, prepared to make the right decision even if it wasn't the one he wanted to make. He eased his hold, ignored the painful stretch in his pants, and guided her off his lap. Dahlia stood beside his chair, waiting. *Fuck!* Trey stood, placed his hand on her back, and walked her across the room.

"You're done for the night."

Dahlia spun around, which put them a breath away with her breasts against his chest. Her eyes widened, and he saw a slight shake of her head.

"What?"

"Get your things and head home."

She knitted her brows. "I still have two hours left on my shift."

“No. You’re done for the night. Go home.”

She clutched onto his jacket, pulling him closer. “Come with me.”

Oh fuck!

“Dahlia.” He narrowed his gaze. “Go home.”

“Are you sure?”

No.

Trey drew in a breath. “Go home, Dahlia.”

The stern command seemed to gain her attention, and not in a good way. She flattened her lips and turned her head, her hair falling over her shoulder, masking her face. “Goodnight, Trey.”

Trey grasped his hips and dropped his chin to his chest. He was in a massive tug-o-war with what he knew was right and honorable to the code and the promise he’d made to Rogue and Oz, which conflicted with wanting Dahlia. He could have given in to temptation, but Trey knew better than to think one or two nights with her would get her out of his system.

What the fuck is happening to me?

Dahlia was different from any other woman he’d been with. He felt something, a pull, a desire, and an unrelenting need to possess and protect. This was dangerous not only to Trey and his lifestyle and choices but, more importantly, for Dahlia. Taking Dahlia wasn’t the problem. It would be letting her go.

Trey stared at the empty doorway, then walked back to his desk. He stopped at the window overlooking the parking lot. He ignored all the brake lights of cars leaving and the headlights of those arriving. He was waiting for one figure only, and a few minutes later, she appeared. She walked the length of the wall.

“Jared!” Trey shouted.

Within seconds, he heard the heavy boots stop a few feet away, but he kept his gaze locked on her small silhouette.

“Make sure she gets on the bus safely.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dahlia stopped, waiting for a slowdown in the cars, and rushed between the lot and onto the sidewalk. Seconds later, as she rounded the corner, disappearing from sight, he saw Jared only fifteen feet behind her.

I can't have her, but I need her safe.

Chapter Twelve

Dahlia dragged her hand through her hair, pulling hard on the strands. She'd been pacing for what felt like hours. It was after seven and pushing dangerously close to the start of her shift at the Bowery. The responsible move would've been to visit the following day. It was actually Trick's suggestion when he called to tell her the news. However, this went above logical thinking. She was thriving on pure emotion and excitement. It was a monumental event in her friend's lives and her own. Karia and Trick were officially parents to a healthy, sweet baby boy.

The waiting area had pretty much cleared out, with only one visitor occupying the room. Her turn was next. Or was it his? Dahlia didn't recognize the older man, but he could've been a relative of Karia's. Secretly, she was hoping he was waiting to see another patient.

Dahlia glanced down at her phone, calculating her potential tardiness. It was inevitable. Even if she went to Karia's room now, she'd still be late. She needed to get someone to cover her shift. Dahlia only had a few contacts from work, and after a few tries to Sloane, she went to her plan B. She searched her phone and hit the name.

"Hello?"

"Hey Keely, it's Dahlia."

"Hi!"

"Hi. I was wondering if you could do me a favor?"

"Anything."

This plan might just work after all. Keely was always stationed at the slowest bar. Surely, they could spare her for a short time.

Dahlia smiled. "I know you're at bar three, but can you cover for me?"

There was a long pause.

“Aren’t you working the balcony?”

“Yes, but I should be there by eight.”

“Uh...” Keely sighed. “You can’t just have someone cover for you in the balcony.”

What?

“It’s just for an hour at most.”

“It doesn’t matter, Dahlia. The balcony staff can only be approved by Trey and Rogue.”

Shit!

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry. I would totally do it if I could.”

“It’s okay. I just didn’t realize how strict it was.”

“Yeah. Did you call Sloane?”

“I can’t reach her.”

Dahlia had thought for sure she’d run into Sloane at the hospital, but she must have visited earlier.

“Yeah, I just walked in and haven’t seen her. Sorry.”

Damn!

“No worries. I’ll see you later.”

Dahlia hung up, glancing at the time once more. It was a critical moment. The decision she made would have consequences. She tapped her finger against her lips, weighing her options. In the few weeks she’d been working the balcony, she’d noticed a pattern. Neither Trey nor Rogue ever showed up before ten. The chance of no one noticing her tardiness was in her favor. She’d mention it to Sloane, who could dock her pay, and no one would be the wiser.

Decision made.

Dahlia drew in a breath and walked through the room, taking a seat facing the hallway. She smiled over at the older man, probably in his seventies, holding a small bag of pretzels from the vending machine. She’d purposely left the seat

between them empty so as to not invade his space. She clasped her hands on her lap and waited.

She had been sitting in pure silence when her stomach growled. *Dammit!* With all the excitement and rushing around, she'd forgotten to eat dinner. It would make for a long night.

The older man extended his arm across the vacant chair, offering her some of his pretzels.

"I know the polite thing to do is decline, but I'm starving."

He laughed. "I wouldn't offer if I wasn't willing to share."

There were still good and kind people in the world, though they seemed to be few and far between. Dahlia took a handful from the bag and popped a pretzel in her mouth. She'd been starving, and this was immensely satisfying.

"I'm Sal."

She smiled. "I'm Dahlia."

"Aw, that's a pretty name."

"Thanks. My dad named me." It was a small, unnecessary fact that she always took a lot of pride in. Her mother had picked a million other names, but her father had been firm and ultimately won the argument. *I love my name.*

"You here for the good or the bad?"

Dahlia swallowed the pretzel, knitted her brows, and glanced over, unsure what he'd meant. "I'm sorry?"

Sal smiled with a careless shrug. "Only two reasons people show up at the hospital. Either it's good news or bad."

Interesting, yet he had a point.

"Very good news. First baby."

"Well, that's what I would call the best news." He raised his brows. "Are you family?"

Dahlia smiled, shaking her head. "No, not really. But I consider Karia and Trick like family. My actual family is

pretty small. Just me and my mom.”

There was a recognition she saw in his eyes. His face softened, and his smile widened, but she couldn't quite understand why.

“Small usually means close. That's not a bad thing.”

Dahlia nodded. “Yeah, we're pretty tight.”

“Close with your father, who picks beautiful names?”

Dahlia stilled, staring straight ahead. Even eight years later, the mere mention of her dad caused a physical ache in her chest.

The man leaned closer and whispered, “I didn't mean to pry.”

“Oh no.” She waved her hand. “You're fine. I just, um...” Dahlia drew in a breath. “No one really asks about my dad, so the question caught me off guard. But yeah, we were very close. My mom used to say I put him on a pedestal. She was teasing me, but it was true. She did the same thing. He was just an amazing man.” She clasped her hands. “The glue that kept us all together.”

“Sorry for your loss.”

Dahlia nodded, then blinked. She may have spoken of her father in the past tense, but she never said he passed. She slowly turned her head, and Sal smiled.

“How do you know he died?”

Sal cocked his head, staring back at her for a few seconds. “The tone of your voice. That's how I know he's not with you anymore. Your voice shakes on the last word of every sentence. He's hard to talk about. Considering all your praise, he doesn't sound like a man who would willingly leave his family. If I had to guess, he wasn't ready to go, and you weren't ready to lose him.”

Her eyes welled, and she bit the inside of her mouth but remained still. Her tears were threatening to drop if she moved even a muscle.

“I’m good at reading between the lines and reading people.”

“Yeah,” she whispered. “You are.”

Dahlia turned away, eating another pretzel, finding it harder to swallow with the knot in her throat. She shouldn’t be this emotional years later. She’d spent a third of her life without her father. Surely, the grieving process should have gotten easier. *No*. The phrase “time heals all wounds” was only a myth. Dahlia was living proof of that.

Dahlia looked up at the clock hanging on the wall, and her nerves spiked. Not only was she definitely going to be late, but time was closing in on visiting hours ending. Dahlia tapped her foot, rolling her neck.

“If you’re concerned about being able to see your friends before visiting hours are over? Don’t. I’ll get you in.”

Dahlia smiled. He really was good at reading people.

“You have connections here?”

Sal arched his brow and smirked. “I have connections everywhere.” He said it with so much confidence she almost believed him.

“Well, that solves one problem.”

“What’s the other problem?”

Dahlia sighed. “I have to work tonight, and as it stands, I’m going to be late. I called to see if someone could cover for me, but apparently, they don’t allow it. And...my boss, well, one of them, is um...” She paused, choosing her words carefully. “He’s not the most reasonable man. Something tells me this good news wouldn’t mean much to him. Not quite sure anything does except maybe himself.” Dahlia chuckled. “But as long as he doesn’t show up early, I should be fine.”

“Everyone deserves time off.”

Dahlia laughed.

“What?” Sal asked.

She licked her lips, trying to explain while still maintaining professionalism. It was a hard task with regard to Rogue.

“I just started, so I’m on probation. And apparently, he hates me, so he’d love nothing more than a reason to fire me.”

“Excuse my language, but he sounds like an asshole.”

Again, he was good at reading people.

“Well, you know what they say, Sal. If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck...”

He burst out laughing, choking on a pretzel. Dahlia quickly shifted in her seat, reached behind him, and tapped his back. His eyes welled, and he cleared his throat.

“From my experience, men like your boss aren’t as tough as they appear.”

It was probably an accurate assessment in most situations. But...*you don’t know Rogue, Sal.*

“No.” Dahlia snorted. “I’m pretty sure he lives up to his reputation.”

She grabbed another pretzel. “It must be a miserable life, always being that mean and negative. Getting off by putting others down. Thinking you’re better than everyone else.”

Sal nodded and gave a half-shrug. “Everybody is bred differently, right? Look at you. Have a good family that raised you right, probably lots of love and coddling, making you feel like the princess you are. You’re a product of where you come from and how you were built. Not everyone is so lucky.”

No, they weren’t. It gave Dahlia cause to think. She had been very fortunate that her parents loved her, would have done anything for her, and raised her to be who she was. Not everyone had that. Aside from being an owner of the club, she knew nothing of Rogue.

“Maybe I’m not good at reading people, and he’s not an asshole?”

Sal side-eyed her.

“No, he sounds like an asshole. But he might just have a reason for being one.” Sal winked and lifted his chin. “What about the other one?”

Ah, the other one. Dahlia realized that the mere thought of Trey was causing her heart rate to spike, her blood to rush, and her skin to tingle.

“Oh, I take it *he’s* not an asshole?”

Dahlia jerked her head to find Sal grinning. He pointed to her and winked. “Your face completely changed when I asked about your other boss. Lit up, and you blushed. Must be a good guy.”

Was he? He was a fantastic kisser, but that wasn’t something she’d be sharing with her new friend.

“I think he is. A little guarded, and he’s got this like...” Dahlia paused, trying to find the right word. “Armor, I guess. He comes across as very intimidating ’cause he’s really smart, and he never stumbles over his words. He’s quick like he knows exactly what someone is going to say before they open their mouths. Maybe he sees people beyond the surface.”

“Sounds like a strong, honorable man.”

“He is.” Dahlia smiled. “And he’s not bad to look at either.”

He laughed. “Good-looking, huh?”

Dahlia snorted. “That doesn’t even cover it, Sal. He’s incredibly gorgeous, like the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

Sal nodded with a small smile playing on his lips. “And the luckiest guy to have such a beautiful person like you think so highly of him.”

Dahlia blushed under the compliment but shrugged it off.

“Probably not the smartest move, having a crush on my boss, right?”

His eyes softened. “I could think of worse things.”

“Can’t take you anywhere without you scoping out a pretty woman and making friends.”

Dahlia glanced up at the man walking through the room. He and Sal were clearly friends.

Sal laughed and waved his hand to the man about the same age as him. “This is John, Karia’s dad.”

What? Dahlia darted her gaze between the two men. Sal was there for Karia? Why hadn’t he said anything?

Dahlia stood, offering her hand. “It’s so nice to meet you. I’m Dahlia.”

His eyes lit up, and his smile widened. “Well, it’s great to finally meet you. Heard a lot about you.”

Dahlia widened her eyes. “You have?”

He laughed and nodded. “Yes, Karia talks about you all the time.”

Really?

“She does?”

“Yeah, mentioned you just got a new job at some swanky disco downtown.”

Swanky disco? Dahlia tightened her lips, holding her smile at bay.

“Heard her telling Trick to make sure you didn’t have to take time off.”

Dahlia had a strong friendship with all the East old ladies, but some were closer. Like Karia.

Sal stood, walking over to John. “Well, she did, so let’s get her in there to see Kar and the baby.”

“Oh no.” She shook her head. “You’ve been waiting longer than I have. You should go first.”

“Honey, I got nowhere else to be. After we leave here we’re stopping for dinner then back home. I got all the time in the world.”

John stepped up. “He’s right. Neither one of us is in a rush to get back. You’d be doing us a favor.”

Dahlia snickered, looking between both men. “If you’re sure?”

Sal lifted his chin, gestured to the door, and smiled. “I am. It was a pleasure to meet you, Dahlia.”

She rushed back and offered her hand. Sal immediately took it. “It was so nice meeting you, Sal. Thanks for sharing your snacks and—” Dahlia chuckled. “—listening.”

“Anytime, honey.” Sal winked.

Dahlia rushed down the hall and halted at the door, peeking into the room. Her eyes welled, taking in the scene. Karia was lying on the bed with her head resting against the pillow, exhausted and glowing. She was staring up at Trick, who had the baby cradled in his tatted arms. Never had she ever seen him appear more protective, proud, and so very gentle. She’d called it months ago. These two were going to make amazing parents.

Witnessing this moment right here was worth the wrath of Rogue.

*

Splurging for a car service wasn’t something she did often, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Dahlia had spent more time than expected at the hospital. Sal was right, he must have had connections, because no one came into the room booting her out, and she’d stayed well past the visiting hours.

Dahlia got dropped off at the main entrance and rushed toward the back and into the building. She didn’t even bother stopping at the break room to drop off her things. She’d store them under the bar. Dahlia ducked into the bathroom and changed into her uniform in record time. She was still straightening her top as she rushed out the door. She weaved through some staff heading down the hall, giving a quick short greeting and raced up the stairs. She was already out of breath when she glanced around the balcony.

Thank God it was empty.

She walked over to the bar, tucking her bag in the cubby on the floor and straightened, taking a deep breath. Her relief was short-lived when Jared walked out from the back. As a member of Trey's security, he rarely showed up without Trey. This was a minor setback knowing Trey was already here, but she'd explain what happened. He would be far more understanding than Rogue.

"Hi, Jared."

His brows dipped into a tight scowl. "Where the hell were you?"

"I know I'm running a little late, but I'll make sure Sloane knows to dock my pay, and I'll explain to Trey."

"Trey's not here." Jared's gaze narrowed. "But Rogue is."

Oh fuck me!

"He never comes in this early..."

"Well, he did tonight and now he's looking for you."

"Shit." Dahlia dragged her hand over her face.

Jared stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Tell Rogue you had a family emergency, and you cleared it with Sloane. That's your best shot."

He was suggesting she lie and put the blame on Sloane?

"And get Sloane in trouble? No way, I'm not doing that!"

Jared rolled his eyes and knowingly sighed. "Sloane doesn't get in trouble."

What does that mean? Dahlia was sure no one escaped the wrath of Rogue.

"I can't lie."

His face hardened. "You wanna keep your job? Fucking lie, Dahlia!"

This was beyond strange. Jared, who rarely acknowledged her and hadn't uttered one word to her, was now trying to help cover for her?

“Why are you helping me?”

Jared ignored her question. “Come on.”

She rushed behind Jared, weighing her options. Trey had saved her once, but it was when Rogue had no valid reason for firing her. Now, she’d given him one. Dahlia walked past Rogue’s security lined up at his door. As usual none of them even looked at her. Jared stopped, knocked on the door, and grabbed the handle, looking her straight in the eyes and mouthed, “Lie.”

Dahlia drew in a deep breath, which did nothing to settle her nerves, and when the door opened she walked in. She barely got through it when his loud, vibrating voice echoed off the walls.

“Where the fuck have you been?”

Dahlia flinched then rushed forward, stopping in front of his desk. “I’m so sorry, I tried to get someone to cover and didn’t realize I couldn’t when I’m scheduled for the balcony and...”

Rogue slammed his hand down on the table causing it to shake and the liquor in his glass swish to the rim.

“Where the fuck were you?”

Lie!

“Um, there was an emergency, and I uh—”

“You can’t pick up a fucking phone?”

“I called.”

“Who?”

Lie!

“I spoke to Sloane about an hour ago,” she blurted.

“Yeah?” He smirked. “Well, let’s get her ass in here now!”

“She’s not here yet,” Dahlia said.

Rogue reached into his pocket, pulled out his phone, tapped the screen, and held it up to his ear. Dahlia hadn’t been

able to reach Sloane, and she'd hoped the same could be said for Rogue. However, luck was on his side, and the corner of his mouth curled.

“Where the fuck are you?” There was a slight pause. “Just walking in? Get your ass up to my office now!”

Rogue tossed the phone on the desk, sat back in his seat, and stared back at her.

Oh shit. The minutes felt like hours, and she racked her brain, trying to come up with a plausible plan to backtrack. *I've got nothing.*

“Hi!”

The blood drained from her face, and Dahlia closed her eyes when she heard the chipper tone and rushed steps, sidling up next to her.

I'm screwed.

“Hey, Karia had the baby! It's a boy, and he's so cute.” Sloane tone spiked as she gushed. “You wanna see a picture? I took tons.”

Dahlia pried her eyes open just in time to see Rogue's menacing glare pin down on Sloane.

“What the... No, I don't wanna see fucking pictures of this kid!” Rogue roared so loud Dahlia was surprised the art on the wall hadn't shifted.

“Is there a problem?” Sloane asked, glancing between her and Rogue.

He pointed at Dahlia. “You get a call from her?”

Sloane jerked her head. “Oh, it was so crazy with Karia being rushed to the hospital. I haven't even checked my phone because after I saw them, I had to rush down to the embroidery store with the name, date, weight, and...”

“Sloane!” Rogue shouted. “Did you fucking talk to her?”

Poor Sloane. She looked like a deer caught in headlights. Her eyes widened, and her head bobbed. Not a nod, not a shake. It was an odd, indifferent movement. It could go either

way. It was as if she was trying to gauge the situation and piece together the scene without having any details. She slowly peeked over at Dahlia, then turned to Rogue.

“Today?” Sloane asked.

“Yeah,” Rogue snapped.

Sloane licked her lips, quirked her brow, and hummed. “Hmmm...”

“Sloane, what the fuck are you doing?”

She’s stalling. Dahlia kept her eyes locked on Sloane and watched as she slowly nodded. “With all the chaos, it slipped my mind, but now it’s all coming back to me.” Sloane looked over at Dahlia. “We talked. This morning?”

Dahlia appreciated the effort, but it wasn’t convincing, and it totally exposed the lie.

“Sloane, get the fuck outta my office before I fire your ass, too.”

Too? Dahlia’s shoulders sagged, and her heart sank.

“Can I just say...”

“Get the fuck out!” His loud voice roared through the room, sending a chill down her spine.

Once Sloane left, Rogue turned his glare on her. “You think you’re smarter than me? Some fucking slit who, before this, was serving stale fucking beer and taking out the trash when you weren’t on your fucking knees sucking off bikers.”

Dahlia gasped. It wasn’t so much the vulgarity. She’d heard it before. It was the tone as if saying it made it a fact, and his belittling came without an ounce of remorse. *Fuck you, Rogue.*

Rogue spread his arms, aching his brow. “What? Am I fucking wrong?”

Technically, no.

“Yes.” She swallowed the knot in her throat, fighting against her anger. “East doesn’t serve stale beer.”

The corner of his mouth curled in a sinister smile. “I always fucking appreciate a smart mouth. Especially before I fucking fire them. Get your stuff, get the fuck out, and don’t come back.”

She straightened her shoulders and walked to the door.

“I’m keeping that last paycheck. And as for working in any other club? Not fucking happening. I’m going to make those calls now, personally.”

You dick!

Sloane was waiting outside the door when Dahlia walked out and quickly ushered her down to her office.

Dahlia’s panic was slowly setting in. She’d made quite a bit of money, but she still had debt she was working off. Knowing that he’d blackball her and make it extremely difficult to find other employment made her last check crucial.

Sloane had her arm wrapped around Dahlia’s back, guiding her to the chair in the corner of her office.

Aaron stood and rounded his desk. “What’s wrong?”

“Rogue fired Dahlia,” Sloane said.

“Shit, I’m sorry.”

“He said he’s keeping my last check. Can he do that?” Dahlia’s voice cracked.

Sloane’s lips twisted, then flattened. “Legally no, but... I mean...” She stammered. “He’s Rogue.”

Fuck! She dropped her face in her palms, and her chest tightened.

“Trey know about it?” Aaron asked.

Dahlia glanced up at the assistant manager, but he was focused on Sloane. It was an odd question, considering Rogue didn’t need anyone’s consent or permission to get rid of her. Trey had saved her once, but it had been different circumstances. Rogue wanted to fire her without just cause. But now? She’d been at fault and lied about it. No matter how

many intimate moments they'd shared, she didn't expect Trey to step up on her behalf.

"Does Trey know? Was he there?" Aaron asked again.

Dahlia shook her head and looked between Sloane and Aaron. There was a silent conversation she wasn't privy to.

Sloane sat up, seemingly gaining a little excitement. "Is he here?"

"Just saw him walk in on the cameras." Aaron smiled and reached into his back pocket, grabbing his phone. He tapped his screen and brought the receiver to his ear.

Dahlia had no idea what was happening or who he was calling, but Sloane did. She moved closer to Aaron, whispering, "Ask if he wants to do the exit interview since he hired her."

Aaron nodded and straightened his back. "Hey Trey, sorry to bother you. We have an employee..." He paused, glancing down at Dahlia. "She was let go by Rogue today. Sloane was going to do the exit interview, but since you hired her, did you want to do it?" Aaron paused. "Dahlia."

There was a small stretch of silence.

"Yes, sir." Aaron nodded and hung up, smiling at Dahlia. "He said for you to wait here."

Sloane wiggled her brows. "Trey's like the undercover hero."

Dahlia wasn't sure what she meant by that but hoped it meant she could at least speak to Trey. Dahlia couldn't put the blame on anyone other than herself. She'd showed up late. She'd lied to her boss. Both offenses were valid for termination. However, keeping her check and blackballing?

Dahlia shifted in her seat, listening to Aaron and Sloane chat. They both seemed relieved, but Dahlia wasn't. The knock on the door was a courtesy tap before it opened. Jared glanced over at Dahlia and crooked his finger, urging her to follow him. Dahlia stood, looking over at Sloane, who was

smiling as she took her seat. Dahlia rushed down the hall to catch up with Jared.

“Is Trey mad?”

Jared scoffed. “Yeah.”

“Shit,” she muttered.

Jared glanced back as they walked down the hall. “Not at you, Dahlia.”

Interesting. Dahlia followed close behind. Her nerves were at an all-time high, and her heart raced as they walked up the stairs. She needed some type of distraction from her thoughts. She looked ahead to Jared.

“Are you giving me the same advice as before? Should I lie to Trey?”

Dahlia wouldn’t, but she was still curious why Jared suggested it in the first place.

“No. Explain it to Trey. He’ll work it out with Rogue.”

“Rogue just fired me.”

“Trey’s not going to let that happen.”

How could he be so sure? This whole scene with Jared was beyond confusing. She reached out, grabbing his arm and forcing him to stop. Jared turned around on the balcony directly in front of the curtains leading back to the offices.

“Why are you helping me?”

“I’m not helping you, Dahlia. I’m helping myself. My job is easier when they get along. Usually, it’s not an issue, but since you showed up, there’s friction.”

What? Was she the source of contention? Dahlia couldn’t think of anything she’d done to come between them. Certainly not purposely. Rogue instantly hated her on sight. She hadn’t done anything to provoke it. She pressed her hand over her heart.

“I didn’t mean to. I’m not even sure what I did and...”

Jared stepped into her space and lowered his voice. “You didn’t do anything wrong. All I’m saying is I’ve worked for Trey and Rogue for close to a decade. Rogue fires people all the time, depending on his mood. Never has anyone kept their job. Ten years, and Trey has never stepped in to go against Rogue in that decision.”

“Why would he now?”

“Dahlia, it’s a test.”

“Well, obviously I failed. He fired me.”

“This isn’t a test for you. It’s for Trey. If he lets it happen, then you’re nothing more than an employee. Let’s be honest, we both know you’re a little more than that.”

Her eyes widened, but she remained silent. How did Jared know? Had he seen them kissing at the fights? It was a possibility.

“Come on, Trey’s waiting. The quicker you get it resolved, the sooner you’re back at the bar. Rogue will be pissed, Trey will be satisfied, and I won’t have to hear about it being bullshit you getting fired from Kil...” Jared cleared his throat. “From any of the other staff.”

Was he about to say Killian? “You’re friends with Killian and afraid he’ll be mad at you if I get fired?”

“Something like that.” Jared sighed. “Kill likes you. Likes working with you, and I don’t wanna have to hear about it if he can’t.”

“Do you really think he’d give *you* a hard time?”

Jared’s eyes shifted down to the floor, mainly at bar one. Then she noticed the softening of his eyes. “Yeah. Come on, Trey’s waiting.”

Dahlia followed Jared but glanced over her shoulder down to the bar where Killian was working.

Interesting.

This was the last thing he needed to deal with right now. However, Rogue having a fit and trying to fire Dahlia again was not happening. Trey didn't have all the details, but they were unnecessary. She wasn't going anywhere whether Rogue liked it or not.

He walked out of his office and waited at the split of the hallway. Seconds later, Jared appeared with Dahlia following close behind and staring at the floor in front of her. Jared stopped midway when he saw Trey and whispered something to her. Dahlia nodded and met Trey at the end of the hall.

"What do I need to know?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, peering down to the end of the hall where security was lined up. Dahlia shifted nervously on her feet and ran her hand through her hair.

"Dahlia?"

She peeked up through her lashes, biting her bottom lip.

"I lied, Trey."

He raised his brows.

"Karia had the baby, and I went to the hospital. I got there two hours before my shift. I really thought I could go and get back here on time, but she already had visitors, so I waited, and it was a lot longer than I planned. I should have left to be here on time."

"Why didn't you?"

Dahlia twisted her lips and shrugged. "I just wanted to make sure she was okay. She and Trick and um..."

"What?"

"I just really wanted to see the baby."

Trey steeled his features, not giving in to a smile. Dahlia was different from him. Her heart was softer and bigger, her priorities were different. This baby took precedent over everything else in her world. It wasn't a bad thing.

"Why didn't you tell Rogue that?"

Dahlia widened her eyes. “I panicked and figured with his distaste for anything East that he wouldn’t understand. So, I lied, and here we are. I totally get why he fired me. I really do. But um...” She leaned closer. “I really need last week’s check.”

She must have read the confusion in his stare.

“Rogue said he was keeping it.”

Trey ground his teeth and grasped her wrist, not even concerned with how it may have looked, and marched down the hall and into Rogue’s office.

He glanced up from his desk, and when his eyes shifted to Dahlia standing next to him, Rogue glared.

“Didn’t I just fucking fire you?”

Fuck you, Rogue.

Unlike Dahlia, he recognized this for what it was. Rogue wouldn’t have noticed or even cared if a balcony bartender had been late. He’d complain to Trey, depending on his mood, but it wouldn’t have been grounds for termination. This was personal, and it didn’t have much to do with Dahlia per se.

Trey walked farther into the room, expecting Dahlia to stay in the doorway. Surprisingly, she followed him, staying noticeably close to his back as if he were a shield against Rogue. In a sense, he was. Trey folded his arms.

“She had my permission to come in late.”

Rogue settled in his seat, shaking his head, grinning. “The fuck she did, Trey!”

They’d been brothers too long for Rogue not to see through the lie, but Trey would take it to the end.

“I assure you, she did.”

Rogue squinted with a small smile playing on his lips. He knew the truth.

“How come she didn’t mention that?”

Trey shrugged. “It must have slipped her mind.”

Rogue laughed, shaking his head and eyeing Dahlia. “Then I guess I was fucking wrong for firing her, huh, Trey?”

This was a battle he didn’t need Dahlia witnessing. It would reveal too much. He glanced over his shoulder.

“Go set up the balcony.”

Dahlia shifted her gaze between him and Rogue. Trey expected more push, but it never came. Rogue remained silent with a taunting smile aimed at Trey. She walked out of the office, closed the door behind her, and Trey drew in a breath. He was bracing for the inevitable.

“What the fuck is going on, Trey?”

There it was.

“I’m not going to allow you to fire an employee for a simple misunderstanding.”

Rogue jerked his head to the door, then back to Trey. “Don’t fucking pull this shit. Not with me.”

“She didn’t deserve to be fired.”

Rogue raised his brows. “Yeah, maybe not. But I can think of a hundred fuckers that I fired ’cause I had a bad fucking day, and you never said anything. But this one? Tried firing her ass twice, and you step in. So, I gotta ask. What the fuck is going on with her?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit! You practically fucked her at the fights, going all fucking caveman when another man steps up to her. Saving her ass twice from being fired and going head-to-head with me. That protective stand you took with me, I’ve only seen it a few times. And never for a random woman who means *nothing*.”

Trey averted his gaze across the room. He could deny it and come up with every valid and believable excuse. But if he was looking Rogue in the eye, his brother would know he was lying. Trey was at a crossroads. He had a decision to make.

Trey stalked to the end of his desk.

“You *will* stop fucking with her.”

The corner of Rogue’s mouth hiked, along with his brows. “Will I?”

Trey hardened his gaze. “Yes.”

One simple word spoke volumes. Trey was officially staking his claim. It was a first for any member of the Underground. It went against all the rules they’d lived by. Their codes they’d abided by since they’d started with Sal.

Rogue lost all semblance of teasing and ridicule. He folded his hands, raised his brows, and nodded. “I will.”

Trey straightened, knowing he’d just given Rogue everything without really saying anything. He didn’t have to. Rogue knew. And in turn, he’d given his vow to back off Dahlia. Trey wasn’t exactly sure what this meant for him, Dahlia, or the Underground. The only thing he was certain of was his need, desire, and want for her.

Chapter Thirteen

“Hey, Jared.”

He glanced back as he passed by, subtly dipping his chin. Dahlia knew better than to talk to any of them. But after spending the last couple of days in the balcony virtually being ignored, the human in her couldn't resist. Jared seemed like the easiest partner, considering their small talk the other day. *Nope!* He was back to ignoring her. *Kinda like Trey.* The man was an absolute mindfuck. One day he was saving her, and the next he barely acknowledged her, much like now.

It had been almost a week since their last kiss, and with the exception of going head-to-head with Rogue for her job, he hadn't muttered so much as a word to her. It didn't mean he wasn't giving her attention. Trey looked, stared sometimes, but hadn't spoken to her.

Maybe Dahlia was reading too much into it, but she felt something there, and every time they got a little closer, he would immediately pull away. Dahlia glanced over at the table where Trey and Rogue were seated. After delivering two rounds of drinks, there wasn't much left to do.

“Hey!” The loud pounding on the bar tore her attention from Trey and shifted to the man at the end of the small bar. *The bane of my existence.* Begrudgingly, she took two steps to the end of the bar and stared up at him. Dahlia wouldn't risk her job knowing he was her superior, but she was also done trying to gain his respect. There were some people who were deadset in their perceptions of others, and clearly, Rod was one of them.

She cocked her head and raised her brows, waiting on him.

“Clean up here. They need a barback at one.”

Dahlia wasn't opposed to helping at bar one. If she was being honest, she missed working with Killian and Misti. But

she was scheduled at the balcony. Was he authorized to make the change?

“Did you clear that with Trey?”

Rod’s harsh features sharpened, and he leaned across the bar only a few feet away from her. “You don’t fucking check me! I tell you to do something, you fucking do it.”

Dahlia kept her composure, forcing herself not to shrink under his tone and not to retaliate. She noticed two members of security glance over. Not at her. They were focused on Rod.

“Am I making myself fucking clear?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” Rod snapped.

Oh, you son of a bitch!

“Yes, sir!” It came out louder than she’d intended and gained the attention of Trey and Rogue. Neither one looked particularly happy. In fact, Trey was livid.

Trey’s glare shifted between her and Rod, though he hadn’t noticed when he walked away and down the stairs. Dahlia turned around and started cleaning up but immediately straightened when she felt a dark presence at her back. She spun around and gasped. Trey was at the edge of the bar, a scowl so deep the lines between his brows prominently stood out.

“Can I get you a drink?”

“In my office. Now!” Trey stalked away, and she dropped the rag on the counter and rushed after him, glancing back and locking eyes with Rogue. His glare had been just as hard and outwardly mean as Trey’s.

What did I do?

Dahlia had to double-time her steps just to keep up with Trey, and when she walked through the door, he stepped to the side and slammed the door closed. This was the first time Trey had ever closed the door while they were alone. Dahlia

swallowed the lump in her throat, watching him circle around her like prey.

“D-did I do something wrong?”

His eyes narrowed, and he pointed toward the door.

“What was that?”

Dahlia stilled, then glanced over at the door.

“What was what?”

“Yes, *sir*?”

As if it wasn't humiliating enough having to say it, knowing Trey had heard it only amplified her embarrassment. What could she do? As her superior, Rod made the rules, not her.

“Everyone calls him sir.”

“No, they don't!” Trey snapped.

Dahlia drew in a breath. “Well, obviously not you, but all the employees.”

“No.” His tone sent a shiver down her spine. “They don't, Dahlia.”

What? Of course, they did. Obviously, Trey wouldn't know as much not working firsthand with the staff. She racked her brain, thinking of the times when she'd heard the others call him sir. But she couldn't come up with one single time. No, surely she was just forgetting. Why would he single her out?

Club whore!

Fuck!

“Well, he told me to, so...”

“You do everything people tell you to do?” Trey's belittling tone only had her shrinking deeper inside her humiliation.

“No,” she whispered.

“Then why are you calling him sir?”

“He’s my boss.”

“I’m your boss!” Trey squared his jaw. “What you failed to see is that he did that to show you and everyone else that you are beneath him. And you complied.”

Her breath shallowed, and the knot in her throat tightened. This was nothing new for Dahlia. She’d been in this position before. Too many times to count. Dahlia had never had an upper hand in any job she’d worked. Entry level could have been tattooed on her forehead. Therefore, she knew how it worked. Rod was a superior, and as such, she’d bow down to ensure her job. *That’s the way it works in the real world, Trey.* It was impossible to explain to a man like Trey, who held all the power above everyone else.

Yet somehow, she found her voice. Dahlia straightened her shoulders and stared back at Trey, not shrinking under his scowl. *No!*

“This is so unfair! You’re mad at me for complying? He’s my boss!” Dahlia shouted, unable to control her emotions.

Trey narrowed his gaze, and she knew what was coming. He’d recite his previous statement. But he was wrong. That’s not the way it worked. Not for her.

“Whether you agree or not, he is my boss, my supervisor. Do I need to remind you of my position in *your* club? I’m a barback, Trey. Everyone is higher than me. If someone tells me to do something, of course, I’m going to do it. It’s my job on the line. That’s how it works, Trey, when you’re *not* the boss.” Dahlia ground her teeth, overcome with emotion. “And with all due respect, I think it’s really shitty that you’re trying to make me feel bad for complying when all I’m trying to do is keep my job.” Her eyes welled, and her voice cracked. She immediately dropped her gaze to the floor and turned. Dahlia didn’t wait for any type of dismissal. She walked out, bowing her head to conceal her tears from the security.

Dahlia walked through the balcony, not making any eye contact with anyone, though she felt the weight of their stares, mainly Rogue. She rushed across the floor and slipped behind

bar one, surveying the operations. Inside, she was furious, offended, and utterly destroyed.

Killian glanced over, smiling, then quickly furrowed his brows and grabbed the glass, moving closer to her.

“Hey Dahlia, what’s happening?”

She should have let it go. *I can't.*

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Killian said.

“Do you call Rod ‘*sir*?’”

Killian stilled and slowly angled his head with a small smile playing on his lips. “What?”

“When you answer him yes or no, do you call him sir?”

Killian chuckled. “Are you serious?”

Oh fuck, there was her answer. If she hadn’t been embarrassed before, she was now drowning in humiliation. But maybe Rod’s attitude was only geared toward women.

“Does anyone, the waitresses, maybe?”

Killian slowly shook his head. “Uh, not that I’ve ever heard.”

There it was...the truth.

Dahlia steeled her emotion and ground her teeth. “Can I take my break?”

“Yeah, sure, Dahl,” Killian said and rested his hand on her back, lowering his voice. “You okay?”

The world needed fewer Rods and more Killians. She nodded, ducked her head, and walked away. She hurried her steps through the crowd and ducked into the break room. It was empty. It was the only silver lining. She took a seat at the table. *That asshole!* Rod knew exactly what he was doing, and as Trey said, she’d complied.

Dahlia rested her elbows on the table and dropped her face into her palms, rubbing her eyes. At this point, she didn’t even care about her makeup.

“What’s wrong?”

She’d recognize Sloane’s voice anywhere. And her touch. Sloane’s hand slid over her back in a soothing motion. Dahlia drew in a breath, released a heavy sigh, and sat back in her seat.

“Dahlia?”

“I hate men!”

“They do suck sometimes. What happened?”

She snorted, shaking her head. “Rod told me to address him as ‘sir.’ I thought it was a little over the top, but I’ve never worked here before, so I just assumed everyone did that. Turns out I’m the only fool. According to Trey, I complied, proving that I really am an idiot.”

“No, you’re not!” Sloane furrowed her brows. “He’s your supervisor, so if he tells you something, of course you’ll comply.

Right, Sloane? ’Cause that’s the way it works. Why couldn’t Trey see that?

“There are one hundred people working here, and I’m the only one calling him ‘sir.’”

“But you didn’t know. He’s the jerk here.”

“Yeah, and now Trey thinks I’m the moron who just bowed down, and ya know what? There’s a part of me that agrees with him.”

Sloane’s lips flattened. “You’re not a moron. You were doing what you were told. Dahl, you’re really smart and kind, and you know your way around the bar better than the majority of employees.”

She slouched in her chair. “Great, I’m a highly skilled moron.”

“Dahlia.” Sloane rubbed her arm.

“I just don’t understand what I did. It’s as if Rod has some vendetta against me or something.”

“He’s probably holding his grudge against East and taking it out on you.”

What? Dahlia jerked her head, looking up at Sloane. “Why would he have a grudge against East?”

“I think he was hoping to prospect. He hung around a lot, according to Blade, but they didn’t think he’d be a good fit, so no one was willing to sponsor him. You don’t remember him?”

What the fuck? Dahlia turned in her seat. “When did he hang around East?”

Sloane glanced up at the ceiling and twitched her nose. “About six months ago, I think.”

This was news to her. Or was it? She didn’t remember Rod, but that didn’t mean much. She’d partied at East for a while and bartended a long time at the club. There were always people coming in and out, thousands of them.

“You gonna be okay?” Sloane squeezed her shoulder.

Dahlia nodded. Sloane smiled and walked out, leaving Dahlia lost in her memories.

Rod had tried to prospect for East? Dahlia thought back to her first day here. There had been a slight feeling of familiarity. She couldn’t quite place him, and his hostility seemed unnecessary. It had struck her as odd at the time, but she’d brushed it off. She hadn’t thought about it again. Until now.

You address me as ‘sir.’ Surely a club whore knows her place. I’ve seen everything you do. Not sure what kind of barback you make, but a hell of a good whore.

Dahlia straightened her back and shot up from her chair, rushing out the door to the end of the hall. She scanned the club. As per usual, it was wall-to-wall people, so she slowed her review of the faces, taking in every inch of the club. Three-quarters of the way in, she spotted him near the second bar, in line with the DJ station. As people passed by, obstructing her view, she focused in on Rod.

Oh, you bitter motherfucker!

How had she not remembered him?

I know you!

Trey grasped his glass, staring down at the amber-colored liquor. He hadn't overreacted, but his anger was directed at the wrong mark. He looked over to the men standing in line, sharpening his glare on who should've been his intended target. *Motherfucker!*

Dahlia had given him the rundown and all of her reasoning. It was valid, but not at the time, and he'd come at her. Hard and relentless. She'd left his office practically in tears. Embarrassed and humiliated. Trey would take ownership of his part. He'd fucked up with Dahlia. He'd allowed his own perspective to discount her reality. But this wasn't one-sided. No one was walking away unscathed, especially *him*.

Trey eyed Rod, who stood alongside security. He wasn't a full-fledged member, though Rogue had been adamant about taking him on months ago. They all had their own security, individually chosen. Trey and Rogue had a unique situation. Working so closely, they often shared their security, mainly Jared as the lead.

“What do you wanna do?” Rogue asked.

Trey stared back at Rod. “He's one of yours.”

“I ain't opposed to scaring the fuck outta him.”

Game fucking on!

Trey raised his hand, calling over Rod.

Rod walked over. “It was a great night.”

He'd been hired months back to train for Rogue's security and watch the numbers on the club. It was meant to be a silent managerial position. However, it seemed he'd started to play a bigger role.

Rod stood at the end of the table, his arms behind his back. And he waited. He showed all the signs of a good and

loyal soldier to the Underground. *Except you fucked with the wrong woman!*

“Why does she call you sir?” Trey asked, fisting the glass in his palm. Just saying it drove heat through his body, spurring the need to throw his fist through something.

“Sign of respect.”

“Have you *earned* her respect?” Trey cocked his brow.

Rod blinked, veering his gaze toward Rogue. Trey glanced over and watched Rogue’s glare harden.

“I’m just doing what you hired me to do. Keep everyone in line.”

Wrong fucking answer!

“You don’t fucking keep *her* in line!” Rogue shouted.

Trey should have expected it. Rogue could never stay quiet for too long, though it was surprising, him taking Dahlia’s back. *Again, game-changer.* Rogue had always been labeled a hothead, unpredictable, irrational, and impulsive. It was fitting. But he was intuitive when it came to Trey and Oz. The three were like moving parts, knowing how the others thought, sometimes knowing their next move before they even acted on it. Trey, making it known Dahlia was off-limits, set Rogue into protective mode over her. In his mind, she was Trey’s, an extension of his own.

Trey drew in a breath, watching Rod squirm slightly. “Dahlia doesn’t answer to you. She doesn’t report to you. And you will not speak to her again.”

“I apologize. It won’t happen again.”

“No!” Trey snapped, then regained some control. “It won’t. Do you understand what will happen if it does?”

“I’ll be fired.”

Trey smirked. “Termination is going to be the least of your concerns. Am I making myself fucking clear?”

“Yes.”

Ah, no motherfucker, we're gonna step it up.

Trey arched his brow. "Yes, *what?*"

"Yes, sir."

Trey stood, straightened his jacket, and walked across the balcony.

"Aaron?" Trey called, and he immediately rushed up the stairs. "I want Dahlia in my office. Now!"

Aaron nodded, already descending the stairs. "Yes, sir."

Trey stalked back to his office, yanked off his jacket, and tossed it on the couch, making a beeline for the small bar in the corner of the room. His tension was so high he shot down the bourbon and immediately poured another.

"You wanted to see me?"

Trey sipped his drink, slowly turning and taking her in. All of her. He'd denied himself all of her, only indulging in bits. He raised his hand, motioning her into the room, and she started forward. But she stopped a few feet away. Trey curled his finger. "Closer."

Dahlia took a few steps, and when she was close enough, he hooked his arm around her waist and pulled her against him. Her hands spread out over his chest, and she gasped in surprise.

"Made some changes. You have a problem or a concern with anything? You come to me. If I'm not here, you go to Sloane or Aaron. You don't deal with Rod. Ever. You understand?"

She nodded but refused to look at him. This was an easy resolution, but he'd hurt her. He grasped her jaw, forcing her to look at him.

"It was *shitty of me* to blame you."

She flicked her lashes, seeming surprised by his admission. Trey wasn't above admitting his faults. He had plenty but usually wasn't held accountable. *Until now*. His thumb caressed over her jaw as he pulled her closer.

“Has he done or said anything else to you?”

Her cheeks pinkened, and she shifted on her feet, darting her gaze around the room but refusing to look at him.

“Dahlia!”

“No.”

She’s lying. Trey wouldn’t push her. But he would find out.

“If you have any problems with him going forward, you come to me directly.”

Dahlia smiled, peering up through her lashes. “I will. And you can be sure I won’t be calling anyone ‘sir.’”

Just hearing her say it was drawing him in. Without thought, his fingers dug into her skin. Trey lowered his mouth, brushing against her lips with a low rumble from his chest. “Choose wisely who you call sir.”

Her gaze heated, and her chest lifted, and he could feel her heart pounding when she whispered, “Yes, *sir.*”

Dominance had been instilled in him since he was a kid, and it only grew as he made his way up the ranks. Trey wanted and needed complete control. Dahlia, being naturally submissive, was only amping up his desire to get her in his bed.

“Anything else you want, Trey?”

Fuck!

“No.”

The corner of her mouth curled. “You sure?”

Trey ground his teeth, steeling his reaction. *You, in my bed.* That was what he wanted. Dahlia smiled and pulled away slowly as if she knew his exact thought.

“Night, Trey.”

He watched her walk across his office and disappear through the door.

Fuck!

Chapter Fourteen

“Thanks for coming in early,” Aaron said as she walked through the back door. “Pretty sure everyone was dodging my calls for the shift.”

Dahlia didn't doubt it. Inventory was never fun, but it was worth it. At least to her. Even with all the tips and her paychecks, she was still struggling without a second income on her rent. She'd tried looking, but her past experience made her a little gun-shy to jump into a living arrangement with a total stranger. To be honest, she kind of liked having her house all to herself, though she knew it wasn't compatible with her financial state.

“I'll never turn down double time.”

Aaron laughed, waving her down the hall to the main room. It was always a strange feeling to be at the club during the day. It was quiet, bright, and somehow seemed far less electrifying during daylight hours. Only two other employees had shown up and were working across the room.

“Since you're familiar, I'm going to have you do bar one and the balcony.”

“Sounds good. Does it matter where I start?”

“Completely up to you,” Aaron said, walking away and heading toward the office.

Dahlia made her way up the stairs. She'd crank out the balcony first since it was the smaller of the two. She rounded the bend, expecting to find it empty. Nothing could have surprised her more than seeing an older man seated at the table usually reserved for Trey and Rogue. It wasn't so much seeing someone else but the recognition. From a distance and only his profile in her view, she couldn't be absolutely sure, so she walked across the floor, angled her head, and smiled.

What was he doing here?

“Got any pretzels?”

Sal turned, furrowed his brows briefly, and then grinned and immediately stood. “Well, this just made my day a whole lot brighter.”

Dahlia laughed, moving closer and taking him in for a hug. It seemed to catch him off guard, but Sal, being a true gentleman, went with it. Though they’d only met once, Sal had left his mark on her, and knowing he was so tight with Karia and her dad only made her feel a closeness to him. When he released her, she stepped back.

“What are you doing here? It’s a little early for dancing.” Dahlia wiggled her brows.

Sal released a hearty laugh as he sat back down, grabbing his cigar from the ashtray.

“Came to see my boys.”

His boys?

Her brows shot up. “Oh, your sons work here too?”

His face softened. “No kids for me, just my boys.” Sal’s gaze shifted past her, and he gestured behind Dahlia. “And here they are.”

Dahlia was smiling when she glanced over her shoulder, but it quickly faded when she realized exactly who Sal’s boys were. *Oh shit!* Panic set in immediately as Trey and Rogue walked to the table, both eyeing her suspiciously.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Rogue snapped.

Before she could answer, a deep rumble sounded from behind her. *Sal.* “Watch yourself, *son.*”

Dahlia gasped and clamped her lips as Rogue’s jaw squared, and he took a seat across from Sal. Did Sal just scold Rogue? And more importantly, did Rogue just bow down? *Do not react!* Any semblance of amusement or appreciation for Sal would not fare well for her later on.

Dahlia cleared her throat. “I’m working inventory today. I’ll come back for the bar when you’re done with your visit.”

Dahlia stepped back, hoping for a sly getaway, but she wasn't quick enough. Sal leaned over and grasped her wrist, urging her to sit next to him. *Dammit, Sal!* Given no choice, she sat across from Trey and forced a smile. His gaze shifted between her and Sal, and his brows dipped slightly.

"Do you two know each other?" Trey asked.

"Actually, we do. I had the pleasure of spending some time with Dahlia in the waiting room at the hospital when Karia had the baby."

Dahlia remained silent, eyeing both men. That had been a memorable night. When Trey locked eyes with her, she gave a small shrug. *What?* His lips twitched, and he turned his attention to Sal.

"So this is where you work? That would make Rogue and Trey your bosses." Sal waved his hand, pointing his finger between the men seated across the table.

Initially, she nodded until she remembered the conversation they'd shared in regards to her job. Dahlia had been more than open and honest about her feelings toward both men. She felt the blood drain from her face as Sal's smile brightened. *Oh my God, Sal, please don't throw me under the bus.*

As if he could read her thoughts, Sal laughed, picked up his cigar, and took a deep drag.

"Don't sell yourself short on reading people, honey. You do it well."

Dahlia forced herself not to react and kept her gaze on Sal, refusing to look at Trey or Rogue.

"Is this a private conversation? Should me and Trey fucking leave?" Rogue asked.

Sal chuckled and winked at her, completely ignoring Rogue. "See? You're very intuitive."

Her lips shook as she tried to hold back her laugh. It was a hard task and strange to have an inside joke with a man she'd just met.

Sal tapped the ashes from his cigar into the ashtray and shifted in his seat to face her. “So, what do you do here, Dahlia?”

She cleared her throat, feeling the weight of all eyes on her. “I’m a barback. Working my way up to a bartender, hopefully.”

“I love a woman with ambition.”

Too sweet, Sal. It was as if he was trying to relax her in what he assumed was a tense environment.

“But today, I came in early for inventory.”

Sal twisted his lips. “The job nobody wants to do.”

So true.

“Yeah, but someone has to do it, and since I love money, it’s a perfect match.”

Sal laughed and brushed his hand over her knee. “Me too, honey.”

Sal just had a way about him. In the most tense situation, she felt at ease. He reminded her a lot of her father. Though not so much in the present day. Sal was much older than her own dad when he’d died. And Sal didn’t have the gruff nature her father once had. But there was something, a sense of safety. A blanket of protection. *I’ve missed this.*

“Yeah, she’s living the fucking dream right now. Getting paid to bullshit with you,” Rogue said.

Dahlia peeked over at Rogue and Trey. Neither man looked exactly happy, but Trey’s features weren’t nearly as forbidding as Rogue’s. Trey almost seemed intrigued, while confused by her banter and familiarity with Sal.

Dahlia stood. “I should go. It was nice seeing you again, Sal.”

“Always my pleasure, honey.”

Ahhh, Sal. The world needs more of you.

What the hell is happening?

There was a clear connection between Sal and Dahlia. Most wouldn't understand it, especially knowing Sal's background. However, retirement and stepping away from the Underground had changed him in a sense.

Trey was careful to mask his emotions and outwardly staring as Dahlia left the balcony. Unfortunately, the brief look as she walked down the stairs was caught by Sal, who smiled, staring back at him. Trey had the distinct feeling Dahlia had shared more with Sal than he was letting on.

"I like her." Sal smirked and cocked his head, looking directly at Trey.

So do I.

Rogue snorted. "Spent an hour together. It used to take you years to like anyone."

Sal shrugged. "Well, I probably don't have years, so I've sped up my process. But that one made it easy. A really sweet and genuine vibe. A good soul. Had a great conversation about her, her family, and of course, work."

That statement piqued Trey's interest.

"She told you she worked here?" Trey asked.

"No, she mentioned a club but didn't give the name. From what I recall, she was concerned that she was going to be late. I said that her bosses would probably understand considering the circumstance, but she wasn't so sure about *one* of them."

"What did she say?" Rogue's tone was harsh but controlled. He knew better than to demand anything from Sal.

"Well, that's between her and me, but I have to admit—" Sal smiled, looking between both him and Rogue. "—she's very smart and good at reading people." Sal folded his arms. "And obviously, very beautiful."

Trey's lips twitched. It wasn't often anyone could get away with taunting Rogue, but Sal was on another level,

always had been and always would be. Retirement didn't mean much in the Underground. One's legacy lived on.

"Are we fucking done talking about her yet?" Rogue snapped.

"Yeah." Sal nodded, taking the last bit of enjoyment of Rogue's annoyance. "Oz tells me you've decided to partner up with Killcreek."

Rogue scoffed. "Decision's not made yet."

Yes, it was. Rogue had no choice, but in true Rogue fashion, he'd prolong the inevitable.

"You have to let it go, Rogue."

"No, I don't, Sal. They fucked us over."

Trey steeled his reaction, watching Sal slowly shake his head. If anyone could get through to Rogue, it was Sal. He'd not only been their boss and leader for decades. He'd served as a surrogate father to all three of them. When Sal spoke, they listened. Honored, beloved, and respected, above all others. How could they not?

Sal saved us.

"You made a risky deal and lost. Sometimes, that's the way it works. They didn't steal from you, Rogue. They outsmarted you, which I know was an extreme blow to your ego. Let that shit go and move on."

Trey forced his lips flat.

Sal turned to Trey. "What are your thoughts?"

"I think it's a solid deal and the best chance we have moving the shipments with the lowest risk. Killcreek won't turn on us. They'll take the heat, if necessary."

"Oh yeah." Rogue scowled. "'Cause those motherfuckers are so damn trustworthy."

Trey arched his brow in challenge. "They are. You don't have to like or respect them, but they can be trusted. Ace has never wavered on that, and you know it."

Rogue took a sip of his drink, ignoring Trey. Trey shared a look with Sal, who gave a subtle nod. They were so in tune Trey read the gesture. This was as far as they'd get for now.

“Anything else?” Trey asked.

“Actually, I have a request,” Sal said, pulling out a piece of paper with account numbers scribbled on the yellow legal head paper. “It seems that the facility doesn't qualify for extra funding this year. Going to need you to talk to your whiz kids in corporate and fudge the numbers.”

Trey reached out, took the slip of paper, and snickered. “I can do that.”

Rogue snorted. “Is this where you're at? Falsifying documents for a better activities program of pottery and line dancing?”

Sal spread out his arms. “This is what you boys have to look forward to.”

“Fucking shoot me,” Rogue said.

Sal arched his brow. “Oh, I've been tempted many times.”

Family. The only one Trey had ever known. Unconventional, unpredictable, and crossed the lines of legal. It wasn't most people's vision of perfection, but it was Trey's. Loyalty had a way of trumping everything else.

Chapter Fifteen

Dahlia cracked her back and ignored the throbbing ache in her feet. *I need better shoes.* After spending the day in inventory and grabbing a quick fifteen-minute break before the club opened, she'd thought she was prepared for her six-hour shift. But she was feeling the effects halfway through. The night had been extremely busy, with little reprieve for any of them working the bar. It certainly made the night fly by, and she was happy to be back at bar one with Misti and Killian for a night.

“Hey, Dahlia!”

It was a miracle she'd even heard him. His voice, though she assumed he was shouting, was barely a whisper over the music and customers at the bar.

She rushed over to the edge of the counter, shouting over the music. “Hey, Aaron.”

“Dinner break.”

Now? She scanned the packed bar. The waiting customers were now three rows deep. Misti and Killian were on either side of the bar, with her playing backup and even making a few drinks herself. This was where she thrived, and the last thing she wanted was to step away. Especially leaving her coworkers short-handed.

“Oh, I'm good.”

Aaron shook his head, waving her closer. Dahlia rested her elbows on the bar and leaned forward.

“You have to take it, Dahlia.”

How could she leave them now? Sure, she was hungry, but it could wait until the crowds died down a bit. If ever. Before she could argue, Killian jumped in, moving closer to the corner where she and Aaron were holed up.

“Aaron, we're swamped here, man!” Killian said while making a drink.

Aaron held up his hands. “I know, but she’s been in here doing inventory all day. Gotta give her a break. Boss’s orders.”

Dahlia tapped Aaron’s hand, gaining his attention. “I took fifteen before we opened. I’m fine.”

Aaron parted his lips but was quickly interrupted by Misti sidling up next to her.

“See? She said she’s fine. When it slows down, I’ll send her on break and talk to Sloane,” Misti said while mixing a drink, but Aaron was shaking his head again.

“The order came from Trey.”

Both Misti and Killian looked back at her, and Dahlia stilled. This was a first. Since she’d begun working at the club, there had been a few times, much like tonight, that they’d been so busy all three of them had skipped their breaks. It hadn’t been an issue back then.

Misti nudged Dahlia’s arm, lifted her chin, and walked to the other side of the bar. “Take your break.”

What?

“But—”

“Dahlia,” Killian said, taking the glass from her hand. “If Trey tells you to take a break, you take the break.”

His statement left no room for discussion, and she tossed the rag in her hand onto the back bar top. Dahlia walked through the back curtain, with Aaron following close behind. While she appreciated the gesture, she certainly wasn’t starving. Dinner could wait.

“I didn’t even bring anything to eat.”

Aaron grabbed her hand, halted her, and leaned over, grabbing a brown paper bag. Without opening it, she could smell the cheesesteak and fries. Her mouth watered, and her stomach growled as if cheering for the free meal.

“You bought me dinner?”

Aaron raised his brows. “I didn’t.”

“Then who?”

Aaron flattened his lips.

“Trey?”

Aaron held up his hands. “I don’t ask questions, Dahlia.”

Just as Aaron walked out, Jared passed by, and then Trey. Without a second thought, she called his name and rushed to the doorway. She was sure he hadn’t heard her over the music, but when she breached the door, he was stopped a foot away.

“Thanks for dinner.”

Trey stared back at her in silence, not even acknowledging her appreciation. It probably stepped over the line in keeping their relationship under wraps. Apparently, Aaron had already read something happening, and Jared clearly knew from their conversation last week. Though, she doubted either one would say anything. It left her wondering if anyone else suspected anything. Surely, Sloane would’ve asked, right?

“Would it be okay if I saved it for a little later? They’re so busy, and I...”

Trey stalked over, towered her much smaller frame, and leaned down slightly.

“No.” His answer was firm with that non-negotiable tone.

Still...

“But I...”

Trey stepped closer, surprising even her.

“Dahlia, I said no. Go eat your dinner.”

Dahlia licked her lips and noticed his gaze drop to her mouth. Dahlia took a step closer, leaving them at a very inappropriate distance for a boss and employee. She was tempted to touch him. So tempted, she tightened her grip on the bag as a distraction.

“How’d you know I like cheesesteaks?”

“Everyone likes cheesesteaks.”

“Not vegetarians.” She slowly quirked her brow and smirked. “I think it’s very sweet that you’re concerned with feeding me. Do you do this for everyone, Trey?”

His gaze hardened, but there was no missing the heat in his stare. “Go eat. Now.”

“Yes, *sir*,” she whispered and brushed past him, her hand grazing over his chest. When she got to the corner of the hall, she glanced over her shoulder. Trey was walking away with his eyes pinned on her.

Trey had no intentions for the night other than going home and getting to sleep. It had been an exhausting day between trying to convince Rogue once again to commit to the Killcreek deal and spending time with Sal. It wasn’t often Trey’s original boss came to the club, but every once in a while, he’d insisted.

I want to see the fruit of my boys’ labors.

His boys. Sal had been calling them that for years. It started out as a way of concealing their identity, especially for Trey and Rogue, who’d entered Sal’s world underage. It kept them safer in Sal’s crew if no one could report back to the authorities. Without names, children’s services didn’t have much to go on.

Trey shut down his computer, grabbed his phone and jacket, and walked out of the office, peering over at Jared.

“You’re all done for the night.”

Jared nodded.

Trey usually used his separate exit, but something had him walking out to the balcony and looking down at bar one. He’d purposely kept his distance since his encounter with Dahlia earlier. She was breaking him down. There was nothing more he wanted than to get her in his bed. But Trey knew it would be the point of no return with her.

Trey had been with multiple women over the years, discretely, with no attachment on either end. He’d made it

abundantly clear there would be nothing more than one or two nights. He specifically chose women who understood how he lived his life and didn't expect more than he was willing to offer.

Dahlia was different. Everything about her was foreign to him.

Killian was working behind the bar, restocking while she was seated on a stool with her arms curled onto the bar and her head down. If not for her foot tapping, he'd assume she was asleep. Trey looked down at his phone, noticing the time. It was after two, which meant the busses had stopped running.

He'd noticed a few times she'd used a car service, and Jared had mentioned Killian giving her a ride on occasion. Trey assumed that was the case tonight.

He shoved his phone back in his pocket and started down the stairs. As he reached the bottom, he paused.

Don't do it. Do not fucking do it!

Trey knew better than to have her alone with him. The bar was a controlled environment and came with restrictions. So did the presence of others. Given complete privacy with her would mean he'd rely solely on his own control in resisting her.

Fuck!

Trey veered left, walking over to the bar.

"How much longer will you be?" Trey asked Killian and noticed her head immediately pop up, and then she swiveled in her seat. Dahlia smiled but remained silent.

"Probably another fifteen minutes."

Trey eyed Dahlia. It was easy to read her thoughts.

"I'll give her a ride."

Dahlia immediately hopped off the stool and grabbed her bag, rushing over to Trey and stopping dangerously close. Subtly was not her strong point. *Who the fuck am I to talk?* Trey looked over at Killian, who was darting his gaze between

the two of them. Killian may have wanted to inquire, but he wouldn't. Instead, he smiled, a little too knowingly, and nodded.

“Have a good night.”

Trey walked through the room with Dahlia a step behind. There was no one besides Killian and his security to witness them, and none of them would so much as utter a word of their suspicions. Well, two would to each other, he was sure of it, but they wouldn't make it public.

When he got to the door, he stepped aside, pushing it open and allowing her to pass. Dahlia brushed her hand against his stomach in a very intimate move. Again, testing his control. They walked across the lot in silence, and he rounded the passenger door, opening it for her and waiting. He expected her to get in, but she stopped, smiling up at him with only the door separating them.

“Thanks for giving me a ride home.”

Trey clenched his jaw when she leaned closer.

“Just have one question. Whose place are you taking me to?”

Trey could call it a weak moment. This was a mistake, and he knew it. For the first time in a while, Trey just didn't care.

“Mine.”

Chapter Sixteen

Dahlia hadn't really thought too much about where Trey lived. She'd assumed it would be nicer than her own place, but nothing could have prepared her for the high rise on Central Avenue. This section of the city alone screamed wealth. Dahlia rarely crossed over to this part of Lawry. She'd never had reason to.

Dahlia stared up at the arrows on the screen as they waited for the elevator in the parking garage.

"What floor are you on?"

Trey stared straight ahead. "The twentieth."

"That's high up. How many floors are there?"

The elevator door opened, and Trey reached out his arm, blocked the door, and gestured for her to go inside. As she stepped in and turned, Trey reached over and pressed the button, saying, "Twenty."

Oh my God.

Dahlia pressed her lips together, trying to fight against a smile. The elevator ride was quick, and when the doors opened again, Trey performed the same move, allowing her to walk out first. She looked down the long hall and was surprised to see only two doors on the floor, one on either side. There was no way there were only two units. That would make his apartment ginormous.

"Only one neighbor, huh?"

"No neighbors."

Dahlia furrowed her brows and hooked her thumb over her shoulder. "No one lives there?"

"No, and no one will."

Dahlia chuckled at the arrogance. "How can you be so sure?"

Trey glanced back at her. "I own it."

What? Dahlia jerked her head, staring at the opposite end of the hallway. *How much did that cost you?* Dahlia kept the question to herself, but her mind was reeling. Given the location and size of the building, it would've had to cost at least half a million for one unit. A prickling heat broke out on her forehead. She was so out of her element.

Dahlia didn't come from money. She didn't have rich friends or associate with people who were well off. Trey was in a completely different league from her in many ways, but this was the most obvious.

Trey led her down the hall, and when he walked her inside, Dahlia had to control her reaction. She'd seen large houses smaller than this. While Trey tossed his keys on the table near the door, Dahlia carefully peeked around the room.

“You live here by yourself?”

Trey smirked. “Yes.”

“This is bigger than the house I grew up in, and there were three of us.” Dahlia wandered over near the kitchen area.

“Seven stools seems excessive for one person.” Dahlia swallowed the knot in her throat, watching his face. As always, it was rigid and non-reactive, but she caught the small curl in his lips. It was fleeting, and had she blinked, she might have missed it. When Trey turned back, his armor was in full effect.

“Aesthetics.”

This was another reminder of a world she didn't belong in. In her own home, she had three mismatched chairs for a four-person table. It was out of necessity. Aesthetics never played a role.

Dahlia cleared her throat. “I have three chairs at my table. One for me, my roommate, and a random guest.” She snorted, feeling the heat rise from her chest under his stare.

Trey stalked toward her, taking off his jacket in the process. Dahlia backed up, colliding into the kitchen counter. She wasn't trying to shy away, but somehow all her courage from earlier quickly dissipated. *He is so out of my league.* It

wasn't self-deprecation. It was self-awareness. Too often, people got caught up in lust, not thinking of the reality behind it. Dahlia had gone down that road before and wouldn't make the same mistake again. She was going into this night, knowing nothing would come from it once the sun rose. Trey would continue to be her boss, and she would continue her obsession with this man and her unrelenting crush. But she'd have some damn good material when it came to fantasizing about him.

He reached out, gripping either side of the counter and caging her in. He was so close. Another two inches, and they'd be kissing. Her heart raced, and a warm tingle spread across her skin.

“Logical.”

There was something about his interpretation. It was fair and concise without judgment. The corner of her mouth curled, and his gaze dropped to her mouth.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “But there's nothing sexy about logical.”

Trey's gaze darkened. “I think there is.”

Dahlia was waiting for him to kiss her. He didn't. It was strange to be in a position of want and waiting on someone else to give it to her. Dahlia had never been shy about making the first move. But with Trey, she hesitated, and the way he angled his head and his lips softened, it was as if he knew she was waiting for him. Up until now, Trey had made the first move, and she'd been good with it. She found his dominance sexy. But he was teasing her for far too long.

Dahlia leaned in, swiping her lips against his softly, performing a little tease of her own. It was slow and sensual, her mouth lingering over his and lightly licking his bottom lip. Her lead ended the second she softly bit his lip. It seemed to ignite something in Trey. He pressed her back against the counter, and kissed her. Tongues lashing, lips smacking, and breath coming in heavy pants. It was rough and wild with little thought or finesse. It's fucking perfect. She grabbed his waist, pulling him in closer as the edge of the countertop dug into her

back. She felt the moisture pool in her panties and ground her hips against him. Dahlia wasn't the only one completely aroused. Dahlia was prepared to strip down and get fucked in the middle of his kitchen.

Unfortunately, it ended without warning. Trey tore his mouth from hers, angling his head away from her. Dahlia tried to catch her breath and failed, gasping. Why would he abruptly stop? Their physical connection was undeniable. Hell, there was only one reason Trey had brought her back to his apartment, and they both knew it. Had he changed his mind? Or had she done something wrong?

“Did I do something?” she whispered.

Trey lifted his head. His heated gaze was the polar opposite of his actions. He didn't look like a man who wanted to end this. “No.” His husky voice was low.

“But you stopped.”

He leaned forward, brushed his lips against her ear, and growled. “I want you in my bed.”

Dahlia tried to ignore the fluttering in her belly and the pounding of her heart. She wouldn't dismiss or discount kitchen counter sex, but the possession in his tone when he spoke of his bed and wanting her there had her racing heart threatening to beat out of her chest.

He slowly straightened and grabbed her hand, threading his fingers through hers.

Dahlia followed him down the hall. She'd be kicking herself later that she didn't even look in the other rooms, but she was mesmerized by their clasped hands and Trey himself. A man she'd deemed out of her league, who she'd obsessed over for months, was taking her to his bed. *And I'm holding his hand.* Dahlia was sure this wasn't something he did often, simply the way his hold was firmer. Or maybe this was his way of staking his claim. Either way, Dahlia was enjoying every second. He stopped at the end of the hallway, released her hand, and gestured for her to walk in.

His bedroom was sleek with muted grays and completely orderly. Just what she'd expect. Even the art on his wall was bland and meticulously coordinated with each piece of furniture. *And his bed is friggin' huge!*

Dahlia only made it a few feet into the room when he grabbed her arm and spun her around. He gripped her throat, wrapped his hand around her neck, and pulled her against his chest. His lips hovered over hers, and Dahlia found herself unabashedly begging. "Please, Trey."

The rumble of his chest vibrated against her seconds before he tightened his grip, the pads of his fingers digging into her flesh, and her body sidled up against his. His fingertips slid over her jaw, and his palm cupped her cheek. His mouth came down on hers hard, pressing her back against the wall. Kissing had always been a favorite of hers. Trey did it with force and passion, as though he couldn't hold back. *Neither can I.*

He fisted her top and ripped open the buttons. Dahlia didn't even flinch, wanting more of his mouth. She slipped her hands over his hips. His muscles tensed under her fingertips as she skimmed his chest, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. Unlike hers, she was sure his shirt cost more than her entire wardrobe. But Trey didn't seem to care. He ripped it off his back, breaking their kiss briefly before his lips slammed against hers. The rest of the undressing was a blur. She was so lost in their kiss she hadn't even realized she now stood naked, pressed against his bedroom wall. Somewhere along the way, he'd dropped his pants to the floor, and his cock slid against her slick mound.

Trey bent slightly, reaching around her back and lowering his hands to her thighs. He lifted her without warning, pressing her back against the wall as the head of his cock slipped between her folds. Dahlia gasped, feeling him enter her. She dug her nails into the back of his neck, as he rocked his hips, fucking her slow. It was almost torturous. She wanted more, but Trey was taking his time, inching deeper inside of her.

Maybe it was their connection or her infatuation with him. But sex had never been this good. Trey stretched his

neck, and the chords tightened, proving too much for her to resist. She pressed her lips against his throat, licking his salty skin. Trey growled, digging the pads of his fingers into her thighs and fucking her harder.

Dahlia would have been content with her back against the wall and this man inside her all night, but Trey apparently had other plans. He pulled her away from the wall and carried her over to the bed, dropping a knee down and cradling her against his chest. His mouth came down on hers as she clung to him with her arms wrapped around his shoulders. Missionary had never been a particular favorite of hers, but with Trey, she could definitely see the advantages. Kissing this man, him taking her all night while locked in their kiss. It would've been perfection.

He broke from their kiss, pulled away, and brushed his hand over her hip. It was a silent instruction, and she immediately followed his command.

Dahlia rolled to her side and hiked up on her hands and knees, glancing over her shoulder. Her hair slipped past her shoulder as she arched her back, begging him to take her. His palm spread over her back, pushing her toward the mattress, and she complied, arching her back. He entered her fast with little warning, and she jolted forward. It wasn't painful or intrusive. It filled her, and she gasped a breath, digging her nails into the soft, crisp sheets.

He spread his hand against the nape of her neck, fisted her hair, and pulled, forcing her to arch her back. There was a spike of pain in her neck.

"Ah," she gasped, craning her neck. She expected him to let up on his hold. He didn't, but Trey did the next best thing. He leaned over, pressing his lips against hers, sliding his tongue past her lips and taking her for a deep kiss as he pounded inside of her. This was no longer a slow seduction. Trey fucked her hard, driving her body to the mattress. His arm looped around her stomach, pulled her up, and released his hold over her hair, sliding his hand over her shoulder, down her back, and gripping her ass.

Dahlia felt her muscles tighten. It was always a telltale sign she was on the verge of an orgasm. But she'd never come this quick with any man. She fisted his sheets in her hands and pressed back, forcing him to take her harder and faster.

"I'm close." She moaned.

Dahlia couldn't be sure if it had been her words or his own arousal, but her walls stretched as he drove inside her harder than before. Trey's breath echoed off the walls, a low growl emanating through the room, only adding to her arousal. The only thing better than hearing him get off would've been watching his face as he exploded inside her. Maybe she could. Dahlia started to slowly pull away, but his arm tightened around her stomach, and he pulled her up. Her back against his chest as his hand slid up her stomach, grasping her breast. The pads of his fingers flicked her nipple, teasing her relentlessly until it formed a tight peak.

"Trey," she whispered, reaching behind her and spreading her hands over his thighs. Strong, muscular, and tensing every time he moved inside her.

"I want to look at you." Her voice was barely a whisper, and she was sure he wouldn't hear her. It wasn't necessarily meant for him. It was a mere thought, wanting to see his face when he came.

His hand spread over her arm, sliding up to her shoulder, then her neck, and he grasped her jaw, forcing her to turn her head. He stared down at her, eyes heated and lids hooded. That was all it took to push her completely over the edge. Trey, inside her, fucking her hard, his eyes trained on her. It was a connection she'd never felt with anyone else. She parted her lips, unable to control herself, and groaned as she came hard over his cock. Every muscle in her body tightened, and her blood raced through her veins as her body jerked from the onset of her orgasm.

Holy shit!

Trey grunted, dropping his face to her neck, his hot breath rapidly hitting her skin. He jerked again, this time harder, and she fell forward, unable to hold her own weight.

Dahlia collapsed against the cool sheets, pressing her cheek against the pillow, practically melting into it. She was done, officially spent. If she could have, she would've passed out immediately. Nerves were keeping her awake, her anxiety feeding off the live wire. She curled into the mattress, glancing over her shoulder and catching a brief glance at Trey's backside as he sauntered into the bathroom. It was dim lighting but enough peeking through the blinds to capture his perfect ass. God! He was perfect in every sense of the word. This night had lived up to every expectation.

Until now.

Dahlia was at a loss. With anyone else, she would've snuggled under the sheets and passed out without a second thought. She'd shared a bed with lots of men and was rarely kicked out. With Trey, she was unsure. He hadn't said anything about spending the night, and if she had to guess, she wouldn't be getting an invite. Sex didn't constitute closeness.

She fisted the sheets, watching him walk back into the room. He stopped at the edge of the bed, tapped his phone, and waited. He hadn't even looked at her, which had her shifting in the bed and awkwardly tightening the sheets over her body. He was probably waiting for her to get up and dressed.

Their night together was officially over.

Dahlia shifted to her side, dropping her legs over the edge of the bed. She bent down, trying to grab her clothes. Her face heated when she saw the condition of her shirt. As if this wasn't awkward enough, now she had to ask to borrow a shirt. It was only fair since he'd ruined hers.

"What are you doing?"

Her hair swept over her shoulder as she glanced back. "I'm getting dressed."

His gaze narrowed, and he dropped his knee to the mattress and leaned forward. "No, you're not."

Her gaze shifted through the room. "You want me to stay the night?"

He looped his arm around her waist, pulling her over to his side of the bed. Dahlia nestled into the curve of his body, slid her leg over his thigh, and rested her cheek against his chest.

I guess that's a yes.

His fingers caressed lightly over her back, down to her ass, sending a chill over her skin. She resisted the urge to smile. This was unexpected coming from Trey, but she wouldn't complain. There was a long stretch of silence, and she thought maybe he'd passed out, but she heard him sigh and sink deeper into the bed, tightening his hold over her.

"I didn't peg you for a cuddler."

"I'm not."

Dahlia laughed. "But you're doing it right now."

There was a small stretch of silence.

"Trey?"

"Go to sleep."

She clamped her lips, sinking deeper into his chest and taking it all in. This would end. Her night with Trey would be nothing more come sunrise. *But at least I have this.*

Trey had been up hours before she finally started to stir. He'd worked out, eaten breakfast, made a few calls, and showered. He was in the process of getting dressed when he saw the sheets move, and her long leg stretch out across the bed. The sheet covered most of her except her leg, a sliver of her ass, and her lower back.

This was a view he could wake up to every morning. *Except I can't.*

Dahlia sighed heavily, turned her head with her eyes still closed, and melted into the pillow. Trey grabbed a shirt and put it on, all the while staring at her. It would be hard to go about his day and not think of last night. She was fucking perfect.

Dahlia rolled onto her back, the sheet slipping an inch and revealing the top of her breasts. She blinked her eyes open and immediately furrowed her brows as if she was confused. She quickly glanced over to his empty side of the bed, and he watched her smile emerge.

“Morning.”

Dahlia jerked around to the corner of the room and quickly sat up, pulling the sheet over her breasts.

“Hi.”

So fucking sweet. Her hair was a mess, and her makeup was smudged. And still, she was the most gorgeous woman he’d ever seen.

“How long have you been up?”

Trey reached into a drawer, pulling out a tie. “A few hours.”

Dahlia gasped, and he glanced over. Her cheeks pinkened. “You should have woken me up.”

Trey smirked. “I tried.”

He’d actually tried twice. Once before he made breakfast and a second before he’d made some calls. Both times, she was completely knocked out.

“Sorry about that. I’m a heavy sleeper.” She smiled, and her face softened.

“Left the number for a car service on the nightstand.” He gestured behind her. “Call them when you’re ready.”

He wasn’t kicking her out, but he didn’t have the luxury of staying in bed all day with her. Not that he would’ve minded. Though it would have complicated things even more. Trey was honest enough with himself to admit that having her once was not enough. He’d have her again in his bed, possibly other locations in his apartment. If she’d been awake earlier, he would’ve insisted she shower with him. *Fuck*. He balled his fists. Just thinking of her naked and wet had him instantly hard.

“Oh, you’re leaving?”

Trey nodded, walked over to his closet, and inside, grabbing his jacket. When he came out, Dahlia was scrambling off the bed in a frenzy and gathering her clothes from the floor. She obviously mistook his instructions.

“There’s no rush, Dahlia. You’re welcome to take a shower and get something to eat before you go.”

She stood with her clothes gathered in a pile against her chest. “But you’re leaving now?”

“Yes.”

“Just give me one minute, and you can drop me off.”

Fuck!

“The car service will take you home.”

Dahlia chuckled, shaking her head. “But you pass right by my street. It’s silly to waste money on a service.”

It had nothing to do with money and everything to do with the possibility of someone seeing them together. He hadn’t given it much thought last night, and considering the time, it wasn’t a concern. Now, it was. It was important to set boundaries if this was going to continue.

“It’s not your money, so it’s not your concern.” It came out harsher than he’d intended.

He could’ve apologized. He probably should’ve. Instead, he remained silent, grabbed a T-shirt from his shelf, and offered it to Dahlia. She reached out, taking it and muttered, “Thank you.”

“Tell Sloane you need another uniform top.”

“Okay.” Dahlia quickly dressed while he continued gathering his wallet and phone.

Trey made sure he was at the end of the hallway and far enough from the bedroom when he called Rogue. They were splitting the pickups between them, and he wanted to double-check the locations. While most businesses in Lawry were on

the legit path, there were others under the thumb of the Underground, and they paid for that privilege.

Trey listened to the phone ring several times and was sure it would go straight to voicemail when Rogue picked up.

“Do you know what fucking time it is?”

Trey rolled his eyes and sighed. Rogue had never been a morning person, but it wasn't an ungodly hour.

“Yes, I do. It's a little before noon. I'm covering the south end, and you'll take the north. Correct?”

Rogue grunted and muttered. “Fuck!”

It was clear he'd forgotten. Years ago, Trey would have offered to make the collections, but he was well beyond those years.

“Correct?” Trey asked again.

“Yeah, Trey, fucking *correct*.”

Trey hung up without another word and tucked his phone in his chest pocket. He was halfway to the kitchen when he heard her soft footsteps.

“I called the service. They said five minutes, so I should go downstairs.” Dahlia smiled and walked toward him. “So I was thinking. I have off tonight and wanted to invite you over to my house. We can order out, or I can make us something. Not a great cook, but not bad either.” Dahlia laughed and angled her head.

It sounded so normal and so far from Trey's reality.

“Unlike you, I'm working.”

“Oh. Well, maybe after you're done, do you want to come over?” She rocked back on her heels, and her stare held so much hope. Trey was once again reminded of her innocence.

“I'm working late.”

She waved her hand. “Oh, I don't care how late. I'm a night owl. And if tonight doesn't work, how about tomorrow night? I have the next few days off.”

Trey narrowed his gaze. “Dahlia.”

She clamped her lips and stared back at him. He tucked his hands in his pockets and sighed.

“Having you here is a conflict of interest as I am your boss. Do you understand?”

The corner of her mouth curled. “You didn’t seem conflicted last night. Are you afraid I’m going to make a complaint, Trey? I mean, let’s be honest, *you are* HR.”

“I value my privacy. This is between you and me only.” Trey arched his brow, waiting for some type of response. It took her a few seconds for it to all soak in. Dahlia, while beautiful, had a very expressive face, leaving nothing to the imagination. She smiled, though it appeared forced and awkward as if she was giving him what she thought he expected. There was a bit of guilt seeing her reaction, though Trey refused to give it more thought. This was how he’d lived his life.

Her lips flattened, and her gaze dropped to the floor just as his phone rang.

“Yeah, sure, I understand,” she muttered.

But she didn’t, and it was evident. This was what he’d been concerned about, the idea of her wanting more. And the worst part was, although he knew he couldn’t have it, he wanted more, too.

Dahlia lifted her chin and hooked her thumb over her shoulder. “I should head downstairs. Bye, Trey.”

Dahlia didn’t wait for a response, and Trey didn’t have one.

Chapter Seventeen

Why did a few days off from work feel like a prison sentence?

Dahlia slumped back onto the couch. It was where she'd spent the better part of her days off. She'd run errands, paid some bills, and cleaned up the house. Other than that, she'd sulked.

“What the hell is wrong with me?” she muttered, staring up at the ceiling.

This isn't me. She hadn't obsessed over guys since her teens. She'd been content with casual sex and a few one-night stands in the past. She certainly didn't wait around for a call that would never come. Trey had been upfront, honest, and transparent, yet she still held out hope he'd call and change his mind about coming over. He didn't. The only saving grace of this situation was that he'd never given her his number. It would be too tempting to call him. *I'd be that girl.*

One amazing night with a man she'd fantasized about for months, who'd lived up to every expectation, didn't constitute a relationship of any type. Even with all her manifesting, she'd known what to expect. There were so many red flags with Trey, yet she couldn't bring herself to fully acknowledge any of them.

Dahlia should've been basking in the relaxation of having a few days to herself. Instead, she was stuck in a holding cell of dread.

She rolled her shoulders, glancing down at her phone beside her on the couch. There were a few text messages and one missed call from her mother, but other than that, nothing urgent. No man was looking for her. Certainly not Trey.

She pulled her legs up on the couch, bending her knees and resting her cheek on them as she hugged her thighs deeper into her chest. Dahlia had thought these days were long past her. The incessant checking her phone to see if he'd called. It

was child's play and a game she hadn't participated in since she was nineteen.

Look at me now.

"I need a distraction," she muttered, hoping binge-watching trash TV would take her mind off him.

Dahlia was reaching for the remote when the loud banging on her door caught her attention, and she reached back, sliding the curtains to the side. It only gave half a view of the small porch, but it was enough to see who was there. Dahlia groaned, shaking her head. She'd thought she'd seen the last of Belinda a month ago. Apparently not. They'd never actually been friends, just roommates, leaving no reason for them to stay in contact. It made it all the more odd that Belinda was showing up at her house.

Dahlia dropped her feet to the floor and pushed up from the couch, making the short walk to the front door.

When she opened the it, she was surprised to see her ex-roommate was not alone. In fact, besides Belinda and her boyfriend Dave, there were two other men behind them.

"Can I help you?" Dahlia's tone was laced with sarcasm.

Belinda stepped up in front of the small group. "I need my stuff."

"What stuff?"

Belinda had been pretty thorough, taking all her possessions when she moved out. Dahlia had even done a sweep-through after she'd left. Belinda had taken everything.

"I-I..." Belinda glanced back at her boyfriend. "J-just my stuff."

Dahlia snorted, eyeing her gang of misfits. Something was off with the group. The two men standing in the back were looking down at the street and nervously shifting, coming closer to the door.

"You got all your stuff, and if..." Dahlia never got to finish her sentence. The knob she'd been holding slipped from her hand when someone pushed the door open, sending her

back a few steps and slamming into the wall. The back of her head took the brunt of the move. *What the fuck?*

Dahlia pushed off the wall, ignored the pain shooting down her back, and chased after Belinda, who was headed to her old bedroom.

Before she could reach the room, one of the men hooked his arm around her waist, lifting her off her feet and moving her to the living room.

What the hell is happening? Panic set in, and her blood rushed through her veins.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” Dahlia dug her nails into his forearm, piercing so hard she was sure she’d break skin, all the while thrashing and trying to escape his clutches.

“Fucking bitch!”

Dahlia was unprepared to be thrown across the room, but thankfully, she landed on the couch. It probably wasn’t his intention. There were no gentlemen in this room.

Another man emerged from the back as she scrambled to get up. She never saw it coming and practically turned into him, giving him the perfect angle. Dahlia didn’t have any time to react or even shield her face. His open hand smacked her so hard across the face, she stumbled back. This time, she had the unfortunate luck of catching the corner of the end table on her fall. She screamed out and rolled on her side, gripping her hipbone. The agony of pain hitting bone on a hard surface was like no other.

“Stay the fuck down!” Dave said.

At this point, she was waving her surrender flag. The fight was pointless, knowing she wasn’t going to win, and the situation could possibly be more dangerous if she pushed it further.

Dahlia scooted herself on the floor to a seated position with her back against the couch. She eyed the other two guys who were standing near the front door, blocking any chance of an escape. She could hear Dave and Belinda’s voices but couldn’t make out what they were saying.

When they walked out of the hall a few minutes later, Dahlia was surprised to see them empty-handed. All this, and they took nothing?

One of the guys pushed off the wall. “You got it?”

“Yeah,” Dave said, smiling as he glanced over at Dahlia. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a large bag of a white substance.

Dahlia didn’t know if it was coke, heroin, or what, but obviously, it was drugs. And it had been in her home for the last month. *Shit!* Dave walked toward her, stopping in the center of the room.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I left some for you. Think of it as an insurance policy. See, you have enough drugs hidden in here to get you pretty much a ten-year sentence. If you decide to report this to the police, I’m gonna make a call of my own and report you.” Dave smirked as Belinda sidled up next to him with a smug grin. “Who do you think they’ll believe? They ain’t gonna find anything on me, but you got that shit in your house. And let’s not forget. You got a record of possession.”

Fuck!

Dahlia had no idea when she’d done a favor for a boyfriend years back that it would forever haunt her. It had been stupid, and if she could go back and change it, she would. She’d been youthful and naïve. When her boyfriend had asked her to hold a package, she hadn’t thought twice. They’d been in love, and he wouldn’t have done anything to put her in harm’s way. She’d been wrong.

Belinda laughed and attempted to kick her leg, missing by a whole foot. *That’s what you get, asshole.* Dahlia laughed, shaking her head. She was taunting her, and Belinda’s lips twisted. Before Dahlia knew what was happening, she had a wad of spit coming at her. She tried to move away, but it landed on her arm.

“You bitch!” Dahlia pushed up, acting on pure rage. Unfortunately, she was met with a foot to her ribs that left her

gasping for breath.

The last thing she remembered was hearing muffled laughs and voices and the sound of the door closing in place.

I'm so fucked!

*

Dahlia was a walking zombie as she entered the back door of the Bowery. She'd spent half the day in bed nursing the bruises on her face and ribs, and the second half ripping apart her entire house. Everything had been tossed, every crevice had been checked, and she'd come up with nothing. They could have been bluffing, and by all accounts, that's how it seemed. But what if she'd missed something, and the drugs were in her house? She couldn't take that risk and report them.

Dahlia slid her tongue over the inside of her lip. Her mouth was only slightly swollen, and the lipstick would conceal it. Thankfully, with the exception of the bathrooms, the lighting was dim in most areas of the club. The bruising on her cheek was a bit trickier, but she had applied enough foundation to lighten the handprint.

She started down the hall and made a quick left into the employee break room, coming face to face with Keely.

“Whoa, what happened to you?”

Dahlia hadn't expected anyone in there. She'd purposely left early to evade interaction with anyone. Her only saving grace was working in the balcony, where she was ignored by everyone. If luck was truly on her side, Rogue and Trey wouldn't even show up for the night.

Dahlia instinctively brushed her hand over her face and swiped her hair over her shoulder, hoping to curtain her cheek. “Nothing. Why?”

Keely squinted as if examining her. “Your eyes are all red like you haven't slept in a while.”

That's because I haven't. So much for the eye drops. Her lack of sleep, combined with a brief meltdown in the form of a crying fit, was less about the pain and more about frustration.

Not only had they completely ransacked and destroyed her house, but someone had rummaged through her wallet, taking all her credit cards and cash.

“I’m fine.”

Dahlia walked around the table, heading to the closet to hang up her jacket. When she reached out to grab a hanger, Keely clasped her wrist.

“You don’t look fine.”

“I am, Keely. I promise.” Dahlia noticed her stare linger longer on her cheek, so she quickly turned and rushed out. “I’ll see you later.”

The balcony was fairly quiet for the first hour of her shift. She hadn’t seen Trey, but she overheard one of the men saying he had a meeting with someone named Nash. At least it was confirmation he was in the building. That thought gave her butterflies in her belly. Two days, she discovered, was too long to go without seeing him.

Rogue showed up an hour later, not even sparing her a glance. *Just the way I like it.* Eventually, he demanded a drink, but he’d been so engrossed with making calls she was sure she’d be able to drop off the drink and go unnoticed.

She walked across the balcony, placing his drink down on the table. She was about to straighten, and he grasped her wrist in a tight, inescapable hold, the pads of his fingers digging into her flesh. She resisted the urge to wince.

She met his stare, but he wasn’t looking directly at her. Rogue was scanning her face, taking a special interest in her left cheek. *Shit!* When she bowed her head, shielding her face with her hair, his grip tightened.

“Look at me!”

Dahlia peeked up through her lashes. His stare was always intense, but there was something sinister about the way he was looking at her. The seconds lingered without him saying a word. He just stared at her face, his gaze darkening. A chill shot up her spine, and her throat tightened.

“Get me a glass of water and some napkins.” He released her wrist, gave her arm a small shove, and straightened his back.

“Sure.”

It was an odd request, especially coming from him, but Dahlia wasn't about to question Rogue. She rushed across the balcony, quickly poured a glass of water, and grabbed a handful of napkins.

She stopped at his table, placing the glass down next to his whiskey. Before she could drop the napkins, he slid the water across the table, landing in front of her.

“Wipe your face.”

Dahlia stilled, unsure about the request.

“Left cheek. Take your fucking makeup off.”

Oh hell.

“You *do not* want me to fucking do it.”

No, I don't. She dipped the napkins in the glass and gingerly swiped her cheek.

“All of it!” His demand left no room for negotiation.

Dahlia flattened her lips and did as she was instructed. Her cheek was still tender, and she winced as she rubbed harder. Her eyes welled slightly, but she drew in a deep breath, hoping to counteract her tears. Not only was it a bit painful, it was humiliating with security watching.

Rogue's jaw squared, and he jerked his hand, pointing at her face. “Who the fuck did that?”

Rogue was the last person she wanted to have this conversation with. She was set to lie, but Rogue didn't give her the chance.

“Who?” he shouted, sending her back a step.

Dahlia clamped her lips, unsure what information she should give. Rogue gave her little time to come up with a story. He shot up from the table. Dahlia stood frozen until he

was halfway across the balcony. He looked over his shoulder, his gaze almost black.

“Get your ass over here!”

Dahlia had no other choice but to follow him, and her dread increased when he made a left at the end of the hall. There was only one place he was leading her to.

Trey’s office.

Fuck!

Trey settled in the chair across from Nash in the sitting area of his office. When the meeting was set up, he knew what Nash was coming in for. Unfortunately, Trey couldn’t give him an answer yet. Rogue was still holding strong on not making a definite decision with Killcreek. They’d done the one job, which had been successful and lucrative for everyone involved. However, Rogue hadn’t agreed to a steady deal, which was what Oz and Killcreek were looking for. Trey understood it, but he’d yet to make further headway with Rogue.

“You think he’ll hold out much longer?” Nash sipped his bourbon.

The inquiry was valid. They were running on borrowed time with another shipment in two weeks. But panicking wasn’t Trey’s style. He’d placate all parties and work overtime convincing Rogue. *This is where I shine.*

“He’s Rogue. Unpredictable and stubborn. Always has been, always will be.”

Nash laughed and sat up, prepping to leave. But Trey had one more matter he needed to discuss. It was something he was hoping would stay off Rogue and Oz’s radar. Trey had looked into it himself, but he needed a deeper dive, and Nash was notorious for his ability to uncover everything meant to stay hidden.

“Got a guy. Need the background.” Trey paused. “All of it.”

Nash stilled. “You want *me* to do it?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. What’s the name?”

“Ben Crosby.” Trey grasped his glass tightly. “And I appreciate your discretion.”

Trey wouldn’t outright tell Nash not to share any information with Oz. He didn’t have to.

Nash nodded. “Got it. I’ll get everything I can and send it to you. Whose crew is he a part of?”

“He’s not.”

Trey watched Nash slowly look up. “This is personal?”

It shouldn’t have been. With all his rules, codes, and control, Trey should’ve never taken an interest in Ben Crosby. He shouldn’t even know his name or background. Or what he did. He wouldn’t if he’d never looked into Dahlia. But Trey wouldn’t be sharing that piece of information with Nash.

“It’s a request with discretion.”

“I’ll get it done right away.” Nash stood and buttoned his jacket.

Without warning, Rogue stormed through the door. Trey jerked his head, and his gaze quickly bypassed Rogue to the small-framed woman behind him. Trey had little time to focus on Dahlia’s face when he realized Rogue was practically dragging her through the room. *What the fuck?* Rogue didn’t release her forearm until they were a few feet away from the seating area.

“Make her tell you who the fuck did that, Trey!” Rogue shouted.

Trey immediately stood, eyeing Dahlia. Her head was bowed, looking down at the floor, standing a foot away behind Rogue. Her hair was swept forward, shadowing her face. “What’s the problem?”

Rogue scowled. “Her fucking face!”

What the hell was he talking about? Trey stepped to the side, looking directly at her.

“Dahlia,” Trey said, and she slowly lifted her head. Her eyes were red-rimmed, semi-bloodshot, tired-looking, and her lips were pale.

Without any hesitation, Rogue roughly swept her hair away from her face, exposing the dark pink handprint across her cheek.

What the fuck?

Trey walked around the chair with his eyes locked on her cheek. She’d kept her head bowed, but Trey could see it in plain sight.

“Dahlia?”

“It’s nothing,” she whispered.

Trey shared a look with Rogue and back at Nash, who was staring at her while he moved to the right, leaving the couch available.

“Sit down,” Trey said, resting his hand on her back and guiding her to the couch. “What happened?”

When she didn’t respond, he crouched down in front of her and tipped her chin with his hand. *What the fuck?* Her face was heavily masked with makeup, but he could see past it since it had been wiped off in one particular spot.

“It’s not what it looks like.”

“It looks like a fucking handprint!” Rogue lunged closer but halted when Trey shot up his arm.

“What happened?” Trey asked.

“Misunderstanding,” Dahlia muttered.

Trey ground his teeth. “With who?”

“My ex-roommate, Belinda.”

“She did this?” Trey asked.

Dahlia clamped her lips, averting her gaze across the room.

“Dahlia?”

“Her boyfriend was there, and two other guys from their band.” Dahlia sighed. “She said she had to get the rest of her stuff. But she’d gotten everything when she moved out, so I was questioning her, and well, let’s just say they lost their patience. They pushed their way inside.”

“Jesus fucking Christ! Who the fuck opens their door for people who aren’t supposed to be there? What the fuck were you thinking?” Rogue snapped.

Dahlia pushed to the edge of her seat and pointed to her face. “I didn’t think *this* would happen!”

Trey grabbed her wrist, pulled it down to her lap, and didn’t let go. She peeked over at him and then bowed her head.

He kept his focus on her without looking directly at Dahlia. But she was staring up at him. He could feel it. When he heard the faint sniffing, he ground his teeth, fighting against the intense heat rushing through his veins.

“You need to pull your shit together and tell us what the fuck happened!” Rogue shouted, and Trey immediately tensed, knowing that coming at her harshly wouldn’t get them anywhere. Dahlia was clearly upset and needed consoling, something Rogue was incapable of.

“I’m sorry, Rogue. Does my trauma offend you?” Dahlia hissed.

“Look at *me*,” Trey said, cupping her jaw, and she immediately obliged. She sniffled, trying to stop the tears, but they were relentless and beyond her control. She brushed her palms under her eyes, smearing what was left of her mascara.

“Why is he yelling at me?” she whispered.

Trey brushed her hair away from her face, looping it over her ear. “‘Cause he’s an asshole!”

Trey rested his hands on her knees, sliding his thumbs over her skin. Soothing and comforting had never been his strong suit, but he’d try. *For her.*

“Ignore him and look at me.”

Dahlia gave a subtly nod as he zoned in on her face, noticing her faint swollen lip, which only infuriated him more. Unlike Rogue, he wouldn't direct his anger at her. Trey remained silent, giving her some time to breathe and calm down. It also gave him time to do the same. Seeing Dahlia in this state had Trey's possessive and protective side coming out in full force.

“Am I interrupting?” The high-pitched voice was all too familiar and not welcome, at the moment.

The last person this situation needed was Sloane Baxter.

“Get the fuck out!” Rogue snapped.

Trey glanced over his shoulder, catching Nash's deep stare at Trey's hands on Dahlia. That would be another issue he'd have to handle, but first he'd deal with Sloane.

Sloane widened her eyes and hooked her thumb over her shoulder. “Oh, you want me to leave. Are you sure?” Sloane stepped to the side but wasn't retreating. In fact, she was slyly advancing into the room, eyeing Dahlia.

“You need me to explain, ‘get the fuck out?’” Rogue asked.

“Well, I wasn't sure if *you* wanted me to leave or everyone did. You didn't clarify.”

Oh, Christ! Trey did not need this right now.

Rogue's jaw squared, and his pupils dilated until it appeared his eyes had turned black. Trey may have been teetering on losing his patience with Sloane, but Rogue had completely lost his. Trey dropped his hands from Dahlia's legs and stood, rounding the chair and putting himself in between Rogue and Sloane.

“You want to take a fucking poll?” Rogue shouted.

“Well, polls aren't a bad thing,” Sloane said, leaning forward to look at Dahlia. “It certainly clarifies everyone's opinions.”

“Sloane,” Trey warned.

Rogue sidled up next to him with his glare aimed at Sloane. “Mine is the only one you should give a shit about right now. Get the fuck out!”

Sloane arched her neck. “Okay, if that’s what you all want.”

“I’m gonna fucking kill her,” Rogue said under his breath, but Trey heard. At this moment, he wasn’t fully opposed to the idea.

“I’m fine, Sloane,” Dahlia whispered. From where Trey was standing, her hair fell forward, shielding her face. But he could see Sloane’s reaction. Her mouth fell open. She rushed past Nash.

“Oh my God, what happened?”

“Dahlia.” Trey’s voice was firm and commanding. This would be handled by him.

She hesitated but finally looked over. Trey gave a subtle shake, and Dahlia looked back at Sloane, smiling awkwardly.

“A little altercation with my ex-roommate. I’m fine.”

Trey waved her toward the door. “Sloane, you can leave.”

“Can I just...”

“No!” Trey snapped, hardening his gaze. It would’ve deterred most people. Not Sloane Baxter. She leaned past Trey, addressing Dahlia.

“Have you called East?”

Rogue lunged closer. “Why the fuck would she call East?”

Sloane’s eyes widened.

“Do you see a property patch on her ass? No, you fucking don’t. We will handle this shit, and if I find out you told East, I’m gonna fucking fire you.” Rogue paused, and Sloane parted her lips, but he gave her no time. “And no, you can’t fucking ask one more thing!”

“Actually...” Dahlia cleared her throat. “I left a message for Grain, but he’s on a run.”

What the... Before Trey could question her, Rogue jumped in.

“Why the fuck would you do that, and we don’t fucking know about this?” He shouted, but in true Rogue fashion, he didn’t wait for a response. He pulled his phone from his chest pocket and stormed out of the room, forcing Sloane out of the room in his wake. Rogue may have been done, but Trey wasn’t.

“Why would you call East?” Trey walked back over, taking a seat on the table directly in front of her. They were so close his knees bumped against hers.

“I don’t want them coming back.”

“Why didn’t you call *me*?” Trey ground his teeth.

Dahlia pressed back against the cushion and widened her eyes, whispering, “It didn’t happen during work hours. And calling you would have only brought attention to—” Dahlia paused, glancing over her shoulder then leaning closer and lowering her voice. “—us.”

Trey jerked his head, scowling. It was unfair to her, even he recognized it. Dahlia was following the rules he’d set in place. Somehow, they didn’t sit right with him.

She bit her lip and shrugged, glancing down at the floor. He had no one to blame but himself. *Fuck!* Trey clinched his teeth and cupped his mouth.

“Trey?” Dahlia leaned closer, and he followed her lead. “They stole my credit cards and the money I had in my wallet.”

Motherfuckers!

Dahlia cleared her throat. “And there’s something else. Dave, Belinda’s boyfriend, came back because they had drugs in the house. He said he left some behind, hidden as his insurance in case I called the cops. I can’t have anyone find drugs in my house, Trey.”

I know. During his background check of Dahlia, he'd discovered her police record. It was a small infraction, and he'd read the reports. It wasn't a concern for him or Dahlia working at the club. That would've been hypocrisy at its finest. However, this had the potential to become a bigger problem for her.

"Did you look for it?"

Dahlia nodded. "I looked everywhere and couldn't find anything, but..."

"Okay. I'll take care of it." Trey straightened. "Jared!"

Jared stepped inside the door, eyeing Dahlia. Trey walked over to his head of security.

"Get Doc up here."

"Rogue called him. He's on his way up."

Trey nodded and lowered his voice. "I want you and two others doing a sweep of her house. Tear it up, check everywhere."

"What are we looking for?"

"Drugs."

Jared lowered his chin and walked out. If it was planted, his men would find it.

Trey turned to Nash, and lifted his chin. "I need Cam's crew. And Noelle."

Cam's crew. It was an outdated reference since Camille was no longer part of the Underground. However, it would take some time to think of Caine, Cyrus, and Ridge as anything other than her crew. They were considered Oz's elite, and the perfect men to accompany Trey. He would personally handle this situation, but with his security at Dahlia's house, it was imperative to leave some type of protection on her. Rogue's men would stay back.

Nash darted his gaze to Dahlia, then nodded. Trey walked back to the couch, sitting next to Dahlia.

"What's the roommate's name?"

“Belinda Wright.”

“And the men?”

Dahlia shrugged. “Her boyfriend’s name is Dave, but I don’t know his last name. Chris and Billy are the other two in the band.”

“What’s the name of the band?” Nash asked.

Dahlia glanced up at the ceiling. “Something stupid like Death Stars, Cow, something...”

Nash pulled out his phone and tapped his screen. Seconds later, the corner of his mouth curled, and his brow arched. “Death Meteor, Milking Dead. They’re playing downtown in a small dive bar. Rigley owns it.”

The Underground had connections everywhere.

Trey nodded. “Make that call, Nash.”

“On it. Caine, Ridge, and Cy are downstairs when you’re ready. I’ll have Noelle meet you there,” Nash said and walked out of the office.

“Trey,” Dahlia whispered but immediately clamped her lips when Rogue came back in. Trey immediately stood forming a shield in front of Dahlia.

“I’m fucking coming,” Rogue said.

Trey shook his head. “You got the meeting with—”

“Fuck him! He can come in another time. I’m coming.”

Trey grasped his hips and sighed. He was about to make the ultimate statement and admission. One that Rogue already knew was coming.

“I need you to stay with her,” Trey said.

Rogue jerked his gaze and knitted his brows. The seconds passed with both men silently having a conversation. They’d been doing it for years.

“Alright,” Rogue said, took one more look at Dahlia, and walked out.

Chapter Eighteen

Dahlia wasn't exactly sure what was happening. Doc, who was not an actual doctor but a retired paramedic, checked her injuries with Trey standing close by. It was a strange shift. For someone who wanted to keep things private and not bring any attention to them, Trey watched and stayed by her side. His concern was overwhelmingly sweet. As she already knew, while her injuries were sore and unsightly, they were surface wounds that would eventually heal and fade in time.

Doc offered her painkillers, which she declined. It struck her as odd that he had a stash readily available, but she didn't question him. When Trey left his office to take a call, she excused herself to the bathroom and redid her makeup. She was only gone about fifteen minutes. When she came out, she was informed Trey had left but would be back in a few hours.

"Trey said you're not to leave until he gets back," Doc said.

"Okay." She tossed her bag on the couch and watched as Doc walked out. Dahlia stalled a little longer, grabbing a water from Trey's mini-fridge and chugging it. She'd only gotten in an hour ago, and she was utterly exhausted. But she had another six hours on her shift.

Dahlia tossed the bottle in the garbage can and walked out the door, halting as she scanned the men lined up on either side of the wall. Rogue's security. Why would they be guarding Trey's office if he wasn't even there? And shouldn't they be with Rogue? Dahlia had watched Trey a lot and knew which men were always by his and Rogue's sides.

Dahlia glanced over at the security guard closest to her. He was the only one to make eye contact.

She pointed down the hall. "I was going to start my shift."

He waved his hand, and she started down the hall, fully aware of the men following behind her. She resisted the urge

to look back.

Dahlia walked out onto the balcony and veered right to the bar, but another girl was standing there. Dahlia didn't know her name, but she was one of the two who became extremely angry when the new schedule had been posted. *I guess I've been replaced.*

Dahlia smiled, but the girl turned her head, ignoring the greeting. She drew in a breath and rounded the bar, headed for the stairs. She'd double-check with Sloane about where she should work for the night.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Rogue's booming voice and venomous tone could be heard over the loud techno music.

Dahlia spun around and pointed down below to the bar. “I'm going to the bar for my shift.”

“No, you're not! Get over here.”

What? Dahlia darted her gaze around the balcony, but no one made eye contact except for Rogue, who was currently glaring in her direction. She slowly walked across the room, stopping at the edge of the table.

Rogue pointed to the chair on the opposite side of the table from where she was standing. “Sit down.”

Dahlia swallowed the lump in her throat. “I'm fine to go back to—”

“Sit the fuck down!”

What else could she do? Dahlia sat in the empty chair beside him. There was no explanation as to why she had to remain with him or even any small talk. Rogue occasionally took calls, having no issue with berating whoever was on the other line. He was very interesting to watch and listen to. She'd always been surrounded by alpha men, but he gave the term new meaning. Oddly enough, he reminded her a little of her dad, not necessarily with his nasty attitude but with his harsh tone. Her father had been very rough around the edges. Some even feared him, which had always struck her as funny. He'd only ever shown her love.

Rogue must have felt her stare because he looked over, and when she smiled, his scowl deepened. It was another attribute he shared with her father. Her dad trusted no one, especially around her, her mother, and their immediate family. He was always a shield around them, protecting them. Until he was gone.

Dahlia glanced up at the man being escorted to the table. While Dahlia tried to refrain from making judgments, she couldn't help but think of Manny from The Moon Bar. This man, much like her ex-boss, shared the same slimy vibe. Dahlia shifted in her seat when he sat down, smiling over at her.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” Rogue snapped.

The man, clearly caught off guard, cleared his throat and waved his hand toward Dahlia. “Just admiring her beauty. She’s exquisite.”

Exquisite? What should've been a compliment came off as creepy coming from this man.

Rogue rested his elbow on the table. “I’ll let Trey know you think so.”

Dahlia whipped her head, but Rogue remained glaring at the man seated across from him. Why would he make a reference to Trey?

“Oh, I didn't know.”

Rogue smiled. “Yeah, this one is Trey’s. Pretty protective of her. He doesn’t like when others fuck with his property. Neither do I.”

Property? Dahlia clamped her lips, darting her gaze between both men.

“My apologies.” He nodded and smiled over at Dahlia. “I’m a collector of women.”

Ew! Dahlia tried to steel her reaction, but her lips twisted. What the hell was a collector of women? Did this guy have a whole basement of them locked up? She peeked over at Rogue, who was watching her.

“He’s a pimp.”

What?

The man narrowed his eyes, clearly offended by the reference. “I don’t use crass terminology.”

“I do, motherfucker.” Rogue took a drag from his cigar, dominating the conversation. It was clear this man had power, but not nearly as much as Rogue.

“Now.” Rogue rested his elbows on the table, rocking it slightly. “Why the fuck are you here?”

The man cleared his throat and slyly glanced over at Dahlia. It was obvious whatever he wanted to discuss was a private matter. Dahlia took the cue and started to stand but didn’t get very far. She heard the ferocious growl before Rogue snapped.

“Sit the fuck down. Jesus Christ! How many times I gotta say it?”

“I just thought maybe this was a private matter.”

Rogue furrowed his brows, pointing to the man. “He sells pussy, cock, and ass, ain’t nothing private about that.”

Dahlia hiked up her brows, and Rogue confirmed her unspoken question.

“Prostitutes.”

“Escorts,” the man corrected.

This had to be the most bizarre conversation she’d ever been a part of. She wasn’t sure why she asked other than pure curiosity. She’d been around a lot of illegal activities, though never directly connected to any. This was a bit fascinating.

“Male escorts too?”

The man slowly turned, the corner of his mouth curling. “A large variety of men.”

Interesting.

“Enough!” Rogue slammed his hand on the table and gestured for the man to speak.

“I’m looking to add another location.” He folded his hands. “As you know, the profits have risen, and we’re looking to branch out.”

“Where?” Rogue asked.

“Right outside of Lawry.”

“Can’t fucking do it in Grove Mill.”

Thank God. Dahlia had a lot of friends who resided in the small town, including Sloane. It kind of made her wonder if Sloane had been the reason Rogue wouldn’t allow it.

“No, a little farther out and up north. Springville.”

Dahlia had lived in the area most of her life and the state for all of it. She knew Springville. There wasn’t much up in that area except woods and some farmland. It was in a depressed part of the state. The only bright spot was the creek in Killcreek. However, the charm had been long gone years ago, and it was now a very desolate area.

Dahlia glanced over at Rogue, whose demeanor completely shifted. She couldn’t say for sure, but she saw a small semblance of a smile.

“That’s about twenty-five miles out from Killcreek.” Rogue eased into his chair.

“Yes. And I know—”

“It’s my fucking territory.” Rogue smirked. “Ten percent cut and it’s yours.”

The man seemed a bit surprised, as if he was anticipating pushback from Rogue. “I am a little concerned about the proximity.”

Rogue scoffed. “Nothing healthier than a little competition. And with my protection, it won’t be a problem.”

Dahlia was definitely missing parts of the conversation, but from what she gathered, Rogue had land that he was willing to lease. Something felt off, though, as if she was missing pertinent details.

Trey got out of the SUV parked in the back of the bar. A spot had been cleared for their arrival. He glanced up at the back of the building. It wasn't much to look at, but it had been around since he was a kid. He'd even ventured in a few times in his teens with Rogue. They were open to new bands. Some good, some were shit.

The ownership had changed hands quite a few times, but the policy of protection had remained intact with every new owner. There was no way around it. The Underground took their cut from everyone.

Trey didn't know Wrigley, the owner, personally, but Ridge did and made the call and arrangements. As they exited the truck and started toward the back door, Trey glanced over at Ridge.

“Any issues with the owner?”

Ridge smiled. “Not one. He said they're a shit band anyway. No loss on his end. He's got them holed up in the back room reserved for *the talent*. He's got bouncers at the end of the hall to keep everyone out, but I think you should send Cy for extra measure.”

Trey nodded. Just as they reached the door, a dark-haired woman rounded the building. Trey gave a sharp nod, and she fell in line behind Caine.

The employee entrance had been left unlocked. As they entered, Ridge gestured to the door on the left. Cyrus continued down the hall, leaving three men and one woman. Trey walked in without knocking. The stench in the room was disgusting, along with the chaos and disarray.

There were three men and one woman situated in the small space. One of the guys looked up and squinted.

“This is a private area, man. Talent only.”

Talent? Trey resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *You must be Dave.*

Another guy pushed forward, standing in the center of the room.

“Hold up. You guys here with a label?”

Ridge sidled up next to Trey, smiling. “I’m pretty sure you’ve never heard of our *label*.”

Trey tightened his lips, holding back his smile. The Underground was its own type of secret society. And Trey was about to make it known *exactly* who they were and why they were there.

“We’re not here for the show. I believe you had a recent altercation with one of my employees.” Trey stepped farther into the room, watching the realization set in as the men looked over his shoulder to Caine and Ridge.

“No, man, we didn’t have an altercation with anyone.”

Trey fisted his hands and folded his arms. “The handprint on *Dahlia’s* face says different.”

“Fuck!” The hushed groan came from the man closest to the corner. Trey kept a careful eye on him, knowing he was seconds from attempting to escape.

“She came at us, man. Went fucking crazy.”

Trey scoffed, narrowing his gaze. “Dave, right?”

The man nodded, and Trey noticed a woman clutching the back of his shirt. *And you must be Belinda.*

“Was that before or after you forced your way into her home?”

Dave held up his hands. “No forcing, man. It’s my girl’s place. We were stopping by to grab some of her things, and the bitch went fucking psycho. Trust me, you don’t know Dahlia, she’s crazy...”

Trey slowly nodded, eyeing the woman and then back to the man. “That’s where you’re wrong. I do know her, and unfortunately for you, I believe the story she told me. Four on one. Does that sound like a fair fight to you?”

The room was drowned in silence.

Trey straightened his shoulders. “You want to fight someone? We’d be happy to make that happen. The odds are

in your favor. As you can see, there's only three of us and four of you." Trey purposely paused and turned to the woman hiding behind her man. "From what I understand, you don't shy away from a fight."

"You're going to hit a woman?" Her accusatory tone was complete hypocrisy, considering she'd stood by and watched, even possibly encouraged, these men to hurt Dahlia.

"No." Trey snickered. "Unlike the company you keep, my men would never think of raising a hand to a woman."

The woman's relief was short-lived when Noelle walked in, sidled up next to Trey, and smirked. "I, on the other hand, don't have that issue."

Trey took a lot of joy watching Belinda pale and shrink behind her man. Trey would never purposely go after any woman.

Unless you come for mine.

Chapter Nineteen

She woke up on the couch to muttered voices in the background. She knew where she was. Trey's office. It was a miracle she'd even fallen asleep, but she had. She kicked off the fluffy blanket and sat up in search of her shoes. Someone must have moved them.

Following Rogue's meeting, he'd dismissed her back to Trey's office. She played on her phone for the first hour, but her exhaustion over the ordeal had finally caught up to her, and she'd succumbed to her exhaustion. It was only supposed to be a power nap, but when she glanced down at her phone and took in the time, she widened her eyes. It was almost three in the morning, which meant she'd been out for at least four hours.

Dahlia stood, glancing over at the door. It was rarely closed, and it had been left open when she'd laid down on the couch. She walked around the chairs, eyeing Trey, who was on the phone. He may have been listening, but his eyes were locked on her.

"Should I leave?" she mouthed.

Trey slowly shook his head. He held up a finger. It could have meant one minute or one hour. Dahlia licked her lips, and his gaze immediately dropped to her mouth. Trey was usually impossible to read, but she'd noticed a few signs, like his smoldering gaze, the moment before he kissed her. That's what she was seeing now.

"You work too much," she whispered.

His lips twitched, and the corner of his eyes crinkled. God, this man was sexy without even trying. What began as a crush had spun into an all-out obsession.

Trey crooked his finger, gesturing her forward.

She raised her brows and pointed to her chest, then angled her finger toward him. He smirked, arched his brow, and slowly nodded while the phone was pressed to his ear.

This was the most inviting and easy Trey had been around her. She slowly walked toward him and rounded his desk. All the while, his gaze was pinned on her. She inched closer and glanced down at his desk. His hand was spread flat, and she furrowed her brows. His knuckles were swollen with small scrapes and dried blood. It was a peculiar sight on a man as polished as Trey. Without thought and acting on pure instinct, she reached out, sliding her fingers over his knuckles. *Had he been in a fight?*

Without warning, Trey tore his hand away and hooked it around her waist, pulling her closer as he turned in his seat to face her. His legs were slightly spread as he leaned back in his chair. Dahlia smiled, not waiting for any type of invitation.

“I need it tomorrow. Oz’s place,” Trey said, staring at her as she climbed over his lap, pressing her hand against his chest. “Yeah,” he said as his hand curved over her hip, pulling her closer.

It was just the welcome she needed.

Trey hung up, and his phone immediately rang again.

“Another hour.”

Dahlia had no idea what it meant, but he assumed he was telling her to wait. *I will*. She nodded and dropped her feet to the floor, pushing off his lap. She barely moved an inch, and he hauled her back against his chest without saying another word except to answer his phone.

“Yeah.” His hand splayed over her back, his fingers caressing softly against the hem of her shirt, dipping underneath.

She couldn’t be sure what came over her. Maybe it was his hard body underneath hers, or his scent, or the deep tone of his voice. Whatever it was, she found herself moving closer, pressing her lips against his neck and tasting him. She licked and got an immediate reaction. His hand shifted up her back and into her hair, pulling her mouth from his salty skin. She craned her neck, looking up at him for a brief second. Then his lips were on her. Taut and powerful, skimming over hers. She

threaded her hand through his hair, shifting closer, pressing her breasts against his chest. All the while, she heard the murmuring in the background from the phone.

His tongue slipped past her lips, deepening the kiss.

He tore his mouth from hers.

“Repeat that.”

His fingers trailed over her cheek, cupping her jaw, forcing her gaze to meet his.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice husky and uneven. So not Trey.

Her smile slipped, and his gaze dropped to her mouth, trailing his thumb over her lips.

“I need it tomorrow. I don’t need to tell you what will happen if I don’t get that information. Correct?”

She licked the pad of his thumb, sucking his finger between her lips. It was a mere preview of what she had in store for him. Dahlia wanted her mouth on every part of this man.

Trey tossed the phone, his eyes darkening, and it immediately rang again.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Yeah.”

Dahlia leaned in, trailing her lips over his neck. He smelled good. A faint cologne. She licked his throat, and his hand tightened in her hair, pulling on her neck and forcing her head back. She expected to feel his mouth on hers, but instead, his hand drifted between her legs, pulling her scrap of panties to the side and circling over her clit. There was no tease. Trey just went for it, and she clamped her knees, but his legs kept them separated.

“Trey,” she moaned, closing her eyes and rolling her hips to meet the thumb teasing over her sensitive bead. His hand skimmed over her pussy.

It was an afterthought that he’d been on a call while she was moaning his name in the background. It should have

embarrassed her, but it didn't. It felt too good to think of anything other than coming all over his hand.

“Give me the location.”

She blinked her eyes open to find him staring at her with his phone held up to her ear. His fingers grazed over her clit, and she gasped, squeezing his shoulders and pulling back slightly. Not enough to create space, but enough to give him a clear view of everything he was doing to her. The heat spread over her skin. She grabbed his wrist. If he continued this game, she'd be screaming.

“I'm gonna come, Trey.” Her breath was shallow, and his eyes hooded. She expected him to pull away, but he shifted his legs, forcing her closer.

“Trey...” She moaned as his finger slipped inside her. Dahlia rolled her hips, meshing her lips together and arching her back. She rode his hand, and then he added another finger.

Dahlia parted her lips, trying to hold back. His hand drove into her as his gaze locked on her. It was too intense, too intimate. Until he spoke.

“Thursday.”

What? She was about to come all over this man's hand, and he was holding a conversation without any distraction. She might have been insulted if not for his eyes locked on her. His voice might have been on a call, but his heated stare was inside her.

Fuck it. She'd worry about it later. For now, all she wanted was to get off, straddling his legs with three digits deep inside her. She rode his hand, dropping her face against his neck. Her breath hitched as her orgasm heightened.

“Ah,” she whispered, riding his hand as he slammed into her. “Fuck, Trey.” She groaned, pressing her pussy against his hand.

“Come by around two tomorrow.”

His voice was fading as she squeezed her thighs tight against his and nuzzled against his neck, hoping to drown out

her moaning. She wasn't sure it'd work, but at this point, she didn't care. She was lost in her own orgasmic euphoric state. She pressed her lips against his neck, licking at his salty skin.

She heard the phone crash against the desk and the tight pull of her hair, stretching her neck back. His lips came down on hers. His tongue lashed against hers. She reached down, cupping his hard cock. He gripped her wrist in a binding hold.

“Not going to fuck you in my office.”

But she was low enough to get off on his hand in his office? She pulled away, ducking her head and tearing her gaze away from him. Now that she was coming down from her high, this whole scene came off as dirty. Not that she was opposed to dirty. If anything, she got off on it. But Trey response seemed cheap with his response—almost like it was a game to him.

Dahlia dropped her feet to the floor, trying to extract herself gracefully. She failed.

Trey gripped her hips. “Where are you going?”

“I'll leave.”

“Why?”

“We're done? I mean, you said you don't want to—”

“I said—” He ground his teeth. “—I wouldn't fuck you in my office.”

“Right.”

“I'm gonna take you home to fuck you.”

Her breath caught in her throat and her face heated. Dahlia ducked her head trying to conceal her smile but kept her gaze locked on him. Trey grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and put it on. He reached in the chest pocket and pulled out three credit cards and a wad of cash. Dahlia widened her eyes when he handed it to her.

They were clearly her stolen credit cards, which she was relieved to have back. However, there was at least two

hundred dollars in cash. It was far more than had been taken from her.

“I didn’t have this much cash in my wallet.”

Trey glanced down at her hand, gripping the money. “You do now.”

“Trey?” she whispered.

Dahlia was about to ask how he’d gotten her things back, but Trey never gave her the chance.

“Come on.”

Trey walked past her, and she followed. After exiting the office, she naturally expected to leave through her usual exit, but Trey continued toward the end of the hall. They were ten feet away when Rogue emerged from his office, heading straight toward them. Dahlia wasn’t exactly sure what transpired between Rogue and Trey, but Trey wasn’t showing any signs of trying to conceal their connection.

“Done for the night?” Rogue asked as he approached them.

“Yes.” That was all Trey said, and Rogue gave a quick nod.

When they reached the elevators, Dahlia glanced over her shoulder. Rogue was rounding the corner when his dark eyes landed on her. Dahlia immediately bowed her head and turned to face Trey. For someone who valued his privacy, he wasn’t doing a good job of protecting it.

“Do you want me to take the stairs?”

Trey scowled. “Why?”

Dahlia shrugged. “Discretion?”

The corner of his mouth curled. “I think we’re beyond discretion when it comes to Rogue.”

Trey had spent time with a lot of women, but this was certainly a first. He’d ordered food and had it delivered to the

apartment when they arrived. Trey expected they'd eat at the breakfast bar, considering that was where he'd eaten most of his meals, if not at his desk.

Dahlia had other ideas. She walked directly to the cabinets, opening a few before finally finding the dishes. She proceeded to set the table. He was sure the dining room had only ever been used when Sal would occasionally stay with Trey for a night or two. While Trey made a drink, she took out all the food, and God knows where she found them, but apparently, he had placemats.

It was a strange, domesticated scene for him. The whole concept was foreign. Dahlia carried the conversation most of the time. She was open and shared a lot. They were the polar opposite. Trey had been trained to never give anyone more than needed, and Dahlia talked about everything from her childhood to her friends with a heavy emphasis on her family. There was one part she'd left out, though he'd already known about it. She never spoke of her father's death or the manner in which he'd died.

Dahlia wiped her mouth and tossed the napkin on her plate, then reached for his plate. Trey would've helped clean up, but he was enjoying watching her move around his kitchen. The first time he'd brought her here, she'd acted almost afraid to touch anything, as if she was in a museum. She seemed to have found her comfort zone at his place.

"You know..." A small smile played on her lips as she walked back to the table. "I could cook for us next time. Have I mentioned I'm pretty good at it?"

Trey sipped his whiskey and smirked. "You have."

"If you invite me over again, I'll make you my specialty."

"As I'm sure you've seen, there's no food to cook here."

Dahlia shrugged. "I'll pick up everything."

"I can pay for my own food."

"I know you can." Dahlia lifted her leg over his thighs and straddled his lap, resting her hands on his chest. "Or? I can do exactly what I just offered to do and make you a meal. And

you can let someone else do something nice for you. No strings attached.”

Trey was too jaded to buy into her statement. It stemmed from his past, and impossible to let go. Nothing came for free. He was living proof of that.

Trey scoffed. “There are always strings attached.”

She playfully pouted. “That’s not a positive way of looking at good deeds.”

“It’s the truth.”

Dahlia hummed, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. “What if I promise there’s no strings attached. And I’ll sweeten the offer by cooking naked in your kitchen. Not exactly sanitary but definitely exciting.”

Dahlia’s playfulness was a breath of fresh air. Exactly what Trey needed.

Trey smiled, wrapping his hands over her hips and around her ass, pulling her against his chest. He kissed her, angling her head to exactly where he wanted her, and Dahlia obliged.

This felt too normal. It felt too right.

At the worst time, his phone rang. It didn’t deter or affect her. If anything, she deepened the kiss, sliding her fingers over his chest. If she was trying to distract him, it was working. But by the fourth ring, he turned his head and reached across the table, grabbing his cell. This was a part of his life, imbedded in him since he’d started with the Underground. Trey always answered the call.

When he saw the name, he immediately answered without a greeting.

“Did you find anything?”

“Yes,” Jared said. “It was taped to the top shelf in a hallway closet. It blended with the white paint. It was easy to miss.”

For Dahlia, but not for his men.

“Anything else?”

“No, sir.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Trey hung up. “They found the drugs and removed them.”

Dahlia drew in a breath, and her relief washed over her face. “Thank you.”

Trey smacked her ass lightly and lifted his chin. “Let’s go to bed.”

The corner of her mouth curled, and her gaze heated. Dahlia was off his lap in five seconds and halfway down the hall. He found her in his room, dressed only in one of his T-shirts, and if he had to guess, nothing beneath it. Easy access was exactly what he’d had in mind. He walked to the closet, taking off his jacket.

“Random question, but I’m curious. What’s your last name?”

“Serra.”

“Trey Serra,” Dahlia whispered, and Trey smiled. It was the way she said it as if she was memorizing it or giving it life in a sense. Dahlia said his name as if it meant something to her. *I fucking like that.*

“What’s your family like?”

Trey stilled, staring at the rack of clothes. It was rare anyone asked him anything personal and never about his past. Everyone who mattered in his life already knew. It was an unspoken rule between Trey, Rogue, and Oz that they never talked about their time before working with Sal. Why would they want to talk about it? They’d lived it.

“I don’t have any family.” Trey unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it off, and tossed it in the hamper behind him.

Dahlia laughed. “Care to elaborate on that?”

Trey turned to her seated on the bed, smiling up at him. “No.”

She pressed her lips together and looked down at the comforter. Maybe he’d been too harsh, but it would keep her

from pressing for more. His life, his past, wasn't up for discussion.

Trey decided to shift the subject back to her.

"How'd you end up at East?"

Dahlia's cheeks immediately pinkened, and she shrugged. She was evading the question.

"Not going to tell me?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I want to know *you*."

Dahlia blinked and bit her bottom lip. She was at odds with herself. He knew it.

"You do?"

"Yes."

The corner of her mouth curled, but she remained silent. She liked his answer but struggled with her own. Judgment was a nasty bitch. Trey knew it firsthand. It had been years since he'd even given a second thought to how anyone perceived him. But she wasn't him. Dahlia still judged her own worth based on what others thought of her.

"East doesn't pay anyone, but they paid you to work their bar."

Dahlia shrugged. "Gunner was just being nice, helping me out."

"No," Trey said, and she looked up, wide-eyed. "Gunner doesn't help others without a gain. Means you must have had value with East."

"I just made drinks," she whispered.

"They saw value in that."

Dahlia smiled. "Maybe."

Ah fuck! How could this woman not see her worth? Trey saw it.

"East?"

Dahlia cleared her throat, shifting slightly. “This is a judgment-free zone, right?”

There it was. Much like East valued Dahlia, she valued what Trey thought of her. Hell, if she only knew, she’d be sitting high and mighty.

“No judgement.”

Dahlia clamped her lips, nodded, and drew her gaze to the floor. “I kind of stumbled upon East. I went to a party with a friend of mine one night and just kinda stayed. Loved the family vibe of the club. Dysfunctional, yeah, but there was this loyalty and trust they had for each other. Like if anything happened, they had each others’ backs.” Dahlia shrugged. “I don’t know, I just liked it. And their dynamic with the old ladies. There was this protective shield over all the women, sometimes even me.”

East had nothing on the Underground. Dahlia had no clue, but her shield was ten times stronger than East could ever provide. Trey had to remind himself it wasn’t a competition. If it had been, he’d win. His possessiveness was showing, and he quickly shifted gears.

“Tell me about your father.”

Her entire face lit up. “My dad was the best. Really rough around the edges and not super social, but he was very protective and loved my mom and me. He died when I was sixteen, and my mom and I were kind of lost without him for a while, you know, ’cause he was everything.”

“How did he die?”

Her face paled as her eyes widened. The question came at her too hard, too fast, and she was obviously unprepared. *Fuck!*

“Uh...” The question seemed to have caught her off guard. “He was in a convenience store, and it was robbed, and he was shot.”

Dahlia spoke without any emotion as if it was a rehearsed explanation. One she’d told a hundred times.

“You must miss him.”

She flattened her lips, but he saw the tremble. Dahlia nodded and stayed silent while he changed. He was dealing with guilt seeing her shut down a little, as if by bringing up her father’s death, he’d dimmed her light. Trey walked over to the bed, and she shuffled to the top near the pillows. He reached for his phone but stopped when he heard her soft, shaky voice. “Can I tell you something?”

Trey lifted his chin.

“I know it’s going to sound crazy, but there was a part of me that was angry with him when he died. Like, mad as hell that he left us. I know it wasn’t his fault, but...” She twisted her hands and gazed across the room. “We had a really great thing, just the three of us. I mean, we never had a lot of money and didn’t go on fancy vacations to the beach. But it was really good, and when he died, it felt as though he took all that good with him.”

Even through his hardened black heart, Trey could feel her loss to his core.

Dahlia laughed without an ounce of humor. “I’m sorry. That was way too deep, and I just made things weird. Forget what I said.”

No, he wouldn’t. Trey couldn’t.

“Dahlia.”

She shook her head and waved her hand. “Damn, I’m sorry.”

She had nothing to apologize for. Dahlia had been open and more honest than most people he’d ever encountered. It took a level of trust to divulge those kinds of inner thoughts and feelings.

He got into bed, grabbed her arm, and pulled her down to his chest. She came willingly, but he sensed her tension.

“That was weird, right?” she whispered.

Trey brushed his lips to the crown of her head. “It was real.”

More real than most people had ever been with him. It was as if she'd given him something she'd never gifted before. Pure openness and honesty. He stroked her back and reached up, turning off the light. This was yet another game changer. A realization.

Trey was all in.

With Dahlia.

Chapter Twenty

Dahlia rushed through the parking lot and rounded the back of the building to the employee entrance. Sloane was waiting with the door wide open.

“Thanks so much for coming in. I know it’s short notice.”

Dahlia chuckled, slipped past her, and headed toward the break room. “Like I told you, it’s not a big deal, Sloane. I didn’t have any plans anyway.”

Well, there were no plans until two in the morning when she’d be meeting Trey at his apartment.

It was supposed to be Dahlia’s only day off for the week, but when she’d gotten the call from Sloane, she’d immediately jumped on it. Aside from the extra cash, she was helping her friend out. There was also the perk of seeing Trey. Even after spending the last week at his apartment almost every night, she hadn’t gotten her fill. He still kept his distance at the club, but every once in a while, when she worked the balcony, she’d sneak into his office. Trey didn’t seem to mind.

“Well, it’s a big deal to me. I understand people get sick, but a little heads up, maybe an hour, would have been nice.”

Dahlia smiled. “Where do you need me?”

“Bar one. I already had Mindy scheduled for the balcony, and if I switch her out now, she might kill me.”

Dahlia snickered, shoving her bag into one of the lockers. “And that would be a tragedy, so I will happily barback for Misti and Kill. I miss working with them anyway.”

Dahlia rushed down the hall onto the floor. The club had only been open for thirty minutes, but the dance floor was packed, and the lines at the bars were two rows deep. She slyly glanced up at the balcony and saw the security lined up. Her heartbeat quickened, knowing that Trey was probably in the club.

They may have been spending every night together, but he never shared his schedule with her. In fact, Trey hardly shared anything. They were the polar opposites in a sense. Dahlia was an open book, and Trey was closed off when it came to his life. Aside from the call from Jared, Trey always left the room when he took a call.

Her relationship with Trey was impossible to navigate. Every time she thought she was breaking through his walls and getting closer, he made moves that proved otherwise. But...this was how he wanted it. Dahlia had known that from the beginning. He wasn't changing the rules. Her heart was.

Dahlia was so focused on the balcony she nearly collided with a woman making her way to the stairs. The woman was about her age, dressed impeccably but not necessarily for the club. Her outfit looked like it cost more than Dahlia's rent. Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight, sleek ponytail, and her bright green eyes were currently sending her a scathing glare. Dahlia rushed to the side, allowed the woman to pass, and offered her an apology.

“Sorry about that.”

The woman scowled and brushed past Dahlia, ignoring her completely, and then started up the stairs to the balcony. It was strange to see anyone except Trey, Rogue, and their security walk up without any type of escort. Dahlia slowly walked through the crowd, keeping her eyes trained on the balcony. When the woman reached the platform, Dahlia saw Trey walk over and greet her. The woman said something and laughed, and Trey's face relaxed, offering her a small smile.

What the hell was that?

With her focus solely on Trey and the woman, she slammed into the back of one of the customers. She braced herself and held up her hands. The man turned and smiled, not the least bit offended. Dahlia slipped between the crowd and around to the back of the bar, then looked up to the balcony once again. She could only see a portion of Trey and the woman, but they were standing fairly close to one another, and the woman was leaning in.

Dahlia's mind was going in a dangerous direction. Had Trey made plans to meet up with this woman, knowing it was her day off? It was possible Sloane had mentioned her coming in, but Dahlia hadn't given him the heads up. She'd innocently thought her unscheduled appearance would be a sweet surprise for him. *Looks like I'm the one in for a surprise.*

"Can you hand me a highball, Dahl?" Killian asked, and she mindlessly grabbed the glass, handing it to him without tearing her gaze from the balcony.

"Killian?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you know who that woman is talking with Trey?"

He leaned past her, glancing up at the balcony. "Don't know. I've never seen her before. Maybe she works for Trey and Rogue's corporate."

It was possible. She certainly dressed the part. Dahlia angled her head, watching the woman lean forward as Trey lowered his head, giving her access to his ear. It was close. *Too close!*

Dahlia squinted. "Seems like she knows Trey well."

When he didn't answer, she looked back at him. Killian wasn't looking at the balcony. He was staring at her.

"Isn't that the way it looks to you?" Dahlia asked.

Killian's lips twitched. "Maybe."

"Well, look again." She nudged his arm. "From a male perspective."

Killian bowed his head, but she caught the curve of his mouth. He stepped forward next to Dahlia, angled his head, and looked up once again.

The woman leaned closer to Trey. It could have been due to the blasting music, but when she grazed her hand over his arm, Dahlia felt heat race through her veins. The woman smiled, then laughed, and surprisingly, Trey's mouth relaxed. It wasn't a committed smile, but he didn't seem

uncomfortable. In fact, Trey looked as if he was enjoying his time with her.

Settle down! You sound like a jealous girlfriend.

Dahlia swallowed the knot in her throat, refusing to look away. “So, what do you think?”

“Help me out here, Dahl. What’s the right answer?”

She furrowed her brows and turned to Killian. “The truth.”

Killian chuckled. “From my experience, when a woman says that in *this* situation, they usually don’t like the response.”

It was answer enough. Dahlia wasn’t reading into it. The woman was clearly interested and possibly making a play for Trey.

“They seem...” Killian hesitated and shrugged. “Friendly.”

Friendly. Or maybe something more.

“Well, have you ever seen any other women with Trey?” She was fishing and putting Killian in an awkward position.

“Dahlia, you signed the same NDA I did.”

Right.

The arrival of Noelle was unexpected. Trey hadn’t reached out to her after the night with Dahlia’s ex-roommate. There was no need to. As she was a member of Oz’s crew, Trey rarely interacted with any of them aside from a small circle.

Noelle smiled, glancing around the balcony. “Hope it’s okay that I’m swinging by.”

“Oz sent you?” Trey knew the answer before she responded.

Noelle cleared her throat and snickered. “Oz has me strictly on club duty, so no. I had the night off and figured I’d

come by and check out the *second* hottest club in Lawry.” Noelle chuckled.

Trey smiled. “Don’t let Rogue hear you say that. But you’re welcome to stay and enjoy yourself.”

Trey took a step away, and Noelle matched his steps. It wasn’t aggressive but definitely forward.

“I may have an ulterior motive for being here. Can I get a minute in private with just you?”

Trey eyed the woman. “In regards to?”

“A business proposition.”

Trey wasn’t expecting her response, nor could he imagine what business they could have to discuss. Noelle was bottom level with Oz’s people. From what he understood, she’d been working her way up the ranks, but one mistake had dropped her back down to service. It was rare for anyone to get a second chance in the Underground, but for reasons unknown, she was kept around to do menial tasks in the club. He didn’t think she’d offer anything he’d be willing to accept, but he was open to hearing her out.

“Come with me.” Trey led Noelle down the hall and into his office.

Noelle glanced around the office and took a seat in one of the chairs across from his desk. He clasped his hands and sat back in his chair, waiting.

“I was wondering if maybe you could find use for me.”

Excuse me? She must have read his expression.

Noelle waved her hand and snickered. “No, not that kind of use. I’d like to work for you and Rogue, if it’s possible.”

Trey furrowed his brows and settled into his seat, scanning her face.

“Why?”

She drew in a breath, clutching the arms of her chair. “You needed me the other night.”

He did, and Noelle had come through. However...

“That was an extenuating circumstance.”

“I understand, but you had use for me. And I believe you were happy with the outcome.” Noelle smiled. “It felt good to be a part of something, even if it was just kicking the shit out of a stupid bitch. Couldn’t have done that without me, right?”

It was a brazen statement.

“I could have.”

Noelle straightened in her seat and cleared her throat. “But you wouldn’t have because that’s not how you do things, Trey. You needed a female, and you don’t have any working under you and Rogue to handle this type of situation. Something like this could come up again. If I worked for you, there wouldn’t be a need to call in Oz’s people.”

Trey couldn’t deny it since everything Noelle had said was true. She had been an asset when needed. It was obvious her talents were being wasted working at the club for Oz.

“Oz know you’re here?”

Noelle shifted in her seat, jerking her gaze across the room. “I thought it would be best to come to you first. If you aren’t receptive, then it’s pointless going to him anyway.”

Trey leaned forward, braced his elbows on the desk, and stared back at Noelle. “You think Oz will give you up?”

Noelle scoffed and shook her head. “He doesn’t trust me, Trey, and not even time will change that. I fucked up, I should have never made that call. It exposed a weakness in me.”

The call. Not many knew of it, even less spoke of it. One single phone call had defined Noelle’s place within the Underground.

Trey lifted his chin. “It showed compassion.”

Noelle laughed without humor. “Well, as we both know, there isn’t much respect or appreciation for that in the Underground. So...” She glanced up with a pleading gaze. “I’ll never move up under Oz.”

No, she wouldn't.

"Is that what you want?"

Noelle shrugged. "I don't have anything else. This is it for me."

Trey glanced down at his desk when his phone rang. It was as if someone's ears were ringing. Nash's calling wasn't out of the ordinary, but the timing with Noelle sitting across from him was interesting.

"Does Nash know you're here?"

Noelle's face paled, and her gaze jerked down to his phone. "No."

Trey drew in a breath and answered, "Yeah."

"Got some things to share, and you're not going to like either of them. The guy you asked about?" Nash paused, not revealing the name. They never did. "He's not gonna let ya have him."

He being Oz.

"Connected?" Trey asked.

"Yeah, but not in the usual sense." Nash paused. "And he wants to see you. Tonight."

Fuck! Trey knew better than to ask for more details, but he knew it meant a sit down with Oz.

"And the other?"

"There's a problem with that deal your friend's pushing back on. It's not good, Trey."

Nash was talking in code, but he understood. Trey instantly put together the cryptic message, and he tightened his grip over the phone. The deal with Killcreek and Rogue was in jeopardy, which they couldn't afford to lose.

"Tell him I'm coming in to see him." *Oz.*

"I will," Nash said.

Trey slammed his phone on the desk and cupped his mouth, shaking his head. It was all bad news. He looked over

at Noelle, who remained silent. The last thing he was thinking about was giving her a favor, but she'd helped him out.

“I'll think about it.”

Noelle smiled. “I appreciate it, Trey.”

At least someone was happy with this whole fucked up situation.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dahlia had abandoned her stalking efforts ten minutes ago when she realized Trey and the mystery woman were no longer on the balcony. She tried every angle to catch any sight, but it was useless, which only compounded her anxiety and curiosity. She busied herself cleaning glasses just as Keely came around the bar.

“Where do you need me?” Keely grinned, bouncing slightly.

“Uhh...” Dahlia glanced over her shoulder to Killian.

Dahlia had never seen two barbacks work bar one, even on their busiest nights. As of now, it had slowed down significantly, making two barbacks particularly unnecessary.

Killian rounded her back, addressing Keely. “Restock the glasses.”

That was exactly what Dahlia was doing. Was she being replaced?

“Sure thing.” Keely scooted in front of Dahlia, taking the glass from her hand. Killian grasped Dahlia’s wrist, pulling her over toward the wall of liquor.

“Aaron mentioned Trey’s bourbon was low in his office. Mind taking up a bottle?”

What the...

“I don’t work the balcony anymore. Shouldn’t one of the servers deliver it?”

Killian arched his brow and placed the brand-new bottle on a tray. “They should. But I thought maybe you’d want to deliver it. He’s in his office. Not alone.”

“How do you know that?”

Killian glanced up to the balcony. “Let’s just say I’ve got my own connections. Go. Got Keely covering for you. Take your time.”

Thank you, Killian!

Dahlia grabbed the tray, straightened her shoulders, and made her way through the room. She walked up the stairs and turned past the large drapes leading down the hallway to his office. She was still harboring some unexplainable feelings but would remain polite and neutral. She walked past the men, smiling at Jared briefly, and stopped in the doorway.

The woman from the balcony was standing at the edge of the desk, smiling and saying something Dahlia couldn't hear. It wasn't warranted, but it didn't stop her from impulsively wanting to barge into the room. So she did.

"Hi!" she said with more enthusiasm than intended. Usually, she waited for Trey to call her in, but not today. She walked to his desk, smiling at the woman. "I'm Dahlia."

The woman arched her brow and scanned her uniform, then looked at Trey, who remained silent with a sharp glare locked on Dahlia.

"We had a semi-collision earlier. Not sure if you remember."

The woman folded her arms and glanced over Dahlia once again. She knew the look. Dahlia had gotten it a fair share for most of her life.

"You weren't paying attention to where you were walking."

Oh hell, no. Not today, sweetheart! Not today, not tomorrow and not even the day after! Stay in your lane, girl, he's mine!

Dahlia smirked and arched her brow. "Or maybe *you* weren't paying attention."

The woman's gaze hardened, which felt like a triumphant win for Dahlia. And then it all came crashing down.

"Who are you?"

I'm...

“She’s an employee. Works at the bar,” Trey said, and when Dahlia whipped her head around, his glare hardened.

What the fuck, Trey? She wasn’t expecting him to offer up a detailed description of their relationship, but brushing her off as a mere employee was a harsh blow. The woman glanced over at Trey, smirking. It felt too much like it was at her expense.

“A very talkative one, I see.”

Dahlia blinked, unsure if she’d heard the slightly snide comment correctly. Before she could think of a comeback, the woman passed by her.

“Thanks again, Trey,” the woman said, not sparing another look at Dahlia, and walked out of the office.

Fucking rude!

Trey dragged his hand down his face, clearly frustrated, though she wasn’t sure why. She expected some acknowledgment of her standing at his desk, but she got nothing. She walked over to his small bar setup and replaced the bourbon. She turned, looking over at his desk. His back was to her, and he was on his phone texting. Dahlia should have walked out without another word.

“Do you need anything else?” Dahlia asked.

“No.”

She sighed, glancing around the office, slowly making her way to the edge of his desk.

“It was busy in the balcony tonight.”

Trey stilled and slowly glanced over his shoulder. “Is there a question?”

He was back to being cold as ice. One step forward, two steps back. It seemed to be a pattern with Trey. Dahlia clamped her lips and shrugged.

“I’m sensing there is.” Trey turned in his seat to face her and narrowed his gaze.

“Who was that woman?”

“An associate.”

Dahlia nodded. “You seem to know her well.”

“Do I?” There was a slight edge in his tone.

“Have you ever dated her?”

His scowl deepened. “I don’t date.”

It was a cop-out answer, and they both knew it. Dahlia wasn’t above getting graphic, especially when she felt as though she was being slighted.

“Ever *fucked* her?”

Trey gaze darkened. “That’s none of your business.”

Her eyes widened. What the hell kind of response was that? Of course, it was her business. *Hell, we’re sleeping together!*

“I would tell you.”

“But I’m not asking.”

Trey was shutting down this conversation. Unfortunately for him, Dahlia wasn’t done yet.

“Why did you introduce me as your employee.”

Trey ground his teeth. “You *are* my employee.”

Dahlia flinched as if she’d been struck.

“And that’s it?”

“Dahlia.” He growled.

Dahlia knew what he was doing. He wouldn’t make a scene or bring any more added attention to them. As it stood, there was a small group a few feet away listening to their interaction. She was sure his security already suspected something more between them, but it had never come out into the open, with the exception of Jared. It seemed Trey was hellbent on keeping it that way.

Trey straightened. “I’m not doing this with you.”

“Doing what? You just introduced me, *barely*, as just some random employee like you’d do with anyone else. Is that

what you're saying? I'm just an employee?"

"That's who you are!"

It wasn't a false statement, but it was cold. The opposite of how he'd been with her the other night. And the week before that.

"You wanted to keep things quiet, and I have. But this is unfair. It's like it's your way or nothing. You won't acknowledge us in any sense?" She hiked up her brows and lowered her voice. "That's not how relationships work, Trey."

Trey balled his fists, and his face tensed. "This isn't a relationship, therefore, there *is* no us."

His statement hit her like a two by four to the face.

But there it was. *The truth*. A cold and harsh reality. Deep down, she'd known it. He'd been upfront and honest, completely transparent. He said it without an ounce of regret and no apologies. Yet somehow, it still stung.

"I explained this to you."

Dahlia drew in a breath and slowly nodded. Her breath caught in her throat when she opened her mouth and immediately sucked in a breath. She was left speechless, with his truth hanging over her like a dark cloud. Trey hadn't lied. From the very beginning, he'd been upfront. She'd read too much into it. Obviously, she wanted more than he did or was willing to give. Some truths had a way of strangling the heart. This was one of them.

"Do you need anything else?"

His glare sharpened. "No."

It's over! *So fucking over.*

She walked out without another word. She didn't make contact with any of the men. Even when she passed Aaron on the stairs, she refused to look at anyone. She walked straight to the bar, wiped down the tray, and started working again. It was the longest shift she'd had since she'd started at the Bowery. All Dahlia wanted was to go home, crawl in bed, and forget this night had ever happened.

It was best it ended now before she got too far in with him. It was clear Trey had no issue with keeping the boundaries he'd set. And the blaring truth was Dahlia didn't mean anything more to him than a few hours of pleasure.

This shouldn't hit so hard. But it did.

It was another half hour before the bar area was spotless. Dahlia didn't partake in the usual afterhours teasing or shit-talking with patrons. She kept quiet and did her job, hearing his voice replay over and over in her head. *This isn't a relationship, and there is no us.* Dahlia should have seen this coming, and if she'd been honest with herself, maybe she had. All the signs were there but it was the mixed signals that gave her hope. *I was wrong.*

The bar had cleared out with everyone going home. Aaron walked over, smiling. "You two done for the night?"

Killian grabbed his jacket from the bench. "Yeah, I'll walk Dahlia out. You need a ride home, Dahl?"

"No, I have a car service coming."

Aaron cleared his throat.

"Actually, Trey wants to see you before you leave, Dahlia."

Oh, I bet he does. It would have been easy to give in, and there was a part of her that wanted to. Dahlia would've loved to have it all resolved, hear Trey apologize, and give her forgiveness. But that's not how it would play out, and Dahlia knew it. She'd be the one accepting whatever Trey gave her simply because she was half in love with him. Half? That was an understatement, which had her standing firm. Dahlia wasn't someone willing to be another's dirty little secret. She wasn't equipped to handle falling for a man who only wanted to acknowledge her when it was convenient for him. Tonight proved that. Trey couldn't have it both ways. *I deserve better.*

Dahlia straightened her shoulders and smiled over at Aaron. "I've already clocked out."

Aaron cocked his head, seemingly surprised with her response. He shared a look with Killian, then both men turned

toward her. This must have been a first. Dahlia would bet her bank account that an employee had never turned down Trey when called to his office. *Looks like I'm popping another cherry, Trey!*

Aaron walked to the edge of the bar, scanning her face. "Is that what you want me to tell Trey?"

It wasn't meant as a threat, but Aaron was issuing a warning.

"That's *exactly* what I want you to tell him. I'm off the clock, no longer working for him tonight. Surely, a man like Trey would understand. I'm pretty sure he doesn't work for free, so why should I?"

"Dahl," Killian said, and she immediately whipped her head.

"Should I work for free?" Dahlia snapped.

"No." Killian paused, glancing over at Aaron. "I'm sure Trey would compensate for the overtime."

Aaron nodded, and then they both turned back to her.

"Overtime isn't necessary. He can keep his money. Whatever he has to say to me can wait until tomorrow when my next shift starts. Have a good night, guys!" Dahlia didn't bother waiting on a response and walked through the room and out the door.

Thankfully, her car service was waiting on her. It was a clean getaway.

I fucked up!

Trey knew it the second the words left his mouth. It was a hard blow. What he and Dahlia shared was the true definition of a relationship, and he'd disregarded it as nothing more than a quick fuck. And that stung. He saw it in her face and in her eyes. This woman was giving him everything freely and basically asked for nothing in return. Except the one thing he refused to give her. Acknowledgment.

Fuck!

Trey glanced at his phone then to the door. It shouldn't have taken this long. His meeting with Oz couldn't be pushed back, and at this point he'd have to leave in ten minutes.

He walked around his desk, grabbing his coat when Aaron walked in.

"I'm sorry, sir, Dahlia's already left."

Trey stilled, eyeing Aaron. He was well aware Dahlia had been in the building when he sent Aaron down to get her.

Aaron rocked his jaw to the side, giving every indication he was nervous. Trey folded his arms but remained silent. Waiting.

Aaron cleared his throat. "She seemed to have been in a rush and..."

No.

Trey held up his hand. "I'm going to stop you now before you make a mistake that I believe you'll regret. As I've explained to you, Aaron, there are no friendships here. You work for us, that's where your loyalty lies. Trying to cover for someone is noble. It's also a move you will regret."

Aaron sighed, resigned to the truth and his expected loyalty to not only Trey, but the Underground.

"Did you tell her I wanted to speak with her?"

Aaron hesitated but ultimately answered with a subtle nod.

Trey cocked his brow. "And *then* she left?"

"Yes."

Trey ground his teeth. He'd upset her; Trey knew it. But he'd obviously angered her too. Enough to blatantly refuse his order.

"What did she say?"

Aaron sighed and grabbed his waist.

"Honestly, she seemed a little off, so..."

Excuses. While Trey could appreciate Aaron's efforts as a friend to Dahlia, it wouldn't be tolerated.

"Aaron," Trey warned.

"She said that she'd already clocked out and wasn't going to work for free, and that anything you had to say to her could wait until her next shift tomorrow."

Trey steeled his features. *My kitten has claws.* He'd known Dahlia was a far cry from a pushover, but her warmth and softness and heart overshadowed her strength and defiance. At least for him. *Until now.*

"Really?"

"But like I said she was..."

As noble as Aaron's excuses were, Trey was done listening.

"You can leave now."

Aaron clamped his lips and started out. Trey heard a soft muttered, "Shit!"

Trey understood his trepidation. No employee would get away with that type of behavior. Except Dahlia.

He'd been cleaning up messes all night, but this time it was one of his own. Trey dragged his hand over his mouth. He contemplated rescheduling the meeting with Oz. He pulled out his phone, staring down at the screen. Trey was conflicted with what he wanted versus what he knew he had to do. Not everyone would understand his commitment to the Underground, but they'd saved him. It was that thought alone that had Trey shoving his phone into his pocket and walking out of his office.

*

Trey pulled up next to Rogue's car in the private lot of the X-Lounge. When he got out, Rogue was waiting for him.

"This is a fucking first. Golden boy is never late."

Trey sighed. "Yes, and considering I'm usually cleaning up your messes, it's a miracle this isn't the first time."

Rogue took a drag from his cigarette, laughed, and tossed it across the walkway as they entered the building. They rarely walked through the club, preferring the elevators located in the back. They were for private use only and manned by security. Unless Oz was expecting someone, no one got upstairs. Ever.

“Oz say what this was about?” Rogue asked as they stepped into the elevator.

Trey wouldn't even dignify the question. Rogue was well aware this had to do with Killcreek. When the doors opened, Nash was waiting. As per usual, Rogue ignored him, and headed to Oz's office.

“Trey.” Nash stepped in front of him. “Can I get a word with you?”

“Is there a problem?”

“I had to account for Caine, Cy, and Ridge's whereabouts last week. Oz called in a late job, there was no way around it. It obviously threw up red flags when Noelle showed up with them at the same time. Oz asked about it yesterday.” Nash gripped his hips and sighed. “I couldn't have kept it between us.”

Ah, fuck! It seemed Rogue's question was valid, and Trey had gotten it wrong. This wasn't about the deal. It was about him, and more specifically, Dahlia.

“How much does he know?”

Nash sighed, veering his gaze across the room. “Everything.”

Trey balled his hands and ground his teeth. This was a problem. Without any time to mentally prepare, Oz would have the upper hand on this conversation. Unfortunately, there was no way out of it.

Trey walked in Oz's office with Nash following close behind. It was unusual for Nash to be at a meeting between the three of them. Rogue took notice also and raised his brows just as Trey sat in the chair across from Oz.

“Oh, we got everyone at this meeting, huh?” Rogue laughed. “So, what the fuck is this about? Or should I ask Nash? Is he running shit now?”

Oz completely ignored Rogue’s taunting, lifted his glass, and took a slow sip of his whiskey. He set the glass on the table, eyeing Trey.

“Dahlia. Carter.”

Trey drew in a breath. “She’s an employee.”

The corner of Oz’s mouth curled. “Taking extreme measures to protect your employees, Trey.”

He knew better than to shift his gaze from anywhere other than Oz.

“How long has she worked for you?” Oz asked.

“A couple weeks.”

Oz nodded, smiling. “And before that?”

Trey knew Oz better than most aside from Rogue, and possibly Sal. This was a set up. Oz wasn’t looking for answers. He was seeing if Trey would be honest. It was a fruitless effort. Trey was always honest with these men. But he wouldn’t offer up more information than absolutely necessary.

“Bartended at Ghosttown East, and spent some time at Satan’s in Blacksburg.”

“Bartending. Interesting. I wasn’t aware Gunner hired staff. In fact, I know they don’t. Though they do have a variety of women offering their services for free. Bartender isn’t the official title.” Oz paused, darkening his gaze. “Nash, enlighten us.”

Trey kept his eyes on Oz but noticed Nash hesitate in answering.

“Nash,” Oz said, leaving no room to argue. It was as if he was giving a direct order.

“Club whore, sir.”

Oz smirked. “That’s right. *Club. Whore.*”

Trey shared a look with Rogue, who seemed unhinged by the term. Ironic since he'd used it on her a few weeks back. However, Rogue was more in tune with Dahlia and who she was to Trey at this point. The derogatory slur only amplified Rogue's fury.

"Is there a fucking point to this questioning?" Rogue said, glaring at Oz.

Oz didn't even acknowledge Rogue and kept his eyes trained on Trey. Oz smirked and raised his brows in challenge. He was waiting on Trey to deny her title. He couldn't, and he wouldn't. He also wouldn't indulge and give Oz more. Not yet.

"There was an incident. It's been taken care of."

"An incident?"

"Yes."

Oz took a deep drag from his cigar, eyeing Trey.

"Is that all she is? Just an incident?"

"Yes." It was a lie, and if Oz was listening and watching closely, he'd see it.

Oz swirled his whiskey in his glass, prolonging the silence in the room, all the while keeping his gaze locked on Trey.

"Is this the same Dahlia who worked for Manny a few weeks ago? That you got fired?"

Shit! He should've known, and Nash had warned him. Oz knew everything. Trey steeled his features, giving nothing away. Any slight change in position or demeanor would be a tell-tale sign, and Oz would pick up on it. No one knew Trey better than the two men seated across from him.

"What the fuck is he talking about?" Rogue asked, eyeing Trey.

It would have been a smarter move on Trey's part to have given Rogue full disclosure when it came to Dahlia. But he hadn't.

“Trey didn’t tell you?” Oz looked between both men. “He neglected to mention it to me also. However, Manny shared quite the story.”

“Is that why you hired her? ’Cause you got her fired?” Rogue clearly didn’t have all the information.

Oz smiled. “No, Dahlia was hired by Trey personally, from what I understand. She declined the position and got a job working for Manny. Ironically, Trey gets her fired, and conveniently, she starts work at the Bowery a few days later.”

Oz knew everything.

“And this incident? Tell me, Trey, why use my men?” Oz cocked his head. “Noelle, I understand, which was a nice touch, by the way. A little outside of your wheelhouse. As I recall, you tend to keep *all* women out of harm’s way. Not this one, though. Belinda Wright? Dahlia’s former roommate, correct?”

Goddammit!

Trey remained silent, calculating his response. There was no room for error or mishaps when divulging information to Oz.

“They were there, and Trey’s guys were working on another job,” Rogue said, taking Trey’s back.

Oz turned to Rogue. “Yours were available. But I guess had Trey taken them, there’d be no one left to protect her. Instead, your security stayed back.” Oz’s gaze hardened. “And so did you, which I found particularly interesting since you’ve never stepped down from a fight in your life. But you had a more important job, didn’t you, Rogue? Gentlemen, I feel a bit left out. It seems I’m the only man in the room who hasn’t had the pleasure of meeting Dahlia Carter. I will say, I’m intrigued.”

The silence was deafening. Even Rogue, who always had something to say, was quiet. Trey had no idea where Oz was going with this. Usually, he could read through his words, but he was drawing a complete blank with the direction of this conversation.

“Now, for your request, Trey. Ben Crosby.” Oz arched his brow. “Interesting reading.”

Fuck! Trey glanced up at Nash, who remained silent and tight-lipped. It was best to play it off.

Trey settled back in his seat. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes, a rather large one, Trey. He’s an informant.” Oz arched his brow, sipping his drink.

Trey drew in a breath, keeping his eyes on Oz and not giving any indication he’d been surprised. However, Trey hadn’t seen this coming and knew it was a roadblock in his desire for revenge. The Underground, while notorious, valued their safety and rarely took unnecessary risks that would put them on the radar of the authorities. It was a smart, responsible move on their end. It’s what kept them safe.

But...

“Who the fuck is Ben Crosby?” Rogue asked.

Oz smirked, staring back at Trey.

“The man who killed Dahlia Carter’s father eight years ago.”

Trey felt the weight of Rogue’s stare but kept his eyes on Oz. His next statement would speak volumes. Trey said it anyway.

“I want him,” Trey said.

Nash sighed. “He has eyes on him, Trey. Getting to him means taking a risk.”

“Then we take the fucking risk, Nash,” Rogue said, then narrowed his gaze. “Know your fucking place! You may be Oz’s second, but there are only three kings, and you ain’t one of them.”

“Rogue.” Oz’s tone was chilling.

“What? You don’t want in, then give us the intel, and we’ll fucking take care of it. Not looking for permission, Oz.”

Nash stepped closer, staring back at Rogue. He may not have been a king, but he was a respected member of the Underground, and he protected his own.

“You really want to take the risk of going down for this? They’re watching and waiting for us to fuck up. One minor infraction and they could come in and take us all down.”

Rogue scoffed. “Oh yeah, that’s not fucking dramatic at all, Nash. Jesus fucking Christ, when did we lose our fucking balls here?”

“We don’t take careless risks. It’s what’s kept you out of prison with a life sentence, Rogue. A thank you will do,” Oz said, issuing a warning without raising his voice.

“Thanks.” Rogue grinned, grabbed his drink, and stood. “As I recall, me and Trey kept your ass out of jail a time or two. But as the number one, I guess that don’t mean shit anymore. Good to fucking know.”

“I want him, Oz.” This was personal. For her. *And for me, because she’s mine.* “As a favor for me.”

Oz squared his jaw. “You can’t have him.”

Fuck! Trey could’ve gone against Oz’s decision. Rogue probably would’ve, but Trey knew better. They all had their place, which was why the Underground ran fluidly and flawlessly. This was years in the making, building, and sacrificing for. This wasn’t just about Trey. It was about all of them.

“I’ll ask again, Trey. Is she just an incident?” Oz took a deep drag from his cigar. “You can’t have it both ways. Either you bring her in or cut her loose.”

Letting Dahlia go wasn’t an option. He wouldn’t, and he couldn’t. However, the alternative wasn’t something he’d come to terms with just yet. Bringing her in meant so much more than it seemed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Dahlia yawned and sank into her couch. It was after ten in the morning, and she should've been fast asleep, but the night's events had brought on a major case of insomnia. She'd gotten it wrong with Trey. Dahlia hadn't been getting closer to him. It was all in her head. She'd confused intimacy with a relationship. Or maybe she'd allowed her own mind to make something out of nothing.

If she really looked back on every conversation, she'd have realized she was giving more to him than he'd ever given to her. In fact, Trey had offered nothing personally. He was right. It wasn't a relationship—at least not on his end.

Then why is he calling?

Dahlia glanced down at her phone. She'd gotten three calls from Trey and ignored them all. She'd eventually have to speak with him, but for now, she needed time. This would be handled on her terms, unlike everything else in their relationship. *Oh, wait, according to Trey, our non-relationship.*

Dahlia tucked the pillow under her head and curled deeper into the couch, staring at the peeling paint in the corner of her wall. She was about to close her eyes when she heard the faint knock on her door.

She sat up, leaned back, and slid the curtain to the side. Dahlia gasped and straightened on her couch. What the hell? Dahlia stood and marched to the door, opening it a few inches.

“Why are you here?”

Seeing Trey through the small crack in the door was strange. He looked different. Still gorgeous, strong, and a bit intimidating, but different.

“May I come in?”

Without thinking, Dahlia widened the door but quickly remembered and halted, knitting her brows.

“No,” she whispered.

When she attempted to close it, Trey gripped the edge, forcing the door open once again.

“Dahlia,” he warned, but didn’t make a move to come inside.

“If you *respect me*, you’ll respect my wishes.” Dahlia glanced at his hand holding the door open. It was a power move, and she wouldn’t deny he’d held it all. *Until now*. Dahlia was reclaiming her own power.

She looked up, staring back at the man she’d fallen for. Love was hard. It had a way of stripping everything apart. It wasn’t a bad thing, but for Dahlia, she needed the equality of it to secure her own worth.

“Trey.” She narrowed her gaze. The seconds felt like an eternity, and she didn’t think he’d back down. How could he? A man like Trey didn’t back down from anyone. It made his next move all the more shocking. He released the door, dropped his hand to his side, and stepped back. It was confirmation she didn’t even know she needed. He was backing away as a sign of respect. *For me*. It may not have meant much to most people, but for Dahlia, it was everything. It was a validation she didn’t know she needed until this moment.

Dahlia grasped the edge of the door and slowly closed it, shutting him out. When the lock clicked into place, Dahlia rested her forehead against the wood and closed her eyes. Everything in her heart wanted to open the door, chase after him, and hear whatever he had to say. But where would that leave her? She’d be in the same position—in love with a man who refused to acknowledge her and their connection. As much as she wanted to fold, Dahlia slowly stepped away from the door.

She wasn’t sure how long she waited. Maybe ten minutes. It could have been thirty. Hell, it may have been an hour. She tiptoed to the window and slid back the curtain, expecting to see an empty spot in front of her house. Instead, Trey’s car was still parked. She jerked her gaze to the porch. Trey was resting

his shoulder against the porch column with his hands tucked in his pockets. He was staring down at the road, waiting. *On me.*

Dahlia had an internal struggle whether to hold her ground or not. It only lasted a few seconds. She walked to the door, opened it only a crack, and peered over at Trey.

“You’re still here.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “I am.”

“How long do you plan on waiting?”

“As long as it takes.”

She widened the door. “Do you mean that?”

“Yes.”

Dahlia rested her head against the edge of the door. She was conflicted. How could she not be? This man, guarded, withdrawn, showing only snippets of his true self, had managed to wiggle his way into her heart. She wanted this. Dahlia wanted Trey. Here was a man who was waiting on her. Trey could have bullied his way into her house, but he hadn’t.

“Why?” she whispered.

Trey straightened and walked to the door, stopping a few feet away.

“You’re worth waiting for, Dahlia.”

Fuck! She liked that too much. She didn’t need proof or confirmation of her worth. Or maybe she did. It wasn’t until his gaze met hers that she was reminded of the boundaries she had to set.

“You can come in, but you’re going to answer my questions. This is my house, and you’re not my boss right now.”

“All right.”

When his lips twitched, she scowled, sending her own type of warning. Trey held up his hand, and she begrudgingly opened the door and watched him walk in. Trey looked out of

place in her dingy house of mismatched furniture. When he glanced around the room, she immediately got defensive.

“I’m not interested in your opinion of my home.”

“If you don’t care, then why mention it?”

Because I’m a little embarrassed. Dahlia folded her arms and watched him pass, stopping at the edge of the couch.

“I like your home.” His words didn’t come off as condescending or disingenuous. However, she’d been in his place.

Dahlia snorted and shook her head, peering around the small living room. It wasn’t anything special. But it was hers. It had her touch, her style, as quirky as it may seem.

“You like purple walls?” Dahlia asked, arching her brow in challenge.

“I like that *you* like purple walls.” It was the most unexpected yet perfect response. But somehow, they were still so far apart. Worlds apart.

“So?” Dahlia raised her brows. “Why are you here?”

“You didn’t return my calls.”

“Oh, you called?”

The corner of his mouth curled. It was evident he didn’t believe her, as he shouldn’t. Dahlia had spent hours at war with her self-control, forcing herself not to cave and listen to his voicemails. Had she heard an apology, she’d be too tempted to forgive and forget. This was bigger than an “I’m sorry.” It needed a discussion with complete and honest communication.

“I’ve been busy, so I didn’t have time to check my messages.”

“Really?” Trey cocked his brow. “Busy doing what?”

“I believe what I’ve been doing outside of work hours falls into the category of—” Dahlia smirked, throwing his words back at him. “—none of your business.”

Trey licked his lips and cupped his jaw. “Touche.”

Dahlia smiled. It wasn't very often she held the upper hand with him.

“The problem with this—” He waved his finger between them. “—is you allowed me into your home, which means you're willing to hear what I have to say.”

Shit!

“No,” she snapped. “You have to listen to what I say!”

Trey's features softened as he leaned back against the edge of the couch. “I'm listening.”

“I understand keeping this between us and the reasoning. But you had your hand on her back, you smiled at her, and seemed to be having a great time with *her*. And when I ask one small question about who she was, you completely shut me down. For the record, Trey. I agreed to keep this quiet, but I assumed I was the only woman you were with.”

“You are.”

“Bullshit!”

His face hardened, but she refused to be intimidated.

“This is my house!”

“Why do you insist on reminding me of that?”

“So you remember that you're in my territory now. And you can't give me that look like I've done something wrong, and now you're pissed. I'm the one who gets to be mad, not you! You screwed up, not me!”

Trey's jaw squared, and his gaze narrowed.

“You're upset about Noelle?”

Dahlia squinted. “Is that her name? I wouldn't know because you refused to introduce me. But then again, why would you since I'm *just an employee*, right?”

“Noelle is an associate. Nothing more. As I explained, I'm extremely private and...”

“Stop hiding behind your privacy excuse,” Dahlia blurted.

Trey straightened, and his eyes darkened. Obviously, she’d just hit a nerve.

“I don’t *hide* behind anything or anyone. It’s not an excuse, it’s the fucking truth. The only people who are privy to any part of my personal life are the ones I trust, which are very few in my line of work. I introduced you as an employee to protect my privacy and yours. It’s safer that way.” Trey paused. “Noelle doesn’t know who you are because she isn’t important in my life. She doesn’t get to know you or about you. She hasn’t earned that.”

“Have I?”

Trey’s stare softened. “Yes.”

“Some might call that a relationship.”

“They would, and they’d be right.” Trey drew in a breath.

This man was a walking and talking contradiction.

“That’s not what you said earlier.”

“I was wrong.”

Dahlia bit her lip, trying to process everything he’d just said. It made sense. *Sort of*. Everyone was entitled to their privacy, and he was her boss.

“So, does anyone know about us?”

“Rogue, Jared, all of my security, and *now* a few others.”

“They know we’re sleeping together?”

Trey walked toward her and looped his arm around her waist, pulled her to his chest, and cupped her jaw.

“They know you’re mine.”

Mine.

Trey walked around his desk, noting the time. Dahlia had spent her dinner break in his office, but her break was almost

over. This was the third night this week he'd summoned her up to his office. It was a strange turn of events since she'd forced him to define their relationship. Trey still intended on keeping it lowkey, mainly for her own safety. But even he knew he could only sustain it for so long before he'd have to face Oz's ultimatum.

“When are you going to let me cook for you?”

Trey smirked. “You didn't like your dinner?”

“I did, but I want to do something for you. I've heard the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.”

You have my heart, Dahlia.

Trey glanced down at his phone and lifted his chin. “Your break's over.”

“Kicking me out?”

“We both have to work. I have a call to make.”

“Business?”

Trey nodded.

“Can I ask you something?” Dahlia wiped her mouth, tossed her napkin on her plate, and stood. “Do you guys own a lot of land or something? Is that how you make your money outside of the club?”

Trey slowly angled his head, watching her fiddle with the sculpture on the corner of his desk.

“Why do you ask?”

“The other night, Rogue met with some guy.” She raised her brows. “He called me exquisite.”

Trey smirked, watching her lip curl in disgust.

“You are exquisite.”

Her cheeks pinkened. “It sounds sexier when you say it.”

Trey smiled and clasped his hands, waiting for her to finish.

“Anyway, he mentioned your property, or territory, as he called it. I was just wondering. I don’t know much about the laws, but since he intends to basically own a brothel... Can you get in trouble if it gets raided?”

Territory. Brothel. *Fucking Rogue!* Trey hadn’t even considered the idea Rogue would allow her to be present while talking with Palmer. What the fuck was he thinking?

“We have a lot of *property*.”

“So, is that another business of yours?”

“Something like that.” He glanced down at his phone, knowing one sure fire way to end this subject. “Misti’s break starts in two minutes, and she can’t go until you show up. Have you ever seen her upset?”

“Shit.” Dahlia spun around and rushed out the door.

Trey waited a few minutes, making sure Dahlia had left, then walked out of his office, heading to the end of the hall. He held up his hand, alerting his security they were to remain at his door. He passed the security lined up near Rogue’s office and didn’t bother knocking.

Usually, Trey would go into every situation with some type of plan on how to approach Rogue. Not this time.

“What the fuck were you thinking?”

Rogue swiveled in his chair to face him, clasped his hands at his stomach, and smirked. “You’re gonna have to be a little more specific.”

“You had that meeting with Palmer while Dahlia sat in?”

Rogue shrugged. “Yeah.”

“What the fuck?”

“Why the fuck not? She ain’t going anywhere.”

“You don’t decide what and when to tell her. I do.”

“Then, fucking do it.”

“Rogue,” Trey warned.

“Why the fuck are you hesitating?” Rogue knitted his brows. “You made your fucking decision! Hell, you made it the day I tried firing her. You knew it then, Trey.”

Trey flattened his lips, refusing to respond. Bringing Dahlia into his world came with sacrifices she’d have to make, risks she knew nothing about, and a life she hadn’t agreed to. Trey couldn’t stake his claim without giving her a choice first. He wouldn’t drag her into this world without knowing she was all in with him, their life, and ultimately, the Underground.

“What the fuck, Trey?”

Trey ignored Rogue, cupping his mouth and veering his gaze across the room. This was bigger than this conversation. This was everything.

“Claim her and be done with this bullshit with Oz.”

Many people didn’t understand Rogue. They thought he was selfish, only out for himself. Little did they know, he did see beyond himself. He saw Oz. *And he sees me.* It wasn’t some strange twist that Rogue accepted Dahlia as his. Rogue was always about Trey and Oz. In his mind, they were all that mattered. And for a long time, ’til Dahlia showed up, Trey had the same mindset.

Trey shook his head. Rogue was seeing it in black and white, but there were so many gray areas. Dahlia didn’t choose this life, and she didn’t have to be subjected to it. Not the threats, the danger, none of it was hers to take on.

“Why the fuck not?”

Trey turned, glaring at the man he’d taken a solemn oath with decades ago.

“Do you have any idea the jeopardy that it puts her in being connected to me? She’s out there completely fucking clueless as to what happens behind these doors!”

“Then, fucking tell her, Trey. Bring her in.”

“Giving her any information, *again*, puts her at risk,” Trey snapped, growing increasingly agitated. “It puts a target on her back if others know she’s with me.”

“And it gives her a fucking shield. We protect her. We do it with Lil. And Sloane, Wren, and Camille. Hell, we fucking protect half of East’s women, what’s another?”

“It’s not the same.”

“We do it with...”

Trey spun around and glared. “It’s not the fucking same. Not with her!”

It wasn’t the same as all the others they’d vowed to protect. This was personal. Dahlia was his, a part of him.

“Oh, fuck.” Rogue squared his jaw. “You’re in deep.”

So deep he was drowning. Trey had never been in this type of situation. Nothing had ever come close to his ties with the Underground. *Until Dahlia*. Giving up Dahlia wasn’t an option. Neither was walking away from the only life he’d ever known.

“Where we at with this, Trey? Kids, marriage...what the fuck are we talking?”

All of it. He was ready to build a life solely around her. Trey dragged his hands down his face, drawing in a deep breath.

Most people would be shocked and possibly alarmed by his silence. Not Trey. He’d known Rogue his whole life. Been tight through the system throughout childhood. Trey knew Rogue. And Rogue knew Trey.

“When are we taking this to Oz?”

“After we get back.”

“Fuck, no.” Rogue folded his arms. “We do it now, Trey. We take her in, keep her fucking safe.”

Trey shook his head.

“Quicker we make it known, the safer she is. Fucking speculation only puts her at risk.”

“No.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Because I have to give her one last taste of normal before I blow up her fucking world.”

And yes, he was about to blow up her world.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dahlia enjoyed working the balcony and the close proximity to Trey, but she also thoroughly enjoyed her time at bar one. Over the course of a month, since she'd started working, she'd built solid friendships with Keely, Killian, and Misti. They were restricted to work hours, but she'd gotten to know each of them, some on a more personal level. Misti had been open, talking about her boyfriend, especially when he pissed her off. Dahlia had become Keely's go-to person for sharing her dating life. Killian was the only one who seemed quiet when it came to anything involving his love life.

Dahlia assumed he had a girlfriend since he constantly fended off advances from customers. Loyal. She'd expect nothing less from him. But she couldn't fault the women for trying to shoot their shot. Dahlia may have eyes only for Trey, but she could recognize and appreciate Killian's good looks. Tall, sleek muscles, blond tousled hair with red highlights, and bright green eyes.

"Hey, Kill, do you have a girlfriend?"

Killian stilled, slowly glancing over, and his brows dipped. But she saw the playful glint in his eyes. "You want to discuss personal lives?"

Dahlia shrugged. "Why not?"

Killian smiled, pinning her in his stare. "Let's start with yours. What's your man like?"

Dahlia froze. Did he know? Trey had made a point of mentioning everyone who knew about them, and Killian's name hadn't come up.

"I didn't know you had a boyfriend, Dahlia." Keely rested her arms on the bar, grinning. "You never talk about him. Tell us everything."

Oh shit!

“Yeah, tell us everything.” Killian grinned and raised his brows.

He knows!

Misti pushed past Killian, sidling up next to Dahlia. “Save the inquisition for later. Need someone to set up Rogue’s bar in his office. It’s the same set up as Trey’s. You got this?”

Dahlia pointed to her chest. “Me?”

“Yeah, you.”

“I don’t think Rogue would want me in his office. I’m pretty sure he hates me.”

Keely chuckled. “It’s not just you, Dahl. His hate is universal.”

Dahlia drew in a breath, glancing to the balcony.

“Or? I can do it, and you can tell Keely more about your man,” Killian said.

There was a slight tease in his tone, and when she looked over at him, he winked.

Oh yeah, he definitely knows!

Dahlia rushed to the liquor wall, grabbing a few bottles.

She made a quick getaway, bypassing the balcony bar and heading down the long corridor. She peeked her head inside his office and found it empty. It would only take a few minutes to set it all up, and she would be out of there before Rogue showed up. *Hopefully.*

Dahlia quickly set everything up. Unfortunately, not quick enough.

“What the fuck are you doing in here?”

Dahlia spun around, facing the door. *Oh God, not you!* She hadn’t had any run-ins with Rod since that disastrous night in the balcony. She’d almost forgotten his existence. Until now! *Fucking douche canoe.*

“Misti told me to set up the bar.”

“I told her to do it. Not you!” He stalked forward. “Being the boss’s fuck toy doesn’t get you privileges.”

She gasped. *What the fuck did he just call me?* She’d had enough of his bullshit. He may have been her superior, but as Trey pointed out, Rod wasn’t her boss. And unbeknownst to Rod, she had information on him. *And I’m gonna use it.*

“Let’s call this what it is.”

Clearly, Rod wasn’t expecting any pushback from her.

“I remember you. From East? I didn’t initially, but now I do. So let’s put it all out there because we both know why you’re butt hurt and taking it out on me.”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about!”

“But I do.” Dahlia smiled, pausing. “You’re mad and bitter that I wouldn’t fuck you.”

His gaze hardened, but she refused to back down.

“I’ll give you props for laying it on thick. As I remember, you were a lot nicer that night. But something was off with you, and I didn’t have the least interest in hooking up with you. I see now that I made the right choice.”

He scoffed. “You’re giving yourself too much fucking credit. Not sweating over a club whore.”

Dahlia snickered. “Yeah, you are.”

This was divine glory. It would have gone down as one of her most triumphant victories if not for the disruption.

“Am I fucking interrupting?”

Dahlia spun around and sucked in a deep breath. Rogue was standing inside the door with another man she recognized. Three guards were standing just outside the door in the hallway. But they weren’t Rogue’s usual security.

“I was just setting up.” Dahlia walked to the door.

“You expect me to make my own drink. Isn’t that why I fucking pay you?”

“I can get Misti to take care of you.”

“No! You’ll do it.”

Rogue took a seat behind his desk, clasped his hands, and shifted in his seat. “So, what did we miss?”

Dahlia peeked over at Rod, who was not nearly as confident as he’d been a few minutes ago. Dahlia clamped her lips, remaining silent, watching Rogue’s gaze sharpen on Rod.

“I was just checking to make sure it was ready when you got here.”

There was a long stretch of silence as the room grew increasingly tense. The other man who’d walked in with Rogue took a seat across from the desk. She hadn’t formally met him, but he’d been present when the whole debacle about her attack had happened. Nash. Unlike her and Rod, he was the epitome of calm.

“Fuck toy,” Rogue said and slowly nodded, his gaze darkening. “Fuck. Toy.”

Clearly, Rogue had been listening longer than either of them suspected.

Oh, God.

“Do you have your own fuck toy, Nash?”

Nash scowled, looking directly at Rod.

“No.”

“Me neither.” Rogue hummed. “Fuck. Toy.”

“Sir, I—” Rod said.

“Shut the fuck up,” Rogue snapped, and Rod immediately clamped his lips.

It was pretty impressive how everyone, herself included, did exactly what they were told when Rogue and Trey spoke. It went beyond any and all professionalism. There was an invisible and unspoken power each man held.

“Enlighten me, motherfucker, ’cause you said being the boss’s fuck toy doesn’t get you privileges. Only two bosses in

this club, and since she ain't my fuck toy that must make her Trey's. Am I right?"

Dahlia felt the heat rise up her chest, spreading over her face. This was beyond humiliating. Rod remained silent, only prolonging the intense scene. Dahlia wiped her hair from her forehead, looking across the room. She caught Nash's stare and immediately averted her eyes.

Rogue slammed his fist on the desk, and she winced.

"If I gotta ask you again, I'm gonna get outta this chair. You don't want that."

"I was referring to Trey," Rod blurted.

"Ah..." Rogue's grin was menacing. "Now we're getting somewhere. So she's Trey's fuck toy?"

Rogue slowly angled his head, staring back at her. "Is that a paid position, or do you do it pro bono?"

Dahlia glanced down at the floor. The heat rising to her face was burning.

"Rogue." Nash's voice was quiet, but his tone sounded like a warning.

Dahlia expected Rogue to continue his rant, but surprisingly, the room was drowned in silence. Until it wasn't.

"Is there a problem?"

Just the sound of his voice had a physical effect on her. She glanced up at Trey, who was scanning the room, taking in the scene. When his eyes locked on her, a strange sensation blanketed her. She hadn't felt it in years. Safety.

Rogue pointed to Rod. "That motherfucker is claiming she's your fuck toy."

Trey's jaw squared, and he narrowed his gaze. "Is that right?"

There was no masking Trey's anger, and she shifted on her feet, watching him glare at Rod. Trey had been adamant about no one knowing about them, with the exception of a select trusted few.

”Dahlia,” Trey called, and she rushed over when he crooked his finger. She was halfway across the room when Rogue snapped.

“You gonna let that motherfucker get away with this shit, Trey?”

“No.” Trey scowled, placing his hand on her back. Without hesitation, she curled closer to his side. “I’m also not going to allow *anyone* to embarrass her any further. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yeah, fucking crystal.”

Rogue quickly jerked his gaze to Dahlia, and she turned slightly, bowing her head. Trey grabbed her hand, and she flinched. Out of reflex, she pulled away, but he tightened his grip, leading her across the room. Dahlia didn’t have to look to know all eyes were on her. With the door open, the likelihood of security hearing the whole conversation was high. Beads of sweat broke out on her forehead.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Trey stopped, forcing her back against the wall. “For what?”

She gestured to the room. “That whole scene.”

Trey cupped her cheeks, forcing her to look at him. “That’s on him. Not you. And I will handle Rod. He won’t ever be a problem for you again. You understand?”

No.

But Dahlia nodded.

“Go to my office, take some time, and if you’re up to it, you can go downstairs to the bar.”

Dahlia shook her head. “I’m fine. I can go now.”

Trey leaned in, his gaze hardening. “I wasn’t asking, Dahlia. Go in my office, close the door, and relax.”

“Okay,” she whispered. “Are you coming?”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes when I’m done dealing with Rod.”

“Are you firing him?”

Please say yes!

“Are you firing him?”

Trey resisted the urge to smile. As he’d warned Rod once before, termination of employment would be the least of his problems if he messed with Dahlia again. But Trey wouldn’t be sharing any of that with her. Dahlia was shielded from the true nature of his business and Trey himself.

“Yes.”

Trey stroked her cheek with his thumb, knowing they were in full view of his men. He just didn’t care. His security already knew, and as for Caine, Cyrus, and Ridge, who stood a few feet away, they could be trusted.

“Go to my office.”

Trey dropped his hand to his side and lifted his chin, gesturing to his office. He watched her walk down the hall. As soon as she closed the door behind her, he turned and stalked back to Rogue’s office. He glanced around but only found Rogue and Nash.

“Where is he?” Trey demanded.

He was ready for Rod to feel the full protection and possession Trey had over Dahlia.

“I had Jared take him downstairs. Almost pissed his pants.” Rogue laughed. “Told them you’d be down after we talked.”

If Rod thought Trey would cool off, he was mistaken. But it could wait for now. They had more urgent matters, mainly an impromptu visit from Nash, which was never social. Trey walked over, took the empty seat, and eyed both men.

“Is there a problem?”

Nash sipped his drink and then placed the glass on the edge of Rogue's desk.

"Oz spoke with Ace earlier. Killcreek pulled from the deal due to your most recent venture with Palmer."

What? It was well-known that Killcreek and Palmer shared in the same business endeavor, but it had never been an issue in the past and had gone on for years. They did business on opposite ends of the state, diminishing any type of competition. Of all the illegal subclasses the Underground was involved with, this had always been the least problematic.

"Why would they be upset? Palmer's been running his house for years, and it's never been an issue. We're well within our rights. It's our territory."

Rogue pointed to Trey. "Exactly."

Nash sighed. "I can see Rogue neglected to mention where in your territory Palmer has plans to set up his new house."

Trey looked at Rogue, who shrugged, but his face hardened as he glared at Nash. "It doesn't fucking matter. Like Trey just said, it's our territory."

Oh fuck. It was clear Trey was missing an important detail.

"Where?"

Rogue took a drag of his cigarette, stalling. Rogue had initially been vague with his details about the meeting with Palmer, but Trey just chalked it up to Rogue being Rogue.

"Where?" Trey snapped.

"Springville," Rogue said.

Motherfucker! No wonder Ace was livid. Springville was only about fifteen miles from Killcreek.

"That close to Killcreek's set up, and you didn't think they'd have a goddamn issue, Rogue?"

Rogue shrugged, not seeming to be bothered by any of it.

Trey dragged his hand through his hair. He'd yet again have to clean up one of Rogue's deals.

"I'll reach out to Ace."

Nash snorted, shaking his head. *Fuck!*

"It's going to take more than a call, Trey. Ace was pissed," Nash said. "Told Oz they got no interest working with you two if you can't be trusted."

"I'll personally handle this." Trey stood, narrowing his gaze at Rogue. "Be ready when I tell you we're leaving."

"Where?" Rogue asked.

"Killcreek."

Rogue's face turned red. "No fucking way am I..."

Trey slammed his hand on the desk. "This is your fucking mess, and *you will* be there when I clean it up!"

Trey turned and stalked out of the office.

Fuck, Rogue!

Chapter Twenty-Four

Dahlia spent the first hour of her shift straightening up the empty balcony. She'd restocked the bar, wiped down the already clean tables, and paced the quarters. Trey and Rogue weren't expected in tonight. Trey had actually mentioned a meeting, and she didn't have plans of seeing him until the next day.

After doing two full rounds of offering help behind all the bars, Dahlia started back to the break room. The whole shift felt like one giant break. She shouldn't complain, but she was beyond bored.

As she passed by Sloane's office, she peeked inside. Sloane was behind her desk, staring down at her phone and smiling.

"I know that look," Dahlia teased.

Sloane jerked in her seat and immediately flipped over her phone, screen side down. Dahlia muffled her chuckle. It would've been impossible to see what Sloane was looking at from across the room. However, her flushed face and wide eyes had Dahlia coming to her own conclusions.

She lifted her chin, smirking. "Sexting with video?"

"No!" Sloane blurted, and her cheeks shaded to a deep red.

Dahlia could no longer hold out. She burst out laughing, walking into the room and closing the door behind her. Her friendship with Sloane had only grown stronger since she'd started working at the Bowery.

Dahlia sat across from Sloane and clasped her hands over her stomach.

"I've checked with all the bars and most of the waitresses and bussers. I even asked the kitchen if they needed help. Everyone is covered, and I'm bored. Anything you need me to do?"

Sloane settled back in her chair and scanned her desk. “I was starting the schedule for next month. That’s how bored I am. It’s always quieter when Trey and Rogue are out.”

“Did they mention where they were going?”

Sloane cocked her brow. “They never tell me.”

Me neither. Dahlia had asked, but Trey’s vague answer of simply “a meeting” left little room to ask questions.

Dahlia sighed, rolling her neck. “Should I leave early? I mean, it doesn’t make much sense to pay me for literally doing nothing.”

Sloane perked up, glanced down at the bottom drawer, then looked over at Dahlia with a wide grin.

Dahlia raised her brows. “What?”

“What if I offered you an alternative to just going home? Maybe you and I can go somewhere and hang out and have a drink.”

I’m game!

“The clubhouse?”

Sloane flattened her lips and scrunched her nose. “I was thinking of somewhere we haven’t been before.”

“Okay. Like where?”

Sloane shrugged, trying to play it off, but Dahlia suspected Sloane knew exactly where she wanted to go.

“How about the X-Lounge?”

The X-Lounge was the only club in the city that rivaled the Bowery. She’d never been and hadn’t had any intentions. From what she’d heard, it was a little more upscale than Trey’s club, and much more expensive. It was also virtually impossible to get in.

Dahlia widened her eyes. “What? You think Blade would be okay with you going to the club?”

It may as well have been a rhetorical question because Dahlia was well aware Sloane’s man Blade would never

condone her going to any club without him.

“I wasn’t going to tell him.”

Dahlia gasped and chuckled. “Sloane!”

“What? He’s on a run right now, and I have no idea where he is. Why do I always have to account for my whereabouts, but he doesn’t? East has their reasons, and I completely respect that. And I have my own for not wanting to be tracked every move I make. This is very similar.”

Dahlia laughed. “This isn’t even close to that, and you know it.”

“C’mon, Dahlia,” Sloane pleaded, leaning on the desk. “Aren’t you curious about what the competition club looks like? Some of the waitresses have gone, and they said it’s amazing. And they just added a VIP lounge in the back. Plus, isn’t it your job to keep fresh with new drinks and ideas for the bar? This could be like a research field trip.”

Oh, Sloane! She was laying it on thick, and Dahlia totally appreciated her passion. It was rare that Sloane did anything without full dedication and a strong conviction. However, going to a nightclub usually didn’t involve much convincing. Dahlia was all in, but there was one obstacle that stood in their way.

“We’ll never get in.”

Sloane reached into her drawer, pulled out the passes, and held them up. “We will with these.”

Dahlia squinted, focusing in on the small, laminated squares that resembled a business card. She couldn’t read the fine print, but they appeared to be some type of admission with the X-Lounge logo prominent in the corner.

Sloane smiled, waving the cards in her hand. “They’re usually reserved for VIPs who come to the club and spend a ridiculous amount of money. But Trey gives a few out a year as an incentive program for the staff. But not until your probation is over, and I don’t qualify because I’m management. That’s not fair, right?”

“So let me get this straight. You—” Dahlia pointed. “—Sloane, *by the books, law-abiding, rule-keeping* Baxter, are suggesting we *steal* passes from our job, leave early from our shifts, to go to a club that I’m sure your man would be pissed to high hell knowing you went? Did I get everything?”

Sloane shoulders sagged, and she gave a small pout. “When you say it like that, it sounds like a horrible idea.”

Exactly, Sloane! Dahlia shook her head, stifling her snicker.

“You’re right.” Sloane dropped the passes on the desk, her lips forming a small frown. “It’s a stupid idea. I just thought it would be fun to go to a different club, maybe dance and drink fruity cocktails. I mentioned it to some of the girls, but Cam and Lil immediately shut down the idea.” Sloane shrugged. “No one else seemed interested, so...”

“You really want to go?” Dahlia asked.

Sloane pursed her lips, stared down at the desk, and shook her head. “No, not really, I guess.”

Ah, hell. Why not?

“Alright, c’mon, let’s go.”

Sloane jerked her head up in full shock. “Are you serious?”

Dahlia stood and smiled. “Yeah, I’ll be the friend you do stupid shit with.”

Wasn’t that how friendships worked? As long as she could avoid the wrath of Blade if he ever found out, they’d be good. With the East women dead set against the X-Lounge, it meant there was no chance they’d run into anyone they knew. They could go, do some dancing, have a few drinks, and sneak out without anyone ever finding out they were even there.

What could go wrong?

Trey glanced down at his phone. He’d told Ace when they’d be arriving, and they were right on time. The president

of Killcreek hadn't been exactly welcoming for a visit when he had called, but Ace relented. For Trey. He'd maintained a decent relationship with Ace and the other MC members when Rogue had declared war over a deal he'd lost to Killcreek. It was in everyone's best interest to stay on good terms, though Rogue could never recognize that.

It took almost two hours to get to the Killcreek Clubhouse. It was virtually in the middle of nowhere. Years ago, they'd chosen to set up their club in an unsuspecting town. They basically owned it and the surrounding area. Where some might take pride in the town by fixing it up, Killcreek did the opposite, making it unsightly and, more importantly, unwelcoming to outsiders. It was well-known throughout the state if anyone needed gas or a pitstop, pass by Killcreek.

Trey glanced out the window to the secluded clubhouse. This wouldn't be an easy sell, especially with Rogue. The guy had never *played nice* a day in his life. Once the car parked, both men got out, and Trey rounded the bumper, watching Rogue's lips twist.

"I can fucking feel the filth walking into this shithole! I can't deal with these motherfuckers."

Trey clenched his teeth. "You don't have a choice. Without them, we have no one for the transport. Do *not* fuck this up!"

Trey didn't wait for a response and took the lead, walking up the stairs. They were being watched. Much like the Underground's operations, Killcreek didn't welcome surprises. When they reached the porch landing, the door opened, and Gent smiled.

"It's like having fucking royalty in the house. C'mon in, boys."

Trey ignored the grandstanding gesture laced with sarcasm and walked inside. Trey wasn't completely sure of the layout of the clubhouse, but it was set up like an old motel. The lobby area had been redone to appear as a living room with a dining area beyond it. It was an interesting setup.

A few brothers were gathered around, with Ace and the VP, Cross, seated at the table. They started across the room, and Trey immediately stopped, eyeing the familiar man tucked in the corner near the bar. *Motherfucker!* The bruises around his eyes, cheeks, and throat were still visible. He didn't stand with as much confidence as he had when he was in the ranks of the Underground.

It had been Trey's choice, his discretion. He could have easily ended Rod's life without any hesitation. In a rare moment, he'd shown mercy. Not for himself but for Dahlia. Firing Rod was what she wanted, not his death. Dahlia got what she wanted, and Trey was regretting his own choice.

"What the fuck, Ace? Scraping the bottom of the fucking barrel for new recruits?" Rogue shouted.

That was Trey's thoughts as he walked to the table, pinning Rod in his stare. The former employee looked across the room, refusing to make eye contact. *I should have fucking ended you.* Trey rarely had regrets, but this was one of them.

"You don't approve of our newest prospect?" Ace smirked and waved to the seat across from them at the table. Trey pulled out the chair, ignoring the blatant taunting.

Rogue snorted, sitting down next to Trey. "Collecting all the rejects? Have at it, motherfucker. That asshole will fit right in with Killcreek."

Trey settled in his chair, ignoring Rod's presence and the snickers echoing through the clubhouse. Rod was the least of the Underground's concerns. His reach would never touch Dahlia again. For now, that was enough.

"Appreciate you seeing us on short notice," Trey said, addressing Ace directly.

"Well, we would've made the trip down, but—" Ace grinned, eyeing Rogue. "You got nothing we need. Can you say the same, Rogue?"

Taunting was the last thing Trey needed, especially directed at Rogue and coming from Ace. There was a history that Trey didn't want to relive. They'd barely survived it the

first time around. A deal gone wrong, and Rogue unwilling to forget. It was best for Trey to take the lead and keep everyone on task.

“It’s a good deal, Ace. Makes you a lot of money,” Trey said.

“Can’t argue with you, Trey,” Ace said, settling back in his chair. “But your brother here is trying to take what’s ours. You didn’t really think I was going to let that happen, did you?”

“Then we’re fucking done here,” Rogue said.

Fuck!

Ace laughed, glancing at the members surrounding the table. For anyone else, it would be intimidating. However, the Underground held more power than the MC. Trey and Rogue were untouchable, and everyone in the room knew it. But it didn’t mean that Killcreek had to accept the deal.

Ace clasped his hands, rested his elbows on the table, and eyed Rogue. “You gotta let it go, brother.”

“I’m not your fucking brother,” Rogue snapped.

Ace smiled, shaking his head. In this situation, Trey would have sided with Ace. However, he’d never go against Rogue. ’Til he took his last breath, Trey would always have Rogue’s back. Right or wrong.

Trey geared up to play peacemaker, but Rogue obviously couldn’t hold back.

“If it wasn’t for Inez, you wouldn’t be sitting at Oz’s table. If it wasn’t for her, I doubt you’d be much of anything. Degenerate lowlife criminals, making small-time cash through muscle, theft, and violence. And let’s not forget—” Rogue purposely paused, eyeing Ace. “—on the backs of women.”

It was a reach and bit hypocritical considering how the Underground made their money. However, prostitution wasn’t an enterprise they’d ever dipped into. The room was drowned in silence with the tensions high.

Gent walked up toward the table, chewing on a toothpick, staring at Rogue with a wide grin.

“The knees, too, man.”

Trey ignored the tasteless joke, zoning in on Ace. “We’ll move Palmer’s location to Ridgemont.”

“Too close,” Cross said.

“Motherfucker, that’s like sixty fucking miles away from this shithole!” Rogue shouted.

“Yeah, still too close. A hundred miles out is acceptable.” Cross folded his arms and settled in his seat.

Killcreek knew they had them, and it was in everyone’s best interest if they wanted the deal to go through. It was pettiness on Rogue’s part that had landed them in this situation. It was Trey’s job to end it.

Trey nodded. “A hundred miles out. We can do that.”

Ace smirked, staring at Rogue, who had surprisingly remained silent.

“Then it looks like we have a deal.” Ace arched his brow. “You guys want a drink to celebrate?”

Ace’s taunting would only aggravate the situation more, which was indicated by Rogue shooting up from his seat and shouting, “Fuck you, asshole!”

Trey sighed, stood, and offered his hand to Ace and then Cross.

“We’ll be in touch.”

Rogue walked out first. It was a purposeful move. Trey didn’t trust Rogue to not turn around and fuck the deal up. They just had to make it out the door without further incident. They were as good as done when a woman walked out, stepping back to let them pass. She was tiny, dressed in rather revealing clothing, with a bright smile.

“I like your suits,” she said.

Trey had never formally met Cleo, the sister of a fallen brother, but he was aware of her staying with Killcreek. It always struck him as strange. Killcreek was notoriously known for not keeping women within the clubhouse. Cleo was the exception.

Trey glanced over. Cleo was smiling and waving her hand, gesturing toward them. “They’re very elegant. Like something you see in a movie or on the red carpet.”

“What the f—” Rogue started, but Trey refused to let him finish.

He stepped in front of Rogue, sending him a scathing glare. “Don’t! It’s a compliment. Accept it.”

Trey stepped back, eyeing the Killcreek Drifters who were watching them, but more noticeably, the young woman.

“It costs more than you’ll probably ever make in your lifetime,” Rogue said.

Jesus fucking Christ, Rogue!

Instead of being offended, Cleo chuckled and nodded. “Not probably, most definitely.”

It caught them both off guard, but she wasn’t done.

“You both look very handsome in them.”

It wasn’t very often that he and especially Rogue were humbled by people around them, but there was something about this woman. It was as if she had no clue about the world she lived in.

“Thank you,” Trey said, and her eyes landed on him, smiling as her cheeks pinkened.

“Cleo.” Ace’s voice was even but was giving an obvious order.

Cleo looked over to the Drifters. Trey followed her gaze and saw Ace subtly lift his chin, dismissing her.

Cleo ducked her head and scooted past them, taking a wide berth. When she was a few feet away, she turned,

continuing to walk backward. Even Rogue seemed mesmerized by her.

“Have a great night. And drive safe.”

Rogue snorted, shook his head, and walked out without another word, and Trey did the same, following behind. Jared was standing beside the SUV with the door open. Neither he nor Rogue could get out of there fast enough. For Rogue, it was out of anger and frustration. For Trey, it was to preserve the deal.

Trey got into the car, unbuttoned his coat, and felt his muscles ease. The SUV was halfway down the driveway when Jared, who was seated in the passenger seat in the front, turned around, addressing Trey.

“Nash has been trying to reach you. He said to call Oz.”

Rogue reached into his pocket for his phone.

Jared cleared his throat, gaining their attention. “He wants to talk with Trey, sir.”

Trey pulled out his phone, tapped Oz’s contact information, and held the phone to his ear. It seemed out of character and protocol for Oz to be calling. They never discussed anything on the phone. Ever. But this was an important deal, and he figured Oz would want to be kept updated.

Oz answered on the second ring.

“Trey.” His tone gave nothing away, as usual.

“We’re on our way back,” Trey said, glancing out the window and surveying the small rundown town.

“Well, while you enjoy your view of the shittiest part of the state, I’ll enjoy mine at the club.” Oz paused. “Her driver’s license doesn’t do her justice.”

Trey jerked his head to Rogue.

”*Dahlia Carter* is more beautiful in person.”

Oh fuck!

“Dahlia’s there? With who?” Trey fisted his phone.

“An old acquaintance of ours.”

Fucking Sloane!

Trey drew in a breath. “Keep eyes on them.”

Oz’s chuckle was unsettling. “I’ll do one better. I think it’s time I *met* Dahlia.”

The line went dead.

“What the fuck is going on?” Rogue asked.

“Dahlia and Sloane are at Oz’s.”

Trey dragged his hand down his face. Just when he thought the night was settling down, it was about to blow the fuck up!

Chapter Twenty-Five

This is living! Dahlia peered around the club, sipping her overpriced but delectable drink. She was soaking it up. It was like nothing she'd ever seen before. The Bowery was amazing, but this was off the charts. Sloane was still holding out hope they'd get into the private VIP section, but Dahlia was happy where they were. *We're like friggin' royalty!*

When they entered the club, bypassing the long line, she'd figured they'd be waiting in line at the bar for at least thirty minutes. Surprisingly, as soon as they walked in, they were escorted to a private section of the club that was separate from everyone else. They were free to leave, but it was guarded by a bouncer, and they had their own personal waitress. What kind of passes did they have? They'd only been there about thirty minutes, but it was proving to be one of Sloane's best nights. Dahlia's too.

"This is so amazing!" Sloane grabbed her arm, shaking it. Her drink spilled over the top, dropping down onto her pants. Dahlia didn't even bother trying to clean it. Who cared? As Sloane said, it was amazing. It wasn't exactly Dahlia's element, or Sloane's for that matter, but there was something electrifying about the atmosphere, the music and energy, and the service. The waitress had been to their table three times already. She was friendly and tentative, as if she and Sloane were something special.

Sloane had been reluctant to go to the dance floor, but Dahlia had been insistent. Wasn't that why they were there? This was the good stuff. Two friends, drinking and dancing without an ounce of coordination and no interest in anyone else but each other. A few men sidled up next to them, but Dahlia played bouncer, pulling Sloane away from them. Blade would not approve.

It was a task escorting Sloane off the dance floor, but Dahlia was determined. They had the whole night ahead of

them, and she was eager to bask in the glory of VIP treatment. It was a first for her.

“You’re my fun friend!” Sloane shouted over the music.

Dahlia dropped her head back, laughing, guiding Sloane through the crowds. If only the world could see this Sloane Baxter. “And you’re mine, Sloane.”

Sloane stopped, forcing Dahlia to do the same. She glanced back at Sloane, still gripping onto her wrist. “Really? I’m nobody’s fun friend.”

Dahlia pulled her closer, wrapping her arm around Sloane’s shoulder and stepping off of the dance floor. Dahlia hugged her close. “You’re mine.”

Sloane grinned, and her jaw fell. “Should we get matching tattoos tonight to commemorate the evening?”

What the...?

“How many drinks have you had?”

Sloane laughed, waving off Dahlia’s comment. “Only two, but I need another. C’mon.”

This time, it was Sloane dragging Dahlia back to the table. Once they settled in their seats and Sloane ordered another round, Dahlia slyly pulled the waitress aside, asking for waters along with the drinks.

The waitress smiled. “Of course.”

Dahlia leaned closer. “And if you want to water down those drinks too, that’d be great!”

The waitress furrowed her brows, then glanced over at Sloane for a brief moment before winking at Dahlia. “I got ya, girl.”

Girl power and protection were alive and kicking at the X-Lounge. Dahlia sat back in her seat, taking in the scene. The vibe was incredible. She never got a chance to enjoy it while working at the Bowery.

They were on their third round of drinks when the waitress walked up to the table.

“I’m sorry to bother you. Would you mind coming with me for just one minute?”

“Oh sure, no problem.” Dahlia stood, glancing back at Sloane. “Stay here.”

The last thing she needed was to lose Sloane and have to answer to Blade.

Dahlia followed the woman through the back corridor. Unlike Trey’s club, there were men lined up in military formation along the hallway in what appeared to be the employee corridor. The waitress walked her to the elevator, and once the doors opened, she gestured Dahlia inside. Without thinking, Dahlia walked in and turned. It took her a minute to realize the waitress wasn’t coming with her. What the... Two men stepped inside next to her. They reminded her of Trey’s security but without the comfort of familiarity.

The last thing Dahlia saw as the doors closed was the waitress mouthing, “I’m sorry.”

Dahlia blinked. *Sorry for what?*

Her stomach dropped as the elevator moved up a floor. When the doors opened, she stepped out. What the hell was happening? From the corner of the hall, she saw a hallway resembling the one in the Bowery, but the vibe was off. *Something’s not right here.*

Dahlia turned back toward the elevator but quickly rammed into a man’s chest and jumped back, holding up her hands.

He lifted his chin, gesturing behind her. “To the table.”

Dahlia shook her head. “I think there’s been a mistake.”

The man’s eyes darkened. He had to be at least six and a half feet and pure muscle. “I won’t put my hands on you, but you’re not getting past me.”

Her breath lodged in her throat, and she inched backward, putting her farther onto the balcony. It probably wasn’t the smartest move, but she refused to take her eyes off the menacing figure advancing on her. Wait a minute. *I know you.*

Kind of. She'd never met the man before, but he'd been one of the guards from the night of her confrontation with Rod. Rogue had come into the office with Nash. And three men had stood outside. This man had been one of them. His gaze lifted over her head, and she spun around, abruptly stopping in front of the familiar man smiling down at her.

What the hell is going on?

"We weren't expecting you, Dahlia," Nash said.

Dahlia released a nervous laugh.

"It was a spur-of-the-moment plan."

Nash slowly nodded. "Complimentary passes?"

"Yes."

"Trey or Rogue give them to you?"

Oh shit. What were the odds he'd actually check if she lied? Considering the size of this mini-enterprise, they had to be making a killing. Why have passes if they weren't meant to be used? She was rationalizing her mistake. Those passes were given out to only a select few. And Trey had never offered her one.

But Nash doesn't know that.

She parted her lips, prepared to sell her lie, but immediately froze when Nash moved closer, leaving only a small gap between them.

"Your eyes shift to the right, then to the left, and back to the right. Then you take a shallow breath and blink."

What was he talking about?

Nash smirked. "Right before you're about to lie."

Caught! She had only one option. Apologize and beg for mercy!

"I'm sorry. We took the passes. And while it wasn't our intent to steal, I can see now it's theft, and I am so sorry. I'd be happy to pay for the admission price. And Sloane's, too." She reached into her bag, but before she could grasp her wallet, she

felt his hand wrapping over her wrist. It wasn't aggressive or tight but halted her from any further movement.

"I can explain myself," Dahlia said.

Nash's lips twitched, and he jerked his head to the far corner of the room. He released her, and for reasons unknown, she followed him. There was only one man seated at the table, eyeing her suspiciously. Of course he was. She and Sloane had basically stolen a place in his club by taking the passes.

She stopped at the edge of the table, extending her hand. "Hi, I'm Dahlia."

The man stared down at her hand, and she heard Nash's faint chuckle.

He had at least fifteen years on her. Salt and pepper hair that somehow only accented his appearance. Dahlia had never taken much interest in older men, but there was something about him. It was almost familiar in his chiseled bone structure and strong brow line. He was handsome but with an edge. He raised his brows, making it evident he knew she was staring, and she immediately looked away. It was awkward, to say the least. It was obvious he had no intention or interest in shaking her hand. She dropped her arm to her side and shifted on her heels.

Then, in a move she did not expect, he lifted his arm, extending his hand. Dahlia rubbed her hand on her jeans, wiping off the sweat, and grasped his hand. It was firm and solid. It could have been a show for power, but she didn't think so.

"Dahlia Carter."

He slowly nodded. "I know." He motioned to the chair beside him. "Sit."

Dahlia immediately followed his directions.

"What do you want to drink?"

"Nothing, I'm fine." She cleared her throat. "I assume you're the owner."

He didn't respond immediately. Instead, he stared. The kind that made people nervous, as if he could see beyond any outward appearance and read one's soul. Dahlia cleared her throat and awkwardly smiled.

"I am."

Dahlia nodded, gearing up for her full disclosure. "Can I just explain how this all happened?"

Nash snickered once again. Dahlia stared up at him, wondering if he was trying to get her in trouble. How could anyone find humor in this situation? She considered using Trey as some type of buffer in the situation. It was obvious he knew Nash. Maybe namedropping would get her out of this clusterfuck. But it would come with consequences. They'd basically stolen the passes from the club. That was one conversation Dahlia would prefer to avoid with Trey.

"I know this looks bad, but neither I nor Sloane was trying to steal from you, I promise. We would never do that."

He raised his brows.

"Um, so we both work at the Bowery downtown." She knitted her brows, leaning forward. "Do you know that club?"

Nash snorted and turned his back, but she had the distinct feeling he was laughing. *Again!* At least one person was amused by this whole fiasco. She turned her attention back to the owner.

He took a slow sip from his glass. "I'm familiar."

She giggled. It was nervous and shaky. "Of course. That's how the Bowery has passes, right?" She cleared her throat. "So, anyway, um, apparently passes are given to certain employees. It's a rating system, as I've been told, if you sell a certain amount of alcohol. It's a great incentive."

"You earned it?"

Shit!

"Not exactly. Sloane, she's the manager, so she's never in the running, and I just started as a barback, so it'll be awhile before I get any perks."

“That doesn’t seem fair.” The man took a long, slow drag from his cigar, eyeing Dahlia. There was an aura about him as if he could read her thoughts. Maybe that was the reason she blurted it out.

“Well, fair isn’t how many people would describe my boss.” She snickered. “Aggressive, hostile, and unpredictable pretty much sums him up.”

The second the words spilled out, she winced. *Why did I say that?* Dahlia glanced around the room. None of the security paid her any mind, but Nash appeared amused.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

The owner settled in his seat, carefully eyeing her. “Why’s that? Were you lying?”

Dahlia started to shake her head and immediately froze. Admitting she wasn’t lying was like saying it all over again.

His face hardened. “Two types of people in this world. Those who double down on the truth and those who back down. Which one are you?”

“I fall somewhere in the middle.” Dahlia drew in a shaky breath, intent on getting the subject back on course. “As I was saying about the passes...”

“You stole them.”

Shit!

“Yes.” Dahlia raised her hands. “But not maliciously. Sloane and I didn’t have any plans, and she has access to the passes. I know this looks bad, but we’ll pay for all our drinks. In fact, I’ll pay for everything.”

“You willing to pay the cover charge, the drinks, and the VIP concierge?”

“Absolutely.”

The owner looked over at Nash.

“Five seventy-five.”

What. The. Fuck?

“We’ve been here less than an hour. Five hundred and seventy-five dollars?”

Nash nodded.

Oh my God!

Her shoulders sagged. She had the cash to back it, but it was not how she’d intended to spend her money. This would be a major dent in her car savings. *Dammit!* She reached into her bag, pulling out her wallet.

“My dad is cursing my name.” She wasn’t sure why she’d said it, but it was true.

“Why is that?” The owner asked, catching her completely off guard.

“What?”

“Why would your father be cursing your name?”

“Oh.” She laughed, thinking of her dad. *Gah*, just the thought of him made her smile even in the worst predicaments. “He was a lover of cheap beer. A six-pack under ten. That was his motto.”

Men like the owner or Nash wouldn’t understand. They were in a different realm.

“Still his motto?” he asked, lifting his cigar to his lips.

It would have been. She was sure of it. But he never got the chance to keep it.

“He passed away eight years ago.”

“How?”

His question caught her off guard. Most people offered an awkward condolence or said nothing at all. Very rarely did anyone pry into something so personal.

“A robbery gone wrong.”

“Your father tried to rob some place?”

The insinuation sent a heated response, and she immediately snapped. “No, of course not!”

His gaze darkened. “Then how?”

This was intrusive. It was personal. She fiddled with her fingers, glancing up at the men lining the balcony. None of them made eye contact, but they were all within ear shot and on high alert. They’d hear it. It wasn’t any type of secret. Anyone with a computer and a name could search for it. That’s what he was...a mere internet search. It spoke nothing of his character or who he was. Some called him a hero, while others called him a fool.

“How?” The man prompted her again. There was no getting out of telling the story. She wasn’t ashamed. It was just hard to retell it. It evoked too much emotion, too much pain, and too much regret for a situation she had no hand in.

“He’d gotten off his shift at the power company. He worked there for almost twenty-five years. He would have retired in ten.” Her dad was only forty-seven. People don’t die at forty-seven. At least they’re not supposed to. Ninety or ninety-five, and if they were lucky, they’d blow out one hundred candles. *But never only forty-seven.*

Dahlia cleared her throat. “He stopped in the convenience store down the street from our house. A six-pack and a pack of cigarettes. My mom tried to get him to quit for years, but he just loved smoking.” She smiled, glancing down at the cigar burning in the ashtray. “You get it, right?”

She glanced up, but he gave no facial response, and she quickly shifted her gaze to the table.

“Yeah, so he uh...” She swallowed the knot in her throat. “He stopped in as usual. Went to the back refrigerator cases, grabbed his beer, and he walked up to the counter. There was a man with a gun aiming it at the cashier. Tony. He owned the store. Still does. But, uh, the guy was robbing the store. Had a gun and was threatening Tony. My dad kind of hung back from what people told me, but then the guy took a shot behind the counter, and my dad charged forward. He actually got the gun away from the robber, but, um...there was another guy playing lookout. He shot my dad. It went straight through, hitting him right in the heart.” Her breath caught in her throat. It always

did. That one phrase played over and over in her head. *Straight through the heart.*

“Anyone else die?”

She shook her head and tightened her lips.

“Probably could’ve saved himself had he not tried to be a hero.”

She slowly nodded, then immediately shook her head as the words sunk in.

“No?” he asked.

Her eyes welled, and she glanced up at the man next to her. “No, I just mean, he did what he would do. He wasn’t the type of man just to stand back and save himself. He wanted to save everyone.”

“But he didn’t save everyone.”

No, he didn’t. He sacrificed himself.

“But he tried.” Her voice shook as a tear escaped, and she quickly brushed it away and took another breath. “Tried really hard. And everyone else in the store lived. He’d be proud of that ’cause that’s the kind of man he was. You know—” Her breath hitched, and she waved her hand, trying to take the focus off her tears. “—a hero, I guess. That’s what the papers called him.”

“Is that what you call him?”

It was a shaky line. Was her father a hero? *Yes.* He’d saved others. That was the true definition. But was it worth what he sacrificed? She batted down her response and bowed her head. She’d decided a long time ago to never answer that question. It was selfish on her part because if she could have rewritten history, there would have been a different outcome. But... Her father did what he believed was right. That was good enough. *It has to be.*

She placed her hands in her lap and breathed deeply. Memories of her father always hit her hard. It was impossible to explain to those who’d never experienced that kind of loss. Those who didn’t quite understand didn’t know the magnitude

of loss and grief. As if grief had a timeline or an expiration date. After so many years, it couldn't hit as hard, right? Wrong. Loss changed people. It altered who they would've or should've been. Who they were meant to be. It shifted alignment, changed direction, the choices, the decisions. It changed everything. Not everyone understood it. But Dahlia did. She'd lived it.

"Let me pay the bill, and Sloane and I will get out of here." She rummaged through her purse in search of her card. The sooner she found it, the quicker she and Sloane could leave. It was only a matter of minutes. Or so she thought.

"As if you don't already cause enough shit at our club, now you're extending your fucking reach?"

Dahlia jumped in her seat, jerking her eyes across the room. Rogue stood front and center, but just beyond his shoulder was Trey. *He did not look happy.*

"I'm sorry, we..."

"You took the fucking passes, didn't you?" Rogue stalked to the edge of the table.

There was no getting past his anger and accusations. *How can I?* Rogue was right.

"I will reimburse the cost of them. I've already spoken to..." What was his name? It was the first time she realized he'd never given it during introductions. She turned to the owner. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

He arched his brow and then glanced across the room at Trey before turning back to her.

"Oz."

Oz. Interesting.

"Like the wizard?" Dahlia smiled, but when his gaze hardened, she cleared her throat. "Sorry, bad joke."

Fuck my life!

She reached in her bag just as Trey took a seat beside her.

Her hands shook, knowing all eyes were on her. Anxiety had never been a thing for her, but it was now. It took her a few seconds to peel her debit card from her wallet. Trey grasped her wrist, and she glanced up.

“I’ll pay for it.”

“No,” Trey said.

“I don’t mind...”

Trey narrowed his gaze. “Put the card away.”

She bit her lip, side-eyeing Oz. She’d pay without argument, but she forced herself to tuck her card back into the slot, settling back in her chair.

“Does Blade know Sloane is here?” Trey asked.

Oh fuck. This was bad.

“I’m not sure. Maybe.” She was trying to save her friend. It didn’t work.

Trey narrowed his gaze. “Dahlia.”

Shit!

“I don’t think so.”

Rogue laughed, reaching into his pocket. “Well, then I’m happy to share with that motherfucker. This is like fucking Christmas.”

Dahlia knew when Blade found out, he’d be livid, especially after getting the call from Rogue. She had to think of something, *anything*, that would resolve this and lessen Sloane’s chances of getting caught. Dahlia scooted to the edge of her seat.

“Blade’s on a run,” Dahlia blurted and swallowed the lump in her throat when all eyes veered to her. “And members aren’t allowed any communication during runs unless it’s with Gunner. It’s an East rule.”

I think. Dahlia wasn’t one hundred percent sure of the rule, but it seemed believable. To her. She turned to Trey, ignoring his deep scowl, and forced a smile. Trey didn’t seem

to put much value into her statement, but she was prepared for a plan B.

“Then we got a fucking problem, don’t we?” Rogue’s snarky tone echoed through the room.

Dahlia drew in a breath, “I have an idea.”

Oz grabbed his glass and lifted his chin. “I’m sure we’d all be interested in hearing your thoughts.”

Perfect!

“Well, if Trey is willing to take me home, um, Sloane’s not too far out of the way.” She cleared her throat. “We can just give her a ride. I mean, aside from the theft, which I offered to pay back. I don’t really see any reason to bring Blade into this.”

Oddly, her resolution seemed to get a reaction from all three men, and not a good one.

“You don’t?” Oz’s gaze darkened.

“No,” she whispered. The less Blade knew, the better off Sloane would be.

Oz took a sip of his drink and placed the glass down, sharing a look with Trey, who remained silent. It was as if they were having a silent conversation. As the seconds lingered on, she shifted in her seat, ignoring the beads of sweat forming on her forehead. Slowly, her heart started to race. *Someone say something!*

“So,” Dahlia blurted, gaining the men’s attention. “What do you think?”

Oz looked over at Trey. “Call Gunner.”

Dahlia didn’t think it was possible, but it seemed like she’d just made the situation worse. *Shit!* The only saving grace was Trey making the call as opposed to Rogue. Hopefully, Trey’s delivery would somehow lessen Sloane’s punishment.

“Do you see the problem?” Oz asked. He wasn’t speaking to her.

She glanced up at Trey, who was staring back at Oz. Even Rogue, who'd been hyped to make the call to Blade, stopped and shifted his gaze between Oz and Trey. The silence was deafening as she watched the men. Finally, Trey answered.

“Yes.”

What does that mean? Was Dahlia the problem? This night had gone to complete shit, and now her relationship with Trey was in jeopardy.

“I’m sorry, Trey,” she whispered, and his head jerked, and his scowl deepened. Dahlia leaned closer. “Really sorry.”

Trey grasped her jaw. “You don’t apologize for this.”

There was a clear meaning behind his statement. She just didn’t know what it meant.

“Is this still *just* an incident?” Oz asked the question, but Trey kept his gaze locked on Dahlia.

“It’s personal.” Trey stroked her cheek.

It seemed like such an intimate moment happening in front of an audience. She should have been embarrassed, or at the very least aware of the eyes watching them. But she wasn’t. It was as if it was just the two of them in a room.

“You get him,” Oz said.

Him? Who? Dahlia had no idea, but Trey clearly did.

He slowly turned his head, looking over at Oz.

“When?” Trey asked.

“We’ll work out the details.” Oz steeled his features but looked over at her briefly. “And you *will* work out yours, Trey.”

Trey immediately stood, grasping her hand. She stood, staying close to his side, and she followed without any type of instruction. This was so out of character for him. Yet here they were, holding hands, with Trey pulling her close to his side for all eyes to see, and he didn’t even hesitate.

She tightened her hold and squeezed his hand, prepared to follow him to the elevator. Instead, he walked down the hall and into a room. Dahlia sucked in a breath when the woman sitting on the couch glanced up. Sloane's shaky smile lasted only a few seconds before her gaze dropped down to Dahlia and Trey's hands clasped. Sloane widened her eyes.

Trey released her hand, gesturing to the couch. Dahlia walked across the room, taking her seat next to Sloane. Neither woman uttered a word and continued staring at Trey. He reached into his chest pocket, pulling out his phone.

"Since Blade is unavailable, I'll call Gunner to come pick up Sloane."

Sloane groaned immediately. It seemed she wouldn't escape the repercussions of their actions. Trey gave them his back, and Dahlia glanced over at Sloane, who was staring across the room, shaking her head.

Dahlia leaned closer, whispering, "Sorry."

Sloane whipped her head and furrowed her brows. "For what?"

"Gunner is gonna be just as pissed as Blade. You know that, right?"

Sloane smirked with a slow nod. "Yeah, I know. But it was so much fun while it lasted."

Leave it to Sloane Baxter to make light of a craptastic ending to the night. Dahlia laughed but immediately clamped her lips when Trey turned, scowling at them. She couldn't hear everything he was saying, but she made out a few words when Trey raised his voice.

"Dahlia isn't part of East. Therefore, she's none of your concern."

What?

"This is a courtesy, Gunner. You are welcome to come retrieve Sloane." Trey paused, and his knuckles whitened, grasping the phone. "*Only* Sloane."

Dahlia was so focused on Trey that she jumped slightly when Sloane nudged her knee. Dahlia turned to find Sloane smiling.

“You and Trey are together?” Sloane mouthed. “Like together, together?”

How was she supposed to answer her friend? Dahlia had agreed to keep the relationship between the two of them, but clearly, Trey had mentioned it to some of his people. *Why can't I?* At this point, it was obvious, and denying anything was fruitless.

Dahlia shrugged and gave a small, subtle nod.

Sloane's jaw dropped, and she grabbed Dahlia's hand. “Oh my God, Dahlia! I knew there was something between you two. Just the way he got all possessive when he heard you were working at The Moon Bar.”

What?

“You two make the most beautiful couple!” Sloane grinned, tightening her grasp.

It was the sweetest sentiment. Unfortunately, it was rather loud and gained Trey's attention. He jerked around, shoving his phone into his pocket, glaring at both of them.

“Gunner is on his way.”

Fuck!

Poor Sloane.

Trey rolled his shoulders and folded his arms, remaining silent in Oz's spare office. Too much had gone down tonight, and he wasn't in the right mindset to process it all. Certainly not until he got Dahlia alone. Trey knew exactly what Oz was referring to by his comment about working out his own details. There were aspects of his life, quite a few, that he'd never share with Dahlia. He couldn't, for her own safety. But he'd made his decision to bring her in, and she had to know what that entailed.

But that would have to wait. For now.

His call to Gunner only intensified Trey's aggravation. While he could appreciate East's president and their club's fondness for Dahlia, Trey wouldn't be allowing her to go home with anyone other than him.

Once Trey gave Gunner the rundown of what had happened, the president of East offered to come get both women. *No fucking chance.*

Trey's phone pinged, and he glanced down.

Gunner: Out front.

Trey tucked his phone in his pocket and looked over at the women. He was well aware they were secretly whispering while he was on the phone with Gunner. But since then, they'd remained quiet.

"Let's go. Gunner's here."

Trey waited until Dahlia was a foot away and grabbed her hand, leading them down the hallway and into the elevator. He didn't make eye contact with either of them but felt Dahlia move in closer to his side. Once the doors opened, Trey made his way through the club with both women following.

Trey ignored all the stares as he weaved through the crowd and down the long corridor toward the back entrance. As expected, Gunner was waiting with three other members in the parking lot.

Trey glanced over at Sloane, whose face was pale, staring back at Gunner and the brothers of East.

"Sloane," he said, and when she looked up at Trey, he lifted his chin. "Go."

Sloane nodded and smiled before walking across the lot. She was a few feet away when Trey heard her utter those fateful words.

"Hi, Gunner! Can I just say one thing?"

Trey rolled his eyes and tugged on Dahlia's hand, leading her to the opposite end of the parking lot. Before he made it to

the SUV, one of his men reached out, opening the door.

“Get in.” Trey gestured to the backseat, but Dahlia made no move. “Dahlia.”

She squeezed his hand and moved closer, ducking her head and brushing her hair against his suit.

“I’m sorry about this. It was not how I intended this night to go.”

“What did you expect?”

She shrugged. “A couple drinks, a few laughs, and maybe some dancing.”

Trey clenched his jaw, motioning for her to get in the car. Surprisingly, Dahlia got in without another word. Trey took a seat next to her and sighed. He was counting down the minutes ’til the night was over.

Trey cupped his jaw, staring out the window. Seconds later, he felt her fingers trail over the back of his hand. He couldn’t explain it or even understand it fully, but her touch had an instant way of easing his tension. He clasped his hand in hers but remained silent as they drove back to his apartment. He wasn’t giving her an option. She was staying with him. Secure and protected.

The ride was longer than expected with the traffic. Usually, Trey welcomed the silence, but he had too much on his mind. Dahlia remained silent during the ride but inched closer to his side. While Trey didn’t outwardly acknowledge her, he allowed her into his space.

They entered his apartment in silence, and he went directly to his bedroom, ripping off his tie.

“I’m sorry, Trey.”

He sighed. “Stop apologizing.”

“But I’m the problem, right?”

What? Trey furrowed his brows and turned.

“Oz asked if you saw the problem. He was talking about me, wasn’t he?”

Yes, but not how Dahlia was taking it. The problem wasn't her. It was her position as Trey's woman without any knowledge of his true identity. It left her vulnerable and clueless through no fault of her own. It was his job to protect her and keep her out of situations where there was potential danger. He'd failed tonight.

"You're not the problem." He pulled off his jacket, not even bothering to hang it up, and then took off his shirt, tossing them both onto the chair in the corner.

"Still mad at me?"

Trey didn't know how to answer. What should have been a minor infraction for anyone else was monumental for Dahlia, but she was completely unaware of it all. If anyone was the problem in this situation, it was him.

He felt her hands slide over his hips and up his bare chest, pressing her breasts to his back.

"Can I make it up to you?" she whispered.

Her hands trailed over his stomach, going in a direction he knew would lead to the ultimate distraction. He grabbed her wrists, tightening them over his stomach.

"I grew up with Rogue and Oz."

It wasn't the best timing, but this conversation was imperative. It had to happen *now*.

Dahlia stilled, and he knew why. He was giving her a part of his past. Up until now, he hadn't given her much of anything personal. He wasn't prepared to lay it all out for her tonight, but this would be a start. A way of easing her into his life and how he came to be with the Underground.

"You mean like when you were kids?"

Trey unraveled from her hold and walked across the room, taking a seat in the chair in the corner. He pulled off one shoe, then the other, and she curled up on the bed with her legs tucked under her butt, waiting on him,

"Yes. We were in the same foster home for a while until we left."

“Adopted?”

“No.” Trey paused, knowing he’d have to be careful with how much he gave her. This wasn’t just his story. It was theirs. “When Oz left at eighteen, he took Rogue and me with him.”

“How old were you?”

“Eleven.”

Her eyes widened. “So, he became your legal guardian?”

In time, Trey would give her everything. But for now, he’d keep the details to himself.

“Something like that.” There was nothing legal about anything from that day on. “We started working for Sal.”

Dahlia’s face brightened. “I knew he had good energy.”

Trey smiled. He couldn’t help himself. If she knew the real Sal, she wouldn’t be saying that. But her naïve and ingenuous perception of one of the most deadly and ruthless men he’d ever known was almost refreshing. She was seeing the man Sal was today.

“What about your family, though?”

“I don’t have any family.” He swallowed the knot in his throat. “Rogue, Oz, and Sal. That’s the closest thing I’ve got.”

“But what about your parents?” Dahlia cocked her head.

“They’re dead.”

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was somber, feeling a loss that even he hadn’t connected to, but somehow she did. “So Sal raised you three?”

Raised? It was a stretch, but he’d offered an opportunity. A chance most weren’t willing to give. It saved Trey. It saved all of them.

It was Sal’s first act when he allowed the three of them to work under him. Their names were changed, and their history was forever erased, so there was no way anyone could come looking for them. Trey had been fully on board with the move. Sal had given them a complete rundown of the history of their

families before he carried out their massacres. Trey's young brain hadn't fully comprehended it all at the time, but he had known they were never coming back for him, nor did they want him. The one item he remembered from everything he'd read in the report was even after his mother had given birth to him, she'd refused to hold him, referring to him as a bastard and an abomination.

"I'm sorry, Trey," Dahlia whispered. She slowly got up from the bed and sauntered over to bend down on her knees, looking up at him. "It's a shame they couldn't see the man you've become. I bet they'd be proud."

They wouldn't, but he couldn't help but devour her sweetness. Dahlia had an amazing gift of seeing good in people, even if she had to look into the depths of their souls. Sometimes, that was the only place it could be found.

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Again, he was reminded of her soft, caring heart.

He skimmed her lips for a kiss. This woman. He didn't deserve her.

"Let's go to bed."

And they did. He slept better than he had in years with Dahlia curled against his chest and his arm wrapped over her.

This is my future.

Chapter Twenty-Six

This was a first!

For all the nights she'd spent at Trey's, she'd never woken up before him. *Never!* She wasn't about to let this opportunity pass her by. She quietly got out of bed, rummaged through his dresser, pulled out a T-shirt, and tip-toed out of the room. The apartment in the early hours was silent and dark. The sun had yet to rise.

His place wasn't what she'd call homey or warm, but it was beautiful and had a few specific Trey characteristics that she loved. It was decorated as if he'd hired someone, and she was probably on point with that assessment, but it did capture him, in a sense. Muted colors, elegant, and sophisticated. His furniture was a dark brown leather, and the end tables were absent of any extras or personal items. It was clean and sleek.

However, there were a few things. Trey had a bar setup in the corner with an array of shot glasses from other states. He had a wall of books that rivaled some libraries and a picture in a frame tucked in the corner of his dining room. Three boys. They were easy to recognize, especially Trey and Rogue. But she saw the similar features from the oldest, knowing it was Oz. It had to have been taken years ago. It wasn't exactly in focus, and none of them were looking at the camera, but they were seated on a concrete wall, side by side.

There was more to their history than Trey had shared. She knew he'd given her a mere snippet. *But he gave me something.* It was enough for now.

Dahlia quickly rummaged through his cabinets. He had the basics but nothing elaborate. When she opened the fridge, she was stunned to see it was pretty much stocked. This was another first. But she had mentioned wanting to cook for him. Had he ordered groceries because of her? Dahlia batted down her smile and grabbed what she needed.

Breakfast wasn't exactly her specialty, but she could make a decent omelet and hashbrowns. She started prepping

the food, started the coffee, and glanced up at the clock on the microwave. She was working on borrowed time if she had any hope of having it all done before he woke up. The potatoes would take the longest, so she started on them first. After thirty minutes, she whisked the eggs, adding peppers, onions, and cheese.

She flipped the omelet, but movement from the hallway caught her attention, and she glanced up. *Oh damn.* Trey in a suit was panty-drenching. Naked was perfection. But there was something sexy about seeing him in nothing but sweatpants.

“I’m making breakfast.” Her breath hitched, watching him stalk forward.

His gaze shifted to the counter, then the stove, and dropped down to her shirt. She didn’t think he’d mind her borrowing it. His gaze darkened, and she immediately felt a rush of heat cover her body. And not in a good way. She pulled at the front of the shirt.

“I didn’t peg you for a T-shirt guy.” She nervously chuckled as he rounded the counter. “I hope you don’t mind that I borrowed it.”

His gaze darkened as he rounded the counter. “Take it off.”

Oh fuck.

Dahlia nodded and started around the breakfast bar, but Trey grabbed her hips, pinning her against the counter, whispering in her ear. “I said take it off.”

“I’m going to, but my top is in your bedroom.”

“I didn’t tell you to change, I told you to take it off.” He growled, digging the pads of his fingers into her hips.

“Trey,” she whispered, her breath laboring.

“Do it.”

That was all it took. One command from him.

Dahlia pulled it over her head, and he grabbed it from her hands, tossing it into the living room. She was left standing with only her G-string panties. He sidled up against her back, sliding his hands over her hips. Dahlia turned her head, and his lips came down on hers. Hard.

Dahlia could multi-task, but this was pushing it. Still, she couldn't bring herself to break away from the kiss. She was addicted to Trey. His taste, his scent, his touch. His hands drove around her stomach and over her chest, palming her breasts. She pressed her hips back, lining up directly with his erection. When she swiveled against him, he groaned, making her instantly wet and soaking her sliver of panties.

They had to stop before she ruined breakfast. She tore her mouth from his. This was another first. Dahlia had never broken away from his kiss. She licked her lips and whispered, "Trey, it's burning."

He dropped his hand to the burner control, spun it off, and grabbed the pan, moving it to the burner in the back. *I guess breakfast can wait.*

Trey grasped her hips, guiding her away from the stove and to the counter. She attempted to turn, but he dug his fingers into her hips and maneuvered her over the counter. Her breasts were flush on the cool granite and her nipples immediately beaded. Or it could have been a result of his touch. Trey's hands spread out over her back, sending an excited shiver down her spine. Dahlia walked her feet out, spreading her legs, and got an immediate reaction. Trey growled. It was the sexiest sound any man had ever made.

Trey slid his finger up the crease between her cheeks, grasping the top elastic with his finger and ripping off her panties. She felt a slight bite as the material scratched against her skin, but it only amped up her desire. His hand trailed up her back and over her scalp. It felt so good. She gasped when his hand fisted her hair, pulling her head back into the crook of her neck. His lips pressed against her neck, and she muffled her moan.

His hands grazed over her stomach and rose to cup her breasts while his warm breath fanned over her neck.

“Are you on something?”

Yeah, an orgasmic high. It took a few seconds for her to make out what he was asking. It was rare that she didn't use a condom. They'd been using one since their first encounter. This was the first time Trey was suggesting anything different. It seemed to signify something had shifted in their relationship. Going bare was a sign of trust, at least for her. It was her giving her whole body to Trey without any concerns.

“Yes.” She breathed deeply, pressing her ass into his hardened cock.

His lips skimmed her neck, the crown of his cock prodded her entrance, and she gasped when he impaled her with one swift motion. She fell forward, grasping tightly to the edge of the counter. It was an effort to stabilize herself but a fruitless one. Trey had her trapped against the granite, with one hand digging into her hip and the other holding a tight fist in her hair. He was in complete control, and she was completely content in her position. Dahlia loved his dominance. She got off on it. She wasn't going anywhere unless he wanted her to.

It didn't mean she didn't hold any power. She clenched her walls, tightening over his cock. Trey grunted, sliding deeper inside her. Dahlia was all about the slow fuck, but there was something to be said about the opposite. And Trey was giving it to her. He fucked her hard, pressing her hipbones against the corner of the counter. There was a slight pain every time the bone made contact, but it was worth everything she was feeling coursing through her body.

She gasped, and he immediately stopped. She inched back and turned her head, whispering, “Don't stop.”

Trey took notice of her position and slid deeper inside her, pressing his palms over her hipbones. If anything would rock into the counter now, it would be his knuckles. He obviously had a stronger tolerance for pain because he slammed into her, shifting her body over the counter. She

scratched her nails against the granite, seeking some type of release. She was close.

Until he stopped.

What the... She jerked her head, looking back at him. Trey stepped back slowly, gingerly grazing his fingertips over her waist. He spun her around, grabbed her waist, and lifted her onto the counter. Not missing a beat, he grasped her thighs, stretched them apart, and slipped inside of her. Of all the positions, this was her favorite. Face to face with Trey. She curled her hand around his jaw and leaned in, kissing him as he drove deep inside her. He looped his arm around her waist, pulling her to the edge of the counter. The position change had him hitting all the right spots in all the right places.

“Fuuuuck.” He groaned against her lips, angled his head, and pressed his lips against her throat, tasting her.

Her head fell back, giving him better access, and Trey took it, sucking her skin, licking her throat up over her chin, and taking her lips. His tongue speared against hers as he drove inside her, gripping her waist and pulling her flush against his chest. So close. As if they were one.

If Dahlia knew how to prolong the inevitable, she would have done it, but she was riding the wave of her orgasm, and from the sounds of his breath, so was Trey. She tightened her hold over his back, and he pounded inside of her as his warm breath mingled with hers.

Sex on the kitchen counter is my new favorite!

Fuck!!!

That was a first.

Trey wasn't a prude when it came to sex. He'd had it often and in an array of places, but never on his kitchen counter with his breakfast cooking on the stove. The irony wasn't lost on him. Always controlled, and never spontaneous in any decisions. Dahlia changed that by merely standing in his kitchen, wearing his T-shirt, and smiling when she

announced she was making him breakfast. Trey went...*official fucking caveman.*

After they'd cleaned up, they spent another ten minutes kissing. God, her fucking mouth. He could kiss her for days. And he might've, but his phone rang, and he knew he had to take the call.

Trey left the kitchen and walked into his home office, taking a seat. He had a few more hours before heading in to the club. He wasn't sure how long he'd been at his desk when he heard a soft knock on the door. Dahlia was standing in the doorway with a plate in her hand, peering around the room. She didn't say anything and placed the plate in front of him.

He glanced down at it, furrowing his brows.

"The hashbrowns are a little burnt." She paused. "That's your fault."

Trey smirked. He'd take full accountability. It'd been worth it.

"And the omelet might be a little overcooked. Your burners are different from mine, and I didn't gauge the heat right. I'm better with dinners, I swear. Breakfast isn't my specialty."

"You made this." He stared down at the plate. The presentation wasn't anything special, and she was right that the potatoes were burnt, crispy at best.

"I can toss it and run out to the bagel store down the street."

Oh, fuck no.

Trey pulled her onto his lap. Dahlia curled up against his chest as he leaned over, slicing a piece of the omelet with his fork and taking a bite. She hadn't lied. It was overcooked, a little dry, and not what he was used to. But still, it was the best omelet he'd ever had.

"How bad is it? You don't have to eat it, Trey."

Trey finished chewing and licked his lips. "You made it for me?"

She reached across the desk, but he blocked her hand, crowding his arm around his plate and sending her a sharp glare. “Then I want to eat it.”

Dahlia chuckled, shaking her head. “I wanted to impress you with my cooking skills.”

The corner of his mouth curled. “I’m impressed.”

“You’re lying.”

No, I’m not.

“Never had someone make me a meal who wasn’t paid to do it. I’m impressed.”

Dahlia’s gaze softened, and she curled deeper into his chest while he ate his breakfast. He was barely done when his phone rang again. Without prompting, she climbed off his lap, grabbed his plate, and walked out of his office.

This was his life. The phone would always ring. He’d always need privacy.

It was another hour before he wrapped up and walked into the hallway. He started down toward his bedroom when he heard two voices and Dahlia’s unmistakable laugh echoing off the walls. Trey immediately turned, walking out to the living room and taking in the scene. Dahlia was seated at the breakfast bar, cupping her mug and smiling at the man seated next to her.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise. He always had an open invitation to Trey’s place, but he usually gave a heads-up on a visit. This felt very much like an ambush. Trey started across the room, rounding the counter and eyeing the man sitting next to Dahlia.

“Hey, Sal.”

He smiled and raised his mug. “Trey.”

“It’s almost eleven,” Trey said, knowing the reminder would get Dahlia out of the room.

He didn’t object to her relationship with Sal. If anything, he’d encourage it. But under the circumstances, he wanted to

speak one-on-one with his former boss.

Dahlia straightened, jerked her gaze to the microwave, and grinned. She jumped off her chair. "I'm sorry, Sal. I have to shower and get going. I pick up my new car today." Dahlia paused, shrugging her shoulder. "Well, not brand new, but new to me."

Sal smiled. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks, I got this amazing deal. Almost too good to be true."

Sal smirked, glancing over at Trey. "Is that right?"

"Yeah, and Trey had a guy he knows even detail it for me."

Sal arched his brow. "That was very nice of Trey."

Trey steeled his features, watching Dahlia brush her hand against Sal's back. It was friendly, warm, and comfortable as if she'd known him for years. "Next time you swing by, I'll take you for a ride." Dahlia was walking away, but she abruptly turned, sidling up next to Sal. "Or? I can pick you up, and we could go have lunch or something."

Sal seemed caught off guard. For all his sweetness toward Dahlia and playful teasing banter, he seemed struck by the offer. Sal drew in a breath and smiled. "I'd like that."

Dahlia nodded. "It's a date!"

She walked off, rushing her steps as she disappeared down the hallway. When Trey looked back at Sal, he was still staring at the empty hallway.

Dahlia Carter had infiltrated many hearts in the Underground, apparently.

"She's a sweet one," Sal said.

Yes, she is.

"So." Sal swiveled in his stool, smirking. "You have anything to do with that amazing deal on her new car?"

Trey had everything to do with it. Once she mentioned it, he reached out to the owner of the used car dealership. It was one of many businesses that paid for protection. Trey wasn't looking for anything that would hurt his income, but he was looking for a deal to benefit Dahlia. If he had it his way, she wouldn't have paid for anything, and she'd pull out of a lot with a brand-new car. Eventually, they'd get there, but not yet.

“And your guy? Does she know the *detailing* also includes a tracking device?”

Trey sighed, refusing to give in to Sal's taunting.

“This is a surprise, you showing up.”

Sal arched his brow. “You said I was always welcome.”

Trey snorted, shaking his head. He'd said it a hundred times over and meant it every time. However, the timing of last night's events and Sal's visit led Trey to believe this was a planned ambush.

Sal grabbed his mug, taking a long sip before setting it down on the counter and glancing up at him. “She's gonna give you something you will think you don't deserve. You'll lay on your deathbed thinking, ‘I don't deserve her,’ and you know what, kid, you probably won't. Taught you boys to take what you earn. But sometimes, you get offered something you didn't earn. It's not rightfully yours.” Sal cocked his head toward the hallway where Dahlia had disappeared to. “Take it anyway. And spend the rest of your life trying to earn her and prove that you deserve her.”

Trey dragged his hand over his head. “I need time.”

“Last night proved you've run out of time.”

Trey jerked his gaze to Sal, who sipped his coffee. Clearly, this wasn't a spontaneous visit. Oz must have called him and given details about the previous night's events.

“Maybe I haven't made a final decision.” Trey arched his brow in challenge.

Sal knew him too well to buy into it. “Yes, you have.”

Trey ground his teeth. “But maybe she hasn't.”

Sal laughed, shaking his head. “First night I met her, the way she talked about you, and that’s before I knew it was you.” Sal paused. “She saw you, Trey. Not like everyone does. She saw you the way I do. Saw the real you.”

Trey shook his head.

“Are you afraid once she finds out the truth, she won’t look at you that way?”

“How could she?”

“Love makes people see through to your soul.”

Trey furrowed his brows. Did the once notorious leader of the largest crime ring in the state, with more deaths under his belt at his own hands than all of Oz, Rogue, and Trey combined, just say love makes people able to see your soul?

“You learn that at the senior center?”

Sal laughed and rested back on the stool. “John. You can learn a lot about life from people who have walked a different path. Like John. Lived a normal, cookie-cutter fucking life. Had a decent nine-to-five, a mortgage, and spent a week at the beach every summer with his family. Married and faithful to one woman his entire life. Never fucking strayed. Not ’cause he couldn’t but ’cause he didn’t want to. He loved her that much. And his girl, Karia. That kid is his whole world. Everything he does is for her. Now, he’s a grandpa.”

Trey hadn’t spent much time with John, but they’d shared a few conversations. He was smart and kind, and from the stories Sal had shared, he was the most decent man Sal had ever known.

“John’s a good man.”

Sal’s eyes softened, and he slowly nodded. “You would have been John had life turned out differently. You were never supposed to live this life, Trey. Saw it the minute I laid eyes on you when you three showed up at my place. Thought, ‘not that one.’” Sal shrugged.

“Oz didn’t give you much of a choice.”

Sal smiled. “No, he didn’t. And I don’t regret taking you on. You gave the Underground a conscience. Something we never had before you.”

Trey snorted.

“What have I been telling you since you three took over? It won’t work without all of you. You all played a part and built a bigger empire than I ever could. And you know why that is?”

Because I keep them human.

Trey glanced down toward the empty hall.

“I can’t give her everything she wants.”

“Why not?”

Trey scoffed and folded his arms. “This coming from the man who never settled down, never took on a family, and suggested we do the same.”

Sal shrugged. “Maybe I was wrong.”

Maybe he was wrong? *What the fuck, Sal?*

“Now you decide everything you said was bullshit?”

Sal held up his hand. “Never gave you boys bullshit. Preached what I believed at the time. Age changes people. Being outta the life changes you. I lived and breathed the Underground with no regrets, but there isn’t a part of me that wonders how it all would’ve turned out had I done it a bit different. I’m just sayin’. It doesn’t have to be the same for you as it was for me.”

“Being with me puts her at risk.”

Sal nodded, acknowledging the truth. “It does. But weigh them. Everyone is at risk for something bad to happen, Trey. You could go your whole life, do everything right, and fall victim. There is no free pass with life.” Sal sighed. “She’ll be at risk with you or without you. But I will say, she’s a hell of a lot safer with you by her side. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Trey glanced at the hallway.

“And after you answer that question, you have to answer another. Can you live without her?”

Trey drew in a breath.

No, I can't.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Her usual dinner break with Trey in his office had been canceled due to a meeting. But she spent time with the next best companion. Her and Sloane had hung out for the last twenty minutes discussing their night at the X-Lounge.

“So, on a scale of one to ten. How mad was Blade?” Dahlia asked, taking a bite of her sandwich.

Sloane rested her elbows on her desk, glanced up to the ceiling, and twitched her nose. “A solid thirteen.”

Dahlia laughed, covering her mouth. “Worth all the trouble?”

Sloane glanced over with a grin. “Yes!”

It was a night a lot of people would remember. Dahlia thought for sure there would have been some type of repercussions for both of them at work. Trey seemed to have completely let it go, but she was convinced they faced some punishment from Rogue. Aside from a few snarky comments, they’d gotten away unscathed.

Dahlia stood and tossed her garbage. “I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.”

She still had another ten minutes of her break and was headed to the bathroom when she got the text.

Penny: Come out back.

Dahlia squinted, bringing the phone closer to her face.

Dahlia: Out back where??????

Penny: The Bowery.

What the...

Dahlia jerked her head and walked down the hall, staring at the employee entrance. She smiled at the two waitresses passing by and pushed open the door. Penny was standing,

waiting. This was not good. While she loved her friend, Penny's unannounced visits anywhere never ended well.

"What are you doing here?"

Penny wiggled her brows. "Hoping my bestie is gonna sneak me in. Have you seen that line? I don't have time for that."

Oh, hell, Penny. Dahlia groaned, shaking her head. "I can't!"

"Why not?" She pointed over Dahlia's shoulder. "You think with all those people in there anyone is gonna notice me?"

Yes! Penny had a knack for finding trouble, and if she couldn't find it, it found her. After the other night's debacle and stealing passes, the last thing she should be doing is sneaking in friends.

"Pllllllease!" Penny's high-pitched squealing with her palms pressed together in prayer had Dahlia twitching her lips. This girl had a gift of breaking people down and always getting her way. Tonight was no different.

"You're gonna get me fired, aren't you?" Dahlia said as she begrudgingly widened the door, allowing passage for Penny.

Penny leaned in, kissed her cheek, and gripped her arms. "Relax, it'll be as if I'm not even here."

Oh, I'm definitely getting fired.

Penny led the way with so much confidence, acting as if she was exactly where she should be, that Dahlia doubted anyone would question them. As they made their way to the end of the hall, she noticed a few men lined up against the wall. It wasn't an uncommon sight.

Dahlia recognized the man leading the pack. Stark. She'd seen him a few times at the East clubhouse, but it had been a while. On instinct, when he looked over, she smiled. His gaze softened slightly, but he didn't smile back. He was older, maybe in his fifties, with a fatherly quality though a stern one.

As she was about to pass, the second in line smiled and lifted his chin. "I know you."

She wasn't sure of his name or the others, but they clearly knew her. "Dahlia, right? I'm Sean."

She gave a subtle nod.

He smiled, eyeing her body. "Not with East anymore, huh? Let me ask you something. Do we need to be a club in order to get our own personal whore?"

Dahlia gasped, unsure if she'd just heard him right. Penny confirmed she had when she spun around and shouted. "What the fuck did he just say?"

Dahlia grabbed Penny's arm when she lunged forward. While she appreciated Penny trying to defend her honor, this was no way to go about staying under the radar.

"Say it again, asshole. I fucking dare you!" Penny shouted.

It was a struggle to keep Penny back until her gaze passed over Dahlia's shoulder, and she froze. Dahlia slowly glanced at Stark's men. They seemed tense, every man staring down at the end of the hall. A few inched back as if clearing a path. Dahlia followed their stares and flattened her lips.

If Stark's men were scary, the four approaching were nightmarish. All of them were well-dressed, sharing the same feral glare aimed at Stark's men.

Penny grabbed her wrist but made no move to leave. She pulled Dahlia backward, and she found herself pressed against the wall, holding her breath.

Dahlia expected them to pass through the hall, but Nash stopped directly in front of her. She peeked up, but he wasn't looking at her. His gaze was pinned on the man who'd made the rude comment to her a minute earlier.

"How's it going?" Sean asked.

For all the confidence he'd shown a few minutes ago, it was lagging under the intent standoff. Nash didn't answer but

continued to stare, his gaze hardening with each passing second.

The tension was so thick her breathing labored, and her heart raced. Dahlia snuck a look at the men behind Nash. She'd seen them before, once at the X-Lounge and again outside of Rogue's office. Tall and muscular behind their expensive suits and emitting a deadly vibe. Stark's men seemed to cower slightly in their presence.

"Say it again." Nash's low, graveled tone sent a shiver down her spine. "*I dare you.*"

Oh shit! Her gaze darted between the two men. It was official. Sean had lost all confidence. He didn't even attempt to open his mouth, and Nash didn't really give him a chance.

"Don't speak to her." Nash's voice was low and threatening. "If you have something to say to her? You can say it to me. Or perhaps you'd like to repeat what you just said to Trey."

Dahlia sucked in a breath, watching Sean shrink back against the wall.

Sean parted his lips, and his eyes shifted to Dahlia. "Apologies."

"Don't fucking look at her." Nash's tone seemed even more sinister. "Would you like to know what will happen if you break either of those orders?"

Sean's face paled.

"I'm going to kill you. And I'll enjoy every fucking minute of it." The threat was a bit over the top. In almost all cases, the threat of death was metaphoric. However, Nash showed no signs of bluffing.

Sean nodded briefly and looked down at the floor.

Nash turned, glancing down at Dahlia. He'd basically just threatened to end another person's life if they just looked at her, yet she didn't see any warmth or friendliness in her direction. He started down the hall with his men following. The man at the end, bigger than the rest, gestured for her to

walk in front of him, and she did, with Penny guiding her to the floor. When Nash and his men veered left to the stairs, Penny shifted right, and they stopped in the corner.

“What the hell is going on?” Penny asked.

“I don’t know.”

Penny squinted and looked over her shoulder and up to the balcony. Dahlia followed her stare. Nash was standing next to Trey, whispering in his ear. Trey’s back straightened, his face hardened, and he stepped forward, glaring down at the entrance of the hallway. If she had to guess, Nash had just given him the rundown of what happened. Trey looked livid.

Penny jerked her head, furrowing her brows. It all happened so quick Dahlia had little time to react.

“Come on.” Penny tightened her hold over Dahlia’s wrist, tugging her against her side. One minute, she was standing in the club with Penny. And the next, she was being dragged down the hall. She glanced across at Stark’s men. None of them looked at her. Apparently, they were taking Nash’s orders very seriously.

Penny pushed open the door with so much force it bounced back, almost slamming against them.

“Pen, calm down.”

Penny whipped around and pointed toward the door. “What the fuck was that, Dahl? Why are Oz’s men protecting you?”

She couldn’t say for sure. Dahlia didn’t think she’d left much of an impression on Oz the other night, but he was close with Trey. From what she gathered, Nash worked for Oz and had a relationship with Trey. It made sense that he’d defended her honor. But in keeping with her promise to Trey, she wouldn’t divulge any of that. Trey’s privacy was important to him, and she wouldn’t break his trust.

Dahlia shrugged. “I don’t really know them.”

It wasn’t a lie. Aside from their connection to Trey, she didn’t know much about Oz or any of his men.

“But they know you.” Penny grabbed her hips, eyeing Dahlia. “You got Oz’s second-in-command, Nash, and his personal security, threatening people over a comment. Why?”

It did seem excessive.

“Maybe chivalry isn’t dead, and they were just being nice.”

Penny squinted, looking at her as if she’d just sprouted an antennae. “Oz’s men aren’t nice, Dahlia. And they don’t give a shit about other people who aren’t directly tied to Oz. So again, I have to ask.” Penny’s brows shot up to her hairline. “What the fuck was that?”

“Why are you getting so freaked out? You went ballistic when that guy Sean made that comment to me. Even more so than Nash.”

“Yeah, but the difference here is when I tell someone I’m going to kill them, they’re alive the next day. When Nash says it—” Penny waved her arms. “—they die!”

“All right, calm down. You’re making something out of nothing.”

“Nothing? Nash just threatened to kill that guy over a barback at the Bowery.” Penny raised her brows and folded her arms. “Make that make sense to me.”

Dahlia had known Penny for years. Her friend wouldn’t just let this go. If she wanted answers, she’d get them by any means necessary. Dahlia had to handle this situation carefully.

“Honest, Pen, I don’t know. I mean, I’ve only met Oz once and...”

Penny waved her hands frantically. “Wait, what the fuck do you mean, you only met him once?”

Dahlia shifted on her feet. “The other night at the X-Lounge, Sloane and I went to the club, and he kinda summoned me to his balcony. And we talked.”

Penny’s eyes went wild, and her jaw dropped. This was the first time in all their long friendship she’d ever seen her outspoken friend speechless.

“It’s not a big deal, Pen.”

Penny’s eyes widened even more, looking as if they were seconds from bulging out of their sockets.

“You talked? To Oz.”

“Yeah.” Dahlia cocked her head.

What was the big deal? Dahlia didn’t even question security since Rogue and Oz had their own. Clearly, they were powerful and wealthy. Dahlia assumed it was the norm for men like this. Hell, East had security in the form of the brothers for each other. How different could it be?

Penny paced around the small area by the door. It was clear she was seconds from losing it again.

“Penny?”

Penny held up her hand, continuing to walk in circles and stare at the ground. It was as if she was brainstorming. Or? Trying to put all the pieces together. *Shit!* Penny didn’t get enough credit for being extremely intuitive and incredibly intelligent. She stopped mid-step and spun around.

“Why would Trey give a shit about what that guy said to you?” Penny stepped closer, cocking her head. “Nash asked Sean if he wanted to repeat what he said to Trey.”

Dahlia shrugged, trying to play it off. “He’s my boss.”

Penny shook her head, “No, no.”

Penny stepped back, staring at Dahlia and darting her gaze to the back door. It was silent for a full minute, which felt like an eternity, until something shifted in Penny’s eyes. A realization. *Fuck!*

“Are you sleeping with Trey?”

Dahlia blinked incessantly, completely unprepared to answer anything. What is that obvious? Dahlia couldn’t recall any interactions she’d had with Trey in front of Penny except maybe for the fights. Even then, though, she wasn’t sure Penny had seen them together, and she hadn’t questioned her at the time. *What the hell is going on?*

“Why are you getting so upset with me?”

“Because I’m trying to figure out what the hell just happened back there and why?”

Dahlia waved it off. “That was nothing.”

“Dahlia.” Penny narrowed her gaze and cocked her head, hooking her thumb over her shoulder. “That was something. And it never happens. Ever. So, I need you to be honest with me, okay? Are you *with* Trey?”

Dahlia hesitated, but in the end, Penny would be relentless, and she’d figure it out eventually. Maybe it was easier to come clean, put her mind at ease, and settle the situation. Penny was one of Dahlia’s closest friends. Surely, she’d keep this between them if Dahlia asked.

“Yes. But you can’t say anything.”

“Oh, my God.” Penny leaned down, bracing her hands on her knees, bending over. It was dramatic and over the top, but nothing she had ever seen from her friend in the past.

“Penny, I don’t get why...”

Penny whipped up, her lips twisting. “You really have no clue what you’ve gotten yourself into, do you?”

A relationship with a gorgeous, sexy, and smart man who protects and respects me? If anything, Penny should be happy for her.

“Trey makes me happy.”

“At what cost, Dahlia? Is being with him worth risking your life?”

What the...

“What are you talking about?”

“Ever hear of the Underground?”

The Underground. Dahlia had heard of it through her ex-boyfriend from the fights. Usually, she didn’t pay much attention. It sounded more like the premise for a movie than

anything that actually went down. Kyle loved to talk up a good game, so she hadn't given it much thought.

Penny spread out her arms, and in a tone harsher than usual, she shouted. "Well, fucking welcome..."

What?

"Oz runs this state, Dahl. Everything illegal that happens, he not only knows about but orchestrates most of it. Drugs, guns, murder—he facilitates it all. There isn't anything that happens in this state that the Underground doesn't have a hand in. Hell, Oz is more powerful than our own fucking Governor! And from what I've heard, it even goes beyond our state."

Now, it was Dahlia's turn to piece everything together. Did Trey know about this? Hell, they'd grown up together. He had to know something. Penny's implications were clear.

Dahlia grabbed Penny's arm, leaning closer and glancing around to make sure no one else was listening. "Are you saying Trey and Rogue work for the Underground?" Dahlia whispered.

Penny raised her brows. "Trey and Rogue *are* the Underground, along with Oz."

Dahlia dropped her hand and stumbled back until she was against the wall.

"Trey owns the Bowery."

Penny nodded. "Yeah, he does, along with Rogue. And Oz owns the X-Lounge. They probably own a shit more legal entities we don't know about. They have to. It covers them from how they make their real money *illegally*. Stark?" Penny hooked her thumb over her shoulder. "You know what he does?"

Dahlia shook her head.

"He sells guns. Biggest distributor in the state. East used to run transport on that deal, but they pulled out about a year ago. Wanna take a guess who handles the transport now?"

There was no need to guess. She saw Stark and his men waiting on their meeting.

“Trey and Rogue?” Dahlia whispered.

“Yeah.”

Dahlia dragged her hand through her hair, tugging at the strands. How had she not put it all together? Wait, but how did Penny know? Dahlia jerked her head.

“How do you know all this?”

Penny smirked. “I have connections.”

Dahlia raised her brows. “To the Underground?”

Penny nodded. “That guy I’m seeing? He’s in.”

Dahlia snorted, shaking her head. “But here you are, all over my ass for being with Trey, and you’re doing basically the same damn thing.”

Penny walked over, stopped next to Dahlia, and rested her shoulder on the wall. “The difference is my man told me. Yours didn’t.”

No, he didn’t.

She really thought they’d gotten closer with him opening up, but it barely scratched the surface of the truth.

Penny sighed. “He drags you into his fucked-up world and doesn’t tell you a goddamn thing? And I always thought Trey was the only gentleman in the Underground.”

“How come you never mentioned his connection when I got the job here?”

“How was I supposed to know you were going to start banging your boss? I’ve known plenty of people who worked here, and they’ve all said the same thing. Trey and Rogue don’t talk or even interact with any of the staff. Ever. Like I said, the Bowery is a front for everything else.”

Oh shit! This was a mess. In more ways than one.

“Pen?”

“Yeah.”

Dahlia drew in a breath. “I love him.”

“Then it looks like you got a choice to make.”

Yes, I do. But first, she was owed a conversation and the truth.

Penny burst out laughing, which was so unexpected considering the heavy content of their conversation. She pushed off the wall, still chuckling and shaking her head. “Leave it to you to become the Princess of the Underground.”

It was a title she wasn't sure she wanted.

“God, I know people who've been in for years and never been in the same room as Trey, Rogue, or Oz. Within a month, you're sleeping with one and on a first-name basis with the other two.” Penny snorted. “The next thing you're gonna tell me is that you had fucking coffee with Caruso.”

Dahlia stilled. “Sal?”

“Oh fuck, Dahlia!”

This was bad.

Trey was beyond livid, and his fury only amplified watching Stark and his men take their seats. Stark and his second, Gerard, sat side by side while Sean and two other members of Stark's crew stood at their backs a few feet away.

Nash had given him the rundown of the interaction between Sean and Dahlia. Nash had also shared it with Rogue. What should have been a cordial meeting discussing the deals of the next transport had become something none of them could've foreseen.

Trey had never been put in this position where he struggled between his professional and personal life. But Sean, unknowingly, had taken a shot at his woman. Trey wasn't about to let that go. *I can't.* He grabbed his glass off the bar and shot back the whiskey in one mouthful. The burn of his throat only magnified the fire in his veins.

Nash, Caine, Cyrus, and Ridge had stayed close to the bar with him while Rogue was seated at his usual table. Once

Stark's men were seated and situated in line, Rogue stood, making his way over to the bar.

"Whiskey," he snapped at the girl behind the bar and shifted his gaze to Trey. "How we doing this?"

Trey glanced over at the table, taking in all the men, but giving special interest to Sean. *Motherfucker!* It was bad enough that Dahlia had her own insecurities to contend with, but to have someone come into his place and outwardly offend her? *Un-fucking-acceptable.* Trey had always seen the bigger picture with business, taking nothing personally.

Until now.

Trey turned to Nash. "We own a higher percentage of the gun trade. Just need a distributor. Got anyone in mind?"

This was a done deal. Stark's man had taken a shot at Dahlia, and now Trey would unleash his own shot.

"I have one in mind." He glanced over at Rogue. "Not sure you're gonna like who it is."

Ah fuck! Trey instantly knew who Nash was referring to, but it took Rogue a little longer. It was clear from the harsh lines between his brows when he realized.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Rogue shouted.

Killcreek Drifters MC.

Nash held up his hand. "There could be others. Just thinking, if you need a guarantee right now of a crew that would take it, Killcreek would."

This would ultimately come down to Rogue's call. Trey had no opposition to working with Killcreek, and as Nash pointed out, they could have other options. Or not. It was a risk cutting ties with Stark and being left to work with Killcreek.

"Your call," Trey said.

He wouldn't force Rogue's hand. That's not the way they worked. They were a team and worked fluidly since the day they'd started. It had to be mutual.

Rogue grabbed his glass, drank it in one shot, and slammed the glass on the top of the bar. He turned to Trey, glared with a tight scowl, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“Out of all the fucking women on this goddamn fucking planet, you pick the biggest fucking pain in my ass.” Rogue turned and stalked back to the table. Trey couldn’t help himself and gave into a small smile.

This was more than just breaking a deal over Dahlia. It spoke volumes of what Rogue was willing to do and sacrifice for his woman. And more importantly, for Trey.

He pushed off the bar and walked to the table, standing a few feet away from Rogue. It was his usual spot. He rarely sat down at any meeting. It was his position and one he was proud of. Trey didn’t have to run a meeting to know his importance or worth.

Stark glanced between them. “I’ve got all the details for the next run. I’ve...”

Rogue held up his hand. “Not so fast, motherfucker. We got other business to address first.”

Stark straightened in his seat, looking to Trey for answers. He’d get none. Trey glared back at the man who shifted in his seat.

Rogue pointed over Stark’s shoulder to Sean.

“Tell me what you fucking said to her. You had no problem saying it. So now say it to me and Trey, motherfucker.”

Stark raised his hand. “Rogue, I don’t—”

Rogue ignored Stark with his eyes pinned on Sean, and he shot out his hand. “I have killed men for less, so I suggest you fucking speak up now, asshole.”

Trey scowled, watching Sean look back at Stark. He was waiting on a lifeline.

“Stark, you better get your boy in line, or you’re walking out one man down,” Rogue said.

“Rogue, he didn’t mean anything by it.” Stark was trying to play peacemaker.

Trey cleared his throat, gaining their attention. “A member of your crew openly disrespected and offended Dahlia.”

“Well, we know her past from East, and she...”

“She doesn’t work with East anymore. She works here. And in addition to being one our employees, Dahlia is also—” Trey narrowed his gaze. “—my woman.”

Stark visibly paled, recognizing the severity of the situation.

“That’s right, motherfucker. That asshole walked into our fucking club and called Trey’s woman a whore.” Rogue laughed and angled his head, grinning back at Stark. “But he didn’t mean anything by it? No disrespect, right? Okay, fair fucking game, Stark. Enough about Trey’s woman. Let’s talk about yours.”

Stark straightened in his seat. “Rogue...”

“Thinking she’s about your age, right? Maybe fifties, pushing sixty. Let me ask you, bitches that old still handle a throat full of cum? She still take it up the ass, or is fucking strictly missionary from here on out?”

It was a vulgar, crass, and disrespectful statement. And it served its purpose. Stark’s nostrils flared, and his face turned a bright shade of red.

“This is getting out of hand.” Gerard, Stark’s second-in-command, looked between him and Rogue.

“Is it?” Rogue asked, glancing up at Trey with a smile. “What do you think, Trey? Have I gone too far?”

“No.” Trey steeled his features.

“Trey,” Gerard said, pleading with his hands spread.

Trey had always been the voice of reason. The peacemaker and able to control Rogue. Not now. Trey would

allow Rogue to unleash on these men and enjoy every minute of it.

Stark jumped up from the table, and immediately security surrounded him. “You’re fucking comparing my wife to a club whore who fucked half the MC?”

Trey smirked, narrowing his gaze. “There’s no comparison.”

Stark and his crew may have looked at Dahlia as though she was beneath them. Trey didn’t. She was everything to him. *And I’m about to prove it!*

Rogue laughed and nodded. “No, there ain’t. No footage of Trey getting sucked off by a whore or two or three. But we got that shit on you. That would make a hell of a fucking Christmas card.” Rogue paused. “We might even be able to Photoshop your wife in it. We can call it Merry Sucking Christmas!”

While Rogue could have gone on taunting them for hours, Trey was done.

“This shipment will be your last,” Trey said.

Gerard stood, eyeing Stark, who adamantly shook his head.

“You can’t do that.”

“He just fucking did.” Rogue smirked. “We own two-thirds of it. That gives us the upper hand.”

Stark was bewildered and looked to Trey. “He’ll apologize to her.”

Trey scoffed. It was too late for that. In fact, the minute he spoke to Dahlia, it had been over for Stark’s crew.

Trey walked around the table, standing a few feet from Stark and his men. He was only an arm’s reach away from Sean. It was a perfect setup for what Trey had planned.

“He will never speak to her again. *Ever.*”

Trey reached out, grabbed Sean by the throat, and lifted him up with one hand before crashing him down over the

table. All the men scattered, showing no effort to help their man. It proved yet another point. There was no loyalty or honor within Stark's crew. Sean curled onto his side, his body half limp, but Trey wasn't done. He was going to inflict enough physical pain as he'd imagined Dahlia mentally endured when she'd heard that comment. *And it's a lot, motherfucker.*

Trey bent down, grabbed Sean by his collar, and forced him to stand. Trey allowed a brief second for him to regain his bearings before he grabbed him by the back of the neck and crashed his face against the hard wall. It was a hard hit, and his body immediately slumped to the floor. Blood pooled around his nose and mouth. Sean wouldn't be walking out of the club. He'd have to be carried. Trey was almost done, but not yet. He leaned down, grabbing Sean by the throat.

"If you ever say anything to her or about her, I will fucking kill you. And I'll make it so your mother doesn't even get a body to bury. Understand?"

His throat gurgled.

Trey tightened his grip. "Gonna need the fucking words, or your end is coming sooner than you fucking think."

"Trey, please," Stark pleaded.

He was beyond reason. In most situations, he could conform to reason. Not this one.

"Do you understand?" Trey asked through gritted teeth.

Sean nodded, and Trey heard a faint, gasping breath. "Yes."

Trey released him with a slight shove and straightened. This was over.

And it was just beginning.

He didn't know when she'd showed up or how much she'd witnessed, but Dahlia was in the corner near the bar, eyes wide and fear written all over her face.

Fuck!

Trey knew this conversation would eventually have to happen, but he'd been enjoying the facade of being the man she thought he was instead of the monster he'd become.

My time is up.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dahlia had no idea what she'd stumbled upon when she reached the balcony, but she stood in the corner, frozen in fear, as she watched Trey grab Sean by the throat and slam him into the wall. It was a side of Trey she'd never seen. If she had to guess, most people hadn't. But after everything Penny had just shared, she was seeing Trey in a different light. It wasn't so much the violence but the reason for his actions. *Me*.

Dahlia felt the weight of the stares coming from the bar, but she'd been so mesmerized by the scene playing out in front of her that she couldn't look away. It was incredibly chilling. Dahlia would've expected Stark and his men to come to the aid of Sean, but as Trey stepped away, they remained silent.

Dahlia had a front-row view to the power of the Underground.

Trey turned and immediately locked eyes on her. The knot in her throat made it impossible to speak. Even if she'd found her voice, what could she have said? When she'd walked up to the balcony, she was fully prepared to storm his meeting. She was hellbent on confronting him about keeping the truth from her. Now? Dahlia was at a complete loss for words.

For all her fear and anxiety, when he stalked across the room and came directly to her, she didn't retreat. Trey grabbed her wrist and hauled her down the hall to his office. And she went willingly.

Trey released her, and he closed the door behind them. Dahlia wasn't sure exactly what she'd walked in on. But when Trey drove his hand over his head, he was clearly trying to calm himself.

"You weren't supposed to see that," he said, giving her his back.

"I think there's a few things I'm not supposed to see or know, right, Trey?"

His body stiffened, and he slowly turned.

This was a moment of truth in their relationship. *Truth* being the operative word.

“Imagine my surprise when I find out the man I’m in love with is considered a King in the Underground.”

Trey stared back at her in silence, giving her no reaction. He may have lost his control with Sean, but it was in full effect with her. His silence spoke volumes, and not just from her question but her admission.

“You’re not even going to deny it?”

Trey sighed, and straightened his shoulders. “Why would I? I’m not going to lie to you, Dahlia.”

Dahlia widened her eyes. “That’s all you’ve been doing, Trey! This whole time, I’ve been in the dark about the other side of your life. I gave you everything, and you pick and choose what you give me.”

“I never lied to you. I simply kept my personal and professional life separate. It’s safer that way.”

Dahlia spread out her arms. “For who?”

“You!” he snapped. “This has always been about *you* for me. Keeping you safe and not allowing you to get caught up in my world. I chose this life. You didn’t.”

Dahlia drew in a breath and walked across the office, running her hand through her hair. While she could understand his reasoning, it still kept her out of the loop. If they were going to do this, she needed everything put on the table. No more secrets.

She folded her arms and turned to Trey. “You never gave me a choice, Trey. And now, after putting it all together, everything you shared with me about your past...I’m thinking you didn’t choose it either. It chose you.”

What choice did Trey really have for his own survival? He’d been so young. He did what he had to do, thrust into a life she couldn’t even have imagined. Her youth may not have

been perfect, but at least she'd had a childhood. That was something Trey had been denied.

If they were going to move forward, they couldn't look back.

"Drugs, guns, extortion, murder. Am I leaving anything out?"

Trey knitted his brows. "Quite a few, actually."

What the... *Oh hell.* Dahlia clamped her lips, trying to stay focused. This was all so much. She needed a breakdown, some type of understanding.

"Were you ever going to tell me?"

Trey cupped his mouth, finally showing some emotion. "Not unless it concerned your safety."

"So I'm just supposed to stay in the dark about this other life of yours?"

Trey stiffened, but his gaze softened.

"Yes. Anything I tell you makes you an accessory. I wouldn't do that." Trey cleared his throat. "And that's the way it will remain. It's the only option that allows you to leave me if you choose. If I tell you everything, you don't have that choice."

Dahlia froze, his admission settling into her mind. Leave him? That thought hadn't even crossed her mind. Even after everything Penny told her, she wasn't going to leave Trey. But in Trey's head, this was his way of protecting her.

"This is why you wanted to keep our relationship a secret?" Dahlia whispered.

"Being tied to me directly puts you at risk. I hold a coveted position in the Underground. Power has a way of creating envy, and some people will use any means necessary once they discover someone else's weakness."

This was all so confusing, yet made perfect sense.

"Am I your weakness?"

“Yes.” Trey clenched his jaw and muttered a curse under his breath. He dragged his hand over his face, clearly distraught. For a man like Trey, who’d had to be strong his entire life, any admission of weakness was probably painful to admit. But he did. *For me.*

“It’s about keeping you safe. I’ll give you what you need to know but nothing more.”

He remained silent, cupping his mouth with a tight scowl forming over his brow.

“Is this how it worked in your other relationships?”

“There haven’t been others. Just you.”

She blinked, trying to comprehend.

“What about Rogue and Oz? How did they...”

Trey was shaking his head before she even finished.

“It’s a world where having anyone too close is a liability.”

”That didn’t stop you from being with me.”

“I tried, Dahlia.”

The corner of her mouth curled. “But you couldn’t stay away?”

“No.”

This was far from a perfect love story. There was no damsel in distress, no shining knight. It was just them. Dark pasts, questionable decisions, danger, death, and violence. *And us.*

“I’m going to take you home.” Trey said.

Wait, what? They were in the middle of discussing their entire relationship, and he wanted her to leave? It made no sense. Before she could respond, Trey spoke.

“I need you to think long and hard about this, Dahlia. If I keep you as mine, that changes everything for you. Your life and how you’ve lived changes to be with me.”

I know.

“It already has, Trey. And let’s be honest, it’s not as if I was living a cookie-cutter life anyway. Maybe not by your standards, but my life isn’t like most women my age.”

When he reached for her hand, she backed away. “I made my decision. But maybe you need to think about yours. Make sure I’m who you really want by your side. Because that’s where I’d be, *right by your side*. Not somewhere in the background without a clue of what’s going on. I won’t be just someone who gets half of you, only the good stuff. I want it all or nothing. And that’s non-negotiable.”

“Dahlia...”

“I know you can’t tell me everything, and I’m not asking you to. This is your business. But I want you wholly. Everything. The good, the bad, and the ugly. I want all of you.”

Trey walked over and slipped his hands over her waist, pulling her close against his chest. “You can walk away, Dahlia.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “You clearly don’t understand how the heart works, Trey. I can’t leave. My heart won’t allow it. It’s too late. You made me fall in love with you.”

His gaze softened. “You have all of me.”

I’ll accept nothing less, and love everything you give me.

When Trey and Rogue arrived at Oz’s safe house, they walked straight down the hall, veered left, and took the stairs to the loft. Most houses meant for this type of work were old, rundown, and mundane. Oz had a different approach. This was a fully furnished old farmhouse. It wasn’t flashy enough to gain attention or rundown enough to bring concern. It was set on twenty acres, forty miles outside of the city.

Finally, Dahlia would get her own revenge. She’d just never know about it. After Oz gave the initial go-ahead, it was Nash who took the lead on setting everything up. Trey was

tied too deeply, and with emotion came mistakes. There couldn't be any when it came to this matter.

Nash waited at the landing and stepped aside to let them pass. "Got him downstairs. Everything's set up."

"Any complications?" Trey asked.

"No, and none that I could foresee in the future. We covered our bases." Nash smiled. "It turns out there's a lot of people who hate this son of a bitch, including his wife, who he bailed on once he was released. No one is gonna look too hard for him."

Perfect.

The room was large and airy, with a huge picture window overlooking the land in the back. In true Oz fashion, it was detailed with expensive furniture, art, and a fully-stocked bar. Trey walked to the couch and sat on the opposite end from Rogue. Oz was seated in the chair across from Trey. He lit his cigar with his hardened scowl aimed at Rogue.

"I heard there was *another* incident. This time with one of Stark's crew."

With their history, it was fair for Oz to assume any altercation, especially public violence, would be at the hands of Rogue.

Rogue laughed and held up hands. "Not guilty this time."

Oz stilled and slowly looked over at Trey.

"We ended the deal with Stark. Need a new distributor," Trey said.

Oz eyed both men. "What was the issue?"

"Dahlia."

Oz raised his brows. "We're cutting million-dollar operations over a woman now?"

Trey didn't even hesitate. "We do when it's *my* woman."

Oz shared a look with Nash, but Trey kept his gaze locked on Oz. This wasn't up for discussion or negotiations.

Rogue would have his back, and Trey would not relent. Trey was prepared for the fight. Though it never came. Oz tapped the ashes in the ashtray and sat back in his chair, staring at Trey.

“Got a few distributors we can use.”

Trey nodded.

“Killcreek being one of them.”

“Ah, fuck me!” Rogue snapped.

They’d been warned, and Trey wasn’t surprised Oz would push for it. Rogue did exactly what Trey expected, listing off a few other crews to consider. At that point, Trey zoned out of the conversation, knowing in the end, Oz would get his way. He always did.

“I can assume since you’re so willing to end deals that you’ve made your decision.”

“I have.”

Oz sipped his whiskey, setting the glass on the table. “Then it’s done. Now we move forward.” Oz glanced over at Nash and lifted his chin. Seconds later, Oz’s security walked up the stairs and spread out in the room.

“Care to fucking explain?” Rogue asked.

“Two of mine will work under you now.”

Rogue scoffed, eyeing the men. “Giving us some of your men? We don’t need them. Got our own.”

“They’re not for you. They’re Dahlia’s security. She needs her own.”

Trey drew in a breath and nodded. She did. Trey eyed the men, knowing they were all capable and trained well. But there was an opportunity for him to pay back a favor at the moment.

“She needs a third. They won’t be able to go everywhere with her. It would bring too much attention to Dahlia. She needs a woman on her security.”

Oz arched his brow. “As you know, that market in the Underground is very small.”

It was. There were only a few who worked on Oz’s security, and Trey knew he wouldn’t eagerly give them up. Trey also knew there was one person he’d never use to her full ability.

“Noelle.”

Trey noticed Nash jerk his head and furrow his brows.

Oz arched his brow. “Want to take your chances with that one?”

“I do.”

Before Oz could respond, Nash stalked over, rounding the back of Oz’s chair, and stood between him and Trey. “She’s not equipped to handle being security.”

What the hell was Nash talking about?

“She was when I needed her.” Trey said.

“She’s a waitress, Trey.”

This line of pushback from Nash was confusing since he’d always been the type to help people advance in the Underground, not hold them back.

“No. She was working her way up the ranks on a crew before you moved her to be a waitress. Had that incident not happened, she’d probably be standing in this room right now alongside the rest of security.”

Nash’s jaw squared.

Oz angled his head, looked up at Nash, and scowled. “Is there a problem?”

Nash cleared his throat. “No, sir.”

Trey watched Nash walk across the room and down the stairs.

“You take Noelle.” Oz said.

“Now that we got all the bullshit squared away.” Rogue stood. “Can we fucking get on with this?”

Trey followed Rogue's lead past the security and down the stairs. The house was old and didn't have access to the cellar from the interior. They had to go out the back door and around the side of the house. Rogue pulled open the metal doors and waved Trey to go first.

It was time for some long-awaited revenge.

For Dahlia.

Trey drew in a breath and walked down the steps.

Ben Crosby.

His head hung low, bloody and battered. This was just the beginning. Trey grasped a handful of hair, pulling his head back. "Years later, and you still can't keep your shit together? Your ass should be rotting in jail."

"I did my time."

Trey tightened his grip. "But she's still doing hers. Lives every day without her father *because of you*. You took him from her. *Your time* isn't over."

"I'm sorry."

"Are you?" Trey tightened his grip. "What's her name?"

He blinked, scanning his gaze over the room. "What?"

"His daughter. What's her name?"

He shook his head, his breath laboring. "I-I don't..."

"You don't know. Not hers, or his wife's, his mother's, sister's, or brother's. You don't know any of them. But I bet you know yours. The same fucking people who were begging for your salvation at trial sat across from the family you fucking destroyed."

"N-no, no, I'm different. I'm not the same person I was."

Even if he had been a changed man. It didn't change the past. Not for Dahlia. Or her father.

Trey narrowed his gaze. "Neither is she. You stole who she was supposed to be. You took that from her. Now, I'm gonna take that from you."

Trey couldn't bring Dahlia's father back, but he could find retribution on his behalf. He may not want it, but Trey needed it. Even if Dahlia never knew about it, he'd seek revenge. This man didn't just take a life. He altered futures. He shifted the realm of what should have been. Even if it meant Dahlia never crossing his path, this man took her future. He changed her. He created the empty hole in her heart. Trey would spend the rest of his life trying to make it whole, but he would never succeed. He couldn't. That space was reserved solely for her dad.

"I have kids." It was a desperate plea and dishonorable at that. He'd been out four years and hadn't made any effort to see his children. He was using them merely as leverage.

Trey leaned closer. "So did the man you killed."

"Please." He wept, dropping his head to the floor. Some people might view his pain as empathy for his children. Trey knew better. He'd seen a lifetime of selfishness and faux heroes. This was one of them. But he wasn't above one last-ditch effort. A Hail Mary of sorts. Trey could be fair. He could acknowledge redemption. But it had to be honest and pure. It had to be real.

Trey crouched down and pulled his head up to eye level. "Dylan, Jacob, and Elsa."

"Those are mine."

His children, whom he hadn't seen in years, but they were still his.

Trey slowly nodded. "Yeah, I know. Now, tell me the name of the kid whose father you killed. Tell me *her* name."

"I-I don't..." Beads of sweat formed over his brow.

"You don't know. Because in your world, she doesn't matter." Trey squared his jaw and dug his fingers into his flesh. "But in *my* world, she's everything and the only one who matters."

Trey pushed his head down and straightened. Several men guarded the perimeter, not making any eye contact. They would do as they were told and follow any order handed down

to them. He glanced over at Rogue, seeing the bloodthirst in his eyes. He felt it. Not only revenge but Dahlia's loss. Rogue would never admit to it, but he'd shown his true colors. Trey had claimed Dahlia as his own, but so had Rogue in a sense. She was part of them now. This betrayal took on a whole other meaning. It was personal. This was family. In his mind, much like Trey's, she was family. Hers had unknowingly become theirs.

Yeah, it's fucking personal.

Trey scanned the room, glancing over at Nash before drawing his gaze to Oz.

Oz slowly nodded with his eyes locked on the man. It was the go-ahead. Permission granted. Oz was giving it because, again...*it's personal.*

"I suppose I could be the better man and allow you to live." Trey slowly smirked. "Unfortunately for you, I'm not."

Trey drew the gun from his waistband, flicked off the safety, and turned, waiting for the man to look up. "I want your fucking eyes." The man peered up, and Trey didn't hesitate. He shot once, twice, a third time, and then a fourth. *Straight to the heart.* The man's body jolted with each bullet, but he hadn't succumbed until the last one. He fell forward, unable to break his fall, and his cheek slammed into the hard concrete.

This wasn't Trey's first kill. Or his second, or third, or his last.

But it may have been his most important.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“You sure you don’t mind?” Sloane asked.

Dahlia laughed, grabbing the keys from her hand. Dahlia had come in for inventory again, but it hadn’t lasted nearly as long as last time. She had about three hours until her shift and wanted to go home and shower before coming back tonight.

Sloane, who was stuck in the office all day, asked if Dahlia could swing by her house and pick up the payroll worksheets she’d forgotten that morning.

“It’s a twenty-minute drive, Sloane. Not a big deal.”

“I’d ask Blade, but he’s on another run, and...”

Dahlia grabbed her hand, forcing her friend to stop talking. “I want to do this. I’ll go grab it, go home, take a shower, grab something to eat, and have plenty of time to be back by seven. This is not a big deal.”

Sloane smiled and cocked her head. “It’s a big deal to me. Thank you.”

Dahlia walked out of her office and down the hall, looking down at her phone. She had a few missed calls but nothing that couldn’t wait until later. She’d been trying to set up a time to visit Karia and the baby. She’d suggested picking up Sal and bringing him along, but coordinating everyone’s schedule was harder than she thought. Apparently, Sal was a very busy man.

Dahlia shoved her phone in her back pocket and glanced up. Unfortunately, it was a second too late to avoid a collision. Dahlia slammed against the woman, and they both fell into the side wall.

“Oh shit, I’m sorry,” Dahlia said, straightened, and reached out, offering the woman help. But she immediately snatched her hand back when she recognized her. *Oh hell, not you.*

The woman adjusted her black form-fitted top and jerked her head with a sharp glare. It only lasted a few seconds before her face softened, and the corner of her mouth hiked.

“We meet again.” Noelle laughed. “Under the same exact circumstances.”

Dahlia forced a smile, noticing the distinct difference from their last encounter. Noelle offered her hand.

“Dahlia, right? I’m Noelle.”

I know who you are.

This is so fucking strange. But, as an associate of Trey’s, she’d be cordial. Dahlia shook her hand and stepped back, expecting Noelle to walk away. She didn’t.

“Nice to meet you,” Dahlia said and pointed toward the door. “I have to get going.”

Dahlia got about five feet away when Noelle called her name. *Oh shit!* Dahlia was too close to pretend to have not heard her. Dahlia drew in a breath, plastered a smile on her face, and turned. Noelle stood two feet away, her hands clasped in front of her.

“I know you’re leaving, and I won’t take up too much of your time. But I want to apologize for our first meeting. I was short with you.” Noelle clamped her lips and shook her head. “Actually, I was rude. It wasn’t personal. I’m like that with everyone, which I know sounds awful. But in my line of work, it’s safer and easier to be a bitch than a decent human being sometimes.” Noelle snorted, shaking her head. “Again, that sounds awful. I’m sorry.”

Dahlia wasn’t following everything Noelle said, but she showed genuine remorse.

“I didn’t know who you were. Had I known, I would have shown you the respect you deserve, and going forward, that’s exactly what you’ll get from me as we work together.”

Working together?

“Are you a bartender?”

Noelle squinted. “No. I’m part of security.”

“Oh, for the club?”

Noelle cocked her head, eyeing Dahlia. “For you.”

What? Security for her? That was absurd. Dahlia didn’t need security. In fact, she didn’t want it. Why would anyone want other people shadowing their every move?

“I don’t have security.”

Noelle widened her eyes but remained silent.

Dahlia leaned forward. “Do I?”

Noelle licked her lips, clearly nervous. “I start in three days as a member of your security, along with two others.”

What the fuck, Trey? Hadn’t they just had a whole conversation about sharing? Oh, this man.

“I take it Trey hasn’t mentioned it to you?”

Dahlia ground her teeth. “Not yet!”

“Shit!” Noelle muttered and grabbed her hips, bowing her head. “I just got this position, and I’ve managed to fuck it up even before it started.”

This wasn’t Noelle’s fault. Trey should’ve told her. But Dahlia was well aware of how this all worked, and taking in Noelle’s nervous and concerned demeanor, it was clear she’d be held accountable for informing Dahlia.

“I won’t say anything to Trey. I’ll wait for him to tell me. Your name will never come up. Don’t worry.”

Noelle glanced up.

“God knows that man has enough secrets. I’m entitled to a few of my own.”

Noelle smiled. “I appreciate this, Dahlia.”

Dahlia nodded and waved, walking out to her car. She’d keep her promise to Noelle, but her blood was boiling that Trey had neglected to mention it to her. He’d warned her that her life would forever change, but she’d thought she’d get a

heads-up first. As with all relationships, this should've been a discussion.

Dahlia got in her car and headed over to Grove Mill. Thankfully, the traffic was light, and she zipped over the bridge and into the small town. Grove Mill was much less congested compared to Lawry. In fact, it'd been a while since she'd seen other cars on the road except for the one behind her.

She was turning onto one of the side streets toward Sloane's house when the large van pulled alongside her, gesturing for Dahlia to roll her window down. It took her a minute to find the button, so she came to a stop.

"There are sparks coming from under your car."

What? How was that even possible? It was new.

"You might be dragging something," the man said.

Oh shit. She had the car less than a few days, and she'd already broken it. Dahlia forced a smile and waved. "Thank you." She pulled into a gravel lot with an abandoned, beaten-down building growing vines on the front of it. She threw the car in park and jumped out, rounding the back bumper.

The only way she'd see underneath was if she got down on the ground. She scanned the concrete, hoping she wasn't going to wind up with dog shit on herself. Ironically, that should have been the least of her worries.

Dahlia bent on her knees, flattening out into a laying position, trying to keep from making too much contact with the ground. It was dark, and she couldn't see much.

"I need a flashlight," she muttered to herself.

"Here you go," the deep voice sent a chill up her spine, and she jerked up.

But she wasn't quick enough. She turned her head and saw the flashlight striking at her from the hand of a tall figure. She didn't even have time to brace herself as it slammed against the side of her head and cheekbone. Dahlia slammed against the gravel and collapsed, unable to find her bearings or

see much of anything. Her vision clouded, her ears rang, and the side of her face throbbed.

“Get her in the van.” It was the last thing she heard as warm liquid dripped down her face.

Then, she saw black.

Trey had been in his office for the last hour finalizing the gun trade details. Oz had already reached out to Ace at Killcreek to set up a meeting. As far as Trey knew, they were interested. Rogue was still being a bastard, but they’d find a way to make it work.

The knock on his door had him glancing across the room to Aaron and Sloane standing in the doorway.

“Do you have a minute?” Sloane asked.

Trey resisted his urge to roll his eyes. Nothing with Sloane ever took just a minute. He turned in his seat and waved them inside. He’d be clear with his time restraint. Not that it ever mattered to this woman.

“No, so be quick.”

Aaron stepped in front of Sloane. Hopefully, he’d take the lead on this conversation rather than her.

“Have you heard from Dahlia?”

Trey had made his connection known throughout the Underground, but at the club, it was still left to people making assumptions and a few rumors. He assumed Aaron was in the know, but he wasn’t aware of Sloane’s knowledge. It was possible Dahlia had shared, and at this point, it didn’t really matter. It would be public knowledge soon enough.

Trey furrowed his brows. “She’s working bar one tonight.”

Aaron glanced over at Sloane, who seemed unusually quiet. “Right, but she’s not here. She hasn’t shown up.”

Trey glanced down at his phone, taking account of the time. It was past eight, with her shift starting at seven. It was

possible she'd gotten stuck in traffic, but Dahlia would have called.

“She hasn't called?”

Sloane stepped forward, clear distress written over her features.

“No, and I've been trying her phone, but it goes straight to voicemail each time.”

Trey hadn't seen Dahlia since the morning. As far as he knew, she was coming in for inventory and had a shift starting at seven.”

“Did she show up for the inventory?”

Sloane nodded. “Yeah, but it ended a little after four. She said she was heading home to shower and get something to eat. And umm...” Sloane rushed forward, pressing her hand against his desk. “Trey, I gave her the keys to stop by my house to pick up the payroll worksheets. When she didn't show up at seven, I got worried and asked my neighbor Trini to go over to my house and see if Dahlia had picked them up. They were still there. Dahlia never made it to my house. Something's not right.”

Trey stood, rounding his desk, feeling his chest tighten. He'd tried calling Dahlia earlier, but it had gone to voicemail, too. He hadn't thought too much at the time and figured she'd pop in his office when she arrived for her shift.

Fuck!

Chapter Thirty

Dahlia flicked open her eyes and immediately shivered. Nothing made sense, especially the draft coming in through her room. She'd gotten the window fixed. As she pushed up from the hard surface, the scent was the first indicator she wasn't in her bedroom. It was damp and musty with another scent, she couldn't quite place.

Her head was pounding, and her neck was sore, but she found the energy to look at the cramped space. *Where the fuck am I?*

It was a room she'd never been inside of, with only a dirty mattress shoved in the corner and an old wooden chair. Dahlia trembled, and for the first time, she noticed she'd been stripped down to her bra and panties. Fear ran through her, and she scrambled to her feet only to get lightheaded. She reached out, grabbing hold of the window sill to steady herself. *Holy fuck!*

Her brain went into immediate overdrive as she tried to retrace her steps, but the panic was heavy as she whipped her head, looking around the room.

She remembered stopping at an old abandoned parking lot in Grove Mill. Someone had alerted her to a possible issue with her car. When she pulled over, she couldn't remember anyone following her, but they had. A sharp object to the side of her head and severe pain was the last thing she could recall before waking up minutes ago.

Oh my God. I'm so fucked. Dahlia steadied herself and tiptoed across the room but stilled when the door swung open. Three men stood in the hallway, peering in. She recognized Sean. The other two seemed familiar, but she couldn't place them. The one closest to Sean seemed concerned but not surprised. The other man was in full shock, which quickly escalated to anger. He jerked his head to Sean and the other guy.

Sean held up his hands. “Murphy, let me explain the plan.”

“What fucking plan? To get us all fucking killed?”

Sean pointed into the room. “To get the deal back in place. Just hear me out. Me and Nick figured if we had something to bargain with, Trey and Rogue would have to reinstate the deal. We can trade her.”

Trade me?

“Do you have any idea what you’ve just fucking done?” Murphy shouted, clearly frustrated.

Nick stepped forward. “It’s a solid plan, man. If they want her back, they’ll work with us.”

Dahlia had the feeling that Sean and Nick weren’t seeing the severity of what they’d done, nor did they fully understand how the Underground worked. But clearly, Murphy did.

“Are you really this fucking stupid? You can’t fucking bargain with Trey and Rogue. They’re not gonna reinstate anything. They’re gonna kill us. Fuck.” Murphy went silent, then spoke again. “I’m calling Stark. Do not fucking move.”

There was a small stretch of silence until he spoke again. Murphy gave a complete rundown and a few details Dahlia hadn’t remembered.

Murphy slowly turned his head, looking into the room.

“She can identify Sean, sir.”

Dahlia could, and she would if given the chance. Murphy nodded, and a minute later, he hung up.

“What did he say?” Sean asked.

“He’s coming down here.”

“See?” Sean said.

Murphy snapped. “See fucking what? Stark ain’t coming down here to try and make a deal ’cause he knows they won’t. Fuck!”

“I was trying to make it right.”

“All you fucking did was seal her fate and sign her death certificate.” Murphy pointed through the doorway directly at her. “He’s coming down here to clean up your fucking mess, but she’s as good as dead.”

A chill ran through her body and pebbled her skin. *As good as dead.*

Sean glanced into the room, his gaze pinned on her. She waited to see some type of remorse or regret in his eyes. Dahlia saw nothing. He carelessly shrugged, reaching for the doorknob and pulled the door closed.

Her body was numb. She couldn’t even feel the ache in her joints or the pain from her injuries. Her body was on the brink of shock at the realization that they were going to kill her to cover their tracks.

Dahlia stumbled back, and she felt the blood draining from her face. Dahlia quickly glanced around the room, looking for anything to use as a weapon. She was officially in survival mode. Unfortunately, unless she planned on striking the man with the chair or smothering him with the mattress, her options were limited.

Fuck!

Before she could come up with another plan, the door creaked and opened. She was now face to face with her would-be killer and no match for the gun gripped tightly in his palm. Murphy made no attempt to advance, but his intention was clear. Dahlia immediately held up her hands.

“Please, don’t do this.”

“I have no choice.”

“Yes, you do.” Her voice cracked, and she swallowed the knot in her throat. “I promise I won’t say anything. You have my word.”

He snorted. “Your word ain’t shit to me, sweetheart.”

When he started toward her, Dahlia raced across the room, pressing her back to the wall. The man walked over to

the bed, grabbed the dirty pillow, and started toward her. His very own makeshift silencer. *Oh my God.*

“Is Trey’s?”

Murphy halted and furrowed his brows. She wasn’t exactly sure if this angle would work, but she was desperate enough to say anything to keep herself alive.

“You were there the other night. You saw how Trey reacted to Sean just insulting me, right? And that’s not like Trey. He doesn’t lose his temper. But he did for me.” Dahlia drew in a breath. “I’m not just some girl. Not to Trey. He will find you, and he’ll kill you.”

“Not without a body.”

Dahlia shook her head. “He won’t need a body. If I don’t show up, he’ll come looking for me. And he won’t come alone. Do you know how many people work under Trey in the Underground? He’ll hunt you down and find you. And when he does, he’ll make you suffer. They all will.” Dahlia cleared her throat, seeing the effect her threat was having on him. She had to push more. Make it personal. “And it won’t just be you. You kill his woman, and he will come for yours. Are you married, Murphy? Girlfriend? Is that what you want?”

He stilled, his face hardening. She wasn’t sure she had him, but she was going to make a deal of her own.

“Call Trey and tell him where we are.”

He shook his head. “It’s too late for that.”

“No, it isn’t. As long as I’m still breathing, it’s not too late. For you. Eventually, Trey will find out who was behind this, and when he does, he’ll leave no man standing. And you know it. But you have a choice here. This is your chance to save your ass if you help me.”

Murphy brushed his wrist against his forehead.

“Call him, explain what’s happening, and show him you’re trying to help me.” Dahlia sucked in a breath. “I give you my word. If you save my life, I’ll save yours.”

Trey stood beside Rogue while staring at the monitors. Jared was pulling up the link to the tracking device he had installed when her car was being detailed. Trey had gone back and forth with his decision to have it placed in her car without her permission. It was an invasion of privacy. It seemed over the top and a bit obsessive, but Trey wanted her location at all times. It had nothing to do with trust and everything to do with safety.

“Hurry the fuck up, Jar.” Rogue shouted.

“It’s a new system. It was only installed a few days ago. Thought I’d have more time to set everything up.”

“Well, fuck...”

Trey held up his hand and remained silent. The more pressure Rogue put on Jared or the situation, the longer it would take. This was where patience would have been an asset for Rogue. His partner was like a caged animal pacing around the room while Trey contained his fury and tension and focused on the screen, waiting for her location to appear.

Jared tapped a few keys, and a map popped up on the screen. Trey immediately stepped forward, scanning it.

“Okay, so after she left here, it looks like she headed out of Lawry and into Grove Mill.”

It aligned with Sloane’s account.

“Why the fuck would she be in that shithole?”

Jared widened the screen and pointed. “Considering her affiliation with East, maybe visiting friends.”

Trey furrowed his brows and squinted. “How close is she to Sloane’s?”

“About half a mile. As far as I can tell, she stopped in a parking lot of an abandoned building.”

Why? That didn’t make any sense.

“And her car is still there?”

Jared tapped on the keyboard and leaned in. “No. She took off about ten minutes later, heading north up to the

mountains.” Jared paused, clicking a few more buttons. “Her speed is off.”

Trey leaned closer to the screen. “What?”

“Well, she follows a pattern for the first few hours. No more than five miles over the speed limit, but when she left Grove Mill, it was clocking her at about thirty over, and those roads are hard to navigate at that speed. Unless you know them.”

It was a clear indication Dahlia hadn’t been driving when she left Grove Mill.

“Where’s the car now?” Trey asked.

Jared stared at the screen. “Greene County.”

What the fuck? There was nothing in that part of the state other than farmlands and country. The Underground had used similar areas for one source only. *Fuck!* Trey pulled out his phone, quickly pulling up his contact.

“Need you to send the screen location to Nash. Now.”

“What the fuck’s going on, Trey?” Rogue demanded as Trey held the phone up to his ear. He pointed at the screen.

“It’s a fucking safe house!”

In their line of work, a safe house meant the polar opposite of what it meant to anyone being brought there. The safety was for the owner, who needed a remote and untraceable location where he could perform whatever wet work, or the spilling of blood, he needed without witnesses.

The phone clicked, and Trey didn’t even wait for a greeting. “Check your computer, Jared sent over...”

“I’m on it now. Just saw it come through. What am I looking at?” Nash asked.

“Whose safe house is that?”

There was a small stretch of silence.

“Who?” Trey shouted, losing his control as he tightened his grip.

“Stark.”

Trey ground his teeth. “It’s Stark.”

“Oh, I’m gonna gut that motherfucker and his whole goddamn crew!” Rogue shouted.

“Trey, what’s...” Nash stopped in mid-sentence, and there was a ruffled noise in the background.

“Trey,” Oz said.

Trey drew in a breath. “Dahlia hasn’t been heard from in hours. Tracked her car to that location.”

“Meet us there,” Oz said, then hung up.

Both clubs were in Lawry but on opposite ends of the large city. Oz would have a twenty-minute head start on them. Trey didn’t waste any time gathering all of their security and calling in those they had on reserve. Combined with Oz’s crew, there’d be an entire army coming for Stark.

Trey did everything he could to batten down his own fear. A few hours was a long time to be holed up at a safe house when its only purpose was for killing. Trey balled his fists, and Rogue grabbed the headrest of the front seat, lunging forward.

“Drive fucking faster!”

They were halfway there when his phone rang from an unknown caller. With his associates, this wasn’t uncommon, and he answered on the second ring.

“Yeah?”

“Trey?”

Trey slowly glanced over at Rogue. He didn’t recognize the voice on the other line, which sent up warning flags.

“Who’s this?”

“Murphy. I’m with Stark’s crew. I don’t have much time, and neither do you. They’ve got her in one of the safe houses. I can only hold them off for so long. Made a suggestion for them to get rid of the car first before they take her out, clear

away any and all evidence. Stark agreed. But I can only fend them off so long.”

“Is Stark there now?”

“On his way. But listen, this isn’t on Stark. It was Sean who grabbed her. Said he thought Stark could negotiate with you and trade her if you’d reinstate the deal. Stark didn’t know anything about it.”

It may not have been Stark’s plan initially, but he was doing everything he could to cover it up. What Stark should have done was call Trey immediately, but instead he was orchestrating a coverup to conceal the murder of Trey’s woman. *I’m going to fucking kill him, personally.*

“Give me the location and directions.”

Trey shared a look with Rogue while listening to Murphy give directions. Trey slowly nodded, confirming that he was giving their actual location.

“She said if I helped her, you’d spare me. Need your word on that,” Murphy said.

It was becoming clear through that single statement that Murphy wasn’t trying to help Dahlia out of the goodness of his heart. He wanted to be spared the wrath of the Underground.

Trey didn’t make deals with the enemy. However, he’d make an exception. He stared back at Rogue.

“Yeah, you have my word. *I won’t kill you.*”

The heavy sigh on the other end was the last thing he heard before Trey ended the call.

Chapter Thirty-One

Dahlia was working on borrowed time. It had been at least an hour since she'd made her desperate plea to Murphy. She was hoping for some type of update, but she was left with her own thoughts, and none of them were good. Even if she could find some way out of the locked room with bolted windows, she had no idea where she was or how far from Lawry. For all she knew, she'd been knocked out for hours.

When the lock turned, Dahlia scrambled up to her feet and pressed her back against the wall in the corner. She expected Murphy to come in, but instead, it was her worst nightmare. She felt the blood drain from her face when Sean walked in, smiling and locking the door behind him. Being stripped of her clothes was scary enough, but being vulnerable in front of this guy had the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end.

“Your time is almost up,” Sean said, smirking with a small shrug. “I thought maybe you'd wanna go out with a bang before the big bang.”

She was left extremely exposed in her thong panties and skimpy bra, but at least she'd have a fighting chance against him. When he lunged for her, she shot out her arm, catching the corner of his jaw. It may not have hurt him, but a shooting pain ripped through her arm.

He rounded the mattress, and Dahlia raced toward the door, but he hooked his arm around her waist, pulling her against his chest.

“A fighter. I like that!”

He tossed her on the bed, and her gut reaction was to try and squirm away, but he grabbed hold of her ankle, pulling her back toward him. She heard the distinct sound of his belt buckle and his zipper. She stopped, and her breathing shallowed. She was officially in fight-or-flight mode. Dahlia shot out her foot, nailing him in the leg, but it only made him more aggressive. He grabbed the edge of her panties, ripping

them down her legs, leaving her bottom half completely exposed.

Dahlia swung her legs and clawed her way, trying to get off the mattress as she screamed. Not for help but out of pure desperation. Her own voice was painful in her own ears, but she didn't stop. As his body came down over her back, she felt his bare flesh rub against hers, and she did the only thing she could think of. She screamed louder.

“Ain't no hero coming through that fucking door.” His taunting cackle had the bile rising in her throat.

Dahlia balled her fists, punching the mattress and swinging her legs. Even if it didn't stop the inevitable, she would not go down without a fight. She sucked in a breath and let out a gut-wrenching shriek. Her last act of salvation.

He gripped her hair, yanking her head back.

Then the door burst open, and a man, bigger than any man she'd ever seen, barreled through the door and gripped Sean by the neck, tossing him across the room with one hand. Sean slammed so hard that he dropped to the floor without a fight. Dahlia wasn't sure if he'd been knocked out cold, but the man raised his gun and shot him three times before he lowered his gun to his side and slowly turned to Dahlia.

Dahlia had seen him before. She knew who he was, yet somehow, it did nothing to ease her fear. She looked down at Sean, and her eyes widened. This was all too much.

Dahlia scrambled to her knees and quickly crawled to the corner of the room, tucking her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around her legs. She balled herself up so tight.

I just want this to be over.

They'd arrived in record time and been given word twenty minutes ago that Oz's team had infiltrated and successfully gathered Stark and all his men. Dahlia was safe. There was very little detail given on the phone, which was expected.

When they pulled up to the safe house, Trey opened and stepped out of the SUV before it actually stopped. Two of Oz's men were stationed at the front door, and as Trey passed, both men stepped to the side.

"Through the living room and down the hall. They're waiting for you."

Trey didn't hesitate, following the directions, and as he rounded the wall in the living room, he stared back at Oz, Ridge, Noelle, and Caine. It shouldn't have even caught his attention, but Caine being the largest of Oz's security and usually meticulously dressed, was wearing only an undershirt and pants. The thought was fleeting, and he stopped next to the door.

"Where is she?"

"Safe," Oz said, not elaborating. He lifted his chin to Ridge.

"We have them all secured in the basement. We got twelve of ours watching them, with Cy taking the lead. The perimeter is completely covered, including a few lined up for about a mile down the road."

"How many with Stark?" Trey asked and shared a look with Rogue.

"Thirteen."

Rogue nodded. "That sounds about right. I want them all accounted for. Any missing? I want that done by the fucking morning."

"Nash is tracking down everyone now." Ridge said.

Rogue moved to grab the door handle.

"Wait, just Trey," Noelle said.

"Are you fucking giving *me* orders?" Rogue snapped.

Noelle opened her mouth and then quickly veered her gaze to Caine, who stepped up next to him. It may have been relying on his gut instinct, but an unrelenting sense of dread and foreshadowing washed over Trey. As he scanned the faces

of Caine, Ridge, and Noelle, none of them would look him in the eyes. They were trained on Oz.

“Ridge.” Oz nodded, keeping his eyes locked on Trey. Obviously, Oz had already been debriefed on the situation, which only amped up his tension. Oz watched him much like he had when they were kids. Waiting for Trey’s reaction. He knew that even with his impressive control, everyone had their limits.

“Our intention was to infiltrate quietly. We had the house surrounded while waiting for Oz to arrive. He was about five minutes out. We had pretty much marked out where they’d been in the house but hadn’t gotten eyes on Dahlia.” Ridge paused, drawing in a breath. Hesitating.

“Fucking speak!” Rogue shouted.

“Caine heard her scream and gave the order to rush the house. He kicked open the door.” Ridge gestured to the door behind Trey. “Shot one of Stark’s men.”

“Which one?” Trey asked.

“Sean.”

Trey balled his hands and squared his jaw. He’d given strict instructions that Sean was not to be touched. At least, not yet. Trey wanted to make sure he suffered.

“I acted on instinct,” Caine said.

“Why?” Trey asked.

The silence should have told him everything, but he needed the words.

“Why?” Trey snapped. Every molecule of his body heated with an uncontrollable rage. It was almost suffocating. His mind warped, and the visual, even without precise detail, was so vivid.

“Her clothes were torn, her bottom half naked, and he had her pinned down on the floor.”

Nothing in his life, even his own experience, could have prepared him for the absolute rage running through his body.

“Trey.” Noelle’s voice was soft. “Caine offered her his shirt to cover her up, but she refused to take it. I think she’s in shock and scared. I—” She cleared her throat. “—stayed with her for a little while, but it didn’t calm her down. I think she’s in so much shock that she can’t quite see beyond her fear. I thought it was best to leave her alone.”

Trey dragged his hand over his mouth.

“Me and Noelle have been here guarding the door,” Ridge said, glancing over at Rogue. “I think, considering the circumstances, it would be best if only Trey went into the room.”

Fuck!

Trey turned and gripped the handle. He had no idea what he’d be walking into.

Trey opened the door, peering around the dark room. There was little light streaming in from the half window. It was only enough to illuminate the small figure in the corner of the room. She never even lifted her head, but her whole body trembled. Caine’s black shirt lay next to her a few feet away. She hadn’t put it on.

Trey glanced down at the floor where underwear had been discarded. On the opposite side of the room, a cracked wall and stained bloody streaks led to the door.

Trey was careful with his steps, slow and quiet as he took in the scene. This visual would forever be ingrained in his head. He’d never be free of it. Some things in life, the horrific moments, would forever stay with a person. A form of prison they were unable to escape when they closed their eyes. *This is mine.*

Trey bent down, rested his elbows on his knees, and whispered, “Dahlia.”

Her reaction was immediate. Her body stilled but tensed, and she slowly turned her head and peeked up at him over her arm. Her eyes were glassy and bloodshot as if she’d spent the last few days wide awake and crying. The black streaks from her makeup formed messy lines down to her chin. The two

cuts over her cheek were darkened with dried blood, and her hair was in disarray and matted in spots.

But she's safe.

Trey was saying it more for himself than as an actual truth. He needed to remind himself of that fact if he had any hope of getting through the next few minutes. She didn't need his rage and anger. That wouldn't benefit her. Dahlia needed to feel safe.

He slowly reached out, expecting her to flinch or shy away. Instead, she curved her cheek against his palm and fell to her side, grasping his shirt. Trey curved his hand over her back, curling her into his chest. After everything she'd been through, Dahlia should've been pulling away, but she wrapped her arms over his shoulders, tightened her hold, and pressed her face into the crook of his neck.

He wasn't sure how long they stayed there. But it would've been hours had she not loosened her grip. Trey was prepared to give her exactly what she needed. As much time as it would take for her to find safety and comfort, knowing no one was going to touch her.

Trey reached behind him, feeling blindly, until he hooked his finger over the smooth material. Caine's shirt. Dahlia remained clutched around him. It would have been easier to get her dressed had they had a little distance, but Trey would work with their current position. He led her arms through the shirt, and when it was on her, she settled back a few inches, and he buttoned it, leaving only the collar undone.

"I'm okay." Her voice cracked, and it wasn't very convincing. Trey read through it, but he also saw the reassurance for what it was. After everything she'd been through, Dahlia was trying to settle him down. He cupped her jaw, brushing his lips gently against hers.

"I'm going to take you home."

Dahlia sniffled and nodded.

When she attempted to stand, Trey straightened his legs, bent down, hooked one arm under her knees, and slid the other

around her back.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Dahlia was clutched to Trey with her arms wrapped around his shoulders when he opened the door. It was silent as if they were the only people there. It felt safe to open her eyes. It was the wrong move. All the men were lined up against the wall in the hall, along with Noelle. She quickly averted her eyes, swallowing the lump in her throat. She felt completely exposed. Not only in the physical sense, but they knew she'd been attacked. She could only imagine their mind would go to the absolute worst-case scenario.

Trey started forward but abruptly stopped when Rogue stepped in his path. Dahlia stared back at him, and for the first time in his presence, she didn't have any fear or nervousness. It was almost a comfort as if she knew Rogue, along with Oz and all the security, wouldn't let anything else happen to her.

She expected him to say something, but Rogue remained silent, scanning her face. She hadn't seen herself yet, but between the dried blood, her busted lip, and her swollen eye, she must have looked like a complete nightmare. His features tightened and pronounced the harsh angles of his face while his right temple pulsed. She'd seen Rogue angry, but never like this. He jerked his head and stormed down toward the end of the hall.

Oz gestured for security to follow, leaving them alone in the hallway, just the three of them.

"The car is outside waiting to take her to your apartment. Sending *her three*. Darren will drive her, Lewis and Noelle will follow," Oz said. Unlike Rogue, he didn't even look at her. "I've made arrangements so she won't be alone."

Trey simply nodded and started down the hall. She wasn't sure why she looked back, but when she did, Oz was staring at her. His gaze softened, and he gave her a small nod.

Dahlia hugged her arms tighter around Trey and pressed her face into the crook of his neck. She just wanted this to all be over. In a perfect world, she'd wake up, and it would've all

been a nightmare. But life wasn't perfect, and this was her reality.

Dahlia didn't pay much attention to the men outside of the house until she heard the engines. She'd know that sound anywhere. She opened her eyes, turned her head, and squinted. They were bikers and definitely belonged to a club, but not one she'd ever associated with. Notorious was an understatement for the Killcreek Drifters.

Trey brushed his lips against her forehead and whispered, "If I had called East, they *all* would've come."

Yes, they would have. There wasn't a doubt in her mind.

"Thanks for saving me."

Trey kissed her temple and whispered, "You saved yourself."

Had she not made a deal with the devil, she would have been killed long before Trey had gotten to her. Dahlia tried to block that thought from her mind, but it sparked a reminder of the promise that she'd made.

"I gave him my word, Trey."

Trey walked toward the car, staring ahead of him. It was as if he was intentionally avoiding her eyes.

"Trey."

He sucked in a breath and finally looked down at her. "You gave him your word. And I'm giving you mine. I won't touch him."

Dahlia knew it would be hard for Trey to not seek revenge on the man, but she also trusted that he'd remain true to his word.

As they got closer to the SUV, a member of security, who she assumed was Darren, leaned forward, opening the door. Dahlia had to adjust her sight and squinted, seeing a familiar face in the backseat.

"What are..."

Sal waved her inside and patted the seat next to him. "I'm here to keep you company."

She must have still been in shock and unable to comprehend what was happening. Sal was here? Trey gently lifted her into the seat, gingerly scooted her, and Sal reached into the back of the truck. He pulled out a blanket, shook it open, and wrapped it over her lap. He smiled, sliding his hand over the top of her head.

"Dahlia," Trey whispered, and she turned. "Sal's going to take you to my place."

Panic immediately set in, and her eyes welled. "You're not coming?"

Trey leaned closer, kissing her forehead. "Soon."

Before she could protest, which he had to know she'd do, Trey straightened and closed the door.

Sal squeezed her hand, gaining her attention. "Gonna take you back to Trey's. We'll order some food and get you cleaned up. You're gonna be fine, honey."

I almost believe you, Sal.

The opposite door opened, and Doc leaned down, offering her two pills. Dahlia stared down and sank into her seat, but Sal grasped her hand.

"Take them."

Dahlia shook her head. "I don't want to."

Sal's gaze softened. "I know you don't, but I need you to take them anyway. Trust me, Dahlia."

Dahlia hesitated but reached forward, taking the pills and the bottle of water offered to her. She swallowed the pills, chugged the water, and settled back in the seat. The effect was almost immediate, and her lids grew heavy as her body settled into a relaxed state. The last thing she remembered was Sal's voice.

"It'll all be over soon."

Stark and his crew had been gathered in a room heavily guarded by the Underground security. They were outnumbered with no hope of getting away. Trey saw it in Stark's eyes when he entered the room. There wouldn't be any negotiations or pleas for their lives. It was pointless. Stark had been around and in the business for years and knew how it worked. The Underground was unforgiving and didn't give second chances. Stark had made a choice by not reaching out to Trey directly when he'd received the information about Dahlia. It was a choice that would cost him and all the members of his crew their lives.

Surprisingly, Stark made a bold move and stepped forward.

"Sean and Nick were the ones who set this in motion."

Rogue laughed, shaking his head, and even Trey gave in to a smile. *You treacherous motherfucker!*

"They may have started it, but you didn't end it."

Trey rolled his neck and glanced around the men, eyeing one man standing off to the side.

"Murphy?"

The man nodded, and Trey gestured him toward the opposite wall.

"What the fuck?" Stark said, glaring at Murphy.

Rogue laughed. "He gave you up, motherfucker, to spare himself. That's the kind of crew you fucking built, asshole."

Stark lunged forward, and Trey pulled out his gun, taking him down with one shot. It was a chain reaction of all his men taking aim and firing. In less than a minute, Stark, along with his crew, were piled on the floor and lifeless. It was anticlimactic.

Trey turned, stepping over one body, with Rogue and Oz by his side.

Trey reached out and shook his hand. "I appreciate what you did. Some might even call it honorable. Most men in our world would have remained loyal to their own."

Murphy nodded. “I kept my dignity, true to who I am, and saved your woman.”

To an outsider looking in, that was how it would appear—a man going against his boss and crew to save a woman in need. A hero, by some’s standards. That was where his efforts were twisted. There were no heroes in the Underground. Not one. There were no selfless acts. Everyone had a motive. He was no different, though he wore a different mask.

“And yourself,” Trey said.

Murphy furrowed his brows.

“You’re the only man standing among Stark’s crew. You essentially sold out your crew to save yourself.”

“And your woman.”

Trey smirked. “Yes, but you didn’t make that call out of the kindness of your heart. You did it because Dahlia bargained for her life. A trade. Hers for yours. You’re a smart man. You knew we’d find you and the others. I wouldn’t have let it go had she been killed. I would have spent the rest of my life and my time hunting Stark down.” Trey paused. “And you knew that.”

Murphy shifted his gaze between Trey and the others. “I didn’t have anything to do with taking her.”

“No, you didn’t. I said I wouldn’t kill you. I gave my word.”

Relief flashed over his face. It only lasted seconds until the guns cocked.

“But I fucking didn’t,” Rogue said.

The gunfire echoed through the room, and Trey watched with complete satisfaction.

Trey walked out of the house to find unexpected visitors or allies, depending on who was speaking. Killcreek was lined up near their bikes, but Ace and Cross were walking across the yard. They stopped a few feet away with their eyes focused on Oz. Trey wasn’t quite sure why they were even there, but clearly, it was at Oz’s request.

Trey eyed the MC president and VP as Jared, Caine, Cyrus, Ridge, and all the members of the Underground security circled around Oz. He looked over at Ridge and gestured to the house.

“Get rid of them.”

No other instructions were needed. The Underground had a few options when it came to disposing of bodies, and years later, not one had been found. Ridge nodded, heading back inside with the others in tow.

“What do you need from us?” Ace asked.

“Torch it,” Oz said, and Ace smiled.

“That’s our specialty.”

It may have seemed like overkill and dramatic, but it would remove any and all evidence once the bodies were removed. It was their safest bet.

This was over.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Dahlia strained to open her eyes. It took a few minutes to focus, but she saw the familiar face seated in the leather chair across the room, staring down at her phone. Dahlia slowly lifted up on her elbow and squinted.

“Karia?”

Her friend whipped her head, dropped her phone to the chair, and stood.

“Hey.” Her voice was soft, soothing, as it was meant to be. “How are you feeling?”

Karia stopped at the edge of the bed and sat, brushing her hand over Dahlia’s cheek and down to her shoulder. Dahlia wasn’t sure how to answer her friend. She was groggy and achy. She tried to sit up but wasn’t able to without assistance. What the hell had Doc given her? Karia put her hand on her back and gingerly grasped her forearm, guiding Dahlia up to rest against the headboard.

Dahlia brushed her hair away from her cheek and rolled her neck. “Doc gave me something, and it knocked me out.”

Karia nodded and reached across to the nightstand, grabbing the small bottle. “Painkiller with a low dose of a sleeping agent. After everything you’ve been through, your body and mind needed to rest.”

Dahlia cleared her throat. “Is that what you would have prescribed?”

“Yeah.”

Somehow, that made it feel all the more safe. Dahlia glanced around the room. The lights had been dimmed, and it was quiet. She assumed that was done for her, considering the circumstances.

“Is Trey here?”

“Not yet. Sal said he would be here soon, though. I’m going to stay with you until he gets here, okay?”

Dahlia nodded and drew in a breath. “How did you know...”

“Sal called me.”

“He told you what happened?”

Karia arched her brow. “No details. He just said you needed me.”

Dahlia’s eyes welled. “And you came.”

Karia smiled, clasping her hand. “I will come every time you need me. I cleaned you up.”

“Thank you.”

Karia rubbed her hand over Dahlia’s arm, comforting her in a sense. “Doc looked over your injuries. Just surface.” Karia paused and lowered her voice. “Is there anything else you need looked at, Dahl? It doesn’t have to be Doc. I can check you out, or if you’d like, I can get a female doctor to come here.”

Dahlia slowly shook her head. “It was close, but he didn’t...”

“Okay,” Karia whispered. “Do you want to talk about it? And just so we’re absolutely clear, anything, and I mean anything, you tell me stays between us.”

Dahlia smirked. “Patient and nurse code?”

Karia smiled and angled her head. “It’s a friend code.”

“I’m not really sure what I’m allowed to say.”

As much as she trusted Karia, this wasn’t just about her anymore, and she recognized it for what it was. This was an Underground matter. Dahlia had a lot to learn, but there were key factors and elements to Trey, Rogue, and Oz that she saw clearly. And now, she was a part of it.

“Okay, I understand. Then let’s talk about something else.” Karia wiggled her brows. “You and Trey?”

“Crazy, right?”

Karia immediately shook her head. “I saw this coming.”

“You did?”

Karia snorted, grabbing her hand. “You’re beautiful, kind, smart, and loving. Even Trey was no match for you.”

I like that.

Trey hadn’t immediately gone back to the apartment, back to Dahlia. He couldn’t.

Before her, his apartment would’ve been his retreat. He’d come home, decompress, and get his mind right. Death wasn’t something he took on or looked at lightly. It had been a part of his life for as long as he could remember, but it didn’t mean he’d adapted. Trey needed space. He needed his time to breathe. His apartment was no longer his sanctuary for that. His place had become theirs, and he wouldn’t taint it with the blood on his hands. Literally.

Trey accepted Rogue’s offer and spent the next few hours at his house. Unlike Trey’s pristine, sleek apartment, Rogue’s home had more fanfare and an eclectic style. Trey never judged. They all came from nothing, and how they chose to spend their wealth was their own decision. Rogue didn’t necessarily showboat, but his ostentatious nature shined through in every facet of his home. They were sitting in silence in Rogue’s living room. Trey was struggling, knowing that Dahlia’s night had been a result of his place in the Underground.

“She’s fucking safe, Trey.”

Trey flattened his lips. “She wasn’t tonight.”

Even Rogue couldn’t argue with the truth.

“You ain’t letting her go. She’s yours. You fucking earned her,” Rogue said, taking a deep drag from his cigarette.

She is mine. But...

“Not sure that’s how it works,” Trey said.

Trey was lying. He knew for sure that wasn't how it worked. "Ask and you shall receive" didn't apply to people in his line of work. They were far from the chosen ones. And honestly? What exactly had Trey earned? He loved his life on the wrong side of the law. He'd committed so many crimes if he were caught, he'd never again see the light of day. There was nothing about him that was deserving or worthy of her and everything Dahlia was offering him.

"What the fuck are you talking about? That's exactly how it fucking works, Trey! You gave up your fucking life *for this life*. You get something. You get her."

Trey wasn't sure if that was true, but he'd take it. Anything to rightfully keep her. Because he couldn't let her go. A better man would have wanted more for her. An easy life. Trey wanted to be that man. *But I'm not*. He couldn't let her walk away.

He arrived back at the somber apartment two hours later. It was quiet as he walked through the hall past Dahlia's security. Had she had them earlier, this night would've turned out so differently. Trey walked down the short hall to the opening of the apartment. Sal was seated at the table, reading a book. He didn't even acknowledge Trey. He turned, seeing Noelle stationed at the edge of the hallway. She straightened but remained silent. He stopped directly in front of her with his gaze locked on his bedroom door.

"How is she?"

Noelle looked over at the room and drew in a breath. "Good, I think. Karia's been with her for a few hours."

Trey nodded and stepped forward.

"I heard them talking. Dahlia laughed a little. That's a good sign."

It was. He glanced back at Noelle, and she froze.

"Thanks."

She gave a subtle nod, and then she veered her gaze in the opposite direction.

He started to the end of the hall, stopping in their bedroom doorway.

Trey watched as Karia hugged Dahlia and walked across the room to retrieve her pocketbook. She smiled and started toward Trey, and he stepped aside.

“I’ll come by tomorrow and check up on you. Bring you lunch too.” Karia winked, and he glanced over to Dahlia.

“And the baby?” Dahlia asked.

Karia stilled and looked up at Trey. “If that’s okay?”

Trey nodded and followed her out and down the hall. Once they reached the living room, and he knew Dahlia couldn’t hear them, he called her name.

Karia stopped, facing the opposite direction. He almost didn’t hear her when she spoke. But he did.

“Promise me this won’t happen again, Trey.” Karia paused and turned back to him, her eyes red-rimmed and welled. She’d obviously been holding back in front of Dahlia, but her composure had been rocked. Karia drew in a breath, glancing back down the hall. “You don’t owe me anything. I know that. But I really...” She gasped a breath, tightened her lips, and looked up at him. Trey saw everything. Dahlia wasn’t just a woman who’d been attacked. She meant something to Karia. She inhaled a breath, seemingly collected herself, and then slid her gaze to Trey. “This can’t happen again. Not to her.”

“It won’t. You have my word.”

Karia bit her lip, looking back at the room, then gathered her jacket, said a quick goodbye to Sal, and started toward the door.

“Clear it with Trick.”

Karia knitted her brow. “He knows I’m here.”

“I meant bringing the baby. If he’s not comfortable, then we’ll work something else out.”

Trey would make arrangements even if it meant bringing Dahlia to the East clubhouse. It would be a last resort and his least favorite option, but he'd do it. He'd do anything for her.

"I'll check with him, but I don't think it will be an issue. He knows you wouldn't let anything to happen to me or our baby. Sal wouldn't allow it, and if you thought he was overprotective of me, you should see how it is with my son."

Trey smirked. He knew very well how Sal protected those he considered his own.

"And I think you're underestimating how important Dahlia is to all of us." Karia arched her brow. "Before she was yours, Dahlia was ours. And if you think East is possessive of their people, you should see the old ladies."

Trey smiled with a nod. "I can imagine."

Karia nodded, her features softening, but she didn't leave. She bowed her head and whispered, "Promise me she's safe with you, Trey."

"She is." It wasn't just an answer. It was a statement. A vow. A promise he'd never break. For as long as he lived, Dahlia would always be safe. He'd make sure of it.

"Oh, and just a heads up." Karia widened her eyes. "You're probably gonna be hearing from East soon. They were not happy. Again, Trey, she was ours before she was yours."

He sighed, knowing he'd be fielding calls in the near future.

"I'll speak to Gunner."

Karia laughed, shaking her head. "He's not the one you need to worry about, Trey."

He arched his brow and waited.

"Grain lost his shit. He was halfway down the driveway, ready to storm your apartment, from what I understand. Dahlia...she's his girl." Karia drew in a breath and smiled. "Lucky for you, they stopped him. But you can't escape the wrath of Grain. No one can. Not even the Underground." Karia smirked. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Trey watched Karia walk out, and for a brief second, he let his guard down and smiled. Dahlia had her people.

Trey waited until Karia left and walked back to his bedroom, glancing over at Noelle.

“You can go.”

Noelle cleared her throat, looking at the end of the hall. She’d been dismissed. Her job for the night was over, yet she still remained standing at the end of the hallway.

“Noelle.” Trey narrowed his gaze.

“We can all just wait in the hall outside.”

Trey furrowed his brows, and before he could refute, she stepped forward, glancing at the end of the hall. Their bedroom.

“We’re her security. You assigned me, Darren, and Lewis to her. Let us do this.” Noelle paused and swallowed, swerving her gaze in the opposite direction. “For Dahlia.”

This was more than him. It wasn’t just about the Underground. It was about Dahlia.

Trey gave a curt nod and started down the hallway to his bedroom. Their bedroom.

Dahlia was curled up on her side. He walked over, waiting for her to look up, but she didn’t.

“Do you need anything?”

Dahlia raised her arm, dropped it to the mattress behind her, and patted the coverlet. *She needed me.* Trey shucked his shoes, pants, and shirt, and crawled up behind her. Trey looped his arm around her waist and pulled her back against his chest. Dahlia settled in, caressing her hand over his forearm.

“I just need this,” she whispered.

And she’d get it. For however long she needed to lay in their bed with his arms wrapped around her, feeling his protection, she would get it.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The aftermath of her attack brought on a slew of changes. She wasn't even home for a full day before her personal security showed up. Noelle, Darren, and Lewis. If Trey thought she'd put up any kind of resistance, he was wrong. Dahlia welcomed them. After everything she'd been through, she saw the importance of having them. This was her new life, and like everyone else in the Underground, she'd adhere to all the rules. As Trey reminded her, it was what kept them safe.

That wasn't to say Dahlia wouldn't make some personal changes of her own. Much like Trey and Rogue's men, hers, along with Noelle, lined the hallway at Trey's apartment for the first couple of days. But Dahlia decided to change the rules slightly. Unlike Trey and Rogue, Dahlia was a different type of boss. She found it silly for them to spend so much time around her and not interact. Dahlia made up her own schedule, which had two security at her door at all times while the third stayed inside the apartment with her. They were on a rotating schedule, which meant she'd gotten to spend time individually with each of them. Noelle and Darren were surprisingly receptive. Lewis was holding out on any human connection. *But I'm not giving up.*

Rogue didn't approve, but as she explained—*my security, my rules*. As she'd expected, it didn't go over well with Rogue or Oz, but Trey had taken her back. As long as they did their job keeping her protected, she should manage them the way she saw fit. Even Sal agreed.

Sal. He'd been a constant companion for the last two weeks she'd been holed up in Trey's apartment. Every day, like clockwork, he'd show up at eleven in the morning and didn't leave most nights until after five.

Oh my God, I love this man. She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so much.

"You have the best stories, Sal."

Sal smiled with a carefree shrug. “Known those boys a long time. Got a lot of stories.”

He did and shared many while keeping her company during her recuperation. It was a stretch, considering after two days, Dahlia was feeling much better. Her cuts and scrapes were healing. The trauma was taking longer to work through, but she’d get there. She had such an amazingly strong support system. Her time with Sal was especially therapeutic.

“What was he like?”

“Trey?” Sal raised his brows and smiled, then sipped his wine. Dahlia didn’t know if he was hesitating or merely recalling a fond memory. “He was small. Scrawny little thing when I first met him. A shadow behind Rogue and Oz. But smart. Probably the smartest of the three.”

“How old was he?”

“Eleven.” Sal snorted. “Tried my fucking darndest to get Oz to drop him. That young, people notice. But, uh, Oz wouldn’t part with him. Said they were a package deal. Take them all or take none.” Sal sighed. “Didn’t see the potential in Trey or even Rogue back then. They were kids. But, uh, Trey’s been proving himself since the first day I met him. Didn’t have the killer instinct like Rogue or the mastermind like Oz. Trey was something different, and it took me years to find his shining point.”

“I think he shines,” Dahlia said and curled deeper into the couch.

The corners of his lips curled, and he turned to Dahlia. “Oh, he does. Trey has always been the balance between Rogue and Oz. It’s an understated position, but it might be the most important. Trey keeps them human and gives them a conscience. They feed off of Trey. This life is cutthroat. Can’t trust anyone but yourself. Except for those three. It’s a loyalty most people will never know in their lifetime.”

“And you, right?”

Sal smiled and reached out, grasping her foot in a comforting squeeze. “Me. And now you.”

Dahlia snickered, resting her head against the couch. “Rogue still doesn’t trust me.”

“Yes, he does. He just won’t show it. And he won’t give you slack. He sees it as a sign of weakness. Thinks if you see a soft spot, you’ll respect him less. It’s just who he is, how he was made. But you’re part of his small circle. He keeps it tight, just like all my boys.”

Dahlia smiled. “I love how you call them your boys.”

“They are. No matter how fucking old and ornery they get. To me, they’ll always be my boys.” Sal side-eyed Dahlia and winked. “And now I got myself a girl.”

“I’m honored to be a part of your family.”

Sal sighed. “The honor is all ours, honey. Trust me, we all know what we’ve got with you.” Sal tightened his hold over his glass, and his jaw squared. “This will never happen again.”

Dahlia sensed the regret and guilt.

“Sal, it wasn’t anyone’s...”

He squeezed her foot, forcing her to take a pause.

Sal slowly angled his head, and his gaze darkened. “*This* will never happen again, Dahlia. I promise you.”

It was a vow. Dahlia didn’t blame anyone except Sean and Stark’s crew. They’d been at fault, but Trey, along with Rogue and Oz, and now Sal, were each taking sole responsibility. She could have argued, but she wouldn’t have won. Not against these men who seemed hellbent on protecting her.

“Okay,” she whispered and drew in a breath as his hold eased.

It was just past twelve when Trey walked through the door. It was the light of her day. She sat up and smiled, watching his gaze soften, looking between her and Sal.

Sal tapped her on her leg. “I’ll call John to come pick me up.”

“Or?” Trey folded his arms. “You can stay in the spare.”

Dahlia straightened. “You should stay, Sal. It’s late. And we can all have breakfast together in the morning.”

Sal smiled, looking over at Dahlia. “How can I turn down that offer?” He pushed up from the couch. She expected him to circle around, but Sal surprised her and moved toward her. He leaned down, grasped the edge of the couch, and pressed his lips against her forehead, then cupped her cheek, smiling.

“You sleep good, my girl.”

“I will.”

Sal smiled and straightened, rounding the edge of the couch. As he passed Trey, he gripped his shoulder in a tight squeeze before retreating down the hall.

Trey walked over, grasping the edge of the couch and leaning in, taking her for a kiss. She cupped his jaw, pulling him closer. But Trey pulled back and then took a seat beside her, resting his hand over her knee.

“How are you feeling?”

Trey gave her the perfect opening to continue her daily request.

“Much better. I’m ready to go back to work.”

He furrowed his brows. “No.”

“Yes.” She sat up. “I’ve been out for two weeks. I’m fully recovered. I want to come back to the Bowery.”

Trey dragged his hand over his face, sighing. “We’ll talk about it next week.”

Dahlia understood where his concern was coming from. Trey loved her and wanted to take care of her and keep her safe. But life had to move on. She still struggled with nightmares, and every so often, she felt a wave of fear wash over her at the most random times. Usually, it was when she was by herself. Dahlia was convinced she had too much down time to think. She needed to get back to her real life.

She squinted. “That’s what you said last week.”

“You need time.”

“No.” She cocked her head. “I need to get back to my routine, which means working. I’m fully recovered. I have been for the last week. I want to come back to work, Trey.”

Trey cocked his head, and she knew exactly what he was going to say. “One more week.”

“No. Either I come in tomorrow, or I start looking for a new job.”

His gaze darkened, and he growled. “Dahlia.”

Dahlia refused to back down. She had taken the time, not refusing her rest, but she was ready to go back. She opted for another tactic. She pressed her hands against his thighs and leaned closer, brushing her lips against his cheek to his ear.

“I miss fucking around with my boss in his office.”

His chest rumbled as he chuckled. Dahlia sat back but stayed close, and smiled.

“Please, Trey. I need everything to go back to normal.”

His jaw squared, and he stared off across the room. “One condition.”

Anything!

“Name it.”

He clasped his hands, refusing to look at her. “I want you here. I’ll pay off the remainder of your lease and have your things packed up and delivered before the end of the week.”

Her brows hiked. “You want me to move in?”

Dahlia had basically taken up residency at his apartment since the attack, but they hadn’t spoken about her staying.

“Yes.”

“With all my shit?”

“Yeah, with all your shit.”

Dahlia snickered, crawling on her knees and leaning over him. “You hate all my shit.”

Trey had never said as much, but she knew their tastes varied. *Significantly*. Dahlia and Trey's tastes were on polar opposite ends of the spectrum. While he enjoyed finer, simpler things, Dahlia loved color and flash. Two people couldn't have been more different. Yet somehow, they worked.

He grasped her neck, pulling her in closer. "Yes, but I love *you*."

That will never get old.

"And I love you." She melted, draping her hands over his chest. "I promise I'll keep it classy."

Well, I'll try.

He tightened his grip over her neck, pulling her closer until his nose skimmed over hers.

"Just has to be you."

Dahlia curled closer and pressed her lips against his. "Just us."

God, I love this man!

Trey should have been gone hours ago, especially since the club was closed on Monday. But he'd been waiting on this call. He held the phone up to his ear, merely listening. The president of Killcreek, Ace, was giving him a brief rundown of the transport. It was all done in cryptic code. Usually, both parties would demand a face-to-face meeting for this conversation, but Ace had enough experience not to slip in the off chance someone was listening.

This should have been Rogue's responsibility, but it had been handed off to Trey since they'd aligned with Killcreek. As much as Trey could have done without another deal of Rogue's that he'd ultimately shoulder, it was in the best interests of everyone that Rogue didn't take the lead. As always, it was Trey's job to play peacemaker.

"No issues," Ace said.

That was exactly what Trey wanted to hear. Rogue may not have liked it, but teaming up with Killcreek had been a win for everyone.

“I’ll be in touch soon.”

“We’ll be here,” Ace said.

Trey pulled the phone away from his ear but heard Ace’s faint voice.

“One more thing, Trey.”

“Yes?”

Ace chuckled. “Give our regards to Rogue.”

Trey rolled his eyes, ending the call without feeding into Ace’s taunting. That would be the last message he’d be sharing with Rogue. Trey dropped his phone on the desk and stood. He was reaching for his jacket when it rang again. *Fuck!* He jerked around and grabbed the phone, showing all his frustration. When he glanced down at the screen, his muscles eased, and his lips twitched. This was the only voice he wanted to hear.

“Dahlia.”

“Hi, Trey.”

It was as if she knew that simple phrase in her sweet voice could change the whole course of his night.

“I’m on my way.”

“You’re still at the club, aren’t you?”

Trey glanced around the office. Lying was pointless. It would take him at least twenty minutes to get home. *Home.* With Dahlia. She’d moved in slowly over the past two weeks. He offered to rent movers, but Dahlia insisted on weeding through her things. She wouldn’t bring everything. It was her choice, not Trey’s, though he didn’t argue with her. Every day, a few new items would appear in the kitchen or living room. It was as if she was trying to ease him into her style.

“I’ll be there in twenty.”

Dahlia clucked her tongue, and Trey squinted. “What?”

“It’s just a shame you’re missing out, Trey. I’m cooking naked like I promised.”

He tightened his grip on the phone and ground his teeth. The vision of her naked was enough to get him hard instantly.

“Twenty. Minutes.”

“I might be dressed by then.”

Trey growled. “Dahlia.”

Her soft giggle did nothing to dampen his need to come home to her naked.

“Hurry, Trey.” She ended the call, and he immediately grabbed his jacket.

This was a whole new world for him. One he’d never seen for himself but one he was thoroughly enjoying. Sal had called it weeks ago. This was the type of life Trey was destined to have until fate stepped in, changing the course of his life. There was no going back or altering his past. But he could have a different kind of future than he’d expected.

“Trey?”

He looked up to find his head of security at the door. Jared looked over his shoulder and stepped aside, allowing the two men to pass through the door.

Trey furrowed his brows. Impromptu visits from Nash were rare, and with Oz, they were unheard of. Trey rounded his desk, watching Oz glance around his office. For as long as they’ve been set up at the Bowery, Trey could probably count on one hand the number of times Oz had come by.

“Wasn’t expecting you.”

Oz scanned the office, taking a special interest in the art on the wall. “Interesting choice.”

Trey glanced up at the piece. “Rogue chose it.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.” Oz sighed, walking over to the seating area, gesturing for Trey to follow.

Trey glanced down at his phone, taking in the time. *Fuck!* Dahlia would understand the delay. But he was itching to get home. Still, this was his life, the one he'd signed up for, and essentially the one she had, too. He tapped a quick message.

Trey: Slight delay. Oz needs me.

She answered almost immediately.

Dahlia: Tell him I said hi, and remind him about Sunday. And Nash too!

Trey tightened his lips and forced himself not to physically respond.

Trey: I will.

He tucked the phone in his chest pocket and sat across from Oz. As per usual protocol, Nash remained standing near the edge of the couch.

“How is she?”

Trey wasn't surprised Oz caught him messaging and knew exactly who it was. Trey was not known for texting, and in fact, he despised it. They all did. It was a footprint that could be traced back to them, so none of the Underground used it to correspond for business. Until Dahlia, Trey rarely used it.

“Good.”

Oz arched his brow. “Waiting on you?”

Trey nodded.

“Then I'll make this quick.” Oz gestured to Nash, who stepped closer.

“About a week ago, our tech guy came to me about a potential risk in the systems. Not the first time they've come to me. It's usually nothing of concern.” Nash stared back at Trey.

“This time?”

Nash spread out his hands. “Got further into our systems than I'm comfortable with.”

Fuck! Trey cupped his mouth, peering over at Oz. “Any way to track it?”

“Untraceable.” Oz clasped his hands. He appeared completely calm, but Trey knew better. If he was personally bringing it to Trey, then it was a valid concern. “Need you to update your security. Going to have our guy come through here tomorrow to check out everyone’s computers and phones. That includes security.”

Trey nodded. “Any idea what they’re looking for?”

Oz arched his brow and lifted his chin to Nash.

“As far as I can tell, they’re looking to shut down our security cameras. This is a problem if they succeed, as you can imagine. Not to mention gaining access to the location of our properties.”

Trey saw the potential dangers and straightened in his seat. “What do you need from me?”

Oz stared back at him. “Be aware. Pass it along to Rogue, and contact Nash immediately if you suspect anything. We didn’t build this fucking empire just so anyone could take it down.”

No, we didn’t.

Oz stood and walked toward the door. “Go home to your woman, Trey.”

He smirked. “Sunday dinner, Oz.”

Trey had mentioned it a few days ago and gotten the same reaction from Rogue and Oz. It was as if he spoke in a foreign tongue. Neither one seemed to understand the concept of a Sunday night family dinner. But Sal did. He embraced it and made it known he expected all the boys to show up. Even though he’d retired from power for more than a decade, they still followed his orders.

Oz glanced back, hardened his gaze, and sent a glare Trey knew all too well. “I remember.”

Trey stifled his laugh and looked over at Nash as he followed behind Oz.

“Dahlia extended the invitation to you as well, Nash.”

Nash halted, glancing back. This was new territory for all the men of the Underground. Nash, while not as close as Trey, Rogue, and Oz, did have his place among them. He gave a subtle nod. He'd be there too. It seemed Dahlia had managed to leave her mark on all of the Underground.

Trey rounded his desk, gathered his things, and walked out. His twenty-minute estimate was now pushing forty-five by the time he stepped out of the elevator onto his floor. Even in the hallway, he could smell the food. He was still getting used to this new side of his life. She didn't cook every night. In fact, they ate dinner at the club most nights. But on her days off, this was what she loved doing for him. *For us.*

It was a small gesture and wouldn't mean much to most people, but for Trey, it was something he'd never had. He couldn't remember the last home-cooked meal he'd had before Dahlia. Trey never asked; Dahlia always insisted, and he wouldn't argue with her. However, he'd be cursing Oz if he walked in to find her fully clothed.

He unlocked the door and walked inside. The apartment was quiet, with soft music playing in the background. Her favorite band. Trey wasn't big on music, but there was something about the current song that resonated with him, and she played it often.

He dropped his keys on the table and stilled, staring down at the picture frame. It was new to the apartment. He grabbed it, taking a closer look. He'd been honest with her when he'd said she was to make his place her home. It meant all her things. The corner of his mouth curled, looking down at a photo taken years ago. It was slightly out of focus, and the quality wasn't great. It didn't take away from the photo. It was a couple. A tall, burly man with a beard and belly towering over a slight woman curled into his side with familiar brown eyes smiling at the camera. Between them, curved into his arm, was a girl no more than four, grinning with her mouth open. Maybe laughing. He'd know that face anywhere. Trey placed the frame down, took another look at Dahlia with her parents, then walked into the open living room.

It took him a minute to register it all.

Trey had told her to bring everything, but somehow he hadn't quite pictured all her possessions in his space. He scanned the room. His once sleek black and white theme had been overshadowed with reds, pinks, and blues. And lots of fucking purple. He slowly walked toward the living room, taking in the end table near his black leather chair. It had been painted many times, and obviously, Dahlia had not been the first owner. Or the second or the third or... Trey drew in a breath, looking at the room as a whole. It was a designer's nightmare. Mismatched, misplaced, with no style or elegance. Trey smiled, looking at the bizarre lamp on his overpriced end table.

Fucking perfect.

Dahlia's stamp was all over the apartment, and surprisingly, he found comfort in that. *In her.*

"Do you hate it?"

Trey jerked his head to the kitchen. Dahlia was standing behind the counter. Two foil-wrapped dishes and a salad were displayed in front of her. He'd been late, but she was trying to keep things warm. This fucking woman. Dahlia was giving him more than he deserved. She was giving him everything he didn't know he wanted, with one exception.

He drew down his brows in a tight scowl, eyeing her body.

"Do you like it?"

Trey ground his teeth. "Everything but that." His pointed stare had Dahlia glancing down. She may have been naked beneath the covering, but the apron was the current bane of his existence.

The corner of her mouth curled, and she grasped the edge of the apron. "Oh, this? You don't like it?"

Trey hardened his stare.

"You want me to take it off, Trey?" His woman was taunting him. Dahlia reached behind her back and tugged at

the ties. The apron loosened but still remained covering most of her.

“Dahlia.” He growled in warning.

Her tongue poked out, and she licked her bottom lip. She knew exactly what she was doing, and so did Trey. She reached for the strap around her neck and slowly lifted it, then dropped it to the floor. She was a woman of her word. She was completely bare beneath the apron. Trey didn’t hesitate. He stalked forward, grabbing her hips, pulling her against his chest, and lifting her. Dahlia’s legs wrapped around his waist, and he cupped her ass.

Dinner would have to wait.

Trey took her mouth for a deep, long kiss. Her mouth, her body pressed against him, and his skin against hers was everything he needed. This was Trey’s safe spot. He’d never had it before. Not like this. Dahlia wrapped her arms over his shoulders, tightening her hold and angling her head, tasting every inch of his mouth as if she couldn’t get enough of him.

It was too much. He jerked his head, ending the kiss. If he hadn’t, he would have taken her on the couch. Trey wasn’t opposed to it. Hell, it wouldn’t have been the first time for them. But he wanted her on their bed, spread for him.

Trey was walking them toward the hallway when his gaze caught a strange wooden sculpture next to the fireplace. Of all Dahlia’s eclectic possessions, this one had to be the strangest. Her hair brushed against his cheek, and she looked in the same direction.

“It’s a Girzebra.”

What the fuck is a Girzebra? Trey eyed the three-foot statue.

“It’s half giraffe, half zebra. A Girzebra.”

Trey tried to steel his features, but glancing around the living room, taking in Dahlia’s personal touch into his space and making it theirs, was enough to break down even his control. Trey gave in to a smile, pressed his lips to her neck, and took her to their bedroom.

This new life. With her.

It's fucking everything.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Trey: My office. Now.

Dahlia had gotten the text when she was walking through the parking lot of the Bowery, heading in for her shift. It was rare she got any type of message from Trey unless it was a response to hers. Even then, it was a short answer with no room to extend the conversation.

Dahlia immediately texted back, asking what was wrong, but he ignored her message, not even bothering to open it. It was clear she'd done something, but after racking her brain, she couldn't come up with anything. He'd been fine when he left the apartment hours ago. In fact, they had a usual morning of sex, breakfast, and more sex. It was a routine that Dahlia would happily keep for the rest of her life.

She glanced over at his personal entrance. Dahlia had been given the weekly code change and encouraged to use it, but she opted for the main employee entrance. After all, that was who she was on nights when she worked. Dahlia had been back about three weeks but not getting nearly as many shifts as she had before her attack. She assumed it was Trey's idea of a compromise and easing her back in. But Dahlia had her suspicions he had an ulterior motive. She just couldn't quite figure it out.

She walked inside, heading down the hall and passing the break room. Since her relationship with Trey was now out in the open, he insisted she leave her things in his office. He claimed it was for security purposes. She'd just passed Sloane's office when she heard her friend call her name. Dahlia stepped backward, stopping in the doorway.

"Hi, Sloane."

Sloane grinned, folded her arms, and rested them on the desk. Her smile was so bright it was obvious she was excited about something.

"Come in. I have an idea I want to run by you."

An idea to run by Dahlia? If it was anything like Sloane's last idea, Dahlia wouldn't have any part in it. Though, she was sure she'd be able to go back to the X-Lounge, with Trey, of course. But there was no doubt Sloane's man Blade wouldn't allow that anytime soon.

"I've been summoned to the boss's office." Dahlia pointed up to the ceiling and raised her brows.

Sloane smiled. "What did you do?"

Dahlia shrugged. "Don't know yet. But Trey's not happy. If you want to run interference in about ten minutes, that'd be great."

Sloane winked and lifted her chin. "I got your back."

Dahlia snickered, waved to Sloane, and headed to the end of the hall and up the stairs to the balcony. Once she made it to the landing, she scanned the room and sucked in a breath. Trey's reason for wanting to see her had become apparent as she stared across the room.

Shit!

"Hey guys."

Dahlia smiled, making her way to the table where Noelle and Darren were seated. Lewis was standing a few feet away. Unlike the other two, Lewis didn't give her any type of greeting except for a chin lift. That was basically the extent of Lewis' communication skills with her.

"Dahlia." Darren smiled, and Noelle gave her a short wave.

"I didn't expect you all for another hour."

Noelle folded her arms and shared a look with Darren, then scowled at Lewis, who seemed completely unaffected.

"Neither did Trey, but Lewis is an overachiever and suggested we come in earlier," Noelle said and turned to Dahlia. Her smile faltered. "We thought since you told us you didn't need us, that meant you were driving in with Trey. So..." Noelle smirked. "You can imagine his surprise when we show up and you're not with us."

Oh shit! Dahlia had been given a complete rundown of how the security worked, and she'd just broken rule number one. She wasn't purposely disobeying the rules, but it seemed silly and a waste of time for them to drive all the way to the apartment just to follow her to the Bowery. Dahlia was just as cautious as anyone else, but the parking garage had its own security system and cameras. She was safe. Apparently, not enough for Trey.

"I didn't want you guys to have to drive out of your way. I'm sorry. I hope I didn't get anyone in trouble."

Darren laughed. "Looks like the only one in trouble here is you, Dahlia."

This explained Trey's text. She stepped back and turned. "If he doesn't kill me, I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

She heard two faint snickers, and she walked down the hall and veered left to Trey's office. As per usual, Trey's security lined the walls leading to his door. Jared was stationed next to the door and the only man to glance over. When she smiled, his gaze softened, and his lips twitched.

"On a scale of one to ten on the mad-o-meter, what am I dealing with?"

Jared smiled, shaking his head. "Teetering between fifteen and twenty."

Fuck!

Dahlia hurried her steps, walked through the door, and made a beeline for Trey's desk. It was as if he'd been stalking her every move since she'd pulled into the parking lot. His sharp glare left no reason for doubt. Trey was pissed!

"Let me explain." She held out her hands, but Trey clearly wasn't in the mood to listen. He pointed to the seat across from his desk.

"Sit your ass down. Now!"

Dahlia clamped her lips and rushed to the chair. Arguing with Trey, or even giving pushback, wouldn't fare well for her at the moment. She may have misjudged her original

assessment, considering his tone. Trey wasn't just pissed, he was livid.

“Do I need to remind you of what happened last month? Do you need a refresher? Is that it? It's the only sensible conclusion I've come up with to explain your disregard for your own safety.” His gaze narrowed. “I've gone over this in great detail, the importance of using your security every time you leave the club, the apartment, or out of my sight, have I not?”

“You did, but—”

“Yet here we fucking are, Dahlia.”

“Trey.” She cocked her head. “It's silly to make them come all the way to the apartment just to...”

“It's not silly, Dahlia. It's for your safety.”

“But the parking garage has...”

Trey slammed his hand on the desk, and she flinched. “It's not enough! You may not see the necessity of it, but I do, and there's no fucking way I'm going to allow what happened last month to ever happen again. I can't do that unless you work with me, which means using that goddamn security. You may not value your safety, but I do. I put it above everyone else's because I never want to get that call again and spend hours wondering if you're hurt or scared or if I lost you!”

Dahlia was struck speechless watching Trey's tension race through his body. His famous control was completely lost, and she saw something she'd never seen before. Trey's fear. And it all stemmed from the prospect of losing her. Trey had taken care of Dahlia, held her when she needed it, and wiped her tears when she was overcome with emotion, remembering what happened. He listened every time she talked about it, but she'd just realized he'd never spoken about his feelings that day she was taken. *Until now.*

Trey dragged his hand through his hair, clearly frustrated. Trey had opened up to her about a lot of his past, but if she had to guess, her attack was something he'd buried. It was another safety measure he'd taken for her, not wanting her to see the

magnitude of his own fear at the thought of losing her. It was love in the truest form.

Dahlia slowly stood and rounded his desk in silence. Trey watched her as she grabbed the arm of his chair and turned it slightly, sitting down on his lap. She cupped his jaw gently.

“I will use the security every time, I promise,” she whispered and meant every word. If doing so kept his mind at ease, then she’d do it.

This relationship was their partnership, and she’d do her part to put his mind and concern at ease.

Trey hesitated briefly but slowly wrapped his arms around her waist, tugging her against his chest and taking her for a kiss.

“I need you safe.”

“I promise, Trey.”

Trey deepened the kiss, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. No man had loved her the way he did.

The soft knock on the door had Dahlia jumping in Trey’s lap. On instinct, she pushed away, trying to get up, but Trey locked his arms in a binding hold, keeping her in place.

“Am I interrupting?” Sloane asked, not waiting for an invitation and starting toward them.

Dahlia felt the bubbling in her chest, but she batted down a laugh when Trey growled. “Yes, you are.”

Dahlia squeezed his shoulder, giving her own type of warning.

“What?” Trey snapped.

Sloane smiled, looking between her and Trey. The news of their relationship had become public within the Ghosttown East MC the night of her attack. Dahlia assumed Karia would fill in the rest of the women, but she was unprepared for fielding calls from the members, along with all the old ladies. While all the women seemed genuinely happy for her, no one was more excited than Sloane. But the brothers weren’t as

enthusiastic. Like Trey, their reasoning came out of concern. It took Gunner and Blade and a very angry Grain coming to Trey's apartment one day with Karia to settle their concerns. Dahlia couldn't be sure, but she suspected they'd also had a conversation or two with Trey.

"You guys are so cute together!"

"Sloane!" Trey snapped, not nearly as amused by the comment as Dahlia was. "What do you need?"

Sloane raised her brows and lifted her hand, holding up two fingers. "Two things. First, what do you think about you two and me and Blade going to dinner? Double date."

Dahlia smiled, but that idea was swiftly dashed.

"No," Trey said, leaving no room for discussion.

Sloane pouted and furrowed her brows. "Nothing fancy, just..."

"No!" Trey said.

Sloane sighed. "Okay, fine. Just think about it."

Dahlia chuckled, shaking her head. *I friggin' love Sloane Baxter.*

"And second, when will the changes go into effect? I just want to make sure I have everything set up." Sloane looked directly at Dahlia. "I'm so excited."

Excited for what? What changes? Dahlia turned to Trey, who was openly glaring at Sloane. He lifted his hand and pointed to the door. "Go."

"Oh, well, I..."

"Now, Sloane."

Dahlia heard her feet quickly move across the floor, but she was more interested in Trey's reaction. Dahlia was missing something, and it seemed Trey and Dahlia were in the know while she was left in the dark.

"What changes?" Dahlia asked and watched as he drew in a breath. Trey unhooked his arm and tapped her on the ass.

“Need you down at bar one.”

Trey stood, taking her with him, and held her hips as she steadied herself. He dropped his hand to her back and ushered her toward the door. It was a clear tactic to get out of explaining what Sloane meant. She stopped at the door and turned, looking up at him.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

Trey leaned in, brushing his lips against hers before straightening. “We’ll talk about it later. For now, I need you down at the bar helping Misti and Killian.”

Dahlia squinted, scanning his face. Trey had the most unbelievable poker face. She couldn’t get a read on him.

“And these changes?”

The corner of his mouth curled. “Good changes.”

Dahlia sighed.

Good for who?

Trey surveyed the floor from the balcony’s edge. As always, Friday night at the Bowery was packed. They’d started turning people away a few hours ago, and there was still a line wrapped halfway around the building. He scanned the bars, leaving the main one for last. Dahlia shifted around, playing the perfect barback for Misti and Killian.

“When are you telling her?”

Trey sighed, glancing over at Rogue, who’d sidled up beside him. This conversation had happened several times in the last few weeks. To say Trey had become overprotective of Dahlia since the incident would be an understatement. But it was expected. Trey’s woman had been attacked and threatened, and he’d acted on pure animal instinct. His reactions were completely warranted in the aftermath. Rogue’s, on the other hand, seemed completely out of character for most people. Not only had he become protective, he’d been extremely vocal about Dahlia no longer working at

the club. It wasn't without reason. Dahlia was vulnerable to outside attacks, which was proven a few weeks ago.

“Two fucking weeks you've been allowing her to work. It's bullshit. And Oz fucking backs me on this shit.” Rogue arched his brow. “That motherfucker doesn't agree with me on anything, but this?” Rogue swung out his arm and pointed down at the bar where Dahlia was working. “He fucking does, Trey.”

Trey had been hearing it from both Rogue and Oz since she'd started back at the Bowery. Trey had her scheduled in the balcony for most of her shifts where he could keep her close, but every once in a while, she'd pick up a shift or two, bringing her back to the floor at bar one with Killian and Misti. Trey was in a hard position knowing Rogue and Oz, and he wanted to keep her safe, but also knowing what Dahlia needed, being happy around her people. It was a compromise, but he was feeling the heat.

“She has her security keeping her safe.”

“Oh yeah,” Rogue scoffed. “Look at fucking Lewis. He looks like he's ready to slit his own fucking throat.”

Trey steeled his features, watching Lewis stand close to the edge of the bar, observing the surroundings but keeping his attention on Dahlia. While the other two members of Dahlia's personal security, Noelle and Darren, seemed happy in their position, Lewis did not. Trey couldn't fault him. He'd been with Oz for years. It was a different element and not one most would enjoy, considering their backgrounds.

Always a fair boss, Trey had pulled Lewis aside, offering to send him back to Oz's crew. There wouldn't be any repercussions or fallout. Not everyone in the Underground was cut out to be her security. Surprisingly, Lewis declined his offer.

No, sir. I'm fine where I'm at. I would like to continue protecting Dahlia.

Lewis may have put on a stern front, but Trey knew better. He was one hundred percent dedicated to keeping

Trey's woman safe.

"If you knock her up, this won't be a fucking problem," Rogue said.

Trey closed his eyes, shaking his head. The man next to him was probably closer to Trey than anyone else. They'd been through everything and stayed solid in their loyalty and trust. Trey would always have Rogue's back and vice versa. There was never a doubt. However...Rogue's views differed immensely from Trey's.

"You do realize that pregnant women are fully capable of working?"

"Gotta fucking put your foot down."

Trey let out a hiss. "I find it amusing how you think I can control her every move. Have you met Dahlia?"

Rogue snorted, taking a drag from his cigarette. "If she was mine, her ass would be at fucking home. Safe and guarded."

Trey's lips twitched. "Is that right?"

"Yeah, it fucking is. You gotta control your woman."

Trey smirked, shaking his head. "I'd love to see you control *your* woman."

"Any woman of mine would fall in line."

We shall see, Rogue.

Trey continued watching Dahlia even after Rogue left. Her break was in a few minutes, and she'd be spending it in his office, as usual. She tossed the rag on the counter just as Keely walked behind the bar to cover her. He watched as Lewis, Darren, and Noelle fell in line behind her. They weren't close enough for anyone to notice, but not so far away that they couldn't protect her. She walked through the floor, completely clueless of all the male attention she was receiving. Trey could understand any man wanting to enjoy her beauty. *But I don't fucking like it.*

When she started up the stairs, he saw a man angle his neck to watch her. Trey fisted his hands and slowly angled his head, glaring at the man. The man's gaze followed Dahlia until she sidled up next to Trey. His gaze shifted, and Trey sent him a scathing glare meant as a warning. He immediately looked away and turned around, slipping into the crowd on the dance floor.

Dahlia chuckled and squeezed Trey's hand, gaining his attention. She moved closer to his chest and smiled.

"Can you teach me how to give that look? You've mastered the art of *fuck off* with just your eyes and face."

His face softened, he released her hand, and he slid it over her back. "I'm not showing you."

"Why not?"

The corner of his mouth curled as he wrapped his hand over her hip. "Because you'll use it on me."

Dahlia laughed, hugging him closer. "I was actually thinking I'd use it on Rogue."

Then Trey would definitely reconsider.

"So." Dahlia arched her brow. "These changes?"

Fuck! He'd have to sell it to her.

"A promotion."

She widened her eyes and smiled. "For me? You're making me a bartender?"

Not exactly.

"Aaron is moving up to full-time in security. That leaves a position open for an assistant manager. You'd work with Sloane."

"In the office?" Dahlia knitted her brows. "I've never been a manager."

"Sloane will show you."

Dahlia bit her lip. "You don't want me on the floor."

Trey nodded. “Assistant manager pays more. Better hours.”

“And keeps me safe.”

There was no reason to lie.

“Yes.”

Dahlia smiled and leaned closer. “Okay.

Trey felt a rush of ease wash over him. She got it. Dahlia understood.

Trey wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her against his chest. This was a bold move in such a public forum, but they were beyond holding anything back or hiding. This was them.

Trey pressed his lips to the crown of her head and whispered, “I love you.”

She tightened her hold, melting into his chest. “I love you more.”

Impossible.

Epilogue

Three years later.

Sunday night dinner.

Dahlia was able to claim it as her own doing. She'd started it three years ago, and surprisingly, it had stuck. She had Sal to thank for pushing her agenda, but it didn't take away from everyone showing up. This was a good thing. It's what families did. She hadn't been much of a traditionalist when she was younger, but Dahlia had seen the value in it as she got older, creating this new life with Trey.

It started out simple at her and Trey's place, and somewhere down the road evolved into trading off houses to host it. It was a strange yet so normal version of a family.

While she enjoyed hosting, it was always a treat when it was Oz's turn. His property was a fortress and a compound. The security was so tight that there were two gates within the property. *And I have both codes.*

Dahlia was walking out of the dining room when she saw the sleek black SUV pull up in front of the house. She started toward the door, peeked out the glass window, and smiled. Who would have thought three years ago that this would be her reaction to this man? It hadn't always been easy, but she'd managed to make small breakthroughs.

Dahlia grabbed the knob and opened it just as he was walking up the stairs. Dahlia leaned to the left, then the right, and furrowed her brows.

"You're alone."

Rogue scoffed. "How fucking observant!"

Dahlia rolled her eyes but leaned in for a kiss. His lips brushed against her cheek. It was their universal greeting. It was more than most people got from this man. She was part of the select few in his family.

“Where is she?”

She. The woman with the patience of a saint, the steadiness like no other, and a wife to a man she'd never envisioned settling down. But he did. Finally...Rogue was domesticated. Kind of.

“On her fucking way. Late as usual 'cause she doesn't listen to a fucking word I tell her.”

And that alone makes her worthy of hero status. Dahlia flattened her lips and stepped back as he walked in and closed the door.

“Need to fucking talk to you,” Rogue said, and she followed him into the den.

“What's going on?”

When Rogue turned, she recognized the look. Dahlia straightened her shoulders, folded her arms, and prepared for the fight. She wasn't sure what it was about, but she knew it was coming. Their relationship, much like hers with Oz, had taken on a sibling vibe. However, Rogue took the title to heart and became the overbearing, overprotective, intrusive brother she'd never wanted.

“Made some changes.”

Dahlia cocked her head, “To what?”

“Your fucking wedding list.”

What?

Trey poured himself a drink, took a swig, and sighed.

Fucking Rogue.

Trey glanced over to the doorway just as Oz and Nash walked in, ignoring the shouting from the other room. It was the same thing Trey had been trying to do for the last few minutes.

“Do I want to know?” Trey asked.

Nash laughed. “Rogue thought it would be a great time to show Dahlia the changes he made to your wedding invitation list.”

Oh Christ, not this again.

As their voices grew louder, he, Oz, and Nash settled on the couches, waiting for the argument to roll into the room. Rogue walked in with Dahlia on his heels. “This isn’t your wedding, Rogue!”

Rogue scoffed. “That’s fucking clear with that bullshit list!” He scowled, eyeing Dahlia. “Aren’t you supposed to be happy marrying the man of your fucking dreams? Is this a new fucking version of the bride? Pissed off and bitter?”

Dahlia squinted, knowing exactly the game Rogue was playing. Trey could’ve stepped in, but he didn’t. Dahlia could handle her own. She’d been doing it for the last three years.

“You’re not exactly a ray of fucking sunshine either, Rogue. You might wanna pipe down, or here’s an idea...how about you mind your own fucking business!”

Trey settled in his seat, smirking. *That’s my girl!*

Rogue lunged forward, but she refused to back down. Trey knew her adrenaline would carry her all the way. It always did. But they were at a standstill, and both being stubborn, they could be there for the rest of the night. As a true peacemaker, Trey stood and made his way to her.

Trey grasped her hips and whispered, “He gets off on this, you know that. Just calm down, Dahl.”

“No, I won’t.” She swung her arm out over his shoulder, pointing directly at Rogue. “Fuck you, Rogue!”

Trey sighed, shaking his head.

“Fuck me?” Rogue scoffed, grinning ear to ear. “Oh, little girl, you wanna go head-to-head with me, huh?”

Trey glared back at Rogue. The man thrived on fighting.

“No, I want to go foot to balls with you!”

Trey smiled, glancing over at Oz, who remained silent, but Trey caught a small twitch in his lips. He circled his thumbs over her waist, trying to calm her down.

“Are you done?”

“No, I’m not!” She balled her fists. “I want to punch him!”

Trey couldn’t resist any longer and laughed. Dahlia was by far the sweetest woman he’d ever known, but when she got fired up, there wasn’t much anyone, including himself, could do to settle her down. Especially when it came to Rogue.

“Dahlia?” Nash was smiling at her. “We all want to punch him.”

True!

“Yes, but only a few of us have had the distinct pleasure.” Oz took a strong pull from his cigar without much reaction other than his response. He glanced up at Trey, but it gave nothing away.

Rogue spun around, sending a scathing glare in Oz’s direction. “One fucking time, asshole.”

Trey laughed, shaking his head. *Welcome to Sunday night dinner...Underground style.*

Trey walked Dahlia over to the couch, pulling her down beside him while she continued glaring at Rogue. “I didn’t tell *you* who you could and could not have at your wedding.”

Rogue scoffed. “That’s ’cause I didn’t invite fucking assholes!”

Trey dragged his hand over his face, watching Rogue and Dahlia banter like siblings. It was a fair assessment. As the years passed, they’d grown closer and resembled every stereotype of brother and sister.

“They’re. Family,” Dahlia snapped.

“We’re your fucking family,” Rogue said and pointed to the list in her hand. “They’re fucking assholes.”

Dahlia folded her arms and settled into Trey's side. "They're invited."

"No, they ain't."

Trey sighed, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. *Yes, they are.*

"Yeah, Rogue, they are, and keep it up with this bullshit attitude of yours, and I'll seat them at your table." Dahlia rested her hand on Trey's leg. It was a power move. And a good one. Whether Rogue liked it or not, Dahlia would have whomever she wanted at their wedding. *Non-fucking-negotiable, Rogue.*

The past three years have seen some changes. The Underground still ran as it always had, but there was a behind-the-scenes life that neither Trey, Rogue, nor Oz had seen coming. The only man who wasn't surprised was Sal.

The loud crash from across the house got everyone's attention. Everyone seemed on high alert with a small ounce of concern. Even Rogue was laser-focused on the doorway. The only man not bothered by it was Oz. He lifted his cigar to his lips, took a deep drag, and slowly lowered his hand to tap off the ashes.

"I'm fine." The soft voice echoed through the main floor, and Trey clamped his lips, not giving in to his amusement. He eyed Oz, who didn't seem the least affected. Why would he? If Trey had to guess, this was a daily occurrence.

"Ah fuck!" Rogue snapped, heading toward the bar set up in the corner of the room. "Tell me you got some fucking backup plan here, Oz. How she hasn't fucking blown up your kitchen is beyond me. You got delivery on standby?"

Rogue's taunting was nothing new, and it didn't get much attention, but Oz did rest his cigar in the ashtray and glare at his brother. "You will fucking eat whatever she puts on that table."

Trey stifled his laugh, eyeing Sal, who was openly grinning. "Personally, I love a creative cook."

“It’s ready!” the soft voice shouted, and immediately Sal stood, walking through the grand living room. Oz was the next to follow, with Rogue trailing behind, his phone up to his ear. He was talking to his woman.

Trey wouldn’t ask questions or ask for a timeline on her arrival. He already knew the answer. It would be the same as always. *She’ll get here when she gets here.* Rogue’s woman answered to no one, not even Rogue.

Trey stared back at his brother in every sense of the word except blood. Rogue scowled, and his lips tightened, shaking his head yet biting his tongue.

It was strange to see the evolution of the three of them behind closed doors.

Rogue nodded and veered left toward the front door.

Trey straightened and attempted to stand, but Dahlia pushed his chest, forcing him back onto the couch.

“He crossed off half my list.” Dahlia held up the handwritten invite list. “I want them all to come.”

He cupped her jaw, stroking his thumb over her cheek. “Then they’ll all come.”

This was their wedding, and while it would be far from traditional, smaller than most, and discrete, Dahlia would get everything she wanted, including the attendees.

“You didn’t put anyone on the list.”

Trey glanced down. His list was short. Everyone she assumed had been marked down.

“There’s no one you want to add? Ya know, to be there?”

Trey stared down at her. The same face he wanted to look at until his last breath. Trey reached out, cupped her jaw, and stroked her cheek with his thumb.

“You and me. That’s all I need there. Promise me you’ll show up, and I’m good.”

Dahlia scooted closer, resting her hand over his chest. “I’ll always show up, Trey. Always.”

And she did.

The End

About The Author

Amelia Shea

Amelia Shea writes contemporary romance. She released her debut novel in 2015, and has followed her passion for series romance ever since. Her writing style includes a little sweet, a little sassy and lots of steam. She loves building stories with settings that become comfortable and familiar, and developing characters who feel real, and though they may be flawed, they learn and grow, and finally deserve a happy ending.

Born and raised, a Jersey girl, she has settled down in the south with her amazingly supportive husband, and children.

Books By This Author

The Favor (Ghosttown Riders #1)

The Hero (Ghosttown Riders #2)

The Samaritan (Ghosttown Riders #3)

The Saint (Ghosttown Riders #4)

The Enemy (Ghosttown Riders #5)

The Return (Ghosttown Riders #6)

The Outlaw (Ghosttown Riders #7)

The Player (Ghosttown Riders #8)

The Enforcer (Ghosttown East #1)

The Rulebreaker (Ghosttown East #2)

The Ex (Ghosttown East #3)

The Draw (Ghosttown East #4)

The Wildcard (Ghosttown East #5)

The Chameleon (Ghosttown East #6)

The Nomad (Ghosttown East #7)

The Liar (Ghosttown East #8)

The Prospect (Ghosttown East #9)

The Reckoning (Ghosttown East #10)