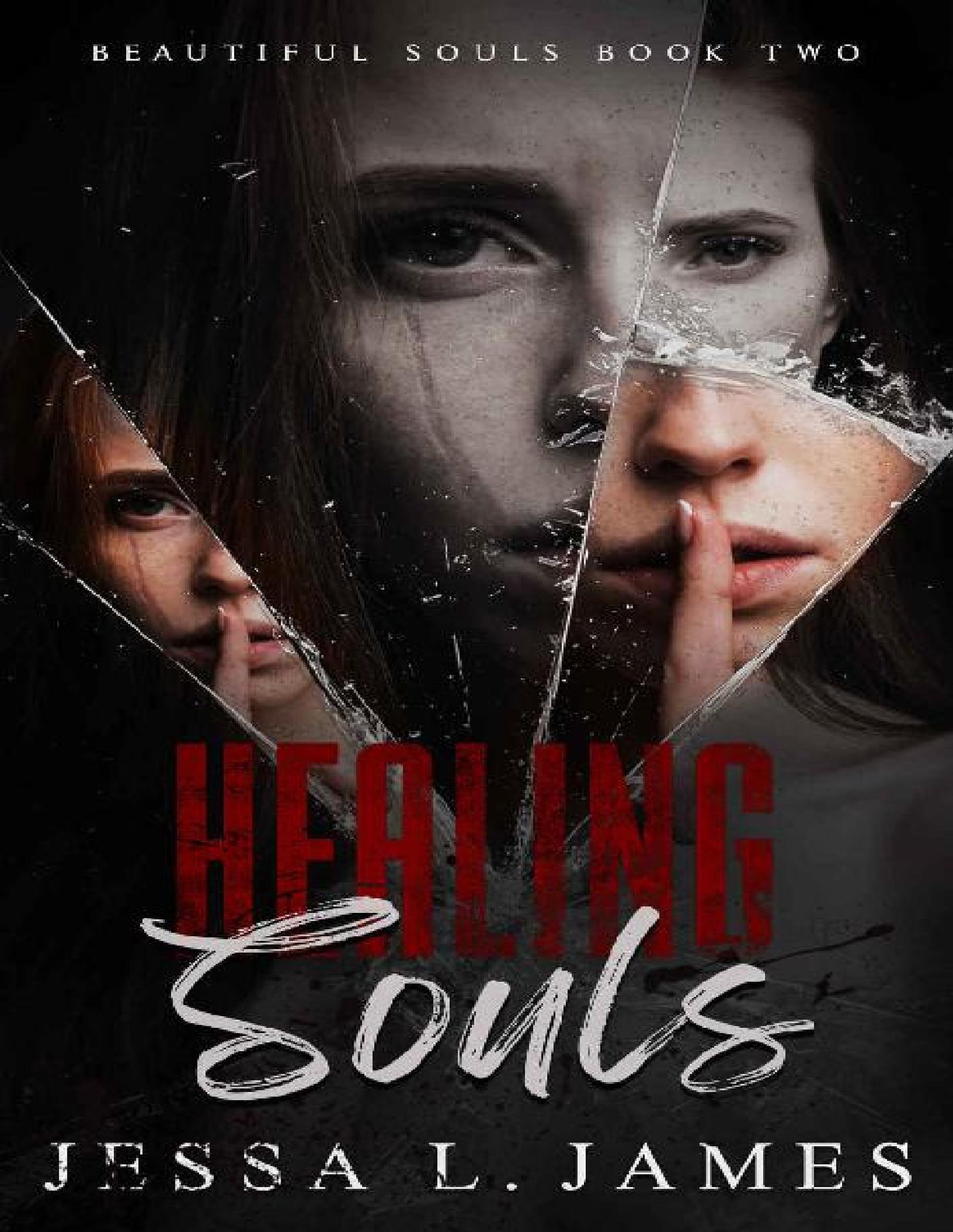


BEAUTIFUL SOULS BOOK TWO



HEALING
Souls

JESSA L. JAMES

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Healing Souls

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Author's Note

Welcome back to Harley's and her boys story! Remember that this is book two out of four and will end on cliffhanger.

Please be mindful of the **triggers** below. These are the warnings for book two but please note that there will be more as things escalate through the series. ***Mentions of rape, mentions of self harm, death, torture, flashbacks of abuse, parental abuse, murder, sexual assault, panic attacks, depression, mentions of sex trafficking, violence, and foul language. Suitable for mature audiences 18+***

Jessa L. James

Sons of Silence MC Characters

Ranking Officers

Rage (Gabriel) - President
Sugar (Colton) - Vice President
Axe (Jackson) - Road Captain
Stone - Sergeant at Arms
Blade (Noah) - Enforcer
Nerds - Tech Guru

Others at the Club

Blade has custody of "the boys"— Cayden (Blade's brother), Ryker, and
Grayson

Prospects – Connor, Daniel, and Parker

Club Sluts - Carly, Maya, Rachel

Playlist

Spotify Playlist

Train Wreck by James Arthur

Are You With Me by nilu

Demons by Lucha

Surrender by Natalie Taylor

Mercy by Lewis Capaldi

Ready To Die by Lucha

Carry You by Ruelle, Fleurie

Broken by Isak Danielson

If the World Was Ending by JP Saxe, Julia Michaels

Half A Man by Dean Lewis

Sorry by Halsey

Falling Apart by Michael Schulte

Us by James Bay

Control by Zoe Wees

Till Forever Falls Apart by Ashe, FINNEAS

Serendipity by lewloh, Julia Gartha

Lost Boy by Ruth B.

hostage by Billie Eilish

My Blood by Ellie Goulding

I'll Be Good by Jaymes Young

Unknown

Six Months Ago

Walking into our small, abandoned warehouse that we took over a few years ago when we had to move clubs, I can't help the grin that spreads across my lips.

Our weekly Friday club party is in full swing, and I wander around checking in on my guys. The main space is a simple open room where we added an old bar for the sluts to serve us drinks from, and the guys found some tables and old couches to add to the room. We may be one of the smallest clubs around, but we're as close as family here. Which is why you usually see one or two—or even sometimes *three*—guys railing a whore that is spread out on a table.

I smirk as I pass my Vice President and Enforcer banging a girl together who is tied face-down to the table with a gag in her mouth. Her back is oozing blood from the knife wounds I know came from my VP, who loves a

little blood play. This would be even more perfect if I had my own whore. But I don't. *Yet.*

Anger at the whole situation simmers beneath my skin, and I spot a bitch not doing her fucking job, so I put her to fucking work.

“Whore, get the fuck over here and get on your knees,” I demand, snapping my fingers.

She walks over to me where I stand in the center of the room and immediately drops to her knees, placing her hands behind her back in submission. She tips her head back and opens her mouth with her tongue sticking out.

An evil smirk curls my lips. “Someone is an eager little bitch tonight. Are the other guys not giving you enough attention?” I tsk, taking my dick out and smacking it against her cheek a few times before shoving it down her throat.

I groan and grip the back of her head, slamming into her mouth over and over again. She gags, and tears stream down her face as my balls slap against her chin. Getting close to cumming, I hold her head down on my dick, feeling her throat constrict around the head as she tries to breathe. Her eyes widen in panic, but she keeps her hands behind her back like the good whore she is. We train them well here.

Tipping my head back, I shut my eyes and picture who *should* be on their knees choking on my dick. “Oh fuck, Harley, your mouth is perfect,” I groan, and cum spurts out down her throat and all over her face as I pull out.

Tucking my dick away, I walk off, leaving the whore to do whatever it is she does. I head down the one hallway in this place and slip into my office. As soon as I take a seat at my desk, the burner phone sitting on it buzzes.

Seeing that it's my inside man at Sons of Silence MC, I quickly scoop it up and answer, eager for my update.

"Do you have her?" he whispers down the line, his breathing heavy like he's just been running.

I sit up straight in my chair and grip the edge of the desk with my free hand, sneering down the line, "Have fucking who, prospect?"

"The girl." He hesitates before whispering, "Harley."

Have her? What the fuck is he talking about? "No," I seethe. "She's locked away with that fucking bitch Tammy."

He mumbles a quick *fuck* before saying, "No, she got out. The club was looking for her. I couldn't get much information, but it looks like she found a way to run away about two weeks ago." There's rustling in the background amidst the sound of loud voices, and he quickly says, "I have to go. I'll keep you updated if I find out more."

He hangs up the phone just as I squeeze it and let out a growl, tossing the stupid burner at the wall. "God fucking damnit!" I scream.

This is why she should have been with me. Not fucking her. But Tammy refused to listen to me when I told her that. No, that bitch just had to have Harley for some reason.

I take out my personal cell and call the bitch. When she answers, I immediately lay into her, my rage mounting at her letting a stupid little girl escape. "This is why she should have been with me. You couldn't even keep her locked away," I seethe.

Tammy sighs, "The bitch got sneaky. We're looking for her, but we have a plan. I told you, you can't have her. She has another purpose. If you find her, you have to report it to me and leave her alone. She isn't yours anymore."

My lips curl back over my teeth. "Yes, the fuck she is. She has been mine

for three years. You have just kept her away from me. She is *mine!*” I yell into the phone as my free hand slams down against the wooden desk. Taking a breath, I lower my voice and say, “And when I find her, you will never see her again. I didn’t put in all that work three years ago just for you to swoop in and ruin it for me.” I hang up the phone, shaking my head at her stupidity.

Fuck her. She has changed so much over the years that I don’t even know who she is anymore. Tammy used to look up to me, but now she thinks she’s better than I am. I’ll prove her wrong by finding my prize and claiming her in front of *everyone*.

A hint of a smile creeps over my face. Oh, how I wish her mother were alive to watch me defile her daughter in front of everyone. It will be a show to remember.

Four Months Ago

Standing across the street in the shadows, I watch as she moves around in the upstairs room. The curtains are still open, and it’s dark out, so with the light on I can watch Harley here at Brielle’s house.

With it being a home on the fucking beach, I can’t see anything from the back of the house, since there would be nowhere for me to stay out of sight, which ended up working in my favor when I realized Harley’s room is at the front. With a two-lane road in between the houses that line the beach and the trees on the other side of the street, it leaves the perfect spot for me to hide and watch undetected.

It didn't take me long to figure out where Harley ran off to. That's one of the perks of having connections with other MCs. But the downside is I can't fucking get to her.

If I was still with the bitches at Sons of Silence MC, I could easily just go in and grab her, but I'm not anymore. Not since Killer died and they decided to turn it into a club full of pussies. So now my buddies and I made our own club, but we're small. There are only ten of us, so whether I want to or not, I have to respect the territory that Brielle is in. Her father is a part of another MC here in Virginia, and he would come after and easily destroy us if I tried taking Harley from here.

So for now, the bitch is fucking protected. But we will keep watching until she makes a mistake. She'll leave this area soon enough, and then I will finally get my hands on what is mine.

Harley Brielle St. James.

Your mother screamed so beautifully for me. Will you do the same?

Will you bleed like she did? Will you flinch at the feel of the cool knife when I run it along your cunt before I shove it deep inside you?

Will you beg me for mercy just like she did?

I groan and adjust my cock in my jeans, thinking about all the things I will do to Harley when she's in my hands. She will be perfect, just like her mother.

Chapter One

RAGE (GABRIEL)

Present Day

It's not possible. It just can't be. There's a reason I've kept myself isolated all these years. The fear of losing someone again is too strong. To have something ripped away in front of my eyes, the guilt sits heavy on my chest. It's never gone away. I should've done more. I *could've* done more.

Why the fuck didn't I do more? How is it possible to find out my daughter is alive within the same hour she shows up here, gun in hand, and murder in her eyes?

There hasn't been a day that's gone by where I haven't thought about *them*. Lilian Thomas. The only person besides my brothers that I ever felt a connection to. She understood me on a different level. Just from one weekend I knew without a doubt that Lilian was the one for me. And then she was ruthlessly ripped away by my father.

Except she wasn't. She outsmarted him. She got away and ran. She had our baby and raised her. She died three years ago, leaving our little one with no parents. How is any of this real? It can't be.

“Rage! Come on, brother. I really need ya to pull it together right now. You can process this all later!” The slap to my cheek is enough to draw me back into the now and the chaos ensuing around me. “I know this is a lot to process, but you've gotta pull it together, brother.” My eyes blink as I focus on Sugar, who stands in front of me gripping my shoulders. “Good. Get it together.”

I nod slowly and take in everything happening. The second the gun went off, my ears began ringing, and I was frozen to the spot as I watched Grayson run forward and help lower Harley to the ground.

But now, everyone is frantic around me even as I stand frozen in the center of the room. Ryker ripped Daniel out of the chair he was set up in while healing from his own wound—inflicted by Nerds—and is beating him to a bloody pulp, but I can't make myself move my feet to stop it. The same fury courses through me as I watch everything play out. Enjoying each grunt of pain from Daniel.

My eyes find Grayson again, and when I see the mounds of red hair next to him, I finally get my legs moving and rush over to them, dropping to the other side of Harley across from Grayson.

He looks up at me, unshed tears turning his eyes glossy. His face is set in a deep frown as he looks back down at Harley. “She passed out. Sugar told me to put pressure on this and that Doc was on his way,” he says quietly, sullen.

Doc, our resident doctor who really is a doctor has been around for many, many years. He doesn't technically work for the club anymore but is still

always around to help us if we need it. Like now. And hell if we can't be thankful for that.

My chest feels like a ton of bricks weighs down on it, making it hard to breathe, making it hard to feel anything other than anger, and even as I glance down at Harl—my daughter—the feeling doesn't subside. My hand shakily moves up to her neck and presses in right at her pulse point, feeling the strong, steady beat of her heart. I exhale and let my eyes fall shut, processing that she's alive, and she really is here.

“Rage?” a soft voice questions. Cracking open my eyes, I meet Grayson's questioning gaze. He scans my face and opens his mouth a few times as if figuring out what to ask, so I speak first.

“She's... she's my daughter.” The words seem foreign to me as I speak them aloud.

I glance back down at the redheaded little spitball who came in here with a gun raised, ready to kill me. I shake my head, not prepared to figure that out yet, and instead really examine her for the first time.

She is tiny, five foot something, just like her mother was. She has her mom's beautiful red wavy locks, but her face looks like mine. The same cheeks, nose, lips, the way her face contorted with fury when she saw me. It was almost like looking into a mirror but with Lilian's eyes and hair instead of my own.

His brows dip in confusion. “What do you mean, she's your daughter?” Grayson's hands falter for a split second before he applies pressure again.

I shake my head and sigh, a million different things running through my mind, but I can't process it all right now. Not when all I really want is to fucking destroy the person who dared pull a trigger on my daughter.

“We will discuss it later. After Doc gets her stable, I want to take her to my

home, and then I have a prospect to deal with.” Venom drips from my voice as I glance behind Grayson’s shoulder to see Stone holding Ryker back. He’s covered in blood, and the prospect is on the ground with Axe helping him clean his face. At that, my rage truly shows as I stand quickly to storm over to them. Shoving Axe away from Daniel, I glare at him. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Axe’s eyes narrow on me. “What do you mean, what the fuck am I doing? Ryker just beat the shit out of the poor kid, so I’m helping him.” He speaks slowly, like he is trying to calm a rabid animal.

“No,” I spit.

“No?” Axe tilts his head at me.

“He shot my fucking daughter. He deserves worse than a few punches from Ryker.”

“Brother—” Blade steps up next to Axe, his hands raised carefully. “Maybe take a breath or two? I’m the last person to vote against hurting someone, but he didn’t know what was happening behind the scenes. He was protecting his prez.”

My fists clench at my sides, and I take a menacing step toward Blade. “I am the president, and what I say fucking goes. Daniel *will* be fucking punished for shooting *my* fucking daughter. End of discussion,” I seethe.

I spin around to face Daniel again but come face to face with Sugar instead. Narrowing my eyes, I silently dare him to challenge me.

Sugar crosses his arms. “Don’t give me that fuckin’ look. Now isn’t the goddamn time to be doing anything, so how about Stone and Axe take him down to the cells, and you go tend to your daughter?”

My eyes jump over Sugar’s shoulder to see Doc with Ryker, Grayson, and Nerds. Ryker slowly lifts Harley into his arms and starts heading towards the

small medical room we have here. Shouldering past Sugar, I head straight for them.

“How is she?” I ask Doc, not taking my eyes off Harley.

He flashes me a sympathetic look. “She’ll be okay. It was through and through. I need to use our ultrasound machine to check for any internal damage, but based on the bleeding, I think I will be able to stitch her right up.” He slaps my shoulder and starts to walk down the hall.

I place my hand on Ryker’s shoulder, taking a slow, deep breath. “As soon as Doc is done, bring her to my house, got it?”

Ryker narrows his eyes, but Grayson intercepts. “No problem.” He nods and pushes Ryker to keep walking.

Whirling around, I find most of my ranking officers and Daniel left in the room. Locking eyes with Sugar, I clench my fists. “Fine. Take him to the fucking cells. But this isn’t finished with. And you all better watch your fucking mouths because I have the final say in what happens to *him*,” I sneer.

The only reason I’m not throwing the prospect outside and beating him until he’s gasping for his last breath is because I need to be there for my daughter and I need more fucking answers as to what is happening.

Heading down the hall that holds the stairs for the basement and a few closets, I soon reach the small medical room we have. It’s not much, but over time Doc has brought supplies from the hospital to keep here, and we have three small beds lined up along the wall with cabinets across from them. Harley lays on the one closest to the door with Ryker and Grayson on one side and Doc on the other, who is currently stitching her up.

“How is she?” I ask, attempting to keep the rage bubbling inside of me under wraps for now.

He nods towards his work. “No internal damage. Honestly, the girl got

really fucking lucky. A few stitches on each side and she's all set."

I nod and stand at the foot of the bed. As soon as Doc is done, I step up next to Ryker by her side and gently scoop her into my arms. *My daughter*. Fuck. Walking out of the medical room, I head back towards the main room and out the back door with Ryker and Grayson close behind me.

Luckily, I live on the compound, my house sitting basically in the backyard of the main building. I was the first house to be built out here. It's small, but it works for me. Plus, most of the time I stay in my room in the clubhouse. But someday, I want all the members to have homes here and make this a community for our families.

Because my dad was wrong about that. Family doesn't make you weak; it strengthens you. You have something worth fighting for.

And the best part is you get to pick your family. It doesn't have to be blood.

We head up my back porch steps and into my house. I walk straight through the kitchen and dining room area, pivoting to the left where a small hallway is.

It holds four doors, a bathroom, a closet, and two bedrooms. I have the master bedroom to myself, so I take Harley into the other room and lay her down on the bed. Grayson, who has stayed over here before, quickly finds a blanket in the closet and covers Harley with it.

Ryker walks over to the desk that sits in the far corner of the room and pulls out the chair before plopping down and meeting my eyes.

He levels me with a serious look. "Don't ask me to leave. I won't. Gray told me she's your daughter, but that changes nothing," Ryker says. There is defiance in his tone as well as subtle challenge, daring me to say something to him about it.

I try to hide my smirk but fail. "Well, if she is my kid, I won't have a say in

who she allows around her. But if things go anywhere, you can bet your ass we will be having a talk.”

Ryker gives a sharp nod, never taking his eyes off Harley. My eyes drift back down to her, taking in her innocent face. As she lays passed out, she looks so fragile, but I know she is far from that. It doesn't bother me that the boys will stick around her. I've known them for years and trust them. I saw how attached they grew to her in the short time they came to know her last year, so I know they will protect her.

Doc comes into the room with a new IV bag and lets us know she is dehydrated. Once he has it set up, he gestures for all three of us to leave the room. “Alright, she's all good to go for now. We just need to let her rest. I will come check on her again soon. Let's go out to the kitchen to talk,” he directs, nodding towards the door.

We slowly leave the room with Ryker taking longer to leave, but Grayson nudges him forward, deep frowns set on both of their faces as they follow us out. Normally, I'd be one of the first people to reassure them, but I don't even know how to help myself right now.

After a quick text to Nerds, he shows up with some of the others in tow, and we all gather around the kitchen and table. The boys sit at the island in the kitchen while Sugar, Nerds, Blade, and I sit around the table that seats four. Nerds fills us in about Lilian; turns out any news articles you look up currently say that she died in a house fire three years ago. But all records of Harley have been wiped away. He assumes that has something to do with Tammy, since Harley's birth certificate is fake and has Tammy and Richard on it.

Nerds hesitates. “I'm going to keep looking into everything and see what else I can find, but our best answers will come from her when she wakes up.

Just... uh, personal advice from someone who has been out for a while then woke up confused... be gentle. Soothing. Maybe one person at a time. Grayson or Ryker would probably be best since she might recognize them, and we don't know why she was trying to shoot you, Rage. So maybe stay back a little, just until we get answers," he explains nervously rubbing the back of his neck.

I hate it. I want to fucking scream at him. I will not stay away from my child. When I've lost what? Sixteen or seventeen years? Hell no.

But I get it. So I let out a breath and nod. I'll stay back, but I won't be far. I need to hear her voice. See her eyes. God, Lilian. I haven't thought of her in so many years. It gutted me when they told me they found her and killed her all those years ago.

I blink hard, making sure I don't cry in front of my brothers. But this hurts differently than anything else I've gone through. There is a turmoil of emotions I can't even begin to understand swirling around inside me. I'm angry, confused, sad, heartbroken. Rubbing my temples, I let my mind wander, attempting to understand everything happening as the others talk around me.

Ryker decides that he wants to sit with her for the night in case she wakes up. Before he even gets up to go down the hall, an ear-piercing scream sounds. My chair clatters to the ground as I jump up and sprint down the hall, my hand immediately gripping my gun in the back of my pants and yanking it out.

But the second I reach the bedroom door and yank it open, I come to a screeching halt, causing someone behind me to run into my back, and let out a curse.

This time, there is nothing I can do to stop the tears that slowly track down

my cheeks.

I may be a thirty-five-year-old hard ass president of a MC that used to deal with very dangerous men and still does occasionally. But none of that, or anything I've gone through in my life, compares to the pain I feel seeing my child hurt like this.

Screaming.

Arms flailing.

Body-wracking shakes.

More screaming.

Tears running down her cheeks.

Another scream.

Silent sobbing. It's like her throat has been damaged and it pains her to cry out, but she can't stop it.

It's then that I realize Ryker and Grayson have shoved past me and are trying to talk to her, but she can't hear them. She can't hear any of us. She's not awake. She's stuck in a nightmare.

It's keeping her captive, and she can't get out.

Scream.

Silence.

Chapter Two

CAYDEN



One Hour After Shooting

I knew the second that I touched Steph at school today I screwed up. But following through was important. I need to get my head on straight and stop thinking about everything that is happening with my brothers and Harley being gone.

Running usually helps. I could normally come out here and run for hours and let my mind go blank, but today, it isn't working. It's been almost three hours and now that it's dark outside, I'm ready to give up for the night.

As Bear and I are jogging back up to the clubhouse, goosebumps break out on my skin, causing my hair to stand on end. I walk through the main doors slowly and immediately freeze. Bear sniffs and then lets out a low growl. Taking in the main room that now has blood splattered on the floor, I notice that no one is around and some of the tables and chairs are knocked over or pushed aside.

Going on high alert, I grab Bear's collar and slowly inch further into the room but pause when I hear footsteps coming from the far hallway.

Before I can even think of what to do in this situation when I have no weapons on me, Axe rounds the corner coming into the main room, frowning down at his phone.

"What the fuck happened?" I growl out, louder than I mean to.

Axe jolts slightly and slips his phone into his pocket as he looks from Bear to me, and then to the blood on the floor. His gaze darkens.

Sighing he runs a hand through his hair. It's usually styled perfectly slicked back, but right now it's a mess. "Harley showed up—" I hear nothing he says after my body freezes up. The blood... Harley is here... But she's not here now...

Cutting off whatever he is saying, I snap, "Where is she?"

He narrows his eyes at me, his arms crossing over his chest. "Listen to me, kid, and I'll explain."

I take a deep breath and nod, knowing I need to hear whatever he has to say. No point in rushing this.

He stares me down for a minute before nodding and speaking again, "She came in here raising a gun at Rage. Rage was trying to get her to put it down, but before he could, prospect Daniel shot her."

I feel my anger boiling under my skin, and I tense up. *I'll kill him.*

Axe hurries to explain, “She’s okay. Luckily, it went straight through. They took her to Rage’s house because Nerds found out right before she got here that Rage is her father.”

My eyebrows raise towards my hairline as I process this information. Holy shit. That just made everything so much more complicated. But then my mind goes back to the prospect. “Where’s Daniel?”

He grunts at that. “He is down in the cells. Stone is guarding them until Rage is ready to go down there and come to his senses.”

“What are you talking about?”

Axe takes a second to scan my features before he huffs and tosses his arms up in the air. “Fuck, everyone around here is insane. You’re not seeing Daniel, so whatever plan you have cooking up in that fucking brain of yours, squash it.”

Knowing Daniel is at least locked away for now, I let thoughts of beating him until he is gasping for breath go. My mind is racing with thoughts of Harley and the fact that she is here. Not only that, but the blood on the ground belongs to her. She should never fucking bleed. I need to fucking see for myself that she is here and okay.

“I’m going to the house,” I mutter as I stomp past him. Axe gives an understanding nod and goes back to whatever he was doing on his phone.

Quickly walking out the backdoor and straight across the yard to Rage’s house, I let myself inside and find Rage, Nerds, Sugar, Noah, and Grayson sitting in the kitchen.

All eyes turn to me as I come in. “Where is she?” I grunt, growing tired of using my voice.

“She’s in the guest room. Ryker is sitting with her right now. She’s not doing well—mentally anyway. She woke up, but not actually—”

I snap, “What the fuck does that mean?”

Noah narrows his eyes at me. “Don’t fucking interrupt me and you’ll know. Cool it or get the fuck out of the house.” I offer a sharp nod, and he continues. “She woke up screaming and thrashing in the bed. She ripped her stitches out. Luckily Doc hadn’t left yet, so he fixed them and gave her a sedative.

“It was like she was stuck in a nightmare or something. She was screaming out *no* and *Mother* and *not again*. Her voice was hoarse and raw. She gripped Ryker’s hand before the sedative kicked in, so he stayed with her. But it took most of us to keep her down on the bed.”

Noah spins a switchblade in his hand, his eyes hardened with unbridled fury: his mask to cover how hurt and bothered he really is.

I should’ve been here. I should’ve been helping. *But I can’t.*

I turn and head down the hall to the guest room. I slowly open the door, finding Ryker, his eyes immediately jumping to mine. He nods and then looks back at Harley. I walk in and go to the other side of the bed. She looks... so small and fragile.

I can’t help but stare at her. I’d almost forgotten how gorgeous she is. I glance down and see Ryker holding her still hand. It pulls me from the warm feeling that was rising in my chest.

I still have to stay away. I can’t let myself fall for a girl who already has my brother wrapped around her finger. He is crazy obsessive, and I know he already loves her. It pains me to walk away from her, but I know I can’t do anything about these feelings. It doesn’t matter that I’ve never felt this way before. I’d rather hurt myself than ever hurt my brother.

My eyes roam over her one more time, then I lean down and lightly kiss her cheek. I look back up and see Ryker staring at me as if he can read every

emotion I am feeling on my face. I know he wants to say something but is holding himself back.

“Take care of her,” I murmur.

He nods, furrowing his brows. “Of course I will. I will always take care of her.”

With one last glance, I walk out of the room knowing I have to stuff my feelings so far down I never feel them again. I go back out to the kitchen where everyone is still at and take a seat, waiting for the conversation they are having to end.

Nerds is currently filling them in about everything he learned, which wasn't much.

“Lilian died three years ago in a house fire. There isn't anything about where Harley was or what happened to her during it. After the fire, Harley disappeared. I can't find anything else until she got enrolled in school last year, but I'll keep digging. I have a feeling Tammy has something to do with all of this.”

“So how do we know for sure that she is Rage's kid?” Noah asks.

Nerds shrugs. “Her original birth certificate. I found it. Whoever was covering everything up didn't try to have that one destroyed. They just made a new one with Tammy's and Richard's names. They did have her legal last name changed to Wilson, so my guess is that they have someone at the station in their pocket.”

Sugar scowls, shaking his head. “I wouldn't be surprised if the police department has someone tangled up in the sex trafficking stuff. They've kept things under wraps for too many years not to have at least one person in this. Whether they are directly involved or just on the payroll to cover shit up,” he seethes with mounting rage.

That same rage courses through me. It's disgusting, and I'd like to destroy every single person that is helping with this shit. Take them down slowly and watch them crumble to ashes one by one.

Nerds clears his throat, breaking up the rising tension in the room as everyone simmers. "I am going to head back to the club if you don't need me for anything else. I'd like to dive into this more and see what else I can dig up. Maybe I'll be able to track down who actually helped them clear Harley's files, and then we can try to get answers out of them."

Rage sighs. "Yeah, you're good to go for now. Let me know the second you find anything. And please get some rest too. Don't work yourself to death. We will need you at your best."

Nerds nods and bids farewell to everyone before stepping out.

"So, what's the plan for the prospect? We should deal with that. It's not like we can just leave him down there forever," Noah retorts with a pointed look at Rage.

"He can stay right where he fucking is," Rage growls.

Running a hand through his hair, Sugar blows out a tentative breath. "Rage, you have to look at this as the club president right now. Not as an overprotective and scared father."

I don't comment, but now that I have seen with my own eyes that Harley is okay and understanding what happened, I get why he did it. It doesn't mean I'm less pissed. But I do understand. He did the right thing by club standards, but I don't think Rage is going to see that right now.

I glance at my brother, who of course is already staring at me and cocks a brow when he sees me looking back at him. Letting out a grunt, I pull my phone out, needing a break from talking right now, and text Noah.

Me: Let Rage go down and see him. Hear what Daniel has to say. That might help a little. But we know better than anyone how blind you can become to the truth when all you want is someone to point the finger for what happened. Even if it was no one's fault.

Noah reads my text and then lets out a whistle to get everyone's attention because Rage and Sugar have come to a stand-off about what to do.

“Alright, listen up, fuckers. Rage, you have to cool it, man. The club needs you to be our president still. Let's all go down and talk to Daniel. Give him a chance to explain his thought process. Rage, you will have to just listen to him. Give him a chance like you would anyone else. You are letting your *literal* rage rule you right now. I don't even think this is fully about Daniel,” Noah says, his eyes softening as he watches his president's shoulders drop with defeat.

He stares at the entrance to the hall, and like always, Grayson seems to immediately know where his train of thought goes.

“Ry can stay with her,” he assures Rage. “I doubt we can even get him to leave her right now, anyway. He already got his pound of flesh, and he won't stay calm enough to be down there. I'll stay too and text you right away if anything changes with Harley.”

Grayson, always the voice of reason. Always the one to help calm people down. He's the best at taming Ryker, but his soothing voice and naturally relaxed demeanor really helps everyone.

Rage agrees with him and then he, Sugar, and Noah all get up to go. I stand too, not planning on staying here. Noah glances at me. “You coming with us?” I nod. He turns to look at Rage, who gives a head tilt. “Alright.”

We all head out Rage's front door and walk back up towards the main building. As we get close to the side of the building, we veer off into the woods where a short path is. It leads back to a small shed that houses random outdoor tools for maintaining the property. Behind it is a cellar door that leads down to our cells. The same ones Ryker was just in not that long ago. From what Noah has told us, the cells don't get used as often, but they still need them sometimes.

Stone is standing outside the door and nods at us before opening it up, heading down first. As soon as we reach the bottom of the steps, I spot Daniel sitting on the floor of a cell.

The anger I thought had calmed within me skyrockets. No matter the reasoning, he still shot Harley. No one should fucking shoot her.

I shove past everyone else that came down ahead of me and go straight to his cell. But of course, it's locked. I stand there staring him down, and he gives me a tiny smirk; the fucker has always been cocky. I doubt anyone else even notices it, but I do. And I don't like it.

Noah walks up to me and puts his hand on my shoulder, applying pressure so I will take a few steps back. I don't think I want to kill him now. I just want some of the anger inside of me to dissipate, and I know that would happen if I just got a few good hits in to the cocky ass prospect. Especially knowing he's going to think he's the shit now for having saved our prez.

Rage steps up in front of the cell. "Want to tell me why the hell you thought it was okay to shoot a young girl?" he says in a deadly tone that even sends chills down my spine.

I'll give Daniel credit; he has balls of steel to not cower at Rage's tone, but also something seems off about it to me. Anyone in his position would be terrified, and he doesn't even look fazed.

Blade lets out a huff and rolls his eyes as he watches Rage, but he doesn't say anything. Which is surprising. My brother loves to give his opinion on fucking everything. Which means they are just letting Rage do this in the hopes it knocks some sense into him. As much as I see their point, I want Rage to lose his shit on the prospect just once. It's not like they're going to let me do it.

"She was aiming a gun at you, Prez. What the fuck did you want me to do? Watch you get shot?" Daniel scoffs.

Sugar speaks up then, "No, of course fuckin' not. But you could have given it some more time, kid. Let Rage try to handle it." His voice is calm as he looks between Rage and Daniel. Trying to keep the peace.

"So, then why am I locked up? I get it. I should've followed everyone else. I was worried about our prez. But this is just some chick. I don't get what the problem is." He shrugs like it's not a big deal, and it sets me off.

"That *chick*," I sneer, "is Harley. You knew about her. Everyone in the fucking club did."

Daniel glares at me. "You're mad about some piece of ass? Are you kidding me? You care more about pussy than my prez's life? Oh, that's right, you aren't even a part of this club. What the fuck are you even doing down here?"

I take a step forward and seethe, "Unlock it." Noah shakes his head.

He snaps, "I've got this handled. You don't need to put more bad shit on your shoulders. Go sit with Ryker and Grayson." I go to tell him no, but Rage glowers at me. "It's a command. Go. Now."

I turn and head back out, feeling pure fury overcoming me.

She was shot. My girl. Mine. *No! Not mine.* I battle with myself the entire way back to the clubhouse, refusing to go back to Rage's place no matter how badly I want to be with Harley right now.

First my mother, and now Harley. Watching them be hurt and then having no way to seek vengeance for them doesn't sit right with me. My anger and warring mind are my only valid excuses for how I behave when I walk into the club and see Axe arguing with two guys. One of them is demanding to see Harley right now. I don't know who these fuckers are, but I walk right up to one yelling in Axe's face and clock him in the face, watching him drop like a sack of shit with a sick sort of satisfaction coursing through my veins.



Blade (Noah)

The second my brother is out of sight, I turn around and face Daniel, preparing to tell him off for opening his big mouth. Yeah, he did the right thing, but now he seems to be pushing buttons and almost enjoying it based on the slight gleam in his eyes.

“Open the cell,” Rage growls.

“No,” Sugar snaps at him, stepping into his line of sight and blocking out Daniel. “That’s enough.”

“It’s not fucking enough,” Rage roars, pushing on Sugar’s shoulders, who doesn’t budge. “He shot my fucking daughter. I don’t care if she showed up here with a gun or not.”

“Rage, you’re not thinking straight.” I blow out a breath.

He turns towards me and narrows his eyes. “I’m your president and I am telling you, as my enforcer, to handle this. Beat the shit out of him until that cocky fucking look is gone from his face. Then we will see what to do from there. But he doesn’t fucking leave these cells. Got it?”

I give a curt nod, not sure what to do in this position. I have never in my life here at the club seen Rage like this.

Sugar firmly grips his shoulder. “Go be with your daughter. Fucking *now*. We will handle this and come catch you up on things later. You stay at the house with her, and I’ll handle club things for you.”

Rage scowls at him for a moment before shaking off his hold and leaving to hopefully return to his house.

“Now what?” I ask Sugar, eyeing the cells.

“Well, we obviously aren’t goin’ to punish him for protectin’ his prez, but...” He turns a glare towards Daniel. “We can’t leave him without a few bruises or else Rage will just get even more pissed. He’s not gonna be thinkin’ rationally anytime soon.”

I crack my knuckles and grin at Daniel. “He *did* call the club princess a piece of ass and he has been a cocky fucker since day one of prospecting.”

“Wait, seriously? You are going to, what? Beat me? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. I thought you all were trying to turn this club around?” Daniel practically whines.

I nod. “We are. Matter of fact, we have. Making our businesses and most of our income legal. But that has nothing to do with how things are run at the club. We don’t need to follow the law here. We form our own rules and laws in church. This is just a beating for disrespecting the prez’s kid and my brother’s girl.”

Daniel scoffs and goes to say something, but I think we’ve had enough talking. Nodding at Sugar, he quickly unlocks the cell and I step inside.

I shrug. “You can fight me back. I don’t mind. I promise not to hurt you too much. It’s about time you toughen up anyway. Especially if you want to become a member someday. Going around and picking on high school boys and showing off to them isn’t going to earn you any brownie points.”

I huff a laugh when Daniel’s eyes narrow on me and he gets into a fighting stance. I go in fast, landing three solid hits to his gut before he reacts, trying to defend himself and move away.

By doing that, he opens his side up to me, so I spin and kick him right in his ribs. He grunts and drops to his knees. I walk up to him and rip his head back by his hair before raining down blows to his face. Then I back up and give a

swift kick to the side of his head, watching him drop to the ground, knocked out. His face is bleeding and already turning black and blue.

I huff, “Well, that was anticlimactic and not that much fun.” Did he deserve that? Not really. But in all honesty, I went fucking easy on him.

Hell, I got my ass handed to me by Sugar, Rage, and Stone once for being a disrespectful little shit. Daniel doesn’t deserve to be down here, but right now we can’t go against what our prez wants. Even if he is being irrational. It would show disrespect and weakness.

So, I just take this beating as the kid fucking needed a good ass kicking. He is very cocky and probably gets away with more than he should because we’ve all been so busy lately.

Sugar snorts. “Were you expectin’ him to *want* to fight you? He acts tough, but he’s a pussy. Ya know, I thought at first he might have been a mole, but I don’t think he has it in him.” He shakes his head with a snort.

I think about it for a few minutes. He does hate my boys. He has since he got here. And my accident months ago still has never made sense to me. “You know, maybe Nerds should look into him. There are some things off with this guy. It could just be him being arrogant, but I’d much rather be safe than sorry.”

Sugar nods. “We’ll bring it up in church tomorrow.”

Locking up the cell, we head back towards the main building together. “I am ready to crash after this day, brother,” I yawn, stretching my arms.

“Me fuckin’ too,” Sugar agrees.

Too bad when I walked into the club, I would not be getting any rest for hours. Fucking hell, my brother has lost his common sense over this girl.



Cayden

Axe immediately shoves me behind him as the other guy jumps forward to grab me.

“That’s enough!” Axe shouts. “Get your friend awake and we will sit down and discuss this. I’m not saying shit until you tell me how you know Harley.”

I watch the shaggy-haired dude bend down and slap his friend lightly until he comes to. When he does, he immediately zeros in on me and jumps to his feet. A part of me knows I shouldn’t do this, but something in me is begging for a good fight, so I step forward and he lunges at me. I dodge his first hit and land one of my own to his side.

He turns faster than I thought possible for a man his size and gets me good on the cheek. I shake it off fast and duck when he goes to throw another punch and earns two hits to his side again. He grunts but shows no other sign of it hurting.

Damn, this motherfucker can take some hits. To be fair, I am not weak by any means; I have been working out for a few years now and can throw some solid punches.

Before either of us can continue, someone puts me in a headlock. I glance over and see Axe and Sugar holding the guy back. I throw my elbow at the person holding me, and they grunt out in pain.

“Fucking stop, Cayden!” *Noah.*

I go lax in his grip so he will let go. As soon as he does, I whirl on him, ready to fight him next. He knows me well though and immediately redirects me.

“No! Get your ass downstairs to the gym. Now!” he commands.

Catching my breath, I do as instructed, knowing I won't win this one. My shoulders stay tense as I move away, going towards the stairs, I can feel the fury inside me bubbling up, ready to explode at any moment.

When we get down to our massive gym, Noah walks to the far wall that has different gloves and equipment hanging from it, while I head into the center of the gym where our big mats are out that we use to box or spar.

“Glove up,” he orders. “We'll box. I am not sparring with you right now.” He throws a set of gloves at me. “I don't know what the fuck your problem has been lately, but you need to sort it out.”

I am not going to do this with Noah. I won't burden him with my ridiculous thoughts about a girl who doesn't belong to me. So instead, I swing at him.

He dodges it easily and comes right at me. “Don't want to talk? Fine. But don't go beating up random fucking strangers! I thought we were past your stage of causing fights all the time.”

I let him hit me a few times before spinning around and attempting a few blows myself. He can take my hits, so I let my anger out. I fucking hate that he is saying shit like that. I don't want to drag up old wounds that don't need reopening. My father forced me to talk and be his puppet for years as a child. So, in return, I took out my anger on everyone he brought to me.

I hurt so many people. My hands are toxic. I break everything I touch. I hate speaking because my voice was stolen from me for so many years. Used as a weapon against me and other people in ways I didn't even understand until now.

Memories of my past slam into me without warning, making me stumble back a step.

“Now, Cayden. Tell him what I said, or I will turn this crop on you and

him,” Father orders from behind me where he sits on a wooden stool blocking the staircase that leads out of the basement in our home.

“You have one more chance to tell us what you did. Or I will take this knife and carve you to pieces,” I say to the guy trembling in front of me. I don’t even understand why Father makes me do this.

My eyes narrow on Blade as he charges me. I let his fist hit my cheek, the pain fueling me as my past surfaces once more, threatening to consume me whole.

The guy doesn’t answer. He can’t be much older than nineteen. Father has randomly brought me down here over the last few years; calls it my training to take over his business.

I have no fucking clue what that business is. I’ve only ever seen him hurt random people. Usually, he tells me what to say and makes me say it all.

But not this time. This time, he hands me the knife.

“Get to work, boy. You’re eleven now. It’s time to put you to work for real. You slice him up like you’ve seen me do until he gives you the answers you want. If you hesitate or refuse, I will take this crop to your back until you get it done.”

Having learned from the moment I could walk and talk that life is a game of survival, I say a silent prayer for forgiveness to the only people I care about: my brother and my mom.

Then, letting my mind go blank, I get to work.

Ending up behind Noah, I use it to my advantage before he has a chance to spin around. I kick straight into the middle of his back, knocking him down to his knees with a grunt. Being older and more experienced than me, Noah easily spins on the mat and knocks me off my feet by kicking out my legs. As soon as my back hits the mat, I drown in the memory—no, a nightmare.

Slice. “Tell me what we want to know.”

He whimpers but remains silent.

Slice. “Tell me now!” I watch the blood pool and drip down his thigh.

I move up to his arms that are restrained in the chair, making long, straight slices in each one. He cries out, begging me to stop. As much as I try to keep my mind blank, I can’t.

His cries sound so familiar. It forces me to freeze up.

Whack. The crop Father is holding hits me square on the back. “Focus, you piece of shit!” he screams at me.

I get back to work slicing him up. One agonizing cut after another.

The man never confessed to whatever my father wanted to know. He died that day. In that room. By my hands.

It didn’t stop after that. For years. Men, women, teens—anyone my father brought would fall victim to my blade. I became his weapon. He trained me to torture and kill. The one thing that kept my mind clear was Noah. He never stopped visiting. He risked his life to come and keep me from getting lost in the darkness every night.

The day he turned eighteen, he saved me. I don’t think I will ever be able to tell him what that meant to me. He let me heal myself by not speaking. For two years, I didn’t say a single word.

But at some point during that time, I gained two more brothers, and they helped pull me further out of my own despair. I couldn’t be more thankful.

A sharp crack echoes through the room when Noah slaps me where he straddles my chest with me pinned to the ground. “Snap the fuck out of it! This isn’t the past. This is different, and you fucking know that,” he growls.

Jumping up to his feet, he sticks out his hand, and I accept it, letting him pull me up only for him to shove me hard in the chest, getting in my face.

Even though I have a solid three inches on Noah, he still finds it in him to be big brother.

He shouts, “You never let me get even close enough to take you down when we spar. Don’t ever let it happen again. Wherever your mind went? You aren’t fucking there. We are past it. So, figure out your shit or ask someone to help you.”

The worst part is Noah doesn’t know I was there. In the shadows. That night, my father broke him. The night Noah got away. Seeing Harley, someone I’ve found myself wanting to protect, but knowing I can’t? It pulls at those memories in my mind. Noah doesn’t talk about what happened, and he never will. He claims that the past is wasted energy and there is no point in dwelling on it.

After we rest for a few minutes, we start heading upstairs, and Noah opens his big mouth again. “Look. I know this shit isn’t easy, and I know you have feelings for Harley but—”

Before he can say more, I cut him off with a scoff. “I don’t have feelings for her,” I say, making sure to show no emotion on my face. The words taste sour on my tongue, like lies, but I have no choice. Hurting my brothers is not an option.

Noah rolls his eyes. “Shut the fuck up. I am not stupid. Don’t make me seem like a blind idiot by lying to me. It’s insulting. I get that your head may not be on straight right now, but for the love of God, don’t cause fucking fights with random ass people. Ask any of us here to spar with you. Got it?”

I nod. I don’t bother responding because he doesn’t want me to lie. By the look on his face, he knows that too. He nods back at me anyway, and we head upstairs.

We find Axe sitting at a table in the main room with the two strangers

across from him. The one I fought is holding a bag of frozen peas to the side of his head.

Sugar and Presley—who is Axe’s Ol’ lady, come out from the kitchen, and Presley tsks at me with a disapproving scowl even as she hands me a bag of frozen peas and points to my cheek, so I put it on my face to make her happy. She smiles at me, knowing she won this one, and goes and sits on Axe’s lap.

Presley is the mother hen around here, and she has come into her own after going through shit in her life. She is sweet but tough and takes care of everyone in the club. She has grown on me over time, and I’ve come to enjoy her company.

It helps that she never questions or pities me. She has never asked why I don’t want to talk or been upset about it. She just... loves.

Noah, Sugar, and I follow suit and take seats at the table as well.

“I called Rage. He’s on his way up, and Nerds is comin’ from the tech room. He’s just runnin’ checks on these guys first,” Sugar says, nodding towards our company.

I glance at them. “Who the fuck are you anyway?”

Presley chuckles, and I look over to find her shaking her head. “What’s with men and boys throwing punches first and talking second? I swear to God you guys would kill each other without a woman around.”

I roll my eyes at her as Axe laughs and the other two guys each give small smiles. It’s been almost two years since she came into our lives, and she has grown into a very strong woman. She has more control and say in this club than I think even she realizes. Everyone has come to love her and listens to every word she has to say because Presley is the breath of fresh air we all need from time to time. Even me.

Rage comes storming in, his anger pulsing throughout the room. At the

same time, Nerds comes around the corner from the hall where the offices are, but he pauses when he spots Rage with his fists clenched and jaw set tight.

This should be interesting.

Chapter Three

CAYDEN



“**W**hat the fuck is going on?” Rage demands, his fists hitting the table with a bang as he glares around at everyone.

The guy I fought with appears slightly taken aback before standing. “You must be Gabriel.”

Rage narrows his eyes at him. “Who are you?”

The man’s brows drop as a frown forms on his face from Rage’s demanding tone, but he runs a hand down the front of his shirt and straightens his shoulders as he speaks directly to Rage. “I’m Atlas Cromwell, and this is Lincoln Tanner.” He points to the other guy, who is still sitting. “We know Harley is here, and we need to see her. Look, I’ll be real with you. We know who you are. I mean, even if we didn’t, after knowing Harley for months now, I can see the similarities. We don’t know what she was doing coming

here, but we just need to check in with her and figure out what the fuck is going on.”

He’s lying; his eyes shift downward, no longer meeting Rage’s eyes, and his fingers press into the table. He knows exactly why Harley came here. Luckily, I don’t seem to be the only one to notice. Rage glances at Nerds, who has now approached the table and taken a seat by Axe and Presley.

Nerds shrugs. “I didn’t have time for a deep dive, but I did a basic background check, and they check out. They live in the same area as Brielle.”

Rage nods and glares at Atlas, who glares right back. They are stuck in some kind of stand-off.

“Rage.” He snaps his head toward Presley, who is still sitting on Axe’s lap. “Sit down. Everyone. They came in here looking for her, and they were worried and scared. Not wanting to take her or hurt her. Let’s just all have a conversation. Okay?” She says it like she is talking to a feral beast, which she probably is.

But besides his VP, Presley is the only other one who can calm him down. He looks at her like a little sister and has since she came into our lives.

Rage nods, exhaling sharply, and takes a seat right across from where Atlas also sits down. “How do you know Harley?” Rage asks carefully. I can see the tension running through him, the way he clenches and unclenches his jaw.

Atlas eyes him like he expects him to leap across the table at any moment. Lincoln, the other guy, speaks up, “Alright, let’s just be real, okay? If you meant any harm, we’d be dead by now. We will be honest if you will also be honest and tell us where Harley is.”

Rage looks back and forth between them before having some kind of silent communication with Sugar, who is across the room. He turns back to Lincoln and nods.

With a sigh, he says, “She is at my house here on the compound. Someone she knows from when she went to school here last year is sitting with her. She is currently unconscious.” He pauses, letting out a breath. “She was shot.”

As soon as the last word leaves his mouth, Atlas flies out of his chair, slamming his hands on the table. “Who the fuck shot her?” he roars.

I tilt my head as I study him. Rage also doing the same thing.

“You care about her,” I say, surprising even myself, but I’m curious to see his reaction.

He turns his furious gaze towards me, his eyes softening slightly at the thought of her. “Of course I do. She is like a daughter to me, and I have spent the last six months keeping her afloat. I don’t care what she has done. I will lay down my life for her.”

I nod and glance at Rage. He looks at me, and I see the dark rage behind his eyes, like he is contemplating killing these guys right now. His hand has been twitching towards his gun this whole time. Something I have been able to pick up on easier since I don’t talk much. I probably would’ve picked up on signs that these guys aren’t a danger to Harley too, had I not been in such a fog earlier. I definitely owe Atlas an apology, but he isn’t going to get one.

“So, when she ran away from here last year, she went to you?” Noah asks, furrowing his brow.

Atlas tenses. “Was she staying here before she ran away?” His eyes narrow on us.

Noah shakes his head. “No. She was staying somewhere else. Look, let’s just get this shit over with. At the end of the night, it’s either you end up with a bullet between the eyes, or we decide to trust you.” He shrugs like it’s no big deal and then continues. “My boys met Harley at the high school here in

October. They tried to become friends with her, but she couldn't speak and was skittish.

“They kept an eye on her and wanted to do something to help her, but there wasn't a lot we could do at the time. They also noticed that she was always hurt, anything from bruises to broken ribs. But because of other shit happening, we couldn't do anything. When we finally decided to try to get her to come here, she had already left. I tried to follow her but lost her. We've been looking for her since then but haven't been able to locate her.”

Nerds starts talking then, “I found her earlier tonight. Figured out that Rage was her father and that she was in Virginia. But then she showed up here.”

“Why would she show up here?” Atlas says, mostly to himself and Lincoln, who rubs his hands down his face with a sigh.

“We have no idea. But she came storming in here and had a gun. She aimed it at me. But before I could talk her down, a prospect shot her. She'll make a full recovery, but she isn't awake yet, so we can't ask questions.”

“Fuck,” Lincoln whispers.

“What?” Rage snaps at him impatiently.

Where Atlas shows his hurt and fears through his anger, Lincoln is closed off. I can't read him very well. Lincoln looks at Atlas, lets out a long sigh as Atlas clenches his jaw and gives a small head tilt.

“Do you remember Brielle? She went to school with you,” Lincoln asks Rage.

Rage pinches his lips together as he thinks about it. “Faintly. I just remember her being friends with Harley's mother.”

Lincoln nods. “Right, so I'm gonna give the details I have and maybe at some point if we trust each other more, Bri can give her own full story.” At this, everyone at the table nods.

He goes on to explain how Lilian, who is Harley's mother, came to her when she was pregnant and stayed as long as she could. But people came looking for her, and she ran. Brielle never saw her again. Then Harley found her when she ran away from here months ago. Brielle kept her safe, and Harley had a rough couple of months.

He doesn't go into detail about what Harley struggled with. As much as that's frustrating, I see respect in Rage's eyes for it. My own heart beats a little steadier knowing she has even more people who seem to care about her.

She doesn't need me. *But maybe you need her.*

I brush off that thought and listen to what else Lincoln has to say. Harley opened up a little to them about the abuse she endured from her aunt. But she wouldn't give much information. Brielle told her the story of her mom.

We all watch as Rage punches a hole in the wall, listening to Lincoln explain how Lilian was raped and Brielle thinks she had some kind of Stockholm Syndrome over her rapist. That she fell in love with him. It devastated Harley, but also made her enraged. They had known she was angry, but no one expected her to do this.

Rage keeps his face perfectly blank but after knowing him for so long and always being the one standing back and watching I know behind that mask is distress and devastation. I can only imagine the horrors he must be reliving from his past as he paces the room, constantly clenching and unclenching his fists. Finally stopping, he lets out a grunt as he turns and stalks off down the hallway toward his office.

Lincoln stops talking, glancing around at everyone in confusion.

Sugar runs a hand down his beard as he sighs and stands up. "Just give him a minute. This is bringing up a lot of shit that happened back then that he has forced himself to repress."

Lincoln and Atlas glance at each other before nodding. Watching them closely, I can't help but notice Lincoln shut down. His face is like pure stone. It conveys nothing, meanwhile Atlas looks enraged and ready to fight at any second.

There is a loud crash that sounds from down the hallway where Rage disappeared to. Sugar blows out a breath before heading in that direction.



Rage (Gabriel)

As soon as my office door shuts behind me, I grab whatever is closest to me and throw it against the wall, heaving as I try to stop my hands from shaking.

I haven't thought about all of these things since I was younger. I learned to block it all out, otherwise it would have destroyed me, and my father would have killed me. Even now, his voice echoes in my head, *Having weaknesses makes you vulnerable. As men, we have no vulnerabilities.*

I shoved everything down in a tiny box and tried to forget about it. But how can you ever truly forget? It all comes back to haunt you eventually.

In my case, it came back in the form of a redheaded girl who looks like her mother but has my anger simmering inside of her. Harley. God, I can't believe that's her name. I remember *that* weekend.

Lilian was struggling with things in her life, and I was fighting my own emotions of wanting to kill my father but not being able to at that point. Lilian had so much strength; I admired her. Hell, I admire her now. I fell in love with her instantly.

All of these things from my past being dragged back up brings to the fore memories I will never forget.

We pull up to a viewpoint that looks straight out at the ocean. The sun is rising, and it's a beautiful sight. Both of us watch the waves crash into the huge rocks that line the bottom of the drop off where we park.

Lilian hops off before I even get the kickstand on my bike down. I chuckle at how excited she is to see the water. Her long, beautiful copper red hair blows

in the breeze as she stands at the edge of the small cliff, looking over the water.

“It’s so beautiful!” she exclaims, spinning in a circle. She has a smile on her face that takes my breath away.

This spot is about two hours away from home. It’s basically just an enormous cliff that overlooks the ocean. When the sun rises here, it’s breathtaking and peaceful. From where we are, you can’t see anything except the water and the trees on either side of us on top of the cliff.

I get the blanket I brought out of my saddlebag, and we sit down on it with our legs hanging over the rocky ledge. She rests her head on my shoulder as we watch the ocean waves. We’re quiet as we listen to the surrounding sounds, the birds singing and the waves crashing into the cliffside. After a while, I break the silence.

“I wish I could take it all back Lili; I wish I would have just killed him instead of listening to him and doing whatever he says.”

She sighs, keeping her head on my shoulder. I have no idea how she can even stand to be around me, let alone touch me. “Sometimes I think about things like that. What it would’ve been like if I had done something differently or if the outcome had been different, but sometimes I think things aren’t meant to happen a certain way.”

“How can you say that?” I whisper, feeling tears burn the back of my eyes. I have never been allowed to cry. If I did, my father would’ve beat the shit out of me. But right now, I feel broken.

My father pushes and pushes. He takes everything and gives nothing in return, and it’s taking everything in me to keep my morals and not fall into the same path as him or allow myself to succumb to his ways.

Sometimes I think it would be so much easier than what I’m trying to do.

She turns, so she is facing me. "I can say that because what you did wasn't your fault. Yes, you did it. But you were doing what you had to do. You were surviving. I was terrified. But I knew what was going to happen. I was coming to terms with it, and then you swooped in and promised to take care of me the best you could. You won against all the other prospects. You showed me kindness and hurt me as little as possible. The others? They would have been doing everything they could to hurt me and destroy me even more."

Tears leak down her cheeks, and she leans forwards and wipes at my face. It's then I realize I am also crying. My heart breaks for her, and I wish I could take away her pain. I wish I could go back and kill my father.

I vow then and there, staring into her beautiful, large hazel eyes that show so much pain and heartache, that I will destroy him. For her. For myself.

Grabbing my desk chair, I fling it at the wall and then continue to throw everything off my desk, heaving and grunting as more memories slam into me from after that weekend. The tiny bit of joy I felt when I found out afterwards that she was pregnant, only for it to be crushed by my father. My hands shake uncontrollably as I growl and grab the edge of the desk, flipping it over.

I should've killed the bastard when I had the chance. I should've fought harder for her. I should've never believed the fucker when he gloated that they were dead.

I should've fucking tried harder.

My legs give out as the anger seeps out of me, and all I feel is devastation as I slowly sink to the floor, resting my back against the wall.

I lost so much. My little girl had to live in hell and think that her father was a monster. She *does* think that I'm a monster. How do I possibly live with

myself now? A light tap sounds on the door as it's pushed open, and Sugar steps in the office, kicking broken pieces of a lamp out of his way.

He glances around before his understanding eyes land on me. Shutting the door behind him, he leans against it but doesn't speak, giving me a chance to start.

"This is all so fucking insane, Sugar." I laugh humorlessly, running a desperate hand through my hair. "How did we manage to come back around to all this shit? It's so much I can't even keep my head on straight to be the president this club desperately needs right now."

I clench my fists in my lap, lifting my head to lock eyes with Sugar, who stares at me, not giving away anything he may be feeling in his expression.

I sigh, "I want to go beg my daughter to let me explain, to hold her and take care of her. I want to go down to the cells and put a fucking bullet between Daniel's eyes. I can't even see how letting him off the hook is the right thing to do. He shot my fucking daughter. I can't see past that. No one fucking hurts her."

Sugar sighs and scratches through his beard as he glances around the office, seeming lost in thought. His lips tilt down in a frown as he looks back at me, "I understand where you're at with Harley. Fuck, I'm feeling all this shit with you after having been by your side when it all happened." He gives a small smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "But we've gotta be fuckin' rational, Rage. You're my brother, and I am always goin' to give it to you straight.

"So, I'll say that right now, you need to step back from bein' prez. This is what I am here for as your VP. I can keep my head level right now. As for Daniel, I'm not goin' try to shove any more logic into you right now when you won't fuckin' hear it anyway. He'll be okay for a few more days when hopefully shit calms down and we can go from there."

He stands up straight from where he was leaning against the door and points a finger at the mess in the office and then at me.

“As for you, right now, get this shit fuckin’ cleaned up and then go be with your daughter. The more time you give her to relax around you, the better. Then you’ll be able to sit down and have a talk with her.”

Groaning I let my head fall back against the wall again. “Sugar, there is not a damn thing I can say to her right now. She knows I raped her mom. I wouldn’t blame her for not even being able to be in my presence ever again. Fuck, I’d want to kill me to. She’ll hate me for the rest of my life, and I don’t think there is anything anyone can do about it.”

Sugar shakes his head. “It’s not that simple and you know it, brother. She needs time to process, and someday you’ll be able to give her more details and offer her your side of the story, and maybe then she’ll understand. Things were fucked up back then. You’d be dead right now if you had refused—or something worse might have happened. We had no way of knowin’.

“Harley wouldn’t be alive right now if it had been someone else. Lilian didn’t hate you. Harley will see that when the rage clears from her vision.” He chuckles lightly, “Why do I have a feelin’ that we now have a Mini Rage on our hands?”

I laugh, but it’s strained. “Because my child just came storming in with a gun, ready to shoot me in a room full of armed bikers. She’s my kid, that’s for sure. Her rage takes over.”

He nods. “Just don’t give up on her. You’ve spent years beatin’ yourself up over things you were forced to do. You are not a bad man, and you’ve spent the last five years since your piece of shit father died provin’ that. Somethin’ horrible happened. You had to make a split-second choice as an eighteen-year-old kid. You did the best you could. If Lilian can forgive you and not

place the blame on you, then you need to do the same. Harley can't work to forgive you and understand if *you* don't forgive you. You've spent sixteen years repressin' all of this. It's time to face it head-on."

I run my hand through my beard. "I know. This is so fucking much to take on right now. I don't even know what to do or think. I think I could learn to forgive myself. Lilian never held it against me. This club doesn't. And I got a kid out of it. Fuck, Sugar, I'm a father. Of a sixteen-year-old girl." I feel my eyes going wide at that thought, as it actually sinks in.

Sugar chuckles. "Yeah, brother, you do. I'd tell you it's all gonna be fine, but unfortunately, that girl has been through things. And now it's goin' to land on you to help her through it in any way you can."

I feel my anger rise. My blood boiling as I think of people hurting her. I may have to find a way to forgive myself for my past and forgive myself for not having been there for my baby girl, but I sure as hell don't have to forgive the people who hurt her. No, those fuckers will die a slow and painful death by my hand.

I swear, "Whoever hurt her will die. They die by my hand. I will torture and destroy them. I will do whatever she wants me to do. If she wants me to burn the world down, I will."

"Fuck. Why do I have a feeling that's not goin' to be the best idea and I'm about to have two Rages to keep an eye on?" Sugar sighs loudly and shakes his head as I let a wicked smile take over my face.

If anything can make me feel better, it's finding a place or more so, a person to take my rage out on.



Cayden

After Sugar disappears down the hall, we all can hear the loud thuds as things hit the wall and break. It's the only sound in the room as everyone takes a minute to process this shit.

I can only imagine what Rage is going through right now. He has always been like a father figure to me, and I have never seen him out of control like this. It feels like he's a completely different person; the calm, cool, collected man who's always in control and prepared to handle anything thrown at him — is gone.

Atlas clears his throat, looking slightly uncomfortable as he shifts in his chair, his eyes jumping around to everyone. We all give him our attention.

“He didn't have a choice in what happened back then, did he?” he asks somewhat sullenly.

Axe shakes his head. “No. But that's his choice of what he shares with you. You need to understand, Rage has had to fight battles the rest of us can't even imagine having to deal with. So don't go judging him without knowing everything. And you might never know everything.”

“I get it. You could see just by his eyes and body language listening to Linc explain everything,” Atlas says with a nod. “Brielle had one side to the story. She had a broken Lilian show up on her doorstep, bruised and a mess, who claimed to love the man who raped her. Brielle told Harley what she knew from back then because we all could see that Harley needed the truth. She needed someone to be honest with her. She also wanted to look into her father to find him, and Brielle didn't want her going down that path.”

Noah scoffs. “That went well. How the fuck did she even get her hands on a gun?”

Atlas and Linc glance at each other before coming to some realization at the same time. “How would she have gotten into it?” Linc asks quietly, but we can still hear him.

Atlas smirks. “She’s Harley. The sneaky shit probably watched us enter the code. We’ll have to have one of the guys working right now do inventory. Text Ryan.”

“Care to fill the rest of us in?” Noah drawls in a bored tone.

Atlas lets out a grunt, while Linc says, “Ryan, our other friend who also co-owns a gym with us, offers gun classes. He was teaching Harley basic knowledge. She picked up on shooting quickly, and it became an outlet for her. We have a locked room for that stuff at the gym. You just need a code, and it seems that she watched us put in the code one too many times.”

I find a smile working its way onto my face. *That’s my girl.*

Noah looks at me and smirks. “Still feeling the same way?”

My smile immediately drops, and I clench my fists. If Rage and Sugar hadn’t walked back out at that second, I would’ve punched him in his smug face. He doesn’t understand.

Rage cracks his knuckles. “Alright. It’s three in the morning. I am fucking exhausted from this shit. Harley is still out. Give your numbers to Sugar, and we will contact you immediately when she’s up. I want to see how she is and what she has to say before either of you sees her.”

He looks calmer now, but exhausted. Everyone starts to agree before Atlas speaks up. “I’m not leaving. Lincoln is going back to the hotel we got where Brielle and Ryan are to fill them in. But I will not be leaving this property unless Harley tells me to.”

Rage studies him for a minute before he nods with a look of respect. “We can give you a room here in the club.”

“Would you actually leave if Harley told you to?” Noah asks with a head tilt.

Atlas smirks and crosses his arms. “Probably not.”

Everyone goes their separate ways, with Sugar going to show Atlas the guest room. I start to head up the stairs but hesitate.

Before I can even think it through, my feet are leading me out of the back of the clubhouse and towards Rage’s house. I don’t want to go in, so I walk around his house towards the back.

From the shadows, I watch them through the back slider. Rage and Grayson are talking in the kitchen. I’m guessing Rage is filling him in. I pivot to the right, making sure to stay hidden as I peer into the bedroom window. The curtains are open halfway, allowing me the perfect view of Harley laying in the bed and Ryker resting in the chair next to her asleep.

My chest feels tight. Like someone is squeezing it, forcing it to nearly burst. *This is it.* I tell myself, giving myself this one last time to watch, to feel. I have to find a way to lock it down. I can’t lose my brothers. What’s best for them is what I want, always.

I feel Stone before I hear him. “You don’t have to do this, you know.”

I look over my shoulder at him as he walks closer, not surprised in the least he found me here.

“I did this.” He nods towards the window. “I spent 500 days doing it. And I wasted 500 days. Is that what you want to do? I think you’re looking at this whole situation wrong. I think you’re going to hurt your brothers and her instead of making them happy.”

I scoff. “That’s different, and you know it. It’s just you and her. She

understands you. Fuck, she even acts like you sometimes. This is not that. He loves her. Grayson cares for her. I can see them becoming more. Ryker and Harley. I don't know about Grayson. But I can't. I won't ruin that for him. I won't fight him for a girl. I'd much rather just step back and see him happy."

Even if it feels like someone is clawing at my chest, trying to rip my heart out. A heart I had long thought was dead, but it seems to beat again for her.

He shrugs. "I'll say this and walk away. You're wrong. I think Ryker is looking at this from a much different perspective than you are. I'm the last person to say this, so listen good: Communicate with him. Tell him how you feel."

I'm already shaking my head before he finishes speaking. I won't risk it.

He snarls, "Don't forget who was around lurking in the shadows watching everyone long before you, boy. When the day comes that your eyes open to reality and what's actually in front of you, let me know. I'll tell you I told you so, and we can spar out your anger at yourself because they've all moved on without you."

With that, he turns and walks away. Leaving me even more confused than I was before.

Could he be right?

No. He can't be.

Chapter Four

HARLEY



Three Days Later

I wake up panting, soaked in sweat. As soon as I sit up, I feel something on my arm and immediately start hyperventilating. *No! Get me out of here.*

Someone's hand comes down on my own as I try to rip whatever is on my arm away.

“Hey! Harley, open your eyes please. Please open them. You're safe right now. You need this IV to get fluids.” I know that voice... but that's not right. I'm back in the basement. This was all just a dream.

Everything fades again as I hear someone call my name. It's a man's voice, but then it morphs into a woman's voice. Mother—no. Not my mom. Tammy.

“Harley! You worthless piece of shit!” I feel the sting of her palm connecting with my cheek as I'm jolted awake. Tears threaten to fall, but I hold them back, not wanting to cry in front of her.

I want my mom... I need her. Wait, Brielle! I sit up with a gasp. Was that a dream? No! It couldn't have been. Please, no.

I blink my eyes open slowly, finding myself in a room I don't recognize. It's dark, but I can scarcely make out the window and a door. The bed I'm on is the same size as the one from Bri's home. Everything is fuzzy, but it slowly comes back to me the longer I stay awake. Blood... I remember so much blood... But then I feel like I'm falling, and everything goes black again.

“What are we going to do with her? We can't just keep her down there forever. What if someone comes looking for her? Lilian is dead. That's what you wanted. What do you want with the girl?”

I recognize that voice... Richard. Father. Wait, is he talking about me? I don't remember this. It's dark, but I hear their voices perfectly clear.

“She's just as much to blame as her piece of shit mother. Lilian destroyed my life and took too many things from me. She may be dead, but I can still take this from her too. She is responsible for a child being taken from me, so I will take one from her, just in a different way. I will be Harley's mother from now on. If the bitch doesn't want to call me that and forget about Lilian, then she'll just have to learn her place fast.”

I faintly remember this... Mother came down shortly after, and when I said she would never be my mom, she beat me.

But she can't be my mom. My mom—my mom is gone.

Slap! Her nails scrape my face, and I feel blood dripping down my cheek.

“You will call me Mother!”

“No.” My voice is but a whisper. I can't. She's not my mom. I want out of here. It's been a day. This can't be real. I must be dreaming.

She kicks me in the stomach over and over again. I feel like I can't breathe. I scream and cry, but she doesn't stop. She laughs at me when I try to move, but I can't get far because of the pain.

She pulls out a wicked-looking knife and stabs me in the thigh. When I scream and try to kick at her, she shoves me down on my stomach and sits on my legs so I can't move and starts slicing into my back.

The pain is unlike anything I've ever felt. She stays calm, telling me I will call her Mother and forget about my mom. This is my new life, and the sooner I adjust to it, the less she will have to hurt me.

“Hurting you doesn't bring me as much joy as it may seem. Just behave, Harley.”

“Yes, Mother,” I croak out through a sob, not caring anymore as long as this pain stops.

It never got better. She never stopped even when I behaved.

Light filters in... I can hear voices... No, not again.

“I think she's waking up.”

“I don't get it. Why does this keep happening?”

“I don't know. It's been two days. I would say her body is just trying to heal itself, but she keeps ripping her stitches. It's like she's stuck in a nightmare and can't fully wake up.”

My eyes slowly blink. Those voices... I don't recognize them. Where am I?

I feel a hand touch my stomach, and I flinch and feel a scream come out,

but it's raw and not very loud. My throat is on fire, as if I've been screaming for weeks. I try to move, but more hands hold me down. *No!*

Get off me! Get off me!

"Harley! Open your eyes!"

My eyes snap open, but the first thing I see is blood. So much blood. I can't... It's too much. *Please, not again, Mother... I'll be good.*

There's blood everywhere... I don't know what's real and what's not. Mother left me, and I rolled over to lay on my back, but it hurt too much, so I sat up. The mattress is covered in blood. The sight and smell of it makes me want to vomit.

I slowly get up and go to shower, leaving a trail of blood as I go.

I can't remain standing in here, so I slowly slide to the floor of this small box shower. It's a standing one that I can barely spread my arms in with a sliding door.

Blood runs down the drain as I sit and stare at it.

Sobs rack my body as I cry. My mom's been gone for three weeks, and I need her. This isn't fair. It feels like a nightmare I just can't wake up from. My dreams are plagued with the men who took her from me. The vile things they said—the things they did—that man's hands holding me. The way his hot, stinky breath felt.

No one here will help me grieve her. None of this makes sense. How could someone be so awful? I want to go home. I want to go back and not have fought with my mom that day. I want to have run with her right away. This is my fault.

I hear... a voice. It has to be Father. But that's not his voice... I don't understand. I don't remember anyone else ever being here. But then again, I

didn't remember the conversation I heard about my mom either. The voice is getting louder, but I can't see.

"Please, Harley. You're scaring the fuck out of me. Please come back. You're safe here. I swear. I need to see those fiery eyes of yours. My little flame."

My... little flame.

My eyes flutter, light coming through. I blink a few times, and I hear someone suck in a sharp breath. I slowly turn my head, immediately getting caught in his stare. Those brown eyes, so dark they're almost black.

I feel faint feather-like touches on my hand and slowly look down to see ringed fingers lightly caressing the top of my hand. I hesitantly flip my hand over, and he lays his hand on top of mine, tracing soft circles on my palm with his fingers.

Afraid to look back up into those dark eyes that I know are going to be filled with questions and possibly anger that I held a gun to their club president, I focus on his rings. They're all black with the exception of one silver ring that sits on his pinky finger. Before I have a chance to think more about them, his fingers wrap around my hand as he squeezes lightly.

Slowly exhaling I draw my eyes back up and immediately feel myself drowning in his dark irises. I feel like I could get lost in them—or maybe they could save me, ground me, make me feel safe. Finally blinking, I pull my eyes away from his, and we both seem to take a moment to take each other in. Ryker looks the same; his hair is still longer on the top with short sides. By the messy top it's clear he runs his fingers through it all the time.

The only difference with him now is he looks tired. His face is drained; there are dark circles under his eyes, and his body is slumped in the chair like he barely has the energy to stay sitting up.

Giving his hand that is still holding mine a soft squeeze, Ryker lets out a contented sigh as his lips quirk up at the corners. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to see your beautiful eyes,” he says quietly. His voice sends shivers down my spine, leaving the same effect of butterflies in my stomach as it did the first time I ever heard his deep baritone.

Letting his words register, I blink at him, confused. It feels like I’m falling again, into the deepest parts of my brain that I can’t escape.

Before I can get lost, he grips my hand, and I immediately grip his back. Not being fearful of his touch, instead feeling as if it’s my lifeline. “Stay with me now,” he urges. “You’re okay. This is real, I promise. Just keep looking at me and squeezing my hand.”

I give a tiny nod and squeeze his hand harder.

“Can you—can you talk?” he asks hesitantly, his tender eyes meeting mine.

I clear my throat, feeling a burn at the back of it. Whenever I go too long without drinking something, it feels like it’s on fire and hurts really badly to talk. I open my mouth, but all that comes out is a nasty sounding cough.

Ryker jumps up, and I panic, squeezing his hand harder, not wanting him to let go. I think he’s the only thing keeping me from slipping away again.

He freezes and looks down at me, his face softening. “I’m just getting you water. But I can have someone else get it.” I nod. “Let me text Grayson. Do you remember him?” Ryker asks.

I nod again. *Beautiful green eyes.* Grayson’s eyes and voice have always stayed with me. Rescuing me from countless panic attacks I’d have in the middle of the night over the months I have been gone. He pulls out his phone with his other hand and then realizes he can’t text easily with one hand, so he calls him.

“Hey, Harley is awake. But stay quiet and calm. Just grab water and bring it

to me, then leave. I want to give her a few minutes before shit goes sideways... Yep... Bye.”

Shit going sideways? My brain is still fuzzy, but I can only assume that has to do with me, and a small trickle of fear works its way down my spine. Even with Ryker here being friendly towards me and helping me stay calm, I have no idea what awaits me on the other side of the door.

He smiles. “Our knight is coming with water.” A tiny giggle escapes my mouth, surprising me, and Ryker winks at me just as the door opens and Grayson comes in.

He pauses and stares with wide eyes, taking me in from head to toe as I lay on the bed. Taking the opportunity, I can’t help but scan him as he stands there, tall and muscular wearing a tight-fitting t-shirt with dark jeans. His floppy curly hair is a mess on top of his head like he’s had no time to do anything with it. His green eyes are just as beautiful and bright as I remember.

A few more seconds pass before he blinks, clearing his throat and walking into the room, handing Ryker the water. With a small smile and awkward wave, he spins around and quickly walks out the door shutting it behind him.

Chuckling quietly, Ryker passes me the water, and I take tiny sips. It burns and feels amazing at the same time.

I glance over at Ryker again and try to talk. “Hi.” It comes out in a quiet croak. I watch as Ryker’s eyes widen as he stares at my mouth. It takes me a few seconds to realize why he looks so shocked...

“Oh... uh...” Fuck. What do I say? *Hey, yeah, I could talk this entire time. Sorry I lied?*

“So, you can talk? Were you able to at school? I have so many questions,” he quickly rushes out before taking a breath.

Shit. I can't answer his questions. *Make something up, Harley.* "Um, I, yeah, I can talk. It's uh, a long story... anyway, um, where am I? Who shot me? Where are they now?" I ask, remembering that I am in this position because I was taken down by a bullet.

He nods. "Oh shit, yeah, you're still at the club. Just in a house behind it. I'm sure that the others would want to be here to explain about the guy who shot you. But you don't have to worry about him. Everything will be okay, and you're safe here."

I stare at him, more questions swirling in my mind. I get why someone would shoot me, but what I don't get is why these people aren't all furious right now. But before either of us can say more, the door bursts open, and I tense and grip Ryker's hand harder, my nails digging into his palm. I feel my breath coming faster and faster. My free hand grabs at my throat. It's as if someone is choking me. Ryker squeezes my hand again as green eyes come into focus in front of me.

"Breathe with me." He inhales. I inhale. We hold. Exhale. He repeats this over and over again as I follow it, keeping my eyes locked onto his. When my breathing calms, I relax the hand I had on my throat. Grayson smiles at me. "You're okay. There are some people here, but I promise you're safe."

"Yeah, these assholes are my family. I'll introduce you," Ryker adds. I turn to look at him but get caught on the other people in the room, standing at the end of the bed.

Two of them. Giant men. My eyes go wide, staring at the one on the left. He's huge. *I know him.* Sugar. I saw his picture, and I recognize him from Brielle as being my mom's brother.

His arms are the size of my thighs. He has tattoos running up his arms, and I can see some on his neck that look like they slither down his chest. He has a

short beard and cropped brown hair. Even his eyes are the same as my mom and I. Hazel. His hair has a red tint to it, but you can barely tell.

He's intimidating. I don't know if I should just shout out, *Hey, turns out I'm your niece*. Or whether I should keep that to myself... The guy standing next to him that I haven't looked at yet clears his throat. My eyes snap over, and he nods at me. He's... wow, he's pretty. Picture-perfect pretty with his dirty blond hair pulled back into a slick bun and large blue eyes. His jawline is sharp, and everything about him is absolutely perfect. I can't imagine he has one single flaw.

He speaks softly, "I see you already know who this is." He inclines his head towards Sugar. "I haven't had a chance to tell him yet with so much going on. Why don't you?" He offers me a kind smile. I don't remember him from my research, but his name on his vest thing says Nerds, and it sounds familiar.

I glance back over at Sugar to see him looking between Nerds and I with furrowed brows. Someone squeezes my hand, and I glance down at Ryker, who is still focused on me.

"What's going on?" he asks, tilting his head as he studies me.

Do I really do this? What if he freaks out like Tammy did? She's my aunt. Well, not blood related, I guess. But... can I risk that again? I got lucky with Brielle, but she's not related to me. It seems people I think are related to me are the problem...

Sugar must be tired of waiting, because he turns towards Nerds. "What the hell are ya talkin' about? Tell me what?"

Nerds completely ignores him and acts like it's not a big deal, as he keeps his eyes focused on me. When I bring my gaze to his again, I let him see my fear. I don't quite understand why I do, but something tells me he understands.

“It’s okay. I see the questions swirling around. The only way to get answers is to step over the ledge, even if it’s the scariest thing you’ve done. I’ve had to do it myself. It might just turn out better than you think it will.” He gives me a sad smile.

I can see the pain in his eyes which so intricately matches mine. It helps me to inhale before opening my mouth. This isn’t the scariest thing I’ve done. Not by a long shot. I can do this. *You’re not that weak girl anymore, Harley.*

“Lilian, my mom. She found out that you and her have the same dad,” I say while keeping my eyes on Sugar, watching for any signs of anger.

“Wh—” He clears his throat. “Sorry, what?” He glances at Nerds, silently asking him a million questions.

Nerds nods at him. “I don’t have all the details, and I still have a lot to look into. But one of the things I found out that I hadn’t had a chance to share yet was that you and Lilian share the same father. It’s on her real birth certificate.”

Sugar’s eyes snap to mine, and he stares at me slack-jawed. I swear it feels like an hour but is only about ten seconds before his face morphs into a huge fucking grin. Ryker squeezes my hand, and I squeeze back.

I look over at him and he grins, saying, “Looks like you’re really not going anywhere now.” I feel like that should scare me... It does. But it also doesn’t.

I hear a smack and flinch slightly before realizing it was Nerds hitting Ryker on the back of the head at the same time Grayson mumbles, “Shut up.”

Surprising everyone, including me, another small giggle slips past my lips.

Everyone seems shocked but then quickly recovers. Sugar glances around like he has a million questions and things he wants to say. The giant man doesn’t seem all that intimidating now. He just seems more like a giant teddy bear.

Things get quiet until there is a soft knock on the door.

I immediately squeeze Ryker's hand, not wanting more people to be in here. I haven't even processed everything, and I really don't want to break down in front of these people.

They may seem like they are on my side and good people, but looks can be deceiving. I've learned that the hard way.

The door slowly pushes open, and a man steps through. Not just any man. My fucking dad. Gabriel. He walks farther in and looks at me.

I try to mask my fear by showing my hatred and anger. *Think of your mom, Harley. Be angry. Not scared.* I hear movement to my left, but I don't dare take my eyes off Gabriel. The bed dips slightly, and I tense.

"Darlin'." *Sugar.* "We need to know what's goin' through your head right now. No one in this room is going to lay a hand on you, including Rage. But you have to tell us what happened and why you were aimin' a gun at him," he says gently.

"Which was beyond fucking idiotic, by the way," Ryker growls, and everyone tenses. I assume they're expecting me to freak out, but for some reason it doesn't freak me out at all.

I finally peel my eyes away from Gabriel and look at Ryker. His face is clouded with anger, and his lips are pressed tightly together. I offer him a small smile that he half returns. "You're cute, but we'll still talk about that later," he murmurs.

I say nothing, not even sure how to respond to that. Plus, I kind of need to figure out what the hell to say to them about, you know, pulling a gun on Gabriel.

I still want to know how Ryker and Grayson are involved with this club. Is Cayden too? It's all weird, and I really liked them, but if I plan to take them

all down, I have to get rid of those feelings... Quickly. Somehow, they are worming their way into my mind, my life, my—my heart. Not even just the boys either, but everyone here.

Nerds gives off this understanding calm energy and Sugar just seems like he would protect you at all costs and give you the fucking world. I realize now that I've been quiet this whole time and probably need to say something.

Fuck. Guess the truth it is because I have nothing else to say.

"I know that you're my dad." I bring my eyes back up to Gabriel. His eyes shine with hope, which makes me glare at him, even as my heart cracks slightly. "I also know that you raped my mom," I add with as much venom as I can.

Sugar tenses while Ryker, Grayson, and Nerds all cast their eyes down. I don't like that.

I watch as many emotions pass over Gabriel's face, from sadness, to confusion, to anger, but mostly, he just looks heartbroken. "Everyone, out," he orders in a tone that brokers no argument.

Unfortunately for him, I refuse to listen and have already made mistakes and don't care to keep my mouth shut anymore. Too many years with no answers to questions. I'm going to get what I want now. This is my revenge. I've already decided it doesn't matter whether I live or die.

"No." Everyone's heads whip in my direction. I exhale. I can do this. "You can't tell them what to do, and I don't want to be alone in a room with you. Got something to say? Fucking say it. But I probably won't listen. Nothing you say will change what you've done." I feel my heart beat faster, and my hands get clammy. My mouth ran from me, and as much as I'm glad to be able to stand up for myself, I'm fucking terrified deep down of the punishment that comes with that.

He nods, masking his emotions under a wall that I recognize well. It's something I've done. "Fine. We can do this however you want. Everyone will leave, including me. There is someone else here that might be able to get through to you."

He makes everyone step out, with Ryker taking the longest. The feel of his hand slipping from mine for the first time since I truly woke up sends me spiraling on top of what Gabriel just said.

Someone is here for me? No. Not her. Please no. I have to get out of here. I have to go. I can't do this again. Fuck! I fucked up, coming back to Jacksonville.

Hands grab my shoulders. I hear a faint voice, but I'm trapped.

I can't break free. I feel someone hugging me.

No... Mother wouldn't hug me.

"Harls, please."

That voice... Before I can do anything, I'm falling again.

Chapter Five

RYKER



When you've lived through hell on more than one occasion, you would think watching someone get hurt would get easier. I guess it does when it's not someone I care about. I don't give a fuck if I have no right to care about her. I do. I know somewhere deep in my soul that my brothers and I need her just as much as she needs us.

She didn't just show up here again for that not to be true, and I'll do whatever I can to prove that to her.

I know I'm a possessive asshole. My brothers are everything to me, and if someone hurt them, I would destroy that person. But now that extends to Harley too. I'm already going to hell, so it doesn't really matter what I do now anyway.

I haven't left Harley's side since the night she was shot. Well, after I beat the shit out of Daniel, that is. It's been about three days, and she is finally

awake. There are so many fucking things to talk about. But of course, Rage has decided that since she won't listen to him, we all have to leave so some fucker from wherever she ran off to can come talk to her.

I didn't like it, and I was fully prepared to fight them, but I know I can't show my crazy in front of Harley yet, so instead I stormed out of the house with Gray hot on my heels.

As soon as I was outside, I started walking further out onto the property in the opposite direction of the clubhouse. I heard Grayson behind me, and I stopped walking to whirl around and face him. "I need a few minutes. I need to be alone. I am just going to walk."

His face dropped, but he agreed. I turned and walked away, not understanding why I felt my heart sink slightly at the expression he wore.

When Harley showed up here, when I saw her, my first reaction was to go straight to her. But then I really watched her, the way she showed pure determination, no emotion. She looked so much better than she had before. She was clean and healthy. Her face had more color to it.

When she was at school, she was so pale and fragile. But the girl walking into the club was strong and determined.

I wanted to go to her, but then Noah stopped me. Before I could even open my mouth to yell at him, she pulled out a gun, a look of pure fury coming over her as she pointed it at Rage.

Watching her get shot was like watching my mom die all over again.

There's a certain way that a person's face contorts. It's not a look of fear, but of acceptance and even happiness that all their pain will be gone once and for all.

I've now seen that look on both my mother and Harley. And both times, a part of my heart broke off and went to hell.

Watching Grayson take off, heading straight for her, I knew he had her. So all my attention turned to him. The fucker who shot her. I know my anger got the best of me—something I have to work on—especially considering I don't even remember beating him. I must have blacked out, it wouldn't be the first time.

I just remember Stone pulling me back while whispering something in my ear—that I now can't recall—before I headed over to join them. Not leaving Harley's side again.

Until now, three days later.

I wander out towards the back gate. We rarely ever use it, so it's pretty overgrown, but I just needed to get away for a few minutes. Breathe.

I glance down at the stupid fucking monitor that is still on my ankle. Part of me wants to take out all of my anger on everyone here. How dare Rage tell us all to leave? They filled me in on everything that happened the night she got shot. Atlas and Lincoln showing up, who I haven't seen yet, all the stuff with Rage's past and his history with Harley's mom.

I get why Harley showed up and did what she did. But I also want to yell at her for putting herself in danger. *Would you have done it any differently?* Nope. I would've done everything the same. If not something worse.

But instead of taking out my anger on everyone here, I'm taking a walk. Letting Cade's words from last week play in my mind.

And believe it or not, you do have a fucking family here. These people want to help you. They aren't your dad. They are not trying to manipulate you or lying to you at every turn. You have to trust them in order for them to ever trust you.

I constantly try to remind myself that they aren't like my dad. Letting Cade's words play in my mind on repeat. I never realized how much I assume

everyone is just like him when they aren't. I guess it's something I need to work on.

I come out of my thoughts when I hear a sound, like a branch breaking. I spin around to look where I came from, assuming someone followed me out here, but no one is there. So I slip over to a large tree that is next to the fence but blocks me from the view of anyone outside of the fence, waiting a few minutes before I hear the sound again.

Someone is out here. It sounds like they are walking by the gate but on the outside, which is weird because it is mostly just woods out there. I slowly peek around the tree before stepping out and trying to keep my steps silent as I work my way towards the gate.

When I get close enough to see clearly through the bars, I catch a glimpse of someone standing out there. I can't quite make them out, so I grab my phone out of my pocket and use the camera to zoom in. Before I can snap a picture, she moves, her head snapping in this direction, and she walks up closer to the gate, but she can't see me behind the overgrown shit back here.

She's young. Probably a few years younger than me. What the fuck would she be doing out here? I debate whether or not to step out and show myself, and for a split second I almost do, but then I stop.

If she gets spooked and runs, I won't be able to catch her with the gate in the way. So instead, I just watch. I snap a picture when she turns towards where I am hiding and wait.

She paces around for about ten more minutes before spinning on her heel and heading back through the woods. If I remember correctly, the direction she's going in will take you back out to a side road that connects to the main road that we used to get to our main entrance.

As tempted as I am to follow her and figure out who she is and what the

fuck she's doing, I also feel the need to get back to Harley, which outweighs everything else.

So, I turn back and head toward Rage's house. When I get close to the backside of his house, I see Gray sitting on the back steps, his elbows on his knees while he stares at the ground. I walk to him and sit down next to him. Neither of us talks for a few minutes.

"She was screaming," he whispers finally, breaking the silence stirring in the dark.

I whip my head in his direction. "What?" I ask more aggressively than I mean to.

Gray shudders and draws in a deep breath, his lips set in a deep frown. "After we left. You took off, but I just sat here. She screamed. I ran back in, but Rage said it was a nightmare or something, and Atlas and Lincoln were calming her down." He sighs before dropping his head into his hands. "I felt so helpless. There's this feeling in my chest of someone raking their claws over it as I watch her struggle. I don't fully understand it."

I find myself grinning widely while listening to him speak. When I don't respond to him, he looks up at me and raises a brow.

"Um, why are you grinning like that?" he asks hesitantly.

I shrug. "Because it's perfect. I mean, not you being in pain or her being in pain. But I was right. We need her. She needs us. She's the one for us."

Gray shakes his head, blowing out a breath. "I still think you're insane. We don't know her. She's probably going to hate us, anyway."

"She doesn't hate us. I promise," I say, not elaborating any further.

It's just like when I met Gray. I knew he would be my best friend. And then we—I—dragged Cade into the fold. Somehow, I just know Harley is the one for us.

Plus, she can hate us all she wants. I don't quit. I'll just have to make her fall in love with us. She will be ours.

Gray looks skeptical but doesn't argue with me.

"So." I say, dragging out the word, which causes Gray to tense and eye me suspiciously. "I walked back towards the back gate, and there was this girl back there on the other side of the gate, pacing around. I watched her for about ten minutes before she finally walked away back towards the side road."

Gray jumps to his feet. "What? Why didn't you start with that?"

I shrug. "Sorry?"

He grabs my arm and yanks me up with more strength than I remember him having. It's quite impressive. He pulls me up the steps and inside to where Rage is in the living room.

"Where is Sugar?" he demands.

Rage glances up at Gray's question. "Back at the clubhouse. Why?"

"Just need to talk to him. Text us when they leave, please?" he asks, and Rage nods, furrowing his brows as Gray yanks me out the front door and towards the club.

"Gray! What the fuck? Why didn't you tell him?" He stops and stares at me before blinking.

"Because his daughter is in there struggling, and he's struggling with his past. He doesn't need more added if Sugar can deal with it."

Oh. "Right. I knew that. Off we go." Gray rolls his eyes and continues pulling me with him. "Um, Gray? Do you want to let go? You don't have to keep pulling me. I'm following you."

He stops and looks at his hand wrapped around my bicep before scrunching his brows together. Something I can't quite catch flashes across his features

before he drops his hand and turns to keep walking. I take a second before I hurry to catch up with him.

When we get inside, we find Sugar at a table with other members. Gray walks over to him, and Sugar immediately jumps up, his eyes wide with panic. “Is she okay? What’s going on?” He starts walking towards the back door we just came through before he even finishes.

My own eyes widen upon seeing this beast of man so fucking panicked, so I quickly blurt out, “Woah, Sugar, Harley is good. She’s with Atlas and Lincoln, and Rage is in the house still. We need to talk to you.”

“And Nerds,” Gray adds.

Sugar takes a deep breath and nods before pointing down the hall. We follow him into Rage’s office as he texts Nerds to come in as well. As soon as Nerds joins us, I explain what happened.

“There are no cameras back there, so I won’t be able to check. I can check the farthest back ones and see if they might have picked anything up, but I doubt it.” He glances at me. “You sure you don’t recognize her? Why would someone so young be back there?”

I shake my head. “Nope. I don’t... Oh! Wait, I got a picture.” I fumble for my phone in my pocket.

“Ry! Why didn’t you start with that?” Gray rolls his eyes.

Oops? “Sorry, I’m a little discombobulated lately.”

“Lately?” Nerds says at the same time Sugar says, “A little?”

Gray snickers, and I flip them off before slipping my phone out and handing it to Nerds, who looks at it before cursing. “It’s Tabby.”

“Tabby? As in, Tammy’s daughter? Harley’s sister? Well, not sister, I guess,” Gray says, his forehead creasing. “Why?”

Sugar shakes his head. “No idea. We told everyone to keep quiet that

Harley was here. But I don't think they'd send Tabby if they knew she was. I'd think they'd come looking for her themselves. Not send their daughter."

"And why be back there? Why just stand and not try to get in? That's so far back from everything, you can't see any of the houses or anything. It makes no sense." Nerds grumbles.

I clear my throat and rub the back of my neck. They all look at me.

"What? Spit it out, kid," Sugar urges.

"I just... What if she was waiting for someone? It kind of felt like she was waiting for someone to meet her back there." I shrug.

"The mole?" he questions with a raised brow. "That doesn't make sense. Why would they be talkin' to a young girl? She's what, fifteen?"

Nerds nods. "Turned fifteen about a month ago."

"You know, Blade brought up havin' you look into Daniel more. See what he's been up to. With everything else goin' on, we haven't had a chance to talk about it."

"I can dig into him just to be safe. But I think we have to lock shit down. I know Rage is dealing with his own shit currently. So can you do that?" Nerds asks.

"I can. It's a good idea until we know who we can trust and have more information on Harley. We don't need shit gettin' out," Sugar responds

Gray's eyes narrow slightly. "What exactly does that mean?"

"It means we don't tell anyone anything. Only ranking officers can know what's happenin'. Regular day-to-day business will look normal, but when it comes to Rage, Harley, Daniel, and Nerds lookin' into Tammy, no one will get any information about it."

I sigh and lean back. "This is all so crazy." I remember Rage talking about how they had to lock down before, but it hasn't happened since I've been

here.

They all look at me before Sugar says, “Guessin’ this reunion didn’t go quite the way you expected, huh?”

I feel my lips stretch into a huge smile. “Are you kidding me? Seems good to me. I mean, not the getting shot part. My mind isn’t handling that bit all that well.” *Look, it’s me, communicating.* “When I met her, I knew there was a fire in her, but someone had stomped it out. She’s found it again.”

Sugar tsks. “And put herself at risk. There is a difference between findin’ your fire and becomin’ stronger and doing somethin’ beyond stupid and reckless. Things could’ve been so much worse. She could be dead right now.”

My body goes rigid at that thought, but I try not to let it show. I haven’t let myself go down that spiral because I’m scared I will yell at Harley, and I don’t want to do that. She isn’t one of my brothers; she doesn’t know me. *Yet.* Grayson eyes me, probably picking up on the tension from what Sugar just said.

I scoff. “You’re just saying that because you found out she’s your niece. How does that one feel, old man?” My lips curl into a smirk.

He glares at me. “It’s terrifying. I don’t just have a niece; I have a sister—well, I had. I had a sister who went through fuckin’ hell. I remember seein’ her a few times, and she never looked okay. If I had known…” He trails off, none of us needing him to finish.

That thought sobers me slightly. This is all much more serious than I am taking it, and I know that is mostly me refusing to face it, but how do you even handle all of this shit?

“You know you can’t do that, Sugar. You can’t let yourself think back to all the things you could’ve done if you had known. *If* being the keyword there.

You didn't know. You can't change that now, and you can't do anything about her mom, but you can do something about her. She's here. Your niece. You want to know what your sister would've been like? Get to know your niece. You have a piece of her in Harley." His voice wavers as he speaks.

I feel my chest tighten, knowing Gray is in pain. But yet he finds it in him to help someone else when saying those things was probably gut wrenching. He was only ten when his brother died, and he has nothing to remember him by. And even though he knows it's not his fault, it still eats at him that his brother is dead.

Sugar inclines his head. "You're right. I know. I think I might still be in shock."

Nerds chuckles, "You think? It's like one thing after another around here. I'm ready for a long vacation."

We all chat for a few more minutes before Gray and I leave the office. "Have you seen Cade?" I ask.

I've been with Harley this whole time, and I only saw Cade the first night she got shot. Since then, he hasn't been back to Rage's house.

Gray shakes his head. "No. Since Noah got us excused from school this week, he said Cade has been down in the gym basically 24/7 since then."

"We should head down and check on him."

Sometimes Cade can get stuck in his head, and he won't come out. Someone has to pull him out of it and usually give him a good fight, too.

Gray nods as we head towards the hall that goes to the stairs.

I add, "I think Harley showing up is throwing him off. Especially after the crap he pulled with Steph a few days ago. I hope that doesn't continue."

"I hope not too," Gray says quietly. I glance over at him and then pause, grabbing his arm to stop him too.

“Hey, you know that just because he let Steph hang off him doesn’t mean anything against you, right? You’re Cade’s brother. He would put you above her. I know those bitches have been annoying over the years with trying to separate you from our group, but that won’t ever happen. You know that, right?”

Gray nods but doesn’t quite look like he believes me. I sigh and let go of his arm to head down the stairs to the basement. As soon as we reach the bottom, we’re met by the sound of someone’s fists hitting a speed bag repeatedly with ‘*Demons*’ by *Lucha* playing through a speaker we have set up in the gym.

We walk into the room and find Cade going at it, shirtless with sweat dripping down him. He’s been down here for a while, and he’s ragged.

Without saying a word, I walk over to the wall we keep equipment on and grab some hand wraps, quickly putting them on. Then I head over to the center mat we have in here that we use to spar and let out a loud whistle.

Cade snaps his head in my direction, not even realizing that Gray and I had come in here.

Gray takes a seat on one of the benches and watches as Cade comes over with a glare on his face. *Oh, caveman needs a fight.* I bounce on my toes and shift into a fighting stance as the song changes to ‘*Ready To Die*’ by *Lucha*. Cade charges right for me, not even bothering with words.

This isn’t the first time we’ve gone at it, and it likely won’t be the last. I know he’s fighting some inner demons. He needs help to diminish them, and I’m always up for a good fight.



Grayson

Ryker grins when Cade goes to clock him right in the face, but he is quick on his feet and easily dodges it. Ry spins behind Cade, twisting his arm while kicking out his knees so he drops and falls forward almost face planting if it wasn't for his other free arm.

“Getting slow, caveman,” Ryker taunts him with a sly grin.

Cade growls and flips them so Ryker is on his back, and Cade is on top of him. Then starts throwing blows at Ryker's gut. He definitely isn't using all of his strength, but I can imagine they still hurt. Well, to other people, like me, who don't have as much muscle built up.

I can spar and hold my own, and Cade and Ry have both trained me in boxing. I work out with them occasionally, but I don't have an obsession with it like they do. I am not a fan of fighting and would prefer to just not do it at all. But I know they both need this, so I sit back and watch, making sure things don't get out of hand.

They have taken it too far before. Luckily, Noah and I were around to stop them before it got even worse, but both of them ended up with broken bones. They use fighting as a release for the things they've been through in their childhoods, so I get it.

I also know that something is going on with Cade that he isn't fully telling us, so maybe this will help him open up to us.

But I am proven wrong when Ry taunts Cade one too many times and Cade gets him pinned down in a headlock and growls, “Why aren't you with your girlfriend?”

Ry grunts and taps his arm, prompting Cade to release him. They both sit up on the mats. Ry glares at him.

“Why aren’t you visiting her?” he asks with an eyebrow raise.

Cade scoffs but says nothing, getting up and unwrapping his hands. If anything, Ry hates it when people go silent on him the most. It makes him overthink and lets his dad’s voice snake into his head. So sometimes it puts the two of them at odds because one is the silent, broody type and the other isn’t.

Ryker stands and starts walking out of the gym towards where an extra bathroom is down here. He grumbles, “I’m going to rinse off before we go back to Rage’s house.”

I wait until he’s in the bathroom and the water is running before standing and walking over to where Cade is chugging down water. “Are you going to tell us what’s going on with you anytime soon?”

Instead of responding, he just grabs another bottle and starts downing it.

I cross my arms. “Alright, well, then how about I tell you what I see? I see you distancing yourself from us. At first, when we met Harley, you were fine. You even talked more than you normally would. But then she left, and you had to watch Ryker slowly lose it. Which made you realize you weren’t the only one who had feelings for Harley. Am I on the right track?”

He raises a brow at me, and there’s a slight twitch to his lip, causing me to grin.

I retort, “What? Do you think you’re the only one allowed to observe people? Not that I need to do a lot of that with you. You’re my brother, Cade. I know you.”

I watch as he looks down at the water bottle in his hand, his face contemplative. I am a few inches shorter than him, so I can clearly see him

begin to war with himself.

He shrugs. "It's easier if I just stay away. Ryker needs her. He deserves someone in his life."

I scoff, "And you don't?"

His eyes narrow on me. "No. I don't. And I wouldn't ever fight Ryker and risk losing a brother over a girl."

My heart hurts for him, always thinking he doesn't deserve good things in life, or that it's impossible for someone to love him because of the stuff he has done.

"Cayden, you're an idiot. I know that anything I say to you right now won't get through that thick skull of yours, but I will say, don't shut us out. You are wrong about so many things. You observe everyone else and yeah, you see some things, but what you are neglecting to do is communicate.

"You can only see what someone allows you to see. You forget that we have so many thoughts and feelings in our brains that don't show. So, until you decide to pull your head out of your ass, don't cut us off. Promise me you will still come around. Be friends with Harley. Be around us. She isn't going anywhere. Especially not now that she has family here. You are more at risk of losing everyone if you continue to do what you are planning than if you just stop and live like you normally would, adding in Harley, as a friend."

With that, I turn and leave the gym, texting Ryker that I will wait for him outside as I head upstairs and towards the back door of the clubhouse. I need a few minutes to get myself together.

I don't enjoy getting onto my brother for things, but Cade needs tough love. And he's hurting. Trauma is a crazy thing with the way it can mess up your head. Sometimes it affects you in ways you didn't realize. And if you have no

one there to pull you out of the darkness when you can't see, then what do you do? You drown in it, and you don't always come back from that. Even if you do manage to break through the waves, it might be too late. And that, in itself, is a form of torture.

About five minutes later, Ry comes outside with a wide-eyed, slightly terrified woman next to him. She's short with medium-length blonde hair and bright blue eyes. I can tell he is trying to ease her, but it doesn't seem to be working.

Ry sees me as I walk over to them. "Grayson, this is Brielle, who Harley has been staying with since she left here. Lincoln brought her, but Sugar all but demanded his attention in the clubhouse asking questions about Harley." He chuckles. "So, we're walking her over to Rage's."

I nod and smile. "It's nice to meet you. Sorry it's under these crazy circumstances."

"Nice to meet you as well." She pulls on the sleeves of her sweater, clearly uncomfortable. So we leave it at that and lead her to Rage's house, which is fine by me because I really want to see Harley with my own eyes again and make sure she's okay now that she's fully awake.

Chapter Six

HARLEY



Mother's favorite thing to do, besides beating me, was to taunt me. That's what this is, right? She's taunting me. She found me. She's here, in this room hugging me.

You're not weak anymore, Harley.

I take a deep breath and let my walls rise. *Show no emotion.*

I grab her shoulders, digging my nails in as hard as I can and pushing her away from me. I kick the blanket off of me and bring my foot up between us to land a kick to her gut. I hear a grunt as the person stumbles away. *That doesn't sound like a female.*

Then I brush that thought off. This is a game. She is taunting me. But I'm stronger.

I fly out of the bed ready to attack, but someone grabs me from behind, pinning my arms to my sides. I try to break free from their hold, but I can't. I scream. My broken, abused throat has to work hard to get it out, but I let that pain and burn fuel me. I wiggle and try to throw them off balance, but it's not working.

I hear someone's voice. "What the fuck is happening?" *Gabriel*. That motherfucker. This is probably his doing. They're trying to capture me, give me to *her*.

"Harley!" someone yells as rough, callused hands grab my face.

That's not Moth... Tammy. I blink until my eyes focus on the room again. The haze is coming down. My breathing is heavy, and I can feel my heart pounding in my ears, making it hard to hear.

As my eyes come into focus, I find Atlas standing in front of me, holding my face with his hands. My heart slows. Everything I just did comes back to me. I attacked Atlas. That wasn't Tammy.

It was Atlas. One of the people who saved me after I got away. A true father figure. My body goes limp, and Atlas grabs me out of whoever was holding onto me. He wraps me in his arms and hugs me tight.

The tears start, and they don't stop, my reality sinking in. I failed. I'm a failure. I couldn't even avenge my mom. That's the least she deserved.

I faintly hear someone tell Gabriel I'll be okay and to give me some space. As I hear a door shut, Atlas lifts me and lays me on the bed before sitting next to me and taking my hand. When I glance up at the other person, I see it's Lincoln.

They shouldn't be here. They should leave. I'm a failure. *Worthless*.

"Harley!" Atlas snaps. "Stop it. You are not a failure. You are not worthless. You need to take some deep breaths and then talk to us, kid."

I obey, breathing slowly in and out, desperately wishing Ryker was still in here holding my hand. Keeping me grounded. *Wow, where did that thought come from?*

As my body calms down, pain settles in, and I groan, looking down to see blood seeping through the shirt I'm wearing, which isn't mine. My eyes widen at that thought. I sit up quickly and gasp at the searing pain that shoots through my abdomen.

Atlas soothes, "Woah there, take it slow. Let me look at where you're bleeding. You might have ripped your stitches."

I raise my shirt up, thankful I still have on my pants from the other night, and true to what he suspected, I ripped my stitches. Atlas puts gauze on it, and Lincoln walks out of the room with his hands in his hair.

"Where is he going?" My voice comes out in a raspy whisper.

"To ask Rage to call their doctor to come back and fix the stitches." I furrow my brows at this. What? Atlas sighs, "Kid I don't even know where to start with you."

"I—" I press my lips together, realizing I have no idea where to even start either. "Is Bri okay?" I whisper.

He scoffs at me, "No, she's not. She's worried about you. She did everything she could to help you, and you leave a letter basically saying *thanks for nothing. I don't care about my life, so I'm going off to do something stupid.*"

Tears well up in my eyes, blurring my vision and spilling over my lashes. "I'm... I'm sorry."

His head shoots up from where he had been staring down at the floor and turns a glare on me. "You're sorry? What the hell was the last five months?"

Why did we all waste our time and lives helping you?” he says with anger, raising his voice.

Lincoln comes back in as he finishes speaking on the phone and shuts the door. “Cool it, Atlas. Give her a break.”

He doesn’t take his eyes off me as he responds, “Give her a break? A fucking break? Bri takes her in, not having any clue what happened or what danger it could bring. We all help taking her under our wings, guiding her, building her up mentally and physically just for her to leave a fucking letter, steal a gun from us, and run!”

I maintain eye contact, taking all that he throws at me. I know I hurt him. But he doesn’t understand. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m sorry I hurt Bri. But I’m not sorry I left and came back here. You don’t understand why—”

“Because you didn’t tell us,” he snaps. “You didn’t open up. We know why you came. No, scratch that. We don’t know *why* you chose to do it. But we get the reasoning behind it. But what you didn’t stop to think about was how we all had one side of the story. One. Every person has their own story. We all have Bri’s. Not even your mom’s. Just Bri’s. You don’t have your mom’s, and you don’t have Rage’s. But yet you still acted off of pure anger and as if there could be no other side to this.”

“How can there be another side? He raped her! Raped!” I yell, my irritation shows as my voice cracks and my hands continually clench and unclench at my sides. I don’t understand how they are acting like that’s not a tremendous deal.

Before either of them can respond, there is a knock at the door. Lincoln opens it, being the closest to the door, and in walks an older gentleman. Probably mid 60s with salt and pepper grey hair and soft brown eyes. He looks at me with a kind, sad smile.

“Hello. I am a doctor, and I work with guys from the club. Everyone calls me Doc. I patched you up the other night when you got shot. I heard you ripped some stitches out again?” he asks.

I nod as he comes closer, my lips thinning into a line. *Again*. So this isn't the first time I've messed up my stitches?

He points to the shirt. “May I?”

I glance at Atlas and Lincoln, who both nod at me. “Yes,” I say shakily.

He raises the shirt slowly and sucks in a breath. “Ouch. Yeah, you ripped them out. Are you in pain?” His eyes raise up to mine.

I shake my head. “It stings a little if I move, but it doesn't hurt now.”

Doc raises a brow at me before getting out supplies from the bag he brought in with him so he can numb me and restitch it. He works in silence, the rest of us also quiet. Seeming to be lost in thought.

My mind races with what's going to happen. Do Atlas and Linc really think Gabriel deserves to live? That he has a side to this? No. He raped her. Just like I was beaten and abused for three years.

There is no other side to it. They did it. They don't deserve to live.

Doc finishes up and packs up his stuff. As he stands, he looks back at me. “Try not to rip those out, okay?” I nod. He sighs before saying, “And because I can't keep my mouth shut, I heard what you said about Rage before I walked in. I'm not saying he did nothing wrong, but maybe try hearing him out before you decide that he's the enemy.”

I don't respond, feeling fury coursing through my veins. How many more times do I have to listen to people say that? I turn a glare toward the other two still in the room as Doc walks out. “Why does everyone think I need to give a rapist even a second to speak?”

Linc sighs while Atlas looks ready to burst. “Look, I know this is all hard

and really confusing, and you're dealing with being shot by someone, which I'm sure is a lot to think about." I haven't even really thought about it or where the guy who shot me is, but I don't say that because I know that'll make them worry that I'm shielding myself from dealing with it. He continues, "But you need to let him talk. You need to hear him out. We will not tell you his story for him. We can be there. We won't leave your side, but you need to hear it yourself and see him as a person and not just as the image you have of him in your head." Linc is almost pleading with me at this point.

Atlas sighs, crossing his arms as he glances from me to the door. "Why don't you go get Bri? It might be better if she is here to be with Harls, and she needs to hear it herself. It'll help her too." He shrugs.

I sputter, "No! Are you insane? You can't just bring Bri here! She should stay far away. I'll hear the bastard out, but then you guys should all leave, and I'll figure out what I'm going to do from there."

They both exchange looks that only serve to piss me off even more. Maybe I'm not being logical, but none of this is making any sense to me. I rip the blanket off myself and scoot the edge of the bed, slowly trying to stand. Luckily, my body is still used to constant pain, so I don't really feel much from the shot and the numbing stuff the Doc used is still working.

"Harl—" I hear one of them start to say, but I am already going to the door and ripping it open. As soon as I do, I realize I have no idea where I am or where Gabriel may even be, if he is even here.

The left goes to two more doors, whereas the right opens up to what looks like a living room, so I head towards it. When I come into the living room, I am taken aback by how nice it is. But before I have a chance to admire it, my eyes narrow on the man sitting on the couch. I storm further in, so I am standing in front of him. The only thing between us now is a coffee table.

Gabriel hears me approach and lifts his head, his eyes widening as he stands. “Harley,” he says almost brokenly.

My heart seems to skip a beat for a second as I truly take him in. Ruffled dirty clothes, dark bags under his eyes, his hair a mess and dirty, and he sounded so broken... No.

“No. You don’t get to do that. You, you are trash. You don’t deserve any of these people around here giving you the time of day. You don’t deserve the people I care about telling me to hear you out, because you had to get in their heads with whatever bullshit you spewed. My mom. She was my mom!” I scream on a sob.

I have to find it in me to lock down my emotions like I used to as I would endure hours on end of beatings. *Don’t cry in front of him.*

I shake my head, trying to get those feelings to go away. “My mom was a beautiful, kind person. She deserved all the love in the world, and you and your filthy club destroyed her! You broke her! You. Are. A. Rapist.” I spit the last word, feeling myself vibrating with rage.

He nods. Fucking nods. I watch as tears glisten in his eyes. *What the fuck.* “You’re right.” His voice cracks. “You are right. Every single word.”

“Rage—” Atlas hesitates, which makes me glance over, realizing Linc isn’t here, but Atlas still is. He watches Gabriel seriously, his eyes full of concern.

“No,” Rage says, not taking his eyes off me as I look back at him. “She’s right. I’m a rapist. I did something awful. Your mom was a beautiful person who deserved nothing she got.” He smiles sadly. “I think you might be the one thing that came out of her childhood that made her think it was okay, though. I am so glad she had you.”

His words only serve to piss me off more. “Stop that! You didn’t know her! You don’t know her. Don’t talk about her like you do!”

My entire body feels like a bomb moments away from exploding. Part of me wants to soften at what he just said, and the other part wants to fly across this table and beat the living shit out of him.

My mom was stolen from me. Hurt in front of me. I had to leave her. I left her and she died. For three years, I didn't grieve her. Three fucking years. Then I find out how bad her life was and realize that she didn't get to suffer and grieve what happened to her because she had me to pretend to be okay for.

Everything we both have been through is so irrevocably unfair, and I am fucking sick of people taking things from us.

"I know." That's it. That's all he says.

"You don't deserve to breathe," I say with as much venom as I can muster. I hear Atlas suck in a breath behind me, but I don't take my eyes off him, wanting to see everything he is showing. Any cracks in his demeanor.

His face drops. It's like he was holding onto some tiny glimmer of hope and now it's gone. He looks... fucking devastated. No. He can't be. This is his fault. *Right?* Gabriel reaches behind him and pulls a gun from the waistband of his pants, but before I can flinch or react, he has it laying on the coffee table in front of me... aimed at himself.

"I can't sit here and tell you what I did was okay. It wasn't. And you're right, I don't deserve to breathe. I would never wish for you to take someone's life, but I also won't tell you that you can't take mine. Either way, I need you to know that I do love you. You're my kid. I see it in you right now, clear as day. I see your mom, too. I know you don't want to hear me say that, but it's true. I wish things could be different, but I don't know what else to do. The decision is yours." He shrugs.

Before I am even thinking it through, the gun is in my hand, safety off,

aimed right at his head. Atlas takes a step towards me. “Harls...” he says carefully.

But I don’t even look at him. I can feel tears trickling down my cheeks as I stare into Gabriel’s eyes. This is what I wanted. Why am I not pulling the trigger? My finger doesn’t move as the seconds tick on like minutes. Never ending as my soul cracks even more than it already has.

This is supposed to heal me. Why is my finger not moving?

Why does this no longer feel like healing?

I feel a presence next to me, his smell alone dragging my eyes to his. Leather and soft Irish spring. Ryker. He is standing right next to me. Atlas is a few steps to his right and behind them, Grayson and Bri are standing at the entrance to the living room. Bri’s eyes are wide and welling with tears, and Grayson looks shocked.

Ryker though, Ryker looks at me with understanding. I move my eyes back to him, and he gifts me with his beautiful, full smile, causing both of his dimples to pop out.

“Oh, little flame, how we are so similar.” My brows furrow, not understanding the sentiment behind his words. He leans in closer to me. “I killed my father.” His smile drops when I suck in a breath, and he nods. “He deserved it. There is not a day that goes by that I regret it. I would do it again tomorrow.”

Atlas mumbles something under his breath that I don’t hear.

Ryker continues, “But, little flame, there also isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t wish I would have handled it differently. That I wish I would’ve not let my darkness consume me so quickly and taken a few minutes first.”

He brings his hand up to rest on my arm that is still holding the gun aimed at Gabriel.

“You don’t want to do this. I’m not telling you because I am on Rage’s side or because he wants me to say it.” How does he know that’s where my thoughts are? “I am saying it because I am on your side, and you wouldn’t be able to live with yourself if you didn’t get answers first. I’m not saying you’ll decide to love him or even like him. You can still hate him. But I think you’ll hate yourself even more if you don’t listen first.”

He puts light pressure on my arm, and I allow it, slowly lowering the gun. He takes it from my hand and puts the safety on before placing it on the coffee table.

My mind seems frozen. No thoughts coming or going. I’m confused. I’m... I’m not sure. All I do know is that Ryker’s words moved right through me, and I trust them. I trust every word he says, as fucking insane as that is.

He nudges me towards the other side of the couch. With it being a large sectional, we end up sitting on the opposite end from Gabriel, with Ryker taking a seat on my left. Grayson comes over and sits next to him while Atlas leads Bri towards me. Bri takes a seat next to me, with Atlas next to her.

I look over at Bri and open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Shame courses through me as Atlas’s earlier words play through my mind.

She wraps her arms around me and squeezes me tight. Tears threaten to fall, but I blink them away. I didn’t know I needed this small validation from her. “I love you so much, but that doesn’t mean things are okay. Let’s just listen and go from there, okay?” she whispers in my ear.

I nod and squeeze her back before we look at Gabriel, who appears sick to his stomach. He nods at Bri.

“Gabriel,” she says softly.

He clears his throat and begins his story.

Something I wasn’t at all prepared for.



Rage (Gabriel)

I can count on one hand the number of times I have felt genuine fear.

I don't even need one full hand, just two fingers. Once when I was a kid and now. Right now, this second, I feel an insane amount of fear as I sit here facing them. Not even them, just her. My daughter.

That concept alone is a scary one, but it doesn't fill me with fear. Not the way that sitting here preparing to tell them my story does. Harley may not believe me. She may decide that it doesn't matter what the circumstances of my life were at the time.

I still did something horrible. To her mother. There is no taking that back or redeeming myself from those actions.

If she can't find it in herself to move forward with me, if I have to live out my life knowing I have a kid out there that hates me... someone better pick up that gun on the table and shoot me because I can't live like that.

I won't. No fucking way.

Here goes nothing.

"I'll start by saying my father was a horrible man. There's no easy way to put it. He was vicious and awful. He had no redeeming qualities, and he proved that over and over again. My childhood wasn't a good one. It wasn't filled with happiness and love from my parents. It was like living my own personal hell."

I watch as Harley's eyes flash at that, understanding flickering through them. Rage simmers inside me at the recognition there.

She shouldn't understand that.

I take a deep breath and continue on, pushing away the thoughts of wanting to hound her with questions and go hunt down the fuckers who dared to hurt my little girl.

“We don’t need to go into details of shit my father did. We’ll just leave it at he was an evil man, and his death was not something we mourned. As I got older, into my teen years, my father decided it was time for me to learn about all of his businesses and what he did. He wanted to mold me into a mini him. A mini Killer, to take over one day and continue on his work. But that plan went to shit pretty early on when he found out how much I was like my mother. I was someone who sought out love. And since I couldn’t get it from my parents, I tried to find it with girlfriends. Or better said, *a* girlfriend.”

I watch Harley’s reaction as I bring up the next part, wondering if this alone will make her never give me a chance. The thought makes my heart sink.

“I fell head over heels in love with Tammy in high school.”

Her eyes shut, and she takes a deep breath. I watch as Ryker keeps an eye on her and reaches over, taking her hand in his. She opens her eyes and glances down before looking at him, and he gives her a soft smile that seems to both confuse and calm her at the same time.

Brielle clears her throat. “We knew that part. That is something Lilian told me when she came to me. After leaving here.”

“Right. Well, I thought she felt the same way as me, but she didn’t. She had been sleeping around, and long story short, we ended things, and she was banned from any club property.”

I neglect mentioning that I killed the man she had been hooking up with, that my father stood by and let me torture and destroy him because I had a temper, and no one was around to stop me.

I don’t want Harley to think I’m more of a monster than she already does.

“After that, I steered clear of relationships. I was lost, a little broken, and my father became even more vindictive, trying to use that heartache against me. When that didn’t work, he took more drastic measures. I became a prospect when I turned eighteen, and you are already considered the club’s bitch as a prospect, but for me, it was even worse because my father was putting me through the ringer.” Which was putting it mildly.

Part of me wants to continue on about things my father did and the shit I had to deal with, but I know what they’re really waiting for. So I throw it all out there. The worst thing that can happen is what I’m already expecting. She walks away from me and wants nothing to do with me.

I let out a sigh, “There were five of us in total that were prospecting at the time. We were all about ten months in, and my father decided it was time to pit us against each other in any way he could. The other four guys were not good people. They all wanted to do the things the club was doing; they wanted things to stay how they were. So, when my father brought us into a room that had someone—”

“Don’t,” comes sternly from Brielle, shocking me out of my thoughts. I glance at her, realizing I was keeping my eyes trained down. “She doesn’t need the details. Just explain in general what happened.”

I nod. She’s right. She doesn’t need to picture her mom in that light. But that does mean that Brielle got the full story. I look in her eyes as she cries, and my heart aches from the onslaught of memories from that day. Damn it, Lilian.

Chapter Seven

HARLEY



Watching Gabriel get lost in a memory is something I understand fully. After all, it has happened to me frequently.

I squeezed Ryker's hand as we all allowed Gabriel a few minutes to breathe before finishing. A part of me hurts for him. I know he isn't telling us everything, which is okay. But I can only imagine what he's been through.

Brielle had told me about him being in love with Tammy and I had just thought that meant Tammy was involved with Gabriel raping my mom, but now my thoughts are confusing.

Did my mom deserve what happened to her? No.

But did Gabriel, either?

No...

So, who is to blame for all of this? Who is to blame for me? How could my mom show me so much love and affection for thirteen years? How can Gabriel tell me he loves me after only having met me just this week?

He can't. No one can truly love me. Look where I come from. I am a walking, talking, breathing reminder of a horrible thing that happened.

"Harley." I look over and see Grayson leaning over Ryker with a soft smile on his face. "It's okay to want a different outcome now. It's okay to change your mind. Don't hold onto your anger because you don't know how to let go of it. Go to him. I think he needs you, and I think you might need him more than you realize."

I stare at his perfectly beautiful face and bright green eyes saying nothing. He's right. I wouldn't know how to let go of my anger even if I tried, but he was wrong about where my mind went. Although, no one needs to know those thoughts.

I glance back at Gabriel, who looks absolutely broken. *Just try, Harley.* I take a deep breath. Either way, I want to know what happened. I need to understand better. I stand up but don't release Ryker's hand. I look down at our still clasped hands, then meet his gaze with pleading eyes. He chuckles and stands up, walking with me to the other side of the sectional.

I sit down next to Gabriel with Ryker right next to me. My lifeline. I gently rest my hand on Gabriel's arm, trying to breathe through the anger I feel towards him along with all the other confusing emotions in me.

He raises his eyes and looks at me, and I release a small gasp at the absolute torment showing in his eyes. This is something he needs to heal. He needs to tell it. But he needs me to accept it and not hate him. The way I understand that on such a deep level makes all the anger that's been building since I found out about him slowly evaporate from me.

I need the same thing from someone I can't get it from. My mom. I ran, I left her there, and she died. *Don't think about that right now, Harley.*

Instead, I stand up straighter. "Tell me what happened to my mom."

He nods and doesn't break eye contact. "The fights began. The winner would get... would get Lilian. I promised her I would win and do what I could to be gentle or stop it. I lied to her when I said I would try to stop it. There was no possible way for me to stop it without a lot of bad things happening. So I beat the shit out of the other prospects and won. She didn't know it was me then, and I did everything I could to take care of her, but it was hard when my father was right there watching. I got beat afterwards for showing too much care while..." He takes a shaky breath. "In my father's eyes, women were nothing but toys."

We just sit there in silence. I can hear Brielle snuffle as she cries for her friend. There are still so many questions, but I don't think I can ask any of them or even accept answers to them right now as I look at Gab... my dad and see how affected he is by all of this.

All I wanted was to seek revenge for my mom. For the things she suffered. But what about him? When does he get to heal from the dark cloud that has been hovering over him for years?

Everything seems to hit me as I sit here staring at him. My eyes burn with unshed tears that are threatening to fall and blur my vision. The dam breaks in seconds at his words and cascade down my cheeks, the weight of my actions becoming a flood, pulling me under its salty waves.

Gabriel shakes his head in despair. "I am so, so sorry, Harley. I can't tell you I take it back anymore, that I would go back and not have it happen because then I wouldn't have you. I have hated with everything in me that it happened, but knowing that you're alive now, that you weren't killed... I

can't regret it anymore. I can only hope your mom would forgive me because it brought us you."

I feel arms wrap around me as I sob. I don't know how long it lasts or how I ended up in my bed, but next thing I know, my eyes are closing as I drift off to sleep. My body too exhausted to keep my eyes open any longer.



I wake up slowly, feeling hot and sticky, realizing I have no idea when I showered last. The need to pee makes me get moving quickly only to kick someone's legs as I try to get up. *What the fuck?*

Ryker's half-asleep voice sounds from next to me, "Lay back down, Harley."

"Can't. Need to pee." I move so I am standing on the bed and then jump over him, landing on the floor easily.

Fuck, probably shouldn't have done that with stitches in. My body does ache, but it doesn't feel too bad right now. I have definitely felt worse. I glance back at the bed and see Grayson and Ryker both sleeping on either side of where I was laying.

The need to pee overtakes any panic I can feel about having just slept in the same bed as not one, but two very attractive guys and I dart from the room in search of the bathroom.

I head into the one across the hall, quickly peeing. Luckily, the door was open, so I knew easily which one was the bathroom. When I finish and wash my hands, I look at my reflection and wince. I look horrible. My eyes are puffy and bloodshot, and my hair is a tangled, greasy disaster. I'm still in the

same pants I wore when I came here and the t-shirt someone put on me after I was shot.

Speaking of, I lift my shirt and pull back the bandage. They are still in and not bleeding, so I guess that's good, but I need a shower, and I'm not waiting until this heals.

One thing I learned about myself since running away from Tammy's is that I can't stand not showering. After my, well, we'll call it my depression hole, where I didn't leave bed for two weeks, I started taking at least two showers a day. It took me a few weeks before I actually started feeling clean, and Brielle helped me tame my hair. It was a giant mess that I didn't know how to handle. My mom always did it, and then I had no way of maintaining it at Tammy's. But Bri helped me with it. It's long, wavy, and thick, and as of right now, it's going to take a full day to get these tangles out.

I sigh and search the drawers for something to put over my stitches. I find some new bandages and throw one on. It's not waterproof, but it'll have to do if I want to shower.

I strip down and take a nice long shower. There are male hair and body products in here, so I just use those hoping for the best. By the time I get out, I know it's been at least an hour. I grab a towel from under the sink and then realize my mistake... I have no clothes in here.

"Fuck," I groan just as a knock sounds on the door.

I glance at the door and then down at me in only a towel... Thoughts of Richard always watching me if I was upstairs assault my mind. *These people aren't him. He was a fucking sicko.*

I take a few deep breaths and yell, "Yeah?"

A soft but masculine shy voice sounds, causing a grin to form on my lips. "Hey, uh, I heard the shower running and figured you have no clothes. I have

your, um, bag here and a t-shirt and sweats in case you want those.”

I crack the door open and pop my head out, finding a blushing Grayson standing there. I give him a smile. “Thank you so much. I didn’t realize I forgot to get clothes. I just really wanted a shower.”

He keeps his eyes directly on mine as he nods. “Right. Here you go.” He hands me the bag and clothes before rushing off.

After I get dressed, deciding to wear the borrowed t-shirt and sweats that I think belong to Grayson since he’s the closest in size to me and these are only slightly baggy, I leave the bathroom and walk back to the bedroom to find it empty. I know I have a lot of things to figure out now, and I still have questions, so instead of hiding in here and letting myself curl up and go numb to it all, I exhale and walk out of the bedroom towards the living room.

I find Ryker and Grayson in the kitchen, the latter cooking something and making me realize I am hungry as my stomach grumbles. I don’t even know the last time I ate something.

“Hey, little flame, feel better after showering?” Ryker asks as he notices me, causing Grayson to turn around and look at me.

My mouth feels suddenly extremely dry, so all I do is nod. Ryker pulls out the stool next to him and taps it. I move without thought, taking a seat while trying to figure out the best way to ask what I need to know. Before I can, a finger comes under my chin, turning my head towards Ryker’s face.

He murmurs, “What are you thinking so hard about?”

Everything spills out. “Who shot me? Where are they? Why? Can I talk to them? Who’s house is this? Where is everyone else? Is Bri okay? How long did I sleep?”

Before I can ask more questions, Ryker’s finger is on my lips.

“Shhh. Okay, okay, you have questions.” He chuckles. “What do you want

to know first?”

I exhale as he moves his finger. Every time he touches me, it feels like my entire body lights on fire. I’m not sure I understand why. Instead of pondering that further, I ask, “Where is everyone? Whose house is this?”

It’s Grayson who answers this time from where he is making eggs and bacon at the stove. My mouth waters at the smell and the sizzle of the bacon.

“This is Rage’s house. Rage is currently at the clubhouse dealing with a few things, and he talked with Brielle, Atlas, and Lincoln. They went back to their hotel, I believe. Rage wanted to give you a little time alone, but he’ll be back soon to talk to you. I think with Atlas.”

Ryker sighs, “Who didn’t want to leave you alone. But Brielle and Lincoln convinced him after he yelled at everyone. The dude really cares for you.”

I nod. “He’s been like a big brother and father to me over the last few months.”

“So, when you left here, you went to them?”

I grimace, knowing they won’t like the answer, but I also don’t want to lie. Secrets and lies have kept me in the dark for years, and I’m over that. I want honesty and to know what’s happening, so I guess that means I need to give what I’m asking for.

I watch as Grayson shoots Ryker a glare, to which Ryker shrugs. “You told me to be patient and not push it. I never said I would.”

That brings a chuckle out of me, which has both of them watching me with smiles.

I clear my throat and answer his question. “When I left Tammy’s, I had no idea where I was going. I had, um, these memories of my mom telling me stories, and I was taking a chance that they were real. I didn’t find Bri right away. For a week, I was on my own.

Ryker's face morphs from happy and carefree to angry within seconds. "You know, I thought I had no self-preservation skills, but I think you might out beat me on that. That wasn't a smart thing to do. You're sixteen. How did you even manage to survive on your own?"

I attempt to tamp down my anger at what he says. He doesn't understand why I had to leave. But that doesn't mean I'm able to say my next words softly. They come out much more harsh than I intend them to.

"I was living in hell. And completely alone. I had no one. Things were progressively getting worse, and I had no answers as to what was going on. Risking being on my own was less of a risk than staying there with unknown threats." I'm surprised at how steady my voice stays as I say that, considering my mind flashes with memories upon memories of the things that happened. My skin shows the proof of what they have done. "And by the way, I'm almost seventeen."

Ryker opens his mouth to respond, but before he can, the front door flings open. My first instinct is to flinch, but I manage to hold it back. When I look over at the guy who is walking into the kitchen, I tilt my head as I study him. He is the guy from the bus stop, I think. His eyes look familiar as they connect with mine. Blue with specks of gold.

Ryker places his hand on my shoulder, drawing my attention back to him. "Harley, this is Noah." He goes to say something else, but I interrupt him. That name. I know it.

"Noah?" I press.

He raises a brow, a cocky smirk coming over his face. "That's my name," he says with a nod.

"Why did Moth—I mean Tammy think I knew you and was telling you shit?" My mind starts to fade back to the last few days in the basement... *No,*

don't go there.

The smirk instantly drops, a serious yet deadly look overtaking his face.

Grayson clears his throat from behind us. I turn to look at him. “Why don’t we all sit down and eat, and we can talk?” he suggests.

I agree, considering my stomach lets out a loud rumble that causes all three of them to chuckle before Noah says, “Cade will be here in a minute.”

I watch as Grayson gives Noah a look with a raised brow and Noah shrugs. Before I can comment on it, Ryker is nudging me towards the table. We all sit down and start filling our plates. Somehow, my nerves don’t seem to be hitting me too hard at being surrounded by near strangers. Ryker and even Grayson seem to calm me, and I feel comfortable around them, even if I don’t fully understand why.

The bigger reason I think the nerves aren’t hitting is because I am fucking starving. Ever since being at Bri’s and starting to work out more often, I grew a new appetite, and I couldn’t imagine only eating maybe two cans a day like I did for three years. Not that it was a choice.

As we start to eat, the door opens again, and Cayden walks in. Isn’t this Rage’s house? Why does everyone just keep walking in? I need to stop holding in my questions and ask things I want to know. So, I do, and Ryker answers.

“We all grew up around here. Rage’s house was built about two years ago, and we are all very close to him. It probably would be more weird if we knocked.” He shrugs.

I wish I could say I knew what that closeness was like, but I don’t. Even when my mom was alive, I never went into her room. It was her space. And at Brielle’s, I kept too many walls up; the secrets kept us from ever getting that close.

I nod like I understand and watch as Cayden takes a seat at the table, never once speaking or looking over at me. For some reason, that bothers me. *You have no right to be bothered by that, Harley*, I remind myself.

“Okay, so you all live here or something?” I wave my fork around before taking another bite of my bacon.

Noah smirks at me. “Why do you get to ask all the questions here? I think it’s my turn now.”

I send him a glare. Fuck. Why didn’t I think that if I start asking questions, then they would have questions for me as well? The attitude, as Atlas has called it, comes out to play. I was never a child who spoke a lot. I was quiet and kept to myself. I mostly talked to my mom, and we never fought. The worst fight we did have... was the day she died.

My mind comes to a screeching halt. *Don’t think about that right now.*

I think living in three years of my own personal hell has changed me, though. I’m a different person now. I’m stronger, and even through the panic and anxiety I feel, I know I can stand up for myself now. I won’t be walked on ever again.

“First off, you haven’t answered any questions, so no, you don’t get to ask any. And second, I woke up today with Grayson and Ryker in the bed with me. I get to ask as many questions as I want.”

Ryker grins as Grayson chokes on the water he was drinking, his cheeks turning pink. “Oh, little flame, that wasn’t our fault. You fell asleep on me last night after hearing Rage’s story, and when I carried you to bed, you hung onto me like a koala, so I climbed in with you. When Grayson covered us and tried to leave, you reached out, snagged his hand and pulled him down on the bed with us and mumbled *sleep* before passing out and drooling all over me.”

I feel my face heat, not remembering any of this. “I do not drool,” I mumble

while stabbing some eggs with my fork and taking a bite, not looking up at anyone.

Why would I do that? I don't even know any of them well, and just less than a week ago, I wanted and was determined to destroy this whole club. But now, I am not too sure how I feel. I still feel this intense need to get revenge.

Someone needs to pay. But when I picture taking out my fury, I can't see these people at the other end of it. The man who looked so broken last night, who handed me a gun and was prepared to die. These guys who are all sitting here like brothers laughing together, or the uncle I didn't know I had who I have seen little of, but when I did see him, he seemed sincere.

I can't imagine hurting them. When I picture evil, vile people who deserve the worst, Tammy and Richard pop into my head. Rage's father. My mom's father, well, a fake father, who she grew up with who hurt her.

Those are the people I picture hurting. Not these people.

I finish the last few bites of my breakfast while the guys talk. Then I get up and take my plate to the sink. While rinsing it, I hear someone come up next to me. When I look up, I see it's Grayson.

He offers me a gentle smile. "Sorry if Ry embarrassed you. He was just teasing, and sometimes he doesn't think before speaking."

Before I can respond, Ryker does from behind Grayson. "I can hear you, fucker. I think before I speak."

Grayson rolls his eyes before turning to face him. "Shall we go through why that isn't true?" he retorts as Noah follows up with, "You don't even think your actions through."

Ryker scoffs and goes to defend himself, but Noah raises a single brow and glances down, which immediately shuts Ryker up. Weird.

I can't see what he was looking at from where I am, slightly behind Grayson, so I step up next to him and look Ryker over. There is a thick black band with a small green light on it wrapped around his ankle. It's partially covered by his joggers, but I can assume that is what Noah is referencing.

"What is that?" I ask, peering closer.

Noah laughs like this is the best thing ever, and Ryker scowls at him. "So glad you find this amusing now."

"Oh, I don't. But I am going to love you having to explain everything to her."

"Um, does someone want to, I don't know, fucking explain? This isn't the first question I have asked that you guys haven't answered. Can someone just fucking answer one question?" I groan.

Grayson nods. "Sorry. This is all weird for all of us. Let's go sit down, and we will answer your questions."

We all head into the living room that holds a large sectional couch and an entertainment center with a large TV. There aren't many other things. Just a few pictures on the far wall that I don't have a chance to look closely at before sitting down on the couch.

No one says anything. Cayden seems bored out of his mind; Noah has an amused smirk on his face as his eyes bounce between everyone. Ryker and Grayson are both tense and look anywhere but at me.

"Well?" I draw out, pointedly looking at Ryker.

He clears his throat as he rubs the back of his neck. "Right. So, we should backtrack and just get this shit out of the way." He waves his hand around, letting out a nervous chuckle.

He goes on to explain how they watched me when I was in school and noticed the bruises and limps and shit. Then how they tried to find me after I

left and everything they have done since.

“You broke into Tammy’s house?” I screech as he tells me about that night. I jump up from the couch and pace in front of it. “That was so fucking stupid! You have no idea what she is capable of. The things that vile woman does. Can do. When you get stuck there, there is no getting out. Fuck, there isn’t even an escape after you get out. The things she does repeat in your head forever like you’re stuck in a goddamn loop.” My mouth keeps running, like I can’t stop the words now that they’re out there.

Everything he has been saying is insane! Why would they care about me at all? Why would he risk breaking into her house? I can’t even begin to comprehend all of this. My brain is fucking scrambled like the eggs we just ate.

Someone steps into my path from where I’ve been pacing, and I almost face-plant right into their chest, but hands on my shoulders stop me. His green eyes, *God, how I could get lost in those eyes.* Grayson bends lower, so he is at eye level with me.

His gaze catching mine and holding me in place, somehow centering me. “Breathe, beautiful,” he murmurs.

I try to take a deep breath, but it comes out as more of a gasp. “Can’t.” I shake my head.

“You can. With me, okay?” He inhales, I inhale. We both hold, and I exhale with him. His hands knead into my shoulders, loosening the tension in them as I find myself almost melting into him.

I realize then I am crying and quickly wipe my eyes and step back from him. They don’t need to see me like this. “Sorry. I’m good,” I try to say with more strength than I actually feel.

Ryker scoffs. “I’d say you’re anything but good. Whatever that bitch did to

you...”

He doesn't finish his sentence, but he doesn't need to because a new voice breaks through, sending a shiver down my spine and making my heart rate pick up.

“She deserves to suffer.”

Noah, who is sitting closest to Cayden, slaps him upside the head. “Shut the fuck up before you scare her.”

Cayden doesn't even flinch or move. His eyes connect with mine. The corner of his lip twitches just the slightest. “She's not scared.”

I say nothing, letting Cayden glimpse the anger I hold. The fear is still there; I don't think it'll ever go away. But anger is more dominant, and I let him see that. Not feeling the need to shy away from what really boils inside of me, the part of me I didn't want Bri, Atlas, and Linc to see.

To see them suffer.

To have my revenge.

Chapter Eight

RYKER



I watch as a look passes between Cade and Harley, and a feeling of contentment flows through me. I knew she was what we needed.

Noah clears his throat, causing them to drag their eyes away from each other. Gray and Harley take a seat again, and I go on to finish explaining what happened the night I broke in. As I explain knocking out Richard, I expect for fear or worry or literally anything except what comes over her face.

She smiles and then lets out the best sound I've ever heard. An evil little cackle. I grin at her before finishing telling her the rest.

Part of me hopes that by sharing everything with Harley, she will feel more comfortable and want to share everything with us too. I don't like being in the dark about things, but I know I have to try to be patient with her. She's

not intentionally keeping things from me; she just doesn't know how to trust us yet.

One thing is still really bothering me about all of this, and as we lapse into silence, I can't let it go. "How come everyone said you were mute, and you didn't speak at school?"

I watch her face closely as she seems to lock down her emotions before answering.

"I—" She clears her throat, straightening her spine as if she is preparing herself for a fight. "I wasn't allowed to speak."

We all wait for her to say more, but she doesn't, and it's clear she doesn't plan to. Surprising us all again, it's Cade who speaks up next. "She did something to your voice."

Harley gives a sharp nod. "Yes. I could still speak, but it hurt. Not using my voice was the best decision at the time. Things could've gotten worse had I tried." Apparently, she's done talking about it because she changes the subject. I guess I'll take what I can get for now. "Earlier, I asked why Tammy thought I was telling you things, Noah. Why would she have thought that? I had never met you back then."

He sighs, "The week before Thanksgiving, you hadn't been to school, and the boys were worried, so Rage, Sugar, and I decided to go over there and check in. I was playing the high school student's concerned friend. We didn't say much, just that I went to school with you and wanted to check on you, but they told us you were at a friend's house."

We all watch as her eyes flash with something, but she masks it so fast I don't know what it was. She clenches and unclenches her fists and immediately jumps up again to pace. It's like she can't sit still when her mind is running.

She's going to pull her stitches again, but before I can comment on that, she mutters to herself. "Liars. Dirty, rotten, fucking lying bitch."

I glance at the others to see if they heard, and they did because Noah speaks up.

"Who are the liars?" When she still doesn't answer or stop pacing, he tries again. "Harley, who are the liars?"

We all watch as she spins around to look at him. Her beauty takes my breath away as her long, wavy hair flows down her back. I want to run my fingers through it and play with it. *Or pull on it.* Her eyes are large, and when she's angry, they seem to get darker. Going from a light hazel to almost a brown color.

Her perfect pouty lips turn down into a frown as she opens and shuts her mouth like she isn't sure what she wants to say.

My leg bounces as I watch her try to contain the side of her that is itching to come out. Not being able to sit and watch anymore, I jump up and walk to stand in front of her. "Stop holding back. Whatever it is, let it out. What did they do, Harley? Who lied? Tammy?"

Her body shudders at me saying Tammy's name, but she doesn't open up. She shuts her eyes and takes a few deep breaths. That's not going to work.

"Ryker..." I faintly hear Gray say, but I ignore him, focusing on my little flame.

"Harley, what is it? What the fuck are you hiding? Because there's still a lot you don't know, and from the looks of things, we still don't even know if maybe you were helping Tam—" Before the word fully leaves my mouth, her eyes are flashing with the fire I knew was in her, and she explodes.

Did I take it too far? Probably. But I don't regret it. She is so stuck in her mind with what to say and who to trust. It would've taken months to get what

we are about to get. I'll make it up to her later.

“Don't fucking say that! Don't you dare think I had anything to do with that bitch!” she seethes, stabbing a finger into my chest. “I lived in hell for three fucking years. I got away on my own. I didn't need help. I don't even understand why you all would be looking for me or wanting to help me.”

She doesn't hear Rage, Sugar, and Atlas come through the door and stop short as they watch this unfold.

Harley shakes her head, sputtering, “The things—the things that they did to me, I can never forget. The way they made me feel worthless. To believe that I was nothing but a punching bag for *her*.”

She makes eye contact with me, and I open my mouth to tell her how that's bullshit. She's not worthless.

But she shakes her head, not breaking eye contact with me. “I'm broken. I'm so far damaged that I don't think I can ever fully recover. Moth—” she scoffs. “I've been out of there for almost eight months now, and I still am stuck in the ways of the shit she made me say and do. Mother. Fucking Mother.” She mutters the last part.

A single tear tracks down her cheek, and I step forward to gently wipe it away. “What did she do to you? Because whatever she did, we will make her pay. We will destroy her. She will never, ever lay a fucking hand on you again.”

She inhales sharply. “You don't understand. I'm broken, Ryker. I can't... I can't tell you everything she did. I can't... I won't let someone else bear my burden.”

Grayson stands up and walks over to stand next to us. “You don't have to give it to us. But you can let us hold some of it. We can hold it. We can be

there to support you until you get where you need to be. You aren't alone. But you have to choose not to be alone. Trust is..." he hesitates.

"Trust is a bitch," I finish for him. "Trust can either destroy you in ways you didn't even think were possible or build you back up and make you indestructible. But you make that choice. You have to decide who to trust."

"I don't know if I can trust again," she whispers brokenly.

"You can," Atlas says from behind us. Harley jumps and looks past me as he continues, "You can because somewhere in you, you know what you truly need. You never trusted us. Not fully."

She goes to protest, but he keeps talking.

"We knew that from the start. You let yourself grieve, but you grieved alone. You let yourself break, but break alone. The only thing you did is let us help build you back up. Make you stronger. Help you see some truths. But you never trusted us. And that's okay. I hope that someday you do.

"But until then, you have hard decisions to make, and no one can help you make them. Still, I can promise you, and I will die before I break that promise: No matter what, Brielle, Lincoln, Ryan, and I will be here for you. Always."

"Always?" she whispers, her eyes holding something I've never seen before. Hope.

"Always." He nods.

She takes a shaky breath and closes her eyes. Silent tears slip down her cheeks. It's like she needed that confirmation from him.

I know the circumstances are different, but I can't help the spike of jealousy I feel at how his words calm her.

"Harley," Rage says softly as he steps forward. "I talked with Nerds. Tammy had a fake birth certificate made. But he can destroy it and get your

original one back, so she won't be able to come get you legally." She gives him a weird look that he seems to understand. He adds, "Brielle and the guys filled us in on what you have told them."

She nods and glances at Atlas, who shakes his head subtly, but I notice. It puts me on edge. Gray's hand comes down on my shoulder, a silent reassurance.

"With that being said, Brielle and I had a conversation this morning. There are a lot of unknowns, and I know it might be hard to talk about, but I am going to need answers. We need to make sure you are safe and there will be no backlash from you running away from Tammy and then discovering me. I'm asking that you give me a week. One week. Stay here, finish healing, give me a chance to spend a little time with you. And then after one week, you can decide.

"You can stay here in this house and live with me and go back to school or even do online classes or you can—" He stops speaking like his voice just stopped working. I think I know where he is going with this, and I want to punch him in the face.

She needs to stay. She *has* to stay here. Gray's hand on my shoulder squeezes. I want to roll my eyes at how easily he can read me and probably sense how close I am to blowing up.

Sugar steps up behind Rage and finishes speaking. "Or you can choose to go live with Brielle and have the same school options there. No one wants to see you go, I promise you that. But no one around here is going to force you to stay if you would be miserable. I have spent the last few days at the club settin' up a room. If you want to stay there for the week, you can, or you stay here with Rage. But both places are open to you."

Harley says nothing. She just stares at them, her eyes moving back and

forth from Rage to Sugar. She takes a minute before she speaks. “You— You’ll give me the choice? Really? You’d let me leave after a week?”

Rage gives a jerky nod. “Yes. I don’t want you to go. I want you here with me. But I won’t take that choice from you, I promise.”

She nods, a sheen of tears in her eyes as she seems to see Rage in a new light. She looks over to where Atlas is leaning against the wall, and he immediately steps forward.

He explains, “Bri wanted to be here, but she had to handle something. She’ll be back later to say goodbye. We are all going back to Virginia.”

The tears now fall from her eyes.

“I don’t want to lose you,” she whispers.

“Oh, Harls.” He cups her face and kisses her forehead. “You couldn’t lose me if you tried. We want what’s best for you, alright? Just focus on you this week and decide what you want. If you stay here, you will not lose us. Do you hear me?” He waits for her to nod. “You will not lose us.”

She wraps her arms around him and hugs him tight. Atlas freezes, but after a split second, his entire face softens, and he hugs her back.

I want to drag her away and wrap her up in my arms. She should be in my embrace, no one else’s. My fists clench, and I have to concentrate on my breathing to not drag her away from everyone.

Atlas murmurs, “I’ve gotta get back to the hotel, but we will stop here before we head out, okay?” She nods against his chest and snuffles. He whispers in her ear, too low for me to hear, and they separate. He kisses her forehead once more before shaking hands with Rage and Sugar. Then he gives the rest of us a nod on his way out the door.

I step forward so I am standing next to Harley. She turns slightly and looks up at me. I open my arms and watch as she hesitates before coming closer

and wrapping her arms around my waist. My heart beats faster as I bring my arms around her, burying my head in her neck.

I raise my head slightly and whisper, “Everything will be okay. I’m here for you. Grayson and Cayden are, too.” I lean back and because I can’t stop myself, I kiss her cheek, watching as she flushes red and smiles at me. *Fuck my heart.*

As we pull away, Sugar turns his attention to Noah. “I’m runnin’ things for the week to give Prez a break so he can focus on Harley. Which means I need you to handle Daniel.”

Rage lets out a growl, “Sugar, maybe now isn’t the time.” He gestures towards Harley.

Harley wipes her eyes and steps away from me. “No. None of that. If I’m here for the week, we obviously have to talk about a lot of things. But I need full transparency. You can’t keep anything from me.”

Rage glances at Sugar, and then they both smile. Sugar chuckles. “That’s all you.”

Rage rolls his eyes. “You have to take some credit for it, too.”

Harley looks around at everyone. “What are they talking about?”

Noah stands up and laughs, “I believe they’re trying to figure out who you got your attitude from.”

“Probably my mom.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Now, will you tell me what’s going on? Who is this person and why does...” She looks at Noah. “What do I call you? Blade or Noah?”

He shrugs. “Either one, sweetheart.”

She scrunches her nose up before turning back to Sugar and Rage. “Why does Noah need to deal with them?”

Rage lets out a dramatic groan that the rest of us chuckle at. Besides Cade,

who is still sitting on the couch with a scowl on his face. When Rage doesn't answer fast enough, Harley turns to me.

I raise a brow. "You think I'm going to explain?"

She raises a brow right back with a tiny smirk playing on her lips before her face transforms into a full-on pout. "Please."

Yeah, that's all it takes. "Daniel is a prospect for the club. He is the one who shot you, and we're trying to figure out how to deal with him."

Her face scrunches up as she thinks. "What do you mean how to deal with him? Didn't he do what he was supposed to do?" she directs at Rage.

His frown deepens as he stares at Harley in shock. "He shot you."

She tilts her head and studies him, her brows pinched in confusion. "Yes." She slowly draws out, "He did. But I was aiming a gun at you. What else was he supposed to do?"

Rage's chest rises and falls faster as his breathing picks up, and he clenches his fists at his sides. I watch Harley, waiting to see how she will react to his anger showing, but she merely watches him before nodding and clicking her tongue.

"Oh, you're not mad that he shot *someone*, you're mad that he shot *me*," she says casually and then frowns, "There's really no reason to be mad about that."

"Why the fuck not?" Rage questions through gritted teeth.

Harley shrugs. "Well, one, I've had worse. This is nothing. And two, if it was anyone else he had shot who was threatening the—what are you again? The president of this place?" She waves her hand around the room. "You'd probably thank them."

Glancing around the room I notice that everyone is looking anywhere but at Rage as they all try to contain their laughter.

That is, until Noah can't hold it in anymore and cackles, pointing a finger at Rage. "How is it that you don't listen to any of your fucking men, but a sixteen-year-old tiny ass girl leaves you standing there dumbfounded with just a few simple words?"

Rage huffs but slowly relaxes, the anger draining out of him as he softens his features and steps towards Harley, but he stops when she tenses. "No one should ever hurt you. Ever. I want—I wanted him punished. But if you aren't mad, then..." He pinches his lips and doesn't continue until Sugar nudges his shoulder. "Then I'll let it go," he mumbles.

"He has had more than enough of a punishment already, Rage. Harley simply just said what we've all been tryin' to say this whole time. None of us blame ya for your emotions overpowerin' you with the whole situation. I'm sure you handled it better than some would. But enough is enough. You need to go down there and talk to him and let him out," Sugar says seriously, staring down Rage, who nods and runs a hand through his already messy hair.

"Let's get it over with," Rage mutters, turning on his heel to head towards the door, but Harley's voice stops him.

"I want to come with you and see him."

Rage spins around. "Why?" he shouts, but then takes a deep breath and tries again, "Why do you want to see him?"

"I said I understood what he did. That doesn't mean I don't still need to process. I just need to put a face to the name and see his personality." She shrugs like it's no big deal, but I think everyone in the room can read right through her nonchalant attitude. She needs to see for herself that he really is one of the good guys or she won't be able to move on.

Rage and Sugar seem to have a silent conversation between each other before Sugar finally gives in. "She'll see him around the club anyway."

“She doesn’t need to go down there,” Rage grits out.

“Let’s just go and I will run down. The rest of you, head to the club, and we will come over there where we can all talk. No big deal.” Noah tries to get everyone moving.

Gray taps me on the shoulder, and I look at him. He gestures towards the couch, and when I look over, I notice Cade is now gone. I really hope he figures out whatever the fuck is going on with himself soon.

As we walk out the door to head over to the main building, Harley is fidgeting with her hands. As much of a strong front as she puts on, I think a lot of this bothers her, and I hope to be alone with her later and get her to open up to me.

I step up next to her and extend my hand, giving her the option to accept it or not.

She looks up at me and then down at my hand before slowly sliding hers into mine, threading our fingers together. My heart warms at the contact and having her so close.

As soon as we get across the yard and inside through the back door, I detour and lead her to the kitchen.

“What are we doing?” she asks, furrowing her brow.

“Showing you around.” I grin, watching as she releases my hand and walks around the kitchen.

For a club full of men, this kitchen is nice. From where we walked in, directly to the right, are counters that wrap around the back wall. Then on the opposite wall is a door that leads to the walk-in pantry. Then next to the door is a large double fridge. Next to that is another opening that goes out to the hall that would take you to the front door or upstairs. There’s a large island in the middle with a couple of bar stools.

“So... you really live here?” she asks as she walks around the island, taking in the massive kitchen as she bites her lip.

I nod. “Yep. Have for about two years now. It’s not bad. I like it most of the time. This is the main kitchen. We don’t really have any certain people that cook. Gray cooks the most and sometimes Presley, who is with Axe, comes in here to cook. The club sluts don’t usually—”

She cuts me off. “The *what?*” Her eyes go comically wide.

“Club sluts? Gray calls them club girls. Well, so does Pres, but they are girls who hang around the club. Some live here, well right now, none of them live here, but they help with things around here and sleep with any of the guys they want. They aren’t forced or anything. One of them, Carly, has been around longer than I have, and right now the club is paying for her to finish going to college, so she is only here on the weekends.”

Harley slowly nods. “That’s kind of cool. It is weird that they are called club sluts. I think I will stick with what Grayson says and call them club girls. It just seems to make more sense.”

I shrug. “Yeah, probably. They have just been called that for so long, and it’s what I’ve always heard. I bet if you told your dad that, he’d make everyone immediately start calling them club girls and not sluts,” I say with a chuckle.

“Gabriel,” she murmurs.

“Huh?” I tilt my head as I watch her.

She fidgets with her fingers for a moment. “I—I’m not ready to call him dad. Or hear him referred to as my dad. Just Gabriel. I’m not ready.” She finally looks up, meeting my eyes, a tear streaking down her cheek that she quickly bats away.

Before I can respond to her to tell her that’s completely okay and no one

here will judge her for it, a door bangs open, and I hear Noah yell for everyone.

Harley walks towards me, and we both head back out the same way we came walking into the main room where Stone is holding back a seething Noah. This isn't my brother, guardian, Noah. This is Blade, the club enforcer, who can quite literally destroy someone faster than they can blink. He rarely ever shows my brothers and me this side of himself, so to see him so angry sets me on edge.

I look around the room and see almost everyone heading into the main room. Cade is walking in from the opposite side, going straight towards Noah. Gray, Nerds, Rage, and Sugar come out from the hall that leads to their offices. I look over my shoulder at Harley, expecting to see her scared or panicked, but she looks perfectly calm.

“Where the fuck is he?” Noah yells. Stone has a grip on his shoulders holding him back, but from what, I'm not sure.

Cade steps up in front of him. “Where is who?”

Stone looks over Cade's head, glancing towards Rage. “He's gone.”

Rage and Sugar both walk towards Noah and Stone. What he said finally clicks in my head and before I even realize what I'm doing, I grab Harley's hand and tug her closer to me.

Surprisingly, she doesn't resist. She merely gives my hand a squeeze before walking towards where everyone is in the center of the room.

Noah is heaving as he explains. “We went down there, and he was gone. There were no signs of a fucking break-in. Everything was still intact. The lock was locked on the door to go down, and his cell lock was still on. Whoever did this had the fucking keys to get in. Someone let him out.” He grits out the last part.

I understand why Stone is holding him now. When Noah gets mad or fears for someone he loves, he tends to go off the rails and wants to go hunting for whatever is the threat. He probably tried to leave even with having no information.

How the fuck did Daniel get out? I feel myself barely holding on, wanting to lose my shit and find out who the fuck would allow him to just leave. And *why* would he? If he truly only shot her because he thought he was protecting Rage, then he had nothing to worry about besides getting his ass beat.

Sugar takes over, seeing as Rage can barely hold himself together. He cares for all of us; I know that. But his love for Harley is so much different, and I don't think he has ever felt that before. Adding in the shit she's been through and the danger she could be in, he seems to be spiraling.

Sugar sends Nerds and Gray back to the tech room to do what they do and find out where he went. He then has Stone, Axe, and a few others check the property and put us on lockdown.

Which means no one leaves the main clubhouse.

Cade grabs Noah's shoulders and talks to him before they disappear. More than likely trying to get Noah to calm down.

I'd normally be with them, but I won't leave Harley. I look down at her and see that she is watching everything happening in the room, a calculating look on her face. I step in front of her, not letting go of her hand. "Hey, it'll be okay."

She peers up at me, her eyes jumping between mine while her lips are pinched. "The guy who shot me, Daniel, he's just... gone?"

I nod, and she continues, furrowing her brows.

"I don't understand why. Why wouldn't he just wait and see what everyone said? Did something happen?" She shuts her mouth and seems to be deep in

thought.

As she goes to say something else, Rage walks up to us.

“We’re going on lockdown, so you can’t leave the main clubhouse. Sugar set up a room for you, so you have your own.” He takes a deep breath as a look of determination comes over his face. “We will find him. We will find out what is going on, Harley. I promise.”

She has the same determination on her face as she says, “We will. Together. I want to help.”

Rage makes a sound almost like a grunt. “No. You can’t help. You need to rest and heal. You still have stitches from being shot. I will handle this.” He turns to me. “Why don’t you show her the room? It’s the old president’s spot between Sugar’s and I’s rooms.”

I nod and he immediately turns and walks away.

Harley releases my hand and steps back, watching him go. She crosses her arms, her entire body is taut with anger. “Harley?” I murmur, and she turns her scowl on me. “He means well. He is just—”

“Stop it. Don’t make excuses for him shutting me down. I can handle more than he thinks I can. I’ll prove that to him. But he might lose any slight chance he has at a relationship with me because I am fucking done being walked over and having people keep shit from me.”

I feel a smile tug at my lips, but I try to hold it back. She looks and sounds so much like Rage when she’s angry. It’s great. Well, not great that she’s mad. I don’t want her to give up on him so easily, but I guess I can’t judge her when I have my own trust issues. I don’t say anything, knowing she won’t want to hear it right now.

“Show me where my room is, please?” she says, forcing a smile.

I sigh and nod, leading her across the main room and out to the hall where

the stairs are. We head up to the second floor and turn left. The space opens up to a sitting area and tiny kitchenette I don't think I've ever seen anyone use. We head through the hall, and I point out the rooms.

“These first two doors on the right are mine and Gray's. Then the first two on the left are Cade's and Noah's.” We keep walking past our doors. The rest have tags on them. We just never got around to putting tags on our own doors. “You can see next on the right is Stone and Axe. In between their rooms is a large bathroom. They don't stay here that often anymore. Then to the left here at the end you can see one is Sugar and one is Rage. This one in between them is what was used when other clubs would visit us. Their president would stay up here. But now it's your room. You get your own bathroom. Lucky you,” I say, turning to wink at her as I open the door to her room.

She looks in, and her eyes go wide. Sugar really outdid himself; I'm impressed. I stand there, not sure what to do. It is late in the day, and as much as I don't want to leave her side, I know she probably wants to be alone.

Harley steps further into the room and turns around to face me. “Thank you for showing me. I'm gonna get some rest.” She offers a hesitant smile.

“Of course. You can go anywhere in the clubhouse anytime. Just don't leave without someone. Since we're on lockdown, we're all stuck in here unless we have permission and someone with us to leave. It's just for safety.” I shrug.

She nods and thanks me again as she shuts her door. I stand there staring at her door like a weirdo. I know I'm supposed to walk away, but I can't.

Would it be weird to sleep in the hall?

No? That's good. I plop down on the floor next to her door and lean against the wall.

Yeah, Ryker, this isn't creepy at all.

Unknown

The firing of my gun rings out loud within the walls of our small club. No one dares make a sound or try to tell me I was wrong for killing the fucker as his body drops with a heavy thud onto the ground in the center of our party room.

He *ruined* a perfect opportunity to capture my sweet little Harley.

She left Brielle's safety net and came back to Jacksonville. I haven't been able to stay and watch over her 24/7. But being the president of my own club means I can tell my guys what to do.

We have all been on a rotation system, and the rules were simple.

Don't take your eyes off the house.

If Harley leaves, follow.

If she steps one foot outside of their territory, you call me immediately.

She did step foot outside. Without anyone watching over her either, and she was all alone. But this stupid fucker fell asleep and didn't know she left until a commotion outside the house woke him up.

Apparently, Brielle was frantic about a note Harley had left before she ran away.

He at least tried to redeem himself by trailing Brielle and her weird ass posse of men that follow her around like lap dogs, straight to Harley.

But now? The problem is she is in another MC.

We don't have any kind of relationship with them. No agreements of any kind. So there is nothing stopping me from taking her. I'm not stupid enough to walk onto their property, so I must wait until she leaves the compound.

Then, after almost four long years, what was owed to me will be mine.

I can't wait to shove my dick into her tight little pussy. *I wonder if she screams just as beautifully as her mother did...*

Heading back to my office with a command to my brothers to get the body taken care of and clean up the blood splatter on the floor and wall, I call my guy at the SOS club.

Luckily, we are able to stay off the radar over here. Rage and his clan of pussies don't even know that we exist, and we prefer it that way. We have learned that being in the shadows is a good thing. Between Tammy and Richard trying to take over Jacksonville and Rage trying to turn Jacksonville around, we know that eventually they will clash, and that's when we will swoop in and own this town just like Killer did.

We are about ten minutes outside of Jacksonville set up in a small warehouse that one of the other guys bought under his mom's name, so we don't ever have to worry about someone finding us here.

With that being said, we still needed a way to know what was going on since Killer died. So when my VP's kid graduated high school, we sent him over there to prospect and be our inside guy to the workings of the SOS. As

luck would have it, one of his friends from high school was already interested in joining the SOS, so they went in together.

Let's just hope our kid stays focused and keeps his goddamn trap shut about our deal, or there will be consequences.

No one can know what we're up to. And I'm not above killing a kid if he betrays me.

He knows that his work at the SOS is his initiation test. If he succeeds over there with keeping an eye on things, then a patch is waiting for him here. We all have our things we're working on, like his father who is keeping his nose in other business, and no one is the wiser that we are here in the background waiting for our chance to rise.

But the prospect doesn't answer when I call, and that sends a chill down my back. There's no way he got caught. Not unless he did something stupid. He's never failed to answer one of my calls.

Fuck. I call church and decide to discuss it with the guys.

We end up deciding to wait it out a few more days and hope he calls us back. After that, we'll have to come up with a way to get eyes inside if he doesn't contact us.

Chapter Nine

HARLEY



I close the door behind me, leaving Ryker in the hall, then I turn around and take in the room. Holy hell, this is much nicer than I expected.

When you first walk in, there is a short hallway. It has a shoe rack on the floor and a coat rack hanging on the wall. When you walk further in, there is a queen-size bed in the center of the far wall. The bedding is black with a deep red comforter on top of it. *How the fuck did they know I love red and black?* There is a window behind the bed with black curtains that have red roses with green vines crawling all over them.

There are dark wooden nightstands on each side of the bed, each with its own lamp. On the left wall is a large canvas with an older Harley Davidson painted on it that says ‘Harley Brielle St. James’ under it in cursive.

The bike is beautiful. It's matte black with chrome features. The background has trees painted on either side, and it almost looks like a cliff is behind the bike with the ocean in the distance. I lightly run my fingers over it, tears welling in my eyes. It's beyond anything I have ever seen. I don't know why it's making me so emotional. This is all for me?

I look away from the picturesque scene and turn around to see a large dresser with a TV on it directly next to the hall with the bedroom door. The wall on the right side of the bed has two doors with a standing mirror in between them. I walk over and open the first one, which leads to a full-size bathroom with a tub shower combo. The tub is fairly deep, so that will be nice to soak in. Everything is white with black marble counters and deep red accents throughout the bathroom.

I walk out and go to the next door, which holds a walk-in closet. My eyes go wide as I see a bunch of my clothes that Brielle helped me get when I was at her house. A note sits on one of the shelves.

Harley,

We brought most everything here for you. You still have stuff at my home, and this doesn't mean you can't still choose to come back. You are always welcome here. I hope you enjoy your room, though.

P.S. Sugar did all of this. He hounded us with questions while you were at Gabriel's house. He wanted it perfect for you. Your uncle is a kind man, and your mom would be so glad you get to know him now.

Please be safe, my sweet girl. You deserve so much love, and I think if you allow yourself to open your heart and mind, you will see what I see someday.

Love you, my sweet niece.

Brielle

A single tear makes its way down my cheek and drops onto the note. I wipe at my face and fold up the paper, placing it in the drawer on the nightstand.

I can't believe Sugar did all this for me. He just met me, after all. I don't understand any of this. But one thing is for sure, I am so tired of crying. I need to get it together and not feel like such a crybaby all the time.

I shake myself from all these intense emotions and go take a long shower before slipping into bed. I had hoped to be tired enough to sleep through the night, but I should've known better.

The nightmares never give me a break.

The door to the basement swings open, and I hear the clack of Mother's high heels as she comes down the stairs. My heart beats in sync with her steps, the sound echoing off the walls of the too quiet basement.

It's been two sunsets and two sunrises since she last came down here.

Sometimes the stillness of the basement feels suffocating, but then I hear her coming again and I realize the stillness is my sanctuary. My peace.

Mother sighs deeply when she reaches the bottom of the stairs. I risk looking up at her from where I am huddled on the corner of my mattress with my knees drawn up to my chest, attempting to hide the way my body trembles at her presence.

She tsks. "Get up. I've had a long day, and since you've been down here doing nothing, you can help make my day better."

I swallow over the lump in my throat, slowly sliding to the edge of the mattress and standing on shaky legs, my body protesting the movement. It's still not healed from the last time she was down here. The last beating.

She comes at me quickly, allowing me no chance to attempt to shield myself before she slaps me across the face. Blood instantly pools in my mouth, but I don't dare spit it out in front of her.

She reaches behind her and grabs something from her back pocket. As soon as I see the knife clenched in her hand shimmering in the low light, I let out a tiny whimper and my body shakes, my knees giving out and hitting the hard concrete below me as she screams at me.

I jolt up with a gasp. My hand flies to my chest, attempting to ease the pain racketing through my ribs. My heart thuds in my ears so loudly it blocks out any other sound.

I learned years ago not to scream when waking from a nightmare. Luckily, that is still embedded in my mind now that I am out of there, because the last thing I need is to wake other people up. Thinking back to the nightmare, my hand flutters down to my thigh.

I can't feel it with the sweats on, but the skin is raised. It's not just my thighs but the back of my arms, my shoulders, my back, my chest... Some of the scars healed, but most didn't.

My skin is disgusting. I hate what she did to me. What *they* did to me.

I look over at the clock sitting on one of the nightstands and see it's only four in the morning. I know I won't be able to fall back asleep now, so I get up and take yet another shower.

I don't get out until my skin is rubbed raw and burns when the hot water touches it. The pain soothes some piece of my broken mind, distracting from the inside by taking some of the agony *out*. Finished washing up, I walk to the closet and look at the selection Brielle brought over.

She helped me order most of these online, and many of the items are black. A lot of hoodies, oversized t-shirts, a leather jacket, sweats, and leggings. There is a dress mixed in with a few colored dressy tops and two pairs of jeans that Bri insisted on. But I haven't worn them yet, seeing as I am not

comfortable with my body. Plus, I prefer and am used to wearing baggy things.

Standing in the middle of the room with a pair of leggings and an oversized 'Friends' t-shirt on, I realize I have no idea what to do now.

Usually at Bri's, I would go walk the beach once I got used to it. Or read a book from her library or watch weird shows on the TV until she got up or someone came over. I sigh and glance at the door. *I can do this. I have nothing to be afraid of. Right?* I really wish I still had that gun, but someone took it.

I gasp when I realize I had the knives from Linc in my backpack when I came here. I don't see the bag now, so I'm guessing it's still at Rage's house.

I could go over and find them... I'm sure no one is up yet. Mind made up, I grab a pair of sneakers from the closet and toss them on before moving to open my door. When I crack it open, I find the hall is dark. There is a soft glow at the end of the hall that leads to the stairs.

I step out and turn around to softly shut my door. There was a key on the dresser with a note that said I am the only one with a key, and I can keep my door locked if I want to.

Having that choice made a tiny piece of my broken heart come back together.

It feels like a new level of freedom. My own space.

I turn and move to take a step, but before I can, my leg catches on something, and I trip. Before I go down, preparing to hurt myself, especially while still healing from the bullet wound, large hands grab my waist and stop me from falling over.

As soon as I am on my feet again, I jolt backwards out of their hold, my breaths coming in fast pants as I clench my fists, expecting to be hit.

You can fight back now, Harley.

I take a shuddering breath. I have been training hard for the last few months. I have never found myself in a situation where I needed to use those skills and honestly, I hadn't thought about it or how I might react or respond.

I get pulled from my thoughts by voices and someone squeezing my wrist gently. I jump and try to back away, but someone else behind me stops me.

My eyes clear from... from the tears. Oh, I was crying. I go to wipe them away, but my wrist is still being held. I look down and see that I have the key clutched in my hand. When I clenched my fist, I kept the key in it, and now there is blood dripping onto the ground. I gasp and release the key, the noise of the hall coming back to me as my mind lets me out of its prison.

"Harley." My eyes snap up from staring at the blood on my hand to familiar green eyes. "Take a deep breath with me."

I inhale and hold it before releasing a shaky breath. I need to get away. I have to stop seeming so weak and fragile. I am neither of those things. I can't be.

I shake my head and pull my hand out of his grasp. "I'm good."

A scoff sounds behind me, and I turn so I can see both Grayson and Ryker. "You are not good." He gestures towards my hand. "Let me look at that."

"No!" I force myself to relax and speak calmly. "No, I am fine." I bend down and scoop up the key. Heading downstairs, I find my way back to the kitchen and quickly wash off the key and my hand. When I am done, a bandage gets dropped on the counter next to me.

I mumble a thanks, not bothering to look up. Taking the bandage, I wrap my hand and then put my room key in the pocket on my leggings.

I look up to find both Grayson and Ryker standing there, watching me. Taking them in, I realize Ryker is in the same clothes that he had on last

night, and Grayson is in sweatpants with no shirt on.

I know without a doubt my cheeks turn red as I look him over, not being able to take my eyes off his chest. *Look away, Harley.* But I can't. I find him... intriguing. He is beautiful, and I feel like I'm staring at a model. Like someone you would see on a TV, not in real life. He is smaller than Ryker and Cayden, but he still has abs and some muscles in his arms. With his glasses, he looks handsome. His hair is mused, like he just woke up and rolled out of bed. His sweats hang low on his hips, and I find it really hard not to look any lower.

Ryker lets out a chuckle as Grayson turns red and rubs the back of his neck. "I'm just going to go get dressed," he says as he takes off out of the kitchen, leaving me with Ryker.

My brain fog clears once Grayson is out of sight.

"Wait, why are you in yesterday's clothes? Why did Grayson look like he just rolled out of bed?" I furrow my brows.

Ryker smirks at me. "You asked to be left alone last night. I left you alone. That didn't mean I had to go anywhere. Now, why are you up at five in the morning, and where are you going?" He raises a brow at me.

I bite my lip, averting my gaze. "I just couldn't sleep, and I was looking for my bag that I brought with me."

He stares at me for a second before sighing. "It is probably in Rage's house."

"Right, so I'm just going to go get it."

"No, you're not. Was no one clear last night? We are on lockdown, Harley. Lock. Down. We don't get to leave. It is even worse for us because we are all under eighteen. Rage gets extra protective."

I had started to turn away, but after he is done speaking, I whirl back

around to face him. “You don’t get to tell me what I can and can’t do. Nothing is going to fucking happen to me by walking out back to a house for two seconds.”

He steps towards me, and it takes everything in me to stay put and not back off and cower. *You are strong.*

“Normally, I would be the one to agree and even go with you. Fuck, I would even offer to go for you, but no. We can’t. You can wait until others are awake and ask someone to take you over there.”

I scoff and cross my arms over my chest. “Okay, *Dad*, are you going to go tell on me?” I raise a brow.

Ryker smirks and leans in closer. “Where is the fun in that, little brat? I could just toss you over my shoulder and take you back upstairs.”

I’m fuming now. “What the fuck is your problem, Ryker? You were all sweet and right by my side at first, and now I swear it’s like you want to piss me off.”

He rolls his eyes. “Right, that’s what I want to do. Do we have to stand in the kitchen all day? I can finish showing you around downstairs. You can go to Rage’s house when someone else is up.”

I’m fairly sure a small growl comes out of me as I spin around and stalk away from him. Maybe I am overreacting or being a little shit about things, but the thought of not being able to leave doesn’t sit well with me. It didn’t seem to sink in until now that they want to keep me here. Indoors. Not leave.

No. That isn’t happening. I walk faster and head straight for the backdoor that we came through last night and shove it open, heading outside. As soon as the slight breeze hits my face, I inhale through my nose and feel my muscles relax.

Not trapped. Not trapped. This isn’t the same thing.

I hear Ryker groan as he comes up behind me. “Are you trying to get me in trouble again? I already have a fucking ankle monitor on.”

I look over my shoulder and let a sly smile play on my face, trying to cover my panic. “That doesn’t seem like my problem. I’ll be right back.”

I take off at a jog across the yard towards Gabriel’s back door. I realize I don’t have any keys, so I guess I am just hoping it’s unlocked. To no surprise, luck is not on my side, and the door won’t budge. I sit down on the back porch and sigh.

Footsteps sound from my right, which is not the direction of the main club building. I whip my head up and see one of the other guys coming towards me. I can’t remember his name, but I have yet to hear him speak.

He sets a hard glare on me. “You’re not supposed to be out here.”

I shrug, feigning nonchalance. “I just needed something from Gabriel’s house.”

“Go back to the main house.”

I roll my eyes and stand up. Looking him over, I see the patch on the front of his leather jacket says ‘Stone’. It’s on the tip of my tongue to argue with him, but instead I just turn and head back to the clubhouse.

I’m so tired of people telling me what I can and cannot do. If this is what it’s always like, then staying here is most definitely not what I want.

When I get back to the club with Stone walking a few feet behind me, I head inside and make sure to slam the door in his face. Walking into the main room, I find Ryker and Grayson sitting on a couch with a man and woman across from them.

They all stand as I slowly approach. Ryker smirks at me, but I ignore his arrogant ass. The woman steps forward. She’s the same height as I am but

has short black straight hair. Her face is shaped like a heart, and she is absolutely beautiful. She doesn't look a day over twenty.

Tears well in her eyes as she takes a step towards me. The man with her places a hand on her shoulder, causing her to stop walking.

Still, she smiles softly at me. "Hi. I'm Presley. Most people call me Pres. This is my husband, Axe. I am so glad I get to meet you." Her voice is gentle and angelic-sounding. She is... perfect.

Realizing I at least need to respond to her, I force a polite smile. "Hey."

A door slamming down the hall on the left makes me jump slightly, but I try to hold it back. A second later, Colton and Stone come out into the main room.

Colton walks straight towards me but stops about three feet away. "You can't leave like that, Harley."

"Good morning to you, too, Colton." I roll my eyes.

"*Harley*," he almost growls.

"Sugar," Presley starts. "Relax. This is new for all of us." She turns back towards me. "Why did you leave the building when you knew not to, sweetie?"

I cross my arms and frown. "No one is going to tell me what I can and cannot do. I'm not your sweetie either." I turn and walk out of the main room, back towards the stairs I know lead back to my room.

A hand on my shoulder stops me in the hallway, and I am turned and pushed against the wall by Ryker. Grayson stands a few feet off to the side of him.

I scowl. "What do you want? To tell me I'm a brat? Go ahead, asshole."

Ryker grins at me. "Brat. But no. I was coming to tell you that those people in that room aren't your enemy. Maybe that will take a while to get through

to you, but don't ruin relationships before you even have a chance to form them."

I scoff and shove his arm off my shoulder. I realize that his touch doesn't bother me. It doesn't make me panic at all, which is odd, but I don't want to think about that right now. Stepping around him, I move towards the stairs as Grayson steps in front of them. Holding in a very childish foot stomp, I raise a brow at him.

"Come with me? Please?" he asks.

Fuck. Why is he so fucking adorable? My brain doesn't even let me think before I blurt out, "Okay."

He smiles at me, and my shoulders drop. The building anger and anxiety fade slightly. Even as he holds out a hand, I can't help but take it and feel myself calm at the touch of his skin. Our fingers interlace, and Grayson runs his thumb over the back of my hand. I'm not even sure that he realizes what he's doing, but it sends tingles through my entire body.

We walk back to the main room, and I glance back at Ryker, who is walking behind us staring at our hands clasped together, looking like a kicked puppy. I probably should find it odd that I actually kind of like these guys.

They don't set me on edge or make my skin feel like it's burning when they touch me.

Very, very weird.

Chapter Ten

GRAYSON



What am I doing? This is so bad. Why did I do this? She's probably going to think I am lame or a nerd. Not only that, but I am holding her hand.

Her soft, slightly chilly hand. Her fingers are long and slim, and it felt like a match made in heaven when her fingers laced with mine. I inwardly curse, *That's weird. Stop thinking like that, Grayson.*

I lead her towards the tech room, hoping that I am not about to embarrass myself. Luckily, I know Nerds isn't in here for once, so it'll just be us. And Ry, because I know he isn't going to leave her side anytime soon. When we get to the door, I open it and glance at Harley, who is looking around with curious eyes.

"What is this?" she questions as we step into the room, with Ry following us and closing the door behind him.

"This is the tech room. It is mostly Nerds's office, but I use it a lot too. I help Nerds a lot." I run the hand that isn't holding Harley's over the back of my neck.

Harley tilts her head and studies me for a second. “Why did you want to bring me in here?”

My mouth dries, and I honestly have no idea what to say. I wanted to help her feel better, and part of me thinks that being busy and understanding things that are happening or just helping would help her like it does me, but I have no idea how to voice that.

A loud chuckle comes from Ry as he drops into one of the extra desk chairs in the middle of the room. “He wants to show you what he’s good at.” He gestures towards the screens. “Researching, learning, trying to solve mysteries.” He points a finger at Harley with a wide grin on his face. “Which you are.”

Harley scrunches up her nose as she stares at Ry. “There is nothing interesting or mysterious about me,” she says quietly.

“I don’t think that’s true,” I argue. I slowly release her hand, and Harley startles slightly, glancing down with an odd look on her face. Like she forgot she was still holding my hand.

I take a seat in Nerds’s usual chair and pull out the one next to it I use for Harley to sit. She cautiously does so and looks at all the monitors as I wake them up. The sound of wheels rolling on the hardwood makes me glance back as Ry rolls the chair he is in towards us so he’s sitting behind us, leaning forward to brace his arms on each of our chairs. “So, what’s the plan, Gray?”

I take a deep breath and then look at Harley, who is already focused on me. “Sometimes, it helps me to stay busy, or to feel like I am helping. After you ran, we looked for you and I helped—”

“Why?” Harley blurts, a blush rising to her cheeks.

My brows scrunch. “Why did we look for you?” She nods, and I hesitate, “I mean, we knew something was going on when we met you at the school, and

I don't know. I guess we wanted to help," I say with a shrug.

Ryker scoffs, "We aren't doing half-truths here, Gray. I know you mean well, but let's not do that." He turns Harley's chair, so his knees bracket hers. She tenses but almost immediately relaxes. "We felt a pull to you. A connection. I know you felt it too, little flame. Even if it was confusing. Even if it still is. We saw someone who we could relate to. Whatever you were going through then— well we've all been through shit that fucked us up too.

"I saw you. Beneath everything, I saw you then. I still see you now. Grayson has never shown an interest in someone besides my brothers and I. And Cade, well, he doesn't speak normally, but he has spoken more since we met you than he has in many years."

Harley opens her mouth and shuts it, biting her lower lip as she searches Ryker's face for something. Then she glances at me and does the same thing before speaking.

"I did... feel something. It was part of the reason I was able to find the strength to leave. That last weekend, the one before I ran, was the worst in a really long time." She takes a shuddering breath and pushes her fingers into her thighs, hard. "But coming to school, meeting you guys, it gave me strength again that I had long thought to be lost. It was my reminder that life isn't supposed to be so bad, and I shouldn't be treated how I was being treated."

The door to the room opens quietly, but Harley's eyes immediately jump to it and watch as Cade walks in and shuts it behind him. Ryker grins but tries to hide it.

Without looking away from Cade, she continues, "I still remember that day at school when you told me you saw my rage. At first, I was angry that I could be read so easily, but then as time went on, I realized it was because

you could just see *me*. I don't even know when I came to that realization, but it's all kind of hitting me now. You all see me just as I am. As much as it terrifies me, it also..."

She trails off as if she isn't sure of the words she wants to say. Ryker finishes, "It lights your flame. You found your flame when you were gone. That fire inside of you. You found it and forced it to the surface, but you've never lit it."

Harley grimaces. "I don't think I know how to. When you talk of flames, it feels like I can find it and light it, but then it burns out quicker than I can stop it. The pain, the memories, the nightma—"

She clamps her mouth shut and shakes her head.

"You have nightmares? About... about what happened when you lived with Tammy?" I ask hesitantly.

Harley averts her gaze with a nod. "It's not a big deal," she mumbles.

Ryker opens his mouth, but I place my hand on his shoulder and shake my head when he glances at me. We can't push her, and Ryker should understand that better than most. She doesn't know or trust us enough for us to be pushing her.

Cade stands up straight from where he was leaning against the wall and walks towards us. Pausing behind Ry's chair, he looks down at Harley.

"Is that what that is from?" he questions, pointing to the scar on her face.

Harley's eyes gloss over as a look of devastation comes over her, but then she seems to lock it down. Her features hardening and her back straightening.

"From Tammy?" she says, emotionless, cold. Cade nods. "No."

"What happened?" I ask softly.

"Do you know what happened to my mom?"

"She died in a house fire," Ry answers, frowning.

Harley shakes her head, her eyes lighting up with fury and her fists clenching on her thighs.

“No.” She takes a deep breath. “I mean, she died in a house fire. But it wasn’t what it was made out to be. I looked into it when I was at Brielle’s house. They covered up what really happened.”

“What happened?” I ask, leaning in.

Harley seems to get lost in her head as she looks off at the wall behind us. Ryker hesitantly reaches forward and takes her hand. She jerks and looks down as Ry rests both of his hands on hers.

He murmurs, “If you’re not ready, you don’t have to say anything. But we will listen when you are. We have all been through shit that has forced us to grow up much sooner than we ever needed to, so we understand.”

Looking from Ry to me and then to Cade, who is still standing behind Ry’s chair, Harley takes a few deep breaths and then focuses on Ry’s hands again, the ones still resting on top of hers. She admits, “I don’t really talk about it. I told Brielle and the guys about it because I felt like I had to. But I don’t want to do things because I feel like I have to do them. I want to do things on my own terms now.”

She speaks so quietly, so subdued, it is clear that her mind has wandered away from here and now. “I understand.” Cade grumbles.

Ry and I tense as we look at him, neither of us having expected him to speak. Harley slowly raises her eyes and looks at him as he walks closer and crouches down next to her.

“My voice was used against me,” he explains carefully. “I never had a say in the things I had to do.” He looks at Ry and I, his expression dark. “I stopped talking when I was in a safe environment. My father used my voice as a weapon.”

He takes a deep breath and looks back at Harley. I rest my hand on Ry's shoulder and give it a light squeeze.

My brother, who has been through hell and back, chose to stop speaking. We all respected it, and Ry and I learned to deal with it because we love Cade as a brother. He's family, and when you go through shitty things as kids and then find people who truly care about you, you learn pretty quickly that you would do anything for them and they would do anything for you.

Harley watches Cade. Her eyes seem to search his. It's like she thinks she can see through him somehow, into him. I have seen her do it with me, Ry, Rage, and now Cade.

She inhales sharply and pulls her hand away from where Ry was still touching it. It shakes as she lifts it and rests her palm against Cade's cheek.



Cayden

Her delicate, soft, cool palm touches my cheek. She's *touching* me.

I watch her beautiful hazel eyes widen in surprise. Even as she is the one touching me, she is shocked by her own actions. Without conscious thought, I tilt my head slightly and press my cheek harder into her palm. My eyes flutter shut as I let out a breath.

A weight of I'm not even sure what, is lifted from my chest. It feels like I have been lost up until now. My brothers have been lost too when it comes to me.

But this tiny redheaded spitfire who is completely turning our worlds upside down is also bringing us back to life. I don't even know why I talked. Fuck, I don't even know why I came in here to begin with. I got back from running with Bear yet again and found Nerds wandering around the main room, looking a little frantic. He said that they were in the tech room, and he wanted to give them some privacy.

It says a lot about him because he clearly didn't like not having access to what he deems as his domain and seems to be a safe space for him to land.

I immediately walked back here. It almost feels like my body makes these choices for me because I am not even thinking. Like now, coming to squat in front of Harley and talking. It wasn't planned.

I just understood her and wanted her to know I did. Plus, it didn't bother me as much as I thought it would that my brothers were in here to hear what I said, too.

Harley's breath hitches, pulling me back to the present. I open my eyes and stare at hers, seeing them water, but she quickly blinks away her tears. "This is all so confusing. I was supposed to hate you all," she whispers, almost to herself.

"Why were you supposed to hate us?" Ry questions in a low voice, taut with anger.

She shakes her head and pulls her hand away from my face. My hand twitches, wanting to grab her wrist and pull her palm back to my cheek, but I stop myself, standing up and grabbing a chair to sit in.

Harley watches me closely, not answering Ryker's question. "How do you do that?" She asks, staring at me, then swiveling her head around to look at Ry and Cade too. "How—how do you make me feel... seen? This wasn't how any of this was supposed to go. My mind is spinning so fast I don't even know which direction is up and down."

Her breaths come faster, and she clutches a hand to her chest. Grayson nudges Ryker's chair out of the way and scoots forward. Taking both of her hands in his, he gets in her line of sight.

"Breathe beautiful," he murmurs in that soothing voice of his.

She inhales shakily and lets it out.

He nods, giving her a small smile. "It's okay to feel lost and confused. Maybe we can help. Will you explain what you're talking about?"

She gives a jerky nod. Grayson smiles and sits back again, releasing her hands, but Harley reaches over and grips his hand again, not letting go. Grayson's cheeks turn bright red, but she doesn't seem to notice.

"When I ran from Tammy's, I knew nothing. I was—" She stops and shakes her head. "No, that doesn't matter right now. I just had no answers to anything and never had a way to find any. When I finally found Brielle, it

was a rough start for me. I felt lost at first. Broken beyond repair. But then things started changing. I started working out with the guys, and Brielle and I started growing closer.

As I got stronger, both mentally and physically, I began having questions. I wanted to try to find my dad that my mom had never talked about. But then Brielle told me the story that I'm guessing you all know." She grimaces.

We all nod, and Harley continues.

"Right. Well, I wanted more answers. Not just that, but revenge. I wanted to destroy everyone and everything. The people who hurt us. The people who hurt my mom. I needed to find revenge on her behalf. So, I wanted to go after Gabriel, since he was the one who started all of this. But now... I don't know how to feel.

"I had this intense anger running through me, and now suddenly I am just filled with confusion. I feel like I have even more questions than I did before, and it's making me feel really out of control." She shrugs.

There is more that she isn't saying. I can see it written all over her body like a book. She is tense and fidgeting slightly, her leg is bouncing, and she doesn't look us in the eye for more than a split second. Whereas before she would obsessively watch our eyes, she is now more shut down. I peer at Ryker, who is staring at her like if he tries hard enough, he can see inside her soul.

Grayson's brows are furrowed as he looks on. "Well, what questions do you have? Maybe we can help you. We are here for you."

"You can't say that," she scoffs, shaking her head.

Ryker frowns at Harley. "Why can't he? It's true."

"Because you can't," she snaps.

"That's not a fucking answer, Harley," Ryker retorts just as sharply.

She huffs and stands up, moving away from all of us. Just as she goes to say something back to Ryker, someone knocks on the door and slowly pushes it open.

Harley turns around to find Sugar. He smiles. “Hey, darlin’, Brielle is here to say goodbye.”

Harley nods and walks out of the room without even a second glance at us. Sugar raises a brow, but then just backs out and shuts the door.

The second it clicks shut, Grayson snaps, “What the heck, Ryker? Look, I get that you have wanted her here for months and now she’s here, but this isn’t the same girl! She isn’t the soft, timid, terrified-out-of-her-mind Harley we met. She has learned how to be stronger. Hell, she’s still learning. She has these walls up now. Cade almost brought them down just by saying a few words, but then you go and open your mouth. Stop pushing her.”

He stands up and paces the room, rubbing the back of his neck before he spins back towards Ryker, his jaw set so hard I wonder if he might break it.

“Stop pushing. You have to—you have to shut up!” His shoulders slump, and he takes a deep breath. “Please. I don’t know why we all are feeling things I can’t explain, but I don’t think whatever is happening is bad. So just give her time. She has barely been here, and she only came for one reason to begin with. Rage. She didn’t even know we were here. We have to be patient. If you can’t do that, then stay back because I can’t—I don’t want to lose her before we ever have a chance for... a friendship.”

Ryker stares at Grayson with his mouth open, not speaking. Rendering Ryker speechless is not something I think anyone has ever done. But it doesn’t surprise me that Grayson could manage it.

I bet that someday these two might be more than just friends, brothers. I have been friends with them for years. I see how different it is for them than

it is for me. They are close and have a different bond. They just don't realize it yet.

“I don't know what's happening to us, but I don't think it is bad,” Ryker whispers before he clears his throat and speaks louder. “Gray, you never let yourself feel things so strongly. I mean, you feel a lot more than the rest of us, but you are usually so level-headed and keep it together. This is new for you, and I don't think it's bad, but I think it is scaring you.

“And you,”—Ryker looks at me—“I can't believe how much you have talked. She's good for us. I can work on backing off, but I also don't think you have to worry that much. She'll put me in my place.” He grins.

I'm not really sure why he's smiling about that. “I heard you,” I say to Grayson. “I'm going to try. Be her friend.”

Grayson smiles at me. “Good.”

Ryker cackles, “This is perfect.”

Chapter Eleven

HARLEY



“**Y**ou’re on edge, Harls. They have a gym here. Why don’t you use it?”

I roll my eyes at Atlas. I came out here to say goodbye, and he almost immediately pulled me to the side. “Thanks for telling me something I already know,” I retort.

Atlas sighs and grips my shoulders, looking down at me with his all-knowing eyes. “You are beyond your age in many, many ways, but when it comes to your emotions, you’re still a teenager. You have more on your plate than anyone your age should. And right now, you have to make a huge decision that will change the rest of your life, and no one can help you make it. So, listen to me when I say that you need to be using the things we have taught you since you came to us.”

I give a jerky nod but say nothing. What do I say to that? *Hey, I know I fucked up, but I really hope you still love me because I think I love you all more than anything.*

Atlas stares at me for a moment longer before releasing me and standing up straight again. Brielle stands to the side of him with Linc's arm wrapped around her shoulder. My eyes narrow on it; I have seen them close and touchy, but this seems... it seems like so much more than that.

Bri steps away from Linc and approaches me slowly. She offers me a smile I can't seem to return. Giving me a tight hug, she whispers in my ear, "I don't know what to do. I have no idea what the right thing to do here is. I am trying to trust. I am trying, honey."

"All I want to do is wrap you up and hide you away. Protect you from the evils of life. You've been through enough." She pulls back slightly to look at me in the eyes. "Enough is enough. Find your peace. I know you want to chase down all these people who have done you wrong, but by doing that, you may lose yourself. That's not worth it. It never will be. Please, put yourself first. I think you have something you need here. But you have to let yourself see it." She kisses my forehead. "I love you, Harley."

"I love you too," I whisper. It took me a while to work up to allowing Bri to touch me. The only time I really let the guys touch me was when we were at the gym. There were a few times Linc would initiate a hug with both Bri and I but I would always walk out of it quickly. It didn't seem to bother me too much, especially his random side hugs, but I never wanted to risk it sending me spiraling. I never initiated hugging them until I hugged Atlas the other day in Gabriel's house. I wasn't planning to do it but I just felt like I needed to and at first my mind immediately went to my past, but then his arms tightened around me and something about it stopped me from spiraling. His

smell, his warmth, the way he held me like he would protect me and never hurt me. It was... a weird feeling.

With Bri, I learned over time that her touch was given with love and never spite or anger. Every time I would flinch away from her, her face would fall and she'd usually walk away so I wouldn't see her cry. Over time, it got easier with her. I know sudden movements from her still startle me, but how we are now doesn't bother me like it used to.

I swipe at my cheek when I realize a few tears have fallen. I won't tell them my fears. That I am terrified this is their out. Moving to live with Bri isn't an actual option. I fucked up, and now I am stuck here.

I formed bonds with each of them. Bri, the aunt I never had. Linc, my calm anchor. Atlas, an asshole who reminds me just how strong I am. Ryan, the man who shows me endless patience and kindness.

What if I never see them again? This could all be fake, the loving words, the hugs, the reassurance. As much as my body and soul are craving to believe it and hold on to every word, I know I can't. It'll hurt me even worse when none of it is true. It wouldn't be the first time someone lied to me, that someone told me one thing and did the complete opposite.

"I'll walk you guys outside," I say, looking over each of them. We head out the front doors and over to Atlas's truck. I stand there as Ryan says goodbye and slips in the vehicle, then Atlas and Linc.

I look over at Bri, who has tears falling down her cheeks. She offers me a tiny smile. "I pray every day that I am doing what is best for you. I promise you, I will be back here in a week. Whether you decide to stay or come back with me, I will come back. You will not lose us. Do you hear me?"

I nod but don't speak. I can't; not with all these emotions swarming inside me, threatening to drown me. Bri sighs and squeezes my hand before

climbing into the truck.

I stand there and watch them drive off. *Get it together, Harley.*

I wipe at my face and then take a deep breath as I turn around and head back towards the door. To no surprise, Gabriel is standing outside. “Scared I’m going to run off?” I snap as I walk straight past him.

“No. I have no doubt that if you wanted to, you would, and no one would stop you.”

I roll my eyes even though he can’t see.

Before I can say anything back, Gabriel is walking past me. “What’s going on?” he asks as he enters the main common room where all three of the boys are standing in front of the large windows.

Grayson is pale and looks like he might throw up at any moment. I stand frozen as I watch Ryker try to talk to him and get him to calm down as he hyperventilates.

Gabriel walks right up to them and grasps Grayson’s shoulders. “Gray, bud, take a breath with me? You need to breathe before you pass out.” His voice is soothing, calm, carrying. He cares about the boys and is acting almost like a dad to them.

Like Atlas and Linc have done for me before. Taking on a role that isn’t theirs because they... *care.*

I shake my head and remember how Grayson has helped me before. When I didn’t even know what a panic attack was, he helped me through it and explained it to me, and he has helped me since I’ve been here now, too. I get my feet moving and head straight for them. When I am close, Gabriel glances at me and drops his hands from Grayson’s shoulders, taking a step back.

I move in front of him and breathe deep, remembering that he has touched me multiple times, and it was okay. That me touching him too is okay.

I raise my now trembling hands and place them on his cheeks. Grayson isn't as tall as some of the others, but he is still very tall compared to me, so I stand on my tiptoes and pull his face down slightly. His wide, frantic, terrified green eyes lock on mine.

“Breathe with me.” I murmur, trying to use the same soothing tone he has used on me. I inhale, he inhales, then we exhale. I smile at him. “Good, keep going with me.”

We keep breathing in sync, our eyes locked. The rest of the room ceases to exist as I help him through this. Minutes pass before his hands raise to rest on mine that are still holding his cheeks.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

I smile. “You taught me that,” I murmur back.

He smiles back at me, and I get trapped in his eyes, which hold so much tenderness—but behind it is unspoken pain. Pain and heartache that I understand more than he'll ever know.

Our moment is broken by a door slamming somewhere else that echoes around us and brings us out of the bubble we seemed to be in. My heart, that had started pounding, now slows as we break eye contact.

Part of me is relieved because it was almost overwhelming, the intensity of all this, but the other part of me wants to drag him away and stay locked in our own little bubble forever.

Nerds comes bursting out from the hallway that has the offices, his wide eyes frantically scanning the room until he locks them on Gabriel, who immediately walks towards him. After a few whispered words, Gabriel yells, “Church now!” and almost everyone around me gets up and walks towards the other hallway that is by the backdoor.

I look around as the room clears, leaving just a guy who is standing behind

the bar and Grayson, Cayden, and Ryker with me.

“What’s church?” I ask, hardly imagining them just happening to have some religious thing going on around here.

Ryker chuckles. “Church is a meeting that all members have to attend. Usually, it is scheduled ahead of time. All members go, and they discuss everything related to the club. But sometimes, on rare occasions, Rage will call an emergency church when there is something that is urgent. Like now, apparently.”

“Oh.” I say. So, not religious then. I glance back towards the hall before focusing on the guys again. “Are you okay?” I ask Grayson.

He nods hesitantly. “Yeah—” He clears his throat. “Yeah. My brother, he passed away six years ago, and his death anniversary is coming up soon, so I think my mind is just messing with me.”

I can understand that. Sometimes I would have dreams about my mom and wake up, not realizing it was just a dream. It hurts more than anything else.

“What brought on the panic attack?” Ryker asks. His voice holds such gentleness that it takes my breath away.

It feels like every second I am around here, I see more and more of how much they all truly care for each other. I have so much darkness inside me that I don’t think I could ever have what they all seem to share with one another.

“I looked outside when we were walking by, and someone reminded me of him. It was like seeing the spitting image of my brother but adding what looked like ten years onto his age.” Grayson shrugs.

“Oh, one of the guys?” At this, he nods. “Didn’t you meet them? They’ve been here for a while.”

Grayson shakes his head. “No, we really didn’t. We saw the one, Atlas, at

Rage's house a few times. But I think that's it." He furrows his brows.

Ryker nods in agreement. "Yep. We never really got to meet them properly. Maybe when they come back, things will be calmer, and we can meet the people that clearly care and love you a lot."

I smile softly, realizing that list of people might be growing. "Yeah, maybe."

"Well, I am fucking starving. We should eat." Ryker spins and points at Cayden, who is standing slightly farther back behind us. "You too, caveman. No running off. Let's go."

Cayden grunts but follows all of us towards the kitchen. He is silent but almost seems like out of everyone he would probably understand me the best. Even though I kind of feel hesitant to be near him. He has this demeanor about him... this coldness. Like he seems calculated and not someone who really *does* emotions.

It doesn't help that he is one of the most beautiful people I have ever seen. Right along with Ryker and Grayson.

They all could be some kind of sexy models, I swear. They are tall and handsome, and although I haven't seen Cayden smile yet, I can guess that his would give me goosebumps just like the rest of theirs do.

Ryker makes me sit down at the island with a wink as he walks off into their huge walk-in pantry. Watching them interact with one another and being in their presence is calming.

"Ry, please get out of there. I will just throw together sandwiches since it's almost lunchtime," Grayson pleads with Ry, urging him out of the pantry.

"I can help!" he calls from inside as something bangs and falls to the floor in there.

Cayden sighs and pulls out the stool next to me, taking a seat. I glance at

him, and when he looks at me, his eyes are filled with curiosity and deep longing. I frown as I stare at him, and he quickly looks away, pulling out his phone to look at instead.

“Ry! Out now!” Grayson demands. Ryker comes walking out of the pantry and pulls his hands up, feigning innocence.

He walks over and plops down on my other side, so I am now sitting sandwiched between Ryker and Cayden. My back straightens, and my hands twitch, wanting to check my hair to make sure it is still fully in its ponytail. With how much hair I have, sometimes it falls out throughout the day, or I get annoying ass baby hairs flying all over my face and sticking up everywhere.

I clear my throat as I watch Grayson move around the kitchen. “Do you want any help? I’m not great in the kitchen, but if you tell me what to do, I can try to figure it out,” I offer.

Grayson flashes me a huge grin over his shoulder, and it almost knocks all the air out of my lungs. “That’s okay. It’ll be quick.”

It *is* quick. Within a few minutes, we are all sitting at the island eating the best sandwiches I’ve ever had.

“Are you alright?”

The question is asked, but I don’t really register who asked it, and then I realize I have been staring at my empty plate.

Do I dare tell them I can eat a lot of food?

No. I look up to find three sets of intense eyes on me. My face heats, and I have no control over how red I probably look right now. *Fucking pale skin.*

“Are you alright?” *Grayson.*

“Yeah, I’m good,” I respond quickly with a small smile.

“Your leg is shaking pretty bad. Ryker and I get like that when we need to

move or burn off energy,” Cayden says, pointing at my leg.

I flush even further, if that’s at all possible. “Oh. Well, I usually run or sometimes go to the gym because Linc, Atlas, and Ryan own a gym. But it’s been a few days now.”

“Well, you did get shot. So doing a lot is probably a bad idea with the stitches. And we can’t go outside to run right now, anyway. But we do have a gym. You could walk slowly and just see how you feel and if it helps at all?” Ryker shrugs.

That sounds better than doing nothing because I know this energy in me is just going to keep building up. Especially with so much on my mind, I need to run again. I will have to ask Doc when I can start more activity and then figure out how to run outside. So I can be fully alone.

For now, I agree to the gym, and we clean up quickly before heading out of the kitchen to the same hallway I saw all the members going to earlier when Gabriel called church.

“So the gym and the room they have Church in are downstairs. But the room is completely soundproof, so we can’t hear anything, and we can be loud if we want.” Ry grins. “I like music playing loud when I work out.”

Downstairs. *It’s okay. It’s not the same.*

We soon reach the end of the hall where it opens up and there is a staircase going down. White walls and hardwood on the stairs, but my mind can’t see that. All it sees is darkness. Cracked concrete steps. Old, cracking walls. Stingy, musty, dirty smell.

Deep breath. You aren’t there anymore. Not the same. I blink and watch Grayson and Ryker jog down the stairs quickly. I take one step down and find myself drowning in memory after memory. It feels like a flash flood.

...“*This is your new room. Enjoy it.*” Tammy smiles creepily at me. She

opens a creaky wooden door, the only light is what's shining from the hallway we stand in. Before my eyes can try to adjust to the darkness, she shoves me forward, causing me to stumble, almost falling down the stairs. "Get down there!" I take a few hesitant steps and then the door is slammed. Plunging me into darkness...

... "Get downstairs! I am tired of seeing your pathetic face," Mother sneers. I don't even know how many months it's been now, but my body is tired. My brain can no longer comprehend why this is happening. Is this normal? I want my mom—my real mom so I can ask her why this is happening to me and why her sister is this way. I walk down the stairs, and the door slams shut behind me, locking me in. Tears stream down my cheeks as I crumble to the floor, my body shaking and aching from the beating it took...

...This is the longest they've left me down here with nothing. It has to have been at least two days, if not three. I want to scream, but I know that would get me nowhere. She put the chain on me the last time she was down here after I tried to end it all and took anything I could potentially use to hurt myself out of the basement. I can't even look at myself in the mirror now unless I see myself when I go upstairs to clean. Why is this happening? I want out. I want to scream, let me out...

"Come on, breathe baby girl, breathe," a voice breaks me out of the darkness.

My lungs burn as I take a deep breath and gasp, my eyes popping open—when did I close them?—to find Cayden's face right in front of mine. We are nose to nose. I tense, but as a soothing hand rubs down my back, I find myself relaxing again.

"Take another deep breath, Harley," Cayden rumbles.

I inhale, hold, exhale. My surroundings become more clear, and I realize I

am sitting on Cayden's lap. We are in the hallway, slightly away from the staircase. His arms are wrapped around me, locking my arms at my sides.

"Why—" I clear my throat that feels dry and scratchy.

"Water," Cayden grunts. I turn my head and see Grayson stand up and take off down the hall towards the kitchen. No one else is around us. *Where is Ryker?*

"Why?" I croak.

"You were fighting me, baby girl. I didn't want you to hurt yourself."

"I—I'm sorry." A few tears leak free, but I can't wipe them away with my arms still pinned. Somehow, it doesn't feel restraining, it feels... safe.

"It's okay," he murmurs softly as his hands run up and down my back again, causing tingles to erupt on my skin from just his touch through my shirt.

Something else registers as I stare at his eyes. "Baby girl?" I ask quietly, my brows furrowing.

Cayden doesn't say anything, he just stares right back at me. His blue and gold eyes blaze with something I have never seen directed at me before. It doesn't scare me; rather, it lights my skin on fire. The way he looks at me with such deep intensity, it brings new feelings to the surface that I haven't ever felt before.

It's like some of the books I read at Bri's house. They all had this intense, insane reaction to each other. They had passion, and their touches brought them to life.

I have—had—never felt that before. But now, the longer his eyes watch me, the longer his hands run up and down my back soothingly, the longer I feel his body heat against me, the more I understand all of those feelings I read about.

Cayden's eyes drop to my lips and then slowly move back up to my eyes. I have never in my life wanted to be kissed, but as a sensuous look passes between us, I can't help but crave his lips touching mine. I scan his face, looking over his blazing eyes, to his short almost buzzed blond hair. My eyes drift to his high cheekbones and lips that seem to naturally curve down like he spends more time frowning than he does smiling.

I stare at him, watching his jaw clench before he leans forward, closing the tiny distance between us and lightly pressing his lips against mine. My heart freezes in my chest as everything else comes alive inside me. *More*. I want more.

I hesitantly lean into him more as one of his hands roams up my back and grips the back of my neck, holding me to him. He tilts his head and kisses me harder, more confidently, as if he'd been waiting for me to silently tell him it was okay.

What feels like an eternity but was only mere seconds pass before he is pulling back just enough to look into my eyes. His beautiful blue sparkling eyes are blazing with need, but a sound like a door opening and voices from downstairs hits us, and Cayden's eyes shut down.

He helps me off him, and we both stand just as Grayson comes back down the hall with a water bottle. His eyes bounce between us before he just gives me a small sympathetic smile and hands me the drink.

With a mumbled thank you, I chug it down quickly.

All of the members come up the stairs and walk past us. Blade, Nerds, Colton, and Gabriel arrive last. Nerds takes off with his laptop in hand, while the others stop and look us over.

"Everything alright?" Gabriel asks.

I glance to my other side, immediately being filled with disappointment,

noticing that Cayden is now gone. I don't quite understand anything that is happening with the boys or why they make me feel things I haven't felt before, but seeing that Cayden just took off right after kissing me stings.

"Everything is fine. What was your meeting for?" I sigh, trying to mask this new feeling inside of me that I don't even fully comprehend.

"Just something we all needed to talk about. Nothing for you to worry about," Gabriel retorts.

I cross my arms and raise a brow at him. Blade—Noah chuckles. "It had to do with Daniel, didn't it?"

"Yes, but it is really nothing you need to be worried about. We will handle it. Let it be, Harley," Gabriel says, a little more sternly.

With the memories of being at Tammy's still playing in the back of mind after the intense panic attack, I can't argue with him at the moment. So for now, I nod and drop my arms. Gabriel looks at the others in shock before giving me a hesitant smile.

We all walk out of the hallway, and I can't help but think that maybe not being able to argue with him right now is a good thing. It means that he thinks I am going to listen and go along with what he says when I actually will not let this go.

For many years, I was left in the dark. I will never allow myself to be in that position again.

Chapter Twelve

RAGE

After Nerds came out to the main room with a frantic look on his face, I knew whatever he found wasn't going to be easy to hear.

All of the ranking members are now sitting around the table while Nerds heads to the other end of the table. He stops suddenly and locks eyes with me. Taking a deep breath, he says, "I usually have the bug we planted at Tammy's up and playing live feed when I'm working just in case something pops up. It makes it easier than having to constantly go back through all the saved logs." He exhales and looks around at everyone before coming back to me. "You need to hear this, but it isn't going to be easy for you."

I nod my head and attempt to keep myself under control. I am the president of this club. I have to keep a cool head, and I've failed to do that lately. Sugar has stepped up and really helped keep us afloat, but my brothers need me. They need their level-headed president. Not the fucking mess that I've been lately.

Nerds presses play and drops down into his chair, running a hand down his face as Tammy and Richard's voices come through the laptop speaker.

“So then what’s the plan, Tammy? What was the point of everything that you had been doing? You almost killed the girl!” Richard’s voice sounds far away but slowly gets louder as they get closer to the audio recorder we have hidden in their house.

“The plan is to find the rotten little shit and drag her back here. Apparently, hanging her from the ceiling and choking her with a chain wasn’t enough—she ruined the deal of a lifetime for me, and she will pay for it,” she seethes. The air in the room seems to get tighter as everyone around the table is frozen in a state of shock. My own rage wants to come out and destroy this fucking room but I can’t. I have to find it in me to keep my shit together. They need me. *Harley* needs me.

“And then what, Tam? We spent three years doing this shit! You kept holding my prize in front of my face but not letting me touch it, all for what?”

Tammy lets out a humorless manic laugh. “Don’t act like you didn’t fucking enjoy tasing her and shoving her head in sinks full of water. I didn’t tell you to do those things.”

Their voices fade out slowly, like they’re walking into another room out of our range, and then a door slams.

Nerds presses a few buttons on his laptop and then sits back in his chair with a sigh. “I kept listening, but they didn’t come back closer where we could hear.”

I slowly rise from my chair and notice Sugar eyeing me, ready to jump up if he needs to. I toss my hand up and shake my head at him. “Just give me a second,” I say through gritted teeth.

Turning away from everyone, I walk over to the wall and rest my palm against it, leaning over and staring at the ground. *Fucking breathe and keep your cool, Rage, they need you.* Inhaling and exhaling, I take a few deep

breaths, trying to keep my mind from sucking me into the torment of whatever else Harley may have endured over the last three years.

Taking a deep breath, I take my seat at the head of the table and glance around at my men, my brothers. They all hold varying looks of disgust, anger, and sadness. I don't really think there are words that can be said about what we heard that will make any of it better.

"How do we fucking destroy them, Prez?" Blade asks, spinning his knife in his hand. The silver flashes in the light.

Running a hand down my face, I exhale a heavy breath, "I wish it was as easy as literally just destroying them, but this is all so much bigger than I think we even know right now. So, it's going to take patience. But for right now? I'm not really sure. We need to find out from Harley everything that has happened and anything she can tell us about them."

"No." Sugar starts shaking his head, his tone taking on a determined edge. "You can't do that to her. We have to let her decide when she shares things and when she's ready to talk. We can't just make her."

"Then what the fuck are we supposed to do in the meantime?" My voice rises along with my irritation.

He simply shrugs. "We support her. We listen to her. We show her that she has a home here and can trust us with anything and everything. It isn't goin' be easy."

I nod my head. This doesn't mean I can't have the boys getting information for me. They are probably going to gain her trust before anyone else does.

"And we keep her out of this shit. She has been through so much; I want her to feel like a teenager again and hopefully live some sort of normal life. She doesn't need to constantly be dragged back into this shit."

"What about that girl that they went to school with—the one who showed

up at Tammy's over winter break and we heard the voice recording of that?" Axe asks.

"Lex?" Blade questions with a tilt of his head. "Honestly, I don't know what went on with her after she approached the guys because Harley came back, and they haven't been back to school. I don't even know what we were going to do about it."

"So, let's have the boys try to talk to her. See if they can get any information out of her. All we heard was Lex going into their house on the recording. We don't know what was said beyond that." I sigh before continuing, "Is there anything else we need to talk about right now?"

Nerds clears his throat. "Yeah, I have some more information about Daniel. I started picking apart his life and came across something kind of disturbing."

He spins his computer monitor around to show us a clear image of Daniel in a car with—with fucking Tabby Wilson. In the next image, they are clearly kissing. I can barely keep down the bile that rises in my throat.

"What the fuck?" I mutter. "She's a child!"

"Yeah." Nerds shakes his head. "It's gross and disturbing."

"Okay, hold on," Blade says, slamming his knife down before standing up and bracing his hands against the table. "Daniel has been seeing Tabby for who knows how long, so there's a chance he's been around Tammy and Richard. Is he our mole? Has he seriously been fucking feeding shit to other people? I mean, the kid was cocky as shit and a pain in the ass, but I figured we'd wear him down and he'd get it together." Blade's eyes narrow, and he whips his head towards me. "Did he fucking know that Harley was there? Was Tabby telling him everything?"

"Okay, hang on." I raise my hands up. "We don't know exactly *what* Tabby knows. This is all speculation right now. The best we can do is have Nerds

keep looking for him. I'm going to put in a call to a few other chapters around us and ask them to keep an eye out for him."

"We should also have someone watch Tabby for a while until we figure out what's going on. Based on this information, there's also a chance that Tammy knows Harley is here," Nerds says, uncomfortably scratching the back of his neck.

Thinking it over, I glance back at Nerds. "There's nothing she can do legally, right? The birth certificate is fixed?" He nods. "Alright, then for now I don't think it's a concern. We're safe here and will continue to do what we've been doing. Harley still has to make her decision on whether she's staying here—"

I hesitate because the words feel wrong to say. She's my kid. She needs to be here. With me.

"Or if she's gonna go be with Brielle," Sugar finishes for me.

I clear my throat. "Right."

"We should call the prospects in here and show them these pictures and gauge their reactions. My guess is one of them let him out, in which case they might know about this." Blade gestures towards the laptop where the pictures of Daniel and Tabby are.

I nod. "That's a good idea. Let's do them one at a time. Will you go grab Connor?" I ask Blade.

A few minutes later, he returns with Connor in tow. He looks slightly nervous to be called in here, as he fidgets absent-mindedly with his hands. He gulps, "What's up?"

"As you know, Daniel was down in the cells, and now he is gone. The issue is that someone had to let him out. Do you know anything about that?" I tilt my head at Connor, watching his reaction carefully.

He furrows his brows. “No. I wasn’t even here when that happened. I found out the next morning because it was my night off to go do whatever I wanted.” He maintains eye contact the whole time he speaks and doesn’t stutter or anything.

I glance at Sugar, and he nods at me. “Alright. If you hear anything from Daniel, you are to tell us right away. We need to talk with him.”

Connor tips his head in acknowledgement.

“You and Daniel are pretty close, right?” Nerds asks him, narrowing his eyes.

He shrugs. “I mean, sort of. We went to school together but didn't really talk that much. Then we both started talking more when we decided to prospect for the club.”

“Did you know about this?” Nerds asks, flipping the laptop around to show Connor the photo of Tabby and Daniel.

Connor stares at the screen for a minute, pinching his lips together. “I don’t know who that girl is.”

After looking around at everyone and seeing that no one seems to be questioning his responses, I dismiss him and tell him to send Parker down here.

Parker is antsy on his feet as he stands in front of us, shifting back and forth. “Connor said you needed to talk to me?” he questions.

We go through the same steps as Connor, asking the same things. Parker is fidgeting the whole time and begins to sweat but says that he was in the club when Daniel got out, and he doesn’t know the girl in the picture with Daniel. After we excuse him, I look around at the guys.

“Well, fuck,” Blade sighs. “Either one of them is a really good fucking actor or its neither of them.”

Nerds types away on his laptop and then grumbles, “Connor did leave the club that night. He didn’t get back until the next day based on the front gate camera.”

“Alright, well, this isn't getting us anywhere now. We can ask around with the other brothers, but I don’t think anyone is going to know anything. There is no possible way that Daniel could have gotten himself out?” Axe directs his question at Nerds.

“I highly doubt it. I mean, he’d have to have something to pick the lock on the cell and then the lock on the door to leave.”

“Okay, so we keep our eyes open, contact other chapters, and then have the boys talk to that Lex girl and go from there. I feel like we’re running in circles, but something has to give soon.”

We discuss a few other things and then church ends. Blade and I talk about the boys going back to school because as much as they will hate it, they need to finish school and can’t keep missing it.

Running a hand through my hair, I leave the room with Blade, and we head towards the stairs to go back up.

Blade chuckles, and I glance over at him with a raised brow. He gestures towards my hair. “I think I see your first grey hair. Don’t worry, though. Silver foxes are a catch with the ladies.” He keeps laughing and walks ahead of me towards the stairs.

I shake my head and follow him up, wondering why I took him under my wing all those years ago.

Chapter Thirteen

RYKER



*S*he's fine. She's going to be fine. She isn't going to hate you for needing to walk away. *It's fine*, I keep muttering to myself as I pace my room.

The second the first whimper came out of her mouth when we were heading downstairs, my entire body tensed as I whirled around and ran back up the stairs. Her legs gave out, and I had to watch in what felt like slow motion as she started to fall.

Luckily, Cade was behind her and immediately grabbed her, pulling her back. She kept whimpering and shaking as tears ran down her face and she started turning pale—pale just like my aunt.

All the times she would pale at the sight of her husband coming home smelling like another woman. At least, she always said it was another woman, but to me it was a foul stench. He reeked of alcohol, dirt, and BO. It was a smell that reminded me of my own father on occasion.

After my aunt's husband, Leon, would come home and pull my aunt into their bedroom, they would be back there for a while, and then she would come back out and swallow some pills before sitting on the couch. So many times, she would whimper and silently cry. Her mouth would open like she wanted to scream, but no sound came out. All the blood would leave her face when the bedroom door opened and Leon would saunter into the living room.

Every time he left the house, I'd tell her I could kill him. I killed my dad and I turned out fine, after all. I could kill him. She always told me to shut up and not speak like that because one of these days, Leon would hear.

She wasn't wrong. One day, he fucking did.

The door opens, and Gray walks in, shutting it behind him. I stop mid-pace and look at him. "I'm sorry. Did you tell her I was sorry? I don't even know why it got to me so bad. I didn't mean to just walk away, but I just kept picturing my aunt Mel over and over again. Then it would turn to that last night when everything went bad—"

Hands gripping my shoulder stop my rambling. "She's okay. She is shaken up, but fine. Surprisingly, it was Cade who comforted her and brought her out of it. She didn't say anything about you not being there, but I'm sure if you just explained to her what happened, she would be more than understanding."

I shake my head. "No, I haven't even told you guys everything—" I wince when I realize I'm admitting that I lied when I moved in here full-time after living with Aunt Mel by not revealing the full truth.

Grayson grips my face in his hands. They are soft but large, and something about them soothes me. "Ryker! Stop it. Take a breath."

I take a deep breath and Gray nods at me, our faces only an inch away from each other. "Everything is fine. If you want to tell us all about it, you can. If

not, then don't. I seriously doubt that Harley is going to be bothered, alright?"

I nod. "How have you ended up being the one to hold us all together?" I ask with a slight smile.

Gray sighs, but I see his lips twitch. "I think I just have the least amount of damage out of all of us."

I furrow my brows and grip his forearms. "That isn't true. Yours is no less than ours. Don't do that."

He releases my face, causing my hands to fall from his arms, and steps back. "I know. I just think it's easier for me to help everyone. Are you feeling alright now?"

"Yeah. I think I'm good. It just made me feel... helpless, I guess. I need a really good run or spar, honestly."

Gray nods. "Well, don't ask me to do that with you." I chuckle, and he continues, "Noah wants to talk to us. He asked me to come get you. Him and Cade are in one of the offices waiting on us."

We head out of my room and towards the stairs. "Do you know what about?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No. But I'd guess it has to do with Harley."

We both let out mirrored sighs. This might not go all that well, depending on what they tell us.

We soon reach the downstairs offices and find them not in one of the extra offices but in Rage's. When we walk in, Rage is sitting behind his desk with Noah standing next to him, along with Sugar and Nerds off to the side by the window, sitting on the couch.

"What's going on?" I ask as I stand behind the chair Cade is sitting in. Rage has two chairs that face his desk, and Cade is in one, with Gray taking the

other.

“We have a few things to talk about with you,” Noah explains gruffly. “First off, I know I haven’t said anything about school, but you guys have missed four days now. With today being Sunday and tomorrow starting a new week, you need to go back. I will get a hold of the school and let you know what I tell them for why you were randomly gone, but it’s time you return.”

“Why? What’s the point?” I demand, my fists clenching. *Don’t snap. Give them a chance to talk this out with you first*, I remind myself. I’m supposed to be improving and not immediately freaking out on people.

“Probably because you need to fucking graduate. Is that a real question, Ryker?” Noah challenges, crossing his arms over his chest and raising a brow. “Or do you just mean, what is the point in being away from your little girlfriend?”

I swear on my life that an actual animal-sounding growl just came out of Cade when Noah said that. Everyone in the room looks at him, but he doesn’t say anything. His leg is bouncing like crazy. He’s probably getting extremely restless and needs to go for a run. Typical Cade.

Rage sighs and runs a hand through his beard. “Blade,” he commands without even looking at him.

Almost instantly, Noah drops the cocky look and takes on the more serious older brother role. “Either way, it isn’t an option. You three go back to school tomorrow.”

“And if Harley chooses to stay here, she will probably join you soon,” Rage adds on.

Before I can even try to open my mouth, Gray responds. “Okay. We get it. We need to go.” He looks up at me. “She has a phone. I just think it’s still at Rage’s house. We can get her bag for her, and you can text her, but we do

have to go back. The school will ask questions, and Nerds has done his best to keep things at bay with us all living in a motorcycle clubhouse and under Noah's care."

Fuck me. Why does he always have to be so smart and logical?

"Fine," I grit out. "I won't fight this one. Only because I know she's going to stay here, so she'll be coming with us in no time. But if she doesn't answer my texts and you guys don't fucking text me back, I will leave in the middle of the day to come back. I don't care if I get suspended for it."

Rage lets out a humorless chuckle. "Alright."

"So why did you need all of us in here for something that Noah could have done alone?" I question, eyeing all of them.

Nerds speaks up from the couch. "I was able to get Harley's birth certificates sorted out. The fake one that Tammy had made no longer exists, and now we are getting a copy of her real one that lists Rage and Lilian. So wherever she goes, she can go to school and do all things that a normal teen should do, and Tammy can't do shit about it."

"Which leads us to the next thing. I need to know what Harley has said about Tammy. Even if it is the smallest detail, I need to know." Rage demands, crossing his arms.

"No," Cade snaps, sitting up straight in his chair. "No, we will not become your spies because you don't have a relationship with her where she will tell you things. If there is something brought up that we think you really do need to know, we will convince her to come to you or we will ask if we can tell you.

"But no. We will not spy. The fact that you would even ask that shows that your head is not where it usually is."

"Cade," Gray says under his breath. A warning.

I agree with everything he said, and I couldn't have said it better myself. I'm not sure why he didn't also tell them we know nothing, but I'm not going to say anything else about it.

Cade is right; the answer is no. We would break her trust, and the three of us know the struggles of talking yourself into trusting someone to begin with.

Sugar stands up and walks to stand next to Rage's desk, so he is glaring at the three of us. "Y'all may think you're high and mighty right now, but you ain't. You've got the right to say no. I understand that. But don't go commentin' on Prez's mind. That ain't your place, boy." He points at all of us. "Y'all are juniors, goin' on to be seniors in what, five or six months? After that, you graduate.

"You becomin' a prospect makes you the lowest on the totem pole. That shit you said may be let off now, but in a year or so? You'd be scrubbin' toilets and doin' every nasty job I could think of."

Without missing a beat, he turns towards Rage.

"And you didn't tell me you were goin' to ask them that, or I woulda told you no as well. Rage, you can't ask them to tell ya things. You will form a bond with her. Give it time. She has a lot of shit to work through, and one of those things is you. In her eyes, you are not only a stranger, but you hurt her mama. She's got to work through that one on her own."

Rage nods and leans forward, resting his elbows on his desk. "That wasn't fair of me to ask. I just want what is best for her, and I don't like not knowing what has happened."

"What can we do to help in the meantime? I know since Harley got here things have been a little off, but has there been anything new on the sex trafficking information?" Grayson asks, glancing over at Nerds.

"Hang on," Noah retorts, drawing everyone's attention. "I know that you

guys have already found your way into knowing about everything that's going on with that, but if you want to continue to know what is happening, then what is said in this room stays in this room."

"You can't be serious," I sputter.

"Yes. He is," Rage says, sitting up straight again. "This is club business. We don't tell anyone what's going on. You guys ended up in the middle of this, and I know Gray has been helping Nerds a lot, so I am okay with you guys knowing what is happening, but if we have to go out to deal with anything, you will not be going. And the information doesn't leave the room. Harley doesn't need to know."

"You don't think that's going to blow up in your face?" Grayson warns, bitterness in his tone. "She obviously went through shit with Tammy and Richard and who knows who else. She doesn't trust people, and you want to keep things from her? What about when she *does* find out?"

"Do you know what goes through a person's mind when they thought someone was being honest with them only to find out later that everyone around them knew something they didn't? Something that is huge!" He jumps to his feet, scowling. "I understand you want to protect her. But this isn't protecting her. This is—" He stops mid-sentence and throws his hands up with a growl of annoyance.

"This is wrong, and you know it," I finish for my brother, leveling our prez with a glare. "You can't—"

"Yes, I can!" Rage slams a hand on his desk as he stands up and leans over it, glaring at us. "I can, and I will, and you will not tell me anything otherwise. You either promise to keep your fucking mouths shut, or you walk out and don't know anything. You aren't a member. You do not have to be kept in the loop."

“But when it comes to *my* daughter, I will make the choice I feel is right. If this comes back to bite me in the ass, so be it. I know I am doing the best I can to keep her safe and protected. Understood?”

My eyes bounce between Cade, who is sitting forward, his arms resting on his legs as his fingers are laced together, and Gray, who is standing with his fists clenched. If we all walk out of here right now, then we don’t get information. We will have no idea what’s going on. Not only to keep each other safe, but to keep her safe. We aren’t older and wiser, like Rage and Sugar and the rest of them, but we can handle ourselves.

Keeping this from Harley is going to hit us really hard. I can see the hesitation of that thought alone on my brothers’ faces.

But the alternative of having no information is worse. I just hope that Harley will see that when she finds out that everyone around her knew this information while she was kept in the dark.

After one more glance at my brothers, reading them like a book, I am stiffly nodding at Rage. “Understood.”

Gray and Cade both give their agreements, and Rage tilts his head at us. “Good.”

Please understand, little flame. Please.

“I found some information on Daniel,” Nerds says as he walks over to the desk and sets his laptop down so it is facing the three of us. When the screen turns on, images of Tabby and Daniel in a car pop up. The screen slides to the next image—they kissing.

“They’re together?” Gray exclaims, his eyes widening as more images come up. “She’s like fourteen or maybe fifteen, and he’s nineteen.”

My fists clench as things connect in my mind. “How fucking long?”

“I don’t know for sure yet. But so far, at least a year,” Nerds answers.

Rage adds, “What we *do* know is someone helped him get out of here, and it wasn’t someone from the outside. The footage from the cameras that face the gate were checked second by second, and there’s nothing.”

“I am going to be upping our security. I should’ve done it years ago, but I didn’t think we would ever be in this position. There will be cameras all over the property starting next week. Not just at the front gate.” There is obvious disappointment in Nerds’s voice as he speaks. Like he thinks he failed.

“We’ve never had reason to have more, Nerds. This has been plenty enough for us over the years, especially after we cleaned things up from Killer; there haven’t been any issues until now,” Rage reassures him.

“Are we staying on lockdown?” Gray asks without looking up from where he is scanning the photos on Nerds’s computer.

He nods. “Yes, but not just to the main house. It will just be the entire property. We’ll be going out to check all the fencing and make sure everything is good and there are no spots someone could sneak in. Also, we do not believe Parker or Connor were involved with helping Daniel, so they can be on gate duty and helping us secure things. They will just be a need to know along with everyone else in the club.”

“Okay. What can we do to help? Were any decisions made in church earlier?” I ask. Looking at my brothers, I see that Cade is listening intently, taking everything in, but Gray is still zoned in on those fucking pictures. I reach down and slap his shoulder. “Gray! Stop staring at those and focus.”

Gray sits up and shoots me a glare but stops looking at the screen.

“Right now? Go to school,” Noah says.

I roll my eyes at him. “What can we do to help with all of *this* crap?” I motion with my hand to the laptop screen that still displays the pictures of Tabby and Daniel.

“Keep your eyes and ears open. Maybe even try being more involved with some of the others. I know you guys like to keep to yourselves, but you aren’t actual members of the club right now, so maybe someone will be more willing to slip up around you. When you’re at school, be cautious. A prospect or a member will be on guard just as a precaution, but still be aware. Also, try to talk to Lex. She was in the Wilson’s house. There’s a chance she knows something or saw something. See if you can get any information out of her.”

“We can do that.” Alright, that’s not entirely true; it will probably be a fight to get her to even be around us she hates us so fucking much. “What are you all going to be doing?” I ask.

Noah smiles, but it’s sinister and even kind of creeps me out. “I am going to play.”

Rage shoves him. “Shut the fuck up. Before Harley got here, Nerds was putting pieces together of everything going on with Tammy and Richard, so he is going to dive back into that—”

“I’ll help,” Gray says immediately.

Rage nods. “Okay. Thank you. I also have some connections I am going to talk with. We’re keeping this close to the chest. We had church and filled them in on the basics, but from here on out, anything having to do with Tammy, Richard, Harley, or Daniel stays between you boys and all the ranking officers. Got it?”

We nod in agreement, then stand up to leave the office. Before Cade can open the door, Rage speaks again.

“Boys.” We all glance back at him. “I know I’m asking a lot of you, but this is important for many reasons. Please remember that when it comes to not speaking to Harley about this.”

“You got it, boss.” I say with a salute. Rage sighs, and we walk out.

No words are spoken as we amble through the club and up the stairs. At the top, Cade halts before entering his room, turning back to look at us.

“We’re keeping this from her for now,” he mutters. “I never made a promise for forever.”

I nod my head. “And we do everything we can to help them figure this out because I don’t think things are going to just magically get easier. I know I have a fuck ton of questions, and I am going to get the answers.”

Cade and I both look at Gray, who bites the corner of his lip, hesitating for a second before speaking. “Normally, I would be the one to say we should leave this all alone. It isn’t our problem, and we shouldn’t be involved, and I really don’t want to keep things from her but... something has changed. Shifted. I know we have to do this. I will work with Nerds and learn everything I can from him. I want to be as good as he is. Especially if it helps Harley.”

Cade gives a grunt of agreement. I will take it, especially since he talks more now with Harley around than he ever has. “I’m going for a run.”

I chuckle. “Bear has probably gone on five runs without you by now.”

Bear, Cade’s dog, hates being inside. He will spend all of his time outside running around. I have only seen him inside occasionally, and it is usually when he is with Cade or Gray. He is definitely not a people person and stays out in the wooded areas often. Although, he loves running with Cade.

Cade disappears into his room to get ready for a run, and I stare at Harley’s door. I am pretty sure she’s in there. It is pretty late in the day now, and everyone is getting ready to head to bed.

“You want to talk to her or just check on her?” Gray asks, standing next to me.

I bite my lip with a shrug. “I want whatever she wants.”

“Well, check on her. But maybe don’t sleep outside her door this time?” he suggests with a hesitant chuckle.

I glance back at him as I walk towards her door. “I will if I need to.”

He sighs and shakes his head, a small smile playing on his lips as he heads into his room.

I knock on Harley’s door, and a few seconds later, the lock twists and she opens it. Fuck me, she is gorgeous. Her hair is wet and in twin braids coming down the front of each shoulder. She is wearing a baggy t-shirt and some leggings. Her face is makeup free. Although, I don’t think I have ever seen her wear makeup.

Her large hazel eyes stare up at me, and I can’t help but examine every inch of her.

The scar on her face stands out against her pale, freckled skin, but it doesn’t take away from her beauty. Rather, it makes her unique and even more beautiful to me.

“Ryker?” she questions softly.

I clear my throat. “I just wanted to check on you. Are you okay?”

Her eyes widen. “Um–uh yeah. All good. Why?” she stammers.

I rub the back of my neck as I debate what to say. Unease comes over me, standing in front of her alone. But when I look back at her eyes, it’s like they call to me. Silently begging me to say or ask the right thing.

“Do you want company tonight? I can stay with you. Well, I can sleep on the floor if you want me to.”

Harley’s shoulders drop, and exhaustion takes over her face as she whispers, “Yes, please.” She opens the door wider, allowing me to enter.

Chapter Fourteen

HARLEY



“Ryker?” I whisper.

“Harley,” he responds, amusement clear in his voice.

“Are you still awake?”

He lets out a light chuckle, and the moon shining through my open curtain shows me his silhouette as he sits up from where he was lying on the floor.

I felt like such an asshole, but I didn’t think I could handle him lying in bed with me. I know I did it once before, but I was distraught and think I just needed comfort. But now I don’t know how to feel.

Laying here for the last two hours listening to his breathing hasn’t helped me fall asleep and feel relaxed. Not at all.

And now I have no idea what I’m doing or why I said his name. All I know is I want him to wrap me in his arms and hold me. But it feels so ridiculous. I

shouldn't need that. Especially not from someone I haven't known for long.

But just like when he knocked on my door, he knows what I need without me even having to ask. "Do you want me to come up there?"

I clear my throat that now feels insanely dry and mumble a soft, "Yes."

I hear him moving before the bed dips behind me. I tense and can't force myself to relax. I can feel his warm breath on the back of my neck as he whispers, "Breathe, little flame."

I attempt to take a shaky breath, but it turns into more of a gasp. Ryker grasps my hips and rolls me over, so I'm facing him. My entire body freezes with fear. My stomach twists with anxiety and frustration.

I shouldn't always be so scared. This is weak, Harley.

One hand stays on my hip as his other hand comes up to cup my cheek. With the moon giving us a soft glow and being so close to his face, I can just barely make out his dark eyes.

"What do you need, babe?" he says so softly that I barely feel his breath on my face.

I close my eyes and inhale his scent that seems to never leave him. Leather and soft Irish spring hits my nose, and I exhale. Allowing myself to be honest, I murmur, "I-I don't know."

"You don't sleep at night, do you?"

"I do. Just not well, I guess." I shrug.

A light scoff comes from him. "When was the last time you slept through the night?"

His thumb brushes over my cheek and I crack my eyes open. "The night you and Grayson stayed with me," I mumble.

"And before that?"

"I don't know."

“I’m going to hold you, okay?”

I nod against his hand on my cheek, and he pulls me closer to him by my hip, my head lying on his shoulder. He tugs my leg up by the back of my knee, so my leg is resting on top of his, then he moves his hand around to my back and slowly runs his hand to the edge of my shirt.

Slipping his hand under, he gently rubs my back. I tense as his fingers brush over the scars. I know he can feel them because he pauses on them for a split second, his fingers lightly caressing the raised skin before he moves on, rubbing up and down my back.

“Tell me something,” he murmurs against the top of my head.

My heart pounds in my chest. “Tell you what?”

Ryker sighs and tightens his arms around me. His one hand is still rubbing me, his warm, smooth fingers making goosebumps rise all over my skin. “Just anything. Tell me something. I want to ask—” I tense in his arms, my one arm that I slowly moved over his chest clenching onto his shirt. “—but I won’t. Not yet. But tell me just one thing. Let me prove to you that you can trust me.”

My mouth starts before I can even think about why this is a terrible idea.

“My mom was murdered, and I was there when it happened. I saw things I wish I could erase from my mind. Afterwards, I was in the hospital for a while. Then I met Moth–Tammy. Who I was told was my mom’s sister. I moved in with them and—”

Nothing else seems to come out. It feels like my throat is closing off as I think back to everything.

Will this ever get easier?

“They kept you in the basement.”

It’s a statement, not a question. He *knows*. He isn’t asking. My hand

unclenches from his shirt, and I rest my open palm on his chest. I want to feel his skin like he is feeling mine, but I'm scared and don't think it's a good idea.

"Three years," is all I respond with. I don't know what else to say or how to dive into what happened.

How do you tell someone all of that? *'Hey, by the way, I was not only locked in a basement for three years, but I was also beaten and humiliated and starved. They would mock and laugh at me, make me watch them eat, and then clean up after them. I was left with almost nothing...*

How do you possibly tell someone that?

You don't.

"Did—did Richard ever..." Ryker hesitates and doesn't speak for a minute before he continues, "Did he ever touch you? Or do things to you?"

His voice is strained, and his hand keeps moving up and down my back like he is doing it for himself and not for me.

Memories of all the weird moments with Richard flash through my mind, the hands on my legs, the leering looks, the odd comments... but yet he never touched me in the way that I know Ryker means. "No. He never did."

Ryker blows out a breath and gently kisses the top of my head. "Why don't you try to sleep?"

I nod against his chest and slowly let my eyes fall closed. Relaxing my body, I find I melt right into his arms. Before I know it, I am sound asleep.



I blink my eyes open slowly, adjusting to the light filtering in through the curtains. The sun is shining straight through, casting a glow over the bed. I

rarely ever stay asleep long enough for the sun to rise. Almost always, I wake up from nightmares when it's still dark outside and can't fall back asleep.

As I adjust, I realize that the weight on my chest isn't because of anxiety, it's warm and comforting. Another body beside mine.

My hand moves from where it rests on Ryker's head, and I gently run my fingers through his hair. Somehow throughout the night, we ended up with me on my back and Ryker lying almost on top of me with his head resting on my chest and his arms wrapped tightly around me.

I find myself smiling softly at how he is holding onto me like I may run away at any second. But the longer I lay here, the more I realize I don't want to leave this. Something about it feels right.

But at the same time, that thought terrifies me. It is daunting and dangerous.

I still have a goal. I want to hurt those who hurt my mom. Gabriel was the only name on the list. There are more, and I will find them.

I may be willing to hear Gabriel out, figure out my place in his life, and decide how I feel about everything, but that doesn't mean anyone else will get that chance. Revenge is still what I need, and I will get it. No matter what it takes.

"What are you thinking so hard about?" Ryker's groggy, deep voice startles me out of my thoughts. I glance down to see him resting his chin on my chest, staring at my face.

"You," I say. My cheeks heat as I realize what I said. It was the first thing that came into my mind because I really don't want to talk about the other stuff right now.

Ryker lets out a husky chuckle. "Oh, do tell. What about me?" His grin turns wicked as he stares at me.

I can't help but smile at him. He really is very handsome, even sleepy and

with mused hair. His eyes are bright. You can see more of the brown in them up close. His face is soft now, like he is fully relaxed and calm. Not carrying the usual underlying hardness and wariness he seems to hold with him at all times.

“It was just weird waking up with you in the bed,” I mumble.

“Did you have any nightmares?”

Thinking for a moment, I shake my head. “No.”

Ryker’s grin turns into a huge smile that overtakes his entire face as he beams at me. He pushes himself up so his hands rest on each side of my shoulders and stares down at me.

His messy hair falls down in front of his face, and I reach up and brush it back without thinking.

His eyes roam over me as I drop my hand to my stomach and don’t move. With Ryker hovering over me, I don’t feel suffocated or scared. “What are you staring at?” I question with a raised brow after a few minutes of his unrelenting staring.

“You, of course.” He says it as if it’s so obvious.

He balances on one hand and lifts the other one to my face, running his finger over my scar. My muscles tense and panic bubbles up in my chest. I want to shove him off of me before he can tell me how ugly—

“You’re so fucking gorgeous.” His finger moves to run across my lower lip. “I really want to kiss you right now, but I’m worried it might scare you away,” he says softly.

“Do it,” I breathe, my heart slowing as he somehow unknowingly takes away the impending panic that was rising.

His eyes darken, and before I can even process that those words actually just came out of my mouth, he grips my jaw and leans down, pressing his lips

to mine. He kisses me hard and relentlessly like he has been waiting forever for this moment.

His tongue touches my lips, and I let out a gasp, which gives him access to my mouth. Every feeling I have had towards him seems to intensify as this new wave of desire comes over me in a way I have never felt before. My hands finally unfreeze from where they were resting on my stomach, and I hesitantly touch his sides, running my hands onto his back and gripping his shirt.

What feels like minutes, but I know to only be seconds, go by before he is breaking away and pulling back just enough to stare into my eyes.

The smoldering flames that seem to light up in his irises startles me, and I feel like he's reflecting what might be showing in my own eyes. His lips slowly curve up into a gorgeous smile that I can't take my eyes away from. He opens his mouth to say something, but then someone is knocking on the door and a bucket of ice water is practically dumped over my head.

Ryker kisses the tip of my nose and hops off the bed before going to the door. He opens it to reveal Grayson on the other side. "Time to get ready. We leave in twenty minutes."

I furrow my brows and get up from the bed, walking up behind Ryker. "Where are you going?"

Grayson looks past Ryker to me, and his face turns bright red. "School," he almost squeaks.

Ryker glances over his shoulder at me and starts cracking up, laughing. "Cute hair," he says in between laughs.

I roll my eyes but speed-walk towards the bathroom, locking myself in. Then I stand at the counter and look in the mirror. My hair is its normal bedhead disaster, sticking up everywhere, and some of the braids came out.

I grip the edge of the counter with both hands and lean forward, staring at my slightly swollen lips. *What the fuck am I doing?*

I kissed Cayden yesterday. Or he kissed me. Whatever, it still happened. It was... nice. But it felt like he was holding back, and I think that was mostly because of me. I didn't mind at the moment. He helped me through a panic attack and kept me safe, but now?

Kissing Ryker? Ryker *kissing* me. My mind is—my mind is fucking losing it because all I can think about now is what it would have felt like if Cayden had kissed me like that.

“What the fuck are you doing, Harley?” I whisper.

I splash cold water on my face and then get ready for the day. My nerves feel explosive. I don't know what I'm supposed to feel about anything anymore, and I know that thinking about these boys isn't even what should be on my mind.

I still have to decide where I'm going to live. Although, I think I already know the answer deep down, and I just need to come to terms with it.

I head downstairs after locking my door and find Noah talking to Cayden, Ryker, and Grayson, who are all dressed and ready for school. I stop at the bottom of the stairs since they are all standing close to the doors. My pulse skyrockets when I realize I have kissed two of them.

Again, *what the fuck, Harley?*

Ryker turns his head and looks at me, his face splitting into a wide grin as his eyes sparkle with eagerness. All my worry slowly fades, and I smile back at him.

I walk over towards them, and four sets of eyes are suddenly on my face.

“Hi,” I say, but it comes out kind of squeaky, making me wince.

I look at Cayden, but the second our eyes meet, he drops his, refusing to

look at me again. Something about it makes me uneasy, especially after he disappeared after we kissed the other day.

“How’s the club princess doing?” Noah asks, grinning at me.

I scrunch my nose up at that. “Princess? Definitely not.”

“Oh, but you are,” he chuckles.

“What are you talking about?” Ryker asks, looking at Noah like he’s insane.

“She is the prez’s daughter. That makes her the club princess. It’s a real thing. They are usually precious, off limits, and girly.” He pauses for a second. “At least, the few I’ve met.”

I snort. “Yeah, no thank you. Technically, I grew up without a dad, so I don’t really have one,” I say, raising a brow and crossing my arms. The thought of being a weird princess to this club is gross to me.

Noah laughs harder and winks. “At least I can say I met a sassy one now, too.”

“How many of these princesses did you hook up with, Noah?” Ryker asks with a devious smirk on his face.

Noah sighs and nudges the boys towards the door. “Alright, we don’t need to talk about that. Go to school and fucking behave for once.”

I step outside with them and watch as Cayden heads straight for a truck while Ryker turns and wraps me in his arms. “Text me all day long or else I’ll drive back here.”

I chuckle and hug him back. “Okay. But I need my phone. I think it’s still in my bag at Rage’s house.”

Ryker releases me, and I immediately want to cling to him, begging him to not let me go. It’s a place I am finding I want to always be.

“Your backpack is sitting on the bar island inside,” Grayson says quietly.

“Thank you,” I reply with a smile.

He nods, his cheeks tinting red as he gives a hesitant wave and walks with Ryker to the truck.

A low chuckle sounds from the side of me, and I look over at Noah, who is covering his mouth with his hand. “What’s so funny?”

“You have those boys wrapped around your finger, and you don’t even know it. I honestly don’t know if I am laughing because they are fucked, or I am fucked.”

My brow creases. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means they would do anything for you. That could be bad for them and probably for me seeing as they are my responsibility.”

I open my mouth, but the sound of a bike revving and coming down the road from the gate draws my attention. A guy pulls up to park where all the other bikes are and takes off his helmet. I can’t see his back to read his leather jacket, but when he takes off his helmet, I see it’s Colton.

He glances in our direction and flashes a beaming grin that is barely noticeable around his beard, and waves. I give a tiny wave back, unsure of what I am supposed to do.

Do I say hi and go away? Do I go over to him? Would I even want to go talk to him?

Mom, I could really use your guidance.

“Go talk to him. He isn’t as bad as he seems, I promise.” Noah gives me a wink before making a shooing motion with his hand as he walks towards the door to head back inside. “Off you go, Princess.”

I scowl at his back and mutter, “Not a fucking princess.”

Steeling my spine, I take a deep breath and walk towards Colton. *I can do this, right? It’s easy. Say hi. Start with hi. That’s it.*

As I get closer to Colton, he looks up from where he was squatting on the other side of his bike, messing with something on the side of it. “Hey, darlin’.”

I swallow. “Hi.”

He keeps staring at me for a second before lightly chuckling. “Ya alright, girly?”

I can’t do this. What am I doing? I don’t just talk to people. “I can’t do this,” I blurt and turn around to start walking back towards the door to go inside, but his voice stops me.

“Hey, girly, talk to me for a second. Don’t go runnin’ off. What can’t ya do?”

Without turning back towards him, I say, “Any of this. I don’t know what I’m doing.” I slowly turn back around to look at him, frowning.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” he asks with a head tilt. I shake my head immediately, and he nods. “Alright. How ‘bout you learn about me then?”

“What about you?” I ask as I step back towards him. I know nothing about him besides the fact that his road name is Sugar, and he’s my mom’s half-brother. My uncle.

Not the same, not the same, not the same, I remind myself repeatedly.

Thinking of an uncle... it just makes me think of Fath–Richard. Part of me is still worried that he or the others are just as bad as the men I have encountered when my mom died or that my mom grew up around. Yet since I’ve been here... they’ve shown me nothing but the opposite of the things I have heard and seen in the past.

There is no harm in trying to get to know Colton, and part of me craves it. To expand this newfound family. I want to know the man who is related to my mom. Will I see pieces of her in him?

“Well, I joined this club when I was eighteen. Fresh outta highschool. I did follow in my father’s footsteps, but I joined for more than just him,” Colton explains.

“Why else?” I ask, curious as to why someone would want to join this club.

“Cause I love bikes. I learned to ride before I was even your age. Riding was my freedom. I had a good childhood, but Mama struggled with depression off and on, so she was kinda absent.

“My dad was always here. I’d come whenever he’d let me. Explore the grounds, hang around with other members, bug my dad. It was fun. But then he passed away when I was still pretty young. The club took care of my mama and I for years. As I got older, I noticed how there was an underlyin’ family dynamic. Things were messy back then, the club was a mess, but they were still a family and I wanted that.”

“Where is your mom now?” I ask, peering down at the bike he’s working on.

“She lives in Alabama. She comes over here every once in a while, but she is healthier mentally there.”

“Why didn’t you go there with her?”

“Well, come here, girly.” He beckons me to the side of the bike.

I walk around and stand a few feet away from him, observing as he squats down and shows me a black zip bag on the back side of his bike.

“This is a saddlebag.” He unclips it from where it is attached to the bike and tilts it so I can see the bottom of the front of it. “See that?” He runs his finger over old black duct tape that is holding the bottom of the bag together. I nod. “Under this tape is a big hole. When I was probably about twenty-sevenish, I went to visit my mama. She left the day after I turned eighteen, and I was not

happy about it, so I didn't go and see her for a few years. Then I started goin' once a year. But this time, when I left, I got into an accident."

"What happened?" I whisper. Colton speaks about everything with such a light demeanor, as if he is fine and happy now. I don't really understand it.

"I was ridin' in the middle of summer, the wind blowing on my face, taking everythin' in, and got distracted. Took a sharp turn too fast and flew off my bike. Luckily, nothin' was too bad, and my bike had minimal damage.

"But I called the club and let them know, and immediately some of my brothers came to get my bike and make sure I was okay and give me a truck to take so I could go see Mama still. I was about five hours into my trip." He reattaches the bag and stands up again. "That's why I stayed. I will always stay. The people who came to me that day? Rage, Axe, and Stone. My brothers."

"They're your family," I murmur, gently running my hand over the seat of his bike and up to the handlebars.

He nods. "Yes. Somethin' that is odd, but it's the most amazin' thing in the world. I wouldn't be me without them."

Not wanting to talk about how much these people are family to him anymore, I change the subject to something that caught my attention. "You said riding makes you feel free?" I glance up at him from where I was staring at his bike.

He nods and smiles. "Wanna learn, darlin'? There is no better feelin' in the world."

My eyes widen. "You'd let me?"

His brows drop as he frowns. "Of course. Anything you want. Just ask, girly."

"I want to learn how to ride." A huge smile breaks out over my face. *This I*

can get on board with.

Atlas, Linc, and Ryan own motorcycles, but they only go out every once in a while on them. I only saw them ride them once, but I was interested right away. I wonder if my excitement over them is why I never saw them again. I know Bri wasn't happy about it. The thought causes me to chuckle.

Colton's head snaps up, and he looks at me with wide eyes.

"What?" I ask nervously.

"I just haven't heard ya laugh. I love that sound."

I grin at him and decide to share. "Atlas, Linc, and Ryan own motorcycles, but they don't ride often. I saw them once and was immediately drawn to the bikes. I told Bri I thought it was cool and wanted to ride with them or learn myself. She frowned and walked away, and I just realized I never saw them on their bikes again after that."

Colton throws his head back and laughs. "Mama bear came out that day. She is a nurse too, huh?" I nod and he tuts. "I bet those boys get yelled at on the daily for those bikes," he says with laughter in his voice. "Alright, we will go over some safety things first before you even get ya ass on a bike. Alright?"

I nod again, and he dives in, walking me through proper attire and being safe on the road and getting a license to drive one.

About an hour later, he is finally ready to let me sit on his and check it out more, but before I can, the door bangs open, and Noah comes out waving something in his hand as he heads towards us.

"For the love of god, Princess, text the fucking shithead before I rip his fingers off so he can't text anymore," he groans and hands me my phone.

I raise a brow and power on my phone that has been off since the day I got here. "That is graphic."

“Too graphic,” Colton grunts and slaps Noah upside the head.

“Calm down, papa bear. It’s fine. I’m joking.”

“Are you?” I question teasingly as I look down at the screen that is now lighting up with messages.

Some from Bri and the guys the day I left, the rest from Ryker and one from Grayson. I realize Noah didn’t answer my question, and I glance up to see Colton glaring at Noah, who is smirking.

“Um, so I don’t really know what’s going on but also, how did they get my number?” I ask.

They both speak at the same time, not even looking at me, “Nerds.”

“Uh, okay.” I look back down and read through the texts from the guys.

Ryker: Have a good day, little flame.

Don’t miss me too much. ;)

Hey, you okay?

Harley, answer the texts.

I swear to god I will come back.

Gray told me I can’t come back. It’s only been an hour, but answer me or I will.

I texted Noah, but he isn’t answering.

Little flame, answer me, please.

Grayson: Ry is freaking out. Do you have your phone on you? Have a good day, beautiful. Sorry I didn’t say that this morning.

I smile at Grayson's text and decide to be a shit and text him back first.

Me: I didn't. Noah just brought it to me. Thank you. Have a good day to

I hit send, and before I can even start to text Ryker, he texts me again.

Ryker: Little flame.

I bite my lip, trying to hide my grin at his nickname for me and the fact that he is probably annoyed.

Me: Ye

Ryker: You are a brat.

Me: No. I'm n

Ryker: Too late. You are. I already changed your name in my phone.

Me: What? That doesn't mean I am! Shouldn't my nickname
your phone be little flame

Ryker: No, brat. But mine in yours should be loml.

Me: Lom

I furrow my brows as I stare at my phone. I have no idea what that means.

"What is that face for?" I glance up to find Noah and Colton staring at me.

"Oh, uh..."

Ryker: Yep. My nickname in your phone.

I clear my throat and decide I will figure out what that is later. "It's nothing." I point at the bike. "I'm ready," I say with a grin as I slide the

phone into the pocket of my jeans.

Colton grins. "Okay. Hop on."

"What are we doing?" Noah asks.

"*You* are going away," Colton snaps at him.

Noah just grins and says, "Nope. I think I'll stay and watch now."

Colton glares at him, but then looks at me as I walk towards the bike and swing my leg over it. "How does it feel?" he asks.

"Weird. It feels way too big," I admit, trying to adjust, but my feet barely touch the ground.

They both laugh, and Noah says, "That is because it's for Sugar's large ass, not your tiny one, Princess."

"Would you fuck off with the nickname?" I mutter, shooting him a glower.

His cocky smile grows. "I could."

"But he won't," Colton grumbles. "Just ignore him, darlin'."

Chapter Fifteen

HARLEY



We spend a while going over basics, and Colton finally lets me start the bike and get used to sitting on one. Noah makes comments throughout, but we mostly ignore him, which only seems to make Colton laugh harder. He is very odd, but in a good way. He seems like he could lighten up any scenario.

I really love the way the motorcycle feels, and all I want to do is take off and ride, but I am trying to be patient and trust Colton to teach me.

I've been sitting on the bike while he ran into the garage to check something. When Colton comes back out, he says, "I will talk to Rage about a bike for you. Axe, one of my brothers, owns a bike shop in town and could probably fix up one of the spares we have around here for you to learn on."

“Really?” I beam at him. My own fucking bike. I never imagined I’d ever have something like that, yet here we are.

He grins down at me as I still sit on the bike with him coming up to my right side and holding a handlebar. “Anything, girly. Anything.”

I stare at his eyes, the same eyes my mom had, and feel my walls that I try to keep up fade a little with him. He has spent his entire morning out here with me, showing me things and just talking with me for no other reason than wanting to. He didn’t get anything out of this. He just did it for me.

His calm nature as he explains things reminds me of Mom. When she would teach me something new, like learning a new song on the piano, she was always so calm and patient. Walking me through things step by step with a smile on her face.

Colton is the same way. Maybe it’s because it had to do with what they were passionate about, but I enjoy seeing the similarities between them.

It gives me a piece of my mom to hold onto and think about. After going through three years of not speaking about her and having no one to talk to, I still find it hard to bring up sometimes or think too much about because my mind is still stuck in that basement and in the words Moth–Tammy would spit at me all the time.

Gabriel comes walking around from the far side of the building, heading straight for us, a scowl on his face as he gets closer. “Doc is here to see you. He said he can probably take your stitches out. Although, I don’t see how when you won’t rest.”

I cross my arms and stare him down. “I have rested plenty. And I haven’t done anything strenuous. So what’s the problem, Gabriel?”

His eyes narrow on me, but when Colton slaps a hand down on his shoulder, he shuts his eyes for a second and takes a deep breath before

talking.

“You got shot Harley. I’m just trying to make sure you heal and stay healthy. I don’t know exactly how to do this or how to give you an outlet to work through it. You don’t just get shot and move on the next day. That isn’t how it works.”

I scoff. “I think I can handle it myself just fine. Being shot was nothing. But if you really want to help me heal, find the fucker so I can beat his ass.”

Noah lets out a loud whistle. “Damn, Princess, tell us how you really feel.”

I turn towards him. “I feel, Noah, ready to punch you in the face if you don’t stop calling me princess,” I growl and then turn back towards Gabriel and Colton. “I feel like you need to tell me what’s going on with Daniel and everything else. I’m not going to be left out because you seem to think I am some weak ass child who can’t handle herself. If I need to prove you wrong, I will. I am *not* weak.”

“Harley, I don’t think you’re weak. But that doesn’t mean I can’t want to protect you. You’re my daughter—”

“No, I’m not!” I yell and then force myself to breathe and speak softer. “I’m not your daughter. I get that you want to call me that, but don’t. You can’t. It’s—” *It’s too close of a connection to Tammy and Richard and them calling me daughter all the time in a sickening tone of voice.*

But I can’t, I can’t say that. I can’t talk about this now.

“Just don’t call me your daughter. I am not your daughter.” I glare at him, finding the anger inside of me to help stop me from crying as Tammy’s voice seems to force its way into my mind, mockingly calling me that.

Gabriel’s face falls. For just a split-second, devastation comes over him before he masks it and gives me a blank stare. My stomach knots, and it feels

like a lump forms in my throat. *Why am I feeling this way?* I shouldn't care how it affects him.

“Fine. But you're staying here. That means you're under my care. You are my responsibility, and whether or not you like it, according to the state, I am responsible for you and at the end of the day, I will decide what is best for you.”

Alarm along with fury seem to ripple up my spine. I won't allow someone to control me. I will run before that happens again. I can't do it.

Words fail me as I glare at Gabriel with burning hatred. For a moment, not only today but the other day when he told us his story, I had felt for him. I'd wanted to do something comforting for him. But now that is gone.

The last time someone decided what was best for me, I got locked in a basement, and I will die before I ever end up like that again.

It *can't* happen.

“Darlin', head inside and see Doc about getting those stitches out,” Colton says gently.

Without saying anything, I turn and head inside to find Doc. What am I supposed to do now? Can I really trust that Gabriel is going to give me freedom? Do I even actually have the choice of staying here or going to live with Brielle?

I'm really trying to give them a fair chance. I have to trust that not everyone I meet is going to end up being like Tammy.

But those first two weeks when I woke up in the hospital after my mom died, I really thought that Tammy was going to help me, love me, tell me everything was going to be okay.

She put on a show for everyone, even me, until we left the hospital. Then everything went to shit.

The thought of that happening again is terrifying.

Doc is sitting at the bar chatting with a prospect. I approach them but turn and walk past Doc to where my backpack sits on the end of the counter. Digging around inside of it, I find my three knives and quickly stash them on myself.

As I walk back towards Doc, he glances at me. “Ready?”

I nod and follow him as he leads me back to the medical room. Inside, I get on the bed and raise my shirt just enough so he can see the stitches. When his hands move to touch me, I tense but bite my lip and stay silent.

His hands drop, and he eyes me as he grabs a stool and pulls it up to my side and takes a seat, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

“I am going to ask you something, and I want you to know that whatever the answer is, it won’t leave this room. No one is asking me to ask you this. I am asking because I picked up on signs. So be honest with me so I can help you. Alright?”

“Okay,” I say hesitantly.

“Were you raped, Harley?”

My brows furrow as my eyes search his face. “No. Why would you think that?”

He sighs and rubs a hand over his forehead. “Just lots of reasons, the biggest one being you flinching and the screaming nightmares you had when you were first shot. You were abused, though. Weren’t you?”

I nod slowly.

“And your voice? They did something to it?”

Again, I nod.

“I’m not asking you to tell me anything right now, but if you need someone to talk to, I’m around. And if you need or want anything checked by doctors,

I can take you to the best I know.” He points at my throat. “Getting that checked out would probably be wise. Sometime soon.”

“Okay.” I can’t muster up the courage to say anything more.

“Alright.” He claps his hands together. “Let’s take a look at these and hopefully get them out of you.”

A little while later, I am stitch free. He numbed the area when he took them out, but I don’t think it would have mattered. I barely felt anything the entire time I had the stitches in. Guess that’s what happens when you are tortured for three fucking years: You become numb to the pain.

As I walk out of the medical room, I can feel my phone buzz in my pocket twice, so I pull it out and read the texts.

Ryker: Sitting in here makes me think of you. I could watch you play for hours. This was my favorite part of the day, the month you went here with us.

The second text is a picture of the piano we used to play last semester when I went there. I smile down at my phone, remembering how that was my favorite class for not only the piano but for him. He always made it fun, and it was fun to play with him. I miss having a piano.

Part of me is scared to really play again. What if all I can think about is Tammy forcing me to play and all the memories it will bring up? I played in school, but that also wasn’t by choice. Tammy picked that class for me.

Piano was Mom and I’s thing. What if...What if Tammy has ruined that?

I never talked about playing or finding a piano at Brielle’s because I wasn’t ready to face it yet, but now staring at the picture and seeing his text, my fingers are twitching to just run over the keys again or play certain notes and

pretend I can hear my mom standing around the house matching the pitch with her beautiful, soothing voice.

I walk around the main room, unsure of what to do now. Since I got shot, Ryker or Grayson have been with me at all times. This is the first time I'm alone, and something about it feels wrong. Like being away from them is wrong.

But I've been alone for so long that I don't need them. So why won't the feeling in my stomach go away?

Maybe I should text Ryker and tell him I want him to come home. I bet he would.

I shake my head at the thought and slide my phone back into my pocket. I decide to just head back upstairs until the boys get home.

As I get to the hall where the stairs are, I hear a soft voice say my name. Turning to look at the other end of the hall, I see Presley, the only other woman I have seen around here looking at me from the entrance to the kitchen.

"Yeah?" I raise a brow.

She gives me a soft smile. "Come meet Raven. We're just getting ready to sit down and eat lunch. You can eat with us."

"Um, I was just going—" I start but then get interpreted by an unfamiliar voice.

"Bullshit. Come on. Come have lunch with us. We don't bite. Promise!" A bright, bubbly pink-haired girl pops out from behind Presley. Her face is bright and welcoming, even more so than Presley, and sports a nose ring, her hair falling in long waves.

"Um, alright," I say hesitantly.

Walking towards them, I notice that Presley is in a lengthy dress that

reminds me of Bri. She loves wearing dresses and Raven, despite how bright of a person she seems to be, dons all-black leather pants, a cropped top, and a leather jacket.

Attempting to be friendly, I say, "I love your outfit."

She beams, "Thank you! I'm Raven, by the way. I am dating the broodiest member of the club, Stone."

"Come on, Harley. We were just going to take this outside to eat since it's nice and sunny. Grab a bowl and get some pasta and come out with us," Presley says.

I quickly get some food before following them outside to one of the tables that sits on the back patio area overlooking the property, including Gabriel's house.

"How are you doing?" Presley asks, settling into a chair.

"I'm good," the automatic response tumbles out from my lips.

Raven lets out a small chuckle and sets her bowl down, leveling with me a look that tells me she doesn't believe a word I say. "There is no need to bullshit us. Despite what you may think or hell, have heard, I don't fucking know, we are our own people. We do what we want. We're asking because being surrounded by a bunch of men can be overwhelming. And you have been through shit that we both can relate to. So, talk to us."

"If you want to," Presley tacks on, shooting Raven a glare.

Raven shrugs but keeps her eyes on mine. I look between them as they relax and start eating like nothing is important right now.

Staring down at my bowl, I don't move. My mind is pounding with questions. No matter how hard I bite my tongue, they don't stay in. I need to know. My stomach knots as I think over the possible answers.

"Why would you want to be here? Are you being forced?" I ask.

Raven tilts her head, her brows furrowing. “Why do you think we are being forced?”

“I know what happened to my mom in this club. I know that a club killed her, and it could’ve been this one. It could’ve been some of the people walking around here for all I know.” My voice, which had started off terrified and quiet, slowly rises with my anger.

How could they want to be around these people? Why am I letting myself be fooled to believe that they are good people? They aren’t.

I can’t trust anyone here. Why do I keep letting myself think I can? I feel like I’m on a lifeboat stuck in the middle of the ocean with no direction and random storms rocking me out of nowhere.

Presley’s face twists in sympathy. “Oh, sweetie, we don’t have all of the details of what happened to your mom, but that was before you were born, right?” I nod my head at her. “That would have been almost seventeen years ago. Things have changed so much since then. This isn’t the same club. It isn’t being run the same way.

“I don’t know everything that went on back then but from what I do know, it was really bad, and I promise you nothing like that happens now. Rage has made sure of that. These people, they saved me. They became my family. I wouldn’t bring my son around them if I didn’t trust them.” She gives me a soft smile.

“You have a son?”

She nods, her eyes showing her love for him as she thinks about him. “Yes. He turns two soon. He is with his grandma today, so we’re having a girls day. But he does usually come here often with me.”

“Harley,” Raven says, drawing my eyes to hers at her stern tone. “Let me tell you something. And I need you to listen and then think long and hard

before you do anything, get me?”

I nod slowly, and she continues.

“Rage is like a big brother to both of us. He has been in my life for almost five years and Pres’s life for almost three. We would both trust him with our lives, the lives of our partners, and Presley would trust him with her son.”

She takes a deep breath and leans forward, locking eyes with me. “You are so young. You have been through things no one your age should have to deal with, and I don’t even know everything.

“But before you go plotting whatever is going on in that head of yours, talk. Talk to Rage. At least hear him out before you do anything.”

“You don’t know what’s going on inside my head,” I retort, staring back at my food.

She smirks. “I do. You almost killed your own father. You get that, right? You almost took his life. He’d be dead. Six feet under. Do you have any idea what it’s like to take a life?”

I shake my head as my leg bounces.

“Taking a life is handing your soul to the devil. You don’t get it back. It is gone forever. Now, there are ways to still feel redeemable. Ways to not let it eat you alive. That is, by knowing you killed someone who deserved to never breathe again. But can you honestly say, without any hesitation, that Rage, Gabriel, your father, doesn’t deserve to breathe? That this world would be better off without him?”

My fists clench in my lap. The need to scream at her that I have been dealing with devils for years is strong, but I bite my tongue.

Thinking over everything she said, I can’t say that he deserves to die right now. But how is that fair? After what he did? He’s not redeemable. He

shouldn't get to just live a happy life while my mom suffered, and he was part of that suffering—but yet he has suffered too.

No, he *is* suffering. None of this is fair. Not for anyone.

Clearing my throat, I stand. “Thank you for lunch.”

Stepping away from the table, I rush away from them, hearing Presley whisper behind me, “That was too far, Raven! That isn't going to help.”

Right before the door heading back inside shuts, I hear Raven respond, “It's what she needed.”

Not paying attention to my surroundings, I head through the main room, planning on going up to my room, but I am stopped by Gabriel stepping in my path. “Harley? What's wrong?”

I stop in my tracks and glance up into his soulful eyes. They seem so kind—so concerned for me. Everything is hitting too hard. I almost killed him. My breath hitches, and when I open my mouth, no words come out.

He furrows his brows, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Something is bothering you. Do you want to talk about it?”

I look away and try to rein in all these emotions I'm feeling. My mom deserves justice, and I want to give it to her. But Gabriel... he does to.

He didn't deserve the life he was handed. And I almost killed him. Glancing up into those same concerned eyes, they overwhelm me, so I turn on my heel and run through the main room to go upstairs.

When I reach my room, my hands are shaking so badly I can barely get the door unlocked. Once I'm inside, I slam the door shut and slump against it.

What have I done?

Everything is so fucked up. This was supposed to be simple. I was supposed to hate these people. They hurt my mom, and there is no excuse for that. There is nothing that can be said that fixes what they have done.

These people haven't actually done wrong.

And yet they have wormed their way in my head and are fucking with me.

They aren't that bad. Maybe there is more to this than I know.

Pulling at my hair, I let out a cry as tears stream down my face. I almost killed the man I thought was responsible for all of my mom's pain, everything she had to suffer through.

My—my dad. *What the fuck am I doing?*

Needing something to relieve the intense emotions coursing through me, I head into the bathroom and turn the shower as hot as it will go. After stripping down and tying my hair up, I get in and let the water hit my skin. It hurts, but not enough. Not enough to take away the pain in my heart and the fear in my brain.

I feel so lost. *I really fucking miss you, Mom. I need you so badly. What do I do? How do I get revenge for you? For everything you were put through...*

I just want the thoughts to stop. The way my mind spins about Gabriel and his story and how everyone is so kind and loving here... but yet I know there has to be more to it. I just don't know if that more is bad or not.

Then I think about how my words might be affecting Gabriel, and my heart hurts. Or how I spent time with Colton and the guys. How they all make me feel things I've never felt before.

But I can't let them consume me. Not when I need to get revenge.

People put on a show. That's what this is, right? It's a show. Just like with Tammy.

Slipping out of the shower that isn't working to take away my pain, I dry off and get dressed again as tears keep streaming down my cheeks. It feels like there is a heavy weight on my chest, and I don't know how to make it go away. It's hard to breathe, and everything feels wrong. So, so wrong.

Me being angry at these people feels wrong. But me letting them in feels wrong, too. It feels like there are no right answers anymore. I'm just lost.

I'm lost and angry, and I need my brain to just stop for a second. Staring at myself in the mirror, I become more pissed off. This girl who has been broken, who escaped and found her own way, is standing here being pathetic.

This is not me becoming the devil. This isn't what I wanted.

I can't be weak. I can't let Tammy win. I have to put my walls back up and dig for the answers I want. Staring at the scar on my face, my anger builds, turning into fury as my fists clench on the counter.

Stop being so fucking weak, Harley.

Let the scar remind you of that day. Of the years that followed it. There is a reason you are here. There is a reason you want to stay here.

Fucking fight back and become the devil. Be the one to fear.

Staring at myself in the mirror, I raise a fist and punch my reflection as hard as I can. The glass cracks but doesn't shatter. My hand throbs as I look down at my slightly bloody knuckles. I let the light pain calm me as I shut my eyes and take a few deep breaths.

I'm not weak anymore. I have power now.

I open my eyes and raise my fist again, slamming it repeatedly into the mirror. The ache in my hand grows as blood drips down my knuckles.

My mind slows from its constant chaos, and I feel like I can breathe again.

I stop and wash my knuckles up before wrapping them in a hand towel. There are luckily only a few scraps, so hopefully no one will really notice. The mirror is cracked in multiple spots, and a few small shards have fallen onto the counter. I pick those up and throw them away before trying to wipe some of the blood off the mirror.

Unknown

This week has been going terribly slow. I am not a patient man, and trying to wait for Harley to leave the comfort of the club is setting me on edge. I can't wait to get my hands around her perfect little neck.

As per usual, my men are partying in the big room of our club. We have parties almost nightly and endless women—most of whom don't get to leave the next day. The club we are set up in is on the small side, but it works for us since we only have ten members right now.

My real brothers. My trusted men.

Unlike those pussy ass fuckers at SOS. Ever since Killer died, they went down fucking hill, and it won't take long before someone else is swooping in to actually own this town properly. *Me.*

My phone starts ringing, so I get up off the lumpy old couch and head down the one hallway towards my small office. Stepping inside, I answer it.

“Roads. Talk to me.” Currently, my VP Roads is watching the SOS club from across the street to keep an eye out for Harley to leave.

“The boys, the younger ones. All three of them just left. Should I follow them? Aren't they close with Harley according to your contact?” he gruffly asks on the other end of the line.

Running a hand over my bald head, I nod even though he can't see me. “Yes. Follow them. Report back with where they are going. I'm going to get ahold of my contact and meet with him tonight. It's time we make a game plan and get this show on the road.”

A little while later, I receive a text that the boys are back at Jacksonville High School. A quick call to my contact in which he promises to meet with me tonight. I take advantage of the party and the available pussy in the club before heading off.

I leave on my bike and go out of town. We bypass Jacksonville and meet out on an abandoned road that has nothing on it. When I see my contact's bike pull up next to me, I kill my engine and give him my full attention. The kid looks rough with dark circles under his eyes as he moves sluggishly while dismounting his bike.

“There is nothing new right now, Prez.” He gnaws on his lip and fidgets on his bike, clearly nervous in my presence, which is good. I prefer intimidating people; makes them work harder.

“I figured. That's not why we are meeting, though. Tell me about who is closest to Harley. Who do you think she would risk her life for?”

He scoffs, “The girl came into a club full of bikers with a loaded gun. I bet she'd be stupid enough to risk her life for almost anyone. It does seem like the boys Ryker, Cayden, and Grayson are fairly attached to her. I think they would be the best bet.”

I narrow my eyes at him, he hasn't made eye contact with me and seems twitchy. “Are you hiding something from me?” I say calmly.

He shakes his head back and forth. “No–no. I’m just tired. Promise. What are you planning?”

I watch him for a few more seconds but let whatever is going on slide. He’s still feeding me information, and I know he won’t risk fucking up because his dad is a part of our club, and he wouldn’t want to disappoint him.

Nodding, I raise my chin, leveling him with a serious look. *Let’s get this thing moving.* “We’re going to get Harley to come out since she isn’t doing so on her own. Which of the boys do you think would be the easiest for us to snatch up soon and use as leverage to get her out of the club?”

He tilts his head as he mulls it over, then says, “Probably Ryker.”

I nod. “Get me a picture of him ASAP so I know which one he is. Once we finalize a plan, I will fill you in, but we are going to take matters into our hands and get her out so I can finally have what belongs to me.”

A grin stretches across my face at the thought of getting my hands on her. Soon, this will be finished.

Chapter Sixteen

GRAYSON



The truck is eerily quiet as we head home. Ry immediately hopped into the back seat, so I am sitting upfront with Cade driving.

When we got to school this morning, Steph, the girl who is obsessed with Cade and Ry, came straight up to us, faking her concern for them about why they were gone for a few days. She completely ignored me, so Ry grabbed my arm and pulled me away, but Cade didn't follow. He threw his arm around her shoulder, and they stayed glued together all day.

After school, when Steph was finally away from us, Ry had turned on Cade. "What the fuck was that today? I really thought that with Harley here and how things have been you would've been shoving her away from you."

Cade shrugged. "Harley being back doesn't mean anything."

"Then why did you kiss her?" I asked him.

I originally didn't want to bring it up, but I saw the tail end before they shot away from each other when people started coming upstairs. It was their moment, and it should stay that way, but he is starting to make me mad too. Harley doesn't deserve this.

“You fucking kissed her and then let nasty ass Steph hang off you all day? Are you fucking insane? Is there something wrong with your brain, Cayden? Because I’m beginning to wonder if something is broken up there!” Ryker had shouted.

“The kiss meant nothing,” Cade responded but he had tucked his hands into his jean pockets and looked away, refusing to make eye contact with either of us.

I knew right then and there that what he said bothered even him, that it wasn’t the whole truth. But for some reason, he is keeping this wall up. He isn’t even letting us in to tell us what’s really going on.

Which is why we are all silent on the ride home now. There is not much to say when he won’t tell us what he really thinks. Sure, I can guess, and I know I would be right, but that still doesn't do us any good if these two can’t pull it together and just let everything out. I have a feeling that I will be intervening sooner rather than later.

When we park back at the club, Cade is the first out of the truck and heading inside. When we catch up to him, Ry demands, “Where are you going?”

“For a run.” Then he’s taking the stairs two at a time and disappearing from view, leaving us fuming.

Ryker starts to go up the stairs, but I grab his arm, halting him. I have to be the voice of reason here. There’s no use fighting, and Harley might hear it.

He looks back at me with furrowed brows. “What?”

I pull on his arm, bringing him back down to the bottom of the stairs with me so we are standing face to face. “Give him a break.”

“He needs to fucking pull it together.”

I sigh. “Ry, he is already talking more than he used to. Can you imagine the

war going on inside his head? When was the last time he talked this much?”

Ry searches my eyes before responding, “That night he got drunk and spilled about some of the crap his dad had done to him.”

“Right. And I don’t even think he fully remembers that. So besides then, the most he is talking is now with Harley around. And he is probably battling with himself about it. I don’t think any of us quite understand what’s happening between all of us.”

Ry opens his mouth, but I quickly press my finger against his lips. “No. I know you have some ridiculous answer about how you know, but you really don’t. You have even changed in ways I don’t think you understand since she has been around. Since the day she got shot you have had plenty of opportunities to do something stupid and get yourself in trouble, but you haven’t.”

He shuts his mouth and gives me a small nod. I remove my finger, and he sighs, running a hand through his hair.

We are standing so close to each other that I can make out the brown in his dark eyes. Ryker’s eyes always look almost black, but standing this close they are more of a dark brown that I can’t help but get consumed in as we stare at each other.

His hand drops from his hair, and he searches my expression, his own contorting with a confused look. A small piece of his hair fell into his face when he ran his hand through it, and my hand twitches to reach up and push it back, but before I have a chance, doors slam and voices are heard coming from the other side of the club.

It brings me back to reality, and I take a step back from Ry, shaking my head as he frowns at me. Ry is in love with Harley. *So what the fuck am I doing?*

I have always felt the closest to Ryker, but I just thought it was because we are good friends. Now, I know it's more than that. The way that I feel when Harley is around or when someone talks about her, I am beginning to realize is the same feeling I get with Ryker. It has been for years.

Rage, Raven, and Presley come out from the kitchen and walk down the hall towards the stairs where we are. Ryker sees them and asks, "Where's Harley?"

Rage frowns. "In her room, I think. But maybe give her some time alone. She'll come down when she's ready. I think today was a lot for her."

Ryker lets out a loud humorless laugh, "Fat chance." He turns and heads up the stairs.

I let out a breath and glance at them. "Everything go okay today?"

Presley sighs, shaking her head in distaste. "If they would all stop pushing the poor girl so much, it would be fine. She needs to catch a break. And these two aren't giving her one," she says with more anger than I usually hear from her as she aims a glare at Rage and Raven.

Raven smirks and shrugs, but Rage draws his brows together seeming lost in thought.

"I'll go make sure those two don't get into trouble. Everything will work out okay," I say, giving Rage a small smile that he tries to return, but it's forced.

I turn and quickly head up the stairs to Harley's room. Ryker is already standing in front of her door with his forehead resting on the wood.

"Um, Ry? What are you doing?"

"She said just a minute five minutes ago," he mumbles, defeated.

The door swings open so fast that Ry has to grab the frame to keep from falling straight onto Harley, who crosses her arms and raises a brow at him.

“Five minutes? Really?”

I chuckle, and Ry just groans. “It was too long. Do you know how much today sucked? Babe, I was dying all day. You didn’t even text me back,” he whines.

Harley fights a smile and shakes her head, turning around and walking back into her room. She sits on the edge of her bed and stares down at her feet. “If it makes it any better, today sucked for me too,” she says quietly.

Ry looks at me, and then we both go and sit on either side of her. Ry, being much more confident than I am, grabs her hand, but Harley quickly pulls it away.

I frown. Considering she has held our hands before, it just seems odd, but then Ryker is standing in front of her and yanking her arm out from where she shoved her hand in between her knees.

“Ry—” I start, but then I see her hand; there are four scrapes on her knuckles, and one is still bleeding slightly. It looks like she punched a wall or something.

“What the fuck happened, Harley?” Ryker demands as he inspects her hand.

“Nothing. It’s not a big deal,” she mutters.

Feeling useless, especially by her defeated sounding tone and the way she won’t meet our eyes, I get up and head towards her bathroom. “I’ll get a first-aid kit. There should be one in here.”

“No!” Harley yells and jumps up, but Ryker easily blocks her path.

“No what?” I ask.

“It’s fine. I already cleaned it up,” she lies, refusing to meet my eyes.

“It’s still bleeding, Harley.”

“I said it’s fine! Get out of my way, Ryker! Or better yet, get out!” she

yells.

Ryker wraps his arms around her even as she flinches and tries to pull away, but he just holds her tighter. In a gruff voice, like he is holding back how he's feeling, Ry says, "Check the bathroom, Grayson."

I open the bathroom door and immediately suck in a breath. The mirror is still up on the wall above the vanity, but it is cracked and missing pieces, and you can see right where someone was punching it.

"Ryker," I whisper in horror, almost unable to believe my eyes.

Ryker walks into the bathroom, still holding onto a now crying Harley. He looks over the mirror and then glances at Harley before shutting his eyes and taking a deep breath. When he opens them, he releases her but immediately cups her cheeks and angles her head up to look him in the eyes.

"Why, little flame? Tell us what's going through that head of yours," Ry murmurs.

Harley shuts her eyes, and I just know that whatever she is going to say, it might be the truth, but it definitely won't be the full truth. "I was just really angry and needed something to get the anger out."

Ryker lets out a grunt that has her eyes snapping open to meet his. "I don't think that's all of it. Is it, Harley?" He moves his hands to her shoulders and spins her around, stepping up so his front is flush with her back. He moves to the side, causing her to have to move so they are lined up with the mirror.

Right in front of the broken pieces. Directly in front of Harley's face. Harley drops her eyes and stares at the counter, but Ryker tsks and grips her chin, pulling her face back up to look at her broken reflection.

"Why are you doing this?" she whispers.

"I told you that we're here for you. That you could trust us. This is me proving that point. You can't scare me away. You can't scare *us* away. We

see you. So you were angry. But why did that mean you had to punch your own reflection? Little flame, you are allowed to be angry. But never at yourself.”

She huffs, “But it’s my mind that keeps pissing me off. I can’t think straight. I feel like I’m going insane half the time. Or... or like I’m failing my mom.” Tears fall down her cheeks as she stares straight into her own eyes through the broken mirror. “I’m proving Tammy right. That I’m weak.”

I step up next to them and face Harley. Giving her a soft smile when she glances up at me, I say, “You are so far from weak. Maybe you don’t see that right now. Maybe with everything swirling around in your mind, it makes you feel weak. But how can you be weak when you’re standing here? When you have gotten to where you are? How is that weakness?”

“It’s not,” Ryker assures her. “It’s strength. It’s fucking bravery. You just need outlets. You need to work through what’s going on inside of you.”

Harley wipes the tears from her eyes and steps away from Ryker so she can turn around and face both of us. “I used to go to the gym when I lived with Bri. I loved going. That and running.” She lets out a small chuckle, “Okay, well, I really hate running, but it did help a lot. I just... I can’t go to your gym because it’s in a basement and it just—”

“It reminds you of Tammy’s?” I ask, finishing for her.

She nods slowly.

“I need to ask you something,” Ry says.

“What?” she asks, frowning at us.

“How much time did you spend down in that basement?”

Harley clenches her fists and looks past us, staring at the door that is behind us. “Always. Until I started school. Three years,” she answers in a dead tone.

Ryker sucks in a breath while I glance down, not really sure how you

respond to something like that. But luckily, Ry fills the silence. “I have an idea. But you’re going to have to trust me. Can you do that?”

“Um, I think I can try,” Harley says with no confidence whatsoever.

Ryker chuckles while I smile. “Well, that’s convincing. Put on some workout clothes and meet us downstairs.”

Ry marches out of the bathroom and straight out of the room.

“Grayson!” he calls back. “Go change into workout clothes too.”

I groan and start walking while Harley chuckles behind me. I look back at her. “You won’t be chuckling once you work out with him. He’s crazy.”

She nods along, but there is a gleam in her eyes that I’m not sure I’m ready for.



Ryker

Standing in the main room by the windows that look out front, I bounce on my toes while waiting for the other two slow pokes to hurry up and get down here. I know my idea is going to work flawlessly.

Noah walks in from the front door and raises a brow at me. “What the fuck is that look on your face for? I don’t like it.”

I cackle. “Nothing for you to be concerned with.” Blade groans, and I smile.

“Please for the love of god stay out of trouble. I have a date tonight, and I would like to actually go.”

Now it’s my turn to raise my brows as I stop bouncing. “A date?” Noah doesn’t date. He fucks and runs.

“Yep.” Quicker than I can blink, he pulls out a wicked looking knife. “With my knife.”

I grin at that. “Do share, dear brother. What will you and the knife be doing on this date?”

Noah returns my grin. “Nice try kid.”

“Fucker.” I mumble as he walks away laughing.

He never tells me the things he actually gets to do. He is the club enforcer. I know he is out doing fun shit, but he won’t share because I’m not technically a member yet.

Sometimes it really bothers me. Well, it used to bother me more than it does now. Violence runs in my veins, and being patient while we wait to be

eighteen so we can join the club and be involved is hard, although I am trying to come to terms with it. Patience and I are going to become best friends.

A few tortuous minutes later, Harley and Grayson come down the stairs and meet me in the main room. "About time!" I shout, throwing up my hands.

Grayson rolls his eyes at me with a smile while Harley looks a little nervous.

"Ready?" I ask.

"No." She laughs. "Not at all."

I wave them to follow me and head over to the hallway that goes downstairs. Harley stops towards the front of the hall, so I walk back towards her. "Harley?" Her gorgeous hazel eyes snap up to meet mine. "Take a deep breath, close your eyes, and trust me."

She very slowly does as I say, and as soon as I see her shoulder relax a little I swoop down and scoop her up from under her thighs. Her legs automatically wrap around my waist while her hands find my shoulders.

She lets out a little squeak. "Ryker!"

"Close your eyes, Harley," I murmur.

She squeezes them shut and then buries her face in my neck. I take a deep breath and remind myself now is not the time or place for my dick to get hard.

Turning around, I find Grayson standing look confused as fuck, which is oddly cute. I strut past him and take off at a jog down the stairs and straight into the gym.

The lights are all off, which makes it kinda creepy, so I turn around and gesture at Gray, who followed us down. He nods and hits the lights to illuminate the entire gym. There are no windows down here, but we have a

good A/C system and multiple ceiling fans, as well as a lot of lights making it bright as shit.

I rub Harley's back and whisper, "Alright, I am here holding you, and Grayson is going to come stand right next to us. I want you to open your eyes and look directly at me. Remember that this place looks nothing like that basement did. This is more like an entire lower level than a dingy ass basement."

Grayson stands right next to us and rests his hand on Harley's back. She takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

I say in her ear, "Ready, little flame?"

She nods and lifts her head from my neck, slowly opening her eyes she looks directly at me. I give her a huge smile and without thought lean forward and kiss her. She lets out a tiny gasp but soon returns my kiss and moves her hands from my shoulders to the back of my neck. One of her hands slowly glides into my hair.

I can't help but let out a groan as I slowly pull back and look at her blown pupils. Her legs squeeze around me, and I know I need to get her off me before I accidentally take things too far before she's ready.

Gently tapping her butt, I say, "Alright. You can do this. Down."

She unwinds her legs from my waist, and I lower her to the ground. She glances around the room and takes another deep breath. "You're right. It looks nothing alike. I don't even feel like I'm in a basement."

I grin and glance at Grayson, whose cheeks are red. Smirking at him, I slap his shoulder as I walk by. "Did you want a kiss too?" I murmur.

The red on his cheeks seems to darken even more as he stares at me. I freeze for a second before shaking my head and moving along. He probably was thinking about kissing Harley.

“Okay, so what kind of things did you do at the gym before?” I ask as I walk towards the wall with all our gloves.

I figured she could take some of her anger out on a punching bag, and I could get away with being closer to her than normal and walk her through it or even maybe teach her how to spar.

I get no response, so I spin around to find her taking in everything in the gym.

“Harley? Are you okay?” I ask, hesitantly wondering if she’s taking in the gym or starting to panic about the basement part.

She glances at me over her shoulder from where she was checking out our wall of treadmills. “I’m good.” She chuckles. “I just didn’t realize how much peace I found being in a gym.”

I grin. “I feel the same way. I love being in the gym. It helps me a lot.” I point at Gray, who has taken a seat on one of the benches along the wall. “He, on the other hand, hates the gym.”

Gray blinks a few times before focusing again. He scoffs quietly, “I don’t hate it. It’s just not my favorite place to be like you and Cade.”

Harley tilts her head as she looks between us. “You don’t have to stay down here with us, you know.”

“Yes, he does,” I sing as I turn around and go back towards the assortment of gloves I was originally heading for.

“Not today, Ryker,” Grayson groans.

I smirk even though they can’t see me. “Yes, today. Yes, every day. You have been slacking off a lot lately. If we plan to be a part of the club, then that means possibly being put in positions where we need to know how to defend ourselves. I don’t care if you want to be a techy nerd. Nerds still gets down here every day and works out. You can too.”

Grayson says nothing because he knows I am right, but Harley asks, “You guys want to be a part of the club? Like full members?”

I nod. “Yes. But let's talk about that later. Right now, we have shit to do and aggression to get out.”

“Okay. Where is Cade? Is he coming down here?” Harley walks towards me, glancing around.

“He went for a run and will be out for a while. You’ll probably see him later tonight,” Grayson responds.

My anger spikes. She asks about him because she cares and yet he is off screwing around when he should be here with all of us. I know in the deepest parts of my soul that Harley was meant for us.

She will heal us, and we will heal her. But she needs all three of us.

Not now, Ryker.

Taking a deep breath, I grab some hand wraps and turn around. “So, if you aren’t comfortable doing it with me, you can use a punching bag. But punching something might help you. If you enjoy it, I can teach you how to do it properly a different day.”

Harley raises a brow that I don’t quite understand. She opens her mouth but then snaps it shut and nods. “I’ll do it with you. What are those?” she asks, gesturing towards the hand wraps.

I step forward and grab her wrist, explaining while putting them on her hands and my own, “It helps keep your wrist stable under the boxing glove and offers extra protection for your tendons and ligaments.”

“Oh, okay.”

I grab her both boxing gloves and myself some boxing pads to wear for her to hit. Then I gesture towards the center mat, where we get ready. Harley

tosses her long red curls on top of her head in a messy ponytail and then slides the gloves on.

“Gray, can you turn on some music?” I ask.

He goes over to our speaker system and hooks up my phone since I am the one who usually has the most music.

“Any preference, Harley?”

She thinks it over for a moment before shaking her head. “No. I like most everything I have heard so far at Bri’s. And the guys at the gym listened to a variety, so I’m good with anything.”

Grayson starts up a playlist and the song, *‘Me, Myself, and I’* by *G-Eazy and Bebe Rexha* comes on.

I raise the pads on my hands and because I am not prepared for a full hit, my balance is slightly off, so when the first swing comes it knocks me back a few steps. I have to shake my head to register what is happening, but I’m not even given a chance before the next hit is coming.

Chapter Seventeen

HARLEY



Ryker falls back a step before catching himself and shakes his head. But before he processes again, I swing once more and hit the other pad.

The fucker didn't even check to see if I had already learned any of this, so why not mess with him?

For the first time in a week, I feel pretty calm and centered. I am in a basement and not freaking out, and Ryker kissed me. *Again*. I think my heart almost stopped when his lips touched mine. I was not expecting it, but it was very welcome. I think kissing Ryker or even Cayden could become addicting very fast.

Maybe Grayson too... *Don't think like that, Harley.*

After the second blow, I give him a moment to work through the shock of how hard I hit. When he finally gets it together, I raise my brows with a

smirk on my face.

Atlas's voice seems to radiate through my head as I start relaxing my muscles and getting into position. *Stand straight and place your feet shoulder width apart. Take a breath, Harley.*

Shift one of your feet slightly in front of the other, keeping them mostly parallel to each other. Breathe again. Keep yourself calm and relaxed.

Ryker notices and removes the pads before grabbing his own boxing gloves and getting into position. The music is blasting too loud for us to talk, but I see the questions, worry, and curious gleam underlying in his eyes.

I know I am going to have to make the first move, so letting Atlas keep me centered in my head, I move.

Always keep your lead foot far enough in front of your back foot so you can shift your weight when you hit. Shifting to the left, I get ready to swing at the side of his head, but when he moves to block, I swing low and hit his gut. He grunts but doesn't lose his balance.

We circle each other, but Ryker never comes at me or tries to hit me even once. He doesn't even fake it.

I start getting frustrated when I know I need this really bad. I need them to just go for it like Atlas and Linc would. I rip the gloves off and wave at the speaker where Grayson still stands slack-jawed. He shakes his head and clicks the music off.

Letting my anger get the best of me, I whirl on Ryker. "Look, I know I didn't tell you that I actually know what the fuck I'm doing, but I do. You could've asked before you went on to mansplain it to me. But now I need a fucking fight, Ryker! So if you won't do it, find me someone who will."

Ryker's eyes darken, the darkest I have ever seen them, and he storms towards me. I back up until my back collides with the wall, and he cages me

in with his arms. “If anyone fights you or lays a fucking hand on you, I will kill them.”

Something inside me ignites at the way he is talking and how possessive he sounds, but it also pisses me off.

I scoff, “Then are you going to do it? For real? No holding back. I need it, Ryker. It’s important to me. Plus, I love it. And,” I growl, shoving him off of me, which fails as he barely moves an inch, “I can fight whoever the fuck I want. If they do something I don’t like, I will take care of it myself. I don’t need you doing shit for me.”

A wicked grin spreads over Ryker’s lips as he bends down and leans forward, bringing us nose to nose. “Don’t test me, Harley. You have no idea the lengths I will go to for you. Whether you want me to or not.”

“Why?” I whisper as goosebumps break out all over my skin.

Staring into my eyes, he exhales and stands back up straight, taking a step away from me. “Fight me,” he says instead of answering.

“No. Answer me. Why?” I demand as I step forward closer to him again.

Ryker smirks. “Box with me and knock me on my ass and I’ll answer you.”

I raise a brow and scoff. “Cocky much?”

Ryker doesn’t respond; he just keeps his fucking cocky smirk in place and gets in position in the middle of the mats.

Grabbing my gloves with a huff, I put them back on before nodding at Grayson, who had been watching the whole thing quietly until now. He presses play on the music, and Ryker and I begin.

I go at him first, landing a good punch to his side but he easily recovers and nabs one right back to my ribs.

It knocks the air out of me, but Atlas is immediately in my head again. *Come on, Harls! Linc hits hard, but you can get him back. If you can’t*

breathe, keep moving. Bounce on your toes and dodge and circle your partner so you can catch your breath.

Staying up and keeping my breathing easy, we circle each other until we start swinging and trading blows. Ryker starts blocking more of mine, and I block some of his, but we both get good hits in. Until I get cocky and swing, almost knocking Ryker down, but he catches himself at the last second. I grin, feeling really proud of myself, and lose focus for a split second, which means Ryker has an opening. Shit.

One second, I am standing, and the next I am flat on my back with Ryker hovering over me. He leans down like he is going to kiss me, and my heart skips a beat.

A smile stretches across his face as he whispers against my lips, “I win.”

He jumps up and takes his gloves off, tossing them to the side and stretching out his arms above his head.

“You almost gave me as good of a match as Cade. I’m impressed,” Ryker says as he takes one of the waters Grayson is holding out to us.

I sit up on the mat and take my gloves off before grabbing the other water. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Are you alright?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah. I feel pretty good. I think I need to do more, though.”

Ryker runs Grayson through a workout while I run on the treadmill and use some of the other equipment they have down here. By the end of the hour, I feel much lighter and calmer. I feel like I can breathe again, and being around Ryker and Grayson feels good. It doesn’t feel suffocating or overwhelming.

Even sometimes at Brielle’s I would get overwhelmed and need to go walk the beach alone or just go up to the room I used and spend some time alone. Being around her and the guys a lot would get to be too much.

But I find myself wanting to be around Ryker and Grayson... and even Cayden, who I have spent the least amount of time with, all the time.

Once we finish our workouts, we all cool down together and then get ready to leave the gym.

Ryker looks back at me. "Do you want to try going up? Or I can just carry you again."

Hesitating by the doors with both Grayson and Ryker looking back at me, now I feel my muscles tense.

The entire time we were down here, I never once panicked or even felt like I was on the verge of panicking. It doesn't feel like a basement at all, and I think being with them helped a lot. But what if I go to walk up the stairs and can't do it? I don't want Ryker to have to fucking carry me every time I want to be down here. That's pathetic.

"I want to try," I say, straightening my spine. I take a deep breath and walk out the doors with Grayson and Ryker on either side of me.

The hallway outside the gym is wide, not suffocating at all. If you go further down the right, there are two doors, while directly across from the gym is another door, and then to the left is more hallway with an opening on the right side that must be the stairs.

We turn left and walk towards them. When we reach the bottom of the stairs, I glance up and take a shaky breath.

My eyes close shut, and my nightmares are right there threatening to drag me under. Before they can, soft, warm hands are gripping my cheeks as another more calloused hand takes my own, squeezing it.

Grayson's voice takes over. "Harley, stay with us. Remember that you aren't there. Open your eyes and look around you. See the differences. This is not the same. You are safe."

My eyes snap open and meet beautiful green ones, with Grayson giving me a soft smile.

“Good job, beautiful. Now, look around me. What do you see?”

I swallow, obeying as my eyes dart around. “White walls, hardwood stairs, light at the top of the stairs, light downstairs. Not the same,” I breathe.

“Not the same,” Grayson and Ryker say back at the same time.

Ryker lifts my hand to his lips and gently kisses the back of it. “Think you can do it?”

Rolling my shoulders, I nod as Grayson’s hands fall from my cheeks.

“Yes.”

Ryker grins at me. “My brave little flame.”

I feel a smile break out on my face, and I glance down, taking Grayson’s hand in my other one and starting up the stairs with both of them in tow.

There isn’t enough room for all three of us to walk side by side, so Ryker is slightly behind me but still holding my hand as we climb the stairs.

Once back to the main level, I let them know I’m going to shower and then come back downstairs.

Heading into my room, I go into the bathroom and stare at the broken mirror. A few hours ago, I was starting to feel hopeless, like my mind will never be at ease, but now it feels calmer. Something inside me is healing. Like my heart is very slowly being put back together.

Staring at my broken reflection, I know now that I have to stay here. There are so many things I need answers about, and the only way to get them is to face the people here.

Ryker, Grayson, and Cayden calm the storm that is constantly brewing inside me, and I can’t even picture letting that go. As scary as it is to open up

to them, I think it hurts more not to let them in. Like my soul knows that it needs them.

Maybe, just maybe, they are the missing piece to what I have needed all this time. Maybe they can help me get the revenge I crave.



Cayden

“Are you going running?” Noah asks from behind me.

I nod but don't look back as I keep heading towards the backdoor.

“Bear hasn't been around all day.” His voice is louder as he catches up to me.

“I let him stay out. There was too much going on around here.” I shrug.

Normally, I make Bear come back with me and stay leashed up at night out back or come inside for the night because he will spend all his time out in the woods and probably never come home if he didn't have to.

I can't blame the dog. Sometimes I think I would do the same if I could. Be out in the woods with no one around? Sounds fucking peaceful.

“Alright. Be safe,” Noah sighs.

I grunt and take off out the door, jogging across the yard and by Rage's house before heading towards the woods. When I come across the trail head, I turn down it and start sprinting through the trees, pushing myself as hard as I can.

Not long into my run, a howl sounds before a black furball zooms by me and then slows to match my pace.

I smirk down at Bear as he sticks his giant ass tongue out and runs alongside me. We soon locate the trail that goes along the perimeter of the property and follow it.

I stay out here running for as long as my body can stand, which now is a few hours. It gives me a good distraction. Besides working on my art, running is my escape. I didn't realize how much it would actually bother me

trying to keep my distance from Ryker and Grayson. Most of the time, they drive me insane, and I usually want to punch Ryker, but I feel like something is missing now.

I know Grayson wanted me to just be around anyway and try to be Harley's friend, but I don't know if I can do that. She doesn't belong to me no matter how badly I wish she did. She is Ryker's even if she doesn't know it yet.

I feel things I have never felt before when I am around Harley, and that is a dangerous thing for me. So, keeping my distance until I can drown out these feelings for a girl I hardly know is the best thing to do.

She likes them, and I am no good for her. They will be what she needs.

It's the only reason I let Steph stay around. She is annoying as fuck, but she is helping me to kind of keep my mind off of Harley. I know Ryker and Grayson hate me for it, but someday they will see why I have done all of this. It's for them. I want them to be happy however they work things out.

When my legs can't keep up my normal pace anymore, I know it's time to stop, so I start heading back towards the main building, making sure Bear is following me so I can have him stay up at the house again now that things are a bit calmer.

As we come out of the woods and head through the yard towards the back patio, I spot Harley sitting on the steps. Her long red curls are wet running down her back, and she's wearing a plain hoodie with leggings and is barefoot.

She runs her toes through the grass, watching her feet, but as she hears us approaching, she glances up.

Her eyes lock on mine for a second but then immediately jump to Bear and light up. Before I have a chance to warn her to leave Bear alone until he decides to approach because he only allows interactions on his terms, the

fucker struts right up to Harley and plops down in front of her, rolling over and offering her his belly.

I stand there frozen as Harley lets out an adorable fucking giggle and slides down the steps to sit in the grass in front of Bear to begin giving him pets.

“What’s his name?” she asks, grinning up at me. Her grin drops as she examines my face. “Cayden?”

Shaking my head I snap, “Bear. Come.” I avoid looking at her as I walk past her with Bear right behind me. I don’t want to see how I might be hurting her. It will crack my walls more than I want them to.

That and seeing her now, there is this pressure on my chest—guilt. For even looking at Steph.

We head to the corner of the porch where there is a leash attached. It stretches out so he can wander through a small portion of the woods, the yard, and all of the porch. It just keeps him from going off into the woods all night long.

Attaching the leash to Bear’s collar, I tell him I will bring his dinner out and head inside to grab it from the kitchen.

My mind is still whirling with how the fuck Harley can show back up here and attach herself to the three things that mean the most to me. This club. My brothers. And now my dog. She has somehow wiggled her way in and is making everyone, even grumpy ass Bear, fall in love with her.

And maybe even you—no. No, I won’t let my mind go there. I can’t.

I slam the pantry door and bring Bear his dinner before heading back inside to go upstairs and shower, making sure to not look and see if Harley is still outside. As I get to the bottom of the stairs Ryker and Grayson come down them.

“Nice timing. Rage wants to talk to us,” Grayson says.

Ryker, surprisingly, says nothing, so I just turn and follow them to Rage's office where all the ranking officers, Axe, Stone, Rage, Nerds, Noah, and Sugar are waiting.

"What's going on?" Ryker asks as we come in and shut the door.

"Did you guys get a chance to talk to Lex today?" Noah asks.

"No, we didn't get a chance to since we had to get caught up from the few days we missed. We'll get it done this week, though," Grayson says.

Rage nods. "Nerds has some information to share." He gestures towards Nerds.

"Alright, but before anyone asks, I have nothing new on Daniel. He's hiding, but if he even steps one foot outside, I will know right where he is. And as far as I can tell, he hasn't left town." He sighs. "Now onto what I found. I have been digging into Tammy and all the names I've been finding that are connected to the offshore accounts and trying to piece together a timeline to figure out a location that might be common among them, and I think I found something."

He stands from the chair he was sitting in across from Rage's desk, placing his laptop on the desk he turns it so everyone can see. The screen is completely black, but in gold letters it says *Black Night* across it.

"What is this?" Axe asks, furrowing his brows. He has the same confused look the rest of us do.

"This, I am assuming, is how they make most of their money." He clicks on the letter B and the screen changes. It now displays a large gold and black mask as the header and a form below that you fill out. "When you come onto the website as a normal viewer, it looks like some kind of elite club. You have to fill out the form and then receive a formal invitation with more

details. They change the location every time the event happens, which seems to be every six months.”

“How do you know this is related to the sex trafficking?” Rage asks, leaning forward in his seat.

“I tracked everyone I could find that was connected to or has been paid from the accounts, and many of them were at these random places almost every six months. So I looked into what could be happening because sometimes it would be at a warehouse and sometimes it’s at a hotel. They get it completely blocked off, and according to one hotel I called, they said it’s an elite ball that happens—completely private and by invite only.

“Because it’s all so secret and private, the host pays extra for all normal working staff to be gone so they run it themselves. The event never ends up at the same location, and I have tracked it back at least ten years so far. The other thing is, Tammy has been to every single one.”

“You were able to track her?” Rage asks.

Nerds nods. “Yeah. I have her on security cameras walking into some of the places, but otherwise she’s always in the area when they’re happening.”

“So what do we do now? When is the next one occurring?” Noah says, twirling a switchblade in his hand.

“They just had one a month ago, so if the timing is correct, then in five months.”

Rage sighs and sits down at his desk. He glances around at everyone before speaking. “Do you all understand what this means? There is a very high chance they are using this elite ball as a front to sell women. Possibly young girls. We don’t know the full extent of it yet.”

Blade flashes a violent grin. “So that means we work our way in, get all the information we can, and we destroy them piece by piece. I will personally

volunteer to take dicks off of every pervert there. Let them keep living but with no fucking dick,” he says.

There is no mistaking the fury in my brother's tone. But at the same time, the thought of being able to be as violent as he wants seems to excite him. He may try to hide it from Ryker, Grayson, and I, but he doesn't always succeed.

What these people are doing is beyond fucked up. I think if I got my hands on any of them, I wouldn't mind letting out the side of me my father created to get some payback. Especially towards Tammy and Richard. Who knows what their plans were for Harley?

Glancing at Ryker and Grayson, I know their thoughts are going down the same path.

“For now, I need to do some more digging. Grayson, I could use you a few days after school this week to help me. You have caught on fast, so you should be able to get this quickly and help,” Nerds says.

Grayson nods. “Of course.”

“Remember, not a word of this is to be spoken about to anyone. Our main priorities right now are finding Daniel and looking into this.” Rage gives pointed looks at Ryker, Grayson, and I.

I know he is referring to Harley and how we aren't allowed to tell her anything. No matter how messed up that may be. I clench my fists but nod, reminding myself that we are doing this to help her as we leave the office.

Ryker and Grayson are right behind me. I plan to just head up to my room for the night, but I'm stopped when Ryker curses under his breath. Looking in the same direction he and Grayson are, I spot Harley on the back patio pacing back and forth wringing her fingers together.

They start towards the back door, heading straight for her, and before my brain can register what I'm doing my feet are moving in the same direction

following them out to the patio.

Harley sees us, and she sighs, “I need to tell you something.” She glances right into my soul. “All of you.”

Chapter Eighteen

HARLEY



Are you really going to do this? I ask myself.

I've gone back and forth with myself since we came back upstairs from the gym. I showered and paced and then came outside and paced again because I thought the fresh air might help me collect my thoughts.

I was wrong. No matter what way I try to go about this, I think I'm insane. They are going to see me differently. There is no way I can bare my demons to someone and not receive pitying looks.

It was bad enough at Brielle's. They barely know anything about what actually happened to me. I told them about when I lost all hope and wanted to die. Brielle saw some of the scars on my back, but I never told them what actually happened.

I never wanted them to know. I never wanted anyone to know. Or so I thought. I need the guys to know now. Or at least have an idea.

Now that I know I will be staying here, I have come to terms with the fact that I can't do this on my own. If I have to learn to trust someone, I know it needs to be them. The three boys who are always around and seem to bring me a sense of peace I haven't felt since my mom was alive.

So now I am standing here with three sets of eyes all on me, waiting.

I saw how Cayden wanted to walk away when I said I needed to tell them something. But even with the weird way he seems to act, I know I need him here too. Something in his eyes reminds me of my own.

"Harley?" Grayson says softly.

I clear my throat, realizing I haven't said anything yet. "Right. Right, um is there somewhere we can talk?"

"This way," Cayden grunts as he starts walking down the patio steps and across the backyard.

We all follow him, with Ryker and Grayson ending up on either side of me. I feel a feather-light touch on my hand and glance down to see Grayson's index finger lightly run over the back of it. He slides his finger lower and links it with my index finger.

I squeeze mine around his and keep walking, looking straight ahead as Cayden leads us across the back road and onto a trail.

After a few more minutes, the trees open up to a small clearing. There are a few old car parts back here that seem to have sat here a long time based on how the grass and weeds have grown over them.

Cayden leads us to a fallen tree and points to the log.

Releasing Grayson's finger, I step forward and sit on it. Ryker sits next to me while Grayson takes a seat on the ground to my other side. Cayden steps

back and leans against a tree a few feet away.

“No one ever comes out here. You can tell us whatever you want,” Cayden says.

I glance around and realize that someone must use this area for something. I know by the surprised and curious looks on Ryker and Grayson’s faces that this isn’t their space.

“Right.” *Fuck, how do I do this?* “So, um, I just wanted to tell you guys a few things about what has happened and why I left Tammy’s.”

“You don’t have to tell us anything you don’t want to,” Grayson immediately assures me.

“Or you can tell us and let us help you carry the weight,” Ryker adds.

Grayson shoots him a glare, and I let out a small chuckle. Looking down at Grayson, I say, “Thank you, but I want to tell you. For some reason, I think I trust you guys, and I know that I can’t do this alone.”

“Do what alone?” Grayson’s asks with a tilt of his head.

My eyes seem to involuntarily snap to Cayden’s blue ones. “Seek revenge.”

His eyes glow with more gold than blue as he stares right back at me. The same look that has drawn me to him since I came here. The one filled with fire, that understands my need for revenge. That is willing to do anything to get it.

But most of all, his eyes hold respect. He’s looking at me like he respects me, and I can’t remember the last time someone looked at me that way, if ever.

“Tammy and Richard?” Ryker prompts, a wicked grin stretching across his face.

I nod. “To start with.” I move the conversation along because I don’t want to bring up my mom’s murder and figuring that out with them quite yet. “So,

I want to tell you guys what I think I can handle bringing up.” Which is literally nothing. Even when I was thinking about it before we came out here, I had no idea what I was going to tell them. Every thought I have about Tammy seems to send me spiraling.

I’ve avoided talking about it. I’ve avoided thinking about it. Because when I do, I feel panic begin to rise. The fear that I will realize this has all just been a dream.

I haven’t fought my way out of hell. I haven’t found my strength and voice again. I am still the girl in the basement that cowers in the corner of the room on a dirty mattress waiting for the next hit. The next nasty word. The next lie.

A large hand grasps my knee, and terror consumes me. Richard’s hands on me. Tammy hitting me, grabbing me, dragging me, chaining me up. I jump off the log and gasp for breath, clutching at my chest.

Why does it feel like my chest is caving in?

“Come on, Harley, I need you to breathe for me.”

My head shakes back and forth violently as I squeeze my eyes shut.

Memories drown me—no, *Richard* drowns me.

Someone is shoving my head into the water. *Remember to hold it, Harley. You can do this. Don’t panic. Take a big breath when they let you up.*

“Harley!” Mother—no. Someone else yells. My eyes fly open and meet perfect green orbs. “Breathe, Harley. You’re holding your breath. You have to breathe. Come on.”

Realizing my vision is going blurry, my body begins to sway. I open my mouth and suck in air. My knees shake uncontrollably, and I start to lose my balance. The hard wall of muscle at my back catches me just as warm large arms wrap around me and lower me to the ground.

I bring my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them as someone

sits behind me, bracketing me with their legs. Then Grayson sits directly in front of me, and Ryker is to my left on his knees leaning in close.

I lock eyes with Grayson and inhale. He nods and gives me a small smile. “Good, beautiful. Keep going, deep breaths.”

Grayson takes them with me, but they don’t seem to calm me as my body continues to shake. He reaches up and touches my arms that are crossed over my knees, rubbing up and down them. Ryker grasps my calf, his thumb rubbing in gentle circles. Then another pair of hands touches my waist from behind and gives it a light squeeze.

I lean back more on Cayden and shut my eyes, focusing completely on their hands that rest on me. Grayson’s the only one touching skin, but the rest of me aches to have skin-to-skin contact from the other two.

“The shaking stopped,” Ryker murmurs softly.

I slowly open my eyes and unwrap my arms from around my knees, watching how they are steady and not shaking anymore. My breathing has calmed, and my chest doesn’t feel so heavy now.

Knowing I need to now tell them something, I let the one thing that is at the front of my mind out. Hoping that their hands will keep me centered.

“They would try to drown me.” I take a shaky breath and look down, not wanting to meet anyone's eyes. “Richard would fill the sink and then shove my head in. I never knew for how long, and sometimes it felt like it lasted for hours as he would do it over and over again. Then as time went on, they would do... do other things while holding my head under the water.” Tears finally break through and run down my cheeks.

“Waterboarding,” Cayden rumbles against my back.

“What?” I ask, looking up at Ryker and Grayson, who are in front of me.

“It’s not quite the same. Waterboarding is slightly different than what they

did, but this is along the same lines,” Ryker replies in a low voice, taut with anger.

Grayson’s hand slowly raises to my cheek, and he gently wipes the tears away. “I’m so sorry, Harley,” he whispers, his body shuddering slightly. A look of helplessness and despair mars his gorgeous face.

This raw and primitive grief slamming into my chest is so overwhelming I squeeze my eyes shut. Someone being in pain with me, grieving what I went through with me, it’s something I never thought I would ever have. Part of me always wondered if I would spend the rest of my life holding it all inside and never letting another person know how tormented my own soul was.

“I can’t—” I clear my suddenly dry throat. “I can’t talk more about this right now. It’s overwhelming,” I murmur. “But I…”

I finally open my eyes again and drag them up, looking at Ryker and Grayson before straining my neck back and peering at Cayden, who still sits at my back.

“I want to destroy them,” I finish. “I want them to pay for everything they did. But I am realizing that I don’t think I can do it alone. Still, I know that I need to do it. I don’t know how or in what way, but I need to know that I am strong enough to face my demons.”

A glorious smile breaks out over Ryker’s face. “I will do everything in my power to bring your demons to their knees in front of you so you,”—he cups my cheek—“my little flame, can destroy them however you please. We will be there every single step of the way, I promise. Whatever you need, you have it.” His eyes hold my own hostage, belaying his sincerity.

“Promise me one thing?” I ask hesitantly.

He nods. “No secrets. I need the truth always. I can’t handle being in the dark. I spent three years there and I don’t want to ever let myself be there

again.” Fresh tears leak out and fall down my cheeks but I quickly wipe them away.

Ryker’s gaze jumps to Grayson’s and then to Cayden’s. As I glance around at them, I see them communicate something through their eyes. A determination? Whatever it is, it’s gone as fast as it appeared.

“No secrets. We all agree to be completely transparent,” Ryker assures me. Giving him a small smile, I nod. “Okay.” Relief and fear flow through me. Trusting people isn’t going to be easy. But they somehow make it easier for me to let down my walls.

We all slowly get up off the ground and decide to head back to the main house before anyone comes looking for us since it’s getting dark now. As we’re leaving, I notice one of the car parts. It looks like the hood to a car and is mostly covered by branches and another car part, but it has paint on it like someone was painting something on it. I run my finger over it as we walk past.

When we reach the yard, I notice a light on at Gabriel’s house. My steps falter as we pass, but I keep following them up to the door that leads to the main house.

Cayden walks over to where the dog, Bear, is. I’m still not sure why Cayden was so weird about it earlier when his dog came up to me, but understanding that we all have our own demons to work through, I let it go for now.

Ryker turns towards me at the door. “Can I stay with you again tonight?” he asks.

My heart warms at the same time as my cheeks, loving that he asked me and thinking about our kiss... “Yes.” I look at Grayson. “Will you, um, stay too?” I’m pretty sure my entire face is on fire now.

Grayson's cheeks flush a little as he glances at Ryker before nodding. "Of course."

Ryker grabs the door and opens it for me, but my feet don't move. My gut turns, knowing what I need to do.

Grayson glances behind me, then in the direction of Gabriel's house, before looking back at me. "How about we meet you upstairs?" he suggests, understanding clear in his tone.

I nod, biting my lip. "Okay."

Ryker opens his mouth, but before he can get any words out, Grayson pushes him inside and shuts the door behind them. I let out a small chuckle and spin around, facing Gabriel's house. *You can do this, Harley.*

My feet don't move. I'm not even sure why; I just feel stuck. Am I sure this is what I want to do? Yes. So why am I so scared to go talk to him?

"Standing there staring won't change anything," a deep voice rumbles from my right.

I glance over at Cayden, who is watching me from where he stands next to Bear, the giant dog that seems to be perpetually attached to his side.

Instead of responding to him, I get my feet moving and head straight to Gabriel's house. Every step makes my heart pound harder. By the time I reach the front door, it feels as if my heart might beat right out of my chest.

Taking a deep breath, I ring the doorbell and wait.

The door opens a minute later to Gabriel in jeans and a t-shirt with no shoes on. "Harley," he breathes with wide eyes. Stepping back, he gestures for me to come inside. "Come in. You never have to knock. This is your home."

I nod and step inside as he shuts the door behind me.

"I was just finishing up cooking a late meal since I was busy during dinner in the main house. Do you want to eat with me? Sugar—I mean Colton said

you missed dinner earlier.”

“You cook?” I can’t keep the surprise out of my voice, it’s definitely not something I expected of him.

Gabriel gives me a sheepish grin with a shrug. “I do. I don’t get a lot of time for it, but since Colton is covering club stuff this week, I have had a little extra time. I actually tried a new recipe tonight. You can be my tester. I promise it won’t be too bad.” His eyes light up with excitement.

I nod and give him a small smile, following him into the kitchen.

This is all so... normal. It feels weird but also nice to see Gabriel doing things like this.

He goes to the oven and checks something before nodding to himself and then moving around the kitchen like he’s been cooking in it for years.

Honestly, he probably has. He’s a lot older than me, after all.

Needing something to keep my nerves down, I ask, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Gabriel spins around with his mouth dropped open. “Jeez, think you can teach Ryker and Cayden that line? They never offer to help with anything.”

I let out a small giggle and shake my head. “I think you might be out of luck there.”

His grin only grows as he stares at my face. After a few more very uncomfortable seconds, he shakes his head and turns back to getting things ready for dinner.

He says, “You can sit there and keep me company. I am assuming you came out here for a reason?”

Taking a seat at the island, I immediately chicken out and talk about anything but what I came to talk about. “Who taught you how to cook?” I ask.

He lets out a small hum as he puts dishes on the kitchen table. “I taught myself. I didn’t really have anyone else growing up, but ever since I was old enough to understand the world, I knew I wanted to live differently than my father. I wanted a family. A home. Something worth living for. So I taught myself to cook.” He shrugs. “Guess I thought it would get me points with the ladies.”

“Do you have a family?” I ask hesitantly. I haven’t seen anyone else, and it doesn’t look like other people live in this house, but I need to ask. Something about him possibly having this whole other family out there bothers me.

“I do.” At his words, my heart drops.

I knew coming here was a bad idea. It’s why I hesitated. I don’t even know why it matters, but—

He finishes, “Everyone you’ve met. Anyone a part of or related to this club is family.” He walks towards the island, standing opposite me. “You are my family, whether you are ready to admit that or not. You are my kid. I will consider you family for the rest of my life. Even if you hate me or decide to go back to live with Brielle, I will make sure you’re taken care of.”

Tears well up in my eyes as I stare at him. I quickly blink them away and whisper, “I tried to kill you. Twice.”

He nods, his face understanding. “You did. That still doesn’t change anything.”

I scoff, “Why not? I tried to kill you, Gabriel. I can’t even say that if I did everything over again, I wouldn’t still try. I don’t know if I would or not. My—my thoughts and feelings are so up and down every day.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, he pinches his lips together and nods again. “I don’t hate you for it, if that’s what you think. If anything, I simply understand.”

“How do you understand?” I ask, almost afraid of the answer.

He uncrosses his arms and leans forward, resting his elbows on the counter. Bringing his face closer to mine.

“My father was a very bad man. He did unspeakable things. He was murdered almost six years ago. If the opportunity would have arisen for me, I would have killed him myself. I have learned even more about him lately and the more I learn, the more I wish I could have been the one who took him out. So, I do understand.

“When you learn about people you love being hurt by someone, you want to do everything in your power to destroy them.” He takes a deep breath and glances down at the counter. “If I could, I would take all of your pain away from you, though.”

My breath stutters as he looks back up at me, tears welling up in his eyes.

“I would take away every bad thing that has happened to you and give it to myself if I could. I wish with everything in me that you didn’t have the pain you do. It’s why I could never ever be upset with you. I just want to protect you. I want to love you, Harley. I *do* love you.

“When I look at you, I see my daughter. A beautiful, strong girl who had to grow up way too fast but has unimaginable strength. I know this isn’t easy for you. I know you feel conflicted about a lot of things. But I need you to understand at least one thing: No matter how much we fight, I love you, and I will forever. You can always come to me for anything. I will be there for you until I take my last breath,” he says with unwavering conviction, never breaking eye contact with me.

The tears in my eyes begin to fall down my cheeks. “I want to stay. I want to live here. I’m so scared, Gabriel, but I want to try.”

I think Gabriel may be just as broken as the rest of us and the knight I

dreamed of as a child. He may be hardened and may have made mistakes but maybe, just maybe, he's redeemable.

A smile lights up his now tear-stained face. "Okay, we can do that. You can stay in the room at the club or here in the house. Or both. Either one is fine," he rambles.

I reach forward and take his hands in my own, giving them a small squeeze. His eyes connect with mine, and he squeezes my hands back and gives me a beaming smile. Family. This is what family feels like.

Flashes of my mom pop into my head. Her smile, her hugs, the way she loved me unconditionally. She showed me endless compassion and love.

When I learned about everything she had been through, I couldn't imagine how she could still have so much compassion and love inside her. How her smiles seemed so real and free.

She didn't deserve what happened to her. But did Gabriel?

I don't have every detail, and I'm not sure I want them all. But can I move on and let go of that part of my mom's past? Would she be okay with that?

I look down at where our hands are touching and can't help but wonder if my mom is disappointed or not.

Pulling my hands away, I look back up at Gabriel. "I'm really tired, I think I just want to head to bed. Maybe we can have dinner a different night?" My voice cracks as I speak. I need to get out of here before I break down in front of him.

He nods as his face falls, a frown forming as he opens his mouth to speak, but I jump up and leave before he can say anything else. Getting outside, I head back towards the main house and sit on the back steps. Taking a few deep breaths, I try to stop the tears, but they just keep coming.

The empty hole that was left in my heart after my mom died throbs. I need

her so bad, and she isn't here. She isn't here because she was taken from me.

Ripped away for what reason? I have no fucking idea.

"I wish I could talk to you, Mom," I whisper, staring up at the dark sky.

Chapter Nineteen

CAYDEN



From the shadows, I watch Harley come out of the house and walk to the back steps of the main house. Sitting down, she cries and angrily swipes her tears away. Looking up at the sky, she says something, but I am too far away to hear what it is.

I wasn't planning on staying out here and making sure she was okay, but I couldn't help it. I needed to know she was alright, and now I know she isn't, but I don't think me walking over to her would help. So instead, I just stay hidden on the side of the building, watching her.

Then the damn fucking dog hears her and wakes up from where he was sound asleep on the far side of the patio. Bear gets up and walks over to her, nudging her legs with his head and then sitting in front of her before staring at her with a head tilt.

She raises her hand and rubs his head, gifting him with one of her beautiful smiles. I see her perfect lips move as she talks to him, and he wags his tail.

My heart clenches at the sight of them together and how easily he goes to her and befriends her. My feet are carrying me towards them before I even think twice about it. As I get closer, she looks up at me and gives me a small smile. Nothing compared to what she gave Bear. The fucker.

I stop a few feet away from her and take a seat on a lower step, watching as she keeps petting him and he takes in all the attention with tail wags and panting. “He doesn’t usually like people,” I say.

Harley raises a brow as she stares at me, then looks back down at Bear.

I grunt. “I don’t know why he is being so friendly with you.”

She hums softly. “Why don’t you like people, Bear?”

“He was my mom’s dog. She rescued him as a puppy and took care of him until she died. Then he was abused and used by my father and some of his associates. I made sure to take him with me when I got to leave home, but he didn’t like being around people after that. So he just stays out in the woods most of the time.”

The words were out of my mouth before I could think twice about saying them. I have no fucking idea why I felt the need to say anything. Harley seems to bring out something in me that confuses the fuck out of me. It makes me crave affection. Connection. Something more than I ever have with my brothers.

Now watching her with Bear, it gives me another thing to draw me towards her. She cares like my mom did.

“I’m so sorry, Bear. You didn’t deserve that. I’m so glad Cade kept you,” she says as she presses her forehead to his head, and he nuzzles in closer to her.

Hearing her call me Cade instead of Cayden pulls at something inside of me, and I know it is more than just my cock rising. Standing up, I carefully adjust myself and then step in front of them.

Holding out a hand to Harley, I say, “It’s getting late. You should go to bed.”

Harley stares at my outstretched hand for a second before gripping it and letting me pull her to her feet. Her head comes to my chest, and when I glance down at her, she is breathing heavier, and her pupils are wide.

She whispers, “Will you... will you come up too? Stay with all of us?”

I grunt and release her hand but don’t step back. “That bed isn’t big enough for all of us.”

“I can sleep on the floor. I don’t care. I just want all of us together.” Her cheeks turn pink, and she glances straight ahead right at my chest.

I grumble, “Fine. But you’re not sleeping on the fucking floor.” I turn and head up the steps to the door, holding it open for her as we head inside and upstairs to find Ryker and Grayson waiting outside her bedroom.

“I’m sorry that took so long,” she apologizes as they stand from where they’d been sitting on the floor and move out of the way so she can unlock the door.

Ryker raises a brow at me, but before I can say anything, Harley does.

“Cade is going to stay too. I hope that’s okay.” She winces.

Grayson looks between us and then quickly steps forward and guides Harley into her room. “It’s perfectly fine, beautiful. Let’s just give them a second.”

Ryker steps up to me, getting in my face once she disappears inside with Grayson. “If you step foot in this room, it will mean something to her. Even more than anything that has happened in the past. If you do this, and then turn

around and go anywhere near Steph or even let her within a foot of you, I will kick your fucking ass, Cayden. Don't fucking test me on this. You're playing with her heart whether you mean to or not."

He's right. But I can't seem to stay away, so instead of doing the right thing and forcing myself to back off, I nod and step into her room. Knowing that more than likely I will break her heart someday when she realizes that I can't give her the love I know she's looking for.

I'm too jaded. Broken. Plus, Ryker loves her, and I would never take that away from him.



Rage (Gabriel)

Heading back to the main house, I go straight to my office and take a seat at my desk. I can't help but wonder if I said too much.

Did I push too far? I know I got emotional, which I didn't mean to do. But knowing that I had a kid out there for the last sixteen years that I thought was dead... and her mom having been alive for thirteen years...

It breaks something inside me. They were my family. It was my job to protect them.

I feel like I failed them because I should have never believed my father when he said that they were dead. I can only imagine what Lilian went through. How scared she must have been.

I should have fucking been there.

But I'm so glad Harley has decided to stay here. It means that she doesn't feel like she has to keep running. Maybe she does have a place here. I know she does; I just need her to see it for herself.

I know the boys are being there for her. I see how they all stay close or keep an eye on her.

It's one of the only reasons I don't lose my shit when they go and sleep in her room every night. I want her to have people she can trust.

And no matter how badly I'd like to wring their necks, they are good boys. I trust them with her. If anything, I think I need to be worried about them telling her things she shouldn't know. It's something Sugar and I have briefly talked about, but we know the boys would want to help.

I just hope they see my reasoning behind not telling Harley what's going on.

She's a loose cannon right now, and giving her too much information, especially without all the answers, will send her off the rails.

Especially since we don't have a lot of answers. Daniel is still in the fucking wind. Even with keeping tabs on Tabby, who he seems to be dating, he hasn't been around her at all. Nerds is working on digging more into Tammy and Richard, but it's slow going because he's trying to look without drawing any attention that someone is snooping around.

A soft knock sounds on my partially open door before it is pushed further open. Carly—who is one of our club sluts, although she acts more like a club manager—steps in. “Hey, I just got back and saw your light on. Thought I would come say hi.”

I wave her in as I stand and walk over to the small bar cart I keep in here. Pouring two glasses of bourbon, I give her one when she takes a seat across from my desk.

Smirking at me, she raises her glass. “To the good old times?” she questions, a spark of mischief in her gaze.

I roll my eyes and sit down before taking a swig. “I think, no, I hope, we are past that by now.”

Carly came around about four years ago. She worked at the nightclub that Blade runs, Dirty Sinner. She was a waitress and got into some trouble. Her and I slept together a few times over the years, but now she mostly just concentrates on the school we are paying for her to attend so she can be a nurse.

The school is about thirty minutes from here, so she usually stays close to it during the week and stays at the club on the weekends, helping us to manage

things with the other club sluts and shit going on around here.

She's a strong-willed woman, and I respect the hell out of her. "How are things going?" Carly asks.

I shrug. "Not bad. I know Sugar filled you in on everything going on around here." She nods. "Well, Harley told me tonight that she wants to stay here. She isn't going to go back to Virginia to live with Brielle."

"How are you feeling about everything?" she asks.

"Fine. It's a little stressful with so much going on. And a bunch of club stuff happening that I can't tell you about."

Like fucking Daniel. Someone I let in my club who could possibly be betraying us. I need to check in with my contacts at the other clubs and see if anyone has heard or seen anything. I'm losing my patience with not being able to track him down.

She waves her hand dismissively in the air. "That is not what I'm asking, and you know it. How are *you* handling this? Rage, I've known you for four years. I've seen you get stressed, I've seen you fight for your family here, but this? This is different. This hits you square in the chest. I may not have all the details, but I can put some dots together. So tell me for real how you're doing or I'll do what you did to me to get answers about my feelings all those years ago," she says with a wide grin.

I chuckle and take a sip of the bourbon. "Fuck it out?" I raise a brow. "If I recall, that only actually worked once on you."

Shortly after I met Carly and she became a club slut, she hit rock bottom in her life and was struggling but wouldn't talk to anyone, so we fucked and didn't stop until she was willing to open up to me. It ended up helping her a lot and gave us both the best sex of our lives.

"Alright, fine," she says as she stands and sets her glass down. Rounding

the desk, she takes my drink from my hand and then grabs my hand. “Let's go to your house.”

I chuckle and follow after her, having forgotten just how demanding Carly can be.

Chapter Twenty

HARLEY



Waking up this morning, I immediately feel like something is wrong. The bed is cold. *I* feel cold.

Which isn't right because last night I fell asleep tucked up in between Ryker and Grayson with Cade making a bed on the floor to stay in the room with us. But now the bed only has me, and both sides are empty. I sit up and notice that Cade is gone too.

I get out of bed and head into the bathroom to shower and quickly get ready for the day. By the time I'm done and dressed in yoga pants and a hoodie with my hair braided down my back because I didn't want to blow dry it today, I find my room still empty.

Gnawing on my bottom lip, I head out and down into the kitchen, seeing Presley, Raven, and another woman in there laughing and cooking.

Presley spots me first and gives me a small smile. “Good morning. We heard the news that you’re staying.”

My eyebrows rise. “News travels fast.”

“The best news usually does,” the woman I don’t know says with a wink. “I’m Carly.”

“Um, Harley. Are you one of the girls? The club—girls?” I hesitate to ask.

Carly chuckles. “Club slut? Not really. I used to be. But now I’m mostly just like a manager around here and I go to college during the week. Plus, the club sluts aren’t around right now. You probably won’t see them for a while.”

Huh, I guess I hadn’t noticed. “Why not?”

“Rage doesn’t want them around you, or for you to see anything you don’t need to see,” Raven says with a shrug.

Before any more can be said, Ryker comes into the kitchen heading straight for me while Grayson and Cayden stay back by the door. “Come with me,” he growls, gently taking my arm and guiding me out of the kitchen and through the back door.

We head down the steps and around the side of the building, out of sight.

Ryker pushes me up against the building and within the blink of an eye, his lips are on mine. His kiss is borderline punishing and filled with anger, but it doesn't scare me. The way his hands caress my sides, one of them working up to hold my neck, it’s... comforting and hot. With one kiss, he can turn me into a blubbery mess, unsure of what to do but left knowing that I want more.

Ryker pulls back, his gaze traveling over my face and searching my eyes. He takes a deep breath, and the hand on my neck moves further back until he’s gripping the nape of my neck. “I’m going to tell you some things. But before I do, you are going to make a deal with me.”

My brain must be malfunctioning after that kiss and the way my lips were still tingling because all I can get out was, “Okay.”

“You are going to dig deep inside yourself, inside your soul, and find that piece of you that trusts me. That trusts Grayson and Cayden. You are going to hook onto it and not let go because it is telling you something the same way my soul screams and aches for you. I know something inside of you feels the pull.”

“I don’t know if I can do that... trust so easily. It takes time,” I whisper, my mind taking in every word he’s saying.

“Yes, you can. Don’t think about how there are three of us. I promise you, that doesn’t matter now, and it never will. I swear it.” His hand on the back of my neck tightens. “Find it, Harley.”

I lock eyes with his dark, commanding gaze. “I don’t have to find it,” I murmur. “It’s there. It’s been there since I met you guys. It’s this pull towards you. The way you all make me feel safe and like I can be vulnerable and show you me. All of me. I’m just still working on the trust.”

“God, you’re so fucking perfect,” Ryker growls as he crashes his lips against mine.

A small gasp slips out when he pushes his body harder against mine, pinning me between him and the wall. I can feel his cock grow hard against me. I run my hands up his arms that are encased in his leather jacket. My fingers move to the back of his neck and into his hair as he groans against my mouth.

I can feel myself soaking my panties the longer he devours me. I push forward against him, trying to find friction, but fail. Ryker’s hands slide down my sides to my hips and lift me up.

Releasing my mouth, he says, “Wrap your legs around me.”

My legs automatically wrap around his waist as he kisses my nose, my cheek, my chin, and works further down to my neck. He sucks on my skin and then bites down gently.

A moan slips out from between my parted lips, and I grind against him. I know my face is on fire with embarrassment at realizing what I just did. I try to pull away a little, but Ryker grips my ass in his hands and squeezes before helping me grind against him.

“Use me, Harley. Get yourself off,” he says huskily as his lips work their way back up to my mouth.

His tongue pushes in between my lips commanding me to follow his lead. I willingly let him take control as he helps me grind against him, his cock rock-hard between us. I know I have soaked through my panties and my leggings by now, but as I grind my core against him, heat ripples under my skin. This intense need for him seems to awaken.

I push harder against him and grip his shoulders. My mouth pulls away from his as I let out another moan. Ryker keeps one hand on my ass and moves the other up to grip my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes.

“You looks so fucking gorgeous flushed and ready to cum just for me. Let me see you cum, Harley. Show me how fucking perfectly naughty you are.”

My eyes fall shut as I fall over the edge. A bliss like I have never felt before takes over my body as I slump in Ryker’s arms. My legs are shaking slightly as he holds me against the wall. After a few moments, I feel his lips brush against my forehead, and he lowers me to my feet.

He doesn’t go until he sees that I am steady. I glance down and then quickly shoot my eyes back up to him, finding a smirk on his very satisfied face.

“Um—what about you?” I whisper, unsure of what I even want him to say

or do.

“This was for you, not me, babe. I’ll take care of this later.” He winks and lets out a chuckle when my face flames.

Reality slowly sinks in, while my mind seems to turn back on from whatever that was—Ryker bliss or some shit. “Wait, what did you need to tell me?” I furrow my brows.

Ryker takes a step back and sighs. “Right. You were distracting.”

I raise a brow at him. “Me?”

“Yes, you, and your perfect fucking body that looks so fucking good using me to cum.” Slowly and seductively, his gaze slides down my body before moving back up to my eyes.

I can’t help but squirm under his attention. Clearing my throat, I hiss, “Ryker.”

His cocky smirk stays in place for a second longer before he nods and drops it. “Right. So, I don’t think we should go into all the details now. I think we all need to sit down and talk about them together, but we know things about Tammy and Richard that we don’t think you know. That and... Harley, I need you to swear to me you won’t do anything rash or tell them that you know this,” Ryker demands.

The sudden change in tone and seriousness sets me on edge, but I nod. “I swear.” I will take any and all information he’ll give me. Especially if it’s about them.

“Since Cayden, Grayson, and I are not eighteen, we can’t be full club members yet. Which means that technically we can’t know anything that is going on that is considered club business. But since we are partially involved in all of this and care about you, Rage is letting us in on what is going on with them. But—”

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair before continuing. “But...” he says again and then hesitates.

The hairs on the back of my neck raise, and I take a step forward. “But what, Ryker?” I seethe quietly as my mind starts running in a million different directions.

Are they involved? What do they know? Did Gabriel do something? Say something? I exhale and glare at Ryker, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Spit it out Ryker,” I demand.

Dropping his hand from his hair, he shakes his head. “It’s nothing serious. We just know more about things with the Wilsons. We should talk about this later, maybe after school with Cayden and Grayson.”

He starts to walk back around the building, but I quickly wrap my fingers around his wrist and yank him back. “No, what the fuck just happened? You were going to tell me something, and it wasn't just that you had more information.”

“I promise it was nothing. We just have more information, and we want to tell you about it. No secrets, remember? But we have school, so let's talk right after, okay?”

I release his wrist quickly as if it burned me and give him a curt nod. “Fine.” Brushing past him, I head back around to go inside.

I know he isn’t being honest with me. What the hell changed so fast? Why would he just shut down? I’m opening myself up to them and this is what I get back? He distracts me with his body then gives me a half-assed explanation?

Ryker walks past me and heads over to where Cayden and Grayson seem to be waiting for him. Grayson says something and glances at me, but Ryker

shakes his head and points out the door. They all turn and leave, and my rage increases. I need to work it off before I do or say something I regret.

Any time I was getting worked up at Brielle's, Atlas would workout with me, and if he wasn't around, I would run on the beach. I head upstairs and quickly change my panties and leggings because the other ones are still wet.

Ryker made me feel things. Well, he constantly makes me feel new things, but this is the first time I have felt cautious or worried.

Not understanding what happened this morning is going to bother me all day, and I know I need a distraction. I head back downstairs and look around. Gabriel, Colton, and Noah are in the main room talking and laughing about something. I hesitantly walk towards them, Noah being the first to see me.

"Well good morning, Princess." I clench my fists at my sides, hating being called that. It sounds so condescending. He knows it too, as he looks at me up and down, the grin on his stupidly hot face widening.

"Mornin', darlin'," Colton greets.

"Good morning," I say back to him. I glance at Gabriel and try to give him a small smile, "Hi."

"Morning. I talked to Brielle earlier this morning," Gabriel replies.

My eyes widen. "You did?"

He nods. "She and those two men are going to come visit on Saturday. We will have a big BBQ with them and all of the club. Does that sound okay?"

"Um, I guess, but why?" I ask with furrowed brows.

"It's just for you, darlin'. We want everybody together for ya. You can get to know people around here more and know that Brielle and her men are always welcome here. They're your family too," Colton responds with a soft smile.

For such a giant of a man, his smile is extremely calming and welcoming.

It's hard to picture him as a badass biker because whenever I've seen him, he's been like a giant teddy bear.

I nod my head. "That's perfect." Maybe seeing everyone together and getting along will help ease my mind. "Um, I really need to work out, but I wanted to spar. It's something I used to do with Linc and Atlas. Could any of you maybe do it with me?" I ask, shoving my hands into the pockets of my hoodie and trying not to fidget.

"Of course. I would like to see what you know. It would be smart for you to keep up on that and continue to get stronger," Gabriel says.

"How are you feelin'?" Colton asks, nodding down towards where I got shot.

I shrug. "It's fine. Doesn't hurt at all." I've had a few twinges of pain but nothing enough to bother me. Pain is one thing I'm fairly comfortable with by now.

"Okay, well, let's—" Gabriel stops talking when his phone starts going off. He checks it and sighs. "I need to go figure out what this is. Sugar?" Gabriel glances at him but doesn't say anything else.

"No problem. How about you and I, Harley girl?" Colton asks.

I force a smile. "That sounds great." *And slightly terrifying. You're huge.*

"Alright. I'll come down as soon as I'm done," Gabriel says as he turns and heads down the hallway that holds the offices.

"Let's go down to the gym."

I stop Colton as he moves to pass me with a hand on his arm. "Um, could we maybe go out back? Fresh air sounds really nice right now." I don't want to admit that I am afraid to go down there without the boys with me, so hopefully he buys my reasoning.

Colton eyes for me a second before nodding. "Sure."

We head outside behind the main house. In between Gabriel's house and the back patio of the main building is a huge grass area. I stretch out and notice that Noah has followed us outside.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I glare at him. "No."

He smirks at me again. "No what, Princess?" He tilts his head at me before stepping towards Colton and I, ripping his t-shirt over his head. "I'm always down for a good sparring. I also want to see how good you are."

"Fine. Then are you first?"

"Sure." He shrugs and tosses his shirt off to the side. Walking up to stand in front of me, he raises a brow at me, waiting.

He's expecting me to go straight for him, attempt to punch him either in his perfect fucking face or his lower stomach. So I do.

But right as my fist is swinging and he goes to move to grab it, I duck under his arm and wrap my arms around his waist while kicking his legs out from under him, causing him to land on his back.

He grins up at me. "You've got some fire, Princess."

Without using his hands, he jumps back up to his feet and immediately comes for me. I try to duck out of his reach, but he is faster, grabbing my under arm and spinning me around, pinning my back to his chest with my arms locked behind me by his hands.

His breath tickles my ear as he whispers, "Now what?"

I can practically feel the cocky ass grin on his face as he speaks. I look up and see Colton leaning against the side of the building watching us. He makes eye contact with me and slowly inhales then exhales, dropping his shoulders.

I shut my eyes and focus on where Noah is touching me, his hand wrapped around my wrists keeping them pinned behind my back while he presses his

chest against me.

I take a deep breath and go lax in his arms.

He lets out a small chuckle, “Ah, giving up so soon, Princess?”

His fingers loosen just a fraction, but it’s enough for me to twist my hand free, spinning around and hooking my arm under his arm, gripping his shoulder before easily flipping him over me so he lands on his back.

The air gets knocked out of him, but he is still fucking grinning. “Nice.” He jumps back up to his feet, but we don’t get to continue because Axe comes out from the back door.

“Sorry, Harley, but I need to steal these guys. It’s urgent.”

I shrug and try not to let it bother me that I don’t know what’s going on.

“Okay.” I stay outside to cool off as they go back in, but the longer I stand out here, the more I start to pace. What is so urgent? Why did he need them?

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I head inside as quietly as possible and go down the hallway to where the offices are. Gabriel’s office door is closed, but leaning against it I can make out their voices.

“Where the fuck is he?” I hear Noah growl.

“A dingy little shithole about three hours away. Daniel was smart with how he traveled and how he got to the hotel. I couldn’t track it at all, but he was spotted by another club. They are keeping an eye on him until someone gets there,” Nerds says.

“I want Axe, Stone, and Blade to go. Take a few others with you. Keep in direct contact with Nerds the entire time. You find this fucker and drag his ass back here so we can set an example to everyone of what happens when you fucking betray us.”

Betray? What the hell is he talking about? Because he shot me? I thought that was just because he was trying to protect the club.

“Look, you know I respect the hell out of you, so please don’t hit me for saying this,” Axe, I think, says.

“What?” Gabriel rumbles so low I almost don’t hear it.

“I think you should let Blade handle him first. We need more information about everything he did and what he might have said to Tammy.”

I bite my tongue to hold in the gasp that wants to slip out. Tammy?

“I have to agree with Axe,” Nerds says. “I only have that one phone call and then the rest is all assumptions. We need to force him to talk and keep him alive long enough for it. Let Blade do it and get the information, and then he’s all yours.”

They talk some more, but I back away from the door. My hands clench into fists at my sides as I walk back out to the main room.

So, Daniel was working with Tammy? Does that mean she knows I’m here? Fuck. I need answers, and I have a feeling they won’t give me them. I have to find out where they’re going to take him so I can be there when Blade gets answers out of him.

They don’t get a choice on whether I am involved or not. Besides, who said they have to know I am involved?

Chapter Twenty-One

RYKER



Slamming my locker shut, I bang my forehead against it and groan. “Is it Friday yet?”

Grayson sighs from where he stands next to me, putting the stuff he doesn’t need into his locker. “How many more times are you going to ask that?”

I shrug. “Probably until we can leave this shithole on Friday.”

“That’s tomorrow, Ry. It isn’t that far away.”

“It’s fucking far away,” I grumble. I hate being here and away from my girl. I just want to be with her at all times.

Now that she has decided to stay, she has to go back to school, so Rage is getting her set up to start back here on Monday. We’ll have someone staying on school grounds with us from the club for added protection.

The guys went and got Daniel last night and brought him back, but we don’t know where they’re keeping him since they definitely didn’t bring him

back to the club. I would know since I stayed up waiting...

I just want one minute. Just give me one full minute with the fucker.

When Rage filled us in on everything when we got back from school yesterday, I told him I wanted to be in the room when he was being questioned. Cade grunted and agreed that he wanted to be in the room too. Rage said that Noah would be doing the questioning, and unfortunately Noah hasn't let us see that side of him yet. We have seen him get angry or hurt someone, but the true enforcer in him? That hasn't been shown, not to us.

So instead, we have to wait until Noah is done, and then we get to go in with them. Rage said it'll be a good test for us to watch him die.

I think Rage keeps underestimating us. He thinks that we won't actually want to be in this life. Where yes, things have been turned around, but shit still happens, and I know that they have taken multiple lives. Rage doesn't get that we are all thirsty for it. Even Grayson in his own way craves this life and being fully in it.

"Do you think we'll be able to talk to Harley tonight? I hate waiting any longer. It feels like we're stalling," Grayson says, running an uneasy hand over the back of his neck.

Cade grunts in agreement. "Well, what were we supposed to do? Rage was talking to her about school, but she just seemed off in her own world. I mean, she didn't even let us stay with her last night. I slept on the fucking floor of the hall again."

When we got back yesterday, Rage filled us in on everything regarding Daniel and then pulled Harley in and just went over school and the plan for her to start back on Monday. Along with all the boring rules and details no one cares about. But after that, while Harley was acting odd through the

whole thing, she said she was too tired for dinner, that today was just exhausting, and she went up to bed.

When I came up after dinner and asked if I could stay with her, she said no, that she was planning on taking a bath and wanted to just be alone for a night.

Something was off, and I knew it. I stayed in the hall, hoping she would end up coming out, having changed her mind, but she never did, and I fell asleep against the wall.

She didn't come out this morning before we had to leave, and now I am just itching to get home and see her. I don't care what she says this time; I will just walk right into her room anyway.

"Um, Ry, please keep your cool, okay?" Grayson mumbles to me.

I furrow my brows and glance around before noticing Steph and her fucking minions walking towards us. My fists clench at my sides, and I look at Cayden, who is on the opposite side of me from Grayson. He is staring at her as she slowly approaches us, a disgusting flirty smile on her face.

"Cade, I swear to God—" I begin to mutter under my breath but stop when Cade shoulder checks me and steps in front of Gray and I.

Steph walks straight up to him and rests a hand on his chest.

"Cade," she purrs, "want to skip the next class with me?"

Cade wraps his fingers around her wrist and pulls her hand off his chest, but he doesn't release her. Instead, he yanks her closer and talks low in her ear. I can't hear what he says, but I'm ready to beat the shit out of him if he doesn't get his hands off her.

"Why?" Steph whines as she pulls away from him, a fake ugly pout rests on her lips. "Things were getting good."

"I let you suck my cock one time. You couldn't even get me off. Things weren't good. Now fuck off. Stay away from me and my brothers," Cade

growls.

Steph opens her mouth to say more, but I'm pretty sure my ears will explode if I have to listen to her whine more, so I quickly slide around Cade. "Shoo, bitch. I don't know what he ever saw in you to begin with. You treat everyone like they are beneath you. It's not attractive. Quit while you're ahead. I can promise you don't want to piss Cade off. He won't be nice."

She crosses her arms and narrows her eyes before spinning around and stomping off with her little posse behind her. As soon as she's around the corner heading down another hall, I turn back around and raise a brow at Cade. "About damn fucking time."

Cade sighs, running a hand through his hair before pulling out his phone. A minute later, Grayson's and I's phones buzz.

Caveman Cade: I don't know what's going to happen between us. Between all four of us. But I know that I never want to jeopardize anything with her. Even though I don't know if I can ever give her what she deserves, I belong to her.

After I read it, I glance up and nod at Cade before clapping him on the shoulder. I get it. I know with everything in me that I belong to Harley too. Just like I think she belongs to all three of us. I know that he is done talking for now, so I don't say anything and grab my backpack as the bell rings.

When we start walking to our next class, I hear Grayson behind me say, "You are good enough for her, you know? She doesn't need perfection. She needs people she can trust right now. That's all. The rest of it will come with time."

Cade doesn't respond, and I don't say anything either, but I know what he said weighs heavily on each of us. We need to talk to her. Tonight.

As we walk down the hall towards fucking Math class I spot Lexington coming up the hall towards us. Looking back at the guys, I point at her. They both nod, so I walk straight up to her, grinning. “Lexington. I need a word with you.”

She glares at me and pushes back the short black hair that fell in her face. “No thanks.”

Glancing around us to make sure most people are cleared from the hall, I grab Lex’s arm. “I wasn’t asking.” I pull her along next to me, walking back towards Gray and Cade. “We need an empty classroom.”

Cade turns to find one as Lex tries to pry my fingers off her arm.

“Let go of me, you fuckhead!” she seethes.

Cade whistles and points to a door further down the hall. Dragging an angry pixie with me we head down to the class and walk inside.

As soon as we do, Lex swings around in front of me and tries to hit me with the arm I’m not holding. Grabbing her wrist before she can reach my face, I push her backwards until her back collides with the whiteboard on the wall. The room is empty with the lights off, so we just have the soft glow from the window on the classroom door giving us light.

Looking down at Lex’s furious green eyes, I tsk. “That wasn’t nice. We just want to talk. If I let go, are you going to stay put so we can get this over with?”

Her chest is heaving, and her eyes shine with unshed tears, but she quickly blinks them away and then inhales sharply. “Why can’t you just let me fucking be?” she hisses.

Losing my patience with her, I narrow my eyes. “Because we know that you went to the Wilson’s house. You know, Harley’s mom?” Calling that

bitch her mom leaves a nasty taste in my mouth, but Lex doesn't know that isn't her mom.

“What the fuck? How would you know I was there?” Her eyes dart between all of us before they land on the door. She quickly brings her knee up to try to hit my balls, but I block it and keep her pinned against the wall by holding her shoulders.

“Knock it the fuck off, Lex. We just want to know what was said when you were there. Answer our fucking questions and we'll leave you alone. Or we can make this harder, and you can come to the club with us and talk to our president. But based on how much you hate us, I doubt you want to be surrounded by bikers,” I snap at her, raising my voice.

Her breath hitches, and she goes lax against the wall, mumbling, “I swear it was nothing. She just had questions about school and how Harley was. She explained that Harley is in a treatment facility—”

“What the fuck? A treatment place? What else did she say?” I snarl.

Lex narrows her eyes trying to push against my hold, but it's futile. “I was still talking, asshole! Nothing. She said Harley couldn't have any visitors right now. I'm just worried about her. I knew something was off back when she was here, and I really do care for her.” Her eyes water, and she quickly ducks her head.

“Lex—” Grayson hesitates, looking at us before continuing. “When did Tammy say you could go see her?”

She snuffles, and I drop my hands, taking a small step back. I can't help but feel kind of bad. She really just cared about Harley, and we treated her like crap. “She didn't say when yet. I gave her my number, and she promised to call me when I can.”

I look back at my brothers and raise a brow, asking a silent question.

Grayson pulls out his phone and mumbles *hang on* before leaving the classroom.

“What’s going on?” Lex asks, looking at the door and then back at me.

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. “Why did you hang off Steph’s arm for so long and try to get Grayson away from us? Because no offense or anything, but you just don’t really fit with them.”

Lex scoffs. “You have no idea who I fit in with.” She takes a deep breath like she’s calming herself and then says, “Our families know each other, and she was threatening to spill a secret she found out about me, so I had to help her. She just wants you and Cayden for some fucking reason.” She rolls her eyes.

“That makes sense, but that doesn’t explain your strong hatred towards us. We’ve never done shit to you, and you’ve always been a pain in the ass. It just escalated when Harley came around. Why?”

Her eyes flash with something dark—like a hidden pain she is trying to turn into anger. Something I know all too well.

She swallows and lets a breath out, “I’ve heard the rumors about your gangs and the things they get up to. You walk around here wearing things with the logo and riding on bikes. It’s fucked up that you back a gang like that. I didn’t want Harley to fall into something she doesn’t belong in,” she says sincerely.

“Well, Harley is involved,” Grayson snaps from the door as he steps back inside. He glances at Cade and I, then focuses on Lex again. “She’s not at a treatment facility.”

We all watch Lex carefully. She says nothing for a second before blinking rapidly and then shaking her head. “What?” she breathes.

“Grayson?” I glance over at him.

“She is staying with us right now. She has a phone, so write down your number and I will give it to her. If she wants to, she’ll call or text you. But Lex...” Grayson walks closer and stares down at her. “You don’t tell *anyone*, and I mean anyone, where she is. If you care for her like you say you do, then now is your chance to prove it.”

Gray’s voice drops low and deadly. He doesn’t look away until Lex nods and agrees. *Why is him getting so protective kind of hot?* I shake my head and take the sticky note that Lex just wrote her number on.

“Are you sure she is safe?” Lex asks, furrowing her brows.

I nod my head. “Safest place she can be.” She nods and then leaves to head to her class. I look at Gray. “What did they say?”

“I talked to Rage and Noah. They said that if we believe her then they do too. And they want to test the waters by maybe telling Tammy or letting her find out that Harley is around to see if she tries anything.”

“Okay. I do believe her. I mean, she faced off with us but then started talking and nothing but the truth came out of her.” I shrug.

Cade nods. “She really does care for Harley, and I think she has her best interests in mind,” he grumbles.

“Let’s get the rest of this fucking day over with so we can go home to our girl.”



Arriving back at the club after school, we head inside and immediately look for Harley. Seeing Noah, Rage, and Sugar sitting at a table talking, I walk over to them.

“Hey kid,” Rage greets, raising a beer.

Giving him a quick nod hello, I ask, "Where's Harley?"

"She went for a run. I tried to go with her, but she wanted to go alone. I'm pretty sure Bear is running with her, though. I watched him shoot off into the woods right after she took off down the trails," Noah says.

"We explained the trails and told her to stay within the fence line," Rage grumbles.

Looking at his deep frown, I nudge his shoulder. "I'm surprised you didn't follow her. Or have someone else do it."

"I tried," he retorts sharply.

"We told him no. He's gotta learn to trust her more. We all do. She can manage. I believe it," Sugar insists, taking a swig from his own beer.

"Well, that's good and all, but I never agreed to it. So I'm going to change and go find her." I flash them a grin and take off before anyone can protest. Walking past Gray and Cade, I say, "Let's go, boys. Time to find our little flame."

After quickly changing and meeting the other two outside the front doors, Grayson and I look at Cade. Even though we have all gone running out here, Cade does it the most and would know the best places.

He explains, "The main trail that wraps around the compound fence line. It's well kept and would be the easiest to follow."

We nod and trail after him as he runs up the road towards the main gate and then turns to the right, following a trail path along the fence. After about ten minutes of running, we can see Bear's big ass body sprinting in the distance up ahead of us with red hair swinging in the air. Cade lets out a loud whistle as we continue to run towards them.

Bear stops and spins around before getting in front of Harley, who has also stopped, and lets out a snarl towards us. We all come to a halt as Cade tilts

his head. “Bear,” he commands.

But Bear ignores him and continues to guard Harley.

“Harley, place your hand on his head and tell him to heel. You have to command it,” Cade says.

Harley’s wide hazel eyes lock on Cade, and then she nods and gently lays her hand on Bear’s head. He stops growling and when Harley commands, “Heel,” he steps to her side and sits, wagging his tail as he watches her.

“Has that ever happened?” Gray asks.

Cade shakes his head, his face set in a deep frown. “No. Not since... not since my mom.”

Shaking my head, I walk closer to Harley and give her a grin. “Having a nice run?”

I watch as she places her hands on her hips and takes a few deep breaths. Beads of sweat run down her face, and her shirt is slightly damp and sticking to her chest, giving me a nice view of her tits that I try very hard not to stare at.

“What are you guys doing? Why did you come out here?” she demands. Her hackles seem raised, and there is slight irritation in her tone.

“We got back and heard you were out running, so we wanted to come find you and make sure you were alright. Plus, we kind of need to talk to you,” Grayson answers.

“Well, I’m fine,” she snaps and then shuts her eyes, exhaling through her nose. Opening her eyes again, she glances at all of us before responding, “I’m sure talking can wait until I get back. I’d like to finish my run now.” She turns away from us, starting to jog again.

My feet don’t even get a chance to move before Cade is sprinting past me, catching up to Harley in an instant and tossing her over his shoulder.

She lets out a croaked shriek and punches his back. “What the fuck! Put me down, Cayden!”

“No,” he growls, glancing back at us. “We’ll meet you back at the club.” He doesn’t wait for us to answer; he just starts jogging further down the path with a protesting Harley lightly bouncing on his shoulder.

“Um...” Grayson hesitates, at a loss for words. I look over at him. “What just happened?”

“Cade went all caveman on her ass.” I chuckle.



Cayden

The pull I feel to this feisty girl is the strongest thing I have ever felt in my life.

So when she decides to get an attitude with us and snap at Grayson, who is the last person who deserves it, my control starts to snap.

I never fucking wanted anything to do with Steph to begin with. But she was an easy distraction. Albeit it never fucking worked fully. No matter what I did, thought, or said, none of it worked to keep my mind off of Harley.

I have no fucking idea what the future holds or what is going to happen with the four of us, but I know that right now? She needs us. We need her. *I* need her.

I take Harley back to where we went the last time we had a talk all together. It's my own little sanctuary. No one knows about it. I guess Ryker and Grayson do now, but they don't fully understand its meaning since I make sure to keep things covered up and hidden from view. It's where I go to escape the world when everything becomes too much, when my father's voice in my head becomes too much.

Heading to the opening where the old car parts are, I drop Harley down to her feet from my shoulder. She shoves the hair that fell in her face back and glances around us. "Why did you bring me here again?" she huffs.

"I just needed somewhere quiet to talk to you," I respond as I lean back against a tree.

"Talk about what?" She narrows her eyes and crosses her arms, which makes her breasts rise, drawing my eyes down. "My eyes are up here!"

Harley snaps at me.

My lips stretch into a smirk as I slowly lift my eyes to meet hers. “I can’t help myself,” I say with a shrug. “Want to tell me what’s wrong with you?” I ask, moving us along. I know damn well Ryker won’t give us much time before he begins hunting us down.

She scoffs, “Nothing is wrong with me.”

I raise a brow. “Your attitude says otherwise.”

A red flush works its way up her neck as her anger skyrockets. “Seriously? What is wrong with you? Is this how you talk to all girls? Asking them what’s wrong with them?”

I raise a brow. “Honestly? I have no idea what’s wrong with me. You bring out a side of me I didn’t even know existed, and it’s really fucking conflicting.” The truth just slips right past my lips.

Her breath hitches, and her arms drop to her sides. “You can’t say shit like that to me,” she says quietly.

Stepping forward so we are only inches away from each other, Harley has to crane her head back to look at me. “Why not?” I ask, bringing my hand up to cup the back of her neck.

Her eyes start to fall shut, but she gains control of herself and shakes her head quickly while stepping out of my reach. “Stop that. You and Ryker—fuck, probably even Grayson, can all mess with me and make me lose my train of thought way too easily. Why did you really bring me over here? Why are you...” She pauses and pinches her lips together before tossing her arms out in the air. “Why are you so fucking hot and cold all the time?”

I chuckle. “Hot and cold?”

Running a hand down her face, she sighs.

“Yeah. You just, you comfort me and are around, and then the next moment

you disappear or lurk in the shadows. Sometimes you talk, and other times you'd think you have no voice."

Clenching my jaw, I start to move past where Harley is standing to sit on the log that is back here, but as I take a few steps, Harley flinches and her breathing grows erratic.

My heart, the one that always seems so dull and lifeless, skips a beat and aches. I never want her to feel like that.

I sit down on the log and look up at her. "Harley—"

"It's nothing," she defends right away.

"I understand not wanting to talk about something, but don't lie about it. I know that this doesn't take the instinct, the fear away, but I will never, ever lay a hand on you. Ever. You could cuss me out and beat the shit out of me and I'd let you. I will never hurt you," I promise, maintaining eye contact with her. "Sit down." I gesture to the log that I am sitting on.

Harley takes a shuddering breath and walks over to take a seat next to me. I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees, and start talking without looking at her.

"When I was really young, probably eight or nine, Noah left. He ran away in the middle of the night. I think he was going to look for our mom. She left us with our dad a few months before. I don't remember all that much about her, but Noah said she came into our room, tears in her eyes, and said she can't do it anymore. Then she kissed each of our heads and left. We never saw her again. After that, my dad had nothing keeping him sane anymore.

"Whether she knew it or not... my mom was a thin barrier between my father and us. So when she left, my dad decided that we needed to grow up faster. It started with Noah. He forced him to do things for him, and when Noah would refuse, my father would threaten me to get him to do it anyway."

Taking a breath, I continue. I don't know how I am speaking about all of this to her, but I know I need to just get it out.

“When Noah ran away, he was going to look for our mom. I think he also thought that our father wouldn't turn to me for his dirty work. That I was still too young. But that wasn't true. My father made me into his own personal weapon.”

I go on to explain how my father made me hurt people. Anyone he brought home, I had to hurt them and get whatever he wanted out of them. I listen as Harley gasps, and when she wraps an arm around me, resting her head against my back, a single tear tracks down my cheek.

I don't go into details about the way he had me torture people or how he beat me into submission, but I tell her more than I have ever told anyone before.

I finish with, “My voice became one of his weapons. I learned how to talk to someone to scare them shitless.”

“That's why you don't talk much,” she whispers softly.

I nod. “Yeah. I never really talked at all. That is, until you came around. I saw your pain when we met you last year. I think my soul called to yours. It could see how damaged we both were. And somehow, I feel okay talking when you're around. It doesn't bother me as much.”

Taking a deep breath, I clench my fists, needing her to understand one more thing.

“But Harley, I hurt people. I... killed people. I left permanent scars on some of these people. They will live like we do... in fear. Traumatized. Never the same. I can't blame you if you never want to speak to me again because of that.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and whisper, “Sometimes I don't know how to live

with it.”

Her warmth disappears as she pulls away from me, and the heart I didn't even know could be broken... breaks.

That is, until she stands and drops to her knees in front of me. She cups my face and locks eyes with me, fresh tears sliding down her beautiful rosy cheeks.

“I could never stop talking to you,” she murmurs, her voice laced with affection that instantly pieces my shattered heart back together. “I knew there was darkness in you. I've seen it in your eyes. I think there is some darkness in all of us and that's why we're all drawn to each other.”

She pushes forward so our foreheads are touching.

With a soft smile, she says, “I'm proud of you. I know how hard it is to open up about things like that. Especially when you're opening up and risking getting swallowed whole by memories. Thank you for trusting me.”

Her eyes drop to my mouth, and without hesitation I grip her face and kiss her like she is the air I need to breathe. *She is the air I need to breathe.* “All these feelings are so new and unknown to me. It's making me feel a little crazy,” I whisper against her lips.

I feel her mouth stretch into a smile as her eyes open and meet mine. “I'll be crazy with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

HARLEY



As Cade and I make our way back towards the club, everything that he told me plays on repeat in my mind.

I mourn for the young boy who lost his childhood due to violence. But I also relate to him in so many ways. The feelings I have for him are growing stronger by the day. I really was beginning to think he would always be so weird with me. Going from staying away to being right there with me, but I think him opening up to me now is a good sign.

I wish I could take his pain away. His and Noah's. Even though Noah is a huge pain in the ass, I can only imagine what he went through back then, and I just want to protect the both of them.

I could kill their father. Which makes me wonder...

“Where is your dad?” I blurt out the question before really thinking it through. Grimacing, I say, “Sorry. You don’t have to answer that.”

Cade stops walking and turns towards me. We are back in the open yard area behind the main building, and I can see Ryker and Grayson sitting on the back porch. “He’s in prison. It’s not really my story to tell, but Noah fought hard to get me out of there and was able to set up our father so he got caught and now will spend his life behind bars.”

At least that’s some form of retribution. “Wait... I’m sorry, I probably should shut my mouth, but what did your dad do to begin with?”

Cade lets out a small, humorless chuckle. “It’s okay. I want to be honest with you. I want you to know everything. He worked for some gang—at least, that’s what Noah and the club assume. We don’t know for sure because everything was kept so secret, but it looked like he was basically the enforcer for a gang. But instead of doing the work himself, he had us do it.”

He sighs when he notices Ryker and Grayson walking towards us.

“Took you guys fucking long enough. I feel like I have been waiting for years.” I am coming to realize that Ryker can be very dramatic at times.

We all chuckle, and Grayson nudges his shoulder. “He was working on being patient.”

“What were you two getting up to? Anything good?” Ryker asks with mirth shining in his dark eyes.

I open my mouth to respond with something to change the subject because I don’t think Cade wants to talk about this anymore, but he surprises me again by saying, “We talked about my father.”

He says it with a casual shrug before a tiny grin comes over his hardened features.

“Wow, Ryker stunned silent.” He chuckles and then looks at me.

I can't help but smile back at him before looking at Ryker and Grayson, who are both staring from me to Cade with wide eyes. "He told you? Everything?" Grayson asks.

I nod, rubbing my arms uncomfortably. "Can we move on now? This is making me feel weird. Didn't you guys say you needed to talk to me?"

Ryker blinks and clears his throat before talking. "Yeah, we do." He looks at Grayson and Cade, who both give him small nods. "Well, since no one is around, we can just do this here. So, when you opened up to us the other day and we all promised to be honest with each other, there is one thing you need to know."

"Okay... what's that?" I ask hesitantly, my fingers wringing together in front of me.

Ryker exhales. "Rage is bringing the three of us in on everything involving Tammy and Daniel and all that shit. The only way he would let us be in the know and be involved is if we promised to keep it from you."

There is this movie I remember from when I was a kid... The guy turns so angry he turns beet red, and smoke shoots out of his ears. If I had to guess right now, that is how I look. Every muscle is so tense I know I will be sore later. My mind is racing with every conversation Gabriel and I have had. He wants trust but yet he does this?

"Well, if you are telling me this, I'm assuming you said no?" I ask through clenched teeth, attempting to keep myself from yelling. *Keep it cool, Harley.*

Grayson shakes his head. "No, we said yes. We wanted to be able to know what was happening. We want to be able to help you. I'll admit, we weren't going to tell you at first. We thought maybe Rage had a point and was right... that we would be protecting you. But I know we were wrong. You don't need

protection. You need trust, support, and loyalty. All the things we need and get, but the difference is you're not only a girl, but Rage's little girl."

"So you weren't going to tell me," I state. My mind is reeling with everything they are saying—*hear them out, Harley. Don't let your temper get the best of you yet.*

Cade sighs, "Harley, don't let that be your only takeaway here. *We are* telling you. The second you opened up to us and wanted to learn to trust each other, we decided to tell you. We didn't even like his decision to begin with."

"But," Grayson continues off where Cade stopped talking, "we understood where Rage was coming from, and I think you should try to as well. He wants to protect you. He isn't ready for his little girl to be the Harley you are. He has to come to terms with that and see it with his own eyes. You have to try to be patient with him."

I open my mouth, but Ryker speaks first, "I understand wanting to jump the gun, to run in there and spew every thought. Fuck, babe, just a few months ago that would have been me. I never fucking thought before I acted. But I'm trying to now. I'm trying to lean on not only these two,"—he points at Cade and Grayson—"but all of them. My family. Because they are my family. They're yours now, too." He points at the large building behind him.

Blinking back the tears, I give them a nod but say nothing. What do I even say to that? All I have ever wanted was a family. I dreamed of my dad. The knight in my story, swooping in to save the day. It's what I wanted, isn't it?

Grayson clears his throat. "For right now, Harley, you can't say anything to anyone that we told you this. I know we're basically asking you to lie. But right now, it's important. We're going to help you get them to see that you aren't some fragile flower. But in the meantime, we still need them to trust us by thinking that we haven't said a word to you."

“Can you do that? Can you set your anger aside for the bigger picture? I know you don’t trust Gabriel yet. I know you don’t trust most of the people in there, but I have to believe you are starting to trust us. So lean on us, okay?” Ryker says, stepping forward and wiping the stray tear that escaped down my cheek away.

I nod and stare up at his face, scanning it for... the truth? I don’t think I really know. “I do trust you, Ryker. I think... I think it’s just taking me time to not constantly jump to the worst conclusion when someone tells me something.”

Ryker nods, his lips thinning in sympathy. “I understand that.”

“Hey! Are you guys all going to stand way out there like a bunch of freaks all night or get your asses in here and eat dinner?” We all glance towards the building to see Raven standing on the porch with her hands on her hips.

Chuckling we all start walking back towards the house. Raven cocks a brow at us as we get closer, and Ryker breaks off into a sprint, running towards Raven and locking her in a headlock before rubbing his knuckles over her head.

She easily flips him over her shoulder, and we all listen as his back hits the porch with a loud thud. As impressed and surprised as I am, I can’t help but wince because that had to hurt.

“What did I tell you about touching the hair?” she questions with a raise of her brow.

He shrugs as he jumps up to stand again, dusting himself off. “Do it all the time because it’s your favorite thing?”

She sighs and glances at me before looking back at Ryker. “And here I thought you getting a girlfriend would mean you’d leave me alone.”

I can feel my eyes triple in size, and I freeze where I am mid-step. Shooting

my eyes between Ryker and Raven, I watch as Ryker just shrugs. “Aren’t you the one who said we’re your little brothers? We gotta keep up the torment.”

He just... he didn’t even deny it or comment on it. *What the fuck...*

“Harley? Hey, Harley, breathe.” Gently, soft, hands caress my cheeks, and I look into Grayson’s bright green eyes. He gives me a soft smile and says, “You alright?”

Clearing my throat, I reply, “Yeah... I just—she just—well I... no, I’m not okay,” I say with a wince.

Ryker hops down the steps to stand right next to Grayson in front of me. “She’s not wrong. You are mine. Grayson’s too. And Cade’s. I kissed you, so that means it’s sealed. It’s the same as licking something, right? Lick it and it’s yours?” he asks, completely seriously glancing at Grayson.

Grayson chuckles. “Sure,” he replies, but it comes out like a squeak, and his cheeks tint red.

“Plus, if any other guy lays a hand on you, I’ll beat the shit out of him.” He shrugs. “I’m starving. Come on, babe, let’s go eat.” He hooks his arms around both Grayson and I’s shoulders, pulling us apart and leading us inside behind a laughing Raven as Cade follows behind us.



“Can I stay with you tonight?” Ryker asks, leading me to my door.

I open my mouth to say no because I plan to follow Noah tonight, but then everything we talked about today comes back to me.

I don’t have to do this alone. I don’t *want* to do this alone. And plus, after everything they told me about Gabriel not wanting me involved, that means they might want to help me wiggle my way into whatever they plan to do.

“Harley?” Ryker tilts his head, studying my face. I glance around the hall and then quickly open my door, pulling Ryker inside before shutting and locking the door. “Okay,” he drawls, “why are you being weird?”

“Okay, look, I overheard them talking the other day about what the plan with Daniel is, and I know that Noah is heading over to the club or whatever to get information out of him. I want to be there. I want to follow him and see what information he gets. I don’t like being kept out of the loop, and I know you guys are letting me in, but the rest of the club isn’t, and I don’t know when or if they will realize I can handle more than they think I can.”

I realize I am rambling, so I stop and bite my lip, staring at Ryker, who is now pacing my room.

He stops and faces me, opening and closing his mouth multiple times. Then he struts forward and cups my face in his hands, kissing me hard and fast. I’m so startled by it I don’t even get a chance to kiss him back before he’s pulling away.

Resting his forehead against mine, he lets out a heavy breath. “God, Harley, you make this turning a new leaf thing really fucking hard.”

“What?” I mumble.

“I can’t go with you because I still have the ankle monitor.” He blows out a breath and pulls his face away just enough that he can look into my eyes.

“And you can’t go.”

“What do you mean I can’t go?” I tug away from his hold and step back. “I need to do this, Ryker.”

He runs a hand through his already messy hair. “I know, babe, I know. But you can’t go alone.”

I cross my arms, fixing him with a pointed look. “I’ve been on my own for a long time and I’ve managed just fine. I think I can handle it. I’m going,

Ryker.”

As much as I want to fall into his embrace and just take in the fact that he is worried about me and wants me safe, I can't because I have to do this. I need to know that I'm strong enough so I can stop questioning myself.

Ryker sighs, “Okay, I can see that you aren't going to take no for an answer. At least let me get Cade up and he can go with you.”

“Ryker, I can handle this. I promise I'll be fine.”

He watches me for a second longer, like he's trying to see inside my mind, and then he nods. “Alright. Fine. Go,” he says quietly.

My heart skips a beat as I see his face set in a deep frown. I shake my head and grab my phone before opening my door. When I step out, I look back at Ryker, “Thank you for caring and not trying to stop me.”

“Don't thank me yet,” he grumbles and comes out to the hall, watching me walk to the stairs. Not seeing anyone around, I quickly head outside and jog towards the gate.

After we ate dinner tonight, Gabriel, Noah, and a few others were talking in the living room area. I had stopped at the stairs and listened to them talk about Noah questioning Daniel at the nightclub they own.

I have no fucking idea why they would do it at a nightclub, but I guess I'm going to find out. I head outside and run across the parking lot, heading up the road that leads to the gate. I stay to the side of the road where it's all trees, so I'm not as noticeable. When I reach the gate, I duck behind a tree on the opposite side of the road from the gatehouse where a prospect stands watch.

After a few minutes, a bike roars to life, and the prospect glances up before pressing the button to open the gate and looking back down at his phone.

Not wanting to miss my opportunity, I quickly sprint out of the gate and duck behind some trees, waiting for the bike to pass. As soon as it does, the

gate closes, and I pull out my phone and order a taxi to pick me up from the house that's down the road from the club.

It takes about ten minutes for my ride to get here and then another fifteen minutes to reach the nightclub. When we arrive, the driver drops me off out front, giving me a weird look because the club is very clearly closed.

Hoping that for some reason Noah didn't lock the front door after he went in, I try it, and it surprisingly opens.

Very slowly walking in so I don't make any noise, I look around at the mostly dark place. The only thing illuminating the space is what appears to be light coming from a hallway across the room. I make my way towards the hall, but halfway to it, someone grabs my shoulders, spins me around, and shoves me against the wall.

Trying to control my breathing and remain calm, I prepare myself to fight, but then his stupid cocky voice chuckles in my ear. "Tsk, tsk, Princess. You are being very naughty."

My eyes widen. "How—"

He tsks again. "You don't get to ask questions right now."

"Look, Noah, I know that Daniel is here. I just want to see him once. That's all."

Noah chuckles. "Don't lie to me, Princess. You've been listening in for a while. You know what I was coming here to do." Wrapping his large hand around my bicep, he pulls me with him to the hall and down it to a door at the end.

"What are you doing?" I ask, my brow creasing.

He glances back and raises a brow. "Exactly what you came here for. You want to play big kid games? Let's see how you handle it then."

He opens a door to a closet, and at the back of the closet is another door he

enters a passcode for before yanking the steel open.

I suck in a breath. *Shit. Stairs. You can do this, Harley.*

Noah smirks. “Chickening out already?”

Straightening my shoulders, I glare at him. “No.”

He shrugs and gestures for me to go down the stairs. Taking a breath and remembering how Ryker helped me and the way he reminded me it’s not the same helps me move my feet and descend the steps.

It’s not the same. The walls are different. Noah is coming down with me. The stairs are old wooden ones that creak with every step. It smells different, like bleach. The lights are bright and light up the entire space. There are three other doors down here.

Not the same, I remind myself.

“This way,” Noah says, walking ahead of me to another door. He stops with his hand on the knob and looks back at me. “You are going to see a side of me my own brother has never seen. Are you sure you want to do this? I may have been picking on you earlier, but Harley, if you need to walk away, do it. This isn’t a game.”

Staring into his eyes that are the exact same blue and gold fire as Cade’s, I nod. “I’m doing this.” There’s no going back. Not now.

He holds my eyes for a second and nods back at me, then unlocks and opens the door. Walking into the room, I find it’s larger than the first one with concrete walls and floor. In the center of the space is a chair with who I’m assuming is Daniel tied to it. He opens his eyes and blinks at Noah before his gaze finds me and he glares, mumbling words through his gag.

I follow Noah and glance around the room, seeing there is nothing besides a long table on the right wall.

Noah pulls the gag out of his mouth, and Daniel immediately goes off,

“What the fuck are you fucking doing here? You’re just another stupid slut —”

Before I even register what I’m doing, I punch him in the face. “I’m not a fucking slut,” I sneer, my lips curling over my teeth. “Don’t ever speak to me like that again.” I snarl.

Adrenaline flows through my veins at the power I realize I hold in this moment. No one has the control they used to have over me. When someone says something about me like that, like what Tammy used to say, I can do something about it. *This is why I needed to do this.*

That makes me feel fucking powerful.

Glancing up at Noah standing next to me with a small smile on his face, I ask, “What information did you have to get from him?”

Noah takes his eyes off of me and glares at Daniel, “Who let you out of the cell?”

“No one,” he immediately responds, his face now a stoic mask. No emotion at all.

Noah sighs, “See, the thing is, I don’t fucking believe you.” He cracks his knuckles. “Let’s try this one more time with a different question.” His demeanor is calm and collected. Like he doesn’t have a care in the world, and dominance just oozes off of him. “Why did you take off to begin with? It was pretty clear we weren’t going to leave you there or kill you.”

Daniel doesn’t respond. Instead, he just glares right at me. If looks could kill...

Noah sighs again, but a large smile slowly spreads over his face. “I’d say I’m sad about this, but I’m really not.” He looks at me. “Stay here.”

He walks out of the room, leaving the door open, and a few minutes he later comes back with arms full of things: knives, blades, a saw, pliers, and a

hammer. My blood runs cold at the sight. Holy shit.

Laying them out on the table, he picks up a wicked-looking blade, glancing to me. “You sure about this? Because I’m not going to try to be a good influence and tell you that you don’t want to be here. I think you’ve been through enough shit that you can decide for yourself.”

I nod, not feeling any nerves but instead being intrigued and a new kind of energy runs through my body. This is intense, but this is what I came here to witness.

Not even five minutes later, Daniel is a sobbing mess and ready to spill his guts. *Not* literally—Noah seems to have barely done anything. Just making thin slices all over his arms and face, just enough to trickle with blood.

“I promise I barely told her anything! I didn’t want to keep doing it for them!” he cries.

My shoulders tense up at *her*. Stepping forward again, I can’t help but ask, “Who?”

“Tammy Wilson. She knew my parents. They worked with her on some secret project. When I was graduating high school, I just wanted to work on bikes—and they knew that was my passion. So they asked me to come join your club and report back to Tammy with everything I was told or saw, and she would pay me.”

“Did you tell her that Harley is at the club now?” Noah demands, toying with the knife he still holds, now covered in blood.

“No. I swear I didn’t.” He shakes his head rapidly as he looks at Noah. “I promise I didn’t. I didn’t even go back there when I left the club. I just left. This isn’t what I wanted—what we wanted.”

“We?” I question, cocking my head as I stare him down.

Daniel shakes his head. “My girlfriend. We just want away from all of this.

I thought I was done last year after the..." He shakes his head and clamps his lips shut.

"After what?" Noah seethes, but Daniel just shakes his head again. Noah grabs some pliers and walks up to Daniel, yanking his hand up. "Want to try that again? I'm not in the mood for games."

"It's nothing!" he screams right as Noah rips off his fingernails one right after the next.

I watch, intrigued by everything Noah does. The blood, the gore. Stepping up next to him, I hold my hand out. "I want to try," I say.

Noah raises a brow at me. "Harley..."

"Don't *Harley* me. Give it to me," I snap.

This is what I wanted. I wanted to hurt the people who hurt me. Who hurt my mom.

How can I ever do that if I can't handle this? Watching Noah carry out this torture doesn't bother me. Especially knowing that Daniel was helping Tammy. But now, I need to know that I can do it, too.

Noah sets the pliers in my open palm and grabs Daniel's other hand. He sobs and begs me not to do this, but I focus on the task at hand and grip his finger before ripping his nail off and watching blood pour out as Daniel screams.

"That grin is wicked and slightly terrifying, Princess. I love it," Noah remarks with a grin that I assume matches my own.

Dropping the smile and glaring down at Daniel, I ask, "Ready to tell us yet?"

"After Harley got away last year!" he blubbers. "I thought I would be done. They wouldn't need me anymore."

He peers up at Noah, his eyes pained as he talks low.

“I’m sorry. I tried to make sure that the damage wasn’t going to be too bad, but they wanted to kill you. I promise I did what I could so you weren’t hurt too badly.” He drops his eyes to the ground, his shoulders sagging in defeat.

“Noah?” I prompt, staring at him as he clenches his fists.

“My accident? When I got hit by the truck the day we were looking for Harley? You’re telling me that was fucking intentional? You set me up?” With every word he speaks his voice drops deeper, his eyes blazing with anger as he clenches his jaw tight.

Daniel doesn’t bother looking up; he just nods. I, meanwhile, have no idea what they’re talking about. Noah got hurt looking for me?

Noah spins around and walks back to the table along the far wall. He picks up all of his tools and strides out of the room, putting them away. Then he comes back and gestures for me to leave the room Daniel is in. When I step out, he closes it up and locks it, then goes to the sink in the corner and washes his hands and arms.

“That was enough for tonight. I need to get you back anyway.” His voice is softer now than when we were interrogating, but there is still a sharp edge to it.

“Are you alright?” I ask quietly.

Noah turns around and flashes me his infamous smirk. “Yeah, Princess, I’m all good. Let’s get the fuck out of here. Come on, you’re riding with me. I don’t have a spare helmet, so you’ll have to wear mine.”

Climbing onto the back of his bike once we get outside, I wrap my arms around him and feel comfort in holding onto him.

“Ready, Princess?” he asks, revving up the engine of the motorcycle.

“Yes.” Even with the slightly tense air that is still surrounding Noah, I can’t help but smile against his back as he takes off and the wind whips against my

face.

The adrenaline that ran through me the entire time we were there continues on; it feels like a high I never want to come down from. Power and freedom. Two things I have never truly felt until right now.

That is, until we pull up to the club where Colton and Gabriel are waiting outside, leaning against the wall by the door. Noah sighs as he turns the bike off and helps me off.

Taking his helmet off my head, he says, “Go in and head to bed. I’ll deal with this.”

Nodding, I pass everyone, keeping my eyes down as I slip in the door and go upstairs. Opening my bedroom door, I find Ryker sprawled out on my bed sleeping. It looks like he was waiting for me based on the lights being on, his phone in his hand, and he is fully dressed.

I walk in and gently take his phone, putting it on the nightstand and covering him with a blanket. Backing out of my room, I turn the light off and slowly shut the door. I think I need someone else right at this moment, and I don’t want to disturb him.

Stopping in front of Grayson’s door, I take a deep breath and then slowly push the door open. The light from the hall streams into the room, and Grayson lifts his head.

“Harley?” he groggily asks.

“Can I lay with you?” I whisper, biting my lip.

He nods and pulls back the covers. I kick off my shoes and take off my jacket, then climb into the bed next to Grayson, slipping under the covers.

“I think there’s something wrong with me, and I can’t find it in me to be bothered by it. Is that wrong?” I mumble against his chest, wrapping my arm around his torso.

Grayson wraps his arms around me and drops a kiss on my head. “No, it isn’t wrong. We are all a little messed up, Harley. That’s why we need each other. To balance each other out.



Ryker

Two Hours Earlier

The second Harley is out of my sight, I pull my phone out and step back into her room. *Please forgive me for this.*

I knew by the look in her eyes and her tone of voice that there was no talking her out of not going. I wanted to go wake up Cade, but I knew that wouldn't have gone any better. He would've just gone caveman on her ass and refused to let her leave.

I do believe she needs to do this, I agree with her. Just not the way she wants to do it.

So, I make the call I really don't want to make.

"What's up? I'm riding to do some club shit right now," Noah says through the Bluetooth set up in his helmet, making it a little harder to hear him over the sound of the bike.

"Right, well there is something you should know first." I clear my throat. My tongue sticks to the rough of my mouth, the words not wanting to come out. It feels wrong, but I know it's the right thing to do. *Trust, Ryker. Trust.*

"Hello? Are you still there? What the fuck do you want, Ry?" Noah grumbles.

"Harley overheard everything that was talked about regarding Daniel. She knows that you all found him and that you took him to the nightclub, and she knows that you're going there tonight to get some answers out of him.

“I tried to talk her out of it, but she is really fucking determined, and I know that pushing too hard would have sent her spiraling. Kind of like I have in the past. But I also want her to be fucking safe, and I can’t go following her myself because of the ankle monitor, so this was my next best bet. But Noah, you have to let her—”

“Woah, Ryker, shut the fuck up for a second and breathe. What exactly is she planning to do?” Noah demands on the other end of the line, voice warped slightly by the helmet.

Letting out a breath, I tell him, “She left and is heading to follow you to the club so she can see what’s going on, and I don’t know what her plan is exactly, whether she is just going to watch or what, but I wanted you to know so you can keep an eye on her to make sure she is safe. But Noah, don’t send her home. She needs—”

“You’re rambling again, Ryker. Chill out. I hear you loud and clear. Don’t forget who you’re talking to. I know what she’s dealing with. I also know how fucking stubborn she is because she is her father’s child and she is fucking like you. A royal pain in my ass.”

I roll my eyes even though he can’t see it. “Yeah, yeah. I’m going to wait up for you guys to come back. Don’t be gone too long.”

“I’ve got it under control, brother. You don’t have to worry. But we’re going to have to deal with this tomorrow, and it probably won’t be pretty. Prepare yourself for her possibly being pissed at you. It’ll just depend on where her head is at.”

Furrowing my brows, I stop pacing Harley’s room and ask, “You aren’t going to tell her tonight that I called you?”

Noah lets out a loud laugh. “Fuck no. I don’t want to deal with that shit if she gets pissed at you. But I’ve gotta go. I just got here and now I have to

prepare for the princess to show up.” He sighs.

“Take care of her,” I whisper.

“Always, brother.” With that, he ends the call.

Taking a deep breath, I run a hand through my hair and pace her room more. Fuck. I know I did the right thing but yet it felt wrong. It felt wrong because I don’t know how to fully trust people, just like Harley doesn’t.

But I do know without a doubt I can count on the people in this club. They are my real family. Not my father.

Letting out a groan, I flop back on her bed, her fresh, light scent hitting my nose. She never wears any kind of heavy scents, I’ve noticed. She uses soft ones: lavender, vanilla, eucalyptus, that kind of shit. I fucking love it.

The clearing of a throat has me jolting up to my feet and spinning towards the door where Rage leans against the doorframe—pissed off.

I breathe out, “Shit.”

“Shit indeed. We’ll deal with this fucking mess tomorrow. I need to go calm down,” Rage all but growls as he turns to leave. Right before he is out of sight, he looks back at me. “Ryker.” I meet his eyes that have softened slightly. “I’m really fucking proud of you.”

He walks away, leaving me standing here with a weird feeling in my chest. It’s not a bad feeling, but it just... Shit, someone is proud of me.

My lips tilt up into a small grin, and I sit back down on Harley’s bed. Exhaustion weighs heavy on me, but I need to stay up and wait for her to come back to make sure she’s really okay.

Chapter Twenty-Three

HARLEY



Slowly cracking my eyes open, it takes me a second for everything from last night to come back to me. *Fuck*. I can only imagine the lecture I'm going to get. Letting out a small groan, I feel the warm arms around me tighten slightly.

Grayson clears his throat. "Um, good morning. Are you okay?" he murmurs.

Lifting my head off his chest, I look up at him, realizing just how close we are. My leg is thrown over his, and our arms are wrapped around each other while I lay half on top of him.

"I'm okay." I give him a small smile.

His cheeks flush, and he hesitantly lifts a hand and runs it down my hair. "You're so beautiful."

“Did you seriously bypass me sleeping on *your* bed to come and cuddle with Gray?” an amused voice says behind me.

Not taking my eyes off Grayson, I widen them and say, “Is now when I run or hide?”

Grayson’s face lights up with amusement, and he grabs the blanket and pulls it over my head. “What’s your problem, Ryker?” he asks sweetly.

He chuckles, “Pain in the asses. Both of you. You could have woken me up. I was waiting for you.” I can hear his voice getting closer, but then it goes silent.

A second later, I feel the bed dip behind me and a large hand wrapping around my waist under the blanket to roll me onto my back. Ryker pulls the blanket away, and I look up at his handsome face. “Hi,” I whisper.

His eyebrows raise. “Hi?” he questions. “You’re not allowed to tell me no at night anymore.”

I open my mouth preparing to shut that down because it isn’t his choice, his mouth descends on mine, and he kisses me. As his mouth covers mine hungrily, his hands roam down my sides, sending tingles through my body.

I want more. *I want his lips everywhere.*

“Ryker,” I moan.

He pulls his lips away from mine, locking eyes with me. “Yes?”

My cheeks blaze as I say what I really want, “More.”

Ryker glances next to me before his lustful eyes come back to mine.

“Hmm, I think we can do that, but you know, you better give Grayson a kiss too.”

Grayson sucks in a breath next to me, and I look towards him at the same time Ryker moves down my body. His hands slowly push my shirt up while his lips kiss any exposed skin they find.

Grayson and I stare into each other's eyes, and he begins to stutter, "We don't—it's okay."

"Grayson?" He shuts his mouth. "Do you want to kiss me?" I ask.

"Yes," he says, the red in his cheeks traveling down to his neck.

"Then kiss me," I demand, edging closer.

Grayson gently cups my cheek and leans over, pressing his lips to mine. His kiss is so different from Ryker's. He kisses me slowly, thoughtfully. He gives me control of it whereas Ryker takes it from me. I love the difference between them, the hardness that is Ryker and the softness that is Grayson.

I feel Ryker's mouth make its way up my stomach towards my chest as he pushes my shirt up. His hands cup my breasts, and he groans.

I gasp into Grayson's mouth while my nipples pebble when the cold air touches them. Grayson pulls away slightly, staring into my eyes before slowly roaming his eyes down my body.

"Ry—" I stumble over my words as he sucks one of my nipples into his mouth.

He releases it with a pop and looks at Grayson and then me. "Do you want more, Harley?" I nod my head, and Ryker grins. "Good girl. Grayson, take care of our girl's gorgeous tits."

Grayson's eyes widen, but he listens to Ryker, moving his hands to cup my boobs and lightly pinching my nipples. I gasp and arch my back off the bed.

Ryker unbuttons my jeans and works them down my legs, leaving my panties on. My brain must be short-circuiting because I can't find it in me to be bothered by being almost naked in front of both of them.

Once my jeans are off, Ryker sits up between my legs and stares at me with hunger in his eyes. He runs his hands up my thighs but doesn't touch me where he knows I want him to.

My eyes move from Grayson's hands on my chest to Ryker's face.

"Ryker." I plead.

"Yes, babe?"

"Please," I beg, arching off the bed again.

"Please what?"

"Please touch me," I moan.

"Such a perfect naughty girl." Ryker hums and caresses my soaked panties. He pulls them to the side and runs a finger up my slit, coating it in my juices before he starts playing with my clit.

Moaning, my hands move on their own, one cupping the back of Grayson's neck and the other grabbing Ryker's hand.

Grayson moves his head down and gently licks around my nipple before sucking it into his warm mouth. At the same time, Ryker slowly enters one finger into me, and I hiss at the intrusion.

"Relax for me," Ryker murmurs as his lips kiss my thighs and he tentatively starts pumping his finger in and out of me. I relax under their touches and lips.

My hips start rocking, meeting his slow thrusts.

"That's it, babe, fuck yourself on my finger." Ryker hums his approval.

A whimper escapes me as I squeeze my eyes shut. My entire body floods with desire I have never felt before as they both move their hands and lips in perfect harmony, working my body up to a peak until I ignite.

Ryker's thumb starts working my clit in fast circles and I gasp, clutching them tighter, my body tensing before I let out a loud moan and melt into the bed, feeling weightless and blissful all at once.

Feeling movement, I slowly crack my eyes open to see Grayson sitting back next to me and Ryker hovering over me. He licks his finger and shuts his

eyes, groaning, “God, you taste so fucking good.”

He kisses me hard, pushing his tongue past my lips, letting me taste myself before pulling back and glancing at Grayson.

“You okay?” he asks.

Grayson readjusts himself and nods as he looks down at me. Running a hand through my hair, he says, “You look so beautiful when you cum.”

We lay in Grayson’s bed for a little while longer, dozing off and on, when someone knocks on the door and slowly pushes it open without waiting for us to respond. Cade steps in. Seeing all of us on the bed, he shuts the door behind him. His eyes lock on mine before his heated gaze slowly scans my body that is only half covered by a blanket.

It almost looks like longing flashes in his eyes but he quickly masks it and looks at the other two. “You should probably get up and come downstairs. Shit is a bit crazy right now.”

Grayson sits up and rubs the sleep from his eyes while Ryker just groans and buries his head in my neck. “What’s going on?” he mumbles.

Cade’s eyes lock on mine, and I gulp. *Fuck.*

“Um, there is something I need to tell you guys,” I say, clearing my throat.

Ryker chuckles and flops back down on the bed. “Yes, Harley, what do you have to tell them?” There is clear amusement in his voice, but when I glance back at him, I can see the hurt and anger in his eyes.

I open my mouth but then shut it, pinching my lips together when a voice that is very much pissed off sounds in the hallway. “I don’t know which room you all are hiding in, but Harley needs to get her ass downstairs before her very Rage-y father comes up here.”

Father... Mother...

“What did you do, Harley?” she screams at me.

The chain tightens around my throat.

I can't breathe... It's impossibly tight. She isn't letting up. Why isn't she stopping this time?

"Harley! Stop! Harley!" Hands wrap around my wrists, yanking them away from my throat and holding them down.

Someone touches my face and I flinch, trying to pull away... "Harley, please." The voice is a soft plea, begging. My eyes slowly open, and beautiful green eyes stare back at me. "Breathe with me."

I gasp for a breath and try to focus on Grayson's chest rising and falling.

"Good girl, keep breathing. It's okay, we've got you."

"You're safe, Harley. You are safe here. You never have to worry about anyone harming you. Even if they tried, we wouldn't let them," Ryker whispers in my ear.

He sits behind me, his legs bracketing mine while he holds my wrists down by our sides.

The bedroom door slamming causes me to flinch, but I relax when I see it's Cade. He walks over and sits down on the edge of the bed, looking me over.

"Are you alright?"

I give a shaky nod. I do feel better now, and it's thanks to them.

He sighs, "I stepped out and talked to Axe. He went back downstairs, but he said that they're waiting for us. Harley, Rage is upset, but he would never hurt you."

"What happened?" Grayson questions softly.

I open my mouth, but Ryker speaks first. "Let's just go down. They aren't going to give us much time before someone comes up to get us." He stands up and walks to the end of the bed, grabbing my jeans that were tossed to the floor.

I take them and stand up, quickly shoving them on. “I need to run to my room and change,” I mumble, my face turning red.

Ryker smirks but doesn’t say anything, so I rush out of the room and quickly clean myself up, then change my panties. Taking a deep breath, I look at the still damaged mirror.

“You can do this, Harley,” I whisper to myself. “You’re safe. Stand up for yourself.”

Walking out of the room, I find all three of my guys waiting for me. Taking Grayson’s outstretched hand, we all head downstairs to face the brewing storm.



Grayson

Harley's hand has a slight shake to it as she grips my mine with all her strength when we walk into the main room and find all the ranking officers sitting at the tables.

I have no idea what she did. I have a feeling it has to do with last night and what she said when she came into my room. I didn't think anything of it, but maybe she did something she shouldn't have.

Sugar's eyes soften when they land on Harley, and he says, "Hi, darlin'. Come take a seat. We've gotta talk."

Harley hesitantly sits next to Sugar while I sit on her other side, and Ry and Cade stand behind us. Looking around, I now notice how tense most everyone is, and I notice the split lip and forming bruise on Noah's cheek.

My eyes widen, "Noah, what happened?"

My question draws Harley's eyes towards him, and she gasps before turning a hard look on her dad, Rage. "What the fuck?" she seethes.

"Okay, hang on a second," Noah says, putting a hand up.

He goes on to explain what happened last night. He gives us every detail up until they got home.

"I explained everything to them. They obviously were not happy. I took a few hits because it was well deserved. Harley, there are certain rules and things we follow, and I should have done things differently. Would I do them differently, though? No. But Rage knows that. You can't be mad at him for any of this," Noah says as he waves his hand in front of his face.

Harley pinches her lips together but gives a small nod.

Rage sighs and sits forward, looking at Harley. “I want to protect you from this life.”

Harley goes to speak, but Rage continues. I rest my hand on her thigh and give a light squeeze, hoping to reassure her.

“But it’s taking me time to wrap my head around that I can’t because you have already been in it. You have already experienced more than a lot of people have. You have been on your own in many ways for probably most of your life.”

He sighs and blinks a few times.

“I can’t take all that away no matter how much I want to. I also can’t keep asking you to trust us when I know deep down that you never will unless we lay it all out there for you. You have shown what you really want. Especially after last night. So we are going to tell you everything. But I swear to fucking God, Harley, if you go behind my back, if you do stupid things, if you fucking test me one more time, I will lock you away here and you will never fucking leave, and I can make it happen.”

He takes a deep breath, calming himself.

“Argue with me, spar with me, yell at me, talk to anyone else here and ignore me, I don’t care. But you will not go behind my back. Is that clear? We are a team. We are a family, and we cannot protect each other if we don’t trust each other with everything. Got it?”

Harley stares him down, something warring in that complex mind of hers before she straightens her back and says, “Got it. But there is one thing I have to say.”

“What?” Rage asks, his brow creasing.

“I don’t think I can forgive you yet. I don’t know if I ever will—my mind is a mess when it comes to everything. But I think I can work on trusting you

more.” She glances back at Ry, Cade, and I. “Because these three are showing me what love and trust is like.”

Rage says nothing; his eyes are blank. You don’t see the devastation that we all know is there hearing those words from her. I hope that someday we can show her that her dad is an amazing fucking man and he would give her the world. But for now, this is progress.

Rage stiffly nods and then looks at Nerds. “Go ahead.”

Nerds starts at the beginning. All the way back when Harley first showed up at school. We all took a liking to her, started looking into her. We were all worried when Harley didn’t show back up around Thanksgiving, so Noah, Sugar, and Rage went to Tammy’s.

Harley’s eyes flash with fury at the mention of that weekend, and she grabs my hand that still rests on her thigh. She takes a few deep breaths and keeps listening.

Nerds continues to talk about the phone call we overheard on the mic we were able to put in the house. He talks about the bank account that we found in Rage’s name and the ones we found later in Sugar and Axe’s names.

Then he tells her. “Tammy is running a sex trafficking ring. We are still doing everything we can to find all the information on it. What we know so far is that Richard and Tammy are at least finding the girls and sending them off to the warehouses where they are prepared and trained before being sold.”

He sighs, “There is a ball that we have just discovered and started looking into called Black Night. It seems to be some kind of auction system, and that is where they send most of the girls they find.”

Harley’s face has remained blank almost the entire time Nerds talked. But now, her walls are cracking. I can’t blame her. This isn’t something you process easily. Especially being in that home for three years.

She could have easily been one of those girls. Which then brings up the next big question, why wasn't she?

All of a sudden, Harley gasps and shoves her chair back, knocking it straight into Cade. He tries to grab her arm, but she is faster, running straight for the backdoor and sprinting outside. Everyone follows after her, with Ryker yelling her name.

When we all make it outside, seeing she has stopped in the yard and is bent over vomiting. When she stands back up, she is gasping and clutching her chest while tears stream down her face.

Before I can move to her, Cade is grabbing her face and demanding, "Open your eyes."

She shakes her head and tries to back away, but Cade grips harder, and Harley lets out a whimper before trying to pull his arms away while she shakes and sobs.

I feel helpless as a few tears fall down my cheeks.



Cayden

"Cade! Stop! Let her go. She needs space, and you're not fucking helping!" Rage snaps at me for the third and final time. I yank Harley into my chest, letting her tiny fists pound into my sides and back as she sobs. I wrap my arms tightly around her and hold on.

Peering over her head at Rage, whose anger is vibrating off of him in waves, I try to reason with him, "Gabriel."

His hard cold eyes snap to mine with the use of his name. The only person I have ever heard call him that is Harley.

"You need to walk away. Go with Sugar. Give me a moment. I'm not going to fucking hurt her, but she needs something you can't give her right now."

His eyes darken. "And you can?" he says in a low voice.

"Yes." I'm sure of it.

Sugar steps closer to Rage, his hand moving to his shoulder. "Come on, brother. Blade is staying out here with them. Come with me."

Rage shrugs off his hand and with one last desperate, helpless glance at his daughter, he walks away with Sugar, Axe, and Stone following closely behind.

Ryker and Grayson stay right next to me where they have not moved an inch since I pulled Harley away from them. Their sweet, placating words did not give her what she needed to pull out of the turmoil she is in.

Noah stands a few feet away, a dangerous look on his face as he spins a blade in his hand. His normal cocky smirk is missing from his face. He must

sense me looking at him because his eyes move from Harley to my face. He scans my eyes and nods once.

Harley continues to shake and sob in my arms, her fists weakening as she hits my back while mumbling incoherent words.

I grip her shoulders and pry her away from me. Her eyes stay focused on my chest as tears continue to track down her cheeks. I hate seeing her so broken.

I attempt the gentler approach first because I know damn well that if I immediately went at her hard, Ryker would be punching me in the face. As much as I don't mind a good fight with him, someone else needs us to keep it together. Cupping her cheeks, I tilt her head up.

Her eyes fall closed, and I let out a small growl, "Open your eyes, baby girl."

She shakes her head, her hands coming up to squeeze my wrists. With a sigh, I glance at my brother, who is watching us intently. He nods at me and moves closer, placing himself between Ryker and Harley and I.

The only reason my brother knows what I'm doing is because I was once so lost in my head, Noah had to take extreme measures to pull me out.

I drop my hands from her cheeks and rest them on her shoulders. "Last chance. Open your eyes." Her head begins to shake but stops when I wrap my hand around her throat and back her up until her back roughly hits the tree behind her.

Her beautiful hazel eyes fly open, and she grips the wrist of my arm. Pushing on her throat, I pin her to the tree with my body. "Now, keep your fucking eyes open and keep them on me. Got it?"

Her glossy eyes widen as she gives a hesitant, tiny nod with the little room she has to move. I tsk and tighten my hold on her throat. She gasps and digs

her nails into my arm.

"Use your fucking words, Harley."

"I—I understand," she breathes.

"Now listen carefully. You're drowning in that brain of yours. We aren't going to let those thoughts consume you. You are stronger than ever. You can fight this."

Her watery eyes start to shut, but she snaps them open, locking them with mine when I let out a growl. She whispers, "I can't fight this anymore. It's too much."

"You can. Do you want to know why?"

She nods, tears leaking down her cheeks. I have to hold myself back from leaning closer and licking them up.

"Because you have power over me. You can bring me to my knees with one look. Harley, no one has had power over me since my father used and abused me. Since he created the monster inside me that I keep locked down tight. But now?"

I lean in closer, bringing us nose to nose.

"That monster belongs to you. I will go to great lengths for you. Including letting myself bring out that part of me again."

"Why? Why would you risk that?" she asks, her bottom lip trembling.

"Because, baby girl, you are my world now. I revolve around you. I will not let you get lost to your demons, the same way you won't let me get lost to mine. We do this together. We fight together. We come out stronger together."

Chapter Twenty-Four

HARLEY



I can hear everyone chattering around me. Some voices are raised, some not. But nothing seems to really sink in as I sit in the grass with my knees pulled up to my chest.

After Cade told me we do this together, I sobbed until my knees gave out and he sat in the grass with me.

I haven't moved since, and I know that time has been going by, but it feels like only seconds since Nerds's words penetrated my mind, sending me spiraling down a dark hole that I don't see a way out of.

Tammy is running a sex trafficking ring.

What we know so far is that Richard and Tammy are at least finding the girls and sending them off to the warehouses where they are prepared and trained before being sold.

I knew that Tammy was the devil of my story. I knew she was this awful person, but she hasn't just ruined me. She has ruined countless other girls. Who fucking does that? How do you even live with yourself?

Why did she keep me there in her home? Why didn't she sell me the second she could? Who are these *connections* she constantly spoke about?

I got out and saved myself from the hell she was putting me through, but how many other girls are out there going through a hell that is the same if not worse?

A stab of guilt hits my chest, and I rub at my skin, trying to ease the ache, but it doesn't go away. If anything, it only intensifies with all the noise in my head... all the noise around me... I need it to stop. I need to breathe before everything consumes me whole and I drown in this guilt and anguish.

Soft, understanding green eyes level with my own as Grayson squats in front of me. With one scan of my face I know he can see the despair, the helplessness. My lips tremble, and I wrap my arms around my knees, making myself as small as possible as I shake.

Everything they did to me sits at the front of my mind like a movie on repeat... repeating over and over again.

Except it's not me anymore. It's faceless, nameless girls. Their screams echo through my head as they go through the same torment as I did, at the same hands.

"That's enough."

Grayson's voice penetrates my ears, coming in clear and demanding. Something I have never heard from him before. I look at his face as his nostrils flare with rage.

He stands again, and his angry tone soothes me in a way I don't expect.

"I understand that this isn't what anyone wanted. I understand that you're

struggling with this, Rage. I can't imagine how you're feeling right now, but Ryker is right. Harley needs the three of us right now. She is drowning in her thoughts. This isn't just upsetting news to her. She experienced more than we even know, and right now she needs to breathe again in order to come to terms with everything."

I hear Gabriel's voice, but I can't make out the words. There is shuffling and more talking but then large hands cup my face, and I look up into Cade's mesmerizing eyes.

"Come on, baby girl," he rumbles as he lifts me from under my arms.

I immediately wrap my legs around his waist and bury my face in the crook of his neck, taking comfort in his large warm body.

As we start walking, someone rests their hand on my shoulder.

I glance up to find Gabriel's grief-stricken face looking at me. "I'm so sorry, Harley. I didn't think how it would affect you. I understand now that I am not a good father."

A heavy feeling settles in my stomach as I take in his tear-filled eyes, drenched in such agony. I want to comfort him, but nothing will come out... I don't know what to say.

Cade keeps moving, and I watch as Colton places his hands on Gabriel's shoulders, speaking low to him. They disappear from sight, and I lower my face to Cade's neck again.

Is he a bad father? *No*. Am I an awful daughter? I don't want to be, but I think I am right now.

"Stop," I croak, pushing on Cade's shoulders.

Cade stops walking, and I wiggle until he sets me down. Then I run around him and back through the club to the backyard where Gabriel and Colton no longer stand.

I look around frantically, trying to find them, when I spot lights on Gabriel's house. Sprinting over to it, I open the door without knocking and walk into the living room to find Gabriel sitting on the couch. His elbows rest on his knees, with his head dropped low as he speaks to Colton, who stands across the room.

“How much more can I fuck this up? I'm failing her, Sugar. I'm failing Lilian.”

A gasp leaves me as I walk across the room and drop to my knees in front of him, cupping his cheeks in my hands.

“You have not failed my mom. My mom—” I clear my throat, “My mom would be so happy that I found you and that you are becoming a part of my life. I haven't been easy to deal with from the second I got here, and that's on me, not you.”

Tears track down my cheeks.

“You are not a bad father. You have been kind and patient with a teen who doesn't understand any of the things she feels and has felt lost and helpless until she came here.”

Gabriel's eyes meet mine. “You're so strong and brave. I never want to put you through more pain. I gave you more pain tonight,” he says, despair clear in his voice.

I shake my head. “No, you didn't. You opened my eyes, but I have to clear my head before we can talk about that,” I sigh.

Gabriel wraps his arms around me and pulls me in close for a hug. I tense, but then everything softens, and my mind quiets as I hug him back. He holds onto me like he might lose me at any second, and I can't help but tighten my grip around him, feeling the love and peace I could only ever receive from my mom's hugs.

“Go with the boys,” he whispers in my ear. “I trust them with you because they are as much my boys as you are my daughter. Let them help you in the ways I can’t.”

I nod against his shoulder and stand up, wiping the tears from my face. I turn and walk out of the house to find all three of my guys waiting for me.

I give them a small, forced smile, and Ryker wiggles a helmet in his hand. “So, you wanna ride, little flame?”

“What?” I ask, my eyes widening.

“I claimed dibs, so you're on the back of my bike.” Ryker winks at me.

“You guys have bikes?”

Grayson shakes his head. “Cade has one, but Ry and I are borrowing some extra ones the club has.”

“Let’s go.” I grin and take the helmet from Ryker as we walk around the main building to where the motorcycles are parked.

“Connor, one of the prospects, is going to be following us. But he will be like a shadow and stay back. It's just to be extra cautious,” Grayson explains.

I furrow my brows but nod, deciding I really don’t want to question it right now.

Cade swings his leg over a gorgeous bike that looks a lot like the one Colton has but it is a different color and I think is a newer model but I don’t know for sure. He settles on the seat, his jeans stretched perfectly over his ass in a way that I can’t help but glance at before letting my eyes slowly roam over the rest of him. He is wearing a leather jacket that sits snug over his broad shoulders.

Hearing movement next to me, I look over to see Grayson settled on his bike. He is also now wearing a leather jacket that fits him perfectly.

His shoulders aren’t as broad, but he still looks so fucking hot sitting on his

bike. He adjusts his glasses before pushing his shaggy brown hair back and slipping on a helmet. I can't help but smile and love the way he bites the corner of his lip when he's concentrating.

A low whistle drags my attention next to Grayson, where Ryker is seated on another bike, leaning over the handlebars staring at me with a smirk on his face. "You got a little drool right here." He taps his chin.

I flip him off, and he laughs loudly, gesturing me towards him. I walk over, and he hands me a leather jacket. "Is this yours?" I ask, noticing he only has on a hoodie now.

He nods. "Put it on."

I shrug it on over my hoodie. It drowns me, falling to just above my knees, and the arms are longer than my own.

A groan drags my eyes back up to Ryker. He bites his lip, and his hot gaze sets my body on fire. "God damn, you are so fucking perfect." He readjusts himself, and my face turns red. Chuckling, he says, "Put the helmet on and get on behind me."

Doing as he says, I strap it on and then swing my leg over, sitting behind him the same way I did with Noah last night.

Ryker reaches back and grabs the back of my knees, yanking me closer to him so my core rests against his back. I wrap my arms around him, and he squeezes my wrists before saying, "Hold on tight."

Starting up his bike, he revs it a few times sending vibrations through the motorcycle and straight through me, like a buzz that excites me. Ryker nods at the other two guys, and we all take off at the same time. The prospect at the gate opens it with a scowl aimed at me.

Oops? Sorry about last night, dude. I'm guessing he got in trouble for not having seen me.

They turn onto the main road, and even though I don't know where we're going, I let my worries fade away and enjoy the feeling of being pressed against Ryker's warm, hard body and the wind whipping in my face.

I watch as we leave Jacksonville and end up on a two-lane road that loops around and is surrounded by trees on both sides. There are no other cars as we speed down the road going much faster than I am sure we're supposed to.

Grinning like a madwoman, I move my hands to Ryker's waist and then slowly raise them above my head, leaning back slightly and laughing as the wind whips against my body.

Looking to my left, I see Cade glance at me quickly with a bemused smile on his face as he shakes his head.

On the other side of us is Grayson, and he looks slightly concerned but still can't help but smile. A wicked grin stretches over my face as an idea comes to my mind. I have never had a chance to live like a reckless teenager, so why not start now?



Grayson

Watching both Harley and the road is becoming a chore, and based on the grin that is taking over her breathtakingly beautiful face, I know she's up to something. I signal to Ryker to slow down a little, and we all match our speeds to the speed limit, which is still moving pretty fast.

Harley grips Ryker's shoulders and says something in his ear. His brows furrow, but then his face lights up as he nods. She scoots back on the seat a little and brings one foot up on the seat, then pushes down on Ryker's shoulders to pull herself up to stand behind him.

My mouth drops open, and I want to scream at her to get down, but watching the carefree smile that graces her lips, I can't bring myself to say anything. I know Ryker will be extra careful as he reaches back one hand and grips her calf. Luckily, we are on a straight stretch with no turns coming up.

Harley very slowly lets go of one of his shoulders and then the other, leaning her knees against his back. Moving slowly, she brings her arms out to her side and tilts her head back. She laughs and lets out a loud, "Woo-hoo."

I notice Ryker tap her leg, and she slowly moves back down until she is sitting behind him again. Wrapping her arms around him, she looks from Cade to me and laughs; she is blissfully happy and looks fully alive for the first time... possibly ever.

For that reason alone, I can't be mad at her for being reckless.

We decide to take Harley to a spot that we've been to a few times before. It's an outlook at the beach, but you can get down the small cliff and have access to the sand and water.

We know from the few times Harley has mentioned being at Brielle's that she really liked the beach. We're hoping this will help calm her nerves and open her up to us so we can help her process everything she learned today and be the powerful woman we know she can be.

When we reach the lookout, Harley's eyes scan our surroundings, a look of awe on her face. Ryker helps her off before slipping off the bike himself. While she is distracted looking around, he unclips her helmet and sets it on the motorcycle, Cade and I doing the same.

Harley wraps Ryker's jacket tightly around her tiny frame and moves closer to the edge, gazing over at the ocean below us.

I stand and watch her from a distance. Her beautiful red waves are frizzy and messy, but she still looks perfect.

Ryker walks up behind her and wraps his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder. From my view, I can just barely glimpse the side of Harley's face, and I watch her lips tilt up into a soft smile as she leans back into him.

"Nice view, isn't it?" Ry murmurs to her.

From where we are, we can see straight out into the ocean where it just goes on and on for endless miles. With the sun starting to go down, there is a nice glow that lights up the water.

We are at the top of the hill with trees that go down towards the sand. In between the trees is a small trail that leads you directly to the beach.

She nods, and Ryker explains, "We've come here a few times when we needed a break from life. This was the first trip we ever made together when we all learned how to ride a year ago."

I walk up to stand next to them while Cade goes and says something to Connor, who is a few feet back. Connor nods and heads down the road a

little, probably to keep watch but give us some privacy.

Then Cade comes back over and leans against his bike, watching us. Harley hears me and glances over, her small smile blooming into a large grin as she watches me, and I can feel my face flush.

Her bright hazel eyes focused on me could very easily bring me to my knees. I don't know if she will ever realize just how much control she has over me. Over all of us.

“You like the beach right?” I ask.

“I do,” she answers with a nod.

“We can go down,” I say, nodding towards the water.

She eyes me curiously. “Um, how? This literally just looks like a giant cliff.”

Ryker chuckles, and before she can process anything, he has flung her over his shoulder and starts walking a bit past where the bikes are parked.

Harley squeals and grips his back. “Ryker! What the fuck?”

I grin and follow behind them with Cade catching up to me. “There is a trail that goes down over here. It's steep, but it isn't too bad to walk,” I explain.

We soon reach the trail, and Ryker immediately starts bounding down it with Harley still over his shoulder. She holds him in a death-grip and swears under her breath. “Ryker, I swear to God, if you drop me!”

“What, little flame? What might you do?” Ryker taunts.

Before she can answer, we are at the bottom already, and Ry flings her back over and gently drops her into the sand. She lands on her butt with an oomph and glares up at Ryker, who just laughs and walks closer to the water.

Cade chuckles quietly and walks over to Harley, easily lifting her to her feet. He keeps a hold on her even when she's steady, and I watch her eyes

widen and a red flush work its way up her neck as she stares at his face.

“Thanks,” she squeaks out and then pulls away from him.

She walks over to the water by Ry, and I glance at Cade. “What was that about?”

He shrugs, furrowing his brows. “I don’t really know.”

“This is still all so new,” I say, and he nods. “It’ll take a while before we all figure everything out. Give it time.”

We both walk towards them as Harley’s mouth drops open when Ryker starts taking off his clothes.

“No way,” she breathes.

Unknown

“Perfect. Thank you, Roads.” I give my VP a nod as he passes me and leaves the room. Right next to my office is a decent sized storage room. We have barred and boarded up the window, and Roads just added a twin mattress on the floor.

We also added heavy duty locks to the door, and for now this will work for my girl. We will be moving farther out after we have Harley. We’ve been looking at other properties, and they have better spaces for me to store my toy.

My phone buzzes, and I quickly answer it. We have our plan in place to snag Ryker from school. We now have a distraction and everything ready to go.

“Yes?” I say to my contact at SOS.

“Prez, they just left. You have to get going now. I’ll find out where they’re headed and get it to you ASAP. But it’s just the boys and Harley, I think. It’ll be the perfect time to get Harley now.”

A large grin spreads over my face. “You just made my fucking day, kid.”

After telling him to get me the information right away, I leave the room with a big smile, knowing the next time I come in here will be with my fiery redhead.

“Everyone!” I yell when I exit to the party room. Someone immediately mutes the music, and all eyes turn to me. “We have Harley leaving the compound with the three young boys. Time to gear up. Remember, you do whatever is necessary and hurt anyone who gets in our way, but you do not touch my toy. You leave her to me.”

Picking up a gun from the table against the wall, I cock it and smile at my men.

“Time to bring my girl home, boys!” Cheers ring out through the room, and they all quickly gear up and get ready to go find her.

Here I come, Harley. I certainly hope you have more fire in you than your mother.

Chapter Twenty-Five

BLADE (NOAH)

After Harley and the boys leave with a prospect following at a distance, I head out back and head over to Rage's house. I know he is fucking livid with me, but I think I have a way to make it up to him.

Not that I regret what I did. I don't at all.

Harley needed to be tested a little. To actually have that anger in her show to see if she can truly handle it or not. She proved herself to me. I just wish I could get Rage to fully see his little girl as the strong, badass woman she is.

Walking into his house without knocking, I find both him and Sugar sitting on the couch but not speaking. "You alright?" I ask.

Rage glares at me and doesn't respond.

Sighing, I walk farther in and plop down next to Sugar. "Look, I get that you don't like the choice I made, but you already yelled at me and got your hits in. So can we move on?" I raise a brow at him.

"I'm not even mad at you anymore. I just—my head is all over the fucking place. I am the president of this MC, and I have barely kept up with what is going on with actual MC business. If it weren't for Axe and Stone, we would

probably be fucked by now. I just need to get my fucking head on straight,” he grumbles.

A grin stretches over my face. “Well,” I drawl, “I might have something that will help.”

Sugar raises a brow at me. “Now isn’t the time to be a smartass kid.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not. We still have some shit to get out of Daniel. Plus, I think you all need to hear what he had to say about my accident,” I snarl.

Rage sits up a little straighter and nods. “Yeah, we do need to deal with him.”

“Well, let’s go get some answers because I didn’t get enough last night, and I still have more to ask him.” Not to mention my hand is itching to get to use my blade again.

A while later, Sugar, Rage, and I head downstairs at the nightclub which is my domain. Not only do I run the nightclub, but when I have someone to question or I just need to do some work, I do it from here to keep it away from the boys.

Although, I have a feeling I won’t be needing to keep the enforcer side of me from the boys for much longer.

They have never seen me fully doing my work for the club. I’m worried about how Cade will take it. Since our own father was an enforcer, not that he did the work his fucking self, but I don’t want to drag up old memories for my brother.

“You good?” Rage asks as we prepare to head into the room Daniel is in.

I nod. “Yeah, I think so. With the way things are changing, I can’t see it being long before the boys see me truly work as the club’s enforcer. I just... I’m worrying over nothing,” I say with a humorless chuckle, walking over to the cabinets that hold all my toys I use on the people I bring down here.

I can lose myself in my job. It's what makes me so damn good at it. I feel fully in control, powerful, and my head is clear. It's probably fucked up that torturing people for either answers or beating the shit out of someone who wronged us clears my head, but it really does.

Maybe that makes me like my piece-of-shit father, but the one big difference is I would never ever force a child or even an adult to do my work for me.

It will always be by my fucking hands, and I take pride in that.

Rage retorts, "They aren't going to look at you differently. They will probably have even more respect for you than they already do. Those boys look up to you, especially after everything you have done for them."

"I know. I just thought I'd have until they all turn eighteen. But apparently not," I sigh.

Cade is seventeen, but he turns eighteen this fall. Grayson just turned seventeen a month ago, and Ryker turns Seventeen this summer.

All of them are almost done with their junior year of high school and then they only have one year left before they can become prospects, and my responsibility for them shifts from a parent role to them being a part of our club family as adults.

Grabbing a few of my favorite toys, I head over and unlock the room Daniel is in. After walking over the table along the wall, I lay out everything and ignore the fucker trying to yell through his gag. Rage and Sugar enter the room and shut the door.

I grab a spare chair we have in the corner and fling it around backwards in front of Daniel before straddling it, resting my arms on top of the back of the chair.

Ripping his gag out, I say, "I had some time to think over our little chit chat

last night, and I'm going to need you to clarify a few things for me."

Daniel stays quiet with his wide, terrified eyes staring at me, so I continue.

"I'm going to ask you one question at a time. And if any of us,"—I gesture towards Rage and Sugar standing behind me—"think you are lying, then we will each take a turn doing whatever the fuck we want to you before we start over."

"And if I tell you the truth?" he asks slowly, his voice wavering slightly.

I shrug. "Your chance of surviving this goes up. By how much? Well, that depends on what you have to say." I crack my knuckles. "Alright. Question one. You told me last night that the plan for my accident was to kill me. Explain who set that up and why the fuck you went through with it instead of telling us."

"I didn't want to go through with it, I swear. I wanted to tell you guys, but I couldn't. You don't understand—my parents could ruin my life," he rambles on.

Rage's fist comes flying in front of my face and lands hit after hit on Daniel. Blood and teeth splatter forward, and I stand up and step back, giving him a moment.

"You almost got one of my fucking men killed!" Rage seethes. "You shot my fucking daughter, and I have come to the conclusion that you were doing it to protect me, but were you? Was there some fucking other motive for it? Were you told to fucking hurt her if you saw her?" He roars the last part.

I glance at Sugar, and he steps forward, gently trying to pull Rage back. "Hey, hey! We've gotta get more answers out of him. Take a fuckin' walk if ya need to," Sugar snaps at him.

Rage shrugs off his hold and steps back against the wall, breathing heavily. "I'm good," he growls, glaring at Daniel.

I step forward again and take a seat in the chair, sighing at Daniel, who has tears streaming down his blood-stained cheeks. Unfortunately, I know how fucking hard Rage can hit when he is showing restraint, so I can only imagine how badly his face hurts right now.

“You said last night that your parents work with Tammy and Richard. What do they do?” I ask.

Daniel, the pussy he is, sniffles. “I don’t really know. They keep me out of it. I was only coming to the club to report back to Tammy with anything I knew.”

“What did she want to know about us?”

“She wanted to know what all your jobs were, who the ranking officers were now. She asked about Rage a lot. Wanting to know where he went and what he did.”

“And why did they decide to target me? How did it even work out for that truck to hit me that day?” I raise a brow at Daniel.

“They wanted someone who was close to everyone in the club, and I knew how close you were to the boys and most of the brothers. Once I told her that—that you had a close relationship with Rage, that he helped you with the boys, she said you would be the target. She told me that should any opportunities arise to call this number she gave me.

“I called that day because I knew we would all be riding and I would be with you, so I could do what I needed to make sure you didn’t die. I promise—after he hit you, I made sure to get you out of there as fast as possible so the guy couldn’t get his hands on you. She never told me why, I swear it. I don’t even know who the guy is. I think he was hired help. I even asked once, and she told me to mind my business, or she would make sure Tabby couldn’t come around me—”

I cut him off, “And then being around Tammy, you were around Tabby?” He nods. “And you’re dating her?” I ask.

He nods again, spitting out blood.

“You do realize she is a child, right? She’s what, fourteen? Fifteen? You are fucking Nineteen,” I seethe, disgusted by his actions. He is a fucking pussy.

“She’s different—” He hesitates but then decides to continue. “She understands me. She promised me that I wouldn’t have to spy forever. She was going to help me get out of it.”

“She was lying to you. There probably was never an out,” Rage grumbles.

Daniel lets out a sob. “I just wanted to be a part of the club when I realized how much of a family you all are. My parents never showed me much love. I wanted to be with Tabby and be at the club. I didn’t know this would all get so out of hand.”

“You and Tabby would meet at the back gate?” Sugar asks, and Daniel nods. “Is she who got you out?”

He shakes his head and won’t meet our eyes.

“Daniel, Daniel.” I tsk. “You have been doing so well so far. Don’t quit now. Tell us who helped you get out, and this can all end now.”

“You’ll—you’d let me go?” His eyes grow wide with hope.

I nod. “Yes. I understand why you did what you did. Just answer truthfully and this ends now.” *Your life ends now.* Maybe if he hadn't tried to fucking kill me he'd have the tiniest bit of hope of getting out of here alive, but my forgiveness and trust only extend so far. This is his end.

Not that I am sad about it. The guy is a fucking creep for dating a literal child. It’s fucking disgusting.

He swallows. “Connor. We’d been friends for so long, and he didn’t want

to see me get killed. He told me to run, said that he heard you guys talking about killing me. He made me promise to never tell anyone that he let me out because he has to maintain face at the club.

“When I asked why, he said that he can’t tell me but that it’s important I don’t tell anyone. I ran and didn’t look back. I was too scared to go around the Wilsons or my parents out of fear of what they would do or say that I couldn’t be their spy anymore. I was hiding in the motel trying to get ahold of Tabby before I left town.”

He breaks out into heaving sobs, and I stand, pulling the chair away from him. Glancing at Rage, I raise a brow. “I’d normally say he’s mine because, hello, I put in the work, but I think you need this one.”

Rage grunts and steps forward. He looks over at the table once but then turns back towards Daniel, whose eyes have widened.

“I thought—I thought you were going to let me go?” he stammers in disbelief.

I tsk, “Always the same mistake you fools make. I never said you could walk out of here alive. I said, this can all end now.” I grin at him.

He starts babbling and crying as Rage takes a knife and cuts Daniel’s binds loose. Then he steps in front of him again and starts going to town beating the shit out of him.

Daniel tries to fight back a little, but it’s futile. Rage is fueled but his fury that has been coursing through him since all this shit came up. He has more pent-up anger than any of us, and hopefully this lets some of it out.

Within minutes, Daniel is a bloody mess on the floor gasping for breath, his face unrecognizable. Rage is heaving as he brings his booted foot up and slams it down into his ribs over and over again. Soon, Daniel goes still.

I step forward and grab Rage’s shoulder. “He’s dead, Prez. You can stop.”

Rage steps back and looks down at the bloody pulp that he is and then turns and stalks out of the room.

I sigh and glance at Sugar. “We need to call Nerds and have him get Connor into a room so we can question him. Daniel was clearly our mole, but what about Connor? Do you think he is too? Did we really let two prospects into our club, our home, who have turned out to be against us?”

My voice raises until I am almost yelling. This is all bullshit. We should be able to trust everyone in our club. Not have a bunch of rats.

Sugar just shakes his head, his lips pinched together as pulls out his phone. After filling in Nerds, he says, “Grab Connor and get him a room. We’ll be back after Rage calms down some.”

With the phone on speaker, I can hear him respond, “Connor went with the boys and Harley.”

“What?” Sugar furrows his brows. “No. It should have been Parker. Connor was on gate duty, so I sent Parker with them.”

Nerds curses under his breath. “Fuck. Connor came and told me you asked him to go with them and to have Parker go on gate duty.”

Sugar meets my eyes, and I know he can see the fear in them.

Everything is fine. It has to be.

“I have Rage. You go. Now. We can’t fucking trust anyone anymore,” Sugar spits, looking at me.

I sprint out the door and straddle my bike, taking off quickly using the Bluetooth helmet Nerds set up for all of us to call Cade.

He doesn’t answer.

Chapter Twenty-Six

HARLEY



Ryker starts grinning like a madman. “Come on, babe. Don’t wuss out on me now.”

I narrow my eyes on him. He’s egging me on, and it’s fucking working.

Looking over at Grayson and Cade, I notice the latter is also taking his clothes off. I scoff, “No way.”

Cade grins at me and shrugs. “Why not?”

I glance at Grayson and raise a brow. He clears his throat and shuffles on his feet. “Um...”

Ryker sighs, “No. Both of you are doing it. Come on. Hurry up, otherwise I’ll chase you both down and toss you in fully clothed. Now *that* would be a shitty ride home.” He smirks.

Meeting Grayson's eyes, he shrugs and takes off his jacket before lifting his shirt over his head. Now each of them stands in front of me shirtless, and my core clenches as I squeeze my thighs together.

Holy fuck, they are a sight to see. All three of them have abs. Grayson has the smallest ones, but he is still so fucking attractive.

Ryker, who is already down to his boxers, struts forward coming to stand an inch away from me and crosses his arms with a raised brow. "Do you need my help? I don't mind helping."

A small laugh escapes me as I try to glare at him and shove him away. "Get out of here." I take off Ryker's jacket and then slowly remove the rest of my clothes until I'm only in my oversized t-shirt and panties.

"You keeping that on?" Ryker taunts, gesturing to my shirt.

I nod frantically. "Yep," I squeak, and then clear my throat. "I don't have a bra on." I mumble.

Ryker's eyes blaze and he takes a step forward right as Cade shoves him back a step and turns towards me, tossing me over his shoulder.

"What the hell is with you guys and carrying me?" I yell over my shoulder, watching as Ryker cackles and sets his sights on Grayson. Grayson's eyes widen and he turns, attempting to sprint away from Ryker.

I don't get to see what happens because Cade, who has now walked into the water up until his waist, stops walking. "Cade, this water is probably freezing cold. I swear, if you—"

The air gets knocked out of me when I hit the water and sink down. Regaining my footing, I stand with the water coming up to right below my boobs.

"You asshole!" I shiver. "It's fucking cold!"

"It's not that bad," Cade says, waving me off.

I scoff and cross my arms over my chest, hoping to hide my very hard nipples. Cade walks towards me and grips my wrists, pulling them away.

His gaze lingers on my breasts, and my heart rate speeds up. His eyes slowly move up until his blazing blue irises meet mine. Releasing my wrists, one hand grips my hip while the other moves to the back of my neck as he yanks me closer to him, crashing his lips to mine.

Without thought, I lift my legs and wrap them around his waist as Cade moves further out into the water until he is floating and holding me up. Every time any of them kiss me or holds me, I feel like I turn into a completely different person who craves their touch and attention—their affection.

Which is why I tend to say things I don't think I'd normally say, like begging Ryker for more, or... "Are you going to keep me warm?" I whisper against his lips.

Cade's mouth stretches into a breathtaking smile, and his hands move down my body at a tortuous pace until he reaches my ass. "Brazen. I like it," he murmurs, bringing his lips back against mine, demanding entrance to my mouth with his tongue that I gladly give him.

He squeezes my ass and then pulls me against him so my core rubs against his abs. His very hard cock stands at attention right below me, and each time he helps me grind against him, I can just barely feel it. My face flames as Cade greedily swallows my moans.

A new set of hands grips my hips under the water, and I jolt, pulling away from Cade to look over my shoulder at Ryker, who is floating behind me. He smirks, his eyes full of heat. "Don't stop on my account, babe. Use him to get yourself off." He leans forward and kisses my neck.

A slight slap hits my ass cheek under the water, and I look back at Cade, who says, "Focus on me, baby girl."

I grind against him again, but I can't fully concentrate when I know someone is missing from this. Letting my eyes wander, I find Grayson watching us, his cheeks flushed as he floats a few feet away.

I raise a brow at him and lift a finger in a come hither motion. His eyebrows shoot up, but he comes towards us. When he stops at Cade's shoulder I lean over and press my lips to his in a quick kiss. "Please don't ever stay back," I murmur.

His eyes betray his vulnerability as he glances at Ryker behind me and then nods. Tension leaves his shoulders, and he moves a little closer, resting a hand on Cade's shoulder. I focus on Cade again, grinding against him as he kisses me. Ryker's hands move to my stomach and under my shirt, slowly working up to my boobs as he lightly squeezes them and pinches my nipples.

I moan and feel my eyes starting to water as another pair of lips meet my neck and kiss and suck. My body ignites in tingles, and my toes curl as I begin to reach my climax.

I shoot off like a rocket when someone's fingers work their way between Cade and I's body to stroke my clit.

My vision goes blurry, and I think I scream as total bliss takes over my mind and body, and I feel weightless as I drop my head to Cade's shoulder.

"Still cold?" he rumbles in my ear.

I laugh lightly, shaking my head. "No, not anymore."

A little while later, Ryker, to no surprise, messes with Cade until Cade gives in and they start wrestling each other in the water. Both of them are smiling widely and look so relaxed and happy. I love seeing them like this.

Grayson is a few feet away watching with a bemused smile on his face. I lightly swim over to him and wrap my arms around his shoulders from behind. "Have they always been like this?" I ask.

Grayson laughs. “Yeah. Ryker actually forced Cade to be friends with us.”

“Really?” I chuckle, glancing back at the other guys.

“Yep. It ended with them fighting, Cade felt better afterwards and stayed close to us, and from then on, we formed a friendship.”

I shiver against Grayson’s back, and he whistles at Cade and Ryker, who both pause to look at us. “Harley is shivering. Let’s go back up to the shore.”

They nod, and we all begin swimming back up. When we get out of the water, I drop down on my butt in the sand and push my toes in it, smiling softly.

Ryker plops down next to me and watches my feet. “What are you doing?” he asks as the others join us, Cade on my other side and Grayson next to Ryker.

I sigh and rest my head against Ryker’s shoulder. “Something my mom and I talked about when I was little. She used to give me bedtime stories about Princess Brielle that saved a lost girl, which I now know was herself. But in the story, my mom said that whenever the lost girl was feeling sad, she would go out to the beach and push her toes in the sand. It made her feel safe and at peace. She told me one day she hoped I’d get to do that, and now I have.”

I take a breath and close my eyes. “At first, I was so proud of myself. I became the warrior princess in my mom’s bedtime stories. I knew she’d be proud. Then I found out about what her life was like and how I was created, and I thought, I have to go get revenge for her. I *have* to make it right.”

“You’re talking about killing Rage?” Grayson asks.

I nod. “Yeah. I thought that was the first step. Kill my dad, find the people who killed my mom, get revenge against Tammy and Richard for how they treated me. But everything has gotten so messy since then. I don’t even know

what's up and down most days. I don't want to fail my mom. I want her to be proud of the person I am and what I do."

I watch as Ryker lines his foot up next to me and pushes his toes into the sand. "You're making her proud every day. I know it."

"How can you know that?" I whisper as tears spring in my eyes.

"Because," Cade rumbles next to me, leaning closer so our shoulders are touching, "we are proud of you. Look at what you've done. You survived. You are a fucking survivor, and you are working your ass off every day to heal."

Grayson picks up where Cade stops, "You could have given up. You could have thought that was it and not tried anything to fight and get out. But you got away. You did the impossible, and now you possibly get to save more people who have been hurt."

"I don't know if I can handle it. Look what happened when Nerds just told me about everything," I whisper, my lips curling into a frown.

Ryker grips my chin and turns my face up towards his, "You can handle it because you have us. You have an entire club at your side. We are in this together. It isn't going to be easy, but we lean on each other."

"When I went to Bri's, I thought I found family. I mean, I did. They *are* my family. But something was missing from it, and I think despite the reason I came here, I have found something here."

"What's that, my little flame?" Ryker asks.

I smile then. "My home. I feel at home here."

Ryker grins and kisses me until I'm breathless.

We all lay in the sand and talk for what feels like hours. They tell me stories about their friendship and when they came to live at the club. They tell

me things about Gabriel and how he has always been like a fun uncle to them, messing around with them and causing chaos.

Everything is peaceful, it feels normal, and I didn't really realize how much I needed this until now. There is so much to talk about when we get back, but for this moment, we are in a little bubble.

As the day goes on, it gets chillier, and now that we are mostly dry, we all get up and put our clothes back on.

"Um, can someone help me wipe all the sand off?" I ask, turning my back towards them. Ryker comes up behind me and starts wiping off my ass.

"You don't have to ask me for a chance to feel you up," he chuckles.

"Ryker, focus," I sigh, holding my hands out in exasperation.

Cade, who is already dressed, says he will be right back and walks back towards the path that goes up the cliff. Once Ryker is done copping a feel and actually helping me get the sand off, I get dressed. When we're done, we head back to the path and up to the bikes.

Grayson, who is ahead of me, stops mid-step, and I bump right into his back. "Ouch," I mumble and rub my nose. "Why did—"

The word dies on my tongue when I see a man leaning against Cade's bike. I glance around but don't see Cade anywhere nearby, which is odd because I watched him walk back to the trail.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and Grayson steps forward just as Ryker moves in front of me.

"Who the fuck are you?" he growls.

"No one you need to be concerned with. I just came to collect what is mine." That voice— I know that voice.

Fear like I haven't felt since *that day* floods my veins. I push Ryker to the side and step forward. His haunting eyes raise to meet mine, and my entire

world comes crashing down around me.

August 18th, 2015

“Harley, be strong. Be brave. You can do this. Remember what I've always told you.”

I think back to what she has told me every week since as long as I can remember, “If anything ever happens, you find an opening, and you run. You run, Harley. You leave me and run.” She used to make me repeat it back to her all the time.

I nod at her, and she closes her eyes and exhales.

I try to fight the man's hold, but he is stronger than I am. I cry out for my mom and claw at his arm. What is happening? Who are these people?

“What do you bastards want? The old fucker couldn't come deal with me himself? How did you even find me?”

“Oh, don't worry, the old fucker is here to deal with you himself,” says a voice from the front of the house.

A huge man comes into the room. I can see tattoos sticking out around his neck from the jacket he has on, and his lips are twisted into a cruel smirk. He walks up to my mom and starts hitting her everywhere.

I gasp, and that same cruel smirk slowly works its way over his face. He looks me up and down and licks his lips. “My, my, you have grown into a fine young woman,” he rasps.

The man who murdered my mom. The man who stole her from me. Who raped and beat her in front of my innocent, child eyes.

Don't panic, Harley. Taking a deep breath, I meet his gaze. "What exactly is it that you think belongs to you?" I demand.

His smirk grows into a huge smile. "Feisty." He groans, "You're making my dick hard already."

"Watch your fucking mouth," Ryker seethes, stepping towards him.

The man tsks, "I wouldn't do that if I were you." He whistles and more men step out from different areas surrounding us.

Then Cade is brought forward from the trees across the street and forced to his knees before us. Connor stands behind him, pulling a gun out and pointing it at the back of his head. *No.* This can't fucking be happening.

I gasp, and Ryker seethes next to me, "You fucking traitorous piece of shit. I'm going to kill you."

Connor raises a brow. "I don't think you're in any position to be making threats."

The man clears his throat and locks eyes with me. "Come with me peacefully, and we will let the boys live."

Ryker curses under his breath and glances at me. I know he is preparing to say no and try to fight our way out of this, so I nod and keep my eyes on the man.

I can't let them get hurt. No one else needs to die for me.

"I'll go."

To be continued...

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About the Author

Jessa L. James was born and raised in the lush greens of the Pacific Northwest. Her love of books began at a young age when thrilling adventures and magical cities sprang to life before her eyes in the form of words. Imagination, darkness, heroes, and villains filled page after page of her notebooks until one day a hobby became a passion. Reading transported her. Writing changed her. And now she hopes to spark the same joy and love of reading from her own words.