



Glass  
Skulls

REBEL SKULLS MC BOOK FIVE

LM TERRY

# **Glass Skulls**

LM Terry

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Also By

About the Author

## Dedicated To My Readers

I think a dragonfly must have brought you here, because each and every one of you is my wish come true.



Sometimes the bad things that happen in our lives put us  
directly on the path to the best things that will ever happen to  
us. ~ *Nicole Reed*

# Content Warnings

This book is a dark romance and is intended for adults who are age eighteen and older. It includes but is not limited to: Sexual assault, dubious consent, violence, BDSM elements, breath play, kidnapping/abduction, death/dying, profanity, murder, and torture.

# Chapter One

## KATIE

“I’m sorry, honey. The boys have kept their lips zipped around me. I don’t have any information for you,” Grandma Maggie says.

I groan and throw myself dramatically on the ground in front of her recliner. “They’re such assholes. I’m so bored.”

She chuckles. “Why don’t you run out to the farm and see if you can help Willow with the garden?”

Wrinkling my nose at her makes her laugh again. “Not your cup of tea?” she asks.

“I don’t know what my cup of tea is,” I grumble, picking myself off the floor. “Well, thanks anyway.”

She rocks back in her chair, her eyes narrowing on me. “Why don’t you just ask Petey if they’re rounding up more bad guys?”

My shoulders fall. “Petey wouldn’t tell me if I was the last person on the planet. He hates me.”

“Oh, now you’re just being foolish,” she scolds.

My hand rests on the doorknob; I’m anxious to escape. The conversation

has turned to a topic I don't like. "I'm not being foolish, Grandma. The hate is mutual."

She clicks her tongue behind her teeth. "Hate is such a nasty word."

"I'm sorry. We dislike each other. Is that better?" I roll my eyes, tapping my foot impatiently on the carpet.

Grandma leans forward in her chair. "Getting snippy are we? Maybe I'm on to something." She pauses before tipping her head. "He reminds you of someone."

That's it. I'm done. "See you later, Maggie. It was nice chatting with you."

She settles back in her chair with a satisfied smile on her face. "It was nice, wasn't it?"

As quickly as I can, I step outside and shut the door behind me. The old woman is smart as a damn whip, but she's wrong. Petey doesn't remind me of anyone. He's a fucking asshole. Although, I do know plenty of those.

Fuck that. I'm out of here.

No use sticking around. Ever since the club found out Grandma Maggie was feeding me information about the men they were hunting, they've watched what they say around her.

I don't know where I'll go this time, but you can bet your sweet cheeks it will be far from this place. Running my hand over the seat of my bike, I think about the possibilities. It has been nice spending time with my family, but ... there are too many memories here.

Throwing my leg over my bike, I fire her up. I'm going to go pack before I change my mind.

When I get back to the warehouse, I spot Petey's bike. I jog around back and sneak in through the mud room only to hear masculine voices in the kitchen just outside the door. *Jesus Christ.*

My gaze roams around the room as I impatiently wait for whoever it is to leave. Unfortunately, I spot the fishing poles in the corner and stop breathing.

*Right where we left them.*

I turn around, blinking quickly. This is why I need to get out of here. *Goddammit, stop.* I shove my thumbs into the corners of my eyes, forcing the tears to stay right the fuck there.

Slowly, I glance over my shoulder. My bright purple fishing pole rests beside my dad's rod and reel. He even bought me the matching tackle box sitting on the shelf above them. It was stupid really. The thing was cheesy and barely held anything. I don't know why I even wanted it.

My fingers grip the washing machine as I lean against it. Why hasn't anyone thrown them away? It's not like Bill or I are ever going to use them again ...

*Stop.*

The door swings open as a tear slips down my cheek, my gaze frozen on the fishing poles.

"Katie?" Jackson, my nephew, steps toward me.

The sound of his voice pulls me from my memories, making me spin around. I grab the laundry detergent, angrily swiping at my eyes. He walks up behind me, reaching around and taking it from me.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Not a fucking thing." I yank the soap away from him and fill the cap, dumping it in the washing machine. "I'm just washing clothes."

He spins me around after I set it down.

"Where the fuck are the clothes then?" he asks, dipping his head to look me in the eye.

"You know, since the club made you president, you've sure turned into an

asshole,” I accuse.

Jackson doesn’t even flinch. He just smirks. Jesus, now *he* does remind me of someone. And speak of the devil, here he is.

Dirk stops in the doorway. “What’s going on in here?”

“Christ. If you all must know, I’m washing clothes. Didn’t know I had to inform the entire club.”

They both stand patiently, waiting for the truth.

“Fine. I’m leaving. Okay? I’m going to go grab my things and hit the road.”

Jackson steps back abruptly. “You were just going to leave without telling anyone?”

Dirk moves farther into the room, making room for Petey. “What’s going on?” he asks.

*Can this day get any worse?*

“Katie here is running away,” Dirk tells him.

I love my brother-in-law, but right now I literally want to kill him.

Petey’s eyes lock on mine. “Always knew she was a runner.” He smirks, but then he turns serious. “You aren’t fucking leaving until you say goodbye to Charlotte.”

I bite down on my bottom lip, wanting to snip back, but he’s right. She’s going to be sad enough I’m leaving. I can’t go without talking to her first. She’ll understand that it’s time for me to move on.

Petey doesn’t even give me a chance to argue. “I’m taking her to McDonalds today. One o’clock. Don’t be fucking late,” he growls before spinning on a heel and stomping away.

Jackson whistles. “I feel for you. That’s not going to be an easy goodbye.”

Dirk snaps his fingers before pointing to the door, indicating Jackson

should leave. I try to slide past Dirk right behind Jackson. No luck. He grabs my arm.

“I could forbid you to go,” he says when the door clicks shut.

I bark out a laugh. “That’s a good one,” I say, wiping my eyes.

“Do you know what you need?” he asks, his eyebrow crawling up his scary fucking face.

“No. But I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“You need an ass beating,” he says, serious as a preacher on Sunday morning.

An obnoxious snort escapes me. “What I need is for men to quit telling me what to do,” I smart back.

“Ain’t no one telling you what to do.” He throws his hands up and leaves the room.

The fucking men around here suck. I stomp over to the fishing poles and grab them both in one hand. Then, I open the back door and shove them in the trash bin.

Fuck them. *A runner?* I’m not running from anything. Maybe I’m running *to* something. They don’t know. They don’t know anything about me.

# Chapter Two

## KATIE

I conned my sister into going to McDonald's with me. She hates this place as much as I do, but here we are. She only agreed to come because it gives her more time to talk me into staying.

She stares at me over the top of her rat rod. "I don't understand why you're leaving," she says as she shuts her door.

I don't know who's going to be harder to deal with, her or Charlotte. "Because I'm bored," I answer simply, tossing my gum in the wastebin as we walk by.

"You told me you were done killing." She grabs my arm as I reach for the door to the building. "I'm serious, little sis. You need to slow the fuck down. You're going to get yourself in trouble, or worse yet, killed."

I catch sight of Petey's bike over Jesse's shoulder. Charlotte's little purple helmet is hanging on the handlebars. Quickly, I look away. "Come on. Petey's already here, and I don't want to piss him off."

"What do you mean? You live to piss Petey off." She laughs but holds the door open for me.



Thank god we're done with that conversation.

We find Petey ordering at the counter with a scowl on his face.

"Where's Charlotte?" I ask, glancing around to see if she's sitting at one of the tables.

Petey nods to my sister in greeting before settling his dark gaze over me. "She's in the bathroom."

I rip my eyes away from him, turning to Jesse. "Just order me a Big Mac or some shit, I don't care. I'm going to hit the ladies' room, too."

Petey chuckles. "Are you sure you're a lady? You don't fucking act like one."

Walking away, I raise my hand over my head and flip him off.

Jesus, this place is packed today. When I get to the bathroom, there's one of those yellow cleaning cones blocking the door. I glance around. Where the fuck is Charlotte if the bathroom is closed? Surely she didn't go into the men's room.

Just as I'm about to walk away, I hear her crying. In two fucking steps, I slam the bathroom door open and catch a man peering into one of the stalls through the crack in the door.

"Come on, honey, open the door. I won't hurt you. Your dad sent me," he says before his gaze lands on me. He takes a step back.

Red. Blood fucking red is all I see. I stalk toward the man as he steps backward into the handicap stall, trying to close it before I reach him.

With a roar I shove the door, sending us both to the ground. He hits his head on the toilet as he falls, but it doesn't knock him out. Good. 'Cause I'm going to do that permanently.

The door to Charlotte's stall bangs open and her little boots hurry out of the room as I deliver the first blow to his face. He brings his hands up to

shield the next one, but it's no use. My fists pound into him before I push off, standing so I can continue my assault with the tip of my boot.

Blood sprays everywhere as I continue to deliver this man to Satan's door.

A startled shriek comes from behind me, but I barely notice. This man has to die. He must die.

*Die. Die. Die, you motherfucker.*

# Chapter Three

## PETEY

“So, you’re okay with her leaving?” Jesse asks me as her sister walks away.

I chuckle darkly. “The sooner the better.”

She puts her hands on her hips, her silver black hair falling over her shoulder. “Then why are we here? I assumed it was because you were going to talk her out of it.”

“Why the fuck would I do that?” Swiping my card, I snarl at the kid behind the counter. He’s looking too hard at my brother’s wife.

He drops his eyes.

That’s what I thought. He doesn’t even deserve to share space with her.

“Petey,” Jesse says, laying her hand on my arm.

I shake it off. “Better she goes now before Charlotte gets more attached to her.” I shrug.

“What about you?” she smarts, raising a brow.

“Daddy! Daddy!” Charlotte screams, running toward me.

Rushing forward, I scoop her into my arms. “What’s wrong, baby girl?” I

ask calmly, despite my heart beating out of my chest at how scared she looks.

“A b-bad man was trying t-to get me,” she cries into my neck, hiding herself in my beard. “K-Katie is b-beating him up for me.”

Jesse and I stare at each other for a moment before we both start running toward the restrooms. An employee rushes out, her face pale.

“Call 911,” she tells her co-worker.

*Shit.*

When we get inside, Katie is indeed beating a man. Jesse tries to pull her sister off him, but Katie is too far gone in her rage. I hand Charlotte to Jesse.

“Get her out of here. I’ll handle it,” I tell her.

She nods, pulling my daughter close to her as she backs away, her sad eyes still focused on her sister.

I turn back to the fucking mess in front of me. *Jesus Christ.* I wrap my arms around Katie, hugging her from behind. “Katie. Katie, stop!” I bark.

She kicks her feet as I drag her away from the bloody man.

Jesse peeks her head in. “The sheriff’s here!” she yells before closing the door.

Hopefully she can stall them for a minute. I need to get this hell cat under control.

“Enough,” I say, wrapping my arm around Katie’s neck, cutting off just enough of her oxygen to get her attention.

She claws at my arms, her eyes wide.

“Calm down. Listen, the fucking sheriff is here. Keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking,” I order.

When she stills, I take some of the pressure off her neck so she can suck in a deep breath.

She tips her head back against my chest, our gazes locking.

We stare at each other quietly. Her big brown eyes relay everything she's feeling. Whatever she caught this man doing, it scared the fuck out of her.

"I need to make sure he's dead," she whispers.

I run my thumb over her slender neck. "We're in public, Katie." She blinks at me in confusion. When the commotion outside the door gets louder, I spin her around, wrapping her in my arms. "Not a word, remember?" I ask.

She nods, but her body is still tense. She wants to finish the job.

As the sheriff hurries in, I whisper in her ear, "Thank you for protecting her."

"What in thearnation?" he exclaims. He turns to his deputy. "Get everyone's contact information and clear the building." When the deputy begins to walk away, he adds, "and tell the EMTs to kick it in the ass."

She nods once as she rushes out the door.

The sheriff takes us in. "What happened?" he asks, leaning over the man to check him for a pulse.

"Katie caught him trying to assault my daughter."

The sheriff looks at the man in disgust. "Well, he's still alive. For now."

He stands, giving me that *I don't want no trouble* look. "I'm going to have to cuff her until we get this all sorted out."

I knew this was coming. Gently, I push Katie back. "It's going to be okay."

She nods, but her eyes are still glassed over. The blood rage I walked in on is still simmering just beneath the surface. "Remember what I said," I tell her. Again, she nods.

"Put your hands behind your back, Katie," the sheriff says as the EMTs make their way in. I watch as the woman who saved my daughter is led away as they begin to load the barely alive man onto a stretcher.

I follow them out. Jesse runs toward us with my daughter in her arms.

“What’s going on. Why is my sister in cuffs?” she asks, setting Charlotte down between us.

The sheriff hands Katie off to his deputy, asking that she be put in his car.

“It’s fine, Jess,” Katie says. “It was worth it.” She winks at Charlotte before the deputy leads her away.

As soon as they walk out the door, my daughter bursts into tears.

“Now, now, sweetie,” the sheriff says, trying his best to console her. “She’s going to be okay.”

“Why are you taking my mommy away?!” my daughter screams at him, her face turning purple.

My eyebrows shoot to my hairline; Jesse’s do the same. We glance at each other before looking down at Charlotte at the same time.

“Your mommy?” he asks, crouching down in front of her.

Jesse puts her hand over her heart. “I’m sorry. She’s in shock,” she explains.

My gaze roams to the window as the deputy shoves Katie’s head down, putting her in the back of the car. Katie gets in, her head held high. She faces forward as the deputy shuts the door. I glance down at my daughter; she’s clutching her dragonfly necklace in her tiny hand.

And then I hear myself say, “I told her it was okay to call her Mommy.”

Jesse’s head snaps my way.

Charlotte snuffles exaggeratedly. “My daddy is marrying her.”

The sheriff glances up at me for confirmation. *Oh, this little shit.*

I shove my hands in my pockets and nod.

He looks back to my daughter. “When are they getting married, sweetheart?”

Jesse’s eyes widen at me. I shrug. I don’t know what the fuck is happening,

but we have no choice but to roll with it now.

Our mouths fall open when my daughter answers him without missing a beat. “Tomorrow! And I get to be the flower girl. Do you know what that is?” she asks the sheriff excitedly.

“I sure do,” he answers her, chuckling. Jesse and I snap our mouths shut before he stands.

“You’re not going to take my mommy to jail, are you?” Charlotte asks, stomping her foot for effect.

The sheriff looks at me. He’d like me to explain the law to her but fuck that.

My daughter ups her game as they haul the asshole out on a stretcher. She starts wailing again. “The bad man. That’s the bad man, Daddy.”

She’s seen a lot in her five years. Everyone in the room no doubt empathizes with her right now. She has every right to be acting the way she is. But when I pick her up and her eyes land on mine, I see she’s not frightened. In fact, I think she’s pretty proud of herself. She tucks her face under my beard, sniffing.

When the EMTs get the man out the door, the sheriff turns back to me. “You understand I’ve got to take her in for questioning.”

Jesse starts to argue, but he holds up his hand. “I’ll do everything I can to help her. She’ll see the judge in the morning. What time is the wedding?” he asks.

The little turd in my arms straightens. “Two,” she tells him, holding up two of her tiny fingers. Then she starts to cry again. “My mommy was just trying to save me!” she wails before tucking her head right back under the beard.

I sigh inwardly. She’s a good actress. Her teenage years are going to be hell.

“I’ll talk to the judge ... see what we can do.” His gaze settles on my daughter. He pats her back. “Don’t worry, honey. We’ll get your momma back home to you.” And then he looks at me. “I have a granddaughter about her age. I’d have done the same thing.” He waves his arm, ushering us out of the building.

We linger around my bike until the car holding Katie drives away. By now word has gotten to the club, and the boys are impatiently pacing behind the yellow tape waiting for us.

When Katie’s car turns the corner, we make our way over to them.

Jesse steps in before I can even open my mouth. “We need to get Owen to the warehouse.” She glances around the group. “I’ll explain everything there.”

Jackson starts barking orders and everyone scrambles.

Jesse grabs my arm before she walks away. “I’ll see you there.”

I run my hand through my hair. “Yeah, sure thing.”

She squeezes my arm, nodding toward the little girl who is now pretending to be asleep in my arms. “She’s smart.”

“Too fucking smart,” I grunt before walking away.

I set my daughter on the bike, and she rubs her eyes. “What the hell was that all about?” I ask her.

Her dark eyes flit over the area. “Did you get me a Happy Meal?”

“Charlotte,” I warn.

“I want her to be my mommy,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest.

“But she’s not, and you know that. It’s not good to lie, especially to the police.” I tip my head, giving her my stern dad look.

“I didn’t lie.” She leans forward, her lashes brushing the apples of her cheeks as she blinks at me.



I take a deep breath. *Lord, please give me patience.*

“You told him Katie and I are getting married tomorrow,” I say through gritted teeth, struggling to remain calm.

“But you are.” She wrinkles her button nose, leaning toward me.

“We’re not. You lied to the sheriff.”

She plucks her helmet off the handlebars and shoves it over her head, scooting back to her spot on the bike.

Sucking in another deep breath, I do the same, climbing on in front of her. “You’re grounded,” I say over my shoulder.

She wraps her arms as far as she can around me. “Does that mean I don’t get to go to the wedding?” Her little body shakes behind me as she giggles.

Five going on fifteen. Lucky me. I should be angry at her, but how can I be? She was only trying to help her friend. That’s all that was. She doesn’t really want Katie to be her mom.

Although, she would make a hell of a mother. She was willing to risk her own neck to protect Charlotte. Kill first, ask questions later. She definitely knows how to protect herself.

*And my daughter.*

Too bad we hate each other.

# Chapter Four

## KATIE

I don't pay attention to what anyone is saying. Makes it easier that way. Because if I listen, I'll snap back. It's my nature.

*Fuck.*

I stare at the white ceiling. Earlier, when I asked myself if the day could get worse, I didn't realize how much shittier it could get. I need to remind myself to quit asking that question. It can always be worse.

"Your attorney's here. He wants to speak with you before you see the judge this morning," the deputy says, opening my cage.

Following her down the hall, I realize this isn't so bad. There are no reminders here. Just white walls and bars. Owen doesn't even look up from his papers when the deputy guides me to sit in a chair across from him.

When the door shuts behind her, he finally graces me with his attention. But I turn away; I don't give a fuck what happens to me.

After a few minutes of wondering if I'll get to eat breakfast before seeing the judge, he taps my hand. "Do you understand what I just said?" he asks.

"Yeah, sure," I say as I yawn, bringing up my cuffed hands to cover my

mouth.

“It’s important that you play along. Okay?”

“I said yeah,” I snip.

He sighs, packing up his papers and shoving them into his bag. “Good. I’ll see you in the court room.”

When Owen reaches for the door, I remember the one thing I do want to know.

“Is he dead?”

He pauses with his hand on the door handle. “Not yet.”

“That’s too bad,” I say, leaning back against my chair.

Owen shakes his head. “Katie, I’m going to give you some advice here. Just focus on your why. Why you did what you did. The judge will empathize with that. He has daughters. He’ll understand.”

I’m sad I’m going to miss breakfast as I watch the other inmates head to the cafeteria as I’m being led away to face the judge. The sheriff walks me down to the courtroom.

“Congratulations,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “Gee, thanks.” Who congratulates someone for getting an attempted murder charge? No one. That’s who.

He ignores me as he guides me to my seat. The court room is a sea of black. Great, the whole gang is here. I know what they’re thinking – I should have had more control. Hit man rule number one ... fly under the radar and don’t draw attention to yourself.

I get it. But no one hurts what’s mine. And Charlotte is my friend. Fuck anyone who thinks that should have gone down any different. The only thing I would change is that I would’ve had my knife. From here on out, it will be

in my boot. I'll be damned if I'm going to be a worthless piece of shit like my mother. Nobody gets away with hurting a child.

If we hurry, maybe I can make it back in time for lunch. That fucking Big Mac sounds good about now.

Owen nudges me in the ribs, pointing to the deputy who's going to take me back to my cell now that the hearing is over. Shit, I missed the whole thing.

"Petey's going to post your bail, and then we'll get you out of here."

I tip my head to the side like an owl. "Petey?"

Owen opens his eyes wide as if he's trying to tell me to shut up. "Yes, now go on. We'll see you soon."

*Whatever.* Rolling my eyes, I follow the deputy.

"You've got quite the catch there," she says as she opens the door.

I laugh. Does she think me and Petey are a thing? That's hilarious.

It doesn't take long, and they're letting me put on the street clothes that someone from the club must have brought me. I wonder if I'll get my bloody ones back. Damn, I loved those jeans.

Over the past few years, I've gotten good at getting blood stains out of my clothes. I could have saved those fuckers. Shame. Oh well, I'm just happy to be out of that orange jump suit. Orange is not my color.

Petey is waiting for me in the lobby. He wraps me in his big arms when I step through the door. *What the fuck is going on?*

"I missed you," he says loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

"I'm sure you did, asshole," I laugh, pushing away from him.

He laughs a little too loudly as he drapes an arm over my shoulder, leading us out of the building. "Always the jokester," he chides.

Petey squeezes me tightly. Ow, jeez, it's not like I asked him to come. He guides us down the steps and over to his bike.

I glance around the parking lot. “Where’s mine?” I ask.

He flexes his fingers, cracking his neck to the side. “Get the fuck on the bike, Katie,” he growls.

I pull my head back. “Ah, no.”

His face turns red. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so mad. I like it. He runs a finger down my face tenderly before wrapping his hand around my neck, pulling us nose to nose. Deadly calm, he quietly orders me on the back of his bike.

And just as calmly, I spit in his face.

“You’ll pay for that later,” he barks, wiping my spit away.

“Just tell me where my bike is, and I’ll get the fuck out of here and you’ll never have to see me again.”

His brows pull together, and then he steps away.

“Did you listen to anything Owen said to you?” he asks.

“You told me not to say anything. I didn’t. Jeez, make up your mind,” I say, leaning against his bike, looking at my nails.

“I told you not to *say* anything. What does that have to do with listening?”

“Well, I thought the two went hand in hand. If I’m not supposed to respond, why listen?”

He plucks a helmet off the handlebars, handing it to me. “Your bike isn’t here, so if you want to leave, I suggest you get on.”

I stand up straight. This dude is serious. He really expects me to get on the back of his bike.

Not happening. I don’t take a backseat to anyone. The last person I rode behind ... doesn’t matter. I shove it back against his chest. “I’ll walk.”

Just then, my sister pulls up with her rat rod. “Get the fuck in,” she orders, revving the engine.

Petey kicks his leg over his bike as I open the door to my sister's ride. He points at me. "You better be listening to me now. From here on out, I'm keeping tally." He slides his sunglasses over his dark eyes, then roars out of the parking lot.

I barely get the door shut before my sister is pulling away. "Why are you being difficult with him?" she asks.

Clicking my seatbelt in place, I answer, "I thought it was obvious. Did you guys hit your heads or something? You both know how I feel about him."

"Yes, but if you want the sheriff to believe you're engaged, you're going to have to do better than that." She puts a cigarette to her lips.

My heart drops and not from the fucking way she just took the last corner.

"Christ, Charlotte is five and she's more believable than you," she continues, reaching over me to the glove box. "Goddammit, is there a lighter in there?" she asks, glancing back at the road.

Numbly, I shove her hand away and shuffle through the crap in her glove box. "Here." I hand her a lighter with bright orange flames on it.

She takes it with a sigh of relief. "I've been busting my ass all night trying to pull this fucking wedding together."

I reach over, pulling the cigarette from her hand. She releases it and grabs the pack to light another. Leaning against the door, I take a long drag and watch her.

"It's a good thing I saved everything from Jackson's wedding. But we're not having it out at the farm. I thought you'd like to have it on the dock by the lake. I know that was your favorite spot with Dad," she continues. "All that's left to do is find you a dress." She glances at her watch. "And we have exactly one hour before I need to be back to finish the food."

Okay, I'm not sure exactly what's going on, but I get the feeling the

wedding she's talking about is mine. Shit, maybe I'm the one who hit my head. *Did I fall yesterday?* I run my palm over the back of my skull.

She pulls up in front of a boutique, hops out, and jogs around her rod. When she opens my door, she scolds me. "I just told you we only had an hour. Hurry the fuck up." Jesse walks away, mumbling under her breath about how I could have worn Willow's dress if I didn't have such big tits.

My tits aren't that big. A handful maybe.

I rush to catch up to her as she opens the door, stepping into a sea of white. My head instantly pulls back, and I brace myself against the door, shielding my eyes.

The store owner hurries to greet us. "Jesse?" she asks. My sister must have called ahead.

Jesse shakes her hand. "Yes, and this is Katie." She sighs loudly when she realizes I'm not right beside her. Stomping over to me, she takes my hand and drags me toward the woman. "We need a dress to fit her and fast. What do you have in her size that we can have today?"

The lady stutters. "Oh, oh my. It's going to be hard to find something that fits her exactly."

"Let me rephrase. I want to see what's in her size. Close as you have. It doesn't have to be perfect."

When the woman stares at her blankly, my sister snaps loudly, sending her scrambling.

Jesse plops down in the middle of a white couch, throwing her arms across the back of it. Then, the front door bursts open, and my niece, Billie Rose, steps in with the rest of the girls right behind her. They're all chatting excitedly. And that's when I notice Charlotte tucked in the middle of the group. She's hugging Willow's leg.

I rush toward her, pushing everyone aside. Dropping to my knees, I take her tiny cheeks in my hands. “Are you okay?” I ask her.

She lets go of Willow’s leg and wraps her arms around my neck. “You saved me,” she whispers.

I gently push her away from me, so I can see with my own two eyes that she’s okay. “Did he hurt you?”

She shakes her head, running a finger under her nose. “Are you mad at me?” she asks quietly.

“Honey, why would I be angry with you?”

Charlotte peeks up at the other women. “Because I told the sheriff you were going to be my mommy.” She sniffles before wrapping herself around me, burying her face in my hair.

Slowly, I rise with her in my arms. *Oh no. This is real.* These people are all covering for me so the court will go easy on me.

The owner of the shop comes out with an armful of dresses, hanging them in a large dressing room. My sister pulls Charlotte from my arms, handing her to Willow. “Come on,” she urges.

My feet trip over each other as she pulls me into the dressing room.

She takes my face in her hands, shaking me gently. “It’s going to be okay, little sis. I’m here for you. I’ll always be here for you.”

I blink at her rapidly. “Jesse, I can’t marry Petey. That’s not what you’re all expecting, is it?”

Her gaze bores into mine. “That man is in critical condition, Katie. He could die.”

“That was the damn point.”

She drops her hands from my face. “You could be brought up on federal charges over this. Charlotte was smart. Thank god she’s a quick-witted child.



She saved your ass.”

Jesse starts looking through the dresses. None of which I’ll be wearing. “Jesse, she wants me to be her mom. I’m not playing with a little girl’s heart like that. What’s she going to do when it’s over?”

My sister ignores me, holding a dress against my body. “This one is pretty.”

I place my hands over hers, pulling them to my chest. “Jesse, I’m not doing this.”

A tiny knock bangs against the door.

My sister and I stare at each other. Then, it opens and Charlotte’s little face peeks in. “I found you a dress,” she says innocently. “Daddy said I could wear black. He said it was fitting. Maybe you could wear black, too. Then, we’ll match.” She steps in with the lady from the store who’s holding a long black dress.

My sister instantly takes the dress from her. “That’s a good idea, Charlotte. We’ll let her try it on.” She hands the dress off to me, and then closes the door behind them.

I plop down into a chair in the corner of the room.

How am I going to get out of this? Surely Petey isn’t going along with this insane plan. But he did bail me out. No. No way he agreed to this. *Daddy said I could wear black.*

My finger trails over the black lace. In all my thirty plus years, I’ve never worn a dress. It’s not that I’m a late bloomer. I bloomed just fine. It’s that I like to keep my body to myself. There’s nothing wrong with that.

*He said black was fitting.*

I chuckle to myself. Fitting indeed. That statement right there tells me everything I need to know. He’s as enthusiastic over this wedding as I am.

It won't hurt to try it on. The damn thing probably won't fit anyhow.

But when I slip it over my head, pulling on the zipper that stops just above my tailbone, I see it fits just fine. Perfect in fact. I step toward the mirror. It's fucking gorgeous. It is all black lace and satin with roses scattered over a sheer material, covering my chest. I spin, admiring the open back.

I pull my hair up and stare at my reflection. The thought of Petey's dark eyes on me in this makes me shiver from head to toe. My hand trails over my throat. Maybe I could paint my nails blood red to top it off.

Yeah, I think that would work nicely.

I'm not sure why he agreed to this, but I'm going to make him regret it. I'm going to remind him that I will always come out on top.

When I leave the dressing room, everyone groans. "Did it not fit?" Billie Rose asks.

"It fit just fine. I'll take it." I hand it to the shop owner as she drops her shoulders in relief. I think she's ready for us to leave.

"Shoes!" Lily exclaims. "We can't forget shoes."

I wave my hand. "No worries. I have that covered."

My sister steps around me to pay, but I stop her. "I'll get it. I'm the one who got myself into this situation."

She rolls her eyes. "Petey's taking care of it. He told me if you argued I'm supposed to tell him."

"Well, tell him. I don't give a fuck." I pull my wallet out of my jeans and pay for the stupid thing myself. Which makes me wince because holy fuck it's not cheap.

*Whatever.* It's a small price to pay for keeping Charlotte safe. And that is what this is all about.

Speaking of Charlotte ... she has her arms crossed over the counter, her

chin resting on them as she runs her finger over a little tiara. I nod toward it. “Add that to my bill,” I tell the sales lady.

Charlotte peeks up at me with her dark eyes. “It’s going to look so pretty with your dress,” she says sweetly.

“It’s not for me. It’s for you.” I pick it up and place it on her head.

When Jesse catches my gaze, my heart squeezes painfully. Our dad used to host treasure hunts and when I first came here, I found a tiara and gave it to Jesse. To me she was the princess of the castle. She had everything I always wanted. She blinks back tears as the sales lady hands me my receipt.

The ride back to the warehouse is quiet.

“Charlotte seems excited over the wedding,” my sister tries to coax me out of my head.

“Of course she is. Who doesn’t want two parents?”

She flinches.

“I’m sorry,” I say, dropping my gaze to the dress draped over my lap. “I just don’t want to hurt her.”

“You won’t.”

“I will. I can’t stay here, Jesse. I’m not mom material.”

She drums her thumbs over the steering wheel. “You’ve never thought about having a family of your own one day?”

“Jesse, I don’t even think about tomorrow. I like living on the edge, and you can’t do that with a family.”

Her brows tug together, and she remains quiet the rest of the way home.

When we pull into the warehouse lot, I see a car with Florida plates on it. “Please tell me Mama Bear and Ally are not here.”

Jesse shuts the engine off and turns to face me. “Listen to me. You almost killed a man in broad daylight, in a fucking McDonalds for god’s sake. You

have no choice here. This is your best bet. Play the concerned parent and marry Petey. Everyone else is on board with this. None of us want what happened to ruin the rest of your life. And that includes Petey, believe it or not. Don't throw his generosity in his face. That's not you."

"Not me? None of you even know me."

She stares at me with a straight face. "You're right."

"Thank you," I say, reaching for the door handle. Glad we got that out of the way because I don't even know my fucking self. But the lock clicks, trapping me inside.

Dirk and Big Dan walk out of the building and stand with their arms crossed over their chests, waiting for us like sentinels on each side of the door.

My head falls back against the seat. "You thought I'd run."

"I know you will."

My gaze flits over the parking lot, scanning it for my bike. No sign of her.

"What are you so afraid of?" she asks.

"I'm not afraid of anything. You want me to marry a man I despise. Did you think I'd be happy about it?"

"Charlotte invited the sheriff. He's going to be here this evening."

I shove my hands between my legs, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth.

"You're scared of him, aren't you?" she asks quietly.

"Why would I be afraid of him? I've killed over a dozen men. I could kill him, too."

"But you can't. You can't kill him. I'm going to ask you something, and I want an honest answer."

She lights up a cigarette and hands it to me. She rolls my window down a

crack as I draw smoke into my lungs.

“Have you been with a man?” she asks, finally breaking the silence.

I laugh. “Yes,” the lie easily rolls off my tongue.

She sighs. “Honesty is not your strong suit.”

“I’ve been with lots of men in lots of situations.”

Jesse rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

I flick the ashes out the window. “Doesn’t even matter, sis. Petey and I aren’t going to be sharing a bed anytime soon.” I sit up straighter. “Let’s just get this over with, shall we?”

“Petey isn’t a bad man,” she says, clicking the lock.

Without responding, I jump out of the car with my dress.

*A fucking dress.*

I storm past my brother-in-law and his ginormous sidekick. Neither say anything as I pass, they just turn and follow behind me. My mom rushes toward me as soon as I step inside. *Oh please, god, no.*

“Baby ... your dad would be so happy for you.”

Ally pushes her aside. “Why don’t you go get Katie something to eat.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea, sweetie. I’ll see you girls upstairs.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Ally grabs my hand and together we run up the stairs. I’ve missed her. When we get to our old room, she throws herself on her bed, stretching her arms out wide. “You’re such a bitch. Why didn’t you tell me you were back with the club?”

“Because I didn’t plan on being here long.” I hang my funeral dress on the closet door, opening the bag. “Did you bring Jason?” I ask.

“He couldn’t get off work on such short notice. Luckily, I was able to get away. There’s a teacher shortage everywhere. It’s getting hard to find subs.”

Ally and her husband are both teachers.

When I came here as a little girl, Ally and I became friends. I mimicked her to a T. Her mom was dating Jesse's dad, Bill. Soon after they got married, they adopted me. Now, we're just one big happy family. Minus one.

Anyway, Ally has always known she was going to teach. She was my only friend, so I did everything she did. She was normal, and I didn't know how to be normal, so I copied her.

But when we got to college, everything went right down the shitter. First, my dad died, and then a week later, my dog. I've fostered a few dogs since then, but I couldn't bring myself to adopt any of them. That would be cruel. I move around so much; it wouldn't be fair to any pet.

I realized I had no fucking clue who I was without the two of them. For a short time, I continued going to class, but then I just couldn't keep up the charade. I'm not like Ally. I don't know why I ever pretended to be.

*She's not dirty like me.*

When she graduated and married Jason, I took off. Mom was distraught over losing Dad, so Ally and her husband took her in. I was happy for all of them, but I didn't fit into the equation. I didn't mind because by that time, I knew I needed to leave.

One night I was bored, so I googled my dad. And holy shit, I learned all about his prison days. How he had killed a man to protect Jesse. That's when I contacted Grandma Maggie and asked if I could help her find the man who took her daughter. I knew the club had been looking for him for years. I needed a bad guy to track down. I wanted to be like my dad. To see what it felt like to dispel evil from this world.

Damn, it was a hell of a ride. I didn't find him, but I found plenty of others like him. It fed something inside me. It made me feel like I was finally in

control.

It worked for a while.

“Black.” Ally wrinkles up her nose, pulling me from my thoughts. I let my eyes roam over the offending object.

Ally’s wedding was beautiful. If you like blue skies, sunshine, and the Pacific Ocean. “You do know I’m being forced to marry this man. Black is fitting ... his words, not mine.”

“Honestly, I didn’t think you’d ever get married.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” I tell her, walking over to the window. My gaze lands on the dock. There are vines running down the length of it with bright, colorful flowers scattered through the greenery.

Our mom knocks on the door before opening it. “Here. Eat, baby,” she fusses over me. Then, her gaze lands on my dress. “Oh my god, it’s beautiful.” Tears fill her eyes, her hand going over her heart. Her gaze flits over the room. “I’ve missed it here,” she says sadly.

I sit in the window seat and shove the food she brought into my mouth. Thank fuck. I was hungry.

Jesse joins us. “Why are you just sitting there? The wedding is in a few hours.”

All three women begin to walk toward me. Oh fuck no. “Stop, right there,” I say, holding my sandwich in front of me. “I don’t need any help. I’ll see you down there.”

“That’s not how this works, honey,” my mom says.

“Well, that’s how it works in my world. I’ll get ready on my own. Just knock when it’s time to face the executioner.”

Jesse crosses her arms over her chest. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.” I shove the rest of my sandwich in my mouth before

walking into the bathroom to shower.

“Come on. Let’s go. It’s her wedding day. We need to do it her way,” my mother tells my sisters. They both grumble but thank god, they leave.

I turn on the shower, waiting a few minutes. Then, I make my getaway. When I swing the door of my room open, Brody’s arm darts across it, clotheslining me.

“Are you guys for real? You’re really going to force me to marry that asshole?” I ask, rubbing my hand over my neck.

“What? You two are a match made in heaven. You both scare the fuck out of me.”

I find that hard to believe because he doesn’t look the least bit afraid of me.

I narrow my eyes at him, taking a step forward. He jumps back. Maybe he is afraid of me. As I begin to slide past him, Charlotte runs toward us in her black dress. Her hair flows loosely around her shoulders, and she carries at least a dozen red roses in her arms.

By the time she reaches us, she’s panting. “Daddy,” she pauses to suck in a deep breath, “Daddy said these are for you.” She holds them up in the air.

My gaze goes from her to Brody.

“Don’t look at me. He sure the fuck ain’t giving me flowers.” He chuckles.

Charlotte blinks up at me with her shiny black eyes. Her father’s eyes. “Aren’t they pretty?” she coaxes. “He even wrote you a note.” She points to the little envelope attached to them as she hands them over.

I accept them and back into my room. “Thank you,” I tell her. “I’ll ... I’ll see you downstairs.” And then I shut the door quietly, sliding to the floor as soon as it clicks shut. There’s no way out of this. It’s happening. They’re going to make me marry Petey.



I would rather go to prison than spend one day with him.

But the excitement on Charlotte's face ...

Plucking the card from the flowers, I open it slowly.

*Well, this is quite the predicament we find ourselves in. But I can't let you go to prison. Not because the thought of seeing you there doesn't give me a thrill ... it does. But my daughter will never forgive herself if you go away for beating the life out of that asshole. And neither would I.*

*So, let's show these fuckers that you and I will do whatever it takes to protect this club and everyone in it. Get your ass down here and marry me, woman.*

*Petey*

I bark out a laugh. Is this his idea of a proposal?

My gaze falls over my dress.

*Fine.*

I'll marry him, but not because I want to. Because the club needs me to. This is the easiest way to minimize whatever fallout comes from almost killing a man at McDonalds.

Would I do it all over again, knowing the outcome would be to marry a man I despise?

Yes. A hundred times over, yes.

Pulling myself from the floor, I open the door to find Brody right where I left him. "Send one of the guys to the store for me, would ya?"

He raises his brows. "Depends on what you need."

"A little girl's helmet. And it better be cooler than the one Petey has for her," I say, catching his dopey grin as the door slams shut.

# Chapter Five

## KATIE

**A**s I'm tying my boots, a knock at the door tells me it must be time. I holler over my shoulder, "Come in at your own fucking risk."

The door opens and Dirk steps inside, his eyebrow at an alarming level. "First of all, you broke your sister's heart by not letting her help you."

I stand up and turn to face him.

His eyes widen as they take in my dress. "Jesus," he mumbles. "Fine. I see you didn't have any problem getting ready on your own, but that still doesn't excuse you from excluding her."

My face falls because he's right. None of this is her fault. It's my own doing. But still, I wouldn't have done it any other way. "I'm sorry." And I am.

He sits on the edge of my bed and pats the spot beside him. "Do you want to make it up to her?" he asks.

"I guess," I groan.

"Let her come in here and do something ... anything. You have time."

I wiggle my fingers. I haven't painted my nails yet. "Fine. Send her in," I

tell him, standing. He grabs me around the wrist and gently pulls me back down.

“I’m not finished,” he says. “I know this isn’t a real wedding. Well, for all legal purposes it is, but any-fucking-way, I was wondering if you would let me walk you down the aisle.”

When I don’t say anything, he continues, “I’ve done a shit job of taking care of you since Bill passed. I’m sorry.”

“You had Billie Rose and Jesse to take care of. I was never your responsibility.” I push off his leg and walk over to the dresser, pulling out the red nail polish.

“I’ll always be his second in command in my heart, and that means his responsibilities are mine. So, what do you say? Can I walk you down the aisle?”

Shaking the bottle in my hand, I stare at him, keeping my face schooled. “Sure. Whatever tickles your pickle, dude.”

He stands and backs toward the door, not taking his eyes from mine. “Be nice today,” he warns, shaking a finger at me.

Two seconds after he walks out, my sister is sitting in front of me, pulling my hand to her. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you with your nails painted,” she tells me.

“So, what’s the spread for my big day?” I ask, my stomach growling. The sandwich Mama Bear brought me isn’t cutting it.

She begins to rattle off everything she’s prepared. “But it was no big deal. Mama Bear helped,” she finishes, her gaze focused on my nails. “You look killer in that dress. Petey’s going to shit himself.” She laughs.

“Yeah, I’ve come a long way from dirty clothes and ratty hair,” I joke.

Her hand pauses, and she looks up at me. We’ve both come a long way

since the day she took me from the trailer. Glancing away from her, I stare into the mirror. “You know, I don’t like the way my hair turned out. Do you think I have time to shower?”

“You look beautiful. Your hair is fine. We only have about fifteen minutes, and then we need to get down there.” She turns her head, locking eyes with me in the mirror. “What’s really going on, sis?”

I sigh loudly, shaking my hand in front of her face. “Nothing. I’m just pissed I have to marry that asshole.”

“Well, you’re stuck with him for a while. Just try to make the best of it.”

“So, I’m just supposed to marry him and then what? As soon as the dust settles, we’re just going to get a divorce?”

She shrugs. “Why don’t you take things one day at a time? Why are you thinking so far ahead?”

Whatever. I just need this charade of a wedding to be over. Maybe this shit will be settled quickly, and then I can move the fuck on. I’ve been thinking about going to Oregon. I don’t know, just somewhere that’s not here. I don’t know why I’ve stayed this long, but I guess it was for the best. Who knows what would have happened to Charlotte if I hadn’t been there.

My sister touches my forehead, pulling me from my thoughts. “Do you think you can muster a few smiles today? You need the sheriff to believe you’re happy.”

“Happy?” I chuckle under my breath.

“I know you know what happiness is. I’ve seen it on your face before,” she says, patting my cheek as she stands. She pulls me with her to the long mirror, hovering behind me. “You’re fucking gorgeous. Remember who you are today.”

*Who I am? I’m just a dirty little kid from the trailer court.*

Dirk knocks on the door before pushing it open. He takes us both in, smiling. A smile from him is rare. Smirks are a given, but this is a genuine grin. Jesse rushes to him, and they do their sickening kissy-kissy- hold-each-other-like-they-haven't-seen-one-another-in-days thing. He swats her butt as she walks away, leaving me alone with him.

He holds his hand out. "Let's do this, kid."

I place my hand in his and that is when it begins ... a nervousness low in my belly. That feeling of being forced to do something you don't want to do. Like being pulled to the edge of a canyon when you're afraid of heights.

Before I know it, we're standing on the patio, looking down at a sea of black leather jackets down by the lake.

"Why are there so many people here?" I whisper, digging my boots into the pavement.

Dirk turns so he blocks everyone out. "Look at me," he orders.

Reluctantly, I do.

"You are a part of this fucking club. Have been since the day Jesse toted your little ass home with her. Everyone is here because they love you. What the fuck did you think it was going to be like on your wedding day?"

I shake my head. "I've never thought of my wedding day, Dirk. I can't fucking do this. I'd rather sit in prison," my voice rises with each word that leaves my mouth.

He grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me. "Stop. You're doing this because I'm not letting my little sister go to jail." He glances over his shoulder, his words coming out faster as the music begins. "You're the toughest bitch I know right alongside your sister. Shut it off, and let's get this shit done." He taps my temple with a tattooed finger. "I know you're a good actress. Pull that shit out right fucking now."

I open my mouth to argue, but he doesn't give me a chance to say anything.

He takes my hand and wraps my fingers around his arm, and then he leads us down the hill. "I know you're struggling more than you let anyone see. I'll help you through that, but I can't do it if you're sitting behind bars."

We both smile as we pass the first group of guests. "I'm not struggling, Dirk. It's just that I had plans, and marrying Petey was not one of them."

"And your plans were?"

"To get out of here."

"And then what?"

I blow a wisp of hair out of my face as we reach the dock. My gaze roams to the end of it where the club's chaplain stands with my sister, Charlotte, Jackson and ... and ... holy fuck. I blink, trying to break the hold those sinfully dark eyes have on me.

The air leaves my lungs, and my knees begin to wobble. Dirk tightens his grip on me, whispering a goddammit under his breath.

Petey's eyes release mine so he can drop them down my frame. A slow smile spreads across his face as he makes his way back up, snagging my gaze once again. And then the fucker has the audacity to wink at me.

Slowly, I turn my head toward Dirk. He's tugging on my elbow, encouraging me forward. But when he sees the look on my face, his softens. "He's a good man, Katie. I wouldn't let you marry someone I don't trust."

My head spins back to the man standing at the end of the dock. The man I'm seconds away from marrying. He doesn't look like a good man. He looks like sin incarnate. "I'm ... I'm ..." A breeze blows across the lake, windchimes tinkling in the distance.

"Trust me," Dirk says as the crowd behind us begins to chatter quietly

amongst themselves.

Charlotte waves at me with a huge smile on her face, and that is what makes me put one boot in front of the other.

When we reach them, my plan is to toss myself into the water just as soon as Dirk releases me. I'm sure I can make it look like a natural fall. Yeah, it's the only way out of this. I'll have to go upstairs and cleanup, giving me an opportunity for escape. I'll grab my things and get the fuck out of here. Just a few more steps ...

But when Dirk releases me it's only after placing my hand in Petey's. I watch as my hand disappears in his big bear paw one. It's firm, unrelenting ... warm.

I shake my head, clearing my thoughts and turn my focus to the chaplain. Staring at his patch, I do my best to ignore the way Petey is rubbing his thumb against the palm of my hand. I'm going to throw up. That's it! It's not something I want to do. I wanted to throw myself over the edge of this goddamn dock, but instead I'm simply going to throw up.

But without the ability to stick my finger down my throat, it doesn't happen.

Soon enough we're facing each other, and I'm staring into his scary as fuck yet incredibly handsome face. His mouth is moving. "I do."

My stomach tightens when his words hit my ears. My fingers begin to tingle. I'm moving past the nausea faze right into the pass out stage. His hands squeeze mine, and I realize it's my cue.

"I do," the words fall from my lips as my mind scrambles to figure out a way to take them back. *I don't. I really don't!*

Darkness tugs at the edge of my vision when the chaplain says, "You may kiss the bride."

Petey lets go of my hand only to place it on the back of my head, giving me no chance to escape. Slowly, he brings our faces together, leaving me no choice but to close my eyes. I brace myself for the contact. Then, his lips press against mine.

That's when something strange happens. The world quiets, my heart begins to beat slower, and for the first time since I found out I was marrying him, the churning in my stomach recedes.

He deepens the kiss, his tongue poking its way between my lips, and I find them opening for him. His scent consumes me. It's nice. I find that I don't mind it. Which should be alarming as fuck. When he releases my other hand, I place it on his chest, needing to keep some distance between us. His hands land just below my neck, resting heavily on my chest. It makes my stomach do a weird little flip.

I pull my head back, breaking our kiss. The crowd cheers as we stare at each other, his hands still on me. Charlotte wiggles between us, jumping up and down. "Now you're my real mommy," she squeals.

Petey drops his hands suddenly as if I burned him.

Little Charlotte doesn't miss a beat. She takes both our hands and pulls us down the dock, between the aisle of well-wishers. My gaze snags on the sheriff, and he smiles at me.

He bought it. He really bought it. How can anyone believe Petey and I like each other, let alone love one another?

I laugh. It's over. Hot damn. Now I can go upstairs and get the fuck out of this dress.

My sister guides us to a table, pushing me into a chair. Petey sits down in the one next to me. *Oh my god, it's not over.*

Everyone begins to take their seats. I poke at the food that's shoved in



front of me, listening to the clatter of plates and the abundance of laughter. Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves. My sister always makes sure everyone has a good time and plenty to eat.

“Smile. The sheriff is coming,” Petey growls in my ear, setting his fork on the edge of his plate. He stands and leans over the table to shake his hand as he approaches.

“Congratulations,” he tells us, shaking Petey’s hand before reaching for mine. I take it reluctantly, immediately wiping my hand off on my napkin under the table once he releases it.

Petey’s eyes drop under the table as he sits back down. His brows pulling together. I pretend not to notice he’s watching me.

“So, I hate to bring this up on such a happy occasion, but you two weren’t planning on leaving the state for the honeymoon, were you?” he asks, glancing behind him to make sure our conversation is private.

My mouth falls open because what the fuck? Honeymoon?

Little Charlotte climbs up on my lap. “Mommy and daddy are having a staycation,” she tells him.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“And I get to stay at the farm with Willow and Jackson,” she continues, picking up a roll from my plate and shoving it into her mouth. She continues to speak, crumbs falling all over her dress. “Do you know what a staycation is, sheriff?”

He chuckles, nodding his head. “I think I do.” His gaze goes to Petey. “So, you’ll be at the cabin then? I only ask in case anything comes up.”

Petey nods. “That’s where we’ll be.”

“Good. Good. I’ll leave you to enjoy the rest of your evening.” He dips his head and backs away.

I watch as he and his female deputy make their way out to the dance floor that Jesse has set up on the patio.

“Charlotte, we talked about this,” Petey scolds the little girl in my lap.

“What? That’s what Jackson told me to tell him.” She blinks up at him innocently, pointing to Jackson.

We both turn our heads his way. Jackson leans back in his chair, holding his stomach, rolling with laughter. I’m going to kill him.

My sister yells that it’s time for cake. *Are you kidding me? Cake too?*

When Petey and I get to the table, he looks at the knife and then at me. “I’ll do the cutting,” he tells me.

I roll my eyes. “Do you really think I’d stab you in public?”

He raises an eyebrow.

“Okay, fine. What did you want me to do? He was peeking at Charlotte like a goddamn fucking creeper.”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t have done what you did, but you could have just scared him away and then followed the fucker.”

“And risk losing him? Maybe that’s why I’ve always gotten to the bad guys before you. First rule, you don’t wait. You strike while they’re within arm’s length.”

“I’ll remember that,” he says, licking frosting off his fingers.

Huffing, I take the piece of cake he offers me and then without giving him a chance, I shove it right in his face.

My sister groans. “Katie, you’re supposed to feed it to each other.”

“I did,” I laugh as Petey smashes a piece right in the middle of my chest, just above my dress. My mouth falls open as I stare at the mess covering my boobs.

The club roars in unison. Whistles break out, and a chant begins. “Lick it

off. Lick. It. Lick it off!”

My eyes narrow on his. “I will gut you right here,” I warn. And I’m not kidding. That knife will be in his throat before his tongue leaves his mouth.

He leans forward and lazily trails his fingers through the frosting. Then, he straightens and shoves them in his mouth. The crowd boos but at least his tongue is where it belongs.

“Let’s get out of here.” He nods toward the lake as he wipes cake from his beard. “They’re only going to get worse as the kegs empty.”

My gaze roams across the lake. He built a cabin not far from Billie Rose and Elijah’s. Surely that’s not where he’s nodding toward.

He grabs my sister’s arm before she walks away. Leaning over the table, he whispers something in her ear. Her gaze flits over me briefly and then she fists his jacket, pulling him close to her, knocking a glass over in the process.

My eyes widen when he holds up his hands in surrender. He whispers to her again, and she lets go of his jacket, patting it. He cups her face in his hand as she blinks back tears. She nods before turning and walking away from us.

“What the fuck was that all about?” I ask as he grabs my elbow and quickly ushers us away from the party and down the hill.

“Nothing. Let’s just get out of here before anyone notices and makes a big deal. You know what’s next, don’t you?” He pauses, catching his breath with his hands on his hips.

This is my chance. I could run. I glance around, wondering which way would be best to make my escape.

“Am I going to have to tie you to my bed?” he mutters.

*His bed?* “W-what is next?” I ask, my heart beginning to beat out of my chest, my escape plan put on pause.

“Our first dance,” he grumbles, resuming to pull me along.

First dance? I'm more worried about the mention of his bed.

"Stop!" I screech, tugging against him.

He stops, turning to stare down at me. His gaze flits over my face, dropping to my chest briefly before landing on my eyes again. My heart picks up, a nervousness settling low in my stomach. He's not looking at me like he usually does. With contempt. I swallow hard.

"Your sister told me about you. So, you don't have to worry," he says.

My sister told him about me? What would she ...

*No.*

# Chapter Six

## PETHEY

**T**he look on her face is killing me. “She told me you don’t like too much human contact. And I knew dancing would probably be pushing your limit for today.”

The corners of her mouth turn down. God, I’m screwing this up. Jesse is going to murder me in my sleep.

“We’ve got to make it look like we’re a married couple and that means we have to live together, so let’s get down there and get this thing started.”

Her lips part.

“I’m not staying with you,” she says quietly.

“You’ll have your own room.”

“I’m not staying with you!” she screams.

Fuck. I wrap my hand around her mouth, silencing her. Her eyes widen as she stares up at me, but the panic in her gaze slowly dissipates. “Good girl,” I tell her. She blinks slowly at my words, as relaxed as I’ve ever seen her. That stirs something in me.

But just as quickly, the hell cat returns. She rips my hand away from her

mouth, drawing her claws over my skin as she does. “Don’t you ever fucking touch me again!” she shouts, stomping away from me. She continues down the path and marches her tight little ass up the stairs, slamming my door in my face.

I brace my hand on the frame. Goddammit. I watch her through the window as she stands in the living room with her hands on her hips, her breathing hard and fast. When I slam the door wide open, she jumps, spinning around. We stare at each other as I kick it closed with the bottom of my boot.

“Remember when I said I was taking tally?” I ask, removing my jacket.

She shivers in response.

“You’re up to three.”

Her brows furrow. “Three? How the fuck is that?”

I settle my ass onto the couch, resting my arm across the back of it. I kick my ankle over my knee. “One,” I hold up a finger, “you thought about running. I saw the way Dirk had to drag you up the aisle.”

She folds her arms across her chest. “You can’t count that.”

“So, you’re admitting it.”

She ignores me and begins to walk around the cabin, trailing her finger over my things.

“Two, you let me stick my tongue down your throat.”

Katie pauses with her hand on a vase of wildflowers. “Are you fucking serious? You’re the one who put it there.”

“It’s your job to stop me because I sure as shit ain’t going to stop myself.”

Slowly, her shoulders pull back as she straightens.

“Three,” I continue. “That dress.”

She looks down, her face turning redder by the second. “Oh ... oh, did my

dress offend you? I thought black was ... what was the word? Fitting. Yes, fitting,” she reminds me.

I lay my head back against the couch. “Oh, the color was fine. But we both know why you chose that one, and it wasn’t because it was black.”

“I fucking chose this one because Charlotte wanted us to match.” She tries to hide her lie by glancing away.

“Come here.” I point to the spot beside me.

I expect her to disobey, but for some strange reason she moves toward the couch. Suddenly, she stops, reaching behind her.

The sound of a zipper pulls my attention to her hips, and before I know what’s happening, the dress slides down her body.

Holy fuck.

She hides her fear well. But what she doesn’t know is I’m an expert at sniffing it out. Maybe it’s because I scare most people. She’s no exception.

She’s terrified.

“There. Is that better?” she asks, not able to hide the tremble in her voice.

“Four and five,” I tell her, lazily running my eyes over her.

She takes a step back. Holy hell, she’s stunning. Her standing there in two scraps of black lace and boots would make the strongest of men fall to their knees.

“What are those for?” She pulls her arms up, wrapping them around herself.

“Lying and tempting,” I tsk, tapping my finger over my mouth. “Admit it. You bought that dress for me.”

She stammers as she lowers herself to the ground, reaching for the lacey material.

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

When she doesn't, I point to the couch again and this time she listens. She holds the dress to her chest, dropping her eyes to the floor.

"It's okay you're trying to tempt me, but I meant what I said ... it's your job to stop this."

"Stop what? You hate me, Petey."

I bark out a laugh. "Hating you doesn't mean I don't want to fuck you."

She flinches, and I instantly regret my words, so I try to smooth it over. "The dress was perfect. I was proud to be marrying you."

"Oh, so you could *fuck* me?" she snips, rising from the couch. "Point me to the door that's mine," she says as she stands, throwing the dress to the floor.

Pointing her toward my bedroom door, she stalks toward it, swinging her hips back and forth as she does. She runs a hand over her left butt cheek as she looks at me over her shoulder. "Goodnight, husband."

Before she closes the door, I calmly inform her she's now up to six. She laughs and slams yet another door in my face, leaving me hard and pissed that she might be winning.

I hate to lose.



# Chapter Seven

KATIE

Sliding down the door, I take in my prison. Someone told me he built this cabin with little help from anyone else. It's what he did when he first came here ... before his daughter arrived. He spent every waking moment that wasn't dedicated to the club out here. It's beautiful.

Letting out a sigh, I push off the floor and step into the attached bathroom. "Congratulations," I tell my reflection. Chuckling darkly, I shake my head, then stare at the counter.

*What a damn day. Is that my toothbrush?*

The severely frayed bristles tell me it sure as shit is. I twirl it through my fingers, wondering how the fuck it got here. It falls from my hand. Did he go through my things?

"Arghhhh!" I hate him.

Whatever. I have nothing to hide ... not in my bag, anyway. *I need a shower.*

Quickly, I kick off my boots, shimmying out of my panties as the water warms up. As soon as steam fills the room, I step under the scalding stream.

As I begin the process of cleaning myself, I let my mind wander to my wedding. It's unbelievable I let them all talk me into it. How could I let that happen?! Maybe because I've had next to no sleep in the past forty-eight hours.

After I've rinsed, I move on to round two, beginning with my hair and making my way down my body. I'm hurrying more than I usually do because I don't know how much hot water there'll be. Three times ... always three times of scrubbing and rinsing.

Then comes the vigorous drying off process. Shit, I left my underclothes on the floor. I can't touch them now. I'll have to find the clothes basket and pick them up before my next shower. Otherwise, I'll have to start the process all over again. My gaze roams over my pinked skin. My underwear will be fine on the floor until tomorrow. My skin can't take much more tonight.

Next, it's on to my teeth. I brush until I spit red. Then, I add more toothpaste and give it another two rounds.

So far, all my hygiene products have been at my fingertips. The only disconcerting thing is that Petey's things are right beside mine. I drop the toothbrush in the holder while staring at his. It's been in his mouth ... I've been in his mouth. *Oh my god!*

Throwing the door wide open, I stomp into the bedroom, ready to get my pajamas and go to sleep.

"Fuck!" I shriek, backing into the bathroom.

Petey's eyes widen, his mouth slowly falling open as his brows pull together. His mouth snaps shut and his already dark eyes darken more, making me scurry to close the door.

"Meet me in the kitchen as soon as you're dressed," he orders before it clicks shut.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* I dance around the bathroom, throwing my hands in the air, carefully avoiding the clothes on the floor. Shit ... what if he calls Jesse?

When I open the bathroom door, I find he's laid out my plaid pajama bottoms, a black tank top, and a pair of panties. I cringe, tapping my fingers over my forehead. He touched my panties. Shit, what do I do? He could be calling her right now. I have to stop him.

Fuck it. The panties slide up my legs, and then I hurry to pull on the other items. *Don't think about it. Don't think about it.* The second my shirt is over my head, I run out the door.

He turns to face me as I round the corner, instantly slowing my steps. I tip forward on my toes, stopping myself a few feet away from him.

Oh good. He doesn't have his phone out.

His dark gaze roams over my face, and we both speak at the same time. "I'm sorry," we say in unison.

He waves his hand for me to go first.

"I'm sorry. Please don't tell my sister," I beg.

The wheels turn behind his eyes as he thinks about it.

"Please ... I'll do anything." The words leave my mouth before I've clearly thought them through.

"Anything?" he asks, tipping his head.

Shaking my hands in front of me, I realize how fucked I am. Prison is looking better and better.

# Chapter Eight

## PETEY

I'm not sure what is happening, but I realize now I have no idea who my wife is. Perhaps I've bit off more than I can chew.

Her bottom lip begins to quiver. It's so unlike her.

Naw, I haven't bitten off more than I can chew ... I just haven't bit hard enough.

But that's about to change.

"I won't tell her," I promise.

Her shoulders droop. "Thank you," she whispers, dropping her head, her wet hair falling over her shoulders and dripping onto her black tank top.

"On one condition," I add.

Her nostrils flare, and fuck if that doesn't turn me on. I wait for her snark, but it doesn't come.

I'll admit one thing: I do admire the way she's holding herself together. It's been a long day, and I know how tired she must be. Sleeping in jail is no fun. I've done it. It's probably not cool of me to take advantage of her lack of sleep, but it's for her own good.

“You let me help you,” I tell her.

She clenches her fists. This woman could kill most men ... *most*.

“And how are you going to do that?” she asks, grinding her back molars together.

Leaning against the counter, I shrug. “I don’t know, but I’ll figure something out.”

She shakes her head and rolls her eyes, blowing me off. “Whatever. Just don’t tell her. I’m going to bed.” Waving her hand at me, she walks away.

I *let* her go.

The corner of my mouth kicks up. I’m not going to tell Jesse anything, but I’m sure there are a few things she can tell me.

Quiet as a mouse, I slip out the door and make my way back to my wedding party. The music is loud as half the club kicks up their heels and the other half are gathered around Dan and our newest member, Ash, as they throw punches at each other. The crowd roars when Dan takes a punch to the gut, but the man only stands taller.

I spot Jesse carrying a handful of dishes inside while Dirk holds the door open for her. Quickly, I brush off the few people who stopped to congratulate me and follow them.

Dirk taps Jesse on the shoulder, pointing to me as I close the door behind us and lock it. She drops the dishes in the sink with a clank, spinning around.

“Oh my god, did she run?” she asks.

Dropping into a chair, I point to the one across from me. “I’ve got a few questions about your sister. And I’d appreciate honest answers,” I say, shooting straight from the hip.

Dirk raises his brow at me, but Jesse pats his arm. “Sure.” She pushes Dirk toward the door. “Go back to the party. I’ll be fine.”

He doesn't budge. "Where's my sister-in-law?"

"At home in my bed," I tell him flatly.

"You better watch yourself, enforcer," he says, grinding his teeth.

"Exactly. I'm this club's enforcer." I jab my finger into the table. "I take the job seriously. She's a member of this club, isn't she? I married her to save her ass from jail. And now I need to know everything about her, so I can save her pain-in-the-ass again."

He pushes off the counter. "From herself?" he asks, and when I nod, he looks at Jesse. "Tell him everything."

Dirk knows Katie is struggling.

He doesn't stick around for the sad story Jesse weaves as tears pour down her cheeks. "You wouldn't have believed it, Petey. I found her mom lying in her own vomit."

I swallow the bile rising in my throat. Then, she continues the story, telling me about the picture she found. I have to stop her so I can take a moment to process. *Jesus Christ.*

She finishes Katie's story with how Bill adopted her. "Watching him raise her made me realize how lucky we were to have such an amazing father. He loved her like his own."

Clearing my throat, I tell her how sorry I am that she missed out on having him around in her younger years.

She shrugs. "I've learned everything happens for a reason. If it had been any different, then we never would have met Katie."

I tip my head back and stare at the ceiling. How right she is. God works in mysterious ways.

"What prompted all this?" she asks, drawing little circles over the table with her finger.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head over it, darlin’. I’m going to take real good care of her,” I say, stretching out of my chair.

She stares into my eyes. “Just so we’re clear, I haven’t killed a man in a long time.” She flicks her lighter, staring into the flame as she continues, “But I’m positive I remember how.”

I lean over, puffing out my cheeks before blowing out her flame. “She’s my responsibility now, sister.”

She rolls the lighter up in the palm of her hand before flicking me in the forehead with a finger. I don’t have to explain how it works. She’s been in the club a long time. Her sister is my old lady now. But I know her threat wasn’t an idle one. She’ll make good on it if I hurt Katie.

“Other than a red bottom, she should be fine,” I add.

Jesse rolls her eyes. “Good luck with that one, buddy.” She laughs, going back to her dishes. “Katie will have your dick on a skewer before that happens.”

Why do neither of these women take me seriously?

*Because they’re tough as shit, that’s why.*

# Chapter Nine

## KATIE

**K**icking the covers off, I huff in frustration. That was the worst fucking night of sleep I've ever had. Not because the mattress is lumpy or the sheets are scratchy ... no, it's because they fucking smell like him.

I shove my nose into the pillow, rubbing my thighs together. Goddammit. Why does he have to smell so good?

Fuck this. I need to get out of here. I find my clothes in one of the dressers. Perfect.

I don't have much. I'm what you call a minimalist. Keeping a light load makes moving from place to place a little easier. When I'm dressed, I head out of the bedroom to find Petey sitting at the breakfast counter with a cup of coffee in his hand.

He looks over the rim of the cup before calmly setting it down. I glance around, noticing a pillow and blanket folded neatly on the end of the couch.

"Did you sleep out here?" I ask him.

"Yes," he answers simply.

I run my hands down my jeans. "Why?"



“Because you were in my bed.”

Oh yeah, right. “Well, I’ll sleep on the couch. I don’t want to put you out.”

He stands and walks over to the cupboard, pulling out another mug. “Absolutely not. That’s not how I roll, Kat.”

I straighten, pulling my shoulders back. Did he just call me Kat? He pours me a coffee and then sets it on the counter next to his, waving for me to join him.

“Too bad, because I’m not letting you sleep on the couch for me.” I take a seat and pull the cup to my mouth, letting the steam hit me in the face. Liquid heaven. When I take a sip, I moan. It’s so good.

He chuckles, taking a big swig from his own cup. “Well, it looks like we agree on one thing.” He holds his cup between us before setting it in front of him. “Okay, you win. I won’t sleep on the couch.”

I nod, happy he agreed. I don’t think I can take spending another night in his bed.

“And neither will you,” he adds, making me spit coffee all over the place.

“You okay?” he asks, handing me a napkin before cleaning up the mess I made on the counter.

“What are you saying?” I ask, already knowing I’m not going to like his answer.

He leans back in his chair. “I think we’re both adult enough to sleep in the same bed. We’ll just be sleeping, right?”

I stare into my coffee, trying to think of a response that doesn’t make me admit I can’t handle it. Never admit weakness. Never.

“Great,” he says, taking my nonresponse as a response. He slams the rest of his coffee and places his cup in the sink. “I’m going to hit the shower.”

My knee bounces nervously as he heads into the bedroom. I jump from the

chair and quickly walk around the rest of the cabin. This place looks big enough for several bedrooms, but as I peak through each door, I see most of the rooms are unfinished and empty. All but Charlotte's.

I close the door, not wanting to intrude on her privacy. The room is cute, though. My sister must have painted it for her. It looks like she's living in the rainforest. I smile, thinking of Charlotte here, safe and cozy.

I've heard the rumors that she witnessed her mother's death. At least here she gets to be a kid again.

My chest squeezes painfully as I make my way down the hall, my head hanging low. I need to go for a ride. Shit's been too heavy.

I'm so busy thinking that I run right into the wall. Not a wall ...

His arms wrap around me, holding me hostage against his bare chest. I stare at the smattering of dark hair in the middle of it. "I'm ... I'm sorry," I stammer, pushing against him with my fingertips.

Jesus, he's still damp from his shower, and he's warm. And that scent ... the one that penetrated my dreams last night. My gaze wanders over his ink.

"If you want a tour, I'll gladly give you one."

I give him another shove, but he doesn't budge. "I'm sorry. I was just wondering if there was a guest room," I admit, only because I don't want him to think I was snooping through his house.

"I meant my tattoos," he jokes, finally releasing me. "But I guess we have plenty of time for both." He winks, backing away.

"Where's my bike?" I blurt out, my face heating to a five-alarm fire. Why am I letting him get to me like this? Men don't usually affect me this way. Especially Petey. *He's an asshole*, I remind myself. An asshole. Asshole. Asshole. I repeat the word as I step around him, avoiding any contact.

"Don't know," he clips. "Why? Got somewhere to go?"

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

He follows me into the kitchen. “Let me finish getting dressed and we’ll go.”

My hand trembles as I grip the handle on my coffee mug. I’m already on the line for attempted murder, what’s one more?

“Listen, Petey. I appreciate your chivalry, but maybe it’s best if I just head back to the warehouse now.” I finish my coffee and set the cup beside his in the sink.

He slips a t-shirt over his head which I appreciate, but then he sits on the couch and starts putting on his boots. “You know that’s not an option.” Glancing up at me, he pulls hard on the laces. “The sheriff could show up at any time.”

I’ve been dying to ask this question, and since we’re on the topic, I decide now is as good a time as any. “So, what are you going to do about that creep in the hospital? You know, if he doesn’t die?”

Running his fingers through his beard, he leans back on the couch. “Club business, Kat. You know better than to ask.”

Ignoring the fact that he’s called me Kat for a second time, I head toward the door. “You know, you can fuck right the fuck off.” Club business? That’s bullshit.

He follows me off the porch, but I stop to take in the view. I love this lake. It was the first thing I saw when I came here. I remember never wanting to leave. So why did I?

Petey sidles up beside me. “We just built the dock last week,” he says, pointing to a smaller version of the one up by the warehouse.

“Good for you,” I snip, turning toward him. He continues to smile over his little slice of heaven. “I’ll just kill him myself.”

His smile falls as he slowly turns to face me. “That’s not your place,” he says.

My hands rest on my hips, and I roll my head on my shoulders. I can’t kill Petey, it would devastate Charlotte. “Sure as fuck is.”

“Charlotte is not your concern.”

Narrowing my eyes, I continue to glare at him. “Well, she’s a girl, and sorry to inform you, but I have a code.”

“Code?”

“Kill any man who fucks with my female friends, family, or club members. She’s all three of those, now isn’t she?”

His jaw clenches. “She’s not your daughter.”

“Hmm.” I tap my finger over my mouth, drawing his eyes there. “I’ve got a piece of paper that says different.”

“Kat,” he warns.

Tires crunch over the gravel behind us, but I don’t budge.

“That man is dead,” I tell him. “So, if he doesn’t die in that hospital, we can do one of two things. You can help me end him, or I’ll do it myself.”

“There’s more to this than you know,” he tells me.

“Mornin’! How are the lovebirds today?” the sheriff calls behind me.

My eyes widen as Petey reluctantly puts a smile on his face and looks over my shoulder. “Sheriff,” he says, stepping around me. Taking a deep breath, I turn with a smile of my own.

“Sorry to bother the two of you, but I wanted to let you know what happened before you hear about it on the news.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?” Petey slides his arm around my waist, tugging me to his side. My nostrils flare, but I grin at him.

The sheriff takes off his hat, wiping his brow. “Before we get into it, know

that I did have a man posted outside his door.”

Petey and I tense in unison.

“I thought you said he was unconscious,” Petey growls, knowing where the sheriff is going with this.

“We think he had help. My man stepped away to help with a disturbance in the lobby. We’ll find him.”

*Not if I find him first.*

Petey squeezes my waist. *Did that show on my face?*

“Did you check the cameras?” Petey asks. “Because you told us he was a lone drifter.”

The sheriff places his hat back on his head. “Ah, there was a glitch with the cameras.”

*Glitch my ass.*

“What does this mean for Katie?”

*Oh, so he does know my name.*

“Well, for right now, the charges stand, but if we can’t locate him, then I guess she’ll be off the hook. No victim, no case.” He shrugs.

*Did the fucking club get rid of him?*

Petey glares at the sheriff, letting go of me to take a step toward him. The sheriff backs up, bumping into his car.

“You better fucking find him before I do.” The threat rolls easily off Petey’s tongue, answering my question on whether the club was behind this. Petey is pissed. Good, ‘cause that makes two of us.

“We’ll find him,” the sheriff stammers, getting in his car and backing up.

Dust rolls behind it as he flips it around, disappearing into the trees. The minute he’s gone, Petey and I exchange a glance.

“Truck. Now,” he says, but I’m already running toward it, swinging the

door open and climbing in. Jesus Christ, could this thing be any higher off the ground?

“I swear to God could the sheriff’s department be any more incompetent?” he complains as we speed around the corner and onto the highway.

I’m already dialing Jackson’s number. When he picks up, I hurry to tell him what I know. “We’ll be there in twenty.” I glance at the speedometer on the truck. “Make that ten. Keep her inside,” I tell him before hanging up.

“Tell me where my bike is, Petey, and I’ll find him. I promise. I’ll find him, and I’ll gut him for you.”

He stares straight ahead, and my hands fly out to grab anything I can as we fly around the corner.

When he doesn’t say anything, I switch tactics because I want this man so bad, I can smell the blood already. “Consider it a wedding present.”

He tries his hardest to pretend he didn’t hear me, but his mouth slowly ticks up on one side. Finally, he looks at me. “Fine. If you insist.”

“Really?” I bounce in my seat. Oh man, this is great. “What do you want me to bring back to you? A tooth? An ear?”

He chuckles.

“No, you’re more of a heart man, aren’t you? I knew it.”

I sit back in the seat, already working on a plan. I need to talk to Brian at the Get and Go. It’s caddy-corner from the hospital’s maintenance entrance. Whoever took the man sure as fuck didn’t take him out the main one. Or there’s that loading dock on the east side of the building ...

Petey hits a few buttons on his phone. “Hey, where’s my wife’s bike?” he asks Dirk, I’m assuming. “Fine, I’ll let her use mine.”

My eyes bulge out of my head as my excitement spikes. He’s really letting me do this, and he’s giving me his bike. Holy shit. He really does want this

man dead.

He tosses his phone between us in the seat. "Alive. I want him alive."

*Or not.*

Groaning out loud, I drop my head on the back of the seat. "That's boring. I did that with that asshole who hurt Willow. It sucked ... took all the fun out of it for me."

"That fucker wasn't creeping on Charlotte the way you thought he was. He was trying to coax her out of the bathroom so he could take her to the man who killed her mom."

"What? The man who killed her mom isn't dead?"

Someone killed his wife and lives? Why do I find that odd? My eyes rake over Petey's dark, ink covered hands. I know those fuckers alone are more than capable of murdering someone.

He grimaces. "It's a little more complicated than that. Just find him."

"Sure, I got you."

We whip into the driveway of the farm and rush toward the house. Jackson steps out, holding his hands out to stop us.

"Hey," he places a hand on each of our chests. "Slow down, you two. She's fine. But if you go in there guns ablazin' she's gonna know somethings up, and it's going to scare her."

He's right.

I take a deep breath. Petey spins in a circle on the porch.

"Dirk called me," Jackson continues, his gaze resting on me. "Please tell me you're not going to do anything stupid. Because first of all, Petey's bike is way too big for you."

A snort leaves my mouth before I can reign it in.

Jackson pokes a finger in my chest. "Ah ha. You are planning on going

after him.”

Petey rolls his eyes at me. “Jackson, just let us in. We’re here to get Charlotte, nothing else.”

His gaze bounces between the two of us. “I forbid it,” Jackson orders.

Petey’s jaw works back and forth, but he gives his president a nod.

I make no such promises. My head falls, though. He takes it as acquiescence. His mistake, not mine. I didn’t agree to anything.

Charlotte jumps from the floor where she’s playing a game with Willow when we step inside. “Daddy,” she squeals, running and jumping in his arms. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, Katie and I were missing you, so we thought we’d come get you and bring you home.” He tells her, rubbing his beard over her cheek, making her laugh.

My heart clenches painfully. Charlotte looks at me, and I offer her a little wave.

She pushes away from Petey, wanting down. She runs to me, wrapping her arms around my legs. Petey watches my reaction closely. I pat her back. “Hey, Charlotte, have you been having fun?”

She nods, still holding my legs tightly.

“Why don’t we go grab your bag?” Willow asks, holding her hand out to her.

Charlotte looks up at me. “I’ll be right back, Mommy.”

Should I correct her? I look to Petey for guidance, but he glances away.

When they disappear up the stairs, Jackson grabs my arm and guides me to the kitchen. “Are you okay?” he asks when we’re out of the room.

“Uh, yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

He leans against the counter, peeking around me to make sure no one



followed us. “I saw Petey come back to the party last night.”

My heart rate picks up. “Well, I’m sure he didn’t want to miss all the drinking and stupidity that happens at club parties.” I drop my gaze to my boots.

“He didn’t come back to drink. He was talking to Jesse.”

My heart begins to bang against my chest so hard I’m sure it’s going to abruptly stop. “Oh?”

“Did you guys get in a fight or something?”

I chuckle. “Jackson, we’re always fighting. Nothing new there.”

“So, you’re good?” he asks, his eyes scanning over my face and then down my arms.

“Peachy,” I tell him, swiveling on one foot before marching back out into the living room. I scowl at Petey, crossing my arms over my chest. He better not have told my sister about what he saw last night. I’m so pissed. Why the fuck did he even come into the bedroom last night? From now on I’m going to have to learn to lock the door when I’m getting dressed.

It’s not like my showering routine is bad for me. I’ve been doing it ever since I came to live at the warehouse.

I’m fine. Life is ... well, was good, until I had to marry this asshole.

Petey’s gaze narrows on Jackson. *Yeah, buddy, Jackson just threw you under the bus.* Just like you did to me last night.

Charlotte bounds down the stairs. “I’m ready,” she squeals, taking my hand and pulling me toward the door.

“Thanks for staying with us last night, Charlotte!” Willow hollers as we walk out with Petey right behind us.

Charlotte grabs Petey’s hand, skipping between us and then pulling up her feet so she dangles in the air. “Did you show her my new room, Daddy?” she

asks him.

“No, I thought you could do that.”

She nods, letting go of our hands to climb in the truck. Petey laughs, giving her a little shove in the butt to help her up. When she’s in, he leans against the door, waiting for me. He waves his hand to get in.

“I can get in by myself,” I inform him.

“I’ve got to set a good example for her.” When I don’t move, he sighs. “I want her to see how a man should treat his old lady. You want her to know what she should expect out of her man someday, don’t you?”

He’s got me there. Fine. I grab the handle to swing myself up and in the cab. His warm hand lands on my ass, giving me a little shove. I’m going to murder him in his sleep.

“Daddy’s truck is high, isn’t it?” Charlotte asks, peeking over the seat.

I turn to help her buckle in. “It sure is, honey.” I think he’s trying to overcompensate for his lack of something else, but of course I don’t tell her that.

For now, I put Petey and my sister’s conversation on the backburner. I have more important things to think about. “Can you stop at the Get and Go over on Fifth? I need to pick up some things,” I ask Petey as he gets in.

“Sure thing, Kat.” He picks up on why I want to go there.

“Why do you keep calling me that?” I ask him.

“Because every wifey needs a nickname.” He guns the truck out of the driveway, making Charlotte giggle in her seat behind us. He smiles at her in the rearview mirror, and she claps.

I glance out my window. These two are too much. I’m glad I’ll be getting away from them for a while.

“But why Kat?”

“Kat ... Katie. Get it? Plus, you’re all skitzzy with sharp little claws.”

“And you’re ...” I stop myself, because Charlotte is listening to us.

“What?”

I bite my tongue. *Don’t say it.*

“What am I, *Kat?*”

Narrowing my eyes only makes him laugh. He knows he’s got me because I won’t call him anything bad in front of Charlotte. I also won’t call him anything nice.

“Can’t think of anything? That’s a first.”

When we get to the convenience store, I hop out. “Be right back,” I tell them. I feel his eyes on my backside as I walk into the store. The only good thing about all of this is that it will be over soon. Because I’m going to find this guy, and then Petey can ask him whatever he wants before I dispose of him. After that, I’ll be off the hook with the law and able to move on down the road.

“Hey, Brian.” I lean on the counter, making sure my tits are on full display to him.

His eyes go to them as if they’re magnetized. “Hi, Katie. What can I do for you today? Need a pack of the usual?” he asks.

“Sure do. Thanks,” I tell him as he reluctantly turns away from me to grab my smokes. When he’s ringing them up, I glance out the window at the security camera that faces the hospital. “Hey, did you hear about that guy I beat up over at the Mickey D’s?” I ask him.

He laughs. “Fuck yeah. Whole town heard about it.”

I turn to face him. “Well, he escaped from the hospital last night.”

He slides the smokes over to me, resting his elbows on the counter, bringing his face closer for a better view of my breasts. “I bet we could see

who helped that fucker from that camera.” I turn and point to it.

“Oh, shit, I bet you’re right.” His eyes slowly roam up to my face. “Would you like to see the footage from last night?” he asks, a wry grin tugging at his lips.

“I sure would.”

He tips his head, thinking about it. “How about a trade?” he offers.

My stomach sinks. “Sure, what do you want?”

“A date,” he deadpans.

He’s asked me out several times, and I’ve shot him down every time. It’s not because he isn’t nice or because he’s not attractive ... it’s just because I don’t date. “Deal,” I find myself saying.

“Hot damn.” He claps, waving me back to his office. “Betty, watch the counter for me,” he yells over his shoulder. Betty hums from somewhere in the back of the store.

I follow behind him, sitting in the chair he pulls out for me. “Let’s see. Do you know what time it would have been?”

“No, but maybe during shift change?”

We fast forward the video, stopping when we spot a black SUV pull up to a door to the right of the dock. Two men dressed in black get out and sprint up to the back door. Soon a nurse opens it for them, and they help the man I beat up down the stairs and into the car. He pats one of them on the back. Doesn’t look too unconscious to me. Fuck.

I pull my phone out, taking a picture of the nurse and the plate on the SUV.

“Is that all you need?” Brian asks.

Spinning around in the chair, I face him. “There is one more thing. Could this somehow disappear?”

His eyebrows raise. “It’s possible, I guess. Are you free tomorrow night?”

I clench my teeth but manage to put a smile on my face. “Sure.”

He rubs his hands together. “Consider it gone.” He reaches over and deletes the video. “I’ll pick you up at the warehouse at six.”

Nodding slowly, I stand. “Sounds good.” I back out of the room, grab my smokes off the counter, and rush back to the truck. Petey leans over, popping my door open as I approach.

“Get what you need?” he asks as I climb in.

“Yep. He didn’t have my brand up front, so we had to go look in the back.” I hold the pack of cigarettes up. I glance behind me and find Charlotte is fast asleep.

His gaze follows mine. “Willow and Jackson poop her out every time she stays with them. She loves it at the farm.”

“Hmm,” I hum, already typing on my phone.

“Want to tell me what you found?”

“Nope.” I’m thrown back in my seat when he guns it. Giving him a dirty look, I go back to my phone. “Don’t trust me to handle it?” I ask.

“Put your seatbelt on,” he orders. “And you know damn well I trust you.”

I yank on the seatbelt. “You sound just like my dad,” I grumble before realizing what he just said. He admitted to trusting me. “You trust me?”

“You haven’t given me any reason not to,” he says, pulling up outside of Black Rose Custom Bikes. He nods toward the building. “There you go. I’m pretty sure your bike is inside.”

I glance around, nervous that Dirk is going to pull up any minute.

“I’m assuming you know how to break in,” he adds, dropping his arm across the back of the seat, his fingers tapping me lightly on the shoulder.

“Pfft, haven’t found a lock I can’t pick yet.” I pull my shoulder away from him, bringing it up to my cheek.

We both look behind us, staring at the little girl in her car seat. “I need him alive,” he reminds me.

“He wasn’t as unconscious as the hospital was telling everyone.”

He nods, turning to face me. “This is important, Katie. I’ve been working on this for a long time. I’d do it myself but ...” His gaze goes back to his daughter.

“I get it.” Before I close the door to the truck, I stare up at him. “Did you tell my sister about what you saw last night?”

“Nope.”

I kick a rock on the ground. I need to get going if I’m going to catch up to those assholes, so I guess this conversation will have to wait. “I’ll see you soon.”

He nods as I throw the door shut. I jog over to the side of my niece’s business. I pull out the kit I always carry in my bag and retrieve my tension wrench and pick. It only takes me a few seconds; the trick is to remain calm and focus on the feel of the pins inside.

When it opens, I spot a bike covered in the corner. I slip all the way inside, and sure enough it’s Ginger. That’s what I named her. She’s a beautiful cherry red Harley Softail Deluxe. I run my hand over her seat.

“Hey, baby. You ready to hit the road?”

I give Petey a thumbs up when I roll out of the shop. He chuckles, giving me a one finger salute as I pull out onto the highway. I’m free ...

# Chapter Ten

KATIE

Oh, how I've missed the wind in my hair and the rumble under my ass. But I need to focus. I've got a job to do.

I checked my phone before I pulled out, and my techie friend from college with access to some pretty crazy shit messaged me with a hit on the plate of the SUV I text him about earlier. A camera caught it on the outskirts of Reno. He said it's government issued. Not good. He sent me the location and said if it picked up anywhere else, he'd let me know right away.

So, me and Ginger ride all day, arriving at the location a few hours before the sun sets. Perfect. It will give me just enough time to scour the area and look for the SUV.

It doesn't take long before I find it parked outside of a roadside motel a few miles outside of town. I leave Ginger around the back of the building and rent a room across from where the SUV is parked. A couple of big guys come and go, and I notice they sit outside the room next to theirs to smoke their cigarettes.

A nurse walks out of the room. The two men stare at her ass as she gets in

her car and leaves. Quickly, I step out, pulling my sunglasses over my eyes. I jog around back and fire up Ginger. I follow the young woman, pulling up behind her as she stops to pump gas.

She eyes me suspiciously when I approach. I glance in her backseat, spying not one, but two car seats in the back.

“Hey,” I greet her. “You want to make a shit load of money today?”

Her gaze roams over me. “How much?”

“How much do you need?”

She sighs, watching the numbers on the gas pump climb higher. “Well, my rent is two months behind. They are coming to repo my car any day, and my daycare is threatening to boot me because I’m a couple weeks behind on my payments to them.” She puts the hose back in the pump, staring at me. “What do I have to do?” she asks hesitantly.

“I just need to borrow your scrubs, and I’ll pick up your next shift at the motel.” I nod my head back toward the way we came.

“That’s it?” she asks.

“That’s it. In fact, I’ll pay off your entire debt right now. You want more? Just shoot me an amount, and your bank account information, and I’ll make it so.”

She leans against her car. “Those men are dangerous, you know.”

“I know.”

“Well, I want to move back home to Texas. That’s where my parents are ...” Her words drift off as I pull out my phone.

She tells me her price, and minutes later, when she checks her bank app, her mouth falls open. “Okay. Follow me, and I’ll get you some clean scrubs.”

As we walk through her living room, her cheeks turn pink. “Sorry about the mess. I kicked my husband out last month, and I’ve been struggling with



everything by myself.”

“No need to explain.” It’s a mess but nothing compared to what I grew up in.

I walk over and open the fridge. It’s filled with things kids love. I check the date on the milk. It’s good. Yeah, it might be a little messy, but her kids have food, and there is a pile of clean laundry piled high on the couch. She’s good.

She walks out of the bedroom, handing me a set of scrubs. “Oh wait, you’ll need these, too.” She drops a pair of white shoes on the pile, looking at my boots. “You’ll need to look the part.” She drapes a stethoscope around my neck. “Whatever you’re going to do, I wish you the best of luck. I’m supposed to be back there in four hours to give him his meds. There’s two of us. They haven’t seen the other nurse yet, so you should be okay there. But they might wonder if you pull up on your Harley. You can take my husband’s truck. He’s supposed to pick it up next week, but I don’t give a fuck if he gets it or not. I’ll be long gone by then,” she grumbles.

When she reaches for the keys on a rack by the door, I notice the bruise circling her upper arm. She throws them to me, and I catch them in one hand.

“Just take care of your babies, and get out of here ... tonight,” I tell her.

She nods. “Thank you,” she says quietly. “I’ve been so lonely here. All I have are my parents and my girls. I’ll be so happy to get back home. I’ve missed them.”

“Well, today was your lucky day.”

She laughs. “I have a feeling it won’t be so lucky for someone else.” She glances around her house with dark circles under her eyes. The task of picking up and leaving must be daunting.

“Hey, I’ve got a few hours. Why don’t I help you pack?”

“Really? That would be amazing. Let me call the sitter and see if she’ll keep the girls for a few more hours.”

Together we gather what we can of her life.

“Do you have any kids?” she asks when she notices me running my finger over a tiny box made of stained glass. I hold it up to the light. It reminds me of Petey. His home is filled with stained glass. It’s like living in a kaleidoscope.

“No.”

“You can have that.” She nods at the box in my hands. “When he realizes I’m gone, he’ll just break everything I leave behind.”

I close the box, setting it back on the dresser. “Do you need me to take this guy out?”

She wants to say yes, but she doesn’t. We finish packing in silence.

“Well, good luck,” she tells me as we stand in her driveway, her car crammed to the hilt.

“You, too. Don’t ever let him talk you into coming back.”

She smiles at me nervously, ducking her head in her car. Before she leaves, I jot my number down on her arm. “Call me if you need anything.”

She tears up. “You’re the first kind person I’ve met since moving here.”

I wave her away. “Get out of here and don’t look back.”

Wiping her eyes, she nods before pulling out of the driveway. I check the time. Gotta go.

When I pull up in front of the motel, one of the men guarding the door rises from his chair, pulling his sunglasses off his face. I keep mine on. He gives me a once over, raising an eyebrow while opening the door for me.

“He’s been bitching about the pain, so give him double the dose of that pain medication. I’m tired of hearing him whine.”

I nod, dipping my head. He closes the door behind me.

The man in the bed moans. “Thank fuck you’re here,” he rasps.

I stand over him, pulling out the syringe the nurse gave me. She told me it would knock him out in seconds. I slide it into his IV and watch as his eyelids get droopy. But before he slips away, I can’t resist fucking with his head. I pull my sunglasses off and lean over his face, covering his mouth at the same time. His eyes widen as recognition hits.

“Hey, sweetie. I’m sorry I didn’t finish the job the first time. You’ve had to suffer so much, huh?”

He nods, knowing he’s at my mercy.

“It won’t be long now,” I lie. I love watching the terror in his gaze as he thinks he’s dying. When his eyes fall shut, I quickly head to the bathroom and pry the window open.

Lucky for me, this dude isn’t too big. I unhook his IV and drag him in the sheet to the bathroom before heaving him over the sill and out onto the ground with a thud. It’s dark; no one will see him back there.

I shove some blankets around on the bed, making it look like the man is asleep. The nurse told me not to stay longer than thirty minutes or they might get suspicious.

When I walk out of the room, the man stands again. I pat his arm. “He’s all good, sweetie. He shouldn’t bother you the rest of the night.”

He laughs, smacking me on the ass as I walk by. “I like this one,” he tells his buddy.

I wave my hand in goodbye, swaying my hips so they focus on my ass. I don’t want them to go back into the room to check on their friend.

When I get in the pickup, they settle back into their chairs. One of them lights up a joint, passing it to his friend. Thank fuck. They won’t be checking

on him anytime soon. I head out onto the highway but flip a U-turn and pull onto the maintenance road behind the motel. After I've finished loading the asshole from McDonalds, I head back to the nurse's house.

I load my bike in the back of the truck before doing a quick walk-through to make sure I didn't leave anything behind. The little stained-glass box catches my attention again. I shove it under my arm and head out.

Just as I'm pulling into town, the asshole starts to moan. I wish I could kill the fucker, but I promised Petey I'd bring him in alive.

I hop out of the truck and jog up to JD's house. He opens the door, glancing over his shoulder as he does. "Katie?" He looks back into his house again before finally giving me his full attention.

"I'm sorry. Did I disturb you?" I ask.

JD's wife left him last year. I didn't know he was seeing someone new, but I doubt the white Nikes by the door are his.

"No. Do you know the whole damn club is out looking for you?" He runs his hand through his messy hair.

"Everyone but you?" I tip my head to the side.

"Uh, yeah. I haven't been feeling well." He coughs into his arm.

"Well, you better take some Tylenol or some shit because I need you to meet me at the junkyard. I've got something I need you to get rid of for me." I nod toward the truck.

"Yeah. Yeah, sure. I'll be there in a few," he says.

"Okay. I just need to drop something off real quick."

He practically shoves me out the door. "Great. See you soon."

The door clicks shut behind me. Jesus, he's strange sometimes. I guess what should I expect from a man who spends most of his time in a junkyard.

I take a deep breath when I pull into the warehouse parking lot. Jackson

and Dirk are waiting for me. Great. JD must have told them I was back.

When I get out, Jackson hops up in the back of the truck with me, helping me unstrap my bike. “You know I could have Petey booted from the club for this.”

“Pah-lease, Petey had nothing to do with this.”

“He asked Dirk where your bike was.”

“And did Dirk tell him?”

Jackson stops what he’s doing to stare at me. “So, you just found it on your own?”

“Yep.”

“When I forbid you to go after this guy, you agreed.”

I laugh, tossing the straps onto the ground. “Did I, though?”

Jackson pauses, his mind replaying the scene. His shoulders fall. “Katie, you need to stop doing shit like this.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re done,” Dirk says, joining us.

He sets up the ramps, and we roll my bike down to the pavement. Then, he goes to the side of the truck, opening the door to find the man I kidnapped. He glances over at me. “He’s alive.”

“Yeah, Petey wanted him that way,” I say, resting my hands on my hips. “Can one of you take this truck over to JD?”

Dirk lights up a cigarette. “Since when do you do what Petey wants?”

“Since he put his trust in me. Something none of you seem to do,” I smart back.

Jackson rolls his eyes. “Stop. You know we trust you, Katie. I’ll take care of this asshole. Go home and tell Petey to get his ass out to the shed. Dirk, can you please take this truck over to JD?”

I grab my bag out of the cab, stomping back to my bike. Dirk grabs my arm as I walk past him. “You scared your sister.”

Facing away from him, I sigh. “Both of you would have done the same for Billie Rose.”

He lets go of my arm. I don’t know why I made that comparison. Charlotte isn’t my daughter.

When I get home ... I mean to Petey’s, I find him sitting in the hall outside Charlotte’s room. We stare at each other for a long moment. “Sorry I didn’t knock,” I joke.

He rises stiffly from the floor. “You don’t have to knock.”

Petey looks tired. I’m sure he stayed up all night worrying about Charlotte. I don’t know what all this is about, but I can see it weighs heavy on him. He said the man who murdered his wife wants Charlotte. I wonder why. Whatever the reason, it doesn’t matter. I trust he is doing what’s best for her. He loves his daughter more than anything. Anyone can see that.

“You got him?” A spark slowly ignites in his black gaze.

“I hope you enjoy your wedding present,” I tell him. “I think I’ll take a shower before Charlotte wakes up. Jackson is waiting for you at the shed.” I walk past him, heading into the bedroom.

“You’re up to seven,” he tells me.

I spin around, my mouth falling open. *No, he didn’t.* “What the fuck did I do now?”

His gaze falls down my frame. “You look sexy as fuck in those scrubs.”

“Petey, you can’t dock me every time your dick stands at attention. That’s not fair. How the fuck was I supposed to know your willy has a thing for nurses?”

He slides his jacket on. “Oh, you’ll learn.”

Then, he walks out, leaving me with my mouth hanging open. Can you believe the audacity of this man? And after everything I've done for him?

I shake my head, heading into the bathroom. When I get there, I find a clothes hamper near the shower. Thank god. I strip my clothes off, dropping them in the new basket before I step under the water.

Going through my routine takes longer than I want, and by the time I get back to the kitchen, I find Charlotte climbing up the side of the cabinets.

"What are you doing, little lady?" I grab her, setting her on her feet.

"I'm hungry," she tells me.

"Why don't I make you some pancakes?" I start opening and closing cupboards, looking for the ingredients.

"Yay. I love pancakes." She climbs up on the stool to watch me. "My daddy puts chocolate chips in them sometimes."

I smile at her. "Well, if I find some, we'll add them."

She points to a cupboard. "Right there, Mommy."

I grab the chocolate chips, setting them on the counter beside her as I continue pulling out what we'll need. "You know, Charlotte, I'm not your real mommy. Your dad only married me so I wouldn't go to jail for beating up that bad man."

"I know," she says, dumping a handful of chips into her tiny hand. "But maybe you and Daddy will fall in love."

Choking on air, I fill up a glass of water, taking a long drink. *Love?* We don't even like each other.

"Daddy was worried about you last night when you were out with your friends. I think he was worried you would find another husband."

"Charlotte. Your dad doesn't even like me."

"Then why did he look at your picture all night?"

“My picture?” I ask, confused.

“Yeah, he has a picture of you on his phone.”

“Of me?” I sit down across from her, filling my hand with chocolate chips and stuffing the whole handful in my mouth.

“Yeah, in your wedding dress.” She pushes her hair out of her face before resting her hand on her chin. “You didn’t find another one, did you?” she asks.

“Another what?”

“Husband.”

“Oh, no. I ... he really has a picture of me on his phone?”

She rolls her eyes. “I think you need to take a nap today. You’re not listening to me.” She taps my forehead. “Wake up, wake up,” she sing songs, giggling.

I smile at her. “Okay. Okay. Let’s get these pancakes done.”

“Where’s Daddy?”

Shoving the bowl in front of her, I ask her to stir for me while I get the griddle warmed up. “He went to help Dirk with something up at the warehouse.”

“He’s going to miss the pancakes. He loves them.” I take over stirring as she dumps the chocolate chips into the bowl.

Petey walks in as if on cue. “Do I smell pancakes?” he asks, quickly covering himself with his jacket.

“Charlotte, can you come help me put these on the griddle?” I do my best to distract her before she notices the blood on him.

She immediately rushes around the counter, pushing a stool up to the stove as Petey slinks off to the bedroom.

I breathe a sigh of relief. The fucker I caught peeking into Charlotte’s stall



is dead. That's the longest I've ever let one live.

When I have her set up and happily eating her pancakes while watching videos on my phone, I go to find out what happened. Petey has showered and is sitting on the bed in nothing but his boxers. Blushing, I turn to leave.

"Wait," he says.

I stare at the door, wishing the floor would open and swallow me whole. "Sorry. I was just coming to see how it went. We can talk later."

The next thing I know, the man is kneeling at my feet, wrapping his arms around my waist. He presses his face into my lower back. "Thank you, Katie. Thank you. Thank you," he whispers, squeezing me tight.

*Ah, what the fuck?*

I hold my hands above my waist to avoid touching him. "Yeah, sure. No problem, dude. I assume it went well."

"I've been trying to find the man who killed Charlotte's mom for years, and now I know. Now I know," he whispers harshly.

Not that I'm analyzing everything the man says, but I notice the way he always refers to his wife as Charlotte's mom. I guess maybe that's not all that unusual but ... Jesus ... why am I worried about it? This is none of my business.

"I'm glad I could be of help. Give me a name, and I'll go get him, too," I tell Petey, trying to pry his fingers apart so he'll release me.

Quickly, he stands up and takes a step away from me. "Shit, I'm sorry, Kat. I'm ... fuck ... I forget you don't like to be touched."

"Whatever. Just give me the dude's name, and I'll get started."

Petey sighs. "I can't."

Throwing my hands in the air, I spin around and stalk out of the room only to catch Charlotte opening the door for someone.

“Charlotte.” I rush over to her but see it’s just Owen. “Next time come get me before answering the door, okay, sweetie?”

She nods, going back to her breakfast, but she eyes Owen as he begins laying papers out on the counter.

“Good news, you two.” He looks over my shoulder, nodding as Petey joins us. “They’ve dropped Katie’s charges. So, I thought I’d get the papers drawn up for an annulment.”

*Thank god.*

Petey runs his hand over his stomach, winking at his daughter as he fills a plate with pancakes for himself. “Sorry to waste your time, Owen, but we won’t be needing that.”

“What are you doing?” I ask, my mouth falling open.

He rubs his hands together before dousing his pancakes in syrup. “I always work up a good appetite after spending time in the shed.”

Owen sticks his fingers in his ears, humming to himself.

“I’m not asking about your pancakes,” I tell him, my mouth still hanging open.

He reaches over, placing a single finger under my jaw, gently closing my mouth. “I’m not signing the papers, Kat.”

Charlotte giggles happily, shoving another bite in her mouth. “Mommy put chocolate chips in them,” she tells her dad.

He picks up his fork. “Are they as good as mine?”

“Yes,” she giggles again, holding her hand up to him.

They exchange a high-five before digging in and shoving their mouths full.

Owen slowly pulls his fingers out of his ears, hopeful that Petey’s done talking about his illegal activities. “Well, then.” He starts putting the papers away, but I slam my palm over them with a smack.

“Petey,” I growl low. “I’m not playing. Let’s just do this now so we don’t waste Owen’s time.”

“You’re the only one wasting his time. Let the man go, because I’m not signing anything and that’s final.”

Owen gently tugs the papers from under my hand before shoving them in his bag. “I’ll show myself out,” he says, quickly ducking out the front door.

My blood is boiling.

Brody holds his hands up as Owen rushes past him. “What has him in such a rush?” he asks, walking in. “Pancakes! Fuck yeah, I’m just in time.”

Charlotte waves her fork at him. “They have chocolate chips in them.”

“Even better,” he tells her, setting a helmet her size on the counter beside her.

Her eyes widen. It’s a miniature version of mine. Of course it is. Brody smirks at me as he steps around the counter to grab himself a plate from the cupboard. He seems to know his way around here.

“It’s just like yours,” Charlotte says in awe, running her fingers over the cherry red helmet.

She’s clearly in love with it, so I guess I can’t be too mad at Brody.

“Yeah, I thought it might be nice for you to have a helmet for my bike, too,” I tell her, backing out of the room. “I’ll be right back.”

Rushing to the bedroom, I try to pull the door closed behind me, but Petey’s foot sticks in the door jamb. “Go away,” I tell him, clenching my teeth so hard I’m sure they’re going to break.

He kicks the door shut behind us, clutching me by the top of my arms. “Listen. You’re stuck with me, Kat. You might as well accept that.”

“Petey, you’re fucking insane. What is this about? Why would you want to stay married? You fucking hate me.”

He shakes me lightly. "I don't hate you."

I look away.

"You're my old lady. Period."

"I've only been your old lady for two days."

"Two days and counting," he tells me as he backs me to the bed, pushing my ass on the mattress.

I laugh loudly at this. "I have places to be, Petey. You're amusing, I'll give you that, but no thanks."

"You've loved every minute of it," he says, crouching in front of me. He lets go of my arms only to drop his hands beside my thighs, pinning me between them.

"Don't fool yourself, buddy." I roll my eyes, doing my best to ignore how much he's invading my personal space.

"I need you to help me protect Charlotte." He's changed tactics.

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I decide to give him my attention. "We don't have to stay married for me to help you with that, you know."

"It will be easier if you have unfettered access to her. Here and at school." His gaze bounces over my face.

"She's really in danger?" I ask.

He nods slowly. "I'll tell you everything eventually. But I need to make sense of it all before I do. Right now, you're safer not knowing."

"We're not talking about my safety. We're talking about Charlotte's," I remind him, scooting back on the bed.

Slowly, he pulls his hands away after noticing I'm shrinking away from him. "I need your help, Kat."

He knows I can't say no.

"Fine. What do you need me to do?"

“Just help me make sure she’s never alone. I work out in my shop when she’s at school. Kelsie usually gives her a ride home, but now that ...”

His words trail off, and I get what he’s saying.

“Fine.” I roll my eyes. “I’ll watch over your kid.”

He lifts himself from the floor and settles beside me, laying his hand on my leg. I stare at it, wondering if he would like it removed from his body.

When my gaze meets his, I see he’s laid it there on purpose.

“In return, I’m going to help you.” He squeezes my leg before releasing me.

My heart is beating loudly in my ears. “Th ... that’s okay. I don’t need anything in return.”

He snorts before standing. “Too bad, Kat. You’re getting my help whether you like it or not.”

When the door clicks shut behind him, I throw myself back on the bed. What the fuck have I gotten myself into?

# Chapter Eleven

## KATIE

**P**ete went to work in the building outside. I don't know what kind of work he does out there, and I don't care. Charlotte rubs a towel over the plate I just handed to her.

"I like doing dishes with you," she tells me.

"I like doing them with you, too," I reply absentmindedly, worrying over how her dad plans to "help" me.

What kind of help does he think I need? Just because I like my personal space doesn't mean I have a problem. And sure, I don't like to hug people, but that's natural, too. Like hugs are an unnecessary part of life, right? I can't be the only one who thinks this way.

Although I do miss my dad's hugs.

"Do you want to see my room?" Charlotte asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Sure," I say, shutting the water off. "Thanks for your help."

She pulls me down to her room, but I stop her. "Oh, wait. I got you a present."

I jog back to my bag and pull out the stained-glass box I brought home from Reno. When I get to her room, she's waiting excitedly. "Here it is." I hand it to her. "I thought maybe you could keep your necklace in it when you're not wearing it." I point to the little dragonfly hanging around her neck.

She sets it on her bed, climbing up and lying on her belly to look at it. Her eyes widen. "Oh, Mommy, I love it."

I sigh, sitting down beside her. "Charlotte, you can call me mommy, but you do know that your daddy and I are not going to stay married, right?"

She ignores me as usual, jumping off the bed to set the box on her dresser. "Did Daddy make this?"

That's when I notice all the stained-glass figurines she has. I stand to join her. "These are so pretty." I notice they all have wings of some sort. Butterflies, dragonflies, and birds.

"They remind me of my angel mommy," she says, sniffing a little.

My gaze drops to her before going back to the winged creatures.

"Daddy says she has wings, too." Her tiny finger traces over a little bluebird with his wings fluffed out. It's made with various shades of blue glass.

"He said when you go to heaven, you get wings so you can fly there."

Blinking furiously, I back away from the dresser, but as I do the beating of my heart intensifies. My gaze has caught on something else. My breath catches in my lungs. Charlotte notices what I'm looking at. "Oh," she squeals. "I found these in the trash can at the warehouse. Daddy and I are going to use them to fish on our new dock." She pulls the little purple fishing pole out of the corner as I turn to rush out of the room.

My hands fly out, and I accidentally knock the little glass bluebird to the floor with a loud crash. I stare at the broken glass. Oh no, what have I done?

Charlotte drops beside me as I frantically try to pick up the pieces. “Mommy?” she says nervously.

Petey steps into the room, his gaze taking in the two of us on our knees. “I’m sorry,” I begin. “I’m so sorry, Charlotte.”

She places her little hand on my cheek, making me stop what I’m doing. “It’s okay. Daddy can make me a new one.”

“Charlotte, Jesse is here to take you to school today. I’ll pick you up when you get out.” He holds his hand out to her.

She reluctantly leaves my side. Before she steps out, she turns. “Bye, Mommy.”

I offer her a little wave. My head falls when they leave, but I continue to pick pieces of glass off the floor. What was I thinking? I can’t do this. I’ll just have to sneak out tonight. I have to get out of here. I’m sure Petey can keep her safe without me. I’m losing my touch. I can’t even keep myself together after seeing a pair of fishing poles. I stare at them over my shoulder. Oh, how my heart aches to sit on the dock with my dad. And it’s my fault that can’t happen.

Petey’s warm fingers wrap over my wrist. “Kat, stop. You’re cutting yourself.”

My head snaps toward him before noticing my bleeding hand. “Oh,” I breathe out, startled by the red pooling in my palm.

He glances over my shoulder, his brows pulling together when he sees what had my attention when he walked in. “Why don’t you just let it out?” he asks.

I shake my head. “It’s nothing. I’m just clumsy. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

He pulls me to my feet, dragging me into our bathroom. While he’s



running water over my hand, he stares down at me. I shift on my feet nervously because he's being awfully quiet.

"Oh look, it's not that bad. No more than a paper cut." I nod at my palm, trying to redirect his attention to my injury again.

After he puts a Band-Aid on the small cut, he pulls me out to the living room and makes me sit on the coffee table. I watch nervously as he walks down the hall, coming back with the poles. He points at me when I start to rise.

"Sit your ass down."

Slowly, I lower myself, looking anywhere but at him. He lays the poles on the floor in front of me. Then, he kicks his leg over the coffee table, facing me. He places a hand on top of my head and one under my chin, forcing me to look at them.

"Feel it, Kat, and then let that shit out."

I try to fight him, but he isn't letting go. "Petey, I don't want to do this. Fucking let me go or I'll staple your balls to the mattress tonight."

In one smooth motion, he's behind me, his arms wrapped tightly around my middle. His beard scratches over my cheek, and he rests his chin on my shoulder. "Charlotte and I found these in the trash. You wouldn't have been the one to put them there, would you?"

My heart stops beating. *He isn't hurting me*, I remind myself, willing my heart to work ... *please, just one beat*.

"I met Bill once when I was just a prospect up north," he says, his voice rumbling against my back. "Boy, did he love his daughters."

"Stop," I beg.

"I bet the two of you loved to fish together. I know I've been looking forward to fishing with Charlotte ever since we found these. Tomorrow

you're going to join us," he informs me.

I shake my head, pushing back against him. "Fuck I am. I'm leaving, Petey. I can't do this parenting shit."

"What did you like best about it?" he continues, ignoring my pleas.

Groaning, I stare at the offending objects. "It doesn't matter. He's gone."

And saying it out loud makes it so much worse. He's been gone for years ... and it's all because of me.

I begin to shake. Petey tightens his grip on me. "I've got you, honey. Keep talking."

Panic begins to wrap its deadly claws around my heart. "I can't breathe, Petey."

He picks me off my feet and carries me outside, settling in one of the big rocking chairs on his porch. He pulls me onto his lap, keeping me securely wrapped in his arms. "You can breathe. Just focus on the dock."

Tears begin to spill down my cheeks. Oh my god, this can't be happening. I've kept it inside for so long, but this asshole and his kid are making me feel things. I glance at the dock, picturing Charlotte and Petey sitting out there.

And that's when I hear Billie Rose's fucking wind chimes from across the lake. "No!" I cry out. "Petey, please. I'll do anything to make this stop."

"Cry for me," he says calmly.

The sobs come hard and fast as I allow myself to think about my dad and how he kept my secret to protect me.

I cry for Petey, despite how much I hate it.

I cry until there are no tears left.

Slowly, the pain eases from my chest as I stare over the lake. My head falls back against his hard body. He places his hand over my forehead, holding me there. His lips press against my temple. "That's my good girl," he whispers.

His words should make me angry, but for some strange reason I feel safe.

My sister's rod roars up the driveway. I try to pull away; I don't want her to see me on his lap, but he doesn't release me.

"Easy now," his deep voice rumbles in my ear. I turn my face away from her as she storms toward us.

"Stop right there, Jesse," he warns.

"Charlotte told me my sister was upset." She places her hands on her hips. I don't look at her, but I know the exact stance she's taking.

"Go home. She's fine," he says more forcefully.

"Katie, you don't have to stay here. Let's go." She ignores Petey, and her boots thud against the first step.

"You know the rules, Jesse. She's my old lady, my responsibility. Now, I'm asking you nicely, please go on home."

She huffs. "I'm going to tell Dirk about this."

"I hope you do."

I assume they're in a stare down, but I don't dare turn and risk her seeing that I've been crying. After a few minutes, she growls before stomping away.

My sister is my biggest protector; I can't let her leave without letting her know I'm okay. "Thanks for taking Charlotte to school this morning," I say quietly.

Her steps slow before pausing. "You're welcome," she sighs, relieved I finally said something.

"We'll be up for supper tonight," Petey tells her. "If you'll have us."

Her car door opens. "You fucking know I'll have you, asshole." It slams shut, and gravel flies when she turns around in the driveway.

It's quiet for a few minutes, and then both of us start to laugh at the same time.

“Christ, your sister was pissed.” He chuckles, pushing me off his lap.

I swipe at my eyes, standing. “I’m surprised she backed down.”

He turns me around, holding my cheeks in his big hands. His black eyes bounce over my face. “She knows you’re mine now.”

Something about the way he’s looking at me helps me resist the urge to roll my eyes. I push his hands away. “Okay, enough of this. I need to clean up the mess I made. I feel terrible for breaking Charlotte’s little bird.”

He tugs the cushion off the rocking chair and grabs my hand, pulling me to the little building where he works. I dig my heels in. What the fuck?

When we get inside, my mouth falls open. I’m surrounded by the most beautiful colored glass. “Oh my god. You made all the stained glass in the cabin?” I ask as he tosses the cushion on the floor.

“I did. Now kneel,” he says, snapping his fingers and pointing to the pillow.

“Fuck that.” I head toward the door. He grabs me by the shoulder and gently but forcefully pushes me to my knees on the cushion.

Again, my heart fails to beat.

I know I’m tough, but Petey outweighs me. “You’re such a dick,” I tell him, trying to push up to my feet, but his hand remains firmly on my shoulder to keep me down.

“Will you just shut up and listen to me? Let me help you. Just sit here while I work, yeah?”

I would like to see him work because it is beyond my comprehension that a big thug like him can work with something as delicate as glass. Steel maybe, but not glass. But I don’t kneel for anyone.

“Let me take charge, just this once. All you have to do is sit and watch me work.”

“Fine,” I mutter, relaxing into the position.

“Good girl.” He squeezes my shoulder lightly before walking away.

Those words again. This is not good. I’m no one’s “good girl.” Oh no. Oh fuck no.

My thoughts evaporate when he leans over the table, focused on the piece of glass he’s cutting. He holds each piece to the light hanging over the table, squinting to make sure it’s just the way he wants it before laying it on the table in a pattern.

The sun pouring in through the window shifts the shadows across the room as he works to put the finishing touches on the little bird that is coming to life. This one is red. My heartbeat slows when he steps around me to grab a tool. His fingers sink into my hair. My eyes fall closed when his nails rake lightly over my scalp for a few seconds.

An easy calm settles around us as he continues to move around the shop. The outside world melts away. His eyes meet mine from time to time. His dark pupils offer me reassurance that everything is okay, and I’m not crazy for submitting to him.

I mean, I’m kneeling in the middle of Petey’s shop ... I don’t ... I’m so confused as to what is happening to me.

# Chapter Twelve

## PETEY

She's in a daze by the time I finish. I rub my hand over the side of her face, and she blinks up at me. Jesus, she's stunning. Could she be the one? I'd all but given up.

"It's time to get Charlotte," I tell her.

This seems to snap her out of the trance I've put her in.

"Oh." She jumps to her feet. "Yeah, shit, I'll go get her." She brushes imaginary dust off her jeans as she steps away from me.

I grab her arm and pull her against my chest, staring down into her beautiful fucking face. Her fate is sealed, and she doesn't even know it. "I'll meet you and Charlotte at the warehouse. I'm going to take care of a few chores before I head over there."

"Oh, okay, yeah. Sounds good."

My eyes track her as she rushes inside the house, returning seconds later with the tiny helmet she had Brody pick up for Charlotte. She doesn't even look at me as she pulls away.

I pick up the little cardinal I just made to replace the broken blue bird and

head into the house. On my way through the living room, I pick up the fishing poles we left in the center of the room. I place them back in Charlotte's bedroom, setting the glass figurine on her dresser. My eyes roam over the pieces I've made for her over the past year. I know it's been hard for her, not having a mother. I pick up the one item on the dresser I didn't make. It's a beautiful little box. This must be the gift Charlotte was telling me about when I walked her out to Jesse's car this morning. She was so excited that her mommy had given her a new helmet and a jewelry box for her dragonfly necklace.

I laugh, thinking about all the times I've made fun of Willow and Jackson and their little dragonfly references.

I know Charlotte's been wishing for a mother ... I've heard her whispering prayers to the damn trinket around her neck. She deserves a strong mother. But I also need a submissive wife. I want someone who will let me take care of them.

Up until a few days ago, I never thought I'd find a woman who could be both ... but maybe ... just maybe that damn little dragonfly found us one.

But Kat is no angel.

# Chapter Thirteen

## KATIE

What an asshole, making me sit on my knees all damn day for him. Why did I continue to sit there? Why didn't I leave? It really didn't seem like that much time had passed.

Lily waves to me from her little Volkswagen Beetle. I pull my leg over my bike and head toward her. "Hey, what are you doing here?" I ask.

"Oh, Dan has Kelsie's car today. He's changing the oil for her, so I offered to give her a ride home."

"You should have said something, I could have brought the truck and got both of the girls."

She waves her hand. "No worries. I kind of wanted to spend a little time with her today. I feel like she's been isolating herself lately."

Lily glances at something behind me, her brows furrowing. She opens the car door, stepping out. I spin around to find Kelsie ushering a crying Charlotte across the street.

"What's wrong?" I ask the minute she wraps her arms around my waist, burying her face into my stomach.



“Some girls were picking on her,” Kelsie tells me, hurrying around her mom’s car and getting in. Lily and I stare at each other.

I push Charlotte back. “Is that true?”

“Y-yeah,” she hiccups. “T-they called me Wednesday.”

“Do you have this handled?” Lily asks me, sliding into her seat. I know she’s anxious to talk to her daughter. Kelsie seems upset, too.

“Yeah, go on. We’re going to the warehouse for supper. Maybe we’ll see you guys there.”

“Yeah, yeah, maybe,” Lily says, closing her door.

After they pull away, I crouch beside Charlotte. “Why would they call you Wednesday?”

She runs a finger under her nose. “Like Wednesday Addams on the Addams Family. They told me I’m weird and scary just like her.”

I run my hand down her black hair. “That’s a compliment. Wednesday Addams is cool as fuck,” I assure her.

Her mouth tips up a little. “You think?”

“Absolutely. She’s badass.” I take Charlotte’s hand and march across the street. “Point out the girls who were calling you Wednesday, hun. I want to thank them for giving you such a nice compliment.”

My gaze scans over all the little bitches around her age.

“There.” Charlotte points to a group of teenage girls.

My eyes drop to hers before going back to the group of girls. “Those older girls?” Surely she isn’t talking about Kelsie’s friends.

“Yeah, but it’s okay, Mommy. I don’t want to make them mad.”

I help Charlotte with her helmet, keeping my eyes trained on every little bitch in the group, making mental notes.

“They pick on Kelsie, too,” she says quietly when I settle her on my bike.

“Aren’t they friends?” I ask her, brushing hair away from her eyes.

Charlotte shakes her head sadly.

“Hey, do you want to go to the warehouse? Billie Rose might be there with Aurelia and the baby,” I tell her, trying to change the mood.

“Yay!” she squeals as I swing my leg over the bike. She wraps her tiny arms around me, fisting the front of my t-shirt in her small hands.

I rev my motor as we pass the bitches who like to pick on little girls. It gets their attention. They all stare at us as I hold out my hand and give them a warm, one-fingered, stay-the-fuck-away-from-my-kid salute.

Every one of them hurries away.

Charlotte giggles behind me, tightening her arms around me. “I love you, Mommy.”

“I love you, too.”

And I do. More than the fear of going to jail, I realize.

# Chapter Fourteen

## KATIE

The bullies are quickly forgotten once we get to the warehouse. The club is hopping today. We've been getting ready for another fundraiser. My sister pulls me from the room while Charlotte helps Billie Rose change baby Tate's diaper.

"What happened this morning?" she asks as soon as we're in the kitchen.

"Nothing, jeez. I accidentally broke something of Charlotte's, and I felt bad about it."

She pulls out a pan and dumps a shit ton of hamburger into it. "Owen said Petey wouldn't agree to the annulment."

I grab a knife and start cutting up the tomatoes for her special pasta sauce. "Yeah, well, I've been trying to tell you he's an asshole."

"He's been nothing but a gentleman since transferring to our chapter." She leans against the counter, narrowing her gaze on me. "Did you and him ...?"

"Did we what?"

"You know." She makes a crude motion with her hands as Dirk walks in.

"Please stop," he deadpans. "I don't want to hear about your sister's sex

life.”

“Oh my god,” I groan. “I don’t have a fucking sex life. Maybe you should worry about your own.” I point to Dirk with the knife in my hands. “He’s getting old, sister. You’re going to give him a coronary.”

Dirk stops dead in his tracks, his eyebrow climbing up his face.

Jackson walks in and sidles up next to me, dodging my knife to grab a piece of tomato. “Petey’s here,” he tells me.

“Good for Petey,” I snip, continuing my stare off with Dirk.

“Me, my dick, and my heart all work just fine, thank you,” he growls.

I toss my head back and laugh. Dirk is too easy.

Jackson rests his forearms on the counter, doing his best to draw my attention away from Dirk.

“What?” I ask, annoyed by everyone in this family.

“He’s out there talking to your date.” His dimples pierce his cheeks as he gives me a sweet boyish smile.

“My date?” I ask confused, but then my mind slowly catches up. Oh, oh shit! I promised Brian from the Get and Go we’d go out.

Fuck!

Dirk rubs his hands together, clearly amused by my confusion. “Aw, shit. I don’t want to miss this.” He pats Jackson on the back, and they head out to the front of the warehouse.

My manic gaze clashes with Jesse’s. “What am I going to do?”

“You have a date?” she asks, wiping her hands off on a dish towel.

I spin in a circle. “Fuck. I promised Brian from Get and Go we’d go out tonight.”

“You made a date with some dude from a gas station?” She wraps her hands around my arms, stopping me.

“I needed to see the camera footage,” I explain mindlessly, running my fingers through my hair.

An evil smile pulls at her face. “This is how you get even with Petey for making you cry this morning.”

“I wasn’t crying,” I argue.

She pulls me up the back set of stairs. “Sure, whatever. Do you want to pay him back or not?”

“I ... I don’t know.” I jog down the hall behind her.

“Well, I do.”

A few minutes later, I’m frowning at her in the mirror as she does my makeup. “This is not what I had in mind.”

She shrugs.

“If you think Petey gives two fucks about who I go out with, you’re crazy,” I tell her, trying to wipe some of the god awful red from my lips.

“Even so, you want to look nice for your date, don’t you?” She tosses a black leather skirt my way.

“No. I don’t give a fuck. I don’t want to look nice for Brian. I just needed to see the camera footage.”

Before I know what is happening, I’m following her back downstairs. Everyone turns to look at us when we walk into the living area. Brian stands, running his hands down his jeans, clearly ready to get out of here.

“There you are,” he says, releasing a nervous chuckle.

Petey, who’s been sitting right beside Brian, rises, too. He’s a good foot taller than the other man.

“Well, it was nice meeting you all,” Brian says, walking toward me.

My gaze clashes with Petey’s. His jaw clenches.

Brian’s fingers wrap around mine. “We should get going. I’ve made

reservations for us at the Pink Diamond.” He gives me a gentle tug.

Petey snorts.

The Pink Diamond is expensive. It will cost Brian his entire paycheck for us to eat there. I feel bad for agreeing to this.

“Um, yeah, sure.” I offer my family a wave as we head out the door.

“Wear your seatbelt,” Petey hollers as we walk out.

*Fuck.*

Brian laughs as he opens the door for me. “The big guy acts like your dad,” he jokes.

I choke on air. *Nope, not my dad ... my husband.*

A small smidgen of guilt creeps up my spine, but I haven’t done anything wrong. I needed the information only Brian had access to. Besides, Petey isn’t even my real husband. It’s not like I’m cheating on him.

I relax in the seat. The one good thing about this date is that I’ll get away from Petey for a while. He’s making my brain all confused. I hate the man. Yet ... argh, I don’t know.

We arrive at the restaurant and take our seats. It’s very nice. Brian is really trying to impress me.

“You’ve been awfully quiet,” he says, his gaze roaming over the nearby tables. A waiter comes to ours, and Brian gives him our drink order.

I fidget with the napkin. “I’m sorry. Honestly, I forgot about our date tonight.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Well, shit. I’d never have known. You look amazing.”

My cheeks heat. “Yeah, my sister helped me when we heard you were there.”

He smiles, happy I took some effort to look nice for him. He looks nice,

too. Brian is an attractive man in a safe, ordinary sort of way.

“I’m not used to this.” I wave my hand over the room. I’ve never felt more out of place. I’m just a dirty nobody. My gaze bounces nervously over the other women here.

He doesn’t seem to notice my discomfort and begins to make small talk. My fingers tingle, and my knee bounces rapidly. This was stupid. Why did I promise I’d go out with him?

He runs his finger over his mouth. “You know, I’ve done nothing but think about our date since we made it.”

“Me, too,” I say without thought, running my hands over the fancy tablecloth.

He laughs, drawing my attention back to him. “You lie.”

Most men would be offended, but he brushes it off when I apologize.

“You haven’t been on many dates, have you?” he asks.

His question only makes me fidget more. “Not recently.” I lower my head, embarrassed. God, this is exactly why I don’t date. I’m awkward as fuck. And dirty. I wish I would have had time to shower.

He drums his fingers over the table. “It’s okay. I don’t mind that you’re inexperienced.”

He smiles when I look at him. He’s trying to make me feel better, I realize. His smile is nice. That’s why it’s so noticeable when it begins to fall from his face. Something behind me has caught his attention.

A warm hand wraps around my neck, tipping my head back. My eyes slowly roll with my head, clashing with eyes dark as night.

“I’m glad you made it safe,” Petey says. He releases my throat, his fingers drifting across my shoulder. He pulls the chair out beside me before lowering himself into it.

Brian clears his throat. “Do you have reservations here, too?” he asks.

“I sure do,” Petey says as the waiter comes to the table and hands him a Jack on the rocks.

“Is your girlfriend here? I’d love to meet her,” Brian continues, deepening his voice, trying his best not to let Petey out alpha him.

*I don’t think that’s possible.*

Petey tips his head back and laughs heartily. It draws the attention of several females in the room. I press my thighs together.

“No girlfriend. I’m married.” He leans forward as his hand wraps around my knee, pulling my leg over his.

My eyebrows crawl up my forehead. *What the fuck is he doing?*

His hand tightens over my knee while his other slides under my skirt.

“Really? I didn’t know you were married.” Brian glances between the two of us.

“Yeah, it’s kind of a new thing,” Petey says as he relaxes in his chair, his finger rubbing over my embarrassingly wet panties.

*What the fuck?!*

“The waiter said it would be fine if I joined the two of you,” Petey informs Brian.

Brian’s face falls as he realizes the club isn’t going to let this date happen. “Oh. Perhaps I should just leave,” he says, his gaze flitting over the room as he looks for other club members.

I doubt anyone else from the club is here. Petey doesn’t need backup.

“Absolutely not. I wouldn’t want you to miss the show.”

My brows crease. *What show?*

The food arrives just as Petey’s finger slips under the band of my panties, running across my slit. I grab my napkin, coughing into it.



“Are you okay, Kat?” Petey asks.

I wave a hand over my face. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Brian and I exchange glances. He’s not stupid. But he also knows there’s no way he can leave this table until he’s dismissed.

Up and down, up and down Petey’s calloused finger rolls over my clit. My brain begins to short out. Quickly, I reach under the table to still his hand. He pauses, my clit throbbing under his warm touch.

We turn to stare at each other. He’s giving me a chance to decide what happens next. The ball is in my court.

My head and heart are at war. One is screaming at me to tell him to fuck off. The other is convincing me he needs this. I’m his old lady. He needs to come out on top.

*And why the fuck do I care about that?*

My eyes fall closed, and slowly I remove my hand from his. I place my hands on each side of my plate face down. This must have been the consent he was waiting for because Petey’s sinful fucking finger begins where it left off, only firmer, more determined than before. My legs begin to tremble, and I try to think about anything other than his hand between my thighs. I send up a last-minute prayer. If I give him this, Petey will want to see the darkest parts of me. *Don’t let it happen. Please, don’t let it happen.* Petey intercepts my prayers, erasing two letters. *Do let it happen.*

He leans over, whispering in my ear. “Come.”

Shiiiiittttt.

The silverware clangs against my plate as I grip the edge of the table, struggling to keep my lips trapped between my teeth.

Oh my god.

I screw my eyes shut as tight as I can as my thighs continue to tremble

around his hand.

“Now do you understand who she belongs to?” Petey asks, deathly calm.

Brian’s chair screeches across the floor and he stands. “Loud and clear.”

“Don’t worry about it. The pleasure was all mine.” Petey pulls his hand from between my legs, and I open my eyes in time to see him reach for the bill, his fingers glistening with my arousal.

I’m going to die. Right here in the middle of the Pink Diamond.

Brian doesn’t even look at me as he turns and walks out of the restaurant.

# Chapter Fifteen

## PETEY

**K**at is quiet the whole way home. I know what I did was a bit drastic, but you know what? I don't give a fuck. She is my old lady, and that gives me every right to act the way I did. While I don't regret it, I do feel bad to a degree. She wasn't expecting any of it.

"I know you're angry at me," I say, the silence getting the best of me.

She turns her head, blinking slowly. Her gaze roams over my face.

"I needed Brian to know you're not available to him," I reason, tugging on my beard.

Her eyes drop to my hand, and her hips lift ever so slightly off the seat.

"Yeah, I *am* angry at you." She swallows hard before meeting my gaze. Her words don't match her body language.

Maybe she's still tethered to me from our session in my workshop. She's a tough woman, but when I put her on her knees, she let it all slip away. And personally I think she needed that. To sit quietly and let someone else take control for a while.

She gives a little huff and turns away from me, shoving her hands under

her legs.

My gaze goes back to the road. “Charlotte’s spending the night at the warehouse tonight,” I say, giving her a heads up.

“I thought she was in danger,” she replies tightly, not looking at me.

“She is, but we both know she’s safe with your sister and Dirk.”

“Well then, you can drop me off there.”

Chuckling, I turn down the road that runs opposite of the warehouse. Her hand reaches for the door handle as we pass Billie Rose and Elijah’s cabin, but I’m not worried. She has more self-control than that.

Now she *is* getting angry. For real this time.

When the truck rolls to a stop, she storms up to the house before I can shift into park. She raises her hand over her head, flipping me off before disappearing inside. I follow her in and hear the shower turn on.

Leaning against the bedroom door, I wait to face her wrath. I’ve thrown a lot at her today, and we’re not done yet. This is me ripping the scab clean off.

The water shuts off, and I smile. But when the minutes pass and she doesn’t storm out, an ache begins to brew in the center of my chest. I knock on the bathroom door. “Everything okay in there, Kat?”

Silence.

My hand falls on the door handle. “Kat?”

“I’m fine,” she says quickly.

She sounds anything but fine. “I’m opening the door,” I warn her. She pulls a towel over her chest as I push it open slowly.

We stare at each other for a moment before she juts out her chin. “The shower isn’t working,” she informs me.

I reach in and turn it on. “Looks like it’s working just fine.”

“It’s not getting hot,” she says, dropping her gaze.

“Why didn’t you come out and tell me that?” I ask, leaning my hand against the wall.

Her eyes fall to the hamper. “I ... well, I was naked, okay? Can you just fix it?”

I open the hamper. “Why didn’t you just put these back on?” I continue to push her.

She cringes. “They’re dirty.”

“So.” I shrug. “You hadn’t showered yet,” I reason, reaching in the basket and pulling out her underwear.

Her hand flies to her mouth, covering it.

I hold them out to her. “Go on. Get dressed, and I’ll take a look at the shower.” There’s more going on here than I originally thought.

She reaches out to take them but snaps her hand back at the last minute. Shifting from foot to foot, she begins to bounce on the balls of her feet. I close the door behind me because I can see she’s fixing to run.

“Just ... just can you make the water hot? That’s all I need. Is that too much to ask?” She fakes a little laugh.

Her eyes widen in horror as I pull her panties to my nose and inhale deeply.

“Oh my god, stop,” she says, spinning around.

“Why? They smell delightful,” I praise, because goddamn, her scent just may be my new drug of choice.

“Just fucking get the hot water going!” she all but screams, one hand letting go of the towel to pull at her hair.

“It’s as hot as it’s going to get, Kat. I turned the hot water heater down. We wouldn’t want Charlotte accidentally burning herself, would we?”

She spins on me, her eyes blazing with fury. “Petey, I’m not joking. Turn it

back up.”

“Or what?” I ask, dropping her panties in the hamper.

“Or I’ll do all my showering somewhere else,” she grates out between clenched teeth.

I reach up and slowly pull my shirt over my head. “The water is warm enough, Kat. I suggest you get in before it runs cold.”

When I kick my boots off, she scampers into the shower. “Don’t even think that you’re getting in here with me,” she says, splashing water out of the shower like a goddamn duck.

I shove my jeans down but keep my boxers on. I don’t think she’s ready for that. After giving myself a once over in the mirror, I step in behind her.

“Jesus Christ, Petey. The water is not hot enough,” she whines, holding her hand under the spray.

I press my body to hers, reaching around her to check the temperature of the water. “Kat, it’s as hot as I can tolerate. I should have turned it down more. You’re lucky it’s this fucking hot.”

She begins to claw at her skin.

I wrap my hands around hers. “Why do you think it needs to be scalding?”

“You can’t get clean in cold water,” she rasps, trying to pull away from me.

I spin her around, bobbing my head until I finally catch her gaze. “Look at me, Kat.” It’s then I notice her big brown eyes filling with tears. “Tell me. I just want to understand.”

“No one will,” she whispers.

“Do you need the pain?” I ask.

“I just need to feel clean.” She begins to sob.

My heart slowly begins to break as the little girl from Jesse’s story

emerges right before my eyes.

I reach down and shut the water off, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around her shoulders. “We’ll have to give it a minute,” I tell her before rushing out of the room. I crank the thermostat on the hot water heater up and then make my way back to her.

She’s sitting on the toilet lid, shivering.

I crouch down in front of her. “I want you to show me, Kat,” I say, brushing her hair away from her face.

“Fuck you,” she says weakly. But at least she’s back to being my Kat.

# Chapter Sixteen

## KATIE

**K**at. I hate it when he calls me that.  
I do.

I'm so mad at him, I can hardly speak. All day long he's been pushing my buttons. You know what happens when you push too many buttons? So many programs begin to run at the same time that the whole system shuts down.

"I don't want to talk about it," I tell him, hoping the fucking water heater hurries the fuck up.

"You don't have to talk. Just show me."

Ignoring the fact that he wants me to shower in front of him, I change the subject. "You know, it was my sister."

His brows pull together at my abrupt change of conversation.

"This," I say, drawing an imaginary circle around my face. "I hate makeup. Who has time for that shit?" I chuckle half-heartedly.

His gaze roams over my face. "I agree, and besides you look better without it."

Waving him off, I turn to look at myself in the mirror. "She was just pissed



at you for the way you treated her this morning.”

He stands, going over to check the water. “If you think that pissed her off, you should have seen her when I left for our date.”

I roll my eyes. “Our date?”

“You think I’d let my wife go on a date without me?” He smirks, glancing at me over his shoulder.

“I’m not your real wife.”

He waves me toward him. “It’s ready.”

When I lift my leg to step in the shower, he grabs me around the waist, holding me back. “It feels real to me,” he whispers before letting me go.

I stumble into the hot water, letting his words wash away. All that matters now is getting clean. I begin my routine, catching the pained look on his face as my skin begins to redden.

When I finish, he hands me a towel. I notice it’s not the one I was wrapped in earlier, thank god. That one was dirty. It gives me a warm feeling right in the center of my chest. Does he understand?

How could he?

“Let’s get some sleep. It’s been a long day,” he says, leaning against the doorframe.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” I tell him, shoving my toothbrush into my mouth.

He watches as I spit red into the sink, keeping a blank expression on his scary face. My cheeks heat as I pat my mouth dry.

“Better?” he asks.

He doesn’t say it in a condescending way. It makes me think he really wants to know if I feel better. If all the hot water, scrubbing, and brushing helped.

“Yeah,” I sigh, walking past him. I pause by the bed, realizing I have yet another obstacle to cross before I can get away from this world and slip into my dreams.

“Get into bed, Kat. I’m too tired to argue,” he says, throwing the covers back and motioning for me to climb in.

Huffing loudly to let him know how displeased I am, I crawl over and flop back onto the pillows dramatically. He begins to change into some dry boxers, so I turn away from him. Jesus, I’ve seen enough of Petey today.

When he gets in, he rolls right up behind me, pulling me close to him. He rests his palm over my pussy. “This is mine, Kat. Don’t be touching it in your sleep,” he orders groggily.

“Fuck you,” I snip, shoving my hands under my pillow. Little does he know I never do that.

But the rumble of his voice when he chuckles makes me consider it.

“You’re not going to tell anyone, are you?” I whisper to the dark.

“No. I’m not going to tell anyone. I’m the only one who needs to know.”

I think he’s fallen asleep, but then he adds quietly, “I understand sometimes it’s hard to feel clean even though you are. Charlotte walked through her mother’s blood. That’s why she always leaves her shoes outside.”

# Chapter Seventeen

## KATIE

The next morning, Charlotte bounds into the room. “Mommy, Daddy,” she squeals. She crawls up the middle of the bed and squishes herself between the two of us.

My sister follows her in, crossing her arms over her chest at the foot of our ... I mean Petey’s ... bed.

“Did you have a nice date, sister?” she asks, glaring at Petey.

“What?” I rub my eyes.

“Your date,” she says again, reluctantly pulling her scowl from Petey to look at me.

I sit up. “Oh, yeah, yeah. It was fine.”

“Are you going to see him again?” she asks, tapping her boot loudly on the floor.

Dirk steps in behind her, grabbing her around the waist. “Sorry,” he mumbles to Petey. “I let go of her leash for five minutes,” he explains.

Petey barks out a laugh.

“Okay, jeez, this is weird, just ... just get out.” I shoo Dirk and my sister

out of the room with my hands.

Jesse gives me a once over before turning to Dirk and slugging him right in the stomach. “Fuck your leash,” she snips, storming out the door.

“Fuck,” Dirk says, straightening. He rubs his hand over his stomach. “Just a little foreplay.” He smirks, following her out.

“Are we having pancakes again?” Charlotte asks, wiggling her fingers at the ceiling, unfazed by anything going on around her.

“Sure. I’ll go start them,” I tell her, throwing the covers back and standing. When I look back at the two of them before closing the door, my heart thaws a little as Charlotte rests her head on Petey’s chest.

Backing toward the kitchen, I find my sister vigorously whipping eggs in a bowl. I sidestep her, going to the sink. “What are you two still doing here?”

“She wouldn’t leave until she could see for herself that you were okay.” Dirk plops down at the breakfast bar as Charlotte runs out, climbing up in the seat beside him.

“Well, I’m just fine.”

“I shouldn’t have let him go after you last night,” Jesse says quietly beside me as I begin mixing the pancakes.

“Don’t forget the chocolate chips,” Charlotte hollers from behind us.

“I won’t,” I assure her, bending my head to catch my sister’s gaze.

When she stops to look at me, I smile. “I’m fine, Jess. Chill, will you?”

She blows hair out of her face, leaning in so Charlotte can’t hear her. “I used to like Petey, but I think I was wrong about him. He’s an asshole. You don’t have to listen to him, you know?”

I snort.

“What?” she asks.

“You’re married to a man exactly like Petey.”

“That’s different,” she says, whipping the eggs faster.

“Is it?”

“Are you saying you like him?” she asks, shaking her head.

“No.” I choke as a big hand wraps around my throat. Petey wrenches my head back, lowering his mouth to mine, effectively silencing me.

Charlotte squeals in delight, clapping her hands. “Mommy picked Daddy last night. She didn’t like that other guy,” she explains to Dirk.

“I see that.” Dirk smirks as Petey releases me.

When he swats me on the ass, my sister’s face turns purple.

“You can’t do that,” she tells him.

“Fuck I can’t.” He grabs my butt, his fingers digging into my flesh.

“Jesse,” Dirk warns.

Petey and I continue to stare at each other as I bounce nervously between him and my sister.

The door swings open, and Brody and Jackson step in. Brody takes off his hat. “Fuck yeah, brother. Sounds like you had an excellent date night.” He laughs, patting Petey on the back.

“What now?” Petey asks dryly, handing me a cup of coffee.

“The owner of the Pink Diamond called Jackson this morning and told him the club isn’t allowed there anymore.”

*Oh my god.*

“Why is everyone here?” I yell, mortified the owner might have told Jackson about last night.

Jackson drops his head, kicking at an imaginary rock. “Just letting you all know.”

*Shit. He did fucking tell him.*

“Who the fuck cares? I’ve never been in that fucking place,” Dirk says, his

eyebrow arching my way.

I cover my face, pushing past everyone. This is beyond ridiculous. I don't need any of this. I can leave anytime I want, and that time is now.

My hand hits the door handle when Charlotte calls out, "Mommy, aren't you going to finish the pancakes?"

Fuck.

"Yeah, I just need a little fresh air," I say, not turning around.

Jackson follows me out.

"Don't," I say, holding out my hand when the door closes behind him.

"Are you okay?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Because your head is spinning."

"I'm fine," I sigh, dropping my ass in one of the rocking chairs. He takes the one next to me.

"You sure about that?"

My gaze roams over the sun kissed lake. "My head's been spinning for a long time, Jackson. No worries."

"Does he make you uncomfortable?" He stretches his long legs in front of him. "Because I wasn't joking about kicking him out of the club. I'd do that for you, Katie."

"He's your enforcer," I say quietly.

"And? There are a dozen guys who would willingly take his place."

"If anyone should be booted out, it's me." I lean back, thinking about all the chaos I've caused the club over the years.

"You're part of the family, Katie. You belong here." He pulls his cigarettes out of his jacket, handing me one.

I light it, inhaling deeply. God that's good.

“He needs the club to protect Charlotte,” I reason, blowing smoke over my head.

“Fine. I’ll ask him to leave when the threat is eliminated,” Jackson says, standing.

“Wait, that’s not what I want.”

He falls back into his chair with a smirk, his feet flailing up as it rocks back.

“You’re such an asshole,” I tell him.

He gives me a toothy smile. “I knew it. He’s getting to you. You’re falling for my best friend.”

“I thought Brody was your best friend,” I state dryly, pulling in another drag.

“He is ... they both are.”

“But you were willing to send him away.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let that happen. You’re always honest.”

I look away. *Not always.*

“Grandma Maggie predicted this would happen,” he adds, snuffing his cigarette out under his boot.

*Of course she did.*

“But can you two play it cool when you’re out in public?”

I stand up, flicking my cigarette off the porch. “I make no promises,” I say, stepping around him. I pause by Charlotte’s little shoes, my chest clenching painfully.

Jackson laughs, following me inside.

Petey is flipping pancakes. Everyone else is focused on their plates, eating quietly. His serious, scary gaze meets mine, and his head tips slightly.

I lower my head, going to stand by him. “Here, let me take over,” I say

quietly, taking the spatula from him.

He bends over and kisses the top of my head.

Strangely, I find that I don't want to shove the spatula up his ass.



# Chapter Eighteen

## PETEY

I warned every motherfucker in this room that they better not upset my woman again. I'm the only one who's allowed to do that.

Everyone was eating quietly when she came back inside. I knew she wouldn't run off. One thing I can count on is the promises she makes to my daughter.

"Will you take me to school this morning?" Charlotte asks her as she's washing the dishes.

Jesse crosses her arms over her chest. I don't know what's crawled up that woman's ass, but she's not my problem.

"Sure thing, sweetie," Kat says, turning to me. "Can I use your truck? It's a little chilly out this morning."

I nod, watching Dirk drag Jesse out the front door.

"See you two later," he says before closing the door.

Kat dries her hands off as I fish my keys out of my pocket. "Make sure she's in the building, yeah?"

She salutes me before taking Charlotte's hand and heading out.

“Come find me down at the workshop when you get back.”

Her steps slow, but she doesn't argue. Charlotte breaks away from her before coming back and throwing herself at me. “Bye, Daddy,” she says, brushing her cheek over my beard.

“I love you, baby girl.”

“Love you, too.”

I watch out the window as they drive away.

As I walk down to my shop, I realize how good I feel knowing my daughter is with Kat. She's proven herself where it comes to Charlotte. She's as tough as they come. That used to irritate me. I'm the kind of man who needs to be in control and in charge. But now I think she might be the perfect mix. I just need to see if we're on the same page.

I remember the first time I met her dad, Bill. It was when the club came up to North Cal looking for Lily. God, that was years ago. I was just a punk kid, straight off the streets. He was obsessed with his family. I remember longing for a club like that. There are Skull Chapters everywhere, but this one is different.

Years after that visit, they heard of my talents in eliminating scum. They asked me to dispose of a few men Lily couldn't bring down the legal way. That's when I met Charlotte's mom. She was scared, fragile, and I don't know ... I just felt like I had to help her.

I stand back and look at the window I'm piecing together for a client. When I grab another sheet of glass, I glance at my watch. Kat should have been home by now. My heart rate kicks up. I hope nothing happened to her. No, someone would have called by now.

I walk over to the window to see my truck parked outside. She's back. When I swing the door open to go look for her, she's standing right in front

of me, her bottom lip pinched between her teeth.

Resting my hand on the door frame above us, I run my eyes over her.  
“Why are you out here?”

She shifts her weight from foot to foot. “I ... um, I got Charlotte dropped off.”

“I see that. But again, why are you out here?”

Her arms wrap around her mid-section. “What are we doing here, Petey?”

I step back and wave her into my shop, coaxing her to come inside.

“You know my sister would freak out if she knew I was kneeling for you.”

“You think she’d be jealous?” I ask, leaving her standing on the porch.

She laughs but follows me inside. “You know what I mean, asshole.”

I stop by the cushion on the floor, pointing at it.

All the noise in her head is begging her not to do it, but I think she’s tired of listening to all that chatter. She walks over and stares down at it. “Part of me wants to kill you for this, you know.”

I don’t give her a response. She’s trying to poke at me so it will give her an excuse to leave. She’s going to find out that I’m very disciplined.

She scratches her head, still torn, but when I place my hand on her shoulder, she closes her eyes and falls to her knees.

“Good girl,” I praise, cupping her cheek in my hand.

She makes a little sound from the back of her throat, keeping her eyes closed. This is hard for her, but she craves it nonetheless.

I crouch down in front of her. “Look at me, Kat.”

Slowly, I’m graced with those big brown soulful eyes.

“It’s quiet here, isn’t it? And I don’t mean in this room.”

She gives me a tiny nod, her cheeks turning pink.

“Don’t be ashamed. I’m going to let you in on a little secret.” I lean in

close, placing my lips to her ear. "It does the same for me."

"But you don't even like me." She drops her face, her hair falling over her shoulders.

"That was when we were in competition."

"And we're not anymore?" she asks, still confused.

I rest my hands on her thighs, steadying myself. "We can both win in this."

She lifts her face. "Because we're on the same team? We've always been on the same team, Petey."

Nodding slowly, I grab her chin. "You're right, but think about what you and I can do if we work together."

"But this is more than that," she sighs. "We're not just talking about taking out scumbags."

"Does it make you feel weak to kneel for me?" I ask her.

She shrugs.

I drop to my ass, sitting cross legged in front of her. She uncurls herself, mimicking my pose. We stare at each other.

"You clear my mind," she finally admits. "I haven't felt this calm since ..." Her words trail off.

"Since your dad was alive," I finish for her. "It's because you feel safe with me."

She looks away. "I don't want to lose myself."

Reaching out, I grab her around the throat, relishing the way her lips slowly part. "You're already lost. I'm here to help you find yourself."

She tries to get up, but I squeeze my hand, stopping her.

"We're already doing this, Kat. So, let's rip the Band-Aid right off. Why do you torture yourself in the shower?"

"Fuck you," she spits.

I run my hand over my face with my free hand. “Wrong answer. Try again. And don’t forget, I’m still taking tally.”

Her nostrils flare, and fuck ... my eyes roll back in my head. God I love her spunk, but I also love her submission.

“What are you going to do? Spank me?” she laughs, mocking me, but I know what’s really going on here. She’s trying to avoid my question. This is what she does with everyone. Act like a badass brat and everyone will give you a wide berth. But I’m not afraid of her brattiness. In fact, it’s the fuel I need to push her. Now all I have to do is light the match.

“Do you feel dirty, Kat?”

The way she looks at me almost makes me lose my resolve. This isn’t the day I planned. I wanted to ease her into this, but maybe it’s best to get this out in the open before we become intimate. And we will be intimate.

“It’s not what you think,” she whispers.

“What am I thinking?”

“It’s not about the man my mom let abuse me,” she sneers. “I will never give any man that kind of power over me.”

Interesting. She did know what I was thinking. Well then ...

“Do you know what it’s like living in a house filled with filth?”

My fingers loosen around her neck, and I run my thumb over her cheek. She pulls away from me, turning her head. Then, she jumps to her feet, rushing to the door.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” I say. “My mother was a hoarder. That’s why I ran away when I was fourteen. Living on the street was cleaner.”

Her hand pauses on the door handle. She glances at me over her shoulder before turning her face back to the wood. “Were there bugs?” she asks, dropping her forehead against it.

I laugh harshly. “Come here, and I’ll show you.”

Slowly, she makes her way back to me, dropping to the floor, but I reach out before her ass hits the ground, pulling her onto my lap. She fights for a second but gives up. When she is still, I hold my phone in front of us.

“I had the place cleaned out a couple of years ago. They have people who help with that kind of thing these days.” I open the first photo. “These were the before pictures.”

She doesn’t flinch, and she doesn’t make any comments. But she does take the phone from my hand, flipping through the rest of them. “Was she able to keep it clean after this?” she asks quietly when she returns it to me.

I rest my chin on her shoulder. “No.”

“My mother,” she pauses. “My biological mother was a drug addict.” Her head falls back against my chest. “She had periods where she would do better, but she always fell back into her old habits.”

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly.

“My first night at the warehouse, Jesse helped me take a bubble bath. When I got out, I was so embarrassed by the ring of dirt I left behind.” She laughs lightly, shaking her head. “And then she gave me a bright pink toothbrush. I remember running my finger over the handle. I’d never had one before.”

I squeeze my arms around her.

“I prayed that night that Jesse would keep me forever.”

“I’m glad she found you.”

“She was so tough. I wanted to be just like her when I grew up,” she says, turning to look out the window.

“You are like her.” My hand rubs over her stomach lightly. “You’re strong just like she is.”

She drops her head, letting her hair fall around her shoulders. "I'm not," she says quietly.

"Why? Because you've kneeled for me a couple of times?"

"I don't want to talk anymore." She pushes off my lap, resuming her position on the cushion across from me.

"Maybe someday you'll be able to trust me."

"Same."

"Kat, I'll eventually tell you about the man looking for Charlotte. It's just safer that you don't know right now. He's a very powerful man."

Her eyes fall closed, so I stand, deciding I better leave it alone for now. I need to get busy on the window I've been commissioned to make for a couple over in Reno. I give her shoulder a gentle squeeze before walking away.

She sits for me the rest of the day. When she begins to sway, I crouch down in front of her. "Are you tired?"

Her big brown eyes blink at me. "No. Is it time to get Charlotte?"

I nod. "But if you're tired, I'll go get her."

"No. I'm good."

I help her to her feet, running my palm over her cheek, but she pulls away from my touch.

"I ... I don't want to do this anymore," she says quickly before rushing out of the shop.

I watch her sprint toward her bike.

# Chapter Nineteen

KATIE

What am I doing? I sat there all day ... again!

That's not even the worst part of it. I told him about my mom.

But I guess he told me about his, too. It doesn't matter; I've told him too much. We can't keep doing this ... whatever this is. It has to stop.

Charlotte runs to me the minute I pull up in front of the building. She grabs her helmet and tips her chin, waiting for me to strap it.

"Where's Kelsie?" I ask, my gaze roaming over the lot, looking for the evil bitches who made my baby cry.

"She went home early."

"Oh. Okay, well next time she's not here, wait inside and I'll come in and get you," I tell her, helping her on my bike. She nods. "Were her friends being mean to her again?"

"No. They were nice today and left balloons all over her locker. I think she just had a tummy ache."

My gaze scans the area. There's no sign of Kelsie's cheerleading friends. Maybe they got the hint yesterday.



When we get home, Big Dan is there. He and Petey both stop talking as soon as Charlotte and I walk in.

Charlotte runs to Dan. She climbs right up his legs. He laughs, hauling her into his arms. “How was school, little lady?”

“Good. Can I come play with the kitties today?” she asks. Lily and Dan have a new litter of barn kittens at their house.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Petey says, peeling her off Dan. “Go wash up. We’re going to start supper early so we can get some fishing in before it gets dark.”

She squeals and runs down the hall to her room.

Dan laughs, and I slowly back away. I’m out. There’s no way I can take watching them fish with my dad and I’s old poles.

“I’m going to go up and see Jesse,” I tell them when I reach the door, ready to make my getaway.

Petey snaps his fingers loudly, halting me in my tracks. “Don’t you dare fucking move.”

Dan’s eyes widen, and I’m not sure if it’s because of the way Petey just spoke to me or if it’s because I listened to him.

“You can’t boss me around.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I realize how childish they sound.

Dan chuckles.

Petey does not.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to ...” he pauses, shaking his head. “Fuck if I know, but I’ll leave you to it.”

When he walks past me, I grab his arm. “Hey, is Kelsie feeling better?”

He stops, staring down at me, his brows pulling together in confusion.

“Charlotte told me she left school early today because she had a stomachache.”

“Oh? I haven’t been home. I’m not sure.” He shrugs but pulls his phone out, no doubt to check on his daughter.

“Well, tell her I hope she gets to feeling better.”

He nods, glancing over his shoulder at Petey before stepping out.

Every cell in my body screams at me to follow him.

Petey turns toward the kitchen. “Do you like chicken?” he asks.

“I need to go see my sister,” I tell him, ignoring his question.

Charlotte comes bounding out of her room. “I love chicken!”

She grabs my hand, dragging me into the kitchen. “Daddy makes it so good.” The little turd turns to look at me, rubbing her hand over her stomach.

Petey pulls out an electric skillet from the seventies.

“Are you making fried chicken?” I ask.

“Yep,” he answers, dumping flour in a bowl.

“Oh, well, I guess I can eat first, but then I really need to go see Jess.”

Grandma Maggie got me hooked on fried chicken. We’ll see if Petey’s is better than hers. I doubt it, but I’m willing to give it a try. “What do you need me to do?”

Charlotte’s already up on a stool with a potato peeler. Petey nods toward her. “Could you cut up the potatoes after she gets them peeled?”

After I wash my hands, I take the seat beside her, placing the cutting board in front of me. She begins to chatter about her day. After we finish our task, she asks me to help her with her homework while Petey finishes supper.

She’s filling in the vowel on three letter words. “Is this how you spell your name?” she asks when she gets to the word *cat*.

I laugh. “No. My name starts with a K,” I tell her, squirming in my seat because I can feel Petey’s eyes on me.

We finish her homework just as supper is finished. I start to clean up in the

kitchen as he places the food on the table.

“Sit your ass down, Kat. We can clean up later. We’re going to eat quick, then go outside. The mess will be here when we get back.”

“I was just going to let the pans soak,” I grumble, plopping down in the seat across from him.

He grunts, dishing up a plate of food for his daughter.

I watch the two of them. The way she smiles at him when he sets it in front of her. The way his eyes crinkle in the corner as she bites into a chicken leg. The way he mimics her, and they both close their eyes, making a chef’s kiss motion with their fingers. The way ...

“Kat, eat. It’s best when it’s hot,” Petey says, motioning to my plate.

Jesus, it’s good. “It tastes just like Grandma Maggie’s.”

Petey chuckles. “The old woman gave me cooking lessons. She even gave me that thing.” He points toward the electric skillet. “Who taught you to cook?”

“Jesse and Mama Bear,” I tell him, shrugging.

“Oh, I love Jesse’s chocolate chip cookies.” Charlotte bounces on her chair. “Can we make some, Mommy?” she asks.

“Yeah, we’ll pick the ingredients up tomorrow and make them this weekend,” I tell her.

She claps her little greasy hands before turning her attention back to her food.

Petey’s boot pushes between mine, and he runs it halfway up my calf. When my eyes meet his, he winks at me.

The rest of the meal is quiet as the three of us chow down, but as we finish up, my fingertips begin to tingle. I flex my hands under the table, taking a deep breath.

“I’ll go get the fishing poles,” Charlotte says suddenly, jumping out of her chair and rushing down the hall.

Petey glances out the window. “We got a couple of hours of daylight left.” He slides over to Charlotte’s chair and takes my hands in his. “You can sit on the porch if you like, but I’d prefer it if you join us. I’m not a goddamn fisherman, Kat. You wouldn’t let me embarrass myself in front of my daughter, would you?”

“I live to see you embarrassed,” I say flatly.

He chuckles but pulls me to my feet.

“Why don’t you just let me clean up, and you guys go on ahead. I’ll meet you out there.”

Rolling his eyes, he reminds me that the mess isn’t going anywhere. Charlotte hands him my dad’s pole as she passes us, excited to get down to the dock.

When we get there, I’m a hundred percent sure I’m going to throw myself over the edge. Charlotte plops down and opens my old purple tackle box, rummaging through the old lures.

“Here, let me help you.” I sit down beside her, our feet dangling over the side.

I get it ready for her and help her cast it out over the water. When I’m satisfied she has it handled, I let go. Petey immediately shoves my dad’s old pole in my hands.

“Here, can you get this started for me? I forgot I need to make a quick call. I’ll be right back.”

My eyes narrow on him, but it’s too late, he’s already jogging back to the cabin. Charlotte’s little eyes turn my way. Fine. I bait my line and then cast it into the lake.

“How will I know when I get a fish?” Charlotte asks after a few minutes of us sitting side by side quietly.

“Oh, you’ll know,” I tell her. “You’ll feel a tug on your line. Just don’t let go of the pole, okay?”

She nods, her gaze roaming over the water.

I’ve missed this. There’s something about this lake. It soothed my young soul when I came here. My dad and I spent hours fishing together. Sometimes we talked. Sometimes we didn’t. Day after day, he made sure we carved out time for it. It was the consistency that made me fall in love with him. Over time, I began to realize he was a good man with no ulterior motives. The men my mother brought home were nothing like him.

Slowly, I began to feel like I was his real daughter. Without him, I don’t think I would have survived very long. He was my anchor. Since he left, I’ve just been floating around, searching the rough sea of life looking for a place to dock ...

Charlotte’s little pole jerks in her hands, and she lets out a little squeal. It does it again.

“Mommy!” she shrieks, looking at me to help her.

“It’s okay, baby. Just hold on. You got one. Reel him in slowly.”

She starts to bring her line in. “Mommy, I can’t!”

I set my pole down, placing my hand on her back. “You can do it, Charlotte. Just hold on tight. I think you got a big one.”

She grunts as her tiny hand turns the reel. I hop up and grab the net.

“Mommy!” she yells out again.

“You’re doing great. Keep going,” I encourage.

When the fish is flopping in the water below us, I scoop him up in the net. “Look at that, baby!” I praise.

She stands, jumping up and down on the dock. “I did it!” she screams.

“You did so good. You’re a pro at this,” I assure her.

I pull the fish out of the net, holding it so she can see it.

Her nose wrinkles, making me laugh. But her curiosity wins out, and she runs a finger over his scales.

“Do you want to hold him so I can take a picture?”

She nods, so I show her where to place her hands. Then, I pull my phone out of my pocket and snap a picture.

Her little feet stomp in delight when I show it to her before shoving it back in my pocket. “Okay, are you ready to let him go?”

“Yes, he needs to get back to his family,” she says seriously, handing him back to me.

I lean over the dock and place him gently in the water, setting him free.

She claps her hands, jumping up and down. “That felt so good! I’m going to go tell daddy,” she says, turning to run down the dock.

I glance over my shoulder to make sure she makes it back to the cabin, finding Petey standing just off the dock. He leans over to catch her in his arms, his gaze never leaving mine.

My heart slows at the way he’s looking at me.

*He’s never going to let me go ...*

I tighten my fingers around my dad’s fishing pole, swallowing hard as I kick my imaginary anchor off the edge of the dock.

# Chapter Twenty

## PETEY

**K**at and I stare at each other as the sky darkens around us. Maybe this dark-haired vixen is a fucking angel.

An angel in disguise.

Slowly, I set my daughter on her feet when I see the shift in Kat.

Reluctantly, I take my eyes off her. “Kat has a picture on her phone,” my daughter squeals, yanking on my hand to pull me down the dock.

“I saw, baby. I saw,” I assure her.

“Wasn’t he so big?”

Kat pulls her phone out and stands next to us, her arm brushing against mine. She holds the phone out in front of me. “She’s a pro,” she says, blinking up at me.

“Well, she had a pretty good teacher.”

Her cheeks turn pink.

She puts the phone away, waving me off. “Oh, she’s a natural.”

“Can we go out back and watch the sun set?” Charlotte asks, picking up her purple fishing pole.

I take the poles and everything else. “You two hurry back there. I’ll put these away and be right behind you.”

The two of them run around behind the cabin hand in hand. I set everything back in her room and then head out the back door. Charlotte is curled up on Kat’s lap as they sit in the grass, facing the horizon. It’s like staring directly at the sun ... the image is seared into my brain forever.

I drop down beside them and carefully wrap my arm around Kat. She doesn’t take her eyes off the horizon as a tear slips out the corner of her eye. She raises her hand to wipe it away, but I stop her, wrapping my hand around hers. Then, I lean over and catch the falling drop with my lips.

When I pull away, she lays her cheek against the top of my daughter’s head, finally turning to look at me. This is a different Kat. Her pupils aren’t darting around, preparing for her next move. It’s almost the same look she gets when she’s on her knees, but there’s something else ... she’s happy.

The sun disappears behind the trees, and Charlotte yawns sleepily.

“We better get inside and get your bath done,” Kat says, pulling her gaze from mine.

She cleans the kitchen while I get Charlotte ready for bed. I grab the little jewelry box Kat gave her so she can put her necklace away for the night.

“I don’t need it, Daddy,” Charlotte tells me as she climbs into bed.

I set it back down and walk over to her. “Why is that?” I sit on the edge of her bed, leaning an arm over her.

She scratches her little nose. “I didn’t need the necklace anymore. I got all my wishes.” She grabs her teddy bear and hugs it to her chest, rolling to her side.

Brushing her hair out of her eyes, I wonder if her final wish was for a mother. Part of me feels bad I’m not enough for her, but I get it. She’s always



loved Kat. From the moment they met, they clicked.

It pissed me off in the beginning.

Now that I think about it, maybe I was jealous of the way Charlotte looked at her. Those kind of looks were supposed to be reserved for me.

I've had a hard time trusting women with my daughter after what happened with her mother. Shaking my head, I clear my thoughts. Charlotte's eyes begin to blink slowly as she begins to drift to sleep.

"What did you do with the necklace?" I ask.

She rubs her eyes with her fists. "I gave it to Kelsie. She's been sad."

"That was very nice of you, baby." Her eyes fall closed when I kiss her forehead.

I glance back at her before shutting the light off. She's the sweetest girl. Even after everything she's had to see in her short life.

When I leave the room, I find a sparkling clean kitchen. I'm surprised Kat let me put her off as long as I did, but she needs to learn that sometimes you need to leave the mess for later. Life comes first. But this I get. I bust my ass keeping this place nice for Charlotte. I'll never let her live in filth.

I shut the lights off and head into the bedroom. Kat is in the bathroom with the door open. I lean against the doorframe, crossing my arms over my chest. She turns away from the mirror to face me. Her chest rises as she takes a deep breath. She releases it slowly. Then, she looks me dead in the eye.

"Will you help me?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

She raises an eyebrow but keeps her mouth shut.

Stepping in, I push the door closed behind me. Her gaze tracks every move I make as I turn the water on, adjusting the temp. Her fingers begin to twitch when the fact that I'm in charge begins to sink in. "Get undressed, Kat."

I grab the back of my shirt, pulling it over my head. She focuses on my tattoos as she follows my lead. “We’ll start slow. It’s a little hotter than I’d like, but I know this will be hard for you.”

She nods, taking in the tattoos on my legs as I step out of my jeans. Her fingers tremble as she struggles to undo the buttons on hers. I reach out to help her, and her arms fall to her side.

“Tonight, you’re only going to go through your routine twice.”

The way she grimaces tells me she wasn’t expecting that.

Her mouth opens, but I place my finger over her lips. “When we’re alone, I’m in charge. You don’t have to do or say anything. Just like in the shop. Let me take control. I’ll look after you, Kat.”

I left my shorts on last night, but tonight I plan on taking an actual shower. When my thumbs hook over the band on my briefs, she turns around.

“Does this bother you, Kat?”

“No,” she answers a little too quickly.

“Kat,” I warn.

“I’ve never been with a man. Okay? There ... are you happy?” She storms around me, heading back out to the bedroom.

I’m dumbfounded for a moment. Kat is in her early thirties at least. Shit. I need to stop her before she leaves.

But when I get to the bedroom, I find her frozen in the middle of the room with a handful of clean clothes. She’s trapped of her own accord. She can’t put them on because she’s dirty, or at least she thinks she is.

“Argh!” she yells, throwing them on the bed.

“Kat,” I stutter, not knowing what to say next.

“Just shut up,” she says, spinning in a circle. “Forget it. I don’t need your help.” She pushes past me, but I stick my arm out, clotheslining her. I pull her

back into my chest, pinning her against me.

“Did the man who took pictures of you when you were young touch you?”

She digs her nails into my arm. “What the fuck do you think?”

I know the man is dead, but I want to dig him up. Jesse left this part out of her story, but maybe she didn’t know.

“Just stop, Petey. It’s not about him, okay? I’ve just never met a man I wanted to ... you know, be with.”

“So, how have you been taking care of your needs?”

My question makes her angry. “Fuck you! I don’t have needs.”

“Oh really,” I whisper against the shell of her ear. “Your cunt was awfully needy at the Pink Diamond.”

She stomps on my toes as hard as she can with her bare foot, making me release her with a grunt. “That fucking hurt!” I bark.

“It was supposed to hurt, asshole,” she growls, storming into the bathroom.

She tries to shut the door, but I slide my hand in before it closes. “That’s it. You’re getting your punishment tonight.”

“Yeah, you can fuck right off,” she snips, dropping her bra in the hamper. Her panties follow.

When I grab her arm, letting my gaze fall down her frame, she shivers ... and those beautiful dusty pink nipples harden.

I’m going about this all wrong. She’s just embarrassed that she’s inexperienced. “Do you touch yourself, Kat?”

She turns her face away from me. “No.”

“Never?”

Her nostrils flare. “I said no.”

“So, in the restaurant ...?”

“I hate you so much right now.”

“Oh, but we both know you won’t be hating me for long, will you?”

# Chapter Twenty-One

KATIE

**M**y heart trips over a beat. *What does that mean?*  
“Answer me,” he demands.

“I’ll always hate you,” I lie.

His gaze narrows. “My tally only goes higher when you lie to me, Kat.”

My eyes roll of their own accord.

“That makes ten.”

I huff, sending stray hairs fluttering around my face. “No fucking way are we at ten,” I argue.

“Have you been counting?” he asks, pulling the shower curtain open. He places his hand in the center of my chest. “Get. In,” he orders.

I step in. “No, I haven’t been counting, but there’s no way.”

He gets in behind me ... in his shorts.

“You get two times of going through your routine. I’m giving you ten minutes, so you better get busy.”

Fuck!

I really do hate him right now.

“What’s the use of counting when you don’t have the balls to follow through,” I hear my stupid self say. I’m in no position to fight him right now. I’m naked, and I told him I’m a fucking thirty-year-old virgin.

*Maybe it’s myself that I hate.*

He wraps his hand around my neck, pulling me against his chest. His other instantly goes between my legs. His fingers rub over my clit fast and furious, not giving me time for my brain to process what is happening.

I dance on my toes as his grip tightens around my throat. My orgasm hits so hard, every muscle in my body seizes.

“One,” he growls in my ear, pushing me away from him and back under the spray.

I stumble, catching myself against the wall with both hands.

“Hurry, Kat. The water is getting cold.”

I’m ... I’m so stunned I can’t speak. My need to get away from him spurs me forward, and I hurry to clean myself. I go through my routine twice, forcing myself to step out even though I don’t feel done.

He chuckles while I’m drying off. “Only nine more to go before dawn,” he taunts, tossing his wet boxers over the shower curtain.

No way is he being serious. You can’t have more than one at a time. Can you?

I brush my teeth, trying to slow the beating of my heart. He’s only joking. I just pissed him off with the comment about his balls. That was stupid. You should never insult a man’s balls unless you have a knife in your hands.

That’s it. I need my knife.

The water shuts off as I rush into the bedroom. I grab my right boot, flipping it upside down. When my blade falls to the floor, Petey’s hand reaches around me, snagging it first.

“From virgin straight to knife play?” he tsks.

He flicks my blade open, holding it in front of my face. It makes me back into his chest. “Petey,” I warn as he presses the blade flat against my cheek.

“I can feel your pulse, Kat. Why is it beating so fast?”

“Um, maybe because you’re holding me at knife point?”

“Mmm. So you’re scared?”

“Never,” I spit.

His fingers dance between my breasts, but I don’t dare move because um ... knife.

When he slides his fingers between my legs, he whispers in my ear, “You’re turned on.” He chuckles darkly.

“I am not.”

“Your sweet pussy is soaked.”

“It’s from the shower.”

He pulls the knife away, spinning me around to face him. “Oh, Kat, we’re going to have so much fun.”

“I ... I ... I fucking told you I was a virgin. There is no fun to be had between you and me.”

“You also told me it was because you hadn’t found the right man.”

*He’s not the right man. He’s not the right man. He’s not the right man.*

Again, he intercepts my prayers, removing three little letters.

*He’s the right man.*

His gaze darkens, and I squeeze my legs together.

“It’s a good thing you’re a virgin, Kat.” He steps toward me, making me take one back. “Because I don’t like to share.”

His hungry eyes roam freely over my body. I take another step back, and my legs bump against the bed. I fall backward.

He's on me in a second, the knife in his hand falling to the floor.

"I would've had to hunt down every man who had stuck his cock in you, leaving behind a string of dead lovers." His wet hair drips over me as I push myself up the bed. He crawls with me, matching my pace.

"Petey, let's call a truce. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have commented on your lack of balls. I'm sure you have some very nice ones," I plead. Part of me wants him to stop ... the top part ... okay, just my brain. The rest of me is anxiously awaiting his touch. Rough or soft, it doesn't seem to have a preference at this point. It's been starved for so long it will take whatever it can get.

"Who are you, Kat?"

"I ... I don't know." And I really don't at this point.

His gaze bores into mine, stealing my breath away. "You're mine. You've always been mine. You've been waiting for me."

Oh, oh this is bad.

When my head bounces against my pillow, he grabs my wrists in one hand, holding them over my head. His other finds its way between my legs. Oh ... oh god, not again.

And I do call out to God. Petey's hand quickly covers my mouth as I come for the second time tonight.

His mouth dips beside my ear as I struggle to catch my breath against his palm. "God isn't going to help you. Eight more to go."

He settles his body to the side of mine, whispering in my ear as his hand teases over my sensitive skin. "Who have you been waiting for? Say it, Kat."

He taps a finger over my entrance, and my eyes fall closed. "You," I breathe out as he slowly enters me.

"Good girl," he praises, bringing me to the brink again ... and again ... and



again.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## KATIE

A warm hand slides between my legs. “The sun will be up soon,” a gravelly voice whispers in my ear, rousing me. “You owe me one more.”

“Petey, I can’t,” I groan, rolling my head over the pillow. My eyes blink open slowly, catching the time on his alarm clock. “Christ.”

“Did you forget my name already?” He slips two fingers inside my tender pussy. “Let me remind you who I am.”

His warm mouth on the back of my neck, makes me drape my leg over him, giving him a little more access. I mean at this point, there’s no arguing with him. I feel him smile against my skin. I come at the same time the alarm goes off.

He rolls me over, running his thumb over my bottom lip. “Why don’t you stay in bed and get a little more sleep? I’ll get Charlotte off to school.”

My eyes fall closed, and I give him a little nod, snuggling under the covers. I’m almost asleep when Charlotte bounds into the room, climbing up on the bed. Petey rushes in after her, scolding her for waking me up.

“I was up. What’s wrong, baby?” I ask her.

“Can you send Daddy the picture of me and my fish? That way he can send it to my teacher. Today is Show and Tell, and I want to tell my class all about it.”

I smile, running my hand over her sweet little cheek. “Of course, sweetie.” Grabbing my phone, I quickly send it to Petey. The phone in his pocket dings. This seems to be all she needs. She gives me a quick hug before jumping off the bed and rushing out the door.

Petey leans over, kissing me soundly on the mouth before following her.

Flopping back on the bed, I realize how spent I am, but as my eyelids begin to fall closed, one of those pesky, intrusive thoughts comes barreling into my mind. *I’m sticky ...*

I jump from the bed and head to the shower. If I hurry, I can get done before Petey gets back. When I reach in to turn the water on, one of the knobs is missing. What the fuck? I pull the curtain back to find someone has removed the one for the hot water. *Are you kidding me?*

Grabbing a towel, I wrap it around myself and rush to the bathroom across the hall from Charlotte’s room. Same thing.

I’m going to kill him.

I’ll just get dressed and go up to the warehouse. But when I get back to the room, I find that I can’t bring myself to put clean clothes on my dirty body.

So, the search for a pair of pliers begins. As I rummage through his junk drawer, I remember the tools in his workshop. There has to be something in there I can use to turn the water on. I run across the lawn, holding the towel tight to my chest.

I smile at the beautiful window he’s making. It’s hanging in the middle of the room. My hand wraps around a pair of pliers hanging above his bench.

Perfect.

The door swings open, and the sun sends a complete color palette across the floor as it hits the glass. I quickly tuck the pliers behind my back like a common thief. In the process, the towel falls from my body.

Brody stares at me with wide eyes. “Oh shit!” he yells. “Fuck, please don’t tell Petey I saw you naked.”

I drop the object in my hand, scrambling for the towel.

Petey’s bike roars into the driveway. Brody glances over his shoulder. “Oh fuck. Oh fuck.” He begins hopping around.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, frantically trying to cover myself with the towel.

“Shit.” He runs his hands through his hair, ignoring me as he starts speaking to someone behind him in rapid fire. “Man, I was just picking up that drill you told me I could borrow. I didn’t ...” he pauses, looking back at me. “I didn’t know she was out here.”

Petey steps around him, his gaze narrowing on me. “Leave,” he orders over his shoulder.

“Sorry, man. Please don’t kill me. I didn’t know ...” His voice fades as Petey kicks the door closed with the bottom of his boot.

He snaps his fingers, pointing to the cushion on the floor.

“Petey,” I try to explain.

“Don’t try me,” he growls.

I scurry over to the cushion, but before I fall to my knees, he rips the towel off me. Quickly, I wrap my arms around myself, dropping my face.

He steps away, crouching down to retrieve the tool I dropped on the floor. I peek at him, noticing his hands are shaking.

“Why are you outside of the house naked, Kat?”

“I ... I wanted a shower,” I answer meekly.

His gaze clashes with mine. “You put yourself at risk.”

“I need a shower.”

He rises slowly, hanging the tool back where I found it.

“I ... I didn’t know Brody was coming today,” I continue to reason.

He ignores me as he takes a few deep breaths and starts working. Several hours pass as I think about what I did. I was so desperate for a fucking shower that I left the safety of the cabin with no clothes on. Petey is right. I put myself at risk and for what?

I watch his hands as he holds each piece of glass to the light, searching for the perfect piece. Adding each one to make the final project even more beautiful. So calm, so steady. I wonder what he’s making now. It’s amazing how he can take something so broken and turn it into something so beautifully perfect. The man has so much patience ...

A lump begins to form in my throat.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

He doesn’t say anything.

“The man who used to come and take pictures of me ...” I let my words trail off, unsure if I should say this out loud.

Petey sets his stuff aside. He’s listening. He braces his hands against the tool bench, his jaw working back and forth at the mention of my abuser.

“He used to ... well, he used to get himself off with my underwear.” I run my hands up and down my thighs. God, this is so mortifying. I’ve never told anyone about this. “And sometimes my mom wouldn’t do laundry for weeks. She’d make me wear dirty clothes to school.”

He walks over and crouches down in front of me. “Did she know?”

I shrug. “I doubt it. She was high all the time ... she wouldn’t have noticed

if my underwear was crusty.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

He reaches out, placing his hand on my shoulder. “It’s not fine.”

“But it is. Because if that wouldn’t have happened, I never would have met Jesse.”

“You’re not dirty, Kat.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

He stands, waving his hand toward his work bench. “Hop up.”

Slowly, I rise from the floor, hoisting myself onto it. “If I get a splinter in my ass from sitting here, I’m going to kick yours,” I joke, wishing I would have just kept my mouth shut.

He doesn’t laugh.

“Lean back.”

As I do, he steps between my legs, hoisting them over his shoulders.

“No,” I start, trying to sit back up.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## PETEY

“I want to eat your pussy, Kat.”

“Petey, please. I’m dirty,” she begins to whine. But her face slowly falls when it begins to sink in why we’re doing this.

Her face turns bright red when I run my nose along her slit, inhaling dramatically. “So fucking sweet.”

“Oh my god, Petey,” she begs, but as soon as the tip of my tongue touches her clit, she quiets.

Her eyes darken as she watches me lick her long and slow.

“You smell like heaven,” I praise, teasing her entrance with my finger. Her eyes roll back in her head when I slide one in. She’s so in-tune with the things I do to her. She’s fine-tuned just for me. I continue to please her with my mouth all the while slowly sliding my finger in and out of her.

*God, I can’t wait until it’s my cock.*

Her knees tighten around my head as she comes over my face. Fucking perfect. I wrap the towel around her and pick her up, carrying her back into

the house. She tucks her face into my neck, wrapping her arms around me tightly.

When we get inside, I put the knob back on the hot water valve. Her gaze nervously bounces around the room as she waits for me.

“I’ve never told anyone that story,” she admits.

I pull her against me as the water warms. “I’m glad you told me, Kat. Now you don’t need to hold onto it anymore. Okay? It’s out. His filth is gone. We’re erasing his touch once and for all.”

She steps into the shower and lets me wash her. It pleases me that she continues to talk to me.

“Dirk killed him, but I wish I could have seen. I know I was too young, and they were only trying to protect me. I probably wouldn’t have wanted to see it back then, anyhow. But now, I wish I could see he’s really gone ... that he suffered.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re so adamant the victims you’ve gotten vengeance for get visual proof,” I tell her, brushing wet hair from her forehead.

“Maybe.” She tips her head back, letting the water run over her hair. “I wanted to be like my dad, you know? He killed for his family. I wanted to know what that felt like.”

“At least you know why you do it. I have no idea why killing people gives me such pleasure.”

She tips her head back, staring at me. Her gaze bounces over my face. “It’s because you’re a good man.”

I laugh at this. I’ve never been called a good man, and hearing it from Kat makes it sound even more funny. The woman hates me.

“I didn’t want to believe it, either.” She runs her fingers through my beard,



her brows pulling together. “But that doesn’t make it any less true, does it?”

“I’m not a good man, Katie.”

“Every time you lie to me, I’m taking tally,” she says, the corner of her mouth turning up.

“Is that so?” I laugh lightly.

“I want to hate you, but you’re making it awfully hard with all the orgasms.”

She pushes the shower curtain back, and I watch as she steps out. She smiles at me before pulling it closed. For the first time in years, I think she’s leaving the shower feeling clean.

“So, you don’t hate me?” I holler over the curtain as I peel my wet boxers off.

“Well, maybe we could knock it down to a slight dislike.”

I laugh loudly. “If I keep the orgasms coming, maybe someday you’ll love me.”

*Shit, why did I fucking say that? I’m going to scare her off.*

The bathroom door opens and shuts. *Jesus, I’m an idiot.* I reach down and turn the water off, stepping out to go find her.

I jump when I see her leaning against the closed door.

We stare at each other for a long time. I do my best to hold completely still as she slowly pulls her gaze from mine, letting it drift down my body. She visibly swallows before quickly bringing it back up.

“What is happening? You hate me,” she whispers.

I wrap a towel around my waist, guiding her back to the bedroom. “Sit.”

She plops down, her body twitching. She’s starting to panic. “Oh god, why did I tell you all of that today?”

“Kat, breathe. I’m not going to tell anyone. What you say to me in private

stays that way.” The way her knee begins to bounce tells me she doesn’t believe a word I’m saying. “And I don’t hate you.”

She chuckles, shaking her head. “I’m so fucked,” she whispers to herself.

My heart breaks at the fear on her face. She’s genuinely worried I’m going to spill her secrets. I have to do something to get her to trust me.

“The man looking for Charlotte is a politician.”

That does the trick. It cuts right through her erratic train of thought. Her big brown eyes meet mine.

“Lily is using her connections to try and help me figure out who he is.”

She scoots close to me. “The man I brought back, he didn’t tell you?”

“He gave me a lot of good information, but he didn’t have a name.”

“Jesus. Why does this man want her?”

My gaze bounces over her face. “Charlotte watched him kill her mother.”

Her face falls. “She saw his face ...” She stands, quickly going to her dresser and rifling through her clothes. I let her. “You should ask the school to keep her inside until I get there. I’ll go in and get her every day.”

I watch as she meticulously braids her hair. “And I’ll talk to Dirk about getting some cameras set up around the cabin.”

“Let’s both pick her up today,” I suggest, standing to get dressed myself. She seems happy I’ve given her a little bit of my trust.

She nods. “Does Lily think she can figure out who it is?”

“If anyone can, it’s her. She’s got more dirt on the elites of this country than anyone I know.”

Kat slips into her boots. “Yeah, she may look sweet, but she was ruthless when she was helping me bring down predators.” She pauses, realizing she let one of her secrets slip. Her gaze flicks up to mine.

I tip my head back and laugh. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Just how

many women in the club were helping you?”

She walks over to me, and before I know what’s happening, her blade is pressed against my jugular. “I think you’ve wrenched enough secrets from me for one day.”

Fuck if my cock didn’t just turn into a piece of granite. I’m going to fuck her soon ...

# Chapter Twenty-Four

KATIE

**H**ow stupid am I, telling this fucker all my secrets?

My head follows the movement of his hand as he spins the steering wheel, turning the corner. God, just looking at his hands give me a straight shot of dopamine. He snaps his fingers, making me shift my attention to his face.

He's smirking. "Are we good to go home, or do you have any errands to run?"

Charlotte leans over the seat, shoving a picture she painted at school in my face. "Daddy, we have to go to the store to get the stuff to make cookies."

"To the store." Petey salutes her. "Buckle up."

She squeals settling back in the seat.

My gaze roams over the parking lot as we pull out. It makes me extremely nervous that we have to let Charlotte out of our sight to go to school. If I had it my way, Charlotte would be home-schooled. At least until the threat is eliminated.

I look over my shoulder as she reads her library book. A tear slips down

my cheek. Petey reaches over, brushing it away. Swallowing, I turn to face him. Can he read my thoughts ... can he see me slowly falling in love with his daughter?

I've always loved Charlotte, but it's morphing into something different. Something stronger than ordinary love.

His hand drops to my leg, squeezing it. I want to dedicate my entire life to Charlotte. I'll never replace her mother ...

My mind wanders to my father. How he made me feel. I want to give that to the little girl behind me. But if I make that commitment, there is no turning back. I'll be stuck with Petey forever.

His big hand slides between my legs, his pinky finger hot against the seam of my jeans.

My core instantly clenches. I guess being stuck with him might not be that bad. I mean, he hasn't been too awful. I'm finding it hard to remember what it is that I don't like about him.

That mischievous little pinky twitches against me, drawing my gaze back to him. My eyes widen, darting toward the back seat before going back to him. I raise an eyebrow in warning, my lips pressing into a thin line. He chuckles, flicking me hard right over my clit. It makes me jerk in the seat. I shove his hand away roughly.

He turns into the parking lot, his laughter growing.

Charlotte has a big grin on her face when I help her out of the truck. She cups her hands around her mouth, whispering in my ear as I set her feet on the ground. "I like the way Daddy laughs when he's with you."

My heart clenches painfully because I know exactly what she means.

The three of us walk through the store with Charlotte riding on her dad's shoulders. She giggles as she grabs a box of cereal from the top shelf. My

mind continues to roll over her comment. Does he laugh differently around me? My dad's laugh was always different around my mom. They had a playful relationship. Dad used to say it was because they were robbed of their younger years together. But I don't think Petey acts differently with me than anyone else. He just likes to pick on me.

*"When a boy is pickin' on you, it means he likes you."*

My dad's absurd words bounce around in my head. It was a foolish statement when he said it to me when I was twelve, and it's even more foolish now. Petey picks on me because he hates me.

He reaches around my shoulder, pulling me from my thoughts. He grabs a can of whip cream. "I'll need this for my dessert," he says, winking as he places it in the cart.

"We're having cookies," I remind him. "You don't need ..." My words evaporate as he runs his hand through his beard, one eyebrow raised. *Oh ... oh! That kind of dessert.*

My face heats and I turn, pushing the cart down the aisle. What a jerk. But now that the image of his face between my legs is running through my mind, an incessant ache has settled low in my belly. Something tells me he's going to take things further than I'm comfortable with tonight.

The rest of the night my mind screams at me to get out of here. So, while he's running Charlotte's bath, I make my getaway.

I run through the trees, and when I get to the warehouse, I let out a long breath. I made it. I reach for the door, noticing the red-hot cherry of someone's cigarette burning nearby.

"Don't even start," I say before he can utter a word.

"Sit your happy ass down," Dirk orders.

"I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

“Well, then go home and get in *your* bed.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I lean against the glass. “My bed is upstairs.”

“Not anymore.”

“Are you kicking me out?”

He leans forward, dropping his cigarette to the ground before rubbing it into the cement with his boot. “It’s okay to be scared.”

“I’m not scared of anything.”

“You really want to live your whole life not knowing what it’s like to be with a man?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

“You’re really going to let your fucked-up childhood rob you of your entire life?”

“I’m not,” I say quietly, sitting down beside him.

“What are you so afraid of?” Dirk taps his cigarette pack, tipping one out and offering it to me.

I slide it out of the pack before catching his lighter. What am I afraid of? I’m not afraid of having sex. I’m not afraid of Petey.

“He’s not going to hurt you, Katie.”

“I know that.” I glance behind me, making sure Petey isn’t coming for me. But he has Charlotte, so he can’t leave the house. My face falls. I guess that was kind of mean, running away when I know he can’t chase me. He’s at a disadvantage.

Dirk’s phone dings. He doesn’t look at it. We both already know who it’s from.

“I’ve never seen him look at a woman the way he does you. And we both know he’s had plenty of opportunities to hook up with someone. The women

around here love the scary fucker. So, what's the hold up?"

"I don't know," I groan, resting my head back on the chair.

"Bill was worried you'd never let anyone get close to you."

My head snaps up. "What? I'm close to lots of people," I argue.

"Katie, you deserve to be loved."

I laugh. "Love? He wants to have sex with me. It has nothing to do with love."

"So, that's what you're afraid of? You're afraid he doesn't love you."

"No, I'm afraid I'm going to fall in love with him."

Dirk smirks, settling back in his chair. "You already do. May as well enjoy the ride, and I mean that literally."

My face heats. "Shut up."

He laughs and part of me warms because of it. Dirk is a hard man. I've always loved him. He's the one person I felt safe with when I first came here. Maybe it's because of the way he's always looked at my sister.

"I don't even like the scary fucker." I cross my arms over my chest, but I know it's not true. I've been lying to myself for a long time.

"You're scared of the things he's making you feel. So, just tell him that. It's not fucking rocket science, Katie."

His phone dings again and again and again. Great, Petey's got all the troops out looking for me.

The lights start to click on one by one in the warehouse. Fuck.

Dirk and I stand at the same time. He grabs my hand, pulling my back against his chest. He points to the dock. "You sat down there with Bill for hours. I know he healed this thing." He places his hand over my heart. "He would be proud of the way you protected Charlotte. You're an amazing woman, and Petey is lucky I let him marry you."



Swiping at my eyes, I chuckle.

“You will always hold a special place in my heart, little girl. You saved my woman. I know you only see it from your perspective, but Jesse needed you just as much as you needed her. You brought her and Bill together.”

“You’re such an asshole for making me cry.”

He laughs in my ear. “You’re so much like your sister.”

“Do ... do you think Dad would have approved of Petey?”

“Petey and Bill are cut from the same cloth, darlin’. I think he may have been the one who sent him to us.”

The sliding door opens, and instantly Dirk releases me. I run my hand over my face before turning around.

“Is everything okay?” my sister asks, rushing toward me.

I hold my hand out. “I’m fine. I just walked over to bum a cigarette,” I tell her.

Her gaze bounces between me and Dirk. “Petey has the club out looking for you,” she says, wrapping her arm around me. She begins to guide me inside. “Why don’t you stay here tonight? Maybe it will do you two some good to get away from each other for a while.”

Shrugging her arm off, I back away. “I’m good, Jess. Really. I just needed a smoke. I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?”

Jesse hugs herself. “Yeah, yeah, sure.”

Dirk walks over and wraps his arms around her waist, whispering in her ear, “Let her go, baby. She’s fine.”

I take a few steps away but then rush back and wrap my arms around them both. “Thank you for always being here. You’ll always be my home.”

And then I hurry back down the hill.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## PETEY

I wouldn't say I was surprised to find she was gone after I put Charlotte to bed. The entire club is out looking for her. I'm sorry, but I can't let her walk. She is my wife. Mine.

It's driving me nuts that I can't look for her myself, but I can't leave Charlotte alone. Especially now that she's in so much danger. The moon ripples across the lake as I wait for a message letting me know someone found her.

If they find her.

She's good. If she wants to disappear, she will.

God, what did I say to scare her off? I thought things were moving along just fine. She'd even opened up and shared her deepest secrets with me.

A dark figure appears in the driveway, and she hovers in place when she notices me sitting on the porch. I don't move and a few seconds later, she picks up her foot and continues toward me.

Thank god she came back.

She pauses on the bottom step.

“I would have set the world on fire.”

“I wasn’t running away,” she lies.

“One.”

She stomps her little foot. “Not with that again.”

“Then don’t lie to me.”

“I was just going to sleep up at the warehouse tonight. I would have been back in the morning.”

I nod. “So, why are you back?”

“Dirk kicked me out.”

Try as I might, I can’t contain my laughter.

“It’s not funny. Where do you think I’m going to go when you get tired of me?” She stomps up the stairs, surprising me by falling into my lap.

I wrap my arms around her. “I’ll never tire of you, Kat.”

“You say that now, but ...”

“Is that why you ran?” I make a mental note to thank Dirk tomorrow. Whatever he said to her seems to have done the trick. She’s talking instead of running. I pull my phone out to call off the troops.

There’s just enough light that I take a quick selfie of the two of us. I send it to everyone, letting them know she’s right where she belongs.

“You know, if I wanted to disappear, I could.” She pouts, clearly embarrassed I had the club out after her.

I turn her on my lap, making her straddle me. “Would you curse me to spending the rest of my days looking for you?”

“You’d find someone else,” she says quietly, looking away from me. The breeze blows tendrils of her hair around her cheeks. She’s so beautiful.

“Now where would I find another woman who can keep up with me like you can?”

She leans forward, hiding her face in the crook of my neck. “I’m scared. Okay? If I give you that part of me, I’m worried ... I’m worried my heart won’t understand it’s just sex.”

I push her back, staring into her eyes. “Kat, it’s not just sex. You’re my wife.”

“Your fake wife.”

“No. My wife.” I grip her chin, forcing her to look at me.

She bites her lip. “If you leave me after this, I’ll cut your balls off,” she jokes, blinking away tears.

“Oh, Kat, I’d never leave you. You’re mine.”

Her little hands press against my chest as she pushes herself off my lap. “I’m going to shower,” she says, waiting for my response.

I nod. “I’ll be in shortly.”

“You trust me to shower alone?”

“I trust you with my life. I think I can trust you with yours.”

This makes her smile. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

She pauses to look at Charlotte’s little shoes before stepping inside.

I let out a long breath when the door closes behind her. My girls are home.

Clicking through the messages from the club makes me smile. Everyone is happy she’s home. All but one person.

**Jesse: I will murder you in your sleep if you hurt her.**

Shaking my head, I think about replying, but I slip my phone back in my pocket. This is what I came here for. Bill raised some strong-ass women. They are fiercely protective of each other, and that is exactly what I want for my baby girl.

Jesse is just protecting what is hers.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## KATIE

I'm shaking by the time I get out of the shower. This is it. I thought it would never happen. Honestly, I don't think it would be happening if I hadn't met Petey. Strange, I know, because part of me still hates him. The part that's trying to protect itself, even if it's illogical.

I stare at my reflection. "Bitch, you can do this." I throw my shoulders back and step out of the room.

Petey is sitting on the bed, facing the door. He looks up, his gaze darkening as he drags it down my body.

I shiver from head to toe in its wake. "I ... I don't have any sexy lingerie," I say, tugging on my black Harley tank top.

"Fuck, baby, that's just my kind of lingerie." He reaches out, latching his big hand around one of my thighs. He pulls me between his legs, staring up at me. His hand slides under my shirt, resting between my breasts.

I look everywhere but at him. He's already naked. I saw his fucking monster meat earlier today, and I'm not sure I want to see it again. Oh, who

am I kidding? I want to see it. I just don't know if I want it in my body quite yet.

“My cock has been hard since the first time I laid eyes on you,” his deep voice pulls me from my thoughts.

I'm positive I'm not hearing him right.

He laughs before pressing his nose into the soft fabric of my t-shirt. “You were forced to marry me. Don't pretend you felt something before you did,” I say.

My fingers press against his head to push him away, but when he bites my shirt, I thread into the soft waves. Jesus, he has nice hair. *What isn't nice about him?*

When his gaze rises to meet mine and he gives me a devilish smile, I remember. But I don't know if that side ... his asshole side, is really that bad. I'm starting to think maybe I'm crazy. Maybe being an asshole is what attracted me to him.

“Do you think I've been forced to do anything in my life?”

He slides my panties down my legs, not waiting for my response, which is good because I don't have one.

My brain is searching for a time where Petey did something he didn't want to do. Fuck me, but I can't find one. “Wait, what about that time you ate that June bug at Brody's birthday party?”

His mouth turns up on one side as he pushes me back a step so he can stand. He lifts my shirt over my head as he rises. “Do you know how much those fuckers put in the pot to get me to do it?”

I shake my head, staring up at him. His warmth seeps into my skin, and my heart slowly begins to kick up when I realize that we're standing mere inches apart with no clothes on.

*Don't look down. Don't look down.*

“Let’s just say it paid for that dock you and Charlotte love so much.”

*Oh. I do love the dock.*

“Not the point. You didn’t want to eat that bug. You did it for money.”

His big, tattooed hand wraps around my throat, his smile widening. “I wanted to eat that bug so I could get the money. The choice was mine.”

I blink up at him, trying to dissect what he’s saying.

“Just like I want to put up with your smart mouth so I can slide my cock in that sweet pussy of yours.”

*Oh.*

“Just like I wanted to marry you so no one else could,” he continues.

My eyes widen.

“Now, shut up and lay the fuck on the bed, Kat.”

Still holding my neck, he turns us and shoves me lightly to the mattress. He leans over, pushing my knees apart. “If anyone touches this, I will murder them,” he says, drawing a finger through my wetness.

When his dark eyes meet mine, I whimper. He’s serious as a fucking heart attack.

He crawls up my frame, settling between my legs. “If I ever hear you doubt my obsession over you again, I will fuck you where you stand.”

My eyebrow slowly climbs up my forehead. The part of me that just has to push back comes out. “Is that a promise?” I taunt, rolling my eyes.

Leaning on the hand he has braced by my head, he reaches between us, grabbing his cock. How fair is that? But I manage to keep eye contact.

His fist bumps against my clit with every stroke he gives himself, and before I know what I’m doing, my hips are impatiently rising to meet the next touch.

When the head of his cock brushes against me, I break away from his gaze to look down our bodies. God, that is fucking hot. I could watch him fuck himself all day ...

“You bet your sweet ass that’s a promise,” he growls, pinching the tip of his dick, pressing it against my entrance. His finger reaches up, flicking my clit. My head falls back against the pillow, catching the look of hunger on his face.

“Can I stick my cock inside you now, Kat?” he asks.

“Fuck yes,” I breathe out, but when he presses against me, I panic. “Wait, stop.”

He does, holding himself perfectly still. “I know your scared, Kat. You don’t have to hide it from me. I’m going to get you through it.”

I blink, turning my head away from him.

“You’re ready for me. I promise. It’s not going to be as bad as you think.”

I’ve waited so long for this. No, that’s not true. I haven’t waited at all. I never thought it would happen, and I was okay with that. I’ll admit I’ve been scared to be intimate with a man. But this fucking asshole is like a goddamn drug I can’t resist.

“Okay,” I breathe out.

He slides his hand under my head, forcing me to watch as he enters me inch by inch. When he’s half-way, he lets go of his cock to press his hand against my knee, spreading me wide for him. “You’re so fucking tight,” he grits out, his jaw clenching.

“It’s not me. If you didn’t have a monster cock ...” I begin to argue, making him bark out a laugh.

“Stop. I didn’t mean that in a bad way,” he assures me, pressing his mouth to mine to shut me up.



His weight settles on me, his hands coming up to cup my face. “It hurts,” I tell him, blinking tears away.

“I know, baby, but it will get better over time.”

He leans down and kisses me. Our tongues dance around one another’s, suddenly frantic. I can’t get close enough. Jesus, I want him everywhere. I press my heels against his butt, urging him farther inside me.

He takes it as permission to continue and thrusts all the way in, releasing a groan into my mouth as he does.

I drag my nails over his scalp as he presses his face into my neck. The way Petey’s cock is stretching me is uncomfortable, but it makes me feel so fucking powerful. He’s the club’s enforcer. Honestly, he’s the scariest man I know, and he picked me.

*He picked me.*

“Come with me, Kat,” he whispers into my ear, reaching between us. His fingers continue to rub over me as he delivers thrust after powerful thrust.

My muscles contract around him, sending him over the edge. The cords on his neck strain as his gaze bores into mine.

And I know in this moment, Petey will never let me go.

I can’t describe exactly how that feels, but I know it’s the feeling I’ve been searching for since my dad left me alone on this spinning ball of dirt.

Petey is my family.

My husband.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## PETEY

**M**y hand roams over the sheet, finding nothing but an empty bed. Shit. I pry my eyes open, glancing at the clock. Fuck, it's ten. I toss the blankets back and hurry to dress.

When I throw the door open, I'm greeted to silence. My gaze slides across the room. Nothing is out of place, other than my daughter and wife are missing.

I glance out the window, my heart instantly slowing at the sight of them on the dock. Charlotte is hopping around, pointing to the water. Kat tips her head back, laughing. It looks like she's reeling something in. My chest aches watching them together.

I wasn't lying to Kat last night when I said I've wanted her since I met her. The only thing that was holding me up was my daughter. She's mine to protect, and I couldn't risk her getting her little heart broken. So, I put my desires away. But when Kat protected my daughter the way she did at that McDonalds, I couldn't fight it anymore. Charlotte's award-winning

performance sealed Kat's fate. I knew neither one of us would ever be able to let her go.

Hopefully my performance in bed last night relayed that message to Kat.

I'll never let her go.

Leaving them to it, I grab a cup of coffee and start packing a picnic lunch. The open road is calling to me. By the time the girls come inside, I have everything packed. Charlotte skips toward me.

"Yay!" she squeals, noticing the basket. "Can I ride with Mommy today?" she asks.

"Of course," I tell her, pushing her toward her room to get ready. Charlotte needs time on the bike as much as I do. She loves to ride.

When she vanishes into her room, I let my gaze settle on Kat. She's hovering near the doorway. Her cheeks immediately turn red, and she blinks away.

"Chop, chop woman. The road awaits," I joke.

She bounces on the ball of her feet. "Okay," she says shyly, hiding a smile behind her hair as she leaves the room.

A possessive shiver runs down my spine. I slide my phone out of my pocket, dialing Dirk. "The man who hurt Kat. Where is he?" I ask.

"Six feet under the motherfucking ground."

"Do you know where?"

"Sure do."

"I want you to show me."

He chuckles darkly. "I'm going to assume last night went well."

When I don't respond, he sighs. "Fine. Come to the party tonight, and I'll show you. He isn't far. But in return, I need you to get Jesse off my ass about

you being with her little sister. You gotta show her all is well. Let her in on how things are going.”

“See you tonight.”

“Hell,” he mutters before hanging up.

The girls come out at the same time, bumping right into each other. They both laugh, holding their stomachs. Kat takes my daughter’s hand, and the two of them head out the door. I grab the basket and follow them out.

Soon, we find ourselves in the foothills, pulling off the side of the road to enjoy an amazing view of the valley below.

The entire ride was amazing. Kat is good on her bike, and I love that my daughter has a female rider to look up to. I won’t be around forever. Eventually, I want Charlotte to learn to ride by herself. Once it’s in your blood, it never goes away.

After we eat, the girls begin to gather wildflowers. When Charlotte falls asleep on the blanket, I pull Kat between my legs. She rests her head against my chest. “I’ve missed this,” she whispers after a few minutes.

“We’ve never done this before.” I chuckle lightly.

She tips her head back to look at me. “Yet my heart still yearned for it.”

Her words lance my soul. “Oh, baby,” I say, brushing my thumb over her cheek. “You’re home now. Don’t be sad.”

She nods, blinking back tears. She turns away from me.

We sit quietly until the sun lowers, and it’s time to head back. As she’s helping Charlotte on her bike, I tell them we have to go to the warehouse for the party tonight.

“Nooooo,” she whines, stomping her foot.

Charlotte giggles.

“Come on. Everyone will be there. It won’t be that bad.”

She gets on the bike. “But we have Charlotte.”

“That’s okay, Mommy. I get to play with Aurelia and the baby when Daddy goes to parties.”

“You know she’ll be safe upstairs, and Billie Rose already sent me a text offering to watch her for us.” I fire up the bike. “So, no excuses. We go. We still have an obligation to the club.”

She rolls her eyes, somehow managing not to argue with me. That’s a first. I watch my girls pull out in front of me. My entire heart is on that bike.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## KATIE

**B**illie Rose took the girls upstairs. Charlotte filled her plate, telling me all about how Billie Rose was going to let her give the baby a bottle. Now that she's gone, I feel a little lost.

I walk along the table of food, trying not to miss Charlotte. I grab a plate and fill it high before heading over to Petey. I set the plate in front of him. Everyone at the table stops talking. Petey included.

Okay, so maybe this was a bad idea ...

Petey reaches for me as I start to back away. He snags me around the throat, pulling me down to his level so we're nose to nose. His other hand grabs my butt, his fingers pressing my jeans into the crack of my ass.

"Thank you, baby," he murmurs quietly, his gaze telling me this is okay. Better than okay even. He's pleased.

A shiver races up my spine, and the ache that's becoming all too familiar settles between my thighs. He kisses me hard, shoving his tongue in my mouth. Before I walk away, I take a second to glare at the other men sitting at the table. Only because my legs are shaking, and I can't move them.

When I get back to the food to fill a plate for myself, my sister is scowling at me.

“Did you just serve that asshole?” she asks, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I did,” I reply, taking my plate and going over to sit by my mom. Her and Ally are leaving first thing in the morning, hence the current party.

“Hey, baby,” she says, kissing my forehead. “How is the honeymoon going?”

“Just fine.” I ignore the look that passes between my sisters as Jesse joins us.

“Well,” Ally chimes in, leaning forward. “That’s a deep hole, Mom. You sure you want to fall into it?”

“Yes,” she says the same time Jesse says no.

I shake my head, chuckling. “Just say it, Jesse.”

“He’s not good enough for you.”

“If I remember right, you were the one who drug me to that stupid shop for a wedding dress.”

“That was before I knew what an asshole he was.”

“I’ve been saying it for months. You should have listened to me.”

“Katie, look at me,” she orders.

Ally and my mom grab their plates and leave the table, sensing Jesse is about to lose her shit. I stir my baked beans around my plate, refusing to look at her.

“Did he hurt you?” she whispers, her voice cracking.

She asked me the very same question when she found me over twenty years ago. Maybe she’s been dreading this day as much as I had been. She’s been afraid for me.

Sighing, I look at her. “Jesse, he didn’t hurt me.” I lay my hand over hers, giving it a gentle squeeze.

She blinks rapidly, squirming in her seat. “Dad would strike me dead if I let anyone hurt you.”

“Well, good thing he didn’t.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Her shoulders drop, the wrinkles in her forehead smoothing away. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a bitch. I just ... I worry about you.”

“He’s ...” I glance over my shoulder to make sure no one is around when I say this, “he’s helping me.”

The minute the words leave my mouth, I realize my mistake. She didn’t know I had anything I needed help with.

“What do you mean?” She curls a leg under her butt, leaning across the table on her arms.

A group of women pass the men, giving them flirty little waves. I rise from my chair, a red haze suddenly clouding my vision. My sister reaches across the table, grabbing my wrist.

“Sit down. They’re harmless hang arounds.”

Petey’s gaze meets mine, his brows furrowing at the look on my face. I swallow hard, letting my sister tug me back into my chair. I force my face to relax; I don’t want him to come over and ask me what’s wrong. He shouldn’t even be able to tell anything’s wrong. And fuck, why is something wrong? We aren’t even really married, and everyone knows it. Jesus, I need to settle down. I offer him a small smile and turn back to Jesse.

“How is he helping you, Katie?” she asks again.

*Oh yeah.* “It’s nothing.” I wave my hand, finishing my beer, so I don’t



have to say anything else.

Someone turns up the music, getting the party ramped to the next level. I grab another beer, shot gunning it. There, that should help my nerves. Nodding my head toward a group of people who've started dancing, I make my getaway.

"I'm going to go see if Raffe wants to dance." Raffe loves to dance. You'd never know there was a time when we thought he'd never walk again.

She starts to argue, but I rush down the hill toward the group. Raffe grabs me around the waist and pulls me into his arms. "Hey, darlin'."

"Hey," I laugh, letting him spin me away from him.

I notice Petey, Dirk, and Big Dan stand from the table, disappearing around the side of the warehouse. My sister notices too and starts to follow them.

Raffe pulls me close, whispering in my ear. "Club business. If they catch her, she'll get her ass whooped. You best stay here."

Rolling my eyes, I grab Ash's freshly filled cup as he passes us, downing it.

"Hey," he whines, spinning on a heel going back to the keg to refill his cup.

After a few dances, Raffe tells me he's going to rest a bit and catch his breath. My eyes fall closed as I continue to dance by myself, raising my arms over my head. I get lost in the music, the alcohol going straight to my head.

When I feel a hand on my ass I smile, thinking it's Petey. I continue to dance, leaning against his hard body, but when his hand moves between my legs, rubbing against my jeans, my eyes fly open, and I spin around.

A man I don't know smiles at me.

"Who the f-fuck ..." I stutter, taking a step back, tripping over a cord. The

music comes to a stop, and I fall flat on my ass.

My sister marches down the hill ready to tear into the bastard, but Petey storms by her, plucking her off her feet and handing her to Dirk who tosses her over his shoulder.

“Cass, my friend, did you just touch my old lady?” Petey calmly asks the man when he reaches us.

“You’re fucking kidding me? Petey got himself an old lady?” He turns toward a group of men at a nearby table and laughs loudly.

“You touched her,” Petey continues, ignoring the other man’s jab.

“Aw, Petey, man, you were the best goddamn enforcer I ever had.”

My gaze roams over the men’s cuts, landing on their Skull patches. Shit, they’re from the NorCal Chapter, the club Petey used to belong to before coming here.

“Thank you for the compliment, but we aren’t talking about club business. You,” he shrugs out of his cut before pointing at the man, “aren’t my president anymore.”

“Come on, Pete.” Cass laughs again. “I didn’t mean any harm.”

“You know the rules. You touched my woman.” Petey walks over to me, holding his hand out.

I take it, our eyes locking as he pulls me to my feet. He grabs my face in both of his big hands. “Are you okay?”

Nodding my head, I blink back tears of embarrassment. “I-I thought he was you,” I whisper.

His thumbs brush over my cheeks before he leans down and kisses me softly.

“See, all is well.” Cass claps before rolling his hand to get someone to start the music again.

“Not so fast,” Petey says. “We’re going to settle this like men.”

The man rolls his eyes heavenward but shrugs out of his cut. “Of all the fuckers at this party, I had to piss this one off.” He tries one last time to reason with Petey. “I don’t suppose you’d go easy on me if I apologized to the lady.”

“I’ve got a precedent to set. Don’t I, Brody?” Petey looks over his shoulder at his best friend. “If I let one man get away with disrespecting me or my old lady, what’s stopping the next guy?”

Brody laughs, and it’s then I notice his black eye.

My mouth falls open, but the look Petey gives me makes me snap it shut.

“Good luck, dude.” Brody salutes the man. “He’s got one hell of a punch.”

For the next ten minutes I watch Petey pummel the man’s face. When Big Dan finally steps between them, Petey has barely broken a sweat. His gaze roams over the rest of the party goers.

The man on the ground gets up with the help of his friends. He mumbles, blood pouring from his mouth. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. Don’t worry about my pretty face. It will heal.” He laughs, wincing.

I shift on my feet. Petey’s still stalking back and forth across the lawn behind them. People are grabbing food and drinks, more than likely just moving the party to the front of the warehouse.

What do I say? The man can’t even see, his eyes are so swollen. “I ... yeah. I’m sorry, too,” I say honestly. I mean, he didn’t know I was Petey’s wife.

Petey’s wife.

Oh my god. I’m Petey’s fucking old lady!

I think it’s just now hitting me. When the last few men drag the keg around the side of the building, Petey pulls his gun.

*What the fuck?!*

He shoots out the two lights that were illuminating the lawn. Naturally I jump, ducking behind a tree, but he catches me around the waist.

“Oh no you don’t,” he growls low in my ear, his beard scratching over the side of my face.

I’m breathing so hard I think I’m going to hyperventilate. I just watched him almost kill a man with his bare hands. “Petey, I-I thought he was you.”

“Do you remember what I said would happen if you ever doubted my obsession over you?”

“I didn’t ...”

“You did. I saw the way you looked at those women.” His beard brushes against my neck as he speaks directly into my ear.

“What? Seriously? You’re worried about me when you just about murdered a man?”

“I should’ve murdered him, but he didn’t know who you were. Now he does. If it happens again, he’s dead.”

“Petey.” I try to push away from him.

“No. I promised you I’d fuck you where you stood if you doubted my obsession.”

I swallow hard. “This isn’t where I stood,” I try to reason with him.

“Close enough,” he says, reaching around and unbuttoning my pants.

A stupid sob escapes me, making him pause.

He rests his forehead against the back of my head. “Shit. I’m sorry.” He breathes heavily, struggling to control himself.

“I’m sorry, too.”

He buttons my pants before spinning me around to face him.

We both start talking at the same time ... it makes us break into laughter.

“God, we’re crazy.” He takes my hand in his. “This isn’t how I planned the night would go.”

“Me, either. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have had so much to drink. It was stupid of me.”

“Why did you?” he asks. Not in a condescending way, but a genuinely curious one.

“I ... my sister was asking so many questions, and the women ...” He smirks, but quickly schools himself. I wrap my arms around my waist. “And ... and I don’t know how to be an old lady, okay? It felt weird.”

“Weird good or weird bad?”

“Just weird. But I really thought it was you I was dancing with. Then, when he touched me, I knew it wasn’t.” A shiver runs through me, and I cover my mouth, suddenly feeling sick.

“Hey.” He runs his hands over my arms. “It’s okay.”

“I stupidly put myself at risk,” I whisper harshly, choking on memories I had carefully placed inside a little box in my mind. I pull away from him, staring at the dock. “Oh my god. My dad and I talked about this. He helped me come up with a plan.”

“What are you talking about, baby?”

“A ... a list of things that would keep me safe. One of them was not drinking.”

Petey grabs my shoulders, shaking me. “Stop. You were with your club. You were never at risk. And if I would have waited a second longer, I’m certain your knife would have been in his neck.”

“You know that’s not true. He caught me off guard. I fell on the ground.”

He runs his finger over my bottom lip. “Don’t beat yourself up over this, Kat.”

“He could have ...”

Petey shakes his head. “Listen, he got what he deserved. Touching you like that without permission was not okay.”

*The whole fucking club saw what happened!*

“I’ve got something for you,” Petey says, pulling me up the hill. He ignores the catcalls as we round the building to where the party has continued.

“Ignore them,” he tells me, pushing my helmet against my chest.

“Yeah, yeah,” I say mindlessly, wandering to my bike.

He grabs my arm, turning me toward his. “Ride with me,” he says, swinging his leg over the seat.

I stand a few feet away as the club quiets and whispers break out behind us.

“You do know bets are being placed as we speak,” he jokes.

I’m sure he’s right. I take a backseat to no one. The only person I’ve rode behind is my dad. And once he taught me to ride, I never sat on the back of a bike ever again. “What’s your bet?”

He shrugs. “I’m betting on us.”

Damn him and his quick wit. “I don’t think that’s the safe bet,” I tell him, strapping my helmet under my chin.

“Go big or go home.”

“I’m no prize,” I say, spinning around. Everyone quickly looks away. Fuckers.

“I know this isn’t a game, Kat. I’ve never let anyone ride behind me except Charlotte.”

Slowly, I turn back to him.

“I want to feel you behind me, Kat.”

The look on his face makes me want that, too. “Well, I guess the riskier the bet, the greater the reward.”

He winks at me as I wrap my hand around his arm, sliding behind him.

The crowd groans. “Pay up, bitches,” Brody yells happily.

When Petey starts his bike, it does things to me. But one thing I wasn’t expecting was the pride that surges through my veins. It’s intoxicating.

Petey is a scary motherfucker.

And I want everyone to know he’s mine.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

KATIE

**M**y sister comes running out of the warehouse before we pull out. “Wait, wait!” she yells over the rumble of Petey’s bike.

She’s panting by the time she reaches us. Dirk stands nearby with a look on his face I can’t decipher. She places a lighter in my palm, one with bright orange flames on it. She wraps my fingers around it, squeezing my hand hard.

“Burn it to the ground,” she says, staring me in the eye. Then, she pats Petey on the back before stepping away.

*What the fuck?*

And then he guns it, tearing out of the lot.

As soon as we hit the open road, I forget everything, spreading my arms out wide. It’s kind of nice, letting someone else take control, leaving me to enjoy the night sky above.

That is until I realize where it is we’re heading. With every mile that passes, I debate how far I’ll roll if I jump off. Petey reaches down and wraps his big hand around my calf. A warning.



When he pulls up to my mom's old trailer, I jump off before he even cuts the engine. I turn on him as the quiet of night settles in around us. "Why the fuck would you bring me here?"

"I have a present, and I thought this would be a good place to give it to you."

My gaze narrows on him. "What kind of a present?"

"Give me a tour first."

"I hate you right now."

He shrugs, lighting up a cigarette.

"Jesus, let's go." I'd stomp up the stairs, but I don't want my foot going through one. I pause to light up a cigarette myself. The flames on Jesse's lighter catch my eye. I shake my head. She knew he was bringing me here. "She's been on your side all along."

"That's not true. She's been on yours."

A lump lodges itself firmly in my throat as I turn to stare at the driveway, remembering the day Jesse saved me. I chuckle sadly. "I'm surprised she hasn't burned this place to the ground already. She's set half of Trap County on fire."

"Maybe she knew you had unfinished business here."

"So, this was your plan for the evening?"

"Yep."

"I should have just let you fuck me where I stood."

He barks out a laugh. "Quit stalling. Let's go."

When we step inside, I feel nothing. My gaze roams over all the broken bottles, trash, and graffiti. Looks like some kids have been using it as a party house.

"Show me your room," Petey's gravelly voice echoes in the empty trailer.

I walk down the hall, waving for him to follow. I'm not sure what kind of reaction he wants; this place means nothing to me. I lean against the door frame and point inside the tiny room that used to be mine.

He steps around me, circling the space, pulling the torn sheer curtains to the side to look out the broken window. "Do you know who your real father is?" he asks, turning to look at me.

His question catches me off guard for a moment. My first thought is that the club sent him here to kill me. But if one of us is going to die tonight, it's sure not going to be me. "Yes," I answer honestly.

He turns away from me. "Your sister told me you didn't know who your real father was."

I glance down the hallway, half expecting to see my mother walk out of her room. "Does she know?"

"No. But what I'm wondering is why haven't you told her?"

"The better question is why hasn't the club told her, if you know?" I ask, kicking an empty bottle of Jack on its side with my toe.

"I'm the only one who figured it out after that whole incident with Draven. But I never found any proof."

I shrug, laughing lightly. "Both parties being dead doesn't help, huh?"

His eyebrow twitches, and I know I just fucked up. He didn't know my mom was dead. No one knows my mom is dead.

No one but me.

# Chapter Thirty

## PETEY

Well, I was not expecting this. My Kat may have bigger balls than I've given her credit for. Her gaze darts down the hall before resting back on me. She's fixing to run. I love a good chase.

Katie's got some skeletons in her closet.

I've known this for a long time, but holy shit. Crow being her father isn't her biggest secret. She killed her own mother. She doesn't have to say it out loud; I saw it in her eyes.

"I'll keep your secret," I say, stepping toward her as she takes one back, bumping into the wall across the hall.

The second her muscles twitch I'm on her. My hands land with a thud against the cheap paneling on each side of her head, pinning her in place. I feel the tip of her blade under my chin.

A slow smile spreads across my face. "Are you doubting my obsession, Kat?" I drop my head, feeling the blade cut into the skin under my jaw.

She pulls it back, scowling at the grin that tugs at the corner of my mouth as blood begins to stain my beard. I pull one hand away from the wall,

running my fingers through the sticky mess. Then, I wrap them around her neck and run my nose over her cheek. “Are you?”

“N-no,” she stutters as I tip her head back.

“I will keep your secrets. Come.” I drag her with me as I walk backward through the house.

When we get to the door, I stop, turning her around. “Leave the filth here. Do you understand?”

“Petey,” she starts.

“No. Leave it here. It’s not yours.”

She shakes her head.

“I want you to picture yourself as Jesse on the day she showed up here. Now, picture Charlotte as little Katie.”

A groan leaves her lips, and she bends over in my arms like someone just punched her in the gut.

“What do you see?”

I don’t expect her to answer, but she does. “I need to get her out of here.”

“And you do. You take her to the warehouse. You feed and clean her. You love her like a sister when your dad adopts her.”

She lets out a sob.

“Is she still dirty, Kat?”

Shaking her head, her tears come hard and fast. “I could never see her that way. She’s just a child,” she cries, laying her head against my chest.

“You were a child,” I remind her.

She pulls away from me, straightening. She wipes at her cheeks with the back of her hands, looking at the place with new eyes. “How could she let me live here? How could she do that to me? I was a child.”

“It’s funny, isn’t it? How sometimes the people who leave the deepest

scars on your heart are the very people who are supposed to love you.”

Her gaze roams the room, stopping on me. “And the ones who hate you sometimes bring it the most healing.”

“I’ve never hated you, Kat.”

She rolls her eyes. “It sure felt like it.”

“I hated that I didn’t hate you. But I had to think of Charlotte.”

She picks up an old calendar with a picture of a dog on the front. “When I went to live at the warehouse, Jesse got a dog named Teddy.” She rolls it up and steps around me to go outside.

I follow and when she sits on the step, I join her.

“He was the meanest looking dog I’d ever seen in my life. I was a little scared of him at first, but for some reason the fucking thing thought he was my personal bodyguard. He even went to college with me.”

She chuckles lightly, raising her face to the sky. “I felt like such a badass having a dad who was the president of the Skulls, and when he wasn’t around, I had Teddy. People gave me a wide berth when I was with either of them. I lost them both only weeks apart. So, without a badass beside me, I had to become one.”

I light up a smoke and pass it to her. She takes a long draw before handing it back. “I want to be that for Charlotte.”

“I think you already are.”

She tips her head thoughtfully, her eyes bouncing over my face. “Tonight, when I got on the back of your bike, I felt it ... I feel safe with you, Petey.”

This fucking woman is perfect. Soft and submissive when we’re alone. Fierce and domineering when she’s protecting what’s hers. I stand up and jog down the steps. “I’ve got something for you,” I tell her.

She follows behind me slowly, watching as I pull a black trash bag out of

my saddlebag. She waves her hand in front of her nose.

“It smells like gas,” she says. “I thought you had a fucking gas leak on the way up here.”

I laugh reaching into the sack. When I pull out the item inside, she takes an abrupt step back.

# Chapter Thirty-One

## KATIE

I stare at the skull in Petey's hands as he holds it out to me. It's stuffed with a gas covered cloth.

"I dug the fucker up for you, Kat."

My eyes widen, noticing the hole blown out the back of it, presumably from a bullet.

"Ah, how?" I stutter.

"Dirk showed me where he was."

Slowly, I take a step forward. Petey dug up the man who hurt me ... *holy shit*.

My eyes dart up to his. "I don't think you've ever looked sexier," I whisper.

He laughs loudly. "You can thank me later."

"Oh, I'll definitely be thanking you." My fingers dance over the offending object in his hands.

"Light him up," he says, his dark eyes reflecting the stars back at me.

I slide my hand in my pocket, pulling out Jesse's flame lighter. As soon as

I flick it and place it near the cloth hanging out an eye socket, it ignites. Petey pulls his arm back and tosses it through the living room window, shattering what was left of the glass.

We both sit down on the ground and watch as the flames grow, climbing up the shredded curtains.

“My real dad’s road name was Crow.” Petey doesn’t look surprised by my revelation, but he takes my hand in his as I continue to spill my secrets. “Bill always knew. I’m assuming my mom spilled the beans when he was trying to adopt me.”

I watch the flames swallow the demons of my childhood. “When Renee came to him wanting money for her bastard child, Bill agreed not because he didn’t want Jesse to find out she had killed her cousin’s father ... it was because he didn’t want her to find out that she had killed mine.”

“I’d just joined the club when all that shit went down. When I found out Bill had been paying for Draven’s upbringing, I knew Bill was hiding something bigger than what everyone was seeing.”

Laughing sadly, I turn to face him. “Renee knew the truth. Bill did as she asked to protect Jesse.”

His brows furrow. “She knew you were Crow’s daughter. He did it to protect both his daughters, not just Jesse.”

The flames are hot on my face. “She told him she would tell the whole world who my father was if he didn’t help her pay for the bastard that was in her belly.”

“What an awful woman.”

My gaze goes back to the flames. “Kind of ironic, isn’t it? That Jesse killed my dad, and I ended up killing hers.”

Petey shoves his hand in the middle of my chest, slamming me back onto



the hard ground. I grunt as he knocks the wind out of me.

“You did not kill father,” he growls, leaning over my face. “Say it,” he demands.

I try to turn away, but he doesn’t allow it.

“I swear to god, Kat. Say it now, or I’ll turn you over my fucking knee.”

Fuck. Him. I spit in his face. “He died because of me.”

“He died because an evil bitch manipulated him and everyone else around her, including her own fucking kid. And that bastard was the one who killed Bill, not you.”

I stare at the dark sky above me as he shakes my shoulders. “Say it,” he begs.

“God, you’re such an asshole. Okay, I didn’t kill Bill.”

“Try again.”

My brows pull together before I realize my mistake. I know what Petey wants me to say. My head falls to the side, and I watch as the flames claw their way out of the windows of my childhood. “I didn’t kill my dad,” I say quietly.

He leans down and kisses the corner of my eyes, whisking away my tears. “You didn’t kill your dad, baby. I’m sorry you’ve had to carry all of this by yourself for so long. I’ll carry it for you from now on.”

Petey slides off me, rolling me onto my side to face the flames. He works my pants down to my ankles with one hand while unbuckling his pants with the other.

“Give me everything, Kat. All of it,” he growls directly in my ear as he slowly enters me from behind.

My eyes fall closed, letting him have everything. He drains my body of poison as the flames rid the earth of the last physical reminder of the filth I

endured.

“That’s it, baby. I want you to feel those demons taking their claws out of you. You don’t belong to them anymore. I’ll crawl through the flames of hell to claim those last broken bits of you. You’re mine. Mine.” He wraps his hand around my throat, slowly cutting off my oxygen.

Petey sends me to a place of complete peace and ecstasy. When he finally lets go of my neck, I suck in a huge breath. Oxygen fills my lungs as if I’m just being born into this world. Into a world that feels fresh and new ... *and clean.*

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By the time the sun rises, the trailer is nothing but a pile of ash. I walk through the rubble, finding the skull. I bat it around with my toe before picking up my foot and smashing it under the heel of my boot.

“I’ve got to go out of town for a few days. You’ll watch Charlotte for me, yeah?” Petey asks, sitting on his bike with a lit cigarette dangling between his lips.

I shield my eyes from the desert sun, meeting his gaze. “Club business?”

He holds his hand out to me, so I go to him and stand by his side. He grabs my butt and pulls me close. “Family business, club business. It’s all the same.”

I drop my head. “Yeah sure, I’ll watch her.”

After everything I’ve shared with him, he still doesn’t trust me. Giving the pile of rubble one last look, I climb on behind him.

He pulls my hands in his, holding them tight. “We have a lead on the man whose been trying to get to Charlotte. That’s why the NorCal chapter was here. They’re holding someone that might have some answers for me.

They've invited me up there to see if I can persuade him to give me a name. He's afraid. I need to make him more afraid."

"Do you want me to go with you? I can be real persuasive too, you know."

He chuckles, releasing my hands. I wrap them in his t-shirt. "I know you can, baby, but I need you here to look over our daughter. That's the most important job of all."

This is the first time he's referred to her as our daughter.

"Okay," I say, hugging him tight as we pull away ... leaving my filth behind.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

## KATIE

**A**fter we send most of the club's men off, my sister and I take Charlotte back to the cabin to pack a few things. We're going to stay at the warehouse while the guys are away. It's the smart thing to do. It's safer this way.

Charlotte kicks her shoes off on the porch before running inside. "Can we bring our fishing poles?" she asks, running to her room. "Then we can fish off the dock there."

"Sure, baby," I holler down the hall. "I'll pack a few things, and then I'll come help you."

"Okay, Mommy."

I toss a few things in my bag, slinging it over my shoulder as Charlotte lets out a blood-curdling scream from the living room. I pull my knife out of my boot and rush out to find her standing in the middle of the room, pulling at her hair.

My sister is trying to console her.

"What happened?"

She shrugs, taking Charlotte's little face in her hands. "What is it, baby?"

Charlotte points to the floor by the door. My eyes follow her finger. *Oh shit!*

I run, grabbing her shoes and picking them up off the floor. Then, I grab Charlotte's hand and drag her outside and down to the end of the dock. I hand her one of her shoes and then toss the other one into the lake.

She abruptly stops screaming, sucking in a few calming breaths.

My sister runs up behind us. "What in the hell are you doing? You threw her shoe in the lake."

"We can buy more." I point to the shoe in Charlotte's hand.

She wipes her nose, staring at me like I'm crazy, but then she gives me a lopsided grin and throws it in.

And then she wraps herself around my legs.

My sister and I stare at each other. "The bottoms of her shoes are dirty," I explain.

"Okay, sure. Why don't we go grab the rest of your things, and then we'll hit the shoe store? I've been dying for a new pair of boots." She winks at me, not fully understanding the situation but playing along.

Later that afternoon, all three of us have new boots. Charlotte leaves hers outside by the front door of the warehouse.

"I'm going to go find Billie Rose," she says, giving me a big hug. "Thank you for the new boots, Mommy!" she yells as she runs down the hall.

"I noticed that she always leaves her shoes outside the door, but I thought she was just being polite. There's much more to it, isn't there?" Jesse asks.

I throw myself on the couch, still tired from getting no sleep last night. "Yeah." I glance down the hall to make sure Charlotte isn't near. "She

walked through her mom's blood, and now she won't walk in the house with them on."

Jesse plops down beside me. "Well, shit."

I lie back, resting my head in her lap. Her fingers run through my hair, and my eyes fall closed. "I understand how she feels," I admit.

"It's hard to erase some things from your mind, isn't it?"

Nodding, I swallow down the lump forming in my throat.

"Is that what Petey's helping you with?" she asks quietly.

"Yeah." I think about all that he's done to help me from scrubbing my skin off. "Wait." I sit up abruptly. "I have an idea!"

After explaining what I have in mind, she heads down to her art studio while I go to find Charlotte. She's sitting beside Billie Rose as she reads out loud. I stare at them for a few minutes before making myself known.

"Mommy!" she yells.

I'm not sure why I keep letting her call me that, but each time she does it makes her happy. I don't want to take that away from her. But I'm not "mommy" material. I mean, just look at the mess I was in last night. I don't carry the good parent genes.

"I'm making a big surprise for your dad, and I was wondering if you guys want to come help me," I tell them.

My niece closes the book. "Sure. Let me run the kids down to Willow."

"Oh, and change into some shoes that you don't mind getting paint on."

Billie Rose laughs. "This sounds like a messy surprise."

"It is. Meet me down at Petey's dock?"

"Sure thing."

Charlotte is jumping up and down so much I think she might rip my arm from the socket. "What are we making Daddy?" she asks.

“Well, I was thinking the dock looks kind of boring. I thought we could make it pretty for him.”

While Jesse sets up outside, we gather all of Charlotte’s little shoes from the front porch.

She giggles uncontrollably when I pick her up, setting her into a tray of purple paint. I make sure the bottoms of her new boots are covered, and then I do my own in some blue paint.

“Okay, let’s go,” I tell her, stepping out onto the dock to show her.

Her squeal of delight when she sees my boot print makes my broken heart heal a little more. Jesse smiles at me. Billie Rose joins us, and soon we are all laughing and painting the dock with every color of the rainbow. It takes me back to being a kid. Good, silly fun.

When we’re finished, we stand back and admire our work.

“Do you think Daddy will like it?” Charlotte asks, holding her hands to her little cheeks.

“I’m sure he will, baby.”

We leave all her shoes in the grass to dry, taking our boots up to the warehouse with us so she has something to wear to school tomorrow.

I give her a bath in the same big garden tub that Jesse bathed me in my first night here. After she gets out, I walk over to rinse it as she puts her jammies on. The tub has a ring of purple around it from the paint she got all over herself. Fighting back tears, I smile. Replacing yet another bad memory with a good one.

“What’s Aunt Jesse making for supper?” she asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

“I don’t know, baby. Let’s go find out.”

All the club women are joining us for dinner, and my sister doesn’t

disappoint. She even breaks out the good wine.

“God, I get so sick of steak and burgers,” Billie Rose jokes. “It’s nice to have the men away, so we can get some refined cuisine.”

Grandma Maggie cackles, tapping on the bottom of her glass to get the last drop.

“Where’s Kelsie?” I ask Lily.

Lily leans back in her chair. “She’s out with her friends. Enjoy your kids now, because once they get in high school, you’ll never see them.”

As the evening winds down, Grandma Maggie offers to take the girls upstairs. “You young’uns enjoy your evening.”

Charlotte gives me a hug.

“I’ll be up in a little bit, okay?” I tell her.

She nods, anxious to go with Grandma. When Maggie takes her hand, she notices Charlotte isn’t wearing her dragonfly necklace. It originally belonged to her daughter. It’s been passed between the women of the club, each needing its magic at different times in their lives.

“Where’s your necklace, sweetie?”

“I gave it to Kelsie.” She pulls on the old woman’s hand, excited to go back inside.

“That’s nice, sweetheart,” Grandma says, looking at Lily.

“Charlotte thinks Kelsie’s been a little down, so she wanted to cheer her up,” I explain.

Lily stands and gives Charlotte a big hug, worry lines pulling at her forehead. “Thank you for being such a good friend to Kelsie.” She turns to the rest of us. “I think I’m going to head home.” She pauses beside me. “Hey, since Jackson is out of town, do you think you could help me at Junkyard Creations tomorrow?”



“Sure. I’ll head over after I drop Charlotte off at school.”

She nods, following behind Grandma and the kids as they head inside.

When the kids are out of earshot, my sister narrows her gaze on me. “So, how did it feel burning that shithole to the ground?”

I laugh, tossing her flame lighter back to her. She catches it with one hand. “Pretty fucking good.”

“I’m happy you and Petey seem to be getting along so well,” Willow chimes in. “I think everyone in the club about fell over when you got on the back of his bike last night.” She giggles, the wine going to her head.

“Yeah, well, no one was more surprised than me.” I drop my head back, looking up at the night sky. “He dug up my abuser’s dead body.”

“Oh my god,” Billie Rose says, but then admits that Jackson did the same thing for her.

“Baby,” Jesse instantly groans, hearing her daughter’s confession.

“Mom, I needed to see that Draven was really gone.” She looks at me. “Did it help to see him?”

I shrug. “It was just a skull with a bullet hole in it. I guess it was nice envisioning Dirk placing his gun in that fucker’s mouth. I hope he pissed himself.”

“Well, I didn’t need to see what Jackson did to Bradley. Honestly, I still feel a little guilty that he’s dead because of me,” Willow admits.

I point my finger at her. “He’s dead because he deserved it. If the law can’t keep them from re-offending, the Grim Reaper sure as fuck can.”

I’m tired. I’ve had enough rehashing past corpses for the night. It’s making me feel a little stabby. “I think I’m going to head to bed. A night filled with arson can sure wear a girl out.”

My sister laughs. “It’s quite the opposite for me.”

“Yeah, yeah, you fucking pyro. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

# Chapter Thirty-Three

## KATIE

I'm anxious for Petey to get home. I hope he found out who's been trying to get to Charlotte. Better yet, I hope he found him and is bringing him back, so I can join in on the fun of making him pay for killing Petey's wife.

My heart stops. *Petey's wife.*

I'm just his fake wife. She had been a real one.

"Hey, can you run over to JD's and drop his keys off to him? I asked Kelsie if she would do it yesterday, but they're still sitting here," Lily asks, pointing at the keys on the back counter.

"Sure. I'm going to head out anyway. I need to pick up our things from the warehouse and move them back to the cabin. Petey just sent me a text saying they should be back in an hour or so."

She tosses the keys to me. "Did they find what they were looking for?"

I flick open the little knife on JD's key chain, running it over my thumb mindlessly. "No. He said we'd talk when he got home. They just stopped for gas. He wanted to get back on the road."

"Hey, I'm sure they figured something out or they wouldn't be coming

back this soon.”

Shoving JD’s keys in my pocket, I start to back away. “I’m sure you’re right. I’m going to go. I want to get this done before it’s time to get Charlotte from school.”

“It will all work out!” she hollers as I step outside.

Jesse’s rod is parked across the street at her tattoo shop. I glance at my phone, checking the time. Shit, I wish I had time to go ask her if she had any more information from Dirk, but I need to get going. I want to get things cleaned up at the cabin so when Petey gets home we can enjoy the evening together.

Maybe Charlotte and I can pick up some steaks on the way home, and I’ll make him a nice meal. I’m running through a list of things I need to get done when I arrive at the junkyard. JD and Kelsie wave to me as I pull in.

I leave my helmet on, shutting off the engine. “Hey guys, what’s up?” Then it hits me that Kelsie isn’t in school. “Why aren’t you in class?”

“Oh my god, there was an assembly today. I hate them. It was for all grades too, so even the little kids were going. Way too people-y for me. I cut out of there early,” she explains, leaning against her car.

“I don’t remember Charlotte talking about an assembly. What was it about?”

Kelsie rolls her eyes. “It wasn’t even on the schedule. It’s just some boring senator ... wait, no, congressman, giving a speech or something. I don’t remember, but I wasn’t in the mood to suffer through it. I feel bad Charlotte had to go.”

My heart beats loudly in my ears as she continues to speak. Maybe I’m just being paranoid.

“I was just getting ready to go back to town,” she says as I start my bike.

Her brows furrow when I turn my bike around. “What’s wrong?” she yells.

I don’t have time to explain. I gun it out of there. Petey said the guy who’s after Charlotte might be a politician.

It only takes a few minutes, and I’m back in town. When I pull up in front of the school, I spot a dozen or so black SUVs parked on the north side. Men in suits and dark sunglasses are standing around the entrance on that side.

I hop off and run to the front doors, swinging them open. A security officer yells at me as I pass the main office. “Ma’am, ma’am, you need to check in.”

Ignoring him, I pick up speed, hurrying down the hall to the gym.

“Jesus, it’s one of the Skulls,” I hear him mutter as he follows behind me. His tone changes. “Hey, lady. You can’t be in here without checking in.”

I turn and flip him off with both hands before pushing the gym door open with my ass. As soon as I’m inside, I lose the security asshole in the crowd. That’s when I spot Charlotte and a few other kids being led out a side door.

Shoving my way through, I follow behind them. I catch up just as they get to the parking lot where the SUVs are parked.

“Charlotte!” I yell, catching her attention.

She pulls her hand out of her teacher’s fingers and runs to me. “Mommy,” she squeals, happy I’m here.

The teacher walks back to me. “We were just getting ready to check out Congressman Duffy’s limousine. Would you like to join us?” she asks. She’s just as surprised as Charlotte by my presence.

“No. Sorry, we need to get going. Her dad called and asked me to pick her up. We, uh ... we had a family emergency,” I whisper, covering Charlotte’s ears. I don’t want to scare her.

A man in a suit walks up behind the teacher, flanked by two burly men. My eyes remain firmly on him. I wait for some sort of reaction from

Charlotte, but there is none. She lets go of my leg to give the man a little wave.

“Is there a problem?” he asks Charlotte’s teacher.

“No, oh heavens no,” she says, patting her hair. “This is my student’s mother. She’s just here to pick up her child.”

He waves her away with the flick of a finger, and she excuses herself to tend to her other students. He looks at his watch before tipping his aviators down his nose and meeting my eye. “A little early to be picking up your kid, isn’t it, *Mommy?*”

My gaze narrows at his question.

“My family has an emer-emergency,” Charlotte stutters, looking proud of herself for saying the word correctly.

Mental note – this kid has supersonic hearing.

“Is that so?” he asks her.

Again, she doesn’t seem alarmed by the man. Christ, I overreacted. Thank god I didn’t tell anyone my crazy thoughts.

She nods.

“I’m sorry to hear you have an emergency. I’d be happy to allow my men to escort you to wherever you’re going.”

That’s when my eyes slide to the man standing to his right.

I shove Charlotte behind me, backing up a step. “No, thank you. It’s nothing really. To be perfectly honest, I lied.” I focus on the congressman, trying to keep my voice steady. “My husband’s coming home early from a trip, and I wanted us to be home when he got there.”

Reaching behind me, I grab Charlotte by the arm and pull her around me, picking her up and settling her on my hip. “Well, it was nice meeting you, sir.” I dip my head, turning away from him.

His voice trails behind me as he talks to the two goons I saw at the hotel in Reno. “Follow her.”

I slip back into the gym, pushing through the crowd. When I get to the other side of the school, I run with Charlotte in my arms. “Get your helmet on, baby,” I say, shoving my own on my head.

Kicking my leg over my bike, I grab her and set her in front of me so we are chest to chest.

“What are we doing, Mommy?” she asks, confused to be riding in such an unusual way, but I can’t risk her falling off. I need to get out of here and quick.

“Mommy’s going to go really fast today. Okay, sweetheart?”

She nods as I tug on the strap of her helmet.

“Hold on tight.”

Charlotte doesn’t question me. I feel bad because I know I’m scaring her. Her tiny body begins to tremble as she hugs me around the waist as tight as she can. I tear off out of the parking lot, noticing a black SUV in my mirror. Fuck!

I need a fucking gun, but if I go back to the warehouse, I know I’ll lead these fuckers right to Billie Rose and her kids. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I get farther ahead as I take a few alleys, slowing them down. Elijah has a gun in his office, I’m sure of it.

If I go through the woods behind the shop, I might be able to buy us a few minutes to locate it. “It’s going to get a bit bumpy,” I warn Charlotte right before jumping the curb. The SUV slows. They’ll follow, but they’re going to have to do it on foot.

As soon as I get to the building, I jump off, pulling Charlotte with me. “Listen to me, baby,” I say, setting her on the ground so I can pick the lock.

“Mommy’s going to find you a good hiding place, and you’re going to be a big girl and call Daddy and tell him where we’re at. Okay?”

She nods, her dark eyes wide and filled with fear. I think she understands what is happening.

“Are you hiding with me, Mommy?” she asks as I pull her through the door, locking it behind us.

I run to Elijah’s truck, hitting the button to open the pit under it. “No, baby. Mommy’s going to keep the bad guys busy, but don’t you worry because tonight you and I are going to bake those cookies we haven’t had a chance to make yet, okay?”

She nods, sliding under the truck then climbing down the stairs into the pit with me. I pull my phone out. “It’s this button, baby. If he doesn’t answer, you keep calling until he does.”

“This isn’t Daddy’s name,” she tells me as she looks down at the phone in her hands. “It says a-as-ass-hole,” she struggles with her pronunciation of my name for Petey in my contacts.

“Yes, baby, your dad *is* an asshole sometimes.” I laugh, kissing her on the forehead. “Press it now. Mommy’s going to close you in, but you’ll be safe here. The phone will give you some light, okay?”

She hugs me before curling up into a little ball in the corner, putting the phone to her ear.

I don’t wait to see if Petey answers. He’s on his bike; he might not answer on the first ring. After hitting the button to close the door on the pit, I rush into the office, finding a locked drawer on the desk. Quickly, I pick it. Bingo.

I grab the pistol and bullets, crouching by the door to load it. The door Charlotte and I came in flies open. My eyes fall closed, and I take two deep breaths before turning to peek around the corner. The two men are searching



the building with their weapons drawn. One is looking inside Elijah's truck, the other coming dangerously close to the office. When the man by the truck looks under it, I release a kill shot. It echoes through the building; I see him fall right before his buddy tackles me to the ground.

*It was either they find her or me.*

Fuck, it just had to be the smaller one I hit, didn't it? My head hits the ground hard, making me see stars. I shake it, struggling to get my bearings as the man takes my wrist and handcuffs it to the leg of the desk. I pound at him with my other hand, but this dude is fucking solid.

"You fucking bitch! Where is she?" He spits in my face.

"Kill me now, fuck face. 'Cause I ain't telling you shit." I laugh loudly, wondering if I can get my leg up high enough to get my knife out of my boot.

His phone rings, and he fishes it out of his pocket with one hand, his other holding my wrist over my chest.

"No, boss. Johnny's dead. I have the woman, but I haven't found the girl."

He listens, his eyes dropping to mine. A slow smile spreads across his face. "Yeah boss, I'd be happy to take one for the team. No problem at all." He hits a button on his cell, setting it on the floor by my head.

"Mommy, Mommy, Mommy," the congressman's voice filters through the speaker as the man above me pulls a knife from his belt. He leans back and begins to cut my jeans mid-thigh all the way up to my crotch. I begin to struggle.

"Where is my daughter?" the man on the phone asks, making me go still.

He laughs as the man here with me continues to destroy my pants. "If you don't tell me where she is, he's going to rape you."

My gaze snaps to the man above me. He stares at me as he slowly begins to unfasten his belt.

“Fuck you!” I scream, bucking wildly beneath him.

“Tell me, and he’ll stop. You have my word, Mommy,” he snarls the last word.

“So help me god, dude, if this fucker sticks his fucking little prick inside of me, I’ll find you and set yours on fire. I’ll make you watch the fucking thing shrivel up like a burnt fucking hot dog.”

He laughs but stops abruptly. “Where is she?” he barks through the speaker.

The man above me pulls his dick out, so I focus on the ceiling tile. *Anything to protect what’s mine. Anything to protect what’s mine.* I repeat the words, preparing myself for what’s about to happen.

“She’s not your daughter, you psycho.”

“She is mine.”

“But you killed her mom.” I try to roll the big fuck off me, but he presses his knee against my thigh.

Fuck that hurts.

“My wife couldn’t conceive, and I needed an heir. I killed that woman because she hid my child from me. She was only a vessel, not a mother.”

Swallowing back bile, I realize I’m about to be raped because I will never help this man find Charlotte. She is *my* daughter. I’ll never let this piece of shit near her.

The man strokes his cock.

*“You got this, honey. Just keep reeling. That’s it. You got yourself a big one here.”* My dad says, laughing. *“You’re going to need to dig deep. Give it everything you got.”*

I go limp, letting my free hand fall to my hip. The man cocks an eyebrow. “I think she’s giving up, boss.”

“Do you want that man’s dick in you? Do you want him to fuck you in the ass?” he asks.

“I’m looking forward to it,” I say, wrapping my hand around JD’s keys, slowly pulling them from my pocket. “Because then I get to set yours on fire, remember?”

“Go ahead and fuck her, then. We’ll see what you have to say when his big dick is ten inches up your ass.”

This makes me laugh. “That’s a good guess, congressman. Have you been playing doctor with your bodyguard?”

The man above me hits me across the face. The inside of my cheek cuts into my teeth. I smile slowly as I turn back to face him. His fingers dig around my panties, pulling them to the side.

One. Deep breath. I’ve got this. Two.

When his cock bumps against me, I open my eyes, narrowing in on the beating pulse of his neck. My hand flies up, sticking JD’s little knife right into the man’s jugular. I revel in the way his dick instantly goes limp against my leg, his eyes widening. His hands fly to his neck as he desperately tries to stop his life blood from pouring out.

I start to laugh until he falls on top of me, knocking the air out of my lungs.

“Tom. Tom, what is happening?” the man on the phone asks.

“He’s ... he’s ...” I struggle to breathe. “He’s having a hard time getting it up,” I chuckle, winded. “Seems all the blood has left his dick,” I joke.

“You’re a dead woman.”

“Whatever, dude. Hey, how do you like your marshmallows? I’ll make you one while I’m toasting your nuts.”

He hangs up.

I try to roll this heavy fucker off me, but it’s no use. Staring at the ceiling, I

try my best to ignore the man's cold hard dick against my thigh.

Goddammit, where are they?

Maybe Charlotte didn't reach him.

What was the battery life on my phone?

Does she have enough air down there?

Fuck.

How long will it take them to find us if she didn't reach him?

I try to push against the desk to lift it, so I can slide my handcuffed hand out. Goddammit! I grunt, shoving with all my might, but it's no use. Swallowing down my panic, I focus on breathing. They'll be here soon. I have faith in my daughter ... and her dad.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

## PETEY

When I park at the warehouse, I see I have nine missed calls from Kat. My heart picks up. Something's wrong.

Lily pulls into the parking lot with Kelsie and JD, and I see Kelsie speaking animatedly to Dan. My phone buzzes. It's Kat again.

When I answer the face call, I see my daughter. The light from the phone illuminates her tear-streaked cheeks.

"Daddy," she cries as I whistle for the guys, pointing at my phone. Jackson runs up, looking down at it with me.

"Where are you at, baby?"

"Th-the bike shop."

Jackson steps away, yelling at everyone. "Black Rose Custom Bikes now. Roll in locked and loaded." He jumps on his bike, firing it up.

"I'm on the way, baby. Stay on the phone with me," I tell her, starting up my own bike.

I watch her scared little face as I haul ass to the shop. She stares back at me. When I get there, I tell her I'm going to hang up now. She doesn't need

to witness what's about to go down.

“Stay where you're at, baby. I'm here. I'll see you in a minute.”

“The bad men are here,” she tells me, but then she hangs up.

When we enter the building, we find one man with a bullet hole to the head in the middle of the shop. I pass by him, heading toward the office. The minute I step inside, rage fills my entire body. I'm too late; she's dead.

“Jesus, are you just going to stand there or are you going to get this fucker off me?” Kat grumbles, her gaze locking on mine.

Relief floods my system. I drop to my knees, shoving the dead man off her. She's covered in blood. “Are you hurt?” I ask, my fingers frantically running over her body. That's when I notice her pants are cut. My eyes go to the dead man, his dick is hanging out of his slacks.

“No,” I whisper.

The slap that Kat strikes across my face echoes through the entire office. Jackson rushes in.

“Fuck. Shit. I've got some sweats on my bike,” he says, rushing past Dirk.

Katie grabs my cheeks, squeezing them in one hand since her other hand is handcuffed to the desk. “He didn't do anything. Now, listen to me.” She squeezes harder. “Charlotte is in the pit. Get her out of here. Don't let her see a fucking thing. Tuck her face under your beard. Get her home, and you fucking tell her that her mother will be home shortly.”

“I can't leave you,” I whisper, choking back a sob.

“I'm fine. You take care of our fucking daughter, goddammit. I'm fine.”

Dirk puts a hand on my shoulder. “Go get your kid, man. We'll get her home to you.”

I give him a nod before leaning down and pressing a soft kiss to her lips, whispering “thank you” over them.

Elijah and Brody run in as Dirk pushes me out the door.

She saved my baby again. How am I going to repay her?

There's only one thing she wants right now, and I'm going to give it to her.

Revenge.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

KATIE

“Get me out of here.” I begin to panic as soon as Petey leaves.  
“We got you, little momma,” Brody says, brushing my blood-stained hair away from my face.

He lifts the edge of the desk up, freeing my arm. I sit up, wrapping my arms around myself.

Dirk crouches in front of me, resting his hands on my knees. “Are you sure this fuck didn’t get a poke at you?” he asks in the crude way only he can get away with.

“I’m sure, asshole.”

He laughs, running his hand over my hair, pulling me in and kissing my forehead. “You did good, kid.”

Jackson tosses him a pair of grey sweats as the club’s clean-up crew comes in. Jackson barks an order for everyone to get out while I dress.

They instantly raise their hands, backing out. Everyone except Dirk and Jackson, of course. Dirk shuts the door behind them, then helps me kick out



of my torn jeans as Jackson pulls his shirt off. I slip the bloody one off me and let him drop his over my head.

Dirk tugs the sweats up my legs, locking eyes with me. “What happened?”  
“Congressman Duffy.”

He exchanges a look with Jackson. They don’t look surprised. Their trip must have been successful.

“He just happened to be passing through and was so kind as to speak at Parkview School last minute. Crazy, isn’t it?”

“How did you know?” Dirk asks, patting the dead man down, looking for the key to the handcuffs.

Jackson steadies me by my elbow when I sway on my feet, bumping into him. “I don’t know. Lucky guess. When I got there, I recognized these two. They were the guys who took the man I beat up from the hospital. I ... I just knew I had to get her away from him. We left the school, and they followed.”

The room starts to spin.

“Is Charlotte okay? Can you find out if she’s okay? Do you think she had enough air in the pit?” I begin to rapid-fire questions at them.

“She’s fine. Petey’s on the way back to the warehouse with her,” Jackson, says, cupping my cheek. “You did the right thing,” he assures me.

They usher me out of the garage. “Oh, shoot. I left my phone in there.” I nod back to the office. I need that douche bags fucking phone because I’m not done speaking with the congressman.

“I’ll get it for you,” Ash offers. “I’ll bring it to the warehouse.”

Dan pulls me in for a big hug when I walk past him. “I love you, little lady,” he whispers in my ear. “Bill would be proud.”

Happiness and sadness swell inside me when he mentions my dad. To avoid tears, I look past him and see my bike is waiting outside.

“Didn’t figure you’d ride with any of us,” Jackson jokes, tossing my helmet to me.

I run my hand over Charlotte’s little helmet, now back in its place.

“You feel good enough to ride?”

I nod.

We roll out of the shop’s lot. The rest of the club will stay behind to clean up the mess I made. Not the way I like to leave things, but I need to get back to Charlotte. I know she’ll be worried about me.

When we get to the warehouse, Jesse is waiting for us. Her and Dirk each put an arm around me and guide me upstairs.

“Petey took Charlotte back to the cabin,” she tells me. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

“I’m good,” I tell them both when we get upstairs. Jesse nods, tears filling her eyes. “Stop, big sis. I’m fine.”

As soon as I get in the bathroom, I turn the water on as hot as it will go and step under the stream. The door opens, and I peek around the curtain to find Brody and Ash each facing away from me.

“What the fuck? Get out!” I yell at them.

“Sorry, Katie. Petey’s orders,” Brody says, refusing to look at me.

“Fuck Petey’s orders,” I growl.

“Turn the water temp down, sweetheart. Or I have permission to do it for you.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Sorry, but no.”

“Fine.” I reach down and turn the knob. “Now goodbye.”

“No can do.”

“Why the fuck not?”

Ash finally decides to join the conversation. “Orders.”

“I’ll show you orders.” I shove the curtain closed and wash myself hurriedly yet thoroughly, because I’m going to go home and give my husband a piece of my mind. “Do you at least have my fucking phone?”

“Um ...” Ash stutters. “Well, I got to thinking about it and remembered that Charlotte had your phone.”

I take a deep breath. “I have two.”

Brody starts to laugh. “Nice try, Katie.”

“That’s really why you fuckers are here?” I lean down and shut the water off. Grabbing a towel, I step out. The assholes are still facing the wall. “This is fucking ridiculous.”

I toss some clean clothes on, then stomp out of the room, grabbing my brush out of the bag I brought last night. Angrily, I run it through my hair. “That phone belongs to me. I killed the owner, so possession is mine.”

“Why do you need it?” Ash asks, sticking his hands in his pockets.

“It’s none of your business.”

Brody grabs my arm, spinning me to face him. “Katie, you need to tone it down. I think you’re still running on adrenaline. Take a deep breath.”

“Where is the phone?”

“Where do you think?”

I glare at Ash. “Of course all you fucking men stick together.” Storming past them, I grab Charlotte and I’s overnight bags and jog down the stairs with Brody and Ash on my heels.

Brody stops me when we get to the bottom. “Katie, wait.” He pulls me into his chest, whispering in my ear, “Petey is worried about you. He loves you. We all love you. This isn’t about the men sticking together. This is about this family sticking together.”

I rest my head against his chest and look at Ash. “I just want to get him before he gets too far away. I have a plan.”

“Petey was right.” Brody laughs. “He said if we didn’t get on you fast, you’d be long gone.”

“I should have skipped the shower,” I chuckle sadly.

Brody wraps his arm around me, guiding me outside. “There’s time to work on this plan of yours, but your man needs to see you’re in one piece first.”

My sister and Dirk greet us on the patio. Suddenly, everything comes rushing back, and I remember how I heard my dad. It was as if he was there with me. I pull away from Brody and fall onto my sister’s lap. She wraps her arms around me, shushing me. I don’t cry, though; I just stare at the lake, numb.

After a few minutes, she gently pushes me off her lap. “Let’s get you home, okay?”

Everyone walks me down to the cabin. There are Skull men littering the yard. The guy Petey beat up last night is rocking on the porch, a lit cigarette hanging out of his mouth. He gives me a nod as I leave everyone outside, closing the door behind me.

I lean against the wall, suddenly nervous. The house is quiet; a soft light pours from Petey’s bedroom. I notice Charlotte’s boots sitting inside the door. *She wore her shoes inside.*

Peeking around the corner, I find Charlotte sleeping in the middle of the bed. Petey is beside her with one arm under her head, the other protectively over her body. Slowly, I crawl up to join them. When I lie back, Petey lays the back of his hand over my pillow, letting me rest my cheek in his big palm. His other hand reaches across her, to rest on my hip.

We stare at each other.

Charlotte wiggles. “Mommy?”

“I’m here, baby. I’m here.”

She smiles sleepily, her eyes falling closed again while hot tears run quietly out the corners of mine. Petey pulls his hand out from under my head and gently runs his fingers over my scalp, calming me.

“We’re going to get him, Kat,” he says quietly.

I nod my head, swiping my eyes.

For the first time in my life, I don’t want to run. I want to stay right here. Forever.

They’re my family.

Somehow, I’m going to have to find the courage to tell Petey that Charlotte might not be his.

My father was honest with me about who my real father was. I need to be honest with Petey, and that kills me.

# Chapter Thirty-Six

## PETEY

All three of us fell asleep. I'm not sure how, but we must have needed it. My girls are still sleeping. I slide out of bed carefully, headed to make some coffee. I look back at them before I close the door, rubbing my hand over my bare chest.

Out the window, I see a few club members milling about the yard. I open the door, inviting them in.

Jesse arrives first. "I wasn't sure if you were sending Charlotte to school today."

I sit down, putting my head in my hands. "I don't know what to do."

"We can post some guys around the school, if you don't want to change her routine. You don't want to scare her any more than she was yesterday," Jackson says, leaning his head on Willow's shoulder.

"Maybe we could call the school and see if Grandma Maggie could be a special visitor today. I know my school used to let you do things like that," Willow suggests.

"That's a great idea, baby," Jackson praises, kissing her on the forehead.

“I’ll give Grandma a call.”

“It is a good idea. I’ll go wake Charlotte up,” I agree.

Jesse is already digging in the fridge looking for something to make everyone for breakfast.

“I’ve got some bacon in the freezer out back,” I tell her, leaving the room.

When I get back to the bedroom, I gently shake Charlotte’s little shoulders. “Hey, sweetie. It’s time to get up for school.”

She rubs her eyes. I tap a finger over my mouth, letting her know to be quiet so we don’t wake Kat.

Charlotte pushes herself to a sitting position and looks over Kat. She points to the nasty bruise on her face, looking back at me with a frown. I pick her up and carry her out of the room. She waves to everyone as I sit on the couch, setting her on my lap.

“Mommy has a few bruises from fighting the bad guys, but she’s okay. She’s as tough as they come, yeah? So, no need for that frown.” I chuck her under the chin.

“Did she chase them away?” she asks, rubbing her hand under her nose.

“She sure did. They won’t be coming back, so no worries today.”

Jackson gives me a thumbs up, still on the phone with his grandmother.

“Hey, Grandma Maggie was wondering if she could go to school with you today. I’ll call the school and get it all set up. Does that sound fun?”

Her dark eyes light up. “Yay!” She jumps off my lap, running down the hall. “I’m going to get my Dragonfly Farms t-shirt. It will make Grandma happy.”

After a few minutes, she’s dressed and scarfing down her breakfast. Everyone is quietly eating when the bedroom door bangs open, and Katie flies out of it. She slows her steps when she sees all of us. Her manic gaze

lands on Charlotte. She rushes over, picking her up and cradling her against her chest.

“Mommy, guess what? Grandma Maggie is going to school with me today!”

Katie starts backing up, her head shaking back and forth. She bumps into the wall, tightening her grip. “No,” she whispers.

I try to pull Charlotte from her arms. Jesse comes to my side to help.

“No,” she says again but louder.

Charlotte tucks her head into Kat’s neck.

I grab Katie’s face, staring her dead in the eye. “Give Charlotte to Jesse. I need your help with something in the workshop.”

She looks down at Charlotte, then back at me. Her big brown doe eyes plead with me to not make her put our daughter down.

It kills me, but I need to address this before it gets any worse. “Now, Kat,” I say in as firm but gentle tone as I can.

She doesn’t take her eyes off me. “I just wanted a hug,” she says, realizing she’s scaring Charlotte. “Hey, baby, why don’t you finish your breakfast while I help Daddy out in the shop?”

Charlotte pulls back, and before Kat hands her off to Jesse, she leans in and presses her little lips to the bruised side of Kat’s face. “Thank you for keeping me safe.”

Katie blinks rapidly, carefully placing Charlotte in Jesse’s arms, and then she runs out the front door.

“I’ll get her and Mags to the school,” Jesse says, backing away.

I nod, and then follow Kat outside, expecting her to be waiting for me in the shop. But no, she’s standing in the middle of the yard. The men on guard are all staring at her nervously.



“She’s not going to school today,” she says, glaring at me.

I point to the shed.

Laughing hysterically, she begins to pace the yard. Goddamn this woman is sexy as fuck-all when she’s angry. She’s barefoot and still in her clothes from last night.

“Kat, I’m not fucking around here. Get your ass to the shop.”

She stops abruptly. “Have you lost your fucking mind, sending her to school? She isn’t safe there. No. She’s staying home today.”

“Kat.” It’s her last warning.

She stops in front of Cass, his face still swollen from the beat down I gave him over the weekend. “You agree with me, don’t you?”

He starts to sputter, but I don’t even give him a chance to come up with a response. I move in quickly, tossing Katie over my shoulder.

She claws at my back. “You fucking asshole!”

“Keep those little claws in, kitten,” I growl, swatting her a good one on the ass.

I kick the door closed behind us, dumping her on the cushion on the floor. She jumps to her feet, her eyes wild and narrowed in my direction.

“I hate it when you do this.”

“It’s for your own good.”

She crosses her arms across her chest.

“Take your clothes off,” I say calmly.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

I turn around, locking the door. “Grandma Maggie is going to school with Charlotte today. Brody, Jackson, and a few others will be watching the school all day, as well as accompanying your sister on the drive over there. You have nothing to be worried about when it comes to Charlotte.”

“Grandma Maggie is going to be there all day?” she asks, blinking back tears when I turn around.

Nodding, I take a step toward her. “I need to see that you’re okay,” I tell her, running my hands down her arms before grabbing her t-shirt and pulling it over her head.

She stands numbly, letting me undress her. I lean in and pepper kisses over the bruise on her face. My hands are everywhere. I touch every inch of her body, making sure she knows I’m the last man who has had his hands on her.

“How am I ever going to repay you?” I tip her face after spending a good ten minutes inspecting every inch of her for injuries.

“Give me the phone.”

I guide her over to the cushion, pushing her to her knees.

She sighs but gives in. “Petey, I need that phone.”

“Why?” I crouch in front of her.

“Because I’m going to arrange a private meeting between him and me.”

“And you think he’ll agree?” I ask, curious as to why she thinks he will meet with her.

She drops her face. “I’m going to tell him I want you all to myself, and I’ll help him.”

My brow rises. “Do you really think he’ll believe that after you killed two of his men to keep Charlotte away from him?”

She nods, keeping her gaze trained on her knees. There’s something else going on here.

“Please trust me,” she whispers.

I stand up, glancing at my watch. “Would you like to say goodbye to Charlotte before she goes to school?”

She doesn’t move. “Yes, please.”

“You may get dressed.”

Slowly, she rises from the floor. “I’m not saying I need to do this alone. I’ll need the club. Just let me be the lure, okay?”

“So, if he bites, do I get to be the one who reels him in?”

She chuckles lightly. “You do you, big boy. I’ll get him out in the open, and you can bring him in, but ...” She holds up a finger. “When it’s time to eliminate him, I’ve already promised him something special.”

“Sounds interesting.” I hold the door open for her.

“Oh, it will be.”

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

## PETEY

Jesse pulls Charlotte away from Kat after they say goodbye. My heart can feel the pain on Kat's face. I wrap my arms around her waist, whispering, "She'll be okay."

She nods, wiping tears from her face.

"We need to get up to the warehouse. Jackson called a meeting. He wants to hear this plan of yours."

When the club hears her out, no one has a problem with it. The only question everyone has is why he would agree to meet her. That's my question as well.

"Like I said, I'm going to tell them I want Petey to myself, and I'll help him get Charlotte."

Dirk temples his hands in front of his face as we exchange a look. There's something she isn't telling us.

I slide the phone to her. "Here you go. Make the call. Did you get the address down on the café?"

We agreed she would ask the congressman to meet her at the café Cass

owns in the mountains. It's off the beaten path and mostly patronized by other club members.

She picks up the phone, standing.

I snap, pointing to her chair. "Call him here. We'll be quiet."

Her gaze roams over the men in the room and she swallows nervously, but when her eyes land on mine, her brow raises. "Fuck no. I'll start laughing and ruin the whole thing."

Dirk and I exchange another look after she hurries out.

"Are you ready for this Ash?" Jackson asks.

Ash stands and salutes him. "Yes, sir." He sits back down.

Big Dan runs his eyes over him. "You clean?"

"Yes, sir," Ash answers, his cheeks heating. "I know I've been fucking up a lot recently, but I'm cleaning myself up. I am. Willow helped me get into a therapist. It's helping ... to talk about it, you know?"

A few of the guys in the room nod. We've got quite a few veterans in our group. Ash couldn't hold better company when it comes to some of these men. That's why he's still here. We know he's been through some shit. We want to see him succeed.

Jackson leans back in his chair. "Good. I'm guessing he'll have at least three men with him."

"You fuckers are gonna owe me some windows and bleach," Cass grumbles, but I see the shadow lurking in his gaze. He's nervous about all of this. "Do you think your old lady knows what she's getting herself into? She isn't going to faint at the sight of a dead body, is she?"

Everyone from our club roars with laughter. His brows pull together in confusion.

Jackson explains, "She's usually the one delivering the dead bodies. I think

she'll be fine."

Cass raises an eyebrow in my direction.

"Don't even think about it. She's mine." I point to his face, reminding him what will happen if he touches her again.

He chuckles, shaking his head. "Fuck. You can't blame me. That woman is crazy hot."

Kat walks back in, striding over to her chair. "It's on. Tomorrow morning at ten. Can you fuckers be ready by then?" She looks at Cass.

Cass stands up. "Yeah, yeah. I better split so I can get everything set up." The men of his club rise with him. He pauses behind Kat, pointedly looking at me.

He leans down to whisper in her ear but finds a knife at his pulse before he's able to speak. His eyes widen, sliding my way. I tried to warn him. He's lucky she doesn't know what I do.

"Touch me again, and you'll find yourself missing your favorite body part."

He holds his hands up. "Duly noted."

"Good." She pulls the knife away, shoving his head away from her. "I'll see you tomorrow."

*That's my girl.*

We spend the rest of the day going over the plans. She watches the clock nervously as it gets closer to three. She's anxious to get Charlotte.

"Ready to head to the school?" I lean over to ask her.

She jumps from her chair. "Yes."

I chuckle lightly.

"What? I promised her we would make cookies, and it hasn't happened for three days. I need to follow through."

Waving to the guys, I lead her out of the room. “I’m sure she knows you’ve been busy.”

“Still.” She bites her nails as we walk back to the cabin to get the truck.

“Well, I’m looking forward to a quiet night with my girls.” I palm her ass, giving her a boost up into the truck.

“Do you really trust Cass?” she asks on the way to the school.

“At one time I would have trusted him with my life. I don’t know anymore. I haven’t been around him much lately, but he sure has developed a piss way of dealing with women.”

She snorts. “So, I’m assuming he knew your wife?” she asks, looking away from me.

“Yeah, why do you ask?”

She shrugs. “I’m just wondering why he’s here. Were they friends?”

“Yeah, I guess. The club’s been looking for this asshole for a long time. He killed one of our own. Cass wants to put it to bed.”

“You never talk about her.”

“What do you want to know?”

She bites her nails. “I don’t know. What was she like?”

“Quiet.” I pull up outside of the school, shutting the engine off. “What’s this about? If you’re jealous, she’s gone, so there’s no reason for it.”

Kat glares at me, opening her door. “If you think I’m jealous, you’re crazier than I thought.”

“Then why the questions?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I want to know what turned you into such an asshole.” She slams the door behind her after she hops out.

I watch her ass jiggle as she jogs across the street. Charlotte runs out of the building to meet her. She scoops my daughter up into her arms, kissing her

cheek as she does.

Grandma Maggie follows slowly behind my daughter, watching the two of them embrace. She nods her head at me. She's pleased.

I wave to Jackson as he pulls up beside me.

"Thank you for going with Charlotte today," I yell out my window. Grandma waves to me as Jackson helps her into his truck.

"Daddy, Mommy and I are making cookies today," Charlotte tells me as my angry wife buckles her in.

Jesus. Sometimes I don't know how to handle Kat.

"That's good because I've had a hankering for them."

"Who said we're sharing with you?" Kat asks, snarling her lip my way.

Charlotte giggles.

I laugh, too. "Oh, come on. What do I have to do to get a little sugar?"

Kat rolls her eyes.

"Mommy, we never got to show Daddy our surprise."

"A surprise?" I turn to look at her. She nods her head, a huge smile on her face.

Kat seems to relax. "We'll show him when we get home, baby."

Charlotte claps.

I reach over and wrap my hand around Kat's, giving it a squeeze. She makes a little humph sound but doesn't pull away from me.



# Chapter Thirty-Eight

## KATIE

Charlotte is leading Petey by the hand, carefully stepping on her footprints on the dock.

“The blue ones are Mommy’s, and the red ones are Aunt Jesse’s.” She points to the patterns our boots left behind.

She lifts her foot to show him the purple that is still on the bottom of her boot. He grabs her by the ankle and tips her upside down, hanging her off the dock.

“Daddy!” she squeals.

He laughs and sets her upright. “You did all of this while I was gone?”

She nods, already running to the house. “Let’s go make cookies!”

When she dashes right over the threshold leaving her shoes on, he stops dead in his tracks. “I thought last night was a fluke because she was so shaken up over those guys following you.”

“Well, we had an incident while you were away. Jesse brought her shoes inside, and Charlotte had a meltdown. So, we threw them in the lake. The ones on her feet are new.”

He looks back at the dock, realizing I gave his daughter a new memory and it has taken precedence over the bad one.

When his gaze meets mine, I take a step back. There are tears in his eyes.

“I’ve ... I’ve tried everything to get her over that. She even went to therapy.” He pauses, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“It was nothing.” I hurry into the house to find Charlotte climbing the cabinets. “Baby, wait for me.”

Petey follows us in after composing himself. He puts on some bluesy southern rock before starting supper and working alongside us.

It’s nice.

Peaceful.

When it’s just the three of us like this, it reminds me of the time I spent with my dad. Of home.

Petey leans around me, sticking his finger in the raw cookie dough. Charlotte is sitting on the counter, licking it from the spoon. “You two are going to get sick,” I scold gently.

“Oh, come on, you party pooper,” he says, wrapping his arm around me while scooping more of the dough onto his finger. “Open up.” He shoves his finger against my lips, trying to push it inside my mouth.

Charlotte holds her stomach, laughing at the way he smears it on my face.

“That’s a good way to lose a finger,” I tell him, turning to wipe my mouth on his shirt.

After supper, the three of us sit side by side on the dock and fish. When the sun begins to set, we head inside, and he gets Charlotte ready for bed while I clean up the kitchen.

I brace my hands on the counter, glancing around the cabin. Petey and Charlotte’s faint voices trail down the hall as he tucks her into bed. I’m not

sure if I've ever felt more fulfilled. Taking care of them makes me happy.

Petey pops his head around the corner. "Do you want to come tell Charlotte goodnight? We have to get on the road early tomorrow."

"Yeah, yeah sure." My heart drops as I think about leaving her, but there's no other way. We need to eliminate the man whose been looking for her. *The man who might be her father.*

I follow him into her room, noticing their differences now. They both have dark hair and dark eyes, but now that I'm paying attention, that is where their similarities end.

"Baby girl, Daddy and Mommy are going to leave early in the morning for a date up in the mountains. Jesse and Lily are going to watch over you while we're gone, okay?"

She nods sleepily. "Can I share our cookies with them?"

"Of course," I say, dropping to the mattress in front of Petey. He wraps his arm around me.

"When will you guys be home?" she asks, rolling to her side and hugging her teddy bear.

"In a day or two," Petey answers.

"We'll bring you back a surprise," I tell her.

She smiles, closing her eyes as I trail the tip of my finger over her forehead and down her nose, tickling her face lightly.

It doesn't take long, and she is snoring lightly. "I don't know how I'm going to leave her," I whisper, not taking my eyes from the beautiful child sleeping so peacefully.

Petey takes my hand and pulls me from the bed, leading us into our own room for the night. We pack our things quietly, and then he goes and starts the shower.

“I’m sorry I haven’t told you as much as you want to know,” he says as we step in together. “It’s just ... God, I can’t stop seeing that asshole lying on top of you. I thought you were ...”

“I’m right here,” I assure him, running my hands over his chest.

“Are you sure he didn’t ...” His gaze bounces over my face.

“He didn’t,” I say, nervously running my hand over my leg where the man’s cock had pressed against my thigh.

“The guys said you were pretty mad that I had them follow you into the bathroom.” He fills his hands with soap and starts washing me in the spot I just touched.

*He’s too perceptive ...*

“Well, I don’t know many women who want their husband’s best friends standing in the bathroom with them while they shower.” I try to push his hands away because I can wash myself, dammit. He bats mine aside.

“Let me clean you, baby.”

My first thought is that he’s not going to do it well enough, but he’s desperate to do it for me. He needs this more than I need to go through my routine.

He smiles at me before turning me around to wash my hair.

“Are you worried about tomorrow?” he asks.

“Nope. You?”

“No.”

“Good.”

# Chapter Thirty-Nine

## KATIE

I pull up in front of the café high in the mountains. There are a few cars scattered in the parking lot, but it's the shiny black one that stands out.

As I pull my helmet off, I notice the driver is still in the car. Another man leans against the building by the front door, and I can guarantee there's one more inside. My gaze roams over the windows, catching on the congressman himself.

He's scanning the area too, making sure I'm alone.

Once inside, I make my way over to his booth. He stands, holding his hand out for me to take a seat. When he sits back down, our eyes meet. He pulls a few papers from the inside pocket of his jacket.

"Here it is in black and white." He points to the paragraph that says Charlotte is ninety-nine percent his.

"You said her mother was a surrogate? How does Petey not know Charlotte isn't his?" I ask, folding the paper in fourths and shoving it in my back pocket.

He shrugs. "I'm assuming because she never told him, leading him to

believe the child was his. That little girl is mine, and I want to raise her as such. Like I said, my wife cannot conceive.”

I cut him off. “But what about what’s best for her? Petey’s the only father she’s ever known.”

“Do you think living in a motorcycle club is what’s best for her?”

“Uh, duh.” I point to myself. “I was raised in the same fucking club.”

“And you turned out to be a murderer.” His eyes darken because he thinks he’s winning. He thinks he’s surprised me, and I do act surprised for a moment.

“Says the man who murdered his daughter’s mother.”

“Maybe if you had been raised by your real father, your life would have been better ... easier,” he continues, unfazed by my statement. He’s not even going to deny that he did it.

“My real father was evil.” I narrow my eyes in his direction.

“Are you going to help me get Charlotte back or not?” He’s growing impatient.

“Why not go to court like a normal person? You’ve got proof, and I’m sure you’ve got a few judges in your pocket. Why go about it this way?”

“Because I don’t want to draw attention to the fact my daughter has been living in a biker club. I also don’t want anyone to know who her mother was. You do know your husband’s first wife was a hooker, don’t you?”

I’m done. I’ve heard enough. Slowly, I pull my sunglasses off my head. The first shots aren’t even heard inside the café. It’s not until the third one, when the window shatters, that people start ducking for cover. His hired man falls to the side in the booth behind us.

But that’s where our plan ends.

Congressman Duffy points a gun to my head, pulling me in front of him as

he rushes us through the set of double doors to the kitchen.

*Are you fucking kidding me?*

Thankfully, Cass is waiting by the back door, but when a smile pulls at the corner of his mouth, I realize he's not one of the good guys. Duffy pushes me in front of him, and Cass pulls a roll of duct tape from behind his back.

I start to tell him to fuck off right before he shoves a bandana in my mouth and tapes over it. The gun is removed from my back only after Cass tapes my hands together. He hauls me over his shoulder, dumping me in the back of a van.

“Your guy better be waiting because these fuckers are going to be on you like stink on shit,” he says as he tapes my ankles together.

And then the world goes black as the van door shuts.

I slow my breathing. Calm. I need to stay calm.

The road is rough as he drives us away from the café, but we don't travel far.

Congressman Duffy opens the door, pulling me out by my feet. My head smacks against the hard ground. I scream behind my gag, blinking back stars. Oh, this dude is seriously fucking testing me.

He drags me across the rough terrain to a black limousine. Rocks slice into my back as my shirt rides up, but there isn't a fucking thing I can do about it.

The congressman doesn't seem to notice.

When we get to the car, he opens the back door and shoves me inside, crawling in behind me. He taps on the window and the driver takes off, leaving a cloud of dust behind us.

My heart starts beating faster.

The congressman tosses his gun beside him on the seat. “Thought you had a pretty good plan, huh?”

I narrow my eyes at him.

“Cass has been working with me for years. He’s the one who told me Charlotte was mine.”

Wait ... what? I thought he said Charlotte’s mom was a surrogate.

He runs his hand through his hair, laying his head back on the seat. “I’m going to run for president someday. I can’t believe you thought that I wanted to raise her.”

My gaze widens. *He wants to kill her.*

“That little shit is smart and ran out of the house when my men killed her mother. They looked for her for hours. Seems she’s good at playing hide and seek.”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket as my mind scrambles for a way to kill him. Congressman Duffy smiles at me as he dials a number before clicking speaker phone.

Jesse picks up. “Hello?”

“How much do you love your sister?” he asks.

“Katie?”

He reaches over, yanking the duct tape off my mouth. When he pulls the bandana out, I gag.

“Katie?” my sister asks again, her voice rising.

“The one and only,” the congressman singsongs. He grabs my hair, shaking my head. “Say hello to your sister, Katie.”

“Whatever this dude wants, tell him to fuck right off.”

He slaps me across the face.

“Don’t you fucking dare hit her again,” my sister growls through the phone.

“You’re not the one in control now, are you?”



“What the fuck do you want?”

“Charlotte,” he answers simply.

“You can fuck right off,” Jesse says.

I laugh. “Right on, sister. I’m going to have a lot of fun roasting this guy’s nuts,” I tell her.

“I’ll get the skewers ready,” she jokes back.

His face starts to turn purple. “If you don’t bring Charlotte to me, I’m going to put a bullet right between your sister’s eyes.”

“And you’ll spend the rest of your days looking over your shoulder,” she warns.

He picks up the phone, shutting the speaker off. “Listen, bitch. If you don’t bring Charlotte –”

I take the opportunity to kick my feet up on the seat, knocking his gun to the ground. He reaches for it, losing hold of his phone in the process. I drop my arms around his neck and pull back with all of my weight, bracing my feet against the inside of the car.

My sister is screaming obscenities over the phone, but I don’t have time for that right now.

When the congressman kindly passes out, I shove him to the side and yell at Jesse, “He’s out!”

“Jesus Christ,” I hear her say.

I’m biting the tape off my wrists when the car begins to slow down. “Call the guys and tell them I’m okay. I just need to blow the driver’s fucking head off, then I’ll try to figure out where I’m at.” I glance out the tinted windows; we’re pulling into a wooded area.

“Don’t get yourself killed,” she yells and then she’s quiet, so I assume she hung up.

The driver parks and walks back to the door. Shit, no time to get the tape off. I reach to the floor, grab the congressman's gun, and the minute the door opens, I fire.

"Fuck!" A man screams ...

My man ... my man screams ... and then the world goes dark.

# Chapter Forty

## PETEY

**G**od-fucking-dammit that hurt. I glance down at my arm. My t-shirt is ripped and bloody, but thank god the bullet just grazed me.

“It’s me, Kat. Drop the fucking gun,” I tell her, crouched against the car, waiting for her to come barreling out.

When she doesn’t answer, I cautiously move forward. “Kat, it’s me. Don’t shoot again.”

I peek around the door to find her slumped against the seat, unconscious.

Quickly, I pull the congressman out onto the ground, then I slide in beside her. “Kat. Kat, baby. Wake up. Please wake up.”

My heart is beating out of my chest as I run my hands down her body, looking for any sign of injury. It’s when I sit her up, pulling her onto my lap, that I notice her back is bleeding. The roar of bikes must call to her subconscious mind because she starts to stir, blinking her eyes slowly.

Jackson runs up to the car. “Fuck! Is she okay? Jesse fucking called Dirk freaking out. She said Duffy called her.”

Kat moans, bringing her hand up to the back of her head. “It’s about time

you fuckers showed,” she groans.

I drop my head against the seat in relief. “I think she’s okay.”

“Someone get this fucker loaded before Dirk gets here and kills him for upsetting his old lady,” Jackson orders.

Kat tries to sit up, but I stop her. “Shhh, baby, just relax. Did you hit your head when he pulled you out of the van?” I ask, gently running my fingers over the knot forming under her hair.

She blinks at me confused. “I ... oh my god, did I shoot you?”

“You did, but you missed,” I joke, carefully peeling tape from her wrists, then her ankles.

“I never miss.”

“Okay, well lucky for me then. You just grazed me. It’s just a scratch.”

“Brody’s got the truck. Get Katie back to the warehouse. I’ll have doc meet you guys there,” Jackson orders, placing a hand on my shoulder.

As soon as we carefully load Kat into the truck, Brody places his hand behind the seat, cupping the back of her head gently as he looks over his shoulder to back out.

“Cass is a fucking traitor,” she spits out before closing her eyes.

I shake her leg gently. “Don’t go to sleep, baby. I think you have a concussion.”

“What are you going to do about Cass?” she asks.

Brody and I exchange nervous glances. She’s going to be pissed. “We knew he was a traitor. He’ll be dealt with.”

Slowly, she straightens. “What do you mean you knew?” Her eyes narrow as she looks over her shoulder at me. “Oh, you motherfuckers. You let that bastard kidnap me.”

“We had to have proof. He’s the president of the NorCal Chapter, Kat.”

“I know who the fuck he is, but you could’ve let me in on it.”

I drop my head in my hands. “I wasn’t sure ...”

“About me or him?” she asks.

“About him.”

When she sees how much it’s hurting me that Cass was involved, her face softens. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“Not as sorry as he’s going to be.”

Her eyes flutter closed again, her head dropping to Brody’s shoulder.

“Jesus, I’m so stupid. I shouldn’t have let it go that far,” I tell him, shaking her awake again.

“Okay, okay. Fuck,” she groans, pushing my hand away.

“I’m sorry he hurt you. This is all my fault.”

“Shut up. You know I’d die for Charlotte. If Cass put her at risk, then I understand why you all did what you did, but why? Why would he betray you like that?”

I shrug. “He wanted me to be his VP. When all that shit went down with Charlotte’s mom, I had to get out of there. He’s wanted me back.”

“So, he put your daughter at risk of being murdered?”

“Cass and I have been friends since we were teenagers. We patched in together. But fuck ...” I slam my hand against the dashboard. Brody leans over and rubs the area I just punched.

“I’m sorry, Hazel,” he apologizes to his ride. “Don’t punch my truck, asshole.”

Kat chuckles. “Finally. You’re seeing it, too.”

Brody winks at me. He’s trying to lighten the mood.

“I’m sorry, dude,” I tell him.

“No worries, brother.”

“Your shirt is going to stick to your back. Can I help you take it off?” I ask Kat.

She gives Brody a look before glancing at me over her shoulder. “Depends. Are you going to punch him in the face for seeing me without it?”

“He can close his eyes.”

She laughs. “He’s driving.”

“Fine.” I glare at my brother. “Just keep your eyes above her neck.”

Brody salutes him, staring straight ahead at the road.

When she raises her arms, I tug it off gently. “We need to get this cleaned up. You’ve got a lot of gravel in these.” I run my finger down her back. When I get to her waistband, I notice a piece of paper sticking out of her back pocket. “What’s this?” I ask, pulling it out.

She turns, snatching it out of my hand. “It’s fucking mine, that’s what it is,” she snips.

“Let me see it.” I reach around and grab the corner of the paper, not letting go.

Her eyes narrow. “I will, but not right now.”

“Why not?” I give it a good yank, taking it from her.

She climbs right up on my lap.

“Goddammit,” Brody sighs under his breath. “How did I get stuck with you two?”

“Shut up,” she tells him, not taking her eyes from me. “This ... this is going to hurt. I’ll tell you, but I don’t know if now is the right time.” She tips her head toward Brody, widening her eyes.

“I don’t have anything to hide from the club.”

Slowly, I unfold it. It’s a paternity test.

*She knows.*

Her gaze bounces over my face.

“I know she’s not mine,” I tell her, taking her cheeks in my hands, pressing my lips to hers.

Her brows furrow. “Y-you know?”

“Yes. It’s a long story.”

She climbs off my lap. “Well, we have about thirty minutes before we get home. Spill it.” She leans forward, resting her chin on her hands.

“I knew she wasn’t mine because I never slept with her mother, Kat.”

“You were married,” she sighs, and I can tell she’s growing weary.

“You know how the club’s been working with Lily for years helping women who’ve been trafficked? Well, Charlotte’s mom was one of those women. She told us she and her baby would be in danger if the father found out she was pregnant. So, I married her, and when Charlotte was born, she listed me on the birth certificate as the father.” I shrug. I don’t know what else to say.

“So ... so, you married her to keep her and the baby safe. You didn’t have any feelings for her?”

“I mean, I guess I liked her as a friend, but no, I didn’t have feelings for her. With that said, I do love Charlotte. She is my daughter. This piece of paper means nothing.” I fold the paternity papers into a small square and light the corner of it, placing it in the ashtray.

She watches the flames.

“When Cass became president of the club, he asked me to be his VP. I declined. I wanted to be a full-time father. I mean, I loved the club, but Charlotte became my world. Other chapters aren’t like yours. What you all have here - it’s unique. You put family first.”

Kat remains quiet as tears fill her eyes.

“Shortly after I gave him my answer, Charlotte’s mom was killed. I had a suspicion it was Charlotte’s father, but I never knew who he was. Charlotte’s mom was very frightened of him.”

“I see,” Kat says, rubbing her temples. She turns away from me and curls into Brody’s side. “I’m so tired,” she whispers.

His gaze meets mine.

“It’s okay, baby. We’re almost home.”



# Chapter Forty-One

## KATIE

**M**y first thoughts were of Charlotte. We are the same. Maybe that explains our connection. We both have dads who aren't really our fathers. It made me fall in love with Petey a little more, but that's when my thoughts shifted from her to myself ...

He snaps his fingers in front of my face. "We're here, baby."

I glance out the windshield. My sister is running toward us.

"She's fine," Petey says, carefully lifting me out of the truck and carrying me into the warehouse.

When we get inside, she points upstairs. "Doc is up waiting for us in her old room."

"Where's Charlotte?" I ask, not wanting her to see me like this.

"She's over with Billie Rose. I thought since the threat was secure, she'd be okay there while we get you sorted out."

I close my eyes as Petey sets me on the bed, my heart breaking when he lets go because I know that will be the last time I'm in his arms.

The doc shines a fucking light in my eyes. "She has a concussion. She's

going to need rest. No phone, TV, music ... just keep things quiet for a few days.”

He gives Jesse the low-down on how to care for me, but I quit listening. I don't care. I don't care about anything right now.

“Roll over, sweetheart,” Doc tells me, helping me to my side.

Thank god. I'd rather stare at the mural on the wall than any of them. But that doesn't happen because Petey crawls right up on the bed beside me as Doc begins to clean my wounds.

I let my eyes fall closed. I can't bear to look at him.

His thumb brushes over my cheek, and I hate it. I want to yell at him to stop. To just stop this whole fucking charade. He doesn't love me. He loves the idea of saving people. He married Charlotte's mom because he felt he had to save her. He did the same with me.

He hated me before I saved Charlotte.

I'm so stupid. How did I let all this happen? I thought he was an asshole. I didn't know he wasn't. That he was the kind of man who would sacrifice finding his soulmate to help someone.

Well, I'm not doing this.

Charlotte's safe. My charges were dropped. There's no need for it.

“You should go and get Charlotte. She has school tomorrow,” I tell him, keeping my eyes closed.

“She's fine, baby,” he says quietly, brushing hair away from my face.

“Go,” I say more forcefully, suddenly hating his pet names for me.

“I've got her, Petey. She'll feel better knowing Charlotte is at home,” Jesse tells him.

He doesn't say anything for a long time, but eventually he presses his lips to my forehead and climbs off the bed.

“I want her moved to the cabin as soon as Doc’s finished with her,” he orders before stepping out of the room.

Brody pops his head in the door a few minutes later. “Just come get me when he’s done, and I’ll carry her down to the truck and run her home.”

“I’m staying here.”

He sighs loudly. “I’m not delivering that message. So, like I said, I’ll be downstairs when you’re ready to go.”

“Well, I hope you brought your pillow and blankie because that isn’t going to happen anytime soon.”

“I’ll talk to her,” my sister says, shooing him from the room.

The doc finishes up. “Change the dressing daily. I’m going to give her a shot of antibiotics before I leave as a precaution.” He jabs said injection in my ass as he goes through a list of things to watch for. “Call me if you have any questions.”

When he leaves, I pray Jesse does, too.

No such luck.

“What’s with the attitude?”

“I’m tired, Jesse. I have a knot on my head the size of a softball. Get off my dick and let me sleep. Petey will get the fuck over it. I don’t feel like moving.”

A blanket drops over me. “I love you, little sister,” she whispers, pressing her lips to my temple.

“I love you, too,” I murmur sleepily.

As soon as she steps out, I open my eyes, staring at the sunset on the wall. “Where should I go next?” I whisper. But I don’t have the energy to even think about it. I just need to find enough oomph to get on my bike and pull out of this county, hopefully the state.

Every time I wake, I turn over, grab the bottle of pain pills the doc left, swallow them down, and stare at the sunset until my eyes fall closed.

My sister comes in a few times, trying to get me to eat, to shower, to get out of bed. Petey also comes, but I ignore him, too.

I don't know how long this goes on, but eventually I run out of pills.

"Hey," I say when Jesse comes in with a breakfast tray. "I'm out of pain meds. Can you have Doc call some in?" I ask her.

She avoids my gaze. "How about you try to eat something, and I'll go grab you a couple of Tylenol?"

"I'm not hungry." I roll over. "Just tell Doc to come see me, will you?"

"Okay," she says sadly. The bed dips when she sits beside me. "What happened? Did the congressman hurt you?"

"Other than what you can see, no. I'm fine, Jess. Just tired."

"Why don't you want to see Petey?"

"I never said that."

"Well, when he comes in, you pretend to be asleep."

"Maybe I've really been asleep. How would you know?"

"Katie, let me in. I'll help you," she pleads.

I sit up in bed. "If you really want to help, help me get out of here," I say, grabbing her hands.

"What? No, Katie. You're married. You have a family. You have Charlotte." She backs off the bed. "Why would you want to go?"

The door opens, and Petey walks in. Fuck.

Jesse looks at him and then me. "I'll leave you two to talk."

She rushes out of the room.

Great.

Petey sits down on the bed, and I roll over. "I'm sorry, Petey, but I'm

tired.”

“Too tired to come out and see the congressman?”

My heart picks up a beat. *Oh, how I’d love to roast his nuts like I promised.* But that doesn’t even matter anymore. I’m trying to remain numb to my feelings. “That’s okay. I’ll sit this one out. You know how to handle it.”

He leans across me, his fist pushing into the mattress by my stomach as he does. His other hand rests on my forehead. “Are you really feeling that unwell?”

“I’m tired.”

My sister knocks on the door. “I called Doc, and he wants us to bring you in to the emergency room to get a scan of your head.”

“Um, no thanks.”

Petey sits up. “Why? Is he concerned?”

“Well, Katie wanted some more pain killers, so I called ...”

I stop her. “It’s fine.” I toss the covers back and head down the stairs, both of them following me closely.

“I can help you shower before we go to the hospital,” Petey offers.

“Oh, I don’t need to shower. I’m not going.”

“But Doc said –” Jesse starts.

“I don’t need the pills. I’m not going. My head is fine.” And it is ... it’s my heart that’s not working properly.

When I walk behind the bar, my sister groans out loud. Petey takes a seat at the bar as she comes around to try and stop me. “Katie, don’t be ridiculous. What are you doing?”

I pour two fingers of whiskey into a glass. “Breakfast of champions.” I toast the air before slamming it down.

Dirk walks by as I'm pouring another one. He pauses, taking the three of us in. "What's going on here?" he asks.

"Katie here is trying to numb her pain," Petey says dryly.

I toast that downing my second glass.

"And no one's going to stop her?"

"How do you propose we do that?" Jesse asks.

I laugh. "Oh my god. You guys are priceless. I'm going back to bed." I step away from the bar but go back for the bottle. "I'll see you assholes when this one runs out." The brown liquid sloshes as I shake it.

No one follows me upstairs. Perfect. I stumble to the windows facing the parking lot. Maybe by the grace of God my bike will be down there. Didn't think so. Ash steps out of his room as I'm heading back to mine.

His brows furrow when he sees the bottle in my hand. "Care to join me?" I ask, waving him to my room.

"I-I can't. Hey." He grabs my arm. "I have to go, but listen to me. This is not the answer." He taps the bottle in my hand.

I laugh. "Good thing I'm not looking for answers." I yank my arm away from him and step into my room, kicking the door closed behind me. After taking another long swig, I cap the bottle. Then, I fall back onto the bed, closing my eyes.

Someone giggling wakes me up.

"Mommy," Charlotte says the minute I open my eyes. "Thank you so much for the surprise you brought back from your trip." She shoves a German Shepard puppy in my face. "Daddy says he's going to a dog school to learn how to protect us."

The dog licks my nose, and for a second everything is right with the world. But then I remember ... none of this is real. Petey was forced to marry me.

I'm a charity case.

"I bet he'll be a good guard dog for you," I tell her, doing my best to ignore her father's looming presence.

"But I have to go to school today, so he's going to stay here with you. He'll need to go potty; he likes to go out back in the trees, and his food dish is in the kitchen."

Then just as fast as she came in, she jumps off my bed and leaves. "Bye, Mommy."

Petey walks over, grabbing my cheeks and squeezing them. He stares at me, his gaze bouncing over my face. "You stink. Get in the shower or I'll help you in when I get back."

I laugh. "Oh, so now you want me to shower alone?"

"At this point I just want you to shower."

When he leaves, I shower, only because I don't want him dragging me in there. I'm not spending that much time with him. There's no way I'm risking it. But on a good note, I don't scrub my skin off. I have no energy for that.

The stupid dog follows my every step. "I suppose your little ass needs to take a shit. Fine, come on. I need some more liquor anyway."

I pass Dirk and Dan on my way outside, dog leash in one hand, bottle in the other. "Either of you fucks want to take care of this puppy for me?"

"Not a chance in hell," my brother-in-law says.

Dan just stares at me.

"Lame."

I stumble out the door. Dog and I walk down by the lake. I wonder what Charlotte named him. The puppy sniffs around, drawing us farther into the trees. I hear the groans before I see him. Quickly, I rush toward the shed to

find Petey sitting on a downed tree branch with Congressman Duffy and Cass a few feet in front of him staked to the ground.

Jackson appears behind me. “We saved a present for you, Katie.” He pulls the leash and bottle from my hands, pushing me forward.

My ears begin to ring as I stare at the two men. My fingers tingle, itching to get to the congressman.

“He’s been waiting a long time for this,” Elijah singsongs, doing a little spin before pausing in front of me. “What do you need?” he asks, holding out his hands.

I want to walk away, but that’s not who I am. “Fine. I need to make a fire.” He hurries to get supplies. “Oh, and grab some marshmallows.”

He turns around, laughing. “This is going to be fun.”

“You’re an asshole,” I tell Petey when I step beside him, looking down at the men strapped to the ground. Both are gagged.

“You haven’t seen the start of it, Kat.”

I glare at him.

“What’s your problem with me?” he asks.

“Other than you interrupting my recuperation by dragging me out here, I don’t have one.”

“Sure about that?”

“News flash, buddy. I’ve never really liked you.”

Cass chuckles behind his gag. “I don’t want that one.” I flick my finger at him.

I step over Congressman Duffy, staring down at him. “But this one.” I tap my finger on his forehead. “I made this one a promise. You do remember my promise, don’t you?”

His eyes widen, and he starts rolling his head back and forth over the



ground. Elijah tosses some wood at my feet.

“Here you go, Katie.”

Jackson shakes two bags of marshmallows, dropping them on the ground as well.

Duffy starts to scream when I place the first stick over his groin. “What kind of underwear you got on? I only ask because if you’ve got those fancy fire-retardant ones, they’ll keep the fire going good and long.”

He screams at me behind the gag.

Petey kneels beside me. “So, back to what’s crawled up your ass.”

“Nothing that I know of.”

“Then why won’t you come home?”

I shrug. “I’m not well yet.” I wave my hand over the man I’m about to kill. “Someone should go get Jess. She’ll love this.”

“So, you’re not mad at me?”

“For what?”

“For letting this asshole take you. It’s my fault he hurt you, and I’m sorry, Kat. I fucked up. I really fucked up.”

“It’s not that,” I mumble.

“Then what is it?”

“Nothing. Jesus, do you have a lighter?”

The man I’m building a fire on ramps up his bitching. God, I wish I could take the gag out and hear what he has to say. Petey tosses me his lighter. I step over the man on the ground, crouching so my crotch hovers over his face. I run my fingers through his hair.

“How does it feel being on the flip side? How many people have you hurt?” I stare into his eyes. “Did you draw it out?” I ask, running the wheel of the lighter over the side of his face. “Did you tell them how you were going

to hurt them? Make them hear what you were going to do to them before you actually did it?"

I drop to my knees, bringing my pussy closer to his face. "I'm going to fuck you. I'm going to fuck you so hard, it's going to knock you straight into hell," I say quietly, staring down at him.

My finger runs over the lighter, igniting it. I watch the flame reflect in his dark eyes. Eyes that look so much like Charlotte's.

I blow out the flame, standing slowly. "I've killed many men, but I've never been more satisfied than I am right now." Before I step away, I light the fire over his groin.

Hearing his muffled screams makes me happy. "Come and get 'em while the fire is hot," I tell the guys, tossing a bag of marshmallows at Brody.

He shoves one on a stick before pushing it into the fire. "Goddamn, Kat. I can't say I've ever seen anyone set a man's balls on fire before. Sucks for you, dude," he jokes, flipping the congressman off before he passes out.

Petey wraps his arms around me from behind as I watch the club men slap Duffy, keeping him awake as long as they can.

"Please come home."

"Maybe tomorrow." I pull away from him. "You should stay and take care of business. I've seen enough. Thank you for waiting for me. I enjoyed it."

He pulls me roughly against his chest. "Go to my shop and wait for me," he demands.

When he pushes me away from him, I stumble. Petey's done being nice.

I've got to get out of here. He's not playing anymore, and I'll admit it, I'm no match for him. I grab my bottle of alcohol, leaving the puppy behind.

Jackson gives me a sad look. "Please do what he asked."

Ignoring him, I walk away.

Petey hollers after me, “I mean it, Katie!”

“Fine,” I say, stomping away, making it look like I’m headed to the cabin. But I’m anything but fine. I can’t find myself alone with Petey.

Since almost everyone is down at the shed, maybe I can get out of here. I hurry back to the warehouse. I snag Jesse’s keys off the hook by the door and rush out to her rod, but when I swing the door open, I find Dirk sitting in the driver’s seat.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Choose.”

I blink at him, confused as to what he’s talking about. Jesse wraps her arms around me from behind, and before I know what’s happening, the bottle is slipped from my hand and I’m in a pair of handcuffs.

“Sorry, baby, but I can’t watch you self-destruct,” she murmurs quietly.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I groan. “You guys don’t understand.”

“Well, you’ve had plenty of time to explain it, but instead you’ve been blown out of your mind. I think it’s time to sober up,” Dirk tells me.

My eyes widen, and I step away from them. “No.” I start to spin in a circle, trying to think of a way out of this. They’re going to let him take me. “No. No. No,” I moan. This can’t be happening.

“The cabin’s nice this time of year.” Dirk smirks.

“I’m not kidding, guys. This isn’t fucking funny. I’ll sober up. Just take these off. I promise,” I beg them.

When I see Petey step out of the warehouse, I do the only thing I can think of to get out of this. “My real dad was Crow,” I tell my sister.

Her and Dirk exchange a look, and they both roll their eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I say honestly. “Just uncuff me, and I’ll get out of here. You’ll never have to look at me again,” I tell her, feeling somewhat bad for pulling this card.

Dirk's eyebrow raises slowly. "I told you she was desperate to escape. She's hit rock bottom."

Jesse stares at me while talking to him. "I know."

"So?" I hold my hands out so she can unlock the cuffs, looking over my shoulder to see Petey heading toward us.

My sister grabs my cheeks in her hand, turning my face toward her. "And just like you don't care who Charlotte's father is, I don't care who yours is."

"Wait, what?"

"I don't care," she repeats.

"My father raped you!" I exclaim.

"No, your father loved me. Bill is your father. I love you, and I'm not going to sit by and watch you turn into your mother."

*Ouch.*

*My mother was an addict. I'm not anything ...*

She turns and walks away.

"Dirk, please. I've never asked anything of you. Please," I beg, glancing over my shoulder one last time to see Jesse drop something in Petey's hand as she passes him. "I'll run. I swear I'll run first chance I get."

"Oh yeah? I was just up there last week. Looked like some bears have been scrounging around."

"I'd rather face a goddamn bear than Petey." I start dancing on my toes. "Please, Dirk."

The sound of a truck rolls up behind us. Jackson hops out. "Just couldn't listen, could you?"

He tosses Petey the keys as he walks up. "Put a full tank of gas in the old girl for you," he tells him, patting the hood.

I ignore them, rushing around Jesse's rod, but Dirk grabs me around the

waist. “So, the hard way, huh?”

“Did you expect her to pick the easy one?” Petey asks, walking over and plucking me out of Dirk’s arms.

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” I scream.

He ignores me, sitting me in the passenger seat of his truck. When he pulls the key to the handcuffs out of his pocket, I think maybe he’s come to his senses. He can’t kidnap me. I rub my wrist when he frees it.

“Thank you,” I say.

But then he shoves me to the middle of the seat, jerking me toward the steering wheel. He locks the open end of the cuff around it.

Oh my god, what an asshole. He closes my door and walks around the hood, keeping eye contact with me. He’s pissed.

When he climbs in, I slide as far away from him as my restraint will allow. I glance out the window, hoping to find someone who will stop him. His brothers all have their arms crossed over their chests in solidarity.

This cannot be happening.

“Care to tell me what the fuck is going on in that crazy head of yours? Because I’m not a mind reader.”

“Well, that’s obvious because you’d let me go if you could read my thoughts.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

We spend the rest of the trip in silence. The farther we drive into the mountains, the more nervous I get.

“Charlotte is safe. We don’t have to keep doing this,” I say as he parks in front of Dirk’s cabin.

He kills the ignition, and the sound of wind chimes instantly fills the cab.

“She finally decides to speak.” He stretches his arms over his head.

“You should be picking your daughter up from school right now,” I continue. Am I making things better? Probably not. But if I annoy him enough, he’s bound to let me go.

He lights up a cigarette. “She was thrilled when I told her you and I were going on a real honeymoon. Besides, she won’t give us much thought. She’ll be focused on her furry new friend.”

I snort. Yeah, I forgot about the puppy. “It’s not nice to use a child *and* a dog against me.”

“Desperate times,” he says, flicking his cigarette out the window. “What’s with all the wind chimes? That shit is going to drive me nuts.”

“Welcome to my world.”

When he waits for an explanation, I sigh loudly. “Billie Rose made a shit ton of them, hoping to hear Bill talk to her through the chimes. When they didn’t work, she sold them. Dirk bought them all and hung them up here.”

He takes another drag off his smoke before handing it to me. “That’s sweet but still annoying as fuck.”

I chuckle. At least the man is honest ...

When I turn to look around, I notice our bikes are strapped in the back. “You brought the bikes?”

“Yeah. You want to get away from all this Tinkerbell shit and put some asphalt under the tires?”

“You trust me to ride by myself?”

“Yeah, I think you’ve sobered up enough.”

I wince, hiding my face behind my hair.

He reaches over and places his hand over the back of my head gently. “You can be as unreasonable as you like, just remember I’m still taking

tally.”

Laughing sadly, I look at him. “Close your eyes,” I tell him.

He pulls the cigarette out of my hand, staring at me. He takes a puff and then hands it back. His head falls back against the seat, and his eyes fall closed.

“Picture yourself in the place that makes you the happiest.”

A smile pulls at the corner of his mouth.

“Is anyone with you?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Who’s there?”

His eyes open slowly. “Are you doubting us?”

“No,” I say quickly, tugging against the cuffs.

“Then tell me, Kat. Who’s with me?” He sits up straight, leaning toward me.

“Ch-charlotte,” I stammer as he calmly slides over and pulls me onto his lap, facing me away from him. I tug harder on the steering wheel.

“Who else?” he asks, reaching around my waist, unbuttoning my pants.

The words “no one” are on the tip of my tongue, but I know that will make it look like I’m doubting us. I *am* doubting us. But he can’t know that because then he’ll fuck me on the spot. I’ve dodged that bullet up until now.

His big hands grip my waist, digging into my flesh. My stomach flips, ignoring my demands to not let him affect any part of me. All I have to do is tell him I was there with him. But was I? Do I live in his head?

He pushes me forward, yanking my pants and underwear down to my knees. I fall back on his lap, thrown off by the sudden movement.

The sound of his zipper makes me answer. If he fucks me, I’m literally fucked. I’ll give in and accept his charity.

He pushes me forward, and his hand cracks over my ass.

“Ow.”

“Who else was with me, Kat?”

“Your wife,” I answer, scooting forward when he taps his cock against my tailbone.

“And her name is?” he presses.

He turns the rearview mirror, so we can see each other. I hold my breath as a tear runs down my cheek.

“Answer me,” he says, grabbing me around the throat and pulling me back against him. He growls in my ear, his erection pressing into the crack of my bare ass.

My eyes fall closed, and he squeezes my neck.

“You look me in the eye, and tell me what my wife’s name is.”

I open them as I begin to struggle for breath. Staring into the dark pits of his gaze, I take in the ferocity of them. He’s being real with me. Petey doesn’t know any other way. He’s a feral man. So, I decide to be real with him, too. He loosens his grip so I can answer him.

“I don’t want to be a charity case, Petey. Don’t let that be my love story or yours. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us.”

His hand falls from my throat, his fingers digging into my hips as he pushes me off him. My eyes fall closed ... *I knew it.*

Suddenly, he slams me down onto his cock. I cry out, my eyes flying open, my hand bracing against the dash.

His eyes lock on mine in the mirror as he holds me tight, his dick pulsing inside of me. “Try again,” he growls, baring his teeth.

A whimper escapes me. He lifts me, slamming me down again.

“Kat. Her name is Kat!” I scream, my tears coming fast and hot.



“If this is about Charlotte’s mom, you can fuck off,” he says, lifting me again. “I didn’t fuck her, did I? So why do you think you two are the same?”

When I don’t respond, he knows exactly where my thoughts have been. He reaches around and pinches both of my nipples. I fall back against his chest, my head resting on his shoulder. The movement pushes his cock deeper inside of me, making me cry out again.

“My dick doesn’t do charity work, Kat. It has a one-track mind. Do you know what that is?”

“No,” I groan as his hand roams down my body, cupping my pussy.

“It’s to get as deep as possible into my wife,” he whispers in my ear.

My pussy responds by clenching down on him. He chuckles.

When I try to lift myself off him, he spreads his legs wide so my toes can’t touch the floor. It drives him even deeper.

*Oh my god that feels amazing.*

“Your cunt feels so fucking good, baby. I’ve missed you.” He holds us still as his finger rubs light circles over my clit.

His dick grows inside me when I moan his name. “Petey,” I beg.

“Not good enough.” He smacks his hand over my pussy, making me jerk.

Oh god, I’m so close.

“I want to hear you beg to come on my cock.”

I groan out loud. “Please.”

His finger rubs a few more circles before sliding down to where we are joined. Slowly, he slips it inside me.

“Oh, oh my god.” I breathe through my nose at the stretch, gripping the steering wheel as tight as I can.

“Feel good?” he asks, the rumble of his voice vibrating through my entire body.

“Yeah,” I whisper, afraid to move.

Slowly, he works it in and out, his thumb pressing over my clit. My body begins to tremble as I try to hold off my orgasm.

“If you come without begging, I’m going to punish you.” His index finger joins the middle one. Slowly, he pushes them both in right alongside his cock.

“Please can I ...” I pause to whimper as he begins to work them in and out of me. I speak slowly. “Please can I come on your cock?” I ask with clenched teeth.

He buries his fingers deep, curling them. I can feel his heartbeat in the pulse of his dick. And then his thumb makes a few light passes over my clit, and I explode, bucking against him as he holds me tight. He buries his face into my neck on a groan, coming right behind me.

He grinds his hips against me, pulling his fingers out of my cunt before shoving them in my mouth. “I fucking love you, Kat.” He picks up his pace, chasing his pleasure for a second time. His cock plunges into me as I gag on his fingers.

My eyes roll back in my head as Petey uses me thoroughly. His cock and fingers take their pleasure anywhere on my body they want.

“Fuck!” he yells when he comes again. The sound of his pleasure sends me into another round of cluster orgasms.

The sun dips behind the trees, and the forest begins to darken around us as we struggle to catch our breath.

He bucks his hips to get my attention. “Do you have any doubt left? Or do I need to fuck more of it out of you?”

I listen to the wind chimes, staring out at the dark trees blowing against the moonlight. “I’m good,” I tell him quietly.

His arms tighten around me. "I love you, Kat. I love you. I love you."

My whole life I've felt like a charity case ... a dirty little charity case.

I realize how resentful I've been of everyone in my life. It's been wrong of me to assume the people around me didn't really love me. I thought they were acting because they felt sorry for me. Why have I let myself think badly of them ... of me?

Petey reaches around me and unlocks the cuff around my wrist. He rubs it before bringing it to his lips and placing a gentle kiss over the mark they left behind. "I'm sorry I kidnapped you."

"You are not."

He chuckles, making us bounce. "Okay, but you have to admit, it's been fun so far."

I roll my eyes even though he can't see me. "You're definitely not boring."

He laughs harder. "You're just lucky I figured out you were doubting my love here and not back at the warehouse."

"You wouldn't have."

"I sure would've." He turns my face to the side so we can see each other. "I wouldn't test me, Kat."

I stare at him. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

"Don't worry. I'll never let you do it for long."

I've never had anyone help protect me from my own thoughts. It feels nice ... safe.

# Chapter Forty-Two

## KATIE

Petey smiles at me as we make the final corner headed back home. We've spent the last week on our bikes, stopping wherever and whenever we felt like it.

It was wonderful.

We watched every sunset from the front row seat of our bikes. God, how I needed the wind in my face, the vibration in my soul. I think Petey needed it, too.

We spent the nights in small town motels getting to know each other. It still feels weird to have deep conversations with Petey. He used to be the man I avoided at all costs. But the longer I'm with him, the more I want to climb inside his mind and learn every single thing about him.

Charlotte runs out the minute our bikes rumble into the parking lot of the warehouse. The German Shepard puppy bounces behind her.

She jumps into Petey's arms. I slide off my bike and join them. She wraps her arm around my neck, pulling me close to them. "I missed you guys," she tells us. "But Teddy kept me company."

I glance over her shoulder, finding my sister and Dirk watching us.  
“Teddy?”

“Yeah, that’s what I named the puppy. Aunt Jesse told me it was perfect for him.”

Of course she did. I roll my eyes as Jesse smirks, waving us inside. “The food is getting cold.”

The whole gang is here. “What are we celebrating today?” I ask my sister, helping her carry trays of veggies outside.

“We don’t have to have a reason to get together, do we?”

“No, but you usually have one. Did one of your grandkids lose a tooth or something?”

“Ha ha,” she says, swatting me on the ass.

I notice a lot of the men from the NorCal chapter are here. She sees me eyeing them.

“They’re here to show allegiance to Petey.” She hands me a plate. “Eat.”

My gaze scans the men. “I knew Cass was trouble,” I grumble. “I should have killed him the night he put his hands between my legs.”

Jesse laughs. “I was surprised Petey let him live that night. Now I know why. He had to prove he was a traitor to the club.”

Petey walks up behind me, wrapping his arm around my collarbone and speaking in my ear. “Hey, baby. Charlotte wants to fish. We’re going to run home and grab the poles.”

“I’ll go get them,” I volunteer.

He tugs me over to a chair. “You stay here and visit with your sister. I got this.”

“But you don’t know how to fish.”

Releasing me, he laughs and backs away.

“You’re an asshole.”

He winks and then jogs over to Charlotte, scooping her up as she squeals. They’ve missed each other.

“Stop.” My sister tosses a grape at me. “There is room for you in their relationship.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

A few minutes later, they’re back. I watch as Petey helps Charlotte bait her line. I laugh as she jumps up and down beside him. I love seeing Petey and Charlotte down there fishing. My dad and I used to spend hours in that exact same spot. It’s where I fell in love with him. It’s where I started to heal.

I glance over at Jesse. She’s staring at me. She offers me a sad smile. “You’re thinking about Dad, aren’t you?”

“I miss him.”

“Me too.”

“I’m sorry about how I was acting. He would have been disappointed in me.”

“Like a human being?” she asks.

“I was a bitch. I’m sorry.”

She shrugs. “Well, I’ve been a bit of a bitch myself. I’ve struggled going back and forth on whether or not I could trust Petey with you. I don’t think Dad would blame us for being overly cautious when it comes to trusting men.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” I sigh, nervous to bring up the next subject. “How long have you known that Crow was my biological father?”

Jesse stands and runs her gaze over the food table, making sure nothing needs to be refilled. “Shortly after he passed,” she answers before sitting back down. “Dirk and I are the only ones who know.”

Charlotte squeals, drawing my attention from the conversation. She caught something. I wave at her when she catches my eye. She holds up the little fish she reeled in. Petey is kneeling beside her, his arm wrapped protectively around her waist.

“And Petey,” I tell her, chuckling sadly.

“Do you think we should look at Charlotte differently because of who her biological father is?” my sister asks, catching me off guard.

Biting my lip, I swallow the lump in my throat. “No, but ...”

“I don’t see Crow when I look at you,” she continues.

“What do you see?”

“My sister.”

I glance away.

“So, let me be one. What triggered you?” She reaches over and takes my hand in hers. “Katie, I’ve seen you upset, but I’ve never seen you want to drown yourself in drugs and alcohol before. Whatever it was, it was really hurting you.”

“He married Charlotte’s mom to protect her and the baby.”

Her eyebrow rises, but she remains quiet.

“He’s ... he’s just like the rest of you. He does things because he’s good.”

“So, you thought he wasn’t really in love with you? That he was only with you out of some sort of moral obligation?”

I nod, dropping my face.

“Did he convince you that’s not the case?”

“I guess.” Shrugging, I bring my knees up, wrapping my arms around them.

“You said like the rest of you. Do you think I only love you out of moral obligation? That Dad did?”

My feet fall to the ground with a thud. “I know why you came to the trailer that day. It was because you found a picture of me.”

“Why does it matter how it all began?”

“Come on, Jess. You absolutely had a moral code. You had to get me out of there. I was disgusting.”

She jumps from her chair, crouching in front of me. “Look at me, Katie.”

I glance away. Dirk is sitting a few feet away, watching us. He shakes his finger at me in warning, reminding me of Dad.

*Fine.* I turn to face her.

“Your environment was disgusting, not you.” She tips back on her heels. “Have you always felt this way?”

Nodding, I wipe my tears on the sleeve of my sweatshirt.

“When I found that photo, I saw myself. I didn’t see you.” She stands and walks over to the porch railing, staring over the lake. “I took you from your mom because that’s what I had wanted someone to do for me. I brought you to Bill because I wanted the little girl in the photo to get a dad. To give her a parent who would do anything to protect her.”

She turns to face me before continuing.

“The same thing happened to you ... when you saw Charlotte in that bathroom, you saw yourself. And at that moment, you wanted to give Charlotte someone who would do *anything* to protect her. So, tell me sister, do you only love her because you had a moral obligation to do so? Because something tragic brought you together?”

Jesse pushes off the railing, walking away. “And you’re right, Bill was a good man.” She pauses to look at Petey and Charlotte as they make their way up the hill. “Petey is a good man, too. Good men don’t fake love, Katie. They wouldn’t even know how.”



Petey picks up Charlotte with one hand, swinging her onto his back. She clings to him like a little monkey.

I sigh, looking up at the stars. “Thank you, big sis. I guess I’ve been living in my head a little too much.”

“We’ll always have each other’s backs, remember?” She walks to me and wraps her pinky around mine. “I pinky promise.”

Laughing, I yank her down onto my lap, wrapping my arms around her and burying my face in her long silver-black hair. “I love you, Jesse.”

# Chapter Forty-Three

## PETEY

**G**od, I'm happy to be home. I loved being on the road with Kat, but this right here is everything.

I slow my steps as Charlotte and I head back up to the warehouse. Jesse is sitting on Kat's lap, and they're laughing. The sound of Kat's laughter brings me a happiness I didn't know I was missing.

I've started to see a shift in her. When we were on the road together, she did a lot of quiet contemplating. I didn't mind. We did plenty of talking, too. More than I've ever done with any other woman. I think she's letting some pretty big things go right now. She's made it through the darkness. Not that she won't have her moments, because we all do, but she's happier than I've ever seen her.

She's helping me grow, too. I don't think she sees it. She's making me softer. Not that I'll ever truly be soft. I would watch cities burn for my girls. But with Kat, I can let go a little because I know she has my back. I can enjoy being a father more now that I know Kat will have my back while I relax a little.

Kat is my other half. In every way. Maybe that's why we were so skeptical of each other in the beginning. I was attracted to her no doubt, but I kept her at arm's length because I knew she could outwit me. It hurt when she got to my mark before me. I wanted to bring in the bastard who hurt Willow, but Kat got to him first. I found them before she made it back to the warehouse with him, so technically we brought him in together ... yeah, she didn't see it like that, either.

Their laughter trails off when we approach them. Jesse wipes her eyes and pushes herself off Kat's lap. She fans her face.

"God, I'm glad you're home," she tells Kat. She waves to Lily when she walks out of the warehouse. "Hey, I'm going to go check on Lily. She's been a little down lately."

"I think we might go ahead and take off," I tell her.

Kat looks up at me, surprised we're leaving so early.

"I'm just anxious to get home with my girls." I brush my hand over her cheek while hoisting Charlotte up higher on my back.

Slowly, a smile pulls at the corner of her mouth. "Okay," she says almost shyly.

"I'll see you guys later then," Jesse says, giving me a side hug, leaning back to give Charlotte a kiss on the cheek.

Before we can get away, a handful of guys from my old chapter surround us.

"Got a minute?" Tank asks.

Tank was Cass's VP. I don't know him very well. He patched in when I was going through all that shit with Charlotte's mom, and then I moved here shortly after.

"Sure. What's up?" I ask, pulling Kat to her feet. "We were just heading

home for the night.”

“It won’t take long,” he assures me.

Kat tries to pull her hand from mine, but I tighten my grip.

His gaze roams over his brothers before landing back on me. “Well, we were kind of hoping you’d come back and take Cass’s position as our prez.”

Kat tenses beside me as she slowly tips her head to stare up at me.

“You don’t have to give us an answer right now. I know this is something you need to discuss with your old lady.”

Kat pulls her eyes from me to look at Tank.

“We’d be honored to have Bill’s daughter join our family,” he tells her, dipping his head in respect. “Bill was one of the greats. He was as fierce and loyal as they come.”

Kat actually blushes.

“I don’t need to think about it. I’m sorry guys, but I’m not interested. This is where I belong.” I look down at Kat as she starts to open her mouth. The warning on my face makes her snap it shut.

“Give it a few days, Petey. We’d like you to bring some of what you’ve found here back with you. We need something fresh after that shit with Cass.”

Again, I see my wife’s mouth open. I squeeze her hand, reminding her this is club business. “I’m not going to waste your time, Tank. I’m not leaving. I like it here. This is where I want to raise my daughter.”

Tank drops his head. He knows their mission has failed. “Alright, man. I can’t fault you for that.”

“You’ve got plenty of good men for the job. Yourself included,” I tell him. “But hey, I hope you guys have a good time tonight. Now, I’m going to get my ladies home.”

We say our goodbyes and make our way around the lake.

When I drop Charlotte to her feet on the porch so she can take off her shoes, she runs inside, keeping them on.

“I still can’t fathom how you helped her get over that. It was a great idea.”

Kat nods, stepping inside. She’s overthinking again. I pull her against me roughly. “Shut it off.”

“I’m trying.” She squirms away from me when Charlotte starts climbing up the cupboards in the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” she asks her, plucking her from them and setting her on her feet.

“I want a snack.”

“Why don’t I fix us one while Daddy gets your bath going?” Kat tells her, pushing her toward the hall.

I give Kat a warning glance before I follow behind Charlotte. She better be here when I get back or so help me ...

Charlotte interrupts my thoughts with worries of her own. “Did you make Mommy fall in love with you while you were gone?”

“She loved me before we left, sweetie.”

“Then why did I hear her ask Aunt Jesse to help her get away.”

I sit down on the toilet lid and set her on my knee. “Mommy has a hard time trusting people, hon. It’s going to take her some time to realize how much I love her. It’s not a matter of her loving me. I know she loves me. Okay?”

“Did someone try to trick her?”

I kiss the top of her head. “How did you get so smart?”

She giggles. “Because I listen.”

Chuckling, I push her off my lap. “Well, you’re right. Someone who was

supposed to love Mommy didn't do a good job of showing her safe love. They didn't protect Mommy's heart. So now it's hard for her to trust in love. It scares her."

"I'm going to show Mommy good love every day."

"Me too." I lean over and shut the water off. "Make sure you wash your face. If you don't dilly-dally, we might just have time to watch a movie."

"We should let Mommy pick."

"I'll go tell her." I ruffle her hair and then head out to make sure Kat hasn't fled.

I find her standing in front of the microwave, wiping her eyes. Loud pops start erupting from the appliance. She's making popcorn.

Fuck. She heard us.

Picking her up from behind, I carry her over to the counter. I set her on it, putting us eye to eye.

"I'm such a terrible person," she whispers, refusing to look at me. "How could I have played with her heart like that? This is why I tried so hard to stay away from you. You had a kid, and I'm no good with kids ..."

I grab her face, kissing her hard to make her shut up. When I pull away, she gasps for breath.

"Welcome to parenthood," I tell her. "From here on out, you will feel guilty for every little mistake you make. It sucks, but it keeps you trying to do better each and every day. Don't feel bad; she learned something from it. Okay?"

Her fingers curl into my beard. "I won't do that to her again."

"I know." I kiss her forehead. "So, what movie are you picking?"

She laughs. "*Beauty and the Beast*."

"Ugh ... living with two women is going to be so much fun," I tease,

backing away when the microwave dings.

“It’s Charlotte’s favorite movie.” She jumps down and grabs a big bowl from the cupboard. “Can you grab us a few sodas?” She points to the fridge.

Charlotte comes out of the bathroom as Kat dumps a whole bag of M&Ms in the popcorn.

“Do you want this kid to be up all night?” I ask.

Charlotte giggles as she fills Teddy’s food dish.

“It’s the weekend, Mr. Scrooge,” Kat says, rolling her eyes.

My daughter laughs harder, thrilled to have an ally in the house. The puppy licks her face when she sets the food down for him.

Kat watches them, a fresh round of tears coming to her eyes. “I thought we could watch *Beauty and the Beast* tonight.”

Charlotte starts jumping up and down. She immediately starts twirling through the house in her pajamas. “I love the beast,” she says.

“Hey, now,” I joke, shaking my finger at her. “There will be no beast for you.”

Both of my girls laugh, plopping onto the couch. “Every girl loves the beast,” Kat says.

I start the movie, turn the lights down, and join them. Charlotte is cuddled on Kat’s lap, so I pull them close, wrapping my arms around the both of them.

“I think there are more M&Ms in here than popcorn,” I tease.

“That’s what makes it so good, Daddy.”

The girls watch the movie, or at least most of it. They both fall asleep before it’s over. I think this is the first time I’ve truly relaxed in years. As the credits roll, I run my fingers down Kat’s hair before dropping my hand over my daughter’s head. *My girls.*

Kat opens her eyes, looking up at me.

I laugh. "Good morning, sweetheart."

She smiles at me slowly. "I wasn't asleep, asshole. I was just wondering how long you were going to stare at me."

My thumb brushes over her cheek. "I could do it for eternity."

This is the first time she hasn't looked at me in disbelief when I've given her a compliment.

"The way you look at me is going to make me a conceited bitch." She sighs, running her fingers through Charlotte's hair. She pulls a piece to her nose. "She smells so good."

"The shampoo is bubble gum scented," I tell her.

This is what Kat needed. Some down time with our daughter. Time to notice the small details and fall in love with her. I know she loves her, but man, I can see it's going to be so much more. She'd kill or die for our daughter now; wait until she really gets to know her.

When you have a baby, those first few days are just exploring every detail about them. Soaking up the way they look at the world. Now that the danger is gone, Kat will be able to do that with Charlotte. It will seal the bond between them.

And as if she can read my mind, she says, "I didn't know how good this would feel. Now I understand why you kept your distance from me when I first came here. You were protecting her from me. I wasn't ready."

I don't say anything.

"I want to make a commitment to her, so she never feels like she did today. Tomorrow. I'm going to do it tomorrow. I don't want her worrying another minute that I'm going to leave her."

"Kids are a good wake up call, aren't they?"



She stares up at me. “I don’t know what I would do without the two of you.”

# Chapter Forty-Four

KATIE

**M**y sister stands beside me as I pick out a ring. “Thank you so much for helping me on such short notice,” I tell the jewelry store employee, taking the small ring out of the box. “It’s so tiny.” I slip it over the tip of my pinky, showing Jesse.

“She’s going to love it.”

“I’m going to give it to her at McDonalds. I wanted to keep it simple, you know. And private. If she has any questions, I want her to feel comfortable to ask them.” I place the ring back in the box, fighting the little voice that’s telling me I’m not good enough to be her mom.

“That is a great idea. But I still think we should have a party.” She pouts, hoping I’ll give in. “You know what would be awesome?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“How about we have a skate party? Someone just opened the old roller rink. Wouldn’t that be a blast? I’ll even buy the kid her first pair of skates.”

That would be fun. I’ll never say that out loud, though.

“Sure, make it happen,” I tell her.

“Okay, great. Because I already booked it. All you have to do is show up after your lunch tomorrow.”

I shake my head, chuckling as we head out. “Don’t you ever get tired of partying?”

“No, ma’am. I love seeing my people happy.”

We step out the door, and I bump right into Brody. He looks surprised to see us. “What the fuck are you two doing here?” he asks gruffly.

My brows narrow. “What the fuck are you doing here?” I spit back.

He stammers, glancing around nervously. “I’m getting my hair cut.” He points to the hair salon next door.

“Well, I was getting Charlotte a ring.” I wave the little bag in front of his face. “What’s up your ass today?”

“I’m fucking sorry.” He runs his fingers through his hair, messing it up. “I was in a hurry. Didn’t expect to see anyone from the club. Okay?”

“Okay ...” I press my hand over his forehead. “You sure you’re feeling alright? You look like you’re going to be sick.”

“I’m good.” He squeezes my hand after he removes it from his forehead. “I’m going to be late. See you guys later,” he says, jogging away from us and into the salon.

“Men are fucking weird,” Jesse says, urging me toward her rod. “Don’t worry about him. The club has him on an important mission, and I’m sure he’s just stressed about doing a good job.”

I shrug, dropping into the passenger seat. “Maybe I should offer to help him.” I look at my sister, hoping she’ll spill the beans on what it is.

She laughs. “I overheard, but I’m not ballsy enough to repeat club business anymore. My ass still hurts from the last time.”

We both laugh. “Everyone around here is lame. Come on, give me some

bad guys to kill.”

“Well, his mission doesn’t involve offing anyone, so you’re out of luck.”

“That’s okay. I think I’m giving up on all of that.”

“Probably for the best.”

“Unless it’s a necessity to protect what’s mine.”

“Absolutely.”

She drops me off at the cabin.

Charlotte and Petey are making supper. She runs over to me. “Mommy! I missed you.”

“I missed you, too, baby. Mmm, something smells good. What are you and Daddy making?”

My gaze roams up to Daddy. He smiles, wiping his hands off on a towel. Fuck me, my husband is sexy.

I’m the luckiest bitch on the planet.

“It’s Grandma Maggie’s famous spaghetti bake,” he says. “Charlotte, will you please set the table?”

She runs over to the silverware drawer. “One, two, three.” She counts out loud, gathering what she needs.

Petey smiles, pushing me into the bedroom. “Did you get it?” he asks.

“Yes.” I pull the box out of the bag and open it up.

His eyes widen. “Kat, it’s beautiful. Are those real?” he asks.

I laugh. “No. But someday they will be. I know she’s little, and she might lose it. I’d never want her to feel bad about that. I plan on having it resized as she grows and on her eighteenth birthday, I’ll put real ones in for her.” My fingers trail over the stones. “They look real though, don’t they?”

He grabs my chin, his gaze bouncing over my face. “She feels like she was meant to be ours, doesn’t she?”

“She does. Charlotte made me realize that maybe it was possible my dad really loved me like his own.”

“I’m one of those dads, Kat, and I can promise you it is possible. I love that little girl like my own.” He leans in, pressing his lips to mine.

# Chapter Forty-Five

## KATIE

When we tell Charlotte we're going to McDonald's, she looks a little hesitant. I buckle her helmet, looking her in the eye. "If we get there and you decide you want to leave, just let me know and we'll go. I promise."

She nods. Petey gives me a look, telling me to stay strong. I know this is hard for her, but it's important she works through this now rather than when she's an adult. But I'll never force her past what she is ready for.

When we get there, Petey tells her he's going to order a Happy Meal for himself.

"Daddy," she laughs.

"I'm serious. I always feel a little left out when I don't get a toy."

"You know, I think I'll get one, too."

This makes her really laugh, but she stops the minute we step inside. "I have to pee." She tugs on my arm.

"Okay. Let's go use the bathroom." I take her hand in mine and gently pull her toward the restroom. "Daddy will order our food."

She follows me inside. I make sure to stand outside the door, blocking the

crack for her. I hold my breath, waiting for her to go. This is hard for me, too.

“Mommy?”

“Yes, baby?”

“Do you think Daddy is really ordering you guys Happy Meals?”

I bark out a laugh. “What? Are we too old?”

“Daddy needs way more food than what’s in a Happy Meal.”

“You’re probably right there.”

She flushes and rushes out to wash her hands. “I’m going to eat all my food so Daddy will buy me ice cream. That’s the rule,” she tells me.

Our eyes meet in the mirror, and she smiles at me.

“Is that the trick to get Daddy to buy ice cream?”

She nods.

When we leave the bathroom, we find Petey is already at a table. He stands when we approach. “Ladies.” He waves a tattooed hand out, waiting for us to sit down.

Charlotte slides in, and he follows. I take the seat across from them, catching his gaze as I lower myself into the booth. I reach over and take his hand, letting him know she’s okay.

“You did get Happy Meals!” she squeals, clapping her hands.

She opens hers, immediately going for the toy. “What is this?” she asks, pulling out a black box.

Petey winks at me. “I don’t know.” He peeks inside his Happy Meal box. “All I got was this plastic car.”

Charlotte turns it over in her hands before opening it. She lets out a little scream. “It’s a ring!”

I reach over, pulling the ring out of the box for her. “It’s from me.”

Her little eyes fill with tears. “It’s so pretty,” she says quietly. She holds

her hand out for me to slide it over her tiny finger.

“I want to be your mom, Charlotte. This is my promise to you that I’ll never leave. I want you to be my daughter forever, okay?”

She nods, tears spilling over the apple of her cheeks.

“You tricked me, Daddy,” she accuses, giving Petey a dirty look.

“Did I?”

My gaze bounces between the two of them. “Am I missing something?” I ask Petey.

“Open your Happy Meal, Mommy.” Charlotte pulls her legs up onto the seat, so she can lean across the table.

“Okay.” I laugh at the two of them, but when I reach inside, I find a small felt box. My heart stops.

Charlotte claps again.

“What is this?” I ask Petey, my hands shaking.

My mouth falls open when Petey stands and then lowers himself beside the table. He takes the box from me. He opens it slowly, watching my reaction.

Oh my god.

“Will you marry me, Kat?”

My hands are still shaking as they cover my mouth.

I don’t know if he understands how much this means to me. He’s choosing me freely. There are no cops around threatening to take me to jail.

“Are you sure?” I ask him.

His brow rises in warning.

I laugh and cry at the same time, running my finger over my mother’s ring. “This is the ring my dad gave Candice.”

“I know. I wanted to do it right this time.”

“This is perfect.”



He pulls my old ring off before placing the new one on my finger. “This is the three of us choosing each other, yeah?” He looks at Charlotte and then me.

“But you guys are going to have more kids. So someday there will be more of us,” Charlotte says, shoving a fry in her mouth.

Petey laughs at the look on my face. He gives me a kiss before sitting back down.

“Maybe someday. Mom and I haven’t discussed having more kids.”

Charlotte tips her head back and forth, weighing her thoughts, clearly enjoying her food. “I think you will.”

Petey eats his hamburger in two bites, grumbling that he’s still hungry. Charlotte and I giggle when he goes to order himself something else.

And just like that, everything is right in the world.

# Chapter Forty-Six

## KATIE

I should have known it wouldn't last long. Jesse tries to distract me, grabbing my hand and pulling me out onto the skating rink floor.

"Whatever it is, Petey is handling it."

Petey and I were watching Charlotte skate with the other kids when Jackson came over and whispered something in his ear. When I looked over his shoulder, I saw the sheriff eyeing me from the front door.

I tried to follow Petey when he headed toward him, but he held his out, ordering me to stay put.

They keep looking at me. "Do you think they found something? Maybe they've found one of the guys I took out, or maybe it's about the congressman," I whisper.

I've killed a lot of men. I never worried about getting caught until right now. I can't leave Charlotte ... I promised her.

"Quit worrying. Congressman Duffy's death was deemed an accident. They found his car at the bottom of a cliff up in the mountains. It was burnt to a crisp. I saw it on the news this morning. We have no idea what is going

on. It could be as simple as one of the club rentals got broken into or something.”

“That’s why they keep looking at me?”

“They’re not.”

*But they are.*

Petey shakes the sheriff’s hand before he leaves. I release a shaky breath.

“See. He’s leaving. You worried for nothing.”

Petey doesn’t tell me what their conversation was about, and I don’t ask. But when we’re about to walk out the door, Petey asks Jesse if she could take Charlotte home and put her to bed.

“Sure,” she says as I give her an *I told you so* look. I told her something was wrong.

Dirk doesn’t give either of us a chance to ask questions. “Let’s go. The game is on, and I don’t want to miss it.” He grabs Charlotte by the waist, hoisting her in the air as she runs by. “Come on, you little stinker. You’re going home with us. Your mom and dad have to go get the truck. They left it up at the cabin.”

My heart sinks because I know Brody and Ash picked it up several days ago.

“We’ll see you tomorrow.” Petey gives Charlotte a kiss on the cheek. I do the same, choking back tears.

I’m going to jail. That’s the only logical explanation for what is happening right now. But he said she’d see us tomorrow. I guess they’re hoping they’ll be able to bail me out.

When the parking lot empties, I pick up my helmet sadly. I knew this was all too good to be true.

Petey turns me to face him. “The sheriff needs to talk to you.”

I choke back a sob.

“He wouldn’t tell me what it was about. I convinced him to give us an hour to wrap up the party, but I promised him we’d head down to the station as soon as it was over.”

“Fine. Let’s go.” I straighten my shoulders.

He grabs my face in his big hands. “Listen. Whatever this is, we’ll deal with it. Together. Don’t even think about shutting me out. I’m going to take care of you, Kat.”

When we sit down in the sheriff’s office, he closes the door behind us. “I’m sorry I interrupted your party today, but this is an urgent matter. I received a call from Texas law enforcement, and I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news. Your friend, Chelsie, has been murdered.”

I pull my head back. “Chelsie?”

“I’m sorry for your loss. It seems her ex-husband entered her parent’s home. He shot everyone, including himself. The children, however, were unharmed. But mentally ...” He runs his hand through his hair. “Well, it’s just a shame those kids had to witness something so brutal.”

I jump from my chair. The woman who helped me in Reno! Oh my god. I was so wrapped up in my own life, I forgot I hadn’t received a text from her letting me know she made it home safely.

“Anyway, your friend lived for a short time. Long enough to leave some directives for her affairs ... and the children. She passed away this morning. It seems she’s left the kids in your care. They are in a foster home right now. As soon as you can get there ...”

“She left her children to me?” I ask in disbelief.

He nods, handing me a piece of paper. “I have all the contact information written down for you. If I can be of any help, please let me know.”

Petey and the sheriff continue to discuss the matter while I stare at the paper in my hands.

I walk out of there, stunned.

Petey straps my helmet for me, but he doesn't let me get on my bike. "I'll have someone come get it. Hop on, baby." He pats the seat of his bike.

I stare at him. "She's the one who helped me in Reno. She was the nurse I told you about."

"It's okay. Just get on."

"But I helped her leave him. I gave her the money ..." I let my words trail off.

He shakes me by the shoulders. "This is not your fault."

When he swings his leg over the seat, I slide on behind him. He wraps his hand around my calf as we ride home.

I stare up at the stars as they glide by. "I'm so sorry," I whisper to her.

Petey squeezes my leg. I drop my face and hug him tight.

When we get home, he walks toward his workshop, expecting me to follow. For the first time I do without a fuss, because this is too heavy for me.

He turns the light on, and I fall to my knees on the pillow. I love the way he always runs his hand down my hair when we begin. It lets me know he's taking over.

Stepping away from me, he takes off his jacket and begins working on a project. I watch him focus on what he's doing. His calm, steady hand glides over the glass, cutting it perfectly. I thought he might question me more about this woman and her children, but he doesn't. He just continues to work.

My mind flits to all the little clothes I helped her pack. They're just babies ... oh my god.

I start to cry and still he doesn't speak. It takes everything in me not to run

out of here and go to them. I take a deep breath.

“Are you ready to go get our kids?” he asks, always so perceptive of what I’m feeling.

“You don’t know anything about them. How old they are. How many there are.”

He crouches in front of me, holding up a glass heart. The light shines through it, painting the floor with a rainbow of colors. “I don’t need to know.”

I stare at the different pieces of glass all melded together by strong, talented hands.

“This is what life is about, Kat. Putting all the broken bits together to make your heart whole. They need us, baby. You and I are going to take care of them. We’re going to show them what a loving, safe home looks like. That’s what their mom would want. It’s the one thing she couldn’t give them.”

He stands, hanging the heart in the window before holding his hand out to me.

“I’m scared.”

“Every new mother is. But I bet they’re scared, too.”

I jump to my feet, wrapping my arms around his waist. “They’re just babies, Petey.”

“Then let’s go get our babies,” he says, hugging me tight.

A few minutes later, we’re up at the warehouse sitting at the kitchen table with Dirk and my sister. We’re all working on different things. My sister is arranging plane tickets for us to get to Texas and back. Dirk is talking to Jackson, who is working on putting a call out to the club for help with everything we’ll need for the girls. A crib, highchair ... oh my god, I’m going to have a baby. Chelsie had told me her oldest daughter was two and the

youngest just two months. But that's all I know. I don't even know their names.

"Everything is in place," I tell them when I set the phone down. "We can pick them up tomorrow afternoon." I place my hand over my stomach, suddenly anxious.

Jesse reaches over, taking my hand in hers. "I'm going to help you, little sis. We've got this. You're doing the right thing."

The case worker I spoke to told me their names were Emma and Ava.

"We better go wake up Charlotte," Petey tells me.

She was a little confused and sleepy at first, but then she was excited. We're taking her with us to get the girls because she needs to be a part of this, too. Petey has spent the plane ride telling her as much about the girls as he can. I'm trying to listen, but I'm just so worried about everything ... her, the girls. Charlotte's life is about to change, and part of me feels guilty about that. I've disrupted her whole world.

Petey reaches over Charlotte and grabs my chin. "Stop."

"So, Emma saw somebody do bad things to her mommy?" Charlotte asks Petey.

I take a deep breath. Petey's right. I need to focus on what's right in front of me, not all the what ifs.

"Yes, baby girl. That's why it will be important for you to be good to her."

"Oh, I will. I'm going to be the best big sister ever. Just like Jesse." She looks up at me shyly.

I poke her in the tummy. "Jesse is a pretty good big sister."

She hugs the two teddy bears she picked out of her collection for the girls. She's honestly the sweetest little girl I've ever met. Charlotte has a heart of gold.

Petey wraps his fingers through the back of my hair, gently tugging my head back against the seat. “Rest, Momma. I’ll wake you when we land.”

He’s looking at me like I’m giving him the moon ... when all I’ve really given him is chaos.



# Chapter Forty-Seven

## PETEY

**K**at paces back and forth, waiting for the foster mother to drop the girls off. Charlotte is waiting in our hotel room with one of the club wives from the Texas chapter. She had our room filled with everything we would need, so we didn't have to bring everything on the plane with us. The caseworker checks her watch.

"I'm sorry. I'll try calling her again."

Just as she puts the phone to her ear, a woman carrying a car seat and a toddler on her hip bustles into the room. She sets both down before holding up her hands. "Don't even start. Here they are."

The case worker rushes over to her as the woman starts to leave. "Don't you have a bag for them?"

"Probably somewhere. I'll go look."

The case worker turns to apologize. "I'm sorry, but I have a feeling we won't be seeing her again." She frets, patting her hair.

"That's okay. We have everything they'll need," I assure her.

"Well, then. I'll leave my card on the table. I'm sure we'll talk again as we

work through all the legalities and paperwork over the coming weeks.”

I shake her hand, then I join my wife who has fallen to her knees in front of the children.

The worker makes a beeline out the door, and when I lower myself to the ground, I see why. The girls are filthy. Ava, the baby, has a ring of dirt under her chin and between each of her fingers. Emma clings to the handle of the car seat, her eyes turned down. Her face is dirty too, her shirt stained. But they are still the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen.

Kat stares at them, blinking furiously. She looks scared, and that’s rare for her.

“Emma,” I say softly.

The little girl lifts her eyes briefly before dropping them again. It’s a start. “My name is Petey, and this is Kat. We were friends with your momma,” I tell her, not knowing if she understands any of what I’m saying. “We’re going to take you home with us, okay?”

She slides behind the car seat, trying to hide herself.

Kat reaches out and rubs the baby’s head. Emma watches her closely. “Do you like bubble baths?” Kat asks her, looking about as shy as Emma is right now.

She nods.

“We have some bubbles back at our hotel.”

The little girl blinks her big brown eyes, putting her own hand out to rub her sister’s head. Her fingers trail over Kat’s. The smile that breaks over Kat’s face is indescribable. I’m watching her fall in love in real time.

“Why don’t we stop and pick up some McDonald’s on the way back?” I tell them.

This gets Emma’s attention; she pushes off the seat, standing. I hold my

hands out, clapping for her to come to me. Unbelievably, she takes a few steps. I don't know if it's because she likes me or because she likes McDonald's, but I'll take it as a win. Who knows if that crazy bitch who dropped them off fed them.

The minute I pick her up, she tucks her face under my beard. Kat smiles up at me, tears filling her eyes. "Let's go, baby," I tell her.

She nods, pulling baby Ava out of her car seat. "I don't trust this car seat. I'll put her in the one we brought," she tells me.

"No need to explain to me, Momma." I pat her on the ass, ushering her out of the room.

We pick up a couple of Happy Meals for Charlotte and Emma, and then we head back to the hotel. Charlotte immediately takes over with Emma. She helps her with her food, and then Kat gets them in the bathtub, filling it with bubbles.

I stare at Ava, watching her little nose wiggle as I feed her a bottle. She's so tiny. Her hair is the same chestnut color as Emma's. It's so soft. The girls giggle in the bathroom, and Kat scolds them gently.

"You two little turkeys are getting me wet."

They giggle again, and Kat squeals.

"That's it," she says, and then they really start laughing. I think she's tickling them.

"Are you guys just playing around in there or are you getting clean?" I yell.

"It's Mommy," Charlotte hollers back.

"Is Daddy going to have to put her in time out?"

Charlotte can't answer, she's laughing so hard.

It warms my heart. My girl loves me, but she needed this. She's happier

than I've ever seen her. Charlotte has always wanted a family.

When the girls come out all squeaky clean in their pajamas, Kat takes the baby from me, rummaging through the bags of baby items so she can bathe her next. I put a movie on for the girls and tuck them in. I bend down and give Charlotte a kiss on the forehead. Emma watches me cautiously.

"Do you want a hug and kiss goodnight?" I ask her.

She thinks about it for a minute but then nods her head. I lean over Charlotte, staying on her side of the bed, and give her a quick hug and peck on the forehead. "Goodnight, monkeys," I say, turning the light down.

Emma snuggles into Charlotte's side, hugging the teddy bear she gave her. Charlotte puts her arm around her and pats her head. So sweet.

Kat stands at the end of the bed, looking a little lost. "You okay, baby?"

She blinks. "Yeah, yeah. I'm just going to go give Ava a bath."

I follow her in, placing the little plastic baby bath in the tub.

"Some of the club members here are going to stop by in the morning to pick up all the stuff we don't want to haul on the plane," she says, avoiding my gaze. "Do you think the water is too hot?"

My fingers trail through the water as I sit on the edge of the tub. "It's fine." She kneels beside the tub, placing Ava in the baby bath.

"We're lucky to have the club." I cup my hand over Ava's tiny face as Kat rinses her hair.

She nods but stays quiet. She's fighting her emotions.

I rub a few circles over her back and then decide to leave her alone, so she can bond with the baby. "I'm going to check on the girls. Holler if you need me, yeah?"

She shakes her head.

All of this is hitting close to home for her. Maybe now she understands that

her club loves her.

The dirty little girl they saved.

# Chapter Forty-Eight

## KATIE

The girls are both snoring lightly by the time I get Ava down for the night. Petey grabs my hand and pulls me to the bathroom.

“It’s Momma’s turn,” he says, shutting the door all but a crack.

The tub is full of bubbles. He helps me undress. I know he wants to talk, but I can’t. Not right now.

When I get in the water, he perches himself on the edge of the tub, facing me.

“This isn’t going to be very relaxing with you staring at me,” I tell him, scooping up a handful of bubbles and blowing them in his direction.

He laughs. “Well, too bad. Get used to it. Now that we have three kids, I’ll be begging for your attention every spare minute you have. It’s an unwritten husband rule.”

I laugh quietly, hugging my legs to my chest. “They’re fucking cute, aren’t they?”

“They are.” He grabs a washcloth and slides down so he can wash my back for me. “Ava is so tiny. I can’t believe Charlotte used to be that small.”

“You’re good with her. I feel like I’m going to break her.”

He chuckles. “You won’t break her. Kids are resilient.”

We’re quiet for a few minutes. Suddenly, my emotions break free, and I cry out, “It’s not fair!” I smack the water, splashing it out of the tub.

Immediately, Petey has me out and in his arms. He doesn’t care that I’m soaking his clothes. He continues to hold me as I weep. Big pitiful sobs wrench from my soul. Tonight triggered me. But maybe that’s what I needed.

I’ll never doubt my father, Jesse, the club ... Petey. I’ll never doubt any of them ever again.

“I ... I love them so much already. But it’s not fair that I’m here with them and their mother isn’t.”

His big hands rub over my back. “I felt the same way with Charlotte. It’s why I left her with her aunt after her mom died.”

Leaning back, I finally feel strong enough to look him in the eye. “Charlotte needed you,” I say, hiccupping.

He laughs sadly. “She did. Just like these girls need you.”

“Us,” I correct.

“Us.” A smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. “Don’t feel guilty for enjoying your friend’s daughters. She picked you for a reason.”

I scratch my head. “Yeah, I have no idea what that reason would be. I acted like a psycho the day we met.”

“I hate to assume what she was thinking, but I bet she saw one tough bitch. Kat, that woman had been fighting to protect those kids their whole lives. She saw you as someone who would continue to do so.”

“If she’s watching over them, I hope she has a little more peace tonight.” I run my fingers through his beard. “I like how you interacted with Emma tonight,” I tell him quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“You asked her if she wanted a hug ... it reminded me of Bill. He was so careful with me in the beginning.”

He hugs me tighter. “That’s a pretty big compliment coming from you.”

“I’m glad these girls get you as a dad.”

“Whoa, two compliments in less than sixty seconds.”

Smacking him on the arm, I lay my head against his chest. “Our girls are going to grow up knowing what it’s like to have a father who loves and protects them.”

“I love you, Katie.”

I lean back, unable to speak, so I press my lips to his instead.

Petey mumbles over my mouth as we kiss, “And don’t think that just because we have three kids, I won’t find ways to get into your pants.”

We both smile, our lips still pressed together.

“Oh, I know you’re still going to be an asshole.”

He swats my ass, pushing me off him. “Finish up, woman. I’m going to go check on the girls.”

When I climb into bed beside him a few minutes later, I find him fast asleep. He’s pulled the crib up to the bed, and his hand is through the bars. Ava’s little hand is curled around his finger.

My heart squeezes almost painfully, but not in pain ... in love. My gaze roams to the other bed. The girls are curled up beside each other, only a teddy bear between them.

Love ... I’m in love.



# Chapter Forty-Nine

## KATIE

**W**hen we step into the house, we all sniff the air. Oh my god, Grandma Maggie is here. She steps out from one of the backrooms.

“Ah, you guys made it home. Come, come.” She waves an arthritic hand toward the kitchen. “You all look hungry.”

Petey and I smile at each other as Charlotte pulls Emma forward. “This is our grandma,” she tells her.

Grandma Maggie runs her knuckle down Charlotte’s nose. “Oh, you girls look like you’re starving.” She picks Emma up and places her in a booster chair at the table. “Are you two just going to stand there? Get your butts over here and sit down.”

We both move forward, bumping into each other. Grandma laughs. “I knew you two didn’t hate each other.” She pulls a pan from the oven.

“Is that your mac and cheese?” I ask, dropping into my chair, holding Ava to my chest.

“It sure is.” She sets it on the table, then holds her hands out. “Let me hold my granddaughter while you eat,” she says, wiggling her fingers.

My heart melts at the way she looks at the baby when I place her in her arms. “They are just beautiful,” she says, looking from Ava to Emma and back again.

Petey helps the girls with their plates, and I watch as Maggie sits down in the new rocking chair that is now in the living room. Emma glances around the house, holding her little spoon in her hand.

“Do you like the mac and cheese?” I ask her.

She peeks at me through her long lashes and nods. Then, she turns her focus back on her food.

My face falls. She’s been quiet since we picked her up. I can’t imagine how scared she must be.

Petey taps his boot against mine. “It’s going to take some time, baby. She’s fine.”

“Your sister is coming over to make cookies in a bit. Her and Dirk have some more stuff to bring over for the girls, and she needs to drop that darn dog off,” Grandma says.

“Oh, this is the best day ever!” Charlotte squeals.

When we finish eating, we show Emma around the house. The once empty rooms are now filled. My sister outdid herself, painting each of the girl’s bedrooms like Charlotte’s. Emma’s eyes widen as she walks around her new space.

“But you can sleep with me,” Charlotte tells her. “Mommy and Daddy won’t care, will you?”

“No, baby girl. Emma can sleep wherever she feels comfortable,” Petey tells her.

Charlotte hears Dirk and Jesse walk through the front door. “Teddy is home!”

Petey laughs. “I’ll go save the puppy from getting his neck broken from her hugs.”

Emma watches them leave. I walk over and sit down in a bean bag chair beside a bookshelf, letting her have space to explore her new surroundings. I pull a book out and thumb through it. She sits down a few feet away from me, picking up a stuffed giraffe and hugging him around the neck. It warms my heart that the club did all of this for the girls.

I begin to read out loud. When I make a funny voice for one of the characters, she giggles.

*Oh my god!* I want to hear it again.

So, I up the ante and let myself be silly. Something I haven’t done since I was a kid with my dad. She giggles again, standing up and walking over to me. I hold perfectly still. She grabs the book in my hand and pushes it down so she can see the pictures.

I open my arms, inviting her to sit on my lap, and to my surprise she does. When we finish that book, she picks another one from the shelf and hands it to me. I don’t know how many we read before she’s asleep in my lap. I set the book on the floor, staring down at her, her cheek smooshed against my chest. She’s using my boobs for a pillow.

Carefully, I lay my hand over her cheek, pressing my lips to the top of her head. “I’ll protect you the rest of my life,” I whisper over her hair. When I look up, I notice my sister sitting against the doorjamb, staring at us.

“How long have you been there?” I ask, slightly embarrassed by my voice acting.

“Long enough to know that *Jellybeans for Breakfast* is still your favorite book.” She laughs, resting her head against the doorframe. “You made Dirk

read that book to you every night for weeks. I thought he was going to pull his hair out.”

I laugh. “Really? I thought it was his favorite book, too. He hid his dislike well.”

“That’s what you do for the ones you love.”

My fingers run through Emma’s hair, pulling a piece to my nose. It smells just like Charlotte’s now. “I don’t understand how anyone could hurt a child. How could her dad take her mom from her like that? How?” I begin to cry.

Jesse stands up, coming to sit beside me. She wraps her arm around my shoulders. “I don’t know, baby.” She kisses my head just like I kissed Emma’s. “You just have to focus on what you can control in this life, and that is you. Just remember you have a family behind you. Ask for help when you need it, and you will need it.”

Dirk walks in, narrowing his eyes on me. “I heard there were readings of my favorite book going on in here.”

I burst out laughing, making Emma jerk in my arms. “Shhh.” I rock her back and forth as she settles back against my breast. Jesse stands up, ruffling my hair before leaving.

He takes her place, his eyes roaming over the little girl in my arms. “I heard Bill tonight,” he says, keeping his eyes on Emma.

My head pulls back. “Okay,” I tell him, accepting what he believes to be true.

His gaze flicks to mine. “He’s so fucking proud of you.”

I don’t ask him how he heard him, or where, or when ... I’ll never doubt the love my family has for me. If it’s true, it assures me that I’ll be able to look over my girls when I’m forced to leave them behind. And if he’s making it up to bring me comfort, it’s only because he loves me.

If my dad is up there looking out for me, I hope he's with Emma and Ava's mom, comforting her and showing her the ropes.

"Thank you for telling me that. I really needed to hear it right now." His attention goes back to Emma.

"Could you put her in her bed for me?" I ask, laughing. "My foot is asleep and maybe my ass."

Instantly, he reaches out and pulls her against his chest. I knew he was itching to get her in his arms. He might put off bad ass vibes, but deep down he's a teddy bear. He rocks her in his arms for a few minutes when she stirs. She peeks her eyes open. I hold my hands out, thinking she's going to get scared, but instead she smiles up at him. A few minutes later, her eyes fall closed again.

"She reminds me of you," he says quietly. "She's going to be okay, you know? She's a little baddie like the rest of you bitches."

# Chapter Fifty

KATIE

Petey and the club men have been fixing up my niece's treehouse out in the forest for the kids. Charlotte has been begging to play out there, but the guys wanted to get it repaired so she didn't get hurt on any rusty nails or anything.

It's been nice because that's meant the women have been helping me with the girls. I know nothing about being a mother, and somehow I became one overnight.

I've also gotten a fair amount of time in Petey's workshop while Charlotte's at school. Petey told my sister I need some quiet time with him and asked her to watch Em and Ava for me. I was pissed at first, but he was right once again. I don't stay as long as I used to. Sometimes I just need a moment to hand everything to him. It gives my brain a chance to slow down and reset.

My sister pulls my wedding dress out of the closet. "Why don't you wear this for the big treehouse reveal?"

I laugh. "Ah, no."

“Oh, come on. All the kids are dressing up. Petey even bought the girls new princess dresses for the occasion. They would love it if you dressed up with them.”

My finger trails over the dress, my mind flitting back to our first night here at the cabin. “News flash. I’m not a kid anymore, and I’m not particularly good at being silly.”

“Who said anything about being silly? Petey’s fucking eyes bugged out of his head when he saw you in this. Don’t you think it would be fun to provoke him again?”

I snort. *But I do love to provoke him.*

“The whole club’s going to be there. I can’t. The guys worked hard on rebuilding the play area for the kids. I don’t want to make myself the center of attention.”

“Well, how about you and the girls go early? A private first look.”

“What time is everyone showing up?”

She claps her hands. “Not till six. Plenty of time to get Petey riled up.”

I roll my eyes, but it does sound fun. “Fine, but you have to get him down there at four. Good luck with that,” I tell her.

“That’s what Dirk is for.” She pulls her phone out and starts texting him.

“I’m sure he’ll be thrilled.”

She stays and helps me get the girls ready. Emma stares at herself in the mirror as I place the little tiara that matches Charlotte’s on her head. She still hasn’t spoken to any of us. I wish I knew how to help her.

Her eyes meet mine, and she smiles. “Do you like it?”

She doesn’t answer of course, but she does climb off my lap and run to show Charlotte.

My sister insists she take the girls out before me so I can make a grand

appearance. I think she's crazy, but whatever. Petey's seen me in this dress before, and I now know he prefers me out of it.

I give her the ten-minute head start she asked for. I'm kind of disappointed because I wanted to see the girls' reaction to the new play area. It was cool before; I'm sure it's even more so now. My dad and Dirk originally built it for Billie Rose when she was no older than Em.

Wandering down the path, I smile when I hear wind chimes. I'm sure that was Billie Rose's contribution. Dirk steps out from between the trees, making me jump a foot.

"Jesus Christ, you scared me, asshole."

He laughs, his scary eyebrow climbing up a few degrees. His gaze roams over me lazily. "You want to try this again?"

"What again?"

"This getting hitched thing?"

I take a step back.

He holds out a black box, opening it for me. "Go on. It doesn't bite."

"What the fuck is going on?" I stand on my toes trying to see what's going on farther up the path.

He sighs loudly. "Do you have to make everything difficult? Christ. But I'll tell you what's going on. You've taken Petey's balls, and now my enforcer is being all *romantic*." He rolls his eyes, which I've never seen him do.

I start laughing.

"Jesus, take this fucking thing, will ya?"

Leaning over, I peek in the box. My heart stops, my hand flying to my mouth to keep from crying out.

"Fuck," Dirk whispers, taking the tiara out of the box for me. He holds it



up to the sunlight. "I'll admit the damn thing is pretty cool."

It's filled with tiny pieces of dark colored glass. "It's the prettiest thing I've ever seen," I whisper.

He places it on my head. "When Petey first came here, I didn't think he'd last. Dude was fucking angry and downright crazy. But now I think Bill sent that fucker here just to make his baby girl feel like the princess she is."

"No way did you just call me a fucking princess."

He tips his arm out. "Trust me, when I get to the other side, Bill and I are going to have fucking words, leaving me here to deal with all you women."

"I love you, Dirk."

"Yeah, yeah, I love you too, kid. Now let's do this right this time. Don't make me drag you down the aisle."

I slip my hand around his arm, letting him lead me into the forest.

The whole fucking club is here. Charlotte waves to me just like she did the first time around. Petey has Emma in his arms.

A sob escapes me, and I pause.

Dirk looks up at the sky. "You owe me a bottle from the top shelf when I get up there, motherfucker," he says, wagging a finger at the clouds.

I laugh and cry at the same time. "He's so handsome."

He shakes his head, pulling me forward. "So, I've heard." Again, he rolls his eyes.

"How did I get so lucky?" I ask, not taking my eyes off the dark ones following my every move.

"You deserve to be happy, Katie. It has nothing to do with luck."

As soon as we're in front of Petey, he grabs my hand, pulling me close, kissing me firmly on the mouth.

Little fingers pat my face, and a sweet little voice calls out, "Momma."

Petey and I pull away from each other, turning to look at the little girl in his arms.

Emma smiles, pointing to the tiara on my head. "Pretty," she says quietly.

"It's very pretty on Mommy, isn't it?"

She nods, reaching up to touch her own.

"Daddy's one lucky guy to live with so many pretty girls."

The rest of the day goes by in a blur.

Later that night, I'm sitting with my niece, staring up at the twinkling lights hanging in the trees.

"Grandpa would have loved this," she says, turning to face me. "You and me, getting to raise our kids here together. With our friends and family."

"He would have. I know he always felt guilty for the childhood he couldn't give your mom," I tell her. "I think this," I wave my hand over the fairytale world in the trees, "was his way of making it up to her. By giving you the best one ever."

She smiles, wrapping her arms around herself. "It was the best. Mom might not have had a good childhood, but look at her now."

We glance over to where Jesse is sitting on a blanket, her grandbaby sleeping on her shoulder and her niece sound asleep in the cradle of her legs. Dirk is sitting beside them watching over her. They share a look, both happy and relaxed.

Charlotte and Emma squeal as Petey chases them around a tree. It draws our attention to them.

"He's a lot like Grandpa," Billie Rose says, nodding toward Petey. "Your girls are going to have the best childhood."

"Oh Mommy," Petey sing-songs. "I need your help rounding up these little trolls."

The girls giggle, running into the treehouse, slamming the door in his face. And then it hits me. The sudden realization that I've always belonged here. My gaze meets my sister's as I stand to join my husband in the shenanigans. She dips her head at me, and I return it. *This was our destiny from the moment she saved me from that dirty trailer.*

The Skulls might be a band of misfits, but we are each willing to set ourselves on fire to light the way for those we love.

The end

# Epilogue

## KATIE - FOUR WEEKS LATER

I'm standing in the middle of the kitchen at the warehouse, warming up a bottle. My gaze roams over the club members through the window. I notice one of the women walk over and crouch down beside Petey, shoving her thumb through the belt loop on the back of his jeans.

Petey's fucking hot, and I know this won't be the first or last time I have to put one of these women back in their place. I yank the bottle to my chest and storm outside.

Without looking at Jesse, I hand her the bottle and storm down the hill. Petey is already up, handing Emma to Big Dan. He doesn't look happy with the bitch, either. It's not him I'm worried about. I trust my husband. The woman sees me coming, but before she can stand, the bottom of my boot is in her chest. She blinks up at me as my foot rests between her fake fucking tits.

The woman starts to laugh as embarrassment stains her cheeks. "We all know you're not Mommy material. This proves it."

Her friend tries to warn her, "Shelia, stop."

I have the knife out of my boot and the woman's tongue pinched between

my fingers in less than two seconds. Oh, her eyes are wide now. Her fake lashes look like they're about to fly off her face. My blade taps over it, and I watch her tonsils bounce as she tries to swallow.

“Who brought her here?” I yell.

Her eyes rise over her head as she scans the group of men behind us.

One of the older club members pipes up. “It was me.”

“She a keeper?”

“Nope.”

“Sorry, sweetheart, but you are no longer welcome at the clubhouse.” I glance over at her friend. “Are you interested in any of the married men here?” She shakes her head feverishly. “Good. You can stay.”

When I pull my knife away, it nicks the tip of the bitch's tongue. I run my thumb over the blade before sucking it between my lips. “Keep my name out of your mouth, or you'll find me back in it. Do you understand?”

She holds her mouth, nodding.

“Don't come back.”

Scrambling to her feet, she runs to the man who invited her. He turns his back. One after one all the men in the club follow his lead, doing the same.

I raise to my full height, shoving my knife back in my boot, turning to look at my daughters. “Never let anyone disrespect you in your own home. You protect what's yours.”

The woman glances at the girls before resting her eyes back on me.

“At all costs,” I finish, spitting on the ground and then stalking away.

Jesse is smiling down at Ava when I pass her. “Amen, sister!” she hollers after me.

Calmly, I close the sliding door behind me and make my way to the laundry room. I brace my hands against the washing machine and wait.

Minutes tick by at a snail's pace before he steps in. The lock clicks loudly in my ears. I drop my head, his boots appearing on each side of my much smaller ones.

“I wasn't doubting us.”

His hand runs from the lower part of my back up my spine, stopping over the back of my neck, his fingers wrapping around it. “I know. You were protecting what was yours. I heard.”

His fingertips dig into my flesh, and slowly he pulls me against his chest. He speaks directly into my ear, his whiskers brushing over my cheek. “Don't let her words fuck with you. You're a great mother. No one expected you to quit being Katie just because you became a mom. Especially not me.”

I don't say anything. Because I am letting her words fuck with me. Real mothers don't behave the way I just did. She was right.

He pops the button on my pants, making me sigh. “Petey, you don't have to fuck me where I stand. I'm not doubting us.”

“No?” He places both of his hands at my hips before sliding my pants down to mid-thigh. Then, he shoves me forward with a hand to my head, pressing my cheek into the cold lid of the washing machine. His other hand palms my ass, his fingers digging in almost painfully.

“Who is us, exactly?” he asks me.

I stomp on his foot.

“Wrong answer.” His hand cracks over my ass.

I wish I could say I hated it, but it fucking lights a fire right between my thighs. “Fine, fuck, I hate you so much right now. Us is you and me.”

“Very good.” He rubs the sting away, the tip of his middle finger dipping inside me with each pass.

God, I've missed this. Needed it even. When we're parenting, we have to

be a team. But here, here is where we can spar. I enjoy the push and pull between us.

“And you doubted your ability to be a mother when she said that, didn’t you?”

My hips jerk against the washer when his hand stings across my ass. I wasn’t prepared for that one. “Fuck. Fine, I was doubting myself,” I say quickly when I see his hand rear back again.

He drops his hand and leans back, staring at me unabashedly. He runs his palms over my ass cheeks, spreading them apart. I start to argue, but he stops me.

“I’m going to fuck this ass, Kat. It’s going to serve as a reminder that you are still my hell cat, and I’m still your asshole. Kids won’t change that, but it doesn’t mean we won’t be good parents. We can parent and still be the enforcers of the club.”

He runs his thumb through my soaking cunt before pressing it against my asshole.

“You’re the enforcer, not me.”

I suck air between my teeth when he slips it in. He chuckles. “Oh, you’re tight here, Kat. This is going to be fun.”

Holding perfectly still, I begin to beg. “Please.”

“Please what? Please stop? Please stick more of it in?” He leans over my back as he speaks, his thumb sliding farther inside me. “Please give me another finger? My cock perhaps? Which is it, Kat?”

His other hand slides around my hip, dipping between my thighs to rub me lightly. I can’t speak with his finger this far in my butt. It feels ... it feels ...

He shoves his thumb all the way in. When I still don’t answer, he pulls his thumb out, only to quickly shove back in with two fingers.

“Oh fuck!” I yell, rising on my toes.

“Hmm, this is the first time I’ve ever been able to silence you. I’ll just have to start guessing which one it is. We’re narrowing it down. If this isn’t it,” he pauses to watch his fingers pump in and out of me a few times before sliding a third in, “that only leaves one thing. Do you want my cock in here? Is that it, baby?”

My eyes roll into my head when he pinches my clit between his finger and thumb.

He chuckles darkly, pulling out of me. I groan loudly, just on the edge of orgasm.

“Don’t you dare fucking come,” he orders, his fist bumping against my ass as he pumps his cock a few times before lining it up with my asshole.

“I can’t ...” I manage to whisper.

“Oh, I think you can.” He slides his cock over my cunt a few times. I bite my lip to keep from coming.

He holds the base of his cock and pushes just the tip inside me.

“Oh, oh Petey.” My legs begin to tremble, and I push off the washer which only shoves him deeper inside of me.

He thrusts all the way, pulling me against him. His hand rubs my pussy while the other wraps around my throat. “Come.”

“Oh god. Oh fuck,” I rasp, his fingers tightening, cutting off my oxygen. His cock hardens as he pumps into me. He slips two fingers into my pussy as I continue to ride the longest orgasm I’ve ever had.

My head falls forward as he brutally thrusts into me from behind, my toes lifting off the floor each time he bottoms out.

“You feel so fucking good, woman,” he growls, removing his hand from my throat to squeeze at my breast.



I suck in a breath. “Oh god.” Wave after wave hits me before he lifts me clean off my feet, coming inside my ass with a loud guttural groan.

“Fuck, I’ll never get enough of you, Kat.”

We fall forward against the washer, his chest landing against my back. We pant, each struggling to catch our breath.

“I don’t know about you, but I needed that.” He chuckles, shaking us both.

A loud knock on the door makes us jump.

“Mommy, I need your help,” Charlotte calls from the other side.

“Be right there, sweetie!” I holler back as Petey reaches over my head to grab some paper towels. He cleans us up quickly as we right ourselves. He’s still washing up in the sink when I swing the door open, drying my hands.

Charlotte shifts from foot to foot, shoving her hands in her pockets.

“What’s wrong?” I pull her over to the kitchen table.

“You know how you said we have to protect what’s ours at all costs?”

I wince, remembering what she just witnessed me do. I’m sure it scared her. What was I thinking? “Yeah, baby, about that –” I start.

“I did something mean yesterday.” She looks at her freshly painted nails. “But I did it to protect what was mine.”

My gaze roams over her head to Petey. He’s wiping his hands off on a paper towel behind her. He freezes, instant concern pulling at his brows. Oh god. If someone hurt her, he’s going to go ballistic.

Taking a deep breath, I turn back to her. “Okay, baby girl. What did you do?”

She runs her little finger over the little dragonfly painted on her thumb.

“Did Kelsie paint these for you?” I ask, trying to get her to loosen up.

Charlotte nods as Petey drops to a knee behind her, pulling her back to sit on his leg. “You can tell us. I promise you won’t get in trouble.”

“Well, you know those girls who called me Wednesday?”

I nod. “I remember. Are they picking on you again?”

“No. They were being mean to Kelsie.”

“What did they do to her?” Petey asks.

She shrugs. “I went to get her in the locker room when she didn’t come out after school, and they were laughing at her. She was crying, Daddy, but she told me not to tell anyone.”

“Okay, so what did you do that was bad?”

Her sadness dissipates, and a grin tugs at the corner of her little mouth. “You know that stuff Uncle Jackson put in Uncle Brody’s underwear last weekend?”

Petey looks at me. I think we both know where this is going.

“Well.” She tips her head innocently. “I may have borrowed some and put it in the girl’s cheerleading shorts.”

Jackson barks out a laugh behind us. He’s standing in the doorway. “Oh god, that’s priceless. Way to go, kid.” He walks over and gives her a high five.

“Honey, that wasn’t very nice,” Petey scolds gently.

“Hey now, Dad. The kid is a Skull, and her mother *did* just tell her to protect what was hers at all costs. And Kelsie is her family, so ...” He holds out his hands.

Charlotte nods, happy to have an ally.

“You’re on her side because it was *your* itching powder she got her hands on,” I remind him.

He shrugs, taking a drink of his beer. “You’ll be happy to know your evil plan worked.” He points his bottle at Charlotte. “I heard the whole team was

itching their cooters at the game last night. They had to leave the court during the basketball game.”

Charlotte starts giggling, and fuck, I do too.

Petey scowls at me.

“What? The bitches deserved it.”

She jumps off his lap and wraps her arms around my neck. “I knew you’d understand.”

Petey’s eyebrow raises.

“Jackson is right. She’s a little Skull ... and we protect what’s ours.”

“Yeah, and Grandpa would have wanted me to put that itchy stuff in their underwear.”

“Your Grandpa?” I ask.

“Yeah, Grandpa Bill.” She kisses me on the cheek.

Jackson crouches beside us, pointing to his back. “Hop on, kid. The treasure hunt is getting ready to start, and you’re on my team. We’ve got to find it before Elijah’s team does.”

She giggles hopping on his back, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Is Willow on our team, too?”

“Of course.” They both wave at us as they step outside.

Petey stands, pulling me against his chest.

“She’s too much like her momma.” He swats my ass.

“Ow.” I rub my ass, staring down the hall toward the front door.

The day I walked through that door, I knew I’d walked into a castle. It still feels that way. I lean back and stare up at Petey. “I love you,” I tell my very own dark prince.

“I love you, too, Kat.” He presses his lips to mine.

“I have a present for you.” I pull away, reaching in my back pocket for the

folded-up patch I had made for him. “I talked to Jackson, and they’re giving you a new patch.” I hand it to him.

He unfolds it, keeping his eyes on me as he does. When he finally looks at it, I take a step back. His gaze slowly rises to meet mine.

Blinking at him innocently, I slide a few more feet away.

His gaze darkens.

“Don’t like it?” I ask.

His gaze darkens even more, if that’s possible. “I’ll love it when it’s wrapped around my dick, but it’s not going on the back of my cut.” He takes his new ‘Property of Kat’ patch and palms it roughly over his growing erection. “This little stunt is being added to my tally.”

My grin widens, and I bump against the wall as I continue to back away. “I was counting on it.” Taunting Petey will never get old.

“I’ll give you a two-second head start.” He shoves the patch in his pocket. “Run.”

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# About the Author

LM Terry is simply a crazy Gemini, writing stories that contain both light and dark elements. Her novels will take you on an emotional roller coaster. But when you get off, she promises it will be with a happy ever after. LM Terry lives in a small town in the heart of the United States. She is a wife, mother, and book lover. You will find her most days with her head in the clouds.

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