

#4

Jester

BORN WILLIAMS MC

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JESTER



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Cover

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Dedication

To SaMiJaMaLu

My lovely betas — Cynthia & Sarah

&

Judy's Proofreading



Special Dedication

*To my mom who always believed in my writing and lives on in
our hearts*

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CHARACTERS



**TO PREVENT SPOILERS, THIS LIST ONLY
INCLUDES CHARACTERS MENTIONED IN THE
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BORN VILLAINS MC FOUNDING MEMBERS

- Brody Marsden/Papa Bear — former President
- Kraken — former Vice President turned rival club President
- Ominous — original chick member
- Jester — Road Captain; currently in prison
- Buzzsaw — former Sergeant-at-Arms; runs Sanctuary's construction
- Flagg — Secretary; Kraken's brother
- Gravel — runs the Sanctuary's ranch
- Dropout — runs Sanctuary's gym
- Tank — runs Sanctuary's landscaping



BORN VILLAINS MC CURRENT LEADERSHIP

- Claymore Marsden/Overlord — President; Papa Bear's son
- Grit — Vice President
- Warwick Marsden/Bomber — Treasurer; Papa Bear's son
- Blunt — (Acting) Road Captain

Hawthorne Baxter/Thorn — Sergeant-at-Arms

Cyril Tayback/Apex — Enforcer

Jesse Zurika/Ghost — Enforcer



MEMBERS

Talon Marsden/Sister Sass — Papa Bear's daughter; chick member

Aqua — chick member

Dire — Ominous's daughter

Rave — chick member; kid: Michael

Riot — chick member; Rave's sister; kid: Michael

Motley

Doughboy

Penthouse

Neon

Smoke

Puppet

Clutch

Vegas

Emo

Topeka



ENEMIES

Kraken — President/Founder of Horned Angels MC; former VP of Born Villains MC

Dio — Vice President

Cypher — Sergeant-at-Arms

Dirty Princes Motorcycle Club
Black Gold Four — Primrose, TX



OLD LADIES/GIRLFRIENDS

Lady Bug — Brody/Papa Bear's second wife, kids: Nadia,
Katana w/Papa Bear

Betty Boop — Brody/Papa Bear's deceased first wife, kids:
Claymore, Warwick, and Talon

Twinkle Toes/Giselle Reinhart — Apex's wife, kids: Amelia,
Anna

Duchess/Jules Gwynne — Overlord's wife, kids: Scout, Zoey,
Evie, Anthony

Care Bear/Mabel "Mabie" Sandza — Blunt's wife; kid: Clark

Bo Peep/Eliza — Penthouse's wife

Pumpkin — Warwick/Bomber's wife, kids: Conner (deceased)
and Collin

Jelly Bean — Aqua's wife

Sweet Buns — Tank's wife

Bunny — Buzzsaw's wife

Queen Bee — Kraken's old lady (deceased); kids: Jules and
Scout

Mother Goose — Kraken's old lady; kids: Rafe,
Rhodes(deceased), Hollis (deceased), Finch (missing), Sutton
(deceased)



ALLIES

Graeme Hubbard — Metamora sheriff/Papa Bear's former
foster brother

Doctor Sal Perez — owner of Refuge Clinic/Papa Bear's
former foster brother

Hope — castoff from Dirty Princes Motorcycle Club
compound

Rafe — Kraken's oldest son; Jules's brother

JESTER



Rayland Crest/Road Captain

I never apologize for who I am. I might not seem like a man whose cup ought to spill over with pride. I probably seem like a monster. I've been told I act like a caveman. I know I think like a predator.

But long ago, I decided if no one was going to love me, I might as well love myself, warts and fucking all.

I was nothing more than an angry boy when Brody Marsden entered my life. He was barely a man, yet not so different than me. People hated us before we were old enough to do anything wrong.

I'd never been loved. My shitty parents hurt my sister and me in many ways, but none were enough to make them feel better. Sometimes, they'd just walk through the door and start hitting. The world fucked with them, so they fucked with us.

My parents got so used to busting us up, they never considered to hide the abuse. As soon as my mom dropped me off at kindergarten, I started bouncing around foster homes.

I have no fucking idea why my parents ever did anything to get us back. Was there a reward for them to jump through the CPS's hoops? I've sometimes wondered if my grandparents were paying for shit and insisted my parents reclaim what they clearly didn't want.

Whatever the reason, I'd end up back with my parents until the bruises showed up again. Child services would intervene. Sometimes, I'd be taken away. Other times, I'd be monitored.

After my father diddled my sister, she never came back to the home. He also had to move out to ensure my mom kept me. Yeah, there must have been money involved. After all, I knew for a fucking fact that my mom loved my dad more than

she loved me. She would have only given him up if keeping me meant cash.

Several weeks after he moved out, my mom lost her shit. She just kept hitting me with anything handy. Finally, she cracked my head open and laughed hysterically as blood pooled on the floor beneath me.

“Am I finally free?” she screamed in my face.

Since I figured I was dying, I finally hit her back. The bitch was so shocked. I was, too. Hitting her felt damn good, so I took that meat tenderizer she liked to use on my back. I swung it at her, over and over. Once she was on the ground, I kicked her.

The bitch screamed for help. That only made me laugh. We were both going to die that day, and I couldn't be happier.

For some reason, her screams of terror drew more attention than mine ever did. The cops arrived to find nine-year-old me on top of my weeping and bloodied mom. I'd cracked her head open to match mine.

Years later, when my sister claimed I took after our parents, I just shrugged. I'd rather be the one throwing the punches than the one taking them.

After I put my mom in the hospital and they fixed my broken head, I started bouncing around foster homes again. The problem was I knew how fucking great it felt to fight back. Submissively taking a beating was no longer an option.

But I overestimated my stamina and resolve. Each foster home was worse. I ended up in a group home run by religious nuts with special ways of dealing with “troubled boys.” I got abused worse than anything my parents could conjure up. My time there nearly broke me.

By then, there was no one to save me. CPS was done caring about a little monster like me. All the boys at the group home were the worst of the worst.

As bad as the religious nuts were with their punishments—beatings, starvation, sleeping in the cold barn, locked in a

coffin—they were child’s play compared to what my fellow monsters did to pass the time.

In the end, I set a fire to the group home and ended up in juvenile hall. Burning down that house was one of the smartest things I ever did.

Around that time, my long-gone sister visited me. She’d found Jesus, thanks to her current foster home, and was trying to better herself by slumming it with me.

Seeing her look ashamed of herself, I asked, “Why do you need to change when our parents are the scumbags?”

Her religious foster dad didn’t let her answer. I don’t know why he even brought her to see me. Maybe it was a “scared straight” tactic, where she’d witness her future if she kept causing trouble. Whatever the reason, my sister looked right in my eyes and said, “God doesn’t make mistakes. Every heartache is a test. Will you pass or fail, brother?”

Man, her foster dad fucking loved that shit. He smiled and looked around the visiting room to see if anyone had noticed how fucking well she puked out the crap he’d taught her.

“If I ever see you again, I’m going to do to you what I did to our mom. Now fuck off,” I replied before smiling at her foster dad. “But first, I’m going to kill you.”

To my relief, they never visited again.

I liked juvenile hall. The beatings weren’t so common. The food wasn’t good, but it came at regular intervals. I wasn’t expected to do well with schoolwork. If I behaved, I got left alone for the most part. Life made sense.

But eventually, I got out and ended up in another group home. The system was just passing time until I was tossed out into the streets. My future was prison and death. Everyone knew that much. Hell, even I was just waiting to see which way it went.

At the new group home, I kept my head down, especially after I heard a few guys talking about how “he” was coming to visit me.

“You have a reputation, asshole,” said one of them. “When Brody takes a boy away, they come back wrong.”

Though I didn't dare show my fear, I was nervous about this new threat. I started thinking of ways to get locked up in juvie again. The head of the group home was a nice young woman named Risa. Until I heard about Marsden, I figured I might be able to get comfortable. With him coming, I changed my plans and started considering whether to punch Risa just to get sent away.

Before I set anything on fire or hurt the nice lady, Brody Marsden arrived. His dark eyes owned a cruel vibe. His arms and chest were thick with muscle. He looked like the kind of older guys I avoided in juvie. Many of them were heading straight from juvie to prison once they aged up. None of them had anything to lose.

Now, a guy like that was at the group home, looking to talk to me before I even did anything wrong.

I'd been so pissed to get hounded when I'd actually been following the rules. On my first night at the group home, Risa made us fried chicken and creamy mashed potatoes. It was the best food I'd had in my life. Yeah, I might have behaved for a good long time if Brody hadn't shown up to fuck up my plans.

I was nearly as tall as him but lacked his muscles. I knew fighting Brody wouldn't work. A man like him wouldn't go down from a kick to the groin.

Though I considered running, he had arrived with several men who sat on their motorcycles in the driveway. I wouldn't get far before they tracked me down.

Escaping to the backyard, I still figured I might jump the fence and head for the woods. I glanced back to find Brody casually following me. I saw the other group house residents spying on us from the upstairs windows. They were hoping for a show.

Brody's nearly black hair had already begun to gray around the temples. I didn't think he had been an adult long. He was thick across the chest and his limbs were like tree

trunks. I hadn't been scared in a long time, but this man terrified me. I felt his punches coming, even as he sat at a patio table and gestured for me to join him.

"What's staining your thoughts?" Brody asked in a weirdly calm voice.

"I just want to be left alone."

"That won't end well for you. This world's got a target on your back. You're looking at an early death or a lifetime in prison. But maybe it doesn't have to be that way."

No one had ever talked to me like Brody did that day. Sometimes, a CPS lady or foster mom might do the quiet, pity voice. However, most people spoke to me like I was already on their last nerve.

Brody's tone held no pity, but he wasn't angry, either. We were just talking like two men might talk. That's why I didn't lash out or take off running. I figured a beating might be worth hearing him out.

Brody and I talked for a long time. He asked questions about my family and all the shit I survived. I tried to act tough, as if nothing mattered and no one could hurt me.

But Brody has always had a way of breaking down a person's resolve. He'd stare at you with his nearly black eyes, silently soaking in your pain, offering no judgment.

I ended up crying like a little bitch by the time we were done. Life was so damn hard. At fourteen, I was already tired of living. Nothing got better. People didn't care. I wanted to get hard inside, so I wouldn't care, either.

Instead, I bared my soul to Brody Marsden and started digging my way out of my miserable existence.

"I'm going to take you to my place, so we can talk more and you can meet my family," he told me, and I instantly assumed the worst. "You can stay overnight or I can bring you back here tonight."

"What do you get out of it?"

“No one loved me when I was a kid,” Brody explained, sounding resigned to the fact rather than angry about it. “I didn’t know what I was missing. Once I knew how it felt to be loved, I wanted others like me to get a taste of that good feeling, too.”

“Are you trying to save my soul?”

Brody chuckled and stood up. “No, I just figure life is short, so we might as well spend our time feeling good.”

I didn’t really believe him. Even after he listened to me blubber, I refused to trust him or anyone else. I’d been fooled by people’s promises before.

A few times during the ride to his house, I considered jumping off the motorcycle and running away. But I knew I was running out of options. If this group home didn’t work out, I’d be in juvie until I aged out. No one would want me as an adult when they couldn’t tolerate me as a kid. I’d end up in a cage for the rest of my life.

That’s why I kept my ass glued to Brody’s motorcycle and let him take me to his house where I assumed I’d be used and abused.

Back then, Brody lived in a small, boxy white house with his wife and young sons. Betty was a thing of beauty with shiny brown hair and soft blue eyes. She smiled at me like I wasn’t a dirty piece of shit stinking up her home. The dinner she made was as good as Risa’s chicken and mashed potatoes.

“Risa and I learned to cook in one of the foster homes we shared,” Betty explained as she had me help her in the kitchen. “Brody and I grew up without good meals. I want to do better for my boys.”

Betty just kept talking to me like I was a normal person rather than a tall, gangly, long-haired monster. She never even seemed scared of me. She also gave me a really big slice of apple pie for dessert and extra whipped cream. I felt like a real person when she focused her warm gaze on me.

By the time the sun set and Brody asked if I wanted to stick around for the night, I’d gotten a little too comfortable in

their house.

Sure, I felt stupid sitting on the ground with their two little boys, watching cartoons and wearing oversized sweats. But I didn't dare leave. Even if Brody hurt me later, I figured the good stuff was worth the abuse.

The next day, his friends returned—several big, tattooed men and a bitchy woman. I soon learned Brody and his crew were criminals.

As they talked in the small, attached garage, I stood outside and watched. Betty came over to check on me.

“We're going to build a place where people like us can be safe and comfortable,” she explained as she handed me a bag of chips like she had for her boys. “They've been saving up to buy land. In a few years, we'll have a safe home. I hope you'll join us.”

“Why the fuck would you want that?” I grumbled, thinking she was buttering me up for some evil shit about to happen.

Betty carefully rested her hand on my shoulder. That's when I realized she did fear me despite how warm she behaved.

Her hand on my shoulder felt real nice. I saw how she touched her boys. It made me wonder why my mom hated me so much. I used to figure all abused people were mean. Except Betty got beat on, yet she was tender with everyone.

That was the day I came to understand how people weren't cursed to be their parents. *Being a violent monster was a choice.*

“The lives we were born into aren't our fault,” Betty explained when I remained wary. “Everyone should get a second chance. What will you do with yours?”

I hadn't really understood what she meant. I figured she viewed me as a charity case. I got that pity shit from CPS in the beginning. Therapists would claim I had the choice to be healthy. There was a foster mom who called me “baby” like I was a sweet thing she was going to love. But none of those

people really cared. I assumed the same about Brody and Betty, but I was wrong.

By the time the Born Villains Motorcycle Club was founded, I was a regular fixture at the Marsden home. Still in my teens, I rode my own motorcycle alongside Brody. Those tattooed men and the one bitch—a good-looking blonde named Ominous who popped my cherry when I was old enough to know what was what—were my friends. After a lifetime alone, I'd found my people.

The club bought land and began building the Sanctuary. Brody took the road name Papa Bear. Betty became Betty Boop, leading the wives to create a warm, safe place for their families. Their children would never know the pain and rejection we did growing up.

Those next years were a blur. Walls were built around our safe space. We fought against any threat. Plenty of blood was spilt, but we always came out on top.

Over time, I grew into a huge guy. Women wanted me. Men feared me. Life was no longer a burden.

But I shouldn't have let my guard down.

A decade passed, and our club's numbers grew. One day, my sister appeared at our front gate, sporting a broken jaw and dead eyes. Others like her started showing up, needing sanctuary.

Eventually, Papa Bear's foster brother—a tough, Indigenous American bastard named Graeme Hubbard—became Metamora's sheriff. His other foster brother—a book smart Latino named Sal Perez—returned to town to open a clinic. Risa and Betty Boop opened up a local women's shelter called Bettina's House.

At the Sanctuary, we built a one-story house we called the "Stockade" for castoffs needing more protection. The club bought properties around town, claiming Metamora and expanding our territory.

Eventually, though, egos crashed into each other. Our VP, Kraken—a mean fucker with a twin brother, two old ladies,

and five sons with potential to be our future president—lashed out at Papa Bear and left the club, taking a decent number of members with him. His twin brother—our Secretary Flagg—did not follow him.

None of that fazed me, though. My loyalty was to Papa Bear and Betty Boop. They were the only people I really loved. Even my sister and I mostly just grunted at each other when we crossed paths at the Sanctuary.

Then, my boy was born. Lando was from a hookup with a dumb bitch completely unsuited for motherhood. I begged the dimpled dummy with her big hair and little brain not to have the baby. No kid deserved such shitty people as parents. Ciara refused to listen. She was fucked in the head, thinking being a mommy would be fun and give her the love her idiot parents never did.

Lando didn't survive two years with her as his mom. She'd taken him to her parents' house to show off how well she was doing. Ciara's family threw a party, where they got wasted and didn't pay attention to my boy. He drowned in a kiddie pool, mere feet from where Ciara and her parents were hanging out. They didn't even notice he was dead until another kid complained how he wouldn't play with her.

Weeks later, Ciara's parents were dead from a house fire. Though I had no trouble ending them, I couldn't stomach doing the same to the stupid bitch who gave Lando his dimpled cheeks. *Life on the Sanctuary had made me soft.*

When I learned my boy was dead, I cried for the first time since I was a kid. Lando was a funny, slobbery creature who really liked me. I hadn't done much with him when he was a baby. Once he started walking, his mom would dump him at my place. He had my dark, wavy hair and blue eyes. When I looked at him, I'd see myself as a tiny boy. I couldn't believe I'd ever been so innocent.

Lando and I got along fine when he stayed over. He liked my grilled cheese sandwiches, and I didn't mind his dumb kid shows.

I'm often haunted by how my boy begged to stay with me rather than visit his grandparents' house. The little guy cried when I said he had to go. I promised he'd be okay, and we'd play when he came back.

I let Lando down. I hadn't wanted to be a dad, so I half-assed raising the kid. A little part of me had kept my distance out of fear I'd snap and turn violent like my parents.

But I could have tried to be like Papa Bear. He wouldn't have let a moron like Ciara take their kid to visit the same neglectful dickheads she fled from years ago. Lando would still be alive if he had a dad like Papa Bear rather than me.

Though I don't suffer many regrets, I nurse plenty over Lando. He was my chance to be a good man. I'd gotten too accustomed to only caring about myself. I never followed in Papa Bear and Betty Boop's footsteps by using my good fortune to fuel an urge to protect others.

If I met them younger, maybe I would have grown into a half-decent man. But by the time Papa Bear entered my life, I was too much of an asshole to change.

Or maybe I never had it in myself to care about anyone like Papa Bear cared. That's why he got to be the leader with a beautiful wife and healthy kids. But even great men don't win in the end.

That's why Betty Boop died during a Sunday picnic. Most of the club came out that day. Papa Bear had wanted to regain the sense of community Kraken stole away.

I'd been sitting near the Marsden family when Betty Boop stuck her hand in a basket and yelped in pain. I saw her face go red and then turn blue. She died as they rushed her to a car. No one even knew she was allergic to bees.

From a strategic standpoint, Kraken's turn against the club was the bigger blow. However, Betty Boop's death is what nearly broke the Born Villains. Up until then, the Sanctuary felt charmed, as if we'd created a magical place where no one could get hurt. Except Betty Boop did, right before our eyes.

I wasn't any good for Papa Bear after he lost his woman. When Lando died, nothing anyone said helped me, so I figured words didn't matter.

Over time, Papa Bear rebounded with a chick named Lady Bug. He loves her. I know he does. There's no denying that fact. But I can't see her without thinking of Betty Boop.

My heart went cold after Lando and Betty Boop were gone. I did my job as the club's Road Captain. I watched people's back. But I felt cold inside. Nothing good pumped through my veins anymore.

Then, when Talon Marsden was nearly legal, she started nursing a crush on me. I'd never really thought of Papa Bear's oldest daughter as anything more than a kid with a big mouth and a broken heart over her dead mom.

However, I figured the teenager having a crush on me was safer than her attempting her goofy flirting with any of the younger members who might have taken her up on what she was sloppily offering.

Talon kept coming around my place or hitting me up at the club's main eating hall, HQ. Papa Bear didn't seem to mind. He probably figured I needed a distraction, and Talon would grow out of her infatuation.

At some point, my dead heart started pumping warm and soft for the young beauty. She was a mix of her parents—stubborn and tough like Papa Bear, sweet and feisty like Betty Boop.

No woman had ever created a flustered heat in my belly before. At some point, Talon transformed into a woman. I remember the exact moment when I realized shit had changed between us. I spotted Talon talking to a younger club member. She was always shooting the shit with them. There was no harm in it, yet I instantly got the urge to kick his ass as if he was messing with my woman.

Not long afterward, Papa Bear came to me to say he understood my feelings for Talon, but she was too young, and

I was too old. Nothing was going to happen. If we wanted to date eventually, it had to happen way down the road.

“You know what kind of man you are,” he said after stopping by my townhome. “You know she’s messed up since Betty Boop died. Maybe this thing is real. But it’s just as likely she’ll have a lot of crushes.”

Papa Bear’s point was clear—I wasn’t special.

I’ve thought of his words a lot since I got locked behind bars for a crime I most definitely committed. Every day, I remind myself how Talon isn’t mine. I want her. She belongs to me in a way no one else does. But she can’t ever be mine in a real way.

Because men like me shouldn’t end up with a goodhearted woman. That’s why I fell for someone so out of my league.

Men like me shouldn’t have families. That’s why Lando fell into the kiddie pool and no one noticed for an hour.

Men like me don’t get the kind of second chances enjoyed by men like Papa Bear. He survived his childhood with his heart and sanity intact. That’s why he got not one but two women to love. That’s how come he has four healthy children. That’s why he doesn’t have to love himself since no one else will.

I rarely nurse regrets. But I do spend every damn day wondering what would have happened if I claimed Talon Marsden on her eighteenth birthday rather than pretending to be a good man. A lot of things might have turned out better.

Or maybe I’d have fouled up shit anyway. There’s no going back or playing out that alternative timeline. I’ve only got whatever future is waiting for me back at the Sanctuary when I get back tomorrow.

SISTER SASS



Talon Marsden/Member

Ever since I was a little girl, I dreamed of riding with the Born Villains Motorcycle Club. My dad founded the club and built the community where we live. I grew up surrounded by rough men and tough women who were beaten down—yet never broken—by the world. They were what I aspired to be.

Ever since I was little, my mom—a beautiful brunette with beautiful blue eyes, milky skin, and the best smile—would promise me how I could be one of the bikers if I stayed strong.

“They look at ugly things,” Betty Boop would explain. “If you want to ride with your dad, you have to be willing to stare into the eyes of evil.”

“You look at ugly things, too,” I replied, never letting a comment die without me tossing in my two cents on the matter.

But I was also right. After all, the Sanctuary offered refuge to people beat down by life. I saw their fresh wounds, old scars, and haunted gazes. My mom was in charge of the Stockade—a one-story house where the new arrivals ended up. Sometimes, we’d have so many new people, we had to put them around the Sanctuary, either staying with members in their big houses or eventually in the cottages on Black Pine Road.

“We face those ugly things within the safety of the Sanctuary,” Betty Boop explained when I insisted she was as badass as the bikers. “To be a Born Villian, you might need to ride to the heart of the evil. There are people in this world with no humanity in them. I hope you never meet them, baby.”

I thought I had all the right stuff to be a member. I was as tough as my brothers—pretty-boy Overlord and spitting-

image-version-of-our-dad Bomber. They might be bigger, but size wasn't everything. I'd seen founding member—and tough-chick Ominous—fuck up plenty of men. She was everything I wanted to be.

My plans shifted after I caught sight of one of the founding members riding shirtless when I was seventeen. Jester whipped up a swirling storm of lust and painful hopes in my gut. I went from a tomboy wanting to get rowdy to a lovestruck bitch.

On that scorching summer day, a lot of the guys—and several chicks—were running around barely dressed. I didn't take notice of any of their bare flesh. However, when Jester—a large man with long, wavy brown hair, gray-blue eyes, and rugged sex appeal—rode by wearing only his vest over his broad chest, I went supernova horny.

Of course, he hadn't even acknowledged me that day. I was just another Sanctuary kid while he'd been a man for a long time.

Jester was never warm and cuddly. Though my father might have looked fearsome, he was always fun and soft with us kids. That's why people called him Papa Bear. He was like everyone's cool, understanding dad.

But Papa Bear could also be scary and lash out suddenly. Never erratically, but if someone threatened his people, my father would fuck them up quick and cruel. Then, he'd be back to the man I cuddled with during Sunday movies.

That's not how Jester has ever been wired. He's an angry, closed-off man unwilling to meet most people even halfway on any matter. Though he has friends, he's rarely friendly. Despite his loyalty toward my family and the club, he had always intimidated me.

That's why I'd never noticed how beautiful he was before. Jester's six-foot-five frame was thickly muscled. He wore his dark hair long to hide his usually frowning face. His gray-blue eyes are simply hypnotic when they aren't shooting hate daggers. Once he got under my skin, I couldn't stop stealing glances and borderline stalking the hunky jerk.

Before my crush, I'd been cagy about guys. Puberty made me very aware of how male the Sanctuary tended to be. Soon after getting boobs, I cut my hair super short and wore a lot of flannel as if I could ugly up my appearance enough to be one of the guys rather than a vulnerable chick.

According to my brother, I lack common sense. "You're like a fucked-up cartoon I saw years ago," Bomber explained despite me telling him to shut up. "The cat got so startled by the ringing doorbell that it ran into the hot fireplace and killed itself. You're that cat. You get so wound up, you never look at where you're going."

Though I called Bomber a lot of names that day, I never forgot what he said.

I might be racing into another fire by dreaming I can make Jester happy once he's released from prison. We've been "dating" for years. I call him every week and talk about food and other casual topics since the prison calls are monitored. Sometimes, he can call on a private cell, and we get more personal. Years ago, during a call, Jester made clear what he had planned for us.

"You can fall for another guy, and I can pretend to be okay with that, but I'll probably just kill him."

At first, his tone and words startled me, but my sassy side refused to back down. "No way would I ever forgive you for killing the imaginary love of my life."

"He should have stayed out of my fucking way."

"This hypothetical guy clearly won my heart fair and square. Probably because you didn't want to win it."

"I don't care how he took you away from me. I'll make nice for a while, but eventually, I'm killing him."

"Not if he kills you first," I warned.

"No one can kill me. I've been dead since before you were born."

That last part freaked me out. *How can I love some undead thing, even if he's handsome and went to prison for me?*

And I do love Jester. I've wanted him since I was seventeen years old. But we've never kissed or held hands. The most sexual moment we've shared is when he ran his index finger across my jaw.

By then, I'd given up on the ugly haircuts and flannel shirts. I knew my mom hated when I looked weird, and losing her nearly killed me.

For the first week after she died, I was in complete denial over how a simple bee sting stole my mom from me. I remembered her saying "Brody" one last time before she was gone. Her death seemed impossible, so I refused to believe it was true. Even after seeing her die, I kept waiting for her to reappear.

The human mind is quite skilled in twisting itself into knots to avoid dealing with pain.

That's why I worry what I feel for Jester isn't real or won't be strong enough to overcome our problems. Has my mind twisted itself up with more denial? Can I trust the dreams I have for Jester and me? Does he even want me in a real way?

As a teen, I flirted with him plenty. My father kept anything too sexy from happening. He claimed I was too young. Though he was right, teen me was pissed. I didn't want to date anyone else. Jester was the only man who existed for me.

Even after I was an adult, Jester didn't make a move. I assumed my dad told him to back off. Jester won't listen to many people, but he'll bow to Papa Bear.

I still felt rejected. Losing Betty Boop broke me. Having a new woman in my father's bed set me off. In an ideal world, Lady Bug would have been a royal bitch, so I could at least hate her for stealing my dad's heart. Instead, they were good together, and he was no longer swimming in grief.

Everyone was so healthy and moving on, but I felt diseased inside. Betty Boop wouldn't want me to be self-destructive. My brother warned how I ran from one problem

toward a worse one. I saw the warning signs yet couldn't help myself.

One night, out of frustration, I threw myself at Jester at his townhome. He just lifted me off him and claimed I was too young.

"I'm not looking to babysit" were his exact words.

If Jester was the scary doorbell setting off the stupid cat, those bar-hopping, frat-boy assholes were my blazing fireplace. I nearly didn't survive their twisted fun. Jester's desire for vengeance got him locked up.

Now, he's getting out, and I have no idea what will happen next.

I'm no longer the immature teenager crushing on him. Or the young woman who fucked up and nearly got herself killed. I've spent the last year preparing to be strong enough for Jester.

Now, I'll need to test my new skills to claim what I've wanted for years.

OVERLORD



Claymore Marsden/President

As a boy, I assumed the most difficult part of taking on the President rank would be living up to my dad's impressive reputation. Papa Bear built a safe place for more than his family and friends. For decades, he saved lives and expanded the club's territory.

During that time, the Born Villains Motorcycle Club's greatest enemy was the Horned Angels Motorcycle Club, founded by our former VP. Kraken took more than a dozen men with him—including an angry asshole named Cypher—and set up a compound in the nearby town of Cahuenga.

For years, there were flareups between the clubs. Eventually, Kraken ordered a hit on my brother, Bomber. Instead, the shooting ended the life of his teenage son, Connor. President by then, I ordered the club's Enforcers—Apex and Ghost—to end the life of one of Kraken's adult sons. As children, Rhodes had been my friend. Ending his life wore heavy on me, but I had no choice.

After each club lost someone from the ruling family, an edgy truce fell between us. Not long afterward, Kraken suffered a stroke and hid his illness. When his men found out he was weak, they executed two of his younger sons. A third son named Finch escaped but hasn't been heard from since.

During this violent time, Kraken's oldest son was locked in prison. Rafe knew a target was on his back as soon as he got released.

After Kraken was sidelined, his daughters were handed over to the Sanctuary. Jules was my dream woman, and I finally staked my claim on her heart. We're now raising Jules's son—five-year-old, Anthony—and her little sister—seven-year-old, Scout—along with my two five-year-old daughters,

Zoey and Evie. Despite our happiness, the trouble with the Horned Angels Motorcycle Club hung over our future.

Then, like a miracle, Rafe was released early, after ratting out a few prison assholes. No one knew he was getting out. The Horned Angels weren't prepared for what he had planned.

Rafe tore through the Cahuenga compound, killing everyone in his path. Cypher and Dio—the club's new President—spent a year at the top of the Horned Angels worried over each other's next move.

In the end, their plans didn't matter. Rafe ended them and a dozen other men. He set fire to homes and the compound's clubhouse. By the time the fire burned out, Rafe was in the wind with his mother.

Later, when Jules spoke to her half brother, Rafe claimed Kraken was already dead prior to the attack. I suspect Rafe likely put the sickly man out of his misery. That or his mom did it to save herself when life got too dangerous at the Cahuenga compound.

The death and destruction Rafe left was big news for all of four months. Questions were asked about the Born Villains Motorcycle Club's possible involvement. There were stories about Rafe. The authorities were looking for him. Not because of any witness statements from the compound, just the timing seemed suspect and he'd ditched his parole check-ins.

During that time, the Sanctuary locked down and stayed quiet. Our lawyers dealt with the authorities. We avoided the media.

Unable to get any interesting details, the news coverage moved on. Without any evidence to pin on our club and unable to locate Rafe, the cops lost interest.

As the heat comes off us, I struggle to accept my club's new reality. Our longtime enemies are gone. Their territory is ours for the taking. And I didn't have to do a damn thing.

I'm pleased, of course. Yet, the relief is jarring after having an enemy lurk at the edges of our territory for years.

The few surviving Horned Angels members sniffed around Metamora to see if they might find a home here. Knowing the twisted shit they did to Jules, I ordered them out of town.

I also refused sanctuary to every woman and child from the Cahuenga compound. They never supported Jules, so I told them to fuck off. Of course, Papa Bear tossed money at the widows and got them set up elsewhere. My father is far more merciful than I am.

Since the end of the Horned Angels, Jules has struggled with a storm of emotions like sorrow, regret, and anger. When my woman sinks into a dark mood, she gets reclusive and rarely leaves our home.

I don't push her. Jules has gone through too much trauma over a short period of time, and she's never really recovered from moving to Cahuenga years ago.

Fortunately, at the Sanctuary, Jules has friends and a support system. The kids still get their schooling, therapy, and playtime, even if she can't bear to leave the house. Our family of six has learned to think like a team and lift up our struggling members. I have no doubt we'll get healthy with time.

After the Horned Angels were dead, I knew only one enemy could threaten the Sanctuary's growing calm.

The "Black Gold Four" run their debauchery out of a small Texas town named Primrose. We first learned about them a year ago when a tiny, blonde ballerina found her way to Metamora and asked around about Papa Bear. Before we could get to her, two PI thugs tried to force her back to Primrose. The struggle left them dead and Giselle with amnesia.

Though she doesn't remember her past, we've pieced together information about the Black Gold Four. Meanwhile, they learned Giselle was in Metamora. So far, they've tried the lawyer route and the "concerned family friend" tactic. More than once, we've received threats from Zack Reinhart's lawyer, claiming they'll report us to the feds or state cops and reclaim Giselle.

Except the Black Gold Four don't know she has amnesia. That's been the rub since the beginning. If I tell them she can't remember—and won't rat them out to the press or authorities—they might leave her alone. Or they'll use her amnesia as a way to con the law into stepping into the issue.

Either way, I know these people won't give up. Killing them seemed tricky, though. They live on several estates with other abused daughters referred to as "Dolls."

The Born Villains don't do assassinations. The club only watches over our territory and the people inside it. Traveling to another state to challenge oil tycoons and their hired guns isn't our way.

But not long after Giselle joined the Sanctuary family, we met a vigilante named Luca Elmwood. She's putting together a plan to raid the estate, kill the assholes, and save the Dolls. Giselle can finally rest, knowing she helped the ones she left behind.

However, rushing into this raid isn't an option. Luca is more than a killer. She's also the woman capable of soothing Ghost's gnarly heart. I hadn't believed their relationship would stick. Yet, a year later, they've built a house together and are talking about having a kid.

Having known Ghost for over a decade, I want him to be happy, so putting his woman—along with him and other members of the club—at risk digs at me.

For six months, we've set the stage for the raid. I've paid people to spy for us in Primrose. We installed cameras around the Texas town to track the movements of the rich fucks and their armed security.

During that time, Luca made inroads against the enemy. She and Ghost took out one of the Black Gold Four while he vacationed in Cabo San Lucas. They killed another one at a New York City Christmas party. One of the remaining two Black Gold Four might have gotten spooked by the seemingly unconnected deaths. He's been hiding out in New Zealand.

Our Primrose sources claim the Dolls are currently at the Reinhart estate. Giselle's father and his security are the only obstacles standing in our way.

Yet, I worry our intel isn't solid. What if Giselle's father paid our spies to feed us false information?

That's why I've hesitated to greenlight the attack. I keep imagining our people walking into an ambush in Texas.

Luca's impatience finally pushes me to make a decision. The tall, platinum blonde walks up to me one day and announces, "I'm trying to have a kid."

By then, she's a patched member of the Born Villains. The process went so quickly from her arrival at the Sanctuary to Luca wearing our vest and becoming Ghost's old lady.

"Then we should wait," I reply as my gaze focuses on my three girls playing nearby.

"Look, I'm glad you're scared," Luca says, winning a frown from me. "You should be. We all might die in Texas. Afterward, those rich fucks could hire an army to roll in here and burn down the Sanctuary. A lot of maybes are in play, but you need to hear what I'm saying."

"I hear you fine."

Luca's an impressive woman. A former professional athlete, she has stellar gun and fighting skills. Though I respect the hell out of her talents, I always sense she's struggling against an urge to talk down to me.

"No, you *don't* hear me. Why else would you think I can do this after I have a kid? That's why I'm explaining how once I get a positive pregnancy test, I'm hanging up my guns for a while, maybe forever. I already struggle to stay focused when I'm worried about Ghost getting hurt. Having a kid will mess with my head. So, if you want to do this Texas shit, you need to pull the trigger already."

I consider explaining my reasons for waiting. Some are quite solid. Yet, in reality, my main reason comes down to "I'm not sure I can handle the consequences if things go wrong."

“Fine, then, I’ll paint you a picture,” Luca says and glances at Scout, Evie, and Zoey dancing around nearby. “Those Texas fuckers are going to hire a team to sneak onto the Sanctuary. In the dark of night, they’ll move through the houses, searching for Giselle. Everyone will be expendable. If they hit your house before hers, your kids and Jules are dead. Same if they hit my house. It’s not like I walk around heavily armed in my PJs.”

“I get it.”

“Do you?” she asks, inching closer. “Let’s say someone sounds the alarm. Your people flood out of their homes, HQ, back from town. They don’t know what’s happening. It’ll be a bloodbath. If you thought war with the Horned Angels crossed lines, trying battling against mercenaries.”

“I get it,” I grumble and flash a pained look at my girls.

“Then, let me round up my group for one last practice run. We’ve got a plan. Even if it doesn’t work, waiting isn’t a better option.”

Luca’s plain talk seals the deal for me. She understands what happens when a person hesitates.

That’s why Luca, Ghost, and a handful of Born Villains members are heading south tomorrow.

As worries weigh me down, I’m joined by Jules on the porch of our southwest-style home. Her presence in my life has been a godsend. I was spiraling when she returned to the Sanctuary. My girls—blonde Evie and brunette Zoey—were struggling after their mothers’ deaths. I hadn’t known how to step up and be the father they needed.

With Jules at my side, I’ve gotten my shit in order. I’m done with the club girls and drinking. I’ve learned how to be a good father to my girls along with Anthony and Scout.

I wrap my arm around Jules’s shoulders. Her round face and golden eyes shine as she looks up at me. She’s finally gotten the life she deserves. People have grown to love and respect her at the Sanctuary.

“It’s going to be okay,” Jules promises me as we watch our kids play with their friends in the yard. Her golden-blond hair feels soft against my fingertips. I find myself breathing easier under the power of her smile. “No matter what happens, you made the best decision.”

Becoming President had been my dream since I was a boy. I always wanted to be like my dad. With Jules’s help, I’ve accepted that’ll never happen.

Instead, I need to be my own man. Papa Bear ran things the way he did because that’s how he’s wired. I’ll never be him, but that doesn’t mean I’m failing.

Tomorrow, Papa Bear will drive with Sister Sass to pick up Jester from prison. My feelings are tangled over the relationship between my little sister and a man I’ve known my entire life. Though Jester isn’t my enemy, I do feel he’s a threat to Sister Sass’s future.

That’s why I’m not joining Papa Bear to pick up Jester. Normally, the club President is there to greet a club member when they’re released from prison.

Jester’s homecoming is a really big deal, too. He’s a founding member. Even though he rubs most people the wrong way, the other members and old ladies respect him. He was locked up for seven years after killing one of the men who raped and nearly killed Sister Sass and another club kid, Dire.

Jester deserves to have his ass kissed. So as a favor to him, I won’t spoil his first moments of freedom by reminding him how the world changed while he was gone.

ANGEL EYES



Luca Elmwood/Ghost's Old Lady/Member

Baby fever isn't the ideal sickness to catch when planning a violent attack on a pervert's stronghold.

The problem is I've lost my cold edge. Though I've tried to regain my icy vigilante vibe, my heart blazes hot these days.

Ghost caught my attention immediately. His eyes are sapphires lined with dark lashes and often hidden behind his shoulder-length brown hair. He's tall, leanly muscled, powerful, and impeccably sexy.

After a few stumbles, Ghost now loves me, and he doesn't love just anyone. We're syrupy sweet in our own asshole ways.

Loving Ghost made me open to loving other people. A year ago, Hope was a stranger sold to sex traffickers by her evil dad. I wanted to save her to give myself a purpose. Now, I want Hope to be happy because she's family.

My fellow women Born Villains are similar to the team I lost when I retired from volleyball. However, with my team, I felt forced to pretend. At the Sanctuary, I can be myself. And what I am now is baby crazy.

I was planning for a kid eight years ago when my sister and her baby girl asked for refuge in my home. A weekend of suffering stole my dream with the same ease as it took the lives of Drew and Abilene. Love offered me a chance to reclaim my old dream.

Though Ghost swore he didn't want a kid, his resolve cracked once his bestie, Apex—a huge, dark-haired Enforcer and our next-door neighbor—became a dad. First to an abused, redheaded toddler named Amelia. Then, Apex and his woman

—the petite, blonde ballerina, Giselle—recently welcomed their daughter, Anna.

Seeing Apex dote on those girls inspired Ghost to reconsider his own abilities. That’s why we’ve been low-key trying for a few months.

But this Texas thing has remained a sore spot. Once I’m pregnant, I can’t go on hunts anymore. After I give birth, I doubt I’ll be willing to leave my child for days or weeks to track and kill assholes.

I had a false alarm this month, leaving me on edge about Texas. When my period showed up, I decided to push Overlord to make his decision. The mission won’t be any easier in a month or a year. We’ve already killed the targets we could. None of those deaths freed the women trapped on the estate where Giselle was once locked away.

“If you die, I’m killing myself,” Ghost tells me the night before we leave for Texas.

I stand in the brand-new kitchen in our slick craftsman-style home. I can’t get enough of this place or how Ghost and I chose everything together.

Despite my good mood, he radiates malice as if we’re under attack. This is our routine since we started hunting together. Ghost starts by telling me how he’ll kill himself if I die. I laugh off his concerns and focus him on how good it’ll feel to end assholes and save people. He pretends not to hear me. By the time we leave, he is sharp and ready to hunt.

“I’m sorry, baby,” I tell Ghost while scooting closer to where he stands near the stove. “I don’t believe in the afterlife, so if you think killing yourself will lead to us reuniting, I don’t figure you’ll get your happy ending.”

“You should stay here while I go to Texas.”

“You know that’s dumb.”

“Fuck off,” he growls as his beautiful, blue eyes narrow.

Running my fingers over our slick countertops, I smile at him. “We picked everything in this house. I can’t even look at

the can opener without wanting to explore your naked body.”

Ghost stops glaring at me and looks around. “I don’t want to live in this house without you.”

“What about Hope?”

“She won’t want to live in this house without you, either.”

“It’s too good of a house to sit empty. Give it to Thorn when he finds the right woman.”

“Fuck that,” Ghost snarls, always feeling competitive with his club brother. “He can build his own house.”

“I’m sure he’d prefer that.”

“Oh, so our house isn’t good enough now?”

Wrapping my arms around Ghost’s waist, I think about the baby pictures I located of him. He was such a gorgeous child with big, blue eyes and floppy brown hair. I always get the urge to crawl into the pictures and hug the sad-looking child. Since that isn’t possible, I comfort him in my arms now.

“Once this thing in Texas is done, we’ll stay close to home.”

Ghost gives me a little grin, liking how I view the Sanctuary as permanent. Even after a year together, he occasionally worries I might run away or betray him like his cunty mom was prone to do.

“When we get to Primrose, we’ll follow the plan just like we’ve practiced for months,” I explain while nuzzling my jaw against his. “This is just another mission. Don’t overthink it. Or worry about dying. Just assume we’ll both be dead at the end. That way, we’ll likely be pleasantly surprised by the outcome.”

“I don’t care if I die. I just want you to live.”

“I don’t want you to die until you’ve knocked me up. Maybe you could jizz in a cup before we go.”

Ghost rolls his eyes. “That’s how Jelly Bean got knocked up. I think her kid will be weird. I’ll jizz inside you like nature intended.”

“So we’re good?” I ask after softly kissing Ghost and giving his ass a tender squeeze.

“I’m not ready to be miserable again.”

“Why do you assume I’ll die and you’ll live?” I ask, trying to seem annoyed. “Maybe we’ll both die.”

“You’re not helping.”

“Ghost,” I say, lowering my voice when I hear Hope moving around in the adjoining family room, “they have women like Giselle locked up in that estate. She was their ballerina. Another one is a schoolgirl. Another is an athlete. There’s a cheerleader. Think about having to dress like that all the time, never being able to be a real person, and instead feeling like a toy. And what happens to them when they get too old to turn on the perverts?”

“I know all that.”

“We kill monsters, you and me. We ended Hope’s dad. We killed those fuckers who hurt little Jesse,” I whisper, thinking of Ghost as a boy pimped out by his mom for drugs. “We’re vengeance. Yeah, I want to save those women. And I certainly want our team to come out of this thing unscathed. But more than anything, I want to destroy the bad guys.”

Ghost considers what we’ve accomplished together over the last year. A dozen perverts are dead now because of us. Many of them hurt Ghost and other defenseless kids. Vengeance felt cathartic. I see in his gaze how he’s reliving the emotional release he gained from ending those monsters’ lives.

“This is likely the last bloodbath we’ll cause. Rather than be afraid, you should feel nostalgic.”

Offering me a small smirk, Ghost stops assuming the worst. He’s a naturally pessimistic guy. His terrible childhood prepped him for a cruel world. But he’s also had a lot of good luck over the last decade.

Ghost always needs a little help to remember how he overcame his shitty childhood to become a strong, smart, sexy man worthy of my obsession.

Scenting up Ghost “kitty-style,” I whisper, “Let’s go make sure Hope has packed enough clothes for her stay with Sweet Buns and Tank.”

The grizzled founding member and his feisty old lady grew attached to Hope back when the damaged young woman barely spoke. She spends time at their house nearly every day and stays over during many weekends, so Ghost and I can run around naked at our place.

Over the last year, Hope has grown accustomed to the Sanctuary. In theory, she could walk around unsupervised. But if Hope gets spooked, she’ll take off running. One time, thirty people needed to fan out to search for her after she disappeared into the woods.

And anything can spook her. Hope knows the men of the Born Villains Motorcycle Club. She can look at them straight on with no problem. But if she notices a few of them out of the corner of her eye, she’ll think she’s in danger and run.

Tonight, rather than eat at HQ, Ghost, Hope, and I get burgers and fries in downtown Metamora before watching “Die Hard with a Vengeance” in our family room. Hope sits between us while cuddling with her shelter cat, CC.

More than once, Ghost glances at me. His expression is easy to read. We’ve started building a beautiful life together. All three of us are healthier than we’ve been in a long time. Everything we have could end in the next few days.

PAPA BEAR



Brody Marsden/Founder

My life's never been particularly simple. My abusive parents were allowed to take their problems out on me for a long time before the state got involved. Foster care and group homes were a mixed bag. I never found any affection from the families I stayed with over the years. If left to them and my own parents, I might have grown up to be a monster.

Foster care and the group homes were also where I met many of my good friends. Without that time, I wouldn't have the Sanctuary, my kids, the women I've loved, or the knowledge that my existence lifts up other people.

Life is often complicated that way. Like with Jester.

On one hand, I'm relieved my friend will breathe free air again. Jester's been locked up for seven years for doing something I wanted to do myself. He's behaved behind bars, focused on the goal of getting out as soon as possible. Now, he can claim his freedom.

On the other hand, prison kept him away from my daughter. No matter what I tell others—or even myself—I can't imagine my firstborn daughter sharing a bed or creating a life with Jester.

Since she was a teenager, Talon's had a weird obsession with him. At first, Jester didn't seem to notice. He was around when she was born and barely acknowledged her existence. She treated him like just another member of her extended club family. There was never any "Uncle Jester" relationship between my kids and him.

One day, though, I realized Jester was no longer oblivious to Talon's interest. At seventeen, she was a looker. Of course, she's always been blind to this fact since she doesn't look like

her mom. But Jester wasn't blind to it, and I had to remind him of how Talon wasn't like him.

"She doesn't know the real you," I explained. "She thinks you've got a heart of gold hiding under your tatted armor."

"Like you do?"

"Yeah."

Jester didn't need me to spell out how his heart wasn't made out of gold.

And if he hurt her, I'd need to hurt him. Jester's a tough bastard, but he can't stand up to me. That's why he backed off.

For a while, anyway. I had to give him the same talk several times, just to make sure Talon had space to grow. She talked tough and never seemed like a pushover, but my baby grew up loved. She's mouthy more than mean. If Jester pushed for something, she was bound to back down and obey. I didn't want her to be his bitch.

I kept hoping a woman would catch Jester's eye. He deserved love. I noticed how he would watch my first wife—a kindhearted, sexy brunette named Betty Boop—and seem lovestruck. He craved the tenderness she offered. But as a grown man, he always seemed drawn to shitty, selfish women. Or maybe those were the only women willing to put up with his bullshit. Either way, he never found someone to love.

Even though Jester was already a teen when we met, he's always felt like my son. Everything good in him came from Betty Boop and me. We transformed him from a raging mess to the semi-normal mess he is now.

When Jester arrived at the group home, Risa sensed something particularly lost in him. That's why she called me. Many boys would do fine in life despite spending their youth in the system.

But some were so lost, they seemed destined to die young or become monsters. Jester was like that. He had potential but was too far gone to find a good path on his own.

“Why’s life gotta be so hard?” he asked me that first day as tears filled his eyes, and he lowered his guard. “Am I being punished?”

All I’ve ever wanted for Jester was to lift some of the burden from his shoulders. Help him see how life wasn’t all bad. Inspire him to desire more than a meal and somewhere warm to sleep.

Jester holds a special spot in my heart. He became family and a trusted friend. Yet, over the years, he pulled away. First, when his son died. Then, when we lost Betty Boop. By the time he took notice of Talon, I felt more like his boss than his family.

I kept Jester and my daughter apart for years. Then, Talon and Emma were raped and nearly killed by a bunch of frat assholes who assumed the wild girls wouldn’t be missed.

As Talon and Emma struggled to survive, the club quietly killed the men. When Jester got wind of the final one’s location, he refused to wait for anyone. Instead, he hunted down the asshole and got himself locked up.

I remember arriving at the jail located outside the Born Villains’ territory. Jester’s big size clashed with the janky, small-town cell. He looked at me with the same confused expression I’d seen on his face as a kid.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” Jester said to me that day.

Fortunately, the asshole who nearly killed my daughter and Emma had a reputation. The prosecutor knew a jury was bound to lack sympathy for the dead guy, not that Jester was particularly sympathetic, either. A deal was hatched to give him eight years. He’s getting out early on account of good behavior.

Though I’m glad he’ll be free, I can’t shake my fears about Talon and him. Despite her nearly dying and his time locked up, they still expect to be together.

“I want your daughter,” Jester told me years ago. “I think she can love me.”

By then, Talon had healed physically and planned to get her patch. She was already calling herself “Sister Sass.” The idea of her big personality being swallowed up by Jester didn’t sit well with me.

“Talon’s got a tough heart,” I explained to Jester. “She’s survived a lot, but you have the ability to break her for good. If that happens, I’ll end you.”

Staring at me through the video screen, Jester said without hesitation, “If I destroy that beautiful creature, I’ll want you to end me.”

Now, there’s nothing to keep Jester from making his move. Talon’s twenty-five. Still too young for a man in his forties, but no longer a child. Jester will soon be free to make his claim on her.

As we near the prison, I glance at my daughter. Sister Sass stares out the window, likely thinking about her future.

Though she loves Jester, she’s never really known him. And Jester doesn’t know Sister Sass. He fell for Talon a lifetime ago, before she nearly died, got healthy, and earned her patch. For years, she’s been pushing people’s buttons to prove she’s tough. I don’t know how much Jester will enjoy her pushing his buttons.

We arrive at the prison’s visitor parking lot to find it filled with other waiting families. Sister Sass doesn’t bolt out of the SUV once we’re parked. She sits quietly, making me wonder what’s got her tongue.

“He’s bound to be weird for a while,” I warn her. “He’s been locked up for too long to be the same.”

“Do you think he blames me?” she asks, startling me with her honesty.

“No, he can never blame you. You’re the person he needs most.”

Sister Sass’s dark brown eyes flash to me, searching for a lie. “No, I think that’s you.”

“No, it used to be Betty Boop. Now, it’s you.”

“But I’m not her,” Sister Sass says, sounding on the verge of tears. “I’m nothing like her.”

“He knows that. He wanted her to be his mom. He doesn’t want the same thing from you.”

Sister Sass regains her composure and asks, “Do you think I’ll make a good mom?”

“Yes.”

“I’m really selfish and rude.”

“No, you’re not selfish.”

After we share a chuckle over her rudeness, Sister Sass stares wistfully at the prison.

“Do you wish Luca and Ghost waited to go to Texas until next week?”

“No, it’s best for us to get everything done,” I explain as I notice movement near the prison entrance. “Besides, the Texas fucks have a spy who will hear about our welcome home party. With all the activity, no one will notice Ghost, Luca, and the others have gone.”

Nodding, Sister Sass stares at the prison entry. Around us, people stir with nervous anticipation.

“How did you know Mom was the one?” Sister Sass asks with her gaze still on the prison. “How were you sure?”

I smile at the memory of meeting Betty Boop as kids in a foster home. She’d looked at me and flinched, even though I hadn’t moved. I figured she was too squeamish for a guy like me. We were friendly enough as kids. I never stopped thinking about her, even after I got transferred to another foster home.

We ran into each other again as teenagers. After juvie, I’d been moved to a group home. She was in another one. We were both friendly with Ominous back when she was Tessie. Betty Boop still flinched when I looked at her for too long, but I didn’t let that stop me from approaching her.

“I knew the moment I kissed her,” I explain to Sister Sass. “I got this feeling in my chest as if I wouldn’t be able to live

without her.”

My daughter looks at me, likely considering how I’ve lived without Betty Boop for a decade now. She doesn’t mention how I found love again with Lady Bug.

Instead, Sister Sass says, “Lady Bug helped me pick out this shirt.”

Her fingers run across the belly of her burgundy T-shirt. I suspect my daughter’s thinking about the scar from her feeding tube hidden beneath the fabric.

“I see him,” Sister Sass says, nearly bouncing in her seat.

Spotting Jester isn’t difficult, considering he stands at least a half foot over his fellow releasees. He wears a simple white T-shirt and basic jeans along with raggedy tennis shoes. His shoulders are slumped forward. His long, nearly black hair sways with his every step, falling more and more in his face. His black-and-gray beard is long past needing a trim. Jester wears a surly, kinda pouty expression like someone’s bugging him.

Sister Sass and I leave the SUV and walk around the reuniting families. Jester hesitates when he sees us. I think he’s reacting to Sister Sass. She instantly feels awkward and nearly steps behind me.

“Jester,” I say, drawing his attention to me, “you’re free. Shake off that prisoner shit.”

A smirk warms his rough face as he lets me give him a quick hug. He steps back and rubs at his beard, seeming as self-conscious as Sister Sass nearly hiding behind me.

I step aside to force them to interact and get the awkwardness out of the way.

“Jester,” she says in a soft tone she offers no one else.

“Talon,” he replies, getting himself riled up and turning off the civilized part of himself.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” I tell them and gesture toward the SUV. “This personal shit can wait for the Sanctuary.”

“No,” Sister Sass insists and steps forward. “I’m hugging Jester.”

“No,” he mutters and steps back.

Cocking an eyebrow, she mutters, “Don’t make me look like a chump by chasing you.”

Jester narrows his fearsome gaze. With anyone else, I’d be ready to kick his ass to protect my daughter. However, I know Jester’s got himself ridiculously nervous over seeing someone he’s known for her entire life.

When Sister Sass wraps her arms around his waist, Jester goes stiff. He’s never been comfortable with nonsexual affection. Betty Boop could get away with hugging him, and Jester never minded cuddling with his son. Otherwise, touching has been reserved for fucking.

Sister Sass doesn’t let him go until his gaze meets hers. “I’m glad you’re coming home,” she says, sounding so much like her mother. “We all missed you.”

“I’m not so sure that’s true,” Jester replies and looks to me for help with the temptation wrapped around him. “I rub people the wrong way.”

“Ignore those fools,” Sister Sass insists, still clinging to him.

Jester looks around at the other families, hugging and crying. There are moms and dads picking up sons. Wives and kids picking up husbands and fathers. I don’t know what the hell we look like right now, but Jester gets that confused look on his face again.

“Let’s go home,” I tell him when he can’t get out of his head.

Nodding, he looks down at Sister Sass and pats her back. I see in his gray-blue eyes the exact moment when he remembers she’s all grown up and no more obstacles remain between them. The protective dad in me nearly rips free of my rational skin, wanting to keep my child safe from this beast.

Instead, I gesture toward the SUV. This time, Sister Sass releases her death grip on Jester who can't take his eyes off her now. I'm about ready to grab her and run when he starts moving toward the SUV.

“Are we eating on the way or should I save my appetite for what's waiting for me at the Sanctuary?”

Opening the back seat door, Sister Sass gasps. “Watch your mouth, pervert. My dad can hear you.”

Jester throws his head back and laughs loud at her teasing. Sister Sass grins at me before sliding inside the SUV. I feel myself breathing normal again. Even though Sister Sass mellows out, and Jester settles down during the drive, worry wraps tight around my heart.

Because as much as I want to save the damaged kid I met decades ago, I'll end him in a heartbeat if it's the only way to protect my baby girl.

JESTER



Freedom doesn't seem real. I walk outside the prison and breathe no easier. Instead, I feel exposed out in the open. Yet, once I spot my people, my mind focuses on returning to the Sanctuary.

Papa Bear looks just like I remember. Seeing him on the phone doesn't mean anything. People change even if they seem the same on a screen. That's what happened to Talon.

She's gone from beautiful to the sexiest thing I've ever seen. Often, in my head, Talon remains a kid. I also struggle not to imagine her still hooked up to those machines. When I went to visit her in the hospital, I couldn't even see her face because of all the bandages. I was sure she would die like Lando and Betty Boop did.

But here she is hugging me so tightly, her tits get smashed against my chest. I don't know what to do with the boner she creates. Talon doesn't even take notice of what she does to me, but Papa Bear is aware.

I feel his mood shift. Men like him and me don't always speak at a human level. We share a deeper, more primal language

And Papa Bear's currently telling me to fuck off. He figures Talon should be off-limits.

Except he's wrong. *Talon belongs to me.* I might fuck up and hurt her. That's a very real possibility. But there's no denying she's stuck on me. And I've never wanted anyone else. Why do we need to play games? I'm certainly not getting any fucking younger.

The ride home feels short. I listen to Talon talk freely about what everyone is up to lately. No editing herself or using coded language. I learn how Ghost's woman is a vigilante.

“We did the math and she’s killed over thirty people. It’s insane. She’s a fucking mass murderer!” Talon explains with great gusto. “But like a virtuous mass murderer. She only kills perverts and killers. No one nice.”

Papa Bear chuckles at her enthusiasm as we pass another mile marker.

“They’re going to Texas to kill Giselle’s dad and his security team. Might even save a few women. Oh, God, I never showed you Apex’s newest kid. The older one is a cutie and thinks I’m a monster. Amelia will flinch in the most adorable way. But the new one is still just a blob of slobber and dirty diapers. Cute as can be, though.”

Talon reaches into the front seat to show me a picture of Apex’s baby daughter named Anna.

“He won’t even hold her,” Talon explains. “Says his hands are too big and scary for such a little thing.”

I look at my hands and remember how small Lando seemed when I’d pick him up. He wasn’t even a baby then, just a scrawny, walking, babbling kid with my eyes and his mom’s dimples.

Sadness floods my senses when I consider what might have been. Regrets don’t serve any purpose. I can’t change what happened. But I still wonder what my boy would be like now if he had lived.

Would he have stayed with Papa Bear and Lady Bug while I was locked up? No, he’d probably live with his turd mom, and she might have bailed when I was in prison. Even my what-if fantasies get weighed down with ugly facts.

“Everyone’s having kids,” Papa Bear says as we pass another little town on our way to Metamora. “Mabie and Blunt are officially together. She goes by the name ‘Care Bear’ now. They just moved into their place and already have a baby on the way.”

Talon leans between the front seats and explains, “They took a test. Like a paternity one for Clark. Turns out all their cheating hit the jackpot.”

“I always figured Clark was Blunt’s kid,” Papa Bear continues. “He gets this one look where he stares at his feet and pouts. Blunt’s face looks the same way when he’s having a bad day.”

“What happens with Blunt’s rank?” I ask, wondering if I’ll be Road Captain again.

“He knew it was only temporary,” Papa Bear explains. “You’re the Road Captain until you say you aren’t.”

Nodding, I don’t know if I even want the rank back. I’m not a young man anymore, and I only want to relax. However, I like hearing how regaining my rank is an option. The idea of everyone moving on without me leaves a piss-poor taste in my mouth. As if my return will be an inconvenience for people.

“Penthouse is having a baby,” Talon says when the silence lingers in the SUV.

“He’s the giant guy, right?”

“Yeah. You don’t know him well,” Talon mumbles as if realizing what I do. *The world changed a whole fucking lot while I was gone.* “He’s a big, quiet guy. But he hooked up with that Eliza chick I told you about. The one from Texas. They just moved in to a house near Overlord’s place and their kid is due soon.”

Feeling grumpy at how domesticated the world got while I was locked in a cage, I ask, “Is there even room on Tobosa Road anymore with all these young fucks getting hooked up and popping out the next generation?”

“Sure,” Papa Bear says. “Overlord didn’t even have his place when you got locked up. There’s only a half dozen homes, so far. Most of the younger members, both guys and chicks, are single.”

Talon leans farther into the front seat and looks at me. “If you built a house, would you be on Tobosa or with the founding members on Creosote Bush Road?”

Hearing her real question, I think about Papa Bear’s tension over his girl loving a piece of shit like me. *Can I really*

just claim Talon, build a house, and make a kid like all these other guys have done?

The answer seems clear, but Talon still waits for me to respond to her question.

“What do I need with a house?”

Cocking an eyebrow, Talon asks, “Well, where will I rest my battered bang-hole if we don’t have a house?”

Papa Bear taps the brakes suddenly, tossing Talon into the back seat.

“Subtle,” she grumbles at her father.

Papa Bear just smirks. “Lost control of myself for a moment.”

Talon leans between the seats again and faces her dad. “I’m a mature woman with natural desires. Don’t try to put my bang-hole in the corner, Dad.”

“Never crossed my mind.”

Grinning, Talon turns toward me. I feel the moment when she realizes she’s playing with a beast. Her confidence sags, and she won’t hold my gaze.

“Which road do your gal pals Riot and Rave live on?”

Talon’s eyes flash upward, finding mine. She watches me for a moment before her big mouth revs again.

“Tobosa Road. They claimed the old ladies aren’t good neighbors.”

“They’re one block over,” Papa Bear mutters. “If the old ladies want to cause trouble, they can walk that far.”

Talon twists around to look at her father. “But unleashing a full-fledged offensive is more difficult from a separate block.”

“I know you’re joking, but Ominous encourages the biker chicks to look down at the old ladies.”

“They look down on us. I’m often insecure around them.”

Papa Bear chuckles at how she doesn’t even pretend to sell that lie. Talon turns around to look at me.

“Who would you rather stand on the street drinking beers with? The young, fun guys like surly Apex, asshole Ghost, mute Penthouse, or grumpy Blunt or the old, Depends-wearing founding members like pissy Flagg, clueless Buzzsaw, and whiny Dropout?”

“Good God, do you like any of them?” Papa Bear scolds while grinning.

Talon glances over her shoulder and explains, “I adore each and every single one, but I’ve got to keep it real.”

When her gaze returns to me, she’s regained her old fire. This is the woman who’s been teasing me on the phone for years. She talks about us like we’re a couple. The sane part of this woman fears me. Yet, I’m not currently looking at the sensible version of Talon. This one is making promises with the way she holds my gaze.

“Talon, sit back before you give me a stroke,” Papa Bear says, forcing his daughter to stop teasing the beast.

Obedying her father, Talon returns to her seat. That only lasts about twenty minutes before she’s leaning forward to show me pictures of people. I learn the names of everyone who arrived after I went away.

Looking through her phone filled with photos, I realize many of the men and women I grew up around have gotten older, changed their hair, and just look different. I don’t even recognize a few old ladies who I’ve known for twenty-plus years. And their kids all got big and unfamiliar.

Talon has to explain who everyone is until I find myself getting pissed at how those kids were Lando’s age. They’re hitting their teens while he’ll always be that tiny thing with the goofy laugh.

“Give Jester a chance to breathe,” Papa Bear says, sensing my mood better than his daughter does.

Talon tosses her phone in the back seat but remains stuck between the front seats. She watches me with a tender expression, reminding me of her mom.

“Life is so busy. Everyone is into their own shit. No one will expect you to remember everything. They’re just happy you’re free.”

Despite my bad mood, I feel a smile on my face. If Talon and I were alone right now, I’d kiss her until she was mine.

But we’re not alone. And we won’t be for a while. The Sanctuary is welcoming me home with a party and lots of happy faces. I don’t mind people missing me. Even a guy like me wants to feel appreciated.

However, all this celebration crap is keeping me from the prize I really want.

SISTER SASS



Jester looks even better than expect, and I assumed he'd be hotter than hell. Talking over the phone, even with video, just couldn't do justice to the insane masculinity he exudes.

I fight the urge to crawl into the front seat and finally enjoy a real taste of the only man I've ever wanted. If my father wasn't around, I might do something reckless.

I'm not sure what will happen when Jester fully meets my interest with his own. It's possible I might run away. I can also see myself crying and needing more time.

As we drive through the Sanctuary's front gates, I'm still riding high on Jester's intoxicating vibe. I want to deny the problems awaiting us back home.

The first issue being Jester refuses to get out of the SUV once we arrive at his townhome. He stares at the dashboard and scratches absentmindedly at his bearded chin.

Papa Bear leaves the SUV and knocks on my window to get me to follow him. I hesitate, thinking I should soothe the edgy beast in the front seat. Papa Bear taps on the window again and wiggles his finger at me. I finally obey since I'm getting a "club founder" vibe from him.

"Let him be," Papa Bear tells me once I stand next to him. "You know what it's like to feel trapped and then set free."

Frowning, I rub my stomach scar through my shirt. "You mean when I was tied down to the hospital bed? Why mention that now?"

"No, I meant when Zoey and Evie locked you in the attic closet," Papa Bear says with complete seriousness before breaking under the strain of his amusement. I roll my eyes while he chuckles. "You were in there for an hour because you refused to call anyone for help."

I still can't believe my evil nieces tricked me into that closet during my babysitting duty. I could have suffocated from my rage, or they could have burned down the house. Well, Scout is a little Miss Goody Two-Shoes, so she wouldn't have let that happen. But she did listen to me pound on the door for an hour before Jules arrived home to free me.

"I'm not laughing at you," Jules said that day despite giggling so hard she was literally fucking crying.

"Ground them!" I demanded of my nieces who dared to stand nearby, looking adorably innocent. "Take away their toys for a year!"

"I can't even with you. Quit bitching, ya cranky-ass fool," Zoey said, having totally ripped off what I often say to her father.

That day was not one of my prouder moments. Like Jester right now, I refused to seek help when I was trapped by two demon children.

Papa Bear finally opens Jester's door and explains, "Tonight's welcome home party is low-key. We'll save the wild shit for when you've settled in and the rest of the members are back."

Jester glances at Papa Bear without moving his impressively masculine body. He seems stuck in the SUV.

"What happens next?" Jester finally asks.

Papa Bear holds open the door and explains, "You go inside your place and get your head on straight. In an hour, we walk over to HQ and get dinner. We'll stick you at a table and have people come by to say hello. If you want to stay longer and have drinks, that's fine. If you want to come back here, that's also fine. The world isn't changing tomorrow. Take your time."

Jester shoots a dirty look at my dad. He doesn't like having anyone talk to him like he's a stupid kid.

But in all honesty, Jester requires everything to be dumbed down. When I said I was prospecting for the club years ago, he acted like he simply couldn't figure out what the hell I was

talking about. I was forced to explain how prospecting worked. Of course, he knew the truth, yet he demanded for me to put the pieces together for him.

Right now, Jester feels out of sorts. Nothing makes sense. Everyone feels wrong. He probably feels wrong, too. Jester can fuss all he wants, but Papa Bear knows how to handle him.

Jester finally gets his muscled body out of the damn SUV and walks to the townhome's front door.

"It's just like you left it," I promise him. "I was here every time the cleaning lady came by. Made sure she didn't move anything."

His gray-blue eyes find me, and something shifts in his stance. He isn't tense about coming home. He doesn't feel out of place. He's gotten that very specific male aura oozing from his every pore. I've never seen him behave this way before.

"Sister Sass and I need to check on the Texas thing and make sure everything is solid here," Papa Bear says and pats Jester's shoulder. "We'll be back in an hour to get you."

Feeling bad over ditching him, I offer Jester a warm smile. He responds by cocking his right eyebrow as if I'm challenging him and he's about to tackle me.

Papa Bear nudges me toward the SUV. Once we're inside, I stare out the window as Jester watches us disappear.

"I should have stayed with him."

"That wouldn't have been a smart plan."

"What, do you think we'd fuck?"

"Yes," Papa Bear says and parks the SUV in his garage next to his favorite Harley and my little sister Kat's bicycle.

Frowning at my father's tone, I consider Jester alone in his townhome.

"He might be sad."

Papa Bear shuts off the engine and turns to me. "He hasn't gotten his dick wet in more than seven years, Talon."

My father rarely uses my birth name. Calling me Sister Sass is a sign of respect at how we wear the same patch. But right now, he isn't Papa Bear, club founder. *He's my dad.*

"Jester's been waiting for you," Papa Bear continues after I cross my arms as if my boobs are under attack. "Now, he's done waiting. You need to keep that in mind when you're alone with him."

"Do you think he'll hurt me?" I mumble before inhaling sharply and declaring, "Because I don't think he will."

"I think he'll push you and you'll bend. He's horny as hell, and you're lovesick. Then, he'll wish he waited, and you'll feel weird about your body."

"I think I'm ready."

"Well, you're either right or you're wrong. Maybe you're ready to test that out or maybe you need more time. But if you stayed there alone with Jester, he was absolutely getting you in bed."

"He never made a move after I turned eighteen."

Papa Bear's dark eyes study me as if he's considering his words. "Jester still saw you as a kid. I mean, you looked exactly the same when you went from child to adult in his mind. Jester can be very literal. He didn't see any change in you, so he kept waiting. He's clearly noticed you're not a kid anymore."

"Damn right, I'm not, chump," I mutter and then smile at my dad. "Thank you for protecting me."

Papa Bear's wary expression breaks as he shares my grin. "You were so horny on the way home. I haven't seen any of my kids like that in years."

"Hey, I kept it subtle."

Papa Bear grunts as he opens his door. "We better air out the SUV. I don't want it stinking of your lust when Lady Bug heads to the store tomorrow."

"Not cool, fool," I mutter and follow after him.

We enter the main house to find my ten-year-old sister, Katana—brunette bob haircut, poofy skirt, pink shirt decorated with glitter—in the living room with her half sister and my sexy, adult stepsister, Nadia.

Thanks to my peacemaking skills, Kat and Nadia super friendly now. Every time they smile at each other, I get an extra karma point.

“Settle your ovaries, chump,” Zoey tells me from the kitchen island. “Look at you all smug, like you don’t eat shit.”

“I never eat shit. You eat it, brat,” I growl at the five-year-old.

Still sporting pigtails because her dad is obsessed with them, the little brunette shakes her head and jumps down from the stool. She’s wearing her “fierce, feisty, & five” pink T-shirt from her birthday party a few months back.

Though I shouldn’t be intimidated by a child, even if she’s demonic in nature, Zoey refuses to stop imitating me and my fellow biker chicks.

“Listen up,” she says, sounding just like Aqua. “I get how you don’t see how you suck, but we’re not blind here.”

“Stop copying our shit, kid.”

“Get high on my fart fumes, chump.”

Jules laughs at me from nearby. When I frown at her, she shrugs.

“You could have stopped talking like that around her, and she might not be saying it now.”

“Why should I edit myself just because your kid’s a copycat?”

“I just told you why.”

“Look at the fool crying,” Zoey tells Evie.

Her equally evil yet sneakier sister nods. The blonde five-year-old plays sweet, but she’s in cahoots with the bitchy one. *Oh, yeah, I’m onto their wicked garbage now!*

“Let’s be nice to Sister Sass,” Papa Bear tells the kids as he pats my shoulder. “She’s dealing with a lot of emotions today.”

“I’m sorry,” Scout says, even though she’s the least evil of Overlord’s four kids.

“You’re my favorite,” I tell the child who owns the same golden hair and eyes as her mom/sister, Jules.

Scout’s little round face lights up under my adoring praise. Meanwhile, her siblings aren’t impressed.

Anthony mutters, “I can’t even with girl drama.”

“You can’t even with anything, child,” I reply to the five-year-old.

“No, I can,” Anthony says and nods at his buddy, Clark.

Mabie’s son walks over to me and wants a hug. I pick him up, knowing the three-year-old is too sweet to wipe boogers on me or any other nefarious shit his buddies might try.

“It’s going to be okay,” he says and squeezes me.

Smiling at Clark, I hope the kid Jester eventually pounds into my bang-hole is a sweetheart like this little guy. I bet I could be a really good mom if my kid was easy like Clark.

Of course, I’ll probably end up with a demonic menace like Zoey.

“Should I change my shirt before dinner?” I ask Lady Bug after Clark leaves to play with his buddies.

My stepmom and I have never been tight. I can’t look at her without thinking she’s replacing my mom.

Of course, Betty Boop would want people to be happy rather than wallow in grief. But I was her only little girl. She worried most about me. I think she was happy when I was a butch brat. Like I was safer in the world if I didn’t own my femininity.

As I got older, I wished I could feel comfortable being girly. Could I pull off a bouncy ponytail? Would I rock out a poodle skirt like Betty Boop did? Would I look silly with bright red lips?

I never tested out those ideas because I didn't look naturally soft like my mom. I worried I'd seem like a joke next to her natural beauty, so I didn't even try.

But for Jester, I want to look prettier. That's why I asked Lady Bug for advice on what shirt to wear. She also talked me into adding layers to my long brown hair.

"It'll look purposely messy that way," she explained a month ago when I succumbed to my insecurities and asked for help.

Lady Bug looks kinda bohemian with her long brown hair and flowery skirts. Though not as dolled up as my mom, she owns her feminine side.

"Did you get sweaty on the ride home?" Lady Bug asks quietly.

I turn my gaze to my father watching us nearby. Papa Bear offers me a slow, taunting smile.

Rolling my eyes, I shrug. "Yeah, I went all horndog on the way home. Should I change?"

"Did you secrete anything?" Nadia asks, looking me over. "Why would you need to change?"

"I got sweaty."

Nadia leans closer and sniffs me. "You smell fine. Minty. Is that your body wash?"

"No, it's my cologne."

"Very primal," she taunts and snickers with Kat.

"I regret playing peacemaker between you two," I grumble at the sisters while Lady Bug draws my gaze back to her.

I stare into her eyes and wish she was Betty Boop. My mom would know just what to say. But holding on to my grief can't bring back my mom. It only keeps me stuck in the past. That's why I turn to Lady Bug for wisdom.

She offers a soft smile. "If you feel uncomfortable in the shirt, change it to something that feels better. There's no wrong answer. It's just a shirt."

“But I want my boobs to look rocking.”

“Vanity,” Papa Bear tells his granddaughters who remain with him in the kitchen, “is not helpful in a long-lasting relationship.”

“Sure, sure,” I say and wrap my arm around Lady Bug. “As if you would have really fallen in love with this one if she looked like Jabba the Hut.”

Papa Bear chuckles and sizes up his woman. “There’d just be more of her to love.”

“But she’d be sticky and have yellow eyes.”

“Everyone gets sticky,” Nadia says, and Kat nods.

“Whatever. You’re all wrong.”

“She’s gonna blow an ovary,” Zoey tells Evie who nods.

“I’m ditching you people and going to my place to get a new shirt. See how I have good listening skills?”

Papa Bear applauds. Scout joins him. Kat and Nadia decide to pity me with a little fake clapping. Clark doesn’t know what’s happening but claps while Anthony narrows his eyes at me as if I’m interrupting his macho-man time.

I bow for them and then walk past Zoey and Evie. “Enjoy your pigtails, nerds.”

After leaving my father’s house, I ride to my cottage on Black Pine Road within the Sanctuary. The cute homes are used by single women and older folks. Jester’s sister once lived out here.

I hurry inside my place and look through my T-shirt collection before settling on a simple black top.

Back on my Harley, I return to the heart of the Sanctuary and walk inside HQ. Papa Bear and Jester should be walking over soon from the townhomes. I just need to chill until then.

“Don’t let him swallow you up,” Aqua whispers as she appears behind me.

My club sister's dark hair is tied back in double braids as usual. She's rocking black-lined eyes and dark-red painted lips. Next to her is a very pregnant Jelly Bean whose sweet face sparkles with glitter.

"I got prettied up," she explains while rubbing her belly. "I've never met Jester."

"He's an ass," I warn her. "He's also in a weird mood right now. Don't take anything he says or does personally."

"You should take your own advice," Aqua mutters while having Jelly Bean sit down at a table near the kitchen. "You look nervous."

"Papa Bear said I got horny on the ride home."

My club sister smirks. "Well, keep it in your pants while we eat. Jelly Bean gets nauseous easily."

"Don't listen to her," Jelly Bean insists and offers me a warm smile. "Just let your love fly."

"You sure lucked out with this one right here," I tell Aqua who wraps an arm around her woman.

HQ's fun, easy mood ends as soon as Jester enters the place. He's showered. The top half of his damp hair is tugged back away from his face, revealing the hunky beast from my horniest dreams. He seems larger now, less uncertain. Just until he becomes the center of attention.

The founding members don't come to his table, one by one. They swarm Jester like ants on a discarded candy. No matter what tactic Papa Bear uses, he can't seem to shoo them away.

I sit with Aqua and Jelly Bean, feeling like maybe what's happening at Jester's table should be left to the founding members. I notice the younger club members don't approach. Jester was an intimidating guy before he spent seven years in prison. Though he radiates an untamed hostility, his old friends can't get enough of him.

Jester doesn't tell them to fuck off. He's really well behaved. I wonder if that's a trick he learned in prison. *Has the*

wild man been broken?

As if sensing my question, Jester's pale-blue gaze finds me from across the room. He stares in a wholly unsubtle way until I'm forced to look away. Except he's still looking when I peek at him.

"Uh-oh," Aqua mutters when Jester stands up and leaves his friends so he can walk straight to my table.

I lift my gaze and try to smile casually. "Not having fun?"

"It's too much."

"Tell them to back off."

The scowl Jester unleashes digs its way past my armor and sinks deep into my bones. I nearly crumble under the weight of such anger. For a second, I'm aware I can't tame this man. He's going to want what he wants. *Whyever would he bend to my needs?* If we come down to a battle of wills, I'm weak, and he's an unbreakable force.

Yet, I refuse to give up, even if he's scaring the shit out of me. That's why I ask, "Want to go for a ride?"

Jester glances around and then scowls at me. "With who?"

"Me?" I ask weakly.

I can't help wondering if he'd rather ride with his old friends. I know they're dying to ride with him, even if he's in a shitty mood.

Jester blinks rapidly as if his brain is about to overheat. The rage drains from his face as his gaze washes over me. Breathing easier now, he nods.

"Are my hogs in running order?"

Annoyance breaks through my earlier fear. "How many times did I promise to take them out on the road to keep them purring?"

"Yeah, but people lie when they know you can't test the truth," he mutters and looks around as if he's surrounded by enemies.

Standing up, I rest my hand on his chest to draw his attention back to me. His gaze goes too sharp, and his breathing speeds up. Having triggered something wicked in him, I consider removing my hand.

“I don’t know what prison is like,” I say softly, keeping my hand put and planning to run for my dad nearby if Jester flips out. “I can’t understand how being locked up for seven years feels. But I still think you’re acting like a punk-ass fool.”

Jester stops eye-fucking me and laughs in that rough, almost mocking way.

That’s when he suddenly notices Aqua and Jelly Bean. I know he doesn’t really remember Aqua. She wasn’t around long before he went to prison. But I talk about her constantly, so he probably feels like he knows her life, from her shitty parents to her love for Jelly Bean to the baby they’re having with Smoke’s jizz donation. I’ve gossiped plenty about my bestie.

“Are you done eating?” he asks, sounding like everyone is on his last fucking nerve.

“Yes.”

“Prove my bikes are in running order.”

I visualize myself walking to his townhome, where his bed is located only a short distance from his motorcycles.

“How about you go get your favorite hog and ride back here? Mine is parked out back. We can ride around and let you breathe free air.”

When Jester steps closer, I become very aware of his size in comparison to mine.

“I want you on the back of my bike, not riding next to me,” he says in a rough voice.

I imagine my arms wrapped around Jester as we ride his hog. When I was a teenager, that was my horniest dream. But I’m now a grown woman and his club sister. Before my resolve can crack, I glance at Aqua to give me a silent pep talk. My gaze then flashes to the only chick founding member.

Ominous knows where my head is at, so she gives me her best “fuck all men” expression. I get a jolt of confidence from their chick support.

“If you want me to act like an old lady,” I tell Jester as I poke his chest, “you’ve got to wine and dine me.”

“Yeah, I’m not doing that. You know what this is. We haven’t been subtle in a long fucking time.”

Jester isn’t wrong. I’ve been acting as if we were dating for the last seven years. I’ve been all-in with Jester since day one. I never once sniffed around any other guys.

However, I still poke his rock-hard chest and repeat, “Wine and dine. Until then, you can ride with me as your fellow club member.”

Jester glances around the room, where people wait for him to do something. He’s acting weird. His vibe is hostile. Papa Bear looks ready to pounce if Jester gets aggressive with me.

When I feel Jester about to say something cruel, I press my index finger to his lips. “I will absolutely fucking cry if you hurt my feelings. I can’t be tough when it comes to you.”

Jester’s hostility shuts off completely. He steps back and nods.

“I’ll get my hog and meet you here. Make sure you can keep up, kid.”

Refusing to let on to how I know he’s messing with me, I reply, “I know it’s been a long time since you’ve been on a hog, so I promise to be patient.”

Jester glares at me before throwing his head back and laughing at my comment. I know he’s about to explode in rage—or jizz—soon.

Leaving with him is dangerous. As soon as he storms out of HQ, everyone turns their gazes to me. Even Overlord’s kids eyeball me as if they’ve caught on to how I’m in trouble.

“I’ve got this,” I announce to the room. “But if not, I expect you all to cry at my funeral. Even you, Buzzsaw. Nothing less than big, beautiful tears, old-timer.”

With that, I walk outside and slide onto my beautiful, vivid black Softail Low Rider. Taking a deep breath, I think about my parents. My mom was a delicate flower in many ways. She might have gotten tats and rode bitch on a rough man's bike, but she mostly just wanted to be pretty and soft.

Papa Bear knew how to make her feel loved while Jester doesn't even know how to make himself happy.

I guess I'm about to find out if I'm strong enough to do all the heavy lifting on my own.

JESTER



I can't settle down. The Sanctuary feels like another prison. Papa Bear keeps eyeballing me like a guard ready to lower the hammer for any misstep.

My friends have changed just enough to remind me of the passing of time. Some of them are grandparents now. I suddenly don't feel like the man I was when I walked into prison.

Rather than putting on a show for my old friends, I want to be alone with Talon. I'm in a hurry to see where things go now that I'm free and she's grown up.

Except she doesn't join me at dinner. Talon sits with her friends instead and returns to her flirty-teenage crap. That's why I lose my temper. I feel like the world moved on. I have nothing anchoring me to this place except for my desire for Talon, and she's playing games.

I know Papa Bear doesn't want us to ride off together. I used to turn to him for advice, but he's right to worry. I have no experience being with a woman in a real way. I'm going to fuck up. But I can't walk away from Talon.

My friends don't get my interest in her. She's too young. They view her as a child rather than a grown woman.

Everyone knows this thing is going to end badly. Even Talon acts as if she's an animal trainer. She plans to keep this beast under control with the tricks she's learned while I was locked in a cage.

Climbing on my chopper blue Fat Boy, I let out a satisfied sigh. In my head, I imagine Talon riding bitch. Her arms around my waist would feel good.

Since she wants to play club sister rather than girlfriend, I guide us around the Sanctuary. I enjoy the hot, dry air on my

skin. The wind blows my hair loose. The breeze also gets under my shirt, wrapping around my chest, making me feel like I'm flying.

Talon was smart to suggest taking a ride. I get my head on right after we explore the Sanctuary's back roads before I lead us to Talon's place. As the sun sets, lanterns light up the cottages on Black Pine Road.

My sister used to live out here before cancer ended her. I don't like thinking about Richelle. She was a scared kid, a brainwashed teenager, and a bitter woman. I didn't blame her for any of those things, and I helped her when I found out she was in a bad way. But I never wanted to share a room with her.

Now, Richelle's gone. She didn't die as quick as Betty Boop, but she wasn't around long enough to really settle her affairs. Life can end quickly in a million ways.

Climbing off my motorcycle, I recall Talon before she went out with Emma years ago. She'd been mouthing off to the club's Secretary that day. Flagg ignored her because he didn't view her as a threat.

For all her big talk, Talon was just a kid. That's why I hadn't fucked her. Kids are stupid. I was a fucking moron when I was her age. I didn't want to get my heart wrapped up in a girl who'd grow into a woman bound to reject me.

Standing between my motorcycle and the cottage, I ask, "This is your place, right?"

Talon stares at me from her silent bike. "Yes. Why are we here?"

"Why do you think?"

"I have no idea," she lies.

Gesturing for her to come closer, I wait until she throws her leg over the bike and shuffles her ass in my direction. Talon's curves tempt me, yet the shell-shocked expression she wears puts my dick in neutral.

A faint breeze brings her shampoo scent to my nostrils. She uses my shampoo brand. I remember the first time I

noticed that fact. She'd been snooping around my townhome back as a seventeen-year-old. I hadn't figured out she was hot for me yet. The scent of her shampoo had been my first clue.

I finally figured it out when she was listening to me bitch about Tank and Buzzsaw doing one thing or another. I looked at Talon and found her staring at me like a lovesick fool.

Even in the dusky light, I can see she isn't currently staring at me with that same hopeful gaze.

"You know what I want."

"No."

"Then let me spell it out for you," I say, leaning down to erase the ten inches I've got on her. "I want to fuck."

"Wine and dine," she mumbles weakly.

Her fear fills the air, building a wall between us.

"If I can't enjoy you on my dick, I'm still staying close. What makes you think I want to spend the night alone in my townhome?"

"I can't."

Cocking an eyebrow, I study Talon. "What did you think would happen when I got out?"

"I don't know."

"Bullshit. Did you think I would wine and dine you?"

"You have a list of things you want to do. Food to try. Shows to watch. I thought we'd do that."

"Because you're my pal?"

Talon stares at me, refusing to speak.

"Are you afraid of me? Do you see those fuckers when you look in my eyes?"

Talon doesn't speak. Doesn't even seem to blink. She's frozen in her spot. Her silence is my answer.

Crossing my arms, I point out, "I've never hurt you, yet you'll punish me for what those fuckers did."

Talon swallows hard and licks her lips like her mouth's gone dry. She looks around for help, but we're alone out here.

"I haven't let another man touch me in all these years. I can't just switch on that sexual part like turning a key on a door. I've shut down that part of me for a long time."

"So have I. Waiting for you stole my interest in anyone else."

Talon's expression is tricky to read out here in the dark. I take her by the wrist and tug her up to the porch where I can see her better. She considers breaking free and running. Cold panic rushes off her. But I know she isn't in any danger, so I don't care much about all this fear she's nursing.

I cup her beautiful face and admire the woman I've already claimed in my head and heart.

"Do you think I'm going to fuck you rough?" I ask, holding her jaw still.

Talon realizes she can't run or hide anymore. I'm no longer safely locked away, speaking to her through a phone. She's got to own up to what she wants now.

"I know you'll be rough," she says.

"Because I'm an asshole?"

"Yes."

"Then, how come you waited all these years for me to fuck you?"

Talon gets a look I used to see on her face a lot when her mind returned to Betty Boop's death. As if she can't breathe right and the pressure is too much.

"I love you," she finally says.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"That's not a good answer."

"I don't know any other answer. I've wanted you for so long that I don't remember why."

“How come you didn’t just fuck one of these other guys to see if you could stop wanting me?”

“I don’t want them, and I can’t be casual about sex.”

“But you want me?”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t know why.”

“Wanting you feels right in a way it doesn’t with anyone else.”

“Maybe your crush got twisted up in your head,” I say and tap her temple. “You got stars in your eyes and wanted someone no one else could really have.”

Talon narrows her eyes, trying to use her temper to protect her heart. “I’m not a child with a crush.”

“No, not now, but you woke up from that coma and learned I was locked up because of you. That’s a lot of guilt. You think you need to repay me. Is that what this has been?”

“No.”

“You don’t know.”

“I know I love you.”

“I’m like family, Talon. You love me because of that.”

Stepping back and pushing away my hands, Talon insists, “No, I love you because you’re you. I don’t feel this way about anyone else.”

“Then. how come you won’t wet my dick tonight? It’s not like you haven’t been picturing this moment for years.”

“I’m not ready.”

“Why?”

“We haven’t shared space in a long time,” Talon says and sizes me up. “I forgot how large you are.”

“The guys who raped you weren’t large. I don’t remind you of them.”

“It’s not that. I know you’re you. But my body is afraid of being touched. I own my space. It’s one of the few things that gives me power. I’m afraid to let you inside my body and not own it anymore.”

Frowning, I mutter, “That’s therapy talk.”

“What do you think I’d be like without therapy?” Talon demands, meeting my scowl with her own. “I wouldn’t have my patch. I wouldn’t have taken a ride with you tonight. Without therapy, I’d just tell you no and hide.”

Exhaling hard, I look at her door. “You’re my club sister, right, Sister Sass?” I ask, and Talon unleashes a snarly frown in response to my mocking. “Prove you’re my equal by letting me inside your tiny fucking house. I won’t claim your body on my first night of freedom, but I’m claiming your bed.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to be in that townhome alone. It feels like the past. I’ve never been inside your place. That’s the future. If you love me for anything more than childish games, you need to make it so I can sleep right tonight.”

Talon glances at her door and then back at me. I feel her assuming I’m going to force her to do more than she wants. I see the exact moment when she wishes her daddy would ride up and save her from the mean man.

But I also catch when she remembers how I’m not a stranger. She’s been teasing me for years. I could have fucked her every which way before she got raped. She didn’t have all these fears back then. I’d have gotten the green light as soon as I sent even the smallest signal.

But I behaved myself. I’m not an animal. I can be good. I just usually choose not to be.

For Talon, I can give her time. Do the whole wine-and-dine thing. All the dumb, girly shit she needs to feel right about my big hands on her body. I can be patient because once she’s mine, there’ll be no going back.

SISTER SASS



I was completely wrong about how Jester's first night of freedom would work. Mostly, I figured he would fuck around with his buddies, talking about the good old days. I assumed he'd get drunk or maybe stoned. I'd hang out nearby, keeping watch like I did when I was young and he was out of reach.

All these years, when we spoke on the phone, our conversations usually remained lighthearted. We were being monitored. Even when Jester used his secret phone, we assumed someone might be listening. I kept my life vague. We talked about food and gossiped about our friends. Yet, I felt like we were close.

Jester was always in my thoughts, and I viewed him as my boyfriend. However, once we can do anything real, I return to peeking at him from a distance.

That's no longer an option once he's in my cottage. I didn't expect Jester to be so willing to enter my cramped one-bedroom space. I remember how Penthouse wouldn't enter Eliza's cottage, even though he was horny for her. Big men like him and Jester aren't usually cool with small, girly spaces.

Of course, Jester's been locked in a cage for seven years. My cottage isn't tiny compared to his cell. That's why he so effortlessly moves his tall, muscled body inside. I look around and wish I cleaned up a little.

"I'm not your fucking dad," Jester grumbles when I stare at him from the middle of the cozy living room. "I don't care if you vacuumed."

"I never have people in here."

"Not even Aqua?"

"No. I visit her on Tobosa Road."

“Because you don’t like this house?” Jester asks and settles on the couch before standing up and moving toward the bedroom. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

I hurry over to see what he’s checking out, only to find him flopping his impressive body across my mattress.

“Your room is pretty damn girly.”

“No, it’s not,” I grumble, forgetting to be scared about the large man in my space.

Jester rests his arms behind his head and gets comfortable, even kicking off his tennis shoes.

“No guy would ever put a pastel blanket on their bed. I think you bought this while on your period, when your lady side is at its strongest.”

I open my mouth to bitch at him but stop myself when I realize he’s poking at me. Jester isn’t a funny man. He doesn’t often joke. He rarely laughs. His road name is an inside joke. Jester finds me amusing, though, and he tries to poke at me like I do him.

That’s all he’s doing right now. I study him on my bed and see someone I’ve known all my life. First, he was just one of the founders. Then, he was a sexy beast I crushed on. Now, I feel like he’s mine. *I’ve been waiting a long time for this moment.*

I tug off my tennis shoes and climb over him. Remaining very still, he just watches me with his gray-blue eyes.

“I admit blue is a pastel, chick color. But I just like it.”

Jester doesn’t react to my comment or the way my body rests inches from his. When he’s silent for too long, I feel the need to fill the void.

“What’s prison like?”

“I don’t mind the routine. I spent a lot of time in juvie growing up. I like knowing what’s happening next. Prison is good for that. It makes some people crazy. They get angry and lash out. That gets them thrown in solitary, which is even more

closed up and monotonous. I'm not a smart man, but even I know how things can go from bad to worse."

"You're plenty smart."

"Not really. I don't know a damn thing about the world outside of Metamora. I don't care about history. I can't do more than basic math. And I've gone silly over a chick I saw in diapers."

Ignoring the diaper thing, I explain, "I don't think you can pick and choose who you go silly over. It's a chemical reaction or fate."

Jester narrows his gaze and asks, "So, you don't want to be silly over me?"

"It would be easier if I was silly over someone like Puppet. He'd be my slave, and I'd never have to hear about being in diapers."

"Which one is Puppet again?"

"Are you really curious or just busting my ovaries?"

Jester smirks. "You're acting more like yourself now. You've ditched that scared-kid shit."

"You intimidate me," I admit as my gaze washes over his thickly muscled chest, tanned flesh, and inked skin. His blue eyes are so stormy. When they're angry, he seems otherworldly. Right now, Jester's relaxed. A smile tugs at the edges of his mouth. "But I still want you."

"Well, whether you're scared or not, I'm staying put tonight."

"I like your townhome. Bunking there might be more relaxing."

"I've been thinking about this place for years," Jester says as his gaze soaks in the room before returning to my face. "When I got bored in prison, I'd picture you here. I couldn't see you as Sister Sass. But I could picture my Talon curled up in this little cottage, sleeping off too much booze."

"I hold my liquor just fine."

“You aren’t a good liar, babe,” he says and adjusts himself in bed as he looks around for a remote. “You should avoid lying. Just talk around shit or change the subject. You won’t get caught so easily.”

Rolling my eyes, I reach across him and dig into my nightstand for the remote. When I can’t find it, I climb over him to go searching. His hands settle on my hips and keep me straddled over his body.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Jester says in a low, predatory voice. “If I didn’t know you, I’d think you were teasing me.”

My body becomes very aware of the masculine beast under me. His lust fills the room. I inhale his scent—a mix of soap and a peppery cologne. I admire his thick beard and consider what it would feel like against my fingertips.

I’m also very aware of the massive erection trapped between our bodies. That’s why I tug my hips free from his hands and finish climbing over him to locate the remote. Sighing, I struggle to make sense of my feelings.

“What’s staining your thoughts?” he asks and taps my forehead.

“I wish we could go slow.”

“Explain what you mean by slow.”

“I want to fool around, but you want to fuck. I can’t do that yet. I haven’t had a man touch me in a sexual way since I was raped.”

“So fooling around is what you mean by ‘wine and dine,’ then?”

“Yes, obviously. It’s not as if I meant Red Lobster and a movie.”

Jester startles me by chuckling rather loudly at my comment. I don’t remember him laughing so much before he was locked up. Then again, maybe I wasn’t so hilarious back in the day.

“I’ve never dated anyone before,” Jester explains, stretching out and making the room seem too small. “Never had a girlfriend. You know how it is at The Lockup, right? Chicks come in and they become a regular hookup, but it’s not a relationship.”

“I’ve never dated, either.”

“And that’s what you want, right?” he asks, reaching over to stroke my hair. “But not the Red Lobster-and-movie part.”

Grinning at his teasing, I shrug. “I wouldn’t mind ordering a meal or trying to cook for you.”

“How dangerous would your cooking be to my health?”

Flicking his shoulder, I roll my eyes at his amusement. “I know how to make mac and cheese. Throw some hot dogs in there, and you’ll be fed.”

Jester chuckles again. “That sounds good. Add some beer and a Kung Fu movie, and I’m willing to give that dating thing a try.”

Smiling, I set the remote on the side table and rest my hand on Jester’s chest. He loses his relaxed grin. *The predator is back.*

“When you fucked those women, did you kiss them? Is that a thing you did at The Lockup?”

“You want me to kiss you.”

“I want you *only* to kiss me.”

Jester sighs before muttering, “I’m not particularly surprised you’re a bossy girlfriend.”

I open my mouth to complain over how I have a right to set boundaries when a large man is hogging my bed. I never have a chance to speak before Jester’s lips claim mine. He moves shockingly fast for a man his size. I gasp, startled by how powerless I feel against him.

As his tongue forces its way inside my mouth, I press my hands against his chest to stop him. The feel of his hard flesh ignites a memory from my youth.

I'd been spying on Jester. He was standing outside the townhomes, talking to Apex, Ghost, and Thorn. The other guys didn't register. There was only Jester, shirtless with his sweaty skin shining in the summer light.

"I'm going to ride that man one day," I told Dire back when she was Emma and we were just dumbass teenagers.

"Yeah, good luck with that," she replied and walked away.

That's how people viewed my interest in Jester—temporary, childish, shallow.

I'd have given anything for Jester to have kissed me back then. Now, his lips are on mine. We breathe together. His fingers sink into my hair. I lean into his affection. When I feel a sharp stab of panic, I open my eyes and see my bedroom. I know where I am. I feel who I'm with. The panic quickly fades.

I swim in the heat between us, embracing the freedom that comes from being an extension of this powerful man.

Jester's kiss offers no hesitation. He isn't nervous. I'm what he wants, and he's waited long enough.

I settle next to him, getting comfortable, not wanting the kiss to end. Jester rests on his side, sucking at my lips and throat. He's both demanding yet never passes that silent stop sign I've got regarding more than kissing.

By the time our lips are untangled, I'm sporting several hickeys, he's got a few of his own, and my phone's lit up with texts from worried people.

"Better answer Papa Bear before he shows up and douses us with cold water," Jester says, reaching over to grab the remote. "Also, find me a Kung Fu movie. I don't care which one. I just want to watch someone nailed with a high kick."

Grinning like a fool, I love how his hands are casually on me as I search for a movie for him to enjoy. Jester doesn't push for fucking. He's pretending to be satisfied with only the cuddly stuff. If we can take things slowly, I know I can have everything I want.

GHOST



Jesse Zurika/Enforcer

For years, I viewed love as poison, killing those who dared to try it. I was never going to trust any woman enough to let her destroy me like that. And I didn't buy into the idea of happiness, either. The whole "fall in love and live happily ever after" felt like a lie only I could see through.

When I met Luca. I fought the poison's allure, but it was no use. Once I gave in to the poison and let myself fall victim to its side effects, I realized I never wanted to live any other way.

Not that love has been easy. My heart is exposed now, like a gaping wound. I miss feeling safe behind my walls of hatred and distrust. But I can never give up Luca.

This need has left my naturally pessimistic nature in a bind. For a year, I've assumed I'd lose everything good Luca and I shared. She still seems out of my league sometimes. I don't really understand why she puts up with my bullshit. Yet, we've built a house together and talked about having a kid. Luca refuses to give me up, no matter how much I try to sabotage our good luck.

But maybe Texas will finally prove my pessimistic nature right. For a year, I've dreaded this moment, yet there's no turning back now.

Next to me in the first of three RVs, Luca is a vision of beauty. Her cold demeanor used to throw me off, but that's just how she acts during a hunt. Having seen her kill plenty of people over the last year, I'm thankful she's focused. Her icy demeanor keeps me focused, too.

I always get edgy during these out-of-town missions. As an Enforcer for the Born Villains, I've killed people with ease.

But I don't play tourist or put on disguises. I might sneak into a drug dealer's place to get the jump on them, but I've never used drones until this mission.

Seated in the back of this RV are sisters, brunette Rave and blonde Riot. They're dressed in tattered jeans and different Ramones T-shirts.

The sisters impressed Luca early on. However, she considered leaving them behind for this job. A few years back, Rave and Riot killed a pair of skeezy dealers messing with our territory. The losers had a neglected three-year-old boy in their care. Rather than ditch Michael and hope foster care worked out, the sisters took him in and have been raising him together.

Luca didn't want the guilt of leaving the now seven-year-old boy motherless if things went to shit in Texas. But Riot and Rave consistently nailed Luca's drills at the Sanctuary's obstacle course. Eventually, their talents outweighed her worries.

The same can be said for Thorn—the Born Villains' muscled, blond-haired, blue-eyed Sergeant-at-Arms—who drives the second RV. Every time he goes on one of these out-of-town missions, he gets his soft heart banged up. Thorn can't shake off violence like some people. That's why Luca initially figured he wouldn't do well.

Yet, unlike the younger guys who can get easily distracted, Thorn always remains focused on the plan. He might mope about shit later, but he doesn't freeze up in the midst of violence.

Over the last year, Luca auditioned a few dozen club members to go on this mission. She's a no-nonsense bitch about hunting assholes, meaning she refused to take it easy on anyone's feelings. If she didn't think they could handle what might go down, she cut them.

We're more than ready, yet Overlord kept holding off. Now, he's pulled the trigger and sent us south to finish this thing.

After we reach the Texas border, our group stops for burgers. Inside the RVs, I sit across from Luca who stares at me as lovestruck as when we met. Though I don't get why she went crazy for me rather than a less fucked-up man, I'm never letting her go.

In the next RV, Thorn's group sounds like they're having a party. I hear metal music playing and plenty of laughter. The sisters must figure they're missing out because they bail on Luca and me.

Watching me with her electric blue eyes, Luca randomly states, "We can't save everyone."

"I know."

"I'm prepping myself to leave behind the Dolls who are too brainwashed to save. I've never willingly left anyone behind."

"Neither have I, but if they're loyal to the Black Gold Four bullshit, they can't succeed at the Sanctuary. They might call the cops and get the law involved in club business."

"I know, but they're still victims of terrible abuse. I'm bound to feel weird about leaving them behind."

Realizing Luca wants me to understand her feelings, rather than try to rationalize them, I reply, "We'll feel weird together."

Luca offers me a great smile. "We'll save the others. That'll have to be enough."

For a moment, I think about those brainwashed Dolls unwilling to escape. One day, they might look back at their choice and regret what freedom might have tasted like. I think of them being so fucked up they'd rather remain a sex toy. Their insanity makes sense to a guy like me. After all, I'm wired wrong. I've sabotaged a lot of my happiness over the years. Hell, when I first met Luca, I nearly lost her more than once just because I refused to trust her.

A creepy sensation crawls over my skin, and I feel on display. Even knowing no one is watching me, I can't shake my paranoia.

I set aside my burger and wrap my arms around Luca. Her familiar scent soothes the weird sensation seeping into my flesh.

I can't lose control on this job. If I fuck up, Luca might die, and I'll have no reason to go on. Just thinking of her dead steals my breath and sends me spiraling.

As usual, I struggle against my urge to assume the worst. I picture us getting ambushed as soon as we step on the estate. Our inside man might be setting us up. I can't see past all the things that might go wrong.

Luca holds me while singing "Joey." The gloom suffocating me breaks slightly. Luca's got a terrible singing voice. Somehow, that makes me love her singing even more.

With her help, I picture myself back home in our new house. I imagine Hope cuddled up in a nearby chair with her cat. I see us watching another classic movie. Luca's been talking about trying one of those black-and-white films like "Citizen Kane" or "Casablanca."

In my head, I visualize Apex next door in his house with Twinkle Toes, Amelia, and Anna. They'll know Zack Reinhart is dead, and whoever we could save has their second chance. I don't let myself feel bad for the Dolls too broken to save. I only see the women breathing free in the Sanctuary.

Finally, I let myself dream of what Luca and I can build once the job is over and we're finally back home for good.

JESTER



I never had much trouble sleeping in prison. My last cellmate was a scrawny, older guy named Danny. I remember how fucking terrified he was when I walked into the cell. I swear I thought the motherfucker might cry.

That night, he did whimper and sniffle, waiting for me to turn him into my fuck toy. The next day, once he realized I had no interest in my dick getting to know him, Danny nearly kissed my damn feet.

Afterward, he kept our cell clean, acting like the maid. I just let him do whatever. People didn't interest me there. I never made friends. As a big guy, I kept to myself and people—even other big guys—liked it that way.

I only wanted to get through my time and go home. I thought about Talon a lot, first at Papa Bear's house and then at this cottage. I never pictured her riding with the club. I refused to imagine her in danger or palling around with a bunch of guys.

But I did like thinking about her sleeping in her bed, safe at the Sanctuary, her body healed from the brutal beating those frat assholes gave it.

This morning, I wake up to find her curled up on the edge of the bed. She's still wearing the pale blue boxers and white tank top from when she changed before bed. Her golden-brown hair hides her face. The blankets are piled up on the ground. I get hot easy and don't like shit on me when I'm sleeping.

Resting on my side, I study Talon and think about last night. She settled down after I managed to kiss her without ripping off her clothes and fucking her sideways.

After I keep my clothes on and let her breathe, Talon goes from a mumbling scaredy-cat to the sassy broad from our phone calls.

Eventually, we smoked a joint and watched a movie. She laughed a lot at the action scenes. As the hour got later, she popped popcorn and brought me a beer. Talon often got starry-eyed and leaned in for a kiss as if I was supposed to sweep her off her feet.

I must have done an okay job with the romantic shit since she never flipped out or asked me to leave. We crashed around midnight. I spotted the nightlight in the corner and nearly mentioned it. Talon noticed my gaze in that direction and said something about needing light to avoid tripping over all the crap on her floor. I knew she was lying. She just feared the dark. I didn't blame her, so I kept my mouth shut on the subject.

I've never felt this weird need for a woman. Few people can hurt me, and she's one of them. I hate giving anyone power over my happiness. As a kid, I wanted to go cold inside and stop feeling. Even after Papa Bear entered my life, I still didn't really warm up to most people. But Talon has got me wound up like I never thought possible.

Talon begins stirring a half hour after I do. I just watch her, fascinated by seeing my woman up close.

And she is mine. I don't know what happens next. I've never loved anyone enough to change for them. With little Lando, I could have been better, but I chose different.

Now, I have a woman who will want shit. I don't even know what. A house on Tobosa Road? She doesn't seem to like kids. I think she thinks I want one. I didn't even want Lando. But if Talon came up pregnant, I'd no doubt celebrate that news.

I've spent more than seven years knowing Talon belongs with me. All I needed to do was get through my sentence and stay focused on freedom. Now, I'm unshackled.

Except I feel like I'm now an inmate in a new prison. Talon's the one holding the keys. She gets to decide what happens next.

Maybe that's why I don't smile immediately when she finally opens her eyes and looks at me. She seems so vulnerable and young as our gazes meet. Her tough-chick armor must have ended up wherever her clothes were because she stares at me with fear.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do now," I say when she refuses to look away.

"Neither do I."

"Don't you have tasks from Overlord?"

Blinking wildly, Talon sits against the headboard. When her shirt tugs up, I spot the tail end of one of her scars. My thoughts return to when I heard she was in the hospital. The world dropped out from under me that day. I don't think I've breathed right ever since.

"You don't have to do anything," Talon finally says after breathing into her palm and flinching. "I need to brush my teeth."

"To impress me?"

Talon stares at me for a second before smiling. "We kissed last night."

"Did more than that," I mention and point at her hickey-covered throat. "Think Papa Bear will reem me out over that?"

"He knows I want you."

"Knowing something and living with it are two different things."

Nodding, Talon slides off the bed and disappears into the hall to reach the cottage's single bathroom. I hear the water running and a toothbrush working.

I ought to get up and piss. Cleaning up seems right. But this bed is really comfy and smells like Talon who smells like me. All these years, and she's still using my shampoo and

body wash. I can't help wondering what it would take to get those stars out of her eyes.

After Talon cleans up, I take her place in the bathroom. I don't close the door. If she wants to peek, she can have at it. But I think she's got romance in mind.

"I don't have any food," Talon announces after I tug on my shirt and stand in her cramped living room.

"You'll need to stock up if I'm going to be coming around."

After yanking up her jeans, she shoves her feet into riding boots before frowning at me. "Why here instead of your place?"

"I like being in your space."

Talon grins at my words. She can't hide her flirty chick feelings right now. I watch her rotate through her masks before she lands on tough bitch.

"I usually have breakfast at HQ. Can you deal with people?" she asks while lacing her boots.

"They all want to tell me shit."

"They missed you."

"I don't remember them telling me shit when I lived here. I think they missed someone else."

Talon steps closer and asks, "But wouldn't it hurt your feelings if they didn't make a big deal out of your return?"

"I'm not you, Talon. I rarely even remember my birthdays, let alone celebrate them. I don't get hung up on dates or special occasions."

"Don't be selfish," she says, making me scowl. "The Sanctuary's suffered a lot over the last seven years. We've lost people. The Sanctuary doesn't feel as secure. Right now, Ghost is headed to Texas with Thorn along with half the chick members. If they don't come back, the Sanctuary might not recover from the loss. I know Overlord won't."

Walking to me, Talon continues, “And here you are, back after so long, a reminder of their past when things made more sense. The reminiscing isn’t just for you. It’s so we can pretend it’s the good old days when the Sanctuary was impenetrable and no one fucked with the club. Maybe those facts were never true, but they felt that way. Why can’t you help people feel that way today?”

“Because I care about me more than anyone else.”

“That’s not true. You love me,” Talon says, and the words—said so casually—hit me hard. “I love you, too. If you were gone, I’d never find anyone else. You’re my one shot, but I’m still scared and wish you weren’t in my house. I don’t like being uncomfortable and new shit scares me. But I suffered for you because I love you. I know you love me. And I know you love the people here at the Sanctuary. Maybe not all of them. But you love enough of them to fake like they aren’t annoying you with their boring-ass stories.”

Crossing my arms, I say, “I guess I wish I didn’t care. Life is easier that way.”

“I think love is worth the hassle.”

“Love isn’t an unbreakable thing,” I say, thinking of the people I’ve loved in life. “It’s not enough.”

“Enough for what?”

“To be happy.”

“Did you worry about happiness before you were locked up?”

“No, but I wasn’t responsible for anyone else then. Now everyone’s expecting me to make you happy.”

“No, they’re expecting us to date for a few weeks and break up. If we survive even a month, we’ll blow their fucking minds.”

Smirking at her sassy bullshit, I erase the space between us. She looks at me as if I’m a totally reasonable man she’s dating. I don’t like when she seems clueless. That kind of

thinking is why she got raped and nearly killed. Talon's used to feeling safe, so she forgets the world is dangerous.

However, when I reach for her cheek, just to enjoy a touch, she flinches. Her lovesick gaze turns wary. She rightfully notices my size and how we're alone in this cottage away from others.

"How much do you love me now?" I ask, cocking an eyebrow.

Talon steps back, looking ready to run. Just as abruptly, she smirks and taunts, "Look at you seeking reassurance. I can't believe how emotionally needy you are."

"Prison made me a pussycat," I say, stepping closer.

Talon backs up until we reach her front door. "Let's go to breakfast."

"Where there are witnesses?"

"And waffles and eggs."

Talon leans down to check her loose laces. When she stands straight, I wrap my hand around her hip and tug her against me.

"Wine and dine," Talon mumbles before my lips cover hers and silence her complaints.

I was never a gawky teenager stealing kisses with his sweetheart. When I kiss, I just take what I want. Even now, I can't help sucking at Talon's tongue, even if she's only got her mind set on breakfast.

By the time I free her lips, Talon's gone soft and breathless in my arms.

Weakly shoving me away, she mumbles, "Why do you gotta make me horny when I'm going to see everyone at breakfast?"

"Is that what the look on your face means?" I ask and run my fingers across her jaw. "Is this what horny looks like on you?"

"Horny mixed with hungry, yeah."

“Well, since you want to be wined and dined before I can fuck you, let’s get you fed,” I say, giving her ass a smack as I walk out to my hog.

Talon gasps before grunting with disapproval. I glance back at her as I reach my bike. She stands on the porch, unleashing her most bitchy glare. I notice her rubbing her ass. Though it’s not really funny, I still chuckle.

“You’re a wuss,” I say, throwing my leg over my hog and getting comfortable.

“I’m slapping your ass later.”

“Sure, but you’re only going to make my dick hard.”

Talon’s rage disappears immediately. She’s back in her horny-chick mode. As my motorcycle roars to life between my legs, my dick twitches at the sight of her strutting toward me. Her lips purse into a pouty snarl.

Talon jumps on her Harley and speeds out without looking back. I follow after her, enjoying the view of her brown hair floating in the air. Her bare shoulders shine in the morning light. She seems different when riding—more powerful like Papa Bear and less delicate like Betty Boop.

For the first time since seeing her in the hospital, I finally accept deep down how Talon survived. For seven years, she’s felt like a ghost. Talon had been all busted up in that hospital bed with machines breathing for her. She stayed that way for so long. A part of me didn’t really believe she ever got better.

But now, watching her ride to HQ, the reality of the situation washes over me. All those questions about the future get very sharp in my mind. I feel different immediately. Talon is no longer a fantasy. She’s healthy and strong. And she wants me.

SISTER SASS



Jester leaves me flustered and afraid. I get the urge to keep riding until I can reach my dad's house. I'm dying to hide inside like a child in need of protecting. Of course, I don't make that chicken-ass move.

Instead, I ride to HQ and climb off my hog as if I've got ovaries of steel. *Nothing gets Sister Sass down. She's a tough broad.* All the lies I sell to others are more difficult to sell to myself.

Jester doesn't leave his bike right away. He looks around the quiet morning as his fingers dance across his motorcycle's hard body. His mind seems to wander.

As I watch Jester enjoy his new freedom, I promise I'm perfectly capable of handling him. He might be a sexy bully, but I am, too. We can bully the world together, but we'll never bully each other.

Except my ass still stings where his hand made contact. *Jester's a bully on a whole other level.*

I'm clearly in over my head. I need help. I should stop standing around and just run away. Papa Bear will make sense of the chaos in my head.

Jester's gaze finally focuses on me. The smirk on his handsome face makes me feel special and loved. I'm what he desires. I can't remember a time when he wasn't what I wanted. Now, he only sees me.

After Jester joins me at HQ's back door, I tip my chin upward to get a kiss before we feel everyone's eyes on us. His lips don't tease. He consumes me as his hand slides across my ass and tugs me against his hard body.

I guess I need to accept baby steps aren't possible with Jester. He nearly broke something last night by not fucking

me. Every time we kissed, I felt him struggling against the urge to rip off our clothes and find relief.

“I normally sit with Aqua and Jelly Bean,” I mumble after his demanding lips free mine. “But we can sit wherever you want. Or I can leave you with the founders.”

“You’re looking to be my old lady, right? That’s how all the commitment shit works, doesn’t it? Well, then, you can’t bail and play with your friends.”

“Well, if you’re looking to be my man, you’ve got to accept how I’m a free bird unwilling to be caged.”

Jester narrows his eyes and states in a low voice, “I’m going wherever you go.”

Grinning, I open the door to HQ and enter to find a place filled with people and tension. Tonight is the attack on the Texas estate. Everyone is worried. That’s why they’re too loud and smiling so much. No one wants to be the one to flip out, but everyone knows we might lose friends tonight.

Jester wraps his muscled arm around my shoulders to keep me from fleeing to Aqua’s table. Instead, we make the rounds as Jester puts on a show like I asked. I know he has zero interest in chitchat. He said he minded his own business in prison and rarely spoke to anyone.

“Now everyone’s up my ass, curious about my every fart” is how he explained his feelings last night.

But my speech about making people feel normal must have worked because Jester plays nice. We move from table to table, saying hello.

Nursing a bad mood, Ominous finds solace with Aqua and Jelly Bean. She wanted to go on the Texas mission, but Luca nixed the idea. That caused a lot of friction in our chick club within the Born Villains.

Luca refused to back down. So, mama bear remained here while her grown cub takes part in the mission.

Jester gets cranky when Ominous gives him grief about marking my neck. “We’re not in high school,” she mutters.

“I didn’t go to high school,” he snarls back.

I tug Jester away before the old friends start throwing punches as a way to distract from their stress. We end up at Overlord’s table, where my brother is on breakfast duty alone. Jules turns into a hermit when stressed. Today, she must be in a bad place because she skipped breakfast.

“Who’s that?” Evie asks me and points at Jester.

My blonde niece looks at her evil “twin.” Sighing dramatically, Zoey stands up on her chair and swings a fist around at Jester.

“I’ll handle him,” she tells her sister like she just can’t even with all this shit.

“Jester is our friend,” Overlord says, gaining a scowl from Jester and Zoey.

“No,” Evie replies, starting shit now. “He’s a stranger. He’s going to steal my pancakes.”

“No one wants your damn pancakes,” I tell Evie as I wave off Zoey’s threatening fist. “Stop hassling Jester on his first full day back.”

Zoey looks at her dad and then at Scout. I notice her gaze flash to Anthony who peeks at Jester as if the man is a monster about to kill us all. Zoey seems to do the math and remember Jules isn’t around to stop her from being bad. An evil little smile warms her pretty face.

“Alright,” she says and puts up both fists. “I’m going to make this chump shit his big-boy pants.”

Rolling my eyes, I snap my fingers and poke Zoey’s nose. “Stop being bad.”

“Never, fool. I’d rather bust an ovary than be good.”

Overlord doesn’t tell his crazy child to sit the fuck down. He knows she’s full of shit. I do, too, but I also fear Jester will yell at the little demonic kid. Then, I’ll need to feel guilty over siding with my mean boyfriend over my evil, crying niece.

“I know she’s doing something cute,” Jester tells me. “But I can’t understand a word she’s saying.”

Zoey narrows her eyes at him before looking to Evie for help.

“He can’t hear,” Evie explains to her sister. “He’s like Grandpa.”

Overlord finds this comment hilarious, winning a scowl from Jester and me. Noticing my anger, he shrugs. “Nice hickeys, Sister Sass,” Overlord says, smirking like I’m a dumb kid.

“Thank you,” I reply and wave at the hickeys I left on Jester’s throat. “I do solid work.”

Scout scoots closer to Overlord, likely thinking the hickeys are bruises.

“They don’t hurt,” I explain to the little girl who looks just like Jules. “It’s just for fun.”

Scout smiles, mostly because she likes when anyone notices her. Anthony decides his sister’s smile means Jester won’t kill us. He returns to eating and ignores the drama around him.

“Family time is fun,” I tell Jester and tug him away from the table. “But it has its limits.”

“Overlord,” Jester mutters to his President.

“Jester,” replies my brother like they’re going to whip out dicks and rulers soon.

Jester and I finally settle across from each other at an empty table with two plates full of food. For the first time since we walked inside HQ this morning, he smiles.

“I’m glad that’s over.”

“Just until lunch.”

“Fuck that. We’ll ride into Metamora and find a meal.”

Smiling, I lean forward and suggest, “We could start working on your ‘freedom list.’ Plenty of foods to try.”

“We’ll do that wine-and-dine crap, so I can get more than a hickey tonight.”

Leaning back, I shrug. “We’ll see. I feel my period coming.”

“You can bleed buckets, and it wouldn’t stop me none.”

“Louder so my brother can hear you,” I grumble when he gives my boobs an aggressive stare.

Jester opens his mouth as if to yell out what he told me but shuts up when I snap my fingers at him.

“Don’t pout,” he taunts when I poke at my food.

“Don’t talk about pounding my bloody bang-hole when I’m trying to enjoy pancakes.”

Jester bites into a sausage link and wags it in my face. “Fucking feels good, Talon. I’ve gotten off with women I didn’t like. I’m real curious what it’ll feel like with someone I love.”

Just like that, I go soft and silly. Grinning at him, I start daydreaming about tonight when we’re alone in my cottage again. I’ll be brave when he reaches for me. I won’t be intimidated by the large man with his grabby hands and devouring kisses.

I will say yes rather than no. I’ll stay rather than run. I’ll spread rather than lock my bang-hole behind a chastity belt.

DUCESS



Jules Gwynne/Overlord's Old Lady

The Sanctuary's mood—a mix of excitement and fear—leaves me with a sense of impending doom. I find myself keeping the kids at home. It's my usual habit when overwhelmed.

I did the same thing last year when my brother Rafe began contacting me. I hid again when he killed Cypher, Dio, and countless other Horned Angels Motorcycle Club members. As soon as the world gets loud, I retreat to my safe place.

Sitting out in the fenced backyard of our gorgeous southwestern-style home, I watch the kids play in their little groups. My girls—Scout, Zoey, and Evie—sit in the playset's west tower, telling stories with their dolls. Anthony is on the bridge between the towers with his best friend, Michael. The boy is staying with us while his moms—Rave and Riot—travel to Texas with Ghost and Luca.

Watching Michael play with his truck, the child reminds me so much of my younger brother Sutton. I still have flashbacks to the day he and Hollis died in front of my kids and me. I often find myself suffering guilt over moving on and living my life, when my brothers can't.

But therapy is helping. That's why I can sit out in the backyard rather than keep the kids locked in the house where I'd feel safer.

When I get this way, Overlord hates to leave my side. I wish I could join him during the welcome home festivities for Jester. He's been worried about Sister Sass getting bullied by the older man. I also know she fears sharing her body with someone. Instead of helping either of them, I hide at home.

I remember Jester from my childhood. He was never friendly toward my mom or me. I sensed he didn't like

Kraken, so he refused to trust anyone connected to my father. Looking back, I don't know if Jester liked most people. But he was right to distrust Kraken.

My father's death feels like a footnote to the Cahuenga mayhem. I'm still unclear if Kraken was murdered or died from his stroke. During a call, Rafe claimed our father's death was natural, and Kraken had been dead for weeks by the time he was released.

Though I can't imagine a reason why my brother would lie, I still feel like he doesn't know the truth himself. Rafe only has his mother's version of events, and Mother Goose was a woman trapped in a house with a very ill man. If she thought Kraken's death might improve her chances of survival or escape, she might have sped along his demise.

Not that Rafe will believe such a thing about his mom. He's always been especially protective of her. That's why he didn't return to Cahuenga to take back the club established by our father and what some might view as his birthright. Instead, Rafe wanted to free Mother Goose and unleash hell on those who killed our brothers.

Studying Anthony, I once again notice how much he looks like his father. I sometimes feel like their physical similarities are a curse. I can never look at my son without seeing Cypher.

Even after a year and knowing he's dead, my feelings remain conflicted toward the man. At one point, Cypher felt like my only friend in the world. Yet, he used and betrayed me. For years, I lived in fear of his mood swings. After he murdered my brothers, I feared he'd kill the kids and me. Instead, he handed us over to the Born Villains.

Cypher was my first love and my worst enemy, yet he saved Scout, Anthony, and me by sending us to the Sanctuary. I know he regretted that decision. He quickly wanted us back. If he had lived and defeated his rival—the new Horned Angels President, Dio—Cypher would have tried to reclaim me.

His death was a good thing. *I know it is.* Yet, I look at Anthony and see Cypher. They're wrapped together in my

head until I can't separate them. My love for my son keeps me from fully hating Cypher.

When I told Scout and Anthony how Cypher and Kraken were dead, she cried while he only shrugged. I don't think my son remembers Cahuenga as well, but he remembers enough. His therapist has worked with him on the issue, making sure he doesn't ignore his feelings over what happened.

"I don't want to go back," Scout told me after she calmed down.

"There's nowhere to go back to. The old compound is gone."

Rafe burned down what our father built. He was so full of rage over the loss of Hollis and Sutton. Family meant more to him than Kraken's legacy.

Recently, Rafe called me to see if I was still happy with my life.

"I can't save you," he said quietly as if I might ask him to do to the Born Villains what he did to the Horned Angels. "But I can try to help."

"We're happy here, Rafe. Overlord has given us a home."

Rafe and Overlord have spoken only once since I arrived at the Sanctuary.

"There will be survivors. I couldn't get them all," Rafe said, sounding more sad than angry. "They'll want sanctuary at your compound."

"None of them are welcome here," Overlord replied instantly. "Not after what happened."

Overlord refused to allow men who hurt me to find refuge at the Sanctuary. He wouldn't offer aid to their women or children, either. His coldness shocked me, but I was also relieved. I couldn't have those people infiltrate my safe place.

The last time I spoke to Rafe, he reminded me to contact him if our missing brother ever showed up. I haven't seen Finch since the day Cypher, Dio, and the other Horned Angels claimed the club from Kraken.

For a while, I assumed Finch got wind of the attack and ran. As time passed, I came to accept how he likely never got far.

But I won't tell Rafe how I believe Finch is probably dead. I let my brother hope because I realize the truth might end him. Rafe went to prison to protect Kraken, who was by then an old man with a tenuous grip on power. The club would have been stronger if Rafe let Kraken do the time, and he took over as President. The men respected and feared my brother. They would have bowed to him.

Rafe did the righteous thing by going to prison to protect his family, but his sacrifice led to most of his people dead and his future in ashes.

"If you ever need a home," I told him the last time when his quiet pain infected me, "you can come to the Sanctuary."

Overlord didn't react to my words. Before Cahuenga burned down, we'd spoken of giving Rafe refuge as a way to push back against the Horned Angels. With their mutual enemy destroyed, Overlord might not see any reason to help Rafe.

I was never close to my brothers. They were the golden children. None of them protected me. Yet, I saw the burden dumped on Rafe as the oldest son of a powerful, cruel man.

"I willingly followed Kraken out the Sanctuary's front gates," Rafe replied to my offer. "You were just a kid, but I knew what I was choosing. I gave up any right to call that place home."

"You're still my brother," I said, choking up.

I was overwhelmed by memories of how happy Rafe had been as a kid here. We were all better off before we left the Sanctuary. Kraken ruined a lot of lives with his choice to go.

"Jules, you'd be smart to forget you have Kraken's blood running through your veins. Scout, Anthony, and you weren't really part of the family. Just forget us and be happy."

My brother ended the call after saying those words, leaving me miserable over how I couldn't save him.

My thoughts linger on Rafe as I sit in the backyard and imagine Ghost, Luca, and the others traveling outside of the Born Villains' territory. They are risking their lives to save strangers. I wouldn't be brave enough to do the same.

All morning, I find myself struggling again with my self-worth. My closest friend, Mabie, must sense my inner battle because she hugs me as soon as she arrives with her son, Clark for a playdate.

We became fast friends after I moved back to the Sanctuary. These days, Mabie—a dark-eyed brunette with olive skin and a barely-there baby bump—now goes by the old lady name “Care Bear.” She and Blunt are building a house down the block.

Despite how good things are with her right now, Mabie understands how easily we can self-sabotage. She is always quick to remind me to focus on what I can control like Overlord and the kids.

“You're happy,” she says as she often does. “You deserve to be. No one can take that away from you.”

Nodding, I consider how tense Overlord was last night. In the past, before I returned to his life, he would have gotten drunk to deal with the stress dragging him down. Last night, I used my affections to distract and calm him. Overlord trusts me. My body soothes him. He listens to my advice. I'm who he turns to when he can't handle the burden of protecting everyone.

That's my power. I might not be capable of driving down to Texas to shoot the bad guys and save people. I don't have the tools to save my brother. Right now, I can't even handle leaving my house.

However, I am capable of wrapping Overlord and my kids in comfort. I'm a good friend to Mabie, Lady Bug, and the rest of our little clique. As the morning wears on and I text Sister Sass to see if she survived her first night with Jester, I embrace my power and stop living in a world of what-ifs.

APEX



Cyril Tayback/Enforcer

The second I saw Giselle, I felt different. She awoke a needy part of me. My heart started beating in a new way. I was addicted immediately.

These days, I don't get so weird about loving Giselle. But inside, I'm the same needy guy as that first day. I want nothing more than to keep her with me.

That's why I'm so fucking scared as I think about the upcoming raid on the Texas estate. For over a year, I've been dying to ride to Primrose and burn it all down. Giselle could finally be free.

Ghost plans to do more than light the match. He and the others—his woman, Luca, and fellow Born Villains like Thorn, Rave, Riot, Dire, Vegas, Puppet, and Neon—are planning to save a bunch of Dolls.

Those women are like Giselle, born into a disgusting life where they're brainwashed and battered until their sole existence is to please perverted men.

Giselle's freedom means she's more than a Doll now. She's a wife, mom, and friend. Giselle has hobbies and plans for the future. She's no longer anyone's toy.

I watch her from my spot at the back door of our new home. I love this place so much, but not as much as I love Giselle and our girls.

Little Amelia drapes herself around the back of Giselle on the couch. When we took in the little girl, she was all fucked up from a shitty mom. I remember how dirty and haunted Amelia was when Giselle admitted she wanted to keep her. The shitty mom thinks her daughter is with CPS, but she found a new family and name with us.

Giselle was pregnant with Anna by the time we took in Amelia. Now, our family is complete with my three beauties and me.

Amelia notices me watching them. The two-year-old stops sucking at her thumb and waves at me. I wave back, making her smile. She loves me. I'm her daddy. We went to the park earlier today. She's learning to play with the other kids.

Amelia's brain isn't right, and she needs stuff dumbed down, but she's still a super cool, little girl. I can imagine her being normal one day. She just needs time to heal from the terrible two years she suffered through before Giselle wrapped her up in love.

In my wife's arms, Anna sleeps. I still can't believe I helped make such a tiny thing. I haven't held my baby girl yet. My big hands are meant for violence. They often feel wrong against Giselle's body and when I pick up Amelia. Eventually, I'll hold Anna. I just need her to be a little bigger, so it'll feel safer.

Safety is all I want for Giselle and the girls. Right now, in Texas, Ghost is preparing to attack the main threat to my woman's security. My best friend fell in love not long after I met Giselle. Luca is a tough chick, but she isn't bulletproof. If she dies, Ghost won't survive. He's like me. We never knew the good kind of love until we met our women.

I feel guilty over Ghost and Luca facing a threat to protect my family. I should have gone, too, but Luca insisted I was too emotional. I told her to fuck off before storming off. Mostly because she was right. No way could I keep my cool down in Texas.

But my friends are walking into danger tonight. If things go wrong and they don't come back, how can I live with myself?

"Apex, come sit with us," Giselle says from the couch. "Amelia needs a lap to sit on."

Giselle can always read me. I might look tense and scary, but she sees the slight differences between when I'm angry

and when I'm coming out of my skin with anxiety like right now.

I settle next to Giselle and kiss her softly. She smiles as if she isn't worried. Her eyes don't hide her fears.

"Everything will be okay," she tells me. "I know it will."

Her voice breaks on the last word before she takes an unsteady breath and glances back at Amelia. The toddler stops sucking on her thumb and breathes faster. She is still so excited to have a new mommy. But she's also jealous of the baby. Amelia thinks people will forget her like her first mommy often did.

Not that my older daughter says any of these things. I can read the fears on her face. When we first met, she was miserable and afraid. Then, Amelia was scared but relieved. She loved Giselle's lap. Now, another little person has taken over her safe space.

"Do you want to sit with me?" I ask Amelia.

The girl looks at Giselle and seems so sad. If I wasn't scared to hold tiny Anna, I'd offer to take the baby so Amelia could get Giselle's lap back.

"You can see Mommy better from my lap."

I don't know if Amelia really understands, but she slides off the back of the couch and into my lap. She gets that scared look in her blue eyes as if I'm too big and monstrous.

I patiently watch her until she settles down. When I stroke her head, she smiles at Giselle to see if her mommy noticed. Once she gets a reassuring smile from the person she loves most, Amelia rests her head on my chest and starts sucking her thumb again.

Giselle plays with Amelia's bare foot and lets her gaze wash over our new family.

"I'm afraid," she says in a quiet voice. "I ran away and got a good life. I'm afraid everyone else will be punished because I got lucky."

“You deserve to be happy,” I say and cover her hand with mine.

Amelia puts her hand on top of mine and sucks harder at her thumb. Despite how quietly we’re speaking, she senses the tension in the room.

“They’ll be back tomorrow, and it’ll be over,” I promise Giselle while my fingers play with Ameila’s hair.

The little girl settles down from my soft touch. My reassuring words soothe the fear in Giselle’s pale blue eyes.

In the past, I felt powerful when I could use my size to scare or hurt people. There was no value in being calm or soft.

Right now, I’m scared for Ghost and the others. I also feel guilty for being in my beautiful home rather than facing danger.

However, I swallow those bad feelings and prove my newer skills by calming my family.

ANGEL EYES



An hour after sunset, Primrose loses its power. The fire department and every cop in the area rush to the fire engulfing the power lines on the south side of town.

Earlier, before the power went out, the estate's daytime hired guns went into town to find solace with the bottle. Some of them eventually head over to the fire, along with many of the locals. The event is probably the most fun anyone in Primrose has had in a while.

The mansion we're hitting relies on the local power. Our inside man promised to sabotage the backup generators.

As the eight of us leave the RVs and walk in the dark toward the estate's outer fence, Dire keeps watch with our drones overhead. Using our earpieces, she offers updates on the security team's movements. When she says we're clear, we use a blowtorch to burn a hole in the fence.

Not long after losing power, the nighttime hired thugs leave the mansion and fan out over the property.

When five men stumble upon my team—Ghost, Rave, and Riot—we end them without resistance.

Zack Reinhart has no reason to believe tonight is his last on earth. His team didn't do drills today to keep them sharp. The only person on his staff to truly know this is coming is on our side.

Until we drop the three security goons, I'm not a hundred percent sure our inside guy is on the up-and-up. There was a very real possibility we were walking into an ambush.

For months, Reinhart's butler fed us information. Theo claimed to be one of the people who helped Giselle escape. However, I never understood why he just didn't anonymously

rat out his bosses if he was that repulsed by their vile lifestyles.

But maybe having the Black Gold Four dead is better than getting them locked up. Cops swarming this town might lead to the butler and other “good” employees taking the rap, too. Or the Black Gold Four might kill those employees to keep them from testifying. Theo made it sound like walking away wasn’t an option.

Overlord worried about trusting the butler. Though I pretended to have a good feeling about the guy, I really just wanted to get the job done. During the entire ride down to Texas, I pictured the millions of ways the hunt could go wrong.

My fears disappear once the three goons are on the ground. They weren’t tipped off by the butler. There’s no ambush waiting. That doesn’t leave us in the clear. Our plan can still hit roadblocks. But my dread eases, leaving me in hunting mode.

With the power out on this cloudy night, I can only see thanks to my night-vision goggles. The land is mostly barren around the property. We’re exposed until we reach a line of manicured trees along the estate’s inner yard. Crouched behind a retaining wall, I send a message to Thorn’s team coming up from the east side.

Ghost, Rave, and Riot kneel when I do. My hunky biker and I are like a well-oiled machine after a year of hunting together. I also work well with the sisters.

The second team reaches cover nearby. Thorn leads Puppet, Neon, and Vegas with the younger guys mimicking his every movement. When we left the RVs, I couldn’t tell one guy from another with their faces all painted and black caps hiding their hair. The sisters are also interchangeable in this getup.

Gripping the DPMS DA-15 rifle in my hands, I embrace my hunter mode and lose all sentimentality. A cold determination washes over me as I lift from my kneeling position and begin moving past the bushes.

As Thorn leads his team toward the east entrance, Dire warns of movement at the west side of the mansion. Two men head in our direction.

Kneeling next to a bush, I line up my rifle for the approaching targets. I'd prefer to kill them all outside. Once we're in the mansion, we'll be dealing with victims, civilians, and tight spaces.

I drop the asshole on the right. Ghost kills the jackass on the left. The quick snaps of gunshots startle the dogs in the nearby detached kennels. Besides the barking, the night is silent.

Moving with my team, I stop at the door where the two security assholes appeared. I wait for Dire to give us the green light to enter. The drones fly silently overhead, searching for movement.

The butler left several doors unlocked. Once Dire gives us the okay to move inside, I enter the mansion to find a security room. The camera feeds have gone dark. With the security system down, the hired guns likely requested for their buddies in town to come help out.

Knowing we might have company soon, I leave Rave and Riot to guard this spot as Ghost and I move deeper into the house.

The security room opens to a long hallway. Ghost and I clear each room we pass. These barracks belong to the security crew, meaning anyone we find is a target.

Thorn and his group enter through the staff's barracks. The butler said none of his people would give us trouble. However, in his messages, he warned two of the "Dolls" wouldn't be willing to turn against their training or masters. He claimed he would "incapacitate" the two young women, but he wasn't able to handle the armed security. That'd be on us.

The mansion would be a maze without Theo's provided map. I've memorized every room, hallway, and blind spot.

We nearly run into a security asshole when he turns a corner on this way back to the barracks. As he lifts his

weapon, Ghost slaps it downward. A shot goes off before I put a bullet in the guy's head. Ghost keeps the body from making a racket on its way down. But the shot might have been enough to alert the entire house.

Once I warn Thorn how things could get dicey, Ghost and I move more quickly. Room after room is cleared. A security guy's boots squeak on the hardwood, warning us to his arrival. We get him before he even realizes anyone is around. This guy dies silently.

I inform Thorn how we're down to two security assholes. Ghost and I hurry through the staff kitchen toward the main hall. A minute later, Thorn responds to say he finished off another security guy. He follows up with how a hostile Doll dressed like a jock just stumbled upon them.

"Got her tied up and sedated," he texts.

The plan for the "jock" and "angel" Dolls is to leave them behind in town. The other seven young women will come with us. *Well, that's the plan, anyway.* No one explained to any of them what was about to happen, just in case they got scared and blurted it out to their captors.

They're not the only ones in the dark. Theo told us how one of the women is Giselle's sister. She's the one who recorded the message used by a lawyer last year. Celine also helped Giselle escape.

All that information was shared with Overlord who told Ghost, Thorn, and me. But no one told Giselle. That way, if Celine doesn't survive tonight, Giselle doesn't need to know what she lost.

With one Doll tied up, and a single security guy still in the house, we quickly clear the rest of the house.

Ghost and I meet up with Thorn's team near the mansion's main hallway, leading to Reinhart's library where he spends most evenings. I assume the final security asshole will be located with his boss.

As we arrive near the library, a short, older man whispers from the shadows. Puppet nearly takes a shot and kills our

inside guy. Thorn stops the younger man from making a mistake. Everyone's gotten jumpy from the lack of resistance.

"I ordered the Dolls to the ballroom," Theo whispers. "The staff wanting to go with you are with them. The others have left for the night."

"Where is Reinhart?" Ghost asks.

The butler looks at him and then points down the hall. "He's with his favorite bodyguard."

I signal for Thorn to go with Theo to round up whoever we're taking with us. Ghost and I move toward the library. I feel my sexy biker wanting to take the lead as if what awaits us is too dangerous for me to face. Mostly, I think his pessimistic nature insists the hunt's gone too easily, so I'm sure to die in the next minute.

I gently push open the library door, preparing for a gunfight. The bodyguard is transfixed by something outside and never gets a chance to notice us, let alone pull his weapon.

As his man hits the ground, Zack Reinhart goes stiff in his luxurious chair. He owns the same blue eyes as Giselle. I wish I could be shocked by a man willing to enslave his own children, but I've seen a lot of fucked-up things over the years.

Reinhart's hand holding a brandy glass begins to tremble. His gaze locks on Ghost and me moving closer. We look fearsome no doubt in our black tactical gear, night-vision goggles, and painted faces. We might as well be the Grim Reaper for what we offer him tonight.

When I don't fire my weapon, Ghost takes the hint and steps closer.

"Giselle can finally be happy," he says, sounding more sentimental than I expect.

Zack's eyes narrow as if irritated by how his toy managed to bring down hell on him.

Ghost fires once in the guy's face, ending him immediately. A year ago, he asked if dead was enough.

Watching Zack Reinhart leave this existence feels like a good thing, even if he goes easily.

Turning to me, Ghost holds my gaze, searching for a reason to panic.

“We haven’t completed the mission, so stop flirting with me,” I tell him, winning a scowl.

Ghost gets his head back in the hunt as we leave the library and move toward the ballroom. Seven costumed women stand in the center while another one is passed out in the corner. The staff stands nearby, looking nervous while each carries a single duffle bag.

I try to imagine moving all these people off the property and to the getaway RVs. Without a doubt, this is the part of the plan bound to fail. Because killing assholes comes easy for me, but playing hero has never been my strong suit.

THORN



Hawthorne Baxter/Sergeant-at-Arms

A year ago, I visited Primrose, Texas, to learn what I could about the people hunting Giselle. I got some information from a pretty, young brunette named Eliza. As soon as she spilled the truth about the evil fucks—the self-dubbed Black Gold Four—in this place, I knew I would come back one day to help burn down their sick setup.

These days, Giselle is a mommy. Eliza's hooked up with one of my club brothers and is carrying Penthouse's giant son. The Black Gold Four are down to two assholes, their armed security, and the remaining victims imprisoned inside Reinhart's lavish estate.

This mission is run by Luca. No one remembers to call the vigilante by her old lady name "Angel Eyes." All the new old ladies just go by their normal names.

I bet it was the same way back in the founders' days. Even the club guys take a while to adjust to their road names. My road name is so close to my real name, it was an easy slide from one to the other. However, I remember calling Ghost by the name Jesse for years after we were patched in to the club. Change doesn't come easily.

And I figure it won't be any easier for the freed "Dolls."

The young women are likely the daughters of the men who run the Black Gold Four. It's not clear if the Dolls are blood-related or were bought by the rich assholes. Each of the Dolls has a role. Giselle was the ballerina. She still dances in that tippy-toe way when a song hits her right. Even with her amnesia, she can't forget her training.

The other Dolls play other roles. One of them is the jock. Based on what Eliza and our inside guy shared, this chick is a

true believer and keeps the other girls in line. She's been especially vigilant since Giselle escaped. No way can we bring her back to the Sanctuary.

I'm not expecting to run into her while my team moves through the estate from the east doorway. Behind me, Puppet, Neon, and Vegas stick to the training they got from Luca. Her plan for the estate attack is solid, but there are plenty of variables, like this chick dressed as a tennis player and swinging a racket at my head.

I don't want to punch this woman. She's a sex slave, trained from childhood to satisfy the needs of her deviant father and his pervert friends. They mixed their training with religious garbage about God's wrath for those girls who disobey. This jock chick isn't the bad guy.

But I'm not letting her fuck up this mission. That's why I knock the racket from her hand and spin her around to avoid her kicks. Wrapping her up in my arms, I cover her mouth. Vegas looks around the supply room we're standing in and grabs binds used to tie down tarps. With Puppet's help, they wrap her wrists and ankles. Neon gives my hand a break from the chick's bites by shoving a handkerchief in her mouth to keep her quiet.

The jock thrashes on the floor, nearly choking on the fabric. I fish out a sedative shot provided by club ally Doctor Sal Perez. He figured we might need it for the two unhelpful Dolls.

Soon, the jock is quiet, allowing me to adjust the cloth in her mouth so she doesn't choke.

"We need to get moving," I tell the men before signaling for Puppet to stay with the jock.

My team keeps moving through the house until we meet up with Luca and Ghost in a main hall. They send us toward the dance hall where our inside guy claims to have the other Dolls ready to roll.

Led by the butler, I enter the room with my rifle raised and my finger resting on the trigger. No matter how well things

have gone, I don't trust what we'll find.

Two groups stand in the large open room. On one side is the staff with their luggage. On the other side, the Dolls are dressed as their characters and carry nothing. I assume they don't own anything. When Giselle arrived a year ago, she wore brand-new clothes she bought from a retail store on her way from Primrose to Metamora.

My gaze washes over the Dolls—the schoolgirl, the cheerleader, the princess, the cowgirl, the Alice in Wonderland, the baby doll, and even a Harley Quinn. In the corner, tied up and sedated, is the angel.

“We are ready,” Theo tells me, looking sweaty in his full butler getup, complete with a black bowtie. “The jock ran off before we could drug her.”

“We found her. She's sleeping now.”

“They won't be killed, will they?” he asks, seeming torn between submissive and worried.

“We'll leave them outside of town where they can find help. It's up to them to ask it,” I explain before asking, “Are these all the Dolls?”

“Yes, the last master is in New Zealand. He went alone. We haven't heard from him in weeks.”

My gaze lingers on the cheerleader in her pigtails, a short, navy-blue skirt, and a gold, blue, and white tank top with “Black Gold Four” printed across the front. Pom-poms are tied to her wrists.

The cheerleader's eyes remind me of Giselle's. In one of Theo's messages, he mentioned she had a sister.

Apex has said more than once how his woman doesn't remember who she left behind, but she still feels like she was supposed to save them. I look at the cheerleader and imagine the sisters hatching a plan for one of them to escape and send help for the others. Now, they'll be reunited.

The cheerleader notices my gaze on her and lowers her chin. The other women mimic her submissive behavior despite

seeming dazed. Their training will take years to kick, but they have a chance at living a good life like Giselle. I wish we could save the jock and the angel, but I've seen what happens with true believers given a second chance.

As I struggle to peel my gaze away from the cheerleader, I know the Sanctuary will offer these women a chance to be more than the sexy archetypes assigned to them years ago.

GHOST



The pessimist in me is perpetually waiting for the other shoe to drop. We enter the estate with little resistance. We get the jump on the security guys. One asshole does fire his weapon before we kill him. For just a second, I know with my whole fucking being how Luca is about to die. Despite that close call, the mission has been too damn easy.

Thorn might be thinking the same thing. When Luca and I enter the ballroom, he's wearing a strange expression. I look around to find everyone ready to go. We can just walk out. So why does Thorn look like someone shit in his cereal?

"Backup is on its way to the estate," Dire says over my earpiece. "You have fifteen minutes tops before they're at your location."

Luca looks to the butler. "This is everyone, right?"

"Except for the jock."

Thorn adjusts the angel chick on his shoulder and explains, "She's with Puppet in a storage room on the east side."

"What about the dogs?" Neon asks.

Theo immediately replies, "It's not safe to let them loose."

"The kennels are too far away to suffer damage from the fire," Luca reassures Neon. "They'll be fine."

"We need to move," I grumble, feeling annoyed at how everyone's just chilling. "We'll grab the jock while the rest of you go out the west exit, where our friends are waiting."

Thorn gets the point. He seems focused, yet I get the feeling he's freaking out. It's subtle enough for Luca not to notice. But I know Thorn. We met in elementary school. Even as a kid, he'd get a specific look when hiding panic.

I signal for Vegas to take the lead while Neon brings up the rear. That way, Thorn can huddle in the middle with the chick on his shoulder. I don't know if he's about to lose his shit or just weirded out by all the women dressed as their characters.

Whatever the reason for Thorn's odd vibe, I don't have time to play shrink. Before meeting up with Puppet, Luca and I move to the library. She pulls out a torch lighter and sets the curtains ablaze. The bottle of vodka I throw crashes against the small fire, spreading it across the floor and toward the dead security guy.

We set more fires as we move toward Puppet's location. With the house's size, the place might not burn down without more help. But we're running out of time.

Retracing Thorn's earlier steps, we locate Puppet and the jock.

"I thought you forgot me," mutters my club brother before moving the jock to his shoulder.

"Of course not," Luca says, flashing him a smile. "You're an integral part of the plan."

Puppet grins in reaction to her praise. I nearly tell him to fuck off before remembering how I'm supposed to keep my temper under wraps on this mission.

As we begin moving again, Luca and I toss improvised Molotov cocktails behind us. The fire doesn't go up like in the movies. The blazes smolder, almost going out.

"The backup has increased their speed," Dire warns on the earpiece. "I think they've noticed something's wrong."

Luca turns to me as we approach the other group near the front bushes.

"We'll need to take a small group and engage those assholes."

Nodding, I tell Thorn, "Keep moving. We'll draw them to us."

Rave and Riot step closer, signaling they'll stay with us. While Thorn guides the others through the darkness to the

RVs, I move with Luca toward the front gates. We get low behind a small retaining wall and aim up our shots.

Two SUVs stop at the front gate. With the power still out, the men need to manually open it.

Over the earpiece, Dire says our group has reached the RVs. It's a tight fit, but they're ready to roll.

"What about you?" Dire asks.

"Find somewhere to dump the two we're not taking," Luca types into her phone. "Then head to our first meetup spot. We'll find a way to get to you. If we go silent or don't show in an hour, just return to the Sanctuary."

My body goes still as I imagine Luca dying here on this shitty estate in the middle of Bumfuck, Texas. Our home feels so damn far away.

We're so close to being free and happy. This is our last job. We can have that kid Luca wants. I was going to learn how to be a decent dad. We have plans, yet I sense we'll never get to see them become reality.

"I like the name Reece," Luca whispers as the men get back into their SUVs and roll slowly toward the front of the mansion.

Luca's words tear me up inside. She's still got her mind on the future while I'm absolutely fucking certain we're about to die here.

Past my dread, though, I realize I'm so close to offering Luca what was stolen from her years ago. She puts up with a lot of my bad wiring and overall asshole behavior. Luca always treats my love as a gift. She doesn't view us as two fucked-up people settling for scraps. *We're magic in her eyes.*

That's why the noise in my head quiets. I only see my targets as they slowly leave their vehicles. They've noticed the lack of security. The men might also spot smoke wafting from the estate. Rather than rush forward, they stay close to the vehicles.

I don't know why they don't just bail. They've got to know shit won't end well. The house is on fucking fire!

I assume they're as brainwashed as the two bitches we can't take with us. Jock and Angel are true believers. So are these assholes. There's no backing out for them.

One of the men pulls out a phone. A second later, the ringer goes off next to the dead guys hidden in the darkness. When the men look in that direction, Luca makes a tsk sound to warn how she's about to fire.

We aim up, knowing the men will move toward the ringing phone. As soon as they leave the safety of their vehicles, we take our shots. With four of us and six of them, we can't end them on the first round. The fifth guy quickly drops. I think Luca hit him, but I don't have time to high-five her.

Firing blindly, the final guy sprays our area with bullets. Luca and I duck down in our spot. The sisters are feet away, hiding behind the rock wall.

Luca drops to her belly and slithers through the bushes where she can line up a shot. I draw the guy's attention elsewhere by firing at the house, shattering windows.

He shoots again, seeming to think we fired from the estate. The night fills with smoke. He's all alone. The dogs bark in the distance.

His disorientation allows Luca the time to line up her magic shot. I hear a single pop and then the sound of the guy's body dropping to the ground.

"There might be survivors," she whispers to the sisters and me. "We need to grab one of their cars and get the fuck out of here."

The air grows thick with smoke as we hurry as a team toward the SUVs. None of the men move on the ground, but I only breathe once we're through the gates and racing down the dark road.

Luca settles next to me. She switches out her rifle for a handgun and stays wary. We don't know who might be between us and the rest of our group.

“Dire, we’re approaching in a silver SUV. We’ll pass the group and find a spot to burn the vehicle.”

After zooming past the three RVs, we park in a field. Soon, the SUV is set ablaze, and we wait at the pitch-black roadside for the RVs to roll up. The sisters join Vegas’s crew while we end up with Thorn. Dire brings up the third RV. We keep our lights off for the next ten miles.

From the back window, I can see several fires brightening the otherwise lightless night.

Luca settles next to me on a bench away from a few of the Dolls. She doesn’t try to engage with the women.

Her silence freaks me out as if she’s secretly hurt and keeping quiet to avoid panicking anyone. Only after my hands slide across her sexy yet powerful body do I settle down.

“The name Reece can work for a girl or a boy,” she tells me when my lips leave hers.

Despite the darkness, I can picture her electric blue eyes watching me full of hope. Luca craves the normal life stolen from her. She wants the home, family, and comfort never offered easily in her childhood. I might be a fucked-up guy, and she might be an effortlessly violent chick, but we feel right in all the best ways.

With the job done, Luca and I can finally focus on making Reece.

OVERLORD



All day, I've had Texas on my mind. A part of me knows something bad will happen, and those deaths will forever be on my conscience.

That's why I bring Jules and the kids over to Papa Bear's house just after sunset when I know the mission is about to begin. I feel like my dad can make sense of the situation, no matter what happens.

One way to distract myself is to focus my worry on Sister Sass, who I find at the house with Jester.

"I considered moving in town and sharing an apartment with Dire," Sister Sass explains to the older man who instantly frowns. "But I'm lazy and moving seemed hard. Besides, Dire claimed I'd be a messy roommate and she wanted someone willing to do the dishes. That's why she hooked up with Nadia, who I hear is quite the housemaid."

Sitting nearby, our stepsister flips off Sister Sass. I know they're both worried about tonight's raid. Dire and Sister Sass have always been close. Nadia recently started dating my club brother Vegas.

Despite how the stepsisters are clearly only fucking about, Jester doesn't lose his scowl. His snarly expression gets worse as the noise level increases after Mabie arrives with Clark who instantly want to play with Anthony and Michael.

I catch the large biker eyeing the three little boys, all older than Lando was when he died. Though I try to feel pity for Jester, I can't help worrying he'll use my sister as his broodmare to create a replacement kid. I'm not sure Sister Sass has any interest in motherhood. She usually calls children "fun killers."

“I want a round two,” Zoey says suddenly and pokes at Jester. “You, me, and my knuckle sandwich.”

“Why do you keep hassling him?” Sister Sass demands of my pigtail-sporting daughter. “He’s just minding his own business.”

Zoey waves off her aunt’s question and mutters, “Choke on your clown tears, bitch.”

“I never taught you to say that. So, wait, now you’re copying other people?”

“Never you mind, little miss. I know you’ve got lady cramps.”

“Okay, who is teaching you this bullshit?” Sister Sass asks and looks around.

Though Jules shrugs, I catch her smirking at Mabie. Zoey and Evie snicker at Sister Sass’s anger while Jester just stares at my sister. Their harmless antics unfortunately don’t distract from my tension about Texas.

I step outside to get myself centered. Feeling edgy, I consider having one of the kids join me. Or I could wrap Jules against my body and let her beauty calm my fears.

Instead, I go alone and look up at the starless night. My mind races with the problems that might arise in Texas. Maybe sensing I’m at a moment of weakness, Jester appears to give me shit.

“Seems about right you’d send Emma on this Texas thing,” Jester says and rubs at his wild beard. “You were always putting Talon in danger, so why not her buddy.”

“Don’t let Ominous hear you talk shit about her daughter.”

“Emma isn’t Ominous.”

“And Sister Sass isn’t Betty Boop,” I reply and narrow my eyes. “She won’t baby you and pretend you’re just a big kid in need of love.”

Jester goes still, like a predator planning his attack. “Don’t talk shit about your mom.”

“Betty Boop had a big heart. Sister Sass’s got far less patience.”

“You’d be surprised what your sister is capable of.”

“That’s rich coming from a guy who wants her locked down at the Sanctuary at all times.”

Jester’s instantly in my face, trying to intimidate me with his size. Having stared down a crazy Apex, I see no reason to bow to Jester.

“You didn’t protect her,” he hisses, nose to nose with me, “and she nearly died.”

“You’re going to lose her,” I reply, ignoring his accusation. “If you expect us to act like her warden, Sister Sass will get tired of your shit real quick.”

Jester breathes down on me. His size and crazy vibe intimidate most men, but I earned my rank by taking on men like him. Besides, Jester isn’t particularly frightening when he’s in lovesick-puppy mode.

“What’s this?” Sister Sass asks as she steps outside. “I better not hear any shit about how you just want the best for me. I’m past sick of that speech.”

Glancing at Sister Sass, I don’t see her strapped down to the hospital bed. I’m not thinking of the months of physical therapy she needed to walk again. Or how she cried when anyone tried to get her to leave the house that first year.

When I look at my sister now, I see a young woman with options. She’s no longer a broken victim.

“Jester was busting my balls over Dire going to Texas,” I explain to my sister who circles us.

“She’s just sitting in the RV, running the drones,” Sister Sass says, stepping closer. “It’s kid stuff, but she was so proud of herself. I’d have gone, too, but I needed to babysit Jester.”

His gaze turns hostile until he realizes she’s poking at him. Settling down, Jester lets his gaze wash over her body. I feel him mentally tearing off her clothes and leaving her bare. She must feel it, too, because her eyes narrow.

I step back and shake my head. “I don’t need to watch this.”

Sister Sass wants to give me grief. Her mouth is dying to splash word vomit on me. But she’s too flustered under Jester’s gaze. Though a speechless Sister Sass is a blessing all people should relish, I still want to get inside and check on the mission.

Papa Bear stands in the kitchen with Scout who shows off her new earrings. My father hides his fears so well. He seems completely oblivious to anything beyond the seven-year-old’s smile.

Then, his dark gaze finds mine, and I feel him stressing things, too.

Every twenty minutes, Dire sends a quick “green light” message. We know things are on schedule. At one point, she texts a “yellow light,” leaving me coming out of my skin.

“Luca is ice cold in these situations,” I tell Papa Bear who nods. “She’ll burn down all of Primrose to get her people out alive.”

Lady Bug and Jules join Papa Bear and me in the kitchen. We don’t dare speak until we get that next text from Dire.

“Green light,” Papa Bear says, sounding as relieved as I feel.

Thirty minutes later, Sister Sass and Jester have returned from their poke-flirting outside. The kids are attempting to play charades with Nadia and Mabie. The house gets so loud until I can barely think.

Finally, I get a text from Luca.

“We’re heading back. Might want to ice those Black Gold Four spies in Metamora. Also, you better have a lot of bunkbeds because we’re bringing back nearly two dozen people.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“No one who matters.”

Her coldness used to bother me. I didn't think she could fit in with the Sanctuary's family atmosphere. I admit I read her wrong. Now, her coldness is a relief.

Kissing the top of Jules's head, I feel myself settling down. I send texts to Apex, Blunt, and the others who will deal with the Black Gold Four's local spies. Meanwhile, Papa Bear prepares his old friend, Doctor Sal Perez, for the influx of people who'll need to be checked out.

The Sanctuary's never taken in so many people at once, but we know how to rally the troops and get organized.

ANGEL EYES



Our RV convoy pulls into a large truck stop just after midnight. An hour ago, I washed off the face paint and changed my black camo top to something more casual. Ghost sits next to me, also cleaned up and wearing a different shirt.

The estate's staff looks almost normal despite their overly formal wardrobe. However, the Dolls seem ready for Halloween.

At the truck stop, Dire, Ghost, and I head into the store section and buy a pile of sweatpants and gas station-themed shirts. Shoes are trickier, but we grab seven pairs of flip-flops.

After the women are changed, they wander around outside the RVs. I keep watch, waiting for one of them to start trouble. They seem lost without someone holding their leashes. The cheerleader hasn't even taken her hair out of the ridiculous pigtails yet.

Meanwhile, Thorn is in a weird mood, where he plays sheepdog to his restless flock. Ghost claims his friend is upset over what the women suffered. I recall how the big, blond biker reacted to finding Hope. The man's got a tender heart hidden under all his muscles and tats. However, I think his mood tonight is a little simpler than the ugly realities of sex slavery.

Because he isn't really keeping watch over all the Dolls. Instead, his attention seems mostly focused on the cheerleader staring at me.

"What?" I finally ask her as Rave and Riot corral everyone back into the RVs.

The cheerleader shuffles closer, stops herself, and then jerks forward again. When she approaches me under the parking lot light, I realize this must be Giselle's sister. They

share the same pale blue eyes, long blonde hair, and “deer in the headlights” expression.

“Is Giselle alive?” she asks, stepping back before again jerking forward. “I heard you say the name Papa Bear. That’s who she was going to see. Is she really alive?”

“Yes.”

“But she doesn’t remember,” Ghost adds. “Not you or the perverted assholes or anything from Texas.”

The cheerleader stares at us, wearing a shell-shocked expression. Thorn inches closer and breaks the awkward silence.

“Giselle hit her head,” he tells the woman who turns her gaze to him. “Before she could get help, men from Texas attacked her. She killed them, but in the struggle, she ended up with amnesia.”

“We never want her to remember,” Ghost mutters, getting hostile.

Thorn flashes a frown at his friend who glares right back. I ignore their male crap and focus on the woman as the RVs fill up with people.

“You’re Celine, right?”

“Yes,” she says and tugs at her new shirt before adding, “Giselle is my sister. My father said she was alive, but I didn’t believe him.”

“Well, she’s alive,” I say and yank out my phone. After a little searching, I find a picture of a pregnant Giselle standing with Apex and Amelia. “She’s had her baby. The little girl is adopted. The guy is Apex. They live next door to Ghost and me.”

Celine stares at the picture and then frowns at Ghost. I doubt she can wrap her head around what I’m saying, let alone imagine the Sanctuary’s setup. I had my own issues trying to figure out how things worked with the Born Villains Motorcycle Club.

“Giselle doesn’t know about you,” I explain, “but she understands how she left people behind. I know she’ll be excited to meet you.”

Celine blinks back tears. “She doesn’t remember anything about me?”

“Not in her head, but she feels like someone is missing.”

Wiping the tears streaking down her cheeks, the woman nods. “She has a life.”

“So will you once we get to where we’re going. Life at the Sanctuary will wrap around you until you feel like it’s where you’ve always been.”

I can see how Celine is conflicted. She’s been thinking Giselle was dead. In reality, her sister’s been falling in love and making a family.

“We should get going,” Thorn tells Celine and gestures toward the RVs.

Rather than budge, Celine looks at me and asks, “Did you kill my father?”

“No, he did,” I reply and gesture at Ghost.

Her blue-eyed gaze finds him as she exhales deeply. “Thank you.”

Ghost shrugs, uncomfortable with the focus on him. He wants to be a grouch. We’re not home yet. He worries something will happen to me. The man can’t shake his pessimism. So being nice to this woman is asking too much.

“Everything will make sense soon,” I promise Celine. “You’re free. You don’t even have to wear your pigtails if you don’t want.”

The woman reaches for her hair, hesitates as her gaze scans for anyone who might complain, and finally tugs her hair free.

Ghost, Thorn, and I follow as Celine shuffles toward the RVs. I notice how everyone seems to be pairing off into groups. Celine doesn’t seem to know where to go.

“I can show you more pictures if you want,” I suggest and gesture for her to follow me to the last RV.

Ghost doesn't really want to share my attention. However, Celine reminds me of Giselle who I've grown close to since we're neighbors and our men are pals.

After Celine brushes her hair before tying it in a simple bun, the four of us shove ourselves into the back of the RV. We mostly look at pictures of Giselle, Apex, and their girls. I also show Celine photos of the Sanctuary, trying to give her a sense of where we're going.

“I only moved to the compound a few months after Giselle,” I explain to Celine who seems to be more depressed the longer we talk. “It's overwhelming. Don't even try to remember everyone's name for a while.”

“Does Giselle know everyone's name?”

“She still gets Tank and Buzzsaw mixed up,” Ghost mutters next to me. “She also calls three different old ladies by the name ‘Sweet Buns.’ So no, she doesn't know everyone's name.”

“Is that true?” Thorn asks, wary of Ghost's bullshit.

“I heard her confuse Cream Puff with Sweet Buns. She thinks Bunny is Sweet Buns, too. Oh, and she called Sugar Plum that, too, which is fucking nuts since she is ten years younger and a brunette.”

I look at Celine and explain, “When a biker hooks up with a woman for good, she becomes his ‘old lady’ and gets a nickname. Mine is Angel Eyes. Giselle is Apex's old lady, and we call her ‘Twinkle Toes.’”

“I came up with that name,” Ghost blurts out. “Because of the dancing.”

Celine's expression shifts. “She remembers how to dance?”

“Some parts are still inside her, like how she knew she left someone behind.”

Biting her lower lip, Celine wears an expression somewhere between panicked and hopeful. I can't even pretend to understand what she's thinking as we erase the distance between her old prison and a reunion with a sister who doesn't remember her.

The consensus back at the Sanctuary is Giselle would be better off never remembering her painful past. However, right now, I can only see her forgotten sister.

JESTER



All day, Talon has kept us busy by checking things off my “freedom list.” I know she’s distracting herself from the Texas raid. Plus, she fears being alone with me anywhere nudity is allowed.

We eat sushi for lunch and Indian food for dinner. My stomach refuses to give in to its queasiness. I’ve eaten weird shit before. Prison food was nasty. I had to check for maggots in my meals. One time, I found metal shavings in the mush they served. So even if sushi won’t ever be on my usual food rotation, I don’t complain about the strange texture.

We end up at my townhouse after the Texas thing gets settled and I need a clean shirt. I watch Talon walk around my place, feeling comfortable here. I think of how she kept everything in order for seven years. That wasn’t the behavior of my good buddy. Talon views me as her man. Yet, we keep playing this keep-away game whenever I try to get closer.

“Should we watch a movie?” she asks, standing too far away in my townhome’s living room.

“I didn’t spend seven years waiting for freedom so I could watch a fucking movie.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I want you naked in my bed.”

Talon gives my loft bedroom a quick upward glance before frowning at me and saying, “I think you misunderstood the ‘wine’ part of ‘wine and dine.’ I didn’t mean I wanted you to complain like a bitch.”

“You’re a laugh riot, Talon,” I reply and wrap my hand around her ass to tug her closer. “But you’re too old to play these games.”

“I’m not wetting your dick.”

Pressing my face in her thick hair, I inhale deeply and murmur, “Fine, then I want a taste.”

“I’ve given you a taste.”

“You’ve offered up these lips,” I say and suck at her bottom one before giving it a playful nip. “I’m looking to taste your other lips.”

Talon isn’t a delicate flower. She was raised around wild people who talked about fucking as casually as ordering a meal. There’s zero reason for her cheeks to blush bright red right now. Yet, that’s what happens as she pictures me sinking between her thighs and enjoying a taste of her sweet pussy.

“No.”

“I’m going to eat you out eventually,” I say and tug off my shirt. “No sense in putting it off.”

Talon goes still at the sight of my bare flesh. She’s got a weakness for me without a shirt. I smirk at her uncertain expression. My fingers tease the soft skin along her tank top straps before sliding down her chest and skimming her hard nipples.

“No,” she says.

“You’re scared of the past. I’m right here now in a safe place. None of this is the past.”

“I’m not ready.”

“You’ve known this was coming for seven years. How long did you think I’d wait?”

Talon squirms away and shrugs. “I figured we’d date for a few years with just kissing and maybe a little boob action. Then, once we were married and I was drunk enough, we’d try sex. Then, I’d hate it and only give it to you on your birthdays.”

I throw my head back and laugh at her bullshit. This woman isn’t frigid. I don’t know what I’d do if she really was. Could I keep my dick zipped up except for a pity fuck once a year?

Probably not. But we'll never know since she's full of shit. No way does a frigid chick eye-fuck me like she is right now.

"It's time," I say, staring into her fearful, brown eyes. "You've been waiting for me for a long time. This is what you want. You know I'm not one of those frat fucks. There's no reason to wait."

"I'm scared," she whispers as tears fill her eyes. "I'm not ready."

"You are. You're not really afraid of fucking. You're afraid of it being like it was with those assholes. You haven't had any other experience. There's being a virgin and there's being raped. So, you want to stick with the safe one, but that's not an option."

"Why can't we wait?"

"Because you won't be any more ready in a day or year. You've been thinking about this for a long time. If this happened before you were raped, you wouldn't be so scared. Because it'd be between you being a virgin and you making your fantasies real."

Talon stares at me and then looks around for an escape. When her gaze returns to my face, she exhales deeply and nods.

My lips meet hers as I keep her pinned to my body. Talon tugs her mouth free and tries to shove me away. I don't budge as she squirms.

"What if I panic?" she asks.

"Depends. Are you panicking because it's your first time or because you're thinking of the rape? If you're just being a scared virgin, I'll tell you to trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"Are you good at sex?" she asks, sizing me up now.

"No, but I know how to do it. I'm going to do it real slow and nice for you. Like, when I was a kid, I'd shove food in my face and lick my plate clean to prevent anyone from stealing my shit. But for Betty Boop, I would slow down and eat like

she wanted. I can be different for the right people. If you were any other chick, I wouldn't even be going down on you."

"Please, stop charming me," she begs and starts laughing. "Your words are too damn romantic. Am I in a rom-com or what?"

Rolling my eyes at her teasing, I wrap my hands under her ass and walk us to the couch where she can't help but tumble back. I drop so my upper body keeps her legs pinned.

Talon narrows her eyes, wanting to push back. I love how tough she thinks she is. Of course, I want her to be strong, especially after I saw her defenseless in that hospital bed. When Talon glares at me and snarls like a pissed dog, I feel how healthy she is now. I see her better when she's like this rather than when she gets scared. I want to know the Talon who survived, not the one dying in a hospital bed.

"You said I love you," I explain as we stare at each other, waiting for the other one to back down.

Talon's gaze softens. "I know you do."

"Then why are you so scared?"

"I don't know how your love feels up close like this."

"If I fuck you wrong, is that the end? Is that what you're worried about?"

"It's not like I can bully you into changing."

"No, I suppose you can't. But you can seem sad or disappointed. That ought to get me to change."

Talon suddenly smiles. "I want power."

"You have my heart in your fucking hands, you nutjob," I grumble as I cup her jaw. "For years, you've been dangling your affections in my damn face. But you can just steal all that shit away and leave me empty. If anything, you have *too* much power."

Smiling again, Talon strokes the scar across my forehead. "I like knowing I can hurt you."

Chuckling at her honesty, I mutter, "Fucking crazy bitch."

“You can destroy me,” she says and lifts her tank top over her head. “You are my one chance at getting everything I want. I’m right to be scared.”

“But fucking isn’t what will sink us, Talon,” I say and nuzzle my lips against her tits. “It’s the monotony. When we’re used to having each other and it’s no longer a reward, that’s when we could fail. We’re nowhere near that moment yet.”

Talon exhales deeply and sucks at my tongue. My fingers slide across her waist, lingering at her feeding tube scar. I struggle against the bad memory. That Talon couldn’t survive. I rest my head against her chest, listening to her heart beating strong. I still mourn the old Talon in the same way I do Lando, Betty Boop, and to some degree my sister.

This Talon is strong and healthy while the men who hurt her are long dead.

Talon reaches behind her to unfasten her bra snaps. The fabric peels away from her golden skin. My beard skims her bare flesh as I slide lower. My lips soon nuzzle the sweet, sweaty spot between her tits.

Talon whimpers when I suck her right nipple into my hot mouth. I pause mid-suck to kiss her lips and calm her nerves. She’s hiding in her head. The bigmouthed troublemaker never thinks too hard. That’s the woman who can handle me. The scared, worrywart Talon will never let me close.

My kiss leaves Talon breathless and calm. She lifts her hips when I tug off her jeans and panties. As soon as she realizes how exposed she’s become, the panic returns to her dark eyes.

“You love me,” I say before she can complain.

“And you love me,” she replies, going soft and compliant again.

“We’re just doing what people do when they’re in love. There’s nothing bad involved.”

Talon’s eyes glow as she goes loose on the couch, leaving her body to my curious fingers.

“I’m going to try to relax,” she says, staring at me like I’m her life jacket in stormy waters.

My fingers spread her pussy to find her wetter than I expect. Talon inhales sharply at the feel of my knuckle across her clit.

“You know what this is,” I tell her and kiss her pouty lips.

Talon cups my face and holds me still. I think she wants to stop things. I tease her clit as a reminder of how we’re not finished.

“Remove your pants,” Talon mumbles, wearing a frown. “I want to be able to injure you easier if things go wrong.”

Smirking at her hostile tone, I slide my finger inside her and watch as she fights the urge to clench around my flesh.

“I thought you were going to eat me out,” she grumbles.

“I’m afraid to put my face near your pussy when you’re in a bad mood. I might lose an eye or chip a tooth.”

Talon stops glaring at me and smiles. “I don’t feel sexy.”

“Because you’re thinking about your body and not mine.”

Leaning back, she gives me a quick glance. “Get naked or I’ll break your finger with my pussy.”

I chuckle at her threat before popping my finger from her viselike grip.

“I’m going to love fucking that pussy.”

“Of course, you will,” she says, sounding edgy again.

I stand long enough to drop my jeans and boxers. Talon never even glances at my dick. She’s watching me like I’m a threat.

“You know me,” I say as I kneel on the ground.

Talon goes from wary to wide-eyed panic in an instant. “This isn’t right,” she says and scrambles away.

I wrap my arm around her waist to keep her from fleeing the couch. “You’re getting worked up over nothing.”

“It’s not supposed to be like this.”

“What do you want?” I ask against her ear, brushing my lips across her throat. “Do you need flowers? Should I go light candles?”

“No. I don’t want that romantic garbage.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I’m scared,” she says.

Talon isn’t playing. She trembles in my arms. Her face pinches while fighting a sob.

“I’m not those assholes,” I mutter, refusing to let her go.

“Yeah, but I’m still me. And I feel the same panic as I did that night. I can’t breathe right. It’s all coming back like it’s happening again.”

Talon twists around and whimpers, “I told Dire I was scared. I needed to say those words. She gripped my hand. That’s when the one guy hit her. I can still hear her bones breaking. I couldn’t protect her. I can’t even protect myself.”

I look around to find one of those Afghan blankets Sweetie Pie crocheted years ago for everyone. She’d been in a weird mood and wanted all the members to have matching blankets. I grab for the blue-and-red blanket now, wrapping it around Talon before settling back on the couch.

Talon’s eyes are terrified, even when her body is held on my lap like a baby.

“You’re still you,” I say, so she knows I hear her.

That’s something Papa Bear always did with me. I’d say something—maybe it was dumb or rude—but he’d always let me know he heard me. *My words held meaning. I wasn’t invisible. I didn’t have to lash out to be acknowledged.* I could just speak and he’d always hear me out.

So it doesn’t matter if Talon is being irrational. Or if she’s getting herself all worked up over nothing. I still need her to know I hear her.

Beyond the fear and flashbacks, I think Talon deep down wants all the romantic garbage. She wishes I'd bring her flowers. She sees herself as no nonsense like Papa Bear, but inside, she's actually sentimental like Betty Boop.

I remember how her mom would get so excited over the little gifts Papa Bear bought for her. Some were cheap trinkets back before they had any real money. But she loved every gift and would put them in her special bookshelf with a glass front and a little lock to keep her children from getting inside. I'd often catch her admiring them.

I always assumed she viewed every gift as special because she grew up with nothing and those trinkets reminded her how someone cared about her now.

But it might just be a woman thing. Or maybe Talon grew up seeing those little gifts and attached romantic meaning to them. Even as a tough chick with a big mouth, she deep down wants her own bookshelf filled with reminders of her worth.

Finally relaxing in my arms, Talon rests her cheek against my shoulder and cries.

I don't rush her. My dick can wait. What I like is how she doesn't ask to leave. She cuddles up and lets me comfort her rather than running to her father or friends. I'm her safe space, even if I remind her of what she fears.

No other woman ever felt worth this kind of effort. Talon is special. Not only because I love her but because she loves me. Right now, she might be scared of me. I'm also probably doing things wrong. But she doesn't leave because I'm who she wants.

And on my second night of freedom, that'll need to be enough.

CELINE REINHART



Newest Castoff

Everything will be fine if I get through the next day. I promise myself if I get through the next hour, day, week, the nightmare will be over. But it's never really over. I only ever enjoy a short reprieve until the next nightmare begins.

I wanted so badly to escape. A gardener named Mike told us about a man named Papa Bear, who had a place up north where people could hide and get help. Papa Bear ran a motorcycle club. I wasn't really sure what that meant, but Mike explained how they were scary men on motorcycles.

"They don't care about the law," Mike told Giselle and me. "They don't care about rich people like your father. If you can get there, you'll be safe."

We planned for months to escape during a wild party at another estate. Yet, when the time came, I couldn't fit through the tiny window in the closet overlooking our only unsupervised exit. Even after starving myself for weeks ahead of time, my breasts were too big. Giselle was forced to go without me with the goal of sending help.

Poor Mike sacrificed himself to free Giselle. I don't know how the Black Gold Four learned who betrayed them. I suspect Moira was snooping. She was always their favorite, floating around, feeling above the rest of us. They even made her the angel because she was the "closest to God."

After Mike was executed, I grew to believe Giselle also died. Months passed without any word from her. No one came to save us.

Worse than our fate, I realized I'd sent my little sister to her death. I was the one who first spoke to Mike about fleeing. I agreed to the plan while Giselle mostly followed me. She

never would have gone if she knew others would suffer. I was the rebellious one while my sister was the hopeful one.

I never knew for sure she was dead. At first, I got the sense she might be alive because my father made me record a message pretending to be Giselle. Why do that if she wasn't alive? He claimed it was meant to bring her back to us. But Giselle never returned.

Assuming she was gone forever, I sank into despair. After Theo claimed he had a plan for escape, I felt worse. If I hadn't agreed to the original plan, Giselle and Mike would be alive. My impatience led to losing the only person I ever loved.

Theo never explained how we would escape. He just told the Dolls—except for Moira and Erica—today was the day.

I assumed the opportunity arose because of the deaths of two of the Black Gold Four. We were never told how they died, yet my father became paranoid afterward. I figured the four powerful men had angered the wrong person. They became arrogant, bringing friends to parties, showing off their Dolls. They also “rented” girls from poor families. Did one of those deals go wrong?

I didn't know the answers. A part of me wasn't interested in the details. I'd lost my heart when I sent Giselle away and she never returned.

Yet, somehow, I've learned she's not only alive but happy.

And she doesn't remember me at all.

“Maybe I shouldn't go with the rest of you,” I tell the tall, blonde woman who saved us. “Giselle is doing well. There's no reason for me to disrupt her life.”

The woman's name is Luca. The dark-haired man is her husband. They are always casually touching. I think his name is Ghost, but that seems wrong. No one would be named that.

The other man in the back with us is so handsome. He keeps looking at me, probably horrified by my life. Or he liked my cheerleader outfit.

Now, I'm wearing a white T-shirt with the word "Texaco" on the front. The black sweatpants fit nice and cover my legs. I haven't worn pants since I was a child. I like how the fabric feels against my skin.

When Luca, Ghost, and the handsome man named Thorn showed up, they were wearing black and had paint on their faces. Now, they look like their normal selves.

Luca is beautiful with the lightest blonde hair. Her blue eyes are so bright. She looks like a model. Her handsome husband's brown hair is tied back. His dark beard is thick. His eyes are a different shade of blue than hers.

They seem comfortable together. Playful, I guess. I've never seen people act that way, where touching isn't about fucking.

Is that what Giselle shares with her husband? I think they said his name is Apex. That seems wrong, too. I think of the motorcycle club thing. Their women have strange names, so it seems sensible for the men also to have odd names.

Luca doesn't respond immediately to my question about Giselle. She sits squished against Ghost in the very back bench of the RV. Thorn is jammed in another corner. They feel too large for this RV. Or maybe the RVs aren't meant for so many people.

"We don't want Giselle to remember," Luca explains as her hand slides across Ghost's hand resting on her knee. "But you were close, right?"

"She's my sister."

"I had a sister," Luca says, watching me in the dimly lit area. "We weren't close. I still suffered to protect her. I understand why you'd be willing to suffer for Giselle, especially if you were close."

"She's the only person I love," I say, tearing up. "They don't want us to be close. Or feel safe. They pitted us against each other to be favored. Giselle and I would plan together who would turn on the other one when the Black Gold Four

were watching. We had to act that way. I never wanted to hurt her for real.”

Luca’s expression goes hard, and I feel like I’m sharing too much. Lowering my chin, I want to disappear. I know I’m a bad person. I lived a bad life. I don’t deserve to be free. I should have burned up with my father’s body and our house. I was just another one of his possessions deserving to be destroyed.

“We’re afraid just seeing you will trigger Giselle’s memories,” Thorn says, and I peek at him before feeling guilty for finding him handsome. “But she might end up remembering one day anyway. It wouldn’t be fair to lie to her and hide you from her.”

“It might be a *little* fair,” Ghost mutters at Thorn. “Giselle just had a kid. She’s vulnerable. Maybe we can wait.”

“And do what with Celine?” Thorn asks, sounding angry.

Ghost narrows his eyes, seeming suddenly dangerous. “The Sanctuary’s a big place. We can have them avoid each other for a while.”

“And the other Dolls are supposed to hide, too?”

“Look, I don’t know,” Ghost grumbles and rubs at his sleepy eyes. “I just don’t want Giselle to flip out. She’s got kids to take care of. Do you think little Amelia can handle having her mommy crying all the time?”

Thorn loses his irritation and looks sad. “What if knowing her sister makes Giselle happy?”

“What if it destroys her?” Ghost snaps back.

Luca clears her throat. “We’ve had this conversation before. More than once. We decided to leave the situation to Overlord.”

“Who?” I whisper, afraid to draw the men’s anger.

Luca gives me a tight smile. “He’s our leader.”

“I thought that was Papa Bear. Are you not with the Born Villains Motorcycle Club? Did I misunderstand?”

“Papa Bear retired,” Thorn explains, drawing my gaze to him. “You’ll still meet him. Giselle spends a lot of time at his house. She’s close with his wife.”

I can’t comprehend Giselle being alive and living a life with a husband and kids. How did all that happen? I mourned her. In my heart, she feels gone forever.

“I will go away to protect Giselle.”

Luca looks at me until I hold her gaze. “Giselle is a tiny thing. I thought she was weak when we met, but she’s tough enough to face her past. You remember it, and you’re not a bowl of mush. Let’s just settle down for the rest of the drive. We’ll get you situated like every other castoff. I went through it. Giselle did, too. You’ll go through that before you need to decide if you want to stay.”

Ghost grins at Luca. “You’re so fucking bossy.”

“I’m just obeying our President. You two are fucking rebels,” she says, wagging her finger between Ghost and Thorn. “How dare you disobey Overlord? I ought to snitch on you.”

Ghost wraps an arm around Luca’s shoulders and settles down. “I don’t care if Overlord gives me shit. I’m going to protect Apex’s family.”

“I know,” Luca replies and glances at Thorn. “And he’s just trying to protect everyone, too. We’re on the same damn side, so stop bickering, children.”

“You’re going to make a great mom,” Thorn says.

Luca smiles softly and looks at Ghost. I feel a lot of unspoken words shared amongst the group. Though I don’t belong with these people, I’d rather sit with them than the other Dolls or the estate’s staff. These people right here know Giselle. They also seem to care about her, which makes them good in my eyes.

“Would you like to see pictures of Giselle again?” Thorn asks when I start to cry over how my sister is better off without knowing me.

Normally, when I smile at men, I'm faking my happiness. However, Thorn's question spurs genuine joy within me. Not only at seeing pictures of my sister, but also that he cares enough to offer.

I don't know what is waiting for me in Metamora or what is best for Giselle, but right this moment, I feel hope.

TWINKLE TOES



Giselle Reinhart/Apex's Old Lady

All night, I struggle with a guilty feeling. I feel like I shouldn't enjoy my daughters or sweet husband. I don't deserve any rest. I should suffer like those I left behind.

I don't know much about my past. However, I've been told there are other women like me called Dolls. I don't know what all that means. People won't fill in my blanks out of fear of triggering my memories to return. Everyone assumes I'm better off forgetting the past. But I feel like I don't deserve mercy because I got away and others didn't.

Even after Apex gets a text from Ghost saying the mission was a success and they're on their way back to Metamora, I can't shake how I'm a bad person in need of punishing.

Apex's beautiful body distracts me for a while. He doesn't feel real sometimes. Every inch of him is muscled, tanned, tatted perfection. But even if he wasn't beautiful on the outside, Apex's heart is enough to brighten the world.

I'm finally able to doze after Anna's late-night feeding. Hours later, I wake thinking I hear my baby crying. I'm certain someone is stealing her away from me. This is my punishment for escaping and leaving the others behind.

I hurry to Anna's bedroom to find the tiny beauty still sleeping. She's terribly small but perfectly healthy. Apex is so afraid to touch her. Though I promise him how his hands are gentle, he doesn't trust himself not to hurt our sweet baby.

In the next room, I find Amelia wide awake in her crib, sucking on her thumb and staring at the lavender safari animals on her mobile. The white noise machine crackles with faux ocean waves crashing. I watch my daughter for a few minutes before she notices me. Amelia is a haunted little girl.

From the beginning, I saw a lot of Apex and me in her broken, needy gaze.

No matter how often I hate myself for escaping and leaving others behind, I can't regret claiming this child. I might be a bad person, but I'm the one Amelia trusts the most.

I watch my baby girl and wish I could erase her bad memories like mine have been erased. Why should she remember the pain of her short life? The Sanctuary's child therapist says Amelia might forget the past, but a part of her will always be marked by her first two years under the care of cruel, neglectful people.

When her blue eyes spot me, Amelia stops staring blankly. She wakes up in a new way. I'm her savior. One day, she might forget how I took her from a cold, painful life and offered her warmth and comfort. I won't be her hero anymore, but I'll always be her mom.

I lift my daughter into my arms and cradle her against me. We sit in the plush rocking chair where she nuzzles me and I stroke her wild, red hair.

"I'm afraid," I whisper to the child. "I ran away from a bad place, leaving others behind. I promised to save them. Or maybe I just ran without saying a single thing. I don't know. I'm unsure what the other girls will think when they see me. I'm why they're now free. I got to the Sanctuary and found help. But I also moved on and built a life. Does that make me bad?"

Amelia doesn't know the answers. She just reaches up and wipes the tear on my cheek.

"Mommy," she says as if the one word will heal my pain.

It does a little, actually. Amelia loves me so much. She believes I'm good. I saved her from a junkie mom who neglected and abused her. I occasionally wonder about the child's red, swollen genitals when I first cleaned her. Did she suffer like Ghost did because of his mom?

"No one can hurt you now," I promise Amelia as she plays with my hair and sucks on her thumb. "Your daddy is big and

strong. He will destroy anyone who tries to hurt his girls.”

I smile at the thought of Apex stretched out in bed. He will often get up with Amelia when she has a bad dream. Occasionally, he'll feed Anna in the middle of the night as long as she's in her carrier because he fears holding her.

“There's too much pain,” I tell Amelia, feeling the bite of panic over seeing the other girls later today. “I know why Jules hides in her house. The world's ugliness feels kept at bay. I want to hide today, too.”

Amelia pops her thumb free and says, “Mommy.”

My daughter doesn't speak much, but she's learning new words. She understands when others speak to her. Yet, her vocabulary is only ten words so far.

“We're both healing,” I promise her as we share a smile. “We're going to be different in a few years. Stronger and smarter. I know you're going to be talking so much by then.”

Amelia sits up in my lap and smiles at me. She was so sad when we brought Anna home from the hospital. The baby monopolizes my lap, which is where Amelia always wants to be.

Now, the little girl has started realizing Apex's lap is also good, and he's usually right next to me. She's adjusting to the new situation. I know she's still jealous of Anna, but she also likes to help take care of her baby sister. I can imagine them being good friends one day.

As Amelia and I head downstairs to get a snack and wait for the sun to finish coming up, I wonder about the women I left behind. I don't know if I was close to any of them. The pang of guilt overwhelms me.

We watch “Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood” until I hear Anna fussing. Apex is already in the nursery when we arrive. He wipes his sleepy eyes and stares down at the baby we made together.

My giant, sweet, complicated husband wants so much to hold our little girl. I see the way his hands flex as if desperate to touch her. But he sees himself as a monster, only good for

violence. Those hands have hurt a lot of people, making them unworthy of touching an innocent baby.

Apex is wrong. His hands are so gentle with Amelia and me. But I don't push him. Life has been too hard for us both. I don't need my memories to be sure how I suffered. I feel it on my body and in the way I flinch even when I'm not under threat. A part of me knows I'm lucky to be alive.

And Apex suffered a lot on his way to finding me and our daughters. So, if he wants to wait to hold Anna, I won't make him feel bad. He's always patient with my hangups, so I'll be patient with him, too.

Soon, our family is ready to walk to HQ for breakfast. Ghost's group will arrive any moment. I feel panicky as we step into the crowded dining space. Eliza waves at me from where she sits with Penthouse. They've saved space for us.

As soon as we join them, Eliza hugs me and says, "You saved them."

"No," I mumble, tearing up as Amelia pats Eliza's baby bump. "I forgot them."

Eliza cups my face and watches me with her hazy green eyes. "If you hadn't gotten to Metamora, I would still be in Primrose. And those people saved last night wouldn't be free. That's all you."

"I'm still ashamed."

Apex frowns at how I'm upset. He just wants to wrap me up in a protective bubble and never allow trouble to touch me. I want the same for him.

But Ghost, Luca, and the others are arriving soon. That's why everyone is in HQ. People know we're about to process a lot of castoffs. Some will be moved into town, others will remain at the Sanctuary. When there's only one or two castoffs, they stay at a little house called the Stockade. That's where I stayed after arriving at the Sanctuary. By the time Eliza arrived a few weeks later, I had already moved into Apex's townhome.

“I don’t know where they’re gonna put everyone,” Penthouse mumbles and scoots his chair closer to Eliza like we’re under attack.

While she’s a brunette beauty with green eyes, a soft smile, and a long swanlike neck, Penthouse is a big, blond Viking. He always looks angry or pouting. I didn’t really know what to think when he started showing interest in my new friend. They didn’t make sense to me in the same way Apex and I don’t make sense to other people.

But I like how happy they are together. Eliza no longer worries about making mistakes and ruining her second chance. She understands how Penthouse belongs with her, and he won’t run away if she does something wrong.

I look at Apex next to me. Amelia sits in his lap, playing with his shoulder-length dark hair. He feeds her little bites of sausage while she lifts a piece of bacon toward his mouth. I grin like a fool at how sweet they are together.

Right now, life feels very simple and perfect. I have my family and friends together. We’re all happy and safe.

But the mood inside HQ shifts as soon as the RVs arrive in Metamora. A large number of bikers and their old ladies flow out of the building. Some head into town to help figure out where everyone is going. Others stay at the Sanctuary to organize supplies for the newcomers.

In town, every Doll and estate staff member will be checked out by the same man who fixed me up after I got hurt over a year ago. Doctor Sal has a kind way about him. He’s Papa Bear’s former foster brother. Where Papa Bear is a big, muscled white man with a cold outer shell, Doctor Sal is a small, Latino man with a warm bedside manner.

I imagine him helping the Dolls like he did me. They’re probably scared. The Sanctuary and the Born Villains Motorcycle Club can be overwhelming to an outsider. I still struggle with everyone’s name and relationships. But the important part is this is my home, and it might become one for the other Dolls.

PAPA BEAR



Lady Bug is awake when I open my eyes. She watches me in the same way she did when we first became a couple. I'm the man who changed her life and loved her like she didn't believe possible.

I saw a similar expression on Betty Boop's face back in the day. Love is so easy to offer, yet some people go most of their lives without feeling it. I've never wanted my wives or children to know such neglect.

Maybe that's why I can't shake my fear over Sister Sass and Jester. Last night, my daughter texted, "I love you, Dad" out of the blue. When I texted back to ask if she needed anything, she claimed she was fine.

I nearly walked over to Jester's townhouse to check on them. I've had spies keeping tabs on their whereabouts since he returned home. Hell, I even got Smoke to sneak over to Sister Sass's cottage and peek in the windows the first night. I needed to know my baby was okay, even if she'd never admit to needing help.

No matter what she says, Sister Sass isn't ready to offer everything Jester needs. I'm not sure he'll ever be willing to offer everything she requires.

Possibly, I'm selling them both short. Or I'm assuming they need to get things right immediately. *Why can't a relationship grow over time?*

I don't know the answer to that question. I've rarely seen it happen. My heart always knew instantly. Overlord and Bomber both fell hard at one point and never looked back. The only time I've seen anyone take a relationship slowly was when they fucked up the first time around like Mabie and Blunt.

“I knew I loved you after our first date,” I tell Lady Bug who cuddles against me. “I knew loving you would cause a lot of problems for my family and friends, but I couldn’t deny my heart.”

Lady Bug offers me a warm smile followed by a kiss. She’s my safe place. Nowhere else can I be weak like I can in Lady Bug’s arms. She’ll never turn on me or mock my fears.

And right now, I’m overwhelmed with worries. About Sister Sass and Jester. About finding room for the returning group. About Giselle’s reaction to the other Dolls. Mostly, I feel useless in a situation where Overlord has rightfully taken charge.

After a leisurely morning fuck, Lady Bug and I rest on our backs and silently think about the day ahead of us. Outside this room, people have expectations. Things might go wrong. People might lash out. Lives might even be ruined.

But for a little longer, I rest with my wife and consider our plan for a vacation. We’ve rarely gotten away from the Sanctuary. Last year, Bomber, Pumpkin, and their surviving boy, Collin, went away for weeks. They returned in a healthier state, having found peace with Connor’s death in a way they couldn’t here at the Sanctuary.

I don’t know if I’m in a bad headspace or just tired, but life seems more difficult lately than it did when I was a young man.

“What’s staining your thoughts?” Lady Bug asks as we finally climb out of bed to face our day.

“I’m worried about the staff members from that estate. They knew what was happening to those girls. I’m sure they were scared, but they could have done more. I’m not sure I want them walking around the Sanctuary, even if I feel most people should be afforded a second chance.”

Lady Bug doesn’t respond as we wash up. Finally, she sighs. “No one runs about the Sanctuary freely in the beginning. You’ll have time to get a feel for them. It’ll be okay.”

Relieved by her words, I find a song on my phone to put a smile on her face. Once “Still the One” starts playing, Lady Bug dances around, grinning like a woman in love.

Eventually, we stop pretending we’re already on vacation and head downstairs where Kat anxiously waits to go to HQ. My youngest child—wearing her favorite gray skirt, pink shirt, black Converse, and a butterfly barrette in her short, dark hair—is always excited about new castoffs.

HQ is packed. In contrast to Kat’s excitement, my club brothers and their old ladies are worried about an influx of so many castoffs.

I also notice Ominous prowling around, angsty about Dire’s safety. I remember how indifferent she was toward motherhood early on. After one look at her baby girl, Ominous was all in on the experience. Now, she’s suffering through the difficult part of parenting when we must let our children stand on their own.

Nearby, Sister Sass sits with Aqua and Jelly Bean. Her sullen expression fills in more blanks after last night’s odd text.

“Can you help process people?” I ask Sister Sass and Aqua.

Sister Sass mumbles, “Do you mean the staff or the Dolls?”

“The latter.”

When my daughter rubs her tired eyes, I notice broken blood vessels near her lashes, indicating she’s been crying hard recently.

“Where’s Jester?” I ask, glancing around HQ.

“He’s out back with Blunt. I think they’re measuring dicks to see who will be Road Captain.”

Unable to stand by while she struggles with her confidence, I stroke the back of Sister Sass’s head. She frowns at first, thinking I’m coddling her. But then, her gaze meets mine, and she seems too young to be ready for Jester.

“Why don’t you check the security at the cottages to make sure they’re ready for the castoffs?”

“I’m fine,” she says, not sounding fine.

I glance at Aqua and Jelly Bean. They’re thinking what I am. That’s why Sister Sass gets pissed and stands up.

“There are seven sex slaves arriving to town. Maybe save your pity for them and leave me alone,” Sister Sass grumbles and starts to leave before sitting back down. “I haven’t finished my eggs.”

I smile softly at her trying to save face. “Check out the cottages. The old ladies can handle the Dolls.”

Aqua looks relieved while Sister Sass just shrugs. I wish I could really check in with Sister Sass, but Jester is always nearby. Last night at the house, I tried to get her alone to talk. She bailed when she thought Jester and Overlord might battle.

For now, I let Sister Sass enjoy her breakfast while I sit with Lady Bug and Kat. Our quiet meal doesn’t last long. As soon as the RVs arrive in Metamora, HQ mostly empties out. Before I leave, I check on Giselle sitting at a table with Apex, their daughters, Penthouse, and Eliza.

“Should I do something?” Giselle asks, seeming nervous.

Admiring her girls, I shake my head. “When it’s time to meet someone, we’ll do it here at the Sanctuary, not in town.”

Nodding, Giselle tears up. Apex instantly goes rigid.

“Everything is okay,” Lady Bug says, joining us. “The hardest part is over. The group is back. No one is hurt. It all worked out.”

Lady Bug’s words calm me. Having been so ready for a clusterfuck, I missed the part where the mission succeeded.

Giselle also settles down. Like Mabie, Giselle views Lady Bug as a mother figure. Apex doesn’t view her in the same way, but her words seem to register with him.

With everyone focused, Lady Bug and I ride into town. We find one RV pulling away from the Refuge Clinic with Dire

behind the wheel. The other two take up much of the parking lot, so I find a spot down the road. Lady Bug and I walk up, enjoying the quiet day before we enter the extremely loud clinic.

Doctor Sal walks over and explains, “The estate’s staff could be moved to a second location and checked later. None of them complain of issues.”

Overlord appears with Ghost and Luca close behind. “Blunt will take the staff over to Metamora Retreat and get them settled in at the motel. Ghost and Luca can head home. We have people to interview the staff and figure out what they need. That’ll leave the clinic for the Dolls.”

“Are any of the women injured?” I ask Sal.

“Not in an obvious way. But I’m expecting old injuries like we found with Giselle.”

Nodding, I scan the lobby. “Is Thorn the only one from the attack group still here?”

“I sent Dire with the others back to the Sanctuary,” Overlord explains.

Ghost adds, “Thorn ain’t going anywhere.”

“Is this another Hope situation?” I ask, thinking of how Thorn grew depressed after witnessing the horror of the rape dungeon.

“No,” Luca replies. “It’s a Ghost situation.”

Her man grunts with disapproval. “I barely stalked you at all.”

Getting their meaning, I know to leave Thorn alone. He can hang out here until the Dolls are set up at the Sanctuary. Whatever happens then is a problem for tomorrow.

Very quickly the clinic goes from overly loud and crowded to quiet and orderly. Thorn remains in the lobby. Old ladies get sizes for the Dolls. Others have followed the Blunt-driven RV with the staff to the motel. By dinner, I expect everyone will know where they’ll rest their heads for the night.

Realizing Overlord has everything in order, I settle next to Thorn and let him know he isn't alone. His blue eyes reveal uncertainty.

Unlike Apex who claimed Giselle immediately and Ghost who fought his feelings, I suspect Thorn will only need a little time to breathe before he makes his move.

SISTER SASS



Last night was what I feared would happen. I lost all sense of time and place. I wasn't in Jester's townhome. It wasn't his body against mine. I returned to the motel room where those assholes took turns with a drugged Dire and me. I remember thinking they were done and I would get to go home soon. Then, they brought out the brass knuckles.

Even with years of therapy and getting healthy, everything came crashing back on me. The mix of scents—their shitty cologne, the moldy smell from the nearby bathroom, and the jizz and blood—came back to me.

I did all my usual tricks. Told myself I had survived. Tried to find a focal point in the room. Nothing worked.

The flashbacks were so vivid. I soon hurt all over like I'd just been beaten.

The next day, I can't shake my exhaustion. Not even after Jester and I sleep all night in his loft bedroom.

Depression nips at the edges of my every thought. I get overly paranoid about Dire's safety. Is she really okay after Texas or are they hiding the truth until they reach home?

All night and into the morning, I'm afraid of Jester. I don't want him to touch me. I'm not sure I want anyone to ever touch me again.

I think to text the Sanctuary's shrink to see if she can get me in today. Except she'll be busy dealing with the Dolls. Their pain is fresher. They need the attention. I'll have to figure out how to get past this panic without asking for help.

Jester and I don't talk in the morning. We don't kiss or fool around. I barely look at him. He isn't angry as much as in that hard mode he gets when bad shit happens. I remember how

scary he seemed after Lando died. No one wanted to cross paths with the silently raging beast.

I'm not surprised when Jester ditches me at HQ and finds a reason to talk to someone else.

Soon, the RVs arrive, and HQ mostly clears out. That's when Jelly Bean starts talking babies with Eliza and Giselle. Having nothing to add to their conversation, I walk outside to find the Sanctuary oddly quiet.

Following Aqua's lead, I ride to the cottages. They've been wired up like the Stockade, but there's no mechanism to keep the Dolls from leaving. Still, if they exit the cottages, whoever is running security at the time will at least know. Plus, there's always the threat of self-harm with castoffs. The cottages' cameras will keep watch.

"I hope these Dolls like each other," I mutter as Aqua and I test one of the cottages. "They'll need to agree on who'll use the bedrooms and who gets stuck with the pullout couches."

Aqua considers how there are seven women and two empty cottages. Even with the Stockade, we don't have enough beds.

"One of them is Giselle's sister, right?"

"I feel bad at how everyone knows that fact except her."

Aqua's blue eyes watch me before she asks, "Do you feel bad about that or do you just feel bad?"

Breaking immediately, I whimper, "I had a panic attack last night when Jester and I were fooling around."

"How did he handle that?"

"He pushed me too hard at first and then got sweet. But he's pissed now."

"Or worried. Jester might just be confused. He isn't really that easy to read."

"Am I?"

"I knew you had a bad night as soon as I saw you."

“I wish I could hide my feelings better,” I say and wipe my wet eyes.

“Hiding shit isn’t helpful. Remember when Blunt couldn’t stop cheating, even though he only wanted Mabie? He could have shown us how he was struggling and needed help. We would have kept the club sluts from him. But he hides his feelings. Now we know, so when those chicks come around, we can quickly scare them away.”

Aqua and I share a grin about those crying club sluts who refuse to leave Blunt alone. He must be good in bed or they just really want what they can’t have. Either way, we’ve had to threaten some gnarly shit to get them to back the fuck off. It’s the main reason I go to The Lockup anymore. Making bitches cry never stops being fun.

“I want Jester in my life. I love him, and he’s fun to be around. But I don’t want him to touch me.”

“And he wants to fuck.”

As we walk outside to check the other cottage, I nod. “Of course. He hasn’t gotten laid in years. I’m his prize.”

“No, you’re a human being with feelings,” Aqua mutters and rests her hands on her hips. “He is well aware of your triggers. If he can’t find a way to make shit work, he deserves to suffer.”

I smile at how Aqua always takes my side, even when I’m wrong. She’s a good friend. I reward her with an awkward hug. She sighs dramatically, reminding me of Zoey who doesn’t want to be hugged by most people, either.

Freeing her from my grip, I mumble, “I wish I could skip to the part where Jester and I have already fucked. Then, I wouldn’t be scared.”

“That’s not how it works,” Aqua says and enters the second cottage. “It’ll never go away. As a kid, I was molested by another foster kid. I remember how there was a baby crying in the next room. Sometimes, when I hear a baby crying now, I feel like I’m back with that pervert. It scares me to think that my own kid will trigger me one day. Since I can’t avoid it, I’ve

prepared Jelly Bean. When it happens, we'll both know to deal with it rather than hide from it."

Aqua's sensible choices make me rethink my own decisions.

"People told me for years to date other guys before I settled down with Jester. How I needed more relationship experience."

Aqua cocks an eyebrow. "Yeah, I was one of the people saying that."

"But I felt like I'd be cheating on Jester."

"True, but now you're in a relationship where you have zero experience. And he doesn't know shit about dating, either. I was talking to Ominous months ago about Jester. She said he can't commit to anyone. He's wired too wrong."

"We thought the same thing about Ghost."

"Yes, but Luca had to do a lot of heavy lifting in that relationship. If it was left to Ghost, she'd have moved on and he would be forever sad," Aqua explains and heads for the door. "So, you need to ask yourself if you're capable of doing the heavy lifting until Jester figures out his shit? Because I really doubt he can be the one in charge of mature decisions and patience."

"Jester knew to stop pushing me last night. He held me while I cried."

Aqua stops on the cottage's porch and sighs. "I know Jester cares about you. It's not that his feelings aren't real. But it's like with Blunt and those club sluts. He wasn't in control of himself. He loved Mabie, but he couldn't tell them no. So, we had to step in and speak for him. Jester might want to be patient and work through your trauma, but that doesn't mean he knows how."

"He doesn't seem to want to get close to anyone besides me. I see him avoiding Papa Bear. He's also making an enemy out of Overlord."

Aqua locks up the second cottage while considering my problem. She finally heads for her bike, only to stop and nod.

“Jester can’t be honest with Papa Bear. They have too much history. As for Overlord, I think Jester has decided to blame him for what happened to you, even though Papa Bear was running things back then. So, maybe, you need to get Bomber to check in with Jester.”

I consider my brother’s intervention. Bomber is a calm voice, but he also thinks I run from one danger toward a bigger one. Will he subconsciously sabotage Jester and me?

“Maybe one of the founders would be better?”

“They all view you as a kid. Even Ominous will just tell him to back off. But Bomber knows you’re an adult. He also suffered through what happened to you up close in a way the founders didn’t. Jester will respect him more than if Flagg starts talking about commitment and patience.”

I’m searching for reasons to avoid asking Bomber for help when our conversation is interrupted by Jester’s arriving motorcycle.

His gray-blue eyes shine with rage. His jaw is clenched. I think he might need a larger-sized shirt since his clenched muscles are about to bust out of this white one. Jester looks fearsome as he climbs off and stomps over to us.

“You just left,” he grumbles, seeing only me and remaining totally oblivious to Aqua.

Shrugging, I explain, “I couldn’t find you.”

“I was where you left me.”

“Oh,” I mumble, though I’m fairly fucking sure he wasn’t where I left him.

Aqua sizes up Jester before glancing at me. Finally, she asks him, “Why are you in such a bad mood?”

Jester frowns ugly at her, but Aqua doesn’t react. She’s got ice in her veins like Ominous. I wish I was half as tough as my best friend who currently eyeballs Jester.

“I don’t like being around those kids,” Jester admits, surprising me. “Every time I turn around, those little kids are around. Overlord’s jizz was busy while I was gone.”

“Two of them aren’t from his jizz,” I explain helpfully.

“There are just too many little people at the Sanctuary.”

“Well, sorry, but you’re about to have more little ones around,” Aqua says and climbs on her bike. “Jelly Bean is due in a month. I’ll be bringing my baby over to your place all the time once you get Sister Sass moved in.”

As Aqua rides off, Jester shoots her a hateful glare until his brain catches up to the part where I’ll be living with him. Mellowing out, he looks at me and even, sort of, smiles.

“You shouldn’t have ditched me.”

“No, *you* shouldn’t have ditched *me*,” I snarl and poke his brawny chest. “Don’t you try to trick me. I know what you’re up to, chump.”

Jester smiles at my bullshit. “I was standing in the same fucking place as when Blunt left.”

“Why not come inside?”

“I told you. There are too many damn kids around.”

I consider teasing him for getting owned by evil little Zoey. But instead, I just hug him.

“They make you think of what you lost.”

Jester doesn’t like when I mention Lando. He wants to pretend his heart didn’t break when that boy died.

But we’re both tied to our traumas. We can’t outrun or ignore them. Pain is what got us to this point in life, and our future is dependent on how we learn to handle the worst moments from our past.

GHOST



Luca and I enjoy our large shower as soon as we return home. I feel the stress of the last few days eating at my skin, making me crazy. The light is too bright. The water feels too hot one second and then quickly too cold.

Forever patient, Luca doesn't rush me. We stand under the water, washing each other off. More than once, I step back and consider hiding from her. For most of my life, I went through this garbage alone. It's what I still expect.

Luca doesn't let me retreat, but she never pushes me to embrace her. Humming, she washes herself rather than touch me. I watch her and hate how I'm not a better man. The ugliness in my head steals my breath. I feel the darkness tugging me down.

"Ghost," she says softly, wiping water from her eyes.

Her voice is so familiar, drawing me away from the darkness. I know this woman. She loves me. I'm the only man who's ever interested her.

When Luca told me that for the first time, I didn't believe her. But I know her better now. Over the last year, I've learned how she ticks. That's why I believe everything she says.

"I love you," Luca whispers.

Her voice still sounds too loud in my defective brain. I want to sink down into the corner and hide. But there's comfort in reaching out for Luca.

She didn't die on this mission. For a year, I believed I would lose her in Texas. I didn't really let myself relax into our life because that mission hung over everything we did.

Now, it's over. We won. Luca doesn't have a scratch on her. We can start the rest of our lives together.

When I focus on Luca, the creeping sensation on my skin fades. We move out of the shower and dry off each other. I focus on her soft skin. My fingers brush across the lean muscles that make her so powerful. I recall those online videos I found of Luca playing with her professional volleyball team. She was a machine, unrelenting and unbreakable.

Now, she wraps me in her arms and sways. I know she isn't moving us to the bed. Fucking isn't an option when I feel this way, but touching Luca is a sedative. My hands slide down her spine before resting on her hard ass.

We stay that way for a long time before taking turns dressing each other. I slide on her panties. She pulls up my briefs. I struggle to figure out her damn bra snaps, making Luca laugh in her husky way.

I love how happy she sounds. My woman suffered for a long time. Even before those evil fucks stole her future, she felt alone. When we met, she was ice cold inside.

Now, she runs hot. Not only for me, but for Hope and our friends. Luca's in love with her life. I like knowing I'm the reason she gave the Sanctuary a chance.

Once we're dressed, we head downstairs. Hope will be home soon. I consider picking her up from Tank and Sweet Buns's house. Before I can go anywhere, Apex shows up at my front porch.

He yanks me into a hard hug and mutters, "I thought you'd die."

I don't mock his sentiment. Apex is in a rough spot. He wanted those Texas assholes dead but couldn't ride down to do it himself. Putting Luca and me at risk—plus our club brothers and sisters—left him feeling like a piece of shit. Even after he frees me from his embrace, he wears a hangdog expression.

"It went easy," I explain.

Apex looks back at where Giselle walks over to our house. She's wearing Anna in one of those carrier things. Amelia shuffles along the sidewalk, gripping her mom's hand. I can

see how Giselle is barely keeping her shit together. Sniffling, she struggles against tears.

“Are they okay?” Giselle asks as Amelia sucks harder at her tiny thumb.

Apex kneels down and asks if his daughter wants him to hold her. She looks at Giselle and then shakes her head.

“You can see Mommy better from up here,” he explains.

Amelia glances at Giselle again and then smiles at her father. Reluctantly freeing her mom’s hand, she reaches up for Apex.

Luca appears at the door and notices all the tension. “We couldn’t save two of them,” she blurts out to Giselle. “They were too bitchy and would have ruined things here. But the other seven are okay and getting checked out. Come on in and we’ll talk about it.”

As Giselle follows after Luca, Apex wants to stay put and talk to me. Of course, he can’t speak freely in front of Amelia.

“Luca is tall, too,” he announces and hands Amelia to my woman.

The kid isn’t so sure about her new situation. Amelia eyeballs Luca who gets her bright-eyed “baby fever” expression.

“Let’s sit on the couch so we’re all together,” Luca says, always a problem solver.

I watch the women settle on the couch with Amelia resting on Luca’s lap while staring at Giselle.

“I have pictures if you want to see,” Luca tells Giselle who wipes her wet eyes.

“Are they angry with me?”

“Of course not. Well, those two bitchy ones probably would hate you for ruining the weird shit they were programmed to love. But the ones we saved are relieved.”

Giselle calms down under Luca’s steely confidence. Amelia stops sucking so hard at her thumb. Anna just sleeps

since infants are lumps of flesh with no personality.

“What are you hiding?” Apex asks as we remain near the front door.

“One of them is Giselle’s sister.”

Apex’s expression mimics how I feel. *The sister is going to ruin everything.*

“She offered not to meet Giselle,” I say, knowing I’m the only one who thinks that’s a good idea.

Apex’s dark eyes are filled with dread when he mutters, “Seeing those Dolls is going to trigger Giselle’s memories.”

“Maybe not,” I say and then sigh. “Maybe it’s better if the memories come back now when we’re all ready for them. If they come back suddenly years from now on, it might be worse.”

“Is this chick worth it?”

“It’s not just Celine. Any of the Dolls or staff could trigger Giselle’s memories.”

Apex gets a panicked expression on his scowling face. “I don’t want her to know what they did to her.”

“But you said she already has nightmares like she knows.”

“It’s still better than her remembering.”

I glance at Luca. Her gaze finds me. My earlier freakout feels like a bad dream. They don’t last as long as they used to before Luca. I got lucky with my woman, and I know what she’d tell Apex.

“Giselle isn’t weak like when she first got to the Sanctuary. She can handle her past. We all do it. She’s tough enough to do it, too. It’s also possible we’re worried over nothing. If she’s not suppressing her memories and they’re just lost from the head injury, we are hiding shit from her for no reason.”

Glancing back at Luca, I see her showing Giselle photos. Amelia touches the phone and smiles whenever her mother does.

“This sister and Giselle were tight,” I tell Apex who still pouts over how the world won’t leave his family alone. “Think of the sisters alone in that place with only each other for comfort. That’s a special kind of tight. You said Giselle feels guilt over leaving people behind. When she feels someone is missing, it’s probably her sister. Even if she never remembers this chick, Giselle’s bound to get an emotional bump from meeting her.”

“What’s the chick like?” Apex asks, turning hostile. “You talked to her, right? I know you. People can’t pull shit over you.”

“Man, I already told you how she was willing to leave the Sanctuary to avoid upsetting Giselle.”

“Maybe she should.”

Shaking my head, I hate playing the rational one. “Thorn’s got the hots for Celine. I don’t see her leaving the Sanctuary. Hell, she’ll probably end up being your neighbor.”

“Fuck that. Thorn shouldn’t be sniffing around those Dolls.”

I stare at Apex until his mind circles back to how he was on Giselle immediately after she arrived at the Sanctuary. I see the exact moment when he accepts how he wasn’t patient with her at all.

On the couch, Giselle looks at pictures of the Dolls and staff. I see Luca hesitating with each photo, just in case there’s any recognition. Giselle stares at the phone like she’s looking at a test and doesn’t know the answers.

When Luca glances at me, I nod at her silent question. She swipes through the photos before stopping at what I assume is Celine.

Giselle blinks a few times. “Is this one important?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You stopped swiping.”

“She says she’s your sister.”

Gasping, Giselle looks to Apex who shrugs like he doesn't know the answer.

"Do you think she is?" Giselle asks Luca while tearing up.

"You have the same eye color."

"Why would I leave her?"

"You couldn't both escape."

"I just left her."

"No, you came here for help."

"And then I got married and had kids and enjoyed my life. She was stuck in that place."

"Look, Giselle, I know you're going through some shit," Luca says, losing her soft tone. "But you're also looking for reasons to rag on yourself. I need you to think rationally, okay?"

Giselle is startled by Luca's change in demeanor. Apex goes rigid and hostile next to me.

"Okay," Giselle mumbles and strokes Amelia's head as if thinking about stealing the child from Luca's lap.

"Celine couldn't escape. She wanted you to be free. You came here to get help and lost your memory. You didn't just leave her behind and move on. Even without remembering, you kept asking people about Texas. You can choose to feel guilty for shit you couldn't control or you can feel pride at how you got to Metamora, fought off those men, and sent help."

Giselle blinks a few times before glancing at an irritated Apex. "I want to feel pride."

Luca nods, completely oblivious to Apex's bad mood. "That's good because you weren't raised to be strong, yet you escaped and got help anyway."

Though Giselle has heard this shit from other people, I feel her taking it more to heart when it comes from someone who doesn't kiss her ass all the time like Lady Bug or Apex.

“Your sister seems nice,” Luca explains. “Celine thought you were dead. She seemed to be having a hard time with you not remembering her. But I think you two might get along, even without your memories. Or maybe you won’t get along and will avoid each other. But you have a right to know the truth.”

“Um,” I say, feeling weird with Apex glaring at me over my woman telling his woman to go against what he wants. “You know Jester, right?” I tell Giselle. “You’ve probably seen him around the last few days. Well, his sister moved to the Sanctuary many years ago. They didn’t get along. But she lived here just fine until she got sick and died. Your sister could do the same without messing with your life.”

Giselle strokes her daughters’ heads before asking, “Where is Celine now?”

“At the clinic,” Luca answers while Apex steps into the family room and frowns at my woman.

“Watch it,” I warn him.

“It’s too fast.”

“You knew this might happen,” I say, stepping between Luca and Apex.

“I knew the Dolls were coming. I didn’t know about a sister.”

“Was she a ballerina too?” Giselle asks Luca.

“She was the cheerleader. Each of the girls were different characters. Now, they can be whoever they want.”

Giselle nods, seeming curious. “Can I see her right now?”

“Celine’s getting checked out.”

Once Giselle’s gaze finds Apex, he loses all his hostility. Her excitement infects him.

“She can stay at our house instead of the Stockade,” Apex says before scowling at me. “Wait, are we sure she isn’t dangerous?”

Feeling helpful, I suggest, “She could stay here instead for a day or two while the sisters get to know each other.”

Giselle looks to Luca who shrugs. “I’d trust her with Hope. I didn’t talk to any of the other girls. I don’t know if I’d want them in my house. But Celine sat with us on the way back. She enjoyed looking at pictures of you.”

Apex can’t deny how excited Giselle is now. Though he still wants to shut it all down and avoid change, there’s no going back.

THORN



No matter how many eyes fall on me or how many people ask if I'm okay, I refuse to head back to the Sanctuary. I just can't walk away from Celine.

At first, I'm sure my feelings mimic what happened with Hope last year. Once I saw that young woman in what was hell on earth, I couldn't leave her side until I knew she was safe at the Sanctuary. I felt like it was my duty to keep watch over her.

Now, Hope has settled into the Sanctuary. She lives comfortably with Ghost and Luca. She's adopted a cat. I see her sitting in her front lawn sometimes, reading books or enjoying the sunlight.

I wish I could say my urge to remain at the clinic this time is as noble. The reality is I'm infected with a possessive need to see Celine. When I see her, I want to talk to her. When we speak, I get the urge to touch her.

There's nothing righteous about my interest in that abused, fearful woman. I hate myself for succumbing to these feelings. I ought to leave and give her space. Just check in with her occasionally until she's settled at the Sanctuary. That's the normal response to romantic interest.

Yet, every time I walk out the clinic's front door, I get stuck. I consider how I'll feel when she isn't nearby. I fight with the image of another guy swooping in when I'm not around.

The Dolls are beautiful, young women. With a surplus of single guys at the Sanctuary, there's bound to be love matches. That's how it always goes.

Except I can't tolerate anyone else laying a claim on Celine's heart.

I know I'm being an asshole. The woman's been free from her life as a sex slave for less than twenty-four hours. The last thing she needs is a bruiser like me playing Romeo.

Once again, I talk myself into walking to the door. I don't have a ride back to the Sanctuary, but I can likely hitch one. Or just call for a pity ride. It'll be fine. All I have to do is leave the Refuge Clinic and allow Celine to build a life filled with freedom and her sister.

I'm stuck in my spot when I notice movement to my left near the patient rooms. I expect to see a doctor or nurse. Instead, Celine shuffles closer, wearing a new outfit.

Her black sweatpants are replaced by a looser version with Tweety Birds. Instead of a T-shirt, she wears a baggy Mickey Mouse hoodie. Her flip-flops are replaced by socks. It's like she went from summer to winter wear while in the other room.

Her damp hair is brushed back. Her beautiful face is free of makeup. All the cheerleader crap is gone.

When Celine stares at me, I step back and close the clinic's door.

"Do you need something?" I ask as she stands in the hallway.

Playing with the sleeves on her hoodie, she shrugs. When I don't say anything, she shuffles closer.

"Where did everyone go?" Celine finally asks.

I explain the basics of everyone's location while she stares at me. I don't think Celine gives a crap where the staff or even Luca went. The way she watches at me leaves my heart racing and my fingers dying to get a touch.

"I did all the tests," Celine says, inching closer. "The doctor says I'm okay. The head doctor explained how I might feel over the next few days. Everything is done. Can I see Giselle? I won't let her see me. I just want to see her alive."

"Are you cold?" I ask while pulling out my phone. "You're wearing a sweater."

“I’m allowed to cover up here,” she says and then mumbles, “I’m always cold.”

When I offer her a grin, Celine’s expression brightens. I realize maybe I’m not reading things wrong. There could be something between us besides me obsessing over a former sex slave.

I text Apex to see if Giselle wants to meet her sister.

“No,” he replies instantly.

I’m in the process of texting Ghost for backup when Apex replies with, “Is she a bitch?”

“No, she’s like a slightly taller version of Giselle.”

“No wonder you’re horn-dogging her, then, man.”

I frown at my phone, hating how Ghost is out there gossiping about me. On the other hand, I guess I should be relieved he’s now capable of pulling his head out of his own ass long enough to notice other people exist. Luca’s been a good influence on him.

“Bring her over for dinner,” Apex types, and his irritation comes through his words. “Giselle’s all excited over meeting her now.”

I shove my phone back in my pocket and smile at Celine. She immediately mimics the gesture.

“You only have to smile if you want. I won’t be mad if you’re in a bad mood.”

Celine pouts as if I’ve scolded her. I lean down so we’re eye level. She isn’t as tiny as Giselle, but she’s still damn petite compared to my six-foot-four height.

“It’s okay to be sad or angry,” I explain as she breathes differently with me so close. “No one expects you to be calm. It’s okay to tell people to back off.”

“I’m grateful for what you’ve done.”

“That’s what the Born Villains do,” I reply, standing straight as I try to keep my hands to myself. “We help people because we were helped.”

Celine's eyes glow with affection. She can't stop staring at me, but I sense she's mostly exhausted. She only dozed on the drive from Texas.

"I'll take you to Giselle's house for dinner," I explain.

Inhaling sharply, Celine looks so excited. "I'll hide so she won't see me."

"No, no, Giselle wants to see you. Luca told her everything."

Celine's smile fades. "But I might make her remember."

"She still wants to see you."

Celine looks around as if we're being watched. I would guess there wasn't much privacy back in Primrose. Suddenly, Celine bursts into tears.

Without thinking, I lift her up and cradle her in my arms. I feel like she's under attack. I can take whatever danger is thrown at us.

Celine goes rigid in my arms until I settle into a chair. She looks around before noticing how my hands are safely placed on her shoulder and calf as she rests in my lap.

Celine snuffles and stares at me. "I thought she was dead."

"Look, you can't think too hard about stuff right now. It all feels weird and wrong. Honestly, the next few days are going to be stressful. You'll meet too many people. The Sanctuary will be confusing. You'll feel on display."

Celine freezes as a medical assistant walks past us. When her gaze returns to me, she looks terrified.

"You didn't sleep last night. You're tired and scared. You're afraid of what'll happen with Giselle. But tomorrow, you'll be past those worries. You'll have slept. You and Giselle will be together. The Sanctuary will make a little more sense. So, when you're scared, try to imagine how much easier tomorrow will be. Then, consider how you might feel in a week."

"Will I see you after I meet Giselle?"

“I live at the Sanctuary. You’ll see me all the time.”

Celine stares into my eyes, wanting something. Finally, she asks, “What if the new Giselle doesn’t like me? Or she remembers something bad and everyone blames me? I don’t think I should meet her.”

“It’s too late. She knows about you now, and she’s got her heart set on meeting you. Giselle might be tiny, but she knows how to get her way.”

Grinning now, Celine nods. “You should have seen her the night she escaped. I told her to run. She didn’t want to leave me, but we didn’t have much time before someone would notice we were missing. Once I ordered her to run, she was like a jackrabbit. I couldn’t believe how fast she ran.”

Admiring Celine’s beautiful smile, I consider what her life was like only twenty-four hours ago. The estate was fussy but nice. The staff don’t seem like monsters. Her father felt more like a chump than a psycho. But that was all a shiny veneer over the perversion rotting underneath.

“You are a biker,” Celine says to break the silence hanging between us.

“Yeah.”

Celine notices the tattoos covering my arms before lifting her gaze to mine. She whispers something shy.

“You’ve got to say that in my good ear,” I explain and tap my left ear. “My foster dad pounded me in the right one when I was little and I can’t hear shit out of it now.”

“I’m sorry,” Celine mumbles, seeming sad and sweet as she studies me. “People are cruel.”

“Not everyone. Maybe not most people. We just got unlucky for a long time. But it’ll be different at the Sanctuary.”

Celine’s warm smile is the proof I need to stay at her side until she’s safely with her sister. Afterward, I’ll back off and let her settle in at the Sanctuary.

But whether it’s this week or in a few months, I’ll eventually take this thing between Celine and me to the next

level.

JESTER



Talon bails on me as soon as we're alone near her cottage. The hug she offered left me thinking she was past her earlier fear. Instead, I see the same panic in her eyes as when I woke up to her frozen in bed.

"I need to check on the Stockade," she lies. "We should meet for dinner."

"What about lunch?"

Talon can't think of a lie, so she only shrugs and mumbles, "I need to talk to my brother."

Watching her ride away, I assume she'll rat me out to Overlord. I always figured she'd use Papa Bear as her shield when things got tricky. But having her brother be my President does have its benefits.

I don't know what to do with myself while everyone is flipping out about the Texas people. I consider just riding around, but I'm restless and need something specific to do.

I head into Metamora to look for lady shit for Talon. At a gift shop, the tiny, old lady suggests a mom-and-daughter figurine would be a nice present for my special woman. She also swears jasmine candles are "super romantic." I think the scent is weird. But if that shit works for chicks, I'll breathe through my mouth.

Next, I ride over to the local flower shop and try to pick something Talon might like. *Is she only looking for some effort on my part or do my choices actually matter? Is this a test I'm already failing?* I can't imagine she has a favorite flower. Like the candle, I'm going through the motions, so Tallon will understand how I'm willing to suffer for her attentions.

A motorcycle rolls up to the shop while the flower clerk tries to sell me on pink flowers.

“Women really adore pink.”

“My chick isn’t into that girly crap. Do you have anything more butch?”

“Masculine flowers?” he asks like I’m spewing crazy talk.

Behind me, the door opens, and Bomber enters. I hadn’t expected for him to be the brother to tell me to fuck off, but here we are.

Bomber looks like a younger version of his father. His hair is still black, yet his eyes hold the same wariness as the man who changed all our lives.

I was locked up when Bomber’s older boy, Connor, was gunned down by the Horned Angels Motorcycle Club. I don’t really remember his kid. I think he looked a lot like a dark-haired version of his mom, Pumpkin.

“What’s a butch kind of flower?” I ask before he can start giving me shit.

“A sunflower, maybe. Why?”

“I’m buying flowers for your sister.”

“Why?”

“I think she wants to feel like Betty Boop.”

Bomber frowns at the sales clerk who takes the hint and disappears into the back of the store.

“Or do you want her to be Betty Boop?”

“I never wanted to fuck your mom,” I reply, winning a glare from him. “I wanted her to treat me like she did her kids. I liked knowing women weren’t evil fucks like my mom. Betty Boop opened my eyes about some shit, but I never had a crush on her.”

Bomber settles down and nods. “Talon is scared of sex.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“She wants me to get you to wait.”

“I get that, too.”

Crossing his arms, Bomber says, “I think you should promise to wait for a month to fuck. Take the pressure off. Then, you can fool around without her panicking. I figure you’ll be fucking by the end of the week.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“People fuck, Jester. Even our moms and little sisters. It’s normal.”

“But not all those moms and little sisters fuck guys like me.”

Bomber looks around the store before moving toward the fridge filled with roses.

“I should get Pumpkin something while I’m here.”

“You’re like Papa Bear.”

Nodding, Bomber allows a little smile. “But I’m my own man. That’s why I see the thing with you and Talon differently. Papa Bear thinks Sister Sass will get scared and break your heart. Overlord figures you’ll scare Sister Sass and break her heart.”

“And what do you think?” I ask when he just inspects the roses.

Bomber glances at me and sighs. “Sister Sass has a big mouth. She’s tougher than most women, but she starts a lot of shit she can’t handle. I figure her having a man like you would keep her safer than letting her run loose on her own.”

“She could find someone else.”

“No, she’s got you in mind. Any other guy would be her second choice.”

“And your advice is for me to lie to her about waiting a month?”

“No, not lie. You *should* be able to wait a whole fucking month for a woman you claim to care about. We both know what she survived. It’s normal for Sister Sass to be scared. But she’s also giving herself these panic attacks. If she wasn’t expecting to be fucked, she’d be open to being fucked. That’s

what she means by ‘wine and dine.’ She wants the fun stuff without the pressure.”

“What if we get to a month and we’re in the same place?”

“Never going to happen. Sister Sass has been lusting over you since she was a teenager. She wants the fun stuff. If you screw around without saying you want sex, I suspect you’ll be fucking soon. If you help Sister Sass from stressing herself out, she’ll stay out of her own way.”

I wasn’t expecting Bomber to give supportive advice. He and I weren’t any closer than Overlord and I ever were. Sure, I’d die and kill to protect them, but I mostly resented how good they had it growing up.

I no longer resent Bomber. He lost his boy, too. Though Connor got to live a lot longer than Lando did, he bled out in his dad’s arms. I hate how my boy died, but at least, I didn’t have to helplessly watch him fade away.

With Bomber being cool about Talon and me, I feel a little lost on what to do next. I stand dumbly while he hits the bell to get the guy back out. Bomber orders two dozen orange roses.

“Pumpkin loves the color orange,” he says when I stare at him.

Frowning, I think about Talon. “Do they have blue roses?”

“Sure,” the clerk replies.

“That’d be butch,” Bomber says, smirking as he pays with cash.

Even knowing he’s mocking me, I’m relieved to have an answer since I’m sick of talking about flowers. Soon, Bomber and I walk outside to our parked bikes.

“Don’t get Sister Sass drunk for sex,” he says while climbing on his hog. “That might be obvious, but I still figured I’d mention it.”

“Why would it be obvious?”

“She was drugged during the rape. If you get her drunk, she’s going to have that same blurry thinking. Then, when she

thinks of you fucking her, it won't be that different than when they raped her. Keep her clearheaded, even if she'd be more willing while drunk."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, do you want a kid?"

Scowling, I step back. "I don't know."

"Sister Sass thinks you do. She's pumping herself up to be a mom. If that's not something you want, you should get it said now. If you want to make a kid with Sister Sass, be honest. It'll help her see the future better, instead of getting herself focused on how she can't handle things right this moment."

"What did she say exactly when she talked to you?"

Bomber focuses on me in the same way Papa Bear used to when I was trying his patience.

"She was scared. She didn't want to lose you. She didn't know how to make you wait. Could I use my magical man words to make you submit to her lady logic?"

A regret strikes me in that moment. I consider how my sister and I lived in the same place for years without speaking. I never turned to her. She couldn't come to me for advice. We let our hangups keep us from being a family.

Now, I'll never know the way it feels to have my sister ask for help and for me to drop everything to fix her problem. Even after all those years watching Papa Bear's kids, I didn't learn how to be like them. I just stuck with what felt easiest.

I keep thinking I've suffered enough for my prize. I waited for Talon before the rape because I didn't think she was ready. I did seven years to make sure the world didn't include the men who hurt her. I've tried to be patient since getting released. Why should I keep waiting?

Riding behind Bomber on the way back to the Sanctuary, I think about how he's been happily married for more than a dozen years. He's still hot for his woman, doesn't cheat even if

he easily could. The guy brings flowers home just because. He puts in the work, even after winning his prize.

I walk into my townhome, realizing I've been thinking about shit wrong. I can't be the real me if I want Talon. That guy doesn't sacrifice anything. He did those seven years because he was a fucking idiot, not because he had noble intentions. That guy also let Lando go away with his shitty mom. He never reached out to his sister because she got on his nerves. That guy would spend the rest of his life alone and figure it was just meant to be.

I set the flowers on the counter next to the gift bag with the figurine. This is stuff that guy wouldn't do. It's what Bomber would do. Or Papa Bear. Maybe even Overlord. They have women who don't fear them.

I'm not there yet, but I have a plan to win Talon's trust.

TWINKLE TOES



Luca doesn't sugarcoat things like a lot of people at the Sanctuary. She spells out what the Dolls were used for, how my father was one of the men in charge of abusing us, and how Ghost shot him in the face. Those parts make me sad.

But she also explains my sister is sweet. Luca said Celine loved me. That she was willing to hide in the bushes just to see me. Those parts made me forget about the sad stuff.

After we hear about Celine, Apex says she can come to dinner tonight. He might only agree to make Ghost and Luca happy. Leaving our house to pick up Hope, they tell Apex how it'll work out, but he doesn't seem convinced.

At first, I'm nervous about being too different than I used to be. What if Celine doesn't like me?

Then, I get panicked over how I left my sister behind. That's when I start crying. Amelia does, too. She doesn't understand why I'm scared. I hold my daughter until she settles down, but Apex remains on edge. He doesn't want the past to tear me away from him.

Eventually, the house is quiet. As Amelia and Anna take their naps, I hide in my bedroom. Apex's touch soothes me. I welcome him into my body, yet we don't speak.

We're lost in our fear. The last year has been a whirlwind. I don't remember any other life. For me, Apex has always been at my side.

But Apex remembers a time when I didn't know and love him. He's terrified Celine will do or say something to ruin our family.

Our little foursome might seem weird to some, but I think we're perfect. Apex feels the same way, so I expect him to be hostile when he meets Celine.

After we fuck twice and eventually get dressed, he remains sullen. Amelia and Anna can't even help him find his calm. He just sees little girls about to lose their mom.

"I'm excited," I tell him as I fix a simple dinner taught to me by Lady Bug. "I've had a hole inside me. I often felt like I was in danger. Now, I know what I was running from and how it can't hurt me. That's a big relief."

As his handsome, bearded face remains pouty, Apex stands nearby in the kitchen and grunts rather than speak. Amelia looks up from her doll and mimics him. I catch a little smile on his face. She must see the same thing because she giggles and looks to me for approval.

"Daddy loves Amelia."

The little girl instantly wants him to pick her up. With a little uncertainty, he figures out how to take her fragile body into his arms. They both look at me with such pride.

"No one can ruin what we have," I promise them.

Amelia trusts my every word, but Apex remains uncertain. He can't imagine a future where I'm able to face my past without breaking down.

Though I want to prove him wrong, my heart starts racing when Thorn's motorcycle rolls up the driveway. I hurry outside with Amelia toddling behind me. Apex reaches for my shoulder as if to stop what's about to happen.

"It's okay," I promise, glancing back at him. "I'm just saying hello, so she won't be nervous."

My words sound utterly calm, yet my teeth chatter with anxiety.

Thorn parks in the driveway. I can't see Celine. I think maybe she hasn't come with him. Is she angry with me?

Then, I notice arms wrapped around Thorn's waist. My mind flashes to the first time I rode on the back of Apex's motorcycle. The world was so new and scary, but I already trusted the large biker.

A petite, blonde woman stumbles off the back of the motorcycle. She's wearing baggy black pants with a little bird character printed on them. Her sweatshirt has Mickey Mouse. She's wearing clothes from HQ's store. I got a lot of the same hand-me-downs when I first arrived.

Celine gains her bearings as she stares at Thorn climbing off his bike. I see how she can't look away for a minute as if he alone is keeping the world from swallowing her up.

When her gaze finds me, I'm so scared. I left Celine behind. I took so long to get her help. I hate myself for leaving this young woman in a terrible place. The shame burns my chest, making it hard for me to breathe.

"Giselle?" she says like she doesn't recognize me.

I panic, thinking maybe she isn't my sister. Was this all a misunderstanding?

My mind swims with questions and fears. I feel faint and wobbly on my feet. I can't bear to walk any closer to her. Instead, I consider running back inside my safe space and hiding with Apex and my girls.

Celine steps closer. She smiles at first. It seems so forced. I don't think she's happy to see me.

Then, she slaps her hands against her face. I'm startled and step back into Apex. Is Celine crazy?

A sob frees itself from deep in her chest. She covers her face with her hands as if she might hide from what's happening. Her knees buckle. She topples to the driveway, sobbing and rocking her little body.

I move without thinking. I don't know this woman. I'm not sure if she's crying because she is my sister or she's upset to learn of the misunderstanding. I just feel the need to comfort her.

Apex's fingers brush against my back as I hurry forward. He tries to stop me from running to Celine and covering her crumbled body with mine.

"I thought you were dead," she sobs against me.

“I’m so sorry.”

Celine calms herself enough to look at me through her messy hair.

“I thought I killed you,” she whispers.

“I took too long to find you.”

Her hands reach for my face as her blue eyes stare into mine. “You don’t remember.”

Shame washes over me again. “I tried to, but I couldn’t.”

Celine uses her hoodie’s sleeve to wipe her eyes before doing the same to my wet cheeks. She sniffles and offers a tired smile.

“I never loved anyone but you. When I thought you were dead, the world held nothing for me.”

“You’re safe now.”

“I don’t want to ruin your life.”

Wrapping her in my arms, I whisper, “Deep down, I knew I left someone important behind. Having you with me will fix that pain. Even if I can’t remember, I missed you.”

Celine and I cry against each other, oblivious to everything else. I even forget Apex and Thorn are watching us sob. Finally, a little hand on my back reminds me how the world exists.

I turn to find a teary-eyed Amelia. She holds her doll in one arm and reaches for me with her other.

“This is my baby girl,” I tell Celine while wrapping Amelia in my arms. “She’s Mommy’s helper.”

Amelia looks at Celine and frowns as she glances between us. She must see enough of a resemblance because she smiles like she’s discovered a secret.

“And that’s Apex,” I tell Celine.

Her gaze flashes to the man I love. Wearing his scowl, he looks so scary right now. I see how she lowers her gaze to avoid his wrath.

“He hates when I cry,” I explain while forcing myself to my feet.

Holding Amelia, I study the sister I can't remember. I thought memories might rush back to me once we were standing face-to-face. But she remains the stranger from Luca's pictures.

“Will you come inside?” I ask when she seems nervous about Apex.

Celine looks back at Thorn. He shrugs and seems uncertain himself.

“I haven't gotten a shower since the raid.”

Apex surprises me by offering, “You can clean up in our place.”

Thorn and Celine share a glance. I feel how she doesn't want him to leave. I also know he'd like to stay. Thinking back to how I immediately craved Apex, I suspect everyone will be happier if we stick together for a while.

As we step into my house, I squeeze Celine's hand. “The Sanctuary is really overwhelming at first. But if you give this place and yourself a chance, I think you'll want to call it home.”

Celine stares at me as if she's still struggling with her new reality. I don't blame her. After I arrived, I was a mess for a long time.

Of course, I didn't have to face my new situation alone then, and my sister won't have to do any of it alone now.

SISTER SASS



Jester texts me a dozen times before I relent and arrive at his townhome. I want to see him. I miss him when we're apart. But I'm scared to trigger another panic attack.

The last one still clings to me, biting at my every thought. I'm jumpy over nothing. I nearly ended up in tears when I visited Jules, and Zoey and Evie ganged up on me about my boyfriend.

"Dump the chump," Zoey said while Evie kept thrusting her thumb backward.

"Whoever taught you that garbage is mean."

Jules had to intervene before I cried all over her children. I eventually found myself hiding at Papa Bear's house, where I stood in the hallway lined with family pictures. My mom smiled out of many of them.

Betty Boop has been gone for so long, I've begun to forget how her arms felt around me.

Lady Bug found me sniffing in front of my mom's picture and offered me a hug. In the past, I'd say no, especially when Betty Boop's smiling face was so close. I didn't want to cheat on my mom with her replacement.

But it's been over a decade. Lady Bug is family. She could have been a bitch and demanded my mom's photos be taken down or stashed where she wouldn't see them. She's always been cool with how much we loved Betty Boop. And Lady Bug's been sweet to me, even when I blew bitch stank in her direction.

So, I relented to her hug offer and enjoyed the affection she offers freely to her daughters. Lady Bug stroked my back while I sniffled and felt more like damaged Talon than tough Sister Sass.

“He’s only been home for three days,” she said when I stepped back and wiped my wet eyes.

“I’ve been waiting for seven years.”

“You’ve gotten healthy and strong,” Lady Bug replied while sliding my hair from my shoulders in that way I see her do with Nadia. “But having Jester’s hands on you isn’t a fantasy. It’s happening for real now. And you’ve only had three days to get used to it.”

Lady Bug’s words were sensible, but I remained wary whenever Jester texted me. Finally, I couldn’t avoid him any longer.

Leaving Lady Bug, I ride over to the Yucca Road townhomes and shuffle my fearful ass to Jester’s door. He opens up and grunts at me. I’m immediately aware of his size. Jester seems terrifying, and I fight the urge to bolt.

“You’re ignoring me.”

“I’m having a bad day,” I mutter, lowering my gaze and going full submissive bitch in reaction to his anger.

“Well, get your ass inside, so I can do my thing.”

My pathetic broken-little-girl act is rattled by his tone. I narrow my eyes and consider refusing to enter. I’m not his property. I ought to run away and reject his horny hands.

Except once I see his rough face twisted into a pout, I feel guilty for blowing him off.

Shuffling into his townhome, I mumble, “It’s not your fault I’m scared.”

“No, it’s not,” he says and reaches for me.

Sidestepping his grasp, I move deeper into the townhome before he can regain his footing. Jester grunts again, sounding more irritated than pouty. I reach the kitchen where a vase filled with blue roses rests on the counter next to a gift bag and a lit candle.

“Are you cheating on me?” I demand and look around. “Where’s the hussy?”

Jester startles me by bolting in my direction and pinning me to the wall. “You’re madness.”

“Just a little. Why you gotta point out my flaws?” I ask, wiggling around against his hard body as I try to escape.

His gray-blue eyes shift from irate to annoyed before finally settling on pity.

“I was dumb to think you were healthy.”

“Hey, I’m plenty healthy. Let me free and I’ll do so many fucking pushups.”

“I mean in here, dipshit,” he says and taps my head.

“Don’t call me names.”

“Stop squirming and just listen to me.”

Forcing my gaze upward, I don’t dare look away. “What?”

“You’re too messed up for me to fuck right now.”

“I resent that.”

Jester almost smiles at my crap before losing the hint of a grin. He steps back enough for me to escape but then pins my arms over my head when I attempt to run.

“I’m giving you a month of that wine-and-dine shit,” he murmurs as his lips brush across mine. “No fucking. I won’t even eat out your pussy. Just girly kissing and fondling stuff. But you can’t leave me alone at night. I don’t want to sleep on my own. Agreed?”

“Why a month?” I ask, thinking about Bomber who came to my rescue, big-brother-style.

“Because I think you’re too insane to let me inside your body within a week. So, a month should be enough time.”

“I’m not crazy.”

“We’re all crazy, Talon. That’s why we live at the Sanctuary.”

“No, I live here because it’s where my family and friends live. If they left, I would, too. I’m a follower.”

Jester doesn't lose focus on his point, no matter how much I babble. "So, are we agreed?"

"I don't know. This feels like a trick."

"Why would I trick you?"

"Because you think I'm too insane to be straight with."

"Well, you are, but this is what we're doing. I thought you were ready. My dick needed you to be ready, but it's just not happening. This is me adjusting to reality rather than me forcing you to do what you can't," he says, sounding gentle before adding in a grumpy voice, "But you're spending the night. I don't want to sleep alone."

Tugging my wrists free from his large hands, I slide out of his reach. My gaze washes over the townhome before returning to his face.

"I'm sorry I wasn't ready for you," I mumble, feeling like I ruined my big shot.

Jester runs his hands through his long, wavy hair, seeming tired and restless. When he stops frowning at the ceiling, he looks at me.

"I wasn't ready for you, either."

"How do you mean?"

"You have a lot of needs. Emotions and expectations. I thought loving you was enough, you know? But it's not, and worrying about you is stressful. If I didn't love you, I'd just end things. Be lazy. Find a broad who didn't care about my name, let alone my history. Just fuck and be dumb and not care."

Jester steps closer. "But I do love you. And I want the stuff I see with your family. I never thought I could have what Papa Bear and Betty Boop did. I grew up seeing them in love, and it seemed impossible for someone like me."

He pauses and glances at the pictures of his boy on the wall. "Wanting something different for myself, I went to that goofy gift store and asked the little old lady for help. Then, I got help at the flower place. That shit is not in my wheelhouse,

but I did it. And it didn't kill me or turn me weird or anything. I'm still me, but maybe better. A little, anyway."

Jester finally looks at me again. "So, I think maybe I can have what Papa Bear had with your mom and what he's got now with Lady Bug. Though I'm not a good man like him, I'm not a total piece of shit, either. But I can only do it with you. No other woman's going to be worth the trouble."

"Why do all this?" I ask in a quiet voice as I look over the blue roses and gift bag. "Did Bomber tell you to?"

"No, I did it on my own. But, yeah, maybe he helped with the flowers a little. But I was already getting them. He doesn't get credit for that."

I smile at how Jester put all this effort into making me feel better. Stepping closer, I ask, "What kind of candle is that? It smells weird."

"It's jasmine. The lady claimed the smell was romantic."

My face hides nothing, revealing a stupid, silly smile like I'm a dumb teenager still stalking her much older crush. Jester's calloused fingers stroke my cheek.

"What if I'm still crazy in a month?" I whisper as he holds my gaze.

"Oh, you'll always be crazy. But I don't think you'll be as scared. I figured you were telling me no just to be a tease. But I forgot how I'm scary, and you're used to having your own space. In a month, I won't seem so scary, and you'll be used to sharing your space with me."

"You're not so scary," I murmur and smile at my flowers. "But you are larger than I remembered."

"And I never really knew this Talon up close. The chick I knew before prison was rowdy and fearless. The chick I knew on the phone seemed the same way, but that was just because you weren't sharing your space with a man. In a month, things will be different."

Smiling big again, I ask, "Can I move some of my clothes in here?"

“Yeah, and your lady stuff, too.”

“You mean like my tampons and vaginal itch cream?” I ask, just to mess with him.

Jester scowls. “Why is your pussy itching?”

“Well, I wear tight jeans and ride on my bike a lot. There’s all kind of friction involved.”

“Wear baggier pants and get a smaller bike so you’re not sliding around so much.”

“No,” I reply and look at my gift. “I want to see what the old lady talked you into buying me.”

Jester smacks my ass before waving for me to check out what’s hiding in the little red bag. The figurine is exactly like what Papa Bear would buy Betty Boop. All my tough-bitch mojo disappears when I see that little girl holding her mom’s hand.

“I miss her so much,” I tell him. “Thank you.”

Jester isn’t sure if my tears are a good thing. He waits until I feel him up before he loses his frown.

“Women are weird.”

“No, we’re the normal ones. Men are so used to thinking the world revolves around them that they’ve turned their weirdness into normal. But it’s okay. It’s not your fault.”

Jester grins at my bullshit. Or maybe he’s smiling because my hands are down his back pockets and giving his ass a squeeze.

“You’re okay now, right?”

The answer is a big fat no. I’m still scared of another panic attack. I never want to relive that night again. My dream is to enjoy all the fun stuff with Jester without facing any of the bad.

But my earlier fear of him is gone. *Jester bought me fucking flowers!* He picked a figurine to remind me of Betty Boop. He’s even giving me a month to get my shit together.

Though I don't know what'll happen in thirty days, I'm certain we're bound to have penetration-free fun tonight.

JESTER



The flowers and gift have thawed the chill Talon blew in my direction after our failed pussy-eating fun. Beyond the romantic stuff, she's gotten a promise to avoid fucking for a month. With her free to fool around without us taking the heat to its natural conclusion, Talon is horny as hell.

We make out on the couch with her grinding her clothed pussy against my crotch. She's making my dick hard enough to rip through our clothes and hit paydirt. Eventually, I jizz in my jeans, leaving her smiling to herself. She's supernova hot right now. She presses her tits into my hands and sucks at my throat.

"Don't you want to come, too?" I ask.

Talon freezes. Literally, all the heat leaves her. She stares at me like my evil plan has been exposed.

"You said one month," she mutters, trying to climb off me.

I wrap an arm around the back of Sister Sass to prevent her from escaping. "I meant you could strip down and rub one out. Don't ladies masturbate?"

Unconvinced, Talon looks me over and leans back. "You're tricking me."

"Who the fuck am I?"

"Sometimes, I don't know," she grumbles and squirms free with such force she ends up on her ass on the ground.

Even if she's all I want, I don't reach for her. Talon's gone crazy again. She's not really here with me. Instead, she's got one foot in the past.

"A month is a long time," I say as I stretch my arms over my head before giving my spent dick a reassuring stroke. "We're going to need to find relief even if it's not together."

“I don’t get horny like that.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m not doing that with you.”

“Why?” When Talon refuses to answer, I give voice to her fears. “You think I’ll fuck you if you let your guard down.”

“Yes.”

“I had my finger in your pussy last night, babe. Yet, you’ve remained un-fucked.”

“Only because I flipped out.”

“If I’m such an untrustworthy asshole, why would I care if you were scared? After all, I know for a fucking fact, you’ll like having my dick inside you once you’ve gotten used to it. But I still didn’t fuck you.”

Talon crawls closer and rests her chin on my knee. “I want to fool around without it turning into fucking.”

“You’re the one who got me to jizz in my pants.”

“Yeah, and your dick didn’t leave your pants. It was safe.”

Studying Talon, I suspect her brother is wrong about her ever agreeing to fuck me. This chick is wound up too tight.

My thumb caresses her lips before gesturing for her to back up. I stand and head for the stairs leading to my loft bedroom. Talon doesn’t follow immediately. She sits on the ground, staring up at the railing looking over the living room.

Stripping out of my clothes, I give my dick a quick wash in the sink. I don’t need to be smelling like jizz when we head to dinner soon.

Peeking over the railing, I find Talon still staring up. She notices my naked body and narrows her gaze.

“I think you’re the problem,” I grumble down at her.

“Yeah, I get it. I’m crazy.”

“No, you’re a sex fiend.”

Talon gasps, considers my words, and then frowns. “How do you figure?”

“I saw you naked and controlled myself. I don’t think you can do the same. You’ve got too much pent-up sexual heat. That’s why you assume my dick’s going to fuck you from this distance.”

Talon rolls her eyes. “I know you won’t fuck me from upstairs. But I do wonder why you’re walking around naked.”

“I like going naked. Couldn’t do that in prison, now could I?”

“No,” she says, standing up and moving toward the stairs. “Are you really pissed at me?”

I walk to my closet and look over my clothes. I find a pair of comfy old jeans and dig around for a pair of briefs in my tiny dresser.

Pain hits when I think of how one drawer used to be for Lando’s clothes when he visited. Grief washes over me while I dress. By the time I turn around, Talon’s gotten her ass upstairs.

“I’m scared,” she mumbles. “Last night rattled me. I haven’t had a panic attack like that in a long time.”

Her honesty drains me of confidence. I drop my ass on my mattress and rub my eyes.

I have so little to show for my life. Yeah, I helped with the club, but nothing was ever my big idea. I’m just a soldier, doing what I’m told.

“I miss Lando.”

Talon loses her scolded-little-girl expression and walks over to me. No longer afraid, she settles on the bed and kisses my bare arm.

“He was a sweet boy. Funny, too.”

I allow a little grin when I think of my son. Lando wasn’t a super special kid. He was just normal. He got scared in the dark and laughed at farts. He liked candy and chicken nuggets.

His favorite toy was a goofy bear doll I got him at the carnival. He was just a kid, but he was mine, and I miss him.

“I think I want another kid,” I admit as I stare at my hands. “I know that kid won’t be Lando. It might be a girl who makes no sense to me. Or a weird kid who bites and rubs snot on everything. Kids are all different. I get that. But I miss using the part of my heart only Lando touched.”

“You miss being a dad,” Talon says softly.

Nodding, I feel old and emptied out. My youth is gone. I didn’t do anything important with my time alive. I was unhappy a lot. I never loved anyone right. I couldn’t connect with my sister. I didn’t try hard enough with my son. I’m not sure how to make Talon happy.

“Growing up, Dire and I always said we didn’t want kids,” Talon says and rests her soft cheek against my arm. “I have no urge for one. But when I think of you and me having a kid, it seems less scary. Dire still swears she can’t deal with a kid. That’s probably going to stick. But over the last few years, as you got closer to your release date, I started noticing people’s kids and wondering what our baby would be like.”

“I wasn’t a good father.”

“You weren’t a bad father, either.”

“I should have been better.”

“It’s hard to do the right thing in the moment, but the answers are always easier in hindsight.”

Talon holds my hand. She seems so delicate sometimes. I’m certain my love will break her. Other times, she seems terrifying. That’s when I’m certain her love will destroy me.

“To have a kid, we’d need to fuck,” I point out when she nuzzles my shoulder and awakens my dick.

“Not necessarily. We can do it like Aqua and Jelly Bean did with a turkey baster and Smoke’s jizz in a cup.”

I frown at Talon, only to find her trying not to laugh. She snorts and fights back the giggles.

“I love you, Jester,” she says, still grinning like a jackass. “I think you’re really hot. I want to fuck, but I’m scared. If you’ll really wait a while longer, I know I can get past my fear. You’re too sexy for me to avoid touching.”

I cup Talon’s hand in both of mine and ask, “If we get stuck with a daughter, can we name her Leia?”

“Sure. A princess who kicks ass is a great role model for our little hypothetical daughter.”

I imagine “ballsy princess” is how Talon views herself. Yet, like Leia, she often needs someone to swoop in and rescue her. Right now, she’s looking for protection from her own fears.

“If it’s a boy,” I say as I stand to find a clean shirt, “I’m thinking Chewy or Han.”

“Sure.”

Even without seeing her reaction, I’m certain she’s rolling her eyes.

“Aqua and Jelly Bean are naming their daughter Vada because they love that movie ‘My Girl.’”

Not knowing what the hell she’s talking about, I just nod. Talon stands to go downstairs, but I stop her by planting a kiss on her startled lips. Before she can panic, I drag my mouth from hers and head downstairs to find a pair of boots.

As we walk to HQ, Talon watches me in her dreamy chick way. I’ll need time to get used to her mood swings. At least she isn’t treating me like the enemy right now.

Once inside HQ, I spot a bunch of founders at one long table. They look at me as if I’m supposed to join them. Knowing Talon won’t want to sit with them, I just keep walking behind her. We end up at a table with Ominous, Dire, Aqua, and Jelly Bean.

“I’ve made a decision,” Talon announces toward the end of the meal after she’s goofed around with her friends and flipped off her oldest brother.

Smirking at Dire, Ominous mutters, “This should be good.”

“Tonight, when Jester and I go for a ride,” Talon continues, ignoring her mentor’s taunt, “I will be riding bitch.”

No one responds to her announcement, though I mentally wear a smug grin.

“There’s no shame in that,” Talon says when no one speaks. “Jelly Bean rides bitch. Luca does, too.”

“That’s true,” Dire says, throwing her friend a bone. “And Luca can kick your ass, but she still climbs on behind Ghost all the time. Riding bitch doesn’t make you a puny chump at all.”

Talon and Dire glare at each other, while Jelly Bean rubs her belly and whispers with Aqua. I know they’re quietly teasing Talon who is too busy eyeballing her other friend to notice.

Ominous smirks at me. “Enjoying freedom?”

“Got me a hot girlfriend riding bitch. How can I complain?”

“I *am* hot,” Talon tells Dire who responds with, “Yes, you’re quite the beauty queen, ya bitch-riding bitch.”

Ominous chuckles and leans back. “Dire’s going to be the one chick member without a kid slobbering on her vest.”

Aqua strokes her woman’s belly and smiles proudly. I try to imagine Talon ever looking so round. I don’t even remember Ciara during her pregnancy. I always assumed she was lying about the kid being mine. Now, I’m wondering how much of a strain pregnancy would be on Talon’s body.

I look at Jelly Bean again and then glance at where that Eliza chick is sitting. She’s around Talon’s height and her man is larger than me. She doesn’t look like she’s splitting apart from carrying his kid.

Still, I worry what I want will destroy Talon. She’s not as tough as I thought. If she can’t be stronger, I’ll need to be smarter. Unfortunately, I’ve never been the brightest guy.

Before I can panic, I glance at Papa Bear's table. He's got three of his four kids nearby. His granddaughters use his lap as their chair. The family looks happy. His ten-year-old daughter is bouncing around while telling a story. Everything about them is normal and healthy.

If I can't be smarter, at least I have good people willing to help me figure things out.

OVERLORD



I keep an eye on the media for mentions of the Primrose attack. I find a vague story about a fire with fatalities. There's nothing about shootings. The lack of coverage reminds me of those news reports we found about the deaths of Luca's sister and niece. The media did their best to bury the story. The locals in Texas seem to be doing the same.

I doubt the estate raid will somehow splash back on the club. But we're still dealing with heat for what happened in Cahuenga.

Right now, the biggest question looming over the Sanctuary and Metamora is what to do with the Black Gold Four's staff. Helping them was the price to get info and assistance from Theo. We can't just cut them loose.

So, I spend most of the afternoon learning what they'll need to start over in life. Many of them want new identities and cash to move somewhere else. They're afraid the final Black Gold Four member will hunt them down for revenge if they return to their old lives.

A few seem uncertain about the future. One woman starts crying and keeps sobbing for an hour. I assume living in that place would be traumatizing for the staff. They were hired to do a simple job, learned they were part of something vile, and were too afraid to bail, let alone rat out their powerful bosses.

However, they did keep those young women caged. Normally, when a castoff arrives, their story isn't shared with everyone. If they did bad shit, we don't shame them. The founders weren't saints. None of us are.

With the estate staff, their culpability is widely known. They might never do well within the Sanctuary or even Metamora. But only time will tell. We'll need weeks to process new identities and get people settled elsewhere. Until

then, they'll stay at the motel and have their needs met by the club.

Back at the Sanctuary, I manage to talk Jules into leaving the house and make rounds with me. Zoey and Evie come along while Scout and Anthony stay with Mabie back at our place. My girls dance-walk ahead of us as we stop by the Stockade to check on two of the Dolls.

The women are sitting silently on the couch when we enter. They stare at me with dead eyes. But their expressions warm when the girls bounce forward.

"We brought flowers," Evie explains and offers a handful of golden columbines they tugged out of the ground on the way over. "They are the same color as pineapple but don't eat them."

The women thank the girls but refuse to make eye contact with me. I'm used to women castoffs treating me like the enemy.

"We're walking over to HQ for dinner," Jules explains, offering her beautiful smile to soothe their anxiety toward me. "Would you like to come with us?"

The women don't want to leave the house. I see them considering if "no" is an option. They're dressed in nearly matching T-shirts and jeans. I'm not sure how the sleeping arrangements were decided. The Sanctuary's shrink worked it out with the women back at Refuge Clinic. I sense some of the Dolls aren't fond of each other.

Despite wanting to hide, the women agree to walk with us to HQ. Chaperones have brought over two other groups of Dolls. The one named Celine is visiting Giselle for dinner.

Jules explains to the women how HQ works and tells them they can sit with each other or at separate tables. Without a doubt, they don't want to sit together.

Despite their wariness of each other, the Sanctuary's shrink wants the Dolls to start participating in group therapy. She figures they might do well speaking openly and airing grievances. I got the impression the Dolls were expected to

view each other as rivals rather than friends or family. Therapy should eventually help them see past their training.

With the growing number of Sanctuary members, we've been looking for an extra shrink. A former child castoff is finishing up her degree and training to join our community. Though she doesn't do one-on-one sessions yet, she'll be in charge of organizing the group therapy.

I look over the women, finding them tired and wary. Jules is likely unsure about them. I notice how she keeps holding the girls' hands and maneuvering them away from the strangers.

"Don't be a chump," Zoey tells Jules.

"I'm having a hard day."

Zoey's smartass expression disappears immediately. She lunges for Jules and hugs her for a long time, while Evie and I walk around to say hello to everyone.

"Your sister is bogarting Jester," Buzzsaw complains when I stop at his table.

"No," Evie tells him. "Zoey is hugging Jules."

"Not *your* sister," he mutters as she waves off his irritation. "Your *dad's* sister."

"Your aunt, sweetie," Bunny explains.

"No," Evie tells him. "You're wrong. I'm not wrong. I'm five years old."

The founders and their women frown at me in unison. I only smile at their attempt to intimidate me.

"She might be running things by the time you're using walkers."

"Sister Sass will never run the club," Tank grumbles. "She told me last week how she doesn't want to be in charge of the elderly."

Chuckling, I stroke Evie's blonde ponytail. "No, I meant my daughter."

As if sensing I'm irritating the masses, Flagg shows up at my side. He glances at Jules and Zoey hugging nearby before sighing.

"It's been a few busy days."

"That it has."

"And Jester is in a weird place."

"That he is."

Narrowing his blue eyes, Flagg can't help reminding me of his dead twin brother, Kraken. "But you know how things can fester."

"It's been three days," I tell Flagg before looking at the others. "Jester's having fun with his hot new girlfriend. Once they get bored of each other, I'm sure he'll be hitting you all up for drinks and games of pool."

The founders scowl hard as if they hadn't viewed Sister Sass as girlfriend material. Maybe they only see her as a kid. Or they just never really put two and two together. But they settle down when they imagine Jester ignoring them for pussy. The world suddenly makes sense again.

Once I leave the founders' supersized table, I walk over to check on Eliza and Penthouse.

"Giselle and Apex are having that new girl over," Eliza explains, seeming nervous. "I can't remember if the cheerleader was nice."

Resting a hand on her shoulder, I explain, "It doesn't matter if she was. You got a fresh start when you moved to the Sanctuary, and so will they. We should also stop thinking of them as 'Dolls' or their character. If we can't stop, they won't, either."

Eliza rubs her swollen belly and says in a worried voice, "I don't want her to hurt Giselle."

Penthouse exudes hostility once his woman is upset. Her pregnancy hormones are making him weird lately. Jules and I were just chuckling about that shit the other night. But right

now, I put on my calmest expression and kneel next to a sniffling Eliza.

“Apex will destroy anyone to protect Giselle. If that new girl is trouble, he won’t have a single bit of trouble putting her in her place, okay?”

“Yeah,” Eliza says, smiling as she wipes her eyes. “He can be a jerk if he needs to be.”

I glance at Penthouse whose rage deflates once he sees her smile. Jules and Zoey join us at the table.

“You’re having a baby,” Evie tells Eliza. “It’s in your stomach.”

“Like a watermelon seed,” Zoey adds. “Your baby is food.”

Jules loses her edginess and laughs at how Zoey didn’t quite understand the “how babies grow in bellies” conversation they had the other day.

“Name it Emperor Zurg,” Evie insists to Eliza.

“I’ll think about it.”

“No,” Penthouse mutters, shaking his head. “Not Zurg.”

Evie turns to Zoey for help. Sensing my little hellraiser will soon swing around her fist and call people chumps, I sweep her up in my arms and move to the next table.

We keep moving from group to group. The girls beg food from Nadia and Vegas. They complain about their feet needing rest. Through it all, Jules doesn’t say much, seeming overwhelmed again.

Eventually, we arrive at Papa Bear’s table. He sits next to Lady Bug and across from Bomber and Pumpkin. Kat and Collin are talking about an anime show at the end of the table.

My girls climb on Papa Bear’s lap and sigh dramatically.

“We’re done,” Zoey tells me and rests her head on his chest. “Stop begging for my sugar, chump.”

Bomber rolls his eyes at my daughter before grinning at me. “Jester bought flowers for Sister Sass.”

“To make up for something he did?” I ask as Jules settles next to Pumpkin.

“No, she got spooked, so he’s doing romantic stuff for her.”

I glance at the corner table where Sister Sass sits with Jester, Dire, Aqua, and Jelly Bean. We skipped that spot since I figured my girls would just get super rowdy with their aunt.

Right now, my sister notices my gaze on her. She leans into Jester and kisses his cheek before flipping me off.

“Everyone seems okay,” Jules tells me. “Can we stop walking?”

“Feet tired, fool?” Zoey asks Jules.

“A little. How are you?”

Zoey glances at Evie cuddled with her on Papa Bear’s lap. She smiles at her sister and then at Jules.

“Could complain but won’t.”

I study HQ filled with my people. Some are strangers, others I’ve known my entire life. They’re all my responsibility. I won’t deny the tension in the air. Change rattles people, and this week has been filled with new shit.

But as I walk to the kitchen to find food for Jules and the girls, I’m filled with optimism. I’d been certain the Texas mission would go to hell, and I’d never be able to move past my guilt.

I’ve never been so happy to be wrong.

CELINE



Giselle doesn't look like I remember. Her face is rounder. Her belly is fuller. Her skin is tawnier. Living at the Sanctuary left her healthier. She's both my sister and a stranger.

Like the others watching us, I keep waiting for Giselle to remember. We walk into her beautiful house, stopping in a living room where the bassinet is set up. I can't believe all that's happened since she escaped into the night.

"Why the name Anna?" I ask, wanting to understand how this version of my sister works.

Giselle shrugs. "We wanted an 'A' name because of Apex's name. We planned to use Amelia, but then we met this little one."

I look at the child in my sister's arms. She's adopted. I'm unclear how that happened. Luca was vague about certain things. I think she wanted to protect me.

Amelia keeps pointing at my face and then cuddling Giselle. I think she might notice our resemblance. That or she thinks I'm weird. I don't know anything about children.

"Anna felt like a good name to go with her big sister's."

Amelia points to the baby and mumbles something. I think about when I was that age and Giselle entered my life. I can't remember the mother we shared. I don't think she raised us at all. I only recall nannies. I'm not sure I met my father until I was five. *But I always had Giselle.*

"Don't be scared," she says as she walks to the kitchen to check the food. "I was nervous when I got here, too. People were so nice, but I didn't know what would happen next."

"But what *will* happen next?" I ask as I look back out to where Thorn stands with Apex.

The men study the sleeping baby, but I sense they're talking about Giselle and me.

Amelia gets down when Giselle needs to check the oven. The redheaded girl walks around the kitchen island and returns to Giselle to be picked up. Once she checks her potatoes, my sister lifts the girl into her arms.

Giselle looks into my eyes and bites her lower lip. "Luca and Ghost said you could stay at their house for a few days. That seemed smart at first because I didn't know you and I want to protect my baby girls," Giselle explains before reaching for my hand. "But now that we've met, I want you to stay here with me."

I study my sister, wanting her to remember me without remembering the pain we left behind.

"I will go wherever you want."

Giselle steps closer until we're less than a foot apart. Her gaze reveals a building panic.

"I want you to stay here with me."

"That's what I want, too."

Giselle settles down immediately. Her earlier panic fades, leaving her worn out. We sit on the couch while the men linger nearby.

Dinner is awkward. I don't know what to say. I feel like I shouldn't be in Giselle's life, yet there's nowhere else I belong.

No, I guess that isn't a hundred percent true. I could go with Thorn. He's so handsome and has been really kind to me. I like the way he held me when I got upset. I also liked holding on to him on the ride here. I'd be willing to do whatever sex stuff he wanted, if I could keep him.

After dinner, he moves toward the front door. I don't want him to go, even if he's clearly exhausted and needs to get home. He said he lives at the Sanctuary. Is Thorn's home close enough for me to visit? Rather than ask that question, I memorize his handsome face.

“I’ll see you at breakfast at HQ,” Thorn says when I just stare. “I eat there every morning.”

“Thank you,” I mumble, wishing he would stay.

Thorn glances back at Apex watching us. Giselle is busy with the baby. Amelia whines somewhere in the house.

“It’ll be okay,” Thorn tells me when I reach for him without thinking. He gently tugs my fingers from his wrist. “You’re safe with Giselle. The world will make more sense once you get a good night’s rest.”

“I’m afraid,” I whisper as tears burn my eyes.

“That’s normal. Last night, you thought your sister was dead. I was a stranger. This place didn’t really exist for you. Tomorrow will make more sense. I promise.”

Exhaling uneasily, I nod and force a smile. Then, I remember how Thorn said I don’t have to fake my feelings anymore. So, I drop the smile and pout.

“I’m still afraid.”

“I’m really tired. So, I’m going to crash at my place and think about you,” he says and steps back. “You can hang out with your sister and Apex and the crying baby and the crying toddler. And maybe in all that mess, you’ll think about me.”

Now, my smile is real. I watch Thorn climb on his motorcycle and ride down the street. Shutting the door, I notice Apex frowning at me. He stands next to Giselle who is bent over the bassinet changing Anna’s diapers. Apex only stops watching me when he gets distracted by Amelia.

The evening is more awkward than dinner. I don’t belong with this family. They have a routine. Amelia seems bothered by how I’m not leaving. Apex keeps glancing at me and shaking his head. Though Giselle seems exhausted, she does smile whenever our gazes meet. Yet, my presence clearly leaves them all out of sorts.

As we watch a kid’s movie, I yawn a lot in my chair and doze off more than once. I wake up to find Apex glaring at me.

Hiding behind my hair, I doze off again, exhausted after being awake for more than twenty-four hours. When I wake again, the living room is empty except for Giselle crouched next to the chair.

“It’s time for bed,” she whispers. “I brought you clothes to wear, and I fixed up the couch.”

Back at our father’s house, I had a routine every night. I got washed down by staff before waiting to see if I was favored by anyone. If not, I slept in my bed naked under a single blanket. I’ve spent my entire life cold.

I don’t want to take off my hoodie and sweatpants. I’m warm for the first time ever.

However, I don’t have the energy to explain my thinking to Giselle. I just obey when she helps me remove my clothes. I’m used to doing as I’m told.

“These are my bamboo pajamas,” she explains, still whispering. “I got them last Christmas. Can you believe they’re made out of bamboo? They’re so warm and soft.”

“I love you,” I say, tearing up. “I’m glad you can’t remember, but I miss you knowing me.”

The corners of Giselle’s mouth turn downward as she rests her hands on my shoulders. “I’m going to know you again. We’ll talk a lot. You’ll live here. I think the Sanctuary will make you happy. Thorn is very nice. Maybe you can go on a date when you feel more comfortable. And you’ll have friends and can go to classes and the park. There’s lots to do here. And we’ll do it together, so we’ll know each other in a new way.”

Wiping my eyes, I’m so tired. I rest on the comfortable couch and watch Giselle cover me with a plush blanket.

Back with our father, I was always in charge of Giselle. I kept her safe and taught her to behave. When she was bad, I got punished, too. I did everything I could to be good to ensure she never got punished for my sins.

I was the leader. It was me who told her not to cry when someone hurt her. It was me who told her what the men did to us was normal. It was me who reminded her to submit.

Then, it was me who decided we should escape. I was the one who sent her running into the night. I spent a year regretting how my baby sister died because of my choices.

Tonight, though, I'm not in charge. Giselle understands the rules at the Sanctuary. She's the one who will guide me in this new life.

I stare up at my little sister and exhale with relief. For the first time today, I truly feel free.

APEX



After tucking in our girls and Celine, Giselle crawls in bed. She clings to me as our bodies move together. I assume we'll talk about today's craziness once we're relaxed. Instead, Giselle falls asleep immediately.

I get up with her when Anna needs her feeding. Moving quietly past the couch on my way to the kitchen, I glance down at Celine and find her mostly hidden beneath the blanket.

I tell myself again and again how Giselle's sister isn't the enemy. But I can't shake how Celine might flip out and hurt my family.

Once I get Anna's bottle, I return to Giselle in the nursery. She looks up at me and offers a bright smile despite her fatigue.

"I have a sister," she says as I settle next to the chair and stroke her head.

"Do you remember her at all?"

Giselle shakes her head as my fingers brush across our baby girl's forehead.

"I thought seeing Celine would be like opening a door to my past. I kept looking at her and waiting for the memories to return. Nothing happened. If I didn't know she was my sister, I wouldn't be any wiser."

Frowning, I wonder if I should have kept the women apart. Celine wants everything from Giselle. My woman shouldn't be responsible for saving the other woman.

"But I can feel how much she loves me," Giselle says, startling me. "That's why I want to be close to her. Celine feels this incredible closeness to me. We were important to each other. I want to feel that way, too."

“But you don’t remember anything. Why can’t she remain a stranger to you?”

“It’d never be like it was, even if I did remember. I’ve changed over the last year. I have you and the girls. I have friends. I do what I want. I spent the last year having choices. I can’t be the Giselle she remembers. But I think Celine’s love for me will feel good. And falling in love with my sister will make me a better person.”

My sleepy brain doesn’t buy into Giselle’s predictions. She isn’t a machine. Her heart and mind are still damaged from the past. I’m not exactly a healthy person. Amelia is so needy. We have our own problems. *Should we really be responsible for another fucked-up person?*

After Anna’s feeding, Giselle and I return to bed. I rest against her little body, needing to know she’s safe.

Soon, I dream of ugly shit. In my nightmares, I can’t protect Giselle. Amelia is stolen away. Anna dies in her crib.

In every dream, I see my dead brother. Crispin’s angry with me for living a good life while he never even got to grow up.

I wake up feeling like the world is out to get me. I don’t want to see Celine. She represents all my fears now.

Giselle seems hyper as soon as she opens her eyes. She bounces out of bed and dances around to get ready. I shuffle behind her, dripping with guilt over letting my brother die. I miss Crispin a lot today. I wonder if he’d have freckles as a grown man. *Why am I thinking about all this negative shit?*

The reason is awake when we get downstairs with the girls. I look at Celine and realize I hate her. She’s going to drag us all down. Her problems are too big. She was a sex slave for her entire life, but she doesn’t have the luxury of forgetting the details like Giselle. Her bad memories will pollute our lives.

Walking silently to HQ, I carry a tired Amelia. Giselle pushes the baby in the stroller. Celine is wearing Giselle’s

clothes, seeming ready for a winter chill rather than the mild early autumn weather.

Luca, Ghost, and Hope exit their house a few minutes after we do. I glance back at my friend, wanting him to fix my problem. Except he's the one who brought Celine into my life. Plus, Luca believes brutal honesty is better than safe lies. I don't trust them not to take Celine's side against me. No one except me can see how she'll ruin things.

At HQ, Celine is quickly overwhelmed by the crowd of people. She hasn't eaten here yet. Her gaze gets bright and panicky at the sight of the other Primrose women.

Suddenly, the women focus on Giselle. I nearly step in front of my woman before noticing Celine does it first.

I frown down at Giselle's sister. I can't believe she'll let us be happy. Much like I don't believe Crispin wants me to break free from my guilt. Why wouldn't he hold a grudge? I would.

I suddenly see my brother clearly in my head. We would often sit out back, bored in the summer afternoons with no money to do anything. In the memory, I don't know where our mom is, but I'm sure we're hiding out from our violent stepdad.

I think of the time Crispin handed me a candy he swiped from another kid's stash at school. My brother couldn't eat it because his mouth was fucked up from our stepdad's belt. He watched me eat the candy and smiled.

"My brother wasn't an asshole," I grumble to no one in particular.

Giselle looks up at me and frowns. "I know. He loved you like you love him."

I don't know how to explain to her how Crispin was better than me. He wouldn't steal my happiness or hold a grudge. That negative shit is inside me. I'm the one hating myself. He would tell me to chill out and enjoy whatever I could.

Settling at the table with Amelia on my lap, I let myself truly see Celine. She stares at Giselle with such longing. The two of them lived an insane, perverted existence. I doubt they

had fun like Crispin and I did. The girls were just toys. I'm not sure they went to school or had friends. They only had each other.

For a year, Celine was essentially alone, thinking Giselle was dead. I remember how bad I felt when my brother died. I'd been a kid. In a weird way, the chaos that followed his death distracted me from losing him.

Celine just had her pom-poms and the next painful day in her prison.

"We should ask if Lady Bug or one of the old ladies will come over to help me watch the girls today," I say as I feed a piece of egg to Amelia. "That way, you and Celine can be alone for a while."

Giselle and her sister share a smile. I think my woman does remember her sister on some level. She's drawn to Celine. I like to think if she got hurt and forgot me, a deeper part of her would still feel the connection.

After I text Lady Bug to ask if she'll help me watch the girls today, I feel a weight lift off my chest. Crispin doesn't linger in my every thought. I no longer suffer the shameful guilt of living when he can't.

And I stop wishing Celine would go away and instead want to ensure she's safe.

That's why I keep an eye out for Thorn during breakfast. When I catch sight of him walking over from the townhomes, I head outside to talk.

Thorn looks more rested and less edgy than yesterday at dinner when he barely spoke. I think about how he kept stealing glances at Celine. I can't imagine she's ready for his attention.

"What are your intentions with Celine?" I ask, blocking his entry into HQ.

"Is this a real conversation we're having or are you fucking with me?" he replies while scratching at his bearded chin. "Should I laugh at your funny joke?"

“Celine is part of Giselle’s life now. That makes her my problem. And here you are making puppy dog eyes in her direction. I want to know what you think is going to happen.”

Thorn stares at me for a long time before saying, “I’m going to do exactly what you did with Giselle. So, expect me to sit outside your house and wait for Celine to come out. I’ll probably have her moved into my townhome in a week, too. Is that cool?”

Taking the bait, I instantly want to use my size to intimidate Thorn and put him in his place. Of course, he isn’t scared of me. Besides, I know he’s my friend and probably a little right about how things went down with Giselle.

“I remember being more patient,” I admit.

“In a year, I’ll remember the same thing when it comes to Celine.”

“Stop being an asshole.”

“No,” Thorn mutters, revealing the darker side of him. “I might be nicer than Ghost and you, but I’m not a pushover. I like Celine. She likes me. We’ll see each other all the time. Shit will eventually happen. But I’ll let her set our pace.”

“Yeah, because she isn’t like Giselle,” I say and poke his chest. “She remembers the sick shit they did to her.”

“I’m aware of that. I went to Texas, remember? Twice, actually.”

Stepping back, I shrug. “Yeah, I do remember, man. I also appreciate you doing that.”

“Then, why the fuck are you hassling me?”

Glancing back through HQ’s front windows, I explain, “Giselle is already attached to Celine. If I want my woman to be happy and healthy, I’ve got to worry about Celine.”

“Maybe this little thing between her and me won’t last. I’m not like you who never had a relationship before Giselle. It’s possible Celine will be like Eliza, where we don’t make sense, so she finds someone else. But I doubt it. That’s why I’ll be patient and let her lead.”

I run my hands through my hair and think of how quickly shit can go bad.

“In my head, I see everything working out,” I explain to Thorn. “A year ago, I met Giselle. A year from now, we’ll be comfortable in our home. That feels like a good dream. My girls will be bigger. I won’t be so nervous about touching them. Life won’t rip my family away from me.”

I fall silent and look over the Sanctuary. People go about their days. Most have routines. Some just like to float around, following their gut. The place has a relaxed vibe. That’s what I want for my family.

“But I’m not used to having things go well.”

“Aren’t you, though?” Thorn asks, pushing back against my pessimism. “Yeah, when you were a kid, everything was stressful and turned ugly. But you’ve been at the Sanctuary for a long time. You’ve had your home and friends. Giselle made everything better. Then, you got Amelia. That was scary. I remember how terrified you looked when you first brought her back here. But now, she calls you ‘daddy.’ Can’t complain about that, can you?”

After Thorn and I nod at Papa Bear, Lady Bug, and Kat passing us to enter, my club brother keeps throwing wisdom at me.

“Plus, you’ve got Anna. You were scared the baby would be too big and hurt Giselle. Then, you were scared about her being too small. But she’s a healthy baby. The Texas thing has been dealt with, and Celine is a good person. I feel it. The sisters will help each other. So, if you think about it, your life has been good for a long damn time, Apex.”

Nodding, I realize when things are spelled out, I feel relaxed about my situation. Of course, my brain keeps trying to derail that happy feeling by pissing paranoia on everything. But there’s no logic behind my feelings.

“Look, I don’t mind if you come to me in the future to offer advice like Bomber did with Jester,” Thorn tells me. “I figure you’ll have the inside track with the sisters’ gossip. So,

if I'm fucking up or should do shit different, yeah, I want to hear it."

Thorn rests his hand on my shoulder as his blue eyes go sharp. "But don't ever come at me like I'm the bad guy. You've known me for too damn long to think I'd hurt Celine or your family."

I step back and frown. "Don't be so sensitive, man."

"You're doubting my ability to treat a woman with respect. That's an insult I won't take sitting down."

As if sensing we need a buffer, Ghost pokes his head out of HQ's front doors.

"Get your asses inside, so people will settle down."

"Apex thinks I might hurt Celine."

"I'm just trying to protect her."

Ghost rolls his eyes. "Well, you're both morons. Now, wipe your bitch tears and get in here."

Thorn frowns at Ghost who frowns back. I pat the blond man's shoulder and sigh.

"I'm sorry I doubted you."

"Apology accepted," says a grinning Ghost before Thorn can respond. "Now, hurry up before Giselle gets Luca involved. I don't want you two getting your asses beat by a hot chick."

Thorn finally loses his edgy glare and smiles at Ghost. "You're so whipped."

Now, Ghost is grumpy, and Thorn is smiling. *The universe has righted itself.*

I return to my table where Giselle tries to speak to me using only her eyes. Not surprisingly, I don't know what she's trying to say. I just smile and reclaim Amelia in my lap. The girl shows me her doll and tries to say the word. I repeat her attempts until she gets really close. We share a proud smile at how she's talking.

Next to Giselle, Celine peeks at Thorn. She's nursing a hardcore crush. I try to see them together in a year. Will they have a kid? A house down the street from Giselle and me? Will she mind knowing her neighbor and Giselle's buddy, Eliza, got a taste of Thorn a year ago? Or will the past not matter once they're focused on the future?

Sharing a smile with Giselle and holding my daughter in my arms, I can see beyond the next few awkward weeks. My earlier fears are gone. If the future is half as good as this last year with Giselle, everything is going to be fucking great.

ANGEL EYES



With the Texas mission behind us, Ghost and I get down to the business of making a baby. He's surprised we haven't gotten pregnant yet. Ghost looks at Giselle, Eliza, and Mabie who got knocked up quickly once they started trying. But those women are younger than me. In his mind, though, the answer is he's shooting blanks.

"My balls are defective like my brain," Ghost says that morning in bed.

"If you're so sure, let's go to a fertility specialist and have your sperm checked."

When Ghost offers a horrified snarl, I grin at his reaction.

"Or maybe we just keep trying for a while before we panic," I suggest, and his expression turns sullen rather than hostile.

For an hour, Ghost glues his body against mine and goes silent. When he gets this way, I usually find something to do on my phone and wait him out.

Eventually, Ghost looks at me and sighs. "I want you to have everything you want. If I can't give you a kid, what good am I?"

"What if I'm the problem?"

"No, you're the healthiest person I've ever known," he says and then smirks. "Except for your burger fetish."

I stroke his forehead and soak in how much he loves me. When we met, I wasn't sure if either one of us was capable of committing to this thing. We were closed off assholes.

But once Ghost and I got past our hangups, our relationship became easier. That doesn't mean our damaged psyches are fixed. But when I'm in a bad place, Ghost knows

how to help me. I've learned to do the same for him. However, often like this morning, when we're feeling bad, nothing can be done except to ride out the dark feeling.

We eventually arrive downstairs where Hope sits at a chair near a front window. She's been especially quiet since we returned from Texas. Ghost and I had planned to take a trip to Vegas to celebrate the mission's success. But with Hope in a weird mood, we've decided to hold off.

The quieter she gets, the more likely she'll spiral soon. Tank and Sweet Buns adore Hope, and she enjoys spending time with them. But if she flips out, they can't calm her. I'm the only one she'll listen to in that state.

"Do you want to come with me to the shooting range?" I ask Hope as Ghost and I walk with her to a late breakfast at HQ.

Chin against her chest and hiding behind her hair, Hope shakes her head. She's dressed in her favorite knee-length basketball shorts and matching pink top. Hope shuffles along in her sandals. Taking her hand in mine, I try to use my touch to draw her out of the past.

"I'll hang around the house while you're gone," Ghost offers after we settle at a table with our waffles. "I'm tired after dealing with those RVs."

Reaching across the table to caress his jaw, I share a smile with the man who owns my heart. He looks at me with a wary gaze. Texas is finally behind us, yet he remains certain something bad will happen.

What Ghost, Hope, and I need is a long stretch of quiet. But that part also scares me. I don't know how I'll deal with living a hunt-free life. Will I be like a junkie who's gone cold turkey?

With Hope's imminent meltdown and Ghost's wariness, I consider skipping the shooting range. Will hiding at home help Hope or just prolong the inevitable?

I decide to stick to my plans. Hope might need to melt down occasionally to get the fear and anger out of her system.

I used to get tense when I went too long without a hunt. After I killed a piece of shit, I'd settle down for a while.

I soon arrive at the shooting range, where the other women members are already set up. The training area was top notch when I arrived, but the Born Villains invested more money to make it even more challenging. I figure I might become a trainer for the club now that my vigilante days are over.

Climbing off my motorcycle, I walk over to the other women who are mostly bullshitting rather than focused on target practice. Aqua is currently explaining about Jelly Bean's false labor. I stand nearby, looking over my gun and fighting the baby fever raging inside me.

Soon, the topic changes to Ominous hooking up with one of the younger guys. Now, he's following her around.

"I can't deal with a stalker," she says and grins at her daughter. "At least, not one I'm not allowed shoot."

Dire suggests, "Be less awesome in bed."

"If only I could," Ominous replies with complete earnestness.

Dire rolls her eyes at her mother's comment, while Rave and Riot clearly whisper about Ominous. Having nothing to contribute to the conversation, I remain silent. That's how I've always been. Though I've warmed up over the last year, I'll never be a chatty person.

The women stop talking about Ominous's sex life long enough for Sister Sass to ask, "What are your thoughts on a hairless beaver?"

Frowning, I ask, "Are we speaking in biker code?"

"No, I'm wondering if I should wax my bang-hole."

"Why?" Dire whines and adjusts the crotch of her jeans. "Have you officially damaged your brain-hole?"

Sister Sass shrugs and seems a little nervous to fess up. The others frown at her shyness.

“Jester wants to go down on me,” she announces like she’s admitting to a crime after an extended interrogation.

“He’s got solid technique,” Ominous says. “He rarely does it, so you know you’re special.”

“Why did he do you?”

“It was my birthday,” she says and shrugs. “It was twenty years ago.”

“So, his technique might not be great anymore,” Dire replies.

“I didn’t say great. I said solid,” Ominous clarifies. “And I would guess he might not be solid anymore. However, I bet he’ll bring his best work to winning over his much younger girlfriend.”

“If Jester isn’t great at oral, who is?” Rave asks. “Just curious.”

“Penthouse and Smoke are good. Blunt is very good. But Neon is the best at the Sanctuary. However, I never sampled your dad,” she tells Sister Sass. “Betty Boop nailed him down quick.”

“You poor thing,” Sister Sass replies. “I heard he’s spectacular.”

“Heard that, huh?”

“Well, I heard *something* through a wall, so I might be mistaking what was happening.”

Everyone enjoys a good chuckle at the thought of Sister Sass listening to her parents porking back in the day.

“But what about the waxed beaver?” she asks when they stop laughing at her.

“No,” Dire insists. “Just no.”

Aqua shrugs. “I do it for my lady’s pleasure.”

“I do it because I’m genetically part-bear,” Rave explains and nudges her sister. “This one just lets her beast run free.”

Riot smirks at her sister’s comment and looks to Ominous.

“I did it when I was young and insecure,” Ominous explains, winning chuckles from us at the thought of her suffering from self-doubt. “But at some point, I just stopped caring. I think it’s when I realized I was attractive enough to get quality dick without me needing to put in any effort.”

Sister Sass frowns before shaking her head. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Is this his suggestion or did you come up with the bullshit on your own?” Dire asks, eyeballing Sister Sass’s crotch.

“It’s my idea.”

Everyone falls silent, and I notice Sister Sass getting antsy.

“I’ve been waxing since high school,” I offer, finally finding my voice. “It kept the area more comfortable for when I was playing volleyball or training. Later, it was a habit. I don’t mind it. Probably don’t need to do it. But it’s not a huge deal.”

Dire reaches over and pokes Sister Sass in the belly. “Don’t waste your time. Jester doesn’t care. Just flash your hairy beaver and let him deal.”

“I don’t know.”

Fighting the urge to bite my tongue again, I decide to be straight with Sister Sass. “I think you should wax,” I say, and everyone focuses on me. “You’ll feel different with it bare.”

“Why does it matter?” Dire asks, wholly set against the waxing idea.

With their gazes on me, I nearly stick to silence. I don’t like sharing my private thoughts with people. But I also like how they’re so close. I want to be comfortable with them in the same way, so I fight my natural need to keep my mouth shut.

“Ghost and I struggled with intimacy when we first met. He always held back. People at the Sanctuary love their routines. Though it’s nice to know what’ll happen next, those routines make them afraid to try new stuff. When Ghost and I went on that job to kill Hope’s dad, we stayed at a hotel. He

was outside his comfort zone and routine. Changing things gave us the strength to push ourselves. I think waxing might do the same for you.”

Sister Sass hears what she needs and offers me a smile. I file away this moment for the next time I want to keep my mouth shut. My ideas aren't better left unsaid. People I care about want to know what I'm thinking.

We spend the next half hour working with various guns. Dire and Sister Sass aren't comfortable with the rifles' recoils. I suggest the best way for them to get over it is to fire the weapons often until they stop flinching so much.

The first time my phone chimes, I nearly ignore it. Then, I remember Hope's earlier behavior. Once I see Ghost's text, I tell the women, “Hope's in the wind.”

“Need help?”

At first, I think to say no. I'm still wary of trusting people. The only reason I worked comfortably with my Texas team was because we trained every few days for months. But I'm part of a larger group now, and trust has been earned by these women.

“Sure. She knows all of you,” I say as I stash my weapons in my motorcycle's pack.

Within five minutes of getting the call from Ghost, I've reached the wooded area not far from our house.

“I took a piss and came back to find her gone,” he snarls, angry with himself. “Clutch texted to say he saw her head into the woods.”

“It's okay,” I say, stroking his jaw. “She's been tightly wound since we got back from Texas. I brought help to find her.”

Ghost frowns at the women climbing off their motorcycles. He always takes Hope's meltdowns personally, as if nothing bad would ever happen if he were a better man.

The women bikers, Ghost, and I meet up with Blunt standing at the edge of the woods. His golden-brown hair is

messy from the wind. He seems out of it, but that's just how he is at all times. Well, I did catch him smiling at his old lady and kid once.

Today, though, he's wearing a blank expression on his handsome face. "Clutch and Neon followed her into the woods and are sticking close. She keeps spotting them and running again. Should I call for more people to help round her up?"

"We've got this," Ghost says and enters the woods.

Blunt and Ominous stay put in case Hope circles back. The other women, Ghost, and I fan out in the woods.

"Call me if you find her," I tell the women while texting Neon and Clutch to ask if they still have eyes on Hope.

The first time we catch up to her, she notices Ghost first and starts running. He grunts at how she still views him as a threat.

"She's running on autopilot now," I say and pat his back before I take off running after her.

During the weeks she was kept at the Dirty Princes' compound, Hope was beaten, raped, starved, and kept underground. Her body was so thin and fragile when we found her. A year later, she's put on some weight yet remains weak. That's why she keeps stopping to catch her breath. She'll likely pass out soon if she doesn't rest and get some water.

Hope doesn't look back but must hear my footsteps because she changes directions. I keep my pace steady, gaining on her as she circles back toward the road.

"No," she says in a rough, thirsty voice as she spots Clutch ahead.

Stopping too fast, she tumbles to the ground. Hope whimpers at the scratches on her hands and bare knees. I hear the panic in her voice as she crawls away from him.

"I'm here," I say, wrapping my body around hers so she won't run.

Hope's panicked demeanor instantly shifts. Rather than fighting to break free, she clings to me.

“I had to run,” she whimpers, catching her breath as I hold her. “I had to get help.”

“I know. It’s good to run. But we’re okay now. Those assholes who hurt us are dead. We’re okay now.”

Hope tenses at the sight of the nearby bikers. I use my shirt to wipe her sweaty face.

“These guys are our friends. You know Clutch, right? And there’s Blunt with Ghost. And you’ve seen Dire at our house. You know all of them. They live at the Sanctuary with us.”

As Hope stares dazed at me, her hands go to her crotch, and she whimpers, “They burned me.”

Hope breaks into pained sobs. She’s only nineteen, and her mind is damaged in so many ways. Not only from the trauma. The abuse seems to have left her stunted in a lot of ways, seeming childlike and easily confused.

I don’t know what Hope was like before her father sold her to those sex traffickers. She might have been a wild teenager. Or a shy young woman afraid of her own shadow. Whoever she was before is gone. This new Hope is like a kid trapped in a woman’s body.

Cradling her, I promise, “They’re dead now.”

“They hurt you,” she says and grips my arm. “I heard them beating you. You were screaming. I heard your bones breaking. I thought you were dead.”

Last year, I made the decision to let Hope believe I was the woman kept with her in that underground dungeon. She blames herself for running and getting the woman killed. I could try to explain who I really am and how staying put doesn’t always end any better. After all, I didn’t bail on my sister, thinking it would save us. Instead, she died, and I live with survivor’s guilt.

I suspect a part of Hope knows I’m not that woman. But she’s freed of her guilt by weaving memories of the woman who comforted her in the dungeon with the woman who comforted her at the Sanctuary. That’s why I’ve chosen to go along with the lie.

“They hurt us both, but we survived,” I tell her. “We’re at the Sanctuary now. We live with Ghost. Do you remember?”

Hope wipes her eyes and nods. “I have a cat.”

“Yes.”

“I won’t be allowed to stay here,” she says and begins panicking again. “My dad is coming for me.”

“No.”

“He’s going to make me go back there.”

“I’ll never let that happen,” I say, holding her still so she doesn’t run. “Neither will Ghost. The Sanctuary is your home, and your dad is a loser. He can’t fight the Born Villains. There are too many powerful people who will protect you.”

Believing my words, Hope rests her cheek against my chest and goes limp. “I had to run. I wasn’t leaving you. I just needed to get help.”

“I know. You were smart to run. But we don’t need to be scared anymore.”

Hope studies the bikers nearby. They won’t go back to their schedules until she’s safely at home. I suspect Hope might need to be carried back to the house after exhausting herself.

“Blunt is having a baby with Care Bear,” Hope says, dragging herself back to the present. “Clutch doesn’t like talking.”

“That’s right. You know them.”

“Where am I going now?” she asks, seeming confused again.

My fingers brush across her forehead, drawing her gaze to me. “We’re going to our new house. You can take a shower in your bathroom and cool off. CC will want cuddles. Ghost and I will stay home today to make sure you don’t get scared.”

“Luca,” she says as her hazel eyes sharpen. “You keep leaving.”

“I had bad guys to kill, but I’m done with that now. I’m going to stay home. Do you remember us talking about that?”

Hope stares at me for a minute before finally nodding. “You’re trying to make a baby.”

Seeming more alert now, Hope tries to stand, but her legs won’t hold her up. I lift her to her feet and gesture for Ghost to approach. He moves soundlessly through the brush.

“Can Ghost carry you?”

“I’m so tired.”

“You ran for a long time, but it’s time to rest.”

Hope tenses when Ghost takes her into his arms. She stares at him like he’s a stranger before exhaling deeply and relaxing. We walk back to the road. The others follow behind. Soon, they ride away while we take our time getting back to the house.

Ghost wears a dark frown for the entire walk. He doesn’t lose it while Hope showers. Or even after she’s sitting on the couch with her cat and I apply ointment to her scratches.

Finally, after she’s settled, I drag him into the shower to clean off and calm down.

“She’s ruined,” Ghost mumbles under the water. “She’ll never be okay. There’s no therapy in the world to fix her. She’ll never get someone like you to love.”

“You don’t know that,” I remind him as I slide my wet body against his. “You and I were alone for a long time before we found each other. Hope might be my age before she meets the perfect guy. You can’t assume the worst.”

“I can and always will.”

Despite his snarly words, I know Ghost understands how he wasn’t ready for me long ago. I don’t think I could have let him close when I was in my twenties. We were too fucked up to love each other like we do now.

And Hope’s only had therapy for a year. She’s also moved around a lot since arriving at the Sanctuary—first staying at

the Stockade before moving to Ghost's townhome and now our house. It's way too soon to know what she might enjoy one day.

"Even if she never finds romantic love, Hope can be happy," I promise him. "But I think our trip to Vegas will need to wait for a while."

Ghost doesn't want to settle down. Like Hope, he's been agitated since we got back. He wants to lose his shit, storm off, and push people away. However, he also wants to protect Hope and me. That's why he finishes the shower and gets us back downstairs.

I settle in between them on the couch and grab for the remote. Ghost wraps an arm around my shoulders and tussles Hope's hair. She gives him a weak smile. The cat purrs louder at the presence of his other humans.

I find a comedy—There's Something About Mary—to watch. Hope smiles as soon as she sees Ben Stiller with braces. Ghost fights the urge to laugh. Once the main character gets his dick stuck in his zipper, his resolve cracks.

With our minds on something lighthearted, I message the friends who came to the rescue today. After spending most of my life feeling alone or insecure about my relationships, I've finally found a home where I can lower my guard and ask for help.

JESTER



My first week of freedom is spent bouncing back and forth between my townhome and Talon's cottage. I prefer the second one. My place is filled with memories of my dead son and the women I've fucked over the years. I don't want to think about the past. When my mind is set on looking back, I feel too old to try anything new.

At the cottage, I only see Talon. Not the little girl I mostly ignored or the teenager lusting over me or the young woman on life support. I see the woman she became while I was gone. That Talon is worth getting wound up over enough to push myself to try new things.

I've come to accept how Bomber overestimated how willing his sister was to put out. We pass the one-week mark without Talon spreading for me. She won't even walk around naked, even though I strut around bare assed.

However, Talon does walk around in her lady boxers and thin tank tops. When I see her bend over, I'm prone to nibbling her exposed ass cheek. Talon doesn't flip out, even though she looks at me like I'm nuts.

The first few times I cup her tits and go in for a kiss, I taste only arctic cold. When I don't push for fucking, she quickly settles her britches and has fun. She seems particularly surprised by how much her nipples like my attention. I realize then how Talon isn't a particularly sexual chick. This explains why she never needs to rub one out when we're left unsatisfied.

With all our PG-13 rated fun, I haven't jacked off this much since I was a young teen. Talon gets me so damn wound up.

"Rate my breasts," she says one night and yanks off her tank top to expose her B-cup-sized tits. Talon straddles my lap

and stares into my eyes. “I want the truth.”

“They’re fantastic,” I murmur and cover them with my greedy hands.

Breathing unsteadily, Talon leans her head back and sighs approvingly. Suddenly, she sits up normal and narrows her eyes.

“Compare them to Ominous’s rack.”

“You’re trying to stir up shit to avoid feeling good.”

“You had her first.”

“Doesn’t having you last count for anything?”

Talon allows a little smile. “I don’t like feeling sexy,” she says as her hips buck in reaction to my knuckles against her hard nipples. “But I want you to think I’m sexy.”

“We already know you’re crazy. Why stress the details?”

“Are you only with me because Ominous wouldn’t settle down?”

Frowning, I lean closer until we’re eye to eye. “What makes you think I couldn’t get that woman to stick with me if I really tried? You’re assuming shit based on nothing. If she and I were the real deal, I would have gotten her to settle down, and she would have been happy to ride only my dick.”

“I don’t want to be your second choice because we both know you’re my only choice. I never even considered another guy.”

“You think too much,” I say and cover her lips so she’ll stop finding reasons to put her shirt on.

I enjoy quality time with her dark pink nipples. When I pluck at her flesh with my lips, she gets so horny and loud. I can feel the heat from her pussy begging for my cock’s attention. She might feel the same thing because she shuts down our fun and gets depressed.

“I’m broken,” Talon mumbles, falling to the side of the couch and covering her tits. “I used to be normal.”

“What the hell would I do with normal, Talon?” I ask, and she finally settles down enough to cuddle up against me.

I’d get irritated with her hot-and-cold shit if her fears weren’t so real. When she’s panicking, I feel like we’re genuinely under attack.

And when she looks at me full of affection, I never doubt this woman loves me. So, rather than complain, I give my dick relief and remind myself to be patient.

Not that my lovesick crap keeps the woman from driving me nuts. Like today, when she blows me off for lunch after her time at the shooting range with the chick bikers. No explanation about her change in plans. I think she likes making me wonder and worry.

I end up wandering over to Papa Bear’s house, where I find his youngest daughter outside with the family’s Hovawart dogs. Katana’s gaze finds me as she brushes the nearest animal. She’s wearing a bouncy skirt and a shirt with that Paris tower on it.

After explaining how her mom and dad went to check on a girl named Hope, she asks, “Are you going to be Road Captain now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does Blunt do a good job?” Katana asks, and her pushiness reminds me of Talon.

“Seems that way. The younger guys know him, not me. Some of those young fucks never even met me until last week.”

“You should quit.” Narrowing my eyes, I look at the little girl for a bit before she glances over her shoulder and smiles at me. “No one wants you to be Road Captain anymore,” she adds, just in case her first words didn’t shove the knife in deep enough.

“You hear people saying that?”

“No, but it’s just how things are. Most of the founders gave up their ranks already.”

“Flagg hasn’t.”

“He has something to prove.”

“How do you figure?”

“His twin brother was evil and went against my dad. People look at Flagg and see Kraken. Everyone knows that.”

“Do they, now?”

“Yeah, but you don’t have anything to prove. No one talks about you being anyone else. You’re just you.”

“That’s true.”

“Then, how come you want to be Road Captain instead of giving power to the next generation?”

I eye the kid, knowing she heard this shit from someone. Talon is always whining about how her niece—the ballbusting brunette one—copies things she hears from other people. I’m wondering if the same thing is true for Katana.

“Giving up my rank feels like I’m saying my time is over.”

“It is. You should do what the other founders do.”

“And what’s that?”

“Other stuff. Tank is always mowing the Sanctuary. Some guys are mentors to the younger guys. Some of the founders just sit around and complain about everyone else. They seem happy.”

“Yeah, but they’re older than I am.”

“You also have Sister Sass. I heard you might put a baby inside her. That’s going to be a lot of work.”

“Your dad raised kids while running the club.”

“I don’t mean the baby will be hard. Taking care of Sister Sass is hard. She isn’t just one person. Sometimes, she’s really wild and confident and bossy. Other times, she’s sad and scared. I don’t really like the second one. But I also don’t like when she’s bossy.”

“So, I should quit being Road Captain and take care of your sister?”

“But you’re not Road Captain,” Katana says, still brushing the dog as if our conversation isn’t something she needs to fully focus on. “Blunt is. If you quit, nothing changes.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“How come?”

“The Road Captain rank was one of the few things I felt proud over. Imagine you’ve been the little sister for a long time, and that’s who everyone thinks of you as. But then, a new baby comes along, and you’re not the little sister anymore. Someone else has your spot now. It feels like you’ve been replaced.”

Katana stops brushing the dog and frowns at me. “I didn’t like when Nadia came to live with us. I was used to being the only daughter my mom could hug and spend time with.”

“How did you get over that feeling?”

“Sister Sass made me go out with Nadia. I got used to my sister and didn’t feel replaced.”

“So should I spend time with Blunt?”

“Sure. He’s nice. I didn’t know he was Clark’s dad for a long time. But he is, and he likes holding his son. That’s good, right?”

“Yeah. I remember Papa Bear holding you all the time.”

When Katana offers me a bright smile, I find myself imagining having a girl. I figure since I want a boy so much, I’ll get a girl instead. That’s why I’m preparing myself for that inevitability.

Over the last few days, I’ve started studying Talon’s nieces and Katana. I can’t really wrap my head around skirts and dolls. But I know a daughter would give me the same feeling in my heart as Lando did. Because I didn’t love him for being a little boy. It was all the goofy kid stuff. And his smile when I made him happy. Or how he came to me to help him with little things, like the time his socks were on upside down. All kids—both boys and girls—act that way. I’m sure I’ll find a way to handle a daughter.

Just like I can handle not being Road Captain. After Lady Bug returns to the house and I head over to HQ, I see a group of the younger guys palling around at a table. I consider sitting with them, getting to know their stories, and taking on the role of Road Captain.

Or I can go sit with the founders and feel like myself. I've been avoiding them a lot. My focus has remained on Talon, but she ditched me today. I don't even see her hanging around her girlfriends or father.

Grabbing three chili dogs, I settle my ass at a table with the founders. They stop talking, eyeball me for a full fucking minute, and then speak again. I listen in while they discuss everything from kids to motorcycles before shifting to how the new old ladies are forming their own clique.

Eventually, the conversation turns to the past. Their reminiscing gets me chuckling. But also has me feeling like an old man as I spot Talon enter HQ. She wasn't even born during some of these stories.

When her gaze finds me, Talon offers a sexy smile that reminds me how she's all grown up now. Gesturing for me to join her at the door, she seems nervous. I consider leaving her to stew after she ditched me earlier. Of course, the one who'd suffer the most with that plan is me.

"Where were you?" I grumble as I walk over to her at HQ's front door.

"I got you a surprise."

"I don't want flowers."

"No, not flowers, but it is landscaping related." Frowning, I let her tug me downward so she can whisper in my ear, "I got all smooth in the bang-hole territory."

"Smooth?" I ask, thinking she's speaking in code.

Talon tilts her head so we're eye to eye as she whispers, "I waxed my pussy."

"To help with that itchy crotch problem you have?" I taunt, assuming she's fucking with me.

Talon snickers before her gaze goes horny and inviting. “I’m really tender down there now. I bet if you were super careful, we could have a little oral fun.”

I stare into her dark eyes and realize her pussy really is waxed. That’s probably why she’s standing a little awkward.

“This is the best gift anyone’s ever gotten me,” I say and lift her up on my shoulder.

Walking out, I hear chuckles at our behavior. I’m sure Talon and I make a curious sight. She’s a club kid all grown up. And I’m, well, I’m that asshole most of them thought would be dead long before forty. Now, we’re acting goofy.

Despite my romantic intentions, I learn really quick how Talon hates being carried. She makes threats, falls limp, and claims she will not share her waxed beaver with me.

“I worried you wouldn’t walk fast enough to my townhouse,” I explain when she stops bitching.

“You’re going to throw out your back and be no fun in bed.”

“Don’t over promise, Talon,” I say and smack her ass resting next to my head. “You’re just giving me a taste. No full penetration, right?”

“Damn straight,” she grumbles, sounding full of lady wrath, yet I bet she’s grinning at how trained I’ve become about boundaries.

Once we’re in my place, I rest her near the couch. Talon quickly pops the button on her jeans.

“It’s really tender,” she warns while tugging down her jeans and kicking off her boots.

“Oh, I bet it is.”

As Talon stands in her panties and tank top, I see her hesitating.

“Why did you do this?” I ask and tug off my T-shirt and remove my jeans and boots. When I’m standing in my boxers,

I study her wary gaze. “I’ve seen your pussy, and it made my dick rock hard. No waxing necessary.”

“I want you to find me sexy.”

“I do.”

“Then, I want to find myself sexy.”

“Should I leave you alone with your waxed pussy then?”

Talon’s pouty expression shifts into a smirk. “I wouldn’t know what to do to make it happy. An ice pack, maybe.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Talon’s gaze washes over me. No woman’s ever eye-fucked me with Talon’s intensity. She might not be sexual, but she wants to enjoy my body.

Her tank top comes off, revealing her simple white bra. Soon, I’m looking at her bare tits. The nipples aren’t hard. She isn’t aroused in the least. But her gaze soaks up my unclothed flesh. I catch her glancing at my dick before she steps onto the couch and sits on the back. Her panties slide down to her knees before she pauses and frowns at me.

“Don’t be rough. Waxing hurt way more than I expected.”

“Stop bossing me around, Talon.”

Her gaze goes sullen before she regains her confidence. She pushes her panties past her knees and then closes her legs to block my view.

“Luca said she waxes all the time. Made it seem easy. I guess she just has a tougher pussy,” Talon mumbles, talking herself out of having fun. “I guess I shouldn’t get you thinking of other women naked.”

Giving my hard dick a squeeze, I frown at Talon. “You really are fucking crazy if you think I’m picturing any woman except you right now.”

Talon looks down at her tits and runs her fingers over her nipples. When they harden, she seems a little more self-assured. I wonder if she was this frigid before the rape. I

suspect she was. The rape just gave her an excuse not to push herself.

Her gaze lifts to mine, and she offers a beautiful smile. “After the first strip of hair, I was ready to give up. But then, I thought of you. Like one of those mental exercises where you picture somewhere comforting to get through pain. The rest of the waxing didn’t hurt as much when I imagined us together. You’re my safe space.”

I step closer, pause to make sure she doesn’t get rattled, and then kneel on the couch. My lips taste hers, enjoying how open she can be when she gets out of her way.

Still kissing her, I brush my fingers across her tender pussy. It must feel good because she stares at me through half-open lids when our kiss ends.

My lips suck at her throat, enjoying her soft skin and familiar scent. Talon’s fingers rest on my shoulders, yet she doesn’t take what she wants. I think she’s afraid to get herself overstimulated.

We both move slowly. I nuzzle my face between her tits, inhaling her scent before my tongue licks each nipple. Talon shudders. Her gaze seems stoned. Her lips are parted as she breathes deeper, causing her tits to rise and fall faster.

Worried my lips near her scar might cause her to panic, I skip teasing Talon’s belly. I want her mind as far from the past as possible.

Talon’s pussy is wet when I blow on the pink flesh. She gasps before sighing. Her fingers on my shoulders are soft. Zero panic. I want to dive into the flesh before me, but fear if I get her too hot and heavy, she’ll fly off into a panic attack.

With her pussy spread for me, I give her clit a caress. Talon swallows hard. Her fingers slide across my back. She’s still calm.

My tongue presses against her clit, making a circle before dipping between her wet folds. Talon sways, seeming lost in a pleasure she never offers herself.

Kissing her flesh, I drink down the hot juices offered. My balls throb with arousal. Her scent is making me lightheaded. Her moans echo in my head. I fuck her gently with my tongue.

I consider the day she panicked. Everything I did then, I try to avoid today.

Talon says my name, sounding a little unsure. Her fingers disappear into my hair. She breathes easier. Talon knows where she is and who is making her body crazy.

Her quick breathing hints at an approaching orgasm. I realize she'll go limp when the pleasure hits her. And she's sitting on the back of the couch with nothing to keep her upright.

My arm reaches around her hips, holding her steady. I lick at her clit, loving how much it swells under my touch. Talon's close. I feel her body flying toward the edge, ready to topple into an orgasm.

Talon isn't expressive in her heat. She doesn't say my name over and over or throw her head back and beg for more. Her big mouth remains quiet as I push her past what she's ever known.

Talon gasps when the orgasm hits her. She seems startled, making me wonder if she's ever masturbated. She seems to have no idea what the buildup was leading up to.

Now, she's awash in heat and pleasure. I keep her from dropping off the back of the couch. I suck down her juices and ride her orgasm until she's limp and shivering.

My gaze lifts to find her watching me between her legs. She's got a silly, startled look.

"I get it now," she says and cups my jaw. "It makes more sense."

Understanding her meaning, I kiss her lips. Talon sucks at my tongue before nuzzling my wet beard.

"You love me," she says and presses her forehead against mine. "That's why you were so gentle."

“No one’s ever made me feel like you do. I’m going to push myself to be the best man I can.”

Talon offers me an unguarded smile. I feel like I’m seeing a new side of her. She usually seems ready to put up her walls and push me away. Even when we watch movies, she acts ready for something bad to happen.

Right now, in the afterglow of what might be her first orgasm, Talon more than loves me. *She finally trusts me.*

“Are you close?” Talon asks, reaching down to stroke my boxers. “I could suck you off if you were nearly there. Is that something we can do?”

Talon’s breathing too fast, working herself toward panic rather than pleasure. I press my lips against hers and free my dick from my boxers. My hand strokes tight from the shaft to the head. I’m surprised I haven’t jizzed already considering how hot her flavor got me.

“I’m close,” I say as our lips part. “I can finish myself if you can’t handle it.”

Talon’s gaze remains relaxed. She doesn’t seem worried or edgy as if needing to prove herself. She remains open and trusting.

Sliding down so her bare ass is on my couch seat, Talon licks her lips, only an inch from my cock. Her fingers wrap around my flesh, gentle yet commanding.

Talon licks the wet tip of my cock, tasting my salty jizz. Her gaze flashes up toward me watching her. She smiles full of trust and opens her mouth wider.

My fucking toes curl when she takes my long-unloved cock into her wet mouth. Talon has no technique. She holds the base with both hands like my dick might break loose from her grip. Her lips take several drags on my cock before she licks jizz from the head. Then, she pops my cock back in her mouth. There’s no rhythm or style, yet I come so hard I see stars.

I grip the back of the couch to steady myself. My free hand strokes her head, wanting Talon to stay with me right here.

The past has no hold over her. We're right here in my place at the Sanctuary. She's a grown woman, making her man crazy. Nothing bad is going to happen.

My careful touch pays off. Talon sucks me dry without whipping herself into a panic. She licks her lips when I pop my dick free and settle next to her.

"I get it," she says again.

Admiring her relaxed smile, I feel different. The townhouse is no longer a reminder of the past. This is now the place where I first tasted Talon's pussy. It's also where she learned to trust me, and I got to show her how good we can make each other feel.

SISTER SASS



I never knew my body was capable of feeling so good. Jester and I have fooled around plenty, and his touch is often sexy as hell. But I didn't grasp how much pleasure was possible.

Now I know, and I want more.

Jester stretches out against the arm of the couch and watches me. He wears a slightly cocky smile. His beard is still shiny from my juices. I can taste his cum on my tongue.

My gaze takes in the sight of Jester's long, muscled body stretched out. His feet rest on the table. His dick, soft yet impressive against his thigh, calls to me.

I drape myself across him. Jester reaches over me and cups my ass so I'm pinned against his body. I kiss his lips before sucking at his throat.

"I'm not on birth control."

"Neither am I."

"I have condoms."

Jester goes still, considering the right answer. "You know what I want. If you're not sure what you want, those condoms might come in handy."

I stare into Jester's eyes and consider my options. If I want a kid, now is the right time. I might not feel ready, but Jester's in his forties. I don't have the luxury of giving us another decade to remain childless.

Bracing myself on the arm of the couch, I glance between us to see his cock is no longer soft. I straddle him and ask, "Will you do that thing with your thumbs on my nipples?"

"You want to do this down here?" Jester asks and glances up at the loft bedroom.

“I don’t care.”

“Then, let’s go to the bed where we have more room to move.”

Climbing off him, I clench my pussy and enjoy the hot tingles let over from my earlier orgasm.

“I don’t want you to get scared,” he says, standing up and seeming unsure. “Does the couch feel safer?”

“I’m okay,” I reply, making no promises. “It’s not the location. It’s you and me. I want you, and I’ll try to keep out of my own way.”

Jester gestures for me to head up the stairs first. I tell myself he just wants to see my ass, but I also think he worries I might run if my escape route is open.

I get to the top of the stairs and watch him approach. A swirling heat fills my gut. I’m suddenly intimidated. His cock is thick and hard.

Jester doesn’t head to the bed. He stops where I’m stuck. His thumbs stroke my nipples, making me shiver.

“What’s the plan?” he asks. “I don’t expect anything for two more weeks.”

Grinning at his comment, I stroke his dick. “I waited seven years for you. I’m sorry I wasn’t ready for you as soon as you walked free. But I think I am now.”

“We’ll see,” he replies and cocks an eyebrow.

“What’s the best position for you to be able to do what you’re doing now?” I ask and glance at his thumbs making wonderful circles around my nipples.

“You on all fours would allow my hands freedom, but I want you to see me,” he says before adding, “For my ego’s sake, not because you’re nuts.”

“So what are our other options?”

“Missionary’s no good,” he says and gives my nipples tender pinches. “You’ll need to ride up top.”

“I’ve ridden plenty of powerful beasts. One more shouldn’t faze me.”

Jester crawls on the bed and drops onto his back. He gives me a lazy smile. Despite his hard cock, he’s in no hurry. I join him on the bed and kiss his lips. His hands return to my nipples, making my pussy clench with approval.

With no windows up here, the space is dimly lit. I used to hang out in Jester’s bedroom, just to feel closer to him. Sometimes, I’d cry over how I was the reason he got locked up. Other times, when I was tense, I would nap in here and fantasize about the future.

I no longer have to enjoy Jester in my head. He’s right here under me.

I admire his ruggedly handsome looks. His eyes are deceptively relaxed. He knows how crazy he makes me, both in good ways and bad ones. His touch is careful, afraid to send me running.

My hands rest against his powerful chest as I lower my hips. I don’t take him slowly, inch by inch. Once he lines up his cock with my pussy, I take him all in one thrust. Just like the first time I rode my new hog, I climb on Jester and throw aside caution.

His cock stretches me, claiming my hot, wet flesh. I take him deep and begin to move my hips. The fevered sensations dig deep into my every nerve, twisting me up so I can’t remember anything outside this room with Jester.

Riding him hard and fast, I can’t believe how incredible he feels inside me. I should have known. The man’s been exciting me for years. I didn’t fall for him based on some sweet thing he did. I just saw him shirtless and sweaty. He was the epitome of male beauty, and I wanted him to be mine.

Jester’s gray-blue eyes watch me like I’m a fascinating yet dangerous creature. His fingers cup my bouncing tits, squeezing my nipples between his knuckles.

I’m so overheated. I can’t catch my breath. I want to find relief again like with Jester’s tongue. I need to make him come

using my pussy like I did with my mouth. I want the power and closeness we just shared. *And I want it again and again.*

My orgasm feels like I'm touching heaven. My pussy clenches wildly. Jester loses his fake relaxed expression and groans with approval. I roll my hips, wanting to claim every bit of pleasure. Jester says my name in a pained way.

Hesitating, I worry my frenzied fucking is hurting him. Jester smiles at my concern as his hands curve around my hips and guide me to move again. Leaning down, I find reassurance in his lips. Jester's hands slide up my back. His arms trap me against him.

I don't panic or freeze in reaction to his hunger. Jester's been so careful about spooking me. Yet, his body has gone a long time without fucking. I suspect he isn't normally a gentle lover. Though he wants to remain in control of himself, long pent-up lust drives him now.

Jester effortlessly lifts himself up, adjusting my body still connected to his. He flips us over, so he's on top. His hips take control, moving fast, drilling his cock inside.

Rather than feel startled or afraid, I'm relieved to see the Jester I know. As much as I love the sweeter side of him, he's a complex man. *Both a dotting dad and an indifferent one. A good friend and a loner. The silent type and a roaring beast.*

And with me, he's a tenderhearted boyfriend and a take charge badass.

My body turns to hot liquid under him. I reach for his shoulders, holding as he fucks me like a wild man.

I'm startled by my orgasm. My pussy is still so hot and wet from the last one. I don't even feel the buildup. Suddenly, I'm hit with a powerful release. I arch my back and moan loudly.

My pussy sucks wildly on his cock, bringing him to his own relief. My name sounds unhinged in his heated voice. I'm both his enemy and his salvation. I feel the same way, bouncing between loving this man and fearing how insane he makes me.

I can only hold on as he pumps into me, releasing years of desire. His lips find mine. I breathe with him. We're lost in the pleasure.

JESTER



I lose control of myself. I've never fucked a woman I loved before. I figured it was like fucking anyone. But I wasn't ready for this primal need. Something breaks inside me. I'm ripped apart by fear and hope.

A part of me wants her to stop what's happening and let us return to our safe holding pattern.

There's nothing safe about this need I feel. Talon owns me completely now. We no longer have any barriers between us. I haven't felt this fragile since I was a kid with pointless affection for my shitty parents.

Talon seems shellshocked after our first fuck. I lost all that soft stuff once she came on my dick. The heat mixed with my love and made me nuts. I don't know what's happening. I'm not a smart man when it comes to feelings. I just do what feels right.

And right now, fucking Talon into submission feels right. She's mine. I never want any other man to have a chance to win her heart.

My brain tries to be reasonable. Talon waited for me. She doesn't want anyone else. I have nothing to prove.

But that rational crap feels wrong. Talon waited because she had an idea in her head about me. The reality of who and what I am is bound to send her running. That's why I need to mark her in some way to keep her with me.

"My pussy feels weird," Talon says, resting next to me on the bed.

I remain on my back, staring at the ceiling and struggling to figure out how to be what Talon needs.

"Weird, how?"

“Like when I used to ride horses and I bounced too much. My bang-hole is battered. The waxing also left the skin sensitive.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You should show pity,” she says, rolling on her side and kissing my shoulder. “My bang-hole has gone through some wild shit today.”

I cup her pussy and glance at her. “Are you scared?”

“No. Are you?”

“Are we still good?”

Talon offers a welcoming smile. “Yeah, Jester, we’re still good. I bet we could have more fun before dinner. Just let me get used to this feeling.”

“I can’t fuck soft.”

“You did fuck soft.”

“No, I got rough.”

“You went wild,” she says as her tender smile turns cocky. “I like how much you want me.”

Settling down, I slide my middle finger between her folds as I cup her pussy. “I feel unsure about things.”

“By things, do you mean me?”

“No, I mean the future.”

Talon loses her smile. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No. It’s just more real now.”

“What is?”

“Us being together. I think a part of me figured it might not happen. Now, I know I couldn’t survive if we don’t work.”

“I want you, Jester. You want me, right?”

“Too much.”

Talon settles down and smiles again. “We’re both in uncharted territory here. That’s good, though, right? What

we feel for each other isn't something we feel for others. It's special."

"I don't know how to protect anything special."

"I think you do."

"I let Lando die."

"No, you let him go with his stupid mom. She let him die."

"I could have been better."

"We all make mistakes. Even Papa Bear fucks up, and he tends to be right about most things."

Turning to my side to face her, I frown. "This thing feels too good for a man like me."

"That's bullshit. Why shouldn't you be happy?"

"I've never been a good man."

Talon considers my words. "I'm not a particularly amazing person. I suck a lot and get in my own way. I usually don't say the best things to people I care about. I don't think I've been supportive enough with Aqua because babies creep me out. But, even if I'm garbage, I still want to be happy with you."

"I can't see shit the way you do. When I look at you, I see a beautiful young woman with lots of options."

"No," she says and shakes her head. "You're not seeing me then. I mean, I guess I'm not a troll. I'll give you that one. But I don't have options. I want you. If you don't want me or give me up to punish yourself, I'm going to be alone."

"I'm not giving you up."

"Good. Then, what the hell are we talking about?"

"I'm working through some things up here," I say and tap my head. "Trying to make sense of how I feel."

Talon studies me for a minute before resting her hand on my chest. "I had three fears when it came to you and me."

"Continue," I say when she remains silent.

“One was that you’d boss me around and steal my power. But I underestimated how sweet you could be and how bitchy I can be. That’s not a worry anymore.”

“So, what are the other two fears?”

“I wasn’t sure I wanted to be a mom. I thought I’d get weak or lose my edge. Sure, I saw Ominous be a mom. And Betty Boop wasn’t a pushover. But I thought having a little person depend on me would be suffocating.”

“And you still fear that?”

“Not if we do it together. If you croaked tomorrow, I wouldn’t have a kid. I can’t handle that alone, and no other man would replace you. So, I’d just stay single like Dire. But you are here, and I think we make a good team. I can handle being a mom to one kid. Maybe two if it’s twins. But I don’t think I want more. It’s exhausting just watching Jules with her four.”

“I don’t want more than one kid. I think I’ll be a paranoid dad after what happened to Lando. Two kids seem like a bigger chance of me fucking up.”

“Okay, so we’re agreed.”

“What’s the last fear?” I ask as her hand slides down my stomach toward my cock.

“I feared sex. I know I’ve been subtle on the topic, but I was really scared. Now, I’m over that.”

“Are you?” I ask as her fingers wrap around my cock.

“I can’t promise I won’t flip out in the future. My brain doesn’t always submit to my requests. But I feel like I’m going to love riding your cock as much as I do my motorcycle. So, yeah, that fear’s gone, too.”

My ability to speak ends as she strokes my cock. Adjusting in bed, Talon slides her fingers under my balls and gets me nice and hard.

“I want you behind me,” she says, turning around and sticking her lovely ass in the air. “I know it’s you. I’m not afraid.”

On my knees, I kiss down Talon's back. My fingers skim her old scars. My mind doesn't immediately flash to how she nearly died. Instead, I think of how strong she is to have survived.

With one hand, I slide my cock between her wet folds while my free hand teases her nipples before settling on her clit.

Talon doesn't flinch when I enter her. She never asks me to slow down, even as I pump wildly inside her hot, tight pussy. I hear her sighing at first, breathless and soft. As her orgasm nears, her voice gets throaty, louder, more insistent.

Her body soon rocks with the orgasm and my unrelenting thrusts. My fingers remain tender, seeming detached from my wild hips and demanding cock.

My balls beg to release, but I hold on longer. Talon eases down from one orgasm before quickly revving up to another. I tease her nipple at the same rhythm as her clit.

"Jester," she says, full of desire.

I take great pride in her pleasure. Talon trusts me completely. Not so long ago, my touch sent her into a panic. Now, she moves with the confidence of the Talon I knew before the rape.

Her second orgasm is too much for me. I can't deny my need any longer. Coming hard, I wrap my arms around her body to steady myself. I lean into her soft hair, inhaling the scent she loves because it reminds her of me.

Talon collapses on the bed and rests on her belly. She glances back at me and smiles.

"I was right to love you."

Settling next to her, I smile at how easily she says those words. Her walls are completely down. That's why I'm nervous to fuck up. Talon's got nothing to protect her heart except me.

We talk in bed until dinner time. I hate to leave my place or share Talon. But routine is a big deal at the Sanctuary.

Walking over to HQ, Talon has a bounce to her step. I grin at her relaxed nature. I don't usually make anyone feel happy. I've been scaring people since I was a boy. But Talon feels right at my side. We make sense in our own weird way.

As soon as we walk inside, I feel eyes on us. That's how it always is, but I still sense we're on display.

"Let me go brag before we eat," Talon says, leaning into me. "My bang-hole needs applause."

Talon heads over to her friends' table, where Aqua, Jelly Bean, Dire, and Ominous sit. She must say something about her pussy because the women all look at it before their gazes turn to me.

Ignoring their applause, I head over to Papa Bear's table, where Blunt sits with his woman and kid. He looks up at me in that dazed way he has about him.

"I'm going to have a new vest made up for me," I tell him as his woman—Care Bear—peeks at me from under her dark hair. Their boy smiles at me. He looks like his mom and wears little kid glasses. I force my face to grin back at him, even if I feel weird with all these people watching me. "One that doesn't say 'Road Captain' on it."

"Are you sure?"

"No reason to change things up. You've owned the rank all these years."

"No reason to rush. You've only been back a week or two, right?"

I feel Papa Bear watching me. They all are, even if they pretend they aren't.

"I've got my focus on other things now. This is how I want it."

Even though Blunt nods as if he gets me, I also notice he looks to Papa Bear for permission to agree.

"Jester knows his mind," Papa Bear announces to the table.

He speaks loud enough for the other tables to hear, too. I give him a little nod. I'm feeling on the spot. Though I'm never shy, I don't want to be hassled. My temper is easier to control when no one's poking me.

Talon shows up and immediately pokes my belly. I expect her to tease me about my impressive dick or win applause from this table, too. Instead, she just asks, "Where are we sitting for dinner?"

Looking into her eyes, I realize she's in a wild mood where the world feels powerless against her. My edginess fades. I like this Talon most of all.

We settle at a table in the corner, so we can talk alone.

"I want you to move into my place," I say as she digs into her chili.

"Okay. I don't have much stuff left at the cottage."

"Just like that?"

"It's been years since I realized you were what I wanted. So, no, not just like that. This has been a long time coming."

Talon doesn't really look like her dad and she never really sounds like him. But right now, she reminds me of Papa Bear. When he wanted something, he just decided to start working for it. That's how he created the Sanctuary, the Born Villains Motorcycle Club, and his family.

Now, Talon reveals the same determination in her expression and tone. She got over a major hurdle holding her back. She's no longer radiating that uncertain vibe about her. We're both in uncharted territory, and it feels great.

TWINKLE TOES



Two weeks after the Dolls arrive at the Sanctuary, we're supposed to get together at HQ for our first group therapy session. Celine doesn't want me to attend, but I think I should try to understand my past. Or at the very least, get a sense for what Celine is experiencing.

My sister has struggled with her new freedom. Celine isn't familiar with a life without rules set by someone else. The more choices she gets, the less confident she becomes.

There are only three things Celine knows for sure. One is she likes wearing warm clothes better suited for winter. Two is she craves my attention. Three is she's gaga over Thorn. Otherwise, she seems lost.

Celine has no experience with TV or movies. She doesn't know anything about kids. She's intimidated by wild women like Sister Sass or even soft-spoken women like Eliza. She acts submissive around Apex to the point where they can't be alone in the same room or she'll start crying.

That's why I push her to attend therapy, both her solo sessions and our joint ones. She is bursting with fears and hopes she can't put words to, but a professional will understand.

As Celine and I get ready for the group therapy, Apex waits for Mabie to arrive to help him with the girls. Her son is always good with Amelia. Though they're close in age, Clark is so much more verbal and advanced. Amelia always tries to talk more after they play together.

Soon, Celine and I walk to HQ. I'm dressed in shorts, T-shirt, and flip-flops while my sister wears a hoodie, sweatpants, and tennis shoes.

“I forget to call Mabie by her old-lady name,” I tell Celine who keeps seeming ready to stop walking. “Care Bear is a sweet name. I think I might introduce myself to the women today as Twinkle Toes. That way, they’ll get use to the name. The more people who call me by my old lady name, the more it’ll catch on.”

“Why not go by Giselle?”

“It’s just how things are. I’ve never heard anyone call Lady Bug anything except her old-lady name. No, I guess, her daughters call her mom. But otherwise, she’s only Lady Bug. It’s her identity at the Sanctuary.”

Celine shuffles along next to me. Our shoulders regularly brush together. Her hand remains in mine.

“If you were to marry someone at the Sanctuary, would you not want an old lady name?” I ask, hoping to focus her on something besides seeing the women at HQ.

Celine blinks rapidly. I see on her face the exact moment when she thinks of Thorn. A small smile warms her face, and she breathes differently.

“I don’t know what I’d be called.”

“Well, I’m Twinkle Toes because of the dancing. Care Bear is because she is like Papa Bear’s adopted daughter and she’s at her best when she’s caring for others. Eliza is Bo Peep because she’s got all those cats following her around.”

“How did Lady Bug get her name?”

“She thought lady bugs were good omens. She saw one when she first got here and felt like she’d be okay.”

As we near HQ, I snicker and nudge her. “I think some of the old ladies got their names because of sex stuff. I know Sweet Buns is because she has a nice butt.”

Celine shares my grin. “I don’t want a name related to my body.”

Nodding, I try to imagine what life was like in Primrose. Our only value came from our looks. Is that the real reason Celine wears such heavy clothes despite the warm weather?

“Does Apex still find you appealing, even though, um, you’re, um, you had a baby?”

Realizing she means I’m still carrying baby weight, I rub my belly. “Of course. Apex is in love with all of me. And I put on weight before I got pregnant.”

“It’s all the food,” Celine says, clearly feeling guilty over asking. “You eat at HQ three times a day. We never ate so much at home.”

“Well, that’s because we were supposed to be skinny and young and objects. Here, we can eat when we’re hungry. Women are all different at the Sanctuary. Some are really skinny. Others are really curvy. There are no rules.”

Celine stops before we enter and asks, “Do you think Thorn will see me as gross if I don’t look like I did when we met?”

“I don’t think he liked how you were dressed like a cheerleader. All that evil stuff makes him sad. He knew you weren’t yourself in Primrose. You’ve been wearing baggy clothes since you got here, but he still wants to be around you. He isn’t worried about your weight or what you wear. He just likes you.”

“Why?”

“Why do you like him?”

“He’s so beautiful,” she says and then looks around nervously like she might get in trouble.

“The Sanctuary is full of beautiful man. Apex wasn’t the only attractive man I met when I got here, but he was the only one I liked. He’s special. I don’t want anyone else touching me. Apex was always mine.”

Celine stares at me like my words make no sense to her. Finally, she gets a goofy little smile on her face.

“Thorn held me in his lap at the clinic when I got upset. I’d never had a man treat me so kindly. I want him to want me, but I feel like he can do better.”

“Your mind doesn’t belong to you yet. It’s got all those old evil rules from the Primrose people. One day, you’ll own your thoughts. Until then, you can’t believe many of them,” I say and brush her hair off her shoulders and hug her. “You aren’t the cheerleader anymore. You’re Celine, and she gets to eat when she’s hungry and wear whatever she wants.”

“I just want to be normal and pretend like the past didn’t happen.”

Considering her words, I glance into HQ. The place looks empty, but I think everyone’s already in the back meeting room.

“I’m probably not the person to say this. I don’t remember my past, so my words might sound too easy. But Apex doesn’t do well when he hides from his past. He thinks he can forget, but all that stuff is still in his heart. Since his mom died, he’s let me put a picture of his dead brother up. At first, he wanted to pretend like Crispin didn’t exist as if he could forget his pain. But it doesn’t work that way. Now he can see his brother and remember the good times they shared. It’s not easy, but I don’t think you should forget. That’s why you’re having therapy. To deal with the past and learn how to be in the present. Not just to forget.”

When Celine stares at me, I add, “But I could be wrong.”

“I’m afraid of this group therapy thing,” Celine says and frowns at HQ. “I don’t want to see the others.”

“They live here now.”

“Maybe they’ll move away.”

“Some might. But others will probably stay. The Sanctuary is a calm, safe place. It can be difficult to leave.”

“They’re crazy,” she whimpers, gripping my wrists and tugging me away. “We all were, but you’re not anymore. You shouldn’t be around them.”

Celine’s fear scares me. I don’t want to feel bad. I also have no emotional connection toward the other women like I do with my sister. I could stay away from them and live my life.

But Celine needs to face her past or she won't want to leave my house. She'll be too afraid to date Thorn or go to cooking classes or ride the horses at the ranch. Unable to face the people who remind her of her past, she'll sacrifice her second chance.

"We should go inside and sit down. What is said in there won't destroy us. Then, we'll walk back home and eat a cookie."

Tears fill Celine's eyes. "You wanted a cookie when you were little and I told you no. When you cried, I hit you. You were scared of me."

Celine's words startle me. Since I met her, I've imagined us standing together against all the evil stuff like Apex and his brother did.

"Whatever you did is okay now," I say despite how I'm confused about our relationship. "The Sanctuary offers everyone a second chance."

Wiping her eyes, Celine doesn't really believe me. Most people feel that way when they get here. Or they're like Eliza, who was so scared to blow her second chance, she barely wanted to do anything at all.

We enter a quiet HQ and walk toward the back meeting room. The other women are already sitting in the chair circle. I realize I can't remember their real names. Whenever Celine points them out to me during meals, she calls them by their "role" like Baby Doll or School Girl.

The shrink-in-training named Donatella waves us inside. The Sanctuary's regular therapist, Sharona, sits off to the side as if supervising. I also notice Dire and Rave hanging out near the other door. They're on their phones, and I realize they're security for this group therapy session.

"How is everyone settling into life here at the Sanctuary?" Donatella asks.

When the women only shrug and lower their gazes, she follows up with, "What have you found to be the most difficult element of living here?"

“We’ve left God’s grace,” says Alice in Wonderland. “We’ve embraced sin.”

“We’re going to burn,” whimpers Baby Doll before falling to her knees and clasping her hands together. “We didn’t hold steady against temptation.”

“It’s your fault!” cries Princess as she stands and points at me.

I stare at them like they’re crazy. A part of me wants to stand up for myself, but I can’t remember any of their real names. I’m not even sure I’m keeping their “characters” straight in my head.

“Let’s all remain seated,” Donatelle insists and tries to regain control of the group.

“You embraced evil and ran,” Princess accuses me. “You were sinful, and you tempted us into sin, too.”

“We’re going to burn!” Alice in Wonderland shouts and falls to her knees next to Baby Doll.

“We’ve sinned,” Cowgirl mumbles and joins the others on the ground.

Harley Quinn stands next to Princess and cries, “You did this!”

When the two women move toward me, I stand up and step away. Celine immediately acts as my shield.

“Don’t hurt her. It was my idea. I did this. I’m the bad one. Giselle doesn’t even remember what I made her do.”

With impending violence in the air, I tug Celine away from them. I’ve noticed how School Girl has joined Princess and Harley Quinn. They’re going to attack us. Celine doesn’t let me drag her away.

“I did this,” Celine tells me and scratches her face. “I’m the beast. I didn’t protect you. I’m a monster.”

Once Rave and Dire get in the middle of the circle to create peace, Princess, School Girl, and Harley Quinn immediately submit under the threat of stronger people. They

drop to the ground, mimicking the other women's bowing and chanting.

“Your fathers perverted the faith!” Donatella announces in a booming voice. “They were the ones listening to sin. They twisted the truth to keep you all caged.”

The women stop bowing and stare up at her. Celine freezes and frowns at the therapist.

“God sent help for you because He knew you were faithful and good. God is the one who punished the men who hurt you. God is why you no longer suffer. Doesn't that make more sense than believing your pain was good?”

Celine looks at me with her tear-filled eyes before she mumbles, “We were sinful.”

“You did what you were told,” Donatella replies calmly. “You obeyed your fathers, yet you suffered. Why would God want that?”

“We're born of sin.”

“So were your fathers. They did terrible things to you. That's why you wanted to leave. God sent avenging angels to save you. Now, the devil is luring you back into the darkness.”

The Dolls look at each other except for Celine who only sees me.

“I didn't protect you.”

Though my mind won't allow me to remember the past, I'm not blind to the situation. Celine and I are only a few years apart in age. She said we never had a mother. Our father wasn't around when we were little. We were trained to be obedient.

I picture Overlord's girls who are around the age Celine would have been when I was born. Those children couldn't take care of each other. Whatever sick things taught to them would be all they knew to believe. Celine was just a little girl, scared and suffering.

“I forgive you,” I say rather than explain how she isn't at fault.

I know Celine can't understand how she was innocent. She hasn't been free long enough. None of the Dolls understand how the world works. They only know the rules taught to them since they were babies. That's why freedom feels like a punishment, and their own happiness is a sin.

The Dolls remain kneeling, unsure of Donatella's words. They seem so lost without someone ordering them around. But they watch me comfort Celine, forgiving her for what she had no power to stop. My sister sobs with shame.

"You weren't allowed to eat cookies," I say, understanding why Celine hit me as a child. "You weren't allowed to have sweets. If you were bad, you got punished."

"They turned us against each other," Celine mumbles, still crying, wanting me to understand. "They made us punish each other. I took away Liza's doll when she cried."

Harley Quinn's lower lip trembles when she looks at Princess. "I told Father you were bad when you didn't want to be with that man."

Baby Doll looks to Alice in Wonderland and says, "I kicked you when you wanted to hide in my bed."

"We're bad," School Girl whimpers.

"We did what we had to do," I say and hug my sister as I look at the others. "We were just kids when they trained us. We felt guilty when we did those things because we aren't monsters. Those men were monsters. Our fathers were the bad ones."

"They made the rules," Cowgirl says and gets off the floor. "They said it was bad to cry, even when something hurt or we were scared. They were bad."

Baby Doll and Alice in Wonderland stand up and hug each other. Soon, they're all on their feet.

"I don't like picking my own food," Princess tells Donatella before sitting down. "I don't like all the choices. I don't like picking my clothes."

“We can make it so there are fewer choices,” Donatella offers. “That way, you won’t be so overwhelmed.”

Dire and Rave go back to their seats while everyone gets back to their circle positions.

“I don’t want to eat around the men,” Baby Doll admits. “I feel like they’re judging me.”

“We can work on that, too,” Donatella says and types something into her phone. “Anyone else having trouble with choices or meal time?”

The women all raise their hands. Celine doesn’t react to any of their words. She’s dug deep inside herself. I hold her against me as I listen to the women talk about the things they don’t like at the Sanctuary. Most of their complaints revolve around being in charge of themselves like with food and clothes. Other concerns are weirder like not wanting to sit on a couch.

“My cottage has no chairs,” Cowgirl explains. “I can’t sit on a couch.”

“We can get you chairs,” Donatella says, seeming relieved to have them sharing.

“What about you, Celine?” she asks when my sister remains silent through the session. “What do you want?”

“Cookies,” I answer for her. “We’re going to bake cookies today and eat them until our stomachs are full.”

My sister nearly smiles, but she’s not really here with me right now. She’s thinking about the past. While the other Dolls focus on what they don’t like about freedom, seeming delighted over being able to complain without punishment, Celine just stares into space.

Only when we’re back home and the first batch of chocolate chip cookies comes out of the oven does she break free from her waking nightmares. I see her watch Apex throw a cookie in his mouth. Amelia and Clark nibble on mini-cookies. I take a bite and hand one to Care Bear and then Celine.

After a minute of watching us eat, Celine bites into the sweet treat and digs her way out of her head. She keeps looking at us to see if we're still eating.

A lifetime of evil rules won't disappear after a little therapy and a cookie pig out. Celine has a long road ahead of her. However, today, she voiced her guilt and found a little relief.

I also realized I'm strong enough to face the past and help my fellow former Dolls. They won't understand how things work, just like I didn't. I was strong enough to run, fight back, and survive. If the Ballerina could break free and find happiness, so can they.

OVERLORD



Every Tuesday, I take Scout with me on errands. She's my little helper as I drive around. We also stop for lunch somewhere and talk about whatever's on her mind.

I haven't gotten much alone time with Anthony since he gets skittish when not playing with his friends or with Jules nearby. I usually take the boys to the park to let Anthony get used to me. When he's older, I hope we can bond better.

I get regular alone time with each of my girls. Usually, I take Evie to the horse ranch on Thursdays. She tells me long stories while the pony walks in a circle. I help her feed and care for the animal after she's finished. Evie always says "You did good, Daddy" when we're finished.

With Zoey, we spend our alone time, walking around the Sanctuary. She likes to threaten people. We also talk about her mom. Sometimes, she cries, and I have to carry her back to the house. But she no longer asks me to bring her mom back. Zoey's hit the point in her grief where she accepts her mom can only be alive in our memories.

Scout still lives with the trauma of her time at the Cahuenga compound. She watched her brothers die. I see her getting startled when too many bikers are around. She knows them and understands they're our friends, but she can't help having flashbacks to when similar-looking men hurt people she cared about.

Today, we don't talk about the painful past. She has been nervous about riding horses since she fell off a pony. Scout is prone to giving up on things that scare her. She's a lot like Jules that way.

"I fell off my motorcycle," I tell her as we sit at Bacon Haven Diner for lunch. "I was a teenager, and a bunch of people saw."

Sitting between the window and me in the booth, Scout asks, “Did you get hurt?”

“Just a little, but I was mostly embarrassed. I wanted to be cool like my dad and all the people I knew growing up. But I just crashed.”

As her feet tap to Waylon Jennings playing overhead, Scout gets my meaning. I obviously got back on my motorcycle and tried again.

When I think back to the day Scout fell, she seemed more embarrassed than hurt. Kat had been riding, too, and she looks up to my little sister. While Kat seems effortlessly cool for a kid, Scout is more self-conscious.

Jules was the same way. I think my love talked herself out of doing a lot in life, just to avoid feeling awkward. I hadn’t noticed that back in the day. Jules was a beautiful child. I found her easy to be around, so I assumed she was easygoing. But now I look back and realize she was always watching people do things rather than doing them herself.

“Your mom got scared when she was little,” I tell Scout. “She didn’t have anyone to help her with feeling scared. I bet she would have liked riding ponies when she was little, but instead she got scared and only brushed them.”

“She still doesn’t ride them.”

“No, she’s scared.”

“Maybe if I’m not scared, she won’t be.”

“That’s smart thinking,” I say and stroke her head.

Scout and I have come a long way in the last year. I used to think loving my girls was enough. But kids need more than happy thoughts and sweet words. The daily grind is when I can build them into confident people. That’s what my parents did. My father never just said I did a good job and walked away. He stuck with me when I failed. He kept me going when I was struggling. He built me back up when I considered giving up.

That shit took effort, but I used to half-ass fatherhood. When Jules showed up, she quickly won over my girls. She got the four children on a schedule, helped them get along, and worked through their trauma. She didn't have a magic wand. It was just the daily grind of giving a shit, even when she was tired or depressed. She never gave up, and they love her for it.

Now, I'm the same way. That's why I really hate leaving Scout early when I get a call from Sheriff Graeme Hubbard. My family's long-time friend explains how the Black Gold Four's lawyer has shown up at the Sheriff's Office. Last year, Teddy Cross tried to talk us into letting him see Giselle. He claimed she only ran away because she was hurt by a family friend. He swore her father was worried about her. I smelled through his bullshit like anyone would. *Now, he's back.*

I wait at the diner until Lady Bug arrives on the back of Papa Bear's hog. She'll watch Scout for me while my dad and I head to the Sheriff's Office. I immediately notice a tricked-out SUV with Texas plates parked in the lot.

A deputy tells us the sheriff is waiting in a room with our guests. Papa Bear enters first and nods at his childhood friend. Leaning leisurely against a wall, Graeme lifts his chin and reveals his face hidden under his cowboy hat. His nearly black eyes find me and then gesture toward the table.

"I'm sure you remember Ted Cross. People back home call him Teddy."

I smirk at Graeme's sneering tone. The lawyer hears it, too, but he doesn't even look at the sheriff.

Teddy's just as I remember—middle-aged man, leather-grade tanned face, blond-highlighted and slicked-back hair, expensive black suit, bolo tie with a black-and-gold ornamental slide, and overly white teeth.

This time, Teddy brought along two security guys. One is as big as Penthouse. He's wearing a lot of leather, leaving him sweaty in the early autumn weather. His bald head seems especially shiny in the harsh lighting.

The other guy is smaller and stands like he's a former soldier. His blunt haircut also implies military, but I spot a prison tattoo on his bare forearm.

The men's firearms would have been left at the front desk. I'm still aware they could be here to start trouble. Or act as a distraction while someone attacks the Sanctuary.

Before walking in this room, I contacted people back at the compound to increase security and put everyone on alert.

Now, I settle across the table from the mouth piece for a band of sexual deviants.

"What can I do for you, Teddy?" I ask, leaning back in my chair and eyeing him.

Flashing his overly white smile, he suddenly freezes and gets a sourpuss expression. "I thought you might want to know Zack Reinhart is dead."

"He's the guy who claimed to be Giselle's dad."

Cocking his eyebrow, he asks in a Texas drawl, "Didn't she tell you about him?"

"She said she had no proof he was her father. The fucker might have bought her. Stolen her, maybe. The situation wasn't clear," I say and brush lint from my jeans. "Considering all that information, his death doesn't seem like much of a loss."

"It was a heart attack."

Without missing a beat, I reply, "Okay."

Teddy hesitates. He suspects we killed his boss. Might assume we did his other employers, too. Why else would he be here?

But I don't give away how the "heart attack" info interests me. After all, the man was clearly murdered. His house burned down. His men were killed. Having the surviving member of the Black Gold Four—or his allies—cover up the crime is a little surprising. But maybe there was more at that estate than just a pervert and his victims. If so, keeping the state authorities away from the house makes sense.

“Zack was a complicated man. A friend of mine,” Cross says and then adds, “But he’s gone, and we have to move on.”

“Moving on isn’t easy for traumatized woman like Giselle.”

Cross exhales roughly, irritated with my attitude. “Let’s put our cards on the table here.”

“Sure.”

“My employers were four men who shared a special bond.”

“Real tight, were they?”

Cross frowns at my mocking tone while I catch Graeme smirking in the corner. Papa Bear is unreadable. I notice how the security guys keep their focus on him.

“The surviving man wants to let Giselle know how she is free.”

“Free, how?”

“With her father gone, there’s no more interest in her.”

“I can’t believe you came all the way to Metamora to share that info.”

“There are suspicious facts about my employers’ deaths. Some people might want to dig deeper into that. I’m here to say my remaining employer has no interest in such a thing. He’s ready to let the past go, and he wishes Giselle well.”

Tapping my fingers on the table, I try to see the con behind his words. I feel like he’s working an angle. But I also imagine what the situation might look like from the point of view of the final Black Gold Four member. The guy’s hiding out in New Zealand, away from his power and the Dolls. Three of his fellow sickos are dead. He might not know who did it, but he’s got suspicions. No doubt, he fears we’ll come for him next.

That makes sense, yet I worry over taking this man’s words at face value. If I let my guard down, people important to me could be in danger.

“I won’t be passing those good wishes along to Giselle. She’s happy. Why bring her painful past into the present?” I explain and then sit up straight. “But I’m glad to hear we won’t be getting more visits from you. I’m sure you’re pleased to know you won’t be schlepping up here to given thinly veiled threats.”

“My employer is sincere.”

“No, I’m sure he is. I hear New Zealand is a laid-back place. Bet that kind of thinking rubbed off on the guy who pays your bills. Now, he’s looking to turn over a new leaf. Good for him.”

Teddy doesn’t react to my comment. He’s locked into his friendly demeanor as if I don’t bother him at all. Maybe showing our hand on the New Zealand front is a mistake. But I fear Teddy’s come here to lie his way into us lowering our guard. I think back to Luca’s description of what a team of mercenaries could do at the Sanctuary. It’s possible the surviving Black Gold Four member has plans to make us pay. He might not even care about getting the Dolls back. He just wants us to bleed.

But now Teddy knows we have eyes on his employer. If we bleed, so does he. Sure, he can run. The guy’s loaded. He can hide anywhere in the world. But we’ve got resources, too.

Even if a mercenary team shows up to the Sanctuary, they’re not killing everyone. The space is too large. Our people are too paranoid. The kill team will die, and our survivors will come for the final member of the Black Gold Four. They’ll likely go through Teddy to get to him, too.

Teddy understands the situation. I see in his eyes how he gets the score. So will his boss.

“Are we done here?” I ask the lawyer as his security shifts their stances.

Teddy surprises me with a big smile. “I think we are. Been a pleasure,” he says and stands up. “Hope to never set foot in your little town again.”

“It’s a hope we all share.”

Teddy signals to his thugs to lead the way. I don't walk out with him, instead lingering in the room with Graeme and Papa Bear.

“Think it's over?” I ask once we're alone.

Papa Bear considers the situation and nods. “I suspect so. The surviving asshole left behind those Dolls. He severed ties to Giselle's dad. He cares more about his survival than revenge or reclaiming those women.”

I stand up and eye Graeme. He knows I'm waiting for his opinion. Pursing his lips, he really considers the situation, not rushing things just to agree with my dad.

“Those Texas fucks enjoyed a lot of power in their little part of the world. They seemed invincible. Now people know they aren't, and this last guy and his allies are scared. I bet those assholes made a whole lot of enemies over the years. Now, there's blood in the water. So, no, I don't reckon you'll have any more problems with the Texas people.”

Nodding, I feel better knowing they're thinking the same as me. I don't want to lower my guard or trust the easier option. But the Black Gold Four have been afraid of coming at us all along, yet they refused to let Giselle go.

Maybe it was just personal. Zack Reinhart wanted his property back. Now, he's dead, and no one left behind cares enough to stir up trouble.

As Teddy and his thugs leave Metamora, I meet up with Lady Bug and Scout at the diner. My newest daughter smiles with relief at the sight of me. I see so much of Jules in Scout. Not only their physical similarities but how they deal with stress and fear.

The woman I love didn't get many breaks in life. She struggled and suffered alone for a long time. But Scout won't go through the same trials. She's part of a good family now. Not only the one Jules and I have created, but the Sanctuary will protect this child as she grows into adulthood.

I see the future more clearly after meeting with the slimy lawyer. The Born Villains Motorcycle Club is still growing.

Our community keeps expanding. The territory we control is larger.

One day, we'll run Cahuenga like we do Metamora. My kids might lead the club or they could take a completely different route. But they'll have choices.

Thanks goes to what Papa Bear and the other founders created decades ago, we all have the opportunity to make our lives better.

DUCHESS



My tendency to hide in the house isn't new. But back at Cahuenga, I didn't own my time. I had to follow orders from Kraken, Mother Goose, my brothers, and club members. No one cared if I was depressed or exhausted. They didn't encourage me to take a breath and center myself. They just wanted whatever made them happy.

At the Sanctuary, I have so much support. Maybe that's why I've gotten too good at hiding at home. My urge to take charge and be a good President's wife has taken a back seat to my need to hide where I feel safe.

Overlord never pushes me. He just asks if I want to join him and the kids at HQ and brings me food back when I said I'm not ready.

Care Bear and Lady Bug have also been godsend by taking the kids to their activities, so I don't need to go anywhere.

The former visits with me every day. Care Bear holds herself different lately. When we met last year, I was immediately drawn to her. We just clicked. But I seemed to be holding my own better than she was. Care Bear struggled with trusting herself, let alone someone else.

Building a life with Blunt has fixed something fundamentally broken inside her. They face their problems together now, filling them both with renewed confidence.

Today, the beautiful woman simply glows. Care Bear settles on the couch next to me while the kids get ready to go with her to lunch.

Taking my hand, Care Bear watches me with her soothingly dark eyes. "You told me last year how I needed to

stop listening to the negativity in my head. You said I was sabotaging myself.”

Thinking back to last year, I nod at her words. “You thought Papa Bear and Lady Bug didn’t want you around once Nadia was here.”

“That’s right. I worked myself up over imaginary signs of trouble. But you told me the truth, so I didn’t ruin things for myself, Blunt, or Clark. That’s why you’re a good friend.”

Care Bear squeezes my hand and continues, “And I want to be a good friend to you. That’s why I’m telling you to put on your shoes and come with us to lunch.”

I glance at my kids watching us. They’re clearly waiting for Care Bear to finish. She signals them to approach the couch.

“Come with us, Jules,” Evie says and holds out her little hand. “You’re weird. We can help.”

Frowning, I look at how Scout brings my shoes. Anthony climbs on the couch with me and just stares. He clearly doesn’t know what’s going on. I kiss his forehead and turn my gaze at Care Bear.

“Why are you doing this?”

“You haven’t left the house in four days. That’s too long. Right, kids?”

“I can’t even with your crap, chump,” Zoey says and puts out her hand. “Let’s do this thing before I bust an ovary.”

Care Bear nods as if the kids are being helpful. I take my tennis shoes from Scout and put them on before choosing to keep my ass planted on the couch.

“I feel like I *have* been out of the house in the last four days.”

“No, we’ve been tracking it.”

“Mommy, you need to come to HQ with us for lunch,” Scout says and cuddles up with me. “You don’t need to be scared. We’ll protect you.”

I look over my four children's faces. Anthony is the spitting image of his dead father, yet I don't see Cypher today. Scout looks like me as a child. I always think if I can do right by her, I'll be saving little Jules. But today, she's the one hoping to save me.

Evie and Zoey have only been in my life for a year, but I love them with all my heart. They can't call me "mom" in respect to the moms they lost. But I'm the one they call for when they're scared. I brought structure to their grief-drenched lives. Now, they want to help me regain my focus.

After putting on my shoes, I stand up and force myself to walk to the door. The kids surround me. Evie holds my right hand. Scout cuddles my left one. On the way to HQ, Zoey leads the way, always peeking back to check on me. Anthony and Clark bring up the rear. Whenever I glance back toward our house and wish I could return, I find my son's gaze on me. I smile at him, erasing the worry on his face.

After the seven of us settle at a table, we're joined by Blunt and Overlord who were out working. I feel safe surrounded by my people. Not just at this table, but HQ is filled with others I know and trust.

Sister Sass sits against Jester, trying to coax him into eating something. My half sister Dire watches them and pretends to puke.

I smile at Eliza at another table. She's getting close to having her son. She'll need me to help out. That's what friends do at the Sanctuary. A new baby is always a big deal. I can't hide in my house anymore.

"We'll get you out the door," Care Bear promises. "Soon, you won't need help. Until then, we'll make you feel safe."

Overlord gives Care Bear a thankful smile. I grin at how he asked her for help. In my head, I've known I'm not at the Cahuenga compound any longer. I'm surrounded by good people here.

But sometimes, I get so wound up on the past, I can't feel the present. After lunch, I know it's time to push myself

harder. I'm missing out on fun by hiding.

This new thinking is why I agree to go on a ride with Overlord a few days later. He surprises me by taking us not only outside the Sanctuary but to the Cahuenga compound.

Dread flows through my veins as I climb off the motorcycle and look around. This place feels cursed, yet Overlord's hand on my shoulder helps keep me grounded.

After Rafe brought hell down on the Cahuenga compound, I saw pictures of the burned-out homes and clubhouse. Now, most of those buildings have been bulldozed. In a year, nature will take back much of the abandoned area. In ten years, there'll be few reminders of the people who once called this place home.

Overlord rests his hand against the small of my back. He's careful not to spook me as we stand in a place filled with so many bad memories.

"The club quietly bought this land through one of our LLCs. We can't build anything for a few years due to press attention. But this land belongs to the Born Villains now."

Looking up, I find his gorgeous blue eyes watching me. Though I think to ask why he brought me here, I can't find the words.

"This place will one day be a second homebase for our club," Overlord explains. "We'll have people living here. Services nearby, too."

My heart races. I feel a panic attack building. I want to leave.

Memories rush over me. I think of my mom dying in the large house we shared with Kraken and his real family. I remember all the times when I was hurt and used. I'm overwhelmed with thoughts of the day when Cypher and the other bikers arrived to take over the club.

So much of my family was destroyed in this place—Queen Bee, Kraken, Sutton, and Hollis. I suspect Finch lost his life somewhere nearby as he tried to flee the men that he once considered his friends.

And a part of Rafe also died out here when he got his revenge.

“Why are we here?” I ask Overlord as grief and depression drag me down.

“One of the services will be a clinic for pregnant women and their babies. I want to name it ‘The Beth Gwynne House’ in honor of your mom.”

A sob fights to break free. I look at him and then around the land where I spent too many painful years. Scout and Anthony were born at the compound. One day, they might visit this place with only the vaguest memories of their earliest fears.

“Thank you,” I tell Overlord and finally wrap myself in his embrace.

“I know coming here is painful. But the world has changed while you’ve been at the Sanctuary. In your mind, this compound remained your former prison. I wanted you to see what it’s become and help you imagine what it might be one day.”

Lilting my lips, I relax under the power of our kiss. Overlord is so beautiful. I often find myself startled when I catch him in a particular light as if his good looks are otherworldly. As a teenager, I crushed hard on him. *Now, he’s mine.*

I don’t feel worthy, especially when he does such sweet things like keep my mom’s memory alive. In Metamora, the local women’s shelter is named after Betty Boop. Overlord’s mom was a great person who helped many. My own mother couldn’t even save herself.

Yet, I loved her. As a kid, I’d see how close she was to taking charge of her life. Beth never broke free of her devotion of Kraken. In the end, I think she stayed out of habit. As if she’d hit a point in her life, where she felt too old to start over.

When I consider the sad, sickly woman she was at her death, I see nothing to celebrate. But my mom was more than Kraken’s side piece. She was once wild and free. Though her

life became a constant competition with Mother Goose, she still told me more than once how she was happy to have a daughter.

“Kraken has enough sons,” Beth explained and winked at me.

Life at the Sanctuary helped me remember my mom as more than the woman she was at the end. Her old friends fill in blanks about Queen Bee in her youth. I feel like I know my mom better now.

“You’re a good man,” I tell Overlord while he holds me. “You saved me.”

“And you saved me,” he says, wrapping me tighter. “Never forget how lost I was when you returned to my life. I couldn’t take care of my girls. They were drowning in grief, and I was useless.”

“We saved each other,” I say, breathing easier now as my gaze washes over the land. “Together, we can do anything.”

For the first time since hearing about Rafe’s attack on the compound, I don’t feel a nagging guilt. I thought I should fix the problems created by men far more powerful than me. Yet, I have no duty to them. What happened in Cahuenga wasn’t my fault.

Overlord and I take the scenic route back to the Sanctuary. As a lovesick teen, I dreamed of riding behind this beautiful man. I had many hopes. The road I took to becoming Overlord’s Duchess wasn’t easy, but there’s no denying I’ve reached the perfect destination.

GHOST



My Angel Eyes is in a great mood this morning. She feels optimistic about getting pregnant soon. She's been especially baby crazy since Jelly Bean gave birth to her little girl, Vada. We visited the new moms last night, and Aqua swore it would happen for us.

Still thinking about the baby, Luca asks Hope, "Isn't Vada a pretty baby?"

Hope nods as she pets her cat. "Do you want a girl?"

"It doesn't matter."

I believe Luca when she says those words. She's dreamed of a kid for nearly a decade. I can feel her excitement as we say goodbye for the afternoon.

"We'll be patient and enjoy the process," Luca promises me before I head out to meet Apex. "No stress."

"I'm always stressed."

Luca grins at my bullshit. "Don't get stuck in here," she says and strokes my forehead. "You deserve to enjoy life."

I'm a naturally negative person. Yet, when I look into Luca's bright blue eyes, I sense her determination. She's a beast when she puts her mind to something—whether it was volleyball or vigilantism or loving me and Hope and riding with the club. If anyone can will a baby into existence through sheer determination, it's my woman.

Walking outside, I wait for Apex to leave his house before we do our rounds at the Sanctuary. My friend finally struts over to me. He seems in a good mood, so I assume his dick got wet recently. I catch Amelia peeking out at us from the front window.

"Your kid wants you to wave at her," I tell him.

Apex turns his head and spots her. Giving the child a big goofy wave, Apex snorts at how she flips out and jumps up and down.

“I’m getting good at being a dad with her.”

“But not the other one?”

Apex frowns at me before looking back at where Amelia is no longer watching us.

“I think she wants her mom to know she saw me. She’s really trying to talk more.”

“But not the other one?”

Apex narrows his gaze at me as I fight a smirk. He finally gets how I’m fucking with him and shrugs.

“Babies are kinda boring. Anna is so beautiful, and I can’t wait until I can hold her.”

“She’ll get big fast. I remember how little Katana was once. Now, she acts like a teenager. Overlord’s daughters were tiny balls of gross not so long ago. Saw them hassling Flagg yesterday,” I say and then chuckle. “I like when they gang up on people.”

“You should have two little girls like me,” he says as we approach Thorn outside of HQ.

“No. I want one kid. It needs to look like Luca. I’m not interested in a girl. I told her ovaries to make that happen.”

Thorn finishes tying his long blond hair back and shakes his head. “Chicks don’t control that stuff,” he tells me. “You’ll need to talk to your jizz about only sending boy cum.”

“Why didn’t you do that?” I taunt Apex.

“I like having girls. Their clothes are really pretty like Giselle.”

I can’t wrap my head around having a kid of my own. But I want Luca to have whatever she wants. So, I’ll have a talk to my balls tonight.

Instead of sharing this info with the men, I ask Thorn, “Apex says you’re going to be his brother-in-law.”

Apex frowns at me and then at Thorn and then shrugs. “Sure.”

“That’s not now,” Thorn explains as Blunt, Vegas, and Neon ride by on their way out of the Sanctuary. “Celine and I just sit together at meals.”

“They went on a triple date with Giselle and me and Penthouse and Bo Peep.”

“Won’t be doing that much longer,” Thorn says and gestures at Bo Peep waddling by with Care Bear and Duchess. “This place is about to get wild with new kids.”

“But you like Celine, right?” I ask, scowling at how I might not be reading the situation.

“Sure, but she is fucked up in the head. Twinkle Toes doesn’t remember her past. Angel Eyes has some distance from hers. But Celine suffered through a rape the day before we saved them. It’s all still fresh. She’s got weird hangups about her body and fucking. So, I’m taking things slow.”

“She giggles when people mention Thorn,” Apex says and snorts. “She thinks he’s so pretty.”

“Well, I guess I can see that,” I reply and smile at Thorn.

Ignoring our teasing, Thorn explains, “I think Celine might be it for me. I don’t mind waiting for her. I think about her all the time. That’s why I’m keep my dick dry until she’s ready.”

“We’re all so fucking emotionally healthy,” Apex says, and I can’t tell if he’s serious.

Thorn grins at Apex who apparently isn’t fucking around. I admit I feel healthier lately. Hope has settled down since her freak out weeks ago. I’ve forgiven myself for letting her get out of the house. That was mostly Luca telling me to stop sulking. But I’m still okay with it now.

Dire and Sister Sass walk outside to HQ’s porch, where we linger. Thorn pokes at the blonde.

“Vegas has gone gaga over Nadia. You might be losing your roommate soon.”

Dire shrugs. “The Sanctuary has no shortage of new chicks. Or I could do this thing adults do called living on my own.”

“Whatever floats your boat,” Thorn teases. “Never really understood why you needed a roommate in the first place.”

“Have you not met my mom? She’s a little bit intimidating. A roommate helped her loosen her grip on me. But now, after the Texas job, she’s realized I’m no longer in need of supervision. I’ll be fine if Nadia moves in with Vegas.”

“You’re growing up,” Sister Sass tells Dire. “One day, you might even get a pet.”

“But no man or kids, right?” Apex asks. “Seems sad.”

“You’re a decade older than me, and you only recently got a woman and kids,” Dire points out. “So, you know, shut the fuck up.”

“Jealous, huh? I get it,” Apex taunts.

“I don’t want a man. Or a woman. And not because of the rape,” Dire mutters, losing her temper. “I’ve never found genital areas interesting.”

“You are the anti-Ominous,” Sister Sass replies. “She fucked everyone. You shall fuck no one. So, it shall be.”

“Eat it, baby maker.”

“Knocked up already?” I ask Sister Sass who narrows her dark eyes. “Those jeans are looking tight.”

“So are yours.”

“It’s my dick. It swells from overuse.”

When I say those words with such malice, Sister Sass takes a second to realize I’m fucking with her.

“Well, I’m probably *not* pregnant yet. But Jester’s putting in the hard work to make that happen. Now it’s just up to my eggs.”

“They’ll play hard to get like you did, no doubt.”

“Don’t get pregnant before Luca does,” I demand of Sister Sass.

“Might be too late to hit the brakes on that, chump. I got jizzed in this morning.”

“Well, I jizzed plenty in my woman this morning.”

“Yeah, but you’ve been jizzing in her for a year. I think you’re shooting blanks.”

“Not cool,” Apex grumbles at Sister Sass who glances around.

“Wait, are we not allowed to mock Ghost anymore?”

“Of course, we can,” Thorn says and pats her shoulder. “Just not about stuff he is genuinely sensitive about. So don’t mock his faulty balls, but feel free to talk shit about his hair.”

Sister Sass studies me, as if looking for something mean to say. Instead, she shrugs.

“I hope Luca and I can get pregnant together. We’ll be partners in the horror show of creating life. And my son can date your daughter.”

“I want a boy.”

“Well, I want a boy.”

“Hey, maybe you’ll both have boys,” Dire suggests before stepping off HQ’s porch. “And they’ll date, and you’ll be in-laws. And I won’t have to see any of that garbage since I’ll be in town away from you whipped fucks.”

Unwilling to let her flee without getting in the last word, I yell, “We’ll bring them to your apartment where they can make out while we complain!”

Sister Sass nods. “You’ll never be free of us Dire. Never!”

We all frown at how loud she gets, but Thorn suggests, “It’s the lady hormones.”

Sister Sass takes a swipe at his hair. He does the same to her. They descend into play-fighting while Apex and I slowly

step away.

“Want to walk around?” he asks like he’s been doing since we joined the Born Villains Motorcycle Club. We might have old ladies now and live in fancy houses. A lot has changed over the years, but Apex and I still feed the best parts of each other.

SISTER SASS



I'm fully aware of how babies are made. Yet, I'm absolutely shocked when I get knocked up during my first month with Jester.

As soon as I'm late, I buy a test and tell him. Jester surprises me by seeming grumpy over how I didn't find out before involving him.

"I guess I could have asked Dire or Aqua to sit with me while I waited for the result."

Jester's hard expression breaks immediately. "No, it should be me. I just don't want to be disappointed, but it needs to be me."

We look at the pregnancy test still in its box. I'm a little nervous to learn the news.

"Do I hold your hand while you piss?" Jester asks when I don't move to the bathroom. "How complicated is this thing?"

Twenty minutes later, we stare at the negative result.

"I'm sorry," I say, feeling guilty for getting his hopes up.

Jester hugs me against him. "Maybe it can't happen that fast."

"Jelly Bean got pregnant right away with Smoke's cup-jizz," I mumble and shrug. "I'm probably just late because I've been so stressed. That's a thing, right?"

"Sure. I mean, no one knows a lady's cycle like me. As an expert, I'd say it's just delayed out of excitement."

I laugh at his eye roll. "Do you want to fool around to help deal with the disappointment?"

"No, I'd rather just sit in the dark and feel sad," he replies as his hand cups my tit and his lips find my throat.

We deal with our disappointment well. At dinner, Jester seems fine. Aqua asks if I was right about my late period. When I shake my head, she hands me Vada as a consolation prize.

Never before have I liked babies. They're simply terrifying. They cry so randomly. Or maybe there's an instruction manual explaining their cries. All I know is they scare me.

But Vada feels different. Probably, because I'm different now. I want my own little screaming monster. It also helps that Jelly Bean had an easy delivery. I'm filled with a false sense of security over what might happen with me.

I tell everyone I hope it's a boy, but I really don't care. I was a butch girl. My nephew Collin is an artsy-sensitive type. There's no telling what a kid will be like. I just want one with Jester.

When another week passes without my period showing up, I drop by the Refuge Clinic and see if I did my piss test wrong. This one comes back positive. My squeals of triumph draw Doctor Sal to my room.

The man who delivered me tears up when he finds out. He's been with me at every step of my life, including after the attack. Now, he'll deliver my baby with Jester.

My stud isn't sure he trusts this positive test when he arrives at the clinic and hears the news. "The other one said negative."

"I peed on it wrong," I reply.

Doctor Sal shakes his head and fights an eye roll. "There wasn't enough HCG for the test to read the first time. It's built up over the last week. No one messed up. It's not a con."

Jester seems unnerved by the doctor's certainty. Once we arrive home from the clinic, he sits on the couch and refuses to leave. Papa Bear shows up to hear him out.

"I want a kid," Jester says when my dad sits nearby. "I want a piece of me and Talon to exist in the world. I need to feel that part of my heart again like with Lando."

“So, what’s staining your thoughts?” Papa Bear asks.

“Pregnancy is hard on a lady’s body. I read stuff online about how it can be dangerous,” Jester explains as his gray-blue eyes find me. “I can’t be the reason Talon’s in danger.”

“You know Sal will be on top of everything. If Sister Sass has any issues, he’ll deal with them. If she needs to be on bed rest, the Sanctuary will baby her. You and Sister Sass won’t be alone with this.”

Jester nods as if he gets what my dad is saying. Yet, his shoulders remain slumped forward and he seems lost in his head.

“I know how it feels to lose something precious,” Papa Bear tells Jester. “After I lost Betty Boop, I struggled to trust my happiness again. It seemed like a trick to get me to lower my guard. I never wanted to feel such pain again. But with Lady Bug, I had to try. That doesn’t mean I wasn’t scared a lot of the time. I still find myself struck with fear over losing her. Or I’ll feel like Sister Sass is in danger. Sometimes, I’ll remember how I felt when Connor died, so I’ll rush to check on my grandchildren. The fear never fully leaves us. But you have to push past it and let yourself enjoy this life. It’s the only one we get.”

When Jester stares at my dad, I can almost see the kid he used to be. He looks lost in a world he doesn’t fully understand. Jester is young in a lot of ways as if he stopped maturing at some point in his head.

That moment with Papa Bear is when I fully realize how Jester doesn’t understand how love works. He’s seen it from the outside. He feels it for me, and I know he’ll love our child. But he doesn’t really grasp how all-encompassing love is supposed to feel. Or how you need to give yourself completely to those you love.

That’s why he’s so afraid. Jester has torn a gaping hole inside himself to fit his love for me. It just got bigger for this baby. He feels vulnerable, leaving him distrustful of everything outside of this townhome.

I think about how he missed out on Lando in the beginning. He had closed himself off to the baby in the same way he did with most people. Yet, once the little guy was old enough to engage with him, Jester accidentally fell in love. He probably didn't even comprehend how much he cared for his son until Lando was gone. The feeling in his heart wasn't anything he understood. So alien, the closeness they shared didn't register until he lost it.

Wrapping my arms around Jester, I want to fix what his family did to him so long ago. But sometimes, it's just too late. This is who he is now. Loving me and the baby will hurt him. He'll get through it, of course. The good will outweigh the bad. Yet, he'll need support to deal with how love leaves him unprotected.

I keep Jester close over the next few days. Then, he pulls a "Sister Sass move" and ditches me unexpectedly. I assume the worst and imagine him hiding out somewhere. After texting everyone to keep an eye out for Jester, I stay at the townhome and hope he hasn't gone off the deep end.

When Jester returns home, he's wearing a smile and driving one of the Sanctuary's SUVs.

"I got you something," he says and gestures at the vehicle.

Though I assume his surprise is baby-related, he reveals a beautiful glass shelf like the one Betty Boop kept her favorite things inside. I remember how I'd find her sitting next to it, thinking about her life. Each time, my mom would tell me a story about how she got a figurine, snow globe, or special item. I learned about my parents through those stories.

Now, I have one set up in the corner of the townhome. Jester surprises me again by revealing a gift bag after the shelf is set up.

"I figured your figurine would get lonely in there all alone."

I immediately tear up at the sight of the statuette of a mom holding her baby. Jester kisses the side of my head before deciding to rearrange the furniture.

“I’m moving the couch against the wall, so you won’t fall off the back when I go down on you. I’ve gotta safety proof the house.”

That’s when I know Jester will be okay. The man I fell for as a teenager was closed off and liked it that way. This Jester is willing to push past his normal tendencies. Not only for me and the baby. *He also wants happiness for himself.*

“Let’s test out the new couch position,” I say after setting my new figurine next to the first one.

Jester grins at how I tug off my boots and strip out of my jeans. We’ve moved past our earlier barriers. Life won’t be easy from now on, but it’ll sure be simpler.

I’m willing to bend and change for Jester. Compromise doesn’t seem like a cop-out. Babies no longer terrify me. Exposing myself to Jester feels right.

Years ago, I nearly lost my life before I even started living it. I’d been a wild kid playing grown-up. For a long time, I just went through the motions. I loved Jester, but I wasn’t sure what that meant.

Now, I understand him and myself well enough to be sure nothing can break us apart.

JESTER



I don't know why my parents ever had kids. They hated parenthood. Maybe they were wired wrong. I know they loved each other, yet they enjoyed the drama of breaking each other's hearts more.

I understand how they weren't normal people. I've seen good love. I just didn't think I had a heart capable of doing what others like Papa Bear did.

Loving Talon proved me wrong. But I can't be the old me if I want to keep her.

That's why my number one goal is to stop living in the past. I've got something good here in the present, and my future looks like it'll be even better.

However, I let myself keep the past close when it comes to Lando. My boy deserves to be remembered. Few knew him like I did. I've got a duty to keep him alive. That's why I force myself to drag that part of the past into the present.

Another area where I cling to the past is in how I refer to my woman. I just can't think of Talon as Sister Sass. Everyone around the Sanctuary is pushing to call the new wives by their old lady names. I might refer to Eliza as "Bo Peep," but I can't call my woman by her road name.

"You're my Talon," I explain to her one night while we watch a Kung Fu movie at the townhome. "That name means something to me. When anyone messed with me in prison, I'd want to lash out and fuck them up. But I'd mentally repeat your name until I remained focused on release. I can't give it up."

Talon doesn't care what I call her. Or how I want her to ride bitch. She's getting the hang of being my woman rather than a fellow biker.

And I'm getting the hang of thinking of her as my club sister. I enjoy it when we ride side by side. She won't be able to do so much longer. That's why we take nightly rides around the Sanctuary.

I love how powerful she looks on her motorcycle. Talon isn't just the kid I ignored or the teen I thought was weird or the young woman I nearly lost. She's also this tough biker chick who talks way too much shit and likes to drop by The Lockup to scare the club girls. My woman's complicated, and I don't want that to change.

Time moves differently at the Sanctuary. When I spend time with the founders, I feel like nothing's really changed. For them, life's been steady for a long time. They've built their houses and finished having their kids.

When I spend time with the younger members, life seems chaotic. People are having babies. Houses are being built. There's a lot of new stuff to remember.

Talon feels most comfortable around her age group. None of them view her as a child. However, the founders are starting to catch on to how she's all grown up. They've even begun inviting us to dinner at their houses like they do with other couples.

As the Sanctuary welcomes autumn, Papa Bear prepares for his long-delayed vacation with Lady Bug and Katana. I know he worries about stepping away from this place and his people.

"I'll shadow Overlord while you're gone," I tell Papa Bear one day while we're at his place and I get him alone.

"How come?"

"I'm still getting the hang of how things work now, and I figure my President might be on edge when you're not around. Two birds, one stone."

Papa Bear smiles at my reasoning. "Overlord could use your support. All the new babies at the Sanctuary seem to have made him paranoid."

I share my old friend's smile. Despite his words, I think Papa Bear's the one worried about the future. Overlord seems to have a steady hand on the Sanctuary as well as the Born Villains Motorcycle Club. He's even got plans for expansion down the road.

I can't even wrap my head around how the club will run both Metamora and Cahuenga. But I've never been the man with the plan. I don't get how most shit works. I just do my job and go home.

And while Papa Bear enjoys his well-deserved vacation, my job will be watching Overlord's back.

When Overlord enters Papa Bear's house with his family, I decide I ought to finally stop blaming him for what happened to Talon. I should stick the responsibility on the assholes who died for their sins.

Seeing Overlord clearly for the first time in years, I like how he's got his mom's soft, blue eyes. Betty Boop lives on in her son.

I see a little of her in Overlord's two girls, too. Zoey and Evie have Betty Boop's delicate features.

As usual, the little brunette stomps over to me to start shit. "Give me a reason, chump," Zoey snarls and waves her fist.

Talon gets annoyed immediately. "Why are you always giving him shit?"

"I think she wants to be my friend," I tell Talon and fist-bump the kid. "After all, she's just a little version of you, and you were always following me around. It's a friendship thing."

Zoey eyes me and then frowns at Talon who bends down and coos, "Do you worship me, fool?"

"Choke on your clown tears, bitch."

"I love you, too."

Zoey breaks into a smile and pats her aunt's stomach. "You ate a watermelon seed."

Evie immediately joins in and pats Talon's still-flat belly. "We won't lock you in the closet anymore."

Talon gasps and hugs them. "Your father finally scheduled that exorcism I begged him to get. Now, you're demon-free."

Though everyone enjoys a good laugh at the moment, I do catch Zoey plotting. She does her little devious eye look. I'm relieved her exorcism wasn't fully successful. I actually like it when the little brat gives me grief.

After all, one day, I'll be an old man, and the younger generation will need to keep the Sanctuary safe. Zoey's bad temper might act as my shield when I'm too frail to protect myself.

Later, when Talon and I return to the townhome, I tell her, "I'm not afraid of the future. Well, okay, designing our house freaks me out, and I'm nervous about your body handling pregnancy. But the future feels like it'll be a good thing."

"I felt a dark cloud hanging over the Sanctuary for a long time," she says, and I know she's remembering the day Betty Boop died. "I think we've gotten past it now."

I wrap her in my arms on the couch and stroke her belly. "I can't wait until our watermelon seed is born."

Laughing, Talon admits, "I know we're moving too fast, but I don't want to slow down. I like having everything I want right this second, even if it's sometimes overwhelming."

I'm on the same page with Talon. We've wasted too many years trying to get to this point. No way do I want to slow down now.

I don't know if a man like me deserves a happy ending. Regret digs at me despite my best efforts to let shit go. If I could rewrite my history, I'd make better choices. Yet, my fuckups led to this life with Talon, and I'm never going to regret that.

PAPA BEAR



The day before I leave for my vacation with Lady Bug and Kat, I stand on the front porch of my house overlooking the heart of the Sanctuary. My mind reels with all the changes over the last few months.

I've put off this long-needed vacation for years. I figured we'd go away after I retired. Yet, I worried about leaving Overlord before he was ready. Then, the Sanctuary suffered the deaths of Connor, Virginie, and Caroline. I used that as an excuse to remain here.

With the Horned Angels finished and the Texas problem handled, I have no more excuses. I need to get my ass on a plane and go see Australia with Lady Bug and Kat.

My wife joins me on the porch. Her fingers brush against the back of my neck, making me smile.

"You should make your final rounds and check in with everyone," Lady Bug says, knowing I've gotten myself wound up over leaving.

I wrap Lady Bug in my arms and hope she knows how much I love her. I doubt I could have survived the last decade without her at my side.

Leaving her to do last-minute packing, I walk around the Sanctuary, checking in with people. At the park, I see Bomber and Pumpkin watching Collin goof around with their new puppy. Nearby, Duchess sits with Care Bear who rubs her growing baby bump. The ultrasound showed she's having a boy. Rumor has it, Care Bear and Blunt are leaning toward the name Parker.

As I wave at my granddaughters playing nearby, I wonder if Duchess and Overlord might have a child together. Four under the age of eight is a lot of work, so I don't blame them if

they don't want more. But I wouldn't be too surprised if I got another grandchild out of the couple.

Walking past the park, I spot Blunt riding by with several of the younger members. He slows down to wave at Care Bear and Clark. The little boy calls out to his daddy. Blunt grins at his son. Though the paternity test answered the question of Clark's biological father, Blunt already had the boy wrapped in his heart.

As I approach Tobosa Road, I spot Twinkle Toes and Bo Peep pushing their strollers toward the park. I wave at Amelia who points at the other stroller where newborn James is hidden. The little redhead comes out of her shell a little more every time I see her.

Following behind her sister, Celine seems fascinated by her new cell phone. The former Dolls have only now gotten accustomed to technology, eating freely, and moving easily around the Sanctuary. A few of them still need to be escorted everywhere or they'll get stuck at their homes.

Overlord moved the two women from the Stockade to Sister Sass's former cottage. None of the seven women seem interested in leaving the Sanctuary.

So far, Celine is the only one with a boyfriend. I've seen her riding with Thorn a few times, and I know they go with the other couples to the Sanctuary's movie nights. However, I don't imagine they'll be living together anytime soon.

As I loop around the neighborhood on my way to see Sister Sass at the townhomes, I spot Hope sitting on the front lawn of her house. She lifts her face to the sun and enjoys its warmth. She's been calm since her last attempt to flee her demons.

Luca walks outside and waves at me. She recently learned she's pregnant. Ghost seems nervous about that fact, but Luca can't seem to stop smiling. Right now, she settles next to Hope on the grass and enjoys the quiet day.

Arriving at the townhomes, I think about how Sister Sass and Luca will deliver only a few weeks apart. The Sanctuary

seems especially vibrant with so many new babies joining the community.

Once Sister Sass answers her door, she blocks my entry. “Jester’s gone native and given up pants.”

“I’ve seen worse.”

My daughter doesn’t budge. “I’m possessive of people seeing my man’s wang. You get how I’m private that way.”

“Are you happy, baby?”

Sister Sass immediately turns off her bravado and offers me a genuine smile. “Yes. Jester’s really mine.”

“Did you doubt that?”

“Yes. Didn’t you?”

“Of course.”

Sister Sass smiles softly and eases in for a hug. Back in the day, my daughter was a cuddler. She lost that interest when Betty Boop died.

Now, she offers me a tight hug. “I’m going to be okay.”

“I know.”

Sister Sass releases me and smiles wider. “So will Jester. But he’ll need your help, especially now that I’m knocked up.”

“He’s always been prone to forgetting how he isn’t alone. I’ll remind him again.”

“I sometimes forget, too. But I remembered to ask Bomber for help. I also asked for help with my beaver issue.”

“Is that last part something I need to ask a follow up question about?”

“No, probably not. You’re going on vacation. No reason to give yourself nightmares.”

Chuckling, I look around the Sanctuary. “I haven’t been away in a long time. Can’t really imagine not checking on everything for two weeks.”

“It’ll be good for you and Lady Bug,” Sister Sass promises. “Overlord, too. He’s always got you at his side, ready and willing to save his ass.”

“I can’t help wanting to protect my people.”

“I know, but we’re going to be okay. You’ve more than protected us all these years. You also taught us how to handle things.”

Sister Sass’s words calm me. I keep thinking there’ll be a moment when everyone is perfectly safe and happy, so I can lower my guard. Kraken taking part of our club was a jolt. Losing Betty Boop so suddenly is what left me worried over the future.

I thought I handled things well enough. I didn’t go nuts when Sister Sass and Dire were nearly killed. I stayed calm when Connor was gunned down. I kept the Sanctuary from closing its doors after Virginie and Caroline were murdered by a castoff.

Despite my outer calm, I had become more than a little paranoid and pessimistic. I assumed bad things were always coming, so I couldn’t truly back off.

Now, I accept life will always be painful and scary. Though the Sanctuary offers a home to broken and lost people, all communities have their ups and downs. So do people, and I’ve gone too long without splurging on Lady Bug and myself.

The Sanctuary is bigger than one man with a dream. This place will stand long after I take my last breath. For the first time in years, I feel the burden lift off my shoulders and let me breathe easier.

EPILOGUE—SISTER SASS



On paper, Jester and I don't make much sense. Beyond the age gap and our very different childhoods, we're both stubborn as mules. We like to poke other people yet despise getting poked back. We also carry a lot of baggage filled with disappointment, pain, and distrust. We ought to butt heads nonstop. *Yet, we rarely do.*

I learn early on in our relationship to ask for help. No more suffering in silence like when my evil nieces locked me in the closet and I refused to call anyone. These days, I'm willing to toss aside my ego to ensure Jester and I get the best life.

That comes in handy during the planning of our home on Tobosa Road.

Initially, our housebuilding process goes well. Jester decides to submit to my desire to live closer to my friends while he can walk a whole block over to spend time with the founders. However, we hit a wall once we start designing the house.

Jester thinks every design element looks weird when we go to stores or look online. The floors are too dark or too light or too medium. The faucets look all wrong. Every light fixture is ugly. Nothing appeals to him.

Not that I have a better imagination. Though I see things I like at people's houses, I can't mash those ideas into a single design.

Jester and I can't even decide on the number of bedrooms.

"Two is fine," he says.

"What if you knock her up with a second kid?" Aqua asks Jester while Jelly Bean nods. "Four bedrooms is best."

"No," he says, getting edgy.

“We’re on a tight timetable,” I remind him and rub my growing belly. “We need to decide.”

“Then you decide.”

Normally, I’d jump into the lead role, but I don’t know the right answer. There are too many choices. I’m nearly ready to replicate my parents’ house to avoid deciding.

“Oh, no,” I reply. “If our house turns out ugly, I can’t handle the shame. You do it.”

In the end, we ask Bomber and Pumpkin to design our house. My brother promises to make it sufficiently butch. *That gets a chuckle out of a grumpy Jester.*

My sexy man often becomes sullen during our first year together. He worries about my pregnancy. He’s paranoid about the baby being a boy and seeming too similar to Lando. Or maybe not similar enough. Jester also fears having a daughter. *He can’t decide on anything.*

Papa Bear is the one to sit us down and explain how we’ll never finish the house before the baby is born.

“You need to set up a nursery at the townhouse,” he explains and glances at the upstairs loft bedroom. “Bomber and Pumpkin are making choices for the house, but they have to run everything by you first.”

“Why can’t they treat us like stupid children?” I ask, making my dad grin. “I thought building a house would be easy. It’s just a roof and some rooms and maybe where to stick the fridge. But it’s a lot of stuff like outlet placements and how a door needs to open. I can’t even with all that shit.”

Jester just sulks, overwhelmed with life. All he really wants is to hang out with me and let the world pass us by. Before prison, he didn’t take charge of much. In prison, he did as he was told. As much as he wants a kid and a house, he wasn’t ready for so many choices.

“The baby will be fine here,” Papa Bear promises. “They don’t even crawl for like eight months. By then, you’ll be moved into your house.”

Jester calms down after Papa Bear breaks it down for him. He rests his hand on my bump and breathes easier.

“I want this kid to have a good life,” he murmurs, revealing the fears he hides from most people. “None of that bouncing around between dumbass parents or feeling unsafe. I want this one to grow up like you did.”

“He will,” I promise and caress his hand. “I’m going to be a great mom like Betty Boop. I demand no less from myself.”

Motherhood is a choice I embrace fully. I just decide I’m going to do a good job and refuse to allow fear to stand in my way.

When I struggle to pick a name for our son, I don’t stress the situation like I do the house. I choose the name my parents planned for me if I’d been a boy. Jester likes Killian and how it honors my parents.

Our son is born in the middle of the Sanctuary’s latest baby boom. Anna started the trend, followed by Vada and then James. Parker is born next. Killian arrives just before Reece. *Ghost and I both get our boys!*

Not long after Nadia gives birth to Vegas’s son named Cash, Bomber and Pumpkin have their surprise baby, Carson. This officially ends that particular baby boom.

Of course, another one revs up as soon as the former Dolls hook up with various bikers. Thorn and Celine—now known as Cozy Glow—lead the way with their daughter, Thalia, followed quickly with a son named Thayer.

By then, Jester, Killian, and I have moved into our finished two-story, four-bedroom house. The dark floors and cabinetry fit our “butch” tastes. Pumpkin adds blue touches around the house, knowing I love the color. Killian’s navy-blue-and-pale-gray nursery is gorgeous. I love hanging out in there with my baby and rocking him during his gassier evenings.

Unlike poor Apex who feared touching Anna with his big, scary hands, Jester never holds back. He’s got Killian in his arms as soon as our boy’s cleaned up at the clinic. I watch him stare at our son as if silently promising to do right by him.

Jester bounces back and forth from joy to depression those first few months. Every happy moment with Killian makes him regret more about what he missed with Lando.

“Regrets will swallow me up,” Jester admits one night as we sit in the living room with Killian. “But what kind of man doesn’t feel guilty for fucking up so royally?”

“I know guilt,” I say as I lean my cheek against him and admire our baby cradled in his strong arms. “I sometimes think Dire wouldn’t be living alone if I hadn’t wanted to go out that night. Like, she might be living a better life if I chose differently. But there’s no going backward. I can’t fix anything. I just try to be a good friend and respect her choices.”

“But I can’t make anything up to Lando,” he explains, sounding so sad.

“You can keep him alive by loving Killian. Raise our boy to know his brother. Be the dad you wish you’d been to Lando. It might not feel like much, but in ten years, you’ll look back and feel good about yourself as a father.”

Jester doesn’t trust my advice. Mostly, he refuses to let himself off the hook. As if Lando can only be remembered if his father is punished.

But life has a way of distracting us from our painful pasts. Killian is like all babies, adorable and demanding. He swallows up his daddy’s time until Jester is too busy to hate himself.

Once he gave up his Road Captain rank, Jester became like any other club member. Overlord gives him regular assignments. My brother never asks too much from Jester, though. Partly because he realizes my man is a special case. But Overlord is also soft on new fathers, giving them lots of time to be around their kids.

By then, Overlord has his crew of younger members running all the leadership positions. Not long after Jester gives up Road Captain, Flagg retires his rank as Secretary. My girl Aqua finally has a chance to move up in the club.

Jester and I rarely worry about club business. We do what we're told. Life is quiet with the Horned Angels gone. Overlord quietly expands our territory into Cahuenga over the next decade. More power brings more stability. Our baby-filled compound is kept safe.

Over time, I rarely leave the Sanctuary. In the past, I had something to prove about my skills or courage. These days, my goal is to be happy, and everyone I need is inside the Sanctuary's walls.

Killian is a great kid. He looks a lot like Jester from his gray-blue eyes and wavy brown hair to his jawline and cheekbones. My son is gorgeous inside and out.

Killian loves to laugh and ham it up. He and Reece are the biggest dorks together. They crack up over farts and honking geese. I've never seen children so easily amused by the dumbest shit. They're endlessly entertaining.

When Killian celebrates his third birthday, Jester falls into a painful depression. I don't think he ever truly grieved Lando's death. Shoving the pain aside hadn't made it go away.

I'm glued to Jester's side for those next few weeks. Where he goes, I go. He gets annoyed when I talk next to the door while he takes a shit. Killian joins me and keeps making farting sounds because the world all about poo for him.

Our son's constant giggles are what finally pulls Jester out of his dark funk. One day, my love sits on the couch, staring at the wall and fully hiding in the past. Killian is nearby telling me how Reece pooped in the potty.

"It was huge!" cries my boy.

As Killian rolls around on the ground, snorting and giggling, Jester cracks up. He finally breaks free of his grief enough to see the blessings right in front of him.

When Jester crawls over to Killian, I know he's turned a corner with his grief. Hiding from it didn't help, but wallowing in guilt isn't the answer, either.

Killian grows up knowing about his brother. Like at Papa Bear's house, our place has a hallway filled with family

pictures. Lando, Betty Boop, Connor, and Richelle live on in our memories.

I took a long time for me to step away from my grief and regrets. I also let my fear trip me up.

But I never gave up on my dream of winning Jester's love. He might have started out as a teenage fantasy, but I grew to know and love him in a real way.

Once I saw him riding shirtless on his motorcycle that day so many years ago, no other man had a chance. And that's one thing I'll never regret.

EPILOGUE—JESTER



I never apologize for who I am. Not even when marriage and fatherhood make me soft. I feel weird sometimes when I'm crawling around on the ground with Killian or picking up flowers for Talon.

Like what happened to the asshole I used to be? The guy who scared people just by standing too quickly? The jackass who attracted women with his looks and repulsed them with his personality?

I was once a beast. Now, I'm a fucking chump who's absolutely goofy in love with a woman who'll challenge grown men to wrestling matches yet squeal at the sight of a grasshopper in the house.

I'm also a fool for my son's laughter. Killian looks so much like Richelle and me when we were little. I keep expecting him to have all the same issues we did, but he's the happiest fucking person I've ever met. He and Reece are the goofiest kids. I'll find them sometimes sitting across from each other, making weird faces until one of them cracks up. They don't even need toys to entertain themselves.

When I was little, I was never as happy as my boy gets, but Killian doesn't have terrible parents. That's the important thing. Killian acts more like I remember Talon being as a kid. She was never so silly, but she smiled a lot and ran around like the world wasn't fucked up at all.

Now, my son has the same carefree energy, and I can't take my eyes off him most days.

So, yeah, I've gone soft.

Being open to love is good and all, but it also brings up a whole lot of pain I figured was long gone. My regrets are the worst. I miss Lando so much I feel like someone's gutting me.

But missing my son also makes him feel closer, like he wasn't only a figment of my imagination but a real person who mattered.

I find myself missing Richelle sometimes. That feeling mostly hits when I'm over at Papa Bear's house with all his kids around. I see how Talon is with her brothers and Katana. I never once shared such a bond with my sister. The guy I am now would have tried. Maybe we would have still hated and resented each other, but I'd have fewer regrets.

Long ago, I decided if no one was going to love me, I might as well love myself, warts and fucking all. These days, I do have people who love me. Talon still looks at me like I'm a sex god. She occasionally gets spooked about the past. There are days when I feel her struggling with bad memories. But usually, she's her smartass self, smiling and roughhousing like nothing's ever gone wrong in her life.

Killian thinks I'm great. We're inseparable as soon as I can hold him. I take him with me everywhere around the Sanctuary. I occasionally feel weird when I see the other founders with their grandkids while I'm schlepping around a diaper bag. But I've always been behind them on things, and they never razz me. I think they understand how I finally got lucky.

Papa Bear still keeps me steady when I want to fuck up. Early on, he wasn't sure I was up to doing right by his daughter. I never blamed him for worrying. When I used to stress having a girl, I'd get real pissed at her future hypothetical suitors, so I understand where he was coming from.

I don't envy Overlord's future with all his daughters. I suspect a few of his girls will be ballbusters like their aunt. He'll have the double worry as their father and President.

Overlord and I get over our tension. He always rubbed me wrong, and I usually seemed like a fucking beast to him. But we're good once we focus on how much we care about the Sanctuary and the people within its walls.

No matter how much time passes, I remain crazy about Talon. No one's ever loved me like she does. Talon made me a better man. She's a great friend and a surprisingly wild lover. When I'm an asshole, she calls out my behavior. When she's an asshole, she expects me to call out her behavior.

The Sanctuary doesn't change despite all the new people coming through or our kids growing up. The place feels unbreakable. In a dozen years, my boy will likely ride these roads with his friends. There'll eventually be a new President and leadership. Men like me will stand back and remember the good old days. All while the Sanctuary keeps on welcoming castoffs and offering second chances.

Like her parents who built this place, Talon Marsden offered me more than I dreamed or even deserved. No matter what awaits my family or the Born Villains Motorcycle Club, I'll never forget how a fucked-up kid like me grew into a man capable of winning the heart of a girl like her.



THE END

BIJOU READING ORDER



Note: These books are written to be read as standalones, but the list below is the preferred order regarding character introductions.



BOOKS CONNECTED TO THE DAMAGED SERIES

- Damaged 1-7 (Sunday Morning is a prequel while In the Wind takes place a decade after book 7)
- Ramsey Security 1-3 (book 3 links the most to the other series and introduces Angus Hayes)
- Junkyard Dog
- Serrated Brotherhood MC 1-3
- Rawkfist MC 1-3
- Right Amount of Wrong (second generation Damaged novel)
- White Horse 2-4 (second generation)
- Reapers MC: Ellsberg Chapter 1-3 (second generation)
- Reapers MC: Conroe Chapter 1-3 (second generation) (bks 1 & 2 take place before Ellsberg bk3)
- Reapers MC: Shasta Chapter 1-3 (second generation) (bk1 takes place before Ellsberg bk1)
- Elko Executioners MC (EEMC) 1-3 (bk1 takes place after Shasta Chapter bk3)
- Reapers MC: Pema Chapter 1-3 (second generation) (bk1 takes place after Shasta Chapter bk3 and Ellsberg Chapter bk3)
- Reapers MC: Nomads (bk1 takes place after Ellsberg, Conroe, Shasta and Pema series)
- Rawkfist MC 2nd Generation (bk1 takes place after Reapers MC: Nomads)



BORN VILLAINS MC SERIES W/JULIET FLYNN

- Apex
- Overlord
- Ghost
- Jester



BOOKS RELATED TO THE STEEL BERSERKERS MC SERIES W/NOELLE ZANE

- Pieces of Me
- Bits and Pieces
- Fall to Pieces
- Pieces We Keep
- Pieces of Heaven
- Jagged Little Pieces



BOOKS RELATED TO WET DICKS MC SERIES COWRITTEN AS ECHO SLATER

- Dirty Bastard
- Daddy Bastard
- Bully Bastard



BOOKS RELATED TO LITTLE MEMPHIS MC SERIES

- Little Memphis MC 1-2
- Rawlins Heretics MC 1-3



BOOKS RELATED TO SPENT SHELLS SERIES

- Gator
- Badlands & Shellshock



STANDALONE BOOKS

- Rich S.O.B.
- Rebound Biker
- Used

ABOUT BIJOU



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