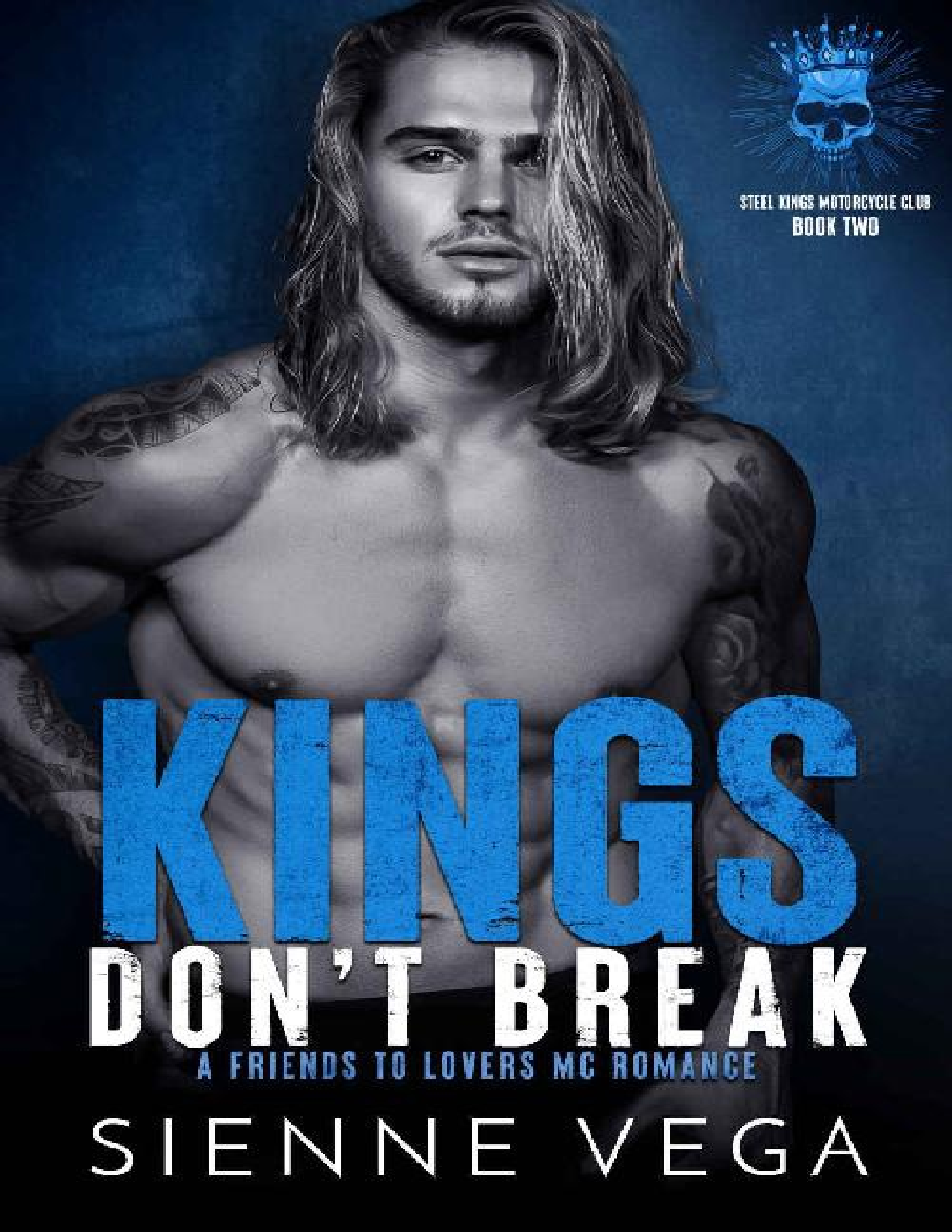




STEEL KINGS MOTORCYCLE CLUB
BOOK TWO



KINGS

DON'T BREAK

A FRIENDS TO LOVERS MC ROMANCE

SIENNE VEGA

KINGS DON'T BREAK

A FRIENDS TO LOVERS MC ROMANCE

SIENNE VEGA



STEEL KINGS BOOK 2

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Cover Design by Mayhem Cover Creations

First paperback edition December 2023

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CONTENT WARNING



HELLO MC LOVERS!

Thanks for checking out Kings Don't Break! This is a friends to lovers motorcycle club romance. But don't let the trope of friends to lovers fool you—this book has dark themes, including a storyline centered around domestic violence.

I understand this is a very sensitive subject that may be upsetting to some readers. It will be addressed in graphic detail in this book, so I just really want to take a second to stress this. As someone who has had loved ones go through similar experiences, this is a subject very personal to me. I felt it was my duty as the writer penning this story to depict the ugliness of this topic in a way that felt authentic... which means there will be some graphic scenes of violence.

I truly hope Cash and Kori's story of survival shines through, and I can promise you in advance ***spoiler alert*** they will get a happy ending. It's just making it through the dark tunnel first...

With all that said, I completely understand if you opt out of this book because of the subject matter. If you think this book will be upsetting for you, **please read a different book.**

Below I have compiled a list of other topics included in this book that could be upsetting:

- Graphic violence and sexual situations
- Graphic depictions of domestic violence and abuse (not between MCs)
- Graphic depictions of alcoholism and addiction
- Mentions of nonconsensual/dubious consent sexual situations (off page, not between MCs)
- Mentions of child abuse (off page)
- Depictions of police brutality/abuse of power
- Depictions of mental health struggles such as attempt to take ones life
- Brief depictions of driving under the influence

This book is not suitable for readers under the age of eighteen.

<3 Sienne

PROLOGUE - BLAKE



October 1998

“BOY, IF YOU DON’T GET AWAY FROM THAT FUCKING WINDOW...”

My face is pressed into the glass, causing all sorts of smudges, my eyes glued to the moving truck parked against the curb outside. At Pa’s growl, I jerk away from the glass like I’ve been electrocuted.

“But, Pa, they’re blocking our driveway.”

He’s settled in his big recliner in front of the TV. The game’s on, and he’s got a can of beer clenched in his hand.

His three favorite things in the world—leather, beer, and sports.

“You think I give a fuck if somebody’s got a moving truck outside?” he grumbles. “They ding any of our cars or my Harley?”

“No, but —”

“Then I don’t give a damn. Stop being a nosy little shithead and grab me a fresh one.” He rattles the empty beer can in his hand.

My shoulders slump from the sigh I let out. I do as he says, taking the empty Texas Brew and plodding over to the kitchen to grab him another.

Our kitchen’s like the rest of the house—squashed-in and reeking of cigarettes. Stacks upon stacks of Ma’s order-by-phone catalogs rest on the counters and bags upon bags of recyclables take up a whole wall space.

I pull open the door to our faded yellow fridge and snatch the last can from Pa’s six-pack.

“OH, C’MON!” he roars at the TV. “Chop block! That was a fucking chop block!”

His rant continues. The longer he goes on, the more F bombs he drops. The louder his voice grows.

I wait it out and instead curl the beer can in my arm like it’s one of those dumbbells at the gym. I run a finger down its icy-cool aluminum sides and then pop the tab out of curiosity. Taking a sniff, I shudder at the gross stench.

It smells like that skunk me and Mason saw at the ravine that one time. How does Pa drink this stuff?

“Took you long enough,” he snarls when I finally head over and hand him the fresh can. He barely looks at me before he returns his attention to the TV.

The Longhorns are down by eight.

It’s made his already bad mood even worse.

I take it as a cue to get the hell away from him. Pa doesn’t take losing well. Anybody that happens to be around becomes the target of his anger. A lesson I don’t really want to learn again. I sneak out the backdoor.

Normally, I’d ride my bike around the block. Maybe go hang out with Mason and his big brother, Logan. But since it’s Sunday morning, their mom’s dragged ’em to church.

She’s real religious. Which is funny ’cuz Mr. Cutler’s not. But Mason says he goes along with the family church outings to make his wife happy.

With nobody fun around, I decide to snoop on the moving truck and people carrying stuff into the house next door. It takes me a few tries, but I wrap my arms around the branch of the lemon tree in our front yard and climb up by stepping off the bark with my feet. Sweat breaks out on my face and a sliver of wood sticks me in the palm of my hand, but I pull it off.

I prop myself up on the thick branch and stare down at the people like I’m some neighborhood watchman.

There’s four of them. A dad, mom, boy that’s older than even Logan, and a small girl that might be even younger than me.

Golden-brown skin. Kind eyes. Clean, like-new clothes.

They almost look like they don’t belong in a neighborhood as dusty and worn down as Pulsboro.

The dad walks up to the truck and takes a box from the mom, scolding her about carrying things that are too heavy. She tinkles out a laugh and mentions something about going inside to unpack the kitchenware.

“Come help me put away the pots and pans, Korine baby,” she calls out to the little girl.

But the little girl’s barely heard a word.

She’s spotted me spying in the tree.

I stare and she stares back. We’re locked in a staring contest for a while. Neither one of us wants to blink and lose.

She’s bony, like she’s the type to pick at her food. Big, brown eyes and corduroy overalls. Hair done up in barrettes and little twisted pigtails. Her brows squish together as if she doesn’t like what she sees.

So I do the same to her. I give her my hardest stink eye, thinking I’m looking real mean and intimidating like Pa.

But the girl breaks out in a *laugh*. She crosses her arms over her chest and starts walking toward the tree.

Toward *me*.

My belly flips and flops. I hold my position where I am—’cuz that’s what Pa would say a man would do—but on the inside I’m wondering what this girl’s up to. Why she’s challenging me with stares and laughing like I’m a joke?

“You climbed that tree all wrong,” she says once she’s directly under me and the branches. “I can climb it better than you.”

“Girls don’t climb trees.”

She glances around as if checking we’re alone. Probably making sure her mom’s not around. Then she tips her head up at me and says, “Wanna bet? Watch this.”

In a few quick seconds, she’s scrambling up the tree like some kind of cat. She’s hooking her leg over the same branch I’m on and then pulling herself up so that she’s sitting by my side.

That had to be under ten seconds.

Way faster than me. I’d almost fallen and busted my ass. Twice.

My face warms. I must be turning red. “So what?” I snap at her. “This

ain't no tree-climbing contest.”

“So, I was right. Girls *do* climb trees. Even better than boys.”

“Nuh-uh!” My hands curl into frustrated fists.

But she only laughs. “Geez, it was a joke. Ever heard of those? What’s there to do around here? Wanna race down the block?”

I’m not sure what to think of her. The other girls from school aren’t like this. They’re busy playing with Barbies and jumping rope. They’re not challenging me to climb trees or run around the block.

I stare down at the street below, wishing I hadn’t caught her attention. “Where’d you come from anyway?”

“West Haven. It’s an hour outside of Hous —”

“I know where it is. You guys left West Haven for Pulsboro?”

“My daddy got a promotion. He’s a cop.”

I grunt.

I’ve never been a fan of the cops—well, Ma and Pa have never been. Which means I’m not either. Being a Steel King, Pa’s no stranger to spending some time behind bars.

“Wanna come over for supper?” she asks randomly. Suddenly, there’s a friendliness to her. She swings her legs as they dangle off the branch. “My mama loves having company over, and she always says God wants us to love thy neighbor.”

“Nah, I probably shouldn’t. My folks say treat strangers like strangers. You don’t know ’em enough to be getting chummy.”

Her nose scrunches. “That’s not too nice.”

I shrug. “They’re not very nice people.”

“What’s that?” She points at the ugly mark purpled all up and down my arm.

I forgot all about it—it still throbs if I move it too much, but I’ve been wearing long sleeves at school to cover it up.

I jerk my arm away from her. “Mind your business. I don’t even know

you.”

“Well... you’re going to,” she says in a smart-alecky tone. “We’ll be in the same class, won’t we?”

Probably so. Pulsboro Elementary’s small enough that there’s only one or two classes per grade level.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t know you... and... and I don’t like you very much. You come over here laughing at me and showing me up climbing the tree. Why would I wanna go over your place for dinner?”

As soon as I say what I’ve said, I know I’ve finally done it.

I’ve hurt the girl’s feelings.

She slow blinks several times. Tears shine in her eyes and her chin quivers.

Oh, no. Here it comes. The waterworks.

Girls love breaking out in cries and making boys the bad guys.

But she doesn’t let a single tear fall. She sucks in a sharp breath and then mumbles, “Fine.”

I’m speechless watching as she swings upside down for a brief second before letting go of the branch completely. She flips over and lands perfectly, right side up on her feet.

How the hell did she do that?! And why can’t I be that cool?!

She takes off without another word or look at me. She’s decided I’m no good and not worth any more of her time.

The screen door to her house slams shut.

Her old man’s on his way out to grab more things from the truck. He glances at his upset daughter as she scurries past him and then looks over at me.

Yep. I’m already the bad guy.

I fold my arms and glare at him. Much like Pa would.

He doesn’t intimidate me, and I don’t feel bad for running his daughter off.

...except, I sorta do. The longer I stay put on the tree branch and watch the house, waiting to see if she'll make another appearance, I wonder if maybe I really *was* a jerk.

She seemed like she was just trying to hang out. Even if she did it in an annoying way.

I huff out a sigh and roll my eyes at how she's got me feeling guilty when I barely know her name.

Korine.

Getting down from the tree's almost as hard as getting up. I struggle and cut up my palm with bitter thoughts about how easy it had looked when she did it.

It's official. I don't like the girl. I don't care how bad I feel. I'll get over it.

"BLAKE!" Pa roars from inside the house. "Where the hell'd you go?! Get me another cold one!"

Dread sinks into me. My shoulders slump and I drag my feet, following the sound of his angry voice. It'll be another night of his fits and bad mood. Another night of peanut butter and jelly for dinner. Meanwhile, my new next-door neighbors will be having a pot roast (I smell it wafting in the air later on).

More than once I consider heading over to knock on their door and apologize.

The girl had said her mom liked having company over. She *had* seemed nice... like one of those TV moms.

As the sun sets and the sky turns into night, I peek out the window and happen to catch the girl looking too. Her eyes widen at the sight of me catching her, then she tugs the curtain back over the window.

She can't stand me either.

Good. Because I don't like her anyway. We'll never ever be friends...

KORINE



Twenty-two years later...

“MISS, HAS ANYONE EVER TOLD YOU YOU SHOULD MODEL?” THE SALES CLERK asks with a wide, welcoming smile. She holds up a bottle of foundation with one hand and flags me down from behind her make up counter with the other. “We’re offering a free item from our Bella Beauty line if you let us use you for a live make up demonstration.”

I flit by, clutching my purse and cursing my luck. “No thanks! I’m in a rush.”

“But, miss! This is an eighty dollar value—and that’s not counting the free make up demonstration by one of our most talented professional artists. We just need fifteen minutes of your time.”

“Can’t. Busy. Sorry!” I call from over my shoulder as I flee the scene.

I hop on the escalator and ride it all the way to the second floor of Keaton's department store. The home decor section is the first thing you see stepping off the escalator. Crystal vases sparkle under the store's fluorescent lighting and there’s a rainbow of throw pillows in every shape, size, and pattern. The clock aisle jumps out on the left, the many hands ticking away.

Just like the panic ticking inside my chest.

I take notice of the time glaring at me and mutter under my breath, “Please be ready. Please, please be ready.”

Racing down the sales floor, weaving between customers browsing at their leisure, I practically break out into a run.

The tailor's station emerges among racks of men's suits and dress shirts. He looks up with his pointed glasses low on his nose, his hands fast at work with a measuring tape and scrap of fabric.

I'm panting by the time I skitter to a stop at his counter. “Hi...” I puff out, my brow shining with sweat. “I'm here for... to pick up... Friday at four.”

His thin lips quirk into a knowing smile. “Yes, Mrs. Stricklin. I'm aware

why you're here. I was the one who took your order. You made it just in time. We close up in four minutes."

Thank you, sweet Jesus. Phew!

I can only mouth thank you as he turns away and rummages among a rack of assorted clothes. "Ah, here it is! A man's Dioni three-piece suit tailored to fit the measurements given."

I tap Ken's credit card to the card read machine and take the suit protected by pristine plastic covering with gleeful hands, feeling like I've just been given a lifeline.

"I presume this suit's for Mr. Stricklin," says the tailor. "He should be pleased with the fit."

My stomach clenches, cutting my glee short. "I really hope so. Thanks again."

I'm able to duck out of Keaton's with only two more salesclerks harassing me about special sales and offers. I dart straight to my dented and dinged Geo Metro in the crowded parking lot, blowing hair out of my face and jerking the key in the ignition.

Forty-five minutes left. I can still make magic happen.

"C'mon, c'mon," I mutter under my breath, encountering traffic.

Even merging onto the highway is a headache.

I slam my palm to my steering wheel, honking my horn at the indecisive car in front of me. They've got their blinker on, going forty in a sixty, driving so slow I'm not sure how we'll ever seamlessly merge. At least not before our lane runs out.

"You dumbass!" I growl. "That's not how you... ARGH!"

The car in front of me speeds up, then slams on their brake before doing the same thing all over again. We play this game to more frustration and swear words from me.

The truck behind me honks their horn as if *I'm* the problem.

I glance in the rearview and see an irate, middle-aged, red-faced man

clenching his teeth. How he's pissed at me is beyond me. It's not like the car in front of me isn't the culprit!

The car comes to a complete stop rather than merge, causing me to smash my foot on my brake to avoid rear-ending them.

I'm not so lucky. The truck tailing me knocks into me from behind like a bad game of bumper cars. I shriek, jerking forward against my seat belt, my grip tight on my wheel.

No, no, no! Not today! Not right now!

The shock takes several seconds to wear off. I've been rear-ended. On the worst possible day ever. This *would* happen to me.

I heave a sigh and go to unlock my car door. We need to assess the damage and exchange information. I've barely set a foot on the ground when the truck revs its engine and then speeds off, cutting around me on the shoulder of the road to make it onto the highway.

"Wait!" I scream, my jaw agape. "You can't take off! You hit me! COME BACK!"

But, as he speeds off down the highway, it's clear he has no intention of doing so. He's long gone, whoever he is.

"Unbelievable!" I growl, kicking dirt. Other cars drift by, some passengers nosily sticking their heads out the window to ogle the damage on my rear bumper. I glare at them, a second away from telling them to fuck off.

Thirty-eight minutes left...

Unsure what direction to even go in, I return to my driver's seat and pull out my phone. Ken's voice mail answers me. At the beep, I inhale a deep breath and launch into an explanation.

"Hey, Ken, it's me," I say tensely. "Nothing to worry about. But... someone hit my car. A hit-and-run. I didn't even get his plate number. I'm going to call the insurance and take it to the shop tomorrow if you'll let me. I didn't involve the police either. I... I knew you wouldn't like that. Again, nothing to worry about. Please don't stress over it. I'll make sure everything's

still perfect for tonight. I love you."

The recording cuts me off at the minute mark, ending the call on its own.

I release the breath I've been holding in, cursing my luck again, before I go to turn the key. The engine gives a pitiful whine that lasts a few seconds and then dies out completely.

"No," I whisper. "No 'effing way! NO!"

There's no way my engine would die like this. Not right now. Not when I'm already behind on what's such an important night for Ken...

Thirty-one minutes...

I should've known an old beater like this was on its last leg. I'd have fixed it myself if I weren't forbidden from doing so. The least that could've been allowed was taking it to a shop.

But that suggestion, too, was frowned upon. Mechanics are too friendly and friendly leads to trouble...

Despite my lack of tools, I pop the hood and take a look. There was a time in the past where I used to keep a secret stash of tools in a makeup pouch tucked away in the bottom compartment of my driver's side door. Those were deemed to be trouble too when they were found out.

A wary sigh leaves me eyeing my dead car engine. I'm not even sure it's salvageable, which would mean my only sense of freedom, my wheels, will be gone. For how long, I'm not sure.

But the thought of going an indeterminate amount of time without my own mode of transportation makes my heart shrivel up.

Twenty-seven damn minutes...

There's no way I'll finish in time. No way I'll make it home and get started on dinner in time with the set schedule.

Panic infects me so that I feel breathless and clammy. I half consider flagging down one of the many cars zipping by just to see if they'll help me. Even just provide the tools. I can do the rest myself.

Really, I'd like to hitchhike the hell out of here. Get as far away from our

new home in Pulsboro as possible. I would if I didn't have Mama to think about.

"What the hell am I going to do?" I groan out loud, staring around at the dreary November landscape.

The thunder of an engine answers me. I look up from my own dead car engine and my heart leaps in my chest at what I see barreling toward me.

Going way too fast for a highway on-ramp, clutching the buckhorn handlebars of his Harley Davidson FXDB Street Bob, his golden brown hair rippling in the wind, is none other than Blake Cash.

Otherwise known not just as my first love but my ex-best friend.

BLAKE



A WHISTLE LEAVES MY LIPS WALKING INTO THE STEEL SALOON. “MASON Cutler, I never thought I’d see the day.”

My best friend's seated at the bar counter grinning wide with his hand on the thigh of his old lady. The sight's still surprising even after a few months of their whirlwind romance.

Once upon a time, Mace swore he'd never settle down, let alone be a one-woman kind of guy.

That changed the day he met Sydney Singer.

The two couldn't stand each other at first, butting heads at every turn, but after false betrayals were cleared up and the real bad guys held accountable, they've been smitten with each other ever since.

So much so, Sydney's head old lady and Mace's in higher spirits than he's ever been.

Not something I say lightly—the two of us have known each other since we rode around in training wheels. He's never been happier than he is with Sydney.

He tears his attention away from her and looks over at me, his dark green eyes glinting. "Well, if it ain't Cash. My best friend who has every woman in town begging to have his babies.”

My face warms as the couple laughs. I play it off with a shake of my shoulder-length golden hair and a modest smile. "Not every woman. Just most."

"Do you hear this cocky mother 'effer?" Mace asks his girl.

Sydney humors us both by holding up her hands like she's innocent. "Don't drag me in the middle! I just got here."

"You've been here four months now. That excuse's wearing off."

She lets out a squeal as he squeezes her thigh and leans close, nipping at her neck.

I fold my arms over my chest, admiring the two. "You need to tone it down. You're making even me sick."

"Then get you a girl and we can double date," Mace says.

I wink in answer. "I've got plenty of girls. Just not *the* girl."

"How are things with Janessa?" Sydney asks in a hopeful tone. "The woman you brought to our last club party? How's she doing?"

"Right... she's good. We're good. Things are very casual."

"In other words, she's for late night calls only." Mace ignores the chiding look Sydney gives him and reaches for his pint of beer. "I didn't care for her anyway. She didn't fit in with the club."

"She was nice!" Sydney says.

"She wouldn't even put her purse down. Like the bar had fucking germs or some shit."

I shoot my best bud an easy smile. "I'd say it's a fair assessment considering the last time the saloon was deep scrubbed, we were in diapers. I'll leave you two lovebirds be."

Both call after me as I turn around and wander the rest of the saloon. On a chilly Friday afternoon like this, the mood's relaxed and casual. The few guys visiting the saloon are sitting back, sipping on their drinks and chatting among themselves.

I pay Mick a visit on the other side of the counter and then hit up the table

where Stein and Bush are enjoying a Texas Brew and some pretzels.

There's a reason I spend most of my afternoons at the Chop Shop. Otherwise, unless we've got club business or a mission we're carrying out, I'm left aimless. I'm left bored. Things never go too well for me when I get too bored...

I'm chuckling as both Stein and Bush give me a hard time about my looks (something I'm used to at the club). I don't have the same harsh ruggedness most of the other guys do. They tease the hell out of me for looking like a Hollywood actor version of a biker versus a real-life one.

I take the digs in stride like I always do.

My phone vibrates in my jeans' pocket. I pull it out as Bush yammers on about my shiny golden hair and how I must spend hours conditioning it.

Janessa's texted me.

Except there are no words in the text message—just heart emojis and a photo.

An *explicit* one that almost has me feeling it's inappropriate even for a damn biker club.

Janessa lies on her bed in nothing but a lacy panty. Her body's arched, pierced tits thrust forward and ass pushed back at an angle showing off her feminine curves.

It's a photo that would make any male brain malfunction.

Damn sure makes mine. I forget where the hell I am for a second.

A moment later, she follows up with another text.

Miss u babe. im so lonely. when can i see u?;)

I glance over my shoulder at Stein and Bush's table. The two older gentlemen have moved on to talking sports. I refocus on my phone and text Janessa

back, asking what she's up to this afternoon.

Thinking of u. Duh. Come over <3

I think on her reply one more second before I agree.

Mace's correct when he says she's for late nights only—our most recent club party being the exception. I tested the waters and brought Janessa around the guys. Something I don't do often with women I'm sleeping with.

There's never been anyone serious enough to. Just casual flings that burn for a couple months before the fire goes out altogether.

But Janessa... it's been longer than usual. Though we've got little in common and our chemistry starts and ends in bed, I don't mind her so much.

An afternoon lay will give me something to do. That photo did what it was supposed to—it turned me on enough to make me want to see Janessa at a moment's notice.

I mount my bike parked outside the saloon and take off.

November in Pulsboro means frosty air and muted skies. Today's no different. I speed through the small-town streets, causing looks everywhere I go with the rumble of my Street Bob.

Janessa and I met a couple months ago in the aftermath of what happened with the Hellrazors and Road Rebels. I'd been in the ER when a registered nurse—all curves under the scrubs she wore and with a wild, chocolatey brown mane—had treated me. She'd had a flirty glint in her eye the entire time. It was no surprise she wound up slipping me her number with my prescription.

We've been hooking up ever since.

She lives on the outskirts of town. Another twenty minutes, and I'll be there.

I turn down the last street that'll lead to the highway. The late autumn wind blows my hair back and feels icy cool on the skin. I've got my shades on or else I'd be squinting against the force of it.

I grip my buckhorn handlebars and turn to merge onto the highway. The road leading out of town looks crowded, even for a Friday. I'm easing up on my speed, gradually braking, when I spot the car on the shoulder of the road.

A beat-up Geo Metro that looks like it belongs at a junkyard rather than on the highway.

The female driver stands in front of the popped hood with the kind of glower that tells me she's having a bad day.

None of my business... 'til I realize I recognize her.

I glance and then glance again.

I'm staring and braking. I'm pulling off to the side of the road to let the impatient cars behind me pass.

I take off my aviators.

My eyes have got to be playing tricks on me. It can't be... there's no way it's...

As I've slowed up and pulled over, the woman's noticed me too. Surprise freezes onto her face, her eyes going wide.

It's when our gazes meet that I know with certainty. That a wave of familiarity strikes me down.

Korine McKibbens.

The Korine McKibbens.

The girl I haven't seen in a decade yet have never stopped thinking about.

Distantly. Deep, deep in the recesses of my mind.

The only girl I've ever been nervous around. The only girl I've ever called my best friend. The only girl who... *got away*.

It's like becoming a time traveler seeing her again. An onslaught of memories rush me. They've got me locking up and speechless as I suddenly feel seventeen again.

Our history runs that far back. Even further than that.

We were *six years old* the first time we met.

The McKibbenses moved in next door, and my world changed forever. I still thought girls were gross and had cooties, yet here was this cute little rowdy thing making me all sorts of confused—she climbed trees and played with her brother’s action figures. She raced all the boys—and even beat some of us—and she wasn’t afraid of a damn thing.

I hated her... ’til I realized I liked her. Then I realized I wanted her to like me.

We settled for friends. Good friends. Friends so close, at times Mace was jealous. Friends so close, eventually, as we grew older, things got too complicated too fast.

I’m so lost in memories, I have to force myself out of the past. I jerk and take a stilted step forward, then I stop again.

Korine’s staring back at me, eyes wide and questioning. She hasn’t budged an inch.

She hasn’t changed a bit—that’s almost more startling than seeing her again.

Korine’s always been the kind of girl that stands out without even trying. In high school, she was one of the prettiest girls. Never with a stitch of make up on. Damn sure with no heels or frilly fixings other girls dabbled in.

Korine, the tomboy with the pixie cut and faded t-shirts, was beautiful all on her own.

A decade later, that’s far from changed.

Every last detail about her is the same. Golden-brown skin blessed with a kiss from the sun itself. The earthy shade of her eyes and the fullness of her mouth. High cheek bones and a soft, diamond-shaped face.

Her hair’s currently a frizzy mess of chin-length curls, yet standing opposite her, I want nothing more than to dig my fingers into the tight tendrils and seal my lips over hers —

I clear my throat and grip my belt buckle. “Kori,” I say hoarsely, like old times. “How the hell are you? It’s been a damn while!”

She blinks out of her shock, no other emotion on her beautiful, bare face. She’s dressed down, in a hoodie and some jeans that swallow up the slim, athletic figure of hers that I remember. Nothing really has changed.

Kori’s still a tomboy at her core.

“Hey, Blake,” she says softly. “I... I wasn’t expecting to see you... right now.”

“What are you doing in Pulsboro?! You come back to town, and you don’t hit me up?”

Her head bows to stare at the sneakers she wears. “It’s been a crazy couple weeks. We’re still getting settled.”

“You’ve moved back to town?!”

I should temper my reaction. Drain some of the enthusiasm from my voice and demand my heart stop beating so excitedly in my chest.

But I can’t help it—it’s second nature to have these reactions around Korine. After a decade spent apart, being around her for even a few seconds feels like old times again.

A familiarity I’ve missed. A sense of home that can be dangerous but addictive.

“Yeah, I have,” she answers after a tense pause. “We bought a house here.”

The spinning wheels and cogs in my brain come to an abrupt, lurching halt. I freeze up again, digesting her words, realizing their meanings. The excitement disappears from my mood and my skin warms despite the November chill.

It’s in this moment that I metaphorically step back and reassess the situation—a diamond-encrusted gold ring glints from the fourth finger of Korine’s left hand. Inside her car, dangling from the backseat overhead handle, is a man’s suit wrapped up in a layer of plastic. I look into her eyes

and suddenly I get it.

I understand what's going on.

Korine's married.

Of course she would be. Girls like Korine don't stay on the market for long...

"Who is he?" I husk out, my voice gravelly, sounding almost primitive. I try to be the opposite—the usual levelheaded, mild-mannered Blake Cash most know me as. *Mace's* the hothead. Not me.

But damn if I don't become one in this moment. I don't even know the guy and yet I already want to bash his face in. A deep-rooted, irrational hatred scorches through me at the thought another man married Korine.

My Kori.

"No one you'd know," she answers vaguely. "We moved here for a promotion."

"Kids?"

She shakes her head. "You should get going, Blake. Don't stop on my account."

"Your car broke down?" I ignore her comment and walk around to stand beside her in front of her engine. Peering down at the rusting guts of the car, I cast her a glance. "I'm surprised you didn't fix it on the spot. You've always been a pro at this."

"No tools."

I raise a brow. "*You?* No tools? You practically carried 'em wherever you went!"

"You should get going."

"I don't got much on me. But the Chop Shop's not far. I can give you a ride. We'll have one of the guys tow the car back there —"

"No, Blake, really... it's okay."

"It's no trouble. It's what we do at the Chop Shop. You know. You worked a summer there."

“It’s not a good idea. You should be on your way.”

“I’m not leaving you on the side of the road —”

“Please,” she snaps, irritated. “Just go!”

I take half a step back and survey her up and down. Now that I think about it, now that we’ve interacted, something’s off about her.

There’s a restraint she possesses that wasn’t ever there before. Almost as if she’s holding back. Her true personality’s bottled up inside. Trapped for some reason.

I cock my head to the side. “You okay?”

“I just need to get home. Without your help.”

“Alright,” I say slowly, taking another step away from her. An awkward beat passes between us where we don’t speak but our eyes remain on each other. I can’t put my finger on it, on what’s off about the moment. So I play along. I do as she asks. “It was cool seeing you again, Kori. Come by the Steel Saloon sometime if you get the chance.”

She gives a stiff nod in answer. Restrained and noncommittal.

Eyes dark and mysterious.

I turn and walk away, feeling like my teenage fantasy has been crushed. The many what ifs and someday’s that always lingered in the back of my mind about Korine go up in smoke. Not only is she married to some asshole she’s bought a house with, she wants nothing to do with me. She doesn’t even want to be friends.

...she won’t even let me give her a ride.

We hadn’t left off on the best of terms, but shit. I thought we were still friendly enough.

I mount my bike, revving my engine, aviator shades disguising any emotion from my face. Then I blast off, speeding by Korine as she stands stranded on the side of the road.

Leaving my dream girl in the dust.

KORINE



“BABY, HURRY UP AND HOP IN. THIS RIDE SLOWS DOWN FOR NOBODY!” MAMA simpers as she slams on the brake. She’s sitting behind the wheel with bright, guileless eyes and her fuzzy slippers on the pedals.

I gape at her for a second before rushing over to the driver’s side door. “Mama, you didn’t even put your seatbelt on.”

“Hmm? Oh. Seatbelt. I could’ve sworn...”

“You’re not supposed to be driving,” I say gently, grabbing her hand, and leading her from the seat. “How’d you get the keys to Ken’s Escalade?”

She pauses, a blank look developing on her plump, round-cheeked face. “Well... you know... I’m not sure. Hey, how about we go eat at Krispy Krunchy?! I could go for some tenders with that dipping sauce.”

“Maybe next time, Mama. You know, when we’re back in *Houston*.”

“And that’s not where we are now?”

I leave her question hanging in the air unanswered. I’m more concerned with buckling her in on the passenger side, double-checking the seatbelt as if I’m childproofing. I might as well be considering Mama’s condition. Walking back around to the driver side, I cast a parting look at my dead Geo Metro and sigh.

This can’t be good.

It can't be good at all.

Driving home feels like I'm marching off to war. My stomach sours and I can't focus on any of Mom's attempts at conversation.

She points out the scenic harvest decorations on the front lawn of the O'Neal's home, then aims such an innocent smile at me, my heart aches.

It aches because I want to smile back—I want to gush over the pretty pumpkins and leafy golden wreaths too.

But how can I when I've failed?

I had a simple set of instructions, a specific timetable to follow them, and I *failed*.

I didn't even make it to the butcher. Which means no special order rump roast.

...which means tonight's big, impressive dinner won't be so big and impressive anymore. It'll be a huge flop.

Everything's ruined.

As I make the last turn onto our block, I feel sick. I feel even sicker when our house slips into view and there's a squad car parked in the drive of our two-car garage.

Mama points it out. "Oh, look. Wonder if there's a cop around catching some bad guys!"

"Maybe, Mama," I humor, pulling the key out the ignition and undoing my seatbelt. "C'mon, I've got to help you to your room."

"My room? Oh, our house! It looks so different. When did we add an extra story?"

I neglect to point out the fact that Mama's thinking about the wrong house. She means my childhood home several blocks away. The house that, to this day, symbolizes the happiest time in my life.

Before I grew up and learned you can't survive off hopes and dreams.

Mama pokes me in the side as I walk her up the front path and tells me I'm too skinny. "I'm gonna fix you up your favorite. Catfish and cheesy grits.

Extra on the cheese and butter.”

I’m more concerned with listening for sounds. I carefully unlock the door and peer down the entry hall.

The inside of our two-story, four-bedroom house resembles a model home in a magazine more than it does a home that’s *actually* lived in.

Eggshell white walls with sturdy wooden beams and farmhouse furniture make up the space. Every picture frame that hangs has been meticulously measured out so it’s just right, so it’s perfectly pleasing to the eye. Every stainless steel appliance gleams, and the sunlight pours in by way of the many bay windows.

There isn’t a crumb anywhere to be found. No smudges or dirt tracked on the floor—I know, I spent an hour scrubbing it spotless earlier.

It’s a house many dream of. It’s a house that makes me hold my breath from the moment I enter.

I take off Mama’s coat and then mine, hanging both on the coat hook on the wall. For a brief second, my gaze lingers on the third hook from which a thick bomber jacket dangles. The Pulsboro Police shield is stitched onto the shoulder in a deep navy-blue and bold shade of gold that’s supposed to be heroic and valiant.

Instead, all it reminds me of is today’s failure. The amazing dinner I won’t be preparing...

“I thought I heard you girls.”

I tear my gaze away from the coat hooks to find Ken walking up. His gaze is set on us, his lips spreading into a smile. He holds out his arms to welcome Mama with a hug that she steps into.

“My favorite son-in-law!”

Ken laughs, giving her an affectionate squeeze. “Sunny, you know I’m your only son-in-law.”

“Ain’t it great winning by default?”

“Just what every man wants to hear.” He turns his attention back onto me,

his smile frozen on his face. “There she is. I’m glad you were able to find your missing daughter.”

Mama’s brows scrunch together. “I... was?”

“I sent you out to find her. Don’t you remember, Sunny?”

“Oh... yes... right.” Though, as Mama answers him, she still looks perplexed.

I step forward to intervene. “I’ll take her to her room. She shouldn’t be out unsupervised. She’ll get lost again.”

My arm curls around Mama’s shoulders to escort her up the stairs without any protests from Ken. He’s letting me make a getaway scot-free—’til we get halfway up the staircase and he speaks again.

His tone matter-of-fact, he says, “Your mother wouldn’t be out wandering unsupervised if someone were home on time to watch her, like was agreed.”

Every bone in my body goes stiff. I hover over the next stair, feeling like a bright spotlight has been shone onto me. Like I’ve been on the run from the police, and they’ve tracked me down via chopper, blinding me with their searchlight.

It might as well be the case—unease and guilt coalesce into one singular, belly-rippling, heart-pounding, clammy-skinned reaction.

“Yes, you’re right,” I answer. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Kor. Just don’t let it happen again.”

“Let what happen?” Mama questions, clueless.

“C’mon, Mama. You need to lay down.”

We make it the rest of the way up the stairs as if I’ve found my escape; I’m fleeing the scene after all.

But it’s only momentary. A small reprieve from what will be a disaster.

My failure that won’t soon be forgotten...

Ding-dong!

“Oooh, somebody’s visiting us!” Mama squeaks, eyes wide and excited. “Should I go answer?”

I’m busy stirring the bubbling pot at the stove so I don’t get to reply in time. Ken beats me to it, aiming a pitying look in Mama’s direction.

“You sit and look pretty, Sunny. *I’ll* get the door.”

Mama winks at me the moment Ken zips out the room. “You chose well, baby. A real winner.”

I hum as an answer. My energy’s depleted from the long day, and if this dinner’s going to be a success, I need to put on a good show. I need to impress Captain Vargas and Lieutenant Gillard. Dinner might not be the special rump roast that was requested, but my butter chicken is one of my secret weapons—no one alive who has ever tasted it walked away dissatisfied.

I add a pinch more red chili powder and then taste test the sauce.

Almost perfect.

But still not good enough.

I’ve been poring over the stove, making sure everything’s just right to the point I’ve forgotten to get ready.

Ken reminds me. He calls out from the front of the house.

“Kor, come say hello to the captain and lieutenant when you’re able!”

The coded message lights a fire under my ass. I stir the sauce a few more times, turn down the heat, and then ask Mama to watch the stove.

“Don’t touch,” I warn.

She waves me off. “Chile, please. Have you forgotten who’s the mama and who’s the daughter? I cooked every meal of yours your whole life!”

That was then. This is now.

I refrain from pointing that out as I race upstairs to go change. Not even ten minutes later, I’m hurtling back down the stairs in a simple turtle-necked sweater dress and my curls framing my face. It’s not until I walk into the den

that my heart skips a beat at my mistake.

It's in Ken's eyes. The subtle way they flash with disapproval.

I quickly stroke my hair that was *supposed* to be elegantly pinned up as I beam wide at the two men in our company.

"Hello, it's so nice to meet you."

"Stricklin, you didn't tell us your wife was a sweet little thing," says Lieutenant Gillard. "Where'd you luck out with one like this?"

"Yeah, is there a store where you buy 'em?" Captain Vargas gives a deep laugh, his protruding belly and white beard making him resemble a Santa Claus with tan skin. "If so, can I return my wife without a receipt and pick up a new one?"

The three men share in more laughter at the joke. I stand by and keep smiling, waiting out the moment.

Ken places a hand on the small of my back. "Wait 'til you taste her cooking. Best you'll ever have."

"Well damn, Stricklin. Don't hold out on us!" cries out Gillard. "Lead the way!"

Fifteen minutes later, they're seated around the table in the formal dining room. I'm bustling to and from the kitchen like a waitress at a restaurant, carrying in the hot dishes and pouring drinks. Mama offers several times to help only for me to decline.

I'm supposed to work alone.

"Darling, have a seat," Gillard says after I've made my fifth trip. He looks across the table at Ken. "Stricklin, you're overworking your poor wife. Is this how you'll run the station?"

Ken sits up straighter than he already is—which is already damn near perfect posture. "Of course not! Korine, sit. You got our company thinking you can't enjoy your meal."

I'd short-circuit if I wasn't used to the contradiction.

One moment I'm working too hard. The next, not hard enough.

I stopped trying to make sense of it years ago...

Dropping into my seat, I put on my well-practiced smile. “I hope you all enjoy. It’s my special butter chicken recipe.”

“Stricklin mentioned a rump roast,” Captain Vargas says.

Ken cuts a pointed stare in my direction. My face warms up at once, my pulse climbing.

Oh no...

“But,” Vargas continues with a pleased nod, “this is even better. You were right about your wife being great in the kitchen. If she’ll be bringing her meals to the precinct picnics, we just might promote you after all.”

“You’re up for a promotion!?” Mama gasps innocently. She clasps her hands together, forgetting about her plate of food.

I have to lean over and remind her to eat—she can’t take her laundry list of medications if she doesn’t, and it’s never good when her blood sugar gets too low.

Talk around the table turns official. Captain Vargas and Lieutenant Gillard grill Ken about his career and whether he truly feels he’s a good fit for the Pulsboro PD.

“I’m almost nine years into my career. I’m ready for the challenge,” Ken says.

“Being lieutenant isn’t just a challenge,” Gillard corrects, his expression serious. His lips have thinned the tighter he’s pulled his mouth. “It’s the biggest responsibility you’re yet to have. We’ve reviewed your record, Stricklin. You’re a damn good sergeant. But there’s a difference between supervising a couple uniforms and helping run a whole precinct.”

Captain Vargas nods. “Even one as small as Pulsboro.”

I remain engaged the entire time. Throughout the talk, I give whoever’s speaking my undivided attention, and I pretend whatever he’s saying is the most fascinating thing known to man.

Really, in the back of my mind, I’m thinking about earlier.

Not about my failure. Not even about the hit-and-run.

I'm thinking about the man I saw for the first time in a decade—the only man that I've spent every night wondering about.

No matter how long it's been. No matter how far away.

Many years ago, Blake Cash stole a piece of my heart that's yet to be returned. He's walked around with it in his pocket like nothing, while I've had to move on, going through the motions, living with a big hole in my heart.

Seeing him again was like ripping off the Band-Aid I'd placed on top of it.

It hurt like hell and made it impossible to breathe.

Impossible to think.

He'd looked just like I imagined; just like I'd spied on social media.

Golden hair. Boundless blue eyes. A smile that melts you on the inside. That makes you *swoon* like some stupid romance novel cliché.

But it was more than Blake's looks—it's always been more than his handsome, perfect face—it's the way he feels more familiar than anyone I've ever known.

Even after a decade apart, it's still there. The bond we'd shared.

"This is some damn good chick—" Gillard interrupts himself with a deep cough. His skin quickly reddens as he beats a hard fist to his chest and his eyes tear up.

I blink out of my reverie in time to hurry and grab him a glass of water. Ken and Vargas have half-risen out of their chairs to check on him.

I return a split second later, clutching the cool glass and handing it over. He chugs it whole, making a grateful refreshed noise when he's done.

"Phew!" he says hoarsely. "That's better. That was some spicy chicken."

"Apparently, too spicy for your White ass," Vargas says.

Gillard takes the joke in stride, barking out a laugh. After half an awkward second, Ken joins him, his laugh unnatural and hollow.

We finish the evening with pound cake and coffee for dessert. Mama regales the captain and lieutenant with the time she accidentally nabbed a bank robber on the street to more howls of their laughter.

“And there I was, minding mine, and he comes running out with bags of cash. So I stuck my foot out, and what d’you know?” she says, shaking her head. “He fell face first into the cement. The cop chasing him caught up and slapped him with cuffs!”

Captain Vargas wipes a tear of mirth from his eye. “I’ll tell you, Stricklin. It sounds like we need to skip your promotion altogether and go straight into hiring Sunny.”

Ken plays along with another humoring smile. “That’s Sunny for you. I knew Korine got her trouble-making personality from somewhere.”

I give no reaction to the subtle slight, appearing the happy and well-behaved housewife I’m supposed to be at these work dinners.

We bid good night, waving off the two senior police officers from our front step like we’ve discussed. Our hands stay in the air ’til they’ve rounded the corner and they’re no longer in view. The second they’re gone, Ken drops his arm from around me.

“Get inside.”

“I’ll get started on clean up.”

I say it as if there’s a choice in the matter. But, somehow, saying it aloud does make me feel better—it offers the *illusion* of choice, which has become enough.

The door swings shut behind us and makes me flinch. I dart to go into the kitchen. I’ve barely made it to the sink when Ken’s voice fills up the quiet house.

“UN-FUCKING-BELIEVABLE! NOT AGAIN!”

The bottle of dish soap slips out of my hand as I spin around and sprint toward the noise.

My heart’s beating so fast, the urgency so instant, I almost feel dizzy.

No, no, no! Ugh!

It's just as I imagine. I come to a clumsy stop feet away from the first floor bathroom, where the door hangs open and Mama's in tears.

"I'm sorry," she cries. "I tried to make it. I tried to hurry —"

"You clean this shit up!" Ken barks, rounding on me. He takes a furious step in my direction, his arm twisted toward the bathroom. "You fucking said it wouldn't happen again—you promised she'd control herself!"

My frustration rips my voice up, making it sound hoarse. "What do you expect, Ken? She's sick! She can't help it —"

His temper clenches on his face and burns in his gaze. I bite my tongue at the fire that's quickly spreading. It's a warning to shut up and back down.

"I'll... I'll clean it up," I stammer.

"I'm sorry." Mama's clutching the bathroom counter, her soiled pants half down her hips.

"It's okay, Mama. Here."

"NO!" Ken yells, and we both jump. "It's not fucking okay—how many times do I have to tell you?"

"Hey, don't you raise your voice at my baby!" Mama shouts back.

"Mama, please!"

I hurry to put myself between them, walking her deeper into the bathroom to get her cleaned up.

But Mama's got a temper too; one that's always been a force to reckon with when shown. As short, sweet, and plump as she is, she's not a woman you want to make angry.

Which means I need her to calm down. I need Ken to calm down.

"Your husband's an ass!" Mama screeches.

I'm trying desperately to clean her up, running a towel under the warm water and wiping her down.

Ken's walked away, though he still overhears. He doesn't have to answer for me to know this.

I wipe Mama some more, my hands shaking. “Please don’t. Please just be quiet.”

“NO!” Mama protests, pouting. “It’s not nice to yell! Who does he think he is? Kick him out!”

A weary sigh leaves me. “This is his house.”

“Then let’s go! I’ll take you home and cook you that catfish! Where’re my keys?”

...what home? What car keys?

I don’t bother answering her, like I so often do.

Mama’s confused. She’s operating off a checkered memory where bits and pieces are clear while the rest is blacked out.

Once I’ve gotten her clean, I guide her upstairs to her room. She’s already forgotten the argument by the time I’m tucking her into bed.

She yawns. “Tell Ken I said good night.”

I kiss her cheek. “Okay, Mama. Sleep tight.”

I close the door and resign myself to more hell.

Downstairs, I scrub the floor clean ’til it gleams under the ceiling light.

My knees are rubbed raw and my back aches. I lose myself in the monotonous motion of the sponge against the tile, my mind traveling far away into alternate timelines.

Alternate lives I wish I were living.

Blake a constant on my mind.

Ken’s shoes clack on the same tiles I’ve scrubbed, without a care about any scuff marks he may make. It’s no trouble for him if I have to go back over the floor again.

These shoes are the first things I see once I’ve taken my eyes off the sponge—his like-new leather dress shoes that he’s worn with his custom-tailored suit. My gaze rakes up his long legs, then travels to his cold blank slate of a face. I’m peering up at him, sweaty and exhausted, appealing for forgiveness.

He stares down at me like he's a judge, about to issue my sentencing.

“Do I need to tell you where you went wrong tonight? All the ways you fucked up?”

“I'm sorry, Ken. It won't —”

“Don't fucking say it won't happen again! Don't fucking insult my intelligence, Kor.”

I put the sponge down and rise up off my knees. “I tried to get the rump roast, Ken. I really did. But I had to drive across town to get to the tailor before they closed —”

“That sounds a lot like an excuse. You had two hours.”

“Someone rear-ended my car —”

“You mean *your* bad driving caused another accident,” he interrupts in a sharp tone. “I let you keep that piece of junk car, and you go and get it totaled. You can say goodbye to that privilege. My kindness only comes back to bite me in the ass. No more of that.”

My brows push together, my heart sinking. “You can't blame me for somebody else hitting my car, Ken. That's not fair.”

His eyes flash in warning and I fall silent. “Fair? Let me tell you about fair. I ask for a few simple things, and you can't even do that right. You've got me promising the guys a rump roast then you come with some over-spiced chicken. That sound fair to you?”

“Both the lieutenant and captain said they loved —”

“I don't give a fuck what they said. They're not the ones living under this roof, are they? I am. You are. I work hard to give you everything, and how do you repay me? You fail at every turn. You can't do shit right. What purpose do you serve, Kor? What use are you? Because from where I'm standing, you're pretty damn useless most of the time.”

A pang of shame hits me as I shake my head and think up ways I can prove him wrong. Convince him I'm not useless. I can try harder.

“Ken... please... today was just a bad day. I'll make up for it.”

“You’re damn right you’ll make up for it. In more ways than one,” he rants, drowning me out. “Especially considering your mother shits on herself! Like a fucking toddler that wets the damn bed! It must run in the family. Both mother and daughter are dead weight. Both determined to fuck up every part of my night.”

I struggle through my next breath, urging myself to stay calm. Deferential. “It’s her condition. You were there when the doctor explained she can’t help it. Sometimes she’s going to have accidents before she can make it to the —”

“Are you saying I’m too stupid to understand her health issues? Is that what you’re implying? I don’t get what the doctor said?”

“No, Ken... of... of course not.”

“Then what were you saying? Be real clear, Kor. Speak very carefully.”

“All I’m saying... I’m just saying she can’t help it. Please give her some grace.”

He barks out a harsh laugh in my face. “Grace?! I’ve given plenty of grace! Do you think anybody else would have the two of you? Anybody else would put up with this kind of shit? *Shit...* on my floors!”

“You’re not the one that cleans it up!” I snap before I can stop myself. My hands gesture to the floor where the cleaning supplies lay. “I’m the one who takes care of it. I’m the one who looks after her and cleans —”

His fist slams into me so hard, I’m almost knocked into another timeline. My body sails backward, all footing and balance lost. I don’t remember hitting the ground.

Consciously, I’ve blacked out. I come to seconds later, crumpled on the floor with Ken standing over me.

My ears are ringing. My body feels disjointed and my jaw throbs in unbearable pain. I open my mouth to speak and realize I can’t. I’m spitting up blood. A panicked sound escapes my throat at the gruesome discovery.

“How many fucking times do I have to tell you about mouthing off?” Ken

roars, and another pained, terrified cry bubbles out of me. “You get real bold like you’re the one in charge here! Stop the theatrics—don’t expect me to feel sorry for you now!”

I should shut up. I should cooperate.

But I can’t. There’s so much blood. It spills past my lips, and I break into another terrified cry, wondering if he’s broken something this time. If my throbbing jaw’s dislocated or he’s knocked out a tooth.

Cries of pain aren’t what Ken wants to hear. It only pisses him off more.

He draws his foot back and then swings it forward, crushing me hard in my ribs.

“I SAID STOP THE THEATRICALS!” he bellows, going for another kick, then another.

With no means of escape, no way to protect myself, nothing to do but cry, I curl myself up in a ball. My arms come up over my dizzy head and I shut my eyes, doing what I always do in these moments.

Praying for its end. Disappearing into my head.

Alternate timelines and realities where this isn’t my life.

When he is done—he’s screamed and kicked and expressed every ounce of rage possible—I’m beyond pain. My body’s gone scarily numb in some effort to protect myself from all the agony being inflicted.

He steps back and observes his work. Blood streaks the once gleaming tiles I’d just finished scrubbing clean from Mama’s accident.

“Clean this shit up. Then I want you ready for me in bed,” he growls, turning away and disappearing down the hall.

Silent tears streak my cheeks as I wobble onto my knees and reach for the sponge with a shaky hand.

I scrub the floors spotless, wiping up the blood I’ve bled all over the place—and when more leaks out, I clean that up too.

My mind takes me far away from the present as I do. Back to those alternate timelines—back to the side of the highway where I’d seen *him*

again.

The one who I once called home.

BLAKE



“SOMETHING BOTHERING YOU, BABE? HOW CAN I FIX IT?” JANESSA COOS, kissing her way down my chest. Her hand finds my dick and starts stroking me. “How about you relax and let me take over? I’ll have you forgetting your troubles in no time.”

We’re lying in her bed, minutes after midnight. We spent most of the evening messing around. First in her living room, then again after we ordered takeout from the Chinese spot that delivers. I fucked Janessa so hard, we knocked over the half-eaten containers on the coffee table. It’s been on and off for hours.

But as the heater in her bedroom kicks out lukewarm air and she tries to start up another round, I’m checked out. The sex was good enough. Janessa’s sexy and playful; she’d have any guy hard as hell in seconds.

This would be the case for me if I weren’t distracted.

If my mind weren’t on one thing and one thing only.

Earlier, on the side of the road, I’d seen Korine McKibbens for the first time in a decade.

It’s a shock to the system. She’s the last person I imagined I’d run into, even if she’s also the person I’ve missed the most.

Most people born in Pulsboro live and die here. They attend the local

colleges and then become the adults and pillars of the community their parents and grandparents before them once were. It's a long generational lineage through the decades.

The few that do leave, rarely, if ever, return. The ones that go cold turkey on Pulsboro—cut everybody from town out of their lives without a word—are almost always gone for good.

Korine barely said so much as goodbye before she left.

It's been assumed she'd want nothing to do with Pulsboro for the rest of her life.

She's married.

That piece of information spins inside my head. It's one of the most distracting aspects of our run-in. Korine McKibbens—what the hell is her married name, anyway?—is forever off-the-market. She's a taken woman. Even worse than a boyfriend and a fucking fiancé.

She's got a husband.

Laying in Janessa's bed among the wrinkled sheets that smell of sex, I begin to imagine what he's like. Tension gathers in my jaw, and I glare up at the ceiling. Janessa's busy stroking my dick and kissing me all over. I barely register her touch, too focused on Korine and the man who put a ring on her finger.

I bet he's tall. Athletic. She always liked a guy that was physical and good with his hands. He's probably got some lucrative career if they've bought a house. There was a brand-new men's three-piece suit in the backseat of her car.

The image of some prick with a spotless suit and a neat part in his hair materializes in my mind.

Does he make her happy? Does he make her laugh? Does he have her trembling with pleasure the way I used to make her —

I cut the bitter thought off midway through. It's not appropriate. She's a married woman, and that should be respected.

It doesn't matter what I think or how I feel, because she chose him. He's the man she wanted. End of story.

That's what I tell myself anyway, despite my feelings to the contrary.

"Mmm, babe, touch me," Janessa purrs. Her wild chocolate mane cascades over her shoulders as she moves. She's climbed on top of me, rocking her hips. The heat of her pussy rubs against my dick and *should* turn me on.

I barely respond, my gaze above her on the ceiling and my mind miles away.

She grabs my hands and places them on her breasts. Her hips rock faster and faster in her attempt to turn me on and make me hard. As soon as she takes her hands off mine, expecting me to grope and knead her breasts, I'm dropping my arms to my side.

It doesn't even register how rude and neglectful it must come across.

"Babe," she pleads, bending forward to kiss my lips. "Babe, don't you want me?"

"Korine—"

The name tumbles out of my mouth when I don't mean for it to—the disconnect between my brain and the rest of me never more real than in this moment.

"Korine?!" Janessa screeches, freezing her efforts. She shoves her hands at my face. "Who the fuck's Korine?!?"

"Janessa," I correct. "I said Janessa."

"You said *Korine*, Cash!" she yells. She makes a sound of disgust and then hops off me. "Who's that, huh? Is that some other slut you're banging? Is she one of those Tits on Heels bitches at the club?"

I sit up, trying my best to be calm. Janessa's taken to flitting about the room in search of her clothes and mine, sorting through her hospital scrubs and my t-shirt. She picks a robe off the floor and wraps it around herself. My jeans she tosses at me with such force they smack into my chest.

“Get out, Cash! I can’t believe I fell for your games again.”

“Janessa,” I say in an even tone, “we’re not exclusive. We’re just messing around.”

Wrong thing to say.

“JUST messing around?! Is that all it is?” She produces a squawk worthy of a bird and stomps around her room some more. “Get out, get out! I don’t want to see you anymore!”

“It’s half past midnight. Can’t we talk about this? We’ve still got some General Tso chicken leftover —”

“GET OUT, BLAKE CASH!”

Her scream must be heard by every other person in the apartment building. If she keeps screaming bloody murder like this, somebody’ll overhear and call the cops.

Then I’ll have a whole other kind of problem.

I hold up my hands and slide off the bed. “Fine, Janessa. But if I go, I ain’t coming back. This is the end.”

“Go back to Korine! Whoever the bitch is!”

I slide on my jeans and pull my t-shirt over my head. Janessa chases me out with more screeches and stomps of her bare feet. The second my boot crosses over the threshold, she slams the door shut with enough force to rattle the wall.

Wait ’til Mace hears about this.

He called it. He already wasn’t her biggest fan.

I head down to my Harley parked at the curb of her apartment building. The street’s dead silent. No traffic coming through and no other soul outside.

Standard, even for a Friday night in Pulsboro.

Except for Larson Lane where all the bars are, the town’s usually asleep a few hours into the night.

The Steel Saloon’s probably still teeming with life. I could stop by and hang with some of the guys. Swinging my leg over my bike and sitting down

on the seat, I decide against it.

There's always tomorrow night if I want to spend time at the saloon.

After my surprise run-in today with Korine and this blow-up with Janessa, I might as well call it a night.

My Street Bob rumbles taking off down the block. The misty fog roams the dark streets. Wandering around Pulsboro this late makes you feel like the only man alive.

The quiet forces you to think. The cold keeps you on edge, with your lungs barely able to take a breath.

I pass through town, ignoring the one street I never go down. The same street we'd driven down on a night like this years ago but a street I haven't gone down since.

I stop at the gas station a couple blocks from my place. No other cars are filling up and only the clerk is inside the convenience store a few feet away. I slide off my bike and reach for the gas nozzle.

My phone buzzes. Glancing at the screen, I expect to see Janessa's name. I don't expect Mom's.

When are you going to come see your father?

I roll my eyes, start to reply, then think better of it. There's no use when it'll never change anything. They'll see me how they want to see me. Mom fires off another text as if sensing my indecision.

You can't ignore us forever, Blake.

My teeth grind together on their own. I pocket my phone and head straight for the gas station convenience store. The door dings above my head as I push it open and earn a look from the clerk. He's bored behind the counter, fiddling with his cell phone to pass the time.

Artificial light bathes the store front to back and every aisle's fully stocked. All the sugary and salty treats you could ask for. Rows of magazines and spin racks of souvenirs and other on-the-go knickknacks, like phone batteries and mini umbrellas.

I go for the far back, where the refrigerators are.

There's every beverage you could thirst for. A dozen different brands of water. Just as many flavors of soda and juice. But it's the beer that steals the show.

That forces my gaze.

It happens within a blink of my eye. The hunger taking over. The instant, unbearable hunger that rushes me and makes the scene around me feel like it's shifted. I'm standing in the middle of a warped tunnel where everything in the store's a blur except for the refrigerators that tower above me. They're in perfect focus. The large, untouched, readily available stock of beer.

Bottles of beer. Cans of beer. Cases of beer.

Texas Brew. Pike. Ranger Ale. And every other fucking brand available for sale.

I become someone else. Someone driven by a compulsion that feels inescapable and instinctual. A core part of myself and who I am. So damn integral, I can't begin to fight it. I've fallen too deep into the pit.

Too far down the hole.

I need it like I need air. My legs move me toward the glass door, my eyes wide and pupils dilated.

Just one fucking drop is all I'll have. One fucking drop can't hurt —

“You need any help?” calls out the clerk, ripping me from my sudden trance.

It's like somebody shining a spotlight on me as I turn stiffly away from the refrigerator and peer at the end of the aisle. He's fixing one of the snack displays. The way he's looking at me, he must sense something's off.

I shake my head once, then twice, then I step away from the refrigerator altogether. "Nah," I say. "No help needed. Except... get me a pack of the Borvo Lights. And some spearmint gum. I'll meet you up front."

He moves on to fulfill my request while I take another few seconds to collect myself. I breathe in and out, throw a parting glance at the refrigerator of beer, and urge myself to walk away.

You've done it before. Do it again. Just... walk away, Blake.

"Hey, thanks," I say once he's rung me up for my cigarettes and gum.

I rarely smoke cigarettes and I chew gum even less... but in this moment, carrying these out of the store fills a void.

The moment's a one-off. A few seconds of weakness. It doesn't mean anything.

I beat that monster years ago.

Throwing my leg over my bike and gripping the handles, it's what I tell myself. These are the kind of reminders I need to keep going. This is the reason I need to forget.

I spare a moment to pull out my phone and delete the text message Mom sent me. Her number gets blocked.

Then I'm off. My bike rumbles as I drive off into the darkness.

"Well, damn," says Chaz, one of the Chop Shop's veteran mechanics. He wipes sweat and motor oil from his brow. "Who said I couldn't create a masterpiece like this? Ain't it a beaut?"

I stand back to admire his work. He's made a number of upgrades to a customer's Super Glide. One-ten twin cam power under the tank. Newly

installed ultra foam step-up seating for both balance and comfort. Sleek Biltwell handlebars that give the bike a fresh, dynamic edge. LED switch back lights. And the finishing touch—chrome canon mufflers for a solid rumble when coming down the block.

“Well, damn is right, Chaz,” I whistle. “This is impressive. Even for you.”

Chaz flashes a gap-toothed smile at me. “They don’t call me Dr. Frankenstein for nothing.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“Beats the hell outta me. But it has a nice ring to it, don’t it?”

I shake my head to keep him laughing and move on to visit the other stations around the garage.

This time of year is a slow season for the Chop Shop, meaning we don’t have as much business or as many customers coming in.

It’s made it easier filling Velma’s shoes, but that doesn’t mean it’ll be permanent. For as big of a lying, backstabbing, fucked up traitor as Velma was, she was damn good at managing the bike shop. She ran a tight ship and kept everything in order.

While I might be the shop owner (along with Silver), I’m not cut out for the day-to-day managerial bullshit. I’m better with my hands. Better at fixing and riding bikes. Managerial office work has never been my thing.

“Shit,” I say from inside the bike shop office. I check the time and then grab the stack of invoices. “Chaz, did anybody ever head over to One Stop Autoshop to grab the lithium ion battery for Daryl Weaver’s Nightster? He’s picking up first thing tomorrow.”

“Nah... didn’t you say you’d do that today? Oh, crap. One Stop closes in thirty.”

“I fucking know that!”

I rush out the door before I’ve barely finished my sentence. Daryl Weaver just might be our biggest customer. He’s competing in a national ride

competition and needs his bike in prime shape before he departs. I'd promised him myself we'd have it ready to rock.

I dash across the parking lot and opt for my pickup truck rather than my bike since I'll be transporting merchandise.

The One Stop Autoshop is the only place within a fifty mile radius that has the exact brand of battery he requested.

No more than fifteen minutes later, am I screeching on the brakes and hopping out the driver's side door to make it inside the One Stop Autoshop.

Shaking back my golden hair from my face, I stride into the shop, prepared to charm the female clerk at the desk.

Instead I'm confronted with a different woman who's ahead of me in line.

Korine's filling out paperwork as she explains to the clerk what's wrong with her car.

"If you could fix it for two hundred that would be greatly appreciated. I'd like to pay cash."

"Ma'am, it's going to come out to at least six hundred —"

"Please, it's all that I can afford," Korine interrupts, then as if sensing a third presence, she looks up. Her eyes meet mine and for a second time within twenty-four hours, we're at a standstill. "Blake... what are you doing here?"

I tilt my head to the side. "I could say the same thing to you."

BLAKE



“YOU HERE TO FIX THAT GEO?” I ASK. “I DOUBT THEY’LL BE ABLE TO DO IT for that amount, Kori. You know that better than anybody. The way that engine was looking, it needs a lot of work. If you bring it by the Chop Shop, we’ll take care of it free of charge —”

“I have to go,” she mutters.

The paperwork at the counter remains unfinished. The same can be said for the transaction with the clerk at the desk. Korine’s busy pocketing her wallet in the same quick motion that she pulls out her keys. She flees from the Autoshop lobby like she’s in imminent danger.

“Kori, what the hell’s up with you? Why are you—KORI!”

I rush after her, but it’s not as easy as it should be. Korine’s always been a quick one. When we were kids, she’d race the boys around the block, often winning. It wasn’t ’til puberty hit that that changed, but by then she’d moved onto showing them up in other ways.

Fixing bikes better than they could. Outgunning ’em in the back road drag races we sometimes had. Generally being cooler and funnier than they were.

And they knew it.

Korine was always the girl all the guys didn’t mind having around. She *was* one of the guys.

...except so much better.

Because she was a girl. A good-looking one, as we all eventually noticed, with soft skin and nice-smelling hair.

But I don't know this Korine.

I follow her outside the Autoshop feeling like I'm dealing with an impostor. This Korine's more anxious mouse than bold lioness. She doesn't talk and seems like she'll do anything to get the hell away from me.

"Kori!" I yell as we start across the otherwise empty parking lot.

"Don't call me that!"

"Seriously, what the hell did I do wrong? How'd I piss you off? Slow up!"

"Don't talk to me!"

She tries her damndest to speed up, pushing herself harder. But it's as she tries to walk even faster that I notice the way her side seems to pain her for every step she takes. Instead of a smooth stride, she winces and drags herself forward. Almost a *limp*.

"What's wrong with your side?" I call after her.

"I was in a car accident twenty-four hours ago. Mind your business!"

Anger rushes me. I show her what's up—in a couple quick steps, I jog ahead and cut her off. She stumbles to a halt to avoid walking straight into me.

Her nostrils flare as her eyes narrow. "Move out of the way, Blake."

"Not 'til you tell me what's going on. It's been ten years and you're acting like we're back in first grade and somebody told you I've got fucking cooties. What the hell's up?"

I sense a smile. It's almost there. For a quick second, as she shakes her head, her lips twitch as if the smile's fighting to take shape. She forces it away before it ever does. Any flicker of personality disappears from her like it's never existed.

She returns to glaring. "You need to let me pass and accept I don't want

to talk to you.”

“What’s the matter with you? You’ve been acting different from the moment I saw you on the side of the road.”

“Because one moment by the highway is enough to make a judgment on someone’s behavior,” she snipes, crossing her arms and giving a roll of her eyes. “You don’t know anything about me. You knew a girl over a decade ago that was still just that. A girl. A naive, stupid girl who didn’t know squat. You don’t know a damn thing about who I am today. I’m a whole grown-ass woman, Blake—and I don’t owe you any answers.”

“I never said you did —”

“You’ve been asking twenty-one questions every second I’ve been around you,” she interrupts, more hostility filling her voice out.

It flashes in her dark eyes to the point I’m questioning if I’m seeing things. Does Korine really hate me this much? Did I really screw things up between us this badly, and I’ve spent the last decade oblivious to that fuck up?

Here I was, thinking, imagining, we were still friendly at the very least. It seems, like usual with matters of the heart, I misjudged big time. I must’ve hurt Korine more than I ever realized. Hurt that’s been left to fester and rot for ten long years.

I sigh, lifting a hand to rub the back of my neck. “Look, clearly, there’s some bad feelings between us. Bad feelings I didn’t realize were there. If I hurt you —”

She scoffs, her expression souring even more. “You think that’s what this is about? That I’m still so heartbroken ten fucking years later that I’m being mean to you now? I’ve spent the last decade hung up on you? Blake Cash, you’ve always been cocky, but do you hear yourself right now? I’m married. You might think you’re god’s gift to women —”

“You obviously hate me!” I growl over her. For the first time since our recent reunion, I raise my voice with her. I let my own pent-up anger rear its

nasty head. My hands grow animated, my gestures expressing this anger, as I step toward her.

She goes silent. Her gaze falls on those hands, like I've given some signal that's put her into a trance, or she's been frozen in a block of ice.

It makes me freeze up too, lost as to what's going on. My temper fades away. In its wake is a weak pulse of confusion that makes me tilt my head to the side. "Kori?" I say much quieter. "Hey... you alright? What's wrong?"

But getting through to Korine in this moment feels impossible—she's at a standstill, her face glazed over, her eyes unfocused. If I didn't know any better, it's one of those reactions they say people go through when they get caught in fight or flight mode. Except Korine's caught in freezing up. She's practically become catatonic.

"Kori," I say when seconds go by and she still hasn't moved. She comes to her senses slowly. The ice melts away, thawing out 'til she's able to blink, and then she's peering at me like she recognizes me again. She's taking a step back as I take one forward.

I've noticed something else about her—since seeing her for the first time since high school, I've marveled at how she's still the same. Just a little older. Her features that I know so well are the same except more defined, less girlish, more womanly. Except her beautiful bare face isn't bare for once.

"You're wearing makeup," I blurt out.

Her brows knit. "So... what?"

"You never used to wear makeup before."

"Blake, that was ten years ago."

I'm no expert by any means. I don't know shit about the junk women put on their faces. The only reason I've picked up on the makeup she's wearing is because I'm standing so close, but I swear I see something on her jaw. That can't be... can it?

She seems to sense what I'm zeroing in on and tucks her chin into the scarf that's wrapped around her neck. "I have to go. I can't be doing this. Not

around you.”

“You haven’t answered me—you alright? Kori? Kori!”

But my calls fall on deaf ears.

She’s already spun away from me and shot toward the dented and dinged Geo Metro. I don’t get the chance to chase her this time; the instant she’s got her car door open, she’s throwing herself inside and locking it.

I watch, flabbergasted, as she twists the key in the ignition ’til she forces the dying engine awake with a loud whine. She guns that little toy-sized car out of the One Stop parking lot at a speed I didn’t even know it’d be capable of. Smoke from the overheated engine and burned rubber of the tires hazes the air.

I run my fingers through my golden mane, feeling like the last five minutes have been some of the most confusing of my life. One thing’s for sure—something’s up. I’m certain of it.

I know my girl. I know everything there is to know about her. Which means I know when she’s troubled.

I won’t let it go ’til I figure out just why.

An idea comes to mind at once. Possibly a Hail Mary but worth a shot. I return to the lobby of the One Stop Autoshop, flashing a smile at the female clerk behind the desk.

“Hey, what’s up?” I say in my casual tone, adding a jut of my chin. Her expression softens like she’s about to let out a dreamy sigh. “That lady that was just here—mind if I take a look at the forms she was filling out? She dropped something in the parking lot and I’d like to return it to her home address.”

Korine lives on 4729 Riddell Road. It’s on the nicer side of town, where real estate developers have recently come in, knocked down decades-old homes,

and put up rows of modern houses that look fancy and uniform but lack any real character.

I drift to a slow stop half a block down from her house. Before coming to check out her address, I swapped my truck out for my bike, figuring it would offer a better chance to scope the place out from afar.

Double car garage. The neatest lawn I've ever seen. A shit ton of windows both on the first and second story. Some kind of neutral shade I bet has a nauseating name like dove gray.

I shake my head.

Sure, it's a nice place. The kind of home you'd see on fucking HGTV. But even taking in the home at a distance, it feels fake.

There's no warmth. No sign of Korine. Both figuratively and literally.

Figuratively because I know my girl. And I know she always said when she bought her own home, she wanted it to have charm. She wanted wind chimes and a fruit and vegetable garden. She wanted a basketball hoop out front in the drive. This house has none of those things. None of the things Korine said would make her house a home. It's nice and new but plain and sterile. Ice cold.

Literally because she's not around. She must've gone somewhere else after the One Stop.

I'm about to pop a U-turn and ride off when the garage door slides up. A car begins backing out from inside.

Tension lances through me. Much of it shoots to my jaw.

Black and white with a badge painted on the side and a bar of blue and red lights up top.

It's a *cop* car. Korine's married to a cop!?

The shock paralyzes me. I'm left sitting immobile on my bike for so long the car backs out of the drive and then disappears down the other end of the road. I snap out of it only when a cold breeze happens to blow past me.

I rush to switch gears on my bike, kicking at my shift lever. My heart's

pounding as I roar down the block after him.

Tracking him down becomes my sole purpose. Seeing him for myself to make sure I'm not going insane.

He's a real person. He's really her husband. The man who put a ring on her finger and made her his wife.

It's a pulse of adrenaline mixed with equal parts possessiveness. Suddenly, I'm reminded of past times where I might've gotten too territorial for Korine's liking—I'm a man on the hunt pursuing the asshole that took her away.

Some would say it's wrong and irrational. I've never met this man before in my life and have no reason to hate his guts, yet I can say without a doubt that I do.

I'd like to end his existence. However psychotic that sounds, I don't give a fuck.

Kori's my girl. Nobody takes her from me.

I track him down a couple blocks over. He's idled at a red light with the rest of midday traffic. I slow up a few cars away, careful not to draw attention to myself. If he's on his way to the local station, then my pursuit won't go on much longer.

I tail him anyway.

We pass the street that leads to the police station. He hooks a left onto the country road that leads out of town. Maintaining even more of a distance, I'm left wondering where the hell he could be going. Pulsboro PD's jurisdiction ends at the town limits.

Unless he's driving to a neighboring town about a case that involves other precincts.

Almost three miles down the road, he brakes enough to turn onto the open field that borders the road. He pulls up behind a wall of trees and bushes.

What the hell is he up to? Is he setting up a speed trap?

It's not until I slow down several yards away that I realize what's

happening.

Korine's husband isn't alone. A second car's parked behind the thick brush. Some kind of Jeep with a wild-maned brunette behind the steering wheel. I don't get a good look at her face, because she hops out the second I'm pulling up and slides into his passenger seat.

The two come together in what must be a hello kiss.

There's very little conversation between them. Their lips move for a minute or two before they're all over each other. He's tangling fingers in her chocolate hair and bringing her head down over his lap.

I don't need to see inside the car to know what's going down.

My hands tighten into fists watching the scene unfold. My pulse echoes in my ears and my skin runs hot.

The most primal part of me wants to storm over and confront the bastard. I want to rip him from the inside of his squad car and introduce him to my fists 'til he's bloody. Then force him to tell Korine all about what he's up to behind her back.

The fucker's cheating on her. A beautiful, smart, infectious woman like Korine.

And she's probably got no clue.

After my encounter with Korine in the One Stop Autosshop's parking lot and my discovery about what her cop husband's up to, I'm in no mood for handling work business. I skip out on returning to the Chop Shop altogether. Mr. Weaver's just gonna have to pick up his bike a few hours later than planned tomorrow.

I need a moment to cool off and figure out how I'm going to approach things.

I ride my Street Bob home.

Home being my trailer at the Pulsboro Trailer Park. The wide lot's full of trailers of various shapes and sizes. Several Steel Kings live here, some solo and others with their old ladies or families.

I've got my own double-wide far in the back, overlooking the ravine. From the outside, it's your standard run-of-the-mill trailer. On the inside, it's not so bad—more than spacious, fixed up with modern appliances, and kept relatively neat (for a single man). Compared to the wild tornado that's Ozzie's trailer across from mine, my place is decent.

...except when I've got uninvited visitors prowling around my property.

I pull up with my engine rumbling and my jaw clenched. Behind my mirrored aviator shades, I'm glaring at the station wagon parked beside my trailer. The driver's side door swings open and an orthopedic shoe touches the spongy grass underneath.

Mom snuffles as she gets out the car, her hair a limp frame for her wrinkled, frowning face. I'd feel sorry for her if I wasn't so used to seeing tears wetting her eyes.

"Blake," she murmurs.

I park my bike and stride for my front door without slowing down. "I've told you before about showing up here unannounced."

"What else was I supposed to do? You won't pick up my calls. You don't answer my texts."

"Then maybe you should take the hint."

"Blake, please!"

She chases after me as I walk up the steps to my trailer. Her foot catches on the bottom stair and makes her lose her balance. Shrieking out in alarm, she tips forward with flailing arms. My reflexes are fast enough that I stop mid-step and catch her.

It's not hard when she weighs a hundred soaking wet. Not that that's surprising—Mom's diet has always consisted of cigarettes and more cigarettes. She even reeks of them.

Turns out, me and Bill aren't the only ones with vices.

I set her back on her feet. "You could've face planted. Then what? You'd blame that on me too?"

"Blake, will you just... can you hang on?"

"What. Do. You. Want?"

"We're not getting any younger. You're all we've got. And you won't even come see us."

My face hardens into a scowl. "You know why."

"I know your father misses you. I know that if you... if you tried a little bit harder, you'd get along."

"I can't fix things. I've tried. It's no use."

"You ain't trying hard enough!" she snaps. The sorrowful lines etched into her face, the tears brimming in her eyes, seemingly disappear in a flash. They're replaced by the irritation that makes her sneer, showing off the rot in her teeth. "Your father and I gave you all we had to give, and this is what you do? This is how you repay us? You *ruined* his life!"

Tension shoots through me, making my body stiff. A reaction from the guilt that's already present at any given moment. Guilt that cuts the breath in my lungs short and reminds me what a piece of shit I am.

On top of all my other shortcomings. Things like letting Korine go the way I did and spending years wrecking my life.

"I can't change any of it," I say hoarsely. "What else do you want from me?"

"Visit your father. It's the least you can do, Blake Montgomery Cash."

I don't answer her with anything else but a rigid, reluctant nod.

"Good. Family dinner. You know where and when."

Mom gets the last word. She casts me a shaming look, then turns and goes. I remain where I am, feeling like I'm stuck between a fucking rock and a hard place—a feeling I've had every moment around my family for the last few years.

Mom drives off in a cloud of dust. The station wagon bobs along the uneven terrain of the trailer park 'til she's turning out of the lot and gone entirely.

I husk out a rough breath and slide both hands through my hair.

Day eighteen hundred and nine...

KORINE



“HELPING HANDS, HEALING HEARTS. THANK YOU FOR REACHING OUT. YOUR story is of utmost importance to us,” comes the gentle voice on the other end. “May I start with your name and zip code?”

I hold my breath to keep from answering. Fingers clenched tight around my phone, it’s all I can do to sit silent and not burst into tears.

“Hello?” asks the advocate. “Helping Hands, Healing Hearts. Are you there?”

I’m frozen. I’m right on the edge. So lost in my head I don’t even know where to begin. It feels like if I even try to speak, I’ll lose control.

“Sweetheart? Please say something. I can hear noises on the other end.”

I glance around at the rest of my surroundings. The parking lot of the local Buy N’ Save bustles with cars and customers coming and going. I’m parked as far off from the store as possible in hopes of even a little discretion.

But it still feels like any word I say will come out wrong. It’ll come back to haunt me. Just like it always does.

“I... I think...” I choke out. My voice sounds hoarse. Devastatingly quiet even to my ears despite the fact that I’m alone. His presence looms even when he’s not around. “I think...” I try again, and then a third time. “I... I need help.”

“Of course, sweetheart. Can we start with your name and zip code?”

“No. No... I can't...”

“But, sweetheart, I'll need your zip code for resources —”

“I said no,” I snap, suddenly irritated. “I can't. No personal info.”

“Okay, remain calm. Why don't you tell me about what's going on?”

It seems like such an obvious question that I should have an immediate answer for. The past decade should be clear in my mind. I should be able to pinpoint how I've wound up here, placing secret phone calls in the parking lot of the local Buy N' Save.

Yet, as I rack my brain, everything blurs. The past feels like a nebulous cloud. Fuzzy and out of focus. How did I reach this point? How could I let things get so... messed up?

The woman on the phone must sense my confusion. “You don't have to share everything. Just tell me what you can. How did you meet your partner?”

I gulp down some air, clinging to my phone like it's a lifeline. “In college... my second year...”

“And how old are you now, if you don't mind me asking?”

“Twenty-eight,” I mutter.

“So young,” she says with a soft laugh. “I remember what that was like. But it sounds as if you've been together a while.”

I nod. “We're... married.”

“I understand. That can make the situation feel complicated. Tell me about what made you call today.”

“My husband...” I trail off, fighting through the fog. *Forcing* the words out. To make it real by speaking them. “He put his hands on me.”

“I see. Was this the first time?”

My heart clenches instead of beats. The pain's worse than the injuries I've sustained—the tenderness in my ribs and deep ache in my jaw. The same jaw I've covered up with several layers of makeup just to be able to go

outside.

“It wasn’t the first time. It’s... it’s happened before.”

“Are you safe where you are? You don’t have to go back. You can head to a local shelter right this moment. Tell me your name and zip code and I can —”

“I said I don’t want to give you that!”

“It’s information I’m going to need.”

A wave of cold panic crashes over me. I cut the call short before the woman can even get another word out.

Pent-up emotion spills out of me in a flood of tears. I shrink in my seat and grip the steering wheel so hard, the leather cracks and tiny chipped pieces fall away. My breath grows sharper the harder I cry, turning into outright gasps for air. Tears wet my lashes and streak down my cheeks in a pitiful trail that I impatiently wipe away.

It’s the crushing knowledge that there’s no escape. No matter what I do, I can’t run from the bed I’ve made.

No stranger over a hotline can help me. No number of fantasies about my ex-best friend and what could’ve been will change a thing.

What’s done is done.

I’m here in Pulsboro because that’s where Ken needs us to be, and anything short of his way is unheard of. I have to do what I always do—smile and bear it. Smile and pretend it’s okay.

I’ll have to pretend Blake doesn’t exist.

There’s not enough room for the both of us in this town.

There’s no chance I can live the life I have and endure being around the man that broke my heart in a way that hasn’t been fixed since. The torture’s too much... even for me.

My cries turn into gasps that turn into hiccups. Soon the emotion expels itself from every inch of my body until there’s nothing left.

Just a dull ache in my ribs that I’m more than used to.

Time to clean myself up. Time to get back on track. Before Ken finds out...

That terrifying thought jolts me into action—I fumble for the to-go pack of tissues I keep in the glove compartment and hurry to wipe the tear stains from my cheeks. My reflection stares back at me as I practice my smile.

An activity that's become routine over the years.

I'm so engrossed in making sure I look presentable that I don't notice the man walking up. His knuckles tap against the car window and make my heart flip in my chest.

My gaze slides over to find Lieutenant Gillard standing on the other side of the glass. After a shocked second, I press a finger on the button that lowers the window.

"Hey there," he says brightly. "Here I was, picking up a couple things at the Buy N' Save, and I thought to myself, that sure looks like Stricklin's wife parked over here. Turns out, I was right."

I put my smile back on. "Oh. Yes. Hello. I... I didn't see you."

"Sneak attack," he laughs, leaning an arm against the car roof. "You okay there? It looked like you were crying."

No. No. No. No!

"I'm fine," I say quickly. "Really, I'm okay."

"Stricklin ain't giving you a hard time, is he? He's a damn good cop, but he can be a regular stick-in-the-mud."

"He's great. He's always great. I'm really lucky to have him. But I should get going. It was nice to see you, lieutenant."

I leave the lieutenant stepping back with a frown as I twist the key in the ignition and swing out of my parking spot.

For the third time in a week, I'm on the run. I'm speeding off with a sense of panic ringing through me. The first two times after being ambushed by Blake. Today it's being ambushed by one of Ken's bosses.

"What's wrong with my baby?" Mama asks a little while later. I've

buckled her into the passenger seat after collecting her from her medical appointment. Her hand covers mine and worry fills her normally warm, if sometimes vacant, eyes. “You’re upset, baby. What’s wrong?”

I give her a sad smile. “I’m just happy your doctor was able to fit you in on such short notice.”

She still doesn’t seem convinced as I walk around to the other side of the car.

Our drive home is a silent one. I’m still reeling from the phone call. Mama stares out the window with keen interest like she always does these days, like she’s seeing the town for the first time.

When we pass the entrance for the highway, I’m half tempted to make a sharp turn and slam on the gas. Speed the fuck out of town and never look back.

Another alternate reality of mine, where Mama and I run away and live happily ever after elsewhere. In that fantasy we’re somehow miraculously able to afford starting over, mounting healthcare bills and all...

I blink out of the daydream and instead turn down the street that’ll take us home.

“Baby,” Mama says softly.

“Yes, Mama?”

“Would you tell me... if you were unhappy?”

“Mama—”

“A mother knows her child,” she interrupts. “If you were unhappy, I hope you’d do what’s best for you. Not for me. I’ve lived my life, baby. You’ve got yours laid out in front of you. You can do anything. Haven’t I always told you that? Didn’t your father too before he passed?”

I’m in tears before I know it. A running theme for today. I let out a shaky sigh and pull into our driveway. “Yes, Mama. You’ve both always encouraged me.”

She reaches over and wipes the tears from my cheek. “I know I’m not

always here. I wish I were. I wish I... oh. Oh no.”

“What is it—bathroom?”

Her wide, horrified eyes tell me we have seconds.

I rush from the driver’s side to make it to her in time.

In the end, we do. Just barely.

I spend the next hour getting her cleaned up and settled in her room. The entire time, I’m preoccupied with thoughts about what she said earlier during our drive home.

Mama makes it sound so simple. As if it’s that easy to follow my happiness and forget the consequences.

Her never-ending medical needs and the steep bills that come with them say differently. My lack of financial freedom and any meaningful career prospects prove otherwise.

I’m not even supposed to have my Geo anymore. Luckily, Ken felt guilty after his latest violent fit once he realized he’d beaten me a little harder than he intended. The black and blue marring my skin were inconvenient reminders which forced a change of heart in him. He let me keep the Geo—*unfixed* and sporting the crushed rear bumper from my hit-and-run—but not without first mentioning I should be grateful for his kindness and mercy.

That sums up the extent of agency I’m allowed...

I went to the Autoshop yesterday, behind his back, with what little funds I have saved.

How do you escape being suffocated when you’re never given room to breathe?

Today’s phone call was reckless. If Ken even senses leaving him is on my mind...

Intense dizziness threatens to take over just imagining his reaction.

It wouldn’t be pretty at all. Would he even let me out the door alive? Already aware of the dark answer to that question, it disturbs me so much I have to force the thought away.

I focus on staying ahead of the schedule, rushing to start dinner prep.

I'm quick and efficient. I chop the green and red peppers as the chicken bakes in the oven and the tomato sauce boils on the stove. The table is set with no plate or piece of cutlery out of place. The fireplace is lit, and Ken's drink is poured and left for him at his seat at the head of the table.

He enters the kitchen, still in his uniform, to the sight of me at the stove. He sniffs the air and gives a nod of approval.

"Smells delicious, Kor."

It's as he comes in close to kiss my cheek that I detect a scent of my own—flowery notes that can only be women's perfume. Far from the first time I've smelled it on him, I'm caught between reactions. Instant curiosity about the scent conflicts with the roil of nerves his proximity brings me. The nerves win out, and I bite my tongue, making every effort to keep my hands steady and appear calm.

He's taken to studying me. His gaze rakes over me, head to toe as if checking for a mistake. Once he's satisfied, he backs off, his hands on his belt. "How was Sunny's appointment?"

"It went well. The doctor thinks he might have a new treatment that could reverse some of her condition."

"Sounds expensive."

My nerves twist tighter in my stomach. "You're right. I'm... I'm sure he'll figure something else out."

"I said it sounds expensive. I didn't say we wouldn't try it. Sunny is a part of our family. Why would you think I wouldn't want her to get better?"

"You're right," I repeat, puzzled by his mood swing. "I just meant if it was too expensive —"

"Nothing's too good or expensive for my girls. Don't I always give you the best of everything?"

I give a stiff nod. "Yes. Always."

The answer is sufficient enough. He steps away without another word. I

let out the breath I was holding, my chest heaving as if I've undergone strenuous activity.

Dinner is no less frustrating.

We sit down as a family to the meal I've prepared. Mama thanks us for inviting her over for dinner (never mind that she lives here) and mentions how she'll need to get going soon to avoid traffic on her drive home. Neither of us correct her. Ken's too busy criticizing the food, and I'm preoccupied pretending I'm not breaking apart on the inside.

"What a delicious meal you cooked, baby." Mama reaches over and pats my hand. "But I really should get going. Where's my coat and purse?"

"You live here, Mama. Did you mean you're ready to go upstairs and rest?"

"Oh. I do?" She blinks a few times. "I guess... maybe that's what I meant."

I take her upstairs to do just that.

Mama lets me help her into the shower and change her into PJs. She settles into bed next to her reading lamp, clutching a good book. I kiss her cheek and remind her to use the alert button if she needs to call me back up.

Ken's on the phone when I return. Honestly, it's a relief, meaning less direct interaction.

I begin collecting the dinner plates and loading them in the dishwasher. Traces of his conversation travel into the kitchen.

"Of course you're not interrupting anything, lieutenant. Any call of yours is important."

My chest constricts tighter. I freeze with a plate in one hand and an empty glass in another.

"No need to worry. My family's well taken care of. You... did, did you? No, she didn't mention it."

He's stopped in the hall, his phone pressed up to his ear, his head turned in the direction of the kitchen's open doorway. I've resumed sorting the

dishes into the dishwasher, urging myself to act cool. Stay calm. Be normal.

I pretend I don't notice him. I don't feel the prick of the invisible daggers he's throwing my way.

"You know how women get," he says in a stilted tone. "They cry over everything. What's that about the promotion? Is there anything I can do to change your mind, lieutenant? But I thought—isn't there some other way—hang on, lieutenant, I'd like to talk about—hello? *Hello?!?*"

Deafening silence follows.

It's like the world falls mute. It's like time stands still. I can't bring myself to move. I clutch the bottle of dishwasher detergent and I become stuck.

Tension overwhelms my body to the point that every bone goes stiff. I'm physically incapable of doing anything except remaining in place and praying I'm wrong.

Praying he'll walk away just this once.

But I should know better by now.

His shoes clack on the kitchen tiles. My heart rate climbs through the roof. I force myself to make conversation. Maybe create a distraction.

"Did you... do you want to watch the... the game?" I sputter out. "I'll pour you another drink and turn it on."

Ken says nothing. He's fixed me with a heavily lidded glare full of rage and loathing.

"Ken—"

"Tell me what I did, Kor," he says. He takes a step toward me. "Tell me what I did to deserve this kind of treatment."

"What... what kind of treatment?"

"What did I do to you, Kor? What did I do to you to make you this fucking difficult?"

My heart drops, and I shake my head fervently from left to right. "You didn't do anything, Ken."

“Because I must’ve done something.” He moves closer, slow at first, ’til he explodes a second later. He bursts toward me, screaming in my face. “I MUST’VE DONE SOMETHING FOR MY WIFE TO RUIN MY LIFE LIKE THIS!”

I flinch from the sheer volume of his voice. My fingers squeeze the plastic bottle of dishwasher detergent and accidentally squirt a straight shot of soap into Ken’s eyes.

“*ARGH!*” he roars.

My mouth falls open in horror. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean —”

The back of his hand collides with my cheek and wipes out everything.

My words. My thoughts. My balance as the blow knocks me backward and the bottle of dishwasher detergent slips out of my grasp.

If not for the kitchen counter and cabinets, I’d be on the floor.

I slump against the counter, trying to remain vertical, but it feels impossible when the room spins and blood wets my lips.

More loud silence follows the violence.

I’m speechless and Ken’s fuming. It’s etched onto his face as he wipes the soap from his eyes and glares at me from where he stands.

“What did you just do to my baby?”

Mama’s wandered into the kitchen in her robe and fuzzy slippers. Instead of wearing her usual perplexed expression, she’s surveying the scene before her with knitted brows and a pinched mouth. Her disgust rolls off her in a thick wave.

Even Ken seems thrown by it. “Sunny —”

“You just hit my daughter,” she says, taking a step closer. “How dare you put your hands on my baby?”

“Mama, please... stop.”

“Sunny, go upstairs. This is between me and Korine.”

But once Mama gets going, there’s no slowing her down. She marches up to Ken and jams a finger in his chest, her fuzzy slippers scratching against the

floor.

“I should’ve known you’re nothing but a bully! You should be ashamed of yourself. You think you’re going to hurt my daughter, then you’ve got another thing coming. I’m calling the police!”

“Mama, no!”

“Sunny, get the fuck upstairs!”

The situation spirals out of control more than it already has.

Mama turns around to go find a phone. Ken leaps at her in an attempt to stop her. His shoulder slams into her from behind. Mama tips over with a frightened whimper as she’s shoved to the ground.

“MAMA!” I scream, snapping into action. “DON’T FUCKING TOUCH HER!”

Something flicks on inside me. Some kind of survival mode, an *attack* mode I’ve never gone into around Ken.

But the sight of him putting his hands on Mama is too much. As he reaches to pull her up by the collar of her robe for another strike, I’m throwing myself at him. My fists smash into any part of him I can reach. My legs do the same. I’m screaming at the top of my lungs as I insert myself between them.

It’s immediately evident I’m no match for him, a man twice my size and a police officer that’s been well trained on physical confrontations.

Ken has no problem redirecting his ire. He blocks my swing and then flips me upside down. I land hard on my back, feeling like my spine has shattered. I haven’t even begun to process the pain shooting through me before Ken’s giving more. He draws back his foot and delivers what can only be called an inhumane kick to my side.

One turns into two, which snowballs into three and four. My body arches and I cry out in pain. In futile hope that he’ll take mercy and stop.

But he’s only getting started—he pins me to the ground where I am, his weight pressing down on me, his face a scary mask of rage and hatred.

“You fucking bitch, why the fuck do I put up with you? All you’ve done is ruin my life!”

“I’m sorry!” I scream out desperately. “I’m so sorry. Please... I’m sorry, Ken!”

I apologize a dozen times even though I don’t know what it’s for this time. But I hadn’t last time either. Maybe this time will be the time he finally believes me.

It stopped mattering why I was apologizing years ago. All that matters is that I get him to stop.

It only makes him madder. His fist slams into my face as he roars at me to shut up and stop talking.

“You’re useless—you and your senile cow of a mother! You think anybody else would want you? You’ve failed at every fucking thing in life, and yet I still wanted you! I still married you and gave you everything you ever asked for! And *this* is how you repay me?”

Another desperate cry of pain leaves me as he hits me over and over again. Tiny stars flash in and out in front of me, my consciousness almost slipping away. His hand clenches around my neck, squeezing to cut off my airway.

“Ken!” I sputter in immediate panic. My hands scrabble at his, trying to pry them away from my throat. “Please, Ken!”

My pleas fall on deaf ears. He’s blacked out. Completely lost in the red-tinged fury of his violence. The hatred clenched onto his face and burning in his gaze breaks what little remains of my heart. I’m left gasping for air, looking up at the man who’s supposed to love me. Yet the only thing staring back at me is raw contempt and loathing.

How can he hate me when I’ve only ever tried to love him? What did I do wrong? What mistake did I make?

In my hysterics, as tears pour out of me and pain radiates through my body and the air leaves my lungs, I’m begging for another chance. Telling

him I can do better. Try harder.

Please don't throw me away...

“Get off my daughter!”

Mama comes out of nowhere, swinging a frying pan at Ken's head. She's up from her hard fall and managed to grab the first thing she could find. Her swing connects, hitting Ken across the side of his face. His hands disappear from my throat. His body's no longer holding me down. He's fallen sideways from the impact of Mama's blow.

I'm coughing as I scramble up onto unsteady feet. One of my eyes is swelling shut and the room continues to spin, but one thing becomes clear in this moment.

From the sadness on Mama's face to the blood I'm dripping.

We can't stay here. If we want to survive the night, we have to go.

Ken won't be on the floor clutching his head in pain for long.

“We've got to go. Mama...”

We scurry from the kitchen in a breathless panic, grabbing coats and purses and running out into the night's cold in socks and slippers.

“KORINE!” Ken bellows from inside the house.

But we don't stop. I buckle Mama in and then throw myself behind the wheel. My barely alive Geo Metro lurches from the driveway and bumbles down the street.

I don't even know where I'm taking us. Just that it has to be somewhere far away from here.

BLAKE



“YOU GOT A MINUTE?”

I’m on the garage floor of the Chop Shop, lying on my side as I twist some lug nuts onto my bike. The rest of the shop’s dead considering it’s early morning. Chaz and the guys won’t be in for at least another two hours.

I don’t look up to see who’s approaching. My attention remains on the lug nuts I’m tightening. Why bother when the sound of his voice tells me who it is?

Mace stands off to the side, his arms folded across his chest. “Cash... you heard me.”

“Speak whenever you want, Mace. Nobody’s stopping you. I damn sure won’t.”

“What’re you doing at the shop so early?”

“I could ask you the same. Neither of us are early birds.”

Mace spears me with a hard look. Even with my focus on the lug nuts and my wheels, I can tell from the corner of my eye.

“I’m not the one who’s been acting different these past couple days. I heard your bike rumble by the house, by the way. So you’re damn right I’m curious when my best friend’s coming by the shop at six a.m. just to turn some wrenches.”

“Still missing your point.” I hoist myself up to my feet with my hair in my face and extra bolts cupped in my hand. You’d think I was alone with way I move toward the other side of the garage and drop off my things in my toolbox.

Mace traces me every step of the way with that damn glare of his.

A tense second passes between us. Even if I act like I’m unbothered. Even if the opposite’s true. We both know it deep down.

“This got anything to do with Korine being back?” he asks finally.

“Korine?” I fiddle with the tools inside my toolbox just to give my avoidant ass something to do. “What about her?”

“Don’t pull this on me, Cash. Don’t act like I don’t know you. We’re damn near brothers. You forget I know all about how in love with her you’ve been damn near all your life?”

“I was a kid —”

“Bullshit. You’ve still got a thing for her. Which means her being back... creates problems for you.”

“Well,” I say, shrugging, “she’s married. So it doesn’t matter what I think, does it?”

“You gonna be alright seeing her around?”

“Alright as I’ve always been. I’ll deal with it. The crazy thing is... here I was hoping we could be cool. At least friends. But she wants nothing to do with me,” I explain, forcing my tone to be more nonchalant than I feel on the inside. “You want to know what’s even crazier? Her husband’s some prick that cheats on her.”

Mace raises his brows, his arms tight across his chest. “She have any idea?”

“Don’t know. She told me to stay the hell away from her... but something’s up. I just don’t know what.”

“You two didn’t leave off on the best of terms.”

“Apparently, worse than I thought. Don’t know what’s worse—what’s

happened with Korine or my parents trying to force me to be around them.”

“They’ve never been good for you.”

“Tell them that.”

“Cash,” he says. “You know we’re all here. We’ve got your back.”

“You don’t need to worry about me. I’m more than good.”

Mace doesn’t look so convinced, but it doesn’t matter. Either he leaves or I do. I slam shut my toolbox, producing a thud that echoes through the empty bike shop. I’d come by for some alone time, keeping my hands occupied and sorting out my thoughts. Not to be lectured... even by my best friend.

I haven’t sorted out what to do about Korine or what’s going on with my folks. Both situations have been sawing away at me so much I’m running on three hours of sleep.

“I’ve got something else I wanted to talk about,” Mace says, picking up on my mood swing. He leans against the cinderblock wall and considers his words. “Things’ve been good for us these past few months. Real good.”

“Real good for you,” I finish for him. I shoot him a sideways smirk. “You and Syd are serious. Living together. Playing house.”

“Yeah, it is. More serious than I thought I’d ever get with anybody. But that’s not what I was talking about—I meant the club. We’ve been thriving since we got back into dealing. We’ve been turning in three times the profit than what we were before. The monopoly we’ve established since the Hellrazors and Rebels’s downfall has helped.”

“Seems like we earned it after what they put us through. It’ll take them a long while to recover. Which is good news for us.”

“You’d think. The law feels differently. We’re their latest target.”

That earns my full attention. Turning around, I forget about my toolbox. “How bad is it?”

“Bad. Stein’s guy on the inside says they’re building a case.”

“And this isn’t leftover bullshit planted by Velma?”

Velma had concocted a whole fake informant story that she sold both to

Mace and his father, the real prez of the Steel Kings. It turned out to be nothing but a tall tale that benefited her secret mission to sabotage the club.

Mace shakes his head, sliding a hand over his low fade buzzcut. “This ain’t Velma. This is real. They’re looking at us for what went down with the other clubs.”

“Shit.”

“Shit is right. They’ve got their eyes on us and they’d love a chance to take us down. One fuck up and it could be all over for the MC. We’re gonna have to be more careful in our dealings with the Barreras. Our next deal is coming up.”

My mind goes to Korine and her piece of shit husband. He’s blue. I’d love nothing more than to get my hands on him one way or another. But for now giving him the biggest middle finger of breaking his laws will have to do.

“I want in,” I say. An excited pulse comes to life inside me. “Whatever we decide with the cartel, count me in.”

Mace nods and then thumps me on the back. “Good. It wouldn’t be a Steel King’s mission without you. We’ll talk more at our next meeting.”

Family dinner comes and goes. I give it my best shot—I put on a decent V-neck shirt and jeans that aren’t so faded and worn. My hair gets pulled back in a ponytail that’ll keep Mom from bitching about it being too long.

I ride over to their house. Turning onto the block brings a wave of nostalgia. What else can be said for the street I grew up on but that there’s a lot of memories that were made here?

Good and bad.

Afternoons running after ice cream trucks and riding around on our bicycles playing MC. Early mornings waiting on the curb for the school bus

and afternoons spent finishing homework as quick as possible to do stuff we *really* wanted to do. Late nights listening to Bill's latest tangent as he smashed his fist into a wall... and sometimes a face.

I park a couple houses down and stare at the place I called home for my entire childhood. Moss has grown along the walls and the threadbare curtains flutter pathetically in the window. Then I shift my gaze to the home next door—the one that often served as my salvation.

Korine's home.

A whole new family lives there now, but they've kept up appearances.

I lost track of how many times I'd sneak out through the backdoor and tap my knuckles on the glass of Korine's bedroom window. Sometimes, Mrs. McKibbens would catch me and warn me that I'd be in serious trouble if her husband ever saw me.

But it was always with the hint of a motherly smile. Always with warmth, like she knew I meant well.

She understood the environment I was seeking to get away from. That I just needed to hide out for a few hours.

And when I was sixteen and finally emancipated, it was *Korine* knocking on my door. It was the two of us cuddled up on the sofa in front of my shitty box TV watching movies late into the night. Sometimes, so late, we'd be rushing across town to get Korine home in time to prevent being grounded.

I smile thinking back to her smile as she'd rush across the front path and then glance over her shoulder at me. I was always parked at the curb, waiting and watching. I'd have walked her up if we didn't think Mr. McKibbens would've started putting his foot down for real.

The memories fade before my eyes. The past disappears and the present returns like a cold gust blowing through my lungs. I inhale a deep breath and resign myself to the next hour or two of torture.

But as I dismount and cross the empty road, my legs grow stiff. Dread rolls through me and leaves a heaviness in my stomach. Thoughts of that

fateful night poison my mind and make me stop altogether in the middle of the road. The realization smacks into me.

I can't do this.

I can't sit down for a meal like nothing.

Not after what happened. Not after all the shit that's wrecked us. It'll only wreck me... more than I already am.

I glance around as if checking for anybody watching, then jog the rest of the way back toward my bike.

No way in hell am I going to subject myself to the kind of torture I'd encounter inside that house. No way in hell am I going to bother pretending like the past can be undone.

Music blasts down the street from the Steel Saloon, even louder than usual. I park my bike where I always do, right outside the Chop Shop, and dismount with heavy shoulders and a grim, tight-lipped expression. The last few days have been like a dump of emotional baggage. Stuff I thought I was either over or okay with keeping in the past, have reemerged out of nowhere.

Mom guilt tripped me into coming by the house. She knew if she showed up out of the blue, I'd be so damn caught off guard, I could hardly turn down her pleas. It's the same classic manipulation tactics I've come to expect of her.

She refuses to accept I'm not the son she wants me to be. I'm a screw up who can't make up for what's happened; I can't change any of it.

What's in the past needs to remain in the past.

The same applies to Korine.

My Kori.

I see it now. After two encounters gone wrong with her, I'm realizing I've been misguided all these years. I've thought of Korine in a way that's put her

and our relationship and friendship on a pedestal. Always the what if or what could've been between us had we stuck out together. The alternate future of how we could've made it had things turned out differently.

But these thoughts were never real. They were just fantasies of what could've been.

Reality has a way of crushing hope, grinding it into dust. That's what happened with Korine. I've been forced to confront the fact that, as much as she *looks* like Kori, as much as I miss that version of her, things have changed.

Ten years have gone by. She's not the girl she once was. She's a woman now, grown and matured. She's not the girl who used to run barefoot in the grassy ravine or leave her bedroom window slightly open for me to sneak into. Gone are the days we ate food off each other's plates and finished each other's sentences.

....and the belief that it was always gonna be us in the end. It was inevitable we'd be end game.

She's married, and even if it's to a piece of trash like her husband who cheats on her, I've got to fall back. She made it clear she wants nothing to do with me.

I shake back my golden hair, effectively shaking away the thoughts infecting my brain—*and* my heart.

Several of the guys greet me with drunken cheers the moment I enter the saloon.

“Look who it is!” exclaims Bush, tossing an arm around my shoulders. He sways on his feet though his grip on his beer bottle is more than secure. “Cash, anybody ever tell you that head of hair is a thing of beauty?”

The other guys snicker among themselves, each as drunk as the next.

“Anybody can have hair like that,” Johnny Flanagan scoffs. His own scraggly hair frames his face like greased-up curtains. “Some of us ain't trying to be pretty boys.”

I push through the wall they've formed without the usual easy-going attitude I'm known for. "Johnny, you couldn't be a pretty boy even if you tried. Only a mother can love a face like yours."

Everybody within earshot erupts into raucous laughter. Suddenly rendered mute, Johnny flushes a shade of brick red.

I don't stop. I keep up my stride, heading straight for the bar counter without a look at anybody else, despite their many sets of eyes on me.

Sydney's behind the counter, pouring shots and polishing beer steins. Her face lights up when she spots me approaching, then dims once she picks up on my mood.

"Bad night?" she asks.

I slide fingers through my hair and rest my elbows on the counter. "That's putting it mildly."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Pour me a glass of whiskey. Straight."

"I don't think I've ever seen you drink." A thoughtful expression crosses her face as she moves behind the counter to make my request happen. She grabs a glass and a bottle of White Oak—an old familiar friend of mine—and pours the amber liquid 'til it's half full.

I eyeball it with an edgy feeling taking root inside me. The sight's hypnotic, like watching liquid gold that's so damn tempting I'm locked into a trance. One that's broken only when she reaches the halfway mark and stops pouring. I blink and refocus, remembering the rest of the bar around me. Everything other than the glass of whiskey.

Sydney's talking to me like we've been engaged in a conversation this whole time. She's got no clue I haven't heard a word. "You should've been here for the poker tournament," she says with a pretty smile that often charms most of the men in the bar. "Ozzie lost a grand. I tried to warn him his hand wasn't good enough."

"Right..." I mumble, detached from the moment. My mind's made up of

busy static while my body buzzes like it is.

Thoughts of Korine and Mom and Bill keep filling my brain. More static noise I can't filter out. Meanwhile, the slithery voice in my ear tells me to just do it.

Just take one sip. One tiny sip can't hurt. Do it. DO IT.

Sydney slides the glass of whiskey toward me and then moves on to pouring a drink for somebody else; all without knowing what she's just done. That she's just dropped blood in shark-infested waters.

My fingers curl around the glass. I stare into its amber-colored contents, so damn tempted there aren't enough words to express it. So damn tempted, in this second, I'd die for it—I'd be willing to meet my maker if it meant just one tiny taste.

"What's going on here?" comes Mace's voice from behind. The sound's distinct and commanding and rough on the ears.

It serves as an alarm bell that wakes me up from the spell I've slipped under. I'm pulled out of the black hole and come to my senses.

He's standing beside me at the bar counter. His normally stony face is even stonier than usual. His eyes focus on the glass in my hand, then meet mine in a hard glare. He says nothing else, though he doesn't need to—his stare's enough. The knowing glint in his dark green eyes communicates his judgment.

His disappointment.

I let go of the glass and slide out of the stool. "I was just... heading out."

"Cash," he starts.

"I'll see you around, Mace. Syd."

Several more guys try to stop me on my walk out. None of their slurred pleas work. I'm of a one-track mind as I stride toward my bike. First came the noise I had been trying and failing to shut out. Then came the temptation. Temptation so strong I almost gave in for the second time. Now comes the shame.

The shame I let my vices rule me. The shame I'm not the son Mom and Bill wish I was.

The fucking shame that Kori can't stand to be around me for two seconds. She wants nothing to do with me. Just like Mom and Bill want nothing to do with who I really am.

It's the ugly truth staring me in the face.

The ugliness on the inside that I can't seem to fix no matter how hard I try.

Aimless and alone, I stop by the convenience store on the way home. This time I go through with my transaction. I buy a bottle of White Oak Whiskey and set it down on my kitchen table along with a glass I don't immediately fill.

It serves as an unbearable temptation as I pace back and forth and have an internal debate with myself over what I want to do next. If I want to finally give into the inevitable and take a drink—just a fucking drop—or if I want to keep up the fight.

I've made it this far. I've come out on the other side. The second I let a drop of that whiskey touch my tongue, then it's over.

Bill would be proven right once and for all.

My jaw clenches hard and I run both hands through my hair. I make more laps around the trailer, throwing furtive glances at the bottle of whiskey on the table. It's possible I could keep a hold on myself. That I won't make the same mistakes I did before...

My phone vibrates with a text notification. Janessa's name pops up on my screen.

I miss u. I'm sorry about before. Come over??

After our last fiasco, I swore off messing with Janessa again, but as the bottle of White Oak stares at me out the corner of my eye, I'm thinking of taking her up on her offer. It'll be enough of a distraction to eat up the rest of the night.

Husking out a deep breath, I shake my head. Janessa's text is deleted. The bottle of White Oak gets put away in my cabinet along with the glass.

I step back with my fingers deep in my hair and tell myself it's the right decision.

Go to bed. Go to bed and wake to day eighteen hundred and twelve...

An abrupt knock on the door sounds before I can. It's not the kind of knock that's heavy or insistent; it's the kind of knock that sounds louder than it is due to the night's silence. I pad over to the door, peeling back the corner of my curtain window.

It can't be...

The moment feels surreal. My stomach pits and my fingers fumble for the locks. I wrench the door open to find myself opposite Korine and her mother, Ms. McKibbens.

But that's not even the most shocking part about it—the face I'm looking at doesn't belong to Korine. It's a face that's been beaten and bloodied.

BLAKE



“KORI.”

Her name leaves my lips as a broken sound. Nothing but a reflection of how I feel on the inside.

It’s a punch to the gut that knocks the air out of me. That’s got me so damn disturbed I can’t move a muscle.

This has to be a dream... a fucking nightmare...

Korine stands before me, battered and swollen, leaking blood on my doorstep. Bruises mar her beautiful face, along with the kind of cuts that only come from a hard collision with a fist. By the slouched way she’s standing, I’d bet other parts of her are just as damaged.

At her side is her mama, Sunny McKibbens. Otherwise known as the *neighborhood’s mama* back when we were kids. She was always fussing over us, cooking us food and making sure we all got home okay. In more recent times, as I understand it, Sunny’s fallen gravely ill.

Worry fills out her plump face, her misty eyes on me. “Please help my baby. I don’t know what to do.”

I shove aside the deep-rooted distress that’s paralyzed me. The disturbed kind of feeling that’s got me unable to even respond right away. The situation’s that jarring and fucked up.

Kori doesn't have to tell me why she's here. She doesn't need to say a word. The shame and pain rolls off her in waves.

Don't worry. You don't gotta say it. I've got you.

I communicate this by reaching for her and pulling her inside. Sunny wobbles in after us, clutching their purses and coats like she's uncertain what might be waiting for them inside my trailer.

I can't blame her. They're both clearly traumatized.

Kori flinches at my touch and she limps at my side as I walk her to the sofa. Her body feels delicate and tender, like it's been put through the wringer. She whimpers in pain when I ease her down onto the cushion.

"You might need a doctor," I say, almost disassociated from the moment. The shock keeps returning, making me question again and again if I'm asleep.

How the fuck could this happen?!

Korine shakes her head. "No doctor. No ER. No police."

"Korine—"

"No," she cuts me off. "I'll... I'll leave if you call them."

I fall silent, though tension rises between us.

Korine just confirmed what I already knew deep down. I've just been battling the reality of it. But the shock begins fading for the inevitable reaction I'd have in a situation like this, where my girl turns up on my doorstep beaten black and blue.

Rage that's blinding and destructive, consuming me whole. It pulses through me, every muscle in my body pulling tight. My hands itch for violence.

To cause the kind of suffering that Korine's been put through—and so much worse.

It clenches in my jaw and spills onto my face. It reflects in the shine of Korine's dark eyes.

"Blake," she says. "Please..."

The pain in her voice hurts.

It fucking hurts my ears, my fucking heart. Her pain's my pain.

She's been through it tonight. Me going on a murderous rampage against her piece of shit husband probably isn't what she needs right now.

I force it back down. The rage and hunger for violent revenge.

I look her in the eye, wanting to let her know she's safe here. She doesn't need to worry.

I've got you... always...

"I'll grab an icepack and the first aid kit, okay?"

She nods.

I rise up, unable to stop myself from giving a brief caress to her hair.

Sunny's still standing in the middle of the living room, clutching their purses and coats close to her chest. The poor woman looks like she's both worried for her daughter but scared to touch anything.

I ease their purses and coats out of her arms and set them down on a table. "Sunny, sit down. Make yourself comfortable. Both of you. I'll turn up the heat while I'm at it."

I disappear down the narrow hall that leads to my bathroom and bedroom and collect all the things I promised I would. The heater rattles before it begins cranking out more hot air. It only takes another minute or two before my trailer's extra toasty.

I kneel before Korine and crack open my first aid kit. It's not much, filled with a bunch of bandages, antiseptic wipes, and nonlatex gloves, but a few things in here might help Korine. She sits still as I clean up the cuts she's sustained, like the split in her lip and gash above her brow.

These are injuries that come about not just from a quick scuffle. They're from a long, brutal, one-sided attack.

Korine's hands bear no marks, telling me she didn't even fight back. Not in any meaningful way that caused him real damage. He probably barely has a scratch on him. The piece of garbage beat her just to beat her.

It takes everything I have to keep calm and clean her up. Cracks form and my fury bleeds through. I can feel it in the way tension thrums at the pulse point of my neck. My jaw's hard and clamped shut as I carefully apply a Band-Aid to the gash above her eyebrow.

"All done. Except for..." My gaze drops down to her side.

She's been hugging her stomach from the moment she got here. Sudden movements make her wince and groan in pain.

A pause passes between us before she gives a hesitant nod.

I gently lift her shirt to expose her bare stomach.

My chest clenches with more immediate rage. Rage I squash back down; rage I swallow against as it rises up.

I try my damndest to keep my cool, but it's too fucking much. My girl's been hurt badly...

A disturbing rainbow of bruises decorates her entire left side. Green, blue, purple, yellow, it's a swirl of color up and down her torso.

The fucker didn't even give the old bruises time to heal before inflicting new ones. No wonder she'd been limping that day outside the One Stop Autoshop. She was probably coming off a recent beating.

My hand extends, my fingers tracing over the swollen, discolored flesh. Something I should probably ask before doing, but the sight's so damn disturbing I can't help myself. It's too unbelievable to digest.

That somebody could do this to her. A man who's *supposed* to be cherishing her.

But as my eyes flick up to hers, I catch the plea in them. The ashamed wave that still encircles her. She doesn't want me asking about it.

Not right now.

I finish cleaning and bandaging her up. She leans back on the couch with the icepack wrapped in a towel and pressed against her side.

"Is my baby gonna be okay?" Sunny asks.

"She should be. She needs rest. Time for the swelling and bruising to

heal. Nothing seems broken.”

“Tell him,” Sunny says, directing her attention onto Korine. “Tell him what that big bully did to you.”

“Mama...”

“He knocked me right down. The big ol’ brute.”

“Mama, please —”

“He was gonna hit me again ’til Kori got in. Then he hit her. And he wouldn’t stop —”

“Please,” Korine whines, the pain in her voice visceral.

“He’s lucky I didn’t have my revolver on me. I would’ve put a bullet in him. That would’ve shut his big bully behind up.”

“MAMA! Stop it. I don’t want to... please...”

Sensing the friction, I interject myself. “There’s been a lot going on tonight. You two need to get some sleep. I’ve got a decent sized bed. It could fit both of you.”

“We’re not taking your bed. We’ll sit out here,” Korine says. “Mama can take the sofa. I won’t be getting much sleep anyway.”

“You think I’m sleeping in a bed while you’re here? After everything that’s happened tonight? The room’s yours.”

Korine’s mouth opens to argue before she seems to realize it’s useless. “Then Mama can have the bed. And, if it’s okay, her insulin needs to be refrigerated.”

“You don’t gotta ask. Make yourselves comfortable, alright?”

“I am feeling a little tired,” Sunny mumbles. She leans on the armrest of the chair she’s parked in. “My head’s pounding.”

“That’s because your blood pressure’s probably through the roof, Mama. You know the docs say not to get upset.”

Korine slips into caretaker mode at once, despite the fact that she’s in need of care herself. She winces her way to Sunny and helps her to her purse to take her medication. Then it’s off to the bathroom and bedroom.

I hang back and let them have some space.

To say tonight's been a lot is a hell of an understatement.

I slide both hands through my hair and let out a deep breath. It's gonna take time to work through everything, from my rage at Korine's situation to actually getting her the help she needs.

She turned up on *my* doorstep.

Though she didn't ask, it means something. She sees me as the person who can help.

Her safety.

Just like she'd been mine so many years ago.

It's another twenty minutes before Korine emerges. She softly closes the bedroom door then pads down the hall into the living room area.

I'm over by the kitchen sink, peering out the square window above it. It's too dark out to see anything but the pitch-black cloak that falls over the ravine. The view fits my mood on the inside.

Dark as night.

"I'm sorry for being here," Korine says, fidgeting. "We'll be gone in the morning."

I glance at her, my palms flat on the kitchen counter. "Gone, where? Back to him?"

"Blake... it's complicated."

"It's about the least complicated thing in the world."

"You don't get it. It's not so black and white."

"He beat you bloody!" I snap, my temper slipping loose. I stride from the kitchen counter where I stand toward her. "What more could there be to it than that? There is no gray area—the guy deserves to have his head bashed in! He'll be lucky if he makes it into next week without me making it happen!"

Korine closes her eyes—or *tries* to. One's too swollen. "I'm married, Blake."

“So you divorce his ass!”

“I have nothing. I am...”

For a second, as Korine’s voice breaks and her lip quivers, I’m certain of the disturbing word she was about to use to finish that sentence. She seems to catch herself, sucking in some air, and wiping at her eye with the back of a hand.

“It doesn’t matter. Because I’m not getting you involved.”

“Too late. If you think I’m going to drop this, you must’ve forgotten who I am in the ten years since you’ve left.”

“Can we not argue? Please... I just... I’m...” she trails off as if losing any resolve to finish.

I see it clear as day. The hurt and pain that’s swallowed her up. It’s so strong, it’s worn like a second skin.

How didn’t I see it before? How hadn’t I noticed it the afternoon on the side of the highway or that morning in the parking lot?

Of course Korine’s been behaving the way she has—she’s been broken. The woman standing before me is a shell of her former self. Her sarcastic personality, the one that often had me laughing along with her, has been snuffed out. Her spunk and sass stomped out. Her spirit so destroyed she was about to call herself *nothing*.

It all makes my fucking heart ache. It makes me angry with myself for not figuring it out sooner.

Somehow. Someway.

Pushing harder the day I saw her limping.

“You need rest,” I say, my voice strained and gritty. “I’ve got a few extra blankets and pillows. The sofa’s more comfortable than it looks.”

“But where will you sleep?”

“I’ll manage fine. I don’t need much sleep.” I grab onto her hand as I pass her up walking out the kitchen.

Korine protests a couple more times as I set up the sofa into a makeshift

bed. Once the pillow and blanket are out, she seems to lose any urge to fight me on it. Dropping down onto one of the cushions, she releases a deep sigh.

“I’m really sorry for bringing this to your doorstep,” she says. “I was driving around Pulsboro in the dark and... and I knew I couldn’t go to the police. And if I drove out of town, I’d be driving nowhere. So... I drove here. Without even realizing it.”

“Don’t be sorry. You don’t ever gotta apologize for seeking me out, Kori. Remember what you told me all those years back?” I join her on the sofa, claiming the spot next to her, and putting my arm around her in a side hug. “You said I never had to be embarrassed. You said you’d always help.”

A small sliver of a nostalgic smile touches her lips. “I was just saying what would make you feel better. You boys always got weird about crying. Even weirder if a girl saw you.”

I laugh. “My rep was at stake. Nothing was more pathetic than being a wuss crying ’cuz I fell off my bike and skinned my knee.”

“That wasn’t always why you were crying.”

“You were there for me just the same,” I say, giving her shoulders a squeeze. “That bedroom window of yours was always open. Don’t know where else I would’ve gone to escape Bill’s fists.”

I’m trying to keep my tone easy, though Korine’s not fooled. Her hand falls into my lap to give my thigh a squeeze of her own.

“How are you, Blake? How’s Bill? I heard about the accident.”

“Bill’s where he is. I’m where I am. We tend not to mix. For good reason, I’d say.”

She blows out a breath. “Does it ever get easier?”

“Life?” I give a shrug. “I’ve been asking myself the same thing.”

“How’s the club? You’re officially a member?”

Korine’s seeking company. She’s seeking to take her mind off what’s happened. I can tell by how she glances over at me. Her fingers are busy fussing with a loose string on the blanket I’ve given her. A tell-tale sign she’s

stressed.

So I give her the distraction. I tell her about the Steel Kings and everything I can about the club and the Chop Shop. She hums along in interest 'til her head's drooping onto my shoulder and her eyes are closing.

She drifts off to sleep while I'm telling her about Ozzie and his thirty-six tattoos.

It's a good thing she does—midnight has come and gone.

I ease her into a lying position on the sofa and then cover her with the blanket.

I won't be getting any sleep tonight, but at least Kori will...

BLAKE



COME DAWN, I'M ALREADY AWAKE. I GET NO SLEEP EXCEPT FOR A FITFUL TWO hour period where I drift off in the recliner by the living room window. The rest of the time, I'm caught between pacing the trailer as stealthily as possible to allow Korine and Sunny rest and glaring hatefully out the window.

My hand curls around my keys more times than I want to admit, my head filled with violent thoughts of taking off to her house. I'd break in and drag his ass out of bed. There's no telling what I'd do next, but I wouldn't leave 'til I was covered in his blood...

Only the peaceful sight of Korine asleep on the sofa stops me. I take a moment to watch her.

She's curled up in a ball, hugging the pillow close. Her expression vacant and relaxed.

My lungs expand with pride knowing I've provided a place where she feels safe enough to sleep so soundly.

But watching her also takes me into another loop of confusion.

What's happened scrambles up my brain. She's a good person—a good woman—who doesn't deserve a mean word spoken to her, much less somebody putting their hands on her.

The ugly reality that somebody has—her fucking *husband* has—for so

long Korine's used to the violence, makes my head hurt. It makes my fucking heart ache in the worst way, thinking about how he must've broken her down. How could he fucking hurt this woman?

My girl.

Korine stirs. It's a slow process. She twists under the blanket, her brows joining together, like she's trying to fight out of a dream. A throaty hum leaves her as she rubs her eyes open.

I watch the magic unfold live. The way her beautiful face gradually lights up the more awake she becomes. Her gaze meets mine and her soft lips quirk in a silent, slightly drowsy good-morning smile.

The bruises can never take away that pretty smile of hers.

I go from wanting to murder a man to wanting to kiss a woman in two-point-five seconds. Only Korine could bring a change so immediately. My murder plot slides to the back of my brain for the moment as I run my fingers through my hair and smile back at her.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey." She sits up, glancing around as if surprised to find herself in my home, tucked under a blanket on my sofa. Last night's turmoil comes rushing in and chases away the momentary light on her bruised face. "Blake... damn. I'm sorry for coming here. Me and Mama, we'll go."

"You'll stay."

"I've told you. I don't want to get you involved in my mess. Ken... he *will* come looking for me. The more trouble I make..."

...the more she'll be punished. She doesn't need to say it. It's more than implied.

My fists curl at my sides. "You're not going back, Kori. I can't let you return to that."

"He's my husband."

"Who beats the shit out of you for looking at him the wrong way."

Her face shifts into a deep, almost ashamed frown. "Blake, you don't get

it. He just... he has a temper. Sometimes it gets out of control... but he's under a lot of stress at work. He was up for a promotion and... and..." she stammers, emotion suddenly swelling in her voice. Pain waters her good eye. "I ruined it for him. I promised I wouldn't, but I did. He didn't get the job because *I* keep messing up."

"Shut the fuck up, Kori."

She looks over at me in surprise, her hands tightly gripping the blanket.

"Do you hear yourself? Is that what he taught you? What you learned over time? To justify what he's doing?"

"I made a mistake —"

"Stop."

I take several steps over to where she is on the sofa 'til I'm close enough to crouch by her side for a direct look into her teary eyes.

"Listen to me, Kori," I say slowly, in a tone that's forcibly calm. The same one I used last night. The rage for him and the situation simply bubbles under the surface. "Nothing you could ever do or say would justify what he's done. *Nothing*. You making a mistake—if you even want to call it that—doesn't give him a right to hurt you. Neither does stress and neither does any other fucking excuse I'm sure he's used. He's a piece of shit that doesn't deserve to look at you, let alone be your damn husband. He's gotten you so down, you've started to think of it as justified. You've started to think it's earned. I'm sure he's real pleased with himself. Because it means you'll never leave."

She shakes her head, a few tears sliding free down her left cheek. "He's going to come, and he'll apologize. He's probably already out looking for me."

"He'll kill you. You know that, right? One night, it's going to go too far, and he's gonna lose control. He'll fucking kill you. Is that what you want? Then who's going to take care of your mama? She'll be all alone."

That seems to get through to her. At least on some level.

Korine sits in tense silence, her cry working through her. She's closed her eye, the one that's not completely swollen, and her hurt comes out in the form of the silent tears and quake of her body. She leans closer, and I put my arms around her to accept her latest silent ask—she wants, *needs*, to be held.

It's not easy. If this has been going on for years, then I'm sure even now her perception's all fucked up. He's reprogrammed her to believe he loves her even if he cheats on her. Even if he makes her black and blue.

Her tears wet my neck and shoulder and dampen my shirt. I stroke the back of her head and try to be the rock I'd been for Korine way back when.

It brings flashbacks of old times, like sophomore year in high school, when her first boyfriend had broken her heart. She'd been more upset than I'd ever seen her. I was a dumb boy that didn't understand girls, but I knew one thing. My best friend was in tears, and it was up to me to make her feel better—so I snuck into her room and held her. We watched movies and ate junk food. I told her Jordan was a fucking loser and she deserved better. She'd smiled at me, so damn pretty, becoming a woman day by day, that a ripple of nerves hit my stomach. It wasn't long before I realized Korine was mine. The territorial feelings I had for this girl, *my girl*, weren't just friendship.

They were something else altogether...

"Where in the world am I?" Sunny's bemused voice jerks me out of my flashback.

Korine and I separate with our heads turning toward my bedroom door. It hangs open. Sunny's wandered out in the baggy t-shirt and sweats I provided her last night. Her round face is a question mark as she blinks over at us.

I get up, determined to keep these two women not only safe, but comfortable. "Sunny, you and Kori are visiting me for a few days. How'd you sleep? You hungry? I was thinking eggs and bacon for breakfast."

"That sounds wonderful. And, err, who... who are you again?" Sunny asks, her tone bemused.

Korine plays along to acclimate her mother. Her tears are wiped away and she gets off the sofa to join us near the entry to the kitchen. “Mama, we’re going to be with Blake for a while. You remember Blake Cash, don’t you? We lived next door to his family for years. You used to love him coming by for dinner.”

Recognition dawns in her eyes. “Blake! My golden boy. Of course. How are you? Oh my lord, still as handsome as always, aren’t you? And you’ve gotten so tall! I bet you’ve got girls slinging them panties right at you.”

“Mama,” Korine moans.

I put on a playful smile. The same one I use to charm women, young and old alike. Sunny’s right, and I tease her about it. She gives off a mischievous laugh that in turn makes Korine laugh.

Good. I’ve got these two in better spirits.

“You ladies sit down and relax. Chef Cash’s got you.”

Korine eases Sunny into a chair and then devotes the next few minutes to her medicine. Sunny’s blood sugar level is taken, and Korine gently injects her with the necessary dose of insulin.

The older woman strokes her daughter’s chin and says, “Thanks, baby. You always look after me.”

I’m focused on making their breakfast. The kitchen fills up with the smoky scent of bacon and the sound of it sizzling on my skillet. More than once, Korine insists on helping me. I shake my head and send her away with a point of my spatula.

“I already told you. Sit down. Get comfortable.”

But it seems like Korine’s got no concept of doing nothing. Especially if the situation involves kitchen work.

She’s a bundle of anxiety, her brows knitted and her foot tapping under the table. You’d think she expects to get in trouble the way she’s behaving, like she’s nervous about being found out for sitting back as somebody else cooks.

Is this the effect he's had on her? He's got her so damn trained she associates anything in the kitchen as her job? Even when he's not around?

I breathe through another beat of anger, forcing myself to keep my cool.

The last thing these two need is somebody else exploding around them. They're skittish deer that have finally come out from hiding. I can't fuck this up.

"Bacon and scrambled eggs," I say, setting down their plates. "OJ? Coffee? I got some decaf."

Korine half rises. "Blake, let me —"

"Sit your butt down, Kori. I got this."

Sunny aims an amused look at her daughter. "He told you."

I laugh, taking up space at the counter to eat. My trailer's not the best equipped to handle guests. Mostly because I don't have many visitors other than the occasional woman that spends the night. Two chairs, two sets of everything, have always been enough.

There'll be some growing pains if they're going to be staying with me. Adjustments that'll need to be made, but that I'm more than willing to make.

"These eggs are amazing, Blake," Korine says after a few forkfuls.

Sunny nods and sips from her coffee. "This is better than the Sunday breakfast your father makes. We should call him up."

Korine glances over in my direction. Her look tells me not to correct Sunny. It's easier to brush off the comment than remind her her husband passed away a long time ago.

I clear my throat and change the subject. "I'm assuming you two don't have much on you? Just what's on your back?"

"We didn't... there was no time," Korine says. "I was more concerned with getting Mama out."

"We've got two options. I can take you by your place to pick some things up or we can swing by the Buy N' Save and pick up what you need." Korine opens her mouth as I present the options, but I cut her off, adding, "Don't tell

me not to get involved 'cuz I already am.”

“The Buy N’ Save.”

“The Buy N’ Save it is. But somebody’s got to go to your house eventually. *If* you want your things.”

She shakes her head, her eyebrows pinched. “Not today, okay?”

I let it go. We agree that I’ll take them by the Buy N’ Save once I run a quick errand to the club. It’s not safe for them to go out by themselves considering her garbage husband might show up and accost them.

Korine promises she and Sunny will stay put while I’m gone. I toss a tarp over her car to hide its whereabouts and show her where my gun collection’s stashed.

“This is too much...”

“*In case*, Kori,” I say. “If he turns up like you think he will, looking for you, he could get violent. Keep the door locked. Don’t let him in and call me if he does show up. I’ll be back in no more than an hour, okay?”

“Hurry please,” she mumbles.

Fuck, the soft whisper of her voice, the note of worry laced in its sound, makes me want to pull her into my arms and never let her go.

The chain in the door clicks into place the second I’m past the threshold. It brings me relief as I stride toward my bike and toss my leg over the side.

The curtains in my living room window rustle. So subtle I wouldn’t notice if I didn’t know better. Korine’s peeking out, watching me go.

As anxious as she is, I doubt she’ll stop counting the minutes ’til I return.

I blast off, determined to make it back soon like I promised I would. I needed to make this trip in order to brief Mace and everybody else on what’s happened. They’ve gotta know some serious trouble could be headed our way.

The law already had us on their radar after the war between us, the Hellrazors, and the Road Reapers.

Now that it’s come to light Korine’s husband is a police officer who’s a

violent piece of shit, it could get complicated. It'll make us—*me*—an even bigger target than ever.

There's no way the asshole's going to take kindly to his wife leaving him. He'll be even less happy she's gone to a Steel King in her hour of need.

Mace and Sydney are posted at the bar counter, sipping coffee with Mick and Tito. The four look up in surprise as I bust through the saloon doors and head straight for them. Probably because I'm usually not by this early. Let alone with fury carved onto my face.

Mace stands up, on alert just from my body language. He juts his chin at me. "What's going on?"

"The club office, now," I growl.

Mace doesn't question me on it. He glances at Sydney, any easiness about him gone, then he nods. "Tito, you coming?"

The three of us head to the back with tension ratcheting up. Sydney seems tempted to get up off the stool and follow us but decides against it.

Mace closes the door to the office and turns toward me. "What's this about, Cash?"

I'm pacing. The rage I've bottled up in Korine's presence is finally spilling free. I go to the nearest wall and slam my fist into it. My knuckles burn, splitting open, and I leave a huge, cracked dent in the plaster, but it proves to be an anger reliever.

I do it again. My blood smears the wall.

Mace and Tito wait patiently as I get it out of my system.

"You done?" Mace asks. "Tell me what the hell's going on, Cash."

"It must be serious if you're this worked up, *primo*. Breathe, it'll calm you down," Tito advises.

I run both hands through my hair. "It's Korine."

Mace's jaw squares, his arms folded. "I expected that. What about her?"

"Her fucking trash husband's been putting his hands on her!" I roar. My anger ramps up all over again just speaking the words. Remembering the

bruises marring her face and body. “He beat her up so bad, last night she fled into the night and turned up on *my* doorstep!”

“Korine,” Tito says slowly. “This the girl from your high school days? I remember you *los jóvenes* working in the shop. Time flies.”

Mace takes a moment, even his silence loud and commanding. “Where is she now?”

“At my place. I won’t let her go back, Mace. She can’t even fucking open one of her eyes. She goes back, he’s gonna do worse. It won’t be long before he kills her.”

“She’s not going back,” he agrees. It’s with that final authority the prez of an MC carries. “You know how we roll, Cash. Kori’s been gone ten years, but she’s still ours. She’s one of us as much as Sydney and Mick are. We’ve got her. Where’s the husband?”

“Probably already out looking for her. He’s a cop,” I spit out in disgust.

Tito shakes his head “Ahhh. That makes sense. That complicates things.”

“She couldn’t even fucking call 911 ’cuz the dipshit’s pals would show up! It’s been going on for years. It’s so bad, he’s got her *brainwashed*. Basically fucking scared of her own shadow.”

“That’s gonna make things interesting,” Mace says, rubbing his chin. “But it explains why Pulsboro PD’s been extra interested in us.”

“You think it’s related?” Tito asks.

“They’ve started patrolling our block more in recent days. Take a look outside.”

I stride over to the window and peer out at the street.

Sure enough, there’s a cruiser parked at the end of the block. He must’ve arrived *after* I rode in... or maybe he was tailing me all along and I was too enraged and distracted to notice.

My eyes narrow into thin slits. “They want to fuck with us? We can fuck them up. Law or not.”

“We’ll do what we need to do.” Mace steps to me, giving one of our

brotherly back-of-the-neck squeezes. The gesture's to calm me down and remind me of our brotherhood. "We'll come up with a plan at our next club meeting. For now... just make sure Korine's straight."

I nod, but I haven't taken my eyes off the window. My glare's set on that police cruiser idling at the curb, my rage flowing through me.

I meant what I've said—if Ken Stricklin wants to fuck with us, if he dares hurt Korine again, I'm going to fuck him up. I'm going to *end* him.

KORINE



“BABY, COME AWAY FROM THE WINDOW,” MAMA SAYS. SHE’S NESTLED INTO the deep cushions of Blake’s recliner, her short legs dangling.

I tear myself away from peeking out for the hundredth time since Blake left. I’m a living, breathing contradiction; so shattered and grief-stricken, I don’t know what to do or say. I don’t know how to act. I’m confused and anxious. Devastated and regretful. Frustrated at my lack of clarity and strength.

All I want to do is hide away. From everyone... including Mama.

My hand comes up to touch my face, and my stomach churns at the grotesque feel of my lumpy, swollen skin. I’ve been avoiding my reflection for this reason—seeing the damage done breaks me down even more.

“Listen, Korine,” Mama says when I take a seat and join her. “We’re not going back, baby. That was the last time. I don’t care about the medical problems or the money issues we’ll have. We’ll figure it out together.”

“You remember?”

Her face dims and then she gives a nod. “I won’t ever forget that man knocking my baby down. Look what he’s done to my beautiful daughter’s face. You can’t, baby... you can’t go back.”

“Mama, I’ve got no money. I’ve got nothing.” My voice breaks, unable to keep speaking.

She reaches for my hand. Her warm touch soothes even if just a little. “We’ll take it a day at a time. Blake wants to help. We need to let him.”

My phone buzzes, alerting me to a voice message that’s been left.

I don’t need to see the number to know who it is—I blocked Ken’s number, which means any attempt of his to call goes straight to voicemail. But I still get the messages. I still receive his dozen-odd voice recordings.

“Just delete that dang message,” Mama says. “We don’t need to hear a word he’s got to say.”

“It could be important.”

I pick up my phone and press the button to play back his recording on speaker.

“Kor,” comes Ken’s voice. It’s deeper than usual, as though weighted down by guilt and regret. “Kor, pick up the phone. We’ve got to talk about this. We can do it wherever you want. Tell me where and when. Things got out of hand, but please don’t play these games. Don’t shut me out. I’ve been driving all over town looking for you. I don’t want anything bad happening while you’re upset and on your own. You know you never think straight in these situations. Just let me know you and Sunny are okay, alright?”

The beep cuts him off as more emotion swells in his tone.

Mom swats her hand at my phone. “That fool won’t trick me. He can kiss my big, fat behind.”

“He’s been driving around looking for us. I wonder if he’s figured out we’re here yet.”

“It don’t matter. He’s pretending like he’s concerned. If he was so god damn concerned, then maybe he should’ve kept his hands to himself!”

“Mama, calm down or you’ll make yourself sick.”

“Delete that message.”

My gaze slides to my phone screen where Ken’s voicemail is pulled up. More notifications come in. He’s sent a slew of texts, begging me to answer and let him know I’m okay.

Kor... where are you?????

I've driven around for hours. Kor, come home.

You're really going to ignore me? We've both made mistakes.
I'm worried sick. Let's talk about it.

In the past, when I've walked out and the texts and calls started rolling in, I wound up responding. He'd track me down, and I'd return home hoping we'd finally fixed our problems. Our marriage was still salvageable.

It's humiliating that, even now, as I delete each message he's sent me, a tiny piece of me wonders what if...

Maybe this time really will be different. We really *can* work through it.

I force the thought away and slide my phone into my jeans' pocket. Mama's been watching me this whole time, her expression downturned.

It becomes a running theme over the next week. Blake and Mama watching me with a hawk's eye and treating me like I'm made of glass. I stay hidden away in Blake's trailer except for the quick runs we make to places like the Buy N' Save.

Any time I'm too silent or withdrawn, they're making it their mission to engage me. Mama comes over as I lay curled up on the sofa and strokes my hair like she used to when I was a little girl. Blake makes it his mission to provide me whatever he thinks I need in the moment. If it seems like I'm shivering from being too cold, he's cranking up the heat or bringing me extra blankets. If I seem too somber, he's trying to make me laugh, trying his

damnedest to draw even a smile out of me.

Their concern is appreciated.

But other times, I can't help craving solitude.

Though Ken's number remains on block and I don't return his efforts to contact me, it doesn't erase the heartbreak. It doesn't make the grim reality of what happened that night an easier pill to swallow.

My husband, the man who took a vow to love and cherish me 'til death parts us, profoundly hurt me.

The vision of his face clenched in rage haunts me. The suffocating grip of his hands around my neck is a feeling I won't ever forget. I'd started gasping for air and he'd only squeezed harder, his gray eyes lacking any sign of a soul. Not a sliver of love to be found.

Where do I begin processing that the man who was supposed to love me actually hates my guts?

He *must* if he's done what he's done.

...at least that's what my logical side insists whenever my heart aches.

"Hey," Blake says, drawing me from my thoughts.

He breezes into the living room and drops down on the opposite end of the sofa. Because I'm lying down, my feet take up part of the cushion he sits down on, but that doesn't deter him—he merely lifts them up by my ankles and places them in his lap.

It mirrors old times. We were teenagers that often wound up with our bodies touching in some capacity when we watched TV on Mama's sofa.

"What're you watching?" he says, staring ahead. The blue light from the TV reflects on his face, the rest of the room dark. He chuckles when he recognizes the scene in the movie. "Assassin's Gamble. Classic."

"It came on after the news. You can change the channel."

"You don't remember when we saw this at the Sunday matinee for three bucks? It was summer between sophomore and junior year. We're watching it."

I push myself into a sitting position and draw my legs back despite Blake's attempt to keep my sock-clad feet in his lap. "You don't have to do this. You don't have to force yourself to spend time with me. It's a Friday night. You should be at the club with Mason and the guys."

A mysterious gleam flickers in Blake's vivid blue eyes. "Ever consider I'm right where I want to be?"

"You've wasted so much of your time on me —"

"It's never been a waste in the past. It's still not a waste today. Kori, do me a favor. Every time you get the urge to feel like you're a bother, stop yourself. 'Cuz that damn sure ain't the case. I'll tell you that now."

My teeth rake over my bottom lip, my anxiety through the roof. "I'm sorry. My thoughts are all over the place. I'm such a mess."

"Don't."

I blink at him. "Don't... what?"

"Ever say sorry," he says. "There's nothing to apologize for. I bet you've spent years doing it—I can see it all over you. How sorry you've been. But that ends now, alright? I don't ever want you to feel sorry. Like you've done something wrong. As for where I'm spending Friday night. I'm choosing to be here. Gimme those feet."

He snatches them back and repositions them in his lap. I'd object if I wasn't so thrown by the sincerity behind his actions. His touch and his words.

Blake and I have known each other since we were first graders learning how to add and subtract and spell simple words.

I can tell when he's lying.

...and the fact that he isn't in this moment is what disrupts my spirit the most. It's what makes me speechless and unable to process anything.

He means it when he says he's where he wants to be.

"I guess it's a sign of how fucked up I am," I sigh. "The fact that I can't fathom why you'd want to be around me. Even knowing how close we used to be."

“Ever consider I *like* being around you? I’ve gone ten damn years without the privilege, and now I’m taking advantage.”

“That’s a much needed boost to my self-esteem.”

He rubs the ball of my foot out of what could only be absentminded affection. “How’d it happen, Kori? How’d you wind up with him?”

“Blake—”

“You left for college—you left me and everything behind. I always imagined you’d be some engineer working for some multibillion-dollar company. I always hoped you wouldn’t be dating some guy equally as great as you are. But never expected somebody like... him.”

“That makes two of us. Ken wasn’t in my plans. Dad passed my sophomore year in college. I was hours away from home. Mom was in Houston, and my brother had moved overseas for a work opportunity. I felt so alone. I was a mess.”

“You could’ve reached out to me. I would’ve been there.”

“I know you would’ve. And maybe that’s why I didn’t. Because it just felt complicated going back. I had convinced myself I only wanted to look forward.”

Blake’s disappointment drips from him. “Then what?”

“One day, when I was visiting Dad’s grave, there he was. Ken appeared with a flower. He offered his condolences. He was so kind, so compassionate... so different from the guys at school. He was a rookie on the force. He mentioned he’d seen me around the campus area when responding to a disturbance. He said he just had to talk to me,” I explain. “I’ve wondered if... maybe it was all a lie. He saw a young woman at a low point and knew he could sink his hooks into me.”

“When did he put his hands on you?”

“That’s the thing. Ken wasn’t always abusive. At least not physically. I think—on some level—he was always emotionally manipulative. Always a little controlling. But it was over small things. So I brushed it off. Stuff like

what I wore and if a guy was too friendly. He would guilt trip me. Make me feel like I was doing it on purpose to hurt him.”

“And you’d feel bad about it,” Blake predicts.

I nod, feeling foolish at the memories. “You were my only serious boyfriend. Anyone else like Jordan was never serious and didn’t count. I was so busy with school my freshman year of college I barely spoke to another guy, let alone dated. I had no idea what Ken was doing. I was too inexperienced and vulnerable to catch on. Then, summer before senior year, he proposed. I told him I wanted to wait a while. A few years to get my career started. But that wasn’t the answer he wanted to hear. We had a huge fight about it. It was maybe the first time he really got hurtful with me—as in raised his voice and lost his temper. He smashed things and stormed out. I should’ve known. But then I started questioning myself. Maybe I was being unreasonable.”

“I can tell where this is going,” he says. His warm touch on my feet has become soothing even as I rehash my trauma. His palm slides along the pad of my feet and gives me the encouragement I need to keep going.

“We compromised—or I thought it was a compromise. We waited ’til graduation, then we got married. I was twenty-two. I moved into Ken’s home, because he said his home was my home now. I believed him.” I pause to let out another breath that feels painful to my lungs. “I did get a job initially. I was working as a mechanical engineer for a local automotive company. That was around the time Mama’s health took a steep decline. Natural causes but also the trauma from losing Dad didn’t help. Ken insisted she move in with us. It seemed like such a selfless sacrifice on his part. But I didn’t realize the trap he was setting.

“When her health got so bad she could barely be alone, Ken suggested I quit my job. I could take care of her full time. He argued it’d save us the costs of a full-time home nurse or nursing facility. We moved a couple times—always for his career—but always to places that felt more isolating. It became

normal that my only contact each day was with Ken and Mama. He'd grow angry if I spoke too long to anybody else. Especially any other men. Once, he even got mad at me for flirting with the mailman. *Flirting*—that's the word he used."

"I'm guessing he still made it your fault."

"Every time. We started trying for a family. It was mostly Ken's idea. He wanted to project a family image for his career. We struggled to conceive. The doctor's were puzzled. I took so many tests trying to figure out what was wrong with me. But Ken refused to be tested too. He insisted it was me. That was around the time he really started changing—it's like he began to hate me because I couldn't complete his perfect picture of what life could be. The first afternoon he ever put his hands on me, we'd come from another clinic and gotten into an argument about his refusal to take the test for his sperm count. He backhanded me and I saw stars. Then he immediately apologized. He was horrified. He *cried* about it. Got down on his knees and begged me to forgive him. Said he couldn't live without me."

Blake's anger has emerged. He's tensed up. Even his grip on my foot has gone from gentle and affectionate to stiff. He's restraining himself, but it's by a thin thread.

"I believed him," I mumble. "And... and from there it slowly escalated. It was over a few years. For a while he would apologize—he would seem so sorry. Then the apologies stopped coming. He'd only grow angrier. To the point sometimes even my presence seemed to enrage him. I took the blame for so many things. So many times he'd fly into a rage, and I didn't even understand what he wanted. By the time it got so bad he was leaving me... well, like you saw me that night... I just... I felt so defeated. So beatdown emotionally I couldn't get back up. Where would Mama and I even go? How would we survive?"

"You could've come here. You could've turned up at any time," Blake says, catching my gaze. My heart aches as we stare at each other and I feel

his sincerity. “I wish you would’ve. I wish you’d come sooner.”

“Me too,” I whisper.

And it’s the truth—I do wish I’d had enough self-worth to leave Ken sooner than I did. That I’d stuck to my decision the few times I tried to leave instead of letting him fool me into returning home again.

“Abuse can be funny,” I say, sitting up on the sofa. My smile’s a dark one, almost bitter. “You normalize it to make sense of it. The longer you stay, the harder it becomes to leave. After a while, it just becomes this part of your existence that you learn to live with, because escape just feels more and more out of reach. More impossible.”

Blake opens his arms to draw me into him. He kisses the top of my head. “I get it. How easy it can be to just... swallow it down. Just to survive another day. For years I told myself Bill’s temper toughened me up. Only a coward would cry.”

“I remember.”

“You’re the one who taught me it was okay to hurt,” he says. “That I had to come clean about what was happening to find a way to make it stop.”

“Ironic you’re doing the same for me now.”

“That’s what best friends do.”

After such a heavy heart to heart, we eventually return our attention to the TV as if there’s been no interruption. I lay back down on my side, curling my arm under the pillow.

We watch the movie just like this.

In silence with my feet propped in his lap and our gazes glued to the screen. But it’s not an uncomfortable silence. It feels natural.

Calming.

Every so often, his fingers still skim over the ball of my feet, teasing me like he’s so often done in the past. So many times we did end up like this, with me curled up and him keeping my feet planted in his lap.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

The movie plays late into the night. For those few hours, I'm forgetting about my trauma and focusing on the characters and storyline. We fall asleep in place on the sofa, with my legs stretched out into Blake's lap and his head drooped to one side.

When we wake hours later in the middle of the night, Blake casts me a sleepy smile and then pulls the blanket over me before he gets up and wanders over to the nearest window.

I'd like to say I stay up with him, but that'd be a lie. I slip back off to sleep, cocooned in the warmth of the blanket he's thrown over me.

Our interactions play out like this—Blake seeking to make me feel better and me reluctant to accept such unencumbered kindness.

"I'll help," I volunteer one morning as Blake makes the coffee.

He's gotten into the habit of cooking Mama and me breakfast. Despite our offers to take over, he's insisted on doing it alone. But after a week, I finally wear him down, coming up on his left side and taking the coffee mugs from his grasp.

Our fingers brush. An unintentional but immediate bout of nerves flicker through me. A familiar reaction whenever his skin meets my skin in any way. In the past, it confused me. To this day, nothing's changed.

I aim a small, hesitant smile at him.

"Let me," I say. "It'll give me something to do."

He returns my smile with one that forms not only on his mouth, but in his eyes. Humor sparkles in them, the furrow of his brow easing up, and he gives a nod.

"Alright. Coffee's all you this morning. I'll get started on the eggs."

We work in tandem. Blake scrambling up a bowl of half a dozen of eggs, adding pinches of pepper and salt before he pours it onto the hot skillet.

"You know," he says, "we need to get your things. Have you been thinking about when you want to go by?"

I freeze as I press the on button on the coffee machine and it launches into

brewing the coffee grounds. The trickling noises it produces serves as filler for our conversation as I figure out an answer to his question.

“I haven’t thought much about it.”

“We need to do it,” he says. “Sooner rather than later.”

“I’d rather not.”

“You wouldn’t be going alone. I’d be with you. Hell, some of the guys from the club’ll come too. Just to make sure no shit pops off —”

“Blake,” I breathe, shaking my head.

“Kori,” he says, his tone much firmer than mine. “If you’ve still got your things there, it’s a door left open. It’s leaving things unresolved. We need to get you removed from that situation.”

Tension hardens my bones. My movements become stiff and unnatural as I reach for the coffee mugs and begin pouring. I miss the cup and spill some onto the counter.

The worst part is the fact that I’m fully aware Blake sees me—he’s watching as I tense up into some malfunctioning robot that can’t even pour a damn cup of coffee the right way. Even more confusingly, my head is polluted with thoughts about what Ken would do in this moment.

The anxiety I’m already living with shoots through the roof. The mug in my hand slips out of my grasp altogether and shatters on the tiled floor.

“Oh my god,” I choke out. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to break it. I’ll clean it up right now —”

“Kori—”

“I’ll sweep it up,” I say desperately, bustling from the kitchen to the hall closet. “I’ll make more coffee. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Blake catches me on passing. His fingers shut around my forearm and he slows me down to a complete stop. “Kori, what did I tell you about apologizing? I’m not angry, okay? Accidents happen. I’m more concerned about you. You’re shaking.”

So I am.

I've gone from stiff as a board to shaking chihuahua in five seconds flat. It's not until Blake points it out that I realize I'm a jittery, panicked mess. My heart's twitching in my chest and I've started wringing my hands.

Once I realize this, I drop them to my sides, forcing myself to stop the nervous habit.

The most embarrassing part is the pity in Blake's eyes—he'd say differently, but it's there in the deep, sparkling blue of them—the sad feelings he has witnessing me like this.

I don't want to be pitied. I don't want to be treated like I'm fragile.

But it's my fault. I've behaved like I am.

I swallow and drop my gaze from his. "I don't know how to act, Blake. Maybe I need to be alone. Check in at some motel and just..."

...wallow in misery.

I don't finish my train of thought.

"Hey," he says, cupping my chin and lifting my gaze back to his. "I want you to be yourself. But what I don't want is for you to feel you have to act in fear. I promise I'm not letting anything happen to you, Kori. You're safe here, okay?"

My heart fills with warmth and affection peering into his gaze. Guilt nags at me too, chastising me for ever thinking there was pity on Blake's part. He's my best friend. Always has been and always will be—he doesn't pity me, just like I never pitied him when we were kids. I always wanted what was best for him.

He wants what's best for me.

I give him the only smile I'm capable of. A slight quirk of my lips. "Thank you for understanding."

"We'll talk more about it later. Should we wake Sunny up now or let her sleep in some more?"

I never get a chance to answer. A light fist double taps at the door and two silhouettes appear in the sheer curtains covering the window.

Blake must know who it is. He leaves me in the kitchen to go answer without an ounce of surprise.

“Mace, brother.” He opens his arms for a quick brotherly hug, then steps aside to let Mason enter.

He’s not alone. A very pretty, tall, curvy Black woman I’ve never seen before enters along with him. She drips with curiosity as she glances around the trailer, her hands stowed inside the pockets of a leather bomber jacket and her honey-colored hair pulled into a messy bun.

Her eyes light up when she sees me, her lips cracking a smile. “You must be Korine. I’m Sydney.”

She holds up a hand in a wave. I can’t hide my confusion quick enough as I glance over to Blake.

Mason answers first. He hasn’t changed in the last decade since I’ve seen him—except he’s grown a few inches taller, gotten more tattoos, and packed on even more muscle than he had in high school. His green eyes flash with amusement as he juts his chin at the Black woman he’s come with.

“Sydney’s my old lady. I brought her by to meet you ’cuz I figured you’d be bored outta your mind if it was just me and Cash shooting the shit.”

It’s an excuse.

I can pick up that much. Blake invited Mason over to talk club business and asked if he’d bring his girlfriend to get through to me. Woman to woman.

I know this for sure when minutes pass and the guys head outside to check out the bike Mason’s rode in on. Sydney sits down at the kitchen table with me over coffee. The sympathetic looks she gives me tells me she knows. Which means Mason knows.

Maybe the whole club.

It shouldn’t bother me; I shouldn’t care what anyone else thinks.

Yet I do. My bruises haven’t healed all the way. The swelling’s still prominent along my cheek. The split in my lip hasn’t finished closing up.

I sigh, peering down into the contents of my coffee mug. “Give it to me

straight, Sydney. They brought you along to talk sense into me, didn't they?"

Sydney's eyes widen. "I'm here because it's a Tuesday morning and I had nothing else —"

I pin her with a stern stare. "Be honest."

For half a second, she seems tempted to keep the charade up before conceding with a sigh and shrug. "It was Mace's idea. He figured it might be easier if a woman talked to you. Somebody impartial on the situation."

"Have you ever had a man you loved hit you?"

She frowns, then shakes her head.

"Then what do you know about my situation?" I snap. "What can you say that'll change anything? My *husband* is probably out searching for me as we speak. I took his name and I wear his ring. We made vows."

"I might not know what it's like to be in your situation, but can I ask you one thing—would you ever hurt somebody you love?"

"Not by choice —"

"Because he *chose* to hurt you, you realize that, right?" she interrupts sharply. A take-no-nonsense attitude emerges from her, which explains how she's wound up as Mason's old lady. He'd trample all over any other kind of woman. She leans closer across the table, staring me down with a hard, challenging stare. "Your husband chose to break his vows and he hurt you."

"From what I hear, he's done it many times before. He'll keep doing it—and worse—if you don't walk away. The Kings have got your back. Cash's got your back. I don't even fucking know you, and I've got your back. But first, you've got to put those big girl panties on and woman up and leave his ass for good. The question is, are you ready or are you going back to being his punching bag?"

I can only blink in response at her words. She goes off like she's been holding in every syllable for a while before she sits up straighter and then calmly sips from her coffee mug.

I... think I like her. Her direct and unfiltered delivery. Her no-nonsense

vibe. The layer of compassion and sympathy hidden underneath the alpha-female exterior.

A slow smile spreads on my lips. “I might need to go shopping for a new pair of big girl panties. It’s been a very long time since I’ve worn some.”

She laughs. “That can be arranged. There’s got to be a sale somewhere. Maybe Big-Girl-Panties-R-Us.”

I exhale a deep breath and slide fingers over my mess of chin-length curls. “You’re right that you don’t even know me, but here I am unloading my issues on you.”

“It’s okay, you’re with the Kings now. We all look out for each other. Including us old ladies. Have you taken pictures of your injuries?”

“Pictures?” I shake my head. “I never have before...”

“You should. Photo evidence is important,” Sydney explains. “You need to start thinking strategically. If you really *are* leaving him this time. I’ve never been hit by a man I’ve loved... but I’ve known many women who have. You need to start collecting evidence. You need to start protecting yourself. Go to the police and submit what you have for a paper trail. File a restraining order.”

A dark laugh bubbles out of me. “He’s a cop. I’ve never been able to go to them for help. They’re always his friends.”

“They have to help you. It doesn’t matter if he’s one of theirs. They’re required to treat you like any other victim. Have you filed yet?”

For a second time, I shake my head. “But I need to. There’s so much to do. And I... I feel like such a damn mess. I don’t even know what to do... where to go... I have nothing.”

Sydney’s expression softens. She reaches out to grip my free hand. “We’ve all been there. At the bottom. A few months ago, I was you. I felt so lost. I was alone with nobody I loved left in this world. Then I came here for answers. I wound up finding a home. Somewhere I belonged.”

“You decided to stay?”

“I did. It seemed like the right thing to do. I haven’t regretted a single day.”

“I’ve never known Mason to be in a real relationship.”

Sydney laughs. “So I’ve heard. It’s just about the last thing I expected when I came here... but I couldn’t resist him. He couldn’t resist me. Believe me, we tried. Funny thing is, Mace gets me more than maybe anybody else I’ve ever known. It’s like he’s the other half of me. I’m sure it doesn’t make sense when I try to explain.”

I blink, discovering tears in my eyes.

Sydney might not realize it, but her words resonate with me—deep in my being, as she tells me how Mason feels like her other half, there’s only one man’s face I see in my mind’s eye.

Only one man who has only ever accepted me as I am. Truly, as if he is my other half.

I spent years trying to morph into the perfect woman for Ken. I changed myself in so many different ways just to be what he said he wanted. The docile wife and the doting homemaker with a sparkling home. A doormat who took whatever he dished out and accepted his many affairs.

It was never enough for him. He demanded more. He broke me down ‘til there was no part of myself left.

For eight years I’ve watched as I was ground into dust. I ceased to exist.

He owned me in every sense of the word. In every way you could own a person. I’ve been so under his control, everything I do, say, think aligns with what *he* wants.

Even now, as I sit and vent to Sydney, it feels as if Ken’s omnipresent.

His control runs that deep.

No more.

An idea materializes as I grow desperate to sever the tether he has on me and my life. Something that will show him—and myself—he no longer controls me or has any say in what I do or who I am.

I rise up from the chair at the kitchen table and wander from the room.

Sydney calls after me. I don't answer her. I've slipped into an almost catatonic state as I pass through the narrow hall that connects one half of the trailer with the other. My hand extends to push open the door to the bathroom. I reach for the shears Blake often uses to trim his golden-brown, shoulder-length hair, and I hold it up to my own.

"What are you—oh!" Sydney gasps. She's rushed over to check on me, stopping in the doorway to the bathroom. Her shocked reflection shows in the mirror as I snip away at my straggle of chin-length curls.

The locks of hair fall away. The sink basin fills with the evidence of my hack job. I cut until I can't cut anymore. Only a couple inches of hair remain on my scalp, my own unprofessional version of an off-the-cuff pixie cut.

Ken would be horrified. He's always hated my hair this short and required I keep it at a minimum chin-length.

In a moment like this, it only emboldens me more. It shows more than anything that I'm really making a change this time. I'm going against his wishes and am no longer under his control...

I breathe a fresh breath into my lungs and drop the pair of shears to the counter with a clang. My fingers slip through my new short crop of hair, my eyes fixed on myself in the mirror. An immediate weight has been lifted from my shoulders; I feel unspeakably lighter.

Even if it's just fleeting. Even if there's still so much to process and work through.

The woman staring back at me in the mirror is different from the woman I was seconds ago.

I meet Sydney's eyes in the reflection of the glass. "I'm ready. For real this time."

KORINE



“I SAW THIS POSTED ON THE CHOP SHOP’S FACEBOOK PAGE. I WANT THE JOB if it’s still open.”

Blake’s lying beside his FXDB Street Bob parked just outside his trailer. In one hand, he holds a torque wrench; in the other, new fasteners he’s tightening onto the rear axle. At the sound of my voice, he shifts his gaze from his gleaming crimson red bike so he can watch my approach.

I’m holding out my iPhone to show him what I’m talking about, though I suspect he already knows.

He returns his gaze to his bike. “That’s not happening.”

“You know I can do just as good if not better than anybody else you hire,” I say, embellishing the confidence in my tone. It’s been a while since I’ve been confident about anything. Right now... it’s just pretend.

“Yeah, you probably would be,” he admits, twerking the wrench around. “But that doesn’t mean it’s a good idea. You’ve been through a lot. Take the time to rest and recover.”

“I’ve rested. I’ve recovered. I’m ready to do more than lay on your couch all day and night. You remember how good I was back in high school. That summer I worked at the shop.” My hands shoot to my hips, taking on an authoritative kind of stance that feels foreign—after years of being married to Ken, I’m not used to being so bold. Everything with him, from my tone of

voice to my facial expressions had to be docile. Deferential at all times.

At the sight of me striking such a pose, Blake pauses long enough from working on his bike and smirks up at me.

“I do remember. You were damn good. They all doubted you. But you proved ’em wrong. You did that a lot when we were growing up.”

“Maybe it’s because there were boys named Blake Cash that sometimes doubted me.”

Blake jumps up from his lying position on the ground. His fingers slide through his golden hair in the way only he can pull off, his amusement rolling off him in a flirtatious wave that’s palpable.

“But I enjoyed seeing you put those boys in their place. Including me.”

On the receiving end of his smile, suddenly standing so close, I find myself flustered. My skin warms against my wishes, and when I draw my next breath, I’m out of air.

It shouldn’t be a surprise—Blake’s proximity has always had profound effects on me. I might as well be fifteen again when I first started noticing the facial hair he had growing in and how tall he’d sprung up over the summer. The girls in the hall at school hung on his every word, sighing dreamily in his wake, while I was the one walking by his side as his best friend.

Just his best friend.

Much to my disappointment the older we got and the more my hormones had me acting like a boy-crazy fool.

Even now, as he peers into my eyes with a spark lit in his, nothing’s changed. How is it possible that our chemistry could be this strong after so long? How are we able to pick right back up like nothing’s happened?

Blake seemingly reads my mind. His lips tip slightly wider and he releases a short chuckle. A familiar, deep-pitched sound that’s easy-going and infectious. That makes me smile too. He reaches out and palms the ball of my shoulder, giving it an affectionate squeeze.

And if I wasn’t flustered before, I’m damn sure flustered now. The flutter

in my belly confirms it.

“Alright, Kori,” he says in his gritty drawl. “The job’s yours if you want it. But I’ve got a couple stipulations.”

I raise my right brow. “Stipulations... like what?”

“You work the shift I work,” he says. “And if he or any of his friends come around the shop, you come get me.”

“Blake...” I shake my head.

“Call me an overprotective ass for insisting on it... but I’m not letting anything else go down. It’s only been a couple weeks. You said it yourself—he’s not giving up easy. This could be the calm before the storm.”

“Fine. If you insist.”

I should be relieved Blake cares so much. All signs point to him being right; it’s true that this could be a calm period before the storm. It’s only a matter of time before Ken makes another move.

Yet I can’t get rid of the heavy guilt for even involving Blake in my mess of a marriage. It should be my burden and my burden alone.

“Alright, Miss Chop Shop Mechanic,” he goes on, gesturing to his bike. “Got any bright ideas about this next mod I’m going to be making? It’s time for these buckhorns to go.”

I fold my arms and strut around the perimeter of his bike as if performing an appraisal. “You’re right—these buckhorns are dated as hell. Whoever picked them out has bad taste.”

“You know what?” he growls, rushing toward me, his arms engulfing me in a ticklish hug.

His fingers dance up and down my torso as I break out in a shriek of involuntary laughter. Most of my bruises have healed, but the few tender spots give a twinge of protest. My laughter falls off for a wince that makes Blake stop at once.

Our happy, playful moment darkens as if a storm cloud has migrated in.

Blake drops his arms to his side, his expression tense. Not *at* me but *for*

me. “Sorry... got caught up in the moment and forgot...”

“It’s okay,” I say, my hand on the achy part of my ribs. “I forget sometimes too. It’s easier when I do.”

He nods, still visibly tense. *Pissed*. “Tomorrow morning, you start. Better bring your A game.”

The dark storm cloud seems to clear up. My first day at the Chop Shop gives me déjà vu. Ten years ago, I’d practically run the day-to-day operations. The manager at the time, a surly ruddy-faced guy named Styx, had enjoyed my work so much he gave me extra perks. Extra authority on managing the shop and our work orders.

Returning to the shop now, it’s like I’ve never left. A fond familiarity washes over me. The moment’s a homecoming in the best way.

A greased-up little man in coveralls approaches with a toothy grin. “Hey ma’am. Whatcha in for? Don’t tell me a pretty thing like you rides?”

Blake cuts in straightaway. “That pretty thing is Korine McKibbens... and she’s about to be your coworker. So you better be respectful.”

“Blake,” I mutter. Then I present the man my hand to shake. “Hi, I’m Korine. I used to work here a while back.”

The guy takes hold of the tips of my fingers and gives them a weak shake, his attempt at chivalry. “You handled the front desk? It has been a while since we’ve had a receptionist —”

“Korine’s an experienced mechanic—she’s also got a degree in mechanical engineering. Safe to say she’s no receptionist.”

Blake’s snappish tone might come across as rude, but it makes me feel strangely... flattered. He’s boasting about me as if I’m the most amazing person in the world when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

Let Ken tell it, I couldn’t do anything right, especially fix and repair

cars...

“An engineer?” the short guy whistles. “Chop Shop’s going all fancy. Next thing you know, you’re gonna only hire mechanics with high school diplomas. Only made it to the eighth grade so I’d be shit outta luck. I’m Chaz, by the way.”

“Why don’t you show me what you’re working on, Chaz? Maybe I can help.”

I wink at Blake as Chaz rushes to fulfill my request. He bounces across the garage like he’s been struck by a bolt of energy.

Blake chuckles with a shake of his head but doesn’t interfere.

My first day ends with me assisting Chaz on an engine replacement.

He elbows Blake in the ribs. “Your girl’s a keeper.”

A funny warmth pours over me at Chaz’s words. Spoken in jest but still enough to make both me and Blake avoid each other’s gaze.

During the course of the next week, it becomes a regular occurrence, whether it’s at the shop toiling over bike repairs, or within the confines of Blake’s trailer. The space in the room always seems to shrink whenever we’re around each other. Suddenly, it becomes a difficult task staying apart.

Accidental touches. Shared smiles. Moments where we get carried away and freeze up catching ourselves.

I almost always ruin it first—thoughts about Ken and our marriage flash through my mind and remind me how messed up my life is.

Blake doesn’t question me on it. Knowing him, he gets me. He understands the war going on inside my head.

My heart.

“You wrapping up soon?” he asks late one evening.

We’re the last two in the shop. Chaz and Moss, another mechanic, have already left for the night. I peek at him from over my shoulder, the corner of my mouth quirked.

“Just one more second. I’m almost done with this Road King.”

“I’ll lock up the office.” The thud of his boots fades from the garage.

I’m racing against the clock to finish the last job of the night. My fingers move fast to be done by the time he returns. More so a game I’m playing with myself to prove I still got it. I can still have a bike like new in no time.

“Yes!” I jump up from where I’m sprawled out on the garage floor and whoop at the air. A giddy victory dance follows—swinging my hips and shaking my behind.

Then it dawns on me, I’m not alone. Blake’s walked back up. A grin spreads across his face and I feel mine flush.

“That...” he says slowly, “was fucking adorable.”

“Anyone ever tell you it’s rude to sneak up on people?”

“Yeah, but I’ve never been one to follow rules. You got something on your cheek.”

I go still as he comes closer, ensconcing me in his soapy masculine scent, and swipes at my cheek. His thumb rubs against the soft curve of it. Our gazes lock, and it’s as if the world slows down around us.

The night becomes stuck in time much like we are.

Stuck on each other. So in tune as my eyes meet the boundless blue of his that I’m able to read his mind.

We’re seventeen again, discovering something in each other that we’ve spent years hiding from...

I drop my gaze from his and seek out a way to break the tension. “Blake Cash, I forgot about your clubbed thumbs.”

The comment’s so random, so out of nowhere it makes him break out in a hearty laugh. His head tilts back and the once studious expression on his handsome face eases up. That flirtatious sort of playfulness about him returns as he slides fingers through his hair and gets his revenge.

“You’ll never let me forget about my thumbs.”

“It’s your one flaw. Of course I’ve got to bring it up every now and then to humble you.”

“Yeah? Well, at least I don’t got Flintstone toes, Miss Bedrock.”

My jaw drops open in offense and he roars with more laughter. He has enough sense to move far enough out of the way so I can’t smack him.

He throws an arm around me as we finally turn for the exit. “Kidding, Kori. You know I’ve got a thing for those Flintstone toes.”

I can’t even be mad. The sense of ease that fills me when with Blake makes it impossible to be.

The more settled I become with life away from Ken, working at the Chop Shop, and staying at Blake’s, the more freedoms I seek. It only feels natural as I try to figure myself out.

While I’ve been pulling shifts with Blake, Mama’s stayed home at the trailer. It worked out fine the first week because she didn’t have any medical appointments, but by the second week, it poses a real issue to our arrangement.

“I’ll have to drive to the shop,” I explain to Blake. His silence and steely expression tells me he doesn’t like the idea. “Then I can use my lunch hour to drive Mama. And... and if it’s okay, I can take a second break in the afternoon to pick her up. I’ll pull an extra hour.”

“I can drive you both.”

A small sigh puffs out of me. “Blake... I’d like to do it myself. You don’t understand what it was like not being able to go where I wanted. Sometimes... not even being allowed to drive at all. I need this.”

He agonizes over it for another second. His conflicted thoughts on the matter flit across his features before he nods. “Alright, take your car then. But promise me you won’t go anywhere near him.”

“That’s the easiest promise ever to make, you know that right?”

He grips my shoulder for his signature squeeze of affection. “I mean it,

Kori. Be careful, alright?”

We still haven't collected my things. I still haven't officially filed for divorce.

I still haven't taken care of a lot of things—including *seeing* Ken for the first time since that violent night.

Though I don't dare mention it to Blake, my insides knot at the mere possibility. For as brave as I might seem venturing out in my car by myself to drop off and pick up Mama, I'm a bundle of nerves. The entire drive, it's a constant on my mind.

I throw wild glances around at my surroundings. My eyes flick to my rearview mirror every other second to make sure nobody familiar's behind me. I drive straight to and from and make sure Mama's taken care of at the trailer when I do return to the garage.

The second day driving her to her medical appointments are little better. Blake offers again to drive, but I wave him off. Certain it's something I've got to do. Agency I *need*.

...even if it scares me to death every second of the way.

By the third day that week, which happens to be Friday, I'm feeling marginally better. I pick up Mama with a smile and drop her off with a kiss to the cheek. The mood strikes me, so I dial up the music on the crappy FM radio of my Geo Metro.

The tiny car bumbles along the roads of Pulsboro, getting me where I need to be.

It's the freest, most refreshing feeling as I pull up to the garage and swing my keyring around my finger.

Blake raises his brows. “You look like you've just come back from a joyride.”

“As close to it in a Geo Metro.”

He grins. “That Geo gets you places. That's all that counts.”

“Look at my baby and her wheels,” Mama says as I pull up outside the trailer. She’s waiting with her handbag dangling from her wrist and cape coat she’s so fond of. She waddles over to the passenger’s side door and slides in. “Maybe we should do something special tonight. Dinner somewhere. How about Steak and Cow? That place was good.”

“In Houston?”

“Oh,” she says, frowning. “We’re not in Houston.”

I give her a sympathetic pat on the lap. “No, Mama. Not anymore. But dinner sound’s good. I’ll text Blake.”

The entire drive to the doctor’s office, Mama talks my ear off about her ‘stories’ as she calls them. She tells me about which soap opera characters are sleeping with whom and about another one returning from the dead.

I laugh along, grateful we’re able to have light moments like this after so much bad.

Once I drop Mama off, I shoot off that text about dinner to Blake and hit the roads. I’m turning down one of the more barren streets in town when my phone vibrates with an incoming call.

It’s Mama. I press accept, putting her on speaker as I drive.

“Hello, is everything okay?”

Before she even says a word, I know she’s in tears. She’s panic stricken and sniveling.

“Mama!” I say, immediately alarmed. “What’s wrong?”

“They... they say it’s no good anymore.”

“What is? Mama —”

“Korine, where do I go? They say I can’t go here. My card—it’s not accepted.”

My insides run cold. “Your insurance card? They turned you away?”

“They say it’s not good anymore,” she repeats between snuffles.

“Mama, stay where you are. I’m coming to straighten it out. I’m sure... I’m sure it’s a mistake.”

But as I hang up and then pop a U-turn, deep inside I know it’s not. It’s no coincidence and it’s no mistake that this is happening.

Worry fills me as I think up what to do. Mama’s medical bills have always been a point of stress for me. The disability coverage she has from the government isn’t the best; it’s barely covered any of Mama’s needs and the quality of care is downright criminal.

Ken’s insurance has always been what we’ve used. It’s gotten us seen by some of the best specialists in the state.

He’s cut us off.

I figured the day would come when he would. I just didn’t count on it happening so soon. Without any notice.

I’m so distracted that it takes me another second to realize red and blue lights are flashing behind me.

Oh no...

There’s an instantaneous shift in my behavior. A numbing that paralyzes me over the course of the next few seconds as if subconsciously preparing myself.

I pull over to the shoulder of the road. The patrol car mirrors my actions, parking up behind me. The driver’s side door pops open and out steps Ken in his uniform.

Where did he even come from? How did he appear so suddenly?

I swallow against the panic. I grip the wheel so tightly, my nails dig into the leather cover. Chills break out across my skin, an icy sensation running down my spine.

Ken takes his time making it over—he’s pretending this is an official stop. He grabs his metal clipboard and speaks into the radio clipped to his shoulder. His boots strike the pavement one at a time as he strolls over.

Sunglasses disguise his eyes. The rest of his face is vacant. Devoid of any

emotion or humanity.

You'd think we were strangers...

He stops by the window and motions for me to roll it down. My hand shakes as I press the button.

"Ken," I sputter out. "I don't want —"

"Do you know why I stopped you this afternoon?" he interrupts in an almost robotic tone.

I shake my head. "No, but I really don't —"

"You popped an illegal U-turn back there," he speaks over me. He gestures down the road to the point where I'd turned around. "You were also going twelve over the speed limit."

My stomach sinks. "I'm... sorry."

I don't know what else to say. I don't know what else to do. It's all I can manage not to spiral into a panic attack.

"License and registration," he says.

Careful to move slow, I reach for my glove compartment and grab hold of the item's requested. He snatches them out of my hand and barely gives them a once-over.

"I'm going to have to ask you to get out of the vehicle."

"Ken—"

"Now." His lips tighten. Terrifying against the rest of the blank mask that's his face.

I give a small nod and let out a feeble breath from my lungs.

This can't be good...

KORINE



“HANDS ON THE HOOD OF THE VEHICLE,” KEN ORDERS.

“Ken, don’t do this,” I gush out. My voice sounds shaky even to my ears. Laced with unmistakable fear.

It claws away at my insides. Gone is the upbeat woman I’ve been the past couple of weeks. She fades away the moment I’m within arm’s reach of Ken and the omnipresent threat of his violence.

“Hands on the hood of the vehicle. Feet shoulder width apart.”

When I still don’t move, his cheek twitches in a subtle warning. A precursor for him snatching me by the arms and spinning me around. My hands are slammed down on the hood and my feet kicked apart.

“Ow, Ken —”

“You were given an explicit order you refused to comply with. Do that again and you’ll be sitting in the back of my patrol car.” He cages me in against the car so that I can’t move an inch. My hands flat on the warm hood. My legs far apart enough to feel humiliating. He’s so close, I can feel his breath against my cheek when he speaks. “Are we going to do this the hard way or the easy way, Kor?”

“Hard? Easy? I don’t know what you mean —”

“My wife,” he snarls. His stoicism vanishes for scorn. “My wife has abandoned me. She took the car I bought her—my name’s on the fucking

title, on the insurance—and she’s been spending the last few weeks at another man’s home doing who knows what.”

My throat aches, my voice lost. I’ve started trembling on the spot like a spineless coward.

Like the traumatized woman that I still am...

“So, you tell me. Do you want to do this real easy or do you want to continue doing things the hard way?”

“I don’t want any way. I don’t want anything. Please.”

A moment passes where Ken seems to study my reactions—the uncontrollable quiver of my body and strained breaths coming from my lungs. The hard swallows I can’t stop as panic keeps rising up, refusing to be denied.

He eases back slightly, his harsh energy receding as he does. Instead he reaches a hand up and brushes my cheek like a lover would. With adoration and affection. “Kor,” he says softly. “This is ridiculous. Do you have any idea how much I’ve missed you? Come home.”

So many times in the past, I did. I’d nod and allow him to steer me toward the car to drive me back from where I had escaped to. Things would be nice for a few days, ’til it happened again. Almost always worse.

I clench my eyes shut and husk out another struggled breath. “Please... I just want to go.”

“You’re my wife,” he insists. “Our home is nothing without you. Do you think it’s fair what you’ve done to me? Answer me!”

The hot and cold behavior. The soft sweetness mixed with the intense scorn. His mood swings have always been impossible to predict.

A living, breathing contradiction.

Throughout our relationship, I’ve learned to shut up and take it. Always ready for a kiss *or* a fist.

A few tears slip free and roll down my cheeks as my imagination darkens into thoughts about where this moment could be going. No matter what I do,

I'll be in the wrong. He wields all the power and I'm at his mercy.

Ken's wider frame presses into me, forcing me to bend even lower. He hunches over me to the point I feel the police equipment strapped to his torso digging into my spine. Violence lives and breathes in the air circling us as I prepare myself for whatever comes next—a slam of my head against the hood, his knee in my back, his hands around my neck. The violent options seem limitless.

Whatever it is, never happens.

As Ken rears closer, another car finally wanders down the road. It steadily slows at what must be an alarming sight. A police officer pinning a woman to her car, his body rubbing up against hers in a manner that's clearly inappropriate.

He snaps upright and takes a wide step back. His hands fly to his utility belt and he nods the driver along with tight-lipped restraint.

The driver behind the wheel—a freckle-faced woman with round glasses and a small child in the backseat—doesn't seem convinced. She eyes Ken carefully as if tempted to pull over and ask for his badge number.

Ken grits his teeth the second she eventually drives off and we're alone again. He seems to have come to his senses about our surroundings and what he was about to do.

“Get out of my sight,” he says, his tone as steely as his face. “NOW!”

I scramble to make my escape. Within seconds, I'm locked into the Geo and pressing the gas to put as much distance between myself and Ken as possible, hands shaking on the wheel.

Flowers await me and Mama when we pull up to Blake's trailer. Several bouquets of them sitting right in front of the door along with a stuffed bear and handwritten note. My favorite kind in my favorite color: pink cremons

with white carnations mixed in.

My brows jerk together, dread sinking into my stomach like lead. I share a knowing look with Mama who's had a traumatizing enough afternoon herself. After the escapade with the medical office turning her away, she had panicked and wandered off. I found her a block down at the bus stop, confused as to how she was supposed to get home.

My worst fears were confirmed—since it happens to be open enrollment season, Ken was able to remove us from his coverage. I had snapped at the receptionist at the medical office and promised I'd call the 1-800 number to fight the sudden removal, but she claimed it had already been processed.

Now this.

Flowers on Blake's front door. I haven't even had the energy to tell him what happened. He's texted and called several times asking why I never returned to the shop.

you have ten minutes to reply. if you don't... I'm coming to find you.

That message was fourteen minutes ago. I had finally replied telling him I was fine, but that was the end of his texts.

"He's certainly manipulative, that husband of yours," Mama sighs. "Who does he think he is sending you flowers like this?"

"He wants Blake to see them." I step forward almost numbly, my walk more of a trudge than anything. "I'm throwing them out."

"Good girl."

Blake shows up only a few minutes later. The flowers have been disposed of and I've helped Mama into the shower. I draw the door to the bathroom closed to find myself on the opposite end of a glaring, jaw-clenched Blake.

“What kinda games are you playing, Kori? You disappear for two hours and barely answer my texts!”

My hand rubs my brow as if plagued by a headache. “It wasn’t on purpose. I lost track of time.”

“Then what happened?” He flicks his gaze over me in search of imaginary injuries like only a best friend would. He seems to read it off me, taking a step closer and grabbing me by the elbow to bring me over into the living room. “Kori, tell me. You saw him, didn’t you?”

“Not on purpose. I was driving back to the shop and then... then he came out of nowhere and pulled me over.”

Watching the change in Blake’s facial expression is borderline terrifying—his brows draw together over blue eyes darkening with rage and a jaw that hardens into steel. His hands clench and unclench, and his breathing goes ragged.

I haven’t even told him everything yet and already he looks tempted to spiral into a rampage. At any second he’ll tear off, heading straight for the home I shared with Ken, where he’d proceed to do things I don’t even want to think about...

I blow out a troubled breath and plop down on the sofa. “I don’t even want to deal with him anymore, Blake. But it seems like he’s not going to let go.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“No. You’re not —”

“Kori, I’m handling it. He’s not going to come around you and fucking terrorize you like that ever again. If he doesn’t understand words, then I’ll make him understand in other ways. The whole fucking club will.”

“He’s a *cop*. He has the entire Pulsboro PD on his side.”

“So the fuck what?” Blake spits. His face twists into more fury. The veins protrude in his thick forearms and his fingers twitch like they’re desperate to ball up into fists again. “Whatever the fuck he thinks he’s doing is going to

end.”

My gaze drops to the floor. “I need to file. Do you think... would you want to go with me?”

His anger fades for tenderness often reserved for me. He reaches a hand out and caresses my short hair as if he can’t help himself. “Yeah, of course. I’ll go with you. Tomorrow.”

“Sydney was saying I should consider a restraining order too. I took some pictures of my injuries.”

“That would be smart. It’ll create a paper trail of his abuse.”

“That’s what Sydney said.”

“We also need to get your things. It’s time, Kori. So long as you’ve got all your things there, it’s another door left open,” he says firmly. When I begin shaking my head, he cuts me off. “You won’t be alone. I’ll be with you. The MC will. We roll in ten, fifteen deep with your permission to enter the premises and grab your things. Under the law, he won’t be able to do shit. You’re legally a resident there. He’ll have to let you in to do it.”

“Blake...” I trail off. Nerves churn in my stomach just thinking about it. “I don’t know if I can...”

He crouches down so that we’re eye level. His hands reach for mine, tucking them inside his. “Look at me, Kori. We’ll be with you. I’m going to be at your side. Let him try anything. Let him raise his voice... look at you the wrong way...”

His temper takes over and he can only clench his jaw even harder at the thought. I don’t need to be a mind reader to know his head’s full of violent imaginings of all the things he wants to do to Ken.

It’s only been my pleas that’ve held him off.

“Okay,” I say softly. “If you’ll be with me.”

Blake reaches for my face, cupping my cheek and then rising up to drop a kiss on my brow. “Always, Kori.”

“Is it strange this feels... like a relief?” I ask in the passenger seat of Blake’s truck. We’re outside the courthouse where I’ve just filed for divorce in the clerk’s office. “It feels like a burden’s been lifted. We’re officially separated... and soon we’ll be divorced.”

Blake covers my hands in my lap with his. “It feels like a relief because it is one.”

“I’ll have my name back soon.”

“Korine McKibbens. The prettiest gal in school.”

I smile, my cheeks warming up. “Stop. You were crazy about Maisy Hamilton.”

“Maisy Hamilton? Seriously?” He hacks out a laugh that has me feeling ridiculous for the accusation. He cuts me a teasing look, his eyes alight with humor. “You think I wanted Maisy Hamilton?”

“You fought Mason over her.”

“I fought Mason ’cuz we were both stubborn dumbasses that refused to back down. We were horndogs who saw a girl with huge tits and got into a pissing contest. That was it.”

I laugh at his honesty. “I forgot how big of horndogs you all were.”

“Being a sixteen-year-old desperate for a girl to touch your dick will do that to you,” he admits. “But Maisy was never the girl. I was over her by the time sixth period hit.”

“The girl?”

In a rare occurrence, Blake’s ears tinge slightly red. “You already know, Kori. Don’t make me say it.”

“You never told me. Even when we dated —”

“I was trying to play it cool. I wanted you to think...” he cracks half a grin, looking handsome and hesitant all at once. “I wanted you to think I was a ladies’ man. I could have any girl I wanted. Including...”

“Me,” I whisper and he nods. “You were trying to make me jealous?”

“I was trying to *impress* you. You were the prettiest girl. You were the coolest girl. You were the girl all the guys in our group wanted. Hell, I think Mace had a thing for you ‘til he backed off out of respect,” he rattles off as if these things were completely obvious. “I was trying to show you I was worthy.”

Things I never once thought about or noticed. I sit in shock for a moment. “I had no idea that’s how you felt. All the girls in our year were crazy about you. It made me... I didn’t like it.”

“How do you think I felt when you dated Jordan O’Neal? Then you two got voted on the homecoming court.”

“Jordan was a really nice guy. But it was never serious.”

“He got your first kiss. I wanted to beat his ass. Almost started a fight with him in the locker room one afternoon just ‘cuz.”

“You got first other things...”

We sit in more silence for a moment ‘til Blake wraps his hand around mine in my lap.

“I did,” he says, giving me an affectionate squeeze. “Something that made me the happiest guy alive. Think I didn’t stop grinning for a week.”

Rolling my eyes, I smile too. “Can we get a move on? I’d rather check more things off this list than take a stroll down our awkward teenage memory lane.”

Blake answers me with a chuckle, starting up the truck engine. We drive from the courthouse another block down to the Pulsboro Police station. I’ve intentionally asked Blake to bring me by today knowing Ken’s off this day of the week.

A middle-aged man with hairy whiskers sticking out of his ears sits at the information desk. He makes no attempt to appear friendly or helpful at all, blinking dryly as he reads the town newspaper.

“Excuse me,” I say. “I’d like to speak to Lieutenant Gillard. I have a

situation to report.”

He blinks and turns to the next page without looking up. “He’s busy.”

“Do you know when he’ll be free?”

“Nope.”

I glance over my shoulder at Blake. “Then can I leave him a message?”

“Nope.”

“I need to get in contact with him.”

He flicks his eyes up at me from behind his reading glasses. “That’s too bad.”

“Hey!” Blake growls, stepping forward. He slams his palm on the desk counter. “You’re gonna stop being a lazy piece of shit and help her—or I’m gonna introduce you to my fist.”

“Blake—”

“Get your hands off my desk,” says the clerk stiffly, though he flinched at Blake’s aggression.

“What’s going on here?”

The three of us look up to find Lieutenant Gillard wandering over with the amused smile he’d worn in the Buy N’ Save parking lot. His lips stretch wider at the sight of me, and he beckons me over.

I don’t hesitate to follow, pushing past the waist-high door flap separating the lobby area from the rest of the station. I let Blake know I’ll be okay with a reassuring nod.

“Mrs. Stricklin,” Gillard says in a jovial tone. “What can I do for you? Stricklin’s off today, but surely you know that —”

“Ken and I have separated. I need to file a police report and restraining order,” I interrupt. I watch his smile drop off and his confusion emerge with a knit of his brows, then he seems to notice the gash above my brow. I know because his eyes shift across my face, tracking the remnants of my injuries. They end on the healing split of my lip.

“Mrs. Stricklin... *Korine*...”

“I have photos. I took them a few days after the incident. They show the extent of the injuries.”

“Korine, let’s slow down a second. You’re not implying—you’re saying Stricklin caused all this?” He gestures to my face as if suddenly he’s repulsed by the fading bruises he sees. He takes half a step back to survey me all over. “He hasn’t said a word to any of us. He’s been acting like it’s business as usual.”

“Please, I’d rather skip any personal talk —”

“I’m sure whatever happened between the two of you can be handled... in a more discreet manner.”

A chill runs down my spine. “Lieutenant, I was attacked. I’ve been harassed. It’s my right to file a report about what’s happened to me.”

“Stricklin’s got a big career ahead of him.”

“His career has nothing to do with this. He abused me.”

“Many encounters like this are complicated. Oftentimes, neither party’s innocent. There’s guilt with both sides,” Gillard explains, raising a brow at me. “You realize if we went down that road—if he makes any allegations against you—we’d have to do our due diligence to investigate? If you put your hands on him at all, if you left a scratch on him, *you* could be in serious trouble —”

“Me?! My eye was swollen shut! I could barely walk!”

“I’d have to hear Stricklin’s version of the story. I’m sure his is more than a little different.”

“Is that Korine I hear?” Captain Vargas calls from the other side of the station floor. He maneuvers through the short maze of police officers’ desks and comes over to join us. He resembles a tanned Santa Claus ‘til he seems to catch on that our conversation isn’t going well. Then he’s glancing from Gillard to me with a stroke of his beard. “Korine, whatever you’re here about, I’m sure this can be handled in house.”

“That’s what I have been telling her,” Gillard says with a nod of his head.

“There’s no reason to do things based off emotion and go ruining anybody’s career.”

“Never mind. I’ll see myself out.” I take a step back to turn around.

“Now, Korine, we can talk to him —”

“Don’t bother. I’m being emotional, remember?”

They call after me several more times, but I don’t dignify them with any responses or even a look back. Blake’s still in the lobby when I return. He rushes toward me with concern etched onto his face, looking as if he was on the verge of storming into the rest of the station if I hadn’t returned just now.

“You alright? How’d it go?”

“I’d rather not talk about it. Can we just get out of here?”

Blake puts his arm around me and steers me from the building, but not before he tosses a furious look over his shoulder. He seems to sense, even without me explaining what happened, that I didn’t get to fill out a report.

Thankfully, instead of badgering me about it, he drives me around town. We stop at a couple different apartment complexes, where he takes me to see what’s available.

“For you and Sunny,” he says, brushing a strand of my hair back. “You’ll have your own space.”

“I can’t afford this apartment, Blake. Not yet.”

“I’ll help you. So you’re back on your feet.”

With a stubborn shake of my head, I push past him and the leasing agent toward the door. “I appreciate the offer, but it’s too much.”

Blake doesn’t fight me on it. We thank the leasing agent of the Sunset View apartments and then head for his truck. He waits ‘til I’m buckled in and then grabs my hand to catch my attention.

“It’s gonna be okay, Kori,” he says. “Things are messy right now. But it’ll get better.”

I smile in thanks, and though everything still feels uncertain, there’s one thing I’m certain of.

Blake will be with me every step of the way.

Blake wasn't kidding when he said the MC would be tagging along to pick up my things. We pull up with at least

a quarter of the members in tow. Mason's even brought his old lady, Sydney, for female moral

support. By the way she walks with her hands on her hips and her eyes narrowed into slits, she's

tempted to confront Ken herself.

Because it's Saturday morning, most of the neighborhood's home. Across the street in his front lawn, Mr. Abrams forgets about the water hose in his hand and watches the conga line of motorcycles rumble through.

Likewise, Mrs. Doyle's out walking her miniature schnauzer, stopping in her tracks at the sight of bikers in *her* neck of the woods. Her leashed white ball of fluff begins jumping around and barking at us.

For living in a town known for its ruthless motorcycle club, you'd think they'd realize it's par for the course—or are they alarmed because they know what a visit from the Steel Kings means? Especially when they've parked in front of the house of a *known* police officer.

Their prolonged stares go ignored.

Blake hops out of the truck he's chosen to drive over (in order to carry my things), and comes around to the passenger side where I am. All morning long, he's been suspiciously calm. Standing in the front driveway of the house Ken and I called a home, he's zen-like, his touch featherlight when he palms my shoulder, and his voice a low rasp of reassurances.

He's doing this for me. Putting me ahead of his anger.

He knows how difficult this is. That I've agonized over it from the moment I turned up bruised and broken on his doorstep.

“Nothing’s gonna happen to you,” he says, making sure to look me in the eye. “We’ll be with you every step.”

I push down the complicated feelings, inhaling a breath, remembering the big girl panties I’ve got on, and give a nod.

“We heading in?” Mason calls from where he and Sydney wait a few feet off.

Blake links his fingers with mine at our sides. “Yeah, let’s pull off the fucking Band-Aid.”

Behind us, Mason signals for most of the guys to stay put. Presumably to keep an eye out on the neighborhood—and to make sure Ken’s cop friends don’t turn up. A handful come along with us.

Every step toward the door feels heavy, requiring so much energy out of me, I feel like I’m running on fumes by the time we’re pressing the doorbell.

It’s not that I’m afraid Ken will hurt me. I’m afraid Blake will hurt him. I’m worried he and the MC will get into some kind of brawl, and they’ll pay the price for Ken’s actions.

We’re left in limbo for several seconds.

The doorbell trills through the house to no answer. I glance at the patrol car and Escalade parked in the double car driveway. He’s home.

Blake loses patience and smashes his finger into the button of the doorbell a second time.

The curtains rustle from the second story window that’s the master bedroom. He’s seen us. He’s simply... refusing to answer.

I sigh and turn to go. “We should leave.”

“Hell nah,” Blake says. His hand closes into a fist and he beats on the door like he’s the police, not the man whose door he’s banging on.

It snaps open mid pound. Ken’s scowling, his nostrils flaring and his left eye giving a subtle twitch every few seconds. His tight-lipped mouth pulls back to bare his teeth at us.

“Is there a reason why you’re pounding on the door of my home at ten in

the morning?”

Blake steps toward him like he’s about to bump chests with him. “We’re here to collect Korine’s things. Move aside and let us in and there won’t be no trouble.”

Ken ignores him. His eyes flick over to me, alight with icy malice. “You’re unbelievable. Bringing these people to our home. How could you do this to me?”

“I just want my things.”

He throws his head back in laughter. “Your things? Your things are my things! I bought you every damn thing you own, Kor. Including that Geo Metro you’ve been driving around in. I expect it returned.”

“Move out of the fucking way.”

Blake bulldozes past the threshold with a swipe of his arm. Ken’s knocked sideways by several steps, clearing the path for Blake. The others and I quickly follow.

The once quiet house fills with noise and movement. Mason and Sydney help direct the guys on what I’ve said I needed help packing my and Mama’s things. Blake’s grabbed hold of my hand and leads me upstairs to the bedroom I once shared with Ken.

“Go ahead,” he says, letting go. He takes up post in the doorway, a thinly veiled attempt to keep Ken out and ensure I have some privacy. “Get all your things.”

I don’t hesitate grabbing anything of mine within reach and stuffing my duffle bag. My passport, birth certificate, reading glasses, medications, and so many other things get shoved into the bag until it’s so full Blake’s coming over to remove it from my shoulder. I move onto the other bags I’ve brought with me and fill those too.

Clothes. Shoes. Underwear. Skincare and haircare stuff.

When I’m unsure there’s much else I can snag, I turn to Blake with a relieved smile. “That’s all. He can keep everything else.”

“You sure about what you’re doing, Kor. Think real carefully.”

Blake and I glance over at the doorway to find Ken’s wandered up. His glare’s laser-focused on me, his face a tight mask of scorn. He’s barely containing himself, barely managing to not explode in a fit of rage like he normally would.

Only Blake and the MC’s presence keeps him in check.

“Get the fuck away from her!” Blake growls.

“This is my house.”

“I don’t give a fuck! You’re lucky you haven’t been knocked out.”

Tension cinches the air. Invisible but unbearable.

Blake abandons my side on a pulse of explosive anger. In a couple short strides he’s coming up on Ken with his fists ready for violence.

“Blake, don’t!”

He stops himself only within five feet of Ken.

Ken’s glower thaws into a small smile. “She’s got you trained. Her own personal attack dog. This is your last chance,” he says, glancing back at me. An eerie quality develops in his tone. “You walk out that door with him, you will come to regret it.”

His words stay with me the rest of the way home to Blake’s trailer. They echo inside my head. When I close my eyes, I see the loathing frozen in his gaze. The same face he always has when he’s doling out his punishments.

What does he have planned this time? What else is he going to do other than cancel Mama’s insurance and demand I return him the Geo Metro?

“You alright?” Blake asks as we brake for a stoplight.

I put on a strained smile as my answer on the outside. On the inside, I’m still feeling broken.

BLAKE



“LISTEN UP, SHITHEADS!” OZZIE YELLS AT THE CROWDED BAR ROOM FLOOR. “Meetings about to start, motherfuckers! We’ve got some real important shit going down, so clean that wax outta your ears and pay attention!”

Mace scrubs a hand over his brow as if pained by a terrible headache. “Ozzie, that’s not what I meant when I said get the meeting started and you fucking know it.”

In typical class clown fashion, Ozzie flashes Mace a smile. “But it got their attention. That’s all that matters, right?”

Several of the guys around the room boo him. A couple chuck crumpled napkins at him. He takes it in stride, his smile only growing as he opens his arms up for a hug.

“I love you shitheads too!”

“Down to business.” Mace rises up from his seat at the head table and peers around at the room of Steel Kings gathered for our monthly meeting. “The rumors are out there. You’ve probably heard about the shit that’s knocking at our door.”

“Is it true?” calls out Ulysses “Mudd” Rudley from his table. His moniker matches his grungy, grimy appearance. Including the crumbs of food trapped in his beard. “Is the law cracking down on us?”

Murmurs break out among some of the guys. Some angrier and more

militant than others.

“Hey!” Mace yells over everybody. “Did I tell you to break off in side chatter like a bunch of gossiping hens? Shut the hell up and listen to the bottom line.”

“Told you,” Ozzie coughs. “Shitheads.”

“It’s impossible to say all of what they do know. Stein’s insider knows for a fact they’re building some kinda case. Fallout from the feud with the Hellrazors and Road Rebels.”

“They don’t got shit,” Mudd rasps to a few chortles from the others.

Mace gestures to me. “Cash, tell ’em the rest.”

Everybody’s attention shifts. I’ve been seated at the head table all along, more silent observer than participant. I stand up and get straight to the point.

“I’ve got reason to believe the boys in blue are already watching us.”

“And you know that how?” asks Johnny Flanagan, tipping back in his chair, arms crossed.

“Because there’s a new sergeant on the force by the name of Ken Stricklin, and he’s a piece of shit.”

“This about that chick you’ve got at the Chop Shop? The one from our school days?” Flanagan says with a curl of his lips. “That sure sounds like personal beef, Cash. Why should I care if some chick got in a little scuffle with her husband?”

“I never said you should care, Flanagan,” I say, my patience lost. “But you keep referring to Kori out of her name, you’re gonna find my boot lodged up your ass.”

The room erupts in laughs at Flanagan’s expense. He falls silent for the rest of the meeting.

“Like I was saying, Stricklin and the rest of ‘em have us on their radar. Which means anything we do is gonna have to be careful. Well thought out.”

“Let me guess,” Bush chimes in, slamming down his beer stein. “We’re going to be doing some shady nocturnal activities.”

“That sounds pretty damn accurate,” says Ozzie.

“We’ll have to be smart about it. Strategic in any steps we make.”

Mudd strokes his knotted beard as if unsure. “So have we set up our next deal with the Barreras? Our partnership with ’em is still rocky. Haven’t forgotten about that last time they tried to short us on some trunk. If we know the law’s got an eye on us, is it worth the trouble?”

“You don’t have to participate. This mission’s going to be kept small. Only a handful of guys. You probably already know who you are.”

Mace rises up again, clamping a hand to my shoulder. “Cash’ll be leading this one. It’ll be kept small for discretion. All our drug and armament deals are going to have to be more underground ’til we’ve got them off our back. That includes the gambling rings.”

A collective groan echoes through the saloon.

The meeting carries on for another forty minutes. I’ve long tuned out by its end.

A thousand other thoughts occupy my head. My mind’s mapping out the deal we’ll soon be carrying out with the Barreras cartel, obsessing over even the smallest things that could go wrong. I’m preoccupied with thoughts of Korine at the Chop Shop and how fucking sexy she looks in the coveralls, bent over a bike as she repairs it. Then I’m feeling like a creepy horndog for even letting my mind go there.

She’s not even officially divorced yet. She’s still struggling with the aftermath of her relationship with her piece of shit husband and I’m over here fantasizing about something that’s never going to happen.

The thing is, it’s been a while. *Over* a month.

I’m not used to going this long without female touch. Without charming some woman around town into bed. And though I could any night if I wanted to—I’ve got no commitment to anyone—I’m holding back.

The idea of hooking up with some chick I’ve picked up at the bar couldn’t sound less appealing.

It feels... wrong.

I force myself to stop digging for the reason why. Deep down I know what's got me feeling that way, but it's not something I can think about.

Korine is off limits. It's got to stay that way.

"Alright," Mace says to quiet down the ribble-rabble going on toward the end of the meeting. "That's enough for today. Get the hell out my face and go enjoy yourselves."

Several Kings explode in cheers, slamming their beer steins together, spilling Texas Brew everywhere. Nobody cares. Not even the barmaids. They simply laugh and shake their heads in scolding, knowing damn well it's expected out of these gatherings.

I'm about to dip out sight unseen when Melody, one of the barmaids, releases a shriek. The only guy not immediately getting drunk off his ass, I jut my chin at her. "What's up? Something wrong?"

"The cops! They're headed this way!" she chokes out, turning to me with big, round eyes.

"Fuck." I check over her shoulder out the bar window.

Sure enough, two police officers in uniform approach the doors. One is some string bean, smug-looking asshole I've never seen, and the other is none other than Kenneth Stricklin. They walk like they believe they own the streets. As if they believe they own our fucking club bar too. I turn around to address the bar room floor.

"Listen up—we've got visitors!"

Barely another few seconds pass before the saloon doors swing open and they barge in. Things go from loud and rowdy to so quiet you could hear a fucking piece of lint flutter to the floor.

Mace meets them halfway, his expression representing the steel we're named after.

Stricklin and the other officer share looks. The two assholes are here to cause shit. That much couldn't be clearer. They stand clutching their belts

and peering around the crowded bar like it's their territory to rule. They couldn't be more mistaken.

"Can we help you?" Mace asks.

The officer with Stricklin answers with a shrug. "We're here for a drink. Ain't that what this is—a bar that serves refreshments?"

"This is our club. Kings only," Mace says.

He and Stricklin share another look. "Are you aware that, by law, you're required to serve everybody during business hours?"

"We're closed. Now get the hell out of here."

Stricklin's cheek twitches as his attention shifts beyond Mace. He's peering right at me from over Mace's shoulder. "Seems like you're hiding something. You boys wouldn't happen to be up to no good, would you? We might be forced to take action."

I rush over, cutting a path in between where Mace stands and the two pieces of shit hover. "What part of we're closed don't you fucking understand?"

"Cash!"

Mace catches me with a hand to my chest, holding me back before I can make it any closer to the dipshits. He holds me back from ever doing what I was about to do. Others like Ozzie and Bush interject themselves too—they break apart from the rest of the bar and put themselves between me and the two officers.

Neither Stricklin nor his pot-bellied partner have budged an inch. They remain where they are, as mocking as ever. They wait 'til the commotion's died down to remind us yet again what pieces of shit they are.

"Be careful, boys," says Stricklin. He stares at me and me only. "You just might be asking for trouble. C'mon, Symonds."

We stand in furious silence watching them go.

“You... you really think you can just... delete us out of your life?” slurs Bill on the voice recording he left. His pitch grows higher the more pissed he becomes. “You’ve always been a... a disappointment. Your mother should’ve... swall... swallowed your ass.”

I shake my head, cutting the message short and pressing delete. His number had shown up as unknown on my caller ID. I’d listened to the voicemail in case it was from someone important. Korine calling from another phone about a run-in with Stricklin or Sunny in need of help. Even somebody from the club.

All guesses that were wrong—it was nobody but my drunk of a father calling to drag me through the mud, like always. Should I expect different after twenty-eight years of living and breathing his shit?

And Mom has the guts to scold me for refusing to turn up at family dinner.

I ride my FXDB Street Bob straight home from the club. Korine’s got no clue about the police stopping by the club because she was off today. It’s just more evidence her dirtbag ex refuses to back off.

She can’t know about what he pulled today. It’ll only upset her more. Something she doesn’t need right now.

Pulling up outside the trailer, I take a moment to collect myself. My shoulders sag and I close my eyes, shutting out the loud static in my head.

Stress about what’s been going on. Frustration over the theatrics that my parents bring into my life.

I’ve got to be there for Korine and Sunny.

Which means I can’t relapse into bad habits. Things I used to do in the past that would take the edge off.

Korine doesn’t need *that* Cash coming back.

It’s a lot of pressure. More pressure than I’ve ever felt before. I can’t fuck this up like I always fuck things up.

I enter through the front door to the sight of her folded up on the floor, a

circle of photographs and yearbooks surrounding her. Her eyes light up at the sight of me.

“Blake, you’re home. Perfect timing! Guess what I’m looking at?”

“Those aren’t old photos of us, are they?”

Her eyes gleam even brighter, looking like chocolate diamonds caught in the light. “Yes! I hadn’t realized I’d grabbed my old yearbooks and a box of photos when we picked up my things.”

“Let me see.” I head over to where she’s sitting on the floor and then plop down onto the edge of my couch. She hands over a stack of photos. Nostalgia hits at once. I crack a smile. “Damn, I forgot Mace went through that goatee phase.”

A laugh bubbles out of her. “He swore it made him look like a man.”

“Look at this—Miss Korine McKibbens at her track meet, holding up the gold medal she won.” I show her the photo from the stack and watch the shocked horror that pushes her brows together.

She plucks the photo out of my hand. “Oh god, why the hell did I smile so wide with those damn braces? I look like a dork.”

“Cutest dork in school with those braces. You were proud. You placed first in the whole county.”

“Thanks for the reminder. You look in the yearbook yet? It’s bookmarked.”

By the taunting lilt of her voice, I know I’m in for a doozie. I crack open the yearbook and then roar with laughter at what she’s circled with a pen.

“Most likely to be the next American Gigolo, Blake Cash,” I say, my laughs deep and raspy. “I forgot about this. Everybody voted me as a prank.”

“And because you were always flirting with every damn woman within a ten mile radius.”

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy?”

Korine rolls her eyes, pushing herself up off the floor and retreating to the kitchen. It’s the first time I notice she’s clutching a drink that’s almost empty.

The last couple swallows of amber liquid, she gulps down.

I cock a brow. “That what I think it is?”

“I found the bottle in your cabinet. You don’t mind, do you?” she asks.
“I’ll replace —”

“Anything in my home is yours to use without any expectation, Kori. You already know that. I’m more shocked you’re...”

“What? Drinking?” She unscrews the cap of the White Oak Whiskey I’d bought at a low point and then pours herself some more. “I guess I just... needed something to calm my nerves.”

“Anything bad happen today?”

She shakes her head, the glass grazing her lips during a moment of pause. “Things have been so... stressful lately, I’m still adjusting. A month ago I would’ve never imagined filing for divorce. I would’ve never been brave enough.”

I follow her to the entrance of the kitchen as she tosses back another mouthful of whiskey. Being around somebody drinking is nothing new to me; I’ve done it a thousand times since becoming sober. It’s a given when I spend most of my free time at the Steel Saloon.

But something’s different about watching the liquor touch Korine’s tongue. Her throat bobs as the whiskey works its way into her system. The stress I’d tried to shut out moments ago presses back down on me, reminding me of how much relief a simple drop could bring.

Just one tiny, insignificant drop.

Would it be so damn bad if I gave in and quenched this urge that’s only growing stronger? The more problems seem to pile up, the more burden that’s placed onto me, the harder it’s become to resist. I’ve got to find a release somewhere, in something.

Korine has no idea. She’s got no clue the effect she’s having on me. Why would she when she doesn’t know the full story?

She might know about Bill and what happened that night, but she doesn’t

know the why...

I breathe through the urge with a deep, ragged breath and a clench of my jaw.

“It’s hard, you know,” Korine continues, wearing a contemplative frown. “Accepting failure and picking yourself up after it. But I have to be there for Mama. That’s my biggest priority.”

“The MC discussed your situation at our meeting. We’re paying for her insurance—for both of your insurance. We’ve got the funds.” She opens her mouth to tell me it’s not necessary, but since I know Korine and can predict everything she says, I cut her off before she gets started. “We’re doing it, Kori. So no use protesting. We’ll make you full time at the shop. For now... ’til you decide if you want to work somewhere else. Then at least you’ll be getting full-time benefits.”

She blows out a breath, a few of her short hairs swept across her forehead, flicking up as if a gust of wind has come through. It’s a sigh of relief and gratitude as her gaze meets mine and she thanks me.

There’s still something else. I see it as soon as she’s dared look over at me. Another demon that’s got a grip on her even if she doesn’t want to let me know what. I’m pretty damn good at figuring her out considering I’ve known her since she was a small girl.

“You saw him again,” I predict, tamping down on the instant rage. “Is that what else is going on? ’Cuz there’s something else, Kori. Something that’s got you tossing back *whiskey*.”

“I just needed a drink.”

“What’d he do this time? Pull you over again on the side of the road? Send more flowers? Leave a dozen more voice mails?”

“I want you to stay away from him,” she says.

My anger ratchets up even more. It dials up ’til my mouth’s snapped shut and I’m busting at the seams, seconds away from tearing off. She sees it in me, because the almond shape of her eyes widens, flickering with worry.

So Stricklin not only harassed me and the club today, but he's been following Korine.

"He come around you?" I grit out. "He threaten you?"

"Blake—"

"I've held off, Kori. I've kept from going after him 'cuz you begged me not to. You begged me not to get mixed up with attacking a police officer. But I'm not gonna tolerate it—I'm not gonna let him fucking harass you! So tell me! What the fuck did he do this time?"

She flinches at the aggression, the volume in my voice. Her grip on the whiskey glass tightens, though she otherwise stands her ground. I've refrained from raising my voice and showing my temper around Korine, out of sympathy and consideration for what she's been through with her shithead ex-husband.

But I've had my fill. I've let him get away with enough.

"I don't know for sure," she murmurs. "I could be paranoid."

"Kori."

"I think he was... I'm pretty sure he's been following me. Him and his partner, Coates. I've spotted them different times around town. In the area... but at a distance. Earlier today when Mama and I were out grocery shopping..."

"How about I go make him stop?"

I'm headed out the door just like that. Keys clenched inside my fist and boots clacking on the wood flooring, I cross the space with my mind made up. Korine calls after me, rushing out from behind the kitchen counter. I stop only when she catches up and cuts me off.

"Blake, please," she whispers. Her hands reach for my chest, gentle against the hardness of it. She peers up at me, her expression imploring, her beauty enough to put me under her spell.

My skin warms and my pulse climbs. None of it reflects on my face—on the outside, I'm as composed as I usually am—but damn if Korine doesn't

still have a hold on me. The second she's pinning me with that soft, sultry, pleading look in her eye, she's pulled me into her orbit. She's the sun that's the nexus of my universe.

I'm powerless to do anything but bask in her light.

Because that's what Korine has always been for me. A light of hope in the bleakest darkness.

"Alright," I say, forcing down my rage. Forcing down the equally strong desire I've got for her. "If you don't want me confronting him, I won't."

...that you'll know about.

Her face eases into a relieved smile. "Why do I feel like I just talked a wild beast down from an attack?"

"'Cuz that's basically what you did."

"Now what?"

I think, trying to circle back to the playful air we'd had looking at the photographs. "So," I say slowly. "About you being jealous."

She smacks a hand to my chest. "Blake, how many times do I have to tell you? I'm not jealous of you wanting to stick your dick in every vagina you come across!"

The corner of my mouth cant's slightly. "You sure about that? Because you're sounding real irritated right now. Almost like it brings out feelings of envy in you —"

"You are so bigheaded!"

"Just admit you're jealous, Kori, and I'll never bring it up again."

"I'd rather eat glass! I've never been jealous of you and your parade of conquests a day in my life," she laughs, shoving more at my chest.

I take it in stride 'til I'm gripping her by the wrists to hold her off. We're locked into a back-and-forth tussling dance as she tries to push at me and I hold onto her. Then I pull her closer, the laughter between us falling freely. The playful air infectious and unstoppable. We push and pull like this for a while.

Korine's brown eyes bright. Her face beautiful with glee. Mine bowed down toward her. Gaze fixated on every inch 'til it drops down and focuses solely on one thing and one thing only—those damn lips of hers.

It's a volcanic eruption. Temptation gone too far, exploding all at once. We reach the realization at the same time. We go for it, swooping in to meet in the middle in a kiss that's wild and uninhibited.

My arm cinches around Korine's slim waist and her hands reach up to touch the roughness of my beard. Our lips explore each other's for the first time in years; for the first time since we were teenagers discovering what it was like to feel such immediate intense pleasure.

And it's no different a decade later. If anything, it's *more* intense, more explosive. Hot and breathless. Passionate as I kiss the fuck out of Korine and she gasps and slides fingers into my golden mane.

I squeeze her hips and walk her back several steps 'til we're banging into the end table pressed up against the wall. Then I'm hoisting her up and plopping her down on top of it, angling her head so I can taste more of that delicious, addictive mouth of hers. The sweetness of it, the sheer heat, the little notes she produces... all of it drives me up the wall.

I growl, kissing her harder. Enough to consume her. Overwhelm her. Make it clear she's fucking mine and always will be.

My girl that's in my heart. That's in my head. That belongs by my side and damn sure belongs in my bed.

Ten years, and not once have I ever stopped thinking about her. It's always *been* her.

It takes all the restraint I have not to rip her clothes off here and now. As our mouths devour each other's and we produce throaty moans at the feel of each other's lips, it takes everything to keep me from carrying her off.

But I already know Korine's filling up with guilt—the explosive heat begins to cool and her hands come up to my chest to nudge me away. Soon she's pulling back from our kiss, turning her head from mine, heaving out

deep breaths.

“Blake...” she puffs. “We can’t...”

All I can do is utter her name. So I do. Just as breathless and dazed as she is. “Kori...”

“Dinner. I’ll get started on dinner.”

She hops down from the table, ducking out from under me, and hurries for the kitchen. I expel another hitched breath from my lungs and run fingers through my messy hair.

What the hell just happened?

That evening, we don’t mention earlier. Sunny’s our buffer, clueless and unknowing as to what happened between us just hours ago. She cracks jokes in typical Sunny fashion, teasing the two of us at different points in time. Korine meets my eyes from across the dinner table, the expression on her face almost panicked.

And, fuck, does she look beautiful even now—her naturally dusky pink lips still kiss-swollen, a flushed glow about her, short hair tousled.

I’d love nothing more than to take her to bed. Make her remember how I’d once given her so much pleasure, she saw stars. That was a decade ago. I could have her seeing whole galaxies now...

These thoughts that feel both inappropriate yet so damn arousing have me cleaning off my plate. I go for seconds, devouring the pot roast Korine prepared like I really want to devour her.

We spend the rest of the evening avoiding it. Sunny asks to turn in early, citing a pounding headache. Korine helps her to bed while I sit by the window and strategize over the club’s upcoming drug deal. She eventually comes out wearing a nervous smile.

“Want to watch a movie?” she asks. “Like old times?”

I cock a brow. “You sure you’re alright being around me? After...”

She rakes teeth over her bottom lip. “Stay on your side of the sofa. I’ll stay on mine.”

“What are we, fourteen again?”

“Yes, if it means you’ll behave yourself.”

I get up off the recliner and cross the living room. “I never behaved myself. You know better than that.”

“True,” she concedes, folding her legs up on the sofa. She spears me with a stern look. “But at that age you knew better than to ever try to touch me.”

“Probably ’cuz I knew your father had ESP and would show up out of nowhere to toss me out the door.”

We both laugh at the truthfulness of the statement. Mr. McKibbens had always been (rightfully) protective of his daughter. That’s not even getting into her older brother, Shawn.

Korine scoffs. “As if you were even interested. You treated me like one of the guys. It wasn’t ’til *after* I started dating that you seemed to notice I was, in fact, a girl.”

“How would you know?”

It’s amusing watching Korine’s subtle surprise flicker in and out. She opens her mouth to reply, then closes it again as if unable to think anything up. The movie starts and we redirect our attention, settling into the awkward kind of tension we’d had during dinner.

I don’t regret it—Korine’s convinced I had never noticed how pretty she was when we were kids. The nice way she smelled and how my stomach rippled whenever she’d grab my hand or touch me in any way. I just hadn’t known how to act on those feelings ’til I was older.

’Til other girls had given me the confidence I needed for my dream girl.

I’d always worried I wasn’t good enough for her.

We watch two movies before Korine drifts off to sleep. I do what I’ve done so many times over the past couple weeks and cover her with a blanket

once she does nod off. Most nights I've been functioning off three or four hours of sleep passed out in the recliner. Tonight'll be no different.

In the heavy silence engulfing the trailer, I move to check the locks on the door and peek out the window. It's in the naked dark surrounding the trailer outside that I spot the police cruiser parked feet away near the ravine. Headlights blink on as if aware I'm watching, then the car pulls away.

My eyes narrow, my glare full of immediate hatred and rage.

That fucking does it. That's the last fucking straw.

Ken Stricklin refuses to keep his distance. He refuses to stay away from Korine. He thinks he's gonna intimidate her, harass her, and much worse...

He's got a real wakeup call coming. I'll have his blood on my hands soon enough.

KORINE



“WILL YOU STOP HOGGING ALL THE HOT WATER FOR YOURSELF?” I YELL FROM the other side of the door. I pound a fist against it for the dozenth time.

The staticky sound of spraying water only seems to grow louder. It does nothing to disguise the whistling coming from the man in the shower— Blake’s taking his sweet time. Probably savoring every second he gets to drive me insane.

“Blake!” I croak with another rap of my knuckles. “I’m going to be late for work if you don’t open this —”

The door swings open and he’s standing before me dripping wet. His normally perfect golden hair is shiny and slicked down. His blue eyes gleam. His warm, pink lips twitch into an almost-smile, waking the dormant butterflies in my belly. They flutter away inside my stomach as my gaze drops and then my jaw.

Blake’s *naked*.

He stands in the doorway looking every bit the impossibly handsome, well-built specimen that he is. Wide shoulders and sculpted biceps decorated by a handful of tattoos. A torso with zero body fat to be found. Just the stack of bricks that make up his six-pack abs.

The lower my gaze tracks, the more bated my breath becomes. It’s like unwrapping a present on Christmas morning except there’s no wrapping

necessary at all—Blake’s dick dangles between his legs, as large and mouthwatering as I remember it.

Fat tip. A slight curve to his length. Smooth velvet that feels so good it sends a shiver down my spine. And the neatest, most well-groomed pair of balls I’ve ever seen.

All on display for me to gape at, speechless.

The rest of his body is no less magnificent. Golden-tinted man-hair dusts his sturdy thighs and legs, and he’s planted his feet on the ground in a stance that exudes confidence, even though he’s naked. He dwarfs me, taller than he was when we were in high school, tapping out a couple inches above six feet.

Mama was right—Blake Cash looks so damn good it’s enough to make any woman sling her panties at him.

Humor sparkles in his eyes watching me ogle him. “Like something you see, Kori?”

My tongue won’t cooperate. Neither will my brain. I blink several times and sputter out, “Huh?”

“Me too,” Blake rasps. He leans closer ’til his lips graze my ear. “I sure as hell like what I see.”

It’s then that it dawns on me in horrifying shock—glancing down my front, I’m naked too!

Naked as the day I was born.

I open my mouth to scream only for the scene around me to vanish. I’m springing up on the sofa with heaving breaths and my eyes wide.

It was a dream. Only a dream.

“Thank god,” I mutter, pressing a hand to my chest where my heart’s pounding. “It wasn’t real.”

“What wasn’t real?” Blake asks. He strolls into the living room—this time fully dressed—holding two mugs of coffee. The one in his right hand he sets on the coffee table for me, keeping the left for himself. “You were too damn cute sleeping on the couch. Couldn’t bring myself to wake you.”

I lick my lips, still dazed from the *very* realistic, *very* convincing dream. “Errr... thanks.”

“Listen, I was thinking we should get out today. Do something other than work at the Chop Shop and hang around my trailer.”

My grip tightens on the blanket sprawled across my lap. “Something as in, what?”

“The Christmas market’s open this weekend. It could be fun.”

“Christmas market? Out in the open around everybody in Pulsboro?”

“Yeah, in front of everybody in Pulsboro. You afraid to be seen by ’em?” He raises a brow as if in offense. “You’re divorced. A free woman who can do as she pleases.”

“I’m only separated. I’m not divorced. Not yet. I’ve only filed —”

“You plan on going back to him?”

Disgust spreads onto my face. “Of course not. I’m done. For real this time.”

“Then, what’s the big deal? You’d be going with a friend to browse the booths. That’s allowed, Kori.”

“It’s not that it’s not allowed,” I say, my hesitation slowing down the words out of my mouth. An uneven breath shakes its way from my lungs, and I run my fingers through the few inches of short, messy hair on my head. “It’s that anybody who’s lived in town longer than five minutes knows our history.”

He releases a husky laugh of surprise, almost spilling coffee down his front. Slamming his mug down on the coffee table, he stares at me like he can’t believe what he’s heard. “So this is about us—you’re worried what people’ll think?”

“Blake...” I say, my speech still slow. My shoulders tensing up. “We have a past.”

“We were *teenagers*.”

I let out my own small laugh. Mine infused with equal disbelief. “Did you

forget what happened between us? How...*attached* we were?"

"You mean like how everybody in town thought we'd get married and have a dozen babies someday? How we'd live out our days in some nice house with a perfect white picket fence?"

"We shouldn't have this conversation. It's too awkward and it's not the right time." I push away the blanket that's been covering me. Up on my feet, I turn in the direction of the bathroom.

Blake's not one to quit once in the middle of addressing a situation. I make it only two steps before he's talking again like the conversation isn't over.

"What're you really afraid of, Kori? Your dickweed of an ex-husband seeing you?" he asks. "Or is it that you're afraid of what could happen if we *really* be friends again?"

My heart aches hearing the accusations. The hole that's been in my heart all these years has never felt more gaping. Combined with the X-rated dream I had mere minutes ago, it's way too much—it's too damn confusing.

I stop short, my shoulders sagging, my head bowing. "I don't know what to tell you."

"Tell me we're still good. You're still my best friend."

The strain in his voice makes me look over my shoulder at him. Blake's never been good at relationships and matters of the heart, but he has his tells. He has his ways where he demonstrates just how much he cares. Meeting his gaze from halfway across the room, I can see the desperation etched in his deep blue eyes.

He misses our bond. He wants it to be like before, where we'd spend whole days together like it was second nature to us.

"You'll always be my best friend."

I flee the scene before he can respond. Considering the trailer's only nine hundred square feet, there aren't many places to escape to. I crack the bedroom door open to check on Mama, then tiptoe inside to grab a few

things. Quiet as I try to be, she stirs anyway.

“Morning, baby,” she murmurs, squinting. “What time is it? I’ve been sleeping real good in this big ol’ bed of Blake’s. I try not to think about all the ladies he must’ve had come through.”

My tepid smile humors Mama as I busy myself with rummaging through my duffle bag of things. A few more paychecks, and I’ll have enough to get us an apartment. Blake’s offered money up to make it happen now—so has Mason and the MC—but I’ve declined.

I want to earn it myself. Through my hard work at the bike shop.

Mama picks up on my lack of response at her joke about Blake and the many women he’s likely bedded. “Baby, everything okay?”

“Do you want breakfast, Mama? Blake made some coffee.”

“I want to know what’s up with my daughter. You think I don’t know when you’re upset? Baby, I carried you for nine long months. I can *feel* your every emotion.”

The smile on my lips transforms from tepid to bittersweet as I give a shake of my head. “It’s just stuff between me and Blake. No big deal.”

“Ahhh, I see,” she says in a sage tone. Three short words that tell me she knows more than I do about my own situation. “You two have always been peas in a pod. From the time you were small.”

“Well, we’re grown now.”

“Which makes things complicated, doesn’t it?”

“He wants to go to the Christmas market.”

Mama’s sparse brows jump high, her lips pursed. “Does he now? And what did you say?”

“I said people would see us.”

“And?”

“And... and...”

I don’t know.

“Korine Tiana McKibbens, get your butt in some decent clothes and go

spend the day with that man.”

“But—”

“You haven’t seen him in ten years, and you could use a little joy. Go, right now.”

I stand up straight with hands on my hips. “Mama, I’m not a child anymore. Remember?”

“Then stop acting like one and go, go, go!”

“Fine. But only if you come with. You’ve been just as cooped up as me. Blake won’t mind.”

And he doesn’t.

When I emerge from the bedroom and let him know we’d like to go after all, he’s no less enthusiastic about the outing. Within the hour, we’re piling into his truck and driving across town to Main Street where the market’s located. Though Mama sits in between us on the drive over, the enclosed space still feels tortuous—it still feels like I’m far too close to Blake.

I can practically pick up on his natural musk. A masculine scent that’s woody but clean and soapy at the same time; a scent that I’m more than a little familiar with.

He smells the same even after all these years.

My throat thickens at the thought, and I swallow against the tight feeling. It’s bad enough that I can’t stop thinking about the dream I had earlier. The last thing I need to be noticing is how good Blake smells, how he casts me and Mama sidelong glances with a little smile canting his lips and the winter sunlight caught in his eyes.

Who am I kidding?

I can acknowledge he’s an attractive man without wanting anything more. Blake always was the cutest boy at school. The guy all the girls threw themselves at. His hair, his face and body, and the one-of-a-kind smile of his that makes you feel so special, like you’re the only person he’s ever given it to—any woman would want him.

That's without even acknowledging his charming personality and the natural confidence he possesses. A certain swag that makes him even more irresistible.

I glance over at him. He's telling Mama about the crêpes booth they have at the market. She giggles at the little jokes he cracks and the sweet way he speaks to her. All genuine and sincere.

In a way Ken never was with Mama. She's never been so at ease.

I've never been...

I force my gaze back to the window on my side of the truck despite the fact that a warmth has settled over me. I'm burning up by the time we've parked and we're walking a block down to the market.

The crowds milling about let us know we're some of the last in town to show up.

Blake's offered Mama his arm to help her navigate all the people. I smile at him in gratitude for being so thoughtful. Busy scenes like this can quickly become overwhelming for her.

We wander around, periodically stopping at a booth that sells Christmas trinkets or tasting samples available from the food vendors. After a pitstop at the funnel cake station, I release an airy laugh that surprises even me.

"Blake... your beard. You've got powder all over it."

Mama joins me in my laughter. Blake tucks his chin into his shoulder, rubbing away the powder using his shirt sleeve. The only problem is, he makes it worse; the powdered sugar spreads across his jaw.

Stepping forward, I take mercy on him and produce a towelette wipe from my purse. "Here, Blake Cash, because you're hopeless."

He stands still and lets me mop him clean of any sugary powder decorating his face. Seconds pass us by before our proximity dawns on me and the unspoken tension rises to a feverish heat. Even in the face of the December wind. My eyes flick up to find his already on me.

Studying me. Admiring me. Peering into me in a way only he's ever been

able to.

I take an immediate step back, feeling acutely aware of every cell in my body and how each one reacts whenever near him.

Mama's watching on with a look that says *I told you so* without actually speaking the words.

Before I can figure out a new direction to take the moment, we're interrupted by two people approaching us.

"Hey, thought that was you," Sydney says, an ease about her. She's at Mason's side, the two so complementary it's no wonder they're together. She smiles at us and asks us how we're liking the market.

"Very good," Mama answers. She points a finger at Mason. "But I really want to catch up with this one."

Mason lets out a short laugh and cocks his head to the side. "What did I do this time, Mrs. McKibbens?"

"It's Ms. these days, and I haven't forgotten about your bad little self riding your bike all over my lawn. Look at you, all grown now. Tell me about all the trouble I'm sure you've caused."

Mason holds up his hands. "I've been behaving myself, Ms. McKibbens. For once."

"So a leopard does change its spots!"

Mama shuffles unprovoked toward Mason and Sydney as if by invite.

"Mama, some other time," I say. "Mason and Sydney are here together —"

"We don't mind," Sydney interjects, sharing a smile with Mama. "We'll take very good care of her. You two go on."

Suddenly, it occurs to me I've walked straight into a trap.

Everybody knows what they're doing. I'm the one that's slow on the uptake. As Mama joins Mason and Sydney and the couple winks at us, I'm left standing alone with Blake. He seems equally pleased with how the situation has been flipped on its head.

Before I can even think up any other protests, Mama's wandered off in between Mason and Sydney, the trio already engaged in animated chatter.

My nose wrinkles as I shoot Blake a suspicious look. "That was totally coordinated, wasn't it? Mason and Sydney didn't just happen to turn up and see us here, did they?"

Blake's shrug is innocuous. "Who knows? Small town."

"I'll say. Full of scheming bikers."

KORINE



“LET’S CHECK OUT SOME MORE OF THE MARKET. REMEMBER THOSE bratwursts you used to love? The vendor’s still around.” Blake grabs hold of my hand and leads me deeper into the crowds.

I don’t know what I’m more thrown by, his warm hand engulfing my own, or the fact that he’s remembered such a small quirk of mine. The last time we attended this market we were seniors in high school fucking around on a bored Saturday.

The memories flicker in and out before my eyes. As we explore the many booths and displays set up on Main Street, I’m caught between the past and present. We’d pissed people off messing up the winter wonderland display by chucking snow at each other and had nicked extra free samples from food booths when the vendors weren’t looking. On a dare, I distracted Mrs. Igeron as Blake rearranged the snowman at her booth, swapping his carrot nose for a different kind of carrot down below. She’d screamed in outrage as he grabbed my hand and we took off running with sides aching from laughter.

It fades for the present where we’re adults, more mature than dressing up snowmen with carrots for penises, but still playful in our own way.

Blake shoves a beanie over my head at a booth selling knitted goods while I hold up an ugly Christmas sweater against his broad chest.

“Puke green,” I tease. “It looks good on you.”

“You and that mouth of yours. Always getting you into trouble.” He yanks the beanie down ’til it’s covering my eyes and I can’t see. Then he’s whisking me off after tossing a twenty at the booth owner.

A confused laugh bursts out of me. “Where are you taking—Blake!”

I’ve barely managed to pull the beanie off when I’m finding myself in front of a game stall. He’s situated me in one lane and himself in the other. The game operator’s already accepted cash in exchange for our turn.

I read the sign.

Shoot Santa’s Reindeer.

A game where we aim fake rifles at the moving reindeer targets and shoot as many of them as possible in under two minutes. A game we’ve played many times in the past.

“How festive,” I say with a disbelieving smile and shake of my head.

Blake winks at me. “We used to love this game. Still think you’re any good?”

“We? You mean you—it was one of the few games you beat me at.”

“There it is,” he says, the slightest twang in his voice. His eyes look over at me, shining a shade of blue more vivid than a sapphire. “There’s that cockiness Korine McKibbens is known for.”

“Cockiness? Me? You must be talking about yourself.”

“You climbed that tree all wrong,” he mimics, making me laugh and roll my eyes. “I can climb it better than you.”

“Well, I did, didn’t I?” I step up to my side of the counter and pick up the rifle that’s not really a rifle but a water gun. “And you *did* climb that tree all wrong.”

Blake says nothing, focusing on his own lane. He props his rifle up against his sturdy shoulder and takes aim. But even at a quick glance I can tell he’s eating this up; he’s loving how he’s gotten a reaction out of me, making me play along.

An old fire ignites inside me. My competitive edge that normally had us trying our hardest to beat each other. It had been a common thread throughout our childhood. While we became the best of friends, that didn't mean we didn't want bragging rights whenever facing off.

As the only girl in our friend group, I always had something to prove. Blake always treated me as an equal, never letting me win, always putting his best game forward like he would any of the boys.

It's what I wanted—I didn't want his pity, or for him to let me win. I wanted to earn it myself.

Still do.

Blake welcomes the challenge. He accepts when he loses. He admits when I've bested him. Almost like he's proud I have. It's not a threat to his masculinity because he's secure in it, appreciating when I show that spark he says he loves so much.

Ken would be the opposite. If he were here right now, I'd have to lose. Any other result and he'd be pissed. He'd recede into stanch silence for the rest of the day 'til he exploded at night. He'd tell me I was trying to humiliate him like he did that time at a bank where I corrected him about something as small as a miscalculation he'd made. He hadn't even waited 'til we got home that time—my mouth was throbbing in pain in the front seat of his Escalade after the wallop he'd given me...

When the game operator announces we're about to begin, I'm still deep in these bad memories. I snap to attention right as the buzzer goes off, and Blake launches into his first round of shots.

Crap, I'm behind!

My competitive spirit pushes me. I focus on the reindeers sliding in and out of my line of vision and squeeze the trigger.

A small crowd gathers behind us. I know because, as I fire away, I can hear their entertained chatter. They cheer at any targets hit whether it's me or Blake. Luckily, I manage to tune them out as I fire away at the reindeers.

The time's up before I'm ready for it to be. We lower our rifles with fast-beating hearts and look to the operator for the verdict. He counts up the results and then gestures to Blake's lane.

"Lane one wins!"

Blake beats a fist in the air in celebration. The audience we've acquired applauds him. I feel the sting of loss but a part of me also looks forward to the shit-talking that's about to happen.

Sure enough, as Blake collects the voucher that's his prize, he heads straight to me with a triumphant expression on his frustratingly handsome face.

I roll my eyes. "Talk your smack, Blake. You won."

"Love hearing those two magic words from those pouty lips."

His tease warms my skin. He catches himself a split second later, clearing his throat and grabbing my hand to lead me to our next stop. The voucher he won buys us brats and Cokes to snack on.

We find seats in a clearing near the park that's been designated for marketgoers. Blake plunks down on the wooden picnic table and pats the space next to him.

I'm still flushed from not only losing but his teasing. He'd called my lips *pouty*. He's spent all afternoon reaching for my hand and being as funny and charming as ever. How am I supposed to fight off the emerging feelings and temptations making their way to the surface?

I haven't had a real sex drive in years. The result of Ken's increasing abuse and my decreasing self-esteem. Yet my dream earlier and my thoughts now have me keenly aware of how my body's awakening in response to his.

"The brats as good as you remember 'em?" he asks after a moment of silence.

My mouth full of the smoked sausage and pretzeled bun, a nod is all I'm capable of.

He washes down his next bite with a drink from his Coke. "I'm glad. That

the brat's still good and that you came out today. You needed something like this."

Inhaling the fresh, crisp air and reaching for a napkin, I know he's right. Today was something I needed.

"Thanks for making me come," I say, tossing my napkin on the plate of my mostly eaten bratwurst. The thing's huge and I'll never finish it.

Blake seems to forget about his food and drink too. He angles his body to face me on the bench, lips tugging into something of a smile. The stare he gives me is the kind of stare he's been giving me since we were clueless teens running through the Christmas market—*certainty*.

Certainty that sends a shiver coursing down my spine, like he knows some big secret I don't. He sees something so damn obvious I'm in the dark on.

The thing is, I've never been in the dark about him. Not then and not now.

I only wished he'd done more to make me stay...

"It's crazy how things can feel like old times," he muses, proving he's a mind reader. "Every part of town has a memory with you in it, Kori. I can look at that tree over there and remember the time we cut class and crashed on the grass."

I blink and feel welled up emotion making itself known. "I did my homework anyway."

"And I took a nap."

A small gasp of a laugh leaves me. "That sounds about right."

"But I see you here today too. At my side as we make new memories. I've always wanted that for us."

"Me... too." My throat works to swallow. I drop my gaze from his and study our hands only inches apart on the picnic table. His inching closer to mine. Mine palm side up as if instinctually waiting to be grabbed. "I wish," I try, and then I sigh at the ache inside. "I wish it could've been different,

Blake.”

“It still can be. It’s not too late.”

When his words are met with my silence, he lifts a hand to cup my chin and guide my gaze back up to his.

“You’re my girl, Kori,” he rasps, drawing my mouth closer to his. “You’ve been my girl since the first moment I saw you moving in next door. You’ve been my girl even when you were somebody else’s wife. You’re always gonna be my girl... ’til I’m fucking dead and gone and buried six feet under. Even then you’ll still be. Stop fucking fighting it and accept you’re mine.”

Our faces are so close they’re almost touching. The space of a breath away from each other. It’s like teetering on the edge as I peer into the boundless blue ocean that makes up his gaze. I’m a second away from falling into deep water that I’ll never be able to swim out of. Over twenty years of feelings that have only grown more intense with age.

It’s in the chemistry that circles us. The heat that caramelizes around us. So visceral and overpowering I feel it in the very core of who I am.

I’m the one that makes the move—something instinctually I know has to happen. Blake needs to know I’m in too. I want this. *I want him.*

My lips press to his almost shyly. It’s all he needs to lose restraint and seize the rare opportunity. For his rough hand to grip the side of my slender throat and deepen the kiss to sweltering levels. He kisses me as if stopping would mean I’m gone forever. I’ll fade from existence.

His lips warm, his tongue caressing, his kisses set fire to my brown skin. I lean into him as my mind empties and my heart races. A pulse of need thrums through me that’s long gone unsated.

It’s been so long since I’ve been touched like this. Since I’ve been kissed like this.

We lose ourselves to a blur of sweeping touches and hot kisses. Everything else is forgotten—who we are and where we are and what’s

happening around us.

In this moment, I feel more alive than I have in years. The wall I've erected around my heart collapses. The hole that Blake left so long ago feels as if it'll finally be filled. I'll be whole again so long as I give into him. I become the Korine I was always supposed to be but got sidetracked along the way.

Blake's kiss is nourishing. An epiphany that has me both dizzy and seeing clearly the second we draw apart and stare heavily lidded at each other.

He thumbs my bottom lip as if tempted to go in for more kisses but resisting by a thin thread. "Don't run and hide, Kori. We're in this together."

I nod before leaning into him again, resting my head on the solidness of his shoulder. His arms come up around me, holding me, making me feel so unspeakably secure.

...until my gaze lands on the many trees and shrubs surrounding us in the park area and I swear I see leaves rustling. I hear the hurried pad of footsteps rushing away.

And I'm certain someone was watching us.

BLAKE



“REMEMBER, TONIGHT’S DEAL IS SUPPOSED TO BE QUICK AND EASY,” I lecture, mounting my Street Bob and fastening my helmet. “We’re making the exchange and then getting the hell out of there.”

“Sounds boring. I’d rather we fuck shit up,” Ozzie says. He stops at his bike parked next to mine. It’s forty damn degrees out and he’s got no jacket on, grinning like the joker he is.

“Do that on your own time. It’s almost Christmas. Nobody’s trying to land in the slammer,” Moses says. Like me, he’s already perched on his bike, ready to roll.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Christmas in jail sounds fucking amazing.”

Moses and me merely shake our heads. Sometimes it’s best to let silence answer Ozzie.

But really, as we wait on Mace, I’m not as focused as I should be. My mind’s not set on the deal we’re about to conduct with the Barreras. It’s on Korine and those damn addictive lips of hers. I’ve had two tastes of ’em now, and there’s no going back.

The second her lips touched mine, it was like a return to everything that was once right in my life. Blood had surged to my cock, and I’d felt a feral need to possess her. Make her mine in all the ways she hasn’t been for years.

I'd kissed the hell out of her. She was breathless and starry-eyed by the time we pulled away. Her lips even poutier, her blinks slow, she'd looked at me like she couldn't believe what had just happened.

God, she was so damn beautiful in moments like those.

Her sun-kissed brown skin flushed with warmth. Her pixie-cut hair tousled by the wind. It took everything I had not to pick her up and carry her home. Back to my trailer where I'd make love to her through the night. I'd have her forgetting her dickhead of an abusive ex ever existed.

I bite down hard on my jaw, sitting on my Street Bob, waiting on Mace. It helps me keep a handle on the desire that rises up so strong it's damn near impossible to suppress. Ten long years of craving my girl is enough to make me lose my mind.

If only she knew. If she had any idea...

"Ready?" Mace asks, striding out from the saloon. He glances around at us like a general assessing his soldiers on the brink of war.

In a way, that's what this is—a new fight's emerging. We're under heavy investigation yet here we are, still doing what we do. We're meeting up with the drug cartel we do business with right under Pulsboro PD's nose.

They're no moral authority. You've got Captain Vargas who's long been rumored to take kickbacks. He and that other asshole lieutenant of his refused to let Kori file a police report against the piece of shit woman beater they're protecting. They'd rather look after Stricklin and his career than help Kori out in her hour of need. They've got no right to come for our club. I take pleasure in flouting their precious laws that mean nothing at the end of the day when they don't follow them their damn selves.

Our engines roar to life and we blast off as a formation in the night. We ride just as expertly when it's dark out as we do when it's daylight hours. Tight and staggered in our designated positions, serving as guides and covers for each other. Mace heads us up while I keep the rear in check.

The winds from earlier have grown stronger, colder. The frigid air blows

back my longer hair and turns my skin into ice. Again I'm wondering how the hell Ozzie's managing with no outerwear at all when I've got a leather jacket on and I'm still freezing my ass off.

We press on past town borders 'til we're coming up on the barren shoulder of the road where we agreed to meet the cartel. None of the Barreras have arrived.

"Damn, they're really about to leave us waiting?" Moses shakes his head, his ski mask covering his face.

"They could be running behind schedule," Mace says. "We'll give 'em some time."

We've hidden ourselves behind a wall of trees and bushes. Headlights off and bikes tucked out of view, we're invisible in the night. The few cars and trucks that do zip by from the highway have no clue what's lurking out of sight.

I dismount my Street Bob and roll my head on my shoulders. Tension's knotted up inside me. Any patience wears thin. We've been planning this meetup for over two weeks now. Miguel and the rest of his crew know what's up.

But mostly it's a recklessness that's taken root inside me and grown almost out of control in recent weeks. From the moment I spotted Korine on the side of the highway and realized she was back in town; the same night Mom and Bill decided they wanted to fuck my world up even more by drudging up the past.

I need to expend this energy somehow. Get it out of my system.

I'd love nothing more than do it by breaking Stricklin's face.

"There they are," Mace says, jutting his chin.

"Took them long enough," Ozzie mumbles.

Miguel and his guys roll up in a Land Rover. They trample over the shoulder of the road and flick off their headlights within a few feet. The doors bounce open and out steps Miguel and two of his guys. Like us, they're

dressed in nondescript black clothing.

Miguel Barrera himself is about as unassuming as you can get—an average-sized guy with a mustache and friendly eyes. You'd never imagine he's an integral part of one of southeast Texas's deadliest cartels. Almost as formidable as Madrigal, a former cartel we'd done business with 'til relations soured.

Me and Mace step forward to meet them.

"You're late," I say.

"*Lo siento caballeros*," Miguel says. "But I brought everything we agreed upon."

"So did we. Sixty-K if you've got what we want."

"You've mentioned you're expanding your territory. We can provide for larger quantities if you're seeking to diversify your clientele."

"We will be now that the Rebels and Hellrazors are out of the picture," Mace answers.

The corner of Miguel's lip quirks up. "I heard about that. It sounds like they got what they deserved for messing with the Kings. I'm glad our understanding is more... peaceful."

Mace glances at me, then back at Miguel. "Let's keep it that way. So long as you uphold your end of the bargain."

"Always."

"HEY! CLEAR OUT!" Ozzie yells suddenly. "We've got visitors!"

We hardly wait for more details. The meeting's cut short within the next second. Ozzie and Moses have retreated from their lookout spots. Miguel and his men have rushed back toward their Land Rover. Me and Mace catch flashing red and blue lights out of the darkness and shrink into the trees and bushes.

A police car has pulled up on the opposite side of the road. Nobody gets out, though the siren lights continue flashing.

We remain where we are, peering through the shrubs, waiting out the

tense moment. It's too dark out to tell who's in the car or what's prompted them to pull over. They could be in the middle of a local patrol, or they could be coming from responding to a call.

They could be out looking for somebody.

Us.

It's not outside the realm of possibility they've received a tip or some kind of lead we'd be doing business with the Barreras tonight.

For five long minutes that feel closer to five hours, we're left waiting to find out. Finally, the officers inside the car seem to decide it's time to move on. The patrol car merges onto the highway and disappears into the distance.

We creep into view again.

Miguel shakes his head. "Some other time. That was no coincidence. They must've suspected a deal was going down in the area."

"We came out here for a reason," I snap, taking several steps in his direction. "We finish the deal we started —"

"You know how to reach me. Another time and place. Something more secure."

Miguel and his men file into their Land Rover. A cloud of dust lingers in their wake as they make their departure.

"Fuck, that was a waste," Ozzie groans. "Now what?"

Mace looks no less displeased at what's gone down. He throws his leg over his Road King and pulls his helmet over his ski mask. "We come up with a better set up for our deal."

The others gear up to take off, but I'm the last one to follow suit. The sliver of patience I had earlier has run out and my adrenaline's no less amped up.

Our mission tonight might've been a bust, but something's got to give. I'll find a release on my own.

You'd think I'd go home after the failed drug deal with the Barreras. It'd be enough to convince me to call it a night. The small crew that has carried it out rides back to the saloon and we debrief. The other guys indulge in a beer (I drink a Coke). Then everybody's calling it a night.

As Mace, Ozzie, and Moses go their separate ways, I know I should be headed home to Korine and Sunny. It's well past midnight, and I've got to be up at an early hour to open the shop.

Maybe I would go home if the adrenaline wasn't still coursing through my veins. I'm still riding a rush of it that's gone unchecked since our deal didn't pan out. I need to expend the energy somehow. Make myself feel some kinda payoff that'll make tonight worthwhile.

Boredom has never suited me well.

Back when I used to drink, it was often one of the reasons I let things spiral. It was what got the ball rolling whenever I was left with my own thoughts and began picking at the toxic parts of myself. I'd seek out a drink to quiet the noise in my head. Make myself forget the bad shit while I also made myself feel good.

At least that's the reasoning I used at first. After a while I was doing it 'cuz I could. It was out of habit and necessity that I'd seek out a drink to function.

Day by day, I was becoming Bill and didn't even realize it...

But tonight, with my pulse racing and a taste for excitement, I don't seek out a drink. I mount my bike, my ski mask covering my face, and I take off from the saloon. I know just where I'm headed as I streak across town in the pitch-black night.

About a block away from Riddell Road, I park my bike behind a bunch of bushes. I dismount and then walk the rest of the way to the perfect house that's marked 4729.

All the windows are dark. The whole street is quiet.

Everybody's turned in for the night.

I pause a second longer, scoping out the area, then I make my move. Korine would be pissed if she found out what I'm about to do; she'd be even more pissed if she learned I swiped her old ring of keys to let myself into Stricklin's house.

But she wouldn't understand why I need to do this. How I've held off as long as I possibly could before acting on my urge to make the piece of shit pay.

This moment is something I've fantasized about from the instant Korine and Sunny turned up on my doorstep.

I make no sound, carefully twisting the key in the lock and then slipping into the house. I enter through the rear door in the kitchen. The room's positioned farther away from the bedroom in the layout of the house. Something I took note of the day I accompanied Korine to pick up her things.

My pulse thrums faster. My adrenaline's kicked up so many notches, I'm fueled by it. I creep through the dark of the Stricklin household, relishing in every fucking second. It's a kind of payback in its own to know I have free rein of the place as the asshole sleeps cluelessly upstairs.

Normally, I wouldn't be in favor of a surprise attack. I'd want to fight fair, man to man.

For Stricklin, I make a special exception. The piece of shit doesn't believe in fairness himself if he's ever put his hands on Korine.

So, I'll make him feel as helpless and afraid as he made her.

I make it to the second floor landing and slink the rest of the way toward their bedroom. Stricklin's a sloppy sleeper—he's stretched out across the king-size mattress, only half covered by the comforter, his mouth open in a loud snore. I ease over to his nightstand and snag the firearm I already know is inside; another discovery I'd made the day I came with Korine for her things.

Standing over Stricklin lying in bed, I wait a few seconds before waking him. I do it smacking him hard across the face. The back of my hand collides

with his cheek in a bitch slap that echoes in the quiet.

SMACK!

His latest snore is interrupted as he jerks awake. His limbs flail. His eyes pop open in drowsy, pained confusion.

I give him no time to react. Snatching him up by the collar of his t-shirt, I'm tossing him out of his bed. I'm barely letting him touch the ground before delivering a brutal kick to the face. He grunts as he lands in a tumble.

I go in. I beat the shit out of him. Ken Stricklin has no choice but to cower and curl up as I pistol whip him, kick every part of his body within reach, and smash my fist into his face 'til blood's splattering all over my glove.

“ARGH! STOP!” he yells in desperation. “STOP!”

But I don't stop. 'Cuz I don't want to. 'Cuz Ken Stricklin doesn't deserve it.

He deserves to suffer and bleed out on his own floor.

I lose myself to the violence. To beating the shit out of him 'til I'm out of breath and slicked with sweat and he's an unconscious heap on the floor.

For the briefest second, I almost keep going. I almost take aim and squeeze the trigger of his pistol to execute him on the spot. The adrenaline buzzing through me surges in my veins and almost pushes me to do it. The high of the moment almost has me in such a trance that I don't think anything of it.

Almost.

It's the smallest voice in the furthest part of my brain that stops me. Reminds me how sloppy it would be.

I've already risked enough being here.

There's no doubt Stricklin will know it was me when he regains consciousness. With no evidence, he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

An unplanned murder is something else altogether.

I leave with the satisfaction that he's swollen and bloodied on the floor.

For now, it's enough.

“Why do you look so happy?” Sydney asks first thing when she and Mace pull up.

It's a couple days before Christmas and we've decided as a group that we'll be traveling to the huge Christmas tree lot outside of Boulder to snag a tree for our homes. Mace and Sydney want one for their house, and I've decided it'd be nice to have one in the trailer for Korine and Sunny.

I open the door and wait for Korine to crawl in first. Then I slide into the backseat and give a shrug as an answer to Sydney's question.

“It's almost Christmas.”

Korine arches a skeptical brow. “I asked him the same this morning. He wouldn't tell me.”

That's 'cuz you'd be pissed I beat the shit out of your ex-husband.

Mace is behind the wheel. He peers at us in the rearview mirror and checks if we're ready to go.

“Ready as ever to pick out a tree and put it up.”

I wink at Korine seated at my side. The corners of her lips tip up, though she says nothing. There's been unspoken tension between us every moment since we've kissed. We've barely figured out what it meant and how it potentially changes things.

I won't lie by saying I'm not expecting more. I'm hoping for Korine to stop overthinking and surrender to what's inevitable as far as I'm concerned.

It'd taken us years when we were teenagers. All the way up to senior year before we both finally got on the same page and gave a real relationship a try.

No surprise that we flourished—we were so damn happy together that people around town used to tease us about our future. I'd believed it to be true. Even when I wound up caught in my own vices and ruined my shot for

good.

Probably why I'm grateful for what feels like a second chance to make it happen.

Make my girl mine.

We travel much of the way with music blasting from the truck stereo. Mace and Sydney bicker over what to play. Mace insists on throwbacks from the early 2000s while Sydney changes the Spotify station more than once to Christmas classics.

"It's that time of year!" she cries out to our laughter in the back.

Mace scowls. "You're the only one I'd ever let change my music."

"You weren't complaining about Christmas last night when I wore that little Mrs. Claus nightie —"

"*Ahem*," Mace coughs. "Company in the back."

"Don't mind us," Korine says. "Tell me more about this nightie, Sydney. It sounds cute."

I'm laughing along 'til Korine's comment. Then my imagination's running wild with vivid images of her in a Mrs. Claus nightie. Complete with sheer lace that shows off every detail of her beautiful body and a matching fucking panty and Santa hat.

If she had any idea, she'd either laugh even harder, or swat me on the arm in horror.

I grin to myself, imagining pinning her down, trapping her underneath me, and sealing her lips with mine.

Fuck... it's been too long since I've had a woman...

The problem being, the only one I want is Korine.

As though she's read my mind, she catches my eye. Instead of just a quirk of her lips, this time she smiles at me. A fucking gorgeous smile that makes my heart beat faster and has me feeling like I'm sixteen again, crushing hard on my girl best friend.

If she had any idea the kind of power she holds over me. Any idea of how

much I've always wanted her.

It takes us about another hour to arrive at the Christmas tree lot. The selection's decent for it being so close to Christmas. We separate into pairs, with Mace and Sydney going off in one direction and me and Korine leaving in another.

"Pick out your favorite," I tell Korine. She glances over in a silent ask if I'm serious. I jut my chin at the trees surrounding us. "Go ahead. Choose which one you think you and Sunny would want to decorate."

"You are..." Korine releases a gentle sigh that's soothing on sound alone. I could listen to the sound when trying to fall asleep. It's that relaxing.

"I'm what? Say it."

A shyness develops about her. She brushes a few strands of her bangs away, then averts her gaze as she circles a few of the trees. "You're so different, Blake. You've got no idea what a mind fuck it is."

"From him?"

She nods. "He picked our tree every year. Mama and I got no say. We didn't get a say in anything. Not even the decorations."

Makes it that much sweeter that I beat his ass just hours ago.

"He couldn't handle you," I say, pocketing my hands in my jacket. "Only a weak man needs that much control over a woman. The only way he felt strong was to go on a power trip. It had nothing to do with you, Kori. It was everything about him being a pathetic piece of shit. Just like Bill."

"Even you saying that..." she sighs softly again. "No wonder all the women in town throw their panties at you."

I grin at her. "Haven't noticed. There's only one woman who I'd like to throw hers at me."

"You are so..." she repeats, trailing off. She shakes her head and laughs instead of finishing her thought.

The small flirtatious moment hangs in the air between us.

Korine merely smiles, again with a shyness about her, and I stand back,

letting her wander around the selection of trees.

I'm patient, aware that her walls are coming down piece by piece. She might bite away her little bashful smiles right now, but I can tell what she's got on her mind—Korine wants me just as much as I want her.

It's all about the right moment.

After we've picked out our trees, Mace and I load them up in his truck bed. We make a quick pitstop at the Sunny Side Up diner for lunch.

"This is where you used to work?" Korine asks.

Sydney nods and smiles, leading the charge inside. "I have very fond, very greasy memories of this place."

The Sunny Side Up's the usual roadside diner, with its pleather-cushioned booths and glass pie displays. The tile's checkered, and the air smells of all kinds of fried foods.

Sydney walks right up to an older man that's behind the counter in the middle of a conversation with a weeping woman in what's known as church dress.

"Freddie," she says. "Ms. Baxter. Long time no see!"

Sydney seems to notice the woman's tears a couple seconds later than I have. The man looks torn between being happy to see Sydney and comforting the woman named Ms. Baxter.

"Sydney, thought you disappeared," Freddie says. "One day you were my waitress, the next day you were thin air."

"Sorry about that. After Pop's passing..."

"No need to explain."

She frowns, reaching over to place a hand on Ms. Baxter's shoulder. "Everything okay, Ms. Baxter? Where's Teysha?"

The woman erupts in a fresh, heartbroken wail and new stream of tears. She buries her face in the handkerchief she's clutching.

Freddie shakes his head. "It's a difficult time, Sydney. Teysha's... missing."

Sydney gasps, her hands flying to her mouth. “Missing? You mean like...?”

“Taken,” Freddie says amid Ms. Baxter’s wails. “Right from the Sunny Side Up parking lot.”

The rest of us share glances.

Though we’ve got no idea who Teysha is, the news puts a damper on the rest of our lunch. Sydney takes the news hard. She spends most of the time up at the front engaging with Freddie and Ms. Baxter.

By the time we’re walking out toward the truck, she’s clutching missing person flyers she promises she’ll hang up everywhere in Pulsboro. Korine offers to help her.

I put my arm around her in the backseat of Mace’s truck in hopes I’m providing comfort. She mutters thank you and leans into me.

“For being there,” she whispers. Her fingers intertwine with mine in my lap and she snuggles closer.

We stay like this the rest of the ride home. Everybody in the truck’s in silent reflection. Mace peers ahead with his eyes on the road. Sydney clutches her flyers, and Korine seems to be thinking about how much my support means to her.

I’m thinking about all the things I’ve done to protect Korine—and all the things I’m willing to do should Stricklin ever come for her again.

KORINE



“MERRY CHRISTMAS, MAMA!” I STRIDE INTO THE BEDROOM FULL OF ENERGY. A mug of hot chocolate rests in one of my hands and Mama’s medication in the other. I set both down by the nightstand and then move on to prying the curtains apart.

Mama rubs her eyes, squinting at the pale morning light. “It’s Christmas? Oh, right. It is! I didn’t sleep through most of it, did I?”

“It’s a few minutes after nine. I woke you up so you can take your insulin and have some hot cocoa while we open presents.”

My vibrant energy doesn’t let up as I help her through the usual morning routine. Bathroom, medications, slipping on her robe and slippers.

“Morning, Blake!” Mama chirps when we emerge from the bedroom. If she suspects anything has started happening between the two of us, she doesn’t act like it.

Blake’s gaze slides over to mine before he looks back to Mama. It’s telepathic words we share as he picks up on how to behave. “Morning, Sunny. Hope you’re hungry. I’m making omelets.”

“A man who knows his way around the kitchen. How haven’t you been snatched up yet?”

I rub the back of my neck and feel the hot flush prickling over my skin. Thankfully, Blake manages to swoop in with his natural charm.

“Because I’ve been waiting on you, Sunny.”

Mama giggles, sneaking me a glance. “Boy, you couldn’t handle me. But I’ve got a beautiful daughter that’s single.”

“Mama...” I groan.

We move on from breakfast to unwrapping the few presents we’ve accumulated. I gifted Mama and Blake what I could afford—a spa bath set for Mama and new riding gloves for Blake. Both are as grateful as if I’d given them a big ticket item.

Blake got Mama a coffee mug that says *Hot Mama* in sparkly gold letters. She gets a kick out of it, boasting about how she’ll use it every time she has coffee and tea from now on. He turns to me and hands me an envelope.

My brows bunch together, a half frown on my face. I can feel jiggling inside the envelope as I carefully tear it open and then gasp at what falls out.

Keys.

With a tag that says 308.

I look up at Blake to find a satisfied gleam in his eyes. It takes another second for me to be able to form the words.

“You... you got me the apartment at Sunset View?”

“For you and Sunny,” he says. “You move in on the first.”

My head shakes left to right. “I can’t take this. Are you kidding? Blake, it’s too much —”

“Too late. You already signed the lease,” he answers. Then he grins at the slow, shocked blink I give him. “The MC might’ve worked out a deal for you. We tend to get our way in negotiations. Your rent’s only nine hundred, including utilities. More than enough for you to afford on your salary from the shop. First and last are already paid. And don’t worry—it’s all in *your* name.”

Emotion floods me. It erupts out of me in a breathless sound that’s half cry and half gasp. I fling my arms around Blake in a crushing hug. He holds me and lets me sputter out all the garbled thank yous and I can’t believe yous

that fall past my lips over and over again.

“Well, ain’t that something!” Mama cries with a clap of her hands. “That’s what I call a Merry Christmas!”

For the rest of the day, we don’t hold back celebrating the holiday. Blake lets us blast Christmas music. I take up camp in the kitchen and start on making us one of my most special holiday dinners—baked ham with glazed brown sugar, homemade mac & cheese, garlic red-skinned mashed potatoes, and roasted veggies (among other sides).

We watch movies and even go for a walk around the block to admire the snowfall from last night.

Once the sky’s darkening and the evening sets in, Mama’s yawning and ready for bed.

“Didn’t you two mention something about a party at the MC? You should go.”

“Don’t be silly, Mama.”

“Blake, take this girl out to the party. Lord knows she can use it.”

Blake chuckles and then sticks his hands in his jeans at the same time his shoulders shrug. “It’s up to Kori.”

“You two are going to stop ganging up on me! Fine, maybe for an hour.”

“Go on. Shoo. I’ll be fine here. After I take my medications, I’m hibernating.”

I double and triple check on Mama before we do head out. Blake doesn’t rush me; he waits in the living room as I throw together my best attempt at a party look. Most of my clothes are plain and modest to the point of befitting a woman twice my age.

Ken didn’t like me showing off too much leg or chest... or much of anything else.

The best I find is a turquoise blouse and a pair of jeans I pair with boots. The final touch is a swipe of lipstick.

I hug Mama goodbye. “Call me the second you need me. Or press your

alert button. I'll be here in minutes."

"Baby, if you don't get going, I'm kicking you out myself!"

Blake whistles when he sees me. Warmth blankets over me remembering that we'll be spending plenty of time alone tonight.

The Steel Saloon happens to be the most festive place in town on Christmas night.

Blake turns off the ignition and glances over at me. "Hear Ozzie screaming Jingle Bells?"

My lips quirk with the same humor. "Someone has got to make him realize he sounds like a toad drowning."

"Let's just hope he doesn't go streaking butt-naked in the snow."

Cheers ring around the bar room when we walk through the door. We're two of the only sober people in the saloon. Most of the guys have been celebrating for hours with beer steins clutched in their hands and a pink tint to their cheeks. A few even wear Santa hats perched on their heads.

Our first stop is a couple we've slowly started pairing off with.

Mason and Sydney are lost in each other. They're standing in the open space of the bar room almost as if they're dancing. Except Mason doesn't dance. The few others surrounding them do their own version of dancing while Sydney sways her hips and gyrates against Mason.

He's enjoying her moves. His arms wrap around her and pull her up against him. It takes them both a second to notice Blake and I walking up.

"You came!" Sydney cries out with an excited smile. "Merry Christmas!"

"Kori needed a night out," Blake says.

"Well, enjoy yourselves. I know I am." Mason draws Sydney even closer, going in for a deep kiss.

Blake and I share a glance before the next song starts up. Our hands clasp

together and within seconds, we're laughing and doing our own version of a dance. I'm not the best on the dance floor and neither is Blake, but we have our fun—neither of us give a damn who's watching.

Something that's always been what sets us apart from others.

By the time we've danced through a third song, Blake slides an arm around my shoulders and steers us toward the bar counter for drinks.

It's my first real moment to admire the Steel Saloon for what it is.

The biker bar might overwhelm outsiders when visiting, but I've always found the saloon inviting in its own way. The bar's practically a relic in time with its bikini beer model posters and cracked leather seating. The floor's a little sticky and there's never any natural light. Just the neon beer signs that flash from every corner of the bar. All things that make the Steel Saloon what it is.

In the ten years I've been gone, it hasn't changed much. A fact that I find a little comforting.

Blake and I slide onto side-by-side stools. Mick looks like an ancient relic with his bushy white brows and shrinking stature. His jaw drops open at the sight of us.

"If it isn't Pulsboro's most infamous duo—Blake Cash and Korine McKibbens," he says with a hint of pride. "I never thought I'd see the day again."

My lips curl, almost channeling my inner embarrassed teenager. "You've seen me plenty of times at the Chop Shop in recent weeks."

"I have. But that's different. This," he says, gesturing to the two of us, "is like old times. 'Cept now you two are all grown up."

Blake and I share in a glance at each other. "Mick, are you trying to make things awkward?"

"Would fit with being teenagers, wouldn't it?" he cackles. He slings his used dish rag over his shoulder and winks at both of us. "Tell you what? I'll fix you the oldie but goodie—two Dr Peppers coming right up."

I shift in my stool for an amused look at him. He catches on without me having to even utter a word and shakes his head side to side like he's letting me know he gets it.

“Mick's never changing. If I'd known he'd make us feel like we're fifteen again, I might've thought twice about tonight's party.”

“It's okay. I kind of like the reminder. It's fun to think back.” I flash him a smile in earnest that feels like a mistake the moment he casts me a sideways look, and in typical Blake Cash fashion, his deep blue eyes gleam.

Hypnotizing and playful just like they've always been.

The nerves living in my belly at any given time flutter away. A reaction I should be used to by now after spending half my life as the best friend of the town's unofficial heartthrob. Instead, I'm powerless to stop the fluttering.

I can't squash *any* of the reactions Blake draws out of me—not the racing heartbeat or the stupid little smile my lips spread into when meeting his eyes.

Not the heat that fires up inside me and then burns on the outside, flushing onto my brown skin 'til I'm worried my melanin has *finally* stopped protecting me. That it's blazing to the surface in a hue of golden warmth.

Blake knows me so well, he can take one look at me and notice how flustered I become around him.

The recent moments we've shared haven't helped. From naked dreams to stolen kisses, we've been dancing around each other for days now.

Most women would've dropped their panties for him already (as Mama calls it). They would be riding the Blake Cash freight train all the way to orgasm town if they had a man as handsome and dedicated and caring as he is.

Separated, soon-to-be-divorced, I should be too. I *should* be enjoying every perk my newfound freedom affords me.

Yet, the idea of hopping into bed with Blake... terrifies me.

It's not that I don't trust him. I trust him more than any other living, breathing person on the planet. Not only would he make me feel safe, but

he'd make it his duty to ensure I feel good.

So fucking good.

At age seventeen, Blake had me seizing up in pleasure. More than Ken ever came close to accomplishing. What would Blake do to me as an experienced 28-year-old man?

I shudder at the thought.

I just need to... let go. Stop overthinking. *Stop* living in my insecurities.

Remind myself it wouldn't have to be some heavy, traumatizing experience like it often was with Ken. With Blake it would be... actually pleasurable.

"Did you hear me, Kori?" Blake asks.

I double blink out of my thoughts and hum in answer. "Hmmm?"

"I'm gonna go put a different song on the jukebox. Something Ozzie *doesn't* know the words to. Need anything?"

I wave him off with a reassuring nod I'll be okay. Not a second later, Mick returns with our Dr Peppers. I take one look at the soda he's poured into glasses with ice cubes and then beckon him closer.

"Can you add a shot—or two—of whiskey to this?"

Mick raises his left bushy brow. "So you're trying to have a real good night tonight, eh, sweets?"

I laugh. "I need something to loosen me up."

"If this isn't a reminder you're all grown up now." He takes back my glass of Dr Pepper and browses the wall of liquor bottles.

"Korine McKibbens. How long's it been?"

I recognize the voice immediately. Silver's snagged the stool Blake was once in.

Otherwise known as the Vice President of the Steel Kings, Jeffrey "Silver" Kingman has always been to Tom Cutler what Blake is to Mace. His righthand man that commands respect in the MC. In high school, I had a small crush on Silver in a silly girlish sort of way; something easy to develop

when he was striding around with his shock of silver hair and piercing, dark eyes. He had enough of an edge to feel exciting without crossing into felon territory.

Just like Blake.

In more recent times, from what I've been told, Silver's been MIA as he dealt with a nasty divorce and custody battle. During that time, Mace has been acting Prez while Tom Cutler's been in prison.

I welcome him with rounded eyes and a surprise hum of my throat. "I thought you were on a leave of absence?"

His shoulders, molded by muscle even at his late-forties age, give a shrug. "I had some things to take care of. That happens when your prescription-pill-addicted wife up and takes your kids one day without telling you."

"That sounds... rough."

"No rougher than what I've heard you've got going on," he says, reaching out to clamp a hand to my shoulder like the father figure he is for the club. His brow creases with concern. "Do you have a handle on things, or am I going to have to get involved?"

"I appreciate the concern. But I think... I'm finally starting to be okay."

"You and Cash have been reconnecting from what I hear."

The insinuation gleams in his dark eyes. My skin flushes against my wishes. I swallow another mouthful of my whiskey and Dr Pepper in an attempt at distraction. "We have. Blake's been... amazing. Not that it's a surprise."

"You might not see it. But Cash's made how he feels clear."

I'm on the cusp of asking him to explain when he gestures to something beyond my shoulder.

"You better go interrupt," he says. "Cash looks like he could use a lifeline."

I follow his gesture, peeking over my shoulder to find Blake still at the jukebox. He's in the middle of a conversation with a woman whose wild

chocolate brown mane falls down her back. Her face tinges redder the longer they talk. Tears well up as a warning she's about to cry.

I slide off the bar stool clutching my whiskey and Dr Pepper and wander over. I've never seen the girl a day in my life, and it shouldn't bother me to see him speaking with her, but a kernel of jealousy flares up inside me anyway.

Keeping my expression neutral, I approach at a slow pace, secretly hoping their conversation ends on its own. The closer I get, bits and pieces of their dialogue starts to reach me.

"So that's it? It's over? Just like that? No notice?!" the woman demands in a distraught voice. "I've tried to get over you. I've been seeing somebody new... but you're the one I really want."

"Janessa, there was never anything between us. It was always casual."

Her first tear slips free, sloping down the curve of her cheek. "I should've known you didn't give a damn about me. I've heard how you throw women away like trash when you're done."

"You told me to leave!" Blake snaps, rubbing a frustrated hand over his brow. "Are you forgetting that part or is this some game you're playing?"

"You're an ass, Blake Cash! You know what you did. Saying another woman's name in bed with me!"

"I'm sorry, alright? But, Janessa, there wasn't shit between us—anything you think there was is a figment of your imagination," Blake says, his tone unapologetic. "I've got feelings for somebody else. You're not even in the picture."

Janessa's chin quivers as more emotion pours out of her, then she notices me standing only a few feet away. Her expression contorts from heartbreak to naked scorn. She grits her teeth and points me out. "Is this the girl? Is this the Korine whose name you were moaning?"

My mouth falls open in shock. I wasn't expecting the woman to call me out. Blake immediately cuts in. The hold on his temper evaporates as he

thrusts a finger at the saloon door.

“You need to go. I’m not putting up with your trouble tonight and I damn sure won’t stand for you disrespecting Kori.”

The brunette seems to consider otherwise for the briefest second before she gives up and listens. With a scathing, teary-eyed glare in my direction, she spins on her heel and rushes for the exit.

Blake spends a moment watching her leave as if he’s stalling for time. For what to say to explain what just happened. As he turns around and opens his mouth to begin, I wave it off, feeling silly for my small fit of jealousy.

“You don’t need to explain,” I say. “You’ve always had women throwing themselves at you. And you’re single. Nobody can blame you for taking advantage of that.”

“Kori—”

“Do what you need to do, Blake. If you ever want to bring a girl home and me and Mama are cramping your style —”

“*Korine*,” he growls in interruption. He takes a step closer, encroaching my space, dwarfing me that easily with his height and stature. He grips me by the elbow and holds me so firmly I have no choice but to look up into his serious, jaw-clenched, handsome face. His eyes darken into sapphire stones I can’t blink away from. “I don’t want another fucking girl—what’s so hard about that to understand? You’re the girl. My girl. The *only* one I fucking want to come home to.”

It’s either the whiskey’s slow-rolling effects or my heart finally winning the war, because I can only take in a small breath and feel the skip of my heartbeat. I peer up at him with a part of my lips, very much aware of where the moment’s leading.

Very much wanting it to go on. Never wanting it to end.

His gaze dips to my mouth and his grip tightens on my elbow and time becomes even more relative than it already is. The entire Steel Saloon slows to a crawling pace as Blake draws me toward him and I tilt my face up to

meet him halfway. His lips seal over mine in a kiss that knocks the remainder of my walls asunder.

They come crashing down in a deafening echo inside my chest where they've previously guarded my heart, and inside my head where they protected me against making foolish decisions like kissing my best friend in the middle of a crowded bar room after getting tipsy off whiskey.

After Ken, I should be running for the hills at the prospect of another man in my life.

Yet, as Blake kisses me like he's addicted to my lips, I discover the only thing I want to do is give into him. I want to be selfish and reckless and indulge for once.

Just this once.

Just for tonight.

I lash my tongue with his and earn a deep rumble out of him that in turn makes me shudder. He's slid my drink out of my hands and set it down somewhere only to wrench me even closer, tighter within his possessive arms that lock around me. It's a hold that communicates he's never letting me go.

Everything about the kiss declares this—the lusty pulse that starts up in my veins. The greedy wet flick of his tongue, and the way his mouth torments mine. Right down to the spicy sweet taste we share in that only makes us kiss harder.

So urgently you'd think we were running out of time.

We're standing in the middle of the Steel Saloon without a fuck to give as we lose all restraint. The built-up tension shatters between us and makes way for unfiltered passion that engulfs us in its heat the longer we indulge.

Warmth floods me. Both on the outside and inside as I feel drunker and braver than I've felt in years. I clutch at Blake's v-neck t-shirt and playfully bite at his bottom lip.

“Take me somewhere,” I puff out. I drag my mouth along the chiseled lines of his jaw and then press my nose into his throat where the intoxicating

masculine musk that is Blake Cash and Blake Cash only swarms my senses even more.

As if I weren't drunk enough already.

Blake seems to feel the same. He squeezes my hip and eyes me like he's deciding which part of me to consume first. Taking my hand, he leads us toward the back of the bar. "C'mon. I've got an idea."

BLAKE



“WHERE ARE WE—YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS?”

Korine finishes her question with a tipsy little giggle as I drag her along by the hand. She must’ve snuck a drop or two of alcohol in her drink. I’d tasted whiskey on her tongue when we were kissing and almost questioned if it broke my sobriety—Kori sure as hell left me feeling drunk as fuck afterward.

I’d kissed the hell out of her right in the middle of the bar. Right in front of the whole damn club.

It’s a wonder I was able to control myself at all. Blood rushed straight to my dick and arousal had me about to go fucking insane.

I want Kori so badly, there’s no word that describes it. No word that does this kind of rampant, intense hunger justice.

As I lead her out of the saloon and down the path to the Chop Shop, I’m reminding myself to keep my cool. Keep myself in check to not overwhelm Kori. She’s been fun and flirty all evening, making things even more tortuous between us, but I can tell she’s still got reservations. A lot of things on her mind, turning round and round inside that head of hers.

I can’t say I blame her—what she’s been through would be enough to break most people.

But knowing how that piece of shit treated her only makes my urges for

her stronger. It makes me want to show her how a real man treats his woman. How he appreciates her, worships her, makes her feel so fucking good she's trembling in a puddle of her own orgasm.

Cocky? Territorial? Possessive? Damn straight.

I'm all these things and more when it comes to Kori. I need her to understand if she were my girl, she'd never have to wonder where she stands. She'd never go unsatisfied, and she'd sure as hell never be mistreated.

I'd treat her like she deserves, like the beautiful, talented, addictive queen she is.

The shop door shuts behind us, giving us the privacy we've been searching for. I flick on the lights expecting Korine to have shied away from our earlier transgressions. For her overthinking habit to kick in and make her back off.

I've never been happier to be more wrong—Korine grabs me by the front of my t-shirt and lays a deep kiss on me. As deep as we'd gotten in the saloon where we'd practically been moaning by the time we broke apart.

Fuck, she's got the sweetest, softest lips of any I've ever tasted.

My arousal rushes back in in a roar that sets off inside my chest. I let out a grunt and cup her face, taking control, kissing her to possess her. Show her she's mine regardless of what happens between us tonight.

I tease her and taste her and suck on her. These pouty, full lips of hers that I've spent endless nights remembering the feel of. These lips that I'll never go without again.

I stop holding back and unleash my hunger. It bursts free in a wave that washes over us and pulses in the air.

My hands wander, sweeping down her back and palming her ass. Squeezing her hip and sliding under the hem of her top just to feel her bare skin.

Korine shudders against me as my boldness grows. My desire's too damn intense to turn down now and I snake my hand down the front of her jeans.

Into her panties.

“Blake,” she gasps. She clutches me by the forearms but doesn’t stop my pursuit. More like she’s holding on in hopes it’ll help keep her together.

Too bad I’m out to torture her with as much pleasure as I can.

I let my fingers skim her folds and find the evidence of her arousal—she’s already slick, her pussy radiating a heat that makes my dick throb.

Shit. All that’s for me.

I don’t break from her as I begin walking her backward. She’s so tuned into our kisses she might as well be floating the way she moves so seamlessly with me. I’ve gotten her to check her reservations at the door and give into the moment.

I pick Korine up at the first opportunity I have to lay her down, which just so happens to be backward on the seat of a Dyna Super Glide. I barely let her come up for air before I’m crashing my lips against hers again, working my hands on her jeans.

The second they’re unbuttoned and the zipper’s down, I’m dragging the pair off her. She doesn’t stop me; she helps me, kicking out her legs to push them the rest of the way off her shins. Just the sight of her sitting backward on a Harley in nothing but her top and panties is enough to make me come.

I almost do.

I would if I wasn’t holding out for feeling that pussy choke my dick. Feeling it spasm around me as I make *her* come first.

Kori’s about as tall as the average woman, but damn if her shapely bare legs don’t look a mile fucking long astride either side of the bike. She’s sexy as hell straddling the bike like this. Right down to how her panties offer a maddening view of the outline of her pussy lips.

But just when I think Korine can’t get any sexier, she surprises me yet again—she reaches for the hem of her blouse and pulls it clean off, letting the fabric crumple to the ground. Then she reaches behind herself and unhooks the clasps on her bra. It falls away only to be forgotten like the rest of her

clothes.

If I could still form a thought or a sentence before, I damn sure can't now.

Korine's always been a beautiful girl. From the time we were kids that much was obvious. By the time we were teenagers that was the bane of my existence. Being her best friend while wanting her in every way. Ways she probably would've been overwhelmed by.

But seeing her now, as a woman who's come into her own, who's offering herself to me, is a sight I'll never forget for as long as I live.

Smooth golden-brown skin. Pert tits and dark, pebbled nipples. A toned torso and cinch at the waist. Slim hips and the softest thighs. She's my fantasy come to life.

In front of me with only a thin layer of fabric hiding the tight wet warmth my dick craves.

Ramrod straight, I'm out of patience. My dick's straining against my jeans. My breaths started coming in harsher, in deep heaves.

"Do you have any idea how sexy you look?" I growl, stepping toward her. I drop a kiss on her mouth and fondle her breast. Feel its soft weight in the palm of my hand. Toy with her nipple. "Do you know," I say between more kisses, "how fucking gorgeous you are?"

"Blake—"

"God damn, I want you so much it fucking hurts," I grunt. I claim her mouth for a longer, deeper kiss. My hands slide appreciatively up and down her naked torso, cupping her breasts, stroking her stomach and hips, like I'm making sure she's really here and not some dream.

Then I'm gripping her panties and wrenching those off too. The instant they're off, I'm slipping two fingers into her warmth and flicking my tongue against hers. Korine's pussy pulses around me, slick and hot.

Tight as fuck as I pump my fingers into her, slow and teasing, testing what draws the biggest reaction out of her.

She releases a throaty hum that's desperate. Begging for more. For my

cock.

“Tell me you’re mine,” I demand, resting my brow against hers for a moment. “Tell me you’re my girl.”

She bites her lip, looking as drunk as I feel. “I’m yours, Blake Cash. No matter how long it’s been. Show me that I am.”

“You trust me? You know you’re safe with me, right?”

“Yes,” she breathes. “I trust you... always.”

I feast on her lips. Just as hungry as ever.

Together we undo my belt and work off my denim. I yank my t-shirt over my head. Korine perches her feet on either side of the saddlebag, sliding her hips toward me. My arm encircles her and I drag her the rest of the way home at the same time I thrust forward, driving into her pussy.

Pleasure rushes me, fast and immediate. Mind numbing enough that I grunt out and pause to soak in the tight warmth wrapped around my dick.

Korine’s as suspended in the moment as I am.

She’s braced herself on the motorcycle seat with her hands. Her eyes have rolled back and her ribcage quivers and pokes out from the deep inhale she takes in, like she’s lost all air.

It’s a reunion. A homecoming that’s so intense, it’s left us paralyzed.

Then, as if somebody somewhere’s pressed the resume button, the moment shatters. The urgency crashes back over us.

I fall forward and seize her lips. At the same time, my hips draw back and snap forward. My pulse accelerates, my senses heightened. I’m no longer a sane man. I’m a man losing his mind in the sopping wet pussy of the woman he’s obsessed with.

A pussy that grips tight as I stroke in deeper and feel her walls ripple over me.

God damn, the feeling’s incredible. Indescribable pleasure.

Pleasure that has me grunting and every muscle in my body tensing. Impulse leads my pace. I fuck her faster ’til my stroke’s making her cry out

and I'm gripping her by the throat to silence her with another kiss.

My cock fills her up. Her sopping pussy juices create even more slip. Even more sensation for the nerve endings all over my length. Soon the noises we're producing echo around the bike shop garage—the squelching sounds of hard dick in wet pussy and the pleased moans that follow.

Then I switch up the pace, slowing up, dragging it out. I'm working into her in strokes that are deep and long. But just as intense.

Korine moves with me. Her hips slide along. Her thighs spread wider. She tilts her head up at me and I bend enough to taste her lips.

The ten long years that have gone by stop mattering. It's like no time passed at all. We're as crazy and hungry for each other now as we were as teenagers. The only difference being neither of us is running away this time.

We're here. We're staying.

That's what we tell each other. We're too damn addicted to even think of letting go. She's my best friend and I'm hers and that's never changing.

We've always belonged together even if we didn't always have the courage to face that truth.

“Come for me, Kori,” I growl against her lips. My fingers find her clit and I play with her. Taking my time with my strokes. Making her shudder as I bury myself deep. “Come all over this dick.”

She moans in answer. Another deep shudder works its way through her body as we kiss and I tease the hell out of her. It's like unlocking a secret code—Korine falls apart on the back of the Super Glide. Her walls ripple and then clamp down on me as she does what I asked.

She soaks my dick in her pussy juices.

It's enough to make me give in seconds after her. I groan out my climax, my hips jerking faster. My arms squeeze her hips and thighs as I drag her right up against me and then spill deep inside her soft, wet warmth.

A few minutes, an hour, a year, or a lifetime may pass. I've lost all concept of time, so I've got no damn clue.

All I know is the next time I'm able to draw a clear breath and see straight, Korine's still naked in my arms. She's perched on the bike equally dazed. I kiss her more tenderly, an offering of reassurance in case doubt's settling in.

"That was just the beginning," I tell her. A grin crosses my face. "You know that, right?"

She smiles in return. So damn beautiful with her windswept short hair and post-orgasm dew on her brown skin. "Just make sure you call out the right name."

I chuckle at the dig. "Trust me, Kori. I called out the right name. It was the woman I was with that was wrong."

I drive Korine straight home. Her bottom lip looks distractingly pouty even in the shadows of my truck as I pull up outside the trailer. I lean over and kiss her cheek before gripping her chin and turning her face toward mine.

"Get some rest, Kori," I say, teasing her. Our faces touch and our lips graze. I can practically feel her yearning—she wants me again.

Fuck, I want her so damn bad too.

But I've got business to handle. Tonight's the night we finish our deal with the Barreras. Suddenly, I'm regretting ever setting the date for Christmas night. I had no idea I'd have Kori at home waiting to be my present.

"I'll be back soon, alright?" I stroke her chin, then cheek. I feel the soft curve of it and catch a note of her scent so up close, my pulse quickens. If it were possible to be addicted to another human being, I'm a goner. I can't help touching her, wanting to invade her space in the way that I am.

As I lean in close and we spend time stalling in my truck, I can tell she's feeling the same. Just as lost to addiction.

“You’re going out for trouble, aren’t you?” she whispers.

I pull back. “Korine —”

“Where did you go the other night? You didn’t get back ’til after two a.m...”

“Nowhere.”

“Were you at the saloon?”

“You were asleep when I left.”

“Years of living with a man who put his hands on me meant I never slept soundly,” she says. “I wake easily. Which means I woke up when you snuck out. Where did you go?”

“It doesn’t matter, Kori.”

“Why do you have bruises on your knuckles?”

...’cuz I was beating the shit out of your garbage of an ex-husband...

“Why are you bringing this up now?”

“Because I don’t want you going out in the middle of the night getting in trouble. Come inside with me. I want you.”

The breathiness of her words do something to me. It’s the sexiest fucking sound in the world next to her moans.

How did Stricklin’s dumb ass ever stop appreciating this woman?

It’s become life’s greatest mystery to me.

“I’ll be back. Get some sleep. Promise me.”

Disappointment trickles into her expression. I kiss her again, more aggressively this time, and then unlock the passenger door.

“Go on,” I say. “Get inside. It’s fucking freezing out.”

I make sure Korine disappears inside the trailer. I wait ’til I see her silhouette in the window pass by, telling me she’s gone to the back half where the bedroom and bathroom are. Only when I’m confident she’s inside and getting ready to turn in do I move from my truck to my bike. I put on my gear and then I’m out.

No more than half an hour later, I’m with Ozzie at another bar called the

Zapote located out in the middle of nowhere. A couple miles outside Pulsboro but before other places like Portales and Wheaton. We're seated in a booth waiting on the Barreras to turn up.

Ozzie glances around the rowdy bar blasting Spanish music and then takes a long sip from his Palma beer bottle. "Miguel and his crew sure picked a different location for this deal."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Cash, take a look around you. We're the Whitest guys in this place."

"So... what?"

"So, you forget this bar used to be associated with the Madrigals?"

"Used to," I say. "That was before we took 'em out. The Barreras run what they used to."

"I guess. But maybe next time let's not go to our old enemies hang out spot?"

"This is a one time thing. Our last meet up was a bust."

It's another few minutes before Miguel and his guys turn up.

We go out back to meet them behind the loud bar blaring with music.

"I'm surprised Mace didn't come," Miguel says. The back alley shadows fall over us, almost cloaking us from view. "He tends to prefer being involved for our deals."

"I'm heading it up. You got the order we requested?"

"Every last powdered crumb." Miguel glances over his shoulder at the men to his left and right who hold up the briefcases they're clutching.

We exchange goods. I pay Miguel what we owe and his men hand off the merchandise to Ozzie.

The deal's done as clean, quick and discreet as we initially planned.

Miguel smiles. "It's nice doing business with you. We appreciate that you do so after what you went through with the Madrigals. And it's fortunate you met us in our neck of the woods this time. The local police seem determined to keep a close eye on you."

“You could say that again,” Ozzie says. “They’ve got a fucking hard-on for us.”

“Should you ever need... other services... we provide those. We can be good at making problems go away. For a price, of course.”

“We tend to solve our own problems,” I answer. I beckon Ozzie with a jut of my chin, motioning for us to go. The deal’s done and we’ve got what we need. I’m more than ready to return to Korine, though in the back of my mind, I store Miguel’s offer for future use.

It’s true the Kings take care of our own shit. But if Stricklin and the rest of the Pulsboro PD are watching us too closely, we might need outside forces to make our problems... go away.

KORINE



“FUUCCKKK!” BLAKE GRUNTS, TUCKING HIS FACE INTO THE CROOK OF MY neck. His breath feathers my skin in heavy pants. His hips work their magic, rolling deeper into me, hitting all the right spots. Breaking me apart as he himself comes undone. “Fuck, fuck, fuck... Kori... you’re fucking perfect. You know that right? *Fuucckkk!*”

I’d laugh at the loud storm of expletives if I weren’t panting and writhing along with him. It’s the only thing I can do as his hot, hard length lights me up from the inside. Filling me, sating me, bringing me unseen levels of pleasure.

I clench around him and slide my fingers through his golden hair.

He swears again. Even louder with more grunts that must alert anyone within a mile radius. Neither of us give a damn.

He lifts up to seek my mouth. The kiss is feral, as urgent and needy as his thrusts become. My whole body spasms reaching my climax. My back arches. My thighs quiver. I pant and moan, both of which are greedily silenced by Blake’s lips. His tongue that flicks to mine.

This man seeks to possess me.

As pleasure pulses through me, I realize I’m more than willing to let him.

I’ve never felt so beautiful. So desired. In a way Ken never made me feel. The way Blake touches me, even how he looks at me, is as if he feels

privileged just to be in the same room as me. Let alone *inside* of me.

Blake grabs my thighs and slings them over his hips. He drives into me in harder, faster strokes. Sweat glistens on his skin, the muscles on his tattooed chest a delectable sight. He exudes raw masculine sexuality with every thrust, every grunt as he gropes me and fucks me and then comes in a powerful sweep of pleasure.

For a few seconds, he's suspended in time. He breaks into pieces the way I have. His features tense and then relax. His ropey muscles do the same. I reach for him, yearning for another passionate kiss.

He's still heaving for air as his lips meet mine. His rough palms glide over my naked skin, pausing at places like my hips and breasts. I shudder as he does.

Blake might not realize it, but he's a huge boost to my confidence. His words encourage me. Embolden me. Make me daring enough to explore all the ways we can enjoy each other. Things I've never felt or done with Ken.

A grin slants across his mouth as he leans back for a look at me. "Damn, Kori."

I laugh. "What?!"

"You've got it going on," he teases, squeezing my hip.

It's such an unexpected thing to say, I laugh a second time, even louder. "Blake Cash, were you always this corny?"

"Yes. And you fell for me anyway." He swoops in and drops an affectionate kiss on the side of my neck.

"I was a teen girl. I didn't know better."

He cocks a brow. "What's your excuse now?"

"I guess I still don't know better." He buries his face in my neck for more kisses. These biting. I squirm against him and his revenge games on the exact spot where I'm ticklish. He *would* remember something like that. "Blake! Blake! What are you—okay! Okay, I like it! I swear I do!"

He nips at my neck one final time. His grin goes nowhere when he peers

into my eyes. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“Yeah, uh-huh. Whatever you say.”

“You staying the night?” he asks. Hope deepens his tone.

Since Mama and I moved into our own apartment, Blake’s trailer has become the location for our private time. We set aside a few hours here and there to spend together. The arrangement works a lot smoother than when the three of us were in the trailer.

I shake my head. “Can’t. I don’t like leaving Mama alone overnight.”

Blake doesn’t like my answer though he kisses my brow and tells me he understands.

We see no less of each other as January passes. Between work, our dates and outings on weekends, and our nighttime visits, we find a groove. Though I told Blake I won’t call him my boyfriend ’til I’m officially divorced, it’s what we are.

It’s what those around us recognize us as. Mason and Sydney insist on double dates. Mama taunts me anytime she catches me smiling at something Blake’s said or done. The guys at the shop give Blake shit for being a softy as far as I’m concerned.

Life is better than it’s been in years. I’m happier, more carefree than I can remember feeling in a long time. I’d never felt this way married to Ken.

There’s still a mess to sort through. The divorce proceedings. Mama’s health remains a concern. My finances, despite the help we’ve had from Blake and the MC. I want to save up enough money to be comfortable. So we’ll never have to worry about where to lay our head at night no matter *what* happens.

But with Blake and Mama by my side none of it feels impossible.

What Blake provides for me I do my best to provide for him—moral support and solidarity through difficult times.

He’s been struggling with things he sometimes hides from me. He forgets I know him as well as he knows me, which means I’m able to figure out

what's on his mind even if he tries to hide these things.

Blake's family has always been a source of trauma for him. His parents never gave him the love and care he deserved as a boy growing up. Into adulthood they've continued their bad parenting. They're determined to guilt trip him and make him feel like he's a horrible son.

I'm a listening ear when he finally does confess these things to me. I gently slide my fingers into his golden strands and brush my face to his as we lay in bed in the middle of lazy, sleepy talk.

"You're not a bad son," I say. "You've given them so many chances. It's on them to fix things."

"My mother sure loves telling me I ruined his life."

"It sounds to me like William Cash ruined his own life."

He strokes my naked skin, his eyes linked with mine. "You're biased."

"Maybe," I admit softly, then I kiss him on the mouth. "But I can say from experience any man who puts his hands on his wife and son isn't a good man."

"The guilt weighs on me anyway. I could've stopped what happened."

"He could've too."

"They keep inviting me for family dinner. My mother swears it'll be different."

"You don't have to go alone." I reach for his hand so I can intertwine our fingers between where our bodies lay. "Maybe it can help you. It'll give you some kind of closure."

His eyes twinkle. "You'd do that? You'd come with me?"

"We're best friends, Blake. I go where you go."

He kisses me so deeply, I'm left spinning. My heart flutters in happiness, setting me at ease as we fall asleep.

“You can go ahead. I’ll close up shop,” I say, wiping my wrench free of oil. I toss my rag over my shoulder and walk around to the other side of Daryl Weaver’s Nightster. I’ve been hard at work all day making the upgrades requested. Initially, it seemed like a job that could be completed within the day, but I’ve fallen behind.

Blake leans against the cement wall of the garage. “I’m not leaving you alone to lock up.”

I understand his protectiveness. Though it’s been weeks of radio silence, Ken’s just not the type to let things go easily. He’s the type to strategize and plan, bide his time, wait for the perfect opportunity for revenge.

For punishment...

A lesson I learned repeatedly throughout our marriage.

In recent times, Blake and I have been happy to indulge in our passion and chemistry, but he’s never lost sight of the threat looming. He’s constantly alert as if trouble might pop off any second.

“Are you always this cautious?”

“Sometimes. About things that are special.”

I smirk. “But I’m a big girl, Blake. I carry pepper spray. I can handle it.”

“Didn’t say anything about you not being able to handle it.”

“Then why are you still here?” I pop a hand to my hip, forgetting about the bike for a second.

He pushes off the cement wall and starts toward me. “Cuz I like seeing you work on these bikes. It’s sexy as hell.”

“Sexy?” I snort, looking down my front at my grease-streaked coveralls. “There’s nothing sexy about this.”

“I beg to differ.”

Blake does what Blake always does—with his bright smile and deep blue eyes, he rivets me to the spot. I’m incapable of doing anything but watching as he approaches and then overtakes me. His hand squeezes at my hip and his mouth hovers over mine.

The heat he gives off makes me dizzy. His clean, masculine, soapy smell makes me reel.

I don't stand a chance by the time he kisses me. I'm swept up in a whirlwind of the pleasure his warm lips and large hands give me. His tongue massages mine and his palms travel along my curves in a way that's appreciative.

Just like that, Blake Cash accomplishes the impossible—he's not only made my pussy clench with desire, he's made me feel like the sexiest woman in the world when all I'm wearing are greased up coveralls.

He brings me up against the garage walls. His fingers undo buttons. They push aside the fabric and then the cups of my bra for a knead of my breasts. His mouth kisses its way from mine to the column of my throat.

I gasp out as he lifts me off the ground and holds me to the wall as he tweaks my nipple.

Things move fast. One second I'm clothed in my coveralls. The next, I've been stripped bare and I'm being fucked against the cement wall. All as Blake devours my mouth and feels up whatever part of my body he can.

He groans as he fucks me hard and his thick dick leaves me tingling. Pleasure radiates from my pussy 'til I feel like I might pass out. I cling to him, wrapping my arms around his strapping shoulders, enjoying the ride he gives me. I'm bouncing on his dick and tangling fingers in his golden-brown hair.

I fall pieces with a shudder that has my vision spotty and my toes flexing from behind Blake's back. He keeps fucking me 'til he's good and satisfied. 'Til he's pounded my swollen pussy to his heart's content.

Only then does he come. He pushes me back up against the wall, my legs snug about his waist, and he plants himself deep. I kiss on him as he comes. I lick the shell of his ear and drag my lips along the hard line of his jaw. Eventually, I'm able to bring him back down to earth. His mouth meets mine before he finally sets me on my feet.

My legs shake. I might as well be made of rubber. “That was... well, you see me barely able to stand.”

He grins. So sexy with so much swag. “Told you I begged to differ. Made sure you felt it. How much I want you —”

“Blake,” I laugh.

“Let’s go back to my place. I’m about to eat your pussy like it’s my last meal.”

The crass, dirty words unlock my inner freak. My pussy’s wet and throbbing all over again. I eye him with what must be an intrigued look, because his grin only widens and he grabs my hand. We race from the Chop Shop straight to his trailer.

He keeps his promise—by the end of the evening, my legs are slung over his shoulders and his face is buried between my thighs as he feasts.

I come three times by the time he’s through with me.

Blake blows out a rough breath. “Kori, this is probably a mistake.”

I reach for his hand. “It doesn’t have to be. You won’t know ’til you give it a chance.”

“I have given it chances. It always ends one way. We don’t speak for a reason.”

He spends another moment peering at the weathered house across the street. The Cash family hasn’t taken care of their property—the home’s long overdue for a fresh coat of paint and the grass is brown and patchy. The only tree in the yard died some time ago, standing barren and leafless.

Once upon a time, it’d grown lemons. The same tree Blake had sat in as he watched my family move in.

An unwashed station wagon sits in the drive, streaked with dirt and debris.

If the lights weren't on, I'd assume no one lived here. Compared to the home next door—*my childhood home*—it's night and day.

I give Blake's hand a squeeze. "Ready?"

His deep sigh serves as his answer. His energy's different tonight. It's as worn as the house he used to live in. He's pulled his golden hair into a ponytail, presumably to avoid any comments from his parents, and put on a button-down shirt. An attempt at a good impression he clearly doesn't think is even worth the effort.

We cross the street in step and hand in hand.

Determination beats through me. I'm ready to help in any way I can.

After everything Blake's done for me in recent weeks, being the support he's been, it's the least I can do.

When we reach the doorstep, I lean over and press my finger to the doorbell. Only a weak buzz sounds. It must need to be replaced like many other things on the property. I knock instead.

"Who's pounding on my door?" screeches Mrs. Cash from inside the home.

A slender silhouette bobs behind the sheer curtain until the door's wrenched open and we find ourselves staring at the sixty-something woman.

"Oh," she bleats as if disappointed. "Right. Forgot you were coming. Well, get in here. Don't want the heat to get out."

We step into the tight space littered with old magazines and boxes of things collected over time. Cigarette smoke assaults my sense of smell. I hold in a cough that winds up croaking out of me anyway the next time I go to talk.

It's a question asking if Mrs. Cash needs any help preparing dinner.

She swats a hand at me like you would a bothersome gnat. "It's all good. Just head to the dining room. Bill's waiting."

I feel Blake tense at my side. His solid muscles strain and tauten. His grip on my hand tightens to the point of pain. I slip it out of his grasp to an

apologetic look from him.

We do as Mrs. Cash says and wander into the dining room. Like the other rooms in the home, it's crowded with stacks of years-old magazines and newspapers. The furniture from the tops of the chairs to the cushions and the edges of the table are coated in a layer of dust.

But the man seated in the wheelchair eyeing us like mortal enemies takes up most of our attention. If Blake's father ever possessed even one-tenth the handsomeness of his son, he's long ago lost it. His hair's disheveled and uncombed, a color mix of gold, gray, and white. Deep wrinkles punctuate his skin and jowls sag his face. He's missing teeth and has some of the unfriendliest eyes I've ever seen.

Puzzling since Blake's blue eyes are always sparkling with humor and warmth.

For a long time, he glares and says nothing.

We slide into seats on the far end from where he's situated. The silence speaks a thousand words, telling the history of a family that's been torn and ripped apart and never truly recovered. I place my hand on Blake's thigh under the table to remind him I'm here. I'll see him through this.

"So," Bill rasps at last. "You finally decided to turn up. It's a miracle."

Blake grinds down on his jaw. "I didn't come for trouble."

Bill scoffs. "Didn't come for trouble—you ever lived a day of your life and didn't cause trouble? You might have her fooled but you ain't fooled me."

I meet Bill's loathsome stare. He's never liked me... or my family. One of the many reasons Dad hated that I became friends with Blake. He forbade me from ever going over his house or even interacting with Bill Cash at all.

The man gave off scary and violent vibes even as a child. I more than happily listened.

"Thank you for having us over," I say in my most pleasant tone.

He hacks out a cough. "Yeah, whatever. You think I don't know you

dragged him here? He ain't wanna be here. He ain't been here for years.”

“You shouldn't wonder why,” Blake snaps, his teeth gritted.

“Mouthing off 'cuz you think you're some big shot. 'Cuz them tables have turned, eh? You're a man now and your father's in a chair—you think that makes you better?”

“Bill.”

Mrs. Cash returns clutching a casserole dish. Her tone's stern but still deferential. Almost a tone I'd take with Ken if I were ever bold enough to scold him. She sets the casserole dish down in the middle of the table and mentions she worked on it all afternoon.

“John Wayne casserole,” she announces with a rare proud smile. “You remember, Blake.”

“Yeah, how shitty it was,” Blake mutters under his breath, so quietly, only I hear him.

But as we each take a plate and pile some of the casserole on, I discover Blake's right. The casserole tastes like dog food—mushy veggies with grainy ground beef and gooey cheddar cheese that somehow makes it taste even worse.

I'm barely able to get a few polite forkfuls down before I have to stop altogether and focus on drinking the iced tea that's been provided.

To her credit, Mrs. Cash attempts keeping things civil. She talks about the recipe she's used for her casserole and then rambles on about how there's yard work that needs to get done. The hint being that she'd like Blake to do it.

When that falls on deaf ears, she goes into asking me questions.

“Didn't realize you were back in town,” she says. “Well, not 'til I found out your husband is a police officer for Pulsboro PD.”

A beat of uncertain silence follows, where I'm lost about how to even reply. The sour expression on Mrs. Cash's face tells me her comment was a slight. I am—I was—a married woman, who's currently attending this dinner

with her son.

I set down my glass of iced tea and answer with calm indifference. “He is a police officer. However, we’re no longer together.”

“I bet.” She flashes plaque-riddled, stained teeth in what’s supposed to be a smile.

“It’s none of your business. Don’t speak on it,” Blake grits out.

“None of my business? You’re in my home.”

“That can easily be fixed. I didn’t want to be here.”

“See,” Bill grunts. “Still the same disrespectful shithead he’s always been. Told you, Martha. Shouldn’t have even bothered inviting him. He doesn’t give a fuck about anybody but himself.” The bitter man turns to me, one of his eyes bulging larger than the other. “You know what he did? Do you *really* know? Or did he tell you the clean version?”

Martha’s brows knit and she warbles out, “Bill —”

“Shut up,” he snaps. He’s focused on me. His attention the kind that’s unnerving. “Did my dear ol’ son tell you all about how he ruined my life? I’m in this chair ’cuz of him!”

“ENOUGH!” Blake roars, rising to his feet. Strands of hair have begun to slip from his ponytail and his face reddens with anger. His neck thickens, each swallow a hard bob of his Adam’s apple. “I don’t need this shit. I never wanted to come here. I’d be fine if I never spoke to you people another day in my life!”

“Then get the fuck out!” Bill yells, spittle flying. “Just like I told you when you were sixteen. Good for nothing piece of shit you are!”

My heart’s pounding fast as the scene explodes before me. The animosity between the father and son chokes the air, making it impossible to breathe. I stand at Blake’s side. My hand goes for his, but he denies me. He’s rounding on his heel and striding for the door.

I don’t bother addressing Mr. and Mrs. Cash as I hurry after him.

The screen door flaps shut in my face. Blake’s strode so far ahead of me,

the door shut before I could reach him. I sprint across the lawn and then the empty street to catch up.

The pulse of rage has followed Blake from inside the house to outside. He flings open the door to his truck and jumps in almost as if he's forgotten I'm with him.

"Blake!" I pant. I scramble to climb into the passenger side. "Wait."

He sits for a moment, scarily silent, processing what just happened. Then he slams his palm into his steering wheel. Once isn't enough and he goes back for seconds and thirds 'til he's grunting and the horn gives a bleat.

"Blake!" I gasp again. I reach for his arm to try to stop him. "It doesn't matter what they —"

"Don't touch me!" he growls. "Don't say a fucking word, Kori! I don't want to hear it."

Shocked by the roughness in his voice, I fall silent. My heart's still hammering inside my chest. My adrenaline's as kicked up as his. The only difference being I'm worried, whereas he's twitching, seething with anger.

Blake starts up the truck and pulls away from the curb so fast the tires screech.

"Where are we going?"

"Home. Your apartment. I'm dropping you off."

"Then where are you—Blake, will you just calm down?"

"Not now, Kori. I don't want to talk. Not even to you."

Fear pricks me in a cold chill that spreads goosebumps on my skin. A Blake I'd hope I'd never see again is emerging—reckless and short-tempered and unpredictable. The Blake he'd been when I'd shook my head in disappointment and gone away to college.

I'd hoped he'd grown out of it...

Blake slams on the brakes outside my apartment building. His silence communicates he's waiting for me to get out.

I unclick my seatbelt slowly. I'm stalling. "You should come up. I'll..."

I'll make you something. A real dinner since we didn't —”

“Kori, you better go.”

“I don't think you should be alone right now. Please come up with me. Mama would love to see you.”

“Go.” He won't look at me. Instead he glares straight ahead at the road that's to come. The muscles in his throat work with every swallow, his jaw's tighter than I've ever seen it.

I frown, on the brink of tears. “I'm so sorry. If I knew it would be like this —”

“Kori. Get out.”

Hopping out of the truck, I barely have enough time to stand back before he's gunning it. His truck jets off and spins sharply around the next street corner.

Instantly out of view. So far out of my reach.

BLAKE



I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE THE FUCK I'M GOING. BUT AFTER I GO HOME AND trade out my truck for my bike, I drive for miles and miles. Flurries start up and slick the roads. The night darkens, growing harsher and more isolating. I push on anyway, riding through the biting wind that numbs my skin. Even with a bandanna draped across my face, the cold's brutal.

I drive so far, I go straight out of town. I drive without seeing the present before me. My mind's taken a deep dive into the past.

The saloon's wilder than it's ever been. Our biggest night of celebration in years let some of the older guys tell it.

Tom Cutler holds up his beer bottle and the rest of the Kings in the bar room follow suit. We raise our beers up and toast to our latest win for the club. We've successfully assassinated a key member in the Madrigal cartel that's been causing us trouble.

The party goes on for hours. Some guys get so drunk they can't see straight. They're collapsing on the bar floor like it's their bed at home. The club girls gyrate on the pool table and then wind up making out to hoots and hollers from the guys; they do a lot more than that once the guys get tired of watching and want in on the action.

A couple brawls break out. Belligerent fights that have a couple fists thrown before the score's settled or it's broken up by somebody slightly less

fucked up.

Not that I'm any better. The room's started turning hazy.

I swagger over to the counter where there's a shot of whiskey waiting for me. Mace, Ozzie, and a couple of the others already have theirs. I pick up mine and toss it back with them. The burn feels so fucking good in the best way.

A refreshed sigh leaves me, then I wash it down with another swig of beer. Two club girls have cornered Mace, rubbing their asses on him. Ozzie's climbed up on the bar counter and started screaming about breaking into the town zoo. Nobody takes him up on his offer.

I set down my empty beer bottle and squint at the rest of the saloon in search of the back door. I'm too fucked up to ride my Street Bob home. I can barely stand straight, swaying in place. Hope Mace doesn't mind if I crash at his house for the night...

Only when the fluorescent lights of a gas station emerge do I brake. I park my bike at one of the pumps, pulling off my helmet and releasing what feels like my first breath in years. The one I've been holding in from the moment I turned up at Mom and Bill's house. It wipes clean of my lungs, but instead of feeling relief, I feel... *empty*.

Nothing new. Nothing I haven't felt before.

The cold isn't what's numbed me. It's the deep pit that's existed inside me since I was a small boy.

An emptiness that's fucking excruciating to the point I'll do anything to make it stop. I'll do anything to feel something good.

I rise up off my bike and follow the bright lights guiding me into the convenience store. The gas station's deserted, not a single other car or motorist anywhere—why would there be minutes before midnight?

The clerk doesn't bother looking up when I enter. The store's as vacant as the parking lot and gas pumps outside. My boots clack with every footstep that takes me nearer to the back of the store. A whole aisle stocked with cases

of beer and bottles of alcohol for any occasion. I stop in front of the selection of whiskey, a buzzing noise starting up in my ears.

My fingers twitch. My heart pounds away. A cool sweat breaks out over my skin, and I edge closer like I'm in the presence of an old friend.

It is an old friend—the kind that understands me no matter what and makes me feel fucking good. It makes me forget.

I husk out a rough breath, shoving my fingers into my hair. The itch comes on so strong, it's all I can do to stand here and keep my hands to myself. It'd be so damn easy to reach out and scratch. Do what I've done so many times in the past and give in.

Before I know what's hit me, I'm blacking out. I'm gripping the handle of a bottle of whiskey and striding toward the counter. I don't wait for the clerk to ring me up. My money's slammed on the counter as I walk out into the shivering cold.

I mount my bike, twist off the cap, and stare into the amber contents of the bottle. The scene's transformed into some warped nightmare where I'm powerless to stop myself. The urge is too fucking strong. *I'm* too fucking weak.

I blink back the moisture in my eyes and bring the bottle to my lips with a hand that shakes.

The whiskey slips past my lips. Poisonous fire that torches my throat and infects my system. A single swallow that undoes years of dedication.

Years of trying to change. Years of doing better. Being the man I've always wanted to be.

The burning liquid slides down my throat and leaves me with a worse feeling than the emptiness I was trying to fill.

The gut punch of realizing what I've done. Followed by a dull ache of regret.

I don't feel any better. I feel a hundred times worse.

The door to the back exit of the bar's only a couple steps away. Then I've

gotta make it across the patio and rock pit and I'll be home free. Is Velma home to let me in? Why the fuck's it so hot in here?!

I take a couple staggering footsteps toward the backdoor. The room's started spinning. Walking becomes a difficult task, like the floor beneath me's shifting.

"CASH!"

My name's bellowed at the top of Bill's lungs. A slur even though it's deafeningly loud.

In a feat that's truly impressive, he's managed to out-drink just about everybody in this bar. Including me.

I turn around to find him stumbling in my direction.

"Where the... where you think... hic... you're going, eh?"

He jabs a finger into my chest and thrusts his keys into my hands.

I clench my eyes shut and grit my teeth trying to hold it in. Push down the emotion that's quickly swelling up inside me. But it's no use—it explodes out of me in a roar that must echo for miles in the cold dark of the night.

I toss the bottle of whiskey. The glass shatters some feet off into dozens of jagged pieces.

Running my fingers through my hair, I'm gusting out heavy breaths that make me feel like my heart might bust out of my chest. I can't say whether I'm relieved the bottle's destroyed or if I'm frustrated that I let it get this far. I made such a stupid fucking mistake all because Mom and Bill got under my skin.

Go home, Blake. Go the fuck home. Sleep this away.

I breathe through another explosive urge to destroy something and focus on starting my bike. It rumbles to life and then I'm off, blasting into the night, getting as far as I fucking can. My steel horse takes me away 'til it feels like I'm outgunning the itch that had begged to be scratched.

If I just make it home. If I can just hold on to another day.

Day one.

Starting from the bottom all over again. But if I make it through the night, then I can make it to day two. Day three. Day four and all the days to come after it.

I know I can. I won't fucking give up.

I glare at the dark road up ahead, my grip on the handles of my bike tight. Thoughts of Korine run through my mind. Just the memory of her beautiful smile and soft touch are enough to keep me straight—I've got to be the man she deserves.

At times, the pressures too much than I can bear, but I've got to try.

I can't do what I always do. I can't fuck this up.

"Bill," I say, shaking my head. My hair's in my face. The room's sweltering. The keys feel wrong even being in the palm of my hands. "I can't..."

"Drive. It's a couple... hic... couple blocks."

We wind up outside the saloon. Nothing's straight. Nothing's clear.

The night air feels cool against my skin. Finally relief from the oven that the saloon became.

Bill fumbles over to his truck and slaps a hand to the hood. He's red-faced, reeking of the liquor he's been drinking since morning. "Get in. Take me home."

"Nah. It's not... we can't..."

"FINE. Then," he hiccups, snatching the keys. "Then I'll do it."

A couple blocks into crossing the town border, the dark and deserted landscape changes. Out of the blackness comes flashing red and blue lights. The whir of a siren closing in from behind me. I check my mirrors to verify something I already know.

I'm being pulled over.

"Bill!" I yell as the truck starts up and I scramble for the passenger door.

I hop in as he slams on the gas. The truck lurches forward, swinging out of the lot, damn near nicking one of the parked cars.

Bill swerves left and right. His foot never lets up off the gas.

We're veering across the road... into the wrong lane...

I reach over and try to steer him back. Try to course correct, but he jerks the wheel again and the truck feels like it's spinning. It's careening out of control.

We're headed straight for the trees lining the road.

The earsplitting crack of metal against wood echoes in my ears as police lights flash before my eyes. I tear my gaze off my mirror and pull over to the side as expected.

And though it could be any police officer from the Pulsboro PD, I already know who it is before he even gets out of the car and walks up to my bike.

Both car doors swing open. Korine's piece of shit ex-husband steps out on one side. His partner gets out on the other.

Tension shoots to my jaw and I mutter, "*Fuck.*"

Fuck is right. This ain't about to end well.

BLAKE



“LOOK WHAT WE’VE GOT HERE, STRICKLIN,” DRAWLS THE POT-BELLIED officer that’s serving as his sidekick for the night. “Didn’t you say one of those bikers took your wife? This was the one, right?”

Stricklin gives nothing away. He’s got a neutral expression and giant shades concealing his eyes despite the fact that it’s pitch-black outside. He might even still be sporting a cut or two from my beatdown. I’d fucked him up bad enough.

He strides up on my left and clicks on a flashlight he shines into my retinas. Ignoring his partner’s question, he speaks to me in a matter-of-fact tone as if he doesn’t hate my guts.

As if this stop ain’t by design.

“This a nice bike you’ve got there,” he says slowly. He drags the flashlight along the length of my FXDB Street Bob, then returns the bright light to my face. “This bike wouldn’t be stolen, would it?”

I grit my teeth. “You know it’s not fucking stolen —”

“Language,” he interrupts sharply. “It would do you well to show some respect. License and registration.”

“What kind of game are you playing? I haven’t broken any fucking laws!”

“License and registration,” he repeats in a calm tone that’s of warning.

“You would do well to follow instructions... or things might not end well for you. But, trust me, it would be deserved.”

His partner on my other side draws my attention. His hand grips his belt where his arsenal of weapons is readily available—his baton, his pepper spray, and his taser. The Glock 17 that rests against his hip.

One thing’s clear.

I’m fucked.

They’re looking for a reason. We’re out in the middle of the night on a dead road. They’ve got all the power; they hold all the cards.

Whatever happens is whatever they *want* to happen.

Revenge for Kori leaving him. Revenge against me for being her sanctuary.

For what happened weeks ago when I broke in and beat the shit out of him.

I half rise up over my seat to pull out my wallet and produce the requested items. Stricklin snatches them out of my hands and drops his bright light onto them. You’d think I’d produced counterfeits the way he studies them, clearly searching for some *gotcha*.

“Where were you headed?”

The corner of my mouth lifts up. “I don’t have to answer that.”

“Where were you coming from?”

“I don’t have to answer that either.”

Stricklin looks up at his partner, whose name is Coates according to his badge. They give each other a nod, confirming they’re on the same page.

“I’m going to have to ask you to step off the bike.”

“I’m not getting off my bike,” I say, defiance dripping off me. In my tone. In the challenging look I give them and my relaxed posture as I sit on the bike.

“You have been instructed to get off your motorcycle. Failure to comply will be met with necessary force.” Stricklin unhooks his baton, holding the

long stick at his side. He thrusts his boot out and kicks at my bike. “If you knew what was good for you, Mr. Cash, you’d recognize my authority.”

“Don’t fucking touch my bike!”

Stricklin glances over to Coates, who grins wide and takes his turn. He punts his boot into the side of my bike as if daring me to react.

I rise off my seat with fury in my glare. “I said don’t fucking touch my bike—and give me back my license and registration!”

As I swipe at Stricklin to snatch it back, he reacts with a defensive block and then submission hold. I go from hovering over my bike trying to grab my things back to being dragged halfway off, locked into the grip of him.

“GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME!” I roar. My temper snaps. My control vanishes. All the fury I’ve been holding in unleashes at once.

I maneuver out of Stricklin’s hold and throw my fist at him. My knuckles collide with his jaw. Coates comes up from behind, wrapping his arms around my front and squeezing his baton into my throat. My air’s immediately cut off, the hard stick digging right into my esophagus. I scabble at his hands and the baton, but it’s no use. He’s got the jump on me and he’s out of reach, choking me out from behind.

Stricklin’s straightened from the right hook he took to the face. He stretches open his jaw, his tongue poking around inside his mouth as if checking for loose teeth. Then he steps up to where Coates has me grunting and sputtering for air and he slams a fist into my stomach.

Things only tumble more out of control from there.

Stricklin drives his knee into me next. All while Coates still has me choking from the baton. I’m grabbed by a fistful of my hair and tossed to the wet asphalt. Before I can even think of getting up—I’m coughing, trying to catch my breath and shake the dizziness away—the two start kicking the shit out of me.

Both of them at the same time. Coates from one side. Stricklin from the other. The baton rains down on me. The hard plastic stick cracks over my

head in a burst of pain. I howl into the cold night air as my body twists and jerks on the ground. Coates lands a combination of punishing kicks to my ribs with the steel-toe end of his boot, showing no signs of slowing down.

“We tried to warn you! This is what happens when you disobey authority,” Stricklin pants, slamming down his baton again. He’s lost his shades. There’s a manic gleam in his eyes, a thirst to do harm. Wreck something. That something being me in this moment. Was this how he looked when he lost control and put his hands on Kori?

I spit out blood and grunt out my defiance. “Fuck you! *ARGH!*”

Coates drives his steel-toe boot into me that much harder.

“Get up, get the fuck up!” Stricklin barks. He’s fisted his hand in my hair again as he forces me up and then forcefully walks me toward their squad car.

I’m all kinds of fucked up—blood leaks from my mouth and my vision’s blurred. I’m limping and my side throbs, begging for medical attention. But I don’t go down without a fight. I jerk against him and attempt to throw a punch or two.

My arms are subdued and my head’s slammed down onto the hood of the car. Inside my skull, it feels like my brain rattles. If I wasn’t able to see straight before, I sure as hell can’t now. The ground beneath my feet feels like it’s giving out, and I’m barely lucid.

Stricklin twists my arms behind my back and slaps cuffs on me. “You are under arrest, Blake Cash. For driving eighty in a forty-five zone. For driving without a license and registration. For assaulting a police officer.”

The grunts that tear from my throat sound like gibberish even to my ears. Muffled from my swollen jaw and inability to think straight. But what I mean to do is yell at the fucker that he’s a lying piece of shit. I handed him my license and registration and I wasn’t going eighty.

I *did* assault him, but the piece of shit deserved it.

Even as they’re placing me under arrest, I’m jerking against them. I’m putting up a fight.

“Add resisting arrest,” Coates says.

“Still not good enough. I know. Driving under the influence,” Stricklin says. A sick glee poisons his voice. He grips me tight by my cuffed wrists, then leans closer to growl in my ear. “I know it was you who attacked me. Imagine my surprise when we saw you earlier. You were at the gas station—you bought some whiskey and chugged the whole bottle.”

“MOTHERFUCKER!” I scream. It’s all I can manage.

“Coates. Hold him down.”

Coates takes over as Stricklin goes to retrieve something from the inside of the patrol car. He returns holding a bottle of whiskey. The same exact brand, the same exact type I’d bought just an hour ago.

Suddenly, even through the throbbing pain and fogginess in my brain, I understand what’s about to happen. How they’re going to fuck up everything.

Coates pins me against the car as Stricklin grabs my jaw and pours the whiskey down my throat.

I scream.

I scream so fucking loud, so fucking hard, my vocal cords strain and ache and eventually give out. The gut-wrenching sound of horror that matches the black void of the night. Nobody’s around to hear the tortuous sound except for me.

Nobody’ll ever know. They damn sure won’t believe me.

Stricklin’s panting in excitement by the time he’s emptied the bottle. Half of it washed over me. The other half slid down my throat.

“I warned you,” he says with a dark laugh. “I told you to stay the fuck away from my wife. But you refused to listen. I’m going to make sure you go away for a long, long time, Mr. Cash. Then I’m going to bring Kor back home—and I’m going to make *her* pay. I’m going to make every moment of hers a living hell and you won’t be around to do anything about it. I can already hear her cries. Makes me hard just thinking about it.”

“MOTHERFUC—”

Coates smashes me over the head with the baton and ushers in a fresh wave of dizziness. Stars dance in front my eyes as I grunt and then finally give into the torment.

My body loses all fight and everything around me wipes out.

KORINE



IT'S AFTER THREE A.M. WHEN MY IPHONE VIBRATES ON THE NIGHTSTAND NEXT to my bed. I roll over, half wondering if I'm dreaming or if someone's really calling me this late.

"Hello..." I mumble, my voice raspy with sleep.

"This is a collect call from the Pulsboro Police Department. To accept the call, please press one."

I'm stuck on words like Pulsboro Police Department and collect call. Who would possibly be calling me this late from the police station? Is this Ken's latest scheme to make me pay? Is he making another attempt to beg me to come home?

He's never used his work number for our personal affairs before...

I press one on my keypad. The line clicks as I'm transferred over and then rings in my ear. The person on the other end comes on and leaves me even more speechless than I already am.

"Kori," Blake says, his voice gruffer than usual. "Are you there?"

A second ticks by. I can only clutch the phone to my ear and stare at the dark shapes in my bedroom.

Blake's calling me from the police station?! Am I dreaming?!

A breath falters out of me before I remember how to speak. "Blake, what's going on? Why are you calling me collect?"

“Long story.” He sounds exhausted. Worn down as if he’s been through so much. “Kori... I need you to get a hold of Mace. He’ll need to bail me out.”

“Bail you out—you’ve been arrested? How? Why? Are you okay?”

“I tried calling him,” he goes on, ignoring my questions. “But he didn’t answer. He’s probably knocked out this time of night. I only get three calls. Kori, this is important. You need to get a hold of Mace.”

The phone slips into the crook of my neck. I’ve jumped out of bed and rushed over to my closet to throw on some real clothes.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be there soon,” I say, trying to keep calm. My hands tremble and my foot refuses to cooperate sliding into my snow boot.

“Kori, I don’t want you showing up to the station —”

“I’ll get a hold of Mason. Blake, be careful.”

I hang up on him before he can scold me anymore. It doesn’t occur to me ’til I’ve grabbed my purse and rushed out of my bedroom that I don’t have Mason’s number. Why didn’t I think to ask?!

“Damn it.”

After a quick check on Mama to ensure she’s okay, I look up the local taxi company. It’s so late it wouldn’t be surprising if they’ve already stopped their service for the night. A moody man answers with the rasp of a chain-smoker.

“We’re about to close for the night,” he grunts. “No more pickups.”

“Please! I’ll pay double the fare.”

He agrees after giving my offer some consideration. Within twenty minutes, I’m seated in the backseat of a dented up taxi that takes me a couple miles down to the Steel Saloon. The grumpy taxi driver blasts off the second I’m stepping out of his car, exhaust fumes clouding the dark scene.

The lights in the saloon are out. Not a peep can be heard from inside. Even the MC has closed down for the night.

I sprint toward the house in the back. Mason lives there with Sydney.

They'll have to hear me banging on their door.

It takes a few tries, but after I pound my fist on their door, I pick up movement on the inside. A curtain in one of the second floor windows sways. Footsteps pad from the opposite side of the door. A pause goes by—presumably as the peep hole's checked—and then the door's yanked open.

Mason's standing before me, shirtless in a pair of sweatpants. A pistol is casually held at his left side. His brows snap together, eyes narrowing. They give me a once-over, and I realize what he's doing a second later.

He's checking if I've turned up on his doorstep injured.

"I'm fine," I clarify. "I'm not hurt. It's Blake. He's been arrested. He needs us to come get him."

Sydney walks up behind Mason in a sleep shirt, her mouth stretched open in a deep yawn. The sleepiness wipes out of her expression the second she realizes it's me at the door. Then she's stepping closer, wedging herself into the doorway as if she's about to ask me if I'm okay.

"Arrested," Mason repeats, then shakes his head. "For what?"

"He didn't say. He told me to get you. We have to go, Mason. Something tells me Ken's involved."

"I'll throw something on and head over."

"I'll come with you," I say.

"Me too," adds Sydney.

Mason gives us stern looks. "You two stay here. I'll handle it."

Sydney puts her hands on her hips. "I'm coming. The last thing we need is you losing your temper too and winding up in a cell next to Cash. The more of us show up, the better. The less they'll be able to pull anything."

"I'm going to bail out Blake with or without your help," I say with equal defiance. "I'm not letting Ken abuse his power by punishing Blake to get to me."

The hard look Mason gives the both of us speaks volumes. He's not happy with the idea of us tagging along, but he recognizes we won't give up.

It's better if he keeps us with him to avoid the headache of us going rogue.

"Alright," he grits out. "But you stay quiet and follow my lead. You want to talk about corruption, we don't know what the fuck we could be walking into. What they might try to pull on any of us."

An icy shudder runs through me. It wouldn't be above Ken to turn his ire on me. Even when acting in an official capacity. Just a few weeks ago, he'd stopped me on the side of the rode and almost...

...I don't know what he'd planned to do that afternoon.

Sydney and I squeeze into the front seat of the pickup truck Mason's driving.

"Tom's truck," he says, a hint of bitterness in his voice. "Guess something of his finally serves a use."

For the rest of the drive to the police station, we're silent. My heart and mind race each other—panicked thoughts and thumps that torture me all at once.

Blake had sounded exhausted. Maybe unwell. What had they done to him? What has *Ken* done?

I blink away the tears in my eyes, cursing the moment I ever got him involved in my problems.

Sydney notices I'm tearing up and puts her arm around me. "We'll get it figured out," she says. "Mace will get him out."

Three and a half hours later, morning breaks across the sky outside. Birds twitter from trees and power lines. Any snow flurries from last night begin melting into sludge on the ground.

And we're still stuck in the lobby of the Pulsboro PD. I'm seated in a hard-backed plastic chair next to Sydney. The two of us have nodded off, shoulder to shoulder, our heads resting against each other.

Mason's paid the bail, but the officer that was helping him—Ken's partner, Coates—was dragging his feet on releasing Blake. He claimed there was a mountain of paperwork that needed to be completed.

I had arrived alert and on edge, fraught with nerves at the prospect of an encounter with Ken. He was nowhere in sight. As far as we can tell, he's not around at all. Which only prompts more questions, like what could Blake have done to get arrested if Ken wasn't involved?

I jerk awake, sensing someone's presence. Mason's walked over from where he's been dealing with Coates at the front desk. At my side, Sydney does the same, rubbing her eyes.

"They'll be releasing him," he says, his hands deep in the pockets of his bomber jacket. "Should be another twenty, thirty minutes."

"Did they say what the charges were?" Sydney asks.

"Where to start? There's a whole list of 'em. Assaulting a police officer. Resisting arrest. Driving without a license and registration. Driving under the influence." Mason meets my gaze at the last one, exchanging a concerned look with me.

I sigh, my head throbbing. "Excuse me. I need to use the restroom."

The second the door flaps shut behind me, I rush to the sink to splash water on my face. The panic buzzing through me only intensifies. Earlier I'd been concerned, but I'd assumed whatever he was arrested for was minor.

The reality couldn't be further from what I'd hoped. Blake will be lucky if he's let off with a year of time in jail, no way he's walking away serving no time at all.

"Fuck," I whisper. My breath gasps out of me, a hand coming up to clutch my chest. "Breathe. It'll be okay. It has to be... doesn't it?"

I don't know the answer anymore.

But I do know this is all my fault. I should've never pushed Blake into attending his family dinner. It couldn't have been a worse idea. He must've spiraled after he dropped me off. He hadn't been in a good place at all.

The door swings open and I look up in the mirror expecting the only other woman in the building, Sydney.

My scream catches in my throat. My insides clench into painful knots where fear takes root. A kind of fear so deep, so traumatic, I can do nothing but clam up like I'm hoping to become invisible.

"Ken," I choke out. "Please..."

He's leaning into the door, blocking any exit. Dark circles ring his eyes. His skin's ghostly pale and slicked with sweat. Hair disheveled and uniform wrinkled. He's never looked... more unsettling. There's a madness gleaming off him. More than his usual rage and violence. It's an instability that's unpredictable and volatile.

"Save it, Kor," he says. "What's done is done. You had to go and disobey me. You had to go run off with your biker. Do you realize you've ruined his life? Do you realize what's about to happen to him? He's going away. I'll make sure of it."

I shake my head, so horrified my throat aches. "Please... Ken... he has nothing to do with this."

"I'd say fucking my wife has everything to do with this," he snarls. His face darkens with rage. "God, look at you. You disgust me, Kor. Nothing but a biker's filthy whore. You should kiss the ground I walk on—you would be lucky if I ever took you back. You'd pay for it. You'd suffer for what you've done. You know that, right?"

My hands reach behind me to grip the porcelain sink basin. It's the only way to keep from quaking on the spot, forcing my body still. A poisonous dark energy has invaded the small space, consuming me whole, pulling at me like an unstoppable force—the control Ken has had over me, and in some sick way, *continues* to have over me.

"If you come home, it all stops," Ken says. "The charges will be dropped. He'll be a free man."

"Ken—"

“But if you don’t, let’s just say things are about to get a whole lot worse for you. Your biker boy toy will be behind bars. You will be penniless and on the street. Who knows? Sunny might have an unfortunate accident.”

My brows knit. I snap back at once. “Don’t you go near my mother!”

Ken grins. “Last chance, Kor. Come home, face your punishment like a big girl, or learn just how much I can take from you. Your choice.”

The door flies open as he steps out without waiting for my answer. It doesn’t matter if he’s gone—the gravity of his ultimatum remains.

KORINE



KEN'S WARNING STAYS ON MY MIND FOR DAYS. IT REMAINS AN UNSPOKEN threat that I keep to myself. One I analyze from every conceivable angle. He could've been bluffing, trying his hardest to make me fearful and paranoid. His delusion could've had him believing he's more powerful than he actually is in thinking he could ensure Blake's imprisonment.

Or... or he could've been serious. He could've been as confident as he was because he really is capable of wreaking such havoc on our lives.

The many different possibilities wear on me. Try as I might to keep it from bleeding through, others pick up on my different behavior.

"How are you dealing with everything?" Sydney asks one afternoon. It's only a few days since we bailed Blake out of jail and Ken issued his threat; the first time I've been around Sydney since we left the station discussing how we'll move forward in light of Blake's new legal troubles. She finds me in the garage of the Chop Shop making some custom modifications on an Electra Glide for Tito.

I look up, wiping my hands on a rag, and give a shrug. "If you mean all these last minute jobs that have come in... I'm managing. Chaz and Moss have been a big help. We haven't even hit our busy season yet. So, should be interesting."

"I meant personally," Sydney says. She wanders over to the Electra Glide

and runs a hand along its sparkling midnight blue cowl up front. “You seem like you’ve become more withdrawn.”

“You know this how?”

“We don’t know each other well,” she admits with a side tilt of her head. “But... I don’t know. Call it women’s intuition. I can pick up on things sometimes. Even from other women. It just seems... you’ve got a lot on your mind.”

“If you knew the half of it,” I mutter.

“So tell me. Over drinks?”

It takes me a second to decide, but I wind up taking Sydney up on her offer. In no more than fifteen minutes, we’re perched on stools at the saloon’s bar counter with Mick pouring us drinks called cherry bombs.

“For the beautiful ladies,” Mick says, sliding the two glasses toward us.

I smile and reach for my wallet, but the seasoned bartender waves me off.

“Don’t even dream of it, sweets. On the house. You two are much easier on the eyes than the usual Kings crowding the place up.” He winks at us before he returns to wiping down the rest of the counter.

Sydney turns to me on her stool. “Leave it to Mick to flirt with some of his only female customers.”

We sample our drinks and find them bearable, even tasty after a few sips as a burst of sweet cherry pairs nicely with the spice of the whiskey. I go for an extra sip to prepare myself for divulging what’s been on my mind.

“This’ll stay between us?”

“In the vault,” she says.

I sigh, worn down by the mere thought of Ken’s threat. “I didn’t say anything... but I saw him at the police station.”

“Stricklin?!”

“Shhh,” I hush, glancing around the saloon. “He came into the restroom when I was in there.”

“And you didn’t tell Mace or Cash? Korine —”

“A fight would’ve broken out,” I interrupt. “Don’t say it wouldn’t have when we both know it would’ve.”

“If he was in there hurting you —”

“He didn’t lay a finger on me. It was one of our more... civil exchanges. Which says a lot considering Ken was still threatening me. He swears he’ll make the charges against Blake stick if I insist on being with him. He’ll make sure Blake winds up behind bars.”

Sydney’s brows jerk together. “Would he even be able to pull that off?”

“I’ve gone in circles about it. Everything from he’s bluffing to he’s serious and will make it happen. I’ve landed on putting nothing past him. He... he even insinuated my mother would have an accident.”

“You need to tell Cash.”

I swallow more of the cherry bomb as a distraction. “I tell Blake, he’ll refuse to back down from Ken. It’ll lead to more trouble. He has enough problems right now.”

“Korine, he would want to know. Mace would want to know.”

“You promised you wouldn’t say a word.”

“And I won’t,” she says, though her tight expression holds tension. “But I just think Stricklin’s proven to be dangerous. He could try anything.”

A sigh blows out of me. “I’ll think about it. I promise I will.”

“I feel that’s as good as I’m going to get out of you for now.”

“Maybe you do already know me well,” I say, giving off a snarky laugh. “How’s your friend doing? The one that was missing? Have they found her yet?”

Sydney peers into what’s left of her cherry bomb and shakes her head. “Still missing. I just don’t know where Tey could’ve gone. She’s the definition of straight and narrow. College. Church. The diner. Those are what she’s always been focused on. She doesn’t get mixed up with the wrong crowd.”

I end our conversation by thanking Sydney and wishing her friend returns

safely.

For the rest of my work day at the Chop Shop, I'm preoccupied with how to move forward.

Mama notices I'm distracted later in the evening when in the kitchen cooking dinner. She pads into the room in her fuzzy slippers and robe, a deep frown dipped onto her mouth.

"I sure wish my baby would tell me when something's wrong."

"Mama, we've been over this."

"Cuz if there were something wrong, you could."

"I'd prefer you focus on your health."

"It's sure been a while since Blake has come around," she muses, shuffling over to the table. She takes her seat and peers at me from where I am by the stove. "I may be old and I may be senile, but one thing I've never been a day in my life is stupid. What happened the other night when you ran out so late? Is Blake in some sort of trouble?"

I pause from stirring the sauce in the pot. "You know I left?"

Mama lets out a single cackle. "Of course I do. I'm your mother, Korine baby. You think you can sneak out without me knowing? I knew when you were seventeen and I know now."

"Then why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Cuz you were headed over to Blake's... and I knew that boy would never let anything bad happen to my baby."

"I always thought I covered my tracks well."

She scoffs with a wave of her hand. "You're kidding, right? You expected me to believe that lumpy pillow under the covers was really you? That's not even touching on how I usually saw your little behind sneaking off the lawn."

"Mama," I say, laughing despite how heavy my shoulders feel. Once the sound dies out and silence reminds us of the core issue at hand, I exhale a sigh and come clean. "If you must know. Blake was arrested the other night.

Some traffic stop made by Ken. The charges are serious.”

“Let me take a guess,” she says. “That no good abuser is threatening you?”

“How did you —”

“Baby, I’ve got the years and experience to predict these things. Have you told Blake?”

Why does everyone want me to get him deeper into my shit?!

I shake my head. “I’m not making the situation worse than it already is.”

“Would it be making it worse, or would it be keeping you on the same page?”

Mama’s question sticks with me to the point it’s on my mind the next time I’m showing up to Blake’s trailer. I’ve arrived certain of what I need to do—or so I think ’til Mama words return and plant a seed of doubt.

The second our gazes connect only intensifies that doubt. Golden hair and stubbled jaw framing his face, his boundless blue eyes make me feel like I’m going for a swim in the ocean. It weakens any resolve I had coming over.

Even with the bruises still marring his face, he’s the handsomest man in town. If anything, it gives him an edge, makes him even sexier. Can you blame me if I find him damn near impossible to resist?

Blake curls an arm around me to guide me inside. His scent floats around me, addictive and comforting, making matters worse. How am I supposed to do this when he’s touching me? When the warm, clean scent of him makes me want to be held in his arms all night long? When I can’t even look him in the eye without my heart fluttering?

“Thirsty?” he asks. He heads into the kitchen to grab two glasses regardless of my answer.

I’ve sat down on his sofa, my stomach a rippling mess. “I think we need to talk.”

“You mentioned that.” He returns clutching some iced tea that he sets down on the coffee table, and then joins me on the sofa. “Judging by the tone

of your voice, it can't be anything good."

"A lot's happened this week."

"If this is about the charges, I already told you I was framed. I was never driving under the influence. Kori, I wouldn't lie about that."

"I believe you," I say, and I mean it.

I do believe Blake. He wasn't driving drunk. I'm not sure I even believe he assaulted Ken and his partner, at least not without extreme provocation and abuse of their authority. Everything about that night feels like it's some horrible nightmare that neither of us will wake from.

It won't go away unless...

"We both have a lot on our plates right now."

"We've been making it work."

My head shakes, my hands nervously gripping my kneecaps. "It's become too much, Blake. For us to be together like this. I tried to warn you I wasn't ready for anything."

He husks out a quick laugh, then raises a brow at me. "You're serious? It's another month and a half 'til April Fools."

"This isn't a joke. And, yeah, I'm being serious."

"You can't be. 'Cuz then you'd realize you make no damn sense."

"Blake, we're taking a break," I say firmly. "I need time to figure out my situation. Time to create a stable life for myself and Mama. Things between us have been moving too fast. Now you have your legal troubles —"

"Who got to you?" he asks.

"This is my own decision."

"I wasn't born yesterday, Kori. You forget I can tell when you're keeping things from me?"

"You're not going to change my mind," I say, standing up. I turn toward the door. "I need a break, Blake... and that's final."

"Bullshit."

I scowl at him from over my shoulder. "It doesn't matter if you think it is."

My mind's made up."

"You always do this. You always run when it gets tough. You did it then and you're doing it now. I hoped you'd grown from that."

"Excuse me!?! You've got to be kidding me because that's NOT what happened, Blake!" I've stopped halfway to the door and spun around from sheer outrage. "I left because high school was over! It was over, and I didn't want to get trapped in Pulsboro for the rest of my life refusing to grow up! I didn't want to spend every night getting drunk at the ravine and sleeping in 'til noon like you and the others. I wanted to go to college and make something of myself! If I stayed here... I would've... I'd have been married and pregnant by the time I was twenty-one!"

"By who? Me?"

Who else?!

"It doesn't matter," I snap. "It's not what I wanted."

Blake takes a step toward me. "I would've taken care of you if that happened."

"I didn't say you wouldn't. But I wanted to go to college."

"Wheaton U is forty minutes away."

"What's your point?" I fold my arms.

His blue eyes thin into slits. "Nobody was stopping you from college! I wanted that for you! But you chose just about the farthest fucking university in the state you could! You were hours away and you dropped me and everybody else like a bad habit! You cut us out of your life and for what, Kori? You wound up married young *anyway*! The difference is, you chose a piece of shit who beat your ass!"

"Don't you dare try to judge my choices!" I yell. The volume of my voice, the raw emotion etched into the loud sound, startles even me. "I didn't know Ken would be... that he would... I never would've —"

"BUT HE DID!" he barks. "He did do those things! That man almost destroyed you and you wanna do what you did last time? Walk away so he

can find a way to force himself into your life again? And don't tell me he won't, 'cuz he will! That man ain't giving up—and the moment you're alone, he's gonna force you back with him! Is that what you want? Why haven't you figured out we're stronger when we stick together?!"

I've fallen silent, my frantic heart beating out of sync.

So has Blake. His ferocity still thickens the air around us. His golden hair long and untamed about his shoulders, his handsome face tightened by tension, he resembles a male lion on the attack.

But it's his eyes that are most affecting—they bore into mine and make me feel like there's no more hiding. No more lies, charades, pretending to be done with him. I can't act as if things are over between us.

This is only the beginning.

We solidify as much in the next second. In a burst of energy, unable to yell and scream any longer, I throw myself at him. He shoots forward and collides with me. His fingers slide into my short crop of hair and he yanks my face toward his.

I kiss him deep and hard, like we're still fighting. Only with our mouths for this next round.

It sets off a chain of urgent, chaotic, sexually tense events that uproots everything. We attack each other. Blake hoists me off the ground and I search his mouth with my tongue, twining it with his. We crash into the nearest wall and he shoves his hands up my shirt, groping and squeezing. He grinds into me as I lose my breath and pant for air.

I feel Blake's need. Mine pulses just as heady and strong.

We kiss until Blake's tearing me away from the wall and walking us toward his bedroom. I'm flung onto the bed with only a millisecond to land before he's on me.

Shoving my jeans down my hips. Jamming a hand between my thighs. Grunting at the beginnings of arousal he finds there.

His lips on my lips, kissing me to devour me. Make it known I'm not

going anywhere.

And he's right—there's no running away this time or fighting the feelings we've always had for each other. There's no resisting the pull that's Blake Cash.

BLAKE



I'M OUT OF PATIENCE.

Kori and I bust through the door of my bedroom in the middle of some heavy kisses. Our hands feel each other up. My feet move us toward my bed. Her legs are notched around my waist, her fingers tangled in my golden mane.

The second the bed's a few feet away, I'm wrenching her from my mouth and dropping her down. I don't wait for her reaction before smashing my lips back to hers and beginning to work off every piece of clothing she's got on.

Kori matches my kisses. She bites at my lower lip and claws nails along my forearms. She's playful and enthusiastic like we're playing another game. We're locked into another competition and she's going to fight me on who's the victor.

A ball of energy that makes the moment that much hotter.

It feeds into my need to dominate. Pin Korine down and show her how I'm going to pleasure her beautiful fucking body 'til she's coming so hard she's screaming my name for all of Pulsboro to hear.

Including Stricklin. *Especially* Stricklin.

So he knows who it is bringing Korine a level of pleasure he never could. The same man who she should've been with all along.

For him to know she was never his in the first place.

I flip Korine onto her stomach once I've stripped her bare. She twists and squirms as if she intends on escaping out from under me.

Another kind of foreplay between us.

My length frames hers. My hands cover hers. She bucks against me all while I tease her wherever I can. I kiss the spot behind her ear and tell her how fucking hot it is that she's got so much fight in her. That she's always trying to one up me.

Her breath's turned even more ragged than before. She's like a damn naughty cat that's about to go on the attack and scratch the hell out of me. I welcome it as I nuzzle her neck and then lean back onto my haunches. My palms slide down her body, appreciative of the skin that feels smooth and supple to the touch.

Korine pushes her ass back at me like the naughty tease she is. I groan at the sight of her ass rounded like a peach I'd love to bite the hell out of and then grip her thighs to bury my face in between.

My tongue slides over the slit of her pussy. Teasing her and tasting every drop of the wetness I find.

Searching, exploring, testing to see what draws the most reaction out of her.

Korine thrashes as I do. She grinds her ass back against me whenever I find the right spot that makes her thighs shake and breath gasp out of her.

I palm her ass, spreading her apart, dining on her like I'm eating a gourmet meal—and I am. Kori's pussy is as delicious as it gets.

Just tasting her and inhaling the most natural feminine scent of her makes me harder. Every reaction she gives as she moans only pumps more blood to my cock.

My tongue flicks at her, swirls inside her, swipes up and down the soft folds of her 'til I'm sure she's about to lose it. She's so damn close she's seconds away from coming.

Then I stop. I'm raising up and grabbing by the hips and pushing myself

against her to remind her of my hardness. The huge erection that's swollen and hot and so damn ready to be inside her.

She pants and rocks back. Sexy as hell as she tosses a look at me with dark bedroom eyes. I can't resist. I lean over her and take her by the lips in a passion-fueled kiss. At the same time I'm guiding myself into her.

My cock slips inside her sopping pussy. Her walls ripple around me. Her warmth envelops me on all sides.

A primal-sounding growl revs up from the deepest part of my chest.

Our kisses deepen. Our pants grow shallower and rougher. Korine rocks against me and I squeeze her hip and start stroking into her.

Slow.

Long but deep.

We build together, rocking as we kiss and ride the stroke I've set. The passion between us burns in the air. It takes over the room and turns it into an inferno. We're burning up, on fire from the heat that breaks out on our skin.

I lift myself up in the same moment I push Korine down. She stretches out beneath me. Only her ass remains in the air. I plow into her even deeper at this new angle, reaching new bundles of nerves inside her. Her walls quiver around me as her whole body does the same.

She quivers *and* writhes, clutching at the comforter and burying her face into it.

She screams into the fabric and tells me how big my dick feels.

"More... Blake, right there... please..." she whimpers.

I grunt in answer, barely able to keep myself in check. The way her pussy's gripping me has me in a fucking chokehold.

It makes me go faster, pound into her harder. Pressure's welled up inside me, ready to explode. Ready to sink deep and spill.

But I fight the urge. I fuck her harder. I flip her over and bend her into a new shape. Both of her legs behind her head, I sink in whole. Both of us groan at how deep I've gone and how good it feels.

A couple strokes more, Korine comes. Her pussy clenches tighter than ever and her creamy juices flood me.

I go crazy, losing any restraint, working my hips fast. I come in close and plant a kiss on her. Her soft hands clutch at my face as I fuck away and experience every inch of her sopping wet pussy 'til I can't hold it off another moment.

My orgasm slams into me. My dick twitches inside her, my release filling her up. I grunt, sucking on her tongue, coming in her soft, wet pussy.

Korine comes a second time—the familiar flutter of her walls around me only adding to my pleasure.

It takes us what feels like an eternity to come down from our highs. I'm a sweaty, out of breath mess crashing beside her. Leftover adrenaline still pings me. My heart's hammering so hard it could bust out of my chest.

But most of all, as I glance over at Korine, all I want to do is hold my girl. Lay with her and sleep at her side and be together like we're supposed to be.

Things won't be easy. Difficult times are ahead. We've got no shortage of problems. But we'll figure them out together.

Korine seems to read my mind as I wrap my arms around her and kiss her brow. She snuggles into me and murmurs she's sorry.

“For trying to leave you. Then and especially now.” Her breath tickles my throat.

I hold her to me and stroke her bare back. “You thought you were protecting me.”

“How did you —”

“Whatever it is he told you—or you think you'd accomplish by breaking up—you're wrong, Kori,” I say. “The only way we're ever gonna get through this is together. You realize that, right?”

She sniffles, then nods. I feel her body quake against mine, a tell-tale sign she's on the verge of tears. Probably upset by whatever fucked up shit he's

done or said to her. I hold her 'til she's calm again and we're both drifting off...

The sweet notes of peaches tease my nose. Light and summery even on the coldest winter day. My arm tightens out of sleepy instinct, my face buried deep into the familiar crook it knows so well. Soft skin and supple curves press against me, relaxing any tension in my muscles. Making me feel so damn at ease.

Calmer than I've ever been even as, in the recesses of my mind, I recognize I've got no shortage of troubles.

Those can wait. For now, I just want to soak up the warm comfort of the moment.

It goes on for hours. 'Til, gradually, dawns spills into the room by way of the part in the window curtains.

We're so damn in tune with each other, I *sense* the moment Korine stirs. It's in the subtle shift of her body wrapped up in mine. Her gentle fingers skim over my forearms locked about her hips and she nuzzles my face with hers.

I tighten my hold even more, taking in a deep inhale of her scent at the pulse point of her neck. Eyes still closed, voice low and raspy from sleep, I mutter, "Still early out. Another hour."

Her smile's a sound. "You forget I'm opening the shop?"

"So what? Open late. Nobody'll give a fuck. Least of all me."

"Mama has a doctor's appointment. I already broke my rule about staying the night."

My hold breaks and I roll onto my back, curling an arm under my head. "Then if you really want to go."

"It's not that I want to go. More like there are things I need to do." She

scoots up into a sitting position, the heavy blanket sliding down far enough that her bare thighs come into view. A distraction of silky smooth, golden-brown skin that's too damn enticing first thing in the morning.

I force my attention to the ceiling, caught between a thread of bitterness and arousal—and a neediness that feels like it's more dangerous than either of the others.

I don't want Korine to go. I don't want there to be some chasm between us. 'Cuz despite what happened last night, things still feel... unsettled. Like if I let her out of my sight, she'll be gone for another ten years.

"Blake, look at me," she murmurs. "I meant what I said last night."

"Which part?" I snap before I can stop myself. "The part where you wanted to quit on us or the part where I made you come so hard you said I was the only man you've ever really wanted?"

Her expression softens. So damn beautiful, her short pixie hair sticking up and all. "You guess. Which do you *think* I meant?"

I blow out a breath. "I know where your *heart* lies. You can't fake that kinda intensity. But it's where your *mind* is that I'm worried about. That's always caused us a hell of a lot of trouble."

"What are you saying?" She frowns, her brows knitting.

"I'm saying... Kori, if you even try to sacrifice yourself..."

I trail off on that ominous note, leaving the rest to hang in the air as a mystery. But she gets it as my gaze slides over and meets hers. There's a dawning in them before she quickly switches to glancing around the room.

"Don't say it," I warn. "Don't even think it. Anything that's happened—I don't regret shit. I've got you back in my life. Which means none of it's a mistake. All of it's been worth it. The good, the bad, the fucking ugly."

She bends her legs at the knee then leans forward to drop her face into them. "What are we going to do? How are we going to deal with what we're up against? He won't stop, Blake. He'll *never* stop."

"Then we'll make him stop."

“I don’t see how that’s possible. He told me he’d make sure you’re thrown behind bars.”

“I’ll handle it.”

When she raises her head and opens her mouth, I swoop in with more reassurance.

“I will,” I say, sitting up. I reach for her, pulling her toward me. Her almond-shaped eyes have no choice but to peer into mine as I hold her face and my thumbs trace the curve of her cheeks. “I’m gonna figure something out. I’ll put a stop to it.”

“Something that’s legal?” she offers weakly.

I answer by pressing a kiss to her lips. “Don’t worry about it. You at least got time for coffee?”

Ice-skating on Valentine’s Day is a longtime Pulsboro tradition. Starting up around Christmas and ending by the time February’s over, a portion of the town park’s turned into a rink for families, friends, and couples alike. No night’s a bigger hit than the night of Valentine’s Day.

Men everywhere decide it’s a simple and easy way to spend some time with the special woman in their lives.

I’m not the only King who brings his old lady by. Mace and Sydney show up. Bush and his old lady do too (who also happens to be his wife of sixteen years). Even Ozzie turns up with some chick none of us have ever seen before.

She holds out her hand to shake Korine’s and Sydney’s, then moves onto Bush’s wife.

“I’m Sparkle,” she says, beaming wide.

Korine shakes her hand before glancing over at me and the rest of the guys. I turn to Ozzie with brows raised myself. He gives a shrug.

“I met her at the Titty Bar,” he whispers not-so-subtly.

Sliding my arm around Korine’s shoulders, I break away from the rest of the group. We head to the nearest bench and tie on our ice-skates. Korine smirks over at me, her fingers quick on her laces.

“What’s that smirk for?”

“You don’t remember, do you?”

“Remember what...” Then it hits me, and I smirk too, rubbing at my jaw. “The night we came after-hours to skate.”

“Senior year.”

“Twenty-eight degrees out.”

“My nose was about to snap off.”

“I kept you plenty warm.”

The corner of her lip quirks up. Just slightly. “You did... ’til you fell on your ass.”

“Ten years, and you won’t let me forget.”

“How can I when I’m the better skater?” she asks silkily as she rises up and then pushes off to slide through the open gate and onto the ice.

I rush to catch up with her. Never mind the fact that it’s true—Korine’s always been the superior skater.

We enter the crowded ice rink engaged in our own little battle of wills. Korine’s half a pace ahead of me. I’m coming up from behind, grinning for every quick glance over her shoulder she gives. Her eyes always find mine. A damn diamond-like sparkle in them.

Then she’s speeding up again. I’m scrambling to keep up. We play this game several times ’til I’m winging her on the left and catching her by surprise. Sweet laughter plays from her throat like a night song I could listen to for the rest of my life. Pleasant and musical and so damn infectious that it makes me laugh too.

I push myself harder, the blades of my skates blurs on the ice, and I cut her off. Scooping her gloved hand up in mine, I take control of the moment

by dragging her with me. Korine's such a graceful skater that it doesn't throw her off for a second. She glides along with me, going where I lead us, weaving between other skaters on the rink.

The light never leaves her face. Neither does the subtle smile that touches her lips. Nothing but trust shines in her eyes.

I turn so that I'm backward, drawing her toward me. We sync up, slowing down, coming together for a kiss on the lips.

My lungs fill with Korine like she's the air I breathe. An intense feeling that comes on strong and consumes 'til it's taken over everything. So damn deep it almost *hurts*.

Just the prospect that one day I could take a breath and Korine wouldn't be around anymore, terrifies me to my core. It leaves me on edge to the point I'd do anything to make sure it never even comes close to happening.

I want to kiss this woman. Hold this woman. Protect this woman with everything I've got.

For as long as I'm alive.

My girl.

We wind up gliding over to our own pocket of the rink where we get a real moment of privacy. I curve my fingers along the shell of her ear, tucking some of her short hairs away, and we share another small laugh about the last time we were here.

"You've gotten better," she says. "Have you been practicing?"

"Sure have. Waited ten whole years for this opportunity. Wasn't about to fuck it up."

She leans closer, burying her face in my chest to stifle a giggle. "Thanks for bringing me out. I've been wanting to go ice-skating forever."

"We'll do it every year from now on," I promise, linking our fingers on both hands. "Even if it's after-hours."

"Spend the night. My place this time," she whispers, tipping her head back in a signal for another kiss. "Please."

“How can I turn down these lips?”

I seal our impromptu plans with another kiss of ours.

Once we eventually move off the ice, we join back up with the others. Korine goes off with Sydney, Bush’s wife, and Sparkle to grab some hot cocoa from the nearby vendor. I hang back with the rest of the guys.

“You two looked like fucking Disney on ice out there,” Mace says.

Ozzie snorts. “Aside from all the tattoos.”

“Doubt Disney would ever have a biker for a character,” I point out, sliding fingers through my hair. “It was good to get out tonight. Some fresh air. Some fun around town.”

Bush nods from my left. “Real fun. ’Cept the missus and I have reached our bedtime.”

“You stay up ’til the butt crack of dawn all the time, Bush,” Ozzie laughs.

“That’s when I’m riding solo. When I’m riding with the missus, I’m tired by ten and in bed by eleven. You boys wouldn’t understand. Wait ’til you’ve got the ol’ ball and chain weighing you down.”

“We’ll see if him and Sparkle ever get that far.” Mace cocks a brow at Ozzie. “Something tells me probably not.”

“You doubt me and Sparkle now, but we’re in it for the long haul. Or whenever her ex gets out of the slammer. Whichever comes first.”

The three of us can only shake our heads with the same thought on our mind—Ozzie’s being Ozzie. Bush bids us good night and wanders off to go collect his old lady.

“So,” Mace says after a moment, his hands deep in his jean pockets, “have you figured out how to move forward?”

I inhale a sharp breath that just as soon leaves my lungs. “I know one thing and one thing only.”

“Which is?”

“Korine’s mine.”

Mace’s features twitch in momentary confusion. “Figured that went

without saying.”

“No,” I say in a tone that’s equal parts certain and lethal, “you don’t get what I mean. Korine’s mine—she’s my girl, and I’m going to make sure it stays that way. No matter what I’ve gotta do.”

Mace and Ozzie share looks though remain silent. Their lack of response is as ominous as my words.

“If I’ve got to bend the rules to make that happen, I will. If I’ve got to destroy a man, I will. If I’ve got to make sure he never sees the light of day again, I will.”

“Cash...” Mace says slowly. “He’s a cop. Whatever we do has got to be smart. Careful.”

“Strategic,” Ozzie offers. “I’m all for guns blazing. You know I am more than anybody. But Mace is right, Cash. You’re already on that dipshit’s radar.”

“I don’t care.”

“We’ll come up with a plan. Something that’ll make sure Stricklin backs off. Maybe hire one of the Barrera’s to do it—they’d probably be willing to carry out an assassination so our hands are clean. We’ve got options.”

I appreciate Mace’s reassurance, but I shake it off, my golden hair following suit. My attention’s on Korine even from thirty feet away, where she’s smiling as she chitchats with Sydney and Sparkle.

So happy and carefree. Unburdened and beautiful.

All things she deserves every waking moment of her life.

All things I’d *kill* to ensure she has.

So long as she’ll never have to sleep another night worried by what danger could be coming.

She’ll never have to know the details.

“I told Korine I’ll handle it,” I say, tearing my gaze off her. I pierce the other two with a look that’s eerily calm and resolute. “And I meant it.”

Whatever it takes.

KORINE



“WHAT WOULD YOU DO WITHOUT US, KORINE?” CHAZ ASKS WITH A WHISTLE. He’s greased up from another long morning in the Chop Shop, his coveralls in need of a deep spin in the washer. Not that Chaz washes them as often as he should (by his own admission).

I remain unfazed, setting my tools down on the stainless steel cart we’ve wheeled out while working on our latest job. “Are you sure you don’t have that the other way around? Because I’m pretty sure it should be.”

His lips break apart in a gap-toothed smile. “You sure you want to be Cash’s old lady? ’Cuz I’m pretty sure you and I got something going on. Have I mentioned I enjoy long walks on the beach at sunset? Or whatever chicks like?”

A sharp laugh slips out of me before I can contain it. I give Chaz a sympathetic pat on the shoulder and tell him, “Nice try. But I’m a taken woman.”

“Worth a shot,” he says, shrugging. “I figure it’ll work on a lady sooner or later.”

“Good luck with that. Let me know how it goes. As for me, if anyone asks, I’m taking my lunch.”

“Don’t you want to wait for your man to get back? Shouldn’t take him long to make it from One Stop with the spark plugs.”

“Tell him I’m picking up Mama from her latest appointment. I’ll have my phone on me.”

I hop in the truck Blake’s been letting me use and drive across town to the doctor’s office. From the moment I’m escorting her out the door and across the parking lot, I pick up on a funny vibe from Mama. Buckling her into the passenger seat, I check on her.

“How did the appointment go, Mama?”

She mumbles something about it being fine but offers no other specifics. I move around to the driver’s side and slide behind the wheel.

“Do you want to stop by the frozen yogurt shop? We can grab a cup of your favorite—sugar-free vanilla with dark chocolate chunks.”

“That’s okay, baby. I’d like to go home.” She rests her head against the seat, eyes closed and her hands folded on her belly.

A frown takes over my expression as I try to reset my attention to the road. Mama’s usually so chatty after her doctor’s appointments. Even after particularly difficult treatments, she talks my ears off until we’re pulling up at home. For her to be so quiet is unlike her.

“Doctor Beyene said you did well today,” I say, hoping to prompt a conversation.

“Mhmmm,” she hums.

“He mentioned some new medication?”

“That’s right, baby. The nurse gave it to me.”

Silence persists. So much so that the noises from surrounding traffic and the gentle whistle from a gust of wind fill up the blank space in the truck.

I twist off the ignition when we’ve reached our apartment complex, racking my brain for what could be the cause of Mama’s shift in mood.

“How about I take the rest of the day off and we watch some TV? I think Judge Joanne is on. It’s supposed to be a new one.”

“Sure.”

I help Mama out of her outdoor clothes—she insists on being presentable

in a button-up dress, stockings, and girdle for each appointment—and change her into her favorite fuzzy robe and slippers. It takes a few more minutes than usual, with Mama struggling to get her arms and legs through the openings of the clothes, but we manage. Once she’s settled in the armchair in front of the TV, I’m fixing her a snack for her next dose of medications.

The pharmacy bag crinkles as I dig inside and pull out the different pill bottles and vials of insulin. The frown I’d worn earlier returns reading the labels.

“Mama?”

“Hmmm?”

“Is this the medication you took at the doctor?”

“It... is.”

“This is the wrong kind. This is the Domnicron that makes your blood pressure shoot up. Mama... Mama!”

She’s gone still in the armchair, her eyes closed. The bottles slip out of my hand, my heart thundering out of instant alarm. I launch myself across the room, practically stumbling over my own two feet to get to her.

“Mama!”

“Hmmm?”

“Mama, keep open your eyes!” I yell.

“Oh... baby...” her words slur.

I don’t understand anything about what’s happening. It’s some disturbing joke being played; it’s some terrible, horrible nightmare that I’ve slipped into. Because there’s no other conceivable explanation for this moment.

Her right arm twitches in place, like she’s lost control of it. The same side of her mouth seems to droop.

“Mama... hold on!”

I punch 911 into my keypad, so panicked I can’t stand still. I’m unable to breathe, my lungs sucking away only to draw in nothing. Dizzying little spots appear before my eyes before I blink and shake them away and scream at the

emergency operator to send help.

“Please!” I cry out. “My mother... she’s having some kind of reaction to the wrong medication! I think... I think she’s having a stroke!”

“We can have an ambulance out to your residence in ten to fifteen minutes.”

“She doesn’t have that long!”

“That is the soonest responders will be able to be in your area, ma’am. Can you repeat your address so I can put in the request?”

I rattle off our apartment address and beg the operator to please work a miracle and get the ambulance here sooner. The second I’m off the phone, I’m kneeling in front of the armchair to keep Mama’s focus on me.

“Just stay awake,” I say. “They’ll be here in a few minutes. Oh... Mama... how could this happen?”

“Baby...” she mumbles.

It seems to be all she’s capable of saying. The fingers of her right hand continue twitching, some kind of involuntary spasm she has no control of. It seems she can’t move the rest of her body.

Tears roll down my cheeks and wet my lips. My voice is hoarse, producing only a whisper when I try to comfort Mama and remind her help is on the way. Any other thoughts become too difficult to process.

The panic rings too loudly from every corner of my being. It makes it impossible to do anything but kneel before Mama and wait out the ambulance. Fists pound on the door and jostle me out of my panic-induced state. I stumble onto unsteady legs to unlatch the lock on the door and wrench it wide open.

I’m expecting a team of EMTs to flood into the apartment in their haste to help Mama.

Instead, a lone man enters.

Ken steps past the threshold and into my apartment before I can digest what’s happening. At the last second, I move to shove the door closed and

force him out. He slams his hand against the door, exerting hardly any effort at all to launch it back toward me.

“NO!” I scream out. “Get out of here!”

“I tried to warn you,” he says with a solemn shake of his head. “But time and time again, you have to be a troublemaker.”

Cold horror washes over me, paralyzing me to the spot. “Ken... what did you do? Oh my god, what have you done?”

“It’s not what I’ve done. It’s what you’ve *chosen*, Kor.”

“How could you?!” I scream in a torrent of emotion. I rush toward him, determined to get him the hell away from Mama. Get him the hell out our apartment.

Ken takes a wide step back and then lifts his arm up, clicking the hammer to the gun in his possession. He’s taken aim at me, the twist of his lips insidious. “Uht-uht. Not so fast, Kor. I told you you’d be coming back home one way or another. Did you think I was lying?”

BLAKE



“ALRIGHT, NOW THAT WE’VE DECIDED STRICKLIN’S GONNA DIE,” MACE SAYS matter-of-factly. “We’ve got to map it out to be as clean as possible.”

“This is boring. We’ve done enough planning. Let’s go shoot shit up.” Ozzie sighs.

Mace grits his teeth. “We’ve been over this. Stricklin’s a cop. No matter how much we want to turn up and spray his ass with bullets, we can’t go leaving a fucking paper trail. We’re already being investigated by the law.”

“How about we get the Hellrazors involved?” Tito asks, stroking his chin. “They owe us for sparing them during our last altercation.”

I’m barely listening to a word the others are saying. I’m peering out the window of the club office, my eyes narrowed as they can go. Pulsboro PD isn’t even trying to hide the fact that they’re tailing us—there’s a squad car parked across the street from the saloon. Some rookie asshole whose name I don’t give a fuck to learn.

Turning away from the window with my arms folded, I’m sick and tired of listening to the strategies being discussed. Mace is convinced we’ve got to be careful about our next move, but I’m done with being careful.

Stricklin dies tonight. One way or another.

Mace glances over at me as if reading my thoughts. “Cash, you hearing this?”

“No,” I answer in the bluntest tone. I slide fingers through my hair, barely containing myself from doing what I want to do in the moment. “I’m not listening ’cuz I told you where I stand. Stricklin’s done. I couldn’t give less of a shit how you think it should go down.”

“I get it. You want to tear him apart. I was where you are when the Rebels had Sydney. We’ll get him. We’ll make him pay.” Mace reaches out and grips my shoulder in his hand that’s capable of just as much damage as mine.

I shrug him off, my insides a deep pit of rage there’s no clawing out from. It’s taken over me, turned me into some kind of entity existing with one goal and one goal only. To seek and destroy. Tear apart the man that’s standing in the way of the rest of my life.

Korine.

Mom and Bill have made things no easier. Rather than leave me the hell alone after our failed family dinner, they’ve taken it upon themselves to reach out once they found out I’d been arrested. Bill left a scathing five-minute-long voice mail telling me I was a piece of shit that thought I was better than him... when all I really am is a drunk.

It’s only amplified the rage that’s already pent up inside me. It’s made me want to stop holding back and unleash everything I’ve been holding back.

My heart booms in my chest and roars in my ears. My hands flex open and shut and I feel the violence swelling up inside me. It’s about to unleash itself.

There’s no stopping it; there’s no holding this kind of brutality inside. I’ve held back long enough.

The other guys in the room exchange looks. Tito steps in the path between me and the door.

“Sit. I’ll grab you a Coke,” he says amicably. In a the way only Tito could pull off. “We all need to let off steam. We get ourselves going like this—it’s never good.”

“Not now,” I drawl. “Step out of my way, Tito.”

The uncle-like King defers to Mace from beyond my shoulder. Mace gives a motion of his head that signals he should do as I say and get the hell out of my way. I leave the office behind and stride across the lot that leads to the Chop Shop. If I have any hope of hanging onto my sanity, then I need to see the person that reminds me of the good in the world.

“You seen Kori?”

Chaz sits up from where he’s lying on the floor replacing some tires. “She left not too long ago. Something about her mama and an appointment. I thought you were at the One Stop? We need those spark plugs for the Screaming Eag—hey!”

I’ve moved on the moment he said Korine’s not here. I almost head through the front exit of the shop ’til I remember the police have staged a full-fledged stakeout on the street outside. Doubling back, I opt for the rear exit while I fire off a text to Korine.

Minutes pass to no answer.

But I do get a slew of texts from somebody else. Probably one of the last people I cared to hear from.

Cash... we need to talk. There’s something I have to tell you...

Please answer... I feel terrible about it...

It’s something you’ll want to know. Cash text me back!

I'm too focused on hearing from Korine to bother replying to any of Janessa's stupid messages.

I've ridden off on my Street Bob, outgunning lights and cutting off traffic. Every other street, I glance at my phone to see if Korine's replied. The last time she stopped responding she'd been pulled over on the side of the road by that piece of shit. If he's gone anywhere near her, I swear I'll rip out his intestines with my bare hands. I'll fucking choke him out with them...

Violent thoughts fester 'til they're immersive daydreams that distract me from reality. I've pulled up outside Korine's apartment complex without realizing it. I dismount and start for her apartment.

The parking lot's far from empty. Several residents have gathered to chat among themselves. Each of them wears an expression of concern, like they've witnessed something troubling. I don't give much of a damn considering I'm here for Korine only.

But one of them, a middle-aged woman that lives on the same floor as Korine and Sunny and who I've seen in passing before, calls out to me.

"You're the boyfriend, right?"

I stop short, throwing a look over in her direction. "There a reason you're asking?"

"You just missed it," she answers. "The ambulance. It came and took the mother. She had some kind of stroke. The daughter was nowhere to be found. Nobody could get a hold of her."

The lady's words reverberate ten times louder than they are. I freeze for a split second to process them, taking in their meaning, before the thin string keeping me civilized snaps. She calls after me as I break out in a run toward my bike. I don't bother with any of my gear, don't even fucking bother checking around me, slamming on the gas.

Several of the residents shriek as I streak through the parking lot with no warning. Right hand on the handlebar to steer myself, my left grips my cell. If she didn't answer her texts before, I don't expect her to answer her phone,

yet I call anyway.

I try 'cuz I'm spiraling down a dark tunnel I won't be able to pull myself out of anytime soon. Someplace where only blood and violence exists with no consideration for consequence. My gut tells me all I need to know—Stricklin's behind this.

The call rings three times with no answer. I'm about to hang up when somebody answers on the fourth.

“Kori!” I shout over the rush of the wind. “Where are you? Your mother's had a stroke —”

“Kor can't answer the phone right now,” Stricklin interrupts, his tone cool. Threaded with a hint of sick glee. “But I thought I'd let you know she's with me. Where she belongs.”

“You fucking piece of shit!”

“Interesting. Because I'd say the only piece of shit here is you. The trash that tried to take my wife from me.”

“She wants nothing to do with you.”

“It's never mattered what she wants. She made a vow 'til death. I'm holding her to that,” he replies. “I told her she wouldn't get away—but if you really think she belongs to you, then you should come. Try to take her from me. Isn't that what you were going to do anyway?”

I glare at the road up ahead, the scenery whizzing by. “You're a fucking dead man.”

“We'll see about that. It's about time we handle this. Come alone.”

The line clicks before it goes dead, and I'm roaring louder than the beastly rumble from my engine. I gun it, barreling down the road, straight for Stricklin's.

To end this once and for all.

KORINE



KEN DRIVES US HOME IN A SILENCE THAT'S AS SUFFOCATING AS IT IS disturbing. We sit still, by all outside appearances, calm and composed. On the inside it couldn't be more of a different story. My throat's closing up, my thoughts a scattered mess of concerns about Mama and dread over where this moment is going.

Ken's zen-like demeanor terrifies me more than his rage-fueled behavior. He drives us like we're still living under the veil of a happy marriage. I'm his wife and he's my husband. We're out for a scenic drive around the neighborhood like any other couple.

Never mind the black, festering rot that's *truly* our relationship—keeping up appearances, pretending otherwise works fine enough.

We pull into the drive next to his squad car. The engine powers off and he unlocks the door with a slow turn of his head at me. His eyes vacant pools of apathy, he warns me to stay where I am.

“Unless you want to come to regret it,” he says. “But you seem to be doing a lot of that these days.”

“Ken...” I swallow, trying to sound calm. “I'm not coming inside with you.”

His lips spread into a wide, toothy smile. Still lacking the real touch of human emotion. “There's no choice in the matter, Kor. What do you think

you're about to do? Run away for help? Go ahead."

He reaches across my lap to push the passenger side door open. I catch a whiff of liquor on his breath. The sour smell roils the contents of my stomach even more.

"Run, Kor," he challenges. "Run away. See if you don't wind up with a bullet in the spine. Or maybe I'll just mow you down as you try to run. Do you want to find out how far I'll go? What I'm willing to do? Either you're my wife or you're not making it out alive. Are you clear on your options?"

My voice escapes me. Any sense of daring and nerve fractures. I remain where I am and give a pitiful shake of my head. It would only be a fifteen foot sprint to the next-door neighbors. Ken would take a fraction of that time to take aim and squeeze his trigger. Am I willing to call his bluff?

As he wrenches me from the Escalade, gripping my arm and walking me at his side, I find any healing, any progress I've made melts away. Maybe the progress wasn't progress at all—maybe it was wishful thinking that lasted a couple months 'til my real life came crashing back in a tidal wave of violence.

Escape was never an option. It was always some untenable pie-in-the-sky delusion.

When I married Ken, I took a vow that was 'til death. He's making me keep that promise even if it'll destroy the both of us in the process.

We walk up the front path leading into the large home he bought brand new, a home many in town fawn over due to its endless curb appeal. Yet the only thing I can think about as I look up at the shuttered windows and perfect lawn surrounding the property is that I'm entering a prison that's pretty on the outside and unbearably hideous on the inside.

Another reflection of who Ken and I are together. Ugly, hidden rot no one would ever know about.

The door slams shut and I flinch. Ken gathers my wrists in one of his hands and slaps a pair of handcuffs around them. At the shock on my face, he

shows more teeth in his grin.

“New rules,” he says. “There’s going to be a lot of them going forward. I see now that I gave you way too much freedom before. All of that’s done, Kor.”

“Ken,” I say, my voice sedated with a forced calm. One slip up away from shaking. “I’m not staying. You can’t hold me hostage here.”

“Hostage? You’re my *wife*. This is your *home*.”

“We’re getting a divorce. It’ll be finalized soon —”

“ENOUGH!” he barks, and I flinch again. His grip squeezes tight on my upper arm as he rushes me down the hall, his breaths suddenly heaving. “This is exactly what I’m talking about. I let you get too damn comfortable thinking you can say and do whatever you wanted. The buck stops here. No more.”

“You’re hurting me,” I gasp out only for him to clench my arm harder. I’m dragged and tugged along, tripping over my feet and jerked around.

“Ground rule number one, these stay on at all times.” Ken shakes my bound wrists so that the metal cuffs clang into each other. “I’ll unlock you at a few select times throughout the day, like when you’re permitted to use the bathroom and when I need you to do something like cook my meals. But don’t think for a second you’ll be unsupervised. That’s ground rule number two. Ground rule number three, no phone, no internet, no TV, no kind of contact with the outside world. You won’t even be leaving the house anymore. Except when with *me*. For things like appearances at precinct events.

“Rule number four, that little bank account I let you have? No more. Kiss the credit card I let you carry goodbye. Anything of yours—your ID, your passport, any other docs—will stay locked up for safekeeping. Rule five, I don’t want to hear that voice of yours unless I speak to you *first*. Keep your fucking mouth shut. Is that understood?”

Listening to him rattle off rules, each one growing more extreme than its predecessor, I can’t even find the strength to push back. Another spate of

terror has numbed me to the bone as I realize he's insane. He's *serious*.

He's crossed over from cruel abuse to outright psychotic torment.

"And if I want to fuck you, I'll fuck you," he growls into my ear. "No more of that not in the mood shit you used to try to pull. And if I want to fuck some other bitch, I'll fuck her too. I'm not sneaking around anymore to spare your little feelings. I'll fuck her right in front of you. Right in our bed. What are you going to do about it, huh, Kor? Nothing!"

He wrings my arm to demonstrate how little I *can* do—he has me stumbling, once again jostled in whichever way he wants like I'm some rag doll at his mercy. But there's also a hint of challenge in his question; he *wants* me to push back and be defiant so he can smash me to pieces.

We've played this game many times before.

There's no winning. The rules are conditional. Always in his favor. If I revolt, then it's considered provoking his temper. In his eyes it's justification for his physical abuse. Compliance pisses him off in a different way during moments where I don't give him the reaction he's searching for.

There's no winning no matter what I do or how I react to him.

When I remain silent, he pushes things a step further. Shoving me forward into the kitchen, he finishes telling me the rest of what'll be different now.

"Your mother and her health coverage? Done," he says. "I spoiled you two rotten. I paid thousands of dollars for her healthcare to keep that old bat alive. For you to betray me the first chance you get thinking that shitstain of a biker was going to be able to take care of you. You thought you'd get away with being his whore and it'd all work out for you? I was a fool. No more of that."

"Leave my mother out of this!"

"Your mother's lucky to be alive! After today, she might not be. It wouldn't matter either way."

"Stay away from her..."

“It was surprisingly easy to pull off,” he boasts. “All I had to do was have a friend give her the wrong medicine. She’s so fucking senile, so fucking stupid, she didn’t even know the difference —”

It’s the night I left him all over again. It’s him triggering something inside of me until the pressure’s too great and it bursts free.

“STAY AWAY FROM HER!”

I don’t know what it is beyond sheer delirious fury that propels me forward. Sheer frustration at the circumstance and my sudden captivity.

I throw myself at him with my bound hands clawing at his face and neck and every other part of him within reach. My nails do some damage—they slice into his skin and leave hideous red welts and scratch marks to his grunts of pain.

He staggers several steps back trying to fend me off. My nails sink into his cheek and draw blood that makes him howl. He slams a brutal fist straight into my stomach once and then twice for double damage, ripping any air from me and sending me crashing to my knees. I cough and curl up, feeling like my insides have been dislodged from their proper place.

No more than a second later, his knee collides with my jaw. Hard and merciless. A blow designed to cause excruciating pain. My body jerks beyond my control, my limbs folding. The axis point of the kitchen feels like it’s tilting. The room streaks by me then blinks out into a black cloak of nothing.

The next time I’m opening my eyes, I’m lying twisted on the kitchen floor. I’m bleeding, throbbing, aching, in so much pain I can’t even bring myself to move. My jaw feels fused shut and the tissue guarding my liver—my fucking *liver*—feels like it’s been shredded.

I force a cough and wince at the deep twinge of pain that follows.

I think... I need emergency medical treatment...

Something’s wrong. The punches to the stomach have caused real damage. Worse than usual. Maybe my body’s finally decided it can’t take

anymore.

Ken's nowhere in sight. The kitchen's empty. The house is eerily silent.

Where he's gone after knocking me out remains a mystery; it wouldn't be the first time he's left me unconscious on the floor. I'd have found it stranger if he stayed to check on me.

Out of the loud stillness comes the slow pad of footsteps. These much lighter and cautious than what belongs to Ken.

It can't be. There's no way someone's —

"Help," I croak, my insides tender, my jaw throbbing. Barely above a whisper, the most I can manage. "Please... if you're... there... help."

The footsteps change course. They travel from farther down the hall toward the kitchen. Whoever it is has heard me; they're coming to peek into the room.

"Help," I gasp again. A shriveled kernel of hope comes to life that this person has wandered into the house somehow and is on the verge of saving me.

My entire face has puffed up from Ken's knee; I recognize this without seeing myself in the mirror. I've had enough injuries throughout our marriage to tell by how my eye sockets ache and my lids won't open all the way. Still, I struggle to glance over in the kitchen doorway, hoping to make eye contact with whoever the person is.

Intense confusion leaves me speechless of even another croak. It goes on for another few seconds as I lay broken on the floor and the woman in the doorway stares at me like she's come across something... *inconvenient*.

"Help," I sputter feebly, hoping maybe... just maybe...

Janessa tilts her head to the side, her features sharp. She's clutching her purse to her shoulder, dressed in her scrubs. "What did you do to him? Where did he go?"

Oh no...

"Please," I mutter. "Help me."

“Kenny! Are you here?”

She pivots on her heel, her dark chocolate hair flipping, and rushes off to another part of the house.

The tiny kernel of hope disintegrates into dust watching her walk away in search of him. A wave of icy dread washes over me as I realize how Ken sabotaged Mama. Janessa had mentioned she was seeing someone new weeks ago at the holiday event at the Steel Saloon. Ken’s always entertained other women...

I close my eyes and finally let myself break. A hoarse cry warbles out of me, tears stinging. There’s no use fighting; no use hoping.

Mama could be dying and I’m lying here beaten on the floor, handcuffed and captive by a man who refuses to let me go. He’ll kill me first.

My mind travels backward in time to that quiet afternoon where he’d turned up with a flower and put a smile on my face. Once upon a time, the memory seemed too good to be true. Many years later, I now know that it was.

Instead of smile back, I should’ve screamed. I should’ve run far, far away. If I’d known how he’d destroy me...

Ken’s shouting interrupts my trip down memory lane. He’s yelling from upstairs.

At Janessa.

“You stupid bitch!” he barks. “I told you to tell no one about it!”

“But Kenny —”

“Shut up!”

His feet pound above my head and then migrate across the second floor ’til he’s emerging from the staircase and storming into the kitchen. He’s fuming, his nostrils flared and jaw squared.

“Get up!” he yells at me, then nudges my leg with his boot. “Hurry up or I’ll make you hurry up!”

I scramble to move against the deep aches and pains of my battered body.

Janessa's in the background with tears streaking her face, rambling her way through a long, contrived apology.

"I said hurry up," Ken snarls when I don't move fast enough. He grips me by the back of my neck and rushes me forward to my pained whimpers.

It hurts to walk. It hurts to breathe. I feel dizzy and like I'll collapse any second.

He rushes me upstairs, then shoves me inside our master bedroom where he locks me in. Unable to support myself, I crumple to the ground in a heap by the door. It's as I slip between consciousness and unconsciousness that I realize Ken's standing on the other side. A phone's ringing and he growls something at Janessa about her fuck up.

"Why the fuck would you tell him you're involved?"

"I felt terrible. I couldn't stand keeping it from him —"

"I said shut the fuck up! He's calling her phone now!"

Ken ignores Janessa's cries of apology and answers. His infuriated tone only intensifies as he speaks to the other person on the line, revealing it must be Blake. They share a tense exchange as I listen from the other side of the door, half passed out on the floor.

"We'll see about that," Ken growls. "It's about time we handle this. Come alone."

My heart shrinks, like it'll die out if it shrivels up any more.

No... Blake... it's a trap...

BLAKE



THE MOMENT I TURN UP, STRICKLIN'S ESTABLISHING HIS STIPULATIONS. NO weapons. No back up. No authorities. None of that or else.

...or else something. But considering he's answering Korine's phone and she's gone missing, I know what that *or else* means.

I stand on the front lawn of his multi-hundred-thousand dollar home and can feel her in the air. My girl's trapped inside. She's in serious trouble if he's lured her here. If he's put his hands on her, he'll be dead on sight.

He's dying no matter what. I'll happily go to prison if it means putting Ken Stricklin in a grave.

The front door creaks open and he appears, hostile and suspicious. He juts his chin at me. "Stay where you are. If I find out you didn't really come alone —"

"I'm alone," I grit out.

And it's the truth—I *am*. On my way up here, I phoned Sydney and had her head to the hospital to keep an eye on Sunny and her condition. Then I phoned Mace and the guys to let them know what the fuck was up.

Mace growled about rolling out to serve as back up, but I told him to stand down. We couldn't risk Stricklin catching wind of us conspiring against him. He's spiraled enough that he would be willing to hurt Korine more than he possibly already has. Just to punish me for breaking his rules.

“You’ll understand if I don’t believe a word out of your mouth,” Stricklin says. He steps out of the doorway in his police uniform, with his firearm in full view holstered on his hip. He wants me to see he’s armed and in the powerful position.

For me to understand I’m supposed to be obedient.

I glare watching him approach me like any other cop during a routine stop. He must anticipate the possibility of any of the neighbors looking out their windows or happening by with the way he moves as if the moment’s official business.

“Hands on your head. Feet shoulder width apart.”

“How about you back off or I’ll shove one of those feet up your ass?” I growl back.

“Careful. You could be seen as resisting arrest again,” he says, stepping behind me. His hands begin patting up and down my torso. “If you think for one second I’m letting you inside my home without a proper police pat down, then you must not realize who you’re dealing with. You try anything—anything at all—and you’ll come to regret it. Why haven’t you learned this lesson yet?”

I grind my teeth. “Where’s Korine?”

“Kor’s home. Where she belongs.”

“You’re gonna let her go,” I say as his pat down continues. He’s making his way down my leg. “You let her go and it’ll be between me and you. The way it’s supposed to be.”

“The way it’s supposed to be is my wife in my home, doing what I want, when I want. Not whoring around town with some alcoholic loser who rides a bike for a living. You’ve gotten in my wife’s ear, and you’ve made her all confused. But that ends tonight.”

He gives me a hard shove forward to prompt me toward the house. I’d crack the arrogant look off his face if it wouldn’t cost me getting to Korine.

For the moment, I do as he orders. I head toward the house, waiting out

the right time. Stricklin might have a gun strapped on him, but I'm not intimidated in the slightest. I'll do whatever it takes to get to my girl.

Whatever I need to in order to make sure Kori's alright and Stricklin's six feet under.

The night I ambushed him will seem like love taps by the time I'm through with him.

The door clicks shut behind us and he directs me to the living room. I don't budge an inch.

"Where's Kori?"

"My wife is otherwise occupied. Get in the living room."

"I'm not going anywhere 'til I see Kori's okay."

"I never said anything about her being okay."

He says the words with a level of cold indifference, like he couldn't care less about how she's doing.

The rage that's clenched deep inside me burns to be set free—but there's another emotion creeping from the depths. Disgust that a man could be this way toward a woman he was supposed to love. It's the same reaction I'd had the night Korine turned up on my doorstep, where I'd gone around and around in circles horrified at how he could hurt her this way. How could he bring her such fucking pain?

"I want to see her. Now."

"You'll see her when I say you —"

"KORI!" I roar into the quiet void that's the large home. "KORI, ARE YOU HERE? ANSWER ME!"

My first couple calls go unanswered... and then it happens. The smallest, weakest cry of pain comes from upstairs. It's a groan of my name from a voice that's been worn thin from trauma.

She's hurt—my girl is in fucking pain.

"KORI!"

All strategy goes out the window. My determination to search for the

right moment. My restraint to play by his rules 'til it arrives. Everything I plotted out before setting foot inside this home flies free of my mind as only one singular thought takes control.

I sink down a hole of red-tinged tunnel vision, where I'm moving off impulse alone.

I'm dashing toward the staircase as Stricklin yells out after me. He springs forward in an attempt to stop me. He's unholstered his gun and warns me he'll pull the trigger. A couple steps behind me, he's swiping out his free hand to grip me by the back of my shirt.

My elbow jerks straight into his face. The hit produces a satisfying crunch of his nose and he's falling away, tripping down the stairs he's climbed. His trigger finger accidentally slips at the same time he does and fires rogue shots into the ceiling. The gun flies out of his grip once he's collided with the floor.

I'm already on the top stair. I bolt down the hall in a surge of adrenaline and ram my shoulder into the door. Sharp pain echoes through my right side, but I couldn't give less of a shit—the door's bounced open, practically knocked off its hinges from my direct tackle. I hurry inside searching for Korine.

I don't have to go far.

She's in a ball on the floor. Her face swollen and bruised, contorted into an expression of suffering. Her arm's curled around her stomach like she's unable to withstand what she's been through much longer.

He's put her through this. He's brutalized her again.

I'd scream from the maddening fury of it if my need to get her to safety didn't win out.

“Kori. Hang on.”

Before I can even scoop her up, I'm being speared into from behind. Stricklin's made his way upstairs and he's launched straight into picking up where we left off. We land in a tumble halfway across the room. We both rise up at the same second and go at it again.

He swings on me. I swing on him. We collide in a brutal crash of violence. If there were any rules, any etiquette to our confrontation, they're long gone.

I slam Stricklin onto the ground and knock the wind out of him. My fists follow up, pummeling him, smashing into his face. He slips into defensive maneuvers and blocks a few of my blows. We tussle, grappling at each other, trying to gain the upper hand.

Korine screams from the background.

We're up on our feet. Stricklin comes at me. I duck when he swings and land a fist into his ribs. Then another. By the third, he's swaying like he's drunk on his feet and I'm smashing my knuckles into his mouth in a spurt of blood.

But I refuse to stop. I can't stop.

I'm beyond reason. I'm feral, beating Stricklin into the ground 'til he's twitching and groaning. My fist only draws back for another hit, seeking to destroy.

To end him.

“Hit him again a-and... and I'll shoot!”

I go still, heaving out breaths, slicked in sweat and blood from the fight. Confusion passes over me at the voice. Female but not Korine's. Glancing over my shoulder, I'm thrown even more by the woman standing a few feet away with Stricklin's gun shaking in her hands.

Janessa?!

KORINE



JANESSA MAKES BLAKE STAND UP. SHE USES THE GUN IN HER GRIP TO DIRECT him where she wants him. Blake takes a second to comply. He's heaving deep breaths, his features still twisted in rage, streaked by the blood that's been shed. Eyes narrowing, nostrils flaring, he tilts his head to the side.

“What do you think you're doing, Janessa?” he asks, then takes a slow step in her direction.

She backs up one. Her hands shake more than they already are. “Stay where you are, Cash! I... I mean it... I won't let you h-hurt him anymore.”

“You're protecting this piece of shit, is that right? You're going to, what, shoot me?”

“You're killing him!”

“Look around you! Did you miss the bound and bruised woman on the floor? His ex-wife that he's kidnapped?” Blake roars over her. He takes another few steps toward the registered nurse with no sign of slowing down until she curls a finger around the trigger of the gun.

“That was a misunderstanding. Kenny didn't mean to,” she says. “But she's tried ruining his life. She cost him his promotion, his *career*. She had the nerve to leave him for you.”

I can barely speak up for myself. The deep pain in my abdomen makes it almost impossible. The smallest movement, the slightest shift, causes an

intense ache of pain. For all I know it could be my insides swelling up.

A weak cough leaves me as I roll onto my side and *try* to speak more than a few words.

“You’re fucking crazy,” Blake says, “if you can see Kori bound on the ground, fucking bruised, and still believe a word he says! Janessa, drop the fucking gun... NOW!”

She flinches at the aggressive volume of his voice, then shakes her head. “No... no... Kenny’s done what he’s had to. You’re the one who’s lying! It’s what you’ve always done. You used me and she used him! You come any closer and I’m going to put a bullet in you, Blake Cash!”

“I don’t give a fuck what you or your piece of shit boyfriend do to me! But Kori needs medical attention —”

“Stay where you are!” Janessa yells. She leans to the left for a look at Ken, who’s gradually coming to after his brawl with Blake. “Kenny, I need you. These two are playing dirty.”

“Please,” I croak. “Please, don’t. Just... let... us... go...”

“Make him sit down,” Ken says. He sounds almost as winded as I am, but he’s managed to push himself up on all fours. He huffs out another difficult breath and wipes the blood from his mouth. “Make him sit. Don’t take the gun off him for a second.”

“You heard him.” Janessa jerks the barrel of her gun in the direction of the accent chair nearest Blake. “Sit down and shut up. You’ll do as we say.”

For the briefest second, Blake looks tempted to take a chance—he’s on the verge of bum-rushing Janessa, overwhelming her enough to snatch the gun right from her. He seems to change his mind before finally he obliges and backs up to the accent chair.

“Keep your hands where we can see them!”

Blake’s jaw clenches. “You’re making a mistake. You’ll regret this.”

“The lady said stop talking.” Ken’s climbed to his feet, still woozy from the many brutal hits he’s taken. Bruises have begun purpling on his skin,

making for an unsettling contrast against his pale complexion. But what's even worse are his darkly rimmed eyes and the madness that lives in them. He spits out more blood and staggers over to steal the gun from a shaky Janessa. "You thought you were going to play the hero, did you? You were going to ride up here on that bike of yours and take my wife from me?"

"Kori needs a doctor. Let her go. Then deal with me one on one like a real man. That's what you'd do if you weren't afraid. But you only seem to want to fight when it's a woman. Isn't that right?"

Ken bares his teeth, his gums shining bright red with blood. "You're not going to trash talk your way into buying her freedom, if that's what you think you're doing. I don't need to beat you at some fistfight, Mr. Cash. I've already won. You're both in for some real punishment. I'm about to make you wish you never disobeyed the law."

He delivers the verdict as though it brings him great pleasure. His tone's measured and authoritative like any other moment he's acting as a police officer, except there's an added layer of enthusiasm. He's been looking forward to this moment.

The chance he gets to make me hurt. Even better that Blake's here too.

If I wasn't nauseous with pain before, it's undeniable now. Between the sore shudder of my lungs and stabbing ache in my side, I'm left feeling like I'll spew sickness on the floor. It can't all be from my injuries.

On some level, it's nausea that a man who once claimed to love me could come to hate me this much. Could hurt me this much.

He could see me practically incapacitated on the floor, bruised and broken and defeated in every way, and speak gleefully about *more* punishment. Familiar feelings of heartbreak return at full force.

Not because I'm mourning my relationship with him out of a desire to be together again.

It's a mourning that I could have ever given my heart to this man. That I could've made such a foolhardy, monumental, soul-destroying mistake as

giving him my love.

He never deserved it. Not for a single second.

Instead, my watery gaze meets the eyes of the man who has always deserved my heart, who's always loved me no matter what, and who has always been there all along.

Blake's already watching. He's acutely tuned into every move I make and breath I take.

Because he loves me.

He always has and always will.

When our eyes meet, he blinks twice. His jaw clenched, his throat tight, his expression tells me everything I need to know.

It's okay. I'm here. You're safe. I love you.

It's the safety net I need in a moment like this as Ken stands over me and kicks me in the side.

"Get the fuck up," he growls, and when I barely twitch, he reaches down to grip me by my hair. "I said get the fuck up!"

"Get your hands off her!" Blake yells, raising off his chair. He stops only when Ken aims the gun at him. His other's still twisted in my short hair.

"Sit the fuck back down. Get up again and I'm putting a bullet in you. You," Ken says, shaking my head by my hair, "get on the bed. Janessa, cuff her to the headboard. It's been a while since I've enjoyed my wife."

Janessa hesitates for the first time since she's shown up. Her brows knit into a line before she obeys his request and tugs me over to the bed. Though she's not as rough as Ken, she's far from gentle. She pushes me back against the pillows and drags my wrist toward the four poster headboard, snapping the handcuff shut around the closest wooden column.

"Kenny," she says as she cinches the metal binding tighter than necessary. "Why does she need to be bound to the bed? What do you mean enjoy her?"

"How about you stop questioning me and listen to what I tell you!" he

snarls. “Take off her pants. Then go wait downstairs. This is between the three of us.”

Janessa freezes up with a frown on her face. “But Kenny —”

“DO IT!”

“YOU SICK FUCK!” Blake blurts out, unable to censor himself. “You’re a sick fucking piece of garbage—and I’m going to fucking bash your skull in!”

The corner of Ken’s mouth merely twitches. He stands guard, his gun trained on Blake, and waits patiently as Janessa strips my pair of jeans off. The registered nurse finally seems to be doubting what she’s been told as she glances from me to Ken.

“Are you going to have sex with her?” she asks, a pitiful quality to her voice.

“Get out, you dumb bitch!” Ken shouts at her. She reacts like a frightened mouse that’s come under attack, the way she squeaks and scurries across the room. Ken chases her to the door, yelling at her to keep watch. He slams the door shut once she’s gone. “Stupid bitch thinks I’ll be with her,” he grumbles. “I’ve never met a woman so fucking gullible. No wonder you took advantage, Mr. Cash. Broke her little dumb heart.”

“You’re going to die,” Blake says, his tone quiet yet thick with rage. “I’m going to rip your throat out with my bare fucking hands. You’re going to bleed out on this floor.”

Ken merely smirks, his free hand moving to unlatch his belt buckle. “We’ll see about that. It’s more like you’re about to see the woman you stole from me is still mine. You’re about to watch on as I show you just how much I own her.”

BLAKE



THERE ARE NO WORDS TO DESCRIBE MY HATRED FOR KENNETH STRICKLIN. It's a hatred that's consumed me to my core. Poison that's invaded every part of me and leaves me in a cold, sadistic trance with a taste for blood.

His blood. His *destruction*.

I bide my time. Wait for the right moment.

I track his every move, the muscles in my face taut. My gaze unblinking and focused.

Inside my chest, my heart hammers away. My pulse surges, leaving me high on adrenaline. Senses heighten to animalistic levels.

Stricklin doesn't get it.

He's already a dead man. It's all about choosing when.

The sick fuck laughs striding toward the bed where Korine's handcuffed. His eyes gleam in triumph. He boasts about Janessa being obedient and waiting for him. He brags about how I'll have to watch him have his way with Korine. The tears that track down her cheeks only seem to make him relish the moment more.

The fucker's got a *bulge* in his pants.

He stops in front of the bed. His left hand fumbles with his belt buckle. The right keeps his gun trained on either me or Korine.

"I know you've missed this, Kor," he says, licking at his chapped lips.

Bruises decorate the rest of his pale face. “You’ve been a bad girl. You thought you would disrespect me and go be this biker’s whore. That’s all over with. I’m going to remind you who you belong to.”

“Ken... don’t do this...” Korine chokes out.

He grins wider, still fumbling with his belt buckle. “Not only am I going to do this, I’m going to enjoy this. I’m going to make this piece of trash biker you love so much watch!”

The opening comes when he still can’t undo his belt buckle. He forgets to keep his aim steady and lets it slip. His attention shifts to the metal prong that’s stuck under the belt’s bar.

I throw myself at him. My priority’s on the arm that holds the gun, on making sure it’s pointed away from Korine. Wrestling it out of his grip. Overwhelming him as I catch him by surprise and take him down.

Korine erupts in a terrified scream. Stricklin howls as my fist connects with his jaw. My other hand’s latched onto the gun. His finger’s curled around the trigger. We tumble down as he squeezes the trigger, and the gun goes off.

BANG!

“BLAKE!” Korine cries, tugging desperately on her binds.

But I can barely hear her. I’m lost to the violence. I’m in attack mode.

I throw my fists. I smash his face. I slam him into the ground. My hand wraps around his throat and his eyes bulge in their sockets. His throat muscles work in desperation against my suffocating grip. He sputters out coughs for air. I lift his head up and ram it back down against the ground.

As hard as I can.

I slam his head down again and then again ’til I’m busting open his skull and blood splatters. Seeing his consciousness fade from his expression only feeds my lust for violence. It only makes me smash him harder. Choke him tighter.

I’m dripping sweat, heaving heavy breaths, on the brink of murder.

So deep down a black hole it takes me another second to realize the bedroom door's been kicked open and a group of men flood the space. I'm wrenched off Stricklin, pulled upright with my fist still clenched for more.

Mace's got me. Several others have come with him. Silver tosses a blanket over Korine's lower half and, together with Moses, they try to uncuff her. Ozzie enters gripping Janessa by the upper arm, asking how she's involved in what's gone down.

I haven't come down from my rush of adrenaline. It roars in my ears. I husk for more breaths and shove Mace from his hold on me.

"You can't fucking stop me," I rumble out, the madness inside me uncontrollable. It's broken free and there's no putting it back in the cage. I whip around to launch myself at Stricklin all over again.

Mace piles onto me to hold me back, clapping his arms around my front. "You can't kill him! We've got to be smart about this. We've got guys from the Barreras who are going to —"

"HE NEEDS TO DIE!" I bark.

"And he will! He'll suffer! But we've got to do it in a way that keeps our hands clean." Mace grapples with me 'til he's able to get through to me.

The fury that's driven me insane fades enough for me to see for the first time in minutes. I struggle for more breath on my come down, my chest heaving up and down. I'm slicked with sweat, blood staining my skin and clothes. Mine and Stricklin's.

He's barely alive on the floor. His face is swollen to the point of being grotesque. He curls onto his side and spits up blood and a couple teeth.

The sight should be satisfying, but it's not when he's supposed to be dead.

I clench my jaw and grit out, "When?"

"Tonight," Mace answers. "They've got a guy that'll do it. Even dispose of him. Part of our latest deal."

"Blake."

My name's spoken in a soft cry. Korine's been set free from the handcuffs trapping her to the bed. The instant our gazes meet, she's darting toward me with a desperate vulnerability that reminds me where I am and what's happened.

More than murdering Stricklin matters in this moment.

My girl's wellbeing takes precedence. I pull her into my arms and press my face into her hair. "Kori," I breathe, feeling her shake against me, "we need to get you to a hospital."

"I'll take this dirtbag downstairs," Ozzie says. He walks over to yoke Stricklin up off the floor.

None of us see it coming.

Stricklin hacks up more blood and lets Ozzie yank him to his feet. He even lets himself be dragged a couple steps toward the door, practically limp with how loosely he moves. Then, as everybody's guard's down, he snatches the Glock 19 that's strapped to Ozzie's waist. He aims in our direction and fires.

Mace ducks down. I dive for cover, folding Korine inside of my body.

Bullets fly. Both Stricklin firing Ozzie's Glock and Mace and Moses shooting back at him.

Stricklin doesn't hang around. He's already split from the room. Ozzie's the first to rush after him.

The adrenaline that had been consuming me earlier returns at full force.

I unwrap my arms from Korine and push myself up off the floor. Both Mace and Korine call after me, but there's no stopping this time—I dash from the room, leaping over Janessa's collapsed body—she's been shot in the crossfire and lays in a puddle of blood. I race down the stairs just as Ozzie chases Stricklin out the front door.

"HE'S MINE!" I roar, leaping down three, four steps at a time.

I shove my way past Ozzie in time to watch Stricklin thrust himself into the front seat of his patrol car. He flicks on the switch that controls the lights

and siren and then swings out of the front drive so recklessly he almost rams an older woman out walking her dog. She clutches at her chest in a horrified scream, first from witnessing him almost mow her down, then me as I mount my bike and rumble after him.

We streak through town like this—Stricklin’s patrol car whirring as if he’s racing toward an emergency and me barreling down on him from behind. More than a few times he checks the rearview mirror to make sure I’m still following him, then swerves hard to the left or right. Once, he almost collides with a metro bus picking up passengers.

The farther we make it across town, the more corners Stricklin begins cutting. He weaves between other cars in traffic and runs a red light, narrowly avoiding another crash. He makes a sharp turn around a corner that almost has him mowing down a group of pedestrians. He spins off road across the grassy hills of the park.

All things he does to try and shake me.

Each one I anticipate and work around. As he cuts a path through the park, I circle another way and meet him once he’s careening back onto the streets.

Finally, as his manic desperation becomes too much, he twists around in the driver’s seat and opens fire on me. A skilled rider that’s dealt with my share of shit on the road over the years, he’ll need to try harder. I’m smooth as I glide left, then right, dodging his attempts.

I’m keyed into the same violent urges as earlier. Only difference being I’m smarter this go round. More strategic.

Stricklin’s operating off of the same kind of hunger. He’ll do anything to see me go down. That becomes clear with each law he openly breaks in public. Every wild turn of his patrol car and bullet he fires.

By the time we’re closing in on the trailer park and ravine, he’s broken the law in front of half the damn town.

I hang back far enough to let him self-destruct. Let his mania fester and

then implode. All I've got to do is trail him, show I'm closing in, and can't and won't be stopped. It makes him that much more desperate to beat me.

He contorts himself from the front seat of his patrol car to take aim yet again. His clammy, bruised face shines as he bares his teeth and squeezes the trigger. I anticipate his move, veering left in time to avoid the errant bullet.

Stricklin doesn't set himself right in time to avoid the row of trees leading to the ravine. The car smashes straight on with one of the towering oak trees. The sound of metal crunching and twisting as it collides with wood decades older echoes for miles across town. Smoke hazes the air, almost obscuring the accordion remains of what was once Stricklin's patrol car.

I've gradually braked coming upon the crash.

The crinkled driver's side door wobbles open, half off the hinges. Stricklin pours out onto the ground, more bruised and banged up than ever. He's still clutching Ozzie's gun as he stumbles onto unsteady feet and half falls, half jogs.

I don't even get to do anything but walk toward him. He's not getting away. He's so fucked up, so disoriented, he's about to collapse any second.

The sirens of real police and emergency responders ring in the distant background. People around town must've called 911.

Stricklin stumbles all the way to the spongy edges of the ravine, where the wild grass meets the strip of water that passes through. In his rush to flee, he trips over some pebbles, landing in a bed of jagged rocks. Rolling over onto his back, his hands tremble as he tries to take aim at me.

"Stay the fuck away!" he coughs out. Blood dribbles down his chin. "You... you must have a death wish, Mr. Cash."

I don't stop approaching him, cutting down the distance between us, closing in on him like he's feared.

"It's over," I say. "You lost."

"I didn't lose a damn thing!" He double blinks, struggling to keep his right eye open. It's swollen shut. "You just couldn't let it be! You couldn't let

me have what was mine!”

“Kori was never yours.”

“SHE’S MY WIFE!” he yells. “She was mine, not yours! But you had to take her away! You had to fucking ruin my life!”

He’s pathetic. It’s never been more obvious than in this moment. As he lays on the bed of rocks, bleeding and swollen, shakily pointing a gun at me, he’s destroyed himself so I don’t have to. He’s got nothing left and he knows it.

Killing him would put him out of his misery. Does he deserve that level of mercy?

Stricklin attempts to steady his grip on the Glock. First he aims it at me with his finger curled around the trigger as if he’s about to do it; he’s about to shoot me.

I couldn’t be less concerned. He’s no threat, even with a loaded gun. He’ll miss if he tries.

And he does.

He squeezes the trigger of the gun. But not at me.

The hatred melts from his bloodied features, morphing into a pitiful clench of sorrow amid a sudden flood of tears. He releases a strangled sound and turns the gun on himself.

The bang rings out. He slumps against the rocks, parts of his body twitching. His fingers and his eyelids. No more than twenty seconds later, the cops and emergency responders we heard in the background are pulling up.

I haven’t moved from where I stand. But I already know what to do when they arrive and fan out onto the scene.

I raise up my hands and wait for the inevitable. Handcuffs slap around my wrists as I’m pulled away...

KORINE



“THERE’S MY BABY,” MAMA CROAKS WITH A WEAK SMILE. SHE’S LYING IN bed, dressed in a hospital gown, tubes stuck up her nose, needles piercing her arms. Over the last day and a half alone her hair’s developed twice as many grays and she’s lost some of the pleasant plumpness to her round cheeks.

Yet somehow, like always, she’s a beacon of light. She’s hope personified in every possible way.

It’s almost disorienting after so much pain and trauma. In the aftermath of what happened with Ken, I was admitted to the hospital. For the last day I’ve been heavily medicated and stuck in bed from my fractured rib (among other injuries).

Seeing Mama so hopeful reminds me there is still good in the world.

My heart aches, my eyes tearing up. “Mama... how are you feeling?”

“C’mere, baby. Gimme a hug. Don’t you dare get all sad and mopey.”

I go to her, careful with how I wrap my arms around her. She’s tender to the touch, every part of her more fragile than glass. I kiss her cheek and stroke her graying hair like she used to do to me when I was a little girl.

Her eyes twinkle. “Baby, don’t worry about me. How are you and my golden boy? Tell me he kicked that big bully’s behind.”

“Ken’s in the hospital. There was a chase that ended by the ravine. He tried to shoot himself... but it didn’t work out so well. He survived,” I say,

swallowing against the sudden soreness in my throat. “Blake’s... not doing so well, Mama.”

She frowns. “Why not?”

“He’s in custody. They’re...” I shudder out a sigh, my lungs pained. “They’re going to try to throw the book at him for everything that’s happened. I just know they’re going to make him take the fall.”

“But he was defending you.”

“It doesn’t matter. Not in their eyes. They’re on Ken’s side.”

“Well... fuck them! They’re bullies too!”

“Mama...”

“Listen to me and listen to me real good, Korine,” Mama says, her tone chiding. “You can’t control what those fools are going to try to do. Just like you can’t control any other evil that comes for you. All you can do is hope and pray, because I promise you, good will prevail in the end. It always does, one way or another. Even if sometimes it takes a little while longer.”

I’ve sat down on the edge of her hospital bed, inhaling a deep breath at the same time I’m absorbing her uplifting message. That’s the thing about Mama—with her warm voice and gentle demeanor, she’s able to make the wariest pessimist see the sunshine through the clouds.

That pessimist often being me.

My gaze drops to my hands in my lap.

It hasn’t been easy looking on the bright side. Just in the last couple days, I’ve once again experienced one of the most traumatic moments of my life. Ken put Mama in the hospital. He beat me and took me captive and would’ve done more had he not been stopped. But he’s gotten his way in some fashion if Blake’s going to be criminally charged.

How can I be optimistic when I’ve once again brought trouble to his life?

I involved him from the moment I turned up on his doorstep battered and broken...

Blake would scold me even more than Mama if he knew about these

thoughts. He'd insist he regrets nothing even as he sits in a jail cell. That makes the situation worse. Intensifies the guilt that's anchored inside me.

"He loves you, baby," Mama says softly. I look up in surprise, blinking as if it'll help me hear better. Mama simply smiles and covers one of my hands with hers. "You know that, right, baby? Blake Cash is in love with you. And when a man loves you—a real man, not that big bully you married—he'll sacrifice anything for you."

A choked sound leaves me. Half gasp, half disbelieving scoff. "Mama, it's complicated."

"No, it's not. It's love. Just about the purest, least complicated thing in the world. The man loves you. So he did what he had to do to protect you. Now you show you love him by supporting him. Don't look at me like that—I know when my baby's in love. Hell, I knew when you were twelve and in tears 'cuz you didn't want him to think any different of you 'cuz you got your period."

"Mama," I groan. "How are you just as embarrassing about it now as you were then?"

"It's my job."

The guilt recedes, if only slightly. Enough for me to break in a slight smile. "I care about Blake... so much. I don't want to be the reason his life's ruined."

"It won't be, baby. It'll work out. Trust an old biddy like me. I know a thing or two even if I forget sometimes." She pats my hand, then lays her head back against her stack of hospital bed pillows. Her eyes close and a serene expression washes over her face. "Just don't forget to get married and have a few babies before I'm gone. I want to be around to see it."

I shake my head, puzzled. "I can't conceive. You know that."

"I know you couldn't with that man. Which tells me he was all wrong for you. Whereas my golden boy is all right for you. It'll be different, baby."

I don't bother arguing with Mama. I kiss her on the brow and promise I'll

be back soon. On my way out, I stop by the nurses' station to chat with the nurse on shift that's overseeing her care.

When I'm sure I've won her over, I slip in another request...

"I was wondering if you could provide me the room number of another patient," I say a few minutes into our conversation. I flash her a friendly smile. "He's my husband, but due to all the commotion lately, we've been separated. His name's Kenneth Stricklin."

All I have to do is flash my ID card with my last name and she's providing me his exact floor and room number.

I ride the elevator up, my insides a topsy-turvy mess of nerves, but also another sensation altogether—the sharp, prodding determination for revenge.

Ken's room is quiet and unguarded when I walk up. I push open the door and slip inside. The blinds are shuttered close, allowing for shadows to edge around the corners of the room. I ease closer to the bed where Ken lays pale and despondent.

His face still bores all the evidence of the confrontation from a couple days ago. Swollen flesh. Purple and blue bruises. Widespread gashes.

There's a thick bandage around his brow, from where I presume the gunshot wound is. He'd tried to shoot himself only for the bullet to miss. It cracked his skull but otherwise caused no other damage. He's survived.

I don't stop 'til I'm at his bedside and he's looking over. His cold gray eyes flicker with surprise; he was expecting anyone but me to turn up.

I stare down at him, my expression grave but otherwise unreadable. On the inside, the nerves have fluttered away to make space for the sheer contempt that sweeps in. I'm staring at the man who spent years making my life a living hell.

The man who beat me repeatedly, who tormented me, who thought so little of me he crushed me to the point I no longer existed.

It would be so easy to just... end him.

In this moment, when we're alone and nobody's watching. I could grab a

pillow and snuff the life out of him.

Just like he did to me... slowly over time...

“Kor,” he chokes out. His eyes water. “I knew you’d come. I knew you’d seek me out. Kor, you’re my wife. Anything I’ve done was for you... for us...”

“I want nothing but the worst for you.”

His brows knit. “W-what?”

“You made my life a living hell. You almost destroyed me. You sure as hell tried your hardest to break me. For so long, I thought you did.”

“Kor, I only ever gave you the best —”

I hack out a cold, loud laugh that cuts him off. “The best is being left swollen and bleeding on the floor? Save it, Ken. You did what you did, because you’re an abusive piece of shit who went on a power trip. You never loved me and never wanted what was best for me. You saw me as a weak woman to own and take your every frustration out on,” I say, glaring down at him. My face resembles his so many times, a cold slate with no empathy to be found. “But, guess what? I’m going to get the last laugh. I’m going to break you the way you tried to break me.”

Fury crawls onto his features and he almost leans up from his sprawled position on the bed, as if he’s forgotten how injured he is. Something tells me if he could, he would rise up in this moment—he would do what he’s always done and seek to physically dominate me.

But, then it seems to dawn on him that he has no power. For once, *I’m* in control.

I smirk at him. “You have no idea how tempting it is to just... grab a pillow and hold it over you. No one would even know. It would be over before they do.”

His eyes widen. “Kor... wait a fucking second...”

I pick up a pillow from under the stack propping him up. “This is what it feels like, Ken. To be helpless and at someone’s mercy. It’s not very fun, is

it?”

“Kor, stop... this isn’t funny!”

I move closer, letting the pillow hover over him as if I’m about to bring it down at any second. He begins squirming in place, trying to push himself up enough to either knock the pillow away or press the help button.

Watching him panic nurtures the darkest part of my soul. It satisfies the part of me that yearns to inflict some kind of pain on Ken in the way that he always made me suffer.

I let the moment stretch on for a while before the pillow drops from my hands and I take a step back.

“That would be too easy,” I say calmly. “I won’t ruin my life just to ruin you. You’re going to suffer all on your own. Karma’s real... and you’ve got plenty of it coming your way.”

“Kor... Kor, come back here!” he calls after me. “You’re my wife—you can’t leave me!”

“I already have, Ken. It’s over because *I* say it’s over.”

He calls my name all the way ’til I’ve reached the door and walked out of his room. Calls that are raspy and desperate. Calls full of panic from a man who’s lost all control.

Believe it or not, that in and of itself is enough revenge.

Once I leave the hospital altogether, I have one stop on my mind. Sydney swings by to pick me up in Mason’s truck, leaning over to push open the passenger’s side door. I hop in and thank her for coming.

“No problem. Let me guess. The police department?”

I nod. “If you don’t mind.”

“We’ve tried, Korine. He hasn’t been granted bail.”

“He will be this time,” I say, determination hardening my tone. “I’m going to make it happen.”

KORINE



“WHAT’S THE PLAN?” SYDNEY ASKS ONCE WE’RE PARKED OUTSIDE THE Pulsboro Police Department. She turns off the engine and waits my answer. “There is a plan... right?”

I spend a few seconds watching police officers and town residents trudge in and out of the front doors of the station. A familiar sense of uncertainty expands inside my chest like a balloon filling with air.

“Sort of,” I answer eventually. “It’s not so much of a plan as it is a hope and a prayer.”

Sydney frowns. “This doesn’t sound good. Korine, you might want to rethink this. We don’t need to give them any more ammunition against Cash.”

“You can wait out here if you want.”

I hop out of the truck and start a fast stride across the parking lot. Several paces behind me, Sydney rushes to catch up. My thoughts focus on what lies ahead, tuning out everything else around me. I can’t spend time trying to convince Sydney of what I’m about to do. The longer I wait, the greater the chance I’ll lose my nerve.

A middle-aged man with hairy whiskers sticking out of his ears sits behind the information desk. The same man who had tried to dismiss me the time I’d been here weeks ago to report Ken’s abuse. His gaze flicks up from

behind his readers the way it had before, his expression stiff and unwelcoming.

“Yes?”

“I’m here to see Captain Vargas.”

The man’s lips bend into a sardonic kind of smile. He doesn’t bother referencing his computer or picking up a phone to call the captain. He merely mocks me with his prolonged, dry-blinking stare, and then clears his throat.

“The captain’s unavailable,” he says. He furls the newspaper in his hands, then goes to return to his place in the article he’s reading.

I reach over and snatch it away before he can. “Did you hear me the first time? I need to see the captain.”

“He’s unavailable.”

Again, he makes no attempt to check. No effort to even pretend he respects my request. He half rises from his chair and steals his newspaper right back.

Frustration boils over inside me, melting away the last ounce of patience I have left. I spring forward without warning and slip past the information desk, through the waist-high door flap that leads into the rest of the station.

The desk clerk yells after me, but it’s too late—I’m darting fast between a maze of desks to the puzzled stares of several officers on shift. A few seem to recognize me, sharing glances among themselves. One stands up to intercept me.

Lieutenant Gillard holds out his arms to coral me away from my destination. “Korine, this is not the time for hysterics —”

I duck under him and scurry the rest of the way to the door marked *Captain Julian Vargas*. When I try the knob and discover it’s locked, I bang a fist against the glass cut out in the door.

“I’m only going to tell you once more. Stop that or you’ll be arrested!” comes Gillard’s voice.

The door pops open. Captain Vargas is on the other end, vexed lines

etched onto his face. “What in the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“We need to talk. Right now. I won’t take no for an answer.”

One of Vargas’s brows cocks higher than the other. “You don’t get to dictate that type of thing around here. You don’t get to dictate much of anything at all. Get out of here and we’ll pretend you never showed your face.”

“You’ll see me. Privately,” I say, undeterred. If anything, my tone’s grown more brazen. I’ve lifted my chin, meeting his gaze with fire burning in mine. I’m still sporting bruises on my face. Bruises his officer once again caused. “Unless you want everybody to find out what a dirty cop you are. *Publicly.*”

A tumult of a dozen different voices breaks out. All the officers under Vargas’s charge murmuring to each other about what I’ve said.

Their gossip, so sudden and unmistakable, forces his hand. He tugs at the collar of his button-up uniform shirt, his tongue poking at the inside of his cheek. If he weren’t so tan-skinned, something tells me he’d be flushing red right about now.

“Alright,” he grinds out. “Fine. Five minutes. Get inside.”

It’s only as I hurry past the threshold of his office that I notice I’m not alone—Sydney’s off a few feet to the side, having followed me into the station. I double back to grab hold of her arm and bring her along with me.

“I don’t think so. You said just the two of us,” Vargas immediately protests.

“She’s my backup. You’ll excuse me if I don’t exactly trust the Pulsboro PD after everything I’ve been through. Which is what we’re about to talk about.”

Vargas’s glare hardens. His grizzly white beard can’t disguise the way his jaw’s clenched up. He gestures at Sydney to shut the door and then at the seats across from his desk. Dropping into his own leather chair, he folds his arms over his Santa Claus belly.

“Spill,” he says. “What’s it that you want? Why’re you here?”

I inhale a quick breath to collect myself and then go for it. My hope and prayer that I’d mentioned to Sydney earlier in the truck.

“Blake Cash is being wrongfully held in police custody.”

“Blake Cash is detained and will be formally charged. He not only engaged in a dangerous high-speed chase, he brutally assaulted a police officer. That’s besides the *other* charges he has pending for driving under the influence. As we say where I come from, the cows have come home to roost.”

“He never drove under the influence. Ken and his partner, Coates, framed him.”

Captain Vargas rolls his eyes. “Conspiracy theories won’t be entertained.”

“Ken kidnapped me. He beat me. He pulled a gun on both me and Blake. Anything Blake did in retaliation was *self-defense*.”

“Then I’m sure that can be determined in a court of law.”

“Not good enough,” I say. “Particularly when the man who terrorized me is scot-free.”

“If you mean Stricklin, he’s laid up in a hospital bed on suicide watch right now. Thanks to *your* biker boyfriend and his club that caused nothing but trouble for the precinct and town.”

“And will charges be brought up against him?”

“That is not a matter that will be divulged to you. Stricklin’s been put on a paid leave of absence pending further investigation.”

My fingers dig into the denim fabric covering my thighs. I lean forward in my chair, my eyes narrowing into distrustful slits. “In other words, he’s going to go away for a while ’til you can clean up his mess. Then, when it’s all said and done, he’ll escape the ordeal unpunished.”

“Korine, listen —”

“No, captain, you listen!” I snap. My voice shakes from the frustration

bottled up inside me. I can feel Sydney in the chair next to me almost reaching out as if to calm me down. But I push on, focusing on what I need to do. “I have been beaten... repeatedly. I have been harassed and threatened by one of your officers. I have been held at gunpoint and taken hostage. I have had to undergo emergency medical treatment for my injuries. So has my mother, who was fed the wrong medication at the behest of that same officer.

“When I came to you to file a report, I was told to shut up. I was told to go away. You tried to bury the dirt that one of your officers was an unstable, homicidal woman beater because you didn’t want to look bad. You chose to preserve your career and paint a fake perfect perception of your precinct at the cost of *my* safety. And everyone else’s safety too—tell me, captain, how would the rest of the town feel if they found out their police captain was covering up the fact that one of his officers fractured his wife’s ribs and took her hostage at gunpoint?”

A nervous laugh rattles out of the captain. He sits up from his more relaxed position in his leather office chair and sputters out a couple nonsensical words like, errr and uhhh. Then he peters off into silence when he seems to realize he has no explanation.

“I have the photos, captain,” I say. “Date stamped.”

“Well... err... that can be... any time... that doesn’t prove...”

“What if I told you I have an audio recording of the day I came in to file my report?” I ask sharply. “I have you and Gillard on audio—the sound clear as can be—covering up for Ken. The local news station’s, what, three, four blocks away? Maybe I’ll head over after our little chat. I’ll turn over my photos and audio files. What do you think, Sydney?”

Sydney’s as stunned as Vargas is, though she instantly backs me up with a keen nod. “Sounds like a plan. I’ll drive you myself.”

“Great. Let’s go.”

“Korine,” grunts Captain Vargas through clenched teeth. “Hold on a minute. You can’t really believe you’re going to hang this over my head. You

think I'll comply because you claim to have some audio recordings?"

"You can call my bluff, captain. Please do. Your career to jeopardize." The look I give Sydney communicates it's time to go. We get up in unison and turn in the direction of the door.

The captain only waits another second before he's rushing to call us back a second time.

"I can't magically get the charges dropped," he says. "It depends on many variables, including the district attorney —"

"You flex some of that Pulsboro Police Captain power you have. You find a way... *if* you don't want what we've discussed going public. Figure it out and make Blake Cash a free man again. Or kiss your career goodbye."

I leave him on that note, letting his office door swing shut behind us. We stride through the rest of the precinct to the hushed stares of the officers on the precinct floor. Gillard in particular stands out among the others, looking paler than usual, like he senses he could be in deep trouble too.

Sydney holds off until we're in the truck before she sings my praises. "You had them shook! Where did all that boss energy come from?"

I blow out a breath, my hope and prayer feeling affirmed. "Maybe I channeled my inner biker."

She winks. "We all have one."

"We?"

"Old ladies," she says, starting up the truck. "You're one of us."

"Remember what you told me about being strategic? Why do you think I even recorded my conversation with them the day I tried to file a report?" I grin at her. "I took your advice."

BLAKE



THERE'S NOTHING LIKE WAKING UP TO MY GIRL'S SMILE. I REACH OUT AND smooth my palm along the curve of her cheek before pressing my lips to hers. Her body's nice and soft against mine, her sweet scent everywhere. Practically *sewn* into the fabric of the sheets we're laying in.

It's what we do first thing in the morning—soak up the quiet, my hands stroking her body, mapping out the shape of her. Morning wood's no stranger, tension gathered in my groin area, but there's no rush between us. We wake up slowly, with her fingers sliding in my hair and her silky thigh curling over mine.

When things eventually heat up, it's still slow. It's greedy passion, taking our time 'til we're both so damn turned on, we can't stand it. I sink into her warmth, and we rock together between deep kisses and moans.

And when she explodes, she claws at me like she's lost in a sea of pleasure and I'm her lifeboat. The morning light falls on her beautiful face as her eyes roll back and she writhes beneath me. I'm close behind her, my hips at work. My dick buried deep.

I let go and find myself swimming in the same waters. The same pleasurable tide washes over me. I groan and pump my hips and nuzzle her face with mine.

Feeling so fucking good I'm on top of the world.

...*then* I wake up and I remember it's just memories. I'm lying on a cot in a six by ten jail cell that's got a permanent sticky feel to the air. Privacy doesn't exist when anybody walking by can see me through the iron bars, and peace and quiet are a thing of the past—I can hear every damn move the officer on shift makes from down the hall.

I roll onto my back and stare up at the dreary popcorn ceiling riddled with what's probably asbestos.

Over the past few days, it's my memories that have been getting me by. The thought that they'll become real again once I'm cleared of the charges being brought up against me. But it's in sobering moments like this, still groggy from sleep, where I wonder if I'm giving myself false hope.

If I'm really fucked.

“Get up, Cash. Your lawyer's here to see you,” grunts Symonds, the officer on shift. From what I've gathered, he's the rookie at the station, so he routinely gets the shittiest assignments and shifts. One of those being oversight of the holding cells. He thwacks his rolled up copy of the Pulsboro Tribune against the iron bars. “Come on, come on. We ain't got all day.”

My lawyer's waiting for me in the briefing room dressed in a wrinkled suit and loosened tie. Flecks of dandruff dust his otherwise dark brown hair and he's got bags under his eyes. Even by public defender standards, he's falling short. He flashes a crooked-toothed smile at me and then cracks open his battered briefcase.

“Hello, Mr. Cash. I'm Reggie Hendricks, your court-ordered public defender. How about you have a seat, and we'll review what's happening?”

I drag back the chair opposite him at the table and then plop down. Though my body language reads as relaxed—I'm sitting half slumped, my legs spread and wide, my hands folded on my abdomen—I couldn't feel more fucking stressed out.

If *this* is the guy that's supposed to get me off, things are bleaker than I thought.

Hendricks spends the next twenty minutes reviewing the charges that have been brought against me. He outlines the definition of each one and then proceeds to explain the potential prison time at stake for depending on the final verdict. Then he goes into the court trial process and what I can expect.

As he rambles on, he sounds bored. More than once, he loses his train of thought and has to rifle through his stack of papers, licking the pad of his finger to separate some sheets that have stuck together.

“Where was I?” he mutters, then his eyes widen behind his round glasses. “Oh, yes... err, at which point you go to trial, all evidence and testimony will be —”

“Skip this shit,” I interrupt, sitting up. I pin him with a hard, agitated stare from across the table. “You’re my defense attorney. Shouldn’t we be going over my defense? How you’re going to get me off?”

His stack of papers slips through his fingers and floats to a scattered mess on the ground. He rushes to pick them up and bumps his head on the corner of the table. I roll my eyes, hopping to my feet, and turn toward the door.

“I don’t have time for these games. Go *public defend* somebody else. I’d be better off repping myself.”

“Cash, not so fast,” says Officer Symonds. He’s waiting just outside the door when I try to step out. “You’ve got another visitor. Your last one for the day. This ain’t no damn hotel. It’s a jail.”

I sit back down as Hendricks shuffles out clutching his crinkled papers and battered briefcase. Two more people enter—one I recognize and one I don’t.

Mace juts his chin at me as he walks in alongside a Black man in a suit that puts my short-lived public defender to shame. I figure out what’s going on almost immediately and shake my head, my long hair an uncombed, scraggly mess that frames my face.

“If this is what I think it is —”

“The club’s not letting you go down for this shit, Cash,” Mace says.

“We’ve used funds to get you a lawyer. A *real* lawyer. This is Isaac Druthers.”

Druthers holds out his hand to shake mine. “Let me start by saying, I’ve been reviewing the file they’ve put together on you. It won’t be easy, but it’s also not hopeless. There are a few ways we can tackle this.”

Before I know it, we’re sitting down to specifics on my case—*real* specifics. Not the canned bullshit Hendricks had tried passing off as representation.

It goes past the point of being able to turn Druthers away. Even if I don’t want the MC funding my defense, the ball’s in motion. He’s here and he’s already putting together a detailed defense for my case.

Besides, if the roles were reversed, I’d do the same for Mace. Whether he wanted me to or not.

“We’ll meet again Thursday,” Druthers says after an hour has passed. He checks his watch and then rises out of his chair. “Your arraignment is in a week, then we’ll go from there.”

Mace follows Druthers out of the room ’til he stops a few footsteps away. He claps a hand to my shoulder in typical brotherly fashion and tells me we’re not going down without a fight.

“We’ll play their game,” he says. “But if things don’t go our way, we’ll find a way around it. Just like we always do.”

I nod along. “Kings can’t be broken.”

“We’re made of steel. We’re always gonna survive and rise up. Stay strong, Cash.”

Officer Symonds scowls watching Mace walk out. He escorts me back toward my jail cell. Whatever mask I wear on the outside, I’m no less troubled on the inside. Mace and Druthers provided some level of reassurance, but it’s still not enough to combat the mess I’ve got going on.

Stress. Anxiety. Uncertainty. Frustration. Even fucking longing.

Kori’s a constant on my mind. Right down to the vivid dreams I keep

having the moment I'm asleep.

What if we're unable to fight what we're up against and I wind up behind bars? I get sentenced to years in prison where I'll probably become even more jaded, dysfunctional, and fucked up? I'd never expect Kori to wait for me.

Though it would kill me if she ever got with another man, she'd deserve better than I could give her from behind the bars of a jail cell.

Story of my life. Me fucking up and then not being good enough for my girl.

But, even now, I wouldn't change a thing. I wouldn't take anything back that I did to protect her from Stricklin. It was well fucking worth it.

Symonds sticks his jagged key into the door of my cell and drags it open for me to step inside.

Back to my cage.

I glare at him before I do it, taking a step forward.

"Not so fast, Blake Cash."

Both Symonds and I turn our heads at the sound of the third voice. Captain Vargas barrels down the hall at a fast stride. The sight's one that forces your attention considering he's six foot four, at least two-fifty, two-sixty. His grizzly white beard can't disguise the irritated, tight-lipped bend to his mouth.

"Captain—" Symonds starts.

"Shut up and listen, Symonds. And get started on out processing him."

Shock speeds up my pulse. "You don't mean —?"

"All charges have been dropped," Captain Vargas interrupts. He couldn't sound less happy and more reluctant about it. Right down to rumble sound he makes. "Go ahead and get him discharged. He's a free man."

KORINE



Three months later...

“I’LL SAY. I’VE NEVER SEEN A FINER JOB DONE ON MY NIGHTSTER,” DARYL Weaver grunts, his hands on his slender waist. He’s all faded denim and worn leather from the button-down shirt and tight jeans he wears to the leather cowboy boots he sports. He winks at me, then does another circle of his bike. “You’ve done a damn impressive job, Korine.”

I give him a breathless smile, slicked down in grease and exhausted from hours toiling away. “I had a feeling you’d like it. Glad I was right.”

“Like it? Work like this deserves to be pictured on the front of Rider magazine.”

I help Mr. Weaver finish his pickup of his Nightster and then get started on closing up shop. Since it’s the second weekend in May, the town’s hosting its annual parade to celebrate the spring season and warmer weather on the horizon. We decided we’d play along by cutting our hours short. Chaz and Moss were more than happy to skip out early.

Once I’ve squared everything away in the garage, I move on to the office. All invoices are sorted where they belong, and I print out the next day’s job schedule for everyone that’ll be on shift. I finish by checking emails and voicemails to make sure there’s nothing we’re missing and no one we need to get back to.

Over the past few months, I’ve had the Chop Shop running like clockwork. Much like I had so many years ago, the summer before my senior year in high school when the old manager, Styx, had asked me to help with managerial duties. I enjoyed the work then and I’ve discovered I love it even more now. It’s been rewarding to not only keep the shop itself running, but to occasionally get my hands dirty whenever I work on a project like the one for Mr. Weaver.

My iPhone rings. I answer as soon as it does.

“Baby,” Mama says with a sigh that’s somehow both exasperated and playful. “When are you going to call it quits and get your butt over here? I’m all dressed up and ready to go!”

I laugh. “Mama, a little patience would be nice.”

“Patience? Who’s got time for patience? I ain’t getting any younger!”

“What are you talking about? You’re a hot young thing, Mama.”

“You’re right. I do still got it, don’t I?”

We hang up after trading more banter and the laughs that follow suit. I snatch my keys off the desk and head out to the parking lot, hopping into my 2001 Jeep Wrangler. It’s brick red and topless, with large wheels I fitted on myself—I worked on much of the vehicle when I saved up enough to purchase it off a used car lot.

It might be almost as old as I am, but it runs like a dream. Leaps and bounds better than my bumbling little Geo.

I drive across town with the late afternoon wind tousling my short hair and my huge sunglasses on.

Some would say it’s silly that I feel so alive during simple drives like this. That I relish every second of them as I speed down the long rural road. But for me, it’s a sense of freedom I can’t begin to put into words. It’s the open road up ahead and the fresh air brushing my skin. It’s the knowledge that I answer to no one.

Only myself.

After spending most of my adult life under the thumb of a man who expected me to bow down to him at every turn, it’s like I’m experiencing what it’s like to live for the first time. Be my own woman and own person. Decide for myself what I want to make of my life and how I want to shape my future.

No more am I the meek little wife that catered to Ken’s every whim. I got so used to suppressing myself, making myself small, dimming my shine, that I wasn’t a living, breathing human being anymore. I was an empty shell of a

woman.

Amazing what starting over can do. In a matter of a few months I've become someone else entirely. I've regained confidence I haven't had since freshman year in college... *before* I met Ken. I'm stronger than I've ever been.

Self-assured and unshakable.

Therapy has helped. I found one in Portales that specializes in helping domestic violence survivors start over. I visit her twice a month in person and meet with her another two times a month via cam appointments. She's helped me develop my new perspective.

So have friends and family. Mama has been there at my side every step of the way as we've begun again as a united team. The MC helped us buy her better quality health insurance, even a part-time home nurse that comes several times a week to ensure Mama's taken care of.

Her condition's more or less remained the same, but the doctors say it's still something to be grateful for. She's fighting like hell against things like early onset Alzheimer's and diabetes and a host of other complications she has. Keeping her to a set routine day after day has helped tremendously. So has keeping her surrounded by love. No more tears whenever she has an accident. Just reassurance it's okay and we love her more than she knows.

Sydney and I have become close friends. It started out as a forced friendship due to my relationship with Blake and hers with Mason, but the two of us have developed a bond that stands on its own. We regularly have lunch at the saloon when she's taking a break from running the club's community relations and I'm taking time away from the Chop Shop. Mason's joked that we've become even closer than he is to Blake.

As one of my first real female friends, I'm more than a little protective of our friendship. If Sydney and I have made plans for a lady's night or mani-pedi afternoon, then there's nothing and nobody that's going to impede our time. It helps that Mama's taken a liking to her too, which means sometimes

the three of us go on our own female adventures outside of the club.

My life has never seemed so full of hope and promise. Every moment I treasure as I spend time on the road in my Jeep and reflect on the past six months.

Two days ago, my divorce with Ken was finalized. I didn't fight him for a dime, even though my divorce attorney felt I could've squeezed some spousal support out of him. Ken has his own problems he has to answer for—an anonymous source sent the Pulsboro PD the body camera footage of the night he arrested Blake (Stein's insider on the force if you ask me).

A thorough police investigation was launched, and Ken was arrested for misconduct. What started out as deep dive into the arrest that night then revealed a history of illegal activity and wrongful actions on his part. He's currently in custody awaiting trial, trying to sell the house so he can pay the five hundred thousand dollar bond that's been placed on him. Word is, he'll be lucky not to serve some prison time.

If I didn't believe in karma before, I damn sure believe in it now.

His absence from my life has made living in Pulsboro that much sweeter.

I'm so lost in my thoughts of reflection that I barely notice I've turned on the street I've been headed toward. I brake outside the community center where the latest Alcoholics Anonymous meeting has just let out.

The doors have flown open and a handful of people pour out. Each goes in a different direction. Blake emerges, a slight grin canting onto his face at the sight of me. He starts toward my Jeep, his golden brown hair caught in a gust of wind.

My heart goes still. My guy's so damn sexy sometimes it makes me forget to breathe. It's impossible to pin it down to one trait of his. More like it's everything of his—from the swagger in his walk to the deepest blue eyes I've ever seen in my life landing on me and sending a shiver up my spine. His handsome, perfect face lights up with the grin he flashes. Both permanently flirtatious and amused but also with a hint of affection reserved just for me.

His body's toned muscle is shown off in a simple white t-shirt and torn jeans, and I'm certain any woman in town would blush at the idea of being in his bed. Blake Cash is just that damn sexy and irresistible. As Mama teasingly says, a real panty-dropper kind of man.

He finally reaches my Jeep and leans against the door, ducking his head into the window. "Hey," he says. "You look familiar."

I smile. "Weird, because so do you. Hop in."

"To what do I owe the surprise pick up?"

"I wanted to see your face," I say, shrugging, starting up the Jeep again. "So did Mama. She's waiting on us, by the way. She's been texting telling me to hurry up. She's not getting any younger."

"She's got a point. None of us are getting any younger, are we?"

"Guess not. But you'll always be the boy who I beat at ice-skating each and every time to me."

Blake's husky laugh fills up the space in the Jeep. He reaches over to smooth his hand down the length of my thigh and says, "We'll be seventy and you're gonna be bringing that up, aren't you?"

"I can skate circles around you is all I'm saying —"

"I see somebody wants to start trouble. You might have to answer for that later... when I get you in my bed."

Blake's sexy threat makes me thrum with desire. I have no doubt he fully intends on collecting. I fully intend on enjoying every second of it. I've never been so sexually fulfilled as I am these days with Blake—he's made it his mission to please me inside and outside of the bedroom. Our chemistry is natural and intense and results in us exploding in passion. But most importantly, it's two best friends in love, having the time of our lives.

We've taken our relationship slow. At least emotionally. No L word exchanges and no real plans for the future. Just a dedication to the present, where we both work to overcome traumas and demons and be the best partner for each other we can possibly be.

For me that's meant therapy to process the damage my marriage with Ken did. For Blake it's been attending AA meetings where he can talk with others in recovery and learn new methods to cope and how to overcome his guilt about the car crash that horrible night. He reached his one hundredth day sober the other week, and I couldn't be more proud of him.

Blake is determined to prove he can break the generational curse his father passed down to him; he won't be ending up like Bill Cash because he's a far better man than his father ever was.

I've made it clear that I won't be ready for anything more anytime soon. It'll probably be a couple years before I'm ever ready to commit to another marriage. That doesn't change the fact that if—*when*—I do, there's no doubt in my heart it'll be with Blake.

He senses it too. I see it in his stare whenever he sets his gaze on me. He *knows* I love him.

Just like I know he loves me.

BLAKE



WE PICK UP SUNNY AND HEAD TO MAIN STREET WHERE THE ANNUAL parade's taking place. The woman who's always been something of a second mother to me won't stop sneaking us smirks. She's a bundle of joy as we pull up and she insists we head even closer for a better look.

Korine shares an exasperated look with me and mouths *sorry*.

But I can only feel warmth inside my chest. How can I not when I'm taking my two best girls out for a day on the town?

What's crazy is that I've never pictured this for myself. Attending the town's spring parade with the woman I love and her mother and enjoying myself. The three of us a unit, something of our own family.

I'm the guy who grew up in dysfunction. The kid who used to wear long sleeve shirts to hide the bruises on my arms. The teen who ran away from home more times than I can count, and who eventually applied for emancipation at age sixteen.

I'm the man who let his demons rule him up 'til a few years ago and almost ruined my life on that fateful night.

I survived to see another day after the crash. I have to keep making the most of it.

It's wild to look over at Korine, her soft, slim body tucked into my side, and realize that I've got something I never thought I would. That I was sure I

was never good enough for. A good woman and the love she gives me.

None of it's been easy. It's been anything but.

We've traveled down a long, twisted path with roadblocks every step of the way to getting where we are. We're still on our way to the final destination... wherever that is for us.

Sharing in a small smile with Korine, something tells me we'll get there eventually. We're halfway there even if we haven't said the words aloud.

I turn my attention back onto Main Street. A string of different floats drifts by as people on both sides of the street wave and cheer them on. The town council has put together a float for damn near everything.

The elementary school's got one. So does the middle school and high school. The local beauty pageant's got one with their most recent queen sitting up top and each of our town sports teams have their own.

Sunny elbows me as the float for the Pulsboro Pioneers goes by. "The motorcycle club might as well get a float."

"Not sure any of the guys would be interested in participating in that. Or any of the town leadership would want us to."

"You could be on it," she teases. "The women in town would love it. We could call the float the Panty Dropper."

"Mama, shush!" Korine gasps through a laugh.

A couple people nearby have glanced over in curiosity at Sunny's comment. She brushed them off, paying them no mind as she pokes an elbow into my ribcage again and mutters, "Think about it."

Once the main part of the parade's over, the town migrates toward the park where the festivities continue with a live performance from a local band nobody outside of our county has ever heard of and barbecue food to snack on. Sunny spots Sydney and beelines over to talk her ear off for a few minutes.

Just the two of us, Korine makes the most of the moment. She loops her arms around my neck and thanks me for another great evening out together.

I'm too distracted by how plump and sweet tasting her lips look. I swoop in and cut her off with a kiss.

"My pleasure," I growl afterward, squeezing her hips and nuzzling her neck. "I scheduled Yara to work overnight. She'll be watching over your mother if you're okay with that."

Korine's eyes sparkle, understanding my suggestion. "I'll have to see if Mama's okay with that first."

I bark out a chuckle. "Okay with it? It was *her* idea. She said you need more fun in your life."

"That does sound like something she'd say."

"Is that a yes? Be careful what you're agreeing to—you'll be mine for the next twelve, thirteen hours."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

My thumb traces the swell of her cheek only to end up tucking hair behind her ears. I'm amused at the spark she's giving, the hint of mischief that reminds me of the many times we spent together through the years. All of 'em that've led us to this point.

"Let's go find Sunny."

The sky's a huge blot of ink by the time Korine's mounting my bike and I'm revving the engine. She clutches her hands to my abdomen, her arms tight around my sides as we blast off into the dark. Her every breath heard and felt pushed up so close against me. Things I savor and take in.

The sounds and feels of Korine McKibbens, my dream girl. My best friend since the time I was a kid. The one person I've always sought in the dark times... and the girl who I've always been willing to destroy the world for.

We ride for miles 'til civilization falls away and it's the open road that's

keeping us company. The night stretches long into the distance with the cool air blowing across our skin. In a few weeks spring'll be over and the breeze in the evening won't feel half as refreshing on the skin.

The moment couldn't be better. Korine snug against my back. My grip on the round top handlebars of my bike as we enjoy each other's company.

Riding my bike 'til *we're* ready to stop. A bike we worked on together in the shop. Once again, Kori showing off her skills as she helped me make upgrades and enhancements, casting me that bright smile of hers as she wiped her hands clean of motor oil.

Just seeing her in the garage makes me hard. Makes me want to bend her over my bike...

Eventually, we stop miles outside of the Ludic County line. Far beyond Pulsboro and other towns like Boulder and Wheaton. I pull onto the shoulder of the highway and then off-road onto a pasture that probably leads to somebody's farmland.

We pull off our helmets and stretch our legs. Korine couldn't look more appetizing in a leather motorcycle jacket I've gifted her—complete with her own personalized club rocker stitched onto the back—and jean shorts that show off how toned her legs are. It's like Christmas night all over again as she shakes her windswept hair out of her eyes.

I grin and step to her. "How was the ride?"

"Smooth," she answers, smirking sexily. "I enjoyed the fine tuning we did on your suspension. It really made the difference long distance."

I chuckle, giving a subtle shake of my head. Korine rests her hands against my chest and peers up at me with curiosity.

"What's that laugh for?"

"Count on Korine McKibbens to think about the technical aspects of a motorcycle ride."

"I *am* an engineer!"

"Yeah, you are. And so fucking sexy."

I kiss her, unable to go another second without tasting her. Sweetness explodes on my taste buds the second that I do. I suck her lips between mine and take my time experiencing her in whatever way I can.

In whatever way feels natural in the moment.

It's a vibe we both give into. Sexual tension rises between us, building from earlier, 'til it shatters now.

Korine wiggles her body against mine and teases the fuck out of me with her touch. Her gentle hands—still so fucking soft even after months of toiling away in the shop—slip and slide up and down my body. She feels the hard curve of my biceps and runs a hand across the muscle etched into my abdomen. The kind of touch that makes my dick throb in demand for relief.

“Keep kissing me like that, Blake Cash, and you'll have me slinging my panties,” Korine says. We've broken apart long enough for a breather. She traces her fingers along the hard-packed outline of my pec and then up toward my throat. She skims the scruff along the upper parts of my neck and then my beard. More touches that make me aware of how erect I am. *All* as she tells me about her panties. “You had me on the back of that bike for an hour. The cool air. Your muscles I was pressed up against. The *vibration...*”

I laugh. “Is that your way of telling me you're turned on, Kori?”

“It's my way of hoping you brought me out here for more than just a ride.”

Fuck. This girl. She's gonna be the death of me.

“I brought you out here for a ride, alright,” I say, thumbing her bottom lip.

“Thank you.”

“For offering you a ride on my dick? Kori babe, anytime.”

She casts me a scolding look, though her smirk still bleeds through. “More like thank you for taking me out. For giving me excitement. For... for sticking around. Any other man would've run for the hills.”

“I'm not any other man. And you're not any other woman. We're Cash

and Kori. Best friends and lovers. There was never any doubt about whether I'd stick around."

"I never should've left. I'm sorry that I did."

"It doesn't matter anymore. It's worked out the way it was supposed to."

We interrupt ourselves with more kisses. My hands slide along the curve of her ass. Hers scratch along my bearded cheeks.

It's only the beginning of the passion that's to come. I sit backwards on the seat of my bike and Korine climbs on top of me. We kiss 'til we're coming undone. We've unbuckled my jeans and my dick's out. Korine's straddling me, sinking down and encasing me in the silky hot tunnel that's her pussy.

There's no better feeling than Korine McKibben's legs wrapped around you. No better feeling than being inside of her. Something I learned when we were seventeen and it's something that's still true today.

I make good on my promise. I give Korine a ride. She rolls her hips and grips my chest and shoulders and makes the most of it.

My girl's so sexy, letting go, tossing her head back, riding the wave of pleasure. I ride along with her, grunting as her pussy walls clench and my dick pushes in deep. We fuck on my bike under the inky sky 'til we're seeing more than just the stars above.

We're seeing stars flash before our eyes as pleasure sweeps us up and a violent orgasm rocks us.

I draw Korine's mouth to mine, my hand palming her bare ass. I keep her perched in my lap where she belongs. We don't move for a long time. The breezy spring air rakes over our skin and cools us down from the heat we shared in.

Finally, things have come full circle. It took us a while, but we're together in the way we've been meant to be from that first moment in the tree.

BLAKE



“COFFEE?”

They’re my first words to Korine the moment we’re both awake. I’ve woken up no more than a minute before she has. She rolls over to face me, blinking blearily as if she’s been asleep for twenty years, not six or seven hours.

A smile almost twitches its way onto my mouth watching her. I reach out and run an appreciative hand along the curve of her hip ’til I’m reaching around to palm her backside.

Korine’s eyes light up and she wiggles even closer for our morning cuddle. “Coffee sounds like just what I need after being kept up all night.”

“Not so sure that can be blamed on just one party,” I say, gripping her ass. I kiss her lips and feel my dick throb in my boxers. “You were more than happy to show me just how much you wanted me last night. I don’t think I’ll ever forget you on that bike.”

Her hands come up to cover her face. Her laughter peals out of her anyway, from through her fingers. I grab hold of her wrists and pry her hands away from her face, forcing her to look me in the eye and endure my taunts about how sexy and dirty she got last night.

Knowing it was just for me—she’d never let go in that way for Stricklin or anybody else—made it all the hotter.

“Don’t hide from me now, Kori.” I nip at her jaw, then bury my face in the crook of her neck. I spend a couple seconds inhaling the natural scent perfumed on her skin. That scent that’s Kori’s and Kori’s alone. It’s enough to make me hard on its own.

It *does*.

My already semi-erect dick becomes harder than steel. Something Korine can more than feel brushed up against her.

Humor flickers onto her face. Her lips quirk as she threads fingers through my hair. “I love waking up to you, Blake Cash.”

“And my morning friend.” I give off a gruff laugh that widens her smile.

“And your morning friend,” she repeats, kissing me on the lips. “I love it all. I love... I love you.”

I lock up, not because the confession’s an unwelcome one; I lock up because it’s an unexpected one in the best way.

We’ve taken things slow these past few months. Korine wanted to wait ’til she was officially divorced before getting any more serious, and we’ve both been sorting through our personal issues. Hearing her say the words—exactly how I’ve felt about her this entire time—is like receiving the most special damn gift imaginable.

Korine’s love. Her trust in me and that she can love me and let me love her after everything she’s been through.

“Kori,” I rasp, squeezing her closer. Dropping kisses all over her face. “You sure you mean it?”

Her brows knit once we’ve pulled apart. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“’Cuz there’s no take backs,” I answer. “’Cuz I’ve been in love with the girl who spotted me in a tree and told me I’d climbed it all wrong. The same girl who used to leave her bedroom window open for me. The same woman who knows how to fix a bike better than any of the guys at the shop. And now that I know she feels the same, I’m never letting her go. Just be prepared.”

“It sounds like we’re on the same page. You’ve been my best friend since before we knew our times tables... and much more.”

We consummate our profession of love in a passionate round of morning sex that gives last night a run for its money. By the time we’re through, we’re both rocked to our cores. We’re slick and breathless and in need of a hot shower. We hop in together, taking our time, unable to keep our hands off each other.

Coffee comes next. Then a small breakfast.

You’d think we have all the time in the world with how lazy and slow we’re being. Eventually, we do have to move on. I drive Korine home in my pickup truck to take over for Yara, Sunny’s home care nurse.

Sunny’s sitting at the kitchen counter when we walk in. She doesn’t miss an opportunity to tease the hell out of us about what we were up to last night. Korine’s mortification shows on her face as she cries out, “Mama, stop!”

I give Sunny a hug, then kiss Korine goodbye.

My next stop is the club. The Steel Saloon’s a ghost town so early in the morning, even if later in the day there’s an event. Mace is throwing a birthday gathering for Sydney. He’s not a celebratory kind of guy, which is what makes the occasion feel even stranger.

I find him in the club office looking uncharacteristically... *nervous*.

He shoves something into his desk drawer when I walk in. Then shakes his head once he realizes it’s me.

“Thought you were Syd.”

“Why would it matter if I was?” I ask, shutting the door.

“Today’s Syd’s birthday.”

“And?”

His stony expression normally doesn’t give away much. Except for today as he slides a hand over his head and exhales a deep breath. “I’m going to ask her today.”

“To marry you?!”

“Shhh, shut the fuck up!” he hushes, glancing around like he believes Sydney’ll pop up at any moment. When he’s certain she won’t, he nods. “We’ve been together eight months. Eight really good months. Things are... they’re serious. I want this with her.”

I grin and then stride forward to shake his hand. “Congrats, brother. Who would’ve guessed you’d be the first in our group to tie the knot? You think she’s got any idea?”

“I doubt it. She thinks we’re just having a small dinner. I swore everybody to secrecy. ’Cept Ozzie saw the ring. But I told him I’d beat the shit out of him if he said a word.” Mace pulls open the drawer to grab the ring box and tosses it my way.

I catch it, popping it open for a quick appraisal. I whistle. “Nice rock. I can see it shining on Syd’s finger.”

I congratulate Mace again before checking in on the bike shop. Moss is busy working on a custom order we got in last minute. Everybody else is either off today (it’s a Sunday) or not in for the day yet.

Half considering taking the day myself, Moss calls out to me from his garage. I follow the sound of his voice ’til I’m slowing up and my insides are twisting into knots.

“This woman said she’d like to speak to you?” Moss says, a clueless frown on his craggy, bushy-browed face.

Mom’s at his side. Her limp sheets of hair are even oilier and grayer than the last time I’d seen her. If I didn’t know any better, I’d guess she’s earned a few new smoker’s lines around the mouth and eye areas of her face. She flashes me a yellow-toothed smile that’s hesitant but manipulative in nature.

“Hi, Blake,” she says. Her tone’s meek. Nothing like the moments where she cusses me out or calls me her life’s disappointment.

Moss excuses himself on the premise he needs a coke break. Leaving us alone, we stand in tense silence for another few seconds.

“Your father and I have been trying to get a hold of you,” she says. “We

heard the charges were dropped. That officer that had arrested you was dirty.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “You mean after you thought the worst of me, you want to pretend you were concerned?”

“We were always concerned —”

“You said I was the biggest mistake of your life.”

“I was angry when I said that.”

“You’d think that’d be your piece of shit abusive husband who’s spent decades beating you—who spent my childhood beating me.”

“Your father’s always had a temper,” she says, her pitch sharpening. “If you’d just stayed out of his way —”

“More like Bill’s always been a fuck up and you’ve never been able to accept it. So, like him, you put it all on me. You made it seem like I was the problem. I was the reason why you both were so damn miserable all the time. When, really, it’s got nothing to do with me.” I shake my head at the clarity I’ve reached. It’s like seeing things as they truly are for the first time. “It’s the two of you that are the fucked up ones. You’ve been so pissed Bill wound up in that wheelchair. Bill put himself in that fucking wheelchair. What happened to him isn’t on me and never was.”

Her mouth drops open. Her wrinkled, pallid face freezes. She’s at a loss for words.

“What’s the matter, Mom? Nothing to say?” I ask, tilting my head to the side. “That tends to happen when you’ve finally been called out on your shit. Get the hell out of my face. I’ve got nothing else to say to you. You’re not my family. Neither is Bill. I’ve *found* my family—and it’s everybody in the MC. It’s Korine and Sunny. The people who *really* care about me.”

Watching her go is priceless. She slowly turns and shuffles off as if in a daze, getting behind the wheel of her clunker of a station wagon and driving off in a plume of exhaust smoke.

I feel good. Better than I ever have. More optimistic for what’s to come.

Funny what letting go of baggage can do.

Day one hundred and five...

Mace proposes to Sydney in front of everybody at her birthday dinner. It's being held on the patio outside the Steel Saloon. Mick, Bush, Big Eddie, and a couple of the other guys barbecued and smoked some meats. Ozzie's volunteered himself as being in charge of the music again. Johnny Flanagan is a fucking annoying sourpuss like he always is; Silver sends him to the back of the bar to carry in more cases of beer and that shuts his whining ass up.

Sunny fits in like she's a been Steel King her whole life. Everybody's entertained by her and the stories she tells anyone who'll listen.

Sydney beams and shakes her head. "Your mom is hilarious. She's the cutest thing."

"She's a lot to handle," Korine laughs. "But she makes everything better."

I nod my agreement, my arm slung over Korine's shoulders. "That she does."

"When are you two going to move in together?"

Korine and I exchange a look, then give a shrug. In sync with each other as if planned.

"It's coming," Korine answers. "When the time is right."

"Kori's in love with me."

Sydney's beam grows even wider while Korine gasps and then nudges me in the ribs. I'm unable to keep from grinning as I put on my most innocent, clueless face.

"What? You told me you did! Now I get to tell everybody."

"Shout it from a mountaintop, why don't you?"

"I would if one was nearby."

"You two," Sydney says, laughing. "Something tells me I'll be at your

wedding soon.”

Korine’s flushing hot to the touch, though she doesn’t object to Sydney’s prediction. I don’t get a chance to give her a hard time about it, because in the next moment, Sydney’s getting a shock of her own—Mace proposes.

He surprises Sydney when she’s seated at her table trying to swallow a bite of her birthday cake. He bends to a knee and takes her hand in his as everybody else on the patio falls into a hushed silence.

“Syd, I think everybody would agree things between us started off rough,” he says. “I couldn’t stand you. You damn sure couldn’t stand me. But there was always a draw between us. I tried like hell to resist you. I think it’s safe to say I’ve failed.”

A small ripple of laughter sounds from everybody watching.

“Probably ’cuz I saw in you something I didn’t want to admit—a woman that could stand on her own. Maybe the only woman I’ve ever met who could truly handle me. These past months together have been some of the best of my life. But it’s not enough. I don’t want you just as my old lady. I want you as my *wife*.”

Everybody erupts in cheers as Sydney frantically nods and throws her arms around him. He slides the ring onto her finger, and they come together again in another joyous kiss. I can’t help holding Korine just a little bit closer. A little bit tighter, more possessively.

Someday, that’ll be us. Me and my girl. When she’s ready. I’ll wait however long it takes.

“Everyone’s clapping,” Silver says from another seat at our table. He takes a swig of his beer bottle. “Everyone’s happy to celebrate ’til the marriage goes down in flames.”

Ozzie eyes the silver-haired vice prez with almost a look of amusement. “Still hurting over the divorce, eh? I’ve got some Bob Marley on deck. It’ll cheer you up.”

“Oz,” Silver grunts. “Shut the fuck up.”

Once Sydney's accepted the proposal, the rest of the party festivities truly begin. People get up to socialize and play drinking and card games. The music blasts louder, and soon the occasion feels like it's more than Sydney's birthday.

It's another night the club's going to make the most of life.

An hour later, Korine and I are the only ones left at our table. I don't even notice 'til I glance around and realize everybody's migrated. Mick's chatting up Sunny while Mace and Sydney are in their own little bubble.

Big Eddie, Bush, Stein, Moses, and a couple more guys are deep in a poker game. Ozzie's started popping and locking on top of a table again. Silver's drunk and flirting with an eager Sandy.

Things feel at ease... 'til somebody walks up that earns double and triple takes.

He approaches as everybody's busy celebrating. He's cut through the pit of rocks that separates the saloon and the Cutler household behind the bar. How he even got in through the house would be a mystery if I didn't look up and recognize him.

And then question my sanity.

The same can be said for Mace—he's mid conversation with Sydney, laughing and hugging up on her, when he glances over and freezes in place. The color drains from him in a way I haven't seen happen for years.

Since his brother's funeral.

Fitting, all things considered.

Logan waits a couple seconds for everybody's shock to set in. For their stares to drag on as they're speechless about how to respond.

Then he juts his chin right at Mace and says, "Got a sec? It's time we talk."

BLAKE



“LOGAN?” MACE CHOKES OUT. HE CHECKS EVERYONE ELSE’S REACTION LIKE he needs to make sure he’s not the only person seeing the man standing before him.

The problem is, everybody else is just as shocked. Everybody’s gaping. Everybody’s speechless.

Including me.

I’m daring my eyes to tell me they’ve deceived me. I’m wondering if there was more than Coke in the soda can I’m clutching.

But he’s real. Logan in the flesh.

It’s been over three years since he died. Three long years have passed. That Logan bears the evidence of—he still resembles himself but different.

Older. Worn down. Battle fatigued.

Mason’s older brother’s got scars. Both physically and metaphorically. From the damaged energy he exudes to the slash mark along his cheek and across his throat. He’s been through things in his time away.

The only way to describe his eyes would be to say they’re *haunted*. In the past, they were a baby blue like their father’s that many women loved. The color’s morphed from being reminiscent of the sky to being closer to glacial ice that makes you uncomfortable when on the receiving end.

A man that’s seen and experienced things no person should.

I know this after one look at him.

His straggly, unwashed sheets of brown hair and overgrown beard confirm this. So do the clothes he's wearing that are riddled with holes and dusted in dirt and grime.

Logan's been to hell and back. Whatever his story is, wherever he's been all this time we've presumed he's dead, he's got the ghosts to show for it.

Finally, after several seconds of stunned silence go by, Silver makes the first move. Fitting, as the vice prez of the club who's recently returned from his hiatus. He steps over to Logan as if about to investigate whether we've got an impostor in our midst.

"Son," Silver says. He grips Logan by the shoulder like a father figure. "We should head inside. You can tell us about... you can tell us where you've been all this time."

Logan blinks several times like he's been in his own trance. His expression's void of any real human emotion. There's an emptiness to it that makes you think of the walking dead. A man that's lived and died and no longer can tell the difference.

But he lets Silver lead him away from the party. Everybody else in attendance watches on, still unable to move or think up anything to say.

I force myself to get up out of my chair. Korine gives me a knowing look, her brows knitted in concern. She gets exactly what I'm about to do.

I go to Mace and collect him in much the same way Silver did Logan. We leave the patio behind and follow Logan and Silver into the club office. Only a few others trickle in, like Tito and Bush.

"What's going on?" Mace says the moment the door's closed. He strides up to Logan in a sudden burst of energy, his face twisted in anger. "You've been alive all these years and you didn't tell us? What kind of fucked-up games have you been playing, Logan?"

"Mace," Silver starts.

"You let us think you were dead?! That you'd been shot and run off a

fucking cliff? You know what it was like finding your bike totaled? Learning from the cops what had happened and how you hadn't survived that big of a fall? That fucking coyotes likely ate your remains?" he rages in a thick rumble. Veins pulse at the sides of his neck and in his forearms as he clenches his hands into ready fists. He takes more steps toward his older brother like he's tempted to swing on him. "Were you trying to escape the MC and what it meant to take over for Pop? Leave me with all the fucking problems, huh?"

"MACE!" Silver bellows. "Enough."

"C'mon," I say, cutting in between. I serve as a buffer, easing Mace back with a hand to his chest, holding eye contact with him in hopes it'll help him snap out of his temper. "Hear him out first. Hear what he's got to say."

Mace inhales a tense breath, his expression no less rabid.

Attention shifts to the other side of the room, where Logan's with Silver, still looking every bit of a dead man who's alive. Silver clamps his hand on Logan's shoulder again to rouse him out of his prolonged stare that's as haunted as it is vacant.

"Tell us, son," Silver says. "What the hell's happened to you all this time?"

Logan's throat bobs with a hard swallow. He blinks a couple times, then strokes a hand over his unkempt beard. A faraway look glazes over his face the more he seems to think on what to say about his whereabouts.

"I was shot, and I was run off a cliff by Madrigal. I don't know what happened next... 'cept I woke up in their hands. In some border town. They were fixing me up," he explains, his speech slow and stilted. "They were gonna use me as slave labor. Then something happened. Their leaders were taken out. The whole cartel was up in the air."

"We took out their kingpin, Javier. His brothers too," Silver clarifies.

"Some of the guys who had me in their custody struck some kinda deal with somebody else. An American. Guy by the name of Rooker. They sold

him me and a couple others. Guess to offload us 'cuz shit was going down.”

“What did Rooker do with you?” I ask.

“He brought us to another dump. Back in Texas. Smuggled us in.”

“Why do I feel like nothing good came of your stay there?” Tito sighs with a solemn shake of his head.

Logan pierces him with a stare that’s lifeless and disturbed. Exhaustion rings his pale blue eyes. The scars etched onto his skin draw more attention to how worn down he is. They speak for themselves.

“It was nothing I would ever wish on anybody,” Logan says after a long pause. “Rooker’s the leader of a cult—the Chosen Saints is what they call themselves.”

“A *cult*?! Holy sweet fucking Jesus,” Bush swears with a whistle.

Mace takes a step toward his brother, his gaze narrowed in suspicion. “A cult? That’s where you’ve been all this time, Logan?”

His older brother drops his eyes to the ground. More horrors pass before him, like he’s suddenly time traveled. “Me and a few others were their captives. Their... offerings.”

He trails off without explanation, and though he doesn’t explain, he doesn’t need to. Whatever it meant to be an offering in this cult he speaks of, it’s evident it’s nothing anybody would want to be.

I run a hand through my hair and glance over at Mace. He’s caught between the suspicion of his brother suddenly being alive and the confusion of it. He doesn’t know which direction to go in. Neither do I. Neither does Silver or anybody else.

Logan sighs. “I escaped. Finally... after years. I made it out. But they’re still strong—they might be looking for me. Rooker and his minions. Don’t know much about ’em. ’Cept that they’re affiliated with the Rebels. The prez in prison, Rollins.”

I share an ominous look with Bush and Tito.

“You’re saying this cult that took you is affiliated with the Road Rebels?”

Silver repeats.

Logan nods and pierces the room with another haunted stare. “I’m going to murder them. Every one of them for what they did... the things they... I’ll die. So long as they do.”

“We’ll get ’em,” Silver says. He turns around to the rest of us. “Right?”

“Always,” Tito adds. “We got you.”

Bush nods while I say, “We’ll take ’em out like we always do.”

Everybody looks to Mace. He hesitates a second, still clinging to his suspicions of his once-dead brother. Then he scrubs a hand over his head and gives a nod.

“Rooker, this fucking cult, what’s left of the Rebels, they’re dead. All of ’em.”

Logan gives no reaction, if he’s even capable of one. “There’s more to it than that. They’ve still got captives.”

“We’ll get ’em out.”

“No,” Logan says. “You don’t understand. They’ve got captives. They’ve got... my *wife*.”

Korine waits up for me. She took my truck and drove herself and Sunny home when the meeting with the guys took too long (I shot off a text and told her to do it). I wave off Bush, who’s given me a ride to her apartment, and then head up to find her waiting for me at her dining room table. She jumps up at the sound of my key in the lock and is rushing toward me when the door falls open.

Her arms fly out to yank me into a grateful embrace. Then come the kisses and mutters of how worried she’s been all these hours. I let her work through it ’til we’re drawing back from each other and I’m able to peer into her shiny dark eyes.

“It’s alright,” I say, stroking her cheek. “I’m okay. Everybody’s okay—or as okay as they could be given everything.”

“What happened? Logan —”

“He’s been held captive. Some kind of... of cult had him. He managed to escape, but they’ve still got others. They’ve got some relation to the Road Rebels.”

Understanding dawns over her face. “Oh my god, that’s horrible. The things he must’ve gone through...”

“It’s fucked him up. He didn’t tell us everything—or even half of everything—but I can sense it all over him. He’s like some soldier returning from war.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he has PTSD. How is the club going to handle this? If the Road Rebels are involved, then there’s no telling how deep it goes.”

I clutch Korine’s hand and walk her over to the dining room area that flows into the kitchen. Before I can even offer, she’s beating me to it, bustling over to pour us some iced sweet tea. She returns to the table with both drinks and then drops into her seat with an expectant air.

My girl’s always got my back. She’s always wanted to be by my side whenever trouble’s arose.

Not that she’ll be involved in this. She’ll be kept far from it.

I sip from the ice-cold sweet tea and let out a breath. “We’re gonna have to take ’em out. For what they did to Logan and for what they could do to us. He said they’ve still got hostages. His wife. Some woman, Teysha.”

“Teysha,” Korine repeats, then she gasps. Her eyes widen and she gapes at me much like she’d stared at Logan earlier. “It can’t be the same Teysha that went missing from the diner. Blake, don’t you remember when we picked out the Christmas trees?”

I stare at her, giving no reaction. The name doesn’t ring a bell.

“*Teysha!*” she says a third time with even more emphasis. “Remember

when we stopped at the Sunny Side Up diner? That older woman Sydney spoke to who was crying about her missing niece?”

It slowly comes back to me thinking on that evening. “That’s right. She’d said she’d been missing for months. It can’t be the same girl...”

“It could be! The woman seemed to think she’d been taken. Did Logan describe her?”

“We didn’t press him for that many details. Mace didn’t catch it either. We’ll have to mention it to Sydney and have Logan describe her.”

Korine shakes her head, her expression one of deep worry. “I can’t even imagine going through what they’ve gone through.”

“Hey, we’ll survive.” I forget about the iced tea and grab both her hands to pull her toward me. Once she’s seated in my lap, I lock my arms around her hips and go in for a kiss that’s full of the love I have for her. She indulges me, smiling against my lips, then resting her brow against mine. “We don’t break,” I tell her. “We survive. We rise up. Never forget that, Kori.”

“I’m not a King.”

“You’re my old lady. Good as.”

She brushes her mouth to mine, teasing another kiss. “I’m yours. I know now I never wanted to be anybody else’s. Even if I pretended otherwise for a while.”

“We were both pretending. Both trying to move on. But we never could. ‘Cuz you’re always gonna be my girl.”

“And you’re always going to be the boy who can’t climb a tree,” she laughs, and I do too.

It’s how we spend the rest of the evening—enjoying each other’s company, being the best friends in love that we’ve always been.

KINGS DON'T BREAK PLAYLIST



Cash:

1. Strawberries & Cigarettes - Troye Sivan
2. Again - Lenny Kravitz
3. Far From Home (The Raven) - Sam Tinnesz
4. I Need My Girl - the Nationals
5. Enemy - Tommee Profitt, Beacon Light & Sam Tinnesz
6. A Silent House - Joshua James
7. Hold My Girl - George Ezra

Kori:

1. Rain on Me - Ashanti
2. Wasting My Young Years - London Grammar
3. Trainwreck - BANKS
4. All Too Well - Taylor Swift
5. No One Else - Taner lle
6. Weaker Girl - BANKS
7. thank you song - FKA Twigs

Listen to [Cash](#) and [Kori's](#) playlists on Spotify!

KINGS

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CHAPTER 1 - LOGAN



Day nine hundred and sixty-one of captivity.

I etch the number on the wooden panel with the dull blade of my knife. It joins the hundreds of other tick marks on the cabin wall.

The sun didn't bother coming out. Thick storm clouds hide it from view. More rain'll be coming by tonight.

The pots placed around the room need to be emptied. They're still full with the water that leaked in during last night's downpour.

I roll over on the sunken-in bunkbed 'til I'm sitting up and my bare feet touch the puddles on the ground. We ran out of pots, causing water to pool around the room.

I barely notice the difference—my feet are pruned to the point of numbness.

Some of the others still cry about it.

I rise up off the bunk to the sounds. A skeleton of a woman sits in the corner opposite me, her bony knees drawn up to her chest, sniveling as she checks her toes. She's one of the newer ones. Still naive. Still delusional with hope.

They're my least favorite types. The ones who think there's still some grand silver lining somewhere.

Relief will have to come eventually...

I make my way across the room and stop in the doorway long enough to take in our surroundings. It's still early enough that the rest of the compound's dead silent. The other cabins bear no sign of life despite the fact that each one has people packed in like sardines in a can.

No different than the cabin I'm in.

My gaze switches out from peering around the grounds to inside the cabin where there's an empty top bunk.

Today's the day she arrives. They'll bring her in and she'll be initiated into the family.

Whoever she is, she probably doesn't know what's in store for her. They're probably still transporting her. Meaning she's probably still knocked out.

In dreamland clueless of the hell she's about to be put in.

The Leader and his saints have been searching far and wide. They've spoken about the new believer they needed to replace the last one. Not just anybody would do—she had to be of pure faith. She had to have a good heart.

Something the Leader claims is damn near impossible these days.

“Most women are deviants,” he'd explained during one of his sermons. “They're dirty, filthy sinners that will burn in hell on judgment day. Our new believer must be worthy of our sacred home.”

Never mind that I'm as sinful as sinful gets.

Never mind that he and his saints are the rottenest, evilest people I've ever met.

In their eyes, they're doing the work of some higher power.

None of that matters in this fucked up world we're captive in.

I'm standing so long in the doorway that Brody appears from the large house upfront. He crosses the grassy stretch of land carrying his AR-15 against his shoulder, his expression tight-lipped.

Our eyes lock on each other.

I don't bother letting him finish his walk toward my cabin. I step forward

to meet him damn near halfway. He clamps a hand on my shoulder and shoves me forward as if I wasn't already going voluntarily.

But appearance is everything in the Chosen Saints—Brody's making sure he *looks* like he's in control; he's leading me, not the other way around. Believers aren't supposed to have autonomy.

“You know the rules,” he growls low enough for only my ears. “No crossing the threshold on your own unless directed.”

I grit my teeth. “I saved you the steps.”

“Hurry up.” He shoves me again. Harder, so I stumble.

There was a time in the past where I was in good enough shape to take out any of the men in the Chosen Saints. I had the muscle power and the hand-to-hand combat skills to not just kick their ass. I had the ability to snap them like twigs.

Nine hundred and sixty-one days into captivity, things've changed. I'm a shell of what I once was, weak and whittled down from the powerful man I once was.

Brody pushes and shoves me all the way to the main house. The three-story mini mansion is where the Leader and his most loyal saints sleep. It's night and day between the main house and the cabins the rest of the believers are kept in.

Dry. Insulated. Full furnishings. Electricity and running water. Luxuries like TVs and real beds. It couldn't be more different than what we're subjected to out in the cabins.

The only time any of us spend in this house is when we're called upon. We're needed for what's known as an 'act of service'.

I'm called to the main house almost daily.

The curse of being a saint's favorite. Brody leads me upstairs to the fourth bedroom on the left, then nudges the door open.

She's waiting for me, propped up on her recliner she treats like a throne. Her eyes light up and a smirk twists onto her lips. She flicks her satiny robe

open and kicks her legs up onto either side of her footstool. She doesn't care that Brody sees she's wearing nothing underneath.

The concept of modesty doesn't exist in a place like the Chosen Saint's sanctuary.

But that doesn't mean privacy isn't sometimes wanted for these acts of service.

Brody knows to close the door without any questions. I know to step forward and then kneel.

Mandy spreads her legs wider. "I've been dreaming of you. All night I was. Almost had Brody go down and pull you out of your cabin to bring you up. It couldn't have been earlier than three, four in the morning. Go ahead and have a taste. That tongue of yours..."

She shudders instead of finishing her train of thought.

I urge myself to tune out of the moment like I usually do. Some days it's easier than others.

In the beginning, I fought. I raised hell each and every time. My back bears the lash marks to show for it.

But everybody surrenders eventually; take any person and put them in this situation. They'd eventually they'd tap out and comply.

I kneel between Mandy's legs and press my face to her vagina the way she likes—so that she's basically grinding into my face as my tongue pokes out and licks at her clit.

Her fingers grip my hair and she sighs in encouragement. Soon her thighs are quivering around my head as I work my lips and tongue the way she likes. I'm checked out of the moment.

So gone I don't taste her. The slick evidence of her arousal doesn't register.

I lick and suck at her while my mind's thousands of miles away.

There was a point in time where I used to laugh and tell my brother Mace and his best friend Cash I hadn't met a pussy I didn't like. Turn off the lights

and they were all the same—they all felt pretty damn good wrapped around my dick.

It was a joke. Something dumb we laughed about before getting shitfaced and going home with a different club girl.

I was always in control. I was always in the driver's seat.

Not once did it ever occur to me that it could be different. That there'd come a time I didn't get any say.

Mandy bleats like a fucking goat when she comes. She rifles her fingers through my unkempt hair, then sags against the cushions of her recliner. Her eyelids grow heavy and her eyes hazy.

“You are the best,” she purrs, petting me like a dog. With affection that makes my skin crawl. “You like the taste of me, don't you?”

My glare would give me away to a sane person. Somebody not delusional.

Turns out, Mandy and the saints like her are as delusional as the new believers who still have hope—the difference is that the believers tell themselves help is on the way.

Mandy tells herself I'm enjoying this; that she doesn't repulse me on every fucking level.

I give the slightest nod in answer. Because if I didn't I'd be on the receiving end of a whip. She keeps hers on her end table within reach. Brody didn't say it, but he's out in the hall. It wouldn't end in my favor even if I did defy her.

It never has in the past.

She strokes my hair again. “Good boy. Have another taste.”

Plugging her pussy with two of her fingers, she gathers some of her juices from her orgasm and then slips them past my lips. Her eyes glint as she watches me. She's waiting for me to play along.

I suck on her fingers and will myself to ignore the tart taste of her.

The only pussy I've ever almost retched at tasting.

When she's satisfied with my performance, she sits up straighter and calls for Brody.

I'm collected and escorted back toward the rear exit of the house. Brody's decided he needs to flex even more of his authority by gripping my arm. The urge to crack my elbow into his face and flip him on his ass rises up inside me.

The ceremony room stops me. I catch a glimpse of the inside where saints and believers are setting up for another ceremony and my stomach roils.

"That for tonight?"

Brody jerks me along faster. "What do you think? She's arriving. You know what you have to do."

I suspected.

It's different hearing it confirmed. Knowing I'm about to be forced to participate in more fucked up depravity I never wanted...

The ceremony begins at sundown. The saints are already seated in the first few pews when the believers are shoved and prodded into the room by the likes of Brody and a few other designated henchmen. None of us fight them. They're well-fed and armed. We're malnourished and barely functioning.

I drop into a seat toward the back, right next to the skeletal woman from my cabin. She hasn't stopped sniveling since this morning, wiggling her toes every so often; she still can't feel them.

Xavier, one of the other armed guards, mutters something in Brody's ear, then points in my direction. Brody nods and comes over to collect me.

"Get up," he says. "We need you up front. You'll be performing your marital duty."

I stand up only after he jams the barrel of his assault rifle into my stomach. I've barely squeezed into the only open space up front when the

double doors fly open.

The Leader strides through in his billowing white robe. His sheets of hair sway around his face like white-blond curtains. A few saints follow, their own robes fluttering. The two in the back enter clutching a squirming, shrieking woman.

The new believer.

My stomach muscles clench. I track every movement of hers down the aisle toward the altar up front.

She's a mess. Clothes torn and streaked with dirt. Her hair's a knotted cloud, like a fist's been gripped up in it and disheveled whatever style her curls had been in. She's got a bruise on her cheek and eyes brimming with tears. A panicked expression's etched onto her face.

...but it's a face I could tell would be pretty in less grim circumstances. In a less fucked up moment where she was put-together and not covered in bruises and scrapes.

She's on the shorter side. Curvy and plump in an enticing way.

But there's nothing enticing about this. It can only be described as the depraved fucked up shit that it is.

Yet we believers sit obediently in our pews and pretend we're not disturbed.

The woman's thrown to the floor of the altar. She lands right at the Leader's feet. He peers down at her with his cold, emotionless eyes, then steps over her like she's an inconvenience.

My hands curl into fists in my lap.

"Saints and believers, we have a new companion in our midst," he announces. "We searched far and wide for a woman with the purest heart who would join our mission. Behold—we have found her!"

Everyone rows back cranes their necks for a better look. A few murmurs break out.

The woman's sat up and tried to scoot away. Xavier nudges her with his

boot to keep her in line.

“Silence!” the Leader calls. “It is time the ceremony begins. We have gathered today to welcome our new believer to our family, where she will be cherished and loved as we are all cherished and loved by each other. The bond we have formed is only outmatched by the bond we have with our sacred Leader and Lord.”

Several of the saints and believers nod and mumble along, drinking in every word he speaks. I’m the only one glaring, fighting off the pulse of anger that throbs inside me.

Me and the woman.

She’s looking up at the Leader with tears streaked down her cheeks and horror widening her eyes.

“And now, we will bear witness to another sacred bond,” the Leader continues, his slivery voice echoing. “The bonding of a man and a woman. Believer Logan, step forward.”

CHAPTER 2 - LOGAN



CHAPTER TWO - LOGAN

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” the Leader says to the room full of Chosen Saints. “You will now drink the matrimonial red wine that signifies the family bloodline you will create.”

I’m handed a goblet. The woman, whose name I’ve learned is Teysha, is given one too. She stands opposite me, averting her gaze. She stares anywhere but at me and the Leader and anybody else in the room.

We’re the enemy. Her captors.

If she had any idea how wrong she is.

I’m not one of them...

“Drink,” the Leader commands.

I blink and realize he’s repeated himself twice now. Cause for punishment if he’s in a bad enough mood.

I bring the goblet to my lips and swallow down the wine in a few short gulps. It tastes of bitter sour grapes mixed with something chemical. Some ingredient that shouldn’t be in wine. A drug to make us more complacent.

It’s a taste I’ve noticed several times before. During past ceremonies where I’d been forced to consummate a bond with the woman chosen for me.

Teysha’s here ’cuz the last bond fell through. Grace hadn’t been able to

take being captive another second...

I keep my expression neutral consuming the wine. Teysha makes a face of disgust, stopping after only a mouthful.

“Drink,” the Leader repeats. His teeth clench and his eyes flash with warning.

She chokes on the rest of it. A couple droplets slip down her chin and splatter onto her chest. My attention’s drawn to the area—she’s busty to the point of distraction and the wine slides down the cleft between her breasts. Breasts that are only halfway visible due to her blouse being torn and muddied.

My gaze lifts a couple inches to her throat. A golden cross pendant dangles from the necklace she wears. Her *real* religion.

No wonder they chose her.

One look at her, and you can tell she’s the type to be seated in church every Sunday. Everything from the modest skirt and blouse she’s wearing to the horror on her face reveals she’s exactly the ‘pure heart’ type they like to corrupt.

She catches on that I’m studying her and wards me off with a knit of her brows and suspicious bend of her mouth.

“Now for the bonding,” the Leader says, stepping aside. His arm sweeps in dramatic fashion as he gestures to the bed that’s propped up on the dais.

A bed that I’m more than familiar with. That makes my stomach roil on sight.

“Get started,” he prompts.

I take a step toward the bed, then realize I’m alone.

Teysha’s stayed put. She makes no attempt to hide her tears or the fact that she’s shaking on the spot. Her fingers have clasped around the gold cross like she expects for it to protect her against the evil swallowing her up.

The Leader sighs. “Brody, Xavier. Help our new believer.”

“No... NOOOO!” she screams in sudden wild hysterics, kicking her legs

out.

Both men have strode forward to grab one of her arms and drag her toward the bed. They lift her up and throw her down onto the bed like they couldn't give less of a shit how much she screams and struggles.

And I stand by and let it happen.

My heart's racing. My fingers twitch and itch. I can barely control my breathing.

The room feels hot and like it's spinning.

My temper pulses, but I tamp it down. I remind myself there's nothing I can do. A lesson I've learned dozens of times over the past nine hundred days.

I can't stop what's about to happen. But I'm maybe the only person in this room that feels sick from the ceremony we're being forced to participate in.

"The binds," the Leader drawls lazily from the sidelines. "Use the binds if she refuses to lay still."

Brody and Xavier wrap leather binds around her wrists, tethering her to the bed, and then move out of the way.

The silence in the room feels deafening. Disorienting as all attention falls on me.

I swallow down the sick feeling and urge myself to blackout. Just like I managed earlier with Mandy.

But blacking out when you're on top of a crying, trembling woman is nowhere as easy. Flashbacks of my first time with Grace pollute my head. She'd cried too, begged like I had the power to end what was happening to us.

I'd caught her eye and then she understood. She got that I was just like her. I was forced into this fucked up situation too.

The room watches on in silent interest as I position myself between Teysha's legs. It takes me a moment to get hard, stroking my dick, reminding

myself there's no choice. If I can't perform then I have no use. Then the Leader's going to turn his ire onto me.

Another thing that wouldn't be the first time...

I try to tune out our surroundings. Nobody else is around. Nobody else is watching.

It's just me and this woman on the bed. We'll do what we have to do as quick as possible to get it over with. Then we'll go back to surviving our captivity.

I guide myself to Teysha's entrance and pause for a second. Even if this isn't consensual—*neither* of us want this—I was hoping I'd catch her eye like I caught Grace's.

Make her understand I have to. I'll make this quick and finish in a hurry. But she won't look at me. She's turned her head away, her eyes clenched shut. Her chin quivers as her cries continue, silent and terrified.

It's enough to hollow out my insides. I'm left with a sinking, empty sensation.

My erection twitches in a warning it'll soften if I don't get going.

I take in a breath and push myself inside. The girl bows against me and cries out in agony. By the way her body jerks and the slight resistance I encounter, I understand what's just happened. What I've just taken from her and I'm sure she'll never forgive me for.

She's outright sobbing now. The horrific sounds chip away at me as I draw my hips back and then thrust into her.

Her walls clamp down on me and the tight heat massages my dick. Soon the beginnings of a climax tickle their way up my spine. I thrust a little faster, chasing the end, wanting for this moment between us to be over.

My gaze remains on her face. Futile hope she'll finally look up at me and I can make her get it. I can promise her it'll be over soon.

But she never acknowledges me in any way beyond her sobs and pained jerks of her body. It's only been a few minutes when I'm able to give in and

let go. My release spills from me in a weak pulse of pleasure. I wait for every drop to be spent before tucking myself back into my pants.

The Leader's smile takes up half of his face. Several of the saints mirror him, smiling at the two of us on the bed as if we've made them proud.

As if what we've done isn't fucked up and depraved.

In the world of the Chosen Saints, it's simply bonding. Just like I bonded with Mandy earlier. Just like the Leader bonds with any of the female saints and believers on a whim. Just like... Teysha will be made to bond with me and others too.

Free love is a whole different concept in this so-called family.

Teysha's taken away to be cleaned up.

The ceremony ends with a celebration of food and drink. The believers are allowed to stay for the first hour. Once it's up, we're corralled back to our cabins—unless the Leader or one of his saints have chosen you for the night.

I'm not chosen, so I wind up in the dank cabin, sitting in the dark on my sunken bunkbed. As far as I'm concerned, a better turnout for the night than if Mandy had requested me a second time today.

Teysha's brought in after everybody else in the cabin's gone to sleep. She's deposited onto her bunk by two of the saints who brought her and then left without a word. They shut the door to our cabin and commence total darkness.

I sit still and watch her corner of the cabin. Though shadows blanket the space and I can't see her, I can hear her—she's sobbing herself to sleep. Probably the first night of many where she'll fall asleep like this.

For half a second, I consider getting up and going over. Explaining to her what I did was unavoidable. Telling her I didn't mean to hurt her. Letting her know she's got to toughen up, 'cuz this is the way things are and we're all captives here.

She can't let herself end up like Grace and the other women before her.

It'd be the first real human words I've spoken in days. Maybe weeks.

But I don't. I stay where I am, sitting in the dark, and I listen to her cries without ever saying a comforting word.

Instead, I focus on the anger I've learned to control. I allow myself to think about something I've avoided for months. Something that gives the false hope I hate seeing in others, but reminds me there might be a reason to keep holding on.

One day... one day I'm busting the hell out of here. Then... then I'm making every last one of these bastards pay...

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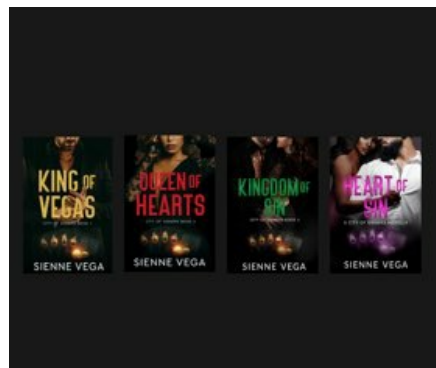
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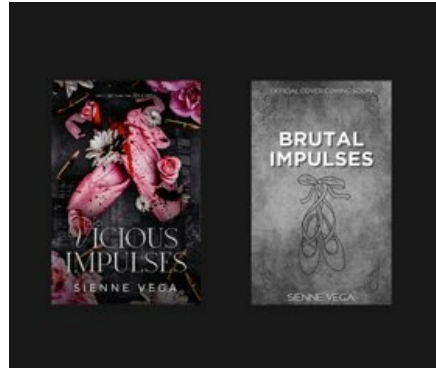
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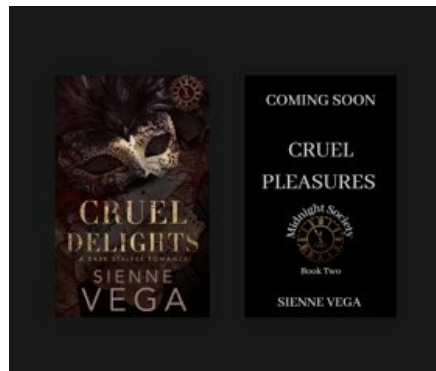


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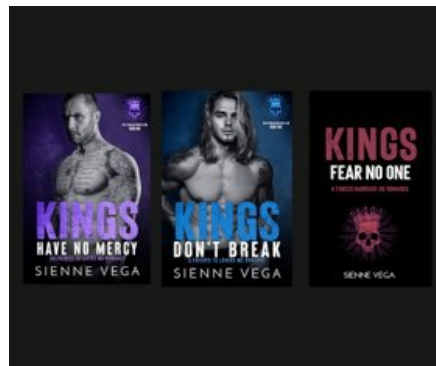
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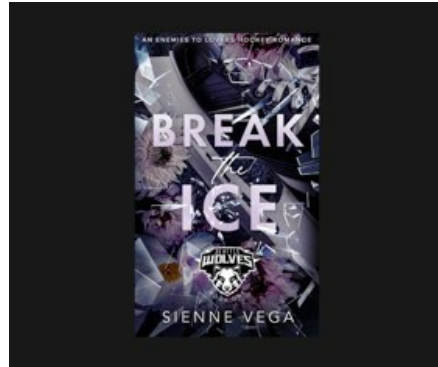
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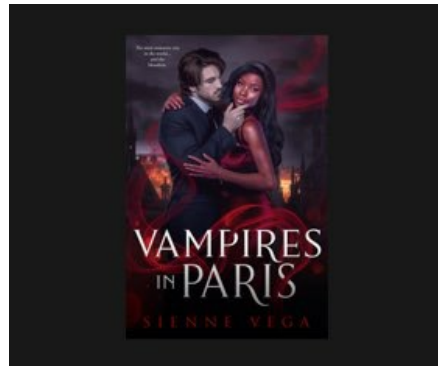
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sienne has a thing for dark and brooding alphas and the women who love them. She enjoys writing stories where lines are blurred, and the romance is dark and delicious. In her spare time, she unwinds

with a nice glass of wine and Netflix binge.