

EVIL DEAD

SINS OF THE FATHER

MARCUS

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CALIFORNIA

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EPILOGUE

MARCUS

**SINS OF THE FATHER
EVIL DEAD MC – SECOND GENERATION
BOOK ONE**

**By
Nicole James**

MARCUS:
Sins of the Father

Evil Dead MC
SECOND GENERATION SERIES
Book One
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CHAPTER ONE – THE MISSION

Marcus—

The old wooden picnic table outside the clubhouse is weathered and carved with dozens of initials from brothers who came way before any of us. I run my fingers lightly over them.

Billy leans against the end, staring across the lot. My eyes lift to the back of his leather vest. It's bare of the usual club patches, with only the bottom rocker that reads: *prospect*—same as mine.

We're on a rare break from our club duties that usually keep us running 24/7, and came out to get some air, even if it is a chilly December day here in San Jose.

Billy bumps my shoulder and passes me what's left of the joint he lit up a few minutes ago. I pinch it between my thumb and index finger and bring it to my lips, taking a toke.

It burns my throat and warms my lungs. I slowly exhale to the sky and offer him the rest, but he waves me off, so I stub it out.

Neither of us are big on drugs, partaking only of the occasional joint, mostly just to relax.

We've known each other since elementary school, and are as tight as can be. When TJ came into the picture, we became like the three musketeers. We were pretty much inseparable. It's stayed that way through high school and the years since.

Billy pulls his vibrating phone from his pocket. The screen lights up with Green's name, and he puts it on speaker. "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Look how well I've trained my wee little prospect. Always ready to jump." I can practically hear his wide grin through the phone.

Green's a full patched member of the club and is Billy's sponsor, which, in layman's terms, means he's assigned to guide him through the process of prospecting for the Evil Dead Motorcycle Club. My sponsor is Crash. TJ's is

Wolf. It's been a long process for all three of us— one I hope is soon coming to an end, but none of us have a say in how long that may be. The club decides when we're ready, and the club decides if they want to bestow a full patch and make us brothers. It's something the MC doesn't take lightly. They've got to know they can trust us to have their backs when shit hits the fan. I get that. The brotherhood is everything. It's one of the reasons I've wanted to join the MC since I was introduced to it. Billy was born into this club life and destined to be a member. It's in his blood. His father is a member. Red Dog, he's called. He's a big man, and people say he reminds them of a Viking with his long red hair and burly beard.

But all that doesn't mean shit if Billy can't make it through the prospecting phase, and that means when they say jump, we jump. Right now, Billy needs to do whatever his sponsor asks of him.

“What do you need?” he bites back.

“Well, it's your lucky day. I need you to do a pickup.”

That has me sitting up a little straighter. Could this be it? Our final test before we get our patches? They've never trusted a prospect with a pickup before. Billy and TJ are both club blood, so maybe a little more trustworthy than the average prospect, but still.

“Should I bring TJ and Marcus with me for this?”

“Uh, yeah. The more hands, the better.”

“Got it. So, what are the details?”

“I'm going to text you the address. When you get there, call me and I'll fill you in on how it's goin' down.”

“Great. When's the drop?”

“Now! Get your ass moving! Oh, and take the van. It's a big load.”

“Yes, sir.”

He slides his phone in his pocket, and we cross the club yard to where TJ stands with Crash and Wolf. They're gathered around a roaring bonfire.

Billy lifts his chin to TJ. “We've got a pickup. Let's ride.”

“A pickup?” Crash turns a questioning eye at the patch next to him.

Wolf shrugs. “I don't fuckin' know.”

“Green's sending us to do a pickup.” He tries to sound nonchalant. They

exchange a look.

Crash smirks. “Right. The pickup. I forgot about that.”

“Let’s go boys.” Billy jerks his chin, and we head to our bikes.

Firing my Harley up, I pause to pull up the address on my GPS. “Looks like it’s some kind of quick-stop shop.”

“We good to roll?” TJ straps his helmet on.

“Yeah, let’s get this done.” Billy glances my way, and our eyes connect. There’s an unspoken knowledge that this is big, and we can’t fuck it up. We both rev our engines and ride through the gate; TJ drives the van behind us.

It takes just under two hours to get to where we're going. We stop at a gas station down the street from our destination to refuel, and Billy pulls out his phone to get the details before we ride up. None of us want to walk into this pickup without knowing what the hell we’re doing. That’s just asking for a fuckup.

Billy holds the phone out for all of us to hear.

Green answers on the third ring. “Hey, you there?”

“Just down the street. So, what exactly are we doing?”

“There are forty-six boxes I need you to load up. The manager has them waiting for you in the back.”

“Forty-six boxes of what?” He peers toward the location. I look, too, wondering when they put a quick-stop manager on the club's books.

“Little Debbie’s.”

Those two words are so surprising I silently question whether or not I heard them right. I frown, still unsure of what we’re picking up.

Billy must feel the same because he frowns. “Is that code for something?”

“Christmas tree cakes.”

He looks a little dumbfounded. “What?”

“Christmas tree cakes. I called around and finally found a shipment.”

Billy’s brows lift, and for a moment, he’s speechless, but soon the words tumble out of his mouth before he can stop them. “Are you telling me you just sent us two hours on a pickup for a fucking snack?”

“Do you know how hard that shit is to find? Yeah, I sent you for the best, most delicious holiday tradition. And it doesn’t really matter if I send you

four hours to pick up a bag of dog shit. You're a prospect, and if you ever want to call me brother, your only concern should be doing what you're told."

Billy's anger and embarrassment are evident. "Fine. I'll get your goddamn cakes."

"Hey, these cakes are divine, so watch your mouth."

He hangs up, and the look on his face tells me he's resisting the urge to chuck his phone across the pavement.

"Let's just pick the shit up and get home before word gets out," I suggest.

Billy nods, and we roll out, heading down the street.

We approach the guy behind the register. We're the only ones in the place. When Billy tells him why we're here, the man brings out two cartons and plops them on the counter. We count the boxes inside. Forty-five. Shit.

Billy pins him with a look that lets him know our displeasure. "I was told you had forty-six boxes on hold for us."

"We did, but a longtime customer came in and wanted one. Forty-five is still plenty."

"Yeah, for a sane, well-adjusted person, maybe." Billy shakes his head.

"Can't we just bring him forty-five?" I grumble, but he already knows the answer to that. We all do.

"Hell, no. I can hear them now. If you can't manage to pick up the right number of Christmas tree cakes, how can we trust you with our real product? Or to handle the money? So, no, forty-five ain't gonna cut it. We have to find another box of damn Christmas tree cakes."

"Jesus Christ, we're gonna be out all night." TJ runs his hands through his hair and looks at Billy. "What's the plan?"

"I guess pull out your phones and start making calls to every grocery store and shop that might carry these."

We spend at least an hour making unsuccessful phone calls.

Marcus—

I hold the phone to my ear. “Paul’s Grocery and Tap, Brandy speaking.”

“Hey doll, weird question. Do you have any Christmas tree cakes?”

“Our truck is unloading now. Let me check. By the way, unless you’re my dad or keeping my bed warm, I’m not your doll.”

“Interesting proposition, doll.” I stretch out the last word and hear a huff on the other side of the line.

“Do you want me to check or not?”

“Please do, Brandy.” I smile.

“Hold just a minute.”

The guys look at me questioningly.

“Truck just came. The girl’s checking for me.” I see the hope in their eyes. We’re all ready to get home, and I admit, I have a bit of a personal motivation for hoping this place has got the product we’re after. I’d love to see what the spitfire on the other side of the phone looks like. Her voice sounds sultry and melodic, and I can only hope she looks like the image I’ve conjured in my head.

Her voice picks up on the other end. “We have eight boxes, but they don’t stay on the shelves long.”

“Thank God. Can you hold one for me?”

“I can hold it for ten minutes.”

“We’re at least thirty minutes out.”

“Well then, may I suggest you haul ass?”

“Be there as quick as I can. Wouldn’t want to keep you waiting, doll.” I chuckle at the last word.

“We’ll see.”

I imagine her eye roll right before she clicks the phone off. I turn to the guys and call out. “We gotta roll. She has some, but will only hold them for ten minutes.”

“Damn, let’s go!” Billy jumps on his bike.

We roar across town and onto the lot of Paul’s, kicking up gravel as we come to a jolting stop. Walking inside, we find what appears to be a massive convenience store on one side, and a wall lined with beer taps and a long

counter on the other. A display of glass growlers sits in the middle of the shop. Several stools are already taken.

A tall brunette with long loose curls has her back to us, filling a growler and giving a perfect view of her round ass in her skinny jeans. As she turns, my eyes travel up to the racerback tank she wears with the name and logo of a local brewery, taking in the ample amount of cleavage it reveals. My gaze travels farther up to connect with her rich brown eyes. She gives me a cocky smirk and walks over to ring up the customer. I stand behind him, watching her every move, hypnotized.

TJ bumps me. “You’re up.”

“Oh, hey. I’m Marcus. I called about the Christmas tree cakes.” My eyes connect with hers, and I can’t help but wink.

“Right.” She leans down, giving me an even better view of her cleavage, and reaches behind the counter, bringing a box out. “Eyes up here, buddy.”

“Sorry, ma’am. You’re a little distracting.”

“Ma’am’s my mom. Call me Brandy.”

“Brandy.” I let her name roll off my tongue in a deep vibration.

“Is there anything else I can get you boys, or are you just here for your”—she glances down at the cakes and a smile forms—“snacks?”

“They’re not for me, but—” I trail off, glancing behind me at Billy and TJ with a pleading look.

Billy throws his hands up. “Fuck it. We deserve a beer after this shit show of a night.”

I smile like a prisoner who just got a reprieve. “Three beers, Brandy.”

“What’ll you have? We have quite a few on tap.” She gestures at the wall behind her.

“Oh, right. Um, something local and not some flavored shit.”

She scans us up and down. “I’m sure I can find one to your liking.”

My eyes skate over her body. “I’m sure you can.”

She draws us three drafts, brimming to the top, and sets the frosted glasses in front of our stools. “So, where are you boys from?”

“We’re from San Jose, doll,” Billy responds.

She glares at him.

“Oh, she doesn’t like being called *doll*. I’m sure I can warm her up to it, though.” I throw in the hint at her earlier words and smiling at the pink flush forming on her cheeks.

Billy snorts "Right. You're a real Romeo."

I ignore him. “So, what’s your story, Brandy?”

“I’m the bartender here, and therefore, the only therapist working tonight. So, tell me your story, and I’ll try and solve all your problems—or at least diagnose you with a few.” She beams at me.

I laugh “I’m trying to win you over, not scare you off.”

“I don’t scare easily.”

“Good to know.”

Billy’s phone rings, and he takes the call. “Hey. Yeah, we just got it. Headed back now. Yes, sir.” He shoves the phone in his pocket, chugs the last of his beer, and slams it down. “Let’s go. Duty calls.”

I glance at Brandy. “Wish I could stay longer, but I know where to find you, doll, and I do love a challenge.” I wink and throw some bills down. “Talk to you soon.”

“Oh, I’m more than a challenge. I’m fucking Mount Everest.” I hear her soft snicker, and the sound almost has me turning back; to hell with Green’s cakes.

“I love a woman who knows her worth. Means her head's in the right place. I’ll be back, and I’ll bring a flag.” I walk through the doors, more excited than I’ve been in a long time.

Billy swings a leg over his bike and lifts his chin at me, his question for TJ. “What’s he so damn happy about?”

“Did you not see that brown-eyed beauty? What was her name?” TJ asks me.

“Brandy.”

“You’re a fine girl,” TJ sings.

The next Looking Glass lyric lays unspoken. But the storyline fits; I do feel like the sailor being called away by the sea, only my sea is the road and the baddest MC in the state.

When we pull up at the clubhouse, it's nearly one a.m. and all is dark.

Billy stretches as he comes off his bike. "Well, at least the whole club isn't here to see us rolling in from our big mission."

I shut my bike off. "You can say that again."

TJ comes to a stop next to us. We each grab as many boxes as we can carry and head inside.

"Wish we could have just dropped these at Green's house," TJ mumbles.

Billy nods. "He wanted them brought here."

We fumble to open the door, and as soon as we cross the threshold the lights flip on, and there before us is just about every brother in the San Jose chapter. *Fuck*.

Green is sitting on a chair by the pool table. He taps the felt. "Put 'em here boys."

I dump my armful on the table, as do the others.

"Look at these big boys pickin' up junk food for Green," somebody calls out.

"I can't believe he trusted the prospects for such an important job," Red Dog adds, grinning from ear to ear. Leave it to Billy's old man to add to his embarrassment.

"He does take his snacks seriously." Shane leans back, folding his arms.

We turn to get the rest, hoots and hollers following us out the door.

"Fuckin' hell. I'm ready to be done with this bullshit." Billy slams the van door shut.

We dump the rest, and Green counts it like he's some bookie checking the money.

"Forty-four, forty-five, forty-six. Good job, boys. Any troubles?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle," Billy replies.

Green arches one eyebrow. "What was the problem?"

"They were short one, so we got you another."

"Good to know you take your job seriously."

It's only when Billy's old man gives a thumbs up that it dawns on me this

was all a test.

Billy jerks his gaze to Green. "You knew we'd be short?"

"Course, I did," Green confirms. "Told the man you'd ask for an extra and to tell you he didn't have it. Wanted to see how committed you were to getting a job done and done right. You passed. You took your sweet time though, so I'm only gonna give you a B+."

Billy points at the boxes. "That shit was hard to find."

"I told you they were, didn't I?" He rips open a box and tosses each of us a Christmas tree cake. "Enjoy!"

"This better be the best shit I've ever tasted," TJ grumbles.

"If it's not, you better fuckin' lie," Billy whispers and takes his cake to the bar. TJ and I follow. We all need something stronger than a sugar high after this night.

"It pairs well with whiskey," Green shouts after us.

Wolf chuckles. "Doesn't everything?"

"I think I'll just go with a glass of brandy." I waggle my brows as I bring up the highlight of my night.

"What's up with Marcus? You'd think he'd be a little sour after your mission. You know, kinda like the two of you." Crash tips his beer toward Billy and TJ.

I break into a wide smile. "I'm just thinking about the thrill of climbing Mount Everest."

Crash frowns. "What the fuck?"

"Don't mind him. He's in love." TJ throws a disgusted look at me.

"Love? Ha! Good luck." Crash walks off, chuckling as he retreats.

CHAPTER TWO – BURGERS & FRIES

Marcus—

The club keeps me busy, so it's several days before I can reach out to Brandy again, but I think of her each night when my head finally hits the pillow. I can't wait until I can catch a break to go see her.

I'm wiping down the bar top at the clubhouse when I hear a sharp whistle and glance up.

"Hey, kid. Fill my bike up. I'm low." Crash sends his keys sailing through the air toward me, and I catch them in a fist.

"Yes, sir."

Being a prospect and at everyone's beck and call—especially my sponsor's—sucks sometimes, but I actually like the quiet time when I'm asked to go fill up a bike or shine one up in the garage. It's my time to think, and lately all I think of is Brandy.

I take care of Crash's Harley, and return to the clubhouse and a laundry list of shit to do: change the van's oil and rotate the tires, clean the sweat and blood from the cage the boys use for fight night, make a beer run since last night's party bled us dry, and change the sheets on all the brother's beds.

I drag my hand down my face. I'm going to need some rubber gloves for at least one of these damn jobs.

The list takes most of the day, but finally I'm finished with the last task of restocking the coolers. It's mostly quiet in the clubhouse now as I wait for Crash to release me.

He finally jerks his chin at me. "Hey, prospect, knock off. I'll call you if I need you before tomorrow."

"Yes, sir." I grab my keys and head to the door before he or anyone else thinks up something else for me to do. I'm ready to make my way to the girl who's filled all my fantasies for the past four days.

Once I'm outside, I dash across the lot to my bike and roar out. A few

miles down the road, I pull into a gas station. I need to fill up if I'm going to make the long haul to see Brandy, but also want to make sure she's there before I do.

Pulling out my phone, I hit her name. She's listed as Doll, which makes me grin knowing she'd be pissed if she ever sees that.

"Paul's Grocery and Tap, Josh speaking."

"Hey, man. Is Brandy there?"

"Yeah, she's working. Let me get her." I hear him call out. "Hey Brandy! Phone's for you."

A moment later, her sultry voice comes on the line. "This is Brandy."

"Weird question. You got any Christmas tree cakes, doll?"

I can practically hear her smile through the phone as she chimes her line back at me. "Unless you're my dad or keeping my bed warm, don't call me doll, Marcus."

I must be doin' something right. The girl remembers my name.

"What can I do for you, *doll*?"

"I want to see you. When do you get off work?"

"Two a.m. Last call is at quarter to, but I'll have to close up afterward."

I glance at the clock on my phone. It's almost midnight now. With the drive, I should just make it. "I'm heading your way. We can grab a bite or some coffee or something. You know of anywhere open all night?"

"Yeah, I know a place."

"Great. Headed your way, babe." I hear her huff out a breath before she concedes.

"I guess babe is better than doll."

"Noted." I disconnect, then pull away from the pump, heading her way.

Brandy—

I hear the low rumble before I see him. I glance at the glass doors at the front of the store. Marcus rolls his bike to a stop and backs into a spot at the curb.

He definitely looks the part of the bad boy biker as he climbs off. My eyes travel from his black boots to his dark jeans that fit just right over his cute ass. A black leather cut covers his back, with the bottom rocker that reads, prospect. Underneath, a gray thermal shirt hugs his broad chest and shoulders and hangs looser over what I can only imagine are some tight abs. A light stubble grows along his chiseled jawline.

He hangs his helmet off his handlebar and threads a hand through the wavy curls that hang past his collar.

My pulse picks up at the sight of him. I drag in a slow breath, trying to control my surging hormones. Goddamn, the man is sexy as hell.

Strolling through the doors, his eyes immediately search me out, finding me at the taps, drawing a mug of beer. I can't stop the corners of my mouth from pulling up when that killer smile of his hits me.

He stands at the end, elbows on the bar. "Hey, babe. Almost ready?"

"Let me grab the tab for my last customer."

Marcus shifts his gaze to the lone man sitting a few barstools down. "Sure thing. I'll wander the store to stretch my legs."

I watch him walk to the display of growlers as I set the mug before the middle-aged man with his hand resting on the bar top. "Here you go, sir."

"Thank you."

I slide his receipt and the credit card we held at the register. "Here's your tab. Top copy is mine, bottom's yours."

His hand comes down on top of the receipt and my hand. "And which one do you prefer, top or bottom?"

I jerk my hand back quickly. "Just leave the receipt on the counter." I move off out of reach and busy myself cleaning glasses, hoping to diffuse the situation. I'm hoping after he signs the receipt, he'll do as I ask and leave it on the counter, but he seems to be waiting for my return. I'm thankful I'm not alone. Josh is in the back unloading a delivery truck, and Marcus is wandering the store up front.

"All done?" I approach the man, staying far enough away that I'm out of his reach this time.

"Well, I have a question about the bill." He motions to something too

small for me to see, forcing me to move closer. As I do, I notice Marcus now watching the interaction from a few aisles over. I can't deny his presence gives me a sense of security.

I lean forward to have a look at the tab, and the customer whistles in a low tone.

“Woohoo. Those are some nice tits.”

I immediately straighten, but not before the asshole reaches out to grope me.

I smack his hand, and what happens next is a blur.

Marcus is down the aisle in a flash. He grabs a fistful of the man's collar and yanks him clear off the stool. The crash of it tipping over brings Josh running from the back.

Marcus holds the asshole customer up with one hand and punches him in the face with his other. He gets in several hits before Josh hooks his arms under Marcus's armpits and drags him off, shoving him back and getting between the men.

“Marcus was protecting me, Josh,” I yell.

The asshole customer spits blood on the floor. “What the hell?”

“Touch her again, and I'll kill you.” Marcus points a finger at him.

“Well, if she didn't have it all hanging out like it was up for grabs, maybe I wouldn't try.” He spits another mouthful of blood on the floor.

Marcus stalks slowly toward the man, his voice low and icy. “I don't care if she's standing here naked. It doesn't give you the right to touch her.”

A chill runs down my spine at his words and the tone of his voice. This is a man who doesn't take shit and isn't afraid to finish it. My eyes are riveted to him.

“Whatever. You can have the slut.” The asshole customer staggers toward the door, but doesn't make it two steps before both Marcus and Josh each grab an arm and manhandle him out of it, shoving him to the ground outside.

Marcus stands over him with a fist. “Watch your goddamn mouth before I knock the rest of your teeth down your throat.”

“Don't come back. You're banned,” Josh adds.

“Paul won't ban me. I'm one of his best customers.”

“Not anymore. Get the fuck off the property before I call the cops and have you arrested for assaulting an employee.” Josh points down the road.

He and Marcus stand in the doorway like a couple of bouncers as the man makes his way to his car. Neither of them moves until the taillights fade down the highway.

“Hey, man. Name’s Josh. Sorry about manhandling you back there. I didn’t know what the fuck had happened.” Josh extends his hand.

Marcus shakes it. “No worries. I’d have done the same. I’m Marcus, a friend of Brandy.” His eyes find mine. “You okay, babe?”

“Yes. I’m fine. Just glad you both were here.”

Josh nods to Marcus. “Glad he was up here to step in.” He lifts his chin toward the road. “That loser’s been nothing but trouble since his wife left him. Good riddance.”

“Hopefully, he won’t be back.” Marcus folds his arms.

“He comes back, I’ll make sure Paul knows to run him off.” He glances at me. “He pay his tab?”

“I’ve got his credit card.”

“Good.”

“He just didn’t sign.”

“Doesn’t need to. We’ll run it through, anyway. People walk off on that shit all the time. It’s the reason we start a tab.” Josh heads inside, and Marcus and I follow. “I’ve got to finish up counting the delivery. Why don’t you two take off? I’ll close up when I’m done.”

I frown. “You sure? I haven’t even counted the till yet.”

“Don’t worry about it. After that asshole, you deserve to go on home.”

“Thanks, Josh.”

“No problem, kid. Makes me feel better knowing someone’s headed out with you.” His eyes flick to Marcus. “Good to meet you, man. Come back anytime.”

Marcus lifts his chin. “I’m sure you’ll be seeing more of me.”

“Thanks, Josh.” I watch his retreating figure, then turn to Marcus. “Thank you for what you did.”

“No thanks necessary. You sure you’re okay?” He takes my hand, his

brow furrowed, his eyes studying me carefully.

His concern warms something inside me. “I’m fine. Nothing a greasy burger can’t fix.” I joke, trying to lighten the mood.

He brings my hand to his mouth and kisses my knuckles. “That I can fix.”

I like the way it feels in his, the way he holds mine firmly but gently. He pulls the door open and leads me outside. I point at my vehicle.

His head turns to look over his shoulder, following where I gesture to my truck. His eyes roam over it. “This yours?”

I get that a lot. It’s an unexpected choice for a woman to drive, but I’ve always had a thing for red pickups, especially old ones like this one. “It is.”

“Nice.” He walks to it, dropping my hand and shoving both his in his hip pockets as he circles the truck. He peers inside and whistles. “Four on the floor. I like it.”

“Thanks.” I twirl the keys. “Want to drive it?”

“Hell yes.”

I toss him the keys, and he catches them in the air. He opens the passenger door for me, and I climb inside, liking his manners.

Marcus walks around the truck to the driver’s side. He shrugs out of his cut and lays it on the bench seat between us. The pickup shifts with his weight as he slides behind the wheel. “Where are we going?”

I point to the west. “That way.”

Marcus pulls onto the highway. His eyes light up as he gives my baby some gas. “She’s got power. I do love a V8 engine.” He shifts through the gears, and his eyes roam over the dash, then flick to me. There’s that killer smile again, and my heart melts a little more. “You name her?”

I bite my lip and look down at me lap, because, yes, I did. “Roxanne.”

He chuckles. “I like it. When did you get her?”

“It was a gift.”

His smile immediately fades. “Oh?”

I know what he’s thinking—there’s a man somewhere. “It’s not like that. My father gave it to me as a Christmas present when I turned eighteen.”

“Wow. Nice gift.”

I stare out the window and change the subject. The last thing I want to do

is talk about my family. “So, you don’t mind leaving your bike?”

“If someone is stupid enough to steal it, I’ve got a tracker. I’ll find it and beat the shit out of whoever took it.” He glances over at me, like he’s trying to judge my reaction to his words.

I hold his gaze. “I bet you would.”

“Would I be wrong?”

“Nope. You wouldn’t.” I look at the road and point. “Turn here.” He does and we drive another mile before I motion to a place on the right near the interstate. It’s a 24-hour diner with a big gravel lot that caters to the interstate truckers.

Marcus pulls in, parking near the entrance. He peers through the windshield. “You come here often?”

“I’ve been here a time or two with Josh and Katie—our other bartender—after closing down the bar.”

“When you said greasy burger, you weren’t kidding, huh?”

I roll my eyes and unbuckle my seatbelt. “Come on. I guarantee you won’t complain.”

We climb out, and he reaches for my hand, then holds the door for me.

There’s a sign that tells us to seat ourselves, and I’m already tugging Marcus toward a booth along the windows. I slide across the green vinyl and grab two laminated menus, passing one to Marcus.

He flips it over. “What’s good?”

A middle-aged waitress approaches with a pot of coffee. Marcus leans back to give her access to the cups already on the table. She flips over the one in the saucer in front of him and fills it.

“Welcome. I’m Sonya. What can I get you, darlin’?”

I answer for him, taking the menu from his hands. “We’ll both have the BBQ burger with fries.”

He lifts an eyebrow but doesn’t contradict me.

The waitress fills my cup. “And would you both like something besides coffee to go with it?”

“I’ll have a cola.”

“And for your companion?”

“Same,” Marcus pipes in.

“Be right up.”

She walks away, and I shove our two menus behind the condiment caddy.

Marcus folds his arms and leans his elbows on the table, his gaze on me.

“So, how’ve you been, Brandy?”

“Good. How’d your Christmas tree cake delivery go?”

He chuckles, his head dropping as he shifts in his seat. “It went fine.”

“I have to admit, the last thing I expected was a bunch of bikers walking in to make the pickup.” I arch a brow. “Guess you boys have a sweet tooth, huh?”

He tilts his head to the side and confesses. “It was kind of a test.”

I take a sip of my coffee and set it in the saucer. “Oh? What kind of test?”

“To see if we could follow directions and come back with the correct number of boxes.”

“So... you passed?”

“Yeah, we passed.”

“Did you at least get a cake out of the deal?”

“I did. Enjoyed it with a glass of brandy.”

His meaning hits me, and there’s that feeling again—the shivery butterflies that tell me there’s something about this guy that draws me in. I’ve only seen him twice, and I already know I want to be around him all the time.

He takes my hand from the handle of my mug. “Glad I got to see you tonight.”

“I am, too, though I can’t stay out too long.”

He nods. “I won’t keep you out until sunrise, then.”

“Was that your plan?”

“To tell the truth, I didn’t really have a plan beyond seeing you. I guess I’m more of a play-it-by-ear kind of guy.”

I take a sip from my mug. “I can see that about you.”

“Oh, you can, can you?” He chuckles, and it’s a deep, melodic sound I’m already addicted to. He seems so comfortable in his own skin, and he has a calm about him that relaxes me around him. I feel safe with him. There’s a good vibe around him, although the leather vest laying across the seat of my

truck screams otherwise. Suddenly I can't help coming right out and asking.

"Are you a good guy, Marcus?"

"I am ninety-nine percent a good guy. But that one percent is enough to kill you."

"Is this MC you're trying to join dangerous?"

"Absolutely. But you have nothing to worry about, Brandy. I would never hurt you, and I would never let anyone else hurt you, either."

I look down at my mug, pulling my hand from his and tucking my hair behind my ear. "You were pretty rough on that guy tonight."

"He deserved it. Did he not?"

"I guess so."

"No guessing about it. Maybe if someone had told him no more often when he was growing up, he wouldn't feel like the world is his for the taking. I've got no patience for guys like that—one's who think they're entitled."

He's hitting too close to home, though he has no idea. "I guess I know a few guys like that."

"Guess we all do." He looks out the window as a tractor-trailer pulls in. "If that guy gives you anymore trouble, or if any guy does, you call me, understand?"

"Marcus, you're over an hour away."

"Doesn't matter."

"Your time is filled with the club."

"You needed me, I'd find a way."

The look in his eyes tells me every word is true. There are those butterflies again.

Sonya returns with two red plastic tumblers filled to the top with crushed ice and cola. She sets them down and slides two paper-wrapped drink straws from her apron and puts them on the Formica. "Be right back with your food."

I grab one, unwrap it, and jab the straw in my drink, stabbing at the ice.

"Tell me about yourself."

I glance up at him. With other men, a statement like that would always make me feel like I'm on a job interview, but with Marcus it's different. I

find myself wanting to tell him, as long as I don't reveal too much. I'd hate to scare him away right off the bat.

When I talk about my family, it always seems to shut men down. I've seen it a dozen times before. Suddenly, there's a wall between us. "What do you want to know?"

Marcus—

I lean against the leather seat, fold my arms, and smile. "You tell me something personal about you, and then I'll do the same. Fair?"

"Fair." She tosses the folded paper aside. "I like the theater."

I tilt my head, frowning. "Like a movie theater?"

"No, like the kind with a stage, silly."

My brows lift. "Like Broadway?"

She shrugs. "Sure."

"How'd you find that out? Were you in drama class?" I want to know everything about this girl.

"Yes. But it started before that. My father used to love to take me to musicals and plays and operas."

"Really?"

She nods. "Do you really want to hear about all this?"

I hate that she's questioning the fact that her life would be interesting to me, to anyone. I want to squash that doubt in her eyes, and I can't help wondering who put it there. It's so at odds with the strong woman who told me she was Mount Everest. On the other hand, I'm thrilled she's sharing with me something she feels so vulnerable about. "Absolutely I do."

She sucks her lips into her mouth for a moment as if trying to decide whether to share. "I remember one of the first operas he took me to called *The Forbidden Marriage* by Kristoff Sarkov. I thought it was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. I couldn't understand a word, of course, but the emotion in the way they sang told the story."

I can't help grinning at her animation. "Tell me about it."

"There was this one scene where the lead, Alessia Ricci, wore this silver dress that was to-die-for, and she carried a clutch. That's where she hid their rings. It had these beautiful sparkling beads all over it, and her shoes were these strappy little heels. To me, she was like a princess. That's the day I decided I was going to be a librettist."

Her voice lifts, and I see the joy in her eyes as she talks about her passion.

Sonya returns and sets two plates in front of each of us as we both shove our coffees aside.

"Enjoy," she says, setting two rolled up sets of silverware down and the check.

The food smells delicious. Once she retreats, I take a bite, and my mouth is filled with the most heavenly thing I've ever eaten. I groan around the mouthful, and Brandy giggles and points a fry at me.

"Was I lying?"

I chew and swallow. "Not at all. This is fantastic." I take a drink. "So, tell me, what's a librettist?"

"It's like a screenwriter for operas."

"Gotcha. I'm surprised it didn't inspire you to be an actress or singer."

"I want to be the storyteller who evokes that kind of emotion. To imagine that I could put something down with a pen and paper and have it cause people to laugh or cry or scream in rage... It just entralls me. So here I am in California, pursuing my dream." She pauses and looks a little dejected.

"As a bartender, which is why I can't tell my father any of this."

"What do you mean?" I ask around a mouthful of burger.

"My father thinks I hung the moon, and the last thing I want to do is to hear his disappointment when I tell him I haven't made it yet. Hell, I haven't even finished my first ten-minute opera."

"Success just takes a while."

She shakes her head. "You don't get it."

"What don't I get?"

"He paid a ridiculous amount of money for me to go to school, and now I'm a bartender." She puts her elbows on the table and covers her face with

her hands.

“Come on, it can’t be that bad.”

She doesn’t respond.

“Babe, look at me. Please.”

Finally, she pulls her hands from her face.

“How long have you even been here?”

She rests her chin on her palm. “Thirteen months.”

“See? That’s barely any time at all, especially when trying to get into that industry. Am I right?”

Her shoulders lift and fall. “I suppose.”

“Tell me about your song or music thing.”

“Opera. Um, well, it’s a love story. The couple are both elites who meet at a ball.”

“Kinda like a fairytale?”

“Yeah, I suppose so, but it’s just not working.”

“Why not?”

“Something feels wrong about this couple.”

“Huh. Well, maybe you need some kind of tension. Sometimes wrong is right.”

Her brows furrow, and she seems to be pondering this while she finishes her fries.

I finish my burger and wipe my mouth with a napkin. “That hit the spot. Best burger I’ve ever had. No lie.”

“Good. We’ll have to come back sometime.”

“Definitely. I’m glad I got to see you tonight. And I’m glad you shared all that with me.”

“Now it’s your turn.” She pushes her plate to the side.

“Right. I did promise I’d share, too, didn’t I?”

“Fair is fair.”

My phone vibrates, and I pull it out. Glancing at the screen, I see it’s Crash. My eyes flick to Brandy. “Sorry. Gotta take this.” I put it to my ear.

“Yes, sir?”

“Where are you?”

“A couple of hours away. Why?”

“We need you back here asap.” He doesn’t say more, but I can hear the seriousness in his voice in a way I’ve never heard it before. My eyes connect with Brandy across the table.

“Yes, sir. Leaving now.”

“Haul ass.” The line goes dead.

I shove the phone in my pocket and grab the bill, already sliding across the vinyl seat. “Something’s come up. I’ve got to get back.”

She doesn’t even blink or give me any guff. She slides across her seat to stand. I like that, and take her hand and walk to the register. Sonya comes to ring us up.

“Did you like the food?”

“It was great.” I dig a money clip out of my hip pocket and peel off a couple of bills that ensure Sonya gets a nice tip. “Keep the change, doll.”

Her face lights up when she sees the amount. “Thanks, hon. Don’t be a stranger.”

I walk Brandy out to the truck and open the door for her. She slides in, and I move quickly around to the driver’s side and take us back to Paul’s.

Parking next to my Harley, I grab my cut off the seat and climb out, slipping it on. It feels right as it settles on my shoulders. Brandy comes to stand next to my bike with me. My hands settle on her waist, and I pull her flush against me. “Sorry I had to cut this short.”

“I understand. I need to get home, anyway.”

“Where’s home?” I ask, knowing I should see her safely to her door, and hating that I probably don’t have time.

“Little blue house a block that way.” She nods to the next street over.

Relief washes through me. A block won’t make a dent in my trip back. “I’ll follow you.”

“You don’t have to do that. I know you need to go.”

“Makin’ sure you’re safe, Brandy. Don’t argue.”

“Fine.”

“I enjoyed tonight. You gonna give me another shot?”

“Well, you still haven’t told me something personal about you, so I guess

I'll have to," she teases, tilting her head to the side. "You don't get off that easy."

"Right. It was my turn, wasn't it?" As much as I'd love to stand here with her longer, I don't have the time. My eyes drop to her mouth, and I lower my head to capture her lips. They're soft and pliant against mine. When they finally part, I take full advantage, my tongue plunging inside. She moans, and her body melts against mine, and I feel every curve. Her hands slide up the leather of my cut, then cup my neck. I stroke my tongue against hers, then pull back and press a soft kiss to her lips. God, it's killing me to leave her, but duty calls. I press my forehead to hers and groan. "You want the truth?"

"Always."

"I know we don't have time, but I want to fuck you right now."

She giggles. "Even if we did have time, I don't believe in sex on the first date, buddy. Sorry."

I nod. "Mount Everest. Right."

"Can't say I didn't warn you."

"How about on the second date?" I ask, with hope in my voice.

"Depends how it goes," she teases with a tinkling laugh.

"I can't help thinking we'd be really good together," I murmur.

"You're a good kisser," she whispers against my mouth, then nips my lower lip.

God, this woman. I can't wait until I can get her in a bed and take my sweet time adoring every inch of her body. But that time is not tonight. I groan again and raise my head. "Gotta go."

She nods and steps back. I pull her driver's door open, and she scoots in. Once she's inside, I close it and lean in the window for one last kiss.

I climb on my bike and follow her down the street. She turns in the drive of the third house from the corner. I idle at the curb, my feet on the pavement, and watch her walk to the front door.

She unlocks it, then turns to wave. I lift a hand and wait until she's safely inside. Then I make a U-turn, and hit the throttle, roaring down the street, wondering what trouble awaits back at the Evil Dead clubhouse.

CHAPTER THREE – SPARK PLUGS & DEATH HEADS

Marcus—

Billy and TJ stand to the side of the gate as I roll in. Their posture is stiff, and Billy is lighting one cigarette with the butt of another. Never a good sign. I park and jog across the gravel lot to them.

“Where you been?” Billy asks before I can say a word.

“With Brandy. What the hell’s going on? What happened?”

“No idea. Green didn’t tell me shit, just for the three of us to watch the gate and be on high alert.” Billy glances at the clubhouse and sucks on his cigarette.

“We were hoping *you’d* have gotten more details,” TJ adds.

“Not a clue,” I reply. We stand guard duty until well past sunrise; my muscles ache from the tension. I down a water and check the time again. It’s almost nine a.m. I toss the bottle in a trash barrel, wishing we knew what the fuck was going down.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I finally spot Crash heading across the lot toward us and lift my chin to the other guys. “Look alive, boys.”

Billy drops his smoke and grinds it under his boot.

When Crash reaches us, we all know better than to ask questions, even though that’s all that’s on our minds at this point. Crash will tell us as much as he feels the need to and nothing more. He meets each of our eyes, and I can see the seriousness of the situation written all over his face.

“We’ve had some reports of the Death Heads MC spotted in California. They know this is our turf, and we’ve never had this problem with them before.”

“Where?” Billy asks.

“In Truckee, north of Lake Tahoe, and also up where I-80 crosses the

state line into Nevada.” He runs a hand over his jaw. “Look, this could be a mistaken ID. This comes to us through some hang-arounds. They might be mistaken about what patches they saw. We haven’t been able to confirm it, but they said they’ve seen them on multiple occasions.”

“How many?” I ask, and Crash swings his eyes to mine.

“They were traveling in a pack of four.”

“Wow,” TJ murmurs, knowing the significance of that. Anything over one could be trouble.

“Exactly.” Crash points at each of us. “Until we know what the hell’s goin’ on, I want every one of you on your game, understand?”

We all nod.

“You be aware of your surroundings. The club could go on lockdown at any moment, and if that happens, it means you three will be in charge of making sure all the ol’ ladies and families are brought to the clubhouse.”

“Understood,” I say.

“In the meantime, I’ve got a job for you. Melissa and Harley Jean are at a ski resort about a half hour north of Truckee. Their car won’t start. Need you three to ride up there and take care of the problem. If you can fix it, do it. If you can’t, you leave the car and take them back. Pack some extra helmets if you don’t already carry one.”

“I’ve got one,” I say.

“Me too,” Billy adds.

“Good. It may be cold up there. You boys have chaps and jackets?”

We all nod, and he jerks his chin to our bikes.

“Haul ass, and remember what I told you. You spot any Death Heads, you report back immediately.” He grabs Billy’s thermal shirt in his fist and stares at his face. “You do not take any chances with these girls. Their safety comes first. Got it?”

“Got it,” Billy says, his jaw tight, and I have to wonder if Crash is on to the chemistry Billy and Melissa have.

“Anything happens to Cole’s daughter, or mine, and you’re a dead man walking. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Billy’s voice is deep and sharp.

I feel for him, and can only imagine by Crash singling him out, that he has got to know something, or at least he suspects.

Crash releases him, but points his finger in his face. “You’re in charge; you’ve been prospecting the longest.”

He turns to TJ. “Don’t let your sister give you any crap about leaving her car if it comes to that.”

TJ straightens. “Yes, sir.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Move,” Crash barks.

The three of us scramble to our bikes.

I check my saddlebag to make sure I’ve got my leather jacket and chaps with me while TJ pulls out his phone and makes a call.

“Where the fuck are you, exactly?” he snaps.

The phone’s not on speaker, but she’s loud enough I can hear the response and recognize the voice. It’s his sister, Melissa.

“We made it as far as the gas station right where we pick up I-80 to head home.”

“You safe?”

“Yes, why?”

“Nothing. Crash is sending us to get you.”

“Crash is sending you? Why?”

“I suppose since you called Dad.”

“I didn’t call Dad. I called Mom.”

“Whatever. Now we’re coming to get you.”

“We? Who exactly is we?”

“Me, Marcus, and Billy.”

“He’s sending the prospects?” Her voice goes up at the end.

“Yup.”

“Why can’t you just come?”

“Because we’ve got orders to do it this way.”

“Oh, for the love—”

“Just stay put, Melissa.”

“Like we could go anywhere, moron.”

“Brat, I’ve got to make over a three-hour ride for your ass. Show some

respect.”

“Right. See you soon, brother dear.”

TJ rolls his eyes and shoves his phone in his pocket. “Let’s ride.”

Billy—

We finally roll into the gas station at noon. It’s about thirty-five degrees this high in the mountains, so we had to stop at a rest area halfway up to put on our leathers. If we can’t get this car fixed, it’s gonna be a cold ride down for these girls. There are a few spots of snow here and there, but thankfully it’s sunny and the roads are dry. It’s in the fifties in San Jose at the clubhouse. California—gotta love it.

I park at a gas pump, and TJ and Marcus follow suit.

“I’m gonna go find them,” TJ advises, leaving his bike at the pump.

I lift my chin and jam the nozzle in my tank. My eyes survey the area, and I spot Melissa’s white Mustang parked by the building. The car is too fast for her, and her father never should have bought it. I know I shouldn’t talk. I drive a ’68 Plymouth GTX when I’m not on the bike.

“There they are.” Marcus lifts his chin toward the door.

I glance over and spot the girls. They’re both stunners; Harley with her long brown hair like her father’s, and Melissa with her long blonde hair. But as they walk toward her car, I’ve only got eyes for Melissa.

She turns her head, her gaze searching until she finds me. We lock eyes and, just like always, we stare for several beats longer than we ought to. Whatever there is between us can never be. We both know that much. She’s the president’s daughter, and it can’t get more off-limits than that for a prospect.

I’ve known her since she was a three-year-old kid in pigtails, following me around at the clubhouse. There are a few years’ difference in age between us, but some days it feels like a cavern. Melissa is pretty like her momma, and strong-willed like her daddy. It’s a deadly combination for a club

princess.

There have been sparks between us since she became a teenager, and I suddenly took notice of how grown up she'd become. I've always known she was off-limits, though, and never more so than now that I'm prospecting with the club.

I slam the nozzle in its cradle and screw the cap on my tank. "Come on. Let's get this over with and get the hell home."

Marcus chuckles, making it clear he sees through my bullshit. "Get this over with. Right."

"Shut up," I snap, and stride across the lot with Marcus falling in beside me. He, TJ, and I have known each other since grammar school, where we became fast friends serving detention together. Marcus can read me like a book. There's no putting anything over on him.

We approach the Mustang, and TJ has already got the hood up and is peering under it.

I lift my chin to the girls. "Ladies."

They both smile at my greeting.

"Hey, Billy. Thanks for coming," Harley says.

Melissa tucks her hair behind her ear, her head down. "Sorry you had to come all this way."

"Don't worry about it," I assure her. "So, what were you two doing up here?"

"Skiing at Donner. A friend of ours is dating one of the ski patrol guys," Harley offers.

I roll my eyes. These girls have always got some friend somewhere having a party or inviting them places. "Didn't know you girls skied."

Melissa shrugs. "We gave snowboarding a try. It was a blast." She leans her palms on the front panel, bringing herself closer. "You should try it sometime."

My eyes sweep down her open ski jacket to the soft cream sweater underneath that hugs her perfect tits, and my dick gets hard. I glance at TJ. "What's wrong with the car?"

"Don't know. She says it keeps sputtering out."

I shift my gaze to Melissa. “You got gas?”

She huffs out a breath. “Yes, I’ve got gas. I’m not an idiot.”

“Could be the plugs,” TJ muses.

“Could be the filter, pump, or injectors. Dirt and debris need only clog one part to cause the others to fail,” I reply.

“Is that a problem?” Melissa asks.

“It can lead to poor engine performance or even complete engine failure.”

“Could be a dirty airflow sensor,” Marcus offers. “Could be a faulty catalytic converter. Could be failing.”

“Could be a lot of things.” I look over at him, then elbow TJ. “Pull the plugs. Let’s start with the easiest answer and go from there.”

He nods and pops the trunk to retrieve the bag of tools Cole makes his daughter carry with her.

“How long has it been sputtering?” I ask her.

“A couple of weeks,” Harley answers for her. “But it got worse climbing the mountain.”

I lift a brow at Melissa. “A couple weeks? Jesus Christ, woman, do you even have oil in this thing?”

She shrugs. “I mean, I think I do.”

“Babe, you got to fill the oil. That knocking sound? That means you’re out of oil.”

TJ swaps out the plugs for some in the tool bag, and the car fires up, but is soon making that noise again. He fills the oil and wipes his hands. “It should make it down the mountain.”

“Good.” I slam the hood. “Let’s roll.”

Just as I turn, the first reverberations echo across the parking lot. The noise grows louder until it’s a thunderous roar. TJ, Marcus, and I all crane our necks toward the east. Four bikes crest the horizon and rumble this way. Every muscle in my body goes tight. They look like a club, everything about them reads MC from the size of their bikes, to their posture as they ride, to the tight formation they keep as they move as one in regimented unity.

They slow as they roll past, and heads turn our way. They spot us at about the same time I see the patches on their backs. Death Heads. Four of them.

Holy shit.

CHAPTER FOUR – SACRIFICE

Billy—

The four Death Heads pull into the gas station, and as they do, I slide my phone from my pocket. Holding it at my side and out of sight, I glide my thumb across the screen, dialing the number for my father, Red Dog.

“Safeties off, boys,” I call to Marcus and TJ, who are already bracing themselves for whatever shit is about to go down. These are four patched members of a rival MC, and we are merely three prospects; there are a thousand ways shit could go sideways. I set my phone on the hood of Melissa’s car, wanting to free my hands and not draw attention to my call to the club. I hope to God he answers.

My eyes never leave the four men coming to a stop in front of us and dismounting from their bikes. I wish we’d had time to book it out of here, but there was no way we’d be able to load up before they were on us. At least this way we’re at the ready.

I glance sideways, taking in the four people with me. They are my responsibility now. My eyes linger for one second on Melissa. I’ll die before I let anything happen to her.

Red Dog—

My phone vibrates in my pocket. As I pull it out, I realize it’s lit up with my son’s name. Dammit. I huff out a breath and bark into the receiver. “You better not be calling me to bail your ass out. And you better have both those girls and be gettin’ your asses home.”

I hold the phone tight to my ear, but there’s no response. I glance down to make sure the call is still connected. Did he accidentally call me? Wouldn’t

be the first time he butt-dialed me. I put it back to my ear. “Billy, you there?”

I’m about to hang up when I hear a sound on the other end, and it’s not Billy’s voice.

“What are you boys doing out this way?”

“I could ask you the same. This isn’t Death Head territory,” Billy replies.

A chill runs up my spine. Shit. Death Heads are with them, and they’re almost four fucking hours away.

I drop my cigarette and take off for the clubhouse door, keeping the phone to my ear.

“Who are you prospecting for, kid? The Evil Dead or those punk-ass Dead Souls?”

I throw open the door to the clubhouse, sprinting inside.

“Whoa, Red Dog, I didn’t know you knew how to run.”

I jerk my head to see Crash leaned in a chair, grinning. My eyes connect with his and the panic must be clear.

His smile falters, and he slams the chair down. *“What’s wrong?”*

“Death Heads are with the boys right fucking now.”

He jumps up. *“Are the girls with them?”*

“I don’t know. I can just hear them talking.” My eyes scan the room. *“Where’s Cole?”*

“His office.”

I run down the hall with Crash on my heels and throw the door open.

“What the hell? What’s going on?” Cole looks up, startled.

I push speaker on my phone and set it on the desk. Billy’s voice comes over the open line.

“We’re with the Evil Dead, and I know for a fact that four members of the Death Heads—including an officer—sure as hell don’t belong in this state.”

Cole immediately stills in his chair, and his eyes connect with mine. *“Holy fuck.”*

I swallow and stare at the phone. I’m proud of the way Billy is trying to get us as much information as he can.

There’s a deep chuckle. *“We’ll see about that. And what are you doing out here by yourselves and with such hot babes? Doesn’t seem like you’ve*

earned that kind of company yet.”

We can almost hear the sickening smile the fucker must be making as he gestures to the girls.

Cole’s eyes lift from the phone to connect with Crash’s. Both their daughters are there, and the only thing standing between them and one of the most notorious MCs around are three of our prospects. And my son is the one in charge. Terror for all their safety flashes through me.

Crash leans forward, his hand clenching like he wants to reach through the phone and strangle this motherfucker. A moment later, he spins and slams his fist into the wall.

“Quiet,” Cole hisses, surging to his feet, his chair flying back. He puts his knuckles on the desk and leans closer to the phone, intent on hearing every word.

Billy—

I move in front of Melissa, blocking her from view. “They’re none of your concern.”

I can’t let these assholes figure out who these girls really are—the daughters of patched members, club royalty, and Melissa a damn club princess.

A burly guy with a dark beard gives a gold-toothed grin in their direction. He’s the man in charge—the only one with an officer’s patch. “I don’t know. I think they may need to be introduced to some real men, not a bunch of little boys.” He leans around me, directing his next comment at the girls. “We can take you for a real ride. The things I’d do to those bodies.” His sick eyes travel up and down while he licks his lips. “What do you think, Trigger? We need a little comfort on this ride?”

The man named Trigger nods. “Yeah Jackal, I could go for a tight fuck.” Jackal, the name fits with his evil smile.

TJ steps forward. “You keep your fucking hands off them.” His voice is

low but commanding.

“Get in the car and lock the doors, girls.” Marcus hisses out the order, never taking his eyes off the threat.

“Oh, the little boys want to fight for them.” Jackal takes a step toward TJ. I shove him back. “I’m the one you’re talking to here.”

Jackal grabs my collar. “Did you just put your damn hands on me prospect?” His nostrils flare, and his eyes look a little crazed, making me wonder what drugs are running through his veins.

I lift my chin. I can’t back down, and I can’t show fear. Not to these guys. “Yeah, I believe I did.”

His fist slams into my jaw, driving me a step back. TJ and Marcus move forward, but I wave them off. They need to remain solely focused on standing between these fuckers and the girls.

I shove Jackal again. His hand moves to his sidearm. I reach for mine as well, and I’m afraid that in another second we’re going to be in a Mexican standoff, both barrels pointing at each other.

Thankfully, another Death Head steps between us. “Too many eyes, Jackal, and this isn’t part of our plan. Look.” He jerks his chin toward the next set of pumps where a van full of college students just rolled up, their faces pressed to the glass and wide eyes on us.

Jackal lowers his hand from the butt of the pistol I know is under his vest, and I let out a breath.

“You’re right, Whiskey. Let’s roll. Ladies, we’ll be seein’ you two real soon.” He stares at them, licking his lips.

“What’s this plan of yours?” I call, trying to get any details I can.

Jackal chuckles. “Don’t worry, kid. You’ll find out soon enough.”

They mount their bikes, fire them up, and roar off the lot, thundering through the intersection. I watch until their taillights disappear around a bend and out of sight, the rumble of their pipes fading away.

I grab my almost forgotten phone off the hood, seeing the call is still open. “Did you get that?”

“Yeah, is everyone okay?” When I hear Cole’s voice in my ear, I realize it’s not just my father on the line anymore.

“Yes, sir. They drove off. We managed to get the car running right before they pulled up, so we’re high-tailing it out of here as soon as I hang up.”

“Good. Stay on I-80. We’re coming to you as fast as we can.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Billy?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t let anything happen to our fucking girls, understand?” As if I didn’t already know what was at stake. My eyes connect with Melissa’s through the windshield.

“I won’t. Got my word on that, sir.”

Melissa—

Billy hangs up the phone and taps two knuckles on the driver’s window, motioning for me to roll it down.

“We’re booking it out of here. I want you leading the way. We’ll trail you.”

“Okay.” My voice shakes slightly as the tension rolls out of me over what could have happened.

He cups my face. “It’s okay, baby. I’d never let anyone hurt you. Let’s get going. Your dad’s already hauling ass as fast as he can toward us, so we’ve only gotta make it about two hours.”

I nod, knowing my voice will break if I try to speak.

He straightens and points at TJ, saying something, but it suddenly feels like I’m underwater, his voice muffled and distorted.

Billy pounds his fist on the roof of my car, the noise jarring me back to life. He dips his head and barks, “Babe, start the fucking car.”

I stare blankly at him. His chin pulls to the side.

“Melissa, are you okay?”

Harley leans across me, twisting the key. “She’s fine. We’re good.”

Billy studies me until I pull it together enough to nod and give him a

shaky smile. “I’m good. Let’s go.”

He straightens and barks to the others as he jogs to his bike. “Roll out.”

TJ and Marcus follow.

I pull out of the station and make a right turn toward the on-ramp, feeling a little better knowing the Death Heads went straight at this intersection. We get caught at a light.

“Are you really okay?” Harley asks. “I can drive if you need me to.”

“No. I’m good.”

“I cannot believe that just happened.” Harley stares around, like she’s trying to find the Death Heads. “Where the hell did they go?”

“I don’t know.” I check my rearview. The boys are right behind us. Judging by the way their heads are turning, I know they’re looking for those assholes as well. “I thought they were going to start shooting.”

“Yeah, me too. Did you see how Billy stepped up and drew all the attention to himself?”

I bite my lip. “Yeah.”

“And TJ jumping in, and Marcus taking command. Damn, it was kind of hot.” Harley giggles nervously. I know she understands the seriousness of what just happened, and the giggle is probably the release of nervous tension.

“Yeah.” It’s all I can get out. My stomach churns, and I’m afraid I might be sick as it all flashes before my eyes. I could have lost my brother and Billy in one fell swoop. The pounding in my chest tells me my heart is racing, and I feel like I’m hyperventilating. I know I’ve got to pull it together. I take a deep, slow breath and count to four in my head before I release it.

Watching Billy step between us and the Death Heads, prepared to draw the fire on himself to protect us all was brave and terrifying. I don’t know whether I want to hit him or kiss him.

The light finally changes, and I hit the gas. We make it onto the interstate, and I glance at my rearview mirror. All three of the prospects are behind me, riding in a V-shape with Billy in the lead. He looks good leading a pack.

We continue down the interstate another thirty minutes before my car starts vibrating. I glance sideways at Harley. “Shit.”

“Do you think we can make it?” she asks, scrunching up her face as if

she's saying a prayer.

On cue, my car starts violently jerking.

"I'd say no." I glance around for a place I can stop. I spot a sign for a truck pullover just ahead, and I will my car to make it. As I come to a stop, the engine starts smoking.

"Well, crap."

Billy rolls his bike next to my door. "Let's go."

"Um, did you not notice my car is smoking?"

"Leave it. We don't have time to fix it. You girls are riding with us the rest of the way."

"But our stuff..." I protest, knowing before I get the words out how lame they sound.

"Melissa, we can't stay here. The only thing that stopped those assholes last time was the fact there was an audience. There's no one here. That makes us sitting ducks." Billy digs a spare helmet out of his saddlebag. "Now get on the fucking bike."

I shut off my car and pop the trunk, then climb out. "Give me a minute."

He looks pissed. "What the fuck are you doing?"

I unzip my suitcase and pull out the snow pants on top, then slip them on. "I'm gonna need these if I don't want to freeze to death, Billy."

That shuts him up.

Harley comes around the side of the vehicle and does the same thing.

"Hurry the fuck up," TJ snaps.

"Hold your damn horses," Harley replies, hopping on one foot, yanking hers on.

"Harley, you ride with TJ." Billy jerks his chin. The man likes to give orders, and it suits him.

I slam the trunk shut and slip on my ski gloves.

Billy holds out the helmet. I slide my purse strap across my body and put the thing on. I climb behind him, my hands wrapping tight around his abs. He glances over his shoulder.

"You ready?" He squeezes my glove, and I nod.

Harley climbs on with TJ, and the three bikes roar onto the road.

Pressed against Billy's back, his body between my legs, I can't deny how right this feels. I lay my head against him, keeping out of the wind and close my eyes, imagining a world where we're together. A world where I am his woman, and we're out for a ride. I know it can't be, but after almost losing him, I allow myself to have this moment.

Billy's body tightens, and his speed picks up. I lift my head to see what's wrong. TJ and Marcus are motioning back and forth with Billy. TJ holds up three fingers. I glance behind us and see three single headlights about a mile away. Could it be the Death Heads? We've got at least another hour to go, and I doubt we can outrun them.

I look over at Marcus. He points to himself and then signals for us to keep moving. I realize he's planning to fall back to see if it is the Death Heads and, if so, stall them so we can get away. He's the only one without a girl on his bike. I know Billy hates this idea, but it's the only option. Billy gives a curt nod, and I can't help but wonder if this is the last time I'll see Marcus. I wonder if Billy is thinking the same thing. I know he wishes it was him, but selfishly I'm glad it's not him or TJ giving themselves to the wolves.

Billy taps his chest and gives him a two-finger salute as Marcus slows his bike. I glance behind me, watching his headlight as it grows smaller.

Please God, let him make it. Let all of us make it.

CHAPTER FIVE – ALL ON THE LINE

Marcus—

I slow my bike, not knowing what I'm getting myself into, as I let the pack of bikes catch up to me. If it is in fact the Death Heads, what the fuck do I do? My mind travels through several scenarios, but none end well for me. I wonder if I'll ever get to see Brandy again, if I'll ever get to feel her lips against mine and her sexy body pressed to me.

The big Harley engines grow louder as the pack closes in. My best shot at saving the others is to lay out my bike right in front of these assholes. I may not take them all out, but I imagine the rest will stop to help the ones I do.

The roar of the engines is right behind me now. I take a breath, mentally preparing myself for the sacrifice I'm about to have to make. I glance over my shoulder. The three riders are dressed in leather. I see their cuts on top of their jackets, but I can't read the patches. They are definitely members of a club, but I want to be sure they're Death Heads before I make a move. I let them close in farther while swerving in an effort to make sure they don't get around me. When I check again, I fully expect to see the telltale Death Heads wings this bunch is known to wear on the front of their cuts, but it's not there.

Who the hell are they? One pulls slightly ahead of me, and I see the Dead Souls patch on his back. This is our support club. Thank God. I take a breath and release it, along with the stress I was feeling. Cole must have called them in. They wave at me, and I'm sure my relief shows in the grin breaking across my face. The one next to me smiles back, and gives me a thumbs up.

I lift my hand in the air, motioning the others back, and they slow up enough for us to catch them.

When we pull along the guys, the same look of relief I felt is written on their faces. The girls are safe. We now have six bikers ensuring it, and I'll take those odds.

We ride another hour before finally seeing a pack of bikes approaching

from the West on the other side of the interstate. I recognize them immediately. They pass us with Cole and Crash in the lead. Cole raises an arm in acknowledgement, and they slow to use the emergency turnaround in the median. Billy lifts his hand and signals us off at the exit coming up. We coast to the side of the off-ramp and wait.

Billy—

I pull my helmet off and climb from my bike to approach Wyatt, the Dead Souls' president, and extend my hand. "Damn, you boys scared the shit out of us."

"Sorry, man. Cole called us in to help. Guess he didn't clue you in first," Wyatt replies, taking my gloved hand in his grip.

"No, he didn't, but I sure am happy to see you."

After a minute, Crash, Red Dog, Wolf, and Green pull in behind us.

Cole approaches Wyatt. "Thanks for helping us out. Keep your eyes peeled. I don't know what the fuck the Death Heads are up to, but they're doing it in our backyard."

"We will. Glad to help." They reach out and clasp hands, pulling in for a back slap like old comrades.

"Good. We got it from here." Cole turns to Melissa, who is already clambering off the bike and running to him.

He throws open his arms, and she about knocks him over with her hug.

"It's okay, baby girl. You're safe." Cole cradles her head to his chest, his eyes sliding closed. Then he presses his lips to her hair and pulls back, taking her face in his hands to search her eyes. "You are okay, right?"

"Yes, Daddy. Billy, TJ, and Marcus kept us safe."

At the mention of us, Cole looks over her head at TJ. "You good, son?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

Cole walks over to TJ anyway, and places a hand on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "You boys did good."

“Thanks, Dad.”

Turning slightly, he directs his next comment at me. “Where’s the car?”

I jerk my chin down the interstate behind us. “About an hour back. Started acting up again, and we left it.”

“Good. And good work back there, prospect.” Cole nods at me. “You calling and leaving the line open to let us hear everything... It was a smart move.

“Thank you, sir.”

My eyes connect with my father, and he gives me a grin and a wink. I return it with a nod.

Cole starts to walk toward Melissa and his bike.

“Come on, I’ll take you the rest of the way home.” He extends his hand to her.

“I’m okay, Dad. I can ride with Billy.”

My heart leaps. Cole looks back, eyeing me suspiciously, but slowly nods.

Well, fuck. I just went from being in his good graces to being on his radar in 2.5 seconds flat.

I hold the helmet out to his daughter as she walks to me.

I quirk an eyebrow at her.

“What? I didn’t want to ride bitch with my dad; get over it.”

“If you say so.” Not believing a word of that. “But you just sent all kinds of red flags your dad’s way,” I say under my breath.

“Shoot. I didn’t mean to,” she whispers back. “Maybe I should ride with Marcus instead.”

“The hell you will. Climb on, babe. My bike’s the only one I ever want to see you on.”

I don’t miss her grin as she slides on behind me.

Marcus—

We pull into the clubhouse lot, and Cole and Crash take a moment to talk with their daughters. Crash digs in his pocket and holds out a set of keys to Harley, nodding to the club van. Cole kisses Melissa's forehead, then steps away and emits a sharp whistle, grabbing the other patched members' attention. "Church. Now!"

The MC brothers head inside—I suspect to discuss the new problem with the Death Heads, though I doubt they'll let us prospects know shit until they need us to do something.

Once they disappear through the door, Melissa says something to Harley, then walks up to Billy, who's digging a pack of smokes out of his vest. He dips his head to light one, then blows a plume toward the purple sky. The last traces of the day streak across the western horizon.

"Can I talk to you a minute, Billy?" Melissa asks softly, stopping a couple feet away from him.

His cigarette hangs from his mouth, and he squints at her through the smoke before reaching up and clamping it between two fingers to pull it away, exhaling. He glances to the closed clubhouse door before answering.

"Yeah, sure."

I watch the two of them walk about twenty yards away before stopping. I can't hear what is said, but Melissa's hands slip to his waist, and she takes a step toward Billy, looking up into his face.

Billy had better be careful with that one, or he'll never get that patch on his back.

I feel a tap on my bicep and turn to see TJ holding out a can of beer to me. He grins as he sips his own. Harley stands next to him, sipping on her own can.

"Where'd you two get these?" I ask.

Harley holds up the van keys. "There's a cooler in the back."

I pop the top. TJ reaches out to clink his can to mine. "Cheers. You did good today, Marcus. No lie. I know what you were planning if that had been Death Heads."

"Do you? I was kind of thinking on the fly. Just knew I had to do something. I was the only one with nobody ridin' bitch."

“You can play it down, but it was brave,” Harley says, a serious look in her eyes.

I down a good portion of beer, choosing not to reply.

After today, and thinking I might have had to lay down my life for this club, I can’t help but reevaluate some things. I’m not even a brother yet, and I could have died today. They say you find out what’s important to you in your final moments. The only thing I thought about was Brandy.

I want this day to be over so I can go see her. I need something or someone to relieve my stress, and I know Brandy is just what the doctor ordered.

A few minutes later, Billy walks the girls to the van, confiscating the beer, he says for their own good.

We stand and watch the van roll out of sight.

I’m sure I’m not the only one ready for this day to end.

When the meeting finally breaks up, Crash walks toward us.

He lifts his chin. “Listen up. Club’s operating on high alert.”

“We goin’ on lockdown?” TJ asks.

Crash shakes his head. “Not until we know more. You boys keep your eyes open, understand?”

“Yes, sir,” we all murmur.

“You can knock off and go on home.” He turns to the clubhouse but pauses two steps in. “Hey. You three did real good today. Represented the club in a way that makes us all proud. It’s good to know we can trust you with something as important as those girls. Don’t think it wasn’t noted.”

It’s as close to a compliment as any of us has ever gotten.

We all stand in semi shock, and watch our VP walk off.

I’m relieved to slip away and head to my bike, throwing my leg over and strapping on my helmet. This time, I don’t call Brandy. If she’s not at work, I know where she lives. I need to see her tonight, and I won’t be able to explain to her why over the phone.

Tearing out of the lot, I roar across town, heading out onto the country roads that lead toward Paul’s bar and package store.

I can already feel my stress melting away just knowing I’m only a couple

of miles from seeing her, from listening to her laugh and hopefully from wrapping her in my arms.

It's all I can think about until my back tire begins to fishtail. Well, fuck, could this day get any worse?

CHAPTER SIX – BLUEBERRY PANCAKES

Marcus—

I'm barely controlling my swerving bike. Every muscle in my body tenses as I twist and shift on the seat in an effort to keep it upright. I don't miss the irony. I'd planned to lay my bike down not twenty-four hours ago, and now I'm doing my damndest to prevent just that from happening. Downshifting, I manage to pull to the side of the road and climb from my bike to search for the cause. Shining back at me, I see the trouble. Shit.

I squat next to the tire, rub my fingertips over the silver head sticking out of the rubber, and feel the warm air slowly hissing out. I'll never make the long drive back on it.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I call Billy and stare down the road to see the sun peeking over the horizon.

"Hey man, where you at?" he asks, dispensing with hellos.

"I was headed to see Brandy, but I picked up a damn nail."

He chuckles. "Your day just keeps getting better, huh? You need me to come get you with the truck?"

"Yeah, I think that'd—" Tires crunch on the gravel behind me, and I'm lit in a flood of blinding light. "Hold on man, someone's pulling up."

I shield my eyes, trying to make out the driver climbing down from a pickup.

"I just keep saving your ass, huh?" The sweet sultry voice is music to my ears.

"Never mind, Billy, an angel just stopped."

"All right, man. Call if you need me."

"Will do." I disconnect and smile at Brandy.

She props a hand on her hip, pulling on the pale pink, cropped, faux-fur jacket she wears, and exposing the curve of her tight white tank top and jeans. "What are you doing out here?"

“I was actually on my way to see you,” I admit, my eyes trailing over her, my dick getting hard.

She quirks an eyebrow. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah, I’ve had a bitch of a day, and all I wanted to do was see your pretty face.”

She smiles at the compliment and gestures to my bike. “Well, doesn’t look like it’s gotten much better.”

“It did the moment you stepped outta that truck, darlin’.”

“You’re a real smooth talker.”

“Just bein’ honest.” I lift my chin to her truck. “Where were you headed?”

“On my way home until I saw you on the side of the road.”

“Glad you did. I’d have been stuck here for a hell of a long time.”

She eyes my bike and then the back of her truck. “I don’t think we can lift it. Can you leave it?”

“Hell no. You got anything we can use?”

“I just got the truck washed and vacuumed; I don’t have anything in it.”

“Damn.” I look around searching for anything we can makeshift to roll the bike on, even a slight rise I could back the truck to, but there’s nothing. “All right, we’ll have to run to a store and grab a tie down kit and a plank or something I can use to load it. I saw a super store a couple of miles back.”

“Do you want me to go while you stay with your bike?” she offers

“No way. I’m not sending you off to some half-deserted parking lot in the wee hours of the morning. I’ll push it behind some of these trees.”

“Suit yourself.”

I stash my bike, then climb into her truck; the leather seat creaks as my weight settles. “How was work?”

“It was all right. Slam packed, as it always is in December. But the tips are good, so I’m not complaining.”

“I didn’t realize the place stayed open so late.”

“On Saturday nights, the bar is open until four a.m.”

“That was hours ago.”

“I stayed to help Josh clean up. The floors were covered in beer.”

“I see. Seems you work a lot of hours there. What about your opera? Have you written anymore on it?”

“Haven’t had time, but I have been mulling over what you said about adding some conflict.” Her face lights up just talking about this passion. “I was thinking maybe the characters should come from two different worlds.” She shifts gears and glances over at my wide grin. “Do I sound crazy?”

“Not at all, babe. I love watching your eyes sparkle with excitement. Makes me content to see you so full of passion. I could spend my days trying to make you happy just to see that smile on your face.”

Her cheeks tinge light red, and knowing I’ve made her blush makes me grin even wider. I feel like we’re a couple of giddy teenagers.

She continues to tell me her ideas, and I listen, rapt by her ability to weave a story filled with so much emotion. I can tell this is more than a pipe dream. She really has the talent and skill to do this. She just needs her foot in the door.

It’s nice to just listen to her talk after the day I’ve had. All the tension in my shoulders slowly unwinds. She swings into a parking spot right at the front of the store, and we climb out.

After finding everything we need, and returning to get my motorcycle loaded and strapped in, it’s time to head to the clubhouse.

“So where am I taking you?” she asks.

“The Evil Dead clubhouse in San Jose. It’s about an hour south of here.”

“Oh.” I don’t miss the falter in her voice.

“No reason to be nervous, babe. We don’t bite. Unless you like it that way.”

Rolling her eyes, she regains her bravado. “I’m not nervous. I’ve just never been to a motorcycle club before.”

“Well, probably won’t be many people there. Not many hanging out on a Sunday morning, and especially not at the time we’re going to be rollin’ in. You’ll probably only see the other prospects like me.”

“Prospect?”

“Yeah, means we’re trying to become a member. We’ve got to prove ourselves first.”

“Oh, kinda like a pledge at a sorority.”

I cringe at the comparison. “Absolutely fucking not like a sorority.”

She glances sideways at me. “I think it fits.”

I can’t help but chuckle at her expression. We continue to chitchat and tease each other the whole way there, and by the time we arrive, I feel lighthearted again.

I direct her into the industrial park where the clubhouse is located, buried deep in the back.

Her eyes flick to me. “This isn’t exactly what I expected.”

“Right here on the left.” I point across the dashboard to a two-story red brick warehouse surrounded by a chain-link fence.

Brandy coasts to a stop, and I hop out to unlock the gate with the keys I carry. It swings open, and she rolls through, parking in the spot where I gesture.

When she climbs out, I hear a low wolf whistle behind us.

“Damn, Marcus. Looks like an angel did come to your rescue,” Billy jokes, eyeing Brandy in her tight jeans, fitted tank, and pink fur jacket. “Hey Brandy, don’t know if you remember me...”

“You were part of the Christmas cake brigade.”

The memory of our shit mission has his face fall a bit. “Yeah, not exactly how’d I like a beautiful girl to remember me, but I guess it worked for Marcus. Must be pity.” He elbows me.

“Something like that.” She gives me a mischievous smile.

“All right, stop flirting with my girl, and help me unload this damn bike.”

I glance over at Brandy and see she hasn’t missed my words, but she doesn’t correct me either. She may not be my girl yet, but she will be. I’m nothing if not determined.

We unload the bike and push it into the garage.

“I’d stay and help, but I don’t want to. Plus, I’m on gate duty. Cole will kick my ass if he rolls up, and I’m not there.” His eyes connect with mine. We both know the importance of that job, especially now that we’ve got the Death Heads up to who-the-hell-knows-what.

“Yeah, wouldn’t want to piss off your future father-in-law,” I harass him

back.

At the reminder, his eyes flare, and he punches my shoulder. “There’s nothing between Melissa and me.”

“You can lie to yourself all you want, man. But you two have it bad for each other. At some point, you guys need to stop fighting it. The flames between you two could give out third-degree burns. Anyone paying attention can see it.”

“Shut up about it, Marcus. The only thing I’m focused on is the club and getting my patch. I can’t let anything fuck that up. And screwing with the president’s daughter would definitely do that.” He walks away, shoulders slumped. I kind of feel sorry for him, but Romeo and Juliet didn’t end too well, and I don’t see these two ending much better.

“What was that all about? Who’s Melissa?” Brandy asks, also watching Billy make his way across the gravel lot.

“Melissa? She’s off limits for obvious reasons. But sparks fly when Billy and her are anywhere near each other.” I squat next to my bike. “She’s also a beautiful girl and could have just about any dude she wants as long as they have the balls to meet her daddy.”

“Why does her father care if she’s with Billy? Is he not a good guy?”

“Our president is a real papa bear when it comes to Melissa. It doesn’t matter who it is. Nobody will ever be good enough for her. And Billy’s the best. He’s club blood, too. Hey, hand me that lug wrench on the toolbox there, will ya?” I point behind her.

“Club blood?” She grabs the tool I need and passes it over.

“Yeah, Red Dog, one of the brothers, is his dad,” I reply, taking the first lug nut off, then the rest, and pop the tire free.

The low rumble of a distant bike carries to me, and I glance at the clock on the wall. Eight a.m. Who the hell would be rolling up this early? Bikers are known for partying all night and sleeping all day. The only ones who normally frequent the club in the morning hours are prospects, because we get the shit jobs.

Brandy glances over her shoulder toward the gate Billy is unlocking. Cole slows his bike and rolls through, nodding as he passes. He’s been so

consumed with his role as President that he hasn't been as observant as he usually seems to be. Melissa and Billy have stayed off his radar. But I'm pretty sure that ended yesterday.

"Speak of the Devil. That's Cole now," I tell Brandy as I roll the tire to the back wall and grab a new one from our stock.

Cole climbs off his bike and heads to the main door, glancing toward the open garage, but abruptly changes direction and heads my way. I stand, ready to carry out any orders he gives.

"What's going on, Marcus? Bike troubles?" He glances at Brandy.

"Yeah, picked up a nail. Just changing the tire."

"Who's this?" He tilts his head in Brandy's direction.

"Brandy, a friend of mine. Brandy, this is Cole, the Evil Dead president."

Cole reaches his hand out and takes hers. "Nice to meet you darlin'. Hope this one's treatin' you well. But I don't see a drink in your hand," he admonishes, glancing my way.

"Sorry Brandy, did you want something?" I wipe my hands on a rag.

"Oh, that's not necessary."

"How about a coffee?" Cole asks. "You wouldn't turn that down, would you?"

"I suppose not. Thank you."

At her reply, Cole looks at me pointedly, arching a brow until I jump to it.

"Oh, yes, sir. Be right back." I pause. "You want any sugar or cream, honey?"

"No thanks."

I jog to the clubhouse door not wanting to leave Brandy alone with Cole any longer than needed. Being a prospect, it makes me nervous what conversation they could be having. I make quick work of making a pot, but the coffee seems to stream out slower than ever as I watch it fill up the carafe.

Brandy—

“So, how’d you two meet?” Cole asks the minute Marcus is gone.

“He was on a mission for Christmas tree cakes.”

Cole breaks out in a wide grin. He’s an attractive man with his blond beard and hair. He wears a pair of faded jeans and a long sleeve thermal shirt that clings to his muscular chest and arms. Its sleeves are shoved up, revealing inked forearms. His leather vest carries the president patch stitched on the breast. He catches my eyes as they lock on that patch.

“Takes a lot to be in our world, and even more when your man’s a prospect. Prospects are meant to jump anytime a brother says jump. No questions asked. Just makin’ you aware. His number one priority will always be this club.”

I level my eyes at him. I’m not sure if he’s trying to scare me off or if he’s just giving me a chance to back out before I get in too deep. He’s obviously waiting for a reply.

“I see,” is all I give him.

The metal door of the clubhouse bangs open, and the crunching of Marcus’ boots carries across the gravel lot.

I’m happy to see him, and I think he sees the relief in my eyes as he hands out the warm, steaming mugs.

“Here you go.”

The aroma makes me sigh, calming my sudden jitters. I’ve always loved the smell of fresh brewed coffee.

Cole brings his mug to his lips, taking a sip. “Well, I’ve got important things to do.” He turns to me. “Nice to meet you. Hope to see you around.”

As he walks away, Marcus draws my attention to him. “The bike’s all fixed. Wanna go for a ride?” He waggles his eyebrows.

“Sure.”

“Ever been on a bike?”

“Never.”

“You’ll love it. There’s nothing like it. Although—” His eyes sweep over me. “You’re gonna need a warmer coat.” He walks over to a row of hooks on the wall and grabs a worn leather jacket. Returning, he holds it up, ready to help me slip it on. “This is my old one.”

I shrug out of my faux-fur, and slip my arms inside the sleeves of his. It has a quilted lining, and I'm taken back by how heavy it is as Marcus pulls it up over my shoulders and turns me around to fasten it up.

"Don't want you getting cold. The wind can be wicked." He steps back. "It looks good on you."

I run my hand over the leather. It's big, but I like the way it feels. It's like I've got a part of him. Like maybe I'm his. "I love it."

"You can keep it."

My eyes meet his. "Really?"

"Sure. Come on."

Marcus holds a helmet out to me.

I take it and connect the strap under my chin while he turns the bike around.

He fires it up, and the low rumble fills the garage. I climb on behind him and wrap my arms around his waist, feeling his rock-hard abs beneath my hands. I press against him, and feel his warmth against my chest.

"Mmm, this feels right. Wind in my face, and a beautiful woman wrapped around me."

I smile as he starts to pull out. Billy opens the gate when we approach, and I wave as we pull through.

We ride down the road and make several turns, finding our way onto the freeway. Marcus twists the throttle, and the bike surges forward, the wind whipping around us. It's exhilarating. After a while, he slows and exits, making several turns until I see we're on La Honda Road. It winds and curves as it climbs upward. The foliage seems to thicken the higher we go until suddenly we seem to be surrounded by trees climbing high above us. Redwoods stretch towards the heavens like giants. The tree-line disappears almost as quickly as it unfolded as we crest the top. Descending on the western side, we pass through the line of redwoods and a misty haze that seems to blanket the other side. We're surrounded by nature, and then suddenly there are cars everywhere along the shoulder, apparently overflow from the parking lot Marcus turns the bike toward.

A restaurant comes into view. Alice's.

He parks, and we both climb off. “This place has some great food.”

“Ah, now all the cars make sense.”

The wooden building stands in a clearing surrounded by tall trees. It’s not anywhere near large enough to hold all the people who belong to these cars, but a big deck wraps around it like it’s an island. With a roaring fire blazing in a fire pit, and several tall heaters placed around the tables, the diners don’t seem to mind the chill in the air.

We somehow manage to snag an empty table when a group leaves, and Marcus passes me a menu.

I crack it open. “What’s good?”

“Everything. Breakfast is great. They also have amazing burgers and barbecue, but we’re a little early for that.”

A waitress hustles over with a pad and takes our order. After a few minutes, she returns with my plate of blueberry pancakes and some kind of scramble for Marcus, along with the mugs of steaming coffee we both ordered. “Enjoy.”

I take a bite and moan. “Dear God, this is so good.” The blueberries burst with flavor.

“Well damn, if it makes you moan like that, I need a taste.”

I stretch my fork across to his open mouth, dripping some of the syrup as I do.

“Mmm, that is good.”

Instinctively, I reach out to wipe the syrup away with my finger. As I pull away, he grabs my hand with reflexes that startle me. Then, staring into my eyes, he takes my finger into his mouth and licks the syrup off. It feels so sensual the crowd around us fades away.

“Delicious.”

I draw my hand back, breaking the moment, but the tension between us has definitely increased a few notches.

“So, how’d you like your first ride?”

I can’t keep the smile off my face. “It was amazing. That last road was gorgeous, and it felt so freeing, winding along it.”

His face lights up, flashing straight white teeth. “Yeah, you’re hooked.”

“Afraid so,” I concede.

A table full of female riders dressed in riding gear sit next to us, their helmets off to the side. They look happy, invigorated, and loving life. I get it completely. I understand now. One ride on a motorcycle, and it’s changed everything.

I love this place and know I want to come back again with Marcus. Warmth floods me, and I realize I’m already thinking of this place as our place. Maybe I’m being silly, but it all feels so right. Everything feels so easy with this man. I lock eyes with him, and somehow it feels like he understands, like he gets everything I’m feeling right now.

Before I stop myself, I lean across the table and press a quick kiss to his lips.

“What was that for?” he asks.

“Thank you for this.”

“Breakfast?”

I shake my head. “For the ride and this beautiful morning.”

He strokes the tip of his index finger along my cheek. “Anytime, sweetheart.”

We finish eating and head back to his clubhouse. It’s close to ten a.m. by the time we return. A couple more bikes are now parked, but it’s still mostly empty.

“Crash and Shane.” Marcus informs me, nodding to the newly parked bikes.

I climb off the back of his motorcycle and stretch while he shuts the engine off.

I glance at the time. “It was fun being your bartender in shining armor, and I loved the ride, but I need to head back. I’ve got to be at work at four this afternoon, and I’d like some kind of sleep before then.”

“All right. Let me follow you home. Make sure you get there okay.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is.” He touches my chin gently, then glances at the clubhouse. “But we need to get out of here quick before one of the brothers sees me and puts me to task.”

Marcus—

I follow Brandy into a gated apartment complex, parking in a spot next to her. The place seems newly built and in pristine condition.

When she climbs from her truck, I take her hands in mine. “This morning was fun. We should do it again sometime, minus the nail.” I yawn.

“It was fun.” She studies my tired eyes. “Hey, come up and get a cup of coffee. I don’t want you falling asleep on your way home.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I stretch and follow her through a locked door and up the stairs to the second floor. She leads me into a modern-styled apartment with vaulted ceilings and a pair of skylights in the living room. Natural light floods in, and a set of sliders leads out to a covered porch. The place is incredibly tidy, and I’d almost say it was the model, except for the mess of papers strewn about a glass top desk pushed into a corner—the kind of creative chaos I’d expect from a writer.

Brandy slips off my old leather and walks into the open kitchen. She pulls down a white ceramic cup and pushes a button on her single cup coffee maker. I follow her and glance around while it fills, taking in the magnets on the fridge. Phantom of the Opera, the Eiffel Tower, and Catalina Island.

I point at them. “You’ve been there?”

“Yes, to all three. I saw the stage production of Phantom on Broadway when I was a child. Paris was a girl’s trip with my mother, and Catalina was last summer with a friend.”

“A friend or boyfriend?”

“Are you jealous?”

“Absolutely.”

“Here you go.” She hands me the steaming mug, changing the subject, and our hands brush against each other, our eyes connecting.

She pulls back, suddenly seeming as jumpy as a cat now that we’re in her home.

“You okay?” I question over the rim of my cup.

“Of course.” She rubs her upper arms.

Taking a big gulp of my coffee, I set it down near the sink, thinking coming up may have been a mistake. Last thing I want to do is rush her or push for more than she’s willing to give. I’ll wait as long as she needs. “I should go, let you sleep,” I offer. Last thing I want is for her to feel nervous around me. I start to turn but her warm hand grasps mine.

“Wait.”

The word is soft—breathless, really. I study her hooded eyes as she steps closer and lets her gaze drop to my mouth. Goddamn, I don’t want to make a mistake here, but I’m getting mixed signals.

“You don’t have to leave yet, do you?”

It’s all the hint I need. I press my hand to the small of her back and drag her body flush against mine.

CHAPTER SEVEN – BLACK LACE

Marcus—

I lean my head down to take Brandy's mouth, softly pressing my lips to hers. She starts out timidly, but then opens and lets me sweep inside. Her tongue dances with mine. She's just as hungry for me as I am for her, giving it as good as she gets. It looks like I have a little hellcat on my hands.

I cup either side of her face, not wanting our kiss to end. My hands trail down her neck to feel the weight of her breasts in my palms. I've been thinking of them all day, ever since she had them plastered against my back. Releasing one, I reach around her shirt to the back and unhook her bra with one flick. She pulls the straps off from under her tank, revealing the little knobs her hard nipples create through the fabric. I brush my thumb across one, and she lets out the sexiest moan that nearly is my undoing.

I break our kiss. "Tell me you want this, baby."

"I do," she pants.

I grab her ass and lift, wrapping her long legs around me. "Which way?"

She points to a hallway off the living room.

Her bedroom is decorated in neutral colors that give a calming feeling. I lower her on to her wrought iron bed, coming down on top of her. Her eyes are clear and her pupils dilated as she stares deep into my eyes. Holding that sultry gaze, I stroke the smooth skin of her belly, pushing up her tank top. *Beautiful*. Her breasts are a nice size, her nipples small, tight peaks. I brush my thumb across one again and again, hoping to draw another sexy moan from her lips. She doesn't disappoint.

"Mmm."

I break our kiss and take one beaded nipple into my mouth. I suck and drag my tongue in slow circles around it while her back arches off the bed. Then I move to the other breast and repeat my ministrations.

While my mouth does its job, my hand wanders down. First over her

smooth belly and then to the top of her jeans. I slide my hand under, feeling the lace of her panties—panties I’ve thought about all night. I want to know their color. My hand slips under the edge, and my fingers find what they are seeking. She’s already dripping with her arousal. The wetness coats my fingers as I plunge two inside her. Her hips lift off the bed, as if begging for more. I give her what she wants and thrust in and out, while my thumb makes small circles over her clit. Her hips roll, taking up an involuntary rhythm, meeting my thrusts.

“Yes, baby. Show me how much you want me.”

“Yes, please. I want you inside me.”

I fucking love hearing those words from her gasping mouth, her head thrown back, but I don’t need her words. I feel her need for release building as I work, not letting up, not holding back until she’s a quivering, trembling mess, her breasts jiggling. Those pretty tits call to me, and I take one plump, swollen nipple into my mouth again, sucking hard.

“Oh, God I’m going to come.” Her head thrashes from side to side.

I pull off her nipple and drag my teeth across it, causing her undoing.

“Oh, Marcus!” She jerks against my hand, coming hard.

“Damn, I like my name coming out of your mouth.” I whisper the words against her panting lips as she crashes to earth. “That was beautiful to watch, sweetheart.” I slide my hand out and lick my fingers. “You taste so sweet. I want a better taste? You gonna let me?”

She nods, and I slide to the foot of the bed to tug her jeans off, revealing a pair of black lace panties that match the bra already cast aside. I hook my thumbs in the lace at her hips and draw them off, revealing her sweet pussy to me. Taking her ankles in my strong hands, I drag her down the bedspread until her knees hang over the edge.

She gasps.

“So sexy. Can’t believe I get something this sweet all to myself.” I drop to my knees and spread her wide. I lean forward and give one long, slow lick. She immediately glistens in answer, and my body responds, my dick, already rock-hard, strains against my zipper. Dipping my head, I take her clit into my mouth and suck, letting my tongue flick across it. Her hips begin their

rhythmic dance again.

“Oh, God.” Her chest rises and falls as I bring her already swollen clit to the edge again.

“Jesus Christ, you taste good.” I lick it in long slow strokes, again and again, until I feel her need growing, until I can’t wait another second to be inside that sweet, dripping pussy. I stand, shrug my cut off, and drape it over a nearby chair. I drop my phone on the nightstand, a reminder to us both that I am forever on call.

I distract her by ripping my shirt over my head and tossing it to the floor.

Our eyes lock as I work my belt buckle open. She scoots to the middle of the bed, never breaking contact. Her face is a mask of desire, her eyes shining, and the sole of her foot moves across the bedspread as if tempting me, reminding me she’s ready and waiting—paradise all laid out in front of me. *Goddamn.*

I open my jeans, releasing my throbbing, eager dick. Her gaze skates down my chest and abs to lock on my engorged length while I dig a condom from my pocket and roll it on.

“You ready for me, baby?” I whisper, and those pretty eyes lift to mine.

“So ready.” Her tongue slips out to wet her lips, then her teeth sink into her plump bottom one.

It’s my undoing. I wrap my fist around my cock and put a knee to the mattress, positioning myself over her. Gentle palms land on my chest, stroking across my ribs.

God, I love her touch. I’m already addicted.

Bringing the head of my cock to her slick entrance, I circle it once, twice. Now that I’m here, on the verge of taking her, I want to prolong the moment, make the sweet anticipation last a bit longer. The look in her liquid eyes tells me she’s right there with me, knowing somehow this moment is important. Our first time, and there are no second first times.

“Please,” she whispers, her hands cup my face.

Slowly sinking into her sweet heat, her tightness envelops me. I want to memorize every second of this. I try to go slow, but my body has other ideas, and it takes over, my hips thrusting, my erection driving in and filling her

completely.

She sucks in a breath, and I give her body a moment to adjust. My dick throbs inside her with the need to release, and soon my hips roll in the age-old motion of a man taking his woman. I lift my weight off her, going up on my palms, suspended above her. My hot gaze sweeps her gorgeous naked body to where we're joined. It's so damn erotic watching as I slowly pump in and out, my dick coming out slick every time. I make sure to rub against her clit as I do, dragging breathy sighs from her again and again, until she becomes impatient, writhing against me.

"I'm not glass, Marcus," she pants. "You don't have to be gentle."

"Maybe I want to be gentle." I lift a hand off the mattress and cup her face, my thumb grazing across her plump lower lip, my body still thrusting, my chest soon slick with sweat.

She turns her head and nips at my thumb with those pearly white teeth. "Harder. Please. I need you to take me harder."

"All right, baby. Anything you want." I thread my fingers through her hair, resting on my elbows and pressing our hot, slick skin together. "I love a woman who says what she wants; it's sexy as hell."

"Good," she breathes. "Not all men do."

Her response causes some protective urge to rise in me. I want to find every man in her past who's ever mistreated her or disregarded her and beat them to a pulp. I hold her eyes. "Then they're fools."

Her nails dig into my hips, and she pulls me tight against her.

I oblige her wish, thrusting hard and fast, again and again. She matches me, thrust for thrust, until we're both breathing hard. Watching the sweat bead between her full breasts, I dip my head and lick it off, keeping my eyes on hers. Those dark pupils flare. Taking her nipple into my mouth, I suck hard, and she unravels. She throws her head back, her mouth dropping open, and her legs wrap around me, linking at the small of my back. She clenches my dick, coming long and hard. I groan, my jaw tight, and my eyes close.

Her hands clasp my neck, tugging me down for an urgent kiss. God, yes, this woman was made for me. But something bubbles up inside my chest, needing more, demanding more. I break free of her mouth and press my

forehead to hers, still pumping through her release. “Say my name.”

“Marcus,” she half moans, half shouts.

Fuck, yes. That does it for me. I let out a guttural shout as my dick explodes in release. I slam into her, my whole body going tense, and I come harder than I’ve ever come.

My breath saws in and out, and my chest heaves. I give myself a moment before I pull free and climb off to go take care of the condom. Returning, I slip in beside her and pull her to me, pressing her head against my chest. She doesn’t hesitate to cuddle close.

I kiss her temple. “I could hold you in my arms like this forever.”

“Mmm, it is nice.”

My fingers thread through her hair, stroking her tenderly over and over until her breathing changes, telling me she’s drifted off to sleep.

I doze for a few hours, more at peace than I’ve been in a long time, until the vibration of my cell drags me from my sleep.

Blindly, I reach out, feel around and grab it off the nightstand, cracking an eye to read the message.

BILLY: WE’RE BEING SENT TO MAKE A PICKUP. GET YOUR ASS BACK SO WE CAN GET STARTED.

I frown. I know exactly what type of pickup he’s talking about. Money. Payments. Sometimes protection payments, sometimes from a business the club has part or full ownership in. But prospects aren’t sent to make pickups. At least, we haven’t been until now. My thumb moves over the screen.

ME: WHERE?

BILLY: SONNY’S

Holy shit. The local strip club the MC owns.

I huff out a breath, swinging my legs over the bed and sit up. I feel Brandy’s warm, soft hand stroke my back.

“Where are you going?” she purrs.

“Duty calls,” I reply, peering over my shoulder at this beauty and wondering how the hell I got so lucky.

“Oh, hey. I wanted to ask you something.”

I twist and lean over her, my hands on either side. “Okay. Shoot.”

She runs her fingers up my arm. “So, are you on duty all the time, or do you ever get a chance to do something without being beckoned away?”

My gaze sweeps over her face, not missing the little frown line between her brows. “Well, I’m still a prospect. So no, not really. Not without permission. Why?”

“It’s just that I have this Christmas party my parents throw every year, and I thought maybe you’d want to come with me.” She runs her finger in a circle on my bicep, not making eye contact. “My ex will be there, and I didn’t really want to go alone...”

I shift my head, trying to catch her eyes. “So, you want me to come so you can rub me in his face?”

“More like armor to allow me to enjoy the party with someone I actually want to spend time with.”

“Who’s this ex? Why’s he going to be at the party?” The red flags start piling up.

“Well, my dad invited him. He and my dad play tennis together.”

“Tennis?” I question, quirking an eyebrow. “Your dad know you don’t want him there?” I cut right to the chase, wanting to know how much of an opening this guy still has.

“No, my dad has kind of viewed him as the son he’s never had, and I didn’t want to ruin that for him.”

My heart drops a little. Well, this just got fucking complicated. Now I’m competing with some prick who’s already the favorite with Daddy. I can’t imagine an MC biker will hold a candle to him. Her father probably won’t even let me through the door.

“He’s the one you went to Catalina with, isn’t he?”

Brandy looks down and nods. “Yes, but there’s nothing between us now.”

I’m not sure whether to believe her. Hell, we’ve only known each other

for a couple of weeks.

“Does he know that?”

“Of course he does. I broke up with him when he turned out to be a jerk.”

“Just sayin’, sounds like he and Daddy might be trying for a second chance.”

“Well, tough. I don’t want him. I want you.”

Those three words have me smiling. “Good to know. When is it?”

“Two weeks.”

I dip my head and brush her lips in a sweet kiss. “I can’t make any promises, but I’ll see if I can pull it off,” I relent. How I’m going to swing a night off, I don’t have a clue.

I stand, shrug into my shirt and cut, and with a sly smile, I scoop Brandy’s black lace panties off the floor and stuff them in my hip pocket.

“What are you doing?” she squeals in panic.

“Memento of the best morning of my life.” Her face immediately softens, and she gives me that pretty smile I love coaxing out of her. “Walk me to the door?”

I don’t wait for a reply; I scoop her up, her legs going around my waist, and carry her naked through the apartment. I like that she lets me, with no argument or false modesty. She twines her arms around my neck and locks eyes with me.

By the time we’re at the door, I’m thinking about banging her against it, but duty calls. I press her back to the door and kiss her deeply. When I break it off, my gaze drops to those magnificent tits, and I give her a slight toss in the air, making them jiggle. She shrieks and clutches me, like I’d ever let her fall.

“Gotta trust me, babe.”

“I do.”

“Good to know. I’ll call you later, angel.” I let her down, kiss her once more, and walk out, cursing the fact that I have to leave her. I stride out to my bike and stare at the building while I strap on my helmet, swing my leg over and fire up my Harley. Brandy’s request plays through my mind. I know if I ever want a real shot with her, I’m going to have to let her ex know she’s

mine now. And to hell with Daddy's plan.

CHAPTER EIGHT – REWARD

Marcus—

Driving to the clubhouse, all I can think about is Brandy. The sex was off the charts, like I knew it would be, and now it's left me craving more. I've also been thinking about the party. She hasn't really asked me for anything, and I know it's important to her. Last thing I want to do is let her down. Somehow, I've got to figure out the right time and place to ask Crash for permission. God only knows when that will be, especially with the Death Heads situation breathing down our necks.

I pull into the Evil Dead parking lot and spot Billy and TJ already sitting on their bikes, waiting to head out.

"About damn time," Billy complains around a cigarette as I bring my bike to a stop next to him.

"Don't give me any lip. You know how far I had to drive."

"You're putting a lot of miles on your bike for this girl," TJ observes.

I readjust my package, giving a grin. "She's worth it."

"She turnin' into something more than a challenge?" TJ prods.

"Yeah, I think she is."

Billy tosses his cigarette. "All right, enough chitchat. We all know this is a step up in responsibilities. The club's obviously checking to see if we can handle it. Let's not fuck it up, boys." He twirls his finger in the air, motioning us to roll out.

We make short work of several convenience stores and a couple of bars.

Our last stop is Sonny's. We nod to Bobby, the muscle at the door as we pass through, our eyes adjusting to the sudden change in lighting. It's still pretty early and mostly empty, but a pretty little redhead is twirling on a pole center stage. The chick's legs kick upward, showing off her knee-high white cowboy boots and red sequined shorts. Then she moves to the middle and starts twirling her chest, making the silver tassels attached to her otherwise

bare breasts whirl in a hypnotizing pattern. Her cowgirl look is complete with a sparkly cowgirl hat she lifts in salute to us with a saucy smile and a wink.

“That’s Red,” a tiny blonde carrying a tray of longnecks calls out to us.

It seems to break the trance, and we all turn.

I see Ronnie, the manager Sonny hired to see to the day-to-day nearly three decades ago, standing behind the bar, wiping a glass with a towel. He’s got gray peppered throughout his hair, but still the physique of a man who can hold his own. I nudge Billy, and we head in his direction.

“Well, hello boys. You here for the pickup?”

“Prez sent us,” Billy responds.

“Gotta say, I was surprised when Cole told me he was sending you boys. Only ever had a patched member do the pickup. Must not be too much longer for you three.”

“That’s the plan,” TJ replies.

“Come on back to the office; you can count it out.” He flips the dishtowel over his shoulder and jerks his chin for us to follow him back.

We walk down a long hallway. I glance in a room to the right and see several girls in the dressing room putting on makeup and adjusting costumes.

“Hey, boys,” one calls out, giving us a flirty smile as she rolls up a stocking and attaches it to a garter belt.

Ronnie leads us to the office at the end of the hall. It’s a small room, and with the four of us, it’s crowded.

Ronnie squats in front of a safe and takes out a canvas bank deposit bag. He unzips it and pulls out several envelopes of cash. He tosses them on the desk.

“Double check it.” His eyes meet Billy’s. “Here’s the slip.”

I glance over Billy’s shoulder to see the amount and have to stifle the whistle that almost escapes. I’m not sure exactly what the envelope system is, but I’ve overheard enough to know the club takes ten percent off the top. The rest goes to the bank to be divided into several accounts, one being the operating expense account to run the joint and keep the bartenders, bouncers, and girls paid.

Sonny’s does very well—the MC does very well.

After a few minutes of counting and triple counting, Billy nods, satisfied. We trudge back down the hall, and Ronnie breaks off behind the bar.

“You boys want a drink?”

Billy shakes his head. “Just here to handle business.”

We move toward the door.

Ronnie calls out to us as we’re about to step through it. “Hey, tell Cole I still haven’t seen anything.”

Billy makes eye contact but doesn’t answer. Just nods and shoves the door open.

We all know what Ronnie meant; the Death Heads have hung low since we saw them. They seem to have disappeared from the area, but we’re all on edge. No one likes a stray in their backyard.

“Have either of you heard anything?” I question, strapping my helmet on.

Billy squats and shoves the thick envelopes in his saddlebag. “No, but they must be thinking things are all right. I mean, they’re throwing JP’s birthday this weekend.”

“JP?” I quirk a brow, my mind blank as to who he’s talking about, but I’m not club blood. I didn’t grow up immersed in the club like Billy and TJ, so they tend to know more members from the other chapters than I do.

TJ swings his leg over his bike and reaches for the helmet hanging from the handlebar. “He’s one of Mack’s good friends. He’s with the War Dogs MC. You know, that ex-military riding club.”

“Oh, right. The members went to their cookout last summer while we manned the clubhouse.”

“Yep. Mack served with some of them, and my dad has kept the relationship going once he took over as President. Mack asked dad if we could throw JP a party for his 70th. Dad said he’d be down for a reason to have a party. Should be fun. You know the girls from Sonny’s will be there.” TJ waggles his eyebrows.

“You’re just hoping that hot little redhead who was up on the pole notices you,” Billy jokes, standing and strapping his own helmet on.

“I wouldn’t complain.” TJ twists his throttle and roars out onto the road. Chuckling, Billy and I thunder out after him.

The three of us ride to the clubhouse and make our way to Cole's office.

Billy taps a knuckle on the open door. Cole, Green, Crash, and Wolf are waiting. Seems our sponsors are here to make sure we didn't screw shit up.

Cole glances up. "Hey boys. Come on in. Put it here." He taps his finger on the desk.

Crash's eyes connect with mine, and I nod, letting him know all's well. He nods back and returns his attention to Cole.

Billy reaches a hand behind his back, lifting his leather jacket to slide the thick envelopes from his jeans and toss them on the desk.

"Great, let's get this counted quick." Cole hands an envelope to each brother, and they thumb through the bills.

They each finish and toss the envelopes to Cole, Green finishing up last.

"Come on, brother, I know you can count faster than that," Wolf teases.

"I was double checkin'. Something you all shoulda done," Green snaps, throwing his envelope Cole's way.

"You did good." Cole nods to the envelopes, then leans in his chair, eyeing us. "We've been talking about you boys."

We all shift, hoping to God we're not in trouble for something.

"We were really thankful for the way you handled the Death Heads yesterday."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Billy relax slightly.

"Been thinking, maybe as a little treat, you boys could bring a date to this party we're throwing and actually enjoy a bit of it."

TJ's face lights. "That'd be nice."

Cole glances toward the other brothers. "And I think these three may have something else up their sleeves to let you know the club appreciated it."

Billy shifts on his feet. "Thank you, sir."

"Yeah, thanks," I chime in.

"Well, that's all." Cole jerks his chin to the door. "Get outta here."

We all swiftly follow orders and move out, our boots scuffling.

"Well, I know who Marcus is bringing, but who are you inviting?" TJ asks Billy's retreating back as we stride down the hallway.

"Ha, no one, dumbass," I reply. "He can't invite anyone, because the one

he wants to invite can't be seen with him, and he can't bring anyone else because then he'll screw up his chances with her." I actually kind of feel bad for Billy. This "reward" is more like a punishment for him, and I can't help but wonder if Cole knew exactly what he was doing. Cole is one smart son-of-a-bitch, and I think Billy has found himself in a game of chess.

"Oh right, Melissa. How long are you two gonna play merry-go-round? I mean, that shit's gotta get old." TJ goes behind the bar and grabs three beers.

"We're not playing anything. I'm just trying to get my patch," Billy growls, snagging a beer from TJ's outstretched hand.

"In all seriousness, you're going to have to bring someone," I break the bad news, and watch the realization dawn across his face.

Billy meets my eyes over the top of his tipped bottle as he chugs half of it down.

"Cole is on to you. You have to bring someone. It doesn't matter who it is, but you better bring *somebody*," I warn him.

His jaw clenches and I feel for him. I know the bind this puts him in. It'd be laughable if he wasn't such a good friend.

"You could bring somebody ugly," TJ suggests. "But I think Marcus is right. You better bring somebody."

"Goddamn it." Billy chunks his half full bottle into the corner trash can, and it smashes just above it. I turn back to look at him, but he's already pushing through the club door, slamming it behind him. I glance around, hoping no one saw his outburst. Thankfully, most of the guys are in Cole's office. But then my eyes connect with Shane's across the room by the pool tables, his feet spread, a pool cue clutched in both fists while he waits for Jake to take a shot.

Jake seems oblivious, but Shane tilts his head to the side, and his brows furrow.

Aw, fuck. I quickly glance away, not wanting to be the one interrogated over what the hell just happened.

CHAPTER NINE – SECRETS & LIES

Marcus—

Brandy holds onto my waist as we ride through the open gates to the Evil Dead clubhouse. Two men wearing prospect cuts who I've never seen before stand guard. I can't help but wonder what the fuck that means. The place is packed with cars and bikes. There are members from the War Dogs, Dead Souls and, of course, the Evil Dead present. The families are here, but since it's JP's birthday, I heard some entertainment was being sent over from Sonny's. Hopefully the girls know which members to stay the hell away from while the old ladies are here, otherwise we could be witnessing a cat fight before the night is up.

A couple of barrels are already blazing with fires and some of the crowd has spilled out to the picnic tables.

I let Brandy off before I climb from the bike. "Damn, girl, you look sexy in that outfit. Did I mention that yet?"

"Once or twice." She giggles. "It's not too much, is it?" She twists her hip and holds her hands out.

I eye her up and down, slowly taking in her copper halter top. It has a plunging neckline that shows off her ample cleavage and beading along the edge. My eyes continue to her jeans that fit just right over her round ass, a few tears marring the legs. But the sexiest part of the outfit are the knee-high, black leather, heeled boots. I definitely have plans for those later. "Not at all."

Taking her hand, I lead her toward one of the barrels where I see Billy, TJ, and the hot little redhead from Sonny's.

"Hey guys, how's it going?" I ask.

"Fine. Hey, Brandy," Billy calls, tipping his beer in her direction.

"Hey, Billy. Good to see you."

TJ lifts his hand from around the blonde chick to wave. "I'm TJ. This is

Kelly.” He nods to the girl under his arm.

“Hi.”

“So, who are those prospects?” I ask Billy, gesturing toward the open gates.

“Dead Souls. They’re loaning the club their prospects so we can participate in the party. Guess Cole still wanted someone manning the gate.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t want to be caught off guard. Think they can actually handle the job?”

“What, stand at a gate?” TJ jokes. “They seem to be doing just fine.”

“Hey, where’s your date?” I finally notice the lack of one with Billy.

TJ shakes his head and scoffs. “Dumbass didn’t bring one. Thought he’d throw all our warnings out the window and walk right into the trap my dad has set for him.”

“That was stupid,” I agree.

“He’s not setting up some damn trap. You’re both overthinking the fuck out of this,” Billy grumbles, taking a sip off of his beer.

“Yeah, okay. But don’t say we didn’t warn you. Come on Brandy, let’s grab a drink.”

“Sure.” She smiles. “Nice to see you guys again.”

Brandy—

Marcus leads me through the doors into a big open room with music thumping. A bar sits along the wall, stools packed with people. Several tables are scattered throughout and a pool table sits off in a corner, a game already in play. We make our way through the crowd to a bar top. Marcus reaches into a bucket full of ice, pulling out two longnecks.

“Beer okay?”

“Of course.” He pops the top off, and I take mine, tilting it for a drink.

Several older, but quite attractive, women walk out of a doorway carrying trays of uncooked meat.

One with long beautiful honey colored hair calls out, “Marcus, be a doll and grab the door.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He quickly moves to do her bidding.

“Now, Marcus, I’m not that old, am I?” She teases as she walks through.

“Of course not.” He gives her a bashful smile. “Just trying to show you some respect.”

“And who’s this?” a petite brunette asks, nodding in my direction.

The blonde in front turns to get a better look at me. “Oh, you must be the girl Cole was telling me about. I’m Angel, Cole’s wife. I’d shake your hand, but...” She lifts the tray slightly.

With her brilliant green eyes aimed in my direction, I can definitely see how she turned that man’s head. “Hi, I’m Brandy.”

“I’m Crystal, Wolf’s ol’ lady.” The brunette lifts her chin and then tilts her head to another blonde woman. “And that’s Shannon, she’s Crash’s.”

“Come on. You can help us get the food set while we drill you about Marcus.” Shannon jerks her head, encouraging me to follow. “We won’t bite. I promise.”

I turn to Marcus, and he answers for me. “Um, we were about to have a drink, and I was going to introduce her to the guys.”

Shannon shakes her head. “You can come rescue her in a few minutes. Right now, she’s meeting the ol’ ladies.” Then she leans closer to Marcus and lowers her voice. “And between you and me, we both know the ol’ ladies are the real test she has to pass.”

He sighs. “Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Oh, come on. We’re not that bad. If anything, we’ll get her to join our little ladies' club.” Crystal chuckles.

“These trays are heavy. Let’s go,” Angel calls.

The women make their way out the door, and I follow, glancing back to see Marcus watching me with a nervous expression. I guess these are the top hens. Trying to reassure him, I give him a wink. I don’t scare easily.

“Here, let me take that for you.” I reach for Shannon’s tray.

“Why, thank you, sweetie.” She passes it into my hands. Before I realize what she’s about to do, she grabs my wrist, twisting my gold flower bangle

so she can get a better look. “Is that a Van Cleef and Arpels?”

The shock of her knowing the designer flashes across my face. “Umm, I’m not sure,” I lie.

She lets go, her eyes connecting with mine, and as if sensing my discomfort, she backs off. “Sure. Must just look similar, because if it was, you’d know it.”

I can tell she doesn’t believe for a second this bracelet is a knockoff, but I’m thankful she’s giving me an out.

We make our way to one of the picnic tables alongside a line of grills. A big burly man with a red beard who looks the part of a lumberjack is manning one of them, while a petite Asian woman sets out condiments and toppings.

“Hey ladies, just set the meat over there,” he calls, gesturing with a pair of tongs to an open space at the end of the table.

“Brandy,” Angel calls. “This is Mary. She’s Red Dog’s ol’ lady.” She motions to the man behind the grill.

“Oh, I hate that term. Nothing about any of us is old,” Mary mutters. Her eyes drag up and down my figure. “So, who are you here with?”

“Marcus,” I reply.

“Oh, that’s right. The prospects were allowed to participate. Who’d my baby boy bring?” Mary asks the other women.

Crystal shrugs. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen Billy yet.”

“Well, I’m off to find out. I need my boy with someone I approve of.” She moves off toward the clubhouse door.

“Good luck to the poor girl Billy brought with him. Mary won’t approve of anyone,” Red Dog mutters, flipping burger patties onto the sizzling grill.

“Yes, yes, Billy’s going to have a hard time finding someone to please Mary, but right now I want to hear all about Brandy,” Angel chimes, turning her attention all on me. “So, I heard you met when Green sent them on that ridiculous run.”

“Yes, he needed Christmas tree cakes.” I laugh at the memory. “Can’t say I wasn’t surprised when three leather-clad bikers walked in to pick them up. Not exactly what I was expecting.”

“Do you work at a grocery store?” Shannon tilts her head, obviously

confused.

“Um, no, I’m a bartender at a sort of convenience store slash microbrewery.”

“Oh, a bartender? Not owner?” Shannon’s brows furrow.

“Nope. Just work there.”

“Do you make good tips?” she prods.

“Shannon! That’s none of our business. Why do you care so much about her job?” Crystal quirks a perfectly sculpted brow, then turns her attention to me. “I want to know how he won you over?”

I shrug. “Well, he was a nice guy. I never thought I’d see him again, but then he came back in the bar one night.”

“Of course he did.” She lifts a hand toward me. “Look at you. The boy would be an idiot not to come back.”

“What happened then?” Angel asks, passing another plate of meat to Red Dog.

“It was last call. There was this one customer giving me a hard time. You know, getting all touchy feely.”

“Oh, God. I can’t wait to hear how Marcus handled that. Was he wearing his colors?” Crystal asked.

“Colors?” I frown.

“His vest. The one with the prospect patch,” Angel answers.

“Um, yes. I guess he was. Why?”

Angel tilts her head. “Anytime he’s wearing it, he represents the club. That includes how he handles himself in public. So, what’d he do to the guy?”

“How do you know he did anything?”

She gives me a look. “Really?”

“Okay, yes, he punched the guy in the face for me.”

Shannon giggles and covers her mouth. “Oh, my God.”

“Good for him.” Angel nods, folding her arms.

“Let’s just say I was glad he was there,” I admit quietly.

“I always think it’s sexy when a man protects his woman,” Crystal chimes from where she sits at the table, resting her chin in her palm.

“Well, that’s a member for you. All these men would have done the same thing for their women. Hell, I’m pretty sure they all already have done it at least once.” Angel reaches out and squeezes my hand.

“So, how’d he end up a prospect here, anyway?” I ask.

Angel lifted a brow. “That’s his story to tell, but I can say he kind of became mine and Mary’s adopted son. He was always hanging at our houses with our boys, and he started to see the brotherhood created by the club. I think that’s something he’s always craved.”

“What’s that?” My brows knit.

“A family. Or at least one that gave a damn about him.” Angel sighs, shaking her head. “But I’ve probably said too much already. He’ll have to tell you the rest.”

Yes, he will. After all, he still owes me something personal. Of course, I feel kind of like a fraud expecting him to share his family, when I’ve intentionally avoided telling him too much about mine.

Marcus makes his way across the yard to me.

“Hey, are the ladies treating you well?”

“Of course we are.” Crystal throws a bun at him. He juggles to catch it against his chest and tosses it back.

“Good. Come with me.” He holds his hand out. “I want to introduce you to my sponsor.”

I slip my hand in his, and he pulls me up from my spot on the bench. “Nice hanging with you ladies.” I smile as we retreat across the yard. Once we’re out of earshot, I lean in and whisper in his ear. “What’s a sponsor?”

“He’s the brother who guides me through the process of prospecting. He’s kind of my boss while I wait to get my patch.”

“Gotcha. Like a big sis in a sorority.”

He tilts his head back to the sky, closing his eyes. “Could you please stop comparing the club to a sorority?”

“I think it’s kind of funny.” I grin.

“Yeah, hilarious.”

“And it’s fun to torment you.”

“Keep it up and there’ll be payback later.”

“Oh, goody.” That gets a surprised laugh out of him.

“Ah, I see how my girl is. I’ll remember that.”

We make our way inside, still laughing, and Marcus leads me to a pool table, where several men in leather cuts are playing.

“Well, looky here,” a man built like a brick house calls out.

Marcus lifts his chin to the man. “Green. This is Brandy.”

“Hey, doll. Make sure our prospect takes care of you tonight.”

He introduces me to several other men. Wolf. Shane. Jake. And then Shannon walks up, arm in arm with an attractive man.

“Crash, this is Brandy. Brandy, this is Crash, my sponsor.”

“Nice to meet you, Brandy. Shannon was just telling me about you.”

“Only good things, I swear.” Shannon smiles and leans against her man. The two of them look good together.

Crash jerks his chin. “Come sit at the bar with us, Marcus.”

Marcus takes my hand, and we follow Crash and Shannon to a corner of the bar where there are some stools. After we sit and get fresh drinks, I lean to Shannon.

“Where’s the restroom?”

She points at a door in the corner. “Use that one. It’s not as bad as the public one on the other side.”

“Thanks.”

I stand, kiss Marcus on the cheek, and slip off.

Marcus—

Crash leans around Shannon, twirling the bourbon in his glass. “While your lady is gone, let me tell you what else we planned as a thank you.”

“For what?”

“For how well you boys represented the club, and how you put yourself between the Death Heads and my daughter. Don’t think I don’t know what could have happened had you not distracted their attention back to you.” He

lifts his glass and clinks it to my longneck.

“Thanks. That means a lot.”

“To show appreciation, we were going to let you boys have a night off to go up to Sonny’s and have a good time. It’ll be on the house.”

“Wow. I appreciate that. I do. Really.”

“Good.”

“But I was wondering if I could use that gift of a night off for something else.”

Crash tilts his head. “Something better than a night at Sonny’s?”

I huff a laugh. “That’s a really nice gift. But Brandy invited me to a party.”

“A party, huh? What kind of party?”

“Her family is having a Christmas party. She asked me to go with her.”

Crash’s eyes hit Shannon’s, and he downs his drink. “I see. Well, if that’s what you want, I don’t see a problem with it.”

“Thank you. Really. I appreciate it.” Leaning my elbows on the bar, I stare at the scared wood and a grin tugs at my mouth. I can’t believe how easy that was.

“Marcus.” I hear Shannon’s soft voice, and turn. “You do realize what you’re getting into, don’t you?”

Her words take me by surprise. So much so that I sit up straight. “What do you mean?”

“Honey, that girl’s rich.”

“What?” I screw my face up. “Shannon, Brandy is not rich. She works at a bar. I mean, she has a nice apartment and all, but she’s no heiress.”

“Well, if she doesn’t come from money, she’s robbed a bank. Her jeans are 7s. Her top is Ramy Brook. Her shoes are Jimmy Choo. Her hair and nails are fab, and her jewelry is the real deal.”

“So she has nice clothing. So what? Maybe she just has expensive taste.” I tilt my beer back, taking another swig, but a ripple of dread runs up my spine.

“That’s not just expensive taste, Marcus. She’s wearing well over twenty grand. Hell, her bracelet alone is about fifteen.”

I choke on my beer. “Wha-what?”

“Hun, I came from money. Trust me. I can spot it a mile away.” She points her bottle at me. “If you’re invited to a family Christmas party, dollars-to-donuts, it’s going to be a big affair. Just giving you a heads up, honey.”

“Thanks,” I say, still not sure if I believe what she’s telling me. None of this makes sense.

Brandy returns and stands against my side. My arm goes around her, and she presses against me, grabbing her beer for a drink.

I catch her eyes. “Got permission to go to that party you asked me about.”

A huge smile breaks across her face, lighting it up and melting my insides. She’s so pretty. Sometimes it hurts to look at her.

“That’s wonderful. Oh, I’m so happy.”

Shannon leans around me to inform her. “You’ll have to help clean him up a bit. I doubt Marcus has anything but these old jeans and boots.”

“Well, it’s black tie, so…” Her voice fades away, replaced by a buzzing in my head.

The two women chat away, but it’s all a blur, because I’m too busy noticing all the things Shannon pointed out. The outfit, the shoes, the jewelry that does, in fact, look like the real deal. My stomach sinks.

Jesus Christ.

I stand and take Brandy’s hand. “Let’s go talk.”

Her smile fades a bit, but she follows, wiggling her fingers at Shannon.

I don’t even know where I’m headed. I glance toward the door, but Brandy’s in a skimpy top and the temperature is dropping. Turning, my eyes hit the door that leads into the back hallway toward the offices, and ultimately out to the old manufacturing side of the building.

Tugging her in that direction, I cut a path through the crowd. Once we’re on the other side of the door in the dim hall, the noise dissipates.

I back her to the wall. “Why weren’t you honest with me?”

“What do you mean?” A small line forms between her brows.

“You’re rich, aren’t you?”

She sucks her lips between her teeth, and I swear she pales.

“Is it true?”

“My family has money.”

“Why did you lie to me?”

“I didn’t lie to you. I just didn’t bring it up. It’s not important to me.”

“Not important? Well, maybe it is to me.” I spin to stalk off.

“Marcus, wait.” She grabs my arm. “Please, stop.”

The door opens, and several of Sonny’s girls come laughing into the hall. They eye us, then move to the bathroom door a few feet away.

We need more privacy, so I take Brandy’s hand. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

I lead her to the end of the hall and out the door into the big manufacturing area, then turn on her. “Secrets and lies... they kill a relationship faster than anything on this earth. How are we gonna make this work if you’re not honest with me?”

“What do you want to know?”

“For one thing, why the hell are you working at some bar when Daddy can pay for anything you want?”

She stares at the floor. “I suppose it’s because I don’t want to admit to my father that I haven’t made it, and I don’t want to rely on his money. I want to support myself. Is that so hard to believe?”

“Yeah. It is. Most people would take the easy way out. I imagine the girls I’ve known wouldn’t think twice about it.” It was the wrong thing to say. I knew it the moment it came out of my mouth.

Her brows shoot up, and her chin pulls back. “And how many other girls have there been, Marcus?”

“None since I’ve started prospecting. None. Until you.” That seems to appease her a little.

“What about you? You haven’t told me anything personal. I’ve told you a lot.”

“Well, you left a big chunk out.”

She crosses her arms. “I bared my soul to you about my passion. Now it’s your turn. Tell me something.”

“Tell you what?”

“Something personal about you.”

I drag a frustrated hand through my hair. “Like what? I’m prospecting for the Evil Dead. What more do you need to know?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. Let’s start with your childhood.”

“What about it?”

“Was it happy?”

“Why is that important?”

“God, it’s like pulling teeth with you.” She turns to leave, but I spin her back around.

“Wait.” I suck in a deep breath and exhale. “Okay. Fine. You want to know. It was shitty. My dad bailed on us when I was in kindergarten. The last memory I have of him is standing in front of our door. He made me pose for a first day of school photo. By Halloween, it was just me and my mom. I remember she cried all the time, and I felt like it was my fault. That kind of shit doesn’t leave a kid. Ever. After that, there were a few loser boyfriends. Thank God she never let any of them move in with us.”

“Did you ever hear from your father?”

“Nope, and he never sent child support. I never got a birthday card or a Christmas present from him. Never. Not once. By the time I met Billy and TJ in fourth grade, I hated him. I saw what a good father was when I saw their fathers with them. I never had that, except whatever rubbed off from hanging around their houses.”

“I’m so sorry.” She touches my arm, but I shake it off.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s over and done with. I don’t like talking about it.”

Brandy—

I’m glad Marcus finally opened up to me, but I hate everything he shared. I don’t want to think about him feeling unloved by his father. It makes me furious on his behalf.

He shoves his hands in his pockets. “So now you know.”

I take a step toward him and cup his cheek. He leans into my touch and

presses a kiss to my palm. I bump my forehead to his, then my eyes catch something over his shoulder—something big, hulking in the shadows. I take a step back. “What is that thing?”

He twists to look, then walks to the wall and flips a switch. Overhead lighting flickers on, illuminating it.

“It’s for cage fighting.” He walks toward it, and I follow.

“Do you guys use it?” I hook my fingers in the chain link.

“Yeah. Fight night. Once a month. The place is packed.”

“Have you ever...?”

“Yep. I’m pretty good. I’m usually a house favorite.”

“What do you mean?” I turn, putting my back to it.

“They bet on the fights.”

“Who does?”

“The club, whoever shows up.” He shrugs.

“When’s the next one?”

“New Year’s Eve, I think. That’s a big party night here, so...” he nods toward the cage. “It’s the entertainment.”

“Does the club make you fight, or do you want to do it?”

He shrugs again, his hands in his pockets, then pulls one out and hooks his fingers in the chain link above my head. “Little bit of both, I suppose. Club members ask me to do something, I’m not gonna tell them no.” He presses closer. “You want to watch me fight, pretty girl?”

I drag in a breath, an image of a shirtless Marcus, his chest glistening with sweat, dancing around the cage, taking swings at his opponent, flits before my eyes. From the way he decked that creep at the bar, I’m sure he can fight. “I...I don’t know.”

His white teeth flash, and my eyes move over his strong jawline and the stubble growing along it. They drop to his sexy mouth, and I’m done for. I want him to kiss me more than anything.

He slants his head and licks my bottom lip. It sets me on fire.

He nudges his nose along the side of mine, then finally captures my lips. One hand glides around my waist to the small of my back and drags me flush against him.

I gasp at the sudden feeling of his hard body pressed to mine.

My arms move up his leather cut to twine around his neck, and desire, like warm honey, melts through my body.

His palms slip under my top and up my spine. One of them drops to my ass, and he squeezes one cheek, pulling me even tighter against him. I feel the bulge of his erection and wonder if in another minute he's going to be tugging my jeans down and unbuckling his belt to take me right here against the chain link of the cage.

The creaking of a door swinging open breaks us apart, and we both turn to see a man in the doorway. It's the one he introduced me to as Shane.

“Marcus. Inside. Now. Cole's making an announcement.”

CHAPTER TEN – GREEN EYES & MAI TAIS

Marcus—

When Brandy and I walk inside, Cole stands in the center of the room near a chair, where JP is now sitting.

“All right, everybody. We’re here to celebrate JP. He and the War Dogs have always been good friends to the Evil Dead. We really appreciate that friendship. Now raise your glasses, bottles, and shots to JP. Happy Birthday, old man!” Cole glances to his side. “Mack, did you want to say a few words?”

Mack slides from his stool and walks to Cole’s side. “I just want to repeat the sentiments Cole stated. We have always been happy to have the War Dogs as our friends. Now, JP, you old dog, happy birthday and enjoy the show.” He winks.

The music starts playing a recording of Marilyn Monroe singing Happy Birthday Mr. President as two scantily dressed Sonny’s girls come out, holding a cake between them. Lit in the middle stands a big 70 in wax. Once he blows out the candle, the girls move to the side and a third struts out. She’s a blonde with quite a rack, wearing a flouncy white dress to complete the Marilyn look. She walks right up to him and does a fast twirl, her dress flares up revealing a red thong underneath. Whistles echo from around the room.

I spot Billy and TJ standing off to the side. I tug Brandy’s hand. “Come on, babe. Let’s make our way to the boys.

Her eyes follow where I gesture. “Sure.”

As we make our way through the crowd, the dress the dancer was wearing hits the floor, and whistles and shouts ring out while she continues her birthday lap dance.

“Hey guys. Some show, huh?” I ask as we get close.

“Yep.” TJ nods.

“Oh, I could give a better one,” TJ’s girl giggles.

“Well, I think you’re going to have to prove that.” TJ waggles his brows.

“I’d ask how your night’s going, but I have a feeling it’s about to get worse,” I say to Billy.

“Why the hell do you say that?”

I lift my chin. “Because here comes Prez.”

Billy—

“Hey boys, having a good time?” Cole asks.

“Yeah, thanks for this.” Marcus nods at the action.

“Appreciate it,” I add.

Cole arcs a brow. “Can’t be that much fun. I don’t see a lady under your arm.”

“I’m just enjoying the night off,” I reply, not skipping a beat.

“Well, let me help you make it even more enjoyable.” Cole whistles, pointing at one of Sonny’s girls, and then crooks his finger beckoning her over. She struts across the floor, her long brown hair sashaying around her lower back. She’s wearing a pair of leather pants and a silver top that looks more bra than shirt. She’s well-endowed, and it’s on full display. “What’s your name, doll?”

“Peyton, but you can call me anything you want.” She runs her fingers up Cole’s cut.

“Hey, Peyton.” He looks down at her fingers, the corners of his mouth rising, and his eyes lift to hers. Then he taps me in the chest with his hand. “This is Billy.” Her sultry brown eyes move to mine. She bats her long lashes and smiles seductively.

“His date fell through; can you keep him company?” Cole gives her a crooked smile.

“Sure, hun.”

“That’s not necessary,” I respond. She’s sex on a stick, and I’m sure men

are lining up for a chance with her, but the only woman holding my attention has the blonde curls of a goddess and intoxicating green eyes.

Eyes that are watching me from across the club.

Cole tilts his head to the side. “Prospect, are you refusing a gift from your President?”

“No, sir.” I flex my jaw. I want to glance Melissa’s way, but Cole’s drilling into my every move.

“How are you doing, sugar?” Peyton asks, sliding her arms around my waist and under my cut. I want nothing more than to push her arms off, but Cole is still watching.

“Doing better now.” I try to sound believable, hoping he’ll move away and become distracted by his own woman.

“Why don’t you come have a drink with me?” Peyton runs her hands over my chest and then down my biceps, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the bar.

Once we’re a few steps from Cole, I risk a glance at Melissa.

Her usually warm green eyes seem to shoot daggers my way. She lifts her chin slightly and whirls away from me, her blonde curls bouncing as she stalks off.

Melissa—

Seeing Billy standing with one of Sonny’s girls makes my temper boil. I want nothing more than to yank her by her skanky brown hair away from him, but I know I can’t do that. So, I’ll do the next best thing. I turn away, searching out someone to serve my purpose. My eyes scan the crowd and land on a couple of young guys. *Perfect.*

I grab Harley Jean’s hand. “Come on. Let’s go have some fun.”

“Okay. Sure.” That’s something I love about Harley Jean. She’s always down for a good time.

We make our way to the table in the corner, and I come to a stop. They’re

even cuter up close. Their gazes scan up my body, and slow grins pull at their lips.

“Hey, ladies. Want to join us?” the one on the right asks.

“We’d love to. Harley Jean, why don’t you sit there?” I gesture to the only open chair.

One of the men starts to stand, but I place my hand on his shoulder. “Thanks, but no need to move. I can sit right here.” I slide onto his lap.

“You sure can, doll.” He flashes his white teeth.

I’ve angled myself so I can see almost the entire room. I’m thankful how packed it is. It seems everyone is occupied with their own fun, so thankfully, no Evil Dead have noticed me sitting in this guy’s lap. I don’t think it’d go over well, but at the moment, I don’t care.

“I’m Melissa.” I gesture across the table. “That’s Harley Jean.”

“Name’s Logan. That’s Jared and Nicco.”

I glance at the other two men. “Nice to meet you.”

Jared is taller and lankier, while Nicco has a stockier build. His tanned skin and jet-black hair are contrasted by his ice-blue eyes.

“The pleasure’s all mine.” Logan’s hand lands on my knee.

I wink, grab his beer from the table, and take a sip.

My eyes search the crowd, finding Billy. He’s leaned against the bar holding a longneck; the slutty Sonny’s girl stands between his legs leaned against his chest. He’s nodding every now and again, but I can tell he’s searching the crowd. He hasn’t spotted me yet.

“So, who are you boys here with?” I ask, giving Logan my best sultry smile. He really is attractive with his light stubble running along his chiseled jawline. His sandy brown hair hangs just long enough to make a girl want to run her hands through it to brush it out of his face.

“We came with the War Dogs, but we’re not members. We never served, but we’re part of the family. My father is Rusty.” Logan then gestures to the other two. “Jared’s uncle is in the club, and so is Nicco’s brother.”

I take another sip of Logan’s beer and spot Billy watching me from across the club. His eyes drill into mine, and his fists clench at his side. *Good.*

I turn back to Logan. His hand now moved up to my thigh, and I can’t

help but hope Billy can see the way Logan is touching me.

“Have you ever thought about joining a club?” I continue making small talk.

“I mean, yeah, I guess I have, but I’m in no hurry. If it happens, it happens.” Logan shrugs. “Why? Are you looking to land a brother?”

Billy—

Melissa sits in some fucking guy’s lap, his hands moving over her legs, and I want to rip his arm off. It takes every ounce of control I possess to not walk over there and beat the shit out of this dude.

My mind races for a way to lose Peyton without raising Cole’s suspicions.

“Hey, doll, I’m gettin’ a headache. I think I might just bounce.”

She pouts. “Oh, don’t leave. I could massage your temples if you’d like.” She licks her bottom lip and pulls it into her mouth, dragging her teeth across it.

“I don’t think I’d be much company tonight. Sorry.” I disentangle myself from her arms and walk away.

I head straight toward Melissa.

Melissa—

Billy walks past me, slowing just long enough for his eyes to connect with mine for one brief moment. “Outside, now,” he growls in a low voice that brooks no argument, then continues past me, being sure to ram his shoulder into Logan as he does.

“What the hell, man?” Logan calls after him.

I lay my hand soothingly on Logan’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about him.

He's just a big grump. Why don't you go grab us a drink?"

"Yeah, sure." He smiles, probably imagining all kinds of fun we could have. "I guess you did finish mine."

"Make mine a Mai Tai."

"Right." He makes his way through the crowd to the bar.

Only then do I turn my eyes to the door Billy just stalked through. Something about his tone makes me dare not disobey his clipped order, even though it would serve him right if I did.

I glance discretely around to make sure none of the brothers are watching, then I slip through the crowd and out into the cool night air.

CHAPTER ELEVEN – OFF LIMITS

Melissa—

I walk out the clubhouse door. There's a chill in the air, and I rub my arms. The sun is starting to set on the horizon, creating vivid pink and purple streaks across the sky. Shielding my eyes from the last golden rays, I try to see around the yard. Quite a few people still hangout near the picnic tables.

I feel a little bad leaving Logan behind, but I know there are a bunch of available ladies inside, and with his looks, he can have his pick.

Glancing around, I notice the toe of a black leather boot sticking out from along the edge of the clubhouse wall. I walk that way and find Billy leaned against it, smoking a cigarette. His thermal shirt sleeves are pushed up, revealing his tanned forearms. My eyes travel over him, taking in the muscles outlined under his shirt. Damn, is he sexy. I've had a crush on him for as long as I can remember, but lately it feels like so much more. My heart lifts whenever he's around, and when he's not, I feel like a part of me is missing. He's got the power to hurt me, and tonight he did just that. I've always been told I have my mother's beauty and strength, but I've also got my father's toughness, and I refuse to be jerked around and treated less than I deserve.

My hands go to my hips. "What do you need, Billy?"

"Are you kidding me with that shit in there?" He gestures to the building with his lit cigarette.

"What? Are you jealous?" I bite back.

"What the hell were you doing hanging all over that dude?" He stamps out his cigarette.

"I was having a good time, just like you," I throw back at him, leaning closer to emphasize the last three words.

"Oh, is that what that stunt was all about? You're the one who is jealous." A little grin starts to tug at his mouth.

He's hit the nail on the head, and the fact that he finds it funny pisses me

off. “What the hell does it matter?” My voice rises, and he glances over to the other side of the yard. I’m getting to the point I don’t even care anymore. Let them hear. Let everyone in the damn place hear us. I lift my chin, daring him to say something.

One thing I’ve learned about Billy in all the years I’ve known him is he’s more about action than words. He proves it again by grabbing my hand and leading me farther into the darkness back near the perimeter fence. I yank my hand free.

“I’m not some sweet-but you can jerk around like your personal property.”

He totally ignores that and circles back to my question. “What do you mean why does it matter?”

“You and I.” I gesture my hand between us. “It can’t happen, so I might as well go have fun with Logan.”

“The hell you will.” He steps closer to me crowding me against the chain-link fence. “We both know I’m the only one who can turn you on.”

“I don’t—” Before I can finish my thought, he grabs my face and pulls me to him, his mouth coming down on mine. This kiss is filled with need and desire and sexual frustration all tangled together. It has me losing myself, and I kiss him back just as ferociously. I’m desperate for this, for any sign he feels what I feel, just as deeply and strongly as I do. Sometimes he makes it seem like it’s so easy to walk away from me, and I hate that. I want him to want me with the same desperation I want him.

But deep down I know there’s something Billy wants more than me. His patch. My heart breaks at the thought. I want what I can’t have, and a part of me hates him for it.

We break apart for air, and he leans his forehead against mine, his chest heaving. “Don’t tell me you want to have fun with anyone else.”

I sigh, trying to catch my breath. “Billy, how are we—?”

“What the hell are you two doing?”

We’re deep in the dark shadows of the building. Jake stands at the corner, the side of his body lit by the bulb above the clubhouse door. He looks pissed in a way I’ve never seen before.

“Are you two fucking nuts?” He practically yells, stalking toward us. “You want to lose your chance at a patch?” He directs his second comment to Billy.

Billy quickly moves away from me, and it hurts like a stab to the chest.

I push off the chain-link, stalking toward Jake. “There’s nothing going on and nothing between us.” I twist my head and look Billy dead in the eyes when I say the second part. His jaw clenches, but he does nothing to stop me. He’s made his choice. The club. Always the fucking club. My eyes sting. I brush past Jake, determined to get the hell out of here before I do something stupid, like letting them see my tears. “Don’t worry, Jake. I’m going home.”

My chest tightens with every step I take. I head to the clubhouse door to search out Harley Jean and see if she’s ready to leave, because I sure as hell am.

Billy—

Goddamn it.

This wasn’t how I wanted tonight to go. I hate watching Melissa walk away from me. If Jake wasn’t standing in my way, I’d no doubt go after her.

As soon as she’s out of sight, Jake turns his attention and ire back at me. “Melissa? Really?”

“You’re one to talk. You fucked your friend’s little sister,” I snap, too pissed to care about the backlash.

That backlash comes swiftly and forcefully.

Jake grabs me by the shirt and slams me into the fence. “Watch your fucking mouth when you talk about my wife. I’m only gonna let that shit slide once because of what you’ve done for the club and because of who your father is, but if I see you around the president’s daughter again, I won’t be the one you need to worry about. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.” I spit the word, my jaw clenching tight. It takes everything in me not to shove him off me, but if I succumb to that temptation, I’ll lose my

shot at a patch for sure.

Jake releases the fists full of cut he has in his grip and turns away. Then whirls back, and before I know what hits me, his fist slams into my jaw, and I stumble backward.

“And you say shit about Layla again, you’ll be spitting blood for a week.”

I rub my jawline, straightening to my full height. “Yes, sir,” I bite out, letting my anger edge my tone, but deep down, I know I deserved that punch and probably more. You don’t talk about a brother’s ol’ lady like that, and you especially don’t do it to a full patched member of this MC. I know all that. It was a dick move, and I’ve got no excuse. Maybe I’m looking for a fight to distract me. I need someone to knock some fucking sense into me.

Jake stalks off, and I stand in the dark, sucking the cold air into my lungs. I wipe the blood from my split lip with the back of my hand, but my mind’s not on the pain. All I can think about is Melissa, and wonder where she’s gone.

I’ve now been warned off her by multiple brothers, and yet I can’t seem to learn my lesson.

CHAPTER TWELVE – FAIRY GODBROTHERS

Marcus—

“That was some party.” TJ’s smile splits ear to ear. I think he’s itching to tell us how his night went.

“Looks like it was a good time for you.” I chuckle.

“Yeah, got my own private lap dance.”

“Did it have a happy ending?” I ask, grabbing the cups and bottles that have been strewn throughout the yard and tossing them into a trash bag. The party was fun, but now it’s back to reality, and we’ve been put on cleaning duty.

“A very happy one. What about you, Billy?”

Billy doesn’t reply.

“I’d say based on the look of Billy’s jaw, it didn’t go too well for him,” I whisper to TJ.

“Yeah, what the hell happened? He’s not usually a bundle of joy, but he’s in an extra shitty mood today.”

I shrug. “No clue. I lost him after a while last night.”

Billy stalks over, dragging his own trash bag. “What the hell are you two whispering about?”

“Just wondering who shit in your Cheerios?” I chirp.

“Yeah, and who the hell decked you? And why?” TJ adds.

Billy rubs his jaw. “Is it really noticeable?”

“I mean, you’ve got some serious bruising, and that cut tells me the fist that hit you was wearing some kind of ring. Was it a brother?” I question.

“Jake punched me.”

That takes me aback, and my face scrunches. “Jake punched you? Why?”

He nods but adds no explanation.

“Why the hell would he punch you, Billy?” I prod, not about to let this tidbit go. As far as I know, none of us have ever been punched by a patch. I’ve heard some clubs really abuse their prospects that way, but the Evil Dead isn’t one of those. Least not from what I’ve seen so far.

Billy shuffles and won’t meet our eyes. “He caught me with Melissa.”

“You dumbass. I thought you were leaving her alone?” TJ snaps.

“It’s weird he’d be pissed enough about it to punch you,” I add.

“He reminded me she was off-limits. I, uh, may have said something about him being one to talk, since he’d fucked his friend’s sister.”

TJ’s eyes widen. “Jesus Christ, Billy. You got a fuckin’ death wish? Talking’ shit about a brother’s old lady? You’re lucky he didn’t flay your ass.”

“I know. I know.” His shoulders slump, and he slides onto a picnic bench, his elbows hit his knees, and his head drops into his hands. “Melissa’s got my head so fucking messed up. I want to be a brother; I don’t want to screw that up, but I don’t want to fuck things up with her, either. Though, I think I may have already done that.”

“It’s her or your patch, Billy. You can’t have both.” TJ picks up his trash bag and stalks off. He twists and looks back. “I thought this was important to you. I thought we were doing this together.”

Billy watches him walk away, and I can see the torment in his eyes.

“It’s a fine line you’re walking, man. It can’t be easy.” I pat him on the shoulder in a lame attempt to give him some kind of comfort.

The door to the club opens, and a couple of brothers trickle out for a smoke. Billy jumps up, and we quickly get back to work.

“Hey, I bet I could distract you at least a little,” I call over to Billy.

“Doubt it,” he replies. “But give it your best shot.”

“I somehow locked myself into going to a Christmas party with Brandy’s family. It’s some big fancy party, and her ex—the Ivy League douchebag—is going to be there.”

“She has an Ivy League ex?”

“Yeah, went to Princeton or Yale or some shit. And now I’m supposed to show up and compete with that. Ain’t no way I’m gonna be able to convince

her father I'm a better choice for his daughter. Especially since he already thinks her ex hung the moon."

Billy laughs at my pain. "You're screwed, man."

"Yup."

"Buy her a really good Christmas present," TJ suggests.

"A Christmas present. Shit, I didn't even think about that." I drag a hand down my face, wishing I'd never asked Crash for permission to go to this damn party.

I see Wolf push off the wall and call to me. "Hey, prospect. Did I hear you say something about an Ivy League ex you have to compete with?"

"Uh, yeah. Brandy apparently comes from money. Now I've got to go to some fancy Christmas party."

He takes a drag off his cigarette, eyeing me, then blows smoke toward the sky. "Is she worth it?"

A half smile forms on my lips. "Yeah, I think she is."

"All right, then. Let's figure this shit out, because I'm not having one of our prospects outshined by some Ivy League prick." With that, he strides toward the door, calling over his shoulder. "You boys comin'?"

"Yes, sir." We drop our bags and follow Wolf and the other brothers inside.

"Line us up some whiskeys, boys," he tells us as he pulls out a barstool.

We start pouring two fingers of whiskey into a line of rocks glasses. Several brothers, including Prez, pull up a stool. Great. I get to have them all meddling in my love life. While help is appreciated, I can't say I'm thrilled.

"So, what's her ex like?" Wolf asks.

"I'm not sure. Never met him, but from what Brandy's said, I know he's rich. He went to an Ivy League college, he plays tennis with her dad, and he wants himself a trophy wife." I start listing the things I can remember.

"Sounds like you're already screwed, kid." Green throws back his drink.

"Wait? Am I hearing this right? Marcus is having to compete with some rich douchebag to win his girl?" Crash asks, glancing from me to Wolf.

"Yup."

"Fuck that shit. We're not having a representative of our club outshined

by some Ivy League dick.” Cole chimes in.

“Okay, so Marcus, how do you plan to outshine this dude?” Crash leans his elbows on the bar.

“Uh...” My mind goes blank, trying to think of a response. I don’t have a clue.

“What about a gift?” Wolf suggests.

“Yeah, but if the dude’s rich, I don’t think Marcus can outspend him,” Green states the obvious as he reaches behind the counter to grab a bag of chips.

Angel walks from across the room. “You know, fellas, with most women, it’s not about the cost of the gift. It’s about the thought and the meaning. What are her interests? Show her you listen and care about what she loves. That’s the kind of gift that makes an impression.”

“Okay, okay.” My wheels start turning. “She’s trying to become a librettist.”

“That’s a fancy word.” Green pauses with a chip halfway to his mouth. “What the fuck does it mean?”

“It’s a person who writes operas.”

“Operas. Huh.” He munches on.

“Perfect. Does she have a favorite opera or performer?” Angel presses.

“There’s this one called *The Forbidden Marriage*, by Kristoff somebody or other. She said it was the opera that made her fall in love with them. She went on and on about the silver dress the heroine wore and some beaded purse she carried. She called it a clutch, which just confused me at the time, because, you know, motorcycles have clutches.”

“Damn. You remember all that?” Green asks.

“It stuck in my head because the title of the opera made me think of *Romeo and Juliet*. You know, forbidden and all that.”

Angel turns and looks at Green as he shoves another chip in his mouth.

“What? Do I have crumbs in my beard?” he asks, rubbing his hand across his jaw.

“Have you been listening at all?” she asks, raising her brows.

“Um, yeah. She wants to write operas,” he replies, looking confused.

“And Marcus can’t tell the difference between a motorcycle part and a purse.”

She rolls her eyes. “We’re trying to think of an awesome gift to give her. Something opera related.” She emphasizes the word, urging him to catch up to her train of thought. “Can you think of anyone we know who works at the San Francisco Opera?”

“Oh, right. Sara. Yeah, okay, let me call her.” He pulls his phone from his pocket and punches in the number for his ol’ lady. Then puts the call on speaker and sets it on the bar top for everyone to hear.

“Hey, honey,” Sara answers.

“Hey, sexy. I need a favor. Well, actually Marcus, our prospect, needs one.”

“Um, okay. Shoot.” Her voice sounds a little bewildered over what she could possibly do for a prospect.

“He’s seein’ this girl, and he wants to impress her. The chick loves operas. Her favorite is The Forbidden Man.”

“Do you mean The Forbidden Marriage, sweetie?” she asks. I can hear her smile in her voice.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. You know anyone involved with that show? We’re tryin’ to come up with a gift he could give her. You know, like a signed playbill or a prop or something?”

“That show hasn’t been active in years.” I can hear her fingers drumming on a table as she thinks. “But sometimes we keep old props and fashion in storage. I’ll check. When does he need it?”

“Saturday.”

“Why do you men always wait until the last minute? Then you expect some fairy godmother to come in and save the day!”

“Babe, now you got me thinking about that fairy outfit you wore that one time. You know, the crotchless one with wings like a goddamn Victoria Secret’s model.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about that one. You know I still have it.”

“I better come home to find you in it.”

She giggles. “Yes, sir.”

“For love of all that is holy, can we please stop listening to your sex plans?” Crash yells across the room.

“Do you have me on speaker?” Sara squeals, mortification in her voice.

“Oh, yeah, sorry babe.”

“Hey Sara, you got any more of those fairy outfits or maybe an Angel one? Asking for a friend,” Cole teases.

“Dear God, I’m hanging up now,” she says.

“Dad, I do not need to hear this!” TJ puts both his hands over his ears trying to use them as earmuffs to block out any more sounds of his parent’s sex plans.

“Guess what, TJ?” Cole shouts. “Your mom and I have sex, and she’s a damn good lay.” He grins, pulling her into his chest and resting his head on hers.

“Lalalalalala,” TJ begins shouting.

“Leave him alone,” Angel chastises and swats at his leg, but her smile says she doesn’t actually mind.

“Love you, babe.” Green mashes the end button and turns. “Well, I think that went well. You and I both get a present.” He winks at me.

“Yeah, now I just have to figure out what to wear.” I scrunch my face to the side, wondering if the suit I wore in high school to my grandma’s funeral would still fit.

“What do you mean?” Crash asks.

“Well, she said she’s wearing a gown and that usually this thing is black tie. And I don’t own a fucking tux and don’t really have the cash to drop several hundred bucks on one.”

“Hey, if you need a tux, you should just wear Green’s,” Wolf suggests.

“Green, you own a tux?” I look back and find him licking chip crumbs off his fingers.

“Of course, I do. I’m not an animal. I’m high-class.”

Crash chokes on his whiskey. “The fuck you are. I remember us fairy godbrothers dragging your ass to buy one.”

“Wait. What?” Billy asks, confused. “This story I’ve got to hear. Why did you need a tux?”

“Because I had to go win my Cinderella.” Green grins, walking around to grab a longneck from the cooler behind the bar.

Crash snorts. “I’m positive you were the Cinderella going from rags to riches in that story.”

Green twists the cap off and flings it in the trashcan, ignoring him and turning to us. “Well, you prospects play your cards right, maybe I’ll tell you my story one day, and you can take notes on how to win the one that got away.”

“More like how to crash and burn.” Cole chuckles.

“Ouch, I’m still in physical therapy, asshole. That’s a little insensitive, you know. A little empathy would be nice.”

“Damn Green, I’m surprised you have such a large vocabulary,” Wolf adds, joining the jabbing.

“Don’t listen to them. I had Mrs. Green wrapped around my finger and her mouth wrapped around my—”

Crash cuts him off. “Too much goddamn information. I don’t want to be picturing your dick, Green.”

Green leans toward me. “It can be intimidating.” Then he raises his voice. “Crash, I’m sure Shannon thinks yours is just big enough. No need to get jealous.”

This gets him a beer bottle chunked at his head, which he easily ducks to the laughter from the rest.

Cole stands. “All right, all right. Let’s get back to more serious matters, brothers. Church in ten. Prospects, you’re on gate duty.”

The brothers amble in to the room, while we make our way to the chain-link fence that wraps around the perimeter of the property. Security is tight, considering the Death Heads are still a threat. But that worry doesn’t fill my head right now. I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

I can’t help but grin, realizing somehow Green is playing the role of Fairy Godbrother in my story.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – FINISHED

Marcus—

I adjust the cuffs of Green's tux, studying my reflection in the bathroom mirror. He has a much stockier build, so it's a bit big, but it should serve its purpose.

Crash let me use his room at the clubhouse to get ready since I had to stop by to get the tux from Green, anyway.

My eyes fall to the wrapped gift on the bed behind me. Sara was able to get an old program and one of the clutches used in the show. It's got sparkly beads all over it. The silk is worn and faded from age, and Sara had to re-tack some of the beads down, but I know it's not really about the way the bag looks. It's the meaning behind it. I think she's going to die when she sees it, and I can't wait to see her face when she does. Taking one last look in the mirror, I grab the present, and head to the door, hoping the clubhouse will mostly be empty.

"Looks pretty good," Green calls. "I mean, you don't quite have your big boy muscles yet, but still good."

"You clean up nice, kid," Crash calls.

"Thanks."

"Now, we don't usually allow this shit, but since we can't have Ivy League pricks stealing our women, we're making an exception. But come tomorrow, you better haul your ass back to the clubhouse by ten a.m. like you're going to turn in to a goddamn watermelon," Green chimes.

"It's a pumpkin, dumbass," Crash chuckles.

"Whatever. He gets my point. Right, prospect?"

"Yes, sir."

"In all seriousness, though, if you're not back, you'll be a pumpkin with his face smashed into the fucking wall." Crash lays a stern look at me.

"I'll be back in time."

I drive my beat-up old truck, Brandy's gift neatly wrapped in a box behind my seat. Thank God the ol' ladies stepped up to make sure it looked nice, otherwise I'd have just thrown it in a grocery sack and called it a day.

My phone rings. I glance down and smile as I pick up. "Hey, babe."

"Hey, I'm running a bit behind. I'll unlock the door, and you can just come on in. I'm just finishing my hair and makeup."

"No rush. This is your thing."

When I pull into the lot, I park and head up to wait on her.

It's not too long before I hear the door creak behind me. I turn to look, and my jaw hits the floor. She is my walking Aphrodite. She wears a burgundy dress the color of a glass of wine, and I want to drink her up. The top hangs off her shoulders with soft lace that clings to her arms and follows the curves of her breasts in a deep plunge. The bottom is short in the front, revealing her long sexy legs and strappy heels. The back flares out behind her like a cape of lace and tulle.

"Um, do we have to go? Because all I want to do is undress you. Damn, baby. You look gorgeous."

"Thank you. You don't look too bad yourself."

"I'm serious, babe. That dress and those legs"—I scan up and down them—"are going to have my mind in the gutter all night. I'm going to be coming up with all kinds of fantasies."

"Let's hurry and get there. Then maybe we can ditch the party early and make some of those fantasies come true," she taunts, grabbing my hand and tugging me toward the door.

"Yes, ma'am."

Brandy—

Marcus turns into the entrance to the neighborhood and brings the truck to a stop at the gated entry. A security guard walks out of the small building in the center of the road and over to the driver's window.

"Can I help you?" He eyes the truck. "It's a bit late for a service call."

I lean forward, calling out, "I'm Brandy Arrington. We're headed to the Arrington Christmas party. My passcode is 0415."

He seems surprised to see a girl like me in this truck. "Yes, Ms. Arrington. I apologize for the confusion."

"No worries." I wave off his apology as the gate swings open.

Cars line both sides of the road as we get closer to my family's home.

"It's this one up here on the right. Just pull into the driveway." I glance over and see Marcus taking it all in, and I can't help but wonder what he's thinking.

Marcus—

Brandy's home looms like a giant symbol of the different lives we've had.

I pull in and park next to a row of cars as she instructed and climb from the cab. I hurry to the other side to open her door, offering my hand.

My truck looks a joke next to the BMWs, Audis, and Mercedes that line the drive. It sticks out like a sore thumb, and I can't help but wonder if I'll do the same as someone who doesn't belong.

We climb the steps that lead to a large porch with tall columns wrapped in garland and lights. White double doors stand in the middle, each carrying a large wreath. I breathe in, and the fresh scent of pine fills my lungs. Reaching for the large bronze handle, I open the door for Brandy and step inside, ready to tackle this night.

A giant ice sculpture of a reindeer sits on a table, and a man handing out crystal champagne flutes greets us as we enter. Taking mine, I chug it in one gulp and take another.

Brandy glances my way. "You'll do fine."

“I know.”

“Brandy, dear, I’m so happy you’re home,” a female voice rings out.

“Hello, Mother.” She takes a tall woman into her arms, giving a warm hug.

“You look fetching, darling.” She holds Brandy at arm’s length, taking in her gown. Then her eyes slide to me. “And who is this you brought?”

“Mother, this is Marcus. Marcus, this is my mother, Patricia.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” I take her hand in mine and dip my head.

“Welcome, Marcus. Come along, you two. You must see the garden. It looks absolutely lovely. Oh, and Holt is here, dear, and I know he’d just love to see you.”

Brandy tugs back, stopping us all. “Mom, Holt and I have been separated for a year now. I’m here with Marcus, and—”

“Yes, of course,” her mother cuts her off. “But you can still be friends. After all, he asks about you all the time.”

I’m sure he does. My mind is already thinking of ways to show this guy exactly where he belongs in Brandy’s life—the rearview mirror.

We follow Mrs. Arrington through a den and living room out to the backyard where a tent has been set-up with twinkling lighting draping from the center in a kind of pinwheel design. A string quartet plays in one corner. The melody to White Christmas rings through the air.

A man with an Ivy League crewcut makes his way toward us. His tux and preppy hairstyle make him look like he belongs in an old-time movie.

“Brandy, good to see you. You always look divine.” He winks. I clear my throat, and he glances my way, quirking a brow. “And who is this?”

“Marcus.” I grab his hand, exerting pressure so he knows I could break him if need be.

“Not your usual type, Brandy.” He takes in the tattoos peeking out from under my jacket sleeve. “Sowing some wild oats, are we?”

“Just dating a man who treats me as a partner and not a prize,” she retorts.

“But shouldn’t you be prized?” he asks, tilting his head, as if genuinely confused.

What a fucking act. “I’ll worry about taking care of her from here on.

Now if you'll excuse us." I lead her away to the dance floor.

"Thank you," she murmurs.

I dip my head, pressing a kiss to the hair just above her temple. "For what, beautiful?"

"For being you." That earns her a smile as I take her in my arms and spin her around until laughter lights her face. We dance the night away, barely giving notice to anyone else at the party. When the quartet finally takes a break, we move to a table.

"Let me introduce you to my daddy."

"Daddy?" I tease.

"Oh, shut up." She pulls my hand, leading me to a table where a man with peppered hair stands talking to several other people. He catches a glimpse of Brandy and immediately turns his attention to her.

"I wondered when you'd come say hello to your father," he chastises, pulling her in for a hug. "How have you been? How's the Opera? I want to hear everything."

"It's all going well and coming along." She tugs me forward. "I want you to meet Marcus."

His eyes shift to me, and it's obvious he's sizing me up. Am I good enough for his daughter? What do I have to offer her?

"Nice to meet you, Marcus. I'm Gerald." He extends his hand as his eyes shift between us. "Did you two meet at the Opera?"

We shake, but before I can say anything, Brandy chirps in. "Yes, we met at work."

Her father seems to be starting to make sense of me, though he couldn't be more off base. I know she doesn't want to tell him about her job at the bar, but I can't help but wonder if she's embarrassed of me.

"I think I'll go grab us some drinks. What will you have, Brandy?" I ask, trying to play the role of civilized upper class.

"I'll have a glass of chardonnay. Thank you."

I meander to the bar and wait in the short line when Holt comes to stand next to me.

"She's out of your league."

“You don’t know my league.”

“Everything about you tells me you’re beneath her. She’ll have her fun, and then off you’ll go, back to the slums, and I’ll be here chumming it up with Daddy, waiting for her to return to me. She belongs with a man who can treat her like a princess to be placed in a glass case. But no hard feelings.” He slips his business card into my jacket pocket. “Give me a call, and I can recommend a good tailor so you can look like you belong in a man’s world instead of a little boy drowning in Daddy’s hand-me-downs.”

I want nothing more than to drive my fist in his face, but I know this isn’t the time or the place. So, I order our drinks and turn to walk away. Still, I can’t resist getting in at least one dig. I stop and lean in, just inches from his face. “Brandy is not a princess to be put on a pedestal and locked in a tower. She’s a queen to be fucking worshipped.” Then I walk away, because beating the shit out of him won’t win me any points. I know he’s trying to fuck with me and get in my head, but he’s about to find out he just woke the beast.

I hand Brandy her drink. My eyes must be flaming with the rage I feel inside, because she leans to me and whispers, “Are you okay?”

“I’m great now that I’m next to you.”

“If you’ll excuse us, Daddy. I’m going to introduce Marcus to some people.”

“Of course, dear. But don’t leave before saying goodbye.”

“I promise.”

She smiles and bats her eyes. “Follow me.”

“To the ends of the earth,” I whisper and trail behind her, watching her hips sashay with each step she takes. “Sweetheart, I’d follow you anywhere to get a look at that fine ass.”

She glances over her shoulder, giving me a mischievous smile.

Inside, people seem to litter the halls and living room. She pushes me into a room and glances around to make sure no one noticed before entering herself, shutting the door behind her, and flipping the lock. I glance around. We seem to be in her father’s study. Shelves full of books line the walls, and an ornately carved desk sits in the middle of the room, an expensive, brown leather chair behind it.

As soon as the door clicks, I move toward Brandy, backing her against the door. I run my knuckles along the swells of her cleavage while I kiss down her neck. She responds to my every caress.

The clinking of glasses and merriment drift down the hall. The noise gets louder. I pull back. "Where can we go where we won't be interrupted?" I growl.

"There's a bathroom through that door," she pants, pointing behind me.

I lock the door behind us and move across the small space like I'm stalking my prey.

She backs against the counter, and I immediately slide my hands up her thighs and hook my thumbs in the sides of her panties, pulling them off. Then I lower to my knees and spread her wide for me to admire. "Damn baby. Ever since I saw you walk out in this dress, I've been wanting a taste of this sweet pussy."

I trace my tongue in small circles around that magic spot. Almost immediately, her hips work into a rhythm, thrusting to meet my tongue.

A knock raps at the door, but I don't relent, continuing my ministrations until she moans.

"Brandy, I know you're in there. I just want you to listen."

I roll my eyes. *Great. Holt.* I stand and growl in her ear. "Turn around."

She immediately complies, bracing herself on the counter.

I undo my belt and unzip, freeing my throbbing dick. Pausing only a moment to slide on a condom, I flip her dress up and position myself between her spread legs. In one swift motion, I thrust inside, sliding easily in with her arousal. She bites her lip to keep from calling out.

Meanwhile, Holt continues droning on from the other side of the door. "I know you brought this other guy to get a reaction from me. Well doll, I see you. You need me to chase you and put up a fight for you, I will."

I thrust hard, quickening my pace, and can feel myself building. Slipping my hand into her dress, I rub her nipple, then pinch it lightly, causing her to clench around my dick, sending us both over the edge.

"That was amazing," I pant in her ear.

"It definitely was," she purrs.

Grabbing a folded paper towel off the counter, I wipe us both off. After adjusting our clothes, I move toward the door.

“What are you doing?” Brandy says in a panicked whisper. “We can’t go out there.”

“Well, we sure as hell aren’t hiding in here.” I grab her hand while Holt carries on.

“Brandy, I know you must be done. Come out and talk to me. We’re not finished.”

I flip the lock and pull the door handle. Holt steps back, surprise all over his face. I make sure to adjust myself as I walk through the doorway. “We’re finished.” I turn my head toward him with a smile I can’t help. We walk out of the study, leaving Holt standing there, his jaw on the floor.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – EXPOSED

Brandy—

We return to the party as if nothing happened. It's not long before I hear my name being called out. I turn to see my bestie, Izzy.

“Brandy, girl, your fit is hot. I always love this color on you.”

“Hey, Izzy. I've missed you!” I pull her in for a hug.

“How's everything going?” She glances over to Marcus, then leans toward me, but doesn't bother to lower her voice. “Is this him? He is sex-y. Spill the tea. Have you...?” She waggles her brows.

I chuckle. “Isabella, this is Marcus. Marcus, this nosy woman is my best friend, Isabella.”

“Nice to meet you, Isabella.” He smiles and waves.

“Oh, I'm sure the pleasure is all mine.” She bites her bottom lip eyeing him like a piece of meat.

She leans forward whispering, “I hear you're in a motorcycle club.”

Marcus's eyes connect with mine as he answers. “I'm a prospect, yeah.”

“What is that like? Have you ever been to jail?”

“Izzy!” I reprimand.

“What? I need to know with what kind of man my best friend is spending all her time with.”

I roll my eyes, but Marcus answers, amusement ringing through his voice.

“It's mostly like a brotherhood. Like a chosen family. And no, I have never been to jail.”

“All right, you passed the first test.”

Marcus laughs out loud, and the sound has me smiling. “Good to know.”

“So, how'd you two meet?” he asks.

“Well, Izzy here was keying the car next to mine when I pulled into high school one morning.”

“What?” Marcus chuckles.

“Yeah, well, David shouldn’t have made out with Sophia under the bleachers while we were still together. Brandy never said a word and actually gave me an alibi, claiming we drove together and walked in together. I knew in that moment she was my ride-or-die friend, and we’ve been besties ever since.”

“Ride-or-die friend?” Marcus questions.

“Yeah, the kind who shows up at your house with a shovel after you tell her you just killed somebody,” I say.

“Yeah, and I’m hers. So, you better do her right.” She stares him down.

Marcus throws his hands up. “I got it. Behave or I end up in a body bag. Message received.”

Izzy and tilts her head in my direction. “He listens well. I like him better than your last few boyfriends.”

“Now that’s something I want to hear about,” Marcus admits.

“I think I’d rather not talk about that,” I chirp.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want to talk about those losers either,” Izzy concedes.

“Well, to tell you the truth, there’s really only one I’m interested in hearing about.” Marcus’s eyes zero in on Holt across the room.

Izzy follows his gaze. “Ah, Holt. Well, he definitely flung his status and wealth around. Bought Brandy everything she wanted and everything she didn’t. But he tends to lack...” She snaps her fingers like she can’t recall the word. “What do you call it? Oh yeah, a heart.”

“That’s not true. We just weren’t the right fit,” I defend. “Besides, your boyfriends were no better. Remember that one birthday, your boyfriend showed up late and forgot to get you a present?”

“That reminds me. I have a gift for you in the car. Let me go grab it.” Marcus turns and is just out of earshot when Izzy starts.

“Oh, a gift.” She rubs her hands together excitedly. “I can’t wait to see what he got you.”

“He shouldn’t have gotten me anything,” I mumble.

Marcus—

As I walk to the truck, my phone starts to vibrate. Glancing down, I see it's the club. "Hey, what's up?"

"We've had some sightings of Death Heads again," Crash responds.

"Shit, really?"

"Yeah, nothing concrete yet. But I wanted to make sure you were on alert and answering your phone."

I glance around, making sure no one is eavesdropping.

"Where were the Death Heads spotted? Same area we had our run in?"

"Around there," he replies, never letting me know any more than I need to know.

"What does Prez want to do? Does he need me at the club?" My eyes search the darkness. I thought I heard something.

"The clock hasn't struck twelve for you yet, but I'll let you know if that changes."

"Yes, sir."

The phone clicks as Crash ends the call. I switch it from vibrate to ring. I need to know if some shit goes down. Crash would flay my ass if I missed a call.

Opening the door to the truck, I reach into the back and pull out the gift box. Tucking it under my arm, I return to the party.

Brandy and Izzy seem to be having the time of their lives, laughing and carrying on.

As I sidle next to her, I hear the clinking of a spoon on a glass. We all turn to see Brandy's father, Gerald, getting ready to make some kind of speech.

"Thank you to everyone for coming to our twelfth annual Christmas Party. We've been fortunate to be where we are and to be surrounded by our friends. Pattie and I want to let you know how much we appreciate you coming, and we hope this season of giving opens your hearts to new ways to support the community."

Another clink, clink, could be heard.

“Well said, Mr. Arrington. In the spirit of giving, I would like to make a donation to the San Francisco Opera in the amount of ten thousand dollars.” He turns to look at Brandy. “I know how much it means to you, Brandy, so I’d like to do it in your name.

“Of course, that’s if Marcus doesn’t mind,” he continues, then snaps his fingers. “Wait, I have an idea. Maybe he could match my donation. Wouldn’t that be something?”

The crowd cheers as if it’s already decided.

“Or…” A triumphant smirk crosses his face, and then he drops the bomb. “If you don’t have that kind of money, you could have your motorcycle club front it.”

How the fuck does he know? Then I close my eyes and nod to myself. Of course, he overheard my conversation. He must have pieced it together. My fist clenches at my side. I really want to put this rich dick in his place.

“Brandy, what is Holt talking about? You met Marcus at the opera. He’s in a motorcycle club?” Mr. Arrington looks questioningly at Brandy.

“Um…” Brandy is like a deer caught in headlights. “I met him at my job.”

“Yes, the opera.” Mr. Arrington nods.

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean, not exactly? You work at the opera house, don’t you? And is he in a motorcycle club?”

Brandy glances around the room, all eyes on her, unsure what to say.

I step forward. “Gerald, may I suggest we move this conversation to somewhere more private?”

“It’s Mr. Arrington to you. Brandy, my study. Now!” His voice cracks like a whip.

I move to go with her, but she turns and places a hand on my chest. “Stay here. Let me talk to him alone.”

I look into her eyes, debating on whether I should listen or help her explain. “Okay.” I concede.

She turns and follows her father down the hall.

Holt walks over to me smirking. “Oh, no. Did I say something wrong?”

His voice rings with amusement.

I want to punch him right in the face. “How’d you figure it out?”

“Nothing a google search couldn’t figure out. Death Heads was an easy find.”

My jaw clenches.

“Well, I guess you were right about one thing; you two are finished.” He drawls out the last word, throwing it back in my face.

Before I can restrain myself, my instincts take over. I tighten my fist and deck him in his jaw. Gasps echo around us as we now have an audience. He’s taken aback, probably never having had someone give him what he deserves. Rubbing his jaw, he turns to me.

“If you’re wanting a fight, I can give you one of those.”

“Good. Outside. Now!” I bark.

“Oh no, a gentleman never fights at a party. But I wouldn’t expect someone like you to know that.”

“I think you’re afraid someone like me is going to kick your ass. And you’d be right.”

“I’ll give you a fight, but a civilized one with rules. How about a boxing match?”

“Boxing?” I raise one eyebrow. “Sounds like my grandpa’s fighting. How about something a little younger? MMA?”

“Mixed martial arts?” He rubs his hand across his jaw again as if he’s thinking, but I’m hoping it’s because my punch hurts more than he cares to admit. “All right, next Saturday, six o’clock at The Academy.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Looking forward to it.” He sneers and walks away.

He thinks he has the advantage, but he has no idea.

Brandy—

“You are to stay away from him. Do you understand me?” My father runs his

hands through his hair. “How did this even happen?”

“Dad, if you just got to know him. He’s not—”

“I know everything I need to, and I will not have some criminal dragging down my daughter.”

“He doesn’t drag me down; he supports my dreams.”

“And how will he do that when he ends up behind bars?”

“Dad, you don’t even know anything about his club.”

A knock on the door interrupts us. We turn our heads to see Marcus step in.

“Mr. Arrington, I wanted to assure you I care about your daughter, and I’d never let anything happen to her.”

My father stares at him for a moment through narrowed eyes, but the bite in his voice has subdued.

“You can’t make those promises, not with what you’re mixed up in, and we both know it.” He turns his attention to me. “I forbid you to see him.” Then he looks at Marcus and points a finger at his chest. “You stay away from her. I think it’s about time you left.”

Marcus doesn’t acknowledge a word my father said. “Brandy?”

I need to give my father a chance to cool down, and running off with the man he’s forbidden me to see isn’t going to help. I have to find a way to make him see that Marcus brings me happiness, and his motorcycle club isn’t as bad as it’s cracked up to be. I mean, they are dangerous as hell, but they also have loyalty and some kind of moral code that seems to make them better. It’s like they’re knights in shining leather. I want to go with Marcus, but I can’t. Not if I’m ever going to convince my father to give him a shot.

“I think you had better leave,” I tell him, though it pains my heart.

“Come with me.” He holds his hand out.

It takes everything in me to not grab it and run, but I quietly shake my head. “I can’t.” I want to explain my intentions, but with my dad watching, I can’t say anything else. Disbelief flashes across Marcus’ face as his hand drops, and then he seems to harden himself against me. He turns, and he’s gone.

Marcus—

I walk from the room feeling like a shell of myself. What the hell just happened? I'm so distracted in my thoughts, I almost run right into Izzy.

"Oh sorry," I mutter.

"Marcus, what's going on? Where's Brandy?"

"She told me to leave," I admit.

"She what? Why would she do that?"

"I guess Daddy's approval was more important. Anyway, I better be going. I don't want to cause any more of a scene than I already have."

"It wasn't *you* who caused a scene. It was Holt."

"Yeah, I guess." I look down and notice the forgotten gift I'm still clutching with one hand under my arm. I slide it out. "This is for Brandy. I forgot to give it to her. Will you?" I hand it over, and Izzy takes it.

She opens her mouth to say something but closes it again, seemingly at a loss for words.

"It was nice meeting you." Then I turn and walk out, unsure if I'm leaving behind the girl of my dreams.

Brandy—

My father returned to the party about ten minutes ago, but I need a minute.

Leaning against the bathroom counter, looking into the mirror, I try to regain my composure. I take a deep breath. *Just make it through the rest of tonight*, I tell myself. Then I can talk to my father and call Marcus to explain. I give myself a once-over and push off the counter.

As I walk out the door, I see Holt casually leaned against the wall, waiting for me.

"Holt," I bite out as I walk past.

He immediately shoves off the wall. “Oh, come on. I didn’t know it was a big secret. I was just trying to do something nice for you.”

I whip around to face him. “You were trying to humiliate him. But he’s not the kind of man who shies from a challenge.”

“Come on, Brandy. He’s beneath you. Your father knows it, and so do you. You and I? We’re the right kind of match, the right kind of social circle.”

“Brandy!” I turn to see Izzy hurrying down the hall. “What the hell did you do?” Her accusation feels like a slap.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, furrowing my brows.

“You sent him away?”

“I have to give my father a chance to calm down, so I can convince him Marcus is a good guy.”

Holt scoffs next to me.

“You’re an idiot,” Izzy says bluntly. Then she shoves a package at me. “Here, he gave me this to give to you.”

“Oh.” I look down at it, unsure if I should open it now.

“Open it,” Holt prods.

I pull off the wrapping and lift the lid to a box. My eyes bulge at the contents.

Holt leans forward to see. “Ha, an old used bag. He couldn’t even swing for a new one. It looks like something he found in his grandma’s closet. What a terrible gift.”

“No,” I whisper. “It’s the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

Holt pulls his head back, perplexed, as if he couldn’t have possibly heard me correctly. “It’s Alessia Ricci’s handbag from *The Forbidden Marriage*. And the playbill. He remembered. How did he get this?”

“Well, he probably stole it,” Holt predicts, clearly annoyed.

Izzy looks at me, deadpan. “Sending him away was a big mistake. You better fix it or you’re going to be in for a world of heartbreak.”

Holt scrunches his face. “I think that’s a bit excessive.”

“Shut up. No one asked you,” Izzy snaps. “The only way you’ll convince your father he’s good for you is having him around, not sending him away.”

Dammit, I think she's right.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – HARD TRUTHS

Marcus—

I pull into the clubhouse lot the next morning as first light glimmers; pink and orange streaks paint the sky.

I still feel numb from last night. The drive home was long, and my mind raced through everything that had happened. Some of Holt's words permeate my brain. I know he has ulterior motives, but I can't help but feel how true his words were. Maybe she is too good for me. Maybe I am beneath her.

As soon as I stepped into the house last night, I checked my phone. No call. My heart sank, and I threw it across the room, then passed out on the bed.

This morning I checked my phone again, and I had several missed calls from Brandy. It helped ease the tension I'd been feeling. It was too early to wake her, but I plan on calling her as soon as I get a chance.

The clubhouse parking lot is quiet. Looks like I'm the first one here, or at least the first one awake. I roll to a stop, shut my bike off, and head inside. Moving behind the bar, I flick on the tv and start a pot of coffee. As I pour a steaming cup, the newscaster draws my attention.

“Gang violence, including that from motorcycle clubs known as one-percenters, is on the rise in California, but State Assemblyman Mickey Patterson from the 1st District has introduced a bill he hopes can stop it. The bill includes more funding for police and making it illegal to wear gang colors or insignia in private establishments. That includes motorcycle clubs wearing identifying patches. The controversial bill is winning support from conservative factions and small business owners across the state.”

“Screw that guy,” Cole calls as he comes down the stairs. “He has it out for motorcycle clubs. He's been all over the news.”

Cole must have spent the night at the club last night, judging by his partial dress and the yawn he emits.

“Hey, can I get you a cup?” I ask, holding my mug up.

“Yeah, that’d be great.”

I pour his cup and hand it to him.

Sipping on it, we continue watching the morning news as it switches to the weather forecast.

“Well Jana, it’s going to be a beautiful day. Highs are in the low sixties with a light breeze from the West. Clouds move in this afternoon and temperatures drop to the forties tonight. Overall, it looks like a day to get out there and enjoy the sun.”

We finish our first cups, and it’s not long before we hear the pitter patter of feet on the steps.

Angel descends. Looks like Prez had a sleepover. I smile as I head to pour another cup. They hardly ever stay at the clubhouse, but it happens every once in a while, especially in the last couple years with Melissa, TJ, and Brayden all grown.

“Can I get you a cup too, Angel?” I call.

Her face breaks into a smile. “What do you think woke me? The delicious aroma of coffee. That and the smell of bacon always do the trick.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “Here ya go.” I hand over the steaming mug.

She holds it to her nose and inhales. “Mmm, sweet lifeblood.”

Cole pulls her against his bare chest and chuckles. “She has an addiction.”

After a few sips, Angel eyes me over the brim of her cup. “Hey wait! What are you doing back so early? Wasn’t last night, *the night*?”

“Yeah, it was.”

“Well, how’d it go? Did you meet the ex?”

“I did.”

“And?”

“He’s an asshole, just as I suspected.”

She waits for me to continue. When I don’t, she prods, “Well, what happened?”

“He flung his money and status around. Told me I wasn’t worthy of her.”

Angel tilts her head. “You didn’t believe him, did you? I mean, why are

you here making me coffee, instead of her? It's like pulling teeth trying to get the details from you."

"All right, all right," I concede. I fill them both in on everything that happened.

Angel gives me a motherly look. She was always the closest thing I had to one, mine being the wreck she was. "Have you talked to her?"

"She called last night, but I missed it. Figured it was too early to call just yet."

Angel nods, taking another sip. "I'm sure you guys can clear this up."

"Well, one thing I know," Cole chimes in. "We got a fight night to go to this weekend."

"The whole club's gonna come?"

"Hell, yeah. You beatin' the shit out of this prick? Now that's a fight worth watching *and* bettin' on."

"Thanks, man."

"You know, times been a tickin' while we've been sitting here. I bet she's up now," Angel hints.

"Yeah, all right." I slide my phone from my pocket and walk a few steps away for some semblance of privacy. I scroll to her name, but the sound of sirens stops me.

All three of us glance at the door.

"What the hell?" Cole mutters, standing.

Before he's halfway across the floor, the door burst open, and a parade of police barge in.

"We have a warrant to search the premises."

I glance at the man who uttered those fucking words. A shiny sheriff badge is pinned to his chest.

"Everyone keep your hands where I can see them. How many members are on the premises?" he asks.

"I don't know. A few may have crashed here last night," Cole bites out. "I want to see your warrant."

The sheriff holds a paper in front of Prez's face.

"You aren't going to find shit here," Cole spits. "You're barking up the

wrong tree.”

“That a threat?” The sheriff steps toward him.

“A warning.” Cole’s voice sounds deceptively casual, but his steely blue eyes show the hint of danger I know boils under the surface.

“Cole, what the hell’s going on?” Jake calls as he shuffles from a back room. He’s followed closely by my dad.

The cops corral us into one location in the yard, while they tear through the clubhouse. They tried to take our phones, but Cole said our persons weren’t on the warrant, just the building. Seemed to piss off the sheriff, but he seemed to know that violating the warrant would derail any chance of charging us with any shit they did find.

“What the hell is this about?” Red Dog mutters.

“No, idea.” His eyes connect with mine. “Send word out. Nobody comes to the club. I don’t need more guys showing up and something dumb happening.”

I nod and send out a mass text.

CLUB BEING RAIDED - STAY AWAY

“What are you two doing here?” Cole asks Red Dog and Jake.

“We were playing pool last night. Got late, and we both crashed here.”

Cole nods. The raid continues for hours, but nothing gets taken out.

After a while, the sheriff makes his way over. My phone vibrates, and I glance down. Incoming call from Brandy. I send it to voicemail, knowing I can’t answer with the cop headed this way. He has a crewcut like he’s been deployed, but I doubt he ever served. Probably just a wannabe. Bet he was a bully in high school, and when he got to the real world, he realized he couldn’t boss people around anymore, so he became a cop. He looks at Cole through his mirrored sunglasses.

“Find anything?” Cole muses, already knowing the answer. We’re not idiots. We never keep the evidence of our more questionable business dealings where the cops could find it.

“Well, there was some marijuana in one of the rooms.”

“Yeah? That shit’s legal. So, nothing then?”

“You can go back in.” He goes to turn.

“Who the hell’s going to clean up the mess you pigs made?” Cole yells.

“Looks like you’re getting started on spring cleaning early.” He laughs.

“What the fuck was this about?” Cole asks.

“We got an informant. I guess you boys have a rat.” The sheriff chuckles as he turns.

“Bullshit,” Jake mutters.

The squads roll out, and we trek inside. The place is in shambles. And I can only guess it’s gonna be us prospects that put it right.

“Damn, this is going to take all day to clean up.” Red Dog eyes the damage.

“Yeah, Marcus, you better call Billy and TJ in to help you,” Cole orders.

I take a breath and blow it out. *Great.* “Yes, sir.”

Brandy—

I call Marcus again, but on the second ring, it gets sent to voicemail. My breath huffs out in frustration. I spent the night in my old bedroom at my parent’s house last night, but now I’m ready to get home. Finding some old clothes in my drawers, I slide into a pair of faded jeans and a loose cable-knit sweater.

When I descend the staircase, I hear the clinking of silverware in the dining room and find my parents and Holt eating brunch.

“Oh, good. Brandy, come join us,” my mother calls, gesturing to an open seat.

“What are you doing here?” I direct my comment to Holt, not moving from where I stand in the doorway.

“Brandy Marie Arrington. That is no way to talk to a guest,” my mother chastises.

“Well, your dad and I caught an early tennis match this morning, and then

Mr. Arrington invited me over for breakfast.” Holt sets his fork down.

“Call me Gerald. That’s the least you can do after the ass-kicking you gave me on the court.”

Holt chortles. “You put up a good fight.”

I hate how they interact like old comrades. I sit, angrily breaking a croissant in two.

“After breakfast, I’m heading home,” I announce, pouring a glass of orange juice.

“How are you getting home?” my dad asks.

“Well, I was going to get Izzy to take me, but it’s her grandma’s birthday. So, I figured I’ll call a taxi or something.”

“I could take you,” Holt offers.

“No, thank you.” I spread butter rather violently on my croissant.

“Nonsense. I don’t want you riding with some stranger all that way.” My mom wipes her mouth with a napkin, as if the subject is decided.

“It’ll be fine.”

My father nods across the table. “I agree with your mother. I’d feel much better with Holt taking you.”

“Well, now that’s settled.” She smiles serenely as she raises her coffee cup.

I chug my juice. “Okay, well I’m ready.” I push my chair out.

“Oh, come now, dear. Sit for more than a minute with us,” Mom insists.

I give her another twenty minutes before I rise again. “I really need to be getting back now.”

“All right, let me take a quick shower and change out of my tennis attire, and we can head out.” Holt rises from his seat. “I need to grab my gym bag from my car.”

All this stalling is making me antsy, but there’s not much I can do about it. I go upstairs to grab my dress and the gift Marcus gave me. I still can’t believe he did that for me.

After about another thirty minutes, I give my parents a kiss.

Holt holds open the passenger door to his car for me, and I climb in.

“Thanks.”

“My pleasure.” He closes the door, kisses my mother on the cheek, and shakes my dad’s hand. “I’ll let you know she gets home safely.”

“Thank you,” my father replies.

“You’re such a good boy.” My mom smiles. “I hope Brandy gives you another chance.”

He climbs in the car and off we go.

Holt tries to make small talk, but after thirty minutes of short answers, we ride the rest of the way in silence.

When he stops on the street in front of my place, I push open the car door and climb out. “Thanks.”

“Wait, can I come in for a minute to talk?” He leans over the passenger seat.

“You had a whole car ride to talk.”

“Well, at least let me use the restroom before I leave.”

“There are bushes over there.” I gesture to some that run along the sidewalk.

He gives me a horrified expression. “I’m appalled by that suggestion. I am not some barbarian, Brandy. Honestly!”

“Fine. Pee and then go.”

“All right, all right.” He holds up his hands, like I win this round. This doesn’t feel like winning, though.

He pulls in a spot and follows me to the door.

Marcus—

The clubhouse takes hours to clean. Billy and TJ arrived about twenty minutes in to help, and the cleanup seemed to move much faster.

I throw the last bag of trash from the shit the cops broke into the dumpster. When I turn, Crash is leaning against the clubhouse door, chewing on a toothpick.

“Hey, knock off for a while. I’m going to need you to be on gate duty

through the night. We want to keep our eyes open with the Death Heads and the cops breathing down our necks.” His eyes flick down at his watch. “Let’s say be back here by six.”

“Yes, sir.” I check the time on my phone; it’s only about ten now. I head to my bike. Time to go figure this shit out with Brandy.

I slow and park in an open spot on the road a few houses down from Brandy’s place. I’m about to climb off my bike when I see a Mercedes stop in front of her pad.

Brandy climbs from the car. She turns and talks to the driver for a minute, and then the car pulls into a spot and Holt steps out.

You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. My anger boils. She walks to the door, and I hold my breath. If she lets him in, I’m going to lose my shit.

She opens the door and steps back as he crosses the threshold.

I immediately rev my engine, the unmistakable rumble of my Harley rattling windows.

She quickly scans, searching the noise out. I roar out of my spot, and our eyes connect. She’s like a deer caught in the headlights when I speed past her, heading to my place.

Brandy—

Shit.

Before I can get over the shock, Marcus thunders past me.

I run into my place. “Holt, hurry up. You need to be on your way.”

The bathroom door opens, and he steps out, eyeing the place. “What’s the hurry? I think this is a perfect time to discuss our relationship.”

“We have no relationship, Holt. I ended it, and I let you hang around because you were friends with my dad, but now I see that was a mistake. We

need to cut all ties. I don't want to see you ever again."

"We had something good, Brandy. We were a perfect match—equal status and birth. We can be that again. Our marriage would be the talk of the town, as it should be. I'll leave you alone today, but we'll see if you still feel that way after Saturday."

"What happens on Saturday?" I ask, confused.

"You'll see. Until then, I'll be thinking of you, my diamond." I always hated when he used pet names for me like I was something he owned. He kisses me on the cheek as he passes, then slips through the door.

What the hell he's talking about? I know of nothing going on Saturday, but I can't worry about that now; I have to get to Marcus.

It takes me almost twenty minutes to find my damned keys. I really need to get one of those tracker things for them. Climbing into my truck, I throw it into reverse and hightail it out of there. It's been almost an hour since Marcus rode by, so I know I'll never catch up to him on the road. I don't even know where he lives; the only place I know I can go is the club.

Marcus—

I'm still pissed when I pull up to my place. It's a one-bedroom rental house. It's nothing great, but the area's good, the rent is cheap, and it came furnished. I live near the community college, so most of the houses are filled with young college students.

I push through the door that leads straight into the living room, throw my cut on one of the wooden chairs in the dining room as I pass, and head to the hallway. One side holds the laundry, and the other is my small bedroom and bath. I twist on the shower.

After a quick nap, I realize I won't get much more sleep. As soon as my eyes open, my mind starts racing over how wrong I've been about Brandy. First chance she got, she brought another man to her place. And not just any man. Holt, that dick. So much for her being Mount Everest.

I give up all notions of sleep, swing my legs over the side of the bed, and push to my feet. Stalking through the house, I nab my cut and slip it on.

I'd might as well head to the clubhouse. A hard drink is what I need to clear my mind. With all the shit going down lately, I've gotta get my head on straight. Brandy is not a distraction I need.

I thought our relationship would be easy and a way to relieve the stressors of this violent life I live, but instead it seems it was all a game to her. Well, screw that. I won't be anyone's goddamn toy. And I sure as hell won't let her turn me into her fool. I'm done with women for the moment, at least anything more than a quick lay.

My focus needs to be on the club and getting my patch.

I need to fucking remember that.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – PIPE DREAM

Marcus—

The clubhouse is full when I slip through the door.

I smooth my palm down the front of my vest, feeling nothing but leather. One day, by God, there'll be patches under my hand. It's all I've worked toward—all I've wanted.

Well, until Brandy.

My jaw clenches. What a fucking pipe dream she turned out to be. The pain slices through me again, almost as fresh as when I saw her letting that asshole into her place.

Shouldering my way through the crowd, the pounding rock music vibrates my chest. I try to lose myself in the party mood of the clubhouse.

I slip behind the bar and help Billy and TJ, who are both busy stocking beer in the icy coolers, and passing them across the bar almost as fast.

Cole and Crash sit at the end of the bar, their heads huddled together, talking club business like they often do. Cole spots me and lifts his chin, sliding his empty bottle forward.

I nod and plunge my hand into the icy water to grab a replacement. He murmurs something to his VP, and they both watch me approach.

“Here you go, sir.” I slide the beer across the bar.

“Thanks, kid.” He wraps his hand around the neck.

“What are you doin’ back so soon?” Crash cocks his head to the side. “I thought I gave you ‘til six to rest up?” He glances at his watch. “Few hours early, aren’t you?”

“I went to talk to Brandy.” Last thing I want to do is talk about it with my Prez and VP. By the cocked brow he gives me, I see my answer isn’t going to cut it. “She, uh, had better plans.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Crash snaps.

My eyes swing toward my sponsor. Christ, they’re both really going to

make me spill this whole damn story. Could this night get any worse? I exhale a long breath. “Ass-wipe was there. Saw him heading into her home.”

“No fucking shit?” Crash whispers.

My throat closes, and I pick up a glass. My hands work the bar rag over it, no matter that the thing is already dry.

“Tough break, kid,” Cole mutters, and takes a slug of his beer, his eyes never leaving mine. “At least you’ll get to beat the shit out of him on Saturday.”

“You need another, sir?” I shift my gaze to Crash, hoping his answer is yes, so I can escape this interrogation. Before he can answer, Cole lifts his chin toward the door, drawing my attention.

“Hey, kid. I’m thinking she sent him home.”

I frown, my head twisting to follow the direction of his gaze.

Brandy stands just inside the door, her gaze scanning the crowd. She’s in a soft pink sweater that stretches across her breasts, emphasizing their size. Her jeans hug her curves like a second skin. I can’t stop the lurch of my heart in my chest. I’m afraid to hope what her following me could mean.

I turn away, my hands twisting the glass, the rag working more vigorously while my brain tries to figure out all the reasons she could be here, but it keeps coming back to just one.

Cole slams his beer down, and I jump. He stares at Crash with a quirked brow. “You gonna do it, or am I?”

My gaze shifts to Crash. What the hell’s Cole talking about?

Crash lowers his own beer and stares back at Cole. “You’re shittin’ me, right?”

As if he’s just been challenged, Cole starts to straighten from his bar stool.

“Sit down, Prez.” Crash stands and digs in his pocket, pulling out a set of keys and with jerking, angry motions, yanks off a single key and slams it on the bar top. He slides it toward me. “Here, kid. The sheets are clean.”

I stare at the key gleaming in the dim light of the neon beer signs, and my eyes shift to my sponsor’s. “For real?”

His brows raise. “Better fucking take it before I change my goddamn

mind, prospect.”

I grab it, then swivel to the door. Brandy is still standing there, but I know with this crowd she won't be alone for long. I toss the bar rag down and slip the key in my pocket. “Thanks.”

Crash catches my bicep as I move around the end of the bar. “Don't forget, you have gate duty tonight.”

“Yes, sir. I got it.” I stand looking at Brandy, unmoving.

He slaps my arm. “Well, don't just stand there, kid. Go get the girl before one of these boys beats you to it.”

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I shoulder through the crowd until I'm standing before the woman I'd started to think of as mine. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to explain.”

“Nothin' to explain. I saw you and Holt.” I fold my arms, my chin lifting with my pride.

“Can we talk? Please?” When I hesitate and look over her shoulder like I'm not going to answer, her hands land on her hips. “Or are you going to be a stubborn ass?”

Goddamn. This woman. “Fine. I know a place we can talk.” I lead her through the crowd and up the stairs. She follows willingly, but I see her gaze flick around the room as we climb the steps.

We reach the second floor, and I lead her down the dark hall to the room at the end. I pause at the door with the frosted glass on top and the stenciled words that read Vice President.

“Where are we?” Brandy asks, rubbing her arms.

“Crash's room. He's not using it tonight and gave me a key.” I slip it in the lock and swing the door open, walking in, but Brandy stands at the threshold, her eyes on the bed. I cock my head. “You changin' your mind, girl?”

Her gaze shifts to mine, and her shoulders stiffen. “Nope.” The word leaves her mouth with a pop, and she strides inside.

I close the door, and my eyes hit her back. The sweater dips low, really low. I let my eyes sweep over every inch, admiring all that bare skin revealed

to me. I feel my dick harden. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

I stay where I am with my hand on the doorknob, my back slumped against the wood. *Don't fucking get your hopes up, Marcus. You know what you saw.*

She turns to face me. “He gave me a ride home. I wanted to take an Uber, but my mom and dad wouldn't hear of it.”

Her words have the iron band around my chest loosening, but I remind myself how gutted I felt when I saw them together, and how much her father wants that union. I pace a step toward her. “And so you decided to let him into your place?”

“He said he had to pee.”

“I bet he did. And what about Daddy? He doesn't want you with me.”

She slams her hand to her chest. “What about what I want? Doesn't that matter?”

“What about all that shit that went down at the Christmas party? You wanted me to leave then.” I lift my hand in the general direction of her home.

“I didn't want to stop seeing you. I wanted to give my dad time to cool down.”

“What, you think he's just going to accept me?”

“You don't know my dad.”

“You're right. I don't.” She hit the nail on the head without even knowing it. “I don't know *any* dad.” I let out a forced chuckle. “I thought maybe I'd have a type of father when I found my girl. Maybe actually have someone who thought of me as a son.” I shake my head. “Guess no father will ever approve of me. Just another pipe dream.”

“That's not true. My dad will come around. And what about Cole and Angel? I thought they took you under their wings.”

I force my gaze to her face. “He's been good to me. They both have, but he doesn't think of me like that.” I'm trying to give myself brothers, a family with this club, but I'll never have what I really seek—a father. I saw it that day with the Death Heads. TJ got the pat on the back, and Billy's dad beamed with pride. Me, I was expendable. They would have cared, but like that of a friend, a brother. I have no father figure to talk to, to teach me life lessons.

Everything I've learned, I've taught myself.

"Baby." Her voice is soft, barely a whisper.

There's pity in her eyes—hear it in that soft word, and I don't want it. "It doesn't matter. I should let that dream go."

"No. You shouldn't. I know my dad could be that for you. He just has to see how special you are."

"Yeah, sure." I concede, not wanting to draw out this pain of rejection any longer.

She sucks in a breath and lets it out. "You're not making this easy for me, are you?"

"Nope." I let the word pop, just like she did a moment ago.

That makes her smile and shake her head. She walks slowly toward me, and her palms land on my chest, sliding up the leather. My gaze drops to her hands, then I meet her eyes.

"So, how long do you have this room for?" Her voice purrs.

"Long enough." I'm no fool, so I grab her waist and drag her body against mine. The knit fabric that clings to every curve is soft under my palms. She's the sexiest thing I've ever seen in just jeans and a sweater, and all I want to do is tear it off her.

"Are we good now?" She rubs her hands across my chest.

"We will be." My eyes follow her tongue as it slips out and across her lip. "Damn baby, I can think of some things for you to do with that tongue."

"Me too." She lowers to her knees. Unbuckling my pants, she grasps my hard dick into her soft hands. Her tongue gives one long lick, making me shudder. Then takes my whole length into her sweet, sweet mouth. I've died and gone to heaven. She starts slow, gliding me in and out until I'm throbbing. She moans around me, and it's my undoing. I thread my fingers through her hair, holding her head in my hands and controlling the rhythm. Soon I'm fucking her mouth hard, but I want something so much sweeter. I pull out and drag her to her feet.

"Take your clothes off."

She wiggles her pants off and drags her sweater over her head. I admire the sight of her matching peach-colored panties and bra.

I raise a brow. “All of it.”

She reaches behind her, unhooking her bra. Her tits pop out, the nipples standing at attention, just waiting for my warm mouth.

I step forward, taking their weight in my hands, and push those beautiful nipples up to my waiting mouth. I flick my tongue across the buds. As I do, my hand seeks the real prize. I slip it under her panties and feel her wetness between my fingers. I thrust two inside, making her come up on her toes. As I pull them out, I make sure to rub them along her most sensitive area. I suck them into my mouth to taste her sweet honey.

“Mmm, I can’t wait another second to be inside you.”

“Take me,” she pleads. “Now.”

I lower her to the bed and rip her panties off. I shimmy out of my own jeans and boxers, grabbing a condom as I do. Then shrug off my cut, laying it over a nearby chair and pull my shirt over my head.

“Spread your legs wide.”

She lets them fall open. I love the way she obeys every command I give her. I’m captivated by the beautiful sight of her spread wide. For me. All for me. My eyes lock on that pretty pussy. She glistens with her need for me to take her.

I roll on the condom and position myself between her legs.

“You ready for me, baby?”

“Yes,” she breathes.

“This”—I thrust into her—“belongs to me. Tell me who this pussy belongs to.”

“Y-you,” she stutters as I thrust in again.

“That’s right.”

We pick up speed, each needing so much more.

She clenches down as she’s sent over the edge, and her orgasm pulls me right along with her.

I collapse on top of her, and she squeezes my ass almost as a tap out. I roll off her and toss my condom into the nearby wastebasket. Then I pull her to my chest.

“We’re a pair, aren’t we?” I speak to the top of her head. “We’re both

searching for Daddy's approval. At least you have a chance at winning yours. Mine's been long gone."

She rests her chin on my chest. "You are worthy of love." Her words shake me. I know she believes them; I don't know that *I* do.

"You're an amazing storyteller, and you will make it in opera. I feel it in my bones."

She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. Then she lays her head down, and we both drift off.

My alarm wakes us. It's almost time to start gate duty. She's sleeping so peacefully; I don't want to wake her, but I'm sure as hell not leaving her naked in Crash's bed.

So I reach across and rub my knuckles lightly down her cheek.

"Mmm." She smiles.

"I've got gate duty tonight. Let me walk you to your truck before I start."

I push Brandy against the truck and kiss her one last time, then open the door for her. She slips inside, and I lean in the open space. "Call and let me know you made it home."

"I will."

"Drive safe."

She gives me a wink. "Get some sleep."

After I watch Brandy's taillights fade into the distance, I stretch and head to the clubhouse. As soon as I walk through the doors, I'm bombarded with hoots and hollers. Pats on the back overwhelm me as I push through the crowd. I can't help but grin like an idiot.

"Hey, prospect," Crash calls from across the room. "Change my sheets."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – MAKING AN IMPRESSION

Marcus—

I stand at the gate, leaning against the post. The crunching of gravel has me glancing back to see Crash making his way to me.

“All good out here? Anything out of order?”

“Not particularly,” I answer, straightening. Both our eyes follow the squad car that slowly drives by the gate. “That’s the third time they’ve driven by.”

“Lookin’ for an excuse to come bust up our party,” Crash muses.

“Noise complaint?”

“Right,” Crash scoffs. “All the empty warehouses really getting disturbed by our music.” He turns to head inside but calls over his shoulder. “Let me know if they do anything more than roll past.”

“Will do.” I turn my gaze to the road to see them making a slow turn. Well, at least with these cops up our ass, the Death Heads should keep their distance. Hell, these cops may actually be doing us a favor. I lean against the gate. It’s gonna be a long night.

Brandy—

I climb into my truck to head to the grocery store. I’ve been delinquent about my responsibilities, and after waking up this morning, I realized I have barely any food in the house. After a quick piece of toast to make it through the morning, it’s time to get some real sustenance.

The key clicks when I turn it, but nothing happens. I try again, but to no avail. My hands slam against the steering wheel. “Dammit.”

Staring out the windshield, I contemplate my options and finally slip my phone from my pocket to make a call.

“Hey, my car won’t start. Do you think you could come look at it? Great, see you soon.”

I climb out and head to the door. No use waiting around in the truck.

After about an hour, I hear a knock on my door. “Wow, that was quick,” I comment, opening the door.

“Expecting someone?” Marcus asks, his arm braced against the doorframe.

“Oh, hey. No, just my dad. My truck wouldn’t start. He’s on his way to look at it.”

Marcus straightens. “Why wasn’t I your first call?” I don’t miss the hurt in his voice.

“I knew you were on gate duty. I wasn’t sure how much sleep you got, and I didn’t want to wake you.” That seems to appease him.

“Billy took over for me at six am, and next time, you call me. Got it?” He lifts a brow, waiting for an answer.

“Got it.” I watch his cute ass as he walks toward my truck.

“You got the keys?” he calls over his shoulder.

I grab them off the hook and follow.

Marcus climbs behind the wheel, leaving the door open. He cranks it, but like before, nothing happens. “How old is your battery?”

“I got it replaced six months ago.”

“Well, that shouldn’t be the problem then, unless you got a lemon.” He clicks on the radio. There seems to be enough juice for it. He pushes the button for AM and then turns the dials to the left.

“Planning to listen to talk radio?” I ask, perplexed. “Won’t that just drain the battery even worse, if that’s the problem?”

He lifts his eyes to mine, smirking, and then revs the engine. The radio noise turns to a fuzzy sound. “No, I’m not listening to talk radio, smartass. It’s an old trick I learned while working at a car shop in high school. You turn the radio to the low channels on AM and rev the engine. If it makes that noise, it means it’s the alternator.”

After a run down the street to a parts store, Marcus is now under my hood, taking off the old alternator.

He's been out there about an hour, when I glance out the window, seeing him hard at work. Wanting to help and say thanks, I decide to make some coffee. It's afternoon, but with it still being winter, there's a chill in the air.

By the time I make it outside juggling a carafe and two mugs, I see my dad and Marcus both bent over the car handing each other tools.

"No, no. The 1970 Plymouth Roadrunner Superbird has 425 horsepower. Hell, it was designed for racing."

"That may be true, Mr. Arrington, but the 1963 Pontiac GTO is the greatest of all time. It was the original muscle car."

"All right, all right, agree to disagree. And call me Gerald."

"Will do."

Marcus glances sideways at my father, and the small smile that spreads across his face warms my heart. I stay back, watching them bond.

"Hey, I was heading to a car auction as soon as I finished up here, and seeing as you're about done, would you like to tag along? Should be some sweet rides there. I'm planning to bid on a 1967 Chevy Camaro Z/28."

Marcus straightens, wiping his hands on a rag and emits a low whistle. "That's a sweet ride."

"Yeah, I had one once when I was young and stupid. The one that got away." My dad smiles and shakes his head. "But I plan to get her back today."

"I'd love to come. I'd like to see that car close up." He closes the hood and catches my eye. "Hey, babe."

"What are you two up to?" I smile.

"I'm taking Marcus with me," my dad chimes.

"Oh, I thought we'd spend time together." My eyes shift to Marcus.

"Nope, I'm taking him to the car auction," my dad continues, like it's all settled. Besides, he already won you over. Now it's me he has to impress."

Marcus grins and shrugs. "He's got a point."

"Fine. Steal my boyfriend. But come have a cup of coffee first. I already made it."

“Yes, ma’am. You guys head on in. I’ll be there in just a minute,” Marcus replies.

My dad and I make our way to my kitchen. I fill two mugs, placing one in front of my father, and one at the empty chair.

“Want any cream or sugar, Dad?” I ask as I grab an extra mug for myself.

“Black is good,” he calls.

I grab the French vanilla coffee creamer out of the fridge for myself. “I’d pull out some kind of lunch for everyone, but I was headed to the grocery store when my truck wouldn’t start, so I’m running pretty empty.”

My dad chuckles. “We have to leave soon anyway if we’re going to make the start of the auction.”

“All right.”

“So, since you’ve been lying to me about quite a bit, how’s the opera *really* going?” He eyes me over the rim of his mug.

Sighing, I stir my coffee and stare into the cup. “I’m working on it. It’s almost finished, but I have no idea how I’m going to get it seen by the right people. Maybe I’ll have to start knocking on doors.”

“Getting your foot in the door is always the hardest part,” he murmurs. “I could make some calls. I’m sure somebody knows somebody.”

“Absolutely not. I want to do this on my own. I want to know my work is good, not that I have an influential father.”

“I get it. But just so you know, I’d only get your foot in the door. Your talent would have to carry you from there, and I don’t doubt for a second that it would.”

I smile. He’s a great dad and a hard man to live up to, but my desire to prove myself is a me problem. He’s never once made me feel like I couldn’t live up to his name, but I still feel the challenge anytime someone learns he’s my father.

Marcus joins us at the table, sliding his phone into his pocket and meeting my eyes. “So, what plans did you have for today?”

“Grocery shopping and doing some laundry. I’m a real wild one.” I waggle my eyebrows.

Marcus sips his coffee then sets his mug down. “Well, change of plans.”

“I thought you were going to the auction with my dad?” I quirk my head to the side, confused.

“Oh, I am. And I felt bad leaving you high and dry, so I called some friends.”

“*What?*” I yelp. I must look appalled because my dad chokes on his coffee.

Marcus shoots me one of his gorgeous smiles—the kind that can talk me into just about anything. “I called the girls.”

“The girls? Like the ol’ ladies?”

“No. Not them. They’re old enough to be your mom, for Christ’s sake.”

“Hey, watch it.” My dad warns. “You’re hanging out with me, and I am her dad.”

“Sorry. No offense.” Marcus holds his hands up. “These are the club princesses. They’re around our age, a couple years younger.”

“I’ve never even met them,” I squeak.

“Well, no time like the present. They’re on their way. Should be here in about an hour to take you out for a girl’s day.”

“A girl’s day? Where are we going? What should I wear? Marcus, I don’t even know their names.”

“Just wear whatever you wear when you hang out with Izzy. And it’s Cole’s daughter, Melissa—you know, the one driving Billy insane? The other is Crash’s daughter, Harley Jean.”

“Okay, well, you guys best be on your way. I have to get ready now.” I stand up and take their mugs.

“Hey, I wasn’t done with that,” Marcus whines.

“You are now. I have to get ready for a day of *who-knows-what* with a bunch of strangers, thanks to you.”

Marcus comes to his feet and pulls me to him. “You’re going to have a good time. I promise.”

“Sure,” I grumble.

He drops a kiss to my lips.

“All right, let’s go.” My dad rises from his chair, and we pull apart.

The men move toward the door, and my dad tells Marcus on the way out,

“Don’t worry about her. She acts like she’s annoyed, but I’m sure she’s excited to get to meet some people up here. I don’t think she’s met too many friends since she moved.”

“That’s because I’m always working,” I snap as he shuts the door. The sound of his laughter carries through.

I roll my eyes and race to my closet.

Almost an hour to the tee, there’s a light rap on my door.

Skidding to a stop in front of the hall mirror, I check my look on the way to the door. Black leather leggings, a beige oversized sweater, and some black ankle boots. I grab my matching black bag and sling it over my shoulder.

Swinging open the door, I come face-to-face with a truly beautiful woman. She has her blonde curls thrown up in a messy bun, but nothing else about her look is messy. She has on a white turtleneck bodysuit that clings to her curves like a second skin. Her high-waisted jeans are faded and torn at the knees. Her brown chunky-heeled boots complete the perfect look.

She gives me a big Julia Roberts’ smile. “Hi, I’m Melissa. Marcus called me.”

I hug the edge of the door. “Yeah, sorry about that. I don’t want you to feel like I’m a charity case.”

“Nonsense. I’ve been wanting to meet you. Brandy, right?” She extends her hand, and I take it.

“Yes, Brandy.”

“You ready to go?”

“Where are we headed?”

“Harley Jean is driving.” She gestures to a Dodge Charger idling in one of the spots. “Mine is out of commission at the moment. We were thinking nails, lunch, and some shopping, if that’s okay with you?”

“Sounds perfect.” I lock the door and follow her to the waiting car. I slide into the back seat, and a pretty girl twists and smiles.

“Hi, I’m Harley Jean.”

“Brandy,” I reply.

“So, I heard you and Marcus met when they went on that snack run for Green,” Harley comments as she throws the car in reverse.

“Yeah, we did.” I laugh.

“Pssh, I don’t want to hear the information we already know. I want the nitty gritty details.” Melissa waggles her eyebrows. “Have you guys, you know...?”

I’m not sure I want to divulge that kind of information to girls I just met. “Um...”

Harley reaches over and swats Melissa’s arm. “Don’t make her uncomfortable. You’ll scare her off before we officially suck her into our group.”

“All right. All right.” She glances over the seat and smiles. “I’ll get that information from you later.”

We continue to discuss everything from favorite shops to what they plan to do with their lives. Before I know it, we’re pulling into a nail salon.

“I’m getting a French manicure and a pedicure. What about you Brandy?” Harley Jean asks as we push open the glass front door.

“I got my nails done the other week, but my toes haven’t seen the light of day this winter. It’s been mostly boots and closed toe heels for me. I could use a pop of color.”

After selecting our polish, we relax in the massage chairs.

“So, you guys seem to know everything about me and Marcus. What about you? Any men in your lives?” I glance at Melissa first, wondering if she’ll admit to all the tension between her and Billy. I’ve heard so much about it, I feel like I’ve been listening to a soap opera.

“Well,” Harley Jean pipes up. “I’ve been on a few dates recently, but nothing serious.”

“What about you?” I ask Melissa, and I don’t miss the exchange between these two friends.

“It’s complicated,” she confesses.

“How so?” I prod.

“I’ll tell you about it, if you answer my question from earlier.”

“You play a hard game.” I chuckle. “Fine. You go first.”

“Well, I’m the daughter of the club President, which basically makes me a nun.”

“That’s not true.” Harley Jean scoffs.

“The guy I’m interested in can’t date me, or he won’t get his number one priority, which apparently isn’t me.”

Harley Jean leans to meet her eyes. “Come on, Melissa. You know that isn’t true. I think he’d burn his patch if he really thought it came down to you or it.”

“I’m sure Billy and you will figure it out. It can’t be that long before he gets his patch.” I try to console my new friend.

“Looks like you already know my story,” she comments at my use of his name.

I grin sheepishly at my slipup. “Yeah, men talk. Especially when you let them in your bed.”

“Ha, I knew it!” Melissa points her perfectly manicured finger at me. “Is he good?”

“Yes, he is.”

Harley Jean leans closer and whispers, “Is he the *throw-you-against-the-wall* or *make-sweet-love* kind of guy?”

“Both. He can be sensual and all about my pleasure, and he can be so hot for it he bends me over the nearest piece of furniture.”

“Damn,” Melissa whispers. “I wish Billy would be more like that. He hardly touches me.”

“All that pent up frustration? That’s gonna be hot when he finally lets it go and takes what he wants,” I assure her.

They continue to drill me with questions about sex through lunch and into shopping.

“All right, enough. I think you guys have to pay me for the sex ed course I just provided.” I giggle.

“Oh my God, Brandy. You need to try this on.” Melissa holds up a lace black jumpsuit. “It would look so hot on you. It’d be perfect to wear to the

fight.”

My eyes travel from the hanger to Melissa. “What fight?”

Melissa and Harley Jean glance at each other. They look like they just let it slip there’s no Santa Claus.

“I thought you knew,” Melissa starts. “Marcus is cage fighting with your ex.”

“He’s *what?*” I practically shriek.

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger.” Melissa holds her hands up.

“Well, now you know,” Harley Jean shrugs. “Let’s see you in this sexy getup, because you’ll need an outfit. I think since the guys are literally fighting over you, it’s only fair to show off what they’re fighting for.” Harley Jean herds me toward the dressing rooms. She’s clearly the pragmatic one in the group. “You can always let Marcus have it when he gets home. No use stewing over it now.”

“Fine.” I practically yank the hanger from Melissa’s hand. “Sorry.”

I can’t believe Marcus didn’t tell me. He and Holt are going to beat each other to a pulp over me. I shake my head. Men are definitely a different breed, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t at least a little turned on. I change out of my outfit and into the jumpsuit.

“Come out and show us,” Melissa yells from the other side of the dressing room door.

“Yeah, or we’re coming in,” Harley adds.

“Okay, okay.” I swing the door open, and their jaws drop.

Melissa and Harley high-five each other.

“Well, that was easy. Found your look. Now to complete the look, we just need to find you a leather jacket.” Harley folds her arms.

“Are you sure?” I turn to look in the mirror. The top is all lace with cap sleeves and a wide plunging V-neck that shows the complete sides of my breasts. A high waist starts the solid black fabric that flares out to wide leg pants. I have to agree a leather jacket completes this sex-kitten, biker-babe look.

“We’re sure,” they both say at the same time.

I meet their eyes in the mirror, then study the look, cocking my head. “It

seems a little over the top.”

Harley grins and nods. “Exactly. That’ll definitely give Marcus a prize to win.”

I roll my eyes. “He doesn’t *win me*.”

Melissa arcs a brow. “You sure about that? I’d kill to have Billy fight for me.”

Harley slings her arm around Melissa’s neck. “Then let’s find you an outfit to drive him crazy.”

By sunset, I lay on the couch reading a book, a glass of wine only an arm’s reach away.

I had so much fun with the girls, but I’m exhausted. We ran around all day and when I got home, I realized I still had to go grocery shopping. I threw some salmon, potatoes, sweet onion, and butter in a pan and shoved it in the oven. It’s always been a quick and easy meal I could make in a bind.

I’m hoping my dad will stay for dinner, and I can hear all about this *bro date*. But I also want to corner Marcus and ask why the hell he didn’t tell me he was cage fighting Holt this weekend.

It’s not long before I hear their voices carrying from the other side of my door.

I let them in with a smirk. “How was your date?”

“It was great. Marcus saved me about fifteen thousand.” My dad pats Marcus on the back.

“Well, it had rust where the subframes mount to the body and in the wheel wells. So, they’d all have to be replaced. I made a point to make my observation very loudly so no other bidders knocked the price higher than it should be.”

“He was brilliant, Brandy. You should have seen him.”

“Well, I’m glad you guys had fun.” I carry my wine glass into the kitchen to pull the salmon out of the oven.

“What about you? Did you have fun with the girls? Or do you still want

to string me up?”

“It was really nice.” I set the pan on the stove top and give him a sly smile. “They wanted all the details on you.”

“What kind of details?”

“Mmm...” I take a sip of wine and cock my head. “I guess they wanted to know about our relationship.”

His face sobers. “Oh, yeah? What’d you tell them?”

My eyes go over his shoulder to my father, and I decide against tormenting Marcus, murmuring instead, “I’ll tell you later. Would you grab some plates out of that cabinet?”

Soon the table is set and Marcus is filling wine glasses as I dish up the food onto each plate. I return the pan to the stovetop and take a seat.

They tell me all about the auction, and I tell them about the girl’s day as we dine.

Marcus clears the dishes, and we walk my father to the door.

“Thank you for coming to my rescue today, Daddy.” I hug him.

“Looks like Marcus had already done the rescuing, but it was nice seeing you. Marcus, walk with me to the car.”

Marcus—

“Sure.” I release my arm from around Brandy and follow Gerald out the door.

“I wanted to say thanks for today. It was good getting some time, just the two of us. It gave me a chance to get to know you a little better. I can tell you’re a good guy, and Brandy obviously cares about you.”

“The feeling’s mutual, sir.”

“I see that. I want you to know I’m really trying here, but I’m having a hard time seeing past the motorcycle club thing. Your lifestyle could come back to hurt my girl. Any father would have concerns about it.”

“I understand what you’re saying.”

“But I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt. *For now.*”

“I appreciate it, sir. I know the club can be worrisome for some, but it’s a brotherhood. They’re my family, and families keep each other safe.”

“Well, I hope that’s true, because if Brandy gets hurt, I will hunt you down.” He locks eyes with me, and I nod. Then he climbs into the car and gives a salute.

As he backs out, I lift a hand in farewell, then shove my hands in my pockets and watch his taillights get smaller. It seems like a door has been cracked open for me, enough to at least give me a chance to prove myself. But it’s a one-shot deal. I fuck this up, I won’t get another one. It’s up to me to prove to her father that she’s safe with me.

I turn and head back inside, feeling optimistic. It was nice having this day with her father. Things are looking good.

As I walk through the door, I can tell the mood has changed. Brandy leans against the counter, arms crossed, looking ready for battle.

“You okay?” I ask, treading carefully into what feels like a trap.

“When were you going to tell me?” she snaps.

“Tell you what?” My mind races, searching for what the hell she could be talking about.

Her hands hit her hips, and her eyes burn like lasers into mine. “About you and Holt planning to beat the shit out of each other.”

My head drops back, and I exhale. *Damn those girls.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – TROUBLE BREWING

Marcus—

Brandy was pissed to learn about the fight, but I made it up to her—several times. She was sleeping soundly when I left her this morning. It was difficult to walk away when everything about her called out to me to climb back into the bed and pull her sexy body into my arms. But club duties were calling, too, and the club has to come first.

I lean against the bar, watching the flat screen on the wall. Either crime is going up in this town or the news is focusing on it more lately. Carjacking on Fourth Street, armed robbery on Emory, a truck full of immigrant women found at a gas station on West Avenue, homicide in the research district... I switch it off, tired of listening to it all.

The clubhouse has been quiet all morning, and I grow bored just sitting around. I decide to stretch my legs and walk to the gate to slide it open for the brothers who I know will start to straggle in now that it's early afternoon.

Shane is the first to arrive. As I head into the clubhouse, I see him pull in, driving his big, black crew-cab, his Harley shining in the truck bed. It's been giving him trouble all week. He must be planning to pull it apart and figure out the problem. Not long after he parks, he pops his head in the door. Scanning the room, he spots me.

"Prospect. Come here and give me a hand."

"Yes, sir." I follow him out and hop up in the bed to help him undo the straps. "Still givin' you trouble?"

Shane drops the tailgate, pulls a ramp out of the bed, and drops it into place. "Yeah, keeps misfiring. I'm going to pull a few things and see what she tells me."

I finish with the last strap, and Shane climbs up, throws his leg over the

seat, and carefully backs the bike down the ramp.

The low rumble of a bike vibrates off the brick building. We turn to see Crash ride through the gates.

He pulls in next to us and dismounts. “What are you doing here so early?”

Shane nods to his Harley. “Bike’s messed up. Gonna take a look at it.”

“Need a hand?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.”

Shane rolls the bike into the garage, and we follow.

“Well, you know what they say. Always check the plugs first,” Crash advises.

Shane nods. “Yep. Planned to.”

“How’s everything with Brianna and Danielle?” Crash asks as they get the bike up on a lift.

“Terrifying. Danielle has become quite a pistol, and Brianna does not take shit. So, it’s like constantly walking on eggshells.”

“Or through a minefield.”

Shades flips a bucket over next to his bike and sits on it. “Yeah, I mean, how’d she go from a little girl who thought I hung the moon to split personalities? Every time I see her, I don’t know if I’m getting Bruce Banner or the Hulk.”

Crash chuckles. “I remember Harley being like that. I asked her if she was going to put on a jacket one time, and she went nuclear. Must be puberty. Cole says his boys were just as bad, but I don’t believe it.”

Shane pulls the rubber boot off and pulls the plugs out one at a time, checking them.

On the first couple, we don’t see any buildup, discoloration, or corrosion that would mark them as bad.

“Could be your wiring or ignition coil,” Crash muses.

“Bingo,” Shane murmurs on the last plug. “This one’s bad.”

Twenty minutes of tinkering, and they figure out he’s also got a clogged air filter.

“Well, looks like I’m going to the parts store. You comin’?” he asks Crash.

“Yeah, I could go for a ride.”

“Hey, do you guys mind if I tag along? I want to change my oil, and I need to pick up a new filter,” I ask.

“The more the merrier,” Crash calls over his shoulder.

We head toward Shane’s truck.

Billy pulls in to take over, watching the clubhouse, and Shane pauses.

“Change of plans, boys. Let’s ride.” Shane lifts his chin to Billy and holds out his hand. “Gimme your keys.”

“What?” Billy asks, but already passing them over like an obedient prospect.

“I’m taking your bike to go grab a part for mine.”

“O-kay,” Billy replies, though I can tell he is not okay with this at all. Even so, he knows better than to refuse a brother.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want to take that beast of a truck either. Must cost a small fortune driving it. How many miles per gallon does that thing get you?” Crash lifts his chin toward Shane’s truck.

“Enough to get to your mama’s house,” Shane bites back with a grin as he straps on his helmet.

We make quick work of getting our items, and they’re tucked away in our saddle bags as we ride back, Crash and Shane in the lead.

When we turn in the industrial park, flashing red and blue lights greet us. We start to slow and move to the outside lane to pass, when we notice it’s not a car pulled over, but a Harley. Crash signals for us to pull behind the squad car. We come to a stop and see the rider face down in the gravel on the shoulder with a fat fuck of a cop pushing him into the ground. The rider turns his head at the rumbling of our bikes. It’s TJ.

Holy fuck.

“We got a problem here?” Crash calls, not moving off his bike.

The cop shifts to keep us in his line of view. “This doesn’t concern you boys. Be on your way.”

I can tell our presence unnerves him. After all, he's outnumbered four to one.

"You got one of our prospects on the ground, so I'd disagree. Why'd you stop him?" Crash rests one hand casually on his handlebars and the other on his knee. Years of being around these men have taught me this is a facade hiding the dangerous threat he really poses to this officer.

"I didn't do shit," TJ grinds out.

The officer seems to be weighing his odds. His radio goes off with another call, and he uses it as an excuse to back out of this situation. He dips his head. "Unit 54 responding." Apparently, he's decided he's not willing to risk tangling with the Dead. Smartest decision he's made all week. Though judging by the purple stain down the front of his uniform, he probably thinks the jelly filled donut he picked up at the quick stop was a pretty good decision, too.

He pushes off TJ and stands. "You boys better stay out of trouble, 'cause we're watching."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Shane snaps.

But the officer ignores him, scrambling into his car and hightailing it down the road.

Crash climbs from his bike and helps TJ to his feet. "You good?"

TJ brushes the dust off his jeans in angry movements. "Yeah, fucker pulled me over for no goddamn reason, and then had me step away from my bike. As soon as I did, the son-of-a-bitch threw me to the ground."

"He say anything?" Shane questions, staring in the direction the officer drove.

"Not really. Just called us thugs and said the Dead needed to be taken off the streets and put behind bars."

"Well, isn't that the fuckin' pot calling the kettle black?" Shane shakes his head. "Talk about thugs. They're corrupt as hell."

"Let's get to the club. Cole's gonna want to hear about this shit," Crash orders, and we all mount our bikes.

An hour later, TJ makes his way to the bar. He's been in church relaying what happened to Cole and all the club officers.

"What's going on?" I ask, sliding him a beer.

He takes a swig and glances to the hang-arounds and club girls at the pool table, then dips his head, keeping his voice low. "Dad is pissed. Wants to know why the cops are suddenly up our ass. Apparently, our man on the books isn't our man anymore. Won't even respond."

"Wow. I didn't know we had a guy on the inside."

"The MC's been paying off the dude for years. Suddenly something's changed. Seems like some back door shady shit may be going down. That's all I heard before I was sent out."

I take my own chug of beer as the door opens and the brothers troop out.

Crash beelines in our direction. "No more riding solo anytime you're within ten miles of the club. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," we both reply.

After he walks off, TJ and I exchange a look. Between the Death Heads and the cops, things are getting pretty intense.

CHAPTER NINETEEN – FIGHTING DIRTY

Marcus—

The cops have kept the club on edge all week. With all the police drama, I've had little time to think about the fight with Holt. Now it's looming over me. Even with the cops breathing down our throats, the club plans to throw a victory party tonight. They have no doubt I'll go in and kick Holt's ass. I fight for the club on a pretty regular basis, so I'm sure I have much more experience than Mr. Preppy.

Red Dog went with me on the beer run for the planned party, since we're still under orders to pair up when leaving or coming to the clubhouse. I follow behind his bike in the van, which is now loaded with cases of beer and bottles of liquor.

A squad car sits in a warehouse parking lot, watching the MC. Red Dog lifts one hand to flip them off as we go by. They flash their lights at him in warning, but Red Dog just laughs and keeps riding. It's a weird time. Usually, the Dead and local law enforcement get along fairly well. Clearly, something or someone has changed the atmosphere. Cole is itching to figure out who the fuck is behind this new problem of ours.

We roll to a stop, and Red Dog makes his way into the clubhouse while Billy and TJ come over to help me unload the cases.

"You ready for tonight?" Billy asks, sliding a case out of the back of the van and throwing it on his shoulder.

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, I know I can beat the shit out of him. Just hoping Brandy is okay with that."

"She'll have to be," TJ pipes in, grabbing a paper bag full of bottles. "Is she coming?"

"Yeah, I think she, Melissa, and Harley are all riding together."

That has Billy pausing long enough for me to notice.

"You talked to her since JP's birthday party?" We set the stuff down

behind the bar and head outside to get the rest.

He scoffs. “I’m trying to keep my distance. As impossible as that’s been, it’s the best thing for both of us right now.”

“Well, that’s the smartest decision you’ve made in a while.” TJ grabs a stack of two cases.

“You’re fucking hilarious,” Billy snaps back, slamming the van doors shut.

I grab his shoulder, so he looks at me. “Hey, just a little while longer, right?”

“I fuckin’ hope so.” His eyes hold mine a long second, and I see the misery there before he turns away, carrying the last of the booze inside.

I watch him go, knowing there’s no help for him right now. A prospect cannot get caught messing with the president’s daughter. Not if he wants to get the man’s vote and earn a patch on his back—and not if he wants to live to see tomorrow.

I shake it off. I can’t worry about my buddy tonight.

I’ve got a fight to win.

Brandy—

I stare at my reflection in the full-length mirror. Harley and Melissa had insisted I come to Harley’s house to get ready for the fight.

“Damn, you look hot,” Harley squeals.

I’m wearing the jumpsuit I bought the other day at the mall. The black lace bodice contrasts against my sun kissed skin, and it hugs my every curve, leaving nothing to the imagination.

“The smokey-eye makeup you did looks amazing,” Melissa adds.

“Marcus is going to flip. I hope you don’t end up being a distraction.” Harley giggles.

“Well, she looks like every man’s wet dream, so I imagine he’ll be at least a little distracted,” Melissa concedes.

“You’re one to talk.” I smirk. “You wouldn’t be wearing that outfit”—I gesture up and down at the minidress with a plunging neckline—“for Billy, now, would you?”

“I’m wearing it for me. If it drives him crazy, that’s just a bonus.” She winks. “And who are you wearing yours for?” Melissa points her mascara wand at Harley.

“Anyone smart enough to notice,” she states with a lift of her chin. “All right, you ready to go watch Marcus kick your ex-douchebag’s ass?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I admit.

“Let’s go then, ladies.” Harley twirls her finger in the air like she’s rounding us up.

I grab the cropped black leather biker jacket I ordered just for tonight.

“Love that jacket. It lets douchebag know which team you’re on.” Harley grins.

Melissa chuckles as we climb into Harley’s car. “She’s one of us now.”

Marcus—

The Academy is jam-packed with bikers and Ivy Leaguers. If I wasn’t about to be center stage, I’d find the contrast hilarious. The line in the sand couldn’t be more obvious—polos to the left, leather to the right.

The fight is scheduled to start in about thirty minutes. I scan the crowd, looking for Brandy. At that moment, the door opens, and the sun shines through, making it difficult to see more than the three shapes moving through the entrance. When it shuts, I see her, and she’s sex on a stick. The outfit she wears looks like lingerie on the top and drives my mind to filthy places. Melissa and Harley are both in sexy outfits, too, but my eyes don’t stray from Brandy. I take in every inch of her body, and I can’t help the low whistle that escapes my lips. Damn, my baby looks fine.

The leather jacket brings the corner of my mouth up. Leather to the right. Her message couldn’t be clearer if she put a damn sign around her neck.

There should be no doubt in Holt's mind just who she's here to see win.

Billy comes up behind me, smacking my back in comradery. "Ready to knock this piece-of-shit down?"

"Yeah." I barely divert my attention from Brandy.

"What's got you distracted?" he questions.

"Brandy." I lift my chin. "Looks like Melissa may be trying to do the same with you."

Billy twists, glancing over his shoulder.

"Jesus Christ." The words hiss out of his teeth in barely a whisper. "I don't know how much more of this temptation I can take. Something's gotta give, or I'm gonna snap."

"You think she realizes she's playing with fire?"

"She's going to sign my death warrant. Her dad's going to bury me six feet under. I swear to God, Marcus, if she keeps tempting me like this, one of these days I'm going to act. Then God help us both."

"Hold it together." I tap him on the chest. He spins and goes in the opposite direction from the girls as if he's trying to put as much distance between him and Melissa as he can. God help him, because I don't think he has much restraint left.

Brandy makes her way to me.

"Marcus," her sultry voice purrs.

"Babe. You're making me want to skip this fight and ride away with you so I can do unspeakable things to that body." I lay my hands on her hips and pull her against me, my eyes dropping to her lace covered tits.

"I think you'd regret that."

"The hell I would," I practically growl.

She lets out a deep, sexy chuckle that gets my dick hard. "Well, I think the club would flay your ass, and I'm kind of partial to it. So..."

"Oh, you are, are you?"

"I am, but I can think of a reward for winning that you'll like."

"If it doesn't involve your mouth around my dick, then I don't want it."

"I think that could be arranged."

I cock a brow. "Oh, really?"

Before we can continue, Crash pushes his way to my side. “Time to get ready.”

“Yes, sir.”

I pull Brandy’s face to mine, kissing her passionately, then press my forehead to hers. “Wish me luck.”

She gives me another quick kiss. “You don’t need luck, Marcus. You’ve got this.”

Her faith in me swells my chest and warms my heart.

Crash slaps my bicep. “Come on.”

I drop my hands from her face and follow my sponsor through the crowd. Brandy still stands where I left her, looking slightly dazed, but I hear her breathless voice.

“You’ve got this, baby. You’ve got this.”

I stand in my black shorts, while Crash slides my grappling gloves on.

“All right, I spoke to the refs. The fight is standard rules. Five-minute rounds with a minute rest between each one. Three rounds and ten points per round.”

“Got it.”

“You ready, prospect?”

“Yep.”

We make our way to the cage. The brothers pat me on the back as I pass, cheering me on. It’s the closest I’ve ever come to feeling like I have a family supporting me, the closest I’ve ever come to feeling like a brother.

Brandy stands at the very end. She grabs my face in her hands and kisses me to the hoots and hollers of the crowd.

“Go fucking win,” she urges, still holding my head in her hands, our foreheads pressed together.

I grin, loving this little badass. “Yes, ma’am.”

We separate, and I climb into the cage, my focus zeroing in on Holt.

He leans against the other side, looking casual, almost bored, but his eyes

are seething. Probably from the kiss he just witnessed.

Take that, asshole.

“Everyone set on the rules?” the ref asks.

We both nod.

I slip my mouth guard in and bounce back and forth, trying to get my blood flowing and my heart warmed up.

“I want a nice clean fight, understood?” the ref calls out, his arms outstretched between us as we size each other up from across the octagon. “Let’s go!” he shouts and backs out of the way.

We move toward each other, two predators ready to attack.

Brandy—

I watch the two approach each other, feeling like I’m witnessing a slow-motion car wreck I can’t seem to turn away from.

I study the two men as they circle each other, bouncing on their feet and jabbing at their opponent. They’re about the same size. Holt has maybe an inch or two and his build is lean, but his muscles are focused in his arms. Whereas Marcus’s muscles are evident from his arms to his back and shoulders and even his thighs. No skipping leg day for him.

The sound of the blow Marcus gives Holt snaps me out of my thoughts. His fist connects with Holt’s cheekbone. Holt swings a punch at Marcus, but he blocks it and kicks Holt in the chest, knocking him back a step. As they continue to attack, it’s clear Marcus has the upper hand. Holt throws another wide swing, and as Marcus goes to block it, Holt jabs him in the throat. Marcus sets a knee down, gasping for breath.

“Where’s the call, ref?” Cole yells.

Holt takes the opportunity to knee Marcus in the head.

More shouts from the crowd.

“That was illegal!” Crash roars.

“What’s going on?” I cry out.

“The jab to the neck was questionable, and the knee to the downed fighter was straight up illegal, but nothing’s being called,” Crash yells over the noise.

Marcus seems to realize no fouls are being called and backs out of striking distance, quickly regaining his bearings. Holt pursues.

Once Holt steps close enough, Marcus bursts forward, knocking him to the ground. They become a tangle of bodies, and it’s hard for me to tell which body part belongs to whom.

The brothers cheer as Marcus maneuvers Holt into a chokehold, but Holt holds out until the round ends.

Each man moves to a corner. Crash climbs in and towels Marcus off. I see him rub petroleum around his eyes and across the bridge of his nose. He squirts some water in his mouth. The crowd erupts in noise. The brothers are furious, while the other side is cheering. Crash climbs out and moves to stand between me and Cole.

“What’d you tell him?” Cole asks.

“That the ref and judges aren’t on his side, so he better go for the knockout.” Crash shakes his head. “He was the obvious winner. I cannot believe they gave the win to Holt.”

Cole’s eyes narrow. “I can. Money buys a lot of things, including people.”

“What’s going on?” I ask, worried. The ref yells to start the next round.

“Clearly, some people have been bought to make sure Holt wins.”

“Holt wouldn’t do that,” I whisper in disbelief.

“You sure about that?” Crash asks, pinning me with a look, then motions to the cage. “Well, someone did. Because they’re not calling shit, and even with the fouls, Marcus bested that asshole, but they gave the win to Holt. It’s laughable how rigged this fight is.”

My eyes widen. He’s right—about all of it. I turn to the fight in progress, seeing—perhaps for the first time—just how crooked men of Holt’s status can be. I glance around at his polo-wearing friends. They’re all smirking, like they share a sick joke.

The sound of fists hitting flesh draws my attention to the cage.

Holt jabs Marcus in the side. Marcus returns the favor with a kick to Holt's ribs. Marcus then gets two quick jabs in Holt's face. I can see the swelling from here. Suddenly, they are tangled up again. Marcus puts Holt in a chokehold, but there's plenty of time left in the round. The place erupts, the brothers cheering him on, but soon the cheering turns to roars of disapproval.

Holt grabs Marcus, jabbing him in the eye.

Marcus immediately releases his hold.

"Call something! That's an eye gouge," Cole roars.

Marcus holds his palm to his left eye. Holt charges at him, but Marcus dodges, giving two right jabs to Holt's rib cage. Holt kicks out and connects with Marcus's left side.

They grab at each other's necks. I can't really tell what's going on, but then I see Marcus flip Holt over. Suddenly they're on the ground, and Marcus has Holt's arm outstretched and pulled back.

"He's got him!" Crash cheers.

"What?" I ask excitedly.

"He's got him in an arm bar. Holt's about to tap out or get a broken arm."

Cheers erupt as Holt clearly taps out.

With a wave of the ref's arm, the round goes to Marcus.

"Yeah!" I cheer.

When Marcus stands, his eye is much more visible. It's swollen, and the part I can see is so red that no white of the eye can be seen.

"Oh my God," I gasp.

Crash turns to me before he climbs in to the octagon to act as cornerman. "The ref has to start calling these fouls, or he's going to get seriously hurt."

"He already looks pretty hurt to me," Melissa whispers from my other side.

Fear tightens my chest. Marcus could get seriously hurt over me, and he already has me. I know his pride won't let him back down, even if he is climbing an uphill battle against a bunch of cheating assholes.

CHAPTER TWENTY – DOWN FOR THE COUNT

Brandy—

I still can't believe Holt would stoop so low as to cheat to win the fight, but the evidence is right in front of me. Crash holds a wet towel to Marcus' swollen eye, whispering hurriedly to him.

"Fuck this. This cheating bullshit ends now." Cole moves toward where the judges sit at a long folding table.

The ref is leaned over, whispering to them and seems taken aback when Cole smacks him on the back and says something to the group. We are too far to hear what's said, but I don't miss the wide eyes or the blood that drains from the judges' faces.

Cole and Crash make it back to where I stand at about the same time.

"God, I hope Marcus can end this quick, or he's going to get seriously injured." Crash runs his hand along his jawline.

"Shouldn't be a problem anymore." Cole smirks.

Crash furrows his brow.

"Why not?" Crash and I chime together.

"I told them if they didn't call this fight fair, they'd be trying to walk out of here on two broken legs. I let 'em know my men aren't afraid to take the trash out even though those pricks"—he gestures to the sea of polos on the other side of the cage—"thought they could buy it. Then I heard the ref tell the others when he agreed to this, he didn't know the other fighter was in a motorcycle club, and fifty thousand wasn't enough to risk pissing the club off."

"Oh, thank God." Before I think better of it, I hug Cole in a tight squeeze. "Thank you."

He seems surprised but gives me an unsure pat on the back. "Sure thing,

darlin. Can't have one of our boys getting injured by some cheating scum."

The fight starts up again, and the men dance around each other, giving quick jabs.

Holt kicks out, landing a powerful blow to Marcus' chest, knocking him backward.

Marcus steps forward again, dodging another blow. He ducks and jabs Holt twice in his ribs and then pops another one across his jaw. Holt staggers back, and Marcus advances, keeping at him. With a powerful kick, Marcus knocks Holt to the ground, and is on him before he has a chance to get up. They're a tangle of body parts again, each grappling to put the other in a hold. Holt grabs Marcus's wavy curls and yanks his head back.

The ref immediately calls the foul.

Holt stops and looks at the ref questioningly, then turns and glances to his corner man, who shakes his head and shrugs. Looks like they just figured out this game's being called fair now.

Marcus moves forward. He lands punch after punch, barely taking any in return. He spins and kicks, connecting with Holt's side. Holt swings a punch back. Marcus pounds his fist into Holt's face. The force sends him to the ground, where he goes still. Marcus moves forward to continue his assault, but the ref waves his arms and ends the match.

"He knocked Holt out cold!" I blurt.

Cheers erupt from the biker side.

Holt stirs, and his cornerman comes to his aide.

I run past the crowd and climb into the octagon. Wrapping my arms around Marcus's waist, I kiss him to roars from the crowd.

He pulls his head back and stares into my eyes. "There's my sexy baby."

I don't care if we have an audience. All I want to do is kiss away every bruise, every hurt that cheating piece of shit placed on Marcus. I pull his face to mine, kissing him passionately. Then I separate and gently tilt his head so I can inspect the damage done. Close up I can see the blood streaking out from his iris and almost completely covering his whites. But he doesn't look like some injured lamb. If anything, he looks more dangerous. There's also some bruising along his cheekbone, which I lightly kiss.

“Mmm, babe. Keep that up, and I’ll take you right here, right now,” he growls.

I give him a tempting smile.

His eyes shift over my shoulder. I turn to see Holt approaching.

“Good match.” He reaches out as if he plans to shake hands. Before he gets close enough, I slap him across the face with all the force I can muster. He twists slowly, his eyes turning black in anger, his cheek already reddening into my handprint.

“You cheating piece of shit. You could have seriously hurt him,” I yell.

Holt, in a blind rage, rears his hand back. I raise my arm to block the hit I know is coming, but Marcus moves with lightning speed, grabbing him by the throat and throwing him to the ground.

“Don’t you dare threaten Brandy,” he grits out between his teeth.

Holt gasps for breath and claws at Marcus’ grip.

“You ever look at her again, and I will end you.”

Holt’s face turns purple as he continues to fight for air.

I’m about to step in, afraid Marcus will kill him right here in front of everyone, but he lets Holt go and stands. Then he looks down at him with disgust and spits on his face.

I grab Marcus’s hand and pull him to the edge of the cage. That’s when I notice several brothers have halfway crawled into the ring. It dawns on me they were moving in to attack when Holt threatened me. Their desire to protect me warms my heart. I feel like they view me as one of their own. I smile thanks at them as we climb out. They nod in return.

We move farther from the cage and the crowd, and Marcus pulls me to a back room.

“Give it to him good, Brandy!” Cole yells from across the room to the sounds of the brothers’ cheering.

Marcus shuts the door behind us, stifling the sound. Looking around the room, I see his clothing neatly folded on a table and realize we’re in the locker room.

He takes my face and pulls my lips to his, kissing me while his hands roam my body.

“Every punch, every blow, was worth it. You’re worth fighting for,” he whispers against my neck.

“I want to kiss away all your bruises,” I murmur.

His hands slide to my breasts, squeezing. “Oh, baby, I want you so bad.”

“I know. Seeing you all hot and sweaty and fighting for me.” I kiss up his neck. “Made me want to strip right there for you.”

“Damn, girl.” He grabs my ass and lifts me, and my legs wrap around his waist as he backs me against a wall.

His mouth moves down the deep plunging neckline of my jumper to my voluptuous cleavage, when suddenly there’s a loud banging on the locker room door.

Marcus lowers me to the ground. “Come on.” He tugs my hand. “Let’s go somewhere more private.”

He quickly changes his clothes, and we move through the door.

Marcus—

Brandy and I walk out, hand-in-hand, to my bike.

The other brothers sit on their motorcycles, waiting. Probably making sure Holt and his cronies don’t pull any shit.

“Man, Marcus, that was quick. Did you even make her orgasm?” Green teases.

Brandy turns beet red, and I squeeze her hand.

“I’m headed to a bed.” I grin back.

Crash crushes his cigarette butt under his boot. “Don’t forget about our victory party.”

“We’ll be there. Just a little detour.” I tug Brandy’s hand, leading her the rest of the way to my bike, and hand her a helmet.

I coast up to the small house I rent. I'm thankful it's surrounded by student housing, because no one bothers me or cares if I roll in on my bike in the early hours.

"So, this is your place." Brandy eyes my home as we dismount.

"Yeah, it's no mansion," I mumble, grabbing her hand and trying to gauge what she thinks.

I unlock the door open, and we enter the living room.

Brandy looks around. "It's nice. I like it."

"Well, it's clean at least."

"It's perfect. Well, almost. I'm not seeing a bed."

I shake my head, grinning, and point to the right. "It's right through that doorway."

"Good. Time to play nurse." She grabs a fistful of my t-shirt and pulls me behind her, leading me to the bedroom. Once we're across the threshold, she pushes me down on the bed and moves toward me.

"No, no, no." I wag my finger at her. "I want my sexy nurse in her bra and panties. Strip for me."

She reaches behind her for the fastening. Then she twists so her back and that fine ass are aimed at me. She slowly slides the zipper down, revealing a strapless black bra. Pulling the zipper even lower, she reveals a barely-there thong. Just a couple of strings and her sexy ass cheeks waiting to be slapped. She slides the straps of her jumpsuit down and then bends forward, keeping her ass in the air for my viewing pleasure as she slides her outfit the rest of the way off. She rises slowly and twirls, showing the deep plunging v of her bra and her hardly covered pussy just begging for my tongue.

"Fuck," I hiss out, grabbing my throbbing dick in my hands as it pushes against my pants.

Brandy spreads my legs wide. Then she proceeds to give me a lap dance, rubbing against me and shaking her ass.

She turns and shoves my face into her cleavage while she grabs the hem of my t-shirt. It slides up my back and over my head in one fluid movement. Dropping to her knees, she unbuckles my pants.

"You look so beautiful on your knees, ready to please me."

Kissing every bruise and mark on my body, she drives me wild.

“I’m sorry Holt cheated. You would have been barely scathed if he hadn’t paid off everyone.”

“I don’t want to talk about that asshole. I want to talk about how wet your pussy is for me.”

“So wet,” she purrs.

I pull her up and slip my fingers under her thong. I thread my fingers in her curls and then slide my hand farther to feel her heat. My fingers easily glide between her wet lips. “Fuck, you’re dripping.”

“Let me show you how bad I want you.” She straddles me, and I love how eager she is for me. She unhooks her bra and tosses it. Her breasts bounce free, nipples already erect, and my mouth waters in anticipation. She dips her head, kissing and licking each mark left on my skin from the fight.

I groan at the pleasure.

She travels lower and lower, then moves off me to pull my pants and boxers down, freeing my erection. It stands at attention, begging for her touch. Her head drops, and she gives me a long lick from hilt to tip. My dick jerks with the sensation, and a groan rumbles up from my chest. God, I want her mouth around me. I cup her face, nudging her and urging her on.

“Suck it,” I growl.

She doesn’t make me wait, taking the whole length into her mouth and sucking hard.

“Fuck, yes, baby.” Watching her take me is erotic as hell. She goes down on me until I explode in her mouth. She doesn’t disappoint me, swallowing and licking every drop.

“Holy shit, that was good.”

“I aim to please.”

I grin, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “What did I do to deserve this?”

“You fought for me. You stood up for me.”

Our eyes stay connected, communicating so many unspoken emotions.

She stands and slowly peels her thong down, revealing every inch of her naked body to me. Her long loose curls fall around her shoulders, looking

like my own personal Aphrodite. She crawls up and straddles my hips.

“I want you to sit on my face.”

“What?” she whispers.

“I want you spread wide on top of my face, so I can lick your pussy until you’re riding my mouth, trembling with your need for release. Then I get to watch those tits bounce while I send you over the edge.”

She whimpers. “Fuck, I didn’t know I wanted that, but I do now.”

“Good. Get up here, woman,” I order.

Like a good girl, she doesn’t hesitate, crawling up and bracing her knees on either side of my head and her palms on the wall behind me. I grab her ass, pulling her pussy to me, and she gasps at the way I take control, putting her right where I want her.

I lick and suck my fill until her boobs are bouncing, just like I said. She moans and writhes. The corners of my lips turn up. I’m loving the way she responds with no inhibitions.

“Oh, Marcus,” she pants. “More.”

I give my girl what she wants. I’ll always give her what she wants. I sweep my tongue across her clit again and again, then reach up and pinch one nipple, sending her over the edge. She shudders in my arms and moans my name as her liquid heat floods across my tongue.

“Damn, I like my name on your lips and your taste on my tongue.”

I roll her onto her back and climb on top, my dick more than ready to sink into her wet pussy.

Stretching over her to my side table drawer, I nab a condom and slide it on. The need for her is urgent, clawing at my belly. When I thrust inside her, I’m ready to take her hard. I plant my fists on the bed near her head and stare into her eyes. “I want it hard and fast. You good with that, Brandy?”

“Yes, please, Marcus. Take me hard.”

I slam into her, thrusting over and over again, reaching a hand between us to strum her clit with my thumb until she’s climbing toward climax again. But I want this to last, so I slow down, pulling her back.

“Keep going. Harder,” she begs.

“Say you want me.”

“I want you.”

“How bad?”

“I want you so fucking bad,” she moans.

“Who do you want?”

“I want you.”

“Say my name, Brandy.”

“I want you, Marcus, so fucking bad. Take me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her fingers dig into my shoulders, urging me on.

I thrust hard until she screams my name.

“Oh, Marcus. Yes, yes, yes!”

I groan as I explode, and it’s so damn good I don’t want this feeling to end. I’m breathing heavily when I finally collapse on top of her. “That was fucking amazing.”

“It was.” She snuggles up to me.

My breath saws out of me, my chest slick with sweat. “Damn, I don’t want to go to the party. I just want to lie here with your legs wrapped around me.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I huff out a laugh. “If we don’t get going soon, that’s what I’m going to do. But there’ll be hell to pay.”

“We better go then. I don’t want to be responsible for you getting an ass kicking.”

I chuckle. “I don’t know. You did make a pretty damn good nurse.”

Brandy clings to my back as I drive through the clubhouse gate.

Dismounting, I grab her hand, and we walk to the door. When I push it open, cheers greet us. I can’t help but feel pride at representing the club well.

“Glad you beat his ass.” Red Dog slaps me on the back. “You’d have had another beat down waiting on you if you hadn’t.”

“Thanks, Red Dog.”

“Way to pull it off, prospect,” Shane calls from the pool table, tipping his beer toward me.

I continue to get pats on the back and congratulations all the way to the bar.

Billy slides two longnecks to me, ice dripping down the sides. “Good job, man.” Billy’s eyes shift to Brandy. “That was some chicken-shit stunt your ex pulled.”

“I know,” she says, solemnly.

Billy grins. “But I did enjoy watching you bitch slap him.”

She smiles big. “Yeah, I enjoyed that part, too.”

“Thought I was going to have to bail you out of jail after you choke slammed the motherfucker to the ground,” Crash adds, coming up behind us.

“Yeah, thought we were going to witness a murder.” Cole chuckles, taking the stool next to us.

Crash looks at me with all seriousness. “Man, for real. You did me and the club proud tonight. With the shit that prick pulled, I was getting concerned.”

Green treks over with his ol’ lady, Sara, and lifts his chin at my face. “Prospect, your eye looks like shit.”

“Yeah.” I rub my palm over it. “Hurts like a bitch, too.”

“Do you need some ice?” Sara asks.

I pull Brandy against me. “I’m all right. Brandy took good care of me.”

“Oh, so you’re Brandy. I’m Sara.” Sara splays her hand over her chest.

“Shit, sorry. I forgot you two hadn’t met.” I twist. “Brandy, Sara’s the one who helped me get the purse. She works at the San Francisco Opera House.”

Brandy perks up. “Oh, my God. How exciting.”

I turn to Sara. “Brandy’s writing an opera now. She recently graduated and wants to be a librettist.”

Brandy smiles.

“What?” I question. “Did I say it wrong?”

“Nope. I’m just surprised you remembered that word.”

“I remember everything you say,” I whisper.

“Well, I want to hear all about it,” Sara chirps. “Let’s go find a spot, and you can tell me what you have so far.”

Brandy looks over at me as if asking if it’s okay. I give her an encouraging smile.

“Okay. Let’s do that.”

I watch the two of them walk outside, happy at the excitement on my girl’s face.

About an hour later, Brandy sidles up to me.

“How’d it go?” I ask.

“Great.” She beams with delight. “Sara knows someone who may be looking for an intern. She’s going to put in a good word, and she loves the idea behind my opera.”

She’s barely containing herself from bouncing up and down like a kid on Christmas morning, and I love every minute of it.

“That’s amazing. I’m so proud of you. You’re really making your dream come true.”

“Thank you for supporting and believing in me.” She kisses me on the cheek.

“All right, all right, you lovebirds. Do I need to give you the keys to my room again?” Crash teases.

I look over at her and waggle my brows.

She slaps at me playfully. “I think we can control ourselves until we make it home.”

“If you say so.” Crash jingles the keys in his pocket, knowing he’s tormenting me.

We continue drinking, playing pool, and shooting the shit until the wee hours of the morning when half the brothers have already gone home.

“Hey Crash, if you don’t need me, mind if Brandy and I head out?”

“Yeah, prospect. You can take off; you earned it.” He glances at his ringing phone and holds it to his ear as we turn to leave. “Hey, what’s up?”

I feel a hand grab my shoulder and turn to see Crash frowning.

“What do you mean he hasn’t made it home? Didn’t he ride with you?”
His eyes connect with mine. “Well, shit. Both of them? Okay, calm down.
We’ll find them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – UP ALL NIGHT

Marcus—

Crash hangs up the phone. “Sorry, man, but it looks like I’ve got a job for you after all.”

“What’s up?” I stand ready to do the club’s bidding.

“Mary called. Apparently, Red Dog never made it home, and neither he or Billy are answering their phones.”

“Could be crashed at Billy’s, but it’s weird Billy wouldn’t answer. He knows he’s on call twenty-four-seven. He’d never be far from his phone.”

“Yeah.” Crash rubs his hand down his face. “Hey, can you swing by Billy’s place and see if they are there? I’m going to let Shannon know I’ve got to go ride around looking for their dumb asses. I hope Harley hasn’t left yet. She can take her momma home.”

I glance over at Brandy, not sure what to do, but thankfully Crash notices. “Hey Brandy, why don’t you ride back to my house with the girls, too? I’m afraid Marcus, TJ, and I are going to be out for a while.”

“Oh, yeah, of course,” she chimes, releasing my hand.

I give her a quick kiss, and she follows behind Crash to find Shannon.

Pulling out, I try to think which way Billy usually takes to his apartment. I decide to take the main drag.

I drive slowly, watching for any tire marks suggesting a bike may have veered off into a ditch. When I roll into the parking lot, I scan the spaces, searching for either of their bikes. I don’t see them but decide to run upstairs and bang on the door, anyway.

I knock loudly, but don’t hear any movement on the other side. I knock one more time for good measure, but I don’t want to make too much noise. We don’t need the cops showing up. They’ve been up our ass enough.

When there’s still no answer, I slide my phone from my pocket and try Billy. He doesn’t pick up. I scroll through to Red Dog. Same thing. Then I

dial Crash.

“Hey, find them?” he asks as soon as he picks up.

“No one seems to be here.” I respond into the phone as I look up and down the hallways, making sure no nosy neighbors have roused.

“Goddamn it. All right, I swung through a couple of gas stations. I’m about to pull back on the road and come your way. Go ahead and call Mary. See if she’s found anything out.”

“Yes, sir.” He clicks off the phone.

I dial Mary, hoping she’s heard something, because I can only imagine the wreck she’s going to be with both her husband and son missing.

“Hello?” Mary answers, her voice full of hope.

“Mary, this is Marcus. Checking to see if you’ve heard from them.”

“No, nothing.” Her worry seeps through the phone.

“All right.” My eyes scan the lot and street. “When’s the last time you saw them?”

“When we left. I drove the truck home, and Red Dog was going to ride alongside Billy.”

“What time do you think that was?” I pat my leg, uncomfortable with the barely held together voice on the other end.

“Um, we left right around one a.m.”

I glance at my phone to see it’s just after four. “So, you haven’t seen them in three hours.” I say it more to myself, trying to work out timelines in my head, then actually expecting a response.

“Yes, and Billy only lives twenty minutes from us. Please find them.” Her voice cracks at the end.

“I’m sure they’re okay,” I say, but not really sure it’s true. “We’re going to go check some of their usual places. Maybe they’re just drinking and lost track of time or passed out or something.”

“Yeah, okay.”

I can tell she believes the bullshit excuse as much as I do.

There’s a faint rumbling in the distance, and I walk over to the railing of the landing to get a better look. It’s a lone rider, but I can’t see who just yet. As the bike turns into the complex, I see it’s Crash.

“Hey, Mary, Crash just got here. We’re getting a game plan. Call if you hear from them, and we’ll do the same.”

“Okay.” She clicks the phone off.

“Mary hear anything?” Crash calls as he pulls off his helmet.

“No, nothing. Said last time she saw them was about three hours ago.” I jog down the steps.

“All right, let’s start checking bars. I sent TJ to Sonny’s to see if they continued the party there.”

“Okay.” I start to walk to my bike and then turn. “Hey, Crash?”

“Yeah?” He responds, strapping his helmet back on his head.

“Do you think someone ought to check the hospital? I mean, if they had a wreck hours ago, it’d probably already have been cleared, and we’d never notice.”

“Shit. Yeah, I’ll head there. You check bars.”

“Yes, sir.”

We’ve ridden to every place we can think of and still no sign of them.

Now we’re all standing around a gas station, trying to decide where to go next.

The sun is cresting over the horizon and motorists are making their morning commutes.

“Where to now?” I glance at Crash.

He rubs his jaw. “I don’t—“ His phone cuts off his words.

“Hey, Prez,” he answers. “They what? How the hell did that happen?” He pauses to listen to the other end. Then he rubs his hand down his face. “Fuck. Yeah, okay. I’ll head that way.” He nods to the phone as if Cole can see him. “I’ll send the prospects. Be back soon.”

He hangs up and looks at us.

“Good news and bad news.”

We stand, waiting for him to drop the bomb.

“What’s the good news?” I ask.

“We found them.”

“Great. So, what’s the bad news?” TJ asks.

“They’re in lockup.”

TJ and I exchange a look before I turn to Crash. “What the fuck for?”

“They got arrested for a drive-by shooting.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO – JAIL

Billy—

The metal doors slam shut behind us as we are placed in the jail cell at county lockup. I've never been to prison before, and though this isn't quite the real deal, the cinderblock walls and lack of windows still give off the same foreboding feeling. I'm surprised they put us in the same cell. They must be full.

"I cannot believe you made me call Mom." I shake my head at my father and sit on the edge of what they claim to be a bed.

"I had to call the club lawyer," he defends.

"Bullshit. You just didn't want to tell Mom you got arrested."

"Would you?"

"I literally just did." I gesture in the direction of the calling area from which we just returned.

"What did she say, anyway?" My dad turns to look at me, his finger twisting around his beard. It's a nervous habit of his. Funny how cops slamming us to the ground and dragging us to jail doesn't make the man nervous, but telling his barely five-foot wife he's been arrested makes him run for the hills.

"She sounded relieved we weren't in a ditch on the side of the road." I lift my eyes to my Dad. "But when I told her we were facing criminal homicide charges, she went straight nuclear. She started yelling in mandarin, and she called you a few choice words."

"What? Why me?"

"Something about getting her baby boy arrested and being too chickenshit to call her yourself."

My dad scrubs a hand down his face. "Well, I can't wait to go home to that fight. Think if I stay locked up long enough, she'll be so excited to see me she forgets to be mad?"

“Not a chance in hell.” I chuckle.

“Well, damn, there goes that plan.”

“So, what’d the lawyer say?” I’m eager to get out of this eight by ten box.

“She’s on her way, and don’t say shit to nobody.”

Marcus—

We’ve been waiting for a few hours now, taking over the courthouse parking lot. Dirty looks are thrown our way by the prosecutors as they enter the courtroom. I’m not sure if it’s because we’re an MC or because we’ve taken so many parking spots. My guess is it’s a bit of both. There’s quite a crowd of us waiting out here now. Cole went inside with the lawyer to be in the courtroom, but the rest of the club is hanging out in the lot across from the courtroom steps. Give us a grill, and we’d practically be a tailgate party.

The doors finally swing open; Cole and Dana, the club’s lawyer, descend the steps. She’s mid-thirties with long dark hair and a no-nonsense look on her pretty face.

“What’s the news?” Crash calls across the road as they cross it.

“Yeah, where are our boys?” Green adds.

“They’re going through processing to be released. Should be out any minute.”

Cole shakes hands with Dana. “Thanks for all you do.”

“Of course.” She waves him off. “Just be warned, that prosecutor filed charges knowing good and well there’s no way logistically it could have been them. Thank God they got a fair judge who dismissed this joke of a case. Next time, you may not be as lucky.”

“Next time?” Cole tilts his head to the side.

“Yes. It appears the prosecutor has it out for motorcycle clubs.”

“Well, we’ll be sure to add them to the list.” Cole shakes his head.

“There are my boys,” Green shouts, a wide toothy grin across his face as Red Dog and Billy make their way across the street. “My baby prospect is

growing up so fast. Already been arrested.” Green pulls a white rag from his pocket and pretends to dab at his eyes. “So proud, so proud.”

Billy accepts a slug in the shoulder from him.

“All right, all right. Knock it off,” Red Dog calls. “Thanks again, Dana.” He shakes her hand, and then moves toward the rest of the brothers. “Let’s go. I’m ready for a cold beer.”

Cole nods, throwing his leg over his bike. “Let’s roll, boys.”

Red Dog gets a few pats from the brothers and climbs on his bike. Twisting the throttle, it rumbles to life. We roar out of the lot, and Red Dog flips off the courthouse as he rides past. Billy, TJ, and I fall in at the back of the pack where the prospects ride, and we head to the clubhouse.

The men immediately go into church once we arrive. Billy is called in, too.

A while later, the door opens, drawing mine and TJ’s attention. Billy exits and makes his way to us.

“So, what was it like?” TJ asks as he wipes the counter.

“A concrete box with nothing to do but count the cinderblocks.”

“What the hell happened, anyway?” I ask, still confused at why they were suspects.

Billy grimaces. “Dude, I forgot how bad your eye looks.”

“Yeah, well, you should see the other guy,” I snap.

That garners a chuckle, something I wasn’t sure Billy was capable of anymore. “True that.” He dips his head to light a cigarette, then blows the smoke toward the ceiling. “We were just riding down the road when three squad cars appeared out of the woodwork. It was like they were waiting for us. We pulled over, and before we could even ask what we’d been stopped for, they ripped us from the bikes and had us face down in the gravel. Said we were being arrested for some drive-by that happened downtown.”

“That’s fucked up.” I slide Billy a beer.

“Yeah, but the charges were so bogus. We didn’t have the right weapon. We were picked up so far away from it, we’d have never had time to do it,

and not to mention at the time it took place, we had about sixty witnesses to say we were at the club party. Diana got the judge to dismiss the case. So that's that, all done. No record or anything."

"Man, you lucked out with that. Well, I'm exhausted." I stretch, and a big yawn escapes my mouth.

"I'm beat, too. We drove all over, looking for your asses. Haven't slept yet," TJ agrees.

"I'm gonna go find an empty room to crash for an hour or two." I slap Billy on the shoulder as I stand. "Get some rest."

"Thanks."

Sliding my phone from my pocket, I wander down the hallway and send a quick text to Brandy.

MARCUS: HEY BABE, ARE YOU STILL AT HARLEY'S?

BRANDY: NO. WE GRABBED BREAKFAST AND THEN I HEADED HOME. I HAVE TO WORK AT 5. ANY NEWS ON BILLY AND RED DOG?

MARCUS: YEAH. THEY WERE IN JAIL, BUT THE CHARGES WERE DISMISSED BECAUSE THEY WERE ALL A LOAD OF SHIT.

BRANDY: OMG I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT! GLAD THEY'RE OUT. SEE YOU SOMETIME TOMORROW?

MARCUS: BET YOUR SWEET ASS.

BRANDY: I'LL BE WAITING FOR YOU. WINK. WINK.

Smiling, I set the phone on a side table and pass out on a bed.

Later that evening, we all sit around the clubhouse, drinking and talking about the excitement over the weekend. No one seems to know why the police have it out for us. That is, until the nightly news draws our attention.

“Reported here first on News 18 from the steps of the state capital earlier this afternoon, State Assemblyman Mickey Patterson spoke of his recently passed crime bill.”

“I hate that guy. Turn that shit off,” Green calls to me from the bar.

“Today is more proof that my crime bill is working as intended. We arrested two one-percent motorcycle club members in connection with a drive-by shooting.”

My hand stills on the remote control.

Red Dog stands from his stool. “Turn that up.”

I press up on the volume until everyone’s attention is on the screen.

“These motorcycle clubs like to pretend they are beneficial to the community and businesses, but all they bring is violence and crime. We need to rid our streets of these criminals, and that’s just what my bill is doing.”

“Is he kidding with this bullshit?” Red Dog roars.

“None of the charges stuck,” Shane reiterates Red Dog’s point.

“Doesn’t matter; he can claim he’s hard on crime, even if none of this shit sticks,” I mutter.

“He’s not even our fuckin’ rep. He’s from San Francisco. Why the hell’s he messin’ in San Jose?” Cole slams his fist onto the bar top.

“Seems like he’s using the raid for political capital,” Crash chimes in.

“Yeah, he’s probably aiming for higher office, like Senator or some shit,” I agree.

“Well, if you want to move to higher office in this club, you better tail this asshole and find some shit,” Cole barks at me, pointing at the screen. “I want to know everything there is to know about this guy. I want to know his every move. You better be able to tell me how many times he shits a day. That’s how closely I want you following him. Because there’s one thing I know. Men in his position never have clean hands. I’ll bet he has a mistress or an addiction or some weird fetish we can use to bend him to our will.”

“Yes, sir. When do you want me to start?”

“Now. Move your ass.”

“You got it.”

I move to the door and out to my bike, shooting a quick text to Brandy before I pull out.

MARCUS: LOOKS LIKE I'M GOING TO HAVE TO TAKE A RAIN CHECK FOR THE NEXT LITTLE BIT. CLUB BUSINESS.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE – RUBBER DUCKY

Marcus—

It's been five damn days, and I've gotten nothing on this asshole, except that he's predictable. It seems State Assemblyman Mickey Patterson is a creature of habit. He leaves the house for a run at 5:30, is home forty-five minutes later for a shower, and then oatmeal and black coffee on the front porch. He arrives at the capital by 7:45, then lunch at Rosco's at noon, where he always sits by the window and orders the salmon with potatoes instead of rice and a Diet Coke, leaves the office by five, dinner with the wife at seven, and retires to the basement where he watches sports and pours over papers until ten. Then off to bed to start it all over again.

Surveilling this guy is getting tedious, to say the least, but today is Friday, the start of the weekend, and his routine seems to have changed. It was a typical day until I saw him walking to his car at four p.m., starting the weekend early. Anything out of the norm with this guy piques my interest.

I pull out in my truck, following a few cars behind, expecting him to make the turn on the route he usually takes, so I'm surprised when he accelerates onto the freeway. Luckily, I topped off the tank before he left for his run this morning, because I have no clue how far he's going.

I follow him for almost two hours. The closer we get to San Jose, the more suspicious I become.

He exits the freeway and makes his way through town, working his way toward the coast. He pulls into a gas station; I assume to fill up, but when he passes the pumps and parks at the curb off to the side, I know something is up.

I park across the lot and wait several minutes in my truck before deciding I don't want to draw any unwanted attention. I head inside the convenience

store and pretend to peruse the aisles with a clear view of his Mercedes. My gaze repeatedly flicks over the display, but he sits in his vehicle.

I wander down the candy aisle, pretending to look at my choices, when I hear the unmistakable roar of a pack of motorcycles.

Five bikes roll in and stop near the same curb where Patterson is parked. The distinctive Death Heads patch is visible on the backs of every one of them.

Fuck.

I scramble, searching for the bathroom. I'm a dead man walking if any of them recognize me. Though I haven't worn my cut since I've been tailing the assemblyman, several of these guys have seen me close up, so I don't want to risk it.

I practically sprint to the counter. "Where's your bathroom?"

The employee on the other side eyes me suspiciously. "Bathroom's outside."

I start to turn.

"But," he drawls, "you're gonna need a key."

"Okay, give me the key." I'm sure he can hear the urgency in my voice, but it doesn't make him move any faster.

"Only for customers."

"What the fuck do I look like?" I hold my hands out in frustration.

"You didn't pump any gas, and I ain't seen you buy anything." He tilts his head to the side.

"Jesus Christ. Give me a pack of smokes."

"Need an ID."

I reach for my back pocket and realize I left it sitting in my truck. I frantically search my pockets and spot several Death Heads approaching the store. *Shit.* Thankfully, I find a crumpled five-dollar bill and slap it on the counter. I grab a pack of Big-League Chew off a display. "Just give me this then and the bathroom key."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the men are almost at the door.

The employee slides across a rubber duck the size of a soccer ball wearing a pink cowboy hat and sunglasses. It's attached to a small key ring

with a single key.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I hiss, hearing the bell above the door jingle and boots scuffle inside.

I do the only thing I can think of and knock the duck to the floor. It gives me a chance to pull my ballcap low and shield my face as I bend to pick it up. I keep my face averted from the men who just walked to the counter.

“Three packs of Marlboro,” one calls out as I quickly head to the door.

Pushing it open, I come face to face with another one of the Death Heads.

“Watch it,” he snaps.

I stand frozen for half a second before I realize I don’t recognize this one, so he can’t recognize me.

“My bad,” I mutter and brush past him, hurrying to the side of the building.

“Nice duck,” he calls after me.

I dash along the plate glass storefront, glancing toward the car that still sits over at the curb. Mickey is leaned against it, speaking to a Death Head whose back is to me.

I wish I could hear what they’re saying, but right now, I need to get out of view and regroup.

Darting around the corner, I find the restroom, unlock the door, slip inside, and throw the deadbolt, blowing out a breath. Christ, that was too damn close. My heart pounds in my chest and adrenaline pumps through my veins.

I slide my phone out and send Crash my location. It’s been drilled into all of us prospects the importance of being careful with what we say through text messages. We know better than to send any information others could understand, so I try to encrypt what I need to share.

MARCUS: OUR FRIENDS FROM THE GIRLS’ SKI TRIP JUST SHOWED UP AT A GAS STATION TO MEET WITH MY NEW BUDDY. I MANAGED TO GET TO A BATHROOM, BUT IF I DON’T CHECK IN SOON, THIS IS MY LOCATION.

CRASH: SHIT. GOT IT.

I move to the door. I'm about to crack it open when I hear voices on the other side.

"Why'd you want to talk over here? That dumpster stinks," Mickey's voice complains.

"No cameras aimed at us in this spot," a scratchy sickening voice I immediately recognize says. It's Jackal, the man in charge when we ran into the Death Heads at that gas station a couple of weeks back.

"Right. Well, let's get to it then."

"I saw on the news you've been keeping the Evil Dead pretty busy. Good. Don't need them fucking up our shipment."

"I'm a man of my word."

"Well, you better be, or we'll be leaking that video we have of you at our cat house. Can't imagine that would fly with your plans to run for Senator."

"I don't imagine it would," Mickey replies in a low voice.

"Just remember, keep Highway 50 clear of police and Evil Dead, and we'll be all good," Jackal sneers.

"I need to know the day and time the girls—I mean shipment—is being moved," Mickey murmurs.

"Here. All the details are on this." Jackal sucks on a cigarette and blows smoke out. "We good?"

"Yeah. I've got plans for the cops to raid the club again, only this time I don't think they'll come up empty-handed." Mickey chuckles, and I want to punch him in the face.

My hand flexes at my side, and my blood boils. This fucker. He's gonna get what's coming to him. The club will see to that.

"Damn. You hearin' this, Jackal? These politicians are just as crooked as us. They just do it in a suit," another man snarls with contempt.

"That's true, Trigger. Well, we're fucking done here."

"The next time you need to contact me, do not call my office," Mickey warns gruffly, and I almost snort. The idea that he's giving orders to the Death Heads is laughable.

A second later, I hear his body slam against the door, and I jump back.

“Remember who you’re fucking talking to, you shithole. I own your ass,” Jackal growls.

There’s dead silence for a moment in which I’m sure Mickey is nodding like a bobblehead.

Finally, boots shuffle into the distance, and I hear Mickey push away from the door and scurry off, followed by the rumble of bikes. I wait until they fade into the distance, then stay put an extra couple of minutes just to be sure. Jamming a piece of gum in my mouth, I let my jaw work my rage out. I crack open the door to check the lot.

A lone car pumping gas and my truck are the only remaining vehicles.

Leaving the idiotic duck on the floor, I stroll out, blowing a bubble.

Hopefully, this information gets me off this crap job. One thing’s for certain. Cole is going to explode when he hears this news. A state assemblyman in the pocket of the Death Heads. Shit’s about to hit the fucking fan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR – CHURCH

Marcus—

I take in the scarred wooden table with the club emblem carved in the center. I'm a little in awe of this room. Church, the brothers call it. It's sacred to the club, and usually only patched members are allowed across the threshold. If that didn't signal the seriousness of the situation, the boom of Cole slamming his fist on the table sure does.

“Are you kidding me with this shit? The Death Heads are behind everything?” he roars.

Crash leans forward. “According to what Marcus heard, not only are they sic'ing their dog on us, but they're also trafficking women right under our noses.”

Cole locks eyes with him. “Fuck, VP, you know how much I hate this shit? If Angel or Shannon find out, they'll lose it.”

“I agree. It took me a hell of a long time to help Shannon overcome her debilitating fear of walking in a parking garage at night or seeing a white panel van. She and Angel cannot hear about this.” Crash glances around the table at all the brothers.

I've heard rumors of how Cole and Crash met their wives after rescuing them from a similar trafficking situation, but I've never heard the two of them mention it. The fury in their eyes tells me just how close to home this subject hits. I get why they wouldn't want to put their women through reliving any part of something like that by hearing about another instance of the same thing.

“That means no pillow talk with your ol' ladies or girlfriends,” Cole commands, glancing around the table. “Got it?”

All heads nod.

“Hell, no one's supposed to be talking club business outside of us, anyway.” Jake slumps in his chair.

“Damn straight, but I also know sometimes the details slip out. This needs to be locked down tight. No one else knows.” Cole’s gaze connects with every man in the room.

“What about Marcus?” Shane lifts a chin in my direction.

Cole stands and walks toward where I lean against the wall. My arms unfold because I’m not sure what he’s about to do, but he opens the door and his voice bellows down the hall.

“TJ! Billy! Get your asses in here.”

Cole returns to his seat at the head of the table, and TJ and Billy troop in. They glance in my direction; I’m sure trying to decipher what the hell’s going on. Prospects aren’t allowed in church. This is my first time stepping foot in this sacred room and only their second. They must know it’s something big.

“If we’ve got the cops, state politicians, and the Death Heads working together, we’re going to need every man we can get,” Cole announces to the room.

I see the surprise flash across TJ’s and Billy’s faces, but they quickly mask it.

After giving TJ and Billy a quick fill-in, the patches talk through all the options until we have some semblance of a strategy which begins with Cole and Crash paying my new friend, the state assemblyman, a visit Monday when he falls into his routine. He has a standing lunch date at Roscoe’s every Monday. This time he’ll have company.

As soon as the meeting ends, the brothers disperse.

“Marcus, stay,” Crash commands from where he and Cole still sit.

The other brothers troop out, some glancing my way as they pass. When the last one exits and shuts the door, I turn to the head of the table.

“We need you to come with us on Monday.” Cole studies me.

The shock must be evident, because the corner of Crash’s mouth turns up. “You know the assemblyman’s every move. We don’t want to waste time figuring out where to go if he strays from his routine. You’ll be our chauffeur.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Be ready to leave tonight, nine o’clock. We want to be up there in the

morning.”

“I’ll be ready.”

“That’s it. You can leave now.” Cole dismisses me and shifts in his seat, discussing details with Crash.

I shut the door behind me, and I’m making my way across the clubhouse when my phone lights up with Brandy’s name. I press it to my ear. “Hey, babe.”

“Hey, hon. How’s your job going?”

“Good. But I’ve got another day, at least. Then I think I’ll finally be off it.”

“That’s great. Well, I have some exciting news of my own.”

“Yeah, what’s that, babe?”

“I have an interview on Monday for an internship at the Opera House.”

“No, shit? That’s great, babe, and I should be back in time to celebrate with you after they offer it to you.”

“God, I hope so.”

“I know so.”

It’s noon on Monday when I roll the truck to a stop and park on the road outside Roscoe’s restaurant. I’ve got a clear view of the table where Mickey Patterson always sits. I shift into park and leave the engine idling.

Cole lifts a chin at me. “You’re coming with us.”

I don’t say a word, but inside I’m screaming, *what?* I nod obediently and turn the truck off.

“I may need you for the details,” Cole explains.

I’m not sure what the hell he means, but I know better than to question it. I climb from the truck. My hands go to the edges of my cut, wondering if we want to make it known to everyone who we are or keep it on the down low.

“Should I...?”

Cole’s gaze slides over the leather as if he’s contemplating, then his eyes harden. “Cuts on.”

Crash and I both nod.

Through the window, Patterson is visible, being seated in his usual spot.

“He’s here.” I tilt my head toward the table.

Cole and Crash peer through the glass. “Let’s join our new friend, then.”

I hold open the door, and Cole and Crash both lead the way, their heavy boots scuffing across the polished floor. They look intimidating and definitely out of place. The maître d’ glances up to greet us, but his eyes widen as they take in the broad-shouldered men in leather cuts, club patches visible to all.

“Excuse me, gentlemen. We have a dress code here. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to seat you.”

Cole smirks. “We’re here for a meeting with Assemblyman Patterson. We’re going to join him at his table. You won’t be stopping us, but I’d love to see you try.”

Cole pushes past the man, whose mouth drops open.

Crash leans over as he moves past, his eyes dropping to the maître d’s hand where it rests on top of the phone. “I wouldn’t call the police. A shootout wouldn’t do well for business, and we’ll only be a few minutes.”

The man seems unsure of what to do but holds off on picking up the phone. Instead, he decides to run behind us.

“Mr. Patterson, I am so sorry. These”—he looks over at us as if trying to come up with a word to describe the crew—“men say they have a meeting with you.”

Patterson’s eyes run over the leather cuts on our backs, and his spoon clatters in his soup bowl. “Um, yes. Thank you, Thomas.”

Cole grins. “Yeah, thanks, Thomas. That will be all.”

Thomas’s jaw tightens, but he spins and stalks away.

Cole sits across from Patterson, taking his focus, while Crash and I sit on either side.

“What is this about?” Patterson hisses, glancing around at the other patrons whose attention we have definitely drawn.

“Oh, you know why we’re here, Mickey,” Cole drawls. “Did you think you could fuck around with the Dead, and we wouldn’t come knocking?”

“Is this about my new bill?”

Cole gives a dry chuckle, but it’s clear he doesn’t find any of this amusing. “We’re here because you’re a dirty scumbag associating with the Death Heads MC and causing us all kinds of problems.”

“And why are your problems mine?” Patterson snaps, clearly unaware of the information we hold.

Cole’s eyes drift to mine, and Patterson’s follow. “Your little Friday night drive to San Jose to discuss your new business arrangement is why, dumbass. Seems you’re the driving force behind my current problems. Seems you’ve been pushing the sheriff’s department and the DA to keep us busy while your new friends, the Death Heads, move in.”

His nostrils flare, but otherwise, he does not indicate the trouble he’s in. “I can take drives and talk to whomever I want. That doesn’t mean anything.” He acts like he doesn’t have a care in the world, but none of us miss the tremor as he picks up his spoon again.

Cole leans forward and folds his hands on the table, staring him dead in the eye. He doesn’t break eye contact as he addresses me. “Marcus, what was it exactly you caught on tape?”

I take the hint. He wants Patterson to believe everything I heard is on film, and he wants me to make sure Patterson knows exactly what I heard.

“Well,” I drawl, “Mr. Corrupt over here, met by the trash cans with some scum. Those trash cans really smelled bad, didn’t they, Mickey?” I hint at his words from the other night. “Seems Mr. Corrupt had a little fun at the Death Head’s cat house, and now he’s helping them move illegal pussy through our state.”

“I... I did no such thing.” He stumbles, clearly on edge now.

“You want us to play the recording, Mickey? Maybe turn the volume up real loud so everyone in the place can hear you?” Cole grins, knowing he’s got this douchebag by the balls.

“Look, as far as moving women, that’s the Death Heads. I was just supposed to keep you out of their way.” Patterson splays his hands. “They have a tape of me with one of their girls at a brothel. I had no idea they owned the place. Don’t you see? I had to do what they said or they would

have destroyed me. I'm sure you can understand that."

"Well, now it's us you have to worry about, because it's us who can destroy you." Cole leans forward and turns his words back on him. "I'm sure you can understand that."

Patterson's jaw clenches, and his eyes narrow. "It's your word against mine."

"I wouldn't be so worried about the Death Heads tape, because now we have our own tape of you." Cole lies to him without batting an eye. "And we heard about your planned raid on our club." Cole tilts his head to the side, daring Patterson to contradict him.

"I had to keep you out of the way. That was the deal." Patterson's face is red now, and he tugs at his collar.

"So, you planned to have the cops..." Cole leaves the sentence hanging for Patterson to fill in the details.

"The cops were only going to plant enough evidence to tie you guys up for a bit. I swear."

Crash scoffs. "Yeah, right. You were going to plant false evidence and then throw the book at us."

"No, no. It was just going to be some minor drug charges. I swear it's the truth. I don't want trouble." He takes out a handkerchief and mops his brow.

Cole leans closer, crowding into Patterson's space. "Should have thought of that before you fucked with us."

"Look, what do you need? What do I need to do to make this all go away?"

He's really sweating now, like the pathetic excuse for a man he is, and it's as if he's pleading for his life, and if I'm being honest, he probably is.

Cole takes the bottle of wine off the table, studying the label. "I'm not really into wine, but a 2008 Chardonnay sounds pretty good."

"That's a four-hundred-dollar bottle," Patterson stutters.

Cole tips it up, taking a long slug. "Not bad."

"What do you want?" Patterson grounds out.

Cole leans in, his voice low. "I need to know the date, time, and location of their pickup."

“That’s a death sentence,” Patterson hisses in return.

“We can stop them on the road, but it’d be easier for everyone if we did it at the pickup location. And if you don’t tell us what we want to know, you can bet we’ll tell them you talked to us.”

“You can’t... Please, I can’t...” Patterson rubs his hand across the tablecloth, and I watch his face as he comes to terms with the fact he’s stuck between a rock and a hard place. There's no getting around it. He's fucked.

“Well, good luck with the Death Heads. You might want to pack your bags and run now.” Cole starts to stand.

Patterson almost knocks his water glass over as he comes out of his chair. “Wait! If I tell you, will you protect me?”

Cole pauses, then drops into his seat. “I’m listening.”

“They’re meeting in four days.”

"Where?"

“A trailer park just off Interstate 5 in Lathrop. It’s exit 465. There’s a truck stop at that exit. The park is off the frontage road. You’ll see it from the exit ramp.”

"What time?"

"Just before midnight."

“We gonna believe him?” Crash asks.

“Well, if he’s lying, he better run.” Cole’s eyes drill into Patterson. “And he better take his family with him, because you don’t fuck around with mine and get away with it.”

Patterson drags a shaking hand through his hair, his knee bouncing a mile a minute now. “I’m not lying, I promise you.”

“Your promises don’t mean shit to us,” Crash snaps.

“You’ll see I’m telling the truth, and then we’re good, right?” He stares beseechingly at our president.

“Not even close, but it’s a start.” Cole leans back in his chair, a little more relaxed now that the assemblyman has admitted all this shit so easily, while Crash recorded it all on a hidden device. He's in our pocket now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE – CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Brandy—

I pull into the lot of the Evil Dead clubhouse. I'd passed Billy on the way in, and he let me know Marcus should be almost back.

I'm brimming with excitement, and can't wait to tell him I received an internship offer, and yeah, it doesn't pay, but it's a foot in the door. The woman who met with me said I had potential. My worries of being inadequate washed away when she spoke those three little words. She hadn't even said them as a compliment—more of a statement that I may be worth her time—but they meant everything to me. I have potential. Me. I did this without my dad's connections. And yeah, sure, Sara had gotten me the interview to begin with, but that was my connection and everything after was me. I finally feel worthy, like I'm capable of success on my own, separate from my family name, and I can't wait to share my joy with Marcus.

After climbing from the truck, I rest on the bumper and wait for him to arrive. The rumble of motorcycles carries to me a few moments before they round the gate and roll onto the gravel lot.

He nods as he passes me, and the sight makes my mouth curve up. Damn, he's sexy riding that bike.

Crash and Cole say something to him, and then he makes his way to me.

"How's my babe?" he calls. I love it when he calls me his babe. It makes my stomach do a little flip.

"Hi." My mouth spreads into a wide smile.

His eyes light up. "You look happy."

"I am." I take a breath. "I was offered an internship."

"Babe, that's great." He wraps his arms around me, bringing me in for a kiss. His warm lips send a jolt through me. He picks me up and twirls me in a

circle as I squeal. “Look at my baby, working toward her dream. We should go out and celebrate. Call the girls, and we can meet up somewhere.”

My eyes glaze because I love how proud he is of me. It melts my heart into a puddle.

“Let me wrap a few things up with the club, and then I’ll call you in about an hour to get the game plan?”

“Sounds perfect.”

“I’m so proud of you.” He pulls me in for one more tight squeeze, then brushes his soft lips against mine again. His lips are one of my favorite parts. I could spend hours with those lips. I have spent hours with those lips. I moan against them.

His eyes flare at the sound. “Damn, girl. You make me want you so bad.”

“Hold that thought for tonight.”

“Yeah, we got my baby to celebrate tonight. Go call the girls.” He walks backward toward the clubhouse. “I’ll call you soon.”

I nod and climb into my truck. Strapping on my seatbelt, I tell my phone to call Izzy. She may not be able to swing a trip out here on such short notice, but I hope she can. I’d love for her to meet Harley and Melissa. I know they’d all hit it off like they grew up together.

A few hours later, we walk into Jack’s Bar & Grill. Marcus has his hand on the small of my back, guiding me through the heavy wooden doors. The lights are dimmed, and it takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the sudden change from the bright California sun. I scan the place, and see a bar area off to the right where Harley and Melissa are already seated at a high-top table. It looks like they pushed a few of them together to make room for our little party. Izzy’s on her way too, but since she had so much farther to drive, she’s not here yet.

Harley looks up from a water she sips on. “Congratulations Brandy!”

Melissa turns to see us strolling over and a wide smile breaks across her face, making her even more beautiful. “So happy for you!”

We take the empty stools.

“Is anyone else coming?” Melissa asks Marcus. She’s trying to play it cool, but we all know she’s asking if Billy is coming.

“Nah, they got stuck at the club.”

Disappointment flashes across her face before she quickly hides it behind a smile. “Guess you’re one lucky man to be surrounded by such beautiful women.”

“That I am,” Marcus agrees.

A curvy little redhead bounces her way to the table with a smile. “What can I get you to drink?”

Marcus orders a margarita pitcher they have on special and the girls order cokes, not actually being of age yet. Though, if I know these two—and I feel like I’m really starting to—I’m sure they plan to snag some sips through the night.

It’s not too long into our rowdy laughter and fun that Izzy arrives. “Well, I was going to say the fun just arrived, but it looks like you beat me to the punch.”

“How are you doing, Izzy?” Marcus stands and drags another chair over for her.

“What a gentleman. You sure you don’t want scumbag back?” she teases me. “Because I sure could use a man with manners in my life.”

I chuckle. “What about your newest man? Didn’t you go on a date just the other day?”

“Yeah, well, he only wanted to talk about how much money he has. I need someone with a little more character... like *any* at all. He was the dullest thing since, since...” She scrunches her lips to the side and looks up like she’s thinking of the blandest food she can.

“Rice cakes?” Harley fills in the empty space.

“Yes! Yes, that right there.” Izzy points at Harley. “Rice cakes.”

“I’m sure I could find you someone with a little more spice.” Marcus lifts his cup to his smiling lips.

“Absolutely not.” Melissa looks appalled.

Izzy seems to perk up and then deflate in the span of the few seconds of

their exchange. I was hoping Melissa and Harley would love Izzy as much as I do, but with that last comment, I can't help but wonder if they are refusing to include her.

"Why the hell not?" Marcus quirks his head to the side at her.

"Because you'd try to set her up with someone like Little Jimmy at the pub."

"What's wrong with Little Jimmy?" Marcus asks as if he's insulted, but the laughter he's holding back seems to say otherwise.

"Um, he has no brains and lives with his mommy. No, I'll do the match-making here. If you're serious,"—she turns her attention to Izzy—"I'll find you a man, and he'll definitely not be bland." She winks. "But I hope you like hot sauce."

"My kind of girls." Izzy nods approvingly.

I feel relieved. They do seem to be hitting it off after all.

"I want to help," Harley pipes up.

We shut down the place, but not before Harley and Melissa have created a list of prospects for Izzy based on the barrage of questions they asked.

"Well, glad we could help pick your candidates for the dating game." Marcus laughs. "But I think I'm stealing Brandy away now."

The girls giggle, but send us off.

Marcus—

The last couple of days, I've heard nothing about Patterson. I think we're expected to be with the brothers, but they've kept us out of the specifics.

The mood in the clubhouse has steadily lost the carefree feeling as the day of the Death Head pickup has inched closer. Based on what I heard Patterson tell Prez, it should be going down tonight.

I feel on edge waiting for the orders to jump. This is the first time I will be knowingly walking into a situation like this. We are bringing the fight. I just hope it doesn't end in a bloodbath.

I'm standing at the gate with TJ when the unmistakable rumble of motorcycles can be heard approaching, and from the sounds of it, it's a lot of them.

TJ and I glance at each other. All the brothers are here, so we have no idea who the hell would be rolling up right now.

They come into view, and I see the president of the Dead Souls at the front of the pack. Looks like they've arrived for backup. We must be preparing to show full force just who owns this state.

We slide the gates wide, and they roll in. Wyatt nods as he passes.

"Well, I guess shit is going down soon," TJ calls over the rumble.

"Yeah, wish they'd clue us in a bit," I grumble, swinging the gate closed behind the last rider.

I'd just closed the gate when another five bikes roll up. It took me a minute to see the patch identifying them as War Dogs.

Cole really called in all the stops. The War Dogs aren't even one-percenters. They're basically a riding club.

"What are you guys doing here?" TJ questions.

"Yeah, I guess we rarely get involved in the Dead's shit, do we?" The man at the front chuckles. "Well, you see, we don't like sex trafficking going on in our state, so we thought we'd help kick this scum out."

TJ nods as he pulls the gate open for them to enter.

"Well, damn," TJ whispers when they pull out of earshot. "I hope they're still planning to take us along. With these numbers, I can't imagine the Death Heads doing anything but hightailing it out of our state."

"I hope you're right," I agree.

We stand at the gate as the sun creeps higher into the sky. The clubs have been inside for over an hour. I can only imagine them cramming into church, trying to get a game plan laid out.

Another hour passes before the door swings open. Billy, who'd been inside manning the bar, jogs across the lot straight to us.

"We're rolling out." He waves his fingers in a circular motion over his head.

"Now?" TJ asks as the clubhouse door opens again, and men start

trooping toward their bikes.

“Yeah, now. I heard someone say we were taking up position early so we don’t run into the Death Heads on the road, plus Cole wants to intersect the shipment before it arrives.”

“How the hell are we going to do that? Do the guys know what the truck even looks like?” I question as we make our way to our bikes. As a prospect, it’s not my place to question anything, but between TJ, Billy and me, we talk.

“I don’t fucking know. But they must know something because Cole, Crash, and Wolf are taking that job.”

Crash stops at our bikes on his way to his own, and we all straighten, giving him our full attention. “You boys ready?”

“Yes, sir,” we chime simultaneously. No other answer is acceptable. Not if we want an Evil Dead patch someday.

“Good. What you prospects do and how you act reflects on the Evil Dead. This is the first time you get to wear your big boy pants, and you’re doing it in front of other clubs. Don’t shit them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX – WARNING DELIVERED

Marcus—

It was a little over an hour's ride toward Lathrop. We got here at about ten—two hours before pickup.

I can see why this is a perfect transfer location. It's kind of like a triangle of interstates intersecting, making it easy to move any type of product quickly and in multiple directions.

It's still disgusting these shitheads think of women as product to sell and do with what they please. I can't wait for the Dead to teach them a lesson.

Cole and his small crew, including TJ with the van, had split off and made their way south to stop the supplier, while we headed north to the rendezvous point.

Jake and Shane make a lap around the trailer park, where the actual meet was taking place, scoping it out. It's secluded and not visible from the side streets or interstate. Hell, if we didn't know exactly where we were going, we would have missed it.

Jake and Shane roll to a stop at an outdoor storage unit where the rest of us wait, not wanting to tip off any watchful eyes in the trailer park of our arrival.

“Well, it's only got one point of entry.” Jake glances toward Shane.

“Yeah, so it should be easy to cover and get the jump on them once they're inside,” Shane confirms.

Jake stretches, climbing from his bike. “Have any of you checked in with Cole?”

“Yeah, they reached the truck stop our gun connection over the border tipped us off about.” Red Dog slides his phone from his pocket. “Should be locating the truck now. Let's cross our fingers it goes well.”

Wyatt, the Dead Soul's president, tosses his cigarette. "Amen. So, how do you guys want to handle this?"

"I'm thinking we need to split our forces. Half of us can hang out here. Is there anything on the other side?" Green looks at Shane and Jake.

"There was an old abandoned gas station a quarter mile down from the entrance," Jake replies.

"That should work," Green agrees.

Red Dog's phone chimes, and he puts it to his ear. "Hey, Cole. You guys find it." He nods. "Okay, yeah, good idea. I'll let you know when they show." He swipes his finger across his screen and slides it into his pocket. "They found the truck. Had twelve women in it."

"Jesus," I whisper under my breath.

"What'd they do about them?" Jake clenches his jaw as he asks.

"Bought 'em," Red Dog snaps, as if that should be obvious.

Billy and I exchange a look. I know we're both thinking the same thing. How the hell is the club going to handle this? Where are we taking those women?

Either no one else is wondering, or they just don't voice it, because nothing else is said about them.

"We're going to handle the Death Heads until Cole and the boys get here. He didn't want to ride up at the same time and blow this whole plan, so they're going to hold back an exit until we give the word those assholes have arrived."

"Good thinking." Wyatt leans forward, adjusting himself on his bike, leather creaking as he does. "Cole's a smart one. He's been one hell of a President; really making Mack proud."

"Yeah, that's a fact, and we all love him." Green grins. "Let's get into position. They should be due soon, and we want to be ready. If we're not, that president you're so proud of will be skinning all our asses."

"Got that right," Shane agrees.

"Red Dog and I'll take the wee prospects and the War Dogs to the gas station. The rest of you stay put. We'll send one of the War Dogs to hide out near the entrance, so at least if he gets spotted, he won't have an Evil Dead or

Dead Soul's top rocker on his cut."

"Good idea," Shane replies.

"Of course, it is. We all know I'm the brains of this crew." Green flashes his white teeth.

Jake chuckles. "Just 'cause you got two heads doesn't mean you got two brains."

"All right, asshole. Keeping my intelligence hidden is part of my secret. See, everybody calls me Green, because they think I'm lucky, but it's really these smarts." He taps his finger on his temple.

"Oh, geez. I'm pretty sure you got that name for some dumbass shit you pulled and were lucky enough to live through," Shane pipes in.

"Says the two guys who haven't been cool enough to get their own nicknames." Green twists the throttle on his bike. "But don't worry, I'll come up with a short list for you two shitheads. I'm sure you'll love them."

Jake shakes his head. "Great, what'd we get ourselves into?"

Billy and I fire up our bikes and follow Green and Red Dog out. The War Dogs follow suit and roll out behind us.

It's thirty more minutes before we hear the faint rumble of motorcycles approaching. The sound increases and then fades away.

A few moments later, Green gets a text. He types a response and then turns to Red Dog to give Cole a heads up, then his whistle pierces the cool night air, telling everyone to circle up. He dials Shane and puts the phone on speaker.

"How many are here?" Shane questions when he picks up. They, too, must have heard the bikes roar past.

"Six. Red Dog already messaged Cole. They're rolling in hot."

"All right. How do you want to play this?" Shane asks.

Green squints into the horizon. "I think we need to roll in quiet. I don't want to give them any more warning than necessary. Last thing we need is to turn this into a bike chase."

"Agreed."

"We get close and coast the rest of the way in. The War Dogs can hang back, blocking the exit. You take the Dead Souls up the left side and Red

Dog and I'll take the babies to the right."

Billy and I share an annoyed glance. Damn it, we're here putting our lives on the line, same as the patches, and they call us babies. Once again, we'll have to prove we can hang with the big boys. Man, am I ready to be patched in, and I know Billy is, too, since he's been doing this longer than any of us.

Shane's laughter carries through the phone. "All right, don't go so slow you lay your bike over, old man."

Green's brows lift. "Yeah, all right. And I got a nickname option for you, Shane."

"Really? Don't be coy. Let's hear it."

"Tuna torpedo."

Shane falls silent, but Jake's laughter rings from the phone's speakers, and Red Dog's hearty laugh bellows out.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Shane bites out.

"Man, he just called you a dick in the most hilarious way," Jake answers.

"Ha ha. You're a real riot. Let's get moving, you asshat."

We start up our bikes and roll out, then lay off the throttle and coast the rest of the way to the entrance. I spot the other brothers approaching down the interstate. Their headlamps are little dots of lights marching along like ants. As they race closer, we can actually make out who each one is. Green holds his hand up in the air to stop us. We all wait for the final signal.

"Now," Green yells, and twists his throttle a second before the whole group of us roar to life. I can only imagine how we sound—like the God of Thunder ready to rain all kinds of pain down on the Death Heads.

We rumble toward the gate and split into two lines of bikes as we fork at the entrance. I glance back. Five War Dogs sit on their idle bikes across the front.

The trailer comes into view, and I spot six Death Heads running to their bikes. Then Shane, Jake, and the Dead Souls roar up on the other side. The Death Heads slow as they realize they're surrounded.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in." Green rolls to a stop.

"Yeah, I fucking hate when the cat brings rodents into our house," Shane adds.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Jackal sneers, his gold tooth reflecting the moonlight.

“I think the better question is, what the fuck are you doing in our state, you slimy little shit?” Red Dog roars, drawing his gun. The rest of us follow suit, pulling our own pieces.

I glance around. This trailer sits at the back by itself with trees that mostly block its view from any neighbors, but we’re making a hell of a lot of noise.

Jake seems to be thinking the same thing. “Let’s move this party inside, less likely to hear the screams.”

Green nods.

We dismount, and after disarming them, we drag the Death Heads inside. The trailer is old with pea green shag carpeting and grimy wood paneling. Everything stinks of cigarette smoke, reefer, and the dirty dishes piled in the sink. Beer bottles litter the place.

“So, you want to tell us what the fuck you’ve been up to?” Green asks, directing his question to Jackal, the one in charge of this crew.

“That’s our damn business,” he grits out.

“Wrong.” Red Dog picks him up by the collar and slams him into the wall. “You don’t have business in our state.”

“We’ll see if our supplier agrees when they get here.” He spits.

Red Dog rears his fist back and punches him in the face. “Your mouth is pissing me off.”

Jackal twists his head and spits. Blood trickles out of the corner of his lips and into his dark scraggly beard.

“Hey, I think I hear your supplier now.” Jake grins as the rumble of more bikes approaching rattles the windows.

Green huffs out a wicked laugh. “Sounds to me like Hell’s Fury just rolled in.”

Boots stomp up the steps right before the metal door swings open to bang against the wall.

Cole’s large outline stands in the doorway, flanked by Wolf and Crash. They all look ready to kill. The Death Heads have no idea the beasts they awoke. This isn’t just treading on our territory; this is personal. The Death

Heads have no clue the girls they screwed with the other day were the daughters of our president and VP or that their wives experienced trafficking first hand. Yup, they have no idea the world of hurt they are in for.

“Well, if it ain’t the president.” Jackal spits more blood out.

“You in charge?” Cole asks, moving across the room.

“Yeah.” Jackal barely gets the words out before Cole grabs him by his cut and throws him to the floor, slamming his boot into the man’s gut.

Jackal clutches his stomach. “I’m just doing a pickup. It’s not hurting you or your business. It’s not guns.”

“I’m aware of what *business* you’ve been up to.” Cole flexes his fist.

“What, got a soft heart?” Jackal gets to his knees with a sadistic laugh.

“Nope. No soft heart here. Especially not for the likes of you. But we respect our women in this state.” Cole grabs Jackal and hauls him to his feet. Then he swings a punch, landing one to his nose. The resounding crack announces the break seconds before the gushing blood does.

“You’re lucky there are so many of you.” Jackal wipes the blood from his face with the back of his hand.

“No one’s going to interfere. Go ahead, swing back. I dare you.” Cole’s mouth turns up at the corners. The smile doesn’t reach his eyes, and it’s the scariest I’ve ever seen him.

“Don’t forget to save a piece for me.” Crash clenches his fist at his side.

Jackal gains his feet, glancing Crash’s way before turning his full attention to Cole.

The two circle each other like predators looking to attack. Jackal is big, his muscles rippling, but I know he’s no match for Cole. Cole shares his height. But his build is leaner, and he beats him in speed, wits, and the pure rage that is currently bubbling under the calm exterior.

Jackal swings, and Cole easily sidesteps, while landing his own punch to Jackal’s jaw. His head snaps back, eyes tracking Cole. He charges him, taking our president around the waist and driving him into the wall. Cole pummels him from above, pounding into his head and back.

Jackal stumbles, and Cole takes his opening, punching him in the face and knocking him to the ground. Cole pins him and gives him a beat down.

“All right, Cole,” Crash interrupts after several minutes. “I want to get a few of my own in while he’s still breathing.”

Cole climbs from him and glances toward the rest of us. “Teach the rest of his men a lesson.” Then he walks to the kitchen, turns on the water, and sticks his bloody cracked knuckles under the flow.

Billy moves toward Trigger. I approach a member closest to me I don’t recognize, ready to do my club’s bidding. We pound on them for several minutes.

Now that the Death Heads are thoroughly bruised and bleeding. Cole walks into the room.

“You’re not welcome in our state. Have we made ourselves fucking clear?”

Whiskey, the man who stepped between Jackal and Billy that day at the gas station, speaks up. “Crystal.”

“Good. Your supplier is pissed and knows you put them in a predicament by lying about who owns this state. We were left paying your bill, so I think we need our reimbursement, right Marcus?”

I glance at Cole, and taking his cue, I move forward, seize the Death Heads' wallets and pull all the cash I find. Billy comes up with the case full of cash they were probably going to use as payment for the girls.

Cole takes in the pile we pillaged from them. “That should cover what we had to shell out, plus a little extra for our troubles, but if I see you in my state again, we’ll kill you.”

Whiskey nods.

“Now get the fuck out of my state.”

Whiskey and Trigger move forward to lift what’s left of Jackal to his feet. They exit slowly, limping to their bikes.

We watch as they ride out. The Dead Souls follow behind them, ensuring they cross over the border where they belong.

“I think it’s time we call Daytona and let the boys at the Vegas chapter know they’ve got competition setting up.” Cole stares after the disappearing taillights.

Crash nods. “I think you’re right.”

“And make sure the Dead Souls are on high alert. I don’t want the Death Heads surprising us with retaliation.”

I walk over to where TJ leans against a wall.

“What’d you guys do with the girls?” I whisper to him.

“They had me take them to a women’s shelter. Left before the people there asked me any questions.”

I nod, thankful they were taken somewhere safe. The whole thing turns my stomach. We deal with some rough people, and I don’t mind handling anything that results from that, but pulling innocent women into the fold is a line I won’t cross. I’m glad the brothers are on the same page.

This went better than I could have expected, but I can’t help but feel we just prodded a bunch of angry hornets. Jackal doesn’t seem to be the kind of man who will turn and run with his tail between his legs. He seems like the kind of man who likes revenge.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN – GOOD GIRL

Marcus—

It's been a couple months since we drove the Death Heads out.

The Dead Souls have watched their border, and there's been no sign of any plans of revenge. They seemed to have taken our message to heart.

I park my truck in the circular drive of Brandy's parents' house. Before I knock on their large wooden double doors, they swing open, and I'm staring at Brandy.

"What are you doing here?" I smile. "I thought you were working late helping with the set for the opera opening this weekend?"

"Diane let me off early. Said I've put in my share of late nights already."

She leans forward and gives me a peck. Damn, I love her lips.

"I knew you had poker night with my dad and the guys, so I called the girls to see if they wanted to go to a winery that has some live music."

Brandy's father had invited me to poker one night about a month ago, and I've tried to make it to a few more. It's really given me a chance to bond with him, but now I'm kind of regretting committing tonight.

"Well, yours sounds like more fun. Think I could ditch your dad?"

"No. Besides, it's all girls."

"Who's going?"

"Izzy, Melissa, Harley and a couple of their friends."

"You know half your crew is underage."

"Izzy and I are each buying a bottle, and then we're picnicking on the lawn, listening to music. No one's going to be walking around carding people once the wine's been bought." She stands on her tiptoes and kisses me one more time before scooting past me. "I gotta go. The guys are already at the table."

"Am I going to see you again tonight?" I call after her.

"If you're lucky." She waggles her eyebrows and then climbs into her

truck.

This girl has really wrapped herself around my heart. I feel like maybe she could be the real deal.

I shake my head. I've always opened myself up too quickly for hurt. Probably because I've been seeking the love I was never given by my parents. In the past, I always threw out *I love you* too soon, hoping the girl would say it back, but the last time my heart was trampled I made a promise to myself I wouldn't jump the gun. I'd only say it if I was absolutely sure my life would crumble without the other person in it. I'm starting to think that girl is Brandy, but I've been stupid so many times I've grown gun-shy. I'm not ready. Not yet.

"Marcus! Get in here!" Gerald calls from the back room.

"Hey, boys," I say as I sit.

We play for a few hours before we decide to call it quits.

The other men drift out the door, the smell of cigars wafting behind them.

"So, it seems you and my daughter have been going strong now," Gerald comments as he hands me a tumbler with two fingers of scotch.

"Yeah, we have." I smile, taking a swig.

"Even with this whole motorcycle thing, I can tell you two are good together. And you've held true to your word about keeping my girl safe. Thank you."

"I'd never let anything hurt Brandy."

"Good." He sips his drink. "Because I won't either."

The sound of the front door opening carries back to us.

Gerald lifts a brow. "Speak of the devil, I believe she's home. I'm going to bed." He sets his glass down and walks toward the door. "Tell her goodnight for me."

I walk into the hallway and see Brandy hopping on one foot, trying to take off her strappy heeled sandal.

Leaning against the doorway, I watch, amused. She finally gets the first shoe off and looks up. Her eyes are glazed and her cheeks flushed with alcohol.

"Did you drive, babe?"

She waves a hand toward the door. “No, Izzy dropped me off.”

“Good. Because you seem to be having a hell of a time taking off those shoes, and I don’t think you’d do much better driving.”

“Ha, ha, very funny.” She sticks her tongue out. “These buckles just hate me.” She finally gets the clasps undone on the second one, and it falls to the floor with a clunk.

“There, that’s better.” She smiles.

“Did you have a good time with the girls?”

“Isn’t that apparent?”

I laugh. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“So.” She steps closer and runs her fingers up my chest. “Now that I’m back, what are you going to do with me?”

I quirk an eyebrow. “I think I like you tipsy.”

“Mmm...” She licks her tongue up the side of my neck.

“Hey now.” My eyes flare. “You’re making me want to do things to you that should never be done in your childhood bed. Least if I want to keep in your dad’s good graces.”

She giggles and reaches her hand along the front of my jeans where my dick is now pushing against my pants. I feel like it’s two against one.

I smack her ass. “Get that sweet ass in my truck. I’m taking you to my place.”

As we move down the road, my little hellcat is all over me, kissing my neck and rubbing her hands up and down my body.

“Damn baby, you’re going to make me run off the road.”

“Better stay focused,” she purrs, then pops open my button and tugs on my zipper. My dick jumps with excitement. She pulls my boxers down and releases my length, taking it in her hand.

“You’re a bad girl,” I hiss.

“Wrong. I’m a very good girl.” She takes me into her mouth.

“Such a good girl,” I groan and thread one hand into her hair, her head bobbing in my lap. I move to the slow lane and try my best to focus and enjoy this happy little surprise.

She continues taking me in and out of her sweet mouth. Her tongue

dances along my shaft, heightening my pleasure, while her hand cups my balls. She works me into a rhythm, and it's not long before I feel it building.

"Fuck, I'm going to blow."

When I do, she sucks me down and licks every last drop, then she rises and licks her lips.

"You definitely were a good fucking girl. Now I'm going to reward you. Show me your pussy."

Her eyes hold mine as she shimmies her jeans and panties down her thighs.

"Slide closer and open your legs. Wide," I command.

She does my bidding with no protest. She is my good girl, and I can't wait to get home to give her a good fucking.

I slide my hand between her legs, spreading her wetness over her. She moans and lifts her ass off the seat, pressing her pussy up to meet my fingers.

"Does my good girl like that?"

"Yes," she purrs.

I thrust one finger in and then a second, and she begins to thrust.

"That's right, baby. Fuck my hand." I'm thankful barely any cars are on the road tonight, because this little sex kitten is making it hard to stay in my lane. I rub little circles with my thumb in her sweet spot while I continue fucking her with my fingers. "My baby's getting close, isn't she?"

"Yes," she pants.

"Good. Pull your tits out and pinch your nipples."

She does as I say. I'm not worried about anyone else seeing because there's hardly anyone on this road, and it's so dark, it'd be hard to see inside the truck, anyway.

As soon as she does what I order, it sends her over the edge.

"Oh God, I'm going to come," she moans.

She clenches around my fingers, and the waves of orgasm roll over her. I'd pull over right now and fuck her sideways, but we're so close to my place, and I want her in my bed.

Fifteen minutes later, I pull into the spot in front of my place. We both quickly redress and I carry her inside, her legs wrapped around my waist.

“Is your pussy ready for round two?” I hold her gaze until that slow, sexy smile forms on her lush red lips, and my eyes shift to them.

“Absolutely,” she breathes.

I carry her down the hall and drop her on my bed. My mouth makes a trail from her mouth to her collarbone while my fingers work open her jeans. I move off the bed and jerk them off, along with her panties. While I’m at it, she tugs her shirt over her head and wiggles out of her bra until she’s lying before me, naked.

I stand and shrug my shirt off, then work my belt buckle open. Her eyes heat as they watch my movements, and her lower lip disappears between her teeth.

Goddamn, watching that gets me even harder.

Once I’m naked, I take my hard dick in my hand, running the length from root to crown. “You ready for me, baby?”

She nods and reaches out.

I shake my head. “Get on your hands and knees.”

She does, looking over her shoulder and shaking her ass at me. I give that sweet ass a smack. “Trying to rush me?”

“Yes. Aren’t you going to fuck me?”

“You bet. But I’m calling the shots tonight. You good with that?”

“Always.”

“Keep your ass in the air, chest to the bed.”

She stretches her arms out, sliding her body forward and tilting that pretty ass up just right.

“That’s my baby.” I close my hand around one hip and rub my other palm over her body. I can’t help but give her another smack, and I watch as her pussy glistens in response. “So wet for me. So ready.”

“Yes. Please.” She wiggles again, and I reward her by sinking two fingers in that slick pussy. She clenches down on them and moans. I finger fuck her until she’s bucking against my hand, begging for more.

Slipping out, I coat her clit and rub circles around it until her legs tremble.

“Please, Marcus. I want you,” she moans, and damned if my name from

her lips in that sexy purr doesn't get my dick bobbing.

I close my big hands around her tiny waist.

She tries to reach for me but can't. I like it that way, because I want to play a bit, and I don't want her rushing me. Moving over her, I pin her wrists to the mattress. "Stay there."

Brandy trembles, and I can tell it's turning her on. She likes me taking control.

My lips travel slowly across cheek and neck, pressing soft kisses on her silken skin, down between her shoulder blades, and following along her spine.

She writhes under me.

I move her legs farther apart with my knees, run my hands over her body, and reach under to cup and squeeze her breasts. They're so fucking soft.

She moans, her head dropping.

Blood rushes to my dick, and it stands at attention. My thumbs brush over her hard nipples, strumming back and forth, and she moans again. I lean forward and nuzzle her ear, shushing her as I pinch and tug at them.

Her breath quickens, and she wiggles, silently begging for more. Trailing a hot, wet path to where her throat meets her shoulder, I can't resist biting as I pinch down with my fingertips.

She moans louder, and it's such a fucking hot and sexy sound, I could listen to it all night

I release her nipples and move my hand between her legs to swirl my fingers around the opening of her pussy. "Such a good girl. My baby is dripping wet for me, isn't she?"

Her body quivers as she stays where I put her but peers over her shoulder, watching and waiting. The heat in her half-lidded gaze has my dick bobbing again.

I kneel on the floor and press kiss after kiss up her thighs, slowly alternating from one side to the other, dragging out the anticipation while rubbing my beard along her skin.

She curls her fingers, fisting the sheets tight but staying right where I put her.

I like how I'm getting to her; I like how her thighs quiver, her breathing accelerates, her hips writhe, and that pretty pussy waits for whatever I want to give it.

I slide my palms up her thighs until my thumbs hover over her pussy lips.

She whimpers as I brush the pads over her. That first barely-there touch has her jumping in response.

My thumbs stroke her slowly, over and over, and I watch her flood in response. Drawing small circles, I take my time, until she's soaked and shaking from my caresses.

"My beautiful, sweet Brandy. You're so damn wet for me."

"Marcus, please—"

"Shh, baby. You'll wait as long as I want, or I'll spank that pretty ass of yours."

She stutters in a ragged breath and writhes but stays quiet.

"Good girl," I say in a low growl. "You deserve a reward." I dip my head and press the flat of my tongue in a long, slow swipe along her clit.

She moans, but stays there, so open for me, so vulnerable. That's how I want her.

I dip my head again and lap, my tongue teasing her clit stroke after stroke, then delving inside her pussy and taking that wetness and coating her clit with it. It glistens and stands out like a tight nub from her swollen pussy lips. I like it wet like that, and I plan to keep it that way all night.

I brush my beard over her, and she stutters in a breath.

I sink two fingers inside and search for her g-spot. She's tight and wet and hot as fuck. I find it, and she bucks. Damn, if that doesn't fire me up.

I fuck her with my fingers, my thumb not letting up on her clit. Her ass presses back to meet each thrust, eager for more, and I give it to her.

She's getting close to orgasm, and her movements become more frantic, urgent, and desperate. Her breath pants in and out. "Please, Marcus. Fuck me."

I take my hard cock in my hand and stroke it, base to tip, twisting at the head. At the same time, I rub my other hand over her soft, lush ass cheek. "You've got a pretty ass, baby." Then I smack it. "But a bad girl gets her

pretty ass smacked when she doesn't listen."

She yelps but pushes her ass up higher, and I smile, giving her another one.

"You like that, baby?"

She groans and nods as I smack her cheek again, watching it jiggle so pretty as that soft skin begins to pink. My eyes trail down to her pussy, and it's drenched from her arousal.

"So insatiable. Such a naughty girl I've got on my hands. What am I going to do with her?"

Coming to my feet, I bring the head of my cock to her opening and circle it, teasing and tormenting her, making her wait until she drops her head, whimpering.

"Tell me you want me."

"I want you, Marcus, so bad."

I thrust inside and fill her completely, then position her hips with my big hands until I know I'm hitting that g-spot with every stroke. I ramp up my speed, and she presses her forehead to the bed with a groan, then starts to pant.

"Oh, God..."

I smack her ass, knowing she likes it, knowing it will intensify her desire. I want to take her higher than she's ever been.

Dropping one hand between her legs, I play with her clit until she orgasms hard, bucking wildly.

I draw out every last shudder before I, too, explode, and it's so damn good. I withdraw with a groan, and she crumples to the bed.

Breathing heavily, I move to her side and draw her against my chest, then kiss her shoulder tenderly where I bit her. "Sorry about this."

She twists her head and meets my eyes. "Don't be. I liked it."

"The woman is totally made for me." I chuckle, and wrap around her tight, loving the feel of her in my bed and in my arms. It's where she belongs. I feel contentment settle deep into my bones. It's a good feeling. A damn good feeling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT – TAKEN

Brandy—

“Let’s fuel up before hitting the shops.” Harley smiles and pulls the door open. I follow her and Izzy into the coffee shop at the outdoor mall where we’ve come on a mission.

“I completely agree.” Izzy eyes the menu board behind the counter.

We walk out a few minutes later, iced coffees in hand.

“Where should we begin?” I ask around the straw in my mouth, eyeing the shops.

“Let’s start with that cute boutique on the corner. I’m sure we can find Izzy a sexy little outfit for the party.”

That’s our mission. Get Izzy ready for the *meet-cute* with the guy Harley and Melissa set her up with.

“I’m down,” Izzy chirps. “Still sucks Melissa couldn’t make it. Hope she feels better.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine in a few days.” Harley moves toward the shop.

After three hours of shopping and a lunch, it’s time to end the day.

We walk to our cars, and Izzy hangs her bag in the backseat. She found a sexy little red lace halter top and a leather skirt. She is definitely going to turn heads.

“I’ll see you in a couple of weeks at the party, if I don’t see you sooner.” I hug her before she slides into her car.

Harley and I climb into Harley’s car, and my phone rings. I see Marcus’ name before I answer.

“Hi, babe.”

“Hey, girl. How’s the shopping day going?”

“It went great. Harley and I had a great time treating Izzy like a Barbie we could dress up.” I laugh.

“What about Melissa?”

“Oh, she wasn’t feeling well, so she didn’t make it.”

“That’s too bad. Where you at now?”

“Harley’s about to take me home.”

“Home? How about my place? It’s only a couple miles from the mall, and I want to see you.”

“Okay. Will you be home soon?”

“I will now.” I can almost hear him grinning on the other end. “It’ll take me about thirty minutes. Key’s under the mat.”

“Sounds great.” We hang up, and I look over at Harley with a smile. “Take me to Marcus’s place?”

She smiles back. “Only if I get to see it? I’m a nosy bitch.”

“A quick peek. You’re not messing up my lay.” I waggle my eyebrows at her.

She chuckles. “Deal.”

Harley pulls into a parking spot right out front and climbs from her car, surveying the place. “This is not what I expected. It’s actually kind of cute.” She glances up and down the street. “Looks like he’s right in the heart of campus housing.”

“Yeah, there are a lot of college students, but the noise doesn’t bother him.”

We walk up the few steps to his door, and I pull the mat back to find the key he told me about.

“Real original,” Harley scoffs.

“Yeah, he probably should hide this in a better place.” I slide the key in and twist the knob. It’s dark inside with all the curtains drawn, and it takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the sudden change in lighting.

I freeze, fear zinging through me when I notice the man sitting on the couch half a second before the door slams shut behind us.

The light flips on, and Harley gasps next to me. My heart is pounding when I glance her way and see recognition flash across her face, but she stays silent.

My first thought is to bolt, but a muscular beast of a man stands in front of the door and another blocks the exit to the kitchen.

Oh, crap.

“Well, look what we have here,” the man on the couch drawls. He has a crooked nose that seems as if it had a break that healed wrong. His black scraggly beard covers his face, and his smile doesn’t reach his eyes. The gold tooth that reflects the light off the lamp gives him the appearance of a pirate.

My eyes dart around the room, seeing a man leaned against the counter in the kitchen and then there’s the two blocking our exit. All of them are wearing leather cuts, but these are not Evil Dead. These guys are something else, and it’s crystal clear they’re to be feared. I try not to let that fear overwhelm me, and I push it aside with anger.

“Who the hell are you?” I practically spit out.

“I’ll ask the questions here, sexy.” The man on the couch licks his lips suggestively, and it makes me want to vomit.

He points at Harley. “I remember seeing you.” Then he points to me. “But you’re new.” He looks between us. “Which one of you is with the prospect?”

When we don’t answer, he snaps his fingers at the man in the kitchen.

I glance that way and see the man lift a piece of mail. “Marcus Pritchard,” he reads the name off the front of the envelope.

“Yeah, that’s the little asshole. Marcus. Which one of you is his?”

I shift, but see Harley’s barely perceptible shake of her head. I know we’re in a dangerous situation, but Harley is more aware of how this world works than I am, so I decide to follow her lead and keep quiet.

“No one going to answer me? Do I need to teach you some goddamn manners? They allow this shit in the Dead?”

Still, we remain silent.

“What should we do with them?” one of the men behind us asks.

Normally I’d turn my attention to whomever is talking, but I can tell the man on the couch is my biggest threat.

“Well, now.” He scratches his beard. “Seeing as we came here to kill that piece of shit who ruined our deal, I’m thinking taking their women may kill two birds.”

“We can’t let them take us,” Harley whispers so faintly I’m sure I’m the

only one who hears her.

I give the smallest nod. I'm hyper aware of everything going on around me, and that each second is bringing Marcus closer to walking in on this scene. There are four of them, so they'd have the upper hand. But maybe he could retreat and call in backup. My mind is a mix of emotions, and my heart is beating a mile a minute while I wait on any sign from Harley that we should fight.

The bikers are discussing whether to take us to replace some product they claim the Evil Dead stole.

"You think we can still sell damaged goods?" the man on the couch asks, and a chill runs down my spine.

The man in the kitchen walks our way, his eyes taking us both in. "Jackal, you know I'm always down with sampling the goods before we put them to work."

Jackal. I study the man on the couch. The name fits. His smile looks disturbed.

I give my attention to the man stalking toward us. From what they just said, I'm pretty sure we're the goods. The fight or flight instinct surges through me. Flight doesn't seem possible. I'm not about to let this guy touch me, at least not without a fight.

I turn, bracing myself, but he seems to sense it and pauses, looking toward Jackal.

"Not here, Trigger," Jackal commands. "Let's load up our goods."

It feels like we've been standing here forever, but in reality, it's probably only been around ten minutes. Nowhere near enough time for Marcus to arrive.

The other two men move toward us. Harley glances my way, and I know it's time to fight.

I summon the immense will to survive that exists inside me. I elbow and kick the man who tries to grab me, roaring a shrieking sound that momentarily gives him pause.

"God damnit, get them under control." Jackal rises from the couch to help. He tries to help wrangle me, and I head-butt him.

“Fucking shit.” He grabs his nose for a second, blood pouring out, then backhands me.

The force knocks me to the ground. My cheek burns, and I feel the coolness of a small trickle of blood down my forehead. I refuse to stand up, knowing it will be harder if I’m dead weight on the ground. I swear to God, they’ll have to drag my body out.

Unfortunately, this doesn’t seem like a problem. He bends down to tug me up, and I grab at him. I yank at the chain hooked to his jeans, trying to drag him to the ground as well. Instead, his wallet flings out and the contents spill all across the floor.

That really pisses him off. He unloads a string of curses, rears back, and hits me again, and pain explodes in my cheekbone a split second before the room fades to black.

Marcus—

I roll to a stop in my drive and climb off my bike. I can’t wait to wrap my arms around my girl. I parked right next to Harley’s car, so I guess I’ll have to wait to do what I really want to when I walk inside.

As I approach, I notice the door is not fully closed. My mind barely registers it as I push it open, but the scene inside stills my blood.

My entryway table is knocked over, contents strewn across the floor. My coffee table is smashed, the glass shattered into the carpet. My TV is cracked as if something was thrown at it.

“Brandy? *Brandy,*” I roar as I run through the house, checking all the rooms. No one is here.

Coming back to the living room, I see two phones thrown on the couch and a few small drops of blood staining the carpet.

I stand frozen in a panic, unsure what to do for only a microsecond until I move into action.

I dig my phone from my pocket and dial Crash. I need the backup from

the club and I have to tell Crash. I know I'll shatter his world the moment I do.

He answers on the second ring, which gives me time to calm myself.

"Hey, what's up prospect?"

"Where are you?" I ask the question because I want to make sure he's in a safe place when I drop this bomb.

"You don't ask where the fuck I am like you're my keeper," he grits out.

"I know." I quickly assure him. "But what I'm about to tell you is going to be hard to hear."

He seems to still and is silent for a few seconds. "I'm at the clubhouse. What the hell is it?"

"I was supposed to meet Brandy at my place." I spew out the details, wanting the words out of my mouth as quickly as possible, as if that will make it hurt less. "Harley was dropping her off. Her car is here, but they're gone. My place is destroyed like there was a struggle. I think they were taken." I stop to take a breath, choking on the last sentence.

A tormented cry rips from Crash's mouth, and I hear the phone drop to the floor.

A few seconds later, Cole's voice booms through the line. "Who the hell is this? What's going on?"

I swallow. "It's me, Marcus. The girls are gone."

"What do you mean, they're gone?"

"I told Brandy to come back to my place, but when I got home Harley's car is outside, but the girls aren't here, and it looks like there was a struggle."

"Was Melissa with her?"

I can tell from the bite in his voice he's barely holding it together himself.

"No, no." I reassure him. "She stayed home sick. It was Brandy and Harley." My voice cracks at the end. Saying the words again brings my world crashing down. I'm trying to hold it together, but I have no idea what kind of danger these girls are in.

"Give me the address. Don't move."

I do, and then I sink to the floor, my hands cradling my head, and let the emotions wash over me. *Oh my God. Brandy, where are you? What the hell*

happened here?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE – LOCK DOWN

Marcus—

Boots stomp up my front steps, and I open the door.

Cole, Crash, Wolf, and Red Dog troop inside my small house. Their eyes roam over the damage, and I can sense Crash is barely holding it together. The skin of his face is tightly drawn, and his jaw is locked.

“What happened?” Red Dog scans the damage.

“I have no idea.”

“Ever have any problems out of anyone?” Cole’s eyes lock on me.

“Nothing. Other than with the club.”

He nods. “Did you move anything? Talk to anyone?”

“No.”

“Red Dog, Wolf, check if the neighbors heard anything.”

The two of them stride out the door at our president's command, freeing up more space to maneuver around my small living room.

Cole lifts his chin. “Let’s look around. See if we can find any hints at who the hell did this.”

I turn my coffee table upright and the remaining cracked glass top crumbles to the floor.

Crash rights the entryway table, and we put the spilled contents back on it.

Cole moves through the apartment, his sharp eyes scanning for any detail out of place.

We’ve been at it for about fifteen minutes when Red Dog and Wolf make their way back in.

“Anything?” Crash asks from where he squats on the floor.

“Nobody heard or saw anything, and they’re all broke college kids so they don’t have security cameras,” Wolf replies.

Crash doesn’t say anything but goes back to picking up shit strewn about

the floor. His hand pauses over a piece of mail, and I glance his way. He's looking at a blood spot on the floor, and his jaw clenches.

Wolf notices, too. "Brother, it's probably just a nick. Doesn't seem to be much of any there."

Crash nods, but his eyes flick back to it several times.

I drop my gaze from him, and slide my arm chair into its spot. The corner of a blue credit card sticking from beneath it catches my eye. I slide it out and flip it over, reading the name. I hold it up. "I think I found something."

Crash pulls it from my hand. "Jasper Watson. Any of you know that name?"

Heads shake all around.

"Wolf, figure out everything you can about this guy." Cole pulls the card from Crash's hand and passes it to Wolf.

"On it." He moves through the door.

We finish up, not finding anything else. There's a lump in my throat. I can't imagine what the girls are going through right now, but I'm happy we found at least one clue to follow.

Crash sits at my kitchen table and puts his head in his hands. "I'm going to have to tell her." His eyes meet Cole's. "What am I going to say?"

Our president squeezes his VP's arm. "Let's see what Wolf discovers. You know he can work wonders. Once we know who this guy is, then you tell her. Because come hell or high water, we'll get your daughter back. I promise you, brother."

Crash nods silently.

Cole's gaze snaps to Red Dog. "Call everyone to church. We need to fill them in on what the hell's going on."

"On it." Red Dog sends a group text.

Cole slides his phone from his pocket. "Wolf? I just called church, but you keep working on that name. Yeah, okay. Call me as soon as you find something out." He slides his phone into his pocket. "Let's roll."

Red Dog and Crash leave first. I wait for Cole to exit so I can lock up. As he passes me, he stops and puts his hand on my shoulder just like he did to Crash.

“How are you holding up? I know Brandy is important to you.” There’s genuine concern in his eyes.

I clear my throat, trying to get the knot out that’s been choking me since the club showed up. “I just want to find them.”

His hand squeezes my shoulder. “We all do.”

I stare at his back as he walks out the door. Then I suck in a long breath and follow.

The room in the clubhouse is crowded with members gathered around the big table for Church, and once again, we prospects have been brought in. We must be setting some kind of record.

I haven’t had a chance to talk to anyone, but I see TJ and Billy glance my way. I imagine my face is reflecting the turmoil I feel. My stomach is in knots, and I feel somehow responsible. The guilt is eating me alive.

Cole slams the gavel and silence falls over the room.

“We have a serious problem. Marcus had his place ransacked.”

Several eyes flick my way.

“The girls were there when it happened.”

Billy leans forward in his chair, gripping his hands together. I can see the whites of his knuckles and imagine he must be thinking Melissa was there, too. I’m sure he wants to blurt out the question but holds back. It’s not his place here to talk unless spoken to.

“They’ve been taken,” Cole continues.

“What the hell? Who took them?” Shane turns and questions me, and there’s that guilt again, spiking up my spine and locking my jaw.

“We’re figuring that out,” Cole answers for me.

“Who exactly has been taken?” Jake asks.

“Harley and Brandy,” Cole responds.

Jake glances to where Crash sits, and the sympathy is written on his face. Every brother in here can imagine his pain.

I notice Billy visibly relax.

“What do we know?” Green leans forward in his chair, his face sterner than I’ve ever seen it.

“They were taken within thirty minutes of Marcus talking to them. We found a credit card that seems to have fallen out in the struggle. Wolf is running the name now.” Cole pulls out his phone and sets it on the table.

“Do we think it's club related? Anyone else in danger?” Shane asks.

“We don’t know. So, I want everyone on high alert and ready to move if we go into lockdown. Understood?”

A murmur of agreement reverberates around the room.

“Until I hear more—” Cole lifts his gavel to adjourn, but his phone vibrates.

Crash leans forward, peering at it.

Cole holds the phone to his ear. “Yeah?”

You could hear a pin drop as every man in the room waits.

“You’re sure? Fucking shit.” Cole sets his phone on the wooden table.

“Did he find something?” Crash blurts before Cole has even taken a breath.

“It was the Death Heads.” Cole drops the bomb.

My blood stills, and a band tightens around my chest. I suddenly feel like I can’t breathe.

“The card belonged to that asshole we beat the shit out of at the trailer,” Cole continues. “Wolf traced the name to an arrest record. He said the mugshot was definitely Jackal.”

“Goddamn it!” Crash roars, flinging his chair against the wall.

“We’re on lockdown immediately. It was obviously retaliation, and we don’t know if they’re planning to hit anywhere else.” Cole looks at all the men. “Get your families here now. TJ, go get your mom and Melissa. Billy, go get Shannon.”

They nod and quickly leave with the rest of the guys to collect their families.

Crash leans his palms on the table, his head drooping. Green pauses to squeeze his shoulder before exiting.

I stay frozen against the wall. I have no family to get. Brandy is my

family, and she's gone.

Red Dog lingers in the doorway with a pensive look on his face. "Why the hell would they go after Marcus? Wouldn't they aim for someone bigger?"

Cole looks up. "I have no idea. Maybe they thought he was an easier target being a prospect."

Red Dog seems unsatisfied with that answer. His gaze moves to Crash for a protracted moment before he, too, walks out the door.

Crash looks up, despair on his face. "Cole, what am I going to say to her? I have to tell her Harley is gone. Taken."

Cole steps to him and grabs his shoulder, squeezing. "We'll do it together. And then we're bringing your daughter home."

I'm still leaning against the wall, and feel like I should leave. This moment is personal, and I probably shouldn't be witnessing it, but I think it would draw more attention if I move now.

Red Dog's yell carries from the main room, drawing all of our attention, and we hustle down the hall.

He stands in front of the television, watching a news report. We all approach, staring at the screen. A newscaster stands at a gas station, crime scene tape and flashing lights in the background.

Red Dog looks over his shoulder. "Looks like this might be the reason they targeted Marcus. Isn't that the gas station where the Death Heads met the Senator?"

I nod, moving closer to hear the reporter.

"Police say the clerk was already dead from an apparent gunshot wound to the head when they arrived. No money appears to be missing, but the tapes from the security cameras were taken. Police do not yet have a suspect, though there were reports of multiple motorcycles leaving the gas station moments before the body was found. They're searching area businesses for any other possible security footage that may provide more information. This is Cynthia Davis reporting. KLNC News."

“They’re out for revenge,” Cole snarls. “Son-of-a-bitch.”

“Got to be the Death Heads,” Red Dog murmurs his agreement.

“Better go get Mary,” Cole reminds him.

It’s not long before the entire clubhouse is full of children, mostly teenagers and ol’ ladies. I hear them whispering amongst themselves, but no one seems to know what’s going on. None of the brothers want to let the cat out of the bag before Crash has a chance to talk to Shannon.

“Shannon, babe, come with us,” Cole calls to her, where she stands at the other side of the room.

Before she makes it all the way to him, he leans down and whispers in my ear. “Go and tell Angel what’s going on. Shannon is going to need her girl pack around her when she comes out.”

I nod, moving past Shannon. I refuse to make eye contact with her because I know the sympathy in my eyes will be a dead giveaway. They lead her down the hall to Cole's office.

“Angel?” I call tentatively.

She turns to me and frowns. I wonder if she hears in my voice the torment I feel.

“Can I talk to you?” I notice the other wives sticking close. “In private.”

“Absolutely.” She doesn’t hesitate for a second, and I’m reminded again she makes a good ol’ lady to our president.

I lead her to a back room where the cage for our monthly fights sits in the shadows.

“What’s going on?” she asks with the seriousness of a mother.

“My place was ransacked.” I pause, not sure I can get the next words out.

“Oh my God. Are you okay?”

“No, you don’t understand. *I* wasn’t there.” I emphasize the word, and she doesn’t miss it.

“Marcus, *who* was there?” The look on her face tells me she’s already stringing it together. Shannon being called away and only a handful of people are still missing from our lockdown. Her shaking hand covers her mouth.

“Harley and Brandy. They were taken.” My voice cracks on the last word,

and my jaw locks tight, my eyes welling. Pain, fear, sorrow, despair all wash over me as my back hits the wall, and I slide down it to crumple on the floor. I wasn't expecting to fall apart, but Angel is the closest thing I've had to a decent mother figure, and I need someone to talk to about it.

"Oh, sweetie." She drops to her knees, pulls me into her arms, and rocks me just as a mother would. I cling to her like a drowning man. "You boys will get them back. Nobody's going to stop until they're found."

"I know." I drag the palm of my hand across my cheeks, dashing the wetness away, embarrassed to have her see my tears. "It's just... her father warned me, and he was right. I can't keep her safe."

"Oh, Marcus..."

Before she can finish, I stand and move to the door, pausing with my hand on the knob. "Sorry, I didn't mean to break down like that. I was just telling you so you girls could be there for Shannon when she comes out." I shift uncomfortably. "Uh, thanks for this." Then I push through the door before she can say anything else.

Shortly after, Shannon emerges, her eyes puffy with the redness from crying. She looks shell-shocked as she walks to Angel, who pulls her into a hug. The room falls silent, and I hear Shannon's anguished voice.

"It's like I've been thrown into that same nightmare again. I... I can't breathe."

I walk toward the brothers, wanting to give them space.

"What's the plan?" Crash grits out. "I want my daughter back now."

Cole checks the 9mm in his shoulder harness, slamming another clip in. "I sent the Dead Souls to do some reconnaissance, since they're so much closer to the Nevada state line. In the meantime, we head to the Dead Soul's clubhouse. We can make a game plan there."

Crash gives him a curt nod.

"Who are we leaving behind to protect the families?" Shane asks.

"The prospects," Cole replies.

I shift, about to protest, which is not what prospects do, but hell, it's my girl's life on the line. I'll be damned if I'll stand around the clubhouse. Before I can get the words out, Cole beats me to it.

“Marcus, you come too.”

I meet his gaze and nod. “Thank you.”

Within ten minutes, the brothers are loaded up on their motorcycles. I’m ready to follow in the van Cole told me bring. He didn’t say why. We both know the girls are capable of riding bikes. I know what his order means. It’s in case they’re so injured or traumatized they physically can’t ride. I refuse to let my mind go any farther down that dark path.

A few hours later, we roll into the Dead Soul’s clubhouse lot. This ride has never felt so long.

The Dead Souls are already back.

Cole dismounts and approaches Wyatt, their president. “Find anything?”

“Two new girls were taken to the Death Head’s cat house. Sent a brother in on the down low, but he never saw them. He asked about new talent and was told they were training some new recruits, and to try back tomorrow. Then he heard one of the employees tell another to buy some makeup to cover up bruising.”

My jaw clenches. I’m going to rip the throat out of anyone who laid a finger on my Brandy.

Crash is already walking to his bike.

“Whoa, whoa.” Cole grabs him. “We can’t just go in, guns blazing.”

Crash shoves his hands away. “The hell we can’t. They have my daughter. They’re all dead men walking.”

“Look Crash, I get it. But you’re going to get yourself or someone else killed running in there hot. Give me ten minutes to get us all on the same page, and then we roll out.”

Crash stares into Cole’s eyes. “Ten minutes,” he repeats. “Then I’m going to kill that fucking asshole.”

Cole slaps his shoulder. “Deal.”

CHAPTER THIRTY – BULLSEYE

Brandy—

A large Death Head with a hand clamped over my upper arm drags Harley and me in the back door of a building and up a flight of stairs. My arm aches from his grip, but I stumble along without complaint. I know what those get me—a pop to the mouth. From what I can tell, we're in some kind of brothel. Scantly clad women wander the halls. They barely look at us, and when they do, there's no curiosity, no sympathy. Their eyes are almost lifeless, resigned to their fate.

Oh, God. Where the hell have these dirty bikers brought us? We pass several open doors, and I see large beds. Moans come from behind the closed ones.

Finally, we reach the end of the hall. The man with the iron grip shoves us, stumbling into a dark room, and the door slams shut behind us.

Light shines in through the window, and I quickly move to it, not sure when the voices on the other side of the door will re-enter. I pull with all my might, but it's nailed shut. Several vest-clad men stand in the driveway. A line of pine trees blocks the view of the road we came in on, but we seem to be miles from civilization with only a house or two in the distance. Even if the men down below leave, I don't know if we can break the window, jump down from the second floor without getting hurt, and then make it to one of those houses. And who's to say they don't belong to someone in the club or are friendly to the club in some way.

Hope dims inside me, but I know I have to be strong for Harley. I have to believe Marcus and her father and the club will find us somehow. They'll come for us. I have to hang on to that belief.

"I don't think we can escape. Least not through the window," I whisper, turning to Harley.

She nods and moves around the room.

I frown. “What are you doing?”

“Looking for a weapon,” she whispers over her shoulder.

She’s proving to be much more of a badass than I anticipated.

Squatting next to a wooden dresser, she fiddles with it. “The drawers are all empty, but there’s a loose screw from one of the handles.” She twists it out with her fingers and slides it into her back pocket.

I take in her face. Her cheek is swollen, and she has a small cut in the corner of her mouth from the fight we put up at Marcus’ place. I lift a hand and brush my thumb over her bruised brow.

She assesses my injuries as well. I’m sure I look a mess. Her eyes water, and I take her in my arms and stroke her back.

“Hey, it’s okay. They’ll figure it out, and then your father will come for you.”

“I know.” She snuffles. “It’s just... when I saw you motionless on the floor and blood all over your face. I thought, I thought...”

“I’m okay. I mean, my head hurts like a bitch, but you know the scalp always bleeds a ton.” There was an inch long gash on my head, but it had stopped bleeding, and I didn’t want her to worry. “It was really just a scratch, honey.”

She nods and wipes the tears.

“Now look.” I lift my chin toward the door. “You can’t let them see you cry. Okay?”

“You’re right.”

“And you can’t tell them who you are. This is what they did when they didn’t realize your importance. I don’t want to think what vengeful plans they’d have if they really knew.”

“I know.” She looks toward the door.

“But they’ll come for us.” I’m not sure if I’m saying it to reassure her or myself. “We’re going to have to do whatever we need to in order to stay alive until they get here. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes.” The word is barely a whisper and I see the realization dawn in her eyes. “I hope they get here fast.”

“Me too, sweetheart.” I squeeze her hand. “At least we’re together.”

Hours pass, and soon the sun is setting, painting the sky with pinks and golds. It would be beautiful if we weren't in such a precarious situation.

Several bikes rode away about an hour ago, but I saw one man down below the window. I'm betting there's at least one or two more still here.

I begin to relax, hoping we may be left alone until morning, when suddenly the doorknob turns.

I immediately recognize the man who steps inside. He's the same one who stalked toward me in Marcus' kitchen. His eyes lock on Harley, and he heads toward her.

I step into his path.

His eyes narrow. "I don't give a shit which of you whores I move; I just know one of you is coming with me. You'll do."

With that, he grabs a fistful of my hair and yanks me out the door and down the hallway. I thrash, trying to free myself from the pain.

He opens the door to another room and shoves me to the floor. I gasp, but quickly gain my feet, knowing I may need to fight. Tears sting my eyes from the pain he inflicted.

"Aren't you a hellcat?" He licks his lips, and his eyes drop to my cleavage, where my chest heaves.

He's on me in a flash, moving toward me with lightning speed to take one of my breasts into his hand, squeezing tight until I cry out in pain.

Everything inside me urges me to fight, but I know resisting only pisses these men off. As badly as I want to, I can't afford to give them trouble, because if Harley and I are too much trouble, they'll have no reason to keep us alive. But I find him so revolting, my skin crawls.

It's almost involuntary when I knee him straight in the balls. He roars in pain, and I quickly try to move out of his reach. Before I get two steps, he yanks me around and slaps me across the face. The rings he wears cut my tender skin. He rears back to hit me again, but the door bursts open and a middle-aged plump redhead stands in the doorway.

“Trigger! What the hell is going on in here? You’re going to have to keep your hands off this one tonight.”

“The fuck I will,” he spits.

Her hands slam to her hips. “You’re scaring away half my paying customers. Half the *Death Heads*’ paying customers.” She emphasizes the word to remind him. “You want to explain that to Snake? Explain how your need for pussy is costing him money?”

He glares at her and then turns his attention to me, considering her words. A second later, he shoves me away, and I stumble. “I’ll be back, and I’ll be sure to bring something that’ll make you a little more docile.”

He shoves past the woman and down the stairs.

I study her, wondering if she could be an ally. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t do that for you, sweetheart.” She uses the endearment, but nothing about the way she says it is endearing. “Tomorrow you’ll start earning me money or the club can take you with them and do what they want. Understand?” She smiles a cruel smile, as if she’s enjoying the suffering she plans to impart.

“Understand.”

She walks through the door, turning back right before she shuts it. “Don’t get any ideas. They’ve got men stationed all around the place.” Not waiting for a response, she closes the door, locking it from the outside.

Pressing my ear to it, I listen intently, hoping Harley is okay. I never hear any screams. I can only hope they left her alone, too. Slumping against the door, I finally let my emotions out, and sob quietly, letting the tears come. *Please find us, Marcus.*

After realizing no one is going to bother us, at least not tonight, I finally doze off on the bed, knowing I’m going to need all my energy for tomorrow.

I don’t know how much time has passed when the rumble of motorcycles startles me awake.

Morning light filters through the window, and fear creeps in again as the events of the last twenty-four hours flash through my head. What if one of those bikes is Trigger coming back to finish what he started?

Marcus—

True to his word, Cole took ten minutes to review the aerial photos of the property online and plan out how we'll surround it and clear room by room to ensure no one sneaks the girls out.

He also has Shane call in the Nevada chapter for assistance. Daytona, the president, was pissed to find out the Death Heads were fucking with the Dead in their state. He informed us he'd bring his full crew. It'll take them about six hours to get to the area. They won't be help at the cathouse, but they should be here by the time we ride to the Death Heads' holding.

The cathouse comes into view as the sun rises over the mountains. It's a sand-colored two-story stucco house. We roar up on it, knowing there's no time to sneak up; we've only got speed on our side. Skidding to a stop with guns drawn, we immediately disarm the man guarding the door, who seems too shell-shocked to even pull his weapon. Once he's down, we dash inside. The Dead Souls hang back to surround the house in case anyone gets the bright idea to sneak out the rear.

Being a prospect, I'm through the door last. A red-headed woman is raising hell, but two of the brothers get her restrained, while another holds a gun on a Death Head's prospect.

I immediately head to the stairs. Crash has the same idea, and I trail behind him as we take the steps two at a time. Crash takes the door on the left, and I move to the one on the right. It's unlocked, but the room is empty.

Crash's door is locked. He steps back and lands a kick next to the doorknob where the shitty lock immediately gives way, busting open. A young blonde kneels between the spread legs of an old white man, giving him head.

"Hey, what is this? Get outta here," he yells.

Crash scans the room and then moves down the hall to the next door. I stand back as he busts through it as well, but we only find two women on a

bed pleasing a graying man. Neither are our girls.

The next door I come to has a key lock from the outside. My heart pounds. This is exactly the kind of room they'd use to keep someone prisoner inside. I jiggle the handle, but it's locked.

Crash moves next to me. We lift our legs together and kick. The door bangs against the wall. A split second later, a wooden drawer comes flying across the room, smashing on the doorframe, causing us to both jump back to avoid being hit.

"Brandy! It's me." I call into the room as she gets ready to hurl another one.

At the sound of my voice, she drops the drawer and runs to me.

I grab her in my arms, holding her tight, breathing in her scent and thanking God. "Are you okay?"

She nods against my shoulder.

Crash interrupts. "Where's Harley?"

Brandy pulls back. "They had her in the room at the end of the hall."

Crash bolts from the room.

My eyes move over Brandy as I run a knuckle gently across her cheek.

My jaw tightens at the sight of her face. She has dried blood smeared across her forehead, her cheekbone is bruised and swollen, and several small cuts and bruises mar her cheek as if she was hit with something.

"Who did this to you?" My voice comes out steely. "Did they, did they..." I can't seem to get the question out.

She cups my cheek and runs her thumb over my lips. "They didn't touch me. Not yet. One tried, but he was stopped."

"Who?"

"The lady called him Trigger."

"He do this, too?" I ask, brushing my fingers gently along her face.

"Some of it."

"Who did the rest?"

"Jackal."

I don't ask any more questions, not wanting to make her relive it all. I take her hand and pull her behind me and out the door as we catch up to

Crash.

He's just managed to get the door open as we make it to him.

Harley stands in the corner, and when she sees her father burst through the door, her face crumbles.

He scoops her into his arms. "Baby girl, thank God. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" He rocks her back and forth, stroking her head.

I tug on Brandy's hand and nod toward the hallway to give them time alone.

We walk down the hall as several brothers troop up.

"You found her! What about Harley?" Cole asks as he nears.

"Crash is with her now. Room at the end of the hall."

He nods and moves past us.

"Any more Death Heads up here?" Green calls as he moves down the hall.

"Not that we came across." I glance behind him and see Jake and Shane clearing rooms as they go.

When we reach the first floor, Red Dog and Wolf stand over several bloodied Death Heads. They're down on their knees, their hands bound behind their backs with zip ties.

I move Brandy to the kitchen and steer her to a chair, then move to the sink and wet a towel to wipe away the dried blood. Once it's cleaned, I clearly see the deep purple bruising along her cheek bone. She also has a small knot at the top of her head with a gash.

"How'd you get this, babe?" I dab the cold cloth to it.

She winces at my touch. "I head-butted Jackal when we were at your place. We were trying to keep them from taking us, or at least stall until you got there."

"I'm so sorry, Brandy."

She touches my face. "I knew you'd find us."

"You girls did good. The way my place looked with you girls putting up a fight let me know to call for help. One of you must have knocked a card out, because we found a credit card that we tracked to the Death Heads." I pull her into my arms. "You're safe now."

“I know,” she whispers against my chest. “How’s Harley? They haven’t come down yet. I hated that they separated us. I tried so hard to protect her.”

As if on cue, we hear the boots thumping down the stairs.

“Let’s go,” Cole calls from the front.

We all move outside to our bikes.

“What should we do with these assholes?” Wolf asks, gesturing to the few Death Heads still on the ground.

“Leave them as bruised as they left our girls.” Cole pauses. “Actually, leave them worse.”

He walks to his bike as Red Dog and Wolf lay a beat down on the Death Heads.

I lead Brandy to the van and spot Crash on his phone. I know it has to be Shannon he’s called. That fact is confirmed when he hands the phone to Harley. I can hear her assuring her mom that she’s okay.

Cole and Crash approach us.

“Hey Brandy, we need to talk to you for a few minutes.” Cole smiles reassuringly.

“Okay.”

“First, I wanted to say thank you,” Crash starts. “Harley said you stepped between her and one of the men to protect her. Said you ended up getting roughed up because of it, but your plan worked because you drew his attention away from my daughter. I’m grateful.”

“It was the least I could do,” Brandy murmurs.

I swallow the guilt I feel for having put Brandy in this situation. I brought her into my life and then I led the Death Heads right to my doorstep.

Brandy relates every detail for them, and by the end of it, my blood is boiling.

“Is Harley okay?” she whispers to Crash.

“Yes, thanks to you. No one bothered her.”

Brandy nods, relief spreading across her face.

Snake, President of the Death Heads Montana Chapter—

“Flick, call the Evil Dead down in Vegas and figure out why they just busted up our cathouse outside Reno,” I snap at the prospect behind the bar. He retreats to do my bidding, and I spot Jackal from the corner of my eye. He seems fidgety, like he knows something. I make my way to him.

He stares from his seat at a table, a drink in his hand. “Prez.”

“Jackal. You want to tell me why the Dead would be interested in our cathouse?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“It’s not Vegas you need to call. It’s California.”

I pick up his whiskey glass and chuck it against the wall behind his head. “God dammit, Jackal! I thought we were done with that shit. I’m not trying to start a war with the Dead. You said it’d be a one-time deal. In and out. Would save us money on paying girls. Now you’re fucking around in their territory again?”

He rises from his chair. “I wasn’t fucking around in California. I was teaching them a goddamn lesson. They don’t get away with what they did to my crew.” His eyes are bloodshot, and his face red with anger.

He’s becoming more damn trouble than he’s worth, and if I’m being honest, he’s been that way for quite some time now.

“What the hell did you do?” I bite out, wanting all the facts before I strangle the life from him.

“We taught ‘em a lesson. Took two of their girls. Prospect girls. They’re basically nobodies.”

Before I can say another word, Flick returns, shaking his head. “Nobody answered.”

Moments later, I can hear the rumble of not a few bikes, but a fucking army of them.

I grab Jackal by the collar and throw him into the wall. “Fucking nobodies, huh?”

“I swear.”

I spit on him. “Now I have to go clean up your damn mess before this turns into a fucking blood bath and, from the sounds of it, it’ll be our blood.”

I point to Whiskey on the way out. He's the only other brother capable of keeping Jackal and his crew in check. "Keep him the fuck inside."

Trusting at least one of my men will do what I fucking tell him, I push through the doors to see about thirty or forty Evil Dead with guns drawn.

I hold my hands up to show truce and walk toward the bikes.

"Cole. Daytona," I call, recognizing two at the front.

"Snake, we're not here for a chat," Cole grits out, his steely eyes tracking me.

"I know. I had a crew go rogue. Took some of your prospects' ladies."

"Wrong," a man wearing their VP patch speaks up. "They took my daughter."

Oh, fuck. I'm sure the look on my face gives my shock away, quickly followed by my anger. I hate being put in this position. Now I've got to fucking concede to this bunch. I grit my teeth. "Those to blame will be dealt with accordingly. Got my word."

"Damn right, they will. But we're gonna be the ones to deal with them," Cole demands in a no-nonsense voice.

Marcus—

I climb from the van. The girls pile in the bench seat next to me. "I'll be right back. You're both safe."

They nod, looking around. They're surrounded on all sides by bikers who would lay down their lives for them.

I walk toward the rest of the men, whom I hope will soon be my brothers, and wait. The Death Heads president has been talking to Cole, Crash, Daytona, Trick, and Wyatt for a while now.

Crash looks over his shoulder and spots me. He calls me over with two fingers.

I hope he's not pissed I left the van.

He whispers the deal they just made in my ear, and I give a curt nod.

The door of the clubhouse bursts open, and Death Heads come spilling out, but their numbers barely make up a third of ours.

Jackal makes his way to the front as some of the Evil Dead climb on their bikes, strapping their helmets on.

“What the fuck is this? You going to just let them ride out of here?” Jackal practically screams at Snake, lifting an arm toward us.

“Nope. We made a deal.” Snake walks toward his crew, leaving Jackal standing there huffing.

“What fucking deal?” he yells after Snake.

“We agreed to forgive all and not start a war,” Crash speaks up, then grins and lifts a chin at Jackal. “In exchange for your head, motherfucker.”

Before Jackal has a chance to let the words sink in, Crash raises his gun and fires.

BAM!

Jackal’s body falls almost in slow motion, a look of confusion plastered forever on his face and a bullet hole through his forehead.

I’d been searching for one more face—Trigger, the man Brandy named as the one who tried to rape her. “Which one of you is Trigger?”

Snake points the man out. He stands only a couple of feet from Jackal’s body.

Crash looks over at me, and I know that’s my cue. I push between some brothers.

“And yours,” I spit out, a split second before I shoot.

“Who-ee,” Green hoots. “Nailed him right between the eyes.”

“Hey.” Shane slaps Green on the chest. “I think you just found Marcus a name. *Bullseye.*”

“Bullseye.” Cole seems to be testing it out. “Yeah, I think I like that.”

“Let’s get our girls home,” Crash calls.

“We good now?” Snake asks.

“Yeah, we’re good.” Cole climbs on his motorcycle and twists his throttle. The bikes pull out as I jog over to the van.

The girls sit in stunned silence.

Harley finally breaks it. “I think it’s safe to say they won’t be bothering

us anymore.”

Brandy laughs. I’m not sure if it’s tiredness, relief, or hysteria, but I love the sound.

“Your laugh brightens my soul.” I squeeze her leg. “Let’s go home.”

She lays her hand on top of mine and squeezes it back.

I feel relief she’s okay, but I also have this dread that something has turned. I couldn’t keep her safe, and the thought gnaws at me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE – DUMBASS

Marcus—

A month has passed since we rescued the girls, and still every time I unlock the door to my house and step over the threshold, my mind flashes to that moment when I saw my place destroyed and my girl missing.

I'm only here to grab some more clothes. I've been staying at Brandy's every night since we got her back. She knows she's safe. Hell, she saw us kill the men who terrorized her and Harley Jean, but we both know she's not ready to step foot in my place. She may never be ready.

Each time I walk through this door, the realization that I failed her hits me in the face all over again.

My phone vibrates, and a name flashes across the screen. Brandy's father. I take a deep breath. She told him what happened yesterday, so I've known this call was coming.

I swallow and put it to my ear. "Gerald."

"You want to tell me why I'm just learning about my daughter being kidnapped?" he snaps, getting straight to the point.

"Everything happened so fast, and we were heading to get them before I had a chance." I know he won't be happy with that answer. I wouldn't be either, but it's the truth. Everything did unfold quickly. Thank God it did, too, because the girls had mostly been untouched when we got to them.

"Bullshit. I should have been your first call. I told you your life was too dangerous. I knew it, but I liked you, so I disregarded what was right in front of my face. You can't keep her safe."

His words cut through me. Maybe because deep inside, I believe them.

"You need to let Brandy go, Marcus. If you have any real feelings for her, you'll break it off. Admit it, you know she's better off without you."

"Gerald." My throat closes. I don't even have an argument to give him.

"She's safer without you in her life, Marcus." He says the words softly, as

if that will make them hurt less.

He's right. I failed her. My life *is* too dangerous. He deserves the admission I give him. "You're right." There's a vise grip around my heart as images of the future I'd imagined with Brandy flash before my eyes and fade away like smoke. I hang up before Gerald can say anything more and before my voice cracks the way my heart just did.

I hear Brandy in the kitchen as I open her door.

"It's me," I call out. Since her kidnapping, I always make a point to announce myself.

"Hey, babe. I'm cooking spaghetti," she yells from the other room.

I want to pretend everything's okay. I want to sit down and have dinner and act like we did before, but I know I can't do that to her. Her father was right. My life is what put her in danger, and I refuse to let that ever happen again.

I walk into the kitchen and stare at the sight before me. She's humming a tune as she stirs the sauce, her back to me. I watch her for a bit longer, wanting to draw out this last moment before I destroy everything between us.

She glances over her shoulder and smiles, and I can't put it off any longer.

"We need to talk."

"Okay." She sets her wooden spoon down and walks around the island to me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

I tuck a strand of hair back, then I let my thumb brush over her lips. I dip my head and take her mouth in a gentle kiss, knowing it will be our last. It's tearing my heart out. I lift my head and stare into her beautiful, soulful eyes. "You mean the world to me, Brandy. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes." A small frown line forms on her brow. "Of course."

"And I'd do anything for you."

I see her take a breath and steel herself as if what's coming is dawning on her. "But?"

“But...” I draw the word out. “My life is dangerous, too dangerous.”

“Stop right there,” she snaps, pushing out of my arms. “You don’t get to decide what’s too dangerous for me.”

“I could have lost you, and it would have been my fault. I’m doing this to protect you.”

“Doing what? Are you breaking up with me?” She pulls her chin to the side, her brows slashing down.

“It’s the only way I know to keep you protected. Being in my life isn’t safe.”

“That’s bullshit. You had no problem with me being around your life before. Now you’re going to run? You’re a coward.”

I look down and shake my head, knowing I probably deserve that, and glad it’s anger she’s releasing on me and not sadness. I don’t think I could handle her tears.

“They were going to use you for sex work. Don’t you get that? In your life, you are safe. In mine, you are not. It’s as simple as that.”

“Simple? So, this is simple to you?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I want to be in your life. I’m not going to let you push me away just because you’re scared.”

Her words are defiant. She’s a fighter. I guess I always knew that. It’s obvious she’s not going to let me end this unless I hurt her. I drag in a slow breath, and do the thing I didn’t want to have to do. I slice her with my words.

“What did you expect from this?” I wave my hand back and forth between us. “You had your time slumming. Now you need to go back to your real life, and I need to go back to mine. It was fun, don’t get me wrong, but we both know this would never work.”

My words do their job. Her face hardens, and her body stiffens as her walls start to erect. I feel her pulling back, but I need to finish it. Make sure she stays away for good. Make sure she goes back to her rich life, where she’s safe.

“I was more than happy to play the role of bad boy in your fantasy, but

now it's time to end it. It's not like we love each other." The lies pour from my mouth, and my heart aches as I say them.

"No," she says quietly. "Of course, we didn't." A single tear rolls down her cheek. It's nearly my undoing. I almost pull her into my arms and tell her they're all lies. Of course I love her. But then her anger returns, and I'm able to steel myself. "Well, looks like you did lose me, and guess what, Marcus? It is your fault. Now get out."

Her words are like a dagger through my chest.

"Brandy—" I start, but then clamp my teeth together. I can't ease her pain, not if I'm going to keep her away and safe.

"Get out," she yells.

I turn and move through the door. When I shut it, I hear glass shatter against it. I rest my hand and forehead on the door and breathe the words she'll never hear. "I'm sorry Brandy. I do love you."

My hand slips from the knob, and I make my way to my bike.

It's been seven long nights since I broke up with Brandy. I haven't heard from her, and that's probably for the best.

I stand behind the bar, sliding beers to brothers and making mix drinks for their ol' ladies.

"How's Brandy doing?" Angel asks.

"Okay, I think." I hand Cole a whiskey.

"You think?" he asks after he takes a sip.

"We, uh, broke up." I bend to grab two longnecks from the ice chest below the bar.

"You broke up?" Shannon asks from a couple of barstools down. "Why?"

"I, uh, thought she'd be safer." I don't make eye contact with any of them.

"You're a dumbass." Shannon slams her beer down.

"Shannon," Crash warns.

"No, he's a dumbass. Tell me I'm wrong."

My eyes flick to Crash, and he shrugs.

“That’s right, Marcus. I said it. You’re a dumbass. You think she’ll be safer without you? Because of all the stuff that happened?”

“Yeah.” I look around the bar at the faces staring at me.

Shannon points her finger at Angel. “Angel was in trouble, and Cole rescued her. I was running from my lunatic ex, and Crash saved me. We are all safer because of this club, not the other way around. Is it dangerous? Yes. But these men move mountains for their women.” Then she points her finger at me. “Wouldn’t you do the same? Didn’t you already?”

“Yeah, I guess I did.” I’m starting to wonder if I made a huge mistake.

“She’s right,” Angel chimes in. “This world is dangerous. But Brandy is worse off without a man like you in her life. That’s just a fact.”

I rest my hands on the edge of the bar and look down, my mind racing from all their opinions.

“Do you love her?”

I look up, and my eyes connect with Cole’s. “What?”

“Do. You. Love. Her? I mean, that’s all that really matters, right?”

“She’s all I think about. I feel whole when she’s around. Yeah. I love her.”

He lifts his hands and arcs a brow. “So then?”

“But I lied to her. I told her I didn’t love her. I pushed her away. Christ, I royally fucked up.”

“Well, you’re not wrong about that.” Shannon’s mouth quirks up.

Angel grins. “Guess you’re going to have to get down on your knees and grovel, Marcus.”

Crash huffs out a laugh. “Man, we’ve all been *there*.”

“That we have,” Cole agrees with a chuckle, and downs his whiskey.

“Well?” Shannon gives me a look.

All eyes stare expectantly at me.

I feel a cold wave wash straight to the pit of my stomach, the fear of losing her settling in like a ball of knots. I rest my suddenly shaking hands on the bar top. Knowing what I have to do, but not having a clue how to go about it. “Well, I guess I’ve got a girl to go win back.”

Cole slaps my shoulder and gives it a shake. “Damn straight.”

Brandy—

My dad’s been calling me several times a day since I told him about what happened. He always seems relieved when I answer.

“Hey, Dad.”

I hear his exhale of breath as if he was holding it. “Hey, baby girl. How have you been?”

“All right. I finished writing my opera. The librettist that I intern with is going to read it and let me know what she thinks.”

“That’s wonderful, honey. I knew you could do it. How’s the apartment? You know the offer to come home for a while still stands.”

“No, thanks. I’m good, the apartment is great. Everything is fine.”

“Are you sure, Brandy? I know you must be lonely without Marcus.”

I pause. I never told him we broke up. It’s been too painful to talk about without crying. “How do you know about Marcus?”

“Oh, uh...” I can practically hear his brain turning, trying to come up with a lie to tell me.

“*Dad?*”

“*Okay*, I talked to Marcus.”

“So, Marcus told you.” I frown. That just seems odd.

“Um, not exactly.”

“Daddy, what’s going on?”

“Okay, okay. Just don’t get mad.”

Too late for that.

“I talked to Marcus right after you told me about the kidnapping.”

“And?”

“And I may have told him his life was no good for you, and he needed to let you go.”

“*What?*” I slam the palm of my hand to my forehead. “Jesus, Daddy, I

love you, but I need you to stay the hell out of my love life.”

“Brandy, I was only looking out for you. I want you to be safe.”

“No, Dad. This wasn’t helpful at all. To tell you the truth, I’ve been lying to you.”

“Lying? About what?”

“Everything is not fine. I’m not fine. I hardly get any sleep. I’m constantly nervous about walking through my door. I turn on every light in the house as soon as I get home. I don’t feel safe at all. The only time I’ve ever felt safe was with Marcus. And on top of all that, I’m dealing with heartbreak because I love him. And he pushed me away and told me I didn’t mean the same to him. He said he didn’t love me. And now I don’t know what to believe. And this was all because of you?”

“Brandy, I’m sorry. I’ll talk to him.”

“No! You’ve done enough. I have to go.” I look at my phone to see Harley calling on the other line. “Love you.”

Harley and I have kind of bonded over our ordeal. We started doing Sunday morning coffees, and it’s been really helpful, like therapy.

“Hey, Harley.”

“Hey, I’m at the clubhouse. They’re having a big family grill out.”

“Oh…” I say sadly.

“Guess what? Someone spilled the tea. Big time.”

“You mean gossip?”

“More than gossip. This came straight from the source.”

“What did you hear?”

“Oh, just that Marcus loves you.”

“What?”

“Ha. I knew *that* would get your attention. He was moping around like he has been all week, and some of the ol’ ladies started asking about you. One thing led to another, and Cole flat out asked him if he loved you.”

“He did?” My heart is racing now.

“Yup. Want to know what Marcus said?”

She’s teasing me. She knows I do. I try to play it cool. “Sure.”

“He said he told you he didn’t love you, but that it was a lie he used to

push you away. He said you're all he thinks about." She giggles. "Then Shannon called him a dumbass."

"Really?" I huff out a laugh as relief spreads over me. Before I even hang up the phone, I'm grabbing my leather jacket and slipping it on.

"So?" Harley asks. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. But one thing I do know is I'm not going to sit around and do nothing."

"Atta girl," Harley cheers.

I hang up, grab my purse, and open the door, coming face to face with Marcus. My body locks up in shock.

We stare at each other for a moment, before I finally get my mouth to work.

"Hi," I whisper, taking in his heaving chest like he ran to my door.

"Hey." He stares at me and swallows. "I lied, Brandy. About all of it. You aren't just some girl. You're *my* girl. I haven't stopped thinking about you. And I know I said my life is dangerous, but the world is dangerous. I'll do anything to keep you safe, because damn it, Brandy, I love you. Please give me another shot."

I stare at him, partly in shock and partly because I want him to grovel for just a moment longer. I arc a brow. "Took you long enough."

A beautiful grin forms across his face a split second before he grabs me by the waist and drags my body against his. I could stay wrapped up in his arms forever. As I feel his hard body curve around me, I know the part of me that was missing is back. His mouth lowers over my lips, and we kiss for a long time before he presses his forehead to mine.

"I love you, girl. I'm not letting you go again."

"I love you, too." I smile up at him, happiness flooding me down to my soul. This man is it for me. "The forever kind of love, and that better not scare you off again."

"No, ma'am. Not a chance."

"Good. Because I'm a forever kind of girl."

He chuckles. "Good to know." His eyes drift to the purse still slung over my shoulder and he lifts his chin to it. "Where were you going?"

“Actually, I was coming to knock some sense into you.”

He arcs a brow and chuckles. “Were you now? Sorry to disappoint, but Shannon already took care of that for you.”

“I knew I always liked her. I’ll have to remember to thank her.”

The next thing I know, Marcus bends, wraps an arm around my hips, and flings me over his shoulder, my ass up in the air. “You’ll have to thank her later, darlin’; we’ve got some really good makeup sex to get on with.” He smacks my ass, and I yelp.

“Is that so?”

“Yep, gonna take all night, woman. You good with that?”

“I’m good with that.”

“Good answer.”

My laughter rings down the hallway. I can’t help it. I’m happier than I’ve ever been, and I’m right where I want to be—slung over my man’s shoulder and being carried off to bed.

Marcus drops me to my back on the mattress and follows me down. We’re face to face, and he slows things down, toying with my hair.

“I never want to lose you again, Brandy.”

“You won’t.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“You’re it for me, baby. No one else I want riding on the back of my bike. No one else I want to come home to. No one else I want to spend my life with.”

Tears slip from the corner of my eyes. “I love you, Marcus.”

“I love you more.”

“Honey?”

“Yes, babe?”

“Shut up and kiss me already.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He grins that sexy smile of his, and my heart melts a little more. The love I feel for him goes so deep I know it will last forever. Then this beautiful man proceeds to kiss me in a way that makes every thought leave my head, and I’m more than okay with that.

EPILOGUE

Marcus—

I walk into the theater in my black slacks and a white button down. My ink is peeking out from under my rolled sleeves.

Moving into the entryway, I see Green's ol' lady, Sara.

"Marcus! Come, come. I'll show you to your seat." She smiles.

We walk down the red carpeted aisle that leads to the matching velvet-covered chairs. The opera house is ornate with intricate carvings gilded in gold leaf and from the ceiling hangs an enormous chandelier. The curtains hang closed in long draping gold fabric. This place is something else. It's exactly where my Brandy belongs.

As we approach, I see Brandy's father and mother sitting dressed to the nines. In the past three months, we've really not seen them. One awkward time at a party and later when they invited us over for dinner, but Brandy's been busy and honestly, I think avoiding them.

Sara leans over. "I have to make sure everything runs smoothly with the costumes."

"No worries. I'll be fine." I assure her with a smile. I take a breath and slide into my seat. "Gerald, Patricia."

He turns, noticing me. "Oh, Marcus. Good to see you."

"You too."

He opens his mouth to say something, but a crowd of MC family come weaving down the aisle.

"Marcus!" Melissa calls, waving as she approaches. She's followed by Harley, Crash, Shannon, Angel, Green, Crystal, and Wolf.

"Hey guys! It's awesome you all came."

"Well, we had to show Brandy our support." Shannon makes a face as if that was obvious.

"I always make it to one of the performances where Sara managed the

fashion. Figured I might as well make it the one where our prospect's girl was showing off her new show." Green squeezes my shoulder.

"Thank you all for coming. I know it'll mean a lot to her, and it means the world to me." The corner of my mouth pulls up.

"All right, all right. You don't have to get all mushy," Wolf teases, and glances around. "When's this thing start, anyway?"

"About"—I glance down at my watch—"five minutes."

Brandy—

Backstage is all hustle and bustle. I move forward to assist a singer in donning their elaborate gown when a flower delivery boy walks in front of me.

"I'm looking for Brandy Arrington." He reads the name off the delivery ticket. I can barely see his face peeking around the edge of a huge vase of what must be two dozen red roses.

My mouth drops open. "That's me."

"Oh, good. Because these are big, and it's hard to see where I'm going."

I grab the card from the little plastic stick that protrudes out of the top.

Brandy—

I am so proud of you and everything you've accomplished. Take a moment. Take a breath. Soak it all in. This is your dream. And you're living it. I love you, and I know your opera is going to kill it tonight.

—Marcus

"Oh my gosh. Who sent you flowers?" Sara leans forward to smell their intoxicating scent.

"Marcus." I grin like a schoolgirl.

"So sweet. Would you like me to take them and put them in my office until the show is over? Speaking of which..." She glances at a wall clock.

“The show is about to start.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Go, go, go. Take your seat. This is your moment.” She shoos me toward the door.

“I know. I’m nervous, and I want to be where I can help.”

“We’ve got it covered. Get out there and enjoy.”

I smile, give her a quick hug, and heed her advice, rushing toward the door.

As I make my way to the front of the house, I see the first row full of family, friends, and the MC—my new family. I immediately start to tear up. I have so many people rooting for me. I start fanning myself with the program, trying to dry my tears without messing up my makeup.

Marcus rises from his seat and comes to me.

“You okay?” he whispers, genuine concern in his eyes.

I nod. “I’m just so happy to have so many people here for me, supporting me. And, most importantly, you. Thank you for the beautiful roses.”

“You’re welcome, gorgeous.”

“You’ve encouraged my dream from the get go, and I wouldn’t be here without you.” I rest my hand on his cheek.

“That’s not true. You got yourself here. I just kept your spirit up. You did all the heavy lifting.”

“How did I get so lucky?” I lean forward and kiss him.

“Get a room.” Green chuckles.

“There’s time for that later. Let’s watch this show,” Wolf calls.

“Opera.” Marcus corrects him, but he’s still staring at me like I’m the only person in the theater. “Let’s go see the fruits of your labors.” He grabs my hand and leads me to my seat, and I can’t help but think I’d follow this man anywhere.

Marcus—

“Bravo, bravo!” The cheers roar all around us as the opera comes to an end.

“I loved it!” I yell in Brandy’s ear so she can hear me over all the thunderous clapping. “Reminded me of us—two lovers from different sides of the track.”

She winks. “I may have used you for inspiration.”

Person after person hugs and congratulates Brandy, and she is beaming.

“I need to go catch the singers before they leave. I want to tell them how amazing they were.” She looks at me as if she doesn’t want to make me wait.

“Do your thing. I’ll be hanging around in the lobby whenever you finish up.”

She gives my hand a squeeze and then hurries down the front aisle to the stage.

“Marcus? Can we talk?” Gerald stands with his jacket draped over his arms.

“Uh, yeah, all right.” I look around, wondering where we can go to talk, assuming he’ll want privacy.

“Marcus, I owe you an apology,” he begins.

“No.” I shake my head, in disbelief that he’s about to do this in front of my entire club.

He holds his hand up. “No, I do. I said you couldn’t keep my daughter safe, but dangers are everywhere. Last week, Patricia and I were walking to our car after a dinner out and some man pulled a knife and stole her purse. I couldn’t keep her safe. We were at a nice restaurant in a decent part of town and still danger found us.”

I frown at his news. “Is she okay?”

He waves me off. “Yes. We just had to replace some credit cards, her license, the whole shebang. But that’s not the point. The point is, I know what you did to get my little girl back and to make sure those men could never touch her again. Now I’ve come to believe she’s actually safer with you in her life.” He glances behind me where the MC stands watching. “Safer with this whole family of yours in her life.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. I really do.”

He extends his hand, and I shake it. Then he reaches up with his other

hand and clamps it on my shoulder. “Guess what I’m trying to say is I was wrong about you. I said some things I shouldn’t have. I hope you will accept my apology.”

“Of course, sir. I think we both want what’s best for her.”

“According to her, that’s you.”

“I love her, sir.”

He nods, solemnly. “That’s become obvious.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

“I do.” He pats my shoulder again. “Enjoy your evening.”

I start to walk away and then turn back. “Oh, and I’ll try to get her to go to Sunday dinner this week.”

“Thank you.” His face breaks into a smile, his eyes crinkling at the edges. “And don’t forget about Wednesday night poker. You need to give me a chance to win back some of the money I lost to you last time.”

I chuckle. “Yes, sir. I’ll be there.”

The club and I wait for about fifteen minutes before Brandy exits out a side door with Sara and holding the vase of flowers I sent her.

“Thanks for coming, everyone.” She greets every face with a smile.

“Of course. Now let’s head to the clubhouse to celebrate.” Green waggles his eyebrows.

“Always looking to have a party,” Sara laughs.

“You know it.”

We walk down the steps to the parking lot. We’re a mixture of motorcycles and trucks. I pull a helmet out of my side bag.

“You want me to ride back?” Brandy looks at me with a half grin and lifted brow.

“Yeah, that’s why I told you to wear a short dress.” I eye her legs peeking out from under her tulle skirted dress.

Her tinkling laughter rings through the night air. “And what am I supposed to do with these?” She holds up the flowers.

“Oh, yeah. Shit, didn’t think about that.”

Melissa hangs out the passenger side of Harley’s car. “As much as I’d love to watch you try to carry those down the road on the back of Marcus’ bike, you better let me take those for you.”

Brandy hands over the flowers, thanking her, and then reaches out to take the leather jacket and helmet I brought for her. Slipping them on, she swings her slender leg over my bike, settling behind me.

I love how easily she’s accepted my world into hers. The blend of our worlds looks good on her, from her-sexy strappy heels and lace dress to my rough leather jacket. Leather and lace—that’s my Brandy to a T.

Brandy—

I wrap my arms around Marcus’ waist. I’m looking forward to the party at the club; they’ve made me feel so welcome, accepting me with open arms. Which is a good thing because I’m here for the long haul.

We stay at the party for a while before I whisper in Marcus’ ear it’s time to take me home. I may have also said something about bubbles and being naked. He’s as ready to go as I am now. I smile to myself, taking his hand and letting him lead me outside to his bike.

We rented a place together two weeks ago and between unpacking and life, we haven’t gotten a chance to use my favorite part of our new home together: the claw-foot tub.

We lock eyes and smile, and I know we’re both thinking the same thing.

God, I love this man and taking on life with him by my side. I’m all in, ride or die.

I hope you enjoyed reading this first book in my new series!

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