



Tarek

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TAREK

BLEEDING ACES MC IOWA

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CHAPTER 1

With my cigarette between my lips, I walk out of our strip club and into the steamy night air. I take another drag and flick the cigarette to the ground before turning and walking down the alley next to the club.

I'm halfway down the alley when I see something that doesn't belong here. A long leg covered in dirt is stretched out from behind the dumpster.

I walk closer and squat down, touching the exposed ankle before slowly dragging my fingers up the leg. When I look up at their face, I see it's a female. She isn't moving. I scoot up and feel for a pulse, and when I get one, I blow out a breath.

"You ain't dead," I mumble to myself. I reach up, move the hair away from her face, and discover she's beautiful. Her full lips are slightly parted, long lashes fluttering against her cheeks. I wonder how she got here. Why she's here?

I pull my cell out and call the manager on staff in the club. Nick comes out quickly and takes a look at the girl.

"She isn't one of ours," he tells me.

"You haven't seen her?" I ask, looking up at him.

"No," he shakes his head. Well, shit. If she isn't one of ours, what the hell is she doing back here?

"I'm takin' her with me," I announce as if it's the best idea I've ever had.

“What the hell do you mean you’re taking her?” he asks, a little laugh in his voice.

“It means I’m takin’ her with me. We don’t need the cops around here, Nick.”

“Okay. Yeah, I get that. What are you going to do with her?”

“I don’t know yet,” I tell him as I reach over and slide my arms under her legs and neck. I lift her off the ground, and her head lolls against me. I turn on my heel and head for the truck. Thank fuck I opted to bring the cage tonight instead of my bike, or I would have had to deal with the cops.

“Open the back door for me,” I order Nick the closer we get to the truck. He walks around me and opens the back door before I slide the girl inside. Once she is situated, I close the door and step back, running my hand through my hair.

“Second thoughts?”

“Well, I don’t typically pick up random half-dead girls out of the ally.” I smirk.

“This would be a first, huh?”

“Somethin’ like that. Let me get her back to the clubhouse. You need to get back inside; shit’s pickin’ up. I’ll let you know if I find out anything about her,” I tell him. He nods and walks toward the door as I walk around the truck and climb into the driver’s seat. I start the truck, back out of the alley, and head onto the main road. I wonder what the guys will say when I bring home a half-dead woman.

I grin at the thought and drive toward the clubhouse. In no time, I’m home and pull into the parking lot. I hop out, round the truck, open the back door, and slide the girl out. I toss her over my shoulder and whistle a song as I carry her inside.

No one pays me much attention as I carry the girl through the main room and down the hall to the rooms. I could have taken her to my house, but this seemed a better idea.

I shove my door open and walk toward the bed, where I gently lay her down before checking for a pulse.

“What the hell is this?” Twitch asks. I smile at him over my shoulder as I place her on the bed. Then I pull the handcuffs from the drawer next to the bed and hook one to her wrist and the other to the headboard.

“What’s it look like?” I ask him.

“It looks like a dead girl. What the hell are you doin’ with a dead girl, Tarek?” Now I flash a bigger smile and turn to face him, my hands on my hips.

“She ain’t dead, brother.”

“She looks dead.”

“Yeah, she’s in rough shape,” I admit.

“Then what the hell happened to her?” I glance back over my shoulder at the girl before looking back at my brother.

“I don’t know. Found her like that,” I explain.

“You found a half-dead girl and decided to bring her back here?” he asks. I nod my head. Yup, that sounds about right.

“Yeah.”

“Jesus, Tarek. Do you have any idea who she is?”

“Nope. She didn’t have any ID on her,” I tell him.

“You checked?”

“Of course, I checked.”

Twitch looks around me at the girl once more, and I grin bigger. I grin like I won a fucking prize. Like I won the lottery. What the hell is wrong with me?

“I can’t believe you brought her here.”

“What was I supposed to do with her? She was outside the strip club.”

“She ain’t one of the dancers?” I shake my head.

“No. I asked Nick. He didn’t know who she was.”

“She was just lyin’ out there?”

“Yeah. Half dead,” I reply.

“So now what? What the hell are you gonna do with her?”

“Keep her.”

“Keep her? What the fuck, Tarek?”

“What? Why can’t I keep her?”

“She isn’t yours to keep! Hell, we don’t even know who the fuck she is!”

“That means nothin’.”

“You’re sick, you know that?”

“Why?”

“She’s half dead, brother!”

“Half dead. The other half ain’t dead,” I point out. Twitch runs his hand over his face, clearly exasperated with me. I can’t say I blame him, either. I can be a lot to handle.

“You have problems,” he says once more.

“I know, like, what am I gonna name her?” I tell him. He looks at me, and I mean really looks at me now. I know how to push their buttons, and I do it often. I’m good at it.

“What you’re gonna name her? That’s the only concern you have at this point?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“I’m outta here. Enjoy your dead girl.” I watch him leave before turning back to the girl on my bed.

“LaLa. I’ll call you LaLa.”

CHAPTER 2

*M*y body aches. My arm hurts. My head hurts. I didn't know I could feel so shitty, and I'm not even dead. What a waste of pills.

I pry my eyes open, and I'm greeted with darkness. Maybe I am dead. No, I shouldn't feel a damn thing if I was. And I can feel everything.

I groan as I try to roll to my side, but something keeps me from moving my arm. I lift my head, and nausea rolls through me. I drop my head back onto the pillow and clench my eyes shut. Memories of what I witnessed assault me. My heart picks up a beat, and I feel slightly panicky before I realize I'm not there. I'm not there anymore.

I sigh and try to open my eyes, and even though I'm dizzy, I force myself to look around. The room is dark, and I have no idea where I am or how I got here. All I remember is sitting behind the club and holding a handful of pills in the palm of my hand. Of course, I wasn't stupid enough to keep the bottle lying next to me. There was no way they would find out who the hell I was that easily.

I remember putting the pills in my mouth and swallowing them. Everything else slowly faded from there. And now here I am.

I still don't know where here is. I blink rapidly and look at my arm. It's being held above my head by something. That's when the dim light filtering in through the window hits something shiny. Is that hand cuffs? My heart beats faster, and

the thought of them finding me hits me hard. I'm cuffed to the bed. They found me. They had to have found me. There's no other reason for me to be handcuffed to a bed and not dead.

I was so careful. I planned it out perfectly. No one would look in the fucking alley. No one would think to look there for me. And yet someone did. They found me, and now I'm cuffed and at their mercy.

I can feel the tears well up in my eyes before slowly running down my cheeks. They will make me pay for this. I know they will.

Just as the thought hits me, the door opens, and someone enters. I close my eyes and wish the tears weren't staining my cheeks as a light flips on in the corner. I keep my eyes closed, pretending to be still asleep.

"How long has she been out?"

"FUCK IF I KNOW," I hear two voices but don't recognize either of them.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"Just what I said. I don't know."

"How long has she been out since you found her?" One asks.

"About two hours," the other responds.

"She should be wakin' up then." No. No, I can't wake up and return to the horror I know is waiting. I don't want to. I won't do it. And now that they know I saw and ran, they will surely kill me after dragging it out.

"Then why isn't she?" They want me awake to torture me, to draw this out and make it as painful as possible. A sob lodges in my throat when I feel hands on me. Don't flinch, Pierson. Don't flinch. I keep repeating to myself in my head. If they see me flinch, they'll know I'm awake, and I can't have that. Not yet. I have to figure out a way out of here first. I need a plan.

“Pulse is better,” the one says as he presses his fingers to my neck. “In fact, that motherfucker is thumpin’ pretty hard.” Shit. I can’t stop it!

“What do you mean?”

“She’s awake, brother. Fake sleepin’.”

“The fuck you mean she’s awake?” My pulse thumps harder against his fingers.

“Just what I said. She’s awake. Her heart is poundin’ against my fingers,” the man says. Keep calm, Pierson. Just keep calm.

“She’s clearly asleep,” the other argues.

“If you think so. She looks fine to me, though. Nothin’ much to worry about. She should be fine tomorrow.” His fingers leave my flesh, and I want to sigh in relief, but I can’t. Instead, I keep playing the sleeping role.

I listen as they move around the room before the door closes, and there’s nothing but silence. Then and only then do I open my eyes and turn my head. I shouldn’t have done that. I should have waited. Sitting there staring me down is a man I’ve never seen before. His lips curl into a grin as he looks at me and sits back in his seat.

“Hey, LaLa.” Who the hell is he talking to? Does he think I’m someone else? I don’t answer him and have no plans to do so. “Should have known you weren’t asleep.” Still, I say nothing as I stare into the man’s dark eyes across the room.

“Not much of a talker?” he asks. “No. Seems not. That’s okay. You don’t need to talk. You just need to listen. I like you, LaLa. I wasn’t sure if I would, but I’ve decided I do. I don’t have many rules around here, except one, do not ignore me. When I talk, I like an answer even if it is a one-word answer.” I blink my eyes. I won’t answer him. I won’t tell him whatever it is he wants to know.

“I guess the first thing I’d like to know is why you were in that alley.” I won’t tell him. I won’t say the words, and he knows it. I can see it in his eyes.

“Remember the rule?” he asks, standing from his chair and walking toward me. He stops at the edge of the bed and kneels to be at eye level with me.

“I ask the questions, and you answer, LaLa.” His voice is calm, almost too calm. Why isn’t he hitting me? Why isn’t he beating the answer out of me? I narrow my eyes at him and take him in. He doesn’t look like one of their men. He doesn’t act like one, either. He can see me taking him in and decides to do the same. His eyes move over my face before stopping on my lips, which slowly part.

“Yeah, I like you, LaLa, but the silent thing is gonna have to end. I don’t pretend to read minds, and I sure as hell won’t start now,” he warns as his eyes come back to meet mine.

“Maybe we should start a little simpler. Like, what’s your name?” Before I can think better of it, I play along with who he thinks I am. I open my mouth and say the name he’s been calling me since I opened my eyes.

“LaLa.”

CHAPTER 3

Oh, I like her. I like that she's using my shit against me. A slight smile tugs across my face as I look at her.

"LaLa," I repeat the name she just said. Maybe the drugs she took affected her brain. Maybe she doesn't know who she is, and she's just going with whatever I say.

"You were in an alley, LaLa. Do you remember that?" She shakes her head slowly but keeps her gaze locked with mine. I don't know if she's lying. It's hard to tell by looking at her because she seems so calm now. Not like before when her heart was beating out of her chest.

"You were unconscious when I found you. Do you know why?" Again, she shakes her head. I want to hear her voice. I want her to answer me, but I don't know how to make her talk. I don't want to force her too much and have her shut down on me.

"You gotta give me somethin' here, LaLa. What were you doin' behind a strip club?" I wait this time. She can't shake her head in answer this time. She has to open her mouth and give me an answer.

"I don't know," she whispers. That's a start.

"You don't remember?"

"No," she replies softly. Maybe the drugs did a number on her. Doc said there were drugs in her system. It's possible she doesn't remember.

“Want me to tell you what I know?” I ask her. She nods her head slowly as she looks at me. I shift and sit back on my heels before taking a deep breath and blowing it out.

“You OD’d. Whatever pills you took, you overdosed.”

“I did?” she asks quietly. I nod my head before running my hand through my hair.

“You don’t remember what you took?”

“No.”

“Do you remember why you took them?” I ask this time.

“No.” I can see how her eyes shifted slightly, and her breathing kicked up a notch. She knows why she took them, and she isn’t telling me. And that’s okay. I don’t need her story just yet. I can wait.

“I want you to know you’re safe here. You’re safe from whatever you were runnin’ from,” I tell her. It’s true. She’s safe here, but why am I keeping her here? Why don’t I just set her free and let her go on about her life or the taking of it? No, I can’t do that. I can’t let her kill herself. I let that happen once. Never again.

“Safe?” she asks, tugging at the cuff on her arm. Smart girl.

“That’s for your safety. I can’t take that off until I know what you were doin’.” Her eyes flash with anger as she looks at me and then turns away. I run my fingers along her jaw until she turns back to me.

“You can’t be trusted, LaLa. You tried to kill yourself,” I tell her. She shakes her head slowly at first before she opens her mouth.

“I didn’t.”

“Yeah, you did. There’s no sense in lyin’ to me. I know what you did,” I whisper as Lala glares at me.

“What do you want from me?” she finally asks.

“The truth, LaLa. I want the truth.” When she doesn’t move to answer me, I shove off the floor and stand to my feet.

I look down at her as she watches me, but I don't say anything else. Instead, I turn and walk to the door.

"You can't leave me like this," she says.

"Oh, yes, I can. I do whatever I want with you, LaLa. You belong to me now," I inform her.

"You can't do this! Is that what they said? That you could keep me. They'll never let you! You have to know that," she screams this time. That intrigues me, but I don't let on that it does. Instead, I smile and nod before leaving the room and closing the door behind me. Ridge is coming my way, and I find myself grinning at him too.

"What are you smilin' about?"

"LaLa's awake," I tell him.

"You couldn't have come up with a better name?"

"What's wrong with LaLa?"

"It's stupid," he deadpans.

"Says you. She seems to like it."

"Is that what she said?" he asks as I shake my head.

"No. I asked her what her name was, and she said LaLa. So I assume she likes it," I tell him.

"You're insane. What else did she say?"

"That they won't let me keep her."

"Who are they?"

"Don't know, brother. She wouldn't say. I figured I'd give her some time to come to her senses before askin' again. She's been through a lot." Ridge huffs out a laugh before scrubbing his hand over his face.

"How the hell do you know that?"

"She tried to kill herself. Doesn't that tell you a lot about a person?"

"Yeah, that they have issues, Tarek. You think she ain't gonna try to do that again?" he asks me. I shrug.

“Maybe not.”

“They always try again. She’s no different.” With that, he turns and walks away, leaving me to my thoughts. She won’t do it again. I won’t let her. Someone out there is looking for her. Someone out there loves her. I can’t let her die. Not on my watch.

Whistling a song, I walk down the hall and out into the main room, where everyone is hanging out. I head for the bar and grab a beer, taking a long pull as I glance around.

“What are you doin’ out of your room?” I turn my head and look at Cage, the Prez.

“Gettin’ a beer.”

“Shouldn’t you be watchin’ your girl?”

“She’s fine. She was fake sleepin’.”

“Was she? What have you found out about her?”

“Not much. She likes the name LaLa.”

“That’s it? Tarek, we don’t know who the hell she is,” he reminds me.

“I know, Prez. I’m gonna find out who she is. Don’t worry.”

“I am worried. We don’t need any drama around here, Tarek. Shit’s been quiet, and I like that,” he says.

“I know it has Cage. The clubs runnin’ smoothly, and I wouldn’t do shit to fuck that up. You know me better than that.”

“I didn’t think you’d bring home a half-dead unknown girl, brother.”

“I know you don’t get it, and you don’t like it much either, but this is somethin’ I have to do.” Cage seems to think that over for a long time before finally nodding.

“I don’t know what makes you do the things you do, but if you say you got it, then I trust you, Tarek. Don’t make me regret that shit,” he warns, pointing his finger at me.

“I won’t, brother. Have I ever before?” Again, he runs his hand over his face before shaking his head.

“No, and I don’t expect you to now.”

“I got this. I promise,” I tell him.

“Good. Keep her close. We don’t know what she’s after.” With that, he walks away, and Ginger, a club girl, approaches me. She drops to her knees and pulls my cock free before stroking it with her small hand.

“What are you doin’?” I ask her.

“Making you feel good.”

“How do you know I didn’t already feel good?” I ask, seeing the glimmer in her eyes.

“I haven’t had my mouth on you yet,” she purrs before running her tongue over the tip. My cock jerks at the feel of her before she wraps her lips around me and sucks me into her mouth. She moans around me, and I reach out, grabbing the back of her head. I let her suck me off. I let her take what she needs from me, but for some fucked up reason, I can only picture LaLa in my head. On her knees, her plump lips wrapped around me and at my mercy. What the hell is wrong with me? The girl is in my room. She tried to kill herself, and all I can think about is if her lips were as soft as I think they would be around my cock.

Shoving the thoughts away, I let Ginger do her thing until I’m coming down the back of her throat. She tucks me back in and zips my jeans before standing to her feet in front of me.

“Thanks for that,” I tell her.

“Can we hook up later?” she asks. I nod my head before pulling her closer to me and kissing her gently.

“Yeah, we can do that.” She smiles and turns to walk away when I slap her ass, causing her to yelp. A few of the guys chuckle around us.

“Ginger is a good fuck,” Twitch declares as he stands beside me.

“No shit. Why do you think I fuck her?”

“What about the chick in your room?”

“She can watch if she wants to.”

CHAPTER 4

The door slams closed, and my eyes snap open. The light has been turned on and now blinds me. I blink to get my eyes to focus when I hear it. The moans. The groans. I turn my head to the side and see the guy from earlier with a woman in his lap. He sits in the chair as she straddles him, kissing and pawing at each other. Did he magically forget he had me cuffed in here? What the hell?

“Pull my cock out, Ginger,” he says as she stands from his lap. I watch her strip out of her clothes before moving to his. She pulls his jeans and boxers down his legs, causing his cock to spring free. Even from here, I can see the piercings, and my eyes widen.

The next thing I know, she’s rolling a condom down his length before straddling his lap in reverse. She’s facing me, but her eyes are closed. Her lips are parted as she bounces up and down on his cock. His hands come around her, grabbing her breasts, tugging at her nipples. She moans and goes harder. I can’t believe they are doing this with me chained to this bed. What kind of sick fucker is he?

The harder they go, the wetter I get. I can’t believe I’m getting turned on by this. What the fuck is wrong with me?

The man’s eyes slowly open before he looks over at me. Our eyes lock, and the air thickens. The girl still rides him hard and fast as he watches me intently.

“What is it, LaLa?” he asks. The girl doesn’t pay any attention to me. She keeps her eyes closed and continues fucking him like I’m not even here. I lick my dry lips, and he smiles at me. He isn’t a bad-looking guy. In fact, he’s almost too perfect. I watch him for a long second before his hand shifts, sliding between her legs and finding her clit. From where I’m lying, I can see everything, watch everything he’s doing to her, and I can’t say that I don’t like it. Maybe I’m insane or fucked up from the number of pills I took. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but I can’t ignore their actions.

His finger teases her clit, and she nearly leaps off his lap. He uses his free hand to hold onto her waist, keeping her in place as he bucks his hips. She cries out the name Tarek as she nearly falls apart for the man, but he doesn’t. Instead, he pushes her off his lap, and she tumbles to the floor at his feet before he stands and walks toward me. I close my eyes and turn my head, pretending I’m not affected by the show. I’m cuffed to a fucking bed, for God’s sake!

“Open your eyes, LaLa, and look at me.” It’s an order and one I take. I open my eyes and see the girl crawling across the floor to him. She kneels at his feet, pulling the condom off as he pets her head.

“You like to watch?” he asks. I shake my head. I’ve never in my life watched anyone having sex before. So what the hell am I doing now?

“I bet if I touched your pussy, you’d be soaked.” Now I squirm on the bed. He can’t do that. He can’t touch me. He must see the look in my eye as he shakes his head, letting me know he wouldn’t do it. He isn’t going to touch me. The girl has his cock in her hand, stroking it before sucking it into her mouth. He moans as she sucks harder and faster. Her head bobs, and I can’t help but keep my eyes glued to the scene before me. What am I doing? Am I sick? I shouldn’t want to see this, yet I can’t look away.

“Come on, Ginger,” he growls as she bobs her head faster. Before I know what’s happening, he pulls his cock from her mouth and turns toward me. His cock is hard and angry in his hand as he jerks it a few times. His cum sprays from the tip,

hitting my face. Hot spurts keep coming before he steps closer. He uses the tip of his cock to paint my lips with his seed before he steps back and looks at me.

“Get off the floor, Ginger.” The girl climbs off the floor obediently and stands next to him, waiting on his next command, but he keeps his eyes on me instead of looking at her.

“Fuck you look sexy as hell covered in me.” His words cause my stomach to heat and my thighs to clench.

“Get out, Ginger,” he says. The girl opens her mouth to protest, but I see how he cuts his eyes at her. She doesn’t argue. Instead, she grabs her things and walks out of the room naked.

The guy, Tarek, looms over me. His eyes move over my clothed body before returning to my face. He reaches for me, running his fingers through the mess he made on my face.

“You should taste it,” he whispers. It doesn’t sound like he’s asking me, rather demanding I taste him. I can feel my body quiver before his fingers glide over my lips. Slowly I part them, and he slips them inside. I can taste him on my tongue. He begins to pump his finger in and out of my mouth until I close my lips around it. Then he growls low in his throat and moves it faster. Before I know it, he pulls it free with an audible pop. My eyes find his, and I can see heat in them.

“If only you’d tell me what I wanted to know, LaLa. This could all be so much easier.” He keeps his tone low.

“I don’t know what you want.”

“I want to know what you did.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I tell him as my heart beats faster.

“You did, LaLa. You tried to kill yourself. It could be much easier if you just told me what I want to know.”

“What do you want with me?” I ask instead of answering him. I won’t give him the answers he wants. I won’t tell him anything because I think he already knows. He has to.

“I couldn’t stand to see you like that. So lifeless. You just laid there, not movin’.”

“Why do you care?” His eyebrows lift as he looks at me.

“That’s a loaded question you won’t get an answer to, LaLa.”

“Then why should I answer you?” I ask.

“I’m the only thing keepin’ you alive right now.”

“I didn’t ask you to!” I scream this time. He smirks and steps closer to my head, leaning down and running his fingers through my matted hair.

“I know you didn’t. But you’re here now, and that isn’t gonna change any time soon. Get used to it, LaLa.”

“Fuck you,” I snarl at him. He can’t keep me here, can’t keep me hostage. “They’ll come for me. And then what? What are you going to do?” If he isn’t a part of this mess, he’s still on the losing end.

“Who will?” he asks cocking his head to the side to study me. “Who will come for you?”

“You know who.” He has to. They had to have sent him out to find me. Otherwise, what the hell is all this? What’s this about? Why am I cuffed to his bed?

“I wish I did know, LaLa. You aren’t very forthcomin’ with information, now are you?” He steps back and grabs his clothes off the floor, giving me a nice view of his tattooed ass. I take him in while he dresses. Tattoos all over his body, the way he talks, the way he moves. Something isn’t right, and then I see him grab the cut off the back of the chair and slide it up his arms. No. This can’t be right. They would never deal with an MC.

“What is that?” I ask, nodding toward the cut, although I already know what it is.

“Why do you care?”

“You’re not one of them,” I whisper. He isn’t one of them and doesn’t know who I am. But how?

“One of who, darlin’?” I shake my head from side to side. This isn’t right. This can’t be.

“I need out of here,” I tell him. I look back at him as he pulls a cigarette from his pack and lights it up. My eyes are nearly pleading with him.

“You ain’t goin’ anywhere.”

“Why? What do you want with me?”

“I don’t know yet, LaLa. Don’t ask me to explain it. I can’t.”

“Where did you find me?” I ask him, vaguely remembering what he said before.

“Behind the strip club. I told you that,” he replies, blowing smoke into the air.

“Why didn’t you leave me there?”

“You weren’t dead, sweetheart. I don’t make it a habit of leavin’ half-dead girls layin’ behind my place of business.”

“The strip club is yours?” I ask.

“The clubs, yeah.”

“None of this makes sense.”

“It might if you’d tell me a little more about what the hell you were doin’.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I tell him, going back to that. I won’t tell him shit. If he doesn’t know who I am, I sure as hell won’t be the one to tell him. Let the cards fall where they may. Either way, I’ll be dead. I was warned about the clubs. I’ve heard about them over the years. They are ruthless. They’re the bad guys, almost worse than my father.

“You did do somethin’. Look, I don’t know what the hell you’re runnin’ from or who, for that matter, but I will find out.”

“What difference does it make to you?”

“Makes all the difference to me.”

“Why?”

“That’s none of your concern. I’ll bring you some food,” he says before walking toward the door.

“You can’t leave me like this!”

“I can and I will. This is how things will go until I get the answers I want.”

“You’re going to leave me cuffed to the bed?”

“With my cum all over your face. Yeah, I am. It looks sexy as fuck, by the way,” he tells me with a smirk.

“You can’t do this.” I grab the sheet with my free hand and pull it up to wipe my face off. Tarek chuckles and watches me but doesn’t make a move to stop me.

“I can do whatever I want. You don’t want to give me answers, so this is it. Get used to it, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“No? Don’t like sweetheart? Fine, Princess. Have it your way,” he says before leaving the room.

“Definitely don’t call me that,” I mumble under my breath.

CHAPTER 5

She's stubborn as all hell. She's a hellion, that's for sure. I can see the fire in her eyes when she looks at me. I can feel the burn of her gaze every time I walk into the room. And I fucking like it.

LaLa has been here a week. A week she hasn't said a word about what happened or who she is. A week I haven't learned much else about her. It bothers me, but I have patience. I can handle the non-talking girl.

I pull shit out of the shed until I find the chain I want to use. I whistle, toss it over my shoulder, and walk back into the clubhouse.

"What's that for?" Ridge asks as soon as he sees me.

"Givin' her a little more room to move around."

"Why? She givin' you what you want?" I shake my head.

"Nope. But I figured I'd be the better person here," I tell him. He chuckles and shakes his head as I turn and continue walking to my room. I push the door open and walk inside, seeing her lying there with her eyes closed. Those pretty eyes pop open and lock with mine when she hears me enter.

"What the hell is that?" she asks, trying to scoot up the bed.

"You've been a good girl, LaLa. I figured I could return the favor," I explain.

"What do you mean?"

“I’m givin’ you a little more space,” I tell her as I drop the chain on the bed. LaLa’s back is against the headboard, and her knees are pulled to her chest as I watch her. I move to the side table, pull the other cuffs out, and set them on the bed beside the chain.

“Why do you have so many cuffs?”

“Some people like them,” I reply casually.

“To be cuffed?”

“Are you kink shamin’?” I ask, cutting my eyes at her. She almost smiles. Almost. Enough that I’ll take it. I set about readying the cuffs and chain before reaching for her wrist. I hook the end of the chain to the cuffs on the bed and then secure the other set to the end. I reach for her wrist, but she tugs it away from me.

“Don’t do that. Don’t make it harder,” I tell her. I don’t want to fight her, but I will if I have to. LaLa seems to think about it for a long second before holding her arm out to me. I secure the cuff around her wrist as she lifts her arm to examine the chain. It’s nothing big. It was big enough that she couldn’t break it but could still get up and move around the room.

“I took everything out of the room you could hurt yourself with while you were asleep,” I tell her.

“You think I’d hurt myself?”

“You did try to kill yourself. I don’t trust you not to try again,” I admit.

“Why do you care so much?”

“That’s none of your business.” I turn my head and look away from her, unwilling to give her any information or insight into why I do what I do. She hasn’t given me a reason to trust her yet.

“Can I use the bathroom?”

“The chain should be long enough for you to make in there,” I tell her. I walk over and sit in the chair, watching as she stands from the bed. She immediately stretches and walks toward the bathroom with her chain hanging beside her. I lean

forward and rest my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. Is this really what I want to be doing? Dealing with this girl? I could have left her. I could have made Nick deal with it, but no. I had to take her, bring her home with me. This is a mess. A mess I created, but there's something about her I can't get past. She reminds me too much of her. The memory of a ghost.

I shake my head and scrub my hand over my face ignoring the memories that want to surface. I shove them back into the box and into the back of my mind where they belong. I can't think about her, or I will lose it. I've worked too hard for too long to have that shit take me down now.

Instead of rehashing the past, I stand and pull my cut down my arms. I toss it onto the chair before pulling my shirt off and moving to my jeans. When I'm in only my boxers, I walk over and pull the blanket back and climb into bed. A few minutes later, LaLa comes out and looks at me for a long second before making her way back to the bed. She climbs in and pulls the blanket over her, staying as close to the edge as possible.

"Scared of me?" I ask her.

"Shouldn't I be?"

"I haven't hurt you, LaLa."

"Oh, because keeping me hostage is normal."

"I never said it was normal. But it is what it is for now," I tell her.

"What does that mean?"

"It means maybe one day you will get to walk out those doors and be free again."

"What do you mean, maybe?" Now she turns her head to face me, and I roll onto my side to face her. Her eyes look hopeful, but there's also a hint of sadness.

"Just what I said. Get better, and we will see what happens," I tell her.

"I am better."

“No, darlin’. You’re not. Somethin’ made you do that, and until you face what that somethin’ is, you’re not gonna get better.”

“What if I can’t face it?”

“You have to. There’s no other way to heal.”

“You talk like you have experience.”

“I do, and I know it’s hard. It’s probably gonna be the hardest thing you’ve ever had to do, but in order to face yourself every day, you have to do it.”

“I don’t think I can,” she whispers. I reach over and brush the hair away from her face and smile at her.

“Yeah, you can. And I’m here to help you. You just have to ask, LaLa.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Of course it is. Whatever it is, you can get past it.”

“What if it’s a person?”

“No person should make you feel like death is the only way out. They don’t get to hold that kind of power over you.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been there before,” I admit to her. I don’t want to, but maybe that’s what she needs to open up to me. Maybe she needs a little of my truth to see I’m not the bad guy here.

“You tried to kill yourself?”

“It’s a long story,” I tell her. She raises her hand, the chain hanging from her wrist.

“I’m not going anywhere.” There it is. The fire I see in her. She hasn’t let that fire burn out, which means there’s hope. There’s a chance she can get past this and live her life.

“There was a girl in my life once. She meant a lot to me. But things were hard back then. Life wasn’t as easy as it is now. Fuck I shouldn’t be tellin’ you this,” I say under my breath. I shouldn’t tell her my story or look at her like she’s

my redemption, but I feel it. I can fucking feel it inside of me. She needs me.

“Why not?”

“It’s personal, and I haven’t told anyone about this. Not even my brothers,” I admit.

“Please.” That one word. I remember that word. I remember how she said it, the way she looked at me with pleading eyes. How did I end up there? At that place? How did I end up where I did?

“We were young. Stupid. Bethany was the girl I couldn’t have until I had her. Her parents hated me. They hated that she liked me. They hated our relationship and that Bethany would always run to me with her problems and not them. I got it, I understood, but what could I do, yeah? I couldn’t push her away. The girl had so many demons locked away inside her,” I say, shaking my head a little. I hate remembering this. I hate going back to that place. I haven’t been there in so long.

“You loved her,” LaLa murmurs.

“Yeah. I did. She made me feel special, whole. But her parents were relentless in tryin’ to keep us apart. They would do anything they could to make it happen. One night Bethany came to me with a plan for us to be together. She had two bottles of pills in her bag. One for me and one for her.”

“Oh, my God.”

“I wasn’t thinkin’ straight. I knew I couldn’t lose her. I knew I didn’t want to. She was everything to me. So when she said we could be together forever, I believed her. We took our bottles and swallowed the pills. It took a little while for them to kick in, and we just laid there, holdin’ each other as tightly as we could.”

“She died,” she says, tears falling down her cheeks.

“I woke up in the hospital. I was in a panic. They knew what we’d done. Someone had found us. They ruined our fuckin’ plans, but when I looked over, it wasn’t Bethany I saw. It was a cop. He told me she didn’t make it. That she overdosed, and they couldn’t bring her back.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I hated myself for a long time. I hated it went that far, and I didn’t think about it before we did it. I let Bethany die. If I didn’t agree, she would still be here. I wouldn’t have lost her. I carry that pain with me daily and the loss in my heart. When I saw you in that alley, I knew it was a sign from her. She wanted me to save you, LaLa.” Silence. I’m greeted by silence, which is fine. It’s a lot to take in for her. I just dropped my whole life on her.

“What if I can’t be saved?”

“Everyone can be saved. You just have to let go and let it happen.”

“It’s not that easy with me.”

“It can be. Whatever it is you’re runnin’ from, I can help you.”

“Why?”

“Because you were sent to me for a reason, LaLa. You’re here for a reason.”

“Pierson. My name is Pierson.”

“Pierson,” I repeat, letting it roll off my tongue. I like it. A lot better than LaLa. “Thank you for that, Pierson.”

“What happens now?”

“Now we sleep. Now you think about what I said and decide if your life is worth livin’. I think it is. You just need to be set on a new course, and I’m here to help you do that.”

CHAPTER 6

I almost wish I didn't tell him my name that night. I should have kept it to myself, but I felt he needed to know it for some reason. He needed that connection, and after hearing what happened, I wanted to give it to him.

He's kept the chain around my wrist this last week too. I can get up and move around the room and bathroom, but that's it. Now I sit on the bed eating the meal he brought me earlier when the door opens, and Tarek walks back in.

"You about finished?"

"I'm done."

"You didn't finish it." He nods toward the plate in front of me.

"It was a lot of food," I tell him. He nods and walks over, picking up the plate and setting it on the table. Then he moves to my wrist and pulls a key from his pocket, unhooking the cuff. I don't say anything; I just watch him. He replaces the cuff with a bracelet, and I'm even more confused.

"You've been good," he tells me before stepping back. I look at my wrist and then back to him, confused by what this means.

"What is this?"

"It has a sensor in it. You get too close to the doors, and I'll know. Hell, the whole club will know."

"What does this mean?"

“It means welcome to the Bleeding Aces MC. You’re free to move around the whole clubhouse.” Something sparks in my chest. Hope? I don’t know, but I feel it. He trusts me enough to walk freely.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Don’t try anything stupid. They all know to look out for you. Stay out of the kitchen unless someone is in there with you. I still don’t trust you around sharp objects,” he warns, causing my heart to split. I wouldn’t do it again.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“Don’t thank me. Thank yourself. You haven’t shown me a reason not to let you move around.”

“What does all this mean?”

“It means you need to get better, Pierson.”

“You’ve said that before, but how will I know when I’m better?”

“WHEN YOU LET it all go, darlin’. When you realize that your life is worth livin’.” I nod as I climb off the bed and shake my arms out. Tarek watches me intently but doesn’t say anything.

“Want me to show you around?” he finally asks. I nod my head, a little excited to be leaving the room. I can even feel a smile tugging across my face. Tarek smiles back at me before walking toward the door and pulling it open. “Come on.” I step into the hallway and take it all in. Doors line the hall, most of them closed.

“This is all the rooms. Some of the guys live here, some don’t, but they all have a room just in case,” he tells me before motioning for me to walk. I walk down the hall and out into the open space. Guys wander around drinking and talking; girls hang out in groups.

“This is the main room. We usually all hang out here,” Tarek tells me. I nod my head as I look around and just take it in.

“It’s big,” I say softly.

“Yeah. We like to have space. You want a drink?” Tarek turns to look at me, and I can see the truth in this man’s eyes. He’s just trying to help me. Why? Why does he care? Is it all because of what happened to him? Does he see me as his redemption? I can’t be anyone’s redemption.

“Sure.” He smiles and nods, leading me toward the bar across the room. He tells the girl to give us two beers, and she quickly slides them across to him with a smile. Tarek pops the tops off and passes me one, which I bring to my lips, taking a small drink, nearly gagging.

“Not much of a drinker?” he asks through a laugh.

“Not really,” I admit.

“Good to know.”

“What do you guys do here?”

“Well, that’s a loaded question. What don’t we do is a better one. We dabble in a little bit of everything, but mainly, we run the strip club and a motorcycle repair shop in town,” he says.

“What else?” He turns his head to look at me, and I see it. It’s off-limits.

“Not everything we do is productive to society. Let’s put it that way,” he answers. I nod my head. They’re into illegal shit, just like I’ve always been told. So why do I feel so comfortable here? Why do I feel safe inside these walls? Not even in my home did I feel this safe.

“You can talk to me,” Tarek says, catching my attention.

“I was just thinking that it all feels so safe here.”

“You are safe here.”

“How can you say that when you have no idea what I’m running from?” Tarek runs his hand through his hair before turning and leaning against the bar as he stares at me.

“We’re family here. We protect each other. It’s that simple.”

“I’m not part of this family.”

“You’re here with me, making you part of this family. While you’re here, any of these guys would lay their life down for you.” Tears burn the back of my eyes as I think about that. There’s no way they’d do that for someone they don’t even know me.

“That makes no sense,” I tell him.

“It doesn’t have to make sense. It is what it is.”

“My father killed a man.” Now he shifts from foot to foot, standing up taller.

“You wanna go back to the room and talk about this?”

“No.”

“Okay.” I swallow hard and lick my suddenly dry lips. I take a deep breath to steady myself before opening my mouth again.

“I saw it all. It wasn’t just him. It was the man I was supposed to marry too.”

“You’re engaged?”

“Not by choice.”

“I don’t get it,” he says. “You have a choice. You could have said no.”

“It’s not that easy. Not in my world.” It’s like a light switch has flipped inside of him. Everything becomes so clear to him now that I’ve said those words.

“You’re mafia.”

“I didn’t ask to be.”

“But you are.”

“Yes. My father is the Boss of the Catoli family.” His face changes. Something registers inside him. The name. He knows the name, and why wouldn’t he? They both deal in illegal shit. They probably run in the same circles, although my father never liked the clubs. He made that very clear when I was younger. “I understand if you want me to leave.”

“I never said that,” Tarek responds quickly.

“You don’t want me to leave?”

“No, I don’t.”

“But what about my father?”

“Is that who you’re runnin’ from?” I nod my head slowly as he blows out a breath.

“Not just him. My fiancé too.”

“Who did they kill?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“It’s dangerous.”

“I’m dangerous,” he responds, and my heart leaps. If it’s even there, he hasn’t shown me that side of him. Tarek’s been nothing but caring toward me.

“I can’t.” He nods his head before looking around the room. He seems a little uneasy, and I can only imagine why.

“For now. I’ll accept that, for now,” he finally says. I nod my head, grateful he isn’t pushing me on this. I don’t know how he will respond if he knows. What if he knew him? What if he was good with him? I can’t risk it.

“I’m gonna go talk to my Prez for a minute. Finish your drink, and we’ll get ready for bed,” he says. I nod my head once more and watch as he walks away. He strolls up to another man, and they quickly start a conversation. The man’s eyes shift to me and then back to Tarek. I imagine he’s telling him who I am. A cold chill works its way down my spine as I think about it.

“You’re new here.”

“You’ve seen me before,” I tell the redhead. The same one Tarek was fucking while I was in the room.

“I know. He finally set you free?” she asks, a smile on her face.

“Something like that.”

“Tarek’s never kept a little pet around,” she states, eyeing me up and down.

“I’m not his pet.”

“Sure looks that way. He did keep you chained to the bed for weeks.”

“What the hell is it you want?” I snap at her a little louder than I need to. A few other girls look my way, but they don’t say anything before going back to what they’re doing.

“I want to know what makes you so special.”

“To be chained to a bed? I hardly think that’s special,” I tell her.

“Oh, when it comes to Tarek, it is. He’s closed off. No one gets in.”

“And why do you think I’m the special one?”

“I don’t. I don’t think you’re special at all,” she snaps at me. The thought of hitting her in the face crosses my mind, but this isn’t my place. However, it may be my way out of here sooner. I curl my hand into a fist and pull back before slamming it into her face. She screams and stumbles back, and then there’s a swarm of people around us. Some rush to her side while others stand at mine.

“What the hell is this?” The tall man asks. I read his cut, and it says Ridge.

“She started it,” I tell him.

“And?”

“And I finished it,” I tell him.

“What the hell, Pierson?” Tarek exclaims. He’s now standing before me with a strange look on his face.

“What?”

“What the hell do you think you’re doin’?”

“She wanted to start shit with me, so I ended it. You told me to get better. Well, this is me, getting better.”

“It made you feel better to hit Ginger?”

“Actually, yes, it did,” I reply, deep breathing. Maybe all I needed was to hit someone. It sure as hell did feel good.

“You’re fuckin’ insane,” he grumbles under his breath, but I see the hint of a smile on his face.

“Go clean her up,” Ridge orders one of the other girls. They look at me like I’m crazy before walking her in the opposite direction.

“You can’t go around puttin’ hands on our girls,” Ridge warns.

“She was starting a fight with me.”

“What did she say?” Tarek asks.

“She wanted to know what made me so special that you’d chain me up in your room.”

“This is all on you, brother,” Ridge laughs.

“It’s none of Ginger’s business why I do what I do,” Tarek adds.

“No, it’s not. But you can’t have your girl goin’ around fightin’ the club girls either,” Ridge tells him.

“I’m standing right here.”

“And you seem to be feelin’ better,” Ridge says.

“That actually made me feel a lot better.”

“Are you always this scrappy?” Ridge asks.

“When I need to be.”

“I like her,” he adds, making me smile.

“Even after what I told you?” Tarek asks him, looking him in the eye. I know he told him about me and who I am.

“Even after that. Listen,” Ridge says, turning toward me. “I know who your father is. I don’t like the man. Never had a run-in with him, but I don’t like him, and I have my reasons. He won’t come around here,” he tells me.

“What if he does?”

“Then we’ll handle it,” Tarek says quickly.

“Will we?” Ridge asks, glancing at Tarek now.

“We will.”

“Is that you puttin’ a claim on her?”

“No. This is me makin’ shit right, Ridge. You don’t know the whole story, and now isn’t the time to hear it, but know this is what I need to do.” Ridge appears to think about it before nodding his head.

“I trust you, brother. Do what you gotta do, and we’ll be here to back you on it.”

“Even against him?” Tarek asks.

“If it comes to that, yeah. Never liked that motherfucker anyway.”

CHAPTER 7

When you think about what your life was like as a kid, you never picture the complete truth. You see all the glory and the good shit but never the bad. That was me. I never pictured that I'd be in the positions I was in. I never thought I'd be the person I am today. But life happened, and my life shifted. Things changed, and now this is what my life is.

Pierson has weighed heavily on my mind over the last few weeks. She's been here about a month now. She's doing better, or at least she seems to be. She hasn't tried to kill herself again or even attempted to get her hands on anything. It makes me wonder what the hell she's planning because she has to be planning something.

"What are you thinkin' about?" Cage asks.

"Pierson. She hasn't tried to kill herself again," I tell him.

"And that's a bad thing?"

"No. It's a good thing, but why hasn't she? She was hell-bent on bein' dead."

"Maybe it was all an eye-opener."

"Doubt that. She's plannin' somethin'."

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"I think she wants to run, brother."

"Run where? From what I hear, she has nowhere to go," he says.

“I don’t know. Maybe she’s on some vigilante-type shit,” I say. Cage chuckles and turns his head, looking at Pierson. She sits off in the corner with a few of the girls talking. She looks okay, seems okay, but that doesn’t mean shit. Bethany looked okay too, and look what we did.

“She seems okay to me.”

“That’s because you aren’t lookin’ hard enough. There’s somethin’ more goin’ on.”

“What are you thinkin’?” he asks as I glance at Pierson again.

“I don’t know, brother. Can’t put my finger on it.”

“Why don’t you just ask her?”

“Because that’s so simple. If you’re plottin’ shit, you gonna tell someone?” I ask him, nearly rolling my eyes.

“True.”

“Exactly. Now I need to figure out what she’s thinkin’.” Cage sits back in his seat, bringing his beer to his lips while I contemplate my next move with Pierson. I know she’s hiding something from me. I know there’s more to her story, and I want it.

I shove out of my chair and cross the room to her. Grabbing her hand in mine, I tug her out of her seat and toward a side room. When we’re inside, I take a deep breath and turn to face her, releasing her hand.

“What’s wrong?” she asks me.

“I need to know who they killed.”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not? What’s the big secret?” Something is unsettled inside of me. I can feel it; something is wrong here. I watch her look anywhere but at me, and that’s my answer. Something is wrong.

“I just can’t tell you right now.”

“Listen, whatever it is, I can help you, Pierson.”

“It was a club member. I don’t know if it was part of this club or not. He wore a cut like yours, but I didn’t see the back. I wasn’t focused on that,” she blurts.

“He had one of these on?” I ask her once more, tugging at my cut.

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t see the back?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. I blow out a breath and run my hand through my hair before I nod at her.

“Good. That’s good, Pierson. Thank you for that.”

“They don’t like the clubs, Tarek. I’ve always heard stories about it.”

“We’re not actually friendly with the mob either, or at least not your dad.”

“I’ve never understood the inner workings of things. I tried to stay in my place and out of their way, but that night, I knew they were up to something. I snuck out of my room and down the stairs when I saw what was happening.”

“You watched them kill a man,” I state.

“Yeah, and then I ran to my room and climbed out the window. I could hear them laughing, Tarek. Like it was all a game to them.”

“And you think they’d hurt you?”

“I know they would. They ... he ...”

“What? He what?” I push when she chokes up on me. There’s more to this story. I reach up and place my hand on her cheek, letting her know she’s safe here. She’s safe with me.

“He killed my brother.”

“What?”

“My brother saw too much too. It was years ago. I could hear the screams, but there was nothing I could do. I tried to run that time too, but they caught me. That’s when I was told I

was marrying Isaac. I knew he was trying to keep me under control.” My heart breaks for her. I may be a bastard, and I may kill people, but my heart fucking breaks for her.

I slide my hand around her neck and pull her against me. Her arms wrap around my waist, and she holds on tight as she sobs into my shirt.

“He was all I had,” she cries. Fuck. What kind of fucked up family does she have? What kind of mess did I get myself into?

“You’re not alone, Pierson. Not anymore,” I tell her. She pulls back a little and looks up at me with so much sadness in her eyes. Then she shocks me. She reaches up and pulls my face to hers. Her lips barely touch mine, and the world seems to spin out of control. She brushes her lips over mine before pressing them against mine. That’s when I take over kissing her. I know I shouldn’t, but I kiss her hard and rough. I bruise her beautiful plump lips before sliding my tongue into her mouth.

Pierson moans and my cock responds. That motherfucker hardens and pushes against my zipper as she moves in closer. Her body is pressed tightly against mine, and I want nothing more than to strip her and fuck her right here and now. And I might.

My hand slides down her back to her ass, where I grip her hard. She must like that because she groans and forces her body closer to me. Thoughts swirl around my head, and none of them are good. Thoughts of her at my mercy, naked, of driving into her over and over. But I can’t do that. I said I would help her stay safe.

So I break our kiss pulling back and listening as a whine falls from her lips. Pierson’s eyes slowly open and lock with mine, and the fucking air in the room thickens.

“We can’t do this,” I tell her.

“Why not?”

“We just can’t.”

“You look at me like a project. Like I’m something you need to fix,” she accuses as she steps back.

“Don’t do that,” I tell her.

“It’s true. You think I’m your redemption, but I’m not, Tarek. I can’t be.”

“I don’t know what I think anymore, Pierson. I know I like havin’ you here. I know I like feelin’ your presence.”

“You do?” she asks hesitantly. I shouldn’t have told her that, but it’s the truth, and I think we both need that right now.

“Yeah, I do. And it’s kinda fuckin’ with my head a little.”

“Why?”

“Because you aren’t Bethany, and I know that. I haven’t wanted to keep a girl around since her, Pierson. But the thought of lettin’ you leave ... it just doesn’t sit right with me.”

“You thought about letting me go?” I run my hand through my hair.

“Yeah, I have. I didn’t bring you here to hold you hostage. I just wanted you to get better.”

“I have nowhere to go.”

“But you were hell-bent on leavin’.”

Pierson sighs, and her shoulders slump. I want to go to her and hold her, but I don’t.

“At first, I just wanted to run. I wanted to get as far from them as possible.”

“And now?” I ask her.

“Now, I don’t want to see you get hurt because of me.” Her words soothe me more than they should. I shouldn’t feel like this, but something tugs at my heart, and I step back toward her, lifting my hand to cup her cheek.

“You have to know I wouldn’t let you go,” I tell her.

“I’m not sure I can agree with that.”

“Then I’m not sure this thing would work between us,” I admit. She nods before biting her lip, but before I know what’s happening, she’s kissing me again.

Everything shifts. Everything. I kiss her back like my life depends on it. My hands are all over her, grasping at whatever I can. She’s moaning, tugging at my belt buckle, and I let her. What the hell am I doing?

Ignoring the nagging question in the back of my mind, I walk her back until her legs hit the desk behind her. Then I make quick work of her jeans, sliding them down her legs with her panties. Pierson leans back, pulling her shirt over her head, and I move in, taking her nipple into my mouth through her lace bra. Her head drops back, and moans fall from her lips.

Then she’s back to work on my jeans, shoving them down my thighs.

“You wanna take this to the room?” I ask her.

“No,” she moans breathlessly. I nod and lean back in, taking the other nipple this time. I bite down and listen to her cry out my name. Her hand wraps around my cock, and she begins to stroke and tug. She surprises me again when she climbs up on the desk and slides her ass to the edge, her pussy right at my cock level. I step forward, and I’m buried inside her in one motion.

“Fuck,” I growl as her pussy wraps around me. I reach between us and pull the cup of her bra down to access her breast. Then I’m licking and sucking until her pussy clenches around me. It feels so fucking good I don’t want to stop. But then her legs wrap around me, pulling me in deeper.

“Fuck me, Tarek,” she whispers, and I oblige. I move to grab her hips in my hands and thrust into her. I fuck her long and hard. My strokes are calculated and perfect. Her body bounces on the desk, but I keep her in place. I may be bruising her, but I don’t care. She feels too fucking good wrapped around me the way she is.

“You like this?” I ask her, rolling my hips.

“God, yes.” That’s my girl. I pull out of her, and she whines as I drag her body off the desk. Then I spin her around and bend her over it. Her chest is pressed against the wooden desk as I line up behind her. She’s so fucking wet that it’s easy to slide back into her. With her hips in my hands, I begin to pound into her. I fuck her harder than before. I fuck her deeper. A chill runs down my spine, and I know what to do. I reach around with one hand and find her clit. I rub hard and fast as I feel her body tense, and then she screams my name, coating my cock in her juices. A few more rough thrusts and I’m falling apart with her. I grunt, growl, and groan. I’ve never felt anything like that in my life.

My hand is pressed against her back while my cock jerks inside her. Hot spurts of my cum hit her deeply.

When I catch my breath, I pull out of her and tug my jeans back up. Pierson lies there, breathing heavily.

“You okay?” I ask her.

“That was the best sex I’ve ever had,” she declares softly, causing me to chuckle.

“I’m glad.” Finally, she stands and turns to face me, her cheeks red. She looks fucking gorgeous right now. I step into her, cupping her cheek before lowering my lips to hers.

“It was pretty good,” I whisper against her lips.

“It was better than that.”

CHAPTER 8

PIERSON

I don't think my body has been used this much ... ever. Of course, I've had sex before, but nothing compares to what Tarek has done to me. He's almost turned me into a sex freak. I find I want him more than I should. But it feels so good. He makes me feel good, which I've not had in a long time.

"We need to talk," Twitch announces as he sits at my table.

"About what?"

"Tarek told me about what you saw, and we need to talk about that," he replies.

"I'd rather not."

"You don't have a choice here, Pierson. There's a club with someone missin'. They've been lookin' for him for a while now and have come up empty. I need to know what you saw that night. I need to know what the guy looked like," he says.

"Is this an interrogation?" When I hear Tarek's voice, I turn my head to see him standing next to me, his eyes on his friend.

"We need information."

"And you didn't think to ask me to talk to her?"

"What's the difference, Tarek?"

"There's a big difference!"

“Since when? Since you started fuckin’ her?” Twitch asks. Tarek’s eyes flash with anger as his fists ball at his sides. Before I know it, Twitch is on his feet, and Tarek is stepping toward him. I leap out of my chair and stand between them. My hands rest on both their chests when Tarek growls.

“Get your fuckin’ hands off him.” I quickly pull my hand away from Twitch and turn to face Tarek.

“Hey. I don’t mind answering the questions, okay.”

“That’s not what this is about.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No. He should have come to me with anything concernin’ you!”

“I’m not a baby, Tarek!” I snap in his face. He looks down at me, and something changes. His face slowly relaxes along with his shoulders.

“Yeah. You’re right.” I nod my head as he holds his hand out to Twitch. The fist bump calms everything down, and we sit again. Tarek keeps me tucked close to his side, and I find I like being here.

“I didn’t see the back of the cut. I don’t know what club he belonged to,” I blurt out the information.

“Did you see him?” Twitch asks. I close my eyes, remembering his face. I remember the look, the way he wasn’t afraid of them. The way he almost smirked at them.

“He was a smaller guy. He had a tattoo on the left side of his neck. I couldn’t make out what it was. Medium-length blond hair. He wasn’t afraid of them.”

“What do you mean he wasn’t afraid of them?” Twitch asks. I open my eyes and look at Twitch.

“He wasn’t scared. He smiled at them. Even when they had guns to his head, he smiled.”

“Jesus,” Tarek mumbles under his breath.

“That’s him,” Twitch says.

“Who?” Tarek asks.

“Dodger. It has to be.”

“No fuckin’ way.”

“Yeah. Paul thought he went off-grid, and now we know why. Small guy with blond hair. That’s fuckin’ Dodger.” They both blow out a breath as I look at Tarek.

“Who is that?”

“He’s a member of the club, a different chapter.”

“He was family?” I ask him. He nods his head as sorrow seeps into his eyes. I feel so bad now. I should have told them to begin with, but I didn’t think I should. Either way, he was already dead, but now I feel horrible.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Thanks for tellin’ us, Pierson,” Twitch says.

“I should have told you sooner. I’m sorry.”

“No. Don’t be sorry. This is all new to you, and you’re dealin’ with your shit on top of it. There’s nothin’ we could have done anyway,” Tarek informs me. I nod my head, still feeling a little guilty. Tarek’s hand slips over mine, giving it a little squeeze.

“What happens now?” I ask.

“Now we deal with this. The other chapter will come up, and we’ll figure out what to do from there.”

“You’re going to kill them?”

“Is that a problem?” Tarek asks, his eyes locking with mine. It’s my father. The man who gave me life, and now they’re sitting here talking about killing him. Is it a problem? If the shoe were on the other foot, he would kill me. I have no doubts about that.

“No,” I whisper, but he still hears me. He looks away from me and straight at Twitch. Something goes down between them. Something unspoken. I don’t bother trying to figure it out or reason it out.

“Everything is gonna be fine, Pierson.”

“I just ... I never thought it would be over. I thought I’d run until they found me.”

“You’re not runnin’ anywhere.” Tarek declares. Twitch chuckles and shoves out of his chair before walking off. I glance back up at Tarek and wonder what’s going on in that head of his.

“I can’t stay here forever.”

“You can until this shit is dealt with. I won’t give you a reason to try what you did again.” His words warm my heart. That he wants to ensure I’m safe and okay means a lot to me.

“Thank you,” I tell him truthfully.

“Don’t thank me. I’m selfish, Pierson. I want you here.”

“You do?”

“Haven’t I made that clear enough to you?” I swallow hard because he has. He has made that clear to me.

“Yes.”

“Good. Then you know where I stand, but things are gonna get complicated soon. When the other chapter gets here, shit is gonna be wild.”

“What does that mean?”

“We need to have a funeral. They will have questions and may want to talk to you and hear it from you. You up for that?” he asks.

“If it’ll help. I was scared to tell you at first, but I want to help, Tarek.”

“Good. We need your help. You saw it all happen, and as much as I hate makin’ you relive that, we need you to.”

“It was so scary. The looks on their faces. They didn’t care, Tarek. They just did it and didn’t even care.”

“They’re ruthless. Considering what you said, we don’t know what he was doin’ with them. They don’t like MCs. It makes no sense for Dodger to be there.”

“I don’t know why he was there either.”

“That’s somethin’ we’re gonna have to look into. We need all the information that we can get.”

“I’ll do whatever you need me to do,” I tell him. Something sparkles in his eyes when he looks at me, and I fall a little more for him. He reaches for me and wraps his hand around my nape, pulling me closer to him.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

“For what?”

“Bein’ you.” Then his lips are on mine. The taste of him invades my system, and I can’t help but lean into him. His lips caress mine, and I moan.

“Get a room!” I hear someone yell as Tarek smiles against my lips.

“I should take you into the room and fuck you senseless.”

“I think I’d like that.”

CHAPTER 9

I sit back in my seat and look around the table at the guys. Everyone seems calm enough, but I know deep down they're not. They're on edge, just like me.

"Missouri chapter is on the way up. Paul recently stepped down as Prez, and Mask was voted in. He'll be the one in control of this," Cage informs as he glances around the room at all of us.

"They gonna need our help on this?" Ridge asks.

"I offered it. It's our turf. We know the area and can offer the assistance they'll need."

"We need to do some diggin' before they get here," I add.

"Yeah, we do. We need to know what the fuck Dodger was up to. More importantly, why was he involved with them in the first place," Cage says.

"It doesn't make sense. Pierson said they don't deal with the MCs," I remind them.

"That doesn't make sense," Twitch chimes in.

"We know that much. None of this is makin' much sense right now. That's why we need to ask around. We'll wait until the guys get here to move forward with this, but we will find out what the hell Dodger was up to." We grunt and nod our agreement. None of this makes any sense. What could he have been doing there? What was his connection to them?

“What about sendin’ the girl back?” Ridge asks. My head whips in his direction, and my eyes narrow on his.

“That’s not a fuckin’ option,” I snarl.

“Why not? She can get in and get the intel we might need,” he adds.

“Because I fuckin’ said no, Ridge. You wanna keep forcin’ the issue? Then we take this shit outside,” I tell him feeling the anger bubbling inside me. There’s no way I’m sending her back into that hell. No fucking way.

“Let’s just calm down. Ridge, you can’t just say that shit about his girl. She tried to kill herself to get away from them. She isn’t goin’ back in,” Cage tells him. I thank fuck one of them is thinking straight.

“Just a suggestion,” Ridge adds.

“Yeah, a shit one,” I grumble.

“Okay, that’s enough. She isn’t goin’ back there,” Cage tells the two of us. I nod my head, letting it go for now. If he brings it up again, shit’s going to get real.

“What we can do is send some people out to sniff around. Someone has to know somethin’.”

“I’ll go,” I tell him.

“Me too,” Twitch chimes in.

“Fine. You two can go out and see what you can dig up. I don’t care how you have to get the information. The shed is open and available.” Now I like the sounds of that. It’s been a while since I’ve gotten my hands dirty, and this seems like a good reason too.

“Sounds good to me,” I tell him.

“It would sound good to you, you crazy fuck,” Twitch chuckles.

“It is what it is, brother.”

“That’s all I got until we have more information,” Cage adds. He ends church, and we stand and make our way to the

door when Ridge stops me. His hand lands on my chest, and I look down before dragging my gaze back to his.

“You need somethin’?” I ask him.

“I’m sorry I brought up your girl. You’re right. She’s been through enough and doesn’t need to be back in that shit,” he says.

“Appreciate that.” He nods and turns, walking out of the room when Cage talks.

“What’s that about anyway?”

“What’s what about?”

“You and the girl? She stickin’ around or what?”

“For now. Sendin’ her back out onto the streets isn’t the smartest move now we know about Dodger.”

“You’re right, but I’m wonderin’ if there’s somethin’ more to it.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“Like you catchin’ feelin’s for the girl.”

“And what if I am?”

“So she’s stickin’ around then,” he states.

“I don’t know enough about her to make the decision. Besides, I’m not lookin’ to keep an old lady around.”

“Why not?”

“Personal reasons,” I tell him. He nods his head as if he understands, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t know about Bethany. None of them do, yet she does. I told her of all people.

“Okay then. You know I’m good with whatever you choose to do,” he says.

“Appreciate that.” With that, he nods toward the door, and I take that as my cue to leave. I stroll out the door, but I don’t see Pierson anywhere.

“Ginger, you seen Pierson?” I ask her knowing she probably won’t answer me.

“Nope.” I huff out a breath and walk past her, heading down the hall. I’m unprepared for what I see when opening my bedroom door.

Pierson’s standing in the corner, her eyes wild and a knife in her hand.

“Pierson?” What the hell happened in the hour I was in church?

“Stay away from me.”

“Pierson, come on. What are you doin’?” I ask her once more as I walk further into the room. She glances around quickly before bringing her eyes back to mine. Tears roll down her cheeks as she shakes her head slowly.

“They’re going to come for me,” she says softly.

“No, they’re not. I’m not gonna let them,” I tell her. She holds the knife so tightly that I see her knuckles turning white.

“Yes, they are. There is nothing you can do to stop them either.”

“Is that how you really feel? You don’t think I can stop them?”

“You can’t! No one can, Tarek!”

“There’s more of us than there is of them. Pass me the knife, Pierson,” I tell her, trying to be gentle with her. I don’t want to startle her or make things worse.

“It would all be so easy, Tarek. Just to end it. I wouldn’t have to worry or look over my shoulder. The dreams would stop. The memories. I miss him, Tarek. I miss my brother,” she sobs as I move closer. When I’m within reach, I hold out my hand for her to give me the knife.

“I know this is hard, Pierson. I know you’re afraid, but everything is gonna be okay.”

“You don’t know that! No one can know that.”

“Pass me the knife.”

“Why can’t I just end it all?” she cries harder. I thought she was getting better. I thought something changed in her. Maybe I was wrong. Judging by the scene unfolding in front of me, I was dead wrong.

“You wanna know why? Because I need you here, Pierson.”

“You only need the information I have.”

“Is that what you think?” I ask her in disbelief. She drags her eyes to meet mine, and they hold there. Something slowly begins to break inside of her. Pierson lowers the knife before passing it to me. I reach for it, taking it from her before tossing it across the room. I hear it hit the wall and fall to the floor before I step even closer to her.

“I asked you a question,” I prod. “Is that what you think I want you here for?”

“I ... I don’t know.”

“You’re wrong. That isn’t what I want you here for. There’s more, so much more. You’re not the only one strugglin’ here either.” She looks at me but doesn’t say anything. Her eyes hold so much sorrow and pain, but I can’t do anything to help her. She has to be able to help herself at some point.

“He was all I had,” she finally tells me.

“What was he like?”

“He was smart. Too smart to be mixed up in the shit my father was. He always wanted to be more, do more, except our life didn’t allow that. We were told what to do and when to do it. More so him. He was the next in line to take over when my father became too old. Now he’s gone,” she whispers.

“What else?”

“He would always ensure I was okay no matter what was happening. He would check on me every night before bed and tell me he loved me before he went to sleep. He was everything, Tarek, and they took that away from me,” she sobs harder.

“He sounds like a good man and brother.”

“He was. And now he’s gone.”

“There’s no bringin’ them back, Pierson. There’s nothin’ we can do now but remember what they were to us. We can hold their memories in our hearts.” She closes her eyes and lowers her head. I step in, reaching for her, pulling her into my arms, and holding her while she cries. I don’t know why this feels so right. I don’t know why I don’t want to let her go, but whatever this is between us, there’s a spark. Something is simmering under the surface, waiting to ignite. But is that what I want? Am I ready to take on a woman? One with so much baggage and sorrow?

When her arms wrap around my waist, I know. I want it all. I want her no matter what she comes with. I need her, and I need to feel this, whatever this is between us.

“I’m keepin’ you, Pierson.” She pulls her head back to look up at me and seems confused.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m keepin’ you. I’m not lettin’ you go when this is over.”

“You can’t possibly know you want me,” she argues.

“I do know what I want. You can’t tell me you don’t feel it,” I tell her. She chews on her bottom lip for a second before nodding her head.

“I do feel it.”

“Then tell me you’re stayin’. Tell me you’re not gonna run when this is over.” It comes out as more of a demand than a question, but she gets it. I can see the look in her eyes. She gets what I’m saying.

“What if you find you don’t like me later?”

“I’m not sure that’s gonna happen,” I tell her.

“It might. I’m a mess, Tarek.”

“No, you’re scared. You’re alone, and you’re afraid of what might happen. That’s understandable, but now you’re

mine. And there's no turnin' back from that."

"Are you sure? We barely know each other?"

"I know enough. However, I get it if you're not sure."

"I don't know what to say. This is a lot so fast."

"You don't have to say anything. You just need to know that this is where I stand." She might not be my redemption, but she damn sure is something.

CHAPTER 10

It's been a few days since Tarek told me I was his. I've thought about what he said and realized I like him, but I don't know him. That doesn't mean I don't want to.

Tarek had to go out, and I've been left at the clubhouse. Most of the guys are off doing whatever they need to, and the girls are getting things ready for the other chapter to arrive.

"You don't have to sit in the corner," one of the girls says. I look up and shrug my shoulders. I don't want another altercation like the one I had with Ginger.

"I'm okay."

"No, you're not. No one wants to sit alone in the corner. I'm GeeGee," she introduces herself before dropping onto the couch beside me.

"Pierson," I tell her like she doesn't already know.

"What do you want to know? I know you have questions. I can see it all over your face."

"I don't have any questions."

"Sure you do. This is all new to you."

"How long will they be gone for?"

"That's a tough one. I'm not exactly sure what they're doing this time, but it varies. Could be hours, could be days."

"What do they do when they go out?" I ask.

“They work at the club or the shop. Or they have some secret shit to do. We don’t get to know about that. It’s club business,” she replies.

“What do you do here?” GeeGee giggles a little before she answers.

“I’m not one of the club girls if that’s what you’re asking. I’m Mikey’s old lady.”

“Is he the shorter one, dark hair?” I ask, trying to put a name to a face.

“That’s him.”

“He seems nice,” I add.

“He is. They all are when they want to be. Tarek being good to you?”

“Yeah, he’s been great. I’ve broken down a few times, but he didn’t seem to mind.”

“He’s a good guy.”

“Have you known him long?”

“About ten years since I’ve been here. What do you want to know?” GeeGee asks as if she can read my mind.

“I just don’t know much about him,” I tell her.

“Tarek is different than the others. He’s quieter and keeps to himself. He doesn’t open up about a lot of things. In fact, I’ve rarely heard him talk about himself since I’ve been here.”

“Isn’t that a little strange?” I ask her.

“I don’t think so. He’s just more of a private person. He keeps his feelings to himself. I heard he had a traumatic past, but I have no idea what happened, and it’s not my place to ask.”

“He seems so sweet and caring, making me wonder what he’s doing in this club. No offense to you,” I tell her. She smiles and shakes her head.

“None taken. The guys all have their reasons for being here. Some were born into this, while others found their way

here. It's a family and not a lot of the guys have that. Most are loners. I think the club gives me that family feeling. There isn't anything the guys wouldn't do for each other."

"You speak from experience?"

"I do. I've seen firsthand how they work. Whenever one needs something, the others are there. It's the dynamic of the club."

"He wants me to stay," I admit. Her eyes widen as she looks at me before a smile tugs across her face.

"He does?"

"Yeah, he said he did."

"That's new for him. He doesn't keep girls around. I have never known him to bring a girl around here. Obviously, that's what the club girls are here for, but he hasn't been with anyone else from outside the club," she tells me. I don't know if that makes me feel better or not. The thought of him with Ginger flashes through my mind.

"And you don't think that's weird? That he brought me here?"

"At first, no. He found you and wanted to help. I understood that, but then Mikey told me he was going all caveman over you. It's new to us too." I nod and clasp my hands in my lap, unsure what to do with myself.

"Is he always so closed off?"

"As I said, he pretty much stays to himself." Just as she finishes speaking, the doors open, and men start filing in.

"They're back," she nods toward where my gaze has already landed. GeeGee stands, walks over, and greets her man with a kiss as I watch the others enter the room. Then finally, Tarek walks in. His eyes look wild, like he's not even here. He searches the room until his eyes land on mine, and then a smile tugs across his face. One of the guys says something to him and slaps him on the shoulder, but he never looks away from me. Something heats my insides, and I squirm in my seat.

Tarek starts toward me when he's stopped by one of the guys to talk. Tarek turns and gives him his full attention, and I feel myself deflate a little.

"Go to him," I hear GeeGee say. I look up and find her standing next to me once again.

"He's busy."

"He's fine. If it's important, they will go into the office. Go over there," she grabs my hand and pulls me from the seat. I stand and adjust my clothes before I start walking toward him. It feels weird. It feels wrong.

But then he turns his head and looks at me as I walk closer, and it all feels right. When I'm close enough, he grabs me around the back of my neck and pulls my lips to his. He kisses me like he hasn't seen me in years. When he finally breaks the kiss, he continues talking with the other guy but keeps me tucked into his side.

"Are you wantin' in on it?" the guy asks.

"What the fuck kind of question is that?" Tarek asks him.

"I didn't know if you wanted to hang out with your girl or not."

"She ain't goin' anywhere," he tells him, and I feel a blush creeping across my face. The guy laughs and turns to walk away when Tarek pulls me in front of him. His hands rest on my hips as he looks me in the eye.

"You okay?" he asks.

"I'm good. Talked to GeeGee."

"Oh yeah? About what?"

"You."

"Me? What about me?" he asks curiously.

"Just about the club and how everyone fits in."

"Is that a good thing?"

"I think so. I wasn't sure how all this worked," I reply.

"I'll explain whatever you want to know, Pierson."

“I know. It was just nice to hear from another woman,” I admit.

“I’m sure it was. GeeGee is a good one to talk to. She will help you with whatever you need,” he tells me.

“I’m glad you’re back.”

“Did you miss me?” he asks playfully.

“I did.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I did.” Then his lips are on mine, and he kisses me slowly, gently, and everything else in the world seems to disappear slowly.

“I gotta go handle somethin’ out back. You good?”

“You’re not leaving again?”

“No. I just need to take care of somethin’.”

“Okay. I’ll be here.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” he says with a smile.

CHAPTER 11

I'll be here. I wanted to hear those words leave her lips. I wanted to hear she'd be waiting for me when I finished. It does something to my insides hearing that. Something good.

"What the hell are you smilin' about?" Cage asks as I walk into the shed and see the asshole tied to the chair.

"Nothin'. Just happy," I tell him.

"About what?"

"Life, brother."

"You're fuckin' weird as all shit, Tarek." Now I chuckle.

"I know, and you like it," I remind him. He shakes his head as he brings his cigarette to his lips and inhales.

"Don't know about that," he argues, making me smile bigger.

"Can we please just get to it?" Ridge asks.

"Yeah, you two bitches done yet?" Twitch chimes in.

"You're just jealous," I tell them.

"About what?"

"That you ain't the shit like me." I walk toward the asshole in the chair and pull the blindfold off before ripping the duct tape off his mouth. He blinks his eyes a few times before they finally focus. Then he looks around the room at all of us before he laughs. It's a sick laugh too.

“Somethin’ funny?” I ask.

“You bunch of stupid fucks!” He laughs harder. I turn to look at Cage over my shoulder, but he just shrugs.

“What makes us stupid when you’re tied to a chair?” I ask, cocking my head to the side.

“Do you know who I work for?” he asks.

“Do I care would be the better question.”

“He will kill you. He will kill you and your families,” he laughs again. I pull my fist back and slam it into his face having heard enough of him already. That quickly quieted him.

“No one is killin’ anyone. I mean, aside from you, but I think that’s obvious.”

“You kill me, and he will come for you.”

“I’ve heard that too many times in the past couple of months,” I tell him as I walk around him and grab the hammer off the table and a large nail.

“From who?”

“Pierson,” I say her name, letting it roll off my tongue as I gauge the man’s reaction. His eyes widen as he takes me in and then looks at my brothers.

“You’re all dead men walking.”

“No, we’re not,” I tell him as I stand in front of him. “Here’s the thing, no one knows I have the girl. No one is gonna know. What I do want to know is what a fellow MC member would be doing with your boss.”

“You think I’d tell you that?” he smirks at me as I take the nail and hold it over his hand. I push the nail into his flesh before bringing up the hammer and slamming it against the head of the nail, pounding it into the back of his hand. The man screams in pain as the nail is forced through his hand and into the arm of the chair, pinning his hand in place. I smile as I back away and grab another nail for the other hand.

“What was he doin’ with them?”

“You’re crazy to think you can fix this!”

“Fix what?” I ask. He doesn’t say anything, and I move to do the same to his other hand. Once again, his screams pierce my ears before I move to the table. Instead of the hammer and nails, I grab the nail gun and walk back to him.

“We want a reason,” Cage tells him as I stand in front of him with the nail gun ready. He looks at it and then at Cage before I lower it to his thigh and press the trigger. Compressed air forces the nail out of the gun, shooting it through his leg as he screams in pain.

“Catoli wanted it all! Dodger was helping him get it.”

“Meanin’ what?” I ask. When he doesn’t speak immediately, I press the nail gun to his other leg, and he speaks just as I’m about to pull the trigger.

“He wants to run whatever the MC has going on!”

“Dodger was helpin’ him?” Twitch asks.

“He wanted more. They weren’t giving him the rank he wanted. Catoli offered more.”

“Are you fuckin’ lyin’ right now?” I growl as I press the nail gun into his stomach.

“I’m not! That’s the truth. He was helping him take down his own club,” he says. I pull the gun away from him and turn to look at Cage.

“What went wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“We know Dodger is dead. What went wrong?”

“That little bitch! She opened her mouth and-” Before he can finish that sentence, I swing the nail gun around and hit him in the face. Blood splatters from the cut on his face and mouth when I pull back and look him in the eye.

“What. Went. Wrong?” I ask him once more.

“Fuck! Dodger didn’t get his way. He didn’t get the position he wanted and threatened to pull the whole thing.”

“Kill him,” Cage orders, nodding toward the asshole.

“That all you want?” I ask.

“That’s all I needed. He’s useless to me now,” he adds.

“Don’t do this. I gave you the information you wanted!” He pleads with us. Too bad we don’t care. I put the nail gun on the table and pulled my knife out instead. As I walk to him, I smile.

“You made a few mistakes today. One was gettin’ caught by us. The other was callin’ my girl a bitch,” I tell him before plunging the knife into his chest. I pull it out and stab him repeatedly until his last breath leaves his body. Then I turn, toss my knife on the table and walk out of the shed.

“Feel better?” Cage asks, slapping a hand on my shoulder.

“It feels somethin’. How are you gonna break this to Mask?”

“I don’t know. That’s some fucked up shit if it’s true.”

“You don’t think it’s true?” I ask, glancing over at him.

“Don’t know. It does make sense to a point, but if Dodger wasn’t happy where he was, why not look for somethin’ more?”

“Because we don’t turn on brothers?”

“Most of us don’t. There’s a few that will, and we both know it.”

“This is fucked up,” I tell him as I reach for the door and pull it open.

“It is. You gonna clean up before your girl sees you like this?” I glance down at the blood staining my hands and shirt and shake my head.

“Hell no. This is what she gets with me. There is no hidin’ who I am.” Cage nods his head, agreeing with me, before he walks inside. I take a deep breath and follow him in. Glancing around, I don’t see Pierson. She must be in the room. So that’s where I go.

I walk through the main room and down the hall before shoving my door open. She's sitting on the bed, but her head pops up when she hears the door open. She's about to say something when her eyes move over me.

"What happened?" She's on her feet now, moving to stand before me.

"Not my blood."

"What? Whose is it?"

"Not somethin' I'm willin' to talk about," I reply as I head for the bathroom. She follows me as I start the shower.

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Are they ... dead?" I slowly turn to face her now, looking her in the eye.

"You need to know what you're gettin' into with me. This is me. This is what I do. It's who I am."

"They are dead," she states, taking me in again.

"Yeah, darlin'. He is. Now ask me if I regret it?" She shakes her head slowly, not wanting to say the words.

"You don't."

"No, I don't." I pull my cut off and hang it on the hook before slipping my shirt off. Then I move to my pants and kick off my boots until I'm completely naked. I step into the shower, ignoring her, giving her space.

I wash the blood from my hands before stepping under the sprayer and letting the water run over me. Then I hear her as she climbs in behind me, and her arms wrap around my waist.

"I didn't want just a part of you, Tarek."

"You want all of me?"

"Yes." I spin around and look down at her, our eyes locking. Then I slowly lower my head, letting my lips caress hers. I kiss her with a new hunger. I kiss her like I never want her to leave. And maybe I don't.

I reach down and grab her ass, lifting her in my arms and pushing her against the wall. Then I reach between us and grab my cock before sliding inside her. She moans as I thrust into her, and I hold on for dear fucking life. Because this girl is going to be the death of me. I can feel it.

CHAPTER 12

*H*ow many positions can a person be fucked in? According to Tarek, the number is endless. He's taken me every chance he can get and then some. He even sneaks us off into a side room just to fuck me. And I like it.

But that isn't all. Tarek talks to me. He asks me questions. He truly wants to know me, and that's something new for me. I hesitate to answer him and close off because I don't know how to respond. I hate that I do it, and I know it bothers him, but he doesn't let on.

"You want to talk about it?" GeeGee asks.

"About what?"

"Whatever you're thinking about. You look lost," she says.

"Tarek ... he seems like he wants to know everything about me. He keeps asking me questions about my past, my childhood."

"And that's a bad thing?" she asks.

"No. It's not. I just don't know how to open up to him. No one has ever wanted to get to know me as a person. The way I grew up wasn't like everyone else."

"Then that's what you tell him." Just as she says that he's standing in front of me, offering me his hand. How could I say no to him?

I slide my hand into his, and he pulls me to my feet, quickly kissing my forehead before he pulls me through the

main room. We're out the door in no time, and he's passing me a helmet.

"I've never been on a bike," I tell him.

"It's easy. Just hold on and lean when I lean. Let your body follow mine and relax."

"Where are we going?"

"I want to show you somethin'." His smile couldn't get any brighter. There's something about this man that calls to me.

I slide on the helmet and climb onto the bike behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist. He pats my thigh and causes bumps to erupt over my flesh before starting the bike. It rumbles beneath us before he pulls out of the parking lot and takes off.

I follow his instructions, and eventually, I relax into him. He takes the road as if it were made just for him. It's amazing to see him become one with his bike and the ease in his posture.

The ride is nice. I never thought I'd like being on the back of a bike, but I do. Or maybe it's being with him. I can't really say for sure.

The bike slowly comes to a stop, and he kills the engine. I climb off with Tarek following me. I look up at the old brick building and wonder where he brought me.

He offers his hand once more, and I take it in mine. He leads me toward the building and finally inside. It doesn't look like anyone has lived here for a long time, but I don't question him because I feel safe with him. I walk with Tarek up what's left of the crumbling steps and down a hallway.

"It was here where I met her. She wasn't supposed to be here," he tells me, giving me another piece of his past. Another piece of him.

"What was she doing here?"

"Being a rebel. Tryin' somethin' new. She wanted to do whatever her parents told her not to."

“And then she met you.”

“Then she met me. I remember seein’ her in the hallway, peekin’ around the corner. One of the other boys who lived here was with her. They were laughin’ and fuckin’ with the older kids. She came around that corner,” he says, pointing it out to me. I look up at his face; it’s almost like he’s right back there again. “They were chasin’ them. I remember them barrelin’ around the corner after the two of them. She took off runnin’, laughter burstin’ out of her, and slammed right into me. I grabbed her and held her even though she tried to fight out of my grip.”

“You saved her,” I whisper. Tarek’s smile gets bigger.

“The older kids came around the corner, and her eyes widened. She was scared of what was gonna happen. She didn’t know me or if I was with them. They came toward us wantin’ to get to her, but I wouldn’t let them. I fought them instead. I fought them to keep her safe,” he tells me.

“You really did save her,” I repeat. He looks down at me and shrugs.

“Not when it counted.”

“You can’t do that to yourself. You can’t blame yourself for what happened.”

“I can, and I do. Over time it’s become easier. Lettin’ go of the guilt, I mean. The pain, though? I don’t think that will ever get any better, but you help, Pierson. You help me more than you could ever know.” My heart swells at his words.

“I never knew my mother. She was there one day and gone the next. We weren’t allowed to discuss it, and I never knew what happened to her. I tried to ask my father over the years, but he just blew me off and said we weren’t to speak of her. It was just me and my brother growing up.”

“What was it like? Livin’ with him?”

“Most of the time, we didn’t even see him. He was always so busy doing whatever it was he did. We were mainly left to the maids to raise. My brother tried his best with me. He did what he could for me but was in line to take over for my father

one day. That meant he had to learn the ropes at an early age. He still made sure to check up on me.”

“So you don’t know much about your dad?”

“Not really. I know he’s a killer and has no feelings. He didn’t want us. If he did, he would have been there for us.”

“That’s sad,” he says softly.

“It was my life. I was used to it. I had my brother, and that’s all that mattered to me.”

“That had to be a lonely life.”

“It hurt at times. We were in a private school, but the kids knew who we were. Some stayed away from us, and others wanted to cling to us, knowing who we were. No one was ever really genuine.”

“I’m genuine, Pierson.” His words burn through me. I know he is. I can see it in his eyes.

“I know, and that’s what scares me the most,” I tell him. His hand cups my cheek, his thumb slowly stroking over my flesh.

“I know it does, but I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

“You’re not?”

“No, darlin’. I’m not.” With that, he leans in, and our lips collide. Tarek walks me backward until my back hits the wall. His kiss is intense, and I like it. I never want it to end.

Slowly, he eases the kiss and rests his forehead against mine.

“Why do you want me?” I ask him.

“Why wouldn’t I want you?”

“I come with baggage. None of which is good,” I reply.

“You also come with the hope of a brighter future. You come with heart and love. You don’t see the good in you, Pierson?” Something in my chest tightens as I look up at him. How can he see so much in me? How does he see the brighter parts when I feel surrounded by darkness?

“Not usually.”

“Well, that’s gonna change, darlin’. You need to see the best parts of you.”

“You’ll show me?”

“Yeah, baby. I’ll show you.”

CHAPTER 13

It's about time for the Missouri boys to be rolling in. I don't know how I feel about that either. It will be hard telling them what we discovered about Dodger. It's going to be even harder to say the fucking words. He turned on his club, his brothers. He went behind their backs, which does not sit well with me.

I've tried to reason it out, but nothing ever makes sense. There's no reason I can come up with that would make me turn on my family the way he did. No reason at all.

"You ready to do this?" I ask Cage as he passes me a beer.

"Not really. How the fuck do you tell them somethin' like that?"

"I was just thinkin' the same thing."

"It's a fucked up situation. I don't know how Mask will take it," he says, bringing his beer to his lips.

"Heard that. I'm not sure how I would handle that either," I admit. That's not something to be taken lightly, but at the same time, the man is already dead.

"You ready for them to be here? They can get a little wild," he reminds me. I smirk and nod my head.

"Yeah, I'm ready for it. The girls all set up?"

"Yeah. They got everything in order." As the last word leaves his mouth, I hear bikes rumbling toward us. Cage and I share a glance before setting our beers on the counter and

walking toward the door. The rest of the guys aren't far behind us.

We head outside as Mask and his boys pull up. The engines slowly die, one by one, and they climb off their bikes, pulling helmets from their heads.

Mask is the first to approach us, holding his hand out to Cage.

"Been a long time, brother," Cage greets him, pulling Mask into a hug.

"Too damn long." They talk to each other as Van, their VP, approaches me. I shake hands with the other two, Pike and Free, before Cage announces we should all go inside.

We all turn and walk back into the clubhouse so everyone can meet the four of them before discussing any business.

"Grab some beers," Cage says as he leads the guys to a table. I nod and head for the bar, grabbing the beers when I see Pierson. She's got on a long t-shirt, probably one of mine, hanging to her thighs, making it look like she doesn't have anything on under it, and damn, does my cock respond to that.

I walk back over and pass out the beers as I watch her watching them. Jealousy sparks in my chest even though I know it shouldn't. While Cage and the guys talk and shoot the shit, I walk over to Pierson. I move to stand behind her, resting one hand on her hip.

"See somethin' you like over there?"

"What? No."

"You're checkin' them out awfully hard," I tell her. I should stop this. I shouldn't feel like this, but I do. I don't want her looking at any other man. I want her all to myself.

"I was just curious," she says softly, lowering her head. I slip my hand around her waist and pull her body against mine.

"Are you sure? It's not too late to change your mind, Pierson." Now her head lifts, and she turns to look at me over her shoulder.

“Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know. See somethin’ you like better.”

“I was just looking at them, Tarek.”

“I think you’re tryin’ to make me jealous,” I tell her. She smiles and shakes her head as I pull her back with me. I step back until I feel the couch behind me before sitting and pulling her into my lap. Then I slide my hand under her shirt and straight into the top of her little shorts.

“What are you doing?”

“Makin’ them the jealous ones,” I whisper near her ear before biting the lobe. She squirms in my lap, and the thought of fucking her in front of the whole club crosses my mind. Not that I’d do it. I wouldn’t. I don’t share, but I can get her off. I can let them know that she’s off-limits, so that’s exactly what I do.

I find her pussy wet and waiting for me. I slip a finger inside her before nudging her legs apart with mine. She slowly spreads them wider, and I groan into her ear.

“Why are you doing this?” she asks as she slowly begins to ride my fingers.

“So they know who you belong to,” I tell her.

“They know,” she whispers as her hips continue to move with my fingers.

“I don’t think they do, but they sure as hell will now, won’t they?” I find her clit, pulsing, and needy. I rub her hard and fast until I feel her tense. I know she’s about to come, and I’m ready. My eyes lock with Van’s from across the room as he watches my girl fall apart. He smirks at me and shakes his head but never looks away from what I’m doing to her. Pierson’s body trembles and shudders as I rip the orgasm from her. Her soft mewls and whines are music to my fucking ears. I lower my head and kiss her neck, sucking the flesh into my mouth.

“Such a good girl, Pierson. You fuckin’ came all over me,” I tell her. She’s breathless as she tilts her head, allowing me

access to her neck.

“Why did you do that?”

“I told you why. Look over there,” I tell Pierson. She lifts her head and looks toward the guys, seeing Van eyeing her.

“I don’t want him, Tarek.”

“Doesn’t matter. He clearly wanted you, and now he knows you’re off-limits.”

“I need you,” she tells me.

“You do?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“What do you need, darlin’?”

“You inside of me,” she tells me. My chest rises and falls, knowing I can’t fuck her right now. Not unless she wants me to take her in front of everyone here.

“You’re gonna have to wait on that,” I tell her.

“Why?” Fuck, her whiny tone is making me harder than I already am.

“I need to talk with the guys.”

“So you come over here and get me all riled up and just walk away?”

“I made you come. Tell me that wasn’t good for you,” I tell her. She shifts in my lap, and I nearly rethink making her wait.

“It was good, but I need more,” she whines. I love her like this. Whiny. Needy. Needing me. I gently lower my lips to her neck and feather small kisses over her flesh. Pierson responds by rolling her hips, grinding against me. This new side of her turns me on. She makes me crazy, and I think she likes knowing that.

“You’re gonna make me fuck you in front of everyone, Pierson,” I warn her. I have too much to do. There are too many things that need to be discussed with the guys to take her back to the room and fuck her. I need to pull away from her, but she’s so damn magnetic.

“Please,” she whines once more. My cock jerks, and she moans.

“Just think about it. What I’m gonna do to you later. All the dirty things. The way I’m gonna lick your clit until you scream. I will pound into you until everyone hears you scream my name. It’ll be so good, Pierson.” She grinds harder against me, and I almost say fuck it all, but then I bite her shoulder and lift her off my lap. I deposit her on the seat next to me as I stand.

“Tarek,” she whines as I smile down at her.

“You got me as hard as a rock, Pierson. I know what you need, but I can’t right now. You’re gonna remember it all for later, yeah?” She shifts uncomfortably in her seat as I smirk at her. Fuck, I want to take her to the room and fuck her senseless.

“Fine. I’ll wait for you,” she finally says. I lean down and press my lips to hers before standing back up and walking toward the guys. Van eyes me a little, but I ignore him and drop into the seat next to Ridge.

“Nice of you to join us,” Van says as I lock eyes with him. It’s a silent warning to not fuck with my girl. He nods, letting me know he understands before the conversation changes.

“We all know why we’re here. You wanna get right to it?” Mask asks, looking mainly at Cage.

“That’s on you, brother. We’re set up to have a good time and kick back while you’re here too.”

“Then I say we do that first. I have a feelin’ this isn’t gonna be somethin’ I wanna hear,” Mask says, looking around the table.

“I don’t think so either, but you’re right. Let’s leave that for another day,” Van adds. Cage nods his head and motions for the girls. Club whores. Gotta love them. They flock to the guys like they’ve never seen a man before, hanging off them, climbing in their laps. One brings a bottle of vodka and some shot glasses, while the other brings beers. They set them on the table in front of us when the music starts up.

“Oh shit. I think someone wants attention tonight,” Ridge says as he looks toward the dancefloor. I turn my head to see who he’s talking about when I see Pierson out there with GeeGee. She has her hands on GeeGee’s hips as they dance and grind against each other.

“She’s a horny little thing,” I tell him with a laugh. She’s something else lately, and I like it. I think Pierson is finally coming out of her shell. I think this is the real Pierson that’s been so hidden by her father’s shadow, and I’m just here to take it all in.

CHAPTER 14

Sweat drips down my temples as GeeGee, and I move to the music. We've been dancing for hours. I tried a few shots that went straight to my head. I'm not a drinker. I have never been, but I thought it would help me loosen up a little, and it has.

"You are keeping his attention," GeeGee says as we keep moving.

"What do you mean?"

"Tarek hasn't taken his eyes off you all night," she explains. I spin around and glance at him, trying not to make it obvious I'm looking. I see him watching me. His eyes are like fire as he takes me in. I spin back toward GeeGee and pull her in closer.

"Maybe it's all the dancing we're doing."

"You trying to make the man jealous?"

"No, I'm trying to get him to take me to bed," I tell her with a laugh. She laughs along with me before pulling my body against hers. We're so close nothing could fit between us. It's a little strange for me. I've never been this ... free before. And I feel it. I feel free. I feel like I can let go and just be me; no one here will judge me. I can open up and live without worrying about embarrassing my father.

A few minutes later, hands slip around my waist, and I'm pulled back into a hard body. I let my head fall back and rest against his chest when his hand slips under my shirt.

“What are you doin’ out here?” Tarek’s voice is dark and sultry.

“Dancing.”

“I think you’re doin’ a lot more than that. You want my attention?”

“No. I’m having fun with GeeGee.”

“So I saw, but I think you wanted me to come out here and get you. Didn’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, here I am, baby. What are you gonna do now?” His fingers brush over my flesh, and I shiver. I spin around to face him and find his eyes blazing with fire.

“Right now, I want to drop to my knees and take you into my mouth,” I tell him. I’m almost embarrassed to say the words, but I have this freeing feeling inside me, and I’m going to embrace it.

“Is that what you want?”

“I want to taste you on my tongue,” I tell him. His nostrils flare, and his hand tightens around me.

“Then what are you waitin’ for?”

“Here?” I ask, confused by what he’s saying. Does he want me to do it in front of everyone? I don’t know how I feel about that. He shakes his head and nods toward the hallway, and I take that as my cue to go. I pull away from him and walk toward the hall with him behind me. As soon as we reach his door, he shoves it open and ushers me inside.

I step in and listen as he closes the door behind me, my heart nearly beating out of my chest. I’ve never done this, not to him, not to anyone. My nerves are firing off, one by one, ripping me apart. I turn to face him and see him watching me, waiting for me to make the move.

“What are you waitin’ for? You wanted me.”

“I’ve never ... it’s just ...”

“You’ve never done it before?” I shake my head as he stares at me.

“Then don’t.”

“I want to.”

“There’s no fuckin’ this up, Pierson. I promise you that.”

“What if I’m bad at it?”

“I just said there’s no fuckin’ this up.” I step toward him one slow step at a time until I’m standing in front of him. Then I slowly drop to my knees at his feet. I reach for the button on his jeans and work the zipper down before lowering them, taking his boxers with me. His cock springs free, hard, and ready for me.

Tarek reaches out and runs his hand along my cheek as I reach for his cock. Then I slip my tongue between my lips and taste him for the first time. His hips jerk, but he holds still, letting me do what I want. Then I take him fully in my mouth. I’m not sure what I’m doing or if I’m doing it right, but I slowly ease him in and out of my mouth. When I glance up at him, I see his eyes are closed and his lips parted. I take that as a good sign.

I keep going, running my tongue along the length of him. Groans fall from his lips as I keep going. His hand finds its way into my hair and holds on, giving me a little more pressure. I bob my head, taking him as far as I can before I start to gag. He moans and finally steps back, pulling out of my mouth.

“Get up.”

“But ...”

“I said get up,” he orders. I stand in front of him as he stares into my eyes. I almost think I did something wrong until he grabs me and pulls me toward him. Tarek kisses me like he’s starving, and I’m the only food he can eat. His hands move over my body, heating me from the inside out until he pulls back and rips my shirt off. He moves to my shorts, shoving them down my legs before demanding I turn around. I do as I’m told and face the wall before I feel him behind me.

“Bend over,” he growls, and I immediately bend at my waist, hands braced on the wall. It doesn’t take long before he’s thrusting into me, and before long, I’m a panting mess.

It seems like he just started when we’re both falling apart. His hands stay planted on my back as he catches his breath. Then he pulls out and lets me stand to my feet, only to drag me over to the bed.

“Get on the bed,” he says. I climb on and lie down as I watch him walk to the bathroom. He returns with a cloth before cleaning me up and tossing the rag. Then he’s in bed next to me, pulling my head to his chest.

“You’re gonna kill me one day,” he sighs.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I can’t get enough of you,” he tells me, and my cheeks heat.

“Is everything okay with the other guys?”

“I don’t know yet. They wanted to hang out and kick back for the night. We’re gonna discuss shit tomorrow. I can’t say how that’s gonna go down,” he admits.

“I wish there was more I could do.”

“You’re doin’ enough, Pierson. You’ve already done so much by tellin’ us.”

“I know, but I wish there were more I could do.” He blows out a breath as I adjust myself and get comfortable. His hand tightens around my back, keeping me close to him. I love this. Feeling this. Safe. That’s not something I’ve felt in a long time.

“Do you think we’ll see them again?”

“Who?”

“My brother and Bethany?”

“I’d like to think so, but I do bad things, Pierson. I don’t know that you and I will be goin’ to the same afterlife,” he admits, breaking my heart.

“I think we will.”

“Even if we don’t, you deserve more. Always remember that,” he says.

“So do you, Tarek. You deserve more too.”

“I get what I deserve every day, darlin’.”

“You deserve me.” The words are a mere whisper, but I know he heard them.

“Thank you for bein’ here, Pierson.”

“Thanks for keeping me.” With that, I listen to his breathing even out. His chest slowly rises and falls as sleep pulls him under. I shift so I can look up at him. His lips are slightly parted as he sleeps. He looks content.

CHAPTER 15

I sit back with my beer in hand and glance around the table. This is it. This is the time to tell the guys from Missouri what we know, and I'm not sure how they will take it. It was one of their own, a brother. I don't know how I'd feel about that shit if it was one of my brothers.

"Let's get to it. We have information on Dodger," Cage announces as Mask sits up a little straighter in his seat.

"What information?" he asks, keeping his eyes trained on Cage.

"Tarek picked up a girl a while back. She tried to kill herself," he says.

"What the hell does that have to do with Dodger?" he snaps.

"Let me finish. He picked up this girl and kept her here. She finally came around and started talkin'. Turns out she's a Catoli."

"As in James Catoli?" he asks, narrowing his eyes.

"The one and only. Seems Dodger wasn't in a good place with you guys. Can you confirm that?" Cage asks.

Mask nods his head once.

"He wanted more. Wanted to be Prez. He wanted to take the club in different directions, and it got shot down pretty quickly."

“Well, that seemed to push his buttons. He went to Catoli. Offered to help bring down the club and take over what you have as long as he had his rightful place,” Cage tells them. Mask slumps back in his chair as if he’d been punched. The others curse under their breath.

“Where’d you get that information?”

“One of Catoli’s men. We picked him to get answers.”

“And Dodger?”

“He’s dead.”

“What? How the fuck do you know that?”

“The girl Tarek picked up. She was there when they killed him. That’s why she ran,” Cage informs him. Van’s eyes meet mine, and I can’t read what’s in his expression.

“So you’re fuckin’ the Catoli chick?” he finally asks.

“Somethin’ like that.”

“How can we trust her?” he asks, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table. I shift in my seat, not liking the accusation in his tone. He better watch who he’s talking to like that.

“We can trust her,” I tell him.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I fuckin’ said we could! You wanna keep questionin’ me?” I snap loudly this time.

“Calm down,” Cage says as I drag my gaze to his.

“She didn’t have to say shit, Cage,” I snap.

“I know that. She told us on her own. Pierson didn’t even realize he was one of us. She said he was wearing a cut but couldn’t see anything else. She described him down to the tattoo on his neck,” Cage tells the room. Van seems to take that as enough and leans back in his chair. The motherfucker is just looking for an ass beating, and if he isn’t careful, he’s going to get one.

“This is a completely fucked up situation,” Mask says, rubbing his hand over his face.

“I get it, brother. It’s fucked up, but it’s your call. What do you want to do here?” Cage asks him. I glance over at Twitch and Ridge, but they sit with their backs straight, waiting for an answer.

“If he was dirty, we don’t need that kind of shit around us. We don’t need a funeral.”

“Heard that. Just wanted to leave it up to you,” Cage tells him.

“What do we do about Catoli?”

“Kill the motherfucker,” I chime in now. All heads turn to face me, and I shrug my shoulders. It’s what I want to do.

“You think it’s that easy?” Free asks.

“Nope. Didn’t say it was,” I tell him.

“Then what’s the point in goin’ to war with him? Dodger did what he did. That didn’t involve us. Catoli didn’t get what he wanted, so why wage war?” Pike interjects. I think about that for a second. They’re right. There’s no real reason to start a war aside from the fact I want to. I want to watch him die. Him and that fiancé of Pierson’s. I want to see them meet their maker and prefer it be by hand.

“You’re right. There really isn’t a good reason for you to start a war. But maybe I have a reason,” I tell them. They all share a glance and wait for me to continue. “My girl isn’t goin’ anywhere. She’s scared for her life. Hell, she tried to take her own life to escape them. That’s enough for me to want to change a few things,” I admit.

“Not enough for the clubs to back you, though,” Mask adds. He might be right. Maybe he is, but that isn’t stopping me from doing what I want.

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t change my plans.”

“What are your plans?” Twitch asks this time. I take a deep breath and lean back in my chair as I look around the room.

“I’m gonna make sure my girl is safe. I’m gonna make sure that she never has a reason to want to end her own life again. I don’t need the club backin’ me for that,” I answer casually.

“You think there won’t be blowback?” Pike asks.

“Not if they don’t know I’m with the club.”

“How’s that gonna work?” Van asks now.

“I haven’t planned that far ahead yet.”

Van chuckles and shakes his head, running his hand through his hair.

“It’s like askin’ for death, brother.”

“Why is that?”

“You’re plannin’ on a vigilante mission with the fuckin’ Catoli family? That’s certain death,” he warns.

“Maybe not. I know what I’m doin’.”

“Do you?” Why is this motherfucker pushing me so much? What the hell does he want from me? A fight? I’m willing to give him one.

“You know what? I’m gettin’ real sick of your shit, Van. First, you’re eyein’ my girl, and now this? You got somethin’ you wanna say or handle with me?” I ask more aggressively than I need to, but I want to get my point across to this asshole.

“I just think you’re steppin’ into somethin’ you can’t walk back out of.”

“And it’ll be for a good reason,” I remind him.

“So you’re willin’ to die for this girl?” he asks this time. The room grows silent, quieter than I’ve ever heard it. They all wait on pins and needles to see what I’m going to say.

“If that’s what it takes to keep her safe,” I reply. Van nods and leans back in his seat as Cage eyes me from the head of the table.

“You’re serious about this?” he asks. I turn to face him completely and nod my head.

“Yeah. I am.”

“So you’re claimin’ her?”

“Looks that way. I did a lot of fucked up shit in my day, Cage. I made a lot of mistakes in life, but this isn’t gonna be one of them. I need to do this,” I tell him. He nods his head before letting out a sigh.

“Don’t suppose you want to share the reason behind it,” he asks. I take a deep breath and shrug my shoulders. It is what it is. They might as well know about my past since she does.

So I open my mouth and tell them everything about me and Bethany. I tell them what we did and how it ended. Then I sit back and let them take it as they may.

“Fuck, Tarek,” Ridge says under his breath.

“That’s pretty heavy shit, brother,” Twitch adds.

“It is, and it happened. I fucked up back then. I didn’t keep Bethany safe as I should have.”

“And you think Pierson is your chance to make it right. I get it, brother.” Pike speaks up.

“Somethin’ like that. I know I can’t change the past, but the past changed me. I see that little girl, I see Bethany in her eyes, and I can’t fuckin’ stand to see the fear. I know what I need to do.”

“Which is?”

“I need to get in with Catoli. I need to step in where Dodger left off.”

“How is that gonna work? They knew Dodger wanted more than they were willin’ to give,” Free says.

“I know. I’m not as greedy as Dodger. I can play it up, pretend I don’t know he’s dead. I can sneak my way in and make them think I’m from your chapter,” I suggest, looking at Mask.

“It could work.”

“It’s fuckin’ dangerous as hell. You could end up dead, Tarek.” Cage warns.

“I understand that. I cheated death once. I doubt the grim reaper is gonna let me go twice,” I tell them.

“And you’re willin’ to do that for her? A girl you barely know?” Pike asks.

“Yeah. I am. I’m willin’ to lay my life on the line for that girl.” The room goes silent as everyone takes in what I said. I know Cage will have my back, but Mask surprises me.

“We’ll back you. You can say you’re a part of this club,” he says. I nod and thank him before my eyes slip over to Van’s. He doesn’t look happy, but he isn’t challenging me.

“Then it’s settled. We got your back, Tarek.”

CHAPTER 16

I've never seen anything like the party these guys put on. Tarek said it's because the other club is here, and they decided on some business together. There are people everywhere and half-naked women prancing around. I try to stay to myself or close to GeeGee, but even she is busy with her old man.

That leaves me alone while Tarek talks to other guys and makes his way around the room. I can't stop looking at him.

"He cares about you," I hear someone say to my left. I turn my head and see the guy eyeing me earlier, standing next to me with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I care about him too."

"It's more than that for him, yeah?"

"What do you mean?" He shifts his gaze to Tarek and then back to mine.

"He's willin' to put his life on the line for you. That's pretty deep."

"I don't understand."

"He didn't tell you?" he asks. I shake my head, not knowing what he's talking about. I don't know what he didn't tell me.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The club, your dad. He's willin' to step out of line to protect you," he explains.

“I still don’t get it.” The guy, Van, chuckles before taking a long pull of his beer.

“He’s gonna get himself in with your dad. Just like Dodger.”

“He what?” I blanch.

“You heard me. He’s gonna get on the inside,” he tells me. My heart wants to beat out of my chest as I look toward Tarek. He’s standing with another man, smiling and laughing, until his eyes meet mine. He must see the look on my face and the confusion in my eyes because his smile slowly fades. Tarek says something to his friend before coming toward me.

Tarek stops in front of me, and my heart hammers against my ribs. He wouldn’t do that. Tarek wouldn’t put himself in danger.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, his hand coming up to cup my cheek.

“What are you doing? Are you insane?” By the time I’ve finished speaking, I’m yelling at him.

“What do you mean?”

“He told me, Tarek. Van told me what you’re going to do. What the hell is wrong with you?” I snap louder this time. A growl leaves his throat before he turns and storms through the room toward Van. I see him grab him by the front of his shirt before his fist collides with his face. A scream rips from my throat as the guys move in on them. It’s quickly broken up, but now Cage stands between them.

“What the fuck is this? You two have had tension since they walked in the door,” he says to Tarek.

“He told my girl what we talked about in church!”

“You what?” Cage asks, turning to face Van now.

“I figured she’d already know.”

“Well, she didn’t, you asshole!” Tarek roars. Cage looks over at me and then back to Tarek.

“Go talk to your girl,” he says. I turn and head for the room quickly, knowing I can’t go outside with this damn bracelet on. Once inside, I walk into the bathroom and close the door. I need a minute. I need to think. How could he do that? Why would he want to do that?

I hear the door slam closed before there’s pounding on the bathroom door.

“Open the door, Pierson.”

“No. I need a minute.”

“You don’t need a minute. We need to talk.”

“Just give me a second, Tarek.”

“No! Open the goddamn door,” he roars louder as he still pounds his fists on the door. I take a deep breath and open the door to see his angry face. Even mad, he looks perfect.

“What?” I snap at him.

“You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand, Tarek? Huh? The fact you want to step into Dodger’s place and get in with my dad? Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?”

“I’m well aware. I also know that’s the only way to get to him.”

“You can’t do this,” I tell him as trembles wrack my body.

“I don’t have a choice. I need to make sure you’re safe,” he reminds me.

“I am safe. With you, Tarek. I’m safe with you.” He blows out a breath and steps closer to me, resting his hands on my shoulders.

“I need to do this. I couldn’t save her, but I can save you,” he says, breaking my heart in two.

“You don’t know what you’re getting into.”

“I know what I have to do, Pierson, and this is it. I need to know the threat is gone. I need to know you’re safe from them,” he tells me, looking me directly in the eye. I can see

what he feels for me. I can feel it, but I can't let this happen. I can't let him go.

"What if you don't come back?" I say as a sob catches in my throat.

"Then I tried."

"You can't just leave me like this, Tarek. You've done all this to keep me safe. You've made me rethink my whole life, and now you're trying to leave me?" Another sob rips from my throat when he pulls me against him.

"I know you don't understand this. I know it makes no sense to you, but it's just somethin' I have to do, baby. I need to fix this."

"You didn't do this. You didn't make things this way. There's nothing for you to fix."

"There's everything for me to fix. There's you. You deserve to live happily and without fear, Pierson. You don't need to look over your shoulder anymore. That's no kind of life," he tells me. I pull out of his arms and look up at him. At a man who barely knows me but is willing to put his entire life on the line for me. At a man who is willing to give anything for me.

"I don't know if there's a life for me without you."

"Of course there is. There was life before me, and there will be life after me." I can feel my heart breaking inside of me. I don't want to let him go. I want to hold onto him forever.

"I ..."

"It's okay, Pierson. You don't have to say anything. I get it."

"Do you?" I ask, my eyes full of tears now.

"I do. You have feelin's for me. I won't lie and say I don't feel the same for you because I do. I didn't think I would, but the longer you're here, the longer you're with me, the more I feel."

“Then don’t leave me, Tarek. You don’t have to do this. There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t. Your dad is untouchable to the outside world, Pierson. I think you already know that.”

“There has to be something,” I snap as I pull away from him and wander the room. I can’t help it. I need to move, to do something, to feel something. He’s killing me slowly. He’s breaking me, and I can do nothing to stop it.

“I’m sorry, Pierson.”

“That’s it? You’re sorry?” Now I spin to face him, anger burning in my veins.

“That’s the best I got. I can’t change things,” he says.

“Yes, you can! You can decide not to do this,” I’m nearly begging him.

“That’s not an option. I fucked up once, Pierson. I’m not gonna leave you to the same fate I left her.”

“She made her own choices, Tarek! You didn’t do that. You don’t have to do this.” Now I am begging. I’ll do whatever he wants me to do as long as he doesn’t go through with this.

“Would you just think about it a second? It makes sense, Pierson!”

“No, it doesn’t. Bethany made her choice. Yeah, I fucked up once and tried to kill myself, but I don’t want that anymore, Tarek. I want you!” My chest feels like it’s caving in. I can’t think straight and don’t know if I want to. I feel like I’m slowly falling apart, and he’s the cause. Who the hell knew that when I tried to kill myself months ago to escape my family, it would come back on me full circle?

“It changes nothin’, darlin’. I gotta do this.”

CHAPTER 17

She's pissed at me, and I get it. Pierson's hurt and upset. I understand why she feels that way, but she isn't seeing my side of things. Letting it go isn't an option. I can't do that.

Deep down inside, I feel like this will make things right even if I don't return from it. It'll ease the ache of what I did back then, filling the void left inside me when she died. I can do this. I can do it for Pierson.

"You okay?" Twitch asks as I bring my third beer to my lips and take a long pull.

"I'm good."

"I assume she didn't take it well?"

I shake my head.

"Not in the slightest," I tell him.

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

"I'm sure. I can't just have Pierson walking around lost all the time, you know? She deserves some peace."

"I get that, but you might not walk out of there alive, brother."

"Then I did the best I could," I tell him, setting the bottle on the counter and picking at the label.

"That's pretty hardcore for a girl you barely know."

“I know it is, but there’s something about her I can’t explain.” He nods his head as if he understands, except he doesn’t. No one could.

“I’ll stand behind you no matter what you choose, brother.”

“Appreciate that. Do me a favor, yeah?”

“What is it?”

“Make sure she’s taken care of if I don’t make it out of this. Make sure she doesn’t try to hurt herself over me,” I tell him. He frowns at me but eventually nods his head.

“I got her,” he says.

“Thanks, brother. I can’t go in there thinkin’ about her. I won’t be able to do what I need to do if I’m worryin’ about her,” I admit to him.

“I get that. Just wish you’d think about this a little more. It’s a rushed decision.”

“I don’t think so. I think it’s somethin’ I was just called to do.” He chuckles and shakes his head.

“If you say so.” With that, he turns and walks away from the bar when Cage comes to take his spot. He drops onto the stool beside me and slaps a hand on my shoulder.

“You piss off a lot of people, you know?”

“Who did I piss off now?” I ask amusingly.

“Well, besides Van, your old lady. She seems pretty pissed at you,” he nods toward the other side of the room, where Pierson sits with her arms crossed over her chest, glaring at anything but me.

“Yeah, she ain’t too happy.”

“I can see that. Changes nothin’?” he asks. I shake my head.

“No, brother. Changes nothin’.”

“Okay then. Mask is ready to back us up on this. He’s more than willin’ to play his part.” I nod once more and bring

my beer to my lips.

“That’s good. Real good.”

“You got a plan for this shit?”

“Not really. I just planned on gettin’ in there and seein’ what’s what.”

“That’s the plan?” Cage asks, not sounding thrilled about it, but I also don’t know what Dodger was up to.

“That’s the plan. Dodger didn’t leave us much of a roadmap, yeah?”

“Guess you’re right.”

“I’m just gonna go in there and say I know Dodger had plans, but my plans are better,” I tell him with a smirk.

“You think it’s gonna be that easy?” he asks. I shift on my stool and lean against the bar to look at him fully.

“Is anything that easy?” I ask.

“You don’t think you’re rushin’ this a little?”

“No. I think it’s perfect. Dodger is dead. It’s time to move in on that shit. Let’s get him while it’s all fresh,” I tell him.

“Suppose you’re right. I don’t like you goin’ in there alone without backup.”

“I’ll be fine, and if I’m not, well, then I’m not.”

“You aren’t afraid to die?” I shake my head and take another drink.

“No. I was there once, so close I could touch it, and then it was ripped away. If the time comes, I’m ready. As I said, the grim reaper will only let you slide so many times.”

“Sounds like you have a death wish.”

“No. It’s nothin’ like that. It just is what it is. I know what death feels like, Cage. I can feel it all around me. It’s been here for years. The time just hasn’t been right, you know?” He nods, taking a drink of his beer before setting the bottle on the counter.

“I get it, but it doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“I don’t like it much either, brother. I know what’s right. She deserves this,” I nod toward Pierson. He follows my gaze, and we both stare at the girl who has a piece of my heart in her hands. I don’t know how she did it or when it happened, but it’s there.

“What does she think about all this?” Cage asks.

“She isn’t happy. She’ll come around though,” I tell him.

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then it is what it is. She’s gonna have to learn to deal with it.” With that, I shove off the stool and stalk toward her. When I’m close enough, I offer her my hand like usual and wait to see if she’ll take it. At first, she’s hesitant. Then she slowly lifts her hand and slides hers into mine. I pull her to her feet and walk toward the door when she stops.

“The bracelet,” she says. I reach into my pocket and pull out a key unlocking it from her wrist. I toss it and pull her out the door with me.

“What are we doing?”

“Just takin’ in the night,” I tell her. She nods and walks with me until we reach the bench out back. We both take a seat when I look over at her.

“I know you don’t get it. I know this is a lot for you to take in.”

“I don’t want to lose you, Tarek.”

“I don’t want to lose you either, darlin’, but you have to understand I need to do this.”

“I get it to a point. However, I don’t completely understand why you’d do this for me.”

“You don’t get it by now?” I ask, looking her in the eye. She shakes her head as I smile and lift my hand to her cheek, caressing her soft skin.

“I care about you. I take care of the things I care about,” I explain truthfully.

“I care about you too. Which is why I don’t want you doing this.”

“I get it. I’ve thought about it, and honestly, this is the best I can come up with. I don’t want you to worry about anything,” I tell her. I see the tears in her eyes, and it hurts. I know she cares, and this is a lot to take in, but she has to know I’m doing this for her. Slowly, the tears begin to leak down her cheeks. I reach up and wipe them away as I smile at her.

“It means a lot to me that you care, Pierson.”

CHAPTER 18

The last few days have been busy. The guys have been going over their plans, but they've been keeping it to themselves for the most part. The guys won't tell me much, and that bothers me.

Tarek has been off a little. He's a little more distant than usual, and that worries me.

"You okay?" GeeGee asks.

"I'm just worried about him. He's been distant the last few days," I reply. She throws her arm around my shoulder and pulls me into her side.

"It happens when they are planning things. They get lost in that side of life," she says, more than likely speaking from experience.

"I hate it. It all feels wrong," I admit.

"I know it does, but it's fine. Everything will be fine." I love she's so positive about all this, but I'm not. The idea to run and go back to them has crossed my mind several times. If I go back, then Tarek doesn't need to go there. If I just give myself to them, maybe the punishment won't be as bad.

"I don't know what you're thinkin', but I don't like the look on your face." I look up when I hear his voice and smile.

"I'm not thinking anything."

"Yeah, you are. I see the look, darlin'. You wanna talk about it?" he asks while I shake my head.

“I’m good. Just thinking about you.”

“Oh yeah? What about me?”

“You’ve been distant,” I tell him what I’ve been seeing, and he nods, agreeing with me.

“Sorry about that. I know it’s wrong of me. I’ve just been tryin’ to get my head around all of this.”

“It’s a lot, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, it is. But we think we found the best way in,” he says, sounding hopeful.

“You did?”

“Can’t talk about it, but yeah. Shouldn’t be hard.”

“Are you finished now?”

“What do you need?”

I look up at him and smile.

“You.”

“I think that can be arranged,” he says, leaning down to take my mouth with his. I let him kiss me softly before I press harder. I need more. I need him.

Tarek pulls me from my seat and leads me down the hall, but before we ever make it to the room, he has me pinned against the wall kissing the air out of my lungs. He kisses me roughly, his tongue demanding entrance into my mouth, and I gladly let him do it.

He moans and groans before pulling away and walking toward the room. I’m the first to make a move as soon as we’re inside. I’m ripping my clothes off before moving to his. He chuckles low in his throat as I pull his jeans down his legs.

“You need me that bad?” he asks, kicking his boots off and watching me as I walk to the bed. I climb on and bend over, showing him exactly what I want and how I want it. I’m not usually this brave, but being with Tarek makes me feel alive.

“Fuck me,” he grumbles as he moves in behind me. I feel the bed shift, and then his warmth is behind me. His hands run

over my ass before sliding up my back and down to my ass again. I arch my back, loving the way he touches me. His hand slips lower, caressing me as he moves to where I need him, want him. Dipping a finger inside me, I moan as he drags his finger in and out of my pussy.

“So fuckin’ wet for me, Pierson. You’re always so wet for me,” he says. I moan the word yes, but that’s the best I can do when he’s touching me like this.

He pulls his fingers out, replacing them with his cock. He thrusts into me slowly at first. He fills me, and everything in this moment feels right. He moves slowly, and I whine, pushing back against him.

“Tell me. All you gotta do is tell me how you want it,” Tarek says as his hands grip my hips a little harder.

“Harder. Please,” I whine, and Tarek gives it to me. He gives me exactly what I want. He plunges into me, gripping my hips in his hands as he goes. Tarek thrusts harder and faster until every fiber of my being is on fire. He doesn’t stop, either. He keeps going and going as I scream his name. I don’t care if anyone can hear me. I don’t care if they hear what we’re doing. All I care about is Tarek and having him here with me. One day this will be gone. He’s going to leave me.

A tear falls from my eye as I moan and take everything he offers.

“You gonna come for me?” he growls as his fingers dig into my hips.

“Please,” I beg him, unsure what I’m begging him for. Release? For him to stay? It’s all a big fucking blur right now.

“Do it, Pierson. Let go,” he orders, but I don’t want to. Not yet. I can’t let go just yet.

He fucks me harder, faster, and lights blast behind my eyes. Tears pour down my cheeks as he reaches around and finds my clit. I’m not ready, and yet he does it. He pulls the orgasm out of me as I cry and scream his name.

“Tarek! Fuck!” My body tenses, and I finally let go. I let go just for him. His body jerks behind me until he’s finished

coming. When he pulls out of me, he lowers himself to the bed next to me. I fall to my stomach, worn out and spent from what he just did to me.

“You’re cryin’.”

“It was a lot,” I tell him. He reaches over and wipes my cheek before leaning in and kissing my forehead. He adjusts himself in the bed before pulling my head over to his chest and running his fingers through my hair.

“I can’t make promises. None of us can because there’s always somethin’ that breaks them, but I’m gonna do my best to come back to you.”

“That isn’t good enough,” I tell him. “I need you here.”

“It’s the best I can do, Pierson. I know it isn’t what you wanted to hear, but it’s the best I can do,” he repeats. I nod my head and press a kiss to his chest as he sighs.

“I just want you back,” I whisper.

“I’ll do everything I can to make that happen.”

“Thank you, Tarek.”

CHAPTER 19

They say trauma heals over time. If enough time passes, you'll forget and move on. I haven't, and I don't think I ever will. I haven't moved on from Bethany's death. I don't think that's even possible. Things become engrained in your head, and you have no choice but to live with them. Bethany's engrained in my mind and soul. But now, so is Pierson.

I think back to the day I found her. I could have left her there and made it someone else's problem, but I didn't. I couldn't because something about that poor lost soul called to me, and now look at where we are, what we're facing. Leaving her hurts. I know it hurts her too, and that's the last thing I want.

It doesn't change things, though. It changes nothing in my mind or my heart.

"You ready for this?" Cage asks as I suit up and pull on one of Mask's cuts. Nodding, I slip my gun into the back of my jeans and hear GeeGee screaming.

"She's not here!" We turn to face her, and I can tell by the look on her face that I won't like what she has to say.

"Who?" Cage asks.

"Pierson is gone. She isn't in the room." Fuck! I took that goddamn bracelet off her to take her outside. I should have known better. I should have seen this coming.

"Fuck!" I roar.

“We don’t know that she’s gone,” Cage adds. I turn my head and glare at him. She’s gone. She fucking left knowing I was going to leave today. I can’t believe her.

“She’s gone,” I tell him.

“So now what? Do we stop the whole thing?” he asks. I could say yes, that I don’t want to do this anymore, but I won’t do that. She’s out there somewhere, and I won’t let her live her life looking over her shoulder.

“No. I’m still goin’ in,” I tell him.

“For what? She bolted, Tarek.” Twitch reminds me.

“I’m well aware, but I’m pretty sure I know where she went.”

“You think she went back?”

“She was plannin’ somethin’. I could see it in her eyes. Maybe she figured I wouldn’t go in if she went back,” I tell them. It’s the obvious answer.

“You don’t know that for sure,” Ridge adds.

“No, I don’t.”

“Then, fuck it. Let’s call this shit off,” Cage says once more. I shake my head and grab the other gun off the table, shoving it into the holster under my cut.

“We’re not callin’ off shit. I’m doin’ this,” I announce. If they don’t like it, I don’t give a shit at this moment. I will do this one way or another, and if I’m right, Pierson will need me now more than ever. If she went back to prove a damn point, they will eat her alive. No, I have to do this.

“Fuckin’ hell!” Cage’s voice thunders through the room. I ignore him. I have to. I’ve already decided about this; there is no turning back now.

“This is it. You ready?” I ask, looking at the other guys. They share a glance letting me know they’re not ready, but that’s too damn bad. This is what it is.

“If this is what you want,” Cage finally says.

“It is. If she went back, she’s gonna need help gettin’ out of there,” I tell him.

“You think she’s that stupid? To go back?”

“She’s tryin’ to keep me from goin’ in. Yeah, I think she’d do it.”

“The girl has a death wish,” Twitch mumbles. He wouldn’t be wrong at this point. If she went back in there for me, she definitely has a death wish. They will kill her after they torture her, and we all know it. How could she do it? How could she put herself in that position?

“You’re probably right.”

“She’s willin’ to give her life for yours,” Ridge says as I nod.

“Looks that way.”

“Then we get her ass back,” he adds.

“Sounds like a plan to me,” I tell him as I shift from foot to foot. I don’t like knowing she’s there with them or that she could be hurt. Far too many things are running wild in my head, and none are good.

“You okay?”

“My girl took off. Do you think I’m okay?” I ask, looking at Ridge.

“I get it, brother. I do.”

“No, you don’t. She wasn’t yours, Ridge. She was mine,” I snarl.

“I know, brother. I don’t know what to say here.” No one does. What the hell could you say? She took off, trying to protect me. I get it, I really do, but it was a stupid move I’ll have to fix.

Anger claws at my insides as I think about what they might be doing to her. I can’t even think straight right now. I want blood. All I can see is red, and I know if I don’t calm down, I will ruin this whole operation. And I can’t have that. I can’t fuck this up.

I take a few deep breaths and close my eyes as the guys talk around me. When I open them, I see Cage staring right at me.

“If your head isn’t in this, we call it, Tarek.”

“My head’s in it. Trust me. I’m just pissed she did this,” I tell him. He nods and glances at the other guys before looking back at me.

“Then let’s do this,” he says. I walk out of the main room and toward the front door. Mask and his guys wait outside for us. I fist-bump the guys before climbing on my bike as they watch me. It feels like the end is coming, and I don’t know why. Hell, maybe it is.

I take another deep breath before pulling my helmet on and glancing at my brothers one last time before riding out of the parking lot.

This is it. I’m on my way to handle a problem. I’m on my way to find my girl and figure out how I will get her out of there.

My heart beats rapidly as I make my way through town. So many thoughts race through my mind. Is she okay? Did they already hurt her? Did she really go there? She must have. There is no other explanation for why she left. Pierson did this for me, of all people.

When I get her back, I will make her little ass pay for what she’s done. I’m going to make her regret ever running from me.

CHAPTER 20

PIERSON

It's not the pain of what they've done to me that hurts the most. It's the pain of knowing Tarek is out there somewhere. The pain of leaving him and walking away.

I thought about it for a long time. I thought about coming back here to end it all for him. And when the day came, I did it. I marched my ass right back up to the door just to have my dad there and ready for me. My stomach churned as I looked into his eyes and saw what he thought of me. Looking at him made me sick to my stomach, but he forced me to. I looked the monster in the eyes because I knew it would keep Tarek safe.

"You're such a fool, Pierson. Life could have been good for you," Issac says as he paces in front of me. Fiancé. No, he's a monster, just like my dad.

"Life has never been good for me," I remind him as he zips his slacks and shoves his feet back into his shoes. I watch him as he dresses after taking what he wanted from me.

"I think it has. Your father has treated you fairly well, I think."

"Then you don't think much."

"You'll watch your tone, Pierson." It's a warning I take. I know what happens when I don't. The black eye and soreness in my cheek are a reminder of that. "The wedding will be in three weeks," he states as I cringe and try not to vomit.

"I'm not marrying you."

“Yes, you are. This isn’t up for discussion. And then you’ll be mine to do with as I please,” he warns, making my skin crawl.

“As if you haven’t already.” The words leave my mouth without much thought. The sting from the impact of Issac’s hand colliding with my cheek brings me back to reality. I don’t let him see me react to it; I won’t give him that satisfaction.

“I’m tired of your mouth. Seems your time away has done a number on you. We’ll have to get you back in line.” I snort a small laugh when Issac wraps his hand around my throat and slams me against the wall closest to us. His breathing is rapid now as he looks down at me with evil eyes.

“I don’t need to remind you where your brother is, do I?” He knows where to hit me to make it hurt, and that’s it. A tear slides down my cheek as I shake my head.

“Good. I’d hate to ruin something so beautiful,” he says, lowering his head to kiss me. I don’t kiss him back. I let his lips move over mine until he’s satisfied with himself. Then he pulls away from me and releases his hold on my throat. I suck in a breath and raise my hand to rub over the spot he held so tightly.

“See to it that you cover those marks before dinner,” he declares as he turns on his heel and leaves my room. I hear the door click behind him before I walk to the bathroom and look at the marks he’s talking about. Angry bruises line my neck, ones he caused now and ones from earlier. I reach up and run my fingers over them as I cock my head to the side to study myself in the mirror.

“I did the right thing,” I whisper to myself. I know I did. Tarek didn’t need to get involved in this shit. He didn’t need to be a part of this. He doesn’t deserve it.

I lower my hands and turn on the faucet, splashing cold water on my face. Then I grab the towel and pat it dry before leaning against the counter.

“You’re stupid, Pierson. You knew this would happen.” I knew it. I knew there was no way to stop it either. My stomach

trembles as I think about what might happen next.

I'm not marrying Issac. No matter how hard I try to force myself, I can't do that. My heart doesn't belong to him. It belongs to Tarek. He made a hole in it and weaseled his way in, and now there is no turning back.

I walk out of the bathroom and head for the door. When I step out, I hear my father talking to someone but ignore the conversation as I head for the stairs. I begin to walk down and stop dead in my tracks when I'm almost to the bottom. No. No fucking way. This can't be!

"You're needed as security for now," my dad tells him as I stare at the back of his head. I know that's him. I can tell by the way he's standing there.

"For now? I made an offer, and you want me as security?" he asks. It is him. What the hell is he doing? I came back so he wouldn't have to do this! I want to open my mouth and say something, but it would blow his cover, and they would no doubt kill him if they knew I was with him. So I keep my mouth shut.

"You think you can come here and get what you want? Dodger did the same thing," my dad chuckles as he looks Tarek in the eye. My dad's gaze shifts as he sees me coming down the steps and smiling sickly.

"This is my daughter, Pierson. It will be her you're security for," he announces, and my heart nearly stutters. He hired security to watch me? And Tarek, of all people.

Tarek turns slowly, a mask in place. I can't read his expression. It's probably for the best.

"Nice to meet you," he says as I continue down the stairs toward his outstretched hand. I reach out and take his hand, warmth flooding my body at feeling him near.

"You too."

"Looks like I'm gonna be your security," he says. I look at my dad as he nods his head.

"Seems so," I tell him.

“You’ll see him around quite often, Pierson. I expect you to be on your best behavior as well. Tarek here has permission to use force if needed,” he informs me, and my stomach tumbles once more. Tarek wouldn’t do it. He wouldn’t hurt me.

“I understand,” I tell him, knowing there are already so many lingering bruises on my face and body. I don’t want anymore, and I know Tarek won’t be the one to put them there.

“Good. Now you have a fitting for your wedding gown tomorrow. I’ve arranged for the dressmakers to come here instead of allowing you out since you seem to have an issue with that. You will act accordingly.” I nod my head as I feel Tarek’s eyes burning through me. Suddenly they’re gone, and when I look at him, I see they are directed at my dad instead.

“Where do you need me today?” Tarek finally asks.

“We’ll discuss the issues with Dodger, and then you’ll be with her,” he says, nodding toward me. Tarek nods, never looking back at me before following my dad toward his office. My heart hammers in my chest as I watch them go. This shouldn’t be happening. Tarek shouldn’t be here, and yet he is.

I finish walking down the stairs and head for the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. When I step inside, Issac is there. I ignore him and grab a bottle from the refrigerator before heading to my room again; only I don’t make it that far. Issac steps in front of me, blocking the only exit from the kitchen with his large frame.

“I hear you’re getting new security,” he says as he gazes down at me.

“That’s what I’m told.”

“You don’t like it?” he asks, tilting his head slightly to look at me.

“It’s fine. I just don’t think I need security to have a wedding dress fitted.” He smiles, and it almost seems genuine, although I know the monster below the surface.

“It isn’t just for that purpose, Pierson. It’s more than that. You’re to be married to me, and that alone poses threats. Not

to mention the threats already out there due to your father.”

“And the one that stands in front of me?” I question him. I shouldn’t have said it, but something about having Tarek so close makes me want to talk back and be my true self. I shouldn’t be so stupid, and that thought hits me harder when Issac wraps his hand around my throat and pushes me back against the wall, just as he did earlier.

“Why do you like to push me, Pierson?” he asks, his lips brushing over mine. Vomit burns the back of my throat as I look him in the eye.

“You’re all evil. You don’t want a wife; you want a punching bag,” I say firmly.

“Is that what you think?”

“That’s exactly what I think.”

“Then you’d be wrong, Pierson. So very wrong. What I want is someone to spend my life with. Someone who can have my children, raise my family and empire.”

“A pawn,” I tell him. His lips curl into a half smile when I hear Tarek clearing his throat. Issac releases his hold on me and steps back, adjusting his jacket before looking over at Tarek.

“She’s all yours. She’s a little on the wild side, so watch her carefully,” Issac instructs him. Tarek nods his head as I grasp my bottle in my hand tighter. Then I turn and leave the kitchen with Tarek behind me.

“Do you have to follow so closely?” I snap at him, putting on a show for my father. I know he’s watching to see how I will react to the new security he put in place.

“I have my orders,” he says in return. We climb the stairs, and I head to my room, where he follows me inside. I slam the door for good measure as Tarek tracks the room with his eyes.

“There are no cameras in here,” I tell him. That’s all he needed to hear. He spins around and grabs my neck, kissing me like he might never see me again. His lips take what they want from me, and I gladly let them.

When he pulls away, we're both breathless, and I'm yearning for more.

"You were stupid, Pierson. How could you do this?" he hisses at me.

"I had no other choice, Tarek. I didn't want you here," I tell him.

"And yet here I am. You shouldn't have done this," Tarek murmurs as he raises his hand to my face and runs his fingers over the bruises that decorate my cheeks.

"I didn't want you to do this either," I argue.

"It wasn't your choice. I needed to handle this, but now it's become more complicated," Tarek explains, and I feel like shit for not listening to him. I hate I made this harder on him.

"I'm sorry."

"I'll handle it. Just stay out of their way, darlin'. Let me do what I need to do," he says. I nod my head before he pulls my lips back to his. His kiss is calm this time, taking his time to enjoy every breath he steals from my body, and I gladly let him.

"I really am sorry, Tarek."

"I know you are. We'll get out of this," he whispers against my lips before pecking one last kiss.

CHAPTER 21

I know she's here now, and I also know she's not safe. I hate it. I hate knowing they can hurt her, and there isn't a single thing I can do to stop it without blowing my cover. I got in with her dad just like I figured I would, but he wanted me to prove my worth before he stepped into anything else with me. I understand that, and I'm playing my part, but that doesn't mean watching her so lost and alone isn't hard. She walks around the house looking sadder than I've ever seen her yet hopeful at the same time. I want to think I'm the hope in her eyes.

I steal every moment I can with her. I steal kisses, touches, and caresses. I need that woman. I need her more than I thought I would.

"When will the shipment be in?" Catoli asks.

"Tomorrow night. Should be a big one," I reply, making up lies to cover my ass. We planted a shipment for him to grab. He just doesn't know that.

"And you're sure we can get to it?"

"They leave the warehouse unattended. No one ever looks there." He shifts in his seat as he looks up at me, his eyes burning through me.

"If you're wrong, you're dead." His statement does little more than piss me off. He can go fuck himself for all I give a shit, but I know the part I have to play, and this is it.

"I'm not wrong. I know my guys," I reassure him. He nods and lifts his glass to his lips, drinking the amber liquid inside.

“I suppose you do. How are things with my daughter?”

“They’re fine. She hasn’t attempted to run, but I warned her it wouldn’t be smart to try.” He chuckles now and shakes his head.

“I didn’t think she would run before either. Yet, she did. That’s why I need you on her at all times. I can’t afford for this marriage to Issac not to happen.”

“Why is that?” He looks up at me once more before pouring more amber liquid into his glass and twirling it in his hand.

“That isn’t something I typically discuss with the security, but you might as well know, considering you’re guarding her. I have plans, Tarek. Big plans. Takeovers are in the works, although that’s something that doesn’t leave this room, understood?” I nod my head, not liking where this is going.

“And how’s that going to work?”

“Quite simply, really. Once they say I do, you will be ready to shoot.”

“Shoot, who?” I ask, feeling a little uneasy now.

“Issac.”

“Why is that?”

“Once they’re married, everything he has will be hers. Pierson is ... controllable with the right kind of discipline.”

“And you plan on using that control to do what? Turn everything over to you?” I ask, knowing the answer already. I can see it in his sick, evil eyes. He’s using Pierson as a pawn to get what he wants, and why wouldn’t he? The man is sick.

“Exactly. She has no use for the things Issac has to offer. Pierson has everything she could possibly need here,” he says, throwing his hands to the sides to make his point.

“What if she wants more?”

“Then you handle her.”

“As in?”

“Do I really need to spell it out for you, Tarek? She’s disposable after we get what we want,” he says.

“We?”

“Yes. Aren’t you the one offering your club up on a silver platter to me, or have you changed your mind?” I shake my head.

“I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Then yes, we. You will move up the food chain, so to speak, and become someone with power and influence, exactly what you wanted.” I nod my head, forcing a smile on my face. I’m not happy about this shit, but I will play the part he needs me to play. I am concerned about Pierson and the fact that he thinks his only living child is disposable. Then again, he didn’t hesitate to shoot his son. The thought sends a chill down my spine as I roll my shoulders and try to ease the tension in them.

“Sounds like a good plan to me, but killin’ your daughter? You sure you’d want to go that far?” I ask.

“Pierson has always been trouble. I can’t see that changing in the future. Perhaps she may calm down, and we can let her live as long as she follows the rules, but if she so much as steps out of line, we have no use for her. After her marriage to Issac, no one else will want to marry her.” His words are hard to listen to. Why wouldn’t anyone want Pierson? She’s perfect. She’s mine. And I have to remind myself that I’m here to save her and not just take him out. The thought of shooting him between the eyes has crossed my mind more than once.

“I’ll do whatever you need me to do.” He nods and stands from his chair, buttoning his suit jacket as he walks around the desk and approaches me. When he’s within reach, he slaps a hand on my shoulder.

“Good man. I have a meeting to attend. Make sure to keep a close eye on her while I’m out,” he says.

“You got it,” I tell him as he walks past me and out of the room. I turn on my heel and follow behind him, watching some of his other men move through the house. Why didn’t he put one of them on Pierson’s security instead of me?

Ignoring the nagging thought, I trudge up the steps and straight to her room. Opening the door, I don't see her on the bed where she usually is. I close the door and click the lock before going to the bathroom. That's when I hear the shower running.

A slow smile curls my lips as I shove the door open and step inside. Pierson lets out a shriek before she sees it's me. Her eyes widen as I take her naked body in. Bruises linger on her skin, and the thought of that motherfucker touching her sends a chill over my body. Pierson steps toward me, wrapping her arms around my neck before planting her lips on mine. She kisses me hard, and I can feel just what she needs. Me. She fucking needs me, and I need her.

Her hands move to the button on my jeans, and they are around my ankles in no time. My cock is hard and ready for her, just like always. I look over my shoulder again at the door before lifting her and sinking inside her. I bury my face in her neck, breathing her in.

"Fuck, I've missed you," I tell her.

"I missed you too." Her little moans go straight to my cock as she slowly moves. I buck my hips, fucking her like she wants to be fucked. Then I move to sit her on the counter to get deeper inside her. I thrust, loving how she clings to me as I fill her full of me. Each thrust inside her is like being home. She is my home. It hits me harder than I thought it would that I need this woman more than I thought I did. She means something to me. Something more than the past. Something more than she could know.

I kiss her neck as I feel myself coming apart for her. In this moment, I realize dying for her isn't all that bad. I would willingly put my life on the line for hers to ensure her happiness.

My cock jerks as she bites into my shoulder, stifling her scream of pleasure. She falls apart around me, and I can't help but groan at the feel of her milking me. Her pussy clenches and pulls, and I could live every second of my life like this.

She wraps her arms around my neck as I slowly pull out of her. She doesn't let go. I don't want her to let go.

"We can't stay in this room all day," I tell her.

"Why not?" she whines, causing me to chuckle.

"They would know somethin' is up," I tell her.

"I don't want to leave you," she whispers.

"I'm not goin' anywhere. We just can't stay in here, or I'll fuck you again."

"I wouldn't mind that." Finally, she pulls away from me, and I palm her bruised cheek.

"When this is all over, you're never leavin' my bed."

"You plan on keeping me?" she asks, a hopeful look back in her eyes.

"Oh, I plan on doin' more than keepin' you, darlin'." Pressing a kiss to her lips, she smiles. I pull my jeans back up and help her off the counter before slapping her ass roughly. She yelps and climbs into the shower as I step back into her room to unlock the door. I walk over, drop into the chair in the corner of her room, and wait for her to come out.

CHAPTER 22

Fucking wedding dresses. I feel like a fool in them and sick to my stomach as I try them on. But then I change my thinking. I think about Tarek and what he would think of me in this dress. Would he ever want to marry me? We haven't known each other long, but the thought remains.

I look at the latest dress in the mirror and want to cringe. It's not that I don't look beautiful in it, because I do. But it's all for Issac, and that thought makes me sick. So I circle back to Tarek and wonder what he would think. Would he like it? Love it? Does it really matter? I let out a sigh as a small smile crosses my face. I think he would like it.

"You must like this one, yes?" Helga, the woman helping me try on dresses, asks.

"Why is that?"

"You smiled at this one," she adds. She's right. I've not smiled looking at any of the dresses, but I could picture myself walking down the aisle to Tarek in this one. I could see him at the end, smiling his gorgeous smile, his eyes taking me in the way he does. I can picture him in a tuxedo waiting for me at the altar. But that isn't my reality, and my happy smile slowly fades as the realization hits me. This is all for Issac, a show for my father. My insides turn as I think about that fact.

"Don't stop smiling now," Helga urges me.

"I don't know which is the best," I tell her. I don't want to pick one. I don't want to marry Issac either, but I have no

choice.

“I think this one is very beautiful, Miss Catoli. It accentuates your curves and makes you look regal. Just like a princess.” I adore her words; if only this weren’t a forced marriage.

“I think you’re right,” I say softly. She doesn’t know what this is. Helga doesn’t know this is a game, and I’m just a pawn in it, so why should I take it out on her?

“I’m so happy you found one you like. Many women go through many dresses, never finding the one.”

“We’ve gone through many dresses,” I remind her with a small smile.

“Yes, but you found the one. That makes it all worth it,” she says, pleased with herself. I smile back at her to make her feel better when I’m slowly falling apart inside. I only chose that dress because I thought Tarek would like me in it. Not Issac. I don’t care about Issac or what he thinks.

Helga slowly undoes the buttons on the back of my dress when the door opens.

“Well, did you pick one?” I hear Issac’s voice.

“Isn’t it bad luck to see the bride before the weddin’ in her dress?” Tarek. He was outside the door the whole time and is now in here. I spin around, holding the top of my dress, when Issac shifts his gaze from me to Tarek.

“I suppose you’re right,” Issac says. “I was just checking in. Shouldn’t you be in the room with her?”

“You want me seein’ your fiancé naked?” Tarek asks as if he hasn’t already. I almost snicker, but I keep it to myself.

“You have no business looking, but your job is to watch her, is it not?”

“Fine. I’ll stay in the room.” Tarek doesn’t back down from Issac, which is something Issac isn’t used to. He’s used to getting his way but not with Tarek.

“Good. You look beautiful, Pierson.” Issac says as he turns and walks back out of the room. Tarek’s eyes slip over to me, looking me up and down, and I can feel myself shiver from his gaze.

“You do look beautiful,” Helga adds.

“Thank you.” My eyes stay on Tarek as he takes me in.

“Let me go grab the veils before you take this off,” she says before scampering out of the room. Tarek closes the door and crosses the room in no time. His hand comes to the back of my neck like usual, pulling my lips to his. His kiss is demanding before it slowly eases.

“You look fuckin’ amazin’ in this dress. I can’t wait to be the one to peel you out of it,” he says.

“What do you mean?”

“You think I’m lettin’ you marry him? No, sweetheart. You’re mine. I’ll do whatever I have to do to keep that motherfucker away from you.”

“You already have. He hasn’t been to my room,” I tell him what he already knows.

“I know. I’ve kept them busy.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me just yet. We still gotta get through this whole weddin’ bullshit,” he tells me. I nod as he drops one last kiss on my lips and steps back just as Helga comes back in.

“I found the perfect veil, Miss Pierson.” She flits around before placing the veil on my head. I turn to look in the mirror and smile. If I weren’t marrying Issac, it would be perfect.

“It looks great,” Tarek offers, catching mine and Helga’s attention.

“Only great?” she asks, sounding saddened by his words.

“I like it,” he says.

“So she looks gorgeous?”

“She looks better than gorgeous,” Tarek adds. My cheeks heat as he looks me up and down before leaning against the wall across the room. I can’t think straight with his eyes on me the way they are. I find it hard to keep my composure.

“That’s better,” Helga says as she moves around the room, searching for shoes.

After trying on dresses, shoes, and every accessory Helga could possibly think of, we have a whole wedding ensemble. She bagged up the other dresses, and Tarek had one of the other men help Helga carry them out of the room. Then he followed me to the kitchen, where I ate lunch, and back to my room, where I sat on the bed with a book. He had to talk to my father about something, and I was left to my own devices. I haven’t thought about running since I know that would only cause problems for Tarek in the long run. He has a plan. He said as much.

The door opens, and I expect to see Tarek walk in, but my smile is quickly ripped from my face when I see Issac step inside.

“I hear you found everything to your liking with Helga,” he remarks as he pulls his suit jacket down his arms. No. He can’t do this. Not right now. My stomach twists into knots as he unbuttons and rolls up the sleeves of his dress shirt.

“I did.”

“That’s all you have to say? I did. No, thank you for doing all that?” He always wants praise for something I didn’t want to begin with, but if that will keep him away from me, I’ll do it. I can’t stand the thought of him touching me while Tarek is here. Bile burns the back of my throat even thinking about it.

“Thank you, Issac. She was very helpful.”

“Don’t sound too grateful,” he sneers at me as he walks closer to the bed. My stomach trembles; nothing good is going to come of this. I scoot back against my headboard and see the predatory look in his eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? Since when do you say sorry, Pierson? You’ve always been a little brat. I love slapping the brat out of you,” he says as he reaches for the buttons on his shirt. I know what this is. He’s going to try to fuck me again, and I can’t do it. I can’t let him.

I watch as he slides his shirt down his arms, and I swallow hard. What am I going to do? I can’t let this happen. Not again.

“Since I know this is what you both want. Maybe you’re right. Maybe you do want more than just a pawn.” I’ll play his game. I’ll use his words against him. I’ll do anything to stop this.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe I’m coming around to the idea of marrying you.” He stops walking, and something in his eyes changes. There’s a flash of something I don’t recognize before a smile tugs across his face. It almost seems genuine too. Hell, maybe it is.

“Are you? I’m telling you it won’t be as bad as you make it out to be, Pierson. You’ll have a good life,” he promises as he steps closer to the bed.

“Will you ... still hit me?” I ask, trying to keep him at a distance. Maybe if I keep talking, he won’t come closer.

“I only hit you when you need a reminder of where your place is, Pierson.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“Yes, I will if I need to. Otherwise, no. If you follow my rules and do as you’re told, things will go much smoother.” My stomach cramps as he pulls his shirt off and tosses it on the end of the bed. Just as he’s about to reach for me, the door opens, and I hear Tarek clear his throat.

“You’re free to go,” Issac says.

“Catoli says otherwise,” he argues, keeping his tone calm.

“She doesn’t need you right now,” Issac snaps.

“I’m doin’ my job. Catoli said to come and sit with the damn girl, and here I am.”

“Why is that?”

“He said somethin’ about a few things he didn’t like on the phone.” Issac pulls away from me and slips his shirt back on. I let out a breath of relief that doesn’t go unnoticed by anyone in the room. Issac looks strangely at me before turning and stalking out of the room. My eyes move to meet Tarek’s and hold there. When Issac is gone, Tarek shakes his head.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“I shouldn’t have left you alone, but your dad wanted me. He didn’t touch you, did he?” I can see the fire in his eyes from across the room, and I love it. I love every second of it.

“No. He was getting there.”

“He won’t touch you again as long as I’m alive,” he vows, a slight growl leaving his throat. I close my book and sit back, taking in the man who has become to mean so much to me in such a short amount of time. The man who brought me back from death. The man who has given me a reason to want to live.

The man who means everything to me.

CHAPTER 23

I won't lie and say my time in the Catoli house has been bad. It hasn't. I've helped the asshole take a few more shipments from Mask's chapter, and they have been putting on a show of looking for it. That seemed to have appeased him for now.

The best part of all of this is being with Pierson. We talk. We can't fuck all the time, but when you're trapped with someone every day, all day, you find something to do, and talking is what it is. She tells me things, things about her past. I learned her father didn't like how some of his men looked at her, so they were never put on her security detail. I learned she loves lilies and the color blue.

Spending time with her has made things that much clearer for me. The reason I'm here and willing to put my life on the line. It's her. It's all about her. She's everything I could have ever wanted, and I can't see walking out of this place without her. If I even walk out of here at all.

"You look like you're lost in thought," she says, breaking my moment.

"I was."

"What were you thinking about?"

"You." She smiles as I sit in the chair in the corner of her room, watching her on the bed with a book in her hand. She looks so innocent like this. So young.

"What about me?"

“Just how much this time with you has meant to me.”

“The time we’ve been stuck here?” she asks with a little laugh.

“I don’t look at it that way. I don’t see it as bein’ stuck here. I’ve learned things about you. Things I probably wouldn’t have known otherwise,” I explain. She shifts on the bed, moving to lay her book down as she scoots closer to the headboard.

“Is it weird that I feel a connection to you?” she asks, looking shy about asking the question. I love that look on her. I wish I could see it more.

“Not at all. I feel it too.”

Her eyes widen in surprise as a smile curls her lips.

“You do?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t, Pierson.”

“The wedding is getting closer,” she says, a sigh leaving her lips.

“Your dad planned on me killin’ Issac.” Her head pops up, and her lips part, eyes locking with mine.

“What?”

“At the weddin’. As soon as you say I do.”

“But it isn’t going to get that far, right?” I shake my head.

“No. You’re not marryin’ that man.” The anger inside me burns at the thought, and my chest tightens.

“Then how is that going to work?”

“I don’t know yet. I need to talk to the guys. It’s been hell tryin’ to get out of here with everything goin’ on,” I tell her. She nods her head and brushes her hair away from her face.

“I know it’s a mess. I don’t see everything, but I can imagine.”

“I’ve set up some shit through the guys to keep your dad busy. I’ve made what calls I can and texted all the information I have.”

“So what happens next?” she asks me. I scrub my hand over my face and sigh before sitting back in the chair.

“I was hopin’ you’d strip for me. Maybe a little lap dance,” I tease her. She lets a laugh that melts my insides and shakes her head.

“You know what I mean,” she says. I nod.

“I know what you mean, darlin’, and I don’t really have an answer for you. We play it by ear for now. Things will work out later.”

“What if they don’t?” she asks.

“They will.”

“Is that a promise?” she asks, wiggling her eyebrows.

“I don’t make promises. I told you that.”

“I know. No promises.”

“You’ll get out of this, Pierson. I’ll make sure of it.” She smiles softly and lowers her head.

“It isn’t me I’m worried about,” she whispers.

“I know you’re worried about me and don’t need to be. Things happen for a reason. We all have a purpose on this earth, and before you, I didn’t know what mine was. I didn’t know why I was still here and Bethany wasn’t. Nothin’ made sense to me, but then you showed up, and it all clicked. It all made sense.”

“What did?”

“My purpose on earth was to save you,” I tell her.

“You already did that.”

“No. I just helped you along the way. This time, I’m savin’ you, and there’s nothin’ that’s gonna stop me from doin’ it.”

“Thank you, Tarek. For everything. I don’t think you hear that enough from me.”

“I hear it enough. Probably too much. You’re thankin’ me for the things you’ve done for yourself. I didn’t pull you back from the edge. If you didn’t want to live, there were other

ways to do it, but you didn't. You stepped up and did what you had to do. You made yourself better, Pierson. Not many can say that."

"It was hard. I didn't think I wanted to get better at first. I just wanted it all to be over. I didn't want to face them or what they would do to me. I didn't have it in me, but somehow, I found the strength to do that with you."

"And I'm so goddamn proud of you." My words cause tears to spring to her eyes. I watch as they slowly fall down her cheeks before I stand from the chair and walk over to the bed. I sit on the edge and reach up, wiping the tears from her cheeks with my fingers before leaning in and pressing my lips to hers. She's everything to me.

Every fucking thing.

CHAPTER 24

*H*air.
Makeup.

Dress.

Shoes.

We've gone over a goddamn checklist of things that needed to be taken care of for the wedding. We did the stupid rehearsal, and my stomach protested the whole time. Now it's time for one last dinner. The wedding is tomorrow, and Tarek has been extra busy. My father has had him dealing with some security and other things for the wedding. I hate it. I hate everything about this. I don't know what Tarek has planned for us, which also unnerves me.

"Are you ready?" Issac asks, offering his arm. I reluctantly slip mine through his and let him lead me toward the restaurant door. My father wanted one last dinner before the wedding, although I don't know why.

I don't say a word as I'm led through the room and toward a back room I'm sure my father paid dearly for. When we enter, I see Tarek standing just inside the room, looking as stoic as ever. His back's straight, his hands clasped in front of him with his legs spread wide. He looks perfect standing there. It's hard to tear my eyes away from him, but I do as Issac leads me toward the table. Luckily, we move to the opposite side to be seated, where I can still see Tarek.

"You're on time," my father says, and I nearly roll my eyes. We're only ever late because of Issac, but we all know he

doesn't take the blame for it. No. The blame lies on me and only me.

"She was ready early tonight," Issac says as he pushes my chair in. I smile politely at my father as he eyes me closely. I don't know what he's looking at or why he's looking so hard, but it unnerves me. When he finally pulls his gaze from me, I watch him grab his glass of wine and raise it in a toast.

"Well. We're here to celebrate the union of Issac and Pierson. I'm happy to welcome Issac as part of our family." He goes on and on about life and love as if he knew anything about that. He isn't capable of love. In fact, I'm not sure he even knows what the word means.

"Let us eat and enjoy," he says when he's finally finished.

Dinner is set before us, and the wine glasses are refilled rapidly. I pick at my food, not at all hungry. I'm on edge. I wish I knew what the plan was for tomorrow. I wish I knew what Tarek was thinking. I lift my gaze and look at him as he stands by the door. I almost think he isn't looking at me, but then I see him wink, knowing it's for me. A slight smile curls as I look back down at my plate. I don't want to get caught by my father or Issac.

Dinner drags on with more wine and more food. There's talk and chatter around the table, but I ignore most of it before excusing myself to the bathroom. I see Issac motion for Tarek to follow me.

I walk through the restaurant and find the bathroom, reaching behind me to close the door. I don't get that far. Tarek's large hand blocks it before shoving it open enough that he can fit inside. He slides through the door and then closes it behind him.

Like I'm prey, he stalks me through the room. His eyes are on fire, darker than I've ever seen, and something about that look turns me on. I squirm under his gaze until he backs me against the wall.

"What are you doing?"

“I’m about to eat,” he murmurs, causing my heart to kick up a notch. He drops to the floor in front of me and lifts my dress in his hands. The material slips over my skin causing bumps to form. Then his fingers slide into the waistband of my panties, and he slowly tugs them down.

Tarek spreads my legs apart and dives in head first. His tongue slides between my lips and finds my clit. I buck my hips, needing him closer to me. He growls and keeps licking and sucking at me until my knees shake. A finger slips inside me, and my head falls back. He keeps going until I can barely stand, and I let go. I moan my release as I feel my cum leaking down my thighs. Tarek pulls back and runs his fingers along my thigh, cleaning it up before sucking it off his fingers.

Then he’s standing to his feet in front of me, stuffing my panties into his pocket.

“I need those,” I tell him as I catch my breath.

“No, you don’t. Issac won’t be touchin’ you tonight.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m gonna make sure of it,” he says firmly. I believe him. If he says it, it has to be true because Tarek doesn’t lie.

“Okay.”

“Use the bathroom and clean up. I’ll be outside,” he says before pressing his lips to mine. I can taste myself on his tongue, and it does something to me to know he isn’t even going to wash his face or hands. He’s going to keep me with him.

I use the bathroom after the door clicks shut and clean myself up before washing my hands. When I come out, Tarek is right there waiting for me. He nods, letting me know that I have to return to the table.

“Can’t we just run away?” I ask softly.

“I wish it was that easy, darlin’.”

“It could be.”

“You’d be hidin’ your whole life. That isn’t any life for you. You deserve more than that, and I’m gonna give it to you.” His words burn into my soul. They wrap around my heart and cause tears to prick the back of my eyes.

“No cryin’, Pierson. We got this.” I nod and take a deep breath before allowing him to lead me back to the table. He walks around like a proper gentleman and pulls out my chair before pushing it in. When I look up to thank him, he’s already around the table and back at his spot by the door.

“Are you okay? You look flushed,” Issac asks. I turn to face him and nod my head.

“I’m fine. I think it’s too much wine for me,” I tell him. It’s a lie. I haven’t drunk that much of it.

“You should slow down then.” I nod my head and smile my thanks. If he’d been paying attention to me, he’d have known I hadn’t drunk that much.

Dinner continues with dessert, and I’m exhausted by the time that’s done. I just want to go home, fall into bed, and relax for my last night of freedom. My nerves are on edge for tomorrow. I hope whatever Tarek has planned works out how he wants it because there is no way in hell I’m marrying Issac.

CHAPTER 25

There are times when our lives make sense. Times when everything is going your way, and you know how the end of the day will turn out.

Then there are times when you know nothing. Times when everything seems to spiral out of control, and you don't know which way is up.

I've felt all of that and more. I feel it now. I don't know what's going to happen today. I don't know how the end of the day will turn out. Will I live or die? Will things turn out the way I want them to? Will I fail at my mission?

I run my hand through my hair and look at myself in the bathroom mirror. This is what I need to do. This is what it's going to take to free Pierson.

A soft knock on the door pulls my attention. I take a deep breath and let it out before turning to walk out of the bathroom and through my room. When I pull the door open, I see her.

"What the hell are you doin' here?" I ask, leaning out of my room to glance around the hall. I know there are cameras around, but none are in this hall. I've been staying in Catoli's house since he always wanted me close by.

"I just needed to see you," Pierson says softly. I sigh and tug her into my room, closing the door quickly.

"This was stupid, Pierson. You need to go get ready."

"Ready for what? What's going to happen, Tarek? I need to know." I shake my head. She doesn't need to know, and I

won't tell her.

"I can't tell you. You need to be as surprised as everyone else is," I tell her.

"What does that mean? Surprised?"

"I can't have you unfocused in there," I explain.

"I can't go into this without knowing."

"You can and you will. You don't have a choice," I declare as I grab Pierson by the shoulders and pull her body against mine. I keep her pressed against me, savoring every fucking second I can get with her. I know it's wrong, and she shouldn't be here, but I'm so fucking glad she came. I needed this to see her before I went in.

"God, I fuckin' need you," I whisper in her ear.

"I need you too."

"Then you gotta trust me, Pierson. Do what you need to do. Play your part for me." She's silent for a long second before finally nodding her head against my chest.

"Okay. I'll do it."

"Good girl. Thank you." She pulls back and pushes up on her toes to kiss me, and I let her. She kisses me hard and rough, and I love every second of it, but I have to pull away before this gets too far.

When I pull back, she whines.

"Tarek."

"You gotta go, baby. You gotta go get dressed," I tell her. She pouts, and it's perfect, but she nods her head. Pierson understands she needs to get herself ready. None of this will work without her.

"Okay. I'm going." I nod my head and drop a kiss on her forehead before nudging her toward the door. She turns and walks over, pulling the door open before taking one last glance at me. I smile at her, a genuine full-on smile. This girl makes me happy. She makes me feel things I wasn't sure I'd ever feel again. My chest swells as I realize what it is. I love her.

I watch Pierson walk out of my room before I finish getting ready.

A few minutes later, I hear another knock before the door flies open, and her father storms in.

“Please tell me things are still in place.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?” I ask as I stuff my gun into the back of my pants. I can’t believe I’m in a fucking tuxedo, either. I look like a complete fool in it. The crisp white shirt clings too tightly to my skin and the jacket? I just look ridiculous.

“I don’t know, Tarek. I’m on edge. I need this to go off without a hitch,” he says, sounding more on edge than I thought he’d be.

“Everything is fine, Catoli. Calm down.”

“Calm down? My entire future is dependent on this marriage!” he roars. I nod my head and motion for him to keep his voice down.

“I’m well aware of that, so you need to calm down. Have I not followed through with what I’ve said I would?” I ask him. He looks at me and nods his head.

“You have.”

“Then you have to trust I’m gonna handle this too.”

“Trust is earned, Tarek.”

“Are you sayin’ I haven’t earned it?” I ask, sounding a little put off by the comment.

“You have so far. Let’s see how this day goes, and then we’ll talk tonight.” With that, he turns on his heel and leaves the room. I shake my head, knowing there won’t be anything to discuss tonight.

I finish getting ready and head for the door before making my way out the back, where the wedding is being held. White covers every surface you can see, and despite being forced to marry, this is perfect for Pierson. Flowers adorn every surface, petals scattered around. Yeah, this is perfect for her.

I take my place as people start to come in and line the seats on either side of the altar. My chest tightens as I think about Pierson right now. She must be a mess, so nervous and afraid.

The longer I stand here, the more I can picture it. The plan and what I'm going to do. This is it. This is my time to shine. I hope the guys come through. No, I know they will. They're on high alert and ready for this. They have all the details.

I inhale through my nose as Issac comes down the aisle. Sick fucker. I'd like to take my time with him, make him suffer like he did Pierson, but I can't do that. I don't have the time for that.

Next, it's her turn. I see Pierson and her father turn the corner at the end of the aisle and begin their descent. A chill runs through my body as I take her in. She's fucking gorgeous. Beautiful in that dress. The veil covers her face, but I can tell her eyes are on me. I can feel it.

They make it to the end of the aisle, and Catoli passes her off to Issac. I shift from foot to foot, ready to end it all. I can see she's nervous when the pastor begins to speak. She doesn't know what will happen, and I can't blame her for wondering.

I slip my gun from the back of my slacks and watch from my place in the shadows. No one can see me. No one knows what I'm up to, and that's how I planned it.

When the time is right, I raise my gun and aim it at Issac. One pull of the trigger. That's all it's going to take. And then I pull the fucking trigger and listen as people scream and begin to scatter. A few pull guns of their own, which I expected as I rush toward the front. No one knows that shot came from me.

Catoli meets me at the front, except something is off. His gun ... it's aimed at Pierson.

"What the fuck are you doin'?" I roar as I step closer to her.

"She had this done! She had him killed!" Pierson's eyes widen as she looks between her father and me.

"How, Catoli? How the hell would she have done that?" I ask, trying to get him to lower his gun. I can't risk shooting

him and having him fire at her. Fuck this isn't what I planned!

"I don't know, Tarek! You tell me. You've been with her this whole time." It's like a light switch was flipped, and everything comes into the light. He knows. He knows it was me.

"You wouldn't!" he growls. I smirk and step in front of Pierson, so I'm blocking her from the gun.

"Wouldn't I? You've been huntin' her like a goddamn animal."

"I don't understand."

"There's not much to understand, Catoli. She wasn't gonna marry that man. Never was. Not since she's been in my bed," I tell him. Before I know what's happening, the gun fires, and I see the guys swarming the room. Catoli hit the floor, but not before his gun went off. Pierson screams as I turn to face her. Adrenaline courses through my veins as I look around to see what's happening. That's when I notice the red splattered on her white dress. My heart beats faster and faster as I look her over. It isn't hers. I look at her face, and that's when I see the shock, the fear.

"You're bleeding!" she screams as I look down at myself. Shit, I was so focused on Catoli and had so much adrenaline running through me that I didn't feel it hit me.

"I'm ..."

What am I? Am I okay? The adrenaline slowly slips away as I glance back down at the blood flowing from me. Pierson helps me to the floor when I hear a few more shots fired.

"Tarek," Twitch yells for me. I shake my head, my ears ringing as I look around again.

"Don't do this to me, Tarek," Pierson begs. I blink rapidly as I look at her. God, she's so fucking beautiful. If this is the last memory I'll ever have of her, I want it. I want it all.

"Pierson."

"I need you, Tarek," she cries as tears fall down her cheeks.

“I love you.”

CHAPTER 26

I love you.
I love you.

I love you.

Those were the last words I heard from Tarek. The last words he said to me as he lay there. I didn't have a chance to say them back. I should have. I should have told him, but I didn't. And that's one of the things I'll regret the most.

He should have heard those words. He should have had the chance to hear them before he was taken away from me.

It all happened so quickly. I wasn't prepared for it. The guys swarmed in, and things became a blur after that. Issac was dead. My father was dead.

"You need to drink something at least," GeeGee says as she thrusts a bottle of water into my hands. I slowly bring it to my lips and take a mouthful, letting the cold water coat my dry throat.

"You want to try and eat?" she asks. I shake my head. I can't possibly eat right now. My stomach is in knots. My head spins. So many tears have fallen down my cheeks, and I don't think I have any left. My heart hurts. I've never felt this kind of pain except when my brother was murdered.

There's an emptiness. One I don't think will ever be filled. I pass the water back to GeeGee before I stand to my feet and head for the room. I need out of this dress. I need the blood off me.

I drag my feet as I walk down the hall and into Tarek's room. Another burst of tears and a sob rip out of me. How am I going to do this? How am I going to move on without him? My heart aches as I pull the dress off and let it slide to the floor. I walk to the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. I can't do this, not without him. He made me better.

I reach for the drawer and pick up the razor blade, looking at it in my hand. I can do it this time. I can end it all because I have nothing else to live for here.

I walk back to the bed and sit on the edge, looking at the blade in my hand. None of the guys are back. They never returned after what happened, so I knew no one would find me in time.

I scoot back against the headboard and take a deep breath when the door opens. I look up to see Twitch standing there. His eyes move from the blade to my face and back.

"You can't do that," he says, looking at the blade in my hand once more.

"You can't stop me."

"I can and I will. You can't do that, Pierson. I promised Tarek I would look after you."

"I don't care what you promised. He doesn't make promises."

"He might not, but he made me," he says, stepping closer to me.

"Leave me alone, Twitch," I tell him as I raise the blade.

"Can't do that. Do you know how pissed he'd be at me if I let this happen?"

"Does it matter now?" A strange look crosses his face as he looks at me.

"What do you mean?"

"He's gone, Twitch! I just ... I just need to be with him," I yell at him.

"Gone? What the hell are you talkin' about?"

“He died, Twitch. I was there, remember?” Twitch curses under his breath as he looks around the room as if confused.

“No one told you anything?”

“Told me what?”

“Tarek isn’t dead, Pierson. He’s at the goddamn hospital throwin’ a fit to get to you,” he replies. My heart stutters in my chest. He isn’t dead? When they rushed me out of there, I assumed that was why. Why hadn’t anyone told me?

“He’s ...”

“Alive, Pierson. He’s alive and fine.” All the air rushes from my lungs as I shove off the bed, tossing the blade to the floor. I run to the dresser and pull on the first pair of jeans and shirt I can find. Twitch chuckles behind me, but I don’t care.

“Take me there,” I order as I pull my shoes on.

“That’s what I came here to do,” he tells me. I rush to him, throwing myself into his arms as sobs wrack my body. “I can’t believe no one told you.”

“I thought ... this whole time, I thought he was dead,” I cry into his shirt. His arms wrap around me, holding me tightly.

“He’s not dead. In fact, he’s bein’ a pain in the ass. He just wants to see that you’re okay. He’s tried to leave the hospital for hours before I said I’d come to get you.”

“I can’t believe it,” I say as I pull away from him and wipe my eyes. “I’m a mess.”

“You look perfect. You ready?” he asks. I nod my head as he walks toward the door. I follow along behind him and out to the truck. As I climb in, my heart leaps in my chest. He’s still here. I almost ended it all, and he’s still here. I shake the thought and take a few deep breaths as Twitch drives.

Getting to the hospital seems to take forever, but my heart leaps when we pull up.

“I can’t tell him what I was going to do,” I say out loud.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s a good idea either,” Twitch adds.

“So we don’t tell him?” I ask, glancing over at him. He shakes his head.

“No. We don’t tell him, but you better not try that shit again, Pierson.”

“I won’t.”

“You mean it?”

“Yeah, I mean it. It was just a lot thinking he was gone.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. I don’t know why someone didn’t tell you sooner,” Twitch says before climbing out of the truck. He walks around and opens my door, helping me out before leading me inside.

We walk down a few hallways before I hear the guy’s laughter. It hits me harder than I thought it would.

“He’s in there,” he says, nodding toward the door.

“I ...”

“You what?”

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I tell him.

“Why can’t you?”

“I’ve thought he was dead for the last four hours, Twitch!” I snap at him.

“Yeah, but he isn’t. So come on and see your man.”

“He did all this for me,” I remind him.

“I know. Because he loves you, Pierson. Tarek did it because he loves you. Now, come on.”

“I don’t know, Twitch.”

“What isn’t there to know? Do you love him?” Do I? Do I love Tarek? I know in my heart I do. I nod my head as Twitch smiles at me.

“Then that’s it. Get your ass in the room.”

CHAPTER 27

I'm on edge. Even though the guys are here and laughing, I'm on edge. Pierson saw it all. I didn't want her to see that, but she did, and she had to. There was no other way around it. She needed to see that it was over. I ensured it was over.

The guys took out Catoli, which pissed me off a little. I wanted his ass. I wanted to make him pay for what he did, but I'm happy as long as he's dead.

Twitch left an hour ago to get Pierson for me. I've been bitching and throwing a fit to have her here. Cage said it was best to wait, but I can't. I need to see her. I need to know my girl is okay.

"What the fuck is takin' him so long?" I ask, looking between the guys.

"I don't know. I'll call him," Ridge offers, pulling his cell phone out. I watch him dial and then bring the phone to his ear when I hear the ringing.

"Is that motherfucker in the hallway?" I ask. Ridge shrugs, pulls the door open, and Pierson comes tumbling in. Cage grabs her and rights her when our eyes connect.

"Fuck," I whisper as she looks at me. She looks like hell. "They didn't tell you, did they?" she shakes her head slowly as the shock of seeing me lingers on her face. "Come here, Pierson."

Once more, she shakes her head and looks at me like I'm a ghost.

“Pierson, come here,” I order this time. Slowly her feet move, carrying her across the room to the side of my bed. I shift, wincing before pulling her down next to me. She kicks her feet up on the bed as the guys turn to leave the room, leaving us alone.

“I thought you were dead,” she says softly as tears fall down her cheeks.

“I’m right here, darlin’. I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

“But there was so much blood,” she cries.

“But I’m here, Pierson. I’m here,” I tell her once more. She nuzzles into my neck, and her tears wet my skin. I couldn’t ask for anything more.

“I love you, Pierson.”

“I love you too, Tarek. More than I thought I could.”

“Everything’s gonna be okay now. You’re gonna be okay.”

“I don’t know what to say to you,” she whispers.

“You don’t have to say anything. I know this was all a shock to you. I know you weren’t expectin’ that at your weddin’, but it had to be done,” I remind her. There was no other way around it. No one will care Catoli and Issac are dead. In fact, everyone hauled ass out of there so fast; they don’t even know who killed them.

“I thought about it.”

“About what?”

“Trying to end it all.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Twitch came in. No one told me, Tarek. I thought you were dead,” she tells me. Anger rises inside me, but I know she acted impulsively. She wouldn’t have done it. I know in my heart that she wouldn’t have done it.

“I don’t know why no one told you, but I’m fuckin’ glad Twitch stepped in. You have so much to live for, Pierson. So so much.”

“You. I have you to live for,” Pierson whispers, pressing her tear-stained lips to my neck.

“You have me,” I repeat her words.

“What happens now?” she asks. I sigh and pull her in as close as I can without causing myself too much pain.

“Now we live, Pierson. Now we live.”

“Both of us?”

“Yeah, both of us. I’ve held back for too long. I’ve lived in the past for far too many years. There’s a reason I’m still here, yeah? You’re that reason, Pierson. You’re the reason I’m supposed to be on this earth, and I believe that with every beat of my heart.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. When I first met you, I thought you were somethin’ I could fix. I thought you were my redemption. I thought, fuck, Pierson. If I could fix you, everything else would fall into place. That it would erase the bad from the past. I hated myself for what happened. I hated who I was and what I did back then. I wasn’t prepared for you, baby. I wasn’t ready to face the facts, but that’s what you were. You were facts, Pierson. I wasn’t supposed to fix you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were supposed to fix me, and you did. You made me better. You made me stronger and wiser. You made me believe there was a second chance for me.”

“You think so?”

“I know. I know, Pierson. Because I couldn’t have moved on without you. I couldn’t have been the man you needed me to be if you didn’t heal that little spot in my chest. I thought you were my good deed this whole time, but that wasn’t it. I was yours, Pierson. You were the one savin’ me.”

“I don’t feel like I’ve saved you. You’re lying here because of me, Tarek. This doesn’t make sense.”

“It does make sense. Who the hell knows where I’d be if you hadn’t come along? You make everything better, baby.”

“You saved me,” she whispers.

“No. You saved me.”