



MARTEEKA KARLAND

WYILDE

IRON TZARS MC #9

Changeling Press

WYLDE (IRON TZARS MC 9)

A Bones MC Romance

Marteeka Karland

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Danica — I've been attracted to the roguishly handsome biker from the very first time I saw him. Wylde's an incorrigible flirt. I know he acts like he's a player, but I've seen another side of him. Kids from all over the area flock to him because he's Wylde — the guru of all things electronic. He has endless patience with the teens looking to learn his skill in video games, but he has none with adults. I love his twisted, sarcastic sense of humor, and that streak of protectiveness he shows on occasion. He's wicked smart and I love watching him use his intelligence and his wit. Plus, he's hotter than sin. So I flirt back.

Wylde — I've got it bad. I come to the coffee shop just to be near Danica. The tiny barista has more heart than most people I've met. But she's the kind of woman who'll want forever, and that's not me. But when I realize the danger she and her sisters are in, I'll do whatever's necessary to keep them safe. Once Danica knows what I'm capable of, I know she'll run screaming into the night, and I'll never see her again.

CHAPTER ONE

Wylde

“I’ll take a double ristretto with iced vanilla double shot and organic chocolate brownie decaf, please.”

The line behind me groaned.

One guy grumbled from behind me, “Some of us got places to be!”

“Yeah,” someone else volunteered. “You shouldn’t get something so complicated when the line’s so long.”

I just grinned, loving the disgruntled mutterings. Did my heart good. “It’s amazing what you can wait for when you’re, you know, *early*. My recommendation to people in a hurry is to start earlier. Then you’re not in such a rush.” I leaned in over the counter for a stage whisper at the woman getting ready to serve me. “Too much stress can lead to gas.”

The young woman gave me a star struck smile, eating me up with her eyes and actually licking her lips. What can I say? I have that effect on women. Even if this one was a little young for my tastes.

“That was a... double... uh... and vanilla... decaf?” She graced me with a dreamy smile. The girl had no clue what she was doing, but I wasn’t about to push her. Mainly because I saw the one person in the whole place who could make this situation better.

Danica James stepped behind the counter as she tied

her apron around her slender waist. She rolled her eyes, giving me a look that said I was being a drama queen again. Instead of saying anything, she pulled out a big mug with the coffee shop's logo on it and filled it full of black coffee.

“Anything else, Wylde?”

I grinned as I paid for the cup and the coffee. “Nope. Thanks, Danica.”

She raised an eyebrow, glancing at the tip jar pointedly. “Just put the tip in, Wylde. See how it feels.”

Yeah, we had a thing going. And I always waited until she said it before I put in my tip. She always said it.

“What? Is that it?”

“Asshole.”

Yeah, the groans behind me were amusing as shit.

“You're welcome.” I threw up a hand and headed back to my table where I'd set up my laptop for the morning. I loved coming here. Not for the glacially slow Internet or the stimulating company that amused me so much. Hell, I didn't even come for the coffee, though it was the best in town. No. I came for Danica James.

The woman was sin and sex with a snarky attitude. She knew my drink as well as my moods and accommodated both. If I were the kind of man looking for a woman for my own, it would probably be Danica. Not only was she beautiful and sassy, but she was kind, as well. I'd seen her giving out the leftover pastries to a few homeless people who hung out a couple of blocks from Henry's Coffee Shop on multiple

occasions. I'd also seen her paying for them out of her tips so her boss didn't get in a twist. I made sure to contribute as much as I could and not look like a creepy stalker. I also was pretty sure she knew what I was doing.

An hour later, I was banging away on a Discord channel I frequented, helping noobs learn to play Fortnite. The other barista approached me, a big smile on her face. She'd loosened a couple of buttons on her top so I had a good view of her cleavage. Which, I admit, was a pretty good view. But she wasn't my style. Mainly because she was star struck by my good looks, tattoos, and quite possibly my Titan GT77, but I didn't think so. She might surprise me, but didn't strike me as the computer geek type.

"Hey, Wylde." She smiled and set a large black coffee next to my empty mug. "Want me to freshen up your mug?"

I glanced at the cup she'd just set in front of me. "I think I'm good. I'll come to the bar if I need something." I smiled to take the sting out, but honestly, I could care less if she got offended. She wasn't stupid... exactly... she was just young and thought she could lead guys around by their dicks. I'd seen it a few times since she started. I'd also overheard her telling her girlfriends she could get me into bed with a crook of her finger. I had to chuckle at that.

Her smile faltered. "I was just being nice."

I sighed and looked up from the chat session I was in. Normally, I'd have my headphones on using voice chat, but it was crowded and I didn't want to disturb anyone. I could be a bastard, but I wasn't a complete asshole. Most of the time.

“Look, kid. I’m sure you’re nice and all, but you ain’t my type. Tell your friends I’m gay or something if you think it will help you save face. But I’m not interested. ‘K?’”

All right. So maybe I *was* a complete asshole. Wasn’t the first time. Wouldn’t be the last.

The girl stomped her foot. “You don’t have to be so rude.” Then she turned and flounced off.

“Making friends, I see.”

Danica grinned at me from where she was wiping down a table while Little Miss Thang had moved back behind the bar. She glared furiously at me before going back to her phone.

I grinned at Danica. “I do my best.”

She snorted. “Right. You do your best to piss as many people off as you can. Pretty sure you think they’ve made pissing people off an Olympic sport, and you’re determined to win gold.”

I barked out a laugh. Which got Little Miss Thang back to glaring at me. Only now, her anger spilled over to Danica. That wasn’t happening. I met her gaze while I continued my conversation with Danica. The look I gave her was probably not very pleasant.

“Well, you know what they say. Better pissed off than pissed on. I mean, that’s not really my thing, but I could do it. Honestly, though, she didn’t take the hint so I had to go the not-so-subtle route.”

“Just be careful of your coffee if Jordan serves it. Not

saying she'd put laxative in it. Not *not* saying it either. Or maybe salt." She looked off, as if pondering which would be worse. "I think I'd prefer the laxative."

I sketched her a two-fingered salute and we both went about our business. It was one of many reasons I liked Danica. She knew when to leave a man alone, and she didn't throw herself at me either. Hell, I knew she wanted me. What woman wouldn't? But she never let on like she did. Which, I'll admit, was part of the draw. It was also the reason I didn't pursue her. Once the chase was over, I'd get bored and she'd get hurt. That was the last thing I wanted.

With a shrug, I turned my attention back to the chat. There were currently twenty-three people other than me. Questions flew around with some of the more seasoned players hanging out answering most of them. I was there to moderate and step in if things got heated. Mostly everyone behaved. Sometimes there were questions no one could answer and they'd turn to me. Looking at the string of chatter I'd missed while interacting with Jordan and Danica, I frowned. Looked like I needed to get them back on track.

SoulHunter15: *I can't believe they won't let me on the e-sports team. I'm better than half of em.*

JustMadness: *Bro that's sick. Gonna do something about it?*

SoulHunter15: *Nothing to do.*

JustMadness: *Merc a bunch a motherfuckers, bro. That'll teach em. lol*

OK, that wasn't going to work.

Wylde: *Soul, join me in a game. We'll walk through some things together then pop in. You ace the battle and they won't be able to keep you out.*

SoulHunter15: *You'd do that?*

Wylde: *I aim to please.*

I didn't, really, but this was my channel and I thought of all of them as kids. I knew some of them, and they were my age or older, but there were plenty of kids on here. Especially during the local e-sport season. Everyone was looking for an edge and I was happy to provide and support the gaming community. Violence, though necessary in my line of work with my club, was never condoned on my server.

It was with supreme irritation I DM'd with the bastard.

Wylde: *Madness, that's one. You don't get another.*

JustMadness: *Jesus, bro! Can't take a fucking joke?*

Wylde: *Keep it up. Just itchin' to ditch your ass.*

JustMadness: *Fuck you*

He left the server. I frowned. Looking into his profile gave me very little, so I started digging a little deeper. After thirty minutes, I knew I wasn't going to find anything from here. I needed my setup at the clubhouse, but I needed to square things with SoulHunter first. I opened another direct message.

Wylde: *Soul when do you want to start? Give me a day and time and I'll be there.*

SoulHunter15: *Don't matter. They ain't gonna let me in.*

Wylde: *We'll see. Day and time.*

SoulHunter15: *Maybe tomorrow?*

Wylde: *What time?*

SoulHunter15: *I get home at 3. How about 3 30?*

Wylde: *I'll be here. Looking forward to it. We'll do our best to get you in.*

I stared at the screen for a while, wondering if I'd gotten control of the situation. I seriously doubted it. Troublemakers like *JustMadness* didn't slink off into the night. They came back when they thought you weren't paying attention. Taking him down would take time, though. Right now, my focus needed to be on SoulHunter. If I could redirect the kid and give him something else to aim for, maybe I could avert whatever disaster Madness was trying to push the kid toward. And I had no doubt it was intentional.

I'd seen the name *JustMadness* around several times. Both on my server and others I frequented. Always, Madness was causing problems. Usually, it was stirring up an already ongoing argument or disagreement. But sometimes, like now, I found *JustMadness* planting dangerous ideas in the heads of users who seemed more than a little unstable. This instance didn't really seem like much, but I'd watched SoulHunter enough to know he was serious about gaming. I also happened to know he wasn't as good as he liked to think he was. Mostly because of users like Madness who knew he wasn't very good but liked to make fun of him behind his back.

Yeah. Not on my server. The only reason I let him stay

on was because I could control and contain the damage. If I banned him outright, I might miss something important. Unlike some servers, I was able to heavily moderate mine. I'd written a program to help. It was amazing what AI could do if you knew how to use it. My software scanned everything being said or typed. If something seemed threatening or questionable, it notified me. As I used it, it learned. As it learned, it became more and more accurate until it had down the troublemakers to keep an eye on and new users it needed to learn.

In the meantime, I needed to find out where the kid was from and what school he went to and have a talk with the e-sports coach. Surely to God there was some place for the kid.

Needing to get back to my office where I could explore this situation more easily, I shut down my laptop and packed everything up. Glancing at the full cup of coffee Jordan had left hours earlier, I scowled. There were a few quirks I had. Taking a cup of coffee from just anyone was one of them. I didn't do it. I made my own or took it from Danica. Even Blaze didn't get to make my fucking coffee. Why was I OK with Danica making my coffee? No clue. Probably because she got me. She knew when to engage me in small talk and when to leave me the fuck alone. Very few people had that capability.

I glanced around the shop and found the woman in question. Danica was behind the counter waiting on a customer. As always, she had a smile and polite conversation if the customer welcomed it. This time, the young man she

served was openly flirting with her. I wanted to growl my disapproval but held it in. Mostly.

There wasn't anyone in line and the guy kept Danica engaged even when she tried to go back to her work.

"I know a sweet little pizza place on the edge of town I'd love to show you. Tell me what time you get off and I'll pick you up."

"I appreciate the offer, Leo, but I don't go out on weekdays. My sisters have school, and I have to make sure they have their homework done."

"Surely you can find a sitter." This Leo wasn't taking no for an answer, but it wasn't any of my business. One thing I knew about Danica was that she could take care of herself.

"I probably could, but it's something I promised myself and my mother before she died. I don't go out during the week unless it's an emergency. Then I take the girls with me."

"Didn't you say they were your sisters?" Leo looked equal parts confused and irritated. He was good-looking. Athletic. I'd seen the guy around a couple of times. He was some kind of local sports hero in high school. Pretty sure he worked for his daddy now at some kind of family business, but I had no reason to find out. Until now.

"They are."

"Then why are you responsible for them?" The fucker sounded like a whiny little pussy. "Get someone else to take care of them so you can live your own life."

"They're my sisters, Leo. Not a responsibility. I could

have passed them on to social services and visited them instead of becoming their guardian, but that wasn't what me or my mother wanted."

"Fine. What about this weekend? We'll go to a movie, then maybe to a nightclub. I have a friend who can get us into The Hudson."

She smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "I appreciate the offer. I really do. But I'm not at a good place in my life to date anyone. I know you understand." Her tone was gentle and sounded truly regretful. While I was happy she'd turned him down, I didn't like the thought that she might be tempted to go out with him if she had fewer responsibilities. I thought that twit, Leo, was going to keep pushing, but he flashed her a smile.

"I get it. Some other time, perhaps. It's not been that long since your mother passed, right?"

"A few years," she said softly, lowering her eyes as if the grief were still close. "Five."

"You've grieved long enough. You'll be ready to move on with your life soon. When you do, I'll be there for you." The superior smirk he gave Danica made me want to bitch-slap the punk.

"I'm sure you will." She smiled up at him. "I really need to get back to work now. It was good talking to you." With that, she turned her back and began cleaning equipment behind the counter.

Leo scowled at her behind her back but didn't continue

to try and engage her again. He picked up his coffee and headed out the door, dumping his untouched cup in the trash. If Danica really needed time before she dated anyone, Leo wasn't one to wait until she was ready. I was pretty sure Danica had no intention of going out with the dumbass anyway.

I dumped the now-cold cup of coffee I hadn't touched into the trash and brought the mug Danica had filled for me when I'd first arrived back to the counter. "Cup for the road, sweetie?"

She turned. There was a tired look on her face before she smiled brightly at me. Unlike the smile she'd give Leo, this one looked genuine. "Anything for you, Wylde." She refilled my cup. "Heading out early today? You usually stay until it's close to closing."

"Got some stuff I can't do on the laptop. Believe me, I'd much rather work here. The scenery is much more pleasant." I winked at her and she blushed.

"Perhaps you need to get some pictures for your office, then. Or maybe a potted plant."

"Plants are like pets. They require maintenance I don't have time to give. As to pictures? I'll do my best to find something suitable."

"Don't find anything too good. I'd miss seeing you here."

"Not to worry. You know I have to come see my best girl."

“Oh?” She tilted her head to the side quizzically. “I didn’t think you thought that highly of Jordan.” The woman in question had cut out early, as usual, leaving Danica to finish the day on her own.

“I don’t.” I picked up my coffee and gave her a small salute as I turned to leave, but not before I snapped a picture of her with my phone as she turned away.

CHAPTER TWO

Danica

I was tired. So fucking tired. Working two jobs sucked ass, but at least the second one was from home. I wasn't lying when I told Leo I couldn't go out with him. The girls were part of the reason, but mostly it was just that I had zero free time. Most nights I worked until midnight before I was done. Then I had to get the girls up and to school, or least to the bus. After that, it was back to the coffee shop. I worked five days a week, ten-hour days, because I needed the money. The owner liked the way I ran the place, so it worked out best for everyone.

The truth was, even if I had been free I'd have blown Leo off. I had exactly zero interest in the guy. Sure, he was good-looking, but he was a prick. A local football hero who had flunked out of college and fallen back on his family's money and pretended to be rich. I'd watched as one woman after another followed him around like a puppy dog as he cheated on her and treated her like shit. When he moved on, to a woman they all followed after him, begging him to take her back. I guess money does a lot for a woman's self-esteem. In the wrong direction.

Now, had it been Wylde...

The man was an enigma. He was so flippant about everything but when he was working, he was hyper-focused. Several times throughout his day, I'd come by and refill his coffee. Why not? He always tipped well, and I enjoyed his

company. If I refilled his coffee for free once in a while, I doubted the shop would go under. He never noticed. Unless someone other than me brought him something. That, he wouldn't touch. Probably because I was the only one to actually refill his mug — and he bought a new one every day. It was why I quit asking and just had it ready. He didn't seem to want a disposable cup, but wouldn't bring one of the dozens he already had.

He also pulled shit like he did today with Jordan, ordering some wild concoction no one could remember and he would never drink. If she'd actually managed to make it correctly, he'd just have said to give it to someone behind him and asked for something even more complicated. The man didn't want to ask for what he wanted. He was arrogant enough to want the people he interacted with daily to know what his needs were and meet them without him asking.

Yeah, he was a colossal prick. But he was *magnetic*. He was also sweet as he could be to me. The few times I'd left when he did, he'd always held the door for me and walked me to my car. It wasn't creepy or stalkery. It felt... protective?

Shrugging both men off, I finished cleaning up. At five I closed up. The last hour was spent preparing for the next morning. The girls rode the bus from school to the shop and did their homework while they waited.

Lemon and Apple were twins. At sixteen, they were outgoing and more than a little wild. Definitely wilder than I'd like, but I didn't really blame them.

“Ready to go?” I smiled as I prepped the last station for

the morning. I always did it, even if I didn't open. It was easier on me when I did, and Jordan was never on time anyway.

Apple blew a bubble. "Sure."

"I need some shit for a school project." That was Lemon. Of course. She was the ringleader of the two, and pushed her boundaries enough to set my teeth on edge.

"Don't say shit," I said, fully aware she'd smirk at me because of my own use of the word, even if it was to correct her language.

Sure enough, she snickered. "Sure, Dani. I'll lay off the shit. Is 'fuck' OK?"

I sighed. "You're really pushing my patience."

"All you need to add is the 'young lady' part and you'd sound like an old woman." And of course, Apple had to add her two cents' worth.

"Living with the two of you is making me old. Come on. Where do you need to go?"

"Just Wal-Mart or something. It's pretty generic." Which meant it would likely be anything but, and she wanted to watch me run around like a chicken with my head cut off trying to find what she needed. They were little brats, but I loved them. They'd also had a rough time of it, losing their mother and being raised by their sister. Just like me, they'd never known their father. Our mom had been a good mother, but she'd had horrible taste in men. Or maybe she'd done it on purpose. She never confided in me, and it was too late now.

"Right. You got a list?"

She grinned, tapping her temple. “All up here.”

“Yeah. That’s not going to work. Done this too many times.” I pointed at her phone. “Make a list and send it to me. We’ll swing by a fast-food restaurant, then go in search of supplies. Deal?”

“Works for me.” Lemon immediately ducked her head, her thumbs flying over her phone. They always had their noses in their phones, so it wasn’t unusual.

Food was quick and light. We all ordered from the dollar menu. The girls might be brats, but they knew the score. Money was tight. They’d both tried to get jobs but I’d refused. School was their ticket out of here, and as long as I could keep food in their bellies and a roof over their heads, they weren’t working. Besides, they were only sixteen. It was how I’d prevented them from starting jobs they’d both managed to score by lying about their age. I’d also confiscated the fake IDs they’d gotten their hands on. Didn’t matter that it listed their ages as eighteen instead of twenty-one.

I studied the list Lemon had sent me. Yeah. Wal-Mart wouldn’t have some of this stuff. Which meant heading to a specialty store with art or hobby supplies.

An hour later I was roaming up and down aisles looking for the few remaining things Lemon needed. Apple was helping, but had stopped to talk to a boy who looked like he was at least four or five years older than her. Maybe more. Closer to my age than hers. Which set my teeth on edge. I was about to call her back to me when Lemon snagged my attention.

I rounded a corner and ran into Jordan. “Hey! Watch where you’re going, bitch!”

“Jordan?” I gasped at the anger in her voice and expression. “I didn’t see you. It was an accident.”

“Like hell! You’ve had it in for me since I started working at the shop. Now you’re trying to kill me!” She wasn’t subtle about voicing her anger. “You stay away from me, bitch!” She stabbed my chest with her finger before shoving past me.

“Fucker,” Lemon muttered.

“I bet Deacon could take care of her.” Apple’s comment was as muttered as Lemon’s. Both girls stared after Jordan angrily.

“Who’s Deacon?”

“What?” Apple looked up at me, her eyes innocent.

“Deacon. Who’s Deacon?”

She shrugged. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You said Deacon could take care of her.” I narrowed my eyes at the girl, knowing I’d missed something.

She rolled her eyes. “I said someone should take care of her.” She turned to her sister. “Right, Lemon?” Which didn’t surprise me. They always had each other’s back.

“Yep. Hey, Dani, I think I see what I’m looking for over here.”

I sighed and followed the girl, knowing their game.

She was trying to distract me. I let them get away with it because sometimes it was best to pick your battles. We moved down to the end of the aisle we were in.

“I think this will work.” Lemon picked up some kind of glaze for the pottery she wanted to make for whatever art project she was working on. I didn’t ask too many questions. I just bought what she told me she needed. It was the way we worked. They knew the score and only got what they absolutely needed, never going overboard when most kids would.

“Is that all? Is there anything else you need?” She looked back down the aisle in the direction of her sister and bit her lip. “Um...” That was when I realized Apple was at the very end of the aisle talking to a guy. Great. Just what I needed. My sixteen-year-old sister dating. Not happening.

I sighed, raising my voice. “Apple. Come here, please.”

Apple rolled her eyes but said her goodbye and sauntered our way. Surprisingly, the young man looked at me and gave a respectful nod of acknowledgment. He was still too old for her, no matter how polite.

With a shake of my head, I gave Apple a warning look before addressing the man in question. “You know she’s sixteen. Right?”

He narrowed his eyes. “No, ma’am. I didn’t.” Apple gasped and glanced over her shoulder. He nodded at Apple, a look of deep disapproval on his face. “You’re in trouble, girl.”

Apple shrugged. “Not like you can do anything about it.”

“I can spread the word to my brothers. Good luck with you or your sister finding a date until you’re eighteen.” His look said that was a promise.

“I didn’t do anything.” Lemon raised her hands innocently. “So, I don’t deserve that.”

The guy raised an eyebrow. “Seem to remember you pushing me toward your sister. You’re the one who told me she was nineteen.”

With a shrug, Lemon turned back to the shelf she was looking at with the pottery glaze. “No worries. You’re not the only fish in the sea.”

“Nope. But me and my brothers are mean as shit. Any guy not your own age gets near you, they’ll feel our wrath.” He pointed at Apple. “Be seein’ you in a few years, girl.”

Apple gaped at him. I knew how she felt. He walked away and none of us seemed to know what to think.

“What the hell have you gotten into now, Apple?” I sighed.

“Trust me when I tell you, you do *not* want to know, Dani.” Lemon pursed her lips and glanced at her sister knowingly.

“Shut up, Lemon!” Apple snapped.

“We’ll talk about this when we get home,” I said. “Let’s just get this stuff and get out of here.”

We made our way to the checkout, chatting lightly with each other. I wanted with all my heart to ignore the fact that my baby sisters were not only interested in boys, but trying to hang out with men. There was no way that guy was still in his teens. Gave me hives just thinking about what could happen. And probably would happen if I didn't keep a closer eye on them. I just hated to smother them when they'd had such a rough life.

The girls were only eleven when our mother died. I'd barely been eighteen, but had dropped everything to become their guardian because there was no way I was going to leave my baby sisters to the tender mercy of foster care.

It was because I was preoccupied with the issue of Apple and her would-be boyfriend I missed the fact that two policemen were right in front of us until they didn't move to let us pass.

"Officers?" I smiled as I looked up at the two of them. They had hard features and looked at me with disapproval.

"We're going to need you to come with us, ma'am."

"Is there a problem?" My heart started pounding. I had no idea what was going on, but it had to be bad. We had no living relatives other than a great aunt, but she lived in California and we hadn't seen her in years. Surely if something had happened to her they wouldn't send the police to tell me. Was it the coffee shop? But why hunt me down?

"There is," the other one said. "Please come with us."

"What's this about?" I stepped in front of the girls who

were looking belligerent at the officers. I got a bad feeling, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out why.

"It's better if we discuss this in private." The same officer spoke while the other one looked around as if making sure we were alone.

"I don't understand."

The silent officer snorted. The first one just sighed and shook his head.

"Of course, you don't. Please come with us." He held out his hand to usher us in the direction he wished for us to go. The officers led us to the back of the store to an office where he indicated we should sit. The store manager accompanied us after someone had called him to the back. Apple looked speculative while Lemon looked ready to take the officers apart with her bare hands.

"We've got rights," Lemon spat. "You have to tell us what's going on."

"Hush, Lemon. Not now."

"They can't just force us in here away from everyone. They have to read us our rights or something. Even then they'd take us to the police station. Not to the back room of a store!"

"Please, Lemon." I was becoming desperate. "What's going on, officer? Has something happened?"

"We were informed that you pocketed some items. Possibly to get high."

Apple and Lemon both gaped at the man. I knew how they felt.

“I beg your pardon?” It was all I could manage. I’d never been accused of stealing anything in my life, especially to get high. I didn’t even drink alcohol. With two teenage girls to take care of, I didn’t have time.

“Would you mind, please, emptying your purse?” the first officer asked politely, but it was obvious it wasn’t a request. I knew I should wait, to get a lawyer or something, but I really had no reason. I hadn’t taken anything.

While the girls sat quietly, I emptied out my purse. I only had a few things in it so I turned it upside down and dumped the contents on the desk in front of us. Out tumbled my wallet, a couple of tampons, my phone, a tube of Chapstick... and two bottles of metallic modeling paint.

The officer reached out and picked it up, looking it over. The store manager had a scanner with him and scanned the barcode on the tiny bottles.

“They usually go for metallic spray paint, but I suppose any metallic paint would do.”

“What?”

He looked up at me in disgust. “Metallic paint. Apparently, it’s better for getting high than some of the other colors.”

“I didn’t put that in my bag. We weren’t looking at modeling paint. Lemon has a pottery assignment she’s working on. The supplies we needed are in the shopping cart.”

“Well, these are our paints. They have our barcodes. You dumped your purse out yourself. No one else touched it,” the store manager snapped at me. He was right. I’d dumped it out myself.

“I didn’t do this. And I don’t get high. You can drug test me or whatever you need to do, but I didn’t do this.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to come with us.” The officer took hold of my upper arm and urged me to stand. Then he started reading me my rights.

“What’s happening, Dani?” Apple looked more fearful than her sister.

“This is horseshit!” Lemon spat. “You can’t do this! My sister didn’t do anything!”

“How old are you girls?” the other officer asked. “You eighteen?”

“Yes.” Lemon’s voice was hard, authoritative.

“No.” Apple spoke at the same time as her sister and immediately shrank back, a look of horror on her face as if she’d realized her words might cost them.

“Well?” The officer was losing patience.

Neither girl said anything else. Apple ducked her head while Lemon raised her chin in defiance.

With a sigh the officer keyed the radio mic clipped to his shoulder. “Dispatch, signal six CPS. Two minors at this arrest.”

“What’s happening?” I struggled as the other officer

snapped handcuffs around my wrists behind my back. “Let me go!”

“Child protective services are on the way. They’ll look after the kids until you’re out on bail.”

“NO!” Lemon stepped forward. One look from the officer stopped her. “We’re not leaving Dani.”

“Girls, just do what they say. It’ll be all right.”

“I’m calling Deacon,” Apple said. “He’ll know what to do.” As she pulled out her phone and made the call, it struck me that I should probably tell her not to call the man who’d tried to get with my sixteen-year-old sister, but I was in shock.

“I-I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Apple.” I was shaking. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Hey, lady,” the officer handcuffing me said, irritated. “You do the crime, you gotta do the time.”

“Deacon says he’s on the way back. He said he’d take care of everything.” Apple sounded a little more settled but still fearful.

My phone started ringing. Unknown number. Fucking spam callers. Now wasn’t the time. When it stopped, Apple’s phone chimed with a text. She read it, then looked back at me.

“Deacon says to answer your phone.”

“Not happening,” the officer said.

When it started ringing again, Lemon grabbed it and answered. “Hello.” She looked at me steadily as she listened to whomever was on the other end. “At the hobby shop. They

found two small bottles of paint in Dani's purse. They're arresting her." There was another pause. "They've called Social Services for me and Apple. We don't want to go with them." Another pause. "OK. I'll tell her." She ended the call. "That was Wylde. He said he'd be here in five minutes and that we could stay with him until he fixes this."

"Wylde?" His name came from my lips like a prayer. And maybe it was.

"Yeah. Said he knew you from the coffee shop."

"Oh, thank God!" I nearly sobbed in relief. If anyone could help me, it was Wylde. I looked at the officer in front of me. "The girls can go with him when he gets here. Wylde is my friend."

"Wylde? Funny name."

I frowned. "So? He can take my sisters. I'm their guardian. There's a paper in my wallet saying so. You can check with Social Services when they get here. It's all on record."

"That's up to them. But if you're their guardian and you say they can go with your friend, I don't see any reason why they couldn't."

Finally! The man was being reasonable. It was the one thing that might go right in this situation.

The officers ushered me outside and into the back of the patrol car where we waited. It wasn't even five minutes before a huge, dark blue Bronco pulled into the parking lot beside the cop car. There, larger than life, Wylde climbed out

and stalked over to us. He looked angry as hell. Another man got out of the other side and walked over to the police. Wylde said nothing, but his gaze was focused squarely on me. It was the other man who spoke.

“I’m Wyatt Raven, Miss James’s lawyer. What’s the charge?”

“Shoplifting. She’ll be booked in county. I’m sure they’ll let you see her once she’s been processed.”

Mr. Raven gave the officer a long hard look. “I’ll be accompanying Miss James.” He looked to me. “Did they read you your rights?”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Wylde growled and took a step forward before catching himself. “You do everything Raven says, Danica. Don’t say a word unless he says so. Understand?”

Again, I nodded, my gaze clinging to Wylde’s. “Please take care of the girls, Wylde. I’ll never ask you for anything else. Don’t let them go with CPS.”

“I’ve got them, honey. You do what Raven says, to the letter. He’ll get you out, then bring you to me. We’ll take care of everything.”

“OK.”

The cop shut the door while Mr. Raven climbed in the other side to sit beside me in the back seat.

“Take a few deep breaths, Danica. Everything will be all right.”

I certainly hoped so. I couldn't afford to spend the night in jail. Not only did I need to help Lemon with her project, but I had to work in the morning. And yeah, I realized I had bigger problems, but I was in shock.

"Don't worry about any of that," Raven said. "I'll have you out in a couple of hours."

"Did I say that out loud?"

He smiled gently. "You did. It's OK. I'll take care of everything. We'll have you back with your sisters in no time."

I watched Wylde help the girls into the Bronco. He turned to look at me, giving me an encouraging nod. I had no idea how this situation happened or why Wylde had come so quickly or even how Apple happened to know someone who immediately sent Wylde to us, but I was grateful. If there was one thing I knew, it was that Wylde was a man of his word. He was also wicked intelligent.

Once we were out of sight, I let out a little shuddering sob before sucking it up and getting myself back under control. I couldn't break down. Now yet. Later. When I was back in my own home behind closed doors, I'd let it all out. Right now, I had to be strong. And I would. For myself. For my sisters. I'd get through this, and all would be well.

At least, I hoped so.

CHAPTER THREE

Wylde

I paced restlessly in my office. I'd already sifted through the information from Danica's arrest. The nine-one-one call came from the store manager, who was acting on a tip from an anonymous source. The security footage had been erased, but I'd recovered it and found Little Miss Thang, Jordan, had been the one to take the paint vials from the shelf. Then she'd bumped into Danica, which was likely when she'd planted them in Danica's purse. I'd forwarded all this to Raven. He'd hotly growled that I'd breached chain of custody and gotten the information without a warrant and blah blah blah...

Bottom line was, he'd convinced the police Danica was innocent and they'd let her out. Raven was bringing her back to the clubhouse now. Which was the reason for my pacing. There was no way I was letting her go back to her house with the girls until I knew for certain she was safe. Jordan might not try anything else, but she'd just become my number one target. It would give me great pleasure to ruin her life. The only thing stopping me was Apple and Lemon. And who named their children Apple and Lemon anyway?

"Do the two of you ever shut up?" I was really about to pull my hair out. The girls had asked questions non-stop since the minute I'd shut the door to the cage I drove back to the clubhouse. Now we were in my office — where I continued to pace — and they were *still talking!*

They looked at each other, like they were communicating silently or some shit. It was unnerving. “Nope,” they said in unison.

“Why did you come for our sister?” I was sure this one was Apple. She was the more reserved of the pair. Sweet, but slightly tart.

“Because none of your business.” I smiled sweetly at them.

“You want to fuck her. Don’t you?” And that was Lemon. Sour to the max.

“You need to watch your fuckin’ language, girl.”

She shrugged. “Soon as you watch yours, asshole.” She had a bright smile on her face. I studied her for a long moment. To her credit, the girl didn’t back down an inch, meeting my gaze as boldly as any old lady in our club.

I lifted an eyebrow. “You’re gonna be a nightmare for me, aren’t you.” It wasn’t a question.

“All depends on what you do to Danica.” Instantly, her demeanor changed. They both did. Apple stepped up beside her sister, and they both gave me a hard stare that promised if I fucked with their sister they’d definitely put poison in my coffee. Or laxatives.

Probably the latter. Just so they could see me embarrass myself. Much more satisfying than killing me.

Instead of answering them, I avoided the question by asking one of my own. “Wanna tell me how you just happened to have Deacon’s phone number to call him for help?”

Lemon raised her chin while Apple, bless her heart, ducked her head and took a small step behind her sister. “I thought you were the badass hacker of the club.” Lemon gave me a superior smirk. “Don’t you know?”

Oh no, she hadn’t...

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Oh, believe me, sugar, I will.” And yeah, the sugar was a play on her name. Judging by the way her face darkened, she got it.

“If we hadn’t, Dani’d be in jail right now. Then what would you have done?”

“Anything I had to, Lemon.” And I meant it. She held my gaze with a hard one of her own. The girl was tough, I’d give her that.

“When you figure out how we had Deacon’s number, come talk to me.” Lemon glared at me. “I’d give you more, but this should be a piece of cake for you.” With a glare, she snagged her sister’s hand and stormed out of my office.

“Where are you going?” I called after them.

“You’re the genius, asshole. Figure it out.”

“Fuck.” I scrubbed my hands through my hair. “I don’t have fuckin’ time for this.”

As I watched the sisters walk from my office through the common room, I felt a smile tug at my lips before I squashed it. I absolutely would not be amused by these two.

“You both need to be turned over someone’s knee!” I called out. Lemon just raised her hand in the air, middle finger

standing prominently. My brothers hooted, so I gave ‘em the middle finger.

“Don’t worry. They’ll get it.” Deacon leaned against the wall next to my office. Big fucker had probably been standing there since I brought the girls back with me.

“You wanna explain yourself? Those two are way the fuck underage.”

“I’m aware of that. *Now.*” Deacon straightened. “Don’t worry. Now that I know, I’ll stay away.” He met my gaze. “Still watchin’ over ‘em.”

“Which one’s yours? Because I know you *think* one of ‘em is.” Which was something I’d be dissuading him of. Soon.

He shrugged, not rising to my bait. “Does it matter?”

“Yep.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Matters way the fuck up.”

“Apple. I can’t have her until she’s eighteen and I won’t go near her. But I’m gonna protect her with my life. That means I protect her sisters too, because Lemon won’t hesitate to fuck a bitch up if they fuck with Apple or Danica. And if Lemon’s hurt, Apple’d be hurt.”

“Who the fuck names their kids Lemon and Apple?” I was cranky. I needed to get to Danica. The need rode me hard to protect her and I’d had to let Raven take over that role until the situation with her and that stupid shoplifting charge was cleared up, but it ate at me. And I had no idea why. I didn’t get possessive over women. Why this one?

“That’d be Dani. She didn’t want siblings. Her mother

told her to name the twins to try to get her to bond with them. So, she thought up the most ridiculous names she could to get even with her mother. Turned out, her mother's plan worked. Dani would do anything in the world for those girls. Including giving up her future until she got them raised."

I snorted. "I doubt it stops there. She might as well be their mother. Seems you know them awfully fuckin' well."

Deacon gave me a level look. "Like I said. Apple's mine."

"That's something we're gonna have to have a talk with Sting about. How could you not know she was underage, you dumb shit? And what the fuck did you do with her?" I was angry, but mostly I was seeking a target for my anger. Deacon was a good man. There was no way he creaped after a sixteen-year-old on purpose.

"Talk all you want. Even she'll tell you I didn't do anything with her. I haven't even kissed her." He shook his head slightly. "Knew something was off, but I couldn't place what it was. She said she was nineteen. Lemon confirmed it and encouraged us to get together. Only thing I was waiting on was to meet and talk with Danica."

"Why?" If that bastard was thinking he'd make a move on Danica, I'd kill him right here.

"Like I said. Something felt off. I wanted to talk to their father first, but they said they didn't have a father. Only reason I knew about Danica was because I followed them to the coffee shop one day. Didn't see how they got to town, but I saw them walking. Each of them had a backpack slung over

her shoulder. Curiosity got the better of me and I followed. When I asked Apple about it later, she got a panicked look on her face, but Lemon said they were enrolled at the community college.”

“And you didn’t press her then?” Anger was building inside me. I blamed Deacon for what I saw as taking advantage of a young woman, but I knew it was more than that.

“No. Of course not. I knew she’d tell me what was going on when she was ready, and I wasn’t getting physical with her until I knew her story. I’m a lot of things, Wylde, but I’m not a moron. Or a creep. As I saw it, my job was to look after her until she came clean. It was Danica who clued me in to the fact they’re only sixteen.” He shook his head slightly as if beating himself up inside. “Felt like a dirty old man and I’m only twenty-six.”

“How long have you known Apple?”

“Not long. Couple of weeks. Gave her my number the second time I met her.”

I’d be checking that out soon as the bastard left my office. I needed to go after the pair, but figured I was the last person they wanted around them right now.

I scrubbed my hand over my face. “Fuck.” Giving Deacon a hard look, I pointed my finger at his chest. “Keep an eye on them. But if you touch either of those girls, I’ll beat you to a bloody fuckin’ pulp.”

He lifted his chin. “I’m not a pedophile, Wylde. And

I'm a prospect with Iron Tzars." The man puffed out his chest in pride. "I know what we do. What we stand for. I'll earn my patch here, and it won't be by takin' advantage of a kid. Don't underestimate either of them, though. They're not typical teenagers."

"You'll still keep your distance." It was a threat and we both knew it.

"I will. Still makin' it known no one is to even look at Apple. I got two years to prove myself with Tzars before she's of age. That should give me time to solidify my position with the club and make a home for her." He moved toward me until we were almost nose to nose. "And if you hurt their sister, if you hurt Danica, I'll personally rip your arms from your body. Try workin' your computer magic with no fuckin' hands." Then he stalked after the girls.

"Go fuck yourself, Deacon!" I called after him. Like Lemon had, Deacon flipped me off without ever turning around. Then I shouted after him. "And I can use voice controls! And you're still a dumb shit!"

It took less than ten minutes for me to access the text messages between Apple and Deacon. Surprisingly, there weren't many. Two or three exchanges each day. Always one in the morning when she got up and one in the evening before she went to bed. No funny business at all. She'd called him a couple of times, but the calls were less than five minutes. The last text had been thanking him for sending help.

Deacon: *I'll always come for you, Apple. You're still in trouble though.*

Apple: *I'm so sorry. I didn't get YOU in trouble, did I?*

Deacon: *Don't worry about me, honey. I've not done anything I'm ashamed to own up to.*

Apple: *Are you not going to talk to me anymore now?*

Deacon: *I can't promise I can. But I'll always be here for you. If you need me for any reason, you call or text. I'll have to talk to my president about this. Let him know what happened.*

Apple: *I'm sorry.*

Deacon: *Don't be, little one. Just promise to always tell me the whole truth from now on. Can you do that?*

Apple: *Yes. Just please don't go away.*

Deacon: *I'll always be around, honey. We'll work things out.*

OK, it didn't look like I was going to have to kill Deacon. At least, not right now. While I was at it, I checked Apple's messages. Which led me to Lemon's messages. With a frown, I skimmed over them. It looked like Lemon had purposefully pushed Apple and Deacon together because Apple was being bullied at school. That was something I'd have to look into.

Using a program I'd written, I hacked into both girls' phones and planted a bit of code to give me access to the phone's GPS, and made a clone of their devices. I could always track their movements as well as monitor any calls or text. And their browsing history. And to see if they were beating my level in Dice Dreams. If I felt bad about invading their privacy, I just reminded myself they were sixteen and already had eyes on the men in my club. This was as much to

protect the Iron Tzars as it was to protect the girls.

Then I did the same to Danica's phone. That was for my own peace of mind, and I would *not* apologize for it. Better to ask forgiveness than permission in most cases. Besides, I was only going to use my powers for good.

By the time I'd finished, I saw Clutch pull up in the Explorer he'd taken to pick up Raven and Danica. The girls flew toward Danica as she climbed out of the front seat. She wrapped her arms around both of them. Time to get all three settled, because there was no way they were going back to Danica's house until I knew this bullshit with Jordan was finished. Which, by the way, I still had to dig into. There was lots of work for me to do tonight. Starting with that bitch Jordan.

I made my way to the parking lot and leaned against the Explorer. Raven was talking quietly with Danica, and she nodded several times before letting go of the girls and giving the large man a tight hug.

Yeah. Not happening.

"All right there, Romeo." I grabbed Raven's shoulder and pulled him away to wrap my arm around Danica's shoulder. Surprisingly, she melted into me. So, I tugged her closer. Then, to my alarm, she buried her face and bunched her fist in my shirt and *sobbed*.

I glanced up, my gaze finding Lemon's unerringly. She gave me a look that said I'd better not fuck this up or she'd carve out my liver. I gave her a slow nod and hugged Danica closer, kissing the top of her head.

“You’re OK, pretty girl. Everything’s OK.”

“I d-don’t know wh-what would have h-happened if you and Mr. Raven hadn’t come to h-help us.” Her slight body shook with her crying. I wanted to scoop her up and take her inside. To my room. To my bed. But that wasn’t an option.

“Nothing happened because I will always be there for you. Me and my brothers.” I let her cling for a while. Not because I needed her to, though. She needed to feel safe and to thank me and I was good with it.

“Thank you so much!” She finally pulled her face out of my shirt and looked over at Raven. “Thank you, Mr. Raven.”

Raven nodded at her. Then that dickhead Deacon stepped onto the porch and leaned against a post. He was a distance away, but he’d come out to see the group.

“Deacon alerted us,” Raven said. I wanted to punch him. Deacon didn’t need to take any credit for this.

“Deacon’s in enough trouble, Raven,” I growled.

Raven shrugged. “Can’t very well take him to task when he saved your girl there.”

“She’s not my girl,” I said, even as I wrapped her tighter against me to prevent her from moving. “And Apple had his number because he was trying to *date* her! She’s sixteen, for Christ’s sake!”

Raven’s gaze snapped to Deacon’s. The big man didn’t move or even flinch where he stood. Surprisingly, it was Apple who spoke up.

“He didn’t know I was sixteen.” She moved around Lemon who’d been shielding her from everyone. “He found out today when Dani told him. I’d texted him when we went to the hobby store, wanting to see him.” She shifted her gaze to Deacon. “I’m really sorry. I just wanted to —”

“Hush, Apple.” Lemon gripped her sister and yanked her back. I almost winced at the pressure she put on the other girl’s arm. There would likely be bruises.

Immediately Deacon unfolded his arms and stormed from the porch. “That’s enough, Lemon. Leave her be.” He focused on Apple then, his tone softening. “What did you want, Apple?” Deacon didn’t voice his question as such. It was a gentle demand. A command for her to tell him her problems.

Apple looked at Lemon who shook her head. Then Apple looked at the ground and stepped behind Lemon to rub her face on her sister’s shoulder.

I sighed. “She’s being bullied at school.”

“Bastard,” Lemon growled at the same time Danica gasped and turned around to face her sister.

“Bullied? Oh, Apple! Why didn’t you tell me?” Danica moved from me to her sister and took her into her arms, hugging her tightly.

“Bullied.” Deacon moved closer to our group. He placed a gentle hand on Apple’s head. “Is that why you singled me out?”

She looked up at the big prospect, tears in her eyes and

shook her head. “It was the excuse I gave myself to follow through with Lemon’s idea for me to get you to be my boyfriend.” Her voice was soft and meek. Tearful. “We kind of played you, but not really. Because I wanted you to be my boyfriend before that.”

“Honey, you knew I couldn’t.” Deacon spoke gently to her, reaching out to brush a lock of hair off her cheek that had stuck because of her tears. “You’re underage and it’s illegal. I could get in big trouble.”

“Not in Indiana.”

“Apple...”

“Is that why you never kissed me?”

Danica let out a strangled squawk and Lemon rolled her eyes. “Please. You’re giving me a fucking migraine, Dani.”

“Language,” Danica admonished but with no real heat.

Apple ducked her head again and Deacon curled a finger under her chin to raise her face back to his. “It is, honey. And why I never encouraged you to hold my hand or even to text me much. I knew something was up. I just didn’t know what.”

“Please don’t hate me.”

Deacon grinned softly at her. “Never, honey. You’re my girl. You’ll always be my girl.”

“No, she won’t,” I snapped. “You’re ten years older than she is!”

Deacon shrugged. “She don’t want me when she turns eighteen, it’ll be my loss. But she’s gonna have that chance if she wants it.”

Apple’s eyes filled with tears again, and she looked like she wanted to run into Deacon’s arms but was using every ounce of restraint she had. Finally, Deacon shook his head, muttering, “Bloody hell,” under his breath and pulled the girl into his arms for a quick, tight hug.

It was only a few seconds, but when he pulled back he gripped her shoulders and leaned down to look into her eyes. “I’m always gonna be watchin’ over you, Apple. You’ve got two years to live your life. After that, there’ll be a reckonin’.”

She nodded and swallowed. “I’m sorry, Deacon. I’ll do whatever I have to, tell anyone who needs to hear everything I did. I’ll even let them see my phone. You were so good to me, and I repaid you —” Tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks again.

“Nope. Not hearin’ that, honey. I’m the adult here. I always knew that. Even if I thought you were older, I knew you weren’t nearly as experienced in life as me.”

“Enough of this,” I snapped. “Let’s get inside and get the girls something to eat. Then I’ll take you to your room.”

“We should really get home.” Danica sighed, looking over the girls one last time. “My car is still in the parking lot at the hobby shop. I’ll need to get it.”

Clutch walked around the Explorer and waved her off. “Already taken care of,” he said, pointing to the garage. “It

was overdue for an oil change and a tune-up. Gotta say” — Clutch scrubbed the back of his neck. —”for an ‘87 Tempo, car’s in pretty good shape.”

“It was my mother’s,” Danica said softly. “For some reason, she loved that car and took really good care of it. I’d planned on selling it after she died, then just never got around to it.”

“No need to fix what ain’t broken.” Clutch grinned at her. “I’m takin’ care of the maintenance on it. Filters and such. Checkin’ the fluids and tires. Probably take me a couple of days ‘cause there’s shit in front of yours, so you might as well make yourself at home.”

“But how am I gonna get to work? And the girls have school. We can’t stay here.”

“You let me worry about the logistics,” I told her, glaring at Clutch. The big man just raised his hands and smirked at me. No way he was gonna be the hero here. “Besides, we need to figure out what happened tonight.”

“I have no idea why Jordan did this,” she muttered. “I’ve been nothing but nice to her.”

“Who cares?” I shrugged off her worry, knowing she had no need because I was taking care of this. “What matters is that she never does this again.”

“It was just a couple little bottles of paint,” Lemon scoffed. “Why the fuck’d everyone make such a big fucking deal outta it?”

Danica sighed. “That’s two f-bombs in one sentence,

Lemon.” The girl just smirked.

“It was the suggestion it might have been drugs,” Raven said. “They used the arrest as an excuse to make sure the kids were away from a dangerous situation. It’s why they called CPS in the first place.”

“They didn’t drug test me or anything.”

“No.” Raven smiled. “I threatened to sue the entire city if they did when Wylde got me the surveillance footage someone had erased.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “Which I’m certain Wylde will look into.”

“Damned straight.” I took Danica’s hand. “Come on. Food, then I’ll get Iris to take you to your room.”

I led them to the great room where supper was just being set out. Blaze and Walker’s woman, Blossom, cooked the evening meal together while Walker hovered. The woman’s puppy, Sparkle, sat in one corner watching intently, her eyes focused intently on Blossom as she set out food. When the dog let out a small whine, Blossom snagged a hotdog and knelt down in front of the puppy, who eagerly took the meat from her hand and ate. Blossom ruffled her ears before going back to the table.

Blaze let out a shrill whistle. “Feedin’ time!”

Lemon rolled her eyes while Apple looked up at Deacon who winked at her. The girl gave him a faint smile before taking the plate Lemon offered her and filling it with a burger and chips.

Danica did the same, looking over her shoulder at me. I

placed my hand at the small of her back to urge her forward to get a drink, then steered her to a table where the members with old ladies had taken seats. I noticed Deacon led Apple and Lemon there as well but didn't try to sit with them. Instead, he gave Apple's shoulder a squeeze before going to a table farther away with more of our brothers. None of the club girls were in the room. If I knew Sting's woman, Iris, she'd banned them while we had guests. Thank God.

As I watched the three eat and slowly allow the old ladies draw them into the conversation, I knew this was what I wanted for myself. I started to turn away and go sit with that bastard Deacon, then thought better of it. Instead, I dropped into a seat beside Danica and raised an eyebrow at Sting. The bastard smirked but nodded.

I'd just claimed Danica in front of my president and most of the officers. I was so fucked it wasn't even funny.

CHAPTER FOUR

Danica

The room Iris led us to was more like a small apartment. There was a living room with a couch, TV, and a small eating table. No kitchen, but there were two areas in opposite corners of the room with privacy screens around them. On the other side of the screens were twin beds. One for each of the girls. Another room — a smaller bedroom — had two chests of drawers and one full-size bed. I had no doubt the girls would be moving their beds together. If they indicated they wanted to, I'd probably give them the bedroom. They'd slept together since they were babies, or at least in the same room. We'd discuss it.

“I appreciate you and the others putting us up for the night. It's not necessary, though. We'll be fine at our house.”

Iris smiled gently at me. “Wylde wants to make sure all the loose ends are tied up before he'll feel good about you going back. Don't worry, though. That man is worse than a dog with a bone when he gets to looking into something. He'll make sure everything's good quickly. Wouldn't surprise me if he had it all worked out tonight and you can go home tomorrow.”

“I have to work tomorrow. The girls have school. The guy from outside. Was his name Clutch?” When Iris nodded her head, I continued. “He said it'd take him a few days to work on my car.”

“Don’t worry. Sting will make sure one of the prospects is available to get you where you need to go. You and your girls.”

I pursed my lips. “Didn’t Deacon say he was a prospect?”

“Yes. He is. Don’t worry. Sting will have a talk with him. Besides, if you’re not comfortable with him, you don’t have to use him. Sting will probably assign someone else anyway.”

“I take it he already knows about Deacon and Apple?”

“Not much in Iron Tzars Sting doesn’t know about.” She pulled me in for a hug. “You have my number. If you need anything, and I mean anything, you call or text. I want you to feel at home here.”

“Why? ‘Cause I gotta tell you, this all feels surreal.”

Iris chuckled. “Yeah. The guys are like that. Just stick to the approved places and everything will be fine.”

“What happens if I go wandering around on my own?”

“One of the guys will escort you back. They’re big on secrecy, but since more and more of them have picked up women and children, they’ve taken more precautions. It’s for our protection as well as theirs.”

“So you’re separate from the club? That sounds a little too secretive for me.”

Iris cocked her head, thinking about whatever she was going to say next. “Not exactly. The old ladies aren’t

technically part of the club, but our husbands don't keep secrets from us. If they feel like there's a need to, they tell us there's something going on they can't discuss. But that's never happened. Sting is my man. He's also the president of this club." She smiled. "I choose to involve myself, and he trusts me enough to include me. I don't have an official say in what goes on with club business, but he listens to my opinion in private and takes that into account."

"Why take me and the girls in tonight? I'm sure it's fine at home."

"Because Wylde wishes it. He's an asshole, but a lovable asshole." She grinned. "He's also an invaluable member of this club. If he wants you here, you're here."

"That's why Clutch took apart my car. Isn't it?"

"Likely."

"Wylde's idea? Is there really anything wrong with my car? Because I am pretty good about keeping up on the maintenance."

"Now you're beginning to see how sneaky these guys are." Iris's mirth spilled over to me, and I couldn't help but grin. "Get your girls settled. Tomorrow they can ride to school with the kids here. Monica and Daisy will love to meet them. Only..." She trailed off, looking speculative. "Might want to keep a close eye on Daisy and Lemon. Daisy cleans under her nails with a big bowie knife in the common room while she stares at a prospect. If Lemon gets in on that, they're all fucked."

I couldn't help myself. I burst out laughing and promptly started choking on the water I'd been sipping from. Iris offered me a tissue while rubbing my back gently. When I got myself under control, Iris squeezed my arm gently. "It'll be all right. I promise."

When she left, I sighed as I closed the door. What a day.

The girls were at the table working on Lemon's project together. They often helped each other with homework. Apple looked up as I turned toward them.

"Everything OK?"

"Yes. Iris said one of the prospects will take you to school with the other kids in the compound tomorrow."

Apple's face lit up and she sat up straighter. "Deacon?"

I frowned. "Likely not. And you know why." I hated seeing her duck her head in disappointment, but this had to be done. "You could get him in big trouble, Apple."

"But I'm sixteen. That's legal in Indiana!"

"You're still a minor. Deacon's not. It might be legal for him to be with you, but he's part of a club, Apple. I don't pretend to know what goes on here, but I've heard rumors. While I have no doubt they're good people, what if the rules of his club say you both have to be eighteen before he can have anything to do with you? Wylde mentioned more than once they'd have to talk to Sting about that situation. What if you've gotten him in trouble because you lied to him?"

"I'm sorry. But Dani... I really like him." God, I hated

that lost longing in her eyes.

“I’m sure you do, honey. Seems he likes you too. But until you’re eighteen, you need to leave him alone. Promise me.”

She sighed, looking so crestfallen I felt bad, even though I knew it was for her own good. “I promise, Dani.”

“It’s only because I love you, Apple.” I brushed a finger down her cheek. “Even if I did give you a horrible name.”

Lemon snorted. “Not as horrible as mine.”

I raised an eyebrow at her, my lips twitching to keep from grinning. “Well, it fit. From the day you were born you were a bit... tart.”

She smirked. “Yep. Don’t expect that to change anytime soon. And Dani? Wylde better not hurt you.”

I gave her a quizzical look. “What do you mean?” My heart sped up and I felt my body dampen in sweat. There was no way Lemon could know I had a secret crush on the guy. That would be too humiliating.

“All this.” She waved her hand around the room. “He came when Apple called Deacon. He brought Raven to help you. He got Clutch to kidnap your car. He set us up here. That man wants you.”

“Lemon!” That girl was going to give me an ulcer. “Wylde is my friend. He comes to the coffee shop.”

“Why do you think he comes to the coffee shop? You

haven't seen his computer setup. Me and Apple have. Trust me when I say he doesn't need to go to a stinking coffee shop for Internet access. He's there for the company."

"Maybe he likes the coffee."

"Coffee? Danica. He can get coffee anywhere. He's there for you." Lemon didn't back down an inch.

"I'm sure you're mistaken. That man has women all over him."

She waved her hand in the air, dismissing my comment. "Whatever. I'm just saying. I trust Deacon with Apple more than I trust Wylde with you. Why? Because Deacon has proven he likes Apple for more than a one-time fuck. Wylde hasn't done the same with you."

"My God, Lemon! Can you please tone it down?"

She shrugged. "Just saying."

I was about to scold Lemon more when there was a knock at the door. "We'll talk about this later."

"Won't change my mind," Lemon muttered.

Grinding my teeth, I went to the door. When I opened it, there was Wylde. There was a scowl on his face as he looked past me to the girls sitting at the table. Apple had her head down, working studiously, but Lemon glared openly at him. He returned the glare.

"We need to talk."

"Of course." I backed out of the doorway to let him inside, but he shook his head.

“In my office.”

“I’m coming too,” Lemon said, standing so suddenly she almost knocked her chair over.

“No,” Wylde snapped. His voice was so authoritative, even Lemon responded. The girl sat back down in her chair abruptly, as if he’d shoved her back. “This is between me and Danica. The two of you need to concentrate on getting your schoolwork done.”

“Wylde,” I said, putting my hand on his arm.

He looked down at me and his expression softened. He sighed and looked back at Lemon. “Please.”

“We have a right to know what’s going on too.”

“Lemon, stay with me.” Apple looked from her sister to me and Wylde.

Lemon scowled at us but subsided. “Fine. But I want to know everything when you get back, Dani.”

“She always this bossy?” Wylde ignored Lemon and spoke directly to me.

“Yes,” Lemon said before I could answer. “She’s always this bossy. Why don’t you ask her if you want to know something about her?”

“Because she’s a little brat and I don’t like talking to her? That good enough reason?” Wylde still looked at me.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re as bad as she is.” I stepped out into the hall and pulled Wylde along with me as I closed the door. As I did, I saw him purse his lips. The gleam in his

eyes said he was trying not to smile. “You’re goading her on purpose? Why would you do that?”

He shrugged. “It’s fun. What better reason?” His grin was positively wicked. “Come on.” Wylde snagged my hand and tugged me down the hall back to his office.

Once inside, he ushered me to a couch and sat beside me. He opened his mouth to say something, but Sting, Iris, and Deacon entered shortly thereafter.

“Don’t you believe in knocking?” Wylde scowled. He wasn’t looking at Sting, but Deacon.

The big man said nothing, but Iris sighed. “Really, Wylde. The door was open.”

“Ain’t talkin’ to you, Iris. You’re welcome anytime you want.” He nodded to Deacon. “Him, on the other hand...”

“Good God, Wylde,” Sting snarled. “Can’t you lay off trying to rub people the wrong way for just a little bit? You’re not going to ruffle Deacon.”

Instantly, Wylde’s demeanor changed. He grinned broadly and put his arm around my shoulders. “Whatever you say, boss man.”

Sting shook his head, sitting on the other couch in the office and tugging Iris to sit in his lap. Deacon sat on the other end from them and waited silently.

“Give me the rundown,” Sting said. “What happened and how is it being handled?”

“Apparently, the owner of the hobby shop Danica

brought her sisters to is a relative of Jordan. The footage was erased from a computer at the store minutes before the police were called.”

“Nice. Who called the police?”

“Came from a phone in the store’s name. I hacked into the nine-one-one system, and there was no call placed for shoplifting at or around a reasonable time. Turns out, those two officers were friends of the store owner. There was a call placed by a phone registered to the store to one of the officers’ personal cell.”

“So they didn’t go through the normal channels to call this in.” Sting played with his beard next to his lower lip.

“Nope.”

Raven appeared in the doorway looking much different than he had when I’d seen him before. Now, he was in a tight white T-shirt and jeans with motorcycle boots. Before, his dark brown hair had been pulled back and tied at his neck. Now, it was wild and hanging past his shoulders. He still had the neat stubble, but it added to the messy look. Also, I noticed tattoos just peeking out from under his shirt.

“Which was another reason I was able to get Dani out as soon as I did. They knew they fucked up. I have a feeling they’ll have to answer for it tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” Wylde grinned. “Especially since I sent the whole incident to the local media.” He blew a bubble like he didn’t have a care in the world.

I looked up at him. “I can’t keep up with your moods

or figure out what you're really feeling."

He winked at me. "Have to keep you on your toes, darlin'."

That wink was followed by a panty-melting grin. Like this, Wylde was positively irresistible. That breakaway lock on his forehead covered one eye and seemed to taunt me, wanting me to brush it aside. The man's charisma was off the fucking charts. This wasn't something new to me. I'd known it since the first time I'd met him in the coffee shop. That roguish look was hot enough to scorch. With him sitting so close to me, his arm securely around me, the heat from his body seeped into me and filled me with... him. Looking up into his eyes now only made me long for something I knew I could never have.

My breath caught, and I had to look away. I lowered my head while the conversation around us continued.

"Good. So that problem's taken care of for now."

"Yep." Again, Wylde popped a bubble.

"And tomorrow?" Sting raised an eyebrow as he glanced over to Deacon, who'd been silent through the whole exchange.

"I'll take all the kids to school. Including Apple and Lemon."

"No fuckin' way," Wylde snarled. Instantly he was up, pacing the length of his office. "You said you'd stay away from Apple, Deacon. That's decidedly *not* staying away from her."

"I've given Sting my word to keep it professional,

Wylde. I want the right to watch over Apple like she was my own.”

“She’s not yours to protect.”

Deacon leveled him a look. “She will be.”

“Boys, rein it in.” Iris sounded every bit like she was in control of the situation. I envied the confidence she showed. There might be only two of them — not counting her husband — but Iris took charge like it was nothing. She fully expected everyone to listen to her.

“You’re arguing with each other when neither one of you will make this decision.” Iris met my gaze with a kind one of her own. “Deacon’s requested this, but you don’t have to agree to it.”

“And have Apple hate me?” I sighed. “Honestly, I’m not naive enough to think that, just because I tell her not to do something, even if it’s for her own good, that she won’t find a way to do it.” I looked at Deacon. “So, I’m going to trust you.” I glanced over at Sting. “You’re his president.”

“I am.”

“You know everything that happened?”

“That Deacon and Apple have been talking for a few weeks and that she’s sixteen? Yes. I also know you had no knowledge of the budding relationship.”

“I know that technically, in Indiana she’s of legal age.” My gaze shifted back to Deacon. “But I’d prefer it if you waited to explore anything with her until she turns eighteen. Especially since you’re a lot older than she is.”

The man nodded at me respectfully. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, ma’am. I’m ten years older and, though she’s mature for her age, my life experiences far surpass hers. I’ll protect her with my life and watch over her and her sister, but I’ve got to cement my place in Iron Tzars and have a way to provide for her that you’ll approve of.”

That startled me. “What?”

He shrugged. “This is an MC. You have to know there are some things we do that you wouldn’t like.”

“I suppose. Hadn’t really thought about it. Perhaps I should.”

Sting smiled. “Deacon is a good man, Danica. He wouldn’t be a prospect with us if he wasn’t. Once he becomes a fully patched member, he and I will sit down and talk about this future. If that future includes Apple, she’ll be included too.”

“I don’t understand. Sounds way more serious than I’m ready for.” I gave a nervous chuckle, trying to lighten the mood when I was getting a little spooked.

“Our club skirts the law on occasion, but we have legitimate businesses as well. If Apple decides she wants to let Deacon take her on, there will be things to discuss. We fully expect mates to talk to each other and take that into account.” Sting gave his wife a squeeze and dropped a kiss on her cheek. “But that’s a couple years or more away. Deacon requested to be the one to take them to and from school, along with the other kids. I wanted you comfortable with the arrangement.”

“And if I’m not?”

“Then Clutch will continue to do it.”

I looked from Deacon to Sting, then finally settled on Iris. Maybe it was because she was a woman and close to my own age, but I trusted her more than I trusted just about anyone here. Except maybe for Wylde.

“If my sister were in Apple’s position, I’d trust Deacon with her life, Dani. He’s a man of his word. All the men here are. If they’re not, they don’t get into Iron Tzars.”

“All right.” I swallowed. “Did you know she was being bullied at school?”

“Not before today. Thinkin’ just my presence when I take her to school will help. If not, we’ll reevaluate in a week or so. She knows she’s got backup now.”

“I still don’t like it that she didn’t tell me.”

Iris moved from Sting’s lap to sit on the couch beside me. “Dani, you’re taking care of two teenage girls. You’re their guardian. Right?”

“Yeah. So I should have known.”

She shook her head. “How many jobs do you work?”

“Two. One at the coffee shop, one from home.”

“Really? How many hours a week do you pull?”

“Um...”

“More than fifty?”

“Not much more than that.” I have no idea why I

thought I needed to underplay how much I worked. These people couldn't judge me.

“How about you try again, darlin’.” Wylde spoke next to my ear, and I jumped.

“Fine. I work at least sixty hours a week. More when I can.”

“To provide for the girls and keep a roof over their heads and food in their bellies?” Iris raised a questioning eyebrow at me.

“They’re my sisters.” I lifted my chin. “I love them and will do whatever it takes to provide for them.”

“As you should,” Iris continued. “But did you ever stop to think that maybe they were trying to work this out themselves? To take care of you?”

I gasped and tears threatened. “I’m the adult,” I whispered.

“And there’s nothing saying you can’t need a little help from time to time,” Sting said. “Wylde? I assume you’re looking into the bullying?”

“Yep. Started working on that the second I found out. It’s being taken care of. The parents don’t nip it in the bud, I will.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that.” Knowing Wylde, there was no telling what he’d do if he had to be the one taking care of it. “Why not let me talk to the parents or the school, and you don’t have to be bothered with it.”

“No bother.” He grinned. “I enjoy taking care of bullies.” Again, he popped a bubble.

“Good. You’ll let me know if you need to take further action, Wylde. They may be bullies, but we’re still talkin’ about kids here.”

“Mostly.” I caught the muttered word and snapped my head in his direction. He gave me an innocent look. Sting didn’t appear to hear, but I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. He cleared his throat. “Understood, prez.”

“I’ll keep an eye out too,” Deacon said softly. He left the room and it was just the four of us left.

“I’m so sorry about this,” I said. “But I’m grateful you were all there to help me and keep the girls out of foster care. Even for a night.”

“You’re welcome, Dani,” Iris said with a smile. She gripped my hand then stood. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Is Wylde taking you to work?”

“Yep.” Wylde didn’t give me a chance to answer. And of course, he had a big grin on his face as he chewed his gum. He blew a bubble before snagging a tissue and getting rid of the gum.

“Good.” She squeezed my hand once more. “Good night.” Iris and Sting left together.

“Night,” I said, waving. “You’re taking me to work?”

“Oh, yeah. You think I’m going to leave you there alone with that bitch, Jordan?”

“She’s harmless. Though, I confess I have no idea why she did this.”

“She did it because she’s jealous,” Wylde said.

“Jealous?”

“Yeah, pretty girl.” He grinned. “She thinks we’ve got something goin’ on.”

I blinked. “But we don’t.”

“Not yet.” He winked at me, and I almost had to fan myself. He had boyish good looks with his wild hair and erratic temperament, but there was an underlying... something... about him that made me shiver.

“Not yet?”

He shook his head. “Nope. But there will be.”

Before I realized what he was going to do, Wylde leaned in and brushed a kiss over my mouth. I stiffened before shuddering as pleasure coursed through me. When I whimpered, he grunted and licked the seam of my lips. One hand went to my jaw while the other gripped my hair at the back of my head. He held me still for his kiss and I found myself accepting it greedily.

My whole body felt like it was going to go up in flames. All from a simple kiss. I’d fantasized about Wylde before. Who wouldn’t? He was boyishly handsome with a lean, hard body. He wasn’t overly muscular, but the veins and muscles of his arms and chest played lovingly under the T-shirts he wore. Myriad tattoos spread over any skin he had exposed except for his face. His fingers, his hands, even up the

side of his neck. Now the man, the reality, was kissing me more passionately than I'd ever been kissed in my life.

When he ended the kiss, he rubbed my nose with his and smiled at me. My gaze was unfocused, and all I could really see was Wylde.

“We can have some fun together if you want. It's by no means a requirement, but I think you're as fascinated by me as I am by you.”

My mouth watered for more of his taste, but was this really a good idea? “I'm not sure I'm ready for a man like you, Wylde.”

He chuckled. “Honey, no one's ready for a man like me. I promise I'll take you on a ride you'll never forget. Doesn't have to be anything heavy. Just mutual pleasure and enjoying each other's company.”

Had he dumped ice water on me I'm not sure I'd have been more shocked. I hadn't expected anything from him, for him to return my attraction, but to dismiss what I felt as mere lust wasn't something I was ready to concede. I genuinely *liked* Wylde. Had from the very first. I'd known he was a player, but hadn't considered he'd want to play with me.

“I'm sorry, Wylde. I'll admit I'm attracted to you, but I'm not into one-night stands.”

“Nothing wrong with one-night stands, but I never said this was a one-time thing. I think we can enjoy ourselves for a long time.”

“I'm not sure I understand what you're getting at.” I

was wary of him now. I stood and moved across the room near the door in case I needed to make a run for it. I knew he wouldn't hurt me. Not physically. But the beating my heart was currently taking certainly qualified as a beating in my book. Might be my own fault for building him up in my mind to be my ideal man, but it still hurt.

“We can pleasure each other. Whenever we like. As much as we like. No strings attached.”

“So, fuck buddies?”

He grinned. “Now you're getting it.”

Ouch.

“As appealing as that sounds, I'm gonna have to pass.” He froze, as if that wasn't the answer he was expecting from me. “I've got two teenagers to look after, Wylde. One of them is very interested in a member of your club who is ten years older than she is. To make matters worse, he returns that attraction. How can I set an example for her if I'm engaging in casual hookups myself?”

“No one said she has to know about this.”

“Trust me. Kids have a way of finding out.” I shook my head. “I'm sorry. If this means you no longer want to help us, I'll get someone to take me home until Clutch has my car ready for me to drive. I'll have to make payments or something, but he'll get this money back.”

“No one said I no longer wanted to help you, Dani. I'll do that no matter what.” He shrugged. “I just thought you might need some adult companionship, and I want you.”

“I’m sorry.” I ducked my head, then headed out the door back to the room with the girls. This was gonna suck. Big time. Wylde might want me, but I wasn’t in the position for casual sex. No matter how much I wanted to experience more of his kisses. And find out what it felt like to have him kiss me again. All over my body.

Yeah. I was fucked.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wylde

I was fucked.

And yeah, I was an asshole. I knew the second I pitched my proposal to Danica it was a mistake. Truth was, I was trying to cover for myself. My reaction to her was not at all what I expected. I had intended to lean in to kiss her and let that be it, but noooo... I had to go all out.

I could — and did — have any woman I wanted. It hadn't always been like that. I was a computer geek in school when it wasn't cool to be a computer geek. Since finding a home with the Iron Tzars, I'd imitated the look and attitude of many of my brothers. Combine that with my own quirky personality, and it worked.

I became more athletic, building muscle and becoming capable of handling myself in any situation that got thrown at me. I was smart as shit and not only was I the motherfucking tech guy, I was a badass motherfucking tech guy. It got me what I'd always wanted. Recognition. Appreciation. That got me women.

Then I met Danica.

I didn't want to have a relationship with her. I didn't *do* relationships. I saw passion and a thrill for living that I had in myself, and wanted to explore that with her. I knew, if I was patient, I could have a fucking good time with her. But I realized right away she wasn't that kind of woman. If she gave

herself to a man, she'd expect it to be for love. I wasn't capable of that.

As I watched her go out the door and through the common room, I had a moment to regret what I'd said to her. My chest ached, but I knew it was only that I regretted hurting her. She was a sweet woman with a good head on her shoulders and a heart the size of Texas. She deserved a man who loved her. Who worshiped her. Unfortunately, that man wasn't me.

I shook myself. Enough of this. I gave her my pitch. She rejected me, and I didn't blame her. Yeah, my pride took a hit. I hadn't been turned down by a woman for sex in a very long time. But I'd survive. I'd find another woman who enflamed me like Danica did and enjoy the hell out of myself until it was time to move on. Besides, if she knew what it meant to be an old lady to a member of the Iron Tzars, she'd thank me. Dani didn't deserve less than being a man's old lady and I refused to bring a woman into this life. This club.

Fuck it. I had work to do. Starting with taking care of the bullies at Apple's school. Then I'd move on to Jordan.

Turned out, phone calls to the parents of the kids in question with screenshots of their social media posts were enough. At least for all but one. The one woman who held out, not believing her daughter had done anything to Apple and, if she had, Apple had deserved it, received a healthy dose of what her daughter had been dishing out to Apple. I'd basically posted copies of what her daughter had posted about Apple to the mother's social media and tagged her church and top

hundred friends, along with a recording of our phone call. If that didn't work — which judging by the replies she was getting, and the phone call I got at midnight from the woman in question, it was getting the desired effect — I'd do something more drastic. Like post pics of her and her other daughter's husband getting it on in her bedroom. 'Cause, you know. Motherfucking tech guy.

Jordan was going to require something more. It was after midnight, but I wanted to make a point with this. The app I used on all the club's phones prevented anyone but a top-level hacker from tracing where it had come from. And by top level, I mean on the level of Giovanni Romano at Argent Tech and myself. Possibly Data and Zora or Suzie at Bones, but I wouldn't give them more than a thirty percent chance of decrypting it. OK, so maybe I'd give Suzie a slightly higher percentage on that, but only because I knew she'd hacked into Giovanni's system on more than one occasion.

Sitting back in my chair, I punched in the girl's number on my phone and put it to my ear, waiting to see if she'd answer a call from an unknown number after midnight.

“Hello?” The sleepy voice on the phone at one time might have aroused me. Now, it just filled me with rage. It was a shock, really. Sure, I was angry at the woman, but she was sleeping soundly when, as far as she knew, Danica was in jail and Apple and Lemon were in foster care until Danica was released.

“I traced every single event of today's shenanigans back to you, Jordan. You planted the paint in Dani's purse. It

was your relative who owned the store and erased the security tapes. Your relative's friends who were called to play bad cop, worse cop."

There was a pause before the rustling of bedding as she either rolled over or sat up. "Who is this?"

"Not someone you ever want to fuck with."

"Well, Someone I Don't Want to Fuck With, I have no idea what you're talking about. If you call me again, I'll take my phone to the police and have them find you."

I chuckled. "Good luck with that, Jordan. In fact, I encourage it. Once the whole story comes out, I imagine it will be you and your cohorts in jail overnight. Maybe the cops lose their jobs. My advice to you? Leave Danica and her sisters alone. You do that, we'll all be golden."

"Fuck you," she muttered before ending the call.

Yeah, I didn't believe that would be enough, but it was the first step. Also, the cops would definitely be losing their jobs given all the illegal shit I found on them both. They were dirty to the max, not only taking bribes, but at least one of them was using phony charges to coerce women into sex in exchange for not taking them to jail. And yeah, the dumb shits weren't smart enough to turn off their body cams before some of the encounters. It had been erased, but, again, I was the motherfucking tech guy.

That information was sent to the chief with a note saying if he didn't do something about the two, the same information would be passed to the media with further

information showing he was aware of everything and allowed it to happen.

Another phone call to the hobby store manager, telling him I knew he'd set Danica up for false arrest and possible rape by dirty cops, and he'd promised to leave town if I kept quiet. I'd told him I'd keep quiet if the police chief did the right thing and arrested his friends. Unfortunately, I wasn't sure if the investigators would be so forgiving. He'd made his bed; he could lie in it.

Satisfied I'd done all I could for now, I powered up my gaming gear to get on Fortnite. I was hoping to catch SoulHunter15 on. Sure enough, I found him.

I found the server and game the kid was on and slipped into his game. I'd long ago used a hack to be able to watch without anyone knowing I was there. Sure enough, the kid couldn't play for shit. At least not where he was in the game presently. This was going to take some noobie teaching and a shit ton of patience I wasn't sure I had. Not because I didn't like introducing noobs to the game, but I hated trying to help someone who thought they knew more than they did. It was counterproductive and a waste of time since they never took anything I said to heart.

Later. I'd deal with him later. We weren't supposed to meet up until three thirty tomorrow. I'd figure something out by then.

* * *

The ride with Danica to the coffee shop was strained. She barely looked at me, her face tense. She was polite and

thanked me when we left the clubhouse and when I dropped her off, but there was a distance between us that had never been there before. I didn't like it.

I waited outside instead of going in. It wasn't my usual time. I liked to wait until there were a bunch of people before going in to make my orders. The more people, the more outrageous the order. Just because I could.

Danica always got there at five in the morning. Her help got there at six unless it was Jordan, who never got there before eight. For a busy coffee shop, having only one person there to run things had to hurt business. Dani never seemed to struggle to handle the crowd, but it took all her concentration. The last thing she needed today was me to distract her.

Once the customers started rolling in, I left. I'd brought her in the Bronco, and I hated driving any kind of vehicle other than my bike. If I was going to babysit today, I was doing it with my bike on hand. Not a damned cage.

The ride to the clubhouse didn't take long. One of the prospects, Breaker, had my bike out and ready when I rolled into the clubhouse. He'd make sure the Bronco was full of gas, then park it.

I straddled my bike, breathing out a contented sigh before starting it and taking off. I needed a ride. Since Danica was safely at work and Deacon was keeping watch at the school, I decided I'd take a couple hours to unwind. I needed a break. Just for a couple of hours.

A couple of hours turned into most of the day. By the time I got back to the coffee shop, it was after two in the

afternoon. That was usually a downtime for Danica, but it looked like the place was hopping.

I slipped in, taking my usual place next to the window where I could keep an eye on my bike and Danica all at the same time. If she noticed, she didn't acknowledge me. To be fair, there were at least five people at the counter and she was waiting on all of them at the same time. Jordan — or anyone else — was nowhere in sight.

“That’s one caramel macchiato for you, a chai latte with oat milk and brown sugar here, a caramel joe for you, a strawberry refresher with coconut milk, and an iced Ristretto ten shot with breve, five pumps of vanilla, seven pumps of caramel, four Splenda, poured. Not shaken.” She grinned as she served the last asshole with his cup. Bastard. I shoulda thought of that one.

Once all of them had paid, she took a breath before wiping down the already spotless bar. Surprisingly, she stepped away with a new mug of fresh coffee and headed my way. She sat the mug on the table and started to walk away, but I snagged her wrist.

“Sit.”

She blew one coffee-colored curl out of her face. “I’m not a dog, Wylde.”

I sighed. “Please, Dani.” I nodded to the chair across from me. “I’m sorry about last night.”

She shrugged. “You want what you want. I’m honestly flattered, given all the women you have after you.” The flirty

smile she flashed me looked a bit strained but was no less lovely. The woman really was appealing on a whole other level.

“I’m not the type of man to want forever, honey. Doesn’t mean I don’t care about you; just means I can’t give you what you deserve.”

“It’s OK, Wylde. Really.” She stood and laid a hand on my shoulder and squeezed, smiling at me before she headed back to the bar.

As I watched her work, I found I wanted to be the man to give her what she deserved. I wanted to be *that man*. But I simply... wasn’t. I had too much going on. Too many responsibilities. Not to mention my club. To bring her into my world meant she had to be mine. Always.

There was no leaving the Iron Tzars for any reason other than death. Expulsion meant death. It’s how this club had worked since its inception in the nineteen forties. I couldn’t change that, *wouldn’t* change it. Iron Tzars did work no one else could or would do, and it was usually a permanent solution. For that reason, what happened in the club, stayed in the club. We’d never risk a disgruntled member leaving and ratting us out. It would bring down every chapter all over the world. And the Iron Tzars were many.

While I waited for her shift to end, I logged on to the server where I was supposed to meet SoulHunter15. I got on at three, anticipating he’d be there at three-thirty like he said. By five, he still hadn’t shown up. The shop was closed, and Danica was cleaning up. I’d searched the other servers the kid

frequented and found only one mention of him. That son of a bitch *JustMadness* had called him to DM when he got on. I could see where Hunter had logged on, but the DM had either been removed or hadn't happened.

That was something else I needed to get a handle on. I had a bad feeling about Hunter, though I wasn't sure if it was for himself or for others around him. Either way, I'd reached out to him. That made him my responsibility. Next thing I needed to do was find out who he was and see if there was going to be any damage to contain.

"I'm done, Wylde." Danica stood at my table, her backpack slung over one shoulder while she picked at the strap.

"Good." I shut down my gear and packed everything up. I still had my bike but I'd brought a helmet for her, not intending to ever drive a fucking cage again. The thought made me break out in hives.

I strapped my gear to the back and handed Dani the helmet. "Climb on the back. Your feet go on the pegs. Watch the pipes when you get off because they'll be hot."

"I'm not sure this is a good idea, Wylde. Maybe you could get someone to bring my car. The girls and I need to get home anyway."

"Get on, Dani." My tone was a little gruffer than I'd intended, but I was not having one of my brothers bring her back to the clubhouse. I knew Clutch wasn't done with her ride yet and, Goddamnit, I wasn't ready for her to leave!

With a sigh, she did as I instructed. Once she had her helmet on and was securely behind me, I grabbed her wrists and brought them around my waist. “Hang on tight.”

When I took off, she squeezed her arms around my middle tighter, looking over my shoulder as we rode. For some reason, I wanted to take her on a good, long ride. I wanted her to experience something that gave me the most peace I’d ever had in my life. Other than, perhaps, being in her presence.

And where the fuck did that thought come from? And why did her arms wrapped around me feel so fucking good? Didn’t matter. I was driving for a while because I fucking wanted to.

She held onto me while we rode, her hands sometimes bunching in my shirt, sometimes gripping my belly and chest over top of my shirt. When we stopped at traffic lights, I placed a hand over top of hers and felt her trembling. Neither of us spoke and I didn’t hurry. It was over an hour later when we rolled into the compound.

I didn’t take her to the front like I should have. Instead, I pulled my bike around to the garage and pulled into my normal spot. No one was around. The area was lit only by the scant sunlight coming in through the door.

I shut down the bike and sat there, trying to gather my thoughts. What the hell was I doing?

“Wylde?” Danica’s soft voice was like a gentle caress over my senses. The woman had bewitched me. Pure and simple.

She handed me her helmet and started to climb off the back. I snagged her hand to help her...

Then pulled her to me, picking her up and setting her on my lap. Somehow, she managed to straddle my legs as my arms settled around her and pulled her to me.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was a mere whisper of sound. I could feel her breath brush my lips.

“I’m going to kiss you, Danica. Tell me now if that’s not what you want.”

“This isn’t a good idea.”

“Not the question. Do you want me to kiss you?”

She hesitated, nibbling her bottom lip as she struggled to form a reply. It was really all the confirmation I needed. Threading my fingers through her hair, I pulled Danica to me, meeting my mouth with hers.

I felt like my whole world tilted. Just like before, nothing I’d ever experienced could compare to the feel of her lips sliding against mine. Dani’s whimpers were the sweetest music. Her skin like the finest silk beneath my touch.

Her thighs tightened fractionally around my hips, and she wiggled against me. My cock was a steel pole mashed against her sex. I grunted when she slid up my length, my hands sliding to her ass to make her move like that again. And, God, the woman could move!

The more I kissed and stroked her, the more Danica fell under my spell, the more her lithe little body seemed determined to drive me out of my mind. Already I was near

coming in my jeans. That hadn't happened in my entire life! I wasn't certain I'd ever wanted a woman more than I wanted Danica James at that moment. Through it all, there was only one thought running through my head.

“Mine...” I growled out the possessive, meaning it with everything in me. I pulled her to me even tighter, needing to crawl inside her skin. I needed inside her with my entire being. Needed to feel her silken pussy wrapping around me, milking me as she came. I needed my seed inside her, taking root so that she'd be mine forever.

“Ride me, Danica. Grind against my cock. Make yourself come.”

“Wylde! Oh God!”

“That's it! Yes! Do it!”

Danica threw back her head and screamed, her hips snapping as she rode out her pleasure. My cock ached like a motherfucker, but I absolutely would not come in my pants.

I lifted her to the handlebars of my bike and snagged the button and zip of her jeans, jerking them off her hips along with her panties. Surprisingly, she wiggled out of them, helping me as much as she could, balanced as she was. Thank God, her jeans legs were wide enough to slip over her feet because I didn't think I could wait long enough to pull her sneakers off.

There she was, her legs spread, bare pussy glistening in the setting sun peeking into the garage. Not tasting her was simply not an option. Looping an arm around her thighs to

hold her, I dove for her, fastening my mouth over her pussy and devouring her. Like a starving man at a banquet, I ate Danica's sweet little cunt until she was screaming and wriggling beneath my mouth. Her clit was a swollen, protruding nub under my tongue, throbbing with each stroke as I took her higher and higher.

Had my cock ever been harder? Had the need to be inside a woman ever been greater? I thrust my fingers inside her wet heat, finding that spot inside her that set her off again.

The second Danica screamed, I unfastened my jeans, freeing my cock. The relief was immense, finally released from the confining fabric. I grunted even as I tried to keep from coming.

“Get on me, woman. Get on my cock!”

“I can't...” She shook her head even as she reached for me. Her hand circled my shaft and she pumped it up and down. Her legs were still spread, my fingers inside her. Danica took in a shuddering breath, one tear streaking from the corner of her eye. “Wylde!”

“Your move, baby. Take me or not.”

With a cry, Danica scooted back across my lap, her pussy kissing the head of my dick. Then, with a shuddering breath, she sank down on me. Tears overflowed her lovely eyes as she threw her head back and moved to take me deeper until she was flush against me, her clit hitting my lower abdomen as she situated herself.

God! The feel of her tight and hot around me! My cock

throbbled and ached, likely spilling precum inside her.

“Hot little thing, ain’t you.” My voice was a husky growl. I pulled her closer, finding my mouth with hers as I urged her to move on me. It wouldn’t take much. I was so fucking close to coming! “Fuckin’ hot little thing!”

“Wylde! Oh, God!”

Danica came with a startled scream. She raised her head to meet my gaze, shock and tears making her eyes glisten. I held her gaze as I let myself go. Hot seed exploded from my cock into her greedy pussy. The more I came, the more she milked me, wanting all I had to give her.

I pulled her to me once again to kiss her. Tenderly this time. Praising her for the gift she’d given me. And I recognized it for the gift it was. This wasn’t a woman to fuck just anyone. In fact, hadn’t she told me much the same thing just a couple of hours ago?

That memory brought me crash landing back to earth. Danica hadn’t wanted casual sex. And I wasn’t offering anything more.

Carefully, I extracted myself from her. That was when I noticed the streak of blood on my cock. And her thighs.

“Danica. Honey.” I met her gaze with a startled one of my own. She stared at me, wide-eyed, her lips trembling and tears streaking down her cheeks. “Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head, but I knew she was lying. The evidence was all over my cock.

“Come on. Let’s get you dressed and go back to the

clubhouse.” It wasn’t adequate in the least, but it was all I had. Of all the things, I never thought Danica was a virgin. Not at her age. It made sense, though. If she’d been taking care of twin teenagers by herself, she wouldn’t have had much of an opportunity for sex.

Danica scrambled for her clothing, shrugging into them while I fastened my jeans. I tried to pull her back into my arms. Needed to. To reassure her. But really, what was there to say? I couldn’t take her on as my old lady, and she would never accept anything less.

The second she was dressed, Danica hurried out of the garage and ran straight for the clubhouse. She never looked back at me once. What the hell? That wouldn’t do at fucking all.

I stalked toward the porch that led to the common room where I fully expected to find Danica. Brick met me at the door.

“What’d you do to her, Wylde?” Brick looked after Danica as she fled. I watched her round the corner without slowing. When he faced me, he frowned. “She was crying. What the fuck?”

“We went on a ride.” I scrubbed a hand over my face. “I thought she’d enjoy it. Didn’t say she was afraid or anything.”

“Well, you did something. Best you figure it out, or Iris might have your balls. She really likes Dani, and her girls like Apple and Lemon.”

“Yeah.” I rested my hand on the back of my neck. “I know what I did.”

“Well?” Brick snapped at me, fully expecting an answer.

“That’s between me and Danica.” I grinned up at him. “None of your business, big guy.”

“Not good enough. What did you do, Wylde?”

I shrugged. “We had sex. I gave her the choice and she chose to fuck me. Satisfied?”

“Not in the least. It had to be something more.”

With a lift of my chin, I stubbornly refused to tell him. It might have been a little childish, but really. It wasn’t his business. Or anyone else’s but mine and Danica’s. Finally, I sighed, not meeting Brick’s gaze but stomping toward him up the stairs. “Women,” I muttered.

“Yeah?” Brick snagged my arm as I tried to pass him. “Maybe it’s not women, Wylde. Maybe it’s you.”

“Look, Brick. I really like Danica. She’s a sweet, hardworking girl. But I can’t be what she needs. I know that and accept it. I thought we could have some fun together but should have realized that wasn’t something she could accept. I fucked up.”

“What did you actually say to her? That you wanted to fuck her and nothing else?”

I winced. “Well, when you say it like that, it sounds worse than it was.”

“Fuck.” Brick scowled at me. “Then you went and fucked her.” Then his gaze narrowed and his fist shot out, grabbing me by the throat. “Did you force her into that situation? If you did, I’ll kill you right here, Wylde.”

“I didn’t. I kissed and played with her, but the choice was hers. She’s the one who made that move. She’ll tell you that if you ask her.” I was telling the truth, but in my heart, I knew it was so much bullshit. I knew she needed more than I could give her, but I’d taken what I wanted anyway. She might have been the one to slide herself down on my cock, but once it was all over, she knew she’d given herself to a man who’d never feel for her what she did for him.

“You’re the one who brought her here. You warned everyone off her. You same as claimed her in front of Sting and the rest of the club! We were waiting for you to make an appointment with Ace for her tatt, for fuck’s sake!”

“What? Hell, no! You know I’ve never been serious about a woman.” I shot Brick my most impressive cocky grin. Difficult given the man was literally squeezing the life out of me. “I’m not a man to settle down. You know that.”

Finally, Brick let me go with a hard shove. “Yeah? Did Dani know that? ‘Cause I’m bettin’ she didn’t.”

“She’ll get over it. She’ll also see I’m right. There’s no way a woman like her would be happy with a man like me.” Get over it? Right. I’d taken her virginity on my bike. I doubted that was something she’d get over. I doubted it was something I’d get over.

“Never thought Serelda would be happy with a man

like me either.”

“Come on, Brick! All you have to do is have one five-minute conversation with the woman to know I’m not for her. I like her. I really do. But I’m not willing to bring her into this life. I could never keep her happy and we’d both be fucked.”

I finished my rant just as Danica came into the room with her sisters. They had the few things they’d brought with them or they’d been given by the old ladies. She had her gaze firmly fixed on Brick. The girls? Well. If looks could kill...

“I’m terribly sorry to bother you, Brick, but could you see if Clutch has my car ready? I know he said it might be a couple of days, but I really need to get the girls home. Besides, I’ve got a second job I do from home I need to catch up on.”

“I’ll see what’s going on, Dani. If he’s not done, I’ll personally take the three of you home and see you get to school and work.” He glanced at me while continuing to speak to Dani. “You can count on everyone here to make sure you’ve got what you need.”

“I don’t need that. I just need to get us all home and our lives back to normal.”

“I understand.” He motioned for the girls to precede him out the door, but not before giving me an angry snarl.

“Fucker,” I muttered as I headed back to my office.

This was really for the best. I knew it. Obviously, Dani knew it. Apple and Lemon would be better off too. Once they all thought about it a day or two, they’d see I was right.

CHAPTER SIX

Danica

That had really happened. I'd had sex. With Wylde. Knowing he wasn't offering anything other than a few pleasurable moments, I'd still given myself to him willingly. I'd been the one to fuck him. He'd taken what I'd offered. *On his bike!* It hadn't even been in a bed! There was nothing about love or even mutual respect. It was all about lust. He'd told me as much at the coffee shop. I'd told him I couldn't do that, then I'd promptly gone against my own declaration.

How was I ever going to be able to look Apple in the eyes after this? It was bad enough I had to face Lemon, but I'd forbidden Apple from seeing the man she wanted romantically and I'd been unable to follow my own instructions.

Brick drove us to our modest house. It was a two-bedroom, one-bath. Not exactly great for three women in the house, but it was what it was. It had been my mother's and had come to me when she died. When the girls were old enough, it would be theirs too.

"I know Wylde was an ass, Dani, but the three of you are welcome to stay at the clubhouse. You don't have to leave because of him."

"I appreciate it, but we'll be fine. It's not like there's anything hanging over us." I smiled at him, trying to hold in the remaining emotion. I'd let out some of it but had to get myself under control for the girls. They knew something was

wrong, of course, but I didn't tell them what. "Thank you for all your help. Please thank everyone else for us. I'll pay Clutch for the work he did on my car. I'll just need a total and a couple of months."

"Honey, don't worry about that. He's helping you because he wants to. I'll send Clutch for you to get to work tomorrow. Deacon will come with the other kids for Apple and Lemon."

"I'd appreciate it."

Brick squeezed my shoulder. "You have Iris's number?"

"I do."

"Use it. I can't stress that enough."

"Thank you. I will."

We got out of the vehicle and walked to the house. Apple wrapped her arms around my waist as we walked. Lemon unlocked the door, glancing back at Brick. She threw up a hand at him before we all went inside. Brick stayed there until we had the door shut.

"Get ready for bed. You have school tomorrow." I didn't need to tell them that. The girls might be sassy and brats, but they were never malicious toward me. Any attitude they showed was all a deflection. I knew it and accepted it. I was much the same way when I wanted to be.

"Dani?" Apple wrapped her arms around me. "You OK?"

“Yeah, baby. I’m fine.” I really wasn’t.

“Bullshit,” Lemon barked. “What did Wylde do to you?”

“Nothing, Lemon. He didn’t do anything. It was all me. Everything was on me.”

She snorted. “Not buying it.”

“Let’s just go to bed and start the day fresh tomorrow. OK?”

The girls did as I asked, Lemon gave me a fierce look while Apple looked worried. Those were my girls. Lemon was the protector. Apple the nurturer. They would both make fierce adults, women I’d be proud to stand beside.

The girls shared a room, and I had my mother’s old room. Once the door was shut and locked, I took a blanket to drape over my shoulders and my pillow to cry into, sank into a corner behind a chest of drawers, and cried until I’d exhausted myself.

* * *

Danica

The next day, good as his word, Brick picked me up at four-thirty for my shift to start at five. Deacon would pick the girls up at seven so they could get breakfast before school, but Apple always made them breakfast. Likely, the little imp would make breakfast for everyone in the school carpool. That’s who she was. And she’d still be trying to impress

Deacon.

Once at the coffee shop, I went about my morning, readying for the day. Surprisingly, Jordan showed up when she was supposed to at seven with a smile on her face. She worked hard which was, again, uncharacteristic. I wasn't about to question my good fortune, though. And I didn't mention what had happened a few days before.

Wylde didn't show. While I was grateful to not have to deal with the drama, I couldn't help but miss him. Which was *so* not good for me.

“If you want to go on home, I can close up.” Jordan grinned as she looked up from her phone. She'd done her fair share of work today, but she was still attached to her phone. I didn't mind, and I got it. Apple and Lemon were much the same. Weren't most people?

“I appreciate it, Jordan, but I'll stay. It was one of the things I promised Henry when I took the job as manager. I'd always open and close.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She picked up her stuff — including what was in the tip jar — and left with a wave. I shook my head with a sigh. For someone who was willing to let me go home, she sure booked out of there in a hurry. And her actually working today was probably her excuse for picking up all the tips instead of dividing it out like we usually did.

The last hour was busier than usual. I could have used Jordan's help, but as always, I managed. As the last customer left, Henry Dorson walked in. The owner of the shop greeted

me happily. He was in his sixties. This shop was his retirement project. It had been something he'd wanted to do before he retired. To make his living with it. He came in and worked from time to time now, but mostly, he left it to me. It made him money and I took care of the day-to-day running, so all he had to do was write the checks.

“You're here by yourself? I thought we always had two people from seven to five?”

“We do. Jordan had some stuff to do so I let her leave early. It's fine, though. Only got busy this last hour and I kept up.”

“I know you did,” he sighed. “You always do. But part of being a manager means you need to keep your people where they're supposed to be. You always cover for her, but we both know Jordan draws a check. She doesn't actually work.”

I sighed and shook my head. “She tries. Sometimes.”

He snorted. “It's the sometimes part that pisses me off. We need to talk, Dani. On the clock, of course.”

“Is this about what happened the other day? Because it was all taken care of.”

“Look, Jordan's parents are big in this town. They're making a ruckus. They say you lied or whatever and ruined their relative's and friends' lives. The two cops involved are on administrative leave pending an investigation. The hobby shop manager has left town.” He reached out and took my laced fingers into one of his. “I'm not telling you this because I'm firing you. On the contrary, I'll probably give you a raise

if you stay through this.” He grinned. “I just wanted you to know, because I’m sure they’re going to make life uncomfortable for you for a while. This shop goes under without you, Dani. I’m well aware of who makes this place successful.” He smiled gently. “I’ll make sure I’m around more for the next couple of weeks. It’ll help keep the fuss down.”

“I’m so sorry about this. I never thought anything would blow back on you.”

“From what I’m hearing, none of it was your fault. Jordan’s parents are the only ones involved who don’t believe that.” He stood. “You’re a good girl, Dani. Know that I’m solidly in your corner.”

“Thanks, Mr. Dorson. I appreciate the support.”

“Always. I think of you as one of my own kids, Dani. So does Mai. She sends her love.”

I couldn’t help myself. With everything that had happened with Wylde and how raw my emotions still were, a couple of tears slipped from my eyes.

“Now, now, sweet girl.” Henry pulled me into his arms and gave me a big hug. He and his wife were never shy with affection. “None of that. A girl as beautiful as you are should never cry.” He pulled back and looked down into my upturned face, a frown looking back at me. “If it’s this situation with Jordan, don’t worry about it. If there’s something else, tell me and I’ll fix it.”

“I’m afraid that’s my fault.”

The voice came from the open door. Wylde stood there, in snug-fitting jeans and a tight, white T-shirt, showing off the tattoos on his arms as well as his muscles. He was mostly lean, but he was extremely fit. Veins roped his arms, and his shoulders and chest tested the material of the cotton he wore. He was simply to God *mouthwatering*.

I groaned. “Not now, Wylde.”

“I’ve seen you here before,” Henry said, moving away from me to extend his hand to Wylde. “Henry Dorson.”

“Wylde.” He took Henry’s hand in a firm grip, nodding at the older man. “I’m around here often.”

“Well, as you can see” — Henry pointed to the closed sign he’d obviously turned over when he came in. — “we’re closed.”

“I’m aware. Came for Danica.”

Mr. Dorson looked back at me with a raised eyebrow. “Is he the reason you’re upset or is it only the situation with Jordan?”

“You know about that, huh?” Wylde narrowed his gaze at Mr. Dorson.

“Everyone in town knows. Her parents are livid.”

“You takin’ it out on Danica?”

Now it was Mr. Dorson’s turn to narrow his eyes at Wylde. In fact, the older man stepped between me and Wylde, putting his shoulders back and standing up to him. “Dani is like family to me and my wife. Not only do we know exactly

why this place is as successful as it is, we consider her another one of our children. I told her if she'd stay here through all this, I'd be giving her a much-deserved raise."

"And Jordan?"

He shrugged. "That's up to Danica. She's the manager. She can let her go or not. I'll support either decision."

That seemed to satisfy Wylde. He gave a crisp nod, then flashed a brilliant smile. "Well, that's settled. Jordan's gone and it's time to go home, Dani."

I sighed. "Wylde, I simply don't have the energy to spar with you tonight. Brick is supposed to either bring my car or send someone to pick me up who's not you."

"I volunteered."

"Then un-volunteer!" I snapped. "I'll call an Uber before I'll go anywhere with you."

"No need for that." Henry put an arm around my shoulders and guided me toward the door. "I'll take you home. We can stop and get the girls something to eat on the way so you don't have to cook."

"You know Apple will have supper ready. She always does." I grinned up at the older man. "If you give her a hug, she might pack up something for you and Mai."

"I'd never turn down anything that young woman cooks. It's a miracle what she can do in the kitchen. If she wants to earn some extra cash, tell her the offer is still open for her to make muffins for the shop. All the proceeds will go to her."

“I’ll remind her.” I tried my best to ignore Wylde, and I was pretty sure Henry was doing it on purpose. But when Wylde didn’t want to be ignored, it was pretty hard to do.

Henry tried to move us past Wylde, but he snagged my hand and tugged me in his direction. “I’ll take her home. We have some things to discuss.”

“I’m sorry, young man. If she wanted to go with you, she would have.” Henry gently extracted my hand from Wylde’s. “If you’ll excuse us.”

“Well, I ain’t excusin’ ya.” This was a side of Wylde I hadn’t seen before. I’d see him annoyed. I’d seen him amused when he wanted people to think he was angry. I’d even seen him intense and hyper focused. I’d never seen him truly angry. He was angry as shit now.

“Look, Wylde,” Henry said. “I knew Warlock. I don’t know anything about your club other than you’re not bad guys, and you protect the people in Evansville. Right now, you’re making yourself into the very thing Warlock fought against. Accept the fact Dani doesn’t want to go with you. I have no idea what’s going on and don’t want to know. But you need to back the fuck off.”

OK. That wasn’t like Henry at all. The man never used bad language and he was never an overly aggressive person. As evidenced by the soft handling of the Jordan situation. It was why he would most definitely be at the shop as often as he needed to be in order to keep me safe and comfortable.

Wylde took another aggressive step toward me. Henry moved with him, still in front of me.

“You’re not gonna win this one, old man.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. *Young man.*”

“I think we all need to take a step back,” I said, pushing past Wylde and taking Henry’s arm. The older man had the same hard look as Wylde. Both men looked as badass as they came. Which surprised the fuck out of me. Henry never seemed like that kind of person. He was always so passive and congenial. “Henry will take me home. I’ll talk to you... uh... later, Wylde.” Which would translate to never. My heart couldn’t take it and I wasn’t putting myself through a conversation with him.

Wylde growled, but backed off. If reluctantly. I wasn’t taking the reprieve for granted. I hurried along with Henry, who helped me into his truck, shutting the door with an admonishment for me to fasten my seat belt. If the situation had been different, I would have smiled. The man really was like a surrogate father. If I’d known my father, I’d have wanted him to be just like Henry.

Henry drove me to my house where Lemon sat on the top step on the porch. She stood when Henry pulled into the driveway. Right behind him, Wylde pulled his motorcycle to the curb and stopped.

“Fuck me,” I whispered.

“You want me to call the police?”

“No. I don’t think that’d be the wisest decision given the present circumstances. Wylde’s not going to hurt me. He’s a lot of things but he’s not that big of a bastard.”

“You don’t want him here, honey, he doesn’t stay. It’s that simple.”

I had to smile, though it was probably a weary grin. I was fucking tired and emotionally drained. “With Wylde, nothing is ever simple.”

“I’ve got a forty-five in the glove box that says otherwise.”

“No, Henry. I’ll be fine. If nothing else, Lemon will protect me. Between the two of them, my money is on Lemon every single time.”

That got a bark of laughter out of Henry. “You make a good point. I’m still going to walk you to your door. Stay inside and I’ll come around. That way you’ve got a buffer as long as you want one.”

I shouldn’t have let him do it, but I took the coward’s way out. Henry opened the door on my side and helped me down from the big truck. Wylde stood next to us not saying a word. Henry kept himself between me and Wylde, his arm around my shoulders as he escorted me to the door. Lemon took it from there.

“Heard you had a rough time with Asshole over there.” She jerked her head in Wylde’s direction. “I can kick his ass if you want me to.”

“How’d you know about that?”

She shrugged. “Word gets around.”

“It’s fine, Lemon. Go on inside.”

“You go with her, Dani,” Henry said. “Pretty sure Wylde was just leaving.”

“Not leavin’ till I talk to Dani.”

“I think everything that needed to be said was said.” I didn’t look at Wylde. Couldn’t. If I did, I’d lose what little composure I had. I’d thought the time away from him would lessen the impact, but I was pretty sure even years away would bring this same aching need in my heart I felt now.

“Five minutes, Dani. That’s all I’m asking.”

I wanted to give in. God knew I wanted to. My heart wouldn’t hold up under the strain if I did. Instead, I shook my head before opening the door and urging Lemon inside.

“No, Wylde.”

Then I met Henry’s gaze. He nodded for me to go on inside.

“Lock your door, honey,” he said as he turned to face Wylde. “I’ll see he leaves.”

Again, like a coward, I did what Henry said and shut and locked the door. I couldn’t help but peek out the peephole and watch as Henry confronted Wylde. I could hear them arguing. Wylde insisting he was going to talk to me before he left. Henry telling Wylde I didn’t want to talk to him.

I was seeing a side of both men I’d never seen before. Henry had always seemed mild and quiet. Even-tempered to the extreme. Now, I was seeing a strong, alpha male determined to get his way against an equally strong alpha male. And I wasn’t entirely sure Wylde would win that fight.

For Wylde's part, he looked half crazed. His hair was all over the place where he kept running his hands through it. He argued with Henry for several minutes before finally throwing his hands up in the air and stalking back to his bike.

That fucking bike.

I doubt I'd ever be able to look at another motorcycle without remembering what I'd done with Wylde on his. He might have done it so many times it didn't mean a thing to him, but that had been my first time. I'd done it willingly. I couldn't say I regretted it. At least not all of it. I'd never known such pleasure existed. But giving myself to him when I'd expressly told him I couldn't do casual sex shamed me beyond measure. Wylde had proven to me I could, indeed, do casual sex. With him. Now, I just needed to convince my heart. And that wasn't happening.

"I'll kill him for you if you want, Dani." Lemon laid her hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

"No, honey. It's as much my fault as his. He's just trying to make himself feel better and I'm not ready to let him yet."

"You better never be ready." Lemon pulled me away from the door and to the kitchen table where Apple had made me a plate of whatever she'd made for dinner. I was too distracted to figure it out just now. "What'd he do?"

"Nothing, Lemon. We just had a falling out is all."

"Bullshit."

I sighed. "Lemon..."

“No, Dani! He doesn’t get to hurt you. Not for any reason or in any way.”

I reached over and took the younger woman’s hand. And she was a woman. They both were. “I’m so proud of you, Lemon.” I looked over at Apple. “You too, honey. You’re both going to be fierce wives and mothers. I’m proud to have had even a small part in raising you.”

“We love you, Dani,” Apple whispered. “We just want you to be happy.”

“I will be. *I am.*” I brushed a tear from my eye. “I am.”

As we ate, the girls told me about their day. Apple hadn’t been bothered by her bullies, and Lemon had punched a boy in the balls when he’d grabbed her ass. He hadn’t wanted anyone to know he’d had his balls beaten by a girl and Lemon hadn’t wanted to get suspended, so neither of them had turned the other in. I figured that wasn’t the end of the story, but was willing to let it go because I was fucking tired.

After supper, I tried to help Apple clean up, but Lemon had insisted I go to bed and she’d help her sister. Normally I’d laugh and send Lemon on her way. The girl hated anything domestic. This time, though, I just wanted a cool shower and bed. I’d start a new day tomorrow. Maybe I could start to put all this shit with Wylde behind me.

And maybe pigs could fly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wylde

I ground my teeth in frustration. I couldn't even find peace on my fucking bike! Every time I even looked at my Harley, I could see Danica laid out over the handlebars, her legs spread for me to eat her sweet pussy. I wanted to bash that old bastard, Henry, but that wouldn't have gotten me anywhere. Besides, I wasn't too proud to admit there was something in the old man's eyes that gave me pause. He wasn't just an old man. He was a warrior, plain and simple. I might go up against him, but not without a little recon first. I might be an asshole, but I wasn't a dumb shit.

I sat down the street from Danica's house on my Harley. Christ! I could still smell her! Feel her silky skin! Danica was the woman who was destined to haunt me until I died.

This was crazy! I could have any woman I wanted. I didn't have to sit here and mope over one who wouldn't talk to me. Maybe I needed to cleanse my palate, so to speak. Lord knew there were a horde of club whores who'd fuck me willingly. All I had to do was crook my finger.

Yep. That's what I'd do. Fuck this shit.

I started my bike, revving it a couple of times. Not to get Danica's attention or anything. I just felt like making some fucking noise. Maybe I'd take a ride before I went back to the clubhouse. Maybe that would settle this pain in my chest.

After a couple of hours, I rolled back into the compound, exhausted, the pain inside me growing with each passing minute. Danica refused to talk to me. And yeah, I'd called her and texted her. After the first couple of each, she'd turned her phone off. Which frustrated me to no end. I could still track her and the girls. Unless she'd taken off without a phone — which she'd never do unless both girls were with her and their phones were on and at their house — she was still home. So no worries there.

Fuck this fucking shit.

Again.

I parked my bike in front of the clubhouse. Normally, I'd never leave it out, but I just didn't feel like putting it up. Either a prospect would see it out and put it up or it would still be here when I got ready to leave.

Stomping up the stairs, I snarled at anyone who got close to me. I also got more than a few glares from my brothers. Yeah. Wasn't dealing with that. I knew I'd fucked up. Literally. I even got why Danica didn't want to talk to me. What I didn't get was why I couldn't charm her into talking to me even though she didn't want to, and why it fucking mattered to me that she wouldn't fucking talk to me. This was what I wanted! She wasn't the woman for me. She was way too fucking sweet and wonderful to be part of Iron Tzars, and that was what she'd be signing up for. To say nothing of Apple and Lemon. OK, so Lemon would fit right in, but that wasn't the point. The point was I wasn't a one-woman man. I wasn't looking for an old lady.

Swearing inventively and creatively, I powered up my gaming gear. Maybe if I killed things online, I'd blow off some steam. Yes. That would help.

I was deep into a battle when Deacon burst through the door to my *locked* office. One big, booted foot landed heavily on the floor where he'd kicked it open.

I jerked off my headphones. "What the fuck, man? Knock next time!"

"Did. You didn't fuckin' hear. Get your shit and come with me."

"What shit do I need to get?"

Deacon stalked in and grabbed me by my shirt. "Now, you fucker!"

I stumbled after him, swearing at him the whole way. Once outside, Deacon shoved me into the back seat of that fucking Bronco. The second Deacon climbed in the front seat, Clutch stomped on the gas and we took the fuck *off*.

"What the fuck? Why are we taking off outta here like our hair's on fire?"

Deacon didn't turn away or answer me. Clutch filled me in.

"There was a raid on Danica's home."

"What? A raid? What the fuck does that mean?" I got a sick feeling in my stomach. That band continually squeezing around my chest, tightening even more.

"It means," Deacon continued, "the police got a call

from someone claiming to be Apple, saying she and Lemon were being held hostage in the house by Danica. Apparently, Apple told the dispatcher Dani had stabbed Lemon and had a gun, threatening to kill the girls, then herself. She stressed that her sister had snapped or something. That this wasn't in her character. But Lemon needed medical attention or she'd die and Apple was afraid Danica would kill both of them."

I thought I was going to puke. "Why the fuck did you bring me here, Deacon?" My voice was barely above a whisper. This couldn't be happening. "I'll make it worse." If I'd pushed Danica to this, I'd never forgive myself. Sting wouldn't have to cull me from the Tzars. If this was my fault, I'd take myself out.

"Because, you dumb shit, Apple called *me*. It wasn't her who made the fuckin' phone call."

"You better start makin' sense, motherfucker," I snarled. My head was spinning. Was this my fault? Had Danica snapped because I'd pushed her too far? But that didn't make sense. Danica would harm herself before she harmed those girls. And if she harmed herself, the girls would definitely be harmed. So there was no way to work this out in my head.

Then something occurred to me.

"Wait a minute. Are you saying they got swatted?"

"What's that?" Clutch asked glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

"Someone calls the police claiming to be someone else.

Convinces them there is imminent danger if they don't intervene. Then the police go in like a SWAT team, expecting heavy, dangerous resistance. It's a prank, but anyone calling in something like this is expecting someone to get hurt." Or killed, but I couldn't say that. Not now. It just... stuck in my throat.

"Then, it's looking like that's exactly what happened," Clutch muttered.

"Apple said the cops burst in with assault rifles. Lemon, of course, attacked the second they burst through the door. It's a thousand wonders she didn't get shot instead of backhanded like she did."

"Is she OK?"

Clutch shrugged. "Fixin' to find out."

"Where's Stitches? If they're hurt, he needs to be here." My heart was pounding. Why would anyone swat Danica or the girls? This made no fucking sense.

"He's on the way. Was at the hospital in the middle of a shift."

Deacon had yet to speak, but I could feel the anger and fear rolling off the man. He was really gone on Apple. I could see sweat trickling down his temple and the pulse at his neck beat like mad.

My chest felt like someone was sitting on it. My pulse raced. Sweat beaded my brow and upper lip.

"What about Dani? Was she hurt?"

Neither man spoke.

My world dropped. I couldn't breathe. I was totally going to puke. Thankfully we pulled up outside Danica's house and I shoved open the door to the vehicle and stumbled out.

Police cars were all over the place. Lights flashed. Cops milled about, some in tactical gear. Ambulances with red flashing lights mingled with the blue from the cops turning the place into something out of an urban warzone. I thought I saw Raven giving some dumbass hell, but all that was on the peripheral. I had to find Danica. *Right fucking now.*

"Danica!" I bellowed her name as I charged toward the house. A cop stepped in front of me, but I shoved him away. Two more took his place and the fight was on.

I'm not sure what happened after that. I know I got hit more than once. Then I got tazed. At one point, someone waved an ammonia capsule under my nose, and I started fighting again. Then Stitches smacked me across the face.

"Snap out of it!"

"Christ, Stitches." Was that Henry? What the fuck was he doing here? "Now's not the time for fuckin' movie lines."

"Look. It had to be done. I left the hospital in the middle of my shift. Second doc in the ER was understanding, and it wasn't too much for him to handle for an hour or so, but I could still get fired. If I am, I might as well have some fun out of this before I get my fuckin' license pulled for abandonment."

“The man’s worried about Danica, Stitches. Leave him be.”

“Oh, yeah? Worried, huh? I heard what he did. The whole fuckin’ club knows. According to him, he doesn’t feel anything for her but a healthy dose of lust. If that’s the case, he’s acting fuckin’ crazy and needed his head smacked.”

I sat up, my head pounding, my muscles aching. “Motherfucker.” I stumbled to my feet and turned back to the house.

“You under control now?” Stitches asked, stepping in my line of sight to the house. “Cause if you’re not, you need to go back to the fuckin’ cage and calm the fuck down.”

“Where’s Dani?”

“She’s in the house with Lemon.”

About that time, a feminine voice filled the air around us.

“Deacon!” Apple flew from the house straight into the big man’s arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

“I’ve got you, honey. You’re safe.”

“They broke in a-and started yelling!” she cried, shivering against Deacon as she told him what happened. “I d-didn’t c-call the p-police for help, D-Deacon. I s-swear I d-didn’t!”

“I know, baby. This ain’t your fault.”

“Will Dani be OK?”

“Stitches will take care of her. She and Lemon are in

good hands.”

“They sh-shot her, Deacon!”

That was all I could take. I rushed on to the house, following Stitches as he entered. Lemon sat on the couch with an ice pack on her face and a killing glare for one of the police officers.

“You better pray I have to go to the hospital, motherfucker,” she said through gritted teeth. “If they release me here, I’m comin’ after you.”

“Threatening people isn’t helping, Lemon,” Henry replied to her calmly. “Let me take care of this.”

“Where’s Dani?” I snapped as I stepped around Henry to look at Lemon.

“In her bedroom. They shot her.” She turned her glare back to the police officer she’d been giving hell.

“We thought she was ready to kill you and your sister,” the officer tried to explain.

“And when I told you she wasn’t?”

“I wasn’t sure if you were her or one of the hostages. All I knew was there was an adult terrorizing two girls. Then your sister came at me.”

“Well, who wouldn’t?” Lemon replied. “She thought someone was breaking in, trying to hurt us! She was defending us and you fuckin’ *shot her!*” The longer she spoke, the louder Lemon got. Finally, she threw the ice pack she’d been holding to her swollen face at the officer with a frustrated screech.

Henry met my gaze. “Danica’s going to be OK. Scared to death, but OK. Go take care of her. I’ll try to keep Lemon from killing anyone.” It sounded like it was a real possibility.

I nodded and turned to go deeper into the small house. It wasn’t hard to find Dani. There were EMTs and police near her room. I could hear Stitches talking to her and Dani’s voice answering him. She sounded in pain and stressed.

When I entered her room, her fearful gaze landed on me. Her breathing quickened and seconds later, she dissolved into tears.

“Wylde,” she breathed, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Where you hit?” My throat was tight and I barely got the words out.

“My arm. It’s not bad.”

“She’ll be OK. Gonna get her to the hospital for an X-ray and some antibiotics. Probably’ll need a few stitches too.” He still probed her arm, dabbing it with some gauze.

“Why ain’t the EMTs in here doin’ this shit?” I pointed to Dani’s arm while Stitches continued to clean and dress it.

“I put them and the cops out. They were stressing her more. Figured I could do as good a job as they could.” He gave me a wry look. “I *am* a doctor, you know.” He went back to work. “Bullet passed through her arm. As long as her bone wasn’t hit, she’ll get to go home in a few hours.”

“Not home,” I snapped. “Back to the fuckin’ clubhouse. You and the girls.”

To my complete and utter shock, Danica didn't argue with me. Just nodded her head. "OK."

"Apple is with Deacon," I told her. "Lemon is giving some cop out there hell while Henry's trying to keep her contained. If Stitches says Lemon can go, I'll have Clutch and Deacon take them back to their room at the clubhouse. My brothers will watch over them."

She nodded. "Thank you, Wylde. I'm sorry we're a bother."

"Honey, this ain't your fault. But I swear to you, I'll find out who did this."

Sitting there on her bed, Dani looked so fucking small and scared. I wanted to kill someone for this, but I wasn't sure who needed to die. Yet.

"All right, Danica," Stitches said when he'd finished bandaging her arm. "Let's get you to the hospital. I'll take care of this, then you can join your sisters."

"I need to see them before I go."

"Not a problem, sweetheart." I gave Stitches a sharp look. He had no business getting that familiar with her. "I'm sure there's no getting either of them to leave until they've seen you anyway." He smiled. "Come on. I'll help you."

"Like hell." I shouldered Stitches out of the way and scooped Danica up in my arms. Finally. *Finally*. The band around my chest eased. Slightly. Seeing the blood on her shirt and how pale her face was still hurt, but I could breathe. Mostly.

I carried her back through the house until we found her sisters in the living room. Apple started crying again. Even Lemon's lower lip trembled before she cleared her throat and scowled at Danica.

"You scared the fuck outta me, Dani. Don't fucking do it again."

Surprisingly, Danica smiled. "I'll try my best, Lemon."

Apple gripped Danica's hand as she continued to cry. "I d-didn't d-do it, D-Dani. I s-swear!"

"Honey, I know you didn't. No one thinks you did."

"Who would do such a horrible thing?" Apple sobbed.

"I'll find out, Apple," I said fiercely. "I swear it."

She looked up at me, then at her sister. Lemon nodded and that seemed to satisfy Apple. "I believe you."

"You better find that son of a bitch before I do." Lemon was going to be a handful for someone.

"I'll find him."

Lemon nodded at me, then stood. Henry helped her out of the house while Deacon took Apple. The girls got into the back of the Bronco while Deacon got back in the front. Clutch was still in the driver's seat. He started the SUV and took off.

Stitches opened the door to his vehicle and I slid in the back and situated Danica on my lap. I held on to her tightly, trying my best to be careful of her arm. She was stiff, but still clung to me, not meeting my gaze.

"Hey, baby. Look at me." She shook her head, but I

gently took her chin in my hand and tilted her head up to me.
“I’ve got you. You’re gonna be OK.”

Tears flowed over her cheeks, and she shook her head.
“No, Wylde. I don’t think I will.”

I hugged her closer, kissing her forehead. “Yes, you will. I won’t have it any other way.”

“Why are you here?” Her question was so soft I almost didn’t hear her. But I did. And I wasn’t sure I had the answer for her. Mainly because I wasn’t sure myself.

When I opened my mouth to tell her that, something else entirely came out. “Because I think I love you, Dani.” I shook my head, wanting to take it back, but the strangest thing happened. That fucking band around my chest... disappeared. Relief flowed over me, consumed me, and I knew it was the fucking truth.

“What?” Now, she met my gaze with bright, wide eyes.
“What did you say?”

“He said he loved you.” Stitches, the asshole, sounded entirely too pleased with himself. “Because, like a fuckin’ dumbass, he’s been trying to deny it since he first stepped foot in that fuckin’ coffee shop. Now. Would you please put him out of his misery and tell him you love him too? If you don’t, let me know. I’ll take you on.”

If I’d been able to, I’d have punched Stitches in the taint. But I was in the back seat with Danica in my lap, and he was in the front seat driving.

“Asshole,” I bit out.

“We all have one, Wylde. You just happen to be everyone’s asshole.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Danica

The visit to the hospital was a flurry of activity. Stitches had pushed everything through in a big Goddamned hurry, and I couldn't say I wasn't grateful.

My arm wasn't broken. The bullet had somehow gone through the side of my arm through the muscle but had missed the bone. Still hurt like a mother, but not as bad as it could have. Stitches cleaned and sutured what needed closing, then rebandaged it. He also insisted on IV antibiotics as well as sending me home with some oral pills. The man was thorough and careful. The whole while he worked on me, Stitches berated Wylde like a naughty child for treating me the way he had. For the first time since I'd met Wylde, the man had absolutely nothing to say for himself.

Once we got back to the clubhouse, Wylde carried me to the room the girls and I had shared before. Iris and several of the other old ladies were with Apple and Lemon, as well as Deacon.

I wiggled, a hint for Wylde to put me down. When he didn't, I patted his chest. "Please, Wylde. Set me down."

He growled, obviously not liking the idea, but did it anyway. Once on my feet, I went to my sisters. Both of them let me hug them. Apple clung to me like she was still terrified. The poor thing probably was. Hell, I was still shaken. Even Lemon, my tough girl, hugged me back fiercely.

Assured they were physically OK, I turned to Deacon, who was sitting on the couch beside Apple.

“Thank you, Deacon. Apple told me she called you, and you were there almost instantly.”

“Woulda been there sooner if I hadn’t had to drag his dumb ass out of his office. Fucker was playin’ a fuckin’ game. Had to kick the fuckin’ door in.” Deacon glared at Wylde like this was all somehow his fault. I tried to ignore the pang I had in my heart that after our confrontation he’d calmly gone back to his club to play video games. He’d said he loved me, but did he really mean it? Or was it just the heat of the moment?

Deacon squeezed Apple’s shoulder before standing. When he did, I stepped into his embrace and hugged him as fiercely as I’d hugged my sisters.

“Thank you so much for being there for Apple. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t been.”

“I’ll always be there for her. I’ll look after all of you, though I’m pretty sure Lemon could do that on her own.” When I pulled back, he had a huge grin on his face. “Girl’s hell on wheels. Gonna make a fine old lady to some poor bastard.”

“Like fuck,” Lemon muttered. “I might find me an old *man*, but I ain’t no one’s old anything. And I damned sure ain’t no fuckin’ lady.”

That sent the women into peals of laughter. Odette, the newest member of the group, actually wiped tears from her eyes, she was laughing so hard.

“Lord help me.” I couldn’t help but grin. “Though she has a point. Maybe that’s the stance I’ll take too.” Lifting my chin, I looked back at Wylde, who had leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, a strange, bewildered look on his face. His gaze never wavered from mine.

“Double-dog dare you.” Lemon rolled her eyes as she scowled at Wylde. “Though, I’m pretty sure you could do much fuckin’ better. Man’s a fuckin’ asshole, and I’m pretty sure I fuckin’ hate him.”

I took a deep, long-suffering breath. “Are you trying to see just how many times you can use the word ‘fuck’ in a sentence before I reach my breaking point?”

The girl shrugged. “Dunno. Maybe. It’s my favorite word.”

“Why don’t you get some rest, Danica?” Deacon patted my uninjured arm gently. “I’ll watch over the girls.”

Wylde snorted. “Yeah. Watch over ‘em. Especially Apple. Right?” The innuendo was clear, and I sucked in a breath. Not because of the implication Deacon would do something improper, but because of the look Wylde’s words put on Deacon’s face. This wasn’t going to end well.

I probably should have at least tried to stop Deacon, but I wasn’t really ready to forgive Wylde yet. The man had hurt me more than anyone in my entire life.

Deacon moved past me, his strides quickening with each step he took. The impact of his fist against Wylde’s face echoed through the small room with what seemed like a

deafening crack. Wylde grunted, stumbling but not going down. Surprisingly, he didn't retaliate, which was surprising.

“Open that fuckin’ mouth again.” Deacon’s face was a mask of rage. Wylde lifted his chin but didn’t say anything. “Done fuckin’ with you, Wylde. One more wisecrack and we’re gonna have it out. Even if I am just a prospect in this club. I got no problem takin’ you to task over these women.”

Lemon tossed Wylde the ice pack she’d been holding to her cheek. “Looks like you might need this more than me, big guy. Now why don’t you get the fuck out?”

“I deserved that,” Wylde said with a nod to Deacon. “Stay with the girls. Keep them safe.”

Deacon cocked his head like he didn’t understand what was going on. Then Wylde turned his attention to me and held out his hand.

“Come with me, Dani.”

I shook my head even as I took his hand. The second my hand touched his, Wylde closed his fingers around it, lacing his fingers through mine. I could see the emotion in his eyes, the need shining there. Which wasn’t a new thing. Wylde made no secret he wanted me. But there was something else there. Something... vulnerable. He was clinging to my hand like it was his lifeline.

Knowing it was a losing battle, I finally nodded my head, going with him when he led me from the room. I’d never seen Wylde so subdued. It was like he was a completely different person. Well, except for goading Deacon. But I got

the feeling that had been a measured attack. One thing I'd noticed about Wylde but had dismissed until that very moment was how he never did anything without a reason. Even when he ordered outrageous drinks at the shop to make it difficult on everyone, it was to get my attention, something I hadn't thought about until this very moment. There was a method to his madness, as it were. I also thought there was an underlying reason he was the way he was.

He opened the door to another room and led me inside, never letting go of my hand. Once the door was shut, he scrubbed a hand over his face and looked around the small room. It wasn't dirty, but was really messy. Kind of like Wylde.

“Sorry. The place is a mess.”

“It's fine.” I was at a loss as to what to do as Wylde went around the small room picking up clothes and chip bags. And pizza boxes. And empty cups of what was probably coffee. Oh. and there was more than one pair of underwear laying around, thankfully masculine and not another woman's. I might have had to kill him over that.

I ducked my head to hide my smile. It was just so... *normal!* It wasn't like I thought the man would have some sort of basement command center or anything, but a normal apartment-like room wasn't what I expected. OK, so maybe I *had* expected that. But for him to be concerned about any mess in his private space didn't seem like Wylde either.

“Wanna sit?” He indicated the big leather couch in front of a massive TV on the wall. They were the only two

things in the living area other than a coffee table running the length of the couch.

“Sure.” I was nervous, not knowing what to expect. But this quiet, almost introspective Wylde wasn’t it.

We sat in silence for a long time. Wylde wouldn’t look at me. He jogged his leg and stared at the blank TV.

When I couldn’t stand the silence any longer, I reached over and placed my hand on his knee, stilling his leg. That brought his gaze firmly to mine. The intensity there made my breath catch.

“I’m sorry, Dani. Not for making love to you. I’ll never be sorry for that. For forcing you out of your comfort zone when I knew what your expectations were before you had sex with me. I was the experienced one in that encounter, and I pushed you further than you were willing to go, and I did it on fucking purpose.”

“It’s OK.”

“No, baby. It’s not. It makes me the worst kind of bastard and, more importantly, it forced you into leaving the protection of my club and straight into the arms of a psychopath.”

“You couldn’t have known this was going to happen.” Much as I was wary of where this was going, I couldn’t let him take the blame for the attack on me and the girls.

“Maybe not, but I might have found out what was being planned once I continued digging in something I’ve been working on for a few days. But that’s not the point. You

guys were safe. Here. In the compound. By hurting you the way I did, I same as forced you out.”

I shook my head. “Still not buying it, Wylde. I get what you’re saying, but it’s not something you had any control over if you didn’t know this was going to happen. Did you know?” I raised an eyebrow at him.

He sighed. “No, baby. I didn’t know. I’ve been looking into a couple users on my Fortnite server. One I believe is a disgruntled teen somewhere. The other is a troublemaker, trying to cause chaos and using that kid to do it.”

“You think that had something to do with what happened to me and the girls?”

“I don’t know, baby. I just have a weird feeling. And I never ignore those feelings.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Nothing. I’ll figure it out. That’s actually the easy part.” He reached for my hand and laced his fingers through mine. The gesture was so tender it made tears form in my eyes.

“What’s the hard part?” I didn’t try to stem the flow of tears. It was just too much trouble. Wylde reached out and caught one as it dripped down my cheek.

“Fixing my fuck-up with you.”

I stared at him for long, long moments, not sure what to say but needing to voice my one burning question. Finally, I cleared my throat and pushed forward.

“Did you mean it when you said you loved me?” I couldn’t hold his gaze, not wanting to see the regret I was afraid would be there. It surprised me when he cupped my cheek in his big palm and urged me to look at him. What I saw there was fierce. Unbending. Undeniable.

“Yes, Danica. I meant every Goddamned motherfuckin’ word. I fuckin’ love you more than anything in this Goddamned world.”

“I thought you weren’t looking to settle down. Does that mean you love me but you don’t want me in your life?”

“No. It means I have to have you in my life, Dani. I have to be in yours. I’ve never loved another soul in my entire life.”

That startled me. “What?”

“You heard me. As emotionally unavailable as I’ve always accused Cyrus of being, I’m worse.”

“Is that why you snark at people? To make them hate you sometimes?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. It’s easier to keep people at a distance so I don’t have to form attachments. Because I honestly don’t know what to do with this shit I feel for you. And can’t imagine feeling it for anyone else. Things like tonight are why.”

“Because, if you love someone, you risk getting hurt when they’re taken away from you.”

“Or when they leave.”

I sucked in a breath. “Who left you, Wylde?”

“Everyone who’s ever been in my life. My mom. Foster parents. Friends.”

“They died?”

“Some of them. My mom just split. Never knew my dad. The sisters at the Catholic home for boys where I lived after that said I was too much trouble and turned me over to the state. Foster parents came and went. Same reason as the sisters kicked me out. When I went to the military there were guys I thought of as friends, but most of them either died or moved on with their lives. Everyone but Cyrus. That’s where I met him.”

“But you ended up here. With Iron Tzars.”

“I did.” He lifted his chin. “Because of Cyrus. They’ve all stuck by me like no one ever has, but sometimes even they want to cut me loose.”

“I think you’re wrong, Wylde. One thing I’ve learned from watching everyone and talking with the women here is that this is a family. You may get mad at family, may hate some of the things they do, but you never give up on them.” I shook my head. “No one here would ever give up on you.”

He snorted, giving me a wry look. “Don’t bet your sweet ass on it.”

“I absolutely would.”

“You saw Deacon attack me. Ain’t sayin’ I didn’t deserve it, but he’d have happily continued if he thought he could have gotten away with it.”

“And who would have stopped him?” I glared at Wylde. “You certainly weren’t going to. You didn’t lift a finger to defend yourself. Or even prevent him from hitting you and I know you could have.”

“Told you. I deserved everything he dished out and more.”

“Uh-huh. You baited him. You wanted the exact reaction from him you got.”

The widening of his eyes said he didn’t expect me to notice that. Then they were veiled once more.

“You know, Deacon’s got plans on claiming Apple for his own. He’ll wait until she’s eighteen, but only because he feels like she should be eighteen. If he felt like sixteen was old enough to take him on, he’d do it now.”

“Deacon’s a good man. I can see that with the way he is with Apple and Lemon. And the respect he showed me.”

“He’s been texting her for a little while now. I hacked his and Apple’s phones. You know. To see what he was saying to her. And to make sure he wasn’t talkin’ to another woman while he was talkin’ with Apple.”

“Wylde! That’s a huge invasion of her privacy! And Deacon’s!”

“Also put a tracking app on her and Lemon’s phone.” He met my gaze with a cocky grin. It was the first time I’d seen a glimpse of the Wylde I knew. “Put one on yours too.”

“Good Lord.” I threw up my hands in exasperation, but the smile tugging at my lips wouldn’t be denied. “Why would

you do that?”

“To keep track of you guys, of course. The girls were having trouble at school. You had a crazy bitch after you. Seemed prudent.”

“Why not just ask permission to do something like that?”

“You might have refused. And I’d have done it anyway. I just saved myself time and aggravation.”

“You’re sounding more like you now.” I laid a palm against his cheek, giving him a little smile. “Feeling better?”

He shook his head, swallowing once. “I could have lost you.”

“You didn’t. You came for us.”

“Not soon enough. I waited outside your house for a couple hours. Then rode a couple more. If I’d stayed —”

“You might have gotten shot. Or worse.”

“You *were* shot!” he barked, shooting to his feet, keeping his back to me. “You were fucking shot, Danica!”

“I was. But Stitches fixed me up and I’m fine.”

Wylde whirled around, facing me again. He looked like his namesake. His hair was a mess, his eyes were wide like a madman.

“I could have fucking *lost* you!”

That was all the warning I got before he pulled me up from the couch and lifted me into his arms. My breast mashed

against his chest. Automatically, I wrapped my legs around his waist. My breath caught just before Wylde grasped my hair at the back of my head and pulled me to him for a desperate kiss.

Everything he'd told me about his upbringing, how he hadn't had a stable home life or anyone in his childhood he could count on came crashing down around me. The instant our lips met, I knew this was something no one ever saw in Wylde. Fear. Wylde was afraid. Of losing me? Maybe he really did love me. At least, as much as he was capable of love.

I'd figure it out later. Right now, all I really understood was that he needed me. This man, who pretended not to need anyone, needed *me*. I'd give him everything he needed and be thankful he'd set his sights on me.

Wylde wasn't gentle. His kiss bruised my lips. His arms wrapped around me so tight I could barely breathe. It was even better than when he'd fucked me on his bike. I could taste his need and was certain he could taste mine. Because, God knew, I was fucking ravenous for him.

Somehow, we ended up in the bedroom. Wylde planted a knee and lay down with me on his bed, covering my body with his bigger one. He never broke our kiss, thrusting his tongue as he ground his cock between my legs. I welcomed the contact, more turned on than I'd thought possible. I met his tongue thrust for thrust while I ground my pussy against his dick.

“Gonna fuck you, Danica. Gonna fuck you till I find oblivion.” His words were gruff. Fierce. I knew I was about to get the fuck of my life.

Wylde grabbed my shirt and yanked, ripping it down the front. Then he shoved my bra over my breasts before squeezing and kneading one with his palm. His big body shivered over me, and he gave a defeated groan.

“What you fuckin’ do to me, woman!”

He found my nipple with his mouth and took it between his teeth. I cried out when he bit down, but the pain was the sweetest, darkest pleasure. His name exploded from my lips as I arched my chest to him, letting him take what he wanted. And he didn’t stop there.

Wylde made his way from one breast to the other. He tugged at my shorts, pulling them down my hips along with my panties. Tossing them to the floor, he shoved my legs apart before making his way down my belly, nipping and licking and sucking all the way to my sex. Once there, he devoured me. Growling between my legs, he covered my pussy with his mouth. He snarled, thrusting his tongue deep, rubbing my clit with his upper lip, the hair of his beard a delicious abrasion.

I had no hope of keeping up with him. Wylde took me over the edge and I screamed over and over as one orgasm tripped into another. Still, he didn’t let up. By the time he finally crawled his way back up my body, I was a mindless, thrashing mass of nerves.

“Wylde! Fuck!” I clawed at his back, needing him closer, needing to stop him so I could regroup and get a hold of myself. But the need, the stark desire and raw emotion in Wylde’s face told me he needed this. Needed me.

He fumbled with his jeans to unfasten them, setting his

cock free to thump gently against my belly. Like I'd done when we were on his bike, I reached between us to grasp his cock. Looking up into his savage, untamed beauty, I guided him inside me. Then we both lost our Goddamned minds.

The first time we'd had sex, I'd been so afraid of losing myself along with my virginity I hadn't fully committed to the moment. Once I'd orgasmed, reality had crashed down on me like a falling mountain. Now, I surrendered to him. Letting him take me wherever he needed to go.

Wylde surged inside me, fucking me with a savage abandon. Hooking one of my legs over his arm, he changed his angle just enough to trip me into another, surprise orgasm. This time, when I screamed, Wylde did too. His bellow filled the room as his cum filled my pussy. As he held himself deep inside me, I felt his dick pulse with each spurt of cum.

When he was spent, Wylde collapsed over me. His breathing was as heavy as mine. Sweat coated my body. A sweet lethargy stole over me as Wylde clung to me as tightly as I clung to him. He was still fully dressed where I was naked. Well, except for my panties hooked around one ankle where he hadn't managed to get them off completely.

He rolled us to one side, stroking a lock of my hair off my face where my damp brow held it. As he looked into my eyes, I saw a kind of anguish on his face. He continued to stroke my cheek as tears spilled from his eyes.

“Wylde?”

“Did I hurt you, Dani?” He spoke softly, still stroking my cheek, seemingly oblivious of his own tears.

“Of course not.” I wiped the moisture from his face.
“You could never hurt me.”

“I can’t lose you, Dani. I can’t.”

“You won’t.” I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “You’ll never lose me. I’m yours.”

Then he rolled me to my back and put his head on my breasts. With his arms wrapped securely around me, I tangled my hands in Wylde’s silky hair, taking comfort in the sensation.

With a contented, exhausted sigh, I closed my eyes and let sleep take me.

CHAPTER NINE

Danica

The next week was an exercise in patience. Because we still didn't know who'd called in the swatting incident, I'd taken time off from the coffee shop. Wylde rarely left his office. When he did, he snarled at everyone in the immediate vicinity for not bringing him coffee. So I started making sure he had fresh coffee every couple of hours, three or four meals a day, and plenty of snacks and soda. As far as I could tell, once I started leaving provisions on a table just outside his office, he didn't come out. For any reason. By the middle of the second week, I was becoming alarmed.

“What's going on?”

Bellarose, Atlas's wife, gave me a soft smile. “This is apparently what he does when he's hunting.”

Odette shrugged her delicate shoulders. She was Cyrus's woman, and Cyrus was Wylde's closest and best friend. From what I'd learned over the last week, Cyrus had as many issues as Wylde had with emotions but because he had a mild form of Asperger's Syndrome instead of emotional childhood trauma. Though, I was becoming aware that more than one of the men and women in this close-knit group had had rough lives. “Cyrus says it's how he works. He gets hyper-focused.” She smiled. “If you're worried he doesn't want you here, don't be. Cyrus says you're good for him. That you understand what he needs and provide it without him or

anyone else having to ask.”

“Do you know what he’s working on? I assume it’s something for the club. I don’t mean to intrude, but I’ve barely seen him for over a week. When I do, he’s a completely different person than the Wylde I’ve seen before.”

“It wasn’t for the club to begin with. Wasn’t more than a project for him.” The big man approaching us was as large as the others, but had a slightly more civilized look about him. Sort of. “Once his woman and her sisters got caught up in this mess, it became the club’s business.”

“I don’t understand.” I had the thought I should be afraid of this guy because he looked so intense, but it was hard to fear him when he looked down at the woman next to him with such love and affection in his gaze.

“Wylde thinks what happened to you might be linked to a couple of gamers he’s been engaging with. The harder he digs, the more roadblocks he’s come up against. Which makes him more all the more suspicious.” He smiled at me. “I’m Roman. You’ve already meant Winter.” He indicated the woman at his side.

“Yes. I’ve met Serelda too.”

“If there’s a way to figure out who did this, Wylde will get it done.” Winter smiled.

“I know. I’m just worried about him. He barely comes out, and when he does he snaps at everyone.”

Instantly, Rose’s face hardened. “He being mean to you?”

“Me? No! Not at all. I just don’t see him much. I try to keep him fed and coffeed, but he must be, as you say, hyper focused on this.”

“He is.” Cyrus came up behind Odette and put his arms around her, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “It’s his way. He gets cranky and locks himself in his office. I like that you started taking him food.” He gave me a small grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. It was nothing like the smile he gave Odette. It was oddly sweet, because I could see the same looks from Wylde. Apparently, the two men were more alike than either wanted to admit. “Let’s the rest of us keep out of his way.”

As if on cue, there was a frustrated roar followed by a loud crash from Wylde’s office. Roman gave a long-suffering sigh while Cyrus snorted.

“Speaking of which,” Bella said, taking my arm. “Maybe we should get him some more coffee. Or, you know, leave it at the entrance to the dragon’s lair.” Her lips twitched, but I could also see she was at least half serious. Probably trying to protect me. It seemed like everyone here tried to take care of both me and the girls.

“Mother fuck!” Wylde roared from his office.

“Nope.” I surprised myself with that. “You guys go on and clear a path. The man’s been holed up in that office for over a week. It’s time he came out and took a break.”

“Not sure that’s a wise idea, little sister,” Roman said with a worried look. “He’s pretty intense when he’s on the hunt.”

“Don’t care. This isn’t healthy and he needs a break. Even if it’s only for an hour.” I put my hand on the doorknob to turn it. Locked. I looked up at Roman with a raised brow. “Well?”

“Don’t look at me,” he chuckled, backing away a couple of steps with his hands raised. “I ain’t goin’ in there.”

“Are you scared of him?”

Roman barked a laugh. “Might be. If I am, ain’t no one here who’d fault me. Wylde’s a real prickly pear when he’s deep on a hunt.”

For some reason, Bella paled. She gave me a forced, watery smile. “I’m sorry, Dani. I need... uh... I need to go...” She turned to leave. Atlas, her husband, rounded the corner and met her gaze. The big man stopped in his tracks before looking around the group, searching for the threat.

“It’s all right, Atlas.” Winter wrapped her arm around Rose. “Memories are not kind at the moment.”

Atlas nodded as Winter helped Rose to her husband. He picked her up and practically surrounded her small body with his fierce embrace. Then Bella wrapped her arms and legs around him and Atlas carried her away from the group.

“Did I do something wrong?” I’d never forgive myself if I’d unintentionally hurt Bella. She was so sweet but fierce. Apple reminded me a lot of Bella. She was so sweet and kind to everyone, yet there was a protective streak inside her reserved for her inner-most circle. I was all too aware that included me now.

“No, Dani.” Roman’s features were strained, as if he too were remembering something unpleasant. “It wasn’t you. It’s the situation. The last time Wylde was this focused on hunting his prey, the compound was attacked and Bella lost the baby she was carrying.”

“Oh, God,” I whispered, covering my mouth with my hand. “Is the club in that kind of danger now?”

Roman shook his head. “No. Wylde thinks everything is aimed at you and the girls.”

“But if we’re here, wouldn’t that put you all in danger too?”

“Absolutely not. From what Wylde says, even if this guy commits or incites violence, it’s not going to be something like what happened last time. It will be something like what happened at your house. No matter what, though, we’ve learned and adapted since the last attack. No one will get close to us like that again.” If anyone else but one of the men in this club had made that statement, I’d have chalked it up to wishful thinking. But not here. I could see on the faces of everyone here — including the women — they meant business.

Another thump from behind the door to Wylde’s office, followed by another enraged yell, and I’d decided enough was enough. Putting my shoulders back I met Roman’s gaze with a steely one of my own.

“Open it. Then clear us a path from here to his apartment.”

Roman studied me for a long moment. I was afraid he

might refuse my order — and it was nothing but an order. Then he gave a slow nod. “You heard the lady. Make a hole.” He pulled out a key and unlocked the door before stepping back himself.

I waited until everyone was gone before taking a deep breath and opening the door. The smell hit me first. Was that Indian food? Stale coffee and dirty sock smell was next. Followed by onions. The trash was mostly contained to one corner of the room, though that was rapidly filling. And Wylde? The man looked like a maniac. His hair was on end, his face a mask of rage. Dark circles under eyes that were red-rimmed, probably where he’d been rubbing them, told the story of how hard he’d been working and how focused he was.

“Wylde, please come with me.” I held out my hand.

“I can’t, Dani. I have —”

“It can wait.”

“NO!” He roared at me before closing his eyes and taking a breath. I couldn’t help but jump. “I have to find this fucker before he does something else! I *cannot* lose you, Dani!”

“You won’t, Wylde.” I kept my voice calm but firm. I didn’t want him to get his back up, but I needed him to know I meant business. “You’ve been at it for a week and a half. How much have you slept?”

“Catnaps here and there. Mostly I just rested my eyes a few minutes at a time.” He was making an obvious effort to calm himself, but his eyes were restlessly moving over the

eight or nine monitors on his desk and mounted on the walls in front of his desk. *This* was more like the basement command center I'd expected him to have.

"That's what I thought." I looked pointedly at my hand still stretched out to him. "Please, Wylde."

"Dani —"

"I'm not taking no for an answer. Now, please." It was the voice I generally used with the girls when I wanted them to do what I said without argument. Generally, for them to go to bed when they were engrossed in a movie, or a game, or anything other than the fact they needed to be in the bed to rest for school the next day.

Surprisingly, it worked on cranky, sleep-deprived bikers too. Wylde stood and took my hand. Not without a bit of grumbling, but I called it a win.

"Is everything important you need on your desk?"

He stopped and narrowed his gaze at me. "Why."

"Because when we come back in here next time, I'd like to be able to breathe. The trash needs removed, and I don't want someone mistaking something you need for trash."

"No one goes in my command center."

I nearly smiled at him but knew that would put his back up and he'd buck me. Instead, I kept my tone and my features firm and even. "This is happening, Wylde. The room is going to be cleaned. The floor vacuumed. No one will touch anything on your desk. What about the couch? Is there anything there that you'll need later?"

He stared at me a moment as if weighing how far how he could push. I could all but see him formulating and discarding ways to get around me. Finally, he sighed before walking to the couch and picking up two stacks of notebooks and printouts. He picked up a plastic tote and dumped out the contents in the corner with the other trash and put the stack in the tote along with a couple of other stacks. The tote was now full to overflowing, but he had everything he needed on or under his desk in less than five minutes.

“There. That’s it.”

“Good. Come with me.”

Surprisingly, Sting stood outside the door to the office well out of the way, but making a presence. I laced Wylde’s fingers through my own before stepping through the door into the hallway.

“Sting, could you please ask someone to clean Wylde’s office while we’re gone? Everything he needs is on or under his desk. Don’t let them touch that. Everything else needs picked up and taken to the trash.” I smiled up at him, trying not to sound too much like I was giving orders in the middle of a biker club. And to the president, no less. “I’m not trying to order you around or anything, but I’m asking. I need to stay with Wylde to make sure he takes care of himself for a couple of hours.”

“Not a problem, Dani. I’ll have the prospects get on it. We’ll have it cleaned and... uh... aired out when you get back.” Yeah. The smell wasn’t pleasant.

“We appreciate it.”

“*You* appreciate it,” Wylde grumbled. “I don’t need a break. And I don’t need my office cleaned. Don’t want no one fuckin’ around with my shit.”

“Honey, not only do you need your office cleaned, if you don’t take a shower in the next ten minutes I’m not going to be able to stand to be near you.” I gave him my best exasperated look, frowning as fiercely as I could. “And if you don’t get at least a couple hours sleep, you’re not going to make any more progress and you’ll end up breaking something important.”

“An hour.” He stuck his chin up, looking for all the world like a grumpy toddler. While I’m sure I wasn’t the only one making that comparison, I was pretty sure Wylde wouldn’t appreciate me stating it.

“Whoever this is isn’t going anywhere, Wylde. You’ll be better able to find him if you’re fresh. You’ve not had a break since you brought us back here.” When he opened his mouth to argue, I plowed on. “You’ve got to rest. Take a shower. Have a decent meal. Sleep for a few hours. When you get up, maybe you can look at the problem from a different angle and get the answers you need.” When he opened his mouth again, I put my hand over his mouth. “Do you love me?”

He jerked back, pulling my hand from his mouth gently. “Of course, I do, Dani. You know I do.”

“Yes. You do. And since I know you love me, I know you’ll do this for me.” I tugged him after me down the hall. To my shock, he only muttered his discontent, but followed me

without further argument.

Once in his rooms, I led him to the bathroom where I started the shower. Wylde stood there, watching me like a wary animal wanting what I offered but afraid I'd hurt him. While the water heated I turned back to him, meeting his gaze steadily. Instead of reaching for him to take off his clothes, however, I stripped off my own clothes. That seemed to prompt him to do the same.

When we were both naked, I stepped into the shower and ducked my head under the spray. Wylde stepped in behind me. Thankfully, the shower was plenty big enough for both of us, so I reached for him and pulled him under the water with me. He groaned as the hot water fell over him, resting his head on my shoulder.

“I’ve got to find this fucker, Dani. I can’t let him go.”

“I’m not asking you to let him go. You’re going to find him. It sounded like you’ve hit a wall.” I shrugged. “Both figuratively and literally. If I’m going to do my part to save the clubhouse from you tearing it down around everyone’s ears, you’ve got to be able to see through this. The only way to do that is to get you rested and comfortable. It starts with getting you clean. After that, we’ll lay down together and take a nap. When you wake, maybe you can see what you’re missing.”

“Fine. But you’re not leaving me until I go back to my office. That’s the only way I do this.”

“Never said I was going anywhere, Wylde. And I intend to be with you when you go back to your office, too. Because I’m not letting you get in this shape again.”

He lifted his head and gave me that cocky grin I loved seeing on his face. “You’re a regular little general, aren’t you?”

“When I have to be.” I smiled up at him. Then I proceeded to wash him from head to toe.

Wylde soaked up my touch like he was starving for me. I knew I needed him. This was different from the other times we’d made love. While the lust was still there, the urgency was tempered. As I washed him, I ran my hands over his body in worshipful caresses. I traced myriad tattoos over his muscular chest and arms. One snaked around his hip down his powerful thigh. I washed his hair, combing my fingers through the silky strands with loving care. When I was finished, his cock was standing proudly from the thick next of curls between his legs.

“Dani...”

I smiled up at him. “You need me.”

“I’ll always need you.”

“Take what you need, Wylde. Make love to me.”

He did. Wylde turned me to face the wall, urging one leg up so my foot rested on the bench. Then he wrapped his arms around me and entered me from behind.

I sucked in a startled breath, then leaned my head back on his shoulder while he surged into me with slow, lazy strokes. Wylde kissed my neck and shoulder, all the while his cock moved inside me.

When he began to move faster, his breaths coming in

short pants and grunts, one hand slid down my belly to find my clit. When he did, I shuddered, gasping out as the orgasm overtook me. My pussy squeezed his cock which triggered his own orgasm and his seed exploded inside me hot and wet. Wylde shuddered around me, groaning in a long release. Both of us were panting, the sounds of our breathing echoing off the walls.

“Thank you,” he whispered in my ear.

I smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Wylde washed my pussy tenderly before turning off the water. He stepped out and snagged a couple of towels before drying me thoroughly. I helped him dry off before he lifted me in his arms and carried me to bed.

I crawled in. Wylde climbed in beside me. It was like he couldn’t stand for our skin to not touch. He groaned as he turned onto his side, pulling me against his hard body, my back to his front. Then he wrapped his arms tightly around me before settling himself. The second he stilled, he started snoring softly. He’d been going at it for over a week. Exhaustion had finally done him in.

I had to smile. I had no idea who he was hunting or what problems he was having in finding the guy, but I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he would. He’d find the motherfucker who’d hurt me and my sisters and he’d make the bastard pay. My job from here on out was to make sure I took care of him so he could take care of all of us.

CHAPTER TEN

Wylde

I gasped as I sat straight up in the bed. I had no idea how long I'd slept, but I was wide a-fucking-wake now.

“Wylde?” Danica was still beside me. Just as she'd promised.

“It's all right, honey,” I said, leaning down to kiss her. “I have to get back to my office. I know what to do.”

She stretched and smiled up at me. “Good. Next time, don't fight me.” I shot her a cocky grin over my shoulder as I stood. When I bent over to snag the clean clothes someone had put on the chair beside my bed, she slapped my ass.

“What the shit?” I chuckled. I couldn't help it. I knew what I had to do, and I was about to catch this guy. Today.

“That's for giving everyone shit. Now, play nice. I'll get dressed and meet you in your office with breakfast.”

I leaned in and kissed her once more. “I love you, Dani.” I straightened and hurried to the door. “You're the best!”

“I love you too,” she called after me.

When I entered my office, I did a double take. Everything was clean. The only sign of the last week and a half was the clutter on my desk, and even that wasn't as bad as it normally was. It didn't reek of curry or onions or sweaty gym socks any longer, and all the pizza boxes, chip bags, and

Red Bull cans were gone from the corner. Even the coffeepot Danica had set up outside my office was now inside the office in that same corner. The scent of freshly brewing coffee hit me like a shot of adrenaline. Snagging a cup, I inhaled deeply of the wonderful aroma.

I was ready to do this. More than ready.

I sat, flexing my fingers as I took a breath to center myself. Then I got to work.

Two hours later, I was grinding my teeth. Not in frustration. In anger. Thank God it was Sunday. If not, I might not have enough time to stop a disaster from happening.

“I’ll be back, love.” I tried to speak calmly as I snagged my phone and a gun from my desk drawer but wasn’t sure I’d pulled it off.

“What’s going on?” Dani had been reading a book on the couch in front of my desk. True to her word, she hadn’t left my side even once since she’d brought my breakfast. God, I loved this woman!

“I’ve got to get the others ready. What time is it?”

“Just after ten. What is it, Wylde?”

“I tracked the two users on my server I had the bad feelings about. My instinct was right. This is all related.” I checked my weapon, making sure the clip was full but didn’t chamber a round — I wasn’t ready for that yet — then holstered it before snagging one more handgun and doing the same. “I’ll be back. We’ve got to plan this thoroughly or there could be problems.”

“I’m coming with you, Wylde.” She stood and I pulled her to me with one arm, giving her forehead a hard kiss before snagging her hand and hurrying to find Sting. I sent a mass-alert text, calling for the officers to assemble in church. It was a security measure I’d been working on improving since the attack on us a couple of months ago that had injured some of our women. Especially Bella. I had found the problem too late to prevent it, but I’d upgraded our alert system substantially in the days and weeks after.

I met Sting and Brick in the hall as they answered the summons. Neither man looked annoyed I’d done this, which, considering it was Sunday and they always tried to take that day as what we’d started calling family day, surprised me. Also, I was surprised the others weren’t right behind them.

“Where’s everyone else?”

“On the way. Clutch said to start without him if we had to, but he was on the way.”

“Start without him?” My anger spiked. “I wouldn’t have sent out an alert just ‘cause I fuckin’ felt like it!”

Sting’s brows knit together. “Take it easy, Wylde. He was under a car when the alert went off. He’s just taking time to scrub the worst of the grease from his hands. And shrug off his coveralls.”

“What the fuck is he doing that deep in grease on a fuckin’ Sunday?” This was insane! “I’ve got critical information, and we need to act today before the school opens on Monday!” I opened the door to Church, continuing to rant and mutter. “Thank fuck it’s so early in the morning. Might be

able to stop this guy before he can get to the school and plant more guns in case he runs out of ammo.”

“Wylde?”

“If we let the cops and school officials know today, they can make plans and have a working solution in place.”

“Wylde.”

“I might have used nefarious means to get the info I did, but if they can prove they’d have discovered the evidence eventually, without my help, they might be able to use it in court anyway.”

“Wylde!” Sting grabbed my arm, spinning me around.

“What?”

“Today’s Wednesday. Not Sunday.”

I stared at him, not sure I heard him correctly. “Wednesday.” This was not computing. “It’s Sunday. It has to be Sunday!” My heart pounded and suddenly the room wasn’t big enough or had enough air. My lungs seized and a panic threatened to overwhelm me. “No fuckin’ way! NO! It’s fuckin’ Sunday! It has to be!”

“Wylde, tell us what’s going on.” Sting’s grip on my arm tightened.

“Wylde?” Dani stepped between me and Sting, placing one palm on my chest, the other on my cheek, urging me to look down into her upturned face. “Talk to me. We can’t fix whatever this is unless you tell us what’s going on.”

I swallowed, taking a breath before nodding once, then

facing my president and vice president. “I told you about JustMadness and SoulHunter15.”

“Yes. Continue.” Brick was all business. Looking at his hard features helped settle me. These were my brothers. They always took me seriously and never dismissed me even though I was sometimes erratic and all the time an asshole.

“Madness has talked Hunter into taking revenge on —” I abruptly cut off, remembering Dani was all too near. She couldn’t hear this. “Dani, I need you to go back to my office and stay there.”

“Wylde, I —”

“Now, Dani! Please.” There was urgency in my voice as I took her face in my hands and leaned down to be able to look her in the eyes without either of us missing something in the other’s face we needed to see. I was certain she saw my panic. I definitely saw her worry. “I promise I’ll tell you everything as soon as I can. But right now, I need you to do two things for me. First, go to my office and shut the door. Then I want you to text the girls. See if they’ll answer you.” I smiled, but I wasn’t sure it was all that reassuring. “Please. I really need this.”

She searched my features for a long moment before nodding her assent. “OK. I’ll go. Whatever you’re doing, be careful.” She kissed me for a lingering moment before doing what I asked. Once I was certain she was out of earshot, I filled my brothers in even as I activated an all-hands alert for the rest of the club.

“Madness has talked Hunter into taking revenge on

Dani for rejecting him and taking up with me. He's going to Harrison High School to find Apple and Lemon, but he's also indicated he'll get revenge on everyone in the school for not giving him the respect he feels he deserves."

"Do we know who we're lookin' for?" Sting pulled his weapon and checked the clip same as I had before heading back to the main part of the clubhouse. The all-hands alert had locked down the club girls and families to their rooms while letting everyone else know they needed to be armed and ready to ride in five minutes. Even now I could hear bikes roaring into the parking area in front of the clubhouse.

"His name is Leo Winston. Graduated a couple of years ago with a football scholarship, then promptly flunked out of college. He blames the university as well as his high school teachers for not preparing him to do better."

"Where does Dani come into play?" Brick asked.

"He's been hittin' on her at the coffee shop. Asked her out a few times. She's always been nice but has steadfastly refused to go out with him. Apparently, he learned she'd taken up with me. Which is where Madness comes in. She's been planting seeds for him along the way. Why is anyone's guess. Even before me and Dani were a thing. Apparently, he's finally snapped. The chat I found between them today happened about an hour ago. She pushed Leo into going ahead with this. Even calling him a pussy for not defending himself. He's supposed to go to the school, shoot it up until he finds and kills Apple and Lemon, then he's comin' here. For me."

"She?"

“Yeah. *JustMadness* is Jordan. She works with Dani at the coffee shop.”

“And Dani? What’s he plannin’ to do with Dani?”
Brick looked ready to do murder. I didn’t blame him.

I shook my head. “His punishment for her is to leave her alive to deal with losing everyone she loves.”

Sting’s face was a hard mask of rage. “Not on my fuckin’ watch.”

Sting stormed through the clubhouse, through the common room, to the parking lot. Like the seasoned, hardened warriors I knew the Tzars to be, every single man was accounted for.

“This is sensitive, boys,” Sting called, his voice ringing. “Got a threat to Harrison, where all our older kids are, then the club. Gonna need five of you to come with me to the school. The rest of you stay here and lock down the compound. No one gets in or out. I don’t care who or what the situation is, you get permission from me or Roman before you even think about approaching the gate to let someone in. The person we’re watchin’ out for is a young man a couple years older than the kids he’s attacking. Wylde has sent his picture to your phones. Study it.” He repeated himself. “No one gets in without express permission from me or Roman.” There was a collective grunt of understanding as the men hurried off to secure their stations and prepare the compound for attack.

As I was calling nine-one-one, I heard Dani calling my name frantically. I turned and she was running as hard as she could across the parking lot to the upper end where we’d

gathered.

“Wylde! *Wylde!*”

I headed in her direction and was aware Sting and Brick had done the same. “Dani, what’s wrong?” That sick feeling in the pit of my stomach started churning again. I could see it in her eyes before she ever voiced it. “It’s started,” I muttered. Dani’s wide, frightened eyes told me all I needed to know. “It’s started!” I yelled. “We need to go now!”

“Apple says the classrooms are all locked down, but Lemon was late to class and is out in the hall somewhere. I can’t get her to answer her phone, Wylde!”

I turned and sprinted to my bike, started it up, and left the compound like a hellhound. So help me, God, if even one hair on either of those girls’ heads were harmed, I’d kill that motherfucker with my bare fucking hands in front of God and everybody, and damn the consequences.

We arrived at the school before emergency crews or police. Which was another thing I was pissed about. They were pretty fuckin’ quick to get to Danica’s house when they had, yet no one was here yet. Not a rational thought, but one I’d be bringing up later. After they got here to clean up the fucking mess I was about to create.

“Stop, Wylde!” Sting called — but fuck that shit.

I stormed to the back entrance to the school. As suspected, it was locked. So I shot the latch several times until it gave with one solid kick. I switched to a full clip before entering fully, needing the maximum amount of ammo

available to me without reloading. When I killed this fucker, I was gonna kill him to death.

Making my way slowly into the school, I could hear the *pop pop pop* of automatic fire. Screams filled the air as the subtle pops of the assault rifle was replaced by a loud *BOOM* of a large caliber handgun. Unless I was mistaken, that was a three-fifty-seven Magnum. If the guy hit someone with that, it didn't really matter where it struck. Someone was either dead or missing a limb.

I came to the first room, just a few meters away from the exit. I tapped on the door before opening it. There were a few whimpers and the teacher had a baseball bat in her hand, ready to attack, but I placed my finger to my lips.

“The way to the back door exit is clear,” I said. “Take your class and head out. Don't make a sound and whatever you do, do not stop running or look back. There'll be men outside to get you to cover and the police are on the way.” Then something occurred to me. “Do you have a resource officer I need to watch out for?”

She nodded her head. “Three, but I think... We think they were the first ones...” Her voice broke, but she clamped her lips together to keep from showing how frightened and grief-stricken she was. She took a breath then added. “There's three ROTC teachers also. They've been trained as well.”

“Good. Get your students to safety.”

The teacher nodded and urged the students out. One large boy seemed to take over from there, putting another boy in charge of leading the class out and he brought up the rear.

When his teacher tried to stay behind to help the other kids deeper in the school, he gently took the bat from her hands.

“Please, Mrs. Bradley. You know you can’t fight a gunman with a bat.” He was kind and spoke softly but insistently.

That seemed to be all the woman needed because she nodded in agreement. “I know. You’re right, Obie.” Tears streamed down her face. “But everyone else needs help too.”

“I know,” the young man said as he urged her out of the class to follow the others. “But that guy’s better equipped to handle this than we are.” He met my gaze, and I knew that kid wanted in this fight with everything in him. Much as I wanted to give him his shot at vengeance, I couldn’t.

“What’s your full name, Obie?”

“Obadiah Mason.”

“I’ll find you later. We’ll talk.” Obie nodded once, then followed the rest of his class to the outside.

I continued on, listening for the gunfire to judge where the shooter was. Each room I passed, I gave instructions on how to get out. Some I sent back the way I’d come, but as I got closer to the gunfire, I started sending them out the window.

It wasn’t long before Blaze and Cyrus joined me. I couldn’t deny I was glad to see the big men.

“What took you so long?”

Blaze shrugged. “Had to make sure all the kids you

sent out got to safety.”

“Police?” I asked, needing to know they were on the way and why there seemed to be a delay.

“On the way. There was a scheduled shutdown of their communications system for an upgrade. At the same time, there was a cell outage all over the southern half of the city. Seems like a coordinated attack to me.”

“Wondered why Dani hadn’t let me know if she’d reached Lemon.”

“If I ever tell you sat phones are overkill again, remind me of this.”

“Blaze and I will take over from here, Wylde.” Cyrus clapped me on the shoulder. “Orders from Sting. You’re to find Apple and Lemon and get them to safety, then stand down.”

“Like fuck. This fucker’s mine.”

“Out of the question,” Blaze snapped. “You have your orders. Follow them or I’ll forcibly remove you, and that would waste time we could use to fix this.”

He had me there. “Fuck,” I muttered, but I knew I’d follow Sting’s instructions.

The next classroom we liberated had Apple flying into my arms. She sobbed into my shoulder to muffle the sound, shaking uncontrollably.

“Where’s Deacon?” She asked the question in a whisper, but I heard her.

“Not sure, honey. I’m sure he’s not far.”

“He’s not.” The man in question had a Ruger in one hand and a rifle slung over his other shoulder. Apple immediately let me go and jumped into the big man’s arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. Her slender body shook with her sobs, but she didn’t make a sound other than to whisper.

“I can’t find Lemon. She’s out there somewhere in danger.”

“She’s tough, honey,” Deacon responded quietly. “I’d worry more about that fucker than I would about her.” I knew Deacon meant it, but also that he was still worried about Lemon. We all were.

“The important thing now is that you’re safe, Apple,” I said before my gaze landed on Deacon. “You keep her that way. Hear?”

Deacon gave a short nod. “I will. I’ll get her to the others, then come help you search for Lemon.”

“You’ll do what Sting says,” I snapped, not wanting the other man hurt. I tried to tell myself that, if he were hurt or killed, it would devastate Apple which would, in turn, upset Danica, but I had the uncomfortable thought it might upset me too. Which I absolutely would not acknowledge right now.

“Wylde —”

“No! You’ll do what I tell you, prospect. If Sting gives the OK, fine. But you will check with him before you come back inside this building.” I was hoping that would give the

police time to get here and the matter would be taken out of Deacon's hands, but he didn't need to know that.

Without waiting for him to acknowledge me, I continued on, making sure everyone we came to got out safely. We were getting closer and closer to the gunfire. It happened in sporadic bursts. Every time the big Magnum went off, I grew more and more angry.

"This fucker is rapidly losing any sympathy I had for him."

"Don't think about it," Cyrus cautioned. "I'm not." The other man had changed somewhat since finding Odette. I was happy for him. Of all the men in Iron Tzars, Cyrus probably understood me best.

We continued on. The area we were currently in had mostly evacuated, but now the gunfire was getting closer. I glanced at Cyrus as we approached a corner. He nodded back to me. I pulled out my phone and turned on the video recorder then carefully moved it around the corner to get an idea of what I was dealing with. I gave it a few seconds before easing it back and taking a look at the video.

Sure enough, the gunman was there. His back was to us, and he appeared to be walking away from us. There was a long expanse of hall ahead of him and he appeared in no hurry. I tucked my phone back in my pocket and caught Blaze's gaze. He shook his head, indicating I needed to back off. Like that was going to happen. I'd been told to find Lemon and get her out, but if I took out the gunman before I found Lemon, the problem would take care of itself. The bloodcurdling battle cry

wasn't something I was expecting.

"Bloody hell," Blaze muttered.

"Fuck me." Cyrus's eyes widened, an uncharacteristic show of emotion on his part. Well, other than irritation. He was good at irritation.

I sighed, fear threatening to take over. "That's Lemon."

All three of us dashed around the corner, guns drawn, charging full speed. I yelled just as the gunmen raised that fucking Magnum in Lemon's direction.

"Move!" I yelled, trying to get the gunman to turn to me. I had no intention of letting him hurt Lemon, and I didn't mind shooting him if I had to, but I had no desire to shoot a man in the back.

Just as I hoped, the guy turned to look over his shoulder. Sure enough, Leo Winston looked back at me. His features were more scared than angry, as if he were doing something he wasn't sure he was fully committed to, yet couldn't seem to stop himself. Until he saw me. Then unadulterated rage filled his expression.

"Fucker!" he yelled. "This is all your fault! Why couldn't you just leave her alone!"

I figured he was talking about Dani, but I wasn't sure and didn't much care. His attention was on me and not on the small figure of Lemon... charging him from the back?

"What the fuck?"

"Lemon!"

“Don’t!”

All of us spoke over top of each other. For all the good it did.

Lemon charged a man, armed to the teeth, with a bigass trophy from one of the cases along the front of the school. Instead of a repeat of the battle cry she’d given earlier, she charged him silently until she was close enough to swing. She hit him with the marble base in the back of the head with all her might. He fell, but Lemon wasn’t done. She took one more swing, this time yelling at the top of her lungs, and hit him again in the back of the head. This time, the base broke and clattered to the floor, leaving Lemon standing over her prey like an Amazon warrior.

“Fucker,” she muttered before throwing the remainder of the trophy to the ground. She kicked the gun that had fallen from his hand across the hall before bending to pick up the rifle in his other hand. She raised her head and met my gaze as I neared. The girl was as calm as any seasoned warrior, but angry as fuck. Glancing back down at Leo, she spat before stepping over him and marching toward us. Shoving the rifle at me, she stared me down.

“Get her out of here,” Blaze ordered. “I’ll deal with the cops.”

“They just pulled up outside.” Cyrus looked out the window. “There anyone else, Lemon?”

“Yeah. That fucking Jordan bitch. But she didn’t stay long. She dropped off this fucker before she left.”

“How do you know that?” I tilted my head as I looked at her. This girl was a fucking handful and then some.

She rolled her eyes. “Why the fuck do you think I was out of class in the first Goddamned place? I saw her. I saw Leo. Neither of them are supposed to be here, so,” she shrugged, “I went to investigate.” She sobered. “I thought I saw Deacon carrying Apple out. I tried to keep this guy’s attention focused on me at this end of the school so she had time to get out, but I didn’t know if she’d be able to leave. The lockdown...”

“Yeah, Lemon. She’s safe.”

When I first met Lemon, I knew she was tough as nails. The girl was gonna make one hell of an old lady to some poor bastard. But now, right before my eyes, she seemed to... crack. Her breathing sped up, then she heaved, vomiting violently. I knelt beside her, holding her hair out of her face, which seemed to piss her off even more. Or maybe it was her defense mechanism, because she was trembling almost violently.

“Get off me, Wylde!”

“Hey. I’m just tryin’ to help, honey. You know I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“Don’t need help.” She spat again, then wiped her mouth with her arm.

“Everyone needs help, Lemon.” Blaze knelt beside her and handed her a bottle of water. “Even tough chicks like you.”

Lemon took a pull of the water, swished her mouth out, then spat again. Then she took several gulps before wiping her mouth again with her arm.

“Fuck you, Blaze.”

Blaze smirked. “You ain’t old enough, sweetheart.”

Lemon bared her teeth and threw the bottle at him. Blaze caught it with one hand before standing and reaching out a hand to her. Lemon ignored him and stood to stride to the closed door. She didn’t look back.

“Yeah. Good luck with that one, Wylde.”

“Leavin’ her up to her sister. I just work here.”

Despite everything that had just happened, I wanted to smile. But I couldn’t. There was still the matter of Jordan to resolve.

“Let’s get out of here. We need to find Jordan.” As much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn’t let the woman go. I wanted to turn it over to the cops and take my girls home, but the woman was too dangerous to leave out there to her own devices.

As we approached the entrance the police entered the building. I recognized one of the men from Danica’s house. The one Lemon had given hell when I’d arrived at their house. The one who’d shot Dani. He nodded as he approached me. I wanted to shoot him in the face.

“What happened to him?” He nodded to Leo lying on the floor of the hall, blood steadily oozing from the wound on his head. Other officers filed past us, hunting for more threats.

“He turned his back on Lemon, thinking we were the real threat.”

Surprisingly, the guy snorted. “Yeah. Big mistake. Anyone hurt besides him?”

“Don’t know. Possibly. The school resource officers and the ROTC teachers would have been the main responders in the school. One of the first teachers we came to was worried they might be injured. Or worse. There’s another woman you need to find.” I pulled my phone out and pulled up Jordan’s picture. “Lemon said she dropped this guy off. I’ve got proof she’d been baiting this guy for months.”

“It possible she’s still here?”

I shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“Was it you three who got the students and teachers out?”

“We cleared the hall and sent them in the direction we’d come from. Or out the windows. But we did our best.”

“We’re glad someone got here in time to help. We were caught blind, deaf, and flat-footed.” The guy looked equal parts angry and anguished. “This happened at the worst possible time.”

“Looks like it’s all clear,” one of the other officers said over the radio. “Got three male adults with injuries, one severe. Other than that, lots of scared people.”

“Make one more check. I want every single closet and cubby double-checked before we release the lockdown. Looking for a female in her twenties. Blonde. Slender.” He

looked back at me. “I’ve got to go meet with the principal for the walk-through. I’ll make sure everyone on each team knows to be on the lookout for this woman.” He stuck out his hand to me. “Thanks for keeping the kids safe.”

I took his hand, my opinion of the guy going up several notches. Didn’t mean I still didn’t want to at least maim him for shooting Danica.

“Glad we were able to help. I’m sending you another file. The one that shows the trail between Leo and Jordan. And how she pushed him into this on the same day and time your communications were taken offline for an update.”

“Wait.” His eyes narrowed. “Leo... Winston?”

“Yeah. He’s the former mayor’s nephew or some shit.”

“And Jordan?”

I shrugged. “Besides a sociopath? I have no idea. I think she liked to play with people. Leo was a convenient target for her to use to get back at Danica.”

“Trust me when I tell you we will find her. I have no desire to be the cause of someone’s death, and I very well could have been because of that bitch.”

“All I can say is that you better find her before I do.”

He raised his hands. “I don’t want to hear it, man. I do and she turns up dead, I still have a duty to investigate you.”

“I kill her, there won’t be anything for you to find.” I smiled to take the sting out of my words, but it probably looked as evil as I felt at the moment.

“Come on, Wylde,” Blaze took my upper arm and tugged me toward the exit. “Let’s get the fuck outta here and back to the clubhouse.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Danica

“I’m going to be gray headed before this is all over.”

They arrived back at the clubhouse to the whole of the Iron Tzars manning the fence around the compound. Armed men looking outside, watching everyone who approached gave the place a feel of being in the middle of a war zone. I wasn’t so sure that wasn’t an apt description given when we’d just been through.

There were only five of the club members who’d gone to the school while everyone else, including myself, had locked down the compound tighter than a snare. Once the others passed through the gate, Roman met them just outside the club house. I had to watch from a window because the bastard wouldn’t let anyone out until he’d confirmed with Sting all was clear on their end.

“They got her,” Roman said without preamble. “They’ve arrested Jordan. Not only did what you send the police help, Wylde, but it led them to the proof she was behind the cell outage. I didn’t understand it all, but she’s got more skill than we gave her credit for as a hacker. The resource officers and the ROTC teacher who were hit are in the hospital. One of them is fine, minor injuries, but two of them are in surgery now. Both are expected to be fine. This is from Stitches, so no one else is in the know yet.” Roman continued. “Leo is at the hospital too. He has severe head trauma, but he’s

alive.”

“Of *course*, he is,” Lemon muttered. “I’ve got to start lifting weights to build more muscle. If I could’ve hit him harder, the fucker’d be dead. Though brain damage might be just as good.”

“Lemon,” I scolded. “Don’t say things like that.” I pulled her into my arms for a fierce hug. Surprisingly, she not only let me, but she hugged me back just as tightly.

“Don’t worry, honey. There’s a possibility he’s going to have permanent brain damage. Anything legal they try to throw at you will be dealt with by Raven, though he doesn’t anticipate anything,” said Roman.

“Tell me you don’t want him dead too and I’ll take it back.” The girl was going to be the death of me.

“Can’t say that, but I can say that I don’t want it to be you who kills him.” I pulled back to look at her. “I’m so glad you’re safe, Lemon. When neither Apple nor I could get a hold of you...” A strangled sob escaped before I could stop it. Lemon might show some normal emotions like fear or grief in private, but she absolutely wouldn’t out in the open where everyone could see. It was just the way she was wired. Always the protector. The tough one.

“Pull yourself together, Dani,” she hissed. “I’m fine.”

I barked out a laugh. “I’ll get right on that. This is twice in as many weeks. I’m not going to be able to pull myself together for a long fucking time.”

Lemon grinned. “Nice f-bomb, Dani.”

“Brat,” I grumbled with no real heat.

“This could have ended so much worse.” Apple wrapped her arms around me and leaned her head on my shoulder. “We could have all been killed.”

“But we weren’t.” Lemon looked and sounded fierce. “We weren’t, and you’re not even going to think about it.”

“Kinda hard not to. I was so scared he’d shot you, Lemon. We could hear him shooting. How did he not kill anyone?”

“Cause he’s a fucking horrible shot. He even missed me with that bigass .357.”

“Wait.” Wylde wrapped his arms around both me and Apple as he confronted Lemon. “What do you mean he missed you?”

“I told you. I saw him and that bitch, Jordan, together outside the school, so I went to investigate. When he pulled a gun, I had to do something. I taunted him. Tried to get him to come after me and leave everyone else alone. It worked. Mostly. He got a couple of the resource officers and one of the ROTC guys. Good thing I lured him in that way instead of through the front door like he’d been going for.”

“I think I’m gonna puke,” I whimpered.

Sure enough...

When I finished, Lemon and Apple were on either side of me as I sat back on my ass and cried, the stress of the day finally crashing down around me. Wylde held my hair out of the way until the girls surrounded me with hugs. Apple cried

quietly and Lemon... tried not to. I felt moisture on my shoulder where she tried to bury her face for a moment, but when she pulled back, she'd composed herself.

"I'm sorry, Dani," Lemon offered. "But I wasn't letting anything happen to Apple."

"I know, baby. And I'm proud of you. I really am. But you need to know you matter just as much as Apple. I love you both and don't want to lose either of you." I gave her a watery smile. "You're much stronger than I've ever been, honey, but you need to learn there are people all around you who can help you. You don't have to do it all yourself."

She shrugged. "I know." She glanced at Wylde before looking away. "I just don't trust anyone to do as good a job as me. Except maybe I'll consider giving Wylde the benefit of the doubt. Unless he starts acting like a fucktard again."

I barked out a laugh. Wylde just sighed. "Appreciate that, sourpuss."

That got a scowl from Lemon, but I thought I saw a hint of relief also. Apple was quite possibly the only person she'd ever let see her feelings. Wylde seemed to recognize Lemon needed a way to regain her composure and had given it to her. It made me love him that much more.

"You sure Jordan's been taken care of, Wylde?" Apple looked up at him like he could fix anything.

"I am. The information I gave the police, combined with the security footage from the school, should be enough to put her away for a long time. Roman's right. She's a pretty

good hacker. Good enough she hid from me. For a while at least. Raven said he's putting some bugs in important ears to make sure she gets held without bail, but given the results of her actions, I don't think that will be a problem."

Apple nodded her head slightly. "Good. That's good."

Lemon scowled. "How the fuck did she do all this anyway? Did she have anything to do with the cell towers fucking up?"

"Lemon..."

"She does it on purpose," Wylde said and chuckled. "I like her style." Lemon snorted. "But to answer your question, she was able to take down the cell towers briefly. Just long enough to allow Leo to get a head start on the police and to prevent information from getting to the right people. I haven't looked in to how she did that, but she has some skill with the computer." He shrugged. "Guess she really *was* after my Titan GT77. Don't really care at this point as long as the cops have her. School security camera caught her giving him a Magnum. Which was found on him. May be hard to prove it was that exact gun, but it's pretty compelling."

"Fuck." Lemon looked disgruntled. "Really wanted a shot at that bitch."

"All right, Lemon. That's enough. Take your sister and do whatever the two of you do when you need to destress."

"Can I hang out with Deacon?" Apple looked up at me. I could still see the terror in her eyes and knew she needed to feel safe. Deacon could give that to her. "I promise I won't do

anything.”

With a sigh, I nodded. “Yes, Apple. I think he’s earned my trust. Just please respect my wishes in this?”

“I will. Thanks, Dani.”

“I’ll go with her.” Lemon stood. “Make sure the lovebirds behave.”

“Christ, Lemon.” My lips wanted to curl despite everything that had just happened. “Can you try to not be so abrasive?”

“Works for him.” She nodded at Wylde. “I reckon it’ll work for me too. To be honest, I don’t really care. See me, love me, motherfucker.”

That got a bark of laughter from both Wylde and Blaze. Neither man bothered to hide their mirth.

“Don’t encourage her. She’s bad enough as it is.”

“Why would I *not* encourage her?” Wylde chuckled. “She’s me.”

“Don’t know about that,” Lemon said. “But I know I’m either a pleasant surprise, or I make everything incredibly fucking uncomfortable and awkward. Like a finger in the asshole.”

That was all Blaze could take. He doubled over with laughter. Wylde too. Both men had tears streaming down their cheeks. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t too.

I pointed at Lemon. “Go pester someone else.” She just shrugged and left, taking her sister with her.

“Got a guy I want Sting to look into, Blaze. Kid from the school. Not sure what he’s got planned later, but he’d make a damned fine prospect. Maybe not now, but when he’s ready. Big kid. Looked like a linebacker.”

“Oh?” Blaze raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Was a really good help when we got to the first class. Even kept the teacher focused. Seems to have a good head on his shoulders. Obadiah Mason. Goes by Obie.”

“In high school? You sure that’s a good idea?”

“I’m just saying it might be a good idea for the officers to look into him. Maybe keep an eye on him while he’s in town. I’m gonna be watchin’ him. Just for shits and giggles.”

Blaze nodded once. “I’ll let Sting know. He’ll likely get with you later.” He gave me a wink. “Sure now’s not the time. Go comfort your woman. That shit can wait.”

Once everyone was gone but me and Wylde, he lifted me into his arms and left. I was glad because sitting so close to my own puke was a bit disconcerting. I probably should have protested, but it felt good to be in his embrace. So I just circled his neck with my arms and buried my face in his chest and let the tears come.

I don’t really remember getting to the room we shared, but the next thing I knew Wylde stood me in front of the bathroom sink and opened a new toothbrush for me, fixing it so I could brush my teeth and rinse my mouth out. Not long after that I found myself sitting on the bed with Wylde holding me as tightly as I held him. He’d turned me so I was straddling

his lap with my head resting on his shoulder.

“I’ve got you, baby. Everything’s OK.” He rubbed my back over and over, soothing me in a way no one in my life had ever been able to. Maybe it was because even before our mother had died, I’d felt responsible for the twins. Or maybe I just never trusted anyone enough to let them in.

“I only pretended not to want them, you know.” I spoke softly, not really sure why I was telling Wylde this, but needing to get it out. “Lemon and Apple. I gave them those ridiculous names out of spite, but Mom just gave me a little knowing smile. I think she knew I’d end up being the one to raise them. It’s why she wanted me to bond with them.”

“You did, baby. You did exactly that.” Wylde rocked me in his arms, all the while clinging to me as hard as I clung to him. “You love them like they were your own. Everyone can see that, including them.”

We sat like that for a long while before I framed his face in my hands and kissed him with all the fear and desperation inside me. It seemed like we were always needing to comfort each other, but I was fine with it. It felt like... home. A family.

I surrendered to Wylde, letting him lead us because I knew he needed me as much as I needed him. As always, when he made love to me, my body sang in his embrace. Wylde took me to heights of wonder I’d only ever read about. Always, before he came, he saw to my pleasure. Several times. Now was no exception.

When we were spent, lying in the bed with Wylde

draped over me, his head between my breasts, he lapped lazily at my nipple. I tunneled my fingers through his hair and massaged his scalp for the sheer luxury of it.

“I’ve set Ace up to get your tat tomorrow,” Wylde murmured lazily to me. It sounded like he was half asleep already.

“You mean the one like the other women have? The property tattoo?”

“Yeah. Tomorrow.” His words were slurred. The man had to be exhausted. I know I was. “Got a problem with that?”

“So defensive. You’d think you set it up without consulting me or something.”

“Told you. I take the path of least resistance. You might have said no, and I’d still have set it up. Do you know what it means?”

“Yeah. You can thank Iris. She explained it all to me. I had a few questions and she answered everything. You gonna make me regret doing this for us?”

I could feel him smile around my nipple before he gave it another lick. “I’ll do everything in my power to always keep you safe and happy, Danica. You and the girls.”

We were silent for a long while after that. I think I dozed on and off in peaceful relaxation.

“You know I love you, right?” Wylde always sounded so vulnerable when he confessed his love. Or any emotions, really. He hid his feelings behind his quirky, snarky, prickly personality. I knew it was a self-defense mechanism, one I was

glad he'd stopped using with me.

“I do, Wylde. You know I love you too. Right?”

“I certainly hope so. I'm not sure I could survive if you didn't.”

I pushed him gently so he rolled off me. In the process I draped myself over him. “I love the feel of your hair-roughened skin sliding against mine. I love how protective you are of me and the girls. I love how you make love to me with both ferocity and tenderness.” I leaned in and gave his lips a lingering, gentle kiss. “But most of all, I love how you love me, Wylde. You're everything I could have ever hoped for in a man.”

“I'll always take care of you, you know. Even if you decide I'm too much for you to handle.”

“You know, for anyone other than me you would be too much to handle. Me? I'm up to the task.”

Then I proceeded to show him how much I loved him. And continued to show him the rest of the day. And into the night. Tomorrow, we'd make it official. Before we left this bed, though, I wanted Wylde to understand that I was never letting him go. He was my heart. My soul.

My... *everything*.

MARTEEKA KARLAND

Erotic romance author by night, emergency room tech/clerk by day, Marteeeka Karland works really hard to drive everyone in her life completely and totally nuts. She has been creating stories from her warped imagination since she was in the third grade. Her love of writing blossomed throughout her teenage years until it developed into the totally unorthodox and irreverent style her English teachers tried so hard to rid her of.

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