

J.E.DAELMAN

RAGING BARONS MC

MC ROMANCE NOVEL



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RAGING BARONS MC



Book Eleven – Forest

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CHAPTER ONE

-:- FOREST -:-

I'm more than happy to be a brother of the Raging Barons MC. It's taken me years to get out of the FBI and start my life afresh. I cannot unsee the atrocities I've had to handle, but I'll never be sorry because of the number of people I've been able to free from the clutches of maniacs, murderers, sadists, and any other kind of monster you can imagine.

Picking up the mug from the kitchen counter, I drink the instant coffee that I detest, but I've not had the time to buy a coffee machine yet. After taking a sip, I dump it down the sink and place the mug on the drainer, before stomping out the back door and across the street to Stitch and Gemmy's house.

Knocking twice on the back door, I open it and walk inside. "For goodness sake, put her down. It's first thing in the morning and I don't need to see that," I state as I stomp over to their coffee machine, where I pour myself a freshly made cup.

I step to the island and take a bar stool before looking up at Stitch, who has an irritated look on his face. Gemmy has her usual amused look before she kisses Stitch's cheek and walks over to the island kissing me on the cheek, which has Stitch grunting under his breath.

"What the fuck do you want?" Stitch asks, and I give him a bright smile.

"Coffee, I came for some freshly made coffee. Oh, and Gemmy, can you get the people who did your kitchen to do mine? You said they'd do it, but I've heard nothing as yet, and I need my place renovated. It's a shithole, and I want it sorted out."

"Have you spoken to Hammer? Maybe he can fit you in now?" Stitch butts in then continues. "The people that did ours are for upper-class folk, you know, not a sheriff like yourself."

"Fuck off!" I snap, take my mug of coffee with me and walk back to my

place. I'm grinning because it's good fun stopping Stitch's shenanigans first thing in the morning.

I've given a key to my place to Gemmy so she can come in, if and when needed. But if the company that did their place isn't available, I'll see if I can push Hammer to get started in this place.

Picking up my phone from where I'd left it last night on the bedside cabinet, I see I've got three unread messages.

Mayor Jackson: Sheriff, please contact me this morning if you get a few minutes. Thank you.

Now, Mayor Jackson is the new mayor who took over before I was made sheriff, so I can guess he wants me to answer questions he may have, but, sadly, I do not have a lot of answers to give at this point.

Forest: I'll be in my office in about 30.

The second message is from Axel.

Pres: Stitch tells me you want Hammer to look at your place. He'll be in the clubhouse later.

Interesting, as Stitch only mentioned this to me a few minutes ago. That fucker is one step ahead of me all the time. I've got to pull up my game.

Forest: Thx.

The third message I cringe, and wish to all hell I'd not stuck my dick in this one, because she is not getting the message I'm done.

Polly: You comin' round tonight?

Forest: No, we're done. It was a one-off. I told you that at the time, now back off.

I block her number, because she's becoming a menace and if I have to sort her out, she'll not like my methods. I know she works at the local dentist as a receptionist and I can embarrass her enough for her to leave me the fuck alone if I have to.

For years I went without female interaction. It was far too risky when on a

job. I'm now wondering if the last few months of living free and easy are going to come back and bite me on the ass.

Looking around the house, I know I can't chase anyone seriously until it's been completely ripped apart. The kitchen is ugly and needs to be like Gemmy's, which I think is great. The island and the granite countertops look stunning. I'm going to speak to Hammer later and see what he can do.

Tying my hair back I make it as neat as I can but no way am I cutting it as it's taken me a while to grow it after coming to town. I like my biker look, and I'm keeping it.

Walking into the sheriff's department, I smile at Zack, who works opposite Gemmy doing the afternoon shift. As yet, the evenings are covered by calls being redirected to my phone, and I do whatever I have to.

Zack is mid-twenties, tall, and although he is constantly eating, he is fairly thin. He has his hair short on the sides and longer on the top, but he has it neat and must use some female shit to keep it in place because it doesn't move much. He's a good worker and is getting to know where everything is which makes it perfect when I have to do a shout-out for something.

He's more of a secretary if I'm being honest, and I think he's going to be perfect for the job. I can't see him not still being here when his three-month trial period is over.

Zack is here today, as he and Gemmy do a system where they get Sunday, and a day in the week free. I think Zack will be upgraded to full-time, as he's not going to be in a position to work part-time for long. No one can survive on half a wage when they live alone, which he does.

"Mornin', Zack. I'll be in my office. Hold calls except for emergencies, as I need to speak to the mayor."

"Okay, Boss, no problem." Zack keeps his head in the paperwork on the reception desk as he replies.

Stepping into my office, I look around and can't help but think it needs brightening up. The place is dismal, to say the least. The desk is now thankfully organized, but the furniture is beaten and looks so worn it needs more than a good clean and polish.

Taking the seat behind the desk, I take the paperwork and pile it on one side. I'll start wading through that in a while. First, I need to see what the mayor wants.

Making the call to the mayor, I tap my fingers on the desktop while I wait for him to pick up. If he misses this call, I'm not chasing his ass all day.

Mayor Jackson's voice draws me out of the daze I was heading toward. "Sheriff Forest, can we arrange a sit down as soon as possible? I've heard a few disturbing reports, and I need to speak to you, but somewhere private, with no ears twitching."

Now that's a surprise, as I've had a few things whispered in my ear too. "What about at my home? It's in a mess as I just purchased it, but it's private and we'll be able to speak freely. Otherwise, we could head to the clubhouse and use Axel's office, I'm sure."

"Send me the address to your home. I'll meet you at... what about three o'clock tomorrow afternoon? I can spare an hour at that time."

"Okay, I can make sure I'm home by then. If an emergency comes along, I'll let you know," I reply, still wondering why he sounds so worried.

"I'll see you then." With that, the mayor cuts the call and I'm left looking at the office door with a frown on my face.

Picking up the paperwork, I look at each piece carefully, placing them in order of importance. When I see Mrs. Osborne placed a complaint regarding someone loitering at night, I walk over to the coat stand and grab my hat from the top. Slamming it onto my head, I leave my office, gaining Zack's attention. "I'm going over to speak with Mrs. Osborne. You can contact me if anything is urgent. I'll pick up lunch on my way back, too."

"Okay, Boss." Zack looks back down at the reception desk and continues with the job I assigned him last week. That being the massive job of picking one box from the basement, looking at every piece of paper inside the box, and sorting out into piles of closed cases, open cases, and anything else that may be in there.

Gemmy has been working on the same task on the opposite shift to Zack, and they are wading through a lot of boxes. But I've not told them they have

to go through every filing cabinet down there, and then re-index by year, month, then alphabetical order.

So far, I see we have quite a few open case files in the box next to Zack. Sighing to myself as I walk out to the cruiser because it's going to take months to plow through all the work that the lazy fucker has left untouched. How he could call himself a law enforcer, I don't know, but it's a good thing the last sheriff has gone and is in prison for a long ass time.

Climbing into the cruiser I look at my phone when a message alert dings.

Gemmy: People coming tomorrow to look at your house.

Forest: Thanks Gemmy.

Gemmy: Welcome. Do you want to eat with us tomorrow night? Going to get the grill out.

Forest: Yeah, thanks.

Well, that saved me having another takeout, which I'm sick of looking at. I'm going to take myself to the clubhouse more often and eat the grub there, because it's far better than paying for the trash I have been eating.

Pulling up outside Mrs. Osborne's house, I look around at the neat row of houses. All bungalows, as this is an area where retired people have congregated. They have a nice community here, helping each other, and giving a sense of family that they can rely on.

Tipping my hat back a little on my head, I exit the cruiser, walk over to Mrs. Osborne's, and knock on the door. I place my back to the door while I wait and focus my attention on the area. Looking for anything out of place and I can't see anything at this point.

Hearing the door open, I turn and take my hat off, smiling at the elderly woman. She's no more than 5' 3", gray hair in a bun at the back of her neck. She is portly, but not what you'd call obese, just nice and round, in my opinion.

"Hello, Mrs. Osborne. I found your complaint on my desk and came over to see what's going on."

“Come in, please.” Closing the door behind us, I then follow her through to the kitchen, where she quickly pours me a coffee from her machine and offers sugar and milk.

Smiling at her, I settle in the seat at the small kitchen table and wait for her to tell me what’s going on. I can see she’s wary, and whatever has happened has her spooked.

“Last week, we had someone lurking around the bungalows. We are a tight community, supporting each other, and we know when someone doesn’t belong.” Taking a sip of her coffee, she looks at me once more. “I saw him in the shadows of Merry’s house across the street. He was looking in her window. Now I’m not sure what he was going to do, but Danny was walking his dog and the dog started acting up, barking and snarling. The man turned and ran into the shadows more and went up the street. I lost sight of him. But he was up to no good.”

I’ve taken notes on my phone app because I’ve found it more reliable than a notepad. “Can you give me any sort of description?”

“I’m sorry, not really. It was dark, and he was staying well out of the light. He had a hoodie on and the hood pulled up so I couldn’t see his face. But the hoodie had a logo of some kind on the back. I couldn’t quite make out what it was.”

“Okay. It’s not a lot to go on, but if you see anything strange again, you contact my number and I’ll come right to you.” I hand her my card and point out the one that will come directly to me and not the office.

“Thank you, Sheriff.” She clutches the card to her, and it’s telling me this has really rattled her and left her fearful.

“I’ll be looking at replacing the deputies’ positions and as soon as I do I’ll have them cruise around here to keep an eye out.” Standing, I place my cup in the sink and head to the front door. “Maybe keep your doors locked even in the daytime for now. Give me time to check around, speak to some people, and see what I can dig up.”

Giving me a smile of thanks I hear her lock the front door as I leave. Back at the cruiser, I take a minute to look at the house opposite but see nothing

out of place. It could be a one-off or it could be a stakeout. Only time will tell.

Back at the office, I give Zack a chin lift as I pass and enter my office. I take off my hat and throw it onto the chair in the corner near the window.

Looking at the filing cabinets against the corner wall, I know I've got to look at what are supposedly open cases that need investigating. What the last sheriff did, I don't know because most of the paperwork in the folders is blank forms, not even filled in. If he was standing here, I'd knock the fucker out without thinking about it.

Looking at the phone on the desk, I squint, trying to work out which one I press to speak to Zack, and not remembering, I bellow, "ZACK, NEED YOU IN HERE."

The door opens a minute later and Zack smirks, "Press 7 and you'll get the desk, Boss."

I give him a nod before asking. "Do you know if we ever had a deputy here that left because of the last sheriff? We need at least two deputies and I think it may be wise to get them from out of town. But I did hear rumblings that a deputy left because he went toe-to-toe with the last sheriff."

"Leave it with me, Boss. I know someone who may know. I'm just going to run out to the coffee house because old man Phillips will know. He knows everything about everyone." Zack turns and near enough runs out of the office, and I hear the front door open and bang closed.

I leave my office door open in case anyone enters while Zack is missing from reception. He has the boxes of files sitting on the reception desk. Maybe I should stand with them until he comes back?

Stepping out of the office, I walk over to the reception desk and don't see the boxes. He's a damn machine is what I'm thinking because they've gone, and I know he'd not have taken them back to the basement unless they were organized.

Sitting behind the desk, I'm wondering what the fuck I'm doing being talked into taking this job. I wanted out of enforcement, yet here I am, the sheriff, sorting through the mess left behind by the last one. Sighing, I rub my palm

down the back of my neck and close my eyes for a moment. Holy shit, I forgot to bring lunch!

CHAPTER TWO

-:- FOREST -:-

Zack walks into my office holding out a bag that is oozing the most delicious smell. Grinning as he passes it to me and a coffee in a takeout cup in his other hand, he chuckles. "I knew you'd forget lunch, so I took the liberty of grabbing some on the way back from seeing Old Man Philips."

"You need to be promoted." I take the bag from his hand and peeking inside, see a huge burger with salad, pickles, and a side of fries, which has me grinning before grabbing it from the bag and taking a huge bite as I groan with pleasure at the taste.

Laughing, Zack leaves the office, and I have to remember to give him the cash for this, or put extra in his pay because he can't afford to be buying lunches for me.

After I've eaten I look at the pile of work on my desk. Folders that are more than likely filled with bullshit, because if any of us are honest, the last sheriff did nothing about anything.

A tap on the door has me look up, and Zack pops his head back into the office. "Old Man Philips said he knew of a man who'd make a good deputy, and you know him."

"Who?" I ask.

"Abner Arlington, but everyone calls him Sober, because of his initials being AA," Zack steps into the office but is only a step away from the door. That way, he can keep his eye on the reception desk. He's going to make one heck of a good employee, showing responsibility, strength, and common sense.

"Did you get any contact details for Sober? He can come in and speak to me if he's interested. I've also thought about someone I used to work with. He retired early, about eight months back. I'll see if he's bored and needs something to keep him busy."

“I’ll get the details you need. I’ve placed a box on the shelf...” pointing to my right, “there are a few case files that I thought were more urgent than others. I hope it was okay to do that, but I didn’t want them lost in the mass of others I’m wading through.” Zack cringes.

“That’s okay, Zack. Anything you find that needs my attention urgently, just bring it to me. We’ve so much shit to wade through that it will take ten fucking years. I’m sure that dickwad did nothing the whole time he was sheriff,” I snap, but I’m sure Zack knows I’m not unhappy with him.

Walking over to the shelf, I pick up the box and carry it to my desk before taking a deep breath and taking out the first folder. The folder is pretty banged up and has dirty finger marks on it. The cover states:

Name: Colin Montgomery – Deceased

Opening the folder, I frown when there are two pieces of paper. One has ‘Found by the river’ written on it, and the other ‘Case Closed’. What...The... Actual...Fuck is going on here?

Picking up my cell phone, I scroll through contacts and find Gemmy’s number. Punching the call button, I wait for her to respond.

“Hi, Forest, what’s up?”

“I need you to look into a case for me first thing in the morning, but in the meantime, ask everyone you think may know gossip. I want to know about Colin Montgomery and his death. The fuckin’ file has nothing in it except two pieces of paper. One says found at the river and the other case closed.” I know I’m snarling, but I can’t pull it back as I’m livid that someone’s death has been thrown away like trash.

“I’ll do that, and get as much as I can before I come to work in the morning. But I suggest you go speak with Mrs. Osborne, because she may know a fair bit. Even Amelia will know something, I’m sure. You’re going to the clubhouse later today, aren’t you? You could catch up with Amelia there.” Gemmy knows me well enough now to not get into a tizzy about me snarling. It’s one of the things I like about her. She is fairly unflappable.

“I’m going to catch up with Hammer about the house. See when he can fit me in and if he can do as good a job in the kitchen as yours. I can have an

evening meal while I'm speaking to everyone, rather than another damn takeaway. Maybe Axel will know something too?" I'm speaking more to myself than Gemmy at this point.

"Okay, I'll talk to you later. Oh, before you go, I've set up a meeting with the people to look over your kitchen at 5 pm tomorrow. But I think you'd be better off having Hammer do the work, as my kitchen was overpriced, Forest."

"Okay, I will." I close out the call and lean back in my seat before sending a text message to Hammer to meet me at the clubhouse, as I'll be there for the evening meal.

Looking at my phone, when I hear a message alert, I see Hammer has responded.

Hammer: Yeah, I'll be there. Tilly didn't fancy cookin' tonight, so we'd said we were going to eat there, too.

Forest: Ok. I want to talk to you about my house.

Hammer: No problem.

Checking the time, I know I've got to make a move if I want to find out something regarding Colin Montgomery's death. I'm going to head down to the basement and see what I can find down there. Maybe, just maybe, the asshole has left something for me to get my hands on?

Two hours later, I've covered over two-thirds of the filing cabinets, and two dozen boxes lying around. As yet, not a single thing about Montgomery. It has me itching, which is a sign that something is very, very wrong.

Sitting on the only seat in the basement, I take out my phone and make the call to Ty Parrellin. I listen to the ringtone and sigh as I think he's not going to answer. Just as I'm about to hang up he picks up.

"What do you want, Forest? You know I'm retired, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know, but I want to ask how bored are you?" I grin and know he cannot see it, but he'll hear it in my tone of voice.

"Bored? You think I've nothing to do?" Chuckling, which tells me he's bored

and doing a cover-up.

“Yeah, bored. I need you to come be a deputy and help me sort out this town. Something is seriously wrong here and I need you at my back.” I’ve taken all the playfulness from my voice. Now he knows this is a serious conversation.

“I thought you were going to become a biker?”

“Well, I am a full brother of the Raging Barons MC, but I’m also the Sheriff after the last one ended up incarcerated. Even the Mayor is new and wants the cleanup done. But I’m finding case files that have so many holes in them you’d think a moth has been making a feast of them.”

“You heard I divorced Rosemary, found the bitch spending money faster than I could earn it. All those years of working my balls off.”

“I’m sorry, Ty,” I sigh because FBI agents often end up divorced or separated, due to time spent apart or other scenarios.

“You got somewhere for me to stay?” Ty asks, which has me thinking I may win him over.

“You can stay with me. It’s not great, but it has three bedrooms and I’m having work done. If you can put up with that shit you can stay with me, meet the brothers of the MC. I’m sure you’ll fit in easily with them, but let me tell you, the women of the club are held in high regard, and if any of us see them being disrespected we jump in.” I know Ty has a good relationship with women generally, and he was never a player, so I’m not worried about him overstepping. I just want him to know that we will defend every one of the women if needed.

“I don’t have a problem with that. You know I’m all for protecting women and kids. Okay, send me all the details of where I need to be. I’ll pack up this place as I’m leasing it, so it’s only my gear. It only has a month left on the lease, so I’ll pay that up and come straight to you.”

I’m sure I heard relief in his voice, and it has me wondering if he was feeling out on a limb and needing direction. Divorcing his wife has to have left a hole in his retirement plan. “I’ll do that and see you as soon as you can get here.”

Sending the addresses for my house, the sheriff's office, and the clubhouse to Ty, I grin to myself, as he's well known for wanting all details before he makes any kind of move. It's what always made him so reliable at your back, and why I had always valued him on my team.

Sighing, I decide I've had enough for today and make my way out of the office. Zack is packing a box, and looks up when he hears me leaving the office, and quirks a questioning eyebrow.

"You going home, Boss?"

"Yeah, and so are you. I've had enough and you've done enough. Take the box down to the basement and then we'll get the fuck out of here for today, but I want to ask if you want extra hours, Zack, as I'm going to need you and Gemmy to step up for a while. I've got a new man coming to step in as a deputy, and I'll speak to the one you mentioned earlier. If we can get two deputies, we can get wading into some of these cases that you've found and highlighted for urgent attention."

"Yeah, I'm good at stepping up my hours. To be honest, Boss, the hours I'm doing now are not enough, and I'm struggling."

I can see he's embarrassed by his statement, but I know what it's like starting out and not having enough cash to live from week to week comfortably. "Okay, Monday, you start working every day. Come in at 8:00 and stay until 5:00. Will that be too much? I need you to do Monday through Saturday at this point."

"No, I can do that, Boss. I'm not sure Gemmy will want to work more hours, though." Zack picks up the box and heads toward the basement.

"Probably not. She's only doing the hours she is to help me out." Chuckling to myself, as she'll be staying longer than she expected, I'm sure.

Stepping into the clubhouse I take a deep breath as the smell of the evening meal is so good my stomach makes a loud growl and Mia, who'd been standing nearby with one of the twins in her arms, giggles. "It's not quite time to eat, Forest."

"I know, but I'm going to see if Meat has anything to keep me going." I give the twin a chuck under his chin with my index finger, wink at Mia, and walk

through to the kitchen.

Meat stands with his arms folded across his chest, appearing as though he'd rather be anywhere but here.

“You okay, Meat? I wonder if you’ve something I can eat to keep me going until the evening meal is ready?” I ask, but keeping a close eye on him for any reaction.

Turning with a blank face, Meat steps over to the stove, throws a skillet onto the burner, and cracks an egg into it after drizzling it with olive oil. Dragging a huge piece of meat out of the oven he slices off a thick piece before pushing it back in, then buttering a large bread bun, he places the meat and the cooked egg on one half and slaps the top of the bun on and hands it to me. All without a word or expression.

“You okay?” I ask, taking my first bite of the bun and growling with enjoyment, because this meat has a hell of a spicy taste to it. Not hot, but bursting with flavor. “If you ever get any free time, I could do with help at the office. We are finding cases that are highly suspicious and need eyes on, and probably some investigating.”

Meat turns to look me over, lifts an eyebrow, then smiles at me. Well, it’s a tip on the corner of his mouth if I’m being truthful, but it is a smile, nonetheless.

“I’ve got to give punishment ideas to Axel for Eden and Mia. But I’m good at coming to help you as I’m stepping back from TJs for a while. I’m letting them two take the load, and after I speak to Axel, I’m sure I won’t need to be at the bar often.”

Now, I don’t know what he’s up to, but whatever it is, I don’t think Eden and Mia are going to like it. I give Meat a nod as I continue eating and then watch as he walks out of the kitchen with purpose in his stride. I hope I’ve not caused myself a shitload of trouble by getting him to come help at the Sheriff’s office, but it’s too late now to change my mind.

Hammer and Tilly walk into the kitchen and I give them both a nod as I finish swallowing. “I’m glad you could make it tonight, Hammer. I want to talk to you about my house.”

The next hour we sit at one of the kitchen tables and discuss my ideas. I make sure Hammer knows that I want my kitchen to be like Gemmy's, as I love the way that is set up. For the rest of the house, I'm pleased to leave it all to Hammer, as I don't have any ideas or any desire to design anything.

Tilly is throwing some ideas and is excited to come to the house and have a look with Hammer tomorrow. I tell them to come on over to Stitch and Gemmy's for the cookout too and grin when I know Stitch will give me the stink eye when I tell him I've invited them. I love getting him on a rant, and we both know it's our way of having fun with each other.

We all three turn and look at the common room where all hell seems to have broken out with shouting and cursing from what sounds like Mia.

Following Hammer and Tilly into the common room, my eyes widen when I see Meat standing with a motherfucking smirk on his face and his eyes sparkling with amusement. Mia is nearly nose-to-nose with Axel, and he has a damn grin on his face.

The front door slams open and Eden rushes in with Silver right behind her. And he's got a huge smirk on his face. What the fuck is going on?

"I'm not doing it," Mia shouts, and Eden takes a stand next to her, both trying to look intimidating, but it's pretty damn obvious that Axel isn't bothered one bit by their display.

"Oh yes, you will, both of you. You caused this problem, now you're going to fix it. Your punishment is set and you'll do this to show Silver, Meat, and the rest of the brothers that you are not selfish people, and you are good to stand by whatever is dished out. You did this, the both of you, taking Cookie away from Club Whisky, leaving Silver in the shit." Axel bends down and gives both Mia and Eden the stink eye. "You will do this for the next month. Then you will take my place for a month, and Eden will take Silver's. You will both learn exactly what you caused when you stepped in and thought you fixed the damn issue. Cookie is back at Club Whisky, and you two will cook at TJs for that month as well as all the managing that Meat usually does. Meat is going to the Sheriff's office to help Forest, although he will still do some meals here.

“Amelia, Bitty, and Sybil are happy to step in, help cook, and look after the twins. But everyone here, brothers and Ol’ Ladies, will step up to help with the twins, so you don’t need to worry about them. You will spend time with them daily, even if it’s fuckin’ midnight, Mia.” Now we can all see how much this has stressed Axel, but he’ll not step back from this punishment. We all know how much trouble this caused as Silver was ready to quit the job at Club Whisky and leave the club. He’d been fighting to get that place right for a long time, and just as things went his way, this shit happened.

Nobody had heard the main front door open but we all turned when we heard someone say. “Now, what trouble have you got yourself into this time?”

“SHAR!” Mia shouts, then runs over to the woman and throws her arms around her. The man behind Shar shakes his head while having a huge grin on his face.

Axel walks over and holds his hand out for a shake, and asks. “Hi, Crack. How’re you doing?”

“Pretty fine, Axel. Someone had to come with Shar to make sure she didn’t cause trouble,” he chuckles at his comment.

“Hey, don’t start that crap,” the woman named Shar says but is laughing all the while.

Shar, Mia, and Eden bustle out of the common room and to the twins' playroom, slamming the door behind them.

Me, I look at everyone, then disappear into the kitchen, ready to eat.

CHAPTER THREE

-- FOREST --

Running the palm of my hand down my face, I can't stop the large yawn that appears. It came around to morning way too fast. I need to get this place sorted out because living here is nowhere near ideal. The bathroom only has a toilet and sink, the kitchen is a nightmare and the bedrooms, well, are blank shells that need something happening to them. The bed I'm sleeping on needs replaced, as it's dilapidated, to say the least.

Stepping into the kitchen I don't even try to make a drink, I walk right out of the back door, out the yard, across the road, and into Stitch's place. Not even bothering to knock this morning on the back door, I just charge right in, grab the coffee pot, and pour a mug, taking a huge swallow that burns the roof of my mouth.

"Are you okay?" Gemmy asks, gently walking over to me and rubbing my back, much to the disgust of Stitch.

"I'm tired, and that house is a nightmare to live in. I've invited a colleague to come live with me and be a deputy, but shit, there is no bed or anything in the damn house." I rub the back of my neck because I realize I've jumped the gun with my offer.

Stitch stands from where he'd been sitting at the island, walks over, and slaps my shoulder. "Look, you can stay here, both of you. We have three bedrooms, we only use one. You and your deputy can use the others while Hammer gets your house ready," then I see the grin on his face. "I'll not charge you much for staying."

"Fuck off," I snarl, but I'm nodding my head in thanks all the same.

Taking my mug of coffee with me, I leave Gemmy and Stitch watching me, both with grins on their faces. But I know I couldn't have a better family, and that's what they are to me now. Family.

After getting ready to leave for work, I take my mug back across the road,

and entering the kitchen I have to smirk when Gemmy is rushing around getting ready for work herself.

“I’m late, Forest, but I’ll only be ten minutes behind you,” Gemmy shouts as she runs out of the kitchen.

“I’M GOING, I’LL SEE YOU IN A FEW MINUTES,” I shout, and giving Stitch a nod, I walk out of the kitchen, take a deep breath of air, and make my way to the cruiser which is parked in front of my place.

Unlocking the Sheriff's Department as I’m the first to arrive, I open my office door and step inside. Looking around, I’m going to have to empty the two filing cabinets, and then check how much else is being hidden.

Looking up when I hear whistling I’m surprised to see Meat walk into my office, giving me a smirk, and he then folds his arms across his chest lifting a questioning eyebrow at me.

“Okay. We have boxes of cases that we’ll need to check out. These filing cabinets in here need to be emptied, every single file checked, and then we can place things in some kind of order.

“Can you start with the filing cabinets here, as I need to make a call to pull in another deputy if I can, that is.”

Meat doesn’t even speak. He steps over to the first filing cabinet and slides open the top drawer, taking out three files, then stepping over to his desk in the office and laying them down. He takes a seat and opens the first file, not giving me a moment's attention while I’m just watching him, resigned that I’m never going to know what the fuck this man is thinking.

I look up when I hear Gemmy shout. “I’m here.” Which I have to admit has me grinning and shaking my head. Standing in the doorway, Gemmy smiles brightly. “Oh, hi, Meat, how you doing?”

Meat gives his usual grunt but doesn’t lift his head. He’s now scratching notes onto a pad before placing them in the folder. Laying it on one side, then opening the next one. How he has all the women as his besties, as they call him, I’ve really no idea.

“Check what Zack has left for you, Gemmy. He’s going to work full-time

starting Monday. It'll be good to have the extra coverage and maybe we'll all be able to make some headway in the mess we have to deal with."

"Okay, I'll do that. Don't forget you have a meeting with the Mayor at three this afternoon," Gemmy says as she leaves my office.

Picking up my phone where I'd placed it on the desk, I head to the small kitchen where it'll be quieter to speak to Sober if he picks up the call. Zack is so good at getting information and giving me all the information I need. He not only found Sober by speaking with Old Man Philips, but he got contact details at the same time.

"Yeah, who's this?" I hear, which brings me back to the moment.

"Sheriff Forest. I assume Old Man Philips has already spoken to you about my needing new deputies. He told me you'd make an ideal one, and from what I remember of you, I have to agree. But, let's not waste time. Are you interested or not?" I'm not fucking about as I don't have time. There is way too much to be done here and too many cases need looking at.

"Yeah, Old Man Philips spoke to me. He reminded me of who you were. But I thought you were FBI?"

"I was. I retired early after the last mission turned my stomach so bad with the images I'll never get out of my head. It's not been an easy job, and I was happy to walk away. Then I got roped into doing this fucking job, but to be honest, it's a job that needs to be done. Lots of shit to dig up and I need people that I can trust and know how to work quietly and get done what we need doing." I wait for his response.

"Is it true that the last sheriff didn't solve Colin Montgomery's death?"

Now that question surprises me. "That's true. If you come on board, I'll show you his case file. Do you have a personal interest in the man?"

"Yeah, he was married to my cousin for six years before she died of cancer. He was a good man, worked hard, and never caused trouble. But he told me he overheard something he wasn't supposed to, didn't say what, but a short while later he was found dead."

"Okay. Even if you don't take me up on the offer of deputy, I'll need you to

come in and put that into a statement.” Rubbing the bridge of my nose as I can already feel the tension building and it’s only the start of the day.

“I’ll come in, and then we can talk about this and the position. I’ll see you in about two hours.” Sober cuts the call and I stand a moment thinking I really need help with this job, and hope he and Ty, including Meat, can help me get some organization going on.

Gemmy is busy behind the reception desk as I pass and walk into my office. Meat is leaning back in his seat, studying a file with a deep frown. Looking up as I take my seat, Meat slams the folder on the desk and looks at me with nothing less than fury on his face.

“You know that cocksucker was hiding tons of shit, right?” Meat snarls. “He has four case files here for rapes he did nothing about. Four women, all being stalked, all having their homes broken into, and all four raped. He did NOTHING!” bellowing the last word.

“No, I didn’t know that because I’m waist-deep in another case file he did nothing about. That’s why I need so much help. That’s why I asked you to come and give me as much help as you can. A fresh pair of eyes and backup if I need it. I’ve spoken to Ty Parrellin. He’s a man I worked with and he’s taken early retirement. He’s coming to be deputized and will live with me at Stitch’s place until my place is ready. I’ve Sober coming to see me in a couple of hours. He’s a great man and if we can pull him in as a deputy, he’ll be good for the department. How about me deputizing you until we have this place organized, then when you’re ready, you can go back to being the cook, gardener, and anything else you want to be?”

Meat’s intense gaze has me fighting to not look away. These prior-military guys are alpha males who sometimes ooze power. But fuck if I will look away from one of them, and this guy can leak ice in his stare.

“I’ll do it, but only until you get this place in shape. I’ll speak to Pres and fill him in, because you’re gonna need all the help you can get. This place is a mess and you can bet a lot of cases need looking at because the motherfucker did nothing.”

Meat has a set look on his face, and I can see he feels the same way I do

about this place, which is the fact that it needs every single file opened, checked out, and dealt with.

Checking every inch of the drawers of the desk, I read each piece of paper I find, every page in the notebooks, and even check out the scribbles on the desk itself.

When Gemmy informs me I have someone here to see me I leave the office and give a smile to Sober, who is looking pretty damn good I have to admit. He's around 6' 2", with short blond hair, clean-shaven, and an athletic build.

Holding my hand out to shake, he grips it firmly and gives me a nod. "I can give you an hour, then I've got to be somewhere else."

"No problem. Come on into the kitchen. We'll have a drink and talk."

Once I've made us a drink and taken a seat at the rickety table and chairs in the corner of the small kitchen I look at Sober. "I need you to come and work with me. I have a retired FBI agent coming also, but the more the merrier. The mess this place is in, you'll not believe. There are cases like Colin's that have never been looked into. Meat, who I'm going to deputize, also has found a file where four women were stalked and then raped. Nothing was done. We need to look into all these cases. It's going to be tough, but I need people I can trust, and I can leave to get on with the job."

"I don't know what Old Man Phillips told you about me, but we worked a case together a few years back. I was a new MP at the time and you were looking into a smuggling operation that had some links to the Marines. I was the liaison between you FBI guys and the Marines. We only met twice, but we sure shut down that operation really quick and with the minimum of fuss." Sober looks at me with a smile.

"Yes, I remember the case. It was one of the few that didn't give me nightmares afterward. I didn't remember the name, but now you've told me the case, I remember you well. You were into every aspect of that case. You had people running around like jackrabbits gathering intel, background checks, and surveillance. I passed on a commendation to your boss for the work you did." I grinned at him as he raised an eyebrow at that bit of information.

“I was told about that commendation, but never who it came from. It was a major stepping stone to my first promotion. I hope I can live up to it now.” He grinned and offered his hand.

“I take it you’re accepting the position then? I’ll be glad to have you with me. If you can be in early Friday morning, I’ll get you sworn in. I have two more to swear in, so I’d like to get that done in one go.” I can’t help the tic that raises the corner of my lip in a smile.

“Let’s finish our coffee and I’ll show you what we’re up against.” We spend the next half-hour going over some of the shit I’d come across and show him the Colin Montgomery file. He writes me his statement, and he lets me know his thoughts on the previous sheriff's complete lack of any involvement with the case.

He leaves me with a promise to be back for his swearing-in on Friday.

Knowing that I now have Sober onboard, I can sigh with a little relief. Having Meat, Ty, and Sober will give me three experienced deputies, maybe not all in the same field, but with the knowledge they have, they will complement each other.

Zack will work every day starting Monday, and Gemmy, I hope, will stay in the job for a while longer, at least. She’s also going to be organizing the work on my house, which I’m leaving in her capable hands, and I’ll be living in her house. I can’t wait to cause some shit for Stitch. He’s way too easy to make fun of.

The piles of folders are being looked through, but it’s slow. We have several files that need attention as our priority. The rape cases being one of them and, of course, Colin’s, which now sounds like it could be murder.

Gemmy leaves and Zack arrives, and he has a bag with fries and chicken burgers loaded with salad for me and Meat. I ask how he knew Meat was here, and he smirks, tapping his nose in the when-you-know-you-know gesture.

I hand him dollars for the lunch and although he doesn’t want to take it, I force his hand by saying if he doesn’t allow me to pay he’ll not bring anymore as I won’t eat it.

Stepping out of the sheriff's office to go meet the mayor, I quickly make my way to his home. He'd sent a message reminding me of the meeting and instead of my home, to meet at his. That's how I find myself stepping out of the cruiser and looking at the two-story plantation house on the edge of town.

The front door opens, and the mayor gives me a nod to follow him into the house. We walk through the entrance and into a huge sitting room which has me thinking I should have taken my shoes off.

"Take a seat, Sheriff."

"Before we start on anything, I need to let you know I'm taking on three deputies, giving Zack more hours, and I'll be looking for another assistant. If the town council doesn't want that then I'll hand in my resignation now because, Mayor, the office stinks, and I don't mean just in smell." I'm not wasting my time because if he isn't going to stand with me, I'm walking.

"You can have whatever the fuck you want, excuse my language. I've spoken to many people these last two months and one thing is perfectly clear, and that is the last sheriff did nothing. It's a good thing he's incarcerated because he'd not have been free long." Leaning forward in his seat, the mayor gives me a solid look. "I want you to find everything and anything you can so I can bring extra charges against him and all his cronies. I want him locked away for the rest of his natural life."

We spend the next hour or so swapping information on some of the crap that has been handed to us. I'm a little surprised when there are areas of concern with the last mayor and his possible links to some of the sheriff's shady activities.

Back at the office, I see Meat has a nice pile of folders that we can place downstairs in the basement and into the filing cabinet we are classing as cases closed. They are mostly idiotic drunk and disorderly, bar fights and other minor issues.

Zack has done a fine job of sorting the basement of the boxes that had been piled in a corner. The cost of the new stationery is going to be phenomenal, but now I've spoken to the mayor, I don't give a crap. Zack has great

organizational skills, making sure everything is marked as it should be and filing things correctly. The filing cabinets are now empty in the basement and boxes upon boxes of folders still need to be looked at. We'll get it done, given time.

"I've gotta go, Meat, can you lock up? Bring the keys to my place when you leave, as I've got that company coming to look at my kitchen. I'll be fucking them off 'cause Gemmy said they were too expensive, and Hammer is happy to fit me in for all my work I need doing."

"Yeah, I'll drop off the keys," then gives me a shit-eating grin. "I can't wait to see what Amelia has cooked up for everyone tonight."

"I'm going over to Stitch and Gemmy's as they are doing a cookout." I pick up my phone where I'd left it on the desk and make my way out of the building, taking a lung full of fresh air before climbing into the cruiser. I'm missing my hog and the wind in my face.

The kitchen company turns out to be very interesting. They talk the good talk and keep mentioning Gemmy's kitchen, and I keep giving them a nod of agreement. I'm waiting for them to give me the price of all the fancy shit they are mentioning.

The back door opens and Hammer walks in, with Tilly in front of him. They are both grinning, and I have to admit I'm a little relieved they'll be here for this final quote for the work.

The man who is folding away all his samples and pamphlets keeps giving Hammer an odd look. I ignore it but I can see Tilly isn't too happy about it.

"So what will the cost be if I decide to go with the kitchen?" I ask, but he looks me in the eye, then Hammer. He then gives me a foul look, then states. "We all here know you're not going with my company and you'll be using his dog and pony show."

"You piece of crap," Tilly snaps as she steps toward the man. Hammer chuckles and grabs Tilly around the waist, holding her against his front. Me, I'm shocked as shit at what he's just said.

Shaking myself into action, I step toward the door, pull it open and eye the man. "Get the fuck out of my house and don't think I won't make sure that

people know about your attitude. I'll speak to the owner of the business, too."

"I'm the owner of the business, asshole," He snarls as he steps out the door, and I cannot resist putting my foot on his ass and pushing him out hard. I smirk as he shoots forward landing on his hands and knees and his samples and shit fly all over the garden. I don't wait for his bluster. I slam the door and clap my hands together before grinning at Hammer.

"Okay, you need to look at Gemmy's kitchen, 'cause I want one like hers. I need the utility room and bathroom, which only has a toilet and sink done. Plus, the bedrooms. In fact, have at it all, Hammer, as I'm staying at Stitch's place until you're done."

Tilly giggles, looking from me to Hammer, kisses his cheek, then heads to the door. "I'm going over to Gemmy's. See you two in a while." We both watch as Tilly disappears before getting to the task of planning each room.

Over at Stitch and Gemmy's, the atmosphere is relaxed and everyone laughs and jokes around easily. Hammer and Tilly are a great couple, and I think it'll be easy to work with Hammer on the house. He has a natural flair when it comes to visualizing the completed work.

CHAPTER FOUR

-:- AXEL -:-

Thursday morning and I cannot help the feeling of amusement that is running through me. Mia and Eden were not happy with their punishment, but after causing so much shit for Silver, they had to have a hard lesson. This is going to be a real lesson, and one I hope has them thinking carefully in the future about the consequences of actions they take.

Sitting back in my seat, I link my fingers and take a minute before the day starts. As president, there is always something I need to be doing, checking, planning, or signing off on anything and everything.

Knocking on the door has me give another sigh before saying 'Come in'. Buzz walks into the office, throwing himself into the chair in front of my desk. I can't hold back the grin at the sight of him. He has to have had a rough night.

"What can I do for you this fine morning?" I nearly sing song.

"Fuck you, Pres, I'm tired and I want out of this tattoo business. It's set up. Reuse is doing great, but we need another artist to take my place. I'm an enforcer, nothing else, and I don't want to be anything else."

Now, if he was a young woman, I'd say he'd be stomping his feet and having a major breakdown at this point. I can, however, see he's not happy, and that's not what I want for my officers or brothers.

"Okay, go speak with Specs. Get him to put out a call wherever he can. He'll do it in the groups he finds, or whatever other avenues he has. He'll get the people, but you and Reuse have to do the interviews. You two have the knowledge to know who has the ability and who doesn't. I don't just want an 'ass on seat' so you can get out of there. I want the best there is for the shop. Get me a dumbass and you'll be there till hell freezes over."

I look him in the eye and the look I get back makes me wonder if I just unintentionally hit a nail on the head. I don't think he'd have left Reuse in

the shit with a dumbass, but I think he was going to dump the interviews on whoever he could.

“No sweat, Pres. I’ll speak to Specs right away, and thanks. This has been messing with my head.” Buzz stands and heads off to find Specs. That shouldn’t be too difficult as he lives and breathes his tech stuff and hardly leaves his office. I don’t know how he can spend so much time in his goddamn office.

Walking out of my office, I go in search of Amelia, who is spending more time here than her home. She is the most amazing grandmother to the twins, although not blood, she may as well be, as I have no doubt she’d be happy to die to protect them.

Hearing laughter from the kitchen, I walk through the common room and stop in the kitchen doorway when I see Amelia, Bitty, and Sybil making a fuck of a mess while making breakfast for everyone.

Brothers are shaking their heads while sitting at the tables and watching the three of them doing their best to serve up plates. Meat is standing with his arms folded across his chest, a deep frown on his forehead and a squint so bad it’s a wonder he can see anything.

Stepping into the kitchen, Meat looks over at me and points at the three stooges, as we’ve all come to think of Bitty, Amelia, and Sybil. “They best make sure not a single crumb is left when they’ve finished. This place better be spotless, and they don’t touch my fuckin’ smoker.”

Before I can reply, Meat storms out of the kitchen and giggles erupt. Looking at the three stooges closely, they have flour on their faces, jelly on their aprons, and what the fuck is that yellow stuff?

Mia walks into the kitchen behind me and kisses me on the chin before walking over to the coffee machine and pouring herself one. I know she’s been in the playroom making sure the twins are settled, so now is the time to burst her happiness bubble.

“After breakfast, you and Eden are going over to TJs and I’ll be laying down what’s going to happen. Don’t be thinking the staff are going to be doing all the work, because they are not. You and Eden will learn the hard way that

what you did was wrong. Now, get your breakfast before we leave.” I don’t wait for her to reply. I kiss the top of her head, grab myself a drink, and hightail it back to my office, with a smirk on my face, now that my back is to everyone.

I was going to sort out the three stooges, but as they are deep in getting everyone’s breakfast, I’ll speak to them before I take Mia over to TJs.

In my office, I take out my phone and send a message for Shar to get her ass here, as I want to know what she has planned for the future. Is she coming back, or staying with the Rogue Legion MC?

When my phone pings, I see the reply from Shar and settle back to wait for her to get down here. I’m wondering if she’s attached to one of the brothers in the Rogue Legion MC, but it didn’t appear so, although Crack looks at her like she’s his everything.

A tap on the door before it opens and Shar pops her head in, giving me a warm smile as she steps inside. “Morning, Pres.”

“Morning, Shar. Take a seat and let’s have a chat,” I say calmly, making sure I don’t set her off because she’s a damn firecracker and the last thing I want is us at loggerheads if she’s decided to stay. If she’s staying I’ll be laying the law down, but if she’s going, then I will let her go feeling a little sad for Mia as I know she’s missed her best friend.

“I know what you need to know, and it’s been a hard decision because Mia and I have a sister type of friendship rather than just best friends. She has you and all the brothers, plus she has the twins, so with that in mind, she doesn’t need me like we needed each other before.

“I’ve discussed options with Sharp and he’s happy for me to stay with the Rogue Legion MC and continue with building businesses for the club. It’s been inspiring, and without Mia pushing me to learn how to do what I do, flipping homes and businesses, I wouldn’t be where I am now.”

I interrupt her because she’s seeing this as all one-sided. “Shar, without you, Mia may not have even made it to me and the brothers. You watched each other's backs when it was most needed. You bonded with each other through a situation neither of you should have even been in. Don’t sell

yourself short. You are someone any club would be more than happy to have.” I look her directly in the eye. “You’re trying to tell me you are not coming back, aren’t you?”

Seeing her swallow before giving a slight nod. “Yeah, I want to stay where I am. I’m happy and I feel I’m supposed to be with them.”

“Has one of them claimed you?”

“No, but I keep them on their toes.” Now we both laugh at that comment because I can imagine she runs them ragged on a good day.

“I know Sharp keeps looking at me as though he wants to stake his claim. As much as I like him, we’re not going to be heading down that road at this moment, anyway. I don’t see myself with a brother at this time, but then I have had little time to mingle, as it were. There’s a couple of barmen at Dance Mecca that fit my bill, though I’m not one for dallying with the hired help either.” Shar grins and her eyes sparkle as she tells me this.

“I’m pretty sure, Shar, that when you see your man, he won’t know what the hell hit him before you have him hogtied and down the aisle, as it were. Well, I wish you well in all your endeavors, be they business or personal, and hope you can keep one step ahead of Sharp.” I laugh at this and Shar laughs with me.

“Okay, you still have some stuff at the coffee house. I took the liberty of having Liam box it up. On the quiet, of course. I’d had an idea that you’d just settled at Rogue Legion MC and wouldn’t be coming back.” I then let her know how well the coffee house is doing and that Liam has become an asset to the business.

“Remember to say goodbye to Mia, and that you can come here anytime she may need you,” giving her a stern look so that she realizes that. “We’ll always be here if you want to return or need us.”

“Thanks, Axel.” When she calls me Axel I know in her mind that she’s already left the Raging Barons MC, and become aligned with the Rogue Legion MC.

Ninety minutes later, I’m pulling up in front of the coffee house, and turning to look at Mia, who’s sulking in the passenger seat. “Do you want to come in or wait here?”

“I’ll wait here.” I lean over and pull her to me, kissing her forehead. I know she’s sad that Shar has left, but she’s not been around for a while. She kept saying she wanted to stay a little longer, and the longer it went, the less likely it was she’d come back. She’s someone who needs to be needed, and the Rogue Legion MC needed and still needs her.

Walking into the coffee house, the tables are busy and Marge is behind the counter, serving with a look of being harassed. She’s red in the face and frowning as she works. I smile at her as I pass and walk into the kitchen where Liam and Frances are working. One is rinsing dishes and filling the dishwasher and one is cleaning counters down.

Liam looks up and gives me a nod. “Hi, Pres, everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just wanted to have a quick word with you if I can,” I say and give him a head nod to step outside the back door with me. Closing the door behind him, he waits for me to speak. That’s one of the things I like about Liam. He never pushes for useless chatter. “Shar has officially left, and that makes you manager permanently. The apartment is yours and you can take on new staff which I know you are desperate for. How many new people do you think you need?”

Liam looks a little shocked, but I know Shar has not collected her belongings yet, so he won’t have known she’s left for good up to my telling him.

“We need four, I think, but it will depend on if I find people that want to work full or part-time hours. What I want is to employ the best people for the job, because Pres, it’s been hard working all these hours, and Marge is tired and thinking of taking a vacation, which would leave us in the shit.”

Studying Liam, I think he could do with a vacation too, by the looks of him. It’s amazing how things keep getting done, day in, day out, and without a word of complaint. I’ll have to have my finger on the pulse when it comes to vacations and such, in all the businesses.

“Get the numbers crunched and we’ll throw them at TwoCents and see where we are. You’ll also need a raise in your salary now that we know the position is permanently yours. The apartment comes as a rent-free addition, the same as it was for Shar. You’ve done a fantastic job with the coffee

house, Liam. Now let's get you the staff in place so you can be the manager we need you to be and take it to the next level." Liam gives me a high five, which takes me by surprise but just goes to show his enthusiasm and commitment. I think we got a great asset when Shar got Liam involved with the coffee house.

Knowing Liam will have everything under control quickly, I head back to the vehicle where I'm sure Mia is still sulking, but she's gonna have to get over it as she's going to have far more to worry about in a short while.

Walking into TJs' kitchen with Mia dragging her feet behind me, I smirk when I see Eden standing at the sink rinsing dishes. Everyone looks up to see who's walked in and I give nods before speaking clearly. "Good day everyone. I'm not sure if Eden has filled you in on what's going on, but, from this moment, Mia and Eden will cook and run TJs. You do not do the cooking for them. They stole the chef from another business and this is what it's earned them. Cookie will work at Club Whisky, not here. She is not the chef for TJs and never will be. We will look for another chef for here, to start in a month's time, but until then, these two..." as I point at Mia and Eden, "will work as chefs and anywhere else needed. Oh, Meat is also busy somewhere else, so any issues you may have, you will also see Mia and Eden, as they are joint owners of the business. If, however, you think I am needed as part club business owner, then you speak to me, or Beer as he is here often with being head barman."

I lean over and kiss Mia on the top of her head, then turn and leave the kitchen, head to the vehicle and as soon as I climb inside, closing the door I throw my head back and laugh. That will teach the pair of them to fuck with the brothers and the businesses.

Before I pull out of the parking lot Beer runs out of the bar and opens the driver's door. "Pres, I want to take two weeks off and go on a road trip. I need a break, been wanting one for a while, and Stitch said he'd go with me. I know he has Gemmy but Forest is happy to keep his eye on her as he is living at their place, and working with Gemmy in the mornings. Can someone else watch the bar for two weeks?"

"Leave it with me and I'll see who I can find to step in. But I don't have a

problem with you taking time out. You've not had a break in a long time. I'm aware of that." My mind quickly roams over the brothers to see who I can enlist to do this. "Yeah, leave it with me for a couple of days, Beer."

"Okay, Pres, thanks." Beer makes his way back to the bar, and I get my ass back to the clubhouse. Damn, I think to myself, another vacation. I've still some organizing to do at the clubhouse and now this.

I enter the clubhouse by the kitchen door and am happy to see the three stooges in the kitchen, with the twins in their twin stroller fast asleep. "You ladies okay?" I ask.

"Yeah, we've just had a walk around the compound to get the boys asleep so we can make a start on lunches," Bitty replies, and she's buttering bread at a hell of a rate while Sybil is slapping ham and salad on before sliding it over to Amelia who's putting a slice on top then cutting it in half and piling onto a serving platter.

"You all three know Eden and Mia are on punishment, so they'll not be around much. I'm relying on you three to look after the twins and make sure meals are made. Can you do that for me?"

They all three stick out their chests, looking proud to be asked, and Amelia gives me her false scowl. "Of course, we can do that. We're not senile yet."

The other two are nodding in agreement and I'm struggling to hold the laughter back, but know it would only bite me on the ass if I let go. "Any of the officers will watch the twins if you are busy cooking or anything. You can come find me too. Don't think this has been dumped on you with no help. All the brothers will help you if you ask, and remember, Jo works from the clubhouse writing so you can call on her, too."

As if speaking of Jo has her appear, she walks into the kitchen, nose in a notepad and scribbling. She bumps into the island, curses, and then continues writing. She smirks, then throws her head back, laughing. That's when she realizes she has an audience. Now I don't know what she's writing, but a blush starts from the neck of her t-shirt and it crawls up her neck, chin, cheeks, and forehead before disappearing into her hairline.

Knuckles walks into the kitchen, notices us all staring at Jo, and as our eyes

flick to him then back again, he walks over to Jo, picks her up, throws her over his shoulder, and walks out of the kitchen giving her ass a hard slap as he does. I shake my head as I look at the three stooges because I don't want to know. I really don't.

CHAPTER FIVE

-:- FOREST -:-

Walking into the office, I see Meat already here and working at the second desk. “Morning Meat, you were here early. Have you found anything we need to urgently follow up on?”

Meat is a man of few words, but when he speaks everyone listens, because you can guarantee it’s worth listening to.

“I’m looking at the rape cases. Four women, all living alone, with no families, no relationships. Whoever did this didn’t just stalk in the normal sense. He studied them, and their circumstances. This is a serial rapist, and if he’s not stopped, he’ll become a serial killer.” Meat is looking me right in the eye, and I walk over and take the notes that he is holding out for me to look at.

Sitting at my desk, I study the notes and can see where Meat has highlighted all the similarities in the women's lives. Down to them all having blond hair, blue eyes, and slightly on the heavy side. Looking up at Meat, I say nothing for a minute. My mind is flying with everything that I need to get done, and it’s obvious I’m not going to be able to do everything alone.

“I’m swearing you in as deputy this afternoon as I don’t have time this morning, along with Sober and Ty. This is going to be your case. You run with it, bringing me everything you find, and we’ll find this fucker before he takes it a step further.” I can see the respect that has earned me, as Meat gives me a nod, then stands and walks over, holding his hand out to shake. I grasp his hand, giving him the respect back, and I know we’ll make a damn good team.

Gemmy walks into the office, hands Meat a coffee, kisses his cheek before walking over to my desk and placing a mug down. She turns to leave the office, I look at Meat who’s smirking, then Gemmy. “Hey, where’s my kiss on the cheek?”

“Oh, you can’t have one. They are only Meat’s kisses.” She has the cheek to wink at me and then walks out, but I turn and give Meat a scowl as he

chuckles while taking his first sip of coffee. “Fucker!” I mumble, but turn back to the pile of paperwork.

The morning is moving along well until I hear a voice I’d hoped not to hear anytime soon. “Where’s my man?”

I look over my shoulder towards the reception and wish I’d closed the door now, but it’s open a few inches, so at least no one can see inside the office.

Meat looks up and gives me a questioning look, which I return with a grimace. Seeing him smirk when he realizes what’s going on isn’t helping my mood much.

“What man are you talking about?” Gemmy asks.

“Well, Sheriff Forest, of course.”

“Oh, you think Forest is your man?” Gemmy laughs and I mean she laughs as in full-on belly laughs.

“What’s so funny, bitch?” Polly asks, and I hear her stomp her foot from where I am in the office.

“You? You think Forest would make you his forever woman?” Now the tone changes dramatically. Gemmy’s voice is ice cold when she continues. “You are the type of woman that’s good for a one-nighter, know what I mean? Dip it and quit it, because you are a cheap ass skank who probably scoots around the clubs and bars looking for some nice man to grab a hold of. Someone you can suck everything out of, and all so you don’t have to do an honest day’s work. Now get the fuck out of this office and don’t let me see you back here again or I’ll have you arrested for trespassing.”

“You can’t talk to me like that, or order me out of here. Who the fuck do you think you are?” Polly snarls.

“I’m Forest’s bestie and so is my man, and every other brother in the Raging Barons MC. None of which would accept you as Forest’s Ol’ Lady, even if he was interested. But my bestie has more sense than tying himself up with the likes of you.”

Gemmy is raging and I see Meat has sneaked up and peeking past the door to see what the scene looks like. I can’t miss this either, so I sneakily walk

over and look past Meat into the reception area. Now Gemmy and Polly are nearly nose-to-nose and I'm thinking I best step out and put an end to this when someone walks in the front door.

"What are you doing here?" Zack's voice has me thinking, 'Saved by the bell.'

"I've come to see my man, Sheriff Forest." Polly tries to get around Zack sweetly.

"No, sorry, if you were Sheriff Forest's woman, you'd call him by his first name, and let's see..." tapping his chin with his index finger, "nope, you don't know it, do you? Hmm..." The extended humming has me wanting to chuckle, but I hold it back to see what's going to happen next.

Screeching happens next, and I step back away from the door because shit, that's just downright childish. Meat opens the office door and stomps into reception with his fierce aura around him. I take a seat at my desk and wait for whatever is going to happen next. I'm not going out there. I'll sit here and listen to the shit going down.

"Get the fuck outta this office, NOW!" Meat bellows the last word, and I hear a squeak before the clapping of heels, then the front door opens and slams closed.

Gemmy barks out a fit of laughter, followed by Zack, and when I look up all three walk into the office with Meat shaking his head at me. "Why the fuck did you dip it with her?"

Gemmy is shaking her head at me, and Zack looks fit to laugh his ass off. I've got to admit I'm a little embarrassed about it, but I didn't know she was going to be a *clinger* at the time.

Zack pulls himself together, then seriously states. "You're going to have a job scraping her off, Boss. She's known in town for trying to get herself a man so she can sit at home doing nothing while he works to earn the money that she can spend. She has more one-nighters than the local hooker."

"Fuck me!" I sigh.

"No, she already did that, and look where that got you?" Zack looks at me

with a *'you really went and did it this time,'* expression.

"I don't think you've seen the last of her, Forest. I'll make sure if she comes here to get rid of her, but I suggest you keep your eye open for her and dodge her until she finds her next victim." Gemmy giggles as she leaves the office with Zack on her heels.

Meat looks over at me, shaking his head. "This is why I don't get involved with women. When I find my woman, she'll know I've not stuck my dick all over town."

Sighing, I know he's right, but it was a weak moment just after I left the FBI, got my life cleared away, and came here to become a full brother. I just needed at that moment to be with a woman and sow my wild oats, as the saying goes.

Gemmy walks back into the office, and both Meat and I look up and wait for what she's going to say.

"We need a cleaner for this place. I'm going to give Heather a call and see if she has a spare person to come and do it. I won't tell them to do the basement, of course, just reception, kitchen, and offices. The basement and cells you all can clean because that's not part of my job." Gemmy places her hands on her hips, gives both of us a sharp nod, then turns and leaves the office once more.

I flick my eyes over to Meat, who gives me that half-grin thing he has going on, then looks down at his notes. I shake my head and think 'whatever', before getting back to reading the paperwork in front of me.

After lunch Ty and Sober arrive. Ty is 6', well-muscled from exercise and gym workouts, with short dark hair and eyes which you could say are nearly black. He's clean-shaven, but I've known him to have a beard once or twice over the years.

"Come in, both of you. This is Meat." I point over to Meat, who stands from the desk and steps over to shake hands with them both. He gives his usual grunt and I think he must have used his quota of words already today.

"Okay, first things first. You're all going to be deputized today, so you'll all be at the same level of law enforcement. I know you well enough that I don't

think there'll be any bullshit about who's in charge or higher up the food chain. I am in charge. I give any orders when they're necessary. However, I expect you to do what's right in each case you work. I don't expect you to be running to me every five minutes second-guessing yourselves." Looking each one of them in the eye, I have to say, I can only see humor looking back at me.

"All right, I've said my piece." They all just grin at me and then Meat fist-bumps Ty and Sober. All three look like the cat that had the cream. I could have just set up the best team ever, or a bunch of delinquents with the keys to the asylum.

"Meat has a case that needs serious attention. We have a serial rapist on the loose. Four women have been raped, all the same MO and all the victims' descriptions are the same. This isn't an opportunist. This is someone targeting a specific set of parameters and it looks like he or they are doing their homework on each victim. Meat may call on us for support in this, and if he does, we go to him. The last prick of a sheriff has done fuck all in investigating this and we don't know if or when there'll be another victim." I struggle to keep my anger in check because I can't comprehend that a sheriff would ignore such serious crimes.

"When. There is no if. There will be another victim. Whoever is doing this is getting more violent each time. We're going to have a corpse in the next couple of attacks." Meat looks at us and I have to say, if I was a bad guy right now, I'd be shitting my pants. The look is one of death and a slow, painful death at that.

"Sober has what we think is a murder case to look into. The case file had a paper in it that said 'found by the river', and another stating 'case closed'. Colin Montgomery, whoever he was, deserves more than two pieces of fucking paper shoved in the back of a drawer somewhere. The same goes for Sober. If he needs help, we help." Ty looks at me and raises an eyebrow.

"Ty gets to do the general day-to-day stuff for now. I expect the roads to get safer and the speeds to come down. There's been an increase in bar fights that have left the owners out of pocket because no one turned up after a 911 call was logged. We need to support Ty in this. He's going to have his

hands full, too.”

“I doubt I’ll need too much help with that, but I know you’ll all be there if I need you.” Ty Looks around the three of us and we all give a nod.

“Does anyone have an issue with being deputized?” I ask them and get a verbal response from each before carrying on.

“I’ll get you all sworn in together now. You’ll be on the payroll starting Monday, but as you’re all here, you can give me the afternoon as a freebie so we can get organized for a flying start.”

I go through the swearing-in process and ensure the paperwork is all signed and dated. I’m not one for leaving loopholes, so I make sure all the ‘i’s are dotted and the t’s are crossed’. Once they’ve got their badges, I introduce them formally to Gemmy and Zack.

Now everything is organized as far as the job goes. I look at Gemmy and smile. She takes that as her cue. “Ty, you’ll be staying at my place with Stitch, my man, and Forest, until his house is ready. Now you don’t have to be tiptoeing around. We are not that sort of people.”

"Thanks, Gemmy, I'll try to be on my best behavior," Ty replies.

“Oh, I hope not. We love some mischief and shenanigans. I’ll be taking you to the clubhouse to meet everyone.”

Now that worries me a little because Ty got into trouble himself at times, with playing pranks on co-workers.

“Okay,” he replies, rubbing his hands together and a damn twinkle in his eye, “I’ll look forward to meeting everyone.”

The next two hours we spend placing desks in the office, and it’s damn good. It’s a large room because I’m not moving into that tiny office that was supposed to be the sheriff’s which is full of furniture at the moment.

Of course, it’s like Sober heard my thoughts. “When we’ve emptied the other office, you need to move in and make it yours. You need to be apart from us as we are deputies, and need space from you, too.”

I look at him, then Ty and Meat, who are all nodding in agreement. Fuck me,

I had no sooner had the thought and they all want rid of me. "Fine!" I snap and walk out of the office, through to the kitchen where I sulk for a minute while making myself a drink.

Zack walks through to the kitchen, giving me a quick look, before asking. "You okay, Boss?"

"Yeah, I got kicked out of that office and put in the smaller one."

"Oh, well, you know that your deputies will work better without you breathing down their necks, and to have you in the same office will feel like that to them." Zack hands me the cookie tin, and I open it and take one out. "There is a large whiteboard on the wall opposite the window. Do you think we could use it like an evidence board where you can have ideas, thoughts, and other stuff written that all of you would need to know? Like in an Agatha Christie book or something, you know 'Murder She Wrote'."

"Get out of here, what damn stuff are you smoking?" mumbling to myself as I walk through reception, the office, and into the smaller office. But looking at the board on the wall, I can see what he means. It could be used as an evidence board. Maybe I was a little sharp with Zack. Sighing, I rub the back of my neck and know it's time to step away for a short while.

Taking out my phone, I send a message to Stitch.

Forest: Meal at Club Whisky, my treat.

Stitch: Ok. What time?

Forest: 6:00

Stitch: C U then

Walking into the deputies' office, which is how I'm going to have to see it from now on, I look up at the three of them sitting behind a desk each. Meat working on his notes, Ty cleaning his desk drawers, and Sober wiping the top of his desk as though it's offended him in some way.

"Okay, you three. We'll finish here at 5:30 and go over to Club Whisky for a meal. You can meet Stitch as he's Gemmy's Ol' Man and Ty, it's his home we'll both be staying in for a while."

“Yeah, Gemmy told me that,” Ty replies but doesn’t look up as his nose scrunches in disgust when he finds something in one of the drawers that should have crawled away and died somewhere else.

“Meat, you keep your ears open for Zack needing anything, and I’ll take these two down to the basement. I’ll show them how far we have gotten with organizing all the cabinets and boxes.” Seeing the slight dip of his head, I lead Ty and Sober downstairs.

It doesn’t take too long to point out what has been checked and needs filing, and what still needs to be looked through. I know that Colin’s case will be Sober’s baby, as it’s personal for him.

“Sober, you’ve seen what I have so far on Colin’s case. I want you to work on that case and see what you can dig up. Ty, I need you to help me wade through this shit and see what needs to be looked at, and what Gemmy can file away as closed cases.”

Ty looks around at all the boxes and gives a nod. “I’ll make a start first thing Monday morning. I’ll prioritize anything I find, so we have red as urgent and green as when we get time. Will that be okay?”

Now I’ve worked with Ty many times, and I’ve seen his color-coded system, and it works, and works well. “Yeah, that’s fine by me. If you need the colored stickers, you can ask Zack to get them, or Gemmy. They have the petty cash and make sure all receipts are kept in order.”

“Okay, will do,” Ty replies but is still looking at the number of boxes he’ll be working through. Looking at his watch, he checks the time and then turns to me. “I have an hour. I’ll look at one of the boxes before we finish and go eat. Everything is in my vehicle, so I don’t have to go anywhere between eating and going to Gemmy’s home.”

“Okay, that’s good. I’ll look at one too. Meat has the rape case he’s working on, and Sober has the suspected murder case. I’m sure there is more that needs urgent attention in these boxes.”

Ty grabs a box and takes out a file. There’s a lot of ‘hmms’ and then he slaps the folder on the ground. I have a folder, but I’m watching Ty more than I am reading the folder. After another round of ‘hmms’ and folders going to

the ground, he catches me watching him.

“Forest, I know you said the previous sheriff had left you shit to clean up, but I didn’t think it was this bad. These are just basic driving offenses, but nothing has been done. There are some with no tickets issued, no warnings, nothing. There is one common theme throughout, though. They’re all for the same family in this box. The sheriff’s family, by the look of things. They just drove anything they wanted, what speed they wanted, drunk or high. There are a couple of tickets here for a fourteen-year-old. They escorted him home with a cruiser while he drove his vehicle home.” Ty looks disgusted and I can't say I blame him.

“Ty, that’s just the tip of the iceberg. The sheriff didn’t get 10 years for allowing a kid to drive a vehicle. He was involved in all types of shit, and I think we’re going to find a lot more by the time we sort through all these boxes.” I sigh as I think of what I’ve got myself into.

Walking into Club Whisky, I can feel myself relaxing. Ty, Sober, and Meat all walk in behind me and we make our way over to a table. Silver sees us from behind the bar and gives a chin lift. Stitch and Gemmy walk into the club and make their way over to us.

“Stitch, this is Sober and Ty,” I introduce and after handshakes, we all settle down in our seats. Silver walks over and waves a server over to take our orders.

“Do you want to eat? I’ll get Tony to get food out to you quickly.” Silver asks.

“Yeah, we’ll eat. Just send out a bunch of stuff and we’ll dig in.” Looking at everyone for their agreement and on their nods, Silver grunts and walks away.

Gemmy is excited, and it’s easy to see she’s bubbling with it. “I love coming here to eat. Tony makes the best of everything. It doesn’t matter what you order, it’s great. We’ll have baskets of food around here soon, and it’ll all be fabulous. Oh, I’ve got your rooms ready, and you just have to put your things away. I’ll do laundry on Saturdays, so make sure your baskets are in the utility room or it won’t get done.”

Stitch is grinning behind his hand, and we all can see he’s holding back his

laughter. Gemmy must see who we're looking at and turns quickly to look at Stitch, but he puts on a straight, serious face. "Yeah, you tell them what's going to happen." Stitch leans over and kisses her on the forehead while winking at us four over the top of her head.

The food arrives and we all tuck in hungrily because it's been a long time since lunch. The chicken is fantastic and melts in your mouth as you bite into it, drumsticks at their best. My eyes round when I see the ribs and can't help but grab a basket of those.

Meat eats quickly, rubbing his hands on a napkin and standing. "I'll see you Monday," he states, then strides out of the club without a backward glance.

Stitch chuckles. "I've persuaded him to have some counseling, and oh boy, the woman is a stickler for punctuality. But to be fair, he's doing great, although he didn't want to go originally. I had to hold something over his head to get him to go, but I think if you notice, he's speaking more, which tells me it's having a good effect."

"Actually, you're right. I've noticed he's not been grunting as much," I add to the conversation.

"Did something happen to him?" Sober asks.

Stitch looks serious when he responds. "Prior military, bad upbringing, all added to a nice dose of PTSD. But, he's got good brothers watching his back, and making him create a routine was the start of Meat coming back to himself and us. We nearly lost him at one point as he'd been held prisoner. I'm saying no more on the matter. It's his story to tell, but I don't think he'll ever tell it to any of us. Just be aware he's not being rude, he's just who he is, and if you accept that, you'll gain the best friend you've ever had."

"Agreed. I've not been too close to him, but over the last few years, I've seen how he acts. It's never personal, he's just not someone that you'd see in the center of things. He likes to look in, and of course, have all the Ol' Ladies running after him like he's the damn Pied Piper." Hearing Gemmy giggle at that comment I can't help but give a half smile. "Well, it's right, you all think the sun shines out his ass."

"Yeah, we do, but he is always there for us. No matter what we are doing,

he is available. He doesn't care if he gets into trouble for us, he'll take it and come back for more. He also teaches us to look after ourselves and is someone to lean on if we feel the need. Whoever snags him will be one hell of a woman, and has to be a little bit loco at the same time." Gemmy laughs at her comment and the reaction we all give at that last part.

Stitch replies. "I thought maybe Nell would be a good one for him, but there is no spark between them at all. Shame as her setup doesn't faze Meat, and her two men can't intimidate him either. Her brother is just as bad as her and I can't wait to see what woman he ends up with."

The rest of the evening is relaxed and easy. We all get on well, and even talking about the sheriff's department and how badly it has been doesn't flatten the atmosphere. Great friends and family are what I've found, and it's something I'm not going to let slip through my fingers.

CHAPTER SIX

-:- FOREST -:-

Sunday morning, and I take Ty along with me to the clubhouse. I'm sure he's going to love being around everyone, but hope after my giving him a talking to he'll behave and not pull any damn pranks while we are there.

Turning to look at him from the passenger seat of his SUV, I frown. "You best not start any shit here. I'll be going into church and you'll stay in the kitchen behaving until I come back for you. Are we clear on that?"

"Yeah, yeah, best behavior. Don't get into trouble. Sit on my hands and whistle Dixie," Ty grumbles, but I can see he's trying to hold back a smirk.

"When we get back, I need to spend time in the yard of my house. There is all sorts of shit to be removed and that dumpster I ordered needs filling, and then carting off before it costs me a month's salary," I snarl, and it's warranted because these dumpsters have escalated in price so badly if you can get them filled and returned in one day, it will save a ton of green. In my case, sadly not, because I had to have it at least a few days to get everything thrown in.

Inside the clubhouse, I get Ty settled in the kitchen and I've got to admit I'm a little worried as he's cozying up to Amelia, Bitty, and Sybil, who are handing out plates of breakfast. The Ol' Ladies that have arrived for Sunday training are eating, drinking, laughing, and sharing stories of their week.

"Ladies, you make sure Ty here doesn't get into trouble," I say, looking at Gemmy in particular. She shrugs and then winks at me, which gets her a dark frown from me in return.

Stepping into church, I find a seat and look around. Meat is here and leaning back in his seat, arms folded across his chest and eyes closed. I'm not sure if he's napping or meditating, but he sure looks peaceful.

Axel walks into church with Buzz behind him, and once they've taken their seats, Axel bangs the gavel hard on the table and looks around. "Morning,

brothers. Let's just cover the basics today quickly. PT, anything different from normal to report?"

PT responds quickly. "No, nothing."

"TwoCents, anything you need to tell us?" Axel asks.

"No, all is good. Finances are running as they should. The coffee house has increased sales once more and Liam is doing a good job. He spoke to me about more staff and I gave him the figures he needed to know for salaries, and he'll keep me informed," TwoCents replies, closing his notepad, which indicates he's saying no more.

"Specs?" Axel continues.

"All is good. I've nothing to report other than I want to add two more cameras at Club Whisky and one at TJs, if that's okay with everyone?" Specs is looking at Meat as he part owns TJs, and when he gets a small nod, he looks at Silver who manages Club Whisky, and again a chin lift confirms he's okay with that too.

"Any reason for that?" I ask Specs.

"I saw someone lurking behind Club Whisky on the monitor the other night and it looked damn shady, but as the fucker moved over to one side of the parking lot, he went out of the camera range. I felt uneasy, so I want to add an extra camera on that side and one at the side of the club. The one at TJs I'll put in the hallway outside the restrooms. It's just something isn't right, and I'm trying to cover all bases." Specs looks over at me and I give him a chin lift.

"Okay, I just wondered because you've got coverage in the right places from what I've seen. I wanted to bring up having a contract with the Sheriff's Department. I'd like security cameras monitored for the offices, reception, kitchen, and basement. I'll get the mayor to sign off on it. The things at the office are not good and we're finding a ton of shit that needs to be sorted. I don't want the fuckin' place torched to eliminate evidence, and if anyone tries, I want them on camera doing it," I say with a touch of snarl along with it. I have a feeling when I follow up on the ex-sheriff's family they are going to be a huge problem.

Axel leans forward, leaning his elbows on the desk, looking at Specs. "Can you do that, Specs, without it interfering with your other activities?"

"Yeah, I can run a program to alert me for various things. I'll look at a contract and get it to you, Forest. I'll try to do it this next week and I mean, contract and cameras completed."

"Okay, that's great." I'm feeling pretty damn good about that because the faster we get the coverage, the better.

Axel speaks again, gaining everyone's attention. "Okay, Beer has asked if he can have a timeout to go on a road trip, and I've given the go-ahead. Stitch has told me he wants to go with him. Gemmy is happy about it as she has Forest and Ty living at their house, so she feels it's a good time for Stitch to travel. Forest, are you good to stay with Gemmy until Stitch gets back?"

"Yes, I'll stay with her, and Ty. She'll be looked after while you are away, Stitch." I look at Stitch, so he knows I'm sincere. "You'll keep in contact with her, I'm sure daily, and if anything occurs that I think needs addressing, I'll do it, and I'll keep Pres updated if necessary. But, if anything, and I mean anything, needs you to come back, I'll let you know ASAP."

Stitch gives me a nod, looking me right in the eye. "I have every confidence you'll watch Gemmy carefully, and make sure she stays safe. You and Ty staying at the house is the only reason I'm agreeing to go with Beer. But we wanted to do a road trip together for a while and this is an ideal time. I'll speak to Gemmy daily, and yeah, anything that needs me to return, I'll come back pronto."

Beer speaks out, getting everyone's attention. "Thanks, Forest, I'm well ready for a break from work. It's been a long time since I had time out and a road trip to clear the cobwebs will be great. On the job front, we need someone to step up and manage the bar. Yes, I have bar staff, but to be honest, none are good enough to manage the bar area. Eden and Mia will have more to do than they realize," chuckling to himself and looking at Axel, "So who's going to step up and watch the bar while I'm gone?"

"I will, but only if Mav assists because we are a team and yeah, we are usually bouncers, but we can run the bar and alternate the door duty. I'll

pull Colton in too, as he needs watching until I've finished his training," Knuckles says calmly, surprising all of us, I think.

"I'm happy to do that, but it'll leave you short on the door at Club Whisky," Mav adds to the conversation.

"Okay, you two with Colton manage the bar and door at TJs. You deal with Eden and Mia and don't hold back if you need to sort them out. They are on punishment duty, after all," Axel states, but has a grin on his face.

"If Silver can take on some of my manager roles, I can help on the door and bar more, if that helps at all?" Wings chips in.

"I could probably fit a couple of evenings a week to help on the door situation after I've closed the range down. I'll do it for free food and drink for the evenings I work." Chaos offers and then looks around the room. "What? A guy has to eat and drink, doesn't he? It's not like I'll be partying or stuff."

"That was a hell of a trick they pulled, wasn't it?" Clay comments with a chuckle in his voice.

"It was a dirty trick, I think, but I'm not sure they realized what they were doing to Silver," Fist says, "They are gonna pay now, though."

The brothers all laugh and we all know that the two of them will be sorry by the end of the month when they've had to cook up a storm and organize at the same time. But when they have to run the MC and Club Whisky, it's gonna be fun to watch.

Axel shakes his head but has a half-smile on his face. "Honestly, they are naïve. They did not know they were putting Silver in the shit. They just didn't think about what they were doing. But they have to learn the hard way that mistakes and actions have consequences and they are going to pay for these next two months. They'll be sick of cooking and telling people what to do by the time they are done."

Drag laughs, "Bitty, Amelia, and Sybil are on a roll. They are excited as all hell at having a lot to do. They may be older, but they are fiery, and have enough spit to run this place if they were left to it. Boredom doesn't suit them, and that's when they get themselves into mischief."

“They cook good too. I’ve had two meals, and they were okay. I think Meat’s are far better and when he’s back, I’m gonna be the first to grab some of his smoked ribs,” Rock smirks.

Meat grunts, as though to say, ‘Of course, mine is better’, and we all smirk at him, getting no response from him, which is to be expected.

“Anything you need from us, Forest, regarding you being sheriff?” Axel asks, taking me by surprise.

“We have two urgent cases. One Sober is investigating, and the other Meat has on his table. If any of you can dig up information on the ex-sheriff’s family I’d be interested. It seems he did a lot of covering up for them and I want to throw the book at them if I can get the evidence.” I look at my brothers and they give me nods, grunts, and comments of agreement.

“Okay, if that’s all, let’s call it done for now,” Axel states as he slaps the gavel and stands from his seat. We all file out of church and disappear in different directions. I head to the kitchen, where I hear loud talking and laughter.

Walking into the kitchen, I come to a halt when I see Jo, Mia, and Winter doing something with bananas! Now this looks a little disturbing, I have to admit.

Ty is laughing so hard he has tears running down his cheeks, and the three stooges are encouraging the three idiots to suck harder. Axel walks in the kitchen behind me and I jump when he bellows. “WHAT THE EVERLOVIN’ FUCK ARE YOU DOING?”

Jo, Mia, and Winter turn slowly to look at Axel, but all three have a banana so far in their mouths their eyes are watering. Fuckin’ hell, this is bad. I don’t want to get involved with this. I walk over to Ty, grab the back of his t-shirt, and drag him out the back door where I hope to escape whatever shit is about to go down.

In the SUV, I turn and look at Ty, who is still laughing. “Was that what I thought it was?” I can’t help but ask.

“Oh, yeah. Amelia started it as she was peeling bananas to make some banana loaf. She just came right out as she was staring at a banana, ‘I used to give the best blowies you can imagine’. We all stopped working and

looked at her, and that's when Winter responded with, 'No, my man gets the best blowies'. Then they all started demonstrating their abilities with their bananas. Man, you've seen nothing so funny in your life. I'm gonna love living here."

Back at the house, we change into old clothing, then walk across the street to my place and make a start, clearing every piece of trash that had been left in the yard. It doesn't take long to fill the dumpster and I send a text to the company to pick it up in the morning.

Once we've found the edge to the flower beds, we clear all the weeds and hope we've left something in to actually flower later. Ty finds an old push mower and starts the grass while I make a compost pile at the bottom of the yard. I'm thankful for his help because between us we are cutting through the work.

Gemmy appears in the late afternoon and looks fairly impressed with all we've got done. "I've spoken to Heather, and she said she'll see if she can find someone to take on the sheriff's office. She thinks it will be best to have one person do it permanently, then all that will be needed is coverage for vacation time."

"Yeah, that suits me. It'll be better than different people in and out seeing what's going on. They'll need a high clearance security-wise, so a clean background check."

"She knows all that. She's no fool. Heather is a good businesswoman, but she hates office work, so put Alf in charge as her manager. He is a great manager, too. I've met him and he is tactful when dealing with assholes, but doesn't suffer fools. He has a huge sense of humor, and the women who work for Heather just love the man. He'll make sure you get the perfect fit for the job," Gemmy fills me in, and I understand why she did so well with her family business, as she can put you at ease quickly.

"Okay, I'll leave it with you as I've far more to do and worry about. Can you make sure you check everything out carefully, then get me the contract so I can get it signed off with the mayor?"

"Yeah, no problem. Now I'm going to be serving the meal in about an hour,

so you need to get finished up here and get cleaned up before we all eat.”

Gemmy is gone before I can reply, and Ty laughs as he steps up to the side of me. “The women here are damn fine, and I hope I can rope one in.”

“Shut the fuck up. I think the MC got them all because there cannot be many like these women left lying around. But I admit I wouldn’t mind roping one in myself, either.”

“I’m thinking of looking at the house further up the street, which is up for sale. It looks similar to yours and I’m thinking of putting down roots. Where better than where I’ve got myself a steady job and people I like around me.”

“Yeah? I’ll look at it with you if you get the realtor to come over next week. Make it an evening because we’ve got a lot to wade through next week at the office.”

“No problem. I’ll let you know. Now, let's go wash up and eat whatever Gemmy has cooked up.” Ty is striding away before I can reply, and as I watch him I think he’s going to fit in perfectly with the office and the MC. Maybe, just maybe, I can recruit him as a brother, I’ll have to speak to Axel!

CHAPTER SEVEN

-:- MIA -:-

The saying about a Monday being crap is not far wrong this morning. I'm ready to go to TJs and make sense of what is to be done in the kitchen and office. I wish I'd paid more attention when Meat was buzzing around, and now Beer is going on a road trip which has Knuckles and Mav stepping in to help. I hope they both know what they are doing.

Walking to the main door of the clubhouse, I wrap my arms around Shar who is on her way home once more with Crack. It was hard hearing her say she wasn't coming back, but I'm happy that she has found somewhere she is calling home.

"You'll keep in touch, won't you?" I ask.

"Of course I will. Just because I'm not here doesn't mean I'm not still your bestie. We girls gotta stick together, and if you need me, I'll be here in a heartbeat."

"I know, but I miss you already." I know I'm whining but can't seem to stop myself.

"You have two beautiful babies, a man, and a whole house full of people who love, support and rely on you. Come on, buck up. None of this mushy crap." Shar gives me a large hug and then turns to Crack, who has kept to himself on the sidelines the whole time they have been here.

"I'll get her home safely. You are welcome to come visit anytime." Crack gives me a hug, which surprises me, but I return it gladly.

Axel appears behind me and wraps his arms around me. "Come on Mia, let Shar get on the road. She has a long journey back. You've gotta say bye to the boys and get to work yourself."

"Yeah, yeah," I grumble, but give Shar a weak smile. She laughs as she walks over to their vehicle and climbs in, giving me a wave and blowing me a kiss before they drive out of the compound.

Hurrying to the playroom, I smile at Amelia and Bitty, who are already here and organizing the boys. "Get to work. We've got everything covered. The boys are good. We'll make sure they stay that way."

"Thank you for looking after them both. If you need me, I'll come home as fast as I can." I lean into their cribs and kiss both my boys on the top of their heads, but they don't give a fig that I'm not going to be here. Hearing Carter fart, I give Amelia a grin because I know that means his diaper is going to be full of something nasty in a minute.

"Off you go. A bit of shit hurt no one," Amelia states as she picks Carter up from his crib and walks over to the changing table. Bitty is giving me a look that's saying off you go too, so I give another weak smile and head out to the compound through the common room, then the kitchen. I grab an apple and banana as I pass the island and head out the backdoor, where Axel is leaning on the SUV waiting for me.

Holding his arms out, I walk right into them, wrapping my arms around his waist, but hanging on to my fruit as I do. Kissing the top of my head, Axel chuckles. "You know you've got to do this, and you have to do it with grace and style. You're the first lady of the club and how you deal with things sets the standard for all the Ol' Ladies. I know you can do it. You've dealt with far worse than this."

"I can do it. We were wrong, I know that, but we just got carried away and didn't think about the effect it would have. I'm sorry we upset Silver. He didn't deserve us dumping him in another shit position when he'd only just got himself right."

"Okay, off you go. Have a good day, and I'll monitor the boys, but you know those three old women dote on the boys and won't let anything happen to them."

"I know. Okay. I'm going or I'll be late and Eden won't be happy with me."

Axel kisses me sweetly, then opens the SUV driver's door and lifts me into the seat. I'm happy that we don't have any trouble, and I don't have to have a prospect or a brother following me around, because that is irritating. Pulling out of the compound, I sigh, square my shoulders, and know I have

to face the day head-on.

Walking into the kitchen at TJs I smile at the staff as I look around watching what they are all doing. Stewart, Stew as we call him, turns and gives me a wink. He helped our last chef in just about everything. He was employed as a chef's assistant but without qualifications or culinary training as a chef and has never wanted to progress that far. If it hadn't been for that, we could have just promoted him instead of poaching Cookie.

"You know this week I'm not going to give you help. I'm only here for an hour to show you how to place the produce order, then I'm having a vacation."

Oh, fuck, I thought he'd be here to help us stay on track. I close my eyes for a minute, swallowing down the scream that wants to erupt from my chest.

"Morning, Mia." I look up as Eden breezes in the back door of the kitchen, looking excited instead of feeling as I do with dread. "So, let's get this started, shall we? Stew, I heard you are having a vacation. I hope you'll have a great time. What can you tell us before you leave?"

I'm looking at Eden like she's grown another head. What the everlovin' is she thinking? We've got to run this place for the next month and then run the freaking clubhouse and Club Whisky, and she looks like she's excited!

Hearing a giggle, I turn to look at Helen, one of the regular kitchen staff. She walks over and throws her arm around my shoulders. "I'll steer you in the right direction, Mia. Don't panic, it'll be okay."

The backdoor opens and Kole, another of the regular kitchen staff, walks in, giving me and then Eden a wink. "I thought I'd come in early and make sure you had some muscle."

I side-eye Eden, who has nothing but amusement on her face. She's not taking a moment's notice of the panic that is rising in my chest. I jump a foot when someone turns me by my shoulders to look at them and I feel relieved when Beer is looking back at me with a calm expression.

"You carry on here, Eden. I'm taking Mia into the office," Beer says, and Eden gives a nod as she notices for the first time the panic that must be written on my face.

“Take a seat, Mia.” Beer steers me to the seat behind the desk, and once I’m sitting he squats in front of me. “You can do this. You survived so much in the past that this is a breeze. Take a deep breath, and face it head-on. You are not Axel’s Ol’ Lady for nothing. You are the club’s First Lady, and you’ve helped guide us through some tough times, you’ve shown us some good times too. You have so many qualities that we see and you don’t give yourself credit for. You have a heart of gold and yet it can be as hard as steel if needed. You would give your last breath to defend your family and the club, but you could kill if that was the way to save them. You are a strong, determined woman and also a kind, loving mother and Ol’ Lady. This is nothing to what you have faced, and dealt with in your past.”

I’m nodding as Beer’s speaking to me and I’m calming. I give him a weak smile. “I can do it. I’ll be okay.”

“Yeah, you can, and you will. Now come on, girlie, slap this fucker in the face.”

Getting to my feet, I square myself up, take a deep breath, and head out of the office to the kitchen where, thankfully, Eden has everything under control.

Beer shows me everything regarding the bar, some of which I already knew. But what has me thinking hard is the fact that I’m part owner of TJs, and I don’t know enough about how it’s run. It shows how much Meat does behind the scenes, quietly, with no fuss. I’ll never take that man for granted again, and I owe him a lot.

I help in the bar, work the office, and send messages to Meat continuously to find out what I need to do, and make sure it’s done. He’s going to get one awesome Christmas present this year, I think to myself.

Knuckles, Mav, and Colton arrive after lunch and Knuckles works alongside Beer while Mav and Colton take turns on the door and being a menace.

Marsha, Allison, and Rhea, the servers, are great and make sure the bar floor is covered and help teach me how to serve tables correctly. Eden has not been out of the kitchen all day, and I’ve got to admit I’m more than happy she took that role because I was dreading having to stand in there cooking

all day.

Beer walks over to me as I'm heading to the office. I'm just done. My legs and back are hurting and I feel like crying with exhaustion. "Mia, you know I'm going on vacation, well a road trip with Stitch?"

"Yeah, I know, Axel told me," I smile as I reply.

"What he may not have told you is I'm going in three days, so you only have two days' notice."

"What?" I pinch the bridge of my nose, eyes closed and wanting to scream. "Okay, thank you for telling me."

"You can do this, Mia. You're not on your own. Knuckles and Mav are taking over the bar area. Colton is making sure the door is covered. Eden has taken control of the kitchen and if you work in the office and generally watch everything, then the place is covered." Beer takes a seat opposite the desk in the office and I can see he's a little worried about me.

We both look up when Eden walks into the office. She has red sauce, flour, and something yellow over her apron, and she has smudges of something on her cheek. "Boy, the kitchen's hard work, but the staff are great. Kole is hilarious and has a running commentary of jokes. Nancy and Helen just keep working and laughing at him. Me, I just keep doing whatever they tell me needs to be done."

"You don't seem worried at all?" I ask, and Eden shrugs her shoulders.

"No point worrying, Mia. We've got a month of this and then I've to head to Club Whisky and be boss. May as well meet it all head-on and get it done. I don't mind being in the kitchen. It's not the same as working at the coffee house, but at least I know something.

"You can organize the office, staff, and suppliers. Between us, we are going to kill this. Oh, I'm going to speak to Meat to find out if we have anything to cover that we don't realize we need to. He's a sneaky one for sure, keeping things close to his chest."

Mentioning the man has my phone ping with a message and my eyes nearly pop out of my head.

Meat: Don't forget theme night

Mia: Shit, what theme?

Meat: I don't know, you are doing it

Mia: Well, thanks for nothing

Meat: Text all the ol' ladies they'll give you ideas

Mia: OK

I look up at Eden who is frowning at me. "Eden, we have a theme night to cover."

Now, her eyes light up with excitement and I could smack her. Why the heck is she excited? It's something else for us to organize.

"Oh, great, that'll be fun. Let's have a girls' night and organize something?"

"Okay," I gingerly respond.

"Come on, Mia, get with the program. We're in charge for a whole month. It's gonna be great."

I side-eye Beer who hasn't said a word, and he has a hand covering his mouth, but his eyes are sparkling. The fucker is laughing at Eden's excitement. What the heck is going on these days? I don't know, but I suppose I'll have to get with the program, as Eden has said.

"We could speak to Lily at the costume shop and find out what she has a lot of. Or Gemmy could, as they are fairly friendly. Yeah, I'll give Gemmy a call, as I think she'll get more from Lily than I would," I suggest.

"That's more like it, Mia, good thinking. You give Gemmy a call and find out, then we'll have a girls' night and decide what we're going to do. I'm sure they'll all pitch in and help us get it organized." Eden claps her hands together before rushing out of the office.

I look at Beer, and as he stands he gives me a shrug and leaves the office too, leaving me feeling like I've been in some form of battle, and lost.

CHAPTER EIGHT

-:- FOREST -:-

Stepping into the Sheriff's Department this morning has a whole new feel to it. Zack is already at the reception desk, and opening a box which he must have gotten from the basement. "Morning, Zack, you are on the ball."

"Morning, Boss. I wanted to get another three boxes done today if I can, and Gemmy is here this morning, so I can leave her in reception while I head downstairs and work in the basement. As you can see she's not here yet, so I thought I'd make a start while in reception in case the phone rang, or anyone called in with a problem." Zack quickly gets his head back down to the box, dismissing me, if you like.

"Okay, that's good. Let me know if you find anything urgent. Ty is working down there today too, so you can ask his opinion on anything you are not sure about."

"Okay, Boss."

Shaking my head to myself because it's damn obvious that Zack is already mentally into what he's doing. I'm just background noise at this point.

Stepping into the office, I'm surprised that Meat is behind his desk, giving me a chin lift as I enter. Ty and Sober have a desk and they are both grinning at me like fools. But Sober, I see, has a pile of papers in front of him already.

Ty's desk is empty, and he gives me a smirk when he sees me looking at it. "It'll be busy in a short while. Don't you worry, I'll find something to investigate."

My desk is gone and clenching my jaw as I step into the smaller office, I allow my eyes to scan over the room. The evidence board has the start of a case. My desk has all the paperwork piled neatly. Thanks to Zack, I'm sure. The filing cabinet in the corner has a potted plant on the top, and someone has fixed a fan on the wall, which is going to be welcome, as this building doesn't have air conditioning.

Zack shouts as he's walking through from reception. "Boss, Mrs. Osborne has just called. She's had someone mess with her back door. There are scratch marks around the lock, she said."

"Okay, I'll head out now. Ty, you come with me. Meat, are you going to be out of the office?" I ask as I'm walking through that office to the reception.

"Yeah, I'm gonna speak to two of these women."

"Okay. I'll catch up later. Sober, if you go out, make sure you inform reception. I need to know where you all are when you are on duty." I head out to the cruiser with Ty right behind me.

Walking around the back of Mrs. Osborne's house, both myself and Ty look at the back door and she's right someone has been trying to break into the lock. Giving a sharp knock, I shout. "MRS. OSBORNE, IT'S THE SHERIFF."

Hearing a deadbolt, and then the door being unlocked, I give the old lady a reassuring smile as she opens it. "I've come to check out what's going on around here. You're right, someone has been picking at your lock, but I'm pleased to hear you have a deadbolt on the door."

Stepping into the kitchen behind the woman, she turns and eyes Ty. "This is Deputy Ty. He's going to be looking at your case, and believe me when I say we're taking this seriously."

Ty holds his hand out to shake and gives the old lady a warm smile. "I'll leave you my contact number and if at any time you are frightened or worried, you call me. I'll be right here."

"Thank you, deputy." Mrs. Osborne replies, and points at the kitchen table, where both myself and Ty take a seat.

"Now, tell us what's been going on," I ask.

"Since I last saw you, Sheriff, the neighborhood has been keeping an extra eye out. Nothing untoward has happened that we've heard or seen. Last night, well, early hours of this morning I should say as it was around three-thirty, I got up for a drink of water. I don't sleep too well these days and often get up, have a drink, and then go back to bed where I read for a while. Once my eyes get tired again, I lie down and try to sleep some more.

Anyway, I was sitting at the table right here, drinking my water, when I heard this scraping noise. I wasn't sure where it was coming from to start with and panicked. I may have thought a rat or something else was trying to get in."

I reach over and place my hand over her clenched fist, which she has laid on the table. I can see this has affected her fairly badly, and when we leave here, I need her to know that we will do all we can to keep the neighborhood safe.

"When I realized it was someone trying to break in the back door, I quickly put the lights on so they knew who lived here was awake. I heard feet pounding down the path around the house and I let out a sigh of relief. But I didn't go back to bed. I was a bit too frightened to be honest." Mrs. Osborne looks a little ashen, and I give her hand another squeeze.

"Ty, go speak to the neighbors, see if they noticed anything. Check their doors and then come back. I'm going to speak to Axel and see if he has anyone spare we can use to do some night patrols around here. If he doesn't, I'll speak to the mayor again."

Ty gives me a nod and leaves the kitchen. I take out my phone and send a message to Axel.

Forest: Do you have any spare brothers we can use to patrol an area during the hours of midnight and six a.m.?

Axel: I'll ask but they all work day jobs so not sure what I can do. Let me ask around.

Forest: OK

"Can you stay with a neighbor for a few days while I check this out?" I ask.

"I'm going to stay with my sister for a week or two. I told her about what happened and she wants me to move in with her, but I don't want to leave here. I love my home and the neighborhood. I'm just frightened at the moment."

"Okay, you stay with your sister. I'll do everything I can to find out what the heck is going on, and put a stop to whatever it is." I do my best to reassure

her, but she brings me up short with what she says next.

“You know, I think this is the work of Sheriff Brackenridge’s family. They were breaking into people’s homes and thieving, but nothing was ever done. His nephew Monty was beaten up by a man in town when he caught him in his kitchen, then he ended up with an assault charge on him.”

“I’ll look into that, don’t you be worrying. Now get packed while I’m here and I’ll make us both a nice hot cup of coffee. How about that?”

“Okay, Sheriff, thank you.” I watch as Mrs. Osborne makes her way out of the kitchen, and I clench my jaw because this ex-sheriff is going to end up with a heap of new charges against him by the time I’m finished with him.

I make the drinks and by the time Ty comes back, a cab is here to take Mrs. Osborne to her sister’s, and I’m about ready to blow a fuse with the extra things she’s told us.

Back at the office, I’m telling Meat, who is back from his investigation, what I’ve learned, and that we need some night patrols. Ty is suggesting he do twelve until three if someone will do three until six a.m. Sober, who comes into the office, adds he has two friends who would do it as they are out of work and have worked security after leaving the Marines. His two friends were MPs also, so could be ideal.

“They sound like they could be just what we need, Sober. As they’re not locals, they won’t be immediately associated with us either. Get them in to see me as soon as you can. Also, anything you guys find regarding the Brackenridge family, anything at all, I want it on the evidence board. I’m getting a gut feeling that somewhere along the line, the sheriff was letting things slide on more than a few traffic offenses.”

Picking up my phone from my desk, I take a seat and lean back, rubbing the back of my neck before making the call to the Mayor.

Mayor Jackson quickly takes my call. “Mayor Jackson, do you have a few minutes to speak with me?”

“Sheriff Forest, what can I do for you? I have time to talk to you.”

“I need you to sign off on my having some night patrol staff. Something is

going on and I don't have enough staff to cover day and night duties."

"Look, get what staff you need. Temp or permanent, I don't care. I want this town put to rights. I heard stirrings of the last sheriff's family needing money for gambling and drinking debts, if that helps you at all."

"Well, that's news, because I've been hearing things myself. Mrs. Osborne had someone attempting to break into her home last night. She's now gone to stay with her sister. But you've put the Brackenridge family in my line of fire too, so I'm going to put extra effort into finding out what they are up to."

Mayor Jackson chuckles on his end of the call. "They are a disgusting family and if you visit them at home, make sure you wipe your feet on the way out or you'll ruin the environment."

Laughing at his comment, I quickly respond. "I will do that. Thanks again. I'll turn this office around if it kills me."

"Well, don't go that far, but it'll be nice to get the town running right and keeping shit off the streets." Hearing someone speaking to the mayor, he quickly tells me he has to go and cuts off the call.

Meat, I notice, is updating the evidence board and I step over and give him a serious look. "Two have left town?"

"Yeah, the family said they just up and left without a word. They sent a message later saying they were safe but needed to get away." Meat looks worried or something is niggling at him.

"What is it? What's eating at you?" I ask.

"I'd like to track them down. I think there is more to this than meets the eye."

I don't think I've ever seen him look worried like this, and I give him a nod. "You let me know what you need to do, and if I can, I'll sanction it."

"I need to speak to Specs." Meat says, more to himself than me, and he takes off without another word.

Ty steps into my office looks at the information, and rubs his chin. "I agree.

Something is odd about them two just upping and leaving. One maybe, two is suspicious. I've placed my notes from this morning looking around the neighborhood on your desk. I'm going down to the basement now to work with Zack."

"Okay. Is Gemmy in reception?" I ask.

"Yeah, she's looking through a box." Ty grins.

"What's funny about that?"

"Well, it has files inside that she can't read. She said the writing is like spider webs." Ty grins even broader. "She's right too, it's the worse fucking writing I've ever seen."

Ty disappears to the basement and I walk out to check on Gemmy. "What time are you leaving? You're only supposed to do mornings."

Gemmy gives me a solid look, and frowns, too. "Well, I'm not leaving when everyone is so busy. Stitch is getting ready to go on this road trip with Beer, so I'm going to work with you. I can't do anything about your place, as Hammer has it all under control.

"I've spoken to Heather's office manager. He's going to send someone here to look at what we need done. Bren, who cleans the house behind the garage and Grease highly recommends her. She's agreed to look here and if it's okay for her, she'll take it on along with the garage as her regular workload." Gemmy smiles. "Mia said Bren is great, works hard, doesn't mess around, and she even puts meals on for them all when she has time."

"Okay, do what hours you want and I'll cover for it. How about you come in with me in the morning, and then leave with me at the end of the day? If you need to leave earlier or something comes up, I can soon get Ty, Meat, or Sober to get you home safely." I give her an expectant look.

"Yeah, okay, we'll do that while Stitch is away. I don't want to be hanging around the house bored."

Walking back through to my office, I take a seat and take out my phone, which I'd slid into my pants pocket.

Forest: Can you fit in a table and chairs?

Fox: Fit in for what?

Forest: For whatever you do to make them new again

Fox: Where is it?

Forest: My place

Fox: I'll come look, but it'll be the weekend

Forest: OK, thanks

Placing my phone down on the desk, I rub my hands because I know that is going to be one hell of a nice table and chairs when he's finished with them.

CHAPTER NINE

-- FOREST --

Arriving at the Sheriff's Department this morning was strange with Gemmy alongside me in the cruiser.

"That was cool, I've never been in a cruiser before, me being a good girl." Gemmy laughs and I give her a smirk because I can imagine she was never a bad girl, but I can guarantee she ran her father around in a merry dance.

"Come on, we have a ton of shit to cover, as always." I wrap an arm around Gemmy's neck and give her a scrunch on the top of her head, to which she screeches about not messing her hair up, and she'll get her revenge.

Entering the reception, Zack is already busy with another box. Are they never going to end? "Morning, Boss, Gemmy."

"Morning, Zack, you get earlier and earlier. Are you trying to make us all look bad?" Gemmy laughs, before scooting through to the kitchen, not waiting for Zack's reply.

"I'm not doing that, Boss. I never sleep past five in the morning, and it's boring hanging around waiting for work to start, so I just come over when I'm ready. Is that okay, or would you rather I wait until my official time?"

Zack looks a little worried, and I'm going to speak to Gemmy about being a little more careful because Zack's still young and he's not always as tough as you think. "Hey, you come in whenever you are ready. Make sure you book the extra hours you do too because your enthusiasm deserves the pay for it. Now, see if you can dig up every piece of information you can find on Sheriff Brackenridge, and every member of his family, meaning sons, daughters, sisters, cousins."

"Okay, Boss, I'll do that when I've finished this box. I'll have something to you by lunchtime. Is that soon enough?"

"Yeah, that's great. I have a few things to do this morning that'll keep me busy until then." I walk through my old office and to my now regular one

and take a seat behind the desk. Before I can pick up a pen, open a drawer, or check the mail, Ty waltzes into the office and throws himself down in a chair.

“Morning. I’m going down to the basement and empty a few more boxes. See what the hell I can find to run with,” Ty sighs, and I know Meat and Sober having their own case has him itching for his own.

“I’ve asked Zack to go down and find everything he can on Sheriff Brackenridge and his family. I have a bad feeling that won’t go away. Can you put your eyes on it too? As I said yesterday, anything found we need to put onto the evidence board, and I goddamn think we’ll all be surprised at what he’d gotten going on.”

“You know, for an older geezer you sure have some wits about you...” holding his hand up to stop me from ripping him a new one about my age. “I worked with three over the years that hit thirty and became doddering old farts, but you are stronger now than I imagine you were then. It’s a compliment, man.”

I’m not sure if he’s joking or being honest, so I give him a mean look before waving him away. But as he steps out the door, he turns and grins, “Shame your hair turned gray.” Throwing my pen holder at him, he laughs as he rushes away to head down to the basement.

“Fuckin’ clever dick,” I mumble to myself, and look up when I hear. “Who’s a clever dick?” Sober leaning on the door frame of the office is grinning.

“Never mind. Are your two friends up for helping here?”

“Yes, they’ll both be here at eleven this morning.” Sober steps further into the office. “I’m going out to do some snooping around this morning. I have a bad feeling still about who murdered Colin, and I’m convinced he was murdered. I’ll be going over to speak to the coroner who did the autopsy, too.”

“Good, dig deep, because if we find anyone that’s on the wrong side of the law, they will pay the price. We are not hiding anything, drag the fuckers out of every dark corner they have been hiding in. No one, and I mean no one, is safe from our investigations.” Sober gives me a nod and I can see the

respect in his eyes. I'm happy to have that and I'll keep it no matter what I have to do.

It's like a revolving door this morning because as soon as Sober steps away Meat walks in, folds his arms over his chest, and gives me a solid look. "What?"

"I'm goin' hunting for those women. I'll touch base once a day unless I find out something urgent. I may be away a few days."

"Okay. Make sure you keep all receipts on food, gas, hotels, etcetera. You know the score." Meat turns and heads for the door, but I speak again. "Be careful, no risks for any reason. I want you back here in one piece." Giving me a nod, he leaves the office and I've got to admit I don't have a bad feeling about him leaving either.

Sitting here tapping my fingers on the desk, my mind is still itching to think of a payback for Ty's comment about me being old. Fuck, I'm not that old!

I lay down the information that the FBI has sent out regarding missing persons and most wanted, which we are supposed to actively look for, as my phone buzzes on the corner of the table. Picking up my phone, I see a message from Axel.

Axel: You need to get your club tat

Forest: OK, will do

Axel: Make sure you use our place too

Forest: OK, will do

When nothing else comes from Axel, I grin as he hasn't a subtle bone in his body. Right to the point, get the tattoo done. Pronto is what he's saying to me, and even though I'm the Sheriff, he wants me tagged as a club brother.

I make a mental note to myself to get an appointment made after lunch. First, I want to get these two prior marines on board for night patrols. Another two to swear into office. I don't even try to hold back the grin that is spreading because I can only imagine the mayor's thoughts when he sees I have five deputies, two receptionists, and a cleaning company on board.

This phone is an archaic thing. It has a light that comes on telling me whoever is in reception wants to speak to me. I see it flashing and as I've turned the sound down to minimal on the fucking thing, it's only the slightest of noise. "Yeah!" I say fairly forcefully, then cringe at myself as I hadn't meant it to come out that harshly.

"You have two fine specimens of manhood standing here waiting to see you, sheriff." Gemmy snidely remarks, but I know it's in response to my snapping.

"Okay, bring them through, please." I do my best to cover my ass with some niceties as damage control. Gotta keep her sweet when I am living with her for the foreseeable future.

A couple of minutes later, Gemmy leads in two men, both give me a calm look and chin lift. "Handsome Marcel and Jean-Paul Marcel."

"Come in. I'm Sheriff Forest. Marcel and Marcel? Take a seat. Now, I presume Sober told you I'm looking for two reliable people I can promote to deputies for patrolling night duty. Something is going down around one end of town, and I want the cruiser I'll allot to you seen patrolling that area between midnight and six in the morning.

"Sober tells me you both have security backgrounds and are prior marines. So, you are not fuckin' idiots and I'm sure you can understand the severity of the situation."

"Yes, sir," Handsome responds. He's African American, tall, with dark eyes, buzz cut, and fit as all hell.

"No need for the sir bullshit. I'm Sheriff or Forest," I say while seeing them both relax more.

"Yes, we have experience with security, so patrolling will not be an issue for either of us." Jean-Paul is tall, and also well-built, with dark hair, dark eyes, and short hair on the sides but longer on top.

"I suppose I have to ask. You're not brothers, are you? Marcel and Marcel?" I look at them both standing there and the size and build are almost the same.

They look at each other and then give me a beaming smile. Handsome

speaks up.

“No, we ain’t, but we have had some fun over time with that one. I’m from New Orleans way, and JP is from Canada. Both are popular places for Marcel as a name.”

“I’m going to have to swear you in as deputies. I can’t have you going out on patrol, arresting anyone without having the official safety net. Are you both up for that?” I watch them closely for their response.

“Yes, we are open to that,” they say in unison.

“Okay, let’s have you sworn in and get the paperwork done,” I call through to Gemmy and when she pops her head in the door, I ask her to arrange uniforms and footwear for the guys while I swear them in. She gives them the once over while holding her chin with a finger and thumb, then says “On it, Forest” and disappears.

As soon as the swearing-in is done and I’m happy all the relevant paperwork is completed, Gemmy walks in with a box of uniforms. She hands it to Handsome and then goes for another for JP.

“Anything that doesn’t fit right, let me know. If you need bigger sizes of anything, I’ll have to order it.” Gemmy smiles and heads back to reception.

“If you guys can start at midnight, there’ll be your cruiser out front waiting for you. Here’s a set of vehicle keys. I’ll get you both a set of building keys too, before your next shift. If you need anything before then, call me. Good to go?” I look at them both, thinking that with the team I’m building, crime has no place in this town. Someone, I guarantee, is going to learn the hard way.

Walking down to the basement, I watch Zack and Ty work together fluidly. They are speaking quietly to each other as they create piles of files and empty folders.

“You both good down here?” I ask, which has Zack jump slightly.

“Yes, we have some files for you to look at regarding Brackenridge and his family. I’ll not call him sheriff as that’s insulting to every other person who holds that title.” Zack spits and I’m more than a little surprised at his

reaction.

Ty hands me a pile of files, and I take them giving a chin lift. “Thanks, I’ll take these to the office and make a start going through them. I want you both to work with me on these files.” Seeing the surprise on Zack’s face, I explain. “Zack, you have found and are still finding what that family has been up to. You are more than entitled to see, and be involved in bringing them down.”

“Thanks, Boss.” Zack gives me a small smile, then turns and resumes searching through the box in front of him.

Ty smirks. “We will finish going through the boxes and find all we can on that shit of a family. Then we’ll make a start clearing away any of this that can be classed as closed files. Gemmy said she’d carry on filing those away in the cabinet on the left, so we know they are all closed case files. Any that still needs attention will be placed in order of urgency, but we’ll watch for dates on these cases too. Some we’ve seen are from years ago and never been looked at.”

“Okay, thanks, both of you. I’ll get started on these. Oh, we have two new deputies and they are covering the night patrols, but I’ll make sure they meet everyone and integrate. I don’t want it to feel like them and us. We are all in this together, and that’s how I want it to feel.”

“Great, I agree,” Ty replies as he turns back to a box in front of him.

Back in my office, I lay the files on the desk, but look up when Gemmy walks in. “Do you want a drink and a sandwich?”

“Yeah, that would be nice, thanks Gemmy. I’m sorry I snapped at you earlier. I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s okay, I understand. There is so much wrong here and it’s going to take a long time to get things right. I’m a little jittery myself as Stitch is leaving first thing in the morning on his road trip.” Gemmy gives me a squeeze on the bicep before turning and leaving the office.

I’ve papers spread all across the desk, all regarding the old sheriff’s family. How the fuck he became sheriff astounds me, but I’m going to look into the last mayor too. Something with all this isn’t adding up.

I finish the lunch and drink that Gemmy brought, then step out of the office, taking the plate and mug to the kitchen. I'm not getting in her bad books for being sloppy when she's going to be making lasagna for the evening meal. Her garlic bread is to die for and I'm not missing it for anything.

The phone on reception rings and I ignore it, knowing that Gemmy is in reception, and continue through to the kitchen. Rinsing my plate and mug, I lay them on the drainer before drying my hands.

Passing reception, I turn when I hear Gemmy slam the phone down and curse. "What's wrong?" I ask because I'm sure I can see steam coming out of her ears.

"Well, it seems your one-nighter, Polly, is going around town telling everyone that I'm cheating on Stitch and warming your bed at night."

"What...The...Fuck!" I snarl, and must have a startled look on my face because, after a minute, Gemmy starts laughing.

"Your face is so funny. Stitch is going to kill that bitch if we don't get to her first."

"I'll see if I can find her, sort her out once and for all. I'm sick of the bitch and wish I'd never had time with her. She knew it was a one-off thing. I made sure she knew. Goddammit." I'm about ready to blow a gasket.

"Oh, she'll be at Club Whisky or TJs on the weekend. She'll be prowling for her next victim. You're popular, as you have standing in the community, and she's wanted to be an Ol' Lady for a few years. Stitch warned me not to make friends with her when she tried speaking with me just after we got together. That's how I know all this. I hope that when you find your woman she's able to hold her own because Polly is going to stir the pot for sure." Gemmy has a sour look on her face, and a certain woman's face flashes across my mind. Now, if that happens, I know she can hold her own.

CHAPTER TEN

-:- FOREST -:-

Hump day and walking into the kitchen, I see Gemmy hanging on tightly to Stitch, who is giving her reassuring words. Honestly, you'd think he was going to be gone forever the way she's carrying on.

"Leave the man alone, Gemmy, he's only going for a short while. You've got me and Ty here with you, and all the club." I wink at Stitch, who's looking like he's on the verge of not going on the trip after all.

"I know. I'll be okay once he's gone. I've told all the ladies to come around tonight and we'll plan the theme night. Mia called and said they had to do one and Meat has gone off too, so I've also called Lily and she's coming over tonight."

"See, you'll be fine. Now let me get on the road or Beer will set off without me." Stitch grabs Gemmy's hand and pulls her outside to where his hog is all set up, ready for the trip. "I'll call every morning and every night. Behave while I'm gone, but if you need me, I'll come home."

"She'll be fine. Now get gone." I laugh, slapping him on his back before heading back inside, giving them a moment of privacy.

Ty finishes his drink before rinsing his mug when he turns to me, grinning. "That woman is going to have him changing his mind on the road trip if we don't get her in here."

"I'm not interfering. We gotta work with her, and she's a hellion when pissed."

"Who's a hellion?" Gemmy asks as she walks into the kitchen.

"Winter," I quickly improvised, but not sure Gemmy believes me if the squint is anything to go by. "Come on, it's time to go. Zack will have all the work done before we get to the office."

Gemmy runs out of the kitchen and through to her bedroom, and when I look at Ty, he has a half-smirk on his face before he whistles under his

breath. "Fuck, that was close."

Half an hour later, we walk into the sheriff's department and see Zack talking with Handsome and JP, who have not gone off shift as yet. Not sure why, as they finished at six in the morning.

"What are you two still doing here?" I ask as Gemmy buzzes past me.

"We saw a few things last night that we want to speak with you about. So, we came back here, had a drink, and rested until you came in." Handsome says, and I give him a chin lift to follow me through to my office.

Taking my seat behind my desk, I indicate they both take a seat, and I wait for them to fill me in on what happened, or what they saw.

"Around two this morning, a male in a dark hoodie, black pants and a bag on his back was dodging between houses. We parked the cruiser and followed on foot, trying to maintain our distance, but get one of us on either side of him. He stopped three times and tested doors, but didn't push the issue of breaking in. We waited for him to get one open before we jumped on the fucker, but he sensed us at one point, looked around and although he didn't see us, he ran and we lost him. He knows the neighborhood, and that was our downfall, as we don't know it well yet," JP says and looks disgusted about losing the man.

"How about you have a few hours of sleep, then cruise around in your own vehicle to get the layout of that area of town? It looks like whoever this is is staying in that area," rubbing my forehead, I continue, "The area is mainly retired folk. Maybe, whoever this is sees them as easy pickings. Now, quite a few have dogs which they walk regularly, so they may be ones he can avoid if he's watching during the day who he perceives to be the most vulnerable."

"We can do that. We are staying at the hotel in Redhill. I think a little distance won't hurt, but Ty said he's looking at a property and we can bunk with him if he gets it." Handsome informs me, and I know he's wanting to look at the one near my place so that would be easy to keep my eye on everyone.

"Okay, go get some rest. Come back before I leave for the day unless you are onto something, then send me a message of what's going on."

“Will do,” they both respond and leave the office.

Gemmy walks in after giving a light tap on the door. “Heather has just called me, and she’s coming over with Bren to check out what is involved here so they can throw a contract together. Do you need to be around for that? Or do you want me to deal with it?”

“I’ll deal if I’m here, but I have some things to do today, so will be out of the office for a while.”

“Okay, no problem.” Gemmy smiles, before turning and leaving the office, singing something under her breath.

Meat and Sober are out-of-town following up on leads. Ty is digging deeper into the files in the basement and finding a ton of shit on the prior sheriff’s family. Zack is wherever he’s needed. He has an uncanny radar of where to be and when. I’m not sure the department would ever run well if he wasn’t here.

Picking up my phone, I send a message to Buzz.

Forest: I need my club tattoo done

Buzz: Yeah, come over to Rolling Thunder anytime

Forest: Is that the tattoo shop?

Buzz: Yep, Rolling Thunder Tattoo Shop

Forest: Damn good name. C U later.

Walking through to reception, Gemmy has her head down reading something, and before I can ask what she’s doing, the door opens and Heather and another woman walk in.

“Hi, Heather, Bren,” Gemmy says brightly.

“Hi, Gemmy. We’ve come to check over how much work is involved,” Heather says, then looks over at me. “Hi, Forest, how are you today?”

“I’m fine, and you?”

“Oh, I’m good as always. Same old, you know.” Turning to the woman with her, she continues. “This is Bren. She’ll be the one fulfilling the contract here

if we both agree on the work and the contract.”

“Okay, it’s nice to meet you, Bren. Gemmy will walk you around and let you see where needs to be cleaned. I’m not sure, to be honest, about how many days or how long you’d need to be here, but the place isn’t clean and hasn’t been cleaned in a long time.”

Turning to Gemmy, I give her a serious look. “I’m going out. Get Zack to watch reception while you take Heather and Bren around. If you need me give me a call, but Ty is here and can step in if it’s not urgent.”

“Okay, will do.” I watch as Gemmy grabs Bren's hand and drags her through to the kitchen. Heather shakes her head as she watches, but follows behind all the time, looking around at the reception area. Me, I watch her ass and hips, because my God she can sway those hips without even thinking about what she’s doing.

Shaking my head, I quickly make my way out of the department and head to the tattoo shop. Not sure I have time today, but maybe they can book me in for an evening or weekend.

Walking into the tattoo shop, I’m surprised to see three men working in the chairs, and working on practice skin. Grinning as I see Buzz stepping from one to another, watching over their shoulders.

I take a seat on the tattered bar stool that is in front of the reception desk and lean on my elbow while watching. Reuse, who is behind the reception, gives me a chin lift before his attention goes back to the men and Buzz.

“What’s going on?” I eventually ask.

“Interviews for the tattoo artist job. Buzz wanted to see how good they were because he said anyone can throw photographs together in a book and say they are theirs. But he wanted to see firsthand how good they were before choosing one of them for the job, if he gives one of them the job.”

“That makes sense, and customers wouldn’t want a jackass putting ink on their skin. I’m proud of mine and I’ll not let some asshole loose with a needle unless I know they are damn good at it.”

Buzz looks over when he realizes I’ve arrived and gives me a chin lift. I return

it but look at my watch because I haven't got all day to hang around here watching.

"Okay, can you book me in to get my club tattoo done? I want you or Buzz to do it, not one of these three." I point to the three working on the practice skins and grimace somewhat at the ugly portrait that the first one is doing.

Reuse opens the book on the reception desk and flicks a few pages. "How about next Tuesday, any time after lunch? Buzz is finishing at the end of next week so he can do it for you then, but he's full the rest of the week." Grinning, Reuse continues. "People are trying to get booked in before he leaves."

"Okay, I don't mind if it's you or Buzz but again I don't want one of these doing it. Maybe when they are settled and we know how good they are in actuality, then I'll consider it."

"The one furthest from us looks promising. Buzz gave him a tribal image and told him to make it his own. What he did was damn good and the thought behind it was perfect. Go look." Reuse sounds impressed, so I saunter over and look from behind the man.

The band of glyphs and lines swirl in directions that catch the eye easily. Moving a little closer, I can see thinner lines entwining the pattern.

The man looks over his shoulder and grins. "I'm adding flowers and petals into the design on the left to show a female, softer flow to the design. But on the right, a masculine take, see here..."

Pointing to the right side, and looking closer, I can see an eagle's head nestled amongst the swirls and lines. It's damn amazing and I'm impressed. "I fuckin' love that. Keep it on one side and I'll have that one." I turn to look at Buzz, so he knows I'm being serious. Slapping the guy on his shoulder, I walk over to Reuse, giving a chin lift to Buzz as I pass.

"Book me in for Tuesday afternoon, and I'll come and get the tattoo done. I want to get it over with or Axel will give me shit, and I've enough of that going on at the department." Stepping to the door, I open it and turn before exiting. "I want that design, so make sure it's kept for me." Reuse grins and gives me a nod.

I'm positive that's the guy who's going to get the job as the next tattoo artist, and I'll be more than surprised if it's not. I love that tribal design and introducing the American eagle just tops it for me. No one is more patriotic than me, and I'm more than happy to show that on my skin.

Back at the Sheriff's Department, I grin when I see Ty and Gemmy arguing. They are not having a serious argument. It's more than one up on each other stuff. I lean on the reception desk and watch without asking what's going on.

"I'm filing. You find the stuff that is done with and I file it. It's my job." Gemmy is telling Ty.

"Well, it's just as easy to file it when I know it's a done file. If the case is done and closed, it's only a step from where I'm working to file it."

"But it's my job, not yours." Gemmy slams her hands on her hips and sticks out her chin. Now she's getting more serious and I'm holding back the chuckle that wants to escape.

"I know that you are helping us by filing, but there are other things you can be doing."

"Like what?"

Ty smirks, and I know I'm going to be out of here any moment.

"Like making drinks." Yeah, that's me out of here. Gemmy screeches and I hightail it to my office because he dug the hole so he can get himself out of it.

Taking a seat behind my desk, I have a smirk on my face because Gemmy is not going to forget that comment anytime soon. She'll make him pay, I'm positive, and, to be honest, I can't wait to see what revenge she has planned.

My phone pings and I look down where I'd just placed it on the corner of the desk and see it's Brand of the Satan's Guardians MC. Now that is a surprise because we don't speak often, although we keep in touch.

Brand: Heard on the grapevine that your last sheriff is stirring shit in the can. He has family in your town and they are going to cause problems. Just a heads up to keep your eye out. Oh, congrats on being the sheriff.

Forest: They are on my radar, but thanks. Maybe I'll have to take a visit to see the fucker?

Brand: We have contacts where he's incarcerated and if I hear more, I'll let you know. But watch your back and warn your president.

Forest: Will do. Is everything good at your place, old boys behaving?

Brand: Yeah, great thanks. They never behave. It's keeping the fuckers' alive that worries me most.

Forest: Sniper got a woman. I'm sure she's keeping him in line. You need to find the others a woman.

Brand: God forbid, can you imagine the crazy bitch Crank would get?

Forest: Yeah, I see what you mean. Thanks again for the warning. Stay safe.

Brand: You too, and if you ever want to defect, you can come be a brother here.

Forest: I'll keep that in mind.

Tapping my fingers on the desk, I know that Brackenridge is going to cause problems, even from the can. I'll have to speak to Handsome and JP, to make sure they know what's going on.

Making a note on the evidence board that we speak about the family, I quickly make my way back to the reception where Gemmy is sitting behind the desk.

"What news have you got for me about the cleaning?" I ask.

Gemmy looks pissed still, but I ignore that and wait for her response. "Heather is happy to take the contract for the job. Bren is good with doing the job for us. The contract will cover Bren cleaning both offices, reception, kitchen, and restrooms. She'll do anywhere basically above the basement."

"That suits me. I know it'll take some cleaning because it looks like no one has done it for years. The last receptionist said she did it, but let's be honest, she was too busy gossiping to do any work."

"Heather's company is very good. They have an outstanding reputation.

They have a lot of personal and commercial contracts. Did you know once a fortnight Heather goes to an old man on Broad Street and cleans house and cooks him a meal?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"She works hard at the clubhouse, doing a lot of hours that she doesn't charge for too." Gemmy continues.

"I didn't know that either."

"You probably need to get her to clean your house when you move in, because I'm not going to do it. I have enough following Stitch's ass," giggling to herself.

"Well, I'm good at cleaning up after myself. But Ty is talking about checking out that house for sale near us. If he does, Handsome and JP may stay with him, so they may all need a good cleaning service."

"Oh, really? That's interesting." Oh, she has that gleam in her eye. I think I just dropped Ty in the shit!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

-:- MIA -:-

Walking into Gemmy and Stitch's house for our Ol' Lady get-together, I can't help but wrap my arms around Gemmy and smile. "This is great," I say, as I'm looking at the island in the kitchen filled with treats for us to munch on throughout the night.

"We'll need something to soak up the alcohol," Gemmy laughs and points at the counter where different bottles of spirits are lined up. Seeing this, I make my way over and pour myself a gin and tonic, opening the jar of lemon slices and dropping two slices into the glass.

The back door opens and Eden, Tilly, and Kya walk in, giving both me and Gemmy a smile and hug. "We're well ready for a night away from work and men," Kya responds chuckling, and heads to where I'm standing to grab herself a drink.

"Are you having trouble with BS?" I ask.

"Hardly. That man is putty in my hands," she giggles. "He knows if he's not, I'm not putting out."

I throw my head back and laugh because we all know Kya can't keep her hands off BS, and we've all seen her drag him into any available empty room, no matter where they are.

Tilly giggles. "I can't do that because I've got to admit I can't keep my hands off Hammer, and not putting out, as you call it Kya, is a no-no because I'm not missing a single moment with my man."

Once again the door opens and Heather steps inside giving everyone the brightest of smiles. "Hi, Heather, it's great you could come tonight."

Heather grabs a bottle of sparkling water and twists off the cap, taking a long sip before speaking. "Sheesh, I needed that. I needed a night out and away from the boring routine I've got myself into. Oh, I asked Bren to come too, as she is in a rut, the same as I am."

“The more the merrier.” I smile, and it’s not long before Carrie, Raven, Winter, and Jo arrive, nearly completing the evening. I’ve no worries as Axel is with the boys and Amelia has about moved into the clubhouse, so is always available when needed.

“How are you two getting along with your TJ duties?” Winter asks.

“Oh, it’s not great, but with Eden taking over the kitchen and me doing the office, we’re getting it done. I didn’t realize that what we did would cause so much trouble,” sighing before continuing, “but I understand now that what we did was unfair to Silver, and I regret that because I knew that he’d had a hard time previously. We all know the trouble that was caused when Fox stepped back, and not that he’d done it. It was the way he did it. Same for me and Eden. We didn’t think about the consequences for Silver.”

Eden looks sad when she speaks up, “I regret it more than Mia, because Silver’s my man. I just didn’t consider what we did by taking Cookie would leave him in the shit. When I sat down later and thought about it, I was devastated at my actions. I love Silver and I hurt him, which hurt our relationship, but thankfully we are okay now. I’ll never hurt him like that again, and I’m doing everything I can to show that I’m happy to be punished for my careless actions.”

“Hey, we are all human. We make mistakes. It’s how we rise from them that counts,” Raven says, and everyone nods in agreement, which has both myself and Eden feeling somewhat better.

Forest walks into the room and gives a general smile around the room, but speaks to Gemmy in particular. “We’re going to the clubhouse for a while. If you need me, give me a call.”

“Okay, but we’ll be fine,” Gemmy responds and we all watch Forest and Ty, who was standing behind Forest, leave.

Hearing tapping on the front door, Gemmy rushes to answer and we all wait to see who’s arriving. When we hear Gemmy speaking to someone as she walks back to the kitchen I realize that I’d not missed Lily, one of the reasons we are all meeting here. I don’t know if I have a brain fart, but I don’t seem to be on the ball lately.

Lily greets everyone with a bright smile and places her huge bag on the floor before heading to Gemmy's coffee pot. "I need caffeine, lots of caffeine. It's been a long day. Oh, who owns the house across the street?"

Before I can speak, Gemmy does. "Forest, why?"

"Well, a man is hanging around outside, and he looks shifty. I made sure he saw me watching him." Turning, Lily takes a sip of her coffee and sighs. "Okay, ladies, let's get down to business."

Gemmy, I notice, is tapping on her phone and I walk over. "Are you texting Forest?"

"Yeah, he may want to come back and check what's going on," Gemmy states, and waves everyone to follow her into the living room.

I walk over to the window and look out, trying to see if the man is still around. Seeing nothing, I turn back to the room.

Bren arrives and quickly settles on the floor in front of where Heather is seated, and they give each other warm smiles. "Have any of you heard the gossip around town?" Bren asks and I look over at her giving her my full attention.

"No," Winter replies, "What gossip?"

Bren sits a little straighter, although her legs are crossed. "A few businesses have been broken into, and some private residences. Mrs. Osborne has gone to stay with her sister for a while because someone tried to break into her house. What have you heard about it, Gemmy? You work with the sheriff."

"I know about Mrs. Osborne having gone to stay with her sister. We have new deputies who are going to be patrolling in the early hours, so let's hope they catch someone," Gemmy replies with a deep frown on her face.

I'm going to speak to Axel about this and make him aware because he wants nothing to happen in town, where Bitty, Amelia, or Sybil could get hurt.

This discussion goes nowhere, but we all agree to keep our ears to the ground, and if we hear anything, we'll let each other and our men know.

As the first lady, I speak out. "Ladies, our men can't keep us or the town safe

if they don't know what's happening. Anything you hear, you make sure you tell your man, but we all need, as we've decided already, to keep each other informed. I have this itchy feeling something isn't right with the town right now, so be careful. Try not to go places on your own."

Eden looks over at me while nodding in agreement. "What happened with Shar?"

Sighing, because I knew someone would ask. "Shar is very happy where she is. She's decided to stay with the Rogue Legion MC. I'm not going to say that I'm happy about it, but if this is what she wants, then I'm going to be quiet and support her. She deserves to find her own path after what happened to her, and she deserves to find her man, but she'll not find him in our MC or she would have already."

There's a general outpouring of well-being for Shar and her decision. There are even some rude comments about her getting some action from a fine Rogue Legion member. We all laugh about that one.

The talk of fine men soon turns to our fine men and everyone tells tales of how they've been re-enacting Jo's sex scenes from her books. Some of these tales get graphic until Jo puts an end to them by telling everyone that if they don't stop sharing their experiences, she'll stop writing the scenes. It's all getting a bit too personal for her to write stories she knows her friends are going to not only read but role play as well.

Lily seems to be in a world of her own as she mutters that Meat is a fine piece of man-meat and that he looks so good in his Viking gear that he could melt any woman's panties.

Everyone goes quiet as they listen to her and then the room bursts into hysterical laughter. Hands reach out to grasp the glass from Lily's hand and another takes the bottle from the table near her. Echoes of "That's enough for you, my lady," and "Ewww, that's Meat you're talking about. He's our bro."

Why they are all grabbing her bottle surprises me as she's only drinking water.

"He'd look scrumptious as a Roman legionnaire. I have a costume that would

make him look as tasty as a chocolate soldier.”

“Have you got enough costumes that we could use Rome as our themed night, Lily?” That could be the solution we need for TJs, I think to myself.

“Hell, yes. I can have togas, slave costumes, soldiers, and gladiators. The whole range. They’re easy to put together. I’d only need numbers and a couple of weeks’ notice.” Lily looks around the room.

“Right, ladies. Get your orders in for you and your man with Lily tonight. I’m having Caesar and his empress for Axel and me.” I beam and giggle at the room in general as I snatch the top costumes from right under their noses.

The rest of the evening we laugh and enjoy each other’s company, but eventually we start to disperse. Giving a wave I say good night to everyone and head home to my piece of man meat.

-:- HEATHER -:-

“It’s been a great evening, Gemmy. Thanks for inviting me and Bren. We’ve had a great time.”

“No problem. Are you okay on your own?”

“Yeah, my truck’s right out front. I’ll see you around at the clubhouse, I’m sure.” I close the door behind me and make my way over to my truck. Opening the driver’s side door, I look to the back of the truck and I’ve got a flat. Now how the heck has that happened?

Slamming the driver’s door closed, I step to look at the flat tire and give it a nasty look. Not sure if the look can help me fix it, but it feels good nonetheless.

Bringing my foot back, I give it a hard kick and mutter, “Fucking tire, as if I don’t have enough to contend with.”

“What did that tire ever do to you?” I hear from behind me. I jump as I turn around, but relax somewhat when I see Forest standing with his hands on his hips, smirking.

“It’s been one of those weeks. You know, when something can go wrong, it will go wrong?” I sigh and turn to retrieve the spare tire when Forest taps my shoulder.

“I’ll do it. Don’t get yourself all messed up.”

Standing back, I watch Forest make short work of the tire, but I have that feeling someone is watching and I turn slowly, scanning the area. I remember the comments and incident mentioned and can feel a cold chill run over me.

“All done. Are you okay, Heather?” Forest has stepped up beside me, wiping his hands on a large handkerchief.

“Yeah, but something’s not right. Do you see anyone watching? I’ve had this feeling and it won’t go away. The ladies tonight have said the town is gossiping about break-ins and other stuff happening. I’ve got to tell you, as you are the sheriff, that the town is getting itchy, and the women of the town are getting worried.” I turn to look at him, so he can see how serious I’m being.

Lifting his hand, he cups the side of my neck and steps closer to me, taking me by surprise. “You’re safe, and we are on top of what’s happening. I’ve taken on five deputies this week, and we are working diligently to find out what is happening and why.”

“O...Okay,” I stutter a little as I hadn’t expected him to get so close and it feels intimate.

“I’ll pick you up Friday and we’ll go on a date night. Steakhouse and dancing,” Forest says as he opens the truck driver's door, and lifts me in before slamming the door closed and waving.

Friday, date, steakhouse, and dancing! My mind is reeling and maybe that’s why I don’t object, and just start the darn truck and drive home.

CHAPTER TWELVE

-- FOREST --

The week is flying past. It's already Thursday and I'm sitting behind my desk listening to JP and Handsome giving me their reports.

"We patrolled the area around Gemmy's place after you sent us the message. But we found nobody hanging around. We stayed in the area for around three hours. Passed your place and around the neighborhood. Nothing stood out as unusual. We spoke to folks who were walking dogs and they didn't notice anyone hanging around or anything unusual.

"If someone is casing the area, they know when and where to be, to give them the cover they need. It has to be a local, and it has to be someone that has up-to-date knowledge of the area," JP reports.

Handsome leans forward in his seat. "Sheriff, we're going to ride the area a little over the next few days. We'll do it at different times, using my vehicle and JP's, rather than the cruiser. We'll use the cruiser on our night patrols. We can sleep when we need to, but we think it'll be wise to get eyes on the streets during daylight hours too."

"What about the area of retired people? Mrs. Osborne won't come back to her home until we know it's safe, and let's face it, who can blame her? My worry is for the elderly folk that must stay in the area, and worried about who is stalking the streets when it's dark." I rub the back of my neck when I feel the tension building already.

"We're creating contacts in the area, particularly with the dog walkers. They see us and wave now, which shows they are not feeling intimidated by us patrolling. One elderly man said he hadn't seen an officer of the law in that area since Sheriff Brackenridge took office," JP states.

"I asked how could he know that because as a retiree he wouldn't have lived there then. He gave me a squint-eyed look, then told me he was born in the house he now lives in, and visited every week when he got a job and family. Only returned when his parents died and his wife passed too. His kids are

living in another state, so he wanted to come back to his roots.” Handsome looks like he’s been put in his place firmly from the tone he’s speaking. Seeing my look, he grins. “Yeah, he put me in my place, but I can’t fault him. I would have had an attitude too.”

“Okay, place any significant information on the board. I want to keep everything visible, where we can all see what’s happening and where.”

I walk out of my office and head to the kitchen because I need a large mug of coffee to even think about whatever else is on my day's to-do list. I keep getting a whiff of lemons. It’s not unpleasant, but it has me wanting to sneeze.

Zack steps out of the basement carrying a box, and Ty is behind him with another one. I raise an eyebrow and Ty grins as he passes me by. “How much more have you got to sort down there?” I ask.

“Two more boxes after this. The filing cabinets are now all empty. The one on the left we are placing all closed cases into. For the one on the right we are placing cold cases, and cases that have not even been looked at, we are placing in priority order. So far, it’s mostly misdemeanor stuff, nothing to worry about, but we’ll want to give out warnings, fines, or the like,” Ty responds but continues into the office.

Stepping into the kitchen, I look at Bren, on a fuckin’ stepladder, cleaning the top of the cabinets. “What the fuck are you doing up there, woman? You shouldn’t be climbing like that.”

“No point cleaning the front of cabinets, counters, and the floor if the top of the cabinets are stinky with dust and grease. I’m working my way from the top down. Now leave me alone to get on as I’ve only an hour here before I need to get to the garage house.” Bren continues wiping with so much vigor I can’t help but think she’ll have one hell of a right hook with the strength in that arm's muscles if she ever lets go with it.

“If you need help, tell us, I don’t want you getting hurt,” I tell her as I pour a mug of coffee from the machine Gemmy purchased for the place. “Is it you that’s using all the lemon-smelling shit?”

Bren laughs. “Yeah, I like the smell, as it’s fresh.”

“Well, it makes me want to sneeze.” Which of course has her laughing. My phone vibrates in the back pocket of my pants, taking it out to have a look, I see it’s Meat messaging.

Meat: I’ve spoken to one woman. Tracing the next, but I’ll not be back until early next week.

Forest: OK. Let me know if you need anyone or anything.

Meat: Yeah

That’s about the most words Meat says at once, and as it’s a message, I think he did well because from what I heard he hardly uses his phone for speaking or sending messages.

Forest: Has the woman given you a lead?

Meat: Yeah, but I need to check it when I get back.

Forest: Anything I can check for you?

Meat: No, I’ll do it.

I can tell I’m not going to get extra information from Meat, so I decide to leave it alone because he knows he can get help if he needs or wants it.

Taking my drink with me, I stop at the reception area and look at Gemmy. “You okay?” I ask and she looks up from what she’s doing and nods, before looking back down again with a frown appearing.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, placing my mug on the desk and leaning over to see what she’s doing.

“Sheriff Brackenridge has four sons and a daughter. They all have children, but there are also a lot of family members like uncles and cousins. I’m trying to do a family chart so we can see by marking the speeding tickets, drunk and disorderly, and assault charges. Maybe it’s just a portion of the family that is trouble.”

Leaning closer, I can see the chart she’s creating, but it’s going to be large. “Why don’t you use one of the walls in the office to do this? You can’t get it on the whiteboard, but if we go to the hardware store, we could get another and put it on that wall. It would be better than you doing it on pieces of

paper.”

“Good idea. Can you keep your ears on reception while I run to the hardware store and get one?” Gemmy asks with an excited look on her face.

“I’ll get Zack to cover for you. Do you think you can get them to deliver it? If not, one of the deputies can collect it. Don’t get a small one, or you’ll be writing so small we’ll need a fucking magnifying glass to read it.” Turning to walk back to my office, I look over my shoulder. “Tell them to bill the department.”

“Okay.” Gemmy grins as she rushes out the door. “Zack, you need to sit in reception until Gemmy gets back,” I state as I pass him and walk through the office to my own.

Looking around my office as I drink my coffee, I can see Bren has cleaned in here. The slight smell of lemon is lingering, but thanks to the small window that she’s opened, it isn’t strong. My desk has been cleaned, and the floor has been mopped. I’m impressed she’s done so much. Giving her a key to the place has allowed her to come in before everyone else and work without dodging us all. I think this is going to work out well, and I trust Heather, as she’s been working for the club a long time, and so has Bren.

Thinking of Heather has me smirking because I’m looking forward to our night out tomorrow. Her face showed how shocked she was, but before she could say anything, I was away and chuckling.

My phone rings and I pick up where I’d placed it on the desk and see Sober is calling. Quickly flicking the green phone icon, I speak. “Sober, everything okay?”

“I’ve started a trail of where Colin had been the week before he died. It’s tangled somewhat, but it seems he could have had someone after him. But I can find no gambling, drinking, or other reason someone would want to see him hurt or dead.”

“The information you’re finding, is it all related to town or other places?” I ask because I don’t want to get into another sheriff’s area if I can help it, but I will if need be.

“No, it’s all in town. I’m following a day-by-day plan, speaking to people and

working out if or who had an issue with him.”

“Okay. If you need any support, let me know. Make sure when you come back, you fill the whiteboard in, and we’ll have a report meeting.”

“No problem. I have to go. I’m checking out a woman that he’d been seeing, and she’s taken to working nights at the truck stop. She’s due home anytime.”

“Okay, watch your back.” I close the call and lean back in my seat, rubbing my chin as I think about Colin and where Sober could be looking.

Hearing Gemmy laughing, I pick up my empty mug and walk into the deputies’ office, smiling to myself as I watch Gemmy passing a huge whiteboard over to Ty and Zack. “It’s the only one they had and he wouldn’t hold it. I gave him a piece of my mind and told him to watch his ass because the department would watch it, thanks to him being a miserable asshole.”

Ty throws his head back, laughing. “I’ll call in a few times, walk around and then leave. That’ll put the wind up his ass.”

Zack is chuckling but remains quiet. It’s obvious he’s at ease with Gemmy and Ty. Standing, he steps over and helps Ty get the placement on the wall that Gemmy wants because let’s face it, she’s not as tall as the rest of us. She’ll never reach the top if we do it to our height.

I take my mug to the kitchen and leave them to it. Rinsing it out and laying it upside down on the drainer. I turn when I hear Bren speak. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Sheriff. I’m done for today.”

“Okay, Bren, thank you. You’ve done a great job for your first day.” I smile at her and she grins back at me.

“No problem. I’ll get this place in shape in no time.” Turning, Bren leaves the kitchen and I watch her walk through reception and out the front door.

Two seconds is all it takes for the door to reopen and I step back behind the kitchen door when I recognize Polly. Holy...Fuck...!

I watch from the crack of the door when Gemmy walks out of the deputies’ office and sees Polly. “Oh, hello, what can I do for you?”

Now I know Gemmy enough to know she's said that with more than a hint of sarcasm to it, and when Zack appears behind her, I grin as he frowns and steps next to Gemmy as though to protect her.

"I want to speak to Sheriff Forest," Polly says, and her voice shows she's trying to give the aura of being important.

I grin when I hear Gemmy respond. "He's not here. He's not interested in you. I've heard him say it, and I know he can do much better than a skank like you. Now, you had a one-night tumble, which, from what I hear is your normal. So, you've had your night with his cock and you're not getting another."

Polly screeches, Zack laughs and Ty walks out of the deputies' office smirking. I'm sure I don't want to know what he's going to say, but when Polly sees him and slinks over, sliding her index finger down his chest, I nearly give away my position when Ty states coldly. "Lady, you want to keep your finger? 'Cause if you don't, I'll rip it from your hand without a second thought."

Polly shrieks again and snatches her hand away from Ty like he burned her. Gemmy laughs then runs her finger down his chest and Ty says nothing at all, which has Polly turning and storming out of the department. I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding and grin until I hear, "You can come out now, Sheriff."

Walking into reception with a slight flush on my face as I'm embarrassed to have been caught hiding, Gemmy laughs. "You should never have stuck your dick in the town whore. You're going to have a hell of a job shaking her off."

Zack shakes his head at me, and Ty throws his head back, laughing. "Man, you are in the shit now. I'm gonna enjoy seeing you get out of this mess." Throwing his arm around my shoulder and pulling me into the deputies' office, he continues, "But tell me, was she worth it?"

I shake off his arm and stomp into my office, slamming the door closed behind me. But I can't help the smirk at them all pissing Polly off and have to admit that no, she wasn't worth it at all. I just hope if she confronts me when I'm with Heather, I can get myself out of the mess and Heather can

deal with it.

Seeing my phone dancing around the desk, I realize it's a message as the vibrate function is switched on. Grabbing it, I see it's Buzz.

Buzz: If you want your tattoo done by me, get over here now.

Forest: What's wrong?

Buzz: I'm done here tomorrow, so you've got now or someone else can do it.

Now, if Buzz is doing his last tattoo today, it is fucking going to be mine. I grab my jacket and head out the door fast. Shouting over my shoulder to whoever is interested. "I'll be back tomorrow."

Sending a message that I'm on my way, I jump into the cruiser and take off with sirens blaring.

Two hours later, I'm standing looking at my left pec in the mirror and the Raging Barons MC logo beautifully inked. Buzz has done a fantastic job of it, and I'm delighted.

"Thanks, Buzz, it's fucking great." I turn and step back to the seat so he can wrap me up.

"That's me done. I'm doing no more." Buzz gripes, but I can see he's happy with the finished tattoo. "I like the position you chose. I've done some on arms, shoulders, backs and a couple on ribs, but funny enough, you are the first one on a pectoral."

The new tattoo artist, Hashtag, steps over and gives me a chin lift. "It looks good, man."

"Yeah, I'm thrilled with it, and it'll keep my president off my back now it's done." Reuse gives me a half grin and a nod as he knows how relentless Axel is at brothers getting their tattoos done.

"Why do they call you Hashtag?" I can't resist asking. He smirks and hands me a notepad, and every single note he has on this pad has a hashtag in front of it. "Okay, say no more," I state, grinning as I hand him the notepad back.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

-:- HEATHER -:-

I do not know how I got hoodwinked into a date night with Forest. One minute I was looking at the damn flat tire, and the next he was walking away smirking about a date night.

Throwing my work clothes on, I brush my hair and tie it back because I don't like it hanging around my face while I'm working.

I need to get laundry done today at the clubhouse, and Lina is finishing cleaning the bedrooms, which we started yesterday. On the whole, the brothers are great. They leave things in their laundry baskets, and some even put them outside their bedroom doors for us to easily pick them up on a Friday.

This morning I need to call in at the office. Alf wants my go-ahead on something. He's a great manager, and it's saved me a lot of sitting behind a desk by giving him the office manager position. He's trustworthy and has become a good friend. He's also happier in himself and it shows. Divorcing his wife had hit him hard. It's taken him a while to settle with us, show us he has a great sense of humor, a great mind, and is a great brother figure to me.

It takes me half an hour to arrive and walk into the business office. I throw myself down in the easy chair near the window and give Alf a large smile. "Good morning, and aren't you bright and breezy this morning?" I ask, and can see the frown on Alf's face because he's thinking, what's going on here? I keep the broad smile just so I'm irritating him a little more.

"What the heck, Heather? You are not usually this happy first thing in the morning." He gives me a searching look, then shrugs his shoulders after whatever conclusion he has come to.

"Well, I'm here, and I'm ready to listen, so what's going on?" I ask, but stay in the easy chair. I don't want to go behind the desk; I hate desk work intensely.

“I’ve had four people contact us the last two weeks. I’ve been out and checked to see what they need. They are private contracts, elderly citizens who have no family, or families that live away. It’s general cleaning, and I’ve been careful to check their financial status because the last thing we need is them not to be eating, or using their heating because they are paying us.” Alf looks up and I give him a small nod because he knows the company is earning enough profits to support several people on lower incomes if need be. “I’ve given them a figure for a monthly payment and all four have agreed they are happy and have signed the contract. This, however, means we need to take on two people because I cannot stretch our staff any more than I have.”

“No problem, but make sure they are checked out thoroughly. If the company we use gives us a long wait time for results, as they did last time, I want you to let me know and I’ll speak to Specs, who I’m sure will do it fast and efficiently. I’d rather give them a contract for the company than keep using this one if they let us down again.” The last time we asked our current company to do background checks, they took so long that the people had already taken on other jobs. That is not reliable, or professional enough for me.

“Heather, when you go to the clubhouse this morning, speak to Specs and ask if they can take us on as clients because this other company has let us down a few times now. I tried to get them to check a client last week and was told it would be ten days or longer. I can’t have a client hanging on that long.” Alf rubs the back of his neck, a sure sign that he is stressed.

“I’ll speak to him this morning when I get in. He’s always in his office, so it’ll be easy for me to see him. How did you get these four clients checked if you didn’t use the company?”

“I asked to see their bank statements. It’s not something I would normally do, but I explained that as an owner of the company, you had rates for anyone on a lower income, and if they could prove that to me, I could fix them the rate they needed. They were happy to show me and only one was fairly wealthy. The other three were doing okay, but not something you’d call flush with money.”

“Okay, that was good thinking.” Seeing he’s still worried, I quickly reassure him. “Alf, you are a good manager for me. You’ve taken every piece of stress from my shoulders. I hate office work, as you know, and you’ve reconstructed the contracts which now cover the company far more than it ever did.

“I’m not worried if you have to take on new staff. I know you’ll have them checked out and that you’ll monitor them for a while. Just let me know how many new staff you introduce and when. I don’t need or want to give you permission. In fact, I’ve been speaking to my lawyer about making you a partner. Fifty-one percent me, and forty-nine percent you, but that is if you would be interested?”

Alf gives me such a look of shock that I can’t hold the giggles that burst from me. Standing from the easy chair, I walk over, pat his shoulder, and head towards the door. “Think about it and let me know. Now I’ve got to get to work.” I leave Alf with his mouth hanging open in shock, and it amuses me no end. That man deserves to be a co-owner of the company. What he’s achieved since he’s been manager is hugely significant. Our reputation is massive now and we turn more clients down than we take, and all thanks to Alf.

I call in at the coffee house to get my usual takeout of a large mocha. I just love that chocolate twist they have and it sets me up for a good start to the day.

Stepping up to the counter, a new woman is serving. I look over to the register and Liam is watching the woman closely. New staff, I’m thinking. When I get to the counter Liam steps away from the register, gets my takeout, and hands it to me with a slight grimace on his face.

I hand over the cash and give him a smirk. “New staff, always hard until they get into the swing of things,” I comment.

“Yeah, we have three new staff members. Two that are working the counter at the moment and a male staff member, who I think is going to be great. He’s so organized, it is helping me tremendously. He’s about taken over the kitchen, and accepting deliveries within days.” Liam is still watching the young woman, although he’s talking to me.

“That’s good. It makes managing, or running, a business easier when the staff you have are reliable. The best thing I ever did was take on Alf, and the best thing the club ever did was take you on as manager here. Don’t overthink things, but always be on top of issues.” I pat his hand and pick up my takeout before quickly making my way to my vehicle and the clubhouse.

Walking into the clubhouse kitchen, I take the top off my takeout drink and sit myself down at the island, sipping and sighing to myself with the pleasure of the chocolate bursting on my tongue. Looking up when I hear a chuckle behind me. Turning, I can’t help but roll my eyes at Wings, who is standing looking at me with a huge smirk on his face. Oh yeah, he’s done something!

Amelia, who is behind the island, and has her hands in a large bowl mixing pastry ready to create whatever pie she’s aiming to make, comes to a halt, and stares at Wings. When he continues smirking Amelia takes a lump of the pastry and throws it at Wings hitting him on his chest. The shock on Wings’ face is so hilarious that I can’t help the laugh that bursts out.

“Get out of the kitchen or you won’t be having a meal this evening. And you better not have caused Heather more work than she does already.”

“Now would I do that?” Wings grins as he scoops the pastry from the floor and throws it in the trash.

“Yeah, you would, now shoo.”

I grin at Amelia when Wings saunters out of the kitchen, whistling, obviously not bothered with wearing pastry on his shirt.

“Be watchful as you do the laundry because that little devil has been up to something.” Amelia grins.

“Yeah, I will. I’ll make sure I get payback, too.”

“You not interested in Wings? You know, as a beau.”

Laughing at her description. “Nope, not even a little. He’s a hunk, I admit, but he’s more of a pesky brother than a romantic interest. I have a date tonight.” Not sure why I let that slip, but when Amelia stops working and looks directly at me I know I need to move or she’s going to be digging for as much information as she can get.

I rush out of the kitchen and head to the utility room, where I'm going to fill up the washing machines and run around collecting laundry baskets. There are usually a few that leave their laundry in here for me on Fridays, Mav being one; he's so thoughtful to me and Lina.

An hour later, I still have a lot of laundry to get through. The first lot is out of the washing machine and in the dryers. The baby clothes are few as Mia makes sure she does her laundry for them, herself, and Axel.

Lina walks in and hands me a laundry basket. "That's the last I've found, and it's Specs' laundry. He didn't have too much, thankfully."

"Oh, Specs. Dammit, I need to speak to him. Thanks, Lina, I forgot all about speaking with Specs." I rush out of the room, leaving Lina behind, looking confused.

Knocking on the tech room door, I wait for Specs to respond. I never enter rooms if the door is closed without being told I can. It's about respecting people's privacy, and catching some things over the years that my poor eyeballs will never be able to forget seeing.

'Come in', I hear, and I open the door, smiling at Specs. "Hi, Heather. What can I do for you?"

Stepping nearer to where Specs is sitting in front of his keyboards, yeah, more than one, and all his other equipment, I quickly get to the point. "The firm I use for checking people's backgrounds before I employ them has become unreliable. They are taking over a week to get back to us. Alf is not happy with their attitude and I wonder if the club would consider having a contract with my company. If I have any security or need any checks done, you probably know more than I do about what's needed."

"We would always consider working with someone like yourself, Heather. You are part of the club now and I mean more than the cleaner. I'll speak to Pres, but I don't see a problem. Shall I speak to Alf about the contract, or do you want me to come back to you?" Specs knows I hate office work, and this is his way of bypassing me for my benefit.

"Oh no, you speak to Alf. I just wanted to put the issue forward as he has had to do some checks himself, and thankfully it was resolved without issue,

but he needs to get things in place because the other company needs to be replaced and fast.”

“Leave it with me.” Specs winks, and I can’t help but give him a bright smile as I turn and leave the office. A lightbulb moment happens and I turn to Specs. “Did you happen to see what Wings has been up to?”

Chuckles tell me all I need to know, and I go back into the office and close the door, making sure no one hears what’s being said. Fifteen minutes later I leave the office and run to Wings’ room, quietly open the door, and step inside.

I make his bed but without the top sheet. I turn the bottom over to make it look like it’s been made correctly, then head into the attached bathroom and open the shower. Grabbing the shampoo, I squeeze it down the sink and fill it with shaving foam. Going back into the bedroom, I take every pair of his boxers out of the drawer and stuff them in a bag I know he keeps in the closet. I push that bag to the back of the closet, smack my hands together, and sneak out of the room.

Back in the utility, I pick up the box of detergent next to the cabinet where we keep supplies and shake it, checking to see what’s inside. Seeing the small colored balls I know that the laundry would have come out blue if I’d used this box. *Fucker, I whisper to myself.* I put the box into the cabinet away from our usual stock and that way it won’t get used this time. I can’t help but be pleased I derailed Wings’ attempt.

The day passes quickly and between getting all the laundry out of the way, I help Lina finish cleaning the bathrooms. It’s a hard job, but it’s a satisfying one because this is not just a biker’s clubhouse as many see it, but a home to all of them. Seeing each room clean and tidy is my reward rather than the income that is generated. The fact that everyone here is now a friend, people I love and trust, again is rewarding.

Once I get home I enjoy a long, hot shower. I know I have an hour before Forest is arriving to take me out. I presume he got my phone number from Specs, but it hardly matters. I’m listed all over because of the business, anyway.

Steakhouse and dancing mean I don't have to dress up for a fancy restaurant, which isn't my ideal night out. I decide on a pair of jeans, cowboy boots, and a wraparound blouse.

In the mirror, I see a woman staring back at me I haven't seen in quite a while. Long black hair flowing over her shoulders and midway down her back. Dark eyes and high cheekbones, olive-colored skin, and a wide sensual mouth. Being only 5' 4" makes my curves stand out and they stand out in all the right places. The cowboy style has accentuated every curve in just the right way.

I've been out with the girls a few times but haven't dressed to impress a man in a long time. Oh, my God! Am I dressing to impress? I hadn't thought about that until now. I've got to admit, though, if he's not impressed with this, he can take a hike.

I've just finished my makeup when there's a knock on the door. Opening it, I find myself face to face with a large bouquet. "Beautiful flowers for a beautiful lady," Forest states and then looks around the flowers he's holding out. His mouth hangs open and I start to panic that something is wrong.

"Forest? What is it?" I look around me to see what could be wrong.

"My God, girl, you look amazing. I always thought you were beautiful, but you look stunning. I don't have the words for it. WOW."

I blush from the soles of my feet to the roots of my hair, thanking him for the compliment. I quickly put the flowers into a vase with water before I grab my purse and we head out.

Entering the steakhouse with Forest feels odd because I don't know him that well as he's not been at or around the club that much, even when he first came from being a nomad. I know he was an FBI Agent for a lot of years and he had had more than enough after a particularly bad case he worked on. Apart from that, I know little about him.

Forest helps me into the booth and smiles at me. "It's a good eating place Heather, I've been here a few times. Best steak around, in my opinion."

Looking around, we are sitting at a booth that is positioned at one of the windows but overlooks other diners and beyond that, the dance floor. A

raised area has a setup for a DJ, small band, singer, or karaoke.

“It’s a cozy place. I like the cowboy feel about the place.” I turn in my seat and smile at Forest.

Handing me one of the menus from the center of the table, Forest takes one for himself. “Do you want a starter or go straight for the main meal?”

“Hm, I think I’ll go right for the main meal.” I bide my time a moment while I look at the menu, then look up at Forest. “I’ll have the country-fried steak with sausage gravy and a wedge salad.”

The waitress appears, and it’s nice to see she’s not half-dressed like some eating establishments have serving lately. Forest doesn’t look at the waitress but at me as he gives her my order and then his own for a 12 oz sirloin, mushrooms, onions fried, and a side salad. He also orders a beer for himself and a glass of red wine for me.

“Are you enjoying working as the sheriff?” I ask, trying to create a little small talk.

“I didn’t intend to stay in law enforcement but agreed, as the town needs someone to whip it into shape. I’m not sure I’ll stay as sheriff once that’s done.”

“You are making headway, I would think?”

“Well, I’ve deputized five men already, taken on two staff for reception and a cleaner, as you know,” he chuckles more to himself. “Who would have thought the place was so stinking bad? And I mean that in all ways possible.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it organized. If you have men to help, it makes life easier. When I started my cleaning business it was very hard, and I couldn’t keep up. The whole thing came together when I employed people who I could trust and delegate jobs. Alf has been a godsend and I’m looking into making him a co-owner.”

“Gemmy and Zack have been a godsend in getting the office back on track. Bren has the place sparkling like a TV ad for cleaning products. The five deputies are working together like a well-oiled machine. I have to say I didn’t think it would come together so quickly.” Forest looks up as the food

is served.

We keep up the small talk while we eat, and I'm pleasantly surprised at how easily it flows between us. As we're finishing the meal, Forest looks me right in the eyes.

"I can't go into case details, Heather, but you need to have your wits about you any time you're alone. You should probably mention this to your staff as well. We're digging up some unsolved cases and they cover quite a period from past and present. We're pretty sure that there are 'criminals' out there who have not been apprehended deliberately, and we're going to be rattling some cages while we investigate. You need to watch for, and report, anything you feel is unusual." Forest gives me a serious look and then smiles.

"Okay, I can do that. I'll warn Alf, who'll pass it on to everyone."

"Come on, let's dance a while," Forest asks as he stands and holds his hand out for me to take. I place my hand in his, which feels small sitting in his palm.

The music has gone from line dancing to slow dancing, where partners can hold on to each other. It's been a long time since I've been held while dancing and I can't say that it isn't nice, because it is and I feel comfortable in Forest's arms.

Leaning toward me, Forest places his lips on mine and gives me one of the sweetest kisses I've ever had. It's soft, slow, and sexy as all hell, I have to admit.

Walking back to our table for a last drink before we leave someone rams into my side and sends me flying across the dance floor. If it wasn't for Forest I would have ended up on the floor itself. Turning I see a woman giving me a filthy look and then pointing at Forest, before screeching at the top of her voice.

"Why are you here with this skank? You are mine, I told you that you were, once you stuck your dick in me, and I've gotta tell you, doll..." giving me a nasty look when she says doll, "He's extra good with his dick."

Oh, my God, what the hell is going on here? I look at Forest and he's giving

this woman a filthy, cold look, but it's more than obvious he knows her. Me, I'm outta here because I have never and will never be *'the other woman'*.

As I turn to leave, Forest grabs my hand and hangs onto me, although I'm trying to pull away. "Let go of my hand," I snap, but he ignores me.

"Polly, it was a one-time thing. I told you that at the time, and I've told you every time you've approached me since. Now, this is your last warning. You do this shit again and I'll arrest you for harassment, stalking, libel, and any other damn thing I can think of. Are you hearing me this time? 'Cause you'd better be."

Slamming her foot down like a six-year-old having a temper tantrum, the woman storms away and quickly disappears out of sight. Everyone stopped dancing and eating staring at the fiasco, some showing amusement, some shaking their head in disgust. I just want to get out of here at this point.

Forest leads me outside and to his truck, takes off his kutte, and throws it over the back of the driver's seat before walking me around and lifting me into the passenger seat. Once in the driver's seat, he turns and looks at me.

"Yes, I was with her one time, and one time only. It was when I first came back to town and settled as a brother of the club. She meant nothing to me then and means nothing to me now. She is, however, not leaving me alone. Coming into the sheriff's department, like tonight, she is always where I am when I go anywhere in the evening. She usually loiters around Club Whisky, so I didn't expect this shit with her tonight." Before Forest can finish, banging on the passenger door draws my attention, and I can't believe it's this bitch back again.

That is me done. I open the passenger door, making sure it's forceful, and narrowly miss her when she jumps back from the truck. I drop to the ground and point at her. "Who do you think you are? You cause a scene in a public place just because a man has stuck his cock in you? You know that a one-time thing is a one-nighter, a hit-it-and-quit-it, and various other nasty sayings."

I poke that bitch right between her false tits and make sure she can feel it. Every time she opens her mouth to say something, I poke her harder and

step closer, which has her stepping back fast. Her eyes are shooting to Forest, who has run around the truck to split us up, but I've had it. My temper is up and it's not going to go down anytime soon.

Forest steps closer and I whirl around and face him, slamming my hands on my hips and squinting. "Next time you take a woman out on a date, make sure your skanks have already been put in their place." I don't wait for a response and I dodge his hand as he tries to grab me as I walk past. Seeing Mr. Cloverfeld, I run over to his vehicle while waving my hand. "Can you give me a lift home?"

"Sure can, girly, jump in." That's exactly what I do. I climb into his beat-up station wagon and relax my shoulders. As we pull away from the steakhouse, I see Forest arguing with the woman and she's arguing right back.

Mr. Cloverfeld is one of our commercial customers. He looks over as he's driving and I know he's going to say something about what's gone on, and he doesn't disappoint.

"Polly is the town whore of her own making. She isn't a prostitute, but she's had more men than you've swept floors. She is tryin' to find a man who'll marry her, or in the club's case make her an ol' lady, but she's not a settle-at-home person. She will never find a man doing what she is because every man in town knows she's had nearly everyone's dick in her. No man wants a woman when she's been with his work colleagues, drinking friends, and family members. Sheriff Forest couldn't have known what he was getting into when he had his one-nighter, and she's seeing him as an ATM. Don't hold it against him if you can let it go. Give him a chance. He's a good man and just needed to blow off steam after he came here."

The silence following his speech lengthens and I try to see it for what it is. We are not teenagers, after all, and I know he has to have been around the block a few times. But this was nasty, and we'd been having a great night up to this point. I look at Mr. Cloverfeld and give him the tiniest of smiles. "I'll think about it."

Patting my hand, which is lying in my lap, he nods his head. "That's all I've to say on the matter, Heather."

Once I arrive home, I lock the door and make my way upstairs, quickly go through my nighttime routine, then sit in bed staring at the wall, my thoughts jumbled and my feelings are as bad. Deciding I'll think about it tomorrow, I turn off the light and settle down to sleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

-:- FOREST -:-

Sitting and watching Gemmy making pancakes for breakfast, I sip my coffee, and my mind races. I could kill that bitch Polly. She's becoming a major problem and if she won't stop, I'm going to have to arrest her.

"What's gotten you so grumpy this morning? I thought you were out on a date last night?" Gemmy asks.

Ty takes a seat next to me and gives Gemmy a large smile when she hands him a plate with four pancakes piled with fruit and maple syrup. "Yeah, how did it go?"

"Well, it was a good night until fucking Polly butted in and ruined it." I drop my head because I don't know how to fix this. "She had my date running off and grabbing a lift home with someone else. I have to tell you that if she fucks with me anymore, she'll get arrested."

"Oh, don't tell me it was Polly again! I've been hearing more about her and her clingy ways. She did this to someone else and he was married, but she still wouldn't leave him alone and his wife up and left him. He sold up and followed his wife, winning her back thankfully." Gemmy takes a seat with her single pancake piled with fruit and honey drizzled over the top. I look at my plate and pick up my fork, but lay it down as I just can't eat it.

"You want me to arrest her? I'll do it. The woman's a nightmare. She has now done this three times and you're still warning her. We can drag her ass in, throw her behind bars and leave her a few days. Maybe she'll stop with this shit when she knows she can get herself locked up," Ty suggests all the while stuffing his face as he's speaking.

"Find out where she lives. If she has family, maybe we could speak to them and see if they can pull her back from this shit." Rubbing the back of my neck, I stand, step over to Gemmy, and kiss the top of her head. "Sorry for wasting a delicious breakfast. I just can't face it this morning."

“I’ll eat them,” Ty says and quickly grabs my plate and begins polishing off my plate.

“I’m going over to my place. Fox is coming over to look at that dining table and chairs. We fixed it for early this morning so I can get to work.”

“Okay, I’ll see you later. I’m going to be here all day doing chores and making calls to my Poppy and Stitch.”

“If you need me, call and I’ll be here,” I tell her, but she knows that, so I’m not sure why I’ve even said it. I make my way over to my place and check out the yard, which looks much better since we got rid of the trash and cut the grass.

Opening the back door, I step inside, walk around each room, and see everything has been stripped. It’s now a blank canvas for Hammer and his crew to fit everything as we want it. Even the walk-in closet has been ripped out and lines drawn on the walls. Looking at them, it’s a plan of where shelves and cabinets are going to be placed.

“You around, Forest?” I hear and quickly make my way to the dining room, where Fox is inspecting the table.

“Morning, Fox.”

“Morning. This is a nice dining table. I can make this like new. The chairs are good and if I need to sort any issues I can. I’ll recover with material as close to the original as I can too.” He steps over to a chair and pulls it away from the table to inspect it. “I’ve been teaching Carrie how to recover items, as she was bored at the reception and office. She’s a damn machine with organizing, but then she has nothing to do.” Fox laughs while shaking his head.

“If you think this can be brought back to looking good, then do it. I like it and it’s a good piece of furniture fitting in here perfectly.”

“Oh, I can bring it back to life. The stain on that end I can remove and I can fix the wobble on this chair. It’s a piece of furniture that wasn’t cheap as it’s redwood. I can bring the natural grain back and it’ll be the focal point of the room, I’m sure.”

“Okay, do it.” I nod and turn to look at him. “I’ll pay whatever it costs. Don’t worry about that. I just want it to be back in its natural state. I loved it when I saw it and knew I wanted to keep it if you could make it look good again.”

“Come on then, give me a hand to get it into the van. I may as well take it while I’m here as come back for it.” Fox picks up two chairs, piling one upside down on the other. I repeat that process and carry two behind him.

Waving Fox away, I lock up the house and head back to Gemmy’s. Opening the front door, I walk in and check the living and dining room, but she’s not about. Even the kitchen is empty, but I hear her in the utility talking to herself I imagine.

Leaning on the utility door frame, I watch as Gemmy is filling the washing machine while holding her phone to her ear, using her shoulder. She’s talking with her Poppy, so I make sure I signal I’m leaving. When she smiles at me and nods I head to my room where I grab what I need and shout to Ty to get a move on as I’m not hanging around for him.

Walking into the sheriff’s department, it’s quiet and as Gemmy and Zack, who is away for the weekend, are not here today. It’s a bit too quiet for my liking. The smell of lemons hits you as you walk in and as I walk further into the reception area, I hear movement in the kitchen.

“I’ll get us both a drink, then come to your office. I have a couple of cases for you to run your eyes over,” Ty says as he walks over to the kitchen and, hearing him say ‘morning,’ to Bren, I make my way to my office.

Standing in front of the evidence board, I note the information we’ve found so far regarding the last sheriff’s family. They are a rough bunch for sure, and how he ever made sheriff staggers me. I know some people drag themselves up from the bottom and I’m all for it, and proud to know a few that have done that. But, this guy, I’m just not seeing how he did it. It makes me think we need to be checking the last mayor more closely.

My eyes scan down the relatives and the things we have against their names:

- Gerome, Cousin—Drunk and disorderly—2 times

- Leroy, Cousin—Driving Under the Influence—4 times
- Abraham, Brother, younger—Speeding fines—19, and none paid
- Eloise, Niece—Drunk and disorderly—3 times
- Lois, Niece—Shoplifting—5 times
- Chester, Uncle—Drunk and disorderly—6 times
- Ulysses, Brother, older—Driving Under the Influence—4 times
- Andrew, Father, deceased—Driving without License—5 times
- Andrew, Father, deceased—Driving without Insurance—5 times
- Andrew, Father, deceased—Driving without Registration—5 times
- Andrew, Father, deceased—Domestic Abuse—7 times, no charges filed
- Elmer, Nephew—Burglary—3 times, insufficient evidence
- John James [JJ], Son—Intent to supply drugs—8 times
- Darlene, Daughter—Driving Under the Influence—2 times
- Darla, Daughter—Intent to supply drugs—5 times
- Lena, Daughter—Drunk and disorderly—3 times

Ty stands next to me, looking at the board too. “It’s a fucked-up family. But we’ll get them. If you notice the brother always gets his speeding tickets on Henderson Road. If we put up a speed trap, we can collar the fucker and haul him in, then slap the other fines on him. I bet he can’t pay them to the county. But we need a reason to take him in front of Judge Patricks.”

Looking at Ty, I grin. “Now, how did you know about our Judge Patricks?”

“Well, I am a deputy around here. It’s my duty to know about everything and everyone, and knowing which judge will be for or against our cases is going to be more than a little handy. This woman worked hard to be a judge, and she’s known for being unmovable when she makes her mind up. She

also takes time and makes sure she has all the information she can get about a case. If we can get her on our side with all this scum, we can get them off the streets and out of our town.” Ty chuckles. “They could go live next door to the old sheriff, you know, in Cellville.”

Nodding in agreement, because he’s right, if we can get this judge on our side, she’ll lock these fuckers up and throw away the key.

“I need to run over to the clubhouse today. While I’m gone, you hold things down here. I’m waiting for JP and Handsome to report from last night’s patrol, then I’m out of here for a while.”

“No problem. I’ll stay here and watch over things. I’ll work on another box out in reception. The two cases I mentioned were so similar that it has to be the same person.” Ty rushes out of the office into the deputies’ office and quickly returns with two files in his hands. Handing me the files, I open them and look at the information. Ty continues as he writes on the evidence board. “Two houses, both broken into, between one a.m. and three a.m. Both times they enter through the utility room window, which had been left ajar. Both houses are single-female-owned and lived in. Both times the females were assaulted, thankfully not raped, in their beds. Both females were able to fight off the attacker. Now, what is interesting here is that they both had DNA under their nails, but both samples were…” and Ty uses the two-finger air quotes sign, “lost somewhere, so were never sent to the lab.”

- Unknown—Home Invasion/Burglary—2 times, Assault on single female occupants

“Oh fuck, another thing that Brackenridge covered up.” I rub the back of my neck. “You can bet this is one of his family members. We need to take a very close look at them as we know they’ve been arrested for breaking into homes but were never charged as he always found them alibis. Now it seems whoever this is, doesn’t just break in, but assaults if the females are young.”

“I’ll keep digging, and anything else I find, I’ll update you.”

“Okay, I’m feeling sick about these people because the more we find, the more it seems they are the root cause of this town’s problems.”

Tapping on the office door, JP and Handsome stroll inside. “Just reporting from our patrol last night,” JP says and I take my seat behind the desk as I’m thinking this is going to be a shit day.

Handsome takes a seat and JP steps in front of my desk. “We saw a man running through the neighborhood, and again, he knew the place well. He was able to give us the slip, but an old man was sitting on his porch smoking and watching over his neighbors as they slept. We spoke to this man, and he said he knew who we were chasing. He’d seen him clearly. The fucker we were chasing was none other than Brackenridge’s nephew, but his nephew doesn’t live in town. He lives three towns over.”

I look at Ty and grimace. “Ty, you get this all looked at, then onto the evidence board, and I’ll catch up later. I’ve got to get out of here and sort something out.” I turn after picking up my phone and cruiser keys from the desk and look at Handsome. “From now on I’m calling you Hands. Your name is a bloody mouthful.”

Throwing his head back, while giving a deep, hearty laugh. “Yeah, you can say that again.”

Entering the clubhouse half an hour later, I give Amelia, Bitty, and Sybil a slight smile, just tipping one side of my face. “Anyone seen Heather?” I ask, “I need to have a word with her,” I continued nonchalantly, trying my best to make it sound innocent because these three will be all over me like bees in molasses if they find out I fucked up date night.

Bitty points to the common room, “She’s upstairs doing bedrooms with Lina. They didn’t get finished yesterday as Lina had a doctor’s appointment and had to leave early.”

“Okay, thank you very much.” I give the best smile I can muster and dash out of the kitchen, through the common room, and up the stairs listening and looking for Heather or Lina.

Hearing voices I stop and lean on the wall listening because my name mentioned has me wanting to know what’s being said.

“It was a good night until that bitch Polly turned up.” I hear Heather say and it has me giving a tiny smile to myself.

“Oh, no, not that disgusting woman. You know she’s been with a lot of men in town. I dodge her if I see her, I don’t want her giving me any cooties if she brushes past me,” Lina replies, and I can just imagine her nose turned up.

Dice walks out of his bedroom further up the corridor and I place my finger on my lips to let him know to be quiet. He walks over and leans on the wall across from me, listening too.

“That woman loudly, and I mean making sure every person in the steakhouse heard what she was saying, informed all that Forest had stuck his dick in her.”

Lina replies. “Oh, that skank! I wouldn’t want anyone to know who I’d been with. I’ve only had one man, so don’t even think I’ve been around the block. Mine was on graduation night, lost my virginity to a piece of crap. Didn’t get an O out of it, I can tell you.” The room was deadly silent, and I flick my eyes at Dice, who cringes at what we just heard.

“Girl, that’s just stinky. Who the hell doesn’t make sure the woman at least gets an O? Honestly, that’s damn selfish, in my opinion.” Heather, I can tell, is trying to get Lina to feel better about what happened.

“Oh, don’t worry, I learned to give myself one.” I slam my hand over my mouth to stop the laugh that is trying hard to burst out, and Dice walks away quickly, but I notice his shoulders are shaking.

As soon as I get control of myself I knock on the door frame and lean on it, watching Heather and Lina placing clean sheets on the bed between them.

“Can I have a word with you, Heather, please?” Shit, I’m making sure I’m polite and don’t give her a reason to slam the door in my face.

Sighing, Heather nods. “Yeah, okay. I’ll be back shortly Lina.”

As soon as we hit the corridor, Heather closes the bedroom door behind her. “Forest, I don’t care that you’ve stuck your dick in women in the past. I do care if I’m going to have it thrown in my face when we’re together. Now, you need to stop it from happening again. It’s your history, not mine.” Heather looks me in the eye and I’m not sure how to respond.

“I told her we were only ever a one-night thing. She’s been told by others

that she is not ever going to be anything to me. She's a lunatic and I wish I'd never met the woman." Looking at Heather with a look of desperation.

"You get one more chance at this, Forest. One...More...Chance. You decide if you're up to the challenge."

"I'm up for it, Heather, believe me. TJs are having a theme night. Rome is the theme this time. We'll make that our date night." I give her my best smile and lean towards her, ready to kiss her to seal the deal. Heather steps back and leaves me hanging, all puckered up, with nowhere to go.

"Not so fast, Forest. Let's see how the date goes first before I offer these luscious lips for the taking. You're gonna have to earn them from now on." With that, she turns and heads back into the bedroom to continue helping Lina.

The day passes quickly and that evening with Ty we head over to Club Whisky for a few relaxing hours. Gemmy is with us as we're not leaving her alone with the Brackenridge family running loose.

Walking in we get a table and I notice Eden is behind the bar. Looking at Gemmy I ask, "I thought Eden was working at TJs with Mia?"

"Yeah, they are, but Mia is home with the boys tonight. Knuckles and Mav are working at the bar and they are not serving food. It's causing a problem, but they still have to find a new chef since Axel made Cookie come back here." Gemmy grins. "To be honest, it wasn't fair they took Cookie from here, and they are paying the price."

Gemmy has business experience, and I know she understands the dynamics of what happened to Silver and the business here at Club Whisky. "Didn't you think about doing more business managing?" I ask her because she'd be ideal to help with any of the club businesses.

"I'm happy doing what I am. I was only going to work with you a short while, but I like it and as long as you are happy for me to stay only mornings, then I'm happy to continue. I'm thinking I may need to speak to my man because I think I'd like to start a family."

Turning to give Gemmy a serious look, I see she's nervous about the subject. "Honey, you know if you tell Stitch what you want, he'll be all over you like a

bad rash. He's a family man and will love a parcel of kids if that's what you want."

"You think so?"

"I know so," I hug her and kiss the top of her head. "Let's eat and get home. I need to sort out patrol times for the deputies tomorrow because I can't have JP and Hands doing it seven days a week."

We all look up when we see Mia rush into the club with Axel right behind her, with Buzz and Drag behind him. "Eden, I think I've found us a chef."

Eden looks up from behind the bar and we can all see she's tired, but she smiles at Mia and lifts an eyebrow. Silver steps up behind Eden and wraps an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into his side. They've made peace, thankfully, and I'm happy this shitshow they caused didn't cause a split that couldn't be healed.

"I was talking to Amelia about it and she said she knows Mr. Collinson has a sister whose son happens to be a chef and just jacked his job because his boss was an asshole of giant proportions. I've arranged for him to come to see us at TJs tomorrow morning." Mia's face is alight with excitement and I can see Axel is doing his best to remain stoic because he's not wanting her to think her punishment is over with.

"I'll come over in the morning. I had to be early to organize the evening menu. I hope he works out because I've got to admit I'm tired and working here is putting more strain on Silver, and I never meant to cause problems for anyone, least of all for my man." Eden gives Silver a watery look, and he kisses her forehead before wrapping her into his arms and chest.

"Okay, tomorrow then, and we'll lock this man down if it kills us doing it." Mia gives Eden a small smile, turns, and walks right out with Axel, Buzz, and Drag following behind.

I look at Gemmy, who's giggling at the sight, and then Ty, who's smirking. Me, I'm just going to eat and go home. I've had more than enough for one day.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

-- FOREST --

Walking into church, I take my seat and watch as Specs, BS and PT take theirs. It doesn't take long for everyone to arrive, and I've already made sure Axel knows that Meat is out-of-town working a case, as I didn't want him getting on the president's bad side by not attending.

"Okay, let's get this meeting started." Axel smacks the gavel and looks at PT. "Anything to report?"

"Nothing. Everything is in order," PT responds.

"TwoCents?" Axel asks.

"All financials are correct. We have a healthy account and I've allotted extra to Liam as manager and for more staff. The coffee house is bringing in far more profit than we imagined and the efficiency with which Liam runs the place is good. He is actually better at waste management, and by that I mean, he has far less waste than Shar. He has taken time to find new suppliers of the same products and gotten an exceptional deal with them for a year's contract supply. That gives both parties stability for their income or profit margin, whichever way you look at it.

"All other businesses are bringing in the same profit as previously reported. The garage is doing well, and Grease has asked for new hydraulic ramps. Maintenance and repair costs for the current ones outweigh the cost-effectiveness. I'm looking at figures for new ones at the moment and cross-referencing prices. I'll report to you, Pres, before any purchase is made, but we need to make the purchase quickly as we don't want something happening to anyone in the garage because we didn't replace it quickly enough.

"Hot Hogs and Cages, nothing to report. TJs and Club Whisky, nothing different to report, but we'll see once Eden and Mia have finished their month running TJs. As for Club Whisky, it's back to normal since Cookie is back. I understand there is an interview forthcoming for a new chef for TJs.

I'll report back on that as soon as I know more," TwoCents concludes.

Axel looks over at Specs. "Anything to report?"

"Nothing apart from I'm going over to TJs when we've finished here because at six a.m. this morning the camera covering the parking lot behind the building went out. It didn't show anything or anyone, so I haven't anything to go by, but I want to replace it, regardless. The last thing we want is a camera out of action," Specs says, and I can see it's bothering him, but we all know he takes the security of all the businesses seriously. "Heather asked if we could draw up a contract for her business. It seems the company she is using is not fulfilling her needs. They are leaving her dangling with background checks that need doing, and the security at the office hasn't been updated when they asked for it to be done. I spoke to Alf after Heather mentioned it, and he's not happy with them at all. I glossed over a contract and a figure to which he agreed upon. If all brothers are okay with us taking on Heather's company then I'll get to that."

Axel looks around, and not seeing anyone against the idea, asks for a vote. Calling out 'Aye' along with all the brothers, that motion is carried.

Fox raises his hand to gain attention and when we all look over he speaks out. "The four young men at the Wood Supply business I'd like to haul in as prospects. So far they have had objections, but I think if Pres speaks to them we may pull them in. They are hardworking, knowledgeable, and would be an asset. I know they'd not be able to do the usual prospect duties, but they could be pulled in for extra if we needed it. I just feel we are missing an opportunity to gain four brothers."

Axel rubs his chin. "I'll go over and speak to them." That's as much as we are getting out of him at this point. "Anyone else have anything to report, or ask?"

"Yes." I quickly say as I can see Axel had wrapped his hand around the gavel already. "Did anyone find anything regarding the Brackenridge family?"

"Nothing more than we know already, which is they are scum," Buzz snarls with a look of disgust on his face.

"I heard they are around town more and it's making people nervous," Drag

adds, and BS nods as he responds, "Yeah, I heard that too."

Target speaks out, which is unusual, as he's one of the quiet ones. "I've put feelers out with my street friends. It's making the homeless community nervous that the family is prowling around late evening and into the early hours. So far, none have seen them doing anything to report to Forest. I told them the new sheriff was one of us and would quickly respond if they called."

"For sure," I throw out and mean it. Being homeless is bad enough, but being homeless and scared is another ball game.

"While you're talking to your street friends, see if they have any info on the old mayor, will you? It might be nothing, but it's like an itch I can't scratch. Nothing is showing that anything is wrong, but my 'spider senses' are tingling."

"You're having too many movie nights, Forest, and watching the wrong movies. Fucking 'spider sense'," Target laughs and shakes his head.

Axel slaps his hand on the table, gaining everyone's attention.

"Mia and Eden, as you all know, are running TJs as punishment this month. They have organized the theme night, and it is a 'Roman' theme. So, Mia has already designated herself and me as the top dogs, Caesar and his Empress. The rest of you can be senators, legionnaires, gladiators, slaves, or merchants. You can be what the fuck you like as long as it's something Rome-related, but you will be something. If I have to play dress up, then so will you fuckers. I don't care if you're behind the bar or on the door. You will all be suited up appropriately for the evening.

"Anything else?" Axel asks and quickly slams the gavel down.

Stepping out of church, we all take our phones from the box next to the door, and I head to the front door. "Where's Mia this morning?" I ask Axel before I exit via the front door.

"She's going to TJs. I've put Colton on her. Eden wasn't at the clubhouse, so I told Silver she'd make her way to the bar when she was ready. Eden hates having a prospect or brother on her since she learned to fight, and Winter is giving her more weapon training now that Eden is carrying."

Climbing in the cruiser, I head out of the compound and a call comes through. Picking it up, I hear Mia. "Forest, someone's broken into TJs. Can you come over once church is finished?"

"On the way, Mia. Stay outside with Colton. We'll be there in a few minutes." I make the call next to Ty and tell him to get his ass to the bar. I flick the lights on and BANG! Not sure what happens but everything cuts out and the meaning of cruiser is defined as cruising to a stop.

I call Axel on my cell, and he picks up right away.

"Axel, we have a problem. I've just taken a call from Mia. She's arrived at TJs and found that it's been broken into. She's safe. I've told her to stay outside with Colton. But my fucking cruiser has chosen this moment to break down. Can you pick me up on your way?"

"I've just spoken to Colton. He rang me while Mia called you. I'll be with you in a couple of minutes. We're already on our way."

Before I can ask who 'we' are, he's cut the call, in typical biker fashion. I call Grease about the cruiser and arrange for it to be recovered and I've just put my phone in my pocket when I hear engine noises in the distance. Holy fuck. Bike engines, I should've known.

I see Axel, Drag, Buzz, and BS thundering down the road towards me. As soon as they pull up, I let Axel know what Mia told me and that I've called for a tow truck.

Buzz and Drag grin at me like fucking fools, and I know what they're thinking, how am I getting to TJs now? Axel looks around and asks which one of them is taking me as their bitch, 'cause as president, he certainly isn't having anyone except Mia on his hog.

Buzz and Drag look at BS with such complete innocence that butter wouldn't melt. BS starts ranting at them.

"I'm not having no-one riding bitch in Kya's place. You can all fuck off. You two don't have an Ol' Lady. One of you can take him." He jabs his finger at me and gives me a shitty look.

"Hey, guys, I don't want to ride bitch, as much as you don't want me to. I

need a ride, and we're wasting time." I'm starting to get angry with all this shit now. I need to get to TJs and as much as I don't want to turn up on the back of one of these guys, I need to turn up pronto.

Axel glances around and then looks at BS.

"BS, you're it. Forest, hop on behind BS, and let's get movin'."

BS stands to his full height and glares at me.

"Forest, you raise one leg to get on my hog, and it'll be the last thing you do with teeth in your head. I swear to God, I'll knock every one of them out before I let your ass on that seat. IT'S NOT HAPPENIN'."

Axel looks directly at BS and he doesn't look happy.

"BS, quit your whining, and let's get going. I'm not wasting any more time on this. I need to get to Mia, and Forest needs to get to TJs. Now let him on."

"One of those two can take him, Pres. Why me? I'm not having a guy behind me and that's fucking it!"

I have to say, for a man his size, he sounds like the whiniest brat you could ever imagine. I have to turn away before he sees me laughing. Buzz and Drag are openly laughing like maniacs at the spectacle going on in front of them.

Suddenly, Axel slams his stand down on his hog and gets off. He walks over to BS and gets nose-to-nose with him. In a quiet and soft voice, he speaks to BS. I don't hear what he's saying, but I see BS look over Axel's shoulder at Buzz and Drag. They both smile back at him and give him a nod.

BS seems to shrink and accept his fate. I look at Buzz and he points over his shoulder with his thumb. Drag nods and also waves his thumb over his shoulder.

I suddenly realize what they're pointing to. Neither of them has a pillion seat. They can't carry passengers. BS was doomed from the start.

I walk to BS and he nods. "Put your hands on me and I'll put my hands on you, so help me God."

I get on behind BS and we all finally get on the move.

Arriving at TJs BS shoots off behind the club away from where Mia and Colton are waiting. As I rush back around the building, I see Buzz and Drag talking to Colton. Axel is checking in with Mia. I head over to Mia and catch up with everything she knows so far.

BS walks around the corner of the building and Colton immediately bursts out laughing. I've never seen two guys their size move so fast. Colton takes off as soon as he sees BS heading for him. They take off down the road as though the devil himself is after them. I hope to God BS calms down before he catches Colton, or he's going to kill him, for sure.

-:- MIA -:-

Finding the back door to the kitchen of TJs open when we arrive has me grabbing Colton's hand. I'm worried as to someone still being inside and with only me and Colton here, I don't want us walking into something or someone we can't deal with.

"Get in the SUV, Mia, and lock the doors," Colton says as he gently pushes me back to the vehicle.

"No, you can't go in there alone." Dragging my feet so he can't get me into the vehicle. "Colton, I'm the first lady of the fucking club. Do as I tell you, or I'll make your life a living hell," I snap and he comes to a stop, looking me in the eye to see how serious I am.

"You stay behind me, and if anything happens to you, you know Axel will bury me and my body will never be found," Colton snaps back.

Opening my purse, I take out my weapon and the taser that Winter gave to each of us. I wave them both at Colton so he can see what I've got at the ready. I don't wait but dash towards the door, but Colton beats me to it and pushes me behind him.

I follow close behind Colton and see nothing amiss in the kitchen. But then again, what are they going to steal in the kitchen? Carrots?

Slowly entering the bar area, it's easy to see the register is open, but we leave it open at night as it's empty anyway, so that's not a red flag. Leaning

toward Colton, I whisper, "Office. I think they'll have made for the office."

Nodding Colton slowly steps to the office and thankfully they've not been able to get inside. Specs placed a fingerprint scanner on the door, so only the four of us could open it. That being Meat, Eden, Beer, and myself.

Turning, we walk back to the bar area and I see two rows of empty shelves. I point it out to Colton. "The fuckers took some bottles, but only enough to carry, so they may not have had a vehicle."

"I'm going to check the restrooms. You stay here, keep your weapons handy, and call the sheriff. I'll call Pres because he'll need to know," Colton states as he walks away, bringing his phone to his ear.

I make the call to Forest and stay behind the bar. It's at least a barrier between me and someone if they appear. I don't think that anyone is here now, and I have a feeling it could be a threat made to either of us or the club.

Colton returns and the restrooms are untouched. We head back to the SUV and it's only a couple of minutes before we hear bikes approaching. If I'm honest, I'd expected to hear a siren approaching first and then see Forest with his lights flashing everywhere.

Three bikes roll up to us and another shoots around to the front of the building. Axel grabs me as soon as he's off his hog and before he's even taken his lid off. He looks me up and down to see if I still have my head, arms, and both legs. At least he didn't check out my tits and ass first. I giggle as I think that to myself.

"Are you okay? Was anyone still here? Did you see anyone?" Axel fires all these questions at me like a machine gun.

"Axel, I'm fine. I can look after myself, and I had Colton as backup."

I look up as Forest approaches and know I'll have to explain everything to both of them. As I look past Forest, I see Colton take off down the road like his ass is on fire. Then I see BS tearing down the road after him.

"Forest, I think they've seen something. Look, they're chasing somebody."

"Don't worry, Mia. The only thing Colton will see if BS catches him is the

inside of an emergency room. Now, tell me what you found when you and Colton arrived.” Forest looks at me expectantly, and so I forget about Colton and BS and focus on what we found.

“Well, we pulled up to the club and parked the SUV around the back parking lot as usual. We were talking as we got out of the vehicle and it wasn’t until we were near the kitchen door that we realized it wasn’t fully closed. Colton wanted me to get in the SUV and stay there while he checked the building, but I was having none of that. I haven’t been training all these Sundays to just sit in the back of an SUV when I could catch someone that had broken into my business and done God knows what to it.”

Axel rolls his eyes at me and tells me I should have gone back to the vehicle and stayed safe. Before Forest can side with Axel, I give them both my meanest stink-eye look.

“In case you two Neanderthals haven’t noticed, I’m perfectly safe, thank you very much. I pulled out my ‘I’m The First Lady of The Club’ trump card, and threw it onto Colton’s ‘Axel Will Kill Me’ ace card, so don’t give him a hard time. If he survives BS that is. Then we made sure that the building was clear and safe. It looks like they got a few bottles of alcohol from behind the bar. It could be a one-man job by the amount they got away with.

“There’s no damage to the office door, so I don’t think they even tried to get in there. The kitchen is all good, although we didn’t look inside the refrigerators or freezers. The cash registers look the same as we leave them every night, open and empty. It looks like someone was desperate for the booze.” I look at Axel and then Forest for any questions. There are none, so I head over to speak to Buzz and Drag, who are standing by their bikes watching BS and Colton disappearing down the road.

Axel and Forest wander off to the back of TJs and I walk with Buzz and Drag as they follow. That’s when they tell me about Forest riding bitch on BS’ bike and I can’t help but belly laugh at the way they tell it.

We’re all at a table in the club when Specs turns up, and he has a stranger with him. We all look at the stranger with a high degree of suspicion until Specs states, “Mia, your candidate for the chef's position has just turned up.”

“Oh, right. I forgot that with all the excitement. We’ll do it in the kitchen. Come this way.” I head off to the kitchen and as the man turns to follow me I hear Axel, “Buzz, go with, and stay there.”

Hearing a grunt, I see Buzz follow us into the kitchen, where he stands by the door, arms folded across his chest like an impassable barrier.

“So, you’re here by recommendation of Mr. Collinson. What can you tell me about your experience or qualifications? Esteban, isn’t it?”

“Esteban Jiminez, at your service, ma’am. My friends call me Geek. You may do the same.” He gives me a dazzling smile and bows his head.

“Geek? That’s unusual for a chef, isn’t it? How did that come about, if it’s not something embarrassing?” I can’t wait to hear this I think to myself.

“Nothing so outrageous or humorous, I’m afraid. When I got the cooking bug, I would spend hours, and occasionally days, scouring the internet for Mexican recipes. I searched for the oldest and almost forgotten recipes I could find and then tried to cook them to perfection. Once I could cook them as they were meant, I would try to give them a modern twist. From the time I spent on my laptop, my friends changed my name to Geek.”

“Changed your name? What were you before?” I didn’t think he looked very geeky to me. A bit more of a gigolo look to him, to be honest, and that meant in his looks, not his manners.

“I was ‘Chainsaw’ throughout my college years and beyond, I’m afraid. I used to prank all the dorms, bars, and anywhere people would hang out. I had a blood-spattered white shirt, butcher’s apron, and trousers, white galoshes, and an assortment of Halloween masks. I also had an ancient gas chainsaw. I removed the blade from it and it was splashed in red paint.

“I would turn up to these places and have the chainsaw started. I would run in and wave it around like a madman and create pandemonium. It was a wonder no one ever shot me. I became so popular that people would hire me for parties and pranks. It was quite lucrative for a while, but I like to think I outgrew that persona when I found my interest in cooking. Like so many others, I have my grandmother to thank for that.” He looks quite sad when he says this and I have to question that.

“Is your grandmother still with us? You looked very sad when you mentioned her.” I watch his eyes for his reaction.

“She was at a restaurant that I did one of my madman appearances at. She had a heart attack and couldn’t be revived when the paramedics arrived.” He lowers his head, and I can see his shoulders shaking lightly. I don’t know what to say to him, so I place my hand gently on his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry. That must be awful for you.”

He looks at me slowly, with his head still bowed. Buzz walks over to us and looks me in the eye.

“For God’s sake, Mia.” Buzz grabs Esteban and starts to march him out the door. “You don’t pull that bullshit at an interview, you fucking moron. And you don’t pull that shit with that woman. She is the First Lady of the Raging Barons MC and as such, you need to be taught some manners.”

“Buzz, wait. Esteban, was that all a joke about your grandmother?”

He looks up and I see the tears in his eyes. “I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help myself. Please forgive me.”

“You son of a bitch! I hope you can cook up something damn special as the rest of your interview. Otherwise, I’m handing you over to Buzz.”

I nod at Buzz and he lets him go. I wave my hand across the kitchen and tell him he has the use of all of it and he has forty-five minutes to cook me either a starter and main, or a main and a dessert. “Oh, and there better be enough for Buzz as well.”

Buzz gives Esteban a filthy look and tells him, “It better not be fine dining portions, either. I have a healthy appetite.”

Buzz and I spent the next forty-five minutes watching Esteban float around the kitchen like he’d worked there all his life. He found everything he needed without asking us a single question. He chopped things like a machine, and he had things cooking in ovens and pans on burners.

At forty minutes he brought us a plate each of shrimp tostadas. They were to die for. The vegetables were cooked perfectly and still had a crispness about them. The shrimp were plump and delicious. The salsa was the best

I'd ever tasted. There were six on each plate and by the time I'd had two, Buzz's plate was empty.

At the forty-five-minute mark, he presented two plates of fish fajitas. He used halibut as the protein and again they were like nothing I'd ever tasted. They were YUMMY.

Buzz looked at me with an eyebrow cocked and I think it was his best version of a non-verbal compliment. I tried to copy it back, but he just shook his head and laughed. As I stood up from my stool, Esteban gave us a third plate with churros on. I could smell the cinnamon and I sat down again quickly as Buzz got stuck in.

I had cinnamon sugar everywhere by the time we'd cleared that plate and I was stuffed.

"What do you say, Buzz? Should I hire him?" Esteban looked from one of us to the other, waiting for the answer.

"Mia, you not getting Cookie could have been your lucky day. I wouldn't want to choose between the two."

"I couldn't agree more. Geek, you're hired. No more Esteban, and no more grandmother jokes." I shake his hand and we agree that he'll be on a three-month contract to begin with and he's ok to start tomorrow, Monday.

Geek heads off to get ready for his first day, and we head back into the club. Specs has installed a new camera and a couple more, just in case. He's installed a new and heavier-duty lock on the kitchen door, as well as an alarm. When he shows me how to operate it, it almost deafens me with how loud it goes off when triggered.

I fill in Axel on our new chef and the tale of his grandmother has him shaking his head at me. I make sure that he's going to bring me for a meal once our Geek has settled in. If his cooking today is anything to go by, it should be awesome by then.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

-:- FOREST -:-

I'm reading reports that are sent through to all Sheriff Departments, and as far as I can see, none of it impacts our daily routines. I toss them into the trash and grin at myself because this is one of the things that cost this country millions of dollars. It's called unnecessary paperwork and expense.

Gemmy rushes into the office in such a manner I'm on my feet before I realize. "What's wrong?" I ask as I step around the desk toward her.

"Silver just called the main desk and said someone's tried to break into Club Whisky. Can you go as it's a legitimate call?" Gemmy looks worried, and I'm sure it's because it's a club business.

"Is Ty in yet?" I ask as I grab the cruiser keys and my phone.

"Yes, he's in the kitchen. Do you want him to go with you?" Gemmy is stepping out of the office but glances over her shoulder.

"Yeah, I'll call him." We quickly make our way to the reception area and I shout. "TY, WITH ME, WE HAVE A CALL." It takes seconds for Ty to run out of the kitchen to the deputies' office and grab his gear, then we both rush to my cruiser and on our way to Club Whisky.

As I'd given the keys to Ty, he'd driven the cruiser and as soon as he stopped I was out and walking toward Silver, who was standing outside the back door to the club.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Someone tried to get into the back door. It shows them on the CCTV, but they had a hoodie over their heads and pulled down so you see nothing. They were trying with a crowbar and, as you see..." pointing to the mess on the door and frame, "they didn't manage it as luckily Fist was heading back home after his latest liaison. Specs had the alarm go off in his office and unknown to any of us, he's put a siren on all the businesses. Well, it's a warning alarm of some sort, so he can press a key on his keyboard and a hell

of a noise pierces the air. That scared him off, but Fist heard the noise and came right over, but was too late to catch the fucker.”

Ty has me looking at him in surprise when he asks. “I’ll search for fingerprints on the frame if you want?”

Silver shakes his head. “He had gloves on. I asked Specs if there was any chance he left evidence behind. He said all he had was the crowbar, but he had on dark pants, a hoodie, and gloves. He took the crowbar with him, so we have nothing.”

“This is TJs and now Club Whisky. I think we need to up the security of the club businesses. I’m not one for believing in coincidences.” I add to the conversation and step inside the club to run my eyes over the door on the opposite side.

“Axel has already told Specs to add any extra cameras or security devices he feels necessary. Wings has said he’s going to patrol the businesses from midnight to three, and Buzz is taking over from three to six a.m. Maybe they’ll see or catch someone?” Silver is more than a little angry about this, and I can understand because he keeps getting one thing thrown at him after another. “Come on, let’s grab a drink.”

Ty and I follow Silver through to the kitchen, and the staff are bustling around getting things prepared for the lunch service. Tony, the chef I’ve spoken to many times and I like him, gives us a head nod but continues working. He has one hell of a sense of humor, when he has time to stop and talk, that is.

“Lexi, grab the three of us a drink, would ya? Thanks.” Silver is a great boss, and the staff does as much as they can for him. The hours this man has put into this place would have earned him a medal if they were being given out.

“Come on, let’s sit at the bar and drink. It’s quieter than in the kitchen. This lot always rush around first thing in the morning.” Silver grins when Nathan mumbles, ‘Sure do.’

Perched on a bar stool, Ty on the other side of Silver, we thank Lexi when she brings our drinks. Cookie brings us a cinnamon roll and I can’t resist asking. “So, you are back here Cookie, and how do you feel about that?”

Cookie sighs, giving Silver a wary look. “Well, I was excited to be given the job at TJs because it was a step up for me. But, I understand what they did was not right. I didn’t know the whole situation at the time. I was just excited about getting the promotion. Anyway, I’m happy here. I’ve always enjoyed working here, and I’m now working my way to get Silver’s trust back.”

Silver says nothing. He takes a sip of his coffee and when Cookie sighs and walks back into the kitchen, I can see a twitch on the corner of Silver's lip. “You making her work for forgiveness then, Silver?”

“Yep, her and Eden. I love my woman, but she had a red ass after this mess and I’m sure she’ll think twice before doing something like this again.” Silver is now full-on smirking.

Ty chuckles and I look over at him and see he has a wide smile. “What you fuckin’ laughing about?” I can’t resist asking.

“I gotta get myself a woman. I’m going to buy that house, do it up, then look for my woman. I need someone to go home to, someone to sleep next to, and someone to give a red ass to when needed.” Ty has a damn dreamy look on his face that has me shaking my head and Silver chuckling to himself.

“I’ll fill in an incident report, but nothing else I can do. If you see or hear anything let me know. I’m giving you Hands and JP’s contact numbers as they are patrolling at night. They can be here far quicker than anyone else during the hours of midnight and six a.m.” I give the numbers to Silver. “Hand them over to Specs too, because if he sees anything on the CCTV, he can call them if necessary.”

“Okay, will do. I don’t think this is club-related. My gut tells me it’s just another burglary in town. A customer was telling me last night that his auntie’s dog stopped someone trying to get into her place last week. She didn’t report it because the dog had taken a chunk out of his ass. She felt he’d not be coming back for another go, so left it at that.”

“I wish she’d reported it because it may help us find a pattern of where these burglaries are happening. If you see the customer ask them to get the aunt to contact me.”

“Okay, I will. He’s a regular, but he only comes in on Friday and Saturday evenings,” Silver informs. “I don’t know how to contact him, or I would. I’ll ask the bar staff when they come in if they know and if so, I’ll give you a call.”

“Thanks. Come on, Ty, we’ve got work to do. Nothing we can do here, unfortunately.”

Back at the Sheriff’s Department, I leave Ty to fill Gemmy in on what’s happening and head to my office. I stand looking at the evidence board and for once I’m thankful we have this whiteboard.

Taking my phone out of my back pocket, when I feel it vibrate, I see a message from Meat.

Meat: Back Today

Forest: OK

Meat: I’ll call in when I get to town

Forest: OK, take care on the road

I didn’t expect a reply to that and I’m not disappointed when I don’t get one. I am, however, pleased that he’s coming back today. I know he’s had PTSD issues, and Axel tells me he’s doing great with his counseling sessions. I don’t ask because it’s none of my business, but I let it be known I would do anything I could to help if it was needed.

Axel admires Meat tremendously. He’s also tolerant of his ‘dressing up fetish’ as Axel calls it but knows it’s part of Meat’s way of getting out feelings. When he stays in the treehouse everyone knows to leave him alone, but he’s using it less and less which shows the improvement that’s happened since he came here with Target, because we all know it was Target that had the pull to get him here.

The story of Meat in the hospital, running around naked, has everyone laughing, and we’ve even seen Meat’s lip twitch with amusement when some of his antics have been discussed. He knows what he’s doing, and he is nowhere near as crazy as people make out either. I’m sure he is fully aware of his actions.

I hope he has found some information about the rape cases because that's something that should have the perpetrator thrown into a cell and the key thrown away. I'd just take them to Nell's, given half a chance, and let her get rid of them, same as pedophiles. I'd let the gators have them too.

Knocking on the door has me look up and Sober walks into the office, takes a seat and rubs the palm of his hand down his face. He looks tired and has dark circles under his eyes to testify to that.

"I followed the trail the best I could without bringing undue attention to myself. It seems Colin was following something, or trying to find information. At this point, I'm not a hundred percent sure what, but I have an idea. I'm not bringing it to the table until I have proof. I'm not going to throw unfounded accusations around.

"He spent the night with a woman, only one night. Seemed to be a hit it and quit it at first, but now I'm not sold on that. The only name I have is Darla, no surname, but I'm digging for that. Colin spent the night at a cheap motel with her, then went back to the hotel he was staying at, packed up his gear, and checked out." Sober leans forward in his seat, resting his forearms on his knees. "Tomorrow I'll continue from where I ended the trail. I'm going to Colin's bank as it appears he had a deposit box, and I've spoken to his lawyer after I received a letter stating I'm the beneficiary of his will. Now it's taken a bit of time to get to me as I've kept moving around and the letter has been reposted to catch up with me."

Sober updates his portion of the whiteboard. He adds the few dates, names, and details he has gleaned from his investigation so far.

Ty updates the whiteboard too with incidences of burglaries we've had brought forward. So far, there doesn't appear to be a pattern of locations appearing. They look like random targets, or is that in itself a pattern? Jesus Christ, I think to myself, I could drive myself mad untangling this mess.

Zack enters the office and looks like he has something important to tell me. I nod at the chair on the opposite side of my desk. "What's up?"

Zack swallows hard, which has his Adam's apple bob. "I spoke to a few people I know and found some information about Mayor Shiloh. He never

blatantly came out on the side of Sheriff Brackenridge at any town meetings. The sheriff's department had a large budget until a year or so ago, and when some questions were put to the town council, they reduced the budget, as it was found that the allocated wage bill exceeded the actual payroll. There was no evidence of embezzlement, just underspending of the budget, according to the town council's accountant. Some contracts with external suppliers were renegotiated, and the council was happy that they'd saved a few dollars to be spent elsewhere. I heard a couple of rumors that Mayor Shiloh was a visitor to the Sheriff's home on rare occasions, but no one could say when or why. I have nothing you would call a red flag, but like you, Sheriff, I have an uneasy feeling."

"Thanks, Zack. There seems to be a lot of rumor, suggestion, he-said, she-said, but nothing on paper as it were. It could all be nothing in the end. We'll just have to wait and see. There are more pressing matters right now than our guts doing flip-flops."

Ty is still in the office and starts writing on the whiteboard all the information Zack is giving us. His face is blank and I've worked with Ty over the years and know that look means he's more than a little pissed at what he's heard.

"Okay, let's get back to what we need to do now. Carry on filing the closed cases. Once we've got all those files away, Zack, let me know." Zack gives me a nod and rushes out of the office.

Meat walks into the office, and he looks good. You wouldn't know he's been on the road for days. "Good to see you back."

Meat takes a seat and reports on everything he found while out of town. He found the second victim, but she had little to add to the original case notes.

"She said that she felt there was something familiar about him and this wasn't in the notes. When I asked why she hadn't mentioned that at the time, she said she had. The sheriff kept inferring she had been the one to instigate the sexual attack by wearing skimpy nightwear, and he also asked if she'd been turned on by having a burglar in the house. He sounds like a real piece of shit."

Meat watches as Ty updates his portion of the whiteboard, and although the board is filling up with information on all areas, we don't seem to take any 'giant leaps for mankind'.

He gives me and Ty a chin lift before he heads back to the clubhouse and a few hours of sleep.

Rubbing the back of my neck as it's been a long day, easing some of the tension that had been building. Closing my eyes, the thought pops into my head of what the fuck am I going to wear for this date night. I'm gonna kill Meat for doing this shit. It was all his idea for all these theme nights, and to dress up and look like a fucking idiot.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

-:- HEATHER -:-

Thank goodness it's Friday. I've had more than enough of this week. I need to stop by the office this morning and sign some paperwork for Alf, and I'm going to give that lawyer a call about my request if I find nothing from him.

Locking the door to my work van, which I always park next to the service entrance at the back of the property. I had a marked area placed for my van, so I don't have to park across the other side and carry all my equipment across the back lot.

Grabbing my purse and jacket, I walk over to the back entrance and root around in my purse for the keys to let myself inside. I know I'm too early for Alf, or the other staff to be here, so if I've left the keys at home, I have a choice of going back for them or sitting here for the next thirty minutes and waiting for Alf to arrive.

Finding the keys in the bottom of my purse, I give a sigh of relief, but that whooshes out as I get to the door and it's slightly ajar. I stop walking, look around, and seeing nothing out of place, I push the door open with one finger.

Alf's desk, as we all refer to it now, is a broken wreck. The top drawer looks like it has been forced open and the front panel is like matchwood. That must have been forced to break the lock that secures all the drawers. There's no sign of the petty cash tin that was always locked in there. It only held a \$100 float, so it's not the end of the world. The others have been taken out, everything thrown on the floor, and then the drawers smashed against the wall. The filing cabinet has had the same treatment, and all the files have been tipped into a pile in the middle of the room.

I'm more than a little upset about Alf's desk. It used to be mine, of course, and was one of the first things I'd bought when the business showed a profit. It was like a symbol to me that I'd made a success of myself. I don't know whether I want to murder someone or cry like a baby.

I take my cell out of my purse and call Forest, keeping it to the minimum, I inform him I've had a break-in. Whoever it was is long gone, and it's a mess. I call Alf next, and he answers with his hands-free and informs me he'll be here in five minutes, as he's already en route.

While I'm waiting I check out the kitchen and restroom. These have also been trashed. All the cupboard contents have been emptied onto the floor, and the cupboard doors ripped off. Luckily, the storage room door was made of stronger stuff and although it shows signs they attempted to get into the room, the door has held. I'm glad they didn't get into the room, as there are some pretty strong chemicals inside and they could have gotten hurt. Why should I be concerned if they got hurt? I'm too nice for my own good. On the other hand, if I catch them I'd gladly dunk them in a bath of the damn chemicals.

Hearing my name being called, I head back into the office. Forest is just coming through the back door with Alf on his heels. Alf looks mortified at the chaos in the office. Ignoring everything around him, Forest walks up to me and, placing his hands on my upper arms, he looks into my eyes.

"Are you okay? Did you see anyone? Have you got any protection with you?" His look of concern takes my emotions over the edge and my eyes tear up.

"Yes, I'm okay. No, I didn't see anyone. And what a question to ask at a time like this! Couldn't you wait till date night to ask that?" Forest looks at me in astonishment.

"Good God, Heather! I meant a weapon. Mace, pistol, Saturday night special. Not a goddamn rubber," Forest blurts out. "We're at a break-in."

Alf looks at us both as if we have grown two heads. "I think she's in shock, Forest. Not thinking straight. You two going on a date?"

"Whoa. Let's just focus on the damage here, shall we?" Forest looks at me and then turns to Alf. "Just check for anything missing and make a note for me. I'll get Ty or Sober over here while I get Heather sorted."

Forest pulls me to him and tucks me under his chin, one arm around me, holding me close while he puts a call through to Gemmy asking her to get either Ty or Sober over here right away.

“Alf, are you okay for me to take Heather for a coffee once my deputy arrives? Whoever it was seems to have made a helluva mess for little gain. It’s almost like it was a bunch of kids. I don’t think a bunch of kids would have chosen a cleaning company as a target, though.”

As soon as Ty arrives, Forest directs him to Alf so he can get a statement and start the report. I tell Ty I’ll make a statement later and we climb into the SUV Forest is driving, and head for the coffee house.

Entering the coffee house, Forest pulls a seat from one of the tables next to the window, and as I sit, he slides my seat in. “What coffee do you want? Anything particular?”

“Liam knows what I like, and he’s serving. Just tell him I want it large, please.” I need caffeine or I’m not going to get through the morning, never mind through the day.

I watch as Forest heads to the counter and I turn, looking out of the window. People are bustling around going to work, taking kids to school, having a decent start to the morning, probably. I’m thinking I would like to get my hands on someone and murder them. Now that’s a different start to a morning!

Forest places my coffee in front of me and takes a seat across the table. He reaches over and takes the hand I had resting on the table between his hands. “Are you okay?”

“I’m shocked because who would expect that? It’s not like we are a business that has a lot of money in the place. Not like the clubs, or a store. I don’t understand, to be honest, but then people who do this kind of thing don’t always need a reason, do they?” My mind is still racing with different thoughts, but none explains why anyone would break into my business.

“There are multiple burglaries, break-ins, or whatever you want to call them happening in town. Most make little sense. It’s like they are taunting the Sheriff’s department, but for what reason, I don’t know.” The look on Forest’s face tells me that the thought had just entered his head.

“I don’t think this will affect the work we do. Everything I need is in my van or at the clubhouse. Bren and the others now have a van, so they have

supplies with them all the time.”

“Bren is making the office smell like lemons. It is fairly pleasant, I have to admit.” Grinning, he leans over the table a little. “I never knew the reception area floor was blue and gray. I thought it was supposed to be a dark gray color,” chuckling at his own comment.

“Oh dear, it must have been disgusting then,” I add, and think Bren must have done a good job on that floor if it’s gone from one color to a brighter one. “I’ll have to call in and look. We usually follow up with a visit after a week with new clients.”

“You are welcome to stop by anytime, for any reason,” Forest grins.

“Now, changing the subject, why are you driving an SUV this morning and not the cruiser?”

“It’s in the garage and I signed a new contract with Grease, much to the mayor’s annoyance, but I told him I only use that garage or he can stick the job up his ass.” Forest smirks, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms over his chest, looking pretty smug with himself.

“Well, I have a contract with the garage to service all our vehicles and Grease is excellent at keeping them all on the road. I shouldn’t say it as it tempts fate, but not one of the vans has let us down. When you think the women who work for me often go on their own, the vans have to be reliable, but you can bet if they broke down Grease would be out to them immediately.”

“I’m sure he would. Raven, being a mechanic and working at the garage, is a bonus for Grease as she fully understands the way the business runs. She’d more than likely go out with Grease to help.”

“I agree. I love all the women at the club. They are amusing and strong. Each suits their man perfectly, you know what I mean? They make perfect couples.” I blush as I’m not coming across clearly to what I’m trying to say.

“I understand what you are trying to say. The brothers all see them as their one. ‘The’ one to compliment them, to be their forever woman.” Forest says and I can’t help but see a hint of longing in his eyes. Forest is more than likely the oldest of the brothers at this point, although he isn’t old. I would

guess he's around 42 years old. Which is a 9-year difference between us. The age difference doesn't bother me at all because some days I feel far older than my actual age.

"I'm going to have to get moving myself because I need to get to the clubhouse. Lina will be worried about where I am and start panicking that something has happened to me." I give Liam a wave as I make my way to the door with Forest behind me.

Back at the office, I leave things in Alf's capable hands and walk over to my van, turning when Forest takes my forearm gently to turn me around to face him.

"Be careful. Keep your eyes and ears open. Make sure your staff does as well. If anything happens to you, I'll bring this town down to its knees, and that's not a threat. That's a promise."

Before I can respond, Forest slams his mouth over mine and totally dominates a kiss, a kiss like I've never experienced before. When he steps away, he chucks me under the chin while smiling down at me. I'm still in mind-blown mode and must look shell-shocked because I sure feel like that.

"Come on, get going. You need to get to work. I'll see you soon," Forest says as he pushes me into the driver's seat of my van and closes the door. I watch him walk to the back of the office building before I turn the key and get my mind back on track.

Walking into the clubhouse I see Lina preparing herself a drink and looking at the clock over the window. I sigh as it's nearly lunchtime already. Holding my hand in the air toward Lina in a hang-on-a-minute gesture, I fill her in quickly on what's happened.

"I'll be careful, Heather. I am always watching anyway, but I'll be even more careful now. Do you think it's something against the company, you, or the club? Or even just more of the burglaries and break-ins I've been told about?" Lina now has my full interest.

"More break-ins?"

"Yeah, I was talking with my neighbor and she said to make sure all my windows and doors were locked at night and to get some deadbolt locks

because there has been an increase in burglaries and break-ins.”

“I didn’t know that. Well, I’ll make sure my window locks are all in place when I get home tonight.” I had all new windows and doors installed on my house because the area has gone down badly since I purchased it. I’ve even considered selling and buying somewhere else.

I quickly clean the common room as my first job of the day. Thankfully, Mia has the brothers trained to put their bottles back on the bar, and anything needing throwing straight into the trash can. Sunday Reuse checks *his* bar as he still cleans it and makes sure everything is recycled correctly; he’s become verbal about telling everyone if they have not.

Next is back to the laundry room, and as I’m walking, I can’t help the tick of a smile when I think of the next trick I can play on Wings. Entering the utility room, I empty the dryers as it seems no one has been in here since I was. I fold and place them in the appropriate laundry basket. Then look for Wings’ basket, grinning when I pick it up and select the items I want.

Humming, I place the sleep pants, underwear, and socks in the washing machine. Opening the cleaning cabinet, I take out the laundry detergent that Wings himself had left. I wet my finger and test the dye he’s put in the detergent. Experience tells me that this isn’t a permanent one, so I go ahead and fill up the machine. Setting it going, I giggle as I walk outside and throw the offending laundry detergent in the trash.

While the washing machine is working, I run upstairs and help Lina clean the corridors and wipe down each of the door frames as we pass them.

“Can we have a new mop up here for the showers?” Lina asks me.

“Yeah, I have one in my van. I’ll run down and get it.”

“Thank you,” I hear Lina say as I rush away. As I walk through the kitchen I find Bitty on the floor.

“Bitty, what happened?” I say as I rush over to her. “Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“I’m not sure what happened. I was finishing putting things away from preparing tonight’s meal and I just went down. I think I bumped my elbow,

but otherwise, I'm good."

I help Bitty to her feet and place her at one of the tables. "Sit there a minute." I rush through to Axel's office and knock on the door, but for once I don't wait for him to say enter. "Bitty has fallen and hurt herself."

Not waiting for Axel, I rush back to Bitty and she's still looking a little shaken. "I'll get you a drink, don't you move," I tell her, and she gives me a small nod.

Axel is squatting in front of Bitty and looks at her elbow, which she had been holding. I can hear how gently he's speaking with her. That man is a proper gentleman regardless of his military background, and the things he's had to do for the MC. He cares deeply about everyone here, and he isn't scared to show it.

"I'm okay, Axel. I just banged my elbow," Bitty says and strokes his cheek. It looks like a mother reassuring a son. It touches your heart watching these people.

The club embraced these old ladies; they wrapped them up in the MC and take all the shit they throw out with no sign of caring they are being berated for things. God forbid anything to happen to them because I think a war would break out.

"When Stitch comes back, I'm telling him to give you a full physical, make sure nothing is wrong. Have you been to have a checkup over the last year?" Axel is poking for information and I can tell by the set on Bitty's face she's not going to tell him anything about her medical issues.

I listen to them bickering back and forth for a while before I step up and speak. "I'll find Amelia and she can watch Bitty for the rest of the day. It'll be easy enough to rest today in the playroom while Sybil and Amelia watch the twins."

"Yeah, that's good. Go get her now while I'm here," Axel says, but he's not stopped looking at Bitty as he replies.

Once Amelia is in charge, I head to the van to get the mop for Lina, who must again think something happened to me. I come to a halt when I see the drawings on the side of the van. Closing my eyes a moment, I look around

but see no sign of Wings. I know he's the culprit for this and he'll be watching from somewhere, so I don't make a fuss. I open the back door of the van, grab a mop, and, closing the door, walk inside the clubhouse.

Mumbling to myself about arrogant assholes who need to be put in their place, I remember the laundry, and that thought brings a smirk to my face.

After giving Lina the mop and filling her in on Bitty, I quickly make my way to empty the washing machine. The laundry is blue, a lovely pale blue, like cornflower blue, but I know Wings is not going to be happy with this. The good thing is the blue will wash out over a few washes. It's not going to be a permanent problem.

Throwing them in the dryer, I take the laundry basket I folded earlier and drop it outside Sentry's door. I know it's his because he wears the same thing week in and week out.

Finding Lina, I ask her to place Wings' things in his room before she goes as they are in the dryer. She's happy to do that, so I make my way out of the clubhouse and to my van, which has drawings of naked women, cocks, and BDSM items. That's my next chore, the car wash. I sigh to myself as I can imagine the ribald remarks I'm going to get from Leo, the owner of the car wash business.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

-- FOREST --

The weekend passed so fast that I hardly knew we'd had one. At least Sunday was relatively relaxed. I watched Gemmy doing her workout, then hand-to-hand with Chaos and filmed it, sending it to Stitch. If Gemmy knows I've done that I'm sure I'll get my ear bent, but I know Stitch will appreciate seeing her hot and sweaty.

Church was simple, just covering the finances and other mundane things. No one had extra information for me regarding the mayor or sheriff, so we headed back to the house. Ty tidied the yard while I was ordered around by Gemmy, *as we just had to get everything done before we started work again tomorrow!*

Now I'm back at the office, looking over paperwork and wondering if we'll ever find a rapist, a murderer, or the ones doing burglaries and break-ins. In its own way, this is a worse job than the FBI.

My phone rings where I'd placed it on the corner of my desk, so I pick it up and check who's calling. Seeing Fox's name, I answer the call. "Hi, Fox."

"Morning, Forest. I've had an excellent result with this table and chairs of yours. I've gotten all the old varnish off, it cleaned up well actually, and I've now re-stained and varnished. It's going to need another bit of work, but it'll be ready by the end of the week. We are waiting for the replacement cloth. I was able to get nearly identical, but we should get it on Wednesday or Thursday at the latest. I'm happy I can bring it around to your place come the weekend. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah, just let me know what day and time, and if I can't be there, I'll make sure someone is. The kitchen and utility room should be finished by the weekend too, so if all goes well, I'm hoping things are moving along and I can get moved in when Stitch and Beer get back."

"Okay. You make your payment to TwoCents as it's brothers' rates, and it doesn't go through the business." I hear Fox chuckle. "You'll only pay for the

materials I used, so it's not going to be much. Maybe if I get a speeding ticket, you'll be able to put it in the trash."

I can't help the snort that I let loose. "Yeah, well, I'll see about that."

Ty walks into the office and plops into a seat, giving me a somber look. "This is like trying to find needles in haystacks. I've been looking at case files until my eyes are stinging. Most are misdemeanors, things we'll not have to worry about. Teenager pranks that we can forget about. It's too late to do anything anyway because some are nine years old, so they've grown up and even left town for jobs elsewhere. Do you want me to keep digging through them with Zack, or can I leave him to it now? He knows what he's doing and there are only four boxes left to check through."

"Okay, leave him doing it. Gemmy is trying to find the family members and make up her whiteboard." I grin because I don't think she's making much headway with it, but I'm not going to tell her how to use the system to do it for her. It'll keep her busy when she has nothing to do at the reception desk.

Sober steps into the doorway and props himself against the door frame. "My next contact is on vacation, not due back until Thursday, so I'm all yours until then."

"Okay, you two can come with me." I stand from my desk, picking up my phone and the keys to the SUV I'm using until the cruiser comes back. "We're going on a mission."

Ty jumps to his feet. "Mission, what mission?" he asks, rubbing his hands together with eager anticipation. I hold back the laugh because he's not going to be so eager when he finds out where we are going.

"No, oh no, I'm not wearing that for no reason." Ty blusters and I throw my head back laughing because he's going to wear it no matter what.

Sober laughs at Ty but steps up and gives Lily a wink. "I'm gonna be Maximus Aurelius from that movie. Bring it on."

I'm struck when I see Sober end up wearing knee-high boots, a red shirt, and a skirt under a chest plate with designs of two horses and a wolf's head. His shoulders are covered by leather armor plates, his forearms have leather braces, and he has a cloak of red with wolf skin across the shoulders. A

Roman gladius, or short sword, hangs at his waist. It looks very authentic, especially on his athletic frame.

“Fuck you, I’m going as a Gladiator then, because man, the women will want a piece of me with all my muscle on display,” Ty snarls, obviously not wanting to be outdone by Sober.

Lily doesn’t take long to have Ty dressed, and he looks pretty fearsome as he walks out of the dressing room in character.

One arm is sheathed in metal platelets held in place by leather bands. A broad leather belt crosses from the top of the shoulder at the highest platelet and round his back. He has a broad leather plate across his abs with strips hanging down as a skirt. His legs are enclosed from ankle to knee in steel armor plates, with leather sandals on his feet. Finishing the costume are a long three-foot sword and a small-headed axe, resembling a tomahawk. With his well-muscled, naked chest, and naked thighs, he’s certainly going to attract some female attention, that’s for sure.

“Now what about you, Forest?” Lily asks.

“Oh, I’m gonna want the one Russell Crowe wore at the end of the movie, the blue one, full leather armor, etcetera.”

“So, let’s get you fitted as Gladiator Maximus, shall we?”

Standing in the fitting room, I strip down to my underwear, slipping on the blue undergarment, basically a simple dress. Over that, goes a black leather chest plate with hanging straps from the waist. Shoulder plates run from each side of my neck to just past my shoulders. I have leather wristbands that go from my wrist to halfway up my forearms. Next, there are leather ankle boots and knee-high leg shields. A metal helmet with spikes around the headpiece and nose and cheek guards comes next. A large gladiator sword with a knuckle guard completes the costume. I say completes it, but there are silver designs on the wristbands and leg guards. On the chest plate, there are silver designs of two dragons or griffins on the abs, a tree up the sternum with a mother and son to the right, and an angel to the left. Above that, covering the pectoral part of the chest plate, are two prancing horses. It looks awesome, and I can’t help the huge grin on my face as I step

from the fitting room.

I stand in front of the long mirror and say aloud, “There is one thing I can think of that would have improved it. My damn tribal tattoo would have looked totally out of this world.”

“I knew when we decided on the Rome theme some of you guys were going to hit me for Gladiator movie costumes. I had these all cleaned and polished to an extra high finish. Normally they would go out to a customer in their ‘worn and used’ persona, but I couldn’t think of any of the MC wanting anything but the best effect. Apart from yourself, Forest, none of the brothers have asked yet. You guys beat them to it.” Lily grins and I can see she’s happy with her decision. All three costumes are exceptional.

Back at the office, I send Hands and JP a message asking them to get into the office before I leave for the evening. They are going to be relieved by what I have to say.

While I wait for them to arrive, I look over the information Sober has left on my desk. This is the trail he’s following to find out what happened to Colin. I can see from this paperwork that he had to have seen or heard something because what I’m looking at is a man hunting.

“SOBER!” I shout, sure he’s in the deputies’ office.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Take a seat.” I place the paperwork on the desk and link my fingers together as I rest my elbows on the desk. “What do you think Colin saw or heard? He was following a trail, or he was digging for information. I wasn’t in the FBI all those years and don’t notice when a man is hunting for something.”

“Honestly, Forest, I came to the same conclusion. My gut tells me he saw something, rather than heard it.” Sober has a faraway look in his eye.

“Why? What makes you think that?” I think he’s right on the money with that feeling, but I want to know if his reasoning lines up with mine.

“It’s the way he was investigating, I think. If it were hearing something, I think he would have approached it differently. I just think he’d have spent

more time at the bar, for instance, rather than sleeping with the woman. She may have information, but if it was something verbal, I think he would have gone down the road of mingling more and trying to fit in rather than a quick fuck that could have left complications if he wanted to hang around.” Sober frowns at me as if to see if I am following him.

“I’m with you on this. I had similar ideas when I read your report. I think he witnessed something he wasn’t supposed to. I also think that whoever he witnessed realized when he started digging around. The moment he started investigating, he was a marked man, and they caught up with him and dealt with him. The lack of information in the file, though, is baffling.”

Sober looks me in the eye. “The sheriff was a lazy son of a bitch. I’d have been more surprised if there’d been ANYTHING in the file. C’mon, Forest. A body washed up by a river. How easy is that to have a closed case?”

“I guess so, Sober. It just goes against all my years in law enforcement. I’ve never once taken the easy road, so it doesn’t compute.” I shake my head and gaze out of the window.

Once Sober has left the office, I sit back in my seat and mull over all he’s said. But before I can come to any conclusions, I look up when Hands and JP enter my office.

“Hi Boss, you wanted to see us?”

“Yeah, take a seat a minute.” Straightening myself once more in my seat, I speak to them both.

“On Friday TJs is having theme night and you two are lucky to be on duty.” I can see them both take a deep breath of relief. “You will be on call. You can still patrol, but you’ll be the on-call contact. Anything coming into the department will come straight to you. Only contact me if you cannot deal with something, or it comes from a higher body. I’m having a night out with my woman and I want to have no interruptions.”

JP asks. “What theme is it?”

“Roman Legionnaires and Centurions. Ty and Sober are dressing up.” I grin evilly, and JP laughs while Hands shakes his head, smirking.

“We can do that. We can cover the evening, Boss. Are you and your woman living together?” Hands asks.

“No, she has her own place, and it’s early for us as this is our second date, but make no mistake, she is mine. I’ve just got to convince her of that fact.” I give them a little information about Heather, her business, and working at the clubhouse. I inform them that the business premises were broken into and the place vandalized.

“Give us her address and we’ll do a drive-by as part of our patrol,” JP states and leans forward in his seat. “With all these burglaries and break-ins with businesses, it makes sense to watch what’s going on.”

After giving Heather’s information, they leave the office, but their mentioning patrolling past Heather's house has left me with a bad feeling in my gut.

The rest of the day rushes past, although I have a meeting with Meat which is like pulling teeth. He obviously plays things close to his chest, but I got a nod out of him when I told him if he needed help or backup of any description to let me know. Reminding him we are not just work colleagues, we are club brothers foremost.

Ty rushes into the office and looks excited. I lean back, rubbing the back of my neck because this has been one hell of a long day, and I’m about ready to lock up and be done.

“I’ve got an appointment to see that house tonight. Will you come with me? Gemmy said she’d come along.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll come look with you.” Well, that wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be. I’d thought he had found something urgent for us to follow up on. “How about we finish early and go eat at the clubhouse, then look at that house?”

“I’m good with that. Let’s aim to finish in an hour, then we can get everything locked away before we leave?”

“Suits me, Ty, now fuck off and let me get finished here,” I smirk when he turns and rushes out of the office, shouting loudly to Gemmy to get her ass moving as we’re having an early finish.

The meal at the clubhouse is okay, not as good as when Meat is cooking, but it was better than some shit I've eaten in the past. Gemmy is fussing over Bitty, who apparently had a fall, and is now milking the sympathy from everyone she can catch in her net. Anyone who asks how she is, she reels them in.

I'm getting the hell out of here as soon as we've finished because I'd like to get this house seen and get back to Gemmy's place and chill out.

Ty is flirting with every woman he lays eyes on, much to the annoyance of the brothers, but it's more than obvious he's doing it on purpose. It's also more than obvious that he's leaving Jo alone once he'd had Knuckles step in front of her and give him the evil eye. Jo giggled and when Knuckles turned and looked at her smiling enough for his dimples to pop, the rest of the women sigh. Fuck's sake, it's enough to make you vomit, I'm thinking.

Walking around the house Ty is interested in, has me looking at Gemmy for her opinion. Seeing me looking, she squints at the realtor before giving me a slight shake of the head to not say anything.

"Can we look around a moment without you following us around?" Gemmy asks the realtor and I can see the annoyance, but the man can't risk pissing us off or he'll lose an offer on the place.

"Sure. I'll wait out front for you." He struts away and I smirk at Gemmy, who rolls her eyes at the back of the man.

"It's a good place, Ty. The decoration is in excellent repair. You won't need to do anything except have it cleaned throughout and put your furniture in. The kitchen is lovely and won't need replacing, and it has a new stove and fridge/freezer. The utility room has a washing machine and dryer, plus plenty of shelving and cabinets. Honestly, it's a good buy. I would get him to knock down the price because the yard needs work. Whoever was here didn't enjoy gardening by the look of it, so that will need muscle to put it right. The house itself is great. A perfect family home, once you get yourself a family, that is."

"I'll put an offer in and see what happens. Despite my ex-wife's best efforts, I've saved a lot of money over the years. I can pay half down on this place

and have a much smaller mortgage.” Ty rubs his chin while in thought. “Let’s see what happens. I don’t want to go as high as he’s asking for the place, but I don’t want to lose it either.”

“Yeah, know that feeling from when I purchased mine. But I had to spend a lot to get it livable whereas Stitch’s wasn’t near as bad.” I look around one last time and head outside.

Ty speaks with the realtor while Gemmy and I walk towards her house slowly. Giving Ty the chance to talk privately. I throw my arm around Gemmy’s shoulders and look down at her, giving a smile.

“Come on, let’s sit and watch a movie. I’ve had enough for one day.”

Gemmy laughs, places her arm around my waist, and gives me a nod. “Shall we watch a romance?”

“Not fucking likely.” I quickly say, which has her throw her head back laughing.

“What about Fast and Furious? We can start at the beginning?”

“Yeah.” I agree. “Why not? I can live with that.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

-:- HEATHER -:-

Wednesday already and I'm so grateful that Alf has taken charge of the mess that the office and the rest of the building are in. The insurance company is sending a check for the estimated damage and thankfully it's not too much, hence the reason they are not dragging their heels. The fact I have an incident report from the Sheriff helps too, of course.

Walking into the office, I take a seat and look up at Alf, who is standing behind a new desk he has purchased. Looking at my forlorn look regarding the desk, he smiles. "Now, I've spoken to Fox, and he's taken your desk away and he's going to see if he can fix it. Let's not get too depressed about it and hope he can do something with it."

Now that brightens me instantly. I'd forgotten all about Fox. "Oh, I hope so. That desk means a lot to me, but if he can't, then I'll have to live without it."

"You have mail. I left it on the table in the kitchen for you." Alf tells me absently. He's sorting paperwork that had been spilled onto the floor during the break-in.

"Thank you, Alf." I quickly make my way to the kitchen, pour a mug of coffee, and take a seat at the table. Placing my mug on one side of the table, I take the mail and fly through it. Enough here to throw right into the trash can, which has me wondering why everyone is surprised we are ripping down trees and forests.

Seeing the large white envelope on the bottom of the stack, I quickly notice it has my lawyer's address printed on it. Now the excitement creeps in as I know this is the contract that I had him draw up for Alf to become a partner in the business. A co-owner, and one I know will be trustworthy and enjoy the challenge.

I flick over the document and am happy that the contract is exactly as I'd asked. No tricky wording, hidden meanings, or small text print that you have to get a magnifying glass to even know it's there.

Picking up my mug and holding on to the contract, I walk back into the office. Alf is now sitting behind the desk and has stacks of papers mounting. Neat piles, which have me smiling to myself. This is one of the reasons Alf is going to be an excellent partner. He's organized and efficient, but above all, he wants everything to be perfect for the company.

"Alf, I've got something I need you to look at, consider, then sign." I hand him the contract, then take a seat once more. I watch as Alf reads over the document, looks over the top of it at me, then rereads it before placing it on the desk and looking me squarely in the eye.

"Heather, are you sure about this? You worked very hard to get this company off the ground, and I'm more than happy being your manager."

"Alf, you see, I'm a woman who is happy doing my work at the clubhouse, helping the ladies who work for the company when needed. I'm happy doing what I'm doing and still enjoy speaking to potential clients. You know I hate the office work these days. I want to have kids sometime before my ovaries stop working and when that happens, I don't want to be working all the time."

He chuckles. "Well, don't you have to have a partner, you know, to have kids with?" Alf places his hand over his mouth to stop the laugh I know he is holding back.

"Well, I know that. But I have to think ahead. Now if I don't find my man, or have kids, that's okay, too," I add, but I'm hoping I'll have kids one day.

Alf looks at me with a smile. "I'm sure there's a good man out there for you, Heather. If you haven't got one on your radar yet? I think you may have someone that is more than a little interested in you, don't you?" He smirks and nods his head in a knowing sort of way.

"It's just a second date. The first didn't go according to plan." I huff at him and then realize I've just said a bit more than I should.

"Second date, huh? And should I ask what the plan was for the first date, for it to go so wrong? I guess not by the color of your cheeks." Alf laughs at me, and I can't help the blush deepening.

"The plan was to have a nice, quiet first date. That was all. Now I have to get

my ass in gear. You need to be giving that contract some serious thought, I'd like you to be on board with it.

"I'm going to the store before heading home, then I'll make my way over to the costume shop. I agreed to go to this theme night coming up on Friday, so I need a darn Roman toga or something to wear. I hope they have something left or I'm going to be in big trouble."

"Rather you than me. I'm happy not doing that sort of thing anymore. The ex-wife would have been up for it, mind you," Alf chuckles.

Although he rarely mentions his ex-wife, it's still obvious that she hurt him badly when she went off with another man and had a child.

"Oh, I'd forgotten you said you were having today free from the clubhouse. Is Lina on her own?" Alf asks as he steps over to the chart on the wall that shows where everyone is and what hours they are working.

"Yes, but we made sure she'd be okay as we did extra the last two days, so she won't be overwhelmed."

"Oh, that reminds me. She said Wings is after you. He was wearing a blue t-shirt that looked like it had been tie-dyed and blamed you for it, and Lina was laughing as she said you'd best be leaving your van a few streets over and walk in for a while." Alf is smirking and I can't help but throw my head back laughing.

I can't stop the little giggles that keep escaping as I drive to the store. I need to pick up a few things before heading out to see Lily.

My cart is half full and thinking that should be more than enough for now, I head toward the register when the skank from the steakhouse steps in front of the cart, which has me come to a stop.

"Stay away from Forest. He's mine," the woman I know is called Polly is standing here in the middle of the store looking like she's due to start working on the street corner.

I give her the once over, up and down, and grin. "You think you will be the Sheriff's woman, dressed like the town's prostitute?" I make sure everyone in the store can hear what I'm saying because if this bitch thinks she's going

to intimidate me she's got another thing coming.

"I'm the one who's been wanting him since he got to town, and I'm not stepping back for you or anyone else!" Polly screeches but the snorting laughter from around shows how many people have stopped to watch what is going down.

"You maybe want him, but he doesn't want you now, does he? He's told you more than once that it was a one-night thing, and let's face it, he didn't take you home now did he? It was a stick his dick in, take it out, wipe it, and walk off moment." I know I'm getting worked up as I don't usually speak like this, but hey, she has revved my nasty engine up.

The store owner, Mr. Garrett, walks over and stands next to me, glaring at Polly. "What's goin' on here? I don't appreciate you comin' in here shouting at my customers."

I side-eye Mr. Garrett because he's showing he's putting this shitshow squarely where it belongs, on Polly's shoulders. Now Polly's face is nearly purple with rage, and she's breathing mighty fast.

I give Mr. Garrett a smile and that has Polly screech and lunge forward trying to grab my hair. I've trained with the ladies at the clubhouse compound on Sunday mornings, so I know how to protect myself from this bitch. I grab her wrist, lean back, take my weight back, and drag her forward. As she's off balance, I stick my left leg out and trip her, letting go of her wrist at the same time. She screams and falls on her hands and knees.

Looking up at the man, who chuckles and states loudly. "Well, look at that! She's on her hands and knees, like always." Now, that has the crowd which has accumulated in the store roaring with laughter, humiliating Polly I'm sure, but she jumps onto her feet, gives the man a dirty look, and whirls around to me once more.

"Don't try it, Polly, I'm warning you," keeping myself calm as I know it's the best option if this escalates.

Being the stupid bitch she is, she lunges at me again, this time with a fist, and I turn my shoulder to her. As soon as her fist touches my shoulder, I turn back to her and say calmly, "That is assault, you dumb bitch, and this is now

me defending myself.”

My right hand snaps out and hits her square on the nose. She stops dead in her tracks and her eyes water. I didn't hit her hard enough to break it, but a trickle of blood soon becomes a gush. She screeches like a banshee and then runs from the store.

The store erupts with laughter as she disappears, and I do a brief curtsy before walking with Mr. Garrett to the register.

“I'm sorry you had to witness that, but I gave her every chance to leave me alone. It's not the first time she's confronted me, but I'm hoping it will be the last.” I give him a look that says I doubt it very much, and he grins at me.

“I'll be making a report to the sheriff's office and I will emphasize that she attacked you first and then assaulted you. And there's no need to be sorry. You just brightened my day, along with a lot of my customers, too.” He looks around the store at all the smiling customers who, only minutes ago, were going about their day dreary and downcast.

The customer behind me offers a high five, and as I respond he states, “She's had that coming a long time. If the sheriff needs a witness statement to go with his report, just give me a call. I'll be happy to see her ass in a sling. I'm sure others would too.”

I finish paying for my groceries and head home.

Walking into Lily's shop ninety minutes later, I drop into the easy chair she has near the counter. Blowing out a breath and letting the tension ease out of my shoulders and neck.

“You okay, Heather?” Lily asks as she walks around the counter and stands in front of me.

“Yeah, I had an encounter with the town skank, but hey, it's done now.”

“Oh,” laughing at me as she steps back to the counter and whatever she was doing when I entered the shop. “Do you want to share?”

“No. The woman's an idiot, had a one-night stand, and thinks she's going to move in and get his retirement,” I sigh, knowing I just said no, then let that loose.

“Oh,” Lily says again, then giggles. “That was something I’d have liked to watch, ‘cause girl I’ve been bored as hell here. Star is away on her very last sporting event, so it’s been so quiet here I can’t wait for her to come back.”

I relive the event to give Lily an insight into what went on, then can’t help the grin as I think that I’m the last person who would have expected to have to put a skank in her place.

After we’ve finished laughing, I think it’s time I got down to business. “Okay, Lily, has anyone been in and got anything for the theme night?” I know I’m late, so I’ll end up with whatever she has left, but it can’t be helped.

“Well, here’s what’s happening...” Lily fills me in on what the Ol’ Ladies are doing, and nodding, I give her the go-ahead that I’m in with everyone else.

Rubbing my hands together, I think this is going to be great, and I can’t wait for the evening. Getting measured, and the costume fitted, I’m ready for the night. The tunic, which is the base layer, is ankle length and plain cream material. The dress is called a stola, sleeveless, and is worn over the top of the tunic, fastened with a brooch on the shoulder.

What surprised me more than anything was the wig that Lily provided with the costume. It’s a lovely blond color and has a messy long bun hanging from the top at the back. It has curls in the bun too. The straight hair from the front to the bun is held in place by two braids running around the head, almost as headbands. It looks quite glamorous, and it finishes the costume I think.

I hug Lily after she has everything boxed up and ready for me. “Are you coming to the theme night, Lily?” I ask, and I realize I’m asking a bit late as I’m ready to leave the shop.

“Yes, I’m coming with Star. I’ll be watching for a man of my own. I’ve plenty to look at for sure.” I can’t help laughing at the look on her face as she says that because if I had to guess, she already has her eye on someone.

Making my way back to the office, I can’t help but smile at the way the costume looked on me. I’m not one for dressing up normally, but this is going to be a fun night. I can’t wait to see what the men are going to be wearing. Well, what Forest is going to be wearing if I’m honest.

Arriving back at the office, I see all the scattered paperwork has been cleared. I look at Alf, still behind his desk, and give him a grin.

“Well done, you. You’ve got that done in record time.”

“It’s off the floor and back in the correct drawers. I do need to get it back into alphabetical order, still. It’s more than two-thirds finished now, though.”

“Have you had time to give the partnership contract any thought? I meant what I said earlier. You’d benefit the business and, as a partner, it would give you an even bigger incentive to push us to the next level.” I look at him and am surprised at the querying look he gives me.

“Oh...My...God! I didn’t mean that you’re not doing that already. That came out all wrong. I love what you have done for the business so far. I just meant, well, you know, shit...”

“I’ve already signed it, Heather. I’m over the moon that you’ve offered me this partnership. When I came for my initial interview, I never dreamed that I’d be a manager for the business, never mind a partner. Are you sure this isn’t going to be an issue for anyone else? Some have been with you longer than I have,” he casts me a serious glance.

“I’ve got a wonderful team, Alf, but there’s no one that wanted the step up to manager, let alone partner. They are all excellent at what they do and the hours they have suit their home lives. There isn’t one of them that would consider trading their family time for more time at the business. You are perfect.” Oh Jesus Christ, this hole just keeps getting deeper. I need to shut the fuck up, I think to myself.

“Not that I’m saying you don’t have a life outside of work... Alf, I’m sorry, that’s not how it was meant to come out.” I see him looking at the desk and my heart goes out to him. How could I be so insensitive?

After a few seconds, he looks up at me, and I’m so relieved he’s smiling. “Girl, you can dig yourself a hole faster and deeper than anyone I’ve ever met. You haven’t got a nasty bone in your body or a bad thought in your head. It’s just a pity sometimes that your brain and mouth don’t engage at the same time.” Alf laughs, steps away from the desk, and hugs me.

“Howdy Pardner. Welcome to the boardroom.” I give him a peck on each cheek and beam at him. “You can finish early today and drop that contract off at the lawyers. You pass it on the way home.

“We’ll get locked up together and then I can head home, too. I need to get my costume hung up and ready for the big night!”

CHAPTER TWENTY

-:- FOREST -:-

Stepping into my office, I'm greeted by Ty who has a sour look on his face. "What's up with you?" I ask, because it's not long since we left the house this morning.

"Zack said that there is a report about Polly attacking Heather, and I know you want to get together with Heather, so why don't we go arrest Polly and get this done? We can charge her with disturbing the peace, assault, anything else we can make stick."

Gemmy, who I hadn't noticed, has walked into the office. "I agree. She's not going to step back. She's got her eye on you and isn't going to let it go. You can add stalking to the charges. Well, Ty could do the arrest, so you're not involved."

"What does the report say?"

"Mr. Garrett at the grocery store made an official complaint that Polly made threats to Heather for no reason. She waltzed into the store and caused a scene by confronting Heather. When Heather wasn't fazed by it, Polly attacked her. Twice! The first time, Heather dodged her. The second time, she struck Heather on the shoulder and then she defended herself. Gave Polly a bloody nose, apparently," Ty growls.

"Okay, go arrest her, but make sure everything is as it should be. I don't want her getting out of any charges because we didn't do it right."

"No problem." Ty grins as he jumps out of his seat and leaves the office. Gemmy has a huge grin on her face as she walks out behind Ty.

I take out my cell and put a quick call through to Heather. I'm sure she'll be ok but I want her to know that I'm concerned about her. She briefly tells me what happened and I inform her that Mr. Garrett has filed a report and Ty is dealing with it. I let her know I'll catch up with her later before cutting the call.

Meat walks into the office and gives me a chin lift, which I know is all I'm going to get from him. I watch as he steps over to the whiteboard and writes what looks like an essay. Has he made some progress on the rape cases?

As I watch, he adds a partial description of the attacker. That came from the fourth woman he spoke to if memory serves me right. There's also a reference to her having undergone a rape test kit at the hospital. That was never mentioned in any of the reports. We'll have to look into that and see if this is more evidence that has gone missing.

When he's finished writing, he looks at me, raises his eyebrows, and then leaves the office. That raising of his brows speaks volumes for Meat. He's not happy with these cases one bit. There has been next to nothing done for these women, or the rest of the townswomen when it comes to apprehending this rapist.

Missing evidence, information not recorded, nothing followed up, insinuations that the women may have encouraged the attacks. That sheriff was a total piece of shit, and I'm going to do everything I can to make sure he gets what's coming to him for failing in his duties, and to make sure this rapist goes down with him. They can share a cell for all I care.

Opening the mail on my desk, I notice an envelope from the coroner's office. Ripping it open, I slide out the papers and read the report. Sighing, I rub my palm down my face, and press #5 on the phone on my desk.

"Yeah," Sober absently says.

"I need you in my office." Pressing the end call, I hold the report, which I know is not what Sober wants to see, but he needs this information to find out what happened, and then by whose hand.

Sober walks into the office, I hold the report in front of me for him to take. Taking the report, Sober sits and reads, then he reads for a second time, same as I did, before looking at the photographs of the injuries on Colin's dead body.

Closing his eyes a moment before he looks at me, Sober's face is set solid. "Yeah, he was murdered, just as we suspected. Beaten to shit, strangled until he was unconscious, and then drowned to make sure. He was still alive

when they put him in the fuckin' river. This proves it, as his lungs were full of river water."

"Keep looking and digging. If you need help, ask. Don't be putting yourself in any position that could get you killed. Ty, Hands, and JP plus myself are here to step up if needed. Whoever murdered Colin needs to be brought to justice and let's get a solid case together against this asshole, or assholes." I'm doing my best to let Sober know we all are a unit in this department. We'll do whatever is needed to find who did this and the other atrocities we are finding.

"I'm good at this point. I'll keep the whiteboard up to date and keep you informed. I'm going to talk to this fucker and see why he didn't send the report at the time, and why wait until you, as newly appointed Sheriff, demanded it," Sober snarls.

I watch as Sober updates his portion of the board before picking up my phone from the desk and the keys for the cruiser, which JP fetched first thing according to the note that I found on the desk with the keys.

Hearing screeching, both Sober and I walk through to the deputies' office and I place my hand over my mouth when I see Ty dropping Polly onto a seat with her hands handcuffed behind her back. She is disheveled so I know she hasn't come willingly. I look at Sober out of the corner of my eye as he's laughing out loud, not worried at all that he is showing how amusing he finds this.

Polly is going crazy on Ty, calling him every name she can think of. If I wasn't so sick of this, it would be amusing. Ty is trying to get her to tell him about the grocery store incident, but she's having none of that. She's getting louder and the insults are becoming more vulgar as she continues.

I can see Ty has had enough as he drags her to her feet from the chair and goes nose-to-nose with her. We can't hear what he's saying to her, but she has gone silent, finally, and it looks like she's been drained of all her blood. She is so pale. He takes her to a cell, and she totters along on her ridiculously high heels. Once she's in the cell, she sits quietly and glares at Gemmy and Sober, who are laughing their asses off. I'm done with this shit. I've more important things to do than be in the same building as her.

My first stop is TJs as I want to check on any other break-in attempts that may or may not have been made. For some reason, I'm uneasy that TJs, Club Whisky, and Heather's business have all been targets. I'm going to have to speak to Axel and the brothers at the next church meeting.

Walking in the front door of TJs I check around as the doors are not normally open until later in the day. Seeing Mia with a broom, I give her a look as I'm sure they have cleaning staff here.

"Why are you using a broom?" I can't resist asking.

"The cleaning staff left already and then I noticed outside the main door was a pile of trash. I cleaned that, then thought, oh well, do just inside the door too." Mia smiles at me. "So, what are you doing here?"

"I came to see if there's been any more attempts at break-ins. I know nothing's been filed as a report, but wanted to see if anyone's been seen hanging around or anything else suspicious," giving the outside another glance as I ask.

Mia looks a bit thoughtful and then replies, "I've not seen anything or anyone. None of the staff have mentioned any incidents either. I'll ask around, just to be sure."

"Your month at TJs must be nearly up. How do you think you've gotten on? And how do you think you'll cope with running the MC? Is that more daunting than this was?" I realize I'm firing questions at her so slow down.

"Alright, as far as I know. I've only had positive feedback from everyone here. They've said good things about Eden in the kitchen, too. I've had a couple of 'unpleasantries' to deal with, but nothing major. Whenever you have people working closely, there's always going to be tensions. Nothing I couldn't handle. I think this experience has put me on a good footing for running the MC. I think some of the brothers are going to test me. Not think, I *know* they will. There probably isn't one of them wondering what they can do to push me to breaking point," Mia laughs and has a 'bring it on' look about her.

"If it's any consolation, Mia, I think you've done a great job here, and I don't think you'll be too stressed about running the MC. Yes, I think they'll test

you. I don't for one minute think they'll break you. I know Axel wouldn't let it get that far, but I have enough faith in you that you won't need him to step in. You'll be just fine." I lean down and give her a kiss on the forehead.

"Thanks, Forest. That means a lot. I think that's the highest praise I've had since the twins were born and Axel said, 'way to go, Mia'." She laughs and I laugh with her. With that, I head off to the clubhouse.

Once there, I give a chin lift to the brothers I see. There aren't many about with it being a weekday. Most will be at work until it's feed time. They'll probably pile in then, ready to demolish whatever Bitty, Amelia, and Sybil have prepared. If a better offer doesn't arise, I may stay myself.

Seeing Heather, I walk over and ask if she's ok. I get a beaming smile, "Why wouldn't I be?"

Smiling back at her, I would love to crush that smile off her face with a long hard kiss, but now is not the time or place, I guess.

"I'll pick you up at six thirty tomorrow night. That'll give us time to find a table and get settled in a good spot." As I turn away, she takes my arm and stops me.

"Erm, I don't think so, Forest. I've already made arrangements to get there. I have a lift at six forty-five, with someone else." Heather's innocent look throws me for a minute and my jealousy goes from zero to one hundred in less than a second.

"What do you mean, you're going with someone else? This is our date night. You're not going with another man." Before I can say anymore, and get myself in deep shit, Heather raises her eyebrows and gives me an 'I'd stop right there,' kind of look.

"I never said I was going with another man, but if I had changed my mind about going with you, I would go with who the hell I liked and not need your approval." She smiles a sickly sweet smile and I realize I came *this* close to saying 'I forbid it,' in my jealous outburst. That would have royally screwed things up.

"I'm sorry, no, you didn't. Who are you going with, if you don't mind me asking?" I say all this with gritted teeth and a false smile that I'm sure she

can see right through.

“Yes, you may ask. I may even tell you before tomorrow night, but maybe not just now? Now I still have the utility room to check out and any washing to sort. So, you can come with or you can stay here, but I need to keep moving.” She gives me that sickly sweet smile again, and it’s enough to make me want to puke.

I stand still and try to get myself back into some sort of composure. Slowly counting to ten, I see Wings walking away from the utility room towards the kitchen door to the compound with a huge smirk on his face.

I’m moving towards the corridor and I start to form the words to shout to Heather when a huge scream rips through the clubhouse. Everything stops and as I run to Heather, brothers start to appear from everywhere.

As I charge into the room, Heather is rooted to a spot in front of the cabinets where they keep cleaning products. I don’t know where Wings got them, but the cabinet is full of live spiders. There are what appear to be hundreds. The cabinet is full of them.

Without a thought, I scoop Heather up, bridal style, and carry her straight out of the clubhouse to my cruiser. I run her home and tell her I’ll pick her up in the morning and take her back for her van.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

-:- HEATHER -:-

I didn't wait for Forest to collect me this morning; I called an Uber and was at the clubhouse before he got a chance. I've got a lot to do today before the theme night tonight. I've got my costume with me and I'm going to Tilly's house to get ready along with the Ol' Ladies, Cora, Lina, and Cookie.

Walking into the kitchen of the clubhouse, I quickly head for the coffee machine. I know Meat is always in the kitchen before anyone stirs, so I'm grabbing myself a cup before it's all gone.

Meat seems happier of late, although it's hard to tell with his grunting personality, but he seems to say a few words these days. I overheard Mia telling Sybil that Meat was going to counseling, so that may be why. Whatever it is, I hope it continues because he's one helluva man, and every woman affiliated with the club loves him like a brother.

Hearing shouting, I gingerly walk through to the common room and the corridor where the offices are. I can hear Axel clearly, and although he's not shouting, he's near to it. "What the fuck did you think you were doing bringing all those fucking spiders into the clubhouse? I know you have this thing going on with Heather, but that's going too far. Where did you get them? How many were there? Find every fuckin' one, and if one bites Mia or the boys, I'll do more than bite your ass. I'll shoot the fucker, now GET OUT AND GET THEM ALL FOUND!"

I rush back to the kitchen and stand at the island as casually as I can. Trying my best not to let on I've overheard anything. Wings storms past and I place my hand over my mouth to stop the laugh from escaping.

When a heavy arm lands around my shoulders I look up, and Meat is looking down at me with a smirk on his face. Winking, he squeezes my shoulders and then walks away, through the door out to the compound, and he's whistling what can only be described as a merry tune.

The morning passes fast as Lina and I rush through the day's chores. We

keep finding odd spiders here and there and thank goodness Lina isn't scared of them as she picks them up and drops them out of the nearest window. I told her to keep count and tell Axel later, but I have to admit I say it with a smirk on my face.

Seeing Mia in the kitchen, I check that we're all still meeting at Tilly's for a drink and to get changed for the night. We'd agreed that we didn't want the men seeing us until we were all at TJs, and getting picked up in one place saved a lot of waiting around. I know Mia had wanted a stretch limo, but Axel had put his foot down. He'd insisted that since it was going to be such a short journey, a minibus would suffice.

Once I'm sure that the last of the clubhouse chores are covered by Lina or completed fully, I hop in my van and head for Tilly's.

Tilly's house later is organized chaos and noisy with laughter, as everyone is getting ready for the evening. Lily arrives, checks everyone's costumes, and makes sure the wigs are in place. It is mayhem with everyone in one place, but the friendship and family feeling oozing from these women is something you'd experience nowhere else.

Winter struts up and down, giving everyone a wink. "If my man doesn't show his appreciation for all this tonight," pointing to her body, "he'll not be getting any for a loooooonnggg time." We all can't hold back the giggles at her playing around.

Jo is sitting and watching everyone, but when she speaks we all stare at her for quite a while. "This gives me an idea for a new novel. It could make a series. Yeah, I'll have to let this ruminate."

"What the fuck is ruminate?" Cora asks and I giggle at the look on her face. She obviously thinks it's something sexual.

Jo laughs. "It means to give it a lot of thought."

"Oh, I thought you were going to write another of those damn sex scenes that have me wanting a bigger BOB than I have already," Cora says blandly but has everyone else doubled over and has tears running down our cheeks.

"I don't need a BOB, I've got Fox, and let me tell you that man doesn't need extra life batteries. His Energizer bunny can run all night and then some,"

Carrie says with more than a little pride in her voice.

“I have to put BS in ‘time out’,” Kya says with air quotes, “because he’s like a damn rabbit too, always wanting to be humping and bumping.”

“Grease does this weird thing with his tongue, but hell, it gets me every time,” Raven states while looking a bit dreamy.

“I’m going to tell Stitch I want a baby when he gets back, so if he’s not humping and bumping, he’ll be in big trouble.” Gemmy grins.

I have to take a seat because my stomach hurts with all the laughing I’m doing. These women are just amazing. I truly love them all. But listening to them has me wanting my own man and I’ve got to say, Forest flips across my mind.

We’re all dressed and itching to be out for the evening, but somehow our timing is off, as we’re thirty minutes early. God knows how we’ve managed that with so many women in one place. Mia calls Axel to see if he can get the minibus any earlier and she’s happy to hear it’s not going to be an issue.

Only five minutes later, we hear a horn beeping outside. When Tilly opens the door, she calls to Mia, “You need to come see this.”

It’s not exactly the minibus we were all expecting. It’s a goddamn party bus. It is so much more than a limo. Mia squeals with delight and I’m sure Axel knew what he was doing when he organized this. He is soooo going to get well rewarded by Mia.

We all climb aboard and before the last of us are inside, champagne corks are popping. There are LED lights changing color everywhere, music is playing, and the bar area looks amazing. We all start singing and screaming like teenagers on their way to a prom night. Mia shouts to the driver that we have thirty minutes to kill before arriving at TJs so he needs to take a detour and not arrive early. Forty minutes later we’re pulling up at TJs. The bar is virtually empty and we’re all in high spirits.

Leaving the bus and entering TJs in pairs keeps the fact that we’re all dressed the same, a secret a little longer. We don’t want it noticed just yet. As the pairs enter the club, they go to their respective partners and try to keep them facing away from the door.

Seeing Forest sitting at the bar, I sidle up to him and he looks at me with what I take to be an appreciative stare. He does not hide the fact that he is looking me up and down. I stop just out of arm's reach and give him a flirty twirl.

As he gets off his stool, I also give him a good look over. He looks good enough to eat in his gladiator armor, standing there with his hand on his sword hilt. I could ravish the hell out of him. Feeling myself getting turned on, I close the gap and brush his lips with mine in a gentle kiss.

Seeing his eyes widen in surprise, I don't give him time to make the kiss anything more than it is, and ask him, "Are you waiting for me to pass out from dehydration, or are you going to get your lady a drink?"

"What can I get you, My Lady?" he asks with a smile.

"I'll have a rosé spritzer, for starters," I say with a wink.

"Oh, for starters? You're going to be mixing things up tonight, are you?" Forest raises an eyebrow and looks at me questioningly.

"I'm feeling a little adventurous, so we'll just have to see how the evening goes. Come with me. I need to speak with Mia."

Taking our drinks from the barman, we cross the dance floor to where Mia and Axel are in a booth with Eden and Silver. As we approach, I see Axel and Silver look from me to Eden and, in turn, to Mia.

Axel nods at Forest and then looks at Mia. "Okay, my interest is piqued. Why are all the women dressed the same? Don't get me wrong. You all look superb, but you all look the same. I thought there'd be quite a competition to outdo each other?"

Mia bats her eyelashes at Axel as she replies. "Well, my Caesar, normally that would be the case, however, this evening there is an ulterior motive. There are secrets and secret plans afoot, of which you are blissfully unaware."

"I don't like secrets or secret plans. They don't tend to end well. Especially not for Caesars. Know what I mean?" Axel grins at her and she giggles.

"Have no fear, Caesar. These plans are for one of your legionnaires, not

yourself. All will be revealed in due course. Just remember, things that you may witness may not be what they appear.”

Eden laughs and looks at Silver. “That goes for you, too. You need to keep your Neanderthal impulses in check. Got that, my hero of Rome?”

Baffled, Silver and Axel look at each other and then Forest. “That include you too, gladiator?” Silver asks.

“It most certainly does,” I say quickly. “If he’s expecting a third date, he will most certainly keep his sword in that sheath until I say otherwise.” I give Forest a knowing look, and he looks as baffled as the others.

Looking around the room, I see all the ladies are comfortable and in position with their men, either sitting drinking, talking, or dancing. When two more ladies appear at our table we make room for them and Mia turns to Eden and says, “Showtime.”

Lily and Star look at each other and Star has such a huge smile you’d think she just won the Powerball. Mia gives a wave to the DJ and the music changes from pop to dance music. All the women know the signal and look over at our table.

Star gives us all a nod, and we disperse, taking our places around the room, keeping our eye on our men because we’ve all seen the women in here ogling them. It’s not happening because looking at the Ol’ Ladies, it is more than obvious they’ll step in and kick some butt if necessary. Even the doormen we hired are watching more of what’s happening inside than out tonight. The doors are closed, and only ticket holders are getting in. Judging by the number of people already in the club, there can’t be many outstanding tickets.

Eden is the first to walk past Meat and run her hand down his forearm. As she passes by, all Meat sees is the back of her, but as she turns her head and smiles, he gives a small chin lift in response.

A few minutes later Raven runs her finger down Meat’s neck, and veers away quickly, again giving him a wink over her shoulder. This time Meat frowns and looks somewhat suspicious.

Meat is dressed as a gladiator in leather sandals, leather leg shields to the

knee, leather braces on his forearms, a wicked-looking sword, that we all hope is a prop, a leather belt that stretches as a leather thong, and a helmet. Jesus Christ, he could almost be naked. He is creating a lot of interest from women who have come to the bar for a night out. We can all see this is revving Star's angry engine, as she's getting more irate as the evening passes. Lily tugs Star into the restroom and we know she's cooling her down and getting ready for the next portion of this evening's event.

Kya, Tilly, and Jo all do the touch-and-pass with Meat. We are all ready to take new positions around the room.

Forest is sticking to me closely and is seeing what's happening. Every time he tries to ask what's going on I lean over and kiss him, which thankfully renders him speechless for a few moments.

The twinkle in his eye is telling me he's now asking just to get the kiss that follows. Men, what can you do?

"Look at Jo and Knuckles," I say to Forest and when he looks at the dance floor, we both laugh as you notice Jo is standing on Knuckles' feet while he shuffles around. No stretch of the imagination can call that dancing, but Jo is looking at Knuckles as though he hung the moon and that's all that counts.

I can see some of the Ol' Ladies have had to tell their men what's happening. There are some very protective alpha emotions being exhibited. I've noticed Forest has refused a couple of dance requests from townswomen and Silver has just looked at another woman as though she was mad. Axel has Mia on his knee, with an arm around her, and the look on his face is enough to ward off even a seasoned, genuine gladiator.

Mia kisses Axel and slides off his knee. As she moves onto the dance floor, the other ladies start to congregate with her. Star mingles with us and her master plan to tease Meat begins to play out.

Before all can be revealed, however, a woman walks up to Meat and plasters herself to his chest. He looks down at her and before he can do a damn thing, Star grabs the woman and peels her off him, throwing her to the floor. Standing over the shocked woman, with her hands on her hips, Star eyes the entire room and practically makes eye contact with every

female in there.

Star turns to Meat and licks him from his chin to his eye. “Listen up, bitches. I’m only gonna say this once. This man is mine. Touch him again and you will answer to me.”

All the Ol’ Ladies scream and stamp their feet in excitement. All those who don’t know what’s going on look scared to death. Around the room, the MC starts cheering, stamping, and clapping. Meat stands there and I’ve never seen him so shocked in all the time I’ve known him. He normally takes everything in his stride with just a ‘Meat grunt’. This has him completely frozen to the spot. He raises a hand to wipe his face and Star stops him.

“Mine. Never doubt it. Gladiator, Viking, American Indian or Man. Mine!” Star turns and dashes into the center of the room and we all close ranks, so Meat has no way to follow her. He grabs a shoulder and spins Eden around, and she just smiles sweetly at him. Next, it’s my shoulder and I give him the same smile. Five shoulders on and he’s nowhere nearer to catching her. He just finds an Ol’ Lady smiling at him. He tries twice more and then lets out a tremendous roar and heads for the bar.

Once we’re sure that Lily has Star successfully out of the club and away, we are all on cloud nine that the evening was a success. The men are all still in protective mode without even realizing that it was the women, and not the men of the town, that were causing an issue. They don’t see themselves as sex objects, I think to myself.

Talking of sex objects, I turn to Forest. He looks very tasty in his costume and that may have to stay on later. Oh my God. What am I thinking? I turn away quickly before he sees the heat in my cheeks. It’s a wonder he can’t feel the heat from between my thighs.

“Forest, you need to take me home. I don’t feel right.” He looks at me with genuine concern in his eyes.

“I’ll bring the SUV to the front doors. I’ll be back in a minute.” He grabs the nearest ‘Ol Lady, which is Raven. “Watch Heather for me. She’s not feeling well. I’m going to get her home,” and with that said he dashes off.

Raven looks at me with concern. “You okay, Heather? What’s the matter?”

“I told him I didn’t feel right, not that I was ill. Raven, I haven’t felt this horny in years. He’ll be lucky if he makes it to my house at this rate. I wonder if he does that tongue thing, like Grease?”

Raven stares at me like I have two heads or something. “Heather! I’ve never heard you say such things. Are you drunk? Has your drink been spiked?”

“Can’t a girl just be horny? I want a cock, and I want Forest’s! If that’s a crime, he can arrest me, handcuff me to the bed or the wall or the damn table and do anything he wants as long as I get a big O out of it.”

I think Raven's eyes are going to pop out of her head, and then Forest is back.

“Is she okay, Raven? Do you think she needs a doctor?” Forest's voice is full of concern. I slide off the stool and start for the door with Forest at my side.

“No, Forest. I don’t think she needs a doctor. I believe the sheriff will be just what the doctor ordered, though,” I hear Raven say quietly as we head across the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

-:- HEATHER -:-

I climb into the SUV, and I ask myself, how the hell did I get myself into this state? I haven't felt like this in a long, long time. If ever, in fact. Forest shuts my door and climbs into the driver's side. He starts the engine and pulls out of the parking lot. I can see him glancing over at me with concern, but I know if I look at him, I'll drag him from the vehicle and take him across the hood.

It's a rural road to my place from the club, and as it's late, there's no other traffic. Spotting a side road to a picnic area, I tell Forest to pull in.

"You need to pull in here, Forest. I need to stop for a while." I open the window to let some cool air onto my burning face.

"Sure thing. Are you going to throw up? It's not far now."

"Forest, I know you're used to giving the orders, but just do as you're told this once. Get off the goddamn road and into somewhere dark and out of sight."

As soon as the SUV stops, I'm out of the door and at the nearest picnic table. Forest rushes over and as soon as he's within arm's reach I grab under his toga and feel for his dick. He stumbles backward, but I'm having none of that. I grip him tighter.

"I'm not ill. I never said I was. What I am is horny. H... O... R... N... Y... I am so horny it's off the scale. Now get that dick out of that costume and put it where it can do some good."

Pulling him to me, I bend over the table and throw my costume toga over my back, my panties pushed down around my knees. I hear a gasp and then feel his hands roaming over my ass. If he thinks there's going to be foreplay, he can think again.

"If you don't get that cock inside me in the next five seconds, I'm going to be arrested for 'wounding with intent'. I swear to God, if I don't get what I

want, I'll cut the damn thing off and use it myself."

There's a very brief moment, and then I feel his tip against my wet opening. I push back and feel it slip in right to the hilt. Gasping, I hold him there, but I can't deny myself and forego enjoying the feeling of him fully seated. Slowly leaning forward, I feel him sliding out of me. When I feel he's nearly out, I push back. If he doesn't get the hint soon, I'll leave him here and use the toy from my bedroom drawer.

Feeling his hands getting a grip on my hips, I let out a sigh. At last, I think. Taking this sigh for more than it was, he starts to pull me onto him. Sliding in and out with a nice hard thrust soon has me building toward my orgasm. I can't help the feelings building so fast, and it's not long before my core starts to grip him hard. I feel myself losing control and I scream out, loud and long. My orgasm leaves my knees weak, and I'm sprawled across the picnic table.

Forest pulls my panties up and lowers my dress. Leaving me lying on the table, he walks around and sits on the bench so he can see my face.

"Was it good for you?" He looks at me with raised eyebrows.

"It was 'supercalifragilisticexpialidocious', as my favorite movie nanny would say. Now, you need to carry me to the SUV, 'cause my legs won't work, and then we can get home, do it again several times before we have to get up for work tomorrow."

Pulling me to my feet, Forest throws me over his shoulder and carries me to the SUV. Unceremoniously dumping me in the passenger seat, he pulls back onto the road. Driving the rest of the way to my place takes only a couple of minutes. When we screech to a halt in my drive, it's only seconds and Forest has my door open and is carrying me bridal style to the front door.

"You threw me over your shoulder to get me in the damn car, now you're being all gentlemanly? What the hell?" I grin at him as I throw my arms around his neck.

"Neighbors. If they see me rushing you into the house like this, I can say you were unwell. Over my shoulder, they'll think you were drunk. Besides that, this way I can feel your ass, and it's making me hard. Your tits have been

driving me mad all night in that dress, and I can see more of them from here. And it's one nil to you. My balls are aching for release. Where are your damn house keys?"

"I don't have any pockets. There in my purse in the SUV."

Forest stops dead in his tracks, spins us around, and heads back to the vehicle. I pull open the door and grab my purse. While we're there Forest gets me to grab his bag from the back seat.

"What's in this?" I ask. "Were you being a bit hopeful?"

"Yes, I most certainly was. It's my uniform and stuff," Forest sounds like he's getting out of breath.

"You'd better not be too tired to do me again when we get inside, Forest. That would leave me most displeased and disillusioned."

"That'll never happen. I'll always be up for you, never fear."

As we once again head for the front door I carefully rummage in his bag until I find what I'm looking for, and slip them up my sleeve.

"You can put me down now. I'll lead the way." He puts me down at the bottom of the stairs and I rush up, heading for my bedroom. At the top of the stairs, I look around and he's still at the bottom, taking his damn sandals off.

"Forest, I love that you're such a gentleman, but believe me when I say tonight is not the night. You can be a perfect gentleman in the morning, bring me breakfast in bed, swear you'll always respect me. Now, right now, right this instant, you need to be a stud, a stud muffin, a raging bull, a caveman that's going to bash me over the head with his club and drag me to his, or my, cave. Ravish me, do what you will with me, just be quick about it. PLEASE!"

"Heather, you've always struck me as being so prim and proper. A real lady. I never expected you would have a dark side, but I have to say, I like it."

Forest reaches the top of the stairs and I grab his hand and drag him into my bedroom. I push him onto the bed and drag every item of his clothing off. Throwing myself on top, I straddle him, and taking his wrists in my hands,

push his arms over his head. Rubbing my tits in his face, I grab the handcuffs from my sleeve and snap them on him through the headboard.

Sliding off him, I stand by the bed. He watches me closely and, surprisingly, never flinches at being cuffed. I slowly remove my sandals. Slipping my arms from the dress and tunic, I pull the top halves slowly down to my waist. Running my hands over my breasts, I roll my nipples, first one, then the other, with a finger and thumb. They're already as hard as bullets and will soon need some male attention.

Turning slowly, I present my back to the bed and my slave. Looking over my shoulder, as coy as I can manage, I let the dress and tunic fall slowly until they're sitting on the rise of my butt. I put my thumbs into them and also hook them into my panties. Uncovering myself as slowly as I can, I hear soft growling noises from the bed. Once I'm naked, I get back on the bed and kneel between his thighs. Taking his hard cock in my hand, I slowly stroke and twist. My other hand cups and squeezes his balls. I run my nails over them and feel them tighten.

Knowing he's never going to get any harder than this, I lean down and position myself over him. Rubbing the head against my lips, I slowly push out my tongue and lick it. As it gets wetter it begins to twitch against my tongue. Sliding it into my mouth, I take it as deep as I can. Feeling him pushing into me, I control the depth and suck gently.

As I feel the buildup in his push, I slip it from my mouth and place my wet pussy over him. Rubbing the head against my clit, I feel his pre-cum lubricating it. Lowering myself onto the hard cock, I feel my core flooding. I can't believe how good it feels to have him inside me. I only keep still for a moment, then I begin riding him. Leaning forward, I feed him my nipples. Feeling him biting and sucking them adds another level to the pleasures flowing through me. I'm not going to last long at this rate. I can't remember the last time sex had felt this good or that I'd felt so uninhibited. I've dominated the poor guy in both of our sexual encounters. Never mind, though! Maybe I'll let him have his way next time.

As I pull my nipples away from his mouth, the act of denial heightens my sensitivity. I start to orgasm and slam myself down onto the hardness that's

filling me. Forest starts to buck like a madman and his eyes are roaming all over me, from my thighs to my stomach. My tits and nipples to my mouth. My eyes and my hair. As the last of my orgasm grips his dick deep inside me, I feel him fill me with his red-hot seed.

Dropping to the bed beside Forest, I snuggle into his side and rest my head on his chest. I nearly jump a mile when I feel a pair of arms wrapping around me. Looking up at him questioningly, he grins back at me.

“Wouldn’t be much of a law enforcement officer if I didn’t know how to get out of my own cuffs, now would I?” He laughs and winks, then he slowly leans toward me and gives me a tender kiss on the lips. Snuggling back into him, it’s only moments and all the sexual activity catches up with me. I’m so relaxed that I’m asleep in seconds.

-:-FOREST-:-

I lay quietly with Heather asleep on my chest. She keeps making little puff noises as she breathes. Not quite a snore, but it sounds incredibly feminine. I don’t think either of us has moved a muscle in the last few hours while sleeping.

I’ve never once thought of her as being a ‘sexual predator’, but after last night, I don’t think I’ll ever be surprised by her again. She certainly had her way with me and how she wanted it. No messing.

I’ll have to move soon. I have things to get done this morning, but I can’t bring myself to break this contact. Looking down at her, I suddenly have to suppress an all-out belly laugh. She still has her costume wig on. Although I manage to silence my laughter, my altered breathing must disturb her.

“Good morning, Sheriff,” she says sleepily.

“I think I prefer Forest when we’re this intimate.” I smile at her and she smiles back.

Running her hand down my chest, stomach, and then latching onto my

morning wood, she looks surprised. In an innocent voice and batting her eyelids at me, she says, "What seems to be the problem, officer?"

Rolling her onto her back, I waste no time in removing her wig and letting her natural hair flow free.

"I'm going to have to ascertain your true identity, ma'am. Wearing a disguise and using police handcuffs is a serious offense." I start to kiss her fiercely and feel her body respond immediately.

"I remember little, I'm afraid. I may have had my drink spiked. You may have to remind me of the incident." She raises her brows in a questioning look.

"Oh, I'm going to remind you." I slip between her thighs and open her pussy lips with two fingers. She's so wet they slip all the way in. That's all I need to know. I replace my fingers with my hard dick and slide in deep. Thinking back to how Heather had used me last night starts to turn me on even more. I've never been just a piece of meat, but the way she took control has me thrusting into her like a pile-driver. I see her eyes glazing over and feel her gripping me with her internal muscles. I've already learned what that means for her, and it has me pumping into her in seconds.

"Do you think we'll ever do this slow and romantic? Not that I mind, you understand, but it would be nice to enjoy your body to its fullest." I smile at her and when she smiles back, I have to be the luckiest man alive. "You have got to be the most beautiful woman God created. You know that, right?"

"I don't know about that, Forest. You have rose-tinted glasses, I think." She looks very shy considering the last twelve hours.

"I've seen things that cover every spectrum of human life. You are the best of everything rolled into one, and then some. I love the fact that you're feminine and ladylike. You can stand firm and hold your own against the best of them. You have a heart of gold and a wicked sense of humor. Let's not mention your body just yet, but hell in a handbasket, it's so hot." Heather blushes and hides her face in my chest.

"How about a nice platonic shower together so we can get ready to face the world?" I stand and hold my hand out for hers. We head for the bathroom together and an hour later, we're ready for the day. I think it could be a

while before we do anything platonic.

Once we're dressed and have had breakfast, we head off in different ways. Kissing Heather goodbye was a strange feeling. I can't think when I last did that with anyone, knowing I'd be seeing them again at the end of the day. I don't think she realizes the depth of my feelings for her yet.

Getting home, I park the SUV in the drive and walk to the back door. I let myself in and look at how the place is coming together. Still a bit to do, I muse. Now I have Heather as an incentive, I'll be pushing things along.

Hearing a horn blaring out front, I head out the front door to greet Fox. He jumps from his truck and beams at me before grabbing me in a man hug and pummeling my back.

"What the hell has you so full of beans this morning?" He has the biggest grin on his face I've seen in a long time.

"I am pumped with this table and chairs. Give me a hand to get it all inside and then you can see what we were able to do with it. Don't take the covers off until it's all in place." Fox is positively bouncing with energy, and he has me laughing with each trip from the truck.

Once everything is in its place in the dining room, he stands back and positions me a few feet away. "No peeking." What the fuck, I think to myself. A minute or so passes and then Fox says, "Okay, Forest. You can look."

I open my eyes and my chin hits the floor. The table and chairs in front of me look nothing like the set he took away. They're not even the same color.

"Fox! Where are my table and chairs? I wanted that set. I didn't want a new set. Damn it, man."

"This is your set, Forest. Isn't it fucking amazing? Look at how the colors have popped once it was cleaned back and re-oiled. It had God knows how many coats of beeswax. Look at the shine. The grain is a killer. I would die for a set like this. Even the chairs have come up first rate. The recovering of the seats is the dog's doodads, man. If you were paying retail for this, it would be in the thousands. Whoever left this behind did you a massive good turn."

I can't tear my eyes off the table. It is stunning. It looks like it should be on the pages of a magazine in some fancy million-dollar-plus mansion.

"My first thought, Fox? No one is eating at this table. If anyone marked it, I'd take 'em to Nell's. You've outdone yourself, brother. I can't wait to show it off."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

-:- FOREST -:-

Walking into church I take my seat and look around for Meat because I can imagine he'll be getting some ribbing this morning. I know who the woman is that's taunting him, but I'm saying nothing about it. It's their game to play, and I'm happy to sit back and watch it play out.

Everyone is entering and taking seats, and looking pretty beat after last night at the bar. Target walks in and takes a seat, and for some reason, he looks damn smug. I lift a questioning eyebrow when he sees me looking at him, and he gives me a grin and a waggle of his eyebrows. I'm saying nothing about my night, but I've got to admit I'm pretty damn smug myself. Heather surprised the shit out of me as I always saw her as the perfect little lady, but seems not when she gets horny, which is a plus for me.

Axel walks in and takes his seat, checks everyone is here, then picks up the gavel, tapping it rather than banging it down. Seems someone had too much to drink last night!

"Okay, let's get done and gone. Officers, anything to report?" Axel asks and as this is not the usual way church is run, we all look at him closely. But he's giving nothing away with his demeanor.

TwoCents speaks first. "Financials are good. Nothing to report other than the investment I entered into paid off and I've pulled out the balance. It gained us \$75,000, but I'll not be doing another investment for a while. The market is not stable, so best keep our dollars in the bank where they are safe. Hydraulic lift for the garage. You asked for a price, Pres. You could be looking at ten thousand dollars depending on which way you want to go. Obviously, all lifts are designed to be safe, but I think you'll want to go with a four-post rather than a two. I'd recommend letting Grease have a look online at what suits the business best, but we can have one paid for and installed inside a week."

"Beer and Stitch are due back this week. Beer will be back at the bar this

week, and Mia is taking over as president for a month.” Axel gives a feral grin, looking from one of us to another. “Now, I don’t want you making her life miserable for the sake of it, but I don’t want you holding back on issues either. So be respectful but make her work for the position. Me, I’m gonna be a full-time daddy.” Axel folds his arms over his chest and looks damn happy with himself.

Specs leans forward and looks around BS, who is sitting next to him, to speak to Axel. “Pres, I’ll watch the monitors closely, but I don’t think she’ll do too bad. She’s good at organizing and isn’t an idiot. I’m not sure how church meetings will run, mind you.” The silly grin on his face has most of us chuckling.

Bantering runs around the room, and everyone seems to find this whole thing amusing. I hope nothing dire happens on Mia’s watch because if Axel has to step in, it could cause a problem between them if Mia thinks he doesn’t trust her.

“Anything heard regarding Brackenridge’s family?” Axel looks to see if anyone has information.

“Only conjecture,” Buzz states, “my contacts tell me there are murmurs that the family is involved in the burglaries, but no evidence.”

“No, my contacts on the street are saying the same, Buzz,” Target replies.

Meat storms into church and takes a seat, but he gives everyone in the room a hard glare. Axel leans forward and stares at Meat. “Where have you been?”

Meat shrugs. “Fuckin’ counseling.”

“You could have told me you had a session. It’s not like you to be late for church and I don’t want you making a habit of it, either.” Axel glares, but we can all see it’s not his mean glare.

“Extra session,” Meat grunts, folds his arms over his chest and we all know the conversation is now over. Nothing and nobody will make him say more than he has already.

I wonder if it has anything to do with last night and the woman who seems

to keep evading his clutches. I know it's done for a reason and I know that she's going to give him a reason to hunt his prey. I can't wait for it to all come to a head and they meet finally.

"Any other business?" Axel asks, and I gain his attention.

"Club Whisky, TJs, and Heather's business have all been targeted and broken into. My worry is, is it coincidental that the three businesses related to members of the club were targeted?"

Discussion flew around the room, but not one of the brothers knew of a reason we'd be targeted. I've no idea, but I have a feeling it's related in some way. My eyes fly over to Fist when he asks. "Do you think it's you, Forest? You know now that you're the sheriff. Do you think it's your connections that are being targeted?"

Rubbing my chin in thought, I frown because he could have a point. "We are working on a series of rapes, a murder, and the shit the Brackenridge family is into. I'll have a meeting with my deputies and see what they think."

Hoots and laughter follow the deputies' comment. Of course, they are going to take the piss. They are all heathens after all, but it's all light-hearted fun, so I'm not going to take umbrage.

"I'll keep an extra watch on the business feeds, Forest. I have a contract drawn for Heather's company, too. She wants us to take over the security and background checks, and I don't have a problem with that. I'll install a few more cameras, get them linked to my system, and she'll be covered. I spoke to Alf, and he's okay with what I wanted to do." Specs hands a dozen copies of the contract out and we all get to run our eyes over it. Nothing unusual and a good and fair price. I've no issue with this.

"All in favor of the contract?" Axel asks and with the unanimous 'ayes', it's done.

"I'm claiming Heather." I burst out. Shit, I meant to put it forward but blurted my mouth off without thinking.

"Oh, are you now?" Wings asks, giving me a squint-eyed look.

"Sure am. You got a problem with that?" I snarl because he's not stopping

me from getting my woman.

“She’s my sis now, so you best treat her right or I’ll take you to Nell’s and let the gators have lunch,” Wings snaps, staring me right in the eye.

I don’t give a motherfucking fuck who he thinks he is. He’s not stepping in the way of me claiming Heather. I’d rather leave the club than not have her in my life. Slowly getting to my feet, I maintain eye contact with him and take a step towards him. Krylon, Clay, and Chaos step between us. Axel snarls. “Sit... the... fuck... down,” emphasizing every word. “Wings, it’s not up to you, it’s a club vote as to Heather becoming an Ol’ Lady or not. Me, I think she’d make a fantastic addition to our stable of Ol’ Ladies and I’m goin’ to nominate Heather as Forest’s. Who will second this motion?” Axel is looking smug as he keeps eye contact with Wings.

“I will,” Wings surprises everyone and I give him a chin lift of thanks.

“Show of hands,” Axel demands and grins as one hand after another raises with an ‘aye’.

Slamming the gavel down, Axel laughs. “You got yourself an Ol’ Lady, Forest. Now you just gotta tell her.” My eyes must round with the shock I’ve done this without asking first, and when everyone laughs, stomps their feet, and walk over slapping my back, the reality hits... Fuck, I’ve got to tell her when I get out of here.

“Anything else?” Axel asks and when nobody speaks he declares the meeting closed.

Stepping out of church, I make my way out of the clubhouse, to my hog, and head home. I want to get a look at how far the house has gotten because I want Heather to move in with me as soon as possible.

Parking in the yard, I walk around to the back door and let myself in. Yesterday I only had Fox bring the table and chairs then left, not waiting around for any time to look at progress.

The kitchen is nearly finished and is looking damn good. It’s a replica of Gemmy and Stitch’s place, but the flooring is stone-tiled. I like it and I’m sure Heather will like it too. Rubbing the back of my neck, I can’t help but realize I have this stunning kitchen and not a pot, pan, or plate to put in it. I hope it's

something Heather will be okay to do with me since it's gonna be her kitchen anyway.

I check out the rest of the house and see the bathroom is nearly finished, too. Hammer has had his men work hard, and I'm more than thankful. I wonder if Gemmy would be interested in designing the yard because it's a crock of shit at the moment.

Locking up, I walk across the street, pushing my hog over with me, before parking it at the side of the house. Walking around the back, I step into the kitchen and inhale the sweet smell of something Gemmy is cooking.

"What is that smell?" I can't help but ask, and Ty, who is sitting at the island drinking a beer while watching Gemmy, laughs at my question.

"Peanut butter cookies and Boston cream pie," Gemmy says proudly, and I feel the saliva pool in my mouth at the smell and sight on the cooling rack.

"Damn, I can't wait for some of that." I pop my butt onto a seat quickly and look eagerly at Gemmy, who giggles at me before handing me a plate of cookies.

"I'll have a piece of that pie Gemmy," Ty asks and has a puppy dog look on his face, which has Gemmy shaking her head at his antics.

"Yeah, me too," I quickly add, and push the empty plate away as those cookies didn't last more than a moment.

"I heard from the realtor. My offer was accepted so she's thinking it'll be done quickly as it's the only offer they have had. I'm going to have it cleaned by Heather's company if she can fit it in for me. The place is in good shape, but I want to know it's clean before I buy furniture and shit. Gemmy, do you think you can help me buy some of the shit I'll need for the kitchen?"

"Yes, of course I can. Just let me know when you want to go and I'll be up for it. Spending someone else's money is always a pleasure."

"Stitch is back in a few days. Has he told you yet?" I ask Gemmy.

"They are hoping to be back on Thursday, but could be Friday if they come across any road closures."

“Okay. Do you want to have a go at designing my yard? It’s a damn mess, and I’d like one of those kitchen herb gardens near the back door. I’ll put in some raised beds too if you think a small vegetable garden would be good.” Finishing the last bite of pie, I push the plate away and then continue, “I’ve claimed Heather this morning, but I’ve still to tell her.”

“Oh no, you didn’t do it without asking her first?” Gemmy’s eyes are round like an owl and she’s looking horrified.

“Hey, I’m not that bad of a catch. I have a good job, money in the bank, and my own home. I’m loyal, trustworthy, and honest.”

“I meant nothing bad, Forest, but Heather may not want to settle down.”

“Well, she should have thought of that before she dragged me into the woods to have her wicked way with me. I was taking it slowly, but she wanted this dick of mine and I gave it to her. Now she’s mine and she’ll have to deal with it.” I’m getting my temper up because what the hell is wrong with anyone thinking I’m not good enough?

“Said like a true biker,” Ty states, holding his hand up to high-five, which I happily do before storming out the back door and to Heather’s house.

Parking my hog outside Heather’s house, I walk up to the front door and don’t bother knocking. I test the door and when it opens, I take myself inside and look for Heather.

“Heather, where are you?”

Heather appears from the utility room off the side of the kitchen and next to the back door. “What’s going on?”

“You are now my Ol’ Lady. You stuck my dick in you, which means you claimed me.” I’m feeling pretty smug about the way I’ve turned this around on her. “So, I’m now your Ol’ Man and you are my Ol’ Lady. You need to get your house up for sale and then get moved into *our* place,” which I say with air quotes.

Heather is standing looking at me with her mouth hanging open and shocked. I step forward, kiss her stupid then whistle as I leave her standing in the kitchen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

-- FOREST --

Monday morning and I'm feeling damn fine. Got myself a house, a woman, and a future that I'm more than looking forward to. Sitting behind my desk, I check the latest mail, which is mostly junk, and I throw it haphazardly into the trash.

Hands walks into the office, throws himself into a seat, and runs the palm of his hand down his face before looking up at me. "That woman in the cell is a damn nightmare. She's done nothing since she was arrested but scream and shout. The best place for her is behind bars, somewhere where nobody has to listen to her."

"She'll be going in front of the judge. I've already left him a message because this needs to be done and she needs to be moved away from here."

"We questioned her and all we got was the same thing," he continues, talking now in a high-pitched squeaky voice, trying to emulate Polly I'm sure, "He's mine, no one else can have him. He came to town, and he claimed me... It went on and on. I just walked away and shut the door."

"Do you have it all documented, and the camera feed?"

"Yep, we have it all. Oh, we have all the threats toward you and any woman you may get with, and that includes Heather, whoever she is?"

"She's my woman. I claimed her yesterday in church. My Ol' Lady, and I'm going to marry her, maybe have a kid too. We're both getting older and if we want one we best get busy, but if not, I'm okay either way."

"We need to get Polly in front of the judge promptly because she needs away from you. I think she'll end up in a mental institution 'cause Forest, I'm not sure she's right in the head."

JP walks into the office, catching the end of the conversation. "No, she's not. She just offered to have sex with me to let her go free, and on the fuckin' camera, because I told her it was recording. She didn't care and dropped her

panties. Boss, I was out of that cell faster than you could spit. I'm not going back in for more information. We have enough to prove stalking and threatening behavior. That includes death threats. Oh and of course assault."

Hands leans forward and continues the conversation. "We have five witness statements from the store where she assaulted Heather. Then we followed up on three leads and have statements where she's threatened you and Heather if she doesn't get her way. The woman is touched in the head."

"She'll be gone by the end of the day. I'll make sure of it," I snarl, and pick up my phone, find the judge's number and make the call that will guarantee this mess is done. The least we can do is move her to another jurisdiction to avoid conflict of interest.

Meat walks into the office and heads directly over to the whiteboard. He never speaks or even grunts. I can't help the smirk that crosses my face because he's throwing a real tantrum over the woman getting away from him on Friday night.

Meat grabs the marker and starts writing more information on the board. He has it in date order, and we see that each attack was towards the end of a month, and in the middle of the night. It seems only one had a rape kit done and there is DNA available from that. There's no match in the system, though. All were women home alone. Three were single, one had a husband working away. They don't look like twins but are similar, so it doesn't seem that he is targeting a stereotype.

Gemmy has information on her whiteboard, not very much as yet, but has started the Brackenridge family history. I haven't looked at it, and if I'm being honest, I don't think anyone else has either.

Walking through the deputies' office, I smell lemons. The whole place reeks of damn lemons in the morning, but I suppose it lets us know Bren is here or has been here. Looking around the reception area and kitchen, before walking down to the men's restroom, I take particular notice of the floors and walls. Everything is noticeably cleaner. Bren has done an incredible job and I'm going to speak to Heather about giving her a bonus payment, one that I can give rather than the department. I think I could swing it past the

mayor, but I'm happy to do it myself.

Sober steps beside me as I'm looking at the kitchen. "What you doing?"

"I'm looking at the amount of work Bren has put into cleaning this place. She's worked damn hard, and she's never said a word about the state of the place. Not a single complaint or comment."

"She's efficient, and you know she is the one who brings that great coffee we are drinking. I gave her a wad of cash for that the other day because she shouldn't be doing that for us. I placed a cash box in the kitchen cabinet for her to take out cash to buy more when we need it. She's started bringing milk, sugar, and even cookies now and again, so hey, I've made sure she has the cash to do it."

I look at Sober and nod. "Yeah, agree, maybe we could take it in turns to put cash in the box. That way, it's not all on one person?"

"Could do, but I don't mind doing it. I'd just rather her not do it." Sober gives me a chin lift to follow him, and in the deputies' office he hands me a sheet of paper.

I take the sheet and walk into my office, sit behind my desk and then read it carefully. My eyes flick up to Sober, "You make sure you have all the proof you need. Don't put it on the whiteboard yet. Don't tell anyone yet, just keep me informed. Get what we need and we'll nail the fuckers for what they did to Colin. You hear me, Sober, nail the fuckers to the boards."

Giving me a nod and such a serious look that I know he's going to nail them. It's just getting enough evidence to do it. Turning and walking out of the office, I can't help but notice he's tense and his body language is angry. After reading what I have, I understand why, *and* I understand him wanting and needing to hammer this down.

Gemmy rushes into the office. "Forest, a call just came in. Mrs. Osborne's house was broken into and it's been vandalized. Her neighbor found the door open when he walked around the house as he said he'd monitor it."

"Is Ty back from his appointment with the bank?"

Gemmy shakes her head, "No, but JP and Hands are still here."

I walk out of my office, keys for the cruiser in one hand and my phone in the other. "HANDS, JP, WITH ME, NOW!"

I hear heavy footsteps and look over my shoulder where I see them both running towards me from the kitchen area.

"What's going on?" Hands asks.

"We're going to look at a burglary. One that should never have happened, and one I'll regret because Mrs. Osborne trusted me and this has let her down," I snarl because I feel responsible for this.

"Meat has gone to speak to a witness," Gemmy tells me just before I leave the office, and, giving her a chin lift, I rush to the cruiser with Hands and JP. Now Hands ends up in the back of the cruiser, much to his disgust and JP's amusement.

Walking to the front door of Mrs. Osborne's home, I feel the anger rising when I see the look on the neighbor's face. "I'm sorry I had to call you out, Sheriff."

"No problem, it was needed. Show me what's going on." I follow the man into the house, and he turns to look at me. "I'm Charlie and have been watching the house for years when Olive visits her sister. Never has this happened before. My dog never barked, and he is usually fast to make a racket if anyone is hanging around. I think they knew that she was away and about my dog."

"Okay, Charlie, it's not your fault, so don't lay that on your shoulders." I slap his shoulder and give it a squeeze.

Looking around, the living room is trashed. TV was gone from where it was mounted on the wall, and the sofa had been slashed. The glass cabinet smashed, and the ornaments broken. There is no sense in this at all. Turning to look at Charlie, I ask. "How the hell did they do this and your dog not make a noise? It had to have made a noise smashing all this."

"I think it must have been when I took him for his last walk. I always go around the same route at night. Checking the ladies who live on their own are okay and locked up tight. It takes me over an hour, but I don't rush. I make sure I do what I can. My dog never barked once when we got back or

throughout the night. That's the only time they could have done it." Charlie rubs his forehead, which has deep frown lines.

Walking through to the cozy kitchen, I close my eyes when I see the devastation that has been left behind. "Hands, get Charlie's statement. JP, follow me."

Outside, I direct JP to check one side of the yard and I check the other. We cover the whole yard and around the sides of the house. Glass from the downstairs half bath shows where they broke into the house.

There's very little in the way of tracks, footprints, anything to give us a clue. I direct JP to speak to residents on his side of the house, while I head the opposite way. As expected, no one heard anything. There was a report of an old truck being seen in the area. A pickup that looked like it was old but sounded loud and modern. That might give us a lead. I'll ask around and see if anyone knows of something like that in town. JP and I head back to the office. I'll get JP back here with Ty so they can take some photos and Ty can do his fingerprint stuff. I'm not hopeful, though. This smells of someone toying with us. Us or me? I wonder.

The day drags on, and I can't shift the feeling something is going on because I'm now the Sheriff.

When my phone buzzes I pick it up and see Specs calling. Now that's unusual, so I take the call. "Specs, what can I do for you?"

"You need to go to Bespoke Furnishings. Fox reported the back door had been tampered with. No one got inside, but he wants you to check it out and make it an official investigation. The cameras showed two men, by the size of them anyway, hoodies on, hoods up, trying to get in. They then tried to get into the wood supply, but Herb and Terry were still working, as they had two large orders to be ready to roll out this morning. They heard something and ran the fuckers off."

"Fuck. Okay, I'll make my way over." Finishing the call, I look up and see Ty standing and waiting. "Come on, Ty, we've got shit happening today."

Pulling up outside Bespoke Furnishings, I see Fox already heading our way. There's no greeting today, he just starts ranting straight away. "If they screw

me over and damage any of my furniture, I'll kill 'em. What the fuck do they expect to steal from here? Practically everything weighs a ton. It's not exactly gonna be a hit-and-run, dammit. What's going on around town lately, Forest?"

"Fox, chill out. Let me and Ty have a look around first. I agree that it's unlikely to be a burglary. And if that's correct, then I'd sway to vandalism."

Ty speaks up. "I've got a hunch. I want to take a look around the perimeter. I'll be back soon."

Fox and I watch him take off towards the outer fence. "I'll need a statement, Fox. I know you weren't here, but I'll still need to know what you found when you arrived."

"You'll get more from Herb and Terry than I can tell you. They were working on an order that we needed to get finished pronto."

Heading over to the supply office, I find the guys having a coffee. Grabbing a mug and helping myself to one, I sit with them and listen to their version of events. They can't tell me much other than what was on the CCTV footage. They didn't see faces or anything that could identify who they were. They ran for the fence, though, not the gates. That says that they had come in through the back of the yard and had probably thought the front would be too well covered by cameras.

I'm just finishing my coffee and standing to go back to Fox when Herb says something that has my ears pricking up.

"We would never have caught them even if we'd chased them to the fence. Whatever they had waiting for them was some high-powered motor. It roared off like a V8 at a quarter-mile drag strip. Man, it was loud and proud."

Could be the same vehicle spotted around Mrs. Osborne's neighborhood? "Did you hear it too, Terry?" This could be the start of a very good lead.

"You'd have to be deaf not to have heard it. They sure had the pedal to the metal when they left here." Terry grins at me.

"Gas or diesel, would you say?" I grin back at him to make this seem less of

an interrogation.

“Gas. No way was that a diesel truck, man. And I haven’t looked, but I bet he had some big tires on that thing. You could hear them skidding and throwing stuff in all directions.”

“Thanks, boys. If you think of anything else, let me know. This could be very helpful.” As I’m about three-quarters of the way across the yard to Fox’s office, I hear an almighty bellow. Running the rest of the way, one hand on my holster, I dash into the building. As I burst into his office, I see Fox, nose to nose, with Ty.

“What the hell is going on here?” I get between the pair and push them apart.

Fox looks like he’s going to murder Ty and Ty looks ready for him to bring it on.

“They weren’t here to vandalize the place, Forest. They were going to torch it. I found those by the hole in the fence they cut.” Ty points to two five-gallon gas cans near the office door.

“You guys need to get your fingers out your asses and catch these fuckers before they kill someone. If they’d done this with Terry and Herb here, we could be looking at two murders.” Fox has totally lost his cool and I can understand why.

“Okay, Fox. You need to stand down. We’re doing everything we can to find out who’s doing this. Whoever it is, has just ramped up the stakes. They’ll also know that we know what they had intended for here.”

We get Fox calmed down a touch, and let Terry and Herb know what we’ve discovered. Everyone is going to have to be on their A-game now when it comes to observation and fire watch.

Dropping Ty back at the office, I decide to call it a day. It’s playing with my head now and this could be what they want. It would put me on my back foot and second guessing myself. Looking at the time, I drop Heather a message.

Forest: Hi, Beautiful. Have you eaten yet?

Heather: Hi, good-looking. Not yet. Was just wondering what to have

Forest: Fancy a pizza and a movie night?

Heather: Sounds like a plan. You picking the pizza up? I'm not cooking, lol

Forest: I sure am.

Heather: I'll have a nine-inch meat feast with fries

Forest: I'll see what I can do when we've watched the movie. LMAO

Heather: In that case, it'll only be a six-inch ha ha ha

By the time I arrive at Heather's, she has the lounge all decked out with drinks, snacks, the works. I don't ask what movie she wants to watch. I'm pretty easy-going where movies are concerned. It turns out to be a documentary called 'The Long Way Round'. Two actors, who are best friends, taking a motorcycle trip around the world. Wasn't expecting that, but it's very interesting. The pizza and fries go down a treat. We have ice cream for dessert and I haven't felt so chilled out in a long, long time. Heather is stretched across the sofa with her back against my side. My arm draped over her neck and down her chest. I could stay here forever.

"Do you think we could do something like that? Maybe not around the world, but a road trip, Bill?" I don't answer, and my mind has gone from relaxed to hypersensitive in a flash. Heather feels my body tense sharply, and she jumps from the couch to stare at me.

"What's the matter? Are you ok?" She kneels in front of me and looks into my eyes. "What's wrong? Talk to me."

I get up from the couch and go to the kitchen. Opening the fridge, I grab a bottle of water and empty it in one go. Dropping the empty bottle into the trash can, I take another and empty that, too. My breathing is fast and Heather looks frightened as she watches me.

"Do I need to get a paramedic? What is it?" She's pretty panic-stricken by now, and I need to sort myself out.

"Heather. It's fine. I'm ok. Give me a minute. It's not a health thing, ok?" I start to feel myself calming slowly and I hold out my arms to her. She steps

into me and I hug her tightly. Feeling her arms wrap around me and stroke my back helps me get my composure back.

Looking up at me with her dark eyes, I feel like she's looking into my soul. I could fall into those eyes, and I don't think I'd ever want to find my way out.

"You took me by surprise when you called me Bill, that's all. It's ok. Nothing to worry about." Her eyes tell me she's not buying into that.

"Why would it take you by surprise that I called you by your name? And even if it did, that's not a surprised reaction. What do you need to tell me?" She leads me back to the couch and sits me down. Settling beside me, she looks at me expectantly.

"I've never spoken of this to anyone. You'll be the only other person besides me that knows this. It's going to be difficult for me to tell you, so please, bear with me." I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"From my earliest memories, all I recall is my parents fighting. It was non-stop, day in, day out. Any time of the day or night, shouting and arguing. Father was the loudest. The one thing that I remember of him. My father walked out before my tenth birthday. The silence after he'd left was deafening. I hardly slept the first week he'd gone because of it. It was so alien. Mother told me he used to hit her during their fights. I never saw this, but she said she hid it well and he only hit her where bruises wouldn't show."

Taking more deep breaths, I slowly exhale each one, calming myself. Heather takes my hand in hers. I can almost feel my anxiety flowing away through the contact.

"The first months were hard. There wasn't much money to pay for food and utilities. My father never sent us a dime. He just dumped us and we never heard from him again. There were never birthday cards or gifts. Christmas was the same. After a few months, things went south fast. I guess I grew up a lot in those months and I saw things a ten-year-old shouldn't see. I suddenly had a lot of 'Uncles' popping in and out of my life. They never seemed to stay more than a few days. While they were around, there was a bit more food on the table, nothing to write home about, but it was

welcome.

“As soon as I could work, my mother had me doing stuff. I’d be running around before school doing ‘errands’ for people. Usually delivering parcels or collecting them. Sometimes just envelopes. It was years before I realized what she’d had me doing. After school, it was the same thing. Any job she could find me, I’d do it. I worked at markets, paperboy, you name it, I did it. I never saw a dime from any of it. When there was no work she would get angry and scream and shout at me. I was lazy, no good, a waste of her time. She didn’t know why she kept me around. And when she went into these moods, she’d call me ‘Bill’.”

I stopped for a few more breaths. I could feel my eyes burning. I hadn’t cried over this shit for years, but it still made me angry. Heather held me for a moment, but before she could say anything, I continued.

“She never called me anything when the money was coming in and I was working. I was just a means to an end, nothing, a nobody, a wallet. I hated my father at these times. He was supposed to be the provider, not me. I was about thirteen before I realized she was an alcoholic. I don’t know what sparked the realization. One minute I didn’t know, the next I did. A lightbulb moment, I suppose. As soon as she saw I knew what she was, the physical abuse started. Emotional abuse had been going on for years, but I was too young to recognize it.”

I stood up and walked around the room for a couple of minutes. Sitting back down, Heather looked at me and I could see the tears in her eyes.

“I won’t go into details, but I put up with it until she broke my rib. That was another lightbulb moment. She could kill me in one of her rages. I could end up dead because she couldn’t take care of her child instead of needing the alcohol. A cheap bottle meant more to her than her own child. I was nothing in her eyes if she even saw me most of the time, which I doubt. I allowed no more violence after that. I was eighteen when I found her dead in her bed. Choked on her own vomit.

“It was around this time, of course, that I found out my father was dying of cancer. I had no reason to feel anything for him, but the cousin that told me about it said I should go see him. Things weren’t all they seemed, he said. I

went because I was bitter and I wanted to see him suffering. I was in an awful place and wanted someone else to suffer instead of just me.”

Heather squeezed my hand. “I can understand that. No child should have to go through that.”

“He was in a hospital bed when I saw him. He looked at death's door. He was nothing like I remembered. The big solid man that used to beat my mother was nowhere to be seen. He opened his eyes as I got to the bedside, and he knew me right away. The recognition was there immediately. ‘William,’ he said, ‘you came’.

“He stared at me for a minute and then looked at the woman sitting in a chair at his bedside holding one of his hands. I hadn’t even noticed her. ‘Evelyn, he came’. She looked from him to me and back again. ‘I told you he would. I’ll make sure he knows everything.’ My father said my name again and then was gone.

Evelyn cried while I stood there like a store dummy. I didn’t know whether to cheer or cry; I was dumbstruck. I had absolutely no emotional reaction. Evelyn said we needed to talk and so we went for coffee. It was all so surreal. Here I was going for coffee with a woman who was what to my dead father? We found a quiet diner near to the hospital.

“She gave me an envelope. ‘Read this first. It will explain a lot and then we can talk.’ The letter told of my father's battles, trying to get my mother sober. The years of arguing. The fights over her refusing to go into rehab. How he’d left me behind because she’d threatened to find me if he took me and ‘end me’. He’d been sending money for the first few months, but when he found out she was spending it on alcohol and was demanding more, he stopped. Instead, the money went into a fund for me for later in life. He’d tried to get custody, but she always turned up at court sober and well-dressed.

“Evelyn told me how he’d sent cards and gifts for my birthday and Christmas every year. He thought of me all the time. Wouldn’t have any more children because he’d already failed one and couldn’t go through that again.

“Long story, I know. I only relate the name Bill to a horrible time in my life.

Throughout my life, I've always discouraged the use of that name. I'm Forest to everyone. Always have been, and always will be. If you want to call me anything else, in private, I can be William."

"I think William should be special to your father. I can live with you being Forest." Heather says before kissing me tenderly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

-- MIA --

Getting out of bed this morning, I quickly throw on jeans, a T-shirt, and my property kutte. Yeah, I'm going to be the big bad president for a while. I look at myself in the mirror and scowl. I need to get my game face right. Scowl, smirk, chin lift, grunt...yeah, I've got it down.

Axel is already with the twins, and I grin because he doesn't know what's going to hit him. Having the three stooges following him around and criticizing what he does with the boys is going to be more than a little amusing.

He's had to get out of bed twice during the night and I turned over, grunted as he usually does, and go back to sleep. I've gotta admit I was damn smiling broadly when I fell asleep too.

Yesterday I spent listening to Axel telling me all I had to do and how to do it. I ended up sitting in front of his desk with not a thing registering. It just went on far too long for me to maintain any concentration on what I felt was unnecessary instruction. I think he got the hint when I yawned loudly, then dropped my head to my chest when I fell asleep!

Walking into the kitchen I grab myself a coffee and walk through to the office, grinning as I pass the playroom and hear Amelia telling Axel to stop whatever he's doing because he's making a hash of it.

I feel kinda sorry for him because, although he's good with the boys, he really does not know what my day involves when I'm looking after them. I do our washing and clean our suite too, not wanting to put extra work on Heather and Lina. That was a shock when he knew he had all that to do, as well as watch and amuse the boys.

Taking the seat behind the desk, I grin to myself because hey, I'm the big chief for a while and I'm gonna make sure everyone knows I'm not a pushover. I read the paperwork on the desk, and nothing seems to be urgent. Reports on neighboring MCs which we are not having any issues

with, but seems Axel has contacts that spy on them, anyway. I can understand why he does that. Better to be forewarned of any impending trouble. I grin at the amount he spends on the street spies and it's nothing, considering the amount of information they bring to him.

Knocking on the door has me looking up and giving a firm, 'Come in'. Drag walks in the door and gives me a wary look. I give him a chin lift, which has his eyes widening in shock, but I look down so he can't see the amused look on my face. "Call all the officers," I say while looking at the paper in my hand, and when Drag walks out of the office, I allow the smirk to form, but it's gone when all the officers walk in and take a seat, or a position around the office.

"Good morning," I begin, and they all give me a verbal reply, grunt, or nod. "We are going to be working together for a while and I expect as the acting president to have your full cooperation. I will, in turn, listen to the advice you give me. I'm not saying I will use that advice, but I will certainly heed it.

"Thankfully, this is a time of peace for the club, and I hope it remains that way during my reign. Now, I want to visit all the businesses, just a check-in, nothing to bother anyone. Wings, Buzz, you'll come with me. Drag, as VP, you will stay here and watch the clubhouse, but I want you to dig into what is happening with the burglaries because something tells me it's to do with Forest, and Forest is a brother. We have his back, even if he doesn't like it."

Buzz and Wings nod agreement, as they know as enforcers they need to have my back the same as they have Axel's. Drag doesn't look happy at being left at the clubhouse, but he seems to perk up when I mention digging into the burglaries. Hmm, maybe Axel didn't want to step on Forest's toes? Oh well, that's okay, he's not president for the time being now is he?

"I'll do that and report this evening," Drag states and gives me a nod of respect.

"Do any of you have anything that needs my attention before I leave the compound?" I ask, looking at Specs, TwoCents, and PT, before turning to look at BS. "BS, you need to give me a full report by the end of the week on every prospect. I want to know how they are personally, as well as the businesses they are running. Colton, of course, is a bouncer, so I see him

regularly, but I want him to get his patch and his club name. I think they have all earned that, and do we really need prospects anymore?"

BS is giving me a piercing look but I maintain the eye contact. Being in prison teaches you fast to not show weakness and one of those weaknesses is dropping your eye contact before the other person. BS smirks, then gives me a head nod and grunt. I grunt back at him which has him chuckling.

TwoCents speaks. "Financials are good. We have no worries and nothing is outstanding. All businesses are running a profit, and I've upped the allotted amount Liam can use for staff salaries."

I look from TwoCents to PT, who quickly reports, "I have nothing outstanding and have been assisting around the club, particularly the garden, since Meat is acting as deputy for the time being."

"Can you keep up-to-date with the paperwork while doing that?"

"Yes, I usually help wherever is needed when I'm on top of my own work. Thankfully, the paperwork is easy enough now that the businesses are established. I make sure we are on the ball with licenses and if one is due, I pass it to TwoCents who takes it from that point."

"Specs?" I ask, turning to look at him as he's tapping on his laptop keyboard.

"Things are good. The cameras are all active and working correctly. I've been checking them continually since we've started having issues with burglaries. I have the contract for Heather's company completed, signed and sealed. I've the background checks she wanted me to do finished and I'll hand her the information after this meeting. Otherwise, nothing to report at this time," Specs tells me all this without lifting his eyes from the laptop, but I don't take offense, as I know he's not being disrespectful to me.

"Stitch and Beer will be back later in the week, so they can catch up before church on Sunday," I add. "Dismissed and I'll let you know when I'm ready to leave." Looking at Wings and Buzz, I give them a head nod to get out of the office. I note the shocked looks on their faces too and can't stop the thought that this is going to be good fun.

Picking up my phone, I send a text message while having the largest smile on my face. I'm happy no one is in the office to see the look of delight on my

face, but I can't wait to see the horror and shock on theirs.

Mia: Is it ready? I'm waiting.

HD: Yeah, be there in 30

Mia: Great

HD: Thanks for the business

Rubbing my hands together, I stand from the desk and compose myself once more into the president persona. Take no shit, take no prisoners is going to be my motto.

Taking my cup back to the kitchen, I give a quick look at Heather and Lina, who are talking in the common room. Once rinsing my cup, I head over to Heather and smile. "Were you happy with the contract and the information Specs gave you?"

"Yes, thanks, Mia. I'm pleased we have no problems with the newest staff. Did you know I made Alf a co-owner with the business?"

"No, but I can understand why you would want that. He's a good person from what you've said about him, and you trust him. That is a huge thing in a friendship and in a business partner."

Lina is a quiet woman, but I like her tremendously. We've had a few good laughs together since she's worked here, and she's a good accomplice when I've needed hiding or someone being diverted. "Are you excited to be president for a while?" Lina asks.

"I wasn't because it's supposed to be a punishment, but I'm going to give it my best shot and try not to let the club down." I look over my shoulder when I hear my name called and see Sentry smirking at me.

"You've a delivery, Mia," Sentry says. His eyes quickly look around the common room to see who is still in here. I know what he's thinking, but I don't care.

"Gotta go, ladies. I've a trike to ride," I mumble as I walk away from Heather and Lina, who are gaping at my comment.

Walking out of the front door of the clubhouse, I can't stop the huge smile

that crosses my face. The man who I'd purchased the trike from walks over and hands me everything I need, and pats my shoulder. "Good luck, girlie, you may need it." Before I can respond he jumps into the truck which has the trailer, now empty on the back, and exits the compound.

Sentry grins and then laughs. "You are so going to get into trouble."

"Nope, I'm the president and need a bike. This is a Harley-Davidson FLHTCU Electraglide Ultra Trike. It has had two owners, and although it's a 2006 model, it's been stripped down to nothing and rebuilt. Painted in black, and as you can see, I've had the club logo painted on the tank." I pat the seat and grin. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Do not let anyone touch my trike."

Sentry laughs but gives me a nod before placing his hand over his heart. "I won't let anyone touch it."

Now, I've had this all sorted out so I can ride it out of here without getting into any trouble with the law, but as the law is Forest, I'm sure I could have got away with something if need be, and that may come, as I've only a little experience in being in the driver's seat. One of the reasons I got a trike is so I don't fall off and make myself look ridiculous.

Running upstairs, I change my jeans to leather pants, and my flats to biker boots. I add a leather jacket and my kutte, which has me feeling stiff in movement but until I'm confident, I'll not ride without the leather protection. I grab my helmet and run downstairs, through the common room, and to the trike.

It takes moments to put my helmet on and get the trike fired up. I'm trying to remember all that Axel taught me, but I'm too excited, so take a moment to calm myself.

Having the clutch at my hand instead of a foot feels weird, but after a few stalls, I'm feeling where the bite of the clutch is and my attempts at pulling away are getting better. The gears on my foot aren't as difficult to adjust to as I thought they'd be. Braking is still a bit of a hit-and-miss, and I'm glad I'm not trying this on a hog like Axel's. Every time the trike shoots forward or screams to a halt with skidding tires, Sentry looks like he's losing another year of his life.

Sentry is puffing and panting as he runs around the compound following me, shouting instructions, then diving out of my way when I make a decent turn which he'd not seen coming.

As my confidence boosts, I get more vocal. I squeal louder and louder as I get the feel of the trike. I start to do double figure eights in front of the clubhouse, each circuit a little faster and the engine revs a little louder.

I see Buzz and Wings watching me with their jaws hanging open. Wings gets his wits about him first and starts to shout, "Go, Mia!"

Not sure if it's Wings shouting or the noise that the trike is making, but suddenly there are officers and brothers everywhere. Some are just staring, others are like Wings, cheering like madmen.

I see Axel standing at the clubhouse doors with a huge smirk on his face and he looks as proud as can be as he watches me throwing the trike around.

Feeling about as good as I'm going to get on my first ride, I head for the gates. Tapping my helmet, I ask Specs to open the gates. As I start to pull out of the compound, I hear the roar of a couple of bike engines firing up. By the time I'm out of the gate and on the road, I see two bikes in my mirrors flanking me. Over my headset, I hear Wings saying that he will pull to the front, so I'm sandwiched between him and Buzz. I speed up a touch and tell him in no uncertain terms that on this, my first ride, I'm out in front. They can go into protective mode. That's not a problem, but I'm leading on this ride.

Truth be told, I don't want anyone in front of me in case I don't stop in time. That will not go down well and is something I'd never live down.

The next four hours are spent visiting all the businesses. Checking in is all I'm doing. I'm not too happy when I get looks that make me think the brothers are not taking me seriously, but I note Buzz gives them a look and they all pull into respect mode. I know they all love and respect me as their First Lady, but as President, it's a different matter. I'll need to slap some down with my new attitude, I'm thinking.

When we arrive at Hot Hogs & Cages, Rock and Clay walk outside to look at my trike. I give them an eyebrow raise and fold my arms over my chest.

Sadly, that isn't the same as when Axel does it, but then he doesn't have a pair of tits in the way either.

"Don't say a word about my trike, you hear me. I've paid good dollars for this and it's been taken apart and rebuilt, resprayed and has the club logo on the tank," I snarl, making sure I give them a squinty-eyed look.

"It's a good one, Mia. I like it. The respray has been done well too. I'm all for the Ol' Ladies having a hog, but you need to buy through the business and have the spray done here, too," Clay growls, and I had an idea I'd annoy them here with my buying outside of the club, but hey, it's my choice. This came up for sale, and I grabbed it and I'm happy I did. I'm not, however, going to tell anyone that Austin found it for me on his website.

Heading to Club Whisky next, I enjoy the freedom of the trike, and it's stable, which gives me confidence. I'm not parting with this for anyone and I'm going to get the ladies to get one, too.

Walking into Club Whisky with Buzz and Wings behind me gives me a lot of confidence. Even when I'm not acting as president and they accompany me I always feel safe with them. No matter which club brother it is, I trust them fully to keep me safe.

Gaz, the bartender, gives me a smile and a questioning look. "I'll have a coffee and a basket of wings and fries, please." I quickly take a seat at the bar and lean on the bar top. Looking over my shoulder, I smile at Wings who is ordering enough food for three men.

Eden walks out of the kitchen and gives me a watery smile. Now that is unusual because it takes a lot to upset Eden. "Are you okay?" I ask with more than a little concern in my voice.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm just overloaded and not knowing everything I'm worried I'll let Silver and the club down." Eden rubs her cheeks, then gives Wings and Buzz a weak smile.

"Look Eden, all we can do is our best, and if everything isn't good enough they can kiss our ass. Now, come sit with me 'cause I want to talk to you about something." I walk away from Buzz and Wings and get a concerned look from them, but I give a grunt which has Wings jump, then chuckle.

Once seated, I feel the excitement growing. “I got myself a hog, a trike, in fact. It’s fan-tas-tic, and you gotta get one. We’ll show these fuckers we can do whatever they can. Wind in our hair, on the open road, finger to the assholes we pass.”

Eden is blinking fast and looking at me like I’ve lost my mind. But I take out my phone and find the photographs of my trike. “See, that’s my girl. She’s outside and I love her.”

“Christ, Mia. I’m not getting a freaking trike or a bike. I enjoy being behind Silver. Hanging onto my man is my ultimate dream. You take your trike and I’ll take the man.” Eden still gives me a look of horror, but I’m not going to deflate on this.

“Okay, I’ll speak to the others. But, if necessary, I’ll go on my own and fuck you all.” I get up and walk back to the bar, take my seat and thank Gaz when he passes me my basket meal.

Back at the clubhouse, I hear arguing in the playroom, but I quickly get past the door and to the office. I can safely say everything is good regarding the businesses and I’m going to catch up with Meat sometime this week. Then I’ll make my way around all the ladies, or call a ladies’ church. Now that’s a decent idea.

Axel rushes into the office and looks red in the face and fairly frazzled. Not a look I’m used to and it has me sitting up straighter, wondering what’s going on.

“Mia, I need you to come sort out Carter.”

“Why do I need to sort out Carter?”

“Well, Amelia and the other two...” said while rolling his eyes, “won’t help me with him.”

“Axel, why do you need help with Carter?”

Sighing and looking embarrassed, Axel quickly bursts out. “He’s shit his diaper, and it’s coming out the top and the legs. I can’t do it Mia, it stinks, and it’s turned my stomach. I can gut a man, but shit is something else. Even when you torture a man and he shits himself it’s fairly solid, but this is like

water. It's running down his legs, Mia."

I blink as I look at my man. He's a big, tattooed biker, who has been in the service, seen horrendous things, and done some things he'd rather forget too. But he's standing here telling me he can't change a really messy diaper!

I can't help the laugh that bursts out of my mouth. I throw my head back, hit my thigh with my hand, and laugh harder than I have in one heck of a long time. It's the belly laugh of the century and the look of disgust on Axel's face has me bursting out once more. I look at him once I get myself under control and calmly say the one thing he doesn't want me to say. "No."

"Mia..."

"No. You've had me on punishment duty, doing some nasty jobs. Worn me out, and not seeing my boys as much as any mother should, and I'm still paying for the mistake of being impulsive. Well now, my man, it's your turn, and you can change Carter's diaper. If I find out anyone else has done it for you, then you'll be on punishment duty. Drag, follow your resting president and make sure he does the job himself, unless, of course, you want to be punished alongside him?"

Next order of business has me contacting the ladies, and I get a yes from Carrie, Raven, Winter, Gemmy, and Kya. The others are thinking about it. But even so, I have some positive results.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

-:- EDEN-:-

Walking into Club Whisky, I take a deep breath and calm my racing heart. This whole punishment has been a nightmare. Working in the kitchen at TJs was more tiring than I thought, but I did it while Mia did all the admin. Between us we kept the place running well, but how Meat does it on top of all his kitchen and gardening chores, I do not know.

Stepping into the office, I sit behind the desk and smile when I see a note from Silver.

Morning Sweetheart,

I've left a pile of paperwork that you need to address first. Then you need to check with Tony if the kitchen and staff are good for the week. Oh, check with Sherman behind the bar to see that they are organized for the week. But you need to check the door staff since Knuckles and Mav are still working at TJs until Beer gets back from the road trip.

You can do this Eden [heart emoji]

Love you and see you at home later.

S x

Picking up the pile of paperwork, I see the first item on the list is placing the kitchen order. Taking a deep breath, I make the call, and what will be a busy day starts.

Rushing to the toilet mid-morning, I throw up, emptying the small amount of breakfast that I had eaten. *'Come on, give me a break.'* I think to myself as I wash my hands and face. I wonder what I've eaten last night to upset my stomach!

Walking into the kitchen, I take a bottle of water from the fridge and pour it into a tall glass. Cookie walks over to me and gives me a concerned look. "Are you okay, Eden? You look flushed."

“Yeah, I’m okay. I think I ate something bad. My stomach is unsettled, and I just emptied it of my breakfast.” It was the nicest way I could think of without saying I just vomited my guts into the toilet, which is exactly what it feels like.

“Let me get you a piece of toast and a cup of tea. Go to the office and I’ll bring it to you in a few minutes.” Cookie gives me a small push towards the kitchen door.

“Thanks, Cookie. I’m going to finish the orders. Tony, do you need me to add anything to the order before I call it in?”

Tony is giving me a hard look, not in a nasty way, but as though he’s looking for something. I lift an eyebrow at him and he shakes himself out of whatever he was thinking and shakes his head. “No, I made sure I gave the order to Silver.”

“Okay.” I walk out of the kitchen thinking maybe the staff don’t trust me to do the job well, but I’ll give it my best as I always do. Life hasn’t always been easy, and I know when to dig in and get things done.

Sherman steps towards me as I head for the office. “Morning, Eden, are you okay?”

“I think I’ve picked up a stomach bug, so don’t get close. I don’t want to give it to you.”

“Oh, that’s not good. If you need anything, let me know.”

“Thanks, Sher,” I respond and use the nickname I gave him months ago.

Sitting behind the desk, I pick up the kitchen order and make the call, place the order on my ‘done’ pile of paperwork, then pick up the next, which is an invoice needing to be paid. I’m not sure how this is done, so I pick up my phone and text TwoCents.

Eden: How do I make a payment for the club?

TwoCents: What payment?

Eden: It’s for the bar area, beer, wine, etc

TwoCents: Give me the reference number on the top right

Eden: RP0246852

TwoCents: I'll pay it, so don't fret

Eden: Thank you

I can't help wondering if Silver pays that way or if he does it himself, but if I'm honest, I don't give a damn as long as it's paid.

Cookie walks into the office with a plate in one hand and a cup in the other. "Here, eat and drink, Eden. You look terribly pale. Do you think you should see a doctor?"

"Stitch isn't back for a couple more days. But if I don't feel better when he gets home, I'll speak to him. He is our medic and he'll sort me out."

"Okay, I'll come back for the plate and cup in a while. Take it easy. Don't push yourself when you are not feeling well." Cookie gives me a small smile as she leaves the office.

I nibble the toast and sip the tea as I work and feel much better by the time I have them both finished. Maybe it was a bug, but I didn't get it fully?

The day flies past, and it's four in the afternoon before I take a break. Stepping out of the office, I walk into the bar area of the club and look around. Customers are lounging around, talking, eating and drinking. The atmosphere in the club, I have to say, is always good. I've never known it to be tense, or frightening. Some clubs have an aura as you walk in where you feel you have to be alert, but I've never felt that here at Club Whisky, and that's thanks to the brothers of the club.

Colton walks in the front door, sees me, and gives me a huge smile as he walks over to the bar where I'm now standing. "Hi, Eden, reporting for duty," giving me a wink.

"You're early?" I ask.

"Of course I am early. I'm going to have a basket meal and one of Cookie's desserts before I start my stint on the door." Throwing his arm around my shoulders, Colton pulls me along with him, chuckling to himself, as I have no option but to go with him.

Entering the kitchen, Travis and Lexi, two of the kitchen staff, look up and give a smile to Colton. "I see you are here to fill your belly before you start work," Lexi laughs.

"Sure am. Now, has my boss here eaten today?" That surprises me, and I look up at Colton, who has a grin on his face, and winks at me as he looks over at Tony for a reply.

"No, I don't think Eden has eaten since Cookie gave her toast this morning," Tony replies, looking at me with a frown. "How many times have I told you to stop and eat something?"

I can feel the blush rising in my cheeks, because Tony is always telling me to eat and I'm sure he thinks I'm anorexic or something, but I'm not. I just forget to eat when I'm busy. "I was busy in the office. But I'll eat now and you," pointing at Colton, "can come and eat at the bar with me."

Tony takes our order and gives me a mean look. I know it's frustration because he's always telling me to eat. "From now on you eat what we bring you."

That shocks me, as Tony is not a person you upset, although he is not usually in other people's business. "I'll eat when I'm ready, Tony."

"You'll damn well eat when you should. I bet you were ill earlier because you'd not had anything for hours and then binged on some shit."

Oh no, he did not just say that to me! "What the fuck, Tony. I had cereal this morning before I came to work, and I had it with Silver at the kitchen table, like we do every morning."

"Well, I'm going to speak to Silver about your eating habits," Tony snaps.

"I'm not fucking six and I'll eat what I want and when I want," I snarl as I'm getting my temper up now.

Colton, however, throws his arm around me once more and pulls me out of the kitchen. "Come on, let's take a seat at the bar and wait for our meal. Chill out, Eden, no need to get touchy. You need to eat the same as the rest of us, and I know you get busy and forget, but you can't afford to do that. None of us can."

I know Colton takes good care of what he eats and when, mainly because of his fitness program. He's still underground fighting, which I'm not sure Axel knows about, but Knuckles and Mav do. Me, I'm minding my own business where that is concerned because if shit hits the fan, I don't want to be in the firing range of it.

Fifteen minutes later, Tony places a basket meal of fries and chicken wings in front of me, with warm crusty bread and butter on the side. He doesn't usually serve with bread and butter, so I know he's done that especially for me. I look up and can't help my eyes watering at the kindness of it. "Thank you, that smells lovely."

Leaning forward, Tony kisses the top of my head, winks at Colton, then says gruffly, "Eat it all."

I watch as he stomps back into the kitchen, and Colton chuckles. "He is such an asshole, tries to make out that he doesn't care, yet look at what he does. Goes the extra mile to make sure you eat and add a little extra, too."

A group of men step up to the bar and order drinks from Connie, who is working alongside Sherman this evening. She must have just arrived as I haven't seen her before now. Looking up at the clock above the bar, I sigh. It's gotten later than I realized, as it's five thirty already.

Taking my phone out of my back pocket, I send a message to Silver.

Eden: Sorry I'm going to be late. But I'm eating now.

Silver: OK, I'll run over to the clubhouse and eat.

Eden: I'll message you when I head for home.

Silver: Do you want me to pick you up?

Eden: No, I'll be ok.

Silver: See you later, sweetheart.

Colton and I eat quietly, and I'm listening to the music playing when I pick up on a conversation.

Voice 1—'Did you hear about that woman getting accosted?'

Voice 2—*'Yeah, and I heard it was probably Bobby-James'*

Voice 1—*'You're fuckin' kidding?'*

Voice 2—*'No, but if it is, the rapes are gonna start up again,'*

I elbow Colton, who turns his head slightly and gives me a small nod. Taking out his phone, he steps to the other side of the bar and tells me to smile. Moving the camera past me, he takes a photograph of the men behind me who were having the discussion.

Taking his seat once more, I see him sending a message to Forest, with the two photographs he's just taken. We both sit with our ears straining to hear any more information that we can give Forest.

Twenty minutes later, Colton leans into me and gives me a light push with his shoulder. "Leave this with me, Eden. Go home."

"Okay, I'm tired anyway." Standing from the bar stool, my head spins and everything goes black...

"Eden, come on, wake up..."

"How long before Silver gets here?"

I'm listening to these voices and wondering what is going on when I hear a bellow. "EDEN!"

Slowly opening my eyes, I see I'm lying on the sofa in the office. Colton, Cookie and Tony are all standing looking at me nervously.

Silver storms into the office and throws himself onto his knees while grabbing my hand. "What's going on? What happened? Are you okay? Do you need the hospital?"

"Wow, slow down Silver. Give her a chance to answer you," Colton says, but keeps his distance from a very agitated Silver.

Sitting up steadily, I feel okay, but I explain about not feeling well earlier in the day and vomiting. I explain I've eaten with Colton and I'd eaten it all, which gets a nod and a tick of a smile from Tony.

"So, what's making you feel ill and pass out?" Silver asks.

"I don't know," I reply with a frown because I don't understand why I'm having such a bad day. I never have illness issues and have always been very healthy, so I'm stumped with what's going on.

First day as the boss of the club and I end up being ill. How inadequate can you get?

"No, don't be saying that," Cookie says, and that's when I realize I said that out loud. "Anyone can be ill, Eden. You can't think you are not doing a good job when you are not feeling well. You have worked hard all day, and didn't stop to eat when you should have, so don't blame yourself for this."

"Do you need the hospital?" Silver asks and I shake my head that I don't. "Okay, let's go home. Colton, get my hog to the clubhouse and I'll drive Eden home."

"No problem, I'll arrange something. Do you want me to tell Sherman to take charge of the place tonight?" Colton asks Silver and at his nod, I'm carried out of the club.

Two Days Later

I'm standing in the bathroom holding a pregnancy test in my hand and the two lines tell me I'm pregnant. I take the steps back until I sit on the side of the bath, and let the shock roll over me. Pregnant! We never planned this. How the hell did this happen? Well, I know how it happened, I'm thinking, but how did it happen as I'm on the birth control injection?

"Eden, where are you, sweetheart?" I hear Silver ask, and I'm so shocked I don't move from where I am.

Silver steps into the bathroom, takes in my shocked look, and the test in my hand. Gently taking the test out of my hand and reading the result which clearly says 'PREGNANT' I wait for him to shout and scream about how I should have been more careful. Instead, a huge smile lights up Silver's face and he grabs me up and hugs me hard, rocking me from side to side and laughing into my hair.

I lean back and study Silver's face. "You're not mad at me?"

"Why the fuck would I be mad? We are cooking a mini-me, or should I say

mini-us. It's fucking amazing. I can't wait to tell everyone. Oh, we need to get the spare room made into a nursery." Silver puts me down and rushes away, talking to himself as he walks away about needing a crib, stroller, and lots of shit.

I retake my seat on the side of the bath in shock, but a smile starts on one corner of my mouth and spreads before I can stop it. "Silver, we need to talk to Mia about an OB/GYN!"

"If you need one, I'll get you one." A moment later Silver asks. "What's an OB/GYN?" Now, that has me throwing my head back and laughing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

-- FOREST --

Friday morning soon comes around. I've called all my deputies and arranged a meeting for this morning. They must think I'm 'meeting mad' but with so much crap left over from our previous sheriff, I can't see how else we can close some of these cases down. Holding individual meetings will take me a full day, and have them hanging around.

I head in to make coffee and see there's already a fresh pot made. Someone is on point with the coffee, I think to myself. As I go back to my office, I pass Zack in reception. "Hi, Zack. You're on the ball with the coffee this morning."

Smirking up at me, he says, "I spoke to you when I came in but you totally blanked me. You were definitely in a world of your own."

"Sorry. I wouldn't ignore you on purpose. These cases that we're all working on, they're getting inside my head. Some days I'm not sure who's done what to who, or when. I remember working FBI cases that were like this. At least this time I have deputies covering a case. It was a bitch when I was doing it on my own and trying to keep the details in the right case files." I shake my head, remembering the times when I'd be juggling several cases at once.

"No problem, Sheriff. I understand. When I was doing my college stuff, I was the same. Didn't know what day it was, whether it was four am or four pm. I can relate to it. Enjoy your coffee while you can. It will be chaotic once you're all in the office together."

Sitting back in my chair and cradling my coffee, I think about what's to come. We need to start seeing some light at the end of the tunnel with these cases. Mrs. Osborne's house keeps coming back to haunt me, too.

Unsurprisingly, Meat is the first to arrive. Early as usual, he gives me a chin lift and heads for the kitchen. Moments later he's throwing himself into a chair in my office with a coffee.

Hands and JP walk in together and seeing Meat and myself with coffee, they

too detour to the kitchen.

Ty bustles into my office with his arms full of bags and boxes. Dumping them on the desk, he grunts, "Help yourselves, breakfast has arrived."

Meat grabs a couple of cinnamon rolls; I take a couple of wraps and Ty looks as though he's already eaten. Hands and JP come in with their coffees and pick up a bag each, not even looking to see what's in them.

Washing down my first wrap with a mouthful of coffee, I open the meeting.

"Meat, you first. Cover what we have so far." Giving me a filthy look, because he's going to have to talk, he runs through his case file.

"Four attacks, all women. All home alone. Someone has done their homework. Unfortunately, the attacker was better at that than the previous sheriff's department. Every case has basic, yet vital, evidence missing or lost. Rape kits, statements, no forensics done at the scene. They're a clusterfuck. Some statements don't even have descriptions of the attacker, although each of the women told me they gave a description at the time. One statement has been doctored to infer the victim was aroused by the fact they had a burglar in the house." Meat looks angrier than I think I've ever seen him, and I've seen him pissed at times.

"I have something for you on this Meat. Colton overheard two guys talking, and they mentioned a name of the possible attacker. 'Bobby-James'." Meat grunts at me and frowns. "No last name, just 'Bobby-James'. However, he did get a picture of the two talking. I'll run it through the system and see if we get any hits. If not, we'll get Target's street contacts on the case. I bet they come through. They always seem to for Target."

Handing copies of the picture around the room, everyone takes a good look. Meat shakes his head, and Ty gives a shake too. Hands looks at it from different angles as if that's going to make a difference, but ultimately I get another shake.

JP looks very thoughtful. "I can't put my finger on it, but something is nagging at me. It'll come to me but at this minute, no. I don't know either of them."

"Right, Sober. You're next. What have you got?"

“As you all know, this case is personal to me. It’s clear from the start, that nothing has been done to solve this case. Colin's body was discovered at the side of the river. Cause of death was recorded as drowning once we found the autopsy report. What we didn’t know was that he had help. He didn’t drown alone. The autopsy shows that he had been badly beaten. Someone then strangled him to unconsciousness and then held him under until he drowned.” Sober pauses and we can all see him struggling with his anger. “We believe Colin witnessed somebody doing something, and he was investigating it, alone. The ‘somebody’ knew this and silenced him for good, trying to make it look like an accident. Colin’s family grew up on the beach. He could swim before he could walk. It would have been virtually impossible for him to drown. Everyone who knew Colin knew his death was suspicious because of this fact. During his investigation, he slept with a woman at a cheap motel. Again, that wasn’t something Colin ever did. He loved his wife, my cousin, like she’d hung the moon. They were inseparable. He gave up his old life in an instant to live here with her. She never asked him to, he just did it. He slept with this woman to get information. Whether she sold him out, or maybe she was more involved than Colin realized, he was dead soon after.”

Taking another pause to compose himself, Sober looks at me and gives a brief nod. I reach into my desk drawer and take out an envelope. Looking around the room, I glance at all the deputies. “We have some forensic evidence from Colin’s body that no one yet knows about. We want it kept that way. We know that Colin was beaten and murdered by two people, not one. This envelope contains a DNA report from Colin’s autopsy that has those details. As yet, we haven’t matched it to any suspects. When we do, we drop all other cases and make sure that we have a watertight case, so these two, whoever they turn out to be, get the maximum sentence available to us.

“We have this evidence only because we have done what the previous sheriff should’ve done. We’ve *‘INVESTIGATED’* the case. By investigating these other cases, I’m convinced we’ll get the evidence to bring them to a satisfactory close, too.

“I need another coffee before we carry on. Let’s take five minutes to get

refills.”

We file out to the kitchen where we find a thermos jug full of fresh coffee, and the coffee machine full, too. There’s a plate of cookies and a plate of sandwiches on the table covered with those mesh umbrella things that you get at picnics.

Gemmy pops her head in the door. “Thought you guys might get hungry and thirsty, so I brought you some nibbles and topped off the drinks, too.” She grins, gives us a cheeky wink, and ducks out the door. I am in awe of the team we have right now. Everyone has everyone else's back as a given.

It doesn’t take long to demolish the sandwiches and cookies. Once everyone has a refill, we take our coffees back into the office. We all get seated, and I notice an empty one. Meat has vanished. Seeing a note on my desk in his handwriting, I give it a quick look.

‘Appointment, Pres’ order. Catch up later.’ As much as I’m pissed, I have a feeling I know what this ‘appointment’ is, and I’m also not going to come between a brother and his Pres.

“Right, Hands and JP. What you got for us?”

JP is the first to respond. “Not a great deal to go on at the minute, I’m afraid. No real identification of the perp. Vague and sketchy descriptions. We think the pickup may be involved in casing the neighborhood, but again, only a vague description. Whoever is doing it knows we’re watching. They also know that the neighbors are watching out for each other, too. They know what households have dogs and which neighbors to avoid. We don’t think it’s a professional burglar, or they’d be targeting high-value goods. We do think they’ve progressed from ‘value’ burglaries to vandalism as well as value.”

Hands speaks up and takes over their report. “Prior to Mrs. Osborne’s place being hit, most of the victims had goods taken and minor damage. It was a grab-and-go scenario. The only one that had received damage was a home with a dog in it. A while back, the dog disturbed the guy trying to break in next door. Couple of days later that home got partly trashed while they were out. We think it was payback. We’re patrolling, but we’ve been discussing

having one of us step out of the car and hold ‘clandestine’ patrolling in back gardens and such. Not sure how legal that would be, though, if we caught them.”

“Do it. I want them caught. I don’t care right now about the legalities of it. I want them off the street, literally. We can fight any do-gooders that start spouting about ‘somebody just taking a walk at two am in someone’s back garden miles from their own home’. Let’s argue and see how they feel about someone prowling their garden at that time of night.”

“Not much else at the moment, I’m afraid, though it’s not through lack of trying.” Both JP and Hands look a bit deflated.

“Don’t be so hard on yourselves. Just keep doing what you’re doing, and I like the idea of the ‘clandestine’ patrols.”

“So, Ty, where are you with the sheriff’s family and these tickets that were never issued, never followed up, shoved under the fucking carpet?” My temper starts to get the better of me, so I take a slurp of my coffee, only to find my mug empty. Stomping to the kitchen, I grab the thermos to see what’s left and, to my surprise, it’s been refilled. I see Zack grin and I grin back.

“You pushing for a bonus, young Zack?” and I raise an eyebrow as I walk past.

Mugs are rapidly topped off and we wait for Ty.

“I think I’m in about the same place as Hands and JP. The home invasions are probably going nowhere. The women are no longer in town. There’s only names and addresses in the files. There’s no details of dates, times, or fuck all. They’re almost as bare as Colin’s file. Some of the traffic tickets are so old we’d never make them stick. Others are so vague that you’d have difficulty getting a judge to act on them. I haven’t identified the relationship, if any, to the sheriff, although they all stink of his shit. I’m going to start ‘actively’ policing some of their traffic violations. One of them has speeding tickets for the same road, so I think I’ll start there and see what reaction I get. They can always complain to my boss!”

We all have a laugh at that and as I open the door for them to file out, I say,

“At some point, they’ll make a mistake. We will get them. Let’s not forget we’re dealing with someone else’s shit. This should never have got this far if the previous sheriff and deputies had done anything about them. You’re doing good, so don’t focus on the negatives.”

A deep voice rolls from reception and calmly states, “That’s a bit unfair, Sheriff, when you never worked with them. Sounds a bit like one of Sheriff Brackenridge’s incident reports. No facts and all bullshit.”

We all stop and look at the shaggy-haired buffalo sitting in the reception area, and buffalo is about the only way to describe what I take is a man.

“And you are?” I ask, giving him a good look over as he stands up. I immediately go into defensive mode. The way this enormous man moves is fluid and agile and not what you’d expect from a man this huge. He has to be all of 6’ 6” and has me looking up at him, but I keep my composure and wait for his response.

“The man you’ve been looking for. My name's Francis Cottonwood.”

Still looking like a buffalo about to charge , I approach him. “The name means nothing. Why would I be interested in finding you?”

“Because I’m the deputy that told Sheriff Brackenridge where he could shove his job, badge and sidearm without the use of a lubricant.” He smiles at me and goes from a buffalo to a rattler in one move.

“Zack! More coffee and see if you can get some food rustled up from somewhere. It looks like I’m going to be here a while longer. And make it enough for me, Ty, and our guest. Sober, you can watch over things while we have a chat in my office. Hands and JP, get some sleep. I’ve a feeling that things are ramping up with our night stalkers, especially after the attempt to torch the wood yard and furniture business.”

Closing my office door to the rest of the world, we sit and wait for Francis to begin. “When I first moved to town and became a deputy, we had a good sheriff and a good team. When he retired and Brackenridge took over, he started to make changes. Slowly, he reduced the number of deputies. We had very little crime, so it didn’t impact on the remaining officers much. He got rid of the female officers first. One resigned and moved away. One he

fired. She was around for a few months and then she too moved away. I think he pressured them both to move away. No proof, just my gut telling me.” Taking a drink of his coffee, he puts his mug on the desk and carries on.

“About six months after he was appointed, petty crime started escalating. Shoplifting mainly. Something we’d never had before on any level. It’s a small-town mentality here. If someone was down on their luck, a store would give them a tab to help them get by. Most people around here don’t like credit, so they’d soon pay it off. Store owners didn’t charge interest ‘cause the tab was for goods in their store. Then we started getting purse thefts and the odd mugging. Next were burglaries which are my pet hate. People have worked all their lives to build their homes and have the things that are special around them. For some thief, to then enter their homes and help themselves, that gets my blood boiling.”

Zack knocks on the door frame. When I call “What?” he opens the door and, on my chin lift, he enters with a tray full of food. Grabbing the thermos, he pops back out and returns with more coffee. My stomach growls and acts like a signal. We all grab a burger and fries and make quick work of them.

“Responses and incident reports were quick but not necessarily thorough. After a while, it was noted that no one was ever caught or prosecuted for any of these crimes. Then things started to get serious. Crime rates not only increased but the severity of the crimes too. It was subtle, but with so few left in the department, we were down to the sheriff and two deputies. We were rushing around town like lunatics. Some days it reminded us of those old black and white movies where the police were tearing around in the old Model T Fords, going around corners on two wheels. Hell, the only difference was, we never had a criminal to chase. By the time we got to a crime scene, we were probably twenty minutes too damn late. I shouldn’t laugh, but by God, we covered some miles. Thinking on it, it was about the time the sheriff told us to quit using the lights and sirens on the cruisers. He told us it was because the townsfolk were getting upset by the amount of time we were spending ‘just cruising around’ and not getting any results.” Francis rubs the back of his neck, showing how tense he’s becoming while bringing up all this shit.

“Sounds to me like he was covering up the number of responses that were

happening, so the people didn't get a true handle on the problem. And he was hanging you guys out to dry as the ones not doing their jobs competently. Sure smells like a set-up to me." Ty shakes his head as he's saying this and, looking over at him, I have to agree.

"When we asked the sheriff what was going on, he would say that the evidence wouldn't hold water. Now I can't speak for you guys, but when I complete an investigation, I know whether my evidence will stand up or not. I never left a case half-finished. If it took years, I'd hold a case open till I got a result. It might not always be the result I expected or wanted, but it gave the case closure. I never closed the case on our only suspicious death. I believed I was getting close, though. Sheriff didn't think there was anything suspicious about a drunk falling into the river and drowning. That may be the case if the guy was a drinker. In all the years I'd known Colin, I'd never seen him drink anything unless it was a toast at a wedding, for a fallen soldier, or a president's inauguration. Colin didn't get drunk and fall in the river. He wasn't pushed either. He'd have swum the length of the Mississippi River and not got out of breath."

I look across to Ty, and I can see the same thing in his eyes. We both lean forward as I ask my next question of Francis. "How much information was in that file for Colin Montgomery's murder when you had it?"

"It wasn't a lot, but there were a couple of witness statements from a couple that were traveling through. They saw three men down by the river, upstream, that night just outside of town. They thought that two were carrying the third. And they said carrying, like you would a carpet. Not supporting, like you would a drunk. There was the autopsy report, obviously, and a DNA report that the sheriff was going to get the FBI to run through their database. Nothing showed on our local system," Francis quickly says.

Reaching into my desk drawer, I take out the two pieces of paper from Colin's original file. "That's all that was in there when we found his file."

Francis looks at the papers and passes them back to me. "You'll have to excuse me. I need a time out. I'll be back, Sheriff. But I knew Colin for a long time, and that is absolutely disgusting. I'll be in touch, but here's my number in case you need it." He scribbles his number on my message pad.

Seeing Francis' reactions to the papers tells me an awful lot about this man and watching him leave the office, I think we'll be seeing a lot more of him in the future. It's more than obvious he's caring and angry about what's happening with Colin's case.

Ty stands and turns to me. "You know something, Forest?"

"Yeah, I know. We'll be seeing a lot more of him." I stand from my desk and head for the door.

"Too damn right. And I think it will all be positive. Unless he finds our killers first, of course. That could lead to one bloody mess." Ty stares at Francis as he gets in his huge old pickup and drives away.

"I'm leaving anything else that crops up for you, Ty. I'm going to find Heather. I need to get my head straight again. I left the FBI so I could chill out more. Go figure, huh?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

-:- HEATHER -:-

Moving all the chairs and tables to one side of the common room Lina and I continue cleaning, and with the weekend upon us, we know we will be back to the washing machines and driers on Monday.

“HEATHER?” Mia shouts.

Turning, I see Mia coming toward me. “Yeah, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, but can you come into the office for a few minutes, please?”

“Yes, I’ll be with you in a moment.” I turn to Lina and give her a shrug of my shoulders. “I won’t be long. Will you be okay on your own here?”

Lina smirks, “Yeah, go on. It’s not like I’ve not done this a million times already.”

Walking through to the President’s office, I smile as I pass the playroom and hear Axel speaking to Sybil. *“I’m not washing that. It can go in the trash. Why has he got the shits anyway?”*

The fact Axel had heaved and vomited after cleaning Carter yesterday has me smiling from ear to ear. Men, they think they are so hard, but give them a baby with shit or vomit and they are useless.

I stop to listen when Sybil responds, “Axel, you have killed people. You’ve served your country. Washing out shit from a piece of clothing is nothing. Now go to the utility room and rinse it out. You can’t leave that for Heather or Lina to do.”

A hand grabs my arm and drags me into the office, closing the door quickly behind me. “Don’t stand still in the corridor, Heather. Axel will grab you and take you with him to the utility room. He’ll do anything rather than clean shit.”

We look at each other and then burst out laughing because you look at Axel, the tough president of an MC, and cannot imagine him having an issue with

something like this. Even the brothers have given him trouble, laughing and teasing him about it.

“Take a seat, Heather.”

Once sitting I give Mia all my attention, and she folds her hands on the desktop, looking very important with her property kutte on her back and behind this impressive desk.

“You know how I like to be involved in everything? I’ve been thinking about you and Forest.” Mia grins at me and I can see this might not end well for me, so I’m quick to step in.

“I’ve been thinking about that too, Mia. It’s on my mind a lot, to be honest. I think I need to step back from cleaning here at the clubhouse to free up some of my time. Probably need to take on another cleaner to work alongside Lina. I don’t know how things with Forest will work out. I’m hoping for the whole house, kids, dog, white picket fence, fairytale happy ending. We have discussed nothing in depth as yet, so please don’t tell him this,” Giving Mia a look with my most pleading eyes.

“Heather! How could you even say such a thing! We’re Girl-Gang. What happens in the gang, stays in the gang!” Mia looks horrified that I’d think she would betray a confidence and I’m as equally horrified that I’ve upset her.

Mia gives me what I can only imagine is her version of an Axel *‘don’t fuck with me’ stare*. Once she seems satisfied that I’m beaten down by it, she smiles a huge smile and laughs.

“Oh, my God. That so worked. I’m going to use that on a brother, or maybe an officer, and see the results.” She claps her hands together in front of her like you see in those chick flicks. Giving her my own version of that look, she tilts her head to one side, like a German Shepherd puppy does. She just doesn’t have the ears to quite pull it off.

“Sorry, Heather. That doesn’t cut it. You’ll need to work on that. Anyway, as I was trying to say, you need to step back and find another cleaner.”

Looking at me as though I haven’t said a damn word, she tilts her head the other way. “For heaven’s sake, Mia. What’s with the head tilting thing? It’s so distracting. And that’s exactly what I’ve just said to you. I need a new

cleaner.”

Mia claps her hands again. “I read somewhere that it helps you to get your own way if you distract the other person's focus. I guess it works. I’m looking into all sorts of things to give me an edge during this next month.”

Beaming at me with her genius, I take a deep breath. “I hate to burst your bubble, but first of all, I was already on board with the new cleaner. Second, if you keep clapping your hands like a demented sea lion, I am going to force feed you some whole fish. I love that you’re embracing this with so much enthusiasm, but it feels a bit much of a power trip to me.”

“Oh, sorry. I just want to try shit out before I do it on the guys. Maybe my *‘enthusiasm’*, as you put it, runs away with me sometimes.” She looks totally crestfallen and now I feel guilty.

“Your enthusiasm is an endearing quality about you. I guess that the whole me and Forest thing is still so new to me that I’m a bit touchy. You’re obviously okay with taking on a new cleaner, so I’ll get Alf on the case right away.”

“So, yes, new cleaner. Kids, a dog, and a yard with a picket fence? That is so cool. We need to make sure that all happens then. What do you need from me? How can I help?” Mia is just on a roll, and I don’t know how to slow her down. Or maybe I do.

“Well, I’m having fertility treatments so you could come with me and insert the sperm for me. That would be great. I don’t fancy some stranger having to shove Forest's swimmers up my lady parts. Oh, Mia. You’re such a sweetheart. Thank you.”

Watching the emotions flow across Mia’s face has me struggling to stay serious. She’s gone from excitement to WTF? Then a bit of sympathy, followed by OMG, a sudden burst of ‘what have I got myself into’ and finally a huge dose of ‘Eww, I’m not doing that’!

“Oh, Heather, I didn’t realize you were going through that treatment. Of course, I’ll support you, but I wouldn’t think they’ll allow me to do that.” Mia’s face is like a kid's pop-up book. It is so readable. Keeping my serious face as best I can, I carry on.

“Oh yes, you can. They say it is far better for a close friend to do it and apparently the swimmers identify with the person. They think they’re being tickled, so they swim harder and faster. It’s been known for them to swim right past the egg and then have to turn round and go looking for it.”

“Oh, well, in that case. If it’s that important, I guess.” Her face is saying the exact opposite of her words, and I jump and drag her into a hug. Hugging her, I can almost feel her legs giving way as she realizes what she thinks she’s got to do. “Now, *that* is how you distract someone and get your own way,” I whisper in her ear.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Mia so angry and so relieved at the same time. Watching her slide back into her chair, I start to laugh and the tears are rolling down my cheeks. I’m bent double with the effort and, oh hell, I’m snorting like a pig.

“I can’t believe you. I was gone, hook, line, and sinker, going to stick my hand up there. When will I ever learn? This happens to me all the damn time. I’m so glad you didn’t do this at Ol’ Ladies’ church. I’d never live it down.”

“Well, you know what they say, Mia. We’re Girl-Gang. What happens in the gang, stays in the gang!” I’m struggling to breathe now and my sides hurt like hell. I don’t know if I’ll ever stop laughing.

Mia reaches into one of the drawers in Axel’s desk. She slams two glasses on the table and then drags what looks like a high-end bottle of scotch out. Sloshing a couple of fingers into each glass, she slides one over the desk to me. “Cheers, Heather. I don’t think anyone is ever going to top that.”

Downing the scotch, we both look at each other as it burns its way down. Putting the bottle back in the drawer, Mia points at the glasses. “You can clean them, bitch.” She’s laughing as she says it.

“There’s another thing we need to discuss before you go and it’s Girl-Gang stuff. I have my Harley trike, as you know, and I want all the gang to have one, too.” She puffs herself up to what looks like twice her normal size, and I look at her, aghast. Me on something like that, on my own. Behind Forest on a road trip, yes. On my own machine? I don’t know about that.

“Now I have my trike, Kya has her Hog and Raven has her truck. I think all the Ol’ Ladies should have something. Eden says she’ll only go behind Silver, but I’ll work on her later. So, what do you think? Are you in?”

“It’s a bit ‘out of nowhere’, isn’t it?”

“Not as far out as me tickling Forest’s swimmers up your vag.”

We both have another fit of laughing and I can’t believe it when I hear my voice saying, “I’m in. Why the hell not?”

Mia starts clapping her damn hands again, and I mime throwing her a fish. My cell pings and I’m glad it’s not a call. I don’t think I could talk right now. I keep having giggling fits.

Ty: Hi, I have a job that needs taking care of

Heather: Not sure if I’m the woman for the job, till you tell me what it is?

Ty: What? It’s a cleaning job

Heather: OK. What and where?

Ty: You know I’m buying a house? I’ll need someone to go through it maybe once or twice a week

Heather: Goodness, I hope you’ll be keeping on top of things then

Ty: I can cope, just want to have a woman's touch around the place

Heather: I’ve got time to find the right person then. You’re not talking tomorrow?

Ty: No dammit. I haven’t completed the sale yet

Heather: OK. Leave it with me

Ty: Cheers. You’re a sweetheart

Heather: Reminder to self: Show Forest flirty message from Ty

Ty: NOOOOOO SO NOT BEING FLIRTY

Heather: LMAO

I must be on a roll today, I think to myself. First Mia and now Ty. Leaving Mia

in Axel's office, I search for Lina around the clubhouse. Finding her finishing a bedroom, I check to see if she needs me for anything.

“No, I’m fine. Not sure what happened with you and Mia, but we could hear the laughter all over the clubhouse.” Lina smiles at me and I blush.

“Can’t say, but it was very funny. You should know something, too. I’m looking to reduce my hours here, so I’ll get Alf on the hunt for someone. I think you should be in on the interview as you’ll be training and then working with them. Will you be ok with that?”

“Yes, of course. Going to spend more time cultivating your love life?” Lina raises her eyebrows at me and smiles a knowing smile.

“Oh, my God. How is my love life so interesting for everyone? I’m going to head home, as you’re okay.”

“Maybe because you’ve never had a love life for so long? Hmm? Go home and get ready for your man.” Lina laughs, and it makes me laugh too. Today has been a good day, so far. Maybe I should get home and see if I can finish it on a high note.

Arriving home, I see I’ve beaten Forest to it. Locking the van up, I head for the house and am already thinking of what we can have to eat. Just as I close the back door, a shadow dashes down the yard to the street. Rushing to the front of the house, I look out the front window. There’s no one there except a noisy pickup rumbling down the road. I must be tired I think to myself. Maybe it was just a bird?

Back in the kitchen, I start searching for something to have when Forest gets home. I know I have a couple of nice steaks in the fridge. They’ll be quick and easy. Grabbing my phone from the kitchen counter, I’m just about to send a text when Forest walks in. Scooping me up, he pulls me to him and kisses me gently. He buries his head in my neck and I’m not sure, but I think he’s smelling me. “Are you sniffing me?” Pushing him away from me and looking him in the eye.

“Of course, I am. Why wouldn’t I? You smell delicious.” He pulls me back to him and gives me another sniff before kissing me again. This time with a little more oomph.

“I’ve been at work all day cleaning the clubhouse and you tell me you like the smell of the brothers’ bathrooms on your woman? You must have had one seriously bad day, if that’s what your best chat up line is when getting home, and I can tell you now that it is not going to get you anywhere.”

“How about we get food out of the way and then take a look at that spa tub you have? I could do with a relaxing soak.” Forest's eyes look far away and it has me wondering just what’s bothering him.

Only an hour later and we’re both laid out in the tub. We have candles burning around the room, scented oils, and bubbles in the water. There are a couple of bottles of wine in an ice bucket and we both have a glass in our hands. Forest looks way better now than when he walked in and I feel so chilled myself.

“So, what had you so wound up? Anything you can share?” Leaning against his shoulder and looking sideways at him, I see his eyes cloud over for a second.

“A case that should have been closed a long time ago is beginning to make headway. Not just that, we have a lot of unsolved files, and the last sheriff seems to be the laziest son-of-a-bitch ever.”

Feeling him tensing and his muscles bunching up, I pull his head down and push his nose into my neck. He takes a deep breath and I smile as he relaxes again. Topping off our glasses with wine, I relax back into Forest’s shoulder.

“I’ve got something I need to discuss with you. Nothing to worry about, but I’d value your opinion, ideas, and experience.” As soon as the words are out, Forest looks down at me.

“That’s a lot to ask, for something ‘not to worry about’.” He sounds worried and starts to sit up straighter.

“Whoa, sit still, I told you it’s ok. Trust me. Mia has had me in Axel’s office today for a conversation. We’re going to find a replacement for me at the clubhouse. That way, I get more time for us and wherever we’re headed. I want to give us every chance to make this a success.” Turning further around, I slip a hand around his neck and pull him to me. We enjoy a long lingering kiss and I feel him start to stiffen.

“Hang on there. We’re not done here yet.” Watching him closely, he shakes his head slowly.

“No. We’re not. Now it’s my turn. You’re not the only one that wants to see where we can take this. I know we’re not exactly a pair of spring chickens.”

“Hey, you speak for yourself. I can keep up with the best of them, I’ll have you know. I’m not ready to be put out to pasture just yet.” We both laugh at that and Forest continues.

“I didn’t say we were past it, either. I was wondering how you felt about kids at our age. Personally, I’d love kids. I’ve always wanted to be a father, dad, pappa, whatever. I think a house with a fence around the garden, a couple of kids running around the yard chasing a dog. Sounds like my idea of heaven. Where do you stand on that?”

I turn round and kneel in front of him. Tears are running down my cheeks uncontrollably. I couldn’t be happier than right at this moment. I’m smiling, crying, and trying to kiss him all at the same time.

“I take it that’s a good thing, then?” He laughs at me and sniffs my hair as we hug. “You up for selling this house and moving into mine? I need you to come and choose what you want to keep from here and what you want to sell. My place has a big yard we can fence off, and it’s more family-sized than this one. That’s why I’m saying my place.”

“There’s one thing missing from that picture though, Forest.” Giving him my most serious face, he looks at me with an equally serious glare.

“There has to be a bike or trike in the garage.”

“Don’t worry, hon. I’ll always have my bike in there.”

“No, Forest, not yours. Mine. I want a bike or trike and I want you to help me decide which and then to learn to ride it.”

We spend the next thirty minutes talking it through and he finally understands that I’m deadly serious about having one. Eventually, I swayed to having a trike.

“After all, if we’re having kids, I can get one with plenty of seats. You never know where this could all end.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

-:- FOREST -:-

Weekend is here and although we all work Saturday at the sheriff's office, it is often a quiet day for families in town, with them mostly being off work and enjoying time together. Walking into the office, I rub my hands together, trying to motivate myself as I study the whiteboard and the open cases we have on it.

Meat has a lot of information gathered. He's a hell of an investigator if truth be told, and it seems he has some type of trail going from what I'm reading. I'll have to speak to him later or have another blasted meeting so I can pin him down.

Gemmy walks into the office and hands me a coffee. "Don't get used to me coming to work on a Saturday. I'm only doing it 'cause Stitch isn't home. I'm going back to mornings once he's home, Forest. And no weekends."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you." I wrap an arm around her shoulders and we both study the board without speaking to each other. It's a nice kind of quiet and I think I'm mellowing out now that I have Heather by my side.

"They should finish my house soon and I'll be moving in. Heather's moving in with me, too. I can't wait." I'm not able to withhold the excitement of my life at last coming together. "Damn, I've got to speak to PT. I don't know if he's gotten Heather's property patch organized. Fuck, she needs her kutte."

Gemmy laughs as she leaves the office and I quickly send a message to PT, telling him I need it pronto. But thankfully he sends a message back to me saying he has it and I can have it tomorrow at church.

Taking a seat, I finish my coffee and organize my thoughts as to what needs to be done today. My thoughts, however, are interrupted by the phone buzzing. I hit the #6 on the phone to take the call, which I know by the light is an outside call being patched to me.

"Yeah, Sheriff Forest speaking."

“Sheriff, it’s Charlie, Mrs. Osborne’s neighbor, speaking. I spoke to you before when her house was broken into. Well, they’ve been back, I think. I saw him this time as my dog was growling viciously so I picked up my bat and walked around to her place. This fucker was lurking in the yard, but he turned and saw me. I hadn’t a hope of catching him, especially when he jumped in that damn pickup.”

“I’m coming over. I’ll be with you in a short while.” I slam the receiver down and rush out of the office, turning and running back to grab the cruiser keys from the desk. “Ty, come on, we’ve got a call,” I say as I pass him in the deputies’ office.

Heading over to see Charlie, I keep seeing Ty smirking. It doesn’t take long for it to get under my skin. “What the hell are you smirking at?”

Ty smirks again before answering, “You haven’t stopped mumbling since you got in the damn cruiser. You’re moaning and complaining, and I can’t understand a word you’re saying.”

“Then how do you know I’m ‘moaning and complaining’?” I smirk back at him.

“Because it’s what you do when something is bothering you. You’ve always done it.”

Pulling up outside Charlie’s, we see he’s already waiting for us. As we get out of the cruiser he’s walking down his yard to meet us. “I’m sorry, Sheriff. I’m not as agile as I used to be. I got him with my bat as he ducked by me, though. He’s going to have a hell of a bruised right shoulder real soon.”

“You be careful, Charlie. If he’d wrestled that thing off you, he could have bruised you, or worse. Leave that stuff to us, you hear? Olive would be mortified if you got hurt. Remember that. Now, was there anything about him you could identify him by? Hair, eyes, build?”

“He had straggly, long, blond hair. It was sticking out from his hoodie, and if it’d been pulled forward, I’d have never seen that he had a baseball cap on, Sheriff. It had a logo on it. It was a logo from a wrecking yard. I remember it from when I had my old Ford pickup. I was always at the wrecking yard on the weekends, fetching one part or another. It’s only a little place, but it was

always busy. Never ceased to amaze me. They always had or could get any damn part, no matter how rare it was.”

“Well done, Charlie. What’s it called?” This is a big break for us. At last.

“I don’t know the name, exactly, but it’s the only one on the road north out of town, ‘bout five miles out. You can’t miss it, Sheriff.”

“Thanks, Charlie. We’ll head out there right away. C’mon, Ty. Let’s go see what scrap we can rustle up.” Climbing back into the cruiser, we roll out of town and I put my foot down. Resisting the temptation to have the lights and siren going, as I don’t want to give out any warning that we’re on our way.

Pulling into the wrecking yard, I leave the cruiser blocking the entrance. I want no one escaping that way as soon as they see us. I tell Ty to watch the yard, especially the pickup parked by a fenced area that could be for dogs, while heading for the office. As I approach, it’s easy to hear raised voices through an open window. Two males are arguing. What sounds like a younger voice isn’t happy that he got hurt, and the other, older one, isn’t happy the younger one was seen.

Knocking and then barging into the office, I see a young male holding his right shoulder. Without a moment's thought, I grab him, spin him against the wall, and slap him in handcuffs, telling him he’s under arrest. As the older guy gets to his feet, he reaches for something in his desk drawer.

Ty is standing at the open window, his service weapon pointed at the man's chest. “If you draw that weapon, you’ll be dead before you aim it.”

“You got no right to come barging in here like this. We ain’t done nothing wrong. Where’s your warrant?” The older guy is working himself up into a temper and he’s doing it real quick.

“I’m Sheriff Forest. I knocked, and I’m sure I heard you say ‘Come in’, so I don’t need a warrant. This young man is suspected of being involved in a crime and so I’m taking him in for questioning. He’ll be released if he’s not the man that a witness can identify. I’m pretty sure though, that when I match his injury with a weapon used in self-defense at the scene, he won’t be back too soon. You might want to put a poster up for a new employee.”

“You’ll regret this, Sheriff Forest. You mark my words. You ain’t heard the last of this.”

Walking over to the desk, staring him in the eye, I say quietly, “You’d better take notice, Mr. Wrecking Yard Man. So far, I don’t give a shit about you. When this little canary stops singing in my cell, you’d better hope he hasn’t sung your name. If he does, I’m going to come back here, take you into custody, after you’ve resisted arrest for a while, of course, and then your yard is going to become the biggest 4th of July bonfire this state has ever seen. You think long and hard on that before you make any threats to me.”

My right arm flashes out, and my fist connects with his jaw. Dropping like a stone, he misses his chair and falls to the ground behind his desk. Grabbing my young prisoner by his right shoulder, I push him out the door and to the cruiser. Seeing we’ve got an audience, I tell them that the boss slipped and hit his chin on the desk and would they mind helping him.

“By the way, nice pickup. Who drives that beauty?” I ask as casually as I can.

A skinny kid, grinning, puts his hand up. “She’s mine, sheriff.”

One of the older guys laughs at him. “You sure are one dumb fuck, Leroy.”

“Ty? Bring Leroy along for the ride, would you. We’ll charge him with the attempted arson at the wood yard.”

Wasting no time, I put on the lights and siren and hightail it back to the Sheriff’s Department. My cuffed man, Elmer, is nearly bawling as he realizes the trouble he’s in. Judging by the look on his face, he has never been in the back of a cruiser on his way to a jail cell. Reading them their rights has Elmer squirming even more. Leroy, who Ty cuffed, doesn’t appear to know what’s going on at all and is just enjoying the ride in a cruiser.

Arriving back at the sheriff’s office, we grab one each and march them inside, Elmer to the furthest cell. Locking the cell door without a word, I call everyone to my office.

“That’s the fucker that has been seen lurking around Mrs. Osborne’s neighborhood. I’m betting he’s the one that’s responsible for the break-ins. I want him left alone, no talking to him, no looking at him, nothing. I’ll get to

him when I'm ready, but I want him to sweat it out for a bit first. The other is an accessory."

As everyone files out of the office, I hear Gemmy scream. Rushing into reception, I see Stitch kissing the everlovin' shit out of her. Before any of us get to say 'hi', he throws her over his shoulder and exits the building. The roaring of his hog tells me he's breaking the speed limit to get her home.

An hour later a tap on my door has me looking up from the pile of paperwork that I've been clearing from my inbox. Seeing Ty nod towards the cells, I clear my desk and head for the door. Instead of going to the cells, I walk into the kitchen and get us both a mug of coffee. Taking a seat opposite the cell with our Elmer in it, we sit and stare at him while drinking our coffee.

We know he's squirming and when he starts yelling at us to stop staring, we know we've nearly broken him. Ty laughs, whispers in my ear, and laughs again. Taking our mugs, he goes for refills. When he gets back, he places the mugs on the desk near us and opens the cell. Ty looks him in the eye and tells him it's time to answer some questions.

Leroy is fast asleep in his cell, sleeping like the dead, because he doesn't stir with Elmer shouting from his cell.

Asking him his name gets us some verbal abuse. Ty sighs and slowly approaches the cell. Simply closing and locking the cell door has our guy go nuts again. Ty holds up his hand until the guy calms down.

"Look, Elmer. We know everything we need to know about you. We've run your ID. There's every chance that you're going away for a long time. If you want help with getting a deal, you have to work with us. It's real simple. We can get more information, but it will just take us longer. You helping us could get you some much needed help. We're going home soon, so you'll have all night in here on your own to think about it. When we come back in the morning, if you're still alive, maybe you'll have changed your mind." Ty gives him a sympathetic smile and goes to wash the mugs.

"Sheriff, what's he mean 'if I'm still alive?'"

"Elmer, we're not going to babysit you pair all night. Your friends out there

aren't such good friends, are they? They won't want you talking about them, so it won't take long for them to figure out that you're in here with no deputies. They're not going to be able to break you out, but they could burn the place down with you in it," standing, I start to head back to reception. Ty is making a big show of getting ready to lock up the department for the night.

"Don't leave me in here. I'll tell you what I know." Elmer didn't take long to crack. I was expecting Hands or JP to call me in the middle of the night, saying he'd cracked. Oh, well. I might get a full night's sleep after all.

Ty brings a notepad and pen and we question Elmer. We don't have to ask many questions as it seems he can't stop once he starts. His father owns the wrecking yard. Elmer gets told what areas to watch and report on. Eventually, he gets told what houses to break into and what to look for. When I took over as the new sheriff he was given more places to hit and more frequently. He doesn't know why, he just does what he's told. He was told to find out where I lived and what places I frequented.

They knew I was involved with the Raging Barons and so that didn't need watching. Trying to break into the two clubs had been Elmer acting alone and his father doesn't know about that. He had been following me when he saw my interest in Heather. The night of the flat tire, he'd been watching for me and saw me help her. He followed me once and saw me stop at Heather's house. Once she'd nearly caught him sneaking around her yard.

He had reported nothing about Heather to his father because he didn't think it was anything he'd be interested in. He broke into her business, but there again was nothing that would interest his father. He broke in with Leroy, and that was who did all the damage. Elmer was back in the truck outside, waiting.

He broke into Mrs. Osborne's on orders, and he did the damage there because he followed Leroy's example. So far, we had a young thug allegedly being given orders by his father to commit burglaries. We could make a case against Elmer, the son, but nothing that would stick against a wrecking yard owner involved in burglaries.

"Bring in Charlie and let's get it confirmed this is our man, and I'll speak with

the DA. Get him processed as we want this fucker tied down and out of our cells as fast as possible.”

Solving one series of crimes but leaving a loose thread seems to be the end of Elmer and Leroy’s case. Ty looks at me and I can see the same sense of frustration in him. We need to look into the wrecking yard at some point. That can come under Ty’s remit, I grin to myself. All this confirms the feeling I had that all this revolves around me, but I don’t yet see why. What has me being a sheriff got to do with all this?

CHAPTER THIRTY

-- MIA --

Watching everyone training this morning has been fun. I am usually involved, but my mind is so full of what I'm going to do in church as acting president I don't want to be getting sidetracked.

The Ol' Ladies take this so seriously and Winter can nearly beat Chaos when they get together in hand-to-hand training. I know with Winter, Target, and Chaos working and living at the gun range, they work out together after hours, using the facility space, giving Winter the opportunity to progress faster than the once-a-week sessions here would give her.

Kya and Tilly are good workout partners and gravitate toward each other on Sunday mornings. They have a great friendship and Kya, working at the flower shop, keeps that friendship thriving. Of course, the fact Kya playfully gives Hammer hell now and again doesn't hurt. Tilly doesn't work at the shop that much anymore, but she'd love a family. It just has not happened yet, but they are not worried or stressed about it.

My eye is caught on Forest, who is here this morning for church, but it's a bit too early for that. He storms across the compound, says something to Heather, then throws her over his shoulder and stomps to the clubhouse, disappearing through the back door and, more than likely, to his room. I grin because them getting together couldn't be better; they are well-suited, but Forest will have to watch Wings, who sees Heather as a sister, and he'll beat the crap out of Forest if he hurts her.

An hour later I finish checking on Amelia, Bitty, and Sybil, who are watching the boys, and being ordered around by Meat in the kitchen. I've no idea how they follow his grunts and one-word demands. I give Meat a sweet smile and he frowns suspiciously as I pass through and into the common room.

A quick freshen up and I head into church, take my seat, and wait quietly and patiently for everyone to arrive. Taking their seats some are giving me wary, or amused looks. Axel walks in, takes a seat at the side of the room,

and leans back, looking damn sexy if I have to say so myself.

“Christ, Pres, you stink,” Jig says shifting his chair a little further away.

“What do you mean, I stink?”

“Well, you smell like shit.” Jig scrunches his nose up and Axel sniffs under his arms and lifts the front of his kutte, taking deep breaths.

“I don’t smell of shit,” he snarls right before he pounces on Jig, who is now laughing his ass off, breaking a chair as they roll around play fighting.

I pick up the gavel and slap that sucker down hard. *“PACK IT IN, TAKE YOUR SEATS OR GET THE FUCK OUTTA CHURCH!”* I bellow, but I won’t admit I hurt the back of my throat screeching.

“Alright, babe, you don’t have to get worked up,” Axel tries to soothe.

“Shut up, sit down, or get out. I’m not putting up with any of you acting like kids in here. This is a serious meeting, and we have a lot to cover.” I give Axel my best scowl, but I can see he’s amused by the sparkle in his eyes.

Buzz chuckles at the side of me and when I turn to look, he gives me a shrug before winking. “You best behave or I’ll send you to work where you can’t...”
I lean closer and whisper, “stop in and see Nell.”

Buzz gives me a dirty look, but I know he’s got a soft spot for her and stops in when he really doesn’t need to. He says it’s keeping the club in good standing, but I think there is more to it than that. Time will tell. It always does.

Forest walks into church, takes his seat and begins tidying his hair. I stare at him, letting him know I’m onto what he’s been up to with Heather before coming in here.

“I hope you washed your hands and face, Forest,” I state clearly, and a slight flush creeps up his cheeks, which, of course, has everyone giving ribald comments.

Picking up the gavel, I tap it down and look around. “Meeting commencing,” I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say, but I think that should do it? “Okay, officers, any of you have anything to report? If nothing we need to cover,

then we'll leave it until next week."

BS speaks up. "I've spoken to the prospects and they are all covering their duties perfectly. The web and transporting business that Chris, Sawyer, and Austin run is doing phenomenally well. They are turning work away because they cannot fit it all in. Sawyer and Austin are hardly ever at the clubhouse as they are on the road transporting bikes or parts. Seems people don't care what they pay if a biker is delivering to a biker."

TwoCents adds, "Yeah, I can agree with that. They are making a huge profit monthly. I've given them a larger cut of the proceeds as they are putting in a lot of hard work to run the business smoothly."

"Do they need extra help? We can see about adding people if they do. Not brothers, but we can add staff," I say to BS.

"They have said no continually, but I don't think it'll be long before they are going to have to admit they need help. I suggested they look at other MCs that we are allies with, as that could work like a relay if a bike had to cover the entire country." BS looks around when brothers speak out that it's a good idea and throw a few MC names out.

"Okay, for now we leave it alone and see what develops. They have worked hard to build the business, and I don't want them to feel it's being taken away from them. Let them keep doing what they have. It's worked so far." I'm getting nods of agreement, so I hasten on.

Axel speaks and takes me by surprise. "I've spoken to the four at the wood supply and at this time, they are still not interested in prospecting. They would make brilliant brothers, but I don't think they'll ever want to do all the dirty shit prospects have needed to do in the past."

Drag speaks out, "We don't need them to, and I don't think we need prospects anymore. It's not like it used to be in the club. We are not at war all the time over turf, businesses or anything else. The club is set up now with the businesses working well, bringing in a profit. We each have our jobs and we all do them well. Why do we need prospects? We have Heather's company cleaning; the three stooges have stepped into the club and are like fuckin' grandmothers to everyone. They help in the kitchen, with the twins,

and around the clubhouse when help is needed. Honestly, we don't need prospects when we have former military like Meat, Chaos, Wings and Target walking into the role as brothers."

Murmurs of agreement run around the room. Most of the brothers are former military, and they've fit into the club without causing a ripple of trouble. Stitch is a fantastic medic and was needed for the club. If we ever have issues, we don't want it taken to the hospital unless it's a last resort. I understand why that is, as we don't want the law on our backs, even though the club is clean.

"Well, that brings me to what I wanted to nominate today," I look around the room, and at PT, who I've spoken to prior to the meeting. He's had all week to arrange things, so I look over and wait for the slight nod I need. When he gives it to me I smile, then turn back to the room.

"I want to nominate Colton be instated as a full brother. Do I have anyone who will second the motion? Yeah, yeah, I don't know the usual jargon, so shoot me." I say clearly. I've seen how hard these prospects have worked and dedicated themselves to the club. It's time this was sorted.

"I'll second," Ruger states, giving a chin lift and a smirk.

Giving my practiced scowl to each of the brothers, I ask for a show of hands. Every single hand is raised, which has me nodding a kind of thank you. "Before I call him in to church, there's one thing I feel needs addressing. Some time ago, it was voted that he have a road name and that name was 'Rage'. No one has taken to calling him that and, to be honest, I don't think any of us see him that way. Some of us have seen him when he gets into a rage, but I don't feel that's a fair description of him."

Knuckles speaks and we all listen, "I've probably worked alongside him the most, and I have to agree with Mia. Even in the ring, you rarely see him in any kind of rage. When I look at him, I only ever see Colton. I know it's rare, but I'd be more than happy to leave him as that. I think it's who he is."

There are a few murmurs around the room that confirm what Knuckles has said. There's the odd comment flying, *'I never called him 'Rage' or 'maybe just once, but yeah, he's always been Colton.'*

Tapping the gavel, I get the room's attention back. "If that's settled then, let's have the ayes that he remains as Colton." A quick round of ayes and that's put to bed.

Turning to look at Chisel, who is nearest the door, "Please call Colton into church."

It takes a few minutes before Colton walks into the room, looking around nervously. I'm not messing around as I still want to cover the other prospects.

"Colton, give me your kutte." He looks at me like I've just stabbed him. He removes the kutte and hands it over slowly. "Why do you think you should wear this? Are you fit to wear this? I think not. As the current acting president of the club, it's been agreed in church that you won't wear this again." He looks like he's going to go into a rage any minute. He won't look any of us in the eye. "From today, Colton, you will wear this in its place, and continue to be the brother that you've become to all of us." Holding the new kutte out to him, he looks at me as though I've got two heads.

"Knuckles, help him put it on before I take it back."

Knuckles gives him a slap on the back and brings him out of his daze. Slipping his arms through the kutte, his grin is so huge he looks like he'll get lockjaw. Everyone takes a turn, slapping him on the back and welcoming him to brother status. "We are taking your road name 'Rage' away and you will remain Colton, as that's how we all see and love you."

"Next for the brother upgrade, I nominate Chris. All those in favor, say aye." Chris is called in and is suitably scared to death, as Colton was. Chris is given the road name of Web.

Sawyer becomes 'Roadrunner', Austin, known for his high intellect, becomes 'Mensa', and Reuse stays as 'Reuse' due to all his work on getting all the businesses up to par with recycling.

Billy has names banded around such as Maitre'd, waiter, vineyard and even vino. After a quick vote, though, he becomes 'Cork'.

All the 'prospects' stand around beaming like a bunch of lunatics, now that they are full brothers. Lunatics that are going to wake up in the morning

with sore and bruised backs after the pounding they've all received.

"I want to nominate that from now on, we add no more prospects to the MC. If in the future we want to discuss this again, then that's okay. But at this time, we don't need to add more. Are you all in agreement?" I'm happy to see everyone gives me an 'aye,' and looks more than happy with the decision.

"Anyone have anything to bring forward?" I ask.

Looking at Grease when he speaks, "I've got the hydraulic ramps being installed this next week, so that should bring the garage up to spec."

"It's paid for and I have the invoice and receipt," TwoCents adds.

"Okay, anything else?"

"I don't know if you have all heard, but Eden is pregnant and the stress of working at TJs, and now Club Whisky was a bit much and she passed out. We have been advised she take it easy, so I'd like to have her punishment canceled." Silver is looking at me a little nervously because I'm sitting here because of our punishment. Not just mine, but Eden's too.

"Okay, does anyone have anything to say about this?" I'm looking around the room, keeping my face blank. I'm more than pleased I've been practicing my facial expressions for these meetings as I don't want to give anything away at this point.

When no comments are made, I ask the question, "Does anyone have an objection to Eden's punishment being annulled?"

"No. I think it would be dangerous to put her under any stress at this time. The last thing any brother sitting here wants is for Eden or the baby to be at risk," Sting speaks out, saying what I can see is on everyone's mind.

"Okay, Eden's punishment is overruled." Knowing this is the last matter for the meeting, I tap the gavel and announce. "Meeting closed. Thank you, brothers, for your attendance."

I don't wait around. I quickly make my way out of church and upstairs towards my apartment. I'm not upset about Eden's punishment. I'm just a little upset that not one brother suggested mine end at the same time.

“MIA?” I hear, and turning, I see Silver running towards me.

I hold my hand out, palm towards him, to tell him to stop. “I don’t have a problem with the decision, Silver. The last thing I’d want is Eden to be put under pressure and lose the baby. So don’t worry about it.”

Not waiting for him to reply, I quickly step into my apartment and close the door. I take a deep breath and walk into the bathroom, where I close the door and let a tear slide down my cheek. Taking out my phone from my kutte pocket, I make a call that I know will get my head right.

“Hi, Shar, how are you?” I ask.

Half an hour later, I step out of the bathroom and feel much better. I knew Shar would understand how I’m feeling, but also that she’d get me past it, too. It’s old feelings of betrayal, no support, and not feeling good enough that have welled up. My thoughts will clear but no one, not even Axel, will know how hurt I feel that not one person spoke up to have my punishment stopped.

Axel knows me well enough to realize I need a little time to myself now the meeting is over. He’ll catch up with me later, but I’ve something I want to do which will get me out of the clubhouse for a short while.

Stepping into PT’s office, I pick up the kutte for Billy, now Cork although he doesn’t know it yet, and head out to give him the news. Walking outside the clubhouse, I start up my trike and glide out of the compound, ordering Specs to unlock the gate, as I don’t have an enforcer with me. But after threatening he’ll suffer for the next ten years, he opens it, and I head out of the compound to clear my mind.

Later that evening, Axel wraps his arms around me as I’m falling asleep and he kisses the back of my neck. “Really proud of you, Mia. You know the brothers didn’t say to let your punishment go was because they know you are strong enough to do it. They are all proud of the way you have not given one complaint over the last month. You’ve worked hard, never whined or cried. But if you needed any or all of us, we’d stand beside you, not in front of you, but beside you. We would *never* leave you in the position your last MC did. Now come on, give me some love before you start snoring.”

The next morning, I am able somehow to contain my laughter when Hunter is poorly and crying. Axel is walking through the common room to the kitchen when Hunter projectile vomits, and unfortunately for Axel it covers him from eyebrows to chest. But it only takes a moment before Axel projectile vomits himself and everyone quickly turns and walks away before being dragged into holding Hunter. Axel is choking, coughing, and nearly crying, I'm sure. My poor man, he's not good with poorly babies.

Seeing Axel react to Hunter being sick holds no surprises for me. For an alpha male, he's about as useless as a chocolate fireguard when it comes to his kids being ill. If they were in danger, he'd do anything to protect them and wouldn't think twice. A bit of kid's vomit or shit and, I hate to admit it, he's reduced to a wimp. He hands Hunter over to Amelia, telling her he'll be back in ten. She shakes her head at him, and her look says, *'It'll still be here when you get back.'*

Once Axel has gone, she gives Hunter's face and hands a good clean. Seeing me, she walks over. "I'm not changing him. Axel can do that when he gets back. We all told him yesterday what was going to happen. Axel was playing with them most of the day and all they did was eat, play, eat, play, and eat some more. They had everything from breakfast, brunch, lunch, afternoon snack, dinner, supper, and all-you-can-eat desserts in between. They had a great time of it, but he wouldn't damn well listen. They're going to be like this all day. Every time they get worked up, they'll either vomit or shit. Carter stinks today, so it looks like he'll be doing the ass work while Hunter vomits."

"At least I know what's bothering the twins, and I don't have to worry. I'm secretly going to enjoy seeing him go through all this today. I'm not getting involved either. He made it clear that unless it was an emergency, he wouldn't step into my 'presidency'. Well, I'm not going to step into his term of 'motherhood'. He's got it to do."

Amelia gives me a high five and we both laugh. Seeing Axel coming back all cleaned up and in a change of clothes, I head for the office. I have a feeling that if Amelia's right, and she probably is, that's not going to be the last change of clothes for him today.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

-:- HEATHER -:-

Start of a fresh week and as I walk into the office, I give Alf an enormous smile. “Good morning.”

“What are you doing here so early on a Monday morning?” Alf leans back in his chair, giving me a grin.

“Did you make any headway in finding someone to work permanently at the clubhouse?”

“Yes, Cherry-Lee has a friend who just lost her job and is looking for something other than being a server. She looks solid, and I think she’ll be good.”

“Okay, I want Lina involved in the interview because she’ll be working with her and if they don’t gel, then I’d rather not use her. Lina is a fantastic worker. She can run that clubhouse with her eyes closed, but there is no way she could do it all on her own, otherwise, I’m sure she’d be willing.”

“I agree with that, Heather. Working with someone who you don’t get along with makes the job awful and, let’s face it, makes you not want to go to work. Lina is about ready for a small pay rise. Are you okay with me doing that?” Alf is scribbling on his notepad as he’s speaking.

“Yes, she’s earned a pay raise. I don’t have an issue with that. We need to make sure that when I am not at the clubhouse, Lina is the one in charge.”

“I agree, and I’ll make sure it’s explained at the interview.”

“When is the interview?”

“Wednesday. I’ll send a message to Lina with the time I’ll arrive with the woman. Or do you want to be around? It would save me leaving the office if you were at the clubhouse, anyway.”

“I can be at the clubhouse. I’ll speak to Lina too.”

Because I’m jittering around in my seat, and chewing my lip Alf grins as he

speaks again. "Okay, what's up? You're like a cat on hot bricks."

"Well, I've been claimed as an Ol' Lady by Sheriff Forest. You know he's a brother of the Raging Barons MC." I don't get to say more before Alf throws his head back, laughing. "What? What's so funny?"

"Oh, Heather. I can just imagine you are going to give him the runaround. I'm happy for you, I really am. If anyone deserves a good man it's you, and he better be a good man because I know my way around a shotgun."

I tell Alf all about getting to know Forest and how I feel about it. That I'm going to sell my house and move into his, and then surprise him even more. "I want to drop my hours working at the clubhouse and do just a day a week so I see things are kept on top of, and I'll do a day here with you. That's it. The rest is up to you. I want to have the picket fence, kids, and all that goes with it, Alf. I can't do that and work every hour of the week. If you need me in the office or to step in to work, I will. Don't think I'm abandoning ship. I'm not."

Alf rubs his chin. "Heather, go for it, but I'll be the favorite uncle to your kids, so don't forget that when all those bikers try to muscle in trying to be. That's my spot."

"I have another job that I want us to take on, too. Ty, one of the sheriff's deputies, is purchasing a house, and he needs a cleaner once a week. It's a stay-on-top job, basically. Ty, I think, will be an organized person, and it'll only involve flicking through the house and checking laundry. One day a week should cover it, or two half days. I want him to have the friends and family rate too, if that's okay with you? The house is not through the final stage of purchase, but it won't be long."

"Okay, give me his details and I'll get something arranged." Alf hands me his notepad to give the details I have.

Arriving at the clubhouse, I update Lina on the interview Wednesday and that I'm going to leave her to ask all the questions, show her around, and get a feel as to being able to work with the woman or not.

I throw in laundry, empty dryers, take supplies to the bathrooms, and wipe around in the twins' playroom. I can't help but watch Axel with a bandana

around his face, changing Hunter. When I lift an eyebrow at him with a grin on my face, it gets me a scowl.

“The boys are vomiting and shitting faster than I can clean it up. It’s foul-smelling stuff, and I don’t want to catch whatever germ these two have picked up,” Axel snaps, but he had to pull the bandana down for me to understand him.

“Do you have anything here for the laundry? I’ll take it now that I’ve wiped around in here.”

Axel points at a bucket he has sitting in the corner of the room, and he’s placed a lid on it, so I’m sure whatever is in the bucket is not going to be pleasant, but that’s what needs to be done, so I’ll do it.

Heading back to the utility room, I pass Bitty. “What’s this ‘germ’ the twins have caught, Bitty?”

Bitty laughs and touches my arm. “You’ve been talking to Axel, deary. They don’t have any germs unless you include ‘sugar’. He gave them too much food yesterday and so much sweet stuff. It’s a wonder they slept at all last night. They were as high as kites with everything he allowed them to have. He wouldn’t listen, so we’ve been keeping our distance all day and letting him deal with the consequences of his actions’.” She giggles and heads off to check on him.

Sorting out the mess in the bucket doesn’t take long and all the smelly clothes are in the washing machine. Going through the kitchen, Wings walks in and grins at me. WTF immediately springs to mind.

“Heather! This thing with Forest. I’m okay with it if you are. If he hurts you, upsets you, makes you cry, ditches you, anything at all I don’t agree with, his ass is mine. I’m claiming ‘bro’ rights on you. You need to know that when you go down the aisle, I’ll be the one giving you away. That’s my right, too. In fact, anything formal, informal, or just downright brotherly is, from this day forward, mine by the right of the brother code. Okay, now that’s settled, I need to see Pres. Catch you later.” Giving me a kiss on the top of my head, he’s gone.

Still with the WTF going on, I head out of the clubhouse to my van to collect

some supplies so I can refill the cabinets. Grabbing at a bottle of detergent, my hand springs off it. What the hell? Reaching out again, my hand touches a force field around the shelving in my van. Looking closely, I see that my shelves are covered in saran wrap. Turning to my drawer unit, that's the same.

Damn it, Wings. I know this has to be him. Ripping away the wrap from the front of my shelving, I grab for the bottle. It too has been wrapped but not wrapped itself, it's wrapped to the other bottles on the shelf. Getting angrier by the second, I rip the wrap off again, and OMG! The individual bottles are wrapped. He had to have had help with this. No way he could have wrapped this by himself in the time I've been here.

Ripping the wrap from the drawers, I pull the drawer open and grab for a new mop head. Oh no. All the mop heads in the drawer are wrapped together. Taking a deep breath, I unwrap the mop heads, only to find that all the heads are wrapped individually as well. Opening another drawer, this time cleaning rags, it's the same story. Letting out a scream that must be heard all around the compound, never mind the clubhouse, I storm back into the building.

"WINGS! BROTHER'S RIGHTS? WAIT TILL I GET MY HANDS ON YOU. SEE WHAT SISTER RIGHTS GETS YOU, YOU ASSHOLE!"

There are brothers in the common room, *and* by the way they are avoiding my eye, they're as guilty as Wings.

"Like that, is it, boys? Well, we'll see who gets the last laugh. You mark my words." As I'm giving them all the stink eye, Forest walks in.

"Hi, Beautiful. Done for the day?" He smiles at me, not knowing anything about what has just happened.

"Get me the fuck out of here before you have to arrest your Ol' Lady for murder," I spit it out with such venom that a couple of the brothers beat a hasty retreat as I look around the room once more.

Grabbing his hand, I pull him all the way out to my van. Showing him all the wrapped stuff, I can see him trying desperately not to laugh.

"Forest! One giggle, one smirk. I swear to God you'll be celibate the whole of

our time together. They must have done this like a production line. I bet every one of those sons-a-bitches in there had a hand in this, literally. I am so going to get my own back on them. I swear by all that's holy that I'll get them back for this. I don't know how. I don't know when. My time will come and they'll rue the day they crossed me."

"I don't know what to say. You're right though. This was done with military precision. Let's get out of here. I want to go around the house together, so if you have any thoughts or ideas, I can flag them with Hammer," Forest gives me such a tender hug I could almost cry. I have to admit, this has been a genius prank and, as Forest said, performed with military precision.

Following him in the van, I calm down somewhat. Once at the house, he's already waiting at the front door. He is not carrying me over the threshold. Oh no, he's not. Not today, no way.

Walking towards him, I can see his mind working overtime. He wants to, but he also knows today is probably not the best day.

"You can do it another day. I appreciate the sentiment, but let's wait for another time, handsome?" I reach up and give him a kiss on the lips. Following him into the house, I get a guided tour. The kitchen is stunning. I love the layout and the cabinets and appliances scream quality. Ushering me into the dining area has me gasping at the table and chairs that dominate the room.

"This is stunning. Must have cost an absolute fortune. Just look at the grain on that table. Thanksgiving here every year, then. And every other celebration meal." My eyes are like saucers as I take in the whole set.

"They were left here when I bought the place. This is Fox's handiwork. I paid a minimal amount as club brother for them to be restored, and this is what he did with them." Forest is positively beaming at me.

"This is going to be a tough act to follow. What's the bed like?"

"Whatever you want it to be, Beautiful. We haven't got one here yet." We walk from room to room, and I throw out suggestions for design, décor, and furnishings. Forest takes notes on his phone as we go around. He looks pleased with my suggestions, and also the fact that I'm so on board with the

whole moving-in thing.

When we get to the master bedroom, he seems nervous. I can see he's on edge about something. He gets me to check out the ensuite, and Hammer's done a knockout job in there. There is a walk-in closet and opening the door, it's easy to see there is ample storage. I notice something hanging there and it takes a few seconds for it to register. Turning to look at him and then back to the item hanging there, I burst into tears. Grabbing it from the rail and throwing the hanger to the ground, I slip into it. I give a twirl and then throw myself into his arms, kissing the hell out of him.

My kutte looks amazing. I am so thrilled and excited I almost forget to breathe. Leading me back toward the kitchen, I see Stitch and Gemmy waiting for us. Gemmy grabs me and gives me a huge hug.

"Oh my! That looks so good on you. You were obviously meant to be an Ol' Lady." Gemmy beams at me and Stitch states, "Pity she didn't find a good brother." His grin dies as Forest punches him on the arm, and I don't think it's too gentle.

"She got the best of the bunch, you asshole." Forest grabs me into a hug and then pulls his phone out.

"One more thing, while I remember. I need to show you this." He holds up his phone and shows me a picture of an old Harley trike. It doesn't look like anything special and I give him my *'Are you for real?'* look.

"Before." He smirks at me. "After." The second picture is more like it. There's a trike that looks like it's going a hundred miles an hour standing still. It's all blue but different shades of blue with 3D flames. It has a wide single seat with a backrest. The rear wheels and tires are huge, with small fenders over.

"Could it be what finishes the picture? It should suit you perfectly." Forest looks like a cat that got the cream.

"I love it. I can't wait for you to teach me how to ride it." I'm so hyper with everything that has happened all at once, that I'm bouncing on the spot. Gemmy grabs Forest's phone and looks at my blue trike.

"Stitch! You need to get your ass in gear and find me one, too. I want a big

comfy one like Mia's, though. This looks amazing, but too fast for me." Gemmy beams at me and then turns back to Stitch.

"What the hell is this all about? Mia's trike? Heather getting a trike? What don't I know?" Looking at all three of us, we can see Stitch's confusion.

"You know Mia is president for a month? She got herself a Harley trike. She wants all members of the Girl-Gang to have a bike or trike too. Kya already has her Fat Boy. Raven has her truck, so don't know if she'll buy into the bike/trike thing. Personally, I'm in for a trike as I can get one with more seats later when we have kids old enough to ride on it. You need to get with the program, Stitch. Gemmy needs some wheels." I grin, knowing I'm pushing the issue.

I look at the men and then grab Gemmy's hand. "Come look around the house. I need some feminine input." As we head off, both our phones beep. Checking our messages shows a text from Mia.

Mia: Girl-Gang church. Wednesday 7:00 pm. Everyone to attend, no excuses.

We look at each other, give a shrug, and then dive into looking around the house.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

-:- FOREST -:-

Pulling up outside Mrs. Osborne's house, I turn to Ty, who is along for the ride. "Walk around the house, make sure it's secure, then come to Charlie's."

"Okay, Boss."

I walk toward the front door of Charlie's house and give a nod when the door opens and Charlie's there waiting. "Come in, Sheriff."

Once inside the house, we settle in the kitchen at a small table. "We've caught the man who you nailed nicely with your bat." I grin because I can still see the fucker trying to hold his shoulder while sitting in the cell. "He's in the cells at the moment. I've spoken to the DA and after giving him all the information we have, he is thinking of cutting a deal with this asshole so we can get his father, too. What I need from you is a positive ID, and a statement, if you are up for that?"

"Oh, I'm up for it, and I don't need to hide behind any fuckin' mirrors, either. I can face this piece of crap with no hesitation. I may be old, but I still have a sense of what's right and wrong, and don't fear men like this one." Charlie puffs his chest out and looks fierce. It has me wondering if he is prior-military or law enforcement.

"Nothing else happened around here?" I ask.

"No. I've kept in touch with the neighbors and completed my nightly walk. Nobody has seen or heard anything overnight, as I did an early walk this morning. That's why the dog is quiet. I've worn the old fucker out. He'll be snoring until suppertime," Charlie chuckles as he points to the old dog in a cozy bed next to the stove.

"Do you want a lift to the department?"

"No, I have my old truck. She's still running sweet. I'll come down in a while, as I need to go get a few groceries this morning, anyway."

Knocking has both myself and Charlie rise from our chairs and walk to the front door. I slap Charlie's back lightly as I pass him and open the front door where Ty is standing.

"Everything is fine next door," Ty informs me before turning and heading back to the cruiser.

"I'll let Olive know she can come home when she's ready now you've caught the fucker," Charlie says, but I turn and shake my head.

"No, give it a few days and I'll let you know. I want this fucker and his father locked up before she comes home. The last thing I want is her coming home and then anyone associated with this cocksucker deciding to cause trouble with this being the place leading to their arrests and convictions."

"Okay, I'll tell Olive to stay at her sister's for now. But she told me she wants to come home soon or she'll put the place up for sale." Charlie looks more than a little angry telling me this.

"I'm doing my best, Charlie, and my deputies are working hard. We are closing in on a few cases that need closure." I hold my hand out for him to shake and he gives me a chin lift, shakes my hand, and turns back to enter through the front door. I turn and jog back to the cruiser where Ty is patiently waiting.

Two hours later, Charlie has identified Elmer Brackenridge, who is the prior sheriff's nephew, shocking us all when we come to that realization. Elmer, being the old sheriff's nephew, makes his father the old sheriff's brother. My God, this is a tangled web of deceit we're uncovering.

Having spoken with the DA at length, lawyers, judge, and sifting through all the case evidence, there's been some plea bargaining going on. For lesser charges pressed against Elmer, he's agreed to testify against his father, Ulysses Brackenridge. He was the one that organized the burglaries and received the proceeds from them. There can't have been a huge amount of value from the burglaries, though. Elmer believes that the money, along with some intimidation, bought rare parts for cars, which his father then sold on at inflated prices. I'm glad that we've seen some results, at last. It doesn't take long to have Ulysses arrested, in custody, questioned, up

before a judge, and bailed.

Wham, bam, thank you, and done. It hasn't taken long with everyone concerned and pulling together. I'm starting to feel some satisfaction in this job after all the paper pushing and case reading. It's about time.

Walking into the clubhouse after I've spoken to Hammer, I grab hold of Heather, who was working in the common room, and kiss the ever-loving shit out of her, much to Lina's amusement. Then quickly make my way to TwoCents' office.

Knocking on the office door, I enter without waiting for the usual 'come in'. "What do you want, Forest?" TwoCents asks as he looks up from his PC monitor.

"I've come in to pay up my bill. I've spoken to Hammer, and he said he'd given you a final balance. But I'm a brother, so remember that, and I want a good *brotherly discount*."

"Fuckin' hell, Forest! Of course, you get a discount." TwoCents digs around in the top drawer of his desk and pulls out a book with invoices and receipts. Handing me an invoice, I grin when I see it has to be paid by a certain date.

"Here, you best take the payment." I take out, then hand TwoCents my bank card. He does the necessary, leaving my account much lighter. I'm happy with the amount I'm paying. The club has been more than fair with the amount they have charged. It's not much when you consider the brothers who work construction need a salary to live on, too.

Back at my office, I'm reading through the paperwork on Elmer, making sure we have missed nothing. The last thing I need is a loophole for this fucker to get off scot-free.

Hearing shouting, screeching, and cursing has my head snapping up, and jumping to my feet, I run to the reception area. What I see has me half wanting to laugh my ass off, and the other half giving a reprimand.

Meat is dragging a guy through the reception area towards the interrogation rooms and cells. Stopping and turning, Meat punches the man hard enough to lay him out, before kicking him in the ribs and then commenting, '*Whoops, he fell*'.

I step closer and look down at the man, then at Meat. “What’s going on?”

Meat sneers before booting the asshole once more. “This is the fucker that’s been goin’ around raping women. He’s lucky he made it back here. Do you want me to take him to Nell’s?”

Now, I can see the ‘want’ in Meat’s face when he asks me about Nell, and although I’d love to see the gators make supper of this piece of shit, I also know we are here to serve justice, and in the old-fashioned way too.

“Throw him in a cell, then come to my office and fill me in.” I slap Meat’s shoulder right before he grabs the asshole's ankle and drags him behind him mumbling curses about *‘motherfuckers need castrating’*.

After a couple more *‘oomphs’* and *‘aaahs’*, Meat walks into my office and stands in front of the desk. I motion to the chair, but he just grunts and stays where he is.

“You want to tell me who our latest guest is?” Eyebrows raised, I wait for his response. And wait. Seeing him taking some deep, calming breaths, I think this has affected his PTSD. In the future, I’ll have to think twice about using Meat for such cases. He’s damn good, but I don’t want to see him suffering because of the likes of Sheriff Brackenridge not doing his job right in the first place.

“I’m okay, Forest. I’m fine. It’s just my anger at the asshole, nothing more.” Pulling the chair over, he sits and points to his board. “All that and we were nowhere close. The conversation that Colton had overheard was a breakthrough. In the cell, we have none other than Bobby-James. Multiple rapist and all-round bad guy. Caught up with him in a bar with his five friends, where I just happened to be having a non-alcoholic beer while he regaled his friends with his daring exploits. Two of his *‘friends’* left as soon as he started bragging. Once he had confessed, I read them their rights and arrested them all. They chose not to come peacefully.” Meat’s huge grin tells me he enjoyed that immensely.

“You arrested all four and not just this Bobby-James? A bit of overkill, wouldn’t you say?” I can’t help but laugh at Meat. He’s sitting there like the king of the castle, grinning.

“Forest, I have to admit that my PTSD was bothering me and I used them, as my counselor would say, ‘as stress relief’. It was very effective, too. It took me fifteen minutes to subdue them all and then I waited for another fifteen minutes for Sober to arrive.”

“Why did you need to wait for Sober if you’d subdued them all?” I wasn’t aware that Sober had been called to help Meat.

“Sober had to take the three friends to the emergency room. Then he’ll get their statements confirming what Bobby-James told them. I have a blood sample that I’m sending for DNA analysis to confirm he was the rapist in other cases. We didn’t have rape kits for all, but we did for two.” Meat has a smug look on his face and I know he’s waiting for me to ask.

“Okay. Okay. How did you get him to consent to giving you a DNA sample for analysis? And do I want to know the answer?”

“I believe they may call it ‘public domain’. If you leave something in the trash, or an empty glass that you drank from on a table, you don’t need their permission.”

“And so, you have his glass? How can you be sure it was his?” Shaking my head, I can see this could start to unravel when a lawyer gets their hands on this.

“Oh, ye of little faith. Nothing as sketchy as that. I have samples of his blood. He left them on the table, my fist, my knee, the reception floor, and the cell door. He may be anemic. He bleeds easily and copiously. I learned that from Stitch.” Yawning loudly, Meat stands up and heads for the deputies’ office. “He’s all yours now. I’ll bring you everything I have on the cases. The DNA analysis shouldn’t take long. I’ll mark it urgent. The statements that Sober takes should be the icing on the cake.”

“Thanks for everything, Meat. You’ve done a good job on this investigation. Things are finally getting some closure and the townsfolk should see that we’re becoming an effective sheriff’s department again. One they can trust and rely on.”

With a grunt, he’s gone. Some things never change, I think to myself.

Making a call to the DA’s office, I make an appointment so we can get

Bobby-James through the system, and that's another tick in the box as far as I'm concerned. Heading for the kitchen and a coffee, I see I have a visitor walking into reception.

"Francis, hello. Coffee?" I get two coffees and when I get to my office, Francis is sitting in the chair recently vacated by Meat. "How are you? We've not spoken since your last visit."

"I was a little upset the last time we spoke. Colin's death and the total lack of any type of investigation by Sheriff Brackenridge caused me some displeasure and more than a little anger. I went to the gun range and vented with my AR15 and my Desert Eagle. I'm a lot better now." Giving me a wink and a wave of his cup, he does seem to be in a good place.

"I've been thinking, Francis. Just hear me out. I need deputies. I need deputies that care about the job and the cases they work on..." Before I get to finish, he's on his feet, hand raised and repeating the 'I solemnly swear...'
"Well, that answers my next question. When do you want to start?"

"I'll start now if you need the trash in the cell questioned. I'll do it for free, no salary required."

"You know him then? Meat has just brought him in..." Before I finish my sentence again, Francis is speaking.

"I had him as the rapist, but like every other case we thought we'd nailed, something vital went missing and he walked away, free. His fucking father has a lot to answer for."

"I know I'll regret asking, but his father is? As I said, Meat has literally just dropped him in there." I lean forward in my seat ready for the answer.

"*That*, Sheriff Forest, is Bobby-James Brackenridge. Second son of *'the'* Sheriff Brackenridge, formerly of the position you now hold."

"WTF! We've just nailed his brother and nephew, for Christ's sake. They're like cockroaches. Everywhere we turn, there seems to be another of them. I'll call a meeting with Ty and Sober for one morning this week. The four of us can go over all the unsolved or cold cases we dug out. Your 'people' knowledge could be what we need to start putting these things to bed once and for all."

“I’ll be up for that. You can sort the paperwork and badge out then, too. We need to keep things right. I like what I’ve seen with your sheriff's department. I think I’m going to fit in nicely and we’ll meld as a team.” Francis holds his hand out, and he has a good firm shake.

“Glad to have you with us, Francis. I don’t think it will take long before the sheriff’s department will be a force to be reckoned with.”

“Zack, Deputy Francis and I have left the building!” Sniggering as we head out the main doors, I decide to take the SUV home instead of the cruiser. Just maybe I can sneak home to Heather, incognito, and get a bit of special loving!

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

-:- HEATHER -:-

Finishing cleaning Wings' room, I smirk, as I know he's going to be coming up here soon. I got myself a nice, itchy-bitsy spider as payback. Tucking one side of the bedsheet, I leave the other loose, not my usual bedmaking, but that's the clue for Wings.

I know I'm clear to do this as I've got permission from the acting president. Rubbing my hands together as I leave the room, I'm thinking, *'payback is a bitch'*.

Lina is sitting at the bar in the common room, and I step over to her and take a bar stool myself. "Is the woman due soon?"

"Yes. Alf told me she's going to be a good one, so I have every hope we'll get along with each other, and she's not wasting our time."

"Alf has a good sense with people, so I think she should be okay, but we'll soon see."

Turning, I watch as Axel walks from the kitchen, through the common room and toward the playroom. He's doing a good job with the twins and even though he gave them too much to eat and upset their stomachs, he eventually got over the vile smell that the boys were creating. I'm okay with children being poorly, but even I thought the smell of the diarrhea was putrid.

Amelia and Sybil are right behind Axel, following him like he's the Pied Piper. The three of them adore the boys and, although they spoil them, they make sure it's not over the top.

Bitty is cooking today, and she's making a heck of a mess of the kitchen, which I'm sure Meat isn't going to be happy about, as we all know not to mess with his kitchen. He's going to be happy when he has finished his stint as a deputy.

Wings walks into the common room from the front door with a woman

walking beside him. She's around 5' 8", chin length chestnut hair, and an hourglass figure. She is stunning and I can imagine she's going to be turning some of the brothers' heads.

I look over at Lina. "Well, here you go. You are going to be the boss when I'm not here."

Sighing, Lina takes a breath and gives an enormous smile as she steps toward the woman and holds her hand out in greeting. I give Wings a side-eye as he passes, and I'm struggling to hold a straight face as I know he'll be going to his room. He always goes for a wash-up whenever he comes back to the clubhouse, and I see Mia walk past him, giving him a pat on the shoulder. She turns to look at me and gives me an exaggerated wink before walking into the kitchen.

Turning so my back is leaning on the bar, I watch as Lina sits the woman down at one of the tables and runs her through the duties expected of her here. But my mind's not on what she's talking about. I'm waiting for the reaction and when I get it I'm out of here.

It takes a while but then I hear a loud screech before "HEATHER!" is bellowed.

Rushing past Lina and the woman, whose name I haven't gotten yet, she asks, "What did you do now?"

"Well, I have a friend who breeds tarantulas..." I don't have time to say more when I hear Mia telling me to run. I run alright, right to my van, and out the front gate of the compound, which thankfully was open. I think Mia is on my side because as soon as I clear the gate, it starts to close and through my rearview mirror I see Wings standing at the front of the clubhouse shouting something.

The bubble starts deep in my chest, and it rises slowly. I keep trying to swallow it down, but it's not having it. I have to pull over to the side of the road as the laughter starts in my chest, up into my throat, and bursts out of my mouth. The laughter is so intense it has my body shaking and tears running down my cheeks. I laugh so long my stomach hurts. That's payback for all those spiders which we're still finding around the clubhouse.

Lina or Alf will update me on the woman later, I'm sure. I hope she works out because she seemed to get along well with Lina from what I saw.

Pulling up outside the realtor's office, I grab my purse and make my way inside. A middle-aged man looks up and gives me a smile of welcome. It doesn't take long to arrange for my house to go up for sale. I organize a day where he can come to the house and take photographs before I make my way to Ty's house. I'm going to check if one day a week will be enough, or if it will be too much for one person to clean.

Parking, I walk up the path to the front door of Ty's house. It's a lovely place, and it's a family home. There is no doubt about that. The size of the place and its aura lends itself to kids running around screaming with excitement and parents watching on with delight. Dang, I think I may have to change from a cleaner to an author with those poetic thoughts in my mind.

After walking around the house I let myself out and will give the key to Alf who'll pass it on to the person who will be the regular cleaner. Ty is quick to organize things and I think that has to make him a heck of a good deputy.

Feeling my phone vibrate in my front pants pocket, I take it out and see it's Gemmy, sending a message.

Gemmy: I saw you up at Ty's. I'm off today. You want to drop by for a coffee?

Heather: Yeah, give me three minutes and I'll be with you

Standing for a moment, I decide to walk down to Gemmy's house as it's such a lovely day. It's a peaceful area and you can hear the birds singing, and feel the breeze blowing against your skin. Damn, I'm at it again!

Walking around to the back door, I knock and wait for Gemmy to answer. I've never been one to just let myself into someone's home without them saying 'Come in.'

The door opens and I'm grabbed and dragged inside. Not able to stop myself, I give a squeak of fright because damn, I didn't expect that.

"Gemmy, take care with Heather. You scared the shit outta the woman," Stitch says, smirking from where he's sitting at the kitchen island.

Giggling as she pours me a coffee from the pot, it's obvious she doesn't take

heed to what Stitch is saying. He's shaking his head at her, but you can see the love shining from him as he watches her moving around the kitchen.

I take a seat near Stitch and pick up my coffee. "Thank you." Taking a sip and sighing, as that is an excellent coffee.

"So, what do you think about Ty's place?" Stitch asks.

"It's a lovely house. Certainly, a family home, and if he keeps it tidy, I think one person can flick through it in one day a week, keeping on top of the dust and general cleaning. Probably can do some laundry as he has a washing machine and dryer, which, let's face it, you don't have to stand and watch."

"Changing the subject," Gemmy picks up her phone, flips through the photographs, then pushes her phone for me to see. "Lily sent me this picture. She said Star had been out for the night and when she came home, she threw herself down in a chair and that's when for the first time Lily took a good look at her," laughing she continues, "Star had been out for the evening with only one eye made up. She did not know she'd only done one eye, as she'd been disturbed while getting ready. When someone asked why she had one eye made up and not the other she gave them a dirty look and said, *Oh, you're not a fashion guru, this is the latest look.*"

Stitch shakes his head after looking at the picture, and we all laugh at Star's antics. She's a fantastic person and one heck of an athlete.

We sit talking for quite a while. It's a good feeling having friends to talk with and spend quality time. But what comes out of Gemmy's mouth next has one of those screeching come-to-a-stop moments!

"When I saw him with that woman up against the wall kissing the shit out of her..." my mind stops working and I'm staring at Gemmy but not hearing any more of the words coming out of her mouth.

Stitch must realize I'm not in the conversation anymore and he frowns, then takes hold of my hand. I snatch my hand back and stand, picking up my purse where I'd laid it on the island next to me.

"Heather, it was when he first left the FBI. Sowing his wild oats is what my momma used to call it. It was nothing special. She was nothing to him. He'd just purchased the house and..."

I don't wait to hear anymore. I am out of the kitchen, around the house and storm toward my van. 'Sowing wild oats', 'Nothing special', I'll give him wild oats and special when I find him. He should have told me there was more than Polly liable to cause me a problem.

It doesn't take me long to storm into the sheriff's department and look around for Forest. Zack is manning the reception desk and looks at me, surprised when I stop in front of him.

"Where is the asshole?"

"Um, the sheriff is in his office." Zack points to a door and I stomp my way to it, look around and see Meat sitting behind a desk. He raises an eyebrow, smirks, and points to another door. Which is where I find my man sitting behind a desk. He gives me a huge smile until he cottons onto the tension in my body and the scowl on my face.

Turning, I slam the door closed behind me and step over to the desk where Forest is getting to his feet. Placing my hands on my hips, I squint my eyes and ask, "How many women have you stuck your dick in since you came back here?"

Looking shocked, Forest continues around the desk and sits on the edge in front of me. "A few. I was single, just out of the FBI, and wanted a feeling of being free and easy. Every woman I went with knew the score, and that it was a one-time thing. Only Polly wanted to take it further."

"Am I going to be getting shit from women wherever I go now? Thanks to you wanting to sow your oats."

"I just said they knew it was a one-and-done. Nobody should give you shit for anything." Reaching out for me, I take a step back and I don't miss the flash of sadness that crosses Forest's face.

Pacing back and forth in front of him, I take deep breaths and blow them out. It takes me a while, but I know that he did nothing wrong; he was single and I have no right to be upset at something that happened before we got together. I stop in front of Forest and give him a head nod before stepping forward kissing his cheek then turn and open the door.

"I'll see you later." It's the best I can manage at the moment. Then Forest

steps forward, wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me back into the office, slamming the door behind us.

“I’m sorry, Beautiful. If I’d known you were coming into my life, I wouldn’t have been with anyone. But we don’t know these things until they happen. I love you and I’ll never look at another as long as I live.” Forest kisses me gently at first and then with more passion.

When I can get my breath I whisper, “I love you too,” but have to follow it up, “and you better not look at another or you won’t live very long.”

As I leave the office, I nod at Meat who has a shit-eating grin on his face. Ty is stunned, and I stick my chin in the air and walk out as regally as I can muster.

Sitting in the kitchen of my house, I look around and note what I’ll take with me and what I need to sell. My notebook has two nice lists building and it’ll keep me organized once I’ve gotten them completed.

Opening my laptop, I find two stores where I can purchase the furniture we are going to need. I make a third list of things that I need Forest to look at before I place orders.

Looking up when Forest walks into the kitchen, I check the time. “Sorry, I didn’t realize it was so late.”

“No problem. What you doing, Beautiful?” Forest wraps himself around behind me and rests his chin on my shoulder.

“Checking out furniture for your place.”

“No, Heather, it’s *our* place. Our home, and whatever you want, just purchase it. I’m no good at matching shit up. You get what you know we need and I’ll pay the bill.” Taking out his wallet, Forest hands me his bank card before kissing me on the nose and walking over to open the fridge. “I can make omelets if you want that?”

“Yeah, okay. Thank you,” I murmur, but my mind is on the furniture displayed on my laptop.

Walking into the clubhouse later, I see the Ol’ Ladies gathered around the bar. Forest heads toward Knuckles, Axel, Jig, and Fist, who are sitting at one

of the tables with a beer in front of them.

I follow the others into what the men call church and take a seat. Mia is sitting at the head of the table and picks up a gavel, tapping it on the table. "Meeting to order." She smirks and I can't help the giggle that escapes. Eden looks at me and smiles, giving me a wink before turning back to Mia.

"Okay, this meeting is for me to find out who is going to be an official girl gang biker and who isn't." I look at the others and can see some confusion. "You know, I've contacted you all about riding your own bike or trike. If we are going to have our own road trips, then we need to be able to ride a freaking bike. Around the room, I want to know your intentions."

Raven, "Bike."

Kya, "Bike."

Gemmy, "Trike."

Winter, "Bike."

I quickly add, "Trike."

Eden, Carrie, Tilly, and Jo remain quiet. Mia gives them a frown before starting. "Okay then, Raven, Kya, Gemmy, Winter, and Heather are official fully paid-up sisters of the girl-gang. You four are prospects."

Winter busts out laughing and the look on the prospects' faces is sadly missed as phones were not allowed in the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

-:- FOREST -:-

Kissing Heather goodbye has become a morning routine I enjoy. Not the parting, of course, just the kissing. None of my previous relationships ever had this depth of emotion. It's very new to me but I have to say, I love it.

Another meeting this morning at the sheriff's office. I'll be glad when we can settle down to investigating our own 'timeline' crimes and not be delving into all this crap we've inherited. I have Ty, Sober, and Francis at this morning's meeting. I'll update Hands and JP with any relevant information we turn up as part of their shift change.

Arriving at the office, I head straight for the kitchen. I know from messages that all three are already here in my office and waiting. I'd better get a coffee as soon as I walk in, I'm sure they'll be keen to get started.

Zack and Gemmy are both giggling as I head back through reception to my office. "I did it again, didn't I? I ignored you on the way in. I'm so sorry. I don't do it on purpose."

Zack speaks for them both and says, "We can always tell when you're focused on something. You walk around with blinders on. We don't take offense because we know you well enough by now."

"That's good to hear because I don't know where I'd be without the pair of you. The place wouldn't be anywhere near as efficient without you." I give them a big smile and take myself off to my chair in my office.

"Morning, guys. You're on the ball this morning. One of my old bosses used to call it, 'chomping at the bit'. Have you been chatting or have you made a start without me?"

"We've been getting acquainted, actually," Ty remarks in his posh voice.

Sober looks serious. "Francis has been giving his thoughts on my case, Colin's murder. Seems we've taken a long time to dig up evidence that should have been in the case file all along." I can see how angry he is about

this, and I can't say I blame him.

"We'll get to the bottom of Colin's murder. I guarantee that. Everyone that knew him wants justice done. There hasn't been a single person we've spoken to that believes he was drunk and drowned. The evidence is screaming murder. A witness statement points to him being carried and dumped in the river, or at the river's edge. We will get those responsible." Everyone agrees with this and I think that has been the topic of conversation before I got here.

"Let's start with the list of outstanding issues we have. See if we can nail some of these fuckers in Brackenridge's family once and for all. Ty, you made a list, so we'll start there." I take a drink of my coffee and listen as he starts to read out his list. He hands us all a copy of the list that he is going to read from. I see Francis glance at it and then turn it over as though he's going to use the blank side for taking notes.

"We have Andrew-James, traffic violations, and domestic abuse. We're wasting our time there as he's deceased." Ty shrugs it off, but before he can move on, Francis speaks up.

"I bet there are no cases for any of those charges? And there certainly won't be any investigation into the death. Andrew-James was the sheriff's father, and you've never met anyone that was as low or mean as him. He gives the term 'scum of the earth' a bad name.

"From what I knew of his death, his wife waited till he was blind drunk one night, and after he finished abusing her, she caved his head in with a bottle of sour mash. Then she took the belt that he used to beat her with and made the body unrecognizable. No one at the department ever saw the body, but people talk, family, morgue attendants, etc. The autopsy stated that the cause of death was heart failure, and that's what it states on the death certificate. I had pictures at the time from one of the morgue attendants. His wife, the sheriff's mother, sure did a number on him.

"Sheriff Brackenridge thought his father was next to God. Funny that his mother died of an overdose, due to being so grief-stricken the day they buried him. She never touched drugs or alcohol her whole life. She was too God-fearing for any of that shit." Francis sits back in his chair, waiting.

“There’s always more coming out of the woodwork with this family,” I say, looking around the room. Seeing everyone’s gaze landing on Francis.

“Just saying. What’s next?” he asks, raising his eyebrows back at us and damn well grinning.

“Ulysses, the wrecking yard owner,” Ty states, “turned out to be a brother to the sheriff, but he’s going down for his part in the crime spree that was rife. He’s been nailed by his own son, the sheriff’s nephew, and the nephew has a plea deal for his part in burglaries around the town.”

“You’ll need to look out for Elmer if he’s spoken out against Ulysses. There’s no family bond at all as far as Ulysses is concerned. I know he beat up his younger brother, and his father, at a bar once when he lost a game of pool. He has far-reaching links too. He’ll be able to get to Elmer if he has a mind to,” Francis informs us.

“I’m afraid that doesn’t worry me. If that happens it will be up to a different department to sort out. I’ve had enough of this family. If they want to start taking each other out, then let ‘em have at it, I say.” Giving everyone my ‘don’t give a fuck’ shrug, I then nod for Ty to carry on.

“I have an Abraham for speeding. It appears he’s never gone beyond getting a ticket. Ticket issued goes unpaid.” Ty looks around the room. “I’ll get a trap set for him as he always does it on the same road.”

“There will be a bench warrant for contempt of court. Leave that motherfucker to me. I probably wrote most of those tickets. I know where and what time to nail his hide. He’ll be in a cell by tomorrow evening, mark my words. Another brother of the sheriff that has been allowed to do as he fuckin’ well likes,” Francis smirks.

“I wish I had a family tree for these assholes,” Ty rants, “it would save me some time in the long run, I bet.”

Francis looks at us all and laughs. I mean laughs loud and hearty. We all turn and glare at him, wondering what he finds so damn funny about us all being so frustrated. As one, we all say the same thing, “Care to share?”

“This has got you guys thoroughly pissed off, hasn’t it? Can’t see the wood for the trees, maybe?”

“Yes, Francis. Very frustrated, pissed off, chasing our tails, etc. Glad you find it so funny.” I’m starting to get louder and I can feel my frustration boiling over.

“You guys have a family tree. It’s on the wall in the deputies’ office.”

“What?” I look at Sober and Ty. “You have a family tree on the wall?”

Ty jumps up and rushes to their office. Only seconds later, he’s back and looks totally crestfallen. “Well?” I ask him.

“Yep. It’s all there. I can’t believe we’ve walked past it so many damn times and not seen it.” Ty is shaking his head. “Gemmy’s whiteboard, dammit. She’s been adding to it, but none of us ever kept up to date with what she was doing. We were so focused on the evidence board we forgot the ‘family’ board you asked her to do.”

“Well spotted, Francis. You probably single-handedly broke these cases with evidence I provided my deputies already. Well done.”

Going through the remaining cases, we connect the evidence to the correct names. We also tie in some aliases that have been used to confuse the charges being traced to a single person. We have an Eloise and a Lois who are one and the same niece. Also, a Darlene, Darla, and Lena are all one daughter.

Of the four sons that the sheriff had, one turned out good. Carey-James. He moved to Florida for college and never returned, apparently going on to university, and making a successful life down there away from the ‘family businesses.’

While we’re doing this, Francis pops our bubble. “Erm, there are only three sons, not four,” he says.

“What? Gemmy has four, so I’ll bet there are four. It’s highly unlikely she would get that wrong. GEMMY! Got a minute?” I call out and she’s soon popping her head in the door.

“Yes, sir? Can I be of assistance?” She beams at me.

“Francis believes there were only 3 sons, not the four that you’ve reported. Any suggestions?” I ask her with my eyebrows raised.

“Of course, Sheriff. Your deputy is wrong,” she beams at Francis directly.

“No, I don’t think so, little lady. I worked with him long enough.” Francis gives Gemmy a sickly sweet grin.

Gemmy steps away from the door and is back in seconds with a large envelope. Taking the contents out, she rifles through them. Giving us all the stink eye, she begins.

“Daughters one, Darlene Brackenridge, aliases Darla, Lena.” Placing a birth certificate on my desk.

“Son Number one, in age-related order, youngest first. Carey-James Brackenridge, no known aliases.” Placing a male birth certificate on the desk.

“Son number two, Bobby-James Brackenridge, no known aliases.” Another birth certificate is placed on the desk.

“Son number three, John-James Brackenridge, alias JJ.” Placing another birth certificate.

“Son number FOUR, and the oldest or FIRST BORN. Corey-James Shiloh, surname changed via the court process from Brackenridge. One birth certificate and one set of court papers showing legal name change.” Shoving her face at Francis and smirking. “So, ‘little deputy’, what do you say now? An apology, is it?”

“My sincere apologies. Gemmy, is it? I won’t make that mistake again. That’s a hell of a lesson you teach, miss.” Francis picks up the fourth certificate and the legal paperwork. Gemmy walks out of the office, wiping her hands together, looking smug.

“Well, Sheriff. You should make Gemmy a deputy. She just made sense of a lot of this mess. The oldest son had his name changed not long after he was born. He was brought up by a former mayor's family. Corey Shiloh was the previous mayor to Mayor Jackson. He was obviously groomed for the mayor's position. That explains how Sheriff Brackenridge was appointed, and how things were going unnoticed for so long. This was a well-executed state of affairs for a long time. I dread to think how much they’ve bled from the community or even the state.”

“Or more importantly, gentleman, just what crimes did they get away with? Ones that we, so far, haven’t discovered?” Leaning back in my chair, I realize how serious this has just become. Picking up my phone, I put a call through to our current mayor, Mayor Jackson.

“Mayor Jackson's office, how may I help?”

“This is Sheriff Forest. I need to speak to the mayor at once.”

“I’m sorry, Sheriff. The mayor is in a meeting and has left instructions not to be disturbed.” The mayor’s assistant responds.

“You’d better disturb him, tell him it’s urgent, and that I need to speak to him now. Do I make myself clear?”

“Hold the line, Sheriff. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Sheriff? Mayor Jackson. What’s happened?”

“Sorry to disturb you, Mayor, I wouldn’t unless it was serious.”

“I understand that, Sheriff. What’s happened?”

“You need to come to my office immediately. This isn’t something that can wait. I have three deputies here that can witness what we’ve discovered and what I have to tell you. I don’t think it wise if we all turn up at your office.”

“Very well. I’ll be there as soon as I can make my excuses. Am I likely to be there long?”

“Probably not. It’s information at this point, not action, I believe.”

“Okay. I’ll be at your office in a few minutes.” The mayor is calling out orders before he cuts the call.

“Let’s get all this into some order so we can lay it out for the mayor, clean and simple.” We clear my desk and put the details out in a timeline fashion. It doesn’t take a lot to do as the important bit for the mayor is the oldest son. Once that’s explained as part of the equation the rest, as they say, is history.

It only takes Mayor Jackson ten minutes, and he walks into reception. Making me look bad, he greets Gemmy and Zack with a polite word and a

big smile. Seeing Gemmy stick her tongue out at me has me cringing.

He speaks to all in the room and then closes the door. As I explain everything we've found, I can see him getting redder and angrier. When we tell him the identity of the last mayor, I think he's going to explode. Giving himself time to digest everything and then to calm down, he looks around the room.

"Sheriff Forest, I have to say that although I find all this very disturbing and distasteful, I am extremely happy with my decision to have you in this position, and with your ability to build the team you have. When you're ready to go to the DA with this, I'll accompany you, but in the meantime, I have someone on my team who can investigate the previous administration and see what else may have been going on. I doubt that they were as successful at hiding their financials as they were at hiding his credentials."

Gemmy taps on the door gently. "Sorry, Forest. A courier has just brought an envelope for Sober, and I thought it may be important. I think it's some DNA results or information."

Sober steps up and damn near snatches the envelope from her. "Thanks, Gemmy. This could be what I've been waiting for." Tearing the envelope open reveals two sheets of paper. We can all see him taking deep breaths before starting to read. The mayor looks at me to see if he should stay or leave. A quick nod from me and he relaxes while we wait for Sober to tell us what he's got.

"The first DNA found on Colin's body, that was never sent for analysis, belongs to Sheriff Brackenridge." Sober doesn't react to this as much as we'd expected, but then we're not surprised. Taking another breath, he reads the second page. When he's finished he hands it, surprisingly, to Mayor Jackson. He reads it and I see his face flushing with anger. Finally getting my hands on it, I read the name out loud.

"Corey Shiloh, prior name Brackenridge. Our former mayor."

Looking at Sober, I can see where he wants to be right now. "Sober? Get everything you have on this case. We still don't know what Colin was investigating. That could be the vital piece of information we need. I'll see

about getting Brackenridge interviewed. He might want to throw someone under the bus when he faces a murder charge. Once you have it and we're certain there are no loopholes, we'll make the arrest. And, Sober? I don't want you alone for the next forty-eight hours. You are not to do anything stupid. You hear me?"

The mayor touches Sober's shoulder. "You're too good a man to let a dirtbag like Corey Brackenridge get away with murder because you're angry. Let's do this together and let's do it right."

The mayor excuses himself and leaves while the rest of us take our seats. Ty looks at Sober. "Hey, man. My house purchase went through. We can get your stuff and you can move in today. That should help keep your mind occupied and your body out of mischief. We can have a few beers later to settle in. Maybe Forest and Gemmy will come over?"

"Me and Stitch will be there!" Gemmy's voice filters through from reception.

"You haven't been formally invited yet," Ty yells back.

"If you don't want to bandy invitations about, shut the damn office door, then," Gemmy calls back. "Anyway, now that your meeting is finally over, I'm going home. See you guys soon. See you Francis, Zack."

"How come you're here so late?" I call through. "Needing overtime?"

"If you're gonna keep the whole day shift drinking coffee and chatting all day, me and Zack have to pick up the slack. See ya later." With that, Gemmy damn near skips out of the place.

The rest of the afternoon, Francis and I stay at the office and as no calls come in, we piece together all the cases. We're going to have a busy time when we start pulling this family in, and they are not going to like it. I keep seeing Francis' grin and I know he's looking forward to it.

When it's time to call it a day, Francis asks if I'd mind taking the SUV so he can have the cruiser. Not wanting to get into anything else today, I pass him the keys. Once I've seen Hands and JP and they've been briefed on the day's events, I'm off to see my Ol' Lady. Getting back to Heather's doesn't take long, and as soon as I see her in the kitchen I scoop her up and kiss the hell out of her. Asking if she wants to go over to Ty's later, she surprises me

when she says it's already arranged. The oven here is full of pizzas and Gemmy has garlic bread and salad. Ty is supplying beer and Sober wine. He says he has a better palate than Ty.

Looks like we're in for a good evening all round tonight. Coming home to a good woman, good food, and being happy as all hell. What more could a guy want?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

-:- HEATHER -:-

It's Saturday and I'm moving into Forest's house. Dang, I should be thinking of moving in with Forest and my new home. It feels strange, as I've been independent for such a long time and lived alone, that to share a home is going to either be awesome or downright annoying.

I kissed Forest silly this morning and gave him a great wake-up call, much to his surprise and pleasure. His rumbled, 'You can wake me up like that anytime you like, Beautiful,' still rings in my ears. I love it when he calls me that.

I'm going to call in at the clubhouse and see if Lina and the new woman Dee are getting along okay. Alf reported that Dee was going to fit in well, and he had no concerns. The background check Specs did was fast and thorough, and I know the cash we pay for that service is well worth every dollar. It's also helped us to get the extra staff onboard that we needed. Two more to cover the new contracts that Alf had done estimates for.

Parking my van next to the back door of the kitchen, I climb out and stretch my back out. Looking across, I can see Meat in the treehouse. What is he wearing and what is he doing?

Walking over to the treehouse, I look up and Meat is standing in what can only be described as a Samurai costume. Damn, he looks good in it too. Watching Meat, who is watching me, I have to ask, "What are you doing?"

"On watch," Meat grunts in reply.

"Meat, you know we don't have any invading Mongols around here, don't you?"

Grunt.

"Hm, let's see..." Tapping my chin, dredging my memory. "Thirteenth century, awesome warriors, fighting the invading Mongols. Defeated by the Imperial Army, the last Samurai was beheaded by his own second. On

Imperial orders, of course.”

Grunt.

“So, Meat, if what I remember is correct why are you on watch for Mongols or Imperial Armies?”

Grunt.

Knowing that’s all I’m going to get from him, I shrug, walk back to the clubhouse, and enter the kitchen. Amelia, Bitty, and Sybil are sitting at a table drinking iced tea and, if I’m honest, looking tired out.

“Are you all okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, we just need Mia to get back to being a mother again. Watching the twins and Axel is damn tiring,” Bitty moans. The other two nod in agreement before taking another sip of their tea.

“Did you know you have a Samurai in the compound?” I ask, grinning at the three of them.

“Yeah. I told him he should be a slave in one of those diaper things they wear. That way we get to look at him in next to nothing. We don’t get to see a naked man anymore, and that man is all man,” Amelia sighs.

“He sure is, and he has those tattoos,” Bitty surprises me by saying. When I look at her, I must have a surprised look because she continues. “Hey, I’m old, not dead. I still have eyes in my head and I intend to use them in case I ever go blind. I want to be able to see that shit behind my eyelids whenever I want.”

Sybil gives a wistful look, leaning her chin on her palm and her elbow on the table. “Those were the days.”

“What days?” Amelia asks.

“You know, when we could come home from work, jump on our man, and have our wicked way with them.” Bitty snorts, amused, but you can easily see the memories in her eyes when she sighs, “Yeah.”

“Okay, enough, I don’t want to know.” I giggle as I make my way out of the kitchen.

Making my way upstairs, I find Lina and Dee making Buzz's bed. The room is clean, and everything is as it should be. I know Buzz likes his room spotless, with no clutter at all.

Lina looks up and smiles. "Have you been into Wings' room?"

"No."

"He's got a tank with that damn spider in it." Shuddering as she tells me. "I've told him if it gets out, it's the last time I clean his room. The thing is huge and hairy."

Dee laughs, "He's feeding it other things, like crickets and mealworms."

"Oh dear. I was going to sneak it back to my friend. Do you think he wants to keep it, or should I make it disappear?"

"Leave it alone now. He'll come back with something horrid if you take it away." Lina frowns at me.

"He's called it Legs. Because it's got so many." Dee looks at me, then busts out laughing, which has me laughing with her.

Hearing heavy footsteps, I step behind the door just in case it's Wings. I'm still hiding from him at this point.

"Have you seen Heather anywhere?"

"No, is her van here?" Lina asks bending down and messing around with the corner of the bed.

"Yeah. I'm looking for her to get some payback." Wings' gruff voice holds amusement. Dee keeps quiet, but I can see she wants to laugh. I'm pinned behind the door and struggling not to laugh and give my position away.

Once Wings walks away, I quickly come out from behind the door. "Do you need anything? You both doing okay?"

Lina grins. "We're fine. Go on, get gone before he finds you, or does something nasty to the van again."

I stealthily make my way out of the clubhouse and to my van, sneaking out of the compound after giving Meat another wave.

Back at my house, I look at the time and know the furniture removal people will be here soon. I arranged it rather than putting more work on the brothers of the club. Forest said they'd be happy to use the vans and move things, but this saves anyone having to move things on a weekend, especially on a Saturday when they've been working all week.

My house has a 'For Sale' sign, and I've noticed a few vehicles slowing down to look as they pass. I'm hoping that shows a good amount of interest in the place.

I've been messaging Gemmy as she feels she caused trouble with her comment about Forest, but I've smoothed it over and we are back to our lighthearted friendship.

The removal goes well, and at Forest's, now our house, I guide them where to place the furniture. This is a huge deal for me, but it also feels like a new adventure, and one I hope is for forever.

I have brought my clothes and toiletries so now it's time to get them all put in the closet and ensuite bathroom. This is going to take me quite some time, but I knuckle down and get started.

It's mid-afternoon by the time I've finished and walk around checking out if everything is how I want it. I open a box in the kitchen and unpack plates and cutlery, filling the dishwasher as I go along. You wouldn't believe how many pots, pans, dishes, and kitchen appliances we have or need. Not until you move homes, anyway.

I have organized the new furniture to be delivered early next week. Thankfully, we are keeping my queen-sized bed as it is only six months old, and I've never shared it with anyone. So, the new furniture is extra pieces that are needed, like a dresser, and a desk for one of the spare rooms as I want to work more from home to help Alf with customer relations, if nothing else. I always liked to see new clients and decide if we take the work on or not. I'd like to start doing that again, even if only for a short time until I start a family.

The kitchen door opens, and Forest walks in, giving me a huge smile. "Welcome home." I giggle at the playfulness he's showing and look behind

him to see if Ty is with him.

With Ty nowhere in sight, I grab my man and enjoy a long, slow kiss. “Ty and Sober are getting settled into Ty’s house, but Gemmy is pouting that she’s lost her favorite men, much to Stitch’s annoyance.”

Forest smirks, “Okay, come see what was delivered this morning.” Taking my hand and leading me out to the garage.

“My trike!” I gasp as I see it sitting in the garage. I can’t wait to get on and learn how to ride it.

“I got you leathers to wear, so come try them on. You’re not having a lesson without the gear.”

Indoors Forest hands me an assortment of boxes and opening them I find leather pants, a leather jacket, boots, and gloves. There is even a helmet with a forest scene at the back. It has a full visor that flips down and the ability for me to speak to someone. I’m so excited that I throw myself at Forest and kiss his cheeks, forehead, nose, chin, and mouth.

“Come on, get dressed. You are going to have your first lesson.” Forest slaps my ass as I walk away and although it leaves a sting, I laugh with the excitement I’m feeling.

Once I’m all geared up, I make my way to the garage. Looking my trike over has me positively cooing with excitement. She is stunning. Walking over to her, Forest tosses me the keys. I can’t wait to get her fired up and start looking for somewhere to put the key.

“Hold up there, Speedy. Let’s just go over where everything is first before you start her up. You need to be sure you’re fully aware of where all the controls are and then we can get you comfortable using them. Right, hop on, and let’s see that you’re comfortable reaching everything. Hands on the grips, feet on the pegs. Hands first, how do they feel?”

“Awesome. Where do I put the key?” Looking around, I don’t see an ignition switch.

“Can your fingers reach the brake lever and the clutch lever, okay? Can you pull them all the way back?” Forest watches as I pull on the levers. The left

one goes back all the way, the right one only about halfway. "I can't pull the right one all the way. Is that a problem?" I look at him worriedly. I hope this isn't going to stop me from riding her.

"No, the right is your front brake. If it goes fully back, you probably have a brake issue. The left should go all the way. That's your clutch. Once you get the feel of the bite of the clutch, you probably won't go more than halfway back. Now, feet. Are they resting okay on the footrests? And can you feel the brake and gear pedals, okay?"

"The big flat one pushes down okay. It doesn't travel far. Is that the brake?" I just want to get the hell out of here and on the road.

"Well done. Yes, that's the brake. The smaller cylindrical pedal, that's your gears. You need to feel comfortable both pressing it down with the sole of your foot but also pulling it up with your toes. That's how you're going to change up and down through your gears." Forest is very patient with his instructions, but I'm nearly bouncing out of my seat and raring to go.

"Now, we're going to start the ignition, so you need both feet on the ground first. The ignition is by your right thigh on this one. Place the key in and turn it clockwise. See the lights come on, on your speed dial? That one is neutral. If the light is out, your trike won't start, it's in gear. You have a fuel light on your fuel gauge. Red means go get some gas fast. You have a blue light, high beam. You'll be dazzling oncoming vehicles just the same as when you're in a car."

"Dammit, Forest. I get all that shit. Get on with the good stuff." I'm about out of patience now and just want to start her up.

"Next to your right thumb is a small square button. That's your electric start. On the top of that grip is a big red switch. That's your emergency stop button. Indicators and horn are by your left thumb. Next to your left forefinger is a switch to flash your headlight. Right, push the start button."

Pushing the button with my thumb almost has me shit my pants. There is a loud honk that scares the hell out of me and has Forest jumping too.

"Wrong thumb, sweetheart."

"You don't say! I bet I don't forget that in a hurry." Pressing the right button

has the engine roar into life. It sits there bubbling loudly and I can't say that I'm not enjoying the vibrations filtering through the seat.

For the next ten minutes, Forest has me stopping and starting, putting my girl in and out of first and second gear, and feeling for the bite of the clutch. Once he's happy with that, he gears up himself and starts his hog. Pulling slowly onto the road, I see Gemmy and Stitch watching from their drive. I wave like a maniac and stall immediately. What a fool. Starting her up again, I turn and follow Forest out of town.

The exhilaration of riding is beyond what I expected. I love riding behind Forest, but I never thought I would enjoy riding a vehicle of my own. But, I just love this and feel so safe with it being a trike. Three wheels are better for me than two wheels.

Knowing it's clear I speed up and overtake Forest and I can't help but laugh as I pass him by seeing the look of shock on his face.

"Slow down," I hear from my helmet, but I'm ignoring it as I'm loving every minute of this. I'm not going fast by anyone's standards. I'm within the speed limit so Forest can be quiet and follow me for a while.

"Pull into the gas station coming up, I need to top up," Forest tells me, and I smirk because looking at my gas I'm fine. I'm going to have my fun here.

Slowing down and pulling in, I stop near the exit and look over my shoulder, watching Forest. I bide my time and as soon as he starts to fill the tank, I'm powering out of the gas station and onto the open road, laughing my ass off.

I travel the miles home, singing and humming as I enjoy the freedom. I'm going to bake Specs a cake for getting my motorcycle license. I'm sure he'll be busy getting Mia's and all the other Ol' Ladies' licenses because we want to be legal if Forest pulls us over. That has me laughing once more.

Later I'm laying over Forest's knee getting my ass tanned, but I'm not worried at all, and when Forest realizes I'm not worried about it we end up christening the bedroom instead.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

-:- FOREST -:-

Monday morning already. The weekends just go by too fast. Kissing Heather before heading out to the sheriff's department has me thinking about how quickly my life has come together. Twelve months ago I would've told anyone they were mad if they'd suggested this is where I would be.

Driving to the office, I suddenly get the urge to call on Mrs. Osborne. She should be back from her sister's by now. Pulling up outside her house, I see Charlie waving from her front window. As I walk up the yard, they both come outside to meet me.

"Sheriff, they made such a mess of my home. I hope they're not going to get away with this. We are all tired of seeing these thugs get away with stealing our hard-earned belongings and vandalizing our homes. You said you'd stop this." She has her hands on her hips and is leaning toward me as though she was telling off a little boy at bedtime, or some such thing.

Charlie is quick to speak up. "I told her you'd got them, Sheriff. I said that you'd had them in your cells. Olive wouldn't take my word for it. Said if she hadn't seen you in a couple of days, she was gonna storm the sheriff's department."

"It's okay, Charlie. Did you tell Mrs. Osborne that you were the hero of the day? It was Charlie who called us and gave us the information that led to an arrest. He came down and identified him too. We nearly had to arrest Charlie for murder though. I bet he hasn't told you that?" I'm smirking as I look at Charlie.

Charlie gives me an evil look in return. "You're just exaggerating things, Sheriff, so Olive leaves you alone."

"I'm sorry we didn't catch them before they damaged your personal belongings. It will be a long time before they're out and even then, we'll be sure that they don't start any of this again. It is nice to see you back in town though," I give her a genuine smile. She is such a lovely person and I wish

she hadn't had to come home to her house in turmoil.

"I think they were after your coin collection. That must be worth quite a bit by now." Charlie looks at Mrs. Osborne.

"There's no chance of anyone finding that. It was my father's before mine and it's so well hidden that without the instructions in my will, no one is getting their hands on it. If you hadn't caught them, Sheriff, I was going to live with my sister. She persuaded me I shouldn't have to live in fear. Now you've done what you set out to; I won't have to. Thank you. I never thought I'd be saying thank you to a sheriff in this town again. Do you want to come in for a coffee?"

"No thanks are necessary. It's my job. I'll take a rain check on the coffee if that's okay. I should've been at the office by now, but I wanted to see if you were home." Making my way to my SUV, I hear Charlie trying to explain why he was nearly arrested for murder. As I start to drive away, I can hear him getting scolded and think, perhaps I shouldn't have said that. Nah. He'll be lapping up all that attention.

Picking up some pastries and savories from the bakery, I arrive even later than I expected at the office. Walking in, I make sure I give a loud and cheerful hello to Gemmy and Zack. They both grin at me and I can see their eyes light up at the bags I'm carrying.

Stopping and looking into the cells, I frown before going into the kitchen. By the time I place the bags on the table, the room is crowded. Gemmy and Zack have a bag between them and disappear quickly. Sober has a Danish pastry in one hand and a sausage roll in the other. Ty has latched onto two sausage rolls and Francis is being very picky as he looks through the remaining goodies, stating that he has to watch his figure. This comment has him wearing the Danish pastry that Sober had crammed into his mouth and then jettisoned when he burst out laughing.

Brushing off the crumbs that missed Francis and landed on my shirt, I give Sober a dirty look, "Sorry, Boss. What figure though?" he states.

Francis looks very indignant at this remark. "I'll have you know this figure has been lovingly nurtured with good food, excellent beer, and as little

unnecessary exercise as possible. Kindly keep such hurtful comments to yourself. I could probably have you arrested for that in some states.”

I look at my three deputies and ask them, “Why has Bobby-James had a buzz cut?” I’m not quick enough to move and end up wearing the last of Sober’s Danish pastry. “What the fuck is wrong with you today? I’m not stopping at the bakery again unless you’re out on patrol or on a day off.”

Francis grabs a donut and an apple turnover and has a huge smile on his face. “That’s not Bobby-James. He was collected as soon as we got here this morning. That is Abraham, former ‘King of Speed’. About to become ‘Broke and Incarcerated’. No judge is going to look favorably on someone with his number of outstanding tickets and flagrant disregard for the judicial system.”

“That’s why you wanted the cruiser.” I give him a high five and a well done. “Did Bobby-James have much to say for himself when they took him?”

“Not to us, but he talked JP to death last night. Wouldn’t shut up. Once he knew about the test results, and that there was someone who recognized him and would stand up in court to identify him, he knew he was going down. There may be more cases that we’re not aware of. He stopped his bragging when he realized that JP was taking notice, and he was getting seriously riled up. He mentioned you several times, though. Seems that when you took over, they wanted to know what kind of sheriff you were going to be.

“More specifically, would you be one that could be bribed? One that might join their ‘family business’? Maybe you had a dirty secret that they could blackmail you with? They didn’t know about your FBI history, that’s a fact. Bobby-James was most put out by that piece of information.”

“Guess their intel gathering wasn’t very thorough then. A bit like ours with the sheriff’s family tree?” Looking directly at Ty has him swallowing his last bite of sausage roll and disappearing to the deputies’ office. Sober asks if he can have a word in private, so I pour a coffee and we go to my office. As I sit in my chair, he closes the door and takes a seat opposite.

“What’s the score with Colin’s murder? I’ve been good all weekend, but it’s

grinding on me now. I need to see some results.” Sober looks tense and I understand his feelings.

“I spoke with the DA Friday. Mayor Jackson was there, too. You know he wanted to be involved. Corey Shiloh now lives out of state, which I’m sure is no coincidence. The local law enforcement is picking him up. Mayor Jackson filed additional charges concerning missing funds and misappropriations. Corey is not going to wriggle out of this. The primary charge though, will be murder in the first degree of Colin Montgomery. There will be no plea deals on that.” I see Sober’s shoulders relax a little, but not completely. I can see he is reacting much like Meat to the stress of the situation. Before I can say more he stands and holds out his hand.

“Thank you, Forest. I’ll rest easy knowing we’re going to get justice for Colin. I’m taking the rest of the day on patrol if that’s okay? I could do with some alone time while I process it all.”

“I’m good with that. If you need some time off, I’m good with that too. Just say the word, Sober. And don’t forget. This is down to your dedication and hard work that we got here. Thank you.” I watch as he leaves my office. He collects a few bits from the deputies’ office, speaks to Ty and Francis, and then heads out.

Watching him drive away through the office window reminds me of something that had been in the back of my mind for a few days. I take my cell phone and place a call to Axel.

“Yeah, Forest. What’s up?” He almost shouts down the phone.

“I was wondering how Meat is doing because I know the investigation he did was first class, but I was wondering how he coped with it.”

“Well, Forest, he’s in his treehouse at the moment, so I’m guessing it got to him. We’ve not seen a lot of him since he came back. He was dressed as a Samurai the other day, watching for invading armies. At least he was dressed, and we didn’t have to look at his dick. That’s always a positive seeing him dressed.” I hear some relief in Axel’s voice. I know Mia and some of the Ol’ Ladies got to see more than their fair share of Meat’s ‘pork sword’ in his early days with the club. It was quite a topic of conversation for a

while.

“The last time I spoke to him, he seemed a bit ‘bothered’. He didn’t seem unstable, but the case hit a nerve. I just wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help, Pres.”

“Going forward, if you use him on cases, don’t make it any heavy shit. Keep it to brute force and ignorance and we should be fine. Use him for his physical abilities rather than his mental. He’s strong in both areas, as you’re well aware. However, the emotional toll takes far longer to heal than the physical ones. If you need him for anything specific in the future, run it by me first. That may be a way of supporting him. Got to go. The twins are raising hell today.”

The call ends with a click, and I have to grin. ‘Got to go’ is far more than I’ve ever got from him in the past at the end of a call. Thinking of Meat, I wonder if I should stop by the clubhouse and check on him. Just showing my face will let him know he’s not alone. Maybe while I’m there, I could see a bit of Heather. Maybe I could see a lot of Heather in my room, alone.

Grabbing my cell and keys, I quickly make my way out of the office and through the reception area. Hearing Gemmy shout, “Say hi to Heather from me,” has me grinning and not slowing down one bit.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

-- FOREST --

Having a bite of breakfast together before going to work is another routine that has been sadly missing from both our lives. It's another few moments that all add up throughout the day. When Heather gets her hours settled and starts to work from home, I'm thinking that we could arrange some occasional lunchtime breaks together, too. Kissing Heather long and hard, I make my way out of the house.

I'm still using the SUV until I get Mayor Jackson to sign off on two new cruisers. In typical politician fashion, he's holding back for the time being. I know he'll sign off, but I also know he wants to make me sweat a little. He doesn't know me all that well yet.

If I don't get the cruisers soon, one of my deputies will sit on the roadside outside his offices until he does. They could have a speed trap set up and have an old bicycle to chase offenders. Francis on a bike pops into my head, and I laugh to myself. That should spark some media interest and have the voters ask some embarrassing questions. I'll not go that far, but the thought is certainly amusing.

Walking into the sheriff's department, I greet Zack. I beat Gemmy in to work today, so she misses out on the super friendly hello. Grabbing a coffee from the kitchen, I see bags of donuts on the table. Even having just had breakfast, I scarf one down and carry two more to my office. Checking my inbox, I see nothing urgent.

Our former mayor, Corey Shiloh, has been singing like the proverbial canary, and has incriminated Sheriff Brackenridge in Colin's murder. Apparently, Colin overheard them talking about how they were going to get the family to rein things in without having to share their own ill-gotten gains. They were worried that Bobby-James' rapes would attract too much attention, so they were thinking of taking him out. That, in itself, speaks volumes. Killing their own son and brother to hide their own crimes. How low can you get?

Judge Patricks made quick work of Abraham, our resident speeder. All the other family crimes were dealt with by the same court and our local media had a field day. I'm sure the townsfolk will encourage the Brackenridge family to move on as they get released back into society. No one wants them around the town anymore.

Sober has quickly gotten himself grounded now that Colin's case is just a formality. That was a relief to me. None of us had seen how affected Sober had become. Even Gemmy hadn't picked up on it, and she's usually a bloodhound with emotional stuff. He's settled in at Ty's well, too. Thinking of Sober reminds me of Meat. I need to see him at some point.

Ty and Francis seem to hit it off well, too. They are forever bouncing jokes off each other. JP and Hands love their night shifts. I spoke to them to see if they wanted to rotate with days, but they both declined. Declined quite strongly too. Apparently, sleeping through the day works well and they arrange their nights off between themselves, so the department is always covered. I'm happy with that. We need more deputies to fully man the department as it should be, but we're in no hurry to do that immediately. I'd rather wait and get quality people on board than just put 'butts on seats', as they say.

I have a surprise for Heather today, so I've arranged with Alf that I can steal her away for lunch and keep her for the rest of the afternoon. Stopping in at the coffee shop, I pick up my picnic order that I arranged with Liam. He got me an assortment of miniature baked goods as a special order. I have mini doughnuts, mini sausage rolls, cocktail sausages with pineapple and cheese on sticks, and dainty little bread loaves made into sandwiches. Even though I say it myself, all of these look as cute as hell. Dropping into see Cork at the wine shop, has me collecting a couple of small bottles of Prosecco for Heather and some non-alcoholic beer for me. Can't say as I relish the thought of non-alcoholic anything, but as I'll be driving I have to consider my sheriff's position.

There's a neat little wooded picnic area just out of town. I swung by there one day to check it was still as nice as I remembered it. It's quiet, beautiful, and overlooks the river. The spot I picked out goes above and beyond that. I taped it off with crime scene tape so I know when we get there, no one will

have claimed it.

Stopping in at the clubhouse, I park out front, then walk around to the rear of the clubhouse where Meat has his treehouse. Bitty, Amelia and Sybil have chairs set up and a small table with a jug of iced tea and snacks. They are staring up at him, with what I can only describe as hunger, in their eyes. Sure enough, he's standing at attention, gazing up the compound. Only not dressed as a samurai, as Pres had said. This time he looks like Leonides from the Spartan movie. Even I can appreciate his physique and I bet the ladies just love the battle scars on his body.

He gives me the eye and a grunt. That for Meat is an entire conversation, so I go off to look for my woman. Saluting Meat, I catch up with Heather in the nursery with Pres. I look at her suspiciously. Axel looks very sheepish, as though he's been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Shut the door, Forest. Quick. And don't you dare say a word to Mia." Pres steps away from Heather and I can see she's changing diapers.

"Got a little cheating going on here, Pres? I thought there was a 'no help unless an emergency' clause in place?" I raise my brows at him.

"It is an emergency. I'm on the verge of rescinding Mia's punishment just to get myself out of 'motherhood'. I can't do any more shit or vomit. I'm shitted and puked out. It's endless, day in, day out. If they're not throwing it out one end, it's coming out the other. I don't know how she copes with it. How any mother can do this for years on end is beyond me."

"Well, you chose the punishment, Axel. You've only yourself to blame. That's both of them changed. You owe me one. Don't forget it." Heather grins at him and we leave him alone with his clean and sweet-smelling twins.

"So, what's my handsome man doing over here at this time of day? Come to sweep me off my feet to your room, maybe?" Winking at me, I blurt out, "No. Not at all."

This starts to head in completely the wrong direction as I see that was so not the right way to say that.

"I've come to take my beautiful lady to lunch. We need to move. I have an appointment to keep in a couple of hours." Taking her hand, I turn towards

the front doors of the clubhouse.

“If we have two hours, you could still take me upstairs?” Heather asks coyly.

“Good God, woman. You’re becoming a monster. We don’t have time to go upstairs,” I hiss at her and drag her to the SUV. Once inside, she gives me a dirty look and I know I’ll have to confess about lunch or I’m going to be in deep shit.

“I’m taking you on a picnic, my sweetheart. It was a surprise.”

“Oh, Forest. I haven’t been on a picnic since forever. That’s so sweet. Where are we going? What are we having? I should call Alf and get the rest of the day off. Oh my God, I’m so excited.”

“We’re going to a lovely quiet spot. I’ve arranged an amazing picnic with bubbly and you’re off the books this afternoon. I’ve taken care of everything.”

Arriving at the picnic area, I grab the blanket and basket from the rear and lead her to our spot.

“A crime scene? Your idea of a beautiful spot for a picnic is a crime scene. Take me home, Forest. I’m done here.” Heather looks like she’s going to burst into tears.

“No. Honey, no. You’ve got it all wrong. I put the tape up so no one else would steal our spot. It’s not an actual crime scene. What do you take me for, for God’s sake?” Ripping the tape down, I throw down the blanket and start to prepare the picnic.

Heather looks at all the mini goodies and sits down next to me. “These look amazing, Forest. Where did you get them?”

“I persuaded Liam to talk to the owner of the bakery. He asked them to make a batch of each specially for me and all the extra ones, I’ve donated to the owner. He’s going to sell them off and see if they could become new lines.” We have a relaxing picnic and lie together watching the river go by. Slurping my non-alcoholic beer while Heather giggles at her second small bottle of fizz, I suddenly realize the time.

“Oh! crap. We’ve got to move. It’s almost time. Quick, let’s get moving.” I

jump up, leaving a bemused Heather looking up at me.

“C’mon, Heather, move your ass. We need to go.” Almost rolling her in the blanket has her jumping up, too. Almost dragging her to the SUV, I tear down the road back to town.

Arriving at the tattoo shop, I drag her from the passenger seat and rush her inside.

“Okay guys, we’re here. Let’s get this show on the road.” I look expectantly at Reuse and Hashtag. Staring back at me, they then look at each other.

“Hi, Forest. What can we do for you?” Reuse asks, and I think I’m going to kill him if he’s forgotten our appointment.

“I booked an appointment with Hashtag on the phone, days back. Today's the day. That fancy tat that he did on his interview?”

“Oh, is that today? Hashtag, bang goes your half day. No early finish for you.” Reuse looks past me to where Hashtag is sitting. Spinning around, I can see him struggling not to laugh.

“You’re not funny, guys. Heather, you need to see the tattoo that Hashtag is doing for me. It is fantastic. It’s tribal, but so much more.”

Walking over to Hashtag, he pulls his portfolio out and shows Heather the design. Looking over the black and white tribal design and the eagle's head, she cocks her head to one side. Hashtag watches her reaction and then turns the page. “How about this?” he asks. Heather positively glows with excitement when she sees the feminine version, with flowers, petals, and vines intertwined within the tribal pattern.

Reaching for her phone from her pocket, she shows Hashtag a picture. “Could you do the flowers and petals to match these colors?” She looks expectantly at him.

“That would look awesome. Those colors would so blend in with that design.”

“Right. When can you do it? I’m in, 100%,” Heather literally gushes with excitement.

“Hey, Forest. Your lady wants a tattoo. If you’re okay with Reuse copying my design, I can do Heather’s freehand. You could get both done together today?”

Looking at Heather and how excited she is, I can’t possibly turn her down. “Sure thing. Let’s get it done.”

Sitting still for long periods isn’t one of my strong points. I wish I’d had real beer now, instead of that zero percent stuff. Heather is doing great as she’s watching everything Hashtag is doing, and asking so many questions that he has to keep stopping to explain. I’ve already told her once, if she wants it finished today, she needs to shut the hell up. I got a nasty squint-eyed look for that.

My design being all dark, it looks mean and moody and totally awesome. I love it. Reuse has done Hashtag’s design proud, and we are both finished as it gets to closing time.

When I get to see the result of Heather’s tattoo, it literally blows me away. It is clearly the same design as mine, but with the flowers and petals in the darker blues from her trike, it is on another level. The femininity of it stands out so well and yet remains fiercely tribal. It wouldn’t look out of place on a lady like an Empress or a Warrior Queen.

Heather is positively bouncing again. I love how her excitement gets the better of her, and it manifests itself not just in her face but in her actions as well. Once we’re all wrapped up and safe to leave, we head home. We’ve both taken so many pictures of both tattoos that we can show Gemmy and Stitch before we settle in for the night. I know that Heather is going to charge over to show Gemmy before the SUV even comes to a stop.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

-:- FOREST -:-

I'm thankful that the cold cases that urgently needed attention are completed, the villains have been apprehended, and incarcerated. I can happily rub my hands together and feel pride in the deputies and the department. It's a good sign for the future of the department and has had me deciding to stay as sheriff for the time being, at least.

Heather is at the house as the furniture is being delivered today. We are having a cookout to thank the deputies, Gemmy and Zack, of course, for a job well done. They have worked tirelessly to close the burglary, rape, and murder cases. I'm damn proud of them and I'm not scared to admit it.

My mind wanders to Heather and I step away from my desk, picking up my phone where I'd laid it next to my notepad. Smiling to myself, I send a message.

Forest: Everyone ok? Has the furniture arrived?

Heather: Yes. All is good here.

Forest: OK, I'll be home soon.

Heather: OK. Love you

Forest: Love you more.

God, I love that woman. She completes me in a way no other could. It would have been nice if I'd found her earlier, but as the old saying goes, *better late than never*.

I don't care, it's still an hour before the office closes. I walk into the deputies' office and state loudly, "Come on, y'all are coming to my house and we're going to have a cookout."

Ty, Sober, and Francis all look at me from the paperwork they'd been working on, give me a grin, and grab whatever they need as I walk through to reception. "Zack, get your ass over to my house. We're having a cookout

and you're coming too.”

Gemmy left at lunchtime now that Stitch is back from his road trip. She’s happy to get back to working fewer hours at the department. I’m thankful she worked so many hours when I needed the support.

Heather has spoken to Axel, and he’s making sure Meat turns up for the cookout. I reckon he’ll turn up too, just to get away from the terrible twins for a while. I’m positive he did not know how much work was involved in rearing those two, but he’s had his eyes opened now.

Arriving at the house, I walk into the kitchen and see Heather working alongside Meat. I look around and see no sign of Axel, so I was wrong with that thought.

Stepping behind Heather, I wrap my arms around her and kiss her neck. “You okay, Beautiful?”

“Yes. Meat has come early and brought some smoked sausages and ribs. I have the side dishes all made with Meat’s help, and we have all the meat you could possibly want to eat too.”

“Everyone will be here soon. Shall we take this outside and start cooking?” I look at Meat because I know he’ll want to do the cooking. When he gives me a chin lift before picking up a tray filled with meat, Heather and I follow him out, laden with a tray each.

Sober, Ty, Francis, Hands, JP, and Zack arrive within minutes of each other, all talking and getting along well. It’s a relief we have no problems with personality clashes because there is nothing worse in a working environment. Ty has Sober and Hands living at his place. JP surprised us all when he said he’d found an alternative home. After a good amount of coaxing, he tells us he’s staying with Mrs. Osborne. They became good friends while Hands and JP worked that area, and once she was home from her sister’s, JP had been having meals with her. While they were talking, one evening, she offered him her spare room rather than the motel he and Hands were in. So after talking it over, Hands went to Ty’s and JP gets all the comforts of home with Mrs. Osborne. I gotta say, I think JP came out on top.

Sober grins, “Where is the beer?”

Heather laughs and points to coolers she has placed near the trestle table filled with side dishes. They all swoop on the coolers helping themselves to a beer, and I smirk when I see Zack pushing Hands out of the way to grab a bottle for himself. Hands wraps his arm around Zack's neck and pretends to pound his head, but everyone is laughing and enjoying the moment.

Gemmy arrives, with Stitch in tow, of course, helping herself to a soda before walking over and talking to Meat. I say talking to but all he is doing is grunting and nodding. Stitch helps himself to a beer and steps over to me.

"You did well with that department, Forest. It was a fuckin' shambles. How anyone could not see how corrupt that fucker was and do nothing about it, I don't know. He's going to be sorry now 'cause he'll never get out of prison nor will the prior mayor."

"That's for sure. Thanks to Meat, those women now get to live knowing they are safe from the fucker's son and that they got the justice they deserved," I reply with satisfaction.

Gemmy walks over and throws an arm around Stitch's waist and I turn to look where Heather has gotten to. Seeing her walking my way, I hold my arm out and she tucks herself into my side.

"Meat has been to see his counselor. He's doing well, and it was a heck of a step that Axel got him to go. I think there were some harsh words said, but it was for Meat's good. He's bouncing back from investigating that case, and if you notice, he smiles now and again." Gemmy is watching Meat the whole time she is speaking, which has all of us looking his way.

The evening progresses and I'm keeping my eye on Meat, who is actually speaking to each of us. Maybe not a full-blown conversation, but he is joining in conversations. I'm more than happy to see that.

Holding my beer in one hand and keeping Heather tucked into my side with my other, I grab everyone's attention. "I want to take this opportunity to thank you all for stepping up and helping with the department. Each of you has put your heart and soul into closing these cases and without you, they'd not have been solved. Now we can look for more deputies to cover the area and close out some of the minor cases we still have to work on. But again,

thank you.”

Ty grins as he replies. “We know we’re awesome. You don’t have to tell us.”

The comment brings laughter and slaps on the back for each other. It’s great to see the camaraderie, and it’s a good sign that the sheriff’s department is in safe hands.

The weekend soon came around and after Sunday morning training and church, we are all relaxing in the common room when Mia storms in from the direction of the President’s office.

“THAT’S IT, I’M DONE, I’VE HAD ENOUGH, I RESIGN!”

I look at Axel, then back at Mia, who is standing in the middle of the common room glaring at Axel, hands on her hips and looking like she’s about to blow a fuse.

Axel slowly stands from his seat, but before he can speak, Mia points a finger at him and shouts again. “I’M NOT BEING PRESIDENT ANYMORE. I’M GOING BACK TO MY NORMAL CHORES AND MY BOYS.”

Now, looking at Mia closely, you can see that her bottom lip has a slight quiver to it and her eyes are a little glassy. Fuck, she’s going to cry crosses my mind, and my eyes shoot to Axel to see what he’s going to do.

The entire room is waiting expectantly for what Axel’s move is going to be, and if he’s going to make the matter worse. Taking steps towards her, Axel reaches out and lifts her chin with one finger, and gives her a reassuring smile, “OK.” That’s all he says to her, but he’s watching her closely.

“Good,” Mia replies, turns, and storms out of the room.

Axel turns and looks at us all, simply stating, “It took her longer than I thought it would. Drag, I owe you a Benjamin.” Chuckles, and dollars changing hands has me shocked, but I shouldn’t be with this fuckin’ lot, after all they are bikers!

We are all sitting quietly, watching the show. Heather and the Ol’ Ladies had been sitting around the bar talking about bikes, of all things, much to some of the brothers’ amusement. They have a laptop open and are looking at different leather clothing for biker chicks as they are calling themselves.

Every one of them are quiet and side-eyeing each other, not sure if they should follow Mia or not. But they must come to a silent agreement as Heather, Kya, Gemmy, Raven, and Winter walk out of the common room to follow Mia.

Buzz walks over to the Ol' Ladies still at the bar and asks, "Why have you not followed Mia?"

Eden sighs, but replies, "We are girl-gang prospects. We are not allowed to know everything that is happening until we earn our sisterhood."

"What...The...Fuck...!" Buzz is more than a little shocked, opens and closes his mouth a few times, which has me chuckling because it is rare you see him speechless.

Drag laughs, "We don't wanna know, brothers, and it's not safe to get involved in the women's shit. Leave it alone."

Most of the brothers nod in agreement, mumbles of 'too right', 'for sure', 'don't wanna know', are heard. I keep quiet and wait for whatever is going to happen because I can feel it. Something is brewing. They are up to no good, I'm sure.

Hearing the noise and vibration of hogs starting, we all dash outside and see Mia leading Kya, Heather, Gemmy, Raven, and Winter once around the compound before waving as they exit through the main gate. This has all their Ol' Men running for their bikes.

Reaching my hog, I hear one of the Ol' Ladies shout, "I DON'T WANNA BE A PROSPECT, I WANT A BIKE!" The others saying the same thing has me grinning as I ride out of the compound to catch up to my woman.

Most of the brothers are up with me chasing and catching up with the women when Axel takes the lead. Pointing, I can't help the laugh that bursts forth when we all see Meat, who is riding in the center of all the Ol' Ladies, left arm held high, waving his middle finger to the world. How did we not know he'd be with them, making sure all was okay?

I can't wait to get Heather home. She's gonna have a red ass before I throw her on the bed and have my wicked way with her, just like any respectable biker would.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, thanks to Richard, who edits & Alpha reads. You work so hard, and I'm so grateful for all you do. You have so much to put up with, my questions, throwing ideas and having you read chapters back to me so I can hopefully see the story from the readers point of view. Love you sweetie xx

My business manager Vic, thank you for taking a load off my shoulders. It is incredible and gives me more time for my imagination to flourish.

Thanks to my Alpha Readers on this book, Marie & Gabi. You are both amazing and I am truly grateful for all you do.

Proofreader Team: Editing Divas aka Rose and Lorrian, also Linda and Allena.

For my BETA Readers, Karen, Jenni and Angie. Thank you for finding all those errors that could easily slip through the net.

My ARC Team, you all keep me tapping the keyboard, giving me the confidence to carry on and enjoy my imagination. For picking up any little error that the rest of us missed, and for writing the incredible reviews. Every word means such a lot to me.

Thank you to Elaine for running the street team, reader group and ARC team manager. Plus, the ladies of the street team for jumping in to help and keep me seen on social media.

Lastly, thank you to my readers, who have reached out and given so many lovely comments about the books. Each of your reviews mean so much and encourages a new reader to give the books a try. Thank you ❤️

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