



*In the Light*  
**OF SIN**

*The Unforgiven Souls MC Book 2*

**JUNIPER NYX**

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IN THE LIGHT OF SIN

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In the Light of Sin

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*To those of you who had to numb yourself to forget.*

*You are seen. You are heard.*

*You're a lioness and I see your fight.*

*You're beautiful just the way you are.*



# Playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6NgAuVrtn53DwktUVU7Igg?si=e65fccd418d94538>

Dying on the Inside - Catch Your Breath

Slayer - Bryce Savage

@ my worst - blackbear

Popular Monster - Falling in Reverse

Cry Baby - Demi Lovato

Touch It - Ariana Grande

Monster - Skillet

pov - Ariana Grande

Cold - Crossfade

BLOW - Ed Sheeran, Chris Stapleton, Bruno Mars

Control - Puddle of Mudd

Coming Down - Five Finger Death Punch

Say Something - A Great Big World, Christina Aguilera

Come Back to Earth - Mac Miller

Addicted - Saving Abel

Beast (Southpaw Remix) - Busta Rhymes, KXNG  
Crooked, Rob Bailey & The Hustle Standard, Tech N9ne

Work Song - Hozier

When We - Tank

Inside the Fire - Disturbed

Hurt - Johnny Cash

Woman Like Me - Adele

Undiscovered - Laura Welsh

Still Learning - Halsey

Living Proof - Camilia Cabello

ICU - Demi Lovato

I Get Off - Halestorm

First - Cold War Kids

Feel Good - Gryffin, ILLENIUUM, Daya

Dancing With The Devil - Demi Lovato

Crowded Room - Selena Gomez, 6LACK

boyfriend - Ariana Grande, Social House

Bound To You - Christina Aguilera

Bad Intentions - Niykee Heaton, Migos, OG Parker

bad idea - Ariana Grande

And I Drove You Crazy - BANKS

Just Pretend - Bad Omens

# Introduction

Dear reader,

In the Light of Sin may have triggering content not suitable for readers under 18. For full list of content warnings please visit <https://junipernyx.com/in-the-light-of-sin>

# Disclaimer

*I'm not paying for your therapy bill.*

# Prologue: Sarge



*“They’re dead.”*

I was conscious, yet I had no control over my body. The crumpled sheets of the hospital bed on my bandaged skin were uncomfortable. My eyelids refused to open, only letting the darkness seep into every crevice of my body. Nothing worked. Nothing physically hurt.

There was nothing except the devastation left behind that plagued my very being.

*“They’re still picking up what’s left of them. There’s not much, though.”*

I wish I had control of my arms to ram my fist into whoever is talking. I didn’t want to hear it anymore. I couldn’t stand the new truth they were telling me.

*It should have been me. It’s all my fault.*

*Just let me die in fucking peace.*

*“You’re not going to die, Darin. That’d be too easy.”* The presence shifted closer to me, my body refusing to move away from the guilt even though I pleaded with the almighty to put me out of my misery. Didn’t he know I prayed the entire time I

tried to save them? He clearly didn't give a damn about us. Now, here I was.

Alone. Broken. A shell of a man I barely was before.

A man God himself gave up on, and scars to remind me that he did.

I felt the heat of the person by my side as they got closer to me, hammering the nail into the new foundation that my life was built upon. *"You're going to live with their deaths every day. Every time you look at your mangled hand, every time you see your worthless fucking face in the mirror, I hope you see them. I hope you see their wives and their children. Children who are going to grow up fatherless and widows who have no other options."*

*Please. Just go away...*

*"You were supposed to lead them."* The voice trailed off, my consciousness waning into the nightmares to come from their parting words. The echoes of their footsteps are something I won't forget. *"All you did was lead them to their deaths."*

I thought of them. The pictures they showed, the stories they shared. Unknown but hopeful futures. It was all we had any time we went on a mission.

Hope was all we had. We had to look forward to a future we weren't certain of.

And now, because of me, the hope they had died along with them.

*Why couldn't they have taken me with them?*

# Chapter 1: Joslyn



I couldn't hear. I could only feel the vibrations of the loud bass as it bounced around the room, as the tremors left ripples on the walls. Even deaf, I could tell this party was loud.

It was loud enough that it could drown out the cries for help, which was likely their intention.

The smell of alcohol and sex made my nose scrunch. Unease prickled at my skin from all the stares, the other patrons at the party wishing I wasn't here or worse. I could tell by their not-so-subtle glances that I didn't belong, which I didn't. I didn't then, and didn't now, and have no desire either.

My eyes sought out my sister, who was currently cheering for someone chugging something through a funnel. She's ignored me from the moment we stepped in here, not that I expected anything less. She didn't want me here—I certainly didn't want to be here. I was only here to save her... if I didn't agree to this, there was no telling what the Souls would've done to her.

I could only think that they already had an unmarked grave for her waiting—*still* waiting. They don't trust her. I don't blame them. But I refuse to give up on her.



*“She won’t stop abusing you until you quit enabling her, Joslyn.”*

Darrell’s words bounced around in my head, an action easier said than done. The guilt eating at me fueled my consciousness, telling me I had to help her because of what I did.

I sighed, accepting my fate. This was just penance for my past discretions. My eyes traveled to an inebriated woman, her dirty hair swinging back and forth as she downed the rest of whatever was in her red solo cup. My mouth watered at the sight, knowingly. I quickly averted my eyes and tried to swallow the dry, cottony taste from my mouth. I’m starting to panic. I can feel it. I’m sweating and starting to breathe too fast. I need to stay focused.

I’ve mastered hiding my urges around Nyla and Oakley during our girls’ nights. I am able to lock away a part of me that has consumed my every thought during the dark times after my parents died and brought the Bloods into our lives. My stupidity keeps them here, and Jordyn makes sure they remain a constant of a past I wish more than anything I could take back.

If only I had just accepted what happened to me instead of drowning it out, maybe Jordyn and I would still be close. She protected me from everything instead of doing everything in her power to ensure I suffered.

I disliked crowds, but crowds full of drunken men were at the top of my *‘I hate this’* list. Feeling unnerved at all of the

bloodshot eyes starting to focus on me from standing in one place too long, I decided to move. Just like everything else that was supposed to be simple, moving through the crowd wasn't as easy as I'd hoped. Each body I passed stood stock still. Even when I tried politely tapping them in hopes they moved, they just smirked at me and stood more in my way, making it extremely uncomfortable having to shimmy through. I didn't want to touch these people. Their bodies are slick with who knows what, and they have awful body odor. The mingling smells of malt, sex, and sweat make my already anxious stomach roll.

*Keep it together, Joslyn. You're doing this for Jordyn.*

I tried to get in the center of the party to see if the wire I had on would catch any good information about the Flock for the Souls. If anyone was going to take them down, it was them.

And they needed to be stopped...

My mind went to poor Clarissa. There haven't been any updates about her since Greyson and Ace helped her back home from the compound, but I could only hope she was coping in a healthy manner.

*Greasy hair. Predatory eyes. Threatening whispers in my ear.*

I sucked in a breath, eyes slamming shut to will the ghost of him away. His face made my resolve grow, giving me more nerve to complete this mission. Even though I couldn't hear the words being said, they were all transcribing through the

wire that Darrell had me wearing. I just hope it's working, and I won't sweat the adhesive off. When we tested it earlier today, it was very clear, but there's no telling what I'm picking up now that I've actually been thrown into this nightmare.

I was just a lamb in a den of wolves who knew they could play with me but chose the right moment to attack.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I thought of the big bad wolf who raised all sorts of Hell about me coming here. In the end, sedation was threatened, and he wouldn't have been here for me at all, a thought that apparently scared him more than me coming here by myself. But I had to do this. People's lives were at stake. My life paled in comparison.

Besides, the only reason I was even allowed in here was because of my enabling Jordyn. She believes there's no way I could still be associated with the Souls, especially since they've done their best to lay low and stay clear of our childhood home. It's not like the Souls could even disguise themselves anymore, as their wanted posters and info are strewn all around this party. I'm just going to assume it's that way at all the Bloods' regular haunts.

I could feel eyes on me, burning their way over me as I continued my way through the bodies. I know he's here—just outside in the shadows—always watching. I've learned to embrace the darkness that has become my new shadow.

And now, when I felt a pair of eyes I have yet to see, I felt comfort knowing that he would sooner break the neck of someone who's wronged me than harm me.

It felt nice, someone being in your corner for once.

Maybe if I had that reassurance and comfort when I was sixteen, my life wouldn't have turned out this way.

The other viable reason for me being here is the Bloods... well they weren't run by a bunch of scholars. And since the Souls took out half of their members, it was a massive blow to the organization and its numbers. According to Jordyn, this disgusting nightmare I'm currently wading through is a recruitment party.

Looking around, seeing all the white powder residue, bags of what seemed to be every pill on the market, and the men with their heads tilted back, hands buried in the hair of whatever poor woman was sucking their dicks, I wasn't hopeful for the future of the Bloods. Not that I ever was.

But now they had the Flock on their side. Who knows what kind of reinforcements they were giving the Bloods.

Trying to get my bearings on where I've ended up in this hell hole, I see a group of men huddled in the corner. There were three of them, all tall and lanky from apparent drug use if the tract marks on their elbows were any indication. Their skin was pale, grayish in the dim lighting. One was sporting a buzz cut, while the other two had unkempt, greasy shoulder-length hair. They were each holding their own bottle of beer by the neck. I told myself repeatedly to stay calm, even though my eyes were locked on the bottles they had in their grasps and not their moving lips to catch some of what they were saying.

With bodies deliberately running into me, I closed in on them, acting like I was getting a bottle from the table close to them. I had to keep up the ruse, using the edge of the table to pop the tab open.

The malty scent wafted into my nose, my mouth watering at how close my temptation was. All I had to do was bring the bottle to my lips and tilt my head back, letting my old vice consume me yet again. Knowing it was wrong but feeling so right, I began to raise the opening closer to my lips as the world around me disappeared—

A rough hand gripped my shoulder, bringing me out of my thoughts and off the ledge in my mind. My eyes instantly widened as I was harshly whipped around. Trying to keep my feet under me, I looked up to face a damn near growling man. He was clearly inebriated and furious. My eyes immediately fall to his mouth, realizing he's grinding out words at me.

*Focus. You're life literally might depend on it.* My hearing aids were rendered virtually ineffective from the moment I stepped in here, so trying to read his lips is my only option. The stench of alcohol coming off his breath had me suddenly throwing my head to the side to avoid it.

Wrong choice.

His hand grabbed my shoulders roughly, shaking me with his teeth clenched tightly together. The aggressive jolts of movement caused my aids to blare even louder than before, my body tensing up and my eyes slamming shut. I have to try to play this off so I don't give it away. He grabbed a fistful of

my dress, slightly ripping the fabric as he dragged me through the crowd. My mind was paralyzed by fear. Oh God, was he going to find the wire? Was he going to rip it off of me and broadcast my betrayal to the entire party of people who wouldn't hesitate to put an end to me? They were already looking for a reason to. This guy finding the wire would just make it more justified to them. The wire was taped between my breasts, not the most ideal place, but a place that wouldn't be the first choice for someone to grab.

I would be caught if his hand moved downwards and to the right. I had to keep my composure and follow him even though every thought in my head told me to claw his hand off my body and run. But I couldn't. Where would I go? I had a better chance at survival going with the man who might literally kill me.

My feet were moving without consent as my eyes shot around the crowd, looking for a savior in a room full of people who would surely just tell me I deserved whatever this man had planned for me. My eyes suddenly stop on Jordyn's. My own shade of emerald green mirrored back at me. By design, they are identical, but by years of wrong roads taken, they are vastly different.

Mine looked at hers with fear and desperation.

Hers with a cold glint that can only be perceived as *you deserve this*.

My stomach sank as I watched her with the catty women surrounding her. I could tell by the way her mouth was moving

that they were all laughing at my misery, a smirk on Jordyn's lips as she sent me off with a mocking wave.

My heart dropped to my stomach. She was just going to let this man do whatever he wanted to me? Whatever his intentions were, I could feel it radiating off of him was a dire situation for me. I'd been to the Bloods' parties in the past. At the end of the day, there was always an unfortunate soul covered in blood, never to open their eyes again.

Tonight, it looks like that poor individual might be me.

I knew coming to this party was a bad idea. But saving Jordyn was worth it... even if she did nothing but shoot me a smug look as I was dragged off by a total stranger with ill intent.

It was my fault. I deserve to suffer whatever consequence I had coming in order to save her from herself.

My eyes burned at her reaction. My mind rationalizes that I deserved it and it was my fault. What was even the point of fighting him? I was only five foot three, and he had to be almost six feet tall and wide enough to fit three of me inside of him. Even if I tried to fight him, there's no chance the people at this party would care enough to bat an eye. They'd let me be swept away like they were doing right now.

He was moving us swiftly through the party, the Bloods and potential new members parting like the Red Sea for him with grins on their faces. I was glad I couldn't hear their chants as this stranger led me to the door. Someone opened it for easy access for my assailant, slamming it behind us as we

stepped onto the porch. The walls must've been soundproof since as soon as the door clicked, the sounds disappeared, allowing me to hear my surroundings again. Panic settled in as he began to drag me down the stairs—

The man's grip on my shirt disappeared when his foot touched the sidewalk. I still couldn't hear anything as my head swiveled in every direction. I gripped my chest to ease my heaving breaths. I pinpointed two figures on the side of the building: my attacker and a giant shadow of a man brawling against the mortar. The slight relief I felt from being freed from my attacker's grasp, but fear racked into my body as his top half slammed against the brick siding. His hands clawed at the larger man, trying to get him to relinquish his hold. His struggle became more desperate as he was slammed against the mortar, head rippling painfully as it made contact.

Again.

And again.

I wasn't sure if the red coloring was from the brick or the blood seeping from the back of his head.

The side of the house was shaking, and I couldn't tell if it was my own trembling or my attacker's body being rammed into the dilapidated old brick.

One final slam and his struggling stopped. He went slack, neck drooping to the side and chest unmoving as the dark figure breathed heavily. I couldn't see his hidden expression due to the hood he always wore. The man's lifeless body dropped to the ground, never to move again. All I could do



was stare unblinking, both of us still heaving calm breaths in the stunned silence now enveloping us. His growl zapped from my shock and back into reality from my drunken stupor.

“Touch her and fuckin’ die.” His words were as dark as the shadow that hid his face from the world. He turned around, suddenly more collected, looking every bit as menacing as the day I met him all those months ago at the Unforgiven Souls’ clubhouse.

“You okay?” His gravelly tone sent goosebumps down my body.

I think I forgot how to speak. Every time I opened my mouth, no words came out, so I settled for nodding my head, trying not to focus on the burning behind my eyes.

Sarge moved towards me, and I involuntarily flinched, taking a step back. He paused and held his steady hands out in caution, “I’m not gonna hurt you, Sunshine.”

*Sunshine.*

The name he let slip past his lips made all the darkened clouds invading my thoughts disperse.

*I opened my door, knowing he was watching me from outside. I knew he couldn’t resist correcting my seemingly careless act - leaving myself open to the unknown dangers of the Bloods and the Flock. The two gangs were like a dark plague in our quaint city of Diamond Ridge. No one was safe.*

*I grinned as I put my hearing aids in. The first sound breaking through was the slamming of my front door. His boots*

*pounding in time with my heartbeat. His aggravated growl was like music to my ears.*

*“What the fuck do you think you’re doin’, Sunshine?” I froze. Sunshine? That’s new. He was obviously too worked up to realize what he called me. “Are you askin’ for someone to come in here and hurt you?”*

*“No.” My reply was easy, coming off my lips as a smile spread to the edges. “I was waiting for you to come in and stop hiding behind that tree. I get lonely at night, ya know?”*

*His growl was menacing but something I could easily brush off. He’s had this temperament since day one. At first, it was intimidating, but then I learned that it was just how Sarge was.*

*And he did everything but terrify me.*

*“Joslyn.” His baritone voice was lower as he caught my attention again. “If I have to ask again, I’m gonna shoot this fuckin’ place up. Are. You. Okay?”*

*My chin dipped without permission, eyes trained on the limp body on the ground. Shivering at the thought that just moments ago, he was dragging me through an uncaring crowd at his mercy. “Is he dead?”*

*Sarge didn’t look in his direction, instead just shrugging a large shoulder. “Hopefully.”*

*An awkward laugh escaped my lips. I laid a trembling hand over my forehead, unsure of what to say or feel about Sarge just taking someone’s life in front of me. I know he’s*

killed before. It might as well be the bare minimum required to be in an unlawful motorcycle club.

A grimace smile strained my lips, remembering the first night I met the Souls. Darrell, the gun, that man's blood splattering on every surface and body within reach. It felt so long ago, but it's only been five months. "Is killing people in front of me going to be a habit with you guys? This is the second one in five months."

"Would rather see their blood than your tears."

I knew he meant that, making my eyes soften. Since day one, Sarge has always been in my vicinity in some way. Be it simply watching me across a room or from behind the giant oak tree in my front yard, I've felt his eyes on me every day for these few months.

Always watching me, and tonight was no different. Thank God for it.

I might be dead if it wasn't for his watchful eyes.

"Thanks." I reached into my shirt, feeling the wire between my breasts, signing in relief that it was still in place. His face was pointed at the area, making me thankful that the only light around was the porch light. It wasn't bright enough to expose the way my face heated under his stare.

I pulled it out, tired of the deceit I was knowingly helping with. "Here. I don't know if it caught anything, but--"

"Joslyn!" Breaking our eye contact, our heads snapped to the front of the house. Sarge immediately stepped closer to

me, ever my protective shadow. My eyes tracked a wild Jordyn as she blew through the front screen door, slamming it shut behind her. She barreled down the steps before stopping dead in her tracks, eyes widening at Sarge. She obviously still remembered him from Hellbound. “Oh God. You’re still associated with them?”

“If you were actually around, you would’ve known,” Sarge countered as he stepped further in front of me, nearly blocking my sister from my view. I tentatively stepped forward, gripping the back of his hoodie as I peeked around his body at my twin. Fear was very much present in her eyes as she tried and failed to stand her ground at the giant biker in front of her. I could see she was breaking.

“You killed them.” Her voice was shaky, and she took a stabilizing step back. “You killed my friends.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t join them,” his words came out clipped and precise, as always. My gut churned with unease at just how close my sister came to dying that night. “Joslyn’s the only reason you got breath in that used-up body of yours.”

“Once again, she ruins everything!” Jordyn’s frustration showed through her shout. The alcohol coursed through her, letting the truth slip through her loose lips. Trying to somewhat contain her emotions, she bent forward, resting her hands on her knees. Her breaths coming in waves, she finally whispered, “I wish you killed me.”

The lump I swallowed past threatened to choke me. Jordyn wished for death more than life. Every time the paramedics

showed up with Narcan, she would cry and fight because she didn't want to wake up again. And, like it was my duty, the rest of the night would be spent taking care of her, praying she didn't get violent again. We shared the same eye color but not the same amount of life in them.

Mine shone bright, people comparing them to emeralds, while hers looked dull, lifeless like the moss on the side of a rock.

Because of me.

Jordyn was like this because of me.

“Trust me, there's nothing I'd rather do than see you grey-skinned and lying on the fuckin' ground.” My knuckles turned white as I gripped the fabric of Sarge's clothing tighter. This whole night has been too much. I can't even hear myself think anymore. I can't hear this right now. I wanted to scream at him for saying unjust things to my sister, but I couldn't. I fought with myself. Part of me wanted to defend her, but the other part still tried to come to terms with her actions earlier. I still can't believe how she looked at me.

She watched as a stranger dragged me from the house. Who knows what he would've done to me.

“I'll be waiting for that bullet, you fucking freak.” She tried to look around Sarge's side to get a look at me, but he refused. A high-pitched laugh left her lips, reminding me of a patient in a psych ward... “Watch your fuckin' back, deaf girl. If anyone from the Bloods sees you after tonight, I won't be the only one with a bullet waiting for me.”

Sarge immediately charged Jordyn. She screamed, attempting to scurry back and escape him but failing when he latched his hand around her throat. His body was heaving, and anger was rolling off his large frame. “If you or any one of these other pieces of shit come near Joslyn again, I’m going to make you believe I’m the fuckin’ devil reincarnate. Get me?” She could barely touch her toe to the gravel, scratching desperately at his hand. She tried to swallow and kicked again, unable to take her eyes off the man currently holding her life in his hands. “Now get out of my fuckin’ sight before Joslyn sees her sister die.”

Sarge finally let her drop, and she gasped for air. She didn’t need to be told twice, turning on unsteady feet and running back toward the house. “Gotta go before the wannabes come out here.”

I nodded numbly, still unable to fully process the events of the last hour. Instead, I slowly followed my shadow towards his bike. His bike has become something familiar to me in the past five months. He doesn’t let me fully hold onto him, but he does make sure I’m always wearing a helmet with my fists securely gripping his hoodie. I’m hyper-aware of my body when we ride. I’m barely allowed to hold his hoodie for support, so I make damn sure my thighs stay off his as much as possible, and I never lean into his body. Even when my instincts push me to.

Once I’m securely on and my fists find their place at his back, he revs his engine and speeds off, throwing gravel on this horrible night behind us. Goosebumps pepper my body,

and I have to take several more deep, calming breaths if I hope to make it home in one piece.

Even if Sarge saved me, I still felt like I was falling apart.

## Chapter 2: Joslyn



Sarge turned onto an unknown dirt path, surrounded by the shade of the trees. The headlight of his motorcycle was the only thing guiding us across the rough terrain. The smell of dew on the grass seeped through the opening of the helmet Sarge always made me wear while on the back of his bike. I felt myself crack the smallest smile, sighing contentedly. I was finally allowing myself to get lost in the ride as the fireflies danced alongside us, lighting up the darkness that stretched out through the trees. My body relaxed, and my grip loosened, watching them with the bike lulling me in a way I've become familiar with just recently.

He must've felt this since he revved his engine, getting my attention and returning me to reality.

A place I didn't want to live in. I'd rather be like these lightning bugs, free from all the pain that came with tumultuous emotions from things we didn't deserve to happen to us but we would feel until our caskets were closed and lowered into the lonely space six feet under.

My fingers dug into his cut, fists shaking as the vibration of Sarge's motorcycle rippled goosebumps along my skin, my mind numbing itself from the pain of what just happened at the recruitment party. That man lying dead in the gravel, the



confrontation with my twin, the ungodly loud bass rattling my brain. I still feel the remnants of the ringing in the migraine I'm currently nursing. Still, it was nothing compared to what I unexpectedly endured the first time I hopped on the back of his bike.

*I was trying to hold in the tears as the engine's vibrations blasted into my hearing aids, making my eardrums feel like they were exploding. The everyday pains here and there aren't even on the same pain scale. Mixed with the absolute fright that seeped into my bones at the fact that I was on the back of a stranger's motorcycle for the first time. My tiny fists were white-knuckling his hoodie, hanging on the only way I was apparently allowed to. When I tried to wrap my arms around him to stabilize myself, a low, threatening growl radiated from within him and scared me into submission.*

*But the longer we rode, the more speed he gained. The louder the screeching in my aids became, I was sure they would be bleeding. I wasn't sure if it was from the deafening engine mixing with the frequency of my hearing aids, the helmet crushing them into my ears further, or both. It was definitely both. Add on top of that the implosion of my little world being blown wide open, showing me all the darkness that lay hidden from not only me but the two most important people in my life.*

*The emotional hardship from the party at Hellbound and someone being murdered right in front of us, mixed with the physical pain from the loud engine, was entirely too much. I couldn't take any of this anymore.*

*My eyes welled up, my heartbeat increasing as my body intrusively itched to jump off the bike, not caring about the consequences. I was already in pain. Scratching my skin on the pavement would be a bee sting compared to feeling this.*

*He revved the engine, making the pain escalate to the point that the tears I was desperately trying to keep in came cascading down. I completely let go of his cut. Raising my fist, I beat on his back with everything I had left. It had to stop. The pain I was feeling, both physically and emotionally, was worth whatever consequence this would have.*

*A small part of me hoped death would come and give me the first reprieve from the pain I've felt since I was sixteen.*

*My hand gripped his clothing again when his motorcycle swerved. I would've been thrown off if I didn't have a solid grip, but obviously, he wasn't expecting me to hit him. He pulled to the side of the road, the pressure coming off my ears, but it didn't provide relief. I was still shaking, both from lingering pain and the newfound fear instilled in me from the large shadow of a man in front of me. His chest was heaving as his breath came out rasped.*

*“Get. Off.”*

*The lump in my throat threatened to choke me at his command as I ungracefully got off the bike. A part of me wanted to escape as I quickly glanced around. A man his size couldn't be quick enough to get me, right?*

*The other part of me wanted to stay put. I couldn't even form a complete thought properly yet. I definitely couldn't*

*outrun this beast of a man without quickly trying to calm myself back down and get myself together. He was gentle with me at the clubhouse, my mind going when I tripped over the leg of the chair, and he made sure that I didn't fall flat on my face. My top teeth sank into my bottom lip, debating life-preserving options when his baritone voice shouted at me, "What the fuck!"*

*I turned. His black denim jeans and a black hoodie with the sleeves cut off overlaid with his cut, making his already dark persona more intimidating. There was nothing soft in his barely-said words when we took off from the clubhouse. No more was the biker who had snapped at his club president for me.*

*My hands went to my ears, ripping out the plastic, ignoring the pain as they scraped against the skin. I felt relief, even if it was just a little. My eyes shut, trying to focus on making my quickened breathing slow breathing in my nose and out of my mouth. My heart rate was slowing, and my other senses were enhanced since I couldn't hear. I felt the way Sarge walked towards me without hearing the crunching gravel beneath the black combat boots he always wore.*

*"I can't see your lips." He paused. I knew my words were loud. I lacked sound control when my hearing aids were out. "I can't understand you." I sucked in a breath, loving the silence but feeling guilty I was purposely ignoring him in favor of my pain. "Hurts." My ears felt like someone was taking a soldering iron to them. I didn't realize how painful riding a*

*motorcycle would be with my hearing aids. Sarge tilted his head as I continued to speak. "It hurts."*

*I knew we weren't going to get anywhere unless I put them back in. He wouldn't touch me, and I was too afraid to move under his scrutiny. Feeling defeated for the second time tonight, I begrudgingly put back my painful hearing devices. Sucking in a sharp breath when they brushed against the newly formed cuts from when I ripped them out moments earlier. I looked at him, silently indicating that I could hear him again.*

*"What?" His question was rough, making me flinch. "What hurts?"*

*"My ears. Loud noises make them hurt. But your motorcycle makes it feel like someone is ripping them off my body." I rubbed soothing circles into the skin even though the pressure was lifted off of them, but it felt like a loud horn just went off, the ripple effects still ringing in my ears.*

*I wish I could see his face to gauge what he was thinking, the hood making the already closed-off man more mysterious. The only skin visible on him was his arms and the sliver of his chin his hood couldn't hide.*

*It was hard to keep from looking at the taut skin marking his left arm. It was obvious this man had been in some type of fire or chemical explosion. If his left arm looked like that, there was no telling what he hid beneath his hood.*

*We were both hiding something. He hid his face behind his clothing, and I hid my pain behind my smile. But now the*

*plastered emotion is so carefully crafted that it is chipping away, no longer believable to anyone that I was trying to convince I was fine.*

*I'd never been so scared in my life. People seeing me without my happy facade only garnered pitiful looks from desperate eyes.*

*I wanted to mend people of those looks, not those of mine. It was the only way I knew how to save myself, giving others a broken piece of my soul. But... it was wearing on me.*

*I was running out of pieces to give.*

*"Hey." My eyes snapped open, looking at the ominous scarred chin that peaked out from his hood. That was all I'd ever seen of this man they called Sarge. There was no way that it was his real name. It made him that much more terrifying.*

*People only used their names when they didn't want to be known. Mitchell wanted himself to be known by us to get to Nyla, the manipulation having a profound effect, but this man? No leeway, no one here to save me if things went astray. It was just me and him.*

*The faceless man and the woman who hid behind a fake smile.*

*"Y-Yes?" I replied to his question, rapidly blinking my way out of my trance.*

*"Take 'em out."*

*I blinked. "What?"*

*“Your hearin’ aids. Take ‘em out.”*

*“But—”*

*“For fucks sake,” he grumbled, his irritation rising by the second. “They hurt you. Put ‘em back in when we get to my place.”*

*“We’re going to your place?”*

*“Joslyn,” he growled, done with my resistance. “Be in pain on the way there or don’t. Either way, you’re getting back on this fuckin’ bike.”*

*I guess that settles that. I reached into my pocket, pulled out my hearing aid case, and grimaced as I pulled them out of my tender ears. They were the old shelled hearing aids, the only ones I could afford at the time, and I haven’t had time to replace them since.*

*He turned, expectantly trying to get me to follow, and with blind loyalty, I did because if I were to die, I wanted it to be quick. Not ripped apart by coyotes in bum-fuck Egypt.*

The headlight illuminated a clearing in the trees, exposing a simple one-story house. The light reflected off the huge window panel and illuminated a quaint wraparound porch, a single rocking chair occupying it.

It felt... lonely. If I didn’t know this was his house, I wouldn’t think anyone had lived here in years.

Sarge pulled his motorcycle right up to the steps before cutting the engine, his long legs stabilizing the bike so I could get off. I reached for my hearing aids, putting them back in so

I could have our usual one-way conversation with one another. “I expected the woods, but I didn’t expect your house to be this small. Do you even fit?”

He shrugged. “I live simple. Bigger on the inside.”

“I would hope so. I’m just imagining you sleeping on the floor with your feet hanging out the door. Can’t be comfy.”

He snorted as he walked to the door, knowing I would follow him. He opened the glass storm door before putting his thumb on a black panel. It lit up as a ping sounded and the lock unlatched. He opened the door, the cold air from the inside of the house like a blast chiller from the muggy night air.

Walking inside, my head went left to the open-concept kitchen. White refrigerator, white stove, white countertops... white everything. And not one speck of dirt or dust. I could still smell the bleach he used to clean lingering in the air. I didn’t fail to notice that the ceilings were high to accommodate Sarge’s height.

As my eyes scanned to the right, I noticed there was no dining room. The kitchen stretched into the living room, where a TV was hanging on the wall with a solitary white recliner.

I felt like I was in a sanitarium instead of a person’s home. I could feel the beginning of a migraine due to the strong chemical smell that still lingered.

I did one last sweep around the open floor plan of his home, and he was right. It looked a lot bigger on the inside

than on the outside. Even though the light reflected off the white like a beacon, it was almost blinding.

The space was as unwelcoming as Sarge was, the single furniture a statement that it was a cabin for one. A simple message that screamed, *'I live alone and want to be alone.'*

I heard the clang of his keys as Sarge methodically hung them on the key rack that was bolted to the door above an entryway table. He stood straight as my confusion morphed into fear as he pulled a gun out from a hidden compartment on the wall. "Stay here."

I stayed stock still, willing myself to not even twitch as he went around the small living space, then down an unknown hallway. I could hear his daunting footsteps echo and the door squeak open as I suspected he entered what I assumed was the only bedroom, making sure no one was in there. His footfalls became louder as his large body passed the threshold into the entry area, tucking the gun in the back of his jeans. "Clear."

I assume that means the house was clear of someone hiding in here. I guess it would be a concern living out in the middle of the woods like he did. Lost hunters and runaway kids and all. I watched as he walked into the kitchen. He squatted down under his kitchen sink and pulled out a container of disinfecting wipes before wiping a section of the counter off, then tossing it in the trash bin before turning to a cabinet I knew I couldn't reach and pulled out a... bath towel?

What kind of person keeps bath towels in a kitchen cabinet? A psychopath, that's who.



He laid the plush towel over the area he had just disinfected before turning his head toward me. “Come here.”

“You really are crazy, aren’t you? What sane person keeps bath towels in the kitchen cabinet?”

He ignored me. “Come. Here.”

“Do you know how to say please?”

“*Now*, Joslyn,” his raspy voice snapped back.

I was debating on listening, his threat earlier coming to mind. Would he really touch me? He’s made it clear he didn’t want to. Any other day, and I’d play with him a bit, but after the night I had, I wasn’t exactly in the mood to be manhandled in case his threat was true. I was overstimulated enough.

I slowly made my way to the counter, feeling his eyes that I’d never seen before on me. I wasn’t really coordinated, and the counter came up to my waist. This should be interesting. This house truly was made for a giant.

I bit my lip as I turned to face him, planning on using my hands to push my body to sit on the counter—

Strong, calloused hands gripped my hips. It was odd with some of his fingers missing as he lifted me up like my weight was nothing, placing my ass on a towel on the counter. In this position, I was taller, my eyes coming up to his scarred ones that slightly slipped from the darkness.

He recoiled his hands once I was fully seated, like my touch burned him. He dug in his pocket, grabbing hand

sanitizer and putting it on his hands as he said, “Take your shirt off.”

I blinked, obviously not hearing him right. “Excuse me?”

“Take your shirt off. Need to see if he gave you a bruise.”

Instinctively, my hands crossed my chest, cheeks heating up. “No way! He didn’t hurt me—”

“He put his fuckin’ hands on you, Joslyn. He hurt you.”

I looked down. I couldn’t deny that. He didn’t physically hurt me, but a mental reminder would always be at the back of my mind. “Not physically—“

He grew tired of my refutes. “Take it off, or I’ll rip it off.”

My face flushed. I wasn’t wearing anything underneath my shirt. My breasts weren’t big enough to wear a bra for most occasions, not to mention how uncomfortable they were.

I knew he wasn’t joking about ripping my shirt off of me, and that thought made my skin crawl. My eyes glazed over, unwanted images starting to invade—

I shook my head. I wanted to be in control, and if I had to make a choice, I’d be the only one undressing myself.

No one was allowed to undress me ever again. I’d rather die.

I tried to ignore Sarge’s face locked on the way my hands gripped the hem of my shirt. I dragged the wrinkled material up my body and over my head, trying to ignore the burning I felt in every nerve. As soon as my shirt was over my head, I

heard a sharp inhale of breath as the chilly air hardened my nipples, and I rushed to cover myself from his gaze.

“Fuck.” His grunt spread more fire to my face. I shifted the corner of my eyes towards him, noticing his head was directed pointedly at my chest.

My chin dipped as I looked at the ground, embarrassed by being this exposed to him.

No one has seen me exposed since I’d gotten sober four years ago.

His hand reached up, fingertips barely a whisper above where the man gripped my shirt. I couldn’t feel anything other than my heart that was threatening to beat out of my chest. I’m sure he could see it thumping against the skin if he didn’t feel the stuttering beneath his fingers. I knew his eyes weren’t on my chest as he said, “Nothing there.”

I knew there wouldn’t be. The man’s hands only gripped the neckline of my shirt, but he was the least of my worries. Not when I felt Sarge’s intensity manifesting throughout me. I began to squirm, still unable to look at him, so I didn’t notice how his knuckles made their way up my body and barely tapped my chin to draw my attention to him.

My heart thumped in my useless ears as I craned my neck to look at him. His head was tilted down in my direction. My proximity to the lighting was so bright that I swore I could almost see into the darkness of his hood.

A side of Sarge no one has ever seen besides Darrell.

Both of his palms rested on the counter at my sides, trapping me as I turned my head away from his, my attention landing on the blinding wall to my left. In the months Sarge and I had known each other, there hasn't been any familiarity. It was just him blending in with the darkness of the night, watching me through my bedroom window.

Now, there was no pane of glass between us. No panicking over who was out there watching me. I knew neither of us knew what to do with this overwhelming tension between us was or was becoming. The light around Sarge was getting brighter. Seeing his home, the way he lived...

I was seeing a side to Sarge no one else dared to discover. He wasn't the man who flinched at the sight of someone being killed and wasn't afraid to do the killing, as he showed tonight. No. He was the man who assigned himself as my personal protector without hesitation from my enemies and the clubs.

A task no one asked him to do, but he decided to anyway. I don't know why he felt the need to watch over me. Part of me yearned for answers. The other part was just thankful I was sober enough to recognize someone was trying to help me.

My eyes burned thinking about Jordyn and how I ruined her life because she was trying to help me, and I was too drunk to see it.

If Sarge ever knew the details of the drunken blur that was five years of my life, he'd never see me the same.

I didn't want him to view me as my past mistakes or my... disability.

“Hey.”

I wanted him to see me as Joslyn Monroe.

“Joslyn, look at me.”

The girl who’s trying to pick up the pieces of a past that can never be mended.

“Joslyn!”

I jumped slightly at the force of his voice, looking at him from the corner of my eye. I couldn’t see his expression, but his stance dared me to look away from him.

“I would hurt anyone else. But never you.”

My breath hitched as my circling thoughts came to a halt. Sarge was a man of few words, but hearing that come from him was something I was never expecting. He was a complex man, and in the handful of times we were together, he’d been mostly gentle with me, but he’d also kept me at arm’s length.

What an enigma this man was. And they said women were unpredictable.

Despite the surprise of his words, I couldn’t help but smile. “I know.”

I felt his eyes on me as the tension between us increased. Scenes like this in movies usually end with the heroine flattened on the kitchen table. Seeing as though Sarge didn’t have a table and this wasn’t a movie, I guess we’d just sit here awkwardly until one of us did something.

But we didn't have to. His cell phone ringing broke the tension between us. He growled as he pulled his phone out to answer it. "What!"

There were mumbled words over the receiver, Sarge's head still in the direction of where my forearms covered my chest. "You're not fuckin' talkin' to her tonight." I assumed it was someone from the Souls contacting him about the operation tonight. I couldn't help but let my smile linger as Sarge's protective side of me shone through again, like killing someone for me wasn't enough.

I should probably be more afraid of him than I was acting. I'd literally watched him bludgeon a man to death tonight for simply touching me.

He deserved it.

More disgruntled voices over the line. "Your fuckin' stunt almost got her killed. You can fuckin' wait!"

He threw his phone on the ground, the pieces scattering on the white tile as his body heaved, trying to calm himself down. So much for kind Sarge, but I shouldn't be surprised that his fuse was so short, either. Hopefully, he had replacement phones. "Phones are expensive, you know."

"Got more," was his simple reply as he stepped away from me, walking to the closet and pulling out a broom and dustpan. "Guest bedroom is down the hall, first room on the right."

"The man who lives alone has a guest bedroom? How scandalous."

“You’re the first one to ever use it.”

“Am I the first person who’s ever been in here?”

A pause. “Yeah.”

“Aww, you’re making me feel all warm inside, Sarge.” I laughed as I hopped off the counter, pulling my shirt back on. My mania was high right now, but as soon as I was alone, I knew it would wash out of me in waves. Would he get mad if there were mascara stains on his pristine pillowcases? I guess I would find out and suffer the consequences later. “You should get some sleep yourself. Not everything has to be cleaned up right away.”

“Military training,” his voice was almost scripted as he pitched the pieces of his phone into the garbage bin. “Cleanliness is effectiveness.”

“Is that why you try to clean up my messes?”

He was quiet as he walked over to the towel, picking it up from the counter before turning to me. “Go to sleep, Joslyn.”

I wasn’t going to push my luck tonight.

“Goodnight, Sarge,” my voice was soft as I felt his eyes on me as I made my way to the guest bedroom and flicked the light on, almost blinded by the brightness of everything. Of course, it was colorless and neat. Right down to the tucked corners of the bedding. Hopefully, he didn’t hate me for messing them up. I may be five foot three, but my starfish sleeping style took up an entire queen-sized bed.

My chin wobbled as I closed the door, immediately flopping myself onto the unwrinkled bedding, burying my face into the unblemished fabric.

I tainted everyone's lives; the white will just show the ugliness more.

\* \* \*

I stifled my yawn as I made my way out of Sarge's comfortable guest room. Of course, the bedding, the walls, and the carpeted floor were all pristine white. Didn't he know that the blood of his enemies would stain white? But the bed was like a pillow, swallowing all of my sorrows for the night.

Unfortunately, today was a new day to face my traumas. How fun.

I hope he didn't mind me taking one of his shirts. I wasn't planning on staying the night and didn't want to sleep in my shirt and pants, even if his shirt reached below my knees and could be considered a dress. But this one was much more comfortable than the moderately skintight dress I wore last night.

And an added bonus? It smelled just like Sarge. Woodsy like the trees that surrounded his hidden sanctuary.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, my footsteps light as I exited the hallway. My feet immediately stopped moving as I spotted Sarge, my mouth falling open at the view in front of me.

*Holy shit.*



Sarge was shirtless, the rippled muscles of his back exposed to me. I've only ever seen him in his cut-off sweatshirt he always wore. His arms were the usual, bulging with defined muscle as his palm rested on the counter, and he took a sip of whatever was in his mug. Trailing my eyes to his back, I noticed the taut skin of his left arm didn't stop there. No, it painted his back, too, more burned than smooth skin on his left side.

I itched to trace the uneven skin with my fingers, to try absorbing some of the pain that lingered along with his permanent scars.

I doubted the physical ones were the hardest scars he dealt with.

You could see the few wavy strands of his beautiful brown hair when he wore his hood. His chestnut hair was missing from the left side, the scars making their mark there. I never imagined that he would have such lush hair, the urge to run my hands through the waves making my fingers twitch. I love having my hair played with, but I doubt he felt the same.

“Sarge?”

The coffee cup he was bringing to his mouth stalled, his arm slightly shaking before he dropped the mug, pieces shattering before he put his hands over his face to hide himself even though his back was turned to me. “Close your fuckin’ eyes!”

I slammed my eyes shut and covered them with my hands as an added precaution. I could hear heavy footfalls as he

rushed out of the room, the slamming of a door rippling off the walls. I waited a few minutes, hoping I was clear from his potential warpath before I opened my eyes.

I glanced down the hall, hearing rustling in his room. My heart sank. He was so used to being alone he forgot I was here, invading his safe place. Sarge relied on routines to keep him sane, and here I was, disrupting all of them. My stomach fluttered, and I felt awful that he couldn't even enjoy his morning coffee unmasked due to me.

Like I said, I tainted everything. That included the simple things. Maybe Nyla would let me stay with her and Mitchell? Or maybe Oakley would be better? V was there a lot. I could possibly ward him off? I sighed, my mind running a mile a minute while I eyed the shattered mug on the tiled floor. The least I could do was clean the mess off the floor.

Walking to the kitchen, I debated which cabinet his broom and dustpan would be in. I opened the tallest cabinet, thinking it would be in there, but I was wrong.

*Very* wrong.

Two shelves full of top-shelf liquor stared back at me, drying my throat instantly. The door rattled as my hand began to shake, unable to take my eyes off my greatest temptation. Last night, I'd almost given in, something I would've regretted instantly and more than likely would've drunk that feeling away. I'd rather be drunk than disappointed in myself. I'd spent too many years feeling that way.

But at the end of the day, I'd rather feel nothing than the internal pain everyone told me was my imagination since they couldn't physically see it. Isn't that why people turn to anything to numb it? So they could physically see on the outside what trauma was doing to us on the inside?

I shut my eyes, slamming the cabinet door to the past closed. The past twenty-four hours have wreaked havoc on me. I'd been so careful to avoid any triggers, but somehow, they always call out to me like a test. I knew it would always be there...

Would I always be strong enough to resist it?

I had to focus on something else. I clamored through the cabinets, finally finding the broom and dustpan underneath the sink. I walked over to Sarge's mess, sweeping the shards methodically into the dustpan. All the pieces were already collected, but my mind was in an endless loop of familiar motions.

I barely noticed when Sarge came out of his room moments later, clothed in his usual attire of dark denim jeans, a cut-off sweatshirt with the hood encompassing his face, and his MC cut. I looked up at him from where I was kneeling on the kitchen floor, cleaning up the shattered mug and spilled coffee. "What are you doin'?"

"You like things clean," I replied with a smile as I stood up, hoping he didn't notice the mindless trance he broke. I dumped the pieces into the trash bin before walking to his God-awful bath towel cabinet to clean the coffee spill.

“Thought I would help out a bit? Only fair after you saved me last night.”

I don't think he liked me comparing my almost assault being equal to cleaning spilled coffee on the floor.

“You don't have to.”

I grabbed the soapy rag before kneeling down again, the lukewarm coffee coming up easily. “I want to. You're not used to people wanting to help you?”

He didn't answer, just watched me circle the cloth on his floor until the stain totally disappeared. I knew he didn't. He was a very independent man, and living out in the middle of nowhere was an obvious indicator of that. Honestly, I was shocked that he didn't have a hidden farm somewhere in the woods, so he didn't have to deal with people at the grocery store. “What's the plan for today, roomie?”

“Not my roommate.” I couldn't help but laugh at his grumble. He was the one that invited *me* here. I think I was allowed to call myself his roomie. “Gotta go to the club. Hear the shit you caught through the wire.”

“Ah.” My mood dipped, but I still tried my best to remain chipper. “So I just stay here?”

“No,” he growled. “Not stayin' here by yourself. This is my fuckin' space. You're already wearin' out your welcome.”

“You're the one who brought me here,” I huffed, crossing my arms under my breasts. “If I'm not wanted, why didn't you just drop me off somewhere else?”

I may not see his facial expressions, but his feverish growl told me he was growing more frustrated with my sass. “Didn’t trust anyone else to watch you.” I opened my mouth to ask him what he meant, but he cut me off. “Don’t have time for your shit. Take your hearin’ aids out, and let’s go.”

I couldn’t help but smile as he walked to his front door, not waiting to hear me out. It was just a small thing, but him telling me to take my hearing aids out before I rode with him because he knew it hurt to ride with them made me feel giddy. Someone remembering the small details about you always made you feel special.

“Joslyn!”

“Coming!” I chirped, practically skipping to the front door. I opened the storm door as he stepped out behind me, ensuring the front door was locked. “Ready to go to our second home?”

I snickered as he stomped past me, choosing not to entertain my jest.

Oh yeah, we were totally roommates.

# Chapter 3: Sarge



I fucking hated this.

This room. The walls.

Even if I knew I could trust every man in this room with my six, I still didn't want to be around them. There's a reason I lived secluded in the woods—so I didn't have to deal with anybody.

But I needed a brotherhood in my life. It was my second chance.

I looked around, seeing that everyone besides Hex and V were already here. They never arrived until the minute church actually started. I couldn't stand that, if you weren't fifteen minutes early you were late to me. Part of my job as Sergeant in Arms was ensuring my brothers were punctual. However, it was overruled when Grim explained that we're lucky if they showed up at all. Which was true. They would have both already been kicked out if this was any other club.

But we needed Hex here. V? Not so much. Even if he was kicked out of the club, he'd never leave. He's been in the club since day one, as loyal as a dog on a leash. And he was absolutely on a leash.

Out of all the members in the club, Hex, V, and I were the most alike. We're actions instead of words. The back line of the club. If you were ever unfortunate enough to see us come out of the shadows, you knew your time was up.

If you were on the Souls' radar in the first place, your death was coming. The three of us? We were like Hades' three-headed hound from hell.

I didn't know what Hex's deal was or why he was even part of this club. He was usually holed up in his room. No one knew what he did. Didn't care to know either. Judging by the dead-eyed snarl he typically led with, I'm sure it was something fucked up. But he was the only brother to actually live at the clubhouse. Everyone else had a room here, but we all had our own spaces.

V used to live at Hellbound and spend his days with his "toys." Toys being the dumbasses who were unlucky enough to get caught up in our web. V was the silent spider, slowly bleeding the life out of them. These days though, his toys were left rotting while he was over at Law's shy daughter's apartment, scaring the shit out of her just by existing. Oakley was afraid of her own shadow, and now she had one twice her size watching her every move. I didn't know all the details. I just knew that Law was gonna put a bullet in his head sooner rather than later.

Couldn't fuckin' believe someone as emotionless as V was suddenly and intensely fixated on a girl who bakes for a living, no less. Having been in the club for four years now, he's never

shown an interest in anything besides beating fuckers heads in with that bat of his. But if anyone used the wrong tone in Oakley's direction, without a doubt, he'd be digging their shallow graves. I thought it was always going to be that way.

Guess even the toughest of them had some type of weakness.

Blond hair, emerald eyes, and a smile that lit up the darkest rooms flashed through my head before I could block it out as I gritted my teeth. I slammed my eyes shut and willed her image away. She was already a temptation I'd stupidly indulged myself with and others had seen. That day in the interrogation where she tripped over the chair and I caught her, to the day where I went toe to toe with Prez was out of character for me. Anyone else, I would step over them after they had fallen flat on their face. I would have let the hateful way Prez spoke to them sink into their bones. But not her. I couldn't just stand there and let her be hurt.

And it pissed me off.

*She* pissed me off.

Joslyn Monroe wasn't my weakness. She was a fuckin' complication.

A weakness was something slipping through the cracks in your armor. I didn't have any cracks in my armor.

It was already completely shattered.

"Is Joslyn okay?"



My teeth were going to turn into dust if I kept grinding them. “Don’t you fuckin’ worry about her.”

“Nyla’s worried about her, asshole,” Grim shot back. “She wasn’t answering her last night after the party. What happened?”

“Isn’t that why we’re here?” I didn’t want to hear the replay of what happened, let alone speak about it. If I had to listen to it twice, Hex would have to sedate me before one of them was dead on the floor.

“Yeah, Sarge kept her busy afterward didntcha?”

The dead brother would be Tyrant. Fucker knew how to push my goddamn buttons with that teasing bullshit he threw at me the day it came out that I let Joslyn ride on the back of my rod.

She’s the only person I’d ever allowed to ride with me.

I’m not the type to voluntarily give a ride to someone. I lead with my fists, not kindness. I mean, shit, I knocked a motherfucker out for accidentally bumping against me in a crowded bar not even that long ago. I’m sure he was sorry, picking himself up off the floor when he finally regained consciousness.

My mind drifted to that night. The brothers wanted to go out and celebrate someone’s birthday, and I begrudgingly went along just to get them to stop bothering me about it. It was a nightclub called Calypso, a favorite of some of the brothers here.

I was a large man at six-foot-five. I took up most of any room I was in, and a crowded club was no exception. A drunken man bumped into me, and after I slammed my fist in his face, breaking his nose, I was kicked out, which was fine by me. My brothers still gave me shit but didn't ask me to go out with them anymore. *"Too much of a hassle,"* they'd said.

I didn't realize that was the night I'd become cursed by a temptress.

"Tyrant," Prez scolded. "We discussed this. I'm not spendin' any more time in Hex's clinic for you bein' a dick!"

The memory of the night I'd lost control of myself for the first time in front of my brothers a few months into my reign here passed through my mind. The innocent celebration about my patch becoming a bloodbath landed Prez and Husk in the clinic for a week.

Maybe if I was normal, I would feel regret, but all I felt were the phantom flames that still licked at my body that day. My vision started tunneling out, the fire crawling from my fingertips to my burnt arms.

Fire wasn't my weakness. It was my trigger.

You better hope you didn't get in my way if I was suddenly exposed to fire. It'd be better for both of us if the flames consumed me like they should have all those years ago.

"Just teasin' Prez," he said with his carefree attitude. "It's fun to watch him and V interact with Joslyn and Oakley. Dontcha think?"

“I don’t think it’s fun,” Law grumbled from his chair, arms crossed over his chest. “We’re gonna need a new enforcer soon if V doesn’t leave Oakley alone.”

“Why can’t you just get over it?” The corner of Grim’s lips twisted. “Prez doesn’t care I’m fuckin Nyla—”

“Watch it,” Prez hissed at his VP. “For the record, I do care. Nyla bein’ happy means more than my feelings about the two of you. But that’s my daughter you’re talkin’ bout. Say somethin’ like that in my presence again, and we’ll be out a VP.”

“I’ll happily take Grim’s place. The place would be a lot more fun with me second in command.” That would be a short candidacy if Tyrant ever became VP. Someone would kill him within a day. And with the way he constantly cub-stomped my nerves, that someone would most definitely be me.

“You givin’ me permission to take V out?” Law asked with a raised brow.

“No.” Prez shook his head, a scowl on his face. “V ain’t hurtin’ Oakley. If I have to deal with a brother dating my kin, there’s no one I’d rather share that pain with than you.”

“They’re not dating,” Law hissed through clenched teeth. “He scares her, Darrell.”

“She needs it,” he challenged right back. “Don’t know what happened to your girl, but she’s scared of her own damn shadow. V forces people out of their comfort zones. Maybe he’s what she needs.”

His clenched jaw told me he was keeping what he really wanted to say inside. My gut feeling told me that whatever almost slipped from his mouth would've caused a brawl in here, and that wouldn't be ideal since I wouldn't care enough to break them up, and neither did Husk. Knight and Tyrant would be cheering, and Grim couldn't break them up alone. Hex just stabs people with a sedative to get them to calm down, but he would rather that not happen since Prez, Grim, and V get shifty around needles.

“If V does hurt her, we'll take care of it. But if you touch him? After he's done beating your head in, you'll deal with my consequences, too.”

“You're about to find yourself a new goddamn lawyer,” Law grumbled. He threatened this weekly, but we all just ignored him. If he wanted to walk, he was free to do so... so long as his tongue was cut out. He couldn't tell our secrets that way.

That was the only way you were allowed to leave this club besides death.

“Why are you so protective of V, Prez?” Tyrant raised an eyebrow. “Dude's an animal. We all know we're going to have to put him down one day.”

A rueful smile spread on his lips. “You just answered your own question.”

A thick silence ensued. V was unhinged and wouldn't listen to anyone. One day, he would get in a bind that we couldn't save him from. Our clubs have already been through

a lot of shit. V's death would be another hard nail to hammer into each of our coffins.

The thought of losing a brother was something that prickled my skin. Anyone who was associated with me met an early demise. It was just a curse I was born with...

A curse that I was passing onto others who were stupid enough to care for me.

I didn't want to be loved. I didn't crave a woman's affection. I desired a brotherhood. I needed a routine. I coveted the solace I created for myself.

No one, not even Joslyn, would change me. Those who tried faced the consequences.

I turned my neck to look at Husk, who sat there staring blankly at the wall with a far-off look. What was going on in his head? No one fuckin' knew. He was slowly descending into a dark madness once he lost his old lady. A smoking shell of the jovial bastard he once was. I gave him two more years before he was lost completely, even if Marilyn was still out there.

I refused to think of Joslyn in a situation like Marilyn was probably in.

The door opened, and Hex came in, followed by V. I looked at the analog clock on the wall, the second-hand landing right on the twelve. The clicking sound of the clock was replaced by Prez slamming the gavel on the sound block, signaling the start of church.

“Alright, brothers. We got lots to discuss.” Prez stood at the podium, wiggling a tape recorder in his hand before pointedly glancing at me. “Joslyn may have gotten us a lead.”

I balled my hands into fists until my fingernails dug into my palm, the sting not helping take my mind off the way Joslyn put herself in danger last night.

And how I was almost too late to stop it.

*Just another person you'll fail, Darin. Just like you failed them all those years ago.*

I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth like the shrink told me to do when I started to feel angry, but it didn't do a goddamn thing. The thought of Joslyn being dragged through that crowd of people, and they just let it happen?

I was going to use their blood as war paint.

Prez clicked the side of the recorder. Light static and loud music came through the speaker, as well as Joslyn's slightly frantic breath. I could hear her trying to push through the crowd, shuffling the mic against fabric. Then the music began to dull as much as it could have, voices becoming clearer.

*“What's Joslyn doing here?”*

*“Shh!”* Another voice hushed. *“She can hear you.”*

A snort. *“No, she can't. She's deaf.”*

Silence for a moment. *“Didn't know that. Maybe Jordyn brought her along?”*

*“Maybe,”* he mused with an appreciative tone. *“She’s a tempting little thing, isn’t she?”*

I gritted my teeth, tempted to smash the recorder against the ground. *“Sure is. She got her use a few years back. She was a crowd favorite.”*

My body went rigid, anger seeping into the depths of my bones hearing his comment. I shouldn’t be surprised by it, women were just holes to the Flock and the Bloods. I just loathed the thought of her going through it.

It was silent for a moment, the image of what Joslyn went through trying to lace my vision but all I saw was read. *“Wonder if Brian found anything useful in the Catacombs yet.”*

*“Don’t talk about that shit here,”* the other voice hissed. *“We’re meeting at the warehouse on Neva Thursday at eight to discuss it. If you’re not there, you’ll be bait at the next Blood match.”*

Prez tapped the tape off before setting it down. “They got spies in the Catacombs.”

“Wonder why they had a bunch of pussy fighters down there recently,” Tyrant complained as he leaned back in his chair, propping his feet on the table. Uncultured bastard.

“So they’re rigging fights,” Knight pointed out. “Andre ain’t gonna like that if he finds out.”

No, he won’t. Andre ran the Catacombs with an iron fist. If he found out his money was being threatened, whoever was

part of the scam would never be heard from again.

Prez looked over at me. “You see anything suspicious during your recent matches?”

I fought down in the Catacombs as recon for the MC. It was beneficial for both parties. I got to beat the shit out of an asshole, and Tyrant and Knight scoped the place out for anything suspicious. “No.”

“His competition has been shit lately,” Tyrant noted. They had been shit. One hit, and they were bleeding in the ring. There was no such thing as a fair fight, but I wanted more of a competition. “It’s only a matter of time before Andre gets tired of it. Sarge will beat anyone, but Andre likes the competition more... exciting.”

I was undefeated in the Blood matches. No one had ever landed a punch on me. I knew some fights I had to give and take to make a show and not raise suspicion, but lately, they’ve all been scrawny, cocky fuckers with bigger mouths than muscles. They were all bleeding with my first hit.

I’d even killed one with one hit. It was accidental, but it was deserved if he was rolling with the Bloods. *Especially if he touched Joslyn.*

“For years, we’ve been laying low. Shit hasn’t been workin’ well, so we’re upping the ante, brothers.” A malice grin that showed just how wicked our President was formed on his face. Before the... incident, we did things a lot different around here. But when Prez almost lost his life, we switched shit up. Something none of us liked but did because of the



respect we had for him. “We’re goin’ back to the old way we do things.”

“Finally, Prez!” Tyrant slapped his hands on the table, excitement rippling through his high-pitched voice, giving me a damn headache. “What changed?”

“Nyla coming back into my life and her having a target on her back from the Flock because of that slimy piece of shit.” Nyla’s adoptive dad’s name was a banned word from the clubhouse. Prez promised to give anyone a strike if it slipped out. “Laying low ain’t doin’ us no good. We’ll show the motherfucker who runs the Flock just who he’s fuckin’ with.”

“Diamond Ridge already hates us, Prez,” Grim reminded him. “Gonna make them hate us even more?”

That was a fuckin’ understatement. One look at our cuts and up their prissy noses went. We weren’t good men, and our morals were even worse. The only people in town who liked us were the homeless and domestic shelters.

But that would likely change if we were truly returning to the old way we did things.

“Don’t fuckin’ care.” He was calm. “Takin’ care of our own is more important. Our mark on this town will be visible to anyone who crosses the city line. If they’re brave enough, they can stay. But if not?” The corner of his lips turned up, sinister and calculating. “Let’s just pray that they won’t need saving.”

The room was humming with excitement and curiosity. We've laid low for years, dormant on what our club truly was capable of. We didn't know why. We could only suspect. But we followed our President blindly. He's never given us a reason not to trust him, and until he did, I'd play my role as a soldier in his small army. Grim spoke up, buzzing from the news. "So, what's the plan?"

"Everyone who has a loan with us? Well, we'll be paying them a nice visit. The properties will be ours. The time for laying low is over. The Flock wants to run this town. We're gonna show them it's ours."

"Fear is a powerful emotion. More people act on it than anger. Once word spreads, they'll either get on our side or be removed faster."

Grim blew out a breath. "Thought the war was already won, but it looks like we're starting another one."

"We didn't start this war, brother." The finality of Prez's words was amplified by the gavel slamming against the sound block. "We're just finishing it."

Hex, V, and Husk rushed out of the room as the rest of the brothers followed behind at a more human pace. Being Sergeant in Arms also meant I was first in, last out. When they'd all made their exit, I stood. Prez stopped me, his hand coming up to grab my shoulder. Ripping out of his near grasp, I faced him silently. He heaved a breath, assuming he realized he'd almost touched me. I'm not one to be touched. After our

body language mirrored the other, he spoke. “Don’t want to get in your business, but be careful around Joslyn.”

I was silent. I had to be practical. Joslyn still wasn’t completely trusted by us. I could understand that even if I was having a hard time thinkin’ someone as sweet as her could be involved with ruthless assholes like the Bloods. The more I thought about it, the more pissed I got. Was she forced? Coerced?

*Did she join willingly?*

There was always a chance she was two-timing us. Gathering intel for them, ready to betray us when she saw fit. I knew the smiles on her pretty lips were fake, and I still let her see a piece of my seclusion only a few had seen.

I thought to this morning. Her on her knees cleaning up a mess I made because I fucked up and forgot she was there. I was used to being alone in my dark world.

Now I was ensnared in her damn light.

I was battling within myself to keep her safe but at a distance if she was still secretly working with them. If she was, would I have the balls to dim that light in her?

I didn’t want to think about her double-crossing us, so I just nodded at him before turning and walking out of church. I knew he had seen the struggle within me. Getting so worked up over a damn girl wasn’t something they’d seen before. But if it came down to it, Prez knew I’d choose the club.

I needed the brotherhood more than I needed her.

I gritted my teeth, tired of these thoughts invading and taking over every crevice of my mind. It takes one person to change your life, just like it takes one person to destroy it.

And my life has already been destroyed.

On my walk back to the common area, I looked from side to side in the hallway, swearing I could hear explosions and feel the fire on my skin. The only reason I cut the sleeves to my hoodies off was in case of a fire, so it was easier to slip out of the clothing. Now my skin was heated, making me pat them to pat away the sparks that were flaring on my skin. I stilled, looking at the palms of my hands, not knowing if my hands were shaking or if my vision was going awry.

These bastards will pay to see what's in my head. I'd pay them to take the memories away.

\* \* \*

The SUV carrying Knight and Tyrant blocked off the street behind us as the rest of our rods came to a slow stop. Prez revving up his engine was an intimidating message to the man inside the walls of the red-bricked building we'd just parked in front of.

Prez got off his bike first, then Grim, Law, and I followed suit as we followed him to the building in front of us. Prez looked at me before nodding at the door. They stepped back as I got directly in front of it, bending my leg before kicking the

spot underneath the doorknob, sending the wooden door off its hinges.

Grim and Law swept by Prez and I, guns drawn as we followed behind them. An older man sat shaking and heaving breaths with his hands up as we made our way inside the small room. “W-Who are you?”

Prez didn’t respond as he walked over to the table, pulling out the contract that Law had drafted and slammed it down in front of him.

“Here’s what’s gonna happen.” Prez leaned forward, hands on the table, intimidating the trembling man in front of us. “Sign your name on the dotted line, and we’ll let you live.”

“I’ve done nothing wrong,” his voice quivered, giving his misdeeds away. What a fucking pussy. “I have a family to take care of. Would you really orphan children due to money?”

“Actually, you have two,” Knight revealed to him nonchalantly, his eyes widening slightly. “They know about each other? Or that you make female tenants who can’t afford the rent fuck you or face eviction?”

“Isn’t that somethin’?” Prez cackled, not fazed in the slightest at the now-sweating man. “Save the sob story, and sign the fuckin’ paper.”

His shaky scrawl went on the dotted line as Prez pulled out another one. “This one too.”

Equally confused and scared, he slowly signed it. Prez grinned as he lifted his gun. “I’ll let your families know

you've been saved.”

The gun went off, and blood sprayed as his body fell. Prez pocketed his still smoking gun as he barked out orders. “Call V. Let him know he has a new toy to collect.” Prez looked over at Law. “Mind doin’ the honors?”

“You’re a fuckin’ bastard,” he snapped back, knowing it was punishment for earlier.

“Sarge, Knight,” Prez called to us. “Start introducing yourselves to our new tenants. This whole strip of building is now ours.”

Knight grinned leading the way out the door. I blew out an annoyed breath, following him outside. Well, this afternoon just went to shit. Why did I have to babysit Knight? He was almost as bad as Tyrant was. The two could be twins in personality and tattoo’s. Not looks though, Tyrant was from Egyptian lineage making his skin and hair darker. Knight’s skin was sunkissed and his hair was dyed dark brown instead of blond. According to him, no woman wanted a blond man.

“Do you have a mirror on ya, Sarge? I wanna make sure I look good in case we run into any pretty ladies who want a cut on the rent.” He wrangled his eyebrows with a cheesy grin.

Maybe he was worse.

\* \* \*

Knight and I walked to *Have a Lil' Faith* and entered the building. A tall woman with long, blonde hair and pale skin looked up when the bell sounded. Her pale blue eyes locked on us, and she blew the pink bubblegum into a bubble before it popped. Her light pink sweatshirt swallowed her figure, and no part of her was exposed. Her neck was hidden by an undershirt. Her eyes shifted to Knight. "Need me to fix your hair? It's looking rough."

His hand went to his gelled hair, running a hand through it with narrowed eyes. "My hair is fine, thanks."

She raised an eyebrow as her lips pursed. "It does show off your ego. What do you guys want if you're not here for a haircut?"

"We're your new landlords," Knight casually explained, his eyes roaming her heavily covered body. "Thought it'd be a good idea to introduce ourselves."

She's immediately visibly pissy with him and his wandering gaze. She snaps quickly in his direction, pointing back to her face. "What happened to Mr. Latham?"

"Decided he didn't want to deal with a certain attitude from one of his tenants." Knight pulled from his ass. "Told us she had a huge mouth on her he couldn't handle."

"Can't say I'm surprised. Haven't found a man yet that can handle me." Her tone had a seductive purr that churned my stomach but made Knight's eyes flash with something I couldn't care less to pinpoint. "I can tell you're up for a challenge, but my legs are currently closed."

“You got two men standing here who could snap you over their knee, babe. I think you should be a bit more self-aware.”

“The only thing I’m intimidated by is your audacity.” She crossed her arms over her chest, eyes narrowed thinly. “If you have no other business here, you can leave.”

“We own this building. You can’t kick us out.” Knight leaned on the counter, knocking into the cup on her desk, effectively sloshing the shockingly blue liquid all over her paperwork and upper half. The bright blue with her light pink sweatshirt. She shrieked, stepping back with a snarl on her face. “Shit, I’m—“

I was immediately on edge as she put her knee on the counter of the desk, sheers up to Knight’s throat. “You’re what, sorry? Your apology doesn’t buy me another drink.”

“No, but I can.” He was pathetic. “What do you say? Wanna meet up around eight at Calypso?”

“What? So you can get me loose-lipped, and hopefully they end up around your cock by the end of the night?” Her grip tightened on the sheers in her hand, pushing the blades a little harder into his skin. “The only thing I want to suck on until I moan is my ocean water, you dense bastard.”

I probably should do something about the way Knight’s throat bobbed, making the sharp edge prick the skin of his neck, drawing light blood, but I wanted to see how far this girl would take it. The worst she could do was slice his neck open.



“You fuckin’ cut me.” The hourglass Knight usually had with his patience was flipped over, the sand pouring out rapidly. “Forget who I was? I’m your fuckin’ landlord, babe. Rent just went up one hundred dollars a month.”

She gasped, pulling back slightly. “I can barely afford it now, prick!”

“Two hundred.” He stepped back, fingertips collecting the small pool of blood on his neck. “Lucky I don’t evict you. Who the fuck puts a pair of scissors to someone’s neck for spilling a damn drink!”

“What kind of men come in and try to intimidate a woman!” She was fearless, but an undeniable flash of something in her eyes told me it was more facade than truth. “Get out, get out, get out!”

“Fine, since you asked so nicely.” I turned and started walking to the door, hearing Knight’s parting words. “You don’t get the pleasure of direct deposit for your rent anymore. I’ll be coming every month to collect it in person.”

A frustrated scream echoed in the small shop as Knight joined me outside.

“She’s stunning,” Knight commented as we walked out the door. If I were him, I’d be making sure she wasn’t going to put the shears in his back. He grinned at me as he fingered the cut she gave him. “Dibs.”

He could have her. I didn’t want that crazy bitch.

I didn't say anything as I headed towards my bike, swinging my leg over the seat. "Say hi to Joslyn for me!"

He was just as bad as Tyrant was.

I started the engine, revving it a few times before heading straight towards Knight, whose eyes went wide as he jumped out of the way, barely escaping me running him over. I couldn't hear his bitching over the high speeds and loud engine.

People may have died too early when they cared about me, but that didn't mean I wasn't the one who did the killing.

# Chapter 4: Sarge



I pushed open the door to Poppy Oaks, where I told myself I wouldn't ever be caught dead. Bright-colored things of all shapes, sizes, and smells clashed with the permanent black cloud that constantly rained down on me. If I stayed in here too long, I'd end up drowning all these flowers the girls were so carefully trying to grow. I don't exude any sort of glowing rays of light. On the other hand, Joslyn radiates warmth and light straight into everyone and everything she comes in contact with.

Everyone except me. I wouldn't fucking allow it. I'd extinguish her light before I ever allowed it to affect me.

I stepped further into the shop, ignoring my negative and nagging thoughts. Deep down, I'm wondering if it's too late to stop her incessant light from trying to infiltrate my cold exterior. She was living up to that nickname I'd given her. She is always such a ray of fucking sunshine. Whether I welcome her in or not, she's always there.

I wasn't going to change for anybody., especially not for her.

Turning in a slow circle, I finally made a beeline to a vacant area on the wall I could lean against. The

overwhelming floral scents were hitting me like a freight train. Crossing my arms over my chest, I took several deep breaths through my mouth, trying to chill the fuck out. I didn't belong in a place like this, and neither did Grim, who was currently grinning like a damn fool at his fiancé, Nyla. She was fixated on wrapping up a large bouquet of red roses in a frilly white tissue paper situation.

Joslyn smiled at them when she heard the bell go off at the front door. Her emerald green eyes lit up instantly as she turned in my direction. Her rose-colored lips spread into a smile rivaling the sun's intensity. "Sarge!" The excitement in her voice immediately pissed me off. My dark clouds were warming at her proximity, but I willed them to hold strong and steady. I have got to figure out a way to keep a thicker shade between us. She is downright blinding, and I cannot handle her enthusiasm. "I heard a bike coming down the street, and I was hoping it was you."

I halted my steps as Grim shot a look at me and then over to her. "That's why you came from the back? You heard it from that far away?"

She looked sheepish. "Yeah. With my hearing aids, I can hear things better than normal hearing." She turned to me, still beaming. "Every time I hear a motorcycle, I always hope it's you."

My now racing thoughts trumped Nyla's adoring coos at her comment. If she can hear bikes better than anyone and is excited to come running outside, thinking it's me, that's

trouble. Picturing her bounding out to a bike that wasn't mine unknowingly—No. She was way too trusting for that shit.

She shouldn't be greeting anyone other than me. What if it was a trap, and she stupidly went outside thinking it was me? That idiotic heart of hers was going to get her killed.

An image of Joslyn on the ground, surrounded by her own blood, made my blood still and my mind blank. That couldn't happen... I'd never allow it to happen.

But she had no sense of self-preservation. She put everyone's feelings before her own. A natural-born people-pleaser with a heart of gold.

There's a reason why true crime documentaries describe the victims as ones whose smiles lit up a room. They drew the most involuntary attention to themselves. People-pleasers don't realize the danger until it's too late, making them the prime targets for psychopaths.

What better addiction than replacing someone's joy with fear that you instilled.

She needed someone to take care of her and balance the lack of fear she had for herself. She would give her last dime to somebody even if it meant she would have nothing.

I knew that for a fact, even witnessed it firsthand.

I didn't care about her. I just couldn't have something happening to her, or anyone else, on my conscience, knowing I could've prevented it.

Just like I could've prevented their deaths.

I couldn't survive someone dying on my watch again. That's all there was between Joslyn and I. I made sure the Bloods didn't get to her, and she stayed the fuck away from me. And when she thought I was opening up to her, I humbled her real fucking quick.

I stepped closer to the group, my eyes locked on Joslyn, but I was still aware of the other sets of eyes lingering on me. Grim was fucking annoying the way he was now. Before Nyla, it was dead stares and fake laughter. Those qualities were still present, but not as often.

Wouldn't know what love did to people. I'm not sure I ever want to find out. Nothing good comes from being loved by me.

"What are you doing here?" Joslyn asked, helping Nyla wrap roses in the tissue paper.

"Needed to talk to Grim," I grunted, turning in Grim's direction. "It's done."

His face steeled as he nodded. "Good. But still doesn't explain why you're here, could've just texted."

Bastard. Aren't brothers supposed to have each other's backs?

"Don't have to explain myself to you," I seethed under my breath as I turned to walk back out the front door. The door opened as I was about to step towards it, revealing two women who were laughing... until they saw me.

Their eyes rounded as their bodies both came to screeching stops. I remained rooted in my spot, refusing to feel bad for intimidating them. I watched one shiver as she grabbed her friend's forearm, pulling her back out the entrance without looking back. I gnashed my teeth together as I heard deep laughter from behind me.

“And Nyla swears I'm the one that scares off the customers.” Grim cackled as he wrapped the ribbon around the bouquet he just finished. “You're the human equivalent to bug repellent, brother.”

I snarled at him but didn't argue. Not that I gave a fuck. The less people around me, the better.

The bell over the front door rings again, this time a small woman rushing straight towards Joslyn and Nyla, positioning herself behind them and trying to hide herself. Her deep breathing would give her away to anyone, red-faced from the excursion or the attention now on her, I didn't know.

Joslyn turned her head to look at her. “What're you doing here, Oak? You're not on the schedule today.”

She shifted so her frame was behind the counter as she ducked down. She was so short she didn't have to duck down very far to be hidden. “He won't leave me alone.”

Nyla's face scrunched. “Who—”

The bell rang, and in walked V. If that bell rings one more time, I'm ripping it out of the wall. His black hair was tied into a low bun, and he had a black surgical mask on his face. His

eyes scanned the shop, his face emotionless as he searched before his eyes landed on top of Oakley's head, popping up from behind the counter. He stood at the end of the row of flowers, dropping the head of his baseball bat to the ground with a clang.

Seeing him around anything that remotely resembled color was odd. This man was basically the human equivalent of the Grim Reaper, weapon-wielding and all. And here he stood in a flower shop. What the hell were all three of us doing here, for that matter? This isn't a good look.

Grim laughed, eyes on Oakley. "If you were trying to get away from V, this sure as shit is the best place to go. Fucker hates anything that brings others joy."

Oakley began to shake slightly, making her friends frown. Nyla glared at V. "We can watch her, V. You can go do..." She paused, trying to think of what V does in his free time besides killing people. "... whatever it is you need to do."

"No."

If I laughed, I would've at that. Stubborn and loyal were V's two best traits. When his sights were set, it was his for the taking, whether they were willing or not.

"Isn't he around you all the time?" Joslyn questioned. "What's different about today?"

"He was in my college class. He got me kicked out!" Oakley shouted, wildly gesturing in his general direction with her right hand before planting it firmly on the counter.



“Man.” Grim shook his head. “You gotta let her go to school, V. That’s not something you should be interfering with.”

Joslyn nodded. “Not everyone has the privilege of education. She’s working towards her dreams, V. Don’t you want her to live them?”

His dark eyes glanced over to her, studying her before arching his back, stretching like he didn’t care... ‘cause he probably didn’t. But it made me look over at Joslyn. There was a hidden message behind her words. I knew she was taking classes. I didn’t know what type, but I assumed that she meant college with her being twenty-five.

“Don’t you go to the same school?” Grim asked Joslyn.

She looked embarrassed as she looked down at her feet and meekly responded, “No.” And she changed the subject before anyone else asked a question. What was she hiding? “V?” His dark eyes shifted to Joslyn. “Why do you wear that mask?”

He just glanced at her before his eyes returned to Oakley, who was still shaking like a leaf behind the counter. Fucking creepy. It still blows my mind that Law hasn’t put a bullet in his head yet.

Grim snorted. “You’re better off asking the President for nuclear codes, Jos. V doesn’t like to talk to anyone.”

He lifted his baseball bat, putting the base of it over his shoulders. “I only talk to those worth my time.”

“Show some fuckin’ respect.” I spat before I could stop myself.

Grim’s annoying chuckle had me narrowing my eyes at him. “For people who say they don’t give a fuck about anyone, you two sure are actin’ like middle schoolers with their first crushes.”

I was beyond done with this conversation as I faced Grim. “Joslyn’s staying with you tonight.”

He nodded, knowing where I had to go. “I’ll take care of her.”

Despite Joslyn shouting my name, I walked out of Poppy Oaks’ front door. I should have known she’d have more say, but I needed to get out of her orbit. I didn’t bother to turn around as she ran after me and asked. “You’re going out again??”

I grunted, and she took that as a ‘yes.’

“I was getting used to sleeping in your guest room.” I could hear her feet shift from one side to the other, a small smile infiltrating her already sweet voice. “I even looked up how to do those sharp corners you do on the bed. Did you learn that from the military?”

“Yeah.” The first thing we learned was how to make a bed. If they couldn’t bounce a dime off of it without it getting wrinkled, they threw all the blankets off and made us redo it until it was right, and if it made us late, we ran for miles. We all learned pretty quick.

“I’m getting really good at it.” She praised herself. She was. I sat in my chair in the living room as a routine, and in the silence of my house, I heard her moving around the guest bedroom with the flutter of blankets for hours. I may have peeked at her work when she’d gone to shower and change. I ignored the flutter in my chest, knowing she was doing it just for me. “But, your house is... colorless. Doesn’t it feel lonely?”

“That’s the point.” I hated that she was there with me. She was throwing off my routine, and that was the only thing keeping me sane. I needed structure, and she shattered that.

I hated what she thought she was doing to me.

“Would you be mad if I brought some flowers? You know, brighten the place—“

“Let’s get one thing straight, Joslyn.” I turned, towering over her. She looked at me with those wide green eyes of hers. She had fear in them. Good. “It’s my house. Not yours.”

“I know—“

“Listen,” I cut her off harshly. “You’re there, so you don’t get sold. You’re not there because I want you to be.” I had to say something that would put the final nail in the coffin, something that would make her understand that what I was doing was instinct and not from my cold, dead heart. “Everythin’ about you is fuckin’ fake.”

The light in her eyes dimmed, and her smile faltered briefly. Something twisted in my gut that I hadn’t felt in years.

I didn't say anything more as I made my way back to my bike, throwing my leg over the seat. I was about to turn the engine over when I heard her voice, smaller than usual. Not the typical way she usually spoke to me.

“I understand Sarge. Thank you for putting up with me.”

She turned and walked back inside Poppy Oaks with her shoulders slumped. The burning in my gut was inferno as I blew out a breath and shook my head as I started the engine. I'd never been a nice guy. Joslyn was the first slip of 'nice' I'd ever been to anyone, and I knew from her track record the nicer I was to her, the harder she'd hold on.

This wouldn't to end like Grim and Nyla, where we lived somewhat happily in our traumas. It was going to end where she pretended, and I continued to live alone in the shadows.

\* \* \*

I walked into the auto shop. Usually, I wouldn't let a single soul work on my bike but me. I had to keep this on the down low from nosy fuckers. I had to have someone do it who I could scare into secrecy. An older man with balding thin hair in greased-up overalls shivered at the sight of me. He eyed my cut before gulping. Prez must've already been here and had a nice chat with this man. “Can I help you?”

“You work on bikes?”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Prefer them to cages.”

“Need you to work on mine.” I threw him the keys, which he easily caught. “You fuck up my bike, I fuck up your life.”

He tried his best to look unphased, but I’d seen the way his throat bobbed slowly out of fear. “Certain time you need it done?”

“I’ll email the details. You have a week.” I turned and started walking away from him. “Donald Klingerman. 405 Woodrow Way. Wife, two kids.” I paused. “Something happens to my bike? Something happens to them.”

I walked out without another word. If Prez was here, he already knew of the Souls and what we would do. Word of Carl Latham committing suicide was being picked apart by the public as a homicide due to us immediately taking over his properties. Prez gave both his families a generous lumpsum and even invited them both out to a celebration of his life.

What a huge surprise they were going to get. Prez was a dick sometimes.

I walked the somewhat busy sidewalk, people moving out of my way. I wasn’t entirely pissed about having to walk to my cabin, either. I needed to clear my head. Everything from the last few weeks seemed to be simmering on a low boil, and I could feel something about to blow. And on top of that, Joslyn is grating my fuckin nerves. She has a lousy history of attaching herself to people who just bleed her dry. She needs someone to watch over her, yes. But she also needs to keep the fuck away from me before I really hurt her. I can’t keep watching her, or I’ll lose myself in it. I walk a thin line every

day, and if there's one wrong move, it's over for me. She may be the sun, but I'm the moon. Maybe that's how I can explain it to her. We're too fucking different, and there's just no shot at anything more with us. She has to learn that quickly.

After the stakeout, I was going to forget Joslyn Monroe. Even if it was just for the night.

# Chapter 5: Sarge



Darkness surrounded our team as we sat motionless. The only light within miles of us was coming from the abandoned warehouse where the Cardinal Bloods were currently holding their meeting. Everyone was watching them through the cameras at the clubhouse besides Husk, V, and I. We were here for clean-up once this meeting was over.

I adjusted my stance, leaning on the opposite side of the tree V was hovering behind. The only sounds were the crickets chirping as we waited for these bastards to start talking and stop wasting our time. The three of us had earpieces to hear from the hidden microphones planted inside the abandoned warehouse.

My mind went back to the party. Jordyn saw Joslyn pull the wire out and hand it over to me. Surely, she would've ratted her out to them, right? Or did they not take stock of anything one of their whores said?

My gut told me something wasn't right.

The static in my earpiece indicated movement, and soon enough voices followed.

Showtime.

*“We got a girl that’s willing to do some stuff for us. She’s also got a twin sister that she hates, so not only will she do the job we need her to do, but she also has a plan for her sister to be the fall person when she gets caught.”*

My eyes widened, the corner of my lip pulling back to bare my teeth. Even if no one could see the anger, they’d sure as fuck feel it when my hands wrapped around his fucking throat. My anger propelled me forward, taking me out of the safety of the trees and to the single dirty window showing four figures sitting at a round table talking.

*“Will that even work?”* Someone questioned. His hair was shoulder length and greasy, and his lanky arm had a full sleeve of cheapass tattoos. *“Up close, Joslyn and Jordyn look different.”* Someone leaned back in their chair, crossing his arms over his chest. *“Joslyn has healthy curves and hasn’t been on drugs for years. She’s a normal-looking girl. Jordyn is anything but normal-looking these days. Her skin is fuckin’ gray.”*

I wanted to rip the other guy’s tongue out of his body and watch him choke on his own blood as the tip traced around his lips. Who the fuck did they think they were talking about her like that? *“Joslyn’s more fuckable than Jordyn. There are more curves to grab onto. Trust me, I’ve had both.”*

*Trust me, I’ve had both.*

My mind went blank, only focusing on the fact that whoever this piece of shit was, he’d fucked Joslyn before. The thought of any man touching her made my hand itch to wrap



around their throats and watch the life dim from their eyes. I didn't want anyone to have that memory of her. No one deserved it.

“Calm the fuck down.” Husk ran up from behind, a stupid move on his part, but I was so focused on not murdering the motherfuckers inside to act on it. He noticed my breathing becoming more labored. We'd run enough missions side by side that he knew not to touch me in the field. Especially now, I'm sure he was putting two and two together and knew my vision was laced with red. “We already knew Joslyn had a past with them, Sarge. The women with them are nothing more than holes for them to fill.”

Joslyn's not just a fuckin' hole. Anyone who thought that was all she was worth would get acquainted with a new hole in their heads.

*“Can't trust Joslyn, though. She's associated with those fuckin' bikers.”*

*“She is. But she won't know what Jordyn did until the cuffs are on.”* He sounded so sure of himself, but his next words made my blood freeze. *“Then she'll really make us some money.”*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“Women's prisons pimp out their prisoners.”* He explained. *“Cuff them to the bed. Cash exchanged. Good time for everyone involved.”*

A low whistle. *“Got the police involved now?”*

He nodded. *“It’s new, still working out the kinks. But they’ll take our word over anyone associated with the Souls. They hate them just as much as we do.”*

*“The Souls have a lot more cash to throw around than we do, though.”* Another pointed out. *“They can pay off the judge and jurors.”*

*“We got a secret weapon on our side.”* This bastard was so fucking cocky. He wouldn’t be in a minute. *“They fuck with us? They’ll all be in that crematorium of theirs.”*

They shouldn’t be able to tell the tale if any of them had gotten as far as the basement. Judging by the slow turn of V’s head in my direction, he’s taking this conversation personally. Hellbound is V’s playground. He plays Satan inside those walls. It’s the only place we all let his leash loose. Something has slipped through the cracks, and we need to figure it the fuck out quickly. Darting my eyes to Husk, he looks just as surprised as I feel. He must have come to the same silent conclusion that I just have. Something is off here. We’re gonna need a church meeting immediately.

*“Crematorium?”* One asked the question we were thinking. *“How do you know they got one in there?”*

*“Like I said,”* a long pause allowed his tone to become much more sinister. *“We have a secret weapon on our side.”*

I stilled, immediately darting my eyes from V to Husk and back again. A rat? Are we dealin’ with a fucking rat? All three of us were now audible, breathing barely contained fire. If I was barely able to hold it together, we needed to get V the

fuck out of here right now. I don't even know if Husk and I can hold him back if he breaks out in a run toward the warehouse. I wouldn't put it past him with this new information. This recon sidebar just took a sharp left turn. No one but the Souls should know about what Hellbound holds.

"Let's go," I barked at both of them. Prez wanted us to get in and round up the Bloods' members inside, but it was obvious to me that they really did have some sort of weapon against us. The best element was the element of surprise, and we might not have that against them anymore.

"Not leavin' until I search every corner of this place." Husk wasn't wavering. After discovering that the Flock was renovating and locking their victims in basements, he'd been checking every place that he could.

This is gonna blow at any second if I don't get these two out of here. As the thought crossed my mind, V stiffly shrugged, storming past us both and flipping his bat up onto his shoulders. He kicked the door off its old hinges in one swift, powerful motion without a care that we could have cleared the building. Shouts immediately rang out from what seemed like every direction further inside the warehouse. Husk and I crouched when we heard the sharp clicking of rounds being chambered in their guns.

"God dammit, V!" Husk roared out of frustration as he rushed towards the building, gun drawn. I sighed and shook my head before following Husk. Fucking V and his impulses. They were going to get someone killed.

Bullets were already flying when I stepped inside the warehouse. Gunfire actually seemed to have the opposite effect on my PTSD. Years spent on heavy-fire missions had my brain hard-wired for these exact situations. My breathing remained calm, eyes sharp, as I followed V in what felt like slow motion. I saw the man with his gun pointed at V first and followed his line of fire to V, noticing he already had his bat raised while moving to dodge the bullet. The man, who'd just missed the most important shot of his life, widened his eyes as V swung his bat across his head. A gash split his face from his temple to his nose, blood spattered from his bat covering all four of us. V's eyes lit up with childlike excitement when the man hit the ground, prompting several more blows to the head for good measure.

Fucking psycho.

Because V was now laser-focused on his already-dead new chew toy, he didn't notice a gun being pointed at his back. I raised my gun and shot his prey's wrist from a distance. His weapon clattered to the floor as he let out an enraged howl. He hit his knees as he tried and failed to stop the rapid bleeding with his good hand.

Husk ran up to a third man, kicking his leg out and hitting him square in the sternum. He fell to his back, hands shooting up in a plea for Husk not to shoot. Husk leveled the barrel of his pistol directly between his frantic eyes. "Hiding anyone in here?"

He vehemently shook his head, making Husk lean down lower as he put the barrel of his gun right on the guy's nose. "I'm gonna check, and if you're lyin'? Your head will look pretty good on my mantel. Might even use it for some late nights when I'm feelin' lonely."

I shook my head. This club was full of sick fucks. I noticed movement from the corner of my eye. At first, all I could make out was a shadowed silhouette. Once I focused in with my full attention, I saw the gun it wielded pointed straight at Husk's back. Instinctively, I moved in on Husk, ready to tackle him down to the ground to shield him. I led with my shoulder, making contact with my brother the second the shot rang in my ears. The stinging pain that followed as we hit the ground told me I wasn't quick enough.

Fucker shot me.

"It's just a graze, you pussy. You're fine," Husk ground out at me directly before his gun fired one shot from my back. He hit the man who had shot me right between his eyes. After watching his body fall, Husk and I shot our eyes back to V.

V straightened, bat clanking to the ground as he smoothed his now messy hair, the blood of our enemies silking it back. He shot us a quick glance before bending to retrieve his bat. Turning, he started to make his way back to the door we came in through.

"V!" He paused when he heard Husk call his name out. "Prez is already gonna be pissed they're all dead, but we still gotta get rid of the bodies."

He made no indication he heard Husk when he walked right out the door, his motorcycle engine roaring to life moments later.

“Fuckin’ bastard,” Husk grumbled as he looked over at me, getting back to his feet. “I’m not wrestlin’ four of ‘em with only two of us. Get outta here. I gotta light this place up.”

I nodded curtly at him. I couldn’t be here if this place was going up in flames. I never like to leave a brother behind, but we both knew he would be better off dealing with this inferno alone.

“I’m gonna scope this place out. It shouldn’t take long.” Every place we went to, he always looked for her. “I’ll be right behind you.” A war playing inside my mind, my traumas fighting one another. My fear of fire and the fear of leaving a brother behind. “Fuckin’ go, Sarge, or I’ll light it up and leave you here.”

“Bastard,” I told him, collecting myself enough to push past my roaming thoughts.

I hopped on my bike, telling myself the loud boom was just my bike, not a fire.

\* \* \*

“Why aren’t you at Hellbound?” Prez shouted at us as we made our way inside the common area.

“They’re dead,” V’s monotone voice answered, red instantly blooming on Prez’s face. We’d always completed every task we were handed to perfection, but not this one.

“What happened?”

“What happened,” Husk said mockingly as he rubbed his hands on a rag he always kept tucked in his back pocket. “Is V’s a fuckin’ impulsive idiot.”

Prez’s eyes narrowed. “What did you do, V?”

“Had some fun.” He put a hand in his hair, the guy’s blood he killed still sticky as it attached to his fingertips. He wiped it on his forehead, the copper clashing with his tanned skin. “They know about the crematorium.”

Grim crossed his arms over his chest, hazel eyes narrowed. “How do you know that?”

“Rat.” Intakes of breath spread throughout our group.

“Shit,” Grim cursed, letting his head fall back. Prez steeled his features, outwardly remaining impassive. Inwardly, though, I know he was boiling with a need for answers. We all were at this point.

“They could be bluffing.”

“I don’t think they are.” Husk shook his head as he answered Tyrant. “They wouldn’t know about the crematorium if they were.”

“Do you think—“

“Hollow wouldn’t do this.” Prez was appalled that Tyrant would even consider it. “Even though he hates us right now, we’re still his kin.”

“Then who else could it be?” Grim rubbed the side of his face. “The only other brother we had was Dagger. It’s not like he’s spillin’ information.”

Prez snarled at Grim before looking at each of us. “Dunno. You’re all in the Souls for a reason. I know you motherfuckers better than you know yourselves. If there was a rat, I would know, and you’d be dead.”

Tyrant let out another exasperated sigh. “Just more shit heaped on our plates, then.”

“What about Joslyn?”

“Joslyn wouldn’t do that!” My defensive words for Joslyn were guttural, hurting my throat at the power of them. Hearing all the shit everyone had planned for her life is teetering me over the edge.

Knight held his hands up. “Just throwing it out there. The only people who’ve escaped Hellbound are the girls and Jordyn from the party we crashed. Oakley wouldn’t tell anyone because of Law. We made sure Nyla didn’t tell anyone. We couldn’t keep close tabs on Joslyn because of her sister. We don’t know what she told her.”

He was right. I hated it, but he was right. We didn’t know what was said. But Joslyn would rather hurt herself than hurt



anyone else. Whoever leaked this type of information knew it would get us all killed.

She wouldn't be able to live with that on her conscience.

She gave herself away. She didn't take from anyone.

“Joslyn wouldn't rat us out,” Law defended her. “She'd kill herself before she willingly hurt anyone.”

“Then who?” Knight quirked an eyebrow. “There's no one else, Law.”

“Dunno.” He dug a finger in his necktie, loosening it up. “But we'll figure it out.”

“Nyla sure opened up a lotta shit when she came into our lives, didn't she?” Tyrant mindlessly said before he was slammed up against the wall by Grim, his face deadly as he spoke.

“And she's fuckin' worth goin' through all this shit for. It was comin' for us anyway.”

“He's right,” Law confirmed. “It's best if we're prepared for it regardless. Clearly, there's a whole lot we don't know. If they knew about Hellbound, who knows what else they could have on us?”

“Knight. Do whatever you can to get some information. We got more planning to do.”

“On it, Prez.”

“Fuckin' idiots. We might've gotten some information if you actually did your jobs!” Prez chastised. “You were

supposed to bring them to Hellbound for questioning!”

V put his pinky in his ear, eyes scrunching. A habit he adopted when he didn't care what Prez said. A habit that effectively drove Prez fuckin' nuts.

Husk's eyes narrowed. “Information more important than V's life?”

“The only thing that's going to survive an atomic bomb are cockroaches and V.” Prez may have been pissed off that we failed our mission, but he was happy we were uninjured—for the most part.

“You need Hex?” Grim asked, eyeing the flesh wound on my arm. I peeked down at it. It was barely bleeding. I'd stitch myself up later. The bullet that grazed me was low on the list of shit to give a fuck about right now.

I shook my head as Prez yelled at us, “Get out of my fuckin' sight. We'll reconvene in a few days.”

He didn't have to tell me twice. I quickly made my way out the door, only one destination in mind.

Joslyn.

\* \* \*

“What's wrong with your bike?” Victoria questioned as I got off my bike, her hip leaning on the door frame. Joslyn stood next to her, looking at me as though she was relieved I was there. “Never heard it sound so aggressive before.”

I didn't answer her, instead looking at Joslyn. "Let's go."

That damn smile again, but this time it was tinged with concern. "She's right. Did something happen?"

"Nothin' happened." My already thin patience was waning. It was none of Victoria's business what I did with my bike.

Victoria snorted, crossing her arms over her chest as she gave me a pointed look. "I think you forgot I'm not in the bitch seat on motorcycles, Sarge. I'm the one in command. I know a modded engine when I hear one."

Fuck.

Joslyn tilted her head. "Modded engine? What's that?"

I wanted to knock that smug grin off Victoria's face, her eyes silently telling me she knew what I did to my bike and why. "He had his engine reworked, so it will sound... different."

Joslyn's eyebrows furrowed. "Why would you do that?"

"Yeah, Sarge," Victoria taunted, a cunning grin on her beige-painted lips. "Why would you do that?"

I knew letting her stay with Victoria and her loud mouth was a mistake. Should've dropped her off at Oakley's... but then V wouldn't have cared if Joslyn came and went. He only cared about keeping Oakley in his sight. He wasn't watching Nyla, and she almost got killed for it.

Not that he gave a fuck. Everyone besides Oakley was apparently meaningless to him.

“Engine was fucked.” I knew Joslyn would buy it but doubted Vic would. “Had to get it fixed.”

“Bullshit,” Vic called me out, glancing at Joslyn briefly before a mocking grin spread on her face. “I think you did it for a certain someone.”

I wasn't having this conversation. I angrily repeated myself. “Joslyn. Let's. Go.”

“Coming!” She chirped as she bounded down toward me, taking out her aids as she went. She hopped up behind me with a comfortability I wasn't used to. Fisting my cut in one of her hands to stabilize herself, she waved back to Victoria. “See you soon!”

That cocky fuckin' smile was still on Victoria's face as she waved us away.

\* \* \*

“Stay,” I commanded Joslyn when we stepped into my cabin. She stood on the tiled floor of the entryway while I searched the inside of my house with my gun drawn. It was something I had to do. If I didn't, I felt like someone would be in here watching me.

Walking past the guest bedroom, I noticed the door was closed. I always made sure the door was open so if there was

an intruder, I wouldn't be surprised when I entered the room. I finished clearing the house and came back to Joslyn at the front door.

Her eyes went to my right bicep, eyes zoning in on a specific area. She walked over, lifting her hand to hover it over my gunshot wound—

“Fuck, woman!” I shouted as she poked my fresh wound. She stuck her fucking finger in it. “What the fuck!”

“Reckless idiot,” She scolded. “You could've been killed!”

“Just a scratch,” I hissed, ripping my arm away from her before walking over to the kitchen cabinet, the same one Joslyn did her best to avoid whenever she was here. I reached for two shot glasses and then grabbed my favorite malt whiskey. I set all three down and began to pour up two shots. I heard a gasp. Joslyn was to my right, skin lightly shining with sweat as her throat worked past the obvious knot. “W-What are you doing?”

“My ritual.” It was just as simple as that. I had two shots and passed the fuck out. “I do it every night.”

“But... why?”

I sat the bottle down, pondering on how to word this correctly so she could try to understand. Taking two shots before bed wasn't typical for anyone, but I doubted Joslyn would understand if I explained it to her. “For honor.”

“Alcohol isn't a celebration. It's the beginning of a downhill spiral.”

“For some,” I corrected. Have there been days I wanted to down a bottle of this poison and forget everything, praying I’d never wake up? More often than I’d ever admit.

“It’s so easy to get lost in something.” Her eyes were far away, but her meaning was close to home. My hands rested on the counter, trapping the three glasses in. My head turned to her, watching as she leaned her body weight against the fridge. Maybe the coolness of the door was grounding her? The shine in her eyes was gone completely, reminding me of the gloom of the dead grass in a graveyard. “Do addicts ever truly recover? Or do they just replace their vice with something else to numb it?”

I stayed silent, not being able to answer that. When you hear the word “*addict*,” you automatically think of drugs and alcohol. No one talks about all the other types of addictions people are crippled with.

Control. Power. Greed. They were just as dangerous, if not more... you couldn’t see these addictions until it was too late.

I was addicted to numbing my pain, mastering the art of not feeling at all. If I felt something, I made you feel something, too.

And then I was alone again.

“Go to bed.” My command was gruff, but looking at her, I noticed the bags under her eyes and clammy skin. She was fighting within herself to be a strong force, afraid to let me see what was really underneath. Truth is, I already knew more about her with a single glance than any feigned happiness she

spewed daily. She didn't fight me, instead bringing her hands to rest on her chest with a relaxed face, trying to steel herself.

“Goodnight, Sarge.” Her voice is sweet, like a melody. Despite our heavy conversation, she still managed to put up a front I could see right through. The painted mask chipping away until sleep would make a new coat, repeating her exhausting process of ignoring what she was truly feeling. “Tomorrow's another day. The sun will always shine again.”

I didn't look at her as she walked past me, her light footsteps slowly taking her away.

“Joslyn.”

Her footsteps stopped.

“As long as you're alive, the sun will always rise for me.”

I swore I could hear her smile as she continued to the guest bedroom and, as quietly as she could, shut the door, leaving me alone.

But, like the sunshine on good days, storms always lurked close behind. The damage left by those storms only depended on how prepared you were for them, even on sunny days.

For Joslyn's sake, I hope she was prepared for the impossible.

Cracking open whatever was left of me.

## Chapter 6: Joslyn



*“As long as you’re alive, the sun will always rise for me.” He whispered against my skin, the heat of his breath igniting a fire where it touched, accompanied by the feel of his calloused fingers. “But when the moon rises, I’ll get you hot another way.”*

*Locking eyes with him, we shared a breath as I whispered, “Show me.”*

I gasped, sitting straight up in bed with a flaming face.

I knew that was a dream for two main reasons.

One. Sarge couldn’t say that much in one sentence without me thinking he had a nicer twin brother.

Two. What I could see of his body was built like a muscular model, but did he have the face to match? Not that it mattered to me. Good looks weren’t an indication of someone as a whole.

Pretty faces were the most deceiving ones.

Besides... mask kinks were hot. Is a hood over your head never showing your face considered a mask kink? That’s beside the point. The mystery of not seeing the man who’s fucking your face? My God.



I'm reading too many of Oakley's books. For a virgin, she's got some tasty kinks.

I still didn't have clothes here, so I helped myself to Sarge's guest closet. There were sweats, t-shirts, and a few hats.

My lips pursed, thinking of what to do. I hated wearing the same clothes two days in a row, but I knew I wouldn't have a choice with my pants. His sweats wouldn't fit me no matter how much I rolled the waist of them.

But his shirt I could tuck in. And a black hat... maybe I would unlock a kink and make the dream I had the night before come true?

I laughed at myself with that idiotic thought. Right now, I don't think Sarge would touch me with a ten-foot pole unless I was in danger. Realization washed over me, tanking the optimism I tried so hard to have.

At the end of the day, I was nothing but a task for Sarge. Something he could check off his good deed list or whatever the bikers did to atone for their sins.

I meant nothing. To him, to anyone. I was just Jordyn's sister.

Like I've always been.

Flashbacks of our childhood plagued my mind. Jordyn playing volleyball, basketball, and softball in school. A star athlete and a straight-A student to boot.

Me? My ears hurt. A lot. I had to take remedial courses and couldn't do anything with my peers. Nothing I did ever relieved the pain. I couldn't go to Jordyn's games because of how loud they were, so I was home alone a lot during the school years. My parents loved me, they did their best. They just didn't know how to take care of a deaf child. Sometimes, I didn't think they wanted to.

Especially when they had the perfect replica of me in Jordyn. Why would they settle for less when they had the town sweetheart as a daughter?

My eyes burned at the memory, knowing I was being unfair. My parents never missed an audiologist appointment. They signed me up for things I might've enjoyed if I actually gave it the effort, but I was too busy thinking how unfair life was when I was a kid.

Watching someone who looked exactly like you living the life you craved was like a dream.

Except it wasn't a dream to me. It was my reality.

I inhaled, holding it until I could no longer before exhaling through my nose. Trying to replace the pessimism with the happy juice I willed my brain to have twenty-four-seven. Turns out you can't will your brain to produce happy juice. My production was deficient.

I took my shirt off, grabbing one of Sarge's long-sleeved black hoodies. I was shocked he had some. All the ones he wore had the sleeves cut off? Maybe he got cold? That heart of his sure was frosty. The clothing engulfed me, going past my

knees. Sarge was over a foot taller and much wider than I was, so I had to tuck a lot of the shirt's material in the waistband of the pants, the excess hanging out. Then, I put the black baseball cap on for fun and maybe a little luck. There was no mirror in here to check out what I looked like, but I'm pretty sure I looked like Sarge if he was short, deaf, and blonde. Oh, and actually showed his face.

I walked to the white dresser, grabbing the balm I put on my ears to soothe the sores I had. I wore these hearing aids upwards of sixteen to twenty hours a day. It just depended on work, classes, and if I had errands to run. I put them in, wincing as the rough plastic brushed the sores these things created after years of wear.

I walked out of the guest bedroom, hearing coffee brewing and the aroma wafting through the house. I inhaled deeply, a smile on my face. Who doesn't love the smell of coffee? It was a good thing to wake up to. It always just made you happy.

Seeing Sarge in a sleeveless hoodie with the hood blocking his face from view, I greeted him. "Good morning, Sarge."

A grunt.

It could make everyone happy except Sarge, apparently.

I looked to my left, seeing a white door. "What's that lead to?"

"The garage."

I blinked. "What do you keep in there?"

“My car.”

“You drive a car?”

“Can’t bring groceries home on a motorcycle.”

I grinned at his straightforward answer. “Are you one of those ‘*my car is my baby*’ men?” He grunted, not giving me an answer, but I knew his grunts meant yes. He was just too macho to admit it.

I bit my lip at the image of Sarge riding on his motorcycle, plastic bags hanging off of his arms as he rode home. “I figured you did delivery or something.”

“Select people know where I live.”

That wasn’t surprising. A jest on the tip of my tongue that I was scared of the answer for. “Never had any female visitors?”

“Victoria.” What? My eyes widened as my heart dropped. He saw my newfound distress and eased my raging thoughts, “Not like that.”

I felt relieved he’d never been with her that way, my heart warming at the fact that I was the only woman he willingly brought to his house—

Did it still count as willingly when there was a gang of people wanting me dead? I’m just going to count it as a win. I didn’t get many of those with a man like Sarge.

“I thought I was the first one here?”

“You’re the first person I’ve allowed inside.” He corrected me.

Still I was curious. “How did she find out where you live?”

“She followed me.”

“And you were okay with that?”

“Almost shot her.” I would have laughed if I didn’t know he was serious. “Prez would’ve skinned me alive, though.”

My lips turned up at Darrell’s obvious weak spot for Victoria. “You’d be living in Hellbound instead of this cabin.”

It was the slightest flinch, but I caught him doing it. Sarge never showed an ounce of instability in the months we’ve been forced together. “Sarge?”

“It’s nothin’,” he cut me off, grabbing two white ceramic mugs from a cabinet above the stove. He had a bandage around his right arm where the bullet skimmed his arm on display. I bit my lip, feeling slightly bad for pressing my finger to it rather than bandaging it up for him.

I bit the inside of my cheek. “I’m sorry.” His neck twisted to face me. “For, uh, putting my finger in your bullet wound.”

“Nothin’ you do could hurt me, Joslyn.”

I raised an eyebrow. “So when you shouted *fuck* last night, it was just a friendly gesture?”

Silence.

I couldn’t help myself, I laughed. This man was so stubborn he couldn’t even admit it when he was in pain. I felt

his eyes—eyes I’ve still yet to actually see—bore into me intensely. The gaze was like a wildfire spreading on my skin as I felt the warmth come to the surface. My chuckle died down as my cheeks heated for a whole new reason. I quickly brushed my knuckle under my eye to get rid of the tear trying to escape.

A calm passed between us. He may have liked the quiet, but I didn’t. “How’d you get the bandage on? It’s gotta be difficult from that angle.”

“Used to do it all the time.” The coffee pot beeped as he grabbed it, pouring it into the separate mugs before reaching up into an adjacent cabinet to pull down the sugar. “Old habits die hard.” He turned to his refrigerator, pulling out milk.

“Sure, I love a splash of coffee with my milk and sugar,” I teased, trying to figure out how he knew exactly how I took my coffee. So, the direct approach was best in my eyes. “How’d you know how I liked my coffee?”

“Sweet girls like sweet coffee.”

I smiled. “You think I’m sweet?”

“Too sweet for my tastes.”

My bottom lip jutted out. “Then asshole men must like black coffee. I’ll remember that it’s a red flag.”

A snort came from the darkness of his hood as he turned his back to me. “Not human without my coffee.”

“I’m starting to think you’re not a human at all,” I jested, taking a sip of the coffee. He was right. I loved coffee. “A

little sugar in your coffee would do you good, Sarge.”

“You’re not drinkin’ coffee.” He shook his head, still not looking at me. “Just milk and sugar.”

It was my turn to snort. “You’ve never had good coffee. Mocha chocolate chip frappe from Diamond Java is to die for. You have to try it.”

“Pass.”

I rolled my eyes before mumbling. “Such a man’s answer. Never let anything sweet into your life.”

“Only one sweet thing I want to taste,” his voice was low, almost raspy. “But don’t think I can stop at just one serving.”

Now, I almost dropped the coffee mug on the ground. I thought back to my dream of Sarge’s hands on my body and lips worshiping me. I tucked my chin in a feeble attempt to hide my face, but this man apparently saw everything. Why can I easily flirt with him, but the second he flirts back, I’m a puddle? I had to change the topic of the conversation. “H-How’s your bike?”

“Good.”

“Victoria said you did it for me,” I tried again, wanting him to admit it. It wasn’t a coincidence that he got a bike he’s had for years changed suddenly. “Is that true?”

“No.” He refused too quickly. “Why would I?”

“Because I commented about listening to the motorcycle engines and hoping it would be you, then a week later, your

engine has a different sound than the rest of the club members.”

“Thinkin’ too much into it.” He brushed it off. “Engine was fucked. Got the cylinders replaced. That’s. It.”

I’ve pushed him too far. I don’t want him to be angry with me. I just want answers. “Just admit it, Sarge. You care about me.”

“I don’t fuckin’ care,” he snapped, causing me to flinch, but he was too pissed to acknowledge it. “I just can’t let somethin’ happen to you knowing I can prevent it.”

“If the Bloods truly want to cause me harm, they’re not going to stop until they’re stopped.”

“No shit,” he grumbled. “That’s what we’re tryin’ to do.”

“But once you stop them...” Would you still want me here? He was waiting for me to answer him. “Would you still let me visit you?”

“No.” He shook his head. “My life is mine. I want solitude. I don’t want you.”

“But last night, you told me as long as I’m alive, the sun will rise for you.”

“Yeah,” his voice was harsh. “The sun rising for me isn’t always a good thing.”

*Ouch.* “What the hell is your problem? I’ve done nothing to deserve you treating me like this!”



“You don’t know what you’ve done to me.” His growl was as vicious as the bite of his words. “And you never will.”

“Sarge!” I called after him, rushing to the front room. He’s just gonna leave me out here? Oh, hell no.

He didn’t stop when I called his name, making desperation rise. Nyla told me Mitchell was ecstatic that she was there even if she didn’t want to be. It was the total opposite with me and Sarge. I loved being here with him, but... he didn’t want me here.

Halting my steps, it hit me—the only people who ever cared about him had died because of him. That’s what he believes. I pushed the dark thought out of my head when I heard his bike start up.

I rushed around the room, looking for some type of key to the car he apparently kept in the garage.

I blew out a breath, rushing into the garage. I tried pulling the door up to no avail. Of course, his garage door is locked. Standing up, I took a panicked breath. I need to follow him, and I have no time to panic. Looking around the garage, I headed straight for a tool chest and ripped the top door open to grab the first thing I could see.

A hammer.

Perfect.

I ran back over to the car, smashing the window out and reaching inside, keeping in mind the broken glass, and unlocked the door. I dropped to my knees and took the wire

panel off, thanking God this was an older car that I could still do this with. I grabbed the rotary wires, pressing them together until I heard the engine roar to life. I sagged with relief, setting my forehead on the steering wheel while a wide smile burst across my face. I still have it.

I shouldn't be proud of that.

I jumped in the driver's seat, putting my seatbelt on. Looking up into the mirror, I realized I still had one huge problem. The garage door is still locked. Taking a deep breath and slamming the gear shift in reverse, I used all my body weight to punch the gas. The car backed up, smashing through the garage door. I kept it floored, roughly bumping over the rumble I'd just caused. Once I was clear of the damage, I threw the car in reverse. I backed the car up before pressing the brakes, changing my direction to the open road Sarge just went down.

I bit the inside of my cheek to calm my nerves, my anxiety prickling every nerve at following Sarge. I didn't know what I was going to see...

But I had a feeling it would change everything.

# Chapter 7: Joslyn



I wasn't stealthy.

I guess a perk to being deaf is all my other senses are heightened. I can see farther and clearer than the average person. And since Sarge was larger than life riding the world's loudest motorcycle, it wasn't hard to keep an eye on him from a distance.

He made a sudden turn down an abandoned road, dead trees and vegetation lining the way. In the expanse, I could make out a small brick building. It almost looks abandoned. It was run down, the color faded, and the windows broken. He parked his bike on one side of the building where a man came to take his keys from him, but Sarge responded by pushing him onto the ground before making his way into the single door.

The man got off the ground, dusted himself off, and quickly faced the direction of the door Sarge had just disappeared through. After a few seconds, he turned on his heels and began pushing Sarge's bike down the side of the building and out of sight.

What the hell?

I looked at the time. It was seven at night. The sun was beginning to set, the trees now casting daunting shadows along the exterior of the building. I hurried to turn my headlights off, unsure what my next move would be. My mind was racing with adrenaline, and I needed to figure out what Sarge was doing there.

Drugs? Drinking? Fighting?

A woman?

The last thought hurt. I know Sarge wasn't particularly fond of me, but the idea of him with anyone else made my stomach hurt. But I wasn't going to get answers sitting here.

*Second strike, Joslyn. Three, and you're out.*

I exited the car, making sure my hood was pulled up and the baseball cap covered my face. Thank God I chose this hoodie today. Who knew I'd be stealing a car and breaking and entering? I guess it's easy to dress the part when you have to choose a makeshift outfit from a biker's spare closet. I made sure to lower my face as I hurried through the odd-looking area. I could only describe it as a scene from a horror movie where the ignorant white person casually goes snooping right before they are brutally murdered.

Let's hope that isn't exactly what's about to happen to me.

Walking closer to the building, my ears started picking up loud noises from the back side. I kept my distance, not wanting to get too close and be seen but also wanting to stay close enough to hear. I stepped around the perimeter, quickly

shimmying behind a tree to see where all the noise was coming from exactly.

*Oh. My. God.*

It was a scene straight out of Hellbound.

Men and women everywhere. Keg stands. Public displays of intimacy. Money exchanges...

What was this place?

A man walked around the side of the building, putting his thumb and pointer finger to his lips and letting out a large whistle that silenced the crowd. Once all the attention was on him, he waved his arm inside, causing the group to steamroll past each other to try to get in the building first, leaving a trail of excited whoops and hollers in their wake.

There's no way this small brick building could hold a crowd this size. There had to be at least a hundred people here. While the majority of them had gone up the steps inside, some still lingered around the door, smoking cigarettes and chatting. My eyes widened, and my body went stiff when I recognized two figures leaning against the side of the building.

Tyrant and Knight—without their cuts—both with cigarettes in hand, scanned what was left of the crowd. If they were here, the Souls were involved in whatever Sarge was doing.

When they were involved, nothing ever turned out good.

“You! Get over here!”

*Strike three.*

A burly man with more gut than height approached me, and I quickly debated running into the woods. My chances of getting out of this situation were higher with him than with the coyotes and whatever else that lurked around.

Shakily, I complied, facing a burly man whose eyes scanned me from head to toe, making me shiver. He pulled the cigarette from his lips, a wisp of smoke leaving it. “You a ring girl?”

My eyebrows furrowed, but I shook my head. I didn’t know what a ring girl was, but I wasn’t dumb enough to ask this man what he meant by it. I wasn’t even supposed to be here. “Sorry, I think I took a wrong turn, I’ll—”

“Nice try.” He grabbed my wrist as I tried to turn back to the car, holding it high as I used my other one to try to claw his hand off my wrist. “You can’t leave once you get here. If you were a regular, you would know that. Who are you?”

Where’s here? All I did was follow Sarge. If he was here, it couldn’t be that bad... right? “I-I’m just lost. Honest.”

His lips turned predatory as I felt my body shiver under the weight of his stare. “I could let it slide this one time—”

A scream left my throat as the man suddenly fell to the ground, a pool of blood forming on the concrete beneath him. My eyes shot up, seeing Tyrant still in position, his eyes darker than I’d ever seen. Usually, his eyes were full of light... but they were filled with death right now.

“The fuck you doing here, Joslyn?” he asked, light returning as he chastised me. He looked to the path to our right, spotting Sarge’s red Cadillac, his eyes widening. “How did you even get Sarge’s car? He keeps that cabin of his locked up like Fort Knox.”

“Oh.” I wracked my mind for an excuse but couldn’t think of one. “I, uh, I hot-wired it.”

I heard another set of footsteps approaching. I blew out a relieved breath when I saw tattoo’s that rivaled Tyrant’s. Knight’s eyes widened in surprise, letting out a low whistle. “You can hot-wire a car?”

I bit my lip, not proud of how I knew how to do it. Instead, my eyes returned back to the dead man on the ground. “Are you guys going to get in trouble?”

“For what?” Tyrant asked so casually like he didn’t just kill someone. His eyes drifted to the man lying dead at his feet. “Oh, for this? Nah, people will probably just take his body and sell what they can off of it.”

My mouth went dry like I ate cotton. “What?”

“Dude.” Knight shook his head. “She shouldn’t know that.”

Why would I ever assume that Sarge would take off to a place that doesn’t have death implications?

“I’ll just go—“

“Can’t do that.” Tyrant tucked the gun back in his pocket. “People are watchin’. If they see you leave before the matches

are over, they'll follow you. These people aren't the ones you want to fuck with, Jos."

I tried to swallow even though I felt like I was suffocating. Sometimes, I hated that I didn't think and just acted. It never turned out well for me. "So... what happens now?"

"What happens," he walks over to me, putting his hand on my back as he guides me around the corpse and towards the small brick building, "is you're gonna stay by our sides and keep your pretty little head down."

"The things you're gonna see aren't meant for girls like you." Knight followed behind Tyrant and me. "But you don't have a choice now."

I've never had a damn choice. Why would life start giving me one now?

Tyrant knocked on the metal side door when we approached it, knocking in a way that was obviously a code. Two taps of his knuckle and a large bang with the side of his fist. The door opened slightly, and a man around our age with a scowl on his face looked at us. It was the man who called everyone in earlier. "You were supposed to be inside already."

"Cry me a fuckin' river," Tyrant grumbled, lifting his leg and kicking the door open. The man's curse echoed on the walls as his body smacked against the ground. I cringed as I heard the back of his head hit the stone floor. "Gonna treat some of Andre's best customers like that?"

Who's Andre?



The man leaned up on his forearms, skin noticeably paling at the mention of Andre's name. "S-Sorry. Please come in."

Tyrant barked out a laugh before looking down at me. "Stay close. It's easy to get lost here."

I nodded before grabbing the back of his black t-shirt. Tyrant led us while Knight stayed close behind me. Passing the man Tyrant just knocked over, he delivered a swift kick to the side of the head, knocking him out, and cackled as we stepped over him. I heard a grunt, so I assumed that Knight stepped on him when he passed him.

With each step down the dark hallway, impending doom hit my stomach like a punch. What was this place? They killed a man and knocked another one out and will face no consequences? Obviously, this is a shady place kept hidden from the general public for a good reason.

"Is the rest of the club here?"

"Nah," Tyrant knew where he was going when we came into a fork in the hallway going right, "Just Knight, Sarge, and I. Victoria wants to come—"

"She's not fuckin' allowed."

I twist my neck to look at Knight, whose face looks menacing at the mention of Victoria. Their relationship was weird. He was always where she wasn't, but she had never uttered a bad word about Knight. She just said he didn't want to be around her, and while it hurt, she said sometimes

personalities just don't mesh. They've made it work thus far. She didn't know how to change it.

“Do you love Victoria or something?” He refused to be around her when her personality was like a gravitational pull.

“No. Don't love her, haven't fucked her. Nothin' like that.” He shook his head adamantly. “None of your damn business, Joslyn.”

“Chill out Knight,” Tyrant scolded. “You don't get to be a dick to anyone you want. Sarge hears you talk to her like that? You'll be his opponent tonight.” I halted, causing Tyrant and Knight to stop. “What're you doing?”

I gulped. “Opponent?”

“This is an underground fighting ring.”

Blood. Fists pounding against flesh. Cries of anguish and begs of stopping...

“I...” My heartbeat picked up, my brain fogging itself to protect me from whatever I was about to see. “Can you tell me what we're going to see before we get down there?”

“Gotta see to believe, sweetheart.” Tyrant grabbed my wrist, forcing me along. “This is a dangerous place for everyone, especially for a girl like you.”

“Then Sarge—”

“He's one of the top fighters. Don't worry about him.”

I worried about everyone, but Sarge was at the top of that list.

He led us to a staircase that went well below the foundation... I guess that explains how they get so many people to fit in here.

I held Tyrant's shirt as Knight's hand grabbed mine while we pushed through the crowd to the VIP section. There were no seats, standing only. I looked around at hundreds of people standing, waiting for the brawls to happen. "What is this place?"

I tried to adjust my hearing aids as I strained to listen to Tyrant and Knight over all the other chatter. Tyrant grinned. "Welcome to the Catacombs."

"Sarge really fights down here?" I settled in the middle of Knight and Tyrant, assuming it was for my safety.

"Yeah. He's fuckin' great too. One of the only two who hasn't lost a match."

I looked at Knight curiously. "Who's the other one?"

"His name is Dai." Well, that's ironic. "Think he's a bit more unhinged than Sarge is, but his fights are always electrifying."

"He and Sarge never fought each other?"

Knight shook his head. "No, Sarge and Dai are the top dogs down here. Sarge doesn't do death matches. Dai does."

I swallowed hard. "Death matches?"

"Exactly as it sounds, sweetheart." Tyrant's grin was devilish. "Two go in breathin', one comes out alive."

“What type of matches does Sarge do?”

“Blood matches. Whoever draws first blood wins.” That still didn’t sound better than death matches. “Don’t worry. No one has ever landed a punch on Sarge. Doubt they ever will, fucker was built for the ring.”

I eyed the ring worryingly, not liking that. I knew Sarge had a violent streak, but I never imagined him being a part of anything like this.

I should’ve just stayed at Sarge’s like a good girl. I could’ve snooped in his room. I could’ve cleaned the already spotless place...

But no. I had to make sure he was okay after our argument and jeopardized my life in the process.

Music blasted suddenly as the lights dimmed, the men and women around us cheering as I slammed my eyes shut, my hands immediately going to my ears. With frantic fingers, I ripped my aids out, feeling the old plastic tear at the sores in my ear canals. Everything was muted as I took a shaky breath, trying to regain my bearings.

I felt the music thumping on my skin. It was fast-paced as a man came out of the tunnel on the other side of the ring. When he smiled, you could see his white teeth from a mile away as he held up his wrapped knuckles, mouth open, and clearly yelling, trying to get the audience hyped up. He made it to the ring, pulling himself up on the ropes before running around the perimeter. He was shirtless, in very good shape,

with traditional boxing shorts. He had more lithe muscles, but his agility would go a long way compared to a broader man.

The place went dark once again. The music went from a high tempo to one that vibrated less.

A tap on my shoulder made me flinch as Tyrant's ice-blue eyes looked down at me. Thankfully I could read his lips under the bright lights. "You okay?"

No. No, I wasn't. My ears felt like they were bleeding. There were too many people here.

I wanted Sarge.

The lights started to flicker rapidly like a strobe. The tempo of the vibrations changed from upbeat to something like a low bass. The lights came on again, and I put my hands over my ears to try to stop the loud, muffled noises from the crowd's cheers. My eyes widened as I watched him come down the ramp.

Sarge.

He wore his usual cut-off hoodie, and instead of jeans, he wore black shorts that ended above his knees. My eyes trailed down to the skin of Sarge's calves that I'd never seen before.

His left shin was severely scarred, while his right was perfectly fine.

Sarge got in the opposite corner, his opponent trash-talking him aggressively, judging by his wild body language. But he was calm and collected like I knew Sarge to be. Someone in a black and white striped stepped in the middle of the ring.

Since it was above ground level and we were in the front row, I could read his lips.

“Welcome to the Blood match between Sarge and Kel!” My ears throbbed as the cheers around us grew louder, but I bit the inside of my cheek to deter some of it. “The first one who bleeds loses. The final bets are already in. Gentleman, I want a good match. Give the crowd what they want!”

I have to remind myself to breathe, in and out, in and out. The louder the cheers got, the more pain I was feeling. With the shape my ears were in, I really need to take a few days off from my aids and let them try to heal after tonight. The referee signaled Sarge and Kel to come to the center of the ring. Kel put his fist out to knock against Sarge, but he didn't return the gesture. Looks like, with Kel's smirk, it was expected. He lowered his hand, and the referee stepped away.

Sarge stayed still while Kel danced on his feet. His fist reared back, and it looked like Sarge wasn't going to dodge—

“Watch out!” I called, making Sarge's head snap in my direction. His brief pause was enough of an opening for his opponent to get a good hit on him, making me cover my mouth, eyes wide with surprise as the vibrations stopped beating my skin.

That man hit Sarge.

Tyrant told me no one's ever landed a punch on Sarge.

Slowly, Sarge turned his body towards the cocky man who was dancing on his feet, fists still raised, prepared for another

hit. He swung, and Sarge sidestepped him, grabbing his wrist with one hand and his bicep with the other. His opponent's face flashed with fear as Sarge's bruising grip thrust his arm down while bringing his knee up, hitting it right on the man's elbow and snapping his arm in half at the hinge.

Nausea pooled in my gut as my hand went to my mouth.

I could feel everyone's eyes. I knew there was a mix of confusion and adrenaline from Sarge crippling a man. But I couldn't focus on them. I could only focus on Sarge. The way he jumped over the ropes, making a beeline towards me. I couldn't hear a word he was saying, looking up at him blankly before he brushed my hair away from my ears, checking to see if I was wearing my hearing aids.

Sarge's opponent was twitching in pain on the ground, blood pooling beneath him from where Sarge literally snapped his arm in half. I stood there horrified, barely acknowledging when Sarge grabbed my wrist hard enough to leave a bruise on my pale skin later. He began to lead us away, the thumping of the crowd left behind.

He took us to a back room that looked like a dressing room. Clothes, bandages, and the smell of sweat lingered. Tyrant and Knight flew into the room just as Sarge slammed the door, turning to face all of us.

"What the fuck are you doin' here?" He roared at me, his head shifting to Knight and Tyrant. "Why did you bring her with you!"

“We didn’t.” Tyrant put his hands up in defense. “Stan caught her. She was already on the premises, and you know the rules; you’re not allowed out of here until the matches are done. So we watched and made sure she was safe. You’re welcome.”

He turned to face me. “Grim was supposed to get you.”

Did he not realize I wasn’t a mind reader? “How was I supposed to know that when you just ran off like you always do!” I vaguely heard a murmur from the two next to us just watching our fight. “Not everyone knows what your temper tantrums mean, Sarge!”

“How did you get here?”

“She hot-wired your Cadi.” Tyrant was enjoying this, leaning against the opposing vanity.

I would’ve done anything to see his facial reaction. “You stole my fuckin’ car?”

Surprisingly, I think that’s the least of our worries right now. “That’s not important right now. Why do you fight in these matches?”

“That’s club business.”

That wasn’t good enough for me. “You know that’s not a good excuse, right? The best way to protect someone like you’re claiming to protect me is by telling me what’s going on with the people who are out to get me!”

He grabbed his hood, obviously frustrated with my behavior, as strained words escaped him, “You’re so fuckin’



reckless it drives me crazy.”

“Says the one who comes down here with a chance of getting killed!” Tyrant and Knight’s eyes widened at my outburst. I guess no one dared talk to Sarge the way I was. “You’re telling me I’m the reckless one, but I’m not the one who had a bullet graze my arm or goes into a fighting match where the goal is to literally hurt each other as much as possible!”

He turned to Tyrant and Knight and seethed, “Leave.”

They hesitated as Knight responded, “No way, man. You’re wound up. You might actually hurt her.”

“I’d never fuckin’ hurt her!” He roared at them. And despite the uncontrollable rage he was presenting, I truly believed he wouldn’t either. He’s had every opportunity to hurt me and hasn’t yet. He was rude, abrasive, and undermining. But he hasn’t hurt me. Not physically, at least.

Knight and Tyrant still stood their ground. They were loyal, unbiased men towards Nyla, Oakley, and I. Their club obviously came before us, but they wouldn’t let us get hurt needlessly.

“It’s okay.” I shot them a convincing smile, hoping it was enough leverage for them to leave. “I can handle him.”

They didn’t look convinced as they eyed Sarge suspiciously. “We’re gonna be right outside the door. You got ten minutes.”

They walked over to the door, Tyrant shooting a warning glance at Sarge as he shut the door behind them. The tension between Sarge and I was almost suffocating, but I refused to relent. He wanted me safe. But he couldn't keep me safe if he kept me in the dark.

I felt like we were the ones in the ring, waiting for the other to make a move. A dangerous move that could either mend or destroy—

“You've done it now, Joslyn.”

Destroy it was.

## Chapter 8: Joslyn



“I’ve done what?” I shot back, “Worry about you when you just stormed off? Caring that the fact that you were as angry as you were made you more susceptible to crashing and hurting yourself?”

“Caring for me is a big fuckin’ mistake.”

I refused to feel sympathy for him being this crass. “I hate that you think so little of yourself that you believe that.”

“Not everyone can be saved.” His words were as cold as a frost-covered ground. “And not everyone wants to be saved.”

“So you’d rather self-destruct the way you are? Living in limbo with no end in sight?”

“It’s how I’ve survived.” He stepped towards me, my shadowman coming into the light. I had to crane my neck to look at him, the palpable rage radiating off of him invading my skin, the empath in me trying to absorb the anger he felt at me chasing after him and discovering a secret I was never meant to be involved in.

He’s killed before. He’s even killed *for* me before. I thought that would be enough to get his violence quota in—why sacrifice himself in these matches? He wasn’t invincible like he thought he was. He couldn’t take on the crowd of people if

they turned on him. It just took one order for a hivemind to start...

Someone who thrived on violence was a lost soul using physical pain to numb their emotional trauma.

“You need to live, Sarge.”

“I have nothing to live for.” He sounded so sure it rattled my heart painfully.

A distant part of my brain wanted him to say *me*. But it was unfair of me to even fathom that. “But—”

“You’re playing a losing game, Joslyn,” he warned. “You can’t save everybody.”

“But I can try!” I cried out to him desperately, hands gripping the front of his hoodie against my better judgment. I ignored the way he froze under my touch. “You can’t keep me away. I care about you, Sarge.”

His chest vibrates underneath my hands, one of his large hands engulfing both my wrists before throwing them off of him. “Keep it up. I’ll lock you up and throw away the fuckin’ key.”

Now, it was my turn to huff. One thing that I would never allow again was being a prisoner on someone else’s terms. “You can’t cage me.”

“Your cage isn’t metal bars.” His head dipped almost level as mine but not any less intimidating. “It’s the way I can do whatever the fuck I want with you.”

I stood strong, hands on my hips, daring him to deliver on his promise. I narrowed my eyes. “No, you can’t.”

“It’s up to you to accept it.” He curtly ordered as he grabbed my right arm, roughly jerking it so my body turned, back flush with his hard front. We were now both heaving in frustration, staring at our reflection in the cracked vanity mirror. “And I’m going to show you why you don’t have a choice.”

“W-What are you doing!” Maybe I shouldn’t have sent Tyrant and Knight out of the room. For the first time since the party, I was terrified of him. He was right. He could do whatever he wanted to me with a flick of a wrist. He was three times my size.

“Shut. Up,” he growled. My throat bobbed with a fear I couldn’t quite handle. I watched as his arm raised slowly, tracing my outline. His strong and calloused hand roughly touched my back, applying pressure. “Bend over, Joslyn.”

Still stunned at this turn of events, I didn’t act quickly enough to his command. He roughly shoved my upper half down towards the counter of the vanity. My cheek hit the cool material of the black granite as I tried to see what Sarge was going to do next, but the steady, firm pressure he was applying didn’t allow me to do so. “Sarge!”

I choked on air as his other hand roughly grabbed my ass through my thin leggings, sure to leave bruises. “You pissed me off playin’ this game with me.”

“I wasn’t playing a game!” I was frantic as I tried to get out of his hold. I didn’t know what was happening or what this side of Sarge was. “Sarge, please! I’m sorry!”

He bent down, something stiff meeting my ass as his large body applied more pressure onto my back. My eyes began to sting with tears. Maybe he would hurt me after all. His panting breaths hit my ear while hot fear flooded through every crevice of my body. “Too late.”

My body began to shake as I felt Sarge’s hand lift up the hoodie I was still wearing. His hands barely ghosted a blazing trail along my newly exposed skin. Once he shoved enough material up, he stepped back slightly to push my sweatpants and underwear down, the draft in the room hitting my pussy, letting me know I didn’t have a choice anymore.

“Fuck.” His voice was strained, but I remained still, too afraid to move as I heard his movements. I thought for a brief moment maybe he was just trying to scare me.

But that was before he stepped back into me. My body tensed at what I suspected was his hard cock pressing into the crease of my ass. One of his hands landed firmly on my hip as he guided himself between my clenched legs, the head of his dick pressing to my clit before he thrust sharply into it. I wasn’t expecting that or the throb that came with it.

God, it hurts. But it hurt so good.

His cock remained pressed on my clit. The pressure it caused was all I could focus on until I felt a fingertip circle my entrance. “Dunno why.” He forced his finger in with one swift

motion, making me cry out at the new sensation. He continued at a steady pace, hips and finger thrusting in unison. I couldn't help but push my hips back to meet his wondrous and torturous pace with a sharp moan. Trying to catch my breath, he leaned down to my ear and whispered, "You bent over takin' my cock has been hauntin' my dreams."

*Me too.* The words were at the top of my tongue, just begging to be spoken, but at this point, I don't think I could even form a full sentence. Not when the blunt tip of his cock was rubbing deliciously against me and muddling whatever thoughts were in my mind. A particularly hard thrust left my thighs shaking and pathetic mewls passing my lips.

"Fuckin' love the sounds you make for me." A pitiful whimper escaped when another of Sarge's thick fingers found my opening, roughly pushing through as this calloused fingertip rubbed against my walls. My knees felt weak, and no doubt, I would be sprawled on the floor if this counter wasn't holding me up. As his two long fingers began to scissor my opening, I suddenly hoped he was doing all this to stretch me for all of him and not just as a tease. I needed him. He had me bent over at his mercy, exposed to anyone who walked in. I've never expected my heated dreams about him to become a reality. Why not give in to this moment? Give into him?

Maybe his touch would take theirs away.

Every time before this, I was passed out in a drunken haze. This was the first sexual experience I was awake to feel—to enjoy. I didn't know how far Sarge would take this game of

his, but my quivering legs and weeping cunt were hoping he'd take it all the way.

I wanted him. And with the amount of attention he was currently focusing on me, I could tell he wanted me, too. But he was as unpredictable as he was menacing. One small slip was all it would take for me to be alone and aching for him in this room.

I didn't want that. I didn't want to be alone in a place like this... a place that brought up so many unwanted memories that I wanted his touch to take away—even if it was just a moment of solace caused by our shared pleasure.

A moment of tranquility was better than a second of agony.

“Do you want my cock, Joslyn?” His voice was raspy, barely in control. His anger turned into an insatiable lust.

“Yes.” Was my breathless answer, my mind already made up. I pressed my body further into the granite vanity. The contact made my already hardened nipples sting with pleasure. My mind finally pushed out thoughts of the nights I used alcohol to numb any other encounter of this nature. This time, it would be different.

This time, it was with Sarge.

“Yes, what?” As the words were about to leave my tongue, his cock pressed more firmly onto my clit, silencing any words or thoughts. “I don't know if you really want it. I need to hear the words, Sunshine. Say. It.”



“I want your cock.” I whimpered, my facade crumbling when I felt the blunt head of his cock brush over a sensitive part of me, making me cry out while I dug my nails into my palm. “Sarge, please.”

“Since you asked so nicely.” His words were condescending as his blunt tip pressed into my sensitive flesh. I bit my lip as the tip of his cock put pressure on my clit again, harshly moving back and forth to continue his torture. He stilled his movements, keeping firm pressure on me. I barely made out his quick and shallow breaths, seemingly trying to restrain himself. Well, I wasn’t waiting for him to change his mind.

No, I threw my hips back, penetrating myself. It was not a smart move. The pain of being celibate for so long and adjusting to the size of the largest cock I’d ever had inside of me. It wasn’t a good combo.

“Fuckin’ hell,” Sarge groaned, throwing his head back with a hiss. His hands bruisingly gripped my hips for a moment before he ripped them away to slam them down on the counter at my sides. His grip tightened to the point I was momentarily nervous it might crack. “You wanted me that bad?”

I couldn’t think of anything besides the feeling of us being connected together. My cheek pressed against the cold vanity, resting between where his hands grabbed the counter between his straining grip, and I numbly nodded my head in answer. I

didn't know if he registered my reaction as he remained still, letting me adjust to his size.

I never wanted to know where he ended and I began.

I let out an impatient sigh as I waited for him to move, but my need couldn't wait any longer, so I did it for him.

“Don't you fuckin' dare.” His voice was low, barely human. His hands left the counter, fingers pressing into my hips as he tried to get a grip on himself. “I control this, not you.”

“Then hurry up!” I wiggled as much as I could against him, biting the inside of my cheek at the feel of him twitching inside my right walls. “I'm not gonna wait anymore, Sarge. Fuck me.”

His fingers tightened again against my hips, threatening to pop my joint out of place with his force. Hell, I'd just seen him pop a bone through the skin of his opponent's arm not thirty minutes ago. He wasn't trying to restrain himself this time.

I feel like I touched an insecurity of his.

When he still didn't start to move inside me like I'd begged for, I started to ask what was wrong, but he responded in his own brute way. He backed his hips up and pushed inside of me so harshly I thought I was going to rip in half. A gasp mixed with surprise, pain, and pleasure escaped. I didn't have time to decipher the delicious feelings as he quickened his pace, simultaneously taking my words and my pleasure closer to an edge I hadn't been on before.

“You’ll wait as long as I fuckin’ tell you to wait,” he whispered harshly in my ear. “I control you. You don’t control me.”

Even in my lust-filled haze, it sounded more like a reminder to himself than a command to me.

“You control all of me, Sarge.” My voice was soft, barely audible, combined with a breathless moan. “I’ll let you take whatever you want from me.”

“What I want from you can never be given back.” He thrust hard into me, causing a whimper followed by a moan to escape my throat, leaving a tingle at the force of it.

“Keep it.” I bit my bottom lip, trying to center myself from his bruising thrusts while attempting to calm whatever storm was invading his mind. My pleasure was building, but so was my worry for him. “Take any piece of me you want.”

“You barely have anything left to give.”

A cry escaped me as I slammed my hand down on the counter. A cry of pleasure tinted with the pain of the truth to his words. Like I touched a nerve with him, he also touched one for me. If he wanted to take his misery out on fucking me, then I’d return the favor. “You have no pieces left either, Sarge.”

I threw my hips back, meeting his halfway. A move he wasn’t expecting. “Fuck!”

He shifted forward until my body was pinned between his and the vanity counter. I was helpless. I couldn’t move.

I was at his mercy, yet I never wanted to be anywhere else.

At that thought, something deep inside me snapped, exploding through my body like wildfire. A deep moan escaped my lips as I shivered through the aftershocks he seemed determined to ride out. Sarge's arm gently slipped around my waist. His affectionate touch surprised me, and I listened to his guttural groan accompanied by his release. I don't think he realized what he was doing, either. I felt his thumb brush against my stomach a few times before his words made me freeze.

"You said I had nothing left to give." He paused. "I'll always have a piece of myself waiting for you."

He hastily pulled out of me like he'd just woken from a trance. My heart dropped, feeling dismal as he jumped away from me like I'd burned him. I half expected him to be gone by the time I pulled myself together, but he wasn't.

"No prettier sight than my come dripping down your thighs."

Using what little strength I had, I pushed myself up on the vanity. Shakily turning around, I rested my elbows on the counter again to keep myself upright. My eyes widened with realization as Sarge looked at me dead on. He stepped closer to me, so close we were centimeters apart. And maybe, just maybe, his affectionate caress earlier wasn't a mistake after all.

Not when his hand clamped itself against my cheek.

“You fuckin’ belong to me, Joslyn.” He grabbed my chin in a bruising grip. This man didn’t know how to be gentle in any sense. “You’re mine to fuck. When I tell you to bend over, I mean you bend your ass over any fuckin’ surface, and I’ll fill that pretty pussy of yours up.”

The knot in my throat threatened to suffocate me as I looked at him, trying to decipher his mood. “I thought you said you’d never hurt me.”

“I did. That was until I finally saw how pretty you look bent over with my come running down your legs. Fuckin’ addicted to the sight of your pussy spilling from my cock, Sunshine.”

“But... protection?” I protested weakly. Reality crashed into me as the lust faded away. “I don’t know if you’re—”

“Haven’t been with anyone in six years. I’m clean.” My eyes widened. That long? Weren’t men in their twenties ruled by their dick? Sarge wasn’t a normal man, though.

“But you don’t know about me—”

“In my mind, I’m your first,” he cut me off. The angry rasp in his tone was not lost on me. “And if you tell me about anyone else, they’re fuckin’ dead.”

“I’m being serious, Sarge.” I hated discussing this, but it was more important than it was embarrassing. I looked down at my feet, face heating up with shame. “I—”

“Get checked. I’ll get checked, too,” he said simply. “But that’s not the last time I’ll be inside that perfect pussy.”

“I’m not on birth control,” I blurted. He finished inside of me. I rubbed my thighs together, feeling the evidence of it but also worried about the potential consequence of our heated moment.

He didn’t seem concerned by that. “Get on it or get pregnant. I’m not using a condom.”

Leave it to a man to not be willing to accommodate a woman. “It’ll take a while for me to get on it. I have an audiologist appointment coming up. All my money is going to that.”

“You’re getting on it for me. I’ll pay.”

My lips formed a tight line. I was debating on teetering on my independence and just letting him. One, he probably was going to do it anyway. Two, I don’t think I could resist him anymore after what just happened. Our quick romp in a strange place filled with even stranger people left me craving for more. “You’re making me feel cheap.”

His voice turned low, raspy even. “I’ll be treating you like my whore.”

Whore was usually used in a derogatory way, but the way he said it...

I was ready to bend over for him again.

A sharp knock resounded before Tyrant peaked in, his dark curls and piercing blue eyes looking at us knowingly. “Apparently, you didn’t do a good enough job if she’s still standing, brother.”

Sarge charged forward, Tyrant's cackling laughter muted by the way he slammed the door shut. Obscenities were shouted as Sarge tried to pry the wooden barrier open. I was sure it was only a matter of time before he kicked it down.

I smiled.

Maybe this was a turning point for us.

*Wishful thinking always bit you in the ass, Joslyn.*

## Chapter 9: Joslyn



Back at Sarge's cabin, I stood waiting quietly in the entryway while he ran his usual house clearing. My body was ridiculously sore, legs still slightly trembling with shock and nerves. Even though I'd been trying to hide it on the way home, I'm sure Sarge had noticed. Would he boast about his latest conquest? Puff out his chest and beat on it, caveman as he was? He'd never seemed like that type of man, but after tonight's events, I realized I didn't know him at all.

I hadn't seen his cock, but I sure as hell felt it. I didn't need to make eye contact with it to fully understand how big he was. So big, in fact, I could still feel him hours later.

His phone suddenly began blaring, breaking the eerie silence only his house could produce. I instinctively brought my hands up near my ears as he answered. "What?"

He couldn't even be nice over the phone. "She's fine. Don't need you anymore." A few more moments. I could pick up mumbled words before an aggravated sigh. "Fine."

He turned to face me, putting his phone on speaker. "You're on speaker."

*"Joslyn Grace Monroe!"* Uh oh, being called by your government name wasn't ever a good sign. Especially when it



was from Nyla. *“Mitchell and I went to Sarge’s house to look for you, only to discover you weren’t there! Where the hell were you!”*

“I’m sorry, Ny.” Guilt sucker punched my gut. I didn’t know that Sarge called them to come get me or that Mitchell even knew where Sarge lived, but I guess tonight was full of my rash decisions and apparent ignorance pissing people off. “I wasn’t thinking.”

*“Damn right, you weren’t,”* she scolded. *“Hot-wiring a car? Smashing through his garage door? You didn’t want Sarge to get hurt, but you’re the one who put yourself in more danger!”*

I looked down at my feet, shifting uncomfortably because what could I say? She was right. I was so worried about Sarge I didn’t even consider what could’ve happened to me.

*“Calm down, pretty girl.”* I heard Mitchell in the background. *“She’s safe.”*

*“I thought you were a smart man, Mitchell Walker.”* Even though I wasn’t physically there, I couldn’t help but snicker at how the conversation was deterred from me now. *“Don’t you know the cardinal rule about never telling a woman to calm down?”*

*“No, but I know how to shut you up.”* His tone turned husky, making my face scrunch up. I knew what was going to happen next, and I didn’t want to hear Nyla having sex with her fiancée.

“Disgusting,” Sarge mumbled before slamming his thumb on the end button, clearly not wanting to hear that either. An awkward silence settled between us, accompanied by the returned and ever so eerie silence that was this god-forsaken cabin. What could I say? I destroyed his car and his garage to chase after him because I thought he was going to get hurt.

I opened my mouth to apologize, but he cut me off, shoving his phone back into his pocket. “Tomorrow we’re going to talk.”

I hated not talking it out immediately. But I was in no position to ask any favors from him. My anxiety was going to have a field day tonight, so I blurted the first thing I thought of. “I just wanted to make sure you didn’t hurt yourself.” He paused at my words, remaining stock still waiting for me to continue. “My parents died in a fit of rage because of my dad,” I confessed to him. “He and my mom were fighting over money for my hearing aids, and they left in the car...” I sucked in a breath, trying to mend the broken memory. “... And they never came back.”

“He killed them?”

I hated even thinking of it. “He purposely crashed into a tree, and I just thought...”

He cut me off, turning to face me. “I’d never do that.”

“You don’t tell me anything. You don’t let me in. All I know is that you’re ruled by your anger, and you let it cloud your judgment.” He didn’t refute. He knew I was just stating

simple facts. “And if you did something reckless all because of a fight with me... I couldn’t live with myself.”

“Couldn’t do that, knowin’ you’d be here waitin’ on me.” He took a step towards me, his movement forcing me to look at him.

His words warmed me, but I still needed more. I matched his step, almost standing chest to chest with him like we did in the locker room at the Catacombs. “Could you just let me in? Even just a little bit?” I was growing desperate, grasping at anything to hang onto with Sarge. Aside from his anger issues and his ability to push me away, I knew nothing. “Do you have a name?” God, what a dumb question that was. Of course, his name wasn’t Sarge.

“Darin.” I was surprised he actually told me. This was the first piece of himself he shared with me—that wasn’t his dick. “Darin Huxley.”

“Darin Huxley,” I repeated, the name rolling off my tongue. Shivers racked through me at the little power Sarge just handed over.

“Love the way you say it.” I wasn’t expecting his praise, causing the warmth on my cheeks to spread outward. “No one’s called me Darin since—” My face fell when he abruptly stopped talking. “Go to bed.” He effectively ended our conversation. “We got lots of talking to do tomorrow.”

I didn’t argue. My legs were still tired from our excursion earlier. Instead, I smiled timidly. I knew he could see the guilt

I still had for wrecking his things. “Goodnight, Sarge. Tomorrow is another day the sun will shine.”

It was a mantra I’d adopted to remind myself that no matter how I felt, the sun would always be there the next day regardless of the problems it faced. It was a comfort, knowing something could still shine despite hardships.

As I slowly made my way down the hallway, I kept waiting for him to reply like he had the night before, but he never did. Not tonight.

\* \* \*

It was quiet.

Dare I say... too quiet?

Every morning, I put my hearing aids in, and I could hear Sarge’s footfalls from the kitchen as he made his morning coffee, but not today. Honestly, I needed some type of pain medication after how rough he was with me yesterday. My ears may have caused me pain, but after years of dealing with it, I’ve learned to block it out. When I could, that is.

What I couldn’t ignore was the throb between my legs and how tired my thighs were. I was half afraid if I tried to stand up, I wouldn’t be able to hold my own weight. Why did everything hurt worse the morning after?

I didn’t like feeling alone like this. I enjoyed mornings where I just lazed around in bed, listening to Sarge do his daily

routine until I decided to grace him with my presence. At first, it was slightly awkward because he had difficulty accepting me into his reclusive space. But now, he always made an extra mug of coffee for me. He got stuff he knew I needed from his ridiculously tall cupboards and had them waiting on the counter when I walked into the room.

It was always in his clothes. And while I couldn't see his eyes, I could feel them on me.

I stepped out of the guest bedroom, the silence sitting like a weight on my chest now. "Sarge?"

Nothing. I walked further into the house, calling his name again. "Sarge!"

Again, nothing. I stepped into the kitchen slowly, peeking around into the living room as I went. "Where could he be this early?" I mumbled to myself, checking the clock on the wall to my right. It was only eight in the morning. He didn't like people any time of day, but his nerves were especially shot in the mornings. He was usually up at five AM to start his workout routine, the light from the hallway waking me up with each step. I'd asked him about it once, and he told me he was just working out. No rhyme or reason.

With Sarge's muscles, I assumed he worked out for several hours each day. He sure ate like he did.

My head turned towards the hall as I pondered, directing my sight towards a room I told myself I would never venture inside of.

Sarge's room.

I slowly walked down the hallway, mind racing with what I would discover. Is Sarge still sleeping? An empty yet disgustingly colored bedroom overflowing with decor he wouldn't dare put throughout the rest of his house? The possibilities were endless. Well, now I had to see.

Opening the door with the careful precision of a bomb squad, I chanced a one-eyed peek inside. Just like the rest of his house, his room was pristine and minimalistic. White covers. White drapes. White carpet. White everything.

It didn't seem healthy to me to be living day to day in this overly white, aggressively organized space. It was just as jarring as it was the first time I stepped foot in his cabin. But I guess Sarge's aura was dark enough to creep its shadowy fingers through any room he entered.

I decided to go back to bed, not wanting a repeat of yesterday. It's not like I could do anything unless I wanted to chase after him again, and after yesterday, I didn't want to poke the beast anymore. I'd already damaged enough of his stuff.

I just had to trust he didn't run off due to anger. That he was coming back to me.

I was nestled in, reading a book Oakley loaned me, when I heard Sarge stomp through the spare room's door. I sat up and smiled at him when he threw a box on my lap. My smile dropped as I tried to read the front of what looked like a box of

medicine. “What’s this?” Of course, he didn’t answer as I picked it up and read the box.

Plan B.

He shoved a glass of water at me. “Take it.”

I bit my lip, trying to hide my smile as I asked, “Did you go to the store and get this yourself?” A laugh escaped when he grunted. “You did! What did the cashier say?”

“He was smart enough not to say anything.”

“It’s eight-fifteen in the morning,” I commented as I glanced back at the clock on the wall. “The pharmacy opens at eight. You got there right when it opened?”

“Before.” His knees hit the bed as he leaned over me. “They let me in early.”

I bit my lip to stop myself from laughing. I don’t think he found this as amusing as I did. Instead, I took the glass of water he held out for me before throwing the pill back and taking a swig of water to wash it down. Setting the cup down on the bedside table, I turned back to him. I felt the bed shift under Sarge’s weight, both his knees now on the bed. His arms caged me in when he fully covered me. I couldn’t help but grin up at him. I knew what he wanted—hell, I wanted the same thing. But we couldn’t. Not yet. We needed to talk about this. One of us needs to be the responsible one here.

I wish I didn’t have to be, though.

Debating briefly about my next move—ultimately deciding to do it anyway - I gently put my hand on Sarge’s scar-free

shoulder. He wasn't good with unwanted physical touch, and I'd learned if I was going to push that boundary, I should stick to touching his right side. I used my hand to slightly shove his shoulder, even though there was no chance of fully moving this mountain of a man on my own. "We can't have sex. I'm not on anything."

As expected, he didn't move and surprisingly didn't acknowledge my touch as his upper half dipped lower, bending my elbows as he got closer. He paused his downward movement long enough that our breaths synced in anticipation for his next words. "That doesn't mean I can't eat." For a man of few words, he knew how to use them. And dirty talk was his specialty. "Lean back and let me have my breakfast, baby."

My teeth sank into my bottom lip as I lifted my hips as a silent invitation. He slowly pulled my panties down my legs, leaving goosebumps where he'd touched. I was wearing his shirt to bed—a habit I loved, and I secretly thought he did too. My ass hit the bed again as Sarge's arms wrapped around my thighs, heat swelling as he pulled me closer to him. I felt his heated breath on the sensitive skin between my legs. "*Fuck*, you're drenched. I bet your cunt is as sweet as you are. I need to have a taste."

God, being manhandled was a lot hotter than I thought it would be. His hot breath on my pussy made my thighs tremble with need.

Apparently, I was going to feel Sarge's mouth before I ever saw it— if he ever genuinely let me see him, that is.



I threw my head back, trying to imagine what his face looked like. Was it sketched in pure ecstasy like he made me feel? At my moan of impatience, his tongue made its first languid pass up my slit. My legs immediately quivered where they lay, draped over his shoulders. A gasp passed my throat as I felt his teeth nip my clit, sucking it into his mouth to soothe the sting with his tongue. I brought my fist to my mouth, biting down and arching my back at the sensation. His calloused thumb brushed steady strokes against my clit, building the pressure between my legs.

It added another level of pleasure not being able to see what he was doing to me.

His finger met his thumb, squeezing my clit in a painful pleasure that made me cry out for him. He soothed that ache with his tongue, my lower half trembling with need. My hands fisted into the covers, ready to deal with the consequences of messing up the fabric he always made sure was pristine whenever he finally finished what he started. He was treating my pussy like his last meal, enjoying bringing me closer to my orgasm with every lap of his talented tongue.

“I knew you’d taste so fuckin’ sweet.” His raspy voice sent a tremor through me. I was already teetering on that edge, desperate to be pushed off. “Be a good girl and come on my tongue for me, Sunshine. Show me how sweet you taste.”

His dirty words, combined with the agonizing pressure he was applying, brought me over the edge sooner than I’d wanted. I cried out, slamming my thighs closed around his

face. My hips had a mind of their own, chasing the waves of pleasure down to the last spasm. I flushed with embarrassment when I realized my legs were still locked around his head. Letting them fall to his shoulders again, I tried to calm my breathing.

He brought his coated fingers to face level before delving them into the shrouded darkness that hid his face. I fought to keep my thighs open at the sight. I could already feel the need to clamp them shut again. His hand remained in his hood so long I couldn't help but wonder if he was sucking every last drop of me off him. Was he wrapping his tongue around his fingers like he'd just done with my clit?

His hand finally emerged from the darkness. His fingers shone with his spit rather than my come.

I swallowed back a groan. Even faceless, this man was the sexiest person I'd ever met.

“You're staying at Grim's until the situation is resolved.”

Well, that killed my mood. “What are you talking about? What if I want to stay here?”

“What you want doesn't matter.”

I felt my heart stop. “What are you talking about, Sarge?”

“You wrecked my fuckin' garage.” He stood up from the bed, tucking his hands nonchalantly in his pockets even though he was getting angrier by the second. “That car you took and destroyed was somethin' I worked on with Pops when I was a kid, and it was gifted to me when I turned

sixteen. To you, you wrecked a garage door and crashed a car. To me, you ruined one of the only tangible memories I have of my dad.”

That was a punch to the stomach. I never thought of it like that. “I’ll pay you back—“

“I don’t want your money.” He was frustrated, and understandably so. “I want you to get out of my fuckin’ head.”

My eyebrows scrunched together. “Get out of your head?”

“From the moment I wake up, it’s you. The minute I go to sleep? You.” Now, I was starting to see Sarge’s mindset; I was plaguing him just like he was plaguing me. “I want me. I want my space. I. Don’t. Want. You.”

With each harsh word was another lash at my heart. He began to walk out of the room, causing me to panic. I hopped off the bed, barely remembering to fix my pants before chasing after him. He was making his way to his living area, and my heart was racing with fear of him walking out the door and keeping true to whatever stupid thought he had about trying to get rid of me. “You just had your tongue in my pussy, and you’re going to tell me you don’t want me?”

“You’re a good time.” His sharp words sliced me down the middle like a razor blade. He turned casually, tone losing its anger even though a hint of it was still there. He was trying to mask his feelings, but he couldn’t hide it from me. “Nothin’ more.”

He had a permanent poker face with that hood. You couldn't see what was affecting him. But I knew he could see how his hurtful words tore me up from the inside out. He was the one who volunteered himself to watch me at the party. He was the one who forced me back to his cabin, doing nothing to make me feel like I belonged anywhere but with him...

How could I have known he didn't want me when his actions showed me the exact opposite?

A booming knock at the front door has us both snapping our eyes in that direction, breaking our frozen stand-off. Mitchell let himself in the door, strolling casually, "Hey, brother."

Sarge didn't respond as Mitchell directed his charming grin towards me. Still shaking with what felt like betrayal, I couldn't return to my usual sunny disposition. Glancing between Sarge and me quickly, he decided to move forward with the conversation. "Ready to go?" He asked, bringing his skeptical eyes back to me. "Nyla would have come, but she's at home making your favorite for dinner."

"I don't want to go with you." I tried so hard to be a light presence in a dark storm. But sometimes I broke.

This was one of those times.

"Don't get a choice." Now, Sarge decided to speak up, his tone firm and finite. "Go with Grim willingly, or I'll throw you over my fuckin' shoulder."

“You sure about that?” I taunted, my deeply wounded anger starting to spill through the cracks of armor. “You’re going to willingly touch me for something other than fucking me? You just fuck me and throw me out like I’m some goddamn whore? Treat me like trash like everyone else?”

“Should I be hearing this?” Mitchell gingerly asked, taking a few careful steps backward into the hallway. His wide hazel eyes bounced nervously between the two of us.

Sarge didn’t answer me, body still standing rigid, arms firmly crossed over his broad chest. My throat burned with the threat of tears as I finally broke. “Do you know how many people have hurt me, Sarge? Used me and thrown me away immediately after? I’ve honestly lost count. But I knew those men and their intentions upfront. I knew what I was to them. I could mentally prepare myself for whatever blows they would throw. You? You—” I slammed my mouth shut as he charged me like a bull, throwing me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Sarge!”

A searing slap radiated from my ass. Did he just.. spank me? “Shut. Up.”

“Did you just spank me?”

No response. Mitchell remained silent and wide-eyed as he opened the door with all the grace of a silent butler, letting in a blast of crisp night air. Mitchell’s car was still running. Figures. Sarge showed no remorse as he ripped open the back door of the car, tossing me inside and making quick work of trying to buckle me in. His fingers brushed along my legs as

he reached across me, making us both pause. Our heaving breaths are the only sound to hone in on. He shook his head, seeming to come to his senses. My hope for him to change his mind fled away as he ripped his touch away from me again. But I'd never been one to give up until every avenue was exhausted.

“Please don't do this. Don't push me away.” I looked up at him, dread sinking into my stomach. My eyes burned with my plea, “Please don't make me go.”

He froze, hand gripping the door frame. A beat passed where I thought maybe I would change his mind. A second later, he growled, slamming his fist down on top of the car. As soon as the car door slammed shut, I knew it was over. I'll never forget that sequence of sounds. Each loud bang is like a baseball bat to the heart. I'll never forget the sound.

They were the sounds of Sarge making his choice.

And his choice was to let me go.

“It'll be okay, Jos.” Mitchell's pathetic man comfort as he got in the driver's seat only worked to piss me off. I shot my tear-streaked glare at him, then quickly back to Sarge's dark form outside the car. “Sarge just doesn't play nice with others. He doesn't...” I tuned him out as I let my thoughts consume me entirely.

*‘He played pretty nice while his head was between my thighs not even an hour ago.’* I thought bitterly as we started to pull away, never letting my eyes stray away from Sarge.

His head wasn't between your thighs playing nice with you this morning. I thought bitterly as we pulled away. As we drove further down the driveway, I glanced out the back window, seeing him turn sharply back toward the cabin. With every step he took, he ripped more and more of the splintered pieces I'd so unknowingly given him away. Even if he said he didn't want me, I knew at that moment I was his to ruin. When his cabin was finally out of view, I broke. Reality sunk in when we took a sharp turn back onto the highway, and I let my body melt into the backseat.

He really didn't want me.

No one did.

\* \* \*

"I know it's tough, Jos." Nyla rubbed my back, but it did nothing to comfort me. It's been two days, and I've barely eaten or slept, and I knew I was worrying her.

"You wanted to get away from Mitchell, but when you tried, you discovered the truth about him." I refused to even acknowledge her adoptive dad as a human, let alone give him a name. "But I want to be with Sarge. Why doesn't he want to be with me?"

Her zoned-out eyes and answering silence proved she had just as many answers as I did. She knew I hated the stereotypical 'he doesn't realize what he's missing' bullshit speech. Instead, she went for something else. "It'll all work

out.” Her empty promise only made me shiver with disbelief. “It always does.”

I gave her a wry smile. “Life never works out for me, Ny.” It’s why I tried so hard to make it work for me. Through trial and error, my tenacity has lost me many battles...

I refused to let it make me lose Sarge.

Nyla kissed me on the cheek before standing up off the bed and gently adjusting her hair behind her ears. “I’ll check on you in the morning. Try to get some sleep, okay?”

I nodded numbly, not bothering to watch her as she walked out of the room, leaving me alone with the most dangerous thing of all—my thoughts.

Hours passed after Nyla had shut the door to my new prison. Hours of sleepless overthinking, lying still. I tapped my fingers on the bedspread as an impulsive plan began to seed within my brain. No one ever said I wasn’t reckless when I formed these dramatic impulses.

Silent as a cat, I tiptoed to the guest window. Ever so gently, I said a silent prayer as I shimmied the window open, letting in a gust of fresh night air. I hesitated only a moment before throwing my leg up and over the windowsill, planting my foot firmly on the roof.

Sarge may have crushed my heart, but I’d be returning the pieces he fractured.



# Chapter 10: Sarge



I threw back the scotch in my glass, hissing an agitated breath through my gritted teeth.

The silence within my cabin had always been a comfort to me before. Now, after today's events, the silence was so deafening, it felt as if it was closing me in—sitting on my chest, adding weight brick by brick. With her gone, these shots of liquor were the only things keeping me from ripping my skin off.

I didn't like this newfound silence.

Every time I tried to clear my mind, I would tumble into this daydream that was starting to tear me to shreds inside. Every morning she'd been with me, I'd catch a glimpse of her from the corner of my eye. Her little feet padded out of her room, only wearing my t-shirt that was swallowing her whole. She'd greet me with sleepy green eyes and a warm, lopsided smile. I'd already had her coffee ready for her—as I habitually had every morning—a splash of coffee in her cup of creamer. I'd make my usual sideways comment about how she liked it made, and her morning giggles would light her face up. Every morning, it seemed to stun her that I had gone out of my way to do something as small as make a cup of coffee for her.

Because no one's done the small things for her in years. I began to look forward to the smiles she gave me, going as far as to drift off to them in my sleep, turning my usual nightmares into warm dreams of sunshine.

The other night at the Catacombs, I just snapped. I knew my strength and what I was capable of doing.

Instead of snapping her perfect neck, I channeled all that aggression into her pretty pussy. I had no idea that quick fuck would flip my world inside out.

And what a big fucking mistake that was. Now that I had her, I was counting down to when I could feel her wrapped around my cock again. I was addicted to her. I'd always craved solitude...

But now I was craving the girl who ran the flower shop. The woman who would give her last dime to a trying soul.

I'd witnessed it firsthand.

*I shoved my hands in my pockets, thanking whatever God there was that I was able to get out of this "mandatory" boys' night out. Even if I was now banned from Calypso, that fucker deserved it. People knew they couldn't touch me. Everyone in Calypso tonight got a show when I slammed my fist into that guy's face, knocking out a few of his pretty boy teeth.*

*I was walking down the opposite sidewalk, hearing voices from across the street. I shifted my head to look, stopping in my tracks.*

*The street lamp shone down on her like an angel's light casting down from Heaven as she helped the homeless person take a sip from the bottle of water she'd clearly bought for him. I didn't like that she was touching him, even if it was to help him drink since he evidently had a few screws loose. I watched them close just in case he tried something, I told myself, not because the woman who glowed under the dim light caught my attention like the golden gates of Heaven.*

*Something I never thought I'd see until now.*

*She pulled out her phone, mouth moving as she talked to someone on the other line before a car pulled up a few minutes later, and the homeless man got in. I knew what she did. She spent her last dime putting that man in a hotel room for a few days. Even from this distance, I could see the financial stress her good deed put on her, but knowing that the man would hopefully have a good meal, shower, and warm bed made it worth it in her mind.*

*Not me, though.*

*I didn't know her name. I didn't care about people. I only cared about living in the memories of the demons that walked around me that only I could see, their mocking stares and crooked smirks, making a bullet to the head tempting, but I knew I wouldn't do it, couldn't do it. My world was full of cruelty. Kind gestures were null and void, only used as a form of blackmail or manipulation.*

*Seeing the woman with blond hair that glowed under the dim street light gave me a minuscule hope that the world I left*

*behind when I joined the army was still there.*

*My jaded view of the world changed the night I first saw her.*

Even when Joslyn wasn't here, she was still haunting me. She'd been haunting me for over a year. And after I'd realized just how addicting she was, I had to do what I knew best. I got rid of her.

I got rid of anything that made me feel even remotely like the man I was before the... incident.

A sigh left my lips as I went to the kitchen, ready to pour myself another glass of scotch. I'd given up my nightly ritual for Joslyn, seeing her struggles around alcohol. It didn't take a genius to figure out it was a vice she still struggled with years later. My phone blared, breaking the heavy silence that was threatening to drown me. I knew a call at this hour was never a good sign, so I answered with a more than agitated tone, "What?"

*"Joslyn's gone."*

The muscle in my chest halted briefly before picking up a frantic speed, beating wildly behind my ribs. I bent over, gripping the countertop, exhaling hoarse and heaving breaths. "What do you mean she's fuckin' gone?"

"She slipped out the window." Grim sounded out of breath and slightly frantic as I heard Nyla freaking out in the background. "She switched the alarms off before she left. Nyla told her about them in case somethin' happened—"

“You were supposed to watch out for her!” My words came from a place I hadn’t felt in six years. “How long?”

“Hours, at least. Nyla came to bed around nine.”

“I’m gonna fuckin’ skin you alive, Grim,” I promised him before slamming my thumb down on the red end button. Dialing Joslyn, I stood up straight, trying to regain some sort of composure. My left hand was still holding the end of my counter with a painful grip as I listened for the usual trill of the connecting ring.

Voice-mail.

And here I thought she’d be capable of reining in her idiocy. If she didn’t want to stay with Grim, fine. But to run away in the middle of the night? She’s fucking insane. I genuinely don’t think a lick of the danger she’s in has gotten through her thick ass skull. My gut sank, my pounding heart still throttling at a pace I couldn’t think through. After three deep, growling breaths, I finally took off at a run for the door. Damn near ripping the door off its hinges, I burst down the front steps with a feeling that I’d long since forgotten starting to return.

Fear.

Fear that they got to Joslyn. Guilt that I let my own issues come in the way of her safety. If I could bash my own fuckin’ head in, I would, but I didn’t have the time. Wrestling my way through the thick sheet I’d hung in place of a garage door, I decidedly ripped it off. I’d already lost too much time. I had exactly zero seconds to fuck with that damn thing. Tossing the

remnants to the ground, I hustled toward my bike to saddle up. As I backed it out of the garage, I froze at a rustling in the trees.

Slowly, I swung my right leg back over to stand firm, gripping my Glock in my waistband. “Who’s there?”

No answer but more rustling. My footsteps were slow and calculated as I made my way over, slipping my gun out of the waistband of my jeans. The rustling grew louder as I narrowed my eyes, trying to locate the source. I lit up the flashlight I kept on my keychain. Since it was midnight, I couldn’t see shit in the dark. The trees blocked too much of the moon to get a good look at whatever was in the foliage.

I didn’t have time for this shit. Pointing my gun in the general direction, I aimed my flashlight at the tree line and whoever was on my fucking property. “You don’t want to test me right now. I’ll blow your fuckin’ brain out the back of your skull. Come out. Now.”

Instant relief hit me like a truck as my eyes landed on blonde hair and dirty, pale skin.

“Uh.” Crouching, she grinned up at me, feigning innocence. “A little help? I’m kinda stuck.”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ, Joslyn.” Finally dropping my gun down to my side, so many thoughts and emotions began to flood my system. Anger, relief, and guilt still lingered. “What the fuck were you thinkin’!”

To my surprise, her dirtied face morphed quickly into anger. “You don’t get to be angry at me.” She heaved, enunciating every syllable slowly.

“Like fuck I don’t!” The anger that coursed through me was growing by the second. “You fuckin’ snuck out? Jesus, did you fucking walk here? Come on, Joslyn. You keep making these stupid fucking decisions that don’t just affect you.” I reached down, waiting for her to grab my hand so I could help her out of the sticks. “You don’t listen, do you?”

“Well, I am deaf. So, no. No, I don’t,” she sarcastically shot back at me, leaving my hand dangling as she stood. She brushed herself off and locked her eyes on me once again. I scanned her body to calm my nerves about her being injured. I couldn’t help but notice her clothes—bright yellow sleep pants and pink, fuzzy slippers. My enormous black shirt tucked in the front of her sleep pants.

God, she was insufferable sometimes. “Now’s not the time to joke about that shit, Joslyn. You keep doing stupid shit like this, and you’re gonna get killed.”

“Hilarious,” she drawled out in a bored tone, crossing her arms over her chest. “Your fight is a goddamn underground ring where the goal is literally death. You’re a part of a club that promotes death like it’s a badge of honor or something. You—”

“I can handle it. I’m in control in every situation I put myself into,” I barked, cutting off her rant. Her trying to throw my misdeeds and dealings with the club back in my face threw

me over the top of my bullshit threshold. What I do down in the ring is my outlet. It's the only one that keeps me sane. Until she so happened to show up, I'd never even been hit. Not once. And what the club did say today was no one's fucking business but ours. It was the only way we managed our suffering, and only we understood it. "The men after us aren't stronger than us."

"You're not stronger than a bullet," she threw back, eyes trailing my new scar from where the bullet grazed me. "Or a hidden knife. You're as vulnerable to them as I am."

That wasn't even remotely close to the truth, but I was tired of talking. I can't make her understand our ways. That just comes with time. Coming down from the high of losing her for that split second only replaced those emotions with other, more immediate needs.

I stepped away from her, eyes trailing absentmindedly. "I built this myself," I mumbled in her direction, gesturing to the now barely standing garage, thanks to my little ray of sunshine. Building things was something I did in my spare time to keep my hands busy and clear my head. If I let myself get lost enough in a project, I could take myself back in time to when I got to build things with my Pops. "Took me six months."

"What about your cabin?" She huffed out, shuffling her feet. I could tell she knew where I was headed with this particular conversation.



“Built it with my bare hands. Bought the land from an old man who needed to sell it. Couldn’t take care of himself, had to go live in a nursin’ home.” I don’t know why I felt the need to tell her all that, but it felt nice to actually talk with her calmly, regardless. “And you?” I asked, turning to face her again. “You’re gonna help me rebuild it.”

Just like I knew she would, she automatically agreed. Always trying to right the wrongs she’s done in life. I looked at her, guilt tightening her features up.

Letting my eyes fall down her body once more, I scanned her. A man can only show so much restraint in one night, and I was fully tapped. “One last good memory with this car,” I growled, and I charged her. She yelped as I picked her up by her waist and slammed her down on the hood. “You fucked with my car, Sunshine.” Stepping between her legs, I slowly ran my hand from the small of her waist to her neck. I gently squeezed when I felt her gulp in anticipation. “Now, I’m gonna fuck you on it.”

Her eyes lit up in a way I didn’t deserve as she bent her knees, lifting that ass of hers in the air as an invitation. I took the opportunity to strip her dainty sleep pants off her legs. “I’m gonna fuckin’ ruin you.”

Her excited smile fell slightly as she looked up at me, doe-eyed. “What if I’m already ruined?”

“Then I’ll stitch you back together,” I breathed along the shell of her ear. Her breath hitched as I hooked my arms under her knees and yanked her down to me. Body to body, I could

feel the warmth radiating out of her core. My cock strained against my jeans, knowing the zipped fabric was the only thing separating me from being buried inside her. Aligning myself with her entrance, I leaned down, hearing her whimpers of need for my cock as my nose hit the shell of her ear and my breath made contact with her skin. “I’ll stitch you back together over and over again. Whatever it takes to be the man who gets to ruin you, Sunshine.”

She’s the only thing that’s ever truly ruined me, so fair is fair. Not waiting for her stunned response, I thrust harshly against her, showing her just how roughly I intend to follow through on my promise. Her gasp morphed into a moan as I leaned in closer. Unzipping myself, I whipped my swollen cock free, giving it a few tight strokes of my own. As I looked up to meet her emerald eyes, they shone with a vibrant green fire. Her hips began to buck toward me almost involuntarily. She could sass me all she wanted, but her body’s reactions to mine told a different truth. She liked me rough. She needed more. And goddamnit, she wanted me to ruin her.

It was about time I listened to one of her commands.

“You’re too big.” I didn’t care about her concerns. I only cared about taking my revenge out on her pussy.

“Even if my cock can’t fit in your tight pussy, I’ll keep fuckin’ until it molds just for me.” I lined myself to her opening, loving the way her upper half was sprawled on the hood. I was mad as fuck that she stole it, but instead of taking it out on her with hurt words. I was going to fuck this sweet

pussy of hers until it remembered the shape of my cock. I pushed in roughly, her strangled cry and the warmth surrounding my dick feeling beginning to feel like a damn home with how much I was in her lately. I wasn't about to fucking complain, though. I'd fuck Joslyn's cunt all day and night, seven days a week, if she'd let me. "You made my car fit through my garage door. I'm gonna make my cock fit in your tight cunt."

I groaned, hips jutting faster as the front of my thighs slapped against the metal, her tight cunt squeezing my cock so tight it was hard to push back inside her, but I made myself fit. Her mewls encouraged me to rut against her faster, my balls already tightening, begging for a release. My upper half hunched over, my dominant hand bracing my weight against my cherry red Cadillac my Pops got me. Her cries increased as my hips jolted, unable to control myself about this woman with a golden fire in her fuck me eyes she was looking at me with. "That's it, Sunshine. You can take it."

My left hand—the hand that was just another physical reminder that the scars of my past were real and my life was an actual living fucking nightmare—reached up to her face. Her lips were open, panting at the unruly treatment of her. My thumb bent at her bottom lip as I lowered my head. The shitty lighting in my garage made it impossible for her to see what lies beneath the darkness I tried to conceal.

"I ruin you." My words scratched my throat at their roughness. She was trying to focus on me, her pupils dilated as

the emerald green dulled, giving into the way I was fucking her senseless. “You fuckin’ ruin me.”

Her top lip clasped around my thumb, her eyelids hooded, making my cock jerk inside of her which earned a groan from that gorgeous throat of hers. The slight suck she gave made my mind go blank. Mindlessly, I ripped my thumb away from her mouth. I roughly grabbed her calves, wrapping them around my waist as I felt her ankles cross at the small of my back. My hands grabbed her wrists, pinning them above her head on the cool glass windshield. My left hand snuck under her thigh, my right keeping a tight hold of her dainty wrists.

“Please, Sarge.” Her throaty plea sounded like a melody. “Make me yours.”

“You’re takin’ my cock like such a good girl, Sunshine.” Spurred into enough of a frenzy from watching her beg for me, I buried myself to the hilt. Both of us froze momentarily, her head thrown back, mouth open in a silent scream. Once she relaxed, I slammed in once more. With each new thrust, her desperate moans pushed me further into my animalistic need to be her undoing.

“I’m still not on birth control.” Her words came out in panting breaths.

“Got more Plan B in the cabin. Now, shut that pretty little mouth for once and come for me, baby. I wanna feel you.”

*Shit.* Her pussy clenched around me. My cock felt strangled, and I didn’t even know if I could pull it back out of her as my hips stuttered fast and shallowly, brushing against

the spot that drove her fucking crazy. My balls tightened, and I knew I wasn't going to last. My right thumb pressed hard on her clit, giving me the prize I wanted to come off her lips. Her orgasm.

“Fuck!” I roared. The way her cunt choked my dick was my undoing. Filling her up with my come, I couldn't help but envision our mixed orgasms dripping out of her and onto the chrome of my Cadillac. I was about to make that a reality. Her pureness would look sexy against the cherry red.

She laughed, bringing me out of my depraved thoughts. “I'll need to get on something besides relying on that.”

“Go to urgent care tomorrow.” I zipped my pants back up, cock hardening at the sight of me spilling out of her tight cunt and onto the hood of my Cadillac. I knew the mixture would look hot as fuck against the paint. “Get on somethin’.”

“M'kay.” I knew she wasn't listening to me, her eyelids heavy now that the fire in them was satiated. I sighed, knowing she wasn't gonna walk to the guest room herself. Instead, I walked over to her, one arm under her knees and the other one under her shoulders as I picked her up. She weighed nothing to me, but it felt as though I had everything to fear holding her. I tried to ignore the way she rubbed her cheek in my chest, nuzzling in like a kitten. “So warm.”

It's ironic since my personality has been compared to an iceberg.

Carefully, I carried her back inside the cabin, stopping to get a towel from the kitchen cabinet. People would probably

think it's weird to have towels in the kitchen and not the bathroom, but I had a cabinet dedicated to them in both rooms. It's logical. Anyone else who argues I'm a psychopath? That's debatable, but having a towel cabinet in your kitchen wasn't a psychopathic tendency. It was efficient.

I put a towel on the guest bed, not wanting to get the sheets messy. Pulling back the covers with one hand, I laid her down gently. Her languid body began to wriggle its way into a comfortable position, her eyes slowly closing with a soft smile. Her tangled blonde hair sprawled across the pristine white of the pillowcase, seeming to glow around her like a halo. Taking a step back from her, I took her all in slowly.

She looked like a fuckin' angel. No, a fallen angel. *My* fallen angel, whom I'd just taken for myself and fucked like the demon I was inside.

An angel thoroughly marked with my cum, currently dripping down her perfect thighs. The only thing she had on was my oversized shirt she'd fallen in love with, apparently. If I had a say, this is how she'd always dress. But she wasn't one for dark colors by nature. Where I was the void of darkness, she was the light. Sunny and vibrant.

She'd only show this side to me, how her secret dark insides could mirror my own. Black was my favorite color on her.

I was her eclipse.

She was the sun, and I was the ever-encroaching moon who would eventually consume her whole, even just for a

moment.

Reaching down, I brushed her messy hair off her forehead. Compelled, I leaned down, pressing my lips to the area. My rough lips are a contrast to her smooth skin.

The first thing my lips touched in years had been her sweet cunt when I ate her out the other day. Now, here I was kissing her forehead like a fucking prissy boy. Fucking hated the way Joslyn was making me do things I'd punch any of the other guys for even talking about. I really thought Grim was a pussy until Joslyn started to consume me. I'm terrified that I can understand it now.

But I wanted to keep her safe. She obviously had no qualms in making it hard for anyone other than me to accept the task.

If anyone asked what the sound that escaped me was, I would've denied it was a laugh. I flicked off the light, looking at Joslyn. The corner of her lips turned up as she buried her head into the pillow. My heartbeat picked up as I heard a distinct 'Sarge' leave her lips huskily.

I had to leave the room before I did anything more to her than I'd planned. If I thought she was encroaching in my mind before, tonight just proved that she's now a permanent fixture. But I couldn't help the image on display. I couldn't help but silently sear this image of her into my brain while she slipped off to sleep. I don't know what I preferred more—this everlasting moment of her constantly looping in my head or

the scarring nightmare that I purposefully lived, which kept me grounded in my lonely reality.

Stepping fully into the hallway, I shut her door quietly. I had to get out of that room, or I'd make my decisions on temptation instead of logic. Walking down the hallway, I looked down at my deformed hand. My pinky and pointer fingers are missing down to the knuckle, the remainder scarred and rough. A plan formed in my mind, but it was one I didn't think I could follow through with. Not now. My hand clenched as Joslyn's face appeared in the depths of my mind.

She was smiling. She was blissfully happy.

She should always be smiling.

As her imagination began to dance around further through my daydream, she looked toward me. She beckoned me, reaching out to touch me. I leaned against the hallway wall, shaking the image from my head.

Her smiles can't be for me. Her heart needs to remain her own. Her life needed to be rid of me. Because one day, I was sure to rip it away from her.

Permanently.

\* \* \*

“Fuck, Joslyn.” Grim was breathing heavily, hands on his knees, when we gathered at the clubhouse the next night. Last night, I'd told the club she was fine and resting. I only updated



them to stop Nyla's incessant calling and worrying. But tonight, I'd brought her with me to the compound to face the music she deserved after her antics. "Scared the fuck out of us."

I didn't give Joslyn a chance at a worded response. My fist in Grim's face. He was used to getting hooked by men of my size, so he stood upright, but that didn't mean there wasn't any damage. With narrow eyes and a trail of blood spilling from his bottom lip, he bared his teeth, and I noticed half of his front one was missing.

"You chipped my damn tooth." His hazel eyes morphed to anger as he looked at me, literally spitting blood on the clubhouse floor. "You know I'm gettin' married in a week, right?"

"Don't fuckin' care." I didn't. I trusted him with Joslyn's safety, and he was unbothered with putting measures in place to keep her safe. "Keeping her safe was your only job. You failed."

"She's a grown-ass woman," he bit out, taking the cloth Nyla held out to him, dabbing the blood running down his chin, and glancing at Joslyn with an aggravated stare. "I shouldn't have to hold her hand when she damn well knows people are out there tryin' to kill us."

"Not so easy to keep someone from climbing out of your window, is it?" Law mocked from his perch in the corner of the room.

Grim whipped around to shoot him a death glare, body vibrating with annoyance. “Don’t you fuckin’ dare, Law. I still owe you an ass beating for that.”

“Not a smart move, Joslyn.” Prez stepped in as he crossed his arms, eyes narrowing at her. “You know there’s people after you, right?”

“There’s always someone going to be after us.” She emphasizes that she wasn’t the only one involved in this mess. “That’s the lifestyle you guys chose to live. You didn’t choose a simple nine to five. This is dangerous for not only you but everyone that gets tangled in your webs. Innocent or not.”

“Speak for yourself, honey.” Tyrant lit up a cigarette, breathing the tobacco in before giving Joslyn a pointed look. “You didn’t exactly choose a good route for yourself either.”

“I didn’t,” she snapped, turning her face to look at Tyrant. She didn’t shy away from her past mistakes. “I fucked up with my past, and it’s affected my future more than planned.”

“Everything we do has a consequence. Whether that’s good or bad is to be determined. And it’s certainly not your judgment to make.”

“Not every negative consequence is bad.” She shook her head at Prez’s words. “One bad decision teaches us more than ten good ones ever will.”

“If you live long enough to learn it,” Prez chastised. He tolerated a lot, but one thing he didn’t was people doing shit like Joslyn did last night. “With the way you throw yourself in

unnecessary predicaments, you won't have the privilege of redeeming your sins.”

I could tell she wanted to say something. It was at the tip of her tongue, but she decided against whatever she was going to say. Instead, she glanced briefly at me. I wasn't sure anyone caught it. “I'd rather help others make up for their own.”

I knew that was what she was doing. And in doing that, she was only gonna add more to hers. One day, she wouldn't be able to take it.

It brought me back to her bitch of a sister and what she was willing to do to Joslyn to help out people who ruined other's lives to get themselves off. I bit the inside of my cheek so hard I tasted the metallic tinge of blood.

If only she knew what Jordyn had planned for her. Maybe she'd feel differently about giving to others instead of taking for herself.

Prez's rueful smile towards her was one of slight pity. “That's gonna fuck ya in the end, Joslyn.”

She gave a sickly sweet smile. “It already has, Darrell.”

A tension filled the room.

“Alright,” Victoria said as she clapped her hands. “I say we have a testosterone and estrogen night. What do ya say? Lotsa tension that could be solved with some fun with the same sex.”

“I don't trust Joslyn to not shimmy out the fuckin' window again,” Grim retorted. I wanted to wanted to knock the rest of

that tooth out.

“Nothin’ fun about these fuckers,” Tyrant complained, throwing back a shot. “Their idea of fun is starin’ at a wall or polishing a bloodstained bat.”

“Speaking of,” Grim looked around the room. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

“*Knight*,” Tyrant sarcastically corrected, but Grim wasn’t wrong. Those two were attached at the hip, and some rumors went around about what happened when they were drunk, horny, and alone. “Went to this tropical place to get some blue fruity drink.”

Grim raised an eyebrow, “Why?”

“Why else would someone who bathes in liquor get a fruity drink.” He said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Fucker wants to get laid.”

Prez grinned at that. “The one who’s always boasting about how easy it is to get pussy is going out of his way now? Who the fuck is it?”

Tyrant grinned. “A girl who rents out a shop on the strip we so graciously took as our own. Haven’t seen her, but she’s got Knight’s dick in a knot.”

“You havin’ withdrawals?”

“Motherfucker.” Tyrant slammed his glass down on the table. “If you’d seen my dick, I’m sure you’d be dreamin’ about it too.”

“We have,” Prez’s tone flat. Tyrant liked to strip when he got wasted. The only one who got a kick out of it was Knight. Those two enabled the fuck out of each other. “Not impressed.”

“Oh?” Tyrant reached for the waistband of his pants, pushing some fabric down and looking at Nyla, Victoria, and Joslyn. “Wanna see ladies? Ny, you can tell me how much better it is than Grim’s—“

Prez’s hand around his throat cut him off as Grim’s fist met his pretty boy grin. Tyrant gripped Grim’s cut and pulled him down, knowing better than to do it with Prez as he slammed his fist in Grim’s jaw. As the other members ambled over to try to break them apart, I glanced at Joslyn. She was biting her tiny fist, trying to hide her grin.

It’s weird how, at the Catacombs, she froze at the sight of violence...

Maybe it was because I was the one fighting there but not here.

Fuck, I hated the way that made my chest warm uncomfortably.

It made me slightly more determined to at least put an effort into my idea. I stepped over to the bar where I knew she’d inevitably be. And I was right. There Libby was, cheek resting against her palm while she swirled whatever malt she was getting drunk on for the night. “Libby.”

She stopped twirling her drink. “Yeah?”

“Need your help with somethin’.”

She twisted in the seat, confused. I don’t blame her. I don’t think I’ve talked to her before. “With what?”

I quickly glanced back behind us at the carnage. Law was finally dragging Tyrant back, and Prez had Grim in a bear hug. Both of their faces were beaten to hell. Nyla began fussing over her fiancé while Victoria headed toward Tyrant. It wouldn’t be the first time she’s nursed his wounds.

I refused to look at Joslyn. I might lose my nerve if I do. “Let’s talk somewhere else.” I started to walk towards the hallway with the meeting rooms, just trusting her to follow me.

Still, I felt a pair of eyes on my back the entire trek out of her sight.

# Chapter 11: Joslyn



I sighed dramatically, tapping my fingers against Oakley's side table.

This sucked.

These medieval men took away my driving privileges after my little stunt with Sarge's car. They even took my car away from me—even if I didn't drive much anymore. Why would I drive if I was basically a prisoner to these men who apparently thought it was the nineteen-fiftys?

I know they were doing it to keep me—and themselves—safe.

Sarge had left with Libby for a while, and I was tempted to follow them, but I already pushed my luck with the club—specifically, Sarge lately. When he came back out, he grunted at me, *'Let's go.'*

The curiosity was eating at me, but I let it go. Things had gotten better between us in the past few days. His fingers were itching for more intimacy, and I couldn't deny I wanted to feel his body crushing mine again. So when Sarge needed to go to the clubhouse, I'd asked him to drop me off at Oakley's.

I'd let Sarge fuck me, but going to the doctor's office to get on birth control? That's something I wanted to do with a

friend. Especially one like Oakley. Her PCOS led her to try all types of birth control, and she'd be able to help me find one. I was already nervous about this enough because of all the side effects that came with taking it. Sarge would only make it worse.

When I first walked in Oakley's door, I was already smiling. Oakley's home always felt like a warm hug, just as she did. I kicked my shoes off and scanned the room, eventually locking eyes with Oak.

And V.

V had become a frequent flyer in this house since the beginning. Oakley explained he let himself in and out. He barely talked, just read books, and always stayed where he could see her out of the corner of his haunting eyes.

Some books were his—some were hers. And she was absolutely mortified. Her reading was a pleasure for her—in more ways than one. V's obsession with her scared Oakley. So even the thought of him reading through her private smutty novels set her even more on edge. He never reacted to them as we imagined he might, so now I just thought of it as a cute little habit he'd picked up to pass the time.

If his presence bothered her so much, I was sure Law would do something about him. But something told me that she felt safer with him here. Hell, whoever was with V was the safest person in the world—

Scratch that. He'd leave anyone's ass to be in Oakley's vicinity. Dying or not.



“Sorry,” Oakley said as she came out of her bedroom with her bag draped on her shoulder. “Are you ready to go, Jos?”

I nodded, standing up. V immediately stood from his seat at the kitchen table, seemingly ready to follow us out. Oakley’s heavy sigh ripped my giggle straight from my chest.

“V.” She turned on her heels to face the masked man who had been with her since the night the Souls came into our lives. “I have to drive Joslyn to work, then I have to go to class. Can you just... back off for today?”

He tilted his head, eyes boring into her lifelessly. “No.”

She sighed again, closing her eyes and rubbing circles on her temples, obviously frustrated with his constant hovering. “I get that you want me safe, but it’s just one time—”

My eyes widened at her bold request, and my gaze darted to V’s cold stare. “That’s all it takes for them to take you away from me.”

That’s the most I’d ever heard V talk in one breath. I wish I had some popcorn, eagerly anticipating what my shy friend was going to say to him next. Her eyes softened a fraction. “I’ll be safe, I promise. You have my location on your phone. You’ll be able to see where I am at all times.”

He didn’t look convinced. But I thought the fact that he had her location was interesting. “No, *glykó koritsi*.”

She frowned, setting her hands on her hips. She didn’t bother to argue, and I doubt she would win even if she tried. “Okay, well—”

He turned his back to her mid-sentence, walking into the kitchen and leaving us there confused. He returned with a light pink travel mug in his hand as he thrust his arm roughly towards Oakley, the light-colored coffee leaking out of the tip slightly. “Coffee. Oat milk with caramel syrup.”

I could tell her cheeks were pink as she looked at the drink he was holding out to her. I grinned as she looked at me with her flushed face. She was embarrassed that someone had witnessed this. Maybe I should tell her that Sarge makes me coffee every morning? It was like a love language, knowing something so simple as their favorite coffee combination. She bit her lip before swiping it out of his hands with a quick *‘thank you’* before she ushered us out the door before locking it, V double-checking if the door was locked before he hopped on his motorcycle, waiting for Oakley to move.

All the car rides with the girls were silent and without music. Something that I hated because I knew Oakley and Nyla loved the calmness that music brought. I could listen to music, but the frequency clashed with my hearing aids since these were a very old model, so it bothered my ears more than usual to listen to it.

I was more curious about something other than the music, though. “What language did V speak to you in?”

“Greek.” She must’ve not realized the gentle tone she was using talking about him, different than the usual hint of fear. “He’s from Greece.”

“He shared details of his life with you?” Most of the brothers didn’t share a damn thing about themselves. It’s been driving my ever-so-curious nature crazy.

“He brought a book over one night that was in Greek. I just asked him about it.””

“So, what does *glykó korítsi* mean?”

She bit her lip. “I don’t know.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“Yeah.” Her admittance was barely a whisper. “But I’m too afraid to find out.”

“V’s different with you.” I didn’t think it was an insult like she was scared it was. We’ve only been involved with the club for around six months now, but V barely looked at anyone or spoke to anyone who wasn’t Oakley. She didn’t reply, not wanting to talk about her borderline stalker anymore. I knew she was curious but had a hard time accepting that someone could be interested in her like that.

I wish she looked at herself the way she used to before the incident.

I blew out a breath, seeing we were getting close to where I needed to go before she dropped me off at Poppy Oaks. “Will you take me someplace before work?”

She cut her eyes from the road to me and back again before asking, “Where?”

“Sarge and I had sex.” Her audible gasp had me whipping my hand up to shush her impending judgment. “I’m not on birth control since it messes with a woman’s body so much, and I already have so much going on...”

She adjusted her hands on the steering wheel, flexing them nervously. “Please tell me you used a condom.”

I snorted. As if it would be that simple with him. “Sarge literally told me to get on birth control or get pregnant. He refuses to wear a condom.”

“Did you at least take a Plan B?”

“Yeah, Sarge got it for me. But he wants to...” I had to contain my smile. “Said he can’t keep his hands off of me and that I was the love of his life.”

Oakley snorted at that. “I don’t believe you.”

“Okay, so he didn’t say that exactly.” I leaned back in the passenger seat content. “But for Sarge, a grunt means yes, and his cock inside of me means I love you.”

Oakley choked on the sip of coffee she’d just taken, patting her chest aggressively. I giggled, leaning over to pat her back. She looked over at me with a wry expression. “You don’t have a filter, do you?”

“My fantasy world is the only way I can escape this shitty thing called life.” I knew she understood me. “That’s why you read, right?”

Her face softened as she turned back to look at the road. “At least books were supposed to hurt me.”

I reached over, patting Oakley's thigh. Like everyone else, I had no idea what happened to her in high school. Just knew it traumatized her enough to withdraw from everything she was excited for in the future. She wanted to work in marketing, but the thought of being around people made her extremely nervous now.

So she began to bake and was pretty damn good at it too. She still had to market a little at the beginning, but now her business had begun to really take off.

We parked near the entrance of the doctor's office, walking in step toward the doors. Nervousness overtook me as I reached for Oakley's hand. "Were you this nervous when you got birth control?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "I'll be with you. It'll be okay."

She was a dream come true. I knew this would make her late for a class of hers, but she was choosing my comfort over hers... she would've gone in the room with me if it wasn't for her own shadow scaring people in the waiting room. He was gonna get arrested one day for bringing a bloody bat in a public space. Oakley looked between us, not knowing what to do, but V wouldn't relent, so I told her to take care of him, and I'd be okay by myself.

\* \* \*

"Is there a chance you could be pregnant?"

My stomach pitted at the doctor's question. The doctor noticed my apprehension before she calmly explained, "We have to ask before we prescribe birth control. I'm not saying you are."

I blew out a sigh of relief. I didn't want kids—yet anyway. Thinking about having Sarge's baby didn't freak me out. It was actually pleasant. Would that big brute of a man even want a family? He was so set in his ways, enjoying everything a certain way and a certain level of cleanliness that was impossible to have with a child. I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to stop thinking about a baby in a flower onesie, the hood covering his eyes like their father. "I don't think so."

She looked skeptical. "Have you had unprotected sex recently?"

My face flamed. "Yes, but—"

"Then you need to do a pregnancy test before we proceed." The doctor stood to gather the supplies she would need to get started. After laying everything out, she washed and dried her hands, leaning over her shoulder to address me, "An STD panel wouldn't be a bad idea either. I highly recommend it."

Sarge did say he'd get checked. It'd be smart for me to do the same. "Okay." I nodded, wringing my hands together to calm my nerves.

Once the pregnancy test came back negative and the STD panels were collected, the doctor snapped her gloves on. "You have to be careful with birth control. There are different types." I knew Oakley told me. She's taken almost every birth

control imaginable for her PCOS before she found one that worked for her. “Lots of side effects, too. The most common one is weight gain.”

Talking through my options, we both decided the Depo-shot might be a good option for me. I wouldn't remember to take a pill everyday and I didn't like the idea of a IUD.

“Is it safe...” I know that we were here for birth control, but still telling them about this was embarrassing. “Is it safe to have sex right after you get it?”

“The Depo-shot might take up to ten days to be effective.” She snapped her gloves on before going to a mini refrigerator and pulling a shot out. “If you decide to have intercourse, I would highly recommend another form of protection.”

“I took plan B.”

“That'll work.” She uncapped the needle and flicked it a few times. “The pill works best the sooner you take it and if you're under one hundred seventy-five pounds.”

I was surprised by that. This is the stuff they should be teaching girls in school, not just telling them to take birth control to not get pregnant. “I didn't know that.”

“A lot don't.” She rubbed alcohol on my arm before lining the needle up with my skin. “Small poke, then were done.”

I braced myself, not looking as it went into my skin. I wasn't a big fan of needles. She wheeled away, capping the needle. “If you're going to have sex, I would highly advise you use another form of protection like condoms until the

Depo takes effect. Come back in three months for your next dose.”

I nodded as she put a bandaid where the needle poked through my skin. I’ve always been a bleeder. “You’re good to go, honey. Watch out for those side effects, any complications, and you come back.”

I hopped off the bed, giving her a smile. “Thank you.”

I walked out of the doctor’s office with Oakley. The area she gave me my shot was throbbing as I got in the passenger seat of the car. I waited for her to put her seatbelt on, starting the engine before grinning at her. “Ten days until I’m clear to get dicked down again by that gorgeous man.”

She snorted, pulling out to the main road. We couldn’t see Sarge’s face, but I didn’t need to see to know that the man was handsome. Even if not traditionally, beauty always peaked out of the shadows of the night, the allure of something you couldn’t resist making something so untouchable seem as if you’d die without a taste of it. “Can Sarge even wait ten days?”

I smiled. I sure hoped not.

\* \* \*

I was busy making bouquets, wanting to rip my hearing aids out. The plastic was waning off and scraping against my skin.



I knew I already had cuts from them, but I just grinned and bared it.

I was good at hiding my pain, physical or mental.

When the bell rang, signaling someone entered the shop, I gave my best customer service smile despite the singing song causing me to grind my teeth together. I hate that bell. “Good morning—“ I paused my greeting, seeing the mass figure take up half the storefront. The smile I reserved for customers became genuine. “Sarge.”

He didn’t respond to me. I was getting better at knowing when he would and when he wouldn’t... or at least I thought I was. “Did everything go okay at the clubhouse?”

He walked past the display flowers, standing on the other side of the hardwood counter, his head tilted down at me as he answered. “Yeah.”

Someone was feeling chatty this morning. I wonder how he’d feel about this? “I went to the doctor today.”

He stood up a bit straighter. “Yeah?”

My elbows rested against the counter, the palm of my left hand resting against the back of my right as I propped my chin against them before looking up at him with hooded eyes. He took his hands out of his hoodie pockets, resting his palms on either side of me from the other side of the table. “She told me it could take ten days before the shot could take effect.”

“Can’t wait ten days.” His voice was strained, hastily making his way to me from the other side of the counter,

placing himself at an intimidating angle in front of me. “It’s already been too long.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s only been a few days.”

“And?” He grabbed my arm, using it to turn the front of my body towards the counter. “Told you you’d bend over and let me fill you up whenever I wanted.”

“S-Sarge!” I felt his hand between my shoulder blades, applying slight pressure to push my upper half onto the front counter of Poppy Oaks. His hands caressed my waist until they dug into the waistband of my leggings. The risk of what he was doing was making my face feel hot in anticipation but also embarrassment. “What are you doing?!”

“I’m gonna fuck you.” I should’ve expected his crass reply. Sarge did whatever he wanted. Not like anyone could do anything to physically stop him; he was always the biggest man wherever he went. I bit my lip. I was attracted to how large he was. Was it weird to be attracted to someone even though you’ve never seen their face? Right now, the way he pushed the fabric of my leggings down my legs made my pussy clench in what was to come—both of us.

“We can’t!” My objection was weak, pushing my ass out a bit more to give him easier access. “Someone will see!”

He grunted. I wish I could tell if he loved the view, but I couldn’t even see his eyes. “Let them.”

The familiar sound of his zipper coming down rang in my ears, making me bite my lips in a dismal effort to stop the

onslaught of pressure that was spreading to my cunt. Sarge and I only had sex a few times, but nothing ever quite this... thrilling.

“Nyla could walk in any second.” My words felt more like building up the risqué play than actually meaningful. Nyla wasn't due in for another hour, but telling myself she would be coming soon lit a fire that only Sarge could satisfy.

“Let. Her.” He grounded out again, his large hand planting itself on my hip. I felt the blunt tip of his cock line up at my entrance. I sucked in a sharp breath, anticipating the slight pain that was to come. Sarge was very blessed in that area, and I've never been with anyone as big as him—I don't think I'll ever get used to the feeling of his thick cock. That and gentle wasn't in this man's vocabulary.

And I hope he never added it.

I cried out as he plunged inside of me, hands gripping the counter as my nails dug into the wood, trying to keep myself grounded and uncaring as I scrapped the wood off of the counter. With his first few punishing strokes, I'd arched my back, pushing into him. He slammed my chest back down on the counter, my hard nipples reacting to the cool of the wood. I groaned at the new sensation sending shocks straight to my clit.

One of Sarge's hands left my hips to snake around and grab ahold of my chest. I wasn't as blessed as Oakley, but if Sarge's hands weren't so freakishly large, they would've been a handful for him. He didn't let the size of my breasts bother

him as he pinched a nipple through the fabric, eliciting a gasp from me. “The fuckin’ sounds you make at my hands, fuckin’ beautiful.”

His rough words drew more heat to my core. I could hear how wet I was for him, each thrust into me getting louder and louder. “Listen to how wet you are.” I could hear the slaps of our skin coming together. It was a hypnotic pace as I tried not to come too early. I wanted to stay in this moment forever.

Just me and Sarge.

No pain.

Just him fucking my senses away.

“I can feel you tightening up around me.” His hand left my breast, making sure to slide down my body as it reached between my legs, his middle finger drawing circles around my clit. “Didn’t you say Nyla was coming in soon? Do you want to finish before she comes in here? Or do you want her to see her best friend being fucked like a slut?” His thumb met his middle finger, pinching my clit deliciously. “Answer me.”

“I want to finish,” I relented when I finally found my voice, “I don’t want her to see me like this.”

“Good.” A hard pinch and a deep thrust that had me seeing stars. “I’m the only one allowed to see you look like a fucked mess.” At his dirty words, I fully exploded around him, gasping. My legs unlocked and began to quiver as the eaves rolled through me.

Even though I was finished, he wasn't. His hips picked up speed, slamming into me deeper and deeper. "Christ, I love the way your come feels." I arched up to give him more of me, and with two more devastating thrusts, he pulled out of me completely. His left hand kept a bruising hold of my hip, and his breathless grunts filled my ears. Warmth spread across my lower back in spurts bringing me out of my post fuck haze.

He finished on my back. I looked at him from over my shoulder, his upper half heaving as he tucked himself back in his jeans. "You... You came on my back?" He shrugged, bringing heat to my face for a whole other reason. "You could've at least taken my shirt off if you were planning on doing that!"

"Didn't know if Nyla would be coming in." I hated that answer.

"You could've just finished inside of me."

"I'll gladly bend you over again and fulfill that wish."

I sucked in a breath, ready to let him have it again, but instead I froze when the bell above the door bounced off the walls. I flattened my hands over my hair, trying to look composed even if my legs were now barely holding me up. Mitchell's eyes went to the chipped wood of the counter with a knowing smirk before eyeing Nyla.

"Public play, aye? We need to step up our game, pretty girl."

My face flamed at his words and Nyla's accusing look. She raised a finger, wagging it between us. "We need to talk."

"For the love of Christ," Mitchell grumbled. "I guess I'll watch the counter."

Nyla smiled and patted her fiance's face. "Yes, you will."

He grabbed her hand, nipping playfully at her fingertips. "Keep talkin' like that, and Joslyn won't be the only one fucked over this counter."

"Mitchell!" I buried my face in my hands, wanting to sink into a hole and not come out. "Don't you have any class?"

He smirked. "I'm a biker, babe. If you wanted class, you should've gotten with a teacher."

She led me to the backroom, not caring about the volume of her voice. "You and Sarge?" I nodded my head meekly. "How come I didn't know about this?"

"Because this is all new to me," I confessed. "I didn't... I didn't want to tell anyone in case it was just a fluke to him."

"So today was the first time?" My cheeks burned as I shook my head. "So, when?"

"The night I stole his car." I recounted. "Then the morning after. Then, the night after I climbed out your window—"

"Doesn't sound like a fluke to me." She cut me off. "When you told me you liked Sarge, I didn't know it was like this."

My relationships before—if you could even call them that—had been warped and forgettable. "I don't know how I feel

about Sarge other than safe.” I sniffled. “I feel so safe for the first time in my life, Nyla. Someone who hasn’t treated me differently because of my disability. He doesn’t care that I’m deaf.” I looked to the ground. “He acts like he doesn’t care about me at all.”

Her eyes softened. “You really think he doesn’t care about you?”

“You don’t have to care about someone to have sex with them.” I wrapped my hands around my biceps, rubbing up and down, feeling vulnerable. Something I’ve never felt after sex until Sarge, but that could also be because everyone else I’ve ever had sex with, I numbed the act with alcohol.

“You have to care about someone to put all this effort into making sure they’re safe.”

A small smile graced my lips as I thought of all the ways Sarge “didn’t care” about me but did it anyway. Looks like he wasn’t as sly with the way he was to me in front of others. “I know.”

“It’s hard to see what he’s feeling since we can’t see his face.” Her smile has a teasing hint on it. “You always have to pick the difficult ones, don’t you?”

I laughed. I couldn’t deny it. I’d always been drawn to the ones who were a walking cry for help. I looked down at my feet. “I don’t deserve a life if I can’t try to save others.”

“You can’t save others if you’re dead, Jos.” Her truth wasn’t comforting.

“Can’t I?” I didn’t mean for the tirade to slip. It just did. “Jordyn’s life would be better if I wasn’t here.”

“Fuck Jordyn and what she thinks!” I was sure Sarge and Mitchell could hear Nyla’s scream from the front of the store. “She knowingly associates herself with men who hurt people for fun.”

I wasn’t proud of this, but I had to remind her about who I used to be. “You know I did at one point, too, right?”

“You’ve changed.” She defended me. “The best atonement is changed behavior.”

I looked towards the front of the store, where I knew he was waiting for me. Even after a heated argument, he didn’t rush out of the room like the night I found him at the Catacombs. With each minute we spent together, me talking and assuming he was listening, he was slipping into a pattern with me. I’ve changed for the better, even if it cost me everything.

Would it cost Sarge everything if he softened the rough exterior he tried so hard to keep?

I smiled, my optimism showing. I wanted to be enough for Sarge. Right now, I was lacking... but I felt, especially after recent events, that I was making my way back up to his good graces. “Hopefully, it’s enough.”

“Also,” Nyla walked over to the newly installed lockers Claudia got for us because she was tired of tripping over our



bags in the backroom. “I have an extra shirt. Put it on. You smell musty.”

I bit my bottom lip shamefully, accepting the new shirt from her. I hope Sarge is happy with himself. I changed quickly while Nyla kept look out in case the men came back here before walking back out to the storefront. Mitchell and Sarge were talking—well, Mitchell was talking, and Sarge was grunting like the barbarian he is—before they both noticed we walked back in. I walked over to him, holding out my stained shirt to him. “This is your mess. You need to wash it.”

He took the shirt from me, my face burning when he gripped it by the sleeves and held it up for the world to see. I panicked, even though Mitchell and Nyla had already seen the aftermath, as I grabbed the hem of the shirt and bunched it up. “Sarge!”

“I wanted to see the mess I made,” he said simply, not caring if his club brother and my best friend were standing right next to us. He folded the shirt in half, throwing it over his forearm. “See you after work. I’ll be making another mess of you.”

He walked out the front door, leaving a cackling Mitchell, a snickering Nyla, and a very embarrassed me.

## Chapter 12: Joslyn



Weddings have always brought tears to my eyes. The fact it was one of my best friends getting married meant a sob fest was going to happen at one point today. Nyla had a small wedding party with Oakley and me being her bridesmaids—but she invited Claudia, Victoria, and Libby to help her get ready. Victoria did her makeup while Oakley did the finishing touches on her hair. She didn't want anything big and fancy, just a small ceremony at the club her father built when he spent the last twenty-two years looking for her.

And it was beautiful the way Libby, Claudia, and Victoria transformed the oversized man cave into something that could be on the cover of *Vogue* magazine.

Claudia owned Poppy Oaks, and while she loved flowers, interior design was just another calling of hers. She was talented no matter what she did. The common area of the clubhouse had a beautiful burgundy carpet that started right at the entrance of the clubhouse doors and ended just at the makeshift altar. There was an arch full of poppy flowers resting on a white-painted wooden overlay—apparently, those flowers were a symbol of Mitchell and Nyla. The chairs were also white with burgundy cushions facing the direction of

where Mitchell and Nyla would be standing in less than thirty minutes.

Victoria also outdid herself, preparing a feast of breakfast foods and a burger bar with every topping imaginable for everyone who attended. She stocked up on enough cheap beer to make sure Tyrant and Knight were shitfaced before the fated kiss even happened. She also made sure to have a pitcher of virgin margaritas for me. She was a thoughtful woman.

Everything was red—which was the color of mine and Oakley’s bridesmaid dresses, with one shoulder strap that cinched our waists and fell to the floor. Red was such a passionate color, and what it represented today, I couldn’t help but let my empathetic ass get choked up a bit for my best friend. I sniffled as Oakley finished the last curl on Nyla’s hair. She looked over at me, concerned, “Jos? What’s wrong?”

“You’re getting married.”

She tilted her head as Oakley turned the curling iron off, her lips turned up in confusion. “You’re crying because I’m getting married?”

“I’m crying because you’re so happy.” I am an empath. I feed on people’s emotions. It’s something I don’t particularly enjoy, but I have absolutely no say in. Mitchell and Nyla went through absolute hell with Nyla’s adoptive father and discovered that Darrell was her biological father who gave her up because it was what was best for her, not for him. He lived with his decision every day, making the Souls in Nyla’s honor to help others from themselves.

He acted as a father figure to the ones in the club who would accept his rough ways. He still didn't trust me, which stung even though I dug to understand the reason why. I put my life on the line for his club, but that still wasn't worthy of a high opinion from him. I wasn't sure what I could do to make him accept me as part of this club, that I was an ally and not a liability.

I would never hurt a place that meant so much to Sarge.

Even though he acted like a top-tier asshole, I could tell there was a soft side to Darrell. Beneath that rough exterior was someone who just wanted to make the world a better place for the innocent. I could see it in the way he was with his daughter, and I could see glimpses of it with Victoria, even though he tried his damndest to conceal those moments to just himself when he thought no one was watching. Being the President of an MC, though, you're always going to have eyes on you. Even ones you'll never feel until it's too late.

The way he went about it wasn't morally correct, but it sure was effective. And one thing I've learned since coming here was that the moral way wasn't always the right way.

Sometimes, you had to play with the shadows in the corners. They knew secrets the light would never dare try to discover.

There was a knock at the door, and when I called, '*Come in,*' Darrell walked through the doors, cut on with a black henley with a nice pair of dark denim jeans. The necklace around his neck was a simple silver band on a plain chain,

matching Nyla's, who still wore hers despite being in a wedding gown. They both wore them proudly. Darrell's eyes softened immensely when they landed on Nyla, a look of love from a father to a daughter. "You look beautiful, sweetheart."

And she did. Her long brunette hair was curled to the middle of her back. The white gown had a sweetheart neckline, flaring at the hips slightly to give a little more curve to her slim frame. Victoria kept the makeup light. Nyla said Mitchell liked her better without makeup, so she just did a simple blush with mascara to make her unique silver eyes pop.

Her cheeks heated at the compliment, still getting used to this side of Darrell. She was still working to get past the man we all met at first, the one who threatened to kill us multiple times if we didn't comply with their demands. Walking her down the aisle was a huge moment... for both of them. "Thanks, dad."

A stab of longing hit me. I tried to push down the envy I felt of Nyla and Darrell—Trevor and Oakley, too. I would give anything to have my father walk me down the aisle, watching out for me and loving me like he did when he was still here. Somedays, I daydreamed about the life I would be living if they were still among the living. Would I have gotten a job at Poppy Oaks? Would Nyla and Oakley be my best friends?

... Would I have ever met Sarge?

I couldn't imagine the what-ifs that riddled me with anxiety. I just had to accept what did happen and not what could've happened. The life I had wasn't ideal... the one I was

starting to have? I bit the inside of my cheek, the faceless man who made me feel on top of the world with just an ounce of his dastardly attention popping into my mind.

I really had to stop getting horny at my best friend's wedding.

"Is Mitchell ready?" I asked to distract myself from the thought of Sarge bending me over the bartop and taking me like he did at the counter at Poppy Oaks—also, he did make a mess of me that night. Three times. I discovered he had a cabinet filled with Plan B—way more than ten days' worth.

"He better be." I couldn't tell if Darrell was kidding or not. He didn't mess around when it came to Nyla. He was very protective of his little girl, wanting to make up for the twenty-two years they lost together.

The door was roughly opened, bouncing off the wall with a thud before a high-pitched shout. "No crying!" Victoria chastised, running over to Nyla, her thumbs going up to wipe Nyla's cheeks. "I spent way too much time on this face of yours for you to ruin it for Darrell."

He snorted, a smile he desperately tried to hide playing on his usual straight lips. "Thanks for that, Vic."

She cheesed over to him. "Go on now, make sure Grim's ready."

He walked over to Nyla, kissing her on the forehead. "Fuckin' proud to be your dad, sweetheart."

I looked over at Victoria to see her reaction, the softness in her violet eye shining. Everyone knew about her feelings for Darrell and that the bombshell of his relation to Nyla would potentially shatter them. But it hasn't. I knew it wouldn't. Victoria's heart was solid gold, knowing what it was like to be abandoned by the ones who love you. She grew up on the rough streets of the Dominican Republic before her mother escaped to the United States. She's never had stability until Darrell crossed her path.

I hope she will find her happily ever after soon. She deserves peace with the life she's lived.

The door opened again, making me wince as it once again hit the wall, leaving a doorknob dent. This time it was Claudia, a short woman with long curly brown hair and light, friendly eyes that looked like liquid gold if you pissed her off—which wasn't hard to do. She was a hothead, especially with her family. Oakley looked and acted nothing like her mother; they were total opposites, but they loved each other unconditionally. "Shoo." Claudia waved her hands. "We didn't work this hard to get your girl all cleaned up for you to ruin it. So go on, get!"

"Mom!" Oakley's face brightened. I thought it was hysterical that a woman half the size of Darrell was bossing him around in his own clubhouse. Any other day, and I'm sure words would be exchanged, but today wasn't about him. It was for his little girl.

Ever since we were pushed into the outlaw world, Claudia was filled-in. A part of me thinks she's always known, but for Oakley's benefit, played a fool when it came to it. So, everyone was starting to get to know Trevor's wife. She was quickly becoming the mom of the club and had a huge spot for Tyrant. Something that drove everyone, especially Trevor, crazy. He didn't want her to be friendly with any of the club members, but he couldn't keep her away from the madness of his secret family now.

She also watched V closely. He was the only brother she wasn't warm with. Maybe it was because of the way V was attached to Oakley's hip without consent, or did she sense something more sinister about the man that none of us knew? V was the definition of unhinged, but there was something else there...

Something that was broken beyond repair.

It reminded me a lot of myself, having a piece of you forever torn from yourself, and you couldn't fix it no matter how many stitches you knitted to hold it in place. One thought and all the years of hard work came undone like you never began recovery in the first place. Something I and many others in this club could, unfortunately, relate to.

With lots of words on the tip of his tongue, ready to strike Claudia for talking to the President of a motorcycle club like he was beneath her, he stepped out of the room, and I released a breath I didn't know I was holding. That could've gotten really ugly.



The things Darrell did for his daughter.

“These men,” Victoria grumbled with a shake of her head, her pale orange-colored afro swaying with her motions. She looked stunning in her burgundy crop top and matching skirt that ended mid-thigh paired with black strappy heels.

“Neanderthals are more like it,” Claudia said without shame. She was more modestly dressed in a spaghetti strap maxi dress the same color as everyone else’s clothing.

Victoria looked at Nyla, a soft sheen in her violet eyes. “We’ll meet you out there, sweet girl.”

Nyla smiled back at her, Victoria stepping out of the room with Claudia following after she promised to see us out there. Nyla inhaled shakingly, her hands trembling as Oakley and I stepped by her side. I put my hand on the small of her back, doing my best to smile at her reassuringly. “Ready to go marry Mitchell?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” She laughed in disbelief. Marriage was always a foreign concept. Her goal was to attend school to become a nurse. Men weren’t ever in the plans until well after she graduated with a steady career. But life has ways of throwing what you thought you didn’t need at you when you needed it the most. “What if he says no?”

“I’m pretty sure Darrell will kill him,” Oakley spoke nothing but the truth. Mitchell would have a comfortable place at Hellbound if he ever hurt Nyla.

“He won’t say no.” Mitchell was obsessed with his future wife. Their relationship was rocky at first, and some days, it felt like the turmoil was too much for either to handle, but just like the beginning, they got through it—together. Marriage wasn’t always fifty-fifty. Some days, it was eighty-twenty or even ninety-ten. Not everyone had the best days, but a supportive partner to support you during your darkest times made the difference between giving up altogether.

There was nothing the two of them couldn’t survive that they hadn’t already. Nyla told me about the days Mitchell would have a far-off look all day, how he would glance at the spot on his arm he used to favor with his addiction. He was still scarred there, a forever reminder of who he used to be. He was better, but even love didn’t cure the demons that we were plagued with.

My lips twisted ruefully.

But I wished it did.

\* \* \*

Everyone was seated in the chairs in the main room of the clubhouse—well, *almost* everyone. As predicted, Tyrant and Knight have had ten beers between the two, the evidence scattered by their chairs in the middle row as I looked from the open front doors. Law sat in the front row with an arm around Claudia’s shoulder, who was sitting by Victoria, chatting her up with a silent Libby by her side who was devoid of all

emotion as she stared hauntingly at the alter. Hex and Husk were nowhere to be seen—I understood why Hex wouldn't show up, but I was a bit surprised to see Husk wasn't here. He usually participated half-heartedly when everyone got together.

I wonder why he didn't want to come to a wedding?

Mitchell was already up there, sneering and holding himself back from snapping at his special family on his special day while his groomsmen—Sarge and V of all people—stood outside with Oakley and I. V was close by a nervous Oakley's side as she fiddled with the messy bouquet of flowers, while Sarge leaned against the front of the clubhouse wanting to get this over with. They weren't dressed in normal wedding attire. They were dressed casually like Darrell was—cuts with black denim jeans on.

I bit my bottom lip, looking at how the jeans hugged Sarge's thick thighs—nothing about this man was small. Hidden parts included. Darrell stepped around the corner, pocketing his phone. He excused himself a few moments earlier when he got a phone call. He grabbed the lapels of his cut, adjusting it before he looked menacingly at me, which made me inch back. Sarge, who noticed everything about me, stepped in front of Darrell. "Don't."

Darrell didn't say anything as the music started. I wasn't going to let Darrell's distrust in me ruin my mood for Nyla's wedding. She deserved a special day. Instead, I walked over to

Sarge, placing my hand on his forearm and looking up at him as he dipped his head to me. “Ready?”

His head was pointed down in my direction, and I felt his eyes on me a fraction longer than normal. In typical Sarge fashion, he didn’t speak. He just started walking as I tripped over my feet and tried to stand upright. His legs were much longer than mine, and I basically had to jog to keep up with his pace down the aisle.

“Hey, asshole!” A voice called. No doubt in my mind, it was Tyrant. Because who else would be bold enough to call Sarge that? “You’re supposed to walk slowly. You’re basically running!”

“Shut the fuck up,” Sarge growled, and I couldn’t help but thank God that this was a wedding only the Souls were invited to. If this was a wedding that the public was invited to, I think everyone would end up in a ditch or a jail cell before the reception even started. But thankfully, Sarge did quiet his steps at a pace I could keep up with. We separated at the end of the row, him standing beside Mitchell and me standing by myself on Nyla’s side.

I stood there looking for the next pair to walk down the aisle. I could see how red Oakley’s face was from here. V held out his elbow, and I swore I heard Claudia tell Trevor to knock his shit off when Oakley tentatively reached for it.

It was odd seeing V like this. Usually, he was uncaring. Some would even say he was lifeless and unhinged with the way he worked. But the way his eyes were soft around the

edges as he made sure Oakley had a good grip on his elbow was a sight I don't think we'd ever witness again.

There was a fifty-fifty chance he would kill you if you ever brought it up.

V was much more cautious of Oakley's steps than Sarge was with mine. She held onto his left arm. His baseball bat was being dragged by his right, messing up the train of flowers purposely placed. The petals scattered around the bloodstained bat.

“Did you really have to bring that fuckin' bat!” Trevor shouted at him from the chairs, and I swear I saw Mitchell's hair gray a bit as he pinched his nose, trying to keep himself together. But honestly, everyone was better behaved than I would've expected.

When the wedding march played, and Mitchell saw his bride, his hazel eyes welled as he formed a fist and brought it up to his mouth to try to keep it inside.

Nyla was radiant. She rivaled the moon in her white dress, a sweetheart cut that flared like a princess dress at the waist. Darrell was proudly by her side as the wedding march sounded.

Mitchell ran down the aisle, making Darrell and Nyla stop in their trek as he ran towards his bride, cupping his hands on her cheeks and pressing his lips to hers. Nyla may have been wide-eyed and still holding onto Darrell's elbow, but she reciprocated. Even if Darrell looked pissed. “You're supposed to do that after the vows, you know!”

Mitchell lifted his hand, sticking his middle finger up to the general direction of where he heard the comment come from.

I had a feeling this was how a typical Souls wedding would go. It was the first one in the club's history. I snickered as the shouting started. I couldn't hear their words, but it brought me back to last week's altercation between the men. Mitchell didn't want any groomsmen, but Nyla wanted Oakley and I by her side, so he relented with two. When Tyrant and Knight stepped up—Sarge and V shot them down.

I still grinned every time I remembered the exchange.

*"You know I'm the one gettin' married, right?" Mitchell reminded everyone. "I get to decide who's by my side and who ain't."*

*"Well, we know that." Tyrant crossed his arms, a pointed look at Sarge and V. "But they don't."*

*"I'm walkin' with Oakley," V declared, lifeless eyes pointed in Tyrant and Knight's direction as he lifted his baseball bat from the ground, pointing it at them. "You try? You die."*

*"I ain't fuckin' marrying her. Just walkin' down to stand by Nyla." Knight shot back at him.*

*V's eyes narrowed dangerously. "So you think."*

*"Jesus Christ." Mitchell closed his eyes, pinching his nose to try to will away the nightmare picking his groomsmen was.*

*“Are you gonna defend walking me down the aisle like that?” I teased Sarge, who was just silently watching the aggressive display. He was nonchalant, hands in his hoodie pocket. I didn’t expect an answer from him as I watched on.*

*“I don’t gotta,” he said after a spell. “They try? They’ll see a bullet between their eyes.”*

*I grinned teasingly. “No man’s allowed to touch me but you?”*

*“Keep that smart lip up, Joslyn. I’ve cut off people’s hands before without a cause. I have no qualms about cutting them off for touching what’s mine.”*

*What’s his. Did this man even understand what he was saying?*

*But I couldn’t deny the warmth in my stomach at the thought of being Sarge’s girl.*

Since Mitchell jumped the gun and decided to make Nyla his wife in the middle of the aisle instead of at the alter, Tyrant declared them married without even being ordained, and everyone just went with it. Nyla bit her lip, debating on what to do.

But she just threw herself at Mitchell again.

When the cheers got too loud, I had to excuse myself. One thing about wedding receptions was they were always loud—even with less than fifteen people, Tyrant and Knight with a few drinks in them could rival a sold-out football stadium.

Nyla offered to not have music at the reception for my comfort, but I adamantly refused. Nyla deserves to have her first dance with her husband and her father-daughter dance. I could handle the pain that came with it for one night with my best friend's smile.

“Not gonna dance?” I teased when my body was shadowed by a much larger man.

“I don't dance.” Sarge leaned against the patio deck fence with me. My eyes strained over to him, face directed towards the fenced-in backyard. The gate was a gray bricklayer with wiring at the top to prevent people from trying to climb over.

“I bet you have two left feet.”

He didn't even try to deny it. “Do you like to dance?”

“By myself,” I admitted. When I was younger, I always dreamed of being a ballerina, like most girls. But... “Can't exactly dance without music.” Just thinking of how loud music hurt my ears, the pain came back in full force. I knew he didn't miss my grimace. He was by my side in a second flat. Hands to my ears, roughly removing my hearing aids for me. I began to rub soothing circles, unable to hear his voice anymore, only feeling the thumping of the loud music playing from the inside.

While I was trying to soothe my pain, my feet left the deck, and I'm sure I screamed as Sarge picked me up like a bride, standing still as I placed my hands on his chest to steady myself.



I didn't know what I expected him to do, but it wasn't the way he began to sway with me in his arms. Uneven and no posture, but he was putting in an effort to make sure I could do something I'd always loved doing on my own... together.

It was enough to bring tears to my eyes.

Boldly wrapping my arms around his neck, I felt him flinch slightly, his steps faltering, but he quickly regained his composure. Swaying to the beat of the music... or at least he tried. I wasn't far off from him, having two left feet.

I didn't need his words. I just needed him in any way he was willing to give me.

Sarge paused for a second, turning with me in his arms to reveal Libby. Her eyes widened briefly before she just turned on her heel and walked back into the party. My memory went back to the night after Sarge fucked me at the Catacombs, how he walked off with Libby. I looked up, concerned.

My mind went to the most logical reasoning, but if it was true... if people thought I self-destructed before? No, I would implode.

There's no way Sarge would fuck Libby when he was with me... right?

Sarge walked through the party at the breakneck speed he used walking down the aisle. I felt eyes on us, but I could only focus on my thoughts. We stepped into the hallway before he settled me on my feet. I put my hearing aids back in before getting to the point. "Are you and Libby—"

“Ain’t fuckin’ Libby,” he stated adamantly. “She’s been helpin’ me with somethin’.”

“What is it?”

He stood there for a second before raising his hands, and my eyes unintentionally went to his disfigured left hand. He noticed before shoving his hands in his jeans pockets and twisting his neck to the side. “Nothin’.”

“I didn’t mean—“

“Only natural to look at freaky things.” My stomach plummeted. That’s not what I meant by it at all. His posture told me he wanted to tell me but felt self-conscious by my brief staring, which made my heart hurt. “Even with a fucked up hand, I could still fuck you into the ground, Sunshine.”

I knew he could. He’s proved it to me many times. “I’d let you fuck me anywhere, Sarge.”

He took a step towards me, pressing my body into the wall with his. “You wanna fuck at your best friend’s wedding?”

“Why does she have to be the only one who gets dick tonight?”

He grabbed my wrist, and I couldn’t help my laughter as he dragged me down the hallway where the extra rooms were. He led us to a door, and instead of there being a room, there was a stairwell there. I didn’t have time to admire it before Sarge impatiently threw me over his shoulder. “You’re takin’ too fuckin’ long.”

Biting my lip to contain my smile, he rushed up the stairs to a secret stairway with another row of rooms. This must be where the other members of the Souls resided. They did say they had other rooms here. Sarge ran—well, more like walked with his behemoth-like steps—and kicked the door open and threw me in the center of the bed, uncaring of my bridesmaid dress or the hair that Oakley spent hours on. “You know I spent hours getting dolled up.”

“Was a waste of time.” He stalked towards me. “That makeup is gonna be running down your face when you’re chokin’ on my cock.”

My eyes lit up, surprised about this turn of events. Sarge wouldn’t even let me touch him, let alone see anything other than what was already exposed on his scarred form. “You’re going to let me see it?”

“I’m gonna let you taste it.”

My mouth watered at the thought. I watched closely as his right hand—he would rarely do things with his deformed hand when others were around—trailed down his stomach before going to the zipper of his jeans. The bulge was prominent and restrained; it looked very heavy. My throat bobbed with nerves. “Will you even fit in my mouth?” I’ve felt his cock. I knew it was long and thick, filling me up to the brim even when I thought I would rip in half. What damage would it do to my mouth? I guess death by dick suffocation was a good way to go.

“Even if it doesn’t,” he zipped his denim jeans down, anticipation making me rub my thighs together as my core heated up, waiting for him to show me his cock, “there’s always room down your throat.”

I groaned, sitting up on my knees and clenching my thighs together as I eagerly watched him unfasten his belt, followed by the button on his jeans. The large bulge threatened to break through the constraints of his boxers before his cock sprang free. Tip straight to the ceiling as my eyes took it in. I knew his cock felt big, but it looked even bigger.

The vein on the underside was pulsating, tempting me to slide my tongue, align it, and soothe it.

I didn’t wait for permission as I dropped to the floor, knees painfully hitting the hard surface, but I ignored the sting in favor of doing what I craved. My hand wrapped around his stiff cock, his hiss of pleasure encouraging me to instinctively drag my tongue from the base of his cock to the sensitive vein on the underside of his dick, making the behemoth of a man shiver under my touch. He was sensitive there...

I’ve never felt more powerful having control of a man twice my size, able to get him to bend at my will with a flick of my tongue.

My tongue left his cock before my lips covered the blunt head, giving a powerful suck that almost brought him to his knees. He took a small step trying to regain his composure—he’s been celibate for a while, and having someone’s mouth on his cock was bound to get him off quickly. His right hand

tangled in my hair, and I bobbed up and down, getting as much of him as I could in my throat. The head of his cock made it far, but his size was making my mouth sore already. It was a difficult task, with my small mouth and his large size, but I made it work.

My sore throat would be worth it in the morning. Maybe his cock could soothe the pain? I relaxed my throat, a trick I bet he didn't think I knew how to do, when I took him as deep as I could, tongue wrapping itself on every inch of flesh it could reach.

“Oh *fuck*, Joslyn. That mouth, baby.” I loved the way his vein throbbed under the assault from my tongue. I craved the attention his hand was giving my hair as he pushed and pulled on it like a saddle, trying to take control of my speed. The pain when he pulled my strands to a fine point, telling me not to stop, and I didn't want to. “That's right, fuck your mouth with my cock.”

I looked up, wishing I could see his face beyond the veiled darkness, but I wouldn't let it stop me as I peppered kisses up his cock, tongue swirling around the tip as my hand—that could barely reach around his girth—twisted around every inch my mouth wasn't currently occupying. The tip of my tongue teased his slit as my thumb brushed against his vein—

He couldn't help himself. He threw his head back, making the loudest sound I'd ever heard from him, along with a guttural growl coming from his chest. I wanted to keep the momentum going. I opened my mouth to take him back inside,

but he let me know my control was over as he shoved me in deep. His hands left my hair, holding onto the sides of my head as he used me like a personal fuck toy, thrusting as quickly as his body allowed him to.

All I could do was grip his jeans and enjoy the ride—which I was. The feeling of his pre-cum spilling from my lips, the burning eyes, the feel of Sarge—

A girl could get addicted to being manhandled like this.

“Fuckin’ good girl, Joslyn.” His hips stuttered before pulling out of my mouth completely. “Good girls get to taste my cock.”

I stuck my tongue out, signaling I wanted him back in my mouth. Maybe showing his cum on my tongue would make him fold, but he didn’t. “What do bad girls get?”

“They choke on it.”

Before I could prepare, Sarge shoved himself back in my mouth, making my hands fly to his thighs to steady myself as I felt tears prick and knew he had made his promise to make my mascara run down my face. The head of his cock hit the back of my throat, a groan escaping him as reflexes made me swallow around it.

I felt his dick swell before he pulled out of my mouth again, picking me up and throwing me on the perfectly made bed. I was still dazed, coughing lightly as my eyes burned from him blocking my airway with his dick. I was regaining my breath as he ripped the fabric of my dress from the waist

down, and if I wasn't so wet and aching for him, I would've protested this dress was a memento and very expensive. But right now I don't care about the dress.

I just wanted his cock so far inside of me I didn't know where I began and he ended.

He pushed my underwear to the side, fingertips rubbing along the slit as I bit my bottom lip to keep the sounds from escaping. His knees hit the edge of the bed, his cock wet from his cum and my mouth. I whined as he rubbed from the head to the base, coating himself to make it more pleasurable for both of us. His knees were at both sides of my legs, trapping me before he lowered down, his head pressing my clit briefly before moving down to my entrance and making me throw my head back when I got my wish of him filling me to the brink. The angle he was at felt incredible, but he needed more—he needed to be deeper.

His hands hooked at the back of my thighs, pulling my ass to the edge of the bed. My back was still pressed on the mattress, but one leg was now hanging off while Sarge's hand came in contact with the back of my thigh, exposing me more to him. He pushed until there was a slight burn of my knee hitting my chest. Sarge angled himself between my legs, the angle making large cock hit a place that I deemed impossible.

Any way Sarge fucked me felt incredible. He was always finding new spots inside of me I didn't know existed.

"The way you choked around my cock was the hottest thing I've ever seen," he grunted, words husky with excursion

and lust. “The only thing to beat that is your cunt dripping with my cum. Knowin’ I made your perfect pussy a fuckin’ mess.”

Moaning, I pictured myself spilling with him. He’s made me do it so many times. I savored the feeling of him inside of me, but I couldn’t deny how sexy it was when he pulled out and felt his come spilling onto whatever surface he had just fucked me into.

“Me too,” I breathed, barely audible as my words were escaping me due to his brutal thrusts. “Make me a mess with your cock, Darin.”

“Fuck!” His real name slipped out of my mouth, surprising both of us. I was happy for the mistake as he picked up his pace to the point I knew I was going to be swollen and bruised from the force of him fucking me. My thigh began to tremble from where he had it pressed against my chest. “Say it again.”

“Darin,” I breathed, but he shook his head.

“Scream.” *Thrust.* “It.” *Thrust.* “Hearin’ you say my name isn’t enough.”

He filled me to the hilt, making his request one I couldn’t pass up as my throat burned at the force of his name leaving my lips. “Darin!”

“Fuck!” He began to push his hips faster, out of control like a wild animal. There was nothing tactful about the way he thrust inside me with abandon, too lost in the lust I made him feel to be slow about bringing us over the edge. My hands



fisted into the bedspread, not bothering to hide the volume as I cried his name over and over, wanting to reach a place we were only allowed to go together.

He began to pulsate, warmth spreading inside. My body flushed as I came apart, bringing my personal shadow with me. His head was thrown back, a long, breathy moan escaping. His chest heaved, and he was barely standing straight after such an intense orgasm. If I wasn't lying on this bed, I'd be curled up on the floor, worshiping him at his feet for making me forget the world.

“Holy fuck.” His words were breathless, like he just went through his daily workout. I could still feel him softening inside me. Shallowly thrusting to make sure we both rode out orgasms to the max, he pulled out, his gaze directed toward where we were just connected. A shaky breath escaped as something warm and slightly sticky spilled out of me. I was panting, trying to catch my breath after such a rough session. With my head thrown back, I couldn't help but grin. “I don't think Mitchell can dick Nyla down like that.”

It might've been just me, but I swore I heard Sarge laugh.

“Fuckin' good girl, baby.”

I looked up at him playfully as he tucked himself back in his pants. I didn't bother to move. I didn't even have half my dress anymore, thanks to him. When we left, everyone would know what we'd done if they didn't hear us already. “Maybe I should start being bad if that's the only way you'll choke me?”

He sucked in a sharp breath, not expecting me to ask that. He walked over to the closet doors I didn't notice were there until just now. He opened them, and a black long-sleeved hoodie was there. I was beginning to think he liked seeing me in his clothes, and he weirdly had some in every place we fucked. Maybe I should get Sarge a locker at Poppy Oaks, just in case? "Nothin' about you is bad, Joslyn."

"Just fake, right?"

The air turned tense before heat radiated from Sarge. Steam practically shot from his concealed face as he stomped over to me. His deformed hand grabbed my chin, forcing me to look into the abyss that hid his face. He was too worked up to notice that he was touching me with the hand he tried so hard to hide. "Every part of you, even the ones you don't show me, make you who you are." His grip tightened, digging his point in. "*Mine*. You're fuckin' mine, Joslyn. Even if all we are is just people who fuck for the rest of our lives."

I laughed condescendingly, removing the top of my ripped dress, ignoring the way his eyes lingered on my chest as I threw the oversized hoodie on. With wobbly legs, I stood, letting the material fall just above my knees. I began to wipe my cheeks, knowing there were black streaks from my tears from when he shoved himself down my throat. I wanted more with Sarge. Why couldn't he just see how much I craved him outside of the bedroom? Did he just ignore it, or did he feel like he didn't deserve it? I wiped harshly at my face, the caked-on makeup barely coming off, making me more frustrated by whatever situation Sarge thought I'd stay

compliant in. And, who was I kidding? I knew I would. I was dependent on him; it was a flaw in my personality to just latch onto someone who clearly didn't care about me and do whatever I could to make them love me, even if the task was a lost cause.

Because who wants to live life without someone who makes you feel alive?

“Stop.” His command was simple, softer than his previous convictions. Earlier, I felt powerful, like I controlled him. But now I handed the reins over to him, and he could pull whatever marionette strings he wanted. I knew I would bend my will for him. He put a hand to my face, bringing a thumb and brushing my cheek, black residue on the tip, as he continued to clean my raccoon eyes. I just let him. I didn't have the mental or physical strength to push him away. Not that I would.

I was a glutton for punishment, wanting Sarge in any way he would willingly give himself to me.

He sighed, stepping away from me. The good moment between us was going to complete shit because I just had to be a total smartass. Did I always have to ruin everything? “Let's go.”

I followed him out of the room, forcing the serotonin back in my brain to create a happy front around people who probably didn't notice we snuck out of there. Maybe I should just sneak out a window. I was an expert at it. But this time, I wouldn't get stuck in a damn bush for Sarge to find me.

I heard the voices get closer as we made our way down the stairwell. The corner of my lips turned up as I made the happy gleam in my eyes return.

Everything about me was fake, indeed.

And Sarge didn't look back at me once.

“Classy,” Victoria cackled, swishing her sparkling cider in her glass as she saw us round the corner of the hallway. “Wasn't Nyla the one that was supposed to get dicked down tonight?”

“I can help you out if you want that too, Vic.” Tyrant was obviously drunk. His slurred, flirty words were evidence of that. A dark cloud appeared behind him, a loud smack sounding before Tyrant's abused form was on the floor. “It was a joke!”

“Jokes are supposed to be funny.” There was no hint of amusement in Darrell. “Get better fuckin' jokes.”

“Everyones got more dick in their personality than their pants 'round here.” Tyrant stood up, still rubbing the place where Darrell hit him. Flashing a smile in my direction. “Except me, of course.”

“Fuck off, Tyrant.” Sarge snapped at him, sending him away with grumbled words I couldn't quite make out. I looked over to Nyla, who was chatting with Oakley and Claudia—of course, V not being too far from his muse's side. Nyla's eyes left mine as I shot her a sheepish grin, everyone in the clubhouse knowing what Sarge and I had just done.

Her smile let me know there were no hard feelings, but she put her thumb and pinky to her ear, resembling a phone silently telling me to call her later or tomorrow. Mitchell would probably occupy her like Sarge did me just now.

My chest bubbled, a feeling I'd long forgotten consuming me as I looked around the room.

This... this was family.

Jordyn flashed past my mind. The way we grew up, my mistakes, the way I ruined her life...

I didn't deserve this family. But I also didn't deserve the way she was treating me, regardless of what she said.

Maybe it's time I start being Joslyn Monroe again.

Not the girl *he* took away.

# Chapter 13: Sarge



“Jordyn still hasn’t done shit they said she would.” It’s been a month since the stakeout, and things have leveled out into a routine of hypervigilance and establishing our roots to take Diamond Ridge back under our control.

“Well yeah,” Grim drawled, “Husk, V, and Sarge killed the people jabberin’ about it. They know that we knew.”

“But now they gotta think of somethin’ else.” Husk crossed his arms. “Can’t get rid of us without a foolproof plan.”

“Didn’t exactly need a plan for V almost gettin’ ya guys fucked.” Tyrant wasn’t wrong. V fucked our operation, giving me a new scar in the process. And, of course, he had no response from the corner he always sat in during these meetings. Still blankly looking on with no care or thought in his deranged head, polishing the stained blood on his wooden slugger. It’s never coming off. Even if it did, it would be replaced by someone else’s blood soon.

“We’ll go back to that later. We have other things to discuss.” He looked to Law, who had his reading glasses on, looking at the pile of papers in front of him. “How’s our property buying going?”

“Bought four strips so far. Renovations and tenants pending. Leases at the shelters renewed.”

“I want the abandoned building on Peony.” All of our heads swiveled to V, some jaws almost hitting the floor. His black surgical mask darkened his soulless eyes as they looked uncaringly at us. He wasn’t going to repeat what he said, instead putting his bat on his lap, lightly tapping the heavy barrel of it on his thighs. He was the only brother to match me in body composition. It wasn’t easy to get to our size or *be* our size.

“What do you want it for?” Prez’s eyebrow was cocked, asking a question we were all thinking but wouldn’t get an answer for. V didn’t tell us shit about himself. But, it was a simple enough request, I thought, since we were buying out as much property as possible. Prez sighed, shaking his head and turning to Law. “Any trouble with buying that strip of buildings?”

Law shook his head, his pointed glare still directed at V. My gut feeling told me that whatever he wanted with that busted-up building on the corner of Peony Street had something to do with Oakley. Everything the fucker did revolved around her.

“Got somethin’ for ya to do. “ Prez’s attention turned to me. “Take Joslyn to her parents’ house and see if there’s anything there. Jordyn still lives there, yeah?” I nodded my head, grip tightening on my bicep, thinking about Joslyn’s bitch of a twin. “No doubt she’s bringing some of them over.

Some of them might be dumb enough to leave some evidence.”

“Or they’re smart enough to plant it,” Husk muttered his two cents. It wasn’t a bad idea. The Bloods weren’t the sharpest out there... but their ties with the Flock might’ve come with someone who was. They could be playing chess in our checkers game.

I didn’t want to risk it, but I could tell she’s been feeling a bit of a longing to go back to her parents’ place. They may be dead, but their comforting energy will always reside there. I kept my parents’ place after they passed for the same reason. “Don’t wanna risk her.”

“Her folks place is the only place we haven’t done a thorough search on. She’d be the one to know if anything was misplaced or added. We need her to go check it out.”

“You’ve been needing her for a lot of this shit,” I pointed out. He was quick to throw her out as bait for the Bloods. “What gives?”

His expression was unwavering as his eyes narrowed, flashing with an emotion I knew was anger at my defiance of his command, that I would blindly follow for the thrill of the fight before she consumed every damn part of me.

He wasn’t fully convinced she was one of us.

“You still don’t trust her,” I growled, the chair falling as I stood up, slamming the palms of my hands against the desk,



rattling everything on the cheap table. “She’s your daughter’s best friend.”

“That means nothing.” He didn’t deny my claim, pissing me off even more. “The only reason Grim started up with Nyla was because of information. He wasn’t even supposed to go after Nyla; he was supposed to get with Joslyn. She could be doin’ the same. She still hasn’t let go of that bitch of a sister. Who’s to say she’s not feeding information to her?”

“She wouldn’t do that.” I was trying to contain myself, my words escaping through gritted teeth. Her heart was too good to cause anyone but herself harm. “That wire at that fuckin’ party wasn’t good enough?”

“We didn’t get any useful information out of it. Jordyn sabotaged that. How could Joslyn be dumb enough to take off the wire at the fuckin’ party!”

I was about to wrap my hands around his neck to stop his breathing. I took a step forward, Tyrant, Knight, and Grim standing up, knowing my intentions. I knew Hex was at the ready with the sedative. I’d fight that fucker, too, if Prez kept talking about my girl the way he was. “But it led to us bein’ in the position we are.” Grim pointed out, trying to diffuse the rising tension in the room. His pretty boy face was irritated about the Nyla comment, even if it was the truth. The thought of Mitchell going to seduce my girl made red tint my vision. Fuck, I was about to lose control of myself.

Prez’s infernal eyes looked into me. They looked different than their usual calculating. He looked like a man who just

flipped his humanity switch off. This wasn't the man who created this club.

Was he going to be the one who demolished the foundation he created?

I briefly glanced at my hand-picked brothers. Each one of us was chosen by Prez to be a part of this club. Promises of atonement or death were our only options. We all had nothing left to lose in life, and that's what brought us together.

My eyes flicked to Grim, his hazel eyes wavering at his only higher-up. Just like me, he's never questioned his loyalty to our President. Sure, we've fought with words and fists, but everything was forgivable. But that was before Grim had something to lose.

Evergreen eyes. Long, blonde hair that ended at mid-back. A smile that rivaled the sun at its highest peak—my fingernails dug into my palm, the stinging pain not enough to get her out of my mind.

I had something to lose now, too.

And maybe that would be the downfall of this club.

“Our only position is fucked, and not in a fun way.” For once, Tyrant's words were welcomed. He was sporadic but a voice of reason when shit got rough. And everyone in the room could sense the gasoline being tossed between us, Prez and I holding a match.

He was ignored, Prez not relenting on his vantage on Joslyn. “Until she convinces me she's still not associated with

those motherfuckers I'll keep using her as bait. It's not hard. One mention of you or her sister, and she goes runnin' playin' savior."

I was in his face in a second flat, Grim and Tyrant trying their best to come between us, but neither of us was backing down. "You're fuckin' with the wrong man, Prez."

"Guess it'd be a bad time to tell you that she already agreed to go, and she's waiting there for you." I could've fuckin' killed him. I was ready to risk my position and brotherhood just for a single punch. "Go be her savior before you're her mortician."

My chest rumbled as my throat burned at the sound that escaped it. It was more animalistic than man as I turned and ran towards the door. I paused. The words I was about to say could shake the club to its core, but I didn't give a fuck. "You just broke my loyalty to you, *Darrell*."

I didn't look back for anyone's reaction. I had to go make sure Prez didn't just send Joslyn to her death.

\* \* \*

Her parents' place was in the middle of the woods, secluded but perfect to raise a growing family. But it is also perfect for anyone to lurk unsuspected, just like now.

I got here in record time, my anger fueling my need to make sure I arrived before someone else did. A relieved breath escaped me when I saw her through the window in what looked like a bedroom, sitting on a bed and looking at a book.

She knew I was out here, watching her like a fuckin' stalker. She always knew when my eye was on her, watching her every move.

I was positioned behind my favored tree, one closest to her window, to see almost every inch of her room. She was sitting on the bed in a red sweater and tight black jeans. Her blonde hair was up in a claw clip. I put my hand on the bark as her back straightened. I could only see the profile of her face, making it hard to read her expression, but I knew she felt me near.

She stood, walking someplace out of my viewpoint. I was about to rush in when she came back in front of the window without the book before facing it, knowing I was somewhere out here. My breath hitched as she took her sweater off, revealing her bra that had tiny suns on it.

Jesus fuckin' Christ.

She kept toying with me, turning around with her yellow-painted fingernails scraping up her back until she found the clasp of her bra, letting it fall off her shoulders as she turned, exposing her perfect tits for anyone to see. Blood rushed to my dick as she stepped forward, a knowing smile on her pink lips as she splayed her hands on the window pane, pressing her tits up against it. Her mouth tipped up at the corners as she pressed forward, the cool glass smashing her nipples—

I don't remember when I started running, but I knew she saw me barreling towards the house when she stepped back,

crossing her arms over her chest. She smirked amusingly, eyes widening when I didn't make a right for the door.

Oh no, I was goin' for that fuckin' window.

She ran far away from it as I crashed through it, shards scattering on the floor and into my hoodie. I brushed myself off, pieces getting lodged in my hand, but I just picked them out of my skin, ignoring the pain as I pulled them out and saw Joslyn's horrified face.

"Sarge!" She charged me, forearm still covering her tits. She was expecting a reaction from me, but me busting through her window must've not been what she had in mind. She grabbed the front of my hoodie, shaking it to remove more glass, careful not to get it on herself. "Windows are expensive!"

"So are caskets." I snatched her wrist, pulling it up high in the air as I watched her throat bob with worry. Like I'd ever hurt her in a way that didn't make her come. "Anyone who sees your pretty tits will be getting one."

She looked confused, not aware of the potential danger surrounding this house. "There's no one out there."

I stepped towards her, making her back up until the back of her knees hit the edge of her bed. The comforter is bright yellow, and the sheets are dark green, just like her nails. "Unfortunately for you, I'm right here."

Desire made her green eyes shine, eyelids fluttering down seductively. "I've been waiting for you."

My craving for her overshadowed the hatred I felt for Prez for putting us in this damn predicament right now.

“We shouldn’t be doing this.” But fuck I wanted to. I couldn’t keep my damn hands off her. She dropped her arms, puckered nipples exposed to the cool air that was coming in from the shattered window.

“We don’t have to if you’re afraid.”

“I ain’t scared of nothin’.” *Except the thought of these fuckers getting their hands on her.*

“Then you’ll let your name haunt my house?” She grinned teasingly, a glint of lust in her eye. “No one is around for miles. It’s just me, the trees, and your cock.”

“I don’t have to put my cock inside you to get you off.” My hands went to the back of her thighs, picking her up and tossing her on the bed. Her back hit the bed, hair sprawling and arm still hiding her damn tits from me. I was gonna remedy that soon enough and leave welts from my teeth in protest.

“Is that a threat?”

My hands wrapped around her ankles, pushing her knees to her chest as I lowered my hips. I watched her teeth dig into her bottom lip, her eyes dulling in their usual green as lust hazed in. I ground my hips, making sure she could feel exactly what she could do to me with me in a few simple words.

“No.” My hand reached down to her breast, and using my thumb and forefinger, I plucked her nipple, loving the way she

was so expressive to it. “It’s a fuckin’ guarantee.”

Those tits of hers bounced, but the smile still remained as I climbed on top of her. “I don’t make threats, Sunshine. I make promises.”

“Promise me you’ll turn all the memories in this room into ones I want to remember.”

*The fuck does that mean?* I didn’t have a response. My focus centered on pleasuring her by stripping her pants down her legs. I placed my hips right against her slit and thrust forward, the friction against her clit making her cry out. “You dunno who’s out there, Joslyn. Don’t be givin’ the sounds I’m forcin’ out of you away. They’re mine.”

I didn’t give her a chance to backtalk me as I pushed against her again, making more illicit sounds escape. I growled, frustrated she wasn’t listening to me, but pride swelling that I was making her spill these sounds from that tempting mouth of hers. But it was the law that those sounds of hers belonged to me. I covered her mouth with my right hand.

I reached down with my other hand to the button of my jeans, unclasping it because I needed to be closer to her and relieve the pressure of my dick that was straining painfully against my jeans. I pressed up against her again, rolling my hips as she threw her head back and moaned against my hand. I had to clamp my teeth down to keep the groan from escaping.

This was such a stupid idea. I prided myself on being aware of my surroundings. But I was so enrapt with this damn woman writhing beneath me—she threw me out of my routines in favor of being more like my old self, a man with no routine and no purpose.

She craned her neck, exposing more of her delicate skin, her eyes hooded with lust. She panted against the palm of my hand. The sexy look she was giving me made me push myself harder against her with another roll of my hips. The thin fabric of our underwear was the only barrier keeping me from sliding inside of her, but not tonight. I could let myself spring free, slide her panties to the side and stuff her with my cock. But I wanted to prove that I could unravel her with just my dick rubbing hard against her. I felt the wet slit through our thin clothing. Feeling it wasn't enough, I had to physically see what I was doing to her. Backing up, I looked down, mouth watering at what I saw.

I could see the wet stain on the slit of her panties, evidence she was enjoying this as much as I was. My deformed hand—one she made sure to pay attention to, probably to make me get over my insecurity of it—between us, her cloudy eyes following it until she couldn't see it. My thumb brushed against her clit, her head falling back on the sun-colored comforter.

“That's it, baby, grind against my fuckin' hand.” I added to the friction, applying more pressure as her muffled scream echoed off my hand. “How close are you?”



I thrust sharply. A hiss escaped my throat as she grew impatient with me making her wait. My lips dipped, scowling at her thinking she was in control. I pushed the waistband of my boxers down. My rock-hard cock sprang free. My hand vibrated as a wanton whine escaped her. She wanted my cock. I couldn't help the few pumps I gave myself as I tried my best to relieve the tension she was building up inside of me. I was about to shatter as her teeth began to nip the palm of my hand, but I fuckin' refused to get off before I got my girl off first.

I guided myself in between her legs, making sure to push my head against her most sensitive spot. My pre-cum was mixed with the drenched material of her panties. I pushed my hips forward, her nibbling on my skin halting as another scream jolted out of her. I circled my hips, letting her ride out her orgasm. I denied mine, but she'd sure as fuck give me one later. I stood my cock tall, the length of myself fitting snugly against her slit. I removed my hand from her mouth, her bottom lip swollen from her teeth. I imagined them swollen from my cock, promising myself that they would be. I had a lifetime to fuck the woman beneath me, make her come without entering her.

My hips kept pushing, the base of my cock rubbing up against that sensitive spot I knew she loved. I pushed harder, her cry against my hand making my cock kick, earning a strangled groan from me. I dipped my chin, making eye contact with her, her eyes a golden green haze as she trusted me to take care of her needs.

Fuck. Her writhing. My cum drenching the lining of her panties. Her infectious, satisfied smile after our rutting—

I pulled away, putting my knees on the outside of her thighs, getting as close to her as I possibly could. She was panting heavily, trying to catch her breath, her tongue lulling slightly out of her mouth. I jacked my cock. I thought I was going to whack some skin off as I made sure my dick was aligned with her face. I grabbed the base and squeezed, moving my wrist up and down. Her eyes trailed to what I was doing, excitement making her emerald eyes shine and speeding my movements up when she stuck her tongue out, preparing for what she knew was coming.

The sight of her tongue hanging out of her mouth as my eye caught her hand wandering between her legs, fingers rubbing over her pussy, collecting her own orgasm, was my undoing.

My balls tightened, and hot spurts released, painting her face. Some dripped off her chin, falling on her chest. More spurts came, hitting her chest, one landing right on her nipple. My hand immediately went to it, pressing down on the pebbled area, earning a gasp of pleasure from her before scooping the come up and holding it by her mouth. “Suck.”

And like the good fucking girl she was, she wrapped her tongue around my fingers like she would my cock.

I’d never get enough of this fucking woman, and that was a problem.

But I couldn't resist. I was a man trained in malicious torture and perfected restraint in dangerous situations...

Yet I couldn't resist her.

She looked up at me like a content angel who just gave herself away to the dark shadow who would slay anyone else trying to consume her light for themselves.

Everyone needed her light. But I was selfishly taking it for myself.

I pushed myself off the bed, forcing myself to look away from her. If I looked at her any longer, I would fuck her until her bed broke from the weight of us. "We got shit to do." I regained my control, getting off the bed and tucking myself back in my pants. I wasn't looking at her anymore, but I could feel her pouting. Prez's threat resurfaced as the lust that clouded my mind faded. I wouldn't tell her about it. She had enough to deal with.

"What stuff?" She relented as I heard her get off the bed, grab her shirt from off the ground, and reach for the white bra with the sun pattern before I snatched it up, putting it in my pocket. "Sarge!"

"You can put it on later," was my reasoning, but not the truth. "Need to see if your sister left somethin' we can use behind."

Her happy expression sobered, but she didn't fight me on it as we left her childhood bedroom, the room getting colder from the broken window. I shut the door when she walked out.

In case someone decided to come in from the window, I could hear the creaky door open before they reached us.

“It looks the same,” she commented, pausing in the living room. She pandered over to the old upholstery couch. It had burn marks all over it, dusty from the smoke it’d collected over the years. “Jordyn and I would put on a ballet for my parents in here. They’d make snacks and bought us tutus to perform in. We did it every Friday night.”

By the faraway look in her eyes, I knew she was locked in memories of the past. I didn’t know what to say, so I just let her continue. “I had to look at Jordyn and copy her back then. I was stubborn and didn’t want to wear my hearing aids. I didn’t understand what they were for. I hated the way they looked and felt. I was just trying to be normal like my sister and hated the fact that I wasn’t.”

I didn’t say anything. I just watched as she walked into the trashed kitchen. Used needles, bottles, and food strewn on the floor and counters. My fingers twitched at seeing such a messy place, but I had more important things to focus on.

She walked up the stairs, the hallway a bridge to a single room on the other end of the hall. “My parents put mine and Jordyn’s room on the bottom floor for safety reasons. It would be easier to escape than if our rooms were on the top floor.” It also made it easier for someone to break in and kidnap one of them without their parents suspecting a thing. She walked over to a closet. It looked like one of those miscellaneous closets people threw shit in and forgot about. She opened the wooden

door, face lighting up as she grabbed a box. “Here’s proof that me and Jordyn actually cared about each other.”

Curious, I walked over to her as she began to dig in the box, pulling out a picture and handing it to me. They couldn’t have been more than thirteen, Jordyn dressed in a volleyball uniform and Joslyn in jeans, a bright shirt, and a sweater. Her hair was down. I knew she liked her hair because it hid her hearing aids.

She pulled out something that looked like a book, but it was too thin to be one. She looked at it so longingly, making me curious about what was inside of it. I saw the embroidered Diamond Ridge High School on the front. “Your diploma?”

“Jordyn’s,” she answered after a brief pause. She hunched in on herself slightly, which was fuckin’ weird. I knew emotions were high for her, but she’s been fine talkin’ bout her past up until now.

“Yours in there, too?” No answer. She wouldn’t look at me, but she stared at the binder, seemingly ashamed. “Joslyn?”

“I don’t have one,” she confessed, embarrassment lingering in her voice. “I dropped out of high school when I was sixteen.”

I wasn’t expecting that. She said she was taking classes. I assumed they were college courses. “I thought you were taking classes.”

“I am. Just GED classes.” She put the diploma on the ground next to her before digging back into the box. “I was

really lost after... everything that happened.” She was careful to skirt around whatever happened, putting me on edge. “I’ve always loved flowers. I gardened with my mom. She told me I had a natural green thumb, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it again when she died.” I stood by her, not saying anything. “I was walking by Poppy Oaks one day, saw a hiring sign, and took a chance. I had no education, no work experience, and Claudia took a chance on me.”

Ever since Joslyn and the others found out the truth of Law’s double life, he’s been bringing his wife, Claudia, around more. The true definition of opposites attract is Law and his feisty wife. Always had to get the last word in and was loud as fuck.

Oakley acted nothing like her. Thank God for that. We already have a lot of loudmouths in the club. Any more, and that would be the grounds for murder.

“Claudia encouraged me to get my GED. And during that time, she paid me under the table. She took a chance on me. She’d let me run Poppy Oaks, but I don’t have the proper documents.” The sad hint in her voice disappeared as she talked about her future. “Been working on that goal ever since. Someone gave me a chance they didn’t have to, and I won’t let them down.”

Guess I had to relent on Claudia, knowing what she did for Joslyn. She could’ve told her to fuck off like anyone else probably would’ve, but she gave my girl a chance.

“It’s always been my dream to walk across the stage and hear my name called.” She reached up, tapping the things I knew she hated. “But these... I’ll never be able to fulfill that dream of mine.”

Fucking hated that I couldn’t do a damn thing to make that dream of hers come true.

“Sarge?” Her voice was shaky, immediately putting me on high alert. “Aren’t these the same blueprints Nyla found at Leela’s house?”

“Let me see.” I bent down, snatching the blueprints out of her hands so fast they almost ripped. There was nothing about a door. It looked like a whole expansion. I flipped it over.

*Chasm. Est. 2002*

The fuck did that mean?

“Move.” I nudged her out of the way, picking up a piece of paper. My cell phone rang, pressing the answer button when I fished it out of my pocket. “What?”

*“Get out of there.”*

He was the last person I wanted to hear from, but the urgency in his voice pushed my anger at him in the back of my mind. “What happened?”

*“Sent Husk and V after you as a precaution. Got some members hiding in the woods with guns. They got them first, but no tellin’ if they got more on their way.”* I stood up, ignoring Joslyn’s worried expression, and grabbed her slender wrist, pulling her up with me. *“Did you find anything?”*

“Some blueprints.” I began to pull Joslyn towards the front door, her confusion with me telling her nothing as I dragged her out of the house, written on her pretty face. “Says Chasm, Est. 2002.”

Prez went eerily silent over the line. I pulled my phone away from my ear since I thought he hung up, but he didn't. I didn't say anything, trying to focus on my surroundings to get Joslyn out of here safely.

*“Bring those blueprints.”* His voice was low and strained with urgency. *“See you soon.”*

With that, the line went dead. I stopped dragging Joslyn along, looking at the black screen of my phone like it was a string to the man I respected. The string didn't just fray. It burned. I pocketed my phone, looking back to look at her. I hated how her eyes shimmered with worry and that I didn't have an answer to soothe them. “We need to leave.”

“What's wrong?” Her free hand rested on top of where my hand was connected to her, involuntarily rubbing my knuckles. Touch was her comfort—*her* touch was mine.

I hated the distress in her tone, but I didn't have a damn answer for her. “I don't know.”

But whatever it was, it wasn't fuckin' good.



# Chapter 14: Joslyn



Sarge has been acting off since we left my parents' place last night. We immediately drove to the clubhouse, where all the brothers were called for church while all the girls hung out in the common area. Everyone was quieter than usual, with the explosive energy suffocating everyone until they were done. The girls gently asked me what we found. But what could I tell them? I had no idea what those blueprints meant—and neither did Sarge.

Darrell's response made me think he knew exactly what they were.

Once they were out of church, Sarge and the rest of the Souls—sans Darrell—solemnly stepped out into the common area. Instead of heading straight to the bar, Tyrant and Knight headed towards the door. Goosebumps pricked my skin when neither one of them came over to spew whatever nonsense was pent up inside, making me feel like something bad was happening.

Mitchell immediately came over and grabbed Nyla, pulling her towards the door, ignoring her protests of wanting to say bye to her Dad. Husk fled out the front door while Hex went to the adjacent hallway to the rooms the clubhouse offered to the brothers.

Trevor came over to Oakley, V right on his heels, but there was no fight in Trevor's eyes. He pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling a stress-filled sigh. His dark eyes glanced at V, who was locked on his shy daughter brazenly. Trevor's offer of taking her home was cut off by V's protest that he would take care of Oakley. With the tension as high as it was, I thought a fight would break out.

His shadow consumed my body before I noticed he was in front of me. I craned my head up to look at him. The way his face was covered by the shade of his hood made him look intimidating, but I was beginning to discover the hard exterior he presented was nothing but a facade to cover up for his drastic sin.

He would never let that exterior crack for anyone but me; even then, it was hard to wiggle my way further into the maze.

He tilted his head, nodding towards the direction Hex disappeared in. Silently telling me to follow him to his room at the clubhouse. My face heated. The last time I'd been in that room was Nyla's wedding. Memories surfaced of what happened with Sarge, instantly putting me in the mood. Could you blame me? This man knew how to use his dick, and he knew how to use it well. I was longing to see the rest of him... he's seen all of me, but I'd only seen his arms and his cock.

I didn't think it was normal to suck a man's cock before seeing his face.

But what about us was normal?

After we'd gone in the room, he told me to get in bed, and I got in, uncovering the spot next to me and waiting for him to get in with an expectant smile on my face—

Only to see him at the doorway, looking fuckable as he leaned against the doorframe with his muscular biceps bulging as his arms were crossed over his broad chest. Still, I smiled, patting the spot next to me. My heart dropped as he shook his head, pushing himself to stand up straight.

*Sleep here, he said. I'll be in the room next door.*

I pouted, not happy with the fact that he could fuck me but couldn't sleep in the same bed as me? Unbelievable.

He closed the door.

I lie here, with the spot I wanted him to sleep in still uncovered. My heart wished he was here sleeping next to me instead of separating us, leaving me in the dark about our findings at my parents' house last night.

What was Chasm? Why were the blueprints in my parents' house? Were they always there, or did Jordyn plant them there? A heavy sigh escaped me. I guess I will never know. No one told me anything. My eyes drifted closed, and it felt like only a few minutes of sleep before I woke up to the sun rays coming in through the window. Was it daytime already? I liked the sunshine, but not this early in the morning.

My cheek was buried in my pillow, thoughts swallowing the last bit of serotonin I was surprised my brain was making when the door opened. My eyes drifted to the doorway, not

surprised to see Sarge doing whatever he wanted yet again. He was dressed in the same outfit he was every day: his sleeves hoodie with the hood covering his face, denim jeans, and combat boots.

His head was turned in my direction. “You’re still in bed?”

Was he hoping to walk in on me doing something? “Seeing as the sun’s barely up and not everyone wakes up at four in the morning to work out, yes, I am.”

“Get up.”

I sat up, my arms resting behind me. His head tilted down, and I fought the urge to roll my eyes as they landed briefly on my chest before trailing back up. “Why?”

“You’ve been wearing my clothes a lot more.” My face felt hot. After he left me, I went over to the closet, needing to take off my clothes—the sweater I had on was very uncomfortable against my nipples since *someone* just had to have my bra as a souvenir even if he knew where my others were. So I stole one of his baggy shirts that I’d never seen him in. It was like a dress on me and, more importantly, didn’t brush uncomfortably against my chest.

I was half in awe of him noticing, half embarrassed that he was telling the truth. I don’t think he’d noticed the changes in my body since he hadn’t said anything about it. But I was feeling the physical and mental effects of it. “Yeah, mine don’t fit right anymore.”

My shirts grew a little tight around the chest and waist while my pants began to dig into the skin of my stomach, making them uncomfortable to wear. I couldn't exactly afford a new wardrobe, so I went for the next best alternative: Sarge's clothes.

He froze. "You're pregnant?"

I vehemently shook my head. "No. But birth control can make you gain weight." He didn't respond, making me slightly worried he was going to be disgusted by me. All my life, I'd never worried about my weight, but now I was gaining and had no idea how to stop it. "Does... does that bother you?"

"Ask me again, and I'll tan that ass of yours." His words were sharp, making me whip my head to him. He walked over to me, upper half hunching over to get closer to me to make sure I heard his message to the depths of my soul. "I'll worship every curve you gain, Joslyn."

Heat pooled between my legs, and my teeth sank into my cheek as I tried to calm my scalding thoughts. He worshiped me already. The memories of how he got off last night at my parent's house using nothing but friction made me crave something more.

"You worship me plenty." I tried to sound seductive, sauntering towards him. We were in his room at the MC, his arms resting at his sides, legs stretching the fabric of his jeans, which were always tight fitting on his thick legs. My eyes dipped to his hips, noticing his bulge increasing in size. When I got close enough, my hand palmed him, feeling it

increasingly harden beneath my touch. “How about I worship you?”

His only response was to widen his legs to accommodate me.

I pushed the blanket off of me, walking around the edge of the bed. He took a step back, giving me space to kneel in front of him. I was about to fall to my knees when my phone vibrated in my pocket. I fished it out to silence it when I saw who it was from.

*Jordyn: Come to the mall with me?*

I was shocked, unable to look away from my phone. She was the last person I expected to hear from. She never talks to me unless she needs a verbal punching bag. “Jordyn texted me.”

“The fuck she want?” Sarge’s stance went rigid, showing his displeasure with her contacting me. Not that he had any reason to be. He only knew Jordyn as a fuck up. He didn’t see her before her downfall.

“She wants me to go to the mall with her.” There was a flutter in my chest at her texting me and wanting to do something. She hasn’t done that since before our parents died.

“No.”

I snapped my head up at him. “No?”

“Exactly that. No.”

He thought he could talk to me in that commanding voice, and I would become an obedient puddle on my knees. He had another thing coming. “You can’t tell me what I can and can’t do.”

He stepped forward, the tip of his combat boots grazing the tips of my toes. If he wasn’t over a foot taller than me, we would’ve been chest to chest—and maybe I would’ve been more intimidated than I was right now. But I couldn’t focus on anything other than him telling me no to something I’d been praying for for years. How sad was that? The fact that my sister texted me and asked me to go to the mall brought me so much joy.

“Not a damn coincidence that she’s texting you after we went to your parents’ house.”

I couldn’t deny that, but I also couldn’t deny the thrill I felt at Jordyn wanting to go to the mall together. “I want to go, though.”

“Why do you keep crawlin’ back to her?” He didn’t understand the vice grip guilt had on my heart every time I saw her. “This is a fuckin’ trap.”

“Even if it is,” I don’t know if he had any siblings, but if he did, he’d understand my side of this. I was hoping the weight of guilt he kept from his sin would be enough for him to empathize with my point of view. To feel wanted by the only family you had left? What I wouldn’t give to re-establish that connection. Trap or not, I was going off my unanswered prayer and greatest impulse. “My sister is more important.”

“Than what?” He cocked his head. I could only imagine how his face looked when he was this furious. Smoke was practically coming from the darkness as he bellowed his words, rage engulfing me like a fire. “Her friends want you dead, Joslyn. *She* wants you dead.”

“I know,” my retort was weak. I didn’t have a response worthy of sympathy for the predicament I was putting myself in. I knew Jordyn’s track record of being kind to me was non-existent, but I couldn’t help but hope that maybe... just maybe this time would be different. “But it’d be suspicious if I didn’t go. Especially after going back to our parents. Maybe—”

“You’re makin’ it hard to protect you.” His words were as sharp as a whip. “Makin’ all these damn excuses, only thinkin’ of other’s feelings than your own safety.”

I looked down shamefully at my feet, my pale pink painted toenails clashing with the polar black color of his combat boots. Something so simple yet understanding washed over me that we were so different. He couldn’t possibly understand. “You don’t know what it’s like to ruin someone else’s life.”

“I know more than you think,” It was barely a whisper but I still heard it. I snapped my head up to him as he stepped back, putting distance between us. “So that’s it,” his tone dropped dangerously. Sarge’s voice has always been akin to despair, but now it was gravely like it was finally at the depths. “You’re goin’ just like that. After everything she’s done to you?”

My silence was enough of a response for him.



And my silence was his undoing. His growl was akin to thunder with his barely contained rage. He turned on his heel, my shoulders drawing in as he opened up the door, the knob putting a hole in the plaster of the white-colored wall. His shoulder straightened when he inhaled, body tight as his head twisted to the side. “When she fucks you over, don’t call me cryin’. She doesn’t give a fuck about you. This little shopping spree she wants to have with you ain’t going to change that.”

He was speaking the truth, but my hope for Jordyn outweighed it. “I have to try.”

A huff of sardonic laughter escaped him. “I wish you’d try for the ones who actually care about you.”

A gasp escaped, his words fueling my temper as I stomped my foot, fingers digging into my palms as my knuckles turned white. “I do!”

“The bare minimum.”

“I’m always there for you.” My voice didn’t have the confidence I hoped it would.

“You’re only there for me because you want to save me,” he threw back at me, shattering my already bleak confidence with my conviction. “Would you have anything to do with me if I wasn’t somethin’ that needed fixing?”

His words left me speechless that he would even think that. I was drawn to Sarge, just like he was drawn to me. That’s why he brought me to his cabin and let me come back even after I wrecked his car and tore up his garage. It’s why he

couldn't stay away from me... right? Or was my hope for Sarge to feel for me what I felt for him a lost prayer? I took too long to answer, a haughty laugh that sounded like disappointment leaving him.

“I—“ What could I say? How could I convey to Sarge just how much he actually meant to me? “I just want my sister back, Sarge.”

“Your sister has always been here,” his tone still had its hardened edge, but it was softer than his tone before. “She just doesn't want you.” He wasn't done with just that. He was going in for the kill. “When Jordyn calls, and you're with Nyla and Oakley, what do you do?”

I knew it was rhetorical, but I answered anyway. “Leave.”

“When Nyla or Oakley call you but Jordyn's there, what do you do?”

“... Stay with Jordyn.”

“And what are you planning on doing when she coincidentally texts to hang out with you when we went to your parents' when she's never done it before?”

I didn't respond. He already knew what I was going to do.

“Your savior complex isn't gonna just cost you the people who care about you, Joslyn.” I looked down at my feet, but I knew he was walking towards me. He stopped when he was right next to me, our bodies aligned. “It's goin' to cost you your life.”

It was a possibility, so I still remained silent. He scoffed, shaking his head, not liking my lack of response to him.

“It’s always about Jordyn.” There was a slight desperation in his voice, one I’d never heard before. “You pick her over everyone. For once, I wish you’d pick me.”

*“For once, I wish you’d pick me.”*

I was always fighting, chasing... caring for him. How could he say I never picked him when I was ingrained in his life? We spent most of our days together, even if it was me talking with him doing his usual grunts. Our nights were usually me bent over somewhere, him using his dirty words and rough thrusts to get me off and leaving me alone. My heart stilled in my chest.

He thought I was with him out of obligation, trying to save him because he slightly reminded me of Jordyn. But that wasn’t the case, not at all.

He was the most important person to me. “Sarge—“

“Save it.” His head snapped to the doorway, preparing to bolt. “You already made your decision.”

“I don’t have to pick.” I was desperately trying to get him to put himself in my shoes. That was such a stupid thing to do with a man as stubborn as him.

“Maybe Prez is right about not trusting you.” My breath hitched at his slipped confession, my heartbeat slowing. His words cut something deep inside of me. I would never do anything to betray the Souls. The club meant so much to my

two best friends, and I put myself on the line for the club. How could Darrell still not trust me?

My heart dropped to my stomach as his words settled more. Did Sarge not trust me?

“I’d never betray you.” All my emotions came out in a disbelieving whisper that he would even think I would do that to him. I’ve sinned enough in my life. I didn’t want to make anyone else suffer for my actions.

I was falling apart internally. He didn’t even look back to acknowledge me, leaving me with crushing words. “The day you don’t go crawlin’ back to her is the day that I’ll believe you.”

The door slammed shut behind him as a disheartening laugh bubbled in my throat. No. There was no way anyone besides my friends and the Souls thought that I was just my sister’s bitch. The denial in me had me digging my phone out of my pocket, frantically typing out a message to my group chat with Nyla and Oakley. Sarge was overreacting, and I would prove it to him.

*Me: Do you guys feel like I always pick Jordyn over you?*

I was confident in what they were going to say, but seeing the three dots go on and off made me more anxious by the second. Whoever was typing was debating on telling me. I held my breath, the dots consistent for three minutes, the knot in my throat growing larger as it spread dread to every nerve.

I wasn’t as confident as I felt sending that text.

*Oakley: I'm sorry, but yes.*

My heart dropped.

*Nyla: I've always tried to understand why. I know you said you're the reason why she got involved in the lifestyle she did, but it wasn't a good enough reason for me to justify the way she was treating you. I love you, Jos. I understand she's your sister, but so are we. We're just not blood-related.*

That was a nail in the coffin. All the years I've spent trying to put others above myself, to start over. Make friends. Have some semblance of a life while taking care of my sister... It wasn't good enough.

I never thought my actions would be ruining me five years later. Everyone looks at it as me giving in to Jordyn's whims, but they don't see the internal struggle. They didn't see my constant breakdowns and the overwhelming guilt.

The way I looked into a mirror and saw what I would've looked like if Jordyn hadn't taken my place in the Bloods staring back at me.

I didn't realize, even with me trying to fake smile my way through a day and be there for my friends, it wasn't a clever enough ruse to make them believe that I was in control of myself. Jordyn controlled me—I've never had control over my life or my actions.

I couldn't ever be happy. Not without feeling guilty that Jordyn was miserable because of me.

My breaths came in and out more rapidly. My chest tightened to the point that I wished the organ inside stopped beating. I gripped the shirt I stole from Sarge in a feeble attempt to stop the world and my problems in it.

I looked at the open doorway, eyes burning at the image of Sarge just walking away from me. I had to get out of here. Out of the room, away from the memories of him.

I dialed a number, needing to be grounded. I need to be reminded of why I never put anyone above the person I owed my life to. “Jordyn?”

“*Yeah?*” Her words were slightly slurred, making me think she had taken something before the phone call.

I blew out a breath, wiping my eyes with the palms of my hands, trying to soothe the throbbing that was lingering there. I knew Jordyn was the wrong choice, but I was making it anyway... for Jordyn.

*She'll never stop until you quit enabling her.* Darrell's words from the night they forced their way into our lives haunted me, but even then, I listened to what was familiar to me. “I'll go.”

With everyone finally telling me what they felt, I felt overwhelmed. I needed familiarity...

Even if it was in the form of abuse from my sister.

\* \* \*

There are only two things I want back in my life.

My parents.

And my sister's love. Did that make me a bad person for craving the love of others who were supposed to love me from the start?

“Been a while, Joslyn.” It had. I hadn't seen her since the party where she caught me with a wire. I never knew the outcome of it or if she ratted us out. “Been ruining anyone else's lives or just mine?”

That was her usual greeting towards me. It always made the backs of my eyes burn. She wouldn't do anything until I answered her, so I told her what I always did. “Just yours.”

“What luck I must have to have a sister like you.” Her sickly sweet sarcasm wasn't lost, making me draw in on myself. We looked the same. We both have blonde hair and the same green eyes. She was thinner with graying skin and track marks, and I was fuller with fair skin and little brushes of freckles on my shoulders that could be seen when I wore sleeveless tops.

“Why did you want to go shopping with me in the first place?” I knew she was going to be a bitch to me. She always was. But I took it since I deserved it after what I did to her and her promising life. But I couldn't remember the last time she'd ask me to go out and do something with her... it's been years.

And even then, we went out, she stole my purse, and I had to walk ten miles home while she and her friends drove past

me in my car and laughed. I hadn't told a soul about that.

I deserved it, but I knew whoever I told would disagree.

"I need new clothes for a party and have no money," she said heartlessly, looking at me like a piggy bank. She's already stolen so much money from me. Our lights have been shut off multiple times, and we went without heat one winter—correction, I did. She went to someone else's warmer house while I bundled up in our cold one because I didn't want anyone to know how bad it was there. But I guess since we didn't live together anymore, she couldn't just take whatever she needed. She actually had to talk to me. "You don't mind, right?"

Still, I relented, being the pushover everyone viewed me as. My smile was sad, just what she wanted. She never wanted to see me happy. She'd find a way to take it away from me. "I don't mind."

She grinned, but it was as fake as she was. "Thanks, sis."

I hated it when she called me that condescending term.

"Went home this morning and found the window smashed," Jordyn casually said as she pulled a shirt off the rack. "Know anything about it?"

Yes. "No. I haven't been there since—"

"Since the night you came wired to the party?" She cut me off, throwing another shirt on her forearm. "Yeah, they weren't too happy when I told them about that. Lucky that big boy was with you, or you'd be dead instead of deaf." The way she said



that so calmly sent chills up my spine. I know she was trying to get me to bite, to confess what the Souls did, but I never would. “Shame he isn’t here now. Where is he?”

“Close by,” I quipped tightly, hoping she believed me. Truth is, I don’t think Sarge even knew I was here. I’d walked from the clubhouse to the mall, usually a twenty-minute walk, but I made it a thirty to prolong it. I didn’t know if Sarge was close. Usually, I felt his presence even when I couldn’t see him. It always made me feel warm. But I felt cold and lonely without the comfort of him watching out for me.

“Would love to see him,” she purred, making my stomach churn and my temper flare. I didn’t want Jordyn to be anywhere near Sarge. I knew how convincing she could be. “Mysterious men always do it so much better, don’t they?” I froze, my reaction being just what she wanted. “After you two fucked in your old bedroom, you forgot to clean up after yourselves.”

I began to sweat despite the AC blasting in the small store. Grabbing another black long-sleeved top, she threw it on her forearm before turning her head to look at me. Her smirk... she knew what she was doing. Sarge and I were caught red-handed. “I won’t tell Lincoln... if you share your man, that is.”

My mind blanked. No. I’d do anything else before I would willingly throw Sarge at her. He was off limits, someone I would fight tooth and nail before she dug her dirty claws into him. She laughed, seeing how that fabricated statement

affected me. She discovered another weak spot of mine, and she was going to capitalize on it.

“You’ve never been shy about sharing before.” There was a burn behind my eyes, and water pooled in my mouth as I felt sick. They shared *me*. I didn’t want to be shared. “I’ve had all the men that fucked you. All their whispers, their tongues, their cocks,” she moaned like one was pleasuring her right now, the nausea within me almost making me embarrass myself in this store. “Don’t you remember how good it felt?”

No. No, I didn’t, and I didn’t want to. I drank as heavily as I did for a reason... so I didn’t remember their touch. My chest began to grow heavy, a night from nine years ago invading my mind, making me grab onto a sales rack. Jordyn laughed as she saw how she was throwing me off kilter.

“But no man does it like Douglas, do they?”

I couldn’t help myself. I blanched right there on the floor. I didn’t want to remember him. Not his words, his face, his name. “Please stop.” I could barely make my plea above a whisper, but she took my discomfort as encouragement. She knew. She fucking knew what happened, and she was doing this. I looked up at her, my eyes shining with tears about to fall while her eyes were laughing at how much she was hurting me with a simple name.

“He came by the other month to a party,” she continued, loving how painful this was for me. “He took me to a back room and fucked me. He asked me about you when we were done.” My heart was about to fly out of my chest. *Please, just*

*stop beating. It would be less painful than this.* “I just had to tell him how you couldn’t forget him. I got his phone number.” She dug in her pocket, pouring salt into the wound. “I think you should give him a call.”

My eyes were trained on that crinkled piece of paper. Was she shaking it, or was that me? That paper was poison to me. Her cackling at my pain was something I would never forget. She knew how I felt about Douglas. She knew what he did to me.

She knew he was the catalyst for our fucked up lives.

“Pathetic, scared of a piece of blank fuckin’ paper.” She crushed it in her hand, dropping it to the ground. “Stay the fuck away from mom and dad’s house. I was a nice sister and covered for you and that ugly bastard you’re fucking. Said some rival gang vandalized the window. But next time? I won’t be.”

I didn’t do anything but stare at the paper on the ground, arms still wrapped around myself.

“Callee, Tirani!” Jordyn’s happy shout echoed as she approached two very thin and pale-looking women. They were both taller than us but had the same track marks that Jordyn did.

The tall redhead looked between Jordyn and me, “Did you multiply, or am I still high?”

Jordyn snorted. “This is my twin sister, Joslyn.”

The other one blinked. “I thought you said your sister was dead.”

That was an arrow straight to the heart, pinned only by Jordyn’s scathing look. “She’s dead to me.”

My lungs deflated, and I felt like I was choking. I refused to fall to the ground despite how weak my legs felt.

Jordyn held out her hand to me. “Card?” I just handed her my entire purse, not having the energy to dig through it myself. “You’re a sweetheart, sis.”

They walked away from me. I stood there with my thoughts, unable to collect myself. Why? Why did she do that? How could she be so cruel? I remember how she let her heart out after the party at Hellbound we all attended. Her words were true, but everyone that wasn’t me called her out on her shit.

I always told myself they didn’t understand. If they were in my shoes, they’d do exactly what I was.

Blaming myself, trying to make up for what I’d caused by giving myself away.

But how could I save my sister if I couldn’t even save myself?

The Souls were men joined together by the sins they committed. They felt like they didn’t have another option, but instead of self-pity and letting their sins control them, they were being proactive. Saving people from making the same mistakes they did.

It was time I started doing the same.

It's been around twenty minutes since Jordyn and her friends walked off. I stood alone by a rack of clothes, pretending to be looking for a new outfit as my head peeked around the small shop. You could see every inch of the store, and I was the only customer here. I frowned, gut sinking knowing what she'd done.

"Excuse me?" I jumped, turning around, my hand covering my heart in a pathetic attempt to stop the rapid beating. The store employee put both his hands in the air, signaling he didn't mean any harm. He was tall, sort of lanky, with dirty-blond hair that ended just below his ears. The black shirt he wore had the store's logo and his nametag that told me his name was Evan. "Do you need some help?"

I recovered from the scare he gave me. "Have you seen anyone who looks exactly like me walk out of the store? She had two people with her."

"Yeah. They left about fifteen minutes ago." My heart dropped to my stomach. Was I really that inside my own head that I hadn't even noticed I was alone for that long?

"Oh, okay." I debated my options for getting out of here. I did walk here, but the sun was probably setting, and by the time I got to the clubhouse, it would be dusk. My chances of being abducted and no one seeing me was much higher when there was no light.

*"When she fucks you over, don't call me cryin'."*

I looked down at my feet, guilt pooling in my stomach. He was right. Everyone was right about Jordyn and me. I couldn't call Sarge, and everyone else was busy. I guess I could call for a ride. My mind flew back to Clarissa and her horror story with a ride-share. I refused to do that. I sighed, not knowing what to do now. "Thank you."

"Is everything okay?"

I didn't want to tell him, but I needed to talk with someone other than my own thoughts. That was the most dangerous place for me right now. "She was my ride."

"You know, I could take ya home if you want. Or if you're interested, I could take you back to my place?" I had a feeling that I knew he was going to say that, especially with the way his eyes raked down my body, making me shiver before taking a step back and crossing my arms over my chest. He still didn't get a clue as he moved closer to me.

His insinuation made my stomach churn, and I couldn't help but compare. This man—no, he actually looked like a boy, especially compared to Sarge—with his scrawny frame and longish hair. It wasn't the chestnut color I accidentally spotted the morning after staying in his cabin for the first time. It just felt so wrong to be flirted with by a man who wasn't Sarge. I could tell his intention wasn't malicious—he was just a horny man trying to get laid.

But I wasn't even tempted—not whenever I already had a man like Sarge.

“No, thank you.” I tried to give him my most polite smile while my heart hurt remembering Sarge’s words. I hated rejecting anyone, even if I was uncomfortable with their advances. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m going to call my friend.”

He nodded, thankfully accepting the rejection. “Just a warning, the store does close in fifteen minutes.”

I blew out a shaky breath before nodding. “Thank you.”

I racked my head for people I could call. Nyla was on her honeymoon. Oakley was in the middle of taking her midterm. I didn’t have any of the brothers’ numbers... I sucked in a breath. I swallowed my pride and dialed the only number. When the ringing stopped, I hoped he was on the other line and didn’t hang up as I rushed out, “I know you told me not to call you, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

“*She fuck ya over?*” I didn’t say anything. He knew she did, or I wouldn’t be calling. He huffed an annoyed breath.

“I’m sorry for bothering you.” I knew I fucked up, but I didn’t want this treatment from him. Not after the emotional bashing I got from him and Jordyn.

“*What did she do this time?*”

What didn’t she do? Abandoning me at the mall was the least painful thing she’s done to me today. “She left me at the mall.”

“*Good thing I’m almost there.*” Even when he was pissed at me, he still was always watching out for me. “*What store?*”

“I’m outside Thrifty Threads.”

“*Stay there.*” With that, the line went dead, just like how I felt on the inside. Jordyn abandoning me in a place like this, combined with Sarge’s truth earlier...

I had some hard decisions to make.

I stood on the curb outside of the store, biding my time for Sarge to get here, when the employee from earlier came to stand beside me. “Are you sure I can’t give you a lift home?”

I shook my head, stepping away from him, still feeling on edge from Jordyn’s words. “No, thank you. My boyfriend is coming to pick me up.”

“You didn’t mention anything about having one inside. I’m not gonna hurt you. I just want you to get home safe.”

I wanted to believe him, but everything I’ve seen recently told me to go with the opposite of everything I thought. I had to be more self-aware, something I’d been lacking lately. “Thank you, I will.”

“I’ll just stay here until your... boyfriend shows up.” He said ‘boyfriend’ like he didn’t believe I had one. And while Sarge and I didn’t put a label on what we were, we were definitely something.

It felt like forever being in this awkward silence before I heard Sarge’s bike pulling up. I could hear his distinct engine. Despite our fight, I found myself smiling. I knew he changed the engine sound for me, even if he never admitted it. He parked right on the edge of the sidewalk, swinging his leg over



his bike, his posture anything but friendly as he walked up to the store associate by my side. He had a good six inches on him as he spat, “Who the fuck are you?”

The guy from the store tried to puff out his chest, but it wasn't intimidating in the slightest. Sarge could snap this guy like a twig. “I was just helping—“

“Help yourself by gettin' the fuck away from her.” He then made a detrimental mistake, putting his arm in front of me in a protective instinct. His hand gripping my shoulder made me flinch away from him.

I didn't want to be touched right now, not in this mindset.

Sarge had the opposite reaction. He gripped his hand, crushing it as he cried out in pain. I swore I heard the bones pop under the pressure. “Put your hand on her again, and you won't have one.”

The poor guy held his throbbing hand with his other, not bothering to say anything else, before he bypassed Sarge, running towards his car. The man in front of me didn't bother to look at him as he went. He lifted his hand, about to touch where the other man did, but I stepped back before pleading, “I don't...” Memories I wanted to forget coiled in my mind, latching onto my brain in a vice grip. “Please don't touch me.”

He dropped his hand immediately, letting the silence settle between us. I've never let him not touch me, so he was obviously waiting for me to continue while I stood there dumbly, wringing my hands together while I tried to build up what little courage I had. I didn't know what to do or say. My

heart constricted at the thought of him just dropping me off at the clubhouse and leaving, not wanting anything to do with me anymore. Do I thank him for looking out for me even if my actions obviously affected him more than he'll ever admit?

I guess I had to do it now or later, and it might as well be now. Before he kicked me out of his life for good this time. I wouldn't blame him.

I took a deep breath, craning my neck to face the darkness that hid his face. My cheeks flushed with embarrassment and shame as I admitted, "You're right. You're absolutely right."

He cocked his head, arms crossing over his broad chest. "About?"

"Everything. I thought... I thought that I was doing okay. That I was dividing my time fairly, but I wasn't, not when my mind is constantly on Jordyn and how she's doing when she doesn't even deserve it." I accepted the hard truth, and I hope it wasn't too late to mend it. "There's a big difference between being physically present, rather than emotionally and mentally. I was always physically present for everyone, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't fair to you, and I'm sorry."

Still nothing from him. But he still hadn't walked away from me, so I took it as a sign that he wanted me to continue with my apology. "I have to let go of my guilt. She doesn't want help, and I can't keep putting myself in danger with the little hope she's given me."

"I'm still learning to let go of mine." Another sneak peek into the mystery that was Sarge. I would ask him about it later,

but for now, I had to be selfish and clear my own conscience.

“I just...” I tried not to feel pity for myself. It was my fault for this. I deserved this for prioritizing Jordyn and making everyone suffer along with me. “When you said you wish I picked you, it really opened up my eyes. Because Sarge? I’ll always choose you first.”

He turned, not expecting the sudden change of heart from me. “Family isn’t always blood.”

“I know.” I always knew. I just prioritized the wrong ones. “You had three right? The military, your real family, and the Souls?”

He was silent for a moment. “Four.”

My face scrunched. “Four?”

“Parents. Military. Souls.” He turned around like he couldn’t face me anymore. “You.”

Warmth spread through me at Sarge giving me my own category. Earlier, I thought he would pawn me off to another brother, something I wouldn’t fight this time after my colossal fuck up. But here he was, still making my heart sing unintentionally. My laugh was watery. “Despite everything, you still want me around?”

“No one I’d rather be around.”

I couldn’t help the smile that formed on my lips, a small watery laugh escaping as I brushed my knuckle against the corner of my eye to collect a tear. “Can we go home?”

There was a pause, like he was trying to process me talking about his cabin as my home. I didn't realize what I said before it left my lips, but his response left butterflies in my stomach. "Yeah."

It was so simple. So Sarge.

There's no one I'd rather be around, either. And I was going to work on proving that to him. Starting now.

# Chapter 15: Sarge



She didn't want me to touch her.

Why didn't she let me fucking touch her?

She always let me put my hands on her whenever with no qualms, but after less than an hour with her sister, it sent her mindset back to a time I knew I would kill anyone who ever made her feel less than the ray of fucking sunshine she pretended to be.

I'd let my anger get the best of me. I almost just deserted her. Tyrant and Knight followed her to the mall. They rode my ass about how dejected her pretty face was as her green eyes were like a damn storm with all the bullshit that was in her mind. I clenched my teeth, jaw shaking as I hit my forehead against the plaster of my bedroom wall. I knew there would be a dent there, and it wouldn't be the first or last. I took my anger out on the punching bag in my basement in the gym or the colorless walls of my cabin.

I couldn't think of what happened at the mall. I would find out, even if I had to fuck it out of that sweet mouth of hers. But if I dwelled on it, I would go on a rampage, finding Jordyn and doing what I should've done the night of the recruitment party. End her fucking life.

I stepped out of my room, walked down the hallway, and immediately locked on Joslyn, who was relaxing on the couch. She was freshly showered after we fixed some of the damage she caused. She looked sexier than I'd wanted to admit in grease stains and dirt, but her domestication in my cabin made me want to throw her back outside to relieve the uncomfortable feeling in my chest. "Joslyn."

No response. My eyebrows pinched together. She never ignored me. My nerves were rising at the thought of it. Did I do something that pissed her off? "Joslyn."

Still, nothing. Gnashing my teeth, I walked over to her, tapping her shoulder and making her jump. "Joslyn."

Her face morphed into an expression I never wanted to see from her: fear. Her dainty hands went up to her hearing aids in a panic. She began fiddling with the volume before frowning. Flicking them a few times, flinching when the high-frequency pitch sounded. She looked up at me, a meek smile on her mouth. "Sorry, did you say something?"

Did she think I was just going to ignore the fact that her hearing aids didn't work? "What's wrong with your hearing aids?"

"Ahh." She looked away, a tad embarrassed. "They're old. Sometimes they don't work."

"When are you gonna get new ones?" I don't know if she was choosing not to respond to me. It was pissing me the fuck off, making me duck down and pinch her chin between my fingers, demanding, "Answer me."

“I can’t afford them.” There was a red hue on her cheeks as her eyes looked at anything but me. “I doubt I’ll ever be able to.”

“So what are you gonna do when they give out?”

No answer. She wouldn’t look at me, which told me everything I needed. I hadn’t really thought much about her hearing aids. I only knew she was sensitive to loud noises, like the first time she was on the back of my bike. Other than that, she didn’t complain. In other words, she was good at masking her pain. So good I didn’t even see it.

Oh, *hell* no. I knew she downplayed the pain she was in daily because of those things. It wouldn’t surprise me if she was so used to it that she was able to ignore it. My mind drifted to the first time she was ever on my motorcycle. The tears she shed out of pure pain—

The thought of her being in more pain than she already was with those damn things wasn’t acceptable. My mind was made up as I stood up straight, turning to walk to the front door before calling out to her, “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” I knew she was confused. I was myself.

“Your ear doctor.”

She laughed, thinking I wasn’t serious, but I sure as hell was. I never wanted to see that look of terror in her eyes when she realized her damn hearing aids didn’t work around me. When I didn’t move, her laughing stopped. “They won’t have an opening for months.”

I didn't reply to her, pulling out my phone and shooting a text off to Knight. If he called me 'whipped,' I was going to show him what it was actually like. "Yeah, they will. Let's go."

I could sense her skepticism. Hell, I would, too. But she still trusted me enough to follow me. After Jordyn left her at the mall, she went radio silent, which is what we expected. Joslyn's been down, refusing to tell me what happened between them, but I knew something did. And I would break Joslyn down until she gave in.

And then I would probably go kill her sister.

Especially after what we found. Still makes my gut churn just thinking about it. How we just walked into a set trap that they failed to execute. We found out what Chasm meant in the blueprints we found at Joslyn's parents' house. Chasm was meant to be a housing unit for breeding. Not breeding animals. Breeding people.

People were so fucking sick. Everyone at church felt the side effects of the thought of something so heinous. Joslyn would never know about the truth of what we found. She was gonna think that night was full of orgasms and bittersweet memories and random fucking blueprints.

Not the fact that it was a trap we'd willingly walk into, one I was still kicking my own ass for. I projected anger onto her when I found out she was ditching me to be with her sister.

Pulling up to the audiologist's office, I could tell she was still convinced we would get laughed out of here for thinking



we could get a same-day appointment. Even if Knight couldn't work whatever the fuck he did on computers, my size was enough to get me in anything I wanted. I rarely use that as leverage, but this would've been for a special reason.

When she approached the counter and said she was there for an appointment, the receptionist smiled at her and confirmed. But when she looked at me, she cowered and pretended she was busy with whatever the fuck it was they did.

Joslyn handed the paperwork in, and we sat down in the uncomfortable as fuck chairs; they needed bigger chairs in these places. I felt the legs of the chair bending. I stood up, going to the open wall space by Joslyn, ignoring her amused snicker as I leaned back against it, crossing my arms over my chest and ignoring the stares of the other people in this shitty office.

I glanced down at Joslyn, whose hands were folded neatly in her skirted lap as one side of her pink lips was tilted at the corners. Why the fuck was she happy about being in a doctor's office?

Or was she happy because this was the first nice thing someone had done for her in fuck knows how long?

That thought made me angry, but I couldn't dwell as her name was called. I stood up with her, and she looked slightly surprised by my actions. Did she think I was gonna let her go back there alone? Or was she afraid I'd kick the doctor's ass if

he did something I didn't like? That was an option, though. I had a hair-trigger temper.

We sat in the patient's room, waiting around ten minutes before the doctor popped in. "Hello, I'm Dr. Regal. What brings you in here today?"

"Her ears hurt," I gruffed out, ignoring her snort before she properly explained. "I've been deaf since I was a few months old. My hearing aids keep going in and out, and as Darin said—my ears hurt. Especially with loud sounds." Fucking loved her calling me Darin.

"I see. You shouldn't be having any pain with your hearing aids." He rolled on his stool over to her with his otoscope, stopping immediately when he saw her ears. "They aren't properly fitted. When was the last time you got new ones?"

I didn't miss the way she bit her lip, a nervous habit of hers, as she counted on her fingers. "It's been years."

So she couldn't even remember. "You should be replacing them every three to seven years, depending on the usage."

"They've hurt before, though." When was the last time she came to the doctor? Shouldn't this be in her medical chart already? "Ever since I can remember. I've always felt pain with them."

"Sounds like you were never properly measured before, and even if you were, you grow so much in a short time through adolescence that parents have difficulty getting new hearing aids every few years. They're not cheap." She shook

her head. The fact that she's spent so many years in pain because it took so much money to do such a simple thing like hearing pisses me off. "Can you hear anything without them?"

"I can recognize loud vibrating sounds. I can't recognize where they're coming from, but I can feel them."

"Okay," He rubbed his chin. "What caused you to be deaf?"

"I had meningitis when I was an infant." I didn't know that. I never asked her what caused her to lose her hearing. Guess it didn't matter to me; it was just a part of who she was, and I accepted it. The reason didn't matter.

"That would do it. In any case, I hate that you've been in pain for this long, but we'll fix that." He sounded confident when he was explaining before his voice dropped to a rushed mumble that I barely heard, "Feel like I'd be killed if I don't." Damn right, he would. I'd cut off his ears and give them to Joslyn; they would get better use that way.

"I'm starting to not recognize sounds with them in," she confessed, making my body go rigid. She did most of the talking between us while I just listened, besides a few grunts. Most of my talking was when we were fucking. Her hands were in her lap, shoulders sunk as she whispered, "It's scaring me."

The doctor had a sympathetic look on his face. "We can always get you properly fitted for other hearing aids. But, there is an option besides standard hearing aids."

Joslyn perked up, the feeling of hope making her emerald eyes shine. “There is?”

“It’s called a cochlear implant.” He rolled over to a drawer, pulling out a plastic sheet. It had a diagram of an ear and a bunch of medical jargon I didn’t understand. “It requires surgery, but you won’t need hearing aids ever again.”

He handed it to Joslyn, and I walked over and peeked at it. It looked like a circle diagonally above the ear with a clip-looking thing connected to a wire that went to something on the shell of her ear. “Is it even comfortable?”

“I’ve only gotten discomfort complaints if it’s not programmed right. But we can always adjust that. It does come with risks like everything else, but this lasts forever. I will warn you it is an expensive alternative. Hearing aids are much more affordable.”

The color drained from her already pale skin, her hopes of being rid of something she hated potentially out of reach. “How much?”

He glanced at me before turning back to her, like he was worried about crushing her dreams with something like finances. “It runs between fifty and one hundred thousand—”

Her face paled, handing the sheet back to him with a crestfallen face shooting me in the fucking gut. “I can’t afford that.”

A look of sympathy shot on his face. “Insurance covers some of it.”

She didn't have any insurance since Claudia was paying her under the table. Her shoulders slumped as she looked at her lap. My heart was cracking looking at her like this. She tried to form a shell around herself because she was unable to shake off the disappointment of having something she'd always longed for dangled in front of her, only for it to be ripped away.

I couldn't fucking take it. "I'll pay."

Her spine straightened, and she shot her eyes at me before shaking her head. "It's way too much."

"It's whatever you want, babe," I told her seriously. The hope she had earlier returned slightly. "There's nothing about you that needs fixing. You don't want to wear hearing aids? Don't have to. Don't want the surgery? Don't have to get it. It won't change anything between us."

"I want it." Her words were meek as she blew out a breath, trying to process what I told her. "But Darin—"

"Don't argue with me." I cut her off, looking at the doc. The only one I trusted was Hex. The only reason I didn't ask him was because I knew he didn't do a nice thing for anyone. If it wasn't saving someone's life or taking someone's life, he was a big metaphorical 'fuck you, go to medical school and learn how to do it yourself.' But since I was left with this short balding fuck, I at least had to ask some questions. My eyes narrowed, watching him tremble under the pressure I was putting on him. "Do you even know what you're doin'?"

"Sir, I'm a doctor."

“Degrees don’t mean you’re smart. Just means you know how to study.”

“I assure you, I’ve done many successful surgeries. She’ll be in good hands.” He pulled something out of his pocket, scribbling on it before handing it to her. I snorted as his hands were still shaking. Pussy. “Here’s the date for your surgery consultation. It’s not the day it will be performed, but the date will be discussed there. Do you have any questions for me?”

She shook her head, eyes trained on the card he handed her. Her mind was consumed with an unreachable dream becoming a reality. “If not, I’ll see you then.”

He exited the room. It took a bit for Joslyn to regain herself as we made our way out to my bike. Her shocked face morphed into a relieved one. I’ve never seen that smile before.

It was the woman who Joslyn was hiding behind her fake ones.

“Is this really happening?” I almost missed her words, memorized by the way her smile lit up her entire face. The happiness she was feeling revolved around her like the sun itself. There was no mistaking the amazement in her voice, like a lifetime of suffering was coming to an unexpected end. Her eyes were closed, the wind pushing her blonde hair to the right as she deeply inhaled the fresh air, already picturing how this change would improve her life. “I don’t know what it feels like for something so simple like hearing to be painless.”

A sense we all took for granted was the thing she wanted the most in this world. I didn’t know how the hell she was still

smiling despite everything life threw at her. The awe in my gut I tried to squash when I looked at her refused to stay down.

I was amazed by Joslyn. Her strength to keep going, to keep smiling despite everything that ails her. She accommodated everyone else, but when was the last time someone accommodated her? The way I snapped at her the other day and the way I had to drag my head out of my ass because if something did happen, I wanted to be there. Pissed at her or not.

And, of course, she apologized to me for it all. Like it was all her fault, like she thought everything in her sister's life was.

She was not responsible for other people's choices.

“Sarge?” I almost didn't respond. I wanted her to call me Darin. I liked it more when she called me by my real name, but I'd never admit the way it rolled off her tongue made my cock twitch. I knew she was only calling me by my real name to not raise questions that saying my road name would.

“Yeah?” When she didn't reply, I turned to her. She was looking at the ground like she was debating on even asking me. I stepped towards her, making her neck crane to look up at me. Her face was serene, trying to prepare for the rejection she had already convinced herself I would give.

“Can your voice be the first one I hear when I'm pain free?”

A knot formed in my throat, not expecting that question from her. She was looking up at me, a hopeful smile on her lips, but her emerald eyes told me she was expecting me to say no. I wasn't a warm man. I cared about very little and loved even less. Times like this, I was thankful I hid my face so she couldn't see just how much her question affected me.

My palms felt balmy as I constricted my fingers to a fist, welcoming the stinging pain digging my nails into my palm would bring, but it didn't take away the fire that heated my skin. *Fuck*. This woman.

I'd do any-*fucking*-thing for her.

"Yeah." I was surprised my voice didn't come out strained the way it felt like a rock was in my throat. But that was all that she needed. One simple confirmation turned that hope into enlightenment, a shine to her eyes that wasn't there before. I couldn't take the emotion that was threatening to burst out of my chest. It was uncomfortable, unfamiliar. I didn't know how to handle this.

I turned away from her, throwing my leg over my bike, looking at my disfigured hand as it rested on the bars when I felt Joslyn's weight behind me. I was missing a few fingers up to the knuckles, my mind racing, wondering if I could even do what was in the back of my mind. She wrapped her hands around my waist, interlocking her ten fully intact fingers, resting them on my stomach, and giving me a tap, letting me know she was ready to go. My mind was already racing to a



safe place. A place of carnage. A place where there were high risks and death around the corner.

A place where I didn't just agree to do the hardest mission of my life.

We raced off to the clubhouse, ignoring the way Joslyn touched me a bit more than before...

And the fact that I let her.

\* \* \*

"We got surveillance cameras all 'round her parents' place."

Even if he couldn't see me, my eyes were narrowed dangerously at Prez.

"If you think I'm fuckin' with ya, you're wrong." He didn't look surprised. I could hold a damn grudge, and everyone in here knew that. But he did do something I didn't expect.

He smirked. His eyes narrowed, but not with warning... he was challenging me. "You called me by my name."

That was a sin for him. While we were in the club, we weren't considered people; we were nothing more than men atoning for a past we'd give it all to change. "You fucked with the wrong girl."

"Gonna let a woman come between you and your brothers?"

"Not my brothers. *You*."

"I *am* your brother."

“Are you?” My head tilted, studying him. Ever since he found Nyla, he began to change. I figured it was to get these fuckers off the streets quicker so they didn’t come after his daughter, but he had no problem endangering people she cared about. It’s only gotten worse since I’ve found the Chasm blueprints in Joslyn’s place. He was ramping up finding any information on the Flock that we could. And being more of a dick about it. Being short and more cross with us than usual. I wasn’t the only brother in here that was pissed by his new style of leadership. It was like he was a different fucking man than the one who’d led us all these years.

“There’s somethin’ fuckin’ wrong with you if you’re pickin’ a girl who used to be involved with our enemies over us.” This dumb motherfucker—

“If you don’t trust her, why do you allow her to come here?” Grim’s voice cut through curiously. He leaned back in his chair, eyes full of contempt. He was tired of his father-in-law’s bullshit too. Glad I wasn’t the only one seeing Prez losing his damn mind.

“Keep your friends close but your enemies closer.” What a stupid, cliché thing to say. “Got eyes on her at all times. She’s not allowed to be anywhere by herself.”

“What if she’s wearing a wire?” I felt my body heat at Tyrant’s question. Why the fuck are the assholes actin’ like this towards her all of a sudden? Prez may not have been kind to her face, but Tyrant was.

His head twisted to mine, anger boiling in my gut as he smirked. “Tell us, Sarge. You’re the one fuckin’ her. Is she wearing a wire?”

This fucking bastard. I know Joslyn blabbed to her friends what we were doing behind closed doors, but it makin’ its way back to Prez, and whatever mindset he was currently in wasn’t good. “You know damn well she isn’t.”

He shrugged innocently like he didn’t know the game he was playing. “Haven’t seen her naked. Don’t know what she’s wearin’ or not.”

“What the fuck is your problem lately?”

“My problem,” he snarled, slapping his hands on the table, “is that we’re focused on shit that doesn’t matter.” I stood up, walking over to him. I intimidated a lot of people, but even though I was taller and physically stronger than him, he refused to waiver under my scrutiny.

*Joslyn mattered.* And even if she didn’t mean a God damn thing to anyone in this room, she fucking meant something to me.

“Like what?” Grim’s lips flattened. “If you’re getting pissed at him for shacking up with Joslyn, you mad at me for shacking up with Nyla?”

“Course I don’t want you with her,” he snapped at his VP. “Fuckin’ love my little girl and would take a damn bullet for her. Built this goddamn club to find her. But she doesn’t stop

our mission. It makes me want to take these fuckers down even more so they don't get to her first."

These fuckers already had my girl once, the invisible scars she refused to burden anyone else there still lingering there in moments she felt like no one would see her pain.

They weren't getting her again.

"What's Chasm?" Grim asked.

That shut him up, causing him to slam his eyes closed, lips curling as he began to slightly shake. "You already know. It was goin' to be built as a breeding farm."

"You're using the past tense," Husk pointed out, straightening his spine, prepared for a fight. "You know somethin' we don't, Prez?"

"Why the fuck would I keep somethin' from you guys?" He was furious, refusing to show us whatever hand he currently had. He was twitchy, fingers slightly spasming with the urge to choke Husk out.

"You seemed awfully interested in them when Sarge brought them," Tyrant accused, his usual carefree attitude frigid as his ice-colored eyes looked incriminatingly at our President.

"Almost ripped the blueprints in half when you snatched them from him," Knight added tepidly, his fingers tapping against his crossed arms as the tensions between everyone rose.

All attention was on Prez. His eyes slowly moved around the room. Any wrong move, and he knew a riot would start. It wouldn't be the first fight that's happened here.

But it could damn well be our last. It depended on his answer.

He let out a heavy breath, the first time he ever showed us a side of defeat in him. The crow's feet on his eyes showed the stress he was under, his dark eyes tired as he sat down in his chair. He put his elbows on the table, interlocking his fingers before taking a steadying breath. "You guys gotta trust me."

"So let me get this straight," Husk rose to his feet. "You accuse us of gettin' distracted, but you ain't tellin' us the truth? That shit doesn't fly, Prez." Husk had a lot at stake with taking our enemies down. I knew he had a pang every time he saw one of us with our girls, making his resolve to finish this shit even stronger.

It was silent, all of us having differing opinions over the man we'd had unquestionable loyalty to for years. I never would've guessed my loyalty to him would be shaken.

"But do you trust us?"

His silence was everything he couldn't have said.

"I think we're done here," Grim said, sounding somber. He looked around the room at us. "We'll reconvene when shits calmed down. Get out of here."

There was no denying this changed the way our club would operate. I was still in front of Prez, him refusing to meet

anyone's eyes as everyone headed out of church and into the common area. It was just me and him left before my anger began to rise at his mistrust of Joslyn due to his own damn insecurities. I turned away from him, heading towards the door.

“Be careful of who you let into your life, Sarge.” Was he trying to manipulate me to change the way I felt about her? “The ones who try to save you are the ones who leave you for dead.”

I didn't turn back to look at him. I would knock him the fuck out if I did, and while that'd help soothe my rage, it wouldn't help whatever situation he was getting us into. “Good thing I'm already dead inside already.”

I walked out the door, meeting my brothers, minus Hex and V, in the common area. Knight and Tyrant were nursing beers while Grim stayed far away from the bar, sitting on one of the leather couches, fingers punching at his phone. Bet he wished he could drink right now, all of us questioning things we thought we had every answer to.

Prez's footsteps were deafening as we heard him enter the common area. None of us looked at him. He knew what he was doing. He always told us finding Nyla was the reason he built the club. But what if he was bullshitting us there, too? I never thought I would find myself distrusting him. But I guess he was right.

Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.

The front door of the clubhouse was kicked open, a tall, slender woman walking through like she owned the damn place. She looked familiar, but I couldn't remember where she was from. My eye caught something dripping from a metal object in her hand—

Blood. Not hers.

The sheers in her hand looked familiar, jarring my memory back to when she cut Knight's neck with the same pair.

"Faith?" Knight asked immediately, running to her side, obviously not holding a grudge for her cutting him the other week. "What are you doin'—"

"Don't come near me unless you want your blood on these again." She held up a pair of sheers, blood coating the silver. Knight stopped in his tracks, knowing this woman made no idle threats. Her eyes narrowed, looking at us. "Which one of you is Darrell?"

Our President calmly stepped forward, exuding power that Faith wasn't cowering to. She stood with him, not wavering even as he stopped a few steps in front of her. "That'd be me."

"You owe me some things." She had some balls on her to be pointing scissors at a man who could order her to be shot down with a flick of the wrist.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Do tell me what I owe you, sweetheart. I don't even know your fuckin' name."

"Name's Faith," she said as she crossed her arms, the material of her oversized hoodie hiding her hands along with

the bloodied scissors she carried. “A friend of yours came into my shop. I showed him why that was a mistake.”

He grinned, not intimidated, though she was pointing a pair of bloody scissors at him. He loved when people got in his face like this. “Crazy bitch ain’tcha?”

“Well, this *crazy bitch*,” she hissed, standing toe to toe with Darrell, “can get even crazier if given the chance. I want new sheers, a new storefront window, and your lackeys to clean my shop and get rid of the dead body that tried to assault me for information about Mr. Latham.”

Knight’s threatening growl was ignored as Prez’s eyes narrowed, darkening slightly. “The fuck you talkin’ about?”

“I’m talking about men who will always come up to an unsuspecting woman thinking if he doesn’t get what he wants, he can just overpower the information out of her.” She flicked her wrist, revealing her bloodied scissors again. “I showed him what a big mistake that was.”

Prez’s grin was wiped off his face, becoming serious. “What did he ask you?”

“Oh no. I’m not talking until my store is spotless.”

“Listen, lady.” I’m surprised Prez put up with her bullshit for this long. With each intimidating step towards her, Faith kept her chin up and eyes narrowed into slits. Not afraid of a man that anyone would be foolish not to fear. “That man could possibly hold the key to saving people from a life you can’t fathom.”



“Don’t assume I don’t know the horrors of what a man can do,” she said with calm conviction. She was a hardened woman, no doubt about that. She had some balls on her to come in, making demands to an MC that could overpower her. Those dull scissors she carried wouldn’t take all of us out before it was too late. “Clean up my shop and the body, then we’ll talk. I believe you’re in a confining position, *Prez*. Especially since I’m the key to some pertinent information you could be needing.” She was a snarky thing. If Victoria was here, I don’t know if she’d befriend her or knock her out for talking to Prez this way.

“Don’t think I didn’t have your background run. I know that...” he leaned down, whispering in her ear as her pupils dilated. If I thought she was pissed before, there was no containing this. Her blue eyes were fiery as she stepped back like he burned her. Her hand raised before thinking through what hitting him would do, slowly putting her hand back down at her side. Her fingers curled into her palm, her fist shaking with barely contained rage.

“Don’t you say his name again.” Her voice was a harsh whisper, trying to maintain the tough persona she commanded of herself. The more she trembled, the more she wavered. She took a step forward, hissing, “You know *nothing*.”

“I know more than you think.” Prez looked down at her, his hands in his pocket as he looked uninterested in her now that her bravado was slightly faltering after whatever he told her. He looked over his shoulder at Tyrant and a seething Knight. Knight usually kept his shit together, rarely ever

coming undone. He ran away from his problems, obviously by the way he just avoided Victoria and whatever problem he had with her, but he was usually level-headed.

Didn't think he'd come undone for the crazy chick that put a pair of scissors to his neck.

Faith's shoulder dipped, and her eyes glazed over slightly before stumbling. Knight couldn't help himself and rushed to her side with his arm around her shoulder, stabilizing her. "You okay?"

Her hand connected with his chest, weakly pushing him off of her, but she still looked wobbly. "Fine."

Her speech was slightly slurred, her skin growing pale. But she stood up as straight as she could, willing herself to stop her body from shaking. Knight was by her side, his lips pulled down and his eyes concerned. Did he not remember her cutting his neck with her scissors a few weeks ago?

"Knight, Tyrant. Go help... Faith out." The two in question shot each other a look, making me wonder if it wasn't for Knight's obvious interest in Faith, would they even listen to him? His eyes narrowed dangerously at her. "Don't keep your end of the deal, and I promise I'll show you I'm worse than him."

She was still edgy, swaying back and forth on both feet. Even if it looked like she was going to fall over at any point, she still had enough backbone to spit at Prez, "Is that a threat or a promise?"

The corner of his lip turned up, cocking an eyebrow at her. “Fuck us over and find out yourself.”

“I’m good,” she drawled, eyes moving over to Knight’s lips, turning up knowingly. It was a weak smile, her eyes still hazed over looking drowsy. “One of you is already trying to fuck me over.”

Tyrant cackled, elbowing Knight, who practically had steam coming from his ears. “This the girl you got your dick in a knot for? Jesus Christ, y’all are falling like dominoes. First Grim with Nyla, then Sarge with Joslyn—“

“Joslyn?” Faith’s eyebrows furrowed. “You guys know her?”

I straightened, my senses on high alert at the mention of her name. “What if we do?”

“That man was asking about her. He was trying to get a location out of me, but I have no idea who she is.”

“Listen, Faith.” Grim stepped in. He was a helluva negotiator, but if he couldn’t get her to talk with his charm, I was going to get her to talk with brute fucking force. “I get you want your store clean, and we’re men of our word, but Joslyn means a lot to this club. Assholes are after her and a lot of other women. Doesn’t take a damn genius to know you went through some shit, and you don’t know us from Adam, and we could’ve easily thrown you on your ass for breaking in here, but we haven’t. We ain’t gonna hurt ya, so why don’t you just tell us some information you know so we can save others from the pain you went through.”

She stared at him long and hard, a debate in her cobalt eyes. She was weighing her options: either be selfish or selfless.

If she chose to be selfish, I'd show her just how selfless I could be when it came to Joslyn.

"... He obviously didn't go into details, but he thinks I know her since she's associated with you guys, and I rent my storefront from you." She looked over at me. I felt in my bones that her next words were going to fuck me up. "He told me to pass a message on to her. *He won't be around to protect you forever, little girl.*"

My mind went blank, and my pupils narrowed as the air was knocked out of my lungs. I ran mindlessly towards Faith, who didn't even so much as flinch at my stampede, but Knight, Tyrant, and Grim got in my way, barely able to hold me back as I spewed, "What the fuck did you just say!"

"Chill out, Sarge!" Tyrant struggled against me, his words not grounding me. I fought, pushing against the three of them, barely noticing the fourth pair of arms that tried to hold me back. They mocked my ability to protect Joslyn. Someone I'd fucking *die* for.

My mind was fixated on this fucker calling Joslyn "*little girl.*" I'd cut out anyone's tongue for calling her something other than her name.

I was still struggling my way through the group of men, all the shouts to stop drowned out by a few words that threatened Joslyn. I threw a fist, making contact with someone, but I

didn't know who. My knuckles burned, and the skin irritated with my action. Nothing else mattered to me than getting to Faith, making her tell me who the fuck she killed so I could kill him again.

“Go get Hex!” The words were muddled. I couldn't make out who said it as I still fought against six pairs of arms that were barely holding me back. I found an opening, sweeping my leg and taking one of my brothers out, and he fell into another one. I didn't know who they were, my gaze still solely on Faith. Prez stepped in front of me, pushing his shoulder into my chest while the brother, not groaning on the floor, was behind me, his arms around my waist, trying to pull me back.

I didn't hear the footsteps racing out of the room as I kicked my foot back, making contact with something hard as the arms around my waist slacked. I grabbed the back of Prez's neck, shoving him toward the ground as I stepped over his body. I didn't know if that blow to the head knocked him the fuck out, but I didn't care.

These bastards were waiting for me to fuck up with her, leave her in a fit of rage like I had in the past. I slipped up when I let my guard down and fucked her on her childhood bed. I should've known they'd be watching, but I was too consumed by my need for Joslyn.

They were using it against me.

I've never been so pissed off at myself. This is why I never wanted anybody to care about me...

And why I never wanted to care about them.

I stepped up to her. The baggy pale crew neck she was wearing went well below her hands, the blood from her scissors still dribbling slightly on the floor. She looked at me, her haze lined with understanding. She was calmer than when she was with Prez and the total opposite of the way I was feeling, my fingers itching for destruction and my chest heaving haggardly.

“Better not fuckin’ do anythin’ to her, Sarge!” Knight’s strained voice sounded from behind me. He was probably on the ground, withering with whatever pain I dealt him. I wasn’t going to hurt Faith. Not unless she didn’t tell me what I wanted.

“His body is still on the floor of my shop.” Faith was calm, way too calm, talking about a man she just killed. “I don’t know who it is.”

Her face disappeared as red bled into my vision, the rage totally consuming me as I let out a howl that shook the whole damn clubhouse. These motherfuckers were fucking dead before. Now they were just going to be ashes to piss on. I was still struggling, trying to get to the source of whoever thought they could get their hands on my fucking girl.

A prick to my neck made the red fade into a familiar black. My body began to relax, and I couldn’t hold my body weight anymore as I fell to the right, my temple banging against the black vinyl flooring. I lay there, drifting out of consciousness.

# Chapter 16: Sarge



*Six years ago*

*“Damn Darin,” Michael laughed at me, rubbing the spot on his arm I just punched. “It was just a prank!”*

*“Fuckin’ idiot,” I mumbled under my breath as I dusted off my sleeping bag. Fucker dumped sand in it.*

*“Lighten up,” Karev grinned. “You’re too serious, man.”*

*Michael and Karev loved to pull pranks. It was their way of lightening a dark situation. Leo rolled his eyes, at least he was on my side. “This isn’t a fuckin’ game you two.”*

*They sobered up, Michael frowning. “We know, but we’re tryin’ to cope.”*

*“Cope in another way,” Jake chastised them. Like me, he didn’t play Michael and Karev’s games. “We need Darin focused. He can’t focus if he pulling sand out of his dick.”*

*I didn’t want to be part of their squabble, heading towards the pit we made. Dan was there, like he always was, looking at a picture in his hands. It was a teenage girl with his hair and his eyes. He knew I was behind him, he always had good senses on him.*

*“My little girl Maddie,” Dan spoke with longing, and smiled at the pocket-sized picture, one he kept in the pocket*

*over his heart. "It's almost her birthday, she's hoping I'll be there for it."*

*He probably wouldn't be. We never knew when we were getting deployed or going home. I didn't respond and he knew I wouldn't. I was shit at comforting people. "Promise me somethin', Darin?" He didn't wait for me to acknowledge his words before speaking again. "If something ever happens to me, make sure my wife and daughter are taken care of."*

*Something happening to any one of us wasn't fathomable to me, but I nodded anyway. His smile was grateful as he asked me, "You thinking of starting a family of your own someday?"*

*I shook my head. Never wanted kids or a wife. I enjoyed my solitude. "No."*

*"You'll change your mind when you meet the right girl." I wasn't so sure about that. "I was like that until I met Lisa. She changed me, gave me something to live for."*

*That was the difference between him and me.*

*I didn't have anything to live for.*

My skull was pounding, my eyes squeezing together to try to relieve some of the ache, but it wasn't working. I opened my eyes, and the light from the windows showed it was dark out now. Not daylight when Faith came in, her words sending me into what people feared; a fucking machine that can only be stopped with death or sedation.



I groaned, back aching from laying on the hard floor of the common room. This wasn't my first time sleeping on this uncomfortable fucking floor. There's been more than a handful of brawls that ended with a cracked open head and Hex sedating me. Could they at least give me a pillow next time? My neck hurt from being tilted back for however long I've been here. I was too big for the brothers to be able to carry me to a bed, so they just left me here after an episode. My body was heavily groggy with the side effects of the medication Hex injected me with.

I expected to feel like this. This is how I usually felt. The pounding in my head was lessening, letting me focus on my surroundings.

What I didn't expect was the steady breath next to me.

With more effort than normal, I turned my neck, at a loss for words, when I saw Joslyn lying next to me on the common room floor. Her hair was up in a messy bun, her cheeks pasty and makeup smudged. She didn't have a pillow or blanket; the only comfort she gave herself was her cheek lying on her toppled hands. Her chest rose and fell with a steady breath. Wearing one of my hoodies, she was careful not to touch me even though I'd been letting her hands linger longer lately.

This fucking woman. She really thought I was worth sleeping on a dirty floor for? My chest cramped, uncomfortable with the sentiment of her doing something as stupid as this. She didn't belong on the fucking floor.

I reached my deformed hand up, pressing it against her cheek. My thumb caressed her cheek, stilling as her lips turned up, nuzzling her cheek into my hand, like she knew it was my touch and it was giving her comfort in whatever dream she was having.

*“Can your voice be the first one I hear when I’m pain free?”*

I’ve thought about that question and the weight of it. Words that had such a profound effect on me. She could’ve asked anyone, but she asked me. I knew it wasn’t because I was going to pay for it. She wanted me to be by her side. She wanted it to be my voice for her special first.

I was letting her get too deep into my skin. She was affecting my actions, my words, my *everything*. I prided myself on having complete control over myself.

The way I fucked her. The way I watched out for her. The way I just fucking lost control of myself because someone insinuated that they were coming after her.

I had to hand the reins over to the wisp of a thing who decided to sleep on a dirty floor with me so I wasn’t alone. Knowing her, she fought her friends tooth and nail so that they left her alone to do this. She fought to be by my side. Proving to me over and over that when I just wanted her out, she was going to find a way back in. Even if she had to kick the door down herself and pull my head out of my own ass.

With more effort than usual, I got up, towering over Joslyn. My shadow covered her like a true eclipse; it was beautiful for a moment, but if left too long, it would destroy the world it was supposed to protect. I hunched my body over, putting a forearm under her knees and shoulders, scooping her up, and pulling her as close to me as our bodies would allow. I just stood there, taking in the warmth she brought to my frigid heart. Having her in my arms like this wasn't a representation of how far she's dug her claws into me.

She embedded herself inside of me in the worst possible way.

I walked off on autopilot, ripping my eyes away from the sleeping woman in my arms. I should've taken her to Hex's clinic and let her wake up in a space she grew familiar with during Nyla's recovery when she was shot. But I found myself taking her to the room we went to during Grim and Nyla's wedding. We fucked here. I let her choke on my cock here.

She called me by my real name for the first time here. Something so simple but something that edges my mind daily. To everyone, I was Sarge.

To Joslyn, I was Darin—the man underneath the hood.

I cradled her with one arm as I opened the door to my guest bed here at the clubhouse. My steps were steady as I walked to the bed, placing her on the dark bedspread, knowing that she liked to sleep above the covers—strange fucking thing, but Joslyn was full of quirks. I knew how she bit the

inside of her cheek when she concentrated. When she was happy, she had to kick her feet in some way.

When she saw someone in pain, she couldn't help but put herself on the line to make them smile.

The moonlight from the window encompassed her, making her look every bit the goddess my brain deemed her to be. Even if she was in something as simple as a messy bun and my oversized hoodie, her makeup had the beginnings of raccoon eyes.

She was still the most beautiful fucking woman I've ever had the pleasure of seeing.

I leaned over her, her face peaceful as my thumb traced her cheek resting on her bottom lip. Never kissed a woman, never been tempted. But the way she looked right now, the way she was clouding every sense of control I seemed to have over myself—

I had to get a taste, even if she never knew.

My head dipped down to hers, lips brushing against hers gently. It was a weird contrast. Her lips were soft and plump. Mine were rough, unfamiliar with touching something as comforting as her lips. This was an experience I would keep to myself, a guilty pleasure to get me through the hard times ahead. Another caress from me. One taste of her lips wouldn't ever be enough. I've never wanted anything more than to spend the rest of my days with my lips on hers. Visions of her kissing me when I left to do club business and her excited shrills when I returned quieted with my lips hedged my mind.

Maybe if we were different people and not a man who was too afraid to let the world see the true side of him and a woman who thought her fake smiles fooled everyone—maybe we would have a chance together. But the way we were now, there was no hope.

Broken people can't love each other. The jagged edges of our shattered pieces would only cut each other deeper.

I let myself linger longer than I planned, struggling to remove myself from her. If I was strong enough to pull myself away, we wouldn't be here. But this woman brought me to my damn knees, an invisible string always bringing me back to her warmth.

I always thought the dark was warm and comforting, but it didn't compare to the light Joslyn consumed me with.

I pulled back, my thumb brushing her bottom lip, feeling the fleeting warmth I had left behind.

She'd never know I'd given her my first kiss.

With extreme effort, I pulled away from her tempting lips, straightening to take in all of her body sprawled on my bed with my hand still connected to her flush cheek. Implanting the vision of her curled up peacefully on my bed.

My fingertips ran down her cheek until they hit the jawline, feeling the loss of her when I didn't feel her warmth under my fingers anymore.

I turned my back to her, walking to the open doorway. I wish I was stronger, but I couldn't resist peeking back.

She was where she belonged, safe under the guidance of  
the moonlight...

Safe away from me.

# Chapter 17: Joslyn



I woke up in a comfortable bed, my mind fogged over with remnants of sleep as I struggled to open my eyes. How tired was I? And why did my back hurt?

Groggily, my eyes opened as I sat up. I stretched my back, rubbing a harsh ache I felt. My eyes were blurry as I looked around the room, my vision clearing as I found myself in a place I instantly recognized.

I looked to the side of the bed—the made bed. I wouldn't know if Sarge was here with me, but I doubted he was. He never slept in the same bed with me. I frowned. How did I get here? The last thing I remembered—

I gasped, jumping up from the bed and out of Sarge's guest room, the previous night's events running clearly through my mind once my brain fog dissipated.

*I was anxiously waiting to get off work. Sarge said they had church, so Victoria was picking up Nyla and me. I was bummed, but he told me he'd see me at the clubhouse. My smile was blinding at the thought of seeing Sarge. I almost didn't wait for Victoria to fully put her car in park as I rushed out of her Camry, ran up the steps, and pushed the front door open, expecting to see his large figure leaning against the wall*

*next to the door where he usually was waiting for me on the days where they had church, and Victoria picked me up.*

*My smile dropped instantly as I saw a group of men circling around a lone body on the floor. My hands cupped my mouth, assuming the worst, as I watched Hex pull a needle out of his neck while all the brothers besides V, Darrell, and Mitchell watched. What did they do to him? I rushed towards the crowd, slipping and almost falling when I stepped on something slick. I looked down, my body freezing, as I saw the smeared blood on the floor.*

*Oh God, please don't let it be his.*

*I looked at the group, who I knew I had the attention of. I wasn't concerned with their stares as my eyes refused to leave Sarge's unconscious form as Nyla ran past me to get to her husband. "What happened?"*

*Mitchell looked at her with a distant look, the haunted eyes reminding me of when he was struggling with his urges to fall prey to the vice that kept him in a death grip. They were similar to mine when I was craving just a drop of alcohol. "He had to be sedated."*

*I looked away from Sarge briefly to question Mitchell, "Why?"*

*"Got too out of control," Darrell clipped. I looked at him, his hate-filled look not lost on me. I looked at his forehead, a large gash with dried blood surrounding it. My throat dries instantly, panic settling in as the knot in my throat grows too thick to swallow past. Did Sarge do that to him?*



*I turned around, looking at the droplets of blood on the floor. "Is that his blood?"*

*"Don't you worry about it," Darrell's harsh words almost made me flinch. He's been cold and snappy with me recently, and I don't know why. "You can leave. We'll take care of him."*

*Absolutely not. With as much courage as I could muster up, I stood between Sarge and Darrell. He eyed me curiously with disdain still laced in his vision. I glanced at Nyla, who was combing her hand through her husband's hair comfortably while looking at me and her father with a hopeless stare. I turned my attention back to him, pushing any discomfort I felt in favor of Sarge. "I'm not going anywhere."*

*He didn't say anything but continued to look at me like his stare would eventually scare me away. But I wouldn't leave. The only way they could get me away from protecting Sarge was death. I walked over to him, his head awkwardly tilted back, looking very uncomfortable as his chest matched his shallow breathing. I sat next to him. They would have to drag me away from him and lock me up if they truly wanted me to leave.*

*"Not like we can do anythin'," I heard Tyrant defending me. His voice wasn't his usual carefree self. It was more strained. I wasn't sure what led up to Sarge having to be knocked out, but whatever it was, it wasn't good. "Gotta leave him here until he wakes up."*

*I swiveled my head to him, noticing how his brawny cheek was reddened. His pale blue eyes, usually so full of life, had*

*very little to spare. "You're just going to leave him here?" On the cold, hard floor alone?*

*Knight shrugged next to him. "Can't exactly pick him up, Jos, this fucker is heavy."*

*He wasn't wrong. Sarge was the largest of all of them, V coming close. My lips turned down, looking at Sarge's still form. His head just lulled towards the left, the rise and fall of his chest at a steady pace, letting me know he was still here with me.*

*All the mornings I woke up broken, hurting, and alone invaded my mind. My eyes felt glassy, like I was in a trance. Like I was the drunken mistake I felt I was. How many times did I want someone to be there when I woke up? Instead, the only thing that comforted me was the broken glass bottle that put me to sleep in the first place.*

*"What are you doing?" Nyla asked as I dropped to the ground, getting as close to Sarge as I could without touching him. "You're really going to lay on the floor with him?"*

*I still felt like I was in a trance, not recognizing my own voice. "I don't want him to wake up alone."*

*There were refutes. Protests about this. But I ignored them all. I focused on Sarge, and when they knew I wouldn't waiver, they left us be. I'm shocked they didn't put up more of a fight, but the tension wasn't caused by me. There was something bigger going on between everyone. Nyla told me to call her if I needed anything before she and Mitchell took off. Soon, it was just Sarge, Darrell, and I. I could feel the way he looked at me,*

*the hate. The judgment. The distrust. But still, he didn't say anything as I heard him walk off, leaving Sarge and me alone on the cold tiled floor.*

*I was just waiting for him to wake up, but as the minutes turned to hours, I felt myself dozing off. The floor was uncomfortable. I was cold. I knew whenever I woke up, it would feel like my spine snapped in half.*

*I told him I would prove to him that he came first to me. Sarge was worth my discomfort.*

*He was worth everything.*

I looked around the room, taking note it was still dark outside. "Sarge?" I didn't know what day or time it was. I just knew that he wasn't in here with me. "Sarge!"

I jumped out of bed. My work uniform was wrinkled, and I was barefoot as I made my way out of Sarge's club bedroom. I rushed down the hall and the stairs, almost tripping down them as I made my way to the common area. I scanned the room frantically, almost missing the dark figure at the bar.

Darrell was at the bar, nursing a beer. I thought he didn't drink? My throat bobbed as it took some effort to keep my mind off how much stress one would take off me right now. Finding my voice, even if it was strained, I asked, "Where's Sarge?"

He lifted the bottle, my eyes lingering on it as he ignored my question. "Join me for a drink?"

I felt my skin prickle with sweat, eyes trained on the beer bottle he was twisting in his fingers. I would absolutely love to join him for a drink. To numb myself to every stress that was popping up so frequently in my life. I shook my head. Darrell knew. He knew what my life was years ago, and this was just a test to see what I would choose: alcohol or Sarge. But there was no competition. My voice was raspy, confidence dwindling as I asked again, “Where’s Sarge?”

“Hmm,” he mused, placing his drink on the bar before swelling in the stool to face me. “Why do you want to know?”

I was growing more irritated with him by the second. I knew it might bite me in the ass later, but Sarge could be anywhere. I didn’t know how sedation made him feel waking up. What if he was out there getting himself hurt? I couldn’t let him do that. I couldn’t lose someone else I loved because of their angry impulses. “Please, Darrell. I need to know where he is. What if he gets himself killed?”

“I know about your past. Every single detail.” I froze, knowing what was going to happen next. I didn’t want to have this conversation with him, but it was a long time coming. I wish Sarge was here to give me strength. “Bravo to you, Joslyn. Manipulating Sarge the way you did.”

My skin flushed with anger, and I narrowed my eyes at him. “I didn’t manipulate him.”

“He’s been straying off our cause now with you in the picture.” He stood up, trying to use his size to intimidate me. We were the only two in the open room, his boots echoing off

the empty walls, making his steps sound all the more threatening. “Grim did the same with Nyla, but obviously, that’s a different case.”

I didn’t have immunity to Darrell’s scrutiny like Nyla did. “What are you trying to say?”

“I don’t trust you.” He stopped right in front of me, his lips sneered. “I’ve been studying you. Your actions. Your calls. Everything. They all lead back to your cunt of a sister.”

I had to bite my tongue. I didn’t like her to be referred to that way, but now wasn’t the time to defend her. “It’s hard to let go of someone who was part of your life.” Darrell let go of everyone important to him when he gave Nyla up. Living for only his next hit to dull the pain he felt inside. “I thought you, of all people, would understand.”

“All I understand is you’re still with her and, by association, the Bloods.”

He obviously doesn’t know about my struggle with letting her go. I’ve been strong, not even sending out a feeler to her to make sure she was still alive. “You wired me up and sent me to the wolves to prove my loyalty.”

“I did.” That night was a clusterfuck, and I still don’t know if it was beneficial or not. “But even afterward, you were still in contact with Jordyn.”

“She’s my sister—”

“She’s your abuser,” he cut me off, not wanting to hear any of my excuses for her treatment. Maybe he didn’t know about

the mall? How she left me behind? How Sarge more or less gave me an ultimatum that shook me to my core, and even if I was feeling the loss of the everyday routine I had with Jordyn, I knew my life would be better without her in it. But letting go, even someone who would rather hurt than love you, was a difficult thing. “You have a choice to make.” I was listening intently. “I’ve been far too kind for our own personal gain. But the tides are turning, and you have to pick a side. Your sister or us.”

If he asked me a few days ago, it would be a much harder question. Jordyn was my best friend. Terrible life choices tore us apart and are keeping us apart. As long as I let her poison into my life, I could never properly heal.

As children, I always needed her. She was my protector from the kids who made fun of me for my hearing. She was keeping me from a life I told myself I never deserved because of the sin I’ve committed. Everyone disagreed, seeing the manipulation but not understanding why I let myself become accustomed to that lifestyle. Jordyn was my sister, and I would always love her despite how rough it was between us.

But if I had to choose between her and Sarge...

I’d pick him every time. I would shatter if I ever lost him.

She was my person.

But now, she’s my downfall.

Sarge was my redemption.

His faceless form popped into my mind. How rough he could be. His sweetness in his own way. I could understand him better than myself sometimes; he was an enigma with jagged pieces I was trying to fit with my own.

Could broken pieces even make a complete puzzle?

“I’d never betray you, Darrell.” He stood there staring into my eyes, probably seeing if I was telling the truth. I was. I didn’t want to give up on Jordyn, but I couldn’t keep hurting the people choosing me because of her. I’ve suffered enough. I was punishing myself for the actions of others. I’d always hold guilt for Jordyn doing what she did for me, but I was choosing me—No. “I’m choosing Sarge.”

He cocked his head. “Does Sarge even want you?”

I looked down at my feet, my insecurity showing. Truthfully, I didn’t know if he wanted me anything other than a release. Emotionally, he was closed off. He was like me, thinking he was undeserving of simple pleasures in life because of past sins. There were little moments where I felt a crack in that armor disguised as his hood. Every time he touched me, his hands lingered on me longer. He’s let me leave my hands on him longer than when we first started... whatever this is.

We were broken down, but we would rise.

Together.

I craned my neck up at the President of the Unforgiven Souls, a new spark in my eyes as I answered him confidently,

“Yes.”

He stood there, his head tilted to his right and his dark eyes considering my words. I knew he wasn't a man swayed by simple words and actions, but I hoped my conviction was enough for him to tell me where Sarge was. Even if he didn't, I would hunt the streets of Diamond Ridge until I found him.

I don't know if it was the confidence, but Darrell let out a sigh, turning away from me. My heart sank, thinking he wasn't going to tell me. I opened my mouth to let him know what I was going to do when he shut me up with a single word. “Hellbound.”

My eyebrows furrowed. I felt like he gave in a bit too easily, concerning how determined he was. Was this his peace offering? “What made you tell me?”

“Don't think this makes me trust you,” he snapped, his head turned, and his eyes watched me from the side. His eyes drifted to the floor, looking exhausted before steeling himself again. He was silent for a moment. “He's gonna need someone soon.”

His message was ominous. I knew he wasn't doing this out of the kindness of his heart but doing it for a brother he cared about deeply, whether he admitted it or not. My brain would try to figure out what that split-second look of defeat meant later. I didn't have time to think about it right now as I headed out the back door of the club. I opened the gate and ran through the path, trying to push what happened the last time I made this trek out of my mind.



My breathing was heavy and ragged. I was not used to running a distance like this before. My hands were on my knees, trying to catch my breath and prepare for whatever I was going to find in there. I hadn't been here since the night I met Sarge. It was a place I didn't want to think about ever again, but I would face the demons lingering behind this closed door if it meant Sarge was the one waiting for me at the end.

I shakily reached for the doorknob, pulled the door open, and held my breath as I opened Hellbound's front door. The creaking made my panic heighten at the endless possibilities of what I was going to see. Blood everywhere? Scattered, lifeless bodies?

*A lifeless Sarge?*

I shook my head. He wouldn't do that, he promised.

*So did your Dad.*

I had to busy my mind. Standing here with thoughts I couldn't change no matter how much I wanted to wasn't doing anything but keeping me from Sarge longer. I drew in a breath, holding it as I turned the doorknob, pushing the door before I lost the nerve.

Nothing.

I looked around the living room, the not fond memories of the party that brought the Souls into our lives rushing back. The pictures were off the wall, and the furniture was removed. The carpet ripped up and turned into an easy-to-clean laminate

floor. The fragrance of bleach was overpowering as I used Sarge's sleeve to cover my nose, my ears faintly picking something up.

I shut the door behind me, stepping farther into the common area. It looked so... empty. It looked vastly different than a few months ago. Did they do that on purpose for a ruse? Was this the true representation of Hellbound, a place where your screams and blood colored the walls, and when they were done, it was just bleached and wiped away like your carbon footprint was erased?

Crossing my arms, I rub my biceps up and down to try to soothe my nerves. I heard a faint noise that had me rooted in place. The knot in my throat was almost suffocating, fear instilling in every fiber of my being, making it impossible to move, to speak. There was a chance it was Sarge... but there was also a chance that this was just a setup by Darrell to get rid of me.

I didn't have any weapons, no means to protect myself. All I had was the stupid trust I had in people who always got me into messes that other people had to fix for me. Not today. I would deal with whatever consequence Darrell threw me into.

Shakingly, I took a step. Then another, until I found a rhythm. It felt like my body was moving on autopilot, my ears faintly hearing slapping sounds and grunts. I paled as I stepped into the hallway, the noises growing louder. I couldn't tell which direction they were coming from, but if the noises were

growing louder, I figured I was heading in the right direction. With a deep breath, I jumped before I lost the nerve.

My breath hitched with what I was witnessing.

There Sarge was, beating on something—not something... someone. A very dead someone with dislocated arms above their head, their wrists shackled connected to a hook that was suspended from the ceiling. I don't think he heard me as he continued wailing on the naked man. Sarge was in the zone, and the only thing worthy of his attention was the corpse in front of him.

That was until he roared, taking the man's head between his two hands and twisting his neck an audible crack making me blanch and Sarge flinch, knowing he wasn't alone anymore. His body raged heavily as he turned slowly to me. His stiff posture told me he wasn't happy to see me.

“What are you doin' here?” he roared angrily at me, reminding me of the man who was adamant about letting me go. His footsteps shook the room as he came towards me. I stepped back slowly, afraid of him in whatever state he was currently in. My back hit the wall, my breathing rapid as I tried to find the words to answer him with. He chased after me, his body stalling right in front of me as he threw his arms up, hands smacking into the wall behind me hard enough to leave dents. “Answer me!”

Tremors racked my body as I looked up at him. This wasn't Sarge. This man was more like a wild animal than the man who protected me out of his so-called moral duty all these

months. My hands flew to my chest, hands trembling with fear. Whatever I was going to do would just set him off more, I'm sure. But I didn't know what could I say that wasn't already obvious? I'm here for him. I'd always be here for him.

“You always chase after me.” It sounded like he was talking more to himself than me. His voice grew more grave with each word that was torn from his throat. “Even when you don't know where I'm goin', you still follow me like a lost fuckin' puppy.”

He wasn't wrong. I think stealing his car and wrecking his garage proved what lengths I'd go to chase him. I looked away from him as I confessed, “I'm scared you're going to get hurt.”

Another slap in the drywall behind me, earning another flinch that he disregarded. “Why the fuck do you care so much?”

“Because I know what it's like to be alone, and I don't want you to feel like that.” My eyes were burning as the emotion swelled in my throat. I was trying to control the overwhelming feeling for his sake, but it was becoming a losing battle. I looked up at him, knowing I would lose the battle with my tears. “There's no worse feeling than being in a room full of people and still feeling so utterly alone. I don't want anyone to feel like that, especially you, Sarge.”

“So now you care?” Looks like we were getting all the pent-up emotions out of us tonight. It was brief the other day and swept to the side, but now it was going to be laid out on the table. Who knows if we'd both still be sitting at it when

this was over. “Now that you finally accepted your sister doesn’t give a fuck about you, you suddenly care about someone else besides her?”

“I’ve always cared about you!” He could say a lot about what I felt, but he couldn’t tell me I didn’t care about him. Why didn’t he see that? “You told me you didn’t want me. You told me you didn’t care about me. You told me I was for fun, and that’s it. You even tried to send me away to stay with Mitchell and Nyla! You don’t fucking care for me. You said it yourself!”

“The way I feel about you is beyond caring, Joslyn.” Sarge’s words took the air right out of my lungs. His hand moved from the wall to wrap around my jaw, holding my face steady as I heard his truth. “You were supposed to be *nothing*.”

“Your words told me I was,” that stung to say, but it was the truth. They replayed in my mind frequently, but I always told myself they were said out of a place of darkness. That he didn’t mean them. Only because his actions proved how much bullshit his words truly were. “But the way you treated me—the way you fucked me—told me about how you really feel about me.”

“Oh yeah?” He challenged, head cocking to the side. “And how do I feel about you, Joslyn?”

“You can’t let me go,” my tone was gentle. I was poking a beast with no cage, not knowing how the truth of my words was going to set him off. My hand wrapped around his wrist, not trying to pry his hand away from my face, but so

hopefully, he felt as connected to me as I felt to him. “No matter how much you want to.”

“You’re right.” My eyes snapped open at his admittance, holding my breath for his next words. “You enjoy saving lost souls. I enjoy picking up the pieces they throw back at you; those pieces of yours should be mine.”

His hand slid to my right cheek, his calloused touch rough against the softness of my skin. My lips turned into a smile as I nuzzled my cheek into his palm, my hand still wrapped around his wrist. I looked into his darkness as I told him why I always put others before myself. “I try to save others because I’m not worth saving myself.”

His hand slipped from my cheek to the nape of my neck, pulling at the loose hair there. He took a step forward, forcing me to take one back as my body planted itself fully against the wall. With a slight tug of my hair to make me look up at him, his face came closer to mine. He opened his hand, his fingers brushing through my long hair before his head dropped fully, his forehead resting on the top of mine as he softly whispered, “If you looked at yourself the way I looked at you, maybe you’d realize you’re worth saving.”

I tilted my head up, his forehead sliding to mine. Desperately trying to hold onto this connection between us, “I don’t know how you look at me, Sarge. I can’t see your eyes. Will you show me?”

I was expecting a rejection. An angry outburst and a berating about how different we were, how much he didn’t

want me. Any second, he would rush out of this room, leaving me alone here with the connection between us severed for good.

My heart dropped when he stepped back, my mind preparing for the worst. I wasn't expecting his hands to grip the sides of his hoods, hesitating for a long moment before his hands slid down, taking the material that always hid his face with them, light reflecting on tanned skin as Sarge finally revealed a part of himself he refused anyone to see. I tried to brace my reaction, showing him how much it didn't affect me. But it did.

The light brown waves I'd seen from the morning after I'd stayed at his cabin splayed everywhere. The left side of his face was covered in matching scars. There wasn't an inch of smooth skin. Just a blotchy pink. It was connected together, going all the way down his arm to his missing fingers... but that wasn't the most damning part. One look at the left side of his face and I knew why he hid himself from everyone.

His left eye was dull and unfocused. It didn't match his right one. His right one was dark, resembling melted chocolate, while the pigment of his left one was pale. I never suspected him to be blind in one eye. The corner of his lips didn't fair much better, the pink roughed with bumpy skin. His right eye, dark and mysterious as it was, was having an internal battle while he looked at me with trepidation. He was trusting me with a piece of himself—and I wouldn't make him regret showing me.

I pushed off the wall, a movement he watched closely, as I approached him slowly like he was a stray animal. I lifted my hands enough for his eyes to catch it, indicating my intention. His working eye looked panicked as he shifted to my lifted hands, his throat bobbing as I asked, “May I?”

He debated, his eyes refusing to leave my hands. I wanted him to feel my touch. Who knew when the last time someone besides himself has touched his face?

He saw his scars as a curse. I saw them as guiding light.

A light that led him to me.

I watched his throat work as he fought against every insecurity he had before he nodded his head, unable to say anything. I lifted my hands, placing both on his cheeks, forcing his brown eye to look at my green ones. His other one remained in place, unfocused. I smiled at him, trying to pour the affection I felt for him in my touch. “It’s okay, Darin. I’m not going to do anything you’re uncomfortable with.”

I knew he had a love-hate relationship when I called him by his name. He loved the way it sounded off my lips, but he hated that I had that ammo.

He hated that I had even an ounce of control over him. He was used to calling the shots and doing whatever he wanted. But with me? He was more careful, more calculated.

I came first to him now when it was always just him.

His lips flattened, trying to resist the urge to pull back from my touch as my dainty hands felt the left side of my face



that was scarred, pushing the curls of my hair out of the way. My hands brushed over his left temple, the rough skin under my fingers. “How anyone could think you’re anything but beautiful, I’ll never understand.”

His lips pulled back, showing me a straight set of white teeth with his sneer. “You only understand what benefits you.”

“What I understand benefits you,” I wouldn’t waiver in that belief. “You hide your face because you’re afraid of the looks of judgment. You want to be hidden as much as you can, but I will always find you.”

“I don’t want you to find me,” his voice was weak, a deeper meaning lurking in the shadowed words.

“You do,” I answered for him, my hands stilling on his cheeks, my left thumb stroking his scarred side, the rough skin tickling the pad on my thumb. “Because you’re tired of hiding.”

He covered his hands with mine, gripping to the point of pain, but I ignored it in favor of letting his walls break down around him. “I’m tired of you being in my head all the time. It’s exhausting.”

I lifted myself on my tip-toes, still being too short, but my face was mere inches away from his. I looked into his one brown eye, speaking from my soul. “You haunt me. It’s only fair I haunt you too.”

His eye flicked to my lips, glazing over as I swiped my tongue along the bottom. His throat bobbed, his eyes looking

back at me as he fought the temptation of my lips. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

My hands slid slowly from his cheeks, arms wrapping around his neck to stabilize myself. I pushed up on my tiptoes, ignoring the burning in my calves. “Do what?”

He dropped his head, putting his forehead onto mine as he was giving up his internal fight. “Give you the last piece of myself.”

“I’ll take care of it,” I promised, my lips a whisper away from his. I wouldn’t close the distance. I’d let him decide that. “The puzzle our pieces make isn’t perfect, but it’s ours. I couldn’t think of a better picture it creates. There are jagged, broken pieces that will never be whole again. But isn’t that the beauty of us?”

“Yeah.” He leaned in closer slightly, increasing the anticipation of feeling his lips on mine for the first time. “We’re fuckin’ imperfect.”

His mouth slammed against mine. The scars pressed against my smooth lips, bringing out more pleasure in me as a low moan escaped, my mouth opening to let his tongue push inside. His arms circled my waist, pressing my front into his as he forced himself deeper, his tongue getting to every inch of me it could. I let him without a fight. It was a fight I wouldn’t win... and one I was willing to lose. He pulled back, his eye glazed over in a lust that made heat rush between my quaking thighs. “Been dreamin’ bout your mouth, babe. A man can get addicted to your pretty fuckin’ lips.”

“They’re yours.” His hands slid to my ass as he lifted me up. My legs wrapped around his waist, and our mouths connected again like he couldn’t get enough of the feeling of our lips together. His tongue pushed past the seam again. My back pressed against the wall once more, completely pinned by him. His hand reached between us, a frustrated growl gracing my lips when he realized I wasn’t wearing a skirt for easy access, just the leggings I wore beneath his heavy hoodie I stole.

But that didn’t stop him. Making sure his chest kept me in place, both his hands reached the seam of my pants and ripped them in half. I’m sure I would be mad later. These didn’t come from the clearance rack, but I was so consumed by my desire for him that he could do whatever he wanted, and I’m sure I’d thank him for it. The new hole in my pants gave him much better access to my pussy. His hand pushed my underwear to the side, thick fingers pressing where he knew it would drive my senses wild. My breath hitched as they stretched me, his tongue trailing up my neck before nipping at my pulse point.

“Gotta make sure my good girl is nice and prepped for me, don’t I?” His pants on my soaked skin drove me crazy. I mewled as he bent his fingers inside, rubbing me in a delicious way that had me coming completely undone for him. I bucked against his hand, head falling back against the wall as a scream ripped from my throat. He buried his face in the side of my neck, making himself at home there, panting out more dirty words. “Even if it hurts, you can take me, can’t you?”

“Yes,” I moaned, the calloused pad of his thumb rubbing against the spot that drove my senses wild. I loved whatever he made me feel. Pain. Pleasure. Anything Sarge was willing to give me, I would accept it willingly. I rolled my hips, increasing the pressure between my legs. He stretched his fingers out, the scissoring motion making my brain think of nothing besides the feeling of him inside of me. His thumb pressed into my clit, and the simple motion was my undoing as my body let go, coating his fingers. He left them inside of me to ride out my pleasure, continuing to push them in and out. “You feel so good inside of me, Darin.”

“There’s one.” His lip slid to my ear as he huskily counted my orgasm. Placing it as a mental trophy in his mind. “How many more times do you think I can make your cunt drip?”

My head lulled back, brain fuzzy from my orgasm as I mindlessly said. “You have a lifetime to find out.”

“That’s right.” I still wasn’t looking at him but felt his hand leave my hip and the distinct sound of his zipper being pulled down with the hand that hadn’t been inside of me. “I’m goin’ to fuck you until your pussy worships my cock and those pretty lips pray my name.”

*They already do.* I thought, but I couldn’t speak. My teeth dug into my bottom lip as I watched his large cock spring free. He was using his fingers that were coated in my cum as a lubricant, pumping himself once, twice, three times. My teeth sank into my bottom lip, wetness returning between my legs, and I was unable to tear my eyes away from the way he was

pleasuring himself with my orgasm on his hand. My release on his cock was shining in the dim lighting of the room, and I eagerly awaited him to hurry up and fuck me.

“Look how good you look on my cock.” His forearms shifted, going underneath my knees as he aligned himself with my opening, this new angle allowing him to go as deep inside as he could. It was uncomfortable, my legs higher in the air, and my back flushed almost painfully against the wall. But Sarge was about to fuck my senses away. “You said we’re just one fucked up puzzle.” His veiny cock slipped between my folds, his head rubbing against my sensitive spot, making me half hear his words. “But even broken artworks are still masterpieces.”

He slammed inside, going so deep I thought the tip hit my cervix. I screamed. It was the pain mixed with pleasure he decided to deliver, feeling it in every nerve my body had to offer. My shirt began to ride up, my skin sliding against the drywall as the air was filled with my moans and Sarge’s grunts. His pace was fast and relentless, his cock hitting a fulfilling spot I didn’t even know I had. “You’re doing such a good job taking my cock like a good girl. Look at you. Look at *us*.”

“God,” I moaned, throwing my head back as it rubbed against the wall. I couldn’t look without coming undone, and I wanted to live in this moment forever. He paused, making me try to fuck myself on his cock. “Sarge!”

“Not God. Not Sarge. Darin.” His fingers were bruising my skin as he tried to gain control. “I’m Darin to you.”

“Darin,” I whimpered, attempting to get him to move again. “Please fuck me.”

If I thought my position was uncomfortable before, as soon as I finished my words, I was fully pressed against the wall, my knees hooking over Sarge’s shoulders as he went harder and faster than before. My eyes were closed, losing myself in the fast rhythm and quicker build-up of my second orgasm. My mouth my open, panting with my tongue sticking out slightly, and he took that as an invitation to mix our breaths together, our tongues in a vicious dance as his cock stretched me repeatedly. “What does my good girl want to do?”

“Come.” My word was breathless and the only thing I could think of at this moment. “I want to come on your cock Darin.”

“You’re going to do more than come. You’re going to fall apart like my good fuckin’ girl.” God, I loved it when he called me that. His girl.

I was Sarge’s girl.

“Get ready.” He sped up, his pace becoming unrelenting. His only worry in the world was getting me over the edge a second time. It was coming, and my legs were shaking from the pleasure and the strain the position was putting on my legs. I kept crying out his name the closer I felt to the point I wanted to go with him, his middle finger pressed harshly on my clit, making me come undone.

I felt myself let go, getting lost in my second orgasm and his persistent attempts to meet me at the bottom of the cliff.

“Do you want me to fill up this pretty puss with my come?”

My body was thumping against the wall, and both of our bodies were sweaty. Our breaths mingled, eyes both hooded in our need for one another. “Give it to me. I want all of you.”

His orgasm came, a rush of comforting heat filling me, making the corners of my lips turn up as I felt his short, shallow thrusts to make us feel the extent of the pleasure we made each other feel. He was still inside of me as my jello legs slipped off his shoulders, but I wasn't ready to let go of him yet. My arms were around his neck, face buried in the crook, legs around his waist. If I could bury myself inside of him and live in this moment forever, I would. I never wanted this to end; the high we made each other feel. The untraditional relationship that he finally accepted us exploring.

Finally, after years of being everyone's afterthought... I found someone who would put me first.

My back slid down the wall, my legs unwrapping around from his waist as my feet fell on the floor. If Sarge wasn't holding me up, I knew I wouldn't be able to stand. But the rough skin of his hands on the small of my back where my shirt rid up kept me grounded. His cheek rested against mine—it was surreal actually feeling his face instead of just imagining it—while we both tried to catch our breaths from our heated escapade. He backed up, and my heart sank that

this was it. He would push me away like he was accustomed to doing.

But the only thing he pushed was his lips against mine, and I was more than happy to reciprocate. We became lost in each other once more, uncaring of the dried blood and dying body on the hook in the next room. Hellbound will always have a special place in my heart.

This was the place we met so many months ago.

This was the place where he put up his walls and the place where I broke them down. The place he showed me a piece of himself he reserved only for me.

This place was supposed to represent the end of life.

But it represented the beginning of ours.



# Chapter 18: Joslyn



It's been a week since our night at Hellbound. It's been calm and full of nights of him getting every orgasm out of me that he could. Apparently, he's trying to break an unknown world record or something. He's even keeping a tally count on his headboard now. I couldn't help but smile at the thought, ridiculous as it was. Who knew a man of so few words could be so vindictive?

We were so caught up in each other that I hadn't told him about the discussion Darrell and I had. Did he know about how he felt about me? That he made sure I knew my place and it wasn't with them? I still didn't fully understand what he meant by Sarge needing someone. He had me and the club...

Right?

Walking down the stairs to his basement, I clutched the bottom of my baggy shirt, making sure it stayed in place. With each passing day, I was beginning to feel more insecure about the way my clothes were fitting. It's getting to the point that I was even trying to keep a shirt on during sex with Sarge, an act he vehemently vetoed. It still feels a little unfair that he can stay fully clothed, and I was completely bare for him.

I tried to understand. Showing that part of himself was difficult, and I should just be thankful he showed me his face for the first time. But I wanted us both to feel the connection

you get from being vulnerable and exposed together as a unit. I've been letting it slide, knowing how he'd felt showing his face to me after all this time. That's a massive step in the right direction for our connection, even though he's rarely shown me his face again since that night. I didn't want our separate insecurities to keep us held at a distance.

He did tell me that if I was unhappy with my newly forming curves, he could show me some simple exercises to do to keep my weight even and build muscle. But, under no circumstances was I allowed to hide my body from him. That's why I'm currently standing in the impressive home gym he has situated in the basement of the cabin. Leaning my shoulder against the wall, I tried to speak confidence into my insecure brain. If I wanted him to tackle his insecurities for me, I needed to do the same.

I sighed, shrugging my shirt off, knowing he'd throw a fit and rip it off of me, and I liked this shirt—I paid full price for it. A shiver ran through me when the air conditioning kicked on yet again. I felt the goosebumps rise down my arms and thighs, cursing the little get-up he insisted I wear down here. A thin black sports bra and matching spandex shorts were the last items I wanted to be wearing in front of him in this frozen tundra of a gym. A workout with a view, he'd said.

He's lucky I liked that face of his.

"Nice gym," I called out to him, watching as he steadily repped on the bench press. The rhythmic up and down motion of that long metal bar, heavy weights on either side, straining

his rippling muscles. The ease with which he moved the weight was exactly what I would call a ‘workout with a view.’ “You like to lift heavy, I see.”

He grunted in response, not pausing in his reps. “Come here. Lay down on the mat and start some sit-ups while I finish this last set.”

I listened, eyes lingering on how his biceps rippled with each push of the metal bar. His chest rising and falling with exertion from lifting so heavily, I bit my lip, remembering the effortless way he picked me up and fucked me against the wall all Hellbound. Maybe if I asked nicely, he would do that again?

I decided I had to stretch out my muscles. I at least remembered that from gym class. I straighten my right arm, curling my left forearm over my straightened elbow before pulling closer to my body. The burn felt good as my muscles loosened. I gave the same treatment to my other arm before bending over, my legs straight as my hands touched my feet. Except, there was something else on me.

Sarge’s eyes.

My lips tipped up in amusement. “Are you looking at my ass?”

“What else am I supposed to look at when you’re bent over in tight shorts?” I rolled my eyes. Typical man. I made my way over to the mat. My knees were bent as my back lay flat on the ground before I heard his strained grunt. “Begin.”

Fingers locked behind my head, I began. Up and back down, my chest touching my knees each time. After the first twenty-five, I was trying to keep focused on my count while simultaneously trying not to die from this hell called exercise. It wasn't until I came up for thirty that I realized Sarge had moved to stand in front of my knees, toe to toe. He wasn't in his usual hoodie and jeans. No, down here, he always wore slick black nylon shorts that hung ever so perfectly from his sculpted hips and ended at his knees. The scars on his left side ended close to his ankle, completing his delicious body. I went back down again, squeezing my eyes shut in hopes of clearing my mind and keeping my count. Lifting back up to my knees, I opened my eyes, momentarily frozen at the sight of his hard cock mere inches from my heaving breaths. Quickly pressing my thighs together to contain the pooling heat, my mouth began watering, and my throat was bobbing, taking in the sight of him before me. "What are you doing?"

His hand gripped his thick cock, giving it a few strokes that I refused to take my eyes off of. "Incentive." I opened my mouth instinctively, wanting nothing more than a taste of him. "No, finish your set. You have one left."

I groaned but complied with his demand. I quickly went back down and came up with an eagerness that made him chuckle. My mouth opened, tongue peaking out. I dropped my hands to the mat and shimmied forward, flicking his slit and causing his body to shiver with need. With a moan of approval, he tried to push in further. I pulled back teasingly, reminding him, "Nuh-uh. I have another set, remember?"

“Teasing wench,” he hissed as his eyes tracked my every movement. I locked my fingers behind my head again, gearing up for another set of twenty-five. The way his eye blazed down my body had me screaming with need in my head. I came back up to him eagerly, wrapping my mouth around his thick head, sucking him only about an inch in. I let my lips pop off him and leaned back down, counting, “One.” His grunt let me know he wouldn’t last long with this new game. After the fourth sit-up, I could tell he was fed up. His cock was pulsating harder with each quick suck. After the tenth, he finally snapped. “Fuck it.”

He bent down, putting his arms under my armpits, lifting to set me on the weight bench. He pushed me back by the collarbone so my head could hang off the edge, his cock somehow larger from this angle.

I was starving for it.

I opened my mouth, tongue out as he cursed, giving himself a few hard pumps before angling his cock to go deep down my throat. The animalistic groans coming from the darkness inside his hood spurred me on. I reached up and cupped his balls slightly. A raspy growl escaped through his teeth when I moved my hand and mouth in unison. He reached down the front of my thin sports bra, pulling the bottom up and over my breasts, exposing my taut and needy nipples to him as the groans came from the darkness that hid his face. I held one of my hands up, hand cupping one of his balls slightly before giving a teasing squeeze as a wolf-like raspy breath escaped from him. His hand engulfed my right breast,

the sensitive peak brushing against his palm each time I bobbed on his dick.

I moaned deep around him in my throat, sending him into a frenzy. He ripped his hips back, freeing himself from my mouth. His heavy breaths matched mine, and I looked up at him in confusion. I was itching to reach back out and grab him. I needed more of him, but I didn't want to face his potential wrath if I touched him without his consent.

I didn't want this mood between us to break with my impulsive actions. I thought he would like my hands on him as much as my mouth, but I guess that isn't the case.

In the back of my mind, I knew he would never dare to truly hurt me. I didn't want this to end because I'd accidentally taken it too far, but the way he was vibrating with rage made me question if it was over before we started. It would be a damn shame to have him waste his talented tongue on a verbal lashing instead of eating me like the starved man I knew he was.

“Don't fuckin' move,” he seethed as he bent his body over mine. He slid his thumbs into the waistband of my shorts, ripping them down my legs. I lifted my hips in an effort to speed this along. I wasn't wearing any underwear, the clammy air hitting my exposed cunt. I felt myself dripping with need onto the weight bench, needing him to make up his damn mind and do whatever he wanted to do with me, and fast.

Frustrated, I let out an impatient whimper, begging him to move. Hunching over as his strong hands gripped my hips,

pulling my exposed pussy to his eager mouth as I was still upside down, his large cock still throbbing in front of me, making me lick my lips in desire. The air left my lungs as his tongue gave a slow lick on the expanse of my pussy, teasing me before he began doing what was becoming both of our favorite activities. He pushed his tongue through the folds, teasing my entrance with the tip.

He craved me, and I enjoyed every second of it.

I cried out when his tongue slipped past the hole, pushing in briefly before pulling back out in a teasing dance that had me squirming, but Sarge's arms encircled my hips to keep me in place—as well as keep my innocence close to his face—I knew I wasn't going to fall.

He's caught me every time I falter.

Water pooled in my mouth, spit and pre-cum sliding out of where his cock came in contact with my lips. I pulled back, swiping the liquid along my lips as I reached out, gripping his hips in my hands to steady myself as I brought my head forward, lips stretching on his thick cock once again.

I felt his groan against my clit, making my legs shudder. Between being upside down and his lips now surrounding my clit and sucking, I was almost done for. He pulled back, "Come for me, baby. Be a good girl, and let me taste you before I fuck you."

I moaned hard around his cock at his dirty words and rough treatment of my pussy. He applied firmer pressure on my clit with his tongue, making me give in to his command.

Riding the waves over and over, he started to pull back, but I was determined to take him over the ledge with me. But, of course, Sarge was competitive. He always had to be at least one above me.

“Don’t you fuckin’ dare,” he growled, flipping me around and putting me on my feet like I weighed nothing. “I don’t finish anywhere but inside of your sweet cunt.”

He was going to have to add five tallies to that damn headboard of his if he keeps this up. I’d say he’d have to get a brand-new one in less than a month. What would he do with the discarded ones? Hang them up as a literal fucking trophy? I didn’t have time to think of that. My mind had better things to think about, like Sarge’s giant cock filling me until I forgot how to speak.

He cocked his head to the left in the direction of the mat I’d just been lying on. “Sit.”

I listened, eagerly waiting to see what he was planning. When he dropped to his knees in front of me, I spread my legs, thinking he wanted another taste of me. While his head slowly dipped closer to that area, it clearly wasn’t his intention. His hand pushed against my chest, flattening me down on the mat.

“Arms up.” I complied with his raspy command, raising my arms over my head as one of his large hands engulfed both of my wrists before pinning them to the foam mat. Was he going to hold me down and fuck me? My thighs came together and began to rub in frustration with him taking so long. Breaking eye contact, his head swiveled to the right before he



grabbed something that I couldn't see. Quicker than I could comprehend, heavy pressure fell on my wrists, cold metal replacing the warmth of his hands. Confused, I strained my neck to look up at them.

A fifty-pound dumbbell. He put a fucking fifty-pound dumbbell over my wrists. Panicking slightly, I wriggled my hands while looking back at his face. They weren't going to budge enough to free both hands. "Darin?" I called out to him, feigning calm and collected.

"Do you trust me?" His question came from the darkness of his shield, hesitating as he awaited my consent to continue. He knew this was new, and it made me nervous. I breathed in through my nose, releasing out my mouth as I tried to steady my heavily beating heart.

Sarge trusted me. I could trust him with this. I bit my lip, skin flushed with desire for the faceless man in front of me.

"I would rather you fuck me." My heated plea spread to my every nerve, making me buck my hips, trying to make contact with his, begging him to make a move.

"Oh, I'll fuck you." His hands went to my ass, lifting my hips up in the air. I could feel the heat of his cock at my entrance. "The question is, can your pussy handle it? Even if it can't, I'll fuckin' make it."

He thrust inside so hard I thought my pelvis was going to break. I slightly answered his question. One of his hands went to the small of my back, and the other one went flat on the mat to give him some stability.

“Fuck,” he groaned, shoving his cock as far as he can get it. “Your pussy was made for my cock, wasn’t it? You take it like such a good girl, don’t you, baby?” I couldn’t answer him if I wanted to. A deeper thrust, a louder cry from me.

I wanted to touch him and feel more connected to him, but my hands were confined by the metal that was clammy from my sweaty skin. I rolled my hips, making his cock swirl inside, which made my toes curl and cry of pleasure fill the room. My head fell to the side, my wrists rubbing slightly raw against the harsh metal as I got lost in each deep push of Sarge’s cock into me. His head was trained on my tits bouncing with every thrust. My back began to slip on the mat, becoming slick with perspiration.

“Your pussy was made for me.” I was having a hard time concentrating on his words, his thrusts becoming much more brutal. “Your body was too. Every.” *Thrust*. “Fuckin’.” *Thrust*. “Inch.” *Thrust*. “Is.” *Thrust*. “Mine. I don’t just want you for your cunt. I want you and every fuckin’ change that comes with bein’ yours.”

He lifted my lower half higher in the air, the new angle feeling like a beautiful punishment. The way his cock rubbed my walls outweighed the pain. My mind blanked out, only feeling the heat as I became overly sensitive, my orgasm sending soothing signals to every nerve in me, but I couldn’t relax, not with the way Sarge twisted my hips, my outer thigh facing the ceiling as he pushed back inside igniting the fire in my again.

Who needed exercise when I could just fuck Sarge? I felt like I ran a marathon, my breath coming out jaggedly as I struggled to keep pace with his bruising grip and harder thrusts.

“D-Darin!”

“I’ll worship every fuckin’ curve you gain.” Another cry, another orgasm that racked my body for all I was worth. “And if that doesn’t work?” He grunted, getting close to his own demise. “I’ll just fuck you until you remember.”

His hips jolted, uncoordinated, and ragged as I felt his dick twitch inside of me, my orgasm welcoming his as he spilled inside me, the warmth relaxing me. It was weird, wasn’t it? Sarge coming inside of me made me feel powerful; such a strong man who his enemies feared, coming undone by me. A nobody with a dark past who dreamed of brightening others’ day one flower at a time.

Sarge made me feel like I was worth something.

“Fuckin’ beautiful seein’ myself spillin’ from you.” He pulled back, head trained on my weeping cunt. I was trying to catch my breath, focusing my senses on breathing in my nose and out my mouth. That was one of the most intense romps we’ve had. I don’t think I could stand—or even crawl my way out of this gym. The cool air was helping a bit with the heat I felt on my skin, but it wasn’t enough.

My upper half left the mat, wincing slightly at the pain between my legs. My eyes were trained on Sarge, who was currently tucking himself back into his nylon shorts, his head

turned on me. I longed to see that scarred face again. I glanced over my messy self, sports bra pushed up above my tits and naked from the waist down. Moving my eyes back up to Sarge, I noticed he was fully clothed, my lips flattened. “How come you can see me completely naked, but I can only see parts of you?”

“You’re not allowed to undress me.”

I cocked an eyebrow. I liked when he ripped my clothes off, but I wanted to share the same experience with him. “But you’re allowed to undress me?”

“Your body belongs to me. I can undress you if I want.” He walked over to me and extended his hand, expecting me to grab it so he could pull me up. Didn’t this guy realize he fucked away my ability to walk? My legs were still asleep. If I let him pull me up, I would just embarrass myself. He grew impatient, leaning down fully before picking me up in a bridal style.

I sighed. Content as I rested my cheek on his shoulder. His warmth lulled my relaxed body into a dreamlike state. I wasn’t thinking before I let what I felt spill from my lips, “I miss seeing your face.” He stopped walking, his head dipped to look at me. “I’m not disgusted by you, Darin. I want you to show yourself to me like you make me expose myself to you.”

He started to walk again, his footsteps falling in tandem with my slow-beating heart. “You wanted to work out.”

“Yeah...” My face flushed, tucking my chin to my chest. “Because I was worried that maybe you wouldn’t find me

attractive if I gained weight.”

“Why the fuck would it bother me?” His underlying message saying *did I not just fuck you into the gym mat?*

“You’re so... fit.” That was one thing to describe the behemoth of a man. Not one ounce of body fat on him. Everywhere I touched was nothing but an expanse of scarred skin and tight muscle. “And I’m—“

“Don’t you fuckin’ finish that sentence,” he snapped at me. “You’ve been hidin’ yourself from me. Told you before I’ll worship every new curve that perfect body of yours gets. Do I have to fuck you again to remind you?”

I don’t think I could handle another rough fuck from him tonight, as tempting as it sounded. “I know, it’s just hard to believe it. I’ve never worried about my weight, but these ten pounds I gained after starting birth control have thrown me in a spiral.” I craned my neck to look at him, a grin on my lips. “You’re starting to fuck that insecurity away.”

He snorted as we made our way to the guest room. He’s been sleeping in here with me instead of taking me to his room. I wasn’t sure why, but I had a feeling letting me into his personal space where he felt his safest was a big thing for him, something he didn’t just let anyone come into. I would be patient, letting him set the pace for that. He was finally letting me into his frigid heart. What was his bedroom compared to that?

He gently laid me on the bed after he untucked the covers before pulling them up to my shoulders. He walked around to

the other side of the bed, leaving that half of the cover tucked in as he laid on top and brought me closer to him. His other arm was bent under his head while I buried my head in the pillow, the exhaustion of our time in the gym catching up to me as my eyes slid closed.

That was until I felt Sarge's disfigured hand wrap around mine, pulling it down to something hard. How could he already be hard again? "Feel that? You still get me hard. You still make me crave to see my come spilling from your cunt. Those new curves you're insecure about are my fuckin' undoing."

"You preach to me to accept myself, my deafness, and my weight gain. I'm putting myself out there, pieces everyone says no one will love. You accept my imperfections. Why can't you let me do the same?"

"I don't want to be whole," he admitted, pushing my hand away, done proving to me that my weight didn't him. "I just want to be us."

"Every broken piece of you is perfect. They're smoothing out mine... and maybe one day, we can be whole together."

"You have me in a way no one else has before." And I knew that everything between us was uncharted territory for him. He didn't know how to act besides impulsively. He's been trained to think of things with precision on how to protect himself from danger. The primal instinct was now battling with something that he couldn't fight with his fists...

Mental battles were harder to face than physical battles; you could punch your enemies... but when your mind was your biggest foe, what could you do besides tuck yourself in and try to protect yourself in any way you could? Even if that meant pushing everyone away, the loneliness was more comforting than the unknown. But I refused to let his mindset be like that. He could push, but I would pull him back in. Now, the red string between us with a pretty bow that would never fray.

“I know,” I whispered, my eyelids fluttering closed once again. “And I hope I make you feel as free as you make me.”

My brain fogged with sleep, my senses dulling but still recognizing the way he pulled me flushed to his clothed chest. The arm tucked under his head petting my hair for a few comforting moments before I felt it stretch above us...

I couldn't help my smile as I gave into the comfort of sleep, the sound of him carving three more tallies into the headboard the last thing I heard.

# Chapter 19: Joslyn



“Sarge insisted we get this expensive soundproof skybox.”

We were back in the Catacombs for another Sarge fight. He didn't want me here, but he knew there was a good chance I'd follow him here again, so he took the safer route, me coming along with Tyrant and Knight.

Oh, and I wore his hoodie to hide my appearance and cover me in his scent. I couldn't help but roll my eyes. Men.

“You know exactly why he got it. Stop bitchin’,” Knight told his best friend. “Easier vantage point to see everyone anyway. Should've done it sooner.”

The giddy feeling in my stomach as Sarge thought ahead of my comfort spread. I couldn't believe the turn of events. Violence used to make me squeamish, having seen all the homemade blood matches the Bloods hosted in mine and Jordyn's home, scarring me from it. But seeing Sarge fight changed my mind about it, or it could just be anything Sarge did memorized me. “Maybe I can actually enjoy his fight this time.”

“Him hitting assholes get you hot?” My face flushed, making Tyrant grin. “Maybe I should start fighting in these? I want a girl all hot and bothered for me after a match.”



“I’m sure if you flash that smile at them, it’ll turn them into a puddle.” Tyrant was a handsome man with baby blue eyes, brawny skin, and curly black hair. From what I’ve heard, he had no troubles with the ladies. Knight was no slouch, either. Women throw themselves at him, but lately, he hasn’t been paying them any attention. “Knight would, too.”

Tyrant rolled his eyes, narrowing at Knight. “This little bitch used to be the best wingman. Now he’s the worst.”

“Shut up,” Knight whined as his head fell back. “Not everything has to involve your dick gettin’ wet.”

“Have you met me?” Tyrant cocked his eyebrow. From the whispers around the club, well, Victoria, he was the one who loved the women. He never turned a single one down. Apparently, his mindset was if someone gotta give people love, why not him? “Faith got your dick that tight in that prissy grasp of hers?”

Knight pushed threateningly off the table, coming eye to eye with his best friend. He was always carefree with his partner in crime, the newfound disdain in his eyes a huge contrast from what I was used to seeing. “Better watch your mouth when it comes to her.”

“Or what?” He tilted his head, challenging him. I was worried it would come to blows. Knight’s body was tight and running on nerves while Tyrant maintained his usual nonchalant attitude. “Gonna spank me? It’s been a while for me. I might like that.”

He groaned in response, his hand slapping his face. “Can’t you take anything seriously?”

That was Tyrant’s charm. Always providing a smile when everyone wanted you to drown in your sorrows. But I preferred large, broody men with scars and one eye.

“Did you guys ever fix Faith’s shop?” I interrupted their fight. I hadn’t met her, but from what I heard, she could hold her own in a clubhouse full of men twice her size. She sounded a lot like Victoria. She was strong, capable, and could take care of herself without anyone’s help.

“Yeah, and the prince here made sure she had that fruity drink she loves so much.” He cackled. “Fuckin’ simp.”

“Y’know,” he started, eyes trained on the crowd below us. The glass was thick, preventing us from hearing any sounds from below. It worked out in favor of all of us— me so my ears didn’t feel like they were bleeding, and them to focus on watching the crowd for suspicious activity instead of potentially missing something while deciphering the sounds in the crowd. “One day, someone is gonna come knock you on your ass. I’m gonna give you a hard fuckin’ time like you’re giving me right now.”

His ice-blue eyes rolled in response, his grin infectious. “Are you even my best friend if you don’t?”

He snorted, but that brought a smile to his lips. He could never stay mad at him for long. But still, his reaction was interesting... I hoped I could meet Faith soon. “Guess not.”

“I’m sure you’ll meet a lovely girl, Tyrant.” I’ve heard stories of the women he brought around of all sizes and cultures. They all ranged from sweet to possessive. Victoria told me about a few cat matches she’s had with some for disrespecting her and the club. After that, Tyrant mellowed out slightly when he saw how much turmoil it caused with her. Victoria was strong-willed and protective of every member of the club, so the olive branch Tyrant gave by not bringing his meaningless one-nights back to his room in the compound was a sweet gesture.

“Or man,” Knight corrected, making me look at Tyrant, not with judgment but with surprise. I’d never heard about the men he brought? He shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m bi,” Tyrant jabbed his thumb at Knight. “Our friendship began because I thought he was hot. Turns out he’s as straight as the pole I used to dance on.”

My jaw practically dropped to the floor, probably not thinking about the right thing. “You used to be a stripper?”

“Keep it classy,” he chided me. “People liked the helicopter thing I could do with my dick and paid me for it.”

Knight burst out laughing. “Nothin’ wrong with bein’ a sex worker, brother. You made more money than most people with a bachelor’s degree.”

“Hell yeah, I did.” His eyes looked distanced. “I could buy anything except the one thing I truly wanted.”

That piqued my interest. “What’s that?”

He smiled at me, not as brightly as his previous ones, but showed a dimmer side of him. “Gotta have some mystery to me, right? That’s what got you shackled up with Sarge?”

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop the smile that formed, but it did no good. Was Sarge a mystery? Yes, he was. Was it appealing? I couldn’t deny it’s what drew me in. The darkness he tried so hard to cast around himself to force people out is what ultimately drew me to him.

It may have been the beginning of my interest, but it wasn’t the reason why I stayed. “It was the way he took the effort to hide himself.” I peeked down at the crowd, Sarge’s opponent—nylon shorts, thin and shirtless with buzzcut hair. His arms were thrown up, I’m sure, as the crowd cheered or booed. Sarge was the favorite down here, and looking at his scrawny stature, I felt way more at ease this time than the last time we were here. “It made me do whatever I could to find him.”

“That was a lot of searchin’.” And patience. Any normal person would’ve given up at the first stone wall he planted to guard himself. “Never thought the fucker would let anyone get to him. We’ve been brothers for years, but only Prez has seen his face.”

I wouldn’t tell them that I saw his face. That was something special to only him and me... and Darrell, apparently. Sharing it with others might spoil it. I’ve been keeping mine and Darrell’s conversation in, unable to talk to anyone about it. But these two might give me insight into the

tension everyone seemed to have with him now. “Is everything okay with Darrell?”

That was not the question to ask. Their heads turned to me, and their usual carelessness turned to uptight as Tyrant’s friendly voice was clipped. “Club business, Jos.”

Or not. I knew when to stop when I was ahead, and Darrell was a touchy subject now between the brothers.

The lights dimmed, the spotlight stopping on the ramp as the three of us watched Sarge come down, pulling himself into the ring. His opponent, another cocky man who thinks the world won’t sock him in the face, tried to shake his hand, but Sarge turned his back to him and went to his corner.

The world might not hit him, but Sarge would.

The whistle entered the ref’s mouth, his cheeks hollowing before stepping back. Just like the last one, this one was dancing on his feet while Sarge stood there. Studying him and twisting his body to the left when he went in for a jab. His opponent looked confused, throwing another uncalculating punch as his teeth clenched in another series of hits. Sarge dodged every one until one hit threw him off balance. Sarge used it to his advantage, bringing his leg up to kick him in the back as he fell on his face.

Sarge straddled his back, gripping his curly locks and twisting the unsuspecting man on his back. Sarge cocked his arm back before his fist slammed into the pinned man’s face. I was deaf, but even I could hear his nose break. After that, it

was just punch after punch. Each hit sent heat to my core as I tried not to embarrass myself in front of Tyrant and Knight.

I couldn't help myself. Sarge was a gorgeous man, with or without his hood. Tyrant was right. These matches got me horny. More than I ever expected them to.

His bloodied opponent feebly tried to hit him, but Sarge dodged the punch, causing me to put a fingertip to my lips, thinking about our conversation when we were about to walk in.

*“Don't get hit tonight,” I told him, my lips turning up seductively. “I might give you a reward if you don't. I think your headboard deserves a new tally.”*

*“You'll give it to me anyway.”*

He's right. I would. That man was going to need a new headboard soon. Especially watching the way his muscles rippled with every punch on his cocky opponent's face. Sarge was the clear winner. He drew first blood. But he's had a lot of pent-up frustration that beating the shit out of a gangbanger could bring.

Oh yeah, he was so getting laid after this.

“I can hear you panting from here,” Tyrant pointed out, making my face burn. Was I being that loud? Sarge fighting was so... sexy. The last time I was here, I was so focused on the pain in my ears and my worry for him I couldn't thoroughly enjoy fighting for the art it was.

The referee stepped in, the man on the other side of Sarge's brutal beating unmoving on the ground. Sarge stood up, not looking back as he hopped out of the ring to the dressing room he brought me in the night I snuck here to see him. Arms were flailing in the air as cheers resounded. Medics were on the platform, checking for a pulse as he shook his head at his partner.

Well, looks like Sarge killed another man. Maybe the fact he could easily take someone's life should scare me, but those rough hands of his were gentle with me. He only showed me disrespect when my head was thrown back and his cock was hitting a delicious spot inside of me. I was fine with that. I began to head for the door, Knight's hand on my arm stopping me. "Gotta wait until the crowd is gone. Sarge's orders."

My lips curled. "Since when do you listen to Sarge?"

"Technically, he's our boss."

I never knew that. I only knew the hierarchy of the club being Darrell, then Mitchell. Sarge didn't exactly speak much about the club, just that he was in it. "He's our Sergeant in Arms. Long story short, he keeps us in line, which is kinda ironic since when he loses his shit, he blacks out. The rest of us can handle our own, well, except V. Sometimes I think he's on a mission to get himself killed."

I didn't know much about him besides the things Oakley told me about some routine habits he did when he watched her against her will. She's given up on trying to force him to leave. He wouldn't listen to her. "He doesn't talk much."

“Better that way.” Knight began to walk to the door, opening it before peeking around to make sure no one was wandering around. “That man is one you don’t fuck with. One wrong move, and that bat will be embedded in your skull.”

“He’s knocked me out before,” Tyrant cackled. Only he would laugh about getting hit with a wooden bat. “Man, that fuckin’ hurt. Was down with a concussion for over a week.”

“What did you say that pissed him off?”

He looked sheepish. “Nothin’ bad.”

“Bullshit,” Knight coughed into his fist before telling me to grab onto the back of his shirt so I didn’t get separated. “Askin’ him if he fucked his bat isn’t nothin’ bad.”

“Yeah, my first time meetin’ him was a trip.” I couldn’t help but laugh. Leave it to Tyrant to make lasting impressions on others, even if it wasn’t for good reason.

Knight led the way, my hand gripping the back of his dark button-up shirt as we made our way down the stairs. Tyrant was behind us, glancing every which way often to try to spot something suspicious. With each step closer to the outside, the more excitement I felt. Would Sarge be just as excited to see me? Or would he play it cool in front of his brothers?

Oh, I was gonna embarrass him if he decided to give me the brush off. Didn’t he know the knot I tied in our connecting string came with a contract in invisible ink? I was liable to pounce him whenever I spotted him. I guess I would have to show him that hidden clause.



We stepped outside into the crisp night air, the only company around the three of us being the trees and the stars in the sky. Sarge preferred to meet us out here, not knowing if anyone was going to be in the locker room, causing problems. Also known as, “I don’t know if people would be loud back here or if another man would try somethin’ with you, and I didn’t know if I’d get away with killin’ two people tonight.” Even though he was only supposed to draw first blood in his matches, he went in for the kill. Literally, I wonder what the excuse was this time?

Either way, I was fine with it. I remember being told all Sarge’s opponents were bad men with large egos, menaces to innocent people everywhere.

I was okay with waiting wherever as long as I got to see him afterward. My energy was spiked, and I felt like I could run a marathon in anticipation of seeing him. What was taking him so long? I thought he’d be out here by now. My guard was down, not even listening to Tyrant and Knight’s banter. My mood was high, my worries were low.

I took the hood down, wanting to live in the moment of this amazing life I was living. I didn’t think anything could bring me down right now.

“Joslyn?” That voice splintered ice in my bones and made me unable to move. The ice frosted over my brain, only leaving room to focus on him. Invisible hands began to touch me, and I felt held down even though I was standing up by

myself. My heart began to constrict, my breathing shallow and fast. “Is that you?”

The shards of ice impaled themselves in my feet. I couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Couldn't think. If I turned around, he'd really be there. Not just a broken fragment of a past I was healing from. I never used to be broken. All my pieces made a beautiful, intact mirror.

He was the hammer that shattered it.

“Little girl.” Disgust made bile rise in my throat. My throat burned, and the back of my eyes showed signs of inklings of tears forming. Why was he here?

Why now?

Why did he have to ruin everything again?

I felt like it'd been years since I'd moved, his unwanted words echoing inside, taking over the crickets chirping in the night. Tyrant and Knight must have noticed my change in demeanor. Was I shaking? It wasn't cold. Sarge's hoodie would prevent me from shivering even if I was.

“Joslyn.” My breathing was ragged, looking into Knight's violet eyes. “You okay, sweetheart?” How do I tell him I was drowning in the air?

He straightened out his body, looking in the direction of a nightmare I thought I'd overcome. “Who the fuck are you?”

Tyrant was already at my back, guarding me from his predatory eyes. There was one thing he wanted... always only

one thing he wanted. Jordyn's words came back in full force. That she fucked him, and he had asked about me...

She knew what he did, and she still gave herself up willingly to him. She gave me up to the man who was the catalyst in my addiction and downfall.

I tried my best to conceal a sob, but it was loud off the trees. Drawing attention from the men close to my side.

"Listen." Tyrant was rarely serious, but when he was, you better watch yourself. "Dunno who you are, don't really give a fuck either. You need to go, though. It ain't gonna be pretty if you stay."

"I just wanted to say hey to an old friend."

Old friend. Why did my skin feel so dirty? Did I rub dirt without realizing it?

"Considering you're old as fuck, and Joslyn looks like she's half your age, I doubt you're a friend of hers," Knight countered, being careful not to touch me but still remaining close to my side, silently letting me know he wouldn't let anything happen to me. "Her man has a real mean temper, so you don't wanna fuck with her. And since he's not here? She's under our protection, so either tell us who the fuck ya are or get gone."

I couldn't help it. I had to get a peek at him. I turned my head slowly, the world going in slow motion as my eyes glanced at him.

His wicked grin. The one I tried to drink away from my memory cockily on his face.

How could he smile? How could he live with himself?

“It was nice to see you again, little girl.” He turned, walking off into the comfort of the trees. He thrived in the darkest corners, his home in me for the past nine years. “Let’s catch up soon, yeah?”

His laughter reached my ears. The bastard had the audacity to laugh as he walked off. My head dropped, my head feeling light as my knees gave out. Knight caught me before I went completely to the ground. “Joslyn?”

I didn’t want him. I pushed back against him, not caring if he was my only anchor from being on the ground. My voice was weak, but my intentions were strong as I looked in every direction while still fighting against Knight. “I need Darin.”

“Darin?” Tyrant said to himself before his lips formed an ‘o’, running off inside the building and leaving me struggling against Knight. It was no use. Knight may not be as large as Sarge was, but he was still twice my size. My pushing wasn’t even on par with a bee sting to him.

My emotions hit me all at once: the grief, the pain, the memories. I needed to numb it. I didn’t want to feel this, and I just wanted it to be over. I wanted the nightmare I covered up with fake smiles and joy to be nulled. Tears slid from my eyes as my chest heaved, hard sobs taking over my body as I began to scream for anyone to hear me.

I was in pain. But no one ever believed me because they couldn't see it. Why would this time be any different?

No one cared that the pain on the inside was what killed us.

“JOSLYN!” I barely heard his shout over my deafening screams. I was causing myself pain by wailing so loud that my hearing aids picked up on the loud frequency. But I didn't care. I'd take the bleeding ears over my heart being torn at the seams again. He dropped in front of me, Knight gently lowering me to the ground as Sarge put his adversity to touching anyone aside to put his hand on my cheeks. He was blurry, but that was the damn tears that were building in my vision. He was still hiding from me. Why did he have to hide from me so much? “Fuck, baby, what's wrong?”

My words were intelligible. How could I talk to him? To tell him everything that was heavy on my heart? If I did, he would run. He wouldn't even want to touch me.

He couldn't know. He couldn't see me differently.

Without him, the sun I rose inside of myself would be extinguished, and my life would be permanently dark.

They would win. After fighting a battle with my demons for nine years... they would win if Sarge ever left me.

“Some guy was out here,” Tyrant explained as I clung to Sarge like a lifeline; without him right now, the glue I put myself together with would come undone. “Said her name. She's been like this ever since.”

I knew he was asking the others. There was no way I could form a coherent word right now.

His hands moved to the back of my thighs, hoisting my body up his, and I clung to him, wrapping my legs tightly around his waist and arms around his broad shoulders. I knew he felt my tears as my face buried itself into the side of his neck. He knew I was comforted by his touch, that it was my love language even if it wasn't his.

“Joslyn?” His rough voice was trying to be soft, but he was incapable of being anything other than who he was. A rough man who spoke with his words. “Who was he?” I remained silent, making him impatient. He wanted to know how to fix my problems. He couldn't stand to see me in any type of pain. I never gave him the silent treatment. I was a constant chatterbox around him, so not answering him was worrisome. But... I just didn't have the strength to say anything. How could a few words sap someone's world away from you? “Do I have to fuck the information out of you? I know how to make you sing. Don't tempt me.”

“Put me down.” My words were barely audible. I couldn't handle the thought of Sarge doing that to me. I felt so... disgusting. I didn't want to taint him. He obliged, seeing that I needed it, but refused to step out of my vicinity. His hand went to my chin, raising it to look at him once again. My smile turned cold as my mind shuttered over, blocking out the pain of my past. Where I was, who I was, and who I am now. I felt numb. I wasn't even registering Sarge's touch. When I felt it, I jumped away. I didn't want to be touched. Not right now.

This was a side no one knew, the side I tried so hard to hide from everyone.

“Tell me who it was, or I’ll go back down there and kill every motherfucker until I find him.” He was serious. He would kill anyone, innocent or not if I didn’t speak up. I was already the cause of so much heartache, and I didn’t want to cause any more. A sordid laugh escaped. It wasn’t funny, but it was Sarge. Sarge opened up to me, showed me a side of him that he was ashamed to show anyone else...

Maybe exposing this side of me would lighten up the dark spot he left in my heart, even if it was just a speckle.

A speckle of who I once was is better than letting him consume any more of me. I tilted my head, fresh tears burning my cheeks.

“The man who ruined my life.”

## Chapter 20: Joslyn



I didn't remember the sequence of events after that. I didn't even remember that Tyrant and Knight were there with us in that open landscape. I felt like a zombie when the two of them kept an eye on my struggling self as Sarge ran to get his bike, the refurbished motor he got for me usually bringing a smile to my face but doing nothing for me.

I felt numb. I felt absolutely nothing.

Tyrant helped me on the bike, and Sarge made sure my arms were wrapped tightly around him. It was tempting to let go and fall and give myself to the darkness lining the corners of my senses. But I couldn't...

I couldn't leave Sarge alone.

We pulled up to his cabin. He picked me up and held me close, and unlike earlier, I let him without complaint. He passed the threshold of the front door, taking me with him to do his routine of checking every room in the cabin before he led up to his living area. He dropped to the floor, his back resting on the edge of the couch as he refused to let me go.

I didn't clutch him. I just let him hang onto me. As much as I tried, I couldn't be the strength for both of us. I needed



him; the tide was rising, almost suffocating me. He didn't know he was acting like my life preserver.

Without him, I might drown.

“My parents died when I was fifteen,” I started my grim tale mindlessly. I didn't know what words would fall out of me. I was speaking on a tandem, not realizing what I was saying until it was too late. “My parents were fighting over how they were going to afford my hearing aids. I'd outgrown the ones I wore, and they were supposed to go to the bank to talk about a loan... but I guess my Dad had other plans.”

Jordyn and I expected shouting coming through the door, not a deafening knock. I remembered a burly police officer and a nice-looking lady coming to our door that night instead of our parents. She told us to pack some things and that we would be staying somewhere for a few days. They wouldn't tell us where our parents were, but Jordyn and I were terrified. Where were they? Why were they allowing this to happen? Did they not want us anymore? “It was a perfect sunny day. The only way he could've hit that tree is if he did it intentionally.”

“They called our family. The only one willing to take us in was Uncle Brian. They did no background check, no property check... nothing. Just placed us with him and left.” If they did, they would've seen the needles, the broken bottles, the used condoms, and the fact that he had been in and out of jail our entire lives, and that's why we'd only met him a handful of times. “He wasn't... the greatest.” Sarge's vicious growl had

me throwing my hands up in an attempt to calm him, but there was no calming this beast of a man when he was wound up. “He wasn’t abusive towards us.”

“Why didn’t he move in with you to your parents’ place?”

“Our parents passed the house down to us, but we legally couldn’t have it until we were eighteen. So the bank possessed it until then.”

He was silent, waiting for me to continue. This part I’d never told another living soul—I could only hope that Sarge would still want to be by my side after I told him the ugly truth about how I destroyed myself and my sister’s life.

*“Joslyn, Jordyn. These are my friends Kody, Douglas, and Anthony.” Uncle Brian introduced us to three boys—no men. We were only a few days from turning sixteen, and his friends looked to be in their mid-twenties at least. “Guys, these are my nieces.”*

*Shivers made my whole body shake as their eyes looked at both of us head to toe—looks that men in their twenties should never have for girls not of legal age. “You’ve been holding out on us, Brian.”*

*Uncle Brian didn’t seem concerned with what his friend said to us, but getting an older man’s attention at sixteen felt nice. At least, I thought so. Boys at our school knew about my condition and steered clear of me, making me an outcast. Jordyn ensured I was always around her and her friends, but I never fit in with them. Their pitiful stares made me self-conscious.*

*Jordyn was the popular, sporty girl.*

*I was just her sister.*

*“Go put your bags in your rooms. Pick whichever one ya want.” Uncle Brian told us once, since twice would’ve been too much around men like his friends, and I was already feeling extremely uncomfortable with the amount of attention they were giving us. Jordyn and I ran to the hall, her picking the first open room while I settled for the second. It was a small room, but it wasn’t bad. It had a bed, a closet, and a window overlooking the trashy backyard. My nose scrunched as I saw a broken beer bottle and shards of glass on the floor.*

*Looks like I would have some cleaning to do—after Uncle Brian’s friends left.*

*“Like your room?” I froze. Thirty minutes after entering my new home, I packed away most of my stuff when one of his friends barged in. He held his hands up in defense, and I noticed he had a wine cooler in his hand as he made his way to the bed. “Not gonna hurt ya, just wanted to introduce myself. My name’s Douglas.”*

*I didn’t respond, but he took it as an invitation to sit next to me on the lumpy mattress. “What do you like to do for fun?”*

*I shrugged. “Study.”*

*He snorted. “Don’t drink?”*

*I shook my head. “Not old enough.”*

*“That’s a pathetic excuse.” He shoved the fruity cocktail into my hands. “Live a little.”*

*I tried to give it back to him. “No, thank you.”*

*“One sip?” He was relentless. “I got it just for you.”*

*I frowned, looking at the bottle. It was a pretty pink. It said strawberry kiwi on the side. He popped the tab open for me, and it smelled exactly like the fruit it said it was on the side, mixed with a musky-type scent. I knew what it was. That was the alcohol.*

*“Brian told me a bit about you.” His smile was charming. He told him about me? “Told me no boys liked you because you’re deaf. That true?”*

*Of course, anything anyone ever said about me related to the fact that I couldn’t hear. I hung my head, still not sipping my drink. “Yeah.”*

*“They’re just boys,” he whispered in my ear as I shivered. No one’s ever gotten this close to me. “I’m a man, drink up. Let’s have some fun.”*

*I don’t know whether it was the fact I was actually getting attention from the opposite sex, but I found myself dumbly agreeing to an idea I knew wasn’t good. “Okay.”*

*I sipped on the bottle until it was gone, Douglas giving me drink after drink—some lighter, some heavier. After a few, my head went light, and black spots started to spread in my vision when I moved. Douglas was there for me the entire time, eating up the fact that I was drinking with him.*

*“You’re beautiful, though.” His hand went under my chin, my tipsy state warming me up, making Douglas’ touch scorch*

where it touched my skin. "I know another way we could have some fun."

"I'm only sixteen," I told him as I pulled away from his touch, his intentions with me sobering me up slightly. I wasn't interested in having sex with a man who was almost a decade older than me, even if the attention he was giving me felt nice after a life of being ignored by everyone but my family. I wanted someone who I loved and who undoubtedly loved me back.

"That's okay." He shrugged, standing up and leaving the room briefly before coming back with a few more wine coolers. "Drink up."

The drinks kept coming until my eyes shut. Douglas' smug grin was the last fleeting thought before I became blissfully unaware of anything around me, weightless as the alcohol clouded my senses.

When I'd gone to bed, the sun was setting, now it was rising.

When I'd gone to bed, I wasn't in any pain, but now there was a stinging pain between my legs.

I groaned, sitting up, my mouth dropping open as I saw blood on the sheets. I didn't recognize the scream that left my lips. I just scrambled off the bed, knees hitting the floor and my hand brushing something cold and sticky. I froze at what I saw.

*A used condom.*

*My eyes welled up with disbelieving tears.*

*It was like a trophy to him. He wanted me to see the aftermath of what he did to me.*

*My tears fell on my hand, the world around me stilling as my mind tried to wrap around what undeniably happened. Something I never thought would happen to me.*

*In less than a day, I lost more than my parents...*

*I lost myself.*

“Alcohol numbed it all.” I still felt numb as I told Sarge more of my past. I was beginning to get fidgety as I remembered the pain that came with the next morning. “I don’t remember it happening, but it happened. And I wanted to forget it did.” Pressure built up in my eyes, letting the tears escape as I tried my best to hold in a sob that was escaping. “I was scared if I was sober, I would remember it.”

Sarge was silent, his body rigid. He was more like a statue than a living being. I looked to my left, shame settling in as his shadowed face was in my direction unnervingly still. My lips trembled as the corners tilted down, trying to hold myself together. I almost lost the fight as Sarge lifted me, mechanically putting me beside him before

“Tell me.”

His voice was so calm, like a deadly precision. “Tell you what?”

“*Tell me his fuckin’ name!*” Sarge roared, making me jump back slightly, taking in the way his body was breathing

erratically like he was about to lose control of himself.

“D-Douglas.” Saying his name felt like poison on my tongue. My body trembled to see this side of Sarge. I’ve seen him like this in the beginning, but now that it was directed at me, it was terrifying. It was different than the Catacombs, which was calculated anger... this was unhinged. “I don’t know where he is... he took off after Tyrant and Knight told him to.”

“I’m gonna fuckin’ kill him,” he growled before he stomped towards the door, making me stand up to run after him. I didn’t want him to go. I wanted him here.

“Sarge, stop!”

His body was twitching, and his voice sounded possessed as it was consumed by the unadulterated hatred he had inside of him. “Don’t tell me to fuckin’ stop, Joslyn. He doesn’t deserve to steal the fuckin’ air you breathe.”

“But—”

“Don’t you dare.” His body turned fully, wanting me to hear the impact of his words. The truth he spoke made me accept that my hopefully grim imagination was my unfortunate reality. “You were raped, Joslyn. Any motherfucker who thinks they can do that to you and still have their dick attached to their bodies, let alone still have breath in their fuckin’ lungs, is going to find out that they’re very fuckin’ wrong.”

Trauma is a strange thing. I never told myself I was raped because if I didn't say it, it didn't happen. Hearing it from someone else made it feel more real like you couldn't avoid it and pretend it didn't happen.

But it did.

I was raped.

I was stolen from myself at sixteen years old.

My heart plunged into my stomach as my knees hit the floor, but I didn't feel the impact. Just the numbness spreading throughout my nerves as disbelief and denial set in at Sarge's words, making the impossible an absolute.

*You were raped, Joslyn.*

I didn't feel like I was in my body. The world around me felt still as the memories of that night came rushing back. With each memory of his unwanted touch, another tear slid down my cheek until I felt as if I was going to flood Sarge's home with the overstimulating misery pouring out of me.

I barely felt as arms were wrapped around me, fingers tangled intimately in my hair as I was pushed into a familiar chest. I tried to focus on his touch. The urge to push him away was there, but I didn't have control of any part of myself. My brain just repeating the words that made me want to vomit.

"It's not your fault." His hushed comfort made my eyes sting. Sarge was usually ruthless and blunt with his words, but he was careful with how he spoke to me in my delicate state. "I don't look at you any different."



“B-But—”

“Don’t care.” He held me tighter, attempting to stop my trembling in his arms. “You’re mine. Nothing will change that.” His arms pulled me in tighter, his warmth comforting around me. “You’ll never feel his touch again. You’ll only feel mine.”

“I don’t believe you...” Who could love me after that? I didn’t even love myself. Who would want to be with someone who couldn’t accept the reality of what happened to her and ruined others along with her? I was too blinded by forgetting that everything I was working for didn’t matter to me. High school. College. Career. My dream family... all destroyed one drink at a time.

“He’s already a fuckin’ dead man, Joslyn. Him and Brian and anyone else who knew what he was doin’ to you and didn’t fuckin’ stop him.”

“I need you.” I didn’t know what to say. My emotions were catching up to me. I felt a sob bubbling in my throat as fresh tears fell from my eyes. My voice lowered to barely a whisper, “Please don’t let my past mistakes make me lose you too.”

“Shh, baby. I’m not going anywhere.” He hugged me tighter to him, constricting my breath slightly. But I didn’t care. I needed to be fully consumed by him. I wanted Sarge to take all the memories. All the hurt. “Nothing you do can make me walk away from you.”

I wanted him to take me to that night in Hellbound when he gave himself to me fully like I was doing with him now.

He held me as I sobbed to the point of exhaustion, but the memories wouldn't let me rest. They would haunt me, awake or asleep. I couldn't escape them no matter how hard I tried to forget alcohol was the only thing that made them go away, but those had consequences.

Douglas was only the first part of my story...

But the aftermath of him was much worse.

\* \* \*

“After Douglas...” I refused to repeat his vile act on me. Sarge picked me up, and he carried us to his bed, not the guest bed. I hadn't been in his room since the morning after we had sex for the first time. “I turned to alcohol, as you know. But I was underage...” I looked away, ashamed of my past self, who did anything but numb myself from reality. “No one would buy me alcohol unless I... did them favors.”

My eyes burned, revealing this to Sarge. I didn't want to, but if he wanted all of me, he would get every part of me, and that includes my tarnished past. “Uncle Brian and his friends were members of the Bloods and took me to parties they hosted. Jordyn didn't want to go, and she tried to stop me, but I knew there would be alcohol there, so I went anyway. She used to worry about me all the time. She tried to protect me.

She's technically older by three minutes and took the older sister's role to heart. It went on for years until..."

No snide remarks, no interrupting. Sarge just stroked my hair as he waited for me to continue. "Can I... can I see your face when I tell you about this?"

With no hesitation, he pulled his hood back to reveal his handsome face. He knew touch was a comfort language to me as he turned to his side, making sure I was still lying on his arm. He touched his forehead to mine, his one eye soft as he did something he was uncomfortable with to comfort me without complaint. "I dropped out of school. I was out all night partying with these people I thought were my friends until one night. We arrived at one party, and I immediately got wasted to the point I didn't know who or where I was." My lips trembled as I relived a memory I told no one until today. "There was a girl. She was around my age. Smiling, laughing. I remember her because we danced, and I saw her go off with three men." The burning behind my eyes slid down my cheeks. "I found her body the next morning. Naked with a bullet hole through the back of her skull."

"That girl was just like me, and they took her life like she meant nothing. What if I was next? I knew I had to get out. I tried. I tried so hard. But they wouldn't let me leave. They told me that the only way I could go was being dead in a ditch on the side of the road. I cried to Jordyn, and she cut a deal with them." My body fell forward, hands covering my face as I spilled my deepest secret. "She would take my place as long as they didn't hurt me anymore."

I remembered stumbling home, feeling violated with smudges of things I didn't want to think about covering me. Jordyn gasped when she saw me, hands over her mouth with watery eyes. I couldn't hold back my sob at the absolute disappointment she must've felt towards me, that she had a sister who was so lost that she would give whatever she could to feel like she was worth something.

I didn't want to be the girl that was only known for one thing. I was more... wasn't I?

I didn't miss the way his eye widened in surprise that Jordyn loved me enough to do that for me. They see her as this malicious, manipulative bitch. But they didn't know the kind soul she was before she gave it all up for me. "How do you repay someone doing that for you, Sarge? Her future was bright; she had a full-ride volleyball scholarship... She was going to be happy." I choked on a sob. "She gave it up because of my mistakes."

"She saved your life." I nodded. His hands retracted from my hair, and I was afraid he was disgusted by me now, but thankfully, he just adjusted his hands so his thumbs brushed my waterfall of tears.

"So please don't be too hard on her—"

"I fuckin' will be." He used his hands to make sure I was looking at him. "What she did for you is hard, ain't no mistake about that. But she's hurt more people and ruined more lives than the whole club can count on their fingers. She's a bad fuckin' person, Joslyn."

“I know—”

“Don’t cut excuses for her,” he interrupted me as I slammed my mouth shut. “You got her involved, but she ain’t tryin’ to get herself out.”

I don’t know if she could, even if she wanted to. I couldn’t look him in the eye. “Addiction is powerful.”

“It is,” he agreed. “You overcome it every day.”

I’m so happy he didn’t say I beat it. Because I didn’t. I was still tempted by my past demons. Every time I saw a spirit bottle or beer bottle, my throat went dry, and I was suddenly thirsty. The memories of all my drunken nights where I felt numb and forgot all my problems sounded much better than reliving the nights I wanted to forget over and over. “I do.”

“You’re fuckin’ strong, Sunshine. I’m proud to call you my girl.” I choked on a sob, his words hitting something deep inside of me. He pulled me to him, my face burried in his chest as my hands gripped his cut.

“She has nothing to get clean for.” I know she’s seen worse than I did. More bodies, more blood, more hardships than when I was part of their gang. It took one murder to get me to stop. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was some unsuspecting woman’s executioner.

“You should be enough.”

“What if she wanted to but couldn’t?” I looked up at him, his brown eye trained on my face. “They threatened to kill me

when I wanted to leave, but she took my place. They would no doubt threaten her the same way, right?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed my fears. “Fucked up situation. She’s willingly hurting others, Joslyn. Projecting pain on others because you’re hurting isn’t justified.”

“I know.” All the strength was sapped from me. Between seeing Douglas and crying to Sarge about everything I’ve been keeping in for years, I wanted to sleep for a whole month. “I just don’t get why people have to make others as miserable as they are. Shouldn’t the ones in pain not project since they know what it feels like to be at the bottom?”

“The bottom is a lonely place.”

“I was there, but thanks to Jordyn, I got out.” I put my hand on the scarred side of his face, mustering my best smile for him. Hoping to not project the hurt I was feeling but to make him understand how much he meant to me. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life, Darin. But my feelings for you are the most free I’ve felt since that night.”

“I’ll keep busting open that cage.” His thumbs brushed the endless stream of tears. “One time. One hundred times. A million times. Every time you get locked in that pretty mind of yours... I’ll save you.”

I had to know. My mind was racing with so many undeserving thoughts. “Why?”

“Because you think I’m worth it.” My breath hitched. “Because I want you to believe you are too. Ain’t a fuckin’

thing I wouldn't do for you, Joslyn."

I leaned forward, pushing our lips together. I knew I was getting his face wet with my crying, but he didn't seem to be bothered by it. I pulled back, resting my forehead against his. My sin was big... maybe too great. "Do you think I'll see Heaven someday?"

His thumb caressed my cheek, lips pressing against my forehead. It was so out of character for him, but him putting my comfort above his made me cling to him harder. "Baby, if you don't see it, nobody will."

"I don't think I would make it in Heaven without you."

"I'm not goin' there."

He was so convinced he wasn't. But wasn't that the point of atoning for their past sins? To go to a better place once they die? "If you're not going to Heaven, then why are you trying to mend your past mistakes?"

His eye glossed over. "You can't mend a dead past."

My eyebrows scrunched, "But—"

"Shh," he shushed me, hand going to the nape of my neck to push me back into his chest. He didn't want this conversation turned on him. He was here for me and my comfort. He knew I would take on any demons he told me about, and right now, we were too busy fighting mine.

"I want to be wherever you are," I whispered against his chest. I couldn't do life without him. Not now. Not ever.

“You will be.” He began to stroke my hair, my eyes growing heavy from exhaustion. “You can’t escape from the ones that haunt you, Joslyn.”

The shadows of the past always lurked, striking when he least suspected it. “I’m not as strong as you are.”

“You’re stronger.” It was a hushed confession, one he vehemently believed but one I profusely denied. Here I was, coming undone at the sight of my demon, ready to throw in the towel to all the pretend healing I’d been doing for nine years.

“Your demons know better than to attack you.”

His face was buried in my hair, and I felt his lips curve ruefully.

“All my demons are dead.” My breath hitched as he pressed a kiss to my head, but I couldn’t focus on the sweet gesture. “And I’ll make sure all yours are dead too.”

A choked laugh escaped as I wiped my eyes, looking up at my savior. “I thought you guys were supposed to be saving your souls? Doesn’t that mean no murder?”

He pulled back, his brown eye soft as he studied me. My reddened eyes, my tear-stained cheeks. My makeup streaked down my face, but he still looked at me like I was a beautiful disaster. “I’d rather save you.”

My hand covered him, or what it could. His hands were large, full of veins. Mine were soft, delicate, and manicured to my favorite flower of the month. My head tilted to the right, farther into the pillow. Despite the overwhelming sadness



consuming me, Sarge managed to pull a small smile out of me.  
“You’re sacrificing your place in Heaven for me?”

“I was never goin’ there.” His face was buried in my neck, trying to get as close to me as he possibly could. “But after meetin’ you? For the first time, I wish I was.”

“I don’t want to go there if you’re not.”

“You’re talkin’ crazy.” I may have been emotionally and physically exhausted, but I meant every word. I’d sacrifice an everlasting life for my finite one with Sarge.

“Go to sleep, Sunshine.” I felt myself begin to doze off. “Tomorrow is another day the sun will shine.” My eyes refused to open, but that didn’t stop my tears from soaking the pillow as my sleepy words left my lips.

“As long as you’re alive, the sun will always rise for me.”

# Chapter 21: Sarge



The world and all its lost souls were fortunate that Joslyn needed me composed during her breakdown and that I cared enough about her to do so, or the world would be painted with the blood of everyone who ever even looked at her wrong last night.

My fucking girl... some motherfucker touched my fucking girl against her will and drove her to addiction to block it out. All the drunken nights she didn't want to feel, they'd taken advantage of her vulnerable state. She could only focus on one thing, and that wasn't herself.

I wanted to go back in time, back to when Joslyn lost herself. I would've picked up every piece that bastard shattered, fuck I would've given her my pieces if it meant she would shoot me with that smile that lit up a whole fuckin' room. I grew addicted to them; if she wasn't smiling, there was somethin' wrong. And if someone caused that smile to flatten, bodies would be lowered into the ground.

Like Douglas was.

When I catch him, he is going to feel all the jagged edges he broke in her stab his skin. I collected all of them last night when the adhesive she patched herself together with came

undone. I wouldn't give her pieces back to her; they were mine.

No one would take care of her better than I would, even herself.

My hood was still down, exposing a part of myself I refused to do for anyone but her, and even then, I was struggling with it. She was falling apart, too, but I refused to let her hide it from me. I took her hearing aids out when she was dead to the world, noticing the little pale scars on her ears from wearing them continuously. I brushed my lips against them.

She was in pain. Physically. Mentally. Emotionally. But she still put everyone before herself, even if they were the ones causing it.

Like her sister... that was a tough thing to fathom. There was a time when she cared about Joslyn enough to give up her future just to get Joslyn out of a sure-death situation. I didn't know Jordyn before the Bloods took over every facet of her personality and habits, but she was the strongest of the two of them. Joslyn lived in her shadow with her disability, watching her sister be who Joslyn wished she could be.

Jordyn didn't deserve to get involved. Joslyn didn't force her to take her place either. But fuck, was I thankful she did. Joslyn would be six feet in the ground if Jordyn hadn't done what she did, but Joslyn lost everyone who was supposed to care about her. She's spent the past nine years unloved,

feeding her addiction just to give it up and lose her only family in the process.

But now, she had me. And I was the only one she needed in her life.

“Wake up, Sunshine.” I felt dumb after I said it. Her hearing aids were out, so she couldn’t hear me. One day, she would, when she got the implant. Which reminds me that the appointment for that was tomorrow. I wasn’t lookin’ forward to dealin’ with that dick of a doctor. I was half tempted to give Hex a marker to do it.

I brought my hand up to her peaceful face, surprised but thankful that she didn’t have a trace of darkness plaguing her when she slept. My thumb brushed her cheekbone, her steady breaths always bringing me comfort.

Her eyes opened groggily, revealing her emerald green eyes that captivated me like nothing else could. The woods were always my place. It’s where I went hunting with Pops and picked berries with Ma. It was my calming place... just like Joslyn calmed whatever the fuck was inside of me.

“Mornin’.” She read my lips, and I blew out an amused breath when she groaned, burying her face back in the pillow. I tapped her cheek, making her look at me again. Her cheeks were caked with dried makeup, bags under her eyes, and slightly bloodshot. She was still fuckin’ gorgeous, but I knew she’d feel better cleaned up. I reached behind me, picked up her hearing aids that I took out, and gave them back to her. I

made sure she had them in before I tried to talk again, “Go get a shower. I’ll make some breakfast.”

She perked up at that. “French toast and berries?”

I’d given up my morning routine in favor of watching her sleep. Now, I was giving up my normal carnivore breakfast. The things I was doin’ for this slip of a woman. “Guess I can do that.”

She beamed that smile I always craved from her as she squealed, throwing her arms around my neck and pressing her lips to mine. I didn’t reciprocate, too surprised at what she did. She noticed my lack of return, and her expression faltered. “Oh, uh, sorry? I really liked waking up seeing your face and you making breakfast.”

I shut up her little rant by pressing my lips against hers. Fucking loved the feeling of her soft lips against mine. This was gonna have to be part of my morning routine with her. I pulled back, her eyes wide and cheeks flushed. “You just caught me off guard. Like you always do.”

She just grinned, coming back in for one more kiss before jumping out of bed. She was still in my oversized hoodie and a pair of leggings from the fight. Her clothing was wrinkled. I’d have to get her some more. She may have started wearing my shirts because she gained a few new curves, but I was gonna make damn sure that’s all she wore at our cabin.

Our cabin?

Christ, she wrecked some of it. Now, I was giving her slight ownership of it. She owns me. What's my space compared to that?

I huffed, throwing the covers off me and getting started on her frilly breakfast.

If it was gonna be our cabin, I would be making some changes to it.

\* \* \*

"I can take the day off."

She could. I wanted her too, but I needed her occupied to do what I planned on doin'. "You'd be crazy worryin' about puttin' Claudia out."

That was also the truth. Her cute pout returned, "Get out of my head, please?"

"Can't," I grunted, hood up as I opened the door to Poppy Oaks. "It's mine."

The scent of fresh flowers hit me like a freight train, and I had to refrain from sneezing. Nyla and Oakley were behind the counter, quietly chatting while V was leaning against the wall, eyes blank as he watched us come closer.

Joslyn, being her bright self, cheered when she saw her friends and threw her arms around them, Nyla reciprocating while Oakley tolerated it. V stepped forward, noticing Oakley's discomfort, but I stepped in front of him. "Don't."

His dark eyes looked at me. He was the only brother who matched my height and strength. It's never come to blows between us, and if it did, I wouldn't know who would come out as the winner, but I knew we both wouldn't back down. "She's uncomfortable."

"Oops," Joslyn muttered when she heard V's words. "Sorry, Oak." Her apology was sheepish as she let go of her shy friend.

"I-It's okay." Despite her trying to calm down from the touch, she smiled at her. "I thought you were going to take the day off?"

She looked at me. "I was, but I need something familiar to keep me from going crazy."

Nyla snorted, sporting a knowing grin. "Sarge couldn't have kept you occupied?"

She cocked an eyebrow back at her. "Who says he's good at doing that?"

I walked over to her, bending my arm so my forearm came in contact with her neck and my mouth at her ear. "Wanna repeat of the last time I saw you at work? Instead of coming on your back, I'll make sure it's seeping out of your cunt your whole shift."

Her thighs began to rub together, subtly enough so everyone in the room couldn't see, but I damn well could feel the movement on my own thighs since she was pressed against me. "Is that a promise?"

God, this girl.

I straightened up. I should've guessed she'd called my bluff. But as much as I wanted to be inside her, I needed to leave to keep on my schedule today. I turned to my club brother, whose eyes were trained on Oakley, who was trying to stay hidden by cutting thorns off a stem. "You gonna watch out for them?"

"I'll watch out for Oakley."

What a fucking bastard. I took a threatening step towards him, one I wasn't surprised he ignored when Nyla spoke up, "Mitchell's coming in a few hours. He has a meeting with Dad."

My eye looked to V, who dragged his eyes to my face. Meetings between those two were rare, and nothing good ever came of it. I hope Grim was able to pull out whatever stick got shoved up Prez's ass lately.

If he kept it up, he might not have a club to lead anymore. My loyalty to him was unwavering; now, there was a ripple, and it was felt by the whole club.

I looked at the clock on the wall, walking to my girl. "Gotta go."

She smiled at me, all trace of pain gone from the previous ones, but I knew it was a ruse. She didn't want to burden anyone with the pain she no doubt felt from her demon coming back into her life. Just like the pale lipstick she wore, the smile



was fabricated. But I would pick up the pieces I knew she'd let fall when we were alone. "Pick me up later?"

My chin dipped before I ducked my head, her wide eyes surprised as I pecked her lips. I knew everyone, excluding V, was staring with interest. I felt like I just lit a fuckin' bomb and was now gonna walk away from the aftermath.

The chatter started almost immediately, but I was able to tune it out. Joslyn was too stunned to speak; I'd never kissed her anywhere but in private. I fucking hated public displays of affection, but my girl needed some extra care after last night.

I'd put aside my comfort for that damn smile of hers.

I hopped on my bike, making sure to rev my engine so Joslyn could hear it. I'd never admit what I did for her. I would only let her tease and speculate because, for whatever reason, she seemed to enjoy it.

I blew out a breath before taking off. That girl of mine didn't know how to push my buttons; she knew how to snap them off and hide them, so I couldn't find them.

No. My lips didn't just curve up at the thought of that.

My first stop was at the hardware store. I drew attention wherever I went, good and bad. I ignored the lingering eyes and did my own thing. When associates tried to talk to me, I grunted and walked on. Knew they were doin' their job, but that didn't mean I had to fuckin' talk to them. I went to my destination, not even bothering to stop fully at the register, just throwing cash on the counter before walking out the door.

They knew me. When I was building my cabin, I was a daily visitor, and after some... complaints, I was told by the manager I could just throw the money on the counter, and they'd use the change to fund someone else's purchase.

Didn't give a fuck what they did with it as long as they didn't bother me.

I put my items in my saddle bag before going to my next destination, the one I was looking least forward to. I was there within a few minutes, putting my bike on the kickstand before walking into Soulless Ink. Tyrant and Knight were setting up their stations for the day. I'd never been in their shop before. It was spacious, with two stations and a portfolio of their work. Gotta admit it was pretty damn impressive. I'd always wondered if they tatted each other. Guess I was right. They were shocked to see me, to say the least. "What'cha want, Sarge."

I walked to Knight, handing him a note. "Knock me out."

Tyrant's eyebrows furrowed. I thought he'd jump at the chance for this. "Why?"

I pointed to the note. It had details of what I wanted. I didn't have to explain myself. I walked over to Knight's station, wanting him to do this instead of Tyrant. God only knew what that joker would do while I was unconscious. I sat on the parlor seat, repeating myself, hopefully for the last time. "Knock. Me. Out."

The two looked at each other before peeking down at the note I'd given Knight. Two sets of eyes widened before a grin

formed on Tyrant's face as he headed for me. He shrugged his shoulders back before cocking his fist. "Okay."

He hit me with all his damn strength. I think he broke a tooth. I spit on the ground before growling. "You dumb motherfucker—"

I felt a prick in the side of my neck, a familiar sensation as I closed my eye, succumbing to the medicine as the last thing I saw was Tyrant's mischievous wave.

Bastard was going to regret it when I woke up.

\* \* \*

I groaned as I woke up, still in Tyrant's tattooing chair but with a new sting on my chest. "Ya awake?"

"Yeah, motherfucker." I wanted to jump up, but the damn medicine made me groggy as fuck when I first opened my eye. Instead, I stood slowly, making my way to Tyrant, who ran to the other side of the chair where I couldn't get him. I was broader and stronger than him, but he had speed on me even when I wasn't coming off sedation. I placed a balled-up fist into the flat of my hand, cracking my knuckles. "Need to pay you."

He cackled, head shaking, making his curly hair wave. "I take cash, pussy, or dick. Fists ain't included in that."

"Did he pop your tattoo cherry?" Knight questioned, but I let the silence answer him before he let out a low whistle.

“Figured you’d have another one.”

“I did,” I admitted. One of the first things I got when I turned eighteen and got my first paycheck. I wanted a barbed wire around my bicep. It was the most badass thing I could think of, and I was just an irrational, impulsive teen looking to rebel against parents who frowned upon any amount of body ink.

The two of them looked at me with curious eyes before Tyrant couldn’t help but ask, “What do you mean did?”

This was the first and only tidbit of information I’d share about my past with them. It was obvious, one look at my exposed arms, and you could see the bumpy, scarred skin. It was where my barbwire tattoo used to be. “Hard to keep a tattoo when the skin melted off.”

“Jesus,” Knight muttered.

“Don’t let the skin get melted where I put this one,” he preached, and I rolled my eye. Didn’t want to experience that again. “I spent a lot of time on it.”

I narrowed my eye suspiciously. “You were just supposed to put a J.” He began to whistle innocently, pretending to be preoccupied with cleaning his station. “What did you do?”

I ran as fast as my legs would take me to the mirror, flinging my hoodie off my head, and looked at my chest, the extra detailing turning my skin cold. They could see my face now, ugly imperfections I had yet to accept, but my anger

trumped those feelings, especially since they had seen it during my tattoo session when I was unconscious. “Tyrant!”

“What,” he feigned. “You don’t like?”

“You’re not gonna like what I’m gonna do to you.” Forgetting my hoodie, I strode over to him as he rushed around his parlor seat, him laughing like this was a damn joke.

“Gonna fight me?” He tapped the digital watch on his wrist, “Don’t you got some more things to do for yours and Joslyn’s cabin?”

I stilled. “How the fuck—”

“You still write your to-do list on paper.” He dangled the piece of paper, grinning like it was his favorite toy. “Dude, it’s the twenty-first century. Use the notes app on your phone like a normal fuckin’ person.”

I tried to snatch it away from him, but he pulled it away. Was there even a point? “Don’t fuckin’ tell her any of this. It’s a surprise.”

“You bein’ a romantic?” Knight laughed in disbelief, and I couldn’t say I blamed him. This was out of character for me. They only knew me as the man who never showed his face and intimidated our enemies with my fists.

Now I was half naked, my face exposed in their tattoo shop.

“I still remember the one time at Calypso that chick was tryin’ to get with ya. You kept pushing her off, and she pretended to get dizzy and fall.” He started laughing, hunching

over and grabbing the counter for support. “And you just let her.”

Yeah, then that bitch had the audacity to say it was my fault. I didn't accept any of her obvious advances. It wasn't my fault she couldn't take the damn hint. I was showing her that I wasn't interested.

Joslyn's the only girl I'd ever been interested in for more than a damn night.

I sighed, giving up going over to put my hoodie back on when Tyrant's words hit me, “We're just givin' ya shit, brother. Happy you're actin' like an asshole instead of a fuckin' asshole lately. It's not a huge improvement, but I'll take it.” I heard the amusement in his voice. “Also, you're a handsome fucker brother.”

I should've just done the tattoo myself.

\* \* \*

My arms were throbbing, and my chest stung as I pulled up to Poppy Oaks. I was exhausted, having put in a week's worth of work in just a few hours. I blew out a breath, hoping it was worth it.

She better love it; I'd hate to have to burn my fucking cabin I built from the ground up and start over somewhere else.

Joslyn ran out the front door when she heard me pull up. She was carrying a backpack that looked like it was going to bust open at any second. I stood up, reaching a hand out, and she looked at it confused. “Backpack.”

She sighed in relief and let the straps slide down her arms, handing it over to me. It was fucking heavy. What did she put in this thing, bricks? I saw her smile tinged with exhaustion, but her eyes reminded me of a dimly lit street light, trying to put in the effort but was flickering for reasons beyond her control. Grim and Nyla walked out of the door shortly after, Nyla locking it behind her. Grim dipped his chin at me. “Brother.”

I didn’t respond, looking at Joslyn. “Gotta go to the clubhouse.”

“What for?”

“Gotta talk to Vic.” Her and Libby were helping me with some things since Victoria begrudgingly knew where my damn place was.

“Why don’t you just call her?” When I didn’t answer, she laughed, probably picturing the look I was giving her under the darkness of my hood. Fucking hated phones. I’d rather talk to someone through messenger pigeon. I only talked to people I deemed necessary and worth my time. Only had Prez, Grim’s, and Joslyn’s contact in my phone. That was it.

And the first two were only because it was necessary.

“Ain’t goin’ to the clubhouse,” Grim told us with a bit of a whine. “Why can’t you just give me what you made, Jos?”

“Because,” she hissed. “Sarge gets it first.”

“Dick always comes first, my love.” Nyla teased her fiance as she patted his cheek. “Text me about it tomorrow. I know where the gift is gonna get you—“

“Fucked.” Grim laughed as he dragged his girl to his bike. “And the fun kind of fucked.”

“Nyla, you’re dating a man-child.”

“Hardly,” he snorted back at her, fastening Nyla’s helmet before getting on himself. She secured her arms around him before he revved up his engine. “Tyrant’s the man-child of this damn club.” Ain’t that the damned truth. “I’ll be expectin’ that gift tomorrow, Jos!”

“Yeah, yeah.” She waved him off before turning to me, fishing in her pocket for her hearing aid case, but I stopped her from takin’ them out.

“You made me somethin’?”

“Originally, it was just for you. But, I feel indebted to the club for...” She sucked in a shaky breath; too much shit to unpack there. I wasn’t quite sure indebted was the right word when our leader didn’t fuckin’ want her in our organization, but we were all championing her. “Well, it’s a thank you. For... believing me. For helping me...” She looked down at the ground, her voice barely above a whisper. “For saving me.”



My knuckle met her chin, tilting her face up. “How many times do I gotta tell ya, Sunshine? I’ll always fuckin’ save you?”

Her smile diminished. She had something she wanted to ask, something that’s been weighing on her mind, but she was too afraid of the consequences to let it escape. My thumb went to the groove of her chin, pushing lightly in a silent plea for her to answer my question. “Even if it’s from Darrell?”

Looks like she wasn’t as in the dark as I suspected. It’s a debate that’s been weighing on me: the club that saved me or the girl that put the pieces they managed to collect back together...

I’d still fuckin’ choose her.

“Even if it’s from Prez. You worry about pleasing me. And I’ll make sure the only thing you feel is me.”

There’s the smile I always wanted to see on her face, one that lit up the shady street more than the sun. Her green eyes turned mossy, a sign that heat was pooling between her legs. Fuck, I felt the blood rushing to my dick now too. “Can we go to the clubhouse now?”

I never rode my bike faster.

\* \* \*

We stepped inside the compound, Tyrant at the bar with Victoria. V was on one of the couches, tapping his bat against

the ground. Why was he here and not up Oakley's ass?

“Hey guys!” Victoria and Tyrant stepped away from the bar, making sure to leave their drinks there and away from Joslyn. She glanced at me. “Got the stuff delivered.”

I nodded at her, adjusting the heavy fuckin' backpack on my shoulder. “What ya got in there?”

“I made you guys something.” She answered as I put the bag on the ground in front of her. She unzipped it before pulling out a large black hoodie with the sleeves cut off. Our club's logo: a grunge white cross with two roses wrapped around it.

“When did you have time to make these?” I asked her. Out of everything she said she made, I wasn't expecting this. She sure as fuck didn't make these back at the cabin. I wouldn't even let her bring flowers in, let alone a shirt press.

“Claudia bought a shirt press for our aprons and merchandise a long time ago. I've been working on them for a while now, but I had extra time to finish them all today.” She held it up, proud of her work. “What do you think?”

“You... made them for us?” Tyrant walked over as Joslyn dug in her bag, pulling one out for him before smiling. It was a rare moment for him to get emotional, but he held the hoodie like it was delicate. He dropped the hoodie to the ground, wrapping his arms around Joslyn. We weren't used to being on the receiving end of anything besides bullets and fists.

She was stunned, not returning his hug, but I saw red. I grabbed his hair and yanked him back, a deadly snarl on my lips. “Touch her again, I fuckin’ dare you.”

He held his hands up in defeat, “Alright, alright.” He bent down and picked up the clothing. “Thanks, Jos. This... means a lot.”

“Give this to Knight when you see him next,” she told him as she pulled out another one. He gently took it from her and folded both over his forearm. “You’re welcome. They were fun to make!”

He walked out of the room uncharacteristically quiet. Victoria shook her head. “And you guys say we have mood swings.”

“Lib?” I asked her, knowing she’d understand what I meant.

“She’s sleepin’ off whatever she drank today.”

“You know,” Joslyn’s voice was quiet. “I’m worried about her drinking.”

Vic sighed, putting her hand on Joslyn’s shoulder. Lib’s love for alcohol was not a secret to anyone. Even before Joslyn told me about her alcoholism, the small hints and stares whenever liquor was around would paint a picture she didn’t have to express. “You ain’t the only one. I’m watchin’ out for her, sweet girl.”

“I know, but—”

“She has periods where she drinks to blacking out and other days she’s feeling good; it’s not a good way to deal with her grief, but we’re tryin’ to help her, I promise.” She gave a sympathetic smile. “Some people don’t want the help, but we love them a bit too hard if they don’t... don’t we?”

Shame flushed her face. I knew she was thinking about her sister. “Yeah. We do.”

“She’s hurting.” All Libby felt was pain since she lost them both. “She doesn’t drink daily. I won’t allow her to. But days I know she needs to forget? Yeah, I let her have some to mellow her out.”

Victoria was a caretaker for everyone, but especially Libby. Hell, Libby lived with Victoria so she could make sure she wouldn’t do somethin’ to herself. That girl was a fuckin’ mess.

Joslyn walked over to V, who was still sitting on the couch, tapping his bat. He paused when she approached him. “I made you one too, V.”

He took it from her, unbinding the material and looking at it with scrutiny. His fingers let go, the material falling to the ground as Joslyn’s eyes trailed it all the way there. I was gonna kill that fucker for making her sad. Anything Joslyn did for anyone was a fuckin’ gift no one deserved. “You didn’t like it?”

“I only accept gifts from Oakley.”

Victoria shook her head before walking off. Joslyn didn't look hurt by it but chose to walk away. V was unpredictable and unhinged. Smarting off to him wouldn't be the best move, but I would've fought him if he disrespected her. Hated that he just tossed her hard work aside, but picking and choosing my battles with him.

“Can we go home?”

Her voice was clipped. Fucking adorable. “We're stayin' at the club tonight.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “Why?”

“Been a long day waitin' on ya.” I grabbed her wrist, pulling her to my room. “I still gotta make that pussy of yours drip with my come.”

She laughed, coming along willingly. She loved the idea of being filled with me almost as much as I loved the thought of filling her to the brim.

“Gonna be a quick one.” I already felt my balls tightening at the thought of being inside of her. I needed this connection just as much as she did. I pushed her on the bed. She fell flat on her stomach before rising on her hands and knees, that perfect ass of hers teasing me. I swore when she shook it, my mouth started to water. “You're gonna be my whore tonight.”

Curiosity lit her eyes up, shining in the darkness of the room around her. “So you're gonna be rough?”

“You're gonna fuckin' break, Sunshine.”

She bit her lip, watching my hands as I slid my zipper down. My hard cock sprang free as soon as the waistband of my jeans was pushed to my thighs. I watched as Joslyn's thumbs went to her waistband to pull her leggings down, but I growled, stopping her. "I undress you. You never undress yourself."

"What about when I shower?"

"I'll rip off your fuckin' clothes." The pre-cum was dripping from my slit at the thought of her body naked and glistening under the shower head. Did she ever try to get off with the shower head? Up the pressure and put it against that sweet cunt of hers? Christ, I was gonna come at my imagination of her even though she was waiting and willing for me to fill her up.

I stalked forward, cock bobbing painfully with each step as I pushed her pants down to her thighs, barely able to stand lining myself up with her entrance before pushing inside roughly, earning a high-pitched moan from her. My hand reached around her, my fingers on the center of her throat. I felt each cry of pleasure as my cock pushed in and out of her, the slapping of our skin becoming a new addiction for me.

I watched her fingers dig into the comforter, knuckles turning white from the force of her trying to hold on for dear life as I tried to fuck every negative thought out of that gorgeous head of hers. There was so much inside there, something comparable to a wasteland with different heaps of worries.

But for now, her only worry was holding my cum in her cunt when I was done.

I pushed her head up with my hand, the force of the action making her gasp and pussy tighten around my cock, forcing a strangled curse from my lips. It felt like my dick was being suffocated by the force of it.

My hand on her hip slid to her front, flicking her clit between my fingers. “You make such a good whore, squeezing my cock like you own it.” And she did. “Let go, let my cock know how good I make you feel by coming on it.”

My dirty words flipped a switch inside of her. I felt the way she screamed her release on my hand and felt the way her cum covered my cock, some spilling out from where we were connected. I groaned. Christ, seeing our come mix together was hotter than I thought. My hips pumped rapidly before turning into short, ragged thrusts before I pushed all the way inside. My roar of pleasure as I filled her up to the brim, which was one of my new favorite feelings in the world.

We were both panting and caught up with each other that I didn't want to pull out. I wanted this connection with her, feeling like I'd fall apart if I pulled out. How the fuck did this girl make me feel all these damn pussy emotions? I never needed anyone the way I needed her.

Her sigh was shaky as I pulled out, ready to shove myself back inside, when I saw our cum fall on the comforter and cascade down the back of her thigh. Her legs were shaking

before she collapsed, her body rising and falling with each heaved breath.

Wanting to touch her more than to fix myself up, I picked her up before pulling the comforter down the bed, placing her on the mattress before getting on the other side... covering both of us with the blankets. We stared at one another, her face flush and eyes bright... until she saw me. Panic set in as her eyes began to dim, and her lips became wobbly. Her eyes shone even though the room was dark. I pulled her tight to my chest, her tears soaking in my clothes. Her heartbeat was thumping against her chest as she choked on sobs, trying to calm herself down. I ran my fingers through her hair, attempting to soothe her, but I knew nothing I did would work.

This was a consequence of a mind-shattering orgasm; your high forced you to feel everything. Including the things you didn't want to.

“I got you, Sunshine,” I whispered against her head, heart hurting with each sob that escaped her. “It's me. It'll always be me.”

I held her until her breathing slowed, falling asleep in my arms where she should've been this entire fucking time. I made promises to myself, and I was nothing if not a man of my word.

He took her innocence. I'd show him what God he should truly fear.

He made her cry. I'd make sure his tears were red.



He made her paint a smile on her face. I'd make sure he never stopped smiling.

He made her lose herself. I'd make sure he lost his worthless fuckin' life.

I would save Joslyn Monroe.

Even if it cost me myself.

## Chapter 22: Joslyn



Sarge was acting off.

It was like he was trying to get away from me all of yesterday. Yeah, we had sex. But even that was quick when he usually took his time caressing every part of me. My heart felt heavy as I thought that Sarge didn't want anything to do with me after I told him the truth about what had happened. Even the way he held me after sex, he was rigid. He's never acted like that before.

I had to step away from the floor at work yesterday and have a good few cries. When I came back out with a reddened face, they looked at me concerned, but I just told them what I was struggling with, finally letting Jordyn go... which wasn't a lie. I hadn't talked to her since the mall incident. Every time I even thought of it made my stomach churn violently. She knew what Douglas did to me, yet she still slept with him and was willing to rat me out to him.

The inside of my cheek stung as I bit into the muscle, trying to keep my emotions in check and trying to focus on the numbing pain I always felt as the wind whipped past as I rode on the back of Sarge's bike. I shouldn't care. Blood family didn't mean a goddamn thing if the only thing you shared was genetics. So, why was I struggling with it? Was it because the

last few years of my life were work, school, and making sure Jordyn didn't OD in our living room?

If I told Sarge how I felt about Jordyn, what would I say? My own thoughts were ripping my heart out? My thoughts were consumed by the girl who wanted to feel nothing, and how I craved that compared to the internal struggle of a past no one knew besides me, him, and everyone who took advantage? That I didn't think the man I was giving everything to could handle how messed up I used to be?

My eyes burned. I couldn't talk to him about it. I didn't need him to get angry in case I was wrong. But I didn't feel like I was. It would be just my luck, falling for someone just for them to leave because of how messed up I used to be. They said the past didn't matter, but everything we've done has consequences. Some of the consequences aren't felt until years later when you're actually feeling the semblance of happiness for the first time since you crawled out of the dark hole.

They all did.

But every other person wasn't Sarge. Would I even survive if who I used to be was too much to accept than the person I am now?

I sniffled, burying my face as far into his back as I could, preparing for one of the very last rides with him. My ears stung, the helmet amplifying the pain, but I ignored it like I always did just to be able to hold him like I always wanted to when he let me ride with him. He refused to let me be on the back of his bike without a helmet for my own safety, but I hid

how the crushing sound affected me. If I got the surgery, would it still be like this? I've been going back and forth with my decision, being exhausted with the options but wanting a better quality of life. I've researched and listened to online webinars with the pros and cons. Sarge told me I didn't have to get this, that my being deaf was something that required fixing. He would be by my side, regardless of my decision.

It's me. It'll always be me.

My lips turned up ruefully.

I wish I believed him.

\* \* \*

“Joslyn, Darin. It's nice to see you again.” Sarge growled when Dr. Regal shook my hand. When he reached for Sarge's, he just flopped down in his chair. The doctor gave me a look. I couldn't do anything but give him an embarrassed shrug. Sarge wasn't a people person. “Anyways... let's get started, shall we?” I sat, almost twitching in anticipation. This could be the biggest meeting of my life. A life of finally being pain-free with a sense most people took for granted. “Basically, this is a meeting to tell me how you're feeling about the surgery, any questions, and then scheduling.”

“Will you be the one performing it?”

“Yes.” He shot his eyes over to Sarge knowingly. “And I've performed hundreds of these surgeries with great success.”

His right arm shot out, forearm resting on the back of my chair protectively as his mouth spewed menacing words. “If she doesn’t wake up, neither do you.”

“Darin,” I scolded him, Dr. Regal’s skin turning pale. Could he not be himself for an hour? This was important. “Threatening the doctor is not a good idea.”

“I... understand his concerns.” He was sweating, obviously nervous about Sarge’s promise. It wasn’t a threat. Sarge didn’t make those. “I’ve never had someone die from complications.”

I’ve been doing my own research, but I got so many answers from the internet, and I didn’t know if people were being truthful with the potential side effects. “What are the complications?”

“You could develop vertigo, swelling, or the device not work the first time around. Which is no big deal. We can always adjust to make it work for you.”

“So... you’re just putting a magnet in my head that connects to the thing in my ear that doesn’t work, and it amplifies the sound?”

“In simple terms? Yes. I won’t bore you with the medical jargon.” Probably a good idea. I wouldn’t understand anything he said. Throughout the years, all things medical went in one ear and out the other. They needed a translator for people who had low comprehension. “The wire would cochlea and deliver signals to your auditory nerve. Compared to hearing aids, which only amplify sounds.”

I frowned. “So this won’t fix my hearing?”

“You don’t need fuckin’ fixed,” Sarge hissed from my left, but he was ignored as Dr. Regal had a sympathetic look on his face.

“No, it won’t. It’s just a way for you to hear more comfortably and, hopefully, clearer.” He sighed regrettably. “With your hearing loss being as profound as it is and seemingly getting worse with the information you’ve told me, hearing aids might not be as effective as they once were for you.”

I knew that. It was getting more difficult to understand what people were saying with them in. I had to rely mostly on lip-reading lately, which was easy to pass off since I enjoyed face-to-face conversations. I looked to my left, Sarge’s head looking right at the nervous doctor. “So you’re saying this surgery is my best chance of hearing somewhat normally?”

He nodded. “I am.”

I blew out a shaky breath, shivering as Sarge’s fingers dug into my hair. He was massaging the back of my head, forcing me to calm down and focus on his touch rather than this life-altering decision. I looked over to Sarge, the man I trusted the most in this world. “What do you think I should do?”

“Don’t you dare ask me.” He shook his head, his words a gravely baritone. “There’s nothin’ wrong with you. I wouldn’t change a goddamn thing about you. If this is what you want, then you do it. But don’t you dare ask my opinion for

something regarding your body other than makin' that sweet pussy of yours come. This is your decision, not mine.”

Dr. Regal coughed uncomfortably, but all I could do was stare at the man sitting next to me. That wasn't the reaction I was expecting from him. He took control of everything, and I guess I assumed this would be just another thing. I knew he told me I didn't need to be fixed. My mind was jumbled, back and forth on my decision. I turned back to the flushed doctor, who was still not over the sexual comment, as I opened my mouth to tell him—

The door was kicked open. A man in a three-piece black suit walked in the doorway, straightening up his tie as he approached the table. His beard was a slight stubble, and his brown hair was slicked back. His eyes went from Sarge to me, silently telling me to stay quiet and let him do his thing. “Trevor?”

“Later,” he told me before turning to my very confused audiologist. “Dr. Regal. I'm here on behalf of my client, Miss Monroe.” I blinked. What was happening?

The doctor was as confused as I was. “Why would she need a lawyer for a surgery consultation?”

“You'll find out in a minute.” He was calm as he slammed his briefcase on the table, scattering papers everywhere. He opened the suitcase, pulling out a piece of paper before handing it to the doctor. His eyes scanned the paper, his skin paling with each word he read.

“How—“

“How did I get this information since you paid people to wipe it off your record?” Trevor cut him off with a shrug. “Apparently, you’re not well-liked.” His eyes narrowed, not taking offense to that. Dr. Regal has always been kind to me. Hearing that he was disliked was new to me. “You read my demands, do you agree?”

Through gritted teeth, Dr. Regal couldn’t fight back. “Anything else?”

“Yeah.” Trevor tugged his tie, loosening it around his neck before going in for the kill. “Fuck you.”

“You’re a lawyer. You can’t say ‘fuck you.’”

“Oh.” Trevor looked bored. “Fuck off. Is that any better?”

What was with Trevor? He’s been a calm presence in my life, rarely showing anything but simple emotion except when Claudia and Oakley were involved. You didn’t mess with his girls, or he’d show you just how ruthless he could be. But that was rare. I knew he was on edge lately because of V’s interest in Oakley, and I didn’t know what was happening behind closed doors, but seeing him like this was new.

“You can’t come here and threaten me in my practice,” Dr Regal seethed, standing up threateningly from his seat. The paper Trevor handed him still in his clutches as his fists shook. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer.”

“Yeah? And I’m sure your wife will love the boob job you bought your receptionist, who, by the way, tried to show me them when I asked where this meeting was taking place.” Dr



Regal's face paled. Trevor looked triumphant as he continued. "She's lucky my wife wasn't here. She would've popped them."

The doctor's hands slammed on the table, and his face was so red I thought it was going to pop off his head. Trevor snapped his briefcase, signifying the end of this out-of-the-ordinary surgery consultation. "Fuck off."

"This is my office—" Sarge stood up, his body towering over Dr. Regal, who was clearly intimidated by his size. He was always the biggest, most commanding body in the room. Dr. Regal's throat bobbed before he scurried from behind his desk and towards the door, not even bothering to look back at us. "Have a nice day."

He rushed out of the room, leaving the three of us behind. I blinked, staring blankly at the door he had just run out of.

What the hell just happened?

I twisted in my chair, looking at my best friend's father. "Trevor? What are you doing here?"

"Sarge asked me to look into Regal." He sighed, grabbing his briefcase and flipping it over his shoulder so that it rested on his back. "Didn't like what I found. Sued for malpractice and sexual harassment multiple times. Settled out of court all those instances."

"Son of a bitch." I was afraid he would go run and actually kill him. When he took a step, I knew I had to intervene. I wrapped my arms around his waist, a feeble attempt to keep

him by my side. He looked down at me, and I knew he saw the pleading in my eyes as he didn't attempt to go after him.

I had a feeling I might hear about something happening to him later on the news.

My hand was still wrapped around his stomach, hand clutching the fabric of his hoodie. I watched as he heaved a deep breath before he wrapped his arm around my shoulder, bringing me into his chest. My heart raced as he calmed down by simply touching me. Trevor coughed forcibly, not wanting to witness our little moment. "I already began the process to revoke his medical license."

Good. He didn't deserve to practice medicine, but my lips dipped at the corners. I'm glad that a man like that wasn't gonna be anywhere near an unconscious me, but I had my heart set on this. I've never been a dreamer, but after hearing an option that would make me feel normal, I was starting to be. "But who will do my surgery now?"

"Hex." My eyes widened at Trevor's answer. "He's more skilled than any doctor you'll ever meet."

"Will he... agree to do it though?" I've interacted with Hex the least. Not for lack of trying, he just adamantly refused to be anywhere where other people were. He had black hair. Black eyes. And if I had to guess, a black heart to match.

"He already has." Trevor stretched his arms before yawning. I'm sure he spent a lot of time researching Dr. Regal to get solid proof about how much of a dick he was on top of

all the stuff the club was involved in. His palm rubbed the side stubble on the side of his face.

“What’s he want in return?” Sarge’s grip on me tightened. I was nervous about his answer. What could a man like Hex possibly want?

“Dunno yet.” He shrugged, grabbing his briefcase and loosening his tie more comfortably. “Just agreed to it. I’m not sure if he has any ulterior motives.” Sarge nodded at him, Trevor taking it as his ticket out. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m meeting Oakley for lunch.”

I grinned, trying to diffuse how uncomfortable I felt with the unknown. “Don’t you mean V and Oakley?” It was a lot of fun to tease Trevor about V’s unlawful attention when it came to his daughter.

His eyes flashed darkly, not appreciating my jest. “Hilarious.” His tone was flat, but he already knew he would be there. Oakley said wherever she was, V’s shadow lingered somewhere close by. He walked out of the room, irritated and ready to fight. I wonder who would win between the two of them?

Trevor shut the door behind us, leaving us alone. I craned my neck up to Sarge, dragging my hand from his stomach to his chest, willing him to dip his head and look at me. “Wouldn’t that put you in a compromising spot with Hex? You know, if he did the surgery?”

“Whatever he wants me to do is worth it.” He dropped his hood, his scarred face one I never grew tired of seeing. He

knew seeing his face brought me comfort. I was a visual person, and seeing how his face reacted to things helped ease my soul. “I gotta keep my promise, right?”

*“Can your voice be the first one I hear when I’m pain free?”*

My head tilted, lips turning up as I thought of what I asked him and his determination to make it come true. I didn’t think it was something he would take so seriously, but him taking the steps to improve my quality of life was warming my gut. Something undeniable was happening between us, and now that Sarge wasn’t fighting it, I was letting it happen freely. That didn’t change the fact I was terrified of the thought of Hex performing the surgery on me, though. “I dunno…”

His right hand went to my chin, pinching it softly. Forcing me to face him even if his hood was back up. “You think I’d let anythin’ happen to you?” I immediately shook my head. In the beginning, even though it was more of a methodical protection, he still didn’t let anyone hurt me—besides him. But now that the wall between his desire for me was shattered, I knew his determination to protect me was tenfold.

I trusted this man with everything in me.

My eyes softened as I brought my hand to the scarred side of his face—it had to be the scarred side I showed more of my affection to. Brushing my thumb over the charred skin, my eyes softened. “You’d die before anything happened to me.”

“Yeah,” his words were soft. “I would.”

My heartbeat increased, and my feelings became entangled. Earlier, I felt like he wanted nothing to do with me, but now? He was looking at me like his life depended on me being here. I took a small step, resting my cheek against his chest.

My life depended on his, too. “Can we go home?”

His arm tightened around me. “Yeah.”

“I got our day planned, and it doesn’t include me fillin’ your tight cunt.” He licked his upper lip, driving me crazy as he looked into my eyes, heat pooling between my legs. “Yet.”

\* \* \*

The ride back to the cabin was uneventful, other than Sarge going a little faster than usual. I grinned as I threw my leg over, getting off before reaching into my pocket for my case. I was putting my hearing aids back in my ears, following Sarge to the front door, when he held his arm out. I looked at him, confused. I always stood in the entryway when he did his little routine of checking his house for intruders. “Sarge?”

“Stay out here.” He didn’t look at me as he retracted his arm. He just expected me to be obedient as he stepped inside the house. He made sure the storm door stayed open with a latch and left the wooden front door open as well. I shifted on both feet nervously as he went inside, gun in hand, as he did a walk-through through the cabin. I inhaled, stilling when I smelled something unfamiliar.

Fumes.

My eyebrows furrowed as I let curiosity lead me inside, ignoring Sarge's order to stay outside. Stepping inside, the scent of something getting stronger. I still had my hearing aid case in my hands as I walked into his living area, noticing that it looked darker with the lights off than usual. That was odd. The white walls usually made it look like the light was still on, even in the dead of night. I headed over to the light switch, flipping it on as I looked at the walls.

My hearing aid case clattered on the floor, heavy footfalls coming from my right, but I couldn't focus on Sarge. My hands cupped over my mouth, taking in the view in front of me.

No more pristine white that was a symbol of Sarge.

Now, the four walls of his living area were three yellow walls with an accented green one. I stood there in disbelief. My head turned to him. He was standing there frozen, waiting for my reaction. I didn't know how to react. He told me not so long ago that I wasn't even allowed to bring in a vase of flowers, and now his colorless world was brighter. It was a major shock for both of us, I think. "How did you—"

"Your fingernails are painted the colors of your favorite flower." He looked away from me with a shrug, his voice slightly off. I had to bite back a smile. Was he embarrassed? "I just went based on that."

My heart fluttered. He remembered the color I kept my nails? I always had pale yellow on my nails besides the ring

fingers; they were green, like the stem of a flower painted with a sunflower design. I loved sunflowers. They always face the way the sun is rising. “Won’t this ruin your man cred?”

“No one comes up here.” He wasn’t bothered by that. He’s reminded me many times that I was the only one he was willing to let in his company. “And if they did, they wouldn’t be able to tell anyone else if they’re dead.”

I chuffed, amused by his response. “What about the ‘everything needs to be white, clean, and pristine’ mantra?” He told me everything had to be spotless. A pristine white, he got mad when I asked him about bringing some color into his cabin that resembled a sanitarium.

He faced me, hands coming to grip the sides of his hood. I grew eager, knowing he was going to show me the face that replaced my nightmares; ironic since people would say Sarge’s face would be the source of all the demons in their dreams. He lowered his hood, revealing his handsome face, his heterochrome eyes on me as he spoke profoundly. “You seem to break everything about me.”

I smiled at him, walking over as his hands slid down to his sides. He shattered every artificial smile I made others believe. It was only fair his facade would break when he cracked mine. I stood toe-to-toe with him, taking in just how much larger he was than me, but I had more power over him than he did himself. His eyes softened as I looked into them, brown and silver, swirling with wonder at what was going to come out of my mouth next. “We make quite the pair, don’t we?”

He grunted, reaching forward to grab my hand before leading us to the front door. I was curious when I saw where he was leading us: his garage. Why was he taking us out there? The last time we were out here...

My face flamed, the sun bright in the sky, so if he turned around, he would know I was thinking of the time he took me on the hood of his Caddy. My legs slightly wobbled at the phantom feeling of him fucking me into the chrome. Maybe he was taking me out here for round two? I wouldn't mind that.

The memories were making my skin hot and my knees weak. This man made me insatiable.

Or was he just replacing the touch of every unwanted man before?

The first oddity was his precious Cadillac parked outside of his garage. He always had it parked inside so a tree wouldn't fall on it or the paint could get weathered by the rain. I paused as he held up a hand, signaling me to stop as he went to the padded garage code he had installed after my little stunt. I wasn't allowed in here without his permission, the door inside the house leading into the attached awning having the same lock.

The door opened slowly as Sarge widened his stance, his head turning towards me. I didn't know what was happening, but I just stood there, trusting whatever was on the other side of that door was something good. Sarge wasn't going to try to kick me out again. He wasn't going to hurt me.



But what I saw had my breath hitching, eyes widening while my fingers covered my now opened mouth as my jaw fell wide open.

Bags of mulch, potted sunflowers, roses, an array of yard decorations, rakes, gloves... everything anyone could only dream about having for a garden. A bird and squirrel feeder and a bird bath. I looked to him, not winning the battle with the waterworks, when I saw what was in the center of it all.

A pale yellow rocking chair. Matching with the white-painted one he had on his porch. I stepped trepidly over to it, fingertips pressing against the smooth wood in disbelief. It was smaller than his, which made sense since I was half his size. When I looked closer, a sun was carved into the wood where the back of my head would rest. A detail that made the back of my eyes burn.

“Is this for me?” That was such a stupid question.

“It sure as shit ain’t for me,” he responded huskily, crossing his arms over his chest and looking away from me. Was that red on his cheeks? It couldn’t have been. It must’ve been the way the light was reflecting off the red mirror ball. “I don’t bring things to life, Sunshine. I kill ‘em.”

Something else he’s proven multiple times: he wasn’t afraid to kill for me. Something that should terrify me but warmed my heart instead. Any man could bring flowers, but a real man brought you the heads of the men who have wronged you. “Why did you do all this for me?”

He shrugged casually, not looking at me. “Wanted you to feel more at home.”

I smiled, fingers tracing the sun indented into the wood. “Are you going to stop trying to get rid of me now?”

“Someone needs to watch after you. You’re too fuckin’ selfless.”

I chuffed, turning to face him, leaning on the side of the garage. I began to walk towards him, his gorgeous, scarred face turning when he heard my footsteps approaching. “So you’re going to be my babysitter?”

He snorted, pushing off the garage and shoving his hands in the pocket of his hoodie. Standing straighter, he said, “Just want you ‘round longer.”

I laced my hands, pushing them behind my back, looking at him with a cheeky grin. “Are you done trying to get rid of me now?” Even if he kept trying, I would always come back.

“Yeah.” A step forward made me drop my arms to my side. His lips stretched thinly as his eye looked serious. “Been walkin’ this life by myself for the past six years. I want you by my side for the rest of it.”

I wasn’t expecting that. My eyes widened, my cheesy smile turning genuine as I grabbed the lapels of his cut, pulling myself into his chest. I wish he didn’t wear such a baggy hoodie. I wanted to feel his body pressed against mine.

Thankfully, his jeans weren’t baggy. His thighs were thick, and his legs were long. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had to

special order his jeans. They fit tightly around his thighs, made his ass pop, and.... other areas look large. Not that it was fabricated in any way. Sarge was very gifted in that area.

His hand grabbed the front of my shirt, a laugh escaping as he dragged me inside. I almost tripped with his large strides, running to keep up with his pace. When we bypassed the living room, something warmed my soul: we were going to his bedroom.

His room was a marvel with the crisp, unchanged white and the perfectly made bed you could bounce a quarter on. I haven't been in here since the night I spilled my heart out about my past. My mood sobered. I didn't want to think about that period now. I wanted to forget, even if it was just for a little bit. Any relief from the pain my life used to be was something I craved.

He let go of me, turning to face me, and I just stood there dumbly, not knowing what to do next. I let him control the pace between us when it came to sex. I knew that's what being in here would lead to. The sun was just setting, and hopefully, he would put his face between my legs. I rubbed my thighs together, anticipating the thought of him.

“If your hearin' aids are botherin' you. You don't have to wear them.”

Well, that was heart-warming, not sexy. I blinked, not expecting that at all. “What?”

“I didn't know they hurt you constantly.”

It was usually with loud sounds and how the hard plastic scraped my ears. I don't know if I wanted to live without hearing Sarge's deep baritone until my surgery. "Then how can we talk?"

"Wanna know what I was doin' with Lib this entire time?" Yes. So I stopped thinking the worst. I knew in my bones they weren't in a casual fling, but my heart assumed the worst. What else would a man do with a woman alone? I thought he was going to tell me, but instead he showed me. He raised his hands, fingers awkwardly moving. My eyes were too focused on his disfigured fingers fumbling with each other. "*She's been teaching me this.*"

My mouth fell open, eyes shooting wide, unable to take my eyes away from him.

He was using sign language.

He *learned* how to use sign language.

"How..." My throat worked past the knot in my throat as I tried to find the words. Was this real life? "How much do you know?"

He lifted his hands again. "*Basics.*"

My eyes burned, and my hand rubbed my chest to try to control myself and my fraying emotions. "When did you have the time?"

"When you were at work," he grunted, not knowing how to spell it in sign language. It was difficult to learn. I had to learn at an early age, but I've kept up with it over the years,

not for myself, but in case I ever met someone else who couldn't recognize speech with their ailment. "She's a speech-language pathologist." He paused before correcting himself, "Well, was."

I didn't know a lot about Libby. She was standoffish and rude the majority of the time. It was hard to get to know someone as prickly as her. Not for my lack of trying. It was just the way she was, and I was curious to know what made her that way. "What happened?"

He was debating. It wasn't his story to tell. Libby was a hard person to read, but she reminded me a lot of myself. Drowning herself in whatever she could to numb her pain. "Her husband killed himself."

My hand rubbed the spot over my heart, that poor woman. No wonder why she was so closed off and drowning herself in liquor. I knew it took the demons away for a moment, but they always invited more in. "That's horrible."

"Yeah," he grunted, voice more hoarse than before. I can tell whoever Libby's husband was meant at least an inkling to Sarge. "Dagger was a good man."

That confused me. I thought she was married to someone else? "Then who's Hollow—"

"A lost fuckin' soul is what he is." He cut me off, not going to tell me any more than that. Hollow seemed like a forbidden subject not just to Sarge but the whole club. Every time his name was brought up, the brothers and Victoria looked gutted. No one dared mention him in Libby's vicinity,

but every time she was brought up with Hollow's name, it sounded like they had something between them. I'd never heard Dagger's name brought up, though.

This band of brothers has been through a lot, haven't they?

My eyes scanned the yellow walls, mind wandering off to the yard decorations and rocking chair in Sarge's garage. My heart was full of gratitude and confusion. I couldn't remember the last time someone's done something for me without wanting something in return. "Why did you do all this for me?"

"Wanted you to have a space to call your own."

His answer was so simple and sincere. I never felt like I belonged anywhere. Not with my parents, not with Jordy, not even with Nyla and Oakley. I felt like I was in a dark room, the spotlight on everyone else but me, and I was the one who would always be forgotten eventually. My fingers brushed the corner of my burning eye. I didn't feel alone anymore. The spotlight was finally shining on me, Sarge closely by my side, embracing the thing he hated for my sake. "I was scared."

His body tightened. "Of what?"

"That last night you were just telling me what I wanted to hear." I rocked back and forth on my heels, feeling uneasy about spilling out what I was feeling to him. Again. "That everything I've been through was too much. You didn't want a girl who was as used up as I was—"

He cut me off, slamming his lips on mine as I felt his hand encompass mine completely before directing it to the large bulge between his legs. The twitch against my palm, followed by a groan leaving his throat, sent heat between my thighs. “Does it feel like I don’t want you?”

I pulled back, panting at this man’s ability to take my breath away. My teeth sank into my bottom lip, fingers grasping his erection, making him hiss and push his hips further into my hand. “I’d rather you show me.”

“I’ll show you all fuckin’ night,” he hissed, stepping away from me. “Tonight, we’re going to try somethin’ different.”

## Chapter 23: Joslyn



*“Tonight, we’re going to try somethin’ different.”*

Different could be good or bad. It depended on what mood Sarge was in. He began to walk closer to me, forcing me to step back until my knees hit the edge of his bed. He brought his hands to my cheeks, his fingers pushing my hair behind my ears, making me shiver as the cool air made contact with them.

“No hearing aids,” he told me, causing me to panic slightly. I didn’t like wearing them, but they were still a comfort for me to wear. He saw my panic, shushing my nerves. “Just me, you, and your senses.”

“I don’t...” I gulped, feeling flustered. I wasn’t sure if I could let go of my one sense for the night, even for him. “I don’t like how vulnerable I am without my hearing aids—“

“I don’t care if you can’t hear me,” his rough words cut me off, hands gripping my biceps roughly enough to leave bruises. I looked up at him, his hood hiding his beautiful face from me as he tried to hold back his hair-trigger with anger. “I just want you to see yourself like I do. Like you’re the breath in my fuckin’ lungs. Like you’re everything I’ve fuckin’ prayed for.”

My breath hitched, and a cry halted in my throat, almost suffocating me. I was never anyone’s first choice, let alone



someone's prayer. I was just Joslyn, someone looked down on by others for a disability beyond my control, a pushover, and a past alcohol addiction.

But to Sarge, I was everything.

His words left me speechless, but I needed to be closer. My hands went into the darkness veiled around his face, feeling grounded by his scarred skin underneath my touch. His breath shuddered, hands circling around my wrists to hold them in place. "I want your other senses heightened."

Oh. That's why he wanted me to take them out. My face flamed with an array of emotions. Embarrassment, uncertainty... lust. I threw my trust blindly at people, which always turned out badly for me. What if, just once, I threw caution to the wind, and it turned into something that would become a treasured memory instead of something I had to heal from?

My fingers cupped his cheeks, standing on my tiptoes to get as close to his face as possible before whispering, "I want you to replace their touch with yours."

"I'm the only one allowed to touch you," he growled, dropping his hold on my wrists as he gripped my hips, the fabric of my pants bunching in his fists as he pulled my front flush with his. My hands slid behind his neck, pushing his hood down, showing me his heterochromia eyes. The pale one unfocused, his brown one fierce as it looked at me in determination. "Anyone else who does is gonna regret it."

I grinned at him, eyes narrowed playfully as my hands slipped from his neck to his chest. Rubbing up and down, loving the way his chest vibrated against my touch. “What’re you gonna do to them?”

His voice lowered, huskier with lust. “You gettin’ wet thinkin’ ‘bout what I’d do to someone who touched you?” My teeth sank into my lower lip, eyes hooding more. I didn’t have to tell him in words. He knew I was. A gasp escaped when a hand snaked between my legs, rubbing up and down my covered slit. “Yeah, you’re gettin’ drenched at me thinkin’ I’d rip men apart for hurtin’ you.”

He applied more pressure in his motions, a ragged breath leaving my lips as I held onto his hoodie to keep myself upright and not buckled onto his floor. “Watching you bang that one guy against the brick wall at the party because he touched me was hot.”

“Yeah?” His hand left my core, almost making me whine until it dipped into the waistband of my pants, grabbing a handful of my ass instead. “Nothin’ compared to what I’m gonna do to ya.” He brushed my hair behind my ear with his thumb. I shivered. He rarely ever touched me with his left hand, embarrassed by the missing half of the appendage. But it never bothered me that his hand was deformed. “Take your hearin’ aids out.”

I didn’t fight him this time. Reaching up and plucking them out, carefully placing them on the bedside before straightening. I felt uneasy, fear spreading through my nerves

at not recognizing Sarge's words but trusting him enough to take care of me. I took two deep, calming breaths as he took a step back. He tapped his lips, my eyes drawn to them. "*Undress.*"

I swallowed my nerves. He told me he was the only one allowed to undress me, but now he was giving me the power. I grabbed the hem of my shirt, lifting it slowly as his eyes trailed my movement. I threw the garment on the floor, his eyes lingered on my fuller chest. I palmed my stomach, dragging my hand into my waistband. My thumbs dipped beneath the band before I turned. My front hunched forward as I pushed the material of my leggings down my waist, giving him a good few of my ass that he's been obsessed with touching.

Sarge moved fast and before I could stand straight, his hands grabbed my hips forcing me to face him. He palmed on the back of my thighs, picking my body up, and tossing me on the bed. My throat worked past the knot as I leaned up on my forearms to watch his next move, my working senses on high alert.

He unzipped his hoodie, my eyes trailing the motion. He's never undressed for me, and now he was giving me a whole show of it. My thighs rubbed together, trying to appease the ache between them, but it was only getting worse as he unhooked the zipper from the chain, revealing his chest to me for the first time. His right side was smooth, sunkissed skin, a small ruffle of chest hair, and abs I wanted to scrape with my fingernails.

The left side was vastly different. The skin was angry and rough, and there wasn't an inch left unbothered. My eyes trailed from his waist, landing at the area above his heart, my body tensing, frozen. My stare refused to leave the spot above his heart.

A letter J was tattooed above the rough skin. The ink was in jagged cursive. I'm sure getting a level finish on bumpy skin was impossible. Behind the J was an uneven sun, as imperfect as I was but still standing on its own. I didn't notice when he moved, his knee landing on the bed as he leaned over me. My eyes were too transfixed on his new ink. He grabbed my hand, pushing my palm against the raised, bumpy skin. His hand went to his lips, tapping until I looked at them. *"Just like it'll always be me, it will always be you."*

My breath caught in my throat. Did I read his lips right? I didn't have time to think as he used my monetary shock to flip my body over. My stomach was pressed against the plush comforter, my body tense with unknown anticipation. I was letting go, trusting Sarge to take care of me. Looking back to see what he was doing was tempting, but the unknown was thrilling me. I couldn't hear him move. I wouldn't know he was here unless he was touching me. Which he wasn't... it was cold without his touch.

I hissed, my body trembling as he pressed ice-cold liquid against me. The cool liquid fell down the curve of my spine, pooling in the crevice of the small of my back. I relished the contrast of the warm room and the icy water trailing down my skin.

His tongue came in contact with where the water droplet ended. I inhaled sharply, holding my breath as I felt him drag his hot tongue up the sleeted swill he put on my back. The rough pads of his fingers trailed where the water was evaporating, causing goosebumps to swell on my skin.

I hissed as he pressed another ice cube against my partially numb skin. It felt enhanced, only focusing on trusting his movements instead of coming undone at his dirty words. I felt everything *more*. He started to move the ice cube, melting it against my skin. It was hard to focus on what he was tracing, but I swear I felt him draw an M.

His hand dragged along my spine. Drawing a straight line with an exaggerated dot. *I*. He moved down more, a straight line followed by a right diagonal line, and straight back up. *N*. On the dip of my spine, I felt a straight line with three dashes. *E*.

I gasped. *Mine*.

The frigid moisture was pooling, the heat he was making me feel being sucked into those trails of water on my back. I closed my eyes, trying to keep my body warm. That was until his rough lips went to the dip in my back, kissing the liquid away. His lips didn't stop there. He kissed, bit, and soothed the area with his tongue until he stopped between my shoulder blades. His tongue overlaid the letters before I felt his lips suck up the excess water.

I buried my face in the blanket, fisting the covers as his mouth trailed to his last design on my shoulder blade. I hold

my breath, his mouth opening wide, replacing the chilly liquid on my shoulder with his scorching lips.

My back wasn't the only place getting hot, the area between my legs growing with moisture the longer he moved his tongue closer to my neck.

His fingers pinched my chin, ripping it harshly towards his face as my eyes met his heated gaze. His mouth was open slightly, his hot breath meeting my lips. They shone with the wetness of the ice, my eyes drawn to them. *"You're Mine."*

He could have all of me.

I felt his arm wrap just below my breasts, hoisting my upper half until my back pressed against his bare chest. He didn't give me time to think, pressing the cool ice cube against a nipple that made a pleasure cry explode from me, my head thrown back and resting on his shoulder. My chest heaved, pleasure pulsating between my thighs as he continued to circulate the ice cube around my nipple, forming a hardening, tepid peak. He dragged the ice cube to the other breast, leaving a trail of cold water as he gave the same attention to my other nipple.

Everything felt... more. It was hard to explain. Usually, I would focus on the sounds. I couldn't tell where they were coming from, but I still focused on them just the same. My arm went up, snaking it around Sarge's neck, bringing his face level with mine. His soft pants fanned my face, his minty breath enhanced just like the way he lifted the ice cube from my nipple. He followed the path, slowly moving up, and slid it

along the side of my neck. His head dipped, blowing on the now-chilled water, making me shiver. I felt his tongue peak out again, my mind focusing on how warm it felt compared to the coldness of the ice cube.

My eyes flicked to the ice cube. It was melting rapidly due to my body heat. Soon, it would be nothing. His head lifted, fingers holding the crystallized water across my jaw, lifting to my bottom lip. He wasn't watching my eyes. He watched how my bottom lip glistened with the melting ice. It was barely anything, almost a flat chip. His eyes darted to mine, fingers lifting to his mouth, his tongue moving from bottom to top, a motion I enjoyed when it was directed between my legs.

I felt my chest vibrate. I'm not sure if it was a cry or a moan—or hell, both—when he put the ice chip in his mouth, letting it melt on his tongue as he removed his hand from around my torso, my upper half falling flat on the bed and my nipples that were still chilled from the ice rubbed almost painfully against the bedspread. I was panting, legs as wet as the cool water on my chest. I felt his hands on my ass first, spreading my cheeks. I tensed, fearing what he would do. I didn't know if I was ready for that kind of play—

A soundless scream escaped as his cold tongue lapped my pussy with the ice still on the tip. My body convulsed as the sensation of the cold spread through my nerves like snowflakes melting on my skin. I pushed my pussy closer to his mouth, his tongue circling my clit as I felt a familiar pleasure build up with the combined sensory deprivation and cool tongue. His tongue was relentless, lapping at my entrance

as his fingers dug into my plump ass, grabbing hard enough to leave marks. I needed release—needed *something*. I was going crazy, the feeling of my impending orgasm more than anything I'd ever felt before.

I fucked his face, guiding my hips up and down his talented mouth, coming undone when his scarred lips circled around my clit, giving one rough, frigid suck. I shuddered, stars forming as my lower half trembled. My orgasm hit me hard. I felt boneless, absolutely drained of energy, and all I wanted to do was fall into a deep sleep.

When I felt Sarge's bare chest pressed against my back and his hard cock pulsate on the divet of my hips, I knew he had other plans. His arm found my waist again, effortlessly maneuvering our bodies until my knees were on either side of his thighs, his hard-on threatening to squeeze itself between my ass cheeks. I turned my head, wondering what he was expecting me to do. He always used to tell me what to do with his dirty words. I wasn't confident enough in my ability to please him to have the free reign he was giving me.

My insecurity was answered when the familiar chill of the ice caressed my stomach. My chest heaved as my teeth sank into my bottom lip, the heat between my legs pulsating in anticipation. He kept going lower, a strangled cry erupting from my throat as he pressed the ice against my core. My pussy was already sensitive from my orgasm, but combined with the ice? My blind was blank with pleasure.



The ice circled my clit, my hips bucking making Sarge wrap his forearm around me to keep me in place. My nails dug into his forearms, but I couldn't focus on the crescent-shaped marks I left on him. My mind was focused on the numbing pleasure he was building in my stomach yet again. He buried his in the crook of my neck, his teeth sunk into my flesh before soothing it over with his hot tongue. Tears formed in my eyes at the over-stimulation of another growing orgasm. I turned to face him when he removed his face from my neck. His eyes were heated, his cock twitching between the crease of my ass. I pushed my hips back making his adams apple bob.

He understood my look, one hand gripping my hip and the other one wrapping around the base of his cock. My mouth opened slightly, the drowsy feeling turning to lust as I felt him push his cock between the crease of my ass. Having his dick close to my puckered hole brought out curiosity in me that I wasn't brave enough to explore tonight.

When his cock was settled, his hand joined with my hip encouraging me to move my hips up and down. I started out slow, his cock slipping out once, him immediately placing it back before continuing to help me fasten my pace. With each bounce off his thighs, I grew more confident, enough that when his cock slipped again, instead of him fixing it, I grabbed his cock, the protruding vein pulsing beneath my thumb as I raised a bit higher, pushing my hips back until the head of his cock hit my opening.

I dared to glance back at him. His jaw was rigid, looking to where we were about to be connected. His brown curls stuck

to his forehead with sweat, his chest moving up and down as he struggled to let me have the reins. His eyes flickered to my narrowing eyes as his jaw twitched, seductive lips moving as I read, *“Move, or I’ll make you move.”*

Message received.

With our eyes locked, I dropped down, impaling myself on his dick almost painfully due to his size. He threw his head back, twitching inside of me as he gave a few shallow thrusts, silently telling me to move or he was going to lose his shit.

Just like previously, I started slowly controlling the pace as I tried to grow confident in my movements. I could smell the musk from our sweat and cum. *Us*. I could smell us.

I could feel the way our thighs rolled off each other, just a little slicker with each bounce. The way my walls were sensitive from my previous orgasm and the way his cock twitched inside of me that was sending triggers to my brain.

My upper half hunched forward, gyrating my hips before exhaling my pleasure before I began to bounce up and down as quickly as my thighs would bounce off of his. I couldn’t hear the gasps coming out of his mouth, but I could feel the bruises his fingerprints would leave behind. His right hand left my hip, and I didn’t have time to look behind me before I felt a burning sting against my ass.

I yelped, volume loud and out of control as it rang in my ears. Burning tears of the unexpected assault glossed my eyes. My core strangled his dick momentarily. His hand caressed the burn, fingertips running circles over the area before his left

hand moved, giving the same treatment to my other cheek. With each slap, my cunt tightened around him. Another rough smack on my right cheek made my hands grab his bare legs and dig my fingernails in them to gain some type of control as my remaining senses focused on the burning pain on my ass cheek and the way his large dick was stretching me over and over.

My orgasm was coming, and each spank he gifted me teetered me on the edge. I felt his right hand push between my ass cheeks, the thumb pressing against my puckered hole, and his left hand giving me a smack that rang in my ears and surely would leave his handprint. The pain made me clamp around him, my orgasm draining out of me and onto his still stiff cock.

I was panting, and if I thought I was exhausted before, the black began to line my vision as my mind gave into the ecstasy my orgasm brought to me. I barely felt the heat from his chest as he came close to my back, lifting me and gently laying me on my back as I looked at this gorgeous man I called mine. His working eye was soft as it looked at the pleasurable damage he made me feel.

He brushed my hair behind my ear with his thumb. We both weren't perfect. Mentally, physically, emotionally. That's why we needed each other... what one of us lacked, the other one had in spades. I'd give him my very last breath if it ever came to it.

He crawled on top of me, slow and methodical. My mind focused on his rough fingertips scraping up my sides until his chest hovered above mine. His eyes, one dark with lust, the other dim, locked in on mine. I was focused on his lips, not only because they were calling to meet mine but because I didn't want to miss anything he had to say about the fantastic experience I could only share with him.

His elbows bent, lowering his chest to mine. A sigh escaped as he brushed against my nipples, throwing my head back against the pillows as his hand traveled up, loosely wrapping around my throat as his thumb was at the pulse. His mouth was open, exhaling soft breaths on my face as his hands reached between our bodies. My teeth favored my bottom lip as the blunt head of his cock brushed against my clit, the slit leaving behind his cum mixed with my two orgasms. I closed my eyes, shivering at the feeling, almost groaning when I felt his movements stop, his hand gripping my chin roughly, forcing my eyes open.

*"Eyes on me,"* he mouthed, his good eye glazed over with need. The head of his cock pushed between my folds once more to give me my third orgasm. He settled quickly, already wet from the way my cum coated him earlier. It felt so full, so complete, whenever he was inside of me. *"I want you to watch what you do to me."*

I nodded, unable to do anything else but lay there too tired to move. I would let him do whatever he wanted to me—

I sucked in a harsh breath, something he must've noticed as he paused his movements. No. I didn't want to be tired, not focused on him bringing me pleasure. It brought back too many memories of me laying here like a drunken zombie, letting whoever touch me as long as they gave me my booze. My hands splayed on his chest, giving a slight shove, but I knew I couldn't move this mountain of a man and just prayed he would comply.

Of course, he didn't. Instead, his forehead lowered to mine. His eyes were soft and understanding as he tapped his lips, drawing my attention to them.

*"It's me,"* he mouthed when he noticed slight panic set in. I tried to breathe in through my nose and out my mouth, but it was hard when I was concentrating on his moving mouth and the way his cock was stretching me with each push of his hips. His lone eye was locked on me. I didn't have to hear them to feel the finality of his words as I read his moving lips through my blurry vision. *"It'll always be me."*

I didn't want anyone else but him.

I couldn't look away even as my body began to shiver, and the urge to throw my head back into the pillows overwhelmed me. My walls clamped around him as I watched his teeth grit together, his eyes closing as his steady thrusts started losing control. A few rough, jagged thrusts tipped me over the edge, his hot cum filling me. His body dropped, propping himself on his forearms, careful not to crush me. My hands came around

to his back, soothing the smooth and uneven skin on either side of his shoulder blades.

After a few moments, his hands palmed my cheeks, which were slightly damp from the excursion. His lone eye was hooded, looking at me with swirling emotion I'd never seen from a man, let alone a brute like Sarge. The dark brown around the iris was soft, the thumb on his non-mangled hand brushing against my cheek. The softness he was presenting to me now was such a contrast to the roughness he showed me just moments before.

In the beginning, Sarge treated me like I was his nightmare.

Now, he was looking at me like I was his dream.

After three orgasms and the stars he made me see darkening my vision, my brain was shutting off. He literally fucked me senseless. He was right. Tonight was different. It brought us closer together. I trusted him more than I ever did before... And I think he felt the same.

My brain began to fog, sleep taking me as I smiled against his left pec that was my pillow for the night. I looked at the black ink amongst pale pink. My face lifted, and my mouth caressed the raised skin. He flinched under my kiss, and his breathing stopped from the rise and fall of his chest stilling. My mind was too muddled by our intense sex session, my vision lining black as I snuggled back into his chest, my hand resting over his heart where his new tattoo lay. As

consciousness faded, I could've sworn he pressed his against my forehead, moving softly.

*“That’s my fuckin’ girl.”*

## Chapter 24: Sarge



I hated going out in public.

I'd rather go through boot camp again than deal with idiots in public. But here I was, going out twice in one week. My eyes narrowed at the one who dragged me out of the comfort of our cabin, wearing a yellow crop top that showed off her stomach with baggy blue denim jeans as she was bent down at her knees, which I wanted her on at a different angle, as she looked at the various flower seeds this store had.

“Does it really take this fuckin’ long to pick out flower seeds? Can’t you just go buy the shit at Poppy Oaks?”

“No. It won’t mean as much if I just go buy the shit at Poppy Oaks,” she mocked. Her eyes, narrowed and angry, shot over to me. Pretty lips in a sneer as she spoke, “It’s gotta match the theme of the cabin. I have to make the outside match if you have the interior yellow and green. Maybe with some complimentary colors? Oh! I wonder if they have some magnolia seeds?”

I swear I could listen to her voice all day, but when it came to flowers, I couldn’t listen for more than a second. The thought of anything bright and floral on the perimeter of the cabin I built with my own two hands to be a dark and secluded



place until my brothers found me dead in my recliner?  
Criminal.

“Don’t you worry,” she said brightly, standing up with a pack of seeds and waving it around. “I got some dark violas. Even if it doesn’t match the house, it’ll match your personality.”

Christ, this woman had a mouth on her. I stalked up towards her, the knowing look in her eyes telling me she wanted this reaction. She was a little minx, trying to get me riled up to take her pretty cunt in any public place we walked into. Poppy Oaks was just the beginning of the risqué play that made both of us hot, but if she kept that mouth of hers up, we’d be fucking right in the middle of this garden section.

“You know exactly what you’re doin’, Sunshine.”

She stepped forward, a hiss leaving my lips as her thigh brushed against the hard-on she was currently giving me. She grinned at my reaction, bringing her leg up to work me over. “Is it working?”

She knew it was. The hardness she was brushing up wasn’t my fucking thigh. A growl ripped from my throat as I grabbed her wrist, making her drop the flower seed back before beginning to tug her away to a spot to fuck that smart mouth of hers shut. Thank fuck that the garden center was secluded with no one besides us—

“Darin Huxley?”

I froze. Who the fuck knew my name? I could count the number of people on one hand who knew who I was, and one of the two currently had my hand wrapped around their slender wrist. I looked in front of me.

A woman, probably no older than twenty, was standing there with a pissed-off look. How the hell would she even recognize me? I sure as fuck didn't remember her. "Who are you?"

"Figured you wouldn't remember me. It's been what, six years?." Six years? Dread seeped into my bones as time slowed, a fog forming over me. "I'm Dan Crook's daughter."

Six years ago, my life was blown up, leaving nothing but ash and smoke-filled days ahead. I focused on her face, piecing together every detail. The brown hair. The blue eyes. Heat flamed my skin as I dropped Joslyn's wrist, arms hanging by my side as my head flashed with memories of a past I was doomed to remember. My head was swimming, pain fleeting in as I sucked in a breath. A bone-deep regret that kept me awake at night now here in the flesh. "Maddie Crooks."

She laughed, but it was feigned. "So you do remember." She wasn't happy to see me. The last time I saw her... I closed my eyes, trying to block out that horrid fuckin' day and all the days that came after it. The healthcare team assigned to my care pushed my tattered body toward the closed casket. I remember her endless tears, the way her mom was on her knees sobbing over the twenty-one-gun salute.

I remembered the way the way her fourteen-year-old eyes looked at me. Worn down from grief but fueled with hatred. I couldn't look at her—I didn't even want to be there. There were five proofs of my failure before me, reminding me of how unfortunate it was that I was living. I still remember her as I sat in my wheelchair, unable to do anything but sit there and wallow in self-pity while families around me had just lost a husband, father, or son.

Madison was young then, too young to experience a tragedy such as losing her role model, and she was fierce. Her blue eyes rippled as they shouted at me, words that have echoed in my head since the way she uttered them.

*"It should've been you. It should've been you!"*

*No one corrected her. I couldn't turn my head due to my broken neck, forced to stare forward. I couldn't talk due to my injury, but I silently told her. Trust me, kid. I wish my casket was alongside theirs.*

*They wheeled me out soon after. I felt their stares, their despair, their disappointment.*

*Everyone there agreed with her.*

My fingers began to twitch, my blood heating as everything began to blur. Madison wasn't the young woman she became. Instead, she shrunk, becoming the little girl who had just lost her father. Her blue eyes were stormy as she sobbed in front of a bloodied flag on her scrapped knees. I couldn't catch my breath as the spasm turned into full-blown trembles.

The breathing in my throat felt as if I was sucking through a straw. Something exploded in the back of my mind, making my breath hitch and look around. Why did it smell like burning ash? Where was the warmth of the sun reflecting in the windows? Where were the flower seeds...

My heart seized. Where was Joslyn?

“Joslyn?” I called, my surroundings blurred, and I couldn’t recognize a damn thing. I was back in that desert, the spot where we were ambushed before being taken back to their torture house. “Joslyn!”

I had to run. I had to find her before they got to her. My heart raced the more I shouted without a response. My throat burned from the intensity, and my neck strained from looking in every direction, only to see nothing but the expanse of endless sand and murky air from the heat.

Something touched my arm, and my left hand instinctively went for it, crushing it until I felt something pop underneath my fingers. I heard a yelp as I stepped back, my right arm going up in the air as survival instincts kicked in, ready to kill whatever was brave enough to fuck with me out in the elements.

“Darin?” I sucked in a sharp breath, the desert fading into shelving and the endless sand reverting back to the tile floor. My mouth was open, eyes wide, as the shadowed figure in front of me began to clear, turning into long, straight blonde hair. Her green eyes were scrunched slightly, pain flickering like gems.

My sun.

I didn't like the hurt in her eyes. I didn't know why it was there. I looked between us, my fucked up hand crushing her small one, it trembling despite trying to remain strong. My breath hitched, immediately letting go, my heart sinking as her other hand came to soothe the ache I caused. She tried to give me a smile that told me it was okay. But it wasn't.

It wasn't okay at all.

"Only thing you're good at," Madison spat. I forgot she was there. The heart in my stomach beginning to beat out of control once more. "Hurting the people you say you care about."

"Excuse me," Joslyn's voice was gentle as she stepped around me, putting herself between me and a past I wish was more distant. Her knuckles slightly swelled as they swayed at her side. "I thought I'd introduce myself. My name is Joslyn, and you are?"

My head turned to gauge Madison's reaction. She looked torn on lashing out at me or snapping at Joslyn. If she snapped at Joslyn, fallen comrade's daughter or not, there'd be some words exchanged. "Madison."

"Hi, Madison." She stepped forward to Madison like she was a wounded animal. I'm not sure how to approach her without setting her off like before. "What's your issue with Darin?"

“He killed my dad.” Her voice broke, ocean-colored eyes forming waves through tears. A knot formed in my throat, my swallowing almost impossible as I glanced at Joslyn’s reaction. She knew I’d killed before, but she didn’t know the sin that led to my induction into the Souls. She looked calm, her lips flat as she considered Madison’s truthful words.

Because she wasn’t wrong. I killed her dad—and our best friends.

Joslyn shook her head, a sad smile gracing her pretty features as she set a comforting arm on Madison’s arm. “I know that’s the truth you tell yourself to keep focused on something other than your father’s untimely death. But Darin didn’t. You see his left arm, right?”

Her eyes trailed on my self-conscious side. It confused people why I didn’t cover my arm, but I covered my face. It was simple, really. I couldn’t fucking stand to look at my worthless face. It was already too much to handle its reflection every morning, the ghosts of my six comrades behind me with daggered eyes I wish would pierce my skin and make me bleed out on the floor. I covered it because I was too much of a coward. “He fought to get back to them. His scars prove he did. There’s only so much a man can do against weapons.”

There was a fight in her eyes. She’s spent all this time hating me, it being a slight comfort in her father’s passing that made it easier for her to bear if she split her emotions. I would take all that burden if it meant my mistake was lesser to her.

It's what Dan had us promise we'd do if something ever happened to him: make sure his little girl was taken care of.

"I tried," I croaked when I couldn't just stand there. I didn't want to talk about this, but I had to. Anything I could do for Dan's kid, I would. "I swear to fuck, I tried to get them out."

"I don't believe you," her sob caught in her throat. "If you did, he'd still be here!"

"I understand you lost your father, sweetheart." She was being as sympathetic as possible. A girl half my size trying to defend me from a direct cause of my sin? It was almost laughable. "Darin lost a lot that day, too."

"Like what?" she scoffed, too hurt to see reason. I lost everything that day, but so did she. "He's still alive!"

"He is," she affirmed. "Alive and living with the deaths of your father and everyone that blames him for it." She reached out, but Madison took an inconsolable step away from her. Her features hardened with Joslyn's comfort, not wanting to feel anything but pissed off at the world. "When people die, it's only once. When people are left behind to live with the memories of death, they die every day."

"He deserves it," she hissed, hate-filled eyes directed at me. She took a step back, arm shaking with either rage or temptation. "He doesn't deserve anything good to happen to him!"

“I think you should go.” Joslyn was more stern as my mind began to numb, a coping mechanism that developed itself. “This isn’t the time or place for this. If you want to have a proper discussion, we can always meet you somewhere.”

She shook her head, heated tears falling from her eyes. “The only place I’ll be near him is when he’s cold and dead in the ground so I can spit on his grave,” she hissed, turning on her heels and walking out. Her shoulders began to shake, her sobs piercing my ears and cutting through my chest. I was lost. My senses were haywire. I needed to get out of here.

“Sarge?” She didn’t touch me. She was afraid I would hurt her again if she did. In this mindset, I might’ve. It wouldn’t be intentional, like moments before, but still something I would just fucking hate myself for. God, why did I ever think giving my fucking heart to someone was a good idea? Madison just reminded me of why I lived secluded. Why I didn’t let anyone in.

She reminded me why I didn’t deserve any form of happiness in my life.

I didn’t answer her. I just walked right past her and didn’t check to see if she was following me. I didn’t care right now. I didn’t want anyone but the misery I should’ve kept around to keep me humble. My priority was getting out and here and to my safe place. A place where I already planned out the rest of my days.

A place I should’ve kept the sunshine out of.

\* \* \*



The ride back to our cabin was silent. We didn't buy anything we went there for, choosing to come home once Madison stormed off with her unforgiving words. I damn near forgot Joslyn as my mind was focused on protecting myself and getting out of danger, bunkered down into a familiar part of my daily routine that I felt in control of. Not the way it felt when I first was sent on my own after the incident, out of my mind and having to be put on suicide watch. I had to be drugged up so I was just a zombie, just so I didn't try to hurt myself or others.

It was a miserable time, and I was still feeling the side effects of that period of my life. It changed who I was fundamentally. I may have always been a reserved man, but I was more willing to let people in. I wasn't always this... freak.

I stopped my bike, letting Joslyn off as I rubbed my wrists. The scars there were faint. You couldn't see them unless you looked at them in the light, but I saw them as clearly as the day I got them from the shackles that dug into the skin for weeks until I escaped. I didn't realize how long I was sitting there looking until Joslyn touched my arm, recoiling when I flinched at the touch.

"I'm sorry." She was trying not to set me off, acting like I was just some ticking time bomb. Not like I gave her any reasons to think otherwise. Mindlessly, I swung my leg over my bike, walking right past her to walk into our cabin. She

held up a hand, careful not to touch me right before I stepped inside, a tepid smile on her lips. “Stay here.”

She reached behind me, pulling the nine-millimeter I always kept on hand out of my waistband. She didn’t know how to use that thing, walking inside the house with it awkwardly pointed in front of her as the storm door closed behind her. My lips felt weird as the corner unfamiliarly twisted up at the corner, watching her do my usual routine I wasn’t in the mindset to do right now. Instead, I stood between the barrier of a glass door, alone with thoughts that were consuming me.

How did Madison even find me? Moved to bum fuck Utah to leave North Carolina and everyone associated with it. The only thing I took was me, my Caddy, and my haunted memories. The only pitstop I made was to Ma and Pop’s graves to tell them what I was doing and apologize for letting them down. They were rolling over in their graves, having a son they raised to have respect to overwhelm everyone with his disgrace.

I made separate plots for them here, in a secret and secluded place. They were private people who loved being alone, miles away from civilization. It’s something they instilled in me and was part of why I got my cabin. They never went out. They didn’t have friends. People would only stop buying to get whatever crops or cattle Pops had for them. My only socializing was at school, but they weren’t strict about my grades. They told me I could do whatever I wanted, and they’d support me if I wanted to go to a big college, trade

school, or stop my education once I graduated high school. They were such good fucking parents.

I missed them and their no-bullshit guidance. My life fell apart whenever they died. I didn't have anyone to talk to about what my next steps in life were, except for the biased people wanting me to join them. But if I picked a different path, where would I be now?

Who would be watching out for Joslyn?

She came back into the common area, passing by the storm door once more, the gun still too far in front of her. Her finger was nowhere near the trigger as she pointed it in every direction, the tip of her tongue slightly past her lips as she concentrated on the task at hand. Didn't do a goddamn thing to deserve her. I just needed to convince myself that being around me wasn't going to get her killed like it did everyone else.

I couldn't lose her. Not when she was the only one who ever fought to stay by my side.

The door creaked open, her smile shining through the dim light as she held it open for me. "It's clear."

I took a step forward, reaching for her hand before pausing. Her knuckles were slightly red and swollen from me crushing them. My teeth gnashed together, just another thing to hate myself for. She noticed my face in that direction, and she immediately brought it up, rubbing the area. "It's okay—"

"Don't you fuckin' dare," I snapped at her, grabbing her hand that I didn't just damn near break and dragged her to the

room I lost control in. My eyes scanned the now colorful walls. The more I looked, the more my heart raced. I wanted this to be Joslyn's safe place as well as mine. She wouldn't be satisfied with no color in her home. She spread joy and laughter. These walls were painted just like that damn smile on her pretty fucking face.

I stopped, turning towards her. We stood in the middle of the living room, my hands wrapped around her forearms and her hands resting on mine. My mind felt far away, like I wasn't here with her, but somewhere descended into the void without the capacity to feel or care about anything. My brain automatically went into a coping mechanism of numbing myself whenever it came to whatever made me Sarge, Sergeant in Arms of the Unforgiven Souls MC.

Darin Huxley died six years ago. The ghost of him just lingers unwantedly with the living.

"Darin." The name I usually loved her calling me, settling like a pit in my stomach. Madison coming back reminded me that I wasn't Darin anymore. A part of me wanted to be him again, just for her. He would be so much better to her. "What was she talking about?"

I looked away, not wanting to infect her light with the darkness that shrouded my eyes. This was it. This was the moment she would leave me, killing me all over again. "She was talking about my sin."

I didn't want to tell her anything beyond what Madison said. She already knew I was a murderer, but the people whose

lives I took deserved it. Hell, I deserved it. But my purpose was to live in a never-ending purgatory where my sin haunted me every time I looked in the mirror. I could never escape from it. The scars on my body prevented it.

“I’m here,” she whispered, eyes sympathetic as her thumbs began to rub my forearms. My eyes darted to them. I don’t know why focusing on the pale yellow color of her fingernails was easier than looking at her beautiful face. “I’ll always be here.”

*No, you won’t, not after this.* Her words earlier were too good to be true. She was too focused on comforting me to think about what Madison was actually telling her. I sucked in a breath, preparing to ruin my life for the second time.

# Chapter 25: Sarge



*Six years ago*

*I limped over to Karev. He was struggling to breathe, his skin hot to touch. I slumped to my knees, using whatever strength I had left to heave his upper half up so he could take a sip of water. “Drink.”*

*He greedily took it, coughing as I lowered him to the ground and turned him on his side so he didn’t aspirate as he passed out again. I prayed for mercy for him, but they cauterized where they cut his foot off so he wouldn’t bleed out. The agony of having three of my teeth pulled was nothing in comparison to what they did to him.*

*“D-Darin.” I heard Michael wheeze. I looked at him, not having enough strength to make it over to him. His skin was pale, his eyes distanced away. My heart seized in my chest looking at him this way. His skin was dirty, blood still seeping out of the gashes on his thighs and wrists.*

*“Don’t talk,” I croaked, my voice raspy with lack of water and emotion. “Save it for when we get out of here.”*

*“We both know I’m not making it out of here,” I swore I stopped breathing. “My mom. Please take care of my mom.*

*I'm all she has."*

*He begged. Michael never begged.*

*"You can take care of her when you get out of here," My words were desperate. Even in the darkened room, they were keeping us in, I could tell the light was dimming from his eyes.*

*"I didn't think dyin' would feel this way," He croaked, making my throat tighten. "I'm not in pain, I feel so light. Maybe I'm goin' to Heaven after all," He shot me a blood-stained smile, his hand raising to his forehead for a shaky two-finger salute. "It's been an honor serving with you, Darin."*

*He wasted his last breath on thanking me instead of cursing me.*

*"Damn, lost one of them." Our captors kicked Michael's lifeless body to the side. Anger churned in my gut at my inability to do anything about them treating Michael's corpse that way. They didn't know him. He loved to joke around and make everyone around him happier than he was.*

*"Fuck you," Leo spat at them, gaining their attention. He had burn marks from the cattle prod on his face. His words were almost unrecognizable, his tongue swelled from the electric torture.*

*"No, thanks," The largest captor said. They all wore black ski masks, I couldn't tell them apart except for their size. He crouched where Leo was sprawled on the grimy floor. "We have other plans for the rest of you."*

*\* \* \**

*Rubbing my wrists raw against the ropes securing my wrists over the bar, I tried to free myself from my constraints. The sharp edge of the metal of the beam was rigid enough to where I could cut away at the thick restraint of the rope. The other problem was how high my squadron and I were suspended off the ground.*

*I was a tall man at six foot five, but my feet were well above ten feet off the ground. I wasn't leaving here without a dislocated knee—if I was lucky. I worked my arms, the rope tied around my wrist scraping against the sharp metal of the rafters. I gritted my teeth, the strain making my muscles sore and tired, but I had to push on. It was more than just me. I had to think about the men suspended on the rafters alongside me after two weeks of strenuous torture.*

*My brothers would make it home to their families. I would make sure of it.*

*“Darin!” I heard Jake shout as the ropes gave into the friction of the metal, causing me to drop down and land on my feet. My legs shook, a painful throb hitting every nerve as it shook all the way up to my waist and almost brought me to my knees. But I wouldn't look weak in front of my squadron. I refused. They needed me. I wasn't going to let them down.*

*I looked up, seeing the men who were more like family than comrades hanging from the rafters that had been our prison for the past few days. Our captors had enough fun with us, and the lack of information we refused to give. They had*



*something planned, something slow and painful. But they'd never get a chance to act on it.*

*My eyes sought Michael's lifeless body. Beside him was Karev who was slowly following his fate. Jake and Leo were trying with all their might to get their restraints off. I looked to Dan, who was calmly looking at me, nodding at me.*

*He trusted me to get them out of there.*

*"If something ever happens to me, make sure my wife and daughter are taken care of."*

*I remembered his words. But nothing was going to happen to him, I was gonna make sure of it.*

*Regret sank into my gut, but I didn't have the luxury to wallow in whatever bullshit feeling was consuming me. I looked around. There was no way to get to them. They used an excavator to get us up there. And I didn't see anything to get them down with. I cupped my hands over my mouth to make my voice louder, "The rafters are sharp! Cut your ropes with it!"*

*I saw Jake and Leo struggle harder, trying their best to remain calm as their arms worked frantically to cut their restraints, their legs flailing with panic. "Ours aren't rough!"*

*Fuck. I tried to think quickly, but it was broken when I heard a crash outside. My head snapped to the noise, debating on what to do. We were taught to never leave a brother behind. My head went from the sound of the noise to my suspended*

*comrades. I couldn't help them just standing here with a thumb up my ass. I had to try to do something.*

*God, please forgive me.*

*"Someone's outside!" I shouted at them, heart sinking at their chants of 'don't leave' ringing in my ears. I didn't know what to do. We were trained for torture. We were taught to survive natural disasters and impossible situations. This? This was uncharted territory.*

*I ran out of the warehouse towards the direction of the sound. It was dumb. It was impulsive.*

*It was my greatest sin.*

*A man was there, almost like he was waiting. I'll never forget the way he looked at me. His black eyes resembled the devil as he held up a joystick. My eyes trained on the way his thumb moved in slow motion as he began to press down on the button. My body moved towards him in an effort to stop him. His thumb jammed the button as I closed my eyes, the bright light of the chemicals detonating blinding me as it exploded in the small area.*

*Unbearable pain spread to the left side of my body, and I moved involuntarily on the ground to try to relieve even an ounce of the pain I felt. My body was melting on the left side, engulfed in flames. A scream ripped from my throat at the unbearable pain, and I rolled around in a feeble attempt to put out the searing fire on my skin as the building went up in flames, connecting to some flammable objects surrounding the perimeter.*

*Fuck. FUCK!*

*A loud pop followed by a huge boom sent debris flying through the air, some cutting my skin. A large piece of the metal siding hit the top part of the suicide bomber's body. His lower half was disconnected a yard away from him. My breathing was rushed, adrenaline setting it where I barely felt the pain as I looked towards the engulfed building where my brothers were still inside.*

*Despite the agonizing pain I felt at my left side being on fire, my mind went to my team still hanging by the rafters. I tried to crawl as the flames spread everywhere, my body bleeding and charred, leaving a trail of blood as I crawled to the area where I abandoned them. The gravel dug into my melted skin, my movements sluggish, and black tinting my vision as I began to black out due to pain and exhaustion. My body became more numb as it started shutting down. In a feeble attempt, I reached my left arm up. My bloody hand was missing appendages, the blood flowing down my palm and dripping to the ground outside of the building. One last blinding light sent me into the darkness. Hopefully, for the last time.*

*I wasn't that lucky. The best thing that would've happened to me is if the blast of the bomb killed me.*

*"They burned." I didn't recognize my voice. It sounded like I was almost in a trance, my body feeling numb like I was practicing for the day I finally wouldn't be burdened by my sin. Joslyn wasn't in front of me. It was like a movie. I was on*

the ground outside the building, flesh melting off of me and the fire cackling in my ear, but I still heard them. They were shouting for me to come and save them, being eaten alive by the flames. “They burned alive. They were waiting for me to go and save them.” I swallowed past the heavy lump in my throat, my eyes slamming shut as five ghosts filled my vision. “But I never came for them.” And they didn’t make it out of there alive. I broke my promise. There was nothing to bring back home to their families besides the customary flag and standard condolences.

She remained stoic. Her face was calm, blonde hair splayed over her shoulder. She tilted it slightly. Was that disgust? Was she planning her escape away from me now that she knew what my sin was? If she left... I don’t know if I’d survive it.

“I was in the hospital for months. Was bandaged to shit when I went to their funerals. Everyone else wore black, and I was wrapped in white bandages.” I remembered all their looks. They knew who I was, even if they didn’t know my name. “I was out-casted. I wanted to stay there for the whole thing, but Madison and her mother were so enraged the health care worker who brought me there was terrified for my safety.” I wasn’t scared, though. I deserved everything that was coming to me.

Her lips flattened before turning up at the corners. I was confused by that tiny, comforting smile and even more confused when she leaned in, her soft lips pressing against the rough skin of my bicep. My scars were an area I’d always

been self-conscious about. She was the first one I'd ever willingly let near them. "You're so strong, Darin." Her words were whispered across my scarred skin, making my whole body shiver. "These proved you survived; your friends would want you to live."

"You don't know that." And I sure as fuck didn't believe that. I was a stupid twenty-two-year-old kid with a golden future ahead of me. Most of my comrades were fathers, holding pictures of their families in their pockets that they stared at in hard times, making silent promises they'd come back to them.

"You don't know that either," she countered, face turning up to mine. "You're the one living with their last days alive. It was tough. What all of you went through something no one should even fathom, but it brought you together. They don't blame you."

"Their families do." Joslyn wasn't there. She wasn't there to see the carnage my choice left behind. I still felt their stares, their judgment, their hatred. I carried it all with me like a badge of dishonor that was cauterized into my skin along with the scars I would always carry. "I tried to take care of them, but they refused. They said they didn't want blood money."

"I know." Hearing her confirmation cut through me even though I knew it was already true. "Because they don't understand. They lost someone. You lost everything."

*I lost myself.* I remembered what she told me. How she lost herself when her parents died. I lost myself the day my

comrades died.

We're just two lost souls with nowhere to go but with each other. And maybe that's why we're so drawn to each other. Others rejected us, not having a place to go but within one another. Two wandering souls with pieces we force to fit.

We just stood there in the middle of the living room, touch comforting but not deleting the rampant thoughts in my mind. I didn't know what to tell her. She was right about me losing myself, but not even she could convince me that I wasn't responsible for their deaths. She didn't see their apparitions every morning. When I woke up from seeing their faces in my nightmares, I would continue to see their shadows surrounding me in my safe space. Everywhere I went, they were there.

Joslyn's light diminished them, but they were still there... they would always be there.

"How did Darrell find you?" My hand moved from her forearm to her cheek, and my thumb brushed against the bare skin. Thinking of that night five years ago took my mind slightly off my sinned past. It's what led me to Darrell and, ultimately, to the girl I held so close to me.

*I was living rough, spending everything I had on forgetting who I was. It's been a year since I'd gotten out of the military. Five months since I'd gotten out of the hospital. I'd just beaten the fuck outta somebody for making me drop the bottle of booze I spent my last dime on. I wasn't supposed to take it with the painkillers and anti-depressants I was prescribed. What*

*was the worst that could happen? I would die? I fucking wished.*

*I picked up the broken glass, pointing the now sharpened end at him. He didn't look phased. He looked impressed. He lifted his hand, putting it right on the jagged edge showing me just how fucking crazy he was. I saw the blood slipping down his palm as I pushed it harder against him, but he still didn't flinch.*

*"I could use someone like you." He could use someone like me? This man was a smooth talker, and I didn't trust a single fucking word out of his mouth. "I know you don't trust me. But do you have anythin' to lose? You want to die, and if this shit doesn't work out, that's exactly what's gonna happen to ya."*

*This sounded too good to be true. My mental health was spiraling. The only relief I got was when I bled the anger from my body using my fists on someone else. There was nowhere for me, but with my fallen comrades, I was struggling to survive. The only reason why I hadn't put a bullet in my head is my guilt. The guilt that I was alive, able to try to start over. And they were six feet under, being mourned by the people they were fighting for.*

*No one was missing me. I had no one.*

*I stood there, the bottle still pushed in this fuckers palm as I considered his words and my options. I was running out of money, living in government housing, and doing petty fights*

*just to barely survive. I needed something else besides my current lifestyle. "What do I have to do?"*

*He grinned, satisfied with my answer. He held out his hand for me to shake, but I refused. He chuckled, putting it back down to his side. "All I'm askin' you to do is atone for your sins." My eye narrowed beneath my hood with no fucking idea what he meant. "And if you don't? I'll make sure you have an early judgment day."*

Her green eyes shined in the minuscule lighting, looked at me concerned when I finished telling her my story. "You joined the Souls thinking you'd die?"

I felt drained from giving her what I promised I wouldn't, but she broke down my walls until it all unwillingly spilled out. I mustered a shrug, not having a good answer for her. "He promised shelter. Food. I was missin' the comradery I had but scared shitless of havin' people in my life my actions could get killed. He was the best option I had at the time."

Her lips pressed to my chest, the warmth of them spreading through the skin on that area, making me shiver. "I'm glad you took him up on that offer."

I was neutral towards my decision to join the Souls. Mostly because it wasn't much different than the life I was living before it. I still wanted to be isolated. But now I felt desperate. I hadn't told anyone anything about me, and now that I was, I wanted her to hear it all. Even if she was just going to leave, I wanted her to know she was the only one to have this piece of myself I kept hidden.



“I wasn’t always like this.” I needed her touch. Her lips on my chest weren’t enough. My hand slid on her lower back and behind her neck, thrusting her clothed body until it was flush with mine. I didn’t know when I went from not wanting anyone’s touch to being lost if she didn’t touch me, but here we are. “Ma and Pop were told they couldn’t have kids, but I came along, and they treated me like a damn miracle. May have been an only child, but I was raised to work for your own shit. Pop was a farmer, and Ma was a homemaker. Been workin’ all my damn life.”

Joslyn took my vulnerable moment as an opportunity to walk us back to our bedroom. A room I refused to touch with paint. I wanted this to be my safe space. Somewhere I could decompress and live alone with my thoughts. Any color in here, and I would think of her.

She guided me to our bed as I mindlessly laid down on her side. I inhaled, the floral scent calming me as she walked to the other side. She laid flat, the back of her hand dragging my hood down before going to the back of my neck to guide my cheek to her chest. Cuddling. A foreign concept that I’d just adapted for her recently. I hated people’s touch, but I was addicted to hers. Her touch was delicate as her fingers ran through my curly brown hair, the gesture soothing me more than I wanted to admit. “Tell me about your parents.”

I reveled in her comfort a few moments before I found the words to describe them. “They were an older couple, had me in their late forties. They were told they couldn’t have kids, and I was an oops baby. They never treated me like one,

though. Came with complications with Ma. She was almost forty-five when she had me, and it wreaked havoc on her body. She died when I was sixteen. Pop followed her closely after.” Watching them die was harrowing, but I made sure they had the best damn care before that passed. “I took care of the farm, but with no help, it got too much for me. Did somethin’ I promised Pops I would never do, but I sold the land. I had to.” And it gutted me.

Her chest vibrated under my cheek as she spoke, “I’m so sorry to hear about your parents. I’m sure they understand your decision.” I wasn’t making any profit, and it was going to shit. Taking care of the household and making sure I had enough funds to keep the farm and myself alive at eighteen years old was an impossible task. I could only hope Pops understood that.

“Had no fuckin’ place to go, so I went to my only option. The Army.” I craned my neck. Her gorgeous green eyes twinkled with sympathy as they met mine. “That’s why when I saw you givin’ a homeless guy your last dime last year, it shook me to my damn core. Didn’t realize how you’d change my fuckin’ life.” She visibly recoiled. I’d never planned on telling her about that night. I wanted it to be a secret I kept to myself in case it freaked her out. I’ve been watching her over the past year.

She blinked at me, astonishment in her eyes. “You saw that?”

“Yeah.” My hands dropped to my zipper, her eyes following. I was tired of all this talk about my past and feelings. I wanted to feel my cock tearing that pretty pussy of hers apart. “Thought it was real nice of you, so I followed you home.”

“I’ve always felt like someone was watching me.” She admitted with a light laugh. Her hand trailed from my hair to my cheek. “I felt you behind the tree in the front yard. I always tried to catch you, but your home was in the shadows. Now it’s with me.” Her hand pushed on the back of my neck, bringing my face closer to hers. “You really did haunt me.”

“Yeah.” My voice was grave as I twisted my body, maneuvering myself over her. My palms were flat on pillows, and her angelic hair wisped on the white bedding. I made a mental note to get a new bedspread... and maybe some more paint. “Now I’m gonna fuck ya.”

That pretty pink mouth of hers spread wide. It still amazed me that someone like her wanted to be with a fuck up like me willingly. “You talk too much.”

My head dipped, claiming her mouth with mine. Her arms wrapped around my neck, bringing me as close as humanly possible. My tongue traced the seam of her lips, dominating her completely.

My hands slid down her sides slipping into the waistband of her pants. Pushing her pants off her legs, I moved her panties to the side. I shoved my unzipped pants down my hips, lining my throbbing cock up with her entrance. I pulled my

mouth away from her addicting lips, pressing our foreheads together, and keeping our eyes connected. She wrapped her legs tightly around my hips, tilting her hips making the head of my cock brush against her slick opening.

She gasped as I pushed inside her, the bed creaking with each thrust of my hips. My eyes briefly glance at the headboard, looking at all the tallies. This was the second headboard, the first making residence out in the garage. I'd have to build a shed just for them, I had plans on fucking her until I wasn't breathing anymore.

My motions were slow, and sensual as I slowly thrust in and out of her. This wasn't our usual ritual when it came to sex. Our sex was rough, and my goal was to make her throat raw by screaming my name.

This? I wanted to feel all of her. Her touch, her emotions, her everything.

Our breaths mingled, her moans filling the silent room. With each push of my hips, her walls tightened around me. I told myself I would go slow, but the feel of her encompassing my cock made me lose whatever control I had. My thrusts turned lethal, her cries of my name ringing in my ears as I tilted her hips up. My hands palmed her ass, lifting her at an angle where my large cock hit that spot that made her sing. Her cunt clenched around me, warmth spreading on my cock as she threw her head back into the pillow. A strangled cry erupted from me as I filled her tight cunt, both our chests heaving in a steady rhythm.

Our panted breaths mixed as I pressed my forehead to hers again, soaking in the feelings between us. I didn't know how to describe what I felt for Joslyn, but it was something I hadn't ever felt. I was addicted to how much lighter I felt whenever she was around.

I watched as her lips turned into a radiant smile, tilting her chin up so our lips could meet once more.

I'd never get enough of this woman.

But, God. If only I fucking knew what was going to happen to us next.

I would've never haunted her.

## Chapter 26: Sarge



“Did you know there are fifty-six Skittles in a bag?”

“Can you choke on one?” Husk grumbled, his nerves already thin, but with Tyrant’s nonsense, it was nonexistent.

Tyrant, Husk, V, Hex, and I were outside of Joslyn’s parents home. Prez didn’t trust me to come here by myself. I would’ve been fine since my girl wasn’t here. Her pressing those pretty tits of hers against the window for all to see brought out something animalistic in me. What was I supposed to do? Resist her and ask her to cover herself up?

No, I was going to make her come. Those hazed eyes glazed with lustful satisfaction, and those pretty pink lips turned up in a daze. The way her nipples hardened on my tongue, the way she threw her head back as she came just from rubbing against my thigh—

Fuck, I shouldn’t get hard at a time like this.

We were here for a stake-out. We’d gotten a tip from a not-so-willing third party that the Bloods were coming here tonight to retrieve something. I didn’t see anyone in the windows just yet, but I hoped they’d hurry the fuck up or the only body we were bringing back was Tyrant’s.

“If I choked to death, that would just be a travesty to the club. I’m the most entertaining fucker here. What would y’all do if I was gone? Finger paint with people’s blood?” I inwardly scoffed. Entertaining was not the way I would describe Tyrant. He was easily the most annoying person I’ve ever had the displeasure of being around.

“Annoying.” At least I wasn’t the only one who thought that.

Tyrant laughed at Hex’s accurate comment, looking over at our club doctor with a grin I knew could likely get him killed. “You can perform surgery, but you can’t rub more than two words together?”

His dark eyes narrowed, lips tugging into a sneer that would scare smart men. But Tyrant wasn’t a smart man. Most of the time, the fucker didn’t have two brain cells to rub together. “Shut the fuck up.”

Tyrant’s lips flattened before his brawny jaw fell open. “Four words? Just for me? You flatter me, Hex.”

Husk groaned, tattooed hand rubbing down the side of his face. Hex turned back to our targeted building, ignoring him. I was just thinking how mad Prez would be if I threw him through the window. V’s eyes shot to Tyrant as he snorted. “What’s your deal? You nearly got them killed last time you interacted with these assholes.”

Dunno why he said it like it was a bad thing. V wore that shit like a trophy. He loved the carnage his actions caused. He threw his bat up over his shoulder. “I can make sure you die.”

He wasn't joking. That devil of a man didn't know what an idle threat was. He took a cloth out of his back pocket, polishing the rusty nail he scotch taped onto his baseball bat. The pointed end sticking out, ready to strike anyone.

Tyrant rolled his eyes at V's words. His pale blue eyes turned back in on our target before grumbling, but he kept glancing at our unhinged brother every so often, knowing that V could snap at any second. "What kind of brotherhood is this."

Wasn't that the million-dollar question? Everything going on recently made me think this brotherhood Prez built was built on a cracked foundation. He wasn't being truthful about shit, and his priorities were fucked, but he'd brush it off as a bias of what I had going on with Joslyn. I knew he didn't trust her, even if the only thing he had against her was a shitty sister and a shittier past.

"This brotherhood gave us all a second chance." Husk was bitter, full of regret and guilt. He hasn't been the same man since Marilyn was taken... the circumstances of her kidnapping weren't brought to light. Only Husk and Prez knew what the fuck happened that night.

"Much like a pussycat, I have nine lives." Tyrant's smile peered in the moonlight, his ice-colored eyes dimmed with the cascading shadows.

"You got two more," Husk reminded him, instantly sobering Tyrant. Tyrant had a strike, something Prez dished out when a brother was out of line and needed to be humbled.



You get two chances to fix yourself, but your third offense? The chains in Hellbound's basement were for more than just our enemies.

“Yeah,” he croaked, eyes locking on the front window of the two-story house. He shifted on his feet, hands in his pockets, eyes far away, almost glowing under the shadow of the tree. His lips stretched up, showing off a canine. “Do you think Prez will let me wear a collar?”

I shook my head. The things that come out of that fuckers mouth. Husk's lips flattened, shivering at the imagery of Tyrant with a collar on his knees—okay, need to think of Joslyn on her knees instead. Her nipples hardened with the ice cube during our sensory play the other day as her green eyes glossed over with the need for my cock to stretch her until it drowned with her cum. Blood rushed to my cock, the imagery of my girl enough to make me embarrass myself. Yeah, that worked. Worked too fucking well.

We needed to get this the fuck over with. I shifted my front half slightly, adjusting my jeans the best I could to not show my brothers my hard-on. I doubt they could see it, with the only light surrounding us being the moonlight. The house was still dark, and we were waiting for a sign of life.

“How're things going with Jos?”

A simple question that had me growling. “None of your fuckin' business.”

Tyrant held his hands up in defense. “Jesus, don't want to fuck her. Just wonderin', ya know? Since Grim was the one

supposed to fuck her—”

He was up against the tree, my forearm pinning his airway as his brawny hands clawed my arms. Husk shouted my name, running towards me. I shot him a glare, stopping right before he reached me. He knew better than to touch me. I'd snap his body in two on the tree trunk I was about to kill Tyrant on.

Even if he wasn't wrong. Shocked as fuck when I saw it was Joslyn on the screen when she was shown at church. My heart ripped to shreds when I heard about all the bad shit she'd done. I didn't believe it. She was too fucking sweet to ever hurt a damn fly. She wouldn't even put fly traps in our cabin. I was relieved when it was discovered she had a bitch of a twin sister, but that relief was short-lived when I found out how Jordyn was treating her... and what the plan was that involved Grim with Joslyn.

He was supposed to go to Poppy Oaks and sleep with Joslyn for information but got enchanted by Nyla instead. Thank fuck for that, or I would've fucking killed Grim. I was the one watching her, and I wasn't as charming as Grim was, but I'd be fucking damned if he was going to be the one to corrupt her.

“She's mine,” I emphasized, blood lightly trickling down my arm where he broke the skin. “She's not your fuckin' concern.”

“Need to let go of him, brother.” Husk's voice of reason came in, but I was focused on crushing Tyrant's throat. “He's friends with Joslyn. Another guy who will put his life on the

line if shit goes south. You want to take away someone willin' to do that for your girl?"

I lessened the pressure, turning my head to look at Husk's hard face. The dark circles and bags under his eyes didn't go unnoticed. He didn't sleep, too busy searching for Marilyn any chance he got. When he did sleep, it was full of nightmares of what-ifs.

That was enough of me to back away from Tyrant, thinking of my girl in Marilyn's place.

"Do you guys always have to go straight to violence?" He coughed, voice raspy from lack of air. "She was telling me about her upcomin' surgery, ya dick! Was just wonderin' how she was feelin' about it."

"She's nervous." I glanced over to Hex, who was staring at us with disinterest. "She's perfect the way she fuckin' is. But it's what she wants, so I support her."

"I don't want to talk to you anymore," Tyrant grumbled, hand rubbing the red around his throat as he walked past me. "Y'all need to fuckin' chill. I know you're gettin' laid, but I thought that was supposed to put you in a better mood. I guess y'all are fuckin' inhuman."

What a fucking child. All I did was pin his neck against the tree. He's been through worse.

All heads snapped when the window illuminated, the five of us crouching to better hide ourselves. My eyes widened as I watched Jordyn go to the living room closet, opening up the

safe expectantly. Four men walked in after her. All of them were tall and lanky, looking at her ardently. She turned slowly, fear overtaking her face as panic set in when she realized there was nothing left in the safe. I only knew because Joslyn and I took whatever was in there.

One of the men gripped her by her blonde hair, dragging her up. Her mouth fell open, and her eyes slammed shut painfully as her hands instinctively went to where he was handling her roughly. He tossed her to the side, crouching in the closet and picking up the small safe. He shook it, a last-ditch effort before it sank in that whatever was in there was gone. He threw the safe against the window, cracking the glass. He turned back to Jordyn, all four of them walking up to her aggressively. She pathetically put her hands in front of her face as a way to defend herself, but it didn't stop the four of them from lifting their legs and delivering swift kicks to her.

Hex rushed past us, gun up as he shot through the window, hitting one of the men in the temple and shattering the window completely. He fell to his side, blood spewing from where the bullet impaled him as the rest of the group looked out the window, their faces sneering as they reached up and pointed their guns at us. The shattering of glass followed closely as our group ran out of view, charging towards the front door. One swift kick from Tyrant and the wooden door fell to the floor with a boom that shook the house and let everyone inside know their end was coming.

There were three more men in the living room, which V immediately rushed to, his bat in the air, swinging at the man

charging our group, the rusty nail going into his eyeball before pulling it out and taking the organ with him. Husk pointed his gun at another man's knee, blowing it off completely. He ran over, kicking him in the head as his screams were agonizing at missing half of his leg. The third one charged at me, and I braced myself for a fight, but it never came. A loud pop sounded before his body fell lifeless to the floor, small trickles of his blood spraying on my eyes as I looked to my right. A very serious-looking Tyrant eyed the dead man as the smoke was still pouring from the barrel of his gun.

He cocked his head in Jordyn's direction. "Go."

I bolted, not hearing anything. I passed the doorframe, face crunching as I looked at the scene in front of me. Hex, hands bloody in the middle of four bodies that circled him like a pentagram. My nose crinkled at seeing the hole in one of the man's backs. It was too big for a gun... Jesus Christ, did he rip that guy's heart out?

He turned his head, glancing at me from the side, his eyes as black as his fucking heart. Blood was smeared, his usual black slicked-back hair falling haphazardly, tinted with the men's blood.

"Chasm," Jordyn's weak voice broke the spell we were under. She was weeping as she was saying the name of the blueprints I took out of here when Joslyn and I came here. "No one was supposed to know about Chasm."

Her eyes shut, her body going limp. I would've thought she was dead if it wasn't for the shallow rise and fall of her

chest. Heavy footfalls sounded behind me, but I suspected it was Husk and Tyrant. I still heard the distinct sound of a bat pounding against flesh in the other room. A low whistle left Tyrant's lips as he surveyed the floor at the corpse with the hand-sized hole in his back. "Jesus Christ, what did you do, Hex?"

Besides V, Hex fought bloody. He rarely joined the fight. He couldn't control himself when he went through a blackout spell that was caused by violence. He killed anyone before they even reached out to touch him. It's why we all stayed clear of him. He knew where every organ in a human was. And he knew how to remove them with his bare hands.

I eyed Hex curiously as he walked over to her. He bent down and picked her scrawny frame up, her oversized shirt sliding down her shoulder. He looked around the room at us, his black as-night eyes telling us if we spoke of this to anyone, our tongues would be cut out. He started to walk, Husk and Tyrant stepping out of his way as he cradled an unconscious Jordyn in his arms.

"Go," Tyrant told me as V was already smashing his bat against the head of one of the dead men. I knew all these assholes would be mutilated at his hands. "We got this."

"Gonna check the rest of this place out," Husk turned on his heel and headed straight for the basement. Tyrant followed his six as the sounds of footsteps and a baseball bat splintering against the dead were the only things left in the house.

I walked out the front door, stopping as I saw Hex throw his leg over his bike, Jordyn still in his arms. It was an awkward maneuver as the front of his body pinned her to the front of his bike, the back of her neck dangled over one of his forearms, and both of her knees were propped over the other one.

He sped off without another word, and I wasn't far behind him.

\* \* \*

Hellbound.

A simple name with a horrific meaning.

The soul of everyone who entered was sent to Hell.

Nyla, Joslyn, Oakley, and Jordyn were the only ones let out of the reaper's grasp.

I followed Prez down to the basement. The smell of death was potent in the air. It was hot down here, the crematorium taking up almost a third of the space. But that wasn't what our attention was drawn to as we hit the final step.

It was the two cowering figures on the same wall but in opposite corners. The chains rattled as their barely clothed bodies shivered with fear. They spotted us, trying to make themselves small so we didn't see them.

But they had our full attention.

Prez walked ahead of me, going to the right corner of the room. A shirtless man was there, his eyes gaunt and gray skin full of tract marks. He tried to look like he was worth something, trying to sit up tall, but physically unable to do so. Hex beat him pretty good but spared him by chance.

“You know, I used to be like you.” Prez stopped in front of him, the strung-out man barely able to crane his neck to look at him. “Barely alive. Only living for my next hit. Thinking the people I surrounded myself with were the only ones who would ever give a damn about me...” He crouched down. To the man’s credit, he didn’t pull away when Prez got right in his face, spitting his truth. “But they hated me more than I hated myself.”

He looked wary at why Prez was speaking to him as if they were equals. They were at one time, but not anymore. Prez got out of his shit and built an empire surrounded by lost souls people would prefer to have dead than steal the air they breathe. After a few minutes of staring, Prez’s eyes slightly glassed over, and he stood up. It was a look he got more often since he found Nyla. He tried to shut it out before anyone saw it, but we all did.

And it let us know maybe the man we’ve had blind loyalty to wasn’t the man we should be following.

“But don’t worry.” He reached for the hidden gun he always kept in the back waistband of his pants, the trigger he cocked echoing as he pointed it at him, a move that even shocked me. I thought he would have at least asked him



questions before ending his miserable life, “I’ll save you from the hatred everyone thrusts upon you. Consider me your God.” His finger pushed on the trigger, “And this is your mercy.”

*Bang!*

Jordyn’s screams almost busted my eardrums as the thud of the nameless man’s body hit the concrete floor of the basement, his eyes falling open as his face was in my direction. Probably had no one missing’ him, had no place to go to but a gang full of people who only loved him for what he could do for them and not him as a person. A fuckin’ sad life to live. Alone, full of people who only wanted you for one thing.

The small window illuminated Jordyn, who was still screaming for help as her eyes refused to leave the man Prez had just shot. She was rocking back and forth, breath heavy and hoarse. I wonder if she was remembering her first night here? When Prez did the same exact thing, but only this time, she wasn’t getting out of here alive.

“You got a few options here, Jordyn.” Prez bent down, and she backed up but could not go anywhere since he backed her into a corner. “Be useful for once in your life and help us out, or?” He smirked, eyes darting to the man with the blood pouring out of the hole the bullet had just put in his brain. Her small form began to tremble uncontrollably, her head going from side to side, making our leader sigh.

“You’re fuckin’ pathetic,” he spat at her. She closed her eyes, gripping her greasy blonde hair praying this was all a

fucked up nightmare. But this was the reality created for her. “You can only be loyal to the ones offering you something.”

“Tell me what you know about Chasm.” She shook her head, cowering into herself, but Prez wasn’t having any of it. He gripped her by her blonde hair, pulling as her eyelid popped open, and he forced her to look at him. If looks could kill, Jordyn would be lying in a puddle of her own blood. “*What do you know about Chasm!*”

“Nothing!” Her cries were frantic, doing everything she could to relent Prez’s tight grip on her hair. “I promise, I know nothing!”

“Your promises don’t mean a fuckin’ thing around here.” He tugged tighter, face centimeters from hers. He was seething, a crazed look of slight desperation on his face. His jaw was tight, the fine wrinkles around his eyes showing with his anger. “Why were the blueprints in your parents’ house?”

“Because they said it was the safest place for them.” Her breathing was heavy, trying to control the pain Prez was causing her. He was damn near ripping the strands of her hair out of her head. “A place where it would be too obvious for people to think of!”

He hated that answer. I could tell he wanted to shake the information out of her, torture her to see if she really knew a damn thing, but just like me, he thought she was tellin’ the truth for once in her life. He growled, frustrated as he threw her, her head bouncing off the ground, her eyes giving a dazed look before Prez stood up to full height and looked at me.

“Kill her. I’m going to get some of the other brothers to load them in the ovens.”

His footsteps didn’t drown out her whimpers as she crunched into herself. She was shaking from fear, unintelligible things escaping her mouth. I did recognize one word she said, and it was the wrong fuckin’ one. “Joslyn.”

Her even uttering her sister’s name pissed me off. “You don’t deserve to say her fuckin’ name,” I growled. Remembering all the shit Joslyn told me her sister did to her. Throwing her rapist in her face that day at the mall. Deserting her, knowing that there were people wanting to torture her for their own twisted amusement. She didn’t give a flyin’ fuck about her sister, yet here she was sayin’ her name like she was her mercy.

Nothing was going to save Jordyn. Not even Joslyn. Her fate was sealed. She’d be nothing but a pile of forgotten ash soon enough. I looked down at her pathetic form, arms around her knees as she was sobbing my girl’s name like a prayer on her lips. It was tempting to leave her alone, make her feel the pain she made Joslyn feel, but while she was still breathin’, I had some things to ask her.

“If you didn’t care about her, then why did you take her place in the Bloods?” It was a question weighing on my mind. Joslyn told me her sister used to give a damn about her, but it all changed the night their parents died.

She wasn’t answering me, too busy trying to plead to save her own skin. That wasn’t gonna fly with me as I bent down,

my hand wrapping around the entirety of her bicep, pulling her into a sitting position. She began to freak out, trying to get herself out of my grip, but she was not getting away from me. Whether she was ready or not, she was going to face the truth for the first time in nine years.

Her breathing was ragged, her eyes glossy. She was on the verge of a panic attack, breathing in through her nose and out her mouth to calm herself down. It was odd to see. This woman looked exactly like Joslyn, just thinner, with tract marks and gray-toned skin. My girl swore she never used the needle, just needing alcohol to block out everything around her. It was hard to stomach that she looked identical to how lifeless her sister looked even though she was still breathing.

Her head dipped, and shame filled her voice as she whispered. "... Because I couldn't protect her."

Did she know what her sister went through when she was resting in the room next door? "From what?"

"Douglas." The glossiness of her eyes overflowed. "I didn't know... I promise I didn't know what he was doing to her until her addiction spiraled out of control."

"Did you not hear her screams?" The anger I was feeling projected my voice to be more demonic than man. I felt like I was on fire for the second time in my life. "Did you not hear her cry out for fuckin' help when he was raping her?"

"I didn't." She sounded so ashamed of herself. "I didn't stay there. I moved in with a friend."

“And left Joslyn behind?” I could snap this bitch’s neck without any effort. My hands were twitching to take her final breath. “Why the fuck would you do that to your own sister?”

“I didn’t want to be there with them!” Her voice was hoarse as she stood up to me, still on the ground where she belonged. She was trying to muster up any excuse she could find to save herself. “I lost my parents too.”

She did. There was no denying her world stopped turning that day, but it didn’t fall off its axis like Joslyn’s did. “Your sister lost more than just her parents.” My footsteps echoed as I approached her. She stopped crying for a moment, horror at what I could do to her, want to do to her, shown in her eyes. “She lost her innocence. She lost the only life that barely accepted her.” I crouched down, elbows resting on my knees as I made sure she was looking in the direction of my face. She wouldn’t see the man behind the darkness, not unless I decided to slice that throat of hers. “She lost her sister.”

She choked on a sob, slamming her eyes shut and teeth chattering together in an attempt to collect herself. “I know.” Her admittance shocked me. “Joslyn won’t tell anyone, but after our parents died, we barely spoke. That night, when we were dropped off at Brian’s house, I dipped. The social worker never checked in on us. Brian was collecting checks and pocketing all of the money for himself. He didn’t care about our well-being. When she dropped out of school, I didn’t see her for over three years.”

“It could’ve been me.” That ‘what if’ weighed heavy on her. She looked vulnerable, bruises and dried blood covering her with clothes that barely fit her too-thin frame. New tears slid down her ruined makeup. “When I saw her again...” A hiccup as she tried to compose herself. “She didn’t even know who I was... hell, she didn’t even know who she was.” I didn’t want to picture her strung out, giving her body out to fund her addiction. “She was so thin. Her eyes were gaunt...” She couldn’t look at me as she whispered, “She didn’t look like my sister anymore.”

*Keep your shit together.* I repeated in my head, hands twitching the more she talked about Joslyn’s past life and how no one was there to save her from herself. Jordyn wasn’t the one to put the bottle to her sister’s lips. That was Joslyn’s decision. But to make someone suffer for a decision they never asked you to after years of addiction, abuse, and vulnerability? That was like giving someone a life preserver only to tie a rope and anchor around their ankle instead. Taking them back down to the bottom they tried so hard to crawl out of.

“I’m tired. I’ve held all this pain inside for years... all the beatings. All the times I... let them do whatever they wanted to me.” She let out a shaky exhale, not able to face me now, as she let out a whispered admittance. “God’s punishing me for leaving Joslyn behind.”

“You deserve it.” She was definitely getting her comeuppance. My hand wrapped around her throat, squeezing hard enough to scare her but not enough to choke her. “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t take your worthless life.”

Her devastated green eyes looked at me. My heartbeat slowed as I felt my hand slacking pressure, picturing a drunken Joslyn in this same position and not her heroin-addict sister. She was like this in the throes of her addiction, down on her luck and begging for her life, using her body to get her another chance. Her eyes glanced as my hand dropped, but she knew it wasn't because of her. I watched her throat bob, gaining the courage to speak. "I gave up my life so Joslyn didn't lose hers."

"And yet you're the one here in chains," I reminded her as if she couldn't feel the shackles containing her from a life full of her vices. "Try again."

She eyed me, racking her brain for something—anything that would spare her life. I couldn't think of one goddamn thing she could offer me to make me think her breath was warranted.

"I know where Douglas is."

My other hand grabbed the fistful of her already torn shirt, red blurring my vision. Images of that fucker hurting my girl for years and no one giving a fuck about it to send me on a murder spree with her being the first victim of the rampage. "You better tell me where he is."

She opened her mouth to tell me when the door was kicked open. I turned to look at who it was, my calm rage making my voice burn as I spoke to the intruder. "What the fuck are you doin'?" I asked as Hex opened the door. Freshly clean from the blood that was plastered on his clothes and skin. He had

bandages and disinfectant on his hands as he walked right past me. Was he going to clean up her wounds? She didn't deserve it. She deserved to fucking hurt.

“Move.” I refused, instead tightening my grip on her throat and cutting off her airway. I knew she would have bruises on her throat, not different than any other injury that was on the rest of her body. Hex's eyes narrowed on my hand around her throat. “I said move.”

I stood, dragging her up with me as her short nails did their best to claw my hands away. I didn't even feel it. Her nails were brittle from the strain she'd put her body through the years. She was hurting herself more than she was hurting me. “What if I don't?”

His eyes trailed from the way she was struggling around my hand to the veil I kept in front of my face. Hex was a smart man; he found ways to blackmail you into leaving him be or you doin' him a favor when he couldn't be bothered. He was a calculated person, always doin' somethin' for a reason and not just for the fuck of it. He walked towards me, his eyes showing no emotion as he tried to stand toe to toe with me. He was a few inches shorter than me and had lithe muscles compared to my bulging ones. I couldn't think of one damn thing he had on me to make me let go of Jordyn's throat.

“You want Joslyn to get her surgery?”

This motherfucker. My teeth clenched together, my voice ragged. “You wouldn't.”



“I don’t play games.” My grip slacked on Jordyn’s throat. This bastard had me by the fucking balls.

He knew I didn’t have a choice. With gritted teeth and more anger rolling off me than I knew what to do with, I let go of her throat completely, her body falling to the ground, sprawled out as she began to shake more as the pain racked through her body. She tried to collect her breath, holding one of her hands around her throat to massage the pain I hoped lasted forever. I was choosing her sister over her, something I would always do, but I wasn’t letting go of what she said earlier. “Where’s Douglas?”

She glared at me, baring her teeth, and I noticed she had a few missing; either they fell out or they got knocked out. I didn’t think she was going to tell me, and if she didn’t? Hex wouldn’t be around forever. Her life depended on if she told me where he was or not. She didn’t make smart choices, but she decided to wise up when her life was on the line, her voice hoarse as she ratted him out. “He’s at our parents’ tearing the place apart for the Chasm blueprints.”

What was so important about this goddamn Chasm?

I turned, not being able to look at her anymore. Hex stood there when I passed them. I was never curious, but I couldn’t help but ask him, “Why the fuck are you savin’ her?”

His eyes flicked to mine briefly, ignoring my question as he stepped forward to her lowly body. He put the supplies on a towel he brought before crouching down to her level. His dark button-up shirt paired with dark slack pants fit in with the

darkness of the room, matching his black hair and matching black eyes.

For someone who saved others with his knowledge, he'd looked like their devil instead.

He reached forward, eliciting a frustrated scream out of her. "Don't fucking touch me." She tried to scoot away from him, meeting the corner wall yet again as fear tinged her eyes as he came closer to her. "Get away from me!"

"Don't give a fuck what you want." He reached out, hand engulfing her wrist as he pulled it towards him. He grabbed the alcohol he put on pads, wiping it on an exposed cut. Shit hurt, I knew that too well. Her scream confirmed it.

"Motherfucker!" She kicked out, which he easily dodged. Her moves were slow and sluggish from lack of exercise and her brutal beating tonight. Hex's eyes transformed, pure instinct kicking in as he grabbed her ankle before flinging his arm out to flatten her on her back. He threw one knee over her hips. Even in the darkness, I could see the spark of fear in her eyes as he towered over her.

"Don't fucking touch me," his voice was a deadly low. "If you do? You won't touch anything ever again."

"I wanna fuckin' die!"

"I'm a doctor." He reached for his back pocket, pulling something out I knew all too well. When I lost my shit, that was the only thing able to stop me from killin' everyone in my path. Her breathing increased when she saw the needle, and

she shook her head with palpable fear in her eyes. “I decide who lives and dies.” He hunched over her, bringing the needle to her neck and injecting it roughly. “And dying is too easy for you.”

Her haggard breaths slowed, the medicine taking quick effect on her. Hex made no moves to get off of her. Instead, he tilted his head as his eyes remained on the rise and fall of her chest.

Well, ain't that interesting.

I walked away from them, fingers digging into the palm of my hands, trying to distract myself from what I just witnessed.

There was no fucking way Hex would ever get with scum like her.

But I didn't have time to dwell on Hex's warped actions.

I had some hunting to do.

# Chapter 27: Sarge



I made sure to rev my engine loudly, letting the fucker inside know someone was here to see him. I didn't care if he had reinforcements with them. I'd end all of their miserable existence with my deformed fucking hand if I had to.

He made my girl bleed. That was a death sentence.

My engine was still alive as I looked at my girl's childhood home. The shattered window wasn't even boarded up. Whoever was inside screamed in desperation.

I was taught in the military to be stealthy, but being too careful got my squadron and me captured, with me being the lone survivor. Last night, we watched from the shadows.

This time, he would know I was here for him.

With one engine rev, I turned my ride off, slowly throwing my leg over the seat before kicking the kickstand to hold the machine's weight. My boots crunched against the ground. It was night. Didn't they know that's when the shadows came alive? Some of us planned revenge by looking at those who abused their ability to act like respectful humans in the light.

I walked up the two steps, and the only barrier between me and my girl's monster was a fickle storm door. My foot raised, pure adrenaline taking over my senses as I kicked the glass in.

It shattered like Joslyn's will to live when Douglas decided not to keep his filthy hands to himself. Another kick, this time at the hinge of the door, the cheap metal breaking under just one. Curses were heard from inside as I gripped the door and pulled it off, throwing it into the yard.

I walked in. Unguarded and unprotected.

Like Joslyn was.

That thought alone made the very monster I thought I was rise to the surface. My fists were itching to knock someone the fuck out and show them what torture techniques were used on me overseas. There was someone in the closet of the living room, strewing everything out at a rapid pace, his anxiety making his breaths come out heavy.

I jumped behind him. My elbow landed on his shoulder and my right forearm went around his neck before pulling back. His pathetic attempt to get me off of him didn't do shit as one of my hands gripped his chin, the other his forehead before giving a hard twist. The cracking of his neck echoed by the way I discarded his body on the floor as I made my way to Joslyn's childhood bedroom. If anyone attacked me, they'd share the same fate.

My mind was focused on one thing. Revenge for Joslyn.

He was sitting on the bed, hands behind him as his fingers were splayed on the floral bedspread. He looked way too casual, way too knowing. I knew it was Douglas. The night Joslyn told me about him, I looked him up and wasn't surprised to see a long list of only petty crimes. Besides a few

thefts, he was an upstanding citizen. I'd remedy that real fucking quick with his head lying at my girl's feet. "You."

His hair was dark, shoulder-length, and greasy. His thick strapped white tank top and baggy denim jeans that were halfway down his scrawny ass exposed his black boxers. He didn't look scared, more like he was expecting this. The fucker even smirked at me, holding up his right hand and waving at me. I wanted to blow the appendage off his useless body.

"May I help you?" His voice was calm, his eyebrow cocked in the air. His yellow-stained teeth showed with his lips pulled back cockily.

I refused to give him any more time than necessary. "You know why I'm here."

He stood. He was tall, skinny, and had graying skin. His forearm was riddled with track marks, leaving behind new and old scars. He stood with me chest to chest, and he may have been tall, but not as tall as I was. He still had to crane his neck to look at me, and it took all my restraint not to kill him right now when he was giving me the opportunity. "Do I?"

He was grating my fucking nerves. A growl ripped from my throat, lifting my leg and delivering a devastating blow to his gut that had him bending over in breathless pain. I couldn't control myself as I grabbed him by his oily hair and threw his face directly into the ground, hearing a distinctive crunch of his nose breaking on contact.

Crouching down, I gripped his hair, pulling out a chunk from his skull, which had him hissing. He was breathing

heavily, teeth clenched together as he tried his best to breathe through the pain. But I knew he was fucking hurting. It was nothing compared to what was going to happen to him next. His eyes flicked with something when I twisted his hair in my grip.

Fear.

For the first time since I walked in the door, he looked scared. I wanted him to remember my face. I pulled down my hood, his eyes widening when he saw my scars. He won't forget them. My lips pulled into a crazed grin, my mind completely blank with everything other than causing this man as much pain as I possibly could. "You do."

I leaned my head back before snapping forward into Douglas', our foreheads slamming together with enough force that his eyes closed and his body went slack. He wasn't dead, just knocked out and would wake with hopefully the worst headache of his life. I would feel mine later; there was too much adrenaline running through my veins to feel anything but my hunger for this man's blood spilling on the ground.

I dropped his unconscious body to the ground, grabbing him by his pant leg before walking out of Joslyn's parents' home with the dead weight being dragged behind me. I made sure to run into some things, satisfaction filling me when he groaned unconsciously when his head bumped into the sharp corner of the door, leaving a small trail of blood in its wake.

He hasn't even begun to bleed yet.

\* \* \*

The door clicked behind me as I turned on the light, eyeing my prey. I wish I could've chained him to the back of my bike and dragged him all the way to the clubhouse. But I wouldn't let his filth touch my bike or my Cadillac. Joslyn loved those, and his touch wouldn't take anything she loved. He deserved a horrible death, but he needed a fitting one.

Instead, I borrowed an old junker from Husk. He loved to collect this type of shit, with the promise of burning it or hitting someone he hated when I was done with it. I was just thankful Douglas didn't suffocate in the trunk on the way to the clubhouse.

My footsteps echoed off the brick walls as I walked towards his body, which was suspended from the thick chain link pushed through the palm of his hand. I pulled my knife out of my pocket, putting it up to his filthy cheek as I dragged the blade along the cheekbone, him hissing, still unconscious, as blood trickled from the fresh cut. He woke up in confusion before clarification shone in his eyes.

"Well, well, well," he chimed, his greasy, shoulder-length hair caked in dried blood falling to the side. "Finally gonna kill me?"

"Death is too easy for you." He deserved more. He deserved a purgatory that never ended, death staring him right in the face as he was hopeful of a reprieve, only to suffer again.

And again.



He laughed. A belly one that raised the hair on my arms and pissed me the fuck off. He shouldn't be laughing. I was tempted to cut those vocal chords, but I wanted to hear his wails of unanswered cries. "I know who you are." I wasn't playing this game. I stood there with my face shielded in the veil of my hood as I waited for his answer. Or not, I didn't fucking care. "Joslyn's your new fuck toy."

It took everything in me not to jump on the chance to feel his neck snap under my grip. "I'm not goin' to bite with whatever bullshit your spewin'."

"Just the truth." He shrugged, chains rattling with the movement. His eyes flicked to my polished blade. "She's a good fuck, isn't she? I was addicted to her pussy—"

My fist acted on its own. I didn't register that I hit him until his tooth went flying onto the floor. I didn't even notice my fists shaking, trying to hang on to my last bit of control. My entire body began to quake as I looked at him through hooded eyes.

He smiled as blood pushed past his closed mouth. His skin became more clammy. His eyes becoming more glassy... fuck. That laugh of his.

Did he laugh at her while he hurt her over and over? My throat burned from a raspy growl that escaped when I delivered another blow. My knuckles busted open at the force of the punch. Even through his pained groans, he made sure he continued to laugh. The temptation to cut his vocal cords was at the forefront of my mind. "Defensive over a used-up bitch,

ain'tcha? You mad I fucked her first?" Another fist slammed into his cheek, my knuckles throbbing at the impact. I wanted to pull every tooth one by one, making him bleed out, but that would be too easy of a death just choking on his own blood.

"Hey, Darin." My blood froze at his taunt. How the fuck did he know my name? "Before you kill me, do me a favor? Ask your precious President what really happened with Dagger and Hollow."

I didn't trust myself. I had to put an end to this fucker sooner than later, or I was going to end him with my fists, and that's not what I intended. I turned away from him, making my way to a spot on the brick wall, pushing one in that opened a secret door. I felt his eyes on me as I collected a bag, its contents making it heavy. I returned in front of him, and he eyed the bag curiously, following my movements as I unzipped it before turning it upside down, multiple knives clattering onto the floor.

His throat bobbed.

Good.

I picked up a random knife, not flicking the blade out, instead running it along his sweaty skin. "Don't got a lot to say now, do ya?" No answer as expected. I flicked the blade out, taking great pleasure at the hiss that escaped him when I pushed it into his rib. I bent down, picking up another one and giving the other side of his body the same treatment. His body began to quiver now, the knives in either side of his ribs painful but not enough to kill him. I grabbed the sides of my

hood, exposing my face to him for the second time. “When you’re meeting the Devil, you’re going to prefer him to me. ”

I picked up another knife, pushing this one into his scrawny thigh. He yelped, eyes shutting tightly as his lips quivered. “Each stab for every time you touched what was mine.” My crazed voice sent fear into the waste of space’s nerves.

Joslyn told me it was too many times for her to count. Therefore, I’ve lost count of how many blades he’s receiving. “You’ll bleed out, just like you’ve made my girl do until she lost herself.” Another blade, this time, pierced his stomach. I gave it another push for good measure, ensuring it stayed in place so he didn’t bleed out quickly. “But I’m not letting you bleed out. You left her scars on the inside.”

Two more follow at the bottom of each foot. Then, two in each forearm. Too bad this fucker was so skinny, I couldn’t put as many as I wanted to in here. I was proud of my work. He was barely bleeding, only small droplets escaping where the blades cut through.

“I’m collecting the pieces of the girl you destroyed.” Another blade out of my pocket, another stab in his side. There was barely any room there now. “She’s rebuilding herself, one piece at a time.” I took the knife, taunting him by holding the blade close to his mouth. His gaze was unfocused, the internal bleeding already affecting him. “While you’re nothing but ashes soiling the ground, I’m gonna be buried deep inside her pussy. I’m the only man she’ll ever fuckin’ think about again.”

The blade slipped past his lips. His screams filled the room as I curved the blade up his cheek, slicing the front corner of his lip to his upper cheek. I finished with the other side, impaling it in his chest. “She wanted to smile for others despite the pain you made her feel. I wanted you to smile too.”

Blood was oozing from his mangled face. He was weakening, his brown eyes dulling with each ragged breath he inhaled. I grabbed his chin, forcing his jaw open before grabbing a switchblade and pushing it through the muscle of his tongue.

This was it. The masterpiece I predicted. Douglas is in chains, with too many blades impaled in his body to count. One for each rape. One for each cry. One for each time Joslyn lost herself to his unwanted touch.

I walked up to him, my hands casually in my pockets like I didn't just deliver this man a death sentence. He looked at me—glassy eyes that begged for death. I felt around in my back pocket, inwardly grinning when I felt a small bulge. I pulled it out, making sure he saw the blade before I pushed it in his right eye. He tried to scream, but he was too weak. He could cry all he wanted. No one was coming to save him.

I turned, walking out of the room, not sparing his dying body another glance. He would leave the world the same way he came in, bloody and alone. Opening the door, I closed it slowly behind me. Letting the click of the door be the last sound he heard beside his pleas for forgiveness and to make the pain stop.

His words got my mind going. How the fuck did he know about Hollow and Dagger? They were both long gone. One dead, one rogue. No one from the Bloods or the Flock should know who they were. Prez did everything he could to erase their memory from everyone but us.

I stilled as a realization hit me. One that I was too blinded by my need for his death to notice at first.

He wanted me to kill him. But why?

I started to move again, my steps more hurried. I needed answers.

And Prez was going to give them to me.

\* \* \*

I was still covered in his blood as I made my way to Prez's office. I didn't want a shower to delay this conversation. I heard shouts on the other side but couldn't make out the words. With my one-track mind, I kicked open the door of his newly furnished office. He sat there, elbows on the table, hands folded and covering his mouth.

A furious Victoria is in front of his desk. Her orange-colored hair frizzed, her shoulders heaving with anger as her french-tipped acrylic nails dug into her tanned skin. Their attention turned to me. Prez's face was calm, almost expectant of me to barge in here without his permission. Victoria's eyes were on fire, fighting for something we all knew she wanted,

but he refused to give it to her. Her cheek sunk in, teeth biting the inside.

“If you keep this up, Darrell.” She was trying to remain composed, but the tremble in her voice was giving her away. “You’ll lose everyone.”

He leaned in his chair, bending backward with his weight, looking emotionless at her. A stare that was becoming more common with him. “I don’t want anyone.”

“What about Nyla?” Her voice quivered. “What about me?”

“What about you?” His eyes shifted to her coldly. “Don’t know what you’re gettin’ on about, Vic. Never promised you a fuckin’ thing from me except food, shelter, and a job. That’s your own fuckin’ fault for havin’ a hero complex with me.” His hands smacked against his desk standing as he shouted angrily at her, “I’m not your damn savior. Stop treating me like I am!”

“You’re not my hero, Darrell.” Her tanned skin tinted red, fury flaming her cheeks as she lashed out at him. “You’re turnin’ into someone I wish I never fuckin’ met.”

*Oh fuck.* I thought as she turned on her heel, trying not to shed tears. Not because she was sad, she was so fucking mad she could barely contain herself. It was just the two of us, Prez’s eyes still staring at the door Victoria walked out of before sighing heavily and slouching back in his chair. He looked well above his forty years of age, gray peppering in his black hair. Without opening his eyes, he asked, “He gone?”

I got straight to the point, beyond done with his bullshit. “What happened to Dagger and Hollow?”

“You know as much as I do.” He was way too calm. His words sounded practiced, no emotion lacing them. “Dagger offed himself. Hollow took off.”

“I don’t fuckin’ believe you.” I slammed my hands on his desk, making the thing jump in the air, and his coffee mug shatter on the floor. “Douglas knew my real name, somethin’ only you and Joslyn know. He told me to ask you what happened to them. How the fuck would he know who they are?” He didn’t answer, the already thin thread of loyalty I had for him snapping. “You’re not bein’ truthful, and every fuckin’ brother here knows you’re not.”

“Be careful with who you trust, Sarge.” He stood slowly, arms behind his back, as he walked around to the front of his desk. His steps were deafening, but I’ve never been intimidated by him, and I wasn’t gonna start now. “You’ve changed.”

Fucker was trying to change the damn subject, but I took the bait, shaking my head. “No. I just finally saw the light.”

He chuffed in disbelief. “One girl is going to make you question your loyalty to me?”

“She didn’t.” She just opened up my eyes to a reality I was locking away without thought. I’ve always been a man with a strict routine, needing structure, or I’d kill everyone in sight. She taught me to shake things up and see things from her

pretty eyes. Be more cautious, so I'd always come home to her. "You did."

"I have my reasonings, Sarge." He turned, walking towards the window. His eyes were deep in thought. The slight wrinkles around them from stress showed in the pale moonlit glow. "Just know if I had to choose between myself and this club. I'd choose my brothers any day."

I didn't share that sentiment anymore. "I'd kill any motherfucker in this club and not think twice about it for her."

He turned, making the moonlight cast down on his face, accenting his anger. "You're not a true brother in this club if you're willin' to kill for a piece of ass."

"She's not just a piece of ass!" I took a step forward, almost giving in to my want to knock his teeth out for talking about her like that. But I held back. "You talk to her like that again, Prez or not, I will fuckin' kill you."

"You got somethin' worth protectin' now." His shoulders shook with laughter. His smile was ominous under the moon's glow. "I need men who aren't afraid of dyin'. You're useless to me now."

"Ain't scared of dyin'." Unease settled in my chest. "Are our lives a fuckin' pawn to you?"

"Men who have committed a sin they can't be forgiven for aren't afraid to die." He turned to me, fully facing me. His head held high as he looked me dead in the eye. "All you need



to know is if you're afraid of dyin', you can give me your cut and get the fuck out."

"You're plannin' on killin' us? Men who have been blindly loyal to you for years?"

"I'm not the executioner." He walked by me, his footsteps louder than his words, telling me in a few words that this club was more fucked than I originally thought. "I'm just the messenger."

I reared towards the door, seeing he already stepped out. My mouth was dry, a knot forming as I was rooted to my spot. Prez has always been reserved, only telling us what we needed to know or what we wanted to hear to do his dirty work for him. But this... this was new. He made it a point to tell us he valued us all. That we were just a fucked up family of people who were bonded by past mistakes. Despite Prez saying he made the club to find Nyla, it was more than that. We were all stupid, blinded by the grief and guilt to see the actual reason why we were here.

We were just pawns in a game our brotherhood wouldn't make it out of. A sordid thought crossed my mind at possibly discovering the true purpose of the Souls.

... Was Prez the rat?

\* \* \*

My mind is going in different directions of what to do. Should I call a secret meeting? Tell some of the other brothers about the shit that just went down between Prez and I? I didn't fucking know what to do or how to handle this. Just like me, the rest of the brothers only knew a life we couldn't go back to and the one we forged together. There was no other option for us.

I stopped in front of the room door I kept in the clubhouse, hand on the doorknob, debating on my next move. Maybe I should've showered Douglas' dried blood on my skin off, but part of me wanted her to physically see that I painted the ground red with his gore. Maybe she didn't want to see the aftermath, though? I didn't know how to handle this fucking situation. I'd never given a single fuck about offending anyone before, but this was a delicate situation. Praying to whatever God that would accept me that I didn't fuck this moment up.

The door creaked when I pushed it open, my girl sitting on the window nook looking at the stars. Should I turn the light on? Should I still be the shadow that consumed her every thought? She knew I was here. I didn't know if she could hear me, but she could feel me.

I stood in the doorway, mesmerized by the beauty that was Joslyn. The soft light of the moon reflected off her features. Her sunkissed skin looked pale in the glow. Her green eyes shined with a reflection of the horrid life she's lived the past decade. She was wearing the club hoodie she made for everyone, specifically mine. My scent brought her comfort. It made her feel safe.

I hadn't made anyone feel anything but useless. Making a woman like her depend on me for safety didn't make sense, but maybe it was a second chance to get shit right. I wouldn't get another one—I wouldn't need another one.

My life started and ended with Joslyn. If she ever stopped breathing, I'd be lying lifeless with her. I was comforted by the thought that she would be free of the agony of nine years of living with a trauma no one deserved to go through.

“I felt... peace.” Her soft words broke my thoughts. Her head twisted to face me as I began to step towards her, forgoing turning on the light. There was no going back now. The moon and stars above would be enough to show her the demon I slayed for her. Her vibrant eyes were strangely dull, trailing down my body as they stopped on the evidence on my arms. “It was brief. But it felt like... something was exorcized.”

I didn't say anything as I continued to move towards her until my large body was in front of her delicate one. She could see that I took care of the demon that haunted her more than the ghosts that came with him. Her dull eyes gained understanding as they floated back up to my face. “That's not your blood.”

“No.”

The corner of her lips twitched a fraction as she stood, the oversized hoodie hitting her knees as she stood in front of me. The top of her head was just below my chin. She had to crane her neck to even look me in the eye when I exposed my face to

her. I still struggled with showing her this side of me, especially now that she knew everything that came with me, but she was still here.

And that told me all I needed to know.

Her hand reached out, going for my arm, but I stepped back before her fingertips could be exposed to his filth. She looked hurt, confused about why I would refuse to let her touch me after so long of getting addicted to it. “I told you. You’ll only feel me. He’ll never touch you again. That includes his blood.”

She tried to drop her hand from mine, but I slipped our palms together, interlacing her perfect hand and my mangled one with missing knuckles. It was a perfect metaphor for us. “Always protecting me even when he’s dead.”

“He’s gone physically. But he’ll always be there mentally.”

She looked up, unafraid. I admired the strength she mustered up. “I don’t think he’ll ever truly go away.”

Ghosts never did. “I’d kill him over and over again if that’s what makes you smile.”

“I know you would.” She stretched on her tiptoes, putting the hand I wasn’t occupying on my cheek, carefully avoiding Douglas’ dried blood. “Once is enough. I want you to be absolved of your sins, Sarge.”

“I never will.” You can’t come back from the anguish I’ve caused six families. I abandoned more than just my comrades. I left behind fathers, brothers, and sons. There’s no coming

back from that. “I’ll keep destroying myself to return your missing pieces.”

She smiled, her pretty pink lips soft as the emerald in her eyes lightened. The way she looked at me always did something to this fucking broken heart of mine. “You’re the only piece that was missing.”

My chest was uncomfortable with the affection she readily gave me. I knew how to fight and fuck, but I didn’t know how to be a gentleman that was suave and soft with her and her needs. “If you want me to say somethin’ sweet and romantic, you can fuckin’ forget it.”

Her hand went to her stomach, body hunched over as she began to laugh. Fuck if her laughing wasn’t the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard. Her emerald eyes twinkled, bright with whatever happiness she could pull out from a life that’s been as fucked as hers was. “I don’t need you to be sweet. I just need you near me.” She never had to worry about me leaving or trying to get her away from me ever again.

The only thing that could separate us was death.

## Chapter 28: Joslyn



I was back at the place where the nightmare began.

My parents' home. A place supposed to be filled with love. Mom baking cookies. My sister and I pounced on Dad when he came home from a rough day at work. Somewhere with endless laughs, smiles, arguments, and everything in between.

But to me, this place was a haunted house. There are many secrets, so many lies, so many tears and abuse behind the simple plaster walls.

The wind sifted through my hair, blowing silently in the wind. I debated going in, knowing I told Sarge I would meet him at the clubhouse. Usually, I would ride with him everywhere, but he told me he had club business, and I had a shift at Poppy Oaks. I was now trusted enough to drive... with a tracker installed in that plus location sharing on my phone. Baby steps.

I decided Sarge could wait a few more minutes. This was something I had to do. Just like Nyla faced her demons with her not-so-grandma, I had to do the same. I had to say goodbye to the walls that destroyed me.

It was just for closure. Nothing else.

I looked around the exterior, and the front window was shattered. I couldn't tell if it was a shootout or if someone's body got thrown through the pane of glass again. I sighed, putting my hands on the rusted railing before stepping up the one lone step that had droplets of dried blood cascading freely. The storm door and wooden door to the front were gone. It was worrisome but not enough to deter me from what I had to do.

The living room was trashed. Blood, strewn papers, and gun casings littered the carpet. The knot in my throat was thick, and I had trouble swallowing past it. What happened here? All the memories of men beating each other lifelessly plagued my mind, and with shaky steps, I did my best to walk away, but nowhere I walked was clear. Whatever happened here, it was a bloodbath.

This wasn't the house I grew up in. How did it go from a family of four to this? I looked at the bloodstained living room carpet. Thoughts of silent nights where Jordyn and I dressed up in tutus and performed amateur shows for them. They clapped and laughed. Encouraged us. They tucked us in bed with kisses on the forehead and told us goodnight. Or building forts and watching our favorite movies cuddled up together as a family.

I felt my heart break at how happy I was. I was blind to what was going on behind the scenes with my parents. With each year that passed they just couldn't pretend anymore. Life had beaten them down and took the smiles and laughter with it.

Dad worked a typical job. Mom worked part-time while Jordyn and I were at school. My childhood memories of them were that they were the hero and heroine of my life, but as I got older, the reality of who they are warped. Long hugs turned into long shouting matches. Looks of love turned into looks of hatred. I'll never forget my dad's last words. I don't think he realized I heard him, but I did, and they sank deep inside and stitched themselves to me forever.

*"I can't afford her fuckin' hearing aids. It's not my fault she's the way she is! Fuckin' expensive bitch. We're gonna get CPS called on us if we don't do something about her quickly. Only one way I know she can get the money for it, and it's a win-win for us."*

I was fifteen at the time. I knew they were talking about me. My stomach sank hearing my dad call me that. He was never like that before, but the financial stress that came with my disability was weighing heavy on him. They walked out of the kitchen not knowing I overheard him. His smile was fake. The crows feet deeper on the corner of his eyes. I remember the way his eyes crinkled, smiling as he told me he and my mother were going out. My mom gave me a hug before she left. Maybe I should've suspected something since my mom wasn't a hugger. Especially not one where she squeezed me so tightly my bones popped. I relived the moment they walked out the front door. The way the door clicked closed.

They never returned home after that.



He had a temper and was impulsive, much like Sarge was. I was worried that Sarge would do what my dad did and just get to the point where he felt like the light at the end of the tunnel was the only way he saw a bright side to life.

I shuddered, throat swelling as I tried to combat the burning in the backs of my eyes. The burden I felt after I heard my dad's last words sank in. Mom didn't say anything. She never did. She went along with whatever he said or did. It wasn't a problem usually. They were never mean or abusive to us. They were amazing parents who always told us they only planned for one child and were blessed with two.

Well, one-and-a-half, according to Jordyn. A jab that always hurts.

I guess parents are only prepared to have a normal, healthy child. It was understandable. You couldn't prepare for the disability your child had until they were born and diagnosed. I got sick when I was an infant, taking away my ability to hear. My mom told me she cried when she talked to me, and I wouldn't even look at her. My being deaf was a financial burden since Dad's insurance didn't cover it. I spent until I was four not able to hear, but I was put in a special class to learn sign language. I remember on my fourth birthday, instead of a party, we went to the audiologist to be fitted for my first pair of hearing aids. I was so overwhelmed by all the sounds that I actually cried. But my parents and doctors helped me transition to hearing everything.

But even if I was a normal girl besides the inability to hear without help, Jordyn still told me I was her half-sister. Not that we had a different parent, just that having a disability made me half a person. Which wasn't true. People with disabilities are stronger than the average person. We had to learn how to adapt to the world in a different way than others who were blessed with working ears, eyes, and legs.

We were still worth it. We still mattered.

But the more Jordyn told me I was half, the more I began to believe I was lesser than. And that I had to do what others wanted if I had a chance of being accepted. My parents were unaware of the torment Jordyn and her friends caused, and I was already burdening them so much that I just let it happen.

With age, Jordyn stopped her petty bullying. Instead, she became my friend in our first year of high school and actually defended me from bullies. I don't know what the switch was, but for the first time in my life, I felt... happy. I had someone who knew my insecurity and accepted me besides our parents. Even if it was just my sister, it was enough for me.

My breath was shaky as my anxiety rose, my breathing rapid and shallow as I made my way to the living room couch. Not the original couch our parents got, one I had to buy a few years ago when the beer stains and cigarette burns from Jordyn and the Bloods in our old ones got too much, and the rancid odor made the thing fall apart at the seams.

Instead, it was a nice faux leather, a little banged up but easily cleanable with bleach. I didn't have the energy to make

my way through the house anymore. I had to sit down and collect myself, and then I would continue down nightmare lane if I could. The fall air outside made the house chilly with the broken windows and no front door. I shivered, wishing I had one of Sarge's oversized hoodies to keep me warm instead of the plain orange t-shirt I wore to work today.

A small smile graced my lips, thinking about Sarge and work. Since that night, he revealed to me he knew sign language, and if I didn't want to wear my hearing aids, I didn't have to. He let me have full control of what I did and didn't do regarding my body. So, I decided to wear my hearing aids less. Nyla and Oakley manned the front while I worked on strictly online orders in the back. If they truly needed me, they just came and got me. I only had to worry about wearing them at school and the clubhouse now, but school was ending in a few months since I decided to graduate early, and nowadays... we barely went to the clubhouse. I tried to talk to Sarge about it, but he brushed it off every time with a rigid stance.

There was a story there that I would drag out of him one day. Until then, I had more things to worry about. Like my upcoming surgery.

When Hex offered the surgery, I was skeptical. I knew he was a good doctor and that he saved Nyla's and the other Souls' lives. But I felt off about his intentions. No one did anything for nothing in return. But this was life-changing for me. Hex had already done preliminary testing and could do the surgery as early as next week.

My heart beat fast at the thought. Life was built on little moments leading into big ones. I never knew that party at Hellbound would lead me to a life I actually loved living.

My body sank on the couch. The night Sarge forced me to recognize the world with my other senses made me want to do it again. I reached into my pocket, pulling out my case before putting my hearing aids inside, sighing as I thought about next week. Hex was going to perform the surgery that would change my whole life. Nerves settled in, the unknown taking the forefront of my mind. I knew people might be against cochlear implants, but it was my choice. There was nothing wrong with hearing aids. There's nothing wrong with being deaf. We all have different wants and needs.

I wanted to feel normal. This surgery was the best chance I had of it. I've always dreamed of not wearing the rough plastic that gave me tiny scars, something I was self-conscious about that led me to always wear my hair down so other people didn't see.

I couldn't wait for Sarge to keep his promise.

Would I sound different to myself? Would he sound different? Even if he did, his baritone voice would always be my favorite thing. I always felt a spark when he spoke to me... his voice was my favorite sound.

The despair was fleeing, hope for the future now settling in. My body sank into the black leather, head resting on the top as the memories—wanted and not—sank deep into my bones. I knew this would be the last moment inside my childhood

home, so I closed my eyes, letting the nostalgia flow through me. One last mental ride through Hell before I let the memories burn.

Mom. Dad. Jordyn. The three most important people in my past life, but only one has remained. I still loved my parents and Jordyn, but not because we were blood. They all made sacrifices for me. Extreme, life altering sacrifices that could've been avoided. My parents killed themselves for insurance money for my hearing aids and I would be dead if it wasn't for Jordyn. The guilt will forever be with me, but I couldn't live my life like that anymore. They made those decisions, I didn't ask them to. I am not responsible for the actions of others. I can only control what I do. And I wasn't going to live my life being a doormat anymore.

A smile that spread on my lips warmed me. Sarge. The most important person in the life I wanted. A lifetime by Sarge's side is exactly where I wanted to be. Holding hands, kissing, late night conversations that led to exploring each other's bodies. Endless adventures and unexpected memories. I wanted everything with him. And soon, we'd get that chance.

I just wish I heard the footsteps barge in the house. I felt their hands pinning me down too late as waves of nausea and fear coursed through me as I watched a man with an eye patch and yellow smile pull out a black handkerchief, pouring something on it before covering my mouth with it.

I struggled against the sedation, but my body grew heavy, and my eyes tired.

The place where my nightmares started would be the place where the Devil kept me.

# Chapter 29: Sarge



No.

No. Fucking. Way.

It had to be the stress I was under. My eyes were just making shit up to piss me off even more. Jordyn was not in the common area of the club, drinking a strawberry milkshake at the bar, a glint on her wrists. Was she handcuffed?

Vic noticed me and possibly felt the murderous aura I saw at seeing my girl's bitch of a twin enjoying something as simple as blended ice cream. She waved at me, her smile not as bright as usual. I hadn't seen her since that night with Prez. She's made herself more scarce. Something she often did to spare everyone from her negative emotions. I rushed over to them, getting as close to Jordyn as I could without touching her. "What the fuck are you doin' here?"

She glanced at me before putting her lips back to the straw. She didn't look scared. Her dull green eyes looked more dead than alive. "Drinking a milkshake."

Even her voice was monotone. My head snapped to Vic, trying not to lose my shit. My jaw twitched at the force of my teeth gnashing together. "Why?"

“Darrell said if y’all were too pussy to kill her, he would do it himself.” Jordyn flinched. Body still as Victoria continued. “She just won’t know when or where. Until then? She’s to be handcuffed and watched at all times.”

My gut churned hearing Prez’s name. I’ve been steering clear of that bastard. I decided not to tell the brothers, not until I had solid proof of whatever the fuck he was doing or who he was working with. They blindly followed him like I did. Words from a man like me wouldn’t sway their opinion of him and could put me at a disadvantage. Or it could piss them off that I knew something fucked up was happening with him, and I kept it hidden. Either way, I was stuck in the middle of a situation I didn’t care to be a part of.

But one that would either save me or end my life.

“Since you’re here I’m out.” Victoria’s been more moody since the night I found her and Prez fighting in his office. “She’s your problem now.”

*She wouldn’t be my problem if I just killed her.* And if Hex didn’t hang Joslyn’s surgery over my head, I would kill her in a heartbeat. I wondered if he knew Prez’s plans for her now.

I flattened my lips annoyed with this situation. She was swirling the straw in the empty glass, chin resting on her palm in deep thought. The more I looked at those devoid eyes on Jordyn, the more pissed off I got. Why the fuck was she looking so damn pitiful? Once the shackles were removed, she was given the luxury of a lush bed to lay her head on. The thought pissed me off, and I had to focus on other things. My



foot began to tap against the floor, an echo I hoped was annoying her coming from it. I saw her glare in the corner of my eye. *Good. Hope you enjoy the headache, you bitch.*

My eyes never left the door, waiting for Joslyn to show up. It gutted me that I couldn't take her to work today. I had some shit to do with V and getting Douglas' corroding body into the furnace to become nothing but mixed ashes that were scraped and thrown away like trash. I dug my useless phone out of my pocket. My screen saver was a selfie she took of herself while she was working on the garden in the backyard of our cabin. She had dirt smudged on her face, her blond hair in a long fishtail braid with a daisy tucked behind her ear, giving the camera a smile that rivaled the sun.

Could look at that pretty smile of hers all day, but it didn't stop the way my gut sank when I saw the time. It was two hours after she promised she would be here. How had I lost that much track of time? I was enjoying the way her monster died excruciatingly, thrown into an oven with the knives I hoped burned worse than the Hell I knew he was suffering in.

But where the fuck was she?

I tapped on my phone to my tracking app. I told her that if she was going out on her own, I wanted to know her location at all times. A tracker in her car and a tracker in her phone. She rolled her eyes and told me I was overprotective, and maybe I was, but I wasn't taking any chances when it came to my too-trusting girl. My eyes widened, seeing where she was, and I walked over to the counter as Jordyn pushed her empty

glass away from her, it falling on the side as I slammed my hand against the wooden counter.

“She’s at your parents’ house.” I closed out of the app, dialing her number and praying she had her hearing aids in. They were Bluetooth and connected to her phone. “The fuck would she be doin’ there?”

“How am I supposed to know?” She sneered, swirling in her stool to face me. “I haven’t talked to her since—”

“Since you threw the fact you slept with her rapist and left her alone knowin’ your fucked up friends were out lookin’ for her?” I leaned in close, barely containing my rage as her face fell, paling with each truthful word spewed from my lips. “She told me.”

“I fucked up.” I snorted at her attempt to sound apologetic. “Look—“

“Don’t want to fuckin’ hear it.” If this bitch tried to talk to me, there’s no telling on if I’d snap that neck of hers. The only reason I wasn’t acting on it was Hex’s threat of not doing Joslyn’s surgery, which lingered heavily in my mind. She wanted that surgery, and I wouldn’t fuck that up for her.

“I want to be there for my sister.” There she goes with the waterworks that had me rolling my eyes. Her tears were pathetic. She’s been treating Joslyn like she didn’t mean anything, and now she wanted something to do with her? I didn’t fucking believe her. “I know my word means shit, but I want to change.”

“I don’t give a flyin’ fuck what you want!” I snapped at her, hatred for her fueling me. Everything Joslyn’s told me Jordyn did to her because of misguided resentment, she was lucky I didn’t fucking kill her. I’ve killed for Joslyn for less, and if Jordyn was anyone other than her sister, I promise you that she’d be in the unmarked grave I dug for her my fucking self where no one would find her, not that anyone would look for this bitch. “Joslyn may not mean anything to you, but she means *everything* to me.”

“She meant a lot to me, too,” she whispered softly in the past tense. Jordyn used to be her protector. Now she was her tormentor. “I want to get that back with her.”

“If you think I’m gonna let you anywhere near her, think again.” She’s not answering. I was growing more panicked by the second as I re-dialed her number. I needed her voice to simmer the temper that her sister was flaring inside of me. It rang.

And rang.

And rang.

No answer. I pulled the phone away from my ear, growling impatiently as I pushed off the counter and to the front doors of the clubhouse.

“I’m goin’ to your folks’ place,” I grumbled, walking away without turning back.

“Wait!” She called after me, and I paused. “Maybe you should take someone with you. They have that place guarded

day and night now.”

“Whatever,” I scoffed but was worried what she was saying was the truth, and Joslyn was there unguarded with who fucking knows.

Her stool scraped against the floor, footsteps following me. “Let me come with you—”

“The only time I want to see you is your casket lowering to the ground. And that’s just to make sure you’re dead and you can’t hurt Joslyn ever again.” I cut her off, eyes narrowed into small slits. She stopped in her tracks, throat swallowing her nerves. Fuck, Vic put me in charge of watching her. I always followed an order from Prez, but not this time. Hopefully he’d come in here and see her by herself and do me a favor. I looked away from her. “Ya know, the only reason she was at that party with a wire was to save you. If I was her? I would’ve let you rot in that shallow grave with the rest of ‘em.”

I left her with the truth that everything Joslyn did was for her.

But now everything Joslyn did was for me.

\* \* \*

Something wasn’t right.

My tires screeched and pushed along the gravel road, my nostrils burning as something smelled hot. The closer I got to

Joslyn's parents, the warmer it was getting. I revved my engine from time to time so she could hear or feel the vibration of my modded engine and know it was me and not some asshole.

But as I passed the lining of the trees, I forgot I was driving a motorcycle. I lost my balance, leaning to the left and toppling over, my eyes unable to look away from my biggest fear right in front of me.

The house was engulfed in flames.

My breathing was rapid, and my pupils dilated as I heard the cracks of the fire that went high into the sky. I couldn't breathe. My mind was blank as I began to tremble so hard the rocks underneath my hand were embedding into my skin, but I couldn't feel the physical pain. I could only focus on the blaze happening in front of me. My skin began to heat, sweat pooling on my forehead and palms.

Fire is what scarred me.

The fire was going to take everything away from me.

Oh God. Was Joslyn inside the house? Survival instincts kicked in, but fear held my body in its place under my wrecked motorcycle. My mouth was open, my heart racing eyes burning just looking at the house.

I looked to my left arm, feeling fire lick the skin as I roughly brushed it, struggling when the weight of my bike felt like the weight of the men holding me down to pull a tooth out

of my mouth or dig their knee so hard in my back I thought they ruptured an organ.

But it wasn't my closest friends inside the burning house now.

It was my world.

I had to go in there, but I was so fucking afraid. I was slowly losing my mind to the black-out rage that consumed me when I saw fire. I wouldn't save Joslyn if she was in there that way. I breathed heavily in my nose, blowing it out of my mouth to try to steady my frantic heartbeat. I couldn't lose to the darkness this time.

Joslyn's life could depend on it.

I scrambled, getting out from under my bike, my mind going blank as I focused on my mission. My breathing was heavy, adrenaline and fear fueling each step I took closer to the flames. There was still no front door from where I ripped it off its hinges when I dragged Douglas out of here the other night. I passed the threshold, the common area ablaze. I frantically searched where the fire hadn't touched yet, my eye catching something by the couch.

Joslyn's hearing aid case. She never went anywhere without it. My heart dropped to my stomach.

She was inside.

"JOSLYN!" I shouted, hoping for a miracle. Smoke filled the air, blinding me, but I've been in this house enough to know the layout without having to see it. "*JOSLYN!*"

I rushed up the stairs, deciding to start high in my search for her since the flames were as bad up here. “JOSLYN!”

The door to her parent’s room was shut. I rushed to it, putting my hand on the doorknob but hissing and pulling back. The handle of the door was too hot for me to open, but I didn’t want to kick the door down. I didn’t want to hurt Joslyn if she was trapped in there.

I heard muffled shouting behind the door, making me feel relief and fear all mixed in one. I guess I didn’t have a choice. Lifting my foot, I launched it underneath the handle, the shouts becoming clear.

“DARIN!” My heart dropped to my stomach. Oh God. Panic set in as my eyes went to the lone door on the opposite side of the room. The fire cackling around it made a path straight into my own personal Hell. They fucking locked her in there. “*DARIN!*”

She’s been screaming for me. She’s scared and calling out for me. I braced myself, grabbing onto the searing doorknob and prying it open, my eyes drifting to the rocking form on the floor.

Joslyn.

Hunched in of herself, shaking. Her face was buried in her knees as she cried out for me. I crouched down, touching her shoulder as she flinched away and screamed. Her voice was hoarse from the overuse as she threw her hands in front of her in an attempt to protect herself. I grabbed both of her wrists, and she instantly recognized my touch because of my

deformed left hand. Her eyes opened, her usually green eyes hazed-looking from the wayward fire and glossy from the fearful tears falling from her eyes. Her skin and clothes were almost covered completely in soot. A sob escaped as she got on her knees before she launched herself at me, holding onto me so tightly she was almost like a second skin.

I wrapped my arms around her waist, clinging her to me. My face went into the crook of her neck. Her floral scent, combined with ash, made her smell like a scorched flower. But she was alive.

One of my hands left her waist, trailing my trembling hand to her dusty hair with the fear I couldn't shake. Images of me being too late plagued me.

I could fail anyone and not give a fuck. But Joslyn? I could never fail her.

The flames crossed the boundary of the closet. Joslyn screamed as the ceiling started to fall in. I cursed, standing up with her still clutched to me like I was her lifeline. Tremors wrecked her body, and I turned and did my best to get us out of the closet unscratched.

I frantically looked around at the fire spreading rapidly. Soon, there would be nowhere it didn't touch. I only had marginal time to get us out of here. These fuckers put her upstairs in her parents' closet for a reason. If she got out, they wanted to make it impossible for her to make it out of her alive.



My teeth clenched, the vein on my forehead throbbing as I raced out of her parent's room, careful to keep Joslyn close to me and away from any crackling fire. It was getting more difficult to see as smoke filled the room, my nerves beginning to fray as I was losing what little hope I had in the first place.

*Fuck! Keep calm, Darin. It's just fire. This shit isn't about getting yourself out alive, it's about getting Joslyn out.*

This is your mission. Don't fail this time.

My eyes flicked to my girl, who was still trembling, trusting me to get us both out of here alive. She would rely on me to break the new faux wall she put up. I lowered her gently to the floor, needing both my hands to navigate through. I made sure my hand was circled tightly around her wrist, half afraid if I let go, she'd burn up along with the place she grew up.

I dragged her through the living room, desperately trying to navigate as the fire was spreading rapidly. It was on the furniture, the strewn papers, the bookshelf, and it was beginning to climb on the walls onto the ceiling.

I heard creaking as my head turned up at the ceiling, eyes wide with panic as the wooden beam supporting it was beginning to collapse under the weight. I frantically looked behind me at Joslyn. She couldn't hear anything that was going on. Thank fuck I had my hood on so she didn't see my face as I pulled her forward, pushing her in front of me as the beam fell apart, crashing on the floor, her scream audible over the crackles of the flames.

But if it came between me and her, I'd always choose her.

Heavy debris from the ceiling hit me square on the back, bringing me to my knees. But regardless, I shielded Joslyn, who was looking at me with wide eyes.

“Go.” I knew she couldn't hear me, and the thick smoke was obscuring her vision. “GO!”

She looked horrified at what I was telling her. This wasn't the time for watering eyes and trembling lips. I couldn't stay in this position much longer, not with the heavy debris on my back. I went to the only patch of area that wasn't filled by flame or smoke. The rest of the house was engulfed with no way out. My eyes were desperate as I pleaded, hoping she saw the words formed on my lips, “Please, Sunshine, go. You need to leave.”

She shook her head, looking at the line of fire in front of her before she inhaled deeply, eyes slamming shut before charging towards me through the fucking fire. Stupid, stupid girl. I tugged her shirt, her loud screams constricting my heart as the skin on her left arm was irritated and bubbling from the heat of the fire. I patted the fire cascading on her arm until it eventually went out, but her arm catching fire was the least of our worries.

The house was falling apart around us. She just had a chance to save herself, but she stupidly ran through literal fire back to me. I grabbed her biceps, shaking her hopelessly as our situation became more bleak. “What the fuck do you think you're doing!”

Her hand touched my cheek as the tears welling in her eyes spilled over as she loudly declared, not able to hear the volume of her own voice without her hearing aids. “I won’t leave you. If we die, we die together.”

“You have to.” The smoke filled the air between us, the space turning black as I ducked to my knees, taking her with me. Emotions I long suppressed welling up inside of me. “I can’t watch someone else I love die.”

Her eyes widened. She may not have heard my confession, but she read it off my lips as a sob broke free from her throat. Her smile was brighter than the flames surrounding us. “I’d rather burn with you than with your ashes.”

I couldn’t think about her words. Another loud crack in the ceiling had me looking up at the rest of the wooden beam preparing to fall right on top of Joslyn.

I moved quickly, not able to push her out of the way because if I did, I would push her into the flames. Instead, I covered her body with my own, my chest to her back, grunting as the hot and heavy wood singed my back, making me hiss in pain as the burning wood went through my cut and hoodie, burning my flesh.

More material fell from the ceiling. I grunted, trying to stand on my own two feet, but when a heavy ceiling tile fell and hit my head, I fell to my knees harshly, straining to keep myself from crushing Joslyn under my weight. I dipped slightly under the weight. The smoke was growing thicker as the flames raged angrily around us. I closed my eyes, trying to

concentrate on keeping upright, when I felt delicate hands on my face, pulling me down and lips I'd briefly thought I would never feel again pressed against my own, taking me out of the burning house into her warmth.

I collapsed onto my right side, lips still connected to Joslyn's as I pulled her to me, letting the flames dance around us.

I didn't want her to die. She deserved to live a life full of love and memories.

But she stuck herself with a sinner like me, and now she was damned for it.

I knew we weren't getting out of this now. The flames licked every inch of the room, dancing around us. The embers lit up her face, turning her teary eyes a fiery green as her bottom lip trembled, knowing what was going to happen next. Guilt punched me in the stomach, emotion suffocating me rather than the thick black smoke blanketing us.

"I'm sorry." I'm glad she couldn't hear the regret in my voice at failing her. I didn't even know if she could read my mouth. "I'm so fuckin' sorry."

"You were alone when you were burning before." Her voice was loud over the falling house and crackling fire. How the fuck was her smile brighter than these flames? "I'm here with you now."

Emotion choked me as I scooted closer to her. If we were going to die, I wanted her in my arms until my lungs filled

with smoke. I had so much I wanted to say to her, but I needed to save the air in my lungs.

I put my left hand up, stretching out my fingers. She watched closely as I put my middle and ring finger down, leaving my pinky, pointer, and thumb up. Her chest heaved, face scrunching up, unable to take her tear-filled eyes off my deformed fingers. *I love you.*

Tears slipped like a waterfall from the corner of her eye, evaporating from the heat surrounding us. She freed her bloody hand from the rubble, placing her middle and ring finger down, copying my hand. *I love you.*

I felt myself smile for the first time in six years. It was unfamiliar. It was burning.

She reached out, intertwining our pinkies together. “Together?”

I had no words. She would rather die than be without me. Someone as angelic as her damning herself with someone like me. The smoke was intensifying, as well as the debris on my back. I couldn't speak as Joslyn's face was being muddled by the black smoke. My chin dipped as I softly whispered, “Together.”

I lowered my face to hers. If the smoke was going to suffocate us, I'd rather our last breaths be wasted on each other's lips. For once, I wish I was going to Heaven. The thought of being parted from Joslyn was almost unbearable.

She'll find her way back to you. God won't be able to stop this woman from finding you.

My lips twitched at the thought. This woman lying by my side, where she belonged, would find me in any afterlife she had to escape from to get to me in Hell.

She loved me...

And I loved her.

“Sorry, I didn't keep my promise.” She couldn't read lips through the thickening smoke, my vision turning black like the smog. But it still had to be said. My failure was not lost on me... but at least I would die this time. I wouldn't live life without her.

At least I would die the way I wanted to but didn't deserve—with my world in my arms.

The smoke burned my eyes, a lone tear sliding at the corner as I focused on Joslyn's lips and not the house falling apart due to the flames around us. A sole thought on my mind.

*I knew I would take her life from her.*

# Chapter 30: Sarge



*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

*“Told you she was a fuckin’ mistake.”* I tried to focus on the voice speaking, but it sounded like I was in the ocean with how muddled it was. *“And look where she got you? The same position you were six years ago.”* Who the fuck was jabbering on? Why the fuck did everything hurt? They got where too late? *“Fuckin’ idiot for goin’ in a fire like that.”*

Going into a fire? Why would I be stupid enough to do that? Everyone knew I lost my shit when someone struck a lighter. Who the fuck was he talking about? Why couldn’t I move? Panic set in. Oh, fuck. I’ve been in this position before—trapped with the misfortune of hearing but not speaking or moving. I was a prisoner in my own fucking body. Again. But why? What happened? *“You’re destined to die. But by my hand. Not hers.”*

I heard the chair scrape against the floor. I focused on the footsteps growing more distant, a door shutting with a loud thud. My mind centered on whoever’s words. Both of us? What—

Memories of the previous night hit me like a freight train. My heart stopped beating, calm before the storm.

Fire. Joslyn was locked in a closet. Her crying wrapped around herself while I carried her down the stairs, attempting to get her out before it was too late. She refused to leave when she could because she wouldn't leave me. The anguish I felt. The agonizing fact that I couldn't save the woman who owned my fucking heart for the second time. Fire surrounded us, closing in before both of us passed out.

Joslyn.

*Joslyn.*

“*Joslyn!*” My throat burned. My body ached. My eyes felt like sandpaper, and the IV was ripped out of my arm when I thrashed around, kicking and flailing my arms in every direction until I stood up on my two shaking legs. “*JOSLYN!*”

My breathing was short and ragged, and I couldn't catch my breath. I was shirtless with panicked eyes scanning the room. She wasn't here. *She. Wasn't. Here.*

I pushed myself off the bed, damn near collapsing to the ground with how weak my legs felt. My steps were haggard, breathing labored as I walked towards the single door of the spare room Hex used underground for a recovery clinic. The hallway was cold against my bare feet. I hadn't realized that I was naked from the waist up, but I didn't care. I needed to find Joslyn.

Her name was a loud prayer coming off my lips. I was leaning heavily against the wall, ready to tear apart this damn clubhouse, even if it killed me. If she wasn't here... if she didn't survive, it was the end of me anyway.



I didn't want to live in a world without Sunshine.

My hand sought out the door handle of the main room of Hex's clinic. The door slammed against the wall, and my frantic eyes desperately looked around the room. My eyes sought out the lone bed in here. There was someone under the sheets. I didn't know if my legs had the strength to carry me there, but I would give my last fucking breath to see if it was her.

My breathing was deep and shallow, and my brain was foggy. My eyes were bleary, and I felt like I was going to pass out at any second. I was desperate, and desperate times called for the weakest, impulsive moments.

I prayed.

I prayed for the first time in six years that the person in that hospital bed was the girl who was my soul living outside of my body.

"Please," I begged in a useless whisper. "Please don't take her away from me."

I sucked in a sharp breath, almost collapsing at the relief that spread through my body when my eyes saw who was lying motionless in the bed.

Joslyn.

I struggled to limp over to her, collapsing to my knees the second I made it to her bedside. The white sheets and blonde hair splayed like an angel's halo. Her pale skin almost blended in with the colorless sheets. There was a clear tube in her nose,

and her face looked serene. I needed her eyes to open and the green-colored gems to sparkle.

But she didn't open them.

She was so small on the hospital bed. The thin white blankets covering her body had my heart constricting. She didn't look good in white. She should never be surrounded by anything colorless.

I went to touch her, to ground myself, but I paused, my hands hovering over her body, afraid that if I touched her, I would hurt her. The steady beat of the heart monitor reminded me that her heart was still beating... for me and me only.

I didn't have the courage to look her whole body over. I knew she didn't come out of that fire without pain. She ran through the fucking fire to get to me. For fucks sake... she was going to have something. The corner of my eye caught something on her left arm. My heart sank as the white bandages clashed with her porcelain skin. Blood was seeping to the surface, turning the white into a pale pink.

She couldn't die. *She couldn't fucking die.*

I couldn't stop myself anymore. I had to touch her. My hand went to her face, taking up half of it. My throat worked past a knot, remembering how full of life she was when I kissed her goodbye before she headed off to her shift at Poppy Oaks. And now she was lying here, almost lifeless.

Is this how she felt on the inside? She was exposed, so defenseless from anything that came for her.

I would've thought she was dead if it wasn't for the slight rise and fall of her chest. I put my hand there in case my eyes were deceiving me. A relieved, shaky breath passed my lips. I didn't dare move my hand, too scared that her breathing would stop moving if I did.

My eyes narrowed, hand gripped hers until her knuckles popped. Whoever did this to her, they were going to fucking pay. Douglas was nothing compared to what I was going to do to whoever locked Joslyn in that closet and almost killed her.

A low whimper escaped her, her face scrunching looking pain. I felt hopeless as my hold on her tightened, hoping my touch was enough to help her get through whatever nightmare she was reliving. I pressed closer to her, my free hand brushing the stray hair plastered against her sweaty forehead. My lips pressed against her forehead. "Shh, Sunshine. I'm here, I'll always be here." Her whimpers ceased, making my lips twitch. My chest felt heavy as I heaved a shaky breath, my lips skimming down her cheeks before brushing against her cold lips. "Please don't leave me."

Her mouth twitched making me pull back. She woke slowly, her eyes unfocused as they blinked awake. I froze as her head shifted, her eyes widening. But not with recognition. She looked fucking terrified of me. A scream ripped from her throat, trying her best to move away from me while flailing her arms. Her palms slapped my face multiple times before I caught her wrists. Pulling them towards me, forcing her to focus on me. She didn't have her hearing aids in. I knew she

couldn't hear me. I just hoped she had enough clarity in her vision to read my lips.

“It's me, Sunshine.” I brought her hands to my face, her palms resting stiffly. As soon as my scarred skin hit her fingertips, she knew who I was, her eyes lighting with recognition. She inhaled sharply, her mouth falling open as her eyes began to shine with unshed tears. I held her wrists tighter, and I didn't know who was shaking. Her or me. “It'll always be me.”

A sob caught in her throat, her eyes slamming shut. Tears slipped through the slits, unable to stop the wails threatening to leave her. Her whimpers were breaking my fucking heart. My hands moved from her wrists to her waist, pulling her flush to me, not being mindful of her injuries in favor of her touch comforting me and the nightmares to come from the fucked up situation we were in.

My face was buried in the side of her neck as I breathed in her scent, hating that the daunting smoke masked her usual floral perfume. Her tears swelled on my neck, falling down my skin like a waterfall. I hated her tears, but right now, I would take anything I could get from her. Good. Angry. Sad.

It meant she was alive. She was here with me, stealing the air I was willing to give her every last drop of.

She tried to pull back, but I wouldn't let her. I needed to hold her tight because I thought I was dreaming, and we actually died in that fire. She patted my back, silently signaling me to let her go, her cheeks damp and eyes irritated

from her cries. Her lips pulled in a smile, her lips quivering as she laughed. Her smile, accompanied by her watery eyes, made her emerald eyes twinkle like gems. “You’re alive.”

Her words were loud. I swallowed the emotion of hearing her voice. It was more raspy than her usual sweet tone. But it was her voice echoing like a metronome inside my head telling me she was here.

She was alive.

“We’re alive.” I thought the more I said them, the more I would believe them. Because right now, I thought this was my fall before going to Hell. That I was seeing my girl, and the floor would fall in, swallowing me but leaving her here alone. My forehead lowered on her chest, against her still beating heart that was thumping against my head like constant reminders that she was here. We were here and not in the fire. I pulled her hospital gown down, making sure she could feel the words against her skin. “We’re alive.”

My breath hitched, something I knew she felt. Her hand dug into my curls as my body began to tremble. What the fuck was I doing? Why were my eyes burning? Why was a puddle forming on her chest? Why did my cheeks feel so goddamn wet?

Was I *crying*? I couldn’t be. I didn’t cry. I didn’t cry when my parents died. I didn’t cry in the aftermath of my sin. I internalized all the trauma, using it to become feared by the Souls’ enemies and anyone who dared to fuck me over.

I was Sarge, Sergeant in Arms of the deadliest motorcycle club in Utah. I didn't cry.

But here I was, weeping for the girl who lit up the darkness that's shielded me for years.

I lifted my head, her eyes widening in surprise before bringing her hands to my cheeks, brushing whatever was on my face away with her thumbs. More tears fell unwillingly from my eyes. Her face moved closer, lips catching the tears trailing down my cheeks. Her lips quivered against my skin before she pulled back. Sympathy was plastered on her face as she maneuvered her right hand over my left one that was on her hip. I refused to let go of her. I couldn't right now. I fucking needed her and her touch.

Her hand closed over mine, her ring and middle finger tucking between our joined hands, leaving her thumb, pointer, and pinky leaning over mine. I choked on a sob, trying my best to keep my emotions in check, but like everything else in my life, I was fucking failing. I bent my ring and middle finger, our knuckles brushing together.

She'd never understand how much I fucking loved her.

More emotion escaped from me today than ever before in my life. I didn't want her to see my sobs, so my hands desperately went to her cheeks, pulling myself towards her so my lips connected to hers, letting her mouth silence my cries.

Her hands gripped my hair like this was our last kiss. They began to tremble to the point I thought she was going

We're alive.

*I survived this time.*

# Chapter 31: Joslyn



This past week has been difficult. Sarge and I may have escaped the fire, but we didn't escape the memories.

My hearing aids were lost in the flames, and I've spent the past week unable to hear anything being said to me. I tried my best to read lips and my friends' hands as they tried to communicate through sign language, but I was still too weak to interact with them. My thoughts were wild and lost to that horrible day that felt like yesterday, but a week had already passed.

All I wanted was to be in Sarge's arms. His rough fingers trailed up and down my back and his lips shaped sweet nothings onto my forehead. I wanted the nightmares of us burning alive to stop.

Losing Sarge, even in my dreams, was too much for me to handle.

The day I watched him cry in relief that we lived through the ordeal but didn't come out unscathed mentally or physically cemented us together in a way I didn't think was possible. I remembered he spent hours on his knees, his mouth moving in apologies on my chest as I did my best to comfort him. But even digging my fingers in his chestnut curls did



nothing to relieve the pain he had to relieve. My heart broke for him. He's survived this ordeal twice now, and even if I didn't die the nightmares of what could've been will still haunt him.

It's been a week of comfort and hardships. Dwelling on the agony of the events. Sarge hasn't left my side. The hospital bed was small, but he maneuvered us in a way we would fit. Him laying flat on his back with my head over his heart. His heartbeat comforted me. It reminded me that my nightmares weren't real. Even if they felt like it.

We needed some good news, something to break us out of this post-traumatic funk. Hex came in yesterday, signing to me, yes, another member of the Souls that knew sign language, that I've healed enough to undergo my cochlear surgery. I didn't understand the pointed looks to Sarge. They almost seemed like my surgery was a way for Hex to control him. But why?

We were still in the clinic. The only difference is he was beside my bed instead of in it. Hex would be in here anytime to start the procedure. My nerves were shot, fearing the unknown. I looked up to Sarge, speaking to him even if I couldn't hear his reply. "You'll be here when I wake up?"

His chin dipped. Warmth rushed in my chest, and I couldn't help the grin that formed on my lips when his eyes went to my mouth. He held out his hand, his fingers held high before dropping his middle and ring fingers. I looked into his eyes. He was waiting for a response, and I doubted he would

leave unless I reciprocated. With the way our luck has gone lately, anything could happen with this surgery.

I would never tire of him telling me he loved me in sign language. I splayed my fingers, kissing each fingertip before pressing them against his. I copied him by lowering my middle and ring finger, returning his gesture of love. His throat bobbed, swallowing whatever emotion only I made him feel.

I couldn't hear as Hex approached, Sarge dropping his hand with a sneer. Words were exchanged between the two brothers before Hex pointed towards the open door. Sarge's face whipped to mine, his eyes filled with unease. Not because of my decision. He's made sure I knew no matter what I decided, he'd be by my side for it all. Just like I was having trouble staying away from him, he was having trouble staying away from me. Hex explained that staying in the room during the operation was a no-go due to infection control. Sarge didn't want anything to happen to me, especially by his doing, so he relented. My gut told me he would be planted outside the door until I opened my eyes.

Sarge let out a sigh, butterflies beginning to swirl in my stomach.

My broody man's lips were pulled back, his scowl still directed at Hex. Sarge's eyes were still locked with his club brother as his upper body dipped, the rough texture of his lips pressing against my forehead before standing up straight. His hands began to move intricately. *"I'm keeping my promise."*

I lifted my hands, unable to stop the grin on my face as my fingers moved. *“I’ll see you when I’m pain free.”*

He leaned forward, lips caressing mine softly before standing to his full height. He didn’t turn and walk out the door. Instead, he walked backward. His eyes never left mine as he backpedaled out of the room, slowly shutting the door until he was out of my sight. Now it was just Hex, I and all the nerves I was feeling. I took a deep breath, eyes closing as I got comfortable on the pillow.

*This was it. The moment my life changed forever.*

I felt Hex placed something over my mouth. I breathed in the anesthesia deeply, letting my eyes drift closed. A man with two different colored eyes and a scarred left side haunting me.

Like he always has.

\* \* \*

The light burned through my closed eyes. I squeezed them tighter, trying to keep as much light out as possible.

Now, I waited. No one was allowed in my room except for Sarge. I wouldn’t even talk to myself, which was a really bad habit I had. I looked down at my lap, the white sheets I had on before now a pale yellow. Sarge told me I wasn’t allowed to have a white sheet over me anymore.

My lips turned up sadly at the thought. A white sheet was usually associated with death; he didn’t want to see me close

to it again.

I saw dark hair and darker eyes in the corner of my vision. I turned to look at Hex, a piece of paper in his hands. *Your implants are programmed. Let me know if you have any issues when you talk to Sarge.*

I nodded at his sweet gesture. He could've easily talked to me, but he went out of his way to let Sarge's voice be the first one I heard after surgery. I guess Hex could be nice when he wanted to be. He walked out the clinic door, making me restless.

The door opened, making me hold my breath. My heart began to race as his large figure shut the door behind him. He was shirtless, bare chest showing off the expanse of his scarred left side. I was surprised he wasn't wearing his usual cut-off.

I couldn't let myself be distracted by his chiseled abs or happy trail. I looked at his face, my eyes burning with anticipation at his face. He didn't show what he was feeling, taking residence in the chair he was in before my surgery. I was groggy with pain meds, swaying slightly even if I was sitting on the bed. He leaned in, forearm bracing my bicep so I didn't hit the side rail of the bed. He eyed me seriously, reaching out to grab mine. He's been more touchy-feely with me since the fire. I loved the attention, but I was worried about the long-term effects the trauma would have on him. He had enough scars, I didn't want him to bare anymore.

He gave a light push until I was centered, my heart racing, waiting for him to deliver his promise. His dark eye softened,

his hands dragging up my arms before settling on his cheeks. My hands circled his wrists. My breathing stalled, eyes lowering to his scarred lips. “It’s me, Sunshine.”

I choked up. The tears threatened to fall. My eyes looked into his.

It didn’t hurt.

“It doesn’t hurt Darin.” Even my own voice was slightly clearer. His lips flattened, emotion swirling in his right eye. Keeping a promise was something important to him... but something he’d never achieved until just now. I never knew hearing could be completely painless. Whenever the pain meds wore off it might be different, but I didn’t care. “It doesn’t hurt.”

The corner of his mouth lifted, a small smile lighting up his face. Those were rare and only reserved for me. I would treasure any he gifted me. His eyes traveled to my left arm. His smile disappeared and his brown eye darkened to almost black. I knew what he was looking at.

Burn marks. Up and down my arm. It wasn’t as extensive as Sarge’s scars, but a good amount of my arm was now an uneven pink color. Every time he looked at them, pain and regret consumed him. He hated his own scars. He thought he was ugly whenever I thought he was the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.

I lightly thumbed the pulse points on his wrists, gaining his attention. “Do you think I’m less beautiful because I have scars?”

He looked pissed that I even thought that. His lips pulled back, showing his teeth as he growled, “You’re fuckin’ gorgeous, Sunshine.”

I tilted my head, giving him my most comforting smile. I already knew the answer to my next question. “Then how come I’m not allowed to think the same of you and your scars?”

He didn’t have an answer to that. His one eye fixated on my new markings. “Hate you have to feel this type of pain.”

“I’m not,” I emphasized my words by lifting my burnt arm and touching his scarred cheek. “Because I’m not alone in this pain. And neither are you.”

“Not anymore.”

I leaned in, heart fluttering at his answer when there was a knock at the door. I looked at Sarge confused as his body steeled. “Who the fuck is it?”

The door opened. I didn’t expect anyone else besides Sarge but I was shocked at who I saw.

My sister.

Jordyn began to walk towards us, her shoulders slumped and hands rubbing her biceps nervously. Sarge stood up so fast the chair he was sitting on toppled over. “Get the fuck out of here.”

She looked up at him, yelping obviously not used to seeing his face. She swallowed her fear, trying her best to remain strong in front of him. “Sarge—“

“You don’t speak my name.” He snapped at her, hands shaking with the need to do bodily harm to her but wouldn’t because of Hex’s threats towards him. My sister was a bargaining chip for him doing my surgery and keeping it. “You need to fuckin’ leave.”

“I just want to talk to her.” Her voice was small and desperate. “I wanted to say goodbye.”

My heart sank. Goodbye? “What do you mean you want to say goodbye?”

She leaned over Sarge’s large body, eyes sad as she begged. “Can you please call him off so I can talk to you?”

I reached my hand out, thinking I should reach Sarge from this position on my bed but I overestimated almost losing my balance and falling out of the bed from the pain medication Hex had flowing through me to help with pain. Sarge was by myself in an instant, arms settling me back in the bed. “What the fuck do you think you’re doin’?”

His grumpy words weren’t going to deter me. “Let me talk to her.”

“No.”

“Sarge—”

“Remember the last time I let her talk to you?” I remembered, even though I was desperate to rid myself of the memory of her abandoning me at the mall with the intention of the Bloods picking me up and... I couldn’t think of that right now.

I sighed, putting my hand on his face knowing my touch always soothed him anger... for the most part. "I understand. This time is different, you'll be right outside the door and I'll yell for you if anything happens."

He debated, jaw clenching as he whipped his head over to you. "Hurt her again and it'll be the last fuckin' thing you ever do." He leaned down to me pressing his lips against mine before leaving the room, his glare never leaving Jordyn until the door shut and the room was cut off from him.

I turned my head looking at my sister. Right now I felt so numb, so naive. For years I've convinced myself that I deserved Jordyn's abuse because it was my fault she got involved with the Cardinal Bloods in my place. I don't know what she went through with them, but I imagined it was similar to my experience. I don't know what happened to the remaining members, but her being here had to be a truce of some sort. One I wasn't sure I was willing to have with her.

"Jos." Her voice cracked trying to keep her tears inside. "I'm so sorry."

No response from me as I tried to absorb her apology. That's the one thing about people who show kindness to others. Once you break us... we break all ties with you. Family or not. Before, all I had was Jordyn, Nyla, and Oakley. Now I have the Souls... and Sarge.

"You look good, Jordyn." She didn't. Her skin was still a grayish tone. Her hair is thin and greasy much like her body.



The eyes we shared were dull and beaten down by the hardships of the past few years.

Her breath hitched, not expecting my compliment. She choked on a sob, shaking her head. “No, I don’t.”

I cut the small talk. “Why are you saying goodbye?”

She let out a shuttered breath, looking away in shame. “I’m going to get help.”

I blinked. That was new, she’d never tried to get help before. “You’re really going to get help?”

“I want to be a better person.” She nodded, the tears she was trying so hard to keep inside spilling from her eyes. “I want to be your sister again.”

I don’t know if we could ever get to that point again. But I needed to say what was in my heart for my own peace, even if it destroyed what little she had left of herself. “You may have hated me, but I promise you no one hates me more than myself. You’ve made me hate myself for so long for choosing sobriety and happiness. I’ve enabled you and let you manipulate every facet of my life because the Bloods’ actions were my fault. Well, it’s not. I am not responsible for the actions of others. Your manipulation of me stops today. Get help or get lost, Jordyn.”

She tucked her chin to her chest, arms crossed as she shakily grabbed her biceps. “I want to prove to you that I want to change. I want to be a person that someone actually wants to see, not just someone they want to avoid.”

“Words mean nothing.” Darrell’s lesson was instilled into my brain, and he was so, so right. Especially when that person spewing words has screwed you over to the point you don’t know where you ended or began. “You have to show me, Jordyn.”

“I will.” Her promise was a quivering whisper. “I’ll show you and the Souls that addicts can redeem themselves.”

“Of course they can.” I was thinking of Mitchell, Darrell, and myself. We all struggled with our vices. Even the slightest thing could send us into a downward spiral, but we had love and support, an ex-addicts greatest weapon. Even if sometimes it wasn’t enough. “Being an addict doesn’t automatically label you as a bad person, Jordyn. Your actions and the way you treat others do. And you haven’t shown even a sliver that you can be trustworthy.”

I could tell my words resonated with her, hitting her in a part she didn’t even know existed. I was finally giving up on her when she was willing to meet me halfway. “I know. I’m going to earn back your trust, I promise.”

I didn’t respond. I didn’t believe her. She gave me no reason to.

“About Douglas—”

“Sarge!” I shouted in a panic, twisting the blanket on my lap. I didn’t want to hear his name and as promised, my big grumpy protector came in with one single call. The door slammed against the wall, Sarge rushed in between Jordyn and

I. Sarge kicked the chair over, Jordyn yelping as her head hit the floor with a hiss.

“Told you what I’d fuckin’ do if you hurt her—”

“And I told you what I would do if you hurt *her*.” Hex hissed as he ran into the room. His black dress pants and a button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up on his forearms. He walked towards us, calm with an edge of aggressiveness. “You don’t have control over this situation, Sarge.”

My heart stilled. I knew what he meant. He would undo my surgery. “Choosin’ this bitch over us?”

“I don’t think there’s going to be an us soon.” My breath hitched, I looked at Sarge, and his eyes narrowed at him. What was he talking about?

Sarge slumped slightly but was more casual with his accusatory words. “You think so too, huh.”

Hex didn’t respond as he went to Jordyn, offering her his hand but she sneered at him standing up albeit wobbly. Hex’s hand hovered close to her back, making sure she didn’t fall. Jordyn’s scowl remained on her face as she stepped away from Hex. Why was he being kind to her? He’s never been kind to another soul that I’ve seen.

I looked at my sister. “How’re you getting to rehab?”

Hex turned to her. “We leave soon, Jordyn.”

“She’s supposed to be watched.” I was still focused on Hex being the one taking Jordyn to rehab.

Hex's eyes darkened as they focused on Sarge. "*Darrell* doesn't have my loyalty anymore."

That was the first time I heard a brother say Darrell's first name. What was going on here?

Jordyn ignored the tension, nodding at what Hex told her. She looked slightly desperate as she asked me, "Do you... do you think I could call you later to tell you how it went?"

It was hard to tell after years of manipulation if she was being genuine. And I hated, even more, the guilt hitting my gut when her face fell and my head shook. "I need time, Jordyn."

"I understand. I'll be here whenever you're ready, Joslyn." She let out a shaky breath, trying her best to recompose herself. She looked away from me, choking on a sob. "I love you, Jos."

She ran out of the room, Hex close behind her. Now I was the one trying to keep my composure. Jordyn telling me she loved me for the first time since our parents died stirring my heart and making me question my bottom line with her. Instead, I tried to take my mind off everything. "Sarge?" He didn't acknowledge me, but I asked anyway, "What did Hex mean when he said there wasn't going to be an us soon?"

It took him a few moments for him to face me again, his head shaking from side to side. "Don't worry about it."

Didn't he know that I was going to hyper-fixate on it now? "But—"

He plopped down in his chair, his forehead pressing against mine. “I love you. No matter what happens with the Souls, I’d choose you.”

Listening to his baritone tell me the words I always wanted to hear did something to me. I tried my best not to get emotional, him telling me he loved me in sign language was a sweet gesture but hearing it in his deep rasp... I wouldn’t ever tire of it. I chose to ignore the last part, focusing on the love he dedicated to me. My forehead pressed harder against his, a grin on my lips as I looked into his eyes. “Say it again.”

“Not until you say it back.” What a stubborn man.

I pouted, his eyes flickering to the way my bottom lip jutted out. “I like you.”

He growled. “You more than fucking like me. Say. It. Joslyn.”

I laughed, the sound as light as I felt right now in his arms. “I didn’t take you as the type to beg a woman half your size for them to say I love you.”

“I am begging,” My eyes widened at his honesty. “You have to fucking love me. I can’t live without it.”

“I love you, Darin.” My forehead pressed against his, our noses brushing together as I breathed in his woodland scent. “I don’t know who I am without you.”

“Never gonna find out,” His lips brushed over mine. “You lit up my fuckin’ world, Sunshine.”

He was a man living in his own darkness. I was a woman trying my best to light everyone else's world up, while still living in my hidden darkness. Sarge was the only one who knew the truth, his darkness clashing with mine until there was nothing but light left.

“Your darkness eclipsed me,” I brushed my lips against his. “The world doesn't always need sunshine.”

He shook his head, nose brushing against mine. “No, but I'll always need you.”

“You'll never be without me,” I sealed our lips together. The feeling of his lips moving against mine spreading warmth along my skin like the sun on a summers day. He pulled back, our panting breaths mixing before I whispered. “Our broken pieces made a masterpiece.”

# Epilogue: Sarge



*“Joslyn Grace Monroe.”*

I watched my girl, blonde hair down to the middle of her back with an infectious smile you could feel from the other side of the gymnasium, walk on stage and grab her GED from the announcer. Seeing her in her black cap and gown, my favorite color on her, made my heart swell with pride.

Getting your GED didn't come with ceremonies. But Joslyn told me that her dream was walking across a stage, hearing her name called with her loved ones cheering in the crowd. So, with a few calls and threats, I got this community center booked and caps and gowns ordered for her and the other nine people getting their certificates with her. She'd throw a fit if I didn't include everybody.

She had many wishes that I turned into my own personal bucket list. Most of the club was here—sans Husk, Hex, V, and Prez.

She's lucky I love her. The noise was getting too fucking loud. Especially the group that came with us to the ceremony to celebrate my girl.

“Go, Joslyn!” Knight yelled right next to my ear, hands cupped over his mouth to make his shout louder. The itch to

push him down these uncomfortable bleachers grew when his thumb and pointer finger went in his mouth to let out a big whistle.

The man to my left was no better. “That’s our girl!” *Oh, hell no.* My lips pulled back, barring my teeth, as I grabbed Tyrant by the back of his cut. I yanked down, a small *oof* flying out of his mouth when his ass hit the spot next to me hard.

He looked sheepish as I roared at him, “She’s. My. Girl. Only.”

“Okay, okay.” He crossed his arms in a sour mood. Nyla and Victoria snickered behind us, clapping for their friend. “Sheesh. I liked you better when you didn’t fuckin’ talk.”

I ignored him, looking among the rows of chairs for Joslyn. She was staring back at her cheering section, a smile in her emerald eyes. Her fingers were on her lips, shaking her head at the club’s antics. I couldn’t wait to get the fuck out of here and show her how proud of her I was—and I wanted to get away from all these fucking people.

Wouldn’t change a goddamn thing about my girl except one thing. Her last name. Joslyn Grace Huxley sounded better. But we weren’t even close to making that commitment to each other even if there was no one else for me, and I’d be fucking damned if I let someone else take her from me.

The rest of the ceremony dragged on. Names I didn’t care about being called on stage and stupid cheesy speeches. It was finally over when they all threw their caps in the air. My foot



was tapping at the need to have her in my arms. Ever since the fire, if I went thirty minutes without her touching me, I got anxious. I saw she was alive, but I wouldn't believe it until I felt her heart beating under my palm.

Finally, after what felt like hours, it was probably only sixty minutes, but anything with Tyrant and Knight being jackasses made everything feel longer, Joslyn was allowed to leave. Her smile was huge as she started running towards me, her arms open. I mimicked her, catching her in my arms when she jumped. My scorched flower reverted to her original floral scent, making me feel like I was home every time I inhaled her scent. "So fuckin' proud of you, baby."

She stood on her tiptoes, wrapping her arms around my neck and making me place my hands on her hips to stabilize her. "It's just a GED, Sarge."

"It's somethin' you worked hard for, Sunshine." I lowered my head, resting my forehead against hers. I still had my hood up and still refused to take it down in crowded places, but I wasn't as shy about keeping my face away from hers ever since I showed her what was beneath the veil of my hood. "Nothin' just about it."

"I should be thanking you." I looked away from her knowing smile. "Anonymous donor ring a bell?"

I shrugged. There was no point in denying that I funded this whole thing for her. "Just wanted you to have the graduation you deserved."

“Don’t hog her!” Victoria whined, but I refused to let go of Joslyn. She could hug people later, I wasn’t fucking done with her yet. Victoria rolled her eyes, knowing I wasn’t letting go of my girl. I growled when Victoria put a comforting hand on her back. She shot me a pointed look before turning her attention to Joslyn. “Proud of you, honey. We got a good party waitin’ at the clubhouse for you.” Victoria grinned. She’s been decorating and making food for the past few days to celebrate my girl. “Let’s ditch this place.”

“We’ll meet you there, Jos,” Nyla said, Grim next to her with his arm around her slender shoulder. “Oakley already left to finish baking.”

She nodded with that smile of hers. “We’ll meet you there.”

The three of them walked away from us. I thought we were going to leave when her arms wrapped around me. I wasn’t as reserved about her touch, even though I still struggled to accept whatever affection she loved to give me in front of others. But when we were alone? Touching her was my favorite pastime, especially if it came with her crying out my name. “You remembered my dream.”

“I’ll make every single one come true.”

“My own personal shooting star?” She teased, going up on her tiptoes and dragging her arms up around my neck. “You know what I’m wishing for right now?”

I scowled, roughly grabbing her hips. “I didn’t do this so you’d fuck me, Joslyn.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “So you don’t want to have sex?”

“Didn’t say that,” I shot back at her. My eyes raked her up and down, sitting still where her yellow sundress showed the cleavage of her perky tits that fit perfectly in my hands. “I wanna fuck you in your cap ‘n gown.”

She pushed her chest against mine, a challenging look in her eye. “Then what are you waiting for?”

I grabbed her wrist, dragging her to the nearest room I could find. I ripped the door open pushing her inside. Her laugh filled the small space as I pushed her against a barren wall. A bucket with a mop sticking out was poking my back as I was fumbling to get Joslyn’s gown and yellow sundress over her hips and panties pushed to the side while she worked my belt off, unzipping me and pulling my rapidly hardening cock out of my jeans.

“This is gonna be quick,” I warned her, lining up with her entrance, wasting no time in thrusting into her, a moan leaving those pretty lips I’d give proper attention to later. For now, I just wanted to feel her tight cunt strangling my cock. I heard the crowd outside talking and walking, cameras being snapped. The thought of someone walking in here and catching us made my cock kick inside of her. She felt it, another low moan escaping her mouth. I crushed my mouth to hers to silence her, the chatter from outside the door diminishing. I didn’t want anyone to hear her cries. Those belonged to me.

Joslyn broke away from our kiss, crying out when my cock brushed against a spot deep inside of her that always made her come undone. My hand clamped over her mouth, making her eyes pop open. “Can’t be caught, can we, Sunshine? Only I can know how you feel when my cock is this deep inside of you.”

Her moan vibrated against my palm, making my cock twitch inside of her again. Her teeth nipped the skin of my palm before soothing the spot with her tongue. The glazed lust in her eyes made me work my hips faster, her eyes slamming shut as her heat strangled me. She cried against my hand as she met her release, spilling all over me. Her come coating my cock made me choke on a curse before hitting my own orgasm. I let us ride out orgasms by continuing to thrust inside of her. I should have been embarrassed having a quickie with Joslyn in a janitor’s closet, but I wasn’t. This woman drove me fucking nuts. I’d worship her like the queen she is later in our bed, but this would satiate the both of us... for now.

Watching her come undone wrapped around me has pride bursting through my chest.

Her face was flushed, and the cap on her head was crooked. She was still breathing heavily as I let her put her feet on the floor. Her face was flushed as she grinned at me, “You should dress up for me tonight.”

This little minx. I leaned forward, giving her a hard kiss before I slapped her ass. “I control what we do.”

She snorted, no longer believing that. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Her gown slipped too far down her left arm, revealing newly crinkled skin. My aura darkened as I fixated on her new scars from the fire. She noticed my stare, moving to pull the gown sleeve back up, but I grabbed her wrist. It slipped down again as my throat worked past an uneasy knot in my throat. She always kissed my scars and made sure I knew how she felt about my markings. She thought I was disgusted by hers.

I leaned forward, ignoring the hitch in her breath as my mouth brushed her uneven skin. I didn't like how rough her skin felt on my lips, but these scars were part of her. And I love every fucking inch of this woman. “Are you going to accept that you and your scars are beautiful now?”

Her voice was more raspy, trying to contain her emotions. My body straightened while I rolled my eyes. I'd never accept the way I looked, but I'd always make sure Joslyn knew she was beautiful. I turned to the door, opening it to see if we could sneak out of here unseen. But like everything else, luck was never on my side. On the other side, we were greeted by wide eyes as we stood in front of Tyrant and Knight's wide, teasing grins. My forearm wrapped around Joslyn's waist, pinning her to me. “The fuck you two lookin' at?”

“Lookin' for the ghost in this place, but it looks like it was just Joslyn.” Joslyn shrieked at Tyrant's jest, burying her face in my side as a growl barred from my throat.

“Shut the fuck up.” I snapped at him.

“You sure finished fast.” I was gonna kill this motherfucker. “I know some people that can help you with that problem.”

I tried to step forward, Joslyn having to hold me back as Knight laughed. He slapped his hand on Tyrant’s back. “Just fuckin’ with ya, brother. See you at the clubhouse?” He led Tyrant away from us, but not without some parting words. “Maybe we could teach you how to last longer than two minutes.”

*Thou shall not kill in public. Thou shall not kill in public.  
Thou shall not kill in public—*

“Two minutes? You’re bein’ generous. I think it was thirty seconds at best.”

I felt Joslyn shrug at Tyrant’s words. “He has a big dick and knows how to use it.”

Tyrant and Knight laughed as they walked away, telling us that they’d meet us at the clubhouse. I felt my cheeks burn. Thank fuck my hood was up. Joslyn squeezed me, I didn’t have to look at her to know she was smiling. “They care a lot about you, ya know?”

“I feel the love.” I deadpanned, guiding us towards the front of the building. My heart was uncomfortable in my chest. Tyrant and Knight annoyed the fuck out of me, but they reminded me of Michael and Karev.

“People show affection in different ways,” She began as she waved at her friends who were leaving. “If everyone

showed love the same way, no one would believe it.”

I didn't show Joslyn love traditionally. There weren't many I love yous. I wasn't romantic. But I fucked her senseless and knew how she liked her coffee in the mornings. I knew she liked to garden when the sun was setting so the dew would help the flowers grow. I knew that her bottom lip jutted out when she was irritated and that she loved it when I talked in sign language to her, even if she had her cochlear implant now.

I loved her in my own way. And that was enough for her.

I grunted in response, interlacing our fingers together. We were walking amongst the crowd. I felt the stares and the whispers, but I didn't care. I glanced to my side, Joslyn still smiling trying to hide what she was hiding from everyone. But she couldn't fool me with how her usual shine was dimmed.

I tucked my middle and ring finger against her palm. I felt her eyes on me, but I refused to look at her. I felt her copy my gesture, her two knuckles brushing against my palm. I glanced at her.

That sparked the light back where it belonged. In her eyes.

\* \* \*

“Not used to seeing your face, brother,” Grim commented but was smart enough to not stare too long. I felt twitchy when anyone besides Joslyn stared for longer than a millisecond. We came back to the clubhouse to have a party for Joslyn. She was

over with Nyla and Victoria, chatting animatedly about whatever the fuck girls talked about. And I was over here annoyed as fuck she wasn't by my side. "We're sure pussies for our girls, ain't we?"

I grunted, not disagreeing. I'd do anything for Joslyn, and she knew damn well I would. Literally fucking killed for her and would until the breath left my body. Thought I was going to be alone forever, but God had other plans. Never had any reason to thank Him before, but if it meant I could keep Joslyn, I'd build my own chapel.

"I'm glad you hid your face all this time." Tyrant sat himself down on the stool next to mine. I was already preparing the little patience I possessed for whatever smart-ass comment was coming out of his irritating mouth next. "You would've given me a run for my money with the ladies. They dig scarred men."

I wouldn't have been interested in them. The thought of being with anyone but Joslyn made my skin crawl. She dug into me, forever solidifying an empty spot in me I never knew existed.

I'm glad she was able to see it, though.

"Brother." I looked at Grim when his voice dropped, sounding serious. "Nyla's not a cure for the demons in my head. There are still days I'd rather be dead than be with her. But leavin' her alone knowin', there's a chance she'd follow me to the grave? It snaps me out of it enough to not go through with whatever intrusive thought popped into my head that



day.” I’m not sure why he was spilling his guts to me. Grim wasn’t a man I told my feelings to. I didn’t tell any of my brothers shit. “Joslyn ain’t gonna be that for you either.”

I knew she wasn’t. Just like I knew that I wouldn’t be that for her either. Someone can only do so much to distract us from the war going on inside. They were a band-aid compared to the kerosene thrown at us. But that little patch of hope is what made us want to keep going, and for Joslyn, I’d slay any demon of mine I could.

I studied Grim. He looked more exhausted than usual. The bags under his hazel eyes are more noticeable, and the stress marks at the corner popping out. I wanted this club to be safer. We used to be men with no qualms for dying, and now Grim and I had someone worth fighting for. I glanced to the bar where Prez was nursing a scotch before returning my eyes to Grim. “We need to talk about Prez.”

“Your girl just got her GED,” he brushed off even though his hazel eyes darkened to brown. “Today’s a day of celebration. Not potential destruction.”

Yeah. Shit was about to change the Unforgiven Souls forever. That look in Grim’s eyes was one he reserved for our enemies. I didn’t bother telling anyone about what went down between Prez and I. I looked at Joslyn again. She felt my eyes on her. I knew since she turned her head to me, waving her delicate fingers.

I needed to build a safe and secure future. For her sake.

I clenched my fist hard enough to indent my palm with my fingernails. I still wanted to know who the fuck was talking to me the morning after the fire. I couldn't make it out due to the heavy drugs and sedation I was coming off of. I knew I had to speak about the shit Douglas knew and Prez's reaction.

Joslyn rushed over to our table. When she was close enough, I grabbed her hips, pulling her onto my lap. One of my arms lazily circled her hip while my elbow rested on the table in front of us. Her smile was bright, locking her arms around my neck. "Wasn't today amazing?"

*Any day with you is amazing.* I couldn't tell her that, so instead, I shrugged with a low grunt, making her eyes roll and a laugh leave her lips. I looked at her pretty pink mouth and told her, "I had fun in the janitor's closet."

"For thirty seconds." Tyrant taunted loud enough that the whole room stopped what they were doing to look over at us. Joslyn squeaked, face hot as she tried to hide in my chest. My chest vibrated with a growl, swiping at a laughing Tyrant who easily dodged my blow.

My hand left Joslyn's hip, rubbing up and down her spine, loving the way she shivered under my fingertips. She brought her forehead to mine, eyes looking at her lap. "Did you ever find out who did that to us?"

I hated thinking about that day. I had no damn leads, neither did the Souls. Joslyn didn't see their faces as they knocked her out. Everything was still foggy as fuck about how we got out of there. Grim told me that Jordyn ran to him and

told them what potentiality could happen. He didn't care about Jordyn and thought she was full of shit. When she told Grim Joslyn hadn't shown up when promised, they decided to head over there as a precaution and saw the fire. He said he found my body crushing Joslyn's in a last attempt to save her from the blaze and that he thought they were too late.

Was it the Bloods? Was it the Flock? I felt a sucker punch to my stomach as my eyes flicked to Prez. His eyes were stuck on Joslyn with disapproval. It couldn't have been him, right?

"No." Ripping my eyes away from Prez as my hand tightened on her hip. "But I will. And when I do? They'll fucking pay for what they've done."

I felt her forehead lower. I turned up my mouth, lips brushing against the area. She loved it when I kissed her forehead. She felt warmth and happiness or some shit, at least that's what she told me.

"Oakley!" Tyrant shouted drawing our attention to the flustered girl bringing in a tray of sweets. Tyrant's shout almost made her drop her tray to the floor. "What do you got for us today, sweetheart?"

She was starting to warm up around us, but slowly. She was still scared of her own damn shadow most days. Tyrant was first up, grabbing a cookie off the tray, giving her a charming smile, making her face turn red, and her stare at the floor, which made Knight laugh and take a cookie for himself. She smiled timidly at him. "I made Joslyn's favorites. Lemon drop cookies."

I snorted. Of course she likes those. She nuzzled into my chest, sighing in content. She's been different since her surgery. Happier. She was still getting used to having magnets in her head and clearer sounds, but she was taking to the surgery well. The external magnet didn't blend in well, but she wasn't ashamed of it. She got more looks out in public, but she handled children's questions with grace and judgmental people's stares with a smile.

I don't know how I got so fucking lucky with a girl like her.

The door was kicked open, drawing our attention to the large figure walking in.

V.

Not just V.

A very bloody V. But not with his own blood.

Gasps bounced off the walls as he dragged his baseball bat on the ground behind him, scuffing the floor of the silent clubhouse when his crazed eyes sought around the room, landing on Oakley. Her jade eyes were wide with fear of the man who was borderline obsessed with being near her. Once he spotted her, he ran—V never ran—to her.

Tyrant and Knight stood like a wall in front of her, making the crazed man pause. "Move."

They didn't relent. "You need to calm down."

"I said move," V repeated himself, his tone low. He was about to start swinging, and I knew for a fact that when he

blacked out, he could take out Tyrant and Knight. Not that they weren't skilled fighters.

V was just in a league of his fucking own.

"I-It's okay." Oakley's shy voice was clear, her face still red from the attention. Tyrant and Knight didn't look too sure but stepped away, making sure they were within arm's length in case shit went down. I would've too, but I didn't give a fuck.

Still holding her tray, she stepped up to the bloody man. Looking scared as fuck and not doing a good job of hiding it. "V?"

His eyes were emotionless as he stared down at her. He sucked in a shaky breath before dropping to his knees, bat clambering to his side. His face was turned up towards her, a fresh bead of blood that wasn't his running down his forehead. Her throat bobbed as she watched it, eyes shaking as she tried to stand her ground with her fear of blood.

"They touched what was yours." Her eyebrows scrunched together as her lips parted, an action he followed closely with his pitch-black eyes. "I made sure they died for it."

Prez, who was watching the whole scene with a scotch in his hand, rolled his eyes, taking another swig. Tyrant's and Knight's faces darkened at his reaction. Looks like Grim, Hex, and I ain't the only ones who have some shit with Prez. "Gotta problem, Prez?"

“Yeah.” His empty glass smashed against the bartop, and his teeth bared in disgust at the scene in front of him. “I can’t believe my strongest soldier is on his knees for a woman who can’t even stomach some bloody bodies,” He hissed, grabbing shards of his broken scotch glass. The broken glass cut into his skin as droplets slid from his palm and onto the floor. He was acting like a fucking psycho. “This is never gonna work, V. You’re supposed to be our fuckin’ machine, and right now, that’s what the club needs. Pull your head out of her ass and stay focused!”

V’s head slowly twisted to Prez, black eyes unfazed at his lunacy. He stood slowly, towering over Oakley’s small frame as she craned her neck with worry in her jade eyes. V was unpredictable. Prez knew this, and yet he was still antagonizing him.

“I’ll focus.” He turned quickly, front half hunching over as Oakley’s cry bounced off the walls. The fucker threw her over his shoulder like she didn’t weigh a damn thing. One of V’s hands casually slipped into his pocket, and the other wrapped around Oakley’s waist to keep her from falling off his shoulder. “On whatever you’re hiding from us. Whatever it is, I’ll find out.” His eyes narrowed dangerously. “And yes. That’s a fucking threat.”

“He’s gonna fuckin’ kill him,” I said, making Joslyn’s breath hitch. V was trying to keep his shit in control. Maybe that’s why he threw Oakley over his shoulder. She hated violence and he wouldn’t do a fucking thing to hurt her.

Tyrant laughed condescendingly. His lips were flat as he glowered at Prez. “There’s no controlling V. And you had the fucking audacity to talk down to him while he’s in front of Oakley? What the fuck are you thinking? He’s hard enough to keep on a leash, and you just ripped it off his neck.”

“If you beat someone long enough, he’s gonna rip your fuckin’ throat out,” Knight added through clenched teeth. Prez was turning his loyal soldiers into his enemies.

My hand tightened on Joslyn’s hip. *When he has something of his own to protect.*

Prez’s lips turned up at the corner. “Maybe it’s time we think about putting our strongest soldier down.”

“The fuck is your problem, man?” Grim made his stand against his best friend. He was trying to restrain himself for Nyla’s sake.

Prez laughed mockingly, his eyes flicking to where Nyla and Victoria were standing before looking back at his second-in-command. “We used to be unstoppable, but we’re only as strong as our weakest link.”

“Having someone worth protecting makes us stronger.” Irritation laced Grim’s voice. Prez should know. He was always a hard bastard, but after he found Nyla he’s gotten way worse. I thought once he found his daughter he’d lighten the fuck up.

Our club wouldn’t survive the internal war that was brewing.

Prez shook his head at Grim's refute, refusing to look at anybody. "It makes us careless and do shit in desperation."

My eyes connected with Grim's. He was thinking the same thing as me.

Prez fucked up.

Law walked in, his arm over his head as he yawned. He took a nap after Joslyn's graduation since he was up all night working. He looked disoriented from his sleep as he looked around the room, snapping whatever grogginess consumed him as he saw a frazzled Oakley over V's shoulder. "Where the fuck are you taking my daughter?"

"My domain." He lifted his shoulder, Oakley giving out a little squeak as he adjusted her in his grip. Her knuckles turned white as she had a death grip on V's cut. "Hell."



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*He's coming.*

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# Acknowledgments

Here I am with book 2. Who would've thought? Not me. Thank you all for making this book possible. I still can't believe people were willing to give my debut a chance and are chomping at the bit for this book AND future books.

This book was a challenge for me to write. I think I've had more mental breakdowns over this book than *Sins of Betrayal*. Writing a character with a disability is a challenge in itself. Thank you to my sensitivity readers for soothing my nerves and your endless encouragement

To Britt, Ofa, Bri, and Taylor. Thank you for helping me make this story what it is, it would not be the same without you.

I hope you all come back for V and Oakley's book... and bring your tissues.

# About the Author

Juniper Nyx was born and raised in the Midwest, being surrounded by nothing but empty cornfields and her imagination. She decided to put that imagination to paper, but accidentally spilled too much ink and the romance she was writing turned dark. Her lines of morality have been blurred ever since.

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