

FINN

Henchmen MC - Next Generation

Jessica Gadziala

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FINN

Henchmen MC: Next Gen #10

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Jessica Gadziala

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“None of this book was written using AI tools. Each word was crafted with human hands.”

DEDICATION

To Jon, Ryan, Renee, Brad, and Julian.

For the music.

And to Jase.

For taking me to “Jake’s”.

Playlist

(best listened to in this order to understand Finn's journey)

“Re-Arranged” - Limp Bizkit

“Millstone” - Brand New

“Down in a Hole (unplugged)” - Alice in Chains

“Hate Myself” - NF

“The Search” - NF

“It's Been a While” - Staind

“Black” - Pearl Jam

“This Night” - Black Lab

“Save Me” - Jelly Roll

“Coal” - Dylan Gossett

“No Complaints” - Noah Kahan

“You Can't Rush Your Healing” - Trevor Hall

“Riser” - Dierks Bentley

“Positive Charge” - The Gaslight Anthem

“From Eden” - Hozier

“Connect the Dots” - The Spill Canvas

“I Think I Love You” - ERNEST

“Alive with the Glory of Love” - Say Anything

“As Good as You Think I Am” - Ryan Hurd

“Still Ain't Sick of Fucking You” - Wheeler Walker Jr.

CHAPTER ONE

Finn

“The fuck is that?” I grumbled, shooting up in bed, disoriented, not sure what exactly had woken me up.

My heart hammered as I sat, some part of me expecting to hear gunshots or something similar that might explain why my heart was racing and wedged up into my throat.

There was nothing for a long moment before the sound echoed through the clubhouse and toward my room again.

A woman’s scream.

I shot off the bed, reaching into my nightstand for my gun before I ran across my room and down the long hallway toward the common area, but found it empty.

Pulse pounding, I rushed toward the back door, yanking it open, the humidity slapping me in the face instantly as I finally found the source of the screaming.

The fucking pool.

The in-ground pool that Sully had somehow managed to talk Fallon and Brooks into putting in last spring. If I recall correctly, it was something he’d only accomplished because of a campaign that involved increasingly messy and annoying party games that he claimed he had to do because of said lack of a pool to entertain club girls with.

It started innocently enough with a whipped cream and chocolate sauce Slip-n-Slide. But somehow it devolved into a large kiddie pool filled with Jello. Then, of course, the now notorious sprinkler that was somehow rigged up to be filled up and squirting fucking margaritas. But something had been off in the recipe, and one of the ingredients had stained all the partygoers—including the bikers—red for fucking *days*.

That was the thing about Sully.

He could get his way without ever having to put his foot down or argue. Hell, he could have fun every step along the way.

Had he appeared at the club ten years earlier, I was pretty sure he and I would have been fast friends. I would have had a fucking ball participating in his asinine party games. And I damn sure would have enjoyed being in close proximity to his charming ways that made every pretty woman in a ten-mile radius flock to him.

That shit just... hadn't appealed to me in a while.

I couldn't tell you where or when the shift happened.

All I knew was that the young, carefree kid I used to be was long gone.

These days, I had to fight the urge to avoid the club as a whole, to hole up in my place, and avoid the world.

I want you to talk to someone, my mom had insisted last weekend when she'd dropped in on me because I'd backed out of dinner at my parents' place for the third week in a row.

I guess I'd been wrong in assuming my absence wouldn't be felt when Fallon was there with his entire litter of kids.

I've been trying not to pry, but I think we are beyond that now. I'm worried about you. I think you're depressed.

Depressed.

I wanted to immediately brush that aside, to say there was nothing to be depressed about, that I had a good life by most standards.

But there was a niggling itch in my mind after she left that had me on my phone, doing some research, and concluding that you didn't necessarily need a *reason* to be depressed.

No, it wasn't, as was commonly stated, just a "chemical imbalance" in the brain. In fact, as extensively as it has been studied, no one has truly found one singular cause of it. Which was what made it so sneaky, so hard to treat.

Hell, even the meds only work fifty percent of the time for most people.

What did seem to help was medication, therapy, exercise, social outreach, and finding some sort of purpose.

That was what really had me thinking.

Because it did seem like the people around me who were happiest were the ones who had something they were passionate about. And the ones who had strong bonds.

Meanwhile, the more I withdrew into myself, the bigger the black hole I'd been slipping into got.

Which was why I was at the damn clubhouse when what I really wanted was to be home.

I was trying.

Baby steps.

I started running with the religiously active Sutton.

I was staying at the clubhouse.

I figured if this shit didn't start to help, I could consider seeing someone, trying the meds out.

"Finn!" Sully called, shooting me his easy-going grin as he stood there with a bikini-clad woman thrown over his shoulder, her long brown hair trailing down his back, her feet kicking, anticipating getting tossed into the pool. "Didn't know you were here," he added, patting the woman's ass affectionately.

"No one was here when I showed up," I admitted. Save for Brooks, of course, since he never really left. And Sutton, because he and Sully had some bad blood, and he didn't usually hit the bar or clubs when he was involved. And Sully was always involved.

Eventually, after doing some basic tasks around the clubhouse, I'd taken my ass to bed.

Apparently, the party had made its way back to the club sometime after that.

Somehow, Sully, Callow, and Nave had managed to bring eight women back with them. Four had already been tossed into the pool. One had somehow lost her top in the process and was holding the cups against her chest as Nave tied her back up.

“Well, we’re here now,” Sully said, doing a little jump that had the woman squealing and sinking her hands into his ass. Which, apparently, made him decide that they were in this together, because he took off toward the pool, and jumped.

The splash was enough to wet my shirt from several feet away.

“Yo,” a deep voice said from behind me, making me turn to find Sutton standing there. “Might wanna tuck the gun away,” he said, glancing down at my hand.

“Right,” I said, tucking it into my waistband, wondering if the women saw. And if they did, if they cared.

It wasn’t exactly a secret that we ran guns, but we didn’t go around advertising that either.

“Not partying?” I asked as he stood there, watching the goings-on.

“No,” he said, his gaze landing on Sully as he hauled himself out of the pool and started chasing down another woman who took off running amongst a mix of laughing and shrieking.

“If you dislike him so much, why not tell Fallon?” I asked.

I knew Brooks and Fallon were aware of the tension between the two men, but it clearly went deep if Sutton still hadn’t loosened up about it.

“Putting salt in his sugar ain’t gonna make mine any sweeter,” Sutton said, shrugging his wide shoulders. “Besides, I won’t be here that much longer,” he said. “No point in putting my personal shit in this club’s business.”

“Didn’t realize you were leaving.”

“That was always the plan,” he reminded me.

And, yeah, of course it was.

Fallon had wanted him here just to feel him out, see if he could be trusted with leading another sister chapter. It was just the way things had worked. My old man had made Huck come up to Navesink Bank to feel him out before he let him have Golden Glades. Slash, Crow, and Sway had come to stay for a long time before Fallon let them have a Shady Valley chapter.

It seemed like Fallon was close to giving Sutton the nod for his chapter in Texas.

“Cary would be happy to have another gym buddy,” he said, as if sensing me wondering how I would keep myself accountable to working out more if he wasn’t around.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Do—“ I started, only to be cut off by his phone ringing.

“Sorry,” he said as he reached for it. “What’s up, Moth?” he asked, making my brows go up.

Moth?

Who the fuck was named Moth?

Whatever Moth was saying had Sutton moving back into the clubhouse for privacy and quiet, leaving me standing there awkwardly by myself again.

“Hey,” a female voice said at my side.

Turning, I found a woman standing there with her expectant gaze on me, sunglasses sitting on top of her head. The big, oversized, movie-star type of glasses. They pulled back some of her hair that was so blonde it was almost white. It was cut to barely graze her shoulders, framing her slightly rounded face with big red lips and eyes whose color I couldn’t really make out in the bad light. Dark, though. Blue, green, brown? It was hard to tell.

She was somewhere around maybe five-seven with a killer rack and strong legs, all shown off in shorts and a tight light blue tank.

Pretty.

She was really fucking pretty.

“Hey,” I said, surprised how serious her vibe was, considering this was a party, and the fact that the recycling bin beside the table was full of dead soldiers. Everyone was happy and wasted.

Except, it seemed, this woman.

“Are you sober?” she asked, scrutinizing my face.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Wanna give me a ride home?” she asked.

I glanced at her, the party, then back.

“Not your scene?” I asked.

“Some of us have work in the morning. I followed my sister here,” she said, nodding her chin toward another blonde in the pool, but this one had long hair in a more natural shade. I couldn’t see her face, but her body was similar to her sister’s. “Lottie has been known to follow the wrong kind of men into the wrong kind of situations. I just wanted to make sure this wasn’t one of those.”

“It’s not?” I asked, feeling my lips curve up a bit.

I mean... an outlaw biker club was as “wrong” as it could get for ‘normal’ girls, wasn’t it?

“You got one big old Golden Retriever,” she said, looking toward Sully, who had his head thrown back at something Lottie said to him. “A man who insists that the girls have water or electrolytes between drinks,” she said, looking at Nave.

Nave, who was the son of two former addicts, so he was a lot more careful around substances than most.

“And Grandpa over there,” she added, looking toward the edge of the yard where Brooks was overseeing the shenanigans without having to be directly involved, “making sure things don’t get too crazy. Besides, when you heard women screaming, you came rushing out with a gun. So... I

figure she's as safe as she can be with her attraction to all things silly and tequila-soaked.

“But we all walked here from the bar, so I either throw myself at the mercy of some random ride-share guy, or ask you to get me the hell out of here. So... will you drive me home?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, nodding. “Let me go grab a shirt and shoes,” I said. “I’ll meet you out front,” I added, getting a nod from her before I moved back inside.

I grabbed a tee and shoes, then put my gun back in my nightstand before grabbing my key and moving out front to find her already waiting for me, her purse on her shoulder, her foot tapping impatiently.

“You good with bikes?” I asked, waving toward the line of them.

“I kind of figured that would be the mode of transportation,” she said. “With the whole... biker thing,” she added, falling into step with me as I made my way toward my bike.

I snatched an extra helmet off another bike as I moved, passing it to her before putting my own on, then getting on the bike.

“Here,” I said, reaching out when she struggled with the strap.

Her eyes narrowed, like some part of her innately distrusted me, but she took a step forward and leaned toward me, letting me secure it into place before moving back.

“Alright. Climb on,” I said, waiting to feel her hand on my shoulder to steady herself before climbing on.

But she seemed intent on keeping her hands to herself as she got on.

“Babe, you’re gonna have to hold on,” I told her.

I didn’t imagine the sigh as her hands went tentatively around me.

I went ahead and didn't get insulted.

I was a strange man.

She was tired.

It wasn't personal.

"Where am I heading?" I asked.

"Down by that abandoned nursery," she said instead of giving me an exact address. "There's a duplex next to it. That's me," she said.

With that, we were off.

The woman, whose name I'd forgotten to get, started with her hands just mostly gripping my shirt, pulling it taut across my chest and stomach. But as soon as we turned off of the streets and onto the highway, her arms slowly wrapped around me as her thighs tightened around the backs of mine.

I didn't remember the last time I'd had a woman on my bike. And it had to be the lapse of time that had my body reacting like it was as we rode.

I was acutely aware of her hands, of her breasts pressed into my back, of the scent of her that kicked up toward me on occasion, something smoky and rich, not the light or fruity scents I was accustomed to many women wearing.

My cock was getting all kinds of ideas that I had to keep forcing down, reminding myself that this woman wanted a ride home, not to take a ride on me.

Hell, she barely seemed to tolerate the idea of being near me.

Disinterest wasn't something that made me want to try harder. It was the ultimate boner-killer. So by the time that the old nursery came into view, all thoughts of the woman's body on mine were drifting away.

Until her fingers started to jab at me, getting my attention.

Her one arm tightened hard around me as the other rose, pointing toward a side street I would have missed if she didn't point it out.

It wasn't until we pulled down that quiet, dark street, that I felt my hairs start to stand on end.

Something was wrong.

But it took a solid moment before that feeling and reality caught up to us.

My headlights caught a parked car in front of us, shadows of men gathered around it.

Behind me, the woman let out a startled gasp even as my stomach twisted hard.

I didn't stop to think, just turned the bike, ready to get back to the main drag, and the relative safety to be found there.

When headlights came barreling toward us, closing off the street.

Trees lined both sides, but I wasn't about to cut the engine and submit to whatever fate these fucks had for us.

"Hold on," I demanded, voice tight, as I pulled in through thick-trunked trees, going fully off the road where their big cars couldn't follow.

It was denser than I'd hoped, though, and after a few hairpin turns, I had no choice but to stop.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, voice high and tight.

"Run," I demanded. "Toward the street," I added, glad when she climbed off the bike. "Run," I added again when she paused.

With just the moon to light her face, all I could see were her huge eyes before she turned and did what I demanded.

As soon as I was sure she was hauling ass, I turned back toward the thick of the trees, trying to maneuver into them, drawing the attention toward me, and away from her.

It wasn't long before they caught up with me.

But I was glad for the rule the club had about keeping a gun under your seat, especially if you were out on your own.

“You’re making a really fucking stupid mistake,” I said to the shadows as they drew closer.

The only answer was a chilling silence broken only by two things.

The crunch of old leaves and twigs as men closed in.

And the scream of a woman.

My heart squeezed in my chest, panic swelling with the need to get to her, to protect her from whatever these men had in mind.

With that in mind, my finger slid to the trigger, and I squeezed off shots.

One.

Two.

Three.

Before the gun was jerked out of my hand, falling somewhere out of sight, out of reach, even as a fist shot out, striking me in the jaw, making pain shoot across my cheek, and deep into my teeth.

It was pure adrenaline then.

Giving and taking before there was a moment of nothingness as I swayed, as I fell.

Consciousness flickered even as the drive to keep fighting started to flee.

But then I heard it again.

Heard her again.

Screaming.

I snapped myself back, striking out with renewed force, something bubbling through my system that I’d never felt before.

It was something I saw in Dezi each time he started a fistfight. Or in Niro back when he got in the ring to fight.

Bloodlust.

It was the most intense sensation I'd felt in fucking years.

I was numb to the pain as my fists met bones, as others landed blows to my body.

Then, almost as if the fight had been in fast forward, there was nothing but my own ragged breathing.

There was only a second of hesitation before I was running in the direction the girl had taken off in, where her screams had come from.

As I ran, I heard a high-pitched whistle, but barely recognized it as my focus stayed on getting the girl.

My shoulder whacked a tree trunk and I almost stumbled over a fallen log before I saw it.

Saw her.

Sprawled on the ground in an opening, the moon casting light down on her.

My stomach twisted as I saw way more skin than I should have.

Her belly, her chest.

Her bra had been yanked to the side.

But her shorts, her shorts were still on, her belt holding the waistband in place.

Small miracles.

My hand was reaching for my phone even as I ran.

"Better be fucking good. I just got to sleep," Fallon grumbled in my ear.

"I was just jumped," I said.

"*What?*" he barked.

"I was driving a girl home from the club. We were cut off on both ends of the road. Took off to the woods. I was jumped. And she's..."

"Where?" he barked.

“What’s going on?” I could hear his woman’s voice in the background.

“Call my father,” Fallon hissed at her.

“Shit,” she said, and I could see them jumping into action.

My brother, the club president.

His wife, a former president herself.

They knew what to do in a crisis.

“Over by the abandoned nursery,” I said. “In the woods.”

“What happened to the girl? Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m... fine,” I said, my entire body too numb to know the extent of the damage. “She’s... alive,” I said as I finally closed in on her, dropping down on my knees in the dirt.

Her chest was rising and falling, but she was out.

“I gotta get her out of here,” I said, not knowing if the men followed me, if they were still out for blood.

“We’re on our way,” Fallon said, even as I heard his front door slam. “Get to the road if you can.”

“I have to call an ambulance,” I said, speaking to myself as I reached out, yanking her bra and tank back into place.

I tucked my phone between my ear and shoulder so I could reach for her, pulling her up into my arms.

And running.

“Okay,” Fallon said, the soft hum telling me he’d taken the family SUV instead of his bike. “Get to the road if you can. We’re all on our way.”

With that, he hung up, and I ran, my arms wrapped tight around the woman whose only fault was trusting me to fucking drive her safely home.

The lights and whir of cars spoke of freedom as I continued to run.

Then, kneeling down at the side of the highway, I carefully lowered the woman down.

And called the police.

Even as the rumble of bikes drew closer.

CHAPTER TWO

Lexy

“Come onnnnn,” Lottie pleaded, sticking out her lower lip and making her big brown eyes go round. “Don’t be a party pooper,” she added.

“God, do people still say that?” I said with an eye roll.

“Yes, those of us who are not, in fact, party poopers, say it,” Lottie insisted with this little smirk of hers that I’d always liked. It was a mix of mocking and affectionate.

Lottie didn’t have a mean bone in her body, but she did often reserve her annoyance for me. The big sister who was the wet blanket over the never-ending good time that was her life.

It wasn’t that I wanted to be that to her.

It was just... how the chips had fallen.

Me, being older. Us, having been raised by a father who didn’t know what the hell to do with two daughters, so he often just... didn’t bother with us. In turn, forcing me to be the adult, the parental figure.

I constantly had to try to veer Charlotte down the road less likely to lead to ruin.

The problem was, when you had someone always looking out for you, shielding you from the ugliest parts of the world, you often didn’t get a chance to see the danger all around for yourself.

Hence... Lottie.

And her love of partying.

And my hatred of it.

Because I couldn’t just... let her go alone. We were both adults now, but I couldn’t let go. Some part of me felt like I always had to be there, that I had no choice but to try to

protect her from whatever bad shit could happen. Even if all I wanted to do was go home, slip into comfy clothes, turn on some *Forensic Files* and go to bed early.

“We just went to the bar,” I said.

“That was a week ago,” Lottie said with an eye roll as she reached up to gather her long hair, and pulled it over one shoulder.

Aside from our hair length and color, we looked a lot alike. She, though, always got all the eyes on her. Including the trio of men who were moving into the studio behind her, dragging their guitar cases and various crap with them.

I’d concluded it was Lottie’s lightheartedness, her sweetness and openness, that they picked up on. Compared to my coldness and hardness, my general distaste for most of humankind.

“You need to loosen up,” Lottie said. It was her usual refrain. There was just enough truth in it that it stung whenever she said it, even if I knew she didn’t intend to be hurtful.

“One drink,” I said.

It was a Thursday night, after all.

I had work in the morning.

“Yes! I knew I could wear you down,” she said, beaming at me. “I’m gonna tell the girls,” she said, reaching for her phone.

I should have known she meant with the girls, not just the two of us.

Which meant that it most certainly would not be one drink.

I would nurse one, of course.

They would con round after round out of whatever poor saps were at the bar. And then likely take this night to a secondary location.

I went to the back office, putting on another pot of coffee. I was going to need it. Sleep was a pipe dream now if all the

girls were going partying.

A couple hours later, I was standing in a bar, keeping an eye on my sister and her three best friends as they made new friends with a few other girls who were all lightly sloshed and very happy to get the attention of a bunch of guys who had ‘bad news’ written all over them.

“So, do they always get a guard dog when they go out drinking?” the bartender asked, making me glance over at him.

Objectively, he was a good-looking guy.

Older, for sure, with salt and pepper in his hair and beard, and some time-worn crinkles around his warm brown eyes. But there was a rough look to him, tattoos and scars on his arm, hands, and neck. That wasn’t counting the nasty limp he had.

There was a cane propped up against the back wall of the bar, something he was likely supposed to be using, but found it hard to do his job when relying on it. So he just limped along instead.

“All that pretty needs some protection,” I said, shrugging.

His gaze slid in that direction, then back to me.

“You’re plenty pretty yourself.”

Was he flirting? Or just relaying what he thought of as fact? I’d been in such a dry spell with men—by choice and by virtue of my ball-shriveling resting bitch face—for so long that I was finding it hard to tell.

“But with a good, strong bite,” I said, getting a smile out of him, one that crinkled his eyes in an appealing way.

I could maybe see myself being interested in him. If I let myself. Which I wouldn’t. Because this was about Lottie and her friends, not me. I could surely find a man to fuck if that was what I was after. I just much preferred my own company these days. On the rare occasion that I got to enjoy that.

Because if it wasn’t hitting the bar with Lottie, it was going shopping, or the salon, or out to lunch.

Lottie was a people person to the core.

And I was her favorite person.

So she was forever pulling me along with her. Sometimes kicking and screaming, bemoaning the need to be out in the world, amongst the other people. When we could paint our nails in my apartment where we wouldn't come across them.

“If you're worried about the look of those guys, they're decent,” the bartender said, nodding over toward the group of men in those leather vest things that I didn't know the name of, but I knew they belonged to guys who rode motorcycles and had lots of tattoos.

At my raised brow, he chuckled.

“Don't get me wrong, they're looking for a fuck. But they're good men. Don't gotta worry about little sis getting hurt.”

I would be the judge of that, but I kept my mouth closed.

“Toll,” the bartender said, pronouncing it Ta-hl. “Short for Tolliver,” he explained at my drawn-together brows.

“Interesting name. Lexy,” I said, pointing to myself. “Short for Alexandra. That's Lottie,” I said, looking at my sister as she threw her head back to laugh, drawing the attention of every man in the bar. She was magnetic like that. “Short for Charlotte,” I said. “So, you know these guys, it seems. What will my sister be dragging me to after this?”

“The clubhouse,” Toll said.

“Clubhouse?”

“They're bikers. Bikers have clubhouses.”

“And in those clubhouses...”

“Lots of drinking and fucking,” he said with that little smirk again. “Innocent enough. They just put in a pool, so I imagine that is what will happen next.”

Great.

Alcohol and a pool.

Always a fantastic combination.

“Can I have a soda?” I asked, pushing my drink away.

“We got energy drinks,” he said, picking up on how long of a night this was going to be.

“Thank God,” I said, accepting it and sipping as the girls got chummy with the bikers.

As Toll predicted, Lottie came skipping up to me, gushing about going swimming with the bikers.

“But you don’t have a bathing suit,” was my genius objection. Because I knew lectures about the dangers of drinking and swimming would be lost on her.

“Um, we live twenty minutes from the beach,” Lottie said, shaking her head. “I always have a suit on me.”

As it turned out, not only did *she* have a suit in her purse, but so did two of her friends. The third claimed her underwear was as good as a suit.

Then, just like that, we were following these random bikers down the road and toward a fenced-off property with a long, low building situated on it. There were newer additions to the clearly dated original building, one massive structure off the back, and some glass room on the roof.

We were led inside where two men were having a drink in front of the TV. One, tall, fit, and handsome with dark hair and a dark beard and lots of tats. The other, almost as tall, though not quite as jacked, with deep skin, and a resigned look as he looked from the guys to the girls who were holding their bathing suits they planned to change into.

Sure enough, that guy moved outside with the rest of us, perching on top of a picnic table, and keeping an eye on the goings-on. Not, though, in a creepy way. Almost in a fatherly way, wanting to make sure everyone was being safe and not drowning.

His presence alone had me relaxing.

At least I wouldn’t have to worry about one of the girls drowning.

As the hours stretched on and sleep started to weigh heavily on my eyes, I was debating calling a ride-share to take me home.

Why had I allowed Lottie to talk me into letting her drive to the bar? Where her car would sit until she was sober again in the morning. And where it was useless to me.

As one of the girls from the bar got caught and tossed over the shoulder of the Golden Retriever guy whose name I caught as Sully, she let out a scream that had even me wincing and looking around.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one startled by that sound, though.

Because a moment later, as she screamed as she was tossed into the pool, the back door to the clubhouse flew open.

And there was another biker.

Like the others, he was shirtless.

He was fit, but not overly muscular, just the outlines of abs as he took in the scene before him.

Hot.

He was hot.

But they all were in their own ways.

This one was tall with dark hair and some careless scruff on his face. Some ink, but not a lot. And a nasty scar on his shoulder.

I couldn't make out his eyes from so far away, but they were pretty regardless. If, I don't know, a little sad.

Most interesting of all, though, was the fact that he was holding a gun.

A gun.

He'd heard a woman screaming, so he grabbed a gun, and came running.

That sealed it for me.

The girls, it seemed, were safe.

I didn't have to babysit all night.

Besides, we were all adults here. I knew what would follow. Girls going back to bedrooms with bikers. Leaving me alone out back or in the common room.

I figured that I might as well get ahead of things and get going.

I made my way toward the gun-toting biker, figuring that aside from the Grandpa guy, he was the only sober one around.

He was even better looking up close and personal where his cut jaw and tortured-looking eyes were on full display.

I felt my pulse speeding up as we spoke, little telltale pulses of desire telling me that my libido, while long-buried, was not dead.

When he ducked inside to grab shoes and a shirt, I moved toward the edge of the pool, kneeling down.

“Try to grab me,” I warned at the Golden Retriever guy, “and I will stab my earrings through your sack.”

“Lexy!” Lottie said, mouth falling open in amused outrage. “She doesn't mean that.”

“Oh, but she does,” I said. “Look, I got the sober guy to give me a ride home. Are you good here?” I asked.

“Yep. We're gonna be crashing here,” she said.

“Phone is charged?” I asked.

“Yes, Mom.”

“You have cash and cards if you need to get a ride?”

“Yesss.”

“And you have condoms?” I asked, lowering my voice.

“Oh, my God. Go,” she said, rolling her eyes at me. “But yes,” she added. “Text me when you get home.”

“I will,” I assured her, even though I knew she wouldn't be checking her phone. “And you text me when you get up in the morning.”

“Always,” she said.

“Okay. Have fun.”

“Enjoy *Forensic Files*.”

She was teasing me, but I smiled. “I will.”

With that, I made my way around the building, waiting for the hot biker as I looked at the line of bikes.

Well, there was a first time for everything, I guess.

I wasn't opposed to bikes, per se. I just never had a chance to ride on one.

Of course, I'd underestimated just how... intimate riding on the back of one was. I guess some part of me always figured that the TV shows and movies were exaggerated, that I wouldn't have to actually hug the driver. I thought there were, you know, grips to hold onto instead or something.

No such luck, apparently.

I grabbed mostly his t-shirt at first, but as the bike sped up, I found myself scooting closer, felt my arms sliding around his strong midsection.

I might even have rested the side of my face on his back. Or as much as I could with the helmet on.

It was a freeing sensation after the whole stomach-dropping sensation went away. The summer breeze cooling my overheated skin. The rumble beneath us.

I was really starting to regret living so close when we turned down the road that would lead to my duplex. I just wanted five more minutes.

I felt the change in the biker before I sensed anything wrong myself.

His entire body stiffened as the bike slowed.

Then I saw them.

A group of shadowy figures ahead of us, cutting off the road.

It looked like a trap, like assholes did to carjack you.

But we didn't have a car, and I doubted a bike was as valuable to sell for parts.

Still, though, something was clearly wrong as another car's headlights came in from the back, closing us in.

The biker reacted before my mind could fully wrap itself around what was happening, turning the bike, and going off the road.

Toward the woods.

The woods?

"Hold on!" he demanded as my stomach dropped, as my arms and legs tightened.

It was a short drive, though, before the terrain was too difficult to keep moving.

"What are you doing?" I gasped, voice sounding tight and high to my own ears as panic welled.

"Run," he said, voice tense. "Toward the street," he added as I climbed off. "Run!" he demanded, voice brooking no argument.

The look of fear on his face was what made me turn and haul ass. Because if a cool, calm, collected biker dude with a gun was scared, I figured I should be shitting myself terrified.

I ran, tearing through the woods, leaves crunching and twigs cracking under my feet.

I was not what anyone would call athletic, so it wasn't long before my breathing was fast and shallow, before my heartbeat was pounding in my ears.

That must have been how I missed the footsteps until they were right behind me.

I'd never been a woman who screamed.

Not at horror movies or when someone snuck up on me. Or when I found a horrifically large spider in the shower with me.

Everything in me rebelled at the idea of screaming for help.

But we weren't that far from the road.

If someone was walking down the highway, or driving with their windows down, they might hear, might call the police. Or maybe even come to help me themselves.

I swallowed back my desire not to, and screamed my fucking lungs out.

Just a second before hands shoved hard into my back, sending me flying forward so hard and fast that I barely had time to throw out my arms to catch myself as I fell.

I landed hard, pain ricocheting up my knees and thighs as the underbrush and God knew what bit into my palms, making them burn.

A laugh, cold and chilling, filled the air, amused at my pain, at my helplessness.

I moved to scramble up, but he was too fast, too motivated by his own sick desires as he grabbed my shoulder, shoving me until I landed on my back hard enough to knock the wind out of me, making it impossible to scream as my heart pounded harder still.

In the distance, I heard a distinct *pop pop pop*.

I'd grown up in a rough area.

I knew gunshots when I heard them.

Who had a gun?

The biker?

The other guys?

Panic wrapped its hand around my throat, cutting off my air supply even as my attacker came down over me, his knees pinning my thighs to the ground, the deep pain oddly dull as my survival instinct started to kick in.

My arms were free.

And I struck out with everything in me, hitting, slapping, scraping.

The man let out a howl of pain as my nails raked down his face.

Some part of me knew from my never-ending obsession with shows like *Forensic Files* that DNA evidence under nails was a good way to find your attacker. I was going to get as much evidence as I could.

Because this fucker wasn't going to get away with this.

"I like a little fight in my bitches," he said, sounding pleased with the pain.

Right before he started to inflict his own.

It was a blur there for a few moments.

Fists on my skin, pain making my brain sluggish.

It wasn't until I felt his hands grabbing at the front of my tee that I seemed to be able to think past it.

Because *no*.

No, damnit.

This could not be happening.

This would not happen.

Before I could unfreeze my limbs, though, I felt his hands on my bra, yanking it to the side, exposing me.

It was then that I started to scream.

Louder.

The sound rattled into my bones, made my own ears hurt, made my throat burn.

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" he demanded, pressing a hand over my mouth.

That wasn't enough, though.

I wiggled and bit and freed my mouth enough to start screaming again.

I couldn't tell you what he used.

A rock on the ground.

A gun he had on him.

Something else.

All I knew was that he silenced me then.

And all there was in the world was darkness.

"You're gonna be alright," a voice murmured as fingers pulled my eye open, then pressed to my throat.

Checking vitals?

My brain trudged slowly toward consciousness.

"The cops are on their way," he added.

Cops?

Why were the cops coming?

But then, through the pain screaming through my head and the darkness, I heard something.

The rumble of motorcycles.

Many of them.

I came awake with a jolt then.

Motorcycles.

Bikers.

The club.

The ride home.

The attack.

My hands shot down toward my body, finding my boobs covered.

"You're alright. Hey, you're okay," the voice said, too tense to be truly soothing, but clearly trying to calm me down as panic welled.

It wasn't until my fingers found my fastened belt that I felt some of the fear slipping away.

Not naked.

Likely not assaulted while unconscious then.

“You’re okay. They’re gone,” the biker assured me. “No, don’t,” he demanded, holding me still as I tried to shoot upright.

“Why?” I asked, my voice sounding and my throat feeling like I’d been gargling glass.

“You have a head wound,” he told me. “I think you should stay still until the ambulance gets here.”

“You’re hurt,” I said, looking up at his battered face, so bloody and swollen that he barely even looked like the hot guy who’d agreed to drive me home less than half an hour before.

“I’m fine,” he said as the rumble of bikes growled louder before silencing completely.

“Finn!” a voice, deep but rough, panic-filled, called as footsteps pounded in our direction.

I felt myself tensing.

“It’s okay. It’s my brother,” he assured me, giving me a unconscious reassuring squeeze.

“Finn, the fuck?” the guy asked as he dropped down beside the biker.

Finn.

That was a very... normal name for a biker, wasn’t it? Weren’t they supposed to be called Gator and Tank and other weird shit like that?

“I’m fine,” Finn insisted.

“You’re not,” the other biker said. “Where are they?” he asked, tone surprisingly calm.

“Down that road. In the woods too.”

“Where’s your gun?” he asked, tone even more serious.

“In the woods. I lost it,” Finn said.

“We’ll find it. Did you hit any of them?”

“I don’t know. It was dark.”

“Okay,” the other biker said as more figures joined us.

A man walked into the woods, then emerged a few moments later, tucking a gun into his waistband, then driving off.

What was going on?

My brain wasn’t working right.

I felt cloudy and slow.

“What’s your name, babe?” Finn’s brother asked, and it took me a second to realize he was talking to me.

“Lexy,” I said.

“Lexy. The cops are pulling up now,” he told me, looking off toward the highway. “And I can hear the ambulance. You’re gonna be alright.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Lottie,” I said.

“What?” he asked.

“Lottie. Her sister. She’s partying at the club,” Finn explained.

“Okay,” his brother said. “I will call Brooks. We’ll get your sister to meet you at the hospital, okay?” he asked.

“Okay,” I agreed, hearing the slamming of doors.

The police, I assumed.

A moment later, there they were.

With so many questions that my head spun, making me close my eyes. A move I instantly regretted as my stomach sloshed and twisted.

“Okay, alright,” Finn said, turning me as I gagged, allowing me to throw up onto the dirt instead of all over myself and him. “She’s gotta have a concussion,” he said, seeming to speak to the cops.

More of them showed up, taking off toward the road and the woods before, finally, the ambulance was there.

I was moved away from Finn, and I felt his absence with a stabbing sensation in my stomach.

But the EMTs had their own questions, did their own poking and prodding.

Then I was strapped to a gurney, loaded into the back of an ambulance, and driven toward the hospital.

Things happened quickly there.

I had a scan of my head.

My fingernails were scraped for evidence. My clothes were also taken for that because there was blood on them, and I couldn't say for sure if it was just my own, or my attacker's as well.

Eventually, my cuts were treated, my head was stitched, and ice was given to me for my face before the detectives came in to start to question me about the events of the night.

I gave them all I knew. Which wasn't much.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

"Who, ma'am?" the detective asked.

"The biker who drove me home," I said. "He looked bad. Is he here?"

"I think he refused treatment," the detective said, and there was something tight in his voice.

Before I could wrap my head around that, though, a voice rang out through the emergency room.

"Where is my sister?"

Lottie.

Not a minute later, she was rushing into the room, eyes huge. Still drunk, but getting closer to sobriety as she looked at me, as she immediately teared up.

"This is all my fault!" she cried.

"No, it's not," I assured her, even as the migraine ratcheted up. I just wanted quiet. And less clawing lights than the stupid fluorescent ones overhead.

“I wanted to party. You wanted to sit home and watch reruns. It’s all my fault,” she said.

“If you remember anything else,” the gestured said, placing a card on the foot of my bed, clearly wanting to get away from Lottie’s emotions.

I gave him a nod and watched him leave.

“How’d you get here?” I asked, thinking of all the drunken bikers.

“I drove her,” a deep voice said, making me look toward the doorway where that wall of a man who’d come out to talk to Finn for a moment then disappeared again back at the clubhouse, said, giving me a nod. “Sober as a judge,” he added, sensing my concerns.

“Thank you,” I said, meaning it. “Is Finn okay?” I asked.

“Had the same question about you,” he said, and I was picking up on a bit of a drawl. Was that Texan, maybe?

“They’re keeping me tonight,” I told him, getting a nod. “I have a concussion.”

That only made Lottie cry a little harder.

“Hey, darlin’,” he said, speaking to her. “How about you and I go get you some coffee?” he asked. “Sober you up a bit while your sister rests?”

“I can’t leave her,” Lottie insisted.

“Think the doctor wants to check in with her again,” the Texan flat-out lied, even shooting me a little wink.

“Oh. Okay. Ah, yeah. Do you want something?” she asked, wiping her red eyes.

“A bottle of water would be good,” I said. “Cold, if they have it.” My throat was killing me.

“Okay. I’ll be back in just a couple minutes.”

Behind her back, the Texan waved a hand as if to say *Don’t worry. I’ll stall her as long as I can.*

I mouthed a *Thank you* to him before he led my sister away, and was granted over an hour of complete silence to nurse my migraine. Well, as silent as an emergency room could be anyway.

Eventually, I was moved up to a room for observation, and Lottie came back a lot more sober than before, but looking dead on her feet.

As soon as the Texan found her a blanket to curl up with in the chair by the window, she was out cold.

Not long after that, I was too.

CHAPTER THREE

Finn

The cops were assholes, as predicted.

Most of the questions had to do with what enemies the club had, who would want to hurt me or us.

The thing was, I couldn't say for sure if it was personal or happenstance.

The whole setup was like a carjacking.

But then why chase us down when we clearly didn't have what they wanted?

None of it made sense.

I'd lucked out in not killing anyone. There were no bullet-riddled bodies for the cops to find and haul me in on charges for.

It didn't matter that it would have been in self-defense. Our state had a 'duty to retreat' law when under threat. Which meant you could not stand your ground and kill someone for trying to hurt you. And especially not to shoot someone since gun laws were strict as fuck.

So the fact that the crew who'd attacked us had retreated to their cars and gotten out of there had worked in my favor. Even if it left even more questions that couldn't be answered.

DNA was taken from my hands and nails. I imagined the same went for Lexy. And the cops would surely check traffic cameras. But other than that, we were in the dark about everything.

"This needs stitches," Fallon declared, eyeing a nasty cut on my arm.

I didn't even remember getting it.

I hadn't even been aware of someone having a knife.

“Eh, it’ll be fine,” Callow said, eyeing it. “Couple of butterfly sutures and it’ll be good as new,” he insisted.

I imagined that with his long history in the service, he’d seen a lot worse.

“For the pain,” Sully said, holding out a handle of vodka toward me.

I took it, even though I didn’t have any intentions of drinking it.

Fallon poked his fingers into the most swollen part of my cheek, brows pinched. “Your teeth alright?” he asked.

I moved my tongue around, poking at them.

“Seem to be,” I said.

“Hope this is just soft tissue,” he said, poking some more.

“You trying to make it worse?” I grumbled.

“Maybe,” he said, the smirk he shot me at odds with the serious look in his eyes.

Sure, we were brothers. And, yeah, he got kicks out of fucking with me a lot of the time. But he didn’t like seeing me beat to shit.

“It’s not bad,” Dezi said, reaching to yank up my shirt to check out my ribs. “Considering how outnumbered you were. I’m impressed,” he said. “You might be my new hero,” he declared, before breaking off into a horrifically off-key rendition of the song “Hero.”

He cut off suddenly when the door flew open.

And there was my old man.

His eyes were panicked for a second before his gaze landed on me.

Then I got to watch as he went from dad to the former club president.

His jaw tightened.

His eyes darkened.

“I’m fine,” I insisted even as he crossed the room toward me.

“Yeah, you look fine,” he said with an eye roll, coming over to do the same once-over that my brother and Dezi had done.

“Did anyone get an update on Lexy?” I asked.

By the time I got back to the club, Sutton had already taken Lottie to the hospital to see her sister.

“She’s staying for the night,” Brooks told me. “Has a concussion they are just keeping an eye on. Other than that, just a lot of bruising. They took her clothes for DNA. There was a lot of blood on them.”

Likely her own.

She’d been mauled.

I wanted to give that fucker who did it a taste of his own medicine.

“I don’t understand what the fuck happened,” I said.

“Yeah,” Fallon agreed. “We are looking into it. Don’t know of any crews operating down that street, but you never know. Could be new. And it’s an odd place for carjacking since not many people live down that way.”

“But it doesn’t make sense if it was targeted, since no one knew you were heading that way. You’ve never driven her home before, right?” Brooks asked.

“No. I’ve never seen her before. Has her sister been here before?” I asked, directing the question at Sully, since he was always the party planner.

“No. She’s new as far as I can tell. Though...” he said, brows drawing down.

“What?” my old man barked, having less patience than Fallon in this situation.

“The sister’s friends... they’ve been here before.”

“Which ones?” Fallon asked.

“Ah... Mercy? Mary?” Sully asked.

“Mandy,” Nave corrected with a head shake.

“Right. Mandy. And the other one... brunette. Small chest, big ass. Little birthmark right on...” he said, pointing toward his hipbone.

“Kerri,” Callow filled in.

“Right,” Sully said, snapping. “Mandy and Kerri have been around before.”

“You got their numbers?” my father asked, sounding dubious.

“Can’t say I did,” Sully admitted, looking a little sheepish.

“Where’d you find them?” Fallon asked.

“Redemption,” Callow supplied. “We can go back a few nights to see if we run into them again.”

“Yeah, do that,” Fallon said. “Sober,” he added. “And you can ask Toll if he’s seen them hanging with any crews around the bar when you guys weren’t around.”

“Got it,” Callow said, nodding.

“I’ll call Junior in the morning,” Voss said. “See if he can do some looking around.”

“Good,” Fallon said, nodding. “Think that about covers all we can do right now. You want me to me to fix you up?” he asked, looking at me.

“Think I’d rather a rabies-riddled honey badger fix me up,” I said, getting a snort out of him.

“I’ll do it,” my father said, giving me a nod toward the hallway.

I moved ahead toward my room, going into the bathroom to look at the damage.

It was worse than I’d anticipated.

I think I was still operating on a lot of adrenaline, because I should have been feeling a fuckuva lot worse than I did, judging by the swelling and bruising going on.

My father moved in through my bedroom and came into the bathroom carrying the plastic container full of medical supplies the club kept around because getting roughed up wasn't exactly a rare occurrence.

"Guess I should be used to this shit," he said, setting the container down on the counter as I sat on the lid of the toilet. "Your brother gave my medic skills a run for their money when he was young. But never gets easier seeing your kid all fucked up," he said, laying out some supplies, then washing his hands.

"I'm alright," I assured him.

"Yeah? Try telling your mother that when she gets an eyeful of this," he said, exhaling hard as he looked at me. "She's already worried about you."

"I know," I admitted with a sigh. "I've been working on that," I added.

That had his gaze lifting to mine for a second. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Did some research. And I'm... taking steps. Not gonna be an overnight fix," I added.

"No," he agreed. "But she'll be glad to hear you listened to her. You know," he went on as he started to swipe at some of the cuts with peroxide, the sting still a dull sort of pain, "think maybe it's time to pick up a hobby. Or open a business like Seth did."

Seth, with his shooting range that was all the rage in the area since it opened, and he started to do shit like girls nights and birthday parties and shit, focusing a little more on female clientele.

"Your brother, he always wanted exactly what he'd got here," he went on.

That was true.

Fallon, being the eldest, was always going to take over for our old man, was destined to become the club president. It was a role he'd always been well-suited for, something that gave him drive and focus.

“And your sister, life came at her hard and fast, and that molded her into a fighting machine, and gave her purpose in life.”

Ferryn, who’d been kidnapped and held when she was a teenager, had seen and endured shit that no woman, let alone a girl, should have to endure. It had switched something on in her head that had her running away from home and dedicating her life to fighting traffickers.

“You didn’t have that,” he went on, swabbing some triple antibiotic onto the cuts on my face before setting his sights on my arm. “Think when you were young, you were enjoying the partying and fun the club offered. But as you got older, especially as your club brothers married, settled down, built other careers, you flailed. And that let that hollowness sneak in.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. My soul-searching had led me to conclude something really similar.

The problem was, I didn’t even know at this point what to take up, what hobby to try my hand at, what business I wanted to invest in. I didn’t know what I was good at, what I was passionate about.

“Not saying any of this shit is gonna be easy,” he went on as he reached back for the butterfly sutures. “But I think finding what drives you will make a big difference.”

“What drives you?” I asked.

“The club,” he said, even though he was mostly retired. “My woman. My family.”

That did kind of sum up my old man.

The club.

My mom.

Us ‘kids.’

And, now, his grandkids.

“Is this the part where you try to convince me to find a woman and settle down?” I asked, smirking at him.

To that, he let out a little chuckle.

“Know that shit ain’t for everyone,” he said, shrugging. “But a good woman... there’s nothing like it,” he said. “But if you tried to tell me that when I was young, I’d’ve scoffed too. So maybe that’s in your future, maybe not. Speaking of women...” he said, reaching for another suture.

“I gotta check on her,” I said, heart aching at the memory of her unconscious in my arms on the side of the road.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Just gotta remind you that this shit wasn’t your fault,” he said. “You did everything you could,” he added. “From the looks of things,” he went on, looking at my face. “Know we all like to think we’re fucking infallible, that we should be able to shield the women around us from ever getting hurt. But that ain’t how it always goes down. You were outnumbered. But you fought like fucking hell to save her. You gotta be okay with that.”

He was speaking from a lot of experience, given how much shit had gone down with the club over the years. That shit often involved the women close to us getting hurt, no matter how hard the men fought to protect them, to shield them from it.

“Yeah. I’ll get there,” I said. “Once I check on her,” I added. There would be no trying to compartmentalize this shit until I saw with my own two eyes that she was alright.

“Do your old man a favor,” he said.

“Okay.”

“Get some sleep before you go tracking her down. She needs rest too,” he added, knowing that was the one that would hold me back.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Maybe you can play this down for me with Mom,” I said, waving toward my face.

“And face her wrath when she knows I lied to her? No fucking way,” he said with a smirk as he put all the shit back into the plastic container and clicked the lid into place. “Ice that face,” he demanded.

“I will. Thanks, Dad,” I said.

He reached out, giving my shoulder a squeeze, then walked out.

Alone, I changed out of my bloody shirt, and made my way toward the bed.

Someone, likely Brooks, had already dropped some water, a bottle of pills, and a few ice packs on my nightstand.

With the adrenaline getting reabsorbed and the pain starting to settle in, I made my way to the bed, took a few of the pills, and placed the ice packs on the spots that hurt the worst.

Eventually, I drifted off to sleep.

And dreamed about driving a never-ending road with a certain woman wrapped around me, her body pressed to mine, both of us without a fucking care in the world.

It was a loud slam that woke me from the dream, making me shoot up in bed, disoriented for a moment, before I realized it must have just been a door slamming.

But as soon as I was awake, every fucking blow I'd taken suddenly hurt with an intensity I hadn't been prepared for.

“Fuck,” I grumbled as a headache clapped behind my eyes, and my entire goddamn face felt bruised and swollen.

Even my ribs, which I hadn't noticed at all the night before, were screaming at the sudden change in position.

I glanced over toward the clock, finding it was already past ten, and cursing as I climbed off of the bed.

I felt like I'd aged a few decades as I trudged toward the bathroom to brush my teeth and change.

If I thought I'd looked rough the night before, I looked like complete shit in the morning light.

My entire face was a bruise. Smatterings of purple, blue, and yellow. The white of my eye was all red. My cheek was swollen almost twice the size it had been when I'd gone to bed.

“Christ,” I hissed at my reflection before turning away from it, and going in search of some much-needed caffeine.

“There he... fuck,” Seth said, eyes widening as he looked at me.

“I’m fine,” I said, knee-jerk, even if I felt anything but.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, shaking his head.

“I feel like shit, but I’m fine,” I clarified.

“That’s more like it,” he said. “The fuck, man?” he asked.

It wasn’t a question that needed answering, so I just nodded as I made my way into the kitchen, grabbing a coffee large enough to fight back the fog in my mind.

“Did anyone find anything out while I was sleeping?” I asked, putting cream and sugar into my coffee.

“Not so far. Junior wasn’t home when Voss dropped over. Just some dude named Barry who was dog-sitting.”

“Right,” I said, nodding. “Is Fallon pulling people in for guard duty?” I asked.

“No, man. I’m here because we’re family,” Seth said, brows pinched. “But we’re supposed to be careful while driving at night for the time being though, just in case.”

That made sense.

Even if it was making less and less sense that it was targeted as I thought about it.

That didn’t change shit in my mind, though. I had to find those fucks. They had to pay for what they did to that girl.

As if sensing the direction of my thoughts, Seth sighed. “Guess it’s good that she got a ride home with you last night.”

“What?”

“Just think... if she went alone, or got a ride-share, no one would have been able to fight for her.”

That was... something I hadn’t considered yet.

If she'd been alone on that road, if someone hadn't brought a gun, and a willingness to fight to the bitter end, would she have endured worse? Would the man or men who'd attacked her have continued to do so? Would she even be alive right now?

There were no answers to these questions, but I did feel a little better about having been there for her.

"You gonna go see her?" he asked.

"Gotta make sure she's alright," I said.

"You gonna ask her about the attack?"

I hadn't really considered that. But, yeah, Fallon would want me to pump her for details. Just in case this was in some way personal to the club.

"Delicately," I said, getting a nod out of him.

"Figured you weren't up for the run this morning," Sutton said, coming into the kitchen, shirt wet with sweat after clearly having gone on his usual run by himself.

"You guessed right," I agreed. "Ribs are smarting today."

To that, he nodded as he grabbed a bottle of water, and ripped open an electrolyte packet to drop into it. "When I left the hospital last night, the girls were both out cold. I was getting eyes from the staff from hanging around, so I had to head out."

"Any other updates before you left?"

"No, they were letting her rest. Place was fucking packed. Guess she wasn't high priority when she was already sleeping. You heading up?" he asked.

"Soon as I finish my coffee," I agreed.

"Not worried about the state of you?" he asked.

I hadn't given that a second thought until that moment. But, I mean, we'd been attacked together. It wasn't like she was my victim or some shit like that.

"Don't give a fuck what they think," I said, shrugging.

To that, he nodded as he made his way out.

An hour later, caffeinated and with some ibuprofen taking the edge off all of my aches and pains, I took the SUV to the hospital.

Only to find she wasn't there.

She'd been discharged first thing in the morning.

To go where?

Home?

Down that same road where she'd been attacked?

Was she in danger there?

Did they possibly know where she lived?

I was back in the SUV in a flash, flying down the highway, then turning down her street, my stomach twisting hard as I drove past the area we'd gotten squeezed in.

But there was no one there.

Further down the road were several small ranch-style homes and a singular colonial duplex.

With no car in the drive.

I parked anyway, going to the side that didn't have men's work boots sitting out in front of the door, and knocking, ringing, listening.

Nothing.

"Damn it," I grunted, sighing hard as I looked up at the house.

Maybe she'd been too freaked out to go home.

She could have gone to her sister's place.

Unfortunately, though, I had no fucking idea where that was.

I grabbed one of the envelopes in her mailbox, scribbling my name and number on the back, then wedging it in the screen door before making my way back to the SUV.

As I climbed in, there was this weird-ass crushing sensation in my chest.

I didn't recognize it as disappointment until I was halfway home.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lexy

It was the damn never-ending migraine that woke me up, squinting hard at the bright light streaming into the window of the room, the glare made worse from the sun dancing off the water of the Navesink River several floors below.

“Stupid fucking sun,” I grumbled as I threw my arm over my eyes, the pressure of it making the pain slightly more tolerable.

“Hold on. I’ll close the blinds,” Lottie said, voice hushed, but her chair scraped hard against the floor as she climbed off of it, making me wince.

She struggled with the task for a minute before the room darkened a bit.

“There,” she said. “Your head?” she asked, coming to the side of the bed, and grabbing my ankle through the thin blanket the hospital had given me.

“Yeah,” I said, peeling my arm off of my face, so I could open my eyes and look at her. “Yours too?” I guessed, seeing her red, heavy-lidded eyes. “Holy hangover, Batman,” I said, wondering how much she’d been able to drink between when I’d left and when she’d shown up at the hospital. It must have been a fuckton to have her looking so puffy.

“It’s not the hangover,” she insisted. “Well, not all the hangover,” she said.

I blinked a few times, trying to focus better on her. And, sure enough, there was a rawness to her cheeks that said she’d been crying.

She’d never been able to keep her emotions private because of her skin’s tendency to react to her own tears.

“Oh, Lott, I’m fine,” I said, reaching my hand out toward her, grabbing her wrist, and giving it a squeeze.

“You obviously haven’t seen your face,” she said, already getting glassy again. “This is all my fault.”

“No, it’s not,” I said, voice firm.

But Lottie was in a blame spiral.

“I was the only reason you were on that street with that guy at that time of night.”

“Wait... you don’t think it was about him, do you?” I asked.

“I mean... they’re bikers. And not, you know, the legal sort,” Lottie said.

This was new information.

I felt like my brain wasn’t processing at its usual speed, though.

“Yeah, but... no. I mean, he was driving me home. It makes no sense. They were already there. Waiting.”

At least, the guys parked on the road had been. The ones behind us in the other car, I don’t know.

“Still,” Lottie said, wiping carelessly at her tears with the back of her hand. “I blame them.”

“I don’t know. I think... I think he saved me,” I said. I mean... something had scared my attacker away, right? Before he could finish what he set out to do to me.

Lottie said nothing to that, just looked at my face for a long moment.

“That good, huh?” I asked.

“I guess it could have been worse,” she said, gaze drifting away.

I went ahead and didn’t tell her how close it had come to being worse. She was feeling shitty enough.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Eight,” she told me. “A little after.”

“Shit,” I said, throwing off my covers, and shooting up in the bed.

“What are you doing?” she asked, reaching to try to push me flat again.

“I have to get to work.”

“What?” she asked, looking at me like I’d suddenly grown another head. “You can’t go to work.”

“I have to go to work. It’s where the money comes from. And I have to open,” I added.

“You’re not going anywhere,” she said, trying for a firm, motherly voice, but it just didn’t work on her. “The doctor hasn’t even been in to check on you again.”

“Well, track him down, because I’m signing myself out whether I see him or not.”

With that, I put my legs on the floor and stood slowly, sensing that the room was going to wobble. I wasn’t wrong. I couldn’t quite tell you if it was more that the room or I was spinning, but everything felt really fucking nauseating for a moment.

“I’m getting the doctor,” Lottie said, rushing away, likely hoping that they could talk some sense into me.

Sure, I wanted to know how my head was doing. And if there was anything I had to look out for. But I needed to go.

Sure, if I needed some sort of emergency surgery or something like that, I would have to deal with the blowback for not being at the studio. But I was conscious and mostly able to function, so I was going in.

Was I queasy as fuck?

Yeah.

Was there an entire marching band playing off-key in my head?

Also yes.

But once I got there, I could put on my noise-canceling headphones, keep the lights low, and take it easy.

The perk to working in a building full of soundproofed rooms was that the only noise I heard all day came from the door opening and closing, or my own music playing on the wireless speakers.

I made my way into the bathroom, wincing as I flicked on the light, and staring at myself in the mirror.

So... maybe Lottie hadn't been overreacting.

I looked like shit.

Bruised and swollen with blood caked in my hair on the side of my head.

There was no makeup that could cover this damage. And I wasn't sure I was even allowed to wash my hair with the stitches in my head.

"Damn it," I grumbled.

I was going to spend the entire day getting pitying looks and explaining the situation.

I grabbed some paper towels, wet them, and worked at getting as much of the blood out of my hair as possible without actually getting my scalp wet.

A few minutes later, I'd gotten a lot of it off, and worked at getting the dried blood off my face.

Then, hearing Lottie call for me, I made my way back out to find that she'd tracked down a doctor who wanted me to sit, so she could get my vitals.

"I know your sister doesn't want to hear this," she said a few minutes later. "But the plan was always to discharge you today. We just wanted to keep an eye on you and let you get some rest. But you're okay to go home."

"Home," Lottie said, voice firm. "Not to work."

I ignored that.

“You should try to avoid stress,” the doctor advised. “It can make the possible confusion, lightheadedness, and nausea from the concussion worse.”

“My work isn’t stressful,” I assured her, then listened to her speech about what I needed to keep an eye out for before she declared she was going to go get my paperwork together.

“Stop,” I said, seeing Lottie glaring at me with her arms crossed. “I’m fine.”

“You look like hell.”

“I know,” I agreed. “But I can sit and wallow in my migraine just as easily at work as I can at home. Besides, I don’t really want to be home right now,” I said.

I watched as confusion morphed to understanding.

“Oh,” she said. “Right. Well... you can stay with me,” she said.

With her and her three roommates, all of whom seemed louder than the last? I couldn’t think of a worse torment.

“It’s fine,” I insisted.

“Then I will stay with you.”

The absolute last thing I wanted was for her to be in danger in case any of those guys got some ideas to come back for me.

“We’ll talk about this later, okay?” I pleaded, not mentally able to argue with her with my head pounding and stomach swirling and reeling from punching bag pain—that I, apparently, wasn’t allowed to take any meds for, thanks to my concussion.

“Okay,” she relented, picking up on my mood. “But I’m gonna stop by your work at lunch to check on you.”

“Good. You can bring me coffee. And something to settle my stomach.”

“All the bland food,” she assured me. “What?” she asked as I sighed.

“I have no clothes anymore. The police took it all,” I told her.

“Oh, right. Ah...”

“They’ll give me something from the lost & found.”

“Ew,” Lottie said, lip curling. “Ah, we probably have like an hour before all the paperwork is done and stuff, right?”

“Probably,” I agreed, even though I had no clue.

“We’re only a few blocks away from a bunch of little shops. I can grab you something to wear.”

I wanted to object. It wasn’t like we were close to some cheap big box store. They were all little boutique businesses that cost a small fortune for just a tee or yoga pants. But I really didn’t want to wear lost & found clothes.

“My treat,” she insisted as I reached for my purse.

“No,” I objected. Lottie was doing okay, especially since she was sharing her bills with roommates. But I was a lot more stable. “Take my card,” I insisted, pushing it toward her, knowing that of the two of us, I was the stubborn one.

“Fine,” she grumbled. “But I am buying you coffee and something plain. Bagel? Croissant?”

“Anything bland,” I agreed. I was teetering on that edge where food might make me actually finally throw up, or it might settle my stomach once and for all. I wasn’t taking any chances on anything crazy.

“Got it. I’ll be as fast as I can,” she said, giving me a smile, then rushing out.

I was glad for the alone time to head back into the bathroom, using their supplied toothbrush and paste to brush my teeth, and doing a quick whore’s bath to hold me over, then making my way out to wait.

Less than an hour later, I had a pair of overpriced cream-colored linen shorts and a black tee on, a coffee in my hand, and a half-eaten croissant in a bag beside me in the ride-share.

Lottie and I were heading in different directions, so we took different drivers. Hers, back to Redemption to pick up her car. Me, to the studio only twenty minutes late.

There was a group of musicians standing around outside the long, low building, looking around, confused why they weren't allowed in for their practice.

A few feet from them was a woman standing there with headphones on and reading a book.

Not a musician. An audiobook narrator who rented time in our smallest recording studio because she claimed her dogs could sense when she wanted quiet, and immediately started barking at squirrels and shadows and dust bunnies.

I thanked my driver who encouraged me to try to take it easy, then climbed out.

I braced myself for their outrage. They had appointments, after all.

But as soon as everyone turned to look at me, their anger fell away, replaced instead with shock and concern.

"Oh, my God! Are you okay?" the narrator asked, her hand flying to her heart.

"I'm... hanging in there," I said. "I was carjacked," I told them all, telling what felt like the closest thing to the truth without getting too personal.

Luckily, the carjacking story didn't leave a lot of room to ask questions, so everyone just begged me to go home, to take care of myself, not to worry about their appointments.

I brushed that all away, just wanting them tucked away in their soundproof rooms, so I could have silence myself.

Half an hour later, I had the lights dimmed and my head in my hands, just rocking back and forth on my office chair, wondering how long a migraine could last before it finally let go of me.

The food had no impact on my swirling stomach, and I figured maybe that was because it was related to the blow on my head as well.

That meant I just had to endure until I could get some sleep later.

At my own place.

Whether I was fully comfortable with that idea or not.

I think I hated that more than anything. The discomfort about being in my own home. Sure, I had a healthy amount of concern for being a woman living alone. But I had a linebacker of a man living next door who would definitely come running if I screamed, so there was a certain comfort in that.

I resented these assholes for making me second-guess the sanctity of my own home. Musicians came and went for the next few hours, most of them keeping their voices low as they passed, and leaving me alone.

But then the door opened, closed, footsteps entered, and just... stood there in front of the desk for a moment.

“Lexy?”

The voice had my head shooting up.

Too fast.

Way too fast.

The whole room spun, making me throw my hands out on the desk, grabbing it for some stability, and knocking half the contents to the floor in the process.

“Whoa, okay. It’s alright. It’s... Finn,” he said as my vision continued to spin as I tried to reason with my flip-flopping stomach, so I didn’t throw up all over my office. “From last night,” he added, voice soft. “Christ,” he added, likely getting a good view of me while he was still all squiggly.

I closed my eyes tight for a second, taking a few deep breaths, then opening them slowly.

There he was.

In a gray tee and jeans.

And beaten to shit.

I remembered seeing blood the night before. But I'd been kind of groggy and in pain. The lack of light hadn't helped either.

I had no idea how badly he'd taken a beating.

But, God, he looked worse than I did with half his face swollen, all of it bruised, his lip split, and the white of his eye all red.

"Jesus," I said, shaking my head ever so slightly as I looked at him.

"What the fuck are you doing at work?" he asked, voice soft even if the words were a little rough.

"Working?"

"You should still be in the hospital," he insisted.

"Not according to the doctor," I said, shrugging.

"You look like you're in agony."

"That... sums it up," I agreed, reaching for my coffee.

"Isn't there someone else who can cover the desk today?"

Probably, if they knew what had happened to me. But no one liked being called in on their day off.

"I can be in pain here just as easily as at home," I said.

He didn't object to that, just looked away for a moment before ducking his head.

"I'm so fucking sorry," he said after a moment, voice raw.

"Sorry?" I asked, squinting at him. "For what? Was this your fault?" I asked, waving toward my face.

"I... don't know," he admitted, sounding tortured about it. "But I should have been able to prevent it."

"Right," I said. "You, one guy, against, what? Five or six others? Who are you, Superman? I mean, it looks like you were busy getting attacked too."

"It's different," he insisted.

I wanted to object to that. But he wasn't wrong, was he? It *was* different. In general, women had other things to fear than getting knocked around. Men, well, it wasn't that they *never* had to fear sexual assault, but it was a lot less likely.

"Well, it didn't happen," I said, playing down what had happened.

"It almost did," he said, making my gaze shoot up to his face.

Green.

His eyes were green.

And not as dark as I'd originally thought.

He, like seemingly all men, had an unfair amount of lashes around those eyes, too, so thick that they almost gave the appearance of him having on liner.

I had no idea when he'd come upon me. Or in what state I'd been in when he'd gotten there.

The last thing I remembered, before unconsciousness claimed me, was my attacker's hands clawing my shirt and bra out of the way.

Was that how Finn had come upon me?

With my tits out?

Ugh.

"But it didn't," I insisted.

"It started to," he pressed.

I don't know where the urge to play that whole part down came from, but I found myself shaking my head. "It's not like he saw something no one has seen before."

"That's different, and you know it."

"Why are you here?" I asked, changing course.

"To check on you," he said, brows scrunching.

"Why? You don't know me."

“Because we both went through some shit last night. And I’m feeling shitty about it, so I figured maybe you are too,” he said.

“I haven’t had time to feel anything about it,” I admitted. “I’m too busy trying not to puke.”

“They won’t let you have anything for the migraine?” he asked. “The concussion that bad?”

“It’s probably never *good* when your brain literally slams against your skull,” I said, lips curving up slightly. “The doctor said it was between a Grade Two and Three. They weren’t sure because no one knows how long I was unconscious. I’m supposed to keep an eye on my symptoms for, ah, what was it called?”

“Post-concussion syndrome,” Finn supplied.

“Yeah, that’s it. You don’t have a concussion?” I asked, looking at the battered state of him.

“Dunno. Didn’t go to the hospital,” he said. “But probably not. Got a headache, but not the blurry vision, nausea, or ringing in my ears.”

“Ugh, that’s what that is,” I said, grimacing. There’d been this on-and-off high-pitched sound in my ears since I’d gotten to work.

“I wish I could say it won’t last, but you could have symptoms for weeks or months. Especially if you get stressed. Which is why you shouldn’t be at work.”

“There’s nothing stressful about this job,” I said, waving around. “And it couldn’t be quieter,” I added.

“Know what’s less stressful? Lounging around in bed.”

“I have to earn a living,” I said, shrugging it off.

“What do you make?” he asked, making me straighten.

“What?”

“What do you make? Your salary?” he asked.

“Why?”

“I’ll pay it.”

“You’ll... pay it?” I repeated, sure I was misunderstanding him.

“Yeah. For a few weeks or months. Until you are back to normal.”

“God, I think I was hit harder than I realized,” I said, pressing my palms into my eyes. “You’re not making sense.”

“I am. I want to pay you to sit at home and recover.”

“Okay,” I said, hands falling. “Maybe you’re the one who got hit harder than they realized,” I said. “Because you’re talking crazy.”

“I’m dead fucking serious,” Finn insisted.

“You want to pay me to sit at home and watch *Forensic Files* in my pajamas for... months?”

“Yeah.”

“My head hurts too much for mental gymnastics right now. What the hell are you talking about?”

“You said you have to earn a living. I am offering you a living.”

“To sit at home.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re hurt.”

“That’s not your fault.” His head turned away at that, like he didn’t agree with me. “Hey, it’s not. You were... just trying to be a good guy,” I said.

To that, he shot me a smirk. “Sounded like you were choking on those last two words.”

“Good guy?” I repeated. “Well, in my experience, those words are an oxymoron.”

Fine, not all the time. I knew a few decent guys. But I was feeling a little down on the man part of mankind. And I felt

justified in that, given the state of me.

Finn was about to open his mouth to say something when the door suddenly flew open, bringing in some blinding sunlight, then Andrew, a coworker of mine.

“Lexy, what the fuck?” he asked, gaze on my face. “I got a text from one of the guys who practices here. I was sure he was exaggerating. But, fuck, it’s worse. What are you doing at work like that? And who the fuck are you?” he asked, looking over at Finn’s damaged face, his jaw going tight.

You had to give Andrew credit for trying to puff himself up and appear ready to go toe-to-toe with Finn. When Andrew was all of five-five, so skinny that he looked like skin hanging off bones, and didn’t actually have a violent bone in his body.

Andrew was one of those decent guys I was lucky enough to know.

“This is Finn. He was... carjacked with me,” I told him.

“Oh, okay then,” Andrew said, going back flat on his feet. “Anyway. Go home. I’m here now.”

“You’re off today.”

“I’d always rather be here than sitting around at home,” he said.

That was probably true enough.

We all actually loved our work, loved being in close proximity to musicians and music.

“I—“

“Am going to get out of my seat,” Andrew cut me off as he plugged in the code to the door, then moved into the office with me. “Yeah, you need to do that. I got three new EPs to listen to. And every minute you’re not getting out of here is time I am not getting to listen,” he said, producing one of his six—yes, six—iPods.

“You still use iPods?” Finn asked, frowning.

“Trust me, with Andrew’s collection, he could never have enough memory on a phone,” I said as I gathered my things.

“About broke my fucking heart when they stopped making these,” he said.

“So he went to every local electronic store and bought out their stock.”

“I almost needed to take out a loan,” Andrew said, smirking. “But it was worth it. Go home,” he grumbled when I just stood there with my purse on my arm.

“Fine,” I said. “Thank you,” I added, voice softer.

He waved that off, already pulling his headphones on. I’d been eyeing those ones for months, but couldn’t quite excuse their price tag. Not yet, anyway.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” Finn said, already reaching to open the door for me as I pulled my sunglasses out of my purse and slipped them on.

“I have to call a ride,” I said.

“Let me drive you,” he said.

I must have stiffened at that as the memories flooded back. The fear and pain.

“Not my bike today,” he said, waving toward a massive SUV instead. “Windows are even bullet-resistant,” he told me, making my brows go up. “It belongs to the club. We all borrow it here and there,” he explained. “Safer than a ride-share.”

“Okay,” I relented.

I was anxious about going down that road and even being in my house. Having someone who proved capable of taking care of business there with me when I first went back felt like a smarter idea than doing it alone.

With that, I got into the SUV, and we rode back up the highway.

I could feel myself tensing as Finn blinked for the turn, but as soon as he had the wheel turned, his hand was landing on my knee, giving it a tight, reassuring squeeze.

My gaze slid to the field near the woods I'd emerged from, where Finn had cradled me as we waited for the police and paramedics.

“What happened to them?” I asked.

“Who?”

“The men who attacked us? What happened to them?”

“Think whoever was in charge told everyone to retreat. That's the best I can come up with,” he said. “The club is working on it, though.”

“Working on it?” I asked, relaxing a bit as we drove past the spot where we'd gotten blocked in.

“Looking into it, trying to figure out who did it. And then why.”

“Isn't that a job for the cops?”

To that, he let out a humorless chuckle.

“What?”

“Babe, the second they heard that it involved someone from the club, they wrote this shit off.”

“Why?”

“Because we don't exactly operate on the right side of the law,” he said. “And because they're paid to look the other way when it comes to us.”

“But... but I'm not a part of the club.”

“They'd see you as collateral damage. Though I don't think this is actually club-related.”

“Should I be worried that you know where my house is?” I asked as he parked on the street out in front of it.

“You told me it was a duplex. This is the only one on the street,” he reasoned. “You gonna let me just take a quick look around, make sure everything is on the up-and-up?” he asked.

I hated that I wanted him to do just that.

“Fine,” I said, not letting him know how vulnerable I was feeling.

We were maybe halfway up the path when my neighbor who’d been chilling out front of his side of the steps, smoking... something, suddenly dropped his cig and was stalking over toward us.

“Did this motherfucker put his hands on—“ he roared.

And when I say this man could roar loud enough to make a lion cower, I wasn’t exaggerating. That, mixed with his massive frame, and the fact that he proudly looked like bad news, made him a really freaking intimidating guy.

“Whoa,” I said, throwing my hands up, and pressing them into his chest, trying to slow his momentum. “Perish, no,” I insisted. “Damn it, Perish,” I said as he kept moving forward, forcing me to walk backward until my back slammed into Finn’s chest. “We were carjacked,” I said.

Just as quickly as his anger fired up, it banked back down, making him take a step back, looking at me, then Finn, brows pinching.

“Carjacked? Where?”

“On the road leading down here,” I explained.

“Wait... Perish. I know that name,” Finn said, looking at the giant.

I still hadn’t moved away from Finn.

And I was going to go ahead and not think about how nice he felt pressed up against me like he was.

“You a Henchmen?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“I know Voss,” he said. “He told me to prospect once my parole is up,” he said. “Got a few weeks to go.”

“Yeah?” Finn asked, sounding intrigued. “Think my brother would be interested,” he said.

“Your brother?”

“The president,” Finn said.

That was new information.

I wouldn’t claim to understand what that meant, but you could bet that I suddenly had the urge to look into outlaw biker clubs and their practices.

“Oh, right. Right. Well, don’t worry about your girl, here,” Perish said, jerking his chin toward me. “She’s got me around when you ain’t.”

“I appreciate that,” Finn said.

Why hadn’t he corrected him?

Why hadn’t I?

“Just gonna get her inside and settled. She’s feeling like shit,” Finn said.

“Right. Right. I can check in on her, if you want.”

“Lexy isn’t much of a people person,” Finn said, surprising me with his accurate assessment. “But if you hear anything off...”

“Got it,” Perish said, nodding, then letting us pass to move up the steps and to my door.

“He’s anal about the lawn.”

“What?” Finn asked as I stuck my key in the lock.

“He’s anal about the lawn. Has a water catchment system installed on the gutters, so he can water it and keep it green. Screams ‘dad energy,’ not ‘ex-con.’”

“People can surprise you,” he said.

Why did I think, as I pushed the door open, and invited him into my space, into my life, that maybe he would surprise me more than anyone else?

CHAPTER FIVE

Finn

“So... you’re a hoarder,” I said, lips curving up as we moved into her living room.

Her place was still decently wide, even being cut up into a duplex.

There was a staircase right inside the front door, then a hallway that led back, with a living room to the right.

And in that living room was... a lot of shit.

She had floor-to-ceiling shelves overflowing with CDs, vinyl, and even some fucking cassettes.

There was one of those giant-ass five CD changer boomboxes, a record player, hip-height speakers, and a stand holding up a guitar.

There was so much musical shit that there was barely any room for her small navy blue velvet loveseat.

Lexy pulled off her sunglasses, popping them back into her purse, and shooting me a smirk, completely unbothered by what I’d said.

“Physical media is always, always the way to go,” she said.

“Go on and explain that to me,” I invited as I walked over toward her collection, seeing more names than I could even pretend to know, along with some that I did.

“Well, you know when you ‘buy’ a movie online, or even music, you don’t actually own that, right? Like, they can take it back at anytime. Ebooks too. They’re technically more like long-term rentals. You don’t have any say if they decide to remove it. The money you spent is just gone.

“And I don’t know about you, but I think it’s fucking ridiculous to spend my hard-earned money on something I don’t actually get to own. Besides, if something ever happens

to the internet and shit, I can still be rocking out into the apocalypse so long as I have a solar bank to run my shit off of. And I do.”

She made a good argument.

I’d never really given it any thought before.

Then again, I couldn’t claim to be that into music or movies or books to care that much if something I bought up and disappeared someday.

“Limp Bizkit? Really?” I asked, producing a CD with a raised brow.

“Hey, we don’t hate on Nu Metal in this house,” she said, brows raising, daring me to dig my heels in. “I mean, have you ever even listened to ‘*Re-Arranged*’?”

“Can’t say I have,” I admitted.

To that, she rolled her damn eyes at me as she stormed across the living room, the old floorboards creaking under her steps.

She plucked the CD out of my hand then turned to put it into the player, clicking until she found the track whose number she knew by heart, then turning it on, though not very loud, given her migraine.

“You listen. I make coffee,” she said, turning to go down the hall.

Then, despite not really caring much about music, I stood there. And I actually listened.

“So?” Lexy asked when the music changed from a much less introspective song to something louder and sillier.

When I looked up, she was holding two mugs. One looked like a vintage amp. The other like a vinyl record.

She held the record one out to me.

“It’s light and sweet. If that’s not how you take it, well, you can just choke it down,” she said, making my lips curve up again as I grabbed the mug.

“That’s how I like it,” I said. A lot of the guys ribbed me about that, liking their coffee black and bitter themselves.

“Well?” she asked, pinning me with an intense gaze. “What did you think?”

“I liked it.”

“That’s a bullshit answer,” she said, surprising me. “You don’t simply *like* music. Do better.”

“I think it’s the first time I’ve actually stopped and listened to the lyrics of a song.”

“I mean, judging by what I heard at the club last night, that kind of makes sense. Don’t get me wrong, party music has its place, but it’s not exactly written to make you think and feel shit. This was. I mean, not all of Limp’s catalog is that way. A lot of it is just music. But there are a few goodies in there.

“I can see you as a Nu Metal guy. Papa Roach, Disturbed, Linkin Park. Moody music for a moody guy.”

Moody guy.

I almost felt a little taken aback by that.

Because that hadn’t been how I saw myself. At least not until the past few years. I’d always been more laid-back, quick to laugh, to fuck around with the guys, to rib people.

There was no denying that I was moodier now, though.

“Did I hit a nerve?” she asked, watching me with her head tipped toward her shoulder. “There’s nothing wrong with being moody. I’m moody as fuck. Hence...,” she started, going toward her shelves, and gesturing to a massive section of it, “all of this. All gets you in the feels.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked, still skeptical, even if I had enjoyed the one song she’d played for me.

“Well, like, you know how fucking impossible it is to open up to people?” she asked, and it felt like her words landed a punch to my gut.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Listening to music that expresses what you’re feeling, it kind of just... decompresses the feelings. Makes them easier to deal with. At least, that’s how it’s been for me. I guess that’s not everyone’s experience,” she said, going to the CD player and hitting a button. There was a whirring and clicking as another CD fell into place before the music started playing.

“Today is a Brand New kind of day,” she said, taking a deep breath as the singer’s voice drifted into the room. “A little wallow-y. It hits right,” she said as she lowered herself down on the couch, leaving room for me to sit.

Surprising myself, I did just that.

And we sat in complete fucking silence, drinking our coffee and listening to the music.

The entire damn CD.

When it went to static before the CD player switched to the next CD, I looked ahead at the wall.

“What songs or bands would you recommend to someone who’s been down in a hole?” I asked.

“You mean aside from ‘*Down in a Hole*’ the unplugged version by Alice in Chains?” she asked, and something about the easy way she said that had me turning to look over at her.

There was no concern or judgment on her face, just a sort of deep understanding.

Because maybe she’d been in a hole once too.

And maybe music was one aspect that helped her crawl out of it.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding.

Lexy made a clicking sound with her tongue before climbing off of the couch, disappearing for a moment, then coming back with a notepad and pen.

“So you can’t go wrong with NF. And Staind. Especially the earlier stuff. ‘*Black*’ by Pearl Jam. ‘*This Night*’ by Black Lab. This keeps you mostly in the rock-type category. If you are ever interested in venturing into the singer-songwriter,

emo, or country genres, let me know. They've got some killer depression tracks too."

"You listen to country?" I asked, gaze moving over her.

"I listen to *everything*," she said, leaning closer toward me as she said it, like it was vitally important that I took that to heart.

The thing was, she leaned closer.

And we were already close as fuck on the couch.

Her face was just inches from mine.

There'd been no sign at all that she'd be interested if I made a move. And, objectively, it was really horrible fucking timing.

But, somehow, that didn't stop me as I leaned forward, as my lips claimed hers.

Not tentatively, either.

My hand grabbed the back of her neck, pulling her closer as my lips slanted, as they pressed deeper.

There was a second of shocked inaction, but she didn't pull away.

When a soft sigh escaped her, my fingers shifted up into her hair, giving a gentle tug to tip her head back as my teeth nipped her lower lip, dragging a quiet moan out of her.

The sound reverberated into my chest, creating a warmth that spread outward, thawing a chill that had been inside for far too long.

I was shifting forward, bending her backward, when there was the sudden stomp of feet on the front steps, something that had us both breaking away. Not like guilty teenagers who'd been caught necking. But like two victims who'd very recently been attacked.

My hand was reaching toward my ankle where I had a holster when the door flew open.

“Alexandra Marie Baker,” a voice snapped as my gaze landed on Lexy’s little sister.

Lottie.

“Charlotte Lynn Baker,” Lexy said back, sounding breathless, and I felt a smirk tug at my lips at that sound. “What are you barging in here all exasperated for?”

“Lunch. Helloooo,” Lottie said, lifting the bag in her hand and waving it around.

“Oh, shit. Sorry. The word got around to Andrew about what happened to me, so he came in and sent me home.”

“Thank God someone has some sense. I’ll have to send him something to thank him. A fruit basket? Do men like fruit baskets?” she asked, looking at me, her eyes wide and soft.

I’d figured her sweet, open demeanor at the clubhouse the night before was mostly thanks to the booze she’d been plied with. But it looked like that was just how she was.

It was interesting how different siblings could be.

Lottie was a lot like the Golden Retriever energy Lexy had assigned to Sully. Whereas Lexy herself was something a little more standoffish. A surly junkyard dog, I guess. Quick to bark and bite if you so much as walked a little too close to her space.

“Ah, fruit is good,” I said.

“Right? I mean, what’s not to like? Oh! Maybe muffins! Or, I think they do, like, donut bouquets now too.”

“You don’t need to get Andrew a donut bouquet for taking over my shift for a day.”

“Well, someone needed to force you to rest,” she insisted. “Someone should be forcing you to rest too,” she said, taking in my face before her gaze lasered in on my busted-up knuckles.

“I wanted to check on Lexy first,” I said, tilting my head toward her.

“Oh, well, good,” she said, beaming at me. “Want some very bland lunch? You look pretty knocked around too, so maybe you’re queasy like Lex is.”

“I’m alright,” I said.

“Your lip is bleeding,” Lottie announced.

I felt a sting, but I just figured that was par for the course. But when my tongue slipped out, I tasted blood.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lexy’s gaze slip away, her lips twitching.

“It’s nothing,” I insisted. “And, no, I won’t stay. You guys enjoy,” I said.

“You’re sure? I got enough bagels and corn muffins and bread to feed an army of, well, pigeons, I guess,” she said, eyes bright.

“Nah, I’ll head out. Let you try to wrangle her into bed.”

I saw a light hit Lexy’s eyes at that, even as my own mind realized what I’d just said.

“She needs rest,” I added.

“Yeah, but try telling her stubborn ass that,” Lottie agreed. “Thanks for checking on her. That was really sweet. And for, I guess, saving her last night,” she added, her eyes going glassy at the possibilities that could have happened if I wasn’t around.

“It was nothing,” I insisted, some part of me still pissed at myself that she’d gotten as badly beaten as she had.

“It was definitely not nothing,” Lottie insisted. “She’s my best friend. I can’t stand the thought of what might have happened if you hadn’t been there. So thank you.”

I gave her a nod, uncomfortable with her gratitude.

Luckily, Lexy broke the tension by noisily ripping the page off of her notebook.

“Here,” she said, shoving it at me. Completely fucking graceless. And I was somehow charmed by that.

“Are you giving him music homework? Really?” Lottie asked, shaking her head. “She’s constantly giving me music homework. I’m not an audiophile like she is. I kind of just like my pop hits and that’s it.”

“Pop is fine,” Lexy said, shrugging. “I just know you would appreciate other things too,” she added in a way that made me think that she knew she was losing the music battle with her little sister. “Anyway, that’s a start,” she said.

“You should give him your number in case he needs more recs,” Lottie said, the light in her eyes just hinting at mischievousness.

“It’s fine, you don’t—“ I started, but Lexy was already tugging the paper from my hand and unceremoniously jotting her number down before handing it back. “Thanks,” I said, going ahead and letting my fingers brush hers as I took it and tucked it into my pocket.

“Oh, and maybe she should have yours,” Lottie went on. “You know, in case she has any questions or concerns about, ah, the case,” Lottie said, looking proud of her matchmaking ways.

“Subtle,” Lexy said, shaking her head.

I plucked the pen out of Lexy’s hand, and let her stabilize the pad while I jotted down my number.

“Get some rest, babe,” I said, giving her a long look, so she at least tried to take me seriously.

With that, I made my way toward the door.

“Nice seeing you again, Lottie,” I said before moving outside.

“Don’t worry,” a voice said as soon as I moved onto the top step. Looking over, I saw Perish there smoking again. “I’ll keep an eye on the girls. No one’s getting into that place without me knowing.”

I nodded at that.

“I appreciate that.”

“She got a concussion, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Sucks. I’ll miss the music blasting,” he said. “She’s got good taste.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, already planning on getting back to the clubhouse to download the songs she’d suggested and give them a serious listen before I crashed again.

“She plays good, too,” he said. “Sings real pretty. Sounds like a fucking angel.”

“Lexy?” I clarified. “Or Lottie?”

“The little one? No. Pretty like an angel, but sings like a cat being shaken in a bucket.”

That was a colorful way of putting it.

I was having a hard time imagining Lexy being the crooner and Lottie the one who couldn’t carry a tune. But I suddenly found myself almost desperate to hear Lexy play and sing.

Preferably in nothing but my tee after I’d fucked her through a few screaming orgasms.

Christ.

That was not what my mind needed to be on right now.

Though I had to admit to myself that it felt good that the interest was even there. Because I wasn’t sure of the last time I had that. Interest.

Yeah, once in a while, I would join one of the club parties and take a girl back to my room. To feel something, anything. But it was something I made myself do, not something I genuinely wanted.

“She okay?” Perish asked.

“She’s too stubborn to be honest,” I said. “But she’ll be alright. Hopefully, her sister can convince her to stay home another day or two to rest.”

“I could slash her tires,” Perish offered. “Or steal her master fuse.”

To that, I felt a laugh escape me.

Fallon was gonna fucking love his ass.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said. “If I give you my number, can you let me know if you see anything suspicious around here?” I asked.

“Yeah, I can do that,” he agreed, and we took a moment to exchange numbers before I finally left, heading back to the clubhouse to see if anyone had made any progress on figuring out who these fucks were.

The clubhouse was popping when I pulled in, bikes lined up deeper than usual with a few extra cars around that I didn’t recognize.

Judging by the lack of music, though, it wasn’t a party.

They wouldn’t have Church without me, would they?

I made my way inside to find Junior, the club’s favorite hacker, set up with his laptop on the bar.

A woman who looked vaguely familiar—multi-colored hair, pretty face, lots of ink—was playing Sully on the pool table. And from the looks of things, wiping the floor with him.

“How is she?” Seth asked as I moved into the room.

“She was at work,” I said, seeing him shake his head. “But she’s home now with her sister. Oh, and she lives in a duplex next to a guy named Perish,” I announced.

“Perish?” Voss asked, brows raising.

“Yeah. Apparently, he’s only a few weeks away from being off parole, so he’s probably going to be dropping in to prospect.”

“Bout time we got some fresh meat,” Nave said, clearly ready to stop being a prospect, and hand the dirty work off to someone else, since he didn’t have a lot of help in the notoriously slacker Sully. Callow and Sutton pulled their weight, but the latter was on his way out soon.

“Don’t forget we got Roderick’s oldest two prospecting soon too,” Seth said.

“Rune and Croft?” I asked, feeling like I hadn’t heard those names in ages. They were twins, but were younger than me and my crew of cousins, so we didn’t keep as in-touch with them as we did with others.

“Yeah.”

“Why haven’t I heard their names in a long time? Did they go off to college?”

“Nah. Last I heard, they took off to Puerto Rico to reconnect with some of their family,” Seth told me. “That was... years ago, I think. I mean, I’m sure their parents and siblings have seen them, but no one else has.”

“Huh. There’s another one, though, too, right?”

“Well, there’s Aviela, their only sister. And the baby of the family, Vas.”

“Did he go to Puerto Rico too?” I asked.

“Come to think of it, I have no fucking idea,” Seth admitted, brows going up, surprised that he didn’t know.

“Guess we can ask when they show up,” Fallon said as he came in from the hallway. “You look like shit,” he said as a greeting to me.

“Thanks.”

“Shale,” he said, greeting the woman with the multicolor hair. “Did you bring us coffee?” he asked.

At my blank look, Seth said, “She’s Junior’s woman, remember? Owns Deja Brew.”

Right.

I’d heard that somewhere.

I’d been so fucking detached from the goings-on at the club and Navesink Bank as a whole that I was starting to feel like I was playing catch up now that I was determined to insert myself back into this crazy world we had all built.

“Would I show up empty-handed here?” Shale asked in a way that had some weight.

“Christ,” Seth said as he looked at me, concern etching his brow. “Little bit back, Dezi, Malc, and Niro were asked to help run a protection detail at Deja Brew for Shale who was involved with some shit. There was a drive-by. Where the fuck were you when all that was going down?”

Home.

I’d been at home, deep in my hole.

It felt like I’d just started to claw out of it, finding the sun blinding, and the world unfamiliar.

“Distracted, I guess,” I said. “Thanks for the *Cliffsnotes*. Did Junior find anything?”

“Not yet. But they just got here. Something about dropping their dog off at some dude’s house. I dunno. Anyway,” he said, shrugging. “How’s Lexy really?”

“Stubborn as fuck,” I said, snorting a little.

“Yeah?” Seth asked, his gaze slipping to my split lip for a second, a knowing smirk toying with his lips.

“It’s not like that,” I said.

“Heard that before,” Seth said, nodding. “So, what does she do?” he asked.

“Works at River Rock Studios,” Junior announced, making my brows go up, not realizing he was close enough to overhear since he hadn’t given a single sign that he’d been listening.

“Ah, yeah, that,” I said, shrugging.

“Been there since she was... eighteen,” he said. “Must like her job.”

“She does,” I said. Then, catching Seth’s grin again, I played it off. “I drove her home. Place is full of CDs and shit. She likes music. It makes sense.”

“She’s got no social media,” Junior said, sounding impressed. “That sister of hers, though, she’s all over. All public. Got a lot of pics with Lexy in them. They’re close.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Why are you looking into them?” I asked, annoyed that he was invading her privacy when she was the victim.

“Because you gotta cover all your bases. Could be wrapped up in shady shit. Or dated someone who was.”

I wanted to object to that, to protect her privacy, but I knew that this was how shit went down in the research stages. I mean, I’d grown up with my aunts Janie and Alex constantly crammed together on the couch, digging into people’s lives. It never felt quite right, but it always seemed necessary.

All I could do was not be a part of it.

“I’m gonna go get some coffee,” I said, making my way to the kitchen to grab one of the many cups Shale had brought with her.

I didn’t want to listen to Junior dissect Lexy’s life. For some reason, I didn’t want to know details that she herself didn’t want to tell me.

Did it seem like Lexy was closed off and hard to get to know? Yeah, for sure. Somehow, though, that only made me all the more interested in having her tell me shit herself. There was something to be said for being trusted like that.

I mean, if I ever even saw the woman again, that is, I reminded myself as I quickly slipped past everyone to go back to my room.

I had a list of songs burning a hole in my pocket.

After popping another few ibuprofen to keep my headache at bay, I sat in bed drinking my coffee and listening.

And, for once, *hearing*.

And, most interesting of all, *feeling*.

She’d been right.

About how hard it was to open up to people.

And how cathartic it was to hear your own thoughts and feelings in someone else’s voice.

It made you feel understood and seen.

It made you not feel so alone.

By the time I was done, I found myself adding her number to my phone, then shooting her a text, begging for more recs.

I didn't know if I expected her to respond.

But she did.

Almost immediately.

With a whole new list of songs to fall into.

Later, I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep that night.

And for the first time in a long time, I was glad to wake up, to get up, to get moving, and—perhaps most of all—to give Lexy my thoughts like she'd demanded when she'd sent me the list.

I wasn't going to pretend to understand what had changed, why there were suddenly cracks of light in my dark world.

I was just going to fucking enjoy it while it lasted.

CHAPTER SIX

Lexy

“Let it drop,” I grumbled as I picked apart a bagel and put tiny bites into my mouth. So far, so good. The food was staying down, and, little by little, the rolling in my stomach was settling.

“You looked super cozy on that couch, that’s all I’m saying,” Lottie said as she gathered her long hair in one hand, then pinned it back with a claw clip that immediately started to sag with the weight of her heavy hair.

I had hair just like hers. Thick and heavy and often hard to contain. Which was why I’d chopped so much of mine off last year. Best decision of my life.

Lexy had crashed on the other side of my bed the night before, refusing to leave me alone in case I might need her.

I tried to insist that I was fine. And, objectively, I was. Sure, I was dealing with the symptoms of the concussion, but I knew that was going to be for the long haul, so I was trying not to get too upset about it.

The thing was, I didn’t want her to go.

There was no one in the world I was okay feeling like I relied on. Except for my sister. Maybe that was only because she relied so heavily on me that it felt like a fair exchange. Or it could just be that she was the only person I’d ever met who could put up with my often surly ass without getting annoyed by it.

“You can fool everyone else, Lex,” she’d say, “but I know there’s a gooey caramel center under that hard candy shell.”

Sometimes I worried she was right about that, about other people finding that out.

Because, I mean, it wasn’t really possible for someone to be so into music without having lots of big feelings inside. If you didn’t have those emotions, you wouldn’t be able to

appreciate what the artists were putting out there for the world to hear.

That was probably why I loved my job and the people there so much. Because we were all cut from the same cloth. We *got* one another without having to open up.

I could pass Andrew a new track I'd heard, and he could listen and understand what was going on with me without me having to say it.

Music was a form of communication.

And the only one I felt comfortable with.

When the text from Finn had come through the night before, I'd been half-asleep and glad for it because that meant the migraine was finally loosening its grip on me.

Still, I'd shot up in bed, and tiptoed out of my bedroom and downstairs to look through my shelves to send him another, longer, list of songs I thought he would relate to.

I didn't know the guy.

And, yet, somehow, I did.

Because I'd been down in that hole in the past.

I understood the way depression acted like your own personal dark cloud overhead, dimming everything in your life, but you couldn't make it go away. And you didn't know how to explain to people around you who were basking in never-ending sunlight what it felt like to never feel those rays on your skin.

So I knew what he wanted to hear.

The same things I'd needed to hear.

Those songs that broke your heart and somehow helped mend it at the same time.

"We were both horribly beaten," I reminded Lexy. "We were resting on the couch at the same time."

"Resting," Lexy repeated, lips pressed together. I knew not to trust that look. "So... the kissing thing. Was that maybe

some mild mouth-to-mouth resuscitation?”

Damnit.

I didn't think she'd seen.

She hadn't acted like it.

And she was usually shitty at keeping things like that to herself if she had.

“Oh, my God. You did make out!” she said, mouth falling open.

Oh, this fucker.

She'd laid a trap.

And I'd waltzed my stupid ass right into it.

Sometimes it was really annoying to have your sister as your best friend. They knew you too fucking well.

“Ugh,” I grumbled, getting up from the table to refill my coffee.

The migraine had turned to more of an ever-present headache now. It was infinitely more tolerable. Even the sun coming in the windows didn't feel like icepicks to the brain anymore. I thought that with some decent food in my stomach, and as always, more caffeine, I might start feeling somewhat human again, and less like a human impersonation of a punching bag.

“You guys would be so cute together,” Lottie declared. She was a dog with a bone. It was going to be a long day.

“Shouldn't you be at work?” I asked, hoping to throw her off topic.

“You know my boss will give me off whenever I want,” she said, brushing it off as only the boss's favorite could.

She was right, though. Sam would give her off for an entire week if she wanted. Hell, he would even pay her for it. You know, because he was madly in love with her and all. Then again, who wasn't?

“He's super hot, you know.”

“Your boss?” I asked, trying once more.

“Finn,” she said as she smushed a bite of a muffin before bringing it to her mouth. *It’s crumbly if you don’t smush it!* “I heard he’s a loner and allergic to fun. So, you know, you two are clearly meant to be,” she teased.

“Ha ha,” I drawled.

“Okay, but, like, why won’t you give it a shot?” she asked. “You’re clearly attracted to him, or he would be walking away with one less testicle for trying to kiss you.”

“Bad boys are your thing, Lot, not mine.”

“I’m starting to wonder if boys in general are your thing at all,” Lottie said. “I mean, how long has it been? At least—“

“Don’t do that math. I’m begging you.”

“Oh, God. Has it been two years?” she asked, eyes huge.

“No,” I said. But at her raised brows, I relented. “A year and eleven months,” I admitted. A summer fling with a musician I met at the studio. All fun and nothing else. Neither of us wanted more.

“You must be single-handedly keeping the battery company in business.”

“Maybe I just don’t have any interest.”

“Libido is partially genetic,” she told me, grinning. “And my libido...”

“I don’t need to know this,” I said in a pained voice.

“Oh, come on. You were the first person to know when I got my cherry popped.”

That was true. She’d been sixteen. And he’d been a complete dickhead to her afterward. He may or may not have woken up to three slashed tires the next morning. It would have been four and a broken windshield if the damn nosy neighbors hadn’t come out before I got around to that.

“We don’t keep sexual secrets.”

“You don’t,” I clarified.

“You tell me things!”

That was true enough to not need a rebuttal.

“So, what’s the problem with Finn?”

“He’s an outlaw biker.”

Lottie stopped for a second, giving that some consideration.

“Okay, yeah. But, like, isn’t that why you’re okay-ish right now? Because of his outlaw bikerness?”

“Probably,” I agreed. “Which makes me grateful he was the one to drive me home, but that doesn’t mean I want to jump into bed with him.”

“But jumping into bed is fun,” she said. “Why are you so opposed to fun?”

It wasn’t that I was opposed to it, per se.

I think it was more fair to say that I’d been forced into a parental role at a young age. That made me need to push aside my desire to have and seek fun, to build social circles, to be light and easy.

And I think that maybe if you lost out on the opportunity to have and be those things at a younger age, you just never got to.

I couldn’t say that, though. Not to Lottie, anyway. She would feel guilty. Like it was her fault our mom was dead and our father didn’t want to raise us.

“I think I just find different things fun than you do,” I said.

“How would you know until you try?” she reasoned. “I mean, maybe you would have loved getting thrown over a hot man’s shoulder and tossed into the pool.”

“Maybe.”

“And maybe you would really enjoy having that gorgeous man on top of you. Or under you. I don’t know your power dynamic.”

“This is a silly conversation. We’re both really injured. No one is getting on top of the other one.”

“Well not *now*. But you could. Eventually. Just think about it, that’s all I’m asking.”

“Fine, I’ll think about it.”

She didn’t need to know that it was all I’d been thinking about all day.

I mean, the man had just... taken his shot.

You had to appreciate that.

Especially when both of us were all kinds of fucked up in the face.

He saw an opportunity to go after what he wanted, and he seized it.

I could have brushed it off, even been annoyed by it, if he hadn’t been a really fucking good kisser. Or if my body hadn’t responded as strongly as it did.

I would never admit this aloud to anyone, but I was pretty sure I would have come from just a brush of his fingers, I was so into it.

Hell, if my sister hadn’t been around nonstop, I might have broken open some new batteries and gotten a little stress relief via my favorite buzzing buddy.

“It’s okay,” Lottie said when there was a pounding at the door that had me almost flying out of my seat. “I sent out your neighbor for more cream, remember?” she asked as she got up. “Come on in, Big Guy,” she called as she stood in the hallway. “We have bland food, if you are hungry,” she invited, waving toward the counter where an assortment of baked goods were laid out.

“Didn’t say what kind,” Perish said as he placed the bag down, then started pulling cartons out. The half & half that we needed, sure, but also light cream, heavy cream, and three different dairy-free options.

“Oooh, oat!” Lottie said, beaming. She usually brought her own over since I didn’t drink it, so I didn’t keep it hanging around to spoil in my fridge. “You are a prince among men,” she declared.

And I shit you not, this absolute tank of a man puffed up at her praise. She’d always had that way with the opposite sex.

“Guess I could go for a bagel,” Perish said as he moved across my little kitchen, seeming to swallow up the space as he sliced and slathered his bagel.

Granted, it was a small room.

A small house.

I’d never really stopped to think how much smaller it must feel when you were a wall unto yourself. I kind of wondered how he managed to fit in the powder room on the lower level, if his was the same as mine. Because mine was so tight that I had to press my stomach against the pedestal sink to be able to slide the door closed.

“So, Perish, I hear you want to join the biker club,” Lottie said, waving toward the empty seat at my table after putting away the various creamers.

“Yep. Been planning it for a long time.”

“How’d you meet them?” Lottie asked, never afraid of being too curious.

“After I got out of prison, was in a halfway house for a bit. Lady who managed it got wrapped up with one of the bikers.”

“Which one?”

“Voss.”

“I haven’t met him,” Lottie said. “I’ve only met Finn, Sully, Nave, Callow, Sutton, and Brooks.”

“Newer guys,” Perish said, clearly having kept an eye on the club despite not belonging yet. “Cept Brooks. He’s partially in charge around there.”

He did give that vibe off.

“He had a big problem with the idea of us bobbing for apples in the pool,” Lottie declared.

“Bobbing for apples?” I asked, clearly having missed out on that bit.

“It was stupid fun,” Lottie said. “Sully’s idea.”

It seemed like all the crazy ideas started with that guy.

“And raspberries,” she said, nodding. “Half the pool was full of fruit.”

“Sounds like I got some good partying ahead of me,” Perish said. “Been keeping my nose clean for a long time now.”

Come to think of it, since he’d moved in six months ago, I’d never seen him have anyone over. And he was always home.

I guess if I was on parole, I’d work hard not to be forced back to prison too.

“So, Perish. What do you know about Finn?” Lottie asked.

To that, his brows furrowed.

“Finn?” he asked. “Thought he was your man,” he said as he looked at me.

“No,” I admitted, ignoring the little twist in my gut at saying that.

“Oh. Ah, former president’s son. Current president’s brother.”

“I think she meant what you know about *him*,” I said, tone a little more biting than I’d intended. “Not his family.”

That had to be hard, always only being known as someone’s son or brother. What a wide shadow that must have cast over him.

“Dunno,” Perish said, looking apologetic. “Figure I can let you know once I prospect,” he added.

“Oh, I think Lexy might find out for herself before then,” Lottie said.

“It’s not gonna happen, Lot,” I insisted for what felt like the fiftieth time.

Even as I insisted that, though, my phone chimed from the counter, making me pop up to check it. Albeit at a slower pace than I really wanted to.

I felt like a schoolgirl with a crush, just waiting for the boy to text.

“It’s Andrew,” I flat-out lied to them as I saw Finn’s name on the screen.

Okay. These are all great. Now, you have anything that is a little more hopeful?

Hopeful.

Could that mean that all the depression tracks helped to exorcise some of his demons, and he was now searching for something more positive?

Or was I overthinking this?

Probably.

I don’t know what the fuck was wrong with me.

I never thought of men obsessively. Not even ones I was *actually* involved with.

I was going to go ahead and blame my brain injury.

It was the only thing that made sense.

“I’m going to go shower,” I declared as Lottie plied Perish with questions.

“You can’t get your stitches wet for another day,” Lottie reminded me.

“I know,” I grumbled.

I wasn’t someone who went a long time between hair washes. I once fell victim to the idea that I could “train” the grease out of my hair. A year of looking like an oil slick never made a lick of difference. So I was a ‘wash your hair every day’ sort of girl. And I just used some quality conditioner to

make up for the drying. So going forty-eight 'or more if you can' without washing my hair made me feel gross.

At least there was no reason I couldn't wash my body, though.

I sat on the end of my bed for half an hour before I got in, though, shooting off songs to Finn that I thought might be the right kind of hopeful without being cheesy or full of toxic positivity.

Then in the shower, hair tucked under a cap, the water washing over me, where did my mind go?

To the couch.

To his lips on me.

To what might have happened if Lottie hadn't chosen that exact moment to burst in.

Ugh.

Fine.

Some part of me, even a large part of me, wanted to get Finn both over and under me.

And since that was never going to happen, I needed to get the hell over it already.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Finn

“Weren’t you supposed to go through the ‘lying in bed all day listening to music’ phase in your teens, not your thirties?” Fallon asked from the doorway of my room, making me jerk at the sudden interruption.

“Christ. The fuck do you want?” I asked, pulling my headphones down around my neck.

“You know what the kids are calling this these days?” he asked, waving at me in the bed.

“That when you start using phrases like ‘the kids are calling this’ means you’re getting old as fuck?” I asked, watching as his eyes brightened before a smirk tugged at his lips.

“That’s probably fucking true,” he agreed, rubbing the back of his neck. “We aren’t young and stupid anymore, huh?”

“Speak for yourself. I’m not the old married man with a litter. What are they calling it?” I asked, though, some part of me giving a shit about the phrases that younger people were using, even if I knew having previously been a younger person, that me trying to use it would make them roll their eyes. *Look at this old guy trying to talk like us.*

“Rotting,” he said.

“That’s... amazing,” I decided. “Kinda pissed we didn’t think of that. “Pretty sure we just called it hanging out.”

“And our parents called it being lazy fucks,” Fallon agreed. “So, if you’re about done rotting in bed for the past few days, you wanna do me a favor?”

“Depends on the kind,” I said, getting a chuckle out of him.

“I have a very fucking illegal gun I need delivered to someone. It was custom made from that chick who is with one

of the Shady Valley guys. Huck had West bring it back up after he went to visit. But I need someone to do the final drop.”

“And you want *me* to do it?” I asked, brows raised.

“Who am I gonna send? Sully? He’d get distracted by a skirt and follow his dick all around town instead of doing the drop for a gun worth over a hundred grand.”

“Christ.”

“Yeah. So get your ass up and meet me in the garage. Time to earn your keep.”

“Says the man who hasn’t done a drop in, what, three years?”

“Perks of being the man in charge,” he said, shrugging.

“What?” I asked when he went to leave, then turned back to look at me for a second.

“Just... this is the first time I feel like we’ve been... brothers in a long time,” he said, then he was gone.

Some part of me wanted to object to that. But the fact of the matter was, he was right.

Somewhere along the way, as I started falling in that hole I’d been in, all the shit that made us brothers, save for blood, fell away. There wasn’t much playful ribbing, picking at each other, or even talking outside of discussing club shit.

I didn’t even know I missed it until right now, when I realized it had been missing.

So I went ahead and took a long-ass shower, keeping him waiting like I would have done purposely back in the day.

My face was looking somewhat better.

The swelling was gone, thank fuck.

And the bruising in some areas had faded completely. In the worst area near my jaw, there were still deep purple and blue shades, but the yellowing around the edges said it would all be gone in a few more days.

The red in my eye, though? That was still hanging in there. I figured it would be a while, considering it hadn't lessened at all yet.

Finished, I grabbed my phone and headphones then went to meet my brother, who treated me to a glower as I moved into the garage.

"Proud of yourself?" he asked.

"A bit," I admitted. Because, fuck, it felt good to even feel a little bit like my old self. Even if it was just fucking with my brother. "That's the gun?" I asked, nodding toward it.

"No. It's a fancy new dildo."

"Yeah? You're gonna have to pull the one outta your ass before you can put this new one in."

Fallon snort-laughed at that.

"What the fuck does it do?" I asked, unfamiliar with the design. But I guess that was the purpose of a weapon designer's existence.

"I honestly don't wanna know with that price tag attached to it. So... secure it to your body in a place that won't fucking set it off is my advice."

"Gee thanks. Love a potential suicide mission," I said, grabbing one of the holsters lying around. The gun was way too fucking big for my usual choice of an ankle holster, and a chest holster would be too obvious when the wind hit my chest on the bike, so I opened for a shoulder one, so the gun would be tucked under my arm.

I pulled off my shirt, and put on the holster before Fallon secured it in its place.

"Good?" I asked when I pulled my shirt back on, then layered on my cut.

"Yeah. It'll do."

"So, who am I giving this to? And how the fuck am I getting paid?"

"Oh, we got paid in advance," Fallon said, waving me off.

“Really?” I asked. That never happened. I mean, we dealt mostly with criminals. They weren’t exactly a trusting group of individuals. They’d never pay in advance. Especially not that amount of money.

“Dunno what to tell you. He really wanted the gun. And knows we are an established organization.”

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Cian O’Donovan,” he said.

“O’Donovan,” I repeated, racking my brain. “I know of a Darragh O’Donovan.”

Big time Irish mafia don who’d gone to prison a few years ago for a triple homicide. News reports said that he was sitting at home, covered in the victims’ blood, smoking a cigar and drinking a beer, waiting for the cops.

“Yeah, that’s Cian’s father,” Fallon said, nodding.

“We’re dealing with the Irish mob now? That’s not gonna fuck with our alliance with the Grassi crew?” I asked, meaning the local Italian mafia we’d been allies with since our father’s reign.

“From my understanding, they deal in different shit, so it’s not some sort of conflict of interest. Besides, it’s not like I run our clients past the Grassis before I make a deal.”

“Where am I making this drop?” I asked.

“Remember that bar I took you to for your twenty-first birthday?” he asked.

“Where you made me pound a drink called Serpent Secretions until I puked?” I asked, recalling the neon green liquid coming back up. Never touched mixed drinks again after that.

I didn’t learn until after that it was some sort of fucking rite of passage in our family. Our old man’s old man had done it to him and our Uncle Cash. In turn, Dad and Cash took Fallon out to do the same to him on his twenty-first.

Both my old man and uncle had been sick as fuck on my twenty-first, so Fallon had continued the tradition. I wondered if he planned to do it to his kids someday. Knowing him, he would.

“Yeah, I vaguely remember that night. Mostly how I spent most of it hugging the bowl, then nursing the worst fucking hangover of my life the whole next day.”

“It was fun as fuck for me,” he said, grinning. “Anyway, further down that road is an old bowling alley.”

“The abandoned one?”

“From what I hear it’s not abandoned anymore,” he said.

Interesting way to wash their money, I guess.

“And when am I supposed to meet them?”

“In forty. So get the fuck moving,” he said, rapping me hard on the back before moving back into the clubhouse.

I made my way out of the garage, eyeing up the bikes as I walked down the front yard.

I could have taken the SUV.

A part of me wanted to.

And it would have been a fuckuva lot easier to hide the gun in an SUV.

But I hadn’t been on my bike since the attack, and I would be fucking damned if I let some fuckheads scare me off of it because of one bad night.

I’d been riding bikes since I was literally a fucking toddler. A fact I had to swear to my father that I would never tell my mother.

Just like she wasn’t supposed to know he’d given me my first beer at fifteen, toasting me with his own beer for beating the shit out of a guy at school who wouldn’t stop running his damn mouth.

I’d been gentler in those days than my brother, a guy who never missed a chance to escalate a side eye or snide comment

into a full-on brawl. And once he was out of school, there was no one threatening everyone away from me anymore. I had to stand up for myself.

It took me an embarrassingly long time to get to doing it. And if the bastard hadn't started in on my big sister running away, I might have kept letting it slide.

But I'd still been raw about her leaving myself, so I took all that hurt, turned it into hard, and leveled that asshole.

Pops was proud.

And it was the first time I ever thought that maybe I could be a biker after all.

I didn't thrive on the chaos like Fallon did, but some part of me had enjoyed the fight. Even if I lost a permanent tooth in the process. Dental implants could be acquired. The pride of that fight would live on forever.

And no one ever fucked with me again.

I didn't like the way my stomach tightened as I sat on my bike, the way adrenaline started to flood my veins.

So I went ahead and allowed my mind to wander to before the attack. To having Lexy wrapped around me on the bike, the feel of her pressed up against me, those stirrings of interest that had been buried for so long.

By the time my mind was drifting toward the couch, to her lips on mine, the soft sounds of her sighs in my ears, I realized I was already pulling past that bar from my birthday, having made the twenty-five minute drive completely on autopilot.

Not smart.

When I was driving with a fucking illegal gun strapped to me.

How many cops had I passed on the way?

I slowed and glanced around, but saw no one following me.

Taking a deep breath, I turned into the lot of the bowling alley.

If it weren't for the cars in the lot, I'd have thought it was still abandoned as fuck. Because the outside was a disaster. The pavement was cracked, weeds peeking out of the spaces between. The parking space lines were bleached away by the sun ages ago. The stucco on the building itself was uneven and crumbling.

But the open sign was on.

And, clearly, people were around.

Likely a bunch of parents sick of their restless kids at home during their summer vacation, and wanting a break from outdoor summer activities.

At least with bowling, they had air conditioning.

Taking a deep breath, I dropped my helmet on my seat, then made my way toward the door with so much privacy film on the glass that you couldn't see shit inside until you pulled the door open.

It was dark inside like all bowling alleys are, the lights mostly of the neon track variety, the carpets and walls dark, and the only real light coming from the lanes.

There was the crash of balls hitting pins, some random pop station bumping from the speakers, and squeals of contented children all around.

The odd mix of popcorn, hotdogs, and shoe disinfectant lingered in the air as I stopped to look around, having no fucking idea where I was supposed to be going.

"Yo," a voice called, making me turn to see a guy emerging from a door to the side of the main entrance.

Nice suit.

Red hair.

That aura of confidence that came from being involved with an established criminal organization.

This had to be one of Cian's guys.

"Got something for Cian O'Donovan," I said, patting the area under my arm where the gun was situated in its holster.

He glanced to my hand, then my cut, and nodded.

“Follow me,” he said, leading me along the line of the lanes, past the shoe rental, concession stand, then into the square nook where a mini arcade was set up. Pinball machines, foosball, table hockey, a ride-on motorcycle game, one of those dance machines, and a photo booth were all occupied by kids with lots of energy and their parents’ money.

To the side of the arcade was another mostly hidden door with an “Employees Only” sign just below the little window cutout. A window cutout with thick as fuck glass, I might add.

I knew bullet-resistant glass when I saw it.

So Cian might not have been interested in fixing up the alley, but he damn sure put some money into protecting himself.

The man knocked his knuckles on the door, and a shadow moved over the glass before the door opened.

“Biker here with a package for the boss,” my guide said.

The man behind the door, a man wide thanks to both a lot of time in the gym and an enjoyment of food, judging by his rounded stomach, nodded and moved aside for me to walk into the room.

This was a situation that could go sideways so easily. But I trusted my brother. There was no way he would send me into a dangerous situation. Especially without any backup.

This room was completely modernized compared to the alley as a whole.

The walls were covered in bulleted concrete. The wide plank oak floors lightened the windowless space up, keeping it from feeling oppressive.

There were two small seating areas to either side of the room, three of the chairs occupied.

Toward the back was a thick antique desk with a studded leather chair behind it.

And a man standing in front of it.

“You must be the brother,” a deep, raspy voice said.

I don't know what I'd been expecting of Cian O'Donovan. But he was younger than I'd anticipated. Maybe in his mid-to-late twenties. Young to be in charge. But, I guess, when your old man goes away on charges for the rest of his life, you don't really get a chance to keep growing up before you gotta take over for him.

Unlike his men, he didn't seem obsessed with the gym, rather had a more lithe kind of strength, but it was hard to say for sure when he was fully clothed in a black button-up, black jeans, and a black leather bomber jacket. Even in the middle of the summer. But it was cold in this room with the AC cranking.

Cian seemed to like his jewelry, sporting a cross, a thick chain bracelet, two rings, a stud in each ear, and a nose ring.

He had a wide, strong jaw, generous mouth, stern brows over dark blue eyes, with a 'more on top' type haircut with a mid-fade.

And a fuckton of ink. Black and gray ink covered his hands, wrists, up his neck and over his throat, and even on his head, partially covered by his hair.

Frankly, he was the kind of guy chicks tossed panties at.

“That's me,” I agreed, nodding. “Got a delivery for you.”

“Should I be offended the boss didn't bring it himself?” Cian asked, head tilted to the side, watching me with the eyes that I could only describe as belonging to a predator. Cunning, intense, chilling. Apple didn't fall from that psycho father's tree, it seemed. “When I gave him the cash ahead of time in good faith.”

“Should I be offended that you don't think I'm a good enough delivery man?” I asked.

“The way I hear it, you aren't in charge. Not the boss, the second, not the road captain or whatever other silly titles your kind has for their jobs.”

“It would have been my right if I wanted it.”

“You didn’t?” he asked, dubious. “Last I checked, everyone wants power.”

“Well, not me. Now, if you want to stop glaring at me like you’re gonna pull a *National Geographic* on me,” I said, reaching up under my shirt.

I’d been in a club long enough to *feel* all his men reaching for their guns.

But Cian’s hand lifted, then did a small wave, a silent demand to put them away.

I reached up under my shirt, freeing the gun from its holster, then inspecting it for a second before placing it down on his desk.

“It doesn’t look special,” I said, thinking out loud.

“That’s the beauty of it,” Cian said, picking up the gun, and inspecting it, opening the magazine, testing the weight. “Alright. Run and tell your brother I accept shipment.”

“You don’t even know if it works,” I said, then immediately wanted to kick myself for it.

“Don’t worry,” he said, lifting it at me, and looking at me down the length of it like he was lining up a shot. “If there’s a problem with it, you’ll know about it. See him out,” he called to his men, waving me off with his gun.

Back on the street, I took a deep breath. It wasn’t that I thought I was in any danger there. And it damn sure wasn’t the first time I’d had a gun aimed at me. But Cian’s whole vibe was fucking dark and overwhelming. I was glad to be out of there.

I rode my bike a block or so away, parking on a main drag of a street flanked on each side with stores.

Only then did I pull out my phone to call my brother.

“How’d it go?”

“He’s intense,” I admitted.

“Yeah. Think there was some sort of power struggle when his old man went away. Knowing how that shit goes, it

probably got ugly.”

And in our world ‘getting ugly’ meant a lot of blood was spilled. To do that, you had to be able to shut yourself down.

Cian certainly seemed shut down.

“Other than that?” Fallon asked, and I could hear a baby crying in the background. He must have gone home after sending me out on the drop.

“He made a not so veiled threat about if the gun doesn’t work... and that was it.”

“Good. Alright. Thanks.”

“Yep,” I said, eyes scanning the street when my gaze landed on a storefront I’d probably passed a thousand times, but never really seen before. There, situated between a clothing store that changed every six months and an upscale restaurant with fenced-off outdoor seating, was a tall, skinny brick building with a small picture window and missable signage.

Jake’s Music.

Then, under that, a sign declaring they have vinyl, CDs, cassettes, and 8-tracks, both used and new, and instruments. As well as music lessons.

“Yo, Earth to Finn,” Fallon said, making me snap out of my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“Asked if you were heading back to the clubhouse or going home?”

“Neither,” I said. “I’m gonna check out a record store,” I said, decision already made.

“A record... you know what... have fun,” he said.

With that, we ended the call, and I followed my newfound appreciation for music into my first fucking record store.

I was reaching for the door before I finally recognized the sensation coursing through me right then.

Excitement.

That shit was so fucking foreign.

But, welcome.

God, welcome.

So I chased that feeling inside the shop.

Never expecting for Lexy to blow through the doors not more than twenty minutes later.

I didn't know a fuckuva lot about fate.

But this?

Yeah, it sure as fuck seemed like fate to me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lexy

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I grumbled at my boss.

“Stop calling me,” he growled back at me.

I guess most of us music types were on the moody side of the personality spectrum.

“I want to come back to work.”

“And I said no.”

“Carl, come on. Please,” I pleaded. Yes, I was at the point of *pleading* to be allowed to come back to work.

“Christ, did you feel that?” he asked. “Never thought I’d live to hear hell freeze over. Or you use your manners,” he teased.

I loved Carl.

Carl was the dad that the universe should have given me. A bit of a loner, but decent enough with people because he had to be to own a business. He adored music, knew more songs than I would ever be able to hear, and loved in his gruff sort of way.

The problem was, he was also forcing me to take two years worth of vacation time until he felt I was healed up enough.

And I was going fucking insane.

I’d lovingly kicked out my sister two days ago. After waking up in the morning to find she had taken my entire CD collection off the shelves and reorganized them by, get this, alphabetical order.

It was a fucking crime against humanity.

If anyone else would have done that to me, they’d have been screamed at.

Because it was Lottie, I'd needed to take several deep breaths and gently tell her I wanted some alone time, that my social battery was about to burst.

And since she knew me, she'd relented, even though she didn't feel comfortable leaving me.

I was fine.

Fine, damnit.

Fine enough to undo all the damage she'd done to my shelves and get them back in the right order—you know, by genre, and then mood.

I was also fine enough to go back to work.

So I stopped losing my mind with nothing to do.

“Carl, I'm going crazy at home.”

“So, don't be at home,” he suggested.

“Where the hell am I supposed to go?”

“I dunno. See some friends. Go out. Live your life a little.”

“Says the guy with no friends who is a certified hermit.”

“Oh, kid,” he said, giving me that snorting laugh I came to know him for. “When I was your age, I was living in my van, following my favorite bands around the country. Remember sex, drugs, and rock & roll? That was my life. I *lived*, kid. And now I'm in the stage of life where I am icing my knees at home while telling the youths how badass I used to be.”

“Hey, you're still a badass,” I insisted.

“Damn fucking right. And I want you to get to the storytelling part of your life, too. So go make some fucking memories.”

With that, he ended the call, leaving me letting out a string of curses as I paced my living room for a few minutes before grabbing my keys and purse, slipping on my shoes, and making my way outside.

“Should you be driving?” Perish called as I moved down the steps.

“I didn’t ask,” I admitted, shooting him a ‘what are you gonna do about it’ look over my shoulder.

He smirked in response.

“Good for you. I’ll keep an eye on your place while you’re gone.”

“You don’t need to. It’s been days. No one has shown up.”

“Just in case.”

“And to get Brownie points with the club?” I asked, letting out a little laugh before making my way down the front path, and into my car.

“Fuck,” I grumbled to myself as I turned over the car.

Carl was right.

I needed to get out of my funk.

No, I was never really the ‘make tons of friends’ type of girl. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t have experiences. That I couldn’t be in the company of like-minded people.

With that in mind, I turned onto the highway, going across the bridge that rose over the Navesink River, then into the town full of shops I used to walk endlessly around when I was younger.

How long had it been since I’d done that?

Too long.

Maybe Lottie and Carl were right about me needing to get a life.

But that was a problem for another day. Today was all about finding some hidden gems inside Jake’s.

I once threatened to toss a mattress in a back corner of the store. And had only been half-joking.

“There’s my girl,” Jake, a tall, skinny guy with white hair, greeted me behind the check-out counter. “Got new pins in!” he said, waving toward the fishbowl full of band pins. I already had too many. But you bet your ass I would be shuffling through them to find something fun for myself.

“I’ll be all over that,” I assured him. “You got anything new for me to find and fall in love with?” I asked.

“Get drop offs every week,” he said, waving toward the shop as a whole.

Jake’s was, essentially, a treasure hunt. Sure, there were vinyl, CD, and cassette sections. And, yeah, those were broken up by genre. But from there, it was a free-for-all. People were constantly shifting shit around, so there was no way to keep it in order. You just had to warm up your fingers, and start flipping.

That was exactly what I planned to start doing when I turned to find someone staring at me.

No, not just someone.

Him.

Finn.

My occasional text buddy.

The star of my ever-kinkier dreams.

“If it isn’t my music dealer,” he said, giving me this lopsided smile that was so unexpectedly open and charming that for a second I thought I’d imagined his standoffishness and low mood.

“This would be one of those ‘fancy seeing you here’ moments if this wasn’t practically my home away from home.”

“No work today?” he asked, making my eyes slit. “Wrong question, I take it.”

“My boss is forcing me to take two years’ worth of vacation to recover,” I told him.

“Paid?”

“Yeah.”

“Nice.”

“Not nice,” I grumbled. “Unnecessary. Overstepping. Annoying.”

“And by ‘nice,’ clearly I meant ‘what a dick,’” he said with that charming, almost boyish smile again.

“Thank you,” I said with a nod, my own lips twitching. “Alright. What do you have there?” I asked, making my way over toward him, and gesturing toward the records in his hands.

“I have no fucking idea,” he admitted.

“Going in blind is half the fun sometimes,” I said as I flipped through what he had. Which was a mix of rock—both old and newer—, Nu metal, and some classics that every collection needed—Beatles, Hendrix, Sinatra, The Doors. “I didn’t know you had a record player.”

“I don’t,” he admitted, looking sheepish. “And I don’t even think I can bring these home on my bike.”

“Men, am I right?” I asked a woman nearby. Dressed all in black, covered in ink, with micro bangs and a septum piercing, she looked like someone who hung here often. “Never thinking ahead,” I added.

I got a nod and eye roll from her that said she had far too much personal experience with men like that.

“I didn’t plan on coming here,” Finn admitted. “I was... working nearby. And happened to see the store. Decided to come in and look around.”

“Okay. Well, you can’t just look around. Because, one, the music comes to you when you need it,” I said, even if that was a little woo-woo for me.

“And two?” he asked.

“This is an independent music shop. As in, in the digital music age. As in, no one is paying for their music anymore and the industry is dying. So you see stuff you like, you buy it. Them’s the rules.”

“You are clearly the expert. I have no choice but to listen to you. But the transportation problem persists.”

“I’ll drive your shit to your house,” I offered.

“Yeah?” he asked, brows raised.

“Yeah. Your house or the clubhouse. Whatever.”

“In that case, this place have any carts?”

“This place is a clear fire hazard and you want to further block the aisles?” I asked. “No, just give Jake your shit. He will keep it behind the counter. Right, Jack?”

“Whatever she says,” Jake called back, waving in the air as he flipped through a box of vinyls that had likely just been dropped off.

“Alright then. I’m all yours. What do I need?”

“A record player, clearly,” I said, waving toward the collections. “Alright. Well, these things are like any audio equipment. Huge range of prices.”

“Because...”

“Quality, for the most part. Like headphones. I have a fair pair because it was affordable. But I salivate every time I see Andrew’s set because I know they’re better. So, I need to know your budget.”

“No budget.”

“Everyone has a budget.”

“Alright. I draw the line at a ten-thousand-dollar record player,” he said, giving me that damn smile again. The jerk. Didn’t he know I was trying not to add to my wet dreams about him?

“In that case, this one,” I said, picking up a box and pressing it into his chest. “And you need a case,” I said, moving toward that section. “Most of these are gently used. Which I feel just gives them more character,” I told him as we started to shuffle them around. “Oh, look at this beauty,” I said after he picked a simple black one. I had a similar one back home. But this buttery-soft brown leather one was making me wish my budget was infinite. “Okay. I’m gonna go toss these at Jack,” I said, taking his case and the player. “I’ll meet you by the boomboxes. Because you’re getting some CDs too.”

With that, we browsed.

For hours.

Talking occasionally about my opinions on genres and artists.

It was the best time I'd had with another human being in a long time.

And I didn't know what the hell to think about that.

"Oh, I forgot I need a new needle!" I declared as Jake started ringing Finn up.

"Already?" Jake asked.

"Needle?" Finn asked at the same time.

"Needle for the record player. They need to be replaced."

"How often?"

"Every eight hundred to a thousand minutes of playtime," I told him. "I'll be right back."

When I got back, Finn and Jake were being weird, but I figured they were just talking about me, so I thought nothing of it.

Until Jake was passing Finn his bags, and he pushed one toward me.

"What's this?" I asked, reaching for it.

"A gift," he said.

"A gift?" I asked, taken aback. "Why?"

"Why not?"

"That's not an answer."

"And it's poor manners to question a gift, now take it and get out," Jake demanded.

I reached into the bag.

And there it was.

The record carrying case I'd fallen in love with.

The one that was out of my budget.

“This is too much.”

“It’s not,” Finn said, turning and walking out of the store, leaving me to rush to catch up. “No,” he said when I joined him on the sidewalk.

“No what?”

“No, I don’t want to hear shit about the case. Which way are you?” he asked, looking around.

“Around the corner,” I said, gesturing. “Hey, Finn,” I called as we walked in silence.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“Trust me, I’m the one who should be thanking you,” he said, but didn’t elaborate, and I wasn’t good at trying to pry personal information out of people.

We put all his things in my car, and he said he’d grab his bike, then I could follow him.

I figured we were going to the clubhouse, but that idea flew out the window as we neared it and didn’t slow.

He turned off a few blocks away, down a road of houses. There was a mix of ranches, capes, and the occasional split level or colonial.

Finn’s bike slowed, and his hand went out on the left, indicating he was turning into the driveway of a bungalow-style house with a charming front porch, blue paint, and some front flowerbeds full of boxwoods.

I guess I imagined him in an apartment. But I was intrigued that he had his own home so close to the clubhouse it seemed like he also lived at least part time.

“What?” he asked as I climbed out of my car.

“Don’t you live at the clubhouse?” I asked.

“I have a room there, yeah. But I haven’t really been spending time there until recently. I bought this place for some

privacy and quiet.”

“I get that. I can’t imagine people partying all the time, and running into strange people in the kitchen every morning.”

“Yeah, exactly. I got this place on a song a few years back. It was a fucking wreck back then. But the nice thing about the club is the prospects do free labor. So they helped me fix the place up.”

“What’s up with that?” I asked as we got the bags out of my trunk.

“With what?”

“The prospect thing.”

“You gotta see if someone fits in with the club,” he said, shrugging.

“Yeah, but the labor thing.”

“Teaches you humility, I guess. And guys who’d be drawn to the lifestyle are usually not the types used to bowing to any sort of authority. By prospecting, they have to submit to the will of the president... and all the patched members. It’s important.”

“Okay,” I agreed, shrugging. “I guess that makes sense. I mean, no way I would be washing everyone’s bikes every day... what’s that look for?” I asked as his lips curved up and his eyes brightened.

“You sure? Wouldn’t mind watching you wash my bike,” he said, then turned and walked toward his door before I could fully process what he was saying. “You coming in?” he called, making my head whip over to find him moving through the door, and leaving it open. Like he expected me to follow.

And, damn him, I was going to.

In my head, I was pretending like I needed to help him set up his record player, and show him how to actually play the records.

In my heart, I knew my motivations weren’t anywhere near that pure.

So I slammed my trunk, and I followed him up the steps of his little porch, then into his home.

And it was... nothing like I expected.

I guess you could say my opinion on men's interior decorating was, you know, low. The select few guys I had been involved with over the years lived like frat boys. Cheap, ugly furniture, no paint, no art, no window dressings or carpets. And damn sure no headboards on the bed. Typically, the only times those places ever saw a vacuum or a dust rag was when I pulled them out because I couldn't take the ick.

Apparently, there were men out there who knew what they were doing when it came to making a house a home. Finn included.

The interior had a distressed brick facade on the upper half of the walls and a gray-green color on the wainscoting on the lower portion. The wood floors were wide-planked and a light color. The furniture was sparse—likely because it didn't sound like Finn had company often—but what he did have looked like good quality. There was a material loveseat facing a big TV and a black leather armchair set up near a window.

The windows didn't have curtains, but they did seem to have a tint of them to lend some privacy. At least in the daytime.

He even had some art. Black and white prints placed here and there.

“There,” I said, pointing near the black leather chair. “That's where you should put the record player,” I added, meaning the little cabinet under the window. It was perfect. “You can sit in the chair and still change the record easily. Besides, this is, like, your TV area,” I said, pointing toward the area by the couch. “So this can be your music area,” I added.

“I like the way you think,” he said, pulling out the record player box. “Alright. I'll unpack this. You go snoop.”

“I wasn't going to snoop,” I insisted.

“Oh, bullshit,” he shot back with a grin. “I snooped through your CDs. It’s only fair.”

Well, I didn’t need to be told twice.

I moved through from the living room and into the kitchen. It wasn’t a huge space, but gave mine a run for its money.

This room had lots of white. White walls, white cabinets, white subway tile backsplash, and quartz countertops. There was a little dining space in front of the windows that overlooked a decent-sized backyard for the area.

It didn’t scream *Finn* to me, so I thought that maybe the previous owners had renovated it before he bought it.

Moving on from the kitchen, I found a hallway bathroom that had the same very white vibes of the kitchen, one completely empty room—guest room, I guess, but he didn’t want anyone thinking they could stay over. Even his couch was too small to sleep on.

Then, jackpot, the primary bedroom.

The same floor from the rest of the house continued on in here, but the walls were painted a light gray that matched the bricks from the living room. There were two more black and white prints above the bed that dominated the space.

And, yes, the man had a headboard.

A deep gray one.

Nice bedding too.

The thick, fancy hotel room sort.

I was walking over toward the window—and he did have curtains in his bedroom, thankfully—when a pile of paper on his nightstand caught my eye.

I was being invasive, but he did invite me to snoop, so I went ahead and walked over to pick the pile up.

There was the notebook page I’d torn off with song suggestions. And he’d taken the time to rate each song based on how much he’d liked them.

That was unexpectedly cute of him.

“I’m all ready for you,” Finn said, startling me as I read the paper, so the one underneath fluttered down on top of his bed.

A little blue rectangle with messy handwriting on it.

I was already reaching for it when I realized what it was.

A prescription.

“It’s for an antidepressant,” Finn supplied, surprising me by being so open. “I’m trying to decide if I want to fill it or not.”

“What’s making you not fill it?” I asked as I put it back with the other sheet on the nightstand.

“Things have been a little better lately,” he said, leaning on the doorjamb. “I guess I’m waiting to see if it is a fluke or not.”

“I get that,” I agreed, nodding. “I was on that one for, like, two years,” I admitted, this time surprised at my own willingness to share. I didn’t even tell Lexy when I was taking antidepressants because I knew she would worry too much.

“Yeah?” he asked, brows lifted.

“Yeah. In my late teens,” I told him. “I’d been trying to get Lottie and I out of the rough area we’d grown up in. And shit was... hard. And I was... I wasn’t in a hole, like you describe. I was just angry. I was fucking angry every moment of every day. I didn’t know it for what it was until I looked it up and realized it was how depression manifests for some people.”

“Didn’t know that either,” he admitted.

“Yeah. And I tried to do the talk therapy thing,” I said, smirking.

“But you’re about as open as a vault?” he filled in, dragging a little laugh out of me.

“Yeah. That therapist sent me to the dude who gave me the meds.”

“And they worked?” he asked.

“I wasn’t so pissed off. I wasn’t constantly biting peoples’ heads off, or getting frustrated at the smallest of things anymore. It let me focus enough to get shit back in line. Got us out of that area, moved here, got my job that I love, got an apartment. Life got... better. And I thought it was time to wean down and see if the anger was gone.”

“Was it?”

“Depends on who you ask,” I said with a big smile. “I mean, I am not a sunshiny person like my sister is. And people piss me off sometimes. But that’s just who I am. It’s not depression, not anymore.”

“It never came back?” he asked, and I could hear the hint of fear there. I remembered that same concern when I’d been weaning down on my meds and felt really off-kilter for a while as my system readjusted, worried that I was going to find that I was still as angry, or worse yet, down. But I eventually leveled out.

“I mean... I think we are all kind of susceptible to getting down from time to time. But I think that’s human. I haven’t gotten to a place where life had no... no joy or no meaning anymore. Or where I felt like I was too overwhelmed to function. If any of that happened, though, I wouldn’t hesitate to get on the meds again. You gotta do what you gotta do to feel like life isn’t a slow slog toward death, right?”

To that, he let out a little snort.

“The slow slog toward death. Yeah, that kind of explains it perfectly,” he agreed. “I told my mom I would talk to the therapist, that’s why I have the meds. But I’ve been doing some other shit to see if that makes a difference.”

“Like what?”

“Like stopping shutting myself up in the house alone all the time, sleeping. I’ve been making myself go to the club instead, be around friends and family, working out more. Shit I read online said that for some people, lifestyle changes can make a big difference.”

“Like working out and being more social?”

“Yeah. On top of hobbies and finding a ‘purpose,’” he said.

“Purpose,” I repeated.

“Right? Fucking weird-ass concept. But I’ve been asking some of the guys and girls around the club about that, and, apparently, they all feel like they have it.”

“And what did these articles say to do to find what your purpose is?” I asked.

“Figure out what shit you care about. Reflect on what matters most. Know your strengths. Then, if you kind of figure out what venn diagram is between all those things, that’s your purpose. Or, you know, volunteer and shit like that.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“I don’t know that I have a purpose, according to that. But I’m not depressed.”

“You do, though. You like your work, you love music, you love your sister...”

“I don’t mind sharing my music love to help with your cause,” I told him. “So, let’s get it moving along, huh?” I asked, suddenly feeling really exposed.

For the next hour or so, that was all we did.

Setting up his record player and boombox, talking about how they worked, arranging his records and opening his CDs. Then, of course, giving some of them a listen.

“Sister?” Finn asked when my phone relentlessly started to ring.

Lottie refused to be ignored.

So when she called, she called until you picked up.

“Yep. She’s relentless,” I said, reaching for my bag and pulling out my phone. “You’re obnoxious,” I answered.

“You love it,” she said. “Where are you?” she asked. “We are supposed to be going to dinner.”

Shit.

Yeah.

I forgot about that.

“Right. Lost track of time. Ah, how about I meet you there to save some time?” I asked.

“Okey doke. Usual place,” she said, hanging up.

“Gotta go?” he asked, looking down at me sitting cross-legged on the floor from his position in the chair.

“Yeah. We have a standing dinner date to catch up. Not that there is anything to ever catch up on since we talk every single day. But it’s a tradition.”

He nodded at that, but was that, I don’t know, a hint of disappointment in his eyes? Or was that wishful thinking?

“I should check in at the club, I guess,” he said, getting to his feet.

“Hey, Finn?” I called.

“Yeah?”

“I’m not getting off this floor without assistance,” I admitted, shaking my head at myself as I extended my arms.

He smiled down at me, reaching for my hands, and pulling slowly, so I could unfold myself from the position I kept forgetting I was way too fucking old to sit in anymore.

I thought nothing of how he kept lifting his arms higher. Until, suddenly, I was on my feet with my arms up in the air, and he was pushing my back up against the wall, my hands pinned above my head with one of his hands.

His heated gaze held mine for a moment before his lips were crashing down on mine.

There was nothing soft or explorative about this kiss.

His lips were hard and hungry, slanting over mine again and again as his body pressed into mine, his hardness against

my stomach.

Desire flooded my system, my skin heating, making my clothes feel scratchy and uncomfortable even as his teeth nipped my lower lip, dragging a moan out of me.

My hands itched to go around him, but when I tried to pull away, his grip only tightened as his other hand moved outward, teasing down the side of my neck, over my shoulder, then downward, teasing across the overheated skin of my chest, before brushing my breast.

There was a pause, looking for any sign of objection, maybe, before his hand closed and squeezed.

My lips ripped from his as my head tilted back on a moan.

Finn's face ducked, his lips meeting my neck, sending a shiver down my spine as he kept moving downward, inch by delicious inch.

His hand slid under my shirt, then went into the cup of my bra, touching me without the barrier.

Desire had my breasts feeling heavy and my nipples twisted into tight points.

Finn's fingers found one, sliding over, then rolling it between his fingers, getting another almost pained whimper out of me.

I needed this.

God, more than I even realized.

As suddenly as his hand was on my breast, though, it was gone. And there was a moment of overwhelming disappointment until, suddenly, his hand was slipping under the waistband of my pants and panties.

Anticipation sizzled across each nerve ending before his fingers were tracing up my cleft, his finger finding my clit, and starting to work it in delicious circles.

"Fucking soaked for me," he murmured as his forehead pressed to mine. His breathing was somehow as ragged as my own as he drove me upward.

The need had me pulling against his hold, wanting to touch him like he was touching me. But Finn was having none of it. His hand was replaced by his forearm across my wrist, his weight pressing them into the wall as his thumb moved to my clit, and his fingers slipped down, then pressed inside of me.

“I was thinking about doing this, and more, when you were on the back of my bike all pressed up against me,” he told me as his fingers started to thrust inside of me. “Fuck,” he groaned as my walls started to tighten around me. “I knew you’d have a fucking perfect pussy.”

Fuck, did I love it when a man wasn’t silent when things got steamy. As if agreeing, my pussy tightened hard around his fingers.

“Fuck, baby,” he groaned as his fingers started to fuck me faster, driving me toward that cliff at a breakneck pace that had my breathing ragged and my moans mingling with the sound of the blues record still turning on the player.

“There you go,” he said. “Come for me. Let me feel your pussy squeezing my fingers,” he demanded.

Then I was doing just that, crying out a release that made my breath catch in my chest, made my legs feel jiggly, made my vision flash white for a moment.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” I hissed at the end as the waves just refused to stop crashing.

To that, Finn made this deep chuckling noise as his fingers slowly slid out of me, then my panties and pants.

His lips pressed to mine again, just a quick, hard kiss, though.

“You’re late for dinner,” he told me as he finally released my arms.

The little satisfied smirk on his face said he knew how badly I wanted to say *Fuck dinner* and head back to his bedroom with him.

But the chime of my phone told me that Lottie was already getting antsy.

“Right,” I said, trying to pull myself together, but I felt frayed all apart at the edges.

Finn stepped back, then reached to pull the door open for me.

But when I managed to pull myself together enough to move into that open space and onto his porch, as I turned back to say goodbye, he lifted his fingers to his lips and slipped them into his mouth.

“Have a nice dinner,” he said after, then closed the door.

I swear my legs felt like fucking jelly as I walked back to my car.

I tried to focus on my sister all through dinner to no avail. I tried to think of *anything* else as I drove home, and went through my evening routine.

No luck.

Hell, he was even on my mind when I was dead asleep.

Right before the sound of shattering glass had me shooting up in bed.

CHAPTER NINE

Finn

I went to the club because if I didn't, I would have driven over to her house and waited for her to get home.

And while I was perfectly comfortable with my obvious attraction to her, I didn't want to come off too needy, too desperate.

No one liked that.

Let alone a woman like Lexy.

I had a feeling this shit between us, it might actually be going somewhere. But it couldn't continue to do that if her antisocial ass suddenly felt smothered.

And since I was only going to stew on my feelings at home, to the club I went.

Unsurprisingly, the place was packed yet again. I had no fucking idea where Sully, Nave, and Callow found this endless rotation of women, but I rarely saw familiar faces more than once or twice a month.

"What's the matter?" I asked as I walked in to find the guys staring at the pool table that was covered with a sheet of wood stored in the garage, so they could set up a beer pong game.

"Listen to this shit," Callum said, nodding toward one of the girls—lots of pretty, but I didn't feel a single hint of interest. "Tell him."

"We're filling the cups with water," she said, shaking her head.

"Water? Isn't it beer pong?" I asked.

"The cups on the side," Sully said, waving toward a row of red cups on each side of the table, "are full of beer."

“But you toss the balls into the water cups,” the girl explained.

“Did you hear that?” Callow asked, looking dumbfounded by this information. “How many years have we been raw-dogging floor-balls when we could have been using water cups?”

“Partying is evolving,” I said, shaking my head.

“Clearly, they are not drinking enough if they are clear-headed enough to come up with these innovative ideas,” Sully declared, grabbing a ball, and eyeing up the girl across from him. “Let’s fix that, shall we?”

“I went to UCSB,” the girl said, smiling as she named one of the biggest party schools in the country. “I’m leaving here sober as a judge.”

“Alright. And what’s this?” I asked the crowd gathered in the living space, staring at the TV, as Nave selected a notoriously violent revenge movie.”

“A drinking game, apparently,” Theo, Dezi’s woman, who was sitting on his lap, told me.

“We take a shot each time he murders someone,” Dezi said.

I looked at the TV again, then back at all of them.

“Christ. You’re all gonna die of alcohol poisoning,” I declared as I watched Brooks come in from the garage, carrying two buckets with black bags tied tightly around them.

He dropped them on either side of the table.

“Someone’s gonna be puking,” he told me. “I don’t want to have to wait for these idiots to get sober in the morning to clean it up.”

“Whatever my brother pays you,” I said, slapping a hand on his shoulder, “it’s not enough.”

“I think it would be easier to babysit *all* of the club kids than these fucking three prospects.”

“Three? Where’s Sutton?” I asked, since the tall Texan was noticeably absent.

“Caught the eye of a girl as she came in. Been in a room since. You partying?” Brooks asked.

“No,” I said, wanting to drive home later to listen to more of my music. And try not to fucking obsess about Lexy. And how fucking perfect her pussy would feel squeezing my cock. “You know what?” I asked, looking at his strained face. “Why don’t you fucking party for a change? I’ll babysit,” I offered, looking around at the club.

Brooks looked at me for a long moment, almost like what I was saying didn’t make any sense. And it struck me that no one had likely ever offered to do his job for him to let him loosen up for a change.

If there was anyone who needed to let his hair down, it was Brooks. He was wound like a fucking top.

“If they get in the pool later...” he said, clearly leaning toward the idea of partying, something that surprised me. I rarely ever saw him have more than a couple beers.

“I know how to swim,” I said, shrugging. I reached for the coffee table, snagging a shot, and handing it to him. “He just blew that guy’s head off,” I said. “Bottoms up.”

Then, with a glint in his eye I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen there, he tossed back the shot, and moved over toward the chair, reaching for the hand of the pretty curly-haired girl who was seated there, pulling her up, sitting down, then pulling her back down on his lap.

I went ahead and brewed myself a pot of coffee, having a feeling I would need it as the movie and pong game continued, as voices got louder, and laughter more constant.

Then I did what I’d seen Brooks do a million times before.

I cleaned up spills. Took out trash. Dumped the ice from the fridge into the cooler, so it would force the maker to produce a fresh batch, checked the TP levels in the bathrooms, made sure condoms were in all of the rooms and bathrooms, including the basement and the fucking glass room on the roof.

By the time a few hours passed, I realized just how much we all undervalued Brooks's contributions to the club.

Sure, at some point, I think we all just thought he was there with a stern word just to keep shit from being too crazy. But it was a lot more than that.

And I was glad to be able to see him having fun for a change. Even if a part of me wondered why he was suddenly open to the idea when he never showed any interest in partying before, not even when he was a prospect himself.

"The fuck you doing here?" I asked as Seth walked through the door. "Don't you have a bunch of kids and a woman to be home with?"

He'd recently shacked up with a single mom of three littles. And was enjoying the fuck out of his new role as partner and father.

"I think we left Clara's blanket here earlier. She won't sleep without it. Been crying for the past hour," he said as his gaze moved around the common room.

"I don't think it's in here. Maybe check outside."

"Yeah," Seth said nodding, and started to move away to do just that when he froze.

"Is that... is that Brooks doing a body shot off a club girl?" he asked, eyes wide.

"Something got him in the mood tonight," I said.

"Probably not something good," Seth said before making his way outside.

I hadn't given that a thought.

I'd figured he was just ready to loosen up a bit.

But Seth was right. This was Brooks. He didn't ever seem interested in partying. So if he was, it was likely something happened in his personal life to make him want to forget.

The thing was, I wasn't sure any of us actually knew the guy well enough to figure out what that might be.

Out of everyone, I figured maybe Fallon or Sutton—natural-born leaders who Brooks would relate to—might have more insight. I made a mental note to bring it up to them, just in case Brooks was heading into some sort of a spiral.

“Found it,” Seth said, coming back in with a pink blanket covered in rainbow unicorns lifted in the air. “Thank God,” he added, looking exhausted. “We tricked her into going to sleep with a car ride earlier. But then she woke up and freaked out. Did you talk to Voss yet?” he asked.

“Is he looking for me?” I asked. “I had to do the drop today for Fallon. Then I had... errands. Just got here a few hours ago. He was gone already.”

“Oh, well, he’d finally heard back from Junior.”

“Know you gotta go, but *Cliffsnotes*,” I demanded.

“Right. Ah, there was another carjacking last night. A boy beat to shit because he tried to resist. Junior wants to talk to you to see if you think it’s related.”

“I’ll call him in the morning,” I said, nodding. “Thanks, man. Go get the blanket home to the baby.”

With that, he was gone, running across the parking lot to climb in his woman’s car, and peeling off.

I wasn’t happy that someone else got jumped, but I couldn’t help but be glad that there was at least something like progress going on.

This wasn’t the kind of area known for carjackings. It seemed really unlikely that there were two crews doing that kind of shit around here. It had to be related.

Maybe that guy had gotten a better look at the guys than I had.

With that, Junior could do a lot. Way more than the NBPD could.

And if he could track down the crew, I could finally take my anger about that night out on someone.

I didn't know if Fallon was going to agree to let me kill any of them, even though we'd both taken lives before and likely would again. But he wasn't going to let someone put their hands on a member of this club without getting some sort of consequences. It wasn't good for our reputation.

Besides, I'd like to be able to tell Lexy that she wouldn't ever have to worry, that it was handled.

Hell, I was excited just to have an excuse to contact her again.

Christ, what was up with me?

I'd never been so immediately into a woman before.

Though, I had to admit to myself as I collected up a bunch of empty bottles and cans, taking them to the kitchen to rinse them out, then bringing them out to the recycling, that it was likely because I'd never met a woman who I felt like I could relate with like Lexy.

The girls at the club were all pretty as fuck like she was, sure. But they were more extroverted and crazy.

Lexy was a homebody. She was kind of prickly.

She suited my personality better.

And the more I got to know about her, the more I felt like we had in common, the more I felt we could understand each other.

Hell, even just the conversation in my room about the meds and depression had been something new for me. Because anyone who'd discussed it with me so far had been... very worried, very serious. To hear her talk so casually, but bluntly, about her own mental health issues had been refreshing, had helped me feel like there was less of a stigma about it.

I was just taking some pizza bites out of the oven—in an attempt to help soak up some of the booze of the partyers—when my phone started to ring in my pocket.

I dropped the pan on the stove, checking the time as I turned it off.

Almost two in the morning.

Who the fuck was calling so late?

I reached immediately for my phone, worried it might be my mom or father, or maybe even my sister, that something was wrong with the family. Because who the hell else would *call* so late? Text? Sure. But call?

It wasn't my parents' or sister's numbers on my screen, though.

Oh, no.

It was a number I'd recently added and completely forgotten about.

Perish.

Perish.

It couldn't be anything good coming from him so late at night.

My heart tripped into overdrive as I swiped to answer the call.

"What's going on?" I asked, hearing the panic in my voice as I moved out of the kitchen, through the living area where the voices were too raised to hear anything, and out front.

"Someone broke into Lexy's place," he said, voice reassuringly calm. If Lexy was hurt, or worse, he wouldn't be so cool.

"What?" I demanded, raking a hand through my hair.

"Heard a scream a few minutes ago, so I rushed over. Must've scared him off. He's gone."

"Is she okay?"

"Shaken up," he said, voice low.

"I'm on my way over," I said, patting my pocket, glad to find my keys there. "Ten minutes," I said, then ended the call before swiping through my contacts, trying to gauge who was best to call so late.

I decided on Malc and dialed.

He picked up on the third ring, voice thick with sleep.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Lexy’s place was broken into. I need to go. But Brooks is partying. So there needs to be someone sober at the club to keep their eyes on shit.”

Malc grunted.

“I’m on my way,” he said. “Go on. They can’t get into too much trouble before I get there.”

“Thanks, man,” I said, ending the call, tucking my phone away, then tossing on my helmet before peeling off.

Who the fuck would break into her house?

If Junior was right about the carjacking crew working the area, then it made this happenstance, not personal.

Right?

I mean, what were the chances that this was random, though?

Most people weren’t the victims of a single crime, let alone two in such a short period of time.

It felt too coincidental.

I cursed the cops hiding out on the sides of the highway, doing their little speed traps they were so famous for in the area, making it impossible for me to get there any faster than the speed limit would allow.

It felt like for-fucking-ever before I was pulling down the street where we’d been attacked, and I felt my gut twist, having a flashback to getting blocked in.

But there was no one around.

Just an empty road that I knew would lead to Lexy.

I reminded myself as some idiot pulled out in front of me and crawled that she was safe. She was with Perish. A fucking wall of a human being, one who’d gone away to prison on more than one assault charge, on top of some other shit. On

top of that, he was someone who wanted in the club. He would see this as a chance to prove himself.

She was safe.

But I didn't feel like the hand around my throat loosened until I was pulling up in front of the duplex, until I knew I was just seconds away from seeing her.

I left my helmet on the bike, and was making my way up the front walk when I saw them.

Little drops of blood.

Had he cut himself trying to break in?

Or had there been some sort of an altercation with Lexy?

Why the fuck hadn't I thought to ask for details when I'd had Perish on the phone?

It was too late now.

I'd have to see for myself.

My stomach twisted, not sure I could handle seeing her all fucked up like that again, knowing that I'd failed to keep her safe from that *again*.

I took one second as I climbed the steps to take a deep breath, to pull myself together. This wasn't about me. I had to be strong and calm for Lexy.

I reached for her door handle, and pushed it open without knocking, figuring they would have heard my bike, and I wasn't going to be sneaking up on them.

The first thing I saw was Perish, standing there in nothing but a pair of black sleep pants, all his ink and 'prison fit' body on display. Wide chest, corded arms, a full-on six-pack. And all of those muscles big.

I needed to hit the gym with Cary more.

I noted a gun nestled in his hand, and felt myself nod in approval before I turned to find who I was really looking for.

Lexy.

Wrapped up in a blanket.

Eyes wide.

But that set to her jaw?

That wasn't fear.

That was fucking rage.

CHAPTER TEN

Lexy

There was a second of sleep-startled incomprehension.

My heart was hammering, and a weird, slithery feeling was moving through my chest and stomach, but I couldn't remember what had startled me awake.

The glass.

Right?

Or had that been a dream?

I was struggling telling reality from fantasy as I blinked some moisture back into my eyes as I sat up in bed, trying to reason with my body, to not overreact when I had no idea if I'd actually heard a noise or not.

It was useless, though.

Panic shot through me, making me swear I could feel the blood rushing through my veins as I tossed off my covers, and slowly climbed off my bed, trying not to let the bed or floor creak as I moved, in case anyone was in my house.

My hand went to my nightstand, looking for my phone.

Only to realize with a sick, sinking sensation, that I hadn't brought it up to bed with me. I'd left it plugged in down in the living room because I'd been using it to try to track down a random old album I'd been trying to get my hands on for years.

Stupid.

God, that was so stupid.

Every woman knew she was supposed to bring two things to bed with her. Her phone and her car keys.

The former for painfully obvious reasons.

The latter, to set off your own car alarm to startle someone if you thought they were trying to break into your house.

I'd brought neither.

I knew better than that, damnit.

I was usually so careful.

I mean, you couldn't watch crime shows and not be at least a little bit paranoid. Especially after having recently gotten attacked, too.

But my mind had been on other things.

Well, one other thing.

Finn.

His lips on mine, his fingers on and in me, his sexy words in my ear.

My bone-deep need to feel his weight pressing me into his bed, to feel him moving inside of me.

Even right then as I crept across my bedroom floor, I could feel completely irrational desire strumming through my body that seemed capable of both panic and the need for pleasure at the same time.

I got to the window, looking down at the street, but seeing nothing suspicious.

And the house was quiet the floor below me.

I needed to calm the hell down. I was being ridiculous.

A bad dream, that was all.

Still, I wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep again without my damn phone.

Taking a steadying breath that did nothing to calm my nerves now that I had adrenaline flooding my body, I made my way toward the landing, pressing my hand to the wall to make sure I didn't miss a step and fall on my face in the dark. The light above them had been out for months at this point, and I wasn't too keen on trying to use a ladder on a staircase to replace the bulb, so I'd just been dealing with the darkness.

Suddenly, that felt like a really stupid thing. Maybe I should put up a puck light. Or, like, wrap the banister in twinkle lights.

Still, as I navigated down into my quiet living room, I felt some of the tension of startling awake slip away.

I moved around the couch and felt around for my phone.

Only to find it wasn't there.

It wasn't there?

Had I brought it upstairs after all? Maybe it fell off the nightstand, and that was what woke me up?

On a sigh at my distractedness, I moved around the couch again.

It wasn't until I was in that space between the living room and the staircase that I realized how fucking stupid I'd been. How much I'd ignored my instincts.

Because right there, standing between the kitchen and the living room, was a dark shadow in the shape of a man.

Fuck.

This could not be happening.

I felt like I stood there in stunned inactivity for hours, but it was likely only a few seconds before I was turning and rushing back into my living room.

My first instinct had been to go upstairs, but there was no escape from a second floor, so I figured I could put my couch between myself and him, then make a mad dash either for the front or back doors.

As soon as I was moving, so was the shadowed man, coming around the couch as my heart hammered against my ribcage, as fear snaked its way up my spine and around my throat, feeling like it was cutting off my air.

My hand shot out, grabbing the first thing I could find, a mug of cold coffee I'd been too lazy to bring back to the kitchen earlier.

I aimed and hurled, feeling a surge of satisfaction as it hit its mark, making the man grunt, and distracting him long enough to rush down the hallway toward the kitchen.

Barefoot.

Forgetting about the glass.

Shards sliced into my feet, making me suck my breath in at the unexpected pain.

Footsteps clomped toward me, heavy and angry at being hit.

The panic swelled again before my brain finally reminded me of something.

I might have lived alone.

But I had a big, scary ex-con next door.

I sucked in a breath and screamed for him even as I started grabbing random things off of my kitchen counters, and hurling them.

The crock full of cooking utensils my sister had given me as a housewarming present, even though she knew I didn't cook. Another coffee cup. The glass canister I kept the sugar for my coffee in.

The man roared even as I heard Perish's back door slam shut.

Hearing it too, my attacker turned and ran toward the front door.

"Glass!" I yelled just in time to stop Perish from rushing over it like I had. "He went out front," I added, hand pressed to my heart as I tried to take a few deep breaths, tried to calm the frantic beat of my heart.

"I'll be right back," he said, turning and rushing back out the door, likely rushing around the house, trying to track down the guy.

Alone, I flicked on the light, then pulled myself up on the kitchen counter, pulling one of my legs across my other one, so I could look at the cuts.

Seeing the shards of glass sticking out of my skin had me reacting on impulse, grabbing the pieces, and yanking them out, then tossing them into the sink.

I was repeating the process on the other foot when I heard the front door open again.

“It’s me,” Perish called before moving back toward me. “He disappeared,” he said as he came into the doorway. “Fuck,” he said, looking at me.

“It’s okay,” I said as I plucked a particularly big piece of glass out, trying to ignore the sting of pain. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Calling Finn,” he said, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

“Not the police?” I asked, brows pinching.

“They done shit about the other attack?” he asked.

That was... fair.

I hadn’t even heard from them again after that, even though there was apparently another carjacking in the area.

I sat listening to him talk for a minute before climbing down off of the counter, and tiptoeing around the glass all around, and making my way down to the bathroom to grab my small medical kit, bringing it with me to the living room.

I flicked on the light, then poured antiseptic over my feet, letting out a string of curses that had Perish chuckling as he followed me into the living room.

“What are you doing?” I asked when I suddenly felt a blanket being draped around my shoulders.

“Dunno. That’s what people do on TV when someone’s had a shock,” he said, looking a little bashful at that. Which, yeah, was kind of charming on a big guy like him.

“Ah, thanks,” I said, pulling it more tightly around me. Not because I was in shock, but because I’d just realized I was in panties and a tank top, and nothing else.

“You okay?” he asked. “Want me to look?”

“I think I got them all out,” I said, though it was hard to tell when the soles of my feet were throbbing like they each had their own heartbeats. “Thanks for coming,” I said.

“Said I would,” he said, shrugging.

“Yeah, but still. I might hate having to rely on anyone to save me, but...”

“Seems like you were doing a pretty good job yourself,” Perish said. “There was blood down the steps and path.”

“I think I hit his nose with a glass container,” I admitted.

“Good for you. The fuck had it coming,” he said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. And more. Because, clearly, no one broke into your house in the middle of the night to have tea. He had plans for me. And I’d very narrowly avoided them.

“Might make him easier to track down, too,” Perish said. “Broken nose is gonna give him some good black eyes.”

I made a non-committal noise. I guess I was a bit of a pessimist, because I didn’t have a lot of faith that anyone was going to find this guy. And even if they did, what?

I heard the rumble of the bike a few minutes later, and was embarrassed at the way my heart swelled in my chest knowing he’d rushed right over.

And the look of concern on his face when he made his way inside only intensified that feeling.

“Hey,” he said, moving forward, and dropping down at my feet. “You okay?” he asked, reaching toward my face, grabbing my chin, and gently turning my face from side to side, inspecting me.

“I’m fine,” I insisted.

“Her feet,” Perish supplied.

“Feet?” Finn asked, already scooting back to grab me by the ankle, and lift my leg up, so he could inspect my soles.

“He broke the glass in the kitchen,” I supplied. “I ran right over it before I realized it was there.”

“Fucker,” Finn hissed.

“I think I got them all out,” I said as Finn pulled his phone out of his pocket, flicked on the flashlight, and started to look a little closer. One foot after the other.

“Yeah, I think so too,” he agreed. “But we gotta get something on these,” he said, putting his phone down, then reaching for the gauze pads and triple antibiotic. “Hm,” he said a moment later. “No vet tape? Elastic bandages? Gauze rolls?”

“Ah, no. No. I’m not usually accident-prone. I don’t need a big kit.”

“This wasn’t an accident,” Finn reminded me with a little squeeze to my ankle.

“I got some shit,” Perish said. “Be right back.”

With that, he lumbered out of the front door, leaving us alone.

The silence felt full and painful before Finn broke it.

“How are you really?” he asked, voice soft.

“Pissed off,” I admitted. “Once the fear drained, just got angry he broke in here.”

“Did you get a good look at him?”

“None of the lights were on,” I admitted. “I got, like, a glimpse of him, but not enough to get a sketch done. White. Kind of big nose. Dark hair. That’s all I got. I think I only noticed his nose because I was aiming for his face when I threw shit.”

“I saw the blood,” Finn said, giving me a small smile. “You hit your mark.”

“Perish thinks I might have broken his nose.”

“Good. Then I’ll know him when I see him,” Finn said. I must have had a look on my face, because Finn’s brows drew together. “What?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“Nope. You’re not getting away with that.”

“I just don’t think anyone is going to find this guy,” I said, shrugging. “Did you hear there was another carjacking? I saw it on the news before bed.”

“I just heard about that, actually. I’m supposed to be meeting up with Junior in the morning to see what he has. Look at me,” he demanded, voice brooking no argument. Which shouldn’t have been as sexy as it was, because I was not a woman who liked being bossed around. “I’m finding this fuck. This one in particular.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, shrugging. “I just need to get better security around here, I guess,” I admitted.

I knew all about the ways I could have been protecting myself all along. Cameras, flood lights, window alarms, a dog, even a gun.

It was just... this was a safe area, technically.

Sure, there was crime. There was crime everywhere. But the rates of violent crimes were relatively low. I didn’t feel like I needed to spend money on all those things just to be safe in my own home.

That, apparently, had been naive of me.

It was never you. Until it was.

Suddenly, I wanted to make sure Lottie had all those things at her place, too. Sure, she didn’t live alone. But it was all girls.

“You’re coming home with me,” Finn declared as Perish walked back in the room with a fucking rolling emergency kit. It looked big enough to handle something on the scale of a train wreck.

“Should have what she needs in here,” he said, moving it next to Finn, then unzipping it, and pulling out a roll of gauze.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, sure I’d misheard or misunderstood his meaning.

“You’re not staying here anymore. It’s not safe. Not saying you wouldn’t do everything you can to protect her,” Finn said to Perish as he held the gauze to my foot, and started rolling it up my foot and around my ankle once before reaching for the tape Perish was holding. “It’s just that you can’t be here with her. I want you at my place,” Finn said, gaze flicking up to mine, and, fuck, I didn’t understand the way my heart fluttered, but it was a good feeling. “Okay?”

“Okay,” I found myself agreeing without even thinking it through.

“Good,” he said as he turned to work on the other foot. “Did you get a look at him?” Finn asked, glancing over at Perish.

“I came in the back. He went out the front. By the time I got around the house, he was gone.”

“You don’t have cameras, right?” he asked.

“So they can catch me doing shit my parole officer wouldn’t like? No,” Perish said with a lazy grin.

“Fair enough,” Finn agreed. “Guess we have to wait to see what Junior figured out.”

“Junior?” Perish asked. “The hacker?”

“Yep. He’s kind of in the club’s orbit. A family friend sort of thing. Been doing your research on the people operating in town, huh?”

“Figured it’s good to know,” Perish said, shrugging. “Heard there was a new crew moving in.”

“The Irish? Yeah. I met Cian yesterday,” Finn said.

“He’s got a reputation,” Perish agreed.

“Yeah?” Finn asked, curious. “As bad as his father’s?”

“He was in and out of juvie, then county. Came across him once or twice, but we didn’t really roll in the same circles. No one fucked with him, though.”

“Yeah, that was the vibe I got from him too.”

“It’s like you’re talking in code,” I said, looking between them.

To that, Finn shot me a little smile.

“Yeah, we do try to manage to all operate under the radar of the average Navesink Bank citizen,” he agreed. “But there’s a lot going on around here.”

“It sounds like it.”

“Okay. What do you need for a few days?” Finn asked.

My gaze slid around the living room, my throat feeling tight at the thought of leaving all of my comfort items behind.

“Can’t fit all the CDs and records in your car, babe,” Finn said, reading my thoughts.

“You could rent a truck,” I joked. “I guess just some clothes, toiletries, laptop... and maybe my guitar. It’s special,” I told him.

“Special?” Finn asked.

“Carl, my boss, gave it to me. It was given to him by Myleo,” I told him.

“Myleo?”

“He was this really obscure musician both Carl and I just so happened to love. Best lyricist I’ve ever come across. But he died after his second album.”

“Okay. Important guitar for sure. Does it have a case?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell Perish where to get it. I’ll go grab some clothes and shit for you,” he said, then stood up quickly, his knees cracking loudly.

“Pretend you didn’t hear that. I’m young and ache-free,” he said, giving me a smirk.

Before he moved away, though, he grabbed the back of my neck, pulling me close for a quick kiss, then disappearing.

“The fuck is wrong with this light?” he called at the top of the landing, likely after having tried to flick the switch a few

times.

“It’s located in the ceiling above the staircase, that’s the problem,” I called.

“I’ll fix it while you’re gone,” Perish offered.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Still gonna do it. The glass on the back door too,” Perish said. “Where’s the case?”

With that, Perish carefully put my guitar in the case, then moved off into the kitchen, sweeping up the glass as Finn moved around upstairs, rifling through my stuff.

I hoped he remembered to grab underwear and socks or shoes in case I needed them. And my shampoo and conditioner, because I hadn’t met any guys who had decent products at their houses.

Alone, I got a moment to wrap my head around the whole... going to stay with Finn thing.

I was an adult.

I knew that if we were trapped in the same place together, we were going to be getting physical.

I had no issues with that.

The thing was, I never got physical with someone I couldn’t easily make a getaway from. I usually felt... smothered when I spent too much time with someone new. I liked my quiet and space.

There would be no getting space from him when crashing at his place.

Somehow, though, it wasn’t unease that was flooding my system as I heard Finn coming back down the stairs.

No.

It was—dare I even think it—anticipation?

“For someone who is such a homebody, you have a pretty big luggage collection,” Finn said as he came into the living

room, dragging a weekender bag that Lottie had gotten me and two rolling suitcases.

“Oh, I bring the rolling suitcases when I go to music swap events. I always need the extra storage.”

Two suitcases and a weekender made me think that he likely had covered all of his bases.

“I’m gonna fix the glass,” Perish said as he came back in.

“I appreciate it,” Finn said, nodding. “And you’ll keep an eye and ear on the place while we’re gone?”

“Of course,” Perish said, looking a little puffed up at the job.

“Mind running these out to Lexy’s car?” Finn asked, passing my luggage to Perish, who took them and my guitar case, then snagged my keys on his way out of the door.

“Ready?” he asked, coming closer to me.

“Yeah, just give me a hand up,” I said, reaching toward him.

“No,” he said.

Then the man swooped down... and swept me up into his arms.

My belly felt like it bottomed out for a moment before my body was pressed tightly against him, his arms effortlessly holding me.

“You can’t carry me everywhere,” I insisted even as I went ahead and rested my head against his shoulder.

“Why not?” he asked as he walked me through the living room, then out onto the front step.

“Careful,” I warned as my arm went around his neck when he started down the steps. “I might just take advantage of that.”

“Works for me,” he said, not sounding the least bit strained or out of breath. “Can you run back and grab her purse?” he asked Perish. “Then maybe you could ride my bike to my

place, then drive Lexy's car back here. If someone is keeping an eye on her, I don't want her car parked at my place."

"Yeah, no problem," Perish agreed, opening the passenger side door, so Finn could lower me in.

"You really think he would drive around looking for my car?"

"I dunno. I can't pretend to know what's in this sick fuck's mind. But I'm not taking any chances," he said, taking my purse from Perish, and handing it to me.

He exchanged keys with Perish, and then we were off.

"I could stay with my sister," I offered, feeling like I hadn't given him a way out of taking care of me. He was a good guy. Of course he would have offered, even if he didn't want someone in his space.

"No."

"I know you like your alone time," I insisted.

"Rather be alone with you," he said, making me turn to watch his profile for a moment.

Because... I liked that.

It wasn't that I always wanted to be *alone*.

I wanted to have that level of comfort with someone where it felt like you were alone... together. No need to perform, to small talk, to do anything but coexist in the same orbit as someone else.

The crazy thing—especially given how short a time I'd known him—was that I was somehow sure that the only person in the world I could feel comfortably alone together with was Finn.

And I had no fucking idea what to do with that information.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Finn

I nestled her in my bed before grabbing all her bags, and having a short conversation with Perish about what to do if he saw anything going on at their place.

Then I took a moment to stop and breathe in my living room, trying to remind my body that I couldn't be putting my hands on an injured woman just because she was staying in my bed for a few days.

I reached for my phone, shooting off a text to Malc to fill him in, so he could tell the others when they sobered up, and Fallon when he dropped by in the morning.

I didn't plan on dropping in there tomorrow. It was top of my fucking priority list to go meet up with Junior, to see what—if anything—he'd figured out. Because I needed to find these fucks. I needed to ensure Lexy of her safety.

It wasn't that I wanted her to go back to her house, to her life.

Despite it not being characteristic of me at all, I wanted her right where she was. In my house.

But I wanted her to know she didn't need to look over her shoulder, to jump at shadows, to think that anyone could get their hands on her.

With no evidence of her at my place, I was confident she was as safe as she could be. And I had Perish keeping an eye out at their place, so if he saw anyone suspicious before Junior could point me in a direction, I could have him carefully follow that lead until I could meet up with him and take over.

"You need to stay off your feet," I demanded as I saw Lexy tiptoeing down the hallway.

"I need a drink," she declared, giving me a small smile.

“Yeah, me too,” I agreed, walking over, leaning down, and tossing her over my shoulder, hearing her startled gasp, then surprised laugh. “Told you that you aren’t walking with me around,” I told her, giving her ass a slap before dropping her down on the couch. “Now keep your stubborn ass there while I get you a drink,” I said, moving off into the kitchen to grab us glasses, doing a generous pour in each, before joining her on the couch.

We both sucked in and released deep breaths at the same time before raising our glasses for a sip.

“Thanks for letting me stay here,” she said.

“You don’t need to thank me for that. Unless you’re gonna leave wet towels all over the floor. ‘Cause I can’t fucking stand that,” I told her.

“Let me guess, your club friends?” she asked.

“Brothers. They’re called brothers,” I told her.

“I did a little research on bike clubs,” she admitted.

“Oh, yeah?” I asked, a little more charmed than I expected.

“Yeah. It sounds... suffocating to be around all those people all the time,” she said.

“It can be. Especially when you’re not in the headspace for it. But there’s something special about the club. It’s a family. You always have someone around to lean on or hang out with. I’ve got a dozen or so cousins that aren’t actually cousins because of this club. Never got lonely as a kid. Or adult for that matter.”

“And, you know, there’s the bikini-clad bobbing-for-apples pool parties,” she said, shooting me a smile.

“Christ. They bobbed for apples?” I asked, thinking of poor Brooks trying to put an end to that. Fruitlessly. Pun intended.

“And other fruit,” Lexy confirmed.

“Your sister, has she always been a party girl?” I asked.

“Lottie just... likes people. I know, bizarre,” she said, shaking her head. “But it’s like being social actually charges her battery instead of draining it. She doesn’t like being alone. So, it’s not always parties. She does brunches and beach days. She plans and goes on girls trips. But late at night, there aren’t a lot of options but bars and clubs. So, that’s where she ends up. House parties like that are less likely, but not unheard of.”

“I get that. Sully always wants people around too. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him alone for more than a few minutes at a time. But I figure maybe that has something to do with being around people all the time while he was in service. Or because of PTSD or something.”

“That guy does not give off former military vibes. The other one kind of does, though...”

“Callow,” I supplied. “They served together at one point.”

“Do you have a lot of ex-military?”

“No. We get more lifelong criminals.”

“Like Perish.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “It makes more sense for them to want in an organization like this. And it makes it easier for us to trust them when we know they’re familiar with the shit that goes on with the club.”

“This shit,” she said. “Does it get violent?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Not all the time. We have long stretches of nothing going on. But I’d be lying if I said blood doesn’t get spilled on occasion.”

“Other criminals?” she asked.

“Yeah. I mean, sometimes the girls that come into the club, come with their own bad guys chasing them. And they’ve gotten hurt in the process. But it’s never gotten too bad for the women. Thank fuck.”

“The kids?” she asked.

“Never gotten hurt. My sister, once, back in the day. But that’s... a long fucking story involving a fucked up family

history.”

“I’ve got most of my drink to go,” she said, holding it up.

With that, I went ahead and launched into it. But, of course, to tell Ferryn’s story, I had to go way back, telling my mother and father’s stories, then having to segue into like a dozen other stories before I finally circled back to Ferryn.

By the time I was done pretty much giving her the entire history of Navesink Bank for two generations, my throat hurt from talking so much, and Lexy’s mouth had fallen slightly open.

“Jesus,” she said finally, tipping back the rest of her drink, and exhaling a breath.

“Yeah, it’s a lot when you recount it all at once,” I agreed, sipping my own drink. “Want a refill?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, handing me her glass.

I went ahead and refilled before turning on a record as we both kind of sat with our own thoughts for a while.

I had been lost in my own head when I suddenly felt her snuggle into my side, her head on my shoulder, her body pressed against my arm.

I pulled the glass out of her hand, placing it down on the table at my side with my own, before wrapping my arm around her.

She snuggled in closer, stealing my warmth as the air conditioning kicked up again.

I sat there just enjoying the feel of her there with me, letting the music run out. Only then did I reach to pull her back into my arms, and move her into the bed, slipping her under the covers, then going back into the main area of the house to lock the door, turn off the lights, and bring her luggage into the room and bathroom, so she had everything she might need if she woke up in the middle of the night.

It wasn’t until I was climbing into the bed with her that I realized that I’d never had a woman in my bed before.

In bed, yes.

I was no saint.

But I'd only ever had women at the club.

Not at my house.

I flicked off the light, then lay there staring up at the ceiling in the dark, willing my body to calm down, to not get any ideas.

She needed sleep.

I needed to let her have that.

Eventually, what felt like weeks later, I finally drifted off as well.

—

I woke up hot.

I dropped the thermostat at night because I slept better cold, so I lay there half awake for a long time, confused, wondering if maybe the air had stopped working.

But then I felt movement at my side.

And it all came back.

The party at the club, the call, the worry, the relief when she was okay, then bringing her back to my house. And my bed.

I was hot because Lexy had migrated across to my side of the bed. And she was a fucking furnace.

And yet, as I was becoming more aware of my surroundings, the bare skin of her legs against me were frigid.

That was likely why she was against me. She was cold.

But trying telling that to my cock. It was already rock fucking hard and aching.

I needed to get out of the bed, hide in the bathroom, and let my cock calm down before she noticed.

It was the second I got one leg out of the blanket that she suddenly shifted up and onto me.

It was like a fucking electric shock to feel her all over me, her soft body pressing against mine, her bare leg draped over my hips. Which had her pussy right against my cock with nothing but her barely-there panties and my pajama pants between us.

I needed to get the fuck out of there.

As soon as I started to shift again, though, Lexy woke up, her head whipping up, eyes unfocused for a second. But the second the sleep cleared from her eyes, it was a hazy sort of heat that took its place.

Her hips shifted, making her glide across my cock, and as she did, her mouth parted as she gasped.

“Let me up,” I said, hearing the roughness in my own voice.

I was too far beyond being able to just take some time and space. I was going to need to rub one out to be able to think straight again.

Then, in a move I didn't see coming, Lexy was sliding over me more fully, her knees straddling me, then pushing up to sit upright, her heavy-lidded gaze on mine the whole time.

She shifted up, letting my cock press between her thighs more fully, then lowered down, and started to rock against me.

And, fuck was it a good sight to look up and watch her as she drove herself up, as her breathing got more ragged and her skin flushed pink.

My hands moved out, gliding up her bare thighs, then up under the hem of her tank top, teasing the skin of her stomach, then under the swells of her breasts.

Lexy kept moving, her heavy breathing turning into soft moans as she got closer and closer.

“Come for me,” I demanded, voice jagged with my own desire.

And just like that, she did, crying out, her body shuddering hard.

She bent forward afterward, her face resting in my neck as her breathing slowed.

Only after she seemed fully recovered did she move again, this time, sliding down my body.

“Baby...” I mumbled as her hands found the waistband of my pants. “You don’t have to,” I said, even as my cock was aching for it.

She ignored me as she freed my cock, then sucked me deep into her mouth.

Lexy wasn’t a woman who teased.

She sucked me off fast and deep, driving me up as quickly, as relentlessly as possible.

My hands gathered her hair, pulling it out of the way, so I could watch as she worked me.

“Fuck,” I growl feeling on the cusp. “I’m gonna come,” I told her as my hips rocked up into her mouth.

She sucked me deeper, letting me come down her throat.

I swear I felt the orgasm through my entire fucking body.

She worked me softly for another few seconds before moving upward again to collapse with her head on the center of my stomach.

“Morning,” she murmured, making a laugh escape me.

“Good morning,” I said as my hands sifted through her hair. “When are these stitches coming out?” I asked when the tip of my finger caught the scratchy little edge of the suture thread.

“I think I have something like five or six more days.”

“Sucks.”

“At least I can wash my hair now. Those first forty-eight hours were hell. I like having clean hair. What time is it? And how long from now can I expect fresh coffee to be brewing? Fair warning, the answer to the latter better be under five minutes.”

A chuckle moved through me as I reached toward the nightstand for my phone.

“It’s ten. And I will have coffee in less than three,” I told her as she rolled off of me.

“Hop to it, then,” she said, doing a long cat-like stretch on the bed that wasn’t meant to be, but somehow was incredibly sexy.

Shaking my head, I made my way out of the room, not realizing there was a smile tugging at my lips until I was pulling cups down for the coffee.

And, fuck, I didn’t remember the first time I had a smile on my lips when I got up in the morning.

I heard Lexy making her way into the bathroom, and when I got back to the bedroom with the coffee, she was there with her hair more tamed than it had been a few minutes ago.

“How’re your feet?” I asked as I handed her the mug.

“They’re alright. I’ll live.”

“I’ll redress... hold up,” I said as my phone started to buzz on the nightstand. “Junior,” I told her as I opened the text. “He says I can pop over whenever to talk about this.”

“And by that, you clearly mean *we*,” she said, raising her disheveled brow at me as she sipped her coffee.

Reaching over, I smoothed her brow. “Yeah, that’s obviously what I meant,” I agreed, realizing my fucking cheeks were starting to hurt from grinning.

“Thought so,” she agreed, looking pleased. “You need to feed me first, though,” she said. “I’m not a good person when I’m hungry,” she warned.

“No?” I asked, liking that information. “What are you in the mood for then?”

“Pancakes,” she decided.

“I can do that,” I agreed, starting to get off the bed.

“Wait... what?” she asked, looking taken aback. “You’re going to... make them?” she asked, making it sound like it was some fucking impossible feat.

“Yeah.”

“You know how to cook?”

“Ah... yeah,” I said, head tipped to the side. “My ma said it’s a life skill, and we all had to learn it. I ended up liking it more than my siblings, so I learned more. You don’t cook?”

“I make a mean microwave soup,” she said, smiling at herself. “My mom died. My dad was never around. If it couldn’t be cooked in a microwave, we didn’t eat it.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Lottie doesn’t cook, either?”

“Not really. She bakes really terrible cookies at Christmas. But that’s about it.”

“So the last time you had a home-cooked meal...” I said.

Her face was blank for a second.

Then, something a little sad crossed her pretty features.

“Never,” she admitted.

“Well,” I said, wondering what I might have in my fridge and cabinets. “Let’s change that, huh?” I asked before making my way to the kitchen.

She followed me out eventually, sitting at the table and watching me as I moved around the kitchen.

I lucked out with eggs that had a while to go yet. And found a couple of potatoes to make hash browns with.

When I was done, she had a high stack of pancakes, scrambled eggs with cheese, and hash browns.

She looked at it like it was a fucking gourmet meal.

“I’ll make dinner tonight too,” I offered. “What do you want?”

“Shush,” she demanded, mouth full. “I’m busy enjoying this right now. It’s wrong to talk about other meals in front of the food,” she added, making a chuckle escape me.

“Okay,” she declared as she sat back with a hand on her stomach. “I want some sort of pasta for dinner. I don’t care what kind,” she told me. “God, my stomach hurts,” she admitted. “Why did you let me steal your pancakes?” she asked, twisting her face up at me like it was my fault.

“Babe, I was worried I’d lose my hand if I tried to eat some of them myself.”

“I wasn’t that bad,” she insisted.

“You growled,” I countered, making her laugh again.

“It was a grumble at most,” she conceded. “Okay. I’m taking a shower. Leave the dishes. I’ll do them while you shower.”

Guests don’t do dishes, my mom’s voice said in my head, but I let her think that was going to happen as she walked away.

An hour later, we were both dressed, and heading not to Junior’s place, but to Shale’s coffee house.

“I didn’t know this place existed,” Lexy admitted as I pulled the door open.

“Not even after the drive-by a while back?” I asked. “It was all over the news.”

“I am hit-and-miss when it comes to keeping up-to-date on local goings-on. It’s nice, though. How’s the coffee?” she asked.

“You’re about to find out,” I said, seeing Shale give me a smile behind the counter.

Junior was waiting at a table, and gave us a nod as we went to order before joining him.

“You okay?” he asked, looking at Lexy, who’d been tiptoeing in her slides toward the table.

“Her place was broken into last night. She stepped on the broken glass,” I explained. “Lexy, this is Junior. Junior, Lexy.”

“Thanks for looking into this,” Lexy said.

“Not doing it quickly enough, it seems,” Junior said with a sigh.

“Sure you’re doing the best you can.”

“You live in a camera dead zone,” Junior told Lexy. “It hasn’t been easy. Not much to go on.”

“Until they hit again,” I guessed.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. “So, the thing is... the parallels are... interesting.”

“What parallels?” I asked.

“The guy who got carjacked was at a party at a club,” Junior told us.

“Club? Bike club?” I asked, confused.

“Yeah.”

“But... oh,” I said, remembering the Vultures in town. My brother’s woman used to be their president until she was pushed out by her own damn brother. Who was still running shit around there. We all kind of kept to ourselves these days. It was easy to forget they still even existed.

“Yeah, so he’d been there until late. But on his way home, he was trapped and carjacked. An actual car this time, though.”

“That’s too big of a coincidence, right?” Lexy asked.

“It’s suspicious as fuck, considering you don’t want to fuck with either of these clubs. The Henchmen have a reputation, but so do the Vultures, even if they are newer.”

“Why would they be targeted then?” Lexy asked.

“Best guess... someone thinks the bikers would have nice cars or bikes and a lot of extra cash and untraceable guns on them. They’re not wrong about that.”

“But how do they know where to create the trap?” I asked.

“That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to figure out. I have no pull with the Vultures. They keep shit locked down tight, so I have no way of getting information out of them about who

was at the party, to see if there was any crossover with people.”

“I wasn’t partying that night,” I admitted. “But your sister was there. And her friends, right?” I asked, looking at Lexy.

“Yeah. But there were other girls that my sister and her friends met at the bar too.”

“Redemption?” Junior asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll talk to Toll. Maybe check their cameras. If the same girls were there both nights... no?” he asked as I shook my head.

“The Vultures crew isn’t welcome at Redemption. You know, for fucking over Danny.”

“Your sister-in-law?” Lexy asked, trying to keep all the stories straight in her head.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Right,” Junior said. “Maybe Chaz’s then,” Junior said. “Just to clarify... you said it was five or six guys?” he asked.

“Yeah. I think only five who chased me. One who attacked Lexy. Why?”

“It’s the same number the other guy said. It wasn’t likely it was a different crew in the area, but I just wanted to check. I’m assuming you don’t have cameras?” he asked, looking at Lexy.

“No,” she admitted.

“Should I have Perish put some up while she’s staying with me? If the guy comes back, that is.”

“Wouldn’t hurt,” Junior agreed. “You know me, I think everyone should have cameras.”

“Anything else new?” I asked.

“This guy gave descriptions to the cops of two of the guys,” Junior said, passing side-by-side sketches to me. “Had

Jackson throw these together from what he said. Look familiar to either of you?"

"No," Lexy said. "But I don't get out much. I don't think this is the guy that attacked me either time, though. He had a big nose."

"That's likely broken now," I told Junior.

"That's good to know," he said, nodding.

"It could have been these guys. I don't know. I was so outnumbered and we were in the woods," I told him.

"Yeah, I get it. I'll figure it out. Got more to go on now. It's only a matter of time," he assured me.

"I appreciate it," I said, my hand sliding across the back of Lexy's chair. "Clearly, one of these fucks is targeting Lexy now."

"Yeah," Junior said, light eyes darkening. "Sick fuck probably got pissed that he couldn't..."

"Yeah," Lexy said, sighing hard, her gaze going to the table.

"He's not going to get to," I insisted.

"I know," she agreed. "I'm just pissed off that anyone gets to walk around with those ideas in their head."

"Not for long," I assured her.

"I know you have the club," Junior said. "But if you need anyone else..."

"I appreciate it. Sorry this is taking up so much of your time."

"Eh, got nothing else going on at the moment," he said, his gaze sliding over to Shale for a second and warming, before looking back at us. "I will have something for you in the next couple of days."

"I'll let you get back to it then," I said, not admitting it aloud, but wanting to get back to playing house with Lexy while I still could.

After our thank-yous and goodbyes, we made our way out.

I left her in the house, watching fucking *Forensic Files* and drinking more coffee as I ran to the grocery store.

“Finn?” a voice called, making me turn to find my mother, of all people, standing a few feet away, her red hair pulled up in a clip, her head tucked to the side as she looked at me.

“Oh, hey Ma,” I said, putting down the sauce I’d been looking at to walk over and kiss her cheek.

“That’s a lot of food,” she said, looking at my cart.

“Oh, ah, yeah. I have... company,” I said, feeling uncomfortable admitting that to my mom. Why? I had no idea. She knew I’d been a biker since I was practically still a kid. And she damn sure knew about the club parties and women.

This was the woman who, the day Fallon turned like fourteen, condoms just showed up in a bowl in the kids’ bathroom.

She knew I’d been fucking.

It was ridiculous to feel weird about having a woman at my house.

“And you’re cooking for her?” she asked, smiling.

“She hasn’t ever had home-cooked meals before.”

“Oh,” my ma said, pressing a hand to her heart. “You’re a sweet kid, you know that?” she asked, beaming at me. “You know, I almost didn’t recognize you when I was passing,” she said.

“What?” I asked, brows pinching.

“You look different. Brighter, standing taller. I think you were even smiling a little.”

I probably had been.

I’d been thinking that I’d forgotten to grab the bag of sour candy she’d requested. And by ‘requested,’ I mean she’d threatened to make earrings out of my balls if I came back without them.

Lexy, apparently, took her food very seriously.

“I’ve been... working on shit,” I admitted. “Working out, being more social, finding things I’m interested in. It’s all helping. Still debating the meds, but haven’t made a decision yet. Ma!” I said, chin going to my chest when I saw her eyes go all glassy.

“No, I know. I’m embarrassing,” she said, wiping under one of her eyes. “I’m just glad to see you feeling better. Even just a little bit better. No one wants to see their kid being unhappy. Even if they are a big kid,” she added. “So... this company,” she started, blinking away her tears.

“Lexy.”

“Lexy. Pretty. What is she like?”

“Prickly,” I admitted, lips twitching. “A homebody. But really loves her sister and music. Works at the studio.”

“She sounds great, bud,” she said, beaming. “Where’d you... wait...” she said, putting the pieces together. “Was this the woman you were attacked with?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that certainly sounds like a Henchmen meet-cute to me,” she said, shaking her head. “I won’t keep you from her for any longer. But give your mother a call, okay? I can’t get enough of this,” she said, waving at me as a whole.

Then she patted my cheek before walking away.

I had no doubt that the entire girls club would now know I was... with Lexy.

Because I was, right?

Or, at least, that was what I was working toward.

I could feel it, somewhere in my bones, that something was right with us, that this was end-game shit.

So with that in mind, I went home to make my woman dinner.

But not before I went back and grabbed those damn sour candies...

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lexy

“What do you mean you’re staying with Finn?” Lottie’s voice nearly yelled in my ear. “Like... on his couch?” she asked. I paused for all of two seconds. But that was too much, it seemed. “Oh, my God! You’re in his bed, aren’t you? Holy crap.”

“Okay, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I said, sitting at the wrought iron table in Finn’s backyard, watching a bluejay flit through a bush, picking at some berries, then letting out a loud trill, likely calling its mate to come eat some too.

“Um, you are in a man’s house. Overnight. And you don’t seem like you’re leaving today. That’s not ahead of ourselves. Not for you, anyway.”

“I think we’ve breezed over my attack way too quickly,” I said, not wanting to bring that back up, but also not wanting Lottie to dig her heels into this other thing too much.

Why?

Because, well, I was starting to think it was actually a big deal myself. I knew it seemed too soon for that. But I wasn’t sick of this guy. I wasn’t itching to get back to my own home.

If anything, I was anxious to spend more time here with him.

Watching him cook me dinner.

Talking more about this crazy town we shared, but apparently, lived in different worlds.

And, yeah, I wanted to go to bed with him.

Then do a whole lot more than dry hump him then go down on him.

Even just the memory of bed that morning had my sex aching for more.

“I mean, of course, that is so incredibly fucked up, Lex! But, like, you’re safe now. With *Finn*. You’re in bed with him! He’s cooking for you. And, on top of all of that, you sound totally calm about all of that. Like, I dunno, you want to be there. That’s a big deal!”

“It’s really annoying when someone in your life knows you too well, you know?” I asked, hearing Finn come into the house.

Not a minute later, he was in the kitchen. I could see him through the window, putting his green reusable bags on the counter, calling out.

I watched as his body tensed as I didn’t answer.

Worried.

He was worried about me.

And I liked that a lot more than I should have.

His head turned, and his gaze found mine. His shoulders instantly relaxed, and a small smile tugged at his lips.

“So, you like him, don’t you?”

“I guess I do,” I admitted. Because I knew better how this would go if I didn’t give in right away. Lottie would keep poking at me until I relented eventually. It was easier just to admit it right away.

“Gah! Oh, my God. I love that so much for you.”

“Ah, thanks,” I said, unsure how I was supposed to respond to that. “But circling back to why I actually called... I want you to install some cameras,” I told her.

“I have to talk to my roommates,” she said. “It’s their privacy that is being invaded too.”

“It’s their *safety* we are talking about too.”

“Okay, *Mom*,” she said in a long-suffering voice. “I promise, I will talk to them. Now go have fun with your guy,” she said. “Love you!”

“Love you too,” I said, hanging up.

Your guy.

I liked that more than I should have as I sat back, watching him through the window as he unpacked his bags, finding myself excited about what he was going to make me for dinner.

When he was done, he made his way out back, tossing a bag of sour candies up and down in his hand, then slapping them down on the table beside my phone.

“I almost forgot them,” he admitted. “Talking to your sister?” he asked, pulling the other chair in front of me.

“Yeah. I just didn’t want her showing up at my house right now. And I tried to talk her into cameras. She said she has to talk to her roommates.”

“She’ll reason with them,” he said, reaching outward toward my knees, his fingers dancing over my skin.

Despite the heat, little goosebumps spread down my arms and legs and a little shiver moved through me.

“Did you get all the stuff for dinner?”

“Yep. And dessert,” he said as his fingers moved further up still, toying with the frayed edges of my cut-off jeans.

“What are you making?” I asked, hearing the breathlessness in my own voice.

“It’s a surprise,” he said as his hands moved from my thighs to my chair, grabbing it, and pulling it closer to his, our knees touching.

“Tease,” I said as my heart tripped into overdrive.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Got a lot of teasing in mind,” he added as his hands sank into my hips, and pulled me forward until I was straddling him on his chair.

My hair fell forward into his face, and he reached up to tuck some behind my ear before his hand shifted to the back of my neck, using it to draw me down toward his.

Our lips met with a jolt that moved down my spine, a sizzling, electric sensation that had me inching forward, my

chest crushed to his.

Finn's hands moved to my ass, sinking in, and dragging me down onto his lap more firmly, making me feel his cock pressing against me.

My moan was muffled by his lips as I ground against him.

His tongue moved inside to slide over mine as I continued to rock against his hardness, but it only managed to make the ache intensify.

Finn's teeth nipped my lower lip as his hands sank more tightly into my ass.

His body tilted forward as he started to get to his feet.

My arms and legs wrapped around him as he walked us back toward the house.

We barely made it into the kitchen before he was slamming me against the door, his hips rocking against me.

A frustrated growl escaped me as his lips went to my neck, his lips and tongue teasing as his scruff scraped over the sensitive skin.

I wanted to feel that between my breasts, down my belly, up my inner thighs.

As if sensing the course of my thoughts, Finn turned, laying me down across the kitchen island, the cool quartz meeting my overheated skin.

But as Finn's head lowered, kissing between my breasts, the heat bloomed to overtake me completely.

His hands moved out, grabbing the front of my tank top along with the cups of my bra, yanking them both down to expose me.

There was just a second where the chill in the room made my nipples twist into tighter points before he was lowering down, his lips sucking one into his mouth as his hand covered the other. Stroking and rolling with his fingers as his lips sucked and his tongue circled.

I arched upward as he moved across my chest, continuing the torment.

It was so much, yet not nearly enough.

Desire was a clawing, aching need that only seemed to get more acute with each passing second.

Finn lifted suddenly, pulling me up by the front of my tank top, then pulling it up and off before reaching behind to remove my bra as well.

The rumbling sound that moved through him made a liquid heat crest through my core even as he lowered me back down, then pressed a kiss between my breasts before making his way downward.

Over my belly.

Across the waistband of my shorts.

Then his fingers were working my button and zipper free, and he was waiting for me to lift up to pull the material down my thighs.

Leaving me in nothing but my black panties.

His lips were moving downward again, teasing the waistband of my panties, then downward where the crease met my thigh.

Then, suddenly, his lips were closing around my clit through my panties, making my hips buck upward into him as a surprised whimper escaped me.

His tongue started to glide across the sensitive spot, the friction of my panties creating a new sensation that had my hands grabbing his hair, holding him to me as my hips writhed against him.

Finn's hand moved between us, yanking my panties to the side so he could trace his tongue up my cleft, then continue the circling of my clit without the barrier between us.

He drove me up slowly, but relentlessly, until my fingers were digging into his head, until my thighs were crushing the

sides of his head, my muscles shaking, and my moans getting louder and louder.

Then just when it felt like it was never going to happen, the orgasm soared through my system, taking my breath and my vision for a moment.

Even as I was coming back down, though, Finn's fingers were slipping inside of me, working to drive me back up.

"Finn, please," I begged, the friction of his fingers only giving me a hint of what my body was truly aching for.

"Please, what?" he asked, looking down at me as his fingers turned inside of me, crooking, and teasing across my top wall.

"Please fuck me," I said, my hips writhing against his palm.

That rumbling sound moved through him as his fingers slipped out of me, then into his mouth as his gaze held mine.

Then he was grabbing my hips, and yanking me against him. My legs wrapped around his waist, and then he was lifting me away from the counter, his hands sinking into my ass as he walked me through the kitchen, down the hall, then into the bedroom.

He lowered me onto the bed, and stood at the side, reaching behind his neck to pull off his shirt.

I didn't think it was possible to feel more turned on than I already was, but as his chest and abdominal muscles twitched and tensed as he moved, I felt the need getting more acute.

His molten gaze was on me as he reached for his button and zip, then pushed his pants off of his hips, leaving him in nothing but navy boxer briefs, that did very little to hide how needy he felt as well.

I folded upward to sit off the side of the bed, my gaze tilted up toward his face as I drew down his boxer briefs.

His hand rested on the back of my neck as my hand slid up his thigh, then closed around his cock, my pussy aching at the thickness of him, the way he would fill me completely.

“Suck me, baby,” he demanded, voice rough.

I didn't need any encouragement.

My head dipped, and I sucked him into my mouth, working him as his breathing got more ragged, as his fingers dug into my neck.

His fingers slipped up into my hair, tugging until his cock left my mouth.

Reaching down, he grabbed the undersides of my knees, and flipped me onto my back.

I was still smiling as he grabbed the condom from the nightstand, and slipped it on, his gaze on me.

Moving in at the side of the bed, he grabbed my ankles, pulling them up, and placing them on his shoulders.

Then his gaze was on me as he rubbed his cock along my pussy before slipping back down, and surging inside of me.

“Fuck,” I groaned, my walls stretching to accommodate him as he sucked in a breath as he buried deep.

“Fucking perfect,” he groaned as his arm anchored over my legs, holding me against him as he started to fuck me.

Fast and deep, driving me up so quickly that I felt unprepared as the orgasm slammed through my system, making my thighs shake and my back arch and my fingers claw at the sheets.

Finn made a growling sound as he pushed my knees into my chest and fucked me through it, driving me back up before the first orgasm had a chance to fully subside.

“You feel so fucking good,” he murmured as he fucked me harder as my moans got louder again.

His hands moved out, closing over my breasts, squeezing and teasing as he fucked me toward that edge again, then throwing me over with a moan that sounded more like a sob.

He slowed afterward, fucking me gently until I was writhing against him again.

Then he was grabbing me and turning me onto my belly, then pulling me onto all fours before slamming deep into me again.

“Oh, my God,” I whimpered, the new position making me feel him even better.

His hands grabbed my hips, using them to slam me back onto him as he surged deep.

He was fucking me hard then.

Hard enough that the bed was starting to slide across the floor with each thrust.

“There it is,” he groaned as my walls tightened hard around him. “Come for me,” he demanded. “Squeeze my cock.”

Then just like that, I was.

This time, taking him with me, his body jerking hard as he came.

He fell forward afterward, pressing me flat on the mattress with his weight pinning me to it.

We were both breathless and silent for a long time, just trying to bring some calm back to our chaotic bodies.

He rolled onto the mattress at my side after a long few minutes, allowing me to finally take a deep breath.

His hand grabbed my hip, pulling me so that my ass was nestled against his hips, his arm going heavy over my stomach.

“Did you happen to pick up any electrolyte drinks at the store?” I asked when I trusted my voice again.

“Why?” he asked as his fingers traced absentmindedly over the skin of my stomach.

“Because we are going to be doing that about five more times today,” I told him, feeling the chuckle as it rumbled through him.

“Glad we’re having carbs for dinner,” he said, face nuzzling into my neck. “I’m gonna need the energy,” he added, making my lips curve up.

Happy.

God, I was really fucking happy right then.

And there wasn’t even the slightest urge to flee, to get some space, to be alone.

“You know what you need?” I asked into the silence as we lay there together.

“Something to play music on in here?” he asked, making my smile spread wider.

“Exactly.”

“Or…” he said.

“Or?” I asked, hazy in an unfamiliar type of joy. The kind that had my heart feeling warm and my head fuzzy.

I was just realizing what the sensation was—starting to fall for someone—when he spoke again.

“You could play,” he suggested.

“The guitar?”

“No, the harmonica,” he said, fingers tickling my hipbone. “Of course your guitar. Perish said you have the voice of an angel.”

“He did not.”

“He did,” Finn confirmed. “And that Lottie sounds like a cat being shaken in a bucket.”

“That’s… very specific yet somehow completely accurate. I love her to death, but the girl couldn’t ever carry a tune. Doesn’t stop her from singing. Loudly and often.”

“So?” he asked.

“Really?” I asked. “Right now?”

“Hey, I’m cooking for you. You could play for me.”

I never played or sang in front of people intentionally.

Somehow, though, I felt myself rolling off the side of the bed, then tiptoeing out of the bedroom, hoping the awkward walk didn't make me look completely ridiculous.

I grabbed my guitar then made my way back to find him sitting up against the headboard, waiting for me.

"That seems completely unnecessary," he said as I fetched a pair of panties out of my bag and slipped them on before getting on the bed.

"Said the person who won't be sitting cross-legged," I said as I got into position, my guitar on my lap.

I strummed for a long time, getting comfortable being watched and listened to. But as I transitioned to this sexy song about 'connecting the dots' with your lover, I started to sing, finding it oddly appropriate for us at that moment.

It wasn't until I was done that I looked up, finding him watching me, head tipped toward his shoulder, his eyes holding something that felt weighty and significant, but I wouldn't let myself consider what it might be.

"Wow," he said, shaking his head a little like he couldn't quite wrap his head around something.

"I could teach you," I said, feeling strange, like he might be able to tell I had that warm feeling in my chest, that swirly sensation in my belly.

"To play guitar?" he asked, brows raising.

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "It's not that hard," I added, going up on my knees to make my way to the head of the bed, then placing my most prized possession in his lap.

I spent the next few hours showing him the basics, and wasn't the least bit surprised with how quickly he started to pick it up.

"Hey, Finn?"

"Yeah?" he asked, looking over at me.

"You need to feed me now," I told him, placing a hand on my grumbling stomach.

“Sounds good,” he agreed, carefully placing the guitar down, then pulling on pants as I pulled on a tee, before we both made our way into the main area of the house. “I’ll cook. You—“

“Pick the music,” I filled in.

As the music filtered through the house and I stood there watching Finn cook dinner, a little voice in my head said that I wouldn’t mind a million more days just like this one.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Finn

After dinner, Lexy got another call from her sister, moving outside to talk to her as I cleaned up the baking ingredients, and put on the coffee as I waited for the cookies to finish in the oven.

I reached up for mugs, and my gaze found her watching me through the window.

Caught, she looked a little flushed, but offered me a shy smile before looking away.

And, fuck, I didn't have a name for that feeling that moved through me then. Like a thawing. Like light was breaking through a long, cold darkness. Like spring after an endless winter.

Whatever it was, I wanted more of it.

I had a sneaking suspicion that to get more of it, I would need to keep getting more of her.

Luckily enough, despite her more antisocial ways, she seemed perfectly content right where she was. With me.

I hadn't seen any withdrawal from her, any sign that she was uncomfortable, that she needed space.

And I'd been looking.

Maybe she, like me, just felt the rightness of this. The ease. The potential for something really fucking good.

She was making her way back inside as I pulled the chocolate chip cookies out, plump and just barely brown around the edges. My mom taught me to take them out as soon as there was a hint of gold around the edges if I wanted them to stay chewy as they cooled.

"Oh, God. That smells stupidly good," she said, coming up under my arm to lean over the stove and take a big sniff of them.

“No, let them cool,” I said, slapping her hand out of the way.

“Okay, *Mom*,” she grumbled, shooting me small eyes.

“They will fall apart if they don’t get a chance to cool for a minute,” I told her as I passed her a mug of coffee.

My phone beeped on the counter, and I reached for it absentmindedly.

“Damn,” I grumbled, looking at the text.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, watching me.

“I have to go to the club,” I told her. “My cousins got in earlier than expected.”

“Cousins?”

“Club cousins. Rune and Croft, they’re twins. We thought we had a few weeks still, but they came back early. They’re on their way to the club, and we gotta give them a big welcome home kinda thing,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, trying not to look and sound disappointed. She failed miserably.

And there was that feeling again.

“Know they’re not your scene, but you wanna come party for a bit?” I asked.

“Really? But I’m not in the club.”

“My female cousins will be there. And a bunch of the club women.”

“Club women,” she repeated. “Is that the new PC way of saying clubwhores?” she asked.

“No, actually. We tend to call them ‘club girls’ now. But I meant more like... the girlfriends and wives of the active brothers,” I told her, trying not to sound as uncomfortable as I said those words, knowing how they were going to come across.

Like I was calling her my girlfriend.

“Okay,” she said, nodding for emphasis. “I mean, if you’d rather go alone, that’s okay. I can entertain myself here.”

“Another night of *Forensic Files*?” I teased.

“Don’t knock it,” she said, giving me small eyes.

“I’d rather have you with me,” I told her, watching as this hard-ass woman’s eyes went all gooey. Fuck if it wasn’t one of the best things I’d seen in a long time.

“Yeah?” she asked, and it was maybe the most vulnerable I’d seen her be. “Okay,” she went on, banking that vulnerability down. “Now, what does one wear to a biker party?” she asked. “Aside from a bikini,” she clarified.

“Anything casual. Everyone is gonna be different. Some of my cousins look for any chance to dress up. Others are allergic to dresses or skirts. Some might come from work, so will be all corporate-looking. It doesn’t matter what you wear.”

“Okay,” she said, giving me a smile. “Well, I’m gonna go get dressed then. But I expect all of those cookies to be there when I get back,” she warned, glancing at them longingly for a second.

“Made ‘em for you,” I reminded her.

“Right. Like I didn’t see you eating that raw batter,” she said, clucking her tongue at me as she passed on her way into the bathroom.

I passed a few minutes later, seeing makeup spread all over my counter as she raised a mascara wand to her eye.

That was another sight I could get used to.

Seeing her there in the bathroom, getting ready, looking completely fucking comfortable being there.

“Hey,” she said a moment later, coming in the bedroom doorway with a lash curler held to her other eye. “I was thinking,” she started, watching me pull my jeans up my legs.

“About?”

“Could you maybe... invite Perish?” she asked. “I mean, I know he is technically still on parole. But if he is going to

prospect anyway, and you know, he's been really helpful..."

"No, that's a good idea," I agreed, nodding. "I'll shoot him a text."

"You don't have to ask your brother?"

Technically, yeah, I did.

But he was my brother as well as my president. I didn't mind giving his rules the middle finger from time to time.

"Nah," I said, watching a smirk toy with her lips. Like she knew I was bullshitting her, and that I didn't particularly care about the consequences of bringing a guest to the party.

"So, these cousins," she said as she came into the bedroom after doing her makeup and hair. "Which ones are these?" she asked.

"Rune and Croft are the sons of Roderick and Liv."

"Liv... Liv was a rival arms dealer, right?" she asked as she dug through the bags I'd packed for her.

"Yeah. And these are the twins who went down to Puerto Rico a while back... and haven't really been seen or heard from since. Aside from, I imagine, updates to their parents and siblings."

"And they still want to prospect? Even after being away and not really knowing what is going on with the club now?"

"It's hard to explain, but we kind of just... always know we are going to end up in the club. Eventually. No matter where our lives take us before we finally prospect."

"Like Nave," she said, grabbing a matching bra and panty set. Pink and lacy. I was looking forward to peeling them off of her later. "He traveled around for years, right?"

"Right," I agreed, feeling a little distracted as she laid out her clothes next to me, then started to pull up her shirt.

"No," she said, lips tipped up.

"No, what?" I asked, playing innocent.

“No, you are not messing up my hair and makeup that I just spent like half an hour on,” she told me.

“I mean, you shouldn’t have taken your shirt off in front of me if that was your plan,” I said as my hand moved up her body, closing over her breast.

Her breath caught and her eyes went all heavy-lidded.

“Finn,” she objected, but there was a plaintive sound to her voice. A neediness.

My fingers slid up her thigh, snagging the side of her panties, and starting to draw them down.

“You needed these off too, right?” I asked, watching her press her thighs closely together after the material slipped down between them.

“We can’t,” she objected, but as my fingers slipped between her thighs, I found her already wet for me.

“We can,” I objected, sliding my fingers into her pussy, feeling her walls tighten automatically, begging for the friction her body needed so badly right then.

I fucked her with my fingers until she was rocking against my palm, until her hands were on my shoulders, holding on for balance.

Reaching over with my free hand, I grabbed a condom out of the nightstand, dropping it on the bed, then freeing my cock.

“Luckily, I can think of a way to fuck you without fucking up your hair and makeup,” I told her, sliding my fingers out of her, so I could slip on the condom.

“Yeah?” she asked, voice soft and airy.

“Yeah,” I agreed, finished, and reaching for her hip. “Ride me,” I demanded, lowering onto my back on the mattress, so I could watch her as she climbed onto the bed, then moved to straddle me.

Reaching down between us, she stroked my cock a few times before holding it, so she could slide down on it.

“Fuck,” I groaned as she took me in.

I swear I couldn't think of a single thing in the world that felt as good as her pussy tight around my cock.

Her gaze slid to mine, molten with her desire, just sitting there with me buried deep for a moment before she started to move, started to ride me.

It was the best view in the world, watching her tits move, seeing her eyes go all hazy, as her moans filled the room, and her pussy became a vise grip around my cock.

And when she came, with my name crying from between her lips, I was pretty sure I never wanted to be with anyone else again. As fucking crazy as that was.

I came with her, knowing that if I didn't, I would break my promise not to fuck with her hair and makeup.

I folded up afterward, my arms going around her, holding on as we both came back down.

“Okay,” she declared a while later. “I don't have to kill you,” she told me. “But I do need to get dressed,” she added, lifting off of me, then climbing off the bed, gathering her clothes, and making her way into the bathroom.

Did I sit and watch her ass as she walked away? Fuck yeah, I did.

Then I finished getting myself dressed, loving the smell of her all over me, before making my way into the kitchen to take the cookies off of the tray.

“I was bringing them to you!” I told her when she appeared in the doorway, mouth open in mock outrage.

“Sure. Sure,” she said, taking the plate from me.

She looked good.

And I couldn't help but wonder, and really like the idea of, if she'd gone a little overboard getting ready because she wanted to look good for me around my friends.

I mean, I'd have taken the woman in a hole-riddled oversized tee and shorts.

But, fuck, did she look good in the black jumpsuit she'd chosen instead. It had a plunging V of a neckline between her breasts and short shorts that showed off a lot of leg.

"What?" she asked, watching me as I stared at her chest.

"How is that bra hidden?" I asked.

To that, she stuck a cookie between her teeth, then yanked one side of the shirt, exposing her breast.

"Fuck," I hissed, taking a deep breath. "Could you not flash me when we need to be heading out the door?"

"Just something to keep in mind tonight," she said with a shrug before finishing off a cookie, then reaching for another.

And I would be thinking about that.

One flick, and she would be naked save for her panties.

"These shoes suck, but I can't wear anything cute with the stupid bandages all over my feet.

She'd taken off the gauze wrap, and seemed to have opted for a couple giant Band-Aids instead.

"Believe me, babe, no one's gonna be looking at your feet," I said, gaze moving over her again.

Her eyes were warm when my gaze finally made it back to her face.

"Okay. One more cookie, and we are going," she said, snagging one off of the plate. "I'm bitter that I have to put a helmet over this hair," she added, reaching up to tousle it slightly.

"It's a short ride," I reminded her. "Won't get a chance to get too fucked up."

With that, we were off.

And I'd never experienced anything like the pride I felt as we made our way up the front path toward the clubhouse, my arm thrown over her shoulders.

Mine.

She was mine.

And I really fucking wanted to show her off to the guys.

“Wow, this place is packed already,” she said as I reached to pull open the door.

It was, too.

Clearly, Sully, Nave, and Callow had gotten word of the party, and took the news very seriously, making ten or twelve scantily-clad club girls head right over.

Most of the guys had shown up too—Dezi, Seth, Voss, Valen. Seth’s woman was home, though, likely hanging with the kids. I knew he’d cut out as soon as he said hi to the twins.

Some of the OG members of the club had shown up too, curious to see their nephews after so long.

Brooks, as usual, was doing too much.

Putting out ice and snacks, checking the levels of the liquor on the back bar. Shit that should have been the domain of the prospects.

Maybe he’d get more help around here when Rune and Croft were officially prospecting too. Being legacies, they knew what would be expected of them. And that their old man would get on their asses if they weren’t doing what they were supposed to.

“Want a drink?” I asked as I walked her over toward the bar, nodding at some of the guys as we passed.

“Sure,” she said, just as Fallon materialized out of nowhere in front of us.

“Ma said you had company,” he said, gaze moving over Lexy.

“Lex,” he said in that familiar, cocky way of his.

But this was Lexy he was dealing with.

She gave it right back.

“Fal,” she said, getting a small smirk out of him.

“How’s your head?” he asked, glancing at it, but she had her hair parted so it covered her stitches.

“Better than my feet,” she admitted, making his gaze move down.

“Right. Yeah. Heard about that. Did every... who the fuck is that?” he asked, looking behind me.

I glanced back, and there was Perish, swallowing up the whole door.

Voss saw him and made his way over.

“Perish,” I said. “He’s been a lot of help. Figured he deserved to come to a party since he’s prospecting soon.”

Fallon made a grunting noise, but nodded.

“How far out are the twins?” I asked.

“Fifteen, tops,” he said.

“Is Dad here?” I asked.

“Not yet. Think he’s heading over eventually, though. But you know what’s gonna happen if he gets to meet her before Ma does,” Fallon said, looking at Lexy.

“She can come,” I said, shrugging, glad that my arm was around Lexy, so I could feel her reaction to my brother’s insinuation. She had none.

“Yeah?” Fallon asked, looking at Lexy.

“Why couldn’t she?” she asked.

“Hmm,” Fallon said, annoyed he couldn’t start some shit. “Nice seeing you, Lex,” he said, then moved away to go talk to Perish.

“I feel like he wanted me to throw some sort of fit,” Lexy said.

“Yeah, that’s on-character for him.”

“I’m okay with meeting your parents,” she said. “But I understand if you don’t—“

“Already told my Ma about you,” I told her. “Ran into her at the food store today. Dunno where your head is at, but I am liking what we have here,” I added before I could lose my courage.

“I’m enjoying it, too,” she agreed.

“How about that drink?” I asked, moving behind the bar as she took a stool to get off of her feet.

The door opened over and over, bringing new people in each time. My female cousins, more of the OG members of the club, and a few other club girls.

Then, finally, Vance.

And Ferryn, my sister.

Her gaze moved around the clubhouse, then landed on me.

“Well, well, well, if it’s not my missing brother. How come I have to be at dinner all the time, but you get to skate by for weeks?” she asked.

“You got to be away from family dinner for years,” I reminded her with a smirk.

“Fair enough,” she said, shrugging it off. “Are you playing bartender tonight?”

“I’m getting Lexy a drink,” I said as I pushed it across the bar to her.

Ferryn’s gaze slid to Lexy, her head dipped to the side. Lexy just looked right back as she slowly sipped her drink.

“Kill anyone interesting lately?” she asked after a long moment, making Vance let out a choking laugh.

A slow smile spread across Ferryn’s face.

“Oh, I like her,” she said, looking over at me.

They might have continued to talk if the door hadn’t opened right then and ushered in the twins.

I was almost taken aback by how much they looked like their old man. Carbon fucking copies, even.

Tall, golden skin, dark eyes, strong frames.

Rune, like his father Roderick had two dimples.

Croft, had only one like his mom, Liv.

“Out of curiosity, did they spend the last few years... modeling?” Lexy asked, shaking her head as she looked from them to me.

Maybe I would have felt insecure about that if I didn’t agree that the fucks looked like movie stars or some shit.

“Sure... modeling,” Ferryn said in a tone that had me looking at her with curiosity. “That’s what they’ve been doing.”

But before I could question her about that, she was walking away to go say hi to them.

“You can go say hi. I’m fine here,” Lexy assured me as the twins seemed to get through most of their greetings.

“I’ll keep her company,” another voice said as my cousin Layna took a seat next to Lexy.

“Oh, great,” I grumbled, but moved away anyway.

“Oh, shit. Finn,” Rune said, reaching a hand out to me. “Long time,” he added.

“Yeah, your asses couldn’t drop in when you were in town?” I asked.

The twins shared a look before Rune shrugged. “We haven’t been back in town,” he admitted.

“In years?” I asked, dubious. They were a tight family. Them, their younger siblings, their parents, grandma, and aunts. They were a big, close family.

“Yeah, no. Our family came to see us. We... had shit going on,” Rune said.

“Shit,” I repeated, glancing over at Fallon, wondering how much—if anything—he knew about that ‘shit’ at this point.

One thing was for sure, it wouldn’t stay a secret for long. You didn’t get to be in the club and keep big secrets. Sure, people who had big histories in the criminal underbelly didn’t sit down and write down every job they’d ever done and every person they’d ever associated with. But the club needed to know the major players who might have an issue with you,

any skeletons in your closet that might come to haunt the present moment.

“Been busy, man,” Croft said, smile easy, but there was a harder look in his eyes than I’d expected. What I remembered about the twins was they were easy-going, jocular, popular in school, and very... carefree.

Whatever they’d been up to in Puerto Rico, they clearly hadn’t just been learning old family recipes and catching some sun.

“You ready to settle down back here now?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s time for a change,” Rune agreed. “Hope you got room for us.”

“The prospect room has plenty of space,” I said. “And Sutton is heading back to Texas soon, I hear,” I added, waving toward him.

“Sister chapter?” Croft asked.

“Yeah.”

“That’s three sisters then, right?” Rune asked, making it clearer how out of the loop they’d been. I had a feeling someone would be sitting them down in the near future to fill them in on all the finer details of the shit that had been going on over the most recent few years.

“Yeah. Golden Glades in Florida. Shady Valley in California. Then... fuck... I don’t know the name of the town in Texas,” I admitted, surprised that wasn’t more common knowledge. Or maybe it was, but I’d been too withdrawn to pay attention.

“There they are!” Kit said, appearing at my side with her pale purple hair, dressed in a lacy black dress. “I have been craving your mofongo for the past two years!” she added.

“Two years?” I asked as she kissed each of the twins on the cheek.

“Ari and I visited each of the states and territories,” Kit said, looking at me curiously. Maybe wondering if I hadn’t

watched their travel vlog channel. I hadn't. I never felt guilty about it until that moment.

"Oh, right, yeah," I said, like it had just skipped my mind as I made a mental note to catch up on at least some of their videos in the near future. Now that I think about it, it was probably fucked of me not to have kept tabs on them. More shit that fell away when I'd been so deeply in that hole.

"You got that homestead of yours set up yet?" Croft asked Kit.

"Enough," Kit said.

"Then we'll come over and cook for you once we settle in here."

"I'm holding you to that," Kit said, giving each of them another peck before moving away.

"Got a blonde at the bar peeping at you nonstop," Croft informed me, making me turn to look at Lexy.

"That's my girl. Lexy," I explained, surprised at how easily that came out.

"Yeah? Nice pull," Rune said. "Feel like we missed out on a lot of that. Coupling up," he added, his gaze moving around.

"Yeah, the guys have been busy. But Nave, Sully, Callow, and Brooks are all still single. Lots of partying to look forward to. I'll let you guys get started on it," I said, clamping each of them behind their shoulders, then moving back to Lexy.

"The girl with the purple hair..." Lexy said when I joined her again.

"Kit," I said.

"Kit. Kit and... Ariaiah."

"Ari," I said, nodding.

"The travelers," she guessed.

"Yep. On that topic, any interest on watching some travel vlogs with me?" I asked. "I mean, it's no *Forensic Files*," I teased.

“We can give it a try,” she said, nodding.

“Think we are gonna start on Puerto Rico,” I said, wondering if they captured the twins at all, or anything to do with what those guys had been up to for years. “So, you want a tour?” I asked as the party kicked up around us, and we both kind of just... watched it unfold rather than really participating.

“Yes,” she said, throwing back her drink. “I need to see that glass room on the roof.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lexy

Parties might not have been my thing, but this one at the clubhouse somehow felt different.

Maybe that was simply because these were all Finn's people. It felt like this was less of a party and more like a giant family gathering. Club girls aside, everyone seemed to know everyone, and they bounced around from group to group, smiling, laughing, teasing each other.

With some eavesdropping, I got to finally put some faces to names Finn had already told me about.

Niro, the former cage fighter. His girl, Andi. Who he'd been in love with since they were kids.

Layna, the professional gambler who seemed to con the twins into a game, money involved. Then wiped the floor with them effortlessly.

Luna, the bookworm, who had likely been dragged out of her house by her more outgoing cousins, who'd found a corner to hide herself in, flipping the pages of a giant book, and completely ignoring the craziness around her.

Willa, the very rich corporate woman, clearly dropping in from work in her tapered gray slacks and simple silk blouse a color of pink so pale it was almost white.

It almost felt a bit like a documentary, watching all these people interact, seeing which bonds were closer than others, who was more the life of the party, and who was reserved.

Maybe I was invested in them because I was becoming invested in Finn.

These were his people.

He loved them.

I wanted them to at least like me.

That said, I wasn't exactly disappointed when I was led away from the chaos of the party, and walked down a hallway full of doors to the room that was the giant addition I'd spied from the outside with big, thick walls and high-up windows. Almost something like a high school gym in style, but instead of a big, empty gleaming floored space, was something that resembled more of an army barracks.

Along the longest wall was a row of black bunk beds with white bedding. Six, in total. There were footlockers at the foot of each one and a row of four cabinets on another wall. Likely meant for storing belongings.

To the side was a bathroom with a center double sink vanity. Then to each side were rooms with toilets and stall showers.

"This place is gonna be full now," Finn said, looking at the beds. "Til Sutton leaves, at least."

"What happens when a new chapter opens up?" I asked, following him back into the hall where the 'patched' members of the club had their bedrooms. Not all of them, of course. There weren't enough. But Finn told me on the walk down them that some of the brothers who got wives and kids simply gave up their rooms, since they weren't around enough to use them anymore.

"Depends, I guess. When we opened Golden Glades, West, one of the brothers, went down there for a while. But with Shady Valley, three of the guys had spent so much time here that Fallon didn't feel like we needed to babysit them as they started their operation.

"I'm not sure what's gonna happen with the Texas chapter. Sutton has been here a long time, but his men all stayed back. He has a ranch there," Finn explained as we stood outside of a closed door to, I imagined, his bedroom. "So I guess he needed them to oversee all that."

"Why would a rancher need to become a biker?" I asked.

"Dunno if he needs to. But he wants to. He's located in a good position for imports and exports. And almost a halfway

point between the sister clubs, so the brothers who are traveling between them have a place to rest for a few days before getting back on the road.”

“Was Sutton a, you know, criminal before this?”

“From what I hear... there were some, you know, youthful indiscretions. And some family history of crime. Guess he’s comfortable with it.”

“Interesting,” I said. And it was. “Now, are you going to show me your room, or not?”

I had plenty of time to ask him about how outlaw biker clubs worked. I really wanted to see his room.

“Don’t get too excited,” he said, grimacing a little as he turned the knob. “Nothing exciting to be found in here.”

He was right about that.

If anything, the room was almost kind of bleak. Plain white walls. A full-sized black framed bed. A matching dresser and nightstand set. No art on the walls. No carpet.

This was a frat guy’s room.

It had none of the cozy vibes of his house.

“No wonder you don’t spend much time here,” I said, moving through to the bathroom.

“Yeah. Kinda never noticed before how depressing it is in here.”

“The lack of windows doesn’t help,” I said.

“Yeah, but some of the other guys actually put some work into their rooms. Guess shit went kinda dark for me before I even thought about doing it. Then...”

“You didn’t have the motivation,” I filled in, recalling that feeling. “So, what else do you have to show me?” I asked.

“The basement.”

“That sounded unnecessarily ominous,” I said, pleased.

I followed him back down the hall before going down the stairs to the basement.

There we found another barracks-style setup. A bunch of bunk beds, food storage, what looked like a giant safe door. And, odder than all of that, a ladder leading up.

“Back before the addition, the prospects used to sleep down here,” Finn told me. “But we also sometimes used it as a sort of safe room. That’s the purpose of it now, too,” he admitted.

That made sense, what with the food storage and all.

“Is there a bathroom?” I asked, glancing around.

“Over there,” he said, pointing to a very narrow door. “You can barely turn around in there, but it’s a bathroom.”

“And what’s the ladder for?” I asked.

“How’re your feet?” he asked instead of answering.

“I mean... they’re... okay,” I said. The cuts hadn’t been that big to begin with, and I was a relatively fast healer. They were kind of red and angry-looking still, but seemed to have grown together already. Sure, they kind of hurt with all this walking, but not enough to keep me from going up that ladder.

“You sure?”

“Shut up and take me up the ladder,” I demanded, getting a smile out of him before he moved in that direction, and started up.

“You coming?” he called when he neared the top, and pushed open a trap-style door.

“Was enjoying the view,” I said, shooting him a flirtatious smirk before grabbing hold of the rungs, and making slow progress up.

It was a lot taller than it looked from the floor, and my belly felt like it was bottoming out as my palms went a little sweaty.

But by then, I was about to poke my head through the open door.

“Oh!” I said, smile spreading as I realized why the ladder had been so steep.

Because we'd just gone from the basement... to the roof. The glass room on the roof, in particular.

"So, like, if something happened and you were in the safe room, you could see what is going on," I guessed, looking around at the lights of Navesink Bank.

"Exactly. This is DARPA glass."

"I don't know what that means."

"Government glass, I guess you could call it. Strong enough to withstand pretty much any kind of bullet," he said, knocking on it.

Now that he mentioned it, it really did look crazy thick.

"How often have you needed to, you know, lock down?"

"Not as often now as when I was a kid," Finn said. "But most of the moms took us up to Hailstorm instead of staying here."

Hailstorm. If I recalled correctly, that was the paramilitary camp up on the hill that I'd seen a hundred times, but I guess I figured it was some *actual* military base or something. What with the fences, dogs, and armed guards.

"What are you doing?" I asked as he closed the trap door, and slid the lock on it.

He didn't answer, just shot me a smirk as he walked up toward me, then moved behind me.

We stood that way for a long moment, his warmth at my back, looking out at the empty grounds, the party still contained within the walls of the clubhouse. It would spill out eventually, I was sure. But it was all quiet out there right now.

As if Finn's mind was on the same thing, his hands slid up my hips, then arms, before sliding just under the material covering my shoulders, and sliding it down.

With one movement, he had my entire jumpsuit falling down to my feet, leaving me standing there naked, save for my black panties.

I should have been shocked, outraged, freaking out.

We were in a *glass* room.

Anyone could walk out or drive past, look up, and see me.

Somehow, though, it wasn't any of those feelings that coursed through me.

Oh, no.

It was anticipation and an almost overpowering sort of desire.

Goosebumps rose across my skin even as a delicious heat spread from my core and outward.

My head fell back on Finn's shoulder.

His hands went back to my hips, sliding up the bare skin of my belly, then closing over my breasts, his thumbs moving across the hardened peaks, stoking the fire that was ravaging its way through my body as my ass ground back against his hardness.

Finn leaned in, his lips meeting my neck as his fingers and thumbs suddenly twisted each of my nipples hard, making a white-hot, pleasure-pain sensation move through me.

At my startled moan, that little rumbling sound I loved so much moved through Finn, and vibrated into me, making me need to press my thighs together to ease the ache there.

As if sensing it, though, one of Finn's hands slid down my belly, and pressed the wet material between my thighs.

He didn't tease me though, just yanked the material down, and started working my clit with his thumb as his fingers slipped down and slid inside of me.

"Fucking soaked," he hissed. "You love the idea of someone looking up and seeing me fingering your pussy, don't you?" he asked. I answered the only way I could, with a little whimper as his fingers fucked me faster and faster.

"Finn," I groaned. "I need—" "I started, then cut off as my breath caught.

"What do you need?" he asked, playing dumb even as what I needed was pressing against my ass.

“I need your cock,” I told him honestly.

This time, it was less of a grumble, and more of a growl that escaped Finn as his fingers slipped out of me.

Then he was grabbing me, turning me to face him.

His hand grabbed mine, pressing it between my thighs.

“Play with your pussy, so I can watch,” he demanded as his hands went to his pants, unfastening his button and zip as my fingers started to move, began to tease.

I watched him too as he freed his cock, then stroked it as he watched me, the muscles in his arm twitching as he worked himself faster and faster, his breath getting heavy, his chest heaving.

“Come over here,” he demanded, his intense gaze on me. “Come suck my cock,” he demanded, his hand holding the base and waiting for me to come to him, to lower to my knees in front of him.

And I did so happily, my pussy aching as I sucked him into my mouth, as I worked him as his hand held the back of my neck.

His hips rocked into my mouth, forcing me to take him deeper.

“That’s enough,” he said, yanking me back by my hair, then releasing me as he grabbed a condom out of his wallet, then slipped it on. “Up,” he demanded, reaching to help me back onto my feet, then turning me again, away from him, as he walked us close to the wall of glass.

His feet nudged mine a little wider.

Then his hand was on my shoulder, fingers digging in.

And then his cock was slamming inside of me, making a loud moan escape me.

It was right then we heard voices.

My body stiffened, gaze sliding around the darkened grounds.

But I saw no one.

“Huh,” the voice said, and I realized it was coming from below us.

Like below our feet.

On the ladder.

Right under the door Finn had been smart enough to lock.

I thought Finn would stay as still as me, his desire momentarily frozen.

But then he was pulling out, and slamming all the way back in, making a gasp escape me.

He was unrelenting.

Hard and deep thrusts that had my hands shooting out to hold onto the glass, so I didn't fly into it.

“Guess we gotta come back later,” the voice said. “Someone else is partying.”

Were they going to go back down, then go outside? Look up? Watch me get railed from behind by Finn?

I didn't know.

But, somehow, even the thought of that had my walls tightening around Finn's cock.

“Fuck, yeah,” Finn growled. “Squeeze my cock,” he said as his hand landed a playful slap to my ass. When it was met with a moan, he landed another. Harder.

“Fuck,” I whimpered, close. Already so close.

But Finn wouldn't go faster, wouldn't drive me to that edge more quickly. He just kept fucking me. Slow, but hard, and deep.

The need for release was a painful ache that had my moans starting to sound like cries.

Then I felt it, a deep spasm so deep it felt like it took ages before it spread, before it became an orgasm that overtook me completely, leaving me crying out even as my legs seemed to lose their strength.

Finn's arm anchored around my hips, holding himself buried inside of me as my upper body hinged forward, fingers nearly touching the ground.

Only then was he fucking me faster, driving me through one orgasm, and up toward another.

My moans and his groans mingled with the sounds of our bodies slamming together.

"There you go," he murmured as my walls started to tighten again. "This fucking perfect pussy," he murmured as another orgasm racked my system, this one stealing my breath, leaving me making a gasping sound as it worked through me.

But Finn still wasn't done with me, even though I felt so pleasure-soaked that tears sprang to my eyes.

"I can't," I whimpered as he let me lower down onto my hands and knees.

"Yes, you can," he said as he knelt behind me, reaching for me to pull me flush against his chest, then gently rocking into me, giving me a chance to work through the complicated emotions overtaking me.

It wasn't long before the pleasure was building yet again, and Finn's hand slid between my thighs, engaging my clit as I started to rock against his thrusts, the combination having me hurtling toward the edge faster than seemed possible.

"Oh, fuck, baby," he groaned as I came, my pussy pulsing around his cock. "That feels so fucking good," he said, getting more and more breathless as he got close.

Then, with a curse and a shudder, he was coming with me.

I couldn't tell you how long we sat just like that afterward, chests heaving, sweat drying, but my thighs were aching when he finally moved away, and I lowered down onto my ass.

Finn moved around, and I wasn't sure what he was doing until he came back with my panties and jumpsuit, a satisfied smile tugging at his lips.

"I can't move," I grumbled.

To that, he went down on his knees, gathering my panties in his hands, and sliding my feet in each leg hole, before slipping them into place.

I'd never had a man dress me before, but instead of finding it infantilizing, I found it unexpectedly sweet as he got my legs into my jumpsuit, then pulled me up to sit with him as he tugged the top part of the ensemble into place on my shoulders.

"I think they're properly arranged," I said with a laugh as he kept *readjusting* my tits.

"Hey, I know you wanted to make a good impression," he said, lips twitching. "My parents might show up at some point, remember?"

"Oh, God," I gasped, mouth falling open. "God, could they have... seen us?" I asked, hand going to my heart.

"No."

"You can't possibly know that."

"Didn't hear my dad's bike," he told me, shrugging.

"Okay. Good," I said, trying to exhale that anxiety. "But also, I really don't think your parents would be looking at my tits," I told him. "Do you think they're gone?" I asked, looking toward the door.

"Yeah, he probably took her to the prospect room," Finn said, going to the door, unlocking it, then pulling it open. His head disappeared in the hole for a moment, listening, before he came back up. "We're good. I'll go down first," he said. "It's a little nerve-racking if you're not used to it," he added. "This way, I can be under you if you slip."

With that, he was gone, and I waited until he was about halfway down before I followed suit.

If I thought the climb was bad, the descent was ten times worse. I don't think I took a proper breath until I felt Finn's hands at my waist.

"Go ahead. Let go," he said. "You're shaky," he added when I didn't immediately release the rungs. "I got you," he

added.

If there was one thing I knew for sure—both right then and in general—it was that I could trust Finn.

I released the rungs, his hands dug in, and he lifted me down to the ground, his arms staying around me for a moment.

“Ready to go back to the party?” he asked.

I wasn’t.

I wanted to stay alone with him forever.

“Yep,” I agreed, preparing myself for the festivities.

We stayed a few more hours, but his parents didn’t show.

And while I did want to meet them, I was glad I had more time before that came to pass.

My social battery was already too full. I felt a bit frazzled and overwhelmed. I wouldn’t have been at my best to meet them.

“You look like I feel,” Finn said, arm going around me, folding me into his side, and pressing a kiss to my temple. “You wanna go home?” he asked.

Home.

Not *my place*.

Home.

Somehow, it was really starting to feel just like that.

And, for the first time in my life, the idea of spending all my time with someone else didn’t fill me completely with dread.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lexy

The days following the clubhouse party all kind of blurred into some music-drenched, sex-tired, food-laden, blissfully happy blur.

Neither of us needed to be anywhere for those days, so we woke up early, shared coffee and breakfast. I taught him more about the guitar, singing as he started to play some songs.

We went to the record store.

We snuggled on the couch.

I learned how to cook and bake some basic things, though I openly admitted I liked it much better when he did all the work, and I could just sit there and eye-fuck him.

Then, yeah, there was a lot of that.

Fucking.

Well, to be honest, there was fucking, there was sex, there was lovemaking. All of it.

Embarrassing as it was to admit at my age, I don't think I ever really knew all three of those until Finn. Or known that I would crave all of them. Especially the latter of them. Because 'lovemaking' required a level of intimacy, of vulnerability that I never felt comfortable sharing with a man.

Finn was just... different.

I couldn't explain it. Not even to myself. And I'd been trying to work it out. When he had to go into the club for a while, or when he went to the grocery store, I would sit there in his house that was starting to feel a hell of a lot like my home as Perish kept dropping off CDs and records we'd requested, stare at the wall, and try to suss out why Finn was so different.

I came up with nothing concrete.

It was just a feeling. One I felt in my bones.

It was the sensation of being alone together with him. As comfortable with his presence as I was completely on my own.

Maybe that's all love was.

A feeling.

A knowing.

Beyond all logical thought.

Something unexplainable, yet undeniable.

"I'll be right back," Finn said, planting a silly, loud, smacking kiss to my lips on his way out the door in nothing but a pair of running shorts and shoes.

Looking out the window, I could see Sutton, the Texan, already waiting for him on the street, his arms up, hands behind his head, chest heaving a bit. He'd been running from the clubhouse, to Finn's house, and then the two of them would run for a while, and Finn would see Sutton off at the club before making his way back home to me.

He always came back covered in sweat, red in the face from the heat, and fucking euphoric. It almost made me want to take up running.

Almost.

But, you know, not quite.

Because sitting around in my pajamas and drinking coffee sounded a hell of a lot better to me.

Clearly, though, it was helping him.

I also didn't mind eye-fucking him when he came back. And maybe climbing in the shower with him.

I was just finishing washing up the dishes from breakfast when my phone buzzed on the island.

I figured it was just Lottie once again, but was surprised to find my boss's name on the screen.

I hadn't even thought about work in days.

You mind coming in to work today? Need to leave early. Not feeling great.

Guilt flooded my system as I remembered that it was Carl, a semi-retired older dude, who had been covering a lot of my work shifts since my forced vacation to recover.

And I was recovered.

I'd even dropped in to my doctor to get the stitches out of my head the day before.

I was fully capable of being back at work.

Then there I was, selfishly letting an old man pull my shifts, so that I could continue playing house with Finn.

I'll be right in.

I rushed through getting myself dressed, then left a note for Finn on the counter, telling him Carl had called me in, and that I would see him after work.

My car was now in Finn's driveway, now that days had passed with nothing scary going on at my house or here. We'd needed it to be able to go to the record or food store, and Perish had been happy to drop it off for us.

So I grabbed my keys, and made my way out.

It felt strange to drive that familiar road toward work. Considering it was a course I'd driven almost every day for many years, it was odd that it felt almost wrong to be doing it again.

When I got there, the small lot was mostly empty, save for the car I'd begun to know as the audiobook narrator and the van that belonged to a local death metal group that had changed their names so many times in the past year that I didn't even know what to call them anymore.

And, of course, Carl's vintage Dodge Charger from the sixties, its black paint and chrome in pristine condition.

My steps felt a bit heavy as I made my way through the lot and toward the door, finding no one behind the front desk.

Figuring maybe Carl was in the bathroom being sick, I went behind the desk, making a fresh pot of coffee, and starting to clean up the disaster that the desk had become with Carl and Andrew mostly manning it since I'd been gone.

I was nobody's neat freak, but there was chocolate stuck to the desk, and a pile of mail that included sensitive financial information, and could be grabbed by anyone who happened in the building.

By the time there was some space to actually rest my phone, the audiobook narrator was walking out.

She stopped short at seeing me, giving me a surprised smile.

"You're back!"

"I am. I was forced into a vacation," I admitted.

"It looks like it did you well," she said. "You're all glowy."

Glowy.

I waited until she was done to grab a mirror I kept in the drawer, checking out my face, making sure I wasn't, you know, *glowing*.

As in *with child*.

I was on the Pill, of course. And we'd been using condoms... almost all the time.

Shit.

Only *almost*.

I was never careless about that kinda thing, but I was also never as serious about someone as I was about Finn.

The thing was, I didn't get a monthly cycle. Not since I changed which Pill I was taking a few years back. I maybe got a few a year, so it wasn't like I would know I was late if that was the case.

Maybe I would take a quick stop at the pharmacy on the way home, grab a test, and take it. Just for the peace of mind. Then grab some extra condoms if it was negative.

I mean, it wasn't like I would be horribly upset if it was positive, not if Finn was the father. But I was hoping we weren't at that point yet, that we had more time alone together.

When another twenty or so minutes passed with no sign of Carl, I decided to move out from behind the desk, and go down the hall to the bathroom.

I mean, no one liked being bothered when they were having stomach issues, but I wanted to make sure he hadn't passed out or something in there.

I walked past the closed door of the first studio. Even with the thick soundproofing Carl had put up, you could hear the guitars, the drumbeat, and the screaming vocals of that metal band as they practiced a song that sounded like an ode to a serial killer.

On the door was a sheet of printer paper that they'd taped there, likely so their friends could show up to listen to their practice without walking into the wrong room.

Macchiato Murder was, apparently, their new band name. Which was better than their last one: *The Furious Fistfuckers*. And leaps and bounds better than their original name: *Syphilitic Scrotum*.

"Progress, boys, progress," I murmured to myself as I moved further down the hall. There at the end was the bathroom, but I didn't quite get there.

Because the door to the next studio was left slightly open.

And inside was a sight that had my heart dropping to my feet.

A crumpled form of a man over near the couch at the side of the room.

It wasn't like there was never any violence at the studio. Sometimes the bands came in drunk or high. And artists are known for their egos at times. Sometimes things got ugly and people got hurt. We'd needed to call the police more than a handful of times over the years.

It wasn't sheer panic that rose in my system right away, thinking someone got hurt, and their friends booked it out of there.

Serious? Sure. But not a first for me.

It wasn't until I saw the shoes—big, clunky, ancient Docs with a bunch of paint splatter on them from spray painting a wall outside of a concert venue once, that the panic surged through me.

Carl.

Had he... collapsed?

Had a heart attack?

Stroke?

He was old enough for either. Years of living hard and fast would have made it more likely than it was even for the average person.

Was that why he hadn't been feeling good? Had something been off with his heart or brain?

Guilt mingled with the panic, immediately thinking this was my fault, that working was too stressful for him these days, that he never would have collapsed if he hadn't been working for me.

"Carl," I gasped, rushing forward toward him, across the overlapping, multicolored carpets on the floor that helped reduce the noise in the studios.

It wasn't until I was right on top of him that I realized it wasn't that he'd collapsed. Or, perhaps, not *just* that he'd collapsed.

There was blood on the floor under him.

"Carl!" I cried again, lowering down as my gaze went to his chest, feeling a small amount of comfort at the steady rise and fall of his chest.

On the ground, he started moving, making a quiet groaning sound.

“Hey, you’re okay. You’re alright. Stay with me,” I said, fingers pressing into his neck, feeling for his pulse.

It seemed a little fast to me, but I thought that might make sense if he’d had a heart attack and hit his head on the way down.

Wait... no.

No.

He couldn’t have hit his head on the way down.

The blood was on the back of his head.

Maybe he fell backward, then rolled a bit as he started to come to again?

“You’re gonna be okay,” I assured him, but the hitch in my voice couldn’t have sounded too soothing right then. “I’m gonna call an ambu—“ I said, reaching back for my pocket, before remembering that my phone was on the spot I’d cleared for it on the desk.

Damnit.

It was then that Carl’s eyes fluttered open, looking at me with confused eyes.

“Lex?” he asked, voice groggy.

“Yeah, it’s me. You texted me, remember? Said you weren’t feeling well. Think this is a little bit more than *not well*, old man,” I said, trying to put some levity on the situation as my heart fluttered.

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“Ah, yeah, it is,” I said. “I have to go get my—“

“I didn’t...” he said, squinting at me, trying to put his thoughts together. “I don’t—“

It was right then that a shock of understanding shot through me.

Because, no. He didn’t. He almost never texted. He would read texts, but he rarely responded via text. He hated texting.

Those damned tiny buttons and my big sausage fingers, I'd heard him say dozens of times when one of us would complain about him always calling instead of shooting us a text.

And when he did manage to text on occasion, it was riddled with typos.

The text I'd gotten today was perfect. Even the capitalization and punctuation.

There was no way Carl had sent me that text.

And if he hadn't texted me, he hadn't summoned me.

Someone else had.

Using his phone.

As if sensing my finally putting it together, there was a low laugh behind me.

Carl's eyes widened as his gaze focused behind my shoulder.

I didn't turn to look.

There was no reason to.

Someone was there.

Someone was there, and I knew down to my bones that it was the same man who'd attacked me in the woods, who'd broken into my home.

Looking would do nothing but waste precious time.

Instead, I flew to my feet, and made a mad dash toward the raised platform where a musician's drum set would be placed.

It was empty now.

Nothing to help me on it.

But I knew these rooms like the back of my hand.

And right on the other side, lined up against the wall, were mic stands.

Not the greatest weapon in the world, but something. Something *long* that would keep my attacker at a distance.

I didn't have to fight him off, not really. I just had to keep him far enough away from me to get to the door.

They didn't lock for safety reasons, so I would only need to rip it open and burst into the room next door. Where Macchiato Murder was practicing.

If there was one thing I knew about death metal guys, with their long hair, tattoos, piercings, and generally scary exteriors and music, it was that they were gentle giants. It was like the music purged all of their ugly, leaving big puppy dogs with hearts of gold underneath.

They would protect me.

I just had to get to them.

Instinct said to scream.

But common sense said we soundproofed these rooms so you *couldn't* hear anyone screaming through them. Hence why I couldn't hear Macchiato Murder, despite knowing the lead singer was probably screaming loud enough into the mic to make the small blood vessels in his vocal cords rupture.

It wasn't uncommon for a metal singer to leave the studio saying they wanted to go get a beer to wash down the taste of blood.

No one would hear me scream for help.

Besides, I didn't want to give this bastard the satisfaction.

My heart leaped up into my throat as my foot caught the edge of the stage funny, sending me flying forward.

I barely had time to throw my hands outward to brace my fall, the impact sending pain shooting up through my shoulders and through my knees.

"Fuck," I hissed, trying to scramble up, or at the very least forward.

But that low, dark chuckle was right behind me again.

No, not just behind me.

Over me.

Even as that thought formed, I felt a hand grab a handful of my hair, yanking back hard enough for the pain across my scalp to send tears flooding my eyes.

I blinked at them hard, trying still to move forward.

But his hand just yanked harder, pulling my head violently to the side.

“Lex!” Carl called, making my gaze shoot over to where he was trying to get to his feet, but kept stumbling forward.

How hard had he been hit?

Hard enough for a major concussion? Or worse?

He had to stay down.

“No,” I said, my voice sounding tinny and small.

“Yes,” the man behind me growled as his hand released me to try to grab my shoulder instead.

I shrugged it down, then threw myself onto my back, knees to chest, kicking out with everything in me.

“I wasn’t talking to you, asshole,” I growled, pleased at how he howled as my feet struck true to his shins. But when I tried to kick him again, his hands grabbed one of my ankles, fingers digging in hard enough to leave bruises.

“Knew I’d see you again,” he said, giving me a sick smile as I finally got a look at this fuck’s face.

I’d been right.

He had a big nose, dominating his face that was otherwise unremarkable. Thin lips, bushy brows, plain brown eyes.

I felt a small surge of satisfaction at the way his nose had a bump now. Likely thanks to me and my glass sugar container.

I stared, trying to commit his face to memory as best as possible. I was going to walk away from this, damnit. And when I did, I was going to tell someone who knew how to draw exactly what he looked like.

Then the cops or Finn or the whole fucking biker club could decide what kind of justice I deserved.

“You have no fucking idea how much trouble you’re in,” I said, voice strong and firm. Because I knew it down to my bones.

Finn would make him pay for this.

And I would be completely okay with that.

“No neighbors to save you now,” he said, grabbing my other ankle, and starting to drag me across the floor.

My shirt slid up in the back, and the rugs burned across my skin, the pain only managing to ratchet up my anger.

I had to focus through it, use it to fuel me, not overpower me.

I knew how this was going to go.

He wanted to hurt me.

And he wanted to rape me.

He wanted to finish what got cut short in the woods.

So I had time.

Time to figure out how to get away.

If nothing else, he’d struggle to get me undressed.

I hadn’t picked an easy to flick off jumpsuit today. But a pair of vintage jean shorts that were a little roomy, enough so that I’d needed to put on...

A belt.

I had on a belt.

The only one Finn had packed for me. With this bulky-ass buckle that was so big that it dug into my belly when I sat down, so I almost never wore it.

I wiggled my legs, trying to distract him, to keep him somewhat distracted as my hands rushed toward my belt, working the clasps free.

But I couldn’t pull it out of the loops while being dragged.

So I paused, waiting until he got me where he wanted me.

Close to poor Carl, who was sweating and green, the room likely spinning each time he tried to get up, to get to me, to help me.

What was his plan here? To rape me close to my boss? My real father figure? Was he that kind of sick?

Probably.

If there was one thing I knew from my *Forensic Files* reruns, it was there was no end to the depths of depravity human beings were capable of. Just when you think you've heard the worst of it, someone comes along with something infinitely more horrific.

I waited until he released my ankles, flattening my feet on the ground, so I could bridge my hips upward, giving me the room to free the belt.

He was fussing with his own button and fly, struggling when he caught his shirt inside of the teeth, and letting out a frustrated grumble.

I didn't pause to think about it.

I just wrapped the leather around my hand, then struck out with everything I had.

The buckle end cracked against his cheek, catching him completely off-guard, making him cry out and stumble backward, his hand going to his cheek.

The shock only lasted a second.

Then his eyes were looking for me, filled with dark promise.

You'll pay for that, bitch.

But I was quick, scrambling back to provide enough distance to get to my feet.

Then I swung out again, this time with even more momentum.

The buckle landed lower than I'd intended, though, catching him in the throat instead of the face, making him choke and cough.

When I cocked my arm to hit him a third time, though, his arm shot out, hand grabbing the belt.

He yanked hard, giving me no choice but to release the belt, or allow him to drag me forward by it.

Now he had another weapon to use against me.

And even more anger toward me.

His smile was twisted as he held the belt between his hands, snapping it.

I could read his thoughts, could see his intentions.

To wrap that around my throat, choking me, silencing me, as he assaulted me from behind.

And no.

No, damnit.

I'd backed myself into a corner, so my only choice was to pick which side to rush past him on.

I decided for his left, knowing his right was his dominant.

With that, I said a silent prayer, and ran with everything in me.

My shoulder rammed into him, sending him back a step.

He took a page out of my book then, striking out with the belt. The sting of it across my back had me biting into my lip to keep my cries in.

But I didn't stop.

I didn't slow.

I ran to that door like my life depended on it. Because it did. Carl's did as well.

I yanked it over and flew into the hall, rushing to the door next door, and all but throwing myself into it.

I stumbled inward, falling to my knees on the carpet as the ear-splitting music slowed, then suddenly stopped.

"Help," I gasped, stabbing a finger toward the wall of the room next door.

There was a second of stunned inaction from the band. Just kids, really. Late teens or very early twenties.

But then the drummer was rushing to his feet as the bass player unplugged.

The singer was already running across the room, the mic stand I'd been planning to use as a weapon in his hand.

"You okay?" a female voice said, making me turn to look up at the girl standing over me.

Even the smallest of bands had their groupies.

Macchiato Murder was no exception.

This girl looked all of eighteen or nineteen, decked out in full-on goth, complete with a corset and long skirt, despite it being the hottest part of the summer.

"Yeah," I gasped, trying to catch my breath. "Can I use your phone?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, holding it out to me.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

"I'm okay," I said, trying to remember Finn's number, then stabbing it into her keypad, and waiting on bated breath.

But... nothing.

His voicemail.

"Damn it," I hissed, handing it back to her, then climbing off the ground.

It was then that the drummer came back in the room. "He ran off out the back," he explained. "Bryce is chasing him."

Bryce.

An unexpected name for a hero.

"Is Carl okay?" I asked, already making my way to the door to check for myself.

"He needs to go to the hospital," the drummer said.

"Yeah, I—" I started.

But then I heard it.

The rumble of a bike.

Close.

It could have been anyone.

But somehow, I knew.

I knew it was him.

I changed directions, rushing toward the front of the studio as the engine cut out front.

I flew out of the front door, the sun blinding me as Finn turned.

The smile that had been forming fell as he looked at me.

“What happened?” he asked, rushing forward.

“He was here. He was who texted me. He hurt Carl,” I said, the words coming out between gasping breaths.

“Okay. Alright,” he said, reaching for me, trying to pull me to his chest.

“Carl needs to go to the hospital,” I insisted.

“Okay,” he said, sensing my desperation.

He took my hand and let me lead him inside.

“Where is he?” he asked.

“In the rehearsal room,” I said.

“No. The guy,” he clarified.

“He ran. Bryce is chasing him.”

“Bryce,” Finn repeated as we made our way into the room I’d left Carl alone in.

“The singer,” I explained, knowing I was only giving him crumbs, but I was too worried about Carl to care.

“I called the cops,” the goth girl told me as I passed.

I felt myself tense, but Finn’s hand squeezed mine, a silent reassurance that it was okay.

“You’re gonna be okay, Carl,” I said, surprised when tears pricked my eyes as I reached for him. “We’re gonna get you help.”

“I’m okay,” he insisted, but his eyes were squeezed shut. “Not my first concussion,” he added. “Got whacked in the head by the bassist of Sugar Loaf,” he added.

“Sugar Loaf,” the drummer scoffed.

“Who are you to judge, Syphilitic Scrotum?” Carl asked, making a smile tug at my lips. He might not have been doing great, but I was sure he was going to be okay.

“It’s Macchiato Murder now,” I reminded Carl. “And thank God they were here, or you and I would not be okay right now,” I told him.

“Bastard came outta nowhere,” Carl snarled.

“I know,” I assured him. “I should have... thought to tell you,” I said. “He came to my house a while ago too. It’s the same guy who attacked me in the woods.”

Carl’s jaw tightened at that.

“He needs to pay,” he said, voice low, just for the two of us.

The singer, Bryce, rushed back into the room then, and Finn moved away from me to talk to him.

“See that guy over there?” I asked.

“The biker?” Carl asked, likely having clocked Finn’s cut.

“Yeah.”

“He yours?” Carl asked.

My heart swelled at that wording.

“Yes,” I said.

“A Henchmen,” he said, nodding, then wincing as, I imagine, the world spun. “Yeah, I bet this fuck is gonna pay then,” Carl said.

The police officer rushed in a moment later, wanting to talk to everyone. Eventually, the paramedics took Carl to the

hospital.

I wanted to go with him, but the cops had too many questions for me.

“We’ll go see him later,” Finn promised me. “They will need to do scans and shit first anyway,” he reminded me.

“I was so stupid,” I spat, watching the cops talk to the musicians, all of whom seemed jazzed up, running on adrenaline from the event. It was probably the most exciting thing that would ever happen to them.

“You weren’t stupid,” he assured me.

“I should have known it wasn’t him who texted me,” I said.

“You had no reason to think it was a trap,” he insisted, hand touching my back.

I guess I stiffened, because he looked down at me, then his brows furrowed before he was moving behind me, and yanking up the back of my shirt.

“The fuck?” he whispered, his fingers touching the skin of my back.

“Is it all carpet burned?” I asked.

“Baby, you have a fucking welt,” he said as his fingers glided over it, whisper-soft, but I still felt the sting of pain.

“Oh, the belt,” I said, nodding.

I guess the kids weren’t the only ones running on adrenaline, because that pain had been numb until Finn brought my attention to it.

“Motherfucker,” Finn seethed as he pulled my shirt back down. “He’s gonna pay for that.”

“I know,” I agreed, leaning my head into his shoulder when he moved beside me again.

About an hour later, Finn and I were walking around the studio, making sure no one was around, then putting a note on the door, and locking up for the day.

I was eager to visit with Carl, who'd been brought up to a room for observation by the time we got there. But I was glad to find he was in good spirits—chatting up the nurses, and conning his roommate's visitor into grabbing him several pudding cups down at the cafeteria.

"I forgot how good these things are," he said, pointing at his half-eaten third cup with his spoon.

We ended up visiting for a few hours, filling him in on the goings-on because Finn insisted it was safer for everyone involved.

"You'll take care of my girl?" Carl asked when we were getting ready to leave, shaking Finn's hand.

"You can trust me with her," Finn insisted, making my belly flutter.

"I'll come visit tomorrow," I promised, kissing him on the temple.

"You okay?" Finn asked as we walked back down to the elevator.

"Yeah," I said, exhaling hard.

"Come on," Finn said, brow raised. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not. I'm... okay. It could have been so much worse. I'm just... exhausted," I admitted. "And hungry."

"That's my girl," he said, beaming down at me.

So then we went home.

And he fed me.

And I fell into a dreamless sleep in his arms, safe in the knowledge that once we got some rest, he was going to move heaven and fucking Earth to find the man who'd attacked me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Finn

There hadn't been time for rage when I'd shown up right after the attack.

There'd been too much to do, too much to handle, too many facts to sort out.

And, of course, Lexy to look after.

It wasn't until she was curled into my body, fed, safe, and content, that it started to creep up on me.

I'd been angry before, pissed that people fucked with my family, with my club. Somehow, though, all of that paled in comparison to the fire that burned through me, igniting the lighter fluid that flowed through my veins, until I could barely think straight, until my fists were curled so tightly that my bones ached.

I slipped out of bed slowly, barely rousing the exhausted Lexy.

I closed the door before reaching for my phone.

It wasn't more than fifteen minutes later before I saw a series of headlights pulling into my driveway.

I made my way to the door, pulling it open, and letting them in.

Not my brothers.

No.

I'd called in the girls for this one.

Hope, Layna, Violet, Danny, and—because I wanted the big guns around when it came to taking care of Lexy when I couldn't do it for myself—Ferryn.

If you wanted a bodyguard for someone close to you, you couldn't do any better than someone with her kill count.

“Is she okay?” Layna asked, coming in with several boxes of pizza, and a reassuring bulge by her hip.

“She’s sleeping. I think it will sink in little by little.”

“She wasn’t hurt, right?” Danny asked.

Since she was here, and I knew my brother was at the club, that likely meant that my parents were at their house, watching the kids.

“She’s got a nasty welt on her back, but she’s okay other than that.”

“And her boss?” Layna asked.

“Concussion. He’s a tough old guy. He’ll be alright too. But he’s safe at the hospital for now.”

“I can’t believe this fuck has gotten his hands on her three times already,” Ferryn said, jaw tight.

“Yeah, he’s not gonna get another chance,” I said, voice tight.

“You have something to go on now?” Hope asked.

“A little something,” I told them.

The kid who’d chased him down, Bryce, said he’d lost the guy after the main parking lot.

And that parking lot had a shit-ton of cameras.

Junior would get me a feed.

Then, hopefully, a direction.

Maybe a plate.

A plate would mean an address.

And then I would finally get this motherfucker.

“Alright. Well, go get him,” Ferryn said, nodding.

“Don’t worry about Lexy. She’s safe with us,” Layna added.

“I know. That’s why I called you guys.”

Plus, I figured she might be more comfortable waking up to the girls all through the house, rather than the guys. Even though, objectively, she might have known the guys better.

“Go on. Go get the asshole,” Ferryn said, giving me a nod, the darkness in her eyes saying she knew what I was going to do. What I had to do. “I could do it,” she said as she followed me to the door, voice low. “Done it hundreds of times before,” she added.

No, I didn’t know anyone else with the kill count like Ferryn had. But that didn’t mean I hadn’t ever taken a life myself.

Sure, this would be a bit more up-close-and-personal than usual. But I was okay with that. That felt right. For what that bastard did to Lexy. For what he *wanted* to do to her.

“I got this,” I assured her. “But thanks.”

With that, I headed out, making my way to the clubhouse first, wanting weapons and to talk to my brother about my plans. He’d be fine with it. But I did need to run it past him.

Turns out, he was waiting for me just a few feet inside the door. Arms crossed, jaw tight.

He already knew.

Danny, I was sure, had given him the lowdown from my sister, who’d gotten it from me.

“I’m going with you,” he said.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“You have kids at home. You should be with them.”

“Ma and Dad are with them. They’re fine. You need backup.”

“I don’t even know where I’m going. Not yet.”

“And if it turns out you don’t end up at this guy’s house, but a clubhouse for this whole crew? Barely made it out last time.”

“I’ll be prepared this time.”

“This isn’t up for discussion. I’m your president. I’m going. End of story.”

It was useless to fight with Fallon. He was always going to get his way.

“I also called Perish.”

“What? Why? He’s still on parole.”

“Not as of this morning.”

“Christ. Getting him right back into it, huh?” I asked.

“If I want someone watching my back, it’s a guy who could easily be mistaken for a wall,” Fallon said, shrugging.

“I need to see Junior first. Probably got hours of sitting around to do still. I’ll call you when it’s time.”

“Yeah, like I fucking trust you,” he said, smirking, following me as I went to raid our supply of weapons.

By the time we were strapped up, Perish was waiting for us in the common room.

After piling into the club’s SUV, we made our way to Junior’s warehouse apartment where I leaned on the buzzer until he finally let us up.

I felt bad when we walked in to find him still pulling on a shirt, and a bleary-eyed Shale wearing nothing but one of Junior’s tees.

“I’m assuming this is important,” Junior said, exhaling hard.

“She was attacked again,” I told him, watching his posture straighten. “In her studio. One of the kids who was there practicing chased the guy down. Said he lost him after the big parking lot.”

“The big parking lot,” he repeated, already walking toward his desk. “There are cameras everywhere there,” he said.

“Exactly why we’re here.”

“You’re enormous,” Shale declared, and I turned to watch her staring up at Perish. “I mean... Junior is huge. You’re a continent.”

To that, Perish smirked down at her.

“You’re the coffee girl.”

“The coffee girl. Quite the legacy I have. But, yes, I’m the coffee girl. You guys are gonna need some, right?” she asked, already turning to make her way to the kitchen in the open space.

“Oh, hey, bud,” Perish said, making me turn to look at what he was looking at.

And there it was.

A pittie puppy, lazily climbing out of its bed with a long stretch, big yawn and all.

“That’s Lucy,” Shale called. “A gift from Andres Alcazar,” she added, sounding amused by that.

“Hey, girl,” Perish said, dropping to a squat as Lucy walked over to him, tail wagging hard, sniffing him, then falling over on her back for scratches. “You’re the prettiest girl in the world, aren’t you?” he asked, cooing at her in a voice a man who looked like he did shouldn’t be capable of.

My gaze shot to Fallon, and his bemused expression matched what I was feeling.

Eventually, we accepted coffee from Shale, then sat, listening to the occasional click of Junior’s mouse or tap of keys.

“She wasn’t wrong about the nose,” Junior mumbled to himself.

“You found him?” I asked, moving across the room to look over his shoulder.

He froze the frame, and there he was.

Eyes wide.

Mouth open.

“Is the picture clear enough to use fucking facial recognition or anything?”

“Won’t need it,” Junior said, skipping to another camera feed, this one catching the guy rushing up to a black sedan. “Got plates,” he said, clicking the space bar to freeze the screen.

And there it was.

The fucker’s license plate.

I doubted he was smart enough to have fakes on.

“How long until you can track him down from that?”

“Not as long as you’d think.”

Turning back, I saw Perish on the couch next to Shale, Lucy curled up on his lap, fast asleep again, what looked like a smile on her face.

It was less than an hour later when Junior had a rap sheet on his screen.

“Got away with sexual assault twice,” Junior hissed. “Fucking useless system we have,” he added to himself.

“Do you have an address?” I asked.

“Last one was a halfway house. But that doesn’t look recent.”

“Known associates?” Fallon asked.

“Older brother... has a list of priors for a bunch of automotive crimes. Figure he’s the link to the rest of the crew.”

“Give us a direction,” I demanded.

Not fifteen minutes later, we were rolling up to the home of Ty Taggert, older brother to actual and attempted rapist Trey Taggert.

There were three cars in the drive of the rundown ranch, the lawn calf-high, and the weeds growing as wildly as they pleased. We were kicking up dandelion seeds the whole walk up.

Perish took the back, Fallon and I the front.

Fallon reached for the door with his hand holding his gun, and mouthed to me.

One. Two. Three.

With a surge of adrenaline, I flew in the front room, finding four guys sitting around on the couches, drinking beer, and playing video games.

They didn't have time to reach for weapons, if they even had them while they were lounging around.

"The fuck?" Ty exploded as he flew up out of his seat.

The two closest to the back door tried to make a break for it, only to run into Perish.

"Remember me, asshole?" I growled, slamming my fist into Ty's face. The crack was one of the most satisfying sounds I'd ever heard.

"Fucking told you we were targeting the wrong people," one of the guys Perish was towering over cried.

"Yeah," the other one agreed, clearly the squeaky wheels of their operation. "Fucking useless bitches, sending us after people like this."

Bitches?

What bitches?

The quick sideways glance Fallon shot me said he was contemplating the same question.

"Perish," Fallon said, looking over at him while keeping his gun trained on the guy next to Ty. "Why don't you take one of your new friends into the back room for some interrogation?" he asked, moving his gun to the guy Perish didn't immediately reach for, no questions asked.

"The bitches," he whispered as Perish passed, getting a curt nod from the giant. "Get your ass over on the couch too," he demanded of the other guy who looked like he was seconds away from pissing his pants.

"Now, my brother here has some questions about your shithead brother," Fallon said, glancing at Ty.

“That motherfucker,” Ty hissed, jaw ticking he was clenching it so tight. “The fuck he do now?”

“Maybe having a rapist on your crew wasn’t the smartest idea. Especially one with stalker tendencies,” I growled.

To that, Ty let out a groan, his chin going to his chest, head shaking.

“Claimed it was false accusations,” he grumbled to himself.

“They always fucking do,” I snarled. “Where is he?”

Ty’s gaze slid upward, and there was knowing in his eyes. The thing was, he didn’t seem torn up about his brother’s fate.

“Parents’ place,” Ty said with a sigh, then rattled off the address.

There was a roar from the back room, then some pleading, and eventually, crying.

Before Perish came back out, dragging the guy by the neck of his shirt back out with him. Bloodied and bruised, and definitely crying.

“The bitches,” Perish said, tossing the guy forward, making him slam down on the coffee table. “Mandy and Kerri.”

“Mandy and Kerri,” I repeated, the names ringing a bell, but it took a moment for my memory to jog. The girls at the bar. The ones Lottie had made friends with. They’d all come back to the clubhouse to party.

It seemed like they were hooked up with this crew, feeding information about people at parties who might have some cash or guns on them. Or at the very least, drive nice cars.

Fallon read the realization on my face and gave me a nod.

“Here’s how this is gonna go,” he said to the crew. “You have one hour to get your sorry asses out of my fucking town,” he said, and there was steel under his words. “My friend is gonna make sure you do,” he said, jerking his chin toward Perish. “And if I get word that you didn’t, or I don’t get word

at all,” he added, making it clear that nothing should happen to Perish. “Then I will bring the weight of my entire fucking organization down on your heads. And, believe me, you don’t want that to happen.”

“We’ll go,” Ty said, voice rough, but resigned. While his partners nodded and sniffled.

“Yeah, you will,” Fallon said.

I saw it the second before it happened.

His finger going to the trigger, then pulling.

I swear I watched in slow motion as the bullet sliced through the air, then lodged in Ty’s hand. Blood erupted with the man’s yells.

“Thieves don’t get off Scot-free around here. Now get fucking packing.”

With that, he gave Perish a nod, then handed him his gun, even though I knew he had at least three on him.

And we were gone.

“Should we be leaving him here alone?” I asked. We were a crew. We never acted alone. Especially if we were outnumbered.

“I’m sending Nave and Sully over too,” he said, already on his phone to do just that. “Tell me about Mandy and Kerri,” he demanded as we got into the SUV.

“The night of the attack, Lexy and Lottie went to Redemption.”

“Telling me shit I know,” he said, pulling out of the street.

“Lottie had her friends, but she also made friends with two new girls at the club. Mandy and Kerri.”

“The fuck we gonna do about the girls?” he mumbled to himself, since we didn’t fuck with women. Not even when they had it coming.

“Could send the girls to scare them,” I said, shrugging. I doubted they needed to be hurt, just scared, just reminded not

to fuck with a bunch of criminals. “Let them know there is shit to fear. If not from us, then from the other crews.”

“True,” he said, sighing as he made his way through town, looking for Ty’s brother, Trey.

“Hey,” I said when he cut the headlights and parked. “I wanna do this alone,” I said, looking over at him.

“Finn, I—“

“I get it. It’s your job to look after me. But I’m not a fucking kid anymore,” I reminded him.

“Ma will skin me alive if something happened to you because I stayed in the car.”

“So stand outside,” I said, shrugging. “But I want to do this by myself. For Lexy,” I added.

To that, he sighed.

“Fine. But if shit sounds sideways, I’m coming in.”

“Fine,” I agreed.

With that, we fell silent as we approached the house.

It was a small cape that had definitely seen better days. Likely when the parents were still alive. Now, it was in worse shape than Ty’s place, which was a wreck.

Inside, a TV was playing, a cheesy, excessive laugh track running every minute or two.

I ducked down low under the front window, then made my way up the cement front steps, before reaching for the door knob, glad when I felt it turn in my hand.

I gave my brother a nod, then sucked in a deep breath.

I closed my eyes for a long second, remembering the look of Lexy in that field, of the aftermath when I saw her at work, then pulling the glass out of her feet, and, finally, the aftermath at the studio, when I’d shown up just to see her, just because I’d missed her, and found her scared and worried with a nasty-ass welt on her back from this fucker.

When the rage was boiling through my veins again, I yanked the door open, and charged inside.

To find the fucker on his cracked leather couch, holding a bag of frozen peas to his throat.

Lexy had mentioned whipping him with the belt before he'd taken it from her then used it against her. Guess he was hurting because of it.

Good.

He was about to be hurting a whole fuckuva lot more than that.

His head whipped over, eyes uncomprehending for a second before recognition hit.

“You,” he said, jumping to his feet.

“Yeah, me, fucker. She told you that you were in trouble,” I said, smiling as my hand curled into a fist. I wasn't going to kill him fast and easy. I wanted him to be hurt first. To be terrified. To know a hint of what he'd done to Lexy. Then and only then would I end his sorry life. “Think she slightly undersold how much,” I added, tucking my gun away, and charging forward.

It was strange how time stretched and shrank at the same time. How hours seemed to pass, but also merely seconds.

I guess that was the adrenaline as my hands cracked into his jaw, his nose, as my hand grabbed his hand and twisted until I heard a crack followed by a howl of pain.

“She's not worth this,” he howled to himself as he was on all fours on the floor, blood dripping into his filthy carpet.

“That's where you're wrong,” I said, kicking him hard in the stomach. “She's worth all of this,” I said, reaching for my gun as my chest heaved. “And more,” I added, letting my finger slide to the trigger, then pulling.

The silencer had it letting out a pop that the neighbors wouldn't hear.

And I stood there, looking down at the body of the man who'd hurt the woman who'd begun to mean a lot to me. Everything to me.

A woman that, yes, I'd been steadily falling in love with since the fucking moment I met her.

"Hey," Fallon said, hand touching my shoulder, shocking me out of my swirling thoughts. "You okay?" he asked, making me turn my head to look at him.

"Yeah. He'll never put a hand on her again," I said.

"Nope," he agreed.

"Are we leaving him here?" I asked.

"Depends. He scratch you?"

"No. But..." I said, holding up my hand, showing him my fists. Two of my knuckles had busted open.

To that, Fallon sighed.

"It's gonna be a long night," I said, looking down at not only the body that would need to be handled, but the carpet as well.

"For the prospects, yeah," Fallon said with a wicked little grin. "The twins gotta prove their worth, after all," he said, turning, then making his way out of the house.

We drove back to the clubhouse where Fallon tracked down all the prospects, save for Perish who'd already shown his willingness to do what needs to be done tonight.

"Don't think I need to remind you of this," Fallon said, but shook his head, "but according to the true crime shit Danny likes to watch, everyone gets fucked over by their phone pings, so cell phones stay here. Repo has a car at his garage all ready to go for this kind of shit. Once you're done, detail the shit out of it, take off the plates, put on the ones in the console, and drive it to the scrap yard," he said, nodding at Nave, who knew which one he was referring to. "Give the cash to Deke. He will crush it right off. Any questions?"

“Not our first corpse,” Rune said when Fallon focused on him and Croft at the end of his speech.

“Good to hear,” Fallon said. “Get moving.”

With that, they did.

It wasn't until the car pulled off that Fallon turned to me. “Give me your gun,” he demanded. I didn't ask, just handed it over. “I'll handle these. Go back home to your girl. If she's got a social battery like you, she's probably full-fucking-up by now,” he added.

“Thanks,” I said, nodding at him. “For... everything tonight.”

“Hey, that's what brothers are for,” he said. “In both senses,” he added. “Now, go send my woman home to me, too,” he added before walking off.

After washing my hands, and applying some triple antibiotic to my knuckles, I did what he said.

I went home to my woman.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lexy

Something woke me up an unknown time later.

Seeing as I was alone in the bed, I figured it was Finn moving around in the main area of the house that I'd heard.

It wasn't until I heard a chorus of laughter—female laughter—that I realized we weren't alone.

Rubbing at my dry eyes, I climbed out of the bed, then pulled on some shorts before making my way to the door.

Was I in the mood for company? Not really. But it was still really important to me to make a good impression on Finn's people, so I squashed my innate distaste for social interactions, and made my way down the hallway.

To find the living room full of women.

From the party at the clubhouse, and some pictures Finn had on his phone, I recognized all of them.

Layna, the poker player.

Hope, the private investigator.

Violet, the skip chaser.

Danny, the former club president.

And, of course, Ferryn.

"There you are!" Layna greeted me, all smiles, clearly the most social out of all of the girls assembled.

"Oh, ah, hi," I said, forcing a smile.

"Oh, you don't have to bother with that," Hope said, waving at my face. "We're all used to prickly women. Most of us being them ourselves," she said.

But that only made me shoot them a genuine smile.

"Is Finn here?" I asked, glancing into the kitchen, but finding no one there.

“No. Finn had... a thing,” Ferryn said.

It was a mix of the hesitancy in her voice and the looks the girls shared that told me exactly what his thing was.

Tracking down the guy who’d attacked me a third time.

“Right. Well, can’t say I will cry over the world losing that asshole,” I said, moving forward to snag a slice of cold pizza out of the box on the coffee table.

“I knew she was one of us,” Ferryn said with a smirk, making Layna and Hope chant *One of us. One of us.*

“Don’t get too full on that,” Layna said. “Gracie is bringing more snacks.”

Gracie... I was drawing a blank on Gracie.

“Umm... pretty blonde. A lot nicer than the rest of us,” Hope supplied.

“Daughter of, ah, Duke?” I tried to recall.

“Duke and Penny, yeah,” Ferryn said, nodding. “It’s a lot. I grew up with everyone and even I can find it confusing. But you’ll get there.”

“How long have you guys been here?” I asked.

“Oh, ah, almost three hours,” Layna said after glancing at her smartwatch.

“Layna is making us watch a professional poker championship,” Violet explained, waving at the TV.

“Which is as fun as it sounds,” Hope grumbled.

“They’ve taken to drinking each time someone exhibits a tell,” Danny explained, waving at the shot glasses lined up on the coffee table around the pizza box. “As you can imagine, they’re all sloshed.”

“You’ve had just as much,” Layna accused, shooting Danny small eyes.

“But I, unlike you lot, can hold my liquor,” Danny said, shooting me a wink.

“You want to catch up?” Layna asked, pouring another shot.

“Why not?” I said.

It had been a hell of a day. I deserved a drink.

Or five.

And that was how many deep I was in when the doorbell rang.

I nearly jumped out of my skin.

The girls all noticed. How could they not? But no one said a thing as Ferryn got up and walked toward the door.

I noticed her reaching into her shirt for something, but the motion stopped when a voice called through the door.

“Come on! This is heavy!”

Ferryn yanked the door open, and there was Gracie, her arms full of big brown bags sitting inside plastic bags. The universal look of to-go Chinese food.

Gracie was very blonde and very pretty, her wavy hair spilling over her shoulders. She was dressed in cut-off shorts and a flowing white peasant top that kept falling off one shoulder to expose her red bathing suit.

“Oh, hey!” she said, beaming at me like we were the oldest of friends. “I’m Gracie. And I have to ask... are you okay?” she asked, pressing a hand to her chest. “Not because of your attack,” she clarified, lips twitching. “But from having to deal with this group for the past several hours.”

“Hey!” Layna objected. “I reject being lumped in with these sour pussies.”

“Second only to her poker playing skills, Layna is clearly most well known for her humility,” Gracie said, all smiles. “Oh, God. You’re all drinking?” she asked.

“We’ll make the prospects drive us home later,” Violet said as she reached for another shot and held it out toward Gracie.

“I shouldn’t,” she said, looking at it.

“And, yet, you’re going to,” Layna insisted.

Gracie was a complete pushover, but was probably the most fun of all of the girls when she got a little tipsy.

It wasn’t long until the laughter that had woken me up was joined with my own.

The way they interacted was almost exactly how my sister and I did. I guess that was the perk of growing up in and around the club. You had dozens of people who were like sisters and brothers to you. People you shared your entire history with, so there was no awkwardness or guards up.

Suddenly, I could see myself as part of this group, not just an outsider looking for acceptance.

And while, no, I was never going to be anyone’s social butterfly, I had to admit that I wouldn’t mind more nights like this, with these girls. Some of the others, too.

“We should bring her to the range!” Layna said, eyes widening. “She can meet Mr. Sex-On-A-Stick.”

“She means Amos,” Gracie said, batting her lashes. “He is dreamy.”

“If we drag her, we should drag Luna. When’s the last time anyone saw her?” Layna asked.

“She was at the party for the twins,” Ferryn said.

“What? Where?” Layna asked.

“In a corner. With a book. I don’t think she talked to anyone,” I said.

“She didn’t. Then she snuck out the second she thought no one would notice,” Ferryn confirmed.

“Oh, my *God!*” Layna exclaimed, whacking Gracie on the chest as she said it, making Gracie rub the spot.

“What?” she asked.

“What do one sexy range watcher dude and our reclusive cousin have in common?” she asked, then burst out before

anyone could even try to respond, “Books! We should hook them up.”

“Oh, God,” Danny grumbled. “Leave the poor girl alone. She likes her books.”

“She likes super-steamy guys inside of books,” Layna said.

“Yeah, but... when are real-life men ever that hot?” Vi asked, then looked around at Ferryn, Danny, Hope, and I, who were all thinking about our own super hot real-life men.

“Ugh,” she grumbled.

“It’s okay,” Layna said, patting Violet’s leg. “I see where you’re coming from. But all that sexy man reading has got to be causing some insane pent-up sexual frustration. I’m not saying she has to marry Amos. Just that, you know, maybe she should take a ride on the Amos train. That’s all I’m saying.”

The next few hours were more of the same.

But as we got drunker, we got louder and sillier. Even the very reserved Ferryn was loosening up.

I couldn’t tell you when or why the deck of cards came out. Yet they did.

We were on our fourth hand when the door opened, and in walked Finn.

“Great fucking security,” he grumbled, looking right at his sister.

“Oh, please, I heard the bike pull up. And your stomping footsteps. I grew up with you. I can hear you from a mile away,” Ferryn said waving over her head at him.

“Are you guys playing poker?” he asked, looking at all of us, but focusing mostly on me. I could tell from the heat I felt there that my face was flushed from the alcohol and laughter. The way his eyes softened said he knew exactly how wasted I was right then.

“No,” Layna grumbled, stabbing a card into the fan of them in her hand. “They’re making me play rummy. *Rummy*,” she added.

“She’s sore about it because she’s losing,” Gracie said, beaming because she was currently our reigning champion, having won every single hand so far.

“I’ll bet,” Finn said, making his way toward me.

I could see the cracks on his knuckles from several feet away. I knew how those got there. I knew, too, that my attacker was likely no longer of the living.

Perhaps I should have been upset about that.

I couldn’t find a single fuck to give, though.

“Hey,” he said, gently grabbing the back of my neck, then leaning down to press a kiss to my lips.

“Aww!” Gracie and Layna cooed even as Ferryn grumbled, “Gross.”

“Okay. I’m calling Sully,” Layna declared.

“Sully is working,” Finn said as he stood next to me, rubbing the back of my neck.

It was a sweet, absentminded touch. But, well, I was kind of drunk. And it was creating all kinds of reactions in my body. Ones we couldn’t act on with a house full of his family members.

“Ah... Nave?” Layna asked, squinting at her phone screen.

“Try Sutton,” he said.

“Oh, the sexy rancher guy,” Layna cooed. “I’m going to be so sad when he leaves,” she added.

“He showed me pictures of his horses,” Gracie said. “And these chickens he has. They have hair like this,” she said, fanning both hands up at the top of her head.

“And by *hair* you mean *feathers*,” Hope said, patting her leg.

“Right. Yeah. Feathers. What were they called? It was a country... Croatia?”

“You think Sutton has Croatian chickens?” Danny asked, dubious.

“They’re Polish,” Layna said. “Hey!” she called into her phone. “How’s my favorite cowboy biker?” she asked, voice way too loud. “Yes, we’ve been drinking a little bit. Okay. A little bit more than that,” she admitted. “We need a ride. Who is we? Me, Vi, Hope, Gracie, Danny, and Ferryn. Yep. Uh-huh. At Finn’s. Okey dokey.”

“He on his way?” Finn asked.

“He’s running over,” she said. “Do you think he’ll be shirtless?” she asked, wiggling her brows.

“Why is he running over?” Finn asked.

“He said then he can take one of our cars to drive us all home in, then run back to the clubhouse.”

“Only Sutton would make a workout out of an errand,” Finn said. “You guys need to gather up any of your shit?” he asked, but was already moving around to gather purses, keys, and shoes.

I couldn’t tell if he just wanted to get me alone, or if he’d had a long night, and just wanted some rest.

Within half an hour, Sutton had shown up—to Layna’s disappointment, fully clothed—and masterfully wrangled the drunk women into Danny’s car since it was the biggest, and they were off.

“Shouldn’t we wait?” I asked when he went to lock the front door.

“For what?” he asked.

“For Sutton? Maybe you should give him a ride back to the clubhouse.”

“He’ll be fine,” Finn insisted, grabbing the Chinese food cartons off the table, and sticking them in the fridge before locking the back door and flicking off the lights. “No, leave it,” he said, voice soft as he came back to find me trying to gather all the shot glasses.

I didn’t need much convincing.

“Come on. Let’s go to bed,” he said, reaching for me, and pulling me against his side, pressing a kiss to the side of my head.

“Are you trying to take advantage of me and my drunken state?” I asked when we got to the bedroom, and he immediately reached for the fly of my shorts.

“Fuck yeah, I am,” he said, his smile sweet and boyish.

It wasn’t long before that turned into something a lot more heated, though.

With a few quick moves, my clothes were in a pile on the floor. With a few more, his had joined mine.

When he reached for me, though, his hands were gentle, pulling me close until my soft lines melded to his firmer ones.

His cheek pressed down on top of my head as our arms went around each other.

“You okay?” I asked, running my hands up and down his back.

“Just glad to be home with you,” he said as his own hands drifted down my back to sink into my ass, then yanking me up by it.

My legs went around him, and he walked us to the bed where he turned to sit off the edge of it with me straddling him.

His lips found mine. Soft at first, then harder as our desire grew.

The ache between my legs was bordering on painful as I lifted up and reached between us to stroke his cock a few times.

A low growl moved through Finn as I guided his cock to my pussy, sliding it up and down my slick cleft before sinking down onto him, feeling him stretch me as he settled deep.

“Fuck yeah,” he groaned. “Feels good to be home.”

He turned then, flipping me onto my back on the mattress, and coming over me, his weight a reassuring pressure against

me as he started to fuck me.

Drunk, and oversensitive because of it, by the time I was crashing into that orgasm, the feelings I'd been pushing down surfaced, tears flooding my eyes as I came.

But Finn just fucked me through it, leaning down to press a kiss to each side of my cheeks, catching the tears, before slamming deep and coming himself.

His weight stayed on me for a long time afterward, and my arms held on tightly, not wanting him to move.

When he did, he rolled us onto our sides, and he pressed a sweet kiss to the tip of my nose.

“I don't want you to go back to your house,” he admitted, voice low.

My lashes fluttered open, finding him watching me.

“I don't want to go back to my house either,” I admitted.

“It's settled then,” he said. And for two people who weren't great at communication, I guess it was.

I wasn't going home.

I was staying here with him.

Moving in.

Calling a new place my own.

“But you're going to need to rent a truck,” I warned him. “I miss my music.”

“Like I would ask you to leave your children behind,” he said, smile almost as soft as the look in his eyes. “Guess I gotta start building some shelves for it all.”

And it really was that easy for us.

Him.

Me.

And the music.

Sounded fucking perfect to me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Finn - 10 days

Fallon kept a crew on watch for Ty and his crew since Perish made sure they took their asses out of our town.

So far, no sightings.

I figured I would maybe pay Junior to track them down to their new location. Just for the peace of mind.

I mean, I figured if he wanted to fuck with us further, he'd have called in his brother's murder.

But as far as we could tell, not a single soul on Earth missed Trey Taggert.

Not that it would matter if they did. I knew this club. I knew the strengths of the brothers. Hiding a body that would never be found, or at least not until it was nothing but bones and we were all long dead, was directly in all of their wheelhouses.

From the sound of things, it had been Rune and Croft who'd taken the lead on that mission we'd sent them on. I'd caught Nave talking to Fallon about it in hushed voices, like it was some big secret, even though the twins had said they'd done this before that night.

I figured my brother was still trying to suss out what the two of them had been up to while they'd been away, but there hadn't been a lot of time to sit them down and talk to them about it.

As for those chicks that had started this mess? Well, let's just say that when Ferryn showed up on your doorstep spinning a karambit around on her finger, you started to rethink all of your life choices pretty quickly.

"Building something?" a voice asked as I stood in the garage of the clubhouse, pulling tools off of one of the shelves.

I turned, finding Callow standing there.

Of the current prospects, he was probably the one I knew the least about.

He was tall and wide-shouldered with brown hair and a matching beard, the dark color making his ice-blue eyes even more prominent. He had a shittion of black & gray ink, and the carriage that came from serving in the military for a good chunk of time.

I knew he'd served with Sully. And that he'd been a Navesink Bank native at one time.

Other than that, though, I didn't know jackshit about the man.

"Lexy has the biggest CD and vinyl collection I've ever seen," I explained. "She needs a place to keep all of it."

Though, logically, some of it might have to find its way into other rooms of the house than the living room.

"You got plans?" he asked.

"Ah, yeah," I said, reaching for the piece of printer paper I'd drawn nothing but my living room dimensions on.

Callow took it, brows pinching as he looked at it.

"This is shit," he declared after a moment.

"What?" I asked with a snort.

"You're wasting way too much space," he said. "The shelves for the CDs should just be slightly taller than the CDs, not the same height as the vinyl shelves. You'll be able to fit a bunch more CDs if you make more, but shorter, shelves."

I had to admit that made a hell of a lot more sense than what I was going to do.

"Come on," he said, sighing at me like I was a complete idiot. "Let's hit the lumbar store. You need help."

I figured I'd be decent enough at drilling some shelves and brackets into the wall.

As I stood back several hours later, though, and saw what Callow had done, I decided that I would have been complete

shit at building shelves.

Because not only had Callow picked different wood than I would have, and better, more hidden, braces than I originally had picked out, he'd made the whole thing look like a built-in feature of the room instead of just some wood slats I'd slapped on the wall for storage.

"Where is your girl?" Callow asked as he checked the time.

"She went out with her sister after work," I explained. "That's why I wanted to do it today. Figured I'd have the whole day to maybe get it done."

"No maybe about it," Callow said. "But you didn't paint or stain it. Which is gonna be a bitch to do now that it's on the wall."

"I wanted her input on that part," I said, shrugging. It didn't matter how much work it was. I was invested on making this feel more like a home for both of us.

To my surprise, Lexy had kind of effortlessly adjusted to being in my house. There was no awkwardness about moving her things into the closet and the dresser, in the drawers in the bathroom. Hell, her makeup was on the counter more often than it wasn't. Her shoes were always in front of the door, an ever-present trip danger. Her favorite mugs were in the cupboards.

And I loved every fucking part of it.

That was why I wanted to consult her on big things like the shelving unit that would house all the music she loved.

"How are the twins settling in?" I asked as I brought him a beer back from the fridge.

"Good. They're... insular," he said.

"They were always like that," I said. "I think it might just be that... twin thing. How they have that bond that kind of makes everyone else feel like they're on the outside of something."

"Maybe," he said, shrugging.

“You think it’s more than that?”

“I think they’ve been busy the last few years is all I’m saying,” he told me, taking a long swig of his beer. “I’m sure the boss man will suss that shit out, though.”

“He always does,” I agreed. “Come on. I’ll give you a ride back to the clubhouse,” I said. “I think I’ll be getting a drunk call soon, and have to go track down my girl.”

“Yeah. Figure Sully has come up with some new way to have fun and piss off Brooks. Might as well get in on it,” he said.

By the time Sully and Callow were done setting up a game Sully called *Spin the Blackout*, my phone was buzzing in my pocket, and my girl’s voice was on the other end.

“So, what I’m gathering here is... when I buy you birthday or Christmas presents,” I said after a half an hour drive where we dropped off Lottie, then drove back home, and Lexy riddled me with questions about her surprise.

“I can’t help it,” she said, doing her third big yawn in five minutes. “We never really got surprises growing up.”

“Not even on Christmas?”

“Our father gave me money to buy Lottie presents. And... myself.”

“So Lottie got surprises, but you didn’t,” I assumed.

“Yeah,” she said, shrugging, but she was too drunk to hide the hint of hurt.

“What about when Lottie got old enough to buy you presents herself?” I asked, reaching over to squeeze her thigh.

“Well, it’s... Lottie,” she said with a smile. “She can never contain her excitement over anything. So she ends up calling me from her car in the parking lot after buying me something, and gushing about how perfect it is...and then telling me what it is.”

“That sounds like her,” I agreed. “But I can keep a secret and hold onto a surprise for as long as needed. But I have a

feeling that you are going to snoop.”

“Me?” she asked, in mock outrage, pressing a hand to her heart. “Never.”

“Lucky for me, I got about a million different houses to stash shit in,” I said, getting out of Lexy’s car, then going around to help her out. Because she was more than a little wobbly.

By the time we got to the door, she was hanging all over me.

“Close your eyes,” I demanded, then put my hand over them just to make sure.

“I was closing them!” she insisted.

“Sure you were,” I said, opening the door, then walking her into the living room right in front of the shelves. “Alright, open,” I said, surprised how anxious I suddenly was.

I didn’t have to worry, though.

There was a stunned moment of silence before she whirled on me, grabbing my arms when the world spun, but beaming up at me.

“It’s perfect!” she declared, turning back to them, grabbing a pile of CDs as she went. “Look!” she said, slipping them into their specially sized shelves. “They fit perfectly! I think we’re going to have extra space even when we shelve everything!”

“Not for long,” I said, smiling at her excitement.

“Well, get over here,” she said. “We have a lot of work to do.”

That was how we spent the rest of the night. Organizing CDs and vinyls while we slipped different music into the player, and discussed our feelings on the different tracks.

Eventually, we fell onto the couch, turned on the TV, and she curled up on my chest.

She was asleep in moments.

And I stayed up, running my fingers through her hair, and watching fucking *Forensic Files*.

It was the best night of my entire damn life.

Lexy - 8 months

Obviously, I hadn't been pregnant.

I did eventually remember to take that test.

It turned out that the *glow* the audiobook narrator had remarked on hadn't been pregnancy. But, rather, something a lot more simple.

Happiness.

I was so happy that I was glowing.

It wasn't until I started to see it in my own face each morning when I went to put my makeup on that I finally understood.

Hell, I actually started to cut back on my makeup, feeling like I didn't need so much of it anymore.

"Ready?" Finn asked as I walked into the living room.

I'd never had a problem settling into Finn's house. But I had to admit that after he and Callow built the shelves, it really started to feel like home to me.

Sure, we now had two record players. But, hey, that meant we got to have one in the living room and one in the bedroom. Save for the boombox. And my wireless speakers were in the kitchen, so we could listen to whatever we wanted anywhere in the house.

"Yep," I said, giving him a smile as I followed him out of the door.

This was one of his lifestyle changes that I was totally on board with.

Once, I'd gotten a wild hair and thought I would take a run with him in the morning. I got to the end of the block before I was wheezing for air, covered in sweat, and calling him a masochist for enjoying that kind of torture.

But occasionally going with him to therapy? Yeah, I was totally on board with that.

He was religious about going to his visits where, yeah, he did have to... *gloss over* certain aspects of his life, but he claimed he'd gained a lot of insight on how to handle his dark moods when they popped back up on occasion.

I only went twice so far, once just to meet his therapist. The second time, we discussed my past history with depression, and my current mental state.

This visit was just a check in.

I loved his therapist. She was a mix of compassionate and stern. She knew when she was not being given the whole story, and she wouldn't accept half answers or avoidance.

She never said so, but I was pretty sure she knew that Finn was operating on the wrong side of the law. So she didn't press about the specifics of his job, or why he said he was stressed because of it, but instead focused on ways to work around that stress, so it didn't compound and lead to those hopeless feelings that would lead to him going down in the hole again.

No, there was no guarantee that he was never going to fall down in it again. Depression was a sneaky bastard like that. But his lifestyle changes and his commitment to understanding his mental health, and, yes, to a much smaller extent, music therapy, would all make it easier for him to recognize the signs of depression earlier, before it completely overtook his life.

His family knew he was seeing a therapist, and I was really relieved and pleased how readily they seemed to accept it. Not worrying about him sharing secrets or getting any of them in trouble. And definitely no toxic "you just need to buck up and power through it" rhetoric.

He really did have an amazing support system. And now that he was not only standing outside that hole he'd been in, but steadily filling it up, he could see those blessings he had, too.

A mom who begged him to make changes, to seek help. A father who never thought he was any less of a man for having

mental health struggles and trying to find a way through them. A sister and brother who, yes, teased the fuck out of him for just about everything... except this.

On a selfish note, I had to admit that being with Finn also allowed me to heal in ways I didn't know I needed to.

Yes, I'd always had a close bond with my sister. But Finn's therapist had been the first to gently remind me that I was just that. Her sister. Not her mother. That while our father's disinterest had forced me into a parental role at a young age, and I'd needed to assume it for Lottie's well-being at the time, that we were both adults now. She didn't need me to babysit her, to lecture her, to play her bodyguard when she went out with friends.

I'd worried initially that stepping back from that mom role would strain our relationship, but I'd found just the opposite.

And, to my surprise and utter delight, without me there to try to wrangle her in, to calm her wild behavior, she somehow learned for herself what her limits were. One too many wasted nights had her actually swearing off parties for a while, deciding to nurture friendships that didn't require so much alcohol and adventure.

Yeah, she was always going to be extroverted and social and a little unruly, but she'd somehow matured more in a few months than she had in years.

On top of that, I also learned that it wasn't that I was antisocial or a loner—though I sure had my moments—it was that I had no use for vapid, superficial connections.

Once I'd gotten integrated into the club, into the family dynamics surrounding it, I found I really enjoyed being with those people.

For the occasional party at the clubhouse, yeah, but also going out with the 'girls club' when they went shooting or to sing karaoke, or to make pussy earrings at a pottery class.

I loved dinner at Finn's parents' house, chatting with his mom as I lent as much help as my mediocre kitchen skills permitted.

I liked getting to know his nieces and nephews, as crazy and feral as they all were.

And I really, really loved having holidays and traditions. Ones that not only pulled me in, but my sister as well, so we could experience all those things we'd missed out on as kids.

"Hey, I got an idea," Finn said as we walked up the path toward his therapist's office.

"What?" I asked.

"After our session, I heard about this enormous fucking record store just over the border in PA."

"A man after my own heart," I said, beaming up at him.

He was, too.

I loved him in a way I honestly hadn't thought I was capable of loving anyone.

And, even better, he loved me back the same.

Finn - 5 years

"Caught you," I said, making Lexy jerk and whip around, eyes huge.

Caught.

Caught in the fucking act.

"I was... checking to make sure we had a, ah, proper winter emergency kit in the trunk," she lied. Right to my face.

I glanced past her where she had the carpet in the trunk of our SUV pulled up, inspecting the storage compartment.

Looking for her birthday present, no doubt.

"Liar," I said jiggling our son on my hip.

"Bad," he said, his big green eyes serious.

"Lying *is* bad, bud," I agreed, raising my brows at his mother.

"Don't you bring him into this," Lexy said, slitting her eyes at me as she slapped the carpet back into place before slamming the trunk and turning to me. "This one is gonna be

on my side all the time, damnit,” she added, pressing a hand to her belly that had just started to pop.

“You don’t want the two of them learning to snoop for their birthday presents, do you?”

“How dare you point out how my bad behavior will look reflected in my own children,” she said with a smile as she followed me back into the house.

“It’s not here, by the way,” I told her, rubbing her lower back as our boy reached for her.

“Of course it isn’t,” she grumbled.

I did manage, on and off, to hide shit around the house because she was so focused on looking at other places. But not this time.

“You will get it later,” I reminded her.

“But I want it now,” she said in a great imitation of Veruca Salt.

“Mama, *Bop Bop*,” our son said, and I watched Lexy’s eyes slide closed as she tried not to groan. Hell, I felt that silent groan down to my soul too. So I was impressed when she managed to give him a smile.

“*Bop Bop*, huh?” she asked. “How about the snowman song?” she tried to compromise.

We’d known when the stick turned blue that we would have a future of children’s music ahead of us. We’d been pleased to learn, though, that some of the soundtracks to kid movies were fucking banging. Hell, I caught myself singing a track from *Tangled* alone in the kitchen the other day. And on more than one occasion, heard Lexy singing songs from *Hercules* in the shower.

That said, our son, our precious, perfect little angel of a child... had absolute shit taste in music. No amount of trying to teach him new songs would sway him from his one true musical love.

Bop Bop.

The most cloying, repetitive, high-pitched, over-the-top song ever to have been created in the history of mankind.

To this day, neither of us even knew how he'd first heard *Bop Bop*, but I had a sneaking suspicion my pain-in-the-ass brother was to blame.

And now, it seemed, we were going to suffer for eternity.

"*Bop Bop. Bop Bop,*" he chanted, bouncing back and forth and clapping his hands.

Lexy shot me a pained look and I let out a deep sigh before grabbing my phone, and putting the damn song on the wireless speakers.

"I can't do it," Lexy started, placing him down on the floor near his pile of toys, "not again," she added, making her way toward the kitchen. "He's made me put it on twenty times already today," she said as she reached for her phone, and put one of our songs on the speakers in the kitchen.

It really didn't actually drown out the horrendous sounds of *Bop Bop* as a group of what sounded like dying cats started to sing the chorus for the first of about seventy-five times, but instead created just this louder sense of *noise* in the house.

"You're going to like good music, right?" she asked, talking down to her stomach.

"I mean, I don't think they could possibly like anything worse," I said, brewing her a cup of half-caf.

"I know one thing... if a worse song exists, your brother will find it and play it for them," she said as she sat down at the table, flexing her feet.

She'd been lucky, never having to really deal with morning sickness. Not like Lottie did, throwing up all day long for three months in a row when she was pregnant. But Lexy's feet seemed to start swelling and hurting as soon as she left her first trimester. Even before she really put on any weight.

"He's a real dick," I agreed.

"But we did get his oldest a drum set for Christmas," Lexy said, shooting a wicked smile at me. "So, at least he will be

suffering too.”

“Gotta find the bright side of things,” I agreed, passing her a mug of coffee, then sitting down, and reaching for her legs, pulling them into my lap to press my fingers into her arches.

I swear the sounds she made when getting a foot rub while pregnant were positively fucking orgasmic.

We’d never really planned either of our kids.

Our son had been a pleasant, unexpected surprise when Lexy had forgotten her Pill packet when we’d gone out of town for a concert for a long weekend then decided to get onto something that didn’t require her to remember to bring it anywhere. But, of course, when she’d gone for that appointment, she’d been told she was pregnant.

We hadn’t been married yet at the time, though she had my ring on her finger.

We’d gone ahead and let the girls club, both first and second generation, do what they did best. Plan a hell of a party.

We’d married about two months after we knew we were expecting. Carl had walked her down the aisle. And Andrew had arranged all the music.

It had been perfectly us.

Then this new one? Well, that was a night-long, loud, seamless sex session when my parents had taken the baby for a sleepover with all the other grandkids.

We’d talked about kids, of course, before we brought any into the world. And we both concluded that we had no idea what we wanted, that we likely wouldn’t know until we started a family. Maybe we’d only want one. Maybe more.

Lexy, of course, was unsurprisingly an amazing mother. There was no question about that after having seen her maternal way of caring for her sister.

And while I’d had some secret concerns about my fatherhood ability, the first time I held that baby, I knew it was something I was meant to have, meant to do.

A purpose, if you will.

So I was over the moon about having another.

After this one? Who knew. Only time would tell.

“Tell you what? How about I give you your smaller birthday gift?” I suggested.

“Yes!” she said, eager.

“Okay, one sec,” I said, releasing her feet to go into the bathroom and dig the small box out of the bottom of her tampon box that had sat unused for the past five or so months.

“Wanna help Mama open it? Lexy asked as our boy toddled over as soon as he saw the decorative paper.

He clawed at the paper with increasing frustration until Lexy secretly slit one corner to give him an in.

Then the paper was on the floor, and she managed to grab the keychain out of the box before our son took the box and lid and walked away with them, clapping them together like an instrument.

It was a simple rectangular silver keychain with a sound wave printed on it.

“Turn it over,” I said, and she did, finding the QR code to scan.

“Ohhh, it’s music!” she said, beaming at me as I handed her my phone.

“Wait, you need these too,” I said, pulling open the lid of my wireless earbuds, and handing them to her.

“Why? Is it dirty?” she asked, shooting me a wicked little smirk.

I gave her a smile as she stuck the earbuds in, scanned the code, and started to listen.

“Oh, it’s twangy,” she said as the country song started to play.

It wasn’t a real song, in the way you typically thought of them. It was more of a comedy song, if that made any sense.

One called “*Still Ain’t Sick of Fucking You.*”

We had a tradition of always giving and trading music for holidays. Sometimes with a beloved CD, or something brand new we wanted to listen to together. Music was always involved.

And I thought this was a funny one.

Especially after a rough day with *Bop Bop*.

“That was amazing,” she declared.

“Go on and click on some of the other ones,” I said. “Can I suggest *Sit On My Face, Puss In Boots, Fuck You With the Lights On, Fucked by a Country Boy, Fuck You Bitch, and Anal & the Dishes?*” I suggested.

“Oh, you’ve been *listening*,” she said, smiling at me as she clicked another track.

“It’s absurd but addictive,” I admitted.

“I mean... we remember my binge of old-school Bo Burnham songs, don’t we?” she asked.

“True,” I agree. “And while you listen, I’m gonna take this little man, and go pick up dinner,” I said.

“Have I mentioned how much I love you?” she asked, and I noticed her feet were moving side to side with the silly music.

“Love you more,” I said, walking over toward her to press a kiss to her head.

I didn’t mean more than she loved me.

It wasn’t a competition.

But I loved her more every fucking day.

“Oh, Finn?” she called.

“Yeah,” I asked.

“Don’t come home without my sour candy.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

Lexy - 21 years

“You sure we can’t tell him he can’t go?” I asked, looking over at Finn as our eldest son loaded his van in the driveway.

It was the same ugly black, windowless thing that he’d insisted on when he’d gotten his license, despite us trying to talk him into an actual car or SUV.

Nope.

He needed that damn van.

Eventually, he and his buddies spray painted the shit out of it, which helped it look slightly less creepy.

To my utter disgust, I’d watched him rip all the shelving out of the back this morning... and throw his mattress in instead.

Because our boy, our precious little baby, was ‘going on the road.’

“He’s an adult now,” Finn reminded me, but his hand was moving up and down my spine.

I knew this wasn’t any easier on him. But he was holding it together better than I was.

I’d already yelled, cried, and pleaded this morning.

And while our kid wasn’t a heartless little jerk who didn’t care that his mother was upset, he had his mind made up.

“We could slash his tires,” I suggested.

To that, he chuckled.

“He’d just replace them.”

“We could... tell him we’ve been lying to him his whole life and that he’s actually *not* a super talented musician and lyricist.”

“We could never,” he said, sighing.

“No,” I agreed, feeling my heart cracking just a little bit more as our son loaded his amps into the back next to his mattress.

We’d encouraged his love of music every single step of the way. We’d bought those amps. His guitar. The notebooks

where he wrote his songs. I let him practice for free at the studio. We drove him to his first shows. We cheered him on.

And he *was* good, damnit.

I wasn't just saying that as his mother, but as a lifelong audiophile.

Hell, his Uncle Andrew had all his music on one of his iPods that were so ancient that I didn't know how they were still working.

He was good.

And he deserved to pursue this.

I just hadn't been prepared for how quickly he would hit the road after he graduated.

It had been, what? Two weeks.

Eighteen years with this kid was not nearly enough.

"Mom," our son said as he walked up, his head tilted to the side, his face so much like his father's. He looked apologetic, but also resigned and excited for his adventure, about following his dreams.

"I know," I said, blinking hard. "I know. I'm not going to make you feel bad, I swear," I said. "But I'm just going to miss you so fucking much."

"You can follow it all online," he said, smiling.

"Just what a mother wants to hear," I said, shaking my head. "Where are you stopping first?" I asked.

"Philly."

"I want a call when you get there. I don't care if you're a grown-up; you need to tell your mom where you are."

"I will. I promise," he said, then let me hug the shit out of him before getting a hug from his father as well.

As for his two younger brothers, well, all he got out of them were those bro-handshakes.

"This is all because of you," he declared to me and Finn.

“Don’t you dare put that on me,” I said. “I wanted you to do something much safer than becoming a musician. Like, you know, an outlaw biker,” I said, smiling at his eye roll. “This is all Carl’s fault. All that talk of sex, drugs, and rock & roll.”

“All the concerts you brought me to didn’t hurt either,” he said, just bursting with joy for this next phase of his life. “I love you,” he said, nodding.

“We love you too,” I told him as he finally turned and made his way back to his van, and climbed in.

“What are you doing?” I asked as Finn immediately reached for his phone, messing around for a second as our son backed out of the driveway.

“Payback,” he said, then an evil little smirk toyed at his lips as our son slammed on the brakes and glared over at us at the end of the driveway as the musical stylings of *Bop Bop* blasted at full from the many speakers in his van. “I’m connected to his stereo. I can blast *Bop Bop* from my phone no matter where he is in the country. And I plan to do it. Often.”

In the van, our boy switched the music to a different song then burst out laughing.

We all did.

And, somehow, that made it just the tiniest bit easier to watch him pull away.

“If it makes you feel any better,” our middle son said, “I plan on being a biker.”

“You will be a damn preacher, kid,” I declared. “I can’t have one kid on the road and another speeding around on a bike. And what about you?” I asked our youngest. “How do you plan on breaking my heart?”

To that, he shot me a smirk that reminded me a lot of the one his Uncle Fallon always had.

“I hate Myleo,” he declared, making my mouth fall open. Like... wide open.

He hated Myleo?

Myleo?

The musician both Carl and I adored.

The one who had once owned my guitar.

The one who Finn and I danced to at our wedding.

“You’re grounded,” I declared, getting a laugh out of him.

“We’re actually gonna go to the clubhouse,” our middle said.

“Fine fine. All my kids just leave me,” I said, reaching for my keys, and tossing them at him. “Oh, and while you’re on the way there, you should have your brother scan that code on my keychain,” I told them, trying like hell not to smile. “It’s a song your father gave me,” I added. “It exemplifies his love for me,” I added.

The boys shared a strange look but said okay as they climbed into the SUV.

They didn’t even fully pass the house before they slammed on the brakes.

The window rolled down on the passenger side.

“Gross!” our youngest called out, making Finn and I both laugh our asses off.

“Couldn’t let you have all the fun,” I declared.

“Traumatizing our sons is always fun,” Finn agreed.

“I feel like an empty-nester, even though I know those two will come back eventually.”

Though it was summer break, and I had a feeling they’d be doing a lot of sleepovers at the club.

I was trying really hard not to be too overprotective of them. They were teenagers. They were going to seek out good times. At least at the club, I knew someone would keep an eye on them. Keep them from doing anything *too* stupid.

“What would we do as empty-nesters?” Finn asked.

“I would love to claim we’d be out going to concerts and being crazy,” I said. “But...”

“*Forensic Files* reruns and Chinese sounds a hell of a lot better?”

“See? That’s why I love you. You get me.”

“Maybe if we get some energy, we can hit Jake’s.”

“Let’s not get too crazy,” I said, smiling as we made our way back inside the house.

“Some music and brownies, then,” he said.

“Only if you’re baking them.”

“Like I’d ever let you make me food,” he said, pulling me down with him on the couch, pulling my legs over his lap.

“You know what?” he asked after ordering the food.

“What?”

“I’m really fucking glad you asked me to drive you home that night.”

I wanted to say something funny, to lighten the mood.

But at the end of the day, I’d had that thought a million times over the years.

I could have asked someone else there.

I could have called a ride-share.

One tiny different decision, and my entire life would have been so much different.

No kids.

No Finn.

I couldn’t even fathom it.

“Me too,” I agreed, leaning into him. “You’re the only person in the whole world I can be alone together with.”

He pressed a kiss to the side of my head.

“Now, let’s go solve a murder, shall we?” he asked, turning on our show.

JESSICA GADZIALA IS the USA TODAY Bestselling author of over 100 steamy romance novels featuring all sorts of twisty and turny plots, strong heroines, lovable side characters, steam, and epic HEAs.

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Ryan

Mark

Eli

Charlie & Helen: Back to the Beginning

Investigators

367 Days

14 Weeks

4 Months

432 Hours

Dark

Dark Mysteries

Dark Secrets

Dark Horse

Professionals

The Fixer

The Ghost

The Messenger

The General

The Babysitter

The Middle Man

The Negotiator

The Client

The Cleaner

The Executioner

Rivers Brothers

Lift You Up

Lock You Down

Pull You In

Grassi Family

The Woman at the Docks

The Women in the Scope

The Woman in the Wrong Place

The Woman from the Past

The Woman in Harm's Way

The Woman with the Target on her Back

Golden Glades Henchmen MC

Huck

Che

McCoy

Remy

Seeley

Donovan

Cato

Shady Valley Henchmen MC

Judge

Crow

Slash

Sway

Detroit

STANDALONES WITHIN NAVESINK BANK:

Vigilante

Grudge Match

The Rise of Ferryn

Counterfeit Love

Of Snakes and Men

The Survivor

Deja Brew

OTHER SERIES AND STANDALONES:

Stars Landing

What The Heart Needs

What The Heart Wants

What The Heart Finds

What The Heart Knows

The Stars Landing Deviant

What The Heart Learns

Surrogate

The Sex Surrogate

Dr. Chase Hudson

The Green Series

Into the Green

Escape from the Green

Seven Sins MC

The Sacrifice

The Healer

The Thrall

The Demonslayer

The Professor

Costa Family

The Woman in the Trunk

The Woman in the Back Room

The Woman with the Scar

The Woman on the Exam Table

The Woman with the Flowers

The Woman with the Secret

The Woman on the Jury

DEBT

Dissent

Stuffed: A Thanksgiving Romance

Unwrapped

Peace, Love, & Macarons

A Navesink Bank Christmas

Don't Come

Fix It Up

N.Y.E.

faire l'amour

Revenge

There Better Be Pie

Ugly Sweater Weather

I Like Being Watched

The Woman with the Ring
Love and Other Nightmares
Love in the Time of Zombies
Primal

Under the pen name JGALA:

The Heir Apparent
The Winter Queen

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<3/ Jessica