

STEEL REAPERS MC



Sacrifice

STRIKER

ZAHRA GIRARD

Striker

Book 3 in the Steel Reapers MC

Zahra Girard

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Thank you,

-Zahra

Chapter One

Striker

The smell of fuel, sweat, and smoke perfumes the humid, hot air. Sunrays shine through the open doors at Reid's Repairs, making the chrome on the bike in front of me shimmer silver and gold. There's a wrench in my hands and the guts of a fine machine in front of me. It's the most peaceful my life has been in ages.

Then it ends.

"Hey, Owen, long time no see. Look, I know you want to kill me, and I don't blame you for that, but remember how I saved your life? I'm here to collect. So, listen, I need you to date my little sister."

I look up.

Frown. No, something deeper than a frown. If a frown is a furrow in your brow, this is the fucking Marianas Trench.

Because this isn't how I imagined my Friday afternoon going.

Not hearing that, not seeing him.

"Smokey?"

Still, I don't turn away from the bike. I keep my focus on it, because maybe I can will him away. I'd wanted to spend the afternoon in quiet, nothing but the sound of the music on the shop's radio, Rook's grumbling, and the clanging of tools while I finish rebuilding the transmission of this beautiful black BWM R100 in front of me.

My mouth is barely even open to respond to my old friend's greeting before the second half of that nonsense hits my ears and knocks my jaw the rest of the way to the floor.

After more than two years of radio silence following an acrimonious parting where I broke his nose and threatened to rip his throat out if I ever saw him again, this is not how I thought I'd be reintroduced to my closest friend from my Marine days: Dixon Green, better known as Smokey.

"You okay, Striker? Look, you know I'm sorry about the way things went down between us. You know I regret it, but I'm here because it's important," he says. His eyebrows furrow as he takes in the road name on my cut, and the movement makes the piercing in his left eyebrow glint as the sunlight strikes

it.

The piercing's new, it's audacious, gaudy, I hate it, and there's a similar shimmer off the chrome of his bike: a jet black, late 1970s Harley FXS low rider, with large saddlebags that, if I know him, are carrying a highly illegal amount of guns and other weapons, and likely at least one hand grenade. I like the bike. Have always liked the bike. The bike is a family heirloom, stolen by Smokey's grandfather from a motorcycle collector and passed down from father to son, with accidents and memories scratched into the frame, and the VIN numbers scratched out of it.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say, definitely not fine. I swipe some sweat from my forehead. "What the fuck did you say this was about?"

"Are you shocked to see me, or do you have a problem with dating my little sister?"

In the background, near a motorcycle he's fixing up for some buddy of his up north named Mayhem, I hear Rook cackle like a child hearing his first naughty joke; long, loud, unrestrained. Which irritates me just enough to distract me from my shock, so I focus on wiping off my hands with a rag and then step forward and shake hands with Smokey. There's no animosity in the handshake, just friendship; beating a man half to death does a lot to kill your anger.

Still, I wonder: is he that desperate for his sister to get a hookup, or does he have some ulterior motive? I never can tell with Smokey, and I know him better than anyone. Well, *knew* him. It's been a while.

Not that I'd mind spending time with Danielle.

Not that I'd expect it from her, either; the last time I saw her, she was wearing cargo shorts and a ratty Motley Crue t-shirt, hollering for her brother and me to slow down our bikes so she could keep up. Boys never seemed to be her interest, except in proving that she could keep up with them, out-wrestle them, or throw harder than them. Most of which she could do with shocking ease.

"How'd you find me, Smokey?"

"Called Nat. She told me where you were. Also told me you're still living with your grandmother. How's she doing?"

"Grandma's fine. Living with her on account of some trouble she went through a while back, she needed some protection." Which is the truth. She had trouble a while back, but that isn't the whole story. It isn't as easy stepping back into the life of a civilian after eight years in hell. "You and Nat

still talk?” My eyebrows rise with the question.

“Time to time. Not as much as we used to, but we still do.”

“Really? Even after you...”

“I’ve already apologized to her for that. She’s moved on. Forgiven me. You should, too.” He clears his throat, clearly as uncomfortable saying those things as I am hearing them. As if it’s so easy getting over that kind of betrayal, especially when it hurts the person you’re closest to the most and comes from the person you owe your life to. “That came out wrong. Let me say it again: I’d like it if you could forgive me. I’ve been working on these things, Striker. Even getting help, sometimes, thanks to Nat and Danielle’s encouragement. Not as much as I should, but you know how it is.”

“I do.”

Most help the VA offers comes as fresh-out-of-college shrinks who haven’t seen the shit I’ve seen. How can I expect help from someone who can’t even fucking conceive the horror I’ve witnessed, that I’ve lived through? It’d be like giving moonwalking advice to an astronaut or Michael Jackson.

“Will you hear me out?”

I nod. Slowly. I’m still too struck by so much of what Smokey’s said that finding my voice for any more questions is an impossibility. Smokey’s eyes go to Rook, who I can feel is close enough we may as well get the introductions over with and dispel any doubts Smokey might have about speaking freely.

“Smokey, that’s Rook. He’s a friendly.” I tap the cut I’m wearing, the patch, and then gesture to Rook’s cut, which is hanging from a chair on the other side of the garage. “A brother, too.”

“How’d you get the name Smokey?” Rook says, eyes narrowing. “You earn it the right way, or did you just draw it out of a hat?”

“Does this weirdo have a thing for names, Owen?”

“Maybe. He’s also just kind of an asshole.”

Smokey nods, grunts; Rook agrees by silence — we all know he is.

“Earned it saving Striker’s life. We were escorting a resupply convoy through enemy territory. Got attacked. An ambush. Striker got hit and was forced to take cover. He was isolated, trapped, a goner. We’d all got ourselves pinned down by these militants who had fortified this freaking cave and set up these traps all thorough this canyon. It was fucking medieval. I looted the resupply, improvised an incendiary device, and incinerated the

problem.”

Rook grunts. It’s an approving grunt. Probably as much approval as anyone except Eliza will ever get from him. “He’s acceptable.”

“Nice to know you love me so much,” Smokey retorts. “Shall we kiss?”

“That’s as close to friendliness as you’re ever going to get to from Rook,” I say. “He might as well have put a ring on your finger. Except for Eliza, we’re all about the same level as dogshit to him.”

Rook’s face lights up at even the mention of Eliza’s name. Well, relatively lights up for the grumpy man; he goes from looking like he wants to kill us all, to looking like he would rather throw us into the dumpster. Alive, at least.

I decide to move on before Rook opens his mouth again.

“Explain why you’re interrupting my job, Smokey.”

“Sure, let’s get down to business. You need to be free to date Danielle next Friday and all the way through the weekend. Maybe into the week after.”

Some time passes. Ten seconds, thirty seconds, a minute, maybe.

“Why?”

“There’s a wedding. It’s vital you’re there by her side.”

“You need to give me details, because it sounds a lot like you’re trying to get me to a shotgun wedding with your sister.”

Rook chuckles at the simple suggestion of me being trapped in a shotgun marriage. Because he’s an asshole.

Joke’s on him, though. Because, what no one else knows, is that if there were one person to ever get me to settle down, it’d be Danielle Green, the little sister of my best friend and the man who saved my life. She’s the one woman I know I can never have, because then the same man who saved my life would do everything he could to reverse that fact. There have been more than a few busted noses and broken bones dispensed around town by Dixon ‘Smokey’ Green on account of his sister.

“She’s not pregnant. And it’s not her wedding. Her best friend’s got a sister, and this sister’s marrying into a family that’s more like a Family mixed with a little bit of clan, but not the clan with a ‘k’ as far as I know. The Vertucci family.”

I wince.

I’ve heard of them. Everyone has.

They’re just big time enough to make the major families in Costa Oscura walk on eggshells around them. They may not be large, but they bury as many bodies as even the biggest criminal organizations in the city. Their

head, Michael Vertucci, is a known psychopath.

“Why the fuck are you letting her go to this thing?”

Smokey shakes his head. “Danielle’s trying to be supportive; she’s a bridesmaid and her best friend’s the maid of honor. She’s stuck on going, despite everything I’ve tried. But I’m not letting my sister go in there without an escort because I know what type of men — to be really fucking loose with the definition of that word — are likely to be at the party. So I need you to be her date. Be her bodyguard and guard her body from all creeps on the premises.”

I take in a breath, let it out, realize that I’ve got my jaw clenched so tight it’s a fucking wonder my teeth haven’t split into pieces.

“Why me? Why not ask some of the others, like Hawk or Ghost?”

He laughs. “Already tried. She hates them. Literally threw a book at me when I suggested Ghost. It hit me right in the head. It was an enormous book, too. Hardcover. Dropped me right on my ass because she’s still got her pitching arm from when she played softball. Figure her speed’s only improved. Made a sniper’s bullet seem slow.”

My eyes go to the ceiling, hunting, seeking an answer. An escape.

There’s got to be some way out of this.

The idea of being trapped at some wedding party for who knows how long, with my best friend’s little sister, has me wishing I had a time machine, just so I could go back and undo the fact that Smokey saved my life.

“You know there’s no chance she’ll say yes if I ask her,” I say.

“She will. You remember that list of names we found in her diary when we were nineteen, twenty, and on a temporary leave?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Remember how your name was written on that list?”

Of course I fucking remember. Thinking about it even now makes me feel so damn hot. It’s like I’m back in the desert all over again.

“Not really,” I answer. “Wasn’t paying much attention.”

“The hearts? The underlining? The way she wrote ‘Mrs.’ and her full name next to yours? Come on, Striker, there’s no way you don’t fucking remember.”

Rook guffaws. “Hearts? Would you like me to change your road patch, Striker? I could put some hearts and unicorns on it for you.”

He could, I have no doubt about it.

It’d probably look great, too.

Because Rook, as much as he denies it, and doesn't even look like it — because he's a giant grumbling asshole with a shriveled black heart that only beats for Eliza — is a talented artist; the motorcycle-riding troll designed the MC's logo and did a damn fine job of it, too.

“Shut up, Rook. And maybe I do remember how she wrote it,” I say. “It sort of rings a bell.”

Smokey nods and grins.

“Good. I'm going to give you her office address. Your mission to pay me back for saving your life is to go there and make sure she agrees to take you along as a bodyguard to this wedding. All you have to do is keep everyone there from putting a hand on my little sister. Your hands included,” he says with a laugh and a clap on my shoulder. “Simple enough, right?”

I have no option. No out. I owe Smokey my life; that loyalty binds me until the day I die.

Which I hope is soon.

In fact, if it happened while I'm on the way to Danielle's, that'd be perfect.

“Sounds simple enough.”

It may sound simple, but there's just one giant problem: for as long as Danielle's wanted me, I've wanted her, too. And while I'm keeping others from putting their hands on her, who's going to keep me from touching the woman who's haunted my dreams from the moment we met?

Chapter Two

Danielle

This is where I belong.

This is the place where it always feels like home.

The place where, despite everything else going on in my life — the frustrations, the missed opportunities, the people ignoring me I want to pay attention to me, the people paying attention to me I want to ignore me — despite all of it, this is where I am the person who I want to be, the woman who dazzles, commands attention, and conquers the people in her way.

Out on this collection of dirt, chalk, and bags that make up the baseball diamond, I'm in control. When I'm on the pitcher's mound, all eyes are on me in exactly the way I want them to.

When I'm on the pitcher's mound, I'm me.

But I'm not on the pitcher's mound right now.

"Again," I call out to my best friend, Morgan, as I choke up on the bat and relax into my stance. Instead, I'm testing myself. Pushing myself.

"You sure? How long have we been at this? An hour?" She calls back. "Why don't we take a break?"

Her reluctance doesn't surprise me. But there's a big game just a couple weeks out, pretty much right after we get back from the wedding, and I want to be prepared. Plus, she's not used to lobbing this many practice pitches. She's a catcher; she's been my catcher since our high school days and even through college, and while she's the best catcher and friend I could ask for, but throwing batting practice like this isn't exactly her skillset.

"You know we have that game coming up and my swing's been off lately. It has to be perfect."

She gives me a look that I can read all the way from the batter's box: *you're crazy*.

"It's a beer league softball game with Decatur Realty from Oakland. We've both scouted them, and you know as well as I do that their best player is a forty-seven-year-old photographer named Bruce who gets winded even running to second. His swing is solid, he's got good eyes, but I saw him hit what would've been an inside-the-park home run for anyone else, and he had

to stop at third because he was sucking wind so hard, and there was a vein throbbing in his forehead that looked like it was trying to crawl out of his skin like some kind of alien monster.”

It’s true. I saw the same game and wondered if someone was going to have to call an ambulance for him. When I asked the person next to me if we should do something, they told me Bruce is like that any time he has to run, he just needs a minute to catch his breath and a couple Miller *High Life*’s to get himself back on track.

I’ll bet Bruce is dead by fifty.

“It’s still a game, Mo. You know that.”

“Yeah, it’s a game, not the World Series.”

“Just throw, okay?”

She does.

I swing, connect with that *ding* that gives me shivers every time I hear it — a wave of pleasant, pulsating electricity that runs up and down my spine and radiates through my arms, legs, and makes my hair feel like it’s going to stand on end — and send the ball flying high toward the left field fence.

It doesn’t quite make it. It lands short.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

Not because the ball bounces short and likely would’ve been nothing more than an easy catch for any competent outfielder, but because, as I track the ball in its course toward mediocrity, I see two motorcycles pull into the softball field’s parking lot. I recognize both of them.

One I recognize right away. I see it at least once a week, usually around lunchtime, when my brother and I meet up to connect, chat, and I have to counsel him out of any likely illegal activities he’s about to get into.

The other, it takes a second to recall. I have to dig into childhood memories. To a summer afternoon spent chasing my brother and his friends on my bicycle, until our paths lead us to another friend’s grandmother’s garage, to something concealed under a tarp so dusty it felt like we were unearthing artifacts in an *Indiana Jones* movie.

Owen.

Electricity of a different kind runs through my body, sparks my heart, and makes my legs feel like Jell-O. Morgan tracks my eyes, turns her gaze back to me, and in that wordless way of hers, says, “Do you need me to get rid of them?”

I shake my head. I know why my brother’s here. It’s one of the same

reasons I'm here, too; it isn't just the upcoming softball game that's on my mind and has me here, wanting to feel like I have some form of control over my life, my future. It's the wedding.

I give Morgan a look. After so many years playing together, that's all it takes for her to know what I want. *Throw another, I'll handle the rest.*

She throws.

I swing, connect precisely, and the fantastic frisson feeling surges through me again as I send a ball flying to land right at the feet of Owen and my brother, Dixon. They both stop.

Let that serve as a warning. Turn around, leave me alone. I have more important things to focus on than hearing my brother nag me about safety at the wedding.

It's not like I don't know this wedding is unsafe. You don't hear the name 'Vertucci' and expect anything close to safety, but there's something greater at stake, which means I can't walk away.

My brother smirks, picks up the ball, tosses it right up in the air and catches it, and then he and Owen resume their walk toward me.

I give Morgan another look.

Another ball comes to me, and another warning lands speeds right past my brother's head as he approaches third base, missing him by inches.

He chuckles quietly — I can hear the cockiness from here and momentarily debate asking Morgan to toss me another ball so I can whip it right at his smug face — and he and Owen continue, undeterred.

"What do you want, Dixon?" I say, knowing full well what he wants. It's the same thing he's wanted ever since he found out that Riley, Morgan's sister, is getting married to Michael Vertucci. My answer, as it has been from the very beginning, is going to be the same: butt out of my business, brother.

Though that Owen is here gives me both pause and hope. I'm sure they both know how I felt about Owen when I was younger — they made no secret of the fact that they'd occasionally steal my diary; I even found a few entries in it, written in Dixon's hand but my voice, talking about how I wanted to run off and join a pack of circus freaks so I could finally feel among my own kind, typical big brother stuff — and Owen's always kept a respectful distance from me. He's always acted in a way that says I'd never, in my wildest dreams, have any of those things I fantasized about as a teenage girl actually happen between us. Nor any of those things I still dream about as a woman, either; teenaged me dreamed about holding hands, sitting

together under a tree by the bluffs outside Costa Oscura, watching the sunset over the Pacific while listening to Taylor Swift — *because it was the early 2010s, I was sixteen, and Taylor was, and still is, a fucking queen* — but the woman I am now has much more refined needs: wine, a shared shower, a bed that gets used so hard the mattress screams for mercy and the frame shatters into a hundred pieces; simple things, that's where the joy is.

These are things I know will never happen between Owen and me, because he's absolutely loyal to my brother — they've been friends since high school, they both served in the Marines together, Owen owes Dixon his life, and my brother has a habit of chasing away any men who even give me a second glance.

“We're here to talk about the wedding and setting you up with someone to watch your back,” Dixon says.

Morgan gives me another look; *are you sure? Why don't you shut him up with a sixty-mile-an-hour fastball right at his head? Make him respect you.*

I answer Morgan first with a look; *one, I throw way a fastball that's faster than sixty. Two, he's my brother, and I don't want to hear his whiny bitching at Christmas if I knock him out with a baseball.*

“I don't need a date, Dixon. I can take care of myself. You know that.”

He isn't the only one who gave boys who bothered me black eyes and bloody noses back in high school. And in college? When high school boys turned into entitled, college-aged 'men' who thought they were god's gift to every woman they saw at a party and the word 'no' was just a 'yes' that needed convincing, I may have broken more than a couple greedy fingers that tried to slip into the wrong places.

After a moment, I add, “Hey, Owen.”

He smiles at me. For a second, I forget about my idiot, over-protective brother and all the stress that sits on my shoulders. It's just Owen and me in this field, the setting sun shining on us, making his blue eyes sparkle and highlighting the vibrant colors of the tattoos that mark his body. *Those are new, I note. New, but not unwelcome. They look good on him.*

“Hey, Dani.”

“It's the Vertucci wedding, sis. Those people are monsters. You need someone there.”

“Yeah, bro, I know whose wedding I'm a bridesmaid at. I know who Michael Vertucci is. He's Riley's fiance. Stop worrying so much.”

“They're criminals.”

“So are you,” I shoot back.

Dixon frowns, but he doesn't fire back, even though his jaw quivers like he's aching to say something. But he can't. He knows it's true. Ever since he got out of the Marines, he's struggled to stay on the straight and narrow. Not that I blame him too much, because we still talk, and even though he tries to hide it behind bravado and a cocksure grin, the things he's confessed to seeing — things that I know are only a fraction of the horror that went on during his multiple deployments abroad — have made me cry on more than one occasion. I hate that my brother's carrying such pain, hate that there's nothing I can do about it except support him, hate that every time I even manage to cajole him into seeing any of the shrinks or counselors the VA is able to set him up with, whatever relationship he establishes with those shrinks usually ends pretty quickly. And in flames.

“Your brother just cares about you, Dani. We both know what we're talking about with this. The Vertuccis are bad news,” Owen says. There's concern in his voice. Honest concern.

My eyes go to him in an instant, zero in on that handsome face, striking blue eyes — both clearly concerned, caring, captivating. I've heard rumors about what he's been involved in, and the evidence of that is clear as day with the biker's cut he's wearing right now; a cut that fits him just right and shows off just how deadly powerful his arms are.

“I know,” I answer. “This isn't something I'm going into blind.”

“But you don't have to go into it alone, Dani,” Owen says. “We care about you.”

“You know what type of people will be at the wedding, sis,” Dixon adds. “They're people you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley at night, and yet you want to spend a weekend alone at some compound with them, surrounded by alcohol and who knows what else, without someone to watch your back? If something happened to you, it'd kill me.”

What is this, some kind of intervention?

Is that why he brought Owen?

My brother thinks that by bringing the man I've had a crush on since I knew what crushes were is the way to sway me into accepting one of his military buddies as a bodyguard?

Not a chance.

No way I'll have that adrenaline addict, Hawk, or that prickly phantom, Ghost, shadowing me the entire time I'm at the Vertucci compound. With

them watching me, there'd be no way I can do what I need to do to support Riley, and there's a ninety-nine percent chance the weekend would end with at least a couple murders.

"So, what, I need a babysitter? A minder? It's fair that you're concerned about me, Dixon, and I appreciate it, but you need to respect my decision."

A glance at Morgan brings an easy pitch right where I need it, and a cracking swing sends a softball skipping right between Owen and Dixon. They both leap out of the way with combat-honed reflexes, dodging my warning shot.

"And you, Owen," I say as he stands and dusts off his jeans. "I expected better from you. I know you owe my brother from what happened in the Marines, but playing a little tag along on his intrusive intervention? Doesn't that feel a little beneath you?"

Owen twists his lips in the most handsome frown I've ever seen. He and my brother trade a look and, just like between me and Morgan, a wordless conversation passes between them. Bullets and blood have built their bond just as strong as the one I share with my best friend.

"That's not why I'm here."

I look from Owen to Morgan — *don't trust him* — and back again. My eyes always go back to him. Right now, he's giving me a look I've never seen before, except in my fantasies.

"Why are you here?" I barely breathe loud enough for him to hear.

He steps forward once more, puts both hands in his pockets, smiles a smirk straight from my sexiest fantasies. It's one that speaks of him holding a secret that I'd love to learn, something we could share just between us; a secret that I know really isn't there, but have dreamed about for so long.

"I think you have an idea about why I'm here, Dani," he says. Whispers words I've so wanted to hear. Words that whip my heart into a wild frenzy.

"Why, Owen?" My vision narrows until all I see is him.

"I'm here to ask you to take me along to the wedding. Let me watch you back. I care about you, Dani. I'll watch out for you, keep anyone from messing with you, but I'll stay out of your way and let you do your thing."

"You want me to take you as my date?"

"Yes, I do. So, what do you say, Dani? Will you take me with you to this wedding?"

A softball zips by my head and rips my attention away from Owen. Morgan's staring right at me, eyes wide, furious. I raise an eyebrow at her

and she comes to me.

“What the hell are you doing? You know it’s a trap.”

It is. It has to be. The look on my brother’s face tells me he orchestrated this whole thing, and he’s made his intentions clear from the very start: if he can’t actively stop me from going to this wedding — and, barring kidnapping me and duct taping me in a basement prison somewhere, he can’t — then he’s going to send in a minder who will make sure I can’t do the things that I need to do.

“I know.”

“If he comes along, there’s no way we can be there for my sister the way we need to be. This compromises everything.”

“You’re right.”

I can’t afford a distraction. Not even one as handsome as Owen. He’s only an extension of my brother’s attempt to control me.

“You know what you have to do.”

I don’t until I look up from the dirt covering home plate and into my best friend’s eyes. The answer’s right there. I don’t like it, but it’s necessary. I nod.

“I got this.”

“I know you do. Thank you, Dani.”

That said, she leaves home plate and walks back to the pitcher’s mound. Owen and Dixon both follow her with their eyes, as most guys do; Morgan’s in great shape, toned, athletic, but just the right height that guys don’t feel threatened by her, until they get on her bad side. Though I love her, there have been more than a few times that I’ve jealously wished I could switch places with my best friend and have guys look at me the way they look at her.

Then she takes the mound. One last exchange: *are you ready, Dani?*

I nod.

The ball comes. A gentle lob that slowly sails high and slow; a perfect pitch for what I need to do.

I swing; strike dead center; send the softball speeding right at its intended target — Owen. It hits just above the groin, in that spot that’s sure to be softer even on a man with abs like him.

He grunts, groans, grabs his midsection, and hits his knees.

The bat drops from my hands, a mic drop as I turn away from my brother and the crumpled man I’ve nursed a crush on for years. Morgan follows behind me and I can feel her approval wash over me. This wedding’s

important — more important that my brother and Owen can imagine — and I can't let anything, or anyone, distract me from that.

Over my shoulder, I give him one last look as I walk away.

“There's your answer. Better luck next time, boys.”

Chapter Three

Striker

My confidence and groin are both bruised as I collect myself off the dirt of the baseball diamond. Minor bruises — you don't go through boot camp with a bunch of hyper-masculine idiotic eighteen-year-old boys without learning how to take a blow to the crotch — but still, bruises.

Dani and Morgan leave immediately. Smokey and I leave once the pain in my crotch dulls enough that riding a bike and having the engine vibrate between my legs won't feel like taking a thousand tiny hammer blows to my cock. He leaves me with a reminder: "You owe me, Owen. I can't let her go to this thing without someone to watch her, so you need to get her to agree."

I don't break my word; to my country, to my club, to my family. When I make a promise, I fucking keep it.

It only takes a look to remind Smokey of that fact.

Then we part in the parking lot of the softball fields, and I go home to nurse my crotch and a plan.

The lights are off in the living room when I pull into the driveway and there's the flickering glow of the television filling the darkness. Grandma Eileen is seated on the sofa in front of the television, bathed in the electric light of some police serial. I enter quietly, slipping through the entrance hallway and passing the opening to the living room, hoping to get to the kitchen before she notices me.

"Oh, that Tom Selleck. That mustache. That bulging, boisterous, magnificent mustache. Those muscles. And at his age, too, oh my. He might've gained a few pounds, but he's still got it. It might give him a coronary — he's seventy-eight, even if he doesn't look it — but a night with him, oh yes, what a way to go."

"Grandma, I'm home," I say out loud, completely giving up my plan to be quiet. Mainly because I need to say something before she narrates out the entire scenario of how she wants to die in bed with Tom Selleck.

This isn't the first time this has happened.

And I still don't know if she's doing it because she can't contain herself, or if she's choosing not to contain herself in order to drive me out. Every time

we discuss it — which is a fucking awkward thing to talk about, asking your grandma why she talks about a sordid sexual suicide with Tom Selleck — she plays coy and says she just can't help herself and I can stay as long as I like, because she knows more than a little of what I went through. Not just because I told her about my time, but because my grandfather went through the shit as well.

But then, often that same night as we discuss it, that damn show comes on — *fucking syndication* — and if I leave the room, I get to hear new, graphic ways to use a man's mustache.

It sure is an inspiration to keep my face just as clean-shaven as the Corps demanded. Every morning, and some nights, too, I've got that razor in hand.

"Owen, I didn't know you were there. Are you limping?"

"Yeah, give me a second," I answer, heading into the kitchen and grabbing a package of frozen peas from the freezer and then taking a seat on the sofa while I ice myself.

"Well, you can keep those peas for yourself from now on," she says, raising a disapproving eyebrow at me.

"They're still in the package. They're fine."

"I will not eat any peas warmed by your crotch, Owen. That is a line I will not cross."

"As long as we're talking about lines, grandma, why don't we draw a firm one in front of dying via Tom Selleck-delivered orgasms?"

Her cheeks color and her mouths shut. My cheeks burn a bit, too, because why the fuck am I talking about orgasms and crotch peas with my grandmother?

"Why don't you tell me what happened?"

"Danielle Green happened. I asked her out, and her rejection was more firm than most people dole out."

"Impossible. I can't believe somebody doesn't like you, dear."

I roll my eyes. I've been shot at enough to know that's not true.

"There are plenty of fucking people out there who don't like me, grandma."

"OK, yes, if you want the truth. I know what you're up to and I'm sure there are plenty of people out there who hate your guts, Owen. You're an O'Connell, and the O'Connell men have always provoked powerful reactions. They kicked your father out of six different schools for fighting, which meant your grandfather and I had to move around a lot, even more

than normal for a military family. And your grandfather, Gerald, he was no Prince Charming either.” She shakes her head, pausing, then a slow smile spreads across her face. “Well, I should say most of the time he wasn’t. When he wanted to, oh, that man could charm the pants off a... well, a young college girl from Costa Oscura who never thought she’d be riding a...”

I interject to save myself from something I can never unhear.

“I know dad was an asshole. And I know Grandpa Jerry could be an asshole, too. But this is Dani we’re talking about. You remember how she felt about me?”

As much as it hurt my groin to have her reject me by blasting a baseball into my crotch, it hurt my pride, too. Now that my dignity’s on the line, I’m more determined than ever to get Dani to say yes.

“Oh, how could I not? That willowy young woman followed you and Dixon around like a little puppy dog, watching you with those wide eyes and chasing in your wake.”

“So why would she have said no?”

“How’d you ask her?”

I shrug. “Smokey and I met her out on the softball fields. She was there practicing with Morgan. Smokey told her how he was worried about her on account of this wedding she’s going to is going to have some untrustworthy people at it and she needs someone to watch her back. Then I asked her out.”

Grandma Eileen cackles like a hyena. “You had Dixon be your lead-in? And you didn’t even really ask her? I’m surprised she only hit you in the jewels and didn’t really teach you a lesson.”

I bristle. “I asked her. Literally, I just told you I did.”

“No. You and Dixon *told her*. You didn’t ask her. Didn’t charm her. And you sure as heck didn’t respect her. All you two boys did was just barge into her life when she was trying to relax and tell her how it is. Now, I know that may work with some girls you and that motorcycle club run around with, but did you really expect that to work on Danielle Green? Do you even know the girl, or were you just blind to her all these years?”

I’m quiet a moment, thinking, and adjusting the frozen peas as they’ve started to defrost. My mind circles Dani, happily, and relives a hundred pleasant memories that make my heart pump faster and the pain fade away.

Suddenly, I find it. The answer.

My grandmother’s right.

I know just what I need to do to change Danielle’s mind.

* * * * *

The next day, early afternoon, I park my bike in a small suburban neighborhood of Costa Oscura. The smell of fresh-cut grass hits my nose and the laughter and shouts of kids playing at a nearby playground fill my ears.

I slip off my bike and pause a minute to check myself out in the rearview mirror, smoothing lines and making sure every piece is perfectly in place. I haven't worn my dress blues in ages, and whatever Marine Corps event I wore them for was not nearly as important as what I have ahead of me: the chance to salvage my pride and clear my debt with Smokey. Everything must be perfect.

Even if wearing this uniform isn't easy.

It hurts to wear this outfit again, to put on my body a reminder of all the pain and nightmares I suffered through. There's pride in it, yes, the same pride that comes with knowing I beat something dangerous, something enormous, yet every time the fabric of my uniform shifts, it's like a knife cutting open old scars.

Twice I check myself to see if I'm bleeding, to see if that spot where I was shot has suddenly reopened to spill a scarlet memento all over my body.

In this uniform, I feel it — the pain, the fear, the rage; I smell it — the blood, the smoke, the choking desert sand; I hear it — the crack of the gun, the wet pop as the lead punctures my body, the screams. It's not there, but it's real; it will always be real; it will always be with me.

That's the thing that few people will ever understand. Only those who have been through it get it. When you come out, when your service is over, you are changed. It's not all waving flags and flying eagles, fireworks and fourth of July parades; you've lost a part of yourself. You bleed it out in the sand, cry it out in shameful tears you hide in the darkest corners, scream it in rage from the purest depths of your heart.

It's sacrifice; of who you are, of other people's lives — your life, the lives of your friends, and the lives of your enemies that you've taken and that you will carry with you until the end — until there's this void inside you that's nothing but pain and lack.

I often wonder if anything will make it better.

I've spent a lot of time looking, and I've yet to find something that doesn't make it worse.

I sigh. Straighten a line in my uniform. Take a deep breath.

When I've finished giving myself an inspection more thorough than a drill sergeant with an ax to grind, I open the saddlebag of my bike and take out a clutch of roses. Red. Traditional. An enormous bouquet, three dozen, at least, and every leaf and petal perfectly in place, just like my uniform.

Now to locate Dani.

Which isn't actually too hard, because there are signs with her face on them all over the place in this neighborhood. Though the smiling face I see on the signs is a far cry from the tomboyish face I remember. This one's wearing makeup that highlights delicate cheekbones, a million-watt smile, and has her hair done up in a way I never imagined Danielle could do. She looks... good. No, better than good. She looks beautiful.

After taking a moment to gawk at her sign, I follow the arrows to a nice two-storey family home half a block away. There are five cars parked in the driveway, a driveway which sports a basketball hoop and leads into a two-car garage. Most of the vehicles are sensible family sedans and there's one minivan. And there is one sparkling silver, late-model Lexus sedan.

That must be hers.

I stop at the front door for a moment, hesitating. Nervous.

This isn't how I normally ask a woman out. Things work differently in a MC, they're far less verbal — you meet eyes across a biker bar, you just *know*, and then it happens — and they're the same as when I first got out of the Marines and thought I could drink that pain away; two people with needs, with pain, with ghosts, find each other in the night and seek what solace they can find in each other's company.

This is different — this is roses-in-my-hands real.

I look through the bay windows of the living room. Dani's inside, dressed in a form-fitting navy blue skirt, white blouse, and navy blue suit jacket. It's an outfit that would be mundane on anyone else, but on her, she's a fucking knockout; she's got curves I never noticed under the collection of baggy band t-shirts and torn denim jeans she used to wear all the time.

Who knew Dani Green could clean up like this?

For a while, I just watch her. Watch her and see her for the first time, like I've never seen her before.

This woman is my forbidden teenage fantasy, all grown up.

While I watch her, I see her leading the tour of the house. I see her fielding questions. I see that smile slip, just a moment, and watch as one family peels away from the group and I step aside as they exit the house and head to their

car.

When I look back at her, those expressive brown eyes of hers sparkle with less confidence than before. Tension grips the corners of her wide smile. Yet she keeps her composure.

But even I can see she's losing them; the husbands with the down-turned frowns, the mothers with the probing, prying eyes and the too-tight smiles.

Now I can see my mission clearly: even if she still turns me down for the wedding, I need to erase the doubt and insecurity from her eyes; Danielle Green deserves better.

I open the door and, in my loudest voice, say, "Where's Ms. Danielle Green?"

All eyes turn to me.

Two of the dads step in front of their wives, putting a protective arm in front of them. The other two do so, but only after a chiding elbow from their partners.

And Dani just stares at me, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, confused. She might be surprised, but she recovers quickly.

"What can I do for you... uh, sir? And why do you have roses?"

I step forward, chest puffed, a grateful grin on my face, and extend them to her. She takes them in a slow, shocked grip. "I'm just here to say 'thank you' to the woman who sold me my home. Maybe you don't remember me, Ms. Green, but you helped me find a home — not just a house, but a *home* — a while ago. I have to tell you it is the first time since getting out of the Marines where I have had a place where I feel at peace. Never would've imagined feeling that way in a million years, but I come home at night and I go to sleep with a smile on my face."

Then I turn to the families. They're all staring at me in slack-jawed surprise.

I point a declarative finger right at them.

"If you all have a lick of sense, you will listen to this woman and work with her, because she sure as hell is excellent at listening to your needs and working her butt off to get you the home that you deserve. I'd worked with other realtors before finding Ms. Green, and I can tell you that all of them were nothing but a waste of time. They fucking sucked, if you'll pardon my French. But not Ms. Green. She listens, she cares, and she fights to get you what you want. No one else does. So even if you're not the lucky one who has their offer on this house accepted, if you have a working brain cell in

your body, you'll take her business card and you'll let her fight for you."

Before I've even finished speaking, a business card is in the hands of every adult in the room, and half of the kids have taken one, too. One's even drawn a mustache on Dani with a crayon and I'll be damned if she doesn't look gorgeous with facial hair, too.

"Do you all mind if I take a quick second to reacquaint myself with this former customer?" She says, her voice shaking with emotion. Then she takes me by the arm and leads me to the other side of the house, to a dining room that really is spacious and well organized.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Owen?" She hisses.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Being a damned fool and trying your absolute fucking hardest to embarrass me and sabotage this open house. Are you trying to ruin my career because I turned you down?"

Even angry, she's stunning.

I shake my head.

"You know that's not what I'm doing. Did you see how those people looked at you? I guarantee you every single one of those families makes an offer on this house." Her anger wavers, just for a second, and I push on, taking the opening. "I'm here because Dixon and I didn't pay you any respect the other night. Hell, it wouldn't surprise me to hear he hasn't respected you at all ever since this wedding thing came up. Well, I respect you. I care about you. I know you want to be at this wedding because you care about your friend, and I understand that. Well, I want to be at this wedding, with you, because I care about you and I don't want to see you hurt."

"Is that true?"

"You know I care about you, Dani. Always have, always will. Even if Smokey hadn't come to me, I'd still ask to come with you to this wedding because I can't bear the idea of you getting hurt." All of which is true, but there's another reason she doesn't know about: I'm asking her because it's the thing I've ached to do since the moment I met her. Nothing can ever happen between us — she's my best friend's little sister — but seeing her in a bridesmaid dress, dancing with her, spending a weekend faking a relationship that I have wanted with her for so long, that's close enough... right?

A smile crosses her face.

It's small, sly, seductive. I can't tell whether to feel hope from it or dread it.

“Fine, Owen. You can come. You can be my date for the wedding. It was nice of you to do this for me today... This house, it wasn’t the assignment I wanted, there’s a bigger project I had my eyes on, but, as usual, my bosses assigned it to a different agent. Sometimes, I feel like they just don’t notice me... Anyway, yes, you can come with me to the wedding. But remember: you’re just going as my friend and my bodyguard. We’ll fake it for everyone else, do what we have to in public, but that’s it. Oh, and one more thing: if you try any more stunts like what you did right here, I will throw another baseball at you, and this time, I’ll put enough heat on it that won’t walk right for the rest of your life. Are we clear?”

I might be in over my head, but I’m exactly where I need to be to set things right with Dixon.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Chapter Four

Striker

"You sure you're ready for this, bro?"

Those are the first words out of my sister's mouth the second she steps out of her car and onto the bustling San Francisco sidewalk. It's foggy, as San Francisco always is, and more people than I feel comfortable with bustle by. Big cities always bother me. The people, the closed-in buildings, the alleys; where others see signs of life, of community, of vibrant dreams and stunning ambitions, I see choke points, obstacles, and ample openings for murder and ambush.

Right now, I'd prefer an ambush over what I'm about to do.

"It's just suit shopping, Striker. There's nothing to be worried about," says Maddy, exiting her car that she's parked right next to Natalie's. Hers is far nicer than my sister's. Natalie drives a Corolla not much newer than our grandmother's, while Maddy drives a BMW that shines like the sun. This is her home turf, close to the fancy financial offices she works at during the daytime. No wonder she's comfortable in this steel and concrete death trap. "It'll be fun."

"I'm ready," I say, not happy about it at all. Though a part of me feels something akin to excitement. Not at the act of shopping for a proper tuxedo to wear to Michael Vertucci's wedding, but to have something that'll make me look halfway decent as I stand beside Dani. I still can't get out of my head how good she looked wearing a simple work outfit — a skirt, a blouse, a jacket. It was like seeing her for the first time.

I'd liked her plenty when she would chase after us wearing a ratty old t-shirt and torn jeans. When she was that girl who was always down for adventure or trouble, but now? Now she's so much more, and I'm left wondering how I never noticed before how truly gorgeous she is.

"I still can't believe you're going to the Vertucci wedding with Danielle Green," Nat says. "Or that Dixon asked you. When he told me he was going to, I was speechless for nearly a minute."

"Why is that so strange?" Maddy says.

"Because, back in the day, Dixon and my brother beat up more than a few

boys who looked twice at Dani Green. They protected her like she was a little sister to both of them, not just Dixon's sister."

"And?"

"What do you mean 'and?'" Natalie says.

"Why is it weird that he'd ask the person he trusts the most to take care of his sister? Especially someone who has already protected her in the past?" Maddy replies.

"Why don't you tell her, Owen?" Natalie casts a long, knowing look at me that says that she'll spill everything in merciless detail if I don't answer to the fullest extent of the truth.

"Dani may have had a crush on me back when she was younger."

"A crush is an understatement. Crush is a mediocre orange soda. What she felt for you was a crush in the same way those gigantic machines at the wrecking yards crush cars. I mean, do you remember the way she looked at you? She wasn't just moon-eyed. It was the entire freaking solar system in her eyes. Everything from Mercury to Pluto — which, by the way, is still a planet in my book."

"Oh, now I see." Maddy nods and shares a look with Natalie. A look that, despite how well I know my sister, I still can't interpret.

"See what?" I ask.

I don't like that I don't know what's going on between them. This is a simple bodyguard mission to pay back the man I owe my life to. That I'm guarding a woman that I've also had a crush on for years is entirely unimportant to my mission objective. I can follow orders, and my orders are clear: protect, but don't touch.

"Be careful," Nat says, mimicking Elmer Fudd's voice. "Be very, very careful."

"Yes, I will, because there are fucking hitmen at this wedding. Which, for some reason, Dani is completely unbothered by."

Maddy's eyes go wide momentarily. Only momentarily. She's seen more than her fair share of shit since hooking up with Bullet.

"Why exactly is she intent on going to this wedding?" She says.

"Because her best friend's little sister is the bride," Nat answers, as if that explains everything.

Maddy nods, as if she gets it immediately.

I don't.

To me, this is a situation you'd solve with a kidnapping, a stern lecture to

the kidnapped bride, and a severe beating — maybe a murder — of the groom. You would not, under any sane circumstances, dress up and support your best friend's sister as she signs her life over to some small-time Mafia boss.

"So this tux is important. Doubly important," Maddy says, eyeing me up and down. Then her eyes go to the sign of the tailor's shop in front of us. She returns her gaze back to me, and suddenly I feel like I'm a stock symbol — or whatever the fuck she deals in with her financial work, I don't know, and hell, I don't think Bullet even knows; it's all a mystery of math, which frankly, is more of a crime of war than anything I saw on deployment — and she is silently picking me apart, reducing me, weighing me. "We've established how Danielle feels about you, we've ascertained the insanity of this wedding, but before we step into this tailor's shop — which may or may not be the place we use — I need to know how you feel about Danielle."

"Why do you need to know that?" I say, a little too quickly.

"Do you have any idea the message a man's tux sends?" She replies.

I look to Nat for help and get nothing but a stern look that says, '*Answer her.*'

"I brought you two along to help me pick something out, not to interrogate me."

"It's important," Maddy replies. "Vitaly important."

"Honestly, bro, it really is. I know shit all about tuxes, but even I know that," Nat says.

"Fuck it, I'll just get a rental."

As soon as those words leave my mouth, both my sister and Maddy break into peals of laughter loud enough that half the fucking block turns to look at us in alarm. I feel like I'm surrounded by enemy combatants and completely out of ammunition, out of comms range, and like I have to use the toilet; totally trapped, utterly without a prayer.

"What's so funny?"

"That you think you could bring a rental tux to any Vertucci event. They're rich Italian criminals, Owen. Even their tracksuits are tailor-made."

"You won't even get through the parking lot," Nat says. "One of Michael Vertucci's cousins, Gino Vertucci, got arrested for murder a few years ago because a dealer paid his debt in cash and there were some five-dollar bills in the mix. He shot the guy because he thought he was trying to pass him some counterfeit money. It'd been that long since he'd seen bills that small, and he

didn't know what they looked like."

"Fuck me with a dildo made of hand grenades," I mutter. "Fine. I care about Dani the same way I care about you, Nat. She's like family. That's it. I'm only doing this because I don't want her to get hurt, and I owe Smokey for saving my life."

Maddy looks at me for a very long time. People pass by on the sidewalks, some of them giving her long, pause-filled glances as if she might be a street performer pretending to be a statue. Finally, she speaks. "That poor woman. That poor, poor woman."

"What?"

"There's more to it than you're telling me," she says.

As if she can size me up like I'm some asset. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nat crossing her arms. There's a frown on her face, too. What the hell? Bullet's ol' lady and my sister are ganging up on me over absolutely nothing.

"There isn't," I insist. "Dani is just a friend. That's it. That's all."

It's the truth.

Or at least I tell myself that's what it is.

Friend doesn't feel like the right word to describe Danielle Green. Sister is closer to it — she's the sister of the man who is as close to a blood brother as I've ever had — yet still that word doesn't feel accurate, either. There's something deeper there. Something stronger. Yet I doubt even the connection that she and I share could ever be anything more than a deep friendship. It can't be. Someone like me, the things I suffered through in the Marines, the things I did to survive... A man like me doesn't deserve someone as pure as Dani Green.

"No, there's nothing more to it." I shake my head, frustrated.

A little confusion about the right term to use for the woman I'm supposed to protect at a Mafia wedding doesn't deserve nearly the reaction that I'm getting from Nat and Maddy.

"You're lying," Nat says. "You're lying, and you're going to get yourself killed for it."

"I'm not lying."

"A Mafia wedding is one of the worst places in the world to fuck around and find out, bro," Nat says. "You're smarter than that. Any drama, any fighting, any extra BS, and you're going to have an army of hitmen up your butt. And not in the fun way, either. Before you even ask how there's a fun way, I'll tell you this: I've read many books, there definitely is a fun way,

and if you really want to know, I'll send you some links."

"Or you could start a war," Maddy says.

"A war?" I give her a questioning look. "Over what?"

"You don't think a Mafia boss would be upset if you caused a shitstorm at his wedding? It's risky enough that you're going, though I know the MC doesn't run in the same circles as the Vertucci family — you don't deal drugs, you don't traffic women, you don't prey on the weak — so they probably don't even know who you are, thank god, but if you end up starting something at this wedding, they will find out who you are, who we are, and they will come after us. If I lose my ol' man because you couldn't keep your dick in your pants, I will remove that offending penis from your person and beat you to death with it."

"Only if I don't get to him first," Nat says. Then she smiles and claps her hands. "Oh, it could be like a race. That'd be fun."

I summon up the same voice I used to answer drill sergeants. It's the voice that speaks without doubt, without fear, without remorse. It's the voice of a Marine ready to die without even blinking, if that's what it takes to complete the mission. "She is only a friend. That's it. I swear on everything that matters to me — on my family, on the club, on my life. I wouldn't do that to Dixon, and I wouldn't do that to you all, either. Danielle Green is only a friend, and that's all she'll ever be."

They both nod, satisfied.

"Fine. Then let's get you a tux," Maddy says, leading the way with Nat right behind her.

I follow.

But deep inside, I wonder: am I satisfied with my answer?

Or do I want something more, despite the costs?

Chapter Five

Danielle

"Keep your eyes open. If you see anything that looks like a weak point in their security, tell me."

I roll my eyes at Owen and focus on driving. "Sure, Rambo."

He bristles. "Rambo wasn't a Marine. He was Army. There's a big difference."

I roll my eyes again, harder. "Sure. Whatever you say."

Watching security is not my priority. It's not even on the list.

Though as we pull up to the gates at this, what can only be described as a compound, on the coast about twenty miles outside of Costa Oscura, I can feel security is definitely watching me. Two men at the metal gates, both wearing black shirts, black pants, with black sunglasses and black hats, carry big rifles and hold up their hands for me to stop.

As if the sight of two men armed to the teeth isn't enough to make me want to stop, then put my car in reverse, then execute a tire-burning turnaround and speed right back to Costa Oscura and sanity.

I love Morgan; I love Riley; I'm here for them and there's no real chance I'm turning around, but the sight of these two guards is a little shocking.

Suddenly, I feel Owen's hand on my shoulder. "It's okay. I'm here. You got this."

When I first agreed to take him as my date-slash-bodyguard, I knew it was a mistake, and I still think it is. But right now, it doesn't feel so wrong. He's a complication, a distraction, a diversion, but he gives me confidence, too. And I can't forget the way he made me feel when he interrupted my open house, dressed in a uniform so pressed it could've probably stood up on its own, carrying a garden's worth of roses, and shouting my praises to high heaven: appreciated, respected, noticed.

He gave me what I wanted: he gave me respect, and, even better, he gave me a choice.

He put himself out there for me and let me choose.

So I chose him.

I might've regretted that choice the second I made it, and Morgan might've

reminded me I should regret it when I called her later to give her the news, but I don't regret the confidence he gives me just by being here. Not much, at least.

"I know I've got this. It's just a couple security guards, Owen." My voice shakes, though. And my eyes definitely feel wider than normal.

"You've seen guns like those all the time. Remember when Smokey and I would clean our weapons on the coffee table at your house when we were back after boot camp? Remember how your mom would yell at us to put those damn things away?"

"Yeah, I do," I say. I like his voice. I like his hand on me. I like the unwavering support I hear in the baritone coming from his kissable, smiling mouth.

"Those rifles we cleaned were more dangerous than the ones those guys have. Those things are pea shooters. Nothing to even a bat an eye at. Hell, I doubt they'd even make a raccoon blink. So just take a deep breath, Dani, and drive on up to them. Let those losers — who are nothing more than mall security guards with little toys — do their thing and feel important for a second, and then we'll drive through those gates, park, and go find out where we're spending the weekend, okay?"

It isn't just Owen's words that soak in and give me strength. I think of why I'm here: my friends, Riley and Morgan; I have to do this for them. So much depends on this.

"Okay, I got this."

With a reinforcing sigh, I drive forward toward my fear.

Then I stop.

And wait.

One guard, who's holding a clipboard in his hand and a look on his face like he's got a grudge against the world, comes forward and raps on my window. He shines a penetrating flashlight in my face, while the other one circles my Lexus, looking through windows, looking beneath the car, and tapping the trunk so I'll open it, and then he looks inside.

I roll down the window.

"Name?" He says.

"Danielle Green. I'm in the bride's party."

He scans the clipboard, grunts, and motions for me to roll up the window. I do, eager for the thin separation of glass between me and his unpleasantness.

After a moment, he says something in a foreign language — *Italian*; it

sounds like — to the other guard. Then the two of them exchange a nod, open the gate, and I'm in.

"Good job, Dani. Now, take us in."

Inside the gate, I can take in the full scope of this place. It'd be both a realtor's dream and a nightmare to have this among their listings. It's huge — with a large main house villa, and two other impressive neighboring villas, and other much smaller buildings throughout the property. Obviously, the commission on it would be enough to take an entire year off and spend it traveling the world in first class, but it's so big, so intimidating, so opulent, that it would almost be impossible to sell. It could sit listed for years waiting for the right client. I mean, really, who wants a vast seaside compound? A cult, maybe? Or a really, really rich militia with a thing for Mediterranean-style architecture, French doors, and Spanish tiled roofs?

I park in front of the main building, my heart pounding.

I am surrounded by the wealth and power of the Vertucci family, and it's in this moment the immensity of what Morgan and I have to do hits me.

This is insane.

Insane, and I'm going to get myself killed.

Not just myself, either, but Owen, too, because whatever happens, he'll throw himself into the line of fire to keep me safe. My brother will probably die soon after, on some baffling suicide mission to avenge me.

"Hey, you're looking lost in your head. I know it's normal for brides to get cold feet before their wedding, but bridesmaids aren't supposed to get that, right?" Owen says, resting his hand on my shoulder and giving me a gentle squeeze.

I look into his steely blue eyes and see that same unwavering support and strength that I've loved since the moment I first saw it. It's only gotten stronger, more resolute, since he served in the Marines, but even as the teenage boy I crushed on, it was there; bright, shining, daring. Ready to challenge the world.

It's going to be okay.

I turn off the car and open the door, and another man in a suit, this one also carrying a clipboard, descends from the large, Saltillo style entryway to greet us. Seconds later, a boy, about sixteen or seventeen, yet also wearing a perfectly tailored suit, comes down and stands at a respectful distance behind the man with the clipboard, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Ms. Green, yes? And your... date, I presume?"

Date.

How I've longed to hear that word applied to the man beside me. It gives me blissful butterflies in my stomach.

"Owen O'Connell. Yes, I'm Danielle's date for the weekend," Owen answers without an ounce of hesitation. It's intoxicating how easily those words flow from his lips.

Unable to resist, I add, "Yes, Owen's my date."

It takes a lot of effort to prevent myself from saying it again, and I remind myself that I have to act like a normal person, and that this guy with the clipboard will probably kick me out if I keep saying the word 'date' over and over and over like a malfunctioning robot.

"You're early. Excellent. That makes my job a little easier. Enzo, come here," he gestures to the young man behind him, who comes forward. "Enzo will help you with your bags and show you to your quarters in the east villa."

Enzo moves toward the trunk of my car, then stops suddenly as Owen holds up his hand.

"Easy there, boy, let me give you a hand with these," he says, taking special care to grab his suitcase and the garment bag containing his tux. "I didn't spend all this money on a tux to have someone other than me put wrinkles in it. Danielle, are you fine with Enzo carrying your bags, or would you prefer I do it?"

What is with him?

Why is he so careful about his bags?

Maybe it's a military thing. They are weird about their packing, and they get tested on how they make their beds by evil drill sergeants. Maybe that's it.

"It's fine," I say. "Thank you, Enzo."

Enzo nods and takes my bags.

"Owen, I need to go find Morgan to talk over some bridesmaid stuff. Will you wait for me in our room?" I say. I put some slight stress on the question, just enough that, since he knows me so well, he'll hear the warning — *stay out of trouble* — but anyone who hasn't known me for almost half my life won't hear a thing.

"Got it," he says.

Owen follows Enzo toward the east villa, and I turn to the man with the clipboard, who raises a disapproving eyebrow at me. Not that I blame him, because I'd be grumpy, too, if I had to organize any part of a Mafia wedding.

"Has the maid of honor arrived yet?"

He nods. "She has."

And leaves it at that, his eyes dismissively drifting back to his clipboard.

It's understandable if he doesn't want to talk to me, fine, but he doesn't need to be so rude. My smile wavers a small amount.

"And where is she?"

"West villa. Second floor. Behind the door demarcated by the red-tiled archway."

"Thank you. By the way, I appreciate all the hard work you're doing here."

"I'm sure you do," he says, rolling his eyes with his tone.

I leave him to soak in his surliness and head for the west villa, which is an impressive, three-storey structure that would fetch me a commission large enough to trade my ancient Lexus sedan in for a brand new Porsche and still have enough left over to take Morgan, Riley, and me on a nice week-long trip to Vegas, where we'd rent out a couple suites and eat and drink way too much and come back with the tans you can only get after spending a week poolside in the desert sun.

It's hard to wrap my head around the money that the Vertucci family has.

I guess crime really does pay.

Being surrounded by all this ostentatious opulence, it's easy to see how Riley got sucked in; she's had her problems in the past, and still does, but even as clearheaded as I am, if I were swept away to a place like this and treated like a modern day princess, it'd be hard to walk away.

Plodding up the stairs — because it feels like I'm plodding, walking on these marble floors in my everyday sneakers — I hear my footsteps echo off the polished travertine stones on the wall. Pausing for a second, I lean in to inspect and run my fingers across the limestone tiles. Yes, they're genuine. And, knowing the heritage of the Vertuccis, I wouldn't be shocked if they were imported directly from Italy, from that most famous of travertine quarries, *Bagni di Tivoli*, which is located twenty kilometers east of Rome, and which was used not only in the ancient Roman times to build that beautiful city, but also used in one of the most famous museums in the United States: the Getty Museum; this stone is the stone of Romans, of oil billionaires, and of the Mafia.

It's so sublime I shudder in admiration.

Then I continue up the stairs. I need to find Morgan. We have to strategize.

It isn't hard to find her, even though this villa is vast. Her room is exactly where the clipboard man said it should be, and I knock on the door.

She answers in a moment, then pulls me into her room and a hug that lasts for nearly a minute.

"Dani," she squeals, squeezing me tight. "I'm so glad you're finally here. This place is fucking hell."

"It's beautiful."

"Gorgeous, stunning, sickening, all of it," she agrees. Then, still hugging me, she looks over my shoulder. "Where's your babysitter?"

"Unpacking."

"Good. That means he can't interfere. Are you ready?"

"Now?" I say, surprised, but the determination in Morgan's face quickly quiets my questions.

"No time like the present. We have to get to her, Dani. We have to talk to her. Time is running out, and she is about to make a huge mistake."

"I know. You're right. But how do we get to her?"

"We walk right in."

Did my best friend take a softball to the head since I last talked to her?

"What?"

She nods, and without waiting for me to even agree to anything, she starts toward the staircase. It's only when I hesitate she offers an explanation over her shoulder.

"Not everyone's here, yet. And the people that are here, well, most of them are so busy setting up that it's the perfect distraction."

I follow.

We leave the villa behind and cross the wide courtyard across to the main villa, walking past the clipboard man, beneath the Saltillo tile archway, through the grand wooden double doors, and into a foyer more massive than the entirety of my one-bedroom apartment.

"She's upstairs. At the end of the hall. She has a suite to herself. At least, I think she does. I heard chatter that the grandparents were flying over from Italy, and apparently Michael's grandmother is so religious she nearly became a nun. My guess, no, *my hope*, is that grandma's presence means they won't be sharing a marital bed until after they wedding. This is our best opportunity to get to her."

More confident, I follow Morgan upstairs, though my eyes still nervously glance around every corner. All I see are a handful of servers in uniform scampering about to finish last-minute preparations and a few suited members of the Vertucci family — some sporting tracksuits, some real suits

— and one old uncle who has his bedroom door open a crack and is standing around in his very hirsute birthday suit while sucking on a forty and scratching his enormous belly while a soccer game blares from a television on the other end of his room. None of them pay any attention to us.

Morgan's right.

This is our best shot.

We ascend to the top floor and Morgan stops momentarily, shoulders stiffening.

At the end of the hall is a large man with a large shotgun held in a loose grip in his left hand. He does not look friendly.

"Can't stop now," Morgan whispers. "This is for Riley."

We advance, confident. We're bridesmaids and Morgan is the bride's sister and maid of honor, so this wedding is nearly our turf as much as it is anyone else's. At least, that's what I tell myself to keep my heart from exploding out of my chest like some alien Xenomorph.

Morgan comes to a stop just a foot away from the big man and I stand just behind her. She looks up at him with a shocking amount of confidence.

"Move, please. I need to talk to my sister."

The man silently shakes his head.

Morgan doesn't back down.

Instead, she steps closer until her nose is nearly touching the barrel of the shotgun.

"I said move, please. I don't want things to get messy."

Still, he doesn't move.

His jaw and his grip on his gun both tighten and my heart goes from wanting to burst out of my chest to shriveling to the size of a raisin in fear.

He won't move. And if Morgan keeps pushing him, we'll be lucky if we just get kicked out of this wedding instead of getting planted as fertilizer somewhere in the gardens of this palatial property.

"Are you deaf? Move."

I can feel the tension in the air growing thicker by the second.

The man with the shotgun looks like he's about to snap, and Morgan's stubbornness isn't helping matters. I reach out to grab her arm, to pull her back, but she steps forward instead, her lips so close to the gun she could simply pucker them and kiss it.

"Look, I'm not here to cause trouble," she says, her voice calm, but firm. "I just need to talk to my sister. You might know her. She's the woman who's

about to marry your boss. Step aside. Now. It's important."

The man says nothing, but he doesn't move either. I can see the anger in his eyes, the frustration at being ordered around by a young woman, the tension growing in his jaw, the tightening of his fingertip around the trigger of the gun.

"No one enters," he growls. "Move along."

But Morgan doesn't flinch; she just stands there, staring him down.

I'm going to lose my best friend on the first hour of this nightmare weekend, and I'm either going to watch my other friend get married to the literal devil, or I'm going to be killed, and Owen will probably get killed, too.

No, he'll definitely get killed.

Because as soon as he hears gunshots, he'll jump into Marine-mode and go berserk.

I have to stop this and get Morgan out of here before she gets us killed for just trying to talk to her sister. There must be a different way we can get inside.

With desperation in my grip, I take Morgan by the shoulder and pull her back. It takes effort; she's rooted to the tile floor with ferocity and love.

"We're sorry to bother you," I say to the guard. "We'll talk to her another time."

Pulling her away from that door is as easy as ripping my own teeth out.

"What the hell was that for?" She hisses as soon as we're out of hearing range.

I blink at her. "What the hell was that for? That was so we don't get shot by the big guy with the gun. I want to help Riley as much as you do, Morgan, but I don't want to get killed."

"Now is our best chance. I could've gotten us past him. There's no way he'd really shoot us. Michael Vertucci would kill anyone who did anything to mess with his wedding, and that guard knows it."

"Meaning he'd also kill the two women who caused a commotion trying to fight their way past the guard he set up to keep his bride in her room, right?"

"Fuck."

"Exactly."

"But we have to get to her. I don't want to lose my sister to this psycho. She's using again, I just know it. I know that's why she's not in her right mind. I've had suspicions, Dani. The second she called and told me she was engaged to Michael freaking Vertucci, my first thought was, 'How in the hell

did my little sister cross paths with that monster?' And then I just knew. There's only one way. That very day, I started saving up, putting money away, so that I could get her out of here, get her to rehab, get her out of his reach. Even if it means I never see her again, I'll be happy knowing she's not a slave to that man and his filth."

My best friend is shaking. With fear, with rage.

And she's right.

Riley's had her share of problems, but when she's clean, she's a level-headed woman who wouldn't give the time of day to a man like Michael Vertucci. When she's not... she's not Riley. Just as much as Morgan wants to get her little sister back, I want to help my best friend.

But not this way.

"You and I both want the same thing, Morgan."

Her lips pull back in a smile that straddles sarcasm and gratitude. "I believe you, Dani. But why'd you bring a babysitter? That's going to make things really freaking complicated, especially since we are going to have to wait for another opportunity to get to my sister."

"Because it was the only way to get my brother off my back."

It's a truth and a lie. Yes, it got Dixon off my back, but it's not the only reason I brought Owen. For the first time in as long as I can remember, Owen saw me for me, and he gave me what I needed: respect, honesty, and a choice. There was no way I could have turned him down.

"It still complicates things."

It does. It puts me in conflict with myself. There's a part of me that longs to do everything at this wedding — share champagne, don my dress and see Owen in his tux, dance together — with Owen. That part of me might make things difficult when it comes time to break this wedding up and rip the bride away from the monster who has her in his clutches.

I shake my head and focus on the matter at hand: getting to Riley.

"Yes, he complicates things. So does the big guy with the shotgun standing in front of Riley's door. But we'll find a way around it. Come on, I think I have an idea."

I lead Morgan downstairs and around behind the main villa. Amid a maze of hedges and perfectly manicured flowers, I find our way to a trellis that leads up the side of the villa, all the way to the roof. The trellis runs alongside Riley's window and is made of thick, sturdy wood. For a moment, Morgan and I stand still, looking both around and up at it. As busy as things are in

front of the mansion, with guests arriving and porters carrying bags, the back of the house is quiet. All I hear are birds and the occasional muted calls of kitchen staff through an open back window.

"This is your plan? To Rapunzel our way up there?"

"Unless you want to try walking through that brick wall with a shotgun in front of Riley's door again?"

Morgan hesitates, doubt and frustration on her face. Sometimes it's the littlest obstacles that are the hardest of all. This is my turn to step up as her best friend.

"I'll climb up there and try to get to Riley. All you need to do is keep an eye out. Maybe I can talk some sense into her, tell her we're going to bust her out of this place and get her free."

She nods. "Thanks, Dani."

"What are friends for?" I reply with a smile.

Then, fear in my heart — because I'm climbing a trellis in the backyard of a Mafia mansion to sneak my way to a crime boss's fiancée — I put both hands and a trepidatious foot upon the trellis. It holds.

I climb.

Step after step, slowly, for fear of making any noise and drawing attention to us, I climb.

This is insanity, but I have to do it.

At the top, I hesitate at the window. It's just beside the trellis, and to see inside, I'll have to lean over and put my face in full view of the window and anyone in there.

Here goes nothing. And everything.

I lean over and look inside.

And immediately have to fight to suppress a wail at what I see. The only thing that gives me the strength to keep quiet is knowing how my reaction would hurt my best friend..

Inside is Riley. She's disheveled, looking so much older than someone as youthful as she should look; hair a mess, face gray, shoulders slumped, and hands shaking. She's not alone. Michael's with her. For as ugly as he is on the inside, on the outside, Michael Vertucci is strikingly handsome; sharp features, thick, dark hair swept back, eyes like razors, shining white teeth, and a muscular body that's shown off perfectly by his immaculately tailored suit. He oozes criminal charm and menacing seduction.

Beside him stands another man, tall and imposing, with a hawkish nose

and deep-set eyes that often seem to scan the room for threats.

I pull back for a moment, scared at being seen, then peer through the window again when I realize all the man's attention is on Michael and Riley.

I can't hear what's going on between them, but I can tell from Michael's commanding, jagged gestures that he's less than happy with Riley, and Riley is emphatically piteous in her reaction — pulling at her hair, dropping to her knees, throwing her arms wide. I want to throw open the window and hug her, if only to save her from acting so pathetic.

Then she nods. Acquiesces to some silent demand.

And Michael suddenly changes; he's all slick smiles and laughter. He pulls Riley into his arms, kisses her cheeks, and pulls from the pocket of his pants a small baggie containing a clutch of white pills.

They go into Riley's greedy grasp, get ground into a powder against the grainy wood of her nightstand, and snorted.

Then a powder-nosed Riley turns from her nightstand to look at her watching groom, a lopsided and loving smile on her face. Arms outstretched, she runs to him and plants a kiss on his smirking cheek.

I look down at my best friend and, without saying it, give her the message. She responds with a silent wail that rips my heart in two.

We have our work cut out for us.

Because Riley is deep down the well of addiction, and it's going to take everything that Morgan and I have to save her from Michael's sick clutches.

"I'll be in my room. We'll talk alter," Morgan says when I get to the bottom. "I need time to think. This is... this hurts."

It's just as well. I don't really know what to say to my best friend, other than saying, "I love you, and we'll figure this out," which is what I whisper after her as I watch her walk away.

Hope sits dead and heavy in my stomach as I walk across the grounds and to my room. My mind is spinning; there's so much I wanted to do here. So many small, momentous things I'd hoped to share with Owen. I'd wanted to get to know him in a way I've never known him before. Maybe I could've even deluded myself into believing that this relationship we're faking could someday be something real.

Now, I can't have any of that.

Now, I have to focus everything I have on supporting my best friend and helping her rescue her sister.

Now, I have to be strong.

No distractions. Nothing can break my focus on what I have to do for Morgan and Riley.

"We have a big problem," Owen says the moment I step through the door.

Shocked, I take a second to respond. I'm so stunned that I barely even register the opulent surroundings; the exquisite furniture that looks straight out of some mid-1950s estate on the Italian Riviera — hand-carved, wooden, elegant.

"What is it?"

Owen gestures, and I follow his motion with my eyes.

I both see it and I don't.

Owen answers my unspoken question with a grave tone.

"There's just one bed."

Chapter Six

Striker

My eyes go from the single, solitary, way-too-fucking-small bed — even though it is at least a California king, probably larger, knowing the arrogance of the Vertucci family — to the woman of my dreams who is standing in the doorway, hands on her hips, hellacious scowl on her face.

"There's just one bed?" She says.

"Just one bed," I answer.

On one hand, it is a nicer bed by far than any I've ever had, and it sure as hell beats a boot camp bunk. If it were just me, I'd starfish on it and there'd be so much space still on either side of me that I might as well be trying to spread across the actual ocean. The night would probably end with me getting the best night of sleep of my life and waking up feeling like I'm ten years younger.

On the other, I have to share this bed with the woman who haunts my dreams and makes my waking hours a nightmare, because no matter how bad I want her, I can never have her because she's Dixon's sister. It's my job to keep her alive, not fuck her brains out, and being surrounded by Mafia hitmen is not the time to test the boundaries of our relationship.

"This won't work. No, it won't work at all."

Dani looks like she's about to raise hell and storm down to confront the man with a clipboard, and realizing the problems that would make for keeping our cover and keeping her safe, I change my mind.

"You know what, don't worry about it. It's not a problem."

"Oh, it isn't? Because I think it is a big problem, Owen O'Connell."

"You have nothing to worry about, Dani. I'm not interested in you like that. Not even close," I say. If my life weren't potentially on the line, it'd physically pain me to say those words. As it is, they still sting inside. "I'll sleep on my side. We'll sleep ass to ass or whatever. Hell, I'll even sleep fully clothed, if that makes you more comfortable."

"You're not interested in me?" She repeats, voice low, weak. It hurts to say it. It hurts even more to hear it coming from her. I want to interrupt, to correct her, but I know it'd be stupid, suicidal, even. "Great to know that the

feeling's mutual."

"What I mean is you don't have to worry about me making a move on you. I'll sleep like I said: clothed, as far away from you as the bed allows."

"That won't work. Owen, you don't get it. You have no idea what's going on here, do you?" She says, tone and pitch rising higher. Frantic.

I shrug. It seems clear enough to me. As large and clear as the elephant-sized bed in the room. A bed that, even now, I'm thinking about pulling her onto, stripping off the blouse she's wearing, ripping away her pants, and silencing her by making her scream my name into the pillow as I eat her pussy.

Being alone in a bedroom with Danielle Green is a dangerous proposition when it comes to keeping to my promise to Dixon; her beauty is poison, her smile's a knife, even her furious eyes are lethal to my loyalty to her brother.

I have to keep control of myself.

"Of course I know what's going on. We're talking about sleeping arrangements."

She shakes her head and sighs with a measure of disappointment that has me feel like I'm back in my first week of boot camp and the drill sergeant's just seen the way I tie my boots; they always look at you like you're their kid who's just come home on break from med school and told them they wanted to drop out to pursue a life of beat poetry and acoustic guitar.

"You obviously don't understand. This just won't work."

"Fine. I'll sleep on the floor at the base of the bed like a dog, if that's what it takes to make you comfortable. I've slept in worse places. Give me one pillow, that's all I need."

With each word, the look on Dani's face changes from general frustration to gnawing anger. She throws her hands up. "You're impossible."

"Impossible?"

What the hell is wrong with her? It seems the more I try to make her comfortable — to make our awful weekend together more tolerable — the more frustrated she becomes. I don't remember her being this unreasonable.

"That's even more absurd than your first idea. What if someone sees? What if someone from the housekeeping staff notices that my supposed boyfriend — the boyfriend that I like enough to invite to this opulent wedding — is someone that I force to sleep on the floor like a dog?"

"Who cares?" I say. "Do you think I give a fuck what some maid thinks?"

"You'd better. They'll gossip, then word will get to someone in the Vertucci family, then they'll start asking questions, and then we'll wind up dead. Is that what you want?"

I look around, my eyes longingly resting on the door out of here for a moment, before surveying the rest of the room; there aren't any other places to sleep — the furniture in here is nice, fancy, expensive, but it's all antique, wooden furniture, and if I tried to sleep on it, I'd end up with a hand carved crucifix up my butt in the middle of the night.

"Fine," I say. "What am I supposed to do? Sleep in the hall? Not sleep at all? Because I will do both if that's what it takes. Hell, I'll do them standing on my head, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, if that's what I have to do to get you to stop whining because they only gave us one bed. A bed that is so gigantic, by the way, that you could literally fit an entire platoon of Marines on it."

"I'll tell you what you should do," she says, eyes going to the window, searching. As she looks out there, it's like her frustration amplifies, grows, her body tightens like she's about to throw a punch, and she looks back to me with an incredible amount of fury in her eyes. What is she thinking about? What has her so angry? Beds can't be that important. "You should leave. Just go."

"You know I can't do that, Dani. I owe Smokey..."

"I'll handle my brother. Don't worry about him. Listen, Owen, you're not needed here. Not needed, not wanted, and if you stay, this is just going to turn into hell for both of us. This is just a wedding, and I'm just a bridesmaid. I know the Vertuccis have a terrible reputation, but me being a bridesmaid means that I'm protected. I'll be fine. All that you'd be doing if you stayed is getting in my way. If you stay, you'll be bored out of your mind, and maybe, if you're lucky, you'll get to watch me do something so thrilling as catch a bouquet — " her voice falters, a glimmer of hope among the venom, and she stops, suddenly, shakes her head, sending her blond hair bobbing. "Just go. Go before you make this nightmare any worse than it is."

I hesitate.

It's a tempting offer. One that traps me between loyalty and common sense. I owe Smokey, but there's no way he could've known the extent of what he's asking. And the idea of spending an entire weekend with Danielle,

while having to keep my distance from her despite the fact that my heart and my body is crying out for me to throw her into that bed and turn her shouted objections into moans of pleasure, is my idea of pure hell.

"Well, Owen?"

I turn away for a moment, torn.

Do I stay out of loyalty to my closest friend?

Or do I escape the pure torture of sleeping in the same bedroom with the woman who makes my body feel like I'm about to parachute into an active firefight, who also is completely untouchable because she's my best friend's little sister?

"I need to take a walk."

I'm out the door before Dani can even muster a response. Let her wait. I need to clear my head.

I leave our palatial room and stalk down the stairs of the villa until I'm outside. The central courtyard looms in front of me; the manicured gardens, the wide and wild expanse of back property — a large, semi-forested field — that they use for fox hunting or polo or whatever the fuck rich people do to pass the time; all of it beckons me.

I walk randomly, my heart and my brain working overtime to figure things out.

Why has Dani changed so suddenly?

I know her feelings for me. I remember the look in her eyes when I showed up at her open house and asked her to take me as her date to the wedding. That woman is a far cry from the woman I just left in our suite. What's happened?

Maybe she finally came to her senses.

Maybe she realized this mission is one of Smokey's more insane ideas and we have to find a way out.

As I walk around the property, I try to tell myself that's it. That this wedding, even though it's for a Mafia boss, is nothing more than an asshole and an unlucky woman hitching their lives together for as long as it takes common sense to penetrate their skulls.

It's nothing more terrible than spending a weekend around self-obsessed Sicilian dimwits. Which is a version of hell, true, but it's not a dangerous one — unless you have an allergy to male body spray.

My mind settles on a decision: I should go. It's safe enough here. The men at the front gates were just security, nothing more than the MPs posted at

every military base to keep the troops in line. The same goes for the few men I see on my walk around the property who are obviously sporting pistols in shoulder holsters. They're just bodyguards. Basic security. Nothing to worry about.

It'll be fine for me to leave Dani here on her own. I can spend the time that I would be stuck playing babysitter and use it instead to have a few beers and finish rebuilding the transmission on the bike that's back at Reid's Repairs.

It makes sense. It's the right call.

Until it isn't.

Until a wrong turn takes me past a shed in the back reaches of the property, and I spy something I can't ignore: a man with a piece of German hardware that sports a name that sounds like you have a fishbone stuck in your throat: the HK33; an assault rifle manufactured by Heckler & Koch, a selective fire rifle shooting 5.56 mm rounds, sporting up to a 40 round magazine, and quite popular with armed forces from Germany and Greece to Mexico and Malaysia, as well as readily available to any mercenary with a modest amount of scratch and common sense. It's a reliable, modular, and deadly tool that can be readily adapted for all your killing needs.

No, this isn't an ordinary weapon.

Nor is the man working on it an ordinary civilian; he breaks it down with the practiced motions of someone who lives to kill.

My choice is clear.

I owe my life to Smokey; Smokey wants me to guard his sister; his sister's intent on staying at this death-trap of a wedding; I'm staying.

I march back to the room, rip a pillow from the bed and a spare coat from my suitcase, and toss them both on the floor next to the bed. It's not pretty, but it'll do.

"What the hell are you doing?" She says.

"I'm staying. I'm not leaving you here alone."

"I'd really hoped you'd decide differently, Owen. You're making a big mistake."

"This is the only choice I can make, Dani. I owe it to you and to Dixon to keep you safe. I'm staying. There's no other way."

Dani looks at me with icy determination, her eyes cold in the way that I've only seen in soldiers about to step into the heat of battle.

"You're going to regret this, Owen O'Connell."

Chapter Seven

Danielle

"Regret it? I'm going to regret it?" Owen says, repeating it both as if he misheard and as if he's taking it as a challenge. "That sounds like a threat."

He's about to learn I don't make idle threats. You can't when you grow up with Dixon Green. You have to follow through. But this isn't just a threat.

This is war.

"You heard me," I say, defiant, disrespectful, daring. "Since we'll be rooming together, thanks to your brilliantly stupid decision, I might as well get started on unpacking."

"Sounds like a good idea," Owen says, using exactly the same tone as if I told him I wanted to use my life savings to open a Blockbuster Video franchise. "We'll be sharing this room for a weekend, so you might as well get comfortable."

I take my suitcase and set it on the bed, then I cast my eyes about the room, looking for just the right place to put my things. I can see that Owen's already nearly finished with his unpacking — all his clothes, perfectly folded with military precision, sit in orderly rows stacked inside one of the open drawers of the room's two dressers; one for him, one for me.

Logically, that would be the best place for me to put my clothes.

Naturally, I take a pair of panties out of my suitcase and hurl it at the ceiling, the lacy thong landing delicately to hang from one of the room's two chandeliers.

"What the hell are you doing, Dani?" Owen says through clenched teeth.

"Unpacking. What does it look like?" I answer with the sweetest smile and then I throw one of my bras to land on a lampshade.

"You're making a mess."

"Oh, does this bother you, Mr. Orderly? I thought Marines could handle a little disorder."

No sooner do the words leave my mouth than I reach into my suitcase, grab a fistful of shirts, a pair of shorts, and three pairs of socks, and cast them in the air into a gigantic cloud. They scatter and land in little piles throughout the room.

"You're acting like a child."

"I am not acting like a child. I'm unpacking," I say as I throw another pair of my panties onto the chandelier. I have no clue how I'll get them down later, but that's not the point — the point is to drive Owen away so that he and his rugged, muscular body don't distract me from my mission of helping Morgan and Riley get out of this wedding. If that means I have to go commando a day or two, then so be it. "Which, by the way, unpacking is tough work. I wonder what they have to eat and drink in here?"

"Dani, this isn't a dorm room. And I'm not your maid. Can we at least agree to keep underwear off the chandeliers?" Owen's voice shakes with the immense effort of remaining calm.

Which means he still has a shred of patience left.

A shred that I need to destroy.

Time to intensify the combat, or whatever the hell Marines say. No, knowing how smart Marines are, it's probably: shoot more better.

In the refrigerator, I find several bottles of wine, including a bottle of expensive looking champagne, and next to the refrigerator is a small cabinet full of snacks, including a packet of what look to be homemade biscotti. Knowing the Vertuccis and their pride in their Italian heritage, they probably are homemade.

I grab the packet of biscotti and the champagne, which I pop open in a messy manner, making a huge foamy puddle on the floor, and announce, "I need to use the bathroom. I'll be back in a second to finish unpacking, Mr. Orderly."

A trail of biscotti crumbs falls in my wake on the way to the bathroom. Though that is only partly by intent — biscotti are always so dry and crumbly they make a mess on their own.

I get to the palatial, marble-tiled bathroom, sipping and spilling champagne as I go, and leave the door open.

"Dani, the door," Owen calls behind me.

His voice sounds more urgent than before.

Good.

He knows what's coming.

Maybe this will drive him away. A serious and shameless escalation of our psychological warfare.

"What about the door?" I reply.

"If you're going to use the toilet, close the damn door."

"It's only pee."

"No, no way," he starts. I can hear him start moving toward the bathroom to shut the door, but it's too late, because I've already started, too.

"Do not come in here, perv," I call out. "Are you one of those sick guys who wants to watch women in the bathroom? What would I find if I searched in your browser history?"

"Oh fuck," he says, stopping just short of the doorway and turning around to run back to the bedroom.

Finished, I return to the bedroom carrying my cookies and champagne, both of which continue to fall in crumbs and puddles behind me. Haphazardly, I grab a few more things from my suitcase and throw them around the room.

"Unpacking is boring," I announce as I snatch up the remote control for the big screen TV that dominates the wall opposite the bed. "I'm going to see what's on TV."

With the push of a button, I bring the TV to life.

With a long, long press of the volume button, I fill the room with the deafening sounds of an infomercial for a chamois cloth so absorbent it can soak up buckets of fluid without leaving, and, according to the excessively excited and skeezy spokesman, 'any evidence that any fluids of any time were there at all; wine, tears, blood. It's like nothing ever happened, and you can get back to your vacation in Reno with no cares in the world.'

It's so specific that it creeps me out, so I change the channel. There's the familiar *duhn-duhn* of one of the most bingeable TV shows in history, and instantly, I'm among the ranks of New York City's finest.

"Seriously, Dani? You make this room look like a hurricane hit a lingerie store and decide now is the time to watch an episode of — oh, fuck, this is a good one — " Owen shakes his head as if fighting off that irresistible inclination to sit down and watch an episode, and then continues, "You can't just sit and watch TV while this room is a fucking pigsty."

"If you don't like it, you can leave," I shout over the silver-haired district attorney on the screen.

"Not happening."

"Then you better be ready for a lot more of this. Now, shut up, I've seen this episode, too — everyone's seen every episode — but I love it, so don't interrupt."

It is an exceptional episode; the bad guy's a total creep; he nearly gets

away with the murder; he taunts the detectives and the DA with his blatant criminality; then the detectives find a last-minute clue that turns out to be the nail in his coffin, and the clue's sprung as a big bombshell in court. Then, like always, the DA closes out the case with a biting one-liner. Classic.

I watch the entire episode while eating biscotti with an open mouth and dribbling champagne everywhere.

As time goes on, I can see veins emerge in Owen's forehead, and soon, those veins have veins, all of which throb in unimaginable rage and frustration.

But, despite everything I do, he doesn't break.

I'll have to try harder.

Smiling at him while chewing with my mouth open, I say, "Again, you can leave at any time. I'll just tell everyone we broke up. No one will question it. They know I'm way out of your league, anyways. Life will go on, and it'll be easier for both of us."

"No."

On accident, I grab another pair of panties and hurl them around the room. Then a floral, low-cut maxi dress I'd packed for after-wedding brunching and to catch Owen's eye, I hurl right at his face and he bats it away like an offending fly.

Then my phone beeps.

It's a text from Morgan. She's in the middle of a breakdown and she needs me.

My feet are on the ground before I know it.

She is infinitely more important than chasing Owen away.

If Morgan is wavering or having second thoughts, there's no way I'll be able to rescue Riley on my own. This is only something that can happen if the two of us are entirely committed and focused on our mission. We cannot fail. We can't abandon Riley in her moment of weakness and let her be prey for that suited Vertucci vulture.

"I'll be back. Don't touch any of my things," I say. Then, as a final barb, I take one of my bras, use the cups to encircle the bottle of champagne, and then tie the straps in an intricate, impossible knot around one of the light fixtures. It's such a precarious position that any jostling will spill the contents of the champagne bottle everywhere.

"What the fuck is that?" Owen says.

"A booby trap. And a test. Mess with my stuff and the mess will only

grow. Got it? Now, I have to go be with Morgan for a bit, so you behave yourself while I'm gone, Mr. Orderly."

* * * * *

It takes a lot of hugs, reassurances, and time to calm Morgan down. She's in such a state of doubt and despair when I arrive that it breaks my heart seeing my best friend like that. But it doesn't surprise me. To know that someone in your family is back to using drugs, after struggling with addiction so much in the past, and is actively ruining their life not only with that poison, but in making the terrible decision to marry the man who is their dealer? Despair is the least of what I'd feel if I were in her place.

By the time I get her calmed down and believing again that we have the strength and the capability to get her sister out of this mess, I'm more determined than ever that Owen has to go.

There can be no obstacles to rescuing Riley. Even handsome, well-intentioned obstacles like Owen that are simply here out of a belief that I need to be protected, no, *coddled*, away from danger. As if I'm not an adult who can make her own decisions, take on her own risks, to protect her friends and the people that are important to her.

They, of all people, being former Marines who risked their lives saving others, should understand that.

But no, they don't. They won't.

Because Owen and Dixon both see me as that little tomboy struggling to keep up, not as the capable woman that I clearly am.

The door to our suite is slightly ajar and I stop in the hallway, feeling a wave of anxiety rush through me. I know whose house this is; I know there are armed men on the property. Could someone have already gotten wind of mine and Morgan's plan to spirit away Riley from Michael Vertucci's clutches and decided to eliminate us?

I creep up to the doorway, my ears straining for any sound.

Two voices.

A woman's hits my ears first. It sounds older. Late forties, early fifties. Overworked. Tired. And, especially at this moment, disgusted and dismayed.

"I cannot believe this. In all my years, I have not seen such a mess made in such a short period of time. How did this happen?"

"We had an argument, that's all. I said some things, did some things,

provoked her. Working here, I'm sure you know how spirited some people can get when they have a fight."

There's a moment of quiet.

"Yes. But all this mess? You call me here to make me clean all this up? I'm a housekeeper, not some slave or servant."

I feel terrible. Not for embarrassing Owen — no, I'd wanted that — but that my actions have ruined this housekeeper's day. Making up for my frustrations is going to fall on her shoulders, not the man it's intended for.

"No, ma'am, I didn't."

"You specifically called and asked for housekeeping. I am the housekeeper for this villa. That would make this my job, no?"

Her *hurt* draws me closer to the door with an urge to call out, to reveal my eavesdropping presence, and then profusely apologize for being such an unmitigated asshole. Then I catch myself. If I go in now, apologizing, Owen will know he's won this round. As hard as it is, I can't go in there. I can't apologize. Because this is war.

"I called for housekeeping, yes, ma'am, but not to make you clean this up. I just wanted access to your cleaning tools."

"My tools? You mean my mop and broom?"

"And your rags, your mop buckets, any cleaning sprays you might have, and definitely a vacuum if you've got one."

"What? Why?"

"Because I'm going to clean this all up myself. You shouldn't have to suffer for an argument between me and my girlfriend."

Even now, hearing that word — *girlfriend* — makes every hair on the back of my neck stand upright in delight. It's wrong, I know, it's absolutely not what I need right now, but every time he says it, it's like someone flips a switch inside me. If only it were coming under better circumstances, instead of him apologizing and making up for my immaturity to an obviously overworked and under-appreciated housekeeper.

"You're going to clean it up?"

"Done it before. Heck, I once cleaned an entire latrine using my best friend's toothbrush. Didn't tell him about it until afterwards, either." There's a pause as Owen lets out a small chuckle. "He was none too happy. But that's beside the point, ma'am. I just need your tools, not your presence. If you're good with knots, there's some booby-trapped champagne over by the bed. It's warm, probably flat, but so expensive it should still be good. You can have it.

And they're running that cop drama on TV right now, so if you want to kick back, put your feet up, and watch an episode while I handle my girlfriend's mess, you're welcome to do so. I'm sure they work you pretty hard around here and you could use a break."

"You have no idea," the housekeeper replies.

"Then relax a minute. I got this."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm always sure. Just don't move any of my girlfriend's things, if you can help it. She left specific instructions that her clothes were not to be moved."

"Even the panties on the chandelier?"

"Especially the panties on the chandelier."

"Why are they there?"

Owen grunts. Inside, I can hear the sounds of a mop bucket being filled and then the wet sploosh of a mop being deployed on a very dirty floor. "Something she saw online on that video app that sounds like a clock. It was about elevating your ass, literally and metaphorically, by placing your underwear in high places. It's supposed to raise your self-esteem and self-confidence. At least, according to the eighteen-year-old DJ and part-time *Abercrombie* model who made the video. Supposedly, they're a certified life coach, too, so it seems legit."

"What the hell is the world coming to?" The housekeeper says.

"No fucking clue." There's the sound of the mop being wrung out and redeployed. "Some days, it makes me long to reenlist. It was hell, but at least it was a hell that made sense, you know?"

Then conversation winds on and on while I listen, feeling guilty, feeling like an asshole, feeling like maybe I misjudged Owen. Maybe he deserves better.

Then I remember Morgan. Her tears. And the sight of Riley as her shaky hands took those pills, and she embraced the man who is guiding her down a path of self-destruction.

I can't afford to lose focus.

No matter how bad it feels, the outcome will be worse for everyone I love if I do not remember what's important.

That means no compassion for Owen.

He's an obstacle. That's it. No matter how much it hurts, no matter how charming it is that the rugged ex-Marine and current biker is mopping floors and kindly chatting with an old housekeeper while he helps her take a rare

break and encourages her to put her feet up and enjoy some champagne.

It makes me want to do what I've ached to do all these years: run in there and kiss him for being a rare mix of compassion, handsomeness, and just the right amount of dangerous that I'd feel safe in his arms and pity for anyone who looked at me the wrong way.

When it sounds like the cleaning is done, I loudly open and shut the door, letting myself in the room just in time to see Owen helping the housekeeper organize her supplies on her cleaning cart and then give her a generous tip.

"Thanks for all your help, ma'am," he says.

The older woman gives him a warm smile and me a frigid glare as she pushes the cart out of the room.

"You're back," he says.

Owen stands there in the center of the bedroom, still surrounded by the scattered piles of my clothes, with his sleeves rolled up, revealing tattoos on his muscled forearms. There's sweat on his brow and an unreadable smile on his face, a face with a masculine jaw and a dimple that's melted my heart for so long.

"I'm back," I say, heading to the bar and grabbing another bottle of wine. As I know I have to do, I take the bottle with me into the bathroom, and slam the door behind me. I have to shut out his face, his eyes, that dimple, those lips that I long to kiss and feel run hungrily across my naked skin. Already, I'm cracking. I need this space to make a new plan to drive Owen away. "I'm taking a bath. This will be a while."

For me.

For Morgan.

For Riley.

I have to stay strong.

But for how much longer can I manage when everything Owen does makes me want him even more?

Chapter Eight

Striker

A walk is my only option, because I refuse to sit in a room, drinking, while Dani takes a sulking soak in the bathroom. Not only will it get me away from her and her maddening attitude, not to mention the distraction of being only a door away from her while she's naked and covered in foam, but it'll also give me a chance to survey the grounds and look for any weak points in their security..

I grab a beer from the fridge — something Italian, with a name I can't pronounce and a flavor that would be perfect for sipping while munching on a slice of pizza — and go outside. More people are arriving, some limos, other fancy black cars, and one stretch hummer that makes me want to vomit my beer right in front of everyone.

Everybody is busy, occupied with finding their place on the large Vertucci compound, and now is the perfect time to scout. If someone questions me, I can just say I got lost.

Sipping my beer and doing my best to blend in with the raucous riot of people arriving, I case the main mansion of the compound. It's where Michael Vertucci is likely to keep his best and most dangerous men, and any chance to size up my enemy is a chance I need to take. Hopefully, I can get an eye for what weapons they're packing and how many more of those HK-33 assault rifles they have.

Just as important, I need something to occupy my mind away from Danielle.

I can't believe her attitude lately. The tantrum she threw earlier is something I'd expect from a teenager in the full throes of hormones, not a grown-ass woman.

What's going on with her?

And what can I do to tone her attitude down? Because if she can't keep a lid on her anger, this is going to be one long weekend.

"Sir... excuse me, sir?"

I stop, ripped out of my thoughts about Danielle by the curt, clipboard-carrying man who checked Danielle and me in earlier.

"Yeah, what?" I say, not exactly happy to leave my confused, frustrated thoughts to talk to a man who looks like he has a hot pepper shoved up his ass.

"Will you or your... female companion... be registering for any of the activities planned for the weekend?" He says, and before I can even answer, he shoves a different clipboard at me.

Out of curiosity, I read it, because I'm wondering if I'm actually getting a peek behind the curtain and am about to find out that the Mafia is actually huge fans of *Settlers of Catan*, when I see the first activity on the list, scheduled to start in less than an hour: a bocce ball tournament.

I get an idea.

A wicked idea that should knock Danielle down a notch.

I read the list of people already signed up for the tournament and see a bunch of very Italian names, all male, all likely belonging to old Italian men who have been playing the game since the dawn of recorded history.

"Anyone can compete in these activities?"

"Yes, anyone at all. They're meant to keep the guests involved and serve as icebreakers, since we are expecting a large crowd, many of whom will be flying in from the old country. We want them to feel at home, so there are several more traditional methods of mingling on the agenda."

"Perfect. My girlfriend..." my tongue trips slightly over that word, which surprises me. "She sent me here to sign her up for bocce. She's a fanatic. Absolutely loves the game and is really looking forward to competing."

"Your girlfriend, sir?"

"Yes, is that a problem?"

"She'll be the only woman competing, sir."

"She can play with the boys, I promise you that," I say.

"Some of them, they're quite good."

"Even better," I say, writing her name on the list and then underlining it with authority, just to show this clipboard-carrying asshole I mean business. "It's there. In pen. Underlined. You can't take that back. She'll be there in an hour, so you better tell everyone to be prepared for an ass kicking."

"I have no stake in the game, sir. I just make the lists. Have a good day."

Smiling, and looking forward to seeing a humbled Danielle a couple hours from now, after she's had her ass spanked on the bocce ball court — or whatever the fuck they play on — I head back to the room. It's been a while, my beer's empty, and Dani will need time to get ready.

Knocking first, I then push open the door.

"I've got news for you," I call out.

Hearing rustling in the bedroom, I continue into our room, through the mini living room of our suite and around the corner into the bedroom.

Then I stop. Frozen.

Danielle's there. Hair wrapped in a towel, one leg planted on the edge of the bed, so much of her exposed from beneath the hem of her very short, hardly tied bathrobe.

"Holy shit, Owen. What are you doing here?" She shrieks, clutching her robe tighter and turning away from me. As short as her robe is, the hem stops just above her knees, and I can see how tanned and toned her calves are. It's not a part I'd normally find sexy on a woman, but on her? Hell, I could become a calf man, if that's even a thing.

Shaking my head clear, I take a deep breath to still my heartbeat and remember why I came.

"There's bocce ball in an hour," I say.

It's only half the reason I came up here. Hell, it's barely a sentence, but it's all I can manage as the sight of Danielle still dominates my thoughts. I shake my head again. I should not be feeling this way about her. She's my best friend's little sister. This is wrong. So very wrong.

"Great, glad to know. So why should I care?"

"Because you're playing. I signed you up."

"Excuse me?"

"I put your name on the list with the clipboard guy. Signed it in pen. Underlined it, too. Oh, and you should know you were the only female and non-Italian on the list."

"You did *what*?" She whirls toward me so quickly her robe flashes open for a second and I throw my eyes to the ceiling. If I were a religious person, I'd probably have to flagellate myself to clear my head of all the thoughts that quick glimpse of Dani put into my head. As it is, I still might flagellate myself later.

I never imagined she had a body like that.

I want to laugh. She's always had a body. I've just never seen it. It's been right in front of me this whole time and I've never recognized it because I've always seen her as Dani the tagalong in baggy t-shirts who did her best to keep up with Smokey and me as we raised hell through Costa Oscura.

But the woman in front of me is wearing a robe that barely covers her...

I shake my head again and remember my mission and my loyalty to Smokey. He saved my life, so I can't go imagining how I want to fuck his sister. I have to knock Danielle down a peg, so I can pay my debt and so Dani and I don't murder each other this weekend.

"I signed you up, like I said. The clipboard guy noted it, too. Oh, and don't even think about trying to back out of it, because I remember you saying we need to avoid attracting unwanted attention to ourselves this weekend, and skipping out on something you signed up for would definitely draw some unwanted attention."

"You're a bastard, you know that?"

"And you only have forty-five minutes to get ready."

"I hate you."

"Feeling's mutual right now." I check the time on my phone. "Forty-four minutes."

"You're the worst."

"You're wasting time. Better hurry, Dani."

"This is ridiculous. I don't even know how to play. What the fuck am I supposed to do? Ask for a tutorial? Watch some YouTube videos?"

"You better watch a lot of them. Because I may have told the guy with the clipboard that you were an expert player and looking forward to crushing everyone on the court."

Her jaw drops. Breathless. Stupefied. It's beautiful. She's beautiful.

"You what?"

"Come on, what do you have to worry about? I'm sure it'll be exactly like softball. If it isn't, maybe some of the people you're competing against can give you some pointers. The clipboard guy mentioned that some of the older ones had been playing bocce longer than you've been alive." I grab another beer from the fridge. It opens with a satisfying crack and the liquid inside tastes sweet. I raise the can in her direction. "Forty-two minutes, now. I'll see you down on the courts. They're out back."

There's a smile on my face as I leave the room. A big, anticipatory smile, because I'm going to watch Danielle Green get humbled. It might even be enough of a humbling that I get a good night's sleep. On the floor, still, but that doesn't bother me — I have slept in worse places — the only thing I need is for Danielle to be quiet and stop throwing her panties all over the place.

On the way to the bocce courts, I finish my beer. Fortunately, there's a passing server with an entire tray of them, already poured into a pint glass. I

take two.

Then I find a seat with a perfect view of the courts and settle in, ready to watch Danielle get her mouth shut.

It's not long before she makes her appearance.

The woman that my eyes register nearly makes me spill my beer all over myself; clad in a pair of tight-fitting yoga shorts that cover nothing, a loose Van Halen shirt that covers everything, and wearing her brown hair in a ponytail out of the back of a beat-up Costa Oscura High baseball cap, she is every bit the image of the girl I had a crush on when I was younger.

I stare.

To my left and right, comments get whispered in Italian by an elderly couple. I don't speak the language, but I know the tone; they're just as struck by her as I am.

She sees me, and she nods in my direction. It's a friendly gesture, but I can see the message behind her eyes: *Fuck you, Owen.*

I raise my beer in reply and give my best shit-eating grin.

"You got this, Dani," I call out.

She smiles. It's a smile that tells me she wants to cut my abdomen open, rip out my intestines, and use them to hang me from a tree so she can beat me with a baseball bat like I'm a human pinata.

Clipboard man comes through the crowd, now wearing a black-and-white umpire's cap. He clears his throat.

"May I have your attention?" He calls out, and instantly, the crowd quiets. "The matches shall be played one-on-one, with a single loss resulting in elimination. We will use the rules as they do in the old country, none of those bastardized variations like they have in Argentina or in Eastern Europe. Which means..." While the clipboard-carrying man goes on explaining the rules of the tournament and doing his best to sound like a Roman emperor announcing the commencement of the gladiator games, several of the eldest competitors sidle up to Dani. Like predators circling their prey, they surround her, whispering to her, even nudging her with the occasional elbow, all with sly, carnivorous grins on their faces. They must recognize her inexperience, her weakness, and I revel in the thought of her being beaten by an eighty-year-old man who definitely is wearing Depends. This loss will not just humble her, it might even kill her.

I'm going to enjoy this.

"Any questions?" The clipboard man says at the conclusion of his

commencement.

Dani shakes her head along with the rest of competitors. She's too proud to admit she's in over her head. Fortunately for her, she's not first up. Two men who look like they just stepped off a cruise ship are.

I grab another beer and zone out while they bat their balls around for everyone to see.

Dani watches them intently, and I don't blame her. She's desperate to learn anything she can about the game she's about to lose.

The match ends.

Then Dani's up, facing off against a guy who looks like he's only a year or two away from needing a walker.

"Good luck, honey," I call out.

Dani gives me a smile that, to anyone else, would look like an expression of love, but which I clearly recognize as being a wish for me to spontaneously combust.

"Thanks, dear," she replies.

I can't wait to see her lose.

The game begins. Dani is good — her first toss is a strike, or whatever they say, but the old man gets his ball down almost perfectly, and he knocks Dani's ball out of the way. He yells out something in Italian, and the crowd roars their approval.

Dani's got a problem.

Every ball she throws, she misses, but barely; every ball the old man throws, he hits. It's like watching a toddler run out onto a Major League baseball field and try to win a game against the Yankees. It's perfect.

The crowd loves it. They cheer louder for each near miss by Dani and each strike by the old man.

In the third round of their match, the old man hits a perfect shot, which sends Dani's ball flying right out of bounds, and he raises his hand in glorious triumph.

Then clutches his other hand to his chest. A shocked gasp breaks through his lips. He crumples to the ground, face going gray, and several of the younger men scramble to his side.

From the crowd, an elderly woman calls out, "He needs his pills. They're in his pocket. Get him his pills and he'll be fine."

After a heart-racing moment, someone fishes inside the old man's pocket, retrieves the pills, and gets them in his mouth. The old man swallows, color

shortly returns to his face, and with the aid of several of the young men, he hobbles off the court.

The clipboard man then steps forward and raises Dani's arm.

"And the winner by disqualification: Danielle Green."

Everyone claps — especially several of the oldest members of the bocce competitors, who cheer loudly as well — and I drown my frustration with another beer.

Dani looks at me and smiles. "Aren't I doing great, honey? I think I'm learning how this game works."

I wave, and somehow stop myself from responding with a one-finger salute.

The matches continue, and when she's not putting her pitching prowess on display, Dani's huddled amongst Italian grandpas who I realize aren't smiling and leering at her like predators, they're giving her advice, input, doting on her like she's their granddaughter. They've taken her under their wing, delighting in sharing their knowledge with a talented young woman who's showing an interest in their favorite pastime.

Dani advances.

She wins again, and again, and again.

With each match, I'm forced to admit she's stronger and more capable of blending in than I gave her credit for. This event's a humbling one, sure, but it's not Dani who's being forced to face facts. It's me.

The last match begins, and it's Dani against a man who looks like he's one of the groomsmen. He's in his mid-thirties, with slick hair and a smirk like he believes all of us belong on our knees, groveling for whatever skull-fucking he deigns to give us.

After just a look at his smug face, I need an entire beer to drown the hateful fire in my gut.

Suddenly, I'm not hoping for Dani to be humbled. I'm cheering for her.

At the start of the match, I'm on my feet, watching, clapping, cheering as her first tosses land exactly where they need to be, in places just fractions better than the punchable prick she's competing against.

The first few rounds go to Dani, but then, with a twisted look on his face, the prick mounts a furious comeback until it's tied going into the final toss.

Tied.

And I'm on my feet, hollering for Dani to kick ass as she steps up to her last throw.

I want her to win. Not just win, but dominate this Mafia motherfucker and send him crying back to his nonna.

She throws. With skill, precision, and grace, showing off every bit the expert pitcher that she is. I may not know much about bocce, but even I know that the toss she makes is one for the ages; it lands on the court with perfect placement and I pump my fist in the air, exultant, as the crowd erupts in cheers.

Dani's toss has put her on the verge of victory, and everyone knows it.

When the cheers die down, the Mafioso sets himself to take his final throw. He has one chance to win; he needs the perfect toss, and everyone watching knows he's not nearly man enough to pull it off.

The ball arcs through the air, graceful. It's a good throw, but not good enough.

It lands. He loses.

Dani's face breaks into a glorious grin and her gang of granddads breaks out into cheers. *They'd raise her on their shoulders if it wouldn't kill them.* The man with the clipboard comes forward to raise her hand in triumph.

Game, set, match.

When Clipboard releases her hand, the losing Mafioso steps forward and extends his hand to shake my woman's hand.

Smiling, she takes it.

They shake.

Then, with a sick grin on his face, he pulls her close and reaches around to slap her on the ass.

Before I know it, I'm on my feet, my fists clenched, ready to storm forward and break this man into pieces.

I want Dani humbled, sure, but not like this.

No one touches her.

No one but me.

But I'm brought to a halt when Dani levels a confident look right at me.

I've got this, it says.

How the hell does she have this under control?

What is she going to do? Throw a fist at a made man and get herself shot for her insolence? I don't know much about the Mafia, but even I know a woman doesn't raise her hand to a made man and live. Anyone who's seen any Mafia movie knows that.

Instead, she doesn't touch the guy at all.

Dani simply leans to whisper in the ear of one of her Italian grandfathers, and that old gentleman snaps his fingers and has three more grandfathers at attention in a second. They surround the smirking younger man, who loses his grin as the oldest guy grips his ear in a merciless pinch and twists him to his knees.

"Apologize to the lady," he says in thickly accented English.

The younger man doesn't even struggle. Wherever he is on the food chain, he's nowhere close to the old shark who has his ear in a death-grip.

"Sorry," he spits.

The old man twists his ear again, making the younger man howl.

"She beat you. You have no reason to disrespect the young lady like that. Apologize like you mean it."

"All right, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. Can you forgive me?"

Expectant eyes land on Dani. One shake of her head, and this impudent punk will lose an ear.

She nods.

The old men release him, and he walks away, rubbing his blistering red ear. As the crowd of supportive old men encircle her to celebrate her victory, she and I lock eyes for a moment.

See? I told you I can handle myself, her look says. Dani's not just Smokey's little sister — she's fearless, capable, and commands respect from people who don't give it easily. This is her moment.

I didn't break her; I elevated her.

Elevated her, and got myself a glimpse of who she really is.

My return glance says something else. Something respectful, but filled with the emotion we both know burns between us. A powerful emotion. One we have to fight, because if we give in to it here, now...

It will get us both killed.

Chapter Nine

Striker

Night can't come soon enough.

The time between Dani's victory and darkness is torturous, filled with cheering, drinking, eating a feast of a meal, more drinking, some fine cigars, and finally coming back to the room and collapsing into the emperor-sized bed. It's exhausting celebrating alongside people I know to be the enemy, people who will kill us both if given half the provocation, people who will shove drink after drink and cigar after cigar into your hands, and if they're not giving you incredible booze or smokes, they're either complimenting the talents of the woman you've wanted for years or giving you food that makes whatever your grandmother cooks taste like moldy prison rations.

By the time I hit the bed, I'm broken and ready to sleep.

"And you doubted me," Dani says, grinning, as she slides into bed beside me.

In bed.

Beside me.

Smiling with confidence, empowerment, the woman I've always dreamed about slides into bed next to me.

She's so close that all I'd need to do to put my lips to hers is turn my shoulders. It'd be so easy. So perfect. I wonder what she tastes like?

Instead, I stand up. "You did well."

Her smile flickers to a frown for a fleeting moment, then returns, strained. "I'm more capable than you and Dixon give me credit for."

"You won a ballgame against a bunch of geriatrics. Don't go getting ahead of yourself."

"No, don't undercut me, Owen. I not only beat them, I won them over. Those old guys love me. Did you know I had half of them ask me for my business card? One guy, he's looking at buying a summer home here by the coast. He wants something with at least five bedrooms, six bathrooms, and three acres. Beachfront. Do you know what I'm going to make in commission on that?"

"Good for you," I say, forcing myself to ignore how enticing she looks as

she lays there in bed, with her face radiating happiness and confidence. She deserves to feel proud of herself after today, but I'll be damned if how she looks right now isn't the sweetest poison; every second alone with her, my loyalty, my mission, my purpose is getting torn to shreds. I busy myself with building my bed on the floor. "Now we just have to focus on living through the rest of the weekend so you can actually be alive to earn that commission from that old Mafia godfather."

"I did well. You can admit that without getting all back-handed."

Bed built, I look for the next thing to do. Something. Anything. Whatever can distract me from how good she looks, how bad I want her.

"Owen?" Her voice is plaintive, hurt. I look up, resistance melting. "You can say that, right? I did well?"

Her face shows me a momentary flash of the young woman I remember: the girl who chased after Dixon and me, wanting nothing more than our approval. Approval that we often withheld.

Because we were fucking idiots.

Young men who thought the world was ours; young, dumb, blind men who couldn't see the smarts, talent, and beauty that was following us around, asking for our unworthy approval.

I look at the vulnerable, beautiful woman on the bed, and I nod.

"You kicked ass today, Dani. You were great today, and you've been great for a long time."

Her smile lights up the darkness of the bedroom.

I return my focus to my bed, needlessly, desperately rearranging the pillow and the pile of clothes that forms my mattress on the cold floor.

Then I stretch out on it, grateful for the discomfort of the cold tile. It's just enough to cut through the warmth that floods my body every time I look at her.

Some time passes.

I hear her busy herself, changing clothes, brushing her teeth.

Then she gets back into bed and she calls to me.

"You don't have to sleep down there, you know." A second of quiet. Of doubt. She adds, "Because, like I said, we don't want the maids to talk. We have to fit in. You know, play the part of a couple?"

It's an offer tailor-made to cut through every defense I have.

All I need to do is open my mouth, say the 'yes' that we both want me to say, and I'll break the most vital vow I've made in my life, ruin my trust with

my best friend, and do what Dani and I have both wanted for as long as we've known each other.

I keep my mouth shut.

Darkness and quiet hurt settle between us until the silence becomes the soft sighs of her sleep. When I'm sure she's deep enough in slumber that she won't wake up, I stand.

I can't stay in this room. I'm not strong enough.

I have to do something, anything, to take my mind off the temptation that's sleeping just feet from me.

Anxiety and doubt take me outside to the perimeter gate.

At first, I don't know what I'm doing there except getting away from her, but then one look at the suited, shotgun-toting guard tells me exactly what I need to do: I need to get back to my people. Even for just a little while, I need to be back with the MC, with my friends, so I can have a break from all this mafia madness and the seductive dream sleeping in my bed.

"The fuck you doing out this late?" The guard says.

"My girl's asleep. I thought I'd take a trip into town and visit some friends, if you know what I mean," I say, tapping my nose, trusting the guard to understand, because there has to be at least one philandering asshole at this event.

He nods. Chuckles. "Have a good night."

* * * * *

I hitchhike once I get back to the main road. Half-an-hour later, I'm outside Reid's Repairs. There's a light on inside, which is exactly what I want. It's probably Bullet or Thunder pulling some late-night work or having a strategy session about how to expand the club's business. Lately, there's been talk about strengthening ties with the Twisted Devils up north. Though I'm not one for business talk, preferring action or the honest silence of good hard work, I'll take planning and the company of my club brothers over sleeping on that cold stone floor next to the woman who effortlessly shreds my loyalty.

But it isn't Thunder or Bullet I find inside the garage.

"You look like shit. Also, you shouldn't be here," Rook says, hardly looking up from the motorcycle in front of him.

It's impossible for me to tell if he's pissed off at working late, or if this is

his normal level of grumpiness. The two are so often the same.

"Had to get out. I spent the day surrounded by freaking Vertuccis, I need some fresh air and honest company. A ride, too," I say, adding that last part as almost an afterthought, though even as the words leave my lips, they sound true. I need a ride. A way to clear my head.

But clearing my head and raising my mood doesn't involve spending time with Rook. As much as he's a brother, he can also be a menace. Clearing my head means some task, some mission, that keeps my mind off the temptation sleeping in my bed.

As if reading my thoughts and knowing the exact wrong thing to say — because he's an asshole — Rook says, "I get you about needing a break. But this thing with that girl at that wedding is more important than you know. Smokey and his two friends, Ghost and Hawk, came by the shop earlier. Let drop the hint that they may look for a place to take them in, should this thing with his sister go well. We could use the extra firepower, too. Chatter on the street is the Santoros are still eyeing Costa Oscura and may make another move soon."

"Chatter on the street?" I say.

"I talked to a guy with connections," Rook says. "Then I put him in the hospital. They had to wire his jaw shut. Broke his fingers, too, so he won't be communicating for a while except by blinking."

Sounds about right for Rook and sounds like awful news for me. The last thing I need is knowing that this thing with Dani means more than just clearing my debt with Smokey, it may even mean the survival of the club itself.

There's some noise in the back office and a light flicks on, revealing Bullet at the lone desk in the office, on the phone.

"He's on the line with the Twisted Devils in Ironwood Falls. I connected Bullet with Rabid up there to see if they could work out something to the mutual benefit of both our clubs. The Devils are established, have great access to the Interstate and all those commercial connections, but they ain't seaside like us, nor are they as close to a major port as we are. Though I'd never tell them to their faces, those guys could be valuable partners."

"You wouldn't tell someone to their face that they're valuable?"

"And openly compliment them? Who the fuck do you think I am? Mother Theresa?"

"You're a strange man, Rook."

"Likewise, Wedding Boy."

"Shut up," I say, grinning. Even though he's a damnably surly asshole, Rook's still a more welcome distraction than spending time on the cold, hard floor next to the woman that I want, but can never have. "You about finished with that bike job for that Chaos guy?"

"Mayhem," he corrects me. "And yeah. It's about back in working order. Took forever, too. Entire engine was burned."

"Burned?"

"Incinerated is more like it. I think he put some kind of alternative fuel in it. It smelled like bacon, to be honest. Mayhem is a..." He pauses. "A fucking lunatic."

"He going to be coming by sometime to pick it up?"

Rook shakes his head. "Nope."

"What do you mean 'nope'?"

"He's in Oakland."

"How'd he get there with no ride?"

"He just dropped his bike off and said he'd walk the rest of the way."

"That's forty miles."

"That's Mayhem."

"So, how's he going to get his bike?"

"I was going to ride it out there and deliver it to him. He gave me a latitude and longitude and a phone number to call when I was on my way." Rook pauses and gives me a half smile, which makes me take a step back, because he never smiles. "If you're looking for something to do, you could deliver it for me. You'd get a ride, and I'd get to go home to Eliza. It'd be a win-win."

Probably not, but it would give me something to do that doesn't involve Danielle. And, if this Mayhem guy is anything like his reputation, there may be some action involved as well.

"Fine."

Rook gestures to the bike and then hands me a scrap of paper, upon which are scrawled the coordinates and the phone number, alongside what is either a smear of blood or devil's food frosting. Or both. "She's all yours. Call that number when you're close, and he said you'll get further instructions."

Thus equipped, I ride.

Thirty minutes later, I'm just a mile out from the coordinates, and I dial the number. There's a loud mechanical screeching that reminds me of a fax machine receiving a signal, and then a voice that sounds like it's being

relayed through a walkie-talkie answers.

"Is the bird approaching the roost? Have the chess castles reached their positions?"

I blink and stare at the phone. "Who the fuck is this?"

"You're not Rook. Where's Rook? He's the chess castles I was referring to."

"No, I'm not Rook. This is Striker. Rook went to go be with Eliza. Said he'd rather not drive his ass across the Bay Area just to deliver your bike."

"That sounds like him."

"So, I have the coordinates. I'm nearly there. Are you at the drop site?"

"I am. You're right on time, too. The deal's just about to go down."

"What deal?"

There's no answer, just a click as the phone cuts out.

Undeterred, I ride on to the coordinate location, but I pat my gun just to reassure myself that it's there. I have a feeling I'm going to need it.

The tires screech as I come to a stop in front of an abandoned fish cannery that smells like oily death heated in a microwave. There's a lone man standing outside the building, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, lounging casually against the brick wall of the cannery. He's sporting a shaved head, with tattoos twining around his exposed arms and neck, and a cut that identifies him as the man I'm looking for. I pull the bike up next to him and hop off.

"Mayhem?"

He nods. "Striker."

"Why are you here?"

He looks at me, confused for a moment. There's something not quite right in his eyes, though it doesn't seem malevolent, just crazy. "Isn't it obvious? I'm waiting. Or is this an existentialist thing? If so, I'm not feeling philosophical tonight. That's usually a Tuesday thing."

"But why here?"

"Because I have business here."

"Business?"

"I'm buying something. I'm waiting. Was waiting for you, still am waiting for my business partners."

"What are you buying?"

"There's no time to explain. You wouldn't get it if I tried, anyway. It's too advanced for you. Besides, the sellers are already here. So just keep your

mouth shut and keep your eyes open."

A black car pulls up at that moment and three men exit it, one of whom has a briefcase bound to his wrist by handcuffs. All three are well-dressed, in suits, and look like they're of Asian descent. Of the three, one man steps forward. He's missing both his left eye and his left hand. He has an impressively thick mustache and his hair pulled back into a thick bun. Coolly, he looks Mayhem and me up and down.

"You are Mr. Mayhem, yes?" He says.

Mayhem nods. "I am, Mr. Takashi. Do you have it?"

"At significant cost, yes. Do you have the payment?"

Mayhem reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small bag of what looks like black sand. "Right here."

Takashi nods, motioning to one of his men, who steps forward to take the bag and check the contents. He nods and hands the briefcase over to Mayhem, who unlocks it with a key he pulls from his pocket. The sight of what's inside takes my breath away — it's a small, glowing orb, pulsing with a faint blue light. It's beautiful and terrifying all at once. Shockingly, it looks like the inside of the case is lined with something metallic as well. Lead, maybe.

"Is it what you were expecting?" Takashi asks, watching Mayhem carefully.

Mayhem nods, locking the briefcase back up. "It's exactly what I was expecting. Thank you for doing business with me, Mr. Takashi."

"You know the terms," Takashi says, his voice low. "If you misuse this, there will be consequences."

"I understand completely," Mayhem says with a grin that sends shivers down my spine.

Takashi smiles, too. A smile that's colder than Mayhem's grin of glee. The men to his side tense, as if preparing for something, and I reach for my weapon. "You understand, too, my friend, that I cannot actually allow you to leave here with that briefcase."

"I figured," Mayhem laughs. Before the other men can react, he launches himself forward, fists flying.

This is not the distraction I imagined. Shady deals, black powders, briefcases, and a fight to the death in front of a fish factory? What the fuck?

But I leap forward into combat, ready for a fight from hell.

One of Takashi's men squares up on me. With a motion as quick as a blur,

he draws a knife and lunges; I barely move aside in time, the steel slipping by my face so close I can kiss it.

No sooner do I dodge it than he follows up with a kick that hits me square in the ribs, doubling me over. I swing a punch to create distance and then charge forward, hitting him in the midsection with a tackle. Our momentum carries us backward into the brick wall of the cannery, and he hits with a shaking thud. With an elbow to the face, I stun him, then turn and grab his knife hand by the wrist, twist it until he howls, and the blade goes flying.

Mayhem's laughter echoes in my ears.

He's in the thick of a two-on-one fight and enjoying every second of it.

Hoping to finish my opponent, I unleash a powerhouse of a right hand and hit him right in the face. Blood spurts out of his nose and cartilage crumples beneath my knuckles as my fist impacts.

The man laughs, and I follow with a right hand to his gut, then another, then an uppercut that knocks him flat on his ass. I step forward and unleash a kick that catches him on the right side of his head and sends him slumping, unconscious.

"Not bad," says a voice behind me. "But not good enough."

I turn to see Takashi, sleeves rolled up, fists clenched. That all the warning I have before a left-right-left combination hits me in the face and I stumble backward, stars in my eyes.

I shake my head and charge forward, but Takashi is too quick. He dodges my punches with ease and then hits me with a swift jab to the gut, then an uppercut that sends me staggering. I wipe the blood from my mouth and grin, feeling the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

"You're good," I say, circling him warily.

Takashi nods, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "I've been waiting for a challenge."

I take a deep breath and launch myself forward, fists flying. We exchange blows, each one harder than the last, until my knuckles ache and my breath comes in ragged gasps. Takashi is a master of hand-to-hand combat, his moves fluid and precise, but I refuse to give up.

With a fierce yell, I throw my weight behind a punch, and catch him off-guard and send him stumbling. He recovers quickly, though, and hits me with a hook that sends me slumping to the ground.

I lie there, dazed, as Takashi stands over me, huffing.

He raises his fist, ready to deliver the finishing blow, when something

heavy, brown, and rectangular comes crashing onto his head. The briefcase.
He crumples.

Mayhem stands over him, smiling like a kid at recess.

"That was fun," he says. "And went exactly like I'd hoped it would. You good, Striker?"

I grunt and fight my way to my feet. Nothing feels broken.

"I'll be fine. What the fuck is in that briefcase, anyway?"

"Best to not ask questions. Just know that I've got one hell of a Christmas present for my Stacy once I finish fixing this baby up." He pats the briefcase lovingly. "You hungry? You want to go get a bite to eat? There's a Denny's not far from here. We could get a Grand Slam."

The man spends a night waiting around a rotten fish factory, nearly gets killed by the fucking Yakuza, and now wants to go eat pancakes?

I shake my head. "Not hungry. But I could use a ride back to Costa Oscura."

"Sure, I can do that," Mayhem says, sliding aside his bike and slapping the seat behind him. "Grab the briefcase and hop on. I'll take you wherever you need to go."

I get on. It feels weird, but so does everything involving Mayhem.

"Did you really walk here?"

"No," he says. "Mostly, I ran."

The bike screams as he kicks it to life, letting loose a howl like a beast unleashed. With reckless speed, he tears away from the fish factory, with three badly beaten men in our wake.

Hours later, I'm back at the gate to the Vertucci compound.

The guard gives me a funny look. "Rough night?"

I grunt. "You have no idea."

I have no idea, either, about what the fuck just happened.

All I know is that, when I lay my broken body down on the floor beside the bed, I'm both lucky to be there, and feeling more tortured than ever. This mission with Danielle is more important than I gave it credit for, and with the moves that the club's enemies are making, it means that the lives of everyone I care about depend on me.

Above me, on the bed, Danielle lets out a sensual, soft sigh and rolls over, throwing a toned, tanned leg atop the blanket. There's a smile on her face that's lit by the moonlight streaming through the window. Dani is everything I could ever want, everything I've ever wanted, everything that could get me

killed.

I turn away and stare out the window, try to keep my thoughts on track and willing my battered body to find some sleep. To make it through this mission, I'll have to fight the irresistible attraction that is growing between us with each passing second.

It's a fight that I'm not sure I can win.

Chapter Ten

Danielle

Grunting.

Deep and primal.

Intense, animalistic, arousing grunting.

It rips into my dream and pulls me awake. Awakens other parts of me, too.

I blink in the darkness, stir, eyes dry and the spot between my legs growing slick, and see a shadow stirring at the edge of my sight. Rippling muscles, an athletic form.

Moaning, I wonder if I'm not actually awake, if I'm still dreaming, if the sight I'm seeing is some sexy phantasm from the deepest reaches of my subconscious.

Then I flip on the light.

And see Owen, shirtless, wearing only a tight pair of shorts, his body a marvel of masculine motion as he moves from push-ups, to jumping jacks, to countless other calisthenic workouts. Sweat glistens on his back, the shimmering reflection of his exertion highlighting the countless colors of his tattoos.

On noticing the light, he turns. His chest is tattooed. Inky art among slabs of muscle that are slick with sweat beckons my eyes with irresistible force. It's stunning. Surprising. And far sexier than the shadowy figure I thought I was dreaming about.

I've seen Owen shirtless before, sure, but that was when we were younger. I haven't seen the man Owen without a shirt before.

"What is it, Dani?" He says. There's a smirk on his face. A cocky, knowing smirk, as if he can read every dirty thought going through my mind. That look and the realization of what I'm doing — I have to look like I'm having seriously thirsty thoughts about him... and I am... — shocks me awake like a hundred cups of coffee.

"Seriously, Owen? You're working out at this ungodly hour?"

Another smirk.

His hands go to his hips, and the motion stresses the muscles in his chest and makes his abs flex.

He knows.

He knows, and he's reveling in it.

"Marines maintain discipline, Dani. If you want to stay sharp, you have to put in the work while everyone else is asleep. I thought you, as an athlete, would understand that."

I roll my eyes so hard the rotation of the earth changes.

"In what universe does waking up before the sun count as sane?"

"Did you never get up like this to practice? Or did you just get lucky all those years?"

"Luck had nothing to do with it. It was skill and dedication."

"Sure," he says, then he turns, resuming his workout. "Dedication. If you say so."

I stand up, incensed. "It fucking was and you know it."

"Like I said, I believe you."

It sounds exactly as if he doesn't believe it. As if I won all those games, captained those teams, took those state titles at both the high school and collegiate levels, through sheer chance and dumb luck.

I want to smack him for his smarmy insolence.

"You watched. You saw all those games. I remember, you were in the stands for so many of them. You can't say that I didn't work for that."

"I'm not saying that," he says, while saying exactly that.

I leave my place by the bed, rage and some other warm — no, hot and confusing — emotion burning in my chest, and I storm to where he's doing his cocky push-ups, ready to bash his arrogant head against the wall.

Something stops me short.

It wasn't possible to see from my place on the bed because of how dimly lit the room is, but there are bruises on his body. On his ribs, on his abdomen. He's hurt.

"Are you hurt?"

"No. I just work out this hard."

"Owen, what happened?" I say, forgetting all about the fact that, ten seconds ago, I wanted to throw him out the window.

"It's nothing. Like I said, when I work out, I work out. You have to break yourself down in order to build yourself up."

Owen's obviously lying to me. You don't get fist-shaped bruises on your ribs from any workout plan I've heard of. Not unless Crossfit's gotten a lot more hardcore than I remember.

But, as well as I know Owen, I know it will take a lot to get him to open up. In reality, he may never open up about the actual source of his injuries, but it's clear to me he seems a little more relaxed in his working out just by me being close to him.

Before I know it, I'm mimicking his movements.

Push-ups, into some weird bicycle-kick exercise, into jumping jacks, finishing with a manly grunt, and then starting all over again.

I do it all.

Even the grunt.

Which is a close approximation of the Marine's Oorah call, a guttural sound I became grossly familiar with when Dixon first came back from boot camp, with patriotism burning in his veins and when even most inane question could provoke a stormlike kill-call of a response.

The first Oorah makes Owen look over at me and roll his eyes.

The second, he smiles.

The third, he doesn't even look. Between us, we're in a silent rhythm; just him and me, our bodies in time, sharing sweat and primal punishment.

Around the fifteenth set, I falter. Mainly because I'm not a Marine used to working out at ass-early in the morning.

He looks over at me as he powers through a ridiculous leaping exercise.

"You keeping up, or should I slow down for you?"

"Dream on, Jarhead. I'm just getting started."

We don't talk after that.

We don't need to.

There's nothing but complete understanding in our silence. He knows I know he's hurt; he knows I know he won't tell me; but just as importantly, he knows I care about him.

Past the point where my muscles are screaming at me that they're breaking down and even my stubborn pride is ready to submit, he stops and pats me on the back gently.

"Not bad for a rookie."

I titanicly roll my eyes at him again and walk over to the room's espresso machine. With the insertion of two pods, I make two cups and bring them over to him. We clink glasses.

"Don't get used to it. I'm not your workout buddy. This... this was a one-time thing."

"Appreciate it all the same. It's good to have someone to share this with."

Someone that I..." His voice trails off and whatever he was planning to say, he hides behind a slow drink of coffee and a wince he cannot disguise.

It's a wince that makes me worry about him.

Just what else is going on here?

What is he involved in where, one moment, he's going to sleep on the floor, and the next, he's waking me up with his ridiculously macho morning exercises while he's all covered with bruises?

The thought of him being hurt makes me reach out and put my arm on his sweaty bicep.

"I'm always here for you, Owen. If you need me."

"You always have been, Dani. It makes me feel fortunate to have always had someone like you around. You..." He pauses, as if catching himself, and his voice hardens by the slightest degree, the warmth in it fading. "You and your brother have always been there for me. Even when things have been difficult, you two have always been people I could talk to. People I could count on."

As he struggles with his words, I struggle with my thoughts.

This is Owen, as I've never seen him. Exposed. Not just because he's shirtless, but he's never anywhere close to this open before. He's always been a closed book with a lock on it kept in an impregnable safe.

Right now, as he's sweating, as he's bruised and fighting some internal war, he's as honest as he's ever been.

If I wanted to get closer, I could; the heat in his eyes, the scent of his sweat, it pulls me in and urges me to kiss him the way I've always wanted to.

I shake my head.

I can not.

My mission to save Riley hangs in the balance, and Owen's presence — Owen's openness, Owen's vulnerability, Owen's ridiculously sexy ability to look hot even at four in the freaking morning — complicates everything. Yet, despite my resolve to stay focused, I can't shake the feeling that what's developing between us is beyond my control. I might as well try to fight the orbit of the earth.

"I'm going to hit the shower," he says, leaving just a moment's worth of hesitation at the end of his statement that it sounds like a question. An invitation. An offer.

As I watch Owen walk away, his muscles still gleaming with sweat, a shiver of forbidden desire courses through me; my heart races, a dangerous

mix of fear and longing grips me.

I want to tell him to wait, to let me join him.

Yet I know that would seal our fate.

"Falling for Owen isn't just a mistake," I whisper to myself. "It could be deadly for us all."

I have to stay strong.

But how much longer can I hold out when every move he makes breaks down all the barriers I put up?

Chapter Eleven

Striker

The steam from the shower wraps around me like a shroud, heat clinging to my skin even as I step out. My reflection in the fogged-up mirror is a ghost of myself, and for a moment, I let the mist hide me from my own conflicting thoughts. Danielle. Her image lingers in my mind, a blend of stubborn strength. She's been on my mind non-stop, her resilience, her stubbornness, and the way she just fits into my world. It's wrong, so wrong. She's Smokey's sister, for crying out loud.

Towel drying myself and then wrapping it around my waist, I head into the bedroom, half expecting more of Danielle's teasing or a snarky comment, but she's not there. The absence hits harder than I expect; it'd felt so right, that moment we shared earlier.

I dress quickly, trying to shake off the unsettling feeling.

When she finally returns, her smile is like the first light of dawn. I can't help but ask, "Where'd you go? And what's got you so happy?"

"I had the most brilliant idea," she chirps. "I signed us up for a group activity this morning. You're going to love it."

Suspicion gnaws at me. "And what would that be?"

"Pampering session. Facials, haircuts, makeup trials," she declares, barely containing her glee. "It was supposed to only be for us bridesmaids and some of the girls, but after a quick conversation with our friend with the clipboard, I got you on the list."

That man must hate me. That's the only explanation.

I'm dumbfounded. For a moment, I just stare at her.

"Makeup trials? You're kidding."

Her smile widens, devilish and triumphant.

"Not one bit. And you can't back out, it'll look suspicious. Plus, they didn't originally plan to have you on the list for the pampering session, so Mr. Clipboard had to call in a specialist just for you. So not only would you backing out threaten our cover, you'd also actively piss off a lot of people that we can not afford to piss off."

I groan internally. This has to be her way of getting back at me for... well,

being here. "You're insane, Dani."

She shrugs, the picture of innocence and wicked scheming. "Just blending in, Owen."

"You've got to be fucking me," I mutter, then my jaw clacks shut as I realize just what I've said. My eyes go to the ceiling, but I can still see the color of desire flash across her cheeks. If only. "How much time do I have before this nightmare?"

"Thirty minutes," she says. Then, after an exaggerated check of the time on her phone, she mimics my voice and says, "Actually, twenty-nine."

"You're the worst."

This is going to be hell. An assault on my dignity and something that, if word gets out about it — especially to Rook or Dixon — I will never live it down.

"If you don't want to do it, you can always go home," she says, mimicking me again.

"Like hell I will."

This is her revenge. Her attempt to drive me away. But I won't let her break me.

Twenty-nine minutes later, I'm sitting in a chair, surrounded by chattering women, feeling like a bull in a china shop. Elegant snacks are everywhere — miniature crepes, smoked salmon, caviar — and champagne flows freely. There's even hard liquor. Vodka, rum, and, thankfully, whiskey, which sits in a glass in my hand, slowly dissolving an ice cube while I stare at it and wonder just how bad things are going to get. Part of me is jealous of that ice cube. I want to dissolve into whiskey right now, too.

The pampering doesn't start off too bad.

My stylist, or 'professional pamperer' to use the term thrown around by the women in the room, is late. Each of the others pairs off with their pamperer, and I'm left alone with my whiskey and my dark thoughts.

Then there's a noise.

A door, open and closing with a flourish.

An announcement of my misery in a dramatic voice.

He walks in — the artist, my enemy for this morning. He's a whirlwind of energy, his laughter infectious, his gestures flamboyant. His presence is like a ray of sunshine, vibrant and full of life, and bound to kill my dignity with ruthless ferocity.

"Darling," he addresses me, "you look like you need a good pampering."

My name is Horatio, and I'll be taking care of you this morning."

"Owen," I say, because I'm not so fucking rude that I won't respond when someone offers me an honest introduction, even if the prospect of what's to come after it creeps me out. Then I snort, frustrated by the ridiculousness of it all and the smug look on Danielle's face. She's living this up and loving every second of my discomfort. "And I doubt that."

"Sit, let me wrap you in my adoration," he says, with a flourish of a hairdresser's cape, "And let me bring out the rugged, handsome man within you."

All eyes in the room turn to me, largely because Horatio just draws attention to him with everything he does, and I know I have no damn choice except to sit down and let this man work on me.

So I do it.

Slowly, but I do it.

I've never hesitated this much at anything, and I've jumped into active gunfire with a smile on my face.

"So, tell me about yourself, handsome," he says as he wraps the cape around me and begins misting my head for some reason.

"Name's Owen."

"We covered that already, dear."

"Last name's O'Connell," I offer.

"Oh, so now I know three things about you: your first name, your last name, and what I'd love to be doing with you on a Friday night, if you weren't so obviously taken." He winks at me, knowing I'm uncomfortable, knowing he's got free rein to tease me, and the only reason I'm not shoving him away is because even I can hear he's only teasing. "What else can you tell me?"

"I was a Marine."

"Men in uniform," he sighs, his eyes lighting up. "Always been my Achilles heel. You boys are sorely underappreciated, but, let me tell you, I am doing my best to make up for that one soldier boy at a time."

I chuckle, suddenly feeling oddly at ease. "Well, glad I could serve."

We get to talking, and to my surprise, the guy's a riot. He's got stories for days and tells the kind of dirty jokes that make all the other women in the room squirm in their seats. Before I know it, we're laughing, joking, and Danielle is blushing like it's nobody's business.

This'll show her for trying to ambush me with a haircut.

But what a haircut.

The haircut he gives me is top-notch, and just when I think he's done, he whips out a straight razor, a bowl, and a brush. Quickly, he whips up some shaving lather.

"And now, my dear Mr. Marine, time for the pièce de résistance. Let me put this cream all over your handsome mug and make you into a new man."

"Watch yourself, Horatio," I chuckle.

"Never. You know you love it. I'm going to cream your face and have you begging me for more, Mr. Marine."

Then he puts the razor to work. And the shave... damn, it's like nothing I've ever experienced. For a moment, I forget why I'm here, lost in the unexpected comfort of being pampered by this ridiculous, wonderful man. I'm dimly aware of the other women in the room being taken somewhere else by their pamperers. Someone says something about massages; I don't give a shit, because Horatio is performing a miracle on my face with his razor. Time passes, but nothing else is important except this man and what he's doing with my face.

Horatio and I are sharing a whiskey when Danielle walks in, her eyes widening at the sight of me. "What in the holy hell is this?"

I'm not broken, not even the least bit bothered by everything that she thought would break me. No, I feel like a new and stylish man. I raise my glass to her.

"You were right, Dani. Not such a bad idea."

"You look... good. Really good." She smiles, but there's a wariness in her eyes that matches the turmoil in mine. We're dancing around each other, caught in a gravitational pull that's becoming impossible to resist. Then she comes close, her voice changing, as if she's realized what she just said to me. In a low tone, she whispers, "But you should still leave. We'll both be better off that way. Leave, or else."

Then she turns and stalks out of the room.

I watch her go, my heart racing, my eyes following her luscious form, lingering longingly on her ass before I catch myself. She's Smokey's sister — off-limits, a line I can't cross. But every moment with her blurs that line, drawing me closer to a point of no return.

I take another sip of whiskey, the liquid fire doing nothing to douse the heat inside me.

One thing is for certain: I'm in dangerous waters, and sinking fast.

Chapter Twelve

Danielle

My breath is stuck in my throat when I slip into the room, my heart racing and my mind spinning with what I know I have to do: confront him. Confront my feelings. It's now or never, because the uncertainty, the unspoken words, the stolen looks, they're tearing at me. And, what's worse, they could get someone hurt. There's no other option: I need to know how Owen really feels.

The door shuts behind me with a quiet click.

How do I make him talk?

How do I make him open up that hidden part of himself and reveal what he's really feeling?

There has to be something. Something big, something powerful, that can push that former Marine and stubborn biker into action.

Glancing around, I spot his bag, and a sudden, reckless idea strikes me.

Maybe the answer to what I need lies inside. I search. It's not like I expect to find a diary, not like the one I kept as a teenager — the same one my brother and Owen occasionally stole — but maybe there is some hint about the person who he truly is that I can use to decipher how he feels.

I reach in and dig through his precisely packed bag. It's much more empty than when we first arrived, as most of Owen's clothes are put away in the dresser, all neatly folded and stacked. It's more accurate to say that what remains in here is less his pack for the weekend and more a 'go bag' in case we need to make a hasty escape.

Or, as my fingers close around something cold, steely, and pull it out to find it's a clip of ammunition, a 'break in case of emergency' bag for when shit hits the fan.

Shivering, I put the bullets back and try to pretend I never saw them.

I don't want to think about him ever needing this. Because, by that point, not only am I likely in mortal danger, but Morgan and Riley are, too. Being the sister of a Marine, I like to think I might handle myself well enough in a scary situation, but I don't want to even consider what would happen to Morgan. Or, even worse, Riley. With her being back in the claws of addiction and being kept under guard by Michael's men, the odds of her surviving

would be...

No, Dani, don't even think about it, I scold myself. Owen's not going to need this weapon. Especially if you do what you came to do and sort things about between you two once and for all.

Now is the time for honesty.

And to get honesty out of that stubborn Marine, you are going to have to subject him to an interrogation.

Determined to find a hostage that I can use to wrench the truth out of Owen, I keep digging through his bag.

Then my fingers settle around a small wooden case. This feels valuable.

I pull it out and open it. Inside is his Purple Heart, earned from that fateful day when Owen took a bullet and my brother saved his life.

This is wrong. My fingers tremble as I pocket it. So wrong, but this is my leverage, my key to unlocking his true feelings. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and our circumstances are as close to desperate as you can get.

Then I search the room, looking for the perfect hiding spot. Finding it, and securely stashing the medal in a place that he'll never think to look, I take a seat on the bed just as Owen strides in, looking refreshed, yet somehow more rugged, after his session with Horatio.

The sight of him renders me breathless. Makes me, for just a moment, doubt what I'm about to do.

But I can't falter now.

"Dani, we need to talk about — " he starts, but I cut him off.

"Sit down, Owen. We're playing a game. A serious game. Because I've taken something of yours," I declare, my tone more confident than I feel.

"What did you take?" He asks, his eyes narrowing.

"Your Purple Heart. And you'll get it back only if you answer my questions," I reply, holding his gaze.

Owen's expression turns from confusion to anger.

"What the hell, Dani? That's not a game," he growls, his fists clenching.

I stand my ground. I can't back down now. Not when we're so close to finally getting everything out in the open.

"I know it's not a game, Owen. Nothing about this weekend is a game. It's serious. Deadly serious. We need to talk, because there's so much going on between us and you haven't been forthcoming. So I'm forcing your hand," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

He takes a deep breath, his eyes still locked on mine.

"Fine. Ask away," he says, taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

I pause a moment to gather my thoughts, trying to figure out where to start. I want to know everything, but I don't want to overwhelm him immediately.

"We'll start with a softball question: other than Dixon, who was your closest friend in high school?"

"You — " he stops, then frowns, and I can see he's clearly second-guessing the answer that he was about to blurt out. "You know it was Ryan Darmody. His older brother would buy us beer, so we had to keep things good between us."

"His brother bought beer for most anybody that asked. But I admit, you and him were close," I say. "Keep giving me the right answers, and you'll eventually get your medal back. Lie to me, and you'll never see it again."

"This is ridiculous, Dani."

"Question two: what was your proudest day as a Marine?"

I know the answer to this question already; I've overheard him and my brother talking about this exact thing countless times. Mainly because they always bring it up when they're drunk and they're both really loud when they've had too many.

"Easy. It's a tie between the day I finished boot camp and the day I got my discharge. Everything in between was pure hell."

"Correct."

"Fucking duh. It's my life."

"Who is the greatest musical performer of all time?" I say.

If he knows me at all, he'll know the answer.

"If you're asking for my opinion, it's a tie between Prince, Led Zeppelin, or Queen. If you're asking me who you think is the greatest performer of all time, it's Ms. Taylor Swift."

"Correct."

"Are we through? Give me my damn medal, Dani."

I shake my head and hold up a calming finger. "Throwing a tantrum is not the way you win the game, Owen. Only the truth will do that."

"I bled for that medal, Dani. By the time they got me back to the medics, my heart was a minute away from giving out due to blood loss. It's not some fucking trinket you win at pub trivia."

"Then we'll get to the heart of the matter between us," I reply. Finally, I take a deep breath and ask the question that's been burning inside me for

years. "Owen, when I was sixteen, you were all I could think about. I wrote about you, dreamed about you. Times have changed, but my feelings... they haven't. I still have feelings for you. Strong feelings. Do you feel the same about me?"

The room fills with a palpable tension and a silence that fills me with dread. I've never been this vulnerable. Never aired everything out so plainly like this. It's one thing to write in your private journal that you want someone. It's another to tell them to their face that you've wanted them for years and those feelings have only grown stronger.

I look at Owen, hope rising in my aching heart.

Owen's face is an unreadable mask, his eyes searching mine for something.

My heart pounds in my ears, each second stretching into an eternity. I need his answer, yet I'm terrified of what it might be.

He opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out. He looks torn, conflicted. The question hangs between us, a fragile thread that could either bind us together or snap under the weight of unspoken truths. His expression remains an enigma, leaving me in agony.

Finally, he takes a deep breath, and I wait, drowning in an equal measure of fear and hope.

"Dani, you and I are close. We've known each other for so long, and you mean a lot to me," he says, choosing his words carefully. Each syllable comes out slowly, as if dragged from the deepest reaches inside him. The eyes of the man I've wanted for nearly half my life stare back at me with deep emotion shining within them. My heart floods with hope and my spirit soars. This is what I've waited for: the truth. "But you will always be Dixon's little sister, which means there can never be anything between us."

Chapter Thirteen

Striker

Even I know it's a lie the second I say it, but what else can I do? Tell her the truth? Tell her that every second I spend with her is making me question my loyalty in a way that I never have before? I'm a Marine, a brother in the Steel Reapers MC, and I have a duty to uphold; these are all truths that I feel in my soul, yet she — just by being who she is — is making me question them.

It shakes me in a way I never thought possible.

Even as I force that lie from my lips, I wish I could take it back.

But I know what I need to do.

Her eyes, her lips, her soul, they all sink before my eyes. Crushing me.

"Your medal's hidden behind the refrigerator. I'm going to take a walk."

Those are the only things she says before she leaves.

I don't follow.

My job — my fucking awful, completely essential job — is done; I've hurt her heart in a way that makes me feel like my soul's been ripped out of my body, but I've kept to the mission and I've probably saved both our lives.

It's better this way.

At least that's what I tell myself.

* * * * *

She comes back hours later with a determined look on her face and a secret fire in her eyes. It's like she knows something I don't. Where she's been, I don't ask.

I don't even get the chance to ask.

"There's a dinner and dancing tonight. One hour. We have to attend. There's no way you can weasel your way out of this one, Owen; we're in the wedding party, so you have to man the fuck up and go with me. I'll give you the room for fifteen minutes so you can put on something decent, then I need the room so I can put on my dress and makeup. Got it?"

I give a mocking salute. "Yes, ma'am."

She flips me the bird with pain in her eyes.

My fifteen minutes only take me ten. It isn't hard to put on a shirt, slacks, a tie and a jacket; doing it quickly and neatly is something I picked up in the Marines under threat of death by drill sergeant. I could do it all in two minutes, but I stop after putting on my shirt and slacks to have a couple beers to quiet the burning in my insides.

I've hurt Dani deeply, and it's something I'll never forgive myself for, even if it was for all the right reasons.

While Dani's getting ready, I take another walk. An aimless one without intent to scout or even find out what fresh hells I can cook up for her with Mr. Clipboard's help. It's only a walk to keep me busy, so I don't think about her as much.

When my feet bring me back to the room, she's waiting for me, looking like radiant torture. We depart.

In the expansive courtyard set up to accommodate the sizable crowd, I struggle through dinner; it's the best steak I've ever eaten in my life, and it tastes like ashes in my mouth.

It gets chased down with grappa, red wine, and beer. They do nothing except wet my throat and still the bitter, self-hating words I want to spit onto my plate. They give me no relief from the pain inside. The only thing holding me together is the fact that I have to do this for her. She's my mission. Keeping her safe, keeping her alive. Even if the words I spoke to her earlier in the day mean that the Dani seated beside me at this exquisite dinner will never be as vibrant and alive as she used to be, it's the right thing to do if it keeps her alive.

Then, as if some silent signal has gone off, musicians come out and traditional Italian music starts, while the serving crew takes away plates, glasses, and moves tables and chairs to clear a large space in the middle of the courtyard.

I send a questioning look Dani's way.

"It's a party," she says. "There's going to be dancing."

Another questioning look. *Do we?*

She nods. "It's expected. We have to."

I frown. "There has to be some other way."

"I thought you were all about your mission?" She says bitterly. "Or was that just a lie? If you give a damn, you'll suck it up and dance with me, Owen."

In that expansive courtyard, surrounded by dozens of onlookers, by music, lit by the flickering of outdoor torches and the light of the moon and the stars circling in the night sky above, I stand and I offer her my hand. It's what my duty requires.

She takes it. Reluctant, slow, with a strained smile on her face.

To the chords of classical Italian music, we walk to the center of the courtyard and take our place among those who are already dancing. I put my hands on Dani's hips; she puts hers on my back; I lead us through exquisite agony.

I've never held her like this, though I've dreamed of it plenty of times. Ached for it. Woke myself up in the middle of the night, rock hard and seeking relief, because of it.

But to really do it?

Dani's touch burns, sets afire the loyalty that sits at the core of me. It's perfect hell.

"You're dancing pretty stiff, Owen," she whispers. "Do they not teach Marines how to move their hips?"

"This isn't right," I murmur back.

"What's your problem with dancing? We're both adults, we both don't want to die. This is just moving together with music, nothing more. It's not like you're attracted to me, anyway, so there's no harm."

I grit my teeth, trying to push away the feelings that threaten to overwhelm me. She's right, of course. It's just dancing. But as I move with her, I can feel her body press against mine, the heat of her breath on my neck, and I can't help but feel like this is so much more than just dancing.

But I have a duty to uphold. To keep her safe. To do what I have to do, even if it means sacrificing my own desires.

So I dance with her, stiff and awkward at first, but gradually loosening up as the music carries me away. Dani's eyes are closed, a smile on her lips, and I feel a pang of guilt knowing that I'm the reason that smile isn't as bright as it used to be.

But for now, at this moment, I can forget about all of that. I can just be here, dancing with her, lost in the music and the way her body moves. Every touch, every brush of her loveliness against me, sends sparks flying through me. We move through the music, carried by the song and the unspoken communication of our bodies.

And suddenly, the mission feels like a distant memory; all I can think

about is her, and how much I want her.

The night wears on; the music changes to a faster tempo, and we keep dancing. Sweat beads on my forehead, my heart pounds in my chest, but I refuse to let go of her. Not yet. Never.

Then there's a pause, a brief second of silence in a song that has us holding each other tight, grinding our bodies against one another in rhythm. Her dress is so thin, I can feel and see every inch of her through the fabric; there's sweat on her forehead; she smells like exertion, like secret joy, like desire she can't contain.

I'm breaking again. Breaking, though I know I can't.

In that pause, she says, "When I was younger, I used to dream about doing this with you. It doesn't feel the same now, but I have a favor to ask."

Guilt hits me again. Knowing how I've hurt her, there's nothing I wouldn't agree to in order to bring a little bit of joy to her night.

"Anything," I murmur.

I'd kill for her.

I'd die for her.

Whatever she asks.

"I know this song. In just a second, there's going to be this perfect moment... will you dip me? I always dreamed about you dipping me on a night like this, under the stars, with music, with us dressed this way..."

"I will."

That moment comes, and just as she asks, I dip her.

Her body extends, stretches against the confines of her tight dress, revealing everything I've ever wanted beneath a nearly see-through layer of fabric. Her chest rises and falls in exertion, her eyes shine back a lusty challenge that ignites an inferno inside me.

The fire in her eyes draws me in.

I raise her, pull her to my chest. To whisper to her that, no matter how hard she tries, she will not break me. Loyalty is part of who I am. I'm defined by it. I've left part of who I am bleeding out in the sand in defense of it.

I won't be broken.

But as I bring her up to me to answer her challenge, her eyes lock with mine and her lips purse slightly.

And meet mine.

The kiss is fiery and passionate, all-consuming and all-encompassing. It captures me, irresistible. It's like a dam breaks inside me, and all the emotions

I've been holding back for so long come rushing to the surface. All the desire, the longing, the need for her that I've been suppressing, all of it is now out in the open and rushing forth beyond control.

I kiss her back with ferocity, my hands moving to grip her waist, pulling her closer to my body. The curve of her hips grind against mine, the heat of her skin sears me, burning the last of my resistance, and I know that I'm lost. Lost to her, to the way she makes me feel, to the way I've always felt about her but never allowed myself to acknowledge.

The kiss deepens, becomes more urgent, hungry. I should stop, I should pull away, but I can't control myself.

Not when she kisses me like this.

Not when I can feel her heart racing against my chest; not when her breath comes in quick gasps released into my mouth between fervent kisses; not when her body pulses against mine with desperate need.

Not when I want her more than anything else in the world.

So I keep kissing her, keep holding her, keep giving in to the passion that burns between us. And as we stand surrounded by a crowd that we ignore, by music that we don't hear, we devour each other with all the intensity that we've fought for so long to contain.

Until a new sound hits my ears: silence.

And a hand taps me on the shoulder.

First gentle, then harder. And harder still.

Our lips part reluctantly, and I separate my hands from Dani's hips.

She looks beyond me with eyes wide in shock. "Morgan?"

I can't see her, but I can sense her behind me. Feel her shocked disapproval, too.

"Dani, if you want to fuck your boyfriend, that's great. But do it in your bedroom, please."

Her words hit us both like a bolt of lightning, and that strike reminds me of what I've forgotten: my mission.

"I can't... we can't..." Dani breathes, eyes wide like a deer in headlights.

Then she runs.

As I start to follow, something stops me — Morgan's hand on my shoulder.

She leans in to whisper. "Let her go. I know why you're here, and if you care about her at all, you'll give her space."

"If you see her, tell her I'll be in our room."

I watch Dani go, feeling the pull of my desire urging me to go after her,

and the pull of my loyalty telling me to leave her alone. Because our actions just now have pushed us both past the point of no return.

Chapter Fourteen

Striker

I'm in our suite, nursing my second glass of whiskey, the bitter amber liquid doing little to soothe the turmoil inside. The kiss with Danielle — it's like a storm that's torn through my life, leaving me adrift in a sea of right and wrong. It's as if she had flipped on a switch inside me, the heat of her lips burning through my resolve and leaving me wanting more. No, not wanting. Craving. Needing. I'm burning inside with a fire I don't know how to contain. My fingers anxiously trace across the centuries-old carvings etched into the glass, some import from some estate in Italy; priceless, worthless. I empty it and fill it back up.

I drink.

Each sip of the amber liquid is a bitter, burning reminder of the line I've crossed.

The acrid taste of bog-smoke whiskey coats my tongue like a thick fog that won't dissipate. I've betrayed Smokey, my brother-in-arms, by giving in to my feelings for his sister. No matter how much I drink, Danielle's taste lingers on my lips, sweet and intoxicating, yet laced with the guilt of crossing a sacred line. I yearn for the clear-cut orders and structure of my Marine days, where life was about following commands and never questioning your duty or loyalty. This inner turmoil and constant battle between heart and mind is completely foreign to me and has me feeling disarmed and helpless.

The glass thunks against the wooden bar as I set it down unsteadily, wanting to blot out all thoughts of her with another drink. As the liquor burns its way down my throat, the memories flood back: her soft skin under my fingertips, her breath hot against my neck as we kissed on the dance floor, her eyes begging for me to go further, to cross every line, and my heart crying out 'yes'.

Growling in pain, I take the glass and hurl it to the wall.

Fucking useless.

Instead, needing more, I snatch up the bottle and take a swig.

The sound of the door creaking open pierces through my consciousness like a dagger, wrenching me from my contemplation. Danielle stumbles into

the room, tears flowing and her skin pale. The vibrant red mark on her cheek burning brighter than a thousand suns, consuming my vision like nothing else.

Someone hit her.

My heart stops as primal instincts flood my body with adrenaline, pushing aside any internal struggle. Standing without delay, I leave the whiskey untouched as every muscle in me tenses for battle.

Someone hurt her.

Someone's going to die.

Without uttering a word, I engulf her in an embrace, feeling her sobs soak my chest.

"Dani, tell me what happened," I murmur, my voice trembling with rage and desperate concern.

"It's nothing, Owen."

"It's not nothing — you're hurt."

A moment of hesitation, a sniff, a fresh rain of tears on my shoulder, my chest. I clutch her to me tighter, envelop her, as if I can shelter from the world with nothing more than my arms.

"I am."

"Who did this to you?"

"It's... It's... What are you going to do to him?"

"Teach him some respect. Tell me who did this, Dani."

Tell me who needs to die.

Through her tears, she recounts what happened at the dance after we separated: a pushy guy, refusing to take 'no' for an answer when she turned him down for a dance, his vicious indignity escalating to insults, to calling her a bitch and a cunt, and finally, to shoving her. My hands tighten into fists at my sides, the urge to protect her from the world surging stronger.

"That's what happened," she finishes, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You still haven't told me how you got that mark on your cheek."

I won't let her skate around this question. Someone did more than push her — someone struck her, someone must be punished.

She hesitates. Afraid.

But she's not the one who should be afraid. The person who should be afraid is the man who thought he could touch her and survive. That man is about to learn a fatal lesson.

"Dani," I prompt again. My voice is a mix of furious fire and delicate

comfort. I want to shield her and then rain down hell on whoever dared to touch her.

"He did it."

"Describe him to me."

"It was the same man as at the bocce court..." Her voice fades, and I release her, heading to the door, my mind made up. "Owen, what are you going to do?"

My entire being is screaming for retribution; every part of me — the man, the Marine, the biker — ready for war.

"I'll deal with him," I growl.

"Owen, please!"

Danielle's plea reaches me as I storm towards the door, but her words can't penetrate the fury that's taken hold of me. No one hurts Danielle. Not while I breathe. Not while my heart beats. I'm out the door, a determined force of vengeance, driven by a fierce need to protect the woman who has unwittingly claimed my heart—and shattered my bonds of brotherhood in the process.

This is war.

Chapter Fifteen

Danielle

In the blink of an eye, Owen is a Marine unleashed, a biker on the warpath, and I am terrified.

Not of him, but of what he might do.

I've never seen him like this, a man on fire and ready to rain hell down on anyone who stands in his way.

My heart is like a hammer in my chest, crashing into my ribs, and it's all I can do to keep one foot in front of the other as I chase behind him, scrambling to think of some way to calm him down before he does something that can't be undone.

"Owen, please, stop."

My voice falls on deaf ears. He doesn't stop.

His fists clenched, his steps a march that carries him forward, down the steps of our villa and toward the door; we're moments away from the start of a war.

"Owen, don't worry about it. It's not important. I'm over it. You don't need to do anything. It was just an accident. It's not worth getting in a fight over."

"Worried? I'm not worried," he bites over his shoulder, his voice a gruff fireball of fury. "I'm outright pissed as fuck. Pissed that some braindead, track-suited fuckhead would be so pathetic as to insult you. And I'm just as pissed that you would think that you're not worth it. Because you are, Dani. You're worth so much more than you give yourself credit for, and I'll be damned if I just stand aside and let anyone, whether it's some fuckface Mafia asshole or even Danielle fucking Green herself, diminish who you are." He throws open the door to the villa and it crashes against the wall with a titanic slam. "This is a problem, and I intend to rectify this problem with as much deadly force as it takes."

Owen storms across the courtyard, a laser-guided missile locked on target.

People on the outskirts of the dance seem to sense him coming. As he nears, they part for him. Unwavering, he stalks to the center of the crowd and I follow in his wake, afraid.

In the center of it all, he stops, scanning the crowd.

"Which one was it? Point him out for me," he says.

There's so much command in his voice, I nearly do. Nearly raise my hand at the offending man, who stands twenty feet away, doing his best to act like he doesn't see us. The man's afraid, I can tell. Afraid, yet trying to seem confident, trying to mask the fear that has turned his countenance white from the second Owen appeared.

Owen follows my eyes with his own; target acquired.

He whirls, storms forward.

Owen doesn't say a thing.

He doesn't need to.

Everyone knows what this is about, everyone knows what's coming, and what's coming is a right hand from the ex-Marine that hits the other man right in the gut and doubles him over.

Owen follows that by grabbing him by his dark, styled hair and holding his head in place while he brings a knee crashing upward into his face. He releases him right after impact, discarding him to land on the ground like trash.

Two of the man's companions step forward and Owen shoots them an icy look that stops them in their tracks.

"You want to join him? Bring it. I'll rip you both to pieces."

Without waiting for a response, Owen kneels and grabs the prone man by his ear, twisting, wrenching him to his knees. The man screams lowly in pain and he tries to struggle, throwing a punch that weakly hits Owen in the hip. Owen snarls in disdain, then retaliates with an elbow to the back of the man's head that makes his eyelids flutter on the verge of unconsciousness.

"Dani, come here," Owen barks with the ferocity of a drill sergeant.

I obey. Stop just a few steps away from the biker who, with only a few brutal movements, has taken command of everyone here. Onlookers and wedding guests stare in shocked amazement as Owen holds my former tormentor at his mercy.

"Apologize," he orders. A twist of the ear follows, and Owen drags the man forward to stop right at my feet, the man moaning in obvious agony.

The man mumbles something that might be an apology. Over the noise of the crowd and the thudding riot of my heartbeat in my ears, I can't hear it.

It isn't enough for Owen.

He hits the man again and twists his ear until I'm sure he's going to rip it off. The man screams for mercy.

"Just like your mother and every other woman in your fucking life has told you: not good enough, you piece of shit," Owen snarls, and then he hits him with a punch that sends blood shooting from his nose. The crunching noise that comes from the man's face as Owen unleashes brutality is enough to make me wince and my stomach turn. In fear, I look around, shocked that no one is interfering, but then it hits me — in this community, this probably isn't the first time that two men have fought over a woman or some other matter of honor. There are rules. Even though some of the younger men seem eager to step in, just as much I can see the elders in the crowd — the grandfathers who circled around me during the bocce game — restraining them with just a look. This is between Owen, me, and the offending man who is currently kneeling in front of me, bleeding from his busted face, awaiting my forgiveness.

"Try it again," Owen snarls.

The man mumbles something once more.

Owen keeps his eyes on me, probing. Is it enough?

But I can't hear a word the man is saying, and my lack of a response is enough for Owen to act.

He twists the man's ear so hard that all the man can do is scream. "I'm sorry. I'm fucking sorry. I shouldn't have said that to you. Please, forgive me."

Owen eases up, a look of satisfaction on his face.

"Better. Now, keep your mouth shut while the lady considers your apology and whether she feels like you should live."

Then he looks at me. The man looks at me, too. Pitiful. Begging.

I stand at the center of both their worlds. I hold someone's life in my hands; Owen is so dedicated to me he would kill for me with just a single word or a slight gesture; this man in front of me lives and dies at my discretion.

It's flattering, overwhelming, terrifying.

"Don't hurt him anymore. I accept his apology."

Owen releases the man's ear and the man's face instantly changes, from hurt and plaintive to dark and murderous. The look he gives me chills me to my bones. He gathers himself to his feet, carefully smoothing his bloodstained clothes.

"She may have forgiven you, but I haven't. Don't think you're getting off so easy, asshole," Owen snaps just before he unleashes a brutal punch that hits

the man square in the face and knocks him on his ass. A kick follows that hits him in the chest and lays him out flat, and in the blink of an eye, Owen is atop the man, perched on his chest while he rains blows down upon him. Punch after punch that turns the man's shocked, snarling visage into something resembling poorly butchered meat.

Fear grips me. Murmurs surge through the crowd, someone screams. They may have been content to stand aside as these two men sorted out the offense against my honor, but will they stand there while my supposed boyfriend murders one of their own?

I have to stop this before he turns this dance into a crime scene.

When I grip his shoulder and try to pull him off, he just shrugs me aside and throws a punch that makes the man shriek like an animal. Owen is unleashed and he won't be satisfied until his vengeance is complete.

How do I stop him?

What can I do that can overcome his ferocity?

An idea grips me. There is something I can do, something that can cut through his animalistic fury.

But once I go this way, will either of us be able to stop?

I don't know.

I don't care, either; I have to do it.

Stepping forward, I put my hands on Owen's face, turn his head, and kiss him on the lips with everything I have; all the passion, all the intensity, all the desire that I've carried for all these years, goes into that kiss.

He stops instantly. Grabs me, pulls me closer to him, and consumes me with equal fervor.

Then he stands.

With his hands on my hips, he guides me backward a few steps and we leave the man on the ground behind us, forgotten entirely as we explore each other's lips. Owen's hands roam my body, down my back, to my ass, which he squeezes. I grind my hips into him and moan.

I want this. Want it, and need it.

I pull away from him and lick my lips, a slow, seductive movement that draws him in. He groans and moves his mouth to my neck, tasting me, devouring me. I tilt my head back so he has better access. Then he sucks and nibbles and I moan, my head falling back as I give myself to him.

The man on the ground is forgotten.

The crowd is forgotten.

He kisses my neck again, nibbles my ear, and then moves lower and kisses my shoulders. His hands move, sliding down my sides and over my hips until he takes a hold of my ass, his hips pushing forward, his erection pressing against me.

And then I remember where we are.

The noise of the crowd comes crashing back and I pull away from him, quickly, and turn to look at the onlookers. They're all watching us, open-mouthed, shocked. Some cheer us on, some are shaking their heads in shameful surprise, some are just speechless.

Owen grabs me by the hand. "Let's get out of here."

I nod.

Without either of us needing to say it, we slip into the night and disappear toward our suite in the villa. We have more important things to do. Something we've wanted for years, yet denied ourselves. My heart thunders in my chest; I'm about to bring my fantasy to life and take the man of my dreams into my bed.

Chapter Sixteen

Danielle

This is what I've ached for, dreamed of, fantasized about countless times while I've moaned alone in the dark. For years, I've wanted this, and now it's mine. He's mine. His lips on mine, his hands roaming my body, his chest pressed against me, his thick, erect cock grinding against me through the fabric of his pants. I've played this moment over so many times in my head, and now it's here.

I hardly hear as the door to our suite slams behind us, my heart is so loud in my chest.

Everything revolves around him. His moans, my moans, his lips, my lips, moving together with a hunger that we can no longer contain.

There's no more room for doubt, for hesitation, in the non-existent space between our bodies.

"Bed, now," he orders.

Our clothes land in a trail behind us as we make our way through the suite to the waiting larger-than-king-sized bed.

When I turn around and sit on the edge of the bed, I see standing in the doorway the man that I've always wanted. He's paused, one muscular arm leaning against the doorframe, a look on his face that I've never seen before. Is he nervous?

"Is something wrong?" I say.

I hope there's nothing wrong. I'm wearing only my bra and panties and we are well beyond the point where we can pretend like nothing's happened between us. It's not like I can just put my clothes on and go back to the party, nor can I put on my pajamas, the television, and an attitude like it's no big deal that I've made out with him multiple times tonight, grabbed his cock through his pants, let him grab my ass, and learned what the inside of his lips tastes like.

No, there's no stopping this.

He smiles at me. Confident, but there's something else behind the confidence. It seems almost bittersweet.

"I can't tell you how many times I dreamed about this moment, Dani.

About having you right where you are, right now. But even in my dreams, you didn't look as good as you do now. So forgive me if I take a second to appreciate the view." He looks at me as if he's taking it in, committing this moment to memory, his eyes running over every inch of my body while I look back at him, feeling flattered, feeling noticed in the way I've always wanted.

"You can get a better view if you come closer," I say.

He does. While I watch him slide his belt free. With a confident smile, he stops in front of me, working open the buttons of his pants, lowering the zipper. Beneath the fabric, I can see the large bulge of his cock. This is what I've waited years for, but something's not quite right.

I'm not in the right position.

I get to my knees in front of him. Look up his body, past the chiseled abs, the slabs of muscle on his chest, to see him watching me with surprise and lust naked on his face.

This is how it should be.

I pull his zipper down, pull him free, and take his thick cock in my hands. It's warm, hard. His heartbeat pulses against my fingertips, and I hesitantly let my tongue out between my lips to give it a gentle lick.

He moans, lightly. "Fuck, Dani. Even that... because it's you..."

Maybe he has more to say, maybe I should wait for him to say it, but I don't, because how often do you get to hold the cock of the man you've had a crush on for years and have fought your attraction to for so long because he's your brother's best friend?

Yeah, not often.

So when you get the chance to swallow that dick, you take it.

And I do.

Take it in hand, take it down my throat, take his breath away and make his knees shake.

He holds my hair, but he doesn't have to. I know what I'm doing. I've done it before. But not like this. With him, it's only been in my sweetest dreams and deepest fantasies.

Now that I have him, I can reenact what I once thought was impossible.

So now, when I'm sucking him, I'm all there.

I know how to move my head, how to push him deeper into my mouth, how to swirl my tongue around the head of his cock, how to suck him in as far as I can and still breathe.

I know how to make him moan, how to watch his eyes roll back in his head as he feels the pleasure I'm giving him.

"Dani," he groans. "Oh fuck, Dani, suck me just like that."

How I relish hearing my name from his lips.

He was right. I've dreamed about this. Not quite like this, not here, not now, but with him, with him this way. I've pictured this moment, sometimes giving him the best blowjob he's ever had, sometimes receiving as he kneels between my legs and tastes me, licks me, pleases me.

But one thing was always the same.

I've always thought of him as my brother's best friend.

I've always thought of him as off limits.

And now I'm not thinking of him that way.

I'm thinking of him as my dream come true.

I'm taking him.

I'm sucking him.

I'm stroking his thick cock into my mouth, moaning, urging him to fill my mouth with his come just as he's done in my dreams.

His hips pulse, thrusting himself deeper into my willing mouth. Groans come from deep in his chest and his abs tense. I can taste the precum as it flows from the head of his cock and down the back of my throat. Sucking, stroking, my free hand teasing his balls to let loose with what I so desperately want to swallow, I moan.

Come for me, Owen, I beg, silently, as he thrusts and buries his cock all the way down my throat.

Come for me.

"I'm going to... Oh fuck, Dani, I'm going to come..."

With each pulse, I swallow; with each gasp, I exult; with each shiver, I know I've pleased the man I've always wanted to fuck, the man who's always been off limits: my brother's best friend.

Gasping, he sits up in bed and looks down at me.

I'm still kneeling between his legs, a smile on my face. I run a finger along my lips, swiping off a stray bit of come, and I suck it off.

"That was..." He takes a deep breath. "I've fantasized about it before, and thinking about you sucking me off always got me hard. But that was better than I imagined."

I don't know what to say, so I just smile at him and then give his cock a gentle lick.

Yes, it was better than I imagined, too.

"Now, I need more," he says, standing. He slips his hands under my arms and lifts me onto the bed. It takes no effort at all for him to pin me, to put his lips on mine. Our tongues dance together, tasting each other, the remnants of his liquid sex in my mouth, in his mouth as we tease and devour each other.

His hands go lower, to my panties, feeling the mound of my sex through them. It's a touch I've longed for. Slight pressure at first, sweet.

Then he slips beneath the lace and a gentle fingertip brushes me in a way that makes me gasp. He explores me, teases me, then brings his hand up to his mouth. A lick. Then he offers it to me and I taste myself on him.

"Better than I dreamed," he murmurs. "I can't wait to eat your pussy. I've fantasized about it for so long."

Owen lowers himself down my body, tasting me along the way.

"Take me, Owen," I whisper. "It's all for you. It's only for you."

My panties slide down my legs to be discarded on the floor.

I can feel his hot breath against me, my skin tingling in anticipation of his lips, his tongue.

Then, finally, he's there.

His tongue is on me, and I'm already wet and ready for him.

I've wanted this for so long.

His tongue touches me, tasting my wetness, caressing and teasing me, over and over. He licks me as if I'm his last meal, as if he can't get enough.

I spread my legs wide for him, opening myself to him.

"You taste so fucking good, Dani," he groans. "I could do this forever."

I can't respond, but I don't have to. He can hear me moan and writhe beneath him. It's heaven, ecstasy, all my fantasies wrapped up in the sensation of his tongue upon my pussy.

Struggling, I finally find my words. Distant, as if I'm floating above myself while the man of my dreams goes down on me, I can hear my own voice, begging him for more.

"Fuck, Owen," I gasp. "Please, eat my pussy. Lick me. Eat me. I need this. I need you to lick me like you did in my dreams."

I can hear his soft chuckle as he licks me again.

"In your dreams, huh?" He teases me, his tongue flicking against my clit. "What else did I do to you in your dreams?"

I want to tell him, but I can't. I can't admit that I've wanted him to do everything he's doing right now for years, but I've never imagined it could

really happen. He's always been forbidden, always been off limits. But we've long since crossed that line.

"Everything. You did everything. You were perfect, Owen."

He laughs and I can feel his smile against me.

"I'm not perfect, Danielle," he says, his voice rough, his breath hot on my pussy. "An ex-Marine, a biker, a criminal. Far from perfect. You know that."

"You're perfect for me," I whisper. "Exactly what I want. Please, just... oh, fuck, eat my pussy, please."

He ceases teasing and his tongue circles my clit, coaxing it, then more. The perfect focused attention that makes my body feel weightless.

I feel as if I'm floating above myself, riding the wave of his touch, his tongue, his lips. I'm riding the wave of his desire, and I'm riding it to the end.

I can feel it building inside me, deep within my core. Everything in me is focused on his touch, his tongue, his lips, his hands as they hold me, as they grasp my thighs. My skin tingles. The sensation is building, rising, rising. I can't hold on any longer. I can't contain the wave. It crashes over me and I cry out as his tongue licks me faster, harder, deeper. The orgasm tears through me, filling every part of me with pleasure. I'm gasping for air, my body writhing beneath his touch.

And then it's over. I'm left shivering, my body trembling beneath his hands.

"Do you like that, Danielle?" he asks.

I nod, unable to speak, unable to move.

He climbs up my body and kisses me, his lips tasting of my pussy.

"My turn," he whispers.

I can feel his cock throbbing against me.

I want his cock.

I want him inside me.

I spread my legs wide, wrapping them around him, and I kiss him again. I can feel his cock, hard and ready, throbbing against my pussy. It is everything I need in this moment.

"Fuck me, Owen," I plead. "Fuck me."

He doesn't need to be told twice.

With one thrust, he sinks himself into me. The feeling is exquisite, a sensation I've longed for, a desire I've held tight to for years.

We move together, desperate to dissolve into each other, to fuse together, to become one.

Our mouths cling together, never wanting to be apart.
Our bodies move together, never wanting to be apart.
Our hot breath mingles as we gasp for air.
Our bodies move together, faster and faster, harder and harder.

"I want you to cum for me, Danielle," he says, his lips on my ear. "I want you to cum all over my cock."

I can feel it building again, that euphoric feeling of my orgasm, the wave that will carry me off, the wave that will fill me with ecstasy. My body presses against his, the man I thought I could never have, both of us riding on the edge of pure ecstasy, our bodies craving release that is just moments away, thrusting, grinding, moaning.

I can feel his cock throbbing inside me, filling me with his desire.

My head spins. My body trembles.

Our lips meet in a passionate kiss.

I explode.

My nails dig into his back, my legs tighten, pulling him into me, amid the torrent of pleasure ripping through my body, I find the presence of mind to bring my lips to his ear and whisper, "Come inside me, Owen."

Four simple words break him and gasps rip my lips apart anew as I feel him release. He shakes in my arms, between my legs, hips pulsing, thrusting, his hot breath against my neck, his lust-filled gasps in my ears.

He lifts himself up for a second, looking down into my eyes as the last aftershocks of orgasm rock him. Dilated pupils, a smile on his face.

I rise and I kiss him as his last, shaking moments of orgasm roll through him.

Time passes as we just savor each other.

This moment that we have both wanted for so long, our bodies entwined, connected, bare flesh to bare flesh.

Finally, Owen settles on the bed beside me and puts his arm against me, pulling me to his chest. I listen to his heartbeat. I hear contentment, and I smile, turning my face to kiss his chest.

"What are you doing?" He murmurs, looking down at me.

"Loving you," I murmur in reply. It feels so right to say, so natural.

"You love me?"

"I've loved you for so long, Owen."

To anyone else, it wouldn't feel right to say those words at our first time being together. But I've known him for so long. Known I've loved him for so

long, too. As I watched him grow up into the man he is today, as I grew up beside him, I've loved him every step of the journey.

"I love you, too, Dani," he says, and he kisses me. There's a moment of pain on his face, of loyalty remembered. "We shouldn't be doing this. Things are different, now."

"Different, yes, but I think this is how they were always meant to be."

He chuckles. "I've wanted this for a long time, too. But some lines you can't uncross."

I yawn, the entirety of the day hitting me like a semi-truck going seventy.

"And those lines can wait until the morning. I'm tired, Owen. Tired and happy. Let's just sleep."

The comforting warmth of his skin and the muscles of his chest make a perfectly firm pillow. I rest there, eyes closed, listening to his heartbeat and the slow sound of every inhale and exhale. Eventually those beats and breaths settle into sleep while I lay there, my mind spinning over today's events.

At the most dangerous time in my life, surrounded by criminals and with my life, and the lives of my closest friends, hanging in the balance, I've crossed a line that cannot be uncrossed, and I've broken trust with my brother.

All for this.

For love.

Found at the worst time in my life.

This love just might kill me.

Chapter Seventeen

Striker

I wake up with a soft, warm glow in my chest and the first light of dawn filtering through the curtains. The gentle, golden light is bright enough to highlight the sublime rise and fall of Danielle's chest as she breathes softly in and out. Her face is relaxed, peaceful, like someone has just told her that everything is going to be okay. She's lying on her back, hair splayed out around her head like a halo, and there's a softness to her I rarely get to see. There's a smile playing on her lips. Lying there watching her, a sense of contentment washes over me, a feeling so foreign yet so deeply craved.

I lay there, my mind clear of the chaos that has haunted me for so long.

The room is silent except for our breathing.

It's just us; two souls who have circled each other for years, who have now found each other in the way they've always wanted. This peace, this pure contentment, it's a stark contrast to the life I've known — one filled with the hard training and deadly missions as a Marine and the heated battles on the streets as a member of the Steel Reapers MC. Here, in this quiet moment, all that seems worlds away.

With the things I've done, for the MC and for the Marines, I know it's a peace I don't deserve.

It's a peace that I won by betraying my brother.

Thoughts of Smokey and the consequences of what Danielle and I have start to creep into my mind. But I push them away, not wanting to taint this precious moment. I've learned the hard way to cling to peace when you find it. You never know how quickly you can lose it.

It can disappear with a word, with a gunshot, and leave a wound that haunts you for life.

I slip out of bed, careful not to wake Danielle, and head for a shower.

As I shave, I catch myself humming — a rare sound these days. The act feels like a celebration, a small acknowledgment of the happiness I'm feeling. Fucking happiness. When's the last time I felt anything close to that?

After my shower, I wrap a towel around my waist and head back into the bedroom. Danielle is still sleeping, her chest rising and falling in a steady

rhythm. I can't help but notice how beautiful she looks, even in her sleep. I could watch her for hours, but I know I have to get dressed and head out soon.

I want to celebrate. I want a drink. I want to feel the morning sunlight on me and know that I'm not actually dreaming, that I heard those words she said last night — I love you — and that I really said them back to her.

What a world where I can say those words and mean it.

Still, even with that mood in my heart, my mind keeps spinning.

As I pull on my jeans and a t-shirt, I can't shake the feeling that something isn't right. It's like a nagging voice in the back of my mind warning me that danger is coming. I try to ignore it, but it's persistent, and it's only getting louder.

Dressed and ready, I watch Danielle sleep some more.

She looks so serene, so right, lying there in our bed.

It's so tempting to climb in beside her, to wrap her in my arms, to kiss her awake and then fuck her senseless, but I'm in the mood for a drink. I scribble a quick note telling her I'll be back soon, and I lean down and press a gentle kiss to her forehead before heading out the door.

Crossing the Vertucci compound courtyard, I come across a small group of the groomsmen and Michael Vertucci, the groom and Mafia shithead himself. They're seated in a circle, chatting, drinking. Their eyes linger on me, but there's no hostility, just curiosity. Whatever ill will I earned with that fight last night seems to have died with the dark. Or maybe they knew that prick crossed a line with Dani and deserved what he got. Hell, he deserved a lot worse than what I gave him.

Either way, I'm in the mood to celebrate, and when Michael gestures for me to join them, I do, and one of them passes me a beer.

"Morning," I murmur, raising my beer toward the groom. "And congratulations. Tomorrow's the big day, huh?"

Michael Vertucci grins.

And despite the paleness in his complexion that I attribute to him likely staying up most of the night partying and starting his morning with what looks like more than a few beers, there's a genuine glow in his smile.

"It is. I'm a lucky man. I can't wait to get married to my woman, to be honest with you. Fucking love. Isn't it a damn crazy thing?"

A man like Michael Vertucci talking openly about loving Riley?

Hell, a man like Vertucci talking about loving anything other than money,

violence, and, maybe, drugs is shocking enough, but Riley — Morgan's little sister, Riley?

I hide my surprise behind a drink of beer.

"I'm glad for you," I say. Another shock — the feeling's genuine. It must be the love in my chest making me want to have something to celebrate and deciding a smiling Mafioso confessing his honest-sounding affection for his bride-to-be is good enough. "Love's a damn fine feeling, isn't it?"

"It is. Makes us do crazy things, too, doesn't it?" He winks at me.

"If you're talking about last night..."

He chuckles. "Water under the bridge. I would've done the same thing if I were in your position. My girl, she drives me crazy sometimes. She's a firebrand and sure, she may have her issues from time to time, but it's her wildness that excites me. Makes me feel alive. And what my friend did last night... You can't let someone disrespect you or your woman like that. Alcohol and... other substances... may have played a part in my friend's misbehavior. Trust me, he has been taught a lesson."

There's a note in Vertucci's tone that makes me look around the semi-circle and realize that the man from last night is the only groomsman not in attendance. Did Vertucci have him killed?

"I'm not sure of the traditions you people have... Italians, I mean... with your weddings, but if he and I need to formally talk or whatever to bury the hatchet, I'm happy to hear him out."

Really, I don't give a shit about the guy — he can rot in hell for all I care — but if Michael Vertucci is murdering people at his own wedding, the last thing I want to do is provoke him and put Danielle in danger. I'll play nice if that's what it takes. At least until I have Vertucci lined up in a clear shot.

Vertucci waves his hand dismissively and something on his forearm catches my eye: ink. Fresh ink. His sleeve's up, and as he gestures, I see several words that remind me of the Marine slogan. Only instead of *Semper Fidelis*, it says something like... *Sempre fedele fino alla morte*. Or close enough. His sleeve moves with his gestures, obscuring my vision.

"New ink?" I say, gesturing toward his forearm.

People always love to talk about their tattoos, and I'm hoping to get an explanation from the surprisingly chatty mob boss.

Instead, he rolls up his sleeve. "It's nothing."

"Doesn't look like nothing. Looks like something I'd shout in the Marines. *Semper fi*," I say.

"You were a Marine? A killer?" He says. There's a gleam in his eye that I don't like.

"Once a Marine, always a Marine. As for the killing... I did what I had to do."

"How many?"

I pause. It isn't something I like to brag about. It feels disrespectful, not just to the dead, but to the brothers in arms who died alongside me. But it's as I pause I realize no one else in the circle is talking. In fact, they haven't spoken since Michael Vertucci and I started chatting. Is it just deference to the mob boss, or is it something else?

Another swig of beer stills the wary feeling in my gut.

"Enough to survive," I answer. But I can see my answer's not good enough for Vertucci — there's a furrow in his brow that wasn't there before. "Look, I could probably sit here and take a minute and get you a pretty accurate count," I start. It's a lie. The number's burned into my soul, and every single one of those lives is a weight I carry with me every day. It's a weight that's gotten lighter thanks to the woman asleep in my bed. "But weddings are supposed to be parties, and digging up those graves is going to kill my mood. Frankly, I'd rather spend the rest of my time here celebrating your upcoming marriage than murdering the vibe with my PTSD. Let's just say the number is bigger than the number of people in this circle, but less than your guest list."

Michael Vertucci contemplates my words for a moment, then taps his beer to mine. "Good enough."

"Good enough for you to tell me about your ink?"

"You're getting ahead of yourself."

"A lot of trouble for a few Latin words on your forearm."

"It's Italian. We are Italians, after all." He rolls his head, takes a drink, then smiles at me. "But since you are so determined, and since I like your style, I'll tell you the story of my tattoo if you tell me a story. What was your closest brush with death?"

'Other than here, surrounded by a half-dozen of your hitmen?' is what I want to say. Anything but the actual story. Anything but thinking about the bonds I've broken and the brothers I've betrayed in the last twelve hours.

"I got shot in an ambush. Nearly died. But didn't, as you can see by the fact that I'm sitting here with you now."

Michael shakes his head and tuts his tongue. "Not good enough."

"It's not much of a story."

"Is your devoted refusal to tell a story about almost losing your life something you're willing to lose your life over?"

"I'd die because I didn't tell you how I almost died?"

Michael chuckles again, his shark-like teeth glimmer in the early morning sunlight.

"I want to know who you are. If I can trust you. You can tell a lot about someone from the stories they tell, the experiences that formed them, that shaped them like clay. What shaped you, Owen? What experiences fired the clay that forms you into the man I see in front of me today?"

Friendship and loyalty formed me.

Two bonds that I've broken.

"I'm not clay, I'm a Marine. But, to tell you the story: my unit was on guard duty, escorting a resupply convoy to a combat outpost that had recently taken a heavy enemy assault. Our assigned course took us through enemy territory and rough terrain. There was a canyon on the route..." As I dig up that story, one of the hallmark moments of my life that has defined me as a man, each word is one I rip out with pain that feels like a knife in my gut.

I betrayed the man who saved my life.

I betrayed my best friend.

I fucked his sister.

No, I've done more than just fuck his sister — I've fallen in love with her and I've let her fall in love with me, too. It's an uncrossable line, and I fucking jumped over it, laughing and giddy, like I'm fucking playing hopscotch.

My story ends and Michael Vertucci nods, satisfied, while I feel like killing myself for the disgusting betrayal I've carried out against everything that I believe.

Then he rolls up his sleeve, revealing his tattoo.

"I received this tattoo from my friends in the Santoro Syndicate. You've heard of them?"

Those words shove all feelings of disgust and betrayal into the back of my skull. It's just like Rook's warning said — the Syndicate is involved and this entire wedding just got a lot more dangerous. I force myself to nod calmly.

"I've heard of them."

"A short while ago, I'd gone to them with a business proposal. A merger, of sorts. They're looking to expand into our area, we're looking to expand, too. It seemed like a natural fit. But before they'd even consider my proposal,

they had a test. They wanted to verify my loyalty, my dedication, my manhood. So they put me in a locked room with two of the Syndicate's enemies that they had recently captured, and they put a knife in the center of that room. There was one rule: if I survived, they'd consider my proposal. If one of my two enemies survived, they'd let that survivor go. They gave everyone an incentive. But I was quicker than them. I got to the knife first. One man, I sliced him open from sternum to pelvis and his guts fell out in a waterfall of blood. The other, he was better. He even hit me with a few punches while I was busy cutting open the first man. Then I hit him back, broke his nose and stunned him, and then I slit his throat so deep that it severed the spinal column and his head dangled like a marionette."

"God damn," I murmur.

I'm not the only one. Several groomsmen mutter in shock.

Michael nods, smiling and proud.

"Absolutely ruined my suit, but it was worth it. They considered their proposal, and this tattoo marks me as a member of their organization. It's all still fresh, still new, but they'll be sending some men tomorrow to watch my vows. This wedding isn't just a celebration of my union with Riley. No, it's a celebration of an even bigger, more important union. My family with theirs."

Holy fucking shit.

It takes everything I have not to beat a retreat in that moment and race back to my room to grab Danielle out of her slumber and fucking drag her as far away from this vile wedding as I possibly can. Instead, I keep cool, the same way I've done before when enemy combatants are firing AK-47s in my direction. I raise my beer and tap it to Michael's, a smile on my face.

"Seems like congratulations are in order a second time."

"Thank you, my friend," he says. "And, if ever a man like you should need work..."

"I'll keep it in mind," I say.

At the earliest opportunity, I excuse myself, and I leave the group, my mind racing. Every word from Michael weighs on me like a ton of bricks. The reality of our situation — Danielle's and mine — hits hard. We're in deeper than ever and getting out won't be easy. Shame and worry gnaw at my heart as I walk back, knowing I must act, and act fast, to protect the woman I love.

I have to get her out of here, no matter what it takes, or else we're both dead.

Chapter Eighteen

Danielle

He comes back to the room looking like he's seen a ghost. White face, wide eyes, heavy breathing. Something's disturbed my man — how wonderful does it feel to say that word, that he's my man, I marvel — and I'm barely into my second cup of coffee, freshly showered and lounging in a bed that smells like us in the best way. This is the feeling I've always wanted, and it feels even better than I could have ever imagined.

But that feeling dissipates like the morning mist the moment I see how Owen looks as he comes through the door.

"Pack your bags, Dani, we need to — "

No, this is not what I want at all.

I cannot leave this wedding yet. Of that, I'm certain. Riley and Morgan need me, and there's no way I'm abandoning them in a sea of Mafia sharks.

Besides, there's nearly a decade of wanted moments I have to catch up on with Owen and the second I pack my bag and let his Marine-slash-biker combat instincts take over, all that will go up in smoke; we'll be forced back into the real world, and we'll both be accountable to my brother.

No, I can't have this.

"Owen, come here for a second," I say with all the desperate strength of love that I've been forced to contain for nearly a decade. It's enough to quiet him and bring him beside me in bed.

"Dani? What is it?"

I look him up and down, see the way his t-shirt clings to his muscles, especially the sleeves around his biceps, and the way his jeans ride his hips and cup his ass. A lifetime of hard work, military discipline, and training has formed that ass, and what an ass it is.

"You're stressed," I say, plainly.

"Fucking right, I'm stressed. Because Michael Vertucci — "

I cut him off again.

This isn't the time for hearing about his concerns. This is the time for me to live out one of the many fantasies I've had involving Owen: taking care of him after a tough day. Yes, the day might only have just started, but I'll bend

the rules just to recapture the sensation that I could only dream about for so long.

"Don't talk. Just take your clothes off and let me take care of you."

Naked, I slide out of bed and to my knees in front of him. As he strips off his shirt, I help him with his jeans like the excellent girlfriend I am. He tries to say something to stop me, but I'm not interested in listening to him. I only want his cock in my mouth. So I take it.

Take it, and shut him up.

"Oh, fuck, baby..."

His cock is already hard, and it's easy for me to set a rhythm with my mouth. Up and down, I bob my head while Owen tries to speak again.

"Dani, we need to..."

I pop his cock out of my mouth for a second. "Owen, shut up."

I lower my mouth to him, feeling his cock fill the space in my mouth. I take as much of him in as I can, pushing my head forward to open up the back of my throat and take him all the way.

I push my head back, and then forward again, setting a steady rhythm of my sucking.

I can hear Owen's breathing now, slow, deep, and it's soothing. His cock fills my mouth, fills me with satisfaction, and I'm calming him down. This is exactly what I want.

My mouth slides over his cock, and it slides up to the back of my throat.

Then I swallow.

I take him all the way.

"Oh, Dani. Just like that. Suck it, baby."

The words feel good, and I want to hear hear him say my name while I take his come in my mouth. I bob my head back and forth, pumping my mouth faster and faster, my hands teasing his balls, aching for what they can give me.

"That's so good, baby. You're so good. Suck it, Dani. Suck my cock. Oh, fuck. I'm going to come."

I want to taste his cum. I want to feel it roll over my tongue and down my throat.

"Come for me, Owen. Come in my mouth."

His cock swells in my mouth, and his pelvis tenses up, thrusting forward, tightening, about to give me what I want.

"Oh, Dani. You're so fucking hot. You're so fucking beautiful. I fucking

love you..."

"Come, baby," I urge him.

"Oh, fuck, I'm coming," he says, his voice strained.

His cock twitches in my mouth and his cum shoots down my throat. I swallow, milking his cock with my mouth for every last drop.

I'm so wet when I release his cock from my mouth that I lay back on the bed and my fingers are instantly on my pussy. For a moment, Owen stands there, obviously torn between his fading awareness of danger and the sight of me fingering myself.

His training begins to win out.

"Dani, we need to talk about..."

I can't have that.

Thankfully, he's still hard.

"Owen, we can talk about whatever you want to talk about later. What can I do to take your mind off whatever problem it's circling around?" I say, my fingers still pleasing my pussy, my words coming in brief gasps between lusty breaths. Suddenly, I remember another fantasy I've always had, and I roll over onto my knees, my face to the mattress, my ass in the air, my hands still touching myself. "Would fucking my ass help you forget?"

His answer is a moan. His abs and his cock both flex with desire. "Your ass?"

"Yes. Fuck my ass, Owen," I moan, my fingers leaving my pussy to tease my asshole. Preparing.

There's a war going on behind his eyes, his training and loyalty up against the lust and love we've shared for years. To tip the scales, I slip a finger into my ass while he watches and let out a gasp.

"Don't you want to fuck my ass, Owen?"

"Oh fuck, I do, but..." He says, pausing, and my heart sinks. "But I want to eat it first."

Then he kneels behind me. With no hesitation, his tongue pleases me and I let out a gasp at the sudden, surprising sensation; the man I've always wanted, eating my ass like it's the first meal he's had in years.

"Oh, fuck, Owen..."

"I'm going to fuck your ass with my fingers, baby," he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Yes, fuck my ass."

He slips two fingers inside of me and fucks me with them, and then I feel

his tongue inside of my ass, probing my tight hole. The sensation of having my ass toyed with while he uses his tongue to fuck it feels incredible and feel myself tightening, ready to cum.

"Oh, fuck, Owen. I can't wait any longer. I need you to fuck my ass," I moan, looking back at him, my hands on my ass cheeks, spreading them apart, beckoning him. "Fuck my ass."

"Roll over. I want to look you in the eyes while I take your ass, Dani." He stands up, and I roll over onto my back, my legs in the air, my ass waiting for him.

"You're fucking gorgeous," he tells me. "Are you ready?"

He eases against me, and the head of his cock begins to push into my ass.

Then it enters.

I let out a gasp so loud it's nearly a shout. Pleasure, sweet, stretching pleasure fills me like I've never felt before.

"Oh, fuck," I moan as he pushes his cock deeper inside of me.

"Are you all right?"

I don't hear him. I hear nothing. The only thing in my world is the sensation of his cock pushing deeply into my body, and I spread my legs open further, inviting him to go deeper.

"Fuck, you're tight," he groans, and I can feel him sliding inside, deeper and deeper.

"Come on, baby. Fuck me. Fuck my ass with your big cock."

He gives me what I want, pushing himself inside me until he's buried all the way.

"Fuck, Dani, you're so tight. You feel so good." His voice is strained, and I can tell that he's using all of his strength to hold himself back from taking me as hard as he can.

"Come on, Owen. Fuck me like I know you want to. Don't hold back."

"You sure?" It's sweet how concerned he is about me, but I nod in answer. He growls at that; an animal, unleashed. Then he thrust into me harder, faster, building a rhythm into a speed and force that shakes me and makes our bed frame scream..

I try to speak, but all that comes out is a moaning, a gasping, a beautiful sound of pleasure. I've never felt so full, so tight, so satisfied. I'm close, so close to the brink of an orgasm that could ruin me in the best way. My fingers go to my clit and I stroke myself, taking myself further to the edge while the man I've always wanted fucks my tight ass.

"Oh, fuck, Dani. Fuck, you feel so fucking good. I could cum in you right now," he tells me, his voice strained.

I want him to.

So desperately want it.

Everything that I am, I want to give to him. Over and over.

"Cum in me. Don't you dare pull out. I want your cum in my ass."

He grunts and growls, fucking me faster and harder, his hands holding my hips down to the bed, pulling me onto him, his cock thrusting deep into my tight ass.

"I'm coming..." He gasps.

But I hardly hear it, because I'm coming, too.

Body on fire, I twitch and shake and scream as he fucks my ass, as he cums inside me.

"Oh, fuck, Dani. Your ass is so tight. Fuck, baby. I love fucking you. I love you."

He falls onto the bed beside me, sweat on his forehead and his muscular chest, and a forgetful smile on his face.

Concerns canceled, I think, feeling triumphant. "I love you, too, Owen."

This is what I want.

I run my finger up his chest, teasing him, giggling as he shakes at my touch, his body so sensitive from the strength of his orgasm.

Another moment of peace with the man of my dreams.

Another fantasy crossed off my list.

One more down, a million more to go...

Then my phone beeps at me from the nightstand.

Again and again.

I know who it is before I even pick it up and see her name on the screen.
Morgan.

The texts are urgent. Serious.

Dani, Riley's having a breakdown.

911, I need you here now.

I'm out of bed before I can even blink, throwing on clothes and racing for the door with my heart in my throat. Whatever dream I was living in a moment ago is completely forgotten, while this dreadful feeling that I'm about to step into a nightmare fills my chest.

Chapter Nineteen

Danielle

As I burst into Riley's room, a whirlwind of bridal chaos greets me. My stomach flips over and my head spins as I take in the scene. Morgan stands there, her face a mask of concern, while Riley, huddled in a corner, clutches her phone like a lifeline. The room smells like roses and panic mixed, an intoxicating, nerve-twisting cocktail.

"Riley, what's happening?" I ask, my voice trembling slightly, echoing off the elegant tiled walls adorned with art. Elegant beauty, now overshadowed by a palpable terror.

Riley doesn't hear me.

Morgan stops me from saying anything more with a look that's equal parts dread and warning.

I go to my friend and I give her a hug. Half because she looks like she needs it, half because I need it, too. Though I do not know what is happening, fear is suffocating me and every breath I take feels inadequate.

Riley's voice cracks over the phone. Her hands shake. Her eyes are glassy, full of tears and red veins that hint at a high not far behind her.

"I can't, Mom... I just... Yes, the wedding will happen," she sobs, her gaze distant and haunted. "It will, it will..."

I glance at Morgan, her expression etched with a mix of anger and helplessness, mirroring the storm brewing inside me.

"What is it?" I whisper.

"There's so much I didn't know..." Morgan says. Her voice is bitter, yet still laced with love. "She disappeared for a while, you know that. I thought it was just another one of her times falling off the wagon. Yet, now... she's my sister and there's so much I didn't know."

"Morgan, tell me."

"It's not for me to tell. I don't even think I can say the words, Dani."

For the first time in my life, when I look into her eyes, I can't tell what's going on inside her head. We've always had this connection, we've always been closer than just friends. Sisters. But now, all I get when I look at her is an overwhelming sensation of sickness and pain.

As Riley ends the call, I step forward, my voice laced with urgency. I can't forget why Morgan and I both are here: we have to save Riley from the monster she's about to marry.

"Riley, Morgan and I both love you. We love you and we're here for you. We need to talk about Michael. You don't have to marry him. We can help you escape this." My words feel hollow in the face of her despair. "He's no good for you. The drugs, the business he's involved in... it's just going to get you hurt. Or worse. I love you. Morgan loves you. Let us help you."

Collapsing into a chair, Riley's eyes, red and swollen, meet ours.

"You don't get it. Michael... he's not just bad. He's monstrous. Yes, he loves me, and I love him, even though I know he's terrible for me. So many times, I've thought about leaving him, and it just didn't happen. Now... now, I can't." Her voice is a broken whisper, echoing around the room filled with wedding finery that now feels more like a cage than a celebration.

"You can't?"

Morgan's voice is frantic, terrified. She kneels beside her sister. "Sis, tell us everything."

Through her tears, Riley gasps. "When we first started dating, I got pregnant. That's why I disappeared. I was so scared and ashamed, and he took advantage of that. He isolated me. And now... he's taken our baby...my baby boy. He'll kill him if I don't go through with this."

Morgan gasps, her face turning pale, while tears flow down her cheeks, just as they flow down her sister's.

An icy dread settles in my stomach, and a pained wail breaks my lips.

How could anyone do that? Threaten to kill a baby? It's pure evil.

I pull Riley and Morgan into a hug. Squeeze them tight with all the desperate strength and love in my body.

In the charged silence, I find my voice. "Riley, we're here with you, no matter what."

"You're my sister. I'm never leaving you. I love you, Riley."

"You can't tell anyone," Riley whispers. "If he finds out I've told, he'll kill my son."

"I promise," Morgan and I both say at the same time.

As we huddle together, a mix of fear and determination takes root within me. I've promised to stand by Riley, but with that promise comes the realization of the danger we all now face. I glance at Morgan, her eyes shining with unshed tears, and understand that this is a battle we must fight

together.

We're sisters, even if not by blood. And sisters do not abandon each other.
No matter what.

Chapter Twenty

Danielle

When I return to our room, exhaustion weighs me down like a lead vest. My heart aches for Riley, for Morgan, for the tiny near-nephew I've just learned I have. Luca Morgan Taylor — a name that made my best friend weep the moment she heard it. Not only has she learned that she has a nephew out there, but he's named after her, too.

Stepping inside the suite I share with Owen, I freeze.

The room is packed up; Owen's stuff, my stuff, everything is in bags. But that isn't what has me standing there in shock. It's the man himself — Owen — standing in the middle of the room with a gun in his hand. His face is set in a grim line, his eyes burning with determination. He looks like a Marine ready for battle, and it takes my breath away.

"What's going on?" I ask, though I already have a feeling of where this is headed.

"We need to get out of here." His voice is firm but compassionate at the same time. "Dani, we need to leave. The Santoros will be here tomorrow. It's not safe." His eyes meet mine, a storm of emotions swirling in their depths — determination, ferocity, but most of all, love. "I may have broken my promise to Dixon by falling in love with you, but I won't forget my mission to keep you safe. Grab your bags. Now."

I plant my feet, my voice rising in anger.

"I'm not going anywhere, Owen. I know about the Mafia, about the Syndicate." What Syndicate? I honestly have no idea, but I can't show him a single opening because he'll take it and turn it to his advantage. "I'm not blind, and I'm not leaving, either. You think it's as simple as just grabbing my bags and walking out that door? Maybe it is for you, but I can't go. I won't leave Riley and Morgan to face this alone. If I leave, they die, too."

Owen's resolve falters as he absorbs my words.

"Riley, too?" he asks, his voice a whisper of disbelief. "He'd kill his own bride just because you left?" Beneath his breath, I hear him whisper, "He said he loved her."

As if a monster like Michael Vertucci could know what love is.

Choosing to ignore that whisper, I nod, my resolve steeling me against the fear that claws at my heart.

"Is that why you're staying?" Owen presses, searching my face for answers. "For them? You don't need to stay, Dani. It's too dangerous. I could get you out and come back for them. That might work. Will you at least try?"

I waver. "Owen, I..."

"Is there something else keeping you here? Tell me, Dani."

I pause, a secret burning on my tongue, a secret named Luca Morgan Taylor, a secret I can't reveal.

Instead, I choose another truth, equally powerful.

"As long as we're here, away from everything else, I can pretend that what we have is real, that it won't end. I love you, Owen. I don't want to lose you."

Owen steps forward, his determination unshaken. "I love you, Danielle. But we can't stay. It's too dangerous. We're leaving."

His advance triggers my reflexes; I grab a coffee cup, hurl it just past his head with accuracy so pinpoint it brushes his ear. He halts, a flicker of surprise in his eyes.

"Dani, what the hell are you doing? We need to go. Now."

With another cup in hand, I stand my ground.

I am resolute. Committed to the women I consider my sisters and to little Luca Morgan Taylor. I will not fail them.

"If you try to move me, Owen, I swear I'll hit you. I made a promise to Riley, to Morgan. I can't abandon them now. You of all people — a fucking Marine — should understand that you don't leave a man, or a woman, behind. This is my stand, my fight, and I have to protect them."

A tense silence envelops us, the air charged with unspoken emotions and the gravity of our situation. Owen's gaze never leaves mine; it's a battle of wills that neither of us is willing to lose. It's love against love, and it's tearing me apart.

"Dani, think about this. What if you get hurt? Or worse... I couldn't live with that."

But I swallow my pain and keep my voice unwavering. I won't be broken. There's too much on the line, including the life of a baby.

"We're staying," I assert, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside me. "We have to see this through, for them, for us. No matter what it takes."

His eyes flare. Rage and love burning with equal measure in those intense blues of his; eyes that have always held my heart.

"You're insane. Think. See this logically. As soon as the Santoros arrive tomorrow, people are going to die because they know who I am. We have to leave."

My mind is already made up. There's no turning back.

I heft the coffee cup. "You know I won't miss. So, you have a choice, Owen: either leave on your own, or stay here with me and see this through."

He lowers his gun, but pierces me with a determined look. Owen O'Connell never was the type to know when he was beaten.

"This isn't over," he says.

I sit down on the couch in our suite's living room, a spot that gives me a perfect view of the bed and the door. If I have one weak point in this whole mess, it's Owen O'Connell, which means I have to keep him at a distance.

"Figured you'd say that. I'll be staying on the couch tonight, and I'll be keeping watch. If you try anything, you'll learn what it's like to have a coffee mug crack your skull open. Are we clear?"

Chapter Twenty-One

Striker

Soft moonlight bathes the room as I watch Dani's chest rise and fall in peaceful slumber. It took hours of waiting in bed, laying still, breathing deep, giving her the impression that I was long gone to exhaustion, to get to this point. Hours of waiting for her to let her guard down. Now, she's out, beautiful even though she's my enemy. Tucking the blanket around her, I feel a pang of loss in my heart, but push it aside.

This situation is more than a solitary Marine can handle. I need help to deal with this conflict. I need my brothers.

Climbing out the window, I land softly on the cool grass, the compound's fence casting long shadows under the starlit sky.

I approach, keeping hidden behind hedges and manicured shrubbery at first, surveying the surroundings to be sure of the gaps in security, and then I make my move. It's easy enough to climb, and then I'm on the other side, heading for Costa Oscura.

I begin to jog.

Just like back in the day, I have a long way ahead of me, miles before I can rest. Only this time, I don't have to run in combat boots and with a giant pack on my back. I get to do it in civilian clothes and with the lead weight of love strapped to my heart.

A handful of hours and twenty torturous miles pass.

The streets of Costa Oscura are eerily quiet, with only the distant sound of the ocean breaking the silence. Streetlights cast a golden glow as I make my way to Reid's Repairs, the clubhouse, my mind a whirlwind of emotions and plans.

What now?

How do I deal with this war between love and duty?

I continue to run.

The familiar sight of the club's shop looms in the darkness, its usual bustle now a ghostly quiet. Inside, the MC members — Bullet, Rook, and Thunder, stand like silent specters, their faces grim. Smokey, Hawk, and Ghost greet me with nods, their expressions tense. I don't know much about them other

than their reputations and the scant stories Smokey's told me, but it's easy to pick out which one is Ghost, the former intelligence officer turned biker — he's lean and toned, bearing the scars and tattoos that tell the story of his tumultuous journey, with eyes that pierce right into me. *Yes, that's the look of a fucking spook.* The other one — tall, muscular, with short hair and eyes reminiscent of a feral animal — must be Hawk. Smokey looks ready to kill, and I don't blame him. The last thing I'd want if I was in his position is a midnight meeting with the man who's supposed to be guarding my little sister.

"I was sleeping, Striker. Now, I'm not. What the fuck is this about?" Rook grumbles. He looks ready to kill, too, but that's his normal look, so I'm not surprised.

"If the big baby needs a nap, the chair in my office is pretty comfy. Go take a lie-down," Bullet says.

"Is that offer only for him, or is that open to others who might want a nap? Either now, or maybe every Friday around one in the afternoon?" Thunder asks.

"I'm not giving you permission to take a fucking nap every Friday," Bullet says. "You're not paid to sleep."

"Other cultures do it. Ever hear of a siesta? Besides, it'd only be for an hour or four."

"Then do us all a favor and move to Spain, you ass," Rook snaps. "Striker, answer me: why am I awake and why am I here?"

"Tell me about Dani, Owen. Is she safe?" Dixon asks.

I look at Rook first. "You're awake and here because this threat involves all of us." Then I look to Dixon. "Dani's safe. For now."

"For now? I don't like those words, Striker."

I look at my friend, the man who saved my life, the person I love as a brother, and try to put as much compassion into my words as I can. "Dixon, you're going to want to sit down for this."

Sensing the weight of what I have to say, he grabs a folding chair and sits.

Then I take a breath. Slow, deep, like I'm about to jump into live fire, and I explain everything — the Santoro Syndicate's dark intentions, the impending alliance with the Vertucci Mafia. My words hang heavy in the air, met with grave faces. Rook's eyes narrow, Bullet clenches his fists, and Thunder's jaw sets firm.

Near the end, overcome with raw fear for his sister, Smokey stands and

begins pacing.

"She won't leave?" Ghost says, speaking up for the first time. His voice matches his name. It's raspy, phantom-like. "There must be something compelling her to stay."

"Yeah, it's called love for her friends," I retort.

Smokey steps forward, his voice firm yet laced with concern.

"Owen, you promised to keep her safe. You owe it to her, to me, to us all." His piercing gaze holds mine, a silent plea clear in his eyes. "Get her out of there. Why have you let things come to this? You promised me. I fucking saved your life, man."

The truth slips out, raw and unguarded. "Dani and I... we've fallen for each other."

The confession hangs between us, a tangible shift in the atmosphere.

Smokey's eyes widen, a mix of shock and hurt flashing across his face. "You what?"

"I love her. She loves me."

Rook murmurs. "Fucking hell. You really know how to cock things up, Striker."

Smokey's voice is stern, his words a mixture of command and desperation. "If you care about her, you'll do what's right. Get her out, Owen. It's what a brother would do." His words cut deep. "Unless you no longer consider us to be brothers?"

"No longer brothers?" I murmur. It sears my soul to even hear that. His words echo in my mind, a painful clarity washing over me. Love has blinded me, made me forget my duty, my promise, my loyalty. Protecting Dani is more than a vow to a brother — it's my obligation, the reason I'm still alive.

"You need to decide, Owen," Smokey says. "Where do your loyalties lie? Are they with me and your club? Do you still hold to your word? Or have you just decided that doesn't matter anymore?"

I've never been so challenged.

I look around the room, at the faces of my club brothers and the man who, until this moment, I considered my brother in everything but blood. Now, that's being put to the test.

Everything I am and everything I believe depends on my answer.

"I keep my promises, Dixon. I'll get her out of there."

"Whatever it takes," he says, grabbing my shoulder and staring into my eyes with unwavering trust. "I don't care about anything else. Hell, if you

love her and she loves you, fine, that's great, and I'm happy for you both. But I don't want my little sister killed by those Mafia assholes. If you need to kidnap her to get her out of there, then you do it. It's for her own good."

"I'll do it, Dixon. Don't worry." I nod and look at my club brothers and find similar support in their eyes.

"Good. Now that we know the Santoros are involved and shit may go down tomorrow, we'll make preparations," Bullet says. "We have to be ready for anything."

"And we'll join you. Many hands, light work, like that old saying goes," Ghost adds.

"Besides, we've been looking for a place to land. It'll be good to have a home... and some honest action," Hawk says with a grin.

My path is now clear and my mission defined: I can't let my emotions endanger Dani. I can't let her endanger herself, either. I steel my heart for what must be done, even if it means defying her, or even a straight-up fight to force her to leave the Vertucci wedding. It's what I need to do.

I catch a ride with Bullet back to the compound. He drops me a mile out from the Vertucci place, and I complete the rest of the distance on foot.

As I approach the compound again, a plan forms in my mind. A desperate plan. I'll do whatever it takes to keep Dani safe, away from the clutches of the Mafia.

Even if it means taking drastic measures... like kidnapping her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Danielle

A solitary noise stirs me from my slumber. I'd been having a dream. A deep, vivid one where Owen and I were buying a house together, decorating it, making it ours, and we were just about to settle into bed together on that first day when all that initial work, all that organizing, that painting, that furniture re-arranging, all that was done; we'd fuck, we'd sleep, we'd wake up in each other's arms, and we'd have breakfast together in a place that was truly our home. I wake up with a sensation of love filling my chest and lifting my lips. The warmth of the couch and the softness of the blanket cocoon me in a haze of comfort. That feeling startles me for a second — a blanket? Where'd that come from? Owen must've put it over me when I fell asleep, I realize, and another gentle smile comes across my face.

Did we just have and resolve our first fight?

It'd be another thing to cross off my list, although not the most pleasant experience. The make-up sex, however, well, that'll be another story.

But then another rustling noise jolts me to alertness. It's closer. It sounds... ominous.

I blink open my eyes to find Owen, equipped with a gag, blindfold, and rope, coming toward me. My heart races, confusion turning to fear. I try to move, but before I can react, Owen acts with military precision, pouncing upon me, pinning me, and effectively gagging and tying me up until I'm nothing more than a bra-and-panty-wearing parcel on his shoulders.

Outside, he moves swiftly through the dark, demonstrating his knowledge of the guard rotations, bypassing all the security and getting me over the fence effortlessly. I'm helpless, carried out like a sack of flour, my mind reeling in betrayal and shock.

He's kidnapped me.

He's kidnapped me, and now he's carrying me through the woods like I'm a backpack at boot camp.

I bounce along for hours on his back, indignantly struggling, with my more desperate attempts to wiggle and kick my way free met by firm slaps on my ass that both enrage and arouse me. Even when he's kidnapping me, I'm so

wild for him I want to fuck his brains out.

He takes me where I expect: the MC's garage and de facto clubhouse. Even though I can't see with the blindfold around my eyes, I can smell it. That, and I know Owen better than anyone — it's obvious he'd take me somewhere safe, somewhere he feels secure having a half-naked woman hostage.

I just hope none of the other men in his MC are here to see me in such an undignified position.

At Reid's Repairs, I fight against my restraints with growing desperation. My wrists turn red, begin to bleed as I struggle against the cordage binding them. My teeth hurt from gnawing on the gag in my mouth and I just know my dentist is going to throw a bitch-fit at my next checkup for all the damage I've likely done to them. Still, I fight on. The realization that Owen kidnapped me, that he's betrayed my trust, sets my entire being ablaze with fury and panic... and still, lust. So much lust. How, I don't know. Maybe it's something primal, the neanderthal inside me expecting to be taken back to Owen's cave and claimed.

"Stop fighting, Dani. I'm not going to hurt you. This is for your own good."

Fuck you, you Jarhead prick, I mutely scream into my gag.

How can he be so heartless, so disrespectful, to put me in this position? Doesn't he know the damage he's going to do?

Fuck you, Owen.

"I know you hate me for this, but it's the right thing to do, Dani. You're not thinking clearly. I can't let them hurt you. I can't leave you in that place. This is how it has to be. I'll keep you here, you'll be safe from whatever the Vertuccis have planned, we'll try to get Morgan and Riley out, and the club will deal with whatever the Santoro Syndicate is trying to do. It's going to get violent, and the best place for you is as far away from the front lines as possible."

But Owen isn't going to get away with this so easily.

Our love may only be young in the open, but we've known each other for so long, loved each other secretly for so many years, that I can tell he's conflicted. There's an opening, a weakness, and I have to take it.

I have to make one, too. In my gag.

I keep chewing. Once I gnaw through the makeshift gag, I unleash my anger. "How could you do this, Owen?" My words are a mix of betrayal, pleading, and confusion. "You need to take me back there right now!"

"No. I can't do that, Dani."

"Fuck, you carried me here. Just carry me back."

"It's not that easy. You know it. You also know what's going to happen tomorrow. This is the safest place for you."

"It's exactly because I know what's going to happen tomorrow is why I need to go back. And, Owen, you don't know everything that's going on. Just... take me back, please. If you love me, you'll take me back."

"It's because I love you that I'm doing this. This is to keep you safe. I'm honoring my word," he says, sparking all kinds of fury inside me. Damn him and his fucking honor. I spit in his direction, my eyes flaring. He sighs, throwing his arms wide in frustration. "The MC is here for you, Dani. Just tell me what's going on so I can help you."

I'm shaking.

Furious. Furious and frightened.

Struggling silently against the knots binding my wrists behind my back, I feel things start to give. He doesn't know it, but they're loosening. My hands and forearms are strong, nimble, honed by years of pitching. I never thought I'd be putting my skills to use like this, but I'm grateful for them.

Torn between my promise to Morgan and Riley, and my love for Owen, I remain silent on the real reason for my insistence. I keep fighting. Keep talking.

I must keep him distracted.

"I can't tell you, Owen, but trust me, it's important."

"That's not enough, Dani. If it's so important, you need to trust me."

"Trust you? That's rich coming from a man who tied me up and kidnapped me in the middle of the night. You should be begging my forgiveness, and if you love me at all, you will take me back to that wedding."

"We've been over this before..."

"Is it going to be me or your promise to Dixon? Choose. You can either love me and trust me, or you can keep your word to my fucking brother, but you can't do both." With my heart in my eyes, I implore him to make the right decision, my voice a cocktail of love, desperation, and defiance.

"I can't let you go back there, Dani." His words cut through me, a crushing confirmation of my worst fears: we're over. Our love is nothing compared to his fucking honor. "It wouldn't be love letting you go back there, it'd be cowardice. I know you can't see that now, but this is the right decision."

Almost there.

The knots are almost undone.

One more good pull, and then I'll be free. I just need a distraction so I can make that happen.

"So we're done then," I whisper. It hurts, and I'll grieve the death of our relationship later, but right now, I have more important things on my mind. The lives of my friends and little Luca Morgan Taylor.

He closes his eyes, tilts his face toward the ceiling, a deep sigh filling his chest.

"Don't do this, Dani..."

Seizing the moment of his inattention, I break free from my restraints and launch into action, leaping from the chair and running to the staff refrigerator that sits not twenty feet away. I'm there before Owen even realizes I'm out of my seat.

"Dani, what the fuck are you doing?" He shouts.

I open the fridge and am greeted by the beautiful sight of dozens of beer cans, all neatly stacked on the shelves. Lovely ammunition. I grab one, it's cold, it fits right in my palm.

I whirl around and hurl it, zipping the freezing projectile right by Owen's ear.

He blinks, as if the sight of me hurling cold cans of beer at his head is too ludicrous to believe. Well, believe it or not, Marine, that was only a warning shot. The next one's going to take you out.

Taking the next can in hand before the other one's even hit the wall, I channel every ounce of my softball pitching skills.

"You chose poorly, Owen," I say, copying the intonation of the Knight of the Grail in one of my favorite movies, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

"What the...?"

The can I hurl connects right with his cranium at fifty-miles-per-hour. It's one of my slower pitches, about the same velocity I'd use for a curveball, not a fastball, but it's still hard enough to knock him unconscious with a heady thunk.

As Owen collapses, I freeze for a moment. A hurt sob wracks my chest, then another.

I'd hoped for so much for us. That it has to end like this, in this place, for these reasons, is something that I don't think I'll ever get over.

Can't grieve now, I remind myself. Too many people depend on me.

Stalking to the staff lockers, I throw one open and grab a pair of dirty mechanic's overalls out and throw them on. They're way too big and they

smell like sweat and motor oil, but they'll have to do, because there's no way I'm wandering around Costa Oscura in my underwear.

Stepping out into the night, I'm overwhelmed by a sense of loss and urgency. Pain rips through me. My breathing comes in sobs that claw through my throat like razor blades. I've lost Owen, my love, the man I wanted for so long.

But I can't lose focus. I must return to the wedding, to Riley, to my promise.

Before it's too late.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Striker

The shock of cold water jolts me awake. Disoriented, I realize I'm lying on the cold shop floor, drenched and shivering. My head is pounding, an aching, sharp throb, and my brain feels like it's too swollen for my skull. Even the dim morning light that filters through the shop windows is too much, and I squint and shield my eyes from the brightness.

Slowly, the events of the night before and how I ended up on this floor unravel themselves in my twisted and torn thoughts. Danielle. She's gone.

I move, compelled to get up and look for the woman who left and took my heart with her, but a grunting noise brings me to a stop.

Rook stands above me, an empty bucket in hand.

"Wake up, Striker," he growls, but there's an unusual softness in his eyes.

"What time is it?" I groan, remembering roughly when I'd brought Dani here. I want to know how long it's been since she escaped. Maybe I can still catch her. Stop her from whatever insanity she's planning.

How can she be so determined to go back there, knowing what's going to happen?

"It's morning, that's what time it is."

I try to get up again, but my arms and legs aren't cooperating. Apparently, getting hit in the head with a soda can thrown at high speed isn't good for you.

Rook puts a hand on my shoulder, stopping my flailing.

"You okay, kid?" he asks, his voice uncharacteristically gentle.

I struggle to sit up, my head pounding fiercely, but it's the agony in my chest that's unbearable. All I can muster is a silent shake of my head.

Rook loops an arm under mine and helps me to my feet, then he guides me to a chair and helps me sit.

"Hell, Striker, I've been in that pit before," Rook confesses. "I'm not one to get emotional, not unless it involves Eliza, but you're not alone in this. You're suffering, yeah, but you've got people around you who still give a shit about you." His gruff voice carries a hint of understanding. "Remember, the MC is your family. We stick together."

His words, rough but sincere, resonate with me, yet they do little to ease the pain of losing Dani.

She's gone.

I had it all with her. Had the woman I've always wanted, and I fucked it up. Now, I've not only lost her, but in a few hours, the whole damn world is going to lose her because she's so intent on going back to that nest of vipers that is the Vertucci family wedding.

I try to stand again.

It works a little better than the last time. For two seconds, I'm on my unsteady legs, and then back on my ass in the chair.

Rook takes a small flashlight from his tool belt and holds it to my face, shining the light right in my eyes.

"Ow, asshole, what the fuck are you doing?"

He chuckles. "Checking you for a concussion."

Though he takes his time doing it, shining that light on me like he not only wants to look at my eyeballs, but illuminate every remaining brain cell in my head. Because Rook is Rook, and even when he's caring for you — which on its own is probably a strange enough thought to give me a concussion — he's still Rook. Still an asshole.

"But you're clear."

"Great. Help me stand. And lend me your bike, too. And a gun."

"Let me correct myself: you're clear of a concussion... for now. If you try anything stupid or ask me again to lend you any of my things, you will find your mental state irrevocably altered."

"Concussions aren't permanent, you ass," I retort.

"They are when you hit as hard as I do."

In my state, I realize that I'm in no condition to test him, even if the look on his face is one that's just begging to be punched. Besides, I've got bigger things to worry about, and as my senses come back, crippling pain comes back with it; Dani's gone. Gone for good.

"She was special," I murmur.

"Eliza's more special."

"Oh, fuck off."

"It's a reflex."

"To be the world's biggest asshole?"

"To talk up the woman I love," Rook says. "But go ahead, continue wallowing in your well-deserved self-loathing. Clearly, you had something

beautiful, and you fucked it up. I know a little about Smokey's sister — she's successful, athletic, though not the smartest woman out there, considering she isn't named Eliza and she also somehow chose you as her partner, but she still seems like a catch — and I know it's got to be eating you up inside to have completely ruined what you had with her. So let it out while I get a pot of coffee started."

"I should kill you."

"Should and being capable of something are two completely different things, Striker. You're welcome to try, but you'll have to live with the consequences of failure — which is me killing you. Though at least you'd get to escape the pain that I'm sure is eating your heart alive. You going to want any of this coffee?"

Briefly, I consider standing up and trying it. Rook would kill me in the state I'm in, but he's right — at least it's an out.

Then I nod my head, even though the action makes my brain feel like it's jumping around inside my skull.

"Yeah. Make me a cup."

He pours one for himself and one for me. Then he brings it to me and pulls up a chair opposite mine.

"What happened?"

"You asking to gloat over the fact I wound up unconscious on the shop floor, or you genuinely care?"

"Both."

"I appreciate the honesty."

"I'm nothing if not honest."

I chuckle, take a sip of coffee, feel the caffeine ripple through my body and jolt my groggy system back to life. "Fuck, that's good."

"The only reason they keep me around. Of course, it's not just that I know how to make a mean cup — this stuff's French press, by the way, because I'll be fucking damned if I drink automatic drip shit, since those machines don't heat the water up to the right temperature for any sort of meaningful extraction — but I have to give some credit to the beans as well. They are imported from Chiapas, Mexico. Bright acidity, light toastiness, and a good, fruity flavor. A chef friend of mine who lives up north recommended them to me. She knows her shit."

Taking another sip, I nod. "She does."

It's damn fine coffee, perfectly roasty, just the right amount of darkness,

and yet a gentle acidity that wakes me up.

"Eliza's been teaching me about this thing. It's called empathy. I can tell you're hurting right now. You're worried you've lost Dani for good. That she's going into a danger that you can't get her out of. That she's going to be surrounded by ruthless Mafia hitmen who are going to rip her limb from limb and send the pieces to you in the mail, bit by bit, until your front porch is filled with packages of body parts, like her eyes, her ears, her fingers, her lips..."

"Rook, that isn't fucking empathy. You're just trying to torture me."

He grins. "Got me."

"Are you even fucking human?" I snarl. Not only am I ripped apart inside with the loss of Dani, not only is my head pounding like there's a jackhammer going off inside it, but I have to deal with this asshole, too.

"For her I am." He shakes his head. "But I can tell you're in pain, and that you care for this woman, too. I'll ease up." Rook cocks his head to the side, listening. With my head banged up and foggy like it is — feeling like it's stuffed full of cotton balls soaked in hot sauce — it takes me a moment to hear what he's hearing. Then I catch it: incoming motorcycles. The MC. And Smokey. Hell, the entire crew is probably on its way to be here in T-Minus thirty seconds. "Also, I want you to know that, in the shit that is about to hit the fan in the next minute, I've got your back."

"You've got my back?" It takes a moment for those words to register, then adrenaline floods my system as those bikes reach the shop and I hear footsteps outside.

"Someone, maybe even multiple someones, will want to beat your ass for letting Danielle get away. They might be justified, but I want you to know that, out of respect for the fact that you — idiot boy-child that you are — tried your best, I will not join them in massacring you. That's me having your back." He clears his throat. "Which is really fucking hard, because the odds are that Danielle is going to be dead in the next few hours and it's all your fault."

"Goddamn piece of shit, Rook," I snap, standing. Fuck the fact that my feet and fists hardly work right now, I'm going to wring his neck for being such an asshole.

Then the door opens. Flies open. Kicked open by Smokey, who stands in the doorway, eyes on fire. Behind him, I see Hawk, Ghost, Bullet, and Thunder. Everyone is here to witness my murder.

Smokey charges forward the second he lays eyes on me.

His hands wrap themselves in the collar of my shirt, pulling my face to within inches of his.

"What the fuck did you do with Dani, Striker? Where the fuck is she?" He shouts, his voice a mix of betrayal and fear. His words hit me like a physical blow. "Where's my sister?"

This close, I can see it isn't fire in his eyes. It's fear. Fear and pain.

My friend isn't just dealing with my betrayal and my failure in my mission, he's dealing with the fact that the other person he's closest to in life, Dani, is about to die. Two of the people he cares about the most have just hurt him in ways so deep it may take him years to process it.

"Owen... Please, tell me what happened to my sister," he prompts again when I find myself unable to speak. "Please."

That pain he feels, it fills my chest, too.

I look at my former best friend, the man who saved my life, the brother of the woman that I love — no, loved — more deeply and fiercely than I thought it was even possible to love someone.

"I lost her, Dixon. I lost her."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Danielle

Worn, weary, wearing dirty overalls, walking barefoot, and brokenhearted down the road outside Reid's Repairs, I take a deep breath.

Well, fuck, if this isn't hell, I don't know what is.

I have no money, no phone, no nothing, and I have to get back to the wedding compound before everyone wakes up and realizes I'm gone. If I don't make it there at all, Morgan and Riley are dead. If I do make it there, but too late, then I'll get killed, too. My only option is to get there faster than humanly possible. Maybe it'd be possible if Owen were carrying me, but I'm alone.

So alone.

For a moment, I look over my shoulder at the shop and debate asking him for help. Explaining things. Maybe he'd understand.

Then I shake my head.

He kidnapped me.

It's his fault that I'm in this situation to begin with, because he couldn't take the basic step of trusting me, trusting that I know what I'm doing. I'm not a child, I'm a grown fucking adult and I'm stepping into a situation that is obviously dangerous — yes, I'm paying attention to my surroundings and being cautious. It doesn't take a Marine's training to know that being surrounded by the mob is not ideal.

This is all on me now. Me and me alone.

Because the man I thought I loved is unconscious on the dirty floor of the garage.

I'll have to hitchhike if I want to have any chance of making it there in time.

Cautiously, I kneel and grab a rock and slip it into my pocket before I approach the busy road and hold out my thumb. The rock is for security. Just in case whoever stops is a serial killer or a creep. Because, if I can take out Owen with a soda can and a half-assed throw, I'll absolutely destroy a lesser man with a legitimate throw.

Thumb out, bare feet taking me forward at a wincing jog along the

roadside, I've nearly given up hope when a semi pulls over onto the shoulder in front of me. The truck rolls to a stop and I eye it warily, until the door opens and a burly, scary-looking man who's at least six-foot-two and well over two-hundred-and-fifty pounds hops out. He looks like the offspring of a silverback gorilla and a brick wall.

He walks toward me. Lumbers is more like it.

"A pretty girl like you shouldn't be out all alone on a road like this. It's dangerous, honey."

I take a few steps backward, hand holding tight to the rock. I wonder if I can throw it hard enough. I wonder if the rock's hard enough. Or if his big, bearded head might be so hard, it'll just harmlessly bounce off.

Would the rock shatter to pieces if I threw it at him and hit him in the face? Would it knock him unconscious, or just provoke him?

"Don't come any closer," I warn him. But my warning isn't too loud. My voice shrivels in my throat.

Then he trips.

It's a light stumble, a boot scraping over a loose rock.

"Whoopsie," he says, inordinately loud and in a high pitch. "Oh, dear me, I'm such a Clumsy Cathy. But then, what else do you expect when you're coming off fourteen hours of driving? Look, honey, I'd love to offer you a ride and help you get where you need to go. It really would bug me for absolutely ages if I just left you to wander barefoot — though you have really cute feet, and did you paint your nails? They look gorgeous; that color is a real keeper — out here all alone. But I can't stand around forever, because I need to get home, put a moisturizing mask on and my feet up, and drink some fucking Zinfandel through a straw while I watch the shittiest reality TV known to mankind." He stops five feet in front of me, lets out an enormous sigh and a giggle. "Where the hell are my manners? Of course you're scared of me. A big guy, ranting on about his need to get to his stories. I'd be frightened, too. My name's Moose. Yes, I know, you're probably wondering how I got the nickname when I don't have any antlers and I look way more like a bear — which is true, I definitely am — but I don't have the time or energy to tell you that story. So why don't you just hop in my truck and tell me your name and where I can take you?"

"I'm Danielle."

"Hi Danielle. Get on in. The step up from the passenger side is a bit of a bitch, but I've got extra pillows on all the seats, so the effort to get up there is

worth it. The additional cushioning is just miraculous on the bottom. I swear, you'll sit down and feel like you're sitting on a cloud."

Moose gets into his truck on the driver's side, and I crawl in on the passenger side. He's right — this seat feels softer than a kitten.

"Where can I take you?" Moose says as he shifts the truck into gear and starts down the road.

I look out the window for a moment. Even though I know where I have to go, the idea of going back to the Vertucci compound — even though it's to save my friends — is still a hard thing to admit. I know my odds aren't good; I know there's a likely chance I'll die and, deep down, there's a part of me that just wants to go back to Reid's Repairs, to see if I can patch things up with Owen, and try to recapture some of that happiness I had. There's this certain feeling in my heart that it will be a long time, if ever, before I have any happiness again.

"Do you know the Vertucci Family?" I say.

"Bunch of evil, sexy Italian men? Yes, I know them. From my fantasies."

"I need to get to their compound. They're having a wedding and I'm supposed to be one of the bridesmaids."

"Looking like that? Honey, they won't even let you through the door wearing that outfit. Heck, I doubt they'd even let you in to take out the trash."

"I have a really nice dress back in my room," I say. I'd been looking forward to wearing it, too. To wearing it as Owen and I shared dance after dance while the wedding band played on. "I'm just wearing this because..." Stopping, I freeze, wondering just how I explain my outfit — and everything else — to Moose. "I had a really rough night."

"Trust me, I've been there. Though instead of a mechanic's outfit, I woke up in a cheerleader's outfit in Baton Rouge. Which is something I still can't figure out because, when I started drinking, I was at a dance party in Dallas. Well, either way, sweetheart, I'll get you to the Vertucci compound. No worries about that."

While he drives, I stare out the window.

I can see myself back at the wedding. I know I'll find a way in, even if I have to fight, but I doubt I'll have to — already the gears in my head are grinding out a story, and I'll claim whatever substance abuse, drunkenness, or sexual escapades I have to admit to in order to get back to my friends. But though I know I'll make it back inside, that I'll be there for my friends, a deep pain sits in my chest. Grips my heart. It's pain, and it's loss.

Because I still love Owen.

I'll always love Owen.

Even now, I love him. Love him just as much as before. Because I know that what he was doing was to protect me. He may have done it in absolutely the wrong way. He may not have trusted me the way he should have. But he was just trying to protect me.

This nightmare of a wedding was made so much easier by sharing it all with him. How am I going to keep it together during the ceremony? Or after? I wanted to dance with him, to see him in his suit, to kiss him under the stars, to live out so many things I've fantasized about since I was a girl. I'm making the right choice by keeping to my promise to Morgan and Riley, but loyalty has a cost, and this is one I'll be paying in pain for the rest of my life.

"Dani, you're crying."

"I am."

"You want to talk about it?"

"No. I want to forget about it. But I don't think I ever will."

"Normally, I'd recommend alcohol, or maybe a pill or two of what you'd find in the little baggie I have in my glove box, the one with unicorns on it, but I don't recommend that for you. Time, a nice bath, good friends, and a massage, those all help. Orgasms do, too. But what also helps is a destination. And, Dani, we're getting close to yours. So, if you can reassure me that where I'm taking you is going to be a safe place for you, I'll be dropping you there soon."

Safe?

Not at all.

But where I have to be?

Yes, I have no choice.

"Thank you, Moose. The Vertucci compound is where I need to be. My friends are counting on me to be there."

Counting on me to save their lives, too.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Striker

My body braces for all of Smokey's punches, each one a stark reminder of my betrayal. They impact with all the brutality a loving brother can deliver; every ounce of his anger, his grief, his rage, batters and breaks against my body.

"You lost her?" He howls as he hammers my face, my ribs, my midsection.

Each blow sinks me lower.

First, I double over.

Then I fall to my knees.

Then an elbow cracks me in the head, knocking me prone.

"You lost my sister? Dani's as good as dead, isn't she? Fuck, Owen, I trusted you. We were brothers."

He climbs atop me, one knee on my chest, pinning me, while he punches my face. I don't fight him. What's the point? I earned this. Earned this with my betrayal — of him, and of her.

"I deserve this," I murmur, as Smokey's fists fall like hammers.

"How could you do that to her?" He snarls, landing a punch on my face that sends my head bouncing off the concrete floor behind me.

"This is for Dani," I mutter, feeling the impact shatter through me. The heavy blow sends darkness creeping in.

Maybe it's better this way. Here, in the void, Dani's face haunts me less, her absence aches less.

Another blow.

Everything goes black.

Maybe this is death. After everything I've done, it'd be a relief.

I welcome it.

Peace at last.

* * * * *

"Get up, Striker," Smokey growls, shaking me awake. Even my nickname sounds bitter in his voice. I doubt he'll ever use my real name again. I've lost

two people today — my brother and my love. With all the damage I've done, I wouldn't be shocked if I'm kicked out of the MC, forced out of town by the people I once considered family. My betrayal has not only cost me, but I've cost the club three potential new members as well, all while our enemies are circling.

"Step aside, Smokey." Rook's voice, laced with gruff humor, breaks through. "Fuck, Striker, I knew Jarheads weren't the brightest, but I didn't think your skull was that thick. How the hell are you still alive, kid?"

"How indeed?" I groan, trying to focus through the haze of pain and regret. Someone out there — up in heaven or down in hell — must hold a grudge against me to keep me from dying.

"Hold still while I look you over," Rook says. With practiced hands, he grabs me by the chin and holds me still while he shines the flashlight in my eyes again.

"You doing this to check for a concussion, or do you just want to be an asshole?"

"Both. It's a win-win for me."

"And am I clear?"

"Well, you're clearly one of the stupidest people I've ever met, and that's saying something." Another moment passes, Rook's eyes narrow. "It's minor. Very minor. If you were in the NFL, they'd send you back on the field. Probably tell you that you could play without a helmet, too. Me, I'm going to advise you to take a minute, drink some water, and take one of the pills in the blue bottle in the care package that Eliza put in my locker. It's just basic acetaminophen."

"Care package? Your ol' lady gave you pain pills?"

"She heard Mayhem was coming to town."

"Yeah, the fuck was that about? Did you know what he was after?"

"I never ask. But Rabid up north gave me a warning. Said Mayhem had been watching a lot of inspirational documentaries lately. Including about the Wright brothers."

"Flying? You're kidding."

"I am. Though I never know with him. Mainly, I'm testing your cognitive capabilities right now. That you're recalling recent events and have a healthy distrust of Mayhem tells me that there shouldn't be any permanent damage. Eliza would probably want to put you through a CT scan, but what's the point with a brain as small as yours?"

"Fuck off."

It's then I sit up and take in the rest of the garage as the haze in my vision fades. I feel like I'm back in the Marines, about to step into a war zone. My MC brothers are in motion, a symphony of determined action as they check weapons and ammo. Hawk, Ghost, and Smokey are doing the same.

"What's going on?" I murmur.

"We're going to get her back, that's what's going on," Smokey says.

"And the MC's giving Smokey a hand in that," Thunder says. "Something about honor, about making good on your promise, or whatever. Honestly, I haven't had my coffee, so I'm maybe half here, at best."

"If you want to make up for the shit you pulled, you'll join us," Smokey says. "It won't do everything, but it'll be a start. And if we get her back, it means I won't kill you when this is all over."

Grunting, I get to my feet and head to my locker. I automatically check my gun, my movements mechanical. Each click of the magazine is a reminder of Dani's terrified eyes.

"I should've listened," I chastise myself.

"You should have," Smokey says.

But I'm not talking about him.

Putting the pieces of my pistol in place, I pause. Dani knew what she was doing. She knew the whole time, yet still she went back. Why?

What could compel her to do that when she knew there was a good chance we could sneak Morgan, and possibly even Riley, out?

There must be something deeper.

Guilt and clarity wash over me, replacing the fog of despair with a sharp need for action.

Stepping outside, I dial Dani. She doesn't answer.

Then I dial the next best thing to learning what's on Dani's mind: Morgan

"Owen? What have you done to Dani? I went by your room this morning and she wasn't there. You weren't there, either. Everything's gone. Tell me what's happening," she says, her voice frantic.

"I took her, Morgan. I took her out of there, but now she's gone."

"Gone? Dani's not some fucking pet bird you looked away from and suddenly she's flown off. Where are you? Where is she?"

"I'm in Reid's Repairs. She is... not here."

"This is not good. Not good... Oh, fuck you, Owen. Fuck you," she says, her voice rising to a strident shriek. "This is going to be bad..."

"Morgan, listen, I — "

"No, you listen. If anything happens to Riley's baby because of you..."

"Riley's... baby?" I stutter, the phone slipping from my grasp.

"Yes. Riley had a baby. She got pregnant by Michael. I have a nephew, Owen. His name is Luca Morgan Taylor, and my soon-to-be-brother-in-law is holding him hostage. If Riley doesn't follow through with the wedding, or if Dani and I do anything to mess it up, he's going to kill the baby."

Her revelation hits like a freight train. Everything Dani did, it was for Riley, for this child.

"I had no idea..."

"You had no idea because you didn't need to know. All you had to do was dance with Dani, love her, and support her. Now, you've fucked that up and my nephew is going to die. Along with me, my sister, and my best friend." There's a moment of silence, then a deep breath. "If I survive this, I am going to hurt you so bad, Owen. If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to make you suffer..."

Numb, I stare into the distance, trying to think of something to say.

"Morgan, I'll fix this. I swear."

Ending the call, I feel a surge of determination. My hand tightens my grip on my gun.

I know exactly what I need to do to set things right.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Danielle

"It's just up ahead. Around the corner, and maybe a quarter mile up the road."

My voice shakes as we grow closer to the place where I'm needed the most, the place where I will probably be murdered. I'm heartbroken over Owen's betrayal, even though I know that's an emotion I don't have any time for right now. People need me, and I have to be strong in order to save their lives.

"Oh, I know where it is. I checked this place out on Zillow a while back. May have even put it on my vision board. Still, my board didn't do it justice. I mean, shoot, these Vertuccis sure have a long driveway, don't they?" Moose says. "Oh, I can see the guy at the gate now. That's a nice rifle he has... Wow, is that an HK-33?"

"I don't know. My ex would, though," I say. It hurts to call him that, but that's what Owen is now. My ex.

"Honey, I'm going to stop here. The guy doesn't seem to be too happy with my semi-truck. You sure you're good to get out? I know we've only known each other a little while, Dani, but you feel like a sister to me already. I hope you get in there fine, and I hope you and Morgan and Riley make it out fine, too."

Moose knows most everything, because I may have vented a little — no, a lot — on the drive here, my fatigue and my pain just spilling out of my mouth in a vomit of despair. Moose listened to it all like a champion, even giving me a one-armed hug a few times, too.

"Thanks, Moose. I think I have it from here."

"I'm going to stay here for a second. Watch and make sure you get in okay."

"Thanks, Moose. I appreciate that," I say. As I slip out of the semi, I'm grateful he's sticking around, because the guard at the gate does not look enthused to see me and, whatever an HK-33 is, it sure is a big ol' gun. I approach slowly, because I know I look like shit and I don't want this guy to shoot me thinking I'm a zombie from *The Walking Dead*.

"Who the fuck are you?" The man calls out. "You look like a fucking ghoul."

I blink for a moment, surprised he even knows what a ghoul is. I wouldn't expect a Mafia thug with a big rifle to have much experience with folklore.

"Danielle Green. I'm not a ghoul; I'm one of the bridesmaids. Will you let me in, please?"

"One of the bridesmaids? For real? Why the fuck are you wearing mechanic's overalls and covered in dirt and... is that motor oil?"

"It's a long story."

"I got time."

I look back over my shoulder, see Moose watching me through the windshield, attentive. I hope he can read my mind as well as Morgan. *Help me, Moose.*

To my shock, he can. He gives me a look in return that clearly says, "Hold on, pretty lady in overalls. I got your back. Just sit tight and let big Moose handle this."

It's very detailed. Maybe he can read minds.

With shocking ease for his size, Moose slips out of the semi like a ballerina, even landing on his tiptoes. His face lights up with a smile as he struts toward the guard.

At first, all the guard can do is watch in awe at the big man's nimble grace, but then he realizes his job and aims his rifle when Moose is just feet away. "Hold on. Who the fuck are you?"

"My name's Moose, Mr. Sexy Suit. Love the lines on that thing. It looks like it was tailored just for you. Really makes your arms and shoulders pop. And your chest, oh my. You must work out."

The man smiles, his chest puffing just a little. It doesn't matter the time, place, or circumstances, if you pay a man a compliment about him looking buff, he will accept it with all the grace of a drunken chimpanzee. "Yeah, I hit the gym from time to time. Do free weights, mostly, but a little bench press, too."

"Whatever it is, man, keep it up. You are looking fierce."

"Thanks. I try," he says. Then he shakes his head. "Hold on. Just what the fuck are you two doing here for real? Why is one of the supposed bridesmaids getting dropped off here at the gates by some big-ass trucker at fucking early-ass in the morning?"

"It's a story," Moose says with elegant ease. "You sure you got time to hear

it?"

"I got time."

Moose gives me a quick look over his shoulder. *Be ready.*

"You really sure?"

I can see his muscles tense. His shoulders and biceps flex. Is this it? Is he going to take on a man with an assault rifle?

"I'm sure," the guard says, keeping his grip on the weapon loose, but still aimed right at Moose and me. "Tell me your story, big guy. Tell it like your lives depend on it, because they do."

"Well, Mr. Suit, to really understand the why of the how that Ms. Green got here, I need to tell you about my time in Jacksonville a few years ago. Spring break."

"Wait, what?" The guard tries to interrupt, but Moose doesn't seem to hear him. Moose is on a roll.

"Okay, so there I am, right in the heart of Jacksonville, Florida, Spring Break central. The air's thick with the scent of saltwater and sunscreen, and the beach is just buzzing with life. Now, I'm not usually one for big crowds, but this was a scene I couldn't miss."

"Hold on..."

"As I'm walking along the boardwalk, I spot this guy. He's tall, dark, and handsome, sure, kind of reminds me of you, but obviously, you're sexier. Man, what I would do with you, if only you could keep up. Doubt you could, though..."

"I'm sure I could," the guard insists, then shakes his head. "But I'm not..."

"I'm not, either. Homosexual, bisexual, I don't take labels, Mr. Suit. I'm just *sexual*. Now, like I was saying, this guy, I spot him, handsome, everything I could want, but it's his mustache that really catches my eye. I mean, this thing was magnificent — so big and bushy you could've swept the floor with it. Like someone locked Tom Selleck in a cave for a hundred years and what emerged from that earthly cocoon was pure man with a mustache made to ride..."

"Where the fuck is this going..."

"Hush, dear. As I was saying, I sidle up to him, trying to play it cool, and strike up a conversation. Turns out, he's got this deep, smooth voice that's as captivating as his facial hair. Like Barry White, but ten, fifteen percent sexier. He introduces himself — let's call him 'Mister Mustache' because I've forgotten his name — and we start chatting about everything under the sun. A

real soul connection. It's like I've found my unicorn, and I am ready to just put a ring on it and ride that mustache all night, friction burns be damned. Of course, I wouldn't actually do that so early in a relationship, and I know I'd still have to do some vetting, because I did meet this man in Florida. 'Florida Man' is a thing for a reason, right?"

"I guess..." the guard says. He's looking so increasingly confused, his grip on the gun wavers, his eyes a mixture of pure, enraptured attention and befuddled sleepiness.

"The night starts to blur as we hop from bar to bar, laughing and sharing stories. Mister Mustache then tells me he's got something special, a 'magic pill' he calls it. Says it will make the night unforgettable. I've taken magic pills before and they usually lead to a lot of fun dancing, or, at the very least, they make the other people at Burning Man tolerable. And, sometimes, of course, they give you fantastic erections that'll never let you down, or they make you see things that aren't there. Sometimes both. Those are the really good ones. But this pill... this pill..."

"What about it?" The guard's gun is pointed flat at the ground. Moose could tackle the man before he even has a chance to react.

"So, I take the pill, and the next thing I know, the world's spinning, colors are brighter, and every sound is like music to my ears. It's like Ecstasy times five. Mister Mustache and I are dancing in the streets, laughing like we've known each other for years. Oh, and he was such a kisser, too. I know people say that all the time, but it was like I hadn't kissed anyone until I kissed him. This man's lips... oh, and that mustache. I had a tickling fetish for a year because of that thing. Just couldn't get off unless someone was working me with that bristly magic. And every time I saw a broom? Oh, I got so hard... anyway, where was I? Oh, that pill. Just a gateway to heaven and that man's mustache was the escalator I rode to get there."

Moose takes a breath. Then continues. "But here's the kicker — I wake up the next morning, not on the beach in Jacksonville, but on some sandy shore in New Orleans. All I've got on are these tighty whities, and I'm thinking, 'How the heck did I get here and what happened to my underwear, because these tighty whities definitely aren't mine?'"

"But where did the underwear come from?" The guard says. He's forgotten everything except Moose's underwear. I could walk right past him and he'd still be standing there, captured by the big man's story.

I start to make my move.

But Moose stops me with a quick look. *Not yet, dear. Trust me. I've done this before.*

You've done this before? Sneak someone into a Mafia compound? I retort with another look.

I like to have fun, says his glancing reply.

So I wait.

Moose clears his throat. "I sit up, and that's when I feel this itch on my chest. I look down, and what do I see? A tattoo of the Hindenburg, right there on my skin, with the words 'Oh, the humanity' inked underneath. I couldn't believe it. Of all the things to remember that wild night by, it had to be a tattoo of a historical disaster!"

"That old blimp?" The guard says.

"Not a blimp, honey," Moose says. "The Hindenburg was a rigid airship, which means the gas envelope was kept in shape by a rigid framework. Blimps are non-rigid airships, which means they only keep their shape through the pressure of the gas in their envelope. Big difference."

"You learn something new every day, I guess," the guard replies.

"You do. It's a pretty marvelous thing about life, isn't it? But, back to the pertinent tale: I woke up alone on that beach, tattooed with the Hindenburg, wondering just how the hell I got there. And you know what? I never saw Mister Mustache again, but I'll tell you, that night was one for the books. And do you want to know the strangest thing? Inside that underwear, there was this quart-sized Ziploc bag just chock full of mustache hair. Somehow, that beautiful man shaved himself and gave me that memento. That, or I took it as a trophy of my conquest. Either way, the next time you're in Jacksonville, you watch yourself if some beautiful man offers you a pill. You got that?"

"That's actually a good lesson. I got a cousin, had something similar happen to him. Starts the night in St. Petersburg, met someone, took something, and woke up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, stark naked and handcuffed to an oil well," he says, shaking his head, a rueful grin on his face. "But how does that apply to her?" He gestures to me with the gun and I flinch at having the thing pointed at me.

"She took a pill, too," Moose says.

"One minute, I'm in one of those rooms," I say, gesturing to the compound in the distance. "The next, I'm three towns over, wearing these overalls." I gesture to my dirty outfit. "And I'm underneath a Ford Mustang with a wrench in my hands. It was so freaky. I knew I had to get back here right

away, so I started walking and Moose here thankfully picked me up and gave me a ride."

"Fine. Go inside," the guard says, gesturing and opening the gate for me. "But one other thing..."

There's a warning note in his voice that stops me in my tracks halfway through the open gate. I turn to him, fighting to contain the fear inside me. "Yes?"

"Don't forget to hydrate. When you're coming down from something like this, water is your friend. A little tea will do you good, too. Chamomile with honey is a fucking miracle. I like Nature's Treasures brand. Here, let me hook you up," he says, and reaches into his suit jacket pocket to take out a tiny, foil-wrapped tea bag. "Take care of yourself."

"Thank you," I say, then I nod a 'thank you' to Moose as well. Along with a look that says, *I owe you a million*.

Then I walk as fast as I can to my room while still looking normal.

Once in my room, I collapse onto the bed, exhaustion overwhelming me. A sob rises from deep inside my chest at what Owen and I might have had together; dreams come to life, only to be lost in the blink of an eye. The sheets are cool against my hot cheeks, and I want to evaporate into tears, let them dissolve my very being. My feet ache from miles of barefoot walking, and I briefly think about soaking them in the tub, but sleep overtakes me like a cool blanket on a summer night.

I'm jolted awake by Morgan's worried voice.

"Dani, what the hell is happening? Why's Owen calling from outside? He sounds... rough." Her eyes search mine, a mix of fear and confusion. "And where the hell were you? I was in here earlier looking for you and everything was gone. Now I find you wearing... dirty men's overalls?"

I open my mouth to reply, but words fail me.

Beaten, broken, exhausted, I don't have the strength to tell my best friend all the ways I've failed in the last twelve hours. I know I should. Morgan deserves some warning about the danger that I've put her and Riley in, but there isn't the strength in me to tell her, or to deal with the look of disappointment and fear I'd see on her face.

Unfortunately, she knows me just as well as I know myself. If not better.

"Dani, what happened? You need to tell me now, because there is something going on. Riley texted me that Michael woke her up, like, five minutes ago and he is pissed about something. There are men with guns

going around the compound and..." She takes me by the hand and pulls me upright. Peering into my eyes, reading every dirty secret there. "Oh no, don't tell me he..."

The door to my room bursts open with a crash, tearing Morgan's eyes away from mine. Michael stands in the doorway, cold, menacing, his face flush, eyes wild, a gun in his hands. A gun that he levels right at Morgan and me.

A burst of adrenaline overtakes me and I stand up and pull Morgan behind me, sheltering her with my body. This is my fault, and if someone has to take responsibility for it. Even if that means taking a bullet to shield my best friend.

"Why is your boyfriend attacking me?" Michael shouts, his eyes glinting with murderous malice.

Fear flows inside me, but I refuse to let it paralyze me.

It's clear that no answer I give Michael will save me. He's past the point of giving a damn about any answers I might give him. He just wants to rant a little before he murders me.

Somehow, I have to get us out of here.

It's all on me, because Morgan's got wide eyes, like she's a deer trapped in the headlights of Moose's semi.

"Michael, just hold on for a second. Clearly, you're in charge here and you deserve some answers. I can explain everything..." I start. Reasoning with Michael is futile; he's too far gone, driven by power and rage, but I have to say something to keep him distracted. Because I've just remembered something important.

The rock in my pocket.

My hand slips into my pocket, fingers curling around the solid stone I'd pocketed earlier.

"If you want the answer about why Owen's doing this, I need to tell you about the time my friend Moose went to Jacksonville..."

I barely get into the story before Michael throws a frustrated look at the ceiling.

"Shut the fuck up," he snaps.

It's just the opening I need.

With a swift movement, I hurl the rock at him, using every ounce of my pent-up frustration and fear. It strikes him, causing him to stagger and the gun to drop.

"Run, Morgan!" I scream, grabbing her hand.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Striker

It doesn't take long to convince Smokey to change his plan from attacking the Vertucci compound to doing what we really need to do. Not once I tell him about Luca Morgan Taylor. The second that little baby's presence becomes public knowledge, everyone in the MC and in Smokey's crew, including Smokey himself, is ready to ride into the mouth of Hell just to free that child from the Mafia's clutches.

It doesn't take long for Ghost to locate the Vertucci family safe house. Five minutes on a laptop, and he has the address, photos of the exterior and interior shots, and schematics for the whole fucking safe house.

"Who the fuck are you?" I whisper as he brings up detailed designs for the place, including exterior photos that are dated just a few weeks ago. "And is this a video feed? How the fuck did you get that?"

"I'm good. That's all you need to know," he says, chuckling. "And yeah, that's a live feed from the liquor store down the street. They didn't secure their network and so their camera's just open for the world. Or, at least, to anyone who knows the slightest bit what they're doing."

"So, just you and a couple of other creepy guys living in their mom's basements?" Thunder says.

"You want your credit card details posted online, Marcus Thompson?" Ghost retorts.

"Sure, go ahead. Some stranger on the internet couldn't do any more damage than I've already done. Got drunk last weekend, got on Amazon, and now I am the proud owner of one-hundred-and-forty-two Chia heads. Including eighteen special edition ones of Sophia from the Golden Girls. Those cost seventy-five bucks apiece."

"Fuck, dude, that's brutal," Ghost says, his voice softening. "Maybe I'll see if I can't do some poking around in your bank's system later. Help you out of that mess."

"And you're sure this is where they're keeping the baby, Ghost?" Bullet says, his arms crossed, a determined look on his face.

Ghost nods. "The Vertuccis got a few other safe houses that I could find,

but two of them are occupied with people who I doubt would appreciate having a crying baby around, and the other one isn't so much a safe house as it is a fuckpad for Lorenzo Caruso and Matteo Biachi, two of Michael Vertucci's cousins. That one has a fuck dungeon in the basement and, according to a few emails I read in Matteo's account — which had the elegant password '69allday69' — has a roof with an open-air orgy pit and an outdoor kitchen with a barbecue and a brick pizza oven."

"Oh, fancy," Hawk says. "I could go for a pizza right now."

"We can all agree on what we've got to do, right?" I say, looking around at each member of the group.

"Order pizza?" Hawk says, hopefully.

"No, you fuckwit," Smokey says. "We're in, Owen. This is the right thing to do. We'll follow your lead."

Our motorbikes roll like vengeful thunder down the quiet morning streets of Costa Oscura as we break toward the safe house, a storm of violence ready to demolish anyone in our path. Smokey and I trade a look as we approach the house, a single glance and the depths of our brotherhood all it takes to communicate. *You take left, I'll take right.* The two guards in the living room hardly have a moment to reach for their rifles before Smokey and I each take them out with well-placed shots to the chest, the bullets shattering the living room window and sealing the fates of the sofa-sitting guards. Center mass, just like we've been trained.

Two down. Doesn't matter how many are left — whatever it takes to rescue that boy.

I leap off my bike before it even hits a stop, Smokey right in my wake. The rest of the crew is right behind us.

"You ready, brother?" He says.

Damn, it feels good to hear him say those words.

"Let's fucking do this," I shout, booting the door and grinning as it crashes open and Smokey and I charge into the brink.

My body's on fire, my mind's sharp, my hands are steady — ready to unleash death on anyone in the way. It doesn't matter what experience our enemies have, Smokey and I are Marines, trained in this and tested by fire, and we will rain down hell on everyone in our way.

The safe house is a labyrinth of hallways and rooms, but we don't hesitate for a moment. We move fluidly, clearing each room with deadly efficiency. The Vertucci soldiers are no match for our crew, and we take them out one

by one, their blood staining the walls and floors. We search each room, looking for any sign of the baby, but he's nowhere to be found.

"Where the fuck is he?" Smokey growls, frustration clear in his voice.

"We have to keep looking," I say, wiping the sweat from my forehead. "They wouldn't leave him in plain sight."

We make our way to the basement, where we find a locked door. Bullet steps forward and kicks it down with one massive blow. Inside, we find a dimly lit room with a crib in the corner. The baby is there, sleeping peacefully.

I rush forward and scoop him up, cradling him in my arms. He's small and fragile, and I can't help but feel a surge of protectiveness. This is what we've been fighting for.

"He's cute," Rook coos. "Look at that little nose. Like a button. I just want to pinch it and kiss his little face."

"Who the fuck are you?" Thunder says, staring in surprise.

"A human fucking being. I might hate all you people, but babies are innocent. They haven't grown up to be people yet. So they're pure."

"He has a point," Bullet says. "Lil guy's cute."

"We have to move," I say, turning to the others. "We can't stay here."

We make our way back upstairs, but as soon as we reach the living room, we're met with a hail of bullets and I turn, sheltering the baby with my body. Something hot sears its way across my back and I hiss in furious pain. With the kid in one hand and my gun in the other, I return fire enough to dive for cover while Smokey and the others spread out, encircling our adversaries, who are shooting in through the living room window from their position in the road.

More soldiers.

They must've been nearby. Backup. They're out there, near our motorcycles, blocking our way out.

But it doesn't matter; they're facing Marines and the Steel Reapers MC — their fates were sealed the second they picked up their guns.

"We'll go out back, circle around," Rook says, gesturing to Hawk and Ghost. "You guys keep them occupied."

I take shelter while a gunfight erupts around me.

"Hey, little Luca, keep your eyes on me," I whisper, while I rip off part of my shirt and wrap it around his head to protect his eyes and ears. All the sound, all the flashes, all the sights — especially the gunfight and the soon-

to-be-dead Mafia — are way too much for him. Maybe when he's older, he can watch the mob die, maybe he can sit down and watch *The Godfather* or *Goodfellas*, but for now, mob violence is way too much for him.

Suddenly, there's a furious crash across the street and an explosion of timbers as Rook breaks through the neighbor's picket fence like the Kool-Aid Man, coming out right behind the Mafia soldiers, who whirl around in dumbfounded surprise.

"What's up, motherfuckers?" Rook shouts as he unleashes a fury of bullets.

Men go down, and Ghost and Hawk appear as well, blasting away with a torrent of lead.

That's the cue.

Bullet, Thunder, and Smokey charge out of cover and join the firefight, killing every man and clearing the way for me.

We get to our bikes, mounting up.

"Fuck, brother, you're bleeding bad," Smokey says as I sit astride my bike.

"Doesn't matter. We have to get to the Vertuccis. We need to save Dani," I say.

"I'll call Eliza. Have her meet us on the way. She can take the kid and patch you up. I might hate you, Owen, but I don't want you to die. And that little sweetheart should be as far away from the coming fight as possible," Rook says, already taking out his cellphone and getting on the line. "Hey, my love..."

Smokey puts his hand on my shoulder. "Hey brother, let's go get my sister. You ready?"

I nod, checking the ammunition in my gun. The new clip snaps into place with a metallic click that will never not be a satisfying sound. I smile at Smokey despite the river of pain burning red down my back. My head's woozy, my body broken, but at the end of my trials sits the woman of my dreams.

I'll keep going until death, just to keep her safe.

"I'm ready, brother."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Danielle

"We have to get to Riley," Morgan says as we clear the door of my villa and step into a courtyard that's in chaos. Men are running around — some are wedding guests gripped in the throes of panic, others are guards with guns, also gripped in the throes of panic, because that shit's contagious — and there's a scream in my chest that just keeps building and building, but can't find its way out, and I have this sinking, powerful feeling that when it finally does, it's going to hurt like hell.

I swallow it. Hope my chest can contain it. "Where is she?"

"I heard her in her suite on the way over. She and Michael were having a screaming match before... Did you just bean him in the head with a rock?"

"I did," I say, smiling. "I'd do it again, too."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Let's go get my sister."

Kneeling, I grab another rock. Just in case.

Hand in hand, we cross the courtyard, running toward Riley's suite. Up the stairs two at a time, we come to the long hallway leading to the heavy door to Riley's room. There's the same guard from yesterday in front of it, with the same shotgun, too.

I don't give him a chance to raise his gun or his voice — I hurl the rock and hit him right between the eyes. He crumples.

"Damn, Dani," Morgan whistles.

"I don't play."

Inside, we find Riley. She's huddled in a corner, hyperventilating, a river of tears coming from her eyes and a cloud of white powder smeared around her nose. Fuck.

"Sis, what did you do?" Morgan wails, running to her little sister and pulling her into a hug.

"He said... he said... he said he was going to kill Luca. That I'd done something, that I must've said something to someone, but I didn't... I don't want to live if my little boy died because of me." Riley is a mess, a torrential downpour of sobs and sudden shakes that wrack her body.

"What did you take?" Morgan says, frantic.

"I don't want to live anymore... My boy... My little boy," Riley replies, sobs decimating her body.

I step in, slip my arm under Riley's and, with Morgan's help, get her to her feet. "We have to get her out of here."

"What? Out through the front gate? They'll shoot us the second that Michael comes to his senses," Morgan says.

"We need to find somewhere safe. Maybe we can hide out. Maybe Owen will..." I stop myself. Owen won't come to save me. Not after what I did to him, not after how clear I was that he should absolutely leave me alone. He may be a Jarhead, he may be a little thick sometimes, but it is impossible to misinterpret a soda can thrown at your head at fifty miles per hour.

Riley blinks blearily and then looks at me, her eyes out of focus, her pupils dilated to the size of dinner plates. "Somewhere safe? Michael has a safe room in his suite. It's upstairs. I know the code... he liked to take me in there sometimes. Liked to lock me up and..."

"We don't need to know that part, sis," Morgan says. Then she gives me a look that hits me in the heart. It's unmistakable. *You don't have to stay, Dani. She's my sister. She's my responsibility. Don't let us drag you down.*

Blinking in shock, I look Morgan right in the eye. Did I get that right? Is she really telling me to leave?

Her eyes go to the door and I realize I haven't misunderstood my best friend.

I shake my head. "You two are my sisters. I'm not leaving you. Let's get her upstairs, get to that safe room. We'll figure things out from there. Maybe... Maybe the MC will come for us."

I voice that knowing a rescue won't happen. But the last thing I want to do is deprive Morgan and Riley of hope.

When we carry Riley out into the hallway and start to the staircase, gunshots ring out. First one, then another. There are screams and an unmistakable yell from downstairs: Michael Vertucci is on the warpath.

His vicious voice carries up the stairs, bouncing furiously off the Travertine stones lining the walls. "Where the fuck are they? Find them. Bring them to me!"

"Run," I hiss, and we sprint like a six-legged animal toward the staircase, leaping up the stairs; Riley stumbles, flailing, but Morgan and I both rip her to her feet and drag her along; Morgan and I don't even need to look at each other to communicate in the adrenaline-filled moments as we sprint up the

stairs and to Michael Vertucci's unguarded suite; this is it. If we die, we die together. I love you, sister.

Bullets zip by our head as we reach the door to the suite and more hit the door as we slam it behind us.

"Where is it, Riley?"

She blinks, her head limply turning to survey the room. Whatever she took, she's fading fast. "Closet," she mumbles.

We rush to the closet and Riley fumbles with the keypad. Her fingers are slow and uncoordinated from the drugs. Finally, she punches in the code and the heavy door slides open to reveal a small, windowless room. It's stocked with water, food, bottles of a variety of medicines, and a shelf with a stack of porno mags on it.

"Good job, sis," Morgan says, pulling Riley inside and gesturing for me to follow.

The door closes behind us with a reassuringly heavy thunk. Not moments too soon, because the second it shuts, the sound of more gunshots heralds Michael and his men arriving in his suite. Dimly, I hear his voice through the door. "They're in my fucking panic room. God damn it. Get it open."

"There's a lock... the keypad on the wall... hit the pound symbol, and then seven," Riley mumbles. "Keeps it shut."

I do so. There's a beep. Then the sound of a heavy lock falling into place.

"He can't open it now. Not until we hit the opening code."

A nerve-wracking rat-tat-tat of deafening volume erupts against the door as Michael Vertucci and his men vent their frustrations with a chorus of lead. It's enough to make me shriek in terror, and Morgan puts her arm around me from behind, pulling me into a hug.

"You're dead. You're all dead." Michael's muted voice comes through the door, a tyrannical scream of rage.

"Can he break in here?" Morgan says aloud. Maybe she's looking for reinforcement from me, maybe she's asking her sister, but all I can do is shrug my shoulders. I hope not.

"It's not bulletproof," Riley murmurs. "It's bullet-resistant, he said. He told me why, but I don't remember, something to do with a Vertucci man only needing a place to take a breather if people broke in, not somewhere to hide forever... he used the word 'honor,' too... My head, oh, my head..."

More bullets. At the door, at the door frame, at the walls around it. The door holds, but it groans beneath the onslaught.

I take Morgan's hand, then I take Riley's, even though I know she may not even be mentally present right now. We only have a temporary reprieve before death breaks the door down.

"Love you both," I say.

If I die, I die with my sisters.

The way things are going, it won't be long.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Striker

Roaring down the road with the screaming of my bike's engine filling my ears, I think about what awaits me. Combat against an enemy who has us outnumbered. Death, most likely.

But Danielle, too.

A chance to protect her, to save her, to tell her just how wrong I was and make things up to her for not listening, for not believing her in the first place.

If my death gets Danielle Green out of danger, it'll be a life well spent.

There's a bandage and a quick set of stitches on my back that barely contain the blood that wants to flow out of my wound. Eliza chewed my ear off when she saw the ugly red streak, then she fixed it and spent the rest of the time cooing at little Luca, a giant smile on her face. Not that I blame her — he really is adorable.

At the pull-off from the main road that leads to the long driveway to the Vertucci family compound, we spot a semi-truck pulled onto the side and an incredibly large man standing next to it. He's got a frantic look on his face, and he's staring anxiously into the distance toward the Vertucci compound. And again, he is the largest man I have ever seen in my life.

Smokey and I trade a look that says — *Are you seeing this shit?* — and I pull to the side of the road and hop off my bike.

"Are you Owen?" He says the second I approach.

I pause, wary. "I am. Who are you?"

"Moose."

"Where?" Smokey says, looking toward the forest. "Look out. Those things are fucking dangerous."

I don't blame him for being cautious — those animals are walking tanks with antlers and a nasty attitude.

"No, Owen, that's my name," the big man, Moose, says.

"I buy it," I say. "What do you want with me? How do you know my name?"

Gunshots ring out in the distance. Rapid-fire. Automatic. I start toward my bike. I don't have time to figure out why some giant of a man knows my

name. The love of my life is in danger.

"Because Dani told me about you."

I stop. "She told you about me? How does she know you?"

As we talk, the rest of the group circles around us, though with each passing second, they cast glances toward the Vertucci compound. They can hear the gunfire. They know time is running out.

"I picked her up when she was hitchhiking. Then, well, I helped her get back in there... the place where those guys are firing all those guns. Feeling a little regret about that right now."

"How did you get my sister into the Vertucci compound?" Smokey demands.

"It's a long story. It all started when I was in Jacksonville. It was Spring Break, and I met this man with a glorious mustache..."

"OK, I can see where this is going," Smokey says.

"Really? You knew I would end up in New Orleans with a tattoo of the Hindenburg on my chest, wearing someone else's briefs, and with that man's shaved mustache in a baggie stuffed inside my underwear?"

"Man, I need to get your phone number, because we don't have time for your story right now — we have to break into that compound — but I need to know how you got there," Thunder says.

"Oh, I'll gladly give you my number, sexy," Moose says. "My number, and whatever else you want."

"Just your number, thanks, big guy," Thunder says, taking out his cellphone and trading digits with Moose.

"OK, I'll also give you guys a little advice: you guys ain't getting into the compound with just your bikes and guns. Their gate is reinforced and the guards are carrying HK-33's."

"Fucking hell, I don't give a shit. We have to try. My sister is in there," Smokey says. Already, he's heading to his bike, gun out, ready to ride to certain death. "I'll fucking scale their walls by hand if I have to."

Moose holds up a calming hand. Somehow, he gets Smokey to stop instantly. "But I might be able to help you."

"How?" Bullet says.

Moose taps the side of his semi. "Their gates and fences might be reinforced, but ain't no way they can stop me when I got my rig going at full speed. You guys ride behind me. Let me clear the way for you."

"You'd do that for us?" I say, feeling a confusing mix of shock and

gratitude.

"If the handsome, surly one agrees to have a beer with me, yes." Moose points right at Rook.

"You're joking," Rook says.

"I'm dead serious."

"Will you tell me the end of the Jacksonville story?" Rook asks.

"I'll tell you anything you want, handsome," Moose says.

"Deal," Rook answers without a moment's hesitation. "Beers on me when all this is over."

Nodding, Moose throws open the door to his big rig, hops into the driver's seat, and starts the engine. It sounds like a tank on eighteen wheels. Over the roar of the diesel beast, he calls out, "Follow right behind me, boys. I'm going to battering ram that fucking gate and run down any gun-toting gangster I see. I'll leave you boys to handle the rest."

"Wait!" Bullet yells above the rumbling thunder. "You need a piece, Moose?"

Moose grins, leans over to grab something from his glove box, and holds a Desert Eagle out the window. "I'm good, thanks. Follow me, boys."

His rig rolls forward, a powerhouse in motion, and we ride behind it as it gathers speed until it's the most fearsome battering ram I've ever seen. Unstoppable, it speeds down the road toward the gates to the Vertucci compound. With a grin, I watch as the guards scamper out of the way, desperate to escape the death rolling toward them. Moose blows through the gates with incredible force — steel screams and goes flying, stonework shatters into hundreds of pieces — and Moose, with his window rolled down, fires shots at the rifle-toting guards, hitting two with shocking accuracy as he flies by in his big rig of death. It is shock and awe that not only blows open the gates and shatters the Vertucci defenses like they're nothing, but sends more than a few guards running in terror at the sight of a semi barreling through their compound at full speed.

"I like this guy," I yell above my motorcycle's engine.

"Oh my god, this is just like that time I went to Atlantic City for my thirtieth birthday. You would not believe the party scene there," Moose shouts with joy as he unloads a series of pinpoint accurate shots that take out two more Vertucci men.

"Guys, I might actually be excited to have a drink with Moose," Rook says, somehow sounding giddy even over the screaming engines. "The destruction,

the Desert Eagle, the headshots... it's all so beautiful."

"Rook and Moose, sitting in a tree..." Thunder yells as we blast through the destroyed gates and go straight into the swirling chaos. Bullets, screams, the smell of smoke and burning rubber fill the air.

"Don't you dare profane what we have with that vulgar song," Rook snaps as he fires his gun, pinning down several approaching Vertucci guards. "This is pure. This is beautiful. This is... fuck, that man is really affecting me."

"Just like old times, right, brother?" Smokey yells to me as he leaps off his bike, pistol in hand, uncorking several bullets that take an approaching Vertucci man right in the face. The man goes down without a sound, his face destroyed by hot lead. "We could die at any second. It's fun. You think I should make a flamethrower?"

"You know the answer to that question is always 'yes'," I reply, laughing.

Combat rages. The club advances under heavy fire toward the main Vertucci villa. That's where Michael Vertucci is most likely to be. That's where Dani is most likely to be, too. Either hiding out or as a hostage. No matter what, I'm getting to her. No matter what it costs me, I'm getting her out of here.

The battle flows like a river around us as Smokey and I battle toward the main villa while the club and Moose have our backs. The courtyard fills with bullets, with screams, with blood and bodies. We get to the entryway and Smokey turns and jumps at me, pulling me to the ground as a hail of bullets flies right past where my head was a split-second ago.

Hitting the ground, I roll, Smokey rolls, and we return fire.

A Vertucci man goes down, and I let out a yelp of joy. He's carrying one of the HK-33's. Finders keepers.

"I've always wanted to play with one of these," I say, scooping the rifle out of his dead grip. He won't be needing this any longer. I check the ammunition and heft the rifle. It feels nice. Real nice.

"Looks like you're taking point on our entrance... Unless you want to pass me that sweet piece of hardware?" Smokey says.

"No fucking way."

We mete out death to all comers on our way up to the second floor, where resistance from the Vertucci fighters stiffens. There's a big guy with a shotgun sheltering behind an overturned wooden table that's so thick it looks like it could take a mortar round. But we have to get past him — Vertucci's suite is on the top floor.

"I'm open to ideas," I shout to Smokey.

He chuckles and shrugs, then a strange look overtakes his face.

"Oh, I got it. Get ready," he replies. "Lay down some cover fire for me, will you?"

"For what?"

"You'll see."

Before I can ask what he means, Smokey jumps up from cover and charges straight at the table, shrieking like a demon. The big guy with the shotgun takes aim and fires, but Smokey dodges and weaves, slipping around the table and closing in on him. With a roar, Smokey tackles the big guy and the two of them go crashing through a window, shattering glass and sending shards flying everywhere. They land on the balcony below, and I hear bones breaking as they hit the ground.

I rush over to the broken window and look down. Smokey is on top of the big guy, pounding him in the face with his fists. The big guy tries to fight back, but Smokey is too quick, too agile, and the big man's body is too broken. Blood sprays from the big guy's nose and mouth, then Smokey rips a knife from his pocket, extends the blade with a flick of his wrist, and plunges it into the man's throat.

Suddenly, I hear a sound above me. Rapid gunfire from the direction of Vertucci's room.

Dani, it has to be her.

"Get your ass back up here," I shout down to Smokey. He rolls his eyes at me.

"Did you not fucking see that? And yet, you're fucking yelling at me to hurry?"

"Gloat later. She needs us. Those shots were from Vertucci's room."

He sprints, but I don't wait for him to come around and up the stairs. I start up alone, my finger hovering over the trigger and my heart in my throat over what I might find.

As I ascend, my nose catches something. Smoke.

Then I see it rising in a great plume from a lower floor. Somewhere in this villa, there's an inferno that'll soon consume the entire building.

I have to get to her. I have to get her out of here. Now.

At the top of the stairs, I take a deep breath and advance, gun at the ready, toward Vertucci's room, where the unceasing sound of gunfire is coming from. Through the door, I see a perplexing sight. Vertucci — dressed in a suit

that looks like it cost more than my yearly wages when I was in the Corps — and a henchman are both firing their guns into Vertucci's closet.

Are they fucking high?

Suddenly, Vertucci's guard turns, as if sensing my presence, and sends several shots blasting right toward me. I duck, but not in time, and lead burns a bloody hole through my left bicep.

I scream, falling sideways. The moment I hit the ground, I roll for cover, sending a storm of bullets to give me breathing room. Sprinting, I take shelter in the adjoining room — a study — and crouch against a concealing wall, my weapon at the ready, blood streaming down my arm in a crimson river.

I just know that Danielle is trapped in that closet. Pinned there by Vertucci and his man. I have to get to her.

Somehow.

The room swims, the blood loss catching up to me, only barely held at bay by the adrenaline in my system and the aching pain in my heart. I'm so close to her I can feel it. Dani, I'm coming for you.

Then a snarky, unmistakable voice comes from the other room. "Look at these prissy bitches. That suit of yours — it's so fucking last year."

It's Smokey. And the rapid tat-tat of gunfire that follows is him, too, and exactly the opening I need to leap back into combat, my gun at the ready.

I burst into the room, my gun aimed at the two men who are now scrambling for cover behind a large wooden desk. I don't hesitate, firing a blast that shatters the desk, sending splinters flying in every direction. Vertucci and his man are caught off guard, and I take advantage of their hesitation by firing another blast. It hits Vertucci's man square in the chest, sending him tumbling to the ground, dead.

Vertucci himself is frozen, his eyes wide with fear. He's not used to being in the line of fire like this, caught helpless and outclassed by a pair of combat-tested Marines. I can see that he's tempted to throw up his hands and surrender, but I don't give him the chance. I grab him by the collar, hauling him to his feet.

"Where is she?" I shout.

"Who?" he stammers.

"Don't play dumb with me. You know exactly who I'm talking about. Danielle. Where is she?"

Vertucci swallows hard. "In there. In my safe room."

My eyes turn for a split second, taking in the sight of a fortified door that's

taken heavy fire. It's weakened, it could be broken, but it'd take more of an arsenal than either Smokey or I have with us.

In that moment, Vertucci makes a move. He slips his hand into the pocket, pulling out a knife, and he slashes at me, cutting a deep wound across my midsection and forcing me to drop my gun. Screaming in pain, I release him and prepare for the fight of my life.

With vicious intent, he lunges at me, the knife flashing malevolently in his hands.

I duck it, swing back with a punch that catches him in the midsections. He swipes back, raising another bloody slash, this time along my forearm.

I stagger, woozy, blood dripping from all my wounds, soaking the floor.

Michael Vertucci advances, a sick light in his eyes.

Then he stops. His eyes go wide. "Oh shit," he whispers. "Please... No."

There's a crack, and his head explodes, blood and brains shooting out the back of his skull and splattering the wall behind him.

I turn. Smokey's there, holding his gun and a grin on his face. "You owe me again, Striker."

"Fuck off, I could've taken him," I retort. Then, remembering the door, I point it out to Smokey. My hand shakes from blood loss. "She's in there."

Before the words even leave my mouth, Smokey and I run to the heavy door, hammering on it with our fists.

"Dani," I scream against the unforgiving steel. "Dani, can you hear me?"

Smoke fills the room, coming from the fires below. It chokes me, making me cough. The room feels hot and hazy with the intense, rolling heat.

I hammer on the door again.

This time, I hear an answering pounding and the faintest voice. "Owen, is that you?"

"Dani, it's me. It's me. How do we get the door open? What's the code?"

There's silence. Silence and sobbing that makes me want to rip apart this door with my bare hands, that anything could be frightening the woman I love like this is unacceptable. I want to rip this door open and take her into my arms.

"I don't know, Owen. I don't know... Riley... she had us put in some code to lock it, but now the keypad's not working and Riley's passed out."

"Fuck," I scream, kicking the door with all my might and accomplishing nothing but making my foot hurt like hell. It's as my scream turns into a cough that I realize the smoke and fire are growing worse by the second. It

won't be long before they consume this room, along with anyone in it.

"How do we get in?" Smokey howls, hitting the wall in his own fury.

Dani's voice comes through the door again. Mournful this time. "Owen, if you're here... Riley's kid, Luca, is he...?"

"He's safe and sound and cute as hell," I say.

Maybe it's my imagination, but I swear I hear her sigh in relief. There's a smile on her face. I just know it.

"Owen, I love you, but this building is on fire and it won't be long before we're all gone. I need you and my brother to do me a favor. No, not just a favor. I need you to swear something to me on everything you hold dear as a biker, a Marine, and the man I love. Can you do that?"

My voice comes out choked, pained. "Anything, my love."

"You need to go. Leave us. I don't want to die knowing that the man I love died, too. I love you too much for that. Just promise me you'll take care of that baby and never forget me, OK?"

I ram my fist into the door with all my might. It does nothing.

The air turns black, and what isn't black is shimmering with the rising heat. There's a hand on my shoulder. Smokey.

His eyes tell me it's time. We need to go, or else we're dead, too.

Slowly, he goes to the door and presses his face to it. "I love you, sis."

The two of them exchange words for a moment.

Then it's my turn.

I go to the door with my heart in my throat and tears of heartache burning in my eyes.

"I promise."

Chapter Thirty

Danielle

The hammering at the door stops. Goes quiet. There's nothing except the sound of Morgan's fearful sobs and, I realize with a shock, my own. I hadn't even realized I was crying. Not that I'm surprised, but I feel so out of my body and so overwhelmed by the sensation of my heart ripping in two that I didn't even notice the tears or the sobs tearing up my throat.

I'm going to die.

But at least he knows that I still love him.

"We're fucked, aren't we?" Morgan says.

"We are."

"This sucks. There was so much I wanted to do. Like, advance my career, start a family, buy a house..."

I nod, wipe away a tear, and hug Morgan tighter. "And I wanted to sell you that house. Oh, Morgan, I know it would've been the best house, too."

"The best. With a fucking amazing kitchen and a bathtub the size of a swimming pool."

Her words end in a cough that doesn't stop. The air is thick now, like inhaling the leftover coals at the bottom of a grill.

I drop low, low enough to huff in some semi-clean air, and then come back up to be next to my friend.

"I wanted to fuck Owen a few more times, too. Not like I'm trying to be greedy, but just two or three... thousand... more times."

"That's not that much, actually," Morgan says.

"Five thousand, then."

"That's my girl, you go get that Marine cock," she laughs, though the act makes her cough so hard she vomits a little, making a mess on the floor.

I look down to where Riley sits, passed out, coughing in her unconsciousness.

Meanwhile, the room blackens. Or maybe it's my vision giving out as all the oxygen in the room is replaced by heated, billowing death. It's the air, trying to burn and strangle me from the inside.

Riley stirs a little in her state, her eyes fluttering for a moment. I kneel at

her side.

"Am I dying?" She whispers.

I nod. "But Luca's safe. They got him out."

"Luca," she whispers. Her eyes close again, but there's a smile on her face.

My head is swimming now, an ocean of wheezy colors floating amongst the black of the smoke. I grab Morgan's hand again and slip down the wall to sit on the floor, the two of us side by side, ready to die, together.

It won't be long now.

A few more breaths, and then I'll pass out, and I'll either become something like a human rotisserie chicken or just straight up charcoal. Either way, I'll be dead.

That thought startles me in how passively it zips through my skull, and in how uncaring I am when I realize that. It must be the lack of oxygen.

Then the walls begin to shake. Heavy, thumping shakes that have Morgan and I exchanging semi-conscious glances.

You fucking feel that?

Yeah, what the fuck? Is the house collapsing?

Another heavy thunk. Then another, right next to where the first one was. It's two heavy, hammering blows, coming one after the other. The walls continue to shake, then crumble, mortar and stone breaking beneath the furious onslaught of the fire and its relentless heat.

Almost time.

Another crack.

Then a hole opens. And light shines through, along with a breeze that stirs the billowing smoke with fresh air.

I stare.

Owen and Moose stand on the other side of the hole, sledge hammers in their hands, smiles on their faces, and my brother right behind them.

"What the fucking fuck?" I gasp.

Covered in soot, in burns, with a bullet wound and a gasping cough, Owen comes through the hole. He locks eyes with me, reaches for me, and, with a smile on his face, he says, "I'm not losing you, Dani. I'd rather die than live in a world without you in it."

Together, Morgan and I stand while Moose enters the room and throws Riley over his shoulder like she weighs less than nothing.

"What fucking took you so long, Owen?" Morgan gasps.

Owen's grin goes sideways. "Had to get a couple of tools from Moose's

truck. Running stairs in this heat is no joke. Now, do you want to stand here jabbering, or do you want to get out of here?"

Hand in hand, Morgan and I limp to him.

On this edge of dying, I've never felt so alive.

Or in love.

Epilogue - Striker

Striker

I hate hospitals.

Not because they smell like death warmed over or are so sanitized and medicinal that it feels like I've dunked my face in rubbing alcohol, not because the doctors and nurses prod and poke you in places that definitely don't seem necessary, and not even because being in the hospital reminds me of other times in my life where I've been laid up and those are definitely not memories that I want to revisit.

It's because every visitor I have looks at me and talks to me like I'm Tiny fucking Tim from *A Christmas Carol*. If I even drag my ass out of bed to use the can, they talk like I'm the bravest, strongest hero alive. I don't want a medal for taking a piss. I just want some peace and quiet. And those days where I talk about even a tenth of the pain that I'm going through — knife wounds, bullet wounds, second-degree burns — they talk and whisper among themselves like I'm dying and it makes me feel like the most pitiable man alive.

Everyone except Rook, that is.

The first time he came to visit me, he told me he was sick of picking up my slack at the MC's shop and that I needed to stop faking it and get my ass out of bed or else he'd drag me out himself and put me back to work where I belong. It was the best visit.

But now I have my discharge papers, now I have my freedom back and a body that doesn't hurt like hell every time I try to move it. Things are looking up.

"Do you have someone to come pick you up?" My nurse says as she stops the wheelchair at the foot of my bed. I don't need the damn thing — I can walk — but it's hospital regulation that they take me out the front door in one. When I found out about it, no amount of protesting on my part could change their minds, even though that means Smokey will soon be pushing me around in a wheelchair and that seems tailor-made to be a special hell. I can only imagine he'll try pushing me down the stairs.

"He'll be here any minute," I say.

"It's not the big grumpy one, is it?" The nurse says.

I shake my head.

"What about the other big one? He's nice."

"No, he's not coming, either. It's Dixon Green," I say.

"Oh. Him," she says, voice falling. "Not his sister?"

I shake my head. I haven't heard from Dani since the day at the Vertucci compound, other than a 'Get well' card that explained she needed to take time to sort her feelings out, to rest, to recover from all the pain and trauma that was inflicted on her.

"Not her."

"For as much as she's been in here, I would've thought it'd be her."

I sit up, suddenly alert. "She's been here?"

"All the time. She comes in most mornings, usually, and sometimes at night. Always asks about you at the front desk to see how you're doing. Does she not come in your room?"

I let the question lie. I don't want to think about what it means that Dani doesn't want to see me. Maybe she's changed her mind about us. Maybe she can't get over how I broke my word to her. Whatever it is, it's done, and she's clearly made a decision.

"Would you like me to wheel you down to the lobby so you can wait there for your friend?"

My butt settles in the chair, my heart and brain spin around the idea of Dani despite the effort I put into trying to fight it.

They always go back to her.

She was it. She was special. The one I'd waited a lifetime for, that I'd always wanted.

And now she's gone.

The wheels squeak on the way to the lobby. Every corner, every hallway, even in the elevator when we're sitting still, somehow, they squeak at me. Like they're taunting me. Reminding me that, even though I'm going back to the brotherhood of the MC, that things between Dixon and I seem to be square — though he still jokes from time to time that I owe him again for saving my life at the Vertucci compound — I'm going back to a world without her.

The nurse puts me near a coffee table in the lobby, where there's a stack of magazines. All of them are old, at least three months, and the TV in the lobby is stuck on the weather channel. Some kid is crying in the corner, arguing

with his sister over a set of off-brand Legos, and the man in the seat next to me smells like cigarettes and urine and keeps looking at me like he wants to start a conversation.

I sit for half an hour. Still no Dixon.

When he gets here, I'm going to get out of this wheelchair and kick his ass.

Another ten minutes pass and I'm close to just signing myself out against medical advice and walking home. All that effort might end up putting me back in the hospital bed, but it might not, and that shot at freedom is worth it. Hell, anything is worth it compared to sitting around in this purgatory of a waiting room.

Then the doors open, and I blink several times, wondering if my heart's stopped and I'm actually dead.

She's here.

Dressed in her work clothes — a skirt, blouse, jacket — and with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, an outfit that's so sexy it makes my heart beat out of control. There's a shy smile on her face, and a light in her eyes that's both reluctant and inviting. She might seem unsure of herself, but I've never been more sure of anything in my life: I love her, and I am so damn happy she's here.

I stand up.

The nurse at the front desk says, "Sir, you can't do that."

"Watch me," I retort as I walk toward the woman of my dreams. It's a slow walk, because I can see that Dani's still reluctant, still hesitant, and she walks toward me at an equally cautious pace.

Then she runs.

And wraps me in a hug so tight I might burst my stitches.

"I missed you," she whispers into my ear before kissing my cheek and then my lips. "I missed you so much."

Her lips are the sweetest thing I've tasted in weeks.

"What took you so long?" I say.

"Got held up at work. An open house that went on longer than I thought..." She says.

"I don't mean that," I say.

She smiles shyly. It's not like her to be so unconfident. "I had to figure things out. Figure out how I felt about you, how I felt about me. That took time, and a lot of talking to people. Morgan, mostly. But also, a professional."

"And?"

"And I really love you. But it hurt what happened between us, that you took me away from the Vertucci compound like that, that you'd kidnap me... but talking things out with Morgan and with my therapist, it helped me sort out my feelings and helped me understand and empathize with why you did it, what you were feeling, how you might have been thinking. It gave me perspective. And it helped put me in a place where I could forgive you. Maybe."

I stop at that. Turn to her. We're still in the parking lot of the hospital. It hardly feels like the right place to say this, but I don't want to hesitate when I feel like the woman I love might be in pain, might still be carrying hurt. Especially from something I did.

"If you're going to think about forgiving me, I need to apologize, first. I should've been more open. I should've listened to you. We should've talked this out. I am sorry that things happened how they did. But I am also grateful that, despite everything that happened, you made it through and that you're here today. I love you, Dani."

She smiles and her lips capture mine in a tender, slow kiss. "I love you, too, Owen. Thank you."

Our slow walk to her car resumes. Hand in hand, we stroll in the mid-afternoon sun, my mind circling around the things she's said.

"I've been thinking about doing the same thing, once I've got all this hospital stuff behind me. About finding someone to talk to."

"Oh?" She smiles at me.

"Your brother said it's helped him, and I have my own things I need to get over. It kills me that, when the cards were down, I had these issues with my feelings of loyalty, of how to handle all the danger, and I couldn't sit down with the woman I love and at least hear her out. That I just immediately dropped into the way I would think when I was in the Marines. I have to figure out how to balance that stuff, because there will be other times in life where there's danger, but nothing should prevent me from listening to the most important person in my life: you." I pull a sigh and let it out. This is hard. As hard as anything I've ever done. "Eliza says she knows someone who specializes in vets. Says he served, too. Saw things like I did, went through stuff like I did. She got me his number."

It isn't easy to say things like this out loud. There's this stigma that's associated with it, with admitting you need help, like it's some kind of weakness instead of a byproduct of surviving through something terrible. If

anything, it's a consequence of having to be strong. But as hard as it is, seeing the look of pride on Dani's face makes all my doubts disappear. I know it's the right call.

"I think you're making a brave decision, Owen."

"Thanks," I murmur. We reach her car and I open the door for her and then take a seat myself. She starts the car, shifts it into reverse, but stops before pressing the gas.

"They're planning a party for you, you know," she says.

"I figured. Eliza's been dropping hints like crazy every time she checks on me."

"It's at the garage. It's in two hours. Originally, they were going to have it almost right after you were scheduled to be released, but I called them on the way here. I asked them to push it back a bit."

"Why?"

A small smile comes across her face. It's not shy, it's secretive, seductive.

"I wanted to see how things went. What you said, how you said it."

"And?"

"And if things went the way I'd hoped, I'd ask you if the doctors cleared you for more strenuous physical activity."

"Physical activity?"

"I've missed you, Owen. I mean, I've really missed you," she says, her voice heated. "My apartment is on the way to the shop. We have time to... catch up."

I'm rock hard from the moment she says my name in that burning tone of voice. It's what a stay in the hospital, where the only human touch you get comes in gloved hands and with the intent to either fill you with medicine or the worst-tasting hospital food known to man, will do to you.

"We have a lot of catching up to do, Dani," I say, reaching across to brush her cheek. She moans quietly and steps hard on the gas.

We're at her apartment in less than five minutes. In the door a minute after that. The second the door shuts behind us, she attacks me like we're on opposite sides of the fiercest war in human history. I attack her with equal ferocity, my lips capturing hers, my hands ripping her shirt off her, my tongue hungry for the taste of her lips, her tongue, her breasts. Moaning, she clutches my head to her bare chest, gasping as I circle my tongue around her erect nipple.

"Yes, Owen. Oh fuck, I've missed you," she moans.

She tastes sweet, but I want more. Need more. After how long we've been apart, I won't be satisfied until I've tasted all of her.

"On the bed, now," I say. But she doesn't move quick enough, so I pick her up and carry her to the bedroom. My body screams at me for that, but let it scream all it wants, nothing will stop me from having Dani.

I set her back on the bed.

Her chest, flushed, rises and falls in excitement as I pull down her panties and bury my face between her legs, inhaling the scent of her arousal and tasting the sweetness of her sex against my tongue.

"Oh fuck, Owen. Fuck, yes," she moans. "I need your tongue on my pussy."

I hold her hips to the bed with my hands and with my mouth; I devour her, my tongue darting around and around her clit, her body shaking, her hands clutching the sheets for dear life, her moans louder and louder.

I lick her with long strokes, slow at first, then faster, focused, listen to her body — every moan, every shake, every gasp — and let it guide me to just how she wants to be pleased. Her juices drip down my chin as she writhes on the bed, her hands clutching at my head, pulling me deeper into her; the scent of her is intoxicating, her taste is decadent against my tongue.

"Yes, Owen, oh yes. I've missed this. I need this."

I'm grinding my cock against the bed. It's so hard it hurts. I want to be inside her so badly. "Yes, Dani, yes. Come for me, baby," I moan, driving my tongue inside her, licking her, sucking her, devouring her.

"Owen, oh fuck, that feels so good. Fuck, yes. Just like that. Keep doing exactly that."

She screams as waves of pleasure crash over her, the muscles of her entire body clenching as I lavish attention on her clit. I feel her juices wet my chin, and I lap them up, hungry for her, hungry for the pleasure I've brought her.

I pull my head up from between her legs, panting. I look down at her, her chest heaving, her eyes glazed with pleasure. "You're so fucking beautiful."

"Oh, my god. I needed that. I've missed you. Fuck me, please. I need it. Give me your cock," she says as she takes hold of my rock hard cock and guides me onto the bed. Then she climbs atop me, straddling me, still holding my cock in her firm grip, and she rubs the head of my dick against her clit, gasping, moaning as aftershocks of orgasm ripple through her body.

I could watch this all day.

Then, with a wide-eyed look and a smile on her face, she lowers herself

onto me, taking me deep inside her tight pussy.

I moan. It's tight, wet, hot, everything I want, everything I need, for the rest of my life. So overwhelming that I realize that, though the doctors might have cleared me for physical activity, there's no way they know I'd be fucking my dream woman within fifteen minutes of leaving the hospital. I just might have a heart attack.

But what a way to go, knowing I'm already in heaven.

"No, don't even think about passing out," she says, eyes half on me, half glazed over in ecstasy. To emphasize her point, she reaches down and slaps me, then she grabs my hands and places them over her tits. "Focus on these," she moans. Then, as she rocks her hips and bounces on my cock, she reaches between her legs and strokes her clit. "Yes. Keep going. Harder, Owen. Deeper. Fuck me like you almost died for this pussy."

"I did almost die for this pussy," I say, kissing her neck.

She moans, her whole body shuddering as I thrust deeper, harder.

"And you're here now. And you're mine," she moans. "And I am going to make you come so fucking hard."

She slams down on me one last time, her tits bouncing, her back arching, her fingers working furiously on her clit, and she comes. I feel her pussy clenching around my cock, her body spasming, and I can't hold out any more. I break.

"Fuck, yes, Dani. Oh fuck, I'm coming," I moan. Intense pressure builds and releases inside of me, as every ounce of my body and soul flows from me into her. The world goes dark for a moment, blinking in and out, and when I come to, I'm holding tight to her hips and my heart feels like it's going a million miles an hour.

She collapses on top of me, sweaty, smiling, and sighs. "I missed you."

Then she kisses me deep and springs off me with stunning energy. Her eyes go to the clock on her nightstand and she laughs. "We just have enough time for a shower before we have to leave for the party. Let's go. I don't want to be smelling like sex when Dixon shows up."

I laugh, easing myself out of bed, my body aching and rebelling when my feet hit the ground. Slowly, I lurch after Danielle.

Damn, does it ever feel good to be back.

"I love you," I say. She smiles at me from the shower, as water cascades down upon her and the rising steam envelopes her like a heavenly cloud. "I love you, and I missed this."

I step into the shower beside her, the water washing over me, and I feel like a new man. A new man ready to start his life with the woman he's always loved.

She kisses me, and I feel complete in a way I've never felt before. "I love you, too."

Epilogue - Danielle

Danielle

Everyone is at Reid's Repairs when we pull up to the shop. The entire place has been decorated and set up for a party; there are barbecues out in the lot with a ton of meat sizzling on them, coolers full of beer, wine, and liquor, and there's even a card table with a blender on it, where Moose is standing — he's wearing a bathrobe, swimming shorts, and slippers — and making margaritas. There's an enormous banner across one of the open bay doors that says, "Welcome home, Owen" and a smaller sign that says, "Get back to work, lazy ass" that's in Rook's handwriting.

The entire family's here. Not just the club, but my brother, his friends, Hawk and Ghost, who, though they aren't official members of the MC, yet, have already said they'll be joining soon enough. Rook's already started keeping a list of ways to torment them, should they prospect. All the club's ol' ladies are here, too, smiling and catching up on each other's lives.

The second I get out of my car, Morgan comes running to me and wraps me in a hug. She takes one look at me and says, "I'm glad you two patched things up. And that you, uh, took a moment for yourselves."

I'd ask her how she knows, but I already know the answer to that, because we're both practically mind readers when it comes to each other.

"It feels good," I say. There's a smile on my face so big my cheeks hurt.

"I'll bet it felt good," she says, with a wink. "Looks like you two aren't the only ones who have made up." Morgan's eyes drift over my shoulder, to where Owen is pulling my brother, Dixon, into a similar hug.

"Those two have been back to being thick as thieves for a while now. Dixon told me it was when Owen grabbed that sledge from Moose's truck and charged back into the villa that he knew he couldn't continue to hold a grudge. That kind of loyalty..."

"That kind of love," Morgan says, interrupting.

I grin. "That kind of love can't be stopped. And it's true. It can't. I love him, Morgan. I love him so much."

Suddenly, the sound of a blender at full blasts cuts through the mood and I turn around, ready to frown, when I see Moose mixing up a gigantic batch of

margaritas. Strawberry margaritas.

"If it's time for hugs, it's time for margs," he says with a gleeful laugh that shakes his whole belly and makes the Hindenburg tattoo on his chest look like it's flying through a storm.

"Is he drunk?" I whisper to Morgan.

She shakes her head. "He hasn't had a drink yet. He just showed up that way. Like he's decided that today his vibe is 'six strawberry margaritas by the pool.'"

"I can get behind that," I say, as she and I make our way to the table, where we grab the first two glasses and tip them together. They're delicious.

Riley, carrying little baby Luca, comes to join us. The baby seems to grow a bunch every day. He must be twice the size since I saw him a few days ago.

"Made one special virgin strawberry margarita just for you, Riley," Moose says, handing her a glass.

"Thank you," Riley says, taking a sip. "Oh, it's delicious. How do you make it so good?"

"Extra lime, and a bit of chili in the mix. The tiniest amount. The heat really wakes up your tastebuds. I can put some Tajin on the rim, too, if you'd like."

"Next time, please," Riley says. Then, noticing Morgan and I watching her in surprise, she smiles shyly. "It's been five days that I'm clean. It's not easy, and every day feels so hard that I don't know how I'm going to make it, but then, all I have to do is look at Luca and I just know. He's my reason."

"Oh my god, Riley," I say, hugging her. "I'm so proud of you."

"Sis, I don't know what to say..." Morgan says. She's shaking, tearful. "You are so strong. I'm proud of you."

"Just say you love me... and maybe agree to babysit Luca every once in a while," she replies.

"Watch that little sweetheart? Done and done whenever you need it."

I look at Luca, who has a little grin on his sweet, chubby face. He is loving being the center of attention. A sudden movement draws my eyes away from his face, and I see Owen watching me with a knowing smile. *Maybe*, his look says.

Maybe, I nod.

"Before we get any deeper into our drinks, I think it's time I say a few words," Bullet says. With Madison at his side, he raises his glass.

Moose raises his, and his voice. "Thanks, Bullet. You know, I learned this

recipe while I was on a vacation in Acapulco with this *vaquero* who owned a few cattle ranches. We were soaking up some rays on the beach, when suddenly this giant shark came thrashing up on the sand and..."

"Later, Moose," Bullet says.

"I vote we let Moose finish his story first," Rook says.

"Honey, quiet down. You can talk to your friend after Bullet makes his toast," Eliza says.

Rook's eyes go wide in a huff. "Friend? No, no way, I don't make friends..."

"I'll be your buddy, Rookie-boy," Moose says. "Like Shakira says: 'Whenever, wherever.'"

Bullet clears his throat loudly, and all eyes turn to him.

"We've been through a lot together. We've survived our share of trials. But it's brought us together in a way that's closer than friendship. Just like Rook says, we're not friends here. We're a family. And we're throwing this party not only to welcome Striker back to the MC, but to announce that our club will be growing by three new members, as Smokey, Ghost, and Hawk have all announced their intentions to join."

There's a loud round of applause, of people raising their drinks and clashing their cups together; strawberry margarita spills everywhere, and Moose immediately begins putting together the ingredients to make another batch. Thank god. These things are life in a glass.

Then Bullet looks at me.

Owen puts his arm around me and gives me a sideways hug.

I note with surprise that everyone else — Morgan included — starts looking at me, too, and my heart begins to beat faster, even though I have no idea why. It's got to be good. She has a smile on her face, but I'm unnerved by all the unexpected, smiling attention. Even Moose seems to know what's coming, which worries me even more.

"There's one more thing," Bullet says. "The club isn't just expanding in numbers. We're expanding in other ways, too. More bodies means there's a need for more space."

"Because I refuse to share a garage with six of you miscreants," Rook blurts out. "Three is enough. I can't take any more."

"Rook, be nice," Eliza says.

And, at nearly the same time, Moose adds, "Calm down, Rookie boy."

Thunder snickers, muttering, "Rookie boy," under his breath.

When the clamoring dies down, Bullet continues and the attention returns to me. Owen tightens his hug, and I can feel something fluttering in my chest. Not just love for the man next to me, but a tingling feeling, like I'm on the verge of something exciting.

"The Steel Reapers and the Twisted Devils continue to grow closer by the day, and they've provided us with some seed money to help expand our business as we keep building ties. With our own money, thanks to the Covingtons," there's a ripple of laughter at the mention of that awful family, "we have the resources to expand our business. To do that, we're going to need an agent who can help us find the properties that fit our needs. And, since those needs are specific and may not be entirely legal, we need someone who is dedicated just to us. At least part time. So, Danielle Green, what do you say? You want to go into business together?"

I look around the group, everyone watching me with an expectant look in their eyes and smiles on their faces.

As if there's any doubt.

I've wanted for so long for people to notice me, to respect me, and now I have everyone I care about gathered around me, ready to invest in me. As an equal, as a partner.

I'm ecstatic. And tongue-tied.

Off to the side, little Luca lets out a wail.

"Come on, Dani, I think some of us are tired of waiting for your answer," Morgan says, laughing. "And not just Luca."

"You want my answer?" I say, giving Morgan a look that says it all. But for everyone else, I raise my glass and say, "I'm in. I'm all in. But don't expect a break on my commission."

The cheers are deafening, and I feel like I'm on top of the world.

Bullet claps me on the back, and Moose hands me a fresh margarita. Owen is grinning at me, then hugging and kissing me, and I know that this is a turning point for us, and for me. I'm no longer just the quiet girl in the corner, the girl tagging along and fighting to be noticed. I'm a part of something big, something real, something that makes me feel truly valued: a family.

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