



**BOOK**  
**OF**  
**THE**  
**FOUND**

**AESLI-01**

**V.E.S. PULLEN**

# BOOK OF THE FOUND: AESLI-01

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THE JAK2 CYCLE

BOOK 4

V.E.S. PULLEN

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*This is for Charlotte Brontë.*

*We can't ever really be friends because you talked shit about Jane Austen, and the ending of Vilette was bullshit.*

*But I will always love you because you gave me Jane. You gave me a heroine and a role model that's poor, obscure, plain, and little, but doesn't compromise who she is for anything. And she's not a liar.*

*And this is also for the "one out of five" women and girls who are also not liars.*

## TRIGGER WARNINGS

Azzie might be driven to save the world, but someone had to save her first, be the hero that she needed. This is Mouse's story. It's ugly and it's raw, but it's hers, and it's the story I've always intended to tell from the moment the character took shape in my brain.

This was not an easy book to write, and it's not easy to read. Part 1 (*Janie*) describes a childhood full of neglect, where an unhealthy relationship grows between an adult male and a little girl. Mouse experiences further trauma as an adult, as seen in the Epilogue of *Book of the Lost*. Although the specifics of what happened during those eleven days are not graphically spelled out, much of this book deals with the aftermath of both her childhood and those more recent events, and how they're related.

Trigger and content warnings are complicated things. No one experience with trauma is universal, or even the same day-to-day for an individual. Something that can be shrugged off one day might cause a panic attack the next. Only you can judge what you're able to handle at any given time, or in what intensity.

To help you decide, I've divided the warnings into two categories, *references* and *descriptions*. References are recollections, comments, statements, or memories that lack immediacy or detail; descriptions are events or experiences that take place for the characters as you read. It's the difference between "I got mugged once" (a reference to an event), and having to read through the actual mugging, and

experience all the fear, anger, helplessness, and violation along with the character. Since references can be just as triggering as descriptions, they're worth noting, but may be more tolerable. If something appears on either list and you aren't sure if you can handle it, please don't. It isn't worth it.

Please take these warnings seriously.



### CONTENT/TRIGGER WARNINGS

The book contains references to: physical and sexual assault (both adult and of a minor, including coerced sex); child abuse and neglect; grooming; depression, anxiety, and suicide; pandemics and pandemic deaths (in more detail than previous books); incarceration; domestic violence; medical violations (pharmaceutical and physical); food insecurity (food shaming); casual drug use (marijuana, heroin); PTSD and trauma; paralysis; human trafficking; forced labor; torture; murder; cancer survival.

This book contains descriptions — sometimes graphic or overt, sometimes implied — of: grooming (specifically a child) and sexual predation; emotional abuse and neglect of a child; sexual exposure to a minor; physical violence, and dealing with injuries received, including burns and manual strangulation; the aftermath of sexual assault of a child (not the act itself); PTSD, trauma, and panic attacks; forced medication; incarceration; depression and anxiety; gun violence and character death.

You'll notice that some things appear on both lists. This is because Part 1 (*Janie*) is a chronicle of Mouse's early life and childhood, and warnings related to childhood are more often descriptions in this section, but only references later. ***It is okay to skip Part 1 entirely.*** You might not catch all the references later, but you should still be able to understand the story without knowing the details.

At the end of the book, there are resources that can provide assistance if you need it, and links to some sites I referenced to

shape the characters and story, if you want to learn more.

Mouse's story doesn't end here, it continues in later books.



# PROLOGUE



*The axe forgets; the tree remembers.*

AFRICAN PROVERB

There are some hurts that don't heal.

No matter how much you want them to, no matter how weak you feel for *still* being affected by them — no matter how many times you remind yourself of the ten billion people out there who have it worse... these wounds don't go away.

Their scars itch. They sting. The jagged edges catch on things and tear, leaving behind a trail of blood drops leading straight to a yawning chasm that was once whole.

When you get them young, some injuries are too deep. They gape and bleed as much after ten years, or ten decades, as the first day you received them.

And every one after that is just another shallow cut branching off the first; a tributary fed by a river, a trunk growing from a great tap root sunk deep in the earth, invisible from the surface.

This is who you are, now and forever: the bearer of these wounds.

*AN: before continuing with the story, please check the trigger/content warnings found [here](#).*

THIRTY-THREE DAYS, TWELVE HOURS,

THIRTY-SEVEN MINUTES AGO...

OR, THE NIGHT MOUSE DISAPPEARED FROM SALEM.

The day I realized that everyone else was dead was the first day I crawled through a ventilation system since I was a kid, but it wouldn't be the last.

Janus-23 hit Salem like a tornado dropping from a clear blue sky, but it wasn't until Aesli got sick that I got scared. Until then, I made the same assumptions everyone else did: this was just a really bad flu. Sure, I'd noticed that the hospital had been operating in crisis mode, but it seemed... I don't know, not a huge deal? They were all strangers, and I didn't feel personally at risk; the threat was an abstract concept until Aesli's dad brought her in, and they isolated her as soon as she crossed the threshold.

She was my special kid, so her oncologist waited for me in the ICU reception area. He knew I'd be there the second I heard she was admitted, and I'd stay by her side when everybody else was overwhelmed and distracted.

She had a fever, and her dad told them that Aesli's mom and both her brothers showed symptoms of the bad flu that was going around. She needed constant supervision and his attention was too divided, but he'd be back once he got everyone settled. That's what he said, at least.

He told Aesli that he and her mom both loved her very much, and he left. It wasn't until after she recovered that she remembered her brothers had already died before he brought her in.

Her dad never returned to the hospital. I tried calling him after a few days, but no one answered. Her fever had been too high to understand why he left her there or what he said, but I told her the story as many times as I needed to, until she constructed memories so she'd remember him saying the words to her.

By the time I made that phone call, I'd realized just how bad the outbreak was. Only two weeks had passed between the

first cases appearing, and FEMA slapping up the fences around the town. I spent my time by her bedside in a hazmat suit, scared out of my mind, scrolling through horror stories posing as news reports on my phone while expecting her to die at any minute. We stayed tucked out of sight, cut off from everyone in our little corner room in the ICU, but when they stopped bringing her food or meds, when I was the only one charting her vitals, *I knew*.

People were dying all around us, and I understood that Aesli and I would join the ranks of the dead soon enough, but I couldn't just sit back and continue to wait. I needed to see for myself.

I'd watched the early seasons of *The Walking Dead* more than once, and although I've always firmly believed I'd do quite well in a zombie apocalypse, I'd accepted early on that I was no Rick Grimes. I was not about to go strutting around that hospital like some redneck kid who thinks he knows who his daddy is, all confident and convinced I was some kind of badass. At the onset of the pandemic, I was twenty-three and smaller than my thirteen-year-old charge. In some ways, being tiny sucked, but when it enabled me to crawl through ducts inside ceilings and walls rather than walk around all exposed like fucking zombie bait? Yeah, I was okay with being fun-sized.

Into the vents I crawled.

I didn't find any zombies, because it wasn't that kind of apocalypse. Instead, I found a lot of people that I'd known, and some I even *liked*, dead or dying in horribly tragic conditions. I didn't go back to Aesli's room for a long time, not until I could explain the situation without sobbing or scaring her more than necessary. Moving from place to place, I spent hours in the ventilation system trying to get a grip on my emotions — not just grief or horror, but a bleak despair, knowing it was our fate too.

Time lumbered onwards as Aesli fought this virus that the news outlets called "Janus-23," and I waited with her, doing what I could to make her comfortable. Sometimes when she slept, the fear and anticipated pain would overwhelm me, and

I'd seek out the narrow metal tubes to express my grief where it wouldn't upset her. And every time I left that room, I gave thanks for the negative pressure system that kept the stench from the rest of the building out. It was... unimaginable.

I still had my badge, and plenty more were available if I needed to access somewhere secure. I used the ducts to go wherever I could find necessary supplies: IV fluids to keep her hydrated; clean bedding to replace what she sweated through; the medicines listed on her chart; food and a phone charger for me. I studied the cleaning protocols and kept the room spotless. I tested her blood density in a small lab that I cleared out — watching it drop first with joy that her polycythemia vera wasn't adding to the virus's effects, then increasing terror — and tracked down and stockpiled antibiotics. Doctors, nurses, and researchers all over the world shared information online, attempting to make sense of the disease; if she lived through the fever, there'd be a secondary infection stage.

I kept myself busy and distracted, and tried not to look into rooms I didn't need to be in. I waited, and wished I believed in something to pray to, as my little friend fought for her life.

And then something miraculous occurred: she began to recover.

Her temperature dropped. She became lucid, able to stay awake for longer periods of time, and even drink water from a cup. She bitched at me until I took out the catheter, then bitched at me more until I surrendered on bedpans and half-carried her to the bathroom whenever she needed. I gave her a present — mouthwash in a fancy bag from the gift shop — and pretended the tears came from laughter when she glared at me and flipped me off with a weary smile.

The ducts became my highway. When Aesli lapsed into a restless sleep, I'd venture out on trips to the cafeteria or pharmacy, or the supply rooms for clean linens and towels. I searched fruitlessly for other survivors. I saw every part of that building, from the roof to the darkest corners of the basement levels, where the entrance to the steam tunnels crouched in the gloom and waited for me.

Time passed. We didn't die. In fact, we survived in a fucking *spectacular* way.

Aesli's blood was the key to fighting the virus, her weird disease kept her alive long enough to develop immunity. With research and practice, I created a vaccine out of the therapeutic blood draws that we used to discard. I was the first human test subject, after countless petri dishes and preserved samples from the infected sacrificed themselves for the cause.

Whatever magic resided in her body that made her blood so potent, so thick with antibodies and surplus white and red blood cells, supercharged my immune system. My first titer test showed a consistent antibody concentration far beyond reasonable expectations, and so did the second a week later. After the third test actually *increased*, matching Aesli's own titer, and she was fully recovered, bored out of her little mind, and getting restless, I decided it was time.

As scary as it was to leave our safe (albeit stinking) haven, the news reports were even more frightening. The losses in Salem were proportionate to the rest of the world: the mortality rate was as high — possibly *higher* — than the Marburg virus, and far more infectious.

It was when we finally left that hospital that shit got weird.

The town became a base. Aesli became Azzie to conceal her connection to the vaccine, and I became her ultimate line of defense against those who would exploit and ruin her.

But those long days, as tedious as they were terrifying, spent crawling around in the walls and ceilings to keep us alive and then create the vaccine, meant I knew this hospital better than anyone else living or dead. Every part, including exactly how to get into Dr. Elizabeth Kane's office despite her locked doors and 24/7 security around the research labs.

*Study on multiple births, my ass.*



As nemeses go, Dr. Colin McNamara was a formidable foe.

He had power and influence, and soldiers with automatic weapons backing his play. He represented the Powers That Be outside the gates of Salem, carrying out their agenda on my fragile friend, and the thousands of people that shared our golden cage.

He was smart, and he was strategic... but he wasn't *me*.

McNamara was up against an opponent that had been arranging the game board, moving pieces into position, for weeks before he even sat down at the table.

And he had no idea that Ms. Sarah Chaney, his assistant, was my secret lunch buddy. Or worse, that *she* had approached *me* to be friends after she grew tired of his machinations and oppressive rules.

Meeting twice a week, in an empty office on the fourth floor, we shared lavish spreads of the fanciest vittles we competed to provide. Neither of us questioned where the ingredients came from; I had the freshest seafood and produce, but she had access to the special shipments of goods brought in for McNamara and the other elites on the base.

While we stuffed our faces and moaned through our foodgasms, we gossiped.... if by "gossiped," I meant Sarah shared everything she could from the meetings, phone calls, and correspondence that passed through McNamara's offices at the hospital and at home. Unsolicited, and unprompted, she spied on the most powerful prison warden that had ever existed.

Because of Sarah, I learned McNamara answered to a man named "Tobit." That he really did care about Azzie's well-being on some level, and negotiated for whatever bits of normalcy he could achieve. And that Elizabeth Kane was not a gynecologist, she was a geneticist.

Even without Sarah's intel — even if she never gave me another name, or copied memo, or screenshots of emails — I would've valued her friendship just for the relief of having someone else I could talk to, unguarded. Sarah understood Azzie was Aesli, and everything that meant.

She recognized the horrific situation we were in: they were exploiting a young girl, doing real and permanent damage to her body, to produce a vaccine they'd commodified into an incentive and a cash cow. And then they purposely weaponized the virus to drive up the demand.

And worse, it wasn't an accident or the act of an opportunist, all of it was intentional.

From day one, the base had been cut off from outside communication but not to protect the source of the vaccine — only a select few may have known about Azzie's involvement, but *many* people were aware of the production facility — but to cover up what was happening beyond our gates. Surveillance surrounded the mailboxes and guards monitored the mail carriers against communicating with residents, but outgoing mail wasn't restricted. Outgoing electronic correspondence was only selectively monitored. *Incoming* mail, electronic correspondence, and internet access, however, was throttled, denied, searched, and redacted, if not blocked, disposed of, or erased altogether.

I'd fucked up. I hadn't taken Kane's presence seriously, not until Tai showed up in my lab and Azzie confessed her "new doctor" had taken her off birth control. Sarah had reported, multiple times, that McNamara was being pushed into finding "other viable sources," but she didn't know what that meant.

I *assumed* a synthetic vaccine, or attempting to reproduce Azzie's unique blood composition with samples from other PV survivors; Betsy Jermaine had passed, but there had to be others out there.

I *assumed* Kane came on about six months ago as a geneticist to unlock the secret of the magical unicorn juice in Azzie's blood. We couldn't continue to depend on using therapeutic phlebotomies to treat her disease; the blood draws provided the vaccine ingredients, but they were too hard on her body. It was criminal that her doctors continued to ignore medication that would slow her mutated bone marrow's roll, requiring fewer blood draws, in favor of vaccine production,



but Azzie herself insisted it was too important. Everyone else was more important than *her* comfort, *her* quality of life.

My creeping depression over Azzie's health had made me complacent, or at least prone to avoidance, and I'd missed or ignored major red flags. And now I was in the ducts above Kane's office, ready to find out what the fuck they were planning so I could prepare my counter moves.

I felt like I could legit identify with Prince Humperdinck, but instead of arranging a wedding, murdering a wife, and framing my enemies for it, I had a government conspiracy to uncover, Sarah Chaney and Tai to read in, a town to evacuate, and a best friend to rescue. I was swamped!

But I'd do what I had to.

Since I was a little girl, I always did what I had to. Above all else, I was a *survivor*.



SEVERAL DAYS LATER

The massive truck was incredible overkill, if you ask me.

It shuddered to a stop, and eight (*eight!*) soldiers poured out of the back and fell into formation with guns raised. I'd ridden with them in the open bed, with sheets of canvas strapped down to a frame as the only thing protecting us from the weather and wind. The benches weren't padded, making one endless day feel like a week, but the soldiers could shift around when they needed to for comfort. They pretended not to see or hear me as they stood up and even walked around when the truck made its infrequent stops, leaving me shackled to rings set into the floor, with little to no give on the chains.

Eight guards sitting vigil, making sure that I didn't escape. It felt like a compliment.

At first I tried questioning them, asking where we were going, which direction we headed in, or at least when we'd arrive, but none of them would answer. By the time the air brakes squealed and the orders came to file out, I no longer

cared where we were. We weren't driving, that's all that mattered.

I struggled to get to my feet and made it to the rear flaps with help. An obnoxiously large luxury SUV had trailed us the entire trip, and I breathed through a cramp as it broke open like a rotten egg and discharged its stinking contents: Dr. Colin McNamara, in all his glory, surrounded by more guards and sycophants. Not my friend Sarah Chaney, though, or anyone else that might get word to Azzie that they took me off base.

McNamara watched with a self-satisfied little smirk as two soldiers had to lift me from the back of the truck, my muscles as frozen as the rest of me. My legs and back had seized up after so long in one position on the rock-hard bench.

It took me far too long to realize where we were. Too busy shooting death glares at my former boss, I stretched and wavy-tube-manned to get blood flowing to my extremities, as much as I could in shackles. But once I did?

Once I recognized the building we were idling outside of?

The fence and razor wire were new, but I was very familiar with the line of men standing like sentinels in the open gate, silent and watching.

The multistory monstrosity used to be a fire station; one end was red brick and historical, the rest a humongous, ugly box of gray cement and brown brick with a stingy number of narrow windows. The whole Frankenstein's monster squatted on a side street close to downtown Jackson, Illinois. The county had renovated and expanded on the original structure only ten years before they got the money and land to build a much bigger, more modern one out near the hospital.

My dad used to love to tell the story about how he outwitted the mayor, because the town council was *furious* when they figured out the shell corporation that bought it was a front for an outlaw motorcycle club. As a kid, I assumed seashells, and was not surprised they were highly profitable. My dad claimed the mayor lost his reelection campaign the next year, because not only was it a historical building, it was

just a few blocks off the town square; the “dirty bikers” ruined the neighborhood.

The building hadn’t changed, but the men lined up at the gate had. It had been fourteen years, after all.

“How?” I whispered, open-mouthed with stinging eyes, staring right at a man I never thought I’d see again. Ever.

A man I didn’t *want* to see.

I’d told myself that again and again over the years, until I almost believed it: I didn’t want to see him, and I certainly didn’t want to run to him. I didn’t want his arms around me either, like it was in the beginning when Beast made me feel safe, before he became someone I feared.

“As agreed,” McNamara’s pompous voice carried over the wind and rumbling engines. That much smug satisfaction warranted a swift and brutal response, but as far as I was concerned, no one else existed anymore outside of Beast and me. In that moment, we were the only two people alive.

I was nine years old again, seeing him for the first time. Feeling *seen* for the first time, making me shy.

I was eleven years old, meeting his eyes under a table top, neither of us looking away.

I was thirteen, staring up into his glittering black eyes surrounded by freckles of spattered blood. Hurt and confused, breaking under every harsh word and brutal touch.

Fifteen, across a metal table bolted to the floor, thinking it was the last time I’d see his face, hear his voice, and hating how much I still cared.

I hadn’t seen him either, until now. In between, the world ended.

He looked... he looked *good*.

To my adult eyes, he looked better than good. He was everything I remembered, and so much more.

He stood a few inches over six feet, with broad shoulders and a barrel chest. His muscles were tight, with bulging

biceps, rippling abs, and an ass that Levi Strauss could've only hoped and dreamed would find its way to filling out his jeans. His thick, raven-wing black hair was way too long, hanging past his shoulders and tangling in the wind, but his beard was trim and smooth.

He always hated taking the time to get his hair cut.

He wouldn't bother until I harassed him into it, then he'd toss me on the back of his bike and take me to the barbershop. I'd sit in the chair next to him and watch with big eyes and a mouth sealed shut as the barber cut his beautiful hair back to a manageable length, his beard groomed and mustache trimmed. He'd see me watching him in the mirror, enraptured by the transformation wrought by a simple pair of scissors, and he'd wink one of those black-as-sin eyes at me as the barber brushed the fine dusting of hair away.

I worshipped him. I adored him. And he *loved* me.

I knew he loved me, never questioned it then, not until he walked away and left me to hang.

I was an obligation to my grandparents, a burden to my father, and a nuisance to everyone else in the world, but for a time, Beast had loved me.

He was my rock, my shelter. My savior. Until he wasn't.

"Bring her inside," he commanded, and I realized I'd been hearing his voice in my dreams for the last decade, not even recognizing it. *Jesus*... I was going to need serious therapy if I survived this reunion. Which wasn't likely.

I shuffled forward, prodded by soldiers with guns, until I got close enough to the compound full of bikers to no longer be the U.S. Military's problem. I crossed the last few feet to the open gate, all on my own. It was almost like it was my choice; by crossing that distance to them under my own volition, I was choosing whatever fate had in store for me. I was *choosing* to go to him, something I swore I would never do.

Still, I couldn't look away from Beast, nor him from me.

I crossed between the stanchions of the gate, my view of the front of the old firehouse unimpeded, and twenty years evaporated into smoke. I was a child again, back in the only playground I'd known: a treacherous space full of jagged metal, with dangerous men and needy women all looking for a good time inside a bottle, a pipe, or each other. As I moved out of Beast's direct sight-line and the invisible tether between us broke, I recognized a few others in the handful of men surrounding me; more gray in their beards and lines in their faces, but their colors hadn't changed.

"Janie," Hammerhead gaped, studying me with wide eyes and lax mouth. "I can't fucking believe it. You look— Jesus, you haven't changed at all since you were a teenager."

"Not true, Hammer, I'm a quarter inch taller and two cup sizes larger," I snarked, bumping him with my shoulder as I shambled past with my ankle chains dragging. Astounding that my dad's VP was still alive and kicking after all this time. I might've said more, but there was that voice again.

"I said get her inside," Beast grated out in his deep, raspy growl; his RBV or *resting badass voice*. He once tried to claim his voice was how he got his road name, but I didn't buy that shit even as a kid: I have eyes, and club girls gossip.

Two men I didn't know stepped up on me, grasping my arms and half-carrying, half-dragging me towards the entrance at a fast clip. "Make that arrogant twat give you the key!" I shouted over my shoulder. "And McNamara? Go fuck yourself!"

He and Beast exchanged words, but I was too far away for it to be intelligible, and too close to the loud music and voices inside the club. Of course there'd be a party raging, it had to be after ten by this point, and not even a world-ending pandemic impeded their alcohol-fueled fuck-fest.

We reached the doors and all my careful compartmentalizing of my situation collapsed like a popped balloon. It was all too much, and nothing I'd ever considered let alone prepared for. Being back here, seeing *him*. Hell, seeing any of them, or the room beyond that door... if just

being outside the building triggered uncomfortable memories, the club room would push me right over the edge.

I couldn't do it. I squeezed my eyes shut and tilted my head down, letting my hair drape over my face. *Do not cry*, I repeated over and over in my head, a sad little mantra against the ghosts of my past. Faster and louder, I chanted that command in my brain, using it to drown out the voices surrounding me, all the questions and all the judgments.

I gave no fucks about who was there to witness my homecoming, who from my past still lingered despite Nature's best efforts, and might spread the word: *Janie Skala had come home*.

The club's little princess.

The abandoned orphan, thrown into the deep water with a bucket of chum and an invitation to any interested sharks to come take a nibble.

The one who got away.

They dragged me up the stairs, then finally — finally! — my walk of shame ground to a halt inside a room that smelled - just - like - him.

I couldn't breathe.

The worn tile of the floor was as familiar to me as my own skin. It was my old room.

My knees locked, determined to keep me upright as voices babbled around me — my jailers argued with a shrieking harpy who would not leave, but she also refused to come into the room and close the door.

I needed the noise to stop.

I needed a minute to catch my breath.

I got none of that.

“Out! Everyone!” Beast barreled into the room, his authority absolute. The door slammed, and I was alone in silence.

No, not alone.

The scrape of a boot against the tile, the whispered swish of fabric. And then he was there, looming over me. I kept my head down, my eyes closed, my mind blank. Whatever he did, I'd handle it. It could only last for so long, then it would end, one way or another.

I'd been waiting for this moment since he'd left my house that morning, left me staring at that closed door at the end of the hallway. Dying wasn't on my wishlist, but I always knew it would eventually come to this.

He dropped to his knees, dragging me against him with those massive arms wrapped around my body. Burying his face in my belly, he gasped out *Janie*, over and over, choking on the emotion that was drowning us both. He'd thought I'd died years ago. There was no way I could've survived, no way I was here, standing in front of him—

He cradled my body against his muscled frame, and I'd never felt so fragile.

“You left me, Janie. I waited outside for you the morning you turned eighteen. From seven a.m. until dark I waited, only to find out you were already gone. You left me and you disappeared, and I looked *everywhere* for you. I tore the state apart looking for any trace of you, but you were just *gone*.” He was struggling for air, strangling on his emotions, but it was the same deep, scratchy voice that has haunted me for a lifetime. The voice and the man that all others were compared to.

I should've stayed silent, retreated into my head and kept my walls intact, but I didn't. I was still scrambling to accept I was even here, let alone be able to distance myself from getting answers to questions I've never dared ask. Questions that haunted me just as much as this man did, a rabid poltergeist in my brain tearing apart any sense of security I might have as soon as I found it. I needed to know, even if it broke my heart to hear it.

“And if I'd been there? Were you going to kill me, Beast? Or just lock me up in a new cage?”

He reeled back, sitting on his heels, letting his arms drop and I felt the loss — I didn't want to, but I did. He gazed up at me, his eyes hollow and red around the edges, his face bearing the weight of more than a decade of regrets. "No. NO! Never. I was angry with you, so fucking angry— you were so goddamn stubborn about *everything*— but I could never— I never wanted to hurt you, kid. I *protected* you and I took care of you all those years. I fucked up — but I wanted you with me." His hand crept up to touch my cheek, fingertips feathering over my skin, sending shivers down my spine. "I can't believe you're here. I can't believe you came back to me."

I could've argued with him, made him admit what a fucking hypocrite he was — he *fucked up?! Is that really what he called it?*

My chest was tight, but being here again, with him... I stood behind a sheet of glass, a wall of ice, and watched my hand reach up to brush the hair back from his face. That thick black hair that I'd adored, once upon a time. He shut his eyes, turning to rest his cheek in my palm, his beard tickling my skin.

I couldn't look at his face without reliving everything, all the love, and the anger, and the fear.

The chains still binding my wrists clanked together, reminding me.

He opened his eyes, reaching for me, and I didn't fight him even though I wanted to, even though I knew it was a terrible idea. The things that had happened— I couldn't ever forgive him for what he did. This man had been my best friend, my savior, my greatest love, and my darkest nightmare. This man had saved me, and he had destroyed me.

The shackles fell away. His hands and his lips trailed down my body, my clothes disappearing as he went. Being here with him... I couldn't say yes, but I didn't say no. I watched from a distance, through that wall separating me from my body as it gave in to him, wrapped around him. Clung to him.

That night, he made love, and I got fucked.



In the morning, I met his wife. And his kids.

Eleven days later, a couple of U.S. Postal Carriers drove me away from him in the back of their armored truck, saving my life, if not my sanity.

# PART 1

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# JANIE

*Hell is a dark forest where your dad opens his ribcage  
and invites you to dance.*

BRENNAN LEE MULLIGAN

# CHAPTER ONE

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I WAS THIRTEEN.

Propped up against the wall in the hallway outside my bedroom, I couldn't stand on my own. The sun was barely up; dim, patchy illumination seeped around the edges of the thick drapes that shuttered every window.

He was a shadowy mass looming over me, something from a nightmare. I was living a nightmare.

He wouldn't look at me. He stared at the door at the end of the hall, or the ground, or towards the living room and the exit away from here. Away from me.

I needed him to see me. I needed to know everything was okay between us, that nothing had changed. Not really. I mean, *everything* had changed, but I needed *us* to be the same.

We couldn't ever be the same.

He tilted his head back, locking his fingers behind his neck. He studied the ceiling, and my stomach churned.

He wouldn't fucking look at me.

"After I leave, call the cops."

I barely heard him. I stared up at his chin, his jaw, his face turned away from me, trying through sheer force of will to tilt his head down, to bring his eyes back to me. He kept his gaze locked on the ceiling.

"Tell them you woke up to get ready for school, and saw the blood."

My legs shook; I whimpered like a trapped animal, pathetic and scared. He flinched, but kept his head back, the muscles in his arms straining.

“Tell them you don’t remember anything.”

I had to swallow to keep from throwing up. *Look at me. Just fucking look at me.*

“Don’t try to *explain* anything. You woke up, saw the blood, and you can’t remember anything since you came home from school.”

I tried to say his name, make him acknowledge me, but I couldn’t get the sounds out.

He huffed out a breath, irritated, like he had other places he wanted to be. His blank expression was familiar, one he wore around other people, but never because of me.

“Do what I say and everything will be okay.”

My voice cracked and I coughed, a dry patch spreading up my throat. He waited, restless and aggravated, as I got myself together. His eyes slid to the side and back like he was contemplating walking out, not waiting for what I had to say.

Finally, I choked out, “What’s going to happen to me?”

His shoulders jerked in a shrug before he could stop himself. He tried to cover it up by unclasping his hands and lowering his arms, but his movements were twitchy and awkward.

“Just do what I said.”

“Don’t leave— please—” I reached for him, but my arm fell to my side as he moved down the hall with determined steps.

“I can’t be here,” he tossed over his shoulder as he disappeared into the living room, heading towards the door. “You’ll be fine. Do what I said and handle it.”

I made a high, keening sound, the trapped animal now wounded beyond repair as a sudden, agonizing pain ripped through me then disappeared, leaving behind a hollow space. I

sank to the ground, my whole body curled inward as my stomach cramped up, and pain radiated from my center. I didn't cry tears, there wasn't anything in me to fuel them. Like dead plants, dead grass, I was dry and brittle and a touch would reduce me to dust; my sobs came out harsh and withered, a mockery of grief.

The door slammed shut.

I don't know how long it took for me to get to my feet and hobble back into my bedroom, looking for my phone. I collapsed to my knees on the floor, unwilling to touch the bed.

"911, what's your emergency?" The dispatcher's voice wasn't friendly. She sounded impatient, and I hesitated. "Is there someone there?"

"My parents..." I choked, coughing again, my head throbbing from the force of it.

"What's your street address, hon?" The woman's voice warmed, now concerned.

I managed to get my address out, and she told me to stay where I was, the police and an ambulance had been dispatched. They'd arrive soon. She wanted to keep me on the line, but I hung up.

I hit the speed dial entry at the top of my very short list, calling Beast. It rang and rang, until voicemail eventually picked up. I disconnected and tried again.

I tried six more times before the police arrived, and he never answered.

Then the real nightmare began.

## CHAPTER TWO

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IN FIRST GRADE, Audrey Blankenship tripped me during gym class.

We were playing kickball outside, and I'd made a solid hit that sent the ball soaring far enough that I didn't have to stop at first base, and my teammates screamed for me to keep going. I flew towards second base, their voices shouting for *me*, when Audrey ran up from the side, stuck her foot out, and pushed me. I fell down, skidding several feet and scraping both my palms and one knee on the gravel, drawing blood. Enough to make me cry.

My gym teacher blew the whistle. He made her sit out for the rest of the game, and told me to go to the nurse. He didn't say or do anything else, offer any comfort or help.

I never forgot how it felt when I limped away from the baseball diamond, how I had to cross the soccer field and the playground closer to the school all by myself. My palms, scraped and bloody, had gravel embedded in my skin, my knee ached, and tears streaked down my cheeks as the game continued behind me.

The school nurse cleaned me up and sent me back out to finish class. I had to sit out, just like Audrey, but she was with her team and all her friends while I was off to the side. When class was over, my teacher kept me back when everyone else filed off, returning to the building. He stood over me, scowling, and said it was an accident. I needed to tell my dad it was an accident, because "Audrey's family doesn't deserve to be punished for a stupid grade school disagreement."

When I got home after school that day, my grandmother saw my bandaged palms and knee and demanded to know what happened. I told her everything. All of it. I cried again, reliving the awful feeling of being hurt and alone, with no one on my side.

She let me cry it out as she chopped vegetables for dinner, and when I was done, she repeated the rules to me: don't tell my dad anything that might upset him; behave at school and obey my teachers without complaint; don't fight or raise my voice, even on the playground. Play quietly, or not at all.

There were other rules, about homework and chores and bedtime, but those weren't nearly as important as the ones about not drawing attention to myself, not taking up too much space in the world.

It was only as an adult, thinking back to that time, that I realized that my grandmother genuinely believed that my dad and I talked when I was with him, that he cared about my life when we were apart.



I WAS NINE YEARS OLD, the first time I saw Beast.

I lived with my grandparents back then, except for when they sent me to stay with my dad. They were stern, stoic people who only spoke Polish in the house, and only English outside of it. Over the years, I heard them called cold and aloof, but you only know what you know; although their house lacked affection and warmth, I never doubted that they cared about me ferociously.

Both of them made sure I knew everything they could teach me: how to cook, how to fix things around the house, and how to take care of what's important. They made sure that my clothes were clean, I ate balanced meals, went to the doctor and dentist, and that I arrived at the school bus stop every day on time.



My grandmother was quiet around other people, outsiders, but could be scathingly critical behind closed doors. She had strong opinions and high standards, but her expectations for me were simple and fair: don't be like your mother. She barely knew the woman who'd left me with my dad when I was two months old, but that didn't stop her from loathing Lulu Marks. Her life goal was making sure that I wouldn't turn out like Lulu. At the same time, she was almost willfully blind about my dad, John "Preacher" Skala, the president of the most notorious outlaw motorcycle club in the area.

From watching and listening to him over the years, I eventually understood that my dad cared about himself, his bike, and the club, in that order. The club gossips told me that after I was born and he didn't give Lulu a property patch, she took off for parts unknown and left me behind.

I was early but not technically premature, healthy despite the rumors of my mom's drug use; I was tiny at birth, and remained at the very bottom of all the growth charts for most of my life, but that was it as far as consequences. I was also, however, an especially needy pain in the ass for my dad, which probably accelerated my transfer to my grandparents.

In my grandmother's mind, he would be a great father, given time and the opportunity to grow into the role. It didn't matter that he was already in his forties when I was born, she'd convinced herself that everything would click together eventually, and he'd be the man she thought they raised him to be. Once I started school, to force a bond that would elevate him to his potential, my grandmother insisted I spend one weekend a month at his house. She believed he would spend that time with me, hanging out at home and being a parent. He did not.

Not any of it.

For one thing, I was twelve before I stepped foot in his house. For another, he never talked to me for longer than a minute or two, and only to repeat *his* rules: stay upstairs in your room; keep the noise down; don't make a mess.

I had a lot of rules.

On those Fridays I stayed with him, I took a different bus home from school, one that let me off down the street from the former fire station, now a motorcycle club surrounded by high fences.

I avoided the public area, the four small vehicle bays on the end used as a mechanic's shop taking business from the public. I circled around the building and parking lots to the main firehouse, the red brick end. It had once housed all the offices and living quarters for the firefighters spread over two floors with lofty ceilings, with a creepy, cramped basement. In-between and making up the bulk of the tacked-on brown and gray monstrosity, was the former apparatus bay with three retractable steel doors on each side for housing the long trucks. My dad and his friends cut the wires for raising and lowering most of them, sealing the doors in place except for the ones they liked to open for big parties.

The red brick side hadn't been changed much, it was still used for housing and offices but now it was for an outlaw motorcycle club. The center section became a giant party room. They filled the space with a ton of different kinds of seating areas: a mix of tables and chairs, clusters of couches and armchairs, and even booths salvaged from a diner that went out of business. A bar that wouldn't have been out of place in a restaurant or nightclub stretched along one wall, stocked with beer and every liquor you could ask for as long as it was tequila or some kind of whiskey. There were a couple of pool tables in one corner, and a stage and sound system on the other side of the room built around the fire station pole.

When the bus dropped me off, I'd walk the block and a half to the club all by myself, crossing at intersections only when the stick figure in lights told me it was safe. I'd go to the gate in the fence outside the tall bays, where there was always a prospect or two monitoring things. One of them would let me in through the sliding gate, opening it enough for me to slip in and shutting it behind me. I'd cross a stretch of asphalt and gravel peppered with custom-built and classic Harleys to make my way to the entrance.

I'd go in, and wouldn't come out again until Sunday afternoon, when my dad drove me to my grandparents' house in time for dinner. He sometimes stayed for the meal, but more often dropped me off at the curb with my backpack, still wearing my school clothes from Friday.

The Friday in question — when I was nine years old, in the fourth grade — I walked from the bus stop to the club as usual. My dad's Harley was in the lot out front with an even bigger bike next to his, one I didn't recognize at all; there were three strange bikes altogether, but only the big one made an impression. I talked to the prospect on guard duty for a few minutes about school, and then he let me in through the heavy, steel-reinforced door.

My dad saw me come in, shooting me a pleasant, almost welcoming look, from a table in the middle of the room, and I ran over to him, excited. He gave me a distracted kiss on the forehead, something he *never* did, then seemed to forget I was standing there next to his chair. I stayed perfectly still, and he left his arm wrapped loosely around my body while he talked, just like I'd hoped.

I got to feel like he wanted me around, for however long it took to realize it was me standing there and not one of the club girls.

He continued his conversation, me frozen in place at his side and barely even breathing, concentrating on being still. I didn't even pay attention to who my dad was talking to at first, but one of them noticed me.

Once I got a look at him, the man sitting across the table from my dad, I couldn't believe I'd spent whole minutes in his presence without realizing it. To this day, I can't remember a thing about anyone else that might've been there.

He was so much younger than my dad and almost every other member of the club, but not someone you would ever call *a boy*. He was as handsome as a movie star but rough like a biker; his black hair fell past his shoulders, as windblown and shaggy as his full beard. His piercing eyes glittered like black gemstones under heavy brows, and he had deeply tanned

skin over thick slabs of muscle. He looked dangerous and a bit mean, and he wasn't a rock star or on a TV show, or even in the movies, but he could've been any of those things.

He wore his cut over a plain white t-shirt, and the name stitched above his heart and below the 1% diamond patch was "Beast."

My dad kept talking, but Beast's eyes locked on me and nothing seemed to break his concentration on whatever he was thinking. He studied me, his gaze flickering to my dad as though trying to figure something out, with the strangest expression on his face: it was like he was angry, but also—more. Curious, maybe.

A club girl flounced by, one I didn't know with massive tits about to burst through her skimpy top, and my dad finally seemed to realize I was there. He disengaged his arm from around me, gave me a small shove while telling me to go do my homework, then pulled the girl down onto his lap. He never told them my name, but that was it, he expected me to clear out and disappear.

I trudged towards the stairs with my head down, but paused on the bottom step and looked back.

My dad was teasing at the girl's cleavage with his fingertips, speaking in a low voice that got her blushing starry-eyed at him as she pushed her boobs up towards pursed lips, but Beast? Beast was watching me.

And that night, I wanted to watch him.



THE WEEKENDS I visited my dad, I was on my own. If he and his VP, Hammerhead, weren't around during the day, I could get away with spending time downstairs in the bar or the kitchen. I liked to sit in one of the booths — the huge, horseshoe-shaped one — and pretend to read while I watched everyone go about their lives. At night, though, I was supposed to stay in the little room set aside for me no matter

what, even if he forgot to feed me. So he wouldn't have to think about it later, he started leaving boxes of granola bars and packs of crackers from the warehouse club in my room between visits, and I had paper cups to drink tap water from the bathroom sink.

My dad wasn't abusive. He was rough, violent, and loud; he ruled the club with an iron fist, ruthless with his enemies, but didn't hit me or call me names. He didn't do anything, really, he just... wasn't interested. I was an obligation, something he worked around one weekend a month and sometimes on holidays, but I wasn't something he'd interrupt his own interests or pursuits for: drinking, smoking weed, snorting cocaine, getting into fights, and fucking club pussy.

I witnessed him doing these things numerous times, before I was even out of elementary school, because I was bored, and curious, and I was a tiny kid. If I was very careful, and very quiet, I could lie on the tile floor of the landing outside my room, in the shadow of the banister where the stairs and the catwalk met, and see the club room from there. It was risky, though, because anyone going to the second floor would catch me immediately, but that was what I did after I ran upstairs: I sat in a kind of desperate, mortified vigil, watching *him*.

Beast talked with all the men. He drank beer from brown bottles with colorful labels. He played a few games of pool, and alternated between winning and losing in a way that seemed on purpose. And he got a blowjob from one of the club girls, sitting on a shabby couch off to the side, with his head tilted back and his hands knotted in her hair.

A few times, I thought Beast looked right at me during the sloppy face-fucking he did to that girl, but that was unlikely. I had no reason to think that he remembered my existence after I left the room.

Seeing him with her, I felt a mix of breathless curiosity and seething jealousy. I could barely look at him, but couldn't look away either. I didn't know why I reacted the way I did; I'd seen countless other acts of public debauchery over the years — ones that even included my dad — but Beast... he was different.

Eventually, I crept off to bed, locking my door behind me.



SATURDAY, from early morning, I lurked between the kitchen and my booth in the bar, switching it up so it wouldn't be obvious. I didn't see Beast or my dad all day, and I was desperate to know if he was still around or whether he'd left; I heard gossip, but nothing concrete. I stayed downstairs as long as I could, reading the same page over and over again as I waited, before finally going back upstairs.

Without my dad around, I didn't want to have my door open or be outside my room once the drinking started, so I sat near the window and hope I could tell when Beast returned. The parking lot wasn't visible, but I could still hear the distinctive rumble of engines; sometime after ten, his bike rolled up. Rather than get caught spying on the stairs, I went into the duct.

There was a two-story, narrow strip of rooms wedged in between the apparatus storage and the smaller bays. The club kept the gym on the second floor, but sealed off the bottom floor from the main bay, making it accessible only through an outside door with a keypad. Those rooms had been storage for equipment and hazardous materials, but were now the garage's office, storage, and public waiting room.

A catwalk stretched across the cavernous club room, a bridge between the gym and the second-floor bedrooms. Before the regulations changed for storing hazardous materials, the ventilation shaft running along the underside of that walkway ineffectively piped heat and AC from the firehouse. After they installed a separate HVAC system for that area, they closed off the ducts under the catwalk. The brothers debated tearing it out when the club took over, but either got lazy or decided they liked the industrial look, and left the existing ductwork intact.

In the corner of my room near the door was a brass scrollwork grate leftover from the fire station days; once I

lifted the grate, the hole was just big enough to fit a small human such as myself. It opened up into the surprisingly spacious ventilation shaft under the walkway that bisected the ceiling. If I kept my hands and knees angled out from my body, I could shuffle my way along in a very creepy kind of crab-walk. The duct itself was dusty, littered with cobwebs, ancient mouse droppings, and the hollow carapaces of dead insects, but it was worth the risk of spiders in my hair or stumbling upon a random rat king. When it wasn't safe to sit out on the landing, and I'd get lonely at night, the vents let me watch the bikers and girls party.

I found him at the second vent opening. He looked just as otherworldly-beautiful as he had the night before, like a movie star playing at being a biker, with those cold eyes sweeping around to take in everything and everyone in the room. Beast accepted a beer from Hammer, talked to a few people, then excused himself to go upstairs. I watched him until he was halfway up the stairs and out of sight, and wished I'd been patient. I could've kept the door cracked enough to notice him when he passed by, maybe even follow him then, if I was feeling brave. He hadn't been drinking yet, and if no one else had been nearby, I might've been able to talk to him. Instead, I was stuck out here in the duct, waiting to see if he came back.

He did, but not before I was half asleep and bored with the normal shenanigans that used to fascinate me so much. He pounded down the stairs in clean clothes, his hair still wet from a shower, with a scowl on his face. He grabbed a bottle of Jack from the bar and found a seat in a shadowy spot not too far from where I camped out above the second vent, sitting with his back against the wall. He glared out at the room as he tossed back mouthfuls of whiskey, and most people stayed away, respecting a man's need to sometimes drink alone. Eventually, one of the club girls either got brave enough or drunk enough to approach, and he let her ride his dick until he came, bottle in hand, with his head tilted back and eyes closed.

That night, I left right after he finished with her, with my belly churning and eyes stinging. I didn't know what I felt except it was all wrong for him to be with *her*, even though he

didn't kiss her or hold her hand like I'd daydreamed about all day.

I'd had these fantasies of him coming back without my dad and finding me alone, telling me he was there to rescue me like some Disney prince on a chromed-out steed. We'd leave all this behind to go someplace hot and sunny, with a beach and a theme park. Beast would take care of me, and pay attention only to me, ignoring the other girls even though I was just a kid. He'd tell me that he'd wait for me to grow up and then be my boyfriend, but until then, we'd live in a little house by the ocean with a porch swing and a dog. I'd go to school, and he'd find a job, and we'd eat chicken nuggets and tater tots for dinner three nights a week, and watch movies together every night.

It was a good fantasy, *really* good, and having it fall apart by watching some red-haired stripper gyrate on his lap was the worst kind of disappointment.

I crawled back to my room, barely caring if I made noise or not, and burrowed under my blanket with hot, bitter tears burning tracks on my cheeks. I didn't see him on Sunday, not before my dad returned me to my grandparents' house; he'd be long gone before the next weekend I visited the club. I'd never see him again.

I was nothing, and no one, and he'd go on with his life without me. Without even a memory of me.

But I was wrong.

He was there the next month, and the one after. Beast lived there now, he wasn't a nomad any longer. And I became obsessed.

Most nights, regardless of who he fucked in the club room — always with his head back and eyes closed — I lulled myself to sleep with dreams of our little white and blue house by the sea.



## CHAPTER THREE

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WHEN I FIRST MET BEAST, I still lived with my grandparents. I only stayed at the club one weekend a month. Until he showed up and decided to stay, I dreaded those weekends and wanted to stay home.

My grandparents had a lot of rules and expected me to obey them. They didn't play with me or read to me at bedtime, and they weren't particularly affectionate. They didn't hang on every word that came out of my precious mouth. What they did was pay attention.

Every afternoon, when I got home from school, my grandmother asked me how my day was as she fussed with something in the kitchen, and I sat at the table and ate a snack. She was constantly in motion, always cooking or cleaning, and never seemed to pin her focus on me, but she remembered day-to-day who I talked about and what I said. She'd ask me for updates on inconsequential things I'd mentioned the week before, wanted to know how problems resolved over time, and kept track of every name I ever spoke.

My grandfather made sure that I was right there with him when he had a new project around the house. He showed me the proper way to use tools, and how to fix or make whatever we needed. On those rare occasions when he didn't have something necessary, and couldn't rig a replacement for it, he'd take me to the hardware store with him. The hardware store was one of my favorite places on earth, because after we'd find the thing we were missing, I'd get to pick an aisle to

explore: we'd go through everything in it, with him explaining what things were and how to use them.

A constant in my life, my grandparents were a source of stability and calm; without them, it would've been hit or miss whether I'd make it into school, whether I had clean clothes, and whether I ate anything real since my last hot lunch in the cafeteria.

I didn't realize how significant any of this was until they were gone.

When I was ten, while I was at school and my grandfather was out working in the garage, my grandmother fell off a step-stool and hit her head. I found her when I got home, unconscious and bleeding, and the hospital said the fall caused a massive stroke. She died a few days later. My grandfather couldn't take me on alone, and I only saw him a few times after her funeral. He died too, within a few months. I think from a broken heart.

But well before I lost my home and family in a single afternoon, while I was still just visiting the club on that one weekend a month, my time there stopped being something I dreaded. It became something I *craved*, all because of Beast.

It happened over time and started with small things. I saw him around whenever I wasn't in my room, and he made a point of talking to me in his deep, scratchy voice. "Hi, Janie," he'd say, looking me right in the eye, and I'd just die a little, right there, I'd crumple up and try to hide my face, and I didn't understand why I had to be so shy. I'd never been shy before, but Beast just needed to look at me for my cheeks to ignite to a million degrees, and I'd become tongue-tied and nervous.

It began with him saying hi to me whenever our paths crossed, then it seemed like he was always there in the clubhouse when I arrived on a Friday afternoon. He was the first person I'd see when I came through the entrance. He checked on me over the weekend, knocking on my door and asking through it if I was alright and if I needed anything — six or seven times he'd check over those couple days, and wouldn't leave until I told him everything was okay.

Then I began to see him when I got off the bus, sitting there on his big Harley on the street near my stop. He'd watch me the entire walk to the clubhouse, making sure I arrived there safe, then ride off and not come back until late. But the first thing he'd do when he arrived was check on me, ask if I had enough to eat at dinner. I'd say yes even if dinner was fruit snacks and a tiny bag of Doritos, just to hear that relief in his voice when he said "Good," like he'd been worried about me or something. He'd say "Have a good night, Janie" and clomp down the stairs in his heavy boots, and I'd go into the vent to watch him in the club room.

He drank, played pool, and eventually stick his dick in some part of a girl on that same couch tucked deep in the shadows, with his head back and eyes closed. Beast was mellower after he finished inside his girl for the night, willing to sit around and bullshit with some of the other guys; I'd stay to listen to the sound and cadence of his voice, whether or not I could understand what they said. And those few times when he laughed? It was the best sound I'd ever heard.

That was Friday.

Saturdays, I'd see him around, but only from a distance. He never came near me when I was out of my room, and never talked to me except to say hi, but I knew he watched me. I knew because when he'd check in later, he'd make comments. "You need to eat more vegetables, Janie. Ketchup doesn't count." and "If you don't have enough light, don't read. You'll ruin your eyes if you do." He paid attention to a million other little details that might escape anyone else, anyone that wasn't paying attention. Things I sometimes wished my dad noticed, but it was enough that Beast did. More than enough.

Saturday nights were a repeat of Friday, and I never saw him on Sundays before I left. And this was how things were for a long time.

Everything changed the weekend the club had a ride-out, when my dad forgot about me.



BEAST WASN'T new to the club, he came in as a nomad from the west coast, but just to be a dick, my dad put him through a prospect period when he wanted to join our chapter. His probation included giving him guard duty during the first big ride-out in the months since he'd joined. I didn't know about it, no one told me anything, and I showed up on Friday afternoon at the same time as normal. I was just a little hurt not to see Beast waiting near my bus stop to watch over me on the walk. The prospect at the gate was super confused to see me, and when I walked into the empty clubhouse to find Beast and another prospect already half-drunk and being "entertained" by a club girl, I was super confused too.

Beast sat on one of the couches, a different one than normal that was more towards the center of the room, but he still had his head tilted back and eyes closed. He had one hand resting on the arm of the couch with a bottle of whiskey in it, his other gripped the hair of the girl kneeling between his legs.

The prospect — I think his name was Ansel? — was asleep in an armchair nearby, waiting his turn with a beer in hand and a half dozen empty bottles on the table beside him. The music, some classic rock song they all loved, was so loud that none of them heard the door or me.

I stood there, about ten or fifteen feet away, and watched.

The girl's head bobbed up and down over Beast's lap; he murmured a few words of encouragement to her with a half-smile, using his fist in her hair to guide her deeper. Maybe she protested, or a tooth slipped or something, because all of a sudden his head shot up with his eyes open, and he yanked her head back. Not completely off him, just an inch or so back, and rougher than how he was with them.

He saw me then and froze. After a time, after I didn't move or speak, he glanced around and realized there wasn't anyone else here, at least not anyone sober or awake. He looked pointedly up at my room and gestured with his chin; not angry

or anything, just giving me an order. I ran for the stairs as he pushed her head back down, the music covering the sound of my footsteps.

She went back to work. I hid on the landing outside my door. He let his head fall back against the couch and closed his eyes.

I had this fluttery, nervous feeling inside. I couldn't look away.

It wasn't long before his mouth fell open, the muscles of his neck straining. A sound escaped his throat, thick and guttural, and his face flushed dark red as he fisted her hair tighter and held her still.

I hid in my room until he came to me an hour later, knocking lightly like he did when he checked on me. This time I didn't just speak through it, I opened my door. He had a pizza box in one hand, and a drink holder with two cups in the other. I moved back to let him in, closing it behind him.

By then, I'd figured out that the entire club had gone on a ride-out, all except Beast, a few prospects, and at least one girl.

Beast looked around in confusion, then disgust, standing there with the food in hand like he didn't know what to do with it. There really wasn't anywhere to put it. "This is— this is where you live all weekend long, baby girl?" he asked, voice deeper than normal. A muscle in his jaw twitched. "There ain't any sheets on that bed, just a blanket."

I looked around, trying to see what he did. I had a twin mattress on the floor opposite a milk crate with an ancient TV on top, the kind with dials, next to a couple of cardboard boxes of activities and toys meant for kids littler than me. There was a bathroom and a narrow closet; my tote bag with clothes to wear over the weekend was on the closet floor, and the big boxes of snacks from the warehouse club were on the high shelf to keep from attracting vermin. To reach them, I had an old barstool tucked inside the closet to climb up.

I shrugged at him, not knowing what he wanted me to say.

“It’s dingy as fuck in here.” He flicked a foot against the faded tile floor with a sound of disgust, eyeing the pillowcase curtain and the broken bathroom door hanging off the hinges. I could fix it if I could get the tools and a stepladder, thanks to Grampa. His jaw clenched as his face flushed. “Grab your shit, you’re going to stay at your house this weekend.”

“My grandparent’s house?” I asked, confused. “They’re out of town—”

“No, your fucking dad’s house,” he snarled, but I knew he wasn’t mad at me. He swore violently, tipping his head down as his shoulders slumped. “I’m too impaired to drive, and I can’t stay there, gotta be here all weekend. *Fuck!*”

I looked around at the room, feeling like crying without knowing why, except everything sucked. “I haven’t been there since I was really little. I don’t have a room there,” I mumbled, my voice catching in my throat. “At least I don’t think so. This is where I stay when I’m with my dad.”

He looked at me like he wanted to kill someone. “This shit ain’t right.”

I cringed, feeling like I did when Audrey Blankenship tripped me and no one cared, no one even made her say sorry. But— but this felt like he would’ve made them, if he’d been there, she would’ve said sorry. “My room at my grandparents’ house is nice,” I finally said in a near whisper. “It’s my dad’s old room, still has a lot of his stuff in it. It’s nice.”

He stared at me, took a couple deep breaths, then set the pizza box and drinks down on the floor. “None of this shit is right,” he muttered, shaking his head. He shoved his hands in his pockets and studied me with narrowed eyes, huffing out a breath. He squeezed them shut, pinching the bridge of his nose before opening his eyes and sighing. “You’re a goddamn ray of fucking sunshine in this club, the only truly good thing in this whole goddamn town, and you’re living off scraps in a shit-hole.” He shook his head, sighing again. “Let’s eat some pizza.”

We sat on the bed, leaning back against the wall, with the pizza box between us and the TV playing a movie that wasn’t

particularly interesting. He cursed every time there was a commercial break. “I’m fuckin’ offended all you got is local channels, princess.”

I sipped my coke and ate a slice for every three of his, and when the whole pizza was gone, he turned off the TV and sat back, staring at me in silence. I waited, shifting in my seat and wondering if I had pizza sauce on my chin, until he finally spoke.

“Need to apologize to you, baby girl,” he said, his scratchy voice even more gruff, and I blushed, thinking it was about what I saw earlier, but it wasn’t. “This whole time, I thought you had a princess room behind that door, but I shoulda known. I shoulda known when no one bothered to walk you here from the bus, or make you breakfast in the morning, or the fact that you’re here at all. Thought you were bein’ treated like the club princess you are, that maybe out there was one thing, but in here was different. This room’s a shit-hole — fuck, I got a room nicer than this just to fuck in, and you don’t hardly ever leave it from Friday night to Sunday afternoon and none of this is right.” I turned in my seat and curled my legs under me, facing him, but he didn’t look away from the little TV screen. He continued talking, his voice lower and less angry; resigned. “I guess I knew no one’s taking care of you, but it didn’t click in my head until you opened that door. So starting right now, I’m gonna be the one taking care of you when you’re here. Your daddy don’t like that, he can man the fuck up and do his fucking job.”

I stared at him as he watched the TV, thinking I liked the idea of him taking care of me, whatever that meant. It made me think of chicken nuggets and movie nights, and blue and white houses by the sea.

“That little button lock on the handle the only lock?” he asked suddenly, and I winced at how mad he was again. I looked over at it and nodded.

He cursed, long and loud, stood up and started pulling my clothes out of the closet and stacking them inside the boxes of toys, then took a closer look at what was in the boxes and cursed again. “This shit is for babies,” he snapped, shoving the

boxes back out of the way. “What the fuck is wrong with him?”

Eventually, he'd piled everything I had that was worth keeping in a couple of cardboard boxes, a tote bag, and my backpack. He made me collect my toothbrush, paste, and shampoo from the bathroom, growled something else out when he saw the dollar store shampoo that burned my eyes every time I used it, and picked up a box. “Follow me.”

We walked through the maze of hallways to the room I knew was his; he unlocked the deadbolt with a key off the same chain as his wallet, holding the door open and gesturing for me to go inside. I noticed three things immediately: he had the biggest bed I'd ever seen; the room was spotless; and it smelled like him, all spicy, smokey, and warm. “Put your shit in the bathroom,” he said, nodding at one of the doors with a weak smile, as he set down the box along the wall under the window. He went back for the rest of my stuff, piling it up alongside the first.

The bathroom was spotless too and smelled like lemons.

After he got me settled, he eyed me and then the bed, disappearing back down the hall and bringing back the milk crate my TV had been on. He set it on the ground against the foot so I could climb up on my own. “You're staying in here for now.” He handed me the remote control for his much larger TV with a DVD player attached. “The sheets haven't been used for anything but sleeping, so they're clean enough. I gotta come in to shower and change, but otherwise I'll be sleeping elsewhere. I'll bring you food. You keep the door locked at all times, I don't want anyone knowing you're up here, I don't trust any of them. Might be able to take you with me to the store tomorrow if I can get a cage— what's your favorite color, darlin'?” The question was so out of nowhere that it took me a bit to realize what he was asking, and I stuttered out the first thing that came to mind: purple. He nodded, the corner of his mouth curling up, and reached for me. He cupped my face in his big, rough hand, thumb sliding back and forth over my cheek. “Keep the door locked at all times,” he



reminded me, looking around and then at the bed with a weird expression on his face. “Don’t stay up all night.”

He left, and I was alone in his room, wondering what the fuck had just happened.

He couldn’t get access to a vehicle on Saturday, so I spent the whole weekend in his room. He showered and dressed in the bathroom every morning, brought me food a bunch of times, and would sit next to me on the end of the bed to eat while we watched TV. Saturday evening, along with dinner, he delivered a giant bag of snacks, candy, and drinks from the convenience store down the street. In the bag was the DVD of a Disney movie I hadn’t seen, still wrapped in cellophane, for me to watch that night. Otherwise, he left me alone, no different from any other weekend at the club.

On Sunday, earlier than usual, he helped me gather my things before sneaking me down the back stairway to the far end of the building. His Harley was parked on the street. He put my things in his saddlebags and strapped a helmet on my head that was way too big. Beast drove me on the back of his bike to my grandparents’ house, and if I thought it weird that he didn’t need to ask for directions or the address or anything, I didn’t say it out loud.

He didn’t leave right away after dropping me off, he took Grampa aside to have a quiet talk with him, and as the roar of Beast’s Harley faded into the distance, Grampa came into the house looking frustrated and furious, but didn’t say a word in front of me.



EXCEPT FOR THOSE nights when I turned off my light and let myself remember sleeping in Beast’s bedroom, in his bed, and how safe and protected and cared for I felt that whole weekend, I didn’t think about the rest of it at all. My dad forgetting all about me and leaving me to fend for myself at a (mostly) empty motorcycle clubhouse really wasn’t much more than a hiccup in my routine. So when a month passed

and my next weekend with the club came up, I didn't have any expectations at all for anything to have changed.

Friday afternoon, when the bus dropped me off, Beast was there waiting right at the stop.

He tucked my backpack and tote in his saddlebags, strapped a shiny purple helmet — exactly my size — on my head, and took me for a ride to get an ice cream cone out by the mall. I told him all about my day, not shy at all, while he ate a dish of butter pecan and I dripped a waffle cone full of peanut butter cup all over myself, then I made him tell me about his day too. When he finished grunting out a couple basic facts, he handed me a chain to wear around my neck with two keys on it: one was for his room if I ever needed it, and one was for the new lock on my door, and he had the only other copy. I nodded and kept eating like any of that made sense to me.

After I was done, he let me go on my own to the bathroom to get cleaned up, then drove me back to the clubhouse like this was all normal, like this was what we did once a month on Fridays, after school. After locking my helmet inside the storage space under his seat, he walked me into the club carrying my tote bag all the way to the stairs. “Go on up,” he said, voice soft and a small, secret smile on his lips. “I’ll bring you dinner in a couple hours.”

Nobody looked at us. My dad was playing pool with some of the guys. He never even glanced over.

I climbed up the stairs, dragging my tote behind me, and found a new deadbolt on my door. I got out my key and unlocked the door, and stepped into a goddamn princess room.

Over the course of the month, Beast had painted the walls a light lavender with white trim. He bought me a set of bunk beds where the bottom bunk was a full-size bed and the top was twin; it had a pale green and white striped tent hanging from the ceiling to drape over it, turning the bed into a two-story blanket fort. Both had heaps of white, pastel green, and lavender pillows, and both of them had thick white comforters printed with big purple daisies. A good-sized flatscreen TV,

mounted to the wall at the foot of the bottom bunk, turned it into a little TV cave.

A couple of bookcases formed a nook. The narrower one had two shelves with books, but the rest were empty. Board games, colorful bins, and fabric covered boxes packed the deeper shelves so full that things were smooshed, the storage containers filled with crafting supplies and kits. On the floor between them was a thick, fluffy, dark purple rug and two giant lime green and white striped beanbag chairs, with a paper lantern light hanging above.

Other shelves near the end of the bed had a bunch of electronics — I recognized a cable box, speakers, and a gaming console — and a collection of DVDs and games. On the opposite wall, I had a new table with adult-size chairs, a dresser with a mirror attached to it, and a desk filled with art supplies.

In the corner by the door, half covering the vent, was a life-size unicorn stuffie with a sparkly purple mane and tail. She was amazing and beautiful, and I was already calling her Princess Glitter-Moon Stardust in my head.

He'd replaced the bathroom door with a new, sturdier one that wasn't falling off its hinges, and the closet had a curtain hanging over it that matched the comforters on the beds. Most of the floor was covered in a thick, green and white patterned rug that was almost as big as the room (but not as fluffy as the one in the reading nook). My clothes filled the closet and dresser, and brand new ones with the tags still on too; the bathroom had all new rugs, towels, and a shower curtain that all matched. The tiles and paint had been white to begin with, but now there weren't any stains and nothing broken beyond use or falling apart. Everything shined like new, even with cracked tiles and ancient fixtures.

And there was girly shit everywhere: all new soaps and shampoo that smelled like strawberries, sparkly stuff to wear in my hair, a row of bottles of glittery nail polish on the dresser, and stacks of the softest stuffed animals on both beds.

I dropped my bags at the door and looked around, bursting into tears. There hadn't ever been a more beautiful room ever, even on TV, and I felt like a real fucking princess. Legit.

“Hey, kid— what the fuck?” his familiar scratchy-rasp of a voice sounded behind me, and I spun around and threw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his waist and muffling my wails in his shirt. “Why the fuck are you crying?” He sounded so confused, and I squeezed him even tighter until he choked out a gasp and wheezed, “You been lifting weights, squirt?”

I relaxed my mega-octopus tentacles a bit, letting him get air into his lungs as I got myself under control. As soon as he caught his breath, he grabbed hold of my upper arms and lifted, carrying me at arm's length from his body with my feet dangling down, across the room to the bottom bunk. He set me down, taking a knee on the ground in front of me.

“So I take it you like it?” He wiped the tears off my cheeks with gentle fingers, studying my face with a little half-smile almost completely hidden by his beard.

“It's so— so pretty,” I gushed, crying again, jabbing my finger in the unicorn's direction and babbling nonsense about it being big enough to ride while he stared off to the side.

“Told you I was gonna take care of you now,” he said, brushing my hair back from my face. “Princess room for a club princess, like it shoulda been all along.”

I gazed at him adoringly, knowing I wouldn't ever be nervous or scared around him again. “You're gonna visit me, right? Watch movies or play games with me?”

He smiled bigger, tugging on the ends of my hair. “Yeah, kid. We'll hang.”

I spent that weekend doing all the things, not leaving my princess room even when I could've, and it was the best weekend I'd ever had. Even better than the one sleeping in Beast's room. I saw him more, too, because he came to visit me a million times just to see what I was up to. He said we'd go to the bookstore the next time I was visiting, to fill up the empty shelves with whatever I wanted to get.

From then on, whenever I was at the club, Beast ate every meal with me, sitting at my table if I cleaned it off, or on the beanbags or the bed if there were puzzles or craft projects in progress. Sometimes, if there was a big party going on downstairs and he thought no one would notice he was gone, he'd spend the night in my room. We'd watch movies together on the TV, lying on piles of pillows and stuffies on the big bed with the sides of the tent unfurled all the way to the ground.

No matter how late I fell asleep, I'd always wake up on the top bunk, filled with contentment as I listened to the sound of his soft, slow breathing as he slept on below me.



SOMETHING CHANGED with my dad after the weekend of the ride-out. I no longer existed to him after he forgot about me in a club full of drunk or stoned strangers, and after Beast took it upon himself to become my caretaker. Since my dad hadn't figured much in my life until that point, and now had even less involvement, I didn't think twice that Beast now drove me to my grandparents' house on Sunday afternoons and stayed for dinner when Grandma insisted.

Beast was an outlaw biker of unknown origin, somewhere in his mid- to late twenties, with a violent temper, a reputation for brutality, and a soft spot for a lonely ten-year-old girl. For whatever reason, no one expressed any concern that all parenting duties transferred to this strange man almost two decades younger than my dad, by sheer force of his will alone. But he wasn't my parent or any relation. He didn't look at me like any parent looked at their kid, and I sure as fuck didn't get the same heavy, tingly feeling around my dad like I did him.

He was my best friend, my protector, the object of my deepest and most excruciating crush, and I'm not sure how any single person believed his intentions were pure. Or maybe it just wasn't talked about.

But even when they were innocent, my intentions weren't pure either.

Beast was *mine*.

One weekend a month, for years, I was alone in a dangerous place and experienced things most civilians only believed happened in movies. Men who'd brought me back a Happy Meal after a run, who quizzed me on my times tables on a Saturday afternoon, or hung pictures I drew up on the club room walls, were different when they didn't think I was around. I saw them fuck, and fight, and become strangers because of drugs or liquor. At seven years old, I saw my first train run on a new girl; at eight, I witnessed the club make an example of a traitor in front of everyone, with a blow-torch and tools my grandfather had taught me to use, on the same kind of tarp we used to rake up leaves. I didn't know if he survived. I didn't know what they'd do to me if they knew everything I saw, or all the secrets I heard from the vents above them.

It was hard for me not to see them all as two different people, who they were face-to-face and who they were from above. Only my dad was always the same in his apathy and loathing until Beast.

Night or day, looking up into his handsome face or down at the top of his head, Beast was the same man to me. My best friend. My protector. *Mine*.

Whether drinking, smoking pot, or letting one of the club girls suck him off or ride his dick, he always ended up on the couch below the second ceiling grate. He'd rest his head against the back of the couch with his eyes half-shut, a contented smile on his face, and I knew as long as I had Beast nearby, I was safe.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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I LOST both my grandparents only a few months before my eleventh birthday, and Beast had gotten me through the almost paralyzing grief.

He stood by my side as we watched strangers clear out their house and dismantle the only home I'd ever known. He rarely left me alone for the first month after my grandmother died and I permanently moved into the clubhouse — why would my dad take me to his house when club girls and prospects provided free childcare? — and then slept in my room every night for weeks after my grandfather passed too. Beast even rented a storage unit for the load of furniture and countless boxes of family heirlooms and special mementos my grandparents left to me, things I didn't even realize had value, to keep them safe from my dad and his destructive rage.

Beast forced me to stick to my routine, not letting me slip down into an ocean of sadness and fear.

I'm not sure I would've survived that time in my life without Beast. Losing his parents did something to my dad, sending him into a spiral of rage and violence. More than once, Beast was the only thing standing between me and the cold, vacant stare of my father's fury; I had no idea what I'd done to cause him to go from an irritated sense of obligation, to complete disinterest, to blind hatred.

No one else seemed to grasp that my dad loathed me, especially not the old ladies and club girls. Not too long after I moved in, one of them found out that my birthday was coming

up, and they collectively decided to throw me a party. A pass-around volunteered to organize everything.

Her name was Sheila, and I didn't much like her.

She wasn't officially club pussy, that was a formal arrangement that gave her certain rights and responsibilities in exchange for services involving household chores and sex. The group of them divided up the cleaning between them, and occasionally one cooked; although they could refuse to fuck certain members if they had reasons my dad agreed with, the majority of them didn't discriminate. Club girls enjoyed the sex and the perks that came with it: free room and board, protection, a job at the club-owned tittie bar, and a non-stop party.

All of those girls lived here rent-free with us, sleeping in the former bunk room if they weren't in a brother's bed, and some had outside jobs or even went to school. They used this time to finance their futures, and very few had aspirations for anything permanent, since it was unlikely for a brother to claim one of them as personal property after everyone else had already dipped their wick. Actual girlfriends were different, they might achieve old lady status, but none of them started as club pussy.

Sheila wasn't a club girl, she was a rando that hung around most nights trying to catch a patched-in member's attention, preferably Beast's. She wanted a property patch, and except for Beast, my dad, and a very select few others, she'd limit it to giving blow jobs or handies. She even "dated" Frogger for a time, until Frogger's old lady, Alabama, found out and beat the shit out of Sheila before dumping him. Alabama ended up with Razor instead, and much happier, because Frogger was kind of a douche; Razor might fuck club pussy, but he wasn't going to get into a relationship with someone else, and that's all Alabama cared about.

Sheila aspired to be like Alabama, but it wasn't working out quite as well for her. She had her sights set on Beast, and for a long time, I was sure that was a colossal waste of her time and effort.



Used to be that Beast was never with the same girl very often, on the couch under the vent. He didn't have favorites, and refused or ignored any girl who was too persistent. As much as it bothered me to see him with any girl, deep down inside where I hid the uncomfortable and inappropriate feelings I refused to acknowledge, I recognized seeing him with the same girl over and over would be a lot worse. If part of me wondered about what happened in places other than the club room, like who he took to his bed when he wasn't sleeping in my room, and how often, I just buried that down deep inside, too.

I might have a huge, unwieldy crush on him, but that didn't suddenly make him my boyfriend or anything; even at almost eleven years old, I knew it was the height of foolishness to get jealous over a *biker*. It was like getting jealous because Bella had Jacob *and* Edward.

I told myself again and again that things were going to be different when I grew up and Beast realized he was madly in love with me, and wanted his patch on me. I wouldn't be jealous of the other girls when I got everything they did, plus so much more. But that didn't make me like Sheila any better, and especially not when she showed up way too regularly on that couch with him and not just on her knees in front of him. It bothered me.

Having her plan my birthday party was like getting a hundred paper cuts and then bathing in salt water: that shit stung, but it wouldn't kill me, so I gritted my teeth and smiled.



THE PARTY WAS in the clubhouse. Swathes of pink streamers and pink lanterns decorated the space, with strings of fairy lights looped around neon beer signs and mounted animal heads. There was a punch bowl of pink lemonade, big bowls full of candy, and a giant white sheet cake covered with pink roses with "Happy Birthday, Janie!" written in raspberry red piping across the top.

I had an enormous stack of presents, small things bought at the drugstore on the corner, but I loved every single thing. I loved everything about the party despite Sheila's involvement, because I'd never had a birthday party before, or been to any birthday party really, and it was magical.

Everyone ate pizza, drank lemonade punch, and tried to be nice to me even though my dad spent the entire party making shitty, sarcastic comments. He made fun of the presents, said mean things he pretended were innocent jokes, and told me not to be so sensitive when I got my feelings hurt. The atmosphere changed from good-natured laughter to uncomfortable silence just in the time between blowing out the candles and devouring the cake. I ended up drinking someone else's lemonade by accident, a cup with alcohol in it, a bitter sting in my throat. I retreated to the corner booth to sit by myself and cry while Beast and my dad went head-to-head, and everyone else pretended everything was fine.

My third favorite place in the clubhouse, behind my princess room and Beast's room, was the massive, horseshoe-shaped booth in the corner past the bar, so big it fit eight bikers around the table with plenty of elbow-room. Sharp knives had etched a constellation of names, initials, and obscenities into the wood over the years, covering the table and the bench seats, enhanced by the colorful graffiti the men drew with whatever pens or markers they found. I'd added a few pictures myself, and Beast had carved my name in a prominent place close to his. The whole thing sat a few inches off the ground on a crude wooden platform that jutted out from the end, forming a step. It was one of the booths salvaged from a diner that went out of business, a place where club members had loved to self-medicate their hangovers with greasy burgers or steak and eggs.

As Beast and my dad continued to argue, I laid down beneath our names along the back curve of the bench. At some point, I fell asleep, and everyone forgot about me.

It was late when I woke up, the room darker and the music louder than it had been. Men were shouting and laughing, and girls were dancing with their tops off. A girl, maybe Silver,

was bent over on the pool table with my dad bumping against her from behind; he moved and then someone else was there doing the same, and I realized they were having sex. I'd never seen it from this angle before.

Huddled against the back of the booth, I peered over the top, thankful everyone gathered closer to the bar and pool tables. The comfortable couches and armchairs scattered around were more popular than the hard wooden benches of the booths in my corner, the reason I favored them.

A full glass of lemonade punch sat on the table, and it looked untouched. The popping bubbles tickled my nose as I sniffed it, only picking up the sweet tang of the juice, so I lifted it to my lips and took a cautious sip. It tasted like summer on my tongue, tart heavenly relief in my mouth, with only the faintest, weakest bite of alcohol. It wasn't nearly as strong as the drink I'd had earlier so I gulped it down, not realizing how thirsty I'd been until it was sliding down my throat and cutting through the sugary legacy left by all the cake and candy I'd eaten earlier.

I laid back down on the bench and stared up at the cavernous ceiling far above me. Only the fairy lights and pink lanterns were on, and the smoke in the air created a hazy, dreamy glow. It was so pretty. I watched the air currents form curls and eddies in the smoke, listening to the music and all the happy voices as my club partied. A couple of voices got louder as they approached closer, and I didn't want to risk getting caught and sent upstairs. I slid off the seat to the ground, sitting with my knees pulled up to my chest, hidden deep in the shadows where the off-center position of the table had the widest overhang.

I couldn't tell who walked over to the table, I could only see their legs. The man's were denim-clad, and the woman's were bare under a short, short skirt and high, high heels. It could've been anyone.

The woman hopped up on the table, her feet dangling down and swinging, and the man stood between her knees. The woman's voice, her words slow and dreamy, interrupted the sounds of kissing. Something slid over her calves and off

her shoes, landing on the wooden step at his feet; I leaned forward for a closer look, finding pink lace panties crumpled on the ground. As I studied them, trying to remember where I recognized them from, the man's pants sagged, his belt buckle swinging underneath the table.

I knew that belt.

It was thick, black leather with sharp, defined edges. Silver rivets ran the entire length in two rows, surrounding a double row of holes, and it had a double tongue on the buckle. No one else in the club had a belt like it. I gave it to Beast for Christmas the year before.

After a few minutes of the table rocking to the soundtrack of kissing and moaning and thorough instructions from him on how tight she should grip his cock and how fast she should pump her hand, he lifted the girl off the tabletop and laid her down on her back, on the bench on the side with the widest gap. Her head was only two feet away from me, but her eyes were closed and she was giggling to herself.

It was Sheila. Goddamn Sheila.

Still only visible below his upper thighs, Beast moved her legs around to make room for him, hiking up her skirt to bunch around her waist, and doing things with his fingers that made her squeal, then moan. He hunched over and rested his weight on one hand next to her face, using the other to smooth the pale latex condom over his dick. He squeezed the tip brutally hard before settling himself between her legs.

Taking full breaths became difficult, I couldn't get enough air. My head felt as swimmy as my belly. I curled back and pressed myself against the bench seat, covering the rapid movements of my chest with my knees. I didn't want either of them to realize I was watching. My stomach hurt seeing him with her, even as it fluttered; I didn't want to see this. I didn't want to see him with her, not like this. Through the vent was different, still difficult to watch but more like a movie. From up above, with the music and other people talking, I couldn't hear all the breathy moans, the low grunts, or the wet sounds; I didn't smell sweat, and beer, and something else so thick and

heavy I could taste it. I wanted to leave, but he'd be mad if he knew I was there and hadn't said anything, and the idea of Beast angry or hating me like my dad paralyzed me.

At first, he rested his weight on his fists braced on the bench on either side of her head. He held himself above her, and the edge of the table, as he pumped his hips, slow but with punishing force. All I could see of his skin was his hands and forearms, and a sliver of his lower body as it disappeared and reappeared behind her bent knee and splayed thigh.

She made noises, said words, but it was muffled even as close as I was. After some time, when the noises she was making were indecipherable and caught somewhere between pain and pleasure, he lowered himself down to settle his weight on top of her. His face was now below the bottom of the table; he kissed her mouth once, told her to shut up, then nudged her face to the side so his head was blocking her from my sight.

Tilting his face towards me, he locked eyes with me without hesitation or surprise, and picked up his pace.

Once his eyes met mine, I was okay. I wasn't scared, or even sick anymore, a warm blanket of calm settled over me. He wasn't mad. He'd known I was there. It didn't matter anymore what he was doing with her, because it didn't change us.

He fucked her for what felt like forever, hard and fast, while staring into my eyes. Eventually, his jaw tightened and the muscles in his neck strained; slamming into her hard once, then again, he stilled with a grimace I'd never seen this close. She made a humming, gasping noise, her hands fluttering by her sides.

After he was done, after he'd pulled out and peeled the used condom off his spent dick while she giggled and babbled nonsense, other legs approached. I heard Hammerhead's voice. He was my dad's VP, and practically my uncle. I called his wife "Aunt Suzanne" when I was little, and used to play with their kids at family parties before she stopped bringing them.

He asked if Sheila was tapped out or if Beast thought she'd take another.

Beast climbed all the way off her — tying off the condom, then tucking his dick back in his pants — and dragged her towards the end of the bench by her legs before flipping her over.

“She’s down to fuck, no worries there, but you ain’t gonna want to risk getting my ball sweat all over your sack,” he told Hammer. “Go in from the back, stay off the bench or have a prospect spray it down.”

“Always thinking of others,” Hammer said, chuckling as he positioned her up on her knees and unzipped his own pants. Her arms were trailing straight out in front of her, her face pressed into the bench. Her eyes popped open as she rocked forward from the force of Hammer’s thrusts. That’s when she noticed me for the first time.

“Birthday gurrrrrl,” she slurred, beaming. “Didja like your parrty?”

She reached her hand towards me, giggling when I reached back. I smiled at her and held her hand under the table while Hammerhead fucked her from behind. She was incoherent, so stoned and drunk she wouldn’t remember any of it, but I would. I’d remember all of it. And I didn’t hate her anymore.

I didn’t blame Sheila for falling for Beast or wanting to be with him, and she didn’t threaten me anymore. He fucked her, but I was the only thing he saw. He’d never flip me over and offer me to another man.

Still, she needed to go. Like my dad reminded everyone at my party, any bitch could poke a hole in a condom. I wouldn’t risk of any sort of attachment, she could be another Lulu Marks in the making.



HAMMER FINISHED and pulled her skirt down, leaving her to sleep it off on the bench. He and Beast wandered off to have

a drink at the bar, but I knew to wait. Things were quieting down; like the girl, most had passed out where they were and the rest had scattered to the various bedrooms. I crawled to the end of the booth and peeked out, seeing Hammer and Beast toss back shots. Hammer stood up from his stool and called out to the prospect that had manned the bar all night.

“Finish wiping down the bar and you’re good to go,” Hammer told the guy — I couldn’t even tell who it was. We had a handful of new prospects, and they were still interchangeable to me. “If you’re interested, Sheila might be up for another round.” Hammer chuckled as he gestured over in my direction and I tensed, sucking in a breath.

Beast made a weird grunting sound of protest, shaking his head. But he wasn’t protecting *her*, he didn’t want anyone to find *me*. “She’s tapped out, man. Let her sleep.”

When Hammer agreed and directed the prospect to find another girl, I relaxed, relieved not to be stuck here through yet another round. I was sleepy and wanted my bed. It had been a long night; the party was both awful and wonderful, and everything that happened after was confusing and kinda gross. Especially Hammer. I never, ever wanted to be that close to Hammer fucking anyone. He was old and, well, *my uncle* — the only way it could be worse is if it was my dad.

Sheila chose that moment to twitch, then she giggled again and kicked her feet. One of her shoes slid to the floor with a thunk, and I ducked back into the booth.

“You goin’ to bed or what, Hammer?” Beast asked, tone casual, but there was tension there. If you knew him.

The metal leg of a stool screeched against the concrete floor and Hammer mumbled something I couldn’t understand, then Beast said, “that’s what prospects are for.” I missed a bunch more of their conversation. I was too busy yawning so wide my jaw cracked, but I heard Hammer’s heavy tread on the stairs while the prospect grumbled and went out the front door. Beast must’ve told him to walk the perimeter before locking up, which left us alone in the cavernous club room

except for a dozen or two unconscious people scattered around.

I knew better than to move, so I stayed flat on the bench with my head sticking out the end enough that I could see. Beast sat at the bar for a few more minutes, staring off into space as he finished his beer. By the time he came for me, I was nodding off.

He completely ignored Sheila, shoving his hands under my armpits to lift me from the bench and into his arms. I wrapped my legs around his waist like I'd been doing it for years, instead of this being the first time he'd ever tried carrying me, but it felt... natural. He'd lifted me up a million times — into truck cabs and top bunks and up onto countertops, swinging me onto walls and over fences, and settling me onto his bike — and I'd had my arms around him on the back of his bike a million more times as he took me out to run errands, or drove me home, or for a long ride when the weather was nice and neither of us had any place to be, but carrying me was new. I tucked my head under his chin and sighed in contentment, breathing in the spicy-smokey scent on his shirt. The heavy muscles of his arms and chest were my armor against an indifferent world.

He carried me up the stairs to my room with no effort, holding me up with one arm while he fumbled for his key and unlocked the door. I'd left on the hanging light over my reading nook, so he didn't turn on the bright, harsh ceiling light and the room stayed cozy. I wanted to stay just like this, *feel* just like this for as long as I could: happy, drowsy, and drunk on his attention.

He continued to carry me inside the room, and reality pinched like a vise on my mood. This was when he'd set me down, maybe give me a pat on my forehead, then leave, even though he'd slept in my room a hundred times before. It felt different tonight. Part of me figured he'd go back downstairs and find Sheila or a different girl, and take her back to his room. Things were unfinished, they'd remain unfinished between us at least, and this was when he'd seek out privacy to suit himself. When he wouldn't choose *me*.



My birthday was at the end of May, but it felt like the middle of winter at that moment, and we were together at the top of a steep, snowy hill with only one sled between us. One of us was going to jet down that slope at full speed, whooping with joy at the momentum, leaving the other to trudge slowly behind. It didn't matter which, it wouldn't be the last hill for either of us; what mattered was that we wouldn't share the experience. We'd be separated, if only for the time it took the other to catch up.

He set me down in the middle of the room and crossed over to my dresser, digging into the middle drawer to pull out pajamas, shoving them at me. "Go get ready for bed," he said, his scratchy voice soft and quiet in the warm, dim shelter of my princess room. "And make sure you brush your teeth. You had a fuck-ton of sugar tonight."

I grunted and staggered into the bathroom, shutting the door but not turning on the light since the nightlight in there was enough for me to see by. Sad enough to understand what the word "melancholy" meant, I was way too tired and mopey to go back out there and insist that he stay. It would start a fight and I knew it. He hated when I got too needy, too demanding. Our relationship worked best when I didn't come at him like an entitled little shit — his words — and let him do for me what he thought was right. Trying to guilt him into it by playing the Birthday card would only get me the silent treatment for a week at least, and I didn't want that. I was thankful for what I had, and I'd learned not to ask for more.

I peed, changed into my pajamas, stuck my dirty clothes in the hamper, and then half-ass brushed my teeth. Twice. And contemplated flossing, but ain't nobody got time for that. I hadn't heard him leave, so he was at least going to say goodnight to me, and if I dawdled when washing my hands or changing my clothes, it was only because I was so tired and not because I was trying to delay the inevitable.

I opened the door, expecting him dressed and waiting for me, sitting on the edge of the big bed and fucking around with his phone, trying not to be impatient. Instead, he'd plugged in a string of extra fairy lights that were draped over the mirror

on my dresser and had switched off the other lamp. He was under the covers in the big bed with all the throw pillows and stuffies shoved off the bottom onto the floor, with the big, foofy, daisy-covered comforter pulled up to cover most of his bare chest, rubbing his face. He'd folded his clothes and left them on a chair, his belt coiled on top.

"What the fuck were you doing in there so long?" he grumbled, sitting up.

"My brain is slow," I whined, making shit up and trying not to giggle or give any other sign I was ecstatic to see him. It wasn't weird, and I wouldn't be the one to make it weird.

"Get the fuck in bed," he muttered, full-on grumpy-pants now, but still stood there in his black boxer briefs and helped me climb up to the top bunk, something that could be tricky when I was overtired. My foot had slipped before, and I clocked myself under the chin hard enough to rattle my brain.

I settled in as he took a piss, leaving the door half-open because they *all* do; I've heard more grown men pee and fart and complain about burning sensations than any girl should. "Lights on or off?" he asked from the bathroom door.

"On," I answered, liking the dim illumination. I wanted to see him. "Did you wash your hands?"

He half-heartedly cursed at me as he went back and washed his hands, then I watched with wide eyes and a fluttery belly as he crossed the room to the bed, not sure why seeing him in his underwear tonight made my face so warm when I'd never paid attention to it before. Maybe because I'd seen him fucking that girl up close for once? It was making me feel weird again to think about it.

*Do not make this weird.*

I restrained myself as he climbed into bed and got under the covers, but then rolled to the edge and hung my head over the side, gasping before I could stop myself at the sight of him. He was lying on his back with the covers pushed down by his waist, with one arm folded under his head and the other on his chest. All that black hair spread out over the white pillow. His

eyes were half-shut and heavy over a sleepy half-smile, surrounded by his silky beard and mustache. His broad chest was hard with muscle; the flat brown disks of his nipples, pierced with steel bars, poked out from the thatch of black hair that spread across it. A trail of hair led down his six pack to disappear below the sheet. He took my breath away, just like the first time I saw him, but he wasn't a handsome stranger that I was crushing on anymore.

Beast was my best friend. He took care of me when no one else did, and he got me through losing my grandparents and my home. I was living with a rough, dangerous motorcycle club, but I was safe because of him. He protected me.

I loved him way more than my dad, but I didn't love him *like* my dad. The feelings I had for Beast were different from anyone else, and they confused me. A lot. But I still knew it was love, even if I didn't know what kind.

It was absolutely love.

I didn't understand some things he did, like what happened tonight at the party. After keeping me away from alcohol as much as he could, even threatening Little Mike once over a sip of beer, he left that glass of spiked lemonade for me on the table, and maybe even gave me the one I drank earlier. He *wanted* me to see him with that girl. I know he picked out that cake for me himself, even if he fronted like he didn't. And even though he was furious with my dad for being an ass, I knew it meant something that he got to stand up for me in front of everyone.

I knew these things, I couldn't explain how. Just like I was so sure he'd go to his own room to sleep, or why this moment, with me in the top bunk looking down on a sleepy Beast in his bed, felt so significant.

"We'll go for a ride tomorrow." His raspy voice, thick with sleep, filled me up with warm happy feelings that made my eyes spark with tears. "Find you a present at the Harley store. Happy birthday, kid. Now go the fuck to sleep."

We'd been standing at the peak of that snowy hill, and he gave the sled a rough kick, sending it barreling riderless down

the slope. In my brain movie, he grabbed my hand and squeezed it tight, and we started trudging forward together, plowing a path through the drifts, side by side.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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AFTER MY ELEVENTH birthday and that party, things changed in good ways, and in ways that were kinda bad.

I stopped being shy, like a switch had flipped in me and I came into my power lying on the bench watching Beast fuck that girl — that girl who thought she'd keep Beast for herself. She never came back to the clubhouse after that night. I made sure of it: I let slip to Alabama about her and Hammer, and then Aunt Suzanne took care of the rest.

I spent as much time as I could outside my room, whenever I knew my dad wasn't around, because even though it was still my sanctuary, the sense of confinement in there was stifling.

That summer, I got my period, B-cup boobs, and I had a growth spurt: I hit five feet tall almost overnight, but was still only about ninety pounds. Little did I know I'd stop there. Two younger club girls took me under their wings; they showed me how to put on makeup, dressed me up in their clothes, and they taught me how to dance. Most of the girls were strippers working at Peaches, the tittie bar owned by my dad and the rest of the club, so my look was... unconventional for my age, and my freakish strength helped me excel at pole-dancing.

I made friends too, with the girls first, and especially with Alabama. It didn't hurt that she'd beaten up my former nemesis, or that she'd chosen Razor over Frogger. Frogger was one of my dad's best friends, but even though Razor was the club secretary, he couldn't stand my dad and got along with Beast. And my loyalties were clear.

Some of the men became my friends. I was always there, a fixture in the club like a pet or mascot. I wasn't prone to drama and didn't give attitude; I was quiet and kept to myself. It took time, but gradually some of them warmed up to me.

Before, I spent most of the summer out in the yard and garage, helping my grandmother with the garden, or my grandfather with everything else. When I wasn't with them, I'd sit out in the sun or up in a tree, reading or drawing, or just thinking deep thoughts. Beast didn't want me to leave the compound by myself, but I still craved the fresh air and sunlight. If he wasn't busy, he'd take me out with him — wherever he needed to go, or on long rides to nowhere — but he couldn't be with me 24/7. He had responsibilities and jobs to do.

At first I would find a place out of the way to read or draw, but someone was always tinkering with their bike or fixing something, or hauling out power tools to do woodworking or make repairs to things around the compound. After years of helping my grampa with projects, I was no stranger to working with my hands. Once they figured out my usefulness, I was golden: I could fetch them the right tools by name, hold the light steady, and my tiny hands fit into places theirs couldn't. I became a valuable asset, and the more patient men even taught me as we went, so my education expanded.

That was the good.

The bad was that Beast stopped visiting me in my room as often as he had been, the chicken-and-egg scenario that led to me leaving my room. We still spent time together in the public areas and ate together most meals, but movie nights were rare and he didn't sleep in my room much anymore. I would've felt rejected or thought that I did something wrong, except I still watched him from the vent; when he partied with the club, he was always on that couch with his head tilted back, but he no longer shut his eyes.

I might not get late nights playing video games or working on a puzzle together, but I still had him. It didn't matter who he stuck his dick into, not when I was all he could see.

School started back up, and nothing much changed. I lived at the club full time along with a lot of the men and most of the girls, but I only hid in my room when my dad was being especially obnoxious or I needed to sleep. Most everyone there lived off of delivery or microwavable meals, and I was tired of it, so I began to cook more often. A few of the club girls cooked, but it was rare and usually not that good. Certainly not as good as my grandma's cooking.

My grandma had taught me how to make all kinds of things: a lot of Polish dishes, but also regular things like meatloaf, roasted chicken, and stuffed cabbage. At first I only cooked for me and Beast, with him picking up groceries for me to use, but once the smell of lasagna or pot roast carried into the club room, I no longer cooked for two. More and more groceries showed up in the kitchen, then brand new pots and pans, new gadgets, a spice rack... Odetta, Amber, and a prospect called Repeat started helping me so they could learn too, and pretty soon we were having sit-down family dinners on Sunday afternoons — sometimes the whole club was there — using real plates and silverware. It wasn't long before the little kitchen was getting renovated to fit a dishwasher, six burner stove, and a double oven big enough to roast turkeys.

Through it all, my dad didn't say anything directly to me, though he talked a lot of shit around me. We never had much to do with each other after my birthday, after he humiliated me in front of everyone. I overheard Hammerhead say that my dad was butt-hurt over something with his parents, but that wasn't my fault; he'd been an asshole to them too, and now they were dead, and he just had to live with himself. He said nothing about me helping with mechanical stuff, and he said nothing about me cooking his mom's recipes for the club. He'd just mutter a general thanks for the meal into the aether and clean his plate.

School was surprisingly good, too. I made a few friends my age, a group of boys that played video games and Dungeons & Dragons, preferred ASOIAF over GoT, and the LotR movies over the books, but we all agreed they made some bad choices with *The Hobbit*. They liked to spend our time between classes debating Marvel vs. DC (comics and

movies), and *Star Wars* over *Star Trek* (which came down to debates over O.G. characters and Han Solo's superiority to Kirk in every way). I soaked it up like a sponge. My boys taught me their nerd ways, and in exchange, I beat the hell out of their bullies, explained in excruciating detail why Harleys were the only bikes worth discussing, and introduced them to vodka and tequila, which I snuck into school in energy drink bottles. Throughout that year, I'd teach them how to fight and how to dance too; by the time everything fell apart and I disappeared from their lives, they were nerds educated in the finer points of life by bikers and strippers by proxy, and I missed them like crazy. I rarely saw them outside school, but our lunchtime D&D campaigns were epic, and sometimes on Saturday afternoons I could get away and we geeked out at one of their houses. Even if I wasn't hanging out with them in person, I talked to them over voice chat in games and texted with them, and they were my friends.

This Golden Age in my time at the club lasted for over a year, but then things got rocky, starting with my twelfth birthday.



MY BIRTHDAY FELL at the end of May, and Memorial Day was always a big holiday for the club, which was founded by a bunch of veterans back in the day. Every year, there was a club-wide ride-out that took place, all the different chapters hitting the highways and traveling to one of the handful of clubs that held a party that year, and the honor of being a host rotated through the chapters.

The year I turned twelve, we were hosting one of the parties, and there was a rumor that the mother chapter was planning to attend.

The morning of the ride-out, when my club went to meet up with whoever would join us at a designated location a few hours away, I got dressed up in jeans and the leather jacket Beast gave me for my last birthday. It was too small but I couldn't stop wearing it. I headed outside to where the bikes



had assembled on the circular driveway out front. Smoke, the road captain, was giving out final instructions when I arrived, my shiny purple helmet in hand, and I stepped out through the front doors just in time to see the first bikes roll forward into the street: my dad in front, Hammer just behind him, then Razor with Alabama side-by-side with Beast... and some bitch I didn't even know pressed up on him.

The end of the procession got to witness me watching him drive off without me, but only Frogger made a point to laugh.

I returned inside, changed into leggings and a t-shirt, and found Aunt Suzanne in the kitchen. I spent the day helping the old ladies and sweeties that stayed behind, didn't even go out to greet the club when they returned and rolled up the massive steel doors, opening up the bar to the outside. The party kicked off, and that's when Alabama and Silver came to find me.

"C'mon, girl." Alabama took the chef's knife out of my hand, leading me away from the cutting board full of celery and peppers I'd been chopping for the various cold pasta salads, and dragged me upstairs to the old firehouse bunk room where the club girls stayed. "There might not be a cake and or candles to blow out, but you're still the birthday girl."

"We're going to dress you up right, so you can hang out with us at the party," Silver explained as she started tossing me clothes off one of the racks they had in place of closets, telling me to strip down to my underwear. She had me swap out my plain cotton bra for a bright pink thing with an underwire, and you could see the lacy top of it peeking out from the neckline of the low-cut tank top they chose for me, adorned with the logo of a classic rock band splashed across the front. I ended up in a pair of denim short-shorts, that skin-tight tank, and a pair of platform wedge sandals with ribbons of fabric criss-crossing around my ankles. Silver said the shoes made my legs look ten feet long. They did my makeup and hair, curling it but leaving it loose to hang down around my shoulders, while we drank hard lemonade and alcoholic soda pop as we got ready. By the time the sun sank down, I was half-drunk and giggling with my girls, the three of us looking fine as hell as we joined the party.

I ate with them, filling my plate up with barbecue ribs, potato salad, pulled pork, a cheeseburger, pasta salad, and chunks of seedless watermelon soaked in vodka — going back for seconds for potato chips, a hotdog with sauerkraut, carrots with dip, and a soft, chewy brownie for dessert. We had jello shots, too, and more cans of lemonade — peach was my favorite — and we danced and danced and danced to whatever songs blared out from the sound system speakers as my head felt fuzzy and my muscles loose. It didn't matter if it was rock, or country, or hip-hop, my girls had taught me how to move to any kind of beat, and I never once looked around to see who Beast was spending his time with. Not once.

And when a boy from another chapter danced up on me, after circling around and studying his quarry, I didn't pull away. He moved in sync with me and the music. By the time he was close enough that I could feel the heat radiating from his skin, I'd already been admiring his lean muscles, his cheekbones as high and sharp as a model's, and his crazy-beautiful eyes that appeared silver in the flickering flames of the bonfire. He plastered himself to my back, hands on my hips moving me where and how he wanted, and if I closed my eyes and pictured someone else when his mouth found a place on my neck that sent shivers down my body, no one needed to know. He spun me around, his lips finding mine in the dark as a hundred bodies writhed to the beat around us, and then it was just one body there, and two familiar hands wrenching me away from him. I glared up at an enraged Beast with the courage born of my first time drinking, and my first time kissing.

I was ready to throw down with him, right there — his fury was no match for mine after the humiliation of that morning — but when he leaned down and ordered me to go up to his room and wait for him, I gave up any fight.

It was all I'd wanted, just to have him to myself for a time.

I was in his room, half asleep in his bed wearing one of his t-shirts, when he showed up with a girl I'd never seen before. She was drunk and high, and so out of it she didn't notice me in the semi-dark room, not even in the same bed. He had sex

with her on that bed while holding my hand, never once looking at anything but me.

I had a heavy feeling inside, heavy but fluttery and weak in my chest, like I couldn't catch my breath.

After he finished, he got her clothes back in place, threw on a pair of jeans but nothing else, and carried her out of the room over his shoulder. When he came back into the room only a few minutes later and settled in for the night, he told me he'd never fucked anyone else in his bed, not for a long time. Only in the club room. Then he kissed me goodnight — kissed me on the lips for the first time, saying he needed to get the taste of that other man out of my mouth — and he was still there next to me when I woke up in the morning. He didn't kiss me again, never touched anything but my hand lying next to me in his bed, but it was enough.

After that, and for most of that summer, we were together constantly — never touching, even when we were alone — to where people started calling me his shadow. I got teased a lot by the club girls for crushing on him, but I didn't care. It didn't embarrass me because I was the one on his bike, riding bitch, or up front as he taught me to ride, working the pedals with my feet on top of his as I learned to throttle, clutch, and brake.

I knew what we had, and it was bigger than a crush or even sex, and it was enough.

It was useful that the club had so many pass-arounds and girls that came just to party with the bikers but didn't try to stick around, because Beast went through a lot of girls that summer. Since he never fucked any of them more than twice — *maybe* — and he was in a constant state of need, he went through *a lot* of girls. And it was always where I could watch, that was our unspoken arrangement: he was never alone with them, and he might kiss them, but he never looked at them during. It was eyes shut or looking up, knowing I was there. It was tight, but I still fit in the vent even after my growth spurt.

I occasionally got jealous, but it was rare and it was fleeting. In a very real way, they'd conditioned me to accept

this even before I met him, by seeing my dad and everyone else with other people all the time. I guess I developed a biker's attitude towards sex: it was just physical release, had nothing to do with feelings; there were people you had sex with, and then there were people you loved, and you might have sex with them too, but maybe not. Him fucking those girls didn't mean anything to our relationship because he didn't care about them. There was only a slight chance he even knew their names. But me? I mattered.

Wearing the colors meant you lived however the fuck you wanted, you did whatever the fuck you wanted, and you fucked whoever the fuck you wanted, as long as you bled for the club. I never saw a man who was faithful, even among the bikers that loved their old ladies like Hammerhead so obviously did; he still dipped his wick in the club girls, or the girls who came to party, whenever he fucking felt like it.

I guess I never saw a woman that was faithful either. The club girls and pass-arounds fucked anyone they wanted too, though unlike the men, they were trading sex for security, or attention, or their next hit, and I never wanted to be like that. Then there were the sweeties — the girlfriends — and the old ladies. They were only at the family-friendly barbecues and get-togethers, because the old ladies never partied on the regular, so who knew what they did or didn't do.

None of it mattered, though, what those other people did, because what *we* had was different. I wasn't ever going to be a pass-around or club girl, but I wouldn't be stuck at home with screaming babies like the old ladies either. I was different, Beast was different, and we'd figure out our own way. It was *our future*.

Maybe once upon a time, I'd had that fairy tale in my brain of the two of us together — only us — against the world, but it was as realistic as some Hollywood actor or rockstar seeing my face by chance and falling hopelessly in love with me. There was the dream of blue houses by the seashore that sometimes eased me into sleep at night, and then there was reality: we were both in this club for life.

I think the real fairy tale, the one that I believed despite everything, was that somehow me and Beast could be together without eventually becoming like the rest of them. I told myself that we'd be different, we could live wild and free in the club and still be committed to each other, even if both of us were getting strange.

Or possibly the fairy tale was that Beast wouldn't be a goddamn hypocrite, even though he brought up me kissing that stranger more than once, when he'd get drunk and needed to pick a fight with me. That it had been my first, and not *him*, was a serious issue between us. And he did not appreciate me saying "You had plenty of chances," and "Maybe if I had been the one on the back of your bike, I would've known not to dance with him."

But all my fairy tales splintered into pieces in mid-August, the day my mother walked back in through the clubhouse doors.



LULU MARKS WAS A FINE-LOOKING WOMAN, maybe even more beautiful at twenty-nine than she'd been at seventeen when my dad knocked her up; he was twenty-one years older than her, the age gap so much wider than the one between me and Beast.

She had honey-blond hair, big boobs, and long legs. She wore the highest heels she could, and dressed in clothes that were tight and short and cut to reveal the most flesh she could get away with while still, somehow, looking classy. Her nails were long, sharp, and shiny red, her makeup on point, and her hair styled to perfection. Her face was like mine, but longer. Older. Harder. She smiled, but it rarely reached her eyes; she never frowned, like she wore a mask that might crack if any emotion creased it.

Lulu strolled into the club like she owned it, calling out for Preacher. Beast took one look at her and moved off the barstool he'd been sitting on next to mine, placing himself in

front of me and blocking her view. Ansel, the prospect working at the bar, whispered something to Silver. She casually got up from her own stool and stood next to Beast, leaning on him like they were a long-time couple. I didn't even mind because I sensed the threat. He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close, building a barrier between me and the wolf howling at the door.

She never bothered looking over in our direction. My dad appeared in the doorway leading to the first floor of the firehouse proper, where he'd been in his office all afternoon.

"Lulu," he purred, like she hadn't dumped a newborn baby on him twelve years ago, taking off for St. Louis or Chicago or someplace else bigger than here. He said her name like it wasn't a surprise to see her.

"John," she breathed out, her eyes locked on his. She smiled, one of her teeth catching the light and reflecting it; her right canine had a diamond embedded in it. Without even moving one step, her body seemed to melt, going from demanding Amazon breaching the gates to sex kitten between breaths.

"Join me in my office." He held out his hand, and she strutted forward on her towering heels and took it, letting him lead her deeper into the club.

"There is nothing about this that I'm comfortable with," Beast muttered, glancing over his shoulder at me. "You recognize that woman? You know who she is?"

I nodded, choking out a cough to get my voice to work again. "That's my mom," I gasped, grateful for the glass of water that Ansel handed me. "What do you think she wants?"

"Nothing good," Silver warned me, detaching herself from Beast with a pat on his arm.



AFTER THAT, Lulu was around a lot.

Not at first, because the club was going to have a “welcome home” party for her that first weekend, so she stayed away until she could make her grand entrance in style. It was thrown together at the last minute, and lacked all the hallmarks of the perfect party in my mind: there were no streamers, fairy lights, candy bowls, presents, or cake. Then again, my dad didn’t spend the whole evening saying mean shit to her either, so maybe her party was superior in an important way.

Instead, she got something closer to what I had for my twelfth, which was an impromptu barbecue for the families, followed by a drug- and alcohol-fueled bacchanal after the sun went down. No one said a word when I stayed downstairs in the club room for the entire night, sticking close to Beast and sneaking sips of his beer while he pretended not to notice. He didn’t hook up with anyone — thank God because I wasn’t sure I could’ve handled watching that in front of others — though my mom and dad both did, with each other, and with other people.

I watched my dad snort white powder off my mom’s tits, then bend her over a pool table to fuck her, and it scarred me for life. She hadn’t ever been a mom to me, but still.

After the pool table, they separated for a while. Beast tried to convince me to call it a night, but I refused. I had some deluded idea that she wasn’t going to force me out, that this was *my* club, and I deserved to be there more than she did. It was... stupid. Incredibly naïve, considering what happened. Instead of going up to my room and spending the rest of the night watching a movie with Beast, I got to witness my parents tag-team Odetta. And then Frogger joined in.

The party sucked, my parents sucked, everything was shit, and I woke up with a headache and sick tummy to find a note from Beast shoved under my door, saying they sent him away on a job. And since I didn’t have a phone, I had no way of contacting him.

## CHAPTER SIX

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I STARTED SEVENTH GRADE — junior high — and that was a major milestone in my dad’s eyes. Or maybe now that my mom was back, he just didn’t want me around anymore, because he banished me from the club.

In one day, I went from living in a little room near the staircase to club access being a privilege that I didn’t deserve. My dad informed me I’d be moving to his house, and I better not give him an attitude about it, like I’d been the one to insist on living there. I wasn’t allowed to bring anything but my clothes and school-related things from my room, because my dad claimed the rest was club property. My mom had this idea to turn my room into a “daycare” for the old ladies to dump their kids off with a club girl for the day, which made her pretty popular with what Alabama called the BWAGs, the biker wives and girlfriends.

It was super weird how my exile coincided with my dad sending Beast and two others out on a job a few states away, one that kept him away for almost a month. I’m sure that wasn’t deliberate at all. Although Beast couldn’t have done much to stop him, I might’ve been able to keep some of my things at least.

I guess it didn’t matter. I was too old for toys, anyway.

I moved into my dad’s guest room, which he’d been using for storage. It had a double bed and a dresser buried under all the shit he’d piled up in there, and I could move almost all of it into his unused home office. I found an old table and chair in



the garage to use as a desk, and I kept my clothes folded in drawers because the closet was full of boxes.

The new rules dictated that I should come right home after school and stay in the house, and I had lists of chores to do every day, but my dad still wasn't around too much. He'd come home at odd times, sometimes with my mom on the back of his Harley Softail, and expect me to be there and my chores to be done. But since food shopping was inconsistent, and I was back to living off of warehouse club snacks and whatever takeout they left in the fridge, he could clean his own fucking bathroom and do his own dishes.

It wasn't like he would yell at me for not doing my chores. That would require acknowledging my existence.

When my mom was with him, they'd roll up with a case of beer and either Chinese or Thai food, and eat it sitting out on the back patio while doing some damage to the case. Afterwards, they'd retire to my dad's room, make a ton of noise, and then walk back and forth between the bedroom and bathroom naked. I kept to my room on those nights, wishing for headphones, earplugs, or bleach for my brain. My dad barely ever spoke to me, my mom somehow even less so; without the rest of the club to make up for it — and especially Beast — I was horribly lonely.

I missed him so much.

I missed the club too, even though it was loud, and sometimes scary because the men were violent and volatile, and fights broke out all the time. People showed up to party and ended up causing trouble or disrespecting one of the brothers, and they'd get beaten to unconsciousness or worse. The club girls could be super bitchy to each other and hold grudges like nobody's business, and they sometimes fought too, but all of that was familiar. Beast's reputation for brutality and hair-trigger temper had kept most of it away from me, anyway. No one targeted me or used me as a punching bag when I lived there, I had protection and a front-row seat to drama and bad behavior far beyond the trashiest reality television shows ever aired.

Then suddenly, I was alone in an old house in a not-great neighborhood with nothing to do and no one to talk to. And Beast came home — my mom made a point of mentioning it in front of me — but I still didn't see him for a long time. He'd been gone for a month, and then back for a whole other month with no effort by him to contact me. It was the longest I hadn't talked to him since we met.

It hurt to be forgotten, it hurt a lot. By the entire club, but especially by him. Out of sight, out of mind, because life went on and everyone returned to takeout and frozen meals like there'd never been a Sunday dinner. Like I was a meal service they canceled, and nothing more than that.

I learned a hard lesson: people only cared about what you could do for them, and only when it didn't inconvenience them.

I must've been an obligation to Beast, because once he was free of me, he moved on without an issue. I didn't understand why he'd put so much effort into taking care of me if he didn't want to, because no one ever forced him to look out for me and he didn't get a paycheck for being my manny. He chose to do all those things for me. But he must've tired of it, I guess, and been happy to be relieved of the responsibility.

It wasn't just stray comments from my mom or dad that made me realize this, it was his complete absence. And also, because I saw him on the street about a week after he'd been back. He looked right past me like I wasn't there.

I had rules about going home right after school, and my dad gave me all those chores to do, and for a week or so, I was terrified about what would happen if I didn't obey. But maybe I'd gotten spoiled by regular meals and being around other people, or maybe I just wasn't a very good kid and never had been, because it didn't take long before I got over my fear.

Being quiet and staying out of the way made it easier to do my own thing, but if my dad had paid attention at all, he'd know that I wasn't obedient. I was stubborn and had a temper; despite all his efforts to isolate me, I still had confidence that Beast was watching my six even when he was out of town. So

one day, I just stopped caring about whether I had my chores done or if my dad would show up when I wasn't around, or whether my exile was permanent. I took the school bus that dropped me off two blocks from the clubhouse just like I had for the past couple years.

Except Pete and Repeat, the twin prospects manning the gates, wouldn't let me in. Orders from my dad. No exceptions.

I asked if Beast was around — and I knew he was because I could see his fucking bike parked in the lot — but they told me no. They ignored me when I yelled at them and banged on the gate, chain-smoking and talking to each other like I wasn't even there. And then Beast came out with Rosemary, one of the club girls, and put her on the back of his bike. He drove right past me out of the gates with her pressed up against him, without even looking at me once as they rolled past. Her arms were around him, her hands all over him, and he reached back and ran his hand down her leg as they drove away.

After that, I stayed away from the club.

After that, I learned to wait until my dad and mom passed out, and then I stole money from their wallets. Or I'd sneak out into the garage and go through his saddlebags and storage compartment looking for cash, and if I found pills or weed instead, I'd siphon off a small amount and sell it to the neighbors. I found a couple packets of a chunky, semi-translucent, whitish substance in my mom's purse one night, and that fed me for a week. I used the money I stole or bartered for to buy food at the gas station a few streets away.

School wasn't much better. Junior high was awful.

I was still taller than most of the boys in my class. I had B-sometimes-C-cup boobs, and hips, and attitude. Since I'd grown out of most of my clothes, I wore whatever I could scrounge up from boxes in the basement and garage, mostly things left behind by my mom when she'd lived there before having me. I also stole things from my dad's room too, any shirts or hoodies that he wouldn't miss. Because of my limited options, I dressed in a combination of faded band or Harley t-

shirts about six sizes too big, and the height of hooker fashion from twelve years before.

I was a freak, and even my nerdy friends looked embarrassed to be seen with me. For the past two years, as my body went through all those changes and I had to relearn how to be inside my own skin, the only people I had real exposure to were at the club. They were who I looked up to and wanted to emulate, so the only way I knew how to move through space was like an aggressive biker or a lithe stripper.

And like any biker or stripper, I reacted to judgment and condescension with hostility.

I was a bitch, and I gave no fucks.

The proverbial gravy on the open-faced shit sandwich that my life had become was that my dad, and the club in general, was notorious. I kind of knew it already, but it wasn't until junior high that I felt it, when other students and even teachers treated me with a certain amount of caution from the moment the teacher called out "Janie Skala" during roll call on the first day. Kids avoided me, some hated me outright with never a word exchanged, and I was immediately summoned to meet with the school counselor who advised — in the most roundabout and tentative way — that the school had a zero-tolerance policy for violence, bullying, weapons, drugs, or any other illegal or immoral acts a twelve-year-old could think of. She warned me that people would be watching.

I went from invisible to everyone but Beast, to earning a place among the club, to being invisible to the only family I knew but under constant surveillance by the rest of the world. In the most uncomfortable way, everyone was just waiting for me to screw up and show my true nature. It made me miss being invisible.

Not everyone seemed to watch me in negative ways though. One group of people saw something they liked: high school boys.

The junior high and high school were next door to each other, enabling them to share certain resources between them. We still had separate classrooms, cafeterias, and all other

facilities, but the two schools combined parking, athletic fields, and sports equipment. And as long as it wasn't raining or freezing cold, gym class took place outside.

Maybe I wasn't particularly athletic, but I was strong as shit and my legs were proportionately long, so I was a good runner. As the school year progressed, my lack of an updated wardrobe, and such necessary items as a sports bra, became obvious to my classmates. Simultaneously, the number of high school boys that found their way to the edge of the soccer field or kickball diamond increased. They came for the show, drawn in by the gym uniform that wasn't sized for a body like mine: the shorts were too short and tight, the shirt stretched around my chest leaving little to the imagination, and even my dollar store tube socks and crappy sneakers seemed to add to the allure. They'd sit up in the stands, shouting and heckling everything we did, but whenever I had to run, the bleachers went silent.

The girls hated me for the attention they wished they had. The boys saw boobs and went stupid; even if I'd covered them with my dad's double-X hoodie or a work shirt, the phantom memories of me jiggling and bouncing around the athletic fields turned them into gaping-mouthed idiots on the regular. Even the boys I thought were my friends. And the teachers weren't much better.

Two months, I lived in this fresh hell, caught between isolation and renewed neglect at home, and narrow-minded objectification at school. Two months until a group of those boys got brave and cornered me on my way home.



I TOOK the school bus that stopped at the main intersection down the street from my house, and every day, as we approached, I'd fantasize that today would be the day he'd be out there on his bike to watch over me. I'd walk the short distance home, remembering what it was like when Beast cared about me and wanted me safe. But that day, I got held after class for being "disruptive" for telling a slack-jawed

yokel to shut his whore mouth when he called me biker trash, and all the buses had left by the time the teacher finished lecturing me.

Just me, mind you. The shithead that started it left at the bell with a smug smirk I wanted to slam into a desktop, and fantasies of doing so kept me sane while the teacher berated me for my language, my behavior, my attitude, and my “air of entitlement.”

By the time I got away, the junior high side of the parking lot was a ghost town. There were still cars and activity over on the high school side because of sports and clubs, but a post-apocalyptic wasteland stretched before me. I was four miles from home, without a phone, and the door had locked behind me; I didn't have a choice. I started walking.

About a half mile from the school, there was a convenience store set back from the road. It had a small parking lot out front wedged in by buildings on either side, and a bigger lot in the back, with only a narrow walkway along one side of the building to connect them. The back lot was a big hang-out spot for the dealers and degens from the high school and beyond, but I didn't realize just how many people that meant would loiter at the store until I was already on the sidewalk in front of it. If I'd known, I would've crossed the street or found an alternative route.

“Hey! Girl, hey!”

I deliberately assumed it wasn't directed at me and kept going.

“Boobs! C'mere, girl!”

Now more than one person was shouting at me like they were calling a dog, even whistling and smacking their legs, and I felt my cheeks flame. I concentrated on my feet, and the sidewalk, and walking faster.

“Girl, we're calling you. Are you deaf?” That voice was closer, but no less mocking.

“Mmm, deaf jailbait... that needs to be a tag on PornHub,” some genius suggested, and there were a bunch of snickers —

too many, and too close.

“Mute would be better.”

“I wanna hear her squeal, at least when I hold her down and pop that cherry.” It was a deeper voice, and he sounded determined and eager.

I was past the parking lot, but they were still behind me and getting closer. I looked up, hoping to see someplace with people around I could hide out in until they left, but everything was closed or vacant for at least the next block. Traffic was going by too fast for anyone to notice something was wrong.

“Hey girl, you wanna come hang with us? We’ll be sweet to you.” That cajoling voice was way too close behind me by that point, and I panicked.

“Alley,” a voice commanded, and I realized there was, indeed, an alley up ahead. Their footsteps picked up speed, so I did too. I broke into a run like I should’ve done immediately, but I’ve seen enough nature shows to know running prey only draws the predators faster.

I didn’t get far before I was jerked backwards, someone catching hold of my backpack and yanking, making me stumble back as I tried to stay on my feet. And like that, they surrounded me.

There were five of them. Four of them I recognized from their attendance at my gym class, but the other was older, in his early twenties. I was no stranger to skids — meth addicts — and he was textbook: skinny, with terrible skin and greasy hair, teeth rotting in his mouth. His addiction made him volatile and unpredictable, and I was in deep shit if they got me into that alley.

“We just want to get to know you better, girl,” one of the high school guys said, grinning at me.

“We like to watch her gym class,” another confided to the skid, smirking and licking his lips. “We like it when she runs.”

“Apparently mommy doesn’t believe in bras.” That jackhole reached out, flicking my nipple. I gasped, covering

my chest with my hands. “Don’t be shy, girl. We love your little titties.”

The skid’s hand darted out as fast as a striking snake, grabbing my wrist and tugging my hand down. “I wanna see them too,” he chittered, a manic gleam in his eyes. “Alley, boys, and we can all look.”

They started herding me toward the alley. The skid kept an iron grip shackled on my wrist. I tried to break his hold, get away, but my freakish strength was no match for a determined twaker, let alone four other guys, and I was losing ground. In the tussle, I didn’t register the sound of the approaching Harley until it was up on us, idling at the curb, with a furious Beast glaring them down, his fists white-knuckled on the bike’s ape-hangers.

“You got five seconds to get the fuck away from her,” was all he said, and the terrified high school kids scattered. The skid had his back to the road and held on.

“Dude, I’ll share,” he whined, jerking my arm painfully. “She’s fuckin’ ripe.”

“Let. Go.”

The skid glanced back over his shoulder, then spun around while dropping my wrist. He looked at me, back at Beast, and what color there’d been, drained from his face. “I— I didn’t know—” he stammered, twitching violently, then whimpered and took off after the boys back towards the store.

I rubbed my wrist, eyeing Beast. Part of me wanted to crumple up and sob as the adrenaline drained away and the shock of my near-miss set in, but a bigger part of me was pissed.

“Thanks, you can go now,” I sneered. “Again.”

“Get on the bike, Janie.” His scratchy voice was thick and guttural, and what I could see of his mouth was white with strain. I examined him slowly, taking in the shaggy hair and unkempt beard, the dark circles under his eyes, and the tension in his body. He’d lost weight, and the muscles and sinews in his arms and neck popped even more dramatically.



“Why should I?” I sassed, crossing my arms. “We’re not friends anymore. You like Rosemary now. You forgot about me.”

“Get - on - the - bike.”

“Are you sure? Because that’s like, I don’t know, spending time with me, and you don’t do that anymore. I’m not your responsibility, remember?”

“Janie,” he ground out, every muscle taut and straining. “I’m about five seconds from running those assholes down and tearing them apart in the middle of the street, and I can get away with a lot of shit in this town, but not mass murder in the middle of the day, in front of witnesses. If you don’t want to visit me in prison, you’re going to need to get on - this - fucking - bike - right - *now!*” He hollered that last part, blood pounding in his face and eyes burning with rage, straining towards me.

I shrugged. “Like I’d visit you.” I gave him another three seconds of the level of disdain only a tween girl can produce, and then stalked toward him in a huff. “Don’t think this means I’ve forgiven you,” I warned him as I climbed on to the bitch seat and scooted forward, pressing my body against him tighter than I ever have in the past, mashing my boobs against his hard back and the center patch on his vest like *she* did. But I couldn’t help it, I took a deep inhale, and his head swung to the side like he heard me breathe him in over the increased rumbling of the engine, as he prepared to swing back out into the road.

“Like I give a fuck,” he growled over his shoulder, and since I’d wrapped my arms around his waist, I yanked his shirt up with one hand and swiped the nails of my other hand across the rippled muscle of his abs, scratching hard enough to draw blood.

“You’re a dick,” I snarled as he jerked away from my talons, releasing one handlebar to grab my hands and drag them out from under his shirt.

“Behave yourself or I’ll tan your ass.” He didn’t sound angry anymore, or at least not *just* angry. He kept a grip on

both of my hands, pressed higher on his chest and plastering me against him even tighter. He squeezed, an unspoken warning to keep my hands where they were, then he released them so he could ease us out into traffic. I stayed where I was, my cheek molded to his top rocker, my hands flattened over the hard muscles of his chest. I could feel his heart thumping beneath my palms, steady but fast.

I swear I heard him mutter something that sounded like “I missed you,” but it might’ve just been wishful thinking.



HE DIDN'T TAKE me home, he turned at a major intersection and continued on, eventually getting on the highway for a stretch. We drove for almost an hour before he exited onto a state road, and ten minutes later we were idling past a guard shack at the entrance to a metropark. He followed the road until it dead-ended at a parking lot with a few vehicles scattered down its length, pulling into a spot.

“Off,” he gestured with his head.

“I’ll have you know that if you intend to abandon me out here like an unwanted puppy, I’ll find my way back, climb over the fence, and put sugar in your gas tank. And if you intend to murder me and throw my body in the river, I’ll come back and haunt you.”

He sighed. “Off, doofus.”

“You are,” I muttered, disgruntled, and peeled myself off him before staggering a little as I dismounted. I hadn’t ridden in months, and had never ridden in such an uncomfortable, stretched position — but there was no way in hell I was going to move from it no matter what.

“Forgot you didn’t have your helmet on,” he grumbled, shaking his head. “Shoulda said something.”

“I didn’t think you had it,” I snapped, feeling salty all over again about his complete absence from my life. “I figured you gave it away to one of your sluts.”

“It’s always in the compartment,” he barked as he maneuvered the kickstand into place and swung a leg over. He popped the seat up and pointed. “See? And no one else has worn it.”

There it was, and the sight of my sparkly purple helmet in there waiting for me, filled me with a heavy warmth. I looked up and met his eyes, nodding. His face relaxed, and he took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Put your bag in here.” He opened one of the saddlebags and pulled out a thick, red and black plaid blanket, gesturing at the newly available space. Once I did, he headed towards a path that originated a few feet from us. “C’mon. We gotta talk.”

We walked for about fifteen minutes, maybe longer, along a wide dirt path covered in wood chips towards the sound of running water. We eventually emerged into a grassy area that gently sloped towards the river, dotted with picnic tables and grill stands. It was empty, a late afternoon on a weekday in late October apparently wasn’t a popular time to picnic, despite the temperatures still hitting the 70s some days.

Beast led me towards the water, and I realized there was an abrupt drop-off not too far from the bank, the slope was a lot steeper for a short distance. He tossed the blanket down on that sharper incline, spreading it out, then laid down with his hands folded behind his head and ankles crossed. From that angle, he could lie in the weak fall sunshine and still watch the current sweep by.

“Sit,” he commanded, tilting his head at the space next to him. I sat, knees up and arms curled around them, chin resting on my kneecap. I stared at the water, not really seeing it, feeling all the feels.

After a time, he said, “This is where I come to think.”

“It’s nice,” I replied, my voice only a little shaky.

“Wanted to bring you here a bunch of times, but always changed my mind. Wasn’t sure if you’d like it.”

“Why wouldn’t I? There’s grass, and trees, and a river. Fresh air. Sunlight, in theory.” I paused, thinking about it.

“You know I didn’t stay inside by choice, right? When I was at my grandparent’s house, I was outside as much as I could be. Same with during the summer once I was older, sitting outside the clubhouse, but I couldn’t do that when I was little.”

“You’re still little,” he said under his breath.

“That skid didn’t think so.” I rubbed my wrist, a bitter taste in my mouth.

“And he’s a dead man because of it.” Beast was as calm as could be. “Didn’t think I needed to send that particular message, but apparently I do.”

“Why were you there?” I suddenly realized how odd and lucky it was that he showed up when he did.

“You didn’t get on your bus. Went looking for you, thinking maybe you went home early. I was heading back to the school when I saw you on the street.”

It took me a full minute, staring at him with my brow furrowed, before I finally asked the question. “You— watch me get on my bus?”

He sighed, closing his eyes, as though exasperated at my stupidity. “I’ve been keeping an eye on you, making sure you get home, every afternoon for three years, dummy. The location of the stop changed, but I didn’t.”

“Every afternoon?” I squeaked out, thinking of my grandparents’ house, and the bus stop about fifty yards away on the corner.

He grunted, shoulders twitching in something resembling a shrug. “Not right how they left you to fend for yourself.”

“You’re there every day?”

“Except for when I’m out of town, then I send a prospect.”

I glared at him, overcome with rage. “Why didn’t you show yourself? Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you say a goddamn word all this time?!” I wasn’t going to mention him driving off with Rosemary, that sting was still too sharp.

“That’s why we gotta talk, kid,” he seemed to collapse with exhaustion. I waited, but the next question out of his mouth caught me by surprise. “You know those boys? Not the skid but the others. They in your class?”

“No.” Bile gathered in my stomach, burning. “They go to the high school. But they watch my gym class.”

He stilled, and not in a good way. “What did you say?”

My mouth curled down, and I lowered my eyes, not really wanting to tell him this but I didn’t keep things from Beast. “My gym clothes don’t fit,” I confessed in a whisper, “and neither does my bra. Boys from the high school come out to watch my gym class, to see me run. They shout things, sometimes take pictures or video. They call me Boobs. And Jailbait. The teacher doesn’t do anything.”

I could feel the rage pouring off him, practically seeping from his pores. Every muscle in his body tensed, and his voice sounded strangled in his throat. “How long has this been going on?”

“Since the second week.” I laid my head down on my knees, pulling them tighter against me. “The girls hate me because of all the attention I get, like I want it. The boys only stare at my chest or call me names. Even the boys I thought were my friends have gotten weird and don’t really talk to me, they seem embarrassed to be seen with me. And the teachers are mean. I missed the bus because I was held after school today because some little asshole called me biker trash and I told him to shut up— well, I told him to shut his whore mouth, and I got in trouble but he didn’t, and the teacher yelled at me for over half an hour. Which is really fucking ironic considering the club forgot I fucking exist and even you—” I snapped my mouth shut, swallowing harshly, trying to hold back the tears stinging in my eyes.

“Goddammit,” he cursed under his breath, propping himself up on one elbow and reaching for me. He dragged me into him, and then dropped back, wrapping both arms around me and forcing me down to curl against him. “Goddammit, Janie.”

I snuffled, wiping my nose on my hand. “I hate crying. I feel pathetic. But everything sucks so bad.”

“I can’t kill them all, baby,” he muttered, “even though I want to. Can’t even beat the fuck out of them. And I’m not your legal guardian, I can’t go to the school and make demands.”

“And my parents sure as hell won’t, they give no fucks.”

He shook his head. “Fuckin’ life you have. You’re the last person who should have to deal with all that shit you’ve been served. I hope you realize that, Janie — you’re good. Genuinely good. You’re so smart, and funny, and sweet as can be. You’re pretty too, beautiful really, but that’s— people might notice your little angel face first, but that’s not what makes you special. And you’ve got the worst luck I’ve ever seen, you can’t catch a fuckin’ break. I do what I can, but it ain’t enough.” He sucked in a breath. “I can’t be what you need.”

I stared at him, completely incredulous. It was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard, but it wasn’t funny, it was sad, because he really believed that. “Beast, you already are.” I buried my face in his chest, hiding the new tears, but I think he knew by the way my voice squeaked. “Nobody else has ever cared, not since my grandparents, or even noticed. You take care of me.”

“Janie— who am I to you?” His voice was weird, slightly higher and strained, and I slid my head back so I could see his face. His eyes were closed, clamped shut really, and his mouth was a tense line. I studied him, seeing the changes wrought over the last months to the face I adored. I slipped my hand up, running my fingertip over the sharp angle of his cheekbone, stroking the line of his brow. He sighed, relaxing under my touch, and I scooted closer to him so I could reach all the parts of his beloved face.

“I’m pretty sure you’re everything,” I finally answered, and his eyes snapped open, burning into mine.

He didn’t hesitate, at all. “I’ll do whatever I have to for you, to keep you safe. Do you understand?”

“If that’s true, then where have you been?” I asked, hating how weak and whiney I sounded even as I kept talking. “If you’ve been there, why haven’t I seen you? I’m alone in that house almost every night, and I get scared sometimes, and—and you left me.”

“I drive down your street every night, at least twice. I go to the gas station, pick up a pack of smokes, and then go back a different route. I gotta be careful not to draw attention to you, so I don’t stop, but I thought you could hear my bike and you’d know.” I shook my head. The TV in the front room was always on, with the volume cranked up too high to hear street sounds. “There are some things going on with the club— I can’t talk about any of it, but I’m glad you aren’t there anymore, it’s not safe. Got a prospect I trust, name’s Ansel. He does drive-bys too, especially if I can’t.”

“Oh.”

“After so long, you gotta know that if I could keep you close, I would.”

I shrugged, not looking at him. “I thought I knew, but then I didn’t. I figured you got tired of me,” I said in a small voice.

He moved, grabbing my biceps and lifting me so I was facing him. “Don’t be stupid, Janie. You know me better than that. I miss you so fuckin’ much, it’s like I lost an arm or a hand, I can’t seem to function the same knowing I won’t be seeing you.”

We didn’t say anything for a long time, but he didn’t let me go. I hung there from his hands, us staring at each other like we were both waiting for something, for the other person to ask the obvious questions maybe? But there weren’t any answers that either of us could live with.

Finally, I broke the stand-off. “How old are you, Beast?” I narrowed my eyes and tilted my head back.

The corner of his mouth curled up in a smirk. “Too old for you, kid.”

I scoffed at him, tossing my hair. “Answer the damn question.”

“Twenty-six.”

“Hmm,” I nodded, pursing my lips. “You *are* old.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m aware.”

“You love me?” I asked, my brow furrowed so he knew I was serious.

He blinked, then nodded. “Yeah, of course.”

I laid my head back down on his chest because I didn’t want to see his face when I asked my next question and he said no, but I had to ask. I had to ask even though I already knew what the answer would be, and it made my limbs weak and my insides feel hollow at forcing the issue, but... I still had to. “Can we leave here? You and me? Get on your bike and drive down to Mexico and keep going until we find someplace where no one will send us back? Please?”

His hand brushed the hair back from my face, then rested on my head, keeping it pressed against him. “I wish we could. I want nothing more than to take you to California, show you the ocean. Show you the mountains.” I felt him say it more than I heard, his voice resonating in my bones. “But I can’t.”

The river kept flowing. The wind rustled the leaves, which were turning to red and orange in preparation for falling, and the sun was beginning to sink into the west. We laid there, silently, until it was dark, then walked back to his bike and he drove me home.

Instead of dropping me off and leaving to return to the club, and whatever girls were taking care of him on the couch these days, he had me open the garage from inside, parked his bike, and closed it back up. He ordered pizza and sat on the couch with me, watching TV while we waited. I saw him send and receive some texts, but he didn’t explain anything.

I expected him to leave, again, once the pizza was gone and it was getting late, but he didn’t. He had me lay down on the couch and use his thigh as a pillow, and we watched one of the *Final Destination* movies, with commercials, while he played with my hair until I fell asleep.



I woke up in my bed, in my pajamas, all alone in the house. I got up and went to school as usual.

When I got home that afternoon, there was a package slipped between the screen door and front door, with my name on it. Inside was a cell phone, already activated, with Beast's contact information in it. There was a grocery delivery app set up with a credit card already attached, and a prepaid Visa gift card sitting underneath the phone with a note that said "Buy some clothes that fit. Put in a security code for the lock screen but leave all the other settings alone."

He texted me to check in every night. He never said much, and I knew better than to talk about anything important over text or chat, but sometimes he'd give me orders like not to go outside that night, or he'd warn that my dad wouldn't be home and I needed to make sure to lock all the doors and windows. One time, he had me call in sick to school.

Not in so many words, I was also ordered to stay away from the neighbors, not to steal money or anything from my parents anymore, and that if I needed something I should ask him. And if I ever missed the bus again, I was supposed to call him; under no circumstances should I try to walk home.

For the next year, he took care of me from a distance, keeping me safe, and except for short glimpses of him passing by as I rode the bus home or watched out the window at night, I didn't see Beast at all.

Not until the night when my parents were home sleeping in my dad's bed, and I woke up around four a.m. to muffled gunshots. I sat in the dark, paralyzed, not sure what to do until my door swung open. The hall light was on, and Beast was silhouetted in the doorway of my bedroom, a dark shape that I knew better than my own.

I turned on the light next to my bed as he approached with dead eyes and a blank face, and I saw he was splattered in blood.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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I WAS thirteen when Beast killed my parents and set me up to take the blame for it.

There wasn't any proof that anyone else had been in the house. Everything the crime scene techs collected that might have implicated Beast was lost, corrupted, or inadmissible, and the prosecution drew its own conclusions. The defense did too, ignoring my claims that it was Beast, because he had an airtight alibi provided by *someone* whose word was unimpeachable. They wouldn't tell me who.

Once they decided no one else was there and charged me, everyone constructed their own version of what happened, including my own lawyer. He was a public defender, I thought, but I never met him. I didn't testify at my trial because there wasn't one. My new legal guardian, Child Protective Services, accepted a plea bargain on my behalf. Even at thirteen, I knew there was shady shit going on.

Despite the sad little story of incest and abuse that everyone focused on, I still didn't have the option of claiming self-defense and being acquitted, because I hadn't been in imminent danger. Everything pointed to my parents being high and asleep when they died. The lawyers and the judge decided that I'd suffered a psychotic break after years of abuse and the trauma of my dad molesting me. They didn't need supporting evidence for all this alleged abuse, because it was enough that I'd been living at the clubhouse since my grandparents died.

It never once triggered an outcry from any concerned citizen before, but now it was obvious I was being *victimized*.

And apparently, in a fugue state or some other nonsense, I waited until my parents passed out to kill them.

I told anyone who listened that it wasn't my dad, because he avoided even acknowledging me, let alone touching me in any capacity. It didn't match their narrative, the one that said that living at the club meant a thirteen-year-old girl could shoot two people without making a fuss, firing a single bullet into each and killing them instantly.

I had their blood smeared on me when the police arrived, after all. Some of it under my clothes.

There wasn't much incentive to look any farther. Anyone who had ever met my dad either loathed or feared him, so no one mourned his death; since the club *turned its back on me*, I was a convenient scapegoat.

The club turned its back on me.

Every single member of it, including Beast.

The man who'd protected me and took care of me, the one I thought he loved me as much as I loved him, that man killed my parents and came to my bed covered in their blood, and then he *hurt* me.

Until that moment, I'd dreamed of being with Beast: romantic, fairy-tale fantasies of kissing and being held by him had been my escape, the bedtime story I told myself every single night from when I was way too young to even understand what I dreamt about.

If I hadn't been shaking and cowering away, confused by what was happening — if he hadn't been covered in their blood — I'd have done anything he asked. If he'd kissed me even once, or touched me with any degree of gentleness or patience, I'd have given him anything and *everything*. But that's not what he did. He took from me when I was crying and begging him to stop.

After years of being the only one who ever *saw* me, he walked away afterwards without ever looking at my face.

Then he let me take the blame for everything.



I WASN'T TOTALLY sure how much time had passed. How long I'd been in here. I hadn't seen anyone from the outside the whole time. And now he was here.

“What do you want from me?” I asked dully, my molasses brain having trouble keeping up. “Beast?”

“What's wrong with you?” he asked, grabbing my chin and forcing my head up.

He looked the same, but different. I tried to capture the changes but couldn't hold on to them. They slipped away. Slithered away. Slid away.

His hair was longer. Shaggier.

I tried to memorize it as it was, remembering it the way it had been. But no matter how hard I stared at it, if I looked away, it surprised me all over again.

Eventually, I realized he asked me something. I moved my eyes to his eyes. “What?”

“Janie,” he whispered, agonized. His voice. It hadn't changed. Deep and scratchy. Saying my name the way he always did.

I blinked, seeing my hand up, touching his mouth.

His mouth.

His mouth.

“Fuck!” He startled me, and I yanked my hand back with a whimper as the room froze around me. All the people. All the marionettes, dancing on strings. I could see their strings. I looked over and Beast was there and my anxiety dissolved like sugar in coffee. But not my anger.

“You fucked me,” I accused. “You fucked me over.” I scowled at him, hating him.

His hair was longer. Shaggier. I wanted to pull it. I stood up and reached for his head, sliding my fingers into his hair.

It was longer. Shaggier.

I tugged it.

“Why?” I asked, feeling my heart break all over again.

“Kid,” he groaned, closing his eyes. “I’m gonna fix this.”

I shook my head, knocking something loose, and I understood everything at that moment. Blessed lucidity, even though the pain would follow.

Pain always followed understanding.

“You can’t fix this, Beast,” I stated, cold and clear, yanking hard on the hair that was still in my fist. “They’re breaking my brain because of you,” I hissed, letting him go and turning my back on him. “Don’t come back. I don’t want to see you ever again.”



THEY SAID I HAD A VISITOR.

I wasn’t totally sure how long I’d been in here, but I hadn’t seen anyone from the outside. I don’t think. Time had moved differently in the beginning. I had memories, but I wasn’t sure if they’d happened. I wasn’t sure about anything before the last month or so, when my doctor had weaned me off the meds. All of them.

All of them.

Then they moved me to the other side of the facility.

It was better, and it was worse. Better because I wasn’t surrounded by violent zombies who sometimes attacked without warning — other people, but usually themselves — but would otherwise stagger through their days without interest in their surroundings. Worse because I went from a room with only one other person — granted, she’d been a violent psychopath who had to be tied down at night — to an open ward with twenty other girls stacked up in little cubbies, all of us in view of a CO at all times.

Better, because I could have things like pencils and access to a library. Worse, because I still went back to the other side for “treatment” and that made me different. It was better not to stand out.

I already stood out enough. Everyone knew who I was.

And everyone knew the club wouldn't retaliate.

My stomach hurt thinking about my so-called family, all the time, a fist bearing down on my guts and twisting them into knots. Thoughts about him were even worse. I relived it all over and over again, every night in my dreams, getting furious every time.

That was a lie. The anger didn't come every night, not even most nights. Most nights, I cried until the tears ran out.

I didn't expect to see anyone, so I'd never bothered checking any schedules or talking to COs about what to do. I didn't even know the protocol to receive a visitor, so it was a huge, disconcerting shock to me when I was told to get into line, and followed the girl in front of me to a room I'd never been in before.

As each of the girls passed through the door, they moved with a speed and excitement I'd never seen in this place, scattering around a room filled with tables and... and *people*.

People in street clothes of different ages; there were little kids and old people, men and women. A lot of laughing, but even more crying.

I stood at the entrance to the room, baffled as to why I was there, until a CO jabbed me in the shoulder and pointed into the room, growling at me to move my ass.

I stumbled forward, head down, not even bothering to respond — I was no stranger to being pushed and manhandled, and never resisted. My doctor told me not to stand out, it would be better if I acted like everyone else. When he said that, I knew Beast was involved with me coming off the meds and getting moved, but I wasn't sure how, and I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. I was scared of messing up. If I fucked up, I might have to go back to the other side, where I

sometimes couldn't remember who I even was from one day to the next, because the meds were treating diseases I didn't have.

It seemed likely that this was all a misunderstanding; everyone has a list of people they want to see, or who want to see them, and the names get checked out before the guards grant permission. No one has asked me about it the whole time I'd been inside, so this had to be a mistake. I made the split-second decision to hover near a big, boisterous family that was nearby, to blend in until I could leave.

I only made it a few steps away from the guard before familiar hands were gripping my shoulders. A voice that I'd almost convinced myself I never wanted to hear again snarled, "Touch her again, and I'll make your whole family disappear."

The surrounding conversations went silent, and the tension ratcheted up. Animosity poured off the man still holding onto me, the one I refused to look at, while fear radiated from everyone else, including the CO.

"No— no touching the inmate," he stammered out, and I wasn't sure if that was a promise or a warning. Whichever it was, Beast was done with the conversation. But he also didn't release his hold on my shoulders.

After a full minute of me staring down at my state-issued slip-on shoes, his worn boots, and the dull tile underneath them, the hands gripping my shoulders squeezed lightly.

"Janie, would you please look at me?" It wasn't an order, he asked in a softer, almost tentative tone. My eyes darted up, just for a second, before returning to my view of the floor and our footwear. In that moment, though, I captured the image of him like a permanent snapshot that I'd enlarge and keep at the entry to my mind palace for all eternity.

He sucked in a painful breath.

"Move. Now," he demanded, scratchy voice harsh and brittle, and the tables around us emptied, everyone retreating to reform in groups at the back of the room, including all the COs, like schools of tuna disrupted by a lazy shark.

Using his grip on my shoulders to guide me, he deposited me in the closest chair. His hands left me and I rolled my shoulders, trying to get the sensation of his touch off my skin, but I feared it might be permanent, a first-degree burn embedded in my flesh. I hunched inward, sitting with my knees together and ankles crossed, my legs not quite long enough for my feet to rest on the ground, and wrapped my arms around my middle.

I kept my eyes on the tile, counting the tiger-stripe streaks of black against the otherwise brick red surface. I pretended not to notice him pulling a chair up to mine and settling in, or the faded denim of his jeans, or how he sat with his elbows on his knees leaning towards me, hands clasped in front, so close I could feel his breath on my cheeks with every exhale. I pretended that the one-second look I had of him didn't engrave his image on my brain, that I didn't see his hair and beard were shaggier than they should be, that he had lines in his forehead that hadn't been there before.

Eventually, the sadness and fear dissipated, and we were right back where we'd always been: he was king of everything he surveyed, and I ruled over him like his little queen. I could lash out at him if he deserved it, because I was never anything but safe with him.

It was amazing how easily I could forget.

Anger took over. It shouldn't have been a surprise to either of us, I had locked it up inside me since that night. And now it had an outlet, and something safe to focus on. Something that wasn't about... us.

"What did you do?" I demanded in a harsh whisper. "What did you do to my doctor?"

He shrugged. The corner of his mouth curled up. "You look better, kid," he said, smirking, and reached across the table to grab a hank of my hair, running it through his fingers. "Doesn't matter how, just matters that I can see something alive behind your eyes and you ain't acting like a zombie."

"It matters, Dominick," I hissed, jerking my head away to tear my hair out of his grasp. His eyes widened at me calling



him that, then his brow furrowed. “Do you get how much worse it’s gonna be whenever your threat falls apart and I get the backlash? Fucking *Flowers for Algernon*, you asshole!”

“Settle down, kid,” he grouched, sitting back and turning his head away, scowling. “It’s handled. It ain’t gonna change.”

“You can’t guarantee that!” I slammed my hand onto the table, ignoring how the sheep jumped and the dogs growled. Beast looked past me, wearing his *Don’t you fucking dare* face, and the flock settled. Badass biker shepherd for the win.

He held his glare for a moment, then returned his attention to me, his face relaxing into irritation. “Chill the fuck out, Janie. I’m telling you it’s handled.” At my scoff, he leaned in, grabbing my hair again to drag me closer — not rough, he was gentle about it, but he was firm. “I promise you, on my honor, that it - is - settled. Now, this is the only time this room ain’t being recorded — somehow knew you’d cause a stink — so you need to shut up and listen to me.”

“I don’t have to do shit, Dominick,” I growled, but didn’t pull back. I had some stuff to say, too. Uncensored.

But he didn’t react the way I expected. He didn’t get angry or frustrated. His face softened, and his smile—

It fucking hurt having him look at me how he used to, a blade shoved between my ribs to pierce my heart. And then he just kept twisting the knife.

“This is why I love you, kid,” he murmured, stroking my cheek. “Even when you were a little girl, you were never afraid of me. You got shy, but never scared. Didn’t matter how ugly shit got, you still looked at me the same, with those big eyes in that angel face, lookin’ up at me like I was some kind of hero. Your hero. I’m a better man because of you. Had to be better.”

I shut my eyes, I couldn’t look at him anymore. Not without seeing him that night, dead-eyed, blood spray dotting his skin like freckles.

Not without seeing him looking down over me, as I begged him. His breath was hot against my face as he studied me,

trying to figure out what I was, an exotic bug inside the killing jar. Or trying to memorize me, in that moment, before he turned his head towards the wall.

I didn't say anything. A wall formed itself in my mouth. I let my head sink down, my eyes back on the floor between my feet.

"I can't get you out early, baby. I can't tell you why, so you gotta trust me. I'd get you out if I could." He was all business now, his tone low but determined. "But they won't fuck with you, and they won't put you on those fucking meds. I promise. You're right that I've done some fucked up shit — nothin' you need to worry about — but I'd do any-fuckin'-thing for you \_\_\_"

Except tell them I didn't pull the trigger.

"—and once you're out, things are gonna go back to how they were. No, better. Things will be better, because you'll be with me like you shoulda been all along. You just gotta be patient, it's just a few more years, then everything will be good again." There was a long pause, then he said, under his breath like even I wasn't supposed to hear, "I'll have my baby back."

From what the calendar said, I'd been here for one year, three months, and eighteen days, but I only remembered the last two months or so. I don't think we had the same ideas about what things being *good again* meant. I don't think he understood how things can change in a moment, let alone a year.

"How are you holding up?" he asked, as if I'd start chattering away about my day like I once did. Back when we were friends.

After I didn't answer, not even the one-shoulder shrug I was tempted to give, he huffed out a brief sigh like I was being difficult. This was just some kind of temper tantrum, not *me* serving time for *him*, after he hadn't even bothered to check in on me for one year, three months, and eighteen days.

"Fine, kid," he said with a longer, gustier sigh this time. "I came all the way here to see you, but if you don't want to talk

to me, that's fine. Alls I'm gonna say is that I don't blame you for telling everyone that I was in your house that morning, even though it made things difficult for me for a long time. I wish you'd followed my instructions, but I'm not mad at you about it."

I guess he expected me to respond somehow? Tell him I was thankful *he* wasn't mad at *me*?

No words. There were no words.

Maybe my darting glare said enough, because he clenched his fists and his jaw. "Look, I just wanted you to know that I didn't stay away from you or not visit because I was angry."

I swallowed back the lump of black tar in my throat, bitter and acidic, and started counting backwards from one hundred, keeping my eyes glued to the tile.

"Would you just say *something*, Janie? Get mad at me if you want, but stop giving me the silent treatment."

No.

He sighed a third time, a put-upon sound; I was frustrating him and he didn't have time for my bullshit. "Fine." His voice had an edge to it now, his jaw clenched. "I'm sure it seemed like a good idea at the time, and you couldn't have realized how much trouble it was going to cause. But you need to know that no one is holding a grudge, and when you get out of here, you're going to be welcome back at the club despite what happened. We're your family, Janie. Everyone loves and misses you."

I didn't respond. I didn't twitch, blink, or change the cadence of my breathing... I froze. Carved from rock.

I didn't give him any indication that I'd heard him, let alone that his words affected me. I didn't scream at him or shank him in the neck, even though I wanted to.

And I didn't break down and sob, crawl into his lap and beg him to tell me why he hurt me. Even though I wanted to do that, too.

I got his message, loud and clear. I just didn't care. I didn't care that he said he missed me, or claimed he loved me, or even that he felt bad about what happened. I didn't care that he had to stay away for whatever reason before now, or that my actions made things difficult for him and the club for a long time.

I didn't care why he'd come to see me, or what reminded him I existed after so long out of sight and out of mind. After one year, three months, and eighteen days without contact, I didn't know him any longer and he sure as fuck didn't know *me*, and I wasn't interested in catching up on the gossip since I'd been gone.

Before my doctor took over all of my treatment, I'd been seeing one of the regular therapists that handled most of the day-to-day stuff, like the group sessions. We still had to attend things like that, despite most of us being so sedated and molasses-brained that we couldn't focus for the length of a television commercial, let alone a therapy session. But that therapist, she kept pushing at my messed-up brain trying for a breakthrough, but she wanted one that was very specific. She wanted me to realize, suddenly remember, that I was the only one in the house with my parents, and I had made up the story of Beast killing them. She wanted me to admit, even if only to myself, that I was the one who killed them. Teasing around the edges of motivation for it, she hinted at abuse and molestation, and suggested I'd suppressed memories. Implying something happened that night, something that pushed me over the edge.

Something did happen, she just wanted me to blame the wrong person.

And no one was going to rewrite my memories, least of all that woman.

Right then, in the visitor room at the juvenile detention center that I was incarcerated in for killing my parents, I did have a sudden and profound realization, but it wasn't the one she'd been looking for that first year. No, what hit me in the chest like an iron spear punching through my sternum, was that I no longer needed to know why he was there that night, or why he killed my parents and let me take the blame for it.

And a big part of me didn't care why he did what he did to me either, coming into my bedroom covered in their blood to fuck me whether I wanted it or not.

He'd *hurt* me, touching my body with a mix of tenderness and brutality that confused me. He'd kissed me, held me reverently in arms spattered with blood, before turning off all emotions and leaving bruises and pain behind in a way that felt deliberate. But somehow worse than the physical damage was the *betrayal*.

After all that time together, after everything... I thought he loved me. I thought he'd cut off his own arm — or his goddamn *dick* — before he'd ever willingly hurt me, but I was wrong. He did hurt me, then he left me behind like I was nothing. I meant less than the girls he fucked with his head turned away. Less than that girl he fucked while holding my hand.

He made everything we'd been, every memory we shared, everything I believed and thought I knew, into a lie.

All of them — and especially *him* — needed to stay in my past with no hold over my future. I'd be getting out of there on my eighteenth birthday with a high school diploma and maybe even some college credits, and I wanted nothing to do with any member of that club. And if I was reading the subtext of his message, unless I did something about it, he'd be waiting outside the gate to force me back into that world.

I was going to give him one chance, one opportunity to do right by me after all this wrong. I looked up, meeting his eyes, and resisted feeling that same connection grind into place like slipped gears meshing back together. I fought against it, steeling myself against *him*. "Don't come back here again, Beast," I said, my voice steady and devoid of any emotion. "Just let me go."

His eyes were like two burning coals held against my skin, leaving a mark I'd never be rid of. "I can't do that, kid. You mean way too much to me," he said, willing me to believe in him again, in his steadfast and eternal love. But I wasn't a naïve little girl anymore.

There have been a number of moments of great clarity and profound significance in my life, when, regardless of my age or situation, I understood that something vital had changed and there could be no going back from that point in time, good or bad. Meeting Beast was the first of those moments, when the connection between us ignited like static shock; him killing my parents, raping me, then walking out the door without even looking at me that morning, was another. His refusal to set me free after I'd done the time for *his* crimes was a third, and from that moment on, I had a new purpose to work towards: *escape*.

Not from juvenile detention, but from the future he intended to lock me within after my release.

I stood up to leave, done with it all, but he stopped me with a hand on my arm. "That day by the river— you remember it? Yeah, you remember it just like I do," he said in the softest voice I'd ever heard from him. "I meant everything I said that day, and I know you did too, and that time with you was the one bright spot in an endless horror show that we've been living in since your mom walked back into the club. I meant what I said that day: I love you, Janie, and I'm not giving you up. Not now, and not ever. I know this is hard, but you're safe here, and I'll make it all up to you when I bring you home."

I pulled away, then walked away, returning back to my cage. I felt his hand on my arm for days before the touch faded.



I DIDN'T SEE him again after that, even though he showed up almost every visiting day asking for me, and I won't deny that I appreciated my new status among the guards *and* inmates once he became a regular. I was finally left alone, and they warned new inmates to stay away from me. But despite what he believed, and despite the benefits I reaped from it, I didn't want him there. I felt sick for days as every visiting day approached, knowing he'd be inside the same building, but I'd have to tell them I didn't want to see him.

There was a part of me, deep inside, that hated knowing that I was disappointing him. That same part of me loved he kept coming back.

It almost seemed like some kind of test he was determined to pass, if he just held out long enough, then eventually he'd win me back. But it wasn't a test, or a challenge, or a game; despite that part inside me that still craved his attention and believed it was love, the bigger part of me was already gone. Whether or not he was willing to accept it.

There were a few visiting days he sent other people from the club in his place, but I refused to see them, too. Hammerhead only came once; I sent him away just like the others, but he still managed to get a message to me, letting me know to expect help. Within a few days, I had a visit from a different lawyer who claimed to be interested in my case and wanted to work on my behalf, pro bono. I met with her in the only room in the facility where cameras and recording devices were completely absent, where she told me that Hammer sent her, and I should contact her if I ever needed anything at all. No one at the club needed to know.

I tested it out a few times over the next year, my requests growing riskier as we went, things I knew Beast would have something to say about — couldn't help but have something to say about them — and she came through every time. Eventually, I trusted her with the only things I actually needed and truly wanted: a new identity, and a head-start.

At three minutes past midnight on my eighteenth birthday, a clerk doing extreme overtime processed me out. Guards I'd never seen before at that facility hustled me through the system and out the door. The box containing my personal effects somehow included two hundred dollars and a set of car keys that worked on a late model, nondescript sedan out in the lot with a suitcase full of clothes, and a backpack with my new life, inside the trunk. "Jayne Stone" drove away from there that night, and I never looked back.

Literally, I *never looked back* because they'd locked me up at thirteen and I never learned to drive a car. I was super happy that it had been backed it into the parking spot or I would've

scraped up and rear-ended every car around me. Without having to go in reverse, I was at least able to fake some driving skills, but it took me a hundred miles to realize I should adjust the mirrors to see behind the car, and two hundred more before I didn't swerve onto the shoulder every time a car drove towards me in the opposite lane. Luckily, it was the middle of the night, and I stuck to the back roads.

I stopped for gas, a hot meal, and ten hours of sleep in a room with a television, a private bathroom, and a giant bed. Even though I could walk around naked if I wanted, I didn't because I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Not for years.

I did have a chance to look through everything that had been in the trunk, though. The clothes were all in my size and still had their tags. In a separate bag, I had brand new, name-brand toiletries and makeup, everything I could possibly need. A roll of \$5,000 in cash, rubber-banded, was buried at the very bottom of the suitcase. It was in small denominations, and used bills, with a note from Hammer wrapped around it telling me I should consider me and the club even, and shouldn't try to get revenge or come back for more.

I might have been pissy at that point, righteously angry and seeking vengeance for everything I'd lost because of them, but I wasn't stupid. I knew a clean disappearance was more important than my wounded pride and battered ego. That Hammer also included a few mementos, including a couple photographs and my dad's pearl-handled switchblade, made it somehow easier.

I had a good ugly-cry over the photographs he included, many of them snapshots of me and Beast through the years. The one that hit the hardest was the two of us sitting at the bar, drinking from similar looking bottles, with the same expression of annoyance on our faces. I don't know why, but that one messed me up. After a time, I put those things away and started my new life.



## PART 2

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# MOUSE

*Hitherto I have recorded in detail the events of my insignificant existence: to the first ten years of my life I have given almost as many chapters. ...therefore I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence: a few lines only are necessary to keep up the links of connection.*

CHARLOTTE BRONTË

*If you're going through hell, keep going.*

WINSTON CHURCHILL

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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PRESENT DAY...

OR, SEVERAL WEEKS AFTER LEAVING

ILLINOIS VIA THE USPS

THERE WAS no possibility of a pleasant walk that night. Or getting any sleep. Or staying dry.

The bus let me off at a crossroads. The supposed bus terminal was the parking lot of a dark and empty gas station; whether they shut it down for the night or longer, I couldn't tell. It was generous even calling it a bus *stop*, let alone a station or terminal, it was a walk-up window with a narrow awning set into a wall of the bigger building. The gas station itself was devoid of any light except one, deep in the interior, with a sign on the door that said it "Out of gas until Thursday," but that sign could've been hanging there for months. It had a high canopy, jutting out over the bank of pumps, that did nothing against the rain and wind. The desolation, the feeling of being in an abandoned place, made me think of the Red Rocket Truck Stop and I scanned my surroundings for Dogmeat or radioactive mole rats. The weather didn't help.

One single light, a hissing sodium lamp up on a telephone pole, perched between the highway and the broken, pitted asphalt parking lot. A decommissioned bus set up as a food truck shared the lot, with metal shutters blocking off all the windows and thick-barred gates, like on a prison cell, padlocked over the folding doors. Across the road, a boarded-

up fruit and vegetable stand had a big sign out front declaring “Will Reopen in May.”

This May? Or four— shit. Going on five years. It was almost May now, and it would be five years in October since Janus came to town.

The fruit stand didn’t look like it had been closed up for that long, but how the fuck would I know?

The job posting I’d found promised a remote location and isolated conditions; it seemed like a warning or disclaimer, but it sounded pretty fucking ideal in my mind. But being here, surrounded by all kinds of nothing with mountains in the distance... shit was different. I was alone, and I had to hope that I stayed that way, but it was out of my control. I didn’t have anywhere to run to and no convenient ventilation system to skulk around in, waiting for the coast to be clear.

I had a plan, dammit.

I needed to stick to the plan.

It never hurt to know what resources were available, so I circled the gas station, bus, and fruit stand, looking for alternative entrances. If it hadn’t been so slippery, I would’ve climbed up to check the roofs too, but everything was sealed up so tight, I doubted anything shy of a crowbar would get me inside. Huddling up and waiting out the weather under the food truck wasn’t an option either; it was up on blocks but too narrow to provide any kind of dry patch underneath it. Puddles on the parking lot around the bus had spread, and the shiny rainbows on the surface let me know I’d be lying in motor oil and gasoline.

Nothing for me here. If shit went sideways, this wouldn’t be a useful place to hide, and the first place anyone would look.

Not that I expected trouble, my new employer seemed to be solid. He’d made the entire process crazy-easy, and the email with the bus ticket came with extremely thorough instructions. Excessively thorough, bordering on telling me which stall to use in the bathroom in Durango. As someone

who has implemented a plan or two in my lifetime, I appreciated the eye for detail.

Tai's mom, Vernita, drove me to the bus station in Gallup, distant enough from the rez in case anyone was paying attention, and left me there with far more than what I had when I arrived. She and her family — the entire community, really — took care of me from the moment the Carrier unloaded me onto the floor of their little post office. In his defense, the Carrier tried to dump me gently onto the floor, but the bins were never intended for human cargo and the wheel slipped under my weight, sending me sprawling. I must've been quite a sight, naked except for "Mama Chandler, Hopi Rez, AZ" scrawled across my torso, with postage stamps stuck to every patch of intact skin I could reach.

I'd sent the rez vaccine a few weeks earlier, and they'd felt obligated to me, so they took me in. But seeing the effort it took just to get clean water for most of the residents, my needy ass being around 24/7 wasn't sustainable. I couldn't continue to take advantage of Tai's family, they gave me enough just by getting me back on my feet.

I wasn't one hundred percent sure, but I thought Vernita might be NNC, maybe even someone important in the Native Nationalist Coalition, so my being there put her in a dangerous position. There was little chance that Beast followed me, and the postal workers took many, many precautions along the way, but it still wasn't a guarantee. Vernita had her own people to look after, her own battles to fight, and she didn't need to get involved in a war with a rabid biker over *me*.

I swore her to silence, and as soon as possible, I started making plans. I might still piss blood, but I could travel.

Fuckin' hell. They'd beat the fuck out of me.

Nope. No. *Not going there.*

At first, I'd just been looking for a rental, a place to hole up for a few months and get my head together, but the world got weird in the years I'd been inside the walls of Salem. The internet was still a vast repository of the strangest shit, and you could buy virtually anything and get it shipped through the

mail, but there was a significant lack of *location* information. No one wanted to draw attention to livable places, so there wasn't anything like real estate for sale, apartments to lease, or vacation rentals. And no one paid rent anyway, not when you could find tens of thousands of cozy fixer-uppers or abandoned suburban dream homes, as long as you were willing to clean out the dead bodies.

The bigger issue than whether a place was livable was that no one trusted strangers. I'd heard it in bits and pieces during the eleven days back in Illinois, when I was trying so hard to keep anyone from figuring out that I had no fucking idea what the world had become. It would've led to questions I couldn't — *wouldn't* — answer. I got more information on the rez, but a lot of them were sheltered about the way things were beyond their borders. Those that knew weren't talking, supporting my theory about their NNC connections. Instead of making people uncomfortable by interrogating them about the state of the union, I gave myself a couple days to recover and then went down one internet rabbit hole after another.

It didn't take long for civilization to collapse. Not completely, not entirely. But enough.

Things got bad the first year and even worse, the second. I'd gotten limited exposure by semi-regularly sneaking off the base in the early days to read news stories and what I found on social media without having any personal connections, but swiftly realized it was all even less reliable than usual. The interwebs were throttled and redacted up the ass. Even formerly credible sites reported propaganda to cover up the national insecurity, and the Powers That Be blocked anything foreign. They'd restricted Canadian sites too, and after living in Michigan for so long, it was surreal to have to acknowledge that Canada actually was a different country. They weren't really Hufflepuff to our Slytherin, more like Hogwarts to our Durmstrang.

Once I was legit out and amongst the people, I saw things had improved over the first couple of years. Normalized, in a way. But individuals across all economic and class strata had tasted privation and danger, far more acutely than political

upheaval and a shortage of toilet paper, and had responded by closing ranks. Communities formed, whether by proximity or familiarity, and outsiders were not welcome. People found a place to dig their heels in and entrench, hoping to find others with the skills that they lacked, so real estate ads might be absent from the internet, but *employment* postings were plentiful.

The ad stood out. *Wanted: Governess. Remote location. Isolated conditions. Room and board included, food plentiful, wages adequate. Must speak Polish.*

I didn't know that "governess" was even still a job, and that intrigued me. The rest of it sounded perfect. But now here I was, in the heart of Sasquatch country just north of Chupracabraville, wondering if I was ready for this after all. Being out in the world.

Alone. Again.

*Nope.*

It only took a week to get through the hiring process and work out the logistics. First thing my new employer, Mr. Ian James, had me do was an online test to make sure I wasn't lying about my language proficiency. Since I didn't have to read and write it fluently — which I couldn't, not consistently — and merely needed to be verbal enough to talk to a child, I passed the test. My grandparents spoke Polish in the house until I entered kindergarten. English was my second language until I was five, then it became dominant, but I'd kept up some skill with the language over the years, and still dreamt in Polish as an adult. I listened to the audiobooks of *The Witcher* series regularly, and played the games without translation or dubbing. I'm not saying all of my language skills were Witcher-related, but I'm not saying they weren't *mostly* either.

After a few hours of watching videos online, I felt comfortable taking the test. It wasn't challenging at all, and suffered from a serious lack of references to bloedzuiger or kikumore. Not to mention Henry Cavill.

Once Ian James had my test results, he didn't seem to care about any other credentials and references, which should have

raised red flags, but it didn't. Maybe I should've been more suspicious, but instead I was relieved at how little I had to do. The job meant that I didn't need to continue to be a burden on Vernita and the rez, and I was used to adapting and surviving pretty much anything.

Everything about it was perfect for me, in my situation, fueling my complacency. Me and a kid or two — he didn't specify, though I doubtless should've asked — left alone in the middle of nowhere, by some rich dude who hadn't noticed there'd been an apocalypse. Was it 2023 again, and the kid named Aesli? WHEN CAN I START?

The answer: as soon as I got my ass on a bus heading northeast into the mountains.

Ian James made arrangements for a ride from the bus terminal to something he called "The Ranch," where I would quarantine for four days. I had no problem with any of that, and good on him for not just trusting my word about immunity, but I didn't do anything blind if I had a choice, so I'd made my own plans. Because I'm a planner. And I knew a bus schedule was barely a suggestion even before the world curled in on itself, trying to protect the soft bits.

I was worried that my plan would be thwarted at first, we were still on time as far as Farmington and had an hour-long stop at the station before continuing north. I relaxed a little when we hit a four hour delay in Durango because of a weather-related obstruction between there and Bayfield; I wasn't paying too much attention, but it was either rocks or mud on the highway because of the rain. Maybe water, could've been flooding. I was a bit checked out.

I hadn't been hungry — for the last, oh, two weeks? — but I forced myself to eat in Durango, at a cluster of food stands nearby, then retreated to a corner seat inside where I tried not to pull a weapon whenever anyone came near me. Not that anyone seemed threatening, and grinding up on strangers wasn't a thing anymore since it could kill you, but I had trouble adjusting after what had happened. That amped-up vigilance made it hard for me to focus on official announcements like what caused the delay; I only knew my



bus boarded again because I watched the others I'd been riding near so carefully.

I'd had the same issues on the rez at first: getting anxious around too many new people, being all jumpy and spooking at loud noises. Anytime I heard a revving engine, despite cars and Harleys sounding nothing alike, I was convinced Beast had found me. I liked to think the NNC would try to protect me, and Beast didn't know where I was, but in any MMA-style cage match between logic and fear, there was no contest. Logic had rules, but fear wasn't rational. It was brutal and panic-inducing, and made you forget all common sense.

I eventually settled down and it got better. Traveling was a new challenge, but as soon as I arrived, those isolated conditions and remote location would relieve my stress. That's why I was here, and why I couldn't stay on the rez: I was looking for the cure my new job promised me.

I needed time to get my shit squared before heading back to Salem, and in theory, a quiet, low-key governess position with plentiful food was exactly what Dr. Mouse ordered. For patient Mouse. That didn't work. Eh, whatever, in theory it seemed ideal and my plan was solid. Then again, communism worked on paper too.

Ian James had his plan, and I had mine. Maybe if either of us had remembered that "no plan survives first contact with the enemy," things would've turned out differently.

Our mutual desperation may have been for very different reasons, and Ian James might very well be a solid citizen and all-around stand-up guy, but I was paranoid even before my time in Illinois. Getting the job may have been easy and efficient, but that was all the more reason not to go in blindly. I wouldn't be a good little girl and follow the instructions without question, and end up alone out in the middle of fucking nowhere, with no idea where I was or what the surrounding terrain was like.

Thus, the plan.

I'd found the posting on one of those anonymous classified ad sites where, in the Before Times, you could find a

roommate or rent an apartment, buy laying hens or an antique wardrobe. Find a job or a quick fuck. It was the biggest and most well-established of those types of websites, and ironically, it was a comfort to know how heavily the government monitored it. Their oversight meant I was unlikely to be responding to some kind of coded communication from a cartel or sleeper cell. Anyone of even moderate intelligence knew better than to include identifying information, it was all dummy email addresses and obfuscation to keep both parties safe until you connected, but fake information was difficult to vet these days without specialized tools or mad skills. The government had those things, and suffered a level of paranoia that outstripped even my own, so I could proceed with some confidence. And although the actual address was hidden, employment ads required the display of a geographical location and included a thumbnail-sized map highlighting a general area.

If the map reflected an urban area, the thumbnail was enough to give you an idea of the city or neighborhood, but not enough to nail down the exact location. You'd get that information from your new employer. If the thumbnail happened to cover the top of a mountain among fifty other mountains... "Eastern Colorado" was a broad area. The thumbnail map I had was just splotches of green and gray with a tiny fork of blue. Without knowing the magnification or additional intel, it could've been almost anywhere.

But I had my trip itinerary, and the drop-off location. I used Vernita's laptop to view the ad side-by-side with an actual map, one that I could zoom in and out. Starting from the crossroads that I now knew up-close and personal, I methodically searched until my head was throbbing and my eyeballs ached, but I found a place that matched the thumbnail image on the ad. That tiny, Y-shaped blue line indicating water finally led me to a random creek and a combination of road and terrain that matched the political view. Once I found it, I switched to satellite view.

There were two buildings of significant size within that geographic boundary: one of them was near the road, and the other was about a mile north with no discernable access. It had

a cluster of smaller buildings surrounding it. The one near the road had to be the house, and it looked huge —like multiple-swimming-pools-and-an-indoor-basketball-court huge — but what did rich people keep in off-site outbuildings? Stables? Guest houses? Sex dungeons where no one can hear the screams?

By morning, I'd know.

Mr. James's plan didn't account for heavy rain in the mountains, and he didn't account for me.

By the time the bus had dropped me off at what he'd termed a "station," it was off-schedule by at least six hours. No one waited to shuttle me around or knew when I'd arrived. The house was only about ten miles from the bus stop, a three hour walk. I'd spend a few hours looking around to confirm it wasn't some human trafficking outfit or worse — like a 364-day Christmas village or Sasquatch breeding facility — then walk back and figure out how to get to this Ranch place on my own. The plan was solid.

Thing was, I'd counted on delays, but I hadn't planned on how exhausted I'd be. And I hadn't planned on the rain, even though that caused the useful delays, or the elevation. It was miserable out— *I* was miserable, and I wasn't looking forward to the next eight hours, but I couldn't go into the job blind.

I survived because when I found myself hiking through hell, I just kept walking. A little misery wouldn't break me.



THE ONLY CELL phone Vernita could spare was an ancient thing that barely held a battery charge; it was for emergencies and to contact her when I arrived at my new job. It didn't have a screen, and the buttons to press — actual buttons — were so big that it had to be a My First Cell Phone meant for someone elderly and tech-phobic. I knew going in that it wouldn't be much use, lacking apps or GPS, so I had gone old-skool with printed tickets for the bus and paper maps. Instead of spending the never-ending bus ride navel-gazing and wallowing, I spent

my time memorizing the map, so it took me half a second to orient myself using the highway signs.

I moved the .22 Vernita gave me from my backpack to my coat pocket. Guns were easier to obtain than clean water or cell phones, though ammo was at a premium. The tribe had a reloader, but I still only took one clip full of bullets.

The pistol was in case of bears, of course, and I hoped the little peashooter's report scared them, because it wouldn't do much damage. My lingering injuries compromised my ability to aim and shoot: my fucked up fingers made pulling the trigger difficult, and aiming with any accuracy at speed had gone to shit with both arms having issues. The gun was a loud noise to frighten away wildlife, but the knife in my boot was for people. Anyone get close enough for me to use it, I'd find the strength.

I realized I'd been standing in the empty parking lot, staring off into space, for long enough that the bus was just a memory of diesel fuel and questionable decisions. I turned in a complete circle, taking one more look around before facing the direction I needed to go.

I gave myself a minute. I just needed a minute, then I'd get moving. Sixty seconds.

I glared at the highway, cursed at the darkness, and shook my fist at the sky. Because the other thing I hadn't anticipated? How much I didn't want to fucking walk. Anywhere.

My body hurt. It hurt a whole fucking lot, though substantially less now than it did a few weeks ago.

*Nope.* Not thinking about any of that. Not today, Satan.

I started walking.



IT SUCKED EVEN WORSE than I imagined. I kept telling myself "After the first mile, it'll get easier," but my self is a stupid lying bitch and deserves to be tarred and feathered in the town square. During the second mile, I consoled myself

with thoughts such as “Was that a mountain lion in the bushes? Maybe it’s hungry!” and the third mile was just a masterclass in profanity.

At least the clothes Vernita and the tribe put together for me kept me (mostly) dry and (somewhat) warm.

On the strength of my relationship to the rez, Vernita solicited donations from the community, since nothing in her house fit me. Tai and his brother had clothes there, but anything they left behind could fit two of me — horizontally for sure, and probably vertically too — and Vernita was almost a foot taller, and at least forty pounds heavier.

Most of the clothes I ended up with had belonged to a young teenager who died from Janus less than two weeks before I sent the vaccine. If I’d been his mom, I would’ve been hella resentful about the timing. She was a better person than me, because she was incredibly gracious and nice, and said her son would’ve appreciated that all his friends and cousins were now safe because of me.

The oilskin jacket I wore came from him, it was his hunting coat, and the detachable hood was the only reason I could make this trip in this weather. It was huge on me, but that worked in my favor: not only did the hood extend quite a ways beyond my face to keep the rain off, but the coat itself was big enough that I had several thick layers on underneath. I was wearing a little girl’s camisole, a long-sleeved t-shirt, one of Vernita’s sweaters with the cuffs folded up, and a hooded sweatshirt that came down to mid-thigh. The hoodie and the baggy, rolled-up jeans were from the same kid as the coat, along with another pair of jeans and a couple of shirts stored in my pack. Vernita had contributed a few things too, but my sneakers and the rest of it all belonged to younger boys and girls, and a ten-year-old girl supplied my new prized possession, my backpack.

She might’ve outgrown her Barbie phase, but I sure the fuck hadn’t. The bag might’ve been worn out and beat up, but that particular shade of pink gave me a little shot of joy every time I saw it.

Hopefully Ian James didn't expect formal dress, and my cobbled-together wardrobe would hold up until I had money and the ability to go shopping. But this was what happened when you dropped in unexpectedly, naked and covered in canceled stamps.

At the first distribution center, the post office employees tried explaining why they couldn't give me anything to wear or even a blanket, but I was so out of it I can't really remember everything they said. It came down to some post-Janus safeguards about not being able to modify any packages, or the "sender" was within their rights to demand it be returned. Since I didn't think to write a return address on my boob while I was scrawling a destination across my belly — writing upside down and left-handed because my right arm was a little fucked up — they'd have to take me back to the drop location where I was picked up or turn me over to the bikers lurking outside.

That first distribution center sent out multiple trucks at the same time as the one I was on, and only sent out groups of trucks for the next 24 hours. At the second distribution center I passed through, they told me that the places those other trucks ended up did the same thing as them. It was a coordinated effort, with each driver carrying the message on to their next destination, spreading the ranks of the motorcycle club stalking me so thin that it didn't matter how many chapters Beast tried recruiting, they couldn't keep up with the post office.

Those postal employees were such sticklers for rules and regulations that they didn't give me a blanket, but they transported me 1,400 miles in less than a day, and made sure that no one followed me or took me back. I was okay with the cold, I covered myself in mail.

But seriously, the rules-following was a bit out of hand. When I was delivered to the loading dock of the post office on the reservation, the first thing the old woman working in the back did was bang something against my fucked-up shoulder. She pressed hard enough that I shrieked in pain and yelled that her mother fucked a wombat, earning me a hell of a glare from

her. I didn't regret the insult one bit when I realized that she'd *canceled one of the stamps* that the others had missed earlier.

Later on, I'd be able to appreciate their borderline-sociopathic adherence to the postal regulations, but at the moment? *Fucked a motherfucking wombat.*

I'd have given anything for a nice mail delivery truck and commando Carriers as I trudged up yet another slope without ever getting to go down — *heh hehe* — with my body aching so much I swear I could even feel my eyelashes.

Vernita tried to get me to wait. She insisted it was too soon. She begged me to let her contact *them*, tell them where I was — and when I lost my shit, she backed off and swore she wouldn't say a word, but I knew...

The countdown had started, and it was only a matter of time until she told Tai or his brother. For my own good.

She didn't understand, though, that *Azzie could not* leave Salem without me. She was way too fucking sick, well beyond the point where Operation: GTF0 could succeed, especially if she was trying to pull it off on her own. Even if she had Tai and his brother, it would be too much. But there was no way in hell she'd stay in Salem if she thought I needed her, so I had to disappear. I had to.

Eventually, Vernita would tell her I was alive but that I'd left. I didn't think she'd tell Azzie about the job, because Vernita at least understood that I needed time, and Azzie would wait for me to come back because she knew she was my priority. She'd stay put in Salem because that's where I'd go, and when enough time had passed, she'd think something happened on my way back to delay me. She might even give up on me.

That might be for the best.

I'd go back, but not just yet. I needed a few months in a remote location, in isolated conditions, to get my shit together so that I could be the person she needed me to be. So that I could be strong for her again, not whatever this thing was that I'd become.

This wasn't me. This was *Janie*.

And I fucking hated that weak, helpless bitch.



## CHAPTER NINE

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IT WASN'T the first time that I found myself in a situation that I might not survive — not even the first time this month — but it was the first time that I legitimately thought I could die slipping on a puddle and falling off a cliff.

It also wasn't the first time that I thought to myself, “there's a good chance I'm going to die and they'll never find the body,” and that was a weird feeling. I wondered if I made poor life choices.

My legs ached. My back ached. Between the bruised ribs and the altitude, I couldn't take a meaningfully deep breath. My hands and feet were numb from the cold and damp, yet my still-splinted fingers throbbed dully along with my heartbeat. My right arm just flat-out hurt, and my left shoulder decided it wanted to ache again when it was the only thing besides my face that had recovered.

Except my throat. The doctor claimed it was all healed up, and the raw and painful feeling that lingered was most likely psychosomatic and trauma-based; I half-believed him because *before*, the coughing had been agonizing. Now it only hurt because of my ribs, and maybe a little of my throat. Never realized how many muscles were involved with coughing, either, so it was something I avoided.

I was a mess, but I was fine. Juvie delivered worse beatings, some of those girls had a huge boner for me, but I was a kid then and bounced back quicker even when bones broke. In my current dotage, I'd moved and grumbled like a little old lady the first couple days on the rez, jumping at

shadows and limping around hunched over and trying not to cry, but I was better now. A ten miles, uphill in the rain, was beyond hellish — and I wasn't even thinking about the walk back at this point — but I kept going. Because the alternative was putting myself in a potentially dangerous situation, blind and ignorant.

So instead, I put myself in an *absolutely* dangerous situation, but at least I was in control of it.

It was so dark on the road, and I was so freaking cold. And thirsty. I'd drank the last of my water on the bus, assuming I'd be able to buy more at the bus station at my drop-off, not realizing how loosely that term "station" could be applied. At first, I'd tilted my head back and at least gotten some rainwater, but it had eased off in the last hour and was now more of a dull trickle than a deluge. Just enough to keep my clothes and feet soaked, but not enough to sate my thirst.

It was an overcast night in— March? April? Early spring, still bloody cold out, and I was far away from any trappings of civilization. Light pollution would've been nice, visibility was limited to my immediate surroundings. I followed the white line and hoped that I didn't go careening off the side, because I couldn't tell if there was ground over there or not. I estimated that I'd already walked at least six miles, if not more than that, but I had no way to know for sure. It was too dark to read my map. Not that there were any landmarks to orient around, anyway. I'd passed a few farms close to the bus stop, and all the crossroads that I'd memorized, making all the turns I'd needed to, and it should've been a straight shot once I'd turned onto this road that just went up. I was really, really hopeful this was the right road, because there was no light except for the occasional moment when the clouds would break and a star peek through. Not like there were street signs, either.

Between the sounds of my harsh, panting wheezes and the squelching sound of my shoes, I didn't even notice the growl of the motor until it was on top of me. Not until I realized there was a light coming up fast and then suddenly a motorcycle was right behind me, and my head swung around in shock.

The rider must not have seen me either, which doesn't say much about his powers of observation, what with the bright pink backpack strapped to my back. I watched in horror as he lost control of his bike and went into a skid that sent him rolling in one direction, and the bike scraping along the asphalt in another, but luckily neither one went over the side. Between the slickness of the road and the slope he was climbing, he hadn't been going very fast, so he ended up lying on his back not far from me, cursing violently.

I sort of half-jogged, half-stumbled up to him, concerned for his well-being but too exhausted to go any faster, and dropped down beside him to assess the damage. "I'm not a doctor or anything, but I was an EMT for a couple of years and have been working at a medical center. If you can tell me where you're injured, I'll do what I can to stabilize you and then call for help if you have a phone."

He clutched his wrist, rocking himself on the ground, as I hovered and felt useless. I was unwilling to touch him until I had an idea how bad it was, but his current movements would not do him any favors if he had a neck, head, or spinal injury. He didn't seem to, based on how all the various parts were moving and the lack of any pain in them, but these things can be deceptive. I'd have to leave him in place until medical help arrived, if there even was such a thing out here. More than likely, I'd keep him stationary until someone brought a backboard and a vehicle, and drove us to a local doctor.

What if there wasn't anyone local to treat this kind of injury?

At least he was conscious and seemed to be coherent. He was still on his back, writhing around and clutching his arm. He cursed fluently, but no longer shouted that I was the fucking undead walking aimlessly in the wilderness looking for brains to feed on.

I wanted to argue with him, tell him how completely ridiculous he sounded. A zombie wouldn't have hesitated. If I was one of the flesh-eating undead, I'd have been on him as soon as he hit the ground, scooping out grey matter. It was far likelier to find a spectre or a White Lady haunting the

lonesome backroads, and none of those feed on brains. He just sounded ignorant.

He also spewed all kinds of nasty things about the road's mother, and possibly mine, but since she was long dead and a terrible person, I didn't take offense. I was only half paying attention to what he was saying anyway, because I was too busy objectifying his body.

Even sprawled out on the cement being spit on by clouds, in the inconsistent glare of the headlight that faced somewhat in our direction, I could tell he was tall. Super tall, around six and a half feet, with giant mitts for hands, enormous feet in heavy black boots, and everything in between was thick muscle and sinew. He was mammoth. I might've been intimidated if it weren't for a few compelling reasons: I had a gun, he wasn't wearing motorcycle club colors, and he was clutching his wrist and growling like a wounded animal. Like a humongous owlbear, a really fit one, with its paw caught in a trap.

I let him rant as I assessed the injuries I could see: besides borderline-nasty road rash along his one leg, the only other damage seemed to be his wrist or arm — couldn't tell the extent of it yet — and his pride. More concerning, though, was that his helmet was pretty battered.

Eventually he settled down into pained groans, and I helped him unclip it and pull it off.

Until then, I'd only been able to ogle his body because his helmet, his pandemic mask, and the situation were keeping the rest under wraps and my libido under control, but as soon as we got the helmet off, he ripped off the mask too. Even with the dim-yet-somehow-blinding light and all the shadows distorting everything, he wasn't a butterface.

Buttisface?

That's a term that needed a gender-neutral version that made sense. Regardless, nobody would look at this man and say "His body is bangin' but his face...?" because even in the broken light of a tilted headlight reflecting off wet asphalt, he was a good looking dude.

Dark hair fell in waves past his shoulders, cut with sun-bleached streaks like he'd just rode up from the beach; even the sweaty bits along his hairline and the stress-sweat beading his forehead didn't detract from the gloriousness of those locks. He had a neatly trimmed, full beard and mustache that looked as soft as bunny fur, framing his lush mouth, and I'm a sucker for a manly beard. Especially one surrounding a bottom lip so full it had a crease in it, right down the center.

He had thick brows, the left pierced with a silver ring, over dark eyes of indeterminate color, the corners creased with tiny lines like he squinted against the sun, or laughed a lot. Those eyes were mesmerizing, they made me feel things I couldn't unpack at that moment, and they were also wild and filled with pain, and I needed — more than I ever needed anything else in my life — to soothe this man. To comfort him and relieve his pain.

I'll admit that I lost track of everything else while I stared at him. I was pretty sure he was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen; even more than Tai, and that seemed impossible.

It was... strange how physical beauty could somehow override instincts. It tricked us. We've been so programmed to equate beauty with goodness and morality that someone we found attractive immediately inspires trust. And a beautiful creature that's hurt or in trouble? Instant, overwhelming need to fix whatever was wrong. Damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead.

Later, I'd question why I didn't run. A man of this size, on a motorcycle, in an unfamiliar place when I was vulnerable and alone—the second the light hit me, I should've been gone. I should've been scurrying through the underbrush, ducking and weaving, looking for a place to go to ground like the goddamn rodent they named me after. But he wasn't wearing a cut or MC colors, so instead of running, I helped him sit up. I used my whole body to brace him upright, shoving my backpack behind him to provide rudimentary support. I didn't even care if it was sitting in a puddle because clothes could dry.

Once he was vertical, I fumbled around, helpless. I avoided looking at him, and I didn't know what to do—

“What do you need?” His voice was rough but deep and rich like hot chocolate for my ears.

“A light.” My voice, thin from straining to be heard over him, sounded thready and almost breathy.

He dug into his pocket, awkward and favoring the one arm, and handed me a phone. I held it up for him so he could swipe the screen and find the flashlight app. He smirked at me as I used it to test him for a concussion, having his eyes follow the light as I moved it around.

“Coulda told you my head was fine,” he chuckled, and forget the hot chocolate, that was caramel sauce on my ears. Salted caramel. With a dash of cayenne.

“Mmhmm,” I agreed. “Because people with head injuries are always so accurate with their assessments of said injuries. I know this isn't an MRI, but I can at least tell that your eyes are moving in tandem, dilating and contracting the same, and you aren't light sensitive. It's a useful evaluation,” I stated, calm and professional.

“You a nurse?”

“No, EMT. Used to be,” I amended. “But I've had to deal with a lot of head injuries in my time.”

He snorted, and I froze in place. His dismissal offended me, and he noticed it because he attempted to bumble through an explanation. “Nah, I trust your training. I was just — you said *your time*— like you've got decades of experience... what're you, sixteen? Seventeen?”

“I'm twenty-seven,” I replied, my voice giving him frost bite as I sat back on my heels. Pretty sure I was twenty-seven, but maybe I was twenty-eight? Did some math, then decided it was close enough. “I've got experience. I was an active EMT before moving into a lab, and I'm certified in First Aid and CPR. Have been since I was eighteen.” It was one of the first things I did when I left juvie. I already knew I wanted EMT training, and it was my first step towards that goal.

He grunted, and I guessed that was the best I would get out of him. I set the phone down, light shining up, and reached for his wrist. His leather jacket sleeves zipped up almost to his elbow, so I thought I might access it without requiring him to remove the jacket completely, but when I grabbed his hand and elbow and tried to straighten his arm out, he resisted. “Leave it.”

“I need to make sure you didn’t break any—” I tried again to pull his arm straight, tugging it away from his body, and he batted me away with his other hand. He knocked me off balance, and I flopped onto my side on the wet cement.

“I said leave it,” he growled, glaring at me.

I gave a big, vocal, disgusted sigh and rolled back to my knees, resting on my heels again. Now I was soaked up to my hip on one side. Asshole. “Fine. I’m guessing there’s no point in trying to check your leg, either?” I scowled at him, my question laced with a thick, gooey syrup of sarcasm.

“None whatsoever.” A smidgen of amusement leaked out from behind the gruffness.

I sighed, looking around. We both needed to get off the wet concrete before chills set in. He might’ve been a big, tough, manly dude, but the shock of the adrenaline drop after the accident would set in regardless of how sculpted his muscles were, how pretty his eyes, how—

Gawd. I caught myself gawking at him like a teenager talking to the cutest boy in school. I shook out my arms and rolled my shoulders — a super bad idea — trying to work out the tension. Until then, I had been ignoring the various aches and pains that had been plaguing me for weeks, it wasn’t the time or place to deal with old injuries when his new ones needed to be front and center, but pretending they didn’t exist wasn’t smart either. Things twinged and twanged and protested in a way that had me catching my breath and waiting it out, hoping the stabbing sensation would fade. *This too shall pass*. Eventually, it did.

I needed to get him up off the ground, but I couldn’t lift him in the condition I was in. I looked around at our

surroundings, but only the Harley seemed like it had potential. If I could stand on one side of it and hold it steady, he could brace against it to get to his feet.

“Can I pick up your bike and walk it over here?” I asked, studying the massive frame of steel, chrome, and rubber, wondering how I could hoist it up with my ribs and shoulder already screaming at me. I needed his permission, regardless, because you don’t touch a man’s bike without it, just like you don’t touch a gamer’s dice.

“I think you’ve done enough, Zombie Girl,” he said in such a reasonable tone that it took me a moment to understand him, and another to shrug off the weird feeling when I realized he’d been studying me the whole time.

“You— wha—I didn’t cause your accident!” My voice was just shy of a shriek, and I glared at him through the coughing my outburst triggered, covering my mouth with both hands. Of all the ridiculous—

“You did,” he said, calm and collected to an irritating degree. “You’re wearing dark clothes, walking along a dark road in the rain with your head down. You looked up, and it was just this pasty white head with sunken eyes floating above the ground... you scared the fuck out of me.”

I rolled my eyes above my hands. He watched me as the coughing slowed, until I swallowed without feeling glass shards in my neck, and I rasped out, “Pasty?! I’m not pasty! I’m just a little pale!” which started me coughing again. I might be a bunker-dwelling-white-girl, but I didn’t have the pallor of the undead.

“Ghostly,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “Corpse-like. I rounded a curve in the road straight into a horror movie.” He seemed awfully pleased with himself, like that scored him points, but I had no energy to continue arguing with him. Then his face sobered up, and he eyed me with an intensity that reminded me why I should be afraid. “And if you coughing on me gives me Janus, you’ll wish you got the chance to die from it compared with what I’ll do to you.”

“Immune,” I got out between painful hacks, “no risk.”



He narrowed his eyes at me. “You got some other virus? Why are you coughing?”

Later on, I’d wonder why he seemed so casual about it; despite the threats and demands for answers, he was super calm about the possibility that I could infect him with something.

“Injury, not illness. Throat is fucked up,” I croaked out.

“You vaccinated?” he asked, his eyes darting around my face looking for what? Signs of deception? Illness?

“Survivor,” I lied. It was the most plausible answer and wasn’t untrue.

“Congrats,” he said cynically, and I shrugged, trying to gather enough saliva into my mouth to swallow it down and coat my throat a bit. It wasn’t working. The drizzle coming down was pathetic: too thin to be useful, yet annoyingly steady and cold.

After a minute of silence as he continued to study me and I fought to get my breathing and speaking abilities back under control, I got my shit sorted enough to examine our situation. Although I still wasn’t thinking clearly at all, because if I had been, I would’ve been running.

I picked up his phone again and stared at the screen, unable to comprehend what I was seeing. No bars. None. The phone wouldn’t connect.

“Who’re you lookin’ to call?” he asked, eyeing me with suspicion. “There’s no service up here. Total dead zone.”

I stared at him, exhausted. “I— I guess I’ll have to walk back a bit to call for help,” I said, trying really hard not to cry. “You need to tell me who to call. I can help you get off the road to wait. It isn’t safe for you here...” I looked around for something useful to help him stand up on that leg, since he didn’t give me permission for his bike. Maybe a sturdy branch to—

He stood up on his own, with a pained string of curses, then limped over towards his fallen steed. I scrambled to catch up to him but he ignored me, picking up the massive machine

using just one hand, steadying it, then getting the kickstand into place. He spent a full minute inspecting it for damage as I fretted next to him, bouncing on my heels and restraining my hand from reaching for him in distress over what damage he could do to himself.

Unlike its rider, the Harley Road King had a few superficial scratches and a bent mirror, but that was it. He scowled at it and then glared down at his left hand. I couldn't tell in the shitty lighting whether it was turning black and blue, or even swelling, not without removing his jacket and comparing it to his other arm and hand, but it seemed to be paining him.

"You might've broken your wrist," I said, wincing. I didn't see him hit the ground or how, but I watched the bike skid past me, and that looked bad enough. "That's why you're gonna need help. You can't clutch with that hand..." I trailed off and his head shot around, his brow furrowed.

"You know how to ride?" he asked, and I winced again. It'd just slipped out, and now— "Answer me."

"Yeah," I replied, defeated. "Never anything this big, my feet won't touch—"

"That's fine," he interrupted. "I can handle that from the bitch seat. Get your shit and my helmet." He turned back to the bike, dismissing me like I'd just jump when he says— "Now. It's late. I should be home."

Apparently, I was working the clutch.

I scurried over to my backpack and his helmet, noting my bag was soaked through on the bottom as I hauled everything back to him. He looked at my sodden Barbie backpack with disgust. "I ain't putting that in my storage, and my saddlebags are full. You sure you need this?"

"Umm... yeah... it's—" *Pretty much everything I owned, donated by nice people who didn't have much shit to spare.*  
"Yeah. I need it."

He shoved the helmet in the compartment under the seat, then sighed as he lengthened the straps as far as they would

go, slid it over his bad arm, and up onto his back. It was way too tight on him, and he gave up trying to maneuver it in place. I wanted to laugh at the sight of this big dude and his tiny Barbie backpack, but I was afraid if I did, he might toss it over the cliff.

He got on the machine first, sliding all the way back to the bitch seat, and patted the saddle. “Hop on.”

I grimaced but climbed on, the huge machine forcing me to spread my legs uncomfortably wide. I had to scoot far forward on the seat to reach the pedals and handlebars, which he’d rotated up because of his height, and to avoid contact with him.

It was a wasted effort. He slid up against my ass and wrapped one beefy arm around my middle, pressing tight against me. It was dangerously close to memories I refused to revisit, so I blocked it out. I blocked it all out. I compartmentalized the fuck out of what was going on in my brain and dismissed everything but the most pressing need of this moment in time, this situation we were in: continuing to walk wasn’t possible. I had to help him.

“You sure you’re twenty-seven?” he interrupted my complete concentration on pretending he didn’t exist, his amusement mixed with suspicion, and my heart raced. “I’ve seen children bigger than you.”

“I’m sure you have,” I agreed, jaw clenched, my anxiety calming as my brain formulated a comeback. “In whatever mountain kingdom your giant kinfolk live in, I’m sure the children are sized proportionately. Here, in the human lands, children are much smaller.”

I swear I heard him chuckle, but he covered it up. “Fair enough,” he said, voice flat, pushing us forward and off the kickstand, making sure the behemoth was in neutral. “I’ll try to keep my kinfolk from using your bones to pick their teeth when we get there.”

“Speaking of...”

“Just do your job. I’ll get us there.”

And with that, I squeezed the clutch as he fired up the engine, the immediate snarl settling into a deep rumble. It was almost effortless, how we worked in tandem: no jerks, no stutters, just a smooth glide that carried us forward on the road.



IT WAS the most uncomfortable ride I'd ever experienced.

The bike was way too big for me, sized for his massive proportions. His feet rested on the pegs with mine on top, working the rear brakes and shifting gears. His right hand worked the front brake lever and throttle, while mine rested uselessly on top of his; my splinted fingers kept me from working the controls but my body wouldn't allow me to drive with one hand resting on my lap. I'd tried, and kept flailing my arm up every time I stopped concentrating on keeping it still, until he grunted out a command to have me shadow over his movements. Same thing with my feet. My left hand and arm were the only things doing any of the real work, and it wasn't enough to distract me from the close physical contact that was taking me back to somewhere I didn't want to be.

I was ten the first time Beast sat me up front and had me shadow his movements, just like this.

I slammed doors shut in my mind, put pillows over faces and held them down, and fled my memory palace to the remotest corner of the Yorkshire moors, hiding amongst the sheep and gorse; I compartmentalized my brain back into a previous century. Nothing could touch me there.

At least having a furnace pressed up against me kept me from shaking hands, clattering teeth, and shivers.

I was so busy trying to suffocate my memories, keep us upright and in a relatively straight line on unfamiliar roads — in awful weather while totally exhausted — that I wasn't paying much attention to anything else. Including where we were going. All my mind retained was *up*: twisty, curvy roads

that wound up the side of a mountain, switching back occasionally just to fuck with my steering.

Eventually he had me turn onto a stretch of dirt road, two narrow wheel tracks bisected with knee-high weeds, looking grown-over and abandoned. Not too far in was a rusty gate, and I had to hop off the bike to open it, watch him walk the bike through, close it again, and then climb back on and seat myself fully against him again. If I wiggled my ass while moving back into position, it was totally by accident, and I could legit ignore the hiss and muted chuckle behind me over the sound of the engine.

The whole ride, I didn't hesitate once, or look around for a potential escape route. My brain was so divorced from the reality of my situation — I was *flirting* with him! — trying to keep from the breakdown creeping up on me, that I never once questioned any of it. It all seemed perfectly reasonable to be driving this handsome stranger down a deserted road in the middle of the night.

I didn't question *any* of the weirdness, like how the road surface changed. We crossed over a deep ditch on a one-lane bridge, the iron supports almost fully grown over with weeds and the railings streaked with rust, with gaps along the edges where the road had crumbled down into the ten-foot drop leading to a creek meandering along the bottom. The gravel track circled along the edge of a small pond framed with cattails and sharp spikes of dusty, winter-dead grasses, the ground sloping steeply away from the edge of the road was marshy and treacherous. Past the pond, trees sprung up to form a canopy overhead, and the dirt and gravel track became smooth, unlined asphalt under their cover. It was barely even wet under the thick ceiling of pine boughs.

I might've noticed the gate on foot, but I never would've turned onto the road. There was no way that Mr. Ian James, wealthy landowner with a Polish-speaking ward, would tuck his mountain getaway back behind a decrepit, rusty gate with a "No Trespassing, No Hunters" sign attached to it with loops of wire. A sign pierced by buckshot. But this road we were

cruising down now? This took money to maintain, even in an apocalypse.

Was this my employer? How did it never occur to me to ask the man's name, or where we were going? I'd been so lost in my head, I wasn't even sure we were on the same road that I'd needed to take, or even the same mountain.

And what the fuck was the funny feeling down south when I considered being this man's employee? Were those *tingles*?

It had to be the vibrating monster between my legs, there was no way that my vagina was suddenly waking up and taking notice of a *biker* I'd met on a deserted road out in the middle of nowhere, one that could snap me like a twig.

If only my brain had woken up too.

We rode for a long-ass time through the mix of towering pines and whatever leafless regular trees these were, until suddenly the forest ended at a fifteen foot-high, sheet-metal wall topped with razor-wire, pierced by a steel and razor-wire gate. With a guard tower.

A goddamn guard tower.

A floodlight sparked to life, illuminating the entire road and blinding me. I reared back into the brick wall sitting behind me, my arm instinctively covering my face, causing me to wince as pain bit through my brain fuzz.

The motorcycle engine abruptly stalled out again, making it really easy to hear him. He tilted forward and spoke right into my ear, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine until his words registered, then shivers were replaced with shards of ice. "Welcome to the Apocalypse Riders' mothership, Jayne Stone. It's not exactly how you were supposed to arrive, but then again, you should be in quarantine right now, not walking here on your own. Care to explain?"

No.

No.

No. *Nonononononononono.*

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think.

I scrambled to get away, off the bike and into the woods, but too little, too late. The time to run was back when I first heard the Harley rolling up behind me.

I was off balance and panicking, my attempt to flee was clumsy. My foot got caught between his leg and the bike. The last thing I remember before sweet, dark oblivion overtook me was the sound of the gate sliding open and a muffled voice behind me yelling, “oh shit!” as if through thick glass.

I toppled off the bike and my face slammed into the ground.

## CHAPTER TEN

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IT TOOK me a long time to wake up. I was warm, so warm, and so comfortable. Sleeping on a damn cloud...

This wasn't my bed in the bunker. This wasn't the guest room at the rez, or the cot—

Then I remembered: the bus stop. The walk up into the mountains. The accident, the scary biker dude... who didn't scare me at all, but should've.

I remembered driving his bike with him behind me just like when I learned— no, none of that.

The fence and the guard tower. The light. Flashing back to —

Nope. None of *that* either.

Then biker dude whispering in my ear. He knew my name, he was— I had to get out, I couldn't stay. This was— Wrong. This was wrong. I couldn't be here.

I scrambled up out of the bed, looking around frantically for my stuff. My backpack was by the door, and— what the fuck was I wearing? A Motörhead t-shirt, *not mine*, and that's *all*. No underwear... and a little sore between my legs but that could be from the motorcycle after so long? I didn't know, and that's the worst feeling in the world.

All the nopes.

“It's my shirt. All of your clothes were wet. Doc thought it would be better if you didn't lie around in them. You would've messed up the bed too.”



The voice was deep, and slightly less emotional than a computer.

I moved quickly, putting the bed between me and the man sitting in a wingback armchair in the corner of my room. I locked my eyes on him, and folded my arms around my center to make the shirt stay in place; the movement pulled on the tight skin surrounding my burn, and the stabbing, itchy pain woke me up completely and cleared all the fuzz from my brain.

If the angle of his knees in relation to the floor and seat were any indication, he was another super tall man, but not nearly as bulky as the other one. He had long arms and legs, big hands and feet, and the fingers gripping the arms of the chair were long and blunt. He wore two giant watches on his left wrist, and that arm, the one with the watches on it, had a full sleeve of ink from his second knuckle up to where it continued on under his shirt. What I could see of the tattoo looked like the flesh had been flayed away from his body to reveal a complex machine of copper and brass fittings underlying his skin, a steampunk automaton skeleton and musculature. It was gruesome and beautiful.

He was staring off to the side, his narrow face calm and expressionless.

It was an objectively handsome face, all the features symmetrical and proportionate. I wanted to pound it with a hammer until it was nothing but bloody pulp.

He had on heavy, square-framed glasses, and was sporting a teal colored mohawk with blonde roots, his scalp inked but he hadn't shaved down around the mohawk recently — there was a layer of dark blonde fuzz, a layer of velvety new growth like the stuff that covers deer antlers, covering the tattoo. I had an impulse to run my hand over it to see if it was as soft as it looked, but I fought it.

The ear I could see was spiked with piercings around the outside rim, with a small gauge in the lobe; I don't like the giant holes some people sport, the stretched out flesh of their lobes dangling there like rubber bands, but his gauge was just

big enough that I could thrust the tip of my tongue in like I was fucking his ear, if he'd let me. If I wanted to.

Fuck... if this had been a month ago and I woke up to this man in my room back in Salem? I'd totally want to. Possibly more than once.

His head swung back around to face me. The eyes that never quite made contact with my own were big and amber brown — lighter than giant biker dude — with long, lush eyelashes hidden behind the black-framed eyeglasses. He had a silver lip ring that he kept flicking with his tongue.

“Are you done? Studying me?” His eyes twitched but stayed focused elsewhere.

I considered him, then shook my head. “No. Stand up and turn around so I can check out your ass too.”

That got a response: his eyes widened and darted towards me, just for a moment, then returned to the side. Nothing else changed. No twist or curl to his lips, no tightening of his grip on the chair. Nothing.

He hesitated, then moved to stand up, but I stopped him. “Wait, I paid for this show, I want a good seat.” I moved back to the bed and sat on the edge, smirking at him. I adjusted my position, making sure the t-shirt stayed in place but that I also had an unobstructed view.

He studied me for a moment then got to his feet and circled the bed until he was in the middle of the room, where I could see him from tip to toe; he rotated in place, standing with his back towards me. “Fair is fair.”

I was right, he was tall, possibly even taller than the other one. Or maybe he only looked it because he was thinner — lanky, with nicely defined muscles but not a whole lot of bulk; his arms and legs were almost disproportionately long but not in a way that looked unnatural or grotesque, it gave him a lean, almost awkward grace. *Coltish*, like he hadn't quite adjusted to his body.

I'd expected motorcycle boots, but he was wearing black Converse high-tops on his large feet.

I hadn't been able to see his other arm in the shadows, but it also had a full sleeve on it. Similar to the left arm, his right had the skin peeling away to reveal bronze scales, gleaming and smooth in parts but stained and torn in others. I could also see the watches more clearly, and one was a fancy smart watch that he had turned to sit on the inside of his wrist; the other, facing out, was the biggest, most complicated steel and glass analog watch I'd ever seen, barbed with so many dials I was pretty sure he could use it to fly an airplane.

His cut clung to his broad shoulders, and the t-shirt underneath was slightly too small, like he was wearing something from his teens without realizing his body had filled out. Those jeans loosely hugged his ass and muscular thighs like they owed me money and this was the payback, and I considered the debt settled. As much as I hated to admit it, it was a *nice* ass, like he was a runner or swimmer. Or an Olympic-level figure skater. He had a Lukov-level ass.

Too bad that ass was hanging out under an Apocalypse Riders cut, "Colorado" spelled out along the bottom rocker. Fuckers owned the state. If I'd known—

He rotated back to face me, slowly, his body practically vibrating with tension, and it was enough to knock me off the dark path I was going down. His hands were clenching into fists and relaxing, almost rhythmically, but each time the squeeze was tighter, his knuckles were going whiter, as he waited for me to release him by staring off into the corner of the room, his face carefully blank. Since I didn't owe him shit, I didn't make it that easy. "You offered."

He shrugged one shoulder. "I didn't realize."

"Realize what?"

"How uncomfortable I'd feel, being made into a sexual object."

I snorted, and his chin jerked in my direction, forcing his eyes to follow for a split second before they darted away. "Believe me," I drawled out, leaning back on my hands on the bed, "when I make you into a sexual object, you'll know. And I won't be bothering to ask about your *feelings*."

That was complete bullshit, of course. I'd only dehumanize someone who was into it, and only after we'd agreed on how things would play out, but he didn't know me. And I found that making this man uncomfortable was my new favorite hobby.

Unexpectedly, he snickered, and the tension drained out of him. He moved back to the chair and gestured with his head at the side of the bed in front of him, like he expected me to sit there like a good little girl. I stayed where I was. He blinked, his brow furrowing for a few seconds then his face went blank again. "First question: why didn't you go to the cabins like I instructed?"

I stared at him, wondering what the fuck he was talking about. "You're Ian James?"

He hesitated, then shrugged one shoulder. "More or less. Fake name. Real job. You can call me Tesla."

"Okay, Tesla, I didn't get any instructions to go to any cabins—"

"The Ranch. They have cabins in the back. Everyone must quarantine for four days before coming here," he said as if by rote, studying the logo on my chest. He took in a deep breath then let it out in a huff. "Luckily you're immune, or the conversation we'd be having right now would be very different."

I nodded, solemn and serious, rolling my eyes internally. "That's a good policy. I guess maybe you should've explained it in the email."

Now he looked irritated. "I explained what you needed to know. You were supposed to— you had a ride to The Ranch. Instead, you were *walking* here. How did you know where to go?"

"The bus was six hours and some change late. There wasn't any ride waiting for me, and no place to go that was out of the rain, so I decided to walk."

"*Here*. You were walking here. How did you know?" He was getting frustrated, I could tell I was triggering something

for him. Maybe it made me a huge asshole, but *good*.

I shrugged. “Not hard to figure out.”

His fingers bit into the arm of the chair. “How?” he ground out from between gritted teeth, as if asking in a civil manner was taking more effort than he was capable of.

I sat upright, crossing my arms and smirking. I was no longer worried about displaying the goods, this man had no interest in my body. Only my mind. “Think about it.”

He swallowed, his throat moving with difficulty given the tension in his muscles. He was too angry to think clearly, and I felt an unreasonable pleasure in it.

I suspected that he understood I wasn't going to explain because he changed tactics.

“Second question: why did you panic.” It was phrased as a question, but so lacking in inflection that he sounded like he was already bored with the conversation and just asking as a courtesy. I didn't think that was the case at all.

“You've asked way more than one question.”

He scowled at my t-shirt. “The others were follow-ups to the first. Now we're at the second, and I imagine this will have follow-ups as well. Answer - the - fucking - question.”

“Don't like motorcycle clubs,” I said baldly, “I never would've taken the job if I'd known.”

For some reason, this answer caused him to relax. The corner of his mouth curled up in a satisfied half-smile, like he was back in control. “But you do know now. And you're here. Might as well make the best of it.”

I chuckled bitterly, pinching the bridge of my nose as I felt a headache tease at my forebrain. “No.”

His eyes flicked up to my face then away. Silence. Then, “Yes.”

I waited to see if he had more to add, and when he didn't, I carefully moved off the bed and towards my backpack, crouching next to it, keeping my legs together. I suspected

what I found: when I unzipped it, all of my clothes were inside, clean and carefully folded, but just my clothes. I removed the stack on top — what I'd been wearing yesterday — and began to get dressed. His eyes never strayed in my direction, so I felt comfortable swapping out his t-shirt for mine even without turning my back on him, something I was even less willing to do than flashing him my boobs.

He waited until I was dressed and looking around for my shoes before he spoke again.

“I’m not the diplomatic one,” he said, careful and slow, “or the friendly one. But someone needed to be here when you woke up, so you wouldn’t—”

“Trash the room? Break the windows trying to get out?”

“—be scared when you woke up. Doc gave Loki an oxy, which he took with eight shots of whiskey, and he’s still out cold. I was the only option.”

Loki. That was beautiful biker dude’s name.

*Focus.*

“That was pretty dumb of him.”

Tesla shrugged. “Oxy gives him nightmares, but he needed something.” He paused. “For his wrist, and it was all we had that was strong enough.” I wasn’t sure that answer was entirely truthful, but I also didn’t care given what thoughts were now circling my brain like sharks around chum.

“What did you give me?”

The eyes flickered, and I swear I saw him wince. “Ketamine.”

“IV or IM?” At his confusion, I clarified, “Intramuscularly. Vein or ass?”

“Initial in arm,” he shifted his weight, eyes stuck on the wall off to the side. “Follow-ups in ass and thigh.”

“How many doses?” I was remarkably clinical sounding, despite my emotional state, and that’s probably why he kept talking.

“Just the three. Total.”

“So about... an hour?” I was winging it. Most of what I knew about ketamine came from a conversation with Tai about field surgery and being an Army medic, and he’d had a lot to say about ketamine versus morphine. Spoiler alert: he considered ketamine a superior anesthetic in every way, so of course they mostly depended on morphine.

“Eighty minutes,” Tesla answered, bringing me back to the conversation.

“What did you do to me while I was out?” I asked, my voice remarkably steady considering I was back on track with wanting to beat this man to death. Preferably with my bare hands.

“Doc examined you. He did a physical and took some blood. He x-rayed your ribs, and I think he needs a urine sample. Necessary precautions.”

I looked down at the crook of my elbow and sure enough, needle marks.

“He ran a titer test.”

I nodded, expecting no less. “And?”

“You’re immune.”

I nodded again. “What else?”

He shifted in his seat, eyes darting around wildly. “You’re *very* immune.”

“What. Else.”

“Doc was concerned about the recent injuries. All the bruising on your ribs, arms, and legs. Bone bruises, he said. And the burns. Newly healed cuts and lacerations. Your shoulder... it had been dislocated?”

I nodded, reluctantly.

“There was some swelling there again, you jarred it when you fell. Your fingers too.”

I stared at him, waiting.

“Not that,” he finally said. “The only reason you aren’t still wearing your underwear was because it was soaking wet, looked like you sat in a puddle or something. Doc was concerned you’d get a yeast infection, so he removed it. We had you in a hospital gown until I got you upstairs.”

I stared down at the t-shirt pointedly.

He blinked at me. “When I tried putting you in the bed, you took off your clothes.”

Yeah, okay. That tracks.

“So I put my t-shirt on you.”

I wasn’t sure what to do with that, so I decided “I can’t even with you right now” was the best course of action.

“Where are my socks?” I asked, after digging through my bag and not finding any pairs. I looked around— “And my shoes.”

“You’ll get them back eventually.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“You don’t seem happy to be here, but I’m afraid you can’t leave. To lessen the risk, or at least slow you down, I kept your shoes and socks.”

“I’m not staying.”

“You are. And you’re going to tell me how you knew how to find this place.”

“Look,” I growled, leaning forward and resting my fists on the bed, drilling holes in his face with my burning glare even though he still couldn’t meet my eye, “I’m sorry for the inconvenience, that you need to find and vet another potential employee but that’s not my problem. At no point during our communication did you mention that this was a - goddamn - motorcycle - club and that’s unacceptable—”

“The governess job has been advertised for going on six months without a single qualified person responding until you. We have a little girl who has been unable to communicate with anyone for over - six - fucking - months. And you know how



to find this place, and that makes you a liability.” As uninflected as his voice had been, there was definitely something underlying his tone — frustration, maybe? — and a determination to keep me here.

It was infuriating and grated against every nerve, and I was stubborn enough to resent the fuck out of being told no, but... But. But he didn't have me by the hair, slamming me into the wall, to insist I'm staying. I wasn't shackled to the bed. He didn't addict me to drugs to keep me tethered to him like traffickers of old. He wasn't even threatening me.

He sedated me and had a doctor exam me without consent, more thoroughly than was warranted by my current condition, but it wasn't out of malice and it wasn't abusive, and I'd experienced both enough to know the difference. He saw things I'd rather he didn't, but there was no going back. His main concern was a child, and the safety of his people, and this wasn't Illinois. It was possible I could find a way to live with it.

He'd pay for it, eventually, but I could live with it for a time because this wasn't Salem either. There weren't two thousand soldiers bent on keeping me contained. As soon as I had my bearings, I would find a way out. When I was ready, I would leave.

“Are you planning to starve me along with keeping me barefoot?” I sneered, and he blinked a few times, as if he expected more of a fight.

“No. You've missed regular breakfast time, but today is an exception.”

“Fine. You can explain the fucking job to me while I eat.”

His head bobbed, once, and he stood up from the chair. “The stairs are out your door and to the right.”

I'd decided to play nice (for now), and up until that moment, I hadn't really noticed my surroundings. I made a quick scan of the room I'd slept in as I made my way over to the door, but I was getting more and more anxious the closer he got, until I wasn't really able to see or process anything.

Instead, my brain was waving around its arms and screaming “Danger, Will Robinson!” at the top of its lungs.

And that’s when I stopped.

I stopped walking, definitely, but I also stopped caring: about the impression I was leaving, or if I was making the people around me uncomfortable, or whether I came across as weird or crazed or whatever. Not that I ever seemed too concerned about any of that in the past, but just because I didn’t show it didn’t mean I didn’t feel it. And at that moment, I was letting that feeling go.

I was in a strange place, in a vulnerable position. This person was taking steps to make sure I couldn’t leave. This person was doing things that violated my personal boundaries *and* my body. So why did I care if he was comfortable?

“You first,” I said, staring down at the floor. It was dark wood, and shiny. Clean. That’s all I registered.

He came to a stop, and I turned sideways so my back wasn’t to him. I saw his hands twitch out of the corner of my eye, where they were hanging by his sides. “You first,” he insisted, an edge to his voice.

I peered up at him, *way* up, shaking my head. I know he saw it even though he was looking off to the side. “No. You crossed a line, and I’m not walking with you behind me. You lead or we’ll stand here for the rest of eternity, staring at the floor, wishing to be elsewhere. That’s the price you pay— *one* of the prices,” I amended quickly, not wanting him to think it was going to be that easy for me to cave. Retribution must be had, when I could actually get it.

His hands twitched again. He made a sound in the back of his throat somewhere between a grunt and a hum, and walked past me out the door. I took a deep breath.

It was a small victory — minuscule, really — but it *was* a victory. And it was mine.



I FOLLOWED him down a long hallway lined in doors, all of them closed. The space was all snowy white plaster and crown molding, polished wainscoting and trim inset with gold fan shapes. The hallway was wide, the ceilings high, the floor a polished parquet of burnished gold-toned diamonds interspersed with dark chevrons and rhombuses. Or is it rhombi? Rhombies?

Flesh-eating rhombies, rising from geometry textbooks everywhere to feed on underdeveloped teenage brains. I'd read that fanfic.

White plaster medallions were set at intervals in the ceiling, each one cradling an amber-glassed sconce giving off dim light. It was spotless and beautiful, this hallway. Elegant even. The occasional cracks and chips in the floor, or the patches in the plaster, didn't take away from it. I felt like I'd turn the corner and stumble into a speakeasy, transported back in time to a more *gilded* age.

The doors all had numbers on them.

"Is this a hotel?" I asked, poking him in the back. He flinched. I poked him again, enjoying his agitation way too much. He stopped suddenly and I rammed right into him, stubbing my toe on the heel of his sneakers and cursing softly as I hopped back. He immediately started walking again.

"It was, yes. Before that, it was a sanatorium—"

"An insane asylum—?"

"No, a san-*a*-tor-ium, not a san-*i*-tar-ium. And the term *insane asylum* is offensive. Mental illness is a brain disease, not a moral judgment." He glanced back with a chiding look like I'd disappointed him, but since he refused to meet my eyes, I pretended I hadn't just been an a-hole. "A sanatorium is a treatment facility for people with chronic illnesses, specifically tuberculosis. Rich people, mainly. More like a spa than a hospital. Then it *was* a spa, like a resort. Also for rich people. Then it was nothing. Now it's ours."

We'd reached the stairs by then, leading down. The hallway opened up into a balustrade looking out over a

polished stone and plank staircase with a scrolled iron and wood banister, with leaded-glass windows along the outer wall framed in delicately carved casements. A few panes of the glass were chipped or even cracked through, and the glass itself was coated with possibly decades of dirt and grime until only a haze of light came through.

“You should let housekeeping know the windows need washing,” I snickered, and his shoulders stiffened but he kept going. As we passed, I darted my hand up and scraped along the lower edge of one of the windows and its frame, picturing using all that carved wood to climb up the wall in the middle of the night to write mysterious threats in the dust, but my finger came away clean. The grime was on the outside. Huh.

We descended multiple flights of the shallow (in height) but deeply set stairs, and I found myself skipping several at a time; with his long legs, he was only hitting every third or fourth step. I was trying to figure out why anyone would build stairs like this except for the aesthetics, because they were totally impractical: with their shallower rise, they took up much more space, were harder to walk on, and—

“Skirts,” he said, pointedly glancing over his shoulder at my bare feet slapping down on the treads with way more noise than his rubber-soled footsteps. “They’re built so women in long, fitted skirts can climb them.”

“How did you know—?”

“You’re jumping down two stairs at a time. And huffing out your breath. Also, the stairs annoy everyone.”

For the first time in a long time, I felt the corners of my mouth curl up in a genuine smile. I continued to hang onto the banister — the thing was sturdy as shit — and hop down multiple treads at a time behind him, but I tried not to *huff my breath* out while doing it.

A miracle must’ve occurred in my sleep because my body wasn’t a persistent dull ache covered in battered skin. Maybe it was just because I got a full night of deep sleep in me, without jerking awake in fear every forty minutes thinking someone

was standing over me, or maybe it was— no, I think it was the sleep.

No way I was telling any of them that. They *drugged* me, and that wasn't acceptable, even if I felt almost human.

Another landing, another turn, and then we were emerging from beneath a pillared archway out onto a marble tile floor inlaid with strips of gold and jet in geometric patterns. It was deco as shit; scuffed, the colors faded by years of neglect, cracks and chips around the edges of many of the tiles, but none of that detracted from the beauty of it.

The lacquered wainscoting on the walls was once glossy, but was now dull and yellowing with age. Above it, stretching to the ceiling, was interlocking pale stone bricks of varying sizes, just as damaged and discolored as everything else. Two sides of the cavernous, multi-story room were lined with pillars and archways forming galleries, with balconies and walkways above.

There was a fifteen foot-long reception desk sitting to one side, in remarkably good condition compared to the rest of the room, made up of panels of polished wood framed with gold metal fittings. It was topped with a slab of smooth black stone. A set of massive double doors cut into the wall just beyond it, close to the grand entrance, big enough for the giant kinfolk of the man I'd met on the road. *Loki*, I guess.

In the center of the space was an empty stone fountain, the human figure in the middle so eroded and disfigured that I couldn't even tell if it was a man or a woman. Scattered around the room, tattered wingback armchairs and leather club chairs formed clusters of seating, most of them mended with duct tape. A grouping of the low-slung club chairs surrounded a tufted leather sofa, facing a massive stone fireplace bracketed by windows looking into the adjoining room.

Once upon a time, this place must've been a shimmering jewel nestled within the mountains. I think I liked it even more now that it was damaged and stained, because someone like me wouldn't fit otherwise. Not that I wanted to fit. Fuck that noise.

The man next to me waved a hand in the direction of the desk, and I realized there was someone sitting behind it. He stood up and stretched, nodding back, and I dragged my eyes away lest he think I was paying him any attention beyond my initial curiosity. He was a biker: big, burly, rough; bearded like a lumberjack, clad in denim and leather. He could be as perfect as my old lab partner, but I couldn't see past the leather vest and the patches declaring his allegiances. I deliberately averted my eyes and pretended not to see the man smile and flick his fingers at me in greeting.

"You really do hate us," the biker next to me observed.

"It isn't personal," I muttered, face heating.

"It absolutely is." His monotone wasn't accusing or judgmental, he was stating a fact so I wasn't on the defensive. "You gonna explain why?" Okay, now I was again.

"Yes, someday in the distant future, when you and I are besties. It'll be on one of the nights we watch movies together while splitting a couple bottles of wine, and you can brush my hair afterward and tell me how all men are a-holes and someday my prince will come... and not all over my tits for once, either."

"So... never?" I actually heard inflection in his tone there like it was a legit question. I peered up at him, resting bitch-face equipped, and waited. After a bit, his brow furrowed and his eyes darted in my direction. "Whatever. Go through those doors." He pointed at a set of french doors leading into the glassed-in room behind the fireplace, then seemed confused when I didn't move.

"After you." I gestured dramatically with my arm.

Sucking in a breath, he led the way, but he wasn't moving with that same awkward grace as before.

"You're picturing coming on my tits, aren't you?" I asked, cautiously, from where I hovered around his elbow as we crossed the room. I tried really hard not to look.

"I am," he sighed, shaking his head. "But don't worry, it isn't personal. You're not my type."

“Cool,” I mumbled, fighting back a twinge of something I wasn’t willing to acknowledge. “Cool, cool, cool.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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THE GLASSED-IN room was a dining room, I guessed that based on all the tables and chairs, and how every table had a little tableau in the center with salt and pepper shakers, and narrow glass bottles that I thought might be ketchup and hot sauce. I was also clued in by what appeared to be a restaurant buffet set up on one end of the room, with three long cart thingies with glass sneeze guards, set up in a square jutting out into the room in front of a set of closed double doors. There were openings big enough for pans full of food to slide into place over steaming hot water. They weren't currently steaming, but I recognized the concept.

Not a lot gets by me.

The whole room was tiled in a pattern of small black diamonds interspersed with fat white octagons, like squares that had given up and let themselves go, not caring about the diamonds cutting into their corners. The walls at this end were mostly windows set above distressed wood paneling that had been sandblasted in preparation for paint, but seemed to have been forgotten; over by the buffet, it was all built-in cupboards and countertops that looked like brand new additions that had been fashioned to match the style of the woodwork in the rest of the room. Whoever built the cabinetry had some skill, it was impressive.

One counter had a couple bowls of different kinds of fruit, and some big glass jars of stuff that looked like granola or maybe trail mix. It was hard to tell from where we were, but it was some kind of grain-based mix of stuff with metal scoops



to dispense it, and a stack of small bowls waiting to be filled. There might've also been plain nuts or dried fruit too, there were a lot of jars and I was too far away.

On the other side of the room, a half dozen glass domes covered plates containing bread products of various kinds, sweet and savory, lined up with strategically placed stacks of small plates. The double doors had coffee stations on both sides with multi-pot machines and hot water taps. The whole thing reminded me a lot of the free breakfast areas you used to see in hotels pre-Janus.

If I hadn't spent the last four years in a place that acted like the pandemic never happened, I'd probably be crying in relief right now over the sheer abundance on display. But I had been. Salem was a masterclass in conspicuous consumption, and my bunker was set up to supply food and shelter for forty people comfortably. Even with my silent companion studying me, I couldn't seem to muster up the reaction he expected.

I also think I learned more about them in the last two minutes than I would've from any speech or explanation, things that I'm not sure they'd want me to know.

"You surprise me," he said, shaking his head. "Are you just in shock?"

I smirked at him, catching his eye for a split second before he looked away. "Nah. I'm good. What's the process? Do I need to get a bowl from someone for the cereal? Is there milk? If not, I'm fine with eating— is there a toaster? I could just make some toast. With a little heat and some weeds, even bread and water can become toast and tea..." I mumbled as I looked around the room for small appliances.

I could feel him looking me over, the weight of his stare. His judgment. I knew what he was seeing, and what he was thinking because of it, and I enjoyed it way too much. He had to reassess some assumptions, and it was probably killing him that I didn't react the way he expected and he didn't know why. Good. The more I could confuse him and keep him off-balance, the easier it would be for me to find out the information I needed so I could leave, like where my fucking

shoes were. And what I could do to make it less likely that they'd catch me again.

“Pick a table. I told you today was an exception,” he reminded me as he headed towards the double doors.

“Are you cooking for me?” I called out in a suspiciously chipper tone that got me a mean-mug in return. “You’re so sweet! I prefer my eggs scrambled, with cheese — cheddar would be terrific, and maybe a little green onion? — and my bacon crispy!”

I had to shout towards the end because he'd made the face over his shoulder and kept walking through the doors, and I wasn't sure he heard my order. If the bacon was limp, I'd be taking it out of his tip.

Hehehehe... *just the tip.*

I looked around the room as I cackled at my own inner monologue, found a nice corner seat with walls on both sides, and removed all the other chairs around the table except for the one directly opposite me. It would place him with his back to the entire room and the door. It was so petty that I was still giggling to myself when he got to the table and stared down at the chair.

I pursed my lips and swept my hand out in a grand gesture. “Please, take a seat,” I choked, barely keeping it together.

He dragged the chair over to my side of the table, sitting down right next to me, crowding me even. His bony fucking elbows in my space.

“*Hey!*” I growled, and scooched out of reach.

“I prefer not to sit with my back to the room.”

“Well, so do I,” I snapped, rocking my hips sideways with a grimace as my chair inched over with another painful scraping sound. “I’m not moving any farther.”

“Didn’t say you had to,” he bobbed one shoulder in a half-assed shrug and then ignored me, staring down at a massive cellphone that was possibly bigger than my face. I tried to

figure out what one does with a phone that large, then I realized it was a small tablet, and that made more sense.

I craned my neck trying to get a look at the screen, but he had some kind of privacy shield on it. I twisted in my chair and leaned closer. “Whatcha doin’?”

He smacked my finger away before I could touch the screen. “The same thing we do every night, try to take over the world,” he replied, his tone and intonation absolutely perfect. His voice— he sounded— but—

“You— you! You think—?!” I sputtered, doing a mini-wave with my whole body to shake off the absurdity! The—the *audacity!* “You think *you’re* the Brain? And *I’m*— I’m PINKY?!”

I slammed my hand down on the table, startling the shit out of the woman approaching with a tray full of food. She had to tilt to keep the plates from sliding off, but he didn’t seem to notice at all. He clicked the power button on his tablet and carefully set it aside, screen downward.

“If the non-sequiturs fit...” he trailed off, ignoring my tantrum as I climbed onto my knees on my seat — the better to rise up on them — waving my fists in the air to emphasize my point, as I argued — *loudly* — at how ridiculous it was to presume — to even *suggest* — that *I* might not be the evil genius bent on overthrowing the patriarchy.

He calmly accepted the plates of food from the woman, who couldn’t get away from us fast enough.

Once I’d made my point — and I *did* make my point — I settled back on my heels and eyed the spread of food. It was only then that I realized the mug he’d set down on the table when he first joined me was intended for me, and I held it up to my nose and inhaled the dark, bitter secrets of my one true love.

“I’m going to suck you back so hard, you’re gonna forget you came from beans, you dirty little whore,” I muttered into my mug with a filthy smile, ignoring the noises he was making. “That’s right, fill me up with your hot, wet love.”

“If this is a ploy,” his voice was strained in a really odd way, “to convince me you’re unfit to be around children, it isn’t working. She lives with *bikers*.”

“Hmm?” I stopped fingering my mug handle and narrowed my eyes at him. “What does any of this have to do with children?”



I STUDIED the food in front of me: scrambled eggs loaded with cheese, a rasher of bacon, three sausage patties, a double stack of pancakes, a bowl of fried potatoes with onions and mushrooms, and two slices of buttered toast.

“You should eat before it gets cold,” he said mildly, not looking up.

“How many people am I sharing this with?” I asked, looking around. “Shouldn’t there be plates to eat off of?”

“All of it is for you. We could count your ribs. You’re underweight for your height and age, you need to gain close to fifteen pounds to be in the lower range of healthy.”

“Excuse me?” I glared at him. He blinked in my direction but didn’t make eye contact, and I could almost hear the machinery start to whirr as the computer woke up and came online, having to deal with an unexpected request. “I think you may have mistaken me for someone you have—”

“You weren’t in shock about the food available, so you aren’t this skinny because of lack of access,” he interrupted, frustrated. “Please don’t tell me you are intentionally this thin, there’s nothing beautiful about malnourishment—”

I slammed my hand down on the table, causing the dishes to rattle and the contents of our coffee mugs to slosh, snarling out, “Shut the fuck up before I punch you in the nuts.”

He recoiled, a tiny movement but one I recognized, surprised and confused by my outburst. I glared at him, and began speaking slowly because it was the only way to keep a grip on my anger. “None of this is your concern. My weight is

not your concern. My health is not your concern. My ideal of beauty is not your concern. Keep your fucking opinions to yourself, I'm not interested in what you have to say." By the time I was done, I was shaking inside, but I was deadly calm on the outside.

The only reason he knew my BMI was because of that fucking exam they did, and now he was using what they found to judge me? Did he also plan to bring up that I'd recently waxed to criticize me at some convenient time?

Rather than get angry back, or attempt to cow me for challenging him, instead something flared up in his eyes like the processor was getting hit with a complicated query it didn't know how to handle. It compensated by redirecting resources to sectors that hadn't engaged in some time: a grin curved up the side of his mouth.

He turned his head, and he met and held my eyes for the first time. The intensity of his stare made my stomach drop. "You're wrong, Jayne. You are my concern."

There was something in how he said it, in the weight of the words, that made it seem more portentous than it might have sounded coming from anyone else or at any other time. There was something of *claiming* in it, some alpha male posturing that smacked of ownership: over me, over my body. Over my *life*.

He doesn't know me. He doesn't know anything about me. He sees what I want him to see, the role I play. "Mouse" is the manic persona I've adopted to keep things impersonal, the face I wear to get through the day; sometimes I feel like I'm just a caricature of a person.

Calling me Jayne felt wrong, she was the one who struggled after juvie to make a place for herself in the world, to get an education, and find a job. She was adrift for a long time, even as she worked like a dog to make everything possible. She had abandonment issues, wanted acceptance, and craved attention, but was too scared to connect with anyone. She was terrified of Beast tracking her down, and was more isolated and alone than Janie in her cell in juvie.

I became someone else, someone *more*, when the name “Mouse” stuck. Only a month into working as an EMT, I’d had to wiggle through a tiny gap into a partially crushed vehicle to keep a child from bleeding out. A firefighter cutting through the doors called me Mouse, and the name spread along with the story. After our shift, I fucked him in the cab of his Ford F-150, my first time since Beast, and I never looked back.

*Janie Skala* was the pathetic little girl that I walked away from on my eighteenth birthday. *Jayne Stone* was terrified of the world, moving through it like a wraith, leaving behind no trace and best forgotten. *Mouse* was a hero. Mouse was fearless and strong. Mouse got shit done.

None of them felt like *me*, but *Mouse* was the badass bitch who’d survive the apocalypse, dragging Azzie right along with her.

“Mouse. My name is Mouse. Nobody calls me Jayne except my brother,” I said in a high, soft voice with a British accent, then corrected it in my own voice. “That’s a lie, I don’t have a brother, but—”

“Mouse? I like that. I’m Ripley. It’s nice to meet you.” His eyes were on his mug, clutched in his elongated fingers and oversized palms, fingertips going white from the grip he had on it as he rocked my fucking world with less than a dozen words. He knew the reference, knew it enough to say the next line. “That’s a lie, my name’s Tesla.”

*Fuck.*

I stared at him, speechless, as his hands relaxed and one fingertip began to tap slowly on the mug’s rim, the tiniest hint of a smirk curling up the corner of his mouth. “You realize that telling me your name is Mouse in no way helps your case about whether to call you Pinky, right?”

My eyes narrowed and jaw clenched. He was fucking *right* and I’d never even considered it, but no one should go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line. “And telling me your name is Tesla in no way supports you as The Brain. Even

though he was a true genius and Edison was just a jealous, vindictive—”

“Mouse, are you pondering what I’m pondering?”

“I think so, Tesla, but I get all clammy inside the tent.”

Fuck. Me.

I stared at him, self-disgust at war with the tiniest, itty-bittiest flare of excitement, because this fucker figured out how to derail me. In less than an hour, he found a shiny red button that I couldn’t ever resist pressing. How?

*How?!*

“Eat your breakfast, Mouse.”



I ATE MY BREAKFAST. I wasn’t about to let it go to waste, and the look on his face as I polished off the entire damn thing? Fucking *priceless*.

I delicately wiped my lips with the cloth napkin that the heavy silverware had been wrapped inside, and set it down on top of my stack of empty plates. Cloth napkins might seem out of place for a motorcycle club, but it made sense: disposable paper products needed to be manufactured and continually replaced, cloth just needed to be washed.

I took another sip of coffee, then explained myself. For that breakfast, I could throw him a bone. “I’m not this skinny because of lack of access or some ideal of beauty, I have an incredibly high metabolism. I’ve even been tested for tapeworms or parasites twice because of it. I did lose weight recently because of circumstances, but only about seven pounds. If you left me alone, I could happily sit here all day and eat everything in sight, so I suggest keeping that in mind before you tell me any nonsense like *help yourself* or snacks are available 24/7.”

“What makes you think—“

“You have six stacks of pastries over on that counter, and I don’t think they’re leftovers from breakfast. Every time those doors open, I can smell baking bread along with whatever else is on the stove for lunch.”

“What else?”

“Hmm?”

“Tell me what else you observed. When I expressed my surprise over your reaction to all the food, you were laughing at me. Like you figured something out. I want to know what it is you think you know.”

I debated for a hot second, but something about him made me want to prove myself. It was irrational, and something I’d need to keep under control in the future, but in this moment I felt like showing off. Totally dumb and short-sighted, but just being back in a motorcycle club was playing havoc with my brain and reactions, and I embraced the dumb girlie part of me that wanted to impress him.

“You brought me here first, knowing I was probably hungry, but assuming it was a chronic condition. You thought my hostility towards you and being here would fade once I saw the food just sitting out, and I think you purposely had this little display set up for that reason. Not that I doubt that food is available at any time, I just don’t believe it’s always like *that*. There aren’t even fingerprint smudges on the glass cloches.”

He made some kind of non-committal sound and continued to stare past my ear. “And? What else?”

There was no advantage in telling him anything, it would make him more cautious around me if he realized how much I pick up on, but he already saw through me. He’d already figured out how to work me, as easily as I figured him out.

After years of toying with the brain trust running Salem, I truly felt like Vizzini in that moment: for once I was engaged in a battle of wits against a worthy opponent.

Incon-fucking-ceivable.

“You feed your people well, but they earn it. Barring some exceptions that I’ll get back to, everything here is homemade



and home-grown, including the ketchup and hot sauce in the glass bottles on every table. It's all set up in a way that is comfortable and familiar to them, despite the elegant surroundings you're restoring to their former glory. But your people — at least most of them, I'm guessing — do appreciate this place. Someone built those cupboards and did the trim work to make them fit with the original woodwork. Someone takes care of the glass cloches and the cut glass bowls holding all that fruit. You don't have access to the creature comforts of the modern world; there aren't any beverage coolers full of Nuka-cola bottles or energy drinks, or boxes of granola bars and potato chips, but you have what you need. Yet... that fruit. All that fucking fruit, Tesla."

"What about the fruit?" He shifted uncomfortably, just confirming my theories.

"This place is *secret*. You said it yourself, that my knowing how to find this place makes me a liability. But that fucking fruit? It's early April, it ain't apple season, and those aren't last year's harvest. It also sure as hell ain't *banana* season up here in the *mountains*. And citrus? You don't have paper napkins, but someone sent you a crate of oranges from Florida. And then you go and set it all out in a big display to impress *me*, not even realizing everything you were giving away, so that means you don't get visitors here often. So what is this place? What are you guarding all the way up here in this abandoned Victorian san-a-tor-ium? And please tell me that at least one of your little sycophants is named *Eye-gor* so I can live out my *Young Frankenstein* fantasies."

"That's Fronkensteen," he mumbled, resting his forehead on the table.

I gave him a minute. I sat there and gloated over how fucking smart I was, right up until he tilted his head and met my eye for the second time.

"We have hothouses and greenhouses on the property, including one that produces banana plants and plantain trees. There's a citrus house that has a lemon tree we think is around a hundred years old, and orange trees that are at least fifty. But you're right about the apples, those were a gift. So what is this

place? It's your new forever home, Mouse, because you're too clever for your own fucking good. You've just convinced me that I can't let you leave. Ever."

"We'll see about that." I pushed the plates out of my way and stared down into my empty coffee mug. He faced down again and closed his eyes. I craned my neck and checked his mug; it was still pretty much full, so I took it, and downed half of what was left before speaking again. "Tell me about the job."

"Adèle is eight years old," he spoke into the tabletop. "She's our ward. She only speaks Polish. Your job is to teach her enough English so that she can communicate with us, and you need to get her caught up to her right grade level so she can be in school with the rest of the kids. Once you've done that, we'll figure out your next job."

"Your ward."

He twitched. "She's related to Magick. Sister or daughter, we don't know which."

"Yikes," I muttered, making a face. That sounded like drama.

He sat upright and looked around, noticed his mug was gone, and glared at the table. I'm assuming it was a glare: there was some tension around his eyes, and his mouth turned down slightly for a few moments before returning to its neutral setting. "Her mom was a club— girl," he hesitated like I'd be offended by whatever term he was used to calling them: bitch, whore, slut, bunny, sweetbutt, fender fluff, pass-around, or even pussy. None of that shocked me — I'd been fucking *raised* in that lifestyle; regardless of whether I believed it was right or healthy, I at least understood it. I kept my expression detached and simply waited. He eyed me again, making eye contact briefly, then finished what he was saying. "At a charter in another state. Popular... girl. Not sure she even knew who the father was."

I nodded, not saying anything.

After a moment, he sat back, letting his hands relax on the table. “You drank my coffee.”

“You weren’t drinking it, and I wasn’t about to waste it.”

“I was going to drink it.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Wasn’t yours to drink.”

I shrugged, and then smiled a wide-ass grin that caused him to blink. “Now you know.”

“Know what?” He blinked again, rapidly, a half dozen times or more. I had another swift internal debate about whether or not to play at being enigmatic and continue to fuck with him, or to explain. It felt important to be direct. With some things, it was clear to me that I needed to be blunt.

“I’m an advocate of boundaries, Tesla, and reinforcing good behavior. Keeping me here, against my will? That’s a big violation. Performing invasive medical procedures on my unconscious body without my permission? HUUUUUGE violation. You might think that you’ve taught me a valuable lesson about my place, and my rights or lack thereof, to establish expectations on both sides. And in a very basic way, I’ve just shown you what I think of your expectations, and that boundaries exist on both sides. The line you draw is going to be reflected back on you, like a mirror. My response might not equal yours, but it’s really less about matching the violation at this point, and more about teaching you about consequences.”

“You’re going to punish me for keeping you here by drinking all my coffee?” He really did seem to be stuck on the face value of my actions, rather than the meaning behind them.

I gave a great big, gusty sigh and shook my head at him. “You created this situation, you’re the one setting the boundaries. You’re trying to establish that I’m fundamentally powerless in this relationship, and I’m showing you — symbolically — that you can’t control everything about me, or how I act. Consider the coffee a warning.”

“Or maybe you just wanted more coffee and didn’t want to get up and go get it yourself.”

“Fair.” I beamed at him, and he blinked a few more times, but slower.

“So which is it?”

“That’s up to you to decide. Continue to overstep, and you’ll find out one way or another.”

“Or I could just take you out into the woods and shoot you, and let the animals have your remains.”

I made a non-committal sound, raised his mug up to my lips and took another sip. “How long did you say the ad has been running for a Polish speaking governess?”

That was definitely anger, no doubt about it.

“Tesla, you can feel free to tuck me in every night by telling me *Good night, Mouse. Good work. Sleep well. I’ll most likely kill you in the morning.* If that will help. But this frustration you’re feeling right now? This helplessness? Talk to me after I’ve injected you with ketamine, stripped off all your clothes, and took pictures of *your* body. No, calling them X-rays is fucking *semantics* so don’t fucking start with that shit, you know that’s irrelevant. Now, shall we take a tour? Maybe meet my new pupil?”

He pushed back from the table, almost violently, and stormed from the room, his long legs eating up the space far faster than I was willing to walk. I finished my coffee, stacked up all the dishes, and carried them towards the double doors at the back, pushing through with my back and turning once I got in the room.

A room unexpectedly full of people, when I thought there might be maybe one or two, in a space as elegant as any other room I’d seen so far, even if more practical.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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THERE WERE SO many people hard at work in the kitchen that it startled me.

Three people chopped and diced mounds of greens and root vegetables on the fifteen foot-long, stone-topped table down the center of the room. The continuous slab of pale, grayish stone sat on top of a single row of deep drawers on a wooden frame and spindle-turned legs stained a rich, reddish brown that had aged to a gorgeous patina over time and use. At one end, a free-standing butcher block had a wide copper stockpot sitting on top, and the other end had a shorter wooden table holding the biggest marble mortar and pestle I'd ever seen, at least two feet wide, and I'd been addicted to cooking competition shows in the Before Times. A brass and steel rack of copper pots of every imaginable shape and size hung on a rack overhead, with hooked poles dangling down for retrieving whatever was needed.

One whole wall was nothing but cast iron cooking stations, at least twenty feet if not more, and it was possible it was one continuous piece. The bottom half was a series of thick iron doors with levered handles that looked hot to the touch, either ovens or possibly where they burned coal to keep the old-timey locomotive runnin' that was surely nearby. Wide pipes fed down into it from above, most likely gas lines, so ovens seemed a better bet. The behemoth had at least three range tops with six burners each, plus a flat-top grill, something with a lid, a broiler or open-flame grill, and a mechanical spit-roaster. There were several lidded pots sitting over low flames, including a stockpot that was so tall, I'd have to use a stool to

look inside it. Over it all, a solid hood rattled with the constant whirring sound of ventilation fans.

A couple of people moved around from station to station: stirring things, opening oven doors and checking doneness, adding a cutting board full of chopped herbs to the tallest stock pot. Someone was scrubbing dirt off of produce in a large stone sink set between windows at the far end of the room; another person was peeling what looked like an army's worth of potatoes, with a speed that made me think she'd done it a time or two thousand before. All of them were wearing chef coats, with hats or scarves covering their heads, and the men's beards were braided when they were too long to be sanitary.

The ceiling was very high, probably twenty feet in the center at least, making the room feel airy and bright. It was painted a stark white trimmed with dark wood, and the walls were tiled in the ubiquitous shiny white subway tile from the floor to a decorative wooden molding halfway up. Several narrow windows on the far wall and skylights up in the ceiling lit the room up, but there were also sconces at intervals along the walls and pendant lights tucked into the center of the pot rack. Shiny, brick-red tile covered the floor under non-slip mats, and it was spotless.

Directly to the right of the door, a small area in the corner was walled in and looked to be a butler's pantry to keep all the dishes, silverware, and serving ware until it was needed. Next to it was an open door leading into a room where a woman with her back to me scrubbed pots, pans, and dishes in a row of giant sinks, steam billowing out around her sprayer.

Despite all the other visual stimulation, I was most fascinated by that archaic wall of stove, a great iron dragon belching out heat and flame to produce so much deliciousness. I was so caught up in trying to figure out if it was one continuous piece, or a bunch of separate units welded together, that I wasn't paying much attention to the people themselves, not until a man appeared from a doorway I hadn't noticed, holding a massive slab of dead animal in a tub. He was walking towards me but looking back over his shoulder, calling out to the man scrubbing dirt off of carrots.

“Quit fucking around stroking those sticks,” he mock-berated the carrot cleaner, laughter underlying his command. “Maddie needs you to get her rutabagas wet, and then Brit needs the sink to fondle some fennel for my meat.” The stick-stroker in question tossed him the bird without even looking back, while the rest of the staff jeered at him.

Between all that dirty food-talk and the greatest - arm - porn - *ever*, I was mesmerized by the man.

He carried that carcass like it was nothing, his inked-up forearms sinewy and flexing under the weight of the meat; his tattoos were mostly black line art, a mix of photo-realistic fruits and vegetables and the diagram of a pig on one arm and a cow on the other, showing their cuts of meat. I was enraptured by his thick wrists and capable hands, but eventually I realized that there was more to him than arms when he set down the tub and moved to a smaller sink to wash his hands, and dried them with a towel big enough to cover it all up. Only then did I notice that he was decently handsome — not as pretty as giant biker dude or as *interesting* as Tesla — with a neatly-trimmed beard and wavy hair of russet-blond pulled back into a tight ponytail. He was broad and muscular, slightly over six feet in height, but once he hung the towel back up, I could not look away from those arms.

“Are you Jayne?” he asked, startling me.

“Mmhmm,” I agreed, realizing I was still standing in the doorway with a stack of plates in my arms, fixated on a stranger’s wrists.

“You can put those in there,” he gestured towards the dishwashing room. I nodded and moved in the direction he pointed, dragging my eyes away from him reluctantly.

I was a little surprised to see the woman who’d brought out my breakfast at the large steel sink, working through a mound of dirty dishes: rinsing them off with a high-pressure sprayer before loading them onto racks then into a commercial dishwasher up on a stand. There were wheeled carts stacked with the finished product, including a ton more of the copper-

clad pots. She nodded at a big, gray tub sitting at the end of her sink and I carefully set the dishes inside it.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, wiping her face on her bicep, and purposely, it felt, not looking at me directly. She was really pretty, even all sweaty and damp from all the steam in the room, and probably about twenty years older than me.

“You’re welcome,” I chirped, friendly as could be, but since she didn’t seem keen on talking — I could tell that by how she ignored me, and also how she started up again with the high-powered sprayer even though I was still in the splash zone — I backed off and left her to her work.

Back in the kitchen, Arm Porn seasoned his meat and penetrated it with a steel spit, before loading it into the open-flame roaster. I watched, impressed by how smooth and precise every movement was, how easily he maneuvered what was likely sixty pounds of meat and bone, how his arms visibly flexed and bunched under his chef’s jacket...

“I’m surprised Tesla let you wander around unattended,” he commented, and I dragged my eyes up to meet his, kind of shocked to see they were a bright, cerulean blue. The spitted meat was in place, and he stood facing me with feet planted and arms crossed, and I worked to focus on his face and not let my eyes wander downward. *It was so hard.*

“He got frustrated and stomped off in a pout,” I confessed without thinking, and only after he began to laugh did I realize what I’d said, and how disrespectful it sounded. I needed to remember where I was. As much as I might hate it, I probably needed to become Janie Skala again, who understood how to act around men like these.

If I’d said something like that about one of my dad’s men, I would’ve been immediately slapped to the ground. If it wasn’t my dad who did it, and Beast was around, the guy would’ve likely ended up with a broken arm or jaw, if he was lucky, but it still would’ve been a knee-jerk response to my mouthing off. But this dude just laughed, despite the wary glances from the others working in the room, so I guessed he wasn’t a member of the Apocalypse Riders despite the tattoos



and somewhat rough look. Things were different since Janus, and maybe it wasn't unusual for a large enough motorcycle club to employ a chef who wasn't club-affiliated.

Didn't matter, really, beyond the relaxing of the immediate tension and dispersing of the anxiety that formed in my gut; he wasn't going to retaliate like a biker would. But those few seconds of distress and fear distracted me from noticing his mood shift.

"Interesting," he murmured like he was speaking to himself, as he studied me with an intensity that I found unnerving.

"W-what?" I stammered, taking an involuntary step back.

He shook his head, unwilling to answer, but the corner of his mouth edged up into a half-smile.

"I should go," I said weakly, and took another step back and in the general direction of the door. His gaze swept over me, eyes narrowing and brow furrowing as he took in my bare feet.

"You shouldn't be in here barefoot," he stated, frowning. "You shouldn't be anywhere here barefoot, there's all kinds of nails and broken glass and shit everywhere, even the areas we finished. What the fuck were you thinking?"

I shook my head but it was jerky and almost hesitant, no longer at all relaxed or comfortable enough to explain: he said *we finished*. We. He was one of them.

"I was thinking it would be harder for her to run if she didn't have shoes," Tesla's calm voice came from behind and above me, and I jumped. I hadn't heard him enter the room over the vent fan, the dishwashing, and all the other chaos in a kitchen running full-bore. I immediately shifted so my back wasn't to either of them, but it put me with my back fully to the door and once again, a voice from above and behind startled me. A cold rush of panic began to set in.

"She's not going to run—"

The voice was familiar, and some part of my brain knew it was giant biker dude — *Loki*, Tesla called him — but it was

too late. My breath caught in my throat, which felt constricted, compressed. White noise roared in my ears, covering over any other sound, and I felt phantom fingers on my skin, clawing at me, tangling in my hair and jerking down.

I couldn't fall. Once I was on the floor, it was all over. I had to stay upright.

I could move though. Nothing was restraining me. Not yet.

I instinctively took off in the only open direction: towards the doorway that I had first seen Arm Porn emerge from.

I frequently try to disguise how fast and how strong I really am, wanting people to underestimate me, but I wasn't thinking clearly enough. I twisted away from any grasping hands, going full-speed down the length of the room and dodging around all the sous chefs and kitchen workers that didn't even bother to stop what they were doing. Without looking back, I knew I was being pursued; heavy footsteps pounded along the floor behind me, but they were slower to react and slower overall, and I made it through the doorway completely unhindered.

Steps, there were steps going down, an almost sinuous curve to the open, iron staircase, and I practically flew down them into the dim reaches below.



I HIT the bottom of the stairs and kept going, around corners and down broad, dimly lit hallways that seemed to stretch into infinity. I couldn't focus, couldn't process my surroundings, I was trapped in my head and the need to *run*.

I heard a clatter of footsteps leaving the stairs, and it startled me enough that I swerved into the wall right by an open doorway with light spilling out. It was a slaughterhouse, a bloody abattoir of horror — or maybe just a butchery, but the sight of a man in a blood-splashed coat and face-shield, breaking down a carcass with a massive cleaver, scared the *fuck* out of me. I made a strangled yelp as my foot slipped and

I took a knee on the hard tile before scrambling forward. The man looked up, surprised, but I kept going towards the double-doors swinging gently at the end of the hall.

Footsteps pounded behind me and rough voices shouted my name. I hit the double doors with both hands, slamming them open, darting forward, passing countless doors and branching hallways, frantic for a way out. Stairs, a door with a glowing Exit sign above, a convenient coal chute... anything. Anything to keep me from being trapped down here.

My panic was riding me hard, I couldn't think clearly. I could've ducked into any number of dark rooms, found a hiding spot they'd overlook, one that couldn't possibly fit a human adult. Find a vent, get into the ducts. Creep through the walls like my namesake. Instead, I ended up at a dead-end, in a closed off vestibule lined with locked doors at the end of a hallway, with my pursuers too close behind for me to backtrack.

I sank to the floor in the farthest corner from the swinging doors, the ones that had tricked me into thinking the hallway kept going. Knees pulled up against my chest, I folded my arms over my legs and rested my forehead on my kneecaps, waiting. It was just a matter of time until they found me. I spent it concentrating on my breathing.

One: tile underneath me. It was cold, and dusty. Dull green.

Two: dim light, just enough to see. Lightbulbs in every second sconce.

Three: the air was humid where I'd landed, with the faint smell of bleach and detergent.

Four: clattering coming from nearby, a clanking sound from loud machines. Muffled voices talking over the racket, but separated by walls and doors. There was an industrial laundry nearby.

Five: footsteps slowing down on approach.

My panic began to fade. This situation wasn't the same, these men had no reason to want me hurt and crawling,

begging for mercy. I just got spooked, is all.

It wasn't the same. I didn't have history with these men. It wasn't personal.

I looked around. Tile covered the bottom half of the walls, shinier and smoother than what was on the floor; same dull green, with a mosaic pattern of ochre-gold worked into a band along the top. White plaster above, stained and yellowed by time. Cobwebs in the corners, dust visible on the black-painted mess of pipes and ducts crowding the ceiling high above. A pendant light dangled directly above me, its bulbs throwing off a hissing, flickering, sulfurous yellow glow.

Clearer voices approached; the door swung open violently, not really that close but it felt like it barely missed my feet. I shrank back, tucking them in closer, hid my face in my knees again.

Three massive shapes loomed over me, blocking the light. I could feel them there even though I didn't look up.

"Get up," one of them growled, rage in his voice. Any thoughts of hiding behind a false bravado dissolved completely and I pulled my arms tighter around my head, like a child would.

"Back off, she's fucking terrified," another one hissed, and there were scuffling sounds before the doors slammed into the walls again, and the heaviest footsteps retreated back down the hall.

Time passed, only the sounds of breathing betraying their presence. Gradually, gradually, the fear faded when they made no move to hurt me or even touch me. Logic began to seep into my brain once more, and with it, mortification. So many people in that kitchen had seen me lose my shit and run away. I'd made myself vulnerable. An easy target.

"Get up, Pinky," Tesla's voice cut through my humiliation and dread, and I glared up at him at the name. He was staring at the wall next to me; the corner of his mouth twitched.

"If anyone's Pinky, it's you," I snarled, ignoring Arm Porn's hand and climbing to my feet, gracelessly but on my

own. My muscles were sore and my joints stiff, the force of my fear had hit my body like a battering ram, leaving behind an aching shell.

“You’ve really done it now, Pinky,” Tesla continued as if I hadn’t said a word. “You made a hung-over Loki, with a sore wrist and fucked-up leg, have to run. He doesn’t run when he’s healthy, let alone after losing a fight with the asphalt. He’s going to be pissy now for the rest of the day.”

“He didn’t have to run, I would’ve actually preferred he didn’t, so don’t put this on me,” I groused back, before snapping the fuck out of it and realizing I was doing it again, sassing these dangerous men. Janie would’ve known when to keep her mouth shut, how to be invisible; Jayne wouldn’t have even had to think about it.

“Don’t go getting shy now,” Arm Porn chided me in low tones, with a soft smile. “You’re fine.”

I busied myself brushing off my knees and ass, pretending everything really was good and my hands weren’t shaking. Arm Porn reached out and rested one of his thick, strong hands on my elbow, and the heat sank through my sleeve and radiated from fingertips to shoulder. “Hey, you’re fine.”

I kept my head down and jerked it in a nod, not believing it for one second, but unwilling to challenge him.

“Audible sigh,” Tesla muttered, “and frustration at the setback.”

I tilted my head to peer up at him in disbelief. “Did you just narrate your emotions?”

He blinked at me. “Yes. I’ve been told I’m an emotionless automaton. I’ve been making an effort to verbalize my responses. I— forgot earlier.”

Arm Porn narrowed his eyes at Tesla, a line forming between his brows. “You forgot?”

Tesla shrugged, and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Wasn’t necessary.”

“Wasn’t necessary,” Arm Porn repeated, staring down at me.

“He was alternating between mocking, taunting, and baiting me. It wasn’t hard to follow along,” I grumbled, and pointed at the doors. “Can we go now?”

“No, not yet.” Arm Porn glanced between Tesla and me, but then gave his head a shake and dismissed whatever was going through his mind. “I need you to promise to give her back her shoes,” he directed at Tesla, then turned to me. “I need *you* to promise not to leave the grounds. You don’t know where you’re going, and it isn’t safe.”

“I could just follow the road, then I’d know quite well where I’m going,” I grumbled, venom staining my tone.

“But you wouldn’t.” Patience infused his tone; he was being so reasonable that I felt the urge to clock him in the face. “You’d expect us to find you on the road, so you’d take off cross-country at some point, whether up here or once you’re off the mountain, and I’m telling you that it isn’t safe.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Because I’m Sergeant-at-Arms for the club. It’s my *job* to know all the risks and threats, and a lone woman traveling in these parts, one that’s been up here, is not going to last long out there.” He punctuated his speech with pointing and gestures, but I forced myself not to watch his arms and hands lest I become distracted, which is good because there was a lot to unpack in what he just said.

“You’re the SAA?” I asked, with more than a hint of incredulity. Only later, when thinking back over this conversation, would I realize what I gave away by calling him that, by not having to ask what that meant. “I thought you were the chef?”

“I’m both,” he said, shrugging. “None of the officers do just one job around here, we don’t have that luxury. I trade off cooking duties when I need to do other things, but whenever possible, I’m in the kitchen.”

“And you?” I grimaced at Tesla, dreading what he was going to say.

“Tesla,” he answered and I rolled my eyes at him. “Right, you knew that. VP and IT. Hardware and network, I’m not a programmer. And I dabble in other things.” It wasn’t quite as bad as I thought, he could’ve been Prez.

“Of course,” I muttered, rubbing my nose that itched from all the dust. “Loki?”

“Enforcer, head of security, and construction foreman,” Tesla responded, leaning back against the wall. I nodded, flipping through files of information in my head.

“Prez?”

“Magick. With a K. That one’s a full-time job but he also works with the dogs sometimes, when Raz lets him—“

“Dogs?” I perked up. “You have dogs? As in plural, as in lots of them?” I *loved* dogs. Loved them. Way more than people. Salem didn’t have any, not even for patrolling the base. No pets or animals of any kind, at all, even when Azzie asked for one.

Arm Porn chuckled. “Yep. And Raz is also Road Captain and—”

The door swung open again, interrupting him. Loki stomped back into the little vestibule-type area that was already feeling crowded, and glared down at me with a thunderous expression. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

I took a step back but only so I didn’t have to crane my neck so much to glare up at him. “None of this is my fault, you know that, right? It wasn’t my fault you lost control of your bike. I didn’t force eight fucking shots of whiskey and an oxy down your throat so you’d wake up with a hangover.” His head swung around to scowl at Tesla, who shrugged. “And the three of you cornered me upstairs. I’m sorry I panicked, but it wasn’t exactly an unreasonable reaction.”

“Interesting,” Arm Porn muttered again, and both Loki and I turned our baleful frowns on him.

“What?” we both managed to growl in unison.

“Amusement. Curiosity.” Tesla’s eyes darted between us, then focused on Arm Porn. “Caliban? Explain that.”

*Caliban.* Loki. Tesla. Magick with a K. Raz, who works with the dogs. Road names, but different. Literary. Historical. *Unique.*

“Nothing.” Caliban shook his head but a grin split his face. “So where are you from, honey? I haven’t had a chance to meet you properly.”

“Call her Mouse,” Tesla commanded before I could say anything. I furrowed my brow at him, surprised he didn’t insist on *Pinky* or something equally demeaning, but nodded my thanks at the same time. “She’s from New Mexico.”

Technically, I did come here from Gallup... That wasn’t the closest bus station to the rez, but it was the one that seemed less *obvious*. But I wasn’t from New Mexico, and I could never live there long-term because that was chupacabra territory.

“New Mexico? That’s used to be Vagos, Angels, and Mongols before Janus. All those clubs took a hit but fighting over the border has kept what’s left clear of Colorado, kept us from having to waste time and resources dealing with them—well, fighting each other and the NNC rezzes in between. You have trouble with any of those clubs?”

I folded my lips shut and stared at his left ear.

“We all have secrets,” Tesla said quietly. “As long as you don’t let them impact the club, you can keep yours.”

“Wait, how do we know she isn’t working—” Caliban’s suspicions were rational, if inconvenient. I didn’t want to have to prove myself—

“She isn’t,” Tesla interrupted both of us. “She legitimately hates motorcycle clubs. I’m annoyed and frustrated, but not suspicious.” He sounded so confident in his answer, enough to make *me* suspicious but Caliban’s concern visibly faded even as Loki’s feelings got hurt.



“You do? What? Why?!”

I shrugged, keeping my mouth sealed shut. Loki crowded closer, but it wasn't threatening. I knew that, instinctively. I reached out and touched his arm, immediately calming him. “I don't hate *you*, despite your insistence that *your* accident was my fault. I concede I was wearing dark clothes, but I had a freakin' bright pink Barbie backpack in plain view that you somehow completely missed—?”

“It *is* your fault that I wiped out. You and your little Walking Dead cosplay,” Loki leaned in, jabbing his finger at me to punctuate his point, so when it got too close to my face, I snapped my teeth and bit his finger. Not soft, but not hard enough to warrant him squealing like he did.

“Now you've got zombie cooties too,” I taunted, clicking my teeth a few more times. “Better get ready to shoot him in the head, Tesla, and leave his remains for the animals in the woods.”

“That's a very specific threat.” Caliban made a face at Tesla, who shrugged.

“She challenged me. I had to put her in her place.”

“Yeah?” I mocked, “And how did that work out for you?”

“You put me in mine,” he replied, and for once his lack of nuance was a problem for me. Was he angry? Resentful? Amused? Did I bruise his ego or earn his admiration?

“Interesting,” Caliban mused, *again*. Loki just grinned. “C'mon, honey. Might as well show you around down here.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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THEY GAVE me a quick tour of the area after that, explaining that it was only one of the basements attached to the full building, there were separate ones under each of the wings. This basement was the only one completely restored so far, because it held the only laundry, and most of the food production and storage facilities for the compound. Besides the abattoir-like butchery, there was also a bakehouse and cheesery, as well as a workroom for making candles and soap.

The little alcove or vestibule or whatever that I'd been sitting in was directly under the club room upstairs, the room through the doorway next to the front desk. Caliban unlocked the left door first, showing me the liquor storage — and much like the ketchup and hot sauce lined up on all the dining room tables, all the booze was in repurposed glass bottles and mason jars, with masking tape labels identifying the type of liquor and batch information.

They had their own distillery. Because of course they did. On the compound, one of the outbuildings housed a brewery and distillery where they produced beer, mead, hard cider, whiskey, vodka, gin, and moonshine. I pointed at cases of bourbon, wine, and tequila, and was told those were “gifts.” The beer and cider were sometimes in individual bottles, but there were also actual kegs stored down here, and one of the other locked doors I couldn't get through led to a two-person lift that resembled a cage on a cable more than a legit elevator, and it apparently led directly to a storage room behind the bar upstairs.

There were other storage rooms all over this level, lined with shelves holding hundreds, if not thousands of jars of whatever could be sealed in vinegar or water and preserved for future use. Every vegetable I could think of was pickled or fermented, made into a relish or chutney, and the range of fruit jams, jellies, compotes, marmalades, and preserves was staggering. Lidded metal bins held dried beans, grains, and other staple foods and starches, and there was a whole wall of hooks upon which sealed bags of dehydrated fruits, veggies, and jerky were hung in neat, labeled rows next to strings of sausages. There were separate walk-in freezers for meat, vegetables, and dairy. It was the bunker on steroids, and I couldn't help but be impressed because this all came to be *after* the pandemic started, not before. The amount of work to grow and harvest and preserve this food... no wonder they each had several jobs.

“We won't get to take you around the rest of the compound today, I don't think,” Caliban said while pointing out where another staircase led, “but we have a small farm in a valley about a half mile through the woods, plus all the gardens and greenhouses surrounding this main hotel building that we repurposed to more practical crops. It was all flowers originally, besides a small herb garden outside the kitchen, but they were at least smart enough to plant a lot of fruit and nut trees throughout the grounds. Most of it is well beyond the prime years of production, but we've started cultivating next-generations of the same trees.”

“How many people live here?” I asked, admittedly a little staggered by the scale of their production. It didn't escape me that the three of them eyed each other before anyone answered me.

“A lot. Fifty-some of which are patched-in.”

That was a huge number of patched-in members, no wonder they needed all the food production and the facilities, as remote as they were—

Something clicked in my head, like I'd finally organized all the puzzle pieces, picture-side up, and was able to see a pattern now where I hadn't before: the location was isolated,

and fully self-sufficient, far away from the businesses and territories that made a club money; they weren't just squatting in a convenient location, they were *restoring* it, making improvements; they were cultivating *fruit trees* for fuck's sake, this wasn't short-term. With an almost physical *snap*, the memory came back of what Loki had said to me just before I fell of his bike — *welcome to the mothership* — and I realized where I was: the Apocalypse Riders' mother chapter, the one ring that ruled them all.

These men weren't just officers in a charter, Tesla was VP over the whole - damn - club. Every charter answered to them. *Every* charter.

“This— this is— you're—“

The three of them stared at me, waiting me out. Not giving anything away. Three imposing men, watching me with narrowed eyes and pinched expressions — even Tesla focused on my face as I gave away every fucking thought in my head.

I blinked at them, giving myself a little shake as if to cast off the chill creeping up my spine.

“Whatcha thinkin', honey?” Caliban asked, and although his voice was warm, his eyes were cold and calculating.

“Where could we possibly get a chicken, twenty yards of spandex, and smelling salts at this hour?”

“I'm sorry, what?”

“And even if we found a tuxedo to fit a blowfish, who would marry it?”

“Are you having a stroke?”

“If Pinocchio was carved out of bacon, it wouldn't be the same story at all, would it?”

“No, seriously, are you smelling burning toast—?”

“She's quoting *Pinky & The Brain*,” Tesla intervened as Caliban was motioning to Loki to pick me up, and I edged away from him, pointing at the splint on his wrist. “She uses non-sequiturs to distract and deflect.”

I glared at him, and when he averted his eyes towards the wall, I moved right in front of him and got in his sightline again. His eyes shifted down, I crouched, forcing him to *see* me. Finally, after a minute of chasing his gaze while the other two watched and tried stifling their laughter, Tesla gave in with a sigh and met my eyes.

“What did I tell you about keeping your fucking opinions about me to yourself?” I snarled at him, and he pursed his mouth and blinked rapidly. “Well?”

“None of it is my concern and you give no fucks about what I have to say.”

“And?”

He thought for a few moments, I could see him running back through the whole conversation in his head, searching for something else that he missed, while I waited and glared so long my forehead and cheeks started cramping a little, and I had to rub my eyebrows to get them to relax. He finally focused on me again, frowning, and pushed up his glasses before running a hand back over his spiky hair. Like magic, it sprang back upright as though it grew that way, not even particularly stiff or loaded with product. Fascinating.

First chance, I needed to get my hands into it, solve this mystery.

“And *nothing*. I said you were my concern, you stared off into space for like five minutes, then told me to call you Mouse.”

I grinned at him maniacally, pointing in a silent recognition that he’d nailed it. “That’s right. But you just crossed another fucking line with me, so I violated your comfort zone and forced you to search your databanks for information that didn’t exist, tying up all your processors for a few minutes on something pointless. *Consequences*, Tesla. You wanna fuck with me? I’ll fuck with you right back.”

“*Jesus Christ*,” Loki swore, staring back and forth between us so rapidly I was surprised he wasn’t getting motion sickness. “What the fuck just happened?”

“I’m not positive, but I think Mouse just won that round,” Caliban answered, leaning back against the wall casually, but it was anything but. He was still radiating tension, even more now that I’d derailed Tesla and upset him enough that he was visibly squirming; I was a threat, and the club’s SAA was evaluating every word I said and move I made.

He had no fucking clue just how big of a threat I could be.

I might not ever walk out of this place. I might end up in a shallow grave or back in the woods with the animals eating my remains, but if that’s how things went, I was going to *destroy* these fuckers before they ended me.

I was suddenly so angry — possibly, *maybe* irrationally so — but every fucking trauma and tragedy I’d suffered because of men like *them* came back on me at that moment, making me speak without thinking.

“Bullshit,” I turned on him, letting some of the disgust I felt leach out into my tone, “you know as well as I do that nothing I do or say will have any long-lasting effect on any of you. Your world is the Mississippi River, and I’m a leaf that had the misfortune to land on the surface. Stop fucking around here and tell me what I’m supposed to be doing, I’m sure you all have better things to do than give private tours to the new *nanny*.”

“Not sure what just crawled up your ass and died,” Caliban responded mildly, but I’d hit a nerve and he was clearly annoyed. “But you’re right, I don’t have time for this shit. Take her up the other stairs, I don’t want her in my kitchen. Until she has shoes,” he amended, pushing off the wall and through the door. As it swung back and forth behind him, I watched him walk away without looking back, those fucking jeans of his making me wish that chef’s jacket was shorter.

“No, really, what the fuck just happened *now*?” Loki asked, confusion and concern wrinkling his beautiful brow as he looked to Tesla for an explanation.

“Mouse pissed off Cal,” Tesla said, back to staring at the wall. “He’s scared of her— maybe not *scared*. Definitely suspicious though.”

“Zombie Girl, you do *not* want Cal considering you a threat. If he orders me to kill you, I can’t—”

“It’s fine, Loki,” I replied, exhausted and sad, and I didn’t even know why. “He won’t do it right away, he needs to figure me out first. Make sure my disappearance won’t bring trouble down on you. And I’m sure by the time he makes up his mind, you’ll be fine with it.”

“Will it?” Tesla demanded, genuine stress and concern in his voice. “Will your disappearance bring trouble down on us?”

“She’s not getting disappeared,” Loki growled, but we both ignored him.

“Most assuredly,” I promised, with a tiny smirk. “From sources you couldn’t even imagine. Used to be, I get a damn paper cut and the cavalry would get dispatched, laying siege to the castle... I’m a goddamn national hero, don’t you know me? Didn’t you recognize me immediately?”

He let out a huff of breath, like I’d just told him some fairy tale. It reassured him, thinking that I really was the plain, poor, obscure girl they took me for.

“I’d never be fine with it,” Loki rasped, and my eyes shot over to him. I hadn’t even paid him any attention once Tesla interrupted us, and I found him red-faced and steaming with anger.

“I— I’m sor—”

“Fuck you for thinking that,” he snapped, slamming out the door and stomping away once more. I stared after him, until the door swung closed and I was alone with Tesla again.

*Mouse* might cover it up with bluster and aggression, but the Janie and Jayne still buried inside me were legit uncomfortable with male authority figures being angry, hostile, or yelling at me.

“I find I’ve got a terrible headache forming.” My voice was weak, my body beginning to ache. Every half-healed cut and scrape, every strained joint and pulled muscle, was suddenly inflamed as if I was living through it all again. The

cigarette burns felt fresh, the patch on my arm throbbed like the blowtorch had just finished eradicating the tattoo of Aesli's name that once filled me with so much fucking pride.

They'd taken *everything* from me.

Whether fourteen years ago or a few weeks ago, my dad's club took everything from me that had ever mattered.

"Doc said you were still recovering from whatever happened to you," Tesla said quietly, "and advised we take things slow. This wasn't slow. I'm sorry."

"It's fine," I snuffled out, trying to keep from falling apart but I couldn't stop some of it from leaking out around the edges. From my nose and my eyes, mostly. "I would really like to lay down though, can you tell me how to get back to the room I was in before? Unless I'm staying somewhere else?"

"No, the Red Room is yours," he assured me, opening the door and gesturing me through. "Adèle is right down the hall from you. You can meet her tomorrow. I'll have food sent up at mealtimes."

"Thank you," I whispered, touched and saddened by his odd sweetness. In a different time, and a different place — if we were different people — he and I...

There was no point to any of that. My body, my *fucking* soul, had been ruined. And even if I wasn't, I had responsibilities. I had *Azzie*.

He walked me to the door of my room, and then left me there. I locked it behind me, closed the heavy curtains, and turned out all but one light before dragging a blanket and pillow into the closet and curling up on the floor.



I WOKE UP TWICE, each time to a soft knock on the door and a different voice telling me there was food out in the hall. I'd get up, drag myself over to the door, and listen for awhile before unlocking it to slide the tray into the room.



I didn't feel hungry, but I forced myself to eat, cleaning my over-full plates and bowls, drinking every drop of the carafes of water included on the trays.

And after I had finished, each time, I shoved the trays back out in the hall and crawled back under the blanket on the closet floor and went back to sleep, a restless sleep full of memories pretending to be nightmares.



IT WAS LATE, very late. Or maybe very early, I couldn't tell and I didn't have a watch or clock to check. The loud voices and shuffling sounds in the hall, the high-pitched giggling and slurred promises in feminine voices, and even the wet sucking sounds had all died out.

The rhythmic thumping against the wall behind my bed had stopped.

Finally there was silence, and I rolled onto my back and stared blindly at the bar of empty clothes hangers and the shelf above me.

I considered getting up, maybe moving to the bed. It was a nice bed, more comfortable than the floor.

I considered taking down those hangers and fashioning some kind of weapon, anything to give me a sense of security.

I stared at nothing and contemplated how sometimes I wished I could just sleep forever, never have to wake up or interact with people. How peaceful oblivion could be.

It was times like this, when I couldn't bear to leave my bed, that Azzie called my "dark days." Or maybe that's what I called them, trying to explain it to her. Didn't matter.

I stared at nothing, trying to feel *nothing*, until I realized I was actually staring at *something*.

In the ceiling of the closet, there was a section that wasn't plaster, although it was painted the same color and *looked* like it had the same texture, but it didn't. It was a little off, there

was a pattern — maybe a grain? — underneath the paint, and there were edges, I could follow them with my eye.

There was a trap door in the ceiling of my closet.

I immediately sprang up — as much as one could spring after sleeping on the floor for a dozen-plus hours with a body only mostly healed from a massive beating — and half-carried, half-dragged the chair that Tesla had been sitting in when I woke up, all the way around the bed and through the room until I had it wedged inside the closet door. Then I realized my mistake of backing myself into the closet with it, and dropped down to the ground, crawling between the legs of the chair and out into the room. I climbed up like a monkey, from seat to arms to back, until I could comfortably squeeze myself up onto the closet shelf on my side and twist onto my back.

I took the opportunity to channel my inner Uma Thurman from *Kill Bill* (the inferior second part), holding my hand up flat with fingertips against the wood, quickly transforming into a fist to smack the surface. But that hurt like a fucking bitch on recently fractured fingers, and I quickly gave up the bit. Instead, I braced my feet against the section of ceiling above me, and pushed until the swollen and painted-over wood broke free from its restraints and flipped open, with a screech and bang.



I WAS IN A VAST, empty space of darkness and dust. Dirt-clouded dormer windows lined both sides of the long rectangle, the depths obscured by shadows. Cross-beams and braces formed a symmetrical web above me, and my feet curled up and away from the long expanse of the rough, wooden plank floor. Piles of debris were scattered throughout, but the space was otherwise bare.

I crept down the center, hoping I was over the hallway. I hesitated a dozen feet from a solid wall bisected by a door, a six-panel wooden thing with an iron knob above a keyhole.

I'd come back with a light, and lock picks, and maybe a weapon. It had to be locked, right? They'd take at least some precautions.

I decided not to get closer, not to check. Even if that door wasn't locked, others would be. It was enough for tonight to know that these men thought they had me trapped here, they thought they could keep track of me and keep me locked away if they needed to — no one had threatened any such thing but I knew it was only a matter of time — but I found a way out.

I would always find a way out.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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THE NEXT MORNING, I woke up to Tesla sitting in the chair in the corner.

It was the rustle of cloth and a frustrated sigh that drew me back from delicious oblivion, but the tap of his fingertips against his tablet screen was how I knew it was him. I peeled open one eye to glare at him, growled out something about boundaries that was unintelligible even to me, and then pulled the covers up over my head.

Luckily I'd not only returned the chair to the corner, but I'd decided to sleep in my bed after my attic adventure. And hadn't stripped off all my clothes during the night.

"Doc wants to see you," he muttered, still focused on his screen, "and then you need to meet Adèle. And we need to talk about a couple things, like how you knew where to find us, and what other kinds of things you can do. Your application was three sentences."

"You hired me off of three sentences," I pointed out helpfully, with only a residual amount of irritation at being woken up and being forced to leave my bed sooner than I'd like. I had a quest now: get shoes, a flashlight, and bobbie pins; having a purpose helped soothe the monster I was when first waking up. Not as much as my hot, bitter soulmate-in-a-cup would, but close. "And your ad was shit." Also helpful, as all constructive criticism was.

"They were three compelling sentences. And the ad worked, didn't it?"

“Yeah, and beggars can’t be choosers when it comes to childcare during the apocalypse.”

“So how exactly did you know where to go? Loki found you way past any turn-offs that you might have claimed were your actual destination. You knew where we are.”

A lot of things conspired to make me feel magnanimous for once, which was the exact word I needed to describe my mood, even though I was a little surprised that I could pull it out of my proverbial ass this soon after waking. Oh! Same with proverbial! My brain was so smart.

But yeah, since I was feeling pretty smug about them overlooking the attic escape route, and underestimating my powers of observation, I lifted the edge of my cocoon and peered out at him again, willing to walk him through the process but wanting to watch his face as he figured it out. “When you placed the ad, what’s the one thing you had to do that made you consider not placing it at all? What bugged you the most?”

It took him a half a second. “The address is masked. I checked, repeatedly, from several different user types. There aren’t any geographic coordinates at all.”

“Did you look at the ad?” He nodded. “Then you saw the map.”

“It’s a static picture of a tiny bit of map without any discernible local identifiers. That’s the only reason I was okay with placing the ad—”

“There’s the end of a road, and a line indicating water, like a creek or a river. And it’s shaded green, indicating forest.”

“Which could be a billion places—!”

“Right. But I knew where the bus stop was.”

I saw him process the information, actually saw his brain working as his eyes shifted back and forth as if reading the air. As he concentrated, his face was serene, almost like one of those religious paintings from hundreds of years ago that Azzie loved staring at— he looked *beatific*. That was the word, thank you brain.

But seriously, he was beautiful.

In his own way, as I watched his powerful brain parse the data, he was as beautiful as the other one.

Then he scowled, completely destroying the image, and gave a sharp jerk of his head acknowledging my answer. He wasn't mad at me, he was frustrated with himself. It hadn't occurred to him that *he'd* sent me all the tools I needed to figure it out, but since it meant that my threat level went down a few defcons, I didn't rub it in or anything. Despite the temptation.

"I'd considered using a different address," he admitted, "but it showed too many identifiers."

I expected him to say more, but we lapsed into silence. After enough time had passed that I was starting to doze off again, he moved on to the next topic. "So what can you do, Mouse?"

I yawned and blinked at him, too warm and sleepy to fuck around. "Draw blood. Harvest shellfish. Carry a grown man up a flight of stairs on my shoulders. Maybe not Loki, but you for sure."

Outsmart and outmaneuver multiple government agencies and the military-industrial complex.

Mastermind a plan for years to evacuate a town occupied by potentially hostile forces.

Teach bartitsu and gun safety to girls with blood cancer.

Grow, harvest, and cure marijuana that can make you see God.

Plan and execute a campaign in every edition of Dungeons & Dragons.

Claw my way out of neglect, abuse, and a corrupt system; overcome the odds to develop legit, career-type skills in the medical field; discover a vaccine that could save millions of lives if the government wasn't being run by greedy a-holes. Formulate plans to protect and nurture the only hope this world has left.

Rinse and repeat.

“Harvest shellfish?”

“RAS. Recirculating aquaculture systems using biofiltration.” I yawned again, thinking over what might be pertinent for them. “Ten thousand gallon tanks using suspension bags for the shellfish, but other seafood too. Plus sugar kelp on growlines and fish, with trout, salmon, and sturgeon in the deep tanks because the water was consistently colder. The tanks had to be kept on an alternating schedule to simulate seasonal temperature changes, which helps with growth and controls biofouling. It was combined with a closed-loop aquaponics system. Vegetables and grains on the surface of the grow beds, sometimes with warmer water fishies underneath, but some plants require the fish to be separate. Mostly tilapia and barramundi.”

“Mostly,” Tesla repeated quietly, making me smile.

“Kelp production would be especially useful here,” I suggested, getting maybe a little too into my subject. “It’s an incredibly nutritional food for humans and livestock, it can be used as fertilizer and biofuel, and some species can be grown in relatively shallow water. I’ve seen twelve to fifteen foot blades of sugar kelp grow in less than two feet of water.” If someone had told me ten years ago how passionate I’d be about seaweed, I would’ve laughed at them. I’ve never even seen the ocean.

“That would be Caliban and Rasputin’s territory then,” Tesla mumbled as he made notes. I thought he was talking to himself, but then I heard a grunt from the foot of my bed. I peeled open one eye and raised my head out from under the blanket, spotting Loki resting his ass on the edge of the desk with his arms folded and ankles crossed.

“Hey,” I grunted at him, and he nodded back.

I arched one eyebrow. The corner of his mouth curled up.

All was forgiven.

“How’s your arm.”

He held it up, like he'd forgotten about it. It was in an air cast, the velcro straps stretched to capacity. "Eh, it's fine. I'm supposed to wear this for a few days to be sure though. You feelin' better? Forgot you were still recovering."

I grimaced. "Well enough."

"You gonna tell us who beat you up?"

"Nope," I replied softly, shaking my head.

"Was it a club? Is that why you hate them so much?"

I debated what I should say, finally shrugging when the silence went on too long. "Yeah."

"We're not like that, you know?" He sounded so earnest, like it was terribly important whether I trusted them, or even liked them. It was kinda cute. But then he kept talking, and cute became annoying. "Most clubs don't understand the concept of *family first*, but they still value loyalty and protecting each other. But you're with the Apocalypse Riders now, Mouse, and we take care of our own." He said that with a straight face, like he actually believed it.

Thirteen year old me was laughing hysterically, or maybe she was crying. I couldn't really tell anymore. Twenty-seven year old me was having a hard time not calling him on that bullshit. *Family first*, my ass.

I ducked my head back under the covers and whispered, "It's adorable that you think that's true."

"What was that?" Tesla asked, way too close. I pulled the blankets down again, enough to uncover my eyes, and found him bent over and hovering above me. Fucker moved like a cat, he'd gotten up and leaned over the bed without making a sound.

"I said it's adorable how protective he is. Like a big ol' teddy bear," I freed my whole face, and said it with such enthusiasm that Tesla winced away from my morning breath. "What's wrong?" I asked, leaning up and making sure to breathe out as much as I could. "Something wrong?"



He straightened out and glared down at my pillow. “Point taken.”

“Aww, you’re learning!”



THEY LEFT me alone long enough to shower and dress (and brush my teeth). When I opened the door to the hall, the two of them were standing there waiting. Tesla had my shoes, and Loki handed me a pair of socks, then looked me over with a frown.

“She needs more clothes,” he stated, and I glared at him.

“These are fine,” I snapped, suddenly self-conscious over my baggy, ill-fitting jeans and the plaid flannel shirt from the dead kid that flapped around me like a sail underneath my giant hoodie. I also had a beanie on, since going barefoot would lead to being cold; I looked like a teenage skater dude in the ensemble, but whatever.

“Do these shoes even fit you?” Tesla eyed the sneakers dangling from his fingertips with a perplexed expression, glanced at my feet, then back at the shoes.

My toes curled under involuntarily, like hermit crabs retreating into their shells; I had a sudden craving for crab cakes, but I focused on the conversation. My shoes were within sight, my quest log could soon be updated with a checkmark. “With thick socks, and I lace them really tight.”

“You’re right,” he muttered at Loki while still studying me, and ignoring my protests. “We can get her sizes and send them to Mags.”

“What else do you need?” Loki poked me to get my attention away from glaring at Tesla. He was still frowning, but I could tell it wasn’t at me as much as the situation. At least what he thought was the situation.

“Everything,” Tesla answered for me, dropping my shoes — barely missing my poor toes — and pulling out his tablet from his front pocket. Getting a better look, I realized it was a

phone after all — albeit a giant one — in an industrial-strength, military-grade case. “I looked through her shit before it was laundered. She’s got almost nothing.”

Irritated, I picked my shoes up and crowded in so I was gazing up at him, widening my eyes as big as I could get them. “Master’s given Dobby clothes! Dobby is free!” I cried out triumphantly, hopping around and waving one shoe back and forth in a swish-and-flick motion. “Apparate! Apparate!” I shouted, smacking the shoe against the wall. “Why won’t this fucking thing work? Dobby is displeased!”

Loki leaned back against the opposite wall, running a hand over his mouth, but it wasn’t doing much to hide his grin. Tesla stared down at me stone-faced, his posture stiff with annoyance. I hopped a few more times, then pointed the shoe at him. “Expelliarmus phone!” I yelled and smacked the cellphone out of his hands to bounce harmlessly on the tile, then leaned in. With narrowed eyes and a sinister whisper, I informed him, “Dobby is master now.”

Tesla picked up his phone and resumed typing without comment.

Loki went from amused to serious in zero-point-six seconds, ruining my moment. I was sure the man would break if I kept taunting him. “So you were beaten and robbed? Is that why you don’t have anything?”

“If you must know,” I turned on him and hissed with enough venom that my Slytherin was showing, “I was caught breaking into a secure research lab on the secret military base I lived on, and I saw their nefarious plans so they had to do something with me but I was too important to kill, so instead they delivered me to my mortal enemies a few states away who tortured me for revenge and because I fucked with *their* nefarious plans.” Then I took a deep breath, because that was a lot to get out in just one. “I escaped, of course. Because I am a diabolical genius.”

“I see,” Tesla said, deadpan. “Their *nefarious plan*... Was it the same plan we have every night? To try to take over the world?”

“More or less.”

“Mmhmm,” he mumbled, typing things into his phone. “Well, problem solved. They were already planning on hitting the Junction City flea market on the way back. We get a lot of supplies there, especially clothing.” He glanced at my feet before typing something else into his phone. “I told him clothing appropriate for a governess, sized *garden gnome*. Shoe size six, yes?”

I rolled my eyes, which he didn't see because he was still staring at his screen, so I kicked his shin lightly and then rolled them again when he glanced up.

He blinked. “Mature.”

“Fuck off. Tell him to get me a onesie. Unicorn preferred, but I'll take whatever.”

“That's your only request?”

“What more does a girl need than a unicorn onesie?”

“Fair enough.”

“Are they on their way back then?” Loki asked, then looked in both directions as though making sure the hallway was still empty, as if his booming voice couldn't be heard through any door if someone chose to listen.

“Yeah. Making stops, though, still a week at least,” Tesla said, voice lower.

Apparently, this was classified information?

I crossed my arms and leaned back against my doorframe, narrowing my eyes at them. “You're obviously trying to keep this info on the down-low, so why is it okay for me to hear it?”

“Because you won't have an opportunity to communicate with anyone,” Tesla explained without even looking up from his screen, “since you're under probation until well after they come back.”

“I'm sorry, what? What the fuck do you mean by *probation*?”

“No outside contact.”

“No— no. That is not acceptable. I need to contact someone. She needs to know I made it here. I was supposed to contact her yesterday, but my phone still doesn’t have a signal —”

“Yes, I removed the SIM card.”

“Wh— you— what—?!” I sputtered out, so angry, so outraged that I couldn’t even get a full sentence out.

“Give me her email address or mobile number and I’ll contact her on your behalf.”

“That’s not—!”

“That’s your only option, Mouse,” he interrupted, looking up but focusing through the doorway next to me, while Loki’s head wagged back and forth as he watched us fight it out. I wanted to punch both of them in the nards.

“That’s unacceptable, Tesla!” I raged, on the verge of *such* a tantrum, and he shrugged. He shrugged! “And you know who sends messages on behalf of someone else, saying they’re safe and there’s no reason to worry? *Serial killers!* She’s not going to be okay with any of this!”

He let out a gusty sigh and looked at Loki — actually focused on Loki, looking him in the eye, which just made me even angrier even though I didn’t know why — who then shrugged right back at him. “Send it from her account?”

“If you think I’m giving you my password—”

“If you think I can’t crack your password in ten minutes —”

“Stop.” Loki held up his hands, and stepped forward, not quite between us but close, and it reminded me how tall he was, how big compared to me. “Tesla, do the thing with the network where stuff looks like it’s going out, but it’s actually just buffering. Let her sign in to her email account from your machine and send the message. You watch her do it, and if everything is fine, then she signs out, and you release the chokehold on the internet and let the spice flow again. Yeah?”

“Yeah, alright.”

“Baby?”

I narrowed my eyes at Loki. “Did you just call me *baby*?” I asked, slowly.

Tesla frowned. Loki looked away and shrugged. “It’s just a thing I call girls.”

“Oh, so you couldn’t remember my name?”

It wasn’t the same, and I knew it, but I couldn’t help resenting the hell out of it. I felt sick to my stomach hearing it, the word and the excuse, especially after the thing in my chest did some kind of somersault when he called me that word. “Don’t do it again,” I warned him, angry and feeling stupid for even that split second of *liking* it.

He stiffened, and I realized I’d crossed a line again. I could get away with fucking around and acting the fool, but women don’t give orders in clubs, women don’t talk back disrespectfully. I shrank back a little, hoping he wasn’t mad enough to hit me, because he was way bigger and stronger than any of the others who’d hit me before, and they about killed me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

He stared at me with an unnameable expression, a mix of anger and other things I couldn’t interpret. “You’re fine,” he snarled, and I flinched, which only pissed him off more. He huffed out a sigh. “I said you’re fine, Mouse. I’m not going to hit you. Stop acting like I am.”

“I— okay,” I replied weakly, trying hard not to react at all, but looked away when I felt tears gathering behind my eyes. This wasn’t like when I had Beast watching my back growing up, when no one would dare retaliate. This was like more recently, when Beast couldn’t seem to decide if he wanted to worship me, or punish me. If I kept fucking up, over and over — if I kept talking without thinking, and making them angry like this — I wasn’t going to survive here long. No one would even know if I ended up back in the woods.

It was so fucking *frustrating*! I’d worked so hard to get past that kind of conditioning until I operated in the other extreme and said whatever the fuck crossed my mind.

“C’mon, Pinky. Let’s deal with your email and then I’m going to take you to see Doc.” Tesla’s voice was quiet, and he moved towards the door across the hall.

“I’m going too,” Loki grumbled. I glanced over to find him staring at anything but me with his shoulders hunched, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Seeing him was all it took to get me past my fear, because I realized he wasn’t angry or even annoyed. He acted like a little kid with his feelings hurt. He could start kicking the ground at any second, calling me a boogerhead, and I wouldn’t be that shocked.

Loki had gotten into an accident in front of me, and still managed to be gentle while dealing with his injuries. He’d howled and cursed, and aggressively avoided most of the help I offered, but he never directed any of it at me. We’d ridden all the way here on his bike, and never once did I feel scared until we arrived. Even then, I wasn’t scared of *him* but of the situation. Yesterday, I’d panicked in the kitchen and he chased me, but only to make sure I was okay.

I’d said things that made him angry, sure, but he never took that anger out on me. *Loki* wasn’t my enemy. He wasn’t going to hurt me. Down to my bones, I knew this.

I had an impulse to hug him, to show him I wasn’t afraid of him and make him happy. Despite just seconds ago telling myself I needed to cut that shit out, I still wasn’t one to put too much thought into controlling my compulsive urges. So that was exactly what I did: I moved up on him with purpose and flung my arms around as much of his body as I could grapple, squeezing him even as I buried my head in his armpit. He stiffened at first, then relaxed as I issued a muffled apology into his shirt.

He tugged his arms free and wrapped me up in what was, quite possibly, the greatest hug I’d ever had. No exaggeration, it was serious perfection.

He was so tall and thick with muscle; he loomed over me to where I felt like I disappeared against him. His shirt was soft against my cheek, and the man underneath was radiating

heat like a furnace. He was substantial and unbreakable, solid enough that even *I* didn't have to worry about squeezing too hard or hurting him. And he hugged me back, with enough strength and pressure that I felt he was into it. It wasn't awkward at all, and he wasn't just humoring me.

On top of all that, he smelled amazing, all spicy-musky and delicious.

It was difficult to let go. Eventually I did, backing up a step as his arms seemed just as reluctant to release me. A woman scurried past us in the hallway, heading towards the staircase, and she stared at me like I was covered in spiders.

“What was that about?” he asked, his voice a soft rumble. He ran his hand over my hair, pushing it back over my shoulder and drawing my attention back to him.

“I felt bad for flinching, but sometimes I can't help it. On some level, I do know you aren't going to hit me or hurt me, but I can't totally trust my instincts right now. I get spooked when I feel like I might've misread the situation or you react too strongly to something, or if I realize I acted without thinking. And I can be impulsive, so that's always an issue. But none of that is on you. It doesn't mean you did anything or even that I *believe* you did something intentionally to scare me. I'm just fucked up inside and I get... spooked.” I shrugged. “I saw you were upset, and I hugged you. Like I said, I'm impulsive.”

He grabbed my shoulders and tugged me back against him, wrapping his arms around to cover my entire back. “Don't be scared of me,” he demanded, the order losing something by him saying it into my hair. “I'm your safe space. You can yell at me, or tease me, or call me names, whatever you want. I'm not ever going to hurt you or hit you, no matter how much shit or grief you give me. I might yell or get all pissy, but I'll never lay a hand on you in anger.”

“But if I disrespect you in front of others—”

He pushed me back so I could see his face, and he grinned down at me with the cockiest smirk. “I got nothin' to prove to anyone, Zombie Girl. I give no fucks what anyone else thinks,

and I'm not worried about getting shit if you don't treat me like some monster."

He had so much calm confidence in that moment, I couldn't doubt him. He meant what he said. All of it. And goddamn, was he handsome when he smiled like that, all rough and wild looking, and yet I hadn't felt that safe in years. In fourteen-fucking-years to be exact.

How was it possible that a man who represented the very thing and people who destroyed my entire life would be the first one to make me feel secure again?

I must've been projecting doubt or something because he bent his head down and whispered in my ear. "You fucked up my wrist, and my leg, and my *bike*, Mouse. That's the most damage anyone's been able to do in a long fuckin' time, so if anyone should be scared of anyone, it's me of you. You think I want to piss you off more?"

I giggled, I actually *giggled*. It was so absurd to think of, yet I could see how it was true. "You should know that I'm freakishly strong," I confided in him. "I wasn't kidding about carrying Tesla up the stairs. So you *should* fear me." I flexed my arms dramatically and crowed, "Though I be little, I be fierce."

Still leaning into me, he bit back his smirk. "I'm terrified. Shaking even. You're really intimidating."

"I feel like you aren't taking me seriously at all right now." I shook my head at him with a disappointed frown. "I'm a badass, Loki. It took four of them to overpower me," I joked, too busy flexing and admiring my own guns, even hidden underneath an oversized hoodie, to read the room. "One on one? I would take - you - down."

I grinned up at him and realized he'd gone pale around his mouth but flushed everywhere else, the tension in his neck muscles causing them to stretch and strain as he tried to work his jaw. "Four?" he finally ground out, his eyes glowing as the blood rushed to his head and pulsed in his temple. "Give me their names and where to find them."



“No.” I shook my head, dropping the fake bravado and gripping his biceps. I looked up into his eyes with every ounce of determination and stubbornness I could muster, forcing him to see *me*. “No, Loki,” I repeated, a warning in my voice. “And don’t ask me again.”

He straightened to his full height, looking down at me with the authority he’d earned, through his place in the club and by his own presence. He was formidable, for sure, but I’d been facing down men like him since I was in elementary school. I wouldn’t challenge him outright, but I wasn’t about to cave either.

“You’re gonna tell me eventually, Mouse. And then they’re gonna pay.”

I sighed. I had a feeling he would not let it go, and that annoyed me. Unfortunately, all that manliness tended to come with an inability to grasp that a girl can eradicate her own nemeses, conquer her own enemies, and storm her own castles. Drive her enemies before her, enjoying the lamentations of their women. Or men. We don’t discriminate. All it took was some patience on my part, and smug complacency on theirs, for them to get distracted. Easy-peasy. But Loki was going to be *persistent*, I could tell.

His frown deepened, becoming a scowl. I gazed up at him, trying not to lose the thread and gaze at him dreamily, ogling the pretty biker man. They tend not to like it when they’re being all serious like this, and all you can do is get all goofy about how manly they look.

Tesla emerged from the doorway a few feet from us, radiating impatience. “Quit fucking around and get in here. I don’t have all day.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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TESLA'S SPACE wasn't anything I could've anticipated. The room I was staying in was all faded glory, with worn and sun-bleached scarlet red damask wallpaper and threadbare crimson upholstery on the armchair, intermingled with dark laminate furniture, damaged but serviceable, and scratched wooden floors. His rooms — plural since an archway had been knocked out of a brick and plaster wall to create a work area in an adjoining space — were the kind of industrial chic that decorators all over New York City tried to replicate in million dollar lofts a couple decades ago. The aesthetic you can only really achieve by stripping everything down to the bones of a space.

Plaster had been scraped away from the exterior walls, exposing bricks stained by water and time. Most of the interior walls had been patched and resurfaced, though some lath still showed, the plaster never skimmed or painted. Whoever took down the wall between the rooms, had done it with the grace of the Kool-Aid Man. The uneven archway was rimmed with ragged tears in the plaster, with dark steel beams inserted as close to the sides as possible, but there were gaps. The pitted and scratched floors needed to be stripped, sanded, and resealed. Two steel-grated steps led up through the archway to a raised, plank wood platform framed on three sides with steel grate access panels; I could see a web of zip-tied, bundled cables and a trunkline running underneath.

Except for the bed — a *very* large one covered in perfectly arranged layers, pristine white duvets and blankets with giant, poofy pillows — and the desk in his nerd-annex, the only

furniture in the room were shelves made out of old copper pipes and reclaimed wood planks. Shelves everywhere, lining every wall, running along the ceiling over the windows, and even blocking the closets he apparently had no use for. Except for books (and there were a lot of those), and clothes in neatly folded stacks of uniform size and shape, everything was in boxes and bins on those shelves, labeled with angular slashes of handwriting.

I looked around and thought up a good dozen different ways I could torture him if I needed to, everything from moving things around to different shelves, to swapping labels on boxes, to moving individual items from one box to another. And that's not even touching his clothes and the books that seemed to be arranged by size &/or color. *At least* a dozen opportunities for fuckery. Maybe two.

I stood in the middle of the room and looked around while Tesla disappeared up the stairs to his command center where he had at least eight monitors mounted above and around his desk. Loki hovered behind me with his hands in his pockets like he was trying not to touch anything. Tesla's eyes kept darting over to me though, I could tell he was trying not to react but my presence in his space must've been making him uncomfortable.

"Loki?" I asked, dropping my shoes and socks, and he grunted in response. "Would you stop me if I took a running leap onto Tesla's bed and started rolling around on it and messing it all up? And most assuredly spreading my cooties all over?"

"Nope, but I'm not sure—"

"Excellent."

*"Don't you fucking dare—!"*

Up until that moment, I wasn't even sure Tesla *could* raise his voice let alone sound so *emotional* about it, but I was already mid-air and about to hit his foofy coverlet full-force, so I didn't have a chance to marvel at him. And *oh fuck yeah!* was his bed soft. I sank down into that fucker like it was a

bathtub full of warm jello, and I began to roll and writhe like I was making snow angels in his down comforter.

“OHMYGAWD this bed is FANTASTIC!” I coughed a little, considered whether or not I should cover my mouth, then decided spraying my saliva everywhere was even more diabolical. Something clamped down on my ankle and started pulling me off the bed, but I fought it like crazy, twisting and kicking, while screaming “Tesla’s bed is my bitch!” at the top of my lungs, then coughing more, right up until a heavy weight landed on top of me, pinning me flat to the mattress.

I looked up into the crazy-eyed wonder that was Tesla: face beet red, glasses askew, hair spikes all mussed up like he was tearing at it trying to hold back. I grinned up at him as he loomed over me, looking like he could easily strangle the life out of me, and although I tried to hold it back, I ended up coughing on him.

“I’m going to— no one will ever— your body will rot in a shallow grave— RACCOONS WILL EAT YOUR CHEEKS!” He shook me by the shoulders until my teeth rattled, and even though he was most likely a violent killer who genuinely would shoot me in the head in the woods if I fucked up, I couldn’t help but laugh hysterically.

I really did repeat that I was sorry over and over, and meant it in the moment, but setting him off like that... it was so beautiful. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it,” I rasped out, my throat raw, “I saw the opportunity and took it!”

One of his arms released me, and he was reaching around on the bed above my head, and that made me very suspicious.

“What are you doing?” I narrowed my eyes at him and coughed out of the side of my mouth, now struggling to get out from under him. He ignored me, keeping me restrained, and stretched a little farther.

“No, really, what are you— are you looking for a *gun*?” I gasped, pushing against his weight to get my arms up, to grab hold of his and stop him, but my fucked up shoulder and second degree burn were impeding me. He glared down to me with such a dark, evil look that I started to panic a little,

fighting against his heaviness on top of me for real. He used his whole fucking body to immobilize me, still feeling around the top of his bed, and I was nearly in tears as I begged him to stop—he wasn't Tesla anymore in my head, rightfully pissed about me fucking up his stuff, he was an anonymous weight pinning me down, looking to hurt me.

“Shut up,” he growled, dragging at the sheets, then suddenly it was Tesla again, lifting off of me but using one hand to keep me pressed to the surface of the bed as he brought the top of the fitted sheet down and wrapped me in a cocoon of his bedding, rolling me up and sealing me inside.

I went still, and limp, expecting any moment to feel the searing heat of bullets ripping through the blankets and into my body, and tears spiked in my eyes. “You'll never get the blood out,” I rasped, closing my eyes and waiting.

It was stupid, fucking with him like I had, it was a stupid reason to die, and I regretted everything.

Azzie was never going to know what happened to me, she was never going to know about what Kane was planning for her, and everything I'd done—it was all lost now, all pointless, because I couldn't just act like a normal person, I had to be a raging idiot who fucks with bad people.

I was stupid, and impulsive, and I was going to die and no one would care.

I don't know how long I laid there, shaking and fighting tears, until I realized that the bullets never came.

I'd calmed down enough to feel it when the bed tilted as someone sat down on the edge right near me, causing me to roll in their direction. I pushed at my Egyptian cotton shroud, and eventually someone helped untangle the bedding around me until I was looking up into Loki's solemn face while my hair fluttered and crackled with static.

“You need to get up. Sienna is here to take all of this to the laundry.”

I braced up on my elbows and looked around. Tesla was up in his geek-nook, standing at the desk fiddling with something

and shooting glares over at me. Loki was sitting on the edge of the bed, and in the middle of the room stood a freakin' gorgeous woman, arms crossed in front so she was holding her own elbows, glaring daggers at me.

She was tall and curvy as fuck, with boobs spilling out the top of her slashed-up, skin-tight tank top advertising a metal band. She had long, tan legs in a pair of ragged-hem cutoff shorts, disappearing into a pair of well-worn cowboy boots. Her hair was cinnamon brown and curly, pinned up off her face on top but spilling down past her shoulders, and her makeup was flawless.

Even though I was pretty sure she was younger than me, I felt like a child in my baggy, flappy clothes, with no makeup and my hair all over the place. I was even messier than usual, and not only that, I had obviously caused more work for her.

"I'll wash it all," I piped up, giving her a weak smile. Her glare got even more intense.

"No," Tesla barked, and her nostrils flared as her mouth curled up in a smug little smile.

"Only Sienna does Tesla's laundry," Loki stated, helping me peel more blankets and sheets off until I was completely exposed. Sienna gave me a slow once-over, clearly not impressed.

"Oh, okay," I said weakly, and crawled off the bed on Loki's side, about as ungracefully as possible, ending up in a heap on the ground near his feet. He was sitting with his knees spread, hands resting on them, and he looked down at me and bit his lip as I pushed my hair out of my face.

"Want me to use extra bleach?" Sienna asked in sharp voice as she gathered up everything that was on the bed, including the pillows. Tesla grunted out a "yes" and I was suddenly and profoundly nauseous.

I'd taunted him about cooties, but those had been *jokes*, something silly to distract from his obvious discomfort around me. I could own them that way, own my feelings of being polluted inside. I could drag those fears out into the light

where they'd wither and die when they were treated as intended. But instead, he confirmed her sneered insult, and I saw myself and the situation through their eyes: I was *unclean*. Touching my skin had left an indelible stain on his sheets.

The back of my throat filled with the sour taste of shame. I stared down at the floor and willed myself not to cry, but the breath I took in was shaky and Loki heard it.

His fingers twitched where they rested on his knee. "Mouse—" he began in a low growl, like a warning, and I shook my head, not looking up.

Logically, I understood that I'd crossed lines I shouldn't have, I'd poked one of Tesla's soft bits, and his response was proportionate. I needed to reap what I sowed; no one should feel bad except me, all of this was on me.

"I won't cause anymore trouble, Loki." I was proud I got that out without my voice cracking, but it took effort. "I know I went too far."

"That's not—" he let out a sigh, then cursed in his deep rasp. I shook my head again, but still couldn't look up because my dang eyes wouldn't stop trying to tear up.

"I promise," I swore, pivoting to get to my feet with my face averted. "I'll be right back, I forgot the email address in my room."

I didn't run out of the room but I sure did get close to it. I ignored Sienna stuffing Tesla's bedding into a cart and darted across the hallway to my door. I made it into my room and closed the door — not even slamming it — and got all the way to the bathroom and the toilet. I even managed to shut that door behind me in some attempt at keeping her from hearing me, before throwing up nothing but bile and humiliation into the porcelain bowl.



I CLEANED MYSELF UP, brushed my teeth and hair, all without looking in the mirror. When I was just about done,

Loki spoke from the other side of the en suite door.

“Tesla needs to deal with something so we’re going to go eat first. You can meet Adèle, she’ll be at breakfast.”

I popped the door open, grinning widely — one might say *bordering on maniacally*, if one chose, but I preferred to think it was a reasonable facsimile of a genuine smile. “Great. Sounds good. So the plan is for me to stay, right?”

Loki narrowed his eyes, nodding slowly. “Yes?”

“Great! I want a lock on my door. Or, I should say, I want the lock on the *outside* of the door taken off, and one that locks with a key from both sides put in.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out in a whoosh. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. I’ll take care of that today.”

“And I want the only key.”

“Mouse—” He looked closely at me and my grin, the one that was taking on the brittle quality of cheap plastic about to shatter under the pressure in my head, and he frowned. “There needs to be a second key for safety purposes.”

“I get to decide who holds it.”

“Mouse—”

“I’m not going to wake up to visitors again, Loki. That’s not fair. You either trust me — and you seem to be willing to trust me with a *kid* — or you don’t. If you don’t, then we’re going to have a problem. Nobody gets to—”

“Okay,” he interrupted, cutting me off before I lost my shit. I was hanging by a thread, a bare wisp of old cotton thread, half-rotted, that had already broken a dozen times, and he must’ve seen that. “I’ll do it today. And I’m in the room next to you, so I’ll hold the key but I promise it’ll go in a drawer and won’t be touched unless there’s an emergency.”

His room was next to mine.

I recalled, with great clarity, the sounds that kept me awake last night: the sounds in the hallway, the pounding of



the headboard against the wall. I kept that smile on my face like it had been stapled in place, as every good feeling I'd fought to hold onto drained right the fuck out of me.

And I hated myself for it.

I don't know why I thought things might be different, and I don't know why I wanted them to be. I knew, more than *anyone*, how things were in a motorcycle club. And I'd never had a problem with it before.

I hadn't even felt this way when I met Beast's *wife*.

This made no sense. Why would Loki be different? Why would he see something different with *me*? And only me.

That... that wasn't how things worked. That wasn't this world. It wasn't *my* world either, and monogamy wasn't anything I'd ever wanted, not as an adult.

I didn't even want him like that, it wasn't smart. I didn't want complications, and this was all temporary.

Loki had his pick of any woman here, he was a patched-in member of a club that supported who knows how many women whose *job* it was to be willing and available. Women who looked like Sienna. In this place, the concept of celibacy was as big a joke as monogamy, so what was I thinking? That he took one look at me and decided I was his forever-girl? His one and only?

*The fuck, Mouse? This was temporary.* And, I reminded myself, even more so than usual.

In the Before Times, then in Salem, I changed partners like most people change their underwear— in the sense that you wore it once and then replaced it, not like I was fucking a different partner every day, that was just being greedy. Impractical, too, since my pool of candidates was finite, especially on the base, and I didn't fish in the company pond: no direct co-workers, no one I gamed with regularly. And no neighbors, back in the day when I lived in an apartment. Those were my rules.

Sex partners, much like Dungeons & Dragons, were about resource management: you don't want to blow your whole

load too quickly, run through all your spell slots or special abilities on the first fight. You needed to pace yourself, keep some things in reserve, because you never knew what opportunities would arise or when you'd have to go from fight to fight without even a short rest. And now that I'd come up with that analogy, I tucked it into the foyer of my memory palace to bring out and work on in the near future, because that was a pearl of fucking wisdom right there. It could work on so many levels! Not just resource management in terms of partners, but, like, sex acts too, and I was sure I could expand on the D&D metaphor.

Pearls of *fucking* wisdom... hehehe. Damn, I wasn't just a tasty snack, I was one clever bitch. But although that tangent was a nice distraction, it didn't actually fix my immediate situation: the knee-jerk emotional reaction I was having to Loki.

I thought I'd learned my lesson at twelve, watching Beast ride out with Rosemary on the back of his bike. It had hurt so bad to be replaced so easily, to be forgotten so thoroughly, that I swore an oath to myself that I'd never let anyone have that power over me again. Romantic attachments made you weak, they undermined any sense of self-preservation; they made you trust when you should be wary. They made you sacrifice your own needs and wants for someone else's, putting their happiness over your own, and — the most egregious offense — they made you vulnerable to the whims and decisions of someone who wasn't as invested as you.

I'd lived by these rules my entire adult life, and I blamed that fuckhead Tai for warping me. For a hot second, he made me think there were men out there who could be *different*.

That wasn't my experience. And that wasn't something I wanted.

Certainly not with a member of a motorcycle club.

I wasn't a weak chick with daddy issues, dependent on a man's approval to make me feel fulfilled as a person. I didn't need attention, or affection. Not from Tai, not from Beast, and not from Loki. Not from anyone.

*I'm motherfucking Mouse.* There wasn't anyone that could measure up anyway.

I had one job here, and it wasn't getting my motor primed. I was here to get my head together before I returned to Salem and the bunker, where I'd have to face reality again. Azzie was sick and getting sicker, it was just a matter of time—*nope*. I needed to get my shit together so I could be strong for her, just like I've always been. So I could be whatever she needed.

Okay, I had *two* jobs here: there was a little girl who needed help finding her voice. Right now, she was lost and alone in a confusing wilderness where nothing made sense, and the things she took for granted her whole life had been ripped away. I could keep her from having to go through that any longer, like I did for Azzie. I wouldn't leave until she felt safe again, and by then, they'd have forgotten to keep eyes on me.

I realized Loki was still waiting for an answer. I blinked up at him, this truly beautiful man who had been nothing but sweet to me even when he'd scared me. He was an ooey-gooey caramel center hidden within a deadly, spiky shell; the perfect arrangement of his features and form were wrapped in a mantle of badassery, but it couldn't fully contain his squishy center. His impulse to protect, to nurture, was as attractive as his face.

No, this man should never sleep alone if he didn't want to, he deserved to be appreciated. I couldn't begrudge him anything, even if my mind went to silly places for a short time.

“Yeah, that's fine, Loki. You can hold the key. I trust you. Can we go eat? I'm starving.”

“Uh, yeah, okay.” He had the weirdest expression on his face, like he didn't expect me to say anything like that, like he was anticipating *something* but really wasn't sure what. “You sure you're okay? You zoned out there for a few minutes...”

“I'm good,” I reassured him with a warm smile, and nodded my head. I wasn't just placating him either, I was okay in my head again and settled back into reality. “Sometimes I forget things for so long that when my thoughts catch up

again, I can get a little overwhelmed. Once things are back in perspective, I'm all good again."

"Yeah, sure," he agreed, not looking convinced at all.

I pushed past him out of the bathroom, grabbing his arm in passing, and tugged him behind me towards the door.

"Seriously, I'm so *hungry*," I whined, and he didn't say another word, just followed me out into the now-empty hallway and towards the stairs.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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ONCE WE MADE it down to the lobby area, there were people *everywhere*, so many that I was getting increasingly uncomfortable. I hovered behind Loki as much as I could.

The same guy as yesterday was behind the front desk, and he nodded at Loki. He noticed me then, shooting me a small smile and raised hand, but then his eyes darted to Loki and suddenly he was busying himself with something on the screen in front of him.

The men spread throughout the area were clad in the standard uniform: jeans, tight t-shirts, leather vests covered in deceptively bright and cheery patches that actually represented terrible things. The women had more variety; there was one that could pass for a blonde version of Sienna, except in a denim miniskirt and platform wedge sandals instead of cut-offs and cowboy boots. She stood near the front desk, pretending not to watch me.

I scanned the rest of the room, noticing all the other interchangeable bikers and club girls that were very deliberately not looking at us, even though I had to believe that a new face was somewhat novel around here. Or maybe it was because of my job? As the governess to the president's ward, they probably thought I should stay only in the background and not draw attention away from the club princess. Despite the language barrier, she was probably coddled and spoiled to an extreme, and as the disciplinarian and teacher, it was in my best interest to keep a low profile anyway—

“Stop dawdling.” Loki’s voice was harsh. He sounded irritated, and I realized I’d been standing on the bottom step staring at people around the room.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, ducking back behind him as we crossed over to the dining room. It was jam-packed with people.

Every table was full. There was so much talking and laughing, milling around, and going back and forth to get refills from the hot bar or coffee pots, that everything was just white noise and a blur of movement. A small group hovered near the pastries, the men having an intense conversation punctuated by devouring the contents of a tray of doughnuts.

It was a whole roomful of people who stopped whatever they were doing and looked over at us — at *me* — and went right back to eating like I was... nothing.

I didn’t know whether to feel hurt or relieved.

Loki led me over to the line at the buffet, handing me an oversized plate and taking two for himself. There were a couple stacks of plates on the rack, one of regular-sized white porcelain and the other was for significantly larger plates, in a variety of materials and colors. It took me a second, but I realized they were using chargers as regular food-delivery plates rather than decoration under the fine china like you’d find in a formal dining situation. It made sense given the amount of food some of these men were piling on, and I followed Loki dutifully to the first steam table as the line moved forward.

“Is there any limit—“

“Take as much as you want,” Loki advised, and I watched him take three biscuits out of the first tray, split them open, stack a fried egg on each half, and then cover the whole plate with sausage gravy.

I took one biscuit and did the same. He gave my plate a dirty look and added a second biscuit, stacked an egg on top of it, and coated it with gravy for me. I’d have been mad at his high-handedness, but I’d really wanted a second biscuit and

the fixings, so I shrugged and followed him past the tray of what I suspected were egg white omelettes, to the second table: hash browns and bacon. Loki's second plate filled up, while I squeezed a heap of hash browns onto mine, laying a half dozen slices of bacon over the top, and gazed longingly back at the sausage gravy. If I'd known there were hash browns...

Someone made a snorting sound behind me, like a delicate little piglet, and I turned to find *yet another* gorgeous woman with a plate of just egg white omelette in her hand.

I stared at that monstrosity, then up at her, then back down at her plate, and turned back to take two more slices of bacon.

No Barbie-lookin' bitch was going to food shame me.

She looked slightly older than the others; still not as old as me, I'm sure, but probably twenty-three or four? Her thick blonde hair flowed over her shoulders in perfect barrel curls, and she'd contoured and highlighted her narrow face and high cheekbones to the max. Another beautiful biker bitch with makeup on-point, even at whatever ungodly hour of the day it was, she was wearing black skinny jeans with horizontal slashes up both thighs, and heeled booties with silver chains wrapped around the ankles, putting her around seven inches taller than me. Her loose, gray v-neck t-shirt looked super soft, and it clung and draped in such a way that not only did I know she wasn't wearing a bra, I also knew her nipples were pierced.

She was literally looking down her nose at me. "Hungry?" she purred in a soft, high voice that I bet these men loved to hear beg for their dick. A tiny little smirk curled up the side of her mouth as her eyes darted around, making sure Loki and the nice lady refilling the bacon pan both heard her. She deliberately eyed my plate and then snorted again.

"*Starving!*" I exclaimed with extra enthusiasm, making my eyes as big and anime-creepy as I could. "Want some bacon? No? Well, then I'll have your share too!" I winked at the kitchen lady while taking two more pieces from the fresh tray, then gave Biker Barbie my coldest, most dead-eye stare.

“Shouldn’t the Mean Girls schtick have died with the apocalypse?”

“Shouldn’t you have?” she sneered at me, and I couldn’t help it, I burst out laughing.

“*Ohmigawd!*” I choked out, doubling over and being careful not spill any of my plate. “Holy Christ, that was a good one. Seriously. Fucking buuuuurrrrrn!” I chortled a few more times, pleased to see tiny droplets of my saliva hit her plate, then went cold again. “Really, that was a killer comeback. Kinda makes you sound like a huge asshole, but well-played.”

After that, I totally ignored her. I followed Loki through the rest of the line, getting a few sausage patties — and heartily agreeing with Loki that they should be on the first table so we could’ve made proper redneck Eggs Benedict — and a scoop of fruit salad in a little ramekin that glistened like a bowl of jewels. When Loki didn’t take any fruit, citing his hands being full with his two plates, I filled a second ramekin for him, and balanced both in my free hand. He grumbled, but he was going to eat the fucking fruit, not just the six pounds of fat, grease, and gravy he’d grabbed for himself.

The downside was that I couldn’t then carry a coffee mug, and I eyed the pots with a longing that far overshadowed my momentary crush on the man leading me away from the food. Maybe I could go back for it—

He pointed at the empty spots at the biggest table, in the dead center of the room, and I blanched. I couldn’t even sit on the side with the least number of people and activity behind it, because Tesla and Caliban were there with plates almost as full as mine. I glanced around, panic sliding over and about to take the wheel, seeing a different table overlaying this one, in a different room crowded with bikers, and—

“Mouse!” Loki barked at me, and I focused on him. The memory slid into the back of my mind leaving behind a greasy residue on my skin. We were left standing in an island of silence surrounded by almost two dozen other, smaller tables full of raucous bikers and club girls eating their eggs and bacon. “Sit.”



I set my plate and the two bowls down, mumbled something about coffee, and slipped away.

I spent a few minutes filling up three mugs as I got my head together. On impulse, I added cream and sugar to Loki's. On the way back to the table, I detoured to the pastry counter and snagged a beautiful cheese danish with a hint of apricot glaze brushed over the surface, then shrugged, grabbed a plate, and threw another one on for Loki. Again, just a feeling.

He'd kept me from making a massive spectacle of myself, and possibly dropping my breakfast on the ground, so serving him coffee and a danish were the least I owed the man.

I returned to the table, setting down his mug and the plate between us, before sliding into my seat and taking my first sip of coffee. "Thank the all-holy fuck for you, my dearest," I whispered into the pair of mugs I was double-fisting. "To paraphrase Nietzsche, without coffee — you steamy little temptress — life would be a mistake."

Then I began to eat.

It took until I'd finished half my plate — and luckily there was enough gravy to mostly cover the hash browns (mostly) — before I realized they were all staring at me: Caliban, Loki, the little girl sitting next to Tesla, the woman between her and Loki, and even Tesla though he was focused on my hands and food more than anything else.

I was hunched over my plate, about to lift another forkful of gravy-coated egg-and-biscuit goodness and prepared to chase it with a wedge of sausage patty and scoop of hash browns, when I noticed how rude I was being. I straightened up, wiping my mouth with my napkin, and looked at each of them.

"I'm sorry for being rude, I am *really* hungry. Good morning, Caliban. Nice to see you again, Tesla. Ty musisz być Adèle. Jestem twoją nową nianią, Myszko," I introduced myself to Adèle as her new nanny because I didn't know the word for governess, then looked to the other woman at the table. She was another raven-haired looker with some serious cleavage revealed by her half-unzipped, skin-tight hoodie.

“I’m afraid I don’t know who you are, but good morning.” She tentatively smiled at me. I pointed at the danish. “Loki, one of those is for you, but just one.”

“I thought you were exaggerating,” Caliban whispered, his eyes wide.

“Annoyed. Why would I lie about her appetite?” Tesla groused, and I shifted in my seat, eyeballing the two of them.

“Czy naprawdę zamierzasz to wszystko zjeść?” the little girl asked, and I studied my plate before nodding at her and assuring her that I really was planning to eat it all. “Nie wierzę ci,” she replied, doubting my intentions or my prowess, or possibly thought I was lying to her.

I studied her with narrowed eyes. She was appropriate in size and proportion for her age. She had glossy black hair and china blue eyes like a living, breathing porcelain doll, and was dressed in a purple t-shirt with a unicorn peeking over the top of the table. Her hair was hanging loose, and it looked like it annoyed her based on how often she was pushing it away from her face. She was the prettiest child I’d ever seen, the kind that would be on the pageant circuit in the Before Times, but she had the most sour expression on her face. Her lips and brows were twisted into a grimace as she stared back at me just as rudely, her chin jutting out in defiance.

I fell in love with her immediately.

“You’re prettier than any girl in here, grown-ups included, and I bet they all want to drown you in the river for those big blue eyes alone,” I said to her in stilted Polish, having to struggle a bit to remember all the words. “I hope you aren’t as bitchy as them, because I’m hoping you’ll be my best friend and loan me that shirt.”

“You won’t fit in it if you keep eating like that,” she scoffed, but her cheeks were getting pink and her jaw relaxed a little of the tension.

“Oh, I eat like this all the time,” I said, the language of my youth coming back to me like the itch of a half-healed cut, unconscious and persistent, like it had always been there but I

just hadn't noticed. "And I didn't have regular food for a few weeks, so I'm even hungrier right now. So can I borrow that shirt? I love unicorns."

I had to say the last word in English, gesturing at the picture on her chest, and she looked down at it then said, "Jednorožec."

"Jednorožec," I repeated, grinning at her. It was a very important word to know, and I made sure she knew how much I appreciated it.

"Pepper is mean," she said, nodding at me, and it took me a moment to realize she didn't mean the spice, she meant the girl I'd had a run-in with in the food line. "But what you said made them all laugh." She gestured with her chin around the table, smiling shyly.

Adorable. Yet troubling.

"Is Pepper mean to you?" I asked, and her cheeks turned even pinker. She focused on her plate and shrugged one shoulder. "Are others mean to you?"

She shrugged again, not looking up at me, and I realized I was totally off-base about her being coddled and cuddled. She was a "club princess" like I'd been, in name only, with no benefits to it, only problems. Without Beast at my back, the years I lived at the club would've been a lot harder, and I would've been an easy, vulnerable target for all kinds of bad behavior from the girls and the men.

"This is your other nanny, right?" I gestured at the woman next to her as subtly as I could, and Adèle glanced over before nodding. "Is she mean to you?"

Adèle's negative head shake was so violent that her whole body rocked in her seat, and I shot a small smile at the woman who was eyeing us, a wrinkle between her brows.

"Are any of the men mean to you?" I asked, and I got another grudging shrug. "Any of the men here?" That got me another violent head shake so that, at least, was reassuring, but it still wasn't enough.

They weren't mean to her, but did any of them have her back? Not just face value, like sitting with them at mealtimes, but truly watching out for her and protecting her from abuse?

Who curb-stomped her enemies?

I knew what it was like to be the one girl at a club that didn't provide some *value*, but couldn't be ignored completely or sent away. Just dismissed, on a regular basis. Disregarded. Like unless he'd said something when I was getting coffee, Loki hadn't even acknowledged her.

"Hey, Adèle," I got her attention and gestured with my fork around the table. "Did everyone say hi to you when they sat down?"

Her eyes widened and she glanced around, then did her little shoulder shrug again.

I pulled my danish off the plate and set it carefully next to my potatoes so it didn't get gravy on it, then slid the danish formerly known as Loki's across the table towards her. I had to stand up and lean really far over to reach her side, but I managed to keep my shirt out of my breakfast. "This is for you now," I said in Polish, "because rude people need to learn a lesson."

"Hey!" Loki reached for his treat but too late, Adèle snatched it up and held it away from his grasping hand. "That was mine."

"Go get another one," I said to him over my shoulder, still hanging half over the table, then to her, "Quick, lick it and stake your claim. He won't take it away then."

Her eyes got really big, but then her little pink tongue darted out and coated the entire pastry in her spit, and he sat back with a disgusted huff.

"You told her to lick it?"

"Of course I did," I curled my lip at him like *duh*. "Why hasn't anyone taught this child anything useful?" To her, I said, "I'm scolding them for not teaching you how licking stuff makes it yours," and was thrilled when she let out a soft giggle. "I'm going to teach you all the best bad words too," I

promised, and her eyes got so wide and her mouth was a perfect circle. It was *adorable*.

“What did you just tell her?” Tesla demanded, suspicious enough to look me right in the eye.

“That I’m going to teach her all the swear words too,” I said, making the same face at him that I did at Loki. Because *duh*.

“No - you - are - not!” Caliban’s palm hit the table, causing everything on it to rattle, and conversations all around cut off. He was turning a bit red from the force of his insistence, and I folded my lips in and rolled my eyes.

“Yeah? And how’re you going to stop me?” I asked mildly, pointing out the obvious. “None of you have bothered trying to learn Polish, and you won’t be hanging out with us, so you aren’t going to have the first clue what I’m teaching her. I could teach her all the wrong words, for that matter, but I won’t, because that would be a total asshole move on my part. But my point remains: you won’t know.”

There was an eerie silence surrounding our table. I refused to look away, keeping my gaze locked on Caliban, who was about five seconds away from exploding.

“Kitchen - now,” he ground out of clenched teeth, and pushed back from the table with a violent force that would’ve made my coffee slosh if there was any left.

I shot Adèle a reassuring smile, letting her know everything was fine and mommy and daddy weren’t really fighting, which confused the heck out of her but it was a better look than terrified.

I climbed out of my chair and followed his stomping form, like an enraged bull snorting and tossing its head, back to the kitchen and into the dishwashing room. The same lady from yesterday was working; I gave her a wan smile as she fled, then leaned back against the wall with my arms crossed. I curled my feet up with one on top of the other, the floors were slippery and there were way too many sharp things sitting around.

Caliban noticed and almost lost his shit completely. “Where the fuck are your shoes?” he shouted, jabbing a finger in the direction of my bare feet.

“Tesla’s room. There was... an incident, and they got left behind accidentally,” I explained, perfectly calm. “I wasn’t expecting to end up in your kitchen again, sorry.”

“You - WILL - NOT —“

“Yeah, I’m going to stop you right there,” I interrupted him, shaking my head. “No disrespect intended, but if you finish that sentence, it’s going to be even harder to save face when I don’t follow your orders. Much easier to just let me do what I’m clearly going to do anyway, and this way it doesn’t reflect on you at all.”

No, *now* he was going to lose his shit. Before was just a false alarm, me not getting just how red and explosive a borderline-ginger biker — and obviously either a fiery Scot or equally passionate Irish bloke — could get.

“Caliban,” came the sharp bark from the doorway, and I glanced over to find both Tesla and Loki standing there. The big guy looked ready to jump between us should the bull charge at me, but it was Tesla who spoke. “I find it to be far more productive to ask her questions rather than just shout orders,” he continued in his normal monotone. “So far, she’s always had a reason for challenging authority, and sometimes it’s even valid.”

I snorted, making a face at him, then scoffed again to make sure it was really fucking obvious what I thought of his judgment. “You can’t see my perspective because you’re so entrenched in your little biker kingdom here, but that’s a whole other issue.” That wasn’t helping anyone’s mood, so I backed off on the sociological critique of their lifestyle. “I get that no one here has been able to communicate with her, and you’ve been waiting for me to arrive, but is there some reason that *no one* has tried learning even some rudimentary words?”

The three of them eyed each other, anger fading to discomfort. “Magick has learned some,” Caliban finally admitted, with a deep sigh. His fists unclenched and settled on

his hips as he met my eye with a furrowed brow and frown. The deep red in his cheeks began to fade, despite the heat and humidity in the room.

I pinched my mouth shut and nodded, not needing to voice my feelings about it. They'd be feeling it soon enough. "But not a lot." It wasn't a question, since the answer was obvious. "Not enough for her to talk about anything, like people being mean to her."

"What?"

I ignored the question, and the sick, almost scared expressions that settled on Caliban's and Loki's faces, or how Tesla's body stiffened, his eyes shooting between his brothers and the wall above my head, frantically, as he practically chewed on his lip ring. "Is there some reason you didn't greet Adèle when you sat down at the table?" I asked Loki, and everything about him tightened up, his eyes narrowing and his arms folding across his midsection.

"I— no." His eyes darted from me to Caliban, to Tesla, and back. "She doesn't understand—"

"She does," I gave him the *duh* face again, with a bit more censure added into the mix, "because she's a sentient being who can identify the meaning of a greeting if not the substance of the words. You know, like even dogs can do." His face flushed as he shut his eyes and swallowed, painfully. "But more importantly, everyone around you understands. They see you acknowledging her, paying attention to her, and recognize she's important. To *you*. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

He nodded, sucking in another labored breath, and then his eyes opened, and there was so much there. Shame. Guilt. Remorse. You name the self-recrimination, he was feeling it.

"We spend time with her," Tesla blurted out, insistence underlying his monotone. "All of us. We all love her, she's our ward, and—"

"It's not enough," Caliban interrupted him, his voice heavy and thick. "We all spend time with her, but who else knows that? A couple people here and there. Magick told the club

who she is, that she's important, but then... as far as most of them know, that's it. Some words spoken once, a long time ago."

I nodded at him, no judgment bleeding through because they got it now. They didn't need me to pound the nails in any further.

"Perception is everything," I leaned back against the wall, folding my arms so I could hold my elbows. Giving myself a secret hug of support, since this was cutting very close to home. "How you treat her publicly is how the club will know her place here. How you treat her privately is how *she'll* know her place. Both are important, because things aren't going to be easy for her. She's a club princess, *the* club princess, and that makes her a target or an asset to be used."

"No one would dare!"

"Your outrage is commendable but misguided. They already do dare," I informed them sadly. "She didn't name names, but people are mean to her. Both men and women. None of you, or we wouldn't be having this conversation, and not her other nanny, who she's really fond of, but others."

"You talked to her for maybe two minutes, how can we trust—"

I interrupted this time, since they were beginning to piss me off again. "She talked to me about it because she saw Biker Barbie was mean to me, and I was mean right back. She saw someone else get picked on, didn't need to understand what was being said, and saw me fight back. And more importantly, she said everyone laughed at what I said. I had your approval. She doesn't know if she would."

Loki cursed and smacked the wall with the open palm of his good hand, barely keeping his shit together. Caliban watched him, ready to reel him back I think, but Tesla was studying me, he was focused on me. That alone meant I had to fight to keep from squirming and backing off, making up bullshit to cover over my obvious knowledge and experience.



But this was too important for me to hide from, trying to protect myself. She needed a champion, and curb-stomping threats to young girls was kind of my jam.

“She needs to know the bad words for two reasons. She’s going to hear them, a lot, and she needs to know which ones are *innocent*,” air quotes, “and which represent threats. Even sweetly spoken ones. Once she trusts you, and I don’t think it will take much, she’ll tell you when something doesn’t sound right. I’ll make sure of that.”

Tesla nodded, his eyes moving to the wall beside me, and I felt like Scheherazade, having given the sultan the right words to secure another day’s reprieve.

“What’s the second reason?” Tesla asked, as they all relaxed.

“Club princesses make bank with swear jars,” I grinned at them as all three expressed humor in their own way: Caliban snorted with barely a curve of his lips, Loki chuckled and nodded with approval, and Tesla blinked.

But it was an amused blink.

“You’ll fill Mags in?” Caliban asked Tesla, who nodded. I assumed that “Mags” was short for Magick, and I wondered where he fell on the whole gif/jif argument. Whether he’d even understand if I started calling him *Majs* instead. It was a twisty mouthful, but it would amuse me and that’s what mattered. To me. But the gif/jif debate didn’t amuse me, because obviously it was *Gif*, hard-G, and that was a serious battle worth fighting. “Let’s go back and finish eating,” he continued, oblivious to the momentous truths I was putting out into the universe.

Loki and Tesla filed out but waited at the door leading to the dining room. Before he followed, Caliban stopped in front of me, his bright blue eyes filled with something I didn’t understand. I think I lost time staring up at him, because when his hand captured hold of me — palm resting against my throat, fingers wrapping around the back of my head, while his thumb stroked along my jaw — it caught me completely by surprise. “You’re exactly what we need, honey.” His voice was

thick, rough. It lit a fuse inside of me, and I had to fight to keep from leaning into him. “I’m going to trust you’ve got your reasons for things, going forward, but I’d appreciate if you’d let me in. Keep talking it through. I don’t want to guess.”

I nodded, unable to think of a single response. There was this warm feeling spreading through my insides, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Another swipe of his thumb, then Caliban leaned down and touched the top of my head with his lips, before releasing me and striding away, not looking back. I watched him go, incapable of forming a rational thought, then trailed after him.

My logic center might’ve been offline, but my brain understood priorities: I might not have been able to do higher math at the moment, but I knew enough to follow close behind, to watch him walk away in those jeans.

Loki and Caliban disappeared through the swinging doors as I approached. Tesla motioned for me to go through after them, and I motioned him back. “You first.”

He huffed out a pained breath but let me have my way.

When we got back to the table, both of my coffee cups were full with fresh, steaming heaven, and Adèle told me that the “dish lady” had come by with a pot but only filled mine. I smiled to myself as Tesla went to retrieve a carafe to top off the rest of their cups, and I was delighted to see him set a plate down in front of Loki with a new danish, a shot glass of cream, and two cubes of sugar.

I knew the big man had a sweet tooth.

As he passed by her to take his seat, Tesla briefly rested his hand on Adèle’s head, brushing her hair back, and the look on her face... No, she wasn’t getting nearly enough from these men. It was clear to me that they cared about her deeply, but I’d bet anything it wasn’t so obvious to her.

Caliban watched, then looked over at me with another one of his unreadable expressions. He nodded his head, just once. Loki elbowed me, letting me know he’d seen it too. Tesla

returned to his seat and conversation at the table resumed, though it was mainly about plans on how to fit more time with Adèle into their respective schedules, and what to propose to Magick when he returned. I sipped my coffee while I observed it all, acknowledging that these men, and this place, were not like what I'd known before. They *listened* to me. They were *changing*, for her.

It made my heart hurt. I think in a good way.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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AFTER BREAKFAST, Adèle went off to parts unknown with her other nanny — I still didn't know the woman's name. I think she introduced herself but her voice was really soft, obviously a mumblor. The world was full of them.

Caliban went back to the kitchen, and the other two walked me over to see Doc. I wasn't going to say I was hostile, but... I was maybe a little hostile, and could feel the muscles in my neck and shoulders already beginning to bunch up. Which was terrific on my ribs. I tried to shake out the tension without anyone seeing, but Loki was *right there*, walking beside me as we followed Tesla, and he noticed. To his credit, he didn't say anything, he just reached over and gripped the back of my neck, and that giant paw squeezing the muscles felt like heaven... painful, painful heaven.

Tesla led the way through the lobby back towards the stairs, veering down a hallway off to the side closest to the dining room. We passed a couple closed doors on both sides, all of them looking far more secure and intimidating than any other doors I'd seen so far, before reaching one that Tesla pushed open without knocking. He then promptly shouted "*Again!?*" with some amount of disgust and horror underlying his regular monotone, as Loki and I followed him into the room.

It was a slightly old-fashioned looking room, compared to the legit old-fashioned vibe from the rest of the place, but filled with state-of-the-art equipment and furnishings. The walls were covered with pale goldenrod subway tile, trimmed

with a mosaic of smaller tiles in a deeper gold, black, and white. That strip separated it from the stark white plaster above, from two-thirds up the wall and over the curves to the coved ceiling. An archway framed in the same multi-colored mosaic pattern led to a professional-looking office area, and there were closed doors in the office and the examination room. Those doors were steel, painted black, with large, frosted glass windows with chicken wire pressed between the panes.

The office had a large, polished wood desk, a bookcase overflowing with medical texts and journals, and comfortable looking seating including an armchair positioned in front of a fieldstone fireplace.

The examination room was lined with shiny, white enamel cabinets with glass fronted doors and stainless steel countertops, all the edges curved. There was a large sink and a full-size gurney off to the side with pristine white sheets; I could see equipment I recognized on rolling carts. In the middle of the room, a biker with long, gray-streaked brown hair, a thick beard, and gold wire-framed reading glasses, was balls-deep in a blonde woman on the regulation exam table, her long legs up in the stirrups.

The biker glanced over but continued to pump away, groaning “One minute.”

It was less than a minute before he and the woman both finished, as the three of us stood and watched. If the woman’s vocalizations were to be believed, our presence helped. He gave her a big, sloppy kiss on the mouth, and she beamed up at him adoringly. It was cute.

“What if this had been an emergency?” Tesla questioned in a rational tone, perfectly calm, but there was an edge to it.

“I’d have moved faster,” the man replied reasonably while removing his deflating dick from the woman, cleaning himself up with a strip of cloth he tossed towards a receptacle, then tucked himself back in and zipped up. He washed his hands thoroughly as the woman righted herself and tugged down her denim mini skirt over her panty-less crotch without any self-

consciousness, chattering away to no one in particular the whole time. After she washed her hands and slid her feet back into her black platform-wedge slides, she crossed over to me with a huge smile on her face and her hand sticking out.

“Hi!” the woman chirped, “I’m Brandy-Lynn, you must be Jayne.” She was all kinds of bubbly, and I shook her hand with bemused cheer. “Oh gosh, I hear you managed to meet the two girls guaranteed to hate you straight-off already, but you should know, we’re not all like that.” The woman smiled at me warmly while adjusting her cleavage in a plaid shirt that knotted at her midriff, and I tried not to watch but they were just so— so *big*. And bouncy. And the shirt pretty much left the entire top half of them exposed anyway, so it wasn’t like her boobs were a secret.

I was starting to get a bit of a complex: I hadn’t seen anyone under a D-cup yet.

“I’m sorry, I got hypnotized by your amazing rack,” I tore my eyes away with some effort, and worked at keeping my gaze focused on her face while she giggled. “Please, call me Mouse.”

“They are pretty impressive, right?” She looked down at her boobs fondly, then over at her man disinfecting the exam table. “My only redeeming quality, right, babe?”

He smiled at her with so much affection. It had to be a joke between them because he was completely gone over her. He tossed his paper towel into the trash and moved closer, grasping her hips and turning her towards him. “Worth every penny,” he leaned in and pushed his face into her cleavage, motorboating her in front of all of us.

She rolled her eyes as she hugged his head to her bosom, then tugged on his ear to get him to come up for air. “Double mastectomy,” she explained to me, even though I hadn’t asked. I wouldn’t have thought twice about a honey-blonde bombshell with a boob job on a biker compound. “Cancer free for six years,” she said proudly, and I felt my eyes prickle with tears as I held up my hand and high-fived her.

“That’s awesome,” I gushed. I felt an impulse to hug her, but unlike with Loki, I fought it. I’d learned that lesson in my youth, that casual affection with other girls was a lot trickier than boys. I usually left it up to the other female to establish boundaries since I was so bad at understanding them; it had taken me years to even understand that I was allowed to have them, and then more years to figure out what my boundaries actually were, so it was something I tended to be hyper-conscious about. And thinking about boundaries, and violating boundaries, lit a spark of temper in me.

As sweet as this girl was, I still had a bone to pick with Doc, but I could hold onto that. I could shove it in a box in my mind until I was done conversing with the first legit friendly woman I’d met since arriving here. Assuming she wasn’t “Doc.” That might make things a little trickier, but even just a few minutes in her presence made me think there’s no way this woman would’ve— eh. She might’ve under Tesla’s orders. Club hierarchy and all.

Hello minefield, watch me navigate you.

Regardless, I’d make the offer to anyone. “I was an EMT for a few years, and worked as a lab tech and phlebotomist at a hospital, so I have some experience with cancer patients and medical shit in general,” I told her. “If you ever want to talk about it with someone... else, I haven’t been through what you have, but I know enough to at least understand it, you know?”

Her smile had been genuine and warm before, but it had nothing on the one that spread across her face as I was talking, and I think she lit up the whole damn room. Some of the shadows lurking in my head cried out and fled from the brilliance of her glow, and she lunged forward and caught me up in a powerful hug. “Yeah,” she murmured as she squeezed me so hard that I might have displaced some vertebrae against her cleavage. “I’d like that, Mouse. Or even not talk about it, we could just hang out. Talk about other things? Oh! OH! Girlie Night! GIRLIE NIGHT! *We can have a Girlie-Girls Night!*”

By that point, she was shouting and bouncing up and down, still hanging onto me and forcing me to bounce with

her, and I instantly regretted ever even saying hello because *Girlie-Girls Night*? That— that implied *multiple* girls. That sounded like a really terrible idea. A horrible idea.

I was useless around people in general, but at least with men I could be as obnoxious as I needed to, as obnoxious as *Mouse* was expected to be, and it was tolerated and sometimes even appreciated. I could usually find some common ground, if not gaming then something violent or disgusting. But women? In a situation of forced socializing, where I was essentially trapped? I couldn't— it would be traumatic for everyone involved, and they would end up hating me even more than some of them already did.

I swiveled my head around looking for Loki or Tesla, but neither one of them were going to be any help: Tesla was poking at his giant-ass phone screen and ignoring everyone, and Loki was leaning back against the doorframe with a smirk like he knew I was in hell and thought it was hilarious.

I was on my own with this one.

She continued to smile at me expectantly while her man was now disinfecting the table and all its attached parts, before unrolling a fresh sheet of white paper. It was right then that I was sure *he* was Doc.

“Uhh, I'm not sure that's a good idea, plus I really need to focus on Adèle right now—”

“She goes to bed at eight,” Tesla contributed in a monotone that sounded even more bored than usual.

“—and I'm a little overwhelmed as it is—”

“It would be good for you to meet the girls that Brandy-Lynn hangs with,” Loki said with an amused determination, like everything was settled and this was a thing that was happening, *for my own good*.

“Yeah, I don't think that's a good idea, since some of them already hate me and they haven't even met me yet. Think about how homicidal they'll be after spending actual time with me—”

“That *is* a good point,” Tesla agreed, still not looking up.



“You’re a fucking treasure,” Loki supplied, that smirk still in place and letting the room know just how full of shit he was.

“Who hates you?” Doc asked, genuinely confused.

“Sienna,” Brandy-Lynn and I both said at the same time, and then she continued with “and Pepper” while I said “and blonde Biker Barbie with the cheekbones.” Apparently her name really was Pepper, that wasn’t just Adèle’s creative translation.

Doc eyed Tesla and Loki, then nodded with a shrug and expression of borderline-reluctant acceptance. “That makes sense, I guess. I mean, I’ve never understood the draw, but—”

“Does it make sense?” I asked, hoping someone could explain. “Because I kinda get Sienna, I made more work for her and then tried to encroach on her territory. Which wasn’t exactly intentional, I never even considered that someone might *want* to do laundry but you do you, crazy biker bitch. But I don’t know what I did to— what was it, Pepper? — yeah, I have no idea what I did to Pepper besides take a me-sized portion of food at breakfast, but only after Loki said it was okay and there was plenty for everyone.”

Brandy-Lynn folded her lips in and stared at Doc with wide eyes. He winked at her and then peeked over at Tesla and Loki with his own smirk. Tesla rolled his eyes but continued focusing on his screen. Loki frowned and shrugged at him. I waited, impatiently — there may have been fidgeting and weird faces involved — for *someone* to explain, and Doc finally took mercy on me.

“Sienna has been in love with Tesla since she was sixteen. Pepper has been obsessed with Loki since he saved her and her sister a couple years ago,” Doc said, grinning at the discomfort radiating from the two of them. “Any girl who has extended interactions with either of them is the enemy.”

Well, shit. I get it, but...

“Okay, I get it, jealousy can be unreasonable, but— it isn’t exactly my choice, right? I’ve gotta interact with them, I’m

new and I'm here to take care of Adèle, right? That's all it means. Plus I didn't know—" I trailed off since none of them seemed to be following my train of thought. In fact, I was getting some pretty annoying reactions from Doc and Brandy-Lynn, a mix of amusement and... ugh. Smug bastards.

Tesla looked up and met my eye briefly before zeroing in on my forehead. "Curious. Didn't know what?"

I stared at him, shifting my weight from foot to foot. I just couldn't figure out how to stand anymore, and there was no good way to answer that without either embarrassing myself or insulting them. And then I remembered Tesla wanting to bleach every trace of me off his sheets, and decided *fuck it*. They could retaliate if they wanted, but I'd been humiliated enough today. I straightened my spine and planted my feet.

"If I've taken up more of your time than I should, that's on you for letting me. I had no idea you were in important roles since your cuts don't have name or position patches on them," I answered, direct and unflinching. "I didn't even know Caliban was patched-in when we first met. You should've passed me off to a prospect from the start, none of you need this much interaction with me. I'll check in on a regular basis about Adèle's progress, and keep other conversation to a minimum, and no one else will get the wrong impression about my place here."

"And what's that?" Tesla asked before anyone else could, just a hint of something underlying his tone. At my confused look, he clarified. "What *wrong impression* could they get?"

I squared up, crossing my arms. It was like he *wanted* to keep humiliating me in front of strangers, people I'd have to deal with as long as I was here. Like he *knew*, and wanted to force me into confessing the raging crush I had on Loki for a hot second, or that I enjoy *his* company even though he considers me an irritant at best. That paranoia and hurt may have led to me being a bit harsher and more direct than I should've been. "That I'm here for anything other than what I was hired for, to help Adèle learn English. I'm not club pussy to pass around, that wasn't our arrangement. I'm the governess. And we should probably keep things professional

so no one gets the *wrong impression*, because I will gut the next motherfucker who touches me without permission.”

I don't even know where that last part came from, but it was someplace deep inside me. My voice even sounded different when I made the pronouncement — louder and somehow deeper, thick with suppressed rage — and I couldn't help but look at Doc when I finally broke my gaze away from Tesla. “That applies to you too,” I warned him, as serious as I'd ever been about a threat, even as my body shook with tension and fear. “You best think twice before knocking me out again for an exam I could be conscious for, one that I don't want or need.”

“Everyone out except Jay— Mouse,” Doc ordered, and Brandy-Lynn practically ran out the door. Loki was slow to follow, and Tesla even slower. He even attempted to protest but Doc insisted, even locking the door behind him before gesturing at the table. “Hop up.”

He went back to the sink to rewash his hands while I debated what to do, finally giving in and crossing to the table. I pulled out the built-in step, and climbed up to sit on the end, touching my pocket for comfort before realizing I didn't have my knife, and that didn't help anything.

Doc appeared in my line of sight again. His leather cut was gone, replaced by a white lab coat, and his hair was clubbed back from his face in a man-bun. He leaned back against the counter facing me and crossed his arms.

“I need you to listen, please, and let me explain. The night you arrived, after you passed out from what was suspected to be a panic attack and fell off of Loki's bike, I took advantage of the opportunity to examine you without interference. I'm a licensed medical doctor, and the terms of your employment state that a medical exam is required. Technically you didn't submit any paperwork in advance to prove you had one—”

Because I wasn't about to have a health record signed off on by a rez doctor. No one could trace me back there, they didn't need my shit hanging over them for helping me.

“—so not only was it my right to do so, it was my responsibility. And doing it while you were unconscious was meant to be a courtesy, in part, so please shut the fuck up and listen to me.”

I'd never had a doctor swear at me before. I mean, I was pretty sure McNamara was cursing me out in his head any number of times, but never out loud. And probably in German. It was... oddly refreshing and I was curious what he had to say, so I waited for him to finish and didn't even interrupt.

I didn't need to help the man dig his own grave.

“You're covered in bruises, I estimated about three weeks old.” *Close enough.* “Most of the bruising appears to be defensive wounds. Your ribs are still a rainbow of colors, and you have a bad burn on your arm — I'd guess it was second degree at the time, but it's healing well.” *Good to know.* “You have a number of other burns and lacerations, a mostly healed shoulder injury, and I suspect your fingers on your right hand were fractured or dislocated. It was hard to tell from the X-ray because they appear to have been broken in the past, several times. But they seem to be healing well this time. However, your fall didn't help any of it, so I'm recommending a regimen of anti-inflammatories for the next week.”

That was actually good news, I was looking forward to some pain relief. They could only give me a few on the rez, their supply was really limited.

He continued, and now I was starting to get uncomfortable with just how much he had to say. “Your face and throat have a few bruises in the last stages of clearing up, so I can only imagine what you looked like a few weeks ago. But despite what I suspect was serious damage, your nose wasn't broken, and you didn't have any fractures in your cheeks, jaw, or orbital bones. This time. Nor any loose or broken teeth. That means you were very lucky, or whoever did this— they took it easy on your face. And that usually means someone you know, someone who might feel remorse or at least some level of protection towards you despite beating the fuck out of you. Like a spouse. Or a relative.”

*Eh, close enough.*

When I didn't respond to confirm or deny, he kept going. He shifted in place, swallowing, and my stomach sank. *Here it comes.* "I took x-rays of your whole body."

I didn't say anything, or look away, or even blink. He waited. Finally, I said, "Okay."

He chewed on his bottom lip, sucked in a deep breath, and eventually nodded. "You have extensive bone remodeling. Fractures and breaks to your fingers, hands, forearms, ribs, shins, and toes. Some on your face, but disproportionately fewer. Those are defensive wounds, and they weren't fresh. And some scarring."

"Wayward youth," I offered, devoid of any emotion. I spent a lot of time in the infirmary during my years in juvie; my father and his club ruined a lot of lives, and I was an easy target. "Not the same situation as recently."

He nodded sharply, tugging on both ends of the stethoscope around his neck. "Okay." He almost sounded relieved. "I took some blood, did a full CBC and chem panel, and everything is normal. And I ran a titer. You're immune."

"I'm aware."

"You don't have an immunization scar, but the position of the burn on your arm is consistent with the registration mark that survivors receive, so I have to ask: did you survive Janus?"

Without hesitating or even thinking about it, I answered, "Yes, I did."

"Have you had any long-term effects? You seem extremely healthy now, so it must have been years ago—" he trailed off as though waiting for me to fill in the blanks. I considered what to say.

"It was a few years ago. Early in the outbreak." Not exactly the truth, but not really a lie either. I did survive it, in the earliest days, in a most spectacular way.

He nodded, and I could see that he wanted to know *more*. About everything. Whether it was professional concern or morbid curiosity, it didn't matter because he wasn't getting any more from me.

“Congratulations, I guess,” he said wryly, running a hand over his beard. “I'd like to get a urine sample, and you should get a gynecological exam if you haven't had one recently. I ran your blood for STIs, and you were clean of any infections, but some infections require a genital swab, and most women don't have access to annual wellness exams—”

“I'm good,” I interrupted. I'd had my annual in February, and anyone on base who was sexually active got tested for STIs monthly.

He flattened his lips and sucked a breath in through his nose. I didn't even know the man, and yet I knew he was irritated with me, but I couldn't tell him the truth even if I wanted to, and I wasn't feeling that charitable anyway.

It wasn't exactly *normal* to have access to the healthcare resources that I did. Explaining any of it would raise more questions than it was worth, questions I couldn't — and *wouldn't* — answer.

After a time, he let out all that pent up frustration in a long sigh. “Do you have any questions about anything?” I shook my head, slowly, and he almost cringed but stopped himself. “Okay, well, I want you to know that I'm here. If you want to talk about anything at all, from this point forward you're my patient, and anything you tell me will be kept confidential. I've had some experience with counseling—”

“What do you mean *from this point forward*?” I interrupted him, my stomach turning as nausea crept up my throat.

He shifted in place again, pursing his mouth and studying me. After a few seconds, he looked away. “Tesla read my report on your intake exam, and— and he stayed in the room for it.”

I hopped down off the table and walked towards the door.

“Mouse!” He called out, and when I kept going, he practically sprinted across the room to get to me, grabbing hold of my arm. I jerked out of his grasp, backing away from him. Unfortunately that meant I also backed away from the door. “Hey, stop. Please. Let me explain—”

I took another step back, rubbing my arm since he’d grabbed the elbow below my burn and twisted the skin. He grimaced, making sounds of apology that I ignored. “I think you’ve explained enough.”

“Mouse, please just listen to me.”

“You can go fuck yourself,” I snarled, backing away another step. “Open the door.”

He studied me with a furrowed brow and clenched jaw, then reached over and unlocked the door. “Okay. But please don’t leave.”

“You have nothing else to say that I want to hear—” and as he began to speak, to interrupt me and talk over me, and try to drown out my voice or force me to silence by the volume and pitch of his manly power of speech, I advanced on him with a rage I hadn’t felt in years, my vision narrowing to a single focus rimmed in red. “No. You don’t get to talk,” I growled, my throat tight and my voice strangled, forced out between gritted teeth in a clenched jaw. “You put my unconscious, unconsenting body through a medical exam *with an audience*. I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, but that—? Get the fuck out of my way or I’ll teach you what it means to be violated.”

My voice was low, so steady it could be mistaken for calm, but I was anything but. I was shaking with rage, barely able to keep myself from attacking, and he backed away to the other side of the room. He held his hands up in front of him, a look of concern mixed with legitimate fear on his face, and it filled me with a sick satisfaction.

By nature, I didn’t think I wasn’t a bad person. I wasn’t a malicious person, not by choice. I didn’t wake up in the morning choosing violence, but sometimes it was thrust upon me, and I was ready for it. This wasn’t one of those times.

This time, I *wanted* it. I *craved* it. I was seconds from losing all restraint.

The door flew opened, Tesla and Loki storming into the room. Loki positioned himself between Doc and me — facing Doc, my mind registered — while Tesla loomed over me and did a quick survey of my person. I glared up at him with so much hateful fury that he flinched. “Go on,” he said softly, his normal monotone inflected with resignation, as he handed me a set of keys. “Go to my room. I’ll be up in a few minutes.”



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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I OPENED the door to Tesla's room and slammed it behind me, then proceeded to pace in agitated loops around the space as I tried to work through my overflowing emotions. Eventually, I calmed down enough to notice my shoes on a bottom shelf, at the end of a line of much larger pairs of combat boots, motorcycle boots, and Converse of different kinds and colors, all with their laces tucked in. My socks were folded neatly on the shelf above.

I retrieved both. I moved to sit down on the floor, glared at the door, then sat down on the end of his bed to clothe my feet. I looked at the dirt on my soles and decided they could probably use a good washing, considering where I'd been.

I didn't hesitate for a second. I found the bathroom and hopped up on the counter, shoving my feet in his sink and using his soap to wash them, and the hand towel to dry them. As far as the Violations Scorecard was concerned, I had a lot of points left to earn to even it up.

I didn't hang the towel back up though, I wasn't going to be gross about it. I used it to wipe down the sink then hung it over the edge of a laundry hamper to dry before returning to his bed. I sat down and put my socks and shoes on, and he showed up while I was leaning over, tying the laces.

He came in the room and tossed a really thick folder on the bed next to me, then disappeared up the stairs into his command center. "Read it," the disembodied voice said from across the room.

I looked down at what I recognized as a medical chart. The tab said *Sault, James*.

“That’s my medical chart from before I joined the club,” he said absently, focused on his screens. “Read it. I’m assuming you can—?”

I nodded, moving to sit on the floor.

“You can stay where you are.”

I wondered how much bleach Sienna would need to use for my ass cooties, but decided not to ask. I opened the thick folder, flipped the pages up to the last, and began to read in chronological order.

I saw the diagrams from the ER, injuries marked on them, and all the intake notes. The x-rays themselves were absent, but the radiology reports were pretty clear. There were notations about CPS and the police, at first, but then those went away.

The notes became more sparse as the injuries got worse.

Halfway through, I flipped to the back again and looked at the date. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-five.”

The first entry was twenty-three years ago. I kept reading. The last event was just weeks before his seventeenth birthday, when he was admitted with a fractured skull and TBI. He was put in a brief, medically-induced coma because of the brain swelling. The file ended not long after he came out of it, and he’d left the hospital much sooner than I would’ve expected given the severity of the injury. It was barely a couple weeks of recovery before he’d been discharged AMA, against medical advice.

When I finished reading, I sat there for a time, absorbing it all. Then I asked him the only question that mattered. “Why’d you leave the hospital?”

There was a long pause, then the disembodied voice answered. “My father was on life support in the bed next to

mine. As soon as I could move on my own, I pulled the plug on him.”

I nodded, staring down at the closed file in my hands, wondering about boundaries. I hadn't expected that answer; I thought he'd say that he felt vulnerable there, anticipating retribution. At the very least, I thought he wanted to prove something. His answer made me almost sick with curiosity, but I needed to restrain myself.

“Ask anything you want. I'll answer or not.”

Luckily he couldn't see my face as I rolled my eyes, because talk about tempting a junkie! That offer was like tossing a plateful of bacon in front of me. Bacon with a brown sugar glaze on it.

“Your dad in the club?”

The abrupt sound of wheels on hollow wood came from his cave, and his chair rolled into sight at the edge of the platform. He rested his elbows on his knees, his hands hanging loose, and focused on me. “Yeah.”

I didn't have the details, but I figured I had the rough outline. There were only so many reasons how something like what I saw in this file could happen, and he'd still be standing in front of me in club colors. An officer, no less. And it all involved some double-dealing and a healthy swig of the Kool-Aid, which meant I needed to be even more careful than I had been.

True believers were as dangerous as cornered animals or damaged people.

“That's all you want to ask me?” He stood up, the chair rolling back towards his desk with a metallic rattle, and stepped down from his geek grotto to stand in front of me, feet planted and arms crossed.

“No, but that's all I'm *going* to ask.”

He let out a huff of breath and blinked slowly up at the ceiling. “I said ask me anything.”

He wasn't looking directly at me but I knew he could see me shrug. "Sure, but I'm not interested in quid pro quo." I closed the folder, resting it on my knees and folding both hands together on the surface.

He studied me for a long time, far longer than I was comfortable with, before shrugging and looking off to the side. "Your secrets are your own."

"It's fine," I smiled, weak but real, and only a little strained. "I think I know all I need to."

He resumed studying me, his face perfectly expressionless but I could *feel* the furrow, the flattened lips. Exasperation tinged with annoyance poured off of him, almost making me giggle-snort at how dramatic he was being. Eventually, he sighed and muttered "Stubborn," under his breath, then louder, "Magick, Loki, and I were raised up in the club, all our fathers and even uncles were members. Cain, the club president, was Magick's dad, so there were always expectations of us patching-in. It was just assumed. Mags was our leader, after all, so naturally Loki and I would fall in line like Crabbe and Goyle, even after getting my skull cracked open."

I'd already been developing an unhealthy crush on the man, so that reference was flicking the zippo next to my puddle of gasoline. He got all my references, all of them.

### *Intoxicating.*

He kept talking as I crossed my legs and practiced some kegels to the sound of his voice. Mostly listening at first — *mostly* — then forgetting everything else as his story unfolded. "They didn't anticipate that it would be left up to me whether we patched in, and I was the one with the most baggage against the club. Cain lost his shit when Mags told him that he was still on the fence, waiting for my decision. I think it was the first time that Cain really saw me. Before that, I was just Mags's broken friend with the shitty father and fucked up brain — and that was even *before* the TBI — but now I was someone that had influence over his kid, his *legacy*. And now he had to acknowledge that I had good reason to tell all of them to fuck off."

He'd let slip something I'd been curious about, something I didn't dare ask. There was no reason for me to know the man's name before now, but Tesla had opened the door.

"You said Cain *was* Magick's dad?" I asked, innocent curiosity infused in my voice, my body language, even my thoughts. Suppressing any sign that his answer meant anything to me.

Tesla eyed me. He blinked. Fuck... I think that was his *you're acting sus* blink. "He's dead," was all he said, and I didn't dare ask how, so I changed the subject.

"I think I know the answer to this, but I don't want to assume anything, so I gotta ask: why were you on the fence?"

"Because the club knew what my dad was like and allowed it. Cain felt bad, kept me away from him as much as he could, but didn't intervene. Didn't make it club business, cited tradition and freedom and bullshit bylaws written decades before by different kinds of men than my father."

Maybe not a true believer after all.

I suddenly had more questions, but Tesla kept talking, and I hadn't known him long but I still understood that this was something rare. He was making it all up to me in the only way he could: I'd been exposed and vulnerable on that table, so now he was baring it all for me.

"My dad chose poorly that night. He didn't know that Mags and Loki were on their way to pick me up when he started beating on me. My uncle was there and at least tried to stop him, but my dad was in a blackout rage. I don't know exactly what Loki and Mags walked in on, but I know that Mags called for an ambulance then held my uncle back while Loki beat my dad unconscious, to the very edge. I regained lucidity four days later, to find him in the bed next to me. Once I was awake, my uncle tried to rally the club to retaliate, but we weren't even prospects when everything went down, so Cain could justify staying out of it, and he wanted to. He told me later, when he apologized for years of ignoring the problem, that he'd come to realize that his actions had consequences. And he knew if the club fucked me over *again*,

his son would never join because Magick understood what true loyalty was. He apologized for that too, for his motives being so selfish, but by then I was over it. Appreciated the gesture though. And after I put my dad down, we'd accepted the prospect offer, making it impossible for my uncle to retaliate. It was strategic, but I'd already accepted that my life was with the club."

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

"I'd always been the cynical one, out of the three of us. Loki had his own shit, but Mags had lived a pretty charmed life. He's a fucking visionary, always has been, and he works like a dog and is as loyal as fuck, but things always seemed to just magically work out the way he wanted back then. He'd never really experienced loss or failure. Then in the same span of six months or so, my dad got a lucky hit and put me in the hospital, and Mags's mom died in a car accident. It changed him— changed all of us. Before, I'd respected Mags's vision, but I didn't fully buy into it. After that, well, things had changed."

"How?" I asked, sitting on the edge of my seat, everything else forgotten. This was...

This was game-changing.

"Magick let it be known that if he took over— if *we* took over, shit would change, and we were really clear about how. Even as prospects, we presented a united front about how things were going to go. We still did all the shit work and took the harassment, did everything right, but we also didn't compromise. The men learned quickly not to ask us to do certain things, and that we wouldn't tolerate fucked up behavior on their part either. I scrubbed a thousand toilets, mopped up gallons of piss and vomit, stood guard through the night in the rain more times than I could count, but nobody fucking hit a woman or a kid on my watch. Nobody took advantage of someone weaker or more vulnerable, or used their colors as a weapon against a civilian. And in exchange for acting like civilized human beings, I made them a fuck-ton of money."

He paused, eyeing me carefully, and I might've been a bit suspicious but then he kept going, making me wonder if I'd imagined it.

“By the time we patched in, even with the mourning period over Magick’s mom, we increased club revenue by twelve percent through legit channels, and another six percent through more questionable means. And by the time Magick needed to take over, that had doubled, and the forecasts for the next three years showed even bigger gains. We’d proven ourselves, so the fuss was minimal and nothing we weren’t prepared for.” He paused again and this time the expectation was more obvious, like we’d agreed it wasn’t a quid pro quo situation, but he was still waiting for me to start laying out my drama at any time. Or maybe I was reading too much into it. Regardless, I had nothing to say. After a very pregnant pause, he got to the point. “The club is different now than it was back then. Especially here. You’ve had bad experiences with a club. I didn’t need to see your exam to know that, but that’s not this place.”

*So you say.*

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you.”

*Ass.* “I said so you say, but, like, under my breath so I got the last word but you were supposed to pretend not to hear anything. Social conventions, that kind of thing. *Manners.*” I stressed that last word, really leaned into it.

“I’m not sure you speak as softly as you think you do. But go ahead, try again, and I’ll be polite about it.”

“*Jackass,*” I muttered, slightly louder than the last thing but still technically under my breath. He blinked in a way I knew was a smirk. It’s what I would’ve done.

I thumped my knuckles on his chart. “So why do you keep this around? Is it to remind yourself where you came from, so you don’t start getting all megalomaniacal? Because I gotta break it to you—”

“We removed my chart, paper and electronic, so there wouldn’t be proof of motive. Not that anyone around here

would've come after me, but it might've gone federal, eventually."

"The apocalypse was good for some things, huh?"

He huffed what passed for a laugh. "Yep."

"Did leaving the hospital and that whole shitstorm set you back? Health-wise?"

He eyed me again. "You never do or say what I expect, Pinky." Before I could get up a righteous bluster at the name, he distracted me. "Not exactly, but it was weird. The TBI made some things worse but some other things better. I was always atypical, but I had more anxiety with it before, which set me off more frequently. After, I developed what they called *OCD tendencies*, but had less anxiety overall, so my *quirks*," air quotes, "have less impact day to day." He shrugged. "I was already fucked up, I remained fucked up. Just different ways."

"I don't think you're fucked up," I informed him, solemnly. "I just think you're an asshole."

He barked out a laugh, almost as surprised by it as me, then shook his head. His mouth was flat but his eyes gleamed, and I knew he was laughing. Quietly. Inside. "Fair."

Damn him for laughing like that. That messed me up almost more than the entire conversation preceding it had, and *that* had done a number on me.

I'd been here less than forty-eight hours, and I was questioning everything. I'd been through extremes of emotional upheaval. I'd found myself entwined with men who twisted me up inside, made me want things I shouldn't. Made me think things could be different.

I'd spent almost five years in a juvenile detention facility because of men like I thought they were, and ever since I drove away that night, I'd been so careful. I built a life for myself as Jayne, then learned to live in it as Mouse. I protected myself and my secrets by building walls and covering them with mirrors, and no one saw anything but a reflection of their own expectations. No one but Azzie knew about my dark days, she was the only one I let get close to the truth about the



hot mess I was inside, but she still only knew what seeped out around the edges when I'd filled up beyond capacity. She was the one I needed to protect the most, I had to be strong for her more than anyone else, ever.

But from the moment I'd arrived here, I'd been spilling out everywhere, uncontrollably. From the second Loki hit the asphalt in front of me, I'd never once put up a front with him, or tried to hide anything. Tesla infuriated me and challenged me in equal measures, and in the course of figuring him out, he pulled back the curtain and saw who was working *my* controls. Caliban... I couldn't even with him. His approval disabled my higher brain functions. His lips touched the crown of my head, and everything shut down.

I was jolted out of my musings by Tesla's voice from directly in front of me. "So are we good?"

I realized I'd zoned out again, right in front of him, and he hadn't moved from where he'd been standing. At all. But his posture had become stiff, with one arm hanging straight in front of him, and his other hand gripping his elbow in a very protective manner. His eyes were locked on the wall behind me.

Apparently me blanking out had made him nervous. Possibly wondering what diabolical plans I was coming up with, but the joke was on him: I'd figured that shit out the first time I saw his room. Not wanting to give any potential revenge tactic away, I shrugged. "We're fine for now. Me and Doc? Not so much."

He made a face, eyes darting to me then away. "You need to let it go."

"Do I?" I mused, tapping my finger against my chin. Tesla's mouth pinched and his nostrils flared. "Look, I get you think it was all justified, but you're wrong," I explained with a degree of patience I wasn't actually feeling. "And I'm sure if you asked him, he'd be the first to admit it. He knows what he did."

Tesla blinked, his annoyance becoming something darker. The kind of suspicion that could cause problems for me, and I

should've been backpedaling, distracting him away before he grasped my intentions, but that felt like a lot of effort when the chances it would work were so slim.

He saw through me, he wouldn't be so easily fooled by smoke and mirrors.

"I gave the order," he insisted, frustration underlying his monotone.

I sighed, shaking my head. "Tesla, I respect that you think you were the final authority in the decision, but you weren't. He's a medical professional, he could've — and *should've* — shut down the examination until you left. He allowed you to stay. He chose to sedate me, to make it easier on all of *you*, he admitted as much. I don't presume to know what the man was thinking, but *he* made these choices, not you."

"It's his *job*—" he argued, but I cut him off, my patience exhausted.

"*First, do no harm,*" I spat out, getting to my feet, jabbing my finger at his chest. "*First, do no harm. I* was his priority, not your convenience, not his curiosity. He did harm. And it was his bad luck that I'm not blinded by the shine off his white coat or the jargon coming out of his mouth."

"What are you going to do, Mouse?" He asked, his concern honest. It was all there, raw and naked and exposed to the world: Tesla was twisted up in emotion, afraid of what I'd do. Afraid of what *he'd* have to do.

He'd put me in that shallow grave in the woods if I drove him to it, but he'd never get over it.

"What do you think I'm going to do, Tesla? He's a fucking *doctor* during a pandemic!" I threw up my arms, giving him the *duh* look but like amplified a trillion watts. "I'm going to be pissed. I'm going to throw shade. And he's going to fucking take it and feel like shit because he's the bad guy here."

The emotion shut down, a shutter slamming into place locking it all back inside, and the relief was palpable but his face was devoid of expression. "Very well."

"So are we done here?"

“No.”

I was in there for another hour, at least, but we didn't talk about anything personal. Tesla went over his rules with me, nothing I had a problem with. He wrote out different schedules on index cards, based on a myriad of situations, so I wouldn't have to wonder what my responsibilities were. I admired his clean, precise handwriting as much as his thoroughness, and even more that he was left-handed. All the best ones are.



AFTER I LEFT Tesla's room, I spent the rest of the day with Adèle so we could get comfortable with each other. I'd hoped that once she finally had someone to talk to, the floodgates would open, but she remained an overly serious child who observed more than she participated. She preferred solitary activities, like reading and drawing, over games. But we'd work on that. Any child under my influence, for any stretch of time, was going to be a gamer. That was just the natural order of things.

As to the reading... I had my suspicions. She claimed to only look at the pictures in the books in English, but I saw her lips moving a few times when she didn't know I was watching.

Hazel, her nanny — the hot, busty brunette — spent most of her time with Adèle, even though we were both employed specifically to take care of her. My role was more flexible, especially for the first few weeks. Doc had reiterated to Tesla that I was still recovering from my injuries, which was kinda thoughtful but all I really needed at that point was time for bruises to heal and skin regrow. Everything else felt pretty normal, especially once I was eating huge amounts of fresh food, and got all the sleep, but arguing was pointless: Tesla's schedule was set in stone and only had me with Adèle a few hours a day at first. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do with the rest of my time, but whatever.

Instead of going off to nap or stare at the wall, I stuck with Adèle and Hazel even when I wasn't technically on duty, telling Hazel I wanted to "observe" Adèle's daily routine. I felt bad because that seemed to make Hazel nervous and a little defensive, like I was a social worker evaluating her capability or something, but I was being covert so I had to let her worry.

I spent the next day with them too, and at dinner that night, I made sure to sit directly opposite the pair of them. I watched the little booger pretend to be clueless, but she was paying more attention to the conversations than she was letting on.

"Back me up, Mouse," Loki nudged me, and I glanced away from Adèle to side-eye him.

"No," I made a squinchy face, because he was being ridiculous. He and Tesla were bickering about the actual necessity of vegetables if one has access to multivitamins, and I was too busy watching the nose goblin across from me, making yuck faces into her plate, to weigh in on his ridiculous assertions.

He nudged me again, harder, and I made a big show of clutching my ribs even though the bruises were on the other side, but apparently he knew that too. "Faker," he hissed, poking me again. "Trying to make me feel bad?"

"Not really, just trying to make you leave me alone. I'm not on your side. I love vegetables." Adèle's head shot up as she narrowed her eyes at me, like she'd always suspected something was off and now I'd confirmed it. I kept my head turned towards Loki, pretending not to see her, but I totally could. "Especially broccoli." Oh, that got a huge reaction, she actually shuddered in her seat.

"Broccoli is an excellent source of nutrition," Tesla agreed, "despite tasting like ass."

"You taste like ass," I tossed back without thinking, then grinned at him. "So I've heard."

Tesla ignored me as Loki and Caliban taunted him, and Adèle forgot herself completely. She watched them shoot insults back and forth with big eyes and a smile, a soft giggle

squeaking out when Tesla insisted only his ass tasted like ass, while Loki's whole face did because nothing but shit ever came out of his mouth.

She wasn't fluent, she didn't understand everything, but she knew more than any of them suspected. Hazel had confirmed earlier that Adèle insisted on reading the same English picture books over and over before moving on to the next — while reading chapter books in Polish on her own — and I felt confident she was teaching herself to read as well.

The devious little minx had them all fooled, and I was now her biggest fan.

I was not a fan of Hazel, however, not after she latched onto me like a nipple clamp once Adèle went to bed, informing me that Brandy-Lynn had recruited her to make absolutely sure I joined them for Girlie-Girls Night. It was like she knew I'd planned to skip it, but Hazel was relentless, and by nine o'clock, I was sipping on a very strong, very pink cocktail involving vodka and strawberry lemonade. Admittedly, it was fucking delicious, and I may have sucked back two very quickly as I adjusted to the scene: hanging out with a half dozen women in skimpy pajamas, talking about honest-to-God girlie shit, like boys. And— well, okay, mostly boys, but not in the ways I would've expected.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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WE WERE in a random (to me) room down one of the hallways off the lobby, which appeared to be some kind of extra hang-out space or quiet lounge area. One wall was bookshelves sporting a collection of novels in no particular order or any specific genre, and some random non-fiction including a coffee table book of photographs of Americana-esque diners, and what appeared to be a 1960s-era cookbook dedicated to the fine art of jello molds and aspics. There were mainstream board games, too, like Monopoly and Scrabble — stuff you could find in big box stores in the past, unlike the selection we had back in my store in Salem — and some jigsaw puzzles.

Interspersed on the shelves were at least a dozen stacked file trays filled with loose papers, labeled things like Sudoku, Logic Grids, Crosswords, and Coloring, with degrees of difficulty. When I first arrived, I took a few minutes to look them over while I acclimated to the situation and gave myself a pep talk, and it was all photocopies of pages out of puzzle and coloring books. I snagged a couple for my room after Brandy-Lynn told me they were fair game.

There was a wet bar on the opposite wall, the counters empty except for a stack of cloth napkins, a covered ice bucket, and the ingredients for the pitchers of cocktails we were imbibing in. In between, in the center of the room, was a selection of couches and easy chairs surrounding a large, square coffee table.

“There’s a couple rooms like this, at least one on every floor,” Hazel explained as Brandy-Lynn mixed the first pitcher of cocktails and we waited for the others to arrive. “Each one has different books and games and such. Even the puzzle pages are different, and things get switched out whenever we get anything new. You’ll meet Goldie in a few minutes, she works for Tesla and is in charge of all of it. She’s basically the compound librarian, and keeps track of all the recreation rooms as well as the library and the school, and everyone knows to be on the lookout for fresh meat whenever there’s a ride-out. We also do some trading with The Ranch in town, especially if we’ve got duplicates of anything. Boredom leads to trouble, and winters can be long.”

“You can reserve a room through Goldie too, which is what I did tonight.” Brandy-Lynn handed me my first drink and we clinked glasses. She pointed behind her at a Raspberry Pi, an unobtrusive little white and bright pink box sitting next to a speaker. “You can connect to the music server through an app on your phone, and play whatever you want in any of the rooms too. There’s a separate app to build playlists too. Tesla can hook you up with all of that and show you how to use it, if he hasn’t already.”

I chose not to mention that he’d confiscated my phone. They didn’t need to know that he didn’t trust me and wouldn’t let me near anything electronic — *yet* — and I decided not to ask to borrow any of theirs despite really, *really* wanting to check in with Vernita directly. I needed to know if she’d gotten her satellite phone back, if she’d been in touch with Tai, and if she knew how Azzie was doing. Not gonna lie, the drama lover in me also wanted to know if sending vaccines to Vernita got Tai and Azzie talking to each other about the important shit— it felt like months ago when I was rubbing my hands together like a cartoon villain as I was taping down that box and writing the label, laughing maniacally as I pictured the confrontation it would force between them.

Now, I just wished I’d been straight with everyone from the start.

Like maybe if I told, I don't know, *anyone* where I was going that night, then McNamara and Kane couldn't have disappeared me so thoroughly. Tai could've even sent word out to Vernita immediately, and if she really did have NNC connections, maybe they would've found me before I was dumped in Illinois. Or rescued me from that place sooner than I was able to rescue myself.

Regrets: I had a few.

But as bad as it was, there was a small part of me that was glad I got to see Beast again. Regardless of what he'd turned into, I still cared for the man I used to know. I still had feelings for the Beast I knew when I was just a little girl. It was fucked up, and made me feel all twisted up inside, but it was—

“What crawled up your ass and died?” A super skinny woman with long black hair plopped down on the couch next to me. A skin-tight black tank top stretched across her enormous boobs, distorting the outline of a vampire bat made out of rhinestones, the neckline scooped so low that it barely covered her nipples. With it, she had on black leggings, and neon green and white striped fuzzy socks.

“Booze me!” she shouted at Brandy-Lynn before turning on the couch to face me, curling her legs up underneath her, and holding out her hand. “Lourdes,” she informed me as we shook. “So why the rain cloud hovering over your head? Isn't this supposed to be a party? Aren't you having fun?”

Her tone, her mannerisms, all of it was that strange mixture of challenge, sympathy, and sarcasm. It was the kind of attitude you gave someone you knew well: someone you knew didn't want to be social or whatever, but showed up anyway, and you were determined to make sure they had a good time even while you acknowledged their shitty mood was valid. It wasn't the way you typically introduced yourself to a complete stranger, but it immediately put me at ease. Some of my best relationships formed from mutual shit-giving from the moment of lift-off, and this woman was unabashedly in my face.



“Sorry for being such a downer all the time,” I smirked, “you know how I am. You can take the girl out of the fetal position, but you can’t take the soul-crushing depression out of the girl.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, and tilted up her chin. “If I thought you were being serious about being that depressed, I’d be talking in code to Brandy-Lynn right now about staging an intervention, but I think you’re being hyperbolic. Right? Or do we need to consider pharmaceuticals?”

I smiled at her, genuinely grateful for the concern. It had been a long time since someone had seen through my bullshit, caught on to one of my moods, and actually tried to intervene; I’d conditioned Azzie over the years to just leave me alone when I was having bad days because I didn’t want her to worry. That was the right thing to do when she was just thirteen or fourteen and struggling with the weight of the world on her shoulders already, but in the last year or so, there’d been times I’d wished I hadn’t been so thorough. Some days, it would’ve been nice to *not* be left alone to wallow in misery.

Then again, I could’ve just *asked* for help, like when I wasn’t in the midst of a dark night of the soul. I could’ve given her a heads up to maybe check on me, bring me ice cream or whatever, if she saw me folding inward. She would’ve done it, no question — of anyone, she’s the person I could count on, if I wanted to burden someone else with my shit. But therein lies the rub.

Azzie might try asking questions, maybe even get me to talk about the things that plague my mind, and I couldn’t do that to her. My shit-show of a life was no one else’s problem but mine.

“Yeah, I was just being dramatic,” I assured Lourdes, waving my hand dismissively. “Had a bit of a trauma not long ago, got the shit beat out of me, and I’m still recovering but I’ll be fine. Just need to work out some of the dark thoughts, you know?”

She nodded, still not convinced, so I threw myself bodily in her direction and rested my cheek against her lycra-clad thigh, peering up at her side-eye as I cuddled up against her in the most obnoxiously needy way possible. “I know we just met, but clearly we’re already best friends so you need to play with my hair and tell me that boys suck, okay? And make Brandy-Lynn bring me another cocktail, that shit is the bomb.”

I was grateful that she started giggling instead of getting freaked out or repulsed by me, and my eyes drifted shut as her long nails scratched against my scalp and carded through my hair. There may have been some soft moans involved, definitely a lot of happy sighs, because it felt like heaven.

I *was* enjoying it, and it did feel good, but there was still a small part of me that wished it wasn’t so fucking easy to distract people away when they got too close. For once, it would be nice for someone to call me on it, force me to actually tell the truth about what I felt, or what I was going through. But the bigger part of me was glad that I was so good at the smoke and mirrors feint, that everyone just saw what I wanted them to, because... because what if they didn’t like the real me?

Mouse was fun. Mouse was loud and obnoxious, and made people laugh, *at* her as much as *with* her. Me? I was different. Deep down, inside, I was... *different*. But nobody liked a Debbie Downer.

Nobody liked *Janie*.

But at that moment, surrounded by strangers without anyone paying too close attention, I let myself feel things. Feelings I’d kept buried for years.

Lonely. Scared. Overwhelmed.

Heartbroken.

It wasn’t that many years ago that Beast had been everything to me. He was the most important person in my life, and he treated me like I was the most important person in *his* life. And then he turned on me, he betrayed me, and he abandoned me, and I never knew why. I’ve never known what

I did, so I can't risk getting attached like that. What if I start to believe it's real, and then I fuck it up again?

If I just knew what I did, I'd make sure it never happened again.

I realized, suddenly, like a slap across my face, that I had to go back. I had to talk to him, really talk to him, without anyone around to interfere or make him put up a front. I needed to get him away from the club, meet him as an equal, and demand answers. Maybe then I could move on, if I knew the truth. Maybe he could, too.

“Are you drooling on my leg?” My new friend, Lourdes, twisted her fingers in my hair and tugged, forcing me back to reality. There was, indeed, a tiny damp patch on her thigh, but it wasn't drool. I swiped at my cheeks then made a big show of wiping my mouth as I sat up, smirking over my shoulder at her.

“It was just so good, bestie.” I winked at her and she snorted, making a face.

“You're lucky you're so cute, because you're fucking needy,” she groused, playing along, but her brows were drawn together as she studied me. After a moment, she seemed to make a decision not to say anything about my teary eyes and blotchy skin — I was *not* a pretty crier — and let me deal with my own shit without interference. But she let her hand rest against my lower back, whether in support or comfort or whatever, it didn't matter. It just felt *good*.

I glanced around then and realized we'd been surrounded while I was wallowing, three other women had joined the party that had been me, Brandy-Lynn, Hazel, and Lourdes.

There was a cheerful, perky blonde with her hair in a messy bun, wearing a tank top that read “I'm way too pretty to fuck from behind” along with flannel pajama bottoms. Brandy-Lynn introduced her as Goldie, the club librarian and the person single-handedly keeping boredom at bay. I made a mental note to ask her about gaming opportunities, and another to mail her some things from my store when I returned

to Salem. No one should be deprived of Small World or Blood Rage, this place needed those games.

Minnie was a quiet brunette sitting primly on one of the armchairs, but her nipple piercings showing under her sheer white tank top, and shortie-shorts displaying the entire length of a pair of amazing gams, were at odds with a face and hairstyle that made her look fifteen, at most. And a nerdy fifteen, with her eyeglasses, hairband, and earrings shaped like cupcakes.

The third woman, Stacy, had black hair done up in a retro victory roll that went perfectly with her sunflower yellow romper with black piping along the seams. Ruffles edged the deep-v halter top and leg holes, and it tied behind her neck in a big bow. She was barefoot and sitting cross-legged in her chair, with a pair of feathered, black patent leather, old-Hollywood-glam mules on the ground and off to the side. But much like the sexy jailbait-nerd, the rockabilly princess look contrasted with the body underneath: she was lean and ripped, sculpted muscles on her arms and legs, with the best shoulders I'd ever seen on a woman. Her BMI had to be a negative number, she was that fit.

Every woman in the room was beautiful in a different way, and dressed comfortably in clothes that flattered them. I felt like a slob in the oversized men's sweatpants and t-shirt that I'd gotten from a dead kid, and hoped Tesla's message about getting me some clothes went through. When he sent it, I didn't want to bother the man out on the road, but now I was feeling seriously out of place and drab compared to everyone else.

Once I'd stopped moping and started socializing, Brandy-Lynn cleared her throat and clinked the massive rock on her ring finger against her glass. "Everyone raise your glasses and welcome Mouse to this meeting of the Girlie-Girls Club, so named because we're the least girly of the women here, and also the least bitchy. Coincidence?"

Goldie held up her hand before anyone could tap their drinks. "You keep saying that like it's going to make it true. We are not the *least* bitchy. Exhibit A, counselor: Stacy."

“Hey!”

“Exhibit B: Lourdes.”

“That’s fair.” Lourdes shrugged next to me, sipping from her bottle.

“And I’m pretty sure Mouse will be C.”

“Also fair,” I agreed, tipping my glass at her.

“But we’re balanced out by Brandy-Lynn, Hazel, and Minnie,” Stacy argued, “who are all genuinely nice. True sweethearts. So still less bitchy.”

“And I’m the swing vote,” Goldie supplied, sipping her drink. “Usually low-key, but situationally bitchy.”

“I want to swing both ways too!” I cried out, keeping my expression innocent but enthusiastic. “I like options.”

“Yeah, she’ll do,” Stacy muttered, and I was infused with warmth, down to my very soul. *One of us. One of us.*

I’d never been accepted by a group of women before; even when they seemed to welcome me, I’ve always been on the outside. Only Azzie and Sarah Chaney have ever stuck.

Visions flitted through my mind at a thousand miles an hour, every cliché and rom-com trope I’d ever been exposed to: book clubs fueled by wine; shopping in actual stores; pedicures in a line with everyone talking loud and graphically, making the nail techs giggle; going to the bathroom in groups.

I didn’t know if it would last, and I was still leaving, but I was going to enjoy the fuck out of it while I could.



“I DON’T KNOW what you think you know about club life, but things are different here.”

Introductions had been made, drinks had been distributed, and seven fine-ass women in comfy clothes were sprawled out on couches and chairs, relaxed and having a nice time just hanging out together.

Brandy-Lynn, the obvious spokesperson for the group, had made the introductions and had now begun her TED talk. But since everyone else seemed to be in agreement that the lecture series was necessary, I kept quiet and listened.

“Ever since Magick took over, this place has been different.”

“It was different under Cain too, but not nearly as much as with Magick and T,” Lourdes pointed out, and the others nodded.

“Explain. Please.” Because I’d seen some things, but none of it warranted this level of earnestness, and the feeling that she was laying down the law for me. Since Tesla had already gone over the rules — straight-forward and mostly common sense, I felt, though some of them were admittedly unexpected — I wasn’t sure that I really needed clarification.

“Well, for one thing, the men don’t cheat on their old ladies.”

Yeah, that wasn’t— what?

I stared at her in disbelief. That was one of the most naïve statements I’d ever heard, and I felt a twinge of pity for her.

“Wipe that look off your face, it’s true.” Stacy — Sporty Spice — wasn’t mean about it, but she wasn’t exactly nice either. She saw my borderline-contempt when Brandy-Lynn made that outrageous declaration, and good on her for standing up for her gullible friend.

“Oh, okay,” I said kindly, not wanting to be the jaded, cynical voice of reason, because she was obviously completely deluded and—

“Being part of the club is about loyalty, right?” Brandy-Lynn paused, ignoring my tone, and waited for me to nod. “Well, it’s even more important up here because the exact location of this place, and what we have, is secret. So no one can be up here unless they prove themselves absolutely loyal.”

Hazel pulled her straw out of her drink and pointed it at me. “As far as Magick is concerned, if a man chooses to be in a committed relationship and cheats on his partner, he’s

displaying a fundamental inability to be loyal. If he can't be trusted in that aspect of his life, he can't be trusted in any other."

"Same for the old ladies," Lourdes shrugged. "Though *that* never has been as much of an issue."

I kind of froze in place, my brain processors kicking into high speed as my perspective changed, as I began to consider what they were telling me — no matter how completely outrageous it sounded — might actually be true. *Because it made sense*. In a completely obvious way that has been overlooked for eons in biker culture.

"It's also about drama," Hazel added in between sips from her cocktail straw. Such a lady. "Mags hates drama, and T can't abide it at any level, so we don't have members or girls —"

"Or anyone, really."

"—who might be the type who feeds on drama. You might've noticed that nobody is an attention whore or a shit-stirrer around here—"

Stacy coughed out *Pepper* at the same time Goldie coughed *Sienna*, and then they giggled and bumped fists.

"—this place is full of outlaw bikers and party girls that are all really just mellow people who want to do their jobs and live their lives. Meals are always pleasant, everything is low-key, and things function smoothly. It's really the only way that this many volatile people can live together in isolation like this."

"The most drama we get is from the pregnant ladies and little kids, which is why they all keep to themselves most of the time. But nobody asks them to do it—"

"Yeah, you try telling a nine months-preggers biker babe to eat in her room because her hormones make her crazy, then watch the volcano erupt," Stacy scoffed, mumbling "Fuckin' breeders" and sticking her tongue out at a scowling Lourdes.

Brandy-Lynn talked louder, ignoring them. "—we all understand it's about respect and maintaining a peaceful

environment, or you put your family at risk. T will not hesitate to boot a repeat offender, doesn't matter what their situation is, they'll have to move to town or to another chapter."

"Wouldn't town be safer for a late-term pregnancy anyway? To be close to the hospital or..." I trailed off as Brandy-Lynn mean-mugged me while the rest of the women folded their lips in or pretended to look elsewhere. Oops.

"Bitch, my man is the only doctor anyone needs," she scowled. "We're a fully-equipped facility here, and Lourdes is a midwife. I'm a physical therapist, *and* I'd done the pre-reqs and was applying to med schools to be an orthopedic surgeon before the cancer derailed our plans. We're *capable*."

Lourdes patted me on the back and flipped her hair back over one shoulder. "Midwife, post-partum doula, and certified lactation consultant, right here. And a damn good shot at range too, so I sit in a crow's nest when I'm not birthin' babies." Took me a second to realize she was talking about the guard towers.

I made an apologetic face at her and Brandy-Lynn, acknowledging my ignorance. I got a huff and rolled eyes from the blonde sweetie. "I'm a big dummy, okay?" I whined, poking at her until she swatted my hand away, trying to hide her smile.

"Truth is, even with Mags laying down the law, infidelity was still a bit of an issue before Janus," Hazel piped up again, ignoring the shenanigans, "but now we literally have to fear for our lives if we leave here. Before, it was about keeping the club resources secure, and they were pretty ruthless about it, but that didn't stop some people from sneaking around on their partner. Men and women. Now there's way more to lose, so everyone is much more careful about being sure before making commitments. It's better to keep things casual rather than take risks if you aren't one hundred percent, so there are a lot of long-term relationships up here where both partners claim they aren't exclusive, but they really are."

There was a lot of nodding as Stacy added, "And a few marriages were just outright dissolved early on, when it



became clear that the men couldn't keep their dicks in their pants no matter what it cost them. Mags made his point real clear when their wives and families were allowed to stay, but the men were sent away. Not all of the women stayed, but it was an option."

"I did," Hazel agreed.

I waited for her to finish that story, talking about the men coming back and lessons learned all around, etc., but there was just a lot of nodding and side comments mentioning names I didn't know. "Wait, you're serious?"

"As a myocardial infarction," Brandy-Lynn nodded. "It isn't God you have to fear around here, it's catching Tesla's attention or breaking Magick's rules."

"For most of us," Hazel mumbled, sucking on her damn straw and pretending not to notice when my head spun toward her. I heard a bunch of stifled giggles but I kept my eyes fixed on the buxom brunette pretending to drink from a glass that was just an ice cube and maraschino cherry by that point. I kept up my singular focus until she was squirming in her seat.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," I muttered as she rolled her eyes into her glass.

"Oh, come on," Stacy scoffed, pointing at me with her bottle. "Are you seriously trying to deny that you're Tesla's *special friend*? Or that you have him and Loki, two of the most powerful men in the club, wrapped around your finger? Bitch, please."

Stacy's voice began to fade out as my mind went blank, until I couldn't see anything but a field of white, and the voices continuing around me were as clear and comprehensible as an adult on a Charlie Brown holiday special. I thought I heard a name, *Rasputin*, but it drifted away as my brain cut ties in self-preservation.

I didn't want the attention of powerful men. Never in my life has that turned out well for me.

I didn't want—

A hand squeezed mine, Hazel's voice was breaking through the static, telling me she was there and she had me. I was safe. Things began to clear, and I was seeing colors again along with hearing Brandy-Lynn go off on them for talking out of their asses and putting pressure on me. She didn't mention what she knew, what she *had* to know from being Doc's old lady, and I was incredibly grateful for that mercy.

"—didn't invite her here to get harassed by you jealous cunts," she hissed. "Not her fault she's got their attention."

"She doesn't even flirt with them," Hazel added, still holding my hand but talking to them like I wasn't sitting right there listening. "She treats Loki like he's her goofy sidekick, and picks on T like an annoying little sister. I'm not even kidding."

"It's true," Brandy-Lynn nodded. "And the best part is watching Sienna and Pepper when she's with one of them. Fucking hilarious!" She crowed, bouncing in her seat.

At any other time, I probably would've been hypnotized by her boobs, but not this time. "You're crazy, this is crazy talk," I grumbled, clearing my throat and making a face at the floor between my feet. "Shut the fuck up." The group went silent and I glanced up to see a bunch of pointed looks exchanged, but since they went back to discussing the club in general, I could pretend it never happened.

Another round of drinks were distributed, and the women settled back and got comfortable. Hazel stayed next to me though, and I ended up sandwiched between her and Lourdes as she took over more than her share of the couch.

"Alright, so *anyway*," Brandy-Lynn continued, taking over again. She was definitely the leader of this girl posse, and now that I thought about it, she did kinda resemble Taylor Swift so that was appropriate. "All of us here, in this room, have legit jobs, so even if we're single, there's no expectation of *servicing the men*, if you will. Sex is always a choice. Some of the other girls don't have other jobs, so they have different expectations. They're supposed to be available and willing for

any of the single brothers — they still have a bit of veto power, but they need to have a good reason.”

“Or they can get off their asses during the day, and do some shit around here. That’s the trade-off. Everyone contributes, one way or another,” Selena Gomez supplied. Okay, it was Hazel but the resemblance was uncanny, and then I was flashing back to the *Bad Blood* video and wondering which one I was. Probably that Cara Delevingne chick, she was the only other blonde I could remember.

“This isn’t just about partying with the club anymore, maybe getting your tuition paid or protection from an ex. The girls who show up at clubhouses aren’t looking for a night of wild, they’re looking for food, shelter, and protection on a permanent basis. Some of them bring family with them. But we aren’t a charity. Joining the club isn’t a lifestyle choice, it’s a *life*. So when girls or even sometimes prospects want to join up, they get maybe a week at that chapter — enough time for the officers to evaluate them, for medical exams, and for Tesla to do a background on them — then they either get sent on their way, or they get moved. Where they go depends on their situation and what they bring to the club as far as skills or abilities, and I’m not being dirty here. A girl who can cook, or sew, or perform surgery, or teach—“

“Or pull wire.”

“—or pull wire, or fuck like a damn succubus... all those things matter. Practical skills matter. Life experience matters. No one rides for free, and no one stays where their loyalties might be divided. The club treats it like a job, and you gotta be willing to relocate if the job requires it. Got dependents? You better bring something more to the negotiation table than just a willingness to fuck any of the members. Those days are over.”

“So all the girls have other jobs as well as—?”

“Not all, but most. There are some where being the entertainment is their job, and they earn their keep, but that job has requirements and expectations like any other. In the old days, you could just be DTF and have nice tits, and the club would let you crash there and feed you. These days, girls who

fuck for a living don't get to be too choosy, and they have to maintain a standard or they get replaced. The candidate pool is far bigger and more varied than it ever was before, just being pretty and willing to blow any of the men doesn't get you a place and certainly doesn't support your outside family. And dependents are an even bigger deal: bring a kid or sibling or dependent parent with you, and expect the club to support them too?"

"You gotta have more skills than just dancing and fucking, or else be an Olympic-fucking-contender in the sack. We're talking smoking hot nymphomaniac or it's *thank you for your interest, next please.*"

"And that's just the regular chapters, we're not even talking about *here.*"

"Before the pandemic, no club girls ever came to this place. Old ladies and families only, the men partied at a bar in town and the *official* club girls stayed in a couple rooms above it. But mostly the strange came from hangers on at the bar."

"And the men weren't there every night. There've always been different expectations for members of this chapter, going back to Cain's days. Partying was secondary or tertiary, not an every-night thing. Fucking might be — and there's been a relationship with The Ranch going back decades — but cutting loose and getting fucked up wasn't. This chapter has always been low-key and the girls reflected that. A lot of them came from The Ranch too, so they were always more professional about it."

"Even those who couldn't cut it at The Ranch, who didn't meet Fatima's standards, were still worlds beyond your typical club slut."

"And after Janus hit, everything changed."

"The club moved up here completely. No more outsiders had access, no more going into town to party on the regular."

"The men still maintain the bar, and most of the old timers that are left stayed down there, act like the public face of the

chapter when outsiders come calling. They're guarding the town *and* this location."

"There's a couple girls at the bar but no one important — no one that knows anything — and some townies do go there to play. The men who stay in town also have accounts at The Ranch that the club covers, and some of them are even faithful to their wives, which you don't see too often in that generation —"

"But this chapter has always been different."

Brandy-Lynn nodded. "Going back to Cain's days. He valued discretion, even with pussy on tap."

"But *anyway*, the pandemic changed things. Most everybody affiliated with the club moved up here. Girls that didn't want to leave their families needed to make a case for the club supporting all of them, and a lot of the workers are the family of the girls or members that need to earn their keep. Girls with mad skillz could have family here that doesn't work —"

"Like my mom and grandma, since I have in-demand skills —"

"But even they still work in the gardens."

"Yeah, because they want to, not because they need to. They could sit on their asses twenty-four-seven and the club would cover their needs. They do some work on their own schedule, and they're earning a bit extra. My mom calls it my *retirement fund*. I call it their medical fund for when either of them need full-time care."

"Plus it pays for your mom's knitting addiction."

"Yeah, who knew wool would get so pricey?"

"But she also sells what she makes back to the club."

"She mostly gives stuff to people, but yeah, the sweaters, mittens, and hats that go to other chapters are paid for. It's a nice racket for her."

"So the little old lady I've seen weeding in the garden is making bank?"

“Grandma? So much bank. She’s Caliban’s secret weapon, he calls her the Herb Whisperer. She has complete domain over the smallest greenhouse and an outdoor plot, just to grow herbs for him and Doc.”

“She even grows *wasabi*,” I heard whispered from the group, said with such awe that I now understood wasabi was difficult. Who knew?

“*But anyway*, that’s the point: things are different. The girls who moved up here with the club are *different*. This is a job to them, one that the club values, and they work hard to earn their place and, more often than not, support others. Even if their family didn’t come here too, they still provide support. That might not be one hundred percent true at every chapter, but Magick and Tesla take affiliations with the club seriously. Chapters have autonomy on most decisions, but no one wears the colors or lives off the club without them knowing about it and vetting them.”

I wondered about that, about what kind of vetting Tesla actually did with me. I trusted that Vernita wouldn’t have betrayed me, but what exactly did she tell him? What I sent him during the application procedure was pretty sparse — all verifiable, but still sparse. Was my ability to speak Polish so rare and valuable that the blank spots in my past didn’t matter to him?

“This is their job, but only with the *single* brothers?” I still wasn’t wrapping my brain around this.

“Correct. If the men want to keep fucking around, don’t commit. And the same applies to the single girls. And if a club girl ends up in a relationship that isn’t open, she needs to find a new job.”

“Or if you want to be pickier about your partners,” Goldie pointed out. “So for those of us that have other responsibilities and do other work for the club, the club room is like any other civilian bar on a given night, where you can pick up whomever you want to take home with you. Or not.”

“And everyone magically respects all these boundaries and never crosses them?” I wasn’t buying it, and sarcasm was

leaking through enough that I was getting some *looks*. But they weren't mean looks, it was more like they were trying to be patient with me.

The jailbait-nerd, Minnie, finally spoke up and everyone else gave her their full attention, in a way that made me feel strange and kinda warm inside. They actually listened to each other, there was genuine respect between these women, and they weren't just friends through convenience. "For the most part," Minnie said in a sweet voice, a soft one that was just naturally quieter. It would've been so easy to talk over her, and all the chatter stopped so it wouldn't happen.

*Amazing.*

And because she didn't hesitate to contribute her opinion, I discovered that even the quiet one was still a biker babe at heart. One who knew just as much about the club as the others, if not more. "I came here from another chapter, pre-Janus, with someone who didn't end up making the cut. He got sent back, I got to stay because my dad was an electrician before he passed, and I'd finished trade school but couldn't find someone to take me on as an apprentice back home. But I knew my shit since I grew up pulling wire alongside my dad, and Loki wanted me on the construction crew so he asked me to stay." *I'm not jealous, you are!* "He was even willing to ask Mags to keep the prick I came with, if I was attached to him, but we didn't have any real connection. He was just a hookup that I'd met when I was hanging around the other chapter partying, because your girl here's got an addiction to biker dick."

There was a chorus of cheers and verbal appreciation, and we all ended up clinking our glasses and bottles against each other. Because *yeah*.

After our impromptu toast, Minnie continued. "I'm from So Cal, originally, and we spent a few weeks on the road getting here, going from one chapter to another on our way. I want to say we stayed at eight different chapters, maybe nine? I can't totally remember because I was high and dick-drunk most of the time—" said with a kind of wistful nostalgia, "*—fuck* that was a good time." She grinned, shaking her head.

“You gonna finish your thought or just keep celebrating biker dick?” Stacy teased. That caused the conversation to devolve into a giggly art appreciation-style discussion of biker peen that I tuned out with a broad smile plastered on my face, until eventually, Minnie held up her drink like it was a spirit stick and they all went quiet again.

“My point of all that was to say that I partied with my fair share of bikers before coming here, a whole bunch of different chapters and their support clubs or hangers-on or whoever happened to show up. So I’m like an authority or something. And this place, here, has always been different. *Always*. I mean, for one thing, there’s way more dick-on-dick action than any other club I’ve been to, but I think that’s to be expected when we’re all still just a bunch of horny adults caught up in a weird, isolated situation. And there’s bound to be drama sometimes, but it isn’t a nightly free-for-all like you find at other chapters. It also means the club room is always open to old ladies, girlfriends, and boyfriends, and everyone knows the score. Some of the committed relationships are open, but it works both ways: girls and boys are both fair game, but consent needs to come from both parties if there’s going to be a hook-up, so group situations tend to be easier for that scenario. It helps make it clear that everyone involved is on the same page, so that’s the most common outlet for the open relationships.”

“There’s a fuck-ton of orgies happening in this place, for sure,” Lourdes and Goldie tapped their bottles together with big grins.

Minnie smiled at them but kept her focus on me, finishing her thought. “But again, that needs to be something all parties involved are okay with, and it’s usually something established from day one or there’s no formal relationship, you know?”

I nodded slowly, my brow furrowed as I worked through the idea that maybe it wasn’t bullshit they were consoling themselves with while their men got pussy on the side. Or apparently dick. And maybe my upbringing wasn’t universal.

Goldie’s head was bobbing, no such hesitation. “If a brother wants to lock down exclusive rights — whether pussy



or dick — he better be ready to keep it in his pants. And vice-versa. Disloyalty, on any level, isn't tolerated by management.”

“Yeah, and if he won't commit, we don't have to either. No harm, no foul. Everyone knows the score,” Lourdes agreed.

“Alright, so what you're saying is that anyone who is single can fuck anyone else who is single, and some of the girls do that as their job. But if you decide to go steady or whatever you want to call it, you're with only that person, unless both of you are okay with an open relationship, in which case, you need consent from your partner to fuck around with the singles—”

“Or other open couples. There are a few,” Goldie interjected.

“And a few polycules, so it isn't just one partner in agreement,” Lourdes added.

“—and no one breaks these rules?” I looked around when I finished, and every single one of them was nodding.

“It's very, very rare,” Minnie assured me. “It has happened, but keep in mind that for the men, it's a loyalty issue. It impacts their place in the club. There are fewer consequences for partners that aren't patched-in, but whoever they cheated with is culpable. So it has only happened maybe twice since lockdown, that we know of. And in both cases, the brothers involved ended up transferring to other chapters.”

“So they say. I'm still not convinced they weren't *taken to a farm*” air quotes, and really sarcastic ones, “like an unwanted pet,” Stacy grumbled, and I was beginning to suspect she was the cynical one in the group.

“Don't be morbid,” Minnie chided.

“Don't be naïve,” she shot back.

“Stop arguing.” Hazel rested her hand on Stacy's arm. “Nobody believes Magick had him killed, okay? He left. He was an asshole, and he left.” From the look on Stacy's face, I wasn't sure if she wanted Hazel to be right or wrong. Clearly some bad shit had gone down... “She's over at The Ranch

now, so you don't have to deal with either of them. It's time to let it go."

Stacy got up and slammed down her drink before stomping out of the room. Hazel and Lourdes went after her, and Brandy-Lynn leaned in, keeping her voice low as she watched the door.

"Her ex was a real piece of work. He had a cheating kink, he got off on knowingly betraying her trust. She had no idea one of the girls was his secret side piece, and the cunt was into the cheating aspect too. Stacy and he weren't *exclusive*," air quotes, "that long before he got caught, but it really messed her up. She still has feelings, so no one talks about him, but I'm pretty sure he didn't actually transfer to another chapter." She got a weird expression on her face as she studied me. I guess watching me for my reaction? "He'd agreed to the same rules as everyone else, swore he was faithful before they became *official*, and Magick can be a little unforgiving when he's lied to. So it's all a little sus."

"Sounds like it," I responded noncommittally. I wasn't sure how I felt about any of what I just heard. I thought... I might've actually liked it. Respected it all, at the very least.

*If it was true. I still didn't know what to believe.*



DRINKS WERE REFRESHED; I switched to water for the next round. Brandy-Lynn and Goldie had their phones out, texting, while I enjoyed the feeling of wibbly-wobbly, time-wimey... stuff. Minnie used the bathroom, then fussed with a playlist on her phone, turning on a song I recognized from when I was little: Justin Timberlake's *Cry Me a River*.

Appropriate, but a little mean. I felt at a real disadvantage having so much alcohol in me, because I was trying to figure out if Minnie was my kind of bitch.

It must've been a playlist of pop music from the early 2000s, because by the time Stacy got back with Hazel and

Lourdes following right behind, Destiny's Child was proclaiming themselves survivors. And you can't *not* dance to that, even if it's just drunkenly swaying and stomping while singing along, and I thought all the talk was done for the night. I was considering putting on *Footloose* and challenging them to a dance fight, when someone knocked on the door and everyone scattered back to their seats as Minnie turned the music back down.

Brandy-Lynn practically humped the couch while shouting at the door, and I was really confused until I saw a wheeled cart covered with snacks come rolling into the room.

YES!

There were a bunch of covered dishes, but also baskets of what looked like tortilla chips, a tray of cut up fruit surrounding a bowl of chocolate sauce, what could very well be fresh guacamole, and then something resembling pastry—

Hazel elbowed me and pointed, and I realized the cart wasn't self-driving. Caliban was standing there, awkwardly staring at me — he didn't look awkward at all, I just felt awkward about not even noticing him — with his hands on his hips and a grin splitting his beard. “Hi, honey.”

“Sorry, didn't see you there,” I grinned back at him, because I decided it was kind of funny.

“I noticed,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “At least you want my food,” he muttered as the girls poked at me and made fun of my appetite, and I wasn't sure I was supposed to hear that but I did, so I responded.

“Your food is sooo good,” I agreed, getting up on my knees on the cushion so I could see the cart better. “Seriously,” I mumbled, eyeing up the bowl of guac with longing, wondering if I grabbed it and ran, would I be able to get away? I waved my arm behind me, blindly batting at the handsy women trying to distract me, and checked my chin for drool. “Are those— mini creampuffs?” I gasped, gazing at him in awe.

He nodded, solemnly. “Filled with vanilla-cinnamon custard.”

“Holy shit,” I breathed, hovering over the tray. I must’ve levitated to the cart or bamfed there like Nightcrawler, because I had no memory of standing up or walking over. I might’ve, quite possibly, climbed over the back of the couch and a table. “Those look amazing.”

He lifted one to my lips and I opened without thought, closing my eyes as the combination of the eggy *pâte à choux* pastry, slightly spicy-sweet custard, and the light dusting of powdered sugar exploded in my mouth hole. “Oh God,” I moaned, chewing up and swallowing Nirvana.

“Try this,” he pressed something drippy against my lips, his voice raspy and deeper than normal. Without opening my eyes, I bit down into sheets of crisp, honey-drenched pastry dough dotted with toasted pistachios.

“Baklava?” I gasped out around my full mouth, holding a hand under my chin to catch any stray drops of honey or crumbs. My eyes flew open, and I met his heavy-lidded gaze in wonder, and the corner of his mouth curled up as he fed me the rest of it. His sticky fingers ended up inside my mouth, my tongue lapping at the sweet honey coating them as he pulled out, and after I swallowed, I sighed. “Amazing. Just... amazing.”

“Want to try something savory?” he coaxed in a low rumble, and I nodded, slowly, our eyes locking. It was weird how I was surprised, every time, by the realization of how handsome he was, but he’d never looked more beautiful as he did at that moment, towering over me while surrounded by the most delicious food. And that was saying something because Caliban was a sweet piece of ass. “Close your eyes and open your mouth.”

A moment later, a sliver of toasted bread passed between my lips, warm and rough on my tongue, as he commanded “Bite.” The rich tang of basil pesto, balsamic vinegar, fresh tomato, and creamy mozzarella cascaded across my tastebuds, and it was the most delicious thing I’d ever tasted. The pesto

was unctuous but bright and slightly peppery, the basil so fresh it almost overwhelmed the nutty flavors of the parmesan cheese and toasted pine nuts; the tomato was juicy and perfectly ripe, marinated in the lush, syrupy vinegar; the cheese was smooth and cool, not bland or rubbery but rather creamy with a whisper of fresh cut grass. Underlying everything was a cracker of freshly baked french bread, somehow both chewy and crisp.

I held his hand in both of mine, against my mouth, my lips lightly brushing his knuckles as I chewed. He didn't pull away, not until I finished the two-bite morsel and opened my eyes to find him as motionless as a statue, watching me with a hot gaze.

"Delicious," I whispered, deliberately touching the backs of his fingers with my lips. "Perfection."

He smiled then, wide enough I could see teeth before he wiped his free hand over his mouth and beard. "Thank you, honey," he whispered back. I released his hand, he glanced up and nodded at the room behind me, then straightened his chef's jacket on his way out.

When the door closed behind him, the bitches behind me *exploded*.

Hazel wrenched me around by my shoulders, giving me a shake, as I smiled at her blissfully and licked my lips. "What the fuck was that?"

Brandy-Lynn was practically crawling over the back of the couch to get to me, her drink tipping dangerously, as she shouted, "What just happened here? What was that?"

I ignored them. I ignored Stacy talking about needing some alone time with her vibrator after witnessing us, and Lourdes demanding to know how she can get hand fed by Caliban. Minnie was squealing, and Goldie was going off about me being a queen or something, and I just swayed in place, reliving every delectable sensation I'd just experienced, and enjoying the scrape of my clothing against my rock hard nipples and super-sensitized clit. I was half tempted to reach

into my pants and flick my bean a few times, confident it wouldn't take much to rub one out given the state I was in.

“How long has this been going on?” Hazel asked, her brow furrowing as the rest of them fell quiet. “I thought you and Loki—?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

“What?”

“Mouse—!”

“No, really, *what?* Me and Loki what? Finish the question!”

“Aren't you boning the big man?” Brandy-Lynn shouted from where she hung on the back of the couch, one leg dangling towards the floor and one still on the cushions.

“I thought she was fucking Tesla?” Minnie asked the room at large but Goldie shook her head.

“Tesla doesn't fuck anyone,” she clarified, without making anything clearer, “despite Sienna's every hope and dream. If anything, I thought maybe he watched her and Loki instead.”

“Wait, what?”

“What were you saying about not having them wrapped around your finger?” Stacy crowed in my face, flicking her tongue out and throwing up devil horns with her free hand.

“Technically, she was wrapped around *his* finger,” Goldie shot back, then those two bitches bumped fists.

“This is crazy talk!” I sputtered, wishing my brain could move faster so I could convince them that nothing was going on. Since nothing *was* going on. “I've been here like two days. I haven't—”

“*Mi tia* saw you hugging Loki in the hallway the other morning, after you both exited your room,” Goldie challenged me, her chin tilted up, “and she said Tesla was in there with you.”

“Yeah, *interrogating* me.”

She went on like I didn't say anything. “And then you all went into Tesla's room and you were on his bed!”

Apparently that was the most damning fact of them all because the room went silent and every head turned to me, eyes wide and mouths hanging open like this was scandalous. I expected one of them to leap to her feet and point at me, shouting “*J'accuse!*” but no one did, they just... stared.

“I jumped on his bed to piss him off. It didn't end well, okay?” I said quietly, back to studying my feet and the floor below them. That feeling was creeping over me again, of being foul and dirty inside. Corrupted. Then the feeling of disappointed resignation from knowing that Loki was the headboard banger in the room next to me, and it wouldn't matter how sweet he was when we were together, no one wants to stick their dick in crazy. Especially not crazy with a side of toxic.

Whatever these women thought they were seeing, they were wrong. I might be attracted to Loki, Tesla, and possibly — okay, *yes*, Caliban too — but none of it meant anything. Even the food-flirting we just did — and no, I wasn't going to deny, to myself at least, that Caliban had been totally flirting with me — it didn't mean anything when it came down to it. I was an untouchable. And I needed to stay that way: I couldn't forget where I was, or why.

No matter how much I liked these women. No matter how much I liked those men. This place wasn't for me, and eventually I'd fuck it up anyway.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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SOMEONE WAS POUNDING on the door at an ungodly hour of the morning, loud enough that I could hear them through the earplugs that Brandy-Lynn had given me.

I wasn't hung-over or anything; the rest of the girls got tipsy and silly, not me. I was sober the entire time, not drowning my sorrows at all. I was just up unusually late, and it wasn't the kind of pounding I could appreciate.

I cracked open an eye to see it was still dark in my room. Rising before the sun? What were we, peasants? "G'way."

More pounding. I shoved one hand out of the blankets and flipped off the door. Whoever was on the other side didn't see it, but the door knew where it stood with me.

There was muffled talking from the hallway, and then more pounding.

I debated whether I could get away with doubling up the soundproofing with pillows and blankets, or whether it was a poor life choice to ignore my employers. I eyed the clock and then consulted the schedule that Tesla had written out for me on an index card, and realized I had fifteen minutes to make it to breakfast or I wouldn't get food... cooked by Caliban. It wasn't as early as I thought, and sure I could make my own if I missed breakfast service, but why would I want to?

It took me nine minutes to shower, brush my teeth, and get dressed. The knocking stopped as soon as I yelled "Go away!" without my face half-buried in a pillow, thumping the door in



passing, so I wasn't expecting to find Loki leaning against the wall across from my room when I exited.

He tried to grab my arm but I dodged, crying out, "I have six minutes to get to the food!" as I slammed my door behind me and raced for the stairs. The big guy did me a solid and made sure it stayed shut after it had rebounded and swung open again, allowing me to keep running for the dining room and not have to backtrack to close it. He called my name, and I shouted my thanks from the top of the stairwell right before I threw myself down, half-sliding on the banister.

I made it to the food line with a few minutes to spare, bouncing on the balls of my feet as I waited for the dozen or so people in front of me to pick through the dregs of the buffet stations. It didn't matter, the food was always amazing, even the last bits and pieces that no one else had wanted. I used my wait time to coil my hair into space buns on top of my head since I'd washed it, but barely even combed it in my rush to get to breakfast.

When I reached the front of the line, the dish lady eyed me with an odd expression as she consolidated pans. I started filling my plates with scrambled eggs, crumbled sausage, and fried potatoes, when a large shape appeared in my peripheral vision and seemed to hover there. I glanced back and saw it was a frowning Loki. Maybe because I ditched him?

"I'm sorry, I figured you already ate," I explained while I heaped more eggs onto my pile of potatoes. "I would've waited for you if I'd known."

"I did," he grunted and motioned at the dish lady. She handed him a paper sack over the counter and he nudged me. "Give her your plate. I've got your breakfast here."

"What? No!" I stared at my beautiful mountain of starch and protein I'd constructed, topped with cheese, hot sauce, and a scoop of sour cream, and shook my head. "No way. Give me five minutes to eat this and then I'll eat whatever that is after."

I scooted past him and grabbed a mug of coffee, making it to the big table before he'd maneuvered around the scattered latecomers and third-helpers. I plopped down in an empty seat

and muttered a few dirty compliments at my bitter nectar of the gods, then started shoveling food into my mouth.

It was only when Loki sat down next to me with a sigh, setting the bag in front of the empty chair beside him, that I looked up and noticed there were *strangers* at the table.

Hazel and Adèle were nowhere to be found. Tesla and Caliban had mugs of coffee only, and were bracketing a pair of men that I'd never seen before. They had empty plates sitting in front of them and nursed their own drinks. I was immediately suspicious of the younger one since he was drinking *juice*, no coffee mug in sight. The four of them were staring at me.

I set my fork down and straightened up, pulling my elbows off the table. I'd unconsciously adopted my prison-posture by hunching over my plate, arms on each side, something I always did when I was trying to inhale food. I delicately wiped my mouth with my napkin, then returned it to my lap.

“Uh, hi. Sorry. I didn't mean to bust in on your conversation. I was, uh, running late and wasn't paying attention.” I made a *sorry I'm an idiot* face at Tesla, and pushed back my chair. “I'll just find another table—” I glanced around as I got up, grabbing for my plate, but Loki's hand touched my arm and stopped me. I sank down into my seat and peered up at him. He shook his head.

“Interesting.”

I looked over at the man who'd spoken.

At first glance, I'd thought he was old. His shaggy, almost shoulder-length hair was silver-white, but it only took a few seconds to realize that his hair, and the steel-gray haze of stubble over his chin and cheeks, was masking a relatively young face. Maybe around forty, his tanned skin was unlined except around his dark, deep-set eyes, but his most interesting feature was the faded blue-black tattoo covering one side of his face. It ran down to his neck, the lines feathering and the pattern obscured by time.

He was rail-thin and wiry, wearing a worn, black leather button-down shirt under his cut decorated with familiar patches; the name on the left side said “Komo” above a patch that read “President.”

For a half-second, I thought the mysterious prez had come home, but the tension dispelled that notion. No one was comfortable, and it wasn't just “Mouse is a screw-up” awkwardness but genuine strain. And no one who *belonged* here wore identifiers, none of the men had names or position patches displayed, or any location on their bottom rocker besides “Colorado.”

The juice-drinking freak next to him was a dirty blonde with a scruffy beard, and a patchwork of scars on his cheek in a pattern like fractured glass. He grinned at me, his eyes crinkling: one pale blue but the other, on the scarred side, had a milky white film covering it. His name was Jelly, and his patch said “Road Captain.”

“Who's this?” Jelly asked. Komo didn't speak. He stared at me with those dark, dark eyes that reminded me so much of Beast that my body was responding by instinct, but it couldn't seem to decide if it wanted to shake with fear or relax and give him a hug. “What's your name, sweetheart? Don't think I've seen you here before.”

Jelly repulsed me, an instant reaction, and not only because of his beverage choice. He had a silky-smooth voice, rich and vibrant, and his tone was flirtatious but not over the line, but there was this underlying sliminess that made me want to cringe. He was slick, in the way that predators are, and I looked young with this hair, these clothes — more a teenager than a club girl, and I sensed my jailbait look drew his attention.

Loki vibrated with tension next to me, and I realized that I'd screwed up. These men were never supposed to see me. Loki was at my room to keep me from coming to breakfast, not keep me from missing it, but once I'd crossed the threshold to the dining room, it was too late. I was already on their radar. The huge sighs of resignation weren't because I

was late, or the totally wrong assumption I was hung-over, it was because I'd fucked up.

I wasn't sure how to play this. I've known men like Jelly my whole life. Any kind of submission would make me that much more interesting, but challenging him could trigger his need to dominate. Disrespect could cause problems, but showing respect encourage him. It was a real Sophie's Choice, and neither Tesla's stone-face nor Caliban's grimace offered me any guidance, though it was clear they saw my visceral reaction to him.

No, that wasn't it. I'd already screwed things up, and they were waiting to see how I'd handle it. Since they'd attempted to keep me away, that made me think I had some level of protection, which helped.

"Hi," I said warmly, smiling at both men. "I'd extend my hand to shake yours, but that would require standing up and leaning across the table, and I'd probably end up wearing my breakfast, so forgive my manners. My name is Mouse, and I've only been here a few days, that's true. I'm a new employee, hired to help with the kids—" I didn't know who knew what about Adèle, and I wouldn't be the one to draw attention to her, "—and I'm still getting oriented, and dependent on Tesla and Loki for direction. I sat here without thinking, not realizing I was interrupting." I let out the fakest and most self-deprecating laugh I could muster. "That's not *completely* true. I've also been feeling a little like the new kid in the school cafeteria, looking for a familiar face, even though it's been many, *many* years since high school. I apologize for interrupting you all, and it won't happen again." I nodded at Tesla, who met my eyes when he nodded back, his expression blank, but I felt his approval.

"Couldn't be that many years," Jelly replied, licking his lips. "What're you, eighteen?"

I laughed, beaming at him. "Well, aren't you sweet? Gosh, no, I'm pushing thirty, but I'll take the compliment."

He instantly lost interest and shoved back his chair, mumbling about a refill on his juice. *Juice*. Pervy asshole

freak.

Komo, however, continued to stare at me. I'm not sure if it was intentional, but Jelly was out of earshot and distracted by someone else when he asked, "Thirty?"

I shrugged. "Twenty-seven. Close enough."

He nodded, pressing his lips together almost like he was suppressing amusement. "Did you say *Mouse*?"

I shrugged again. "Nickname. It suits me."

"What's your real name?" he challenged, sitting forward.

I stared pointedly at his patch. "What's yours?"

He fell back in his seat and chuckled, a rusty sound like his vocal cords weren't used to making that noise. Jelly had been on his way to the table and Komo's laugh caught his attention, putting me back in his sights. He took his seat, eyes drilling holes in me. I ignored him.

"Fair enough," Komo wheezed out, nodding at me. "Mouse it is."

Loki's hand smacked down on the table, making me jump. I glared over at him, but he was already glaring at me, so we were at a stalemate. "Eat. We need to leave."

I nodded, not wanting to spend any more time with Stranger Danger than I had to, and resumed my prison-posture speed-eating. The men continued their conversation about road conditions; I took a few surreptitious glances around the room, noting a serious lack of women. I'd been the only dumbass that didn't get the message, too worried about missing a meal to listen to Loki. I resolved to try harder.

As soon as my plate was clear, we were both up and moving toward the door, and I tried to ignore Stranger Danger's eyes pinned on my ass. I guess I didn't age out after all.



LOKI WALKED me back to my room then waited while I brushed my teeth and used the bathroom. I emerged to find him sprawled out on my bed with his feet resting on the ground and his hands folded behind his head, leaving his entire torso vulnerable.

It's like they don't know me at all.

Which, I guess they don't, but they'll learn.

I took a running leap from my bathroom door, coming straight down on top and driving the air completely out of him. He curled up around me, his face going dark red; I casually straightened to straddle his stomach and looking down at him as he wheezed and gasped for breath.

His abs and whole torso were like rock, ripply-bumpy rock. I resisted the urge to poke his pecs, but only for a second. He was still gasping, so I took advantage and felt him up. His chest was as spectacular as I suspected it would be.

I leaned over, watching him attempt to catch his breath with sadistic glee, and just before he was able to get actual sounds out, I informed him, "You should really ask permission before lying down on someone's bed."

His eyes bugged out at me, and I knew by the flex of his muscles that he was getting ready to grab me, but I didn't move. I wanted to see what he'd do. His giant mitts ran over my shoulders and biceps, and finally settled on my thighs. It was fairly gentle considering what I'd just done to him, so five points to Gryffindor.

"What— was that— for?" he croaked, punctuated by coughing.

"No reason. You left yourself open and vulnerable, so I exploited it." Once he got the coughing under control, he lowered his hands back to my thighs and stared with wide eyes and a slightly gaping mouth. I folded my lips in to keep from laughing, he looked so shocked and outraged. "It was a teachable moment."

"I didn't— realize— how evil— you are."

I shrugged. "I really am. A diabolical genius, in fact."

“I’ll remember that.” His breathing was steadier, less gaspy. His voice was still scratchy but it was a sexy kind of rasp so I felt a tingle.

He moved his hands back behind his head, locking his fingers together.

“Shouldn’t you be wearing a brace or something on that?” I leaned forward and tugged on his arm until he lifted it up, holding it in the air and examining it with a puzzled expression. I ran my fingertips lightly over his injured wrist, and it wasn’t swollen any longer, but there was some bruising. Or possibly that was shading on his tattoos. It was hard to tell.

“Oh, yeah. I keep forgetting to wear it.” He grinned sheepishly, shrugging one shoulder. “It doesn’t really hurt anymore but Brandy-Lynn is all up in my ass about it.”

I rolled my eyes. “It hurt enough that you couldn’t clutch three days ago, but you’re fine now? You know it doesn’t make you manlier to suffer in silence or reinjure yourself because you think a brace makes you look weak.”

He chuckled, using his fucked-up hand to tuck my hair behind my ear. “Zombie Girl, why do you think I wouldn’t let you examine my injuries out on the road? You’d would’ve seen it wasn’t that bad, and resisted getting on my bike. I didn’t want to sit in the rain and argue with you, because even mild road rash stings like a bitch. But once you indicated you knew how to drive a bike, I faked it being worse than it was so you’d feel obligated to help.”

“You sonuvabitch.” I was torn between real annoyance and legit admiration for his trickery, and a bit of concern that it was so easy to read my care-giving impulses. I knocked his arm away, enjoying his wince because I can be a monster sometimes, but also because it meant he wasn’t completely faking the injury. He might’ve played me, but not completely. That helped my ego and my trust issues.

“Don’t hate the playa,” he teased, bringing his hand back to tug on the ends of my hair. “It got you here, and that’s what mattered to me.” He’d gotten serious, studying my face with an intensity that made me squirm. The air felt heavier, my

heartbeat and breaths seemed to reverberate in the silence, a cacophony to my ears but his own breathing had picked up too.

*He's going to kiss me*, I thought as his hands wrapped around my shoulders, and immediately jerked back. Just a little, barely at all, but it was enough to break the spell even though I was still straddling his torso. He sighed, giving me the tiniest smile at the end. I felt... relieved and disappointed, in equal measure. Don't know how, but I knew he did too. *Too soon*, my traitorous brain informed me.

I needed to distract us both before we started discussing feelings.

“So who is Komo?” I asked as I climbed off him and flopped down on the mattress beside him. I moved his arm up to where I wanted it and laid down on my side, my head pillowed on his bicep, so I could face him. “And how badly did I screw up?”

All the humor, and any hint of sexy-fun-times-with-the-biker, were sucked out of the room as completely as if a black hole had formed overhead. His brow lowered, his mouth flattening out. “He's the prez in Detroit.”

Well that was a weird coincidence. I was suddenly feeling very interested in why the president of that particular chapter was visiting the mother chapter; Detroit was way too close to Salem not to be concerned.

Loki rolled towards me and kept talking without me even having to prompt him, leaving his arm stretched out for me. “Most of the club chapters are west of the Mississippi, but we have a few on the other side. Detroit is the farthest east and wouldn't normally have been territory we fought to hold, but the proximity to Canada makes it worthwhile. And that was before Janus. Now, it's a critical location, especially since there's maybe one or two other clubs in all of Michigan because of the militias and NNC.”

“Should you be telling me all of this?”



He shrugged, side-eyeing me with a calculated gaze. “Are you gonna tell anyone?”

“I might. I know people. I have friends.”

He smiled, and I grinned back at him, until he asked, “Do you also have a girlfriend in Canada that you met at chess camp?”

My smile dropped instantly. “*Rude!* I could have friends. You don’t know.”

“I’m sure you do, babydoll. You’re irresistible.”

I scoffed. It was the most placating, patronizing thing I’d ever had directed at me, and the way his eyes were gleaming and mouth twitching, I couldn’t even get mad at him. Not even for the *babydoll* part, because if I was being honest with myself, I loved it. I fucking *loved* it. “So what’s Komo’s story?”

He shrugged again, the humor dying off his face. “He’s smart and ambitious. *Very* ambitious,” he studied me for a few moments, apparently deciding to tell me more. “He started out as the club’s lawyer, got entrenched in our business. Approached Cain when shit was really messed up, made a deal: he’d do what needed to be done, but he got Detroit for it. Second biggest chapter now, after this one.”

I blinked at him. That was a lot to take in, and raised all kinds of questions but none of it was my business so I kept my mouth shut.

After a time, when I didn’t say anything, even though it was obvious to both of us that I was dying to, Loki explained, “*Komo* is short for Komodo Dragon.”

I contemplated that but couldn’t figure out the message. “Okay?”

He huffed out a laugh. “Everyone used to think komodo dragons had mouths filled with bacteria, and they’d kill their prey by giving them a non-lethal bite and waiting patiently while the animal died of infection.”

“So the poor antelope or whatever thinks he got away from the giant lizard, but then starts to feel terrible and dies a few days later from sepsis?”

“Pretty much.”

“That’s... *really* fucked up.”

He nodded. “He’s always playing the long game. He’s basically Magick’s nemesis though they keep things friendly for the most part. Tesla just outright hates him, but also enjoys his company. If you ever hear T mumbling about Moriarty, he’s talking about Komo.”

“Hates him but enjoys his company—?” I repeated, not understanding how that worked.

Loki shrugged. “Tesla’s complicated, okay?”

“Sure,” I agreed, nodding and smiling, and deciding to change the subject before I got myself in trouble. “You said *everyone used to think*, about the way komos hunt. Is that not true?”

Loki eyed me for a second, seeing through my ploy, but let himself be distracted. “Naw, their mouths aren’t filthier than any other predator—”

“Or your average biker.” That got me a pinch somewhere fleshy.

After pinching me, Loki left his hand resting on my hip. I distracted myself by running my fingertips over the patches on his cut, flicking the edges, playing with the buttons at the neck of his thermal underneath. I could focus on that, and his voice, and pretend none of it meant anything.

“—and they actually do have venom glands, plus their teeth are serrated like a shark. Instead of death by infection, they inflict these horrific tearing wounds, and inject an anticoagulant venom into their prey. The animal suffers massive blood loss and dies from shock.”

“That’s even more diabolical than super-sepsis from a stalker lizard,” I giggled, impressed by that sick bitch Nature coming through again.

“Right? And honestly, either way makes sense for Komo, the prey thinking it got away right up until it goes into organ failure, or the predator being much more active in their downfall. He’s a dangerous man, Mouse,” Loki’s voice lowered, the tone becoming serious. “There are rumors he stole a pair of komodo dragons from the Toledo Zoo and uses them to fuck people up. It’s said he wears a vial of venom around his neck. I don’t want you around him, and I don’t like how friendly the two of you were at breakfast.”

My eyes flicked up to Loki’s and I studied his face. He was slightly flushed, with his brows drawn together in irritation, and it seemed like— was he *jealous*?

It took me a few seconds of internal debate, but I folded like a chump. “Part of me wants to fuck with you, since you seem so irritated by him, but I’m really just trying to figure out how badly I screwed up this morning. It took me a hot second, but once I had some coffee in me, I realized there weren’t any other women around in the dining room, and that... bothers me. So any interest I show is just self-preservation, and I’m not being subtle about it because I didn’t think I needed to be.” It was my turn to watch his reaction, to see if my tentative trust was warranted.

He instantly relaxed, rolling onto his back and heaving out a groan as he ran his free hand over his face. “Good. Didn’t want to have to kill the man,” he muttered, his eyes shifting over slyly to see my reaction, his mouth twitching underneath the cover of his silky beard and mustache. I gave him a dead-eye stare and he started laughing. “But for real, Komo isn’t the problem. Yeah, he’s dangerous, and he’s a little too smart and ambitious for anyone’s genuine comfort, but we’re not worried about him. The problem is Jelly. But you knew that right away too.”

“That guy’s a predator.” I nodded my head wildly. *Emphatically*, even.

“He’s something alright,” Loki said softly, and his hand crept up to touch my cheek, finger drifting down and I realized he was gently tracing the edges of the fading bruises on my

neck. “We didn’t want to expose you to him, given— stuff,” he finished lamely, meeting my eye with a nervous tension.

I understood what he wasn’t saying out loud, and I didn’t like the implications. We were having two different conversations, one unspoken, and I wondered if Loki realized what that was telling me. The permission it was giving me. “I’m okay, Loki. I love that you were trying to protect me like that, but it isn’t necessary. I’m fine—”

“A couple days ago, you were running from us through the basement because we surrounded you unexpectedly. You’re not fine, Mouse.” He was being so careful with me, this massive, muscle-bound, motorcycle club *enforcer*, and I felt like all the impulses I’d ever had with him, including that spontaneous hug, were beyond validated. A swell of affection filled me up and was getting close to overflowing out of my mouth, but *that* was not something I felt comfortable with. In an attempt to block it, I burrowed into his side.

“There was so much chaos in the kitchen that I didn’t hear anyone enter the room behind me so when both of you spoke up, that part of me that panics right now when a situation is out of my control, kicked in. It had nothing to do with *who* was behind me, just that I wasn’t aware of you. It could’ve been toddlers and I’d still run,” I explained to his chest.

His arm came down and surrounded me, tucking me closer against him. I tentatively let my cheek rest against his chest, and he made a happy sound in the back of his throat.

“I’ll *be* fine, Loki,” I finally said, and his arm squeezed me closer. I laid my hand on his stomach, and he put his free one over the top of mine but just rested it there, didn’t hold it or restrain it or anything. “I really will,” I whispered. “I didn’t run because I’m afraid of any of you, my lizard brain sometimes reacts to things before my logical brain can catch up. That’s what scares me the most, my lack of control. Not any of you. Promise.”

“When you’re ready, babydoll,” he rumbled, and I felt it vibrate through his chest as much as I heard him.

I wasn't sure what that meant. Ready to talk about shit? Ready to give him names, like he's asked a few times? Ready for— *more*? I was too afraid to ask, and he didn't explain.

We laid together in silence after that, each thinking our own thoughts. Eventually, Loki stirred.

“I was okay with waiting a bit, but we really should get going,” he mumbled, lifting his head and looking around, presumably for a clock, so I pointed at the little travel alarm on my nightstand. He squinted at it, but it was too dark and gloomy in the room to really be able to read the display.

I was pretty sure it was going to rain. It had never gotten much lighter, and the air had that oppressive quality like it was holding its breath, waiting for something.

“Where are we going?”

“The farm,” he grunted, and I propped my chin up on his chest and squinted at him.

“There's a farm?”

The smile uncurled slowly. “Where do you think all that food comes from that you fill your hollow leg with?”

I made a face at him, since he was the first to tell me to eat as much as I wanted, and continued to do so at practically every meal. “Oh, wait, yeah. Caliban mentioned something about a small farm somewhere.”

He nodded. “Yep. And since Adèle likes to go there pretty regularly, you should get the tour and know what parts to avoid with her.” That made sense. Farm equipment could be dangerous, and even the most benign animals could be a risk when you're just a little girl. “You ready to go?”

I nodded. He stared at me like he was waiting for something. I stared back.

Finally, he said, “You're going to need to get off me if we're going to go.”

I looked down and realized I'd managed to wrap myself around him like bandages on a mummy. My one leg was stretched across both his thighs, my foot hooked around his

knee. I was half on top of him, with one hand up on his shoulder, and the other shoved so far up in his armpit that I'd be smelling his deodorant on my knuckles for days. My head was on his sternum.

I was completely at ease. Both his hands were resting on my back, the one in the air cast angled so the weight of it wasn't on me, but it didn't bother me. At all.

"I'm sorry," I lied, peeling myself off him and rolling away.

"Not a problem." He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, and his back was to me so I couldn't see his face, but his voice sounded amused.

"In my defense, you're very cuddly," I proclaimed, reaching back and pinching his ass hard enough that he jumped and scurried away from the bed, rubbing the spot that I'd bruised and glaring at me. "That's for tricking me into complacency. I haven't forgotten you're the enemy."

"We're not your enemy, Mouse," he huffed at me, shaking his head. "I don't know why you hate bikers so much, but this place—we're not like whatever you knew before. Magick is law around here, he rules this club with an iron fist — for a lot of good reasons — and we'd never tolerate what happened to you."

I shrugged, looking away.

"Get your coat," he snapped, heading for the door. Apparently I'd offended him. I rolled my eyes as I put on my shoes and a few more layers, then yanked the dead kid's coat off its hanger and followed Loki out the door.

For all his annoyance with me, he was waiting in the hallway, strapping on his wrist brace, in the leather jacket that I saw him in the night we met. But unlike that night, his cut was worn over it. I guessed we were taking his bike, which gave me all kinds of mixed feelings, as did riding for however long with the Apocalypse Riders' patches touching my skin. I mentally girded myself and followed him down to the lobby.



OUR TIMING WAS TERRIBLE. Loki and I were crossing the lobby, almost to the front desk, when Tesla and Caliban exited the dining room with Komo and Jelly.

“There she is,” Komo proclaimed loudly, causing me to wince — something that Loki noticed and very obviously didn’t like — then called out across the expanse of the room, “Hey, Mouse, got a question for you.” I could tell by his tone that he was looking to cause trouble. A big part of me wanted to pretend I couldn’t hear him and keep walking, but Loki stopped dead in front of me, turning to look at the silver-haired devil.

“We’re running late,” he said, tone icy. I looked up at Loki with pleading eyes that he didn’t see, too busy staring down the other man to catch my psychic message to just keep walking. I sighed, giving in to the realization that I was going to have to talk to them, and it was going to be bad.

“This’ll just take a sec,” Komo replied, his friendly tone tinged with sarcasm. I turned to watch him approach us at a fairly fast clip, which left Tesla and Caliban behind and clearly annoyed: Caliban was scowling, and Tesla’s blank expression was extra blank. I glanced over when the security dude stood up from behind the front desk, momentarily distracted by the expression on his face. It was the same guy as the other day, and I made a mental note to find out his name.

It was the one nice thing about bikers’ colors, how they conveniently act as name tags, but not here. I had some suspicions about why they didn’t wear identifiers, but I really needed to just ask one of them.

Look at me, caring.

And look at me, comfortable with Loki and his guy at my back — even *thankful* for them — to face down Komo and Stranger Danger, who was slightly behind and to the side of his boss. Tesla and Caliban hovered in the background radiating displeasure. I’m guessing. Tesla was completely

stone-faced as usual, and Caliban was carefully neutral, but it was still pretty obvious. These weren't men accustomed to being subtle.

“What can I do for you, Komo?” I asked brightly, keeping my tone and body language as impersonal as possible.

He was fast. He struck like a cobra, stepping into my space and running a finger lightly along my throat to trace the ring of faded bruises I hadn't thought to hide. He studied the lingering marks on my face with hot, heavy-lidded eyes. “Just curious what happened, Mouse. Saw these at breakfast. If someone here did this...?” He trailed off, watching me carefully, ignoring the pin he'd just pulled from the grenade as Loki reacted: to the accusation, to Komo's touch, and I was guessing from the residual crankiness lingering from our conversation.

Or maybe Loki just hated Komo and Jelly, and was looking for an excuse to beat the fuck out of them. We've all been there.

Tesla and Caliban both lunged forward, hauling him back away, as I stared up at Komo's calculating gaze, registering the violence breaking out behind me but still not feeling any threat.

“Finish the sentence,” I commanded, dropping my mask for the first time in years. This man—the damage he'd just wrought, *intentionally*—this douchenozzle should *not* be fucking with me. I completely ignored his companion, he was insignificant to this stand-off between Komo and I, but Komo gestured to him and Stranger Danger backed off, moving out of earshot.

It was high noon, and we were thirty paces apart, our hands hovering over our pistols waiting for the other to make a move. His eyebrows crept up as his eyes narrowed, his expression almost... avid?

“If someone here did this, and it wasn't with your consent,” he murmured, voice like silk, “you're welcome to return to Detroit with us. Even if it was.” He smiled, and I was brought to mind the pictures I'd seen of sharks going in for the



kill. “With your consent, that is. Even better. It would be our... *pleasure* to escort you east.”

I studied the man, seeing things that I knew he wouldn't want me to. I nodded with a small smile. “I just have one question for you, Komo: after this plays out to its inevitable conclusion, what do you want me to tell your family?”

His eyes widened and he flinched, taking a half-step back before catching himself, then dismissed me with a scoff.

But we both knew for a second there, he was scared of me, and that meant he understood. Enough to be concerned, at least. Enough to know I wasn't bluffing.

Keeping my voice low, counting on the men behind me being too wrapped up in their own drama to be paying much attention to our conversation, I responded to his offer in the only way I could. “The man who did this to me died, gasping for air through a collapsed windpipe, weeping blood from a gouged-out eye. But something tells me you knew that already.”

Komo's head bobbed down and back up, slowly, as the corner of his mouth curled up. “I'd heard about some trouble at a club near mine.”

“And you thought what? That I'd try to deny it? Or maybe ask what it would take for you to keep my secret?” One of my eyebrows arched up as I waited impatiently for his response.

His smirk never faltered, but it grew tight, almost pained. “A man can hope.” I rolled my eyes, but before I could reply, he continued, “I'd ask if they know, but we both know that they don't. So what are your intentions, Mouse? Why are you here?”

I continued to ignore the tussle behind me, wiping a hand over my face. “Pure coincidence. I accepted a job I found online, a place to stay while I recovered.” I also ignored the skepticism pouring off the man like flop sweat, since I knew how preposterous it all sounded. “I legit have no intentions here, and I would've left immediately if Tesla hadn't taken my shoes.”

At his surprised snort, I sighed wearily, rolling my eyes again, and nodded like *IKR?!*

“And now?” he asked, a fair question.

“Now?” I deliberately looked down at my shoes and then back up to meet his eye. “Now I’m curious. Now I’m attached.” And I gave him an answer he could believe, “And I’m really fucking enjoying the food.”

He chuckled, and he let his guard down. In that moment, I saw the calculation in his gaze as he watched whatever was taking place behind me, as Loki raged out like a barbarian. I saw as he considered what he could do, how he could use the situation to his advantage.

“Don’t even think about it,” I warned him, and he glanced down at me for a second, then his eyes bounced back down to stick. He studied my face, and I shook my head, touching my neck. “He died because he’d underestimated me. Thought I was *prey*. Thought he could take something that wasn’t his.” Komo didn’t need to know that it wasn’t from me. “He didn’t understand that *no one* fucks with me or mine, didn’t believe me when I warned him. You should believe me though. I won’t let you fuck with them.”

He deliberately surveyed the room, his smile widening into a full-blown grin. “So this is yours now? *They’re* yours? Does Magick know?”

Well, shit. He had a point. Regardless, that didn’t matter to *me*; as long as I was here and they continued to do right by me, this place was mine. I might as well pee in the corners and lick the doorknobs, because this place and everyone in it was absolutely *mine*.

“If he was here, we wouldn’t be having this conversation at all, would we?” His eye twitched, his expression freezing and settling into a plastic facsimile of his previous glee, proving me right. Komo wouldn’t have tried fucking with any of us if Magick had been here, which made me think the club prez was formidable. “Think of me as the dog guarding the house when the master’s away: step out of line and I’ll tear your throat out. Here. On the road. Maybe once you get home.

You'll never know when your time is up, and no one ever sees me coming. Do you doubt me?"

He considered me, studying me without any pretense. Sizing me up. After a moment, his head jerked to the side and back. "Nope. Not even a little." He glanced beyond me again as Loki bellowed threats, held back by three men at least. "And they don't have any idea." He huffed out a humorless laugh, eyes locked on mine. "You should know that I have regrets. Remember that, if you ever decide to come for me. Maybe we can have a drink together, hash things out, before the throat-tearing and eye-gouging." He waited, watching me. Eventually I inclined my head in the barest acknowledgment of his offer. It was apparently enough because he relaxed, looking past me again, then smirked. "We're leaving in the morning. Until then, we'll behave. And I'll keep your secrets, Mouse."

He turned and strode off, gesturing for his man to follow, and I watched them disappear down a side hallway before carefully schooling my features, letting the mask slip back into place.

I spun around and faced the mess behind me.

Loki was apoplectic. It was like he expanded half a foot in every direction, he was *looming* over the others, fighting against five men to get to me. Tesla was bracing his chest and up in his face, attempting to break through his blackout rage with a constant stream of logic. Caliban was on one shoulder, the security guy from the desk on the other, while two others I didn't know were attempting to hold him back from behind. And he was still able to press forward, inch by inch.

Some part of me recognized that it was a bit twisted to get turned on by this level of barely-restrained violence, but *c'mon!* Every man there was over six feet tall, with honed bodies and work-strong arms, and Loki was *still* winning. That was sexy as fuck.

I darted forward and slid between Caliban and Tesla, ducking under Tesla's arms to tuck myself up against Loki. I wrapped my arms around his waist, under his cut and jacket,

and rested my cheek on the top edge of his rippling abs — not helping my inappropriate horniness *at all* — and hugged the shit out of him. And it bears repeating that I am freakishly strong, so my hugs can be... intense.

He lost his breath in a whoosh and began to choke. It was enough to break through his fury. I felt the strain leave his body, so I relaxed my arms and nuzzled up against his sternum.

“You’re adorable when you’re all protective and shit,” I cooed, pushing back against Tesla and he retreated from my touch. *Ouch*. Caliban stared down at me, disbelieving, and I winked at him. The corners of his mouth twitched, and he also stepped back, gesturing to the others. They melted away, leaving me with my semi-tamed grizzly bear, with Tesla and Caliban lingering in the background waiting to see how this would play out. “But I can handle Komo. And Stranger Danger. You don’t need to tear them to pieces for fucking with me.”

“Stranger Danger?” He chuckled, painfully, and his arms found their way around me. “Jesus, Mouse,” he sighed. “What did Komo say to you?”

I shook my head, my face still buried in his drool-worthy pecs, and I had no plans to detach myself from them anytime soon. Not if I could help it.

“Mouse, I’m not kidding around. What did he say to you?”

I tilted my head to look up at him, digging a trench into his flesh with the force of how deeply I was committed to not sacrificing an inch of contact between us. He winced, but I ignored it. “It’s not worth repeating, so I’m not going to. Channel your inner Disney princess, Loki, and let it go.”

He grumbled protests, insisting, and I eventually closed my eyes and went to my happy place — which, consequently, was right here and right now, except with Loki shutting his whore mouth and just holding me.

“Are you even listening to me?” he demanded, sounding way too put-out for me to continue to ignore.

“No, sorry, I was living out a fantasy where I was crush-hugging a burly biker in the middle of a decrepit Victorian sanatorium, except he was mute. And it was just starting to get good, I was about to rip his shirt off, when you interrupted me. What were you saying?”

There was a moment of silence. “Umm, I’m good. Let’s get back to that fantasy you were just having—”

“Too late. The moment has passed.” I sighed mightily and released him, fighting his not-very-subtle attempts to keep me in place. “We should get going, right?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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THE RAIN HAD STOPPED, or at least taken a break. Not that it would've mattered; a little rain, up to and including hurricane conditions in some cases, never got in the way of a good ride.

There was something inherently beautiful about watching a powerful, confident man mount a Harley. Loki swung his leg up and over in a motion so practiced and fluid that it felt like this was what nature had always intended, that man and machine would become one. I felt it, watching him.

Felt it in my private zone.

Clambering up behind him, pressing up against him as tight as I could get... it was a weird flash of memory back to riding with Beast about a thousand times over the years, mixed with knowing this was Loki. Bittersweet nostalgia tempered by current desire. Especially after watching him go up against five men to go after Komo.

*Rawr.*

The vibrating engine between my legs, plastered tight against the leather-clad back of this mountain of a man — I completely forgot to pay attention to where we were going. Next thing I knew, we were bouncing on shallow ruts dug into a dirt road, then pulling up in front of an old farmhouse in the middle of frickin' nowhere.

Loki backed us into line with a half dozen other bikes, engaging the kickstand, then reached behind to wrap a big mitt around my calf.

“You okay?”

I looked around, unsure why I wouldn't be. “Yes?”

He mumbled something about “big bike, little girl” and I rolled my eyes. I'd started riding bitch when I was maybe half my current size. “I'm good.”

I climbed off, making sure to rub all over him in the process — getting a grin of appreciation over his shoulder for my efforts — and strolled out into the center of the yard.

Besides the house, there was a massive, wood-sided barn in the proper red color that barns should be, a half dozen other outbuildings of various sizes, and a huge, sheet metal pole barn with the doors retracted open. Two men in coveralls were inside, working on tractors at least twice their height if not more.

“Animals are that way,” he pointed towards the red barn and majority of the outbuildings. “Your standard array: goats, chickens, pigs, turkeys, and about a dozen dairy cows. That's mainly where Adèle likes to go, and she can show you her favorites. Try to keep her away from the shop — she eyes up those massive tractor tires like its a kiddie climbing wall.”

I nodded along as he filled me in on the highlights, walking me around the farmyard pointing out places Adèle could and couldn't go. Apparently she and the chickens, particularly the rooster, had a mutual hatred that burned brighter than the fires of hell. I was instructed to keep her far away from the coop and let them know if I was bringing her to visit because they wouldn't let the chickens loose if she was going to be around.

“I swear to God, the thing hates her but she's absolutely fearless. That rooster starts strutting toward her, trying to exert his dominance, and her little spine stiffens up and she gets this look in her eyes like she's about to throw hands. The bird comes up to her waist, has those spurs on his clawed feet and that sharp as fuck beak, and she's like *bring it, shithead*. As much as we'd like to see who'd come out the winner, we need both of them soooo... just keep those two apart.”

The whole time he was talking, that rooster and I were sizing each other up, and I stared into his beady little eyes without showing a lick of fear, despite his obvious feral nature and demonic possession. I pointed at my eyes then at him, letting him know that I was watching, and he turned his back like I was beneath his notice. I looked around, trying to find the woodpile and the axe, so that rooster and I might come to an understanding.

“Okay then... maybe we need to keep you two separated as well,” Loki muttered, grabbing my arm and pulling me away.

“You saw him challenging me, right? I’m not imagining this! That cock-fuck thinks he could take me. Somebody needs to teach him some humility, and I volunteer as tribute—” I pulled against his grip on my arm, ready to go back and kick some rooster ass, but Loki wouldn’t let go. I didn’t want that *pollo maligno* to see me having to struggle with him because then I might look weak. I was fully confident I could easily get free if I wanted, it just wasn’t worth the effort or the loss of face in the process.

“Seriously, Mouse, this ain’t the time.”

I didn’t bother mentioning I’d already decided to forget it for now, letting him think he won the argument. We walked beyond the buildings to where there were fenced-off pastures full of happy cows and goats, and he pointed out the cultivated fields of wheat, alfalfa, barley, and hops. “It’s not a very big operation, given this location, so we only grow enough here on site to cover us for basics and emergencies, and trade for the real volume.”

“Trade... what?” So far, the in-demand resources I’d seen were medical services, skilled mechanics, construction, and possibly firearms? All valuable, sure, but not of any significant amount to supply the amount of food I’ve personally imbibed, let alone anyone else.

Loki’s discomfort was palpable, he eyed me with a level of intensity and consideration I hadn’t yet seen from him, and I realized they had a secret. A big one.



“What I’m about to show you is worth *my* life if you sell us out. I’m trusting you. Please don’t betray me. I’m not exaggerating, they will execute me.”

I wasn’t exactly a stranger to world-changing secrets, but I wasn’t comfortable having *Loki’s* life in my hands. I didn’t want to be the reason why everything stopped for him, why the world would keep going without him.

There were plenty of people I was comfortable seeing shrug off this mortal coil, but he wasn’t one of them.

“Don’t tell me.”

He didn’t respond, he studied me. The longer he stared, the softer his eyes became, until I saw something I couldn’t ignore. I couldn’t pretend it away. But I also couldn’t accept it.

“Loki—” I was torn between frustration, disappointment, and more longing than I was willing to admit to. Because he was pretty fucking amazing — even after such a short time knowing him, I felt strongly about the man.

“Quiet, girl,” he grumbled, turning from me to head back to the row of motorcycles. “Told you I’d wait,” I heard him say over his shoulder, and I should’ve spoken up right then and given him a dose of reality, but I was a coward. I still wasn’t completely sure what that meant, and I wasn’t brave enough to ask. Maybe because I wasn’t sure what I wanted the answer to be.

Or maybe because I was sure, but knew it was impossible.

I could fantasize all I wanted, but it wasn’t reality. And I didn’t even know, for certain, what he wanted anyway. It could very well be the quick, casual fuck that was a staple of my diet, but I knew Loki wasn’t someone I could easily hit and quit. He was the type that *lingered*, made me think about how things might be if this was a different world, and I was a different person. But it wasn’t, and neither was I.

I trailed after Loki, agonizing over the conversation I needed to have with him, but remained silent. I was as big an asshole as that cock-fuck strutting around the yard pecking at his bitches like the egg pimp he was. I scooped up a rock and

winged it at the feathered fuck, and he flapped his wings and carried on like the world had fucking ended.

Loki was back on his bike, and I couldn't even appreciate it. I climbed up behind him without any superfluous rubbing. He didn't say anything, but I could see he wasn't thrilled with the turn things had taken.

We didn't speak as we circled around behind the farmhouse and followed a narrow dirt track between a pasture and a field that had been plowed into hundreds of straight furrows that followed the contours of the land. It sloped upward gradually, then abruptly, and he gunned the engine to get us over the top of a rocky ridge lined with scrubby evergreens. The downward slope was completely forested and I couldn't see anything beyond the trees, until suddenly the trees were gone. Loki slowed to a stop, reaching back and tugging on my thighs until I was standing on the pegs. I stretched up over his back, my hands resting on his shoulders, and looked out over the top of his head.

We were above a valley that stretched off into the distance, a south-facing slope swarming with dozens of workers preparing acres of fields for planting. The road we were on ended at the tree-line, where it turned into meandering paths through the fields. The cultivated part dead-ended at a row of grassy hills with doors cut into them under overhangs. On the other end, up on the slope leading out of the valley, were more doorways cut into hillsides, and all around the outside, still within the trees, were high platforms with ladders climbing up to them, and there were people up on the platforms with guns and binoculars. Like the same platforms I'd spied around the resort buildings, I was almost certain there were women in the mix of sentries.

In places that couldn't be easily disguised, like the motor pool or what looked like a pumping station and mechanical shed, really tall poles secured stretches of camouflaging fabric, masking what was below.

“What am I looking at?”

Loki pointed towards the bigger hills, the ones with double doors. “Grow houses,” he grunted, then pointed towards the smaller doors. “Housing for the workers. Pot in the grow houses. The fields are, well... poppies.”

It took me a second to process what he just said. “Wait, *opium* poppies?”

“Ayup.”

“That’s—”

“Incredibly lucrative? Yes it is.”

“You’re— *seriously*? You’re fucking making *heroin*?” Of all the changes the pandemic-apocalypse brought about, the severe lack of the really hardcore recreational drugs was probably the best change by far. Access to opioids, heroin, meth, and all the synthetics was seriously compromised. I understood that there were still places that produced the core ingredients, and ways to bring shipments into the country, but supplies were extremely limited and access was difficult. Not completely unobtainable, but really, really difficult; since it was nearly impossible to get *antibiotics* in many places, something like cocaine just wasn’t a priority.

Pot was king: it was cheap, easy to acquire, and less likely to result in medical issues that either exposed you to Janus or killed you on their own. It’s medicinal uses were a bonus, and the very reason why I grew it in the bunker; the military didn’t allow it even for legit, medicinal purposes, so I supplied it to my friends as needed.

“Not heroin. Well, maybe some, we can’t always control what the raw opium gets used for. But no, mostly morphine. Even laudanum, which feels very Dickensian. Surgery still happens, even in the apocalypse. Injuries happen. Bones need to be set. There’s not exactly a surplus of anesthesiologists running around, trading their services. Early on with COVID, Tesla anticipated a need, and we... diversified. And now there’s not that many other sources available domestically, at least none as well-established as we are. In a few years, we might have some competition, but right now we have a monopoly.” He was proud of what they’d accomplished, and I

couldn't fault him. I could see how it would be quite the cash-cow.

“And you distribute using the Apocalypse Riders' chapters?”

“A lot of them,” he nodded, looking out over the valley. “But not all of them. We have other networks too. A lot of it depends on what they have to offer in trade.”

I didn't have anything to say for a long time.

The first year of the Janus outbreak, I made an effort to try to find out what was going on outside the walls of Salem, what was happening in the rest of the country and maybe even the rest of the world. I wanted to know if things were as bad in other places. It wasn't easy. I had to sneak out beyond the walls with one of the burner phones, try to find a cell signal, then try to find news that wasn't wholly skewed by propaganda so heavy-handed it made me feel dumber.

Going into the second year, the view of the world that we were spoon-fed felt very much like civilization was on the verge of collapse. Access to any other perspective, one outside our borders, was severely limited. Really, that only made me even more suspicious that things out there weren't the same, but proving that point was very much secondary to the immediate, day-to-day reality of the suffering and fear that permeated the very air beyond Salem. People were dying by the thousands, everything was in chaos, and we were on our own.

That was when people began to realize that there wasn't any going back to the Before Times. All those people who'd screamed and rallied against the government when it was just about guns, or abortion, or stolen elections, immediately turned to the very institutions they'd spent years undermining, looking for answers and looking for help, but the damage had been done. There wasn't any social safety net, let alone programs in place to cope with extinction-level emergencies, and by the second year of the pandemic, it became clear that there wasn't anyone left who was worth a damn, who wasn't working some agenda or trying to get theirs. It was too late to

try to dial back the carnage; no one was going to magically appear with God- or government-granted authority, step up and take charge, and make everything right again.

The country splintered. At that point, what could be called the “separation of the wheat from the chaff” occurred: some people and groups thrived in the new world order, some couldn’t handle it. Not all of us float down here.

The Apocalypse Riders’ leadership definitely floated.

“No fly zone over these mountains,” Loki finally broke the silence, and I was shocked by that. What it would take to make that happen. “But satellites are still an issue. Tesla tracks exposure, here and at the compound. We can’t disguise the compound or shit like the solar panels and wind turbines, let alone the farm, but we can make sure it’s as limited as possible as far as numbers, equipment, whatever. This is fully disguised. Tesla regularly pulls satellite images of this area, and from far above, it looks like a field of wildflowers even during the bloom. Alarm goes off when we’re in satellite range, everyone moves inside or into the trees until it passes.” His thick finger made a path around the valley, pointing at the armed guard towers. “The platforms here, the farm, and HQ are for drones, which get shot down on sight. Haven’t had one in a few years, but that doesn’t mean someone won’t get curious. We’ve kept our exact location secret for a long time, most people think we’re based in town and a few outlying farms, and we built up a significant amount of ground security while we could, but eventually someone is going to figure it out.” At my confused face, he smiled. “That this is the mother chapter, this is the source. Our club has a lot of fucking resources, shit no one else has, and most of it passes through here, Detroit, or San Diego. Detroit and San Diego are fucking fortresses in the middle of those cities, so certain things... anyone with half a brain who puts some thought into it has to realize you need a lot of fucking space to grow poppies or train dogs. To do half the shit we do. So eventually, someone is going to come for us — rival club, militia, government, fuck... even the *Mormons*. We can’t stop that, but we can keep them from having eyes and ears on us, from knowing more than the bare minimum.”

I didn't have anything to say to that. Not without giving away secrets that weren't mine, involving military bases and a red-headed girl getting sicker by the day. I couldn't tell him the kinds of shit I'd done over the last couple years, about the bunker, or the steam tunnels, or the salt mines that stretched thirty miles underground, right under the center of Detroit, if you knew which tunnels to take.

I couldn't tell him about Operation: GTFO, or all of the things I've done under the noses of thousands of soldiers, politicians, scientists, and strategists. Or what I'd done to make sure that Azzie has a fighting chance until her disease takes her down. Her training. The preparations we made.

I couldn't tell him about how I was thinking about returning there, once my head was back in the game, and putting all that in motion. Walking her out of that luxurious golden cage and setting us free to fly away.

Fly all the way back to Colorado, maybe.

I snapped back out of my daydream of a future that included Loki, maybe even Tesla and Caliban, and focused on the here and now. Concentrated on what I was seeing in front of me, and not memories or fantasies, because my inability to keep my head from drifting was the very reason I was here and not already on my way back to Salem. I wouldn't be able to save anyone if I couldn't keep my head on straight.

I stared out at the valley and really concentrated on what I was seeing, putting it into perspective. The precautions they took were solid, some of them even more than I might've thought about doing, but my strengths were in hiding in plain sight, not running a full-scale operation on the down low. From the doorways cut into hillsides, they knew the value of going underground, but I had to wonder if they took—

“Anything happens,” Loki turned to make sure I was seeing his face, looking him in the eye, “you don't hesitate. You take Adèle down to the basement, to the bakehouse. Flour bins are on a track, opens to a tunnel. There's a couple safe rooms, bomb-proof ones, and other tunnels off of the infirmary and laundry, but those are too well-known, any threat just has

to follow the line of old ladies running to them, so you get to the bakehouse. Or if you're outdoors, to the kennels, there's a tunnel behind the food bins. Set the dogs loose and go. I don't care if it's a false alarm, you go, and we'll find you. Understand?"

I nodded. His eyes softened.

"There's a reason you're in the red room, Mouse. Ceiling of the closet opens to the attic, there are ways out from there. Worst-case happens, you get Adèle into your room, barricade the door, and go up. You and she are about the only ones who will fit through that hole to the attic. When you go up, there's a door at one end — ignore it. There's a panel in the wall next to it that slides, and the corridor goes around that room and dead-ends at a staircase that doesn't let out until the basement, and it comes out into a storeroom. Go from there to the tunnel. And if you aren't with Adèle, go anyway. Understand? Hazel knows all the ways out, so if Adèle's not with you, she's with her or one of us. Someone is going to make sure she gets out. So you run, you hear? Get to the tunnels and get out, don't bother with safe rooms or anyone else. Can't have you trapped."

I blinked at him, not saying anything, not letting on that I already knew about the attic. The silence sat heavy between us, because it was too soon for what he was telling me, the secrets he was giving me. Too soon to trust me like that, and we both knew it, and neither one of us wanted to say those words and cross that line. Neither one of us was ready to stand on the edge of that precipice and take a look into the chasm below. Therein lies madness.

He turned back around in his seat, and looked out over the valley. We sat for a long time on the idling Harley at the top of the ridge, ruminating over our own thoughts. So long that it gave me a physical jolt when I finally realized something I should've maybe noticed immediately: there were a *lot* of people all over the valley, and the ones I could see weren't exactly what I'd come to expect here, there was a mix of genders, ages, races...

The club was overwhelmingly white men in their late 20s to 30s, with only a few exceptions; the club girls were a slightly more assorted mix of women twenty-five and under. Though the women were more racially diverse, it really wasn't about equality, it was about sex: it wasn't a secret that the girls represented "preferences" that the men had, and they were all unbelievably beautiful and sexy, making every night a woke Victoria's Secret runway show.

The people working here in the valley weren't anything like the club brothers and girls that I'd seen, and given the secrecy that Loki implied about this place, I had some questions about these workers.

"It's like I can feel your brain processing... and I have a feeling I know what you're pondering here. There are questions that you aren't going to like the answers to. My advice is that you shouldn't even ask the questions, because right now it's a Schrödinger's dilemma. You can believe what you want to, without anything to contradict it or give you a moral crisis. And since nothing you do or say will change the reality of this situation, it's better not to need to reconcile it in your mind."

I began to laugh. I couldn't help it, Loki's little speech was *delightful*.

He stared at me, more confused than amused but still looking like he wanted in on the joke. I don't think I reacted like he expected. Eventually he shifted in his seat and poked at me, his eyes widening and chin jutting forward in expectation.

"I'm sorry." I was finally reduced to random chuckles, and possibly a few undignified snorts. "I wasn't laughing at *you*. I just... you really need to understand that I'm not— there isn't going to be a moral crisis," I finished with finality. "My rose-colored glasses got thrown out with my Barbie dolls, and that was even before Janus. We all make choices in this life, and sometimes they work out better than others. I'm not going to judge you *or* them. Unless I hear that you kidnap children off the street and force— you know what? Whether you do or don't, you're going to deny it, so I'm not going to finish that thought."



His brow furrowed as he studied me. “You don’t seem the type to condone—”

“Oh, believe me, I’m *not*,” I interrupted, smiling but it wasn’t friendly. “But verbal confrontation is meaningless. If you’re doing something I don’t feel is right, I’m going to handle it, not talk about it. Not give you advance warning that I feel compelled to act.” His eyes narrowed, and I shook my head. “Don’t misunderstand, this isn’t an... *actionable* situation from what I can see. If my perspective changes, well —” I shrugged, “—clearly you’ve been doing something questionable, and my response shouldn’t be that much of a surprise. Understand? If you’re fucking up, you’ve gotta know a reckoning is coming at some point or another. Only the innocent would be shocked, and you all are far from innocent.”

He ran a hand over the bottom half of his face, stroking down his beard, an almost resigned expression on his face. But never once did he question that I was a formidable opponent if it came down to it, and I appreciated that. “Fair enough,” he finally rumbled. He pursed his mouth, then blurted out, “We don’t grab kids off the street.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. Probably.” He grimaced, and I shrugged again. “I’m not exactly a paragon of morality here. But even though it might be really distant and hard to make out in the gloom, I do have a line that you aren’t going to want to cross. Until then, we’re cool.”

He gave a jerk of his head, kicked the bike into gear as he gave it gas, and did a three-point turn on the dirt track to point back in the direction of the farm proper.



LOKI HEADED BACK down the ridge, with me clinging to his back but too distracted to invest any attention in perving on him.

I didn’t lie to him about not judging, or not even caring about the fate of those people. I’m not Azzie; I’m not that

altruistic. And I'm not the one driven to save the world, just the girl looking to do so.

I don't believe in the inherent goodness of anyone, I think we all start out with a neutral alignment and the scales tip over time and experience. We learn to be selfish or selfless, and most times it's situation-dependent; we learn to take, or we learn to give. Regardless, neither direction reflects a failure within *us*, these are things we're taught by the rest of the world. But once we're old enough to recognize how outside forces influence us and achieve self-awareness, then our choices become our responsibility.

We are who the world shapes us into, and we can either accept that, rail against it, or rise above it. But more than that, we need to understand the same standards apply to everyone else as well. Too many people see everyone else as a two-sided coin, you're either one or the other. Bad or good. Right or wrong. Worthy or worthless.

We're not just coins that can be flipped, we're twenty-sided dice: every roll has an equal chance at a critical hit or a critical failure. We're a full set of polyhedrals, with all the potential implied by a brand new set of dice rolling and clicking in your palm.

Some people never really understand that you have a choice whether or not to be a dick. They blame the rest of the world, or very specific people, for every failure and defeat. They take out their anger at the unfairness of life on everyone around them, always grasping for what they think should be theirs but isn't. Other people...don't. They believe we're all in this together and need to help each other, or they just want to be left alone to live their life and you can live yours.

I believe everything in my life had led to this moment. The way I was raised, the things I did. The things that were done to me. What I learned when I was Janie, from my grandparents, from the club, and from my time in juvie — and everything I learned and did after, as Jayne and later Mouse. All of it enabled me to be in the hospital when Azzie needed me. It made me see things from a different perspective, like seeing the potential in Azzie's blood.

It made me capable of crawling through ventilation shafts and steam tunnels, taking over bunkers, gathering resources, and hiding my tracks.

I'm a planner, a schemer, and an opportunist. I was here, in this place, to do a job and to get my feet back under me so I could keep going. I wasn't here to get involved with this club and their business. Will I take advantage of what I can get from this experience? Fuck yes, I will.

Will I walk away from here with a supply of morphine?

Yes. Yes, I will.

But I wasn't going to do anything that might get in the way of my goals or my job, or do anything that would stop me from getting back to Azzie.

And I wouldn't try to disrupt their way of living in this world, not based on a couple days and a lot of assumptions. I wouldn't make decisions hinging on a few random facts and observations that lack context or perspective. I have never been willing to impose my beliefs on anyone else, so I'd withhold judgment until my dusty, faded line is crossed irrevocably, and only then would I act. Until then, we were cool.

Loki rolled his Harley back into the row of bikes in front of the farmhouse, and we dismounted. He led me inside, where an older man sat at a large table in the middle of an even larger kitchen. He had gray streaking his hair and beard, even more than Doc, and a plaid flannel shirt under his cut. A laptop sat in front of him at the table, and he looked to be transferring information from a spiral-bound notebook into the computer. He nodded at Loki, not even acknowledging my existence.

That momentary burst of irritation I felt was leftover from a childhood being disregarded and ignored by men that looked eerily similar to him. It was an emotional response, not logical; there were a million reasons why he could ignore my presence, up to and including situational blindness due to middle-aged, white male entitlement. Or it could be the misplaced confidence of middle management.

I don't know this man's life.

"Mouse, this is Silas," Loki muttered, approaching the refrigerator and cracking it open, taking out two bottles. He popped the caps off using an opener attached to the fridge, handing me one of them. I took a deep swig of what turned out to be a strong, hoppy, dark beer with underlying flavors of coffee and chocolate, and an almost creamy texture. I savored another mouthful, preferring it over small talk with the man at the table. "Silas, Mouse. She's Adèle's new nanny. She'll be around."

"Governess," I corrected. Loki's eyebrow juttet up. "What? Nanny implies nursemaid, governess means teacher. No one should mistake me for a caregiver or make me responsible for a child's well-being. I'm good for a few hours of distraction and instruction, then the adults should take over again. Otherwise the kid will never have any structure or learn boundaries. I'm best in small doses on developing minds."

Loki stared at me blankly. I took another swig of beer.

"How exactly was she deemed qualified for the job?"

Rude.

He wasn't addressing me, but Loki wasn't going to answer so I did. "Mówi po polsku."

Apparently "she speaks Polish" was enough of an explanation. After that, I might as well not even be there.

"The girl's ready," Silas informed Loki, whose eyes darted over to me but I focused on my beer, the floor, the ceiling, and whatever view was out the window that I wasn't really seeing. I was pretty sure Loki didn't want to have this conversation in front of me, but that didn't matter to Silas because *I* didn't matter to Silas, and therefore I didn't matter to anyone. Narcissist logic. I may not know this man's life, but I had a pretty good handle on *him* from just a few minutes in his presence.

Old skool fucking biker. My dad and his cronies.

The kind of guy that would fuck a club slut against a pool table in the middle of their kid's eleventh birthday party, if

that's what they wanted to do.

My contempt was interrupted by their conversation.

"We still letting her choose?" Silas asked in a tone that made me think he disapproved that there was a choice, that whoever this girl was, she should just do what she's told.

Loki huffed out a sigh of resignation and leaned back against the counter, giving the man a death stare whether for talking about it in front of me, or for being so obviously a misogynistic ass about it. "Yeah. It's her choice. What's the boy thinking?"

"He wants the club, but he'll go to whichever she doesn't. All of it contingent on their mom."

"She's got a spot waiting."

"She's a hard worker."

"We're aware." Loki took another sip of beer, finishing his bottle. He rinsed it at the sink and tucked the bottle into a case of empties on a bench by the door; I quickly finished mine and followed suit. He gave me a small smile as he returned to propping up the counter. "The girl still wants to start as a house mouse?"

Silas had gone back to his laptop and notebook, apparently done with the conversation. "Yup."

"She knows she doesn't get to change her mind, right? Not without—"

"She knows."

Well, that was exceptionally cryptic, and vaguely threatening. I eyed Loki with a cocked brow and he made a face at me.

He'd either explain or he wouldn't. I'd either live with the explanation, or lack thereof, or I wouldn't. We each had choices to make, decisions that would determine how things went from here. But given our earlier conversation, if he didn't translate this conversation for me then it would imply there was something going on that I probably wouldn't like, and we were already working with a pretty low bar there. Then I'd be

forced to discover the truth on my own, &/or pretend he didn't just check a really big box on my list of reasons why I hated motorcycle clubs: the ubiquitous "club business" excuse.

This thing between Loki and me, whatever it was — burgeoning friendship or something *more* — was fragile. I was prepared to let it die on the vine, it was less complicated that way and I had shit to do far away from here, so it was his decision whether it was worth saving. His call whether we'd enjoy ourselves in the here and now, and whether I'd feel positive about visiting Colorado in the future; I could see myself meeting up with Loki in a nearby town, spending a weekend with him, before Azzie and I moved on to wherever we needed to go. I didn't need to like the club to want to spend time with the man.

And I did like Loki, quite a bit. Without question, he was exceptionally attractive and appealed to me on a physical level, but I also enjoyed his company. I liked talking to him. I really liked how I felt around him: *seen*. Safe. Important. He was my friend, above all else. A friend I wanted to fuck through a few mattresses, but still, the friend part was the most important.

And if I maybe had similar feelings about Tesla, they were separate and the feelings were different. He appealed to me for other reasons, made me feel different things, and I could appreciate them individually. I could enjoy myself with either, and it wasn't like I needed to choose. These were *bikers*.

I wanted us to be friends. I wanted to fuck them.

I didn't want to feel conflicted about either of them or what their club was doing, that wasn't a turn on.

Maybe it was unfair to put the fate of my relationships with both of them on Loki's shoulders at this particular juncture, but that was the nature of the beast.

*Beast.*

Nope.

I walked out of the house, preferring the fresh air and smell of manure over where my mind was roaming back there

in that room, dealing with a man that reminded me too much of my father. Things that were best forgotten.

I wasn't that girl anymore. I wasn't *Janie*, that weak little bitch.

“Mouse!”

I could hear Loki calling for me, but it was from a farther distance than made sense. I snapped back to attention, and realized I was out in the middle of a fucking pasture, hundreds of yards from the farmhouse I'd just left, what I thought was a few seconds ago. I wheeled around, feeling disoriented, staring dumbly at the biker waving his arms at me in the distance. A small herd of cows grazed placidly between us, staring at me with their calm brown eyes as their jaws worked. I must have walked right through them without noticing.

I turned back towards Loki as he opened the gate and headed my way. I passed through the cow herd before he got close, and gave the ones within reach some hearty pats and strokes. “Thank you for not being overly aggressive with me when I was vulnerable,” I said as I passed through, “or, you know, bossy. See what I did there? Like Bossie? Because you're cows?” I cackled at just how unimpressed they were. “You just don't appreciate me, that was comedy gold.”

“Quit harassing the cows,” Loki called out, picking his way through the field. “We need them to give milk and they won't if you traumatize them.”

“The cows and I are just fine.” I approached him at a faster pace than he was making. “It's the chickens you need to worry about. I'm with Adèle, that rooster is a fuckwad.”

He lifted his boot up and started cursing, then scraping it off in the grass as I giggled. To myself. Because laughing at a shit-covered boot was just rude.

After it was moderately clean, and I was close enough, he glared at me and then down at my (relatively) pristine sneakers. “How?”

“It's my super power,” I replied. “I'm able to pass through minefields of shit without collateral damage, even when I'm

not paying attention.”

“I kinda hate you right now.”

“No you don’t.”

He sighed dramatically and held out his hand. I bounced over and took it. We began the long trek back to the Harley; him dancing around, trying to avoid stepping in anything, me walking like normal and managing to miss every surprise in my path. On the way back, he began to talk.

“There are a half dozen or so patched-in members who work out here at the farm, mostly supervising but doing a lot of the work with the animals. They live in the house, and take turns coming back to HQ for R&R. Silas is our vet, he splits his time between here and the dogs—” I didn’t interrupt to ask questions even though I was dying to, because I somehow had forgotten about the dogs even after Loki had mentioned them earlier. *Dogs!* Plural! “—and the people who work in the fields are different. They aren’t club members, but they also aren’t exactly employees. They either owe the club for something big, like medical care or some other debt, or they came to us for protection. Or someone in their family did, and they ended up here too. There are lots of reasons they’re out here working in the fields or doing the menial shit around the compound like cleaning and laundry, but they didn’t have anything else to offer us besides manual labor. The girl that Silas was talking about, her family has been out here for a long time. Her dad incurred a really serious debt pre-Janus, and then ended up dying but the debt didn’t go away. She and her mom and brother have all been working for us for going on— eight years now? Something like that. Debt was paid off a year ago, they’ve been working for a wage since then, and she was just a cute little kid when they started, and now she’s not. She grew up... well, *hot*. Like super pretty with a killer body. And her brother is a decent, trustworthy guy who has always taken care of his family and worked really hard without complaint. He’s a year or two older than her.”

He was trying so hard to be nonchalant about it, but I could tell that he expected me to judge them. Any of them, all of



them, just one big courtroom of the morality police. I kept my expression neutral.

“The guys working out here noticed. Her and him. It got into different reports to Tesla, and he raised the issue in church. Discussion was had. Her brother was invited to prospect for the club, which is rare, we don’t usually have prospects here given the nature of our situation. There aren’t exactly new people hanging around, checking us out and getting evaluated in turn, so we generally only pick up transfers from other chapters or the occasional nomad that decides to settle, and only after careful vetting and if they provide something we need. An offer was made: if the girl was interested, she could become a club girl or work at The Ranch, and if the boy didn’t want to party with his sister around or vice-versa, he could go to whichever she didn’t choose. Either way, it will be a much easier life for both of them, and for their mom. She has a job offer too, to move to the main compound. Cleaning crew, laundry— there are lots of jobs available, and if she has any other skills, there’s jobs in the kitchen or bakehouse, or even the distillery. The offer has been on the table for a long time, and what Silas was telling me is that the girl is finally ready to make a decision.”

“Between the club and The Ranch? What exactly is this ranch that I keep hearing about? I’m beginning to suspect it doesn’t involve cattle and cowboys.”

“It’s a brothel. We have ties to it. Personal and business.” He said that with a finality that made it clear I shouldn’t ask questions.

“So her brother gets to become one of you, but she gets to sell her body to strangers or give her body to the club, and her mom gets to do laundry? Merry Christmas to the women.”

He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at me with a mixture of disappointment and distress. I gave him my best stone-face until I broke and began to laugh.

“Are you really laughing or are you going to freak the fuck out on me?”

I swung in front of him, never releasing my grip on his hand, and patted his chest with my free hand while getting my laughter under control. “Relax. It’s fine. I mean, it could be better, but that’s not this world, and it isn’t as though the club members are sitting around on their asses. All of you work really hard, and you provide for your people. And as it is, she has choices, right? All of them have choices? You said their debt is paid and they’ve been earning a wage, so that means they could leave— okay, barring some security concerns you’d have to deal with, but it’s still possible. And regardless, with the club and I’m assuming at The Ranch, she can choose not to fuck someone, right? Then I don’t see a problem. You all are giving them opportunities that they wouldn’t have otherwise, the best ones available to them. And it sounds like you gave her dad an opportunity eight years ago too. The club girls have a pretty nice life and very few of you are what I would deem repulsive, I mean, I’d set a trap for any number of you — get it? *Mousetrap*? I think that’s what I should call my pussy. Lure in men with some sweet honey as bait — not *cheese* though, the whole concept of crotch cheese is disgusting, not sexy at all, but honey or candy works. Why are you turning red? Is it the crotch cheese? I’m sorry, I never should’ve let that idea out into the universe—”

“Shut up, Mouse,” he ground out, his voice straining with tension. “I’m being patient, but one more word about your sweet honey trap and I’ll have you on your back right here in this field.”

I looked around at the soft new grass covering the ground, not yet sharp or dry from summer’s heat, or churned up by animal hooves. The cows watched us from a distance, but I never really had problems with an audience. If it wasn’t for the rain that had been pouring down off and on, leaving the ground muddy and a chill in the air, I might’ve taken Loki up on his offer. It’d been a long time since I’d felt so much genuine attraction for someone, untainted by betrayal or pain. Maybe if I was on top? My ribs were still a little sore, and he was a big guy...

With a wordless groan of frustration, he began to walk really fast, dragging me behind him through the pasture and

back to where his bike waited. He loaded me on without another word, drove me back to the compound, and left me at the door with a warning to stay away from Komo.

Before he took off, he pulled me close, pushed my hair out of the way, and kissed me on the forehead.

On the forehead.

I wasn't sure where he went after he left me, or why he didn't even give me a chance to tell him I was all-in. Maybe he went back to the farm to help break in the new girl. Maybe he went to town, to visit The Ranch. I didn't like how it made me feel to consider either of those two options, I wasn't a girl who got *jealous*.

I told myself I was just irritated that he left me hanging, when I was finally feeling like I was ready for some hot biker action — a phrase I never thought I'd say in this lifetime considering my history with MCs. Yes, my irritation was almost overwhelming, my frustration at its peak, and if I pictured ripping some girl's hair out by its roots and making her not so *super pretty with a killer body* anymore, well, that was just out of annoyance at being clam-jammed. Not jealousy. Never that.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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LOKI STILL WASN'T BACK by dinner time.

I could've spent the meal with Hazel and Adèle, hiding out in the playroom, but I didn't want Komo or Stranger Danger to think they bothered or intimidated me. Yeah, that was the reason. It wasn't because I was looking for Loki.

The meal was awkward and conversation stilted given that Caliban was working in the kitchen and Tesla wasn't much of a talker. My brooding and general bad mood didn't help. Without Loki, Hazel, or Adèle to distract us, the table was rife with indigestion-inducing snipes and awkward silences. At one point, Jelly asked me if anyone had ever threatened to shove their dick in my mouth just to shut me up, and I snapped my teeth at him, agreeing that I'm super annoying and he should totally give that a try.

"I feel like one of these days, we're going to get bloody," he smirked at me like that was a viable threat or something.

I grinned at him. "How about now? I got time."

When he moved like he was going to stand up from the table, Tesla didn't even look up or set his phone down, saying mildly, "Take one step toward her, and it won't just be your dick that you lose."

Kinda felt like a warm, robot hug.

In fact, it made me feel secure enough that I even put my steak knife back on the table, and stretched out my hand — got a little cramp from how tight I was clenching it — and that was unexpected: I trusted Tesla to have my back.

When the meal time had passed and Loki still hadn't returned, I was borderline-homicidal enough to consider Komo's invitation for a drink in the club room later. I needed some way to blow off steam, and poking at Stranger Danger was a nice distraction. I was kinda sorta hoping I'd go too far and he'd come at me, I hadn't been in a fair fight in a long time and pounding the shit out of some fucker's face who deserved my wrath sounded like a good time. Even with my sore ribs and residual injuries, I was pretty sure I could take him.

Nobody ever expects the tiny chick to go batshit crazy and use guerilla warfare tactics. Or be as strong as an ox, able to take a punch, and willing to use improvised weapons. As far as I was concerned, a fight was no place for *honor*, it was about survival, so I learned not to bother with niceties like letting my opponent hit first. Stranger Danger didn't strike me as being particularly honorable himself, but he'd hesitate if only because of the others. That would be all I needed.

When I arrived, I immediately noticed that there were a serious lack of girls in the club room when I was positive that almost all of them were down there like every night. I only saw Camilla, Plum, and Lourdes, and they weren't in their full-on biker bitch regalia; still sexy as hell with perfect hair and makeup, but dressed almost conservatively. For them. Painted-on leather pants, or jeans with so many rips that they showed more flesh than they covered; a leather bustier, leopard-print cami, and lace halter top, respectively; mile-high platform heels. These were girls who usually wore outfits so skimpy that I knew Camilla had her labia pierced, Lourdes had a tattoo of Saturn on her right butt cheek, and Plum's areola and nipples were a tawny brown color. And that was from seeing them at dinner.

These really were the most beautiful and DTF club girls. Sex on a stick, every one of them.

I shared this observation with the room as I polished off my second beer, the same dark brew I'd had at the farm earlier. The beer I'd had with Loki. Who still wasn't back. Not that I noticed. Or cared.

“What are you going on about?” Caliban reached over and tapped my bottle as I was drinking, causing a tiny bit of beer to escape my mouth and dribble down my chin. I caught it with my hand and glared as I licked the deliciousness off my palm.

“Every one of the club girls is sexy as fuck,” I repeated pointedly, making a *duh* face at him. “Like next-level. That’s all. Just appreciating some fine looking women.”

He grinned at me, shaking his head slowly. “I think you’re drunk.”

“Because I appreciate the female form? That’s such a narrow-minded, patriar— patriarchic... patriarchal thing to say.” I shook my head at him in disappointment.

“No, that’s not why.” He tipped his bottle up and took a sip, keeping his eyes locked on mine the whole time.

“It’s because you took off your shoes, and you’re standing on the couch watching the door,” Tesla said, pointing at me with his bottle. “And I’m certain you meant patriarchic or patriarchal, either of which would work in context, but neither of which apply. What you said isn’t an actual word.”

“You’re not an actual word.” I twisted around, sinking down to sit with my knees tucked up against me, ignoring his mansplaining of my social commentary on the club dynamics, even if I was making up words. It sounded right at the time. “I’m not drunk, I’m just antsy,” I explained, staring at my bottle morosely. “I’ve been on edge all day. Excess energy I need to burn off, and my normal outlets aren’t available.” Like the shooting range, the practice dummy, or a battalion of horny soldiers that wouldn’t complicate my life if I fuck-and-run.

I eyed Stranger Danger. He and Komo were playing pool with Camilla’s assistance, and from what I could tell, her ass made a fine brace to line up their shots. Guess I wouldn’t be having that drink with Komo.

Jelly wasn’t that bad looking if you ignored the creep-factor, and they were leaving in the morning. I bet I could get either a tussle or a rough fuck out of him if I—

“No.”

I fixed a baleful glare on Tesla, my eyes narrowed and chin jutting up. My wrath, it was formidable. “No, what?” I spat out.

“Stay away from those two,” he gestured in the direction of the pool tables with his head but kept his eyes locked on my chin.

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“You want to punish Loki for whatever’s been going on between you two, there are better ways to do it,” Caliban advised, leveling me with a judgey stare that I didn’t appreciate. “Ways that you won’t regret later. And won’t get someone killed.”

“I’m not *punishing*—”

Tesla interrupted me this time. “There’s history, Pinky. This isn’t the time to stir that shit up.”

My shoulders slumped and I rubbed a hand over my face, suddenly exhausted. “It had nothing to do with Loki.” I sighed, understanding that it didn’t matter what I said, they’d believe what they wanted. But I still felt compelled to explain. “His appeal is that he’s *leaving* tomorrow,” I shrugged at them, hands up, still clutching my empty bottle, “and I won’t have to see him again. I don’t like strings, and I suspect any other man here would be a fucking marionette and loaded with complications. But thanks for ascribing the worst kind of motives to me, manipulation and game playing. That’s fucking fantastic. And fuck you for thinking I ever fuck for any other reason than getting off. I don’t *regret* anything. Ever. It’s just a fucking dick, not a contract signed in blood.”

It was all true. Or at least it used to be.

I couldn’t exactly say any of that anymore though, there were eleven days spent in hell that contradicted my self-righteous rant. Eleven days when I fucked for a lot of different reasons, none of them about getting off, and I had many regrets. My anger deflated with a hiss of curses.

“And now I’m a fucking liar,” I barked, getting to my feet as the two of them watched with carefully blank expressions, almost tentative, like I was about to shatter to pieces in front of them. “For a minute, I’d forgotten what shame feels like. I guess I should thank you for reminding me. I’m going to bed. Alone. I don’t need any more *regrets*.”

I dropped my bottle on the table, not even caring if it stayed upright or fell over or rolled off the table and broke into jagged shards of glass waiting to pierce flesh. I stormed out of the club room, unable to even appreciate how many of these badass bikers jumped to get out of my way. I took the stairs up two at a time, relishing the pull on muscles still bruised as fuck, joints still sore, and ribs that sent arrows of pain shooting through my side and into my back. How my harsh pants still made my throat burn. I wanted the pain. I needed it.

I might feel like the worst hypocrite in the world, I might look back on my actions with nothing but shame and self-loathing, but I - still - fucking - survived. And I’d never regret *that*.



“WHERE WERE YOU LAST NIGHT?”

I stared across the breakfast table at Loki standing behind his chair, his plates having just landed on the table with a rattle of crockery and silverware. My expression blank, I noted the deep red flush on his face and the brightness of his eyes against the ruddy skin. I stabbed my fork into a slice of fried potato and placed it in my mouth, chewing slowly. Not blinking, not looking away.

All other activity at the table ceased. Tesla, Caliban, Hazel, and even Adèle, stopped what they were doing and fixed their attention on us. I took a sip of coffee, whispering *filthy slut* into the dark brew.

“Where were you?” he repeated.



“Where’d you go after you kicked me off your bike and dumped me at the front door?”

“That’s not what happened—”

I shrugged and scooped up a forkful of eggs. “Tell me what time you got in and I’ll tell you where I was.”

He scowled, yanking out his chair and throwing himself down on it. “You weren’t in your room. I knocked on the door. A lot. So where were you?”

“At what time?”

He ground his teeth together, so hard I heard it. The muscle in his jaw pulsed. “Late. I don’t know the exact time, but I got back *late*.”

I nodded, calm as could be, taking another sip of my hussy brew. “Then I was asleep.”

He didn’t need to know. He didn’t need to know I fell asleep lying on the dusty planks of the attic floor, earplugs in place, so all I heard was my heartbeat echoing in my ears. He didn’t need to know that I cried last night, that I felt things I *shouldn’t*.

I couldn’t be jealous. I couldn’t be possessive. Not over a *biker*.

But I was.

And I couldn’t tell him I’d dreamt of them, the *three* of them. I’d been happier than I’d ever been in that fantasy world built by my sleeping brain, so happy that it hurt to wake up.

“Bullshit,” he muttered, still glaring at me and shaking his head like I disgusted him. Rage flared up, but I tamped it down. I stomped on it, crushed it to ashes, but a single spark escaped and flared for a brief second.

“I wear earplugs,” I hissed, “so I don’t have to listen to your headboard bang against the wall behind my fucking head. So no, I didn’t hear you knock, because Sleepy Mouse would assume it was just you fucking someone in the next room, and it’s such a familiar sound I tuned it out. Sorry - not - fucking - sorry.”

I slammed back the rest of my coffee, my appetite evaporating. So determined to get away from this humiliating scene, I wasn't paying attention to anyone else until a hand snaked out and settled on my wrist. I glanced up at Hazel, who was blushing. "That's, uh, my room..." she mumbled, eyes darting around. "The one to your left? That's mine. Loki's room is on the other side of your bathroom, closest to Adèle. I'm, uhh... I'm sorry. I didn't realize we were keeping you awake. Pumpkin is... *energetic*." Her voice dipped to a pained whisper, her eyes pleading with me not to give her shit about this, not in front of everyone.

I bit my lip and nodded, sitting back down.

My eyes rose and locked on Loki's. He had a weird expression, one I imagined looked similar to my own. We stared at each other for a long time before my gaze drifted over to Tesla, and then Caliban, who were both watching me with equal intensity.

"I helped the family move," Loki said, drawing my eyes back to him. "They'd been in their cabin for eight years. There was a lot of shit to move around, furniture and household goods to distribute to the neighbors. I moved the mother to her new room here, after taking her and the girl to The Ranch for her mom to meet Fatima. Then I taught Gus how to ride a motorcycle, took him out for a ride so he'd get used to it. He wasn't confident in the rain, so we waited in town until it stopped. Got back late." I nodded, accepting his explanation. "You really were asleep?"

It pained him to ask that, I could see it. It made him vulnerable, the big man felt exposed. Since I might as well have been sitting there naked too, I nodded again. He slumped in his chair, letting out his breath. As if choreographed, we picked our forks back up and continued eating.

We didn't talk about it again. Not a one of them mentioned it. I even let Hazel off with only a swat on her juicy ass for keeping me awake almost every night — and only a single comment about her fucking a dude named *Pumpkin* — and she moved her bed to the wall with the windows.

I stayed out of the club room, though, not liking what I might witness. I couldn't explain, not even to myself, that it wasn't just Loki — I didn't want to see *any* of them hooking up with one of those gorgeous girls. That dream... it lingered. The feelings from it lingered. Or maybe I kept dreaming it, I don't know. I didn't remember any other dreams, but I often woke up crying, overwhelmed by a memory of loss and yearning.

I kept my distance from all three of them.

We fell into an easy routine, with meals shared at the big table, the conversation superficial. Caliban made a point of taking a break to join us, even if just for ten minutes. I spent most mornings with Adèle and Hazel, or one-on-one with the monkey I now called *Addie* despite Tesla's very vocal protests. We worked on her language skills by interacting with the people and objects that made up her everyday life.

After lunch, I had free time because Addie had a nap, according to Tesla's schedule. It struck me as odd, given her age, until Hazel explained Addie needed quiet time to get over all the peopling — even before my “full immersion” tactics — but the guys continued to show up every day to check on her or play with her or whatever, and she wasn't getting any downtime. When Hazel started referring to it as Addie's “nap time,” they stayed away so she'd sleep, but instead she read, or drew, or worked on puzzles by herself. Hazel sat in another room with music playing, knitting or reading, and not at all suspicious about the diabolical plans the kid could be formulating. I guess Addie's Nap Time helped her deal with what came after that: three days a week, she spent a mandatory hour with other kids in a kind of forced socialization. It looked painful for everyone involved, but I guess it kept her from going feral or getting aggressive or something. Maybe I was confusing children with pit bulls, I don't know, but either way, it made sense.

Even though I didn't have to, I stuck with the kid when I wasn't helping somewhere else. She was a cranky little thing, but I was cracking through her obstinate shell to get to the chewy center. At her age, being isolated by a language barrier

for almost seven months was an eternity, let alone adjusting to the massive changes after her mom died. She was slow to trust, but I'd wear her down; until then, I kidnapped her in the afternoons, and she was my little sidekick in our adventures exploring the "safe" areas of the compound.

I didn't limit it to English lessons while we were off on our own, because the kid was clearly working a long con and I was here for that. She acted younger around the others, just like she pretended she didn't understand; although some of the disconnect was just general cluelessness with the guys, Hazel shouldn't have been as easily fooled. Yet she was.

Addie was a devious little shit like I used to be, and I wanted to encourage her initiative by passing on my wisdom to her when we were alone. Some of it was real Boy Scout shit, such as knot-tying or reading a compass, but I included things I learned from my grandparents, and the sneaky shit I'd taught myself. Lots of lurking and hiding; if it'd been a college course, I'd call it *Creeper Techniques 101*.

The most valuable lesson I taught her, though, the one I reinforced every single day, was trusting her own instincts. That gut-feeling, that unconscious situational awareness and impulse to act even when it seemed irrational, those were signals sent by our primal brain still keyed into the dangers we'd become oblivious to. It was the greatest defense a girl had in her arsenal.

She soaked it up with her little sponge-brain, just like Azzie had, and I felt better about leaving, knowing she had the necessary skills for the world we lived in. It wasn't just because it was my job, or a sense of responsibility or obligation, I was beginning to love Addie with a ferocity I hadn't felt since Aesli was fighting Janus in the ICU, and I'd do *anything* to make sure she survived.

Even with all that, I still had too much time to think. Tesla kept my phone, although I did send an email to Vernita, but for some reason I was driven to prove myself trustworthy to him. Between that, wanting to keep busy and distracted, and the conversation about roles and jobs during Girlie-Girls Night, I went looking for more work. I even asked Caliban if I could

work for him during my free hours; I'd prefer the kennel or farm, but I wouldn't talk to Silas unless I had to, and I still hadn't met the Raz person who worked with the dogs. I offered to wash dishes, since I didn't have training or experience to work in the kitchen, but Caliban decided I should try a few of the production jobs first.

He let me do a shift making cheese and one that was less fun in the butchery, but neither of those was a good fit. Turns out it was easier for me to cut up people than animals... like in field surgery, not serial killing, something I had to clarify when I made that same comment at the end of my shift. Tesla and Caliban both said they were looking for times when I could help out or try something new without being disruptive, and I was most excited about a potential job at the distillery. They already had a full crew, but I was dying to learn how to make hooch. It seemed like a valuable skill in a dystopian world.

I was *less* thrilled for a ridiculously early morning shift in the bakery, even though I'd be working with Caliban. I might've been more enthusiastic if the food flirting had led anywhere, but it was the opposite.

When I was in juvie, I read a lot of poetry; it was a section of the library virtually untouched, with all the books intact. I liked the challenge of it. Every poem was a snarled, knotted piece of string to untangle; knowing every word mattered created a puzzle to solve, to understand *how*. Why. What it all meant, to the writer and to me.

Robert Browning wrote a poem, *My Last Duchess*; every time I read it, it was an ice pick to the chest. On the surface, it was the arrogant ramblings of a wealthy, powerful old man showing off his super fancy shit, humble-bragging or just outright boasting about how cool he was, how much shit he owned. The gloating focused on a portrait he commissioned from a famous artist of his *last* Duchess. *Last* because she was too friendly, too spirited, too willing to see the good in everything instead of appreciating *him* like he felt he deserved. Because she ranked courtesy and kindness the same as his

“nine-hundred-years-old name” and treated everyone the same, he killed her.

*I gave commands; then all smiles stopped together. There she stands as if alive.*

All smiles stopped together. All flirting, with any of them... stopped. I didn't know why. Did I give my smiles away too freely? Did I not appreciate the opportunity they'd given me? Or did they realize I was too high-maintenance after I lost my shit on Tesla and Caliban in the club room, and had that jealous rage-fit all over Loki the next morning.

Whatever it was, whatever I'd done, had ruined what might've been. It was over before it even started, leaving me wondering. Standing there as if alive. Again. In the shuttered light of the sun rising outside my dad's house, with the smell of copper and the taste of salt choking me.

*Nope.*

I decided it didn't bother me. No, I was glad to be free of any strings tangling me up. It was easier.

In Salem, I was a friendly outsider. A core member of our D&D group, and a sidepiece everywhere else. I had Azzie, and that's all that really mattered there, and here too. I didn't belong here, and I needed to remember this was temporary. Azzie was waiting for me.

People kept me at a distance because that's what they wanted, and I couldn't guess at the reasons. I thought I was fun as hell, but I also wasn't deluded, I was a lot. *A lot*. So I continued to spend meals with the three club officers and the club princess — and usually Hazel, but not always — and I was friendly with the women, but I mostly kept to myself. (Mostly.)

I worked my shifts with Addie, spending as much extra time with her as either of us could stomach. The little booger liked her alone time as much as I did. Caliban found extra jobs for me, when someone had the time and patience to deal with me. Otherwise, I was on my own.

I kept telling myself I should explore the massive, Fallout-esque landscape I was living in. I needed to know every possible way in and out, needed to see what might be available to exploit... needed to collect every coffee mug, clipboard, Nuka-cola cap, and radioactive core I found to bring back to my very own Sanctuary Hills bunker. But the thought of it exhausted me.

Instead, I found things to read or did puzzle pages. I asked for (and received) a spiral-bound notebook from Tesla, a nice one more like a blank book than a school notebook. In it, I planned a dream D&D campaign — complete with a dozen area maps, and the names and locations of fifty-eight NPCs with adventure hooks — like there would be plenty of time to finish Azzie's Ravenloft campaign and play some epic home-brew adventure once I returned to Salem. Like I'd be able to interact or even leave the bunker.

But denial was a fun place to live. It kept me from thinking about the reality I'd face when I returned and the dread about it I couldn't seem to shake. The bunker that I rarely wanted to leave felt like returning to prison, and I could never step foot in Salem again. Everything was going to change, one way or another: either we'd leave Salem, or Azzie would leave me.

NOPE.

I wasn't about to say I had a string of dark days that I somehow muscled through, but I wasn't saying I *didn't* either. I was moody, for sure. Sleeping a lot? Nope, hardly at all. Only enjoying anything at all when Addie was around? Yeah, okay.

But shit changed on a dime sometimes, and although it felt like months had passed, it was maybe a week after Komo's visit when the president came home.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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I WAS GETTING Addie ready for bed when we received the summons: like a goddamn lord of his castle, apparently the prez was home and wanted to see his minions.

I glared at Hazel in the mirror. She was in the bathroom doorway, and I stood behind Addie watching her brush her teeth, because the little shit was shirking and had only been brushing for like fifteen seconds at a time. Good oral hygiene is a necessity, especially in these unprecedented times. You can't learn that young enough.

"Keep brushing," I mean-mugged her reflection. She wrinkled her nose at me, but kept brushing. I felt like I won that round.

"You've made progress," Hazel gave me a tentative smile, and I shrugged. I'd take the credit for her improvement; I may not have taught her all of it, but I was the only one that realized she understood a lot more than she let on. *Clever girl.* And I was figuring out how best to exploit it. "Anyway, you should get down there sooner rather than later. And maybe... do something with your hair? Get cleaned up a little?"

That sent me into a fit of laughter — like wiping the tears from my eyes, that level of hilarity — and she rolled her eyes at me once I calmed down enough. "What? You don't think his majesty will approve?" I asked, and gestured at my body with a flourish.

"You're wearing Addie's clothes—"



“Just the t-shirt, because duh, unicorn. But the pants are \_\_\_”

“—and the leftover clothes that none of the boys here were willing to wear. Those are *bibbed overalls*, Mouse. I don’t even know why we had them—”

“They fit though!”

“Just because you *can* wear something, doesn’t mean you *should*. You look like a farmer.”

“I think I look cute,” I grumbled in Polish, waving a finger at myself for Addie’s benefit. “Don’t you think I look cute?”

“You look little,” Addie mumbled out through her foaming mouth, “and a boy. Except for the hair.”

I admired my long braids in the mirror. Azzie used to wear them all the time, and they made me feel closer to her, like a coiffure tribute to my bae.

“I’m not changing, or doing anything else with my hair. I’m going to be in his majesty’s presence all of fifteen minutes, tops, and then I’m getting this one to bed and getting my own Z’s. There’s no point in making an effort, I’m the *governess*. I’m not here to seduce him.”

“I’m a nanny too, and I make the effort,” Hazel mumbled, looking put-out. And she did make an effort, she looked absolutely beautiful in a skintight brown leather vest that showed the perfect amount of cleavage and cuddled her boobs like they were precious gifts. I wanted to motorboat them and I’m not usually into chicks. She wore that over a pair of hip-hugging, boot-cut jeans that squeezed her ass just right and made her legs look super long, belted with a thick, brown leather belt with a fancy brass buckle and decorative studs. With her leopard print, platform stiletto booties, she was sexy and a little wild, but still classy. A sophisticated, fashionable biker babe. Big hair, frosty taupe eye makeup accentuating her green eyes, and deep burgundy lips all added to the look. She was *hot*.

“And if I looked like you, I might make the effort too, but there’s no point trying to put lipstick on a pig, amirite?” I

smiled at her, hoping she understood I wasn't fishing for false compliments, and I certainly wasn't suffering from low self-esteem, I was just realistic. The women here, they were bombshells, and I was more like a firecracker: loud, a little dangerous, and then easily forgotten once the initial shock had passed.

That's what I *wanted* to be, a phantom, a shadow; a wraith lurking in the background, only noticed if one was looking for me.

"Mouse..."

"Hazel. It's all good."

"Mouse." She pursed her lips, her hands resting on her hips. I ignored her, monitoring Addie's efforts to rinse and spit, then wiped her mouth with a clean towel. She was in her pajamas already — totally cute gray and pink joggers with a matching t-shirt — and I'd already brushed her hair out into silky waves of black.

I stared down at her bare feet. "Where are your slippers?" I asked in English, then repeated in Polish when she gave me side-eye. Yeah, she totally understood that, the big faker.

"Gracie painted my toes earlier, I didn't want to mess them up." I looked down and realized her toenails were red with black polka dots on them, like little ladybugs. "You didn't even notice," she accused, and I went for full denial.

"No, I just thought you were crawling all over with bugs. I didn't want to say anything, in case you hadn't noticed, but I thought it was kinda gross."

She shook her head, narrowing her eyes with a disgusted look, and I swear it was like a mini Tesla judging me.

I made a face at her, which got me a big sigh. "Kid, you need to stop hanging out with Tesla, he's a bad influence," I turned and hunched down. "Up!" She hopped up like we'd been practicing the move, and I wrapped my arms around her legs, bouncing her once to get her settled in place. "Ready?"

"You're going to carry her?" Hazel asked, looking concerned.

“Fresh pedicure,” I said, lifting Addie’s foot to wave it around at Hazel. “And she has yet to walk around in flip-flops without tripping, which would not be cool on the stairs. Can you grab them for once we get down there?” I yelled back over my shoulder, because I’d already taken off at a run with Addie shrieking in glee as we barreled through the door and down the hall, galloping like I was her personal pony.

Her little arms wrapped around my neck in a chokehold that was making me a bit sick to my stomach, but I kept reminding myself that she was a little girl. She wouldn’t hurt me.

Being what Azzie referred to as “freakishly strong” had its benefits — I could’ve probably carried Hazel down the stairs easily, let alone this little girl — so I flew down to the first floor in record time, only hitting every third step, and I didn’t even worry about all the noise since the music pouring out of the club room had reached a new level of loud. There were a few clusters of people scattered around the lobby area attempting to have conversations, but there was enough shouting and raucous laughter from the open doors of the club room that it didn’t seem like it bothered most of them.

We did a lap down the side hall past the dining room while waiting for Hazel, Addie thumping me on the head and screaming for me to go faster, then I decided to make a loop of the fountain. That was a mistake. It was too public, too—much.

“What dark sorcery is this? Is Miss Adèle... *laughing?*” The man cried out in exaggerated wonder, stepping out in front of me as I rounded the cistern and headed back towards the stairs where Hazel was finally in sight. He had his hands up, and I hit the brakes, rocking backwards a smidge — perfectly in control the whole time, he didn’t have to grab hold of my arms — and stared at the stranger like I’d never seen a man before.

There was no other way to describe him other than *exotic* and *deadly*, like a beautiful serpent you know carries lethal venom in its bite, but you can’t *look* away let alone run. He was at least three inches shorter than Caliban, putting him at

right around six foot or slightly less, and lean but wiry, the sinews on his neck and arms standing out as they flexed. He had dark brown, almost black eyes, and looked like he might have Asian ancestry, and maybe some Middle Eastern. Thick black brows, a silky black mustache and goatee circling his pink mouth, and hair like a waterfall of black satin hanging loose around his face to tumble down well past his shoulders.

Black and sepia-toned tattoos painted his hands, arms, and neck under his plain white t-shirt, with a tiny, exquisite compass rose on the cheekbone under his left eye, the arrow pointing east. He was wearing his cut, knee-length black cargo shorts, and white athletic socks scrunched down into his black, high-top sneakers... and a motherfucking *machete* hanging from his hip and swinging in place.

His fingers flexed, his grip on my arms almost painful, but I knew not to flinch or make any sign of fear or weakness. I straightened, releasing my hold on Addie's legs and she slid down to stand on her own. I moved my arm just enough to tuck her fully behind me, keeping my eyes locked on his the whole time. I wished I had a weapon. He wasn't overtly threatening me, but I'd feel better if I had something to block that blade, like that stupid tactical baton that Azzie refused to give up even though she totally cheated—

Addie tugged on one of my braids until I tilted my head down towards her. "That's Rasputin," she whispered loudly, "and he takes care of the dogs."

"What did she say?" He purred in a smooth baritone that made my toes curl a little.

"She said you take care of the dogs," I answered, tensing up but finally connecting the names *Raz* and *Rasputin*: Road Captain, dog trainer, and potentially in charge of aquaculture projects. "And normally that would make you instantly trustworthy in my book, but you still have hands on me even though it isn't necessary, and you stepped in front of me with an unsheathed machete just fucking *hanging* on your belt as I was - running - with - a - child - you - *dumbass!*" I lost my shit, my hands hitting his chest between the open edges of his vest and giving him a powerful shove away from us, as I

hollered at him with the kind of mama-bear fury I'd only ever felt towards Azzie's doctors before. "Are you fucking *stupid*? If I'd tripped or slipped or reacted poorly to you *stepping in front of me*, you could have seriously hurt her or *killed* one of us. What - the - FUCK!?"

He rubbed the spot on the chest where my hands connected, looking down at his weapon, confused, like he'd completely forgotten it was even there. He then looked up at me with wide eyes and a horrified expression. "I—I'm so sorry, I didn't even—"

"Ah, I see you've met Mouse," Caliban interrupted from behind me, and I pivoted in place so I could see both of them, keeping Addie behind me. He'd emerged from the club room, a bottle of beer in one fist, and a very drunk Sienna clinging to his side under his arm. She gave me a once over and began to giggle, whispering something into his neck. He glanced down at her with a grimace, one brow crooked up, then focused back on me and Rasputin.

"I— yeah," Rasputin nodded, gaze shooting back and forth between me and Caliban. "The kid was giggling and shouting like a— like she was having fun, and I wanted to ask her what magic she was working on Adèle but I—"

"It's fine," I interrupted him, knowing how protective Caliban was of Addie. No use getting Rasputin into trouble. I glanced at Caliban, focusing on Sienna's claws sunk into his chest. "He startled me, I almost fell, but everyone is fine." *You can go now*, I willed in his direction, but my psychic powers were weak at the moment, because instead of leaving, he ambled closer and brought Sienna with him.

I was feeling trapped. Caliban and Sienna blocked me in on one side, the fountain was now directly in front of me, Addie pressed up against my back — granted, I had my arm folded back to hold her there — with Rasputin and his machete on the other side. I felt cornered, surrounded by hostile or potentially hostile forces, and my heart was thumping too fast for my peace of mind. Panic hovered around the edges of my brain waiting for an opportunity to step in and take over.

I didn't want that. I didn't want Addie to see me like that, like a cornered animal acting on instinct. She needed me to be stable, she needed me to be her rock.

Two things happened simultaneously, bringing me back from the edge: Hazel appeared at my side, passing Addie's little yellow flip-flops to her, and she immediately sat down on the floor to put them on because apparently she missed the point of shoes you don't need to tie or even get over your heel; and Caliban must've noticed my weak hold on sanity because he backed away, taking Sienna with him, before murmuring something to her and giving her ass a sharp smack. She jumped, and giggled, and strutted back towards the club room, looking back over her shoulder to give him sex eyes while he leered at her.

But it was weird, and kinda funny, because the second she was gone, the suggestive smirk fell off his face and he looked... tired. "Missed you, dude," he said, stepping past me and Hazel like we weren't even there, grabbing Rasputin up into a tight hug. "Mags filled us in a bit, then someone said they spotted Mouse and Adèle raising hell out here and he sent me out to find them."

"Sienna did her lamprey move?" Rasputin asked, and I snorted, which caught the attention of both of them.

"She sure did," Caliban said slowly, as they both eyed me. "So you two looked like you were having a rather... *heated* discussion when I came out here—"

"Forgot I was wearing the blade, man," Rasputin groaned, tilting his head down and shaking it, his loose hair flowing down around his shoulders and draping around his face in a shiny, smooth curtain. I wanted to rub my cheek on it. "Mouse almost kicked the shit out of me for putting her and the kid at risk. You fuckin' pack a punch there, girl."

Caliban eyed me, peeved. "She *punched* you?"

I shook my head, making a face at them, as Rasputin chuckled. "Naw, just shoved me back, but there was some legit force behind it." The corner of his mouth curled up, his eyes glittering like gems, striking me dumb. Whatever pheromones

or aura or whatever he was putting out there, he was liquid sex. I had no natural defenses against it. “Though she be little, she be fierce.”

“Is that a famous line or something?” Loki asked, teleporting to my side because he certainly couldn’t have walked over there without me noticing. Was I that hypnotized by Rasputin that I didn’t even notice *Loki* approaching? That was bad. Really bad.

Dangerous.

I couldn’t afford to be so distracted.

“Yeah, Shakespeare or Milton or someone like that,” Rasputin answered. “Why?”

“Mouse said the same thing to me at one point. I think she was talking about carrying Tesla up the stairs if she needed to. Pretty sure she was challenging me to feats of strength, but I know when I’m bested since she already broke my wrist.”

I glared up at the dramatic faker, elbowing him in the side. “First off, it wasn’t barely even sprained, you big baby, and you aren’t even wearing an air cast on it anymore. And second, it wasn’t my fault you ate asphalt, you—”

“You were lurking on the road like a damned creeper—”

“Creeper! *Creeper?! I was not—*”

“As much as I’m enjoying you flirting with me,” Loki tilted over to elbow me with a wink, letting me know he was joking about the flirting part, “Mags will send Tesla out next if we don’t—”

“Too late,” Caliban groaned, pointing at the doorway where an annoyed Tesla was alternating between texting someone and glaring at us. He crossed the room and pointed at me.

“You. Now. Where’s Adèle?”

I looked back over my shoulder and motioned to her; she was still sitting on the ground, poking at her ladybug toes while the grownups bickered. I hooked my arms out and bent

my knees, and she hopped up. “Aye, aye, Captain,” I directed at Tesla, and he pointed at the door. “You first—”

“Cut the shit, Mouse,” Tesla sounded so put-out that I decided to let it go this time, especially since we’d be walking through a room packed with people, and I actually felt some slight comfort having him and Loki at my back.

...and that thought bothered me more than it probably should. I went first, but I hated how comfortable it felt doing so.

We must’ve made quite a parade, because I swear that the conversation and laughter died around us as I carried Addie through the room on my back, weaving between the tables and clumps of people hanging out or watching one of the girls dance, all with drinks of some sort. The room was so full of people that I wasn’t sure who I was looking for but just kept walking, nodding occasionally at a familiar face and fighting the panic welling up inside me like carbonation bubbles waiting to pop. The music was loud, and the lights were low, and I looked back once to see Loki, Tesla, Caliban, and Rasputin all fanned out, following behind me, their eyes seeming to be locked on me and the little monkey clinging to my back. I found a weird sort of comfort in that. If nothing else, they’d protect this girl with their lives, and weren’t going to let anything happen to either of us as long as I had her with me. No one would grab me, no one would—

Tesla gestured me forward, an unreadable expression on his face, but he was looking me right in the eye. I nodded, my gaze flickering to Loki, who bobbed his head in an almost imperceptible nod back at me. I ignored the other two: Caliban ran hot and cold, and I was still pissed at Rasputin. Realistically though, I knew that if he let me meet the dogs, I’d forgive him anything.

The crowd melted away, and then there he was, just like a fucking king on his throne.

I knew him *immediately*. I’d know him anywhere, because he was the spitting image of Addie — black hair, pale skin, electric blue eyes — but instead of a shy little porcelain doll,



he was an indolent god, sprawled in his chair with his long legs spread wide. He had one inked-up arm resting on the chair arm clutching a glass of glowing amber liquid, and the other wrapped around the luscious Plum curled up on his lap and kissing his neck, her leather dress so short and tight that not only could I see her asscheeks hanging out, I could make out her cheek contours and the location of the dimple at the top, *through her skirt*.

His hooded eyes swept over me, expression inscrutable, then he whispered something to Plum and carefully lifted her to her feet before standing up himself. Plum giggled, tried to wrap her arms around him again, but he pushed them away, crooning something to her that I couldn't hear, but his tone and expression was a filthy promise. She coyly smiled up at him through her lashes then strutted off on her six inch platforms, hips swaying, and I took the opportunity to check out the elaborate, full-piece tattoos on her her right thigh and left calf. Her other thigh had a leather garter buckled around it, and with her long black curls and that leather dress, she was a biker pin-up, a sex goddess in stripper heels.

Again, I wasn't usually into girls, but...

Maybe I'd been on a military base for way too long, because these women oozed sex and temptation in a way I hadn't encountered in, oh, about fourteen years. I'd avoided the club room and I guess I blocked it out when not exposed, because I seemed to keep forgetting what club girls were like with their sexuality on constant display. Their willingness was how they got access to the brothers, they personified "down to fuck" or DTF; it was their purpose, their job, and even after the world seemed to end, the relationship between bikers and club girls stayed true. *Especially* here, since there were no casual hang-arounds, no fresh pussy dropping in to party, no chance of visitors — the women who lived and worked at the Apocalypse Riders' mother chapter earned their place by being the biker chick ideal, from tip to toe, and keeping the men happy in isolation. Every flavor of male fantasy was in this room, and here I was surrounded by these biker *gods*, every one of them a fantasy themselves, and all of *their* eyes were on *me*.

I barked out a sardonic laugh, letting my gaze drift around the circle of men surrounding me, finally settling on his majesty. “You must be Magick,” I said with a smile, and I know it was borderline-smirky but I couldn’t help it. The irony of *me* being the center of their little world, if only for a few minutes, was fucking hilarious in a room filled with a cross-section of wet dreams, all of them willing and eager.

A tiny wrinkle formed between his brows, but he was otherwise stone-faced and studying me with an intensity that might have been disconcerting, if I had any illusions at all about who I was to these men, or why I was here.

I was the nanny, the *governess*. And although that’s a porn setup waiting to happen, Hazel was a much better candidate for that role than I was.

“You must be Mouse,” he replied, in a rough, forced rasp of a voice that sounded painful. My eyes flicked down and spotted the scar on his neck; at some point, his throat had been damaged. I nodded, dragging my eyes back to his. His eyelid twitched like he knew where I’d been looking, and it bothered him. “The governess,” he continued flatly, “without appropriate clothes.”

“Sorry it took so long to get in here, we got distracted,” I said, wrapping an arm around Addie and dragging her forward, ignoring the dig about my clothes. She looked up at her guardian — whether brother or father, I didn’t know either, but blood relation was unquestionable — and seemed to withdraw a little, pressing back against me.

The second she appeared, his face transformed, relaxing and somehow becoming more anxious simultaneously. He squatted down, getting closer to her level, and held out a hand. When she didn’t take it immediately, I bumped her with my knee; she glared back at me with a sour expression but then took his hand and let him drag her into a hug.

The look on his face— it was love and pain and regret.

Whatever else, this man loved this little girl, and would do anything for her, even practically kidnap the one person who he thought could help her communicate with him. Trickery,

deceit, or threats wouldn't faze him when it came to Adèle, and for a moment I thought about what I'd do if I didn't have Azzie waiting for me back in Salem, whether I'd stay here for her.

It didn't matter, because Azzie *was* waiting. As much as I cared for my little charge, someone needed to help Azzie shoulder the crushing responsibilities she carried, day after day. And I had critically important work: after seeing Kane's research, it was clear that none of them were working on an alternative or synthetic vaccine — not one based on the existing vaccine at least — and when Azzie's illness inevitably won... if I didn't get the years of data I'd collected to the right people to find a solution, then it might take a decade, but Janus could very well be our extinction event.

It was a grim reminder of how vulnerable the unvaccinated were, and I had to keep myself from tearing Addie out of his arms.

“Hey!” I cried out, pointing at him with a red-hot fury seeping into my bones. “Unless you're vaccinated, you're putting her at risk—” I shouted at a surprised Magick, who stepped back from my attack.

“It's fine, Mouse.” Loki put his hand on my shoulder, holding me back from wrenching Addie away from him. And Rasputin too, they were both out there and then just—

“They quarantine for four days, automatically,” Tesla reminded me, leaning down to mansplain in a low voice. “Anyone who leaves our territory for any reason has to stay in one of the cabins we have at The Ranch. Remember? The place you were supposed to go? Minimum of four days before they can come home, right? When we know someone is inbound, the cabins get stocked with food and liquor. And no one goes unmasked on the outside.”

“Oh.” My memory was refreshed immediately, but I let him think he was making a point since it gave me time to get my shit back under control. That surge of rage and panic was rough on the ol' composure.

I glanced over at Magick, who'd released Addie but was still holding her close to him. He'd focused on me though, and I couldn't tell if he was angry or— or what.

“Hazel,” he called out, and when she popped up next to Tesla, Magick pointed at Addie. “It's past her bedtime, can you take her? Mouse needs to stay.”

“No I don't,” I said, shaking my head. “I'll put her to bed. This really isn't my scene—”

Everyone decided to ignore me. Hazel reached for Addie's hand while Magick gave her a quick squeeze and said “Dobranoc, maleńka” in stilted Polish. *Goodnight, little one.* That was actually really sweet, and my cold, dead heart thawed by one degree, but then refroze immediately as Hazel disappeared with my exit plan and Magick pointed at a chair and said “Sit.”

“I really don't—”

“Sit.”

So I sat.



“WHAT'S YOUR POISON?” Magick asked me as he took the chair on my left, a different one than he'd been sitting in before. I was only slightly comforted that Loki sat on my right, then Tesla, Caliban, and Rasputin all took the other chairs around the table.

“Strychnine, usually, but ricin if I get a hookup. Hemlock or deadly nightshade if I'm feeling poetic.”

He blinked at me, the corner of his mouth stretching out in a half-grimace, half-smile.

“Strychnine is primarily for rodents, Pinky. That seems unwise,” Tesla commented, with his dead-eye stare that was the Tesla equivalent of sticking his tongue out at me.

“Can gummy worms really live in peace with the marshmallow chicks?”

“Sometimes you make my head hurt, Pinky.”

“If we had a snowmobile, wouldn’t it melt before summer?”

“Once I take over the world, remind me to publicly snub you.”

“Not this again,” Caliban groaned, getting back to his feet and wandering off.

Rasputin looked around the table. “I’m so confused right now...”

“It’s how Mouse and Tesla communicate,” Loki explained, smiling at me. I couldn’t help it even if I wanted to, I smiled back at him. It was hard to resist a happy Loki. “It’s from some old cartoon about mice bent on world domination, and they quote things at each other. Strangely, it seems to work out pretty well.”

“What’s up with this?” Magick asked, clearly irritated, and gesturing in a circle at Loki who lost his smile and glowered back, now uncomfortable.

“What?” he grunted, and I was left looking back and forth between them like a goddamn tennis match.

“The smiling. And talking.”

Loki got up and left the table.

“What just happened?” I sat forward and craned my head around, trying to find Loki in the crowd and maybe figure out why he left. He was over by the bar near Caliban. Pepper approached, all dolled up in a patent leather bikini top, hot pants, and strappy stiletto heels, the gem in her bellybutton gleaming in the light. I straightened in my seat and met Tesla’s eye. He looked away first.

“I can’t believe this is what we’ve been missing out on while dealing with that fuckwad,” Rasputin shook his head at Magick, frowning.

Magick ignored him, focusing solely on me. “You’ve been here a few weeks now?”

“Ten days,” I corrected, dully.

“Settling in okay then?” As neutral and innocent as his words seemed to be, I felt like there was another conversation taking place underneath it, some kind of challenge. He was trying to feel me out and get information. *Good luck.*

“Sure,” I bobbed my head like it was on a spring. “But there’s a lot of work to do, you know? Long days. Early hours too... yeah, I usually try to go to bed the same time as Addie, so I’ll be well-rested and alert while I’m with her.”

“Mmhmm,” Magick nodded, the corners of his eyes crinkling though his mouth didn’t move. “Your room is comfortable then? Nice bed?”

“Oh, the nicest!” I chirped, beaming at him. “*Such a comfortable room.*”

He nodded again, then the smirk crept out like it couldn’t be restrained any longer. “Hopefully you aren’t kept up too late by your neighbors, things can get... loud here at night. Especially in the bedrooms.”

I blinked at him. *Asshole.* “I have no idea what you mean. I’m a super deep sleeper, and I wear earplugs.”

“Right. That’s great. So not indulging yourself then?”

“In the girls? Oh, no. As beautiful as they are, I’m actually straight, so... not really my scene, like I said. But if anyone could get me to question my sexuality, it’s probably Plum. Well done, my man.” I held my fist for him to bump, and he stared at it then me, ignoring Rasputin who rocked in place sputtering in glee, and Tesla, who smirked at his phone screen — his version of ROFLMAO, a veritable tsunami of humor. “No? Gonna leave me hanging? Aww, that’s alright. I guess it is kinda rude to celebrate your conquests, huh?”

He eyed me, leaning back in his seat. “What’s your story, Mouse?”

“Hmm, that’s a great question. Big fan of *Harry Potter*, of course, I mean who isn’t? Anything by Tamora Pierce, she got me through childhood... Then there’s *The Witcher Saga*, fuckin’ love those books... but lemme see— are we limiting

this to books? Yes, that's for the best, I think. So where was I... Oh, if we're talking classic novels and shit, the intellectual stuff, I've read *Persuasion* about eight times, but really it's probably *Damage*. The Hart novel, not the one about head injuries. Have you heard of it? Yummy existential angst and taboo drama all over the place... so good. But if I only get to choose one, I'd say *Cinderella*. If I'm feeling poetic. I just really love how she makes things happen for herself, you know? Sure she has some help, but really, she pulls herself out of the gutter all on her own."

"That's not—" Magick sputtered as Tesla began to choke, he must've swallowed wrong or something. Rasputin reached over and smacked him on the back a few times.

Me? I kept talking.

"My first tattoo was a quote from *Damage*, actually. This one right here," I showed him my wrist and the slightly faded, slightly blurry ink inscribed in my flesh. I traced the familiar letters with my finger as I recited the quote, my eyes locked on his. I didn't need to look to read the braille of my own skin. "*Damaged people are dangerous. They know they can survive.* Isn't that just the goddamn truth though? Doesn't that just say everything?" I held his stare through the whole conversation, barely blinking, my face a mask of pleasant vacancy. When I finished, he was the one who looked away.

Tesla had gotten himself back under control. He stared at the center of the table, the slightest wrinkle in his forehead. I could tell he was upset. I couldn't rationalize how I knew but I did, I could tell that he was practically distraught. I thought maybe it was the angle of his head, the tension in his jaw, and how he was biting at his lip ring almost unconsciously.

Rasputin was the one sitting back in his chair now, drumming his fingers on the table as he eyed Magick, who was staring off to the side, ignoring all of us.

"Well, this has been great fun, but I really need to get to bed, you know? Early, early day tomorrow," I pushed back my chair and began to stand up as Caliban and Loki arrived back

at the table with Pepper trailing behind, their hands full with six drinks.

“Every night,” Magick said, turning his head to look at me. “I want you down here. Every night,” he repeated.

“That’s not going to—”

“Every. Night.” He wasn’t smiling or glaring, his face was as much a pleasant vacancy as mine had been, but the order was clear.

I gripped the edge of the table, about five seconds from flipping it, and gave him a rictus of a smile. “You got it, your majesty,” I ground out from clenched teeth. “And it was great to finally meet you. Have a super night.”

I was out of the room before any of them had a chance to reply.



BACK IN MY ROOM, I locked my door and slid the desk chair under the door handle. I dragged the armchair back to the closet, climbed up, and opened the trapdoor into the attic.

I hadn’t been up there since the night Loki disappeared on me, and everything looked different. It must’ve been a full moon or close to it, because there was a ton of light pouring in through the narrow windows, especially the ones I’d rubbed the grime off of so I could see the stars. I laid down on the dirty planks making up the floor, over my room, staring up through the window above me at the night sky.

There were so many stars, I couldn’t even count them all.

They had no idea what I meant by any of that.

I had to wonder if it was worth pissing off the president of the outlaw motorcycle club that employed me, to make a point none of them even understood. I guess I was a sucker for threats of shallow graves in the woods, and bodies left for the wild animals to feast on.



Even though I had a really early morning working with Caliban in the bakery, I laid there for hours, listening to the creaks and groans of the house, and the noises from the rooms below. The wide open space, the height of the ceilings, and the exposed wood turned the attic into an echo chamber for the twenty-some rooms along the corridor below. Doors slammed, conversations took place that were so distant and so slurred I could never hope to understand what was being said; groans and squeals and thumping headboards gave way to silence.

Once the noise from below died off, I considered staying up there all night. I thought it would be nice to sleep in the wash of moonlight surrounding me, but then there was a noise: a weird, dry, rustling sound came from behind the door at the end of the gallery, the door I was only maybe thirty yards from. It echoed in the still silence.

I don't know... there was something about that noise, it sent a chill down my spine. The darkness that had been so comforting now felt oppressive, it was cloaking some threat or danger sneaking up on me. Not daring to move, I kept my eyes on the door obscured by the gloom, but I couldn't tell if it was moving. If the doorknob was turning.

I heard the rustling again, and a thump against the wooden panel, like a single knock from the inside of a tomb. My heart raced, and I was shaking but frozen in place; any movement — even a breath too loud — would give my presence away to whatever *thing* lurked beyond the door.

Eventually, after silence had stretched on long enough the immediate danger had passed, I unfroze my muscles and joints and made my way to safety. I crept back through the trapdoor and into my closet, pulling it closed behind me and wincing at the thump as it settled into the frame. I moved the chair I'd used to climb up out of the doorway, but only until I closed the closet door, and then I moved it right back in front of the door.

It wasn't much use against a ghost, but it would slow anything corporeal at least. Hopefully long enough that I could get out of my room.

I didn't sleep with my earplugs that night. I barely slept at all. I kept hearing that sound in my brain, that dry, rustling sound like desiccated flesh rasping against a linen nightgown, or fingernails scraping against the lining of a coffin. It was a long night, and left me tired and cranky in the early morning — too early for there to even be coffee in the dining room, but Caliban at least had a pot brewed in the kitchen for us and the other first-shift suckers.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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I'VE ALWAYS FELT that I was pretty self-aware. At least I'd *like* to think so. But I guess if I actually wasn't, I wouldn't know because I wouldn't be aware of it?

This was the kind of circular thinking that used to keep me up at night in the bunker, an occasional side effect of smoking the jazz cabbage.

I smoked pot for a lot of reasons. First, because I liked it, I liked how it made me feel — all except the appetite stimulation, which I've never really needed and Stoned Mouse could really pack away some fucking snacks. Secondary to that, it helped to calm my worries: about Azzie, about the instability of Salem, and the feeling that everything there seemed to be balanced on a knife's edge all the time. About the fate of the world in general, and whether we could survive. Whether we deserved to.

About all the dogs and cats and other pets left behind, some trapped inside houses with their dead families.

I've dealt with a lot of anxiety-based insomnia, in the last year especially, but sometimes instead of rocking me to sleep against the soft bosom of the chronic, the devil's lettuce caused me to get all caught up in pondering shit like whether I'm really self-aware or just think I am. Which might be frustrating and ultimately confusing, but it was a fuck-ton better than picturing abandoned pets.

Even though I might've ended up staying up for most of the night, at least if I'd been stoned I wouldn't be pondering

death because of a terrible suspicion the attic above my bedroom was haunted. Which led to a lot of reasonable questions about the afterlife, like what if nothingness would ultimately be better because what if heaven sucks? I mean, I get bored easily and *eternity* is an awful long time to be restless and looking for entertainment.

“Well?” Caliban asked like I knew what he was talking about. My eyes darted from side to side, looking for clues, but nothing jumped out at me. He’d forced me out of bed — okay, the floor partially underneath the bed — at an ungodly hour to help him in the bakehouse, which was something I’d agreed to, in the abstract, because only in the abstract did “wake up before 5 a.m. to bake bread and cinnamon rolls” sound like a great idea.

Even with most of the pot of coffee he provided as soon as I crossed the threshold of the kitchen, I still wasn’t quite latching onto linear conversations. My brain was about four steps behind and wandering in a million different directions. Not to mention we’d been at this for hours already, and I think I was all baked out. The scent of cinnamon and warm dough filled the room and awoke the ravenous beast living in my gut.

“Uhh...” I trailed off, hoping it would prompt him to repeat himself.

His lips pursed, nostrils flaring, and his jaw ticked with annoyance. He crossed his arms and planted his feet, which I’ve begun to think of as the biker equivalent of shoring up the levees before the flood waters of Hurricane Mouse get too high. I mean, they do it *all the damn time!* And I never see them do it with other people nearly as often as me, so I’m really beginning to take it personally.

“You weren’t listening. At all.”

I quickly debated the merits of trying to fake my way out of this, but then decided there was no point since I really had no fucking idea what he’d been talking about for quite a while, and what could the possible repercussions be anyways?

“Nope, sorry. I got distracted thinking about puffing the magic dragon and whether ghosts were just angels taking a

vacation, and whether we'd all qualify for at least major holidays and maybe some personal time in the afterlife. What do you think? OH! And do you think we can go to different planes of existence or maybe different timelines in the multiverse or only our specific earth, unless we qualify for different tourism packages or something? Which begs another question: multiverse, yay or nay? I have a lot of problems with most conceptions of time travel but—”

“Stop.”

My mouth snapped shut and I frowned, feeling slightly offended at the interruption, but also kinda bad about going off on another tangent again, since Caliban wasn't nearly as interested in this nonsense as I—

“You can't just keep asking questions and not waiting for the answers, that's incredibly rude and frustrating. I have shit to say, honey.” He rested a hip against the edge of the work table. His arms were still crossed, but they were looser now, a little more relaxed, as he began to articulate the shit he had to say. “So personally, I've always thought ghosts were residual energy, anchored to a specific place by the strength of the person who died, but the whole idea of them being spirits on vacation from heaven has a lot of appeal to me,” his brow furrowed as he contemplated the new ideas I'd introduced, and I swear the more he spoke, the more attractive he got. “I'm not necessarily pro-multiverse but I certainly believe there's more to this world than dreamt of in your philosophies, Horatio — and side note, I've read some good arguments that say that quote is actually Hamlet elevating theology above philosophy as a superior tool for understanding the world, and has nothing to do with the supernatural. I think that argument, faith over philosophy where *philosophy* means the scientific method in this case, has a lot of merit. Especially right now because Janus has set us so far back in terms of innovation and research. Sometimes we'll have to take a leap of faith because there just isn't the time or resources to do full-scale testing of things.”

Like having a hunch about a vaccine for Janus? *Preach, my soul brother.*

He continued, settling in to the delivery of his monologue. “As a species, right now the human race is caught up in those basic tiers of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and will be for a long time, and we’ve lost too many brilliant minds that could’ve achieved so much. We may never get back to a point where time, resources, and energy can be put into exploring some of these fringe theories like the multiverse— and don’t even get me started on things like art, or music, or literature— which begs the question: can something be a loss if it never existed? This... I ask myself this almost every day, and I—”

I jumped him.

I couldn’t help it.

The more he talked, and the more his mind leapt from idea to idea in a trail of gingerbread crumbs leading me to a candy-based construction in the woods, the more I kept repeating “more, yes, *please!* Now, now, all of it now, tell me— *Yes!*” in my head. And I realize that poor impulse control is usually considered a character flaw, but it works out for me 50% of the time, every time.

I launched myself up at him using the bottom shelf next to me for a boost, and flew into his arms. The good part about how they brace themselves against my impending onslaught, is that he didn’t move an inch when all my weight slammed into him. Not a goddamn inch.

It was really less of a kiss than a mauling, me losing all sense of humanity once my mouth landed against his, and he parted those firm lips and let me in. My tongue was a barbarian horde plundering his fortifications, the whole invasion was rough and a little violent as our tongues fought for territory. It wasn’t anything near resembling *romantic*, but if the grip he had on my ass and how he fought me for dominance was any indication, he didn’t mind one bit. I went full-on spider monkey, my ankles locking together behind his back, my hands knotting in his hair and dragging it from the blunt, tight ponytail he’d bound it into for cooking. He hitched me up against the shiny new toy growing in his pants as I began to roll my hips, seeking friction on my special lady parts.

My grip on his hair and face, presumably giving me control of the kiss since I could move him around in any position and angle I desired, left my own territory vulnerable and exposed. His hands, free to roam, plunged right down the back of my pants to grip my ass cheeks up close and personal, lifting and separating like a 1950s bullet bra. I moaned desperately into his mouth as one hand kept me spread open in a kung fu grip — now with more squeezing action! — while the other slid deeper until I was impaled on two fingers then three. Blessed, blessed baggy jeans falling right off my ass... and blessed, blessed fingers.

*Fuuuuck yes.*

He walked me backwards to the only open vertical surface — a two foot wide section next to the closed door — and crushed me against it in the best possible way. I breathed in the heady scent of baking bread and Caliban's umami and spice, writhing like a cat in his arms.

Once in place, and despite my whimpering protests, he detached first his hands, then his mouth, before commanding, "Drop your legs." I unlocked my ankles, worried he'd come to his senses, but I was still pinned between his body and the wall.

Instead of releasing me, he went right back to the kissing as he stripped my jeans and underwear down to my ankles, fumbling blindly to yank my shoes free as I attempted to bring them within reach with my pants jammed down and tangling up my feet. It took some cursing on my part, some frantic wriggling and stretches that would inspire a contortionist, but his show of strength and strategic thigh-bracing keeping me mid-air throughout was equally impressive. Eventually I was free of everything below the waist but a single sock.

He fumbled with his belt as I ground against his thigh, soaking his jeans, and ravaged his mouth. He tasted like coffee, and cinnamon, and *Caliban*, and I couldn't get enough of him. I had a stranglehold around his head and neck, melding us together, as he freed his cock from the fabric prison that had contained it and let his jeans drop.

Heat. Silky smooth yet rock-hard flesh pressed against my hipbone, hot and thick. The hairs on his bare thigh scraped against my skin as I continued to grind against him, leaving a slippery trail behind. The heat of the ovens was no match for his skin against mine, it burned where we touched. Hands gripped the underside of my thighs, lifting me up and spreading me open as he began to slot into place, only to pull back with a groaned curse. “Forgot the condom,” he mumbled against my lips, releasing one leg to reach down, trying to catch hold of the slipping-down denim.

Thinking I could help, I began to lean in that direction too but was suddenly tipping over off his leg and jerking up to correct, only to catch him in the throat with my shoulder. “Nhgng,” he croaked as I clipped him in the chin, slamming his mouth shut unexpectedly.

“Sorry!” I chirped, and he huffed out a soft laugh before kissing me on the tip of my nose.

“Hold on.” Almost in slow motion, he lifted me into the air, my back sliding up the wall. His hands gripped my ass, forearms under my thighs, spreading my legs open with the air turning cold against my wet sex. I caught hold of the ceiling beam above us and held on as he hitched me up to wedge a shoulder under my thigh, then guided my other leg up to drape over the other shoulder. He tilted my pelvis towards his face and proceeded to lick me from clit to slit, then muff-dive like a motherfucking *champ*.

“*Oh Jesus!*” I swore, my eyes rolling back in my head as he latched on with lips and even teeth, licking and sucking and fucking me with his tongue until my already drenched pussy became a goddamn ocean — I could feel it trickling down as he kneaded and squeezed my ass like the bread dough he set to proofing.

My back arched. I jammed my pussy against his talented mouth, forcing his tongue deeper. He lapped in a circle like he was licking a pudding cup clean, making all the same yummy noises and causing me to squeal in rapture. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I kept repeating, rocking against his face, the ceiling beam in a death grip, until his teeth scraped lightly against my clit and



my orgasm detonated inside me, flares going off behind my eyes, sparks of pleasure rippling through my body.

I gasped and moaned and panted through it, my eyes rolling back in my head, oblivious to everything. I slumped as my body went boneless, my back sliding down the wall behind me. He twisted his shoulders until my legs slid off and down around his arms — the hands on my ass gliding me back down his body until I was hovering just above his now condom-clad cock, rock-hard and jutting up towards his stomach.

“Put me inside you,” he rasped out, and I had to look away from the intensity of his gaze, using the need to fumble between my legs, to find and position him, to break the stare. I gave his cock a bit of a tug and squeeze on the tip — kind of like a secret handshake for my new acquaintance — and murmured a greeting as I directed his man stick towards my lady hole. “As much as I appreciate the narration, never use those terms ever again,” he groaned, as the tip of his cock breached my opening and began to glide in.

“Okay, sure, whatever you say.” I would’ve agreed to anything at that moment, considering he was filling me to the point of almost-pain, right on the edge where I liked to live.

I accepted it about myself years ago that I was a total size-queen. As a relatively small person, it might make sense to prefer average size men with average size cocks, but nope, I wanted to feel like my partner could potentially crush me flat and then ideally tear me in half with his dick. I wasn’t willing to plumb the depths of my past to explore why. It is what it is. I wasn’t just talking ripped and muscle-bound either, I was down with the husky dudes too as long as they were packing, but those were a rare breed these days with too much work and not enough food.

Caliban was a solid, compact piece of man-flesh endowed with satisfying length and substantial girth, enough that, if I was lucky, I’d have a limp for the rest of the day. If he stepped it up a little.

“Harder, harder, harder,” I begged, earning a grin from him.

His flushed, sweat beading at his hairline, and his bright blue eyes practically glowed. Not glittery black. I shook off the sensation and focused on him, on *Caliban*, and I was struck again by what a ruggedly handsome guy he was — not sure why it was always a surprise when I'd randomly recognize these things, I guess most of the time he was just "Caliban" in my brain and not a *man*. Not someone who'd ever be in this position, this close. Seeing him like that made me feel...

Unsettled.

I was finding eye contact to be difficult, so instead I looked around for something to brace my hands on so he could focus on banging my brains out, but there wasn't anything.

"I'm close," he warned, picking up speed. I gave up on finding a convenient pull-up bar and left my arms around his neck, closing my eyes. I dug my fingers into his hair, feeling the coarse wavy texture that was so different from— from whatever my fingers had expected. His beard scratched, not tickled, against my neck as he kissed me. I tightened all those pelvic muscles I worked so hard on, until he was losing his mind and blowing his load, in that order.

I didn't come a second time, but I was happy just to get through the experience without a panic attack, so I was more than satisfied.

The last person I'd had sex with, well, the situation had been different. Less about choice than survival. I hadn't thought it would weigh on me this much, that I'd conflate my two very different partners. I felt a surge of disappointment in myself, for not being stronger.

After a few softer thrusts, he dropped one of my legs to reach between us and hold the condom as he pulled out. I let out a little sigh of contentment as my muscles relaxed. He moved back a half-step or so, but he was eyeing me like he was going to make shit awkward, so I used his preoccupation with removing and tying off the condom to slip out from between him and the wall. I gathered up my clothes and circled to the far side of the work table.

I kept my head down as I dressed, giving myself a minute to enjoy the feeling of being thoroughly fucked without any complications. Once I had my shoes on, I gave him a huge, borderline-manic grin. “Thanks, chef. That was fun.”

He’d already tucked everything away, buckled his belt, straightened his chef’s coat, and was watching me with arms crossed (again!) and a furrowed brow, but my words seem to throw him off or something. He tilted his head in confusion. “You’re welcome?”

“We should probably disinfect— something?” I looked around and shrugged. Besides the ceiling beam and wall, we hadn’t actually touched anything except each other.

“It’s fine,” he replied, still watching me carefully.

“Cool...” I looked around, then grinned at him again, just as wide. “Since we were done for the day, I guess I’ll go then. I’m starving.” I circled back around the table on my way to the door, and he stepped in front of me.

“Mouse,” his voice was soft, and I squished my face in frustration, running a hand over it, before looking up at him with a patient smile.

“Yes?”

“Should we maybe talk about this?”

I blinked at him, waiting for the punchline. He sighed.

“Umm, well done? That was great?” I supplied tentatively, giving him a thumbs up, and his eyes narrowed. Maybe I shouldn’t have posed those as questions? “Really great! And the oral?” I gave him a chef’s kiss, nodding in appreciation. “Four stars, definitely.”

“Mouse,” he repeated, and I sighed.

“I don’t know what you want me to say. And frankly, you seemed pretty satisfied too so I’m not sure why I’m the only one giving compliments here,” I muttered, looking off to the side.

“You can’t seem to get away from me fast enough here — I just want to make sure we’re okay.” He looked genuinely

concerned, and I nodded, rolling my eyes at my own stupidity. He was a good guy, he wouldn't treat me like a pass-around even if that's what I really wanted: no strings and no attachments. "Did you just roll your eyes at me?"

"What? No!" I shook my head, realizing I was just making it more awkward by not verbalizing things. "I was rolling them at myself. Look, this ain't my first rodeo, okay? I'm not exactly a blushing virgin, haven't been in a long, long time, and I'm familiar enough with... biker culture, I guess. I didn't expect you to see this any differently than hooking up with any of the other girls — unless... are you a cuddler? Is that the problem? I guess we could hug it out or something," I stepped forward with my arms outspread and his whole body went stiff in outrage.

"I'm not a cuddler." He glared at me, crossing his arms even tighter.

"It's okay if you are," I said, soothingly as I stepped closer and patted his arm. "I'm not, not after sex. Or at least not usually, but even I can see the appeal sometimes—"

"Goddammit, Mouse, I'm not a cuddler!"

"Okayyyy..." I drew out the word, my eyes darting around. "What's the problem then? Oh— oh wait... You don't have an old lady, do you? Or a sweetie? Am I in the presence of the rarest of all creatures, a monogamous biker? *Motorheadunus monogami*? So rare to find in the wild," I teased, but he didn't smile, so I mumbled, "Quick, let me get NatGeo on the line to send a photographer!" just to finish the joke properly.

He gave me the death stare to end all death stares. I widened my eyes and tried to look innocent. Finally, in a low, but by no means *soft*, voice, he said, "I just want to know what you're thinking."

That stopped me in my tracks, and I shook my head. "No, you don't."

"Yeah, I really do," his voice was softer, and there was this look in his eye— nope. Needed to shut this shit down

immediately.

“In reverse order, I was thinking it’s cute that you’re a cuddler but really inconvenient because I’m super hungry and I’m pretty sure there’s pancakes upstairs. I was thinking that you’re a hell of a fuck, and I wasn’t expecting you to be so proportionate — you’re unexpectedly girthy is what I mean, and I’m really feelin’ it right now, which isn’t a bad thing. While I was getting dressed, I was thinking about taking Addie to see the dogs and wondering if she’d want to go to the farm again soon. Right before that, I was thinking how inconvenient it would be to get flour up my vag, so I was glad we didn’t end up using the work table, besides that being really unhygienic. And that made me wonder if flour and lube mixed together would make glue, and how awful that would be on the girlie bits. And then before that, I was thinking *gee I hope he doesn’t try to make this complicated by wanting to talk about feelings or shit, because I really just wanted to get laid, and I might be up to revisiting this again at a later time as long as he’s not all clingy*. So now I’m a little disappointed because I’m thinking this probably needs to be a one-and-done situation. And that’s regrettable because your oral skills alone are really worth revisiting.”

I watched his face change as I spoke: jaw getting tenser, lips more and more pinched, eyes narrowing, and nostrils flaring, but he wasn’t angry. No, there was hurt there. And I kinda felt bad, because there really isn’t a worse feeling than hooking up with someone you think cares, and then finding out they don’t, or at least not at the same level as you. Apparently, Caliban cared. And I just hurt his feelings.

That sucked, but better now than later.

“Hey, look, I’m sorry,” I said, shrugging. “I thought this was just a casual fuck. It’s not like we really spend a lot of time together so it didn’t occur to me you might want... *more*.”

“If I was Loki, you wouldn’t be so quick to walk away,” he said, in a voice low and raw. A vein in his temple began to throb.

“Well now you’re just pissing me off,” I snapped at him, shaking my head. “You don’t know *shit* about me, Caliban, so don’t presume— you know what? Go fuck yourself. I don’t *owe* you anything. We fucked. We both got off. End of transaction. Don’t bring anyone else into this, and don’t— GOD! Just fuck off!” I yelled, and then stormed past him, so angry that I wanted to break shit but couldn’t.

I stomped to the stairs, passing our next-shift replacement leaning against the wall, smirking. I then stomped *up* the stairs, but could still hear him over my racket, following behind at a more reasonable pace and not having the courtesy to keep his distance. It just made me madder. And part of me realized that I was *unreasonably* angry — one might even say *hangry* — but the rest of me told that part to shut its whore mouth and stay out of this because Caliban was being an asshole.



I STALKED THROUGH THE KITCHEN, growling at anyone who dared get in my way, then out to the dining room where I got in the food line and bounced on my heels, impatient at how long the fucking line was taking. Were they cooking the pancakes to order? How long does it fucking take to scoop some eggs onto a plate?

Fuckwad followed me out of the kitchen, sans chef’s coat and wearing his cut now, and he glared at me as he passed by and got in the line a few people behind me. I heard a couple guys try to talk to him but he growled something rude in response, and then there was an uncomfortable cone of silence surrounding our whole area. I ignored the weighted looks of all the gossipy little bitches and wished some of the club girls were here to distract them, but it was too early for most of them to be up yet. Or at least ready to be seen in public, so I was on my own. Hazel and Addie weren’t even downstairs, though Tesla and Magick were at the big table.

Oh. Joy.

I filled two plates up, per usual at breakfast, and no one even raised an eyebrow anymore. I also didn't feel bad about how much I ate because I was working my ass off for them, and would be doing a lot more to benefit them before I was done here, so a couple extra pancakes and strips of bacon were a small price for them to pay.

Once I had my standard two cups of coffee in hand, I headed to the big table and settled in, unfurling my napkin with a snap and going prison-rules on my plates: head down, posture guarded, eating as fast as I could. It didn't help. Caliban slammed his plate down across from me and next to Magick before I was even half done with my pancakes.

"I take it the bakery shift didn't go well?" Magick asked mildly, sipping from his cup. I shrugged, not looking up, and hoped Caliban would keep his fucking mouth shut.

I should've known better.

"Oh, the cooking part was fine," Caliban sniped, and I could just *feel* his glare on me. I ignored him and kept eating.

"Did you two bicker the entire time?" Now he was starting to sound amused, and I grunted, again *hoping* Caliban would keep—

"No, we got along so well that we ended up fucking against the wall." That asshole just couldn't keep the smugness out of his voice. I looked up and shot him a death-glare through my hair before I straightened up in my seat and looked around the table, meeting Magick's and Tesla's eyes.

Both were stone-faced, but there was a tic jumping in Magick's jaw like he was grinding his teeth, and Tesla was frantically chewing on his lip ring.

"And everything was great until Resting Bitch Face over there wanted to cuddle and I wanted breakfast." I smirked at Caliban, not breaking my stare-off with him as I chewed slowly through a forkful of pancake. "I guess I hurt snowflake's feelings."

"That's not what I wanted and you know that!" He slammed his fork down on the table, rattling all the dishes, and

causing conversation around us to die out as everyone turned to see what was going on.

“To be really honest, I don’t know *what* you wanted,” I snarled back at him, keeping my voice as low as I could. “But I’d really appreciate if you kept your fucking voice down. Or maybe not do this publicly? Or how about not at all? Can’t we be fucking *adults* about this?”

Apparently that was past Caliban’s limits because he’d turned a deep red with his fists clenched on the table, and he looked like he was about to explode.

“My office, *now!*” Magick barked, pointing to the door like we were errant children, and I silently seethed but stood up. I shoved another massive forkful of pancake in my mouth, sucked down one mug of coffee without even reminding her what a filthy slut she was, and gazed sadly at the cup I’d have to leave behind. I fisted the rest of my bacon and followed the three of them out of the dining room. I trailed behind as the line of them crossed the back part of the lobby towards Magick’s office, the first room off the hallway next to the stairs, the one that led to Doc’s office and the infirmary. A confused Loki was descending the stairs right then, and I frantically shook my head at him, gesturing for him to continue on to the dining room.

He ignored me.

“What’s going on?” He sounded like he was getting angry in anticipation, and I stepped towards him to convince him to just keep walking but Magick stopped me.

“This concerns you too,” he said grimly, tipping his head towards his office door.

“No it fucking does not,” I snapped, actually stomping my foot in frustration, and every fucking one of them ignored me — except Loki, who reached over and broke off the top halves of all my bacon, shoving it all into his mouth. “Goddammit!” I shrieked, and he shrugged.

“I already know I’m going to end up pissed at you, and bad girls don’t deserve bacon.” Loki walked right past me into



Magick's office, and I stared dumbly at his back. What the *fuck?*

"After you," Caliban gestured with his arm, smug as fuck, but I was paralyzed, no longer sure what was going on.

"Raz is on his way," Tesla said, deliberately not looking at me, and followed Loki in. Magick stood by the door, waiting patiently, while my eyes darted back and forth between him and Caliban.

"What the fuck is happening right now?" I whispered, unmoving.

"Conversation that probably should've been had awhile ago, but apparently wasn't," Magick said, tilting his head towards the inside of the room, and giving nothing away. Caliban glanced at me again, then disappeared through the door. I didn't move.

"I don't want to do this," I shook my head, and he looked past me, swallowing hard.

"It'll be fine."

"I know we basically just met and maybe I haven't made a sterling impression on you, but I'm a grown-ass woman, Magick. I should be able to fuck who I want. It doesn't impact my ability to do my job, and I'd never let anything I do get near Addie. *Never.*"

"What's this now?" Rasputin came jogging up the hallway on the other side of Magick's office, presumably coming in from the kennels. I couldn't see him approach from where I stood near the bottom of the stairs, where I was still contemplating whether I could just take off up them and disappear. "Is that bacon?"

I handed the handful of bacon halves over to him, and he shoved them in his mouth and stared between me and Magick as he chewed.

"Everybody in my office," Magick sighed, running his hand through his hair. Rasputin shrugged and went in, but I still stalled. "Mouse, please just—" he ran his hand over his

face this time, visibly aggravated. He took a deep breath. “Get the fuck in my office, *now*.”

“You first,” I whispered, and I guess he could see how bad my hands were shaking, because he nodded and went in. I followed, shutting the door behind me and standing with my back to it.

Magick circled his desk and sat down in his chair. Loki stood in the corner behind him with his back against the wall, and I hadn’t heard anyone talking in the room but he was *livid* and doing everything possible not to look at me.

Tesla sat on one end of a couch, Caliban on the other. Rasputin stood against the wall just inside the door, putting him right next to me. I shifted a little so I was more in the corner and he eyed me but didn’t say anything, just continued licking his fingers while I wiped my bacony hand on my jeans.

“So what’s going on?” Rasputin asked, still mostly eyeing me but glancing at the others as well.

“Caliban fucked Mouse,” Tesla said, voice devoid of any emotion or inflection.

I stared at Tesla, not letting my gaze wander, and corrected him coldly. “No. Caliban and Mouse fucked. There’s a difference. Don’t take away my agency in this, I initiated it and I was an equal participant. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that Mouse fucked Caliban.”

He met my eyes. His nostrils flared and his jaw clenched. I stared back and waited.

“So?” Rasputin asked, and I threw up my hands and smiled at him. “I mean, cheers for Cal for breaking the curse, but other than that...”

“Exactly! So what? Why does this require— wait, curse?”

“For an equal participant, you sure did get pissed off at him,” Magick observed.

“I was mostly just hangry,” I admitted, and shrugged. “We had a little spat about post-fuck etiquette that got out of hand and I’m sorry it ruined everyone’s breakfast. Won’t happen

again.” I focused on Caliban. “I can guarantee that,” I said coldly.

His eye twitched, his face flushing darker. “And that’s exactly the problem, Mouse. I tried to talk to you so this exact situation wouldn’t happen, but you were too interested in pancakes to check in with me. And when I pushed you, you got pissed.”

“No, to be fair, I didn’t get pissed at you until you brought Loki into the conversation,” I snapped at him, ignoring the noises being made by the others. “Before that, I was all kinds of reasonable trying to figure out what you wanted from me, but you refused to accept anything I said and kept pushing me until I said something you didn’t like.”

“Stop.” Magick interrupted as Caliban started to respond, and he sat back, glaring at me. I took a chance and glanced over at Loki, who looked surprisingly calm considering how mad he was when I walked in. “We’re not going to sit here and listen to you two continue to bicker. We need to—”

“What do you mean you brought me into the conversation?” Loki interrupted Magick, growling at Caliban. Okay, so he seemed calm, but I’m pretty sure that was a trick to lull people into complacency because he did not *sound* calm.

Caliban groaned, tilting his head back and covering his face with his hands, before facing him. “It was a fucked up thing to say, but I was frustrated, and— and I was fucking jealous, okay?” He turned to me then, and I saw that look again, the one that caused me to run in the first place. “I wanted to kiss you, and maybe enjoy some goddamn afterglow, but you just fucking dodged me and went racing to get dressed. I tried talking to you to make sure you were okay, but you were blowing me off. And I was a dick. I shouldn’t have said what I did.”

“I didn’t— okay, I did dodge you,” I said, making a face, “but I wasn’t racing to get my clothes on. We were done, and I was hungry, and I didn’t think you were going to make a big deal out of it. It was just sex, Caliban—”

“Mouse, I’m pretty sure it’s the first sex you had since you — uh, got here—”

“I’m *fine*,” I insisted. “Perfectly healthy.”

“—and I wasn’t thinking. I wasn’t exactly gentle, and towards the end you couldn’t even look at me, so I needed to make sure you were okay.”

“Why didn’t you just say that?”

“I tried, but the first words out of your mouth were *thanks chef, that was fun* like you couldn’t even say my name. You avoided everything until you accused me of being a cuddler and offered to hug it out. And then, yeah, you bruised my ego a little with your inner monologue. You called me fucking *clingy* for wanting to make sure you were okay!”

He was right.

He was right, and I was even more fucked up than I realized.

I couldn’t get out of there fast enough because I was freaking out over how my brain kept trying to superimpose Beast over Caliban. How it was making me feel.

Like before I was Mouse.

I kept telling myself what we did a few weeks ago wasn’t rape. He didn’t force me. And at the end there, whatever they might have been planning, it didn’t get that far. But those eleven days I spent with Beast and the club, back in my childhood hell, that wasn’t... it wasn’t my choice. Even the sex — given an option, I wouldn’t have, but I felt like I had to. At the time, I felt like I had to, to survive.

What happened back in Jackson, it wasn’t sex.

He didn’t physically force me, but only because he didn’t have to. Not this time. And I was just deluding myself that it was my choice, this time was my choice. But it wasn’t.

I couldn’t do this right now, not here, not in front of them. I couldn’t face my demons with witnesses, especially not *them*.

They didn't need to know that I *never* stuck around after, or that I couldn't ever watch my partner come, not without feeling... *polluted*. I had to look away, so I didn't see them turn their heads away. Once they were done with me.

I thought I was okay because as Mouse, I had a lot of sex and it was always my choice. With all of them, I was the one deciding what we did, how far it would go, and I was the one eager and willing just looking for some fun. And I was the one who left when it was over.

Every time, it was all okay because I was the one sitting back on the couch with my face tilted toward the ceiling while they gave me what I wanted, even though it never really felt like what I needed. Even though it left me feeling empty inside afterwards.

But was it really my choice? Or was I just acting out what I knew, the only thing I knew: a good time, quick and casual. No feelings involved.

"I'm sorry I acted the way I did," I said, almost robotically, but I couldn't seem to muster up any emotion at the moment. I was a void inside. I stared at the wall just above his head, hoping it looked like I was making eye contact. "Thank you for thinking to check in with me, but everything was fine. You weren't too rough, you didn't hurt me, I was into everything we did. I'm a bit of a commitment-phobe, and I haven't been in a relationship in years—" *Yeah, like fourteen of them, you fucked up little whore!* "—and I really do prefer to keep things casual. No strings. I'd be up for a repeat if you were game," I curled up one side of my mouth in a pathetic attempt at a smile.

"Which brings us to why we needed to talk," Magick said and I flinched, somehow having forgotten the rest of them were in the room. "Although it sounds like half the issue is solved since you prefer things casual." His voice sounded weird, and I glanced over at him — I couldn't place the expression on his face.

"Not sure why my name came up, but I told you I was being patient," Loki wasn't exactly angry, but he sure as fuck

wasn't *happy* either. It was enough to snap me out of whatever emotional fugue I was in, and I focused on him, swallowing back the lump in my throat. "That hasn't changed."

"When you said that, I— I don't know what you mean," I stuttered out, not liking the look on his face, there was *hurt* there. "I thought you meant you were waiting for me to be more *normal*, fit in here better. Not be so weird and talk about shit like *crotch cheese*, or— or whatever."

"You know now," he said, and lowered his head to stare at the ground, done with the conversation, even though I *didn't* know, not for sure. Was he waiting for me to initiate something? For me to choose him? Did I ruin things by fucking Caliban?

"Imma throw my hat in the ring too," Rasputin grinned and winked at me, "you just say the word."

"Okay, cool, so Mouse knows she has options," Magick interjected before I had to respond, saving me from embarrassing myself by asking Rasputin if he was just fucking with me or not, and if that was what Loki meant too. "Mouse, the whole club knows you're off-limits — don't give me that look. You have a job and it isn't fucking club members, you're here for Adèle. We did the same thing with Hazel, we do that with any woman who has a specific job. Off-limits doesn't mean untouchable."

It followed what I'd learned from the women about jobs and responsibilities, and I appreciated the confirmation, giving him a head bob. "Anyway, you're right, you're a grown-ass woman and you can fuck who you want. But we're gonna want to check in with you and make sure you're okay with whatever is happening, and you're gonna need to let us. Any of us, or you can talk to Doc. You're one of us, Mouse, and we need to look out for you. Okay?"

I was touched, truly I was. And I was one hundred percent onboard, until he said I was one of them. All that did was remind me that I wasn't, that I needed to keep some distance. I needed to keep things casual, whether sex or friendship or whatever, because attachments... Not them. Never them.

I needed to be Mouse. Not Janie or Jayne, desperate for attention and affection. And especially not looking for it from bikers.

And just like that, all those fortifications slammed back into place, and I was Mouse again. I gave him my most sincere smile. “Thank you, that means something to me. I know the rules now, and I won’t get pissy about you checking up on me. I’m going to go upstairs now. Sorry for all the fuss this morning, Caliban and I should’ve resolved it before anyone else got involved, and that won’t happen again. Caliban? I hope things are good between us now? Yes? Good. Great. Okay then, I’m just gonna—” And I managed to open the door and back out before I finished that sentence, like Homer Simpson disappearing into the shrubbery, then turned and took off up the stairs full-speed.

Like fuck I was going to talk to Doc about anything.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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IT DIDN'T TAKE Magick long to show up at my door.

I might've suspected that they drew straws or something, but then I realized that he probably just issued an order or proclaimed first dibs. Did he declare *prima nocta*?

Does it count as *prima nocta* if you're there to yell at your subject instead of fuck her?

I'd answered the door to find him leaning forward with one hand on the doorframe, the other tugging at his hair like he was armwrestling a headache. Same, dude.

"Hey, can we talk?"

"Yeah, sure." I stepped back and gestured for him to come into the room. He looked around like he'd never been in there before, and I noticed him grimace at the bags of clothes lined up along the wall. It was all the stuff Magick and Rasputin picked up for me at the flea market; the bags had been delivered here at some point after I left for the bakehouse and I hadn't yet had a chance to look through them. It must've been a pain in the ass for them based on the look on his face. "Uh, thanks for picking up those clothes for me. I really appreciate it." He nodded, but the grimace only seemed to get worse, so I decided distraction was the best strategy. "So what's up?"

He did another survey of the room, his brow furrowed. "This is your room. Permanently," he clarified. I nodded slowly. "I mean you can put personal shit out. You don't need to keep it the same, it isn't a hotel room or something."



“Oh, okay.” I nodded along like that was what was holding me back. He glanced around again, slower.

“You don’t have anything...”

“Uh, yeah. Nope. Sorry. Basically came here with the clothes on my back and a few extra things that they scrounged up for me at the— place I was at.” If he noticed my hesitation, he didn’t say anything. For lots of reasons, I wanted to keep the rez out of things. “So like I said, I really appreciate the clothes that you and Rasputin picked up for me.”

There was that grimace again. Weird.

“Uh, yeah. Sure. No problem. So, can I sit?”

“Sure.” I gestured at the armchair and let him pass me, then pulled out my desk chair and perched on it. I think he expected me to sit on the bed right in front of him because he looked a bit annoyed when he realized I was on the other side of the room.

He got up and moved to the end of the bed, sitting down right in front of me instead. Resting his elbows on his knees, he leaned in even closer.

I don’t know why I thought this was going to be an interrogation, but it was the opposite. He didn’t ask a single question after that token polite inquiry about sitting down, he *lectured* me. For forty minutes, he went into excruciating detail about how the club worked, what was expected of me as an “employee” of the Apocalypse Riders — *not* a member, that was made very clear — and in my position caring for Addie.

In a lot of ways, it was fascinating to hear how he ran the club, what his expectations were of someone associated with the Apocalypse Riders, what their long-term goals were... it made me wonder. Would this still be the case if Janus hadn’t happened? Did the pandemic free this man to carve a kingdom out of a chaotic, post-apocalyptic wasteland? Or would he be a billionaire now instead, the CEO of a multinational corporation, one where their hostile takeovers included firearms and company picnics devolved into drunken orgies?

And how the fuck was he going to enforce this at other chapters?

Even before Janus, the Apocalypse Riders cut a swathe right down the center of the country. Post-Janus, it seemed like they were looking to expand even farther; at dinner, Komo had been talking about his attempts to get a foothold in Ohio and Pennsylvania, he had some kind of in with the club that currently owned that territory that he planned to exploit.

With those poppy fields, it might just work, but it required that this place stayed secret, it needed to stay safe.

I wondered if Loki told Magick that I knew, but I didn't think so. Pretty sure this little talk would be very different if that were the case, and probably include a bullet to my skull.

As he spoke, I kept my eyes big. I kept my mouth just a little bit slack, projecting shock and admiration at his grand plans. I nodded enthusiastically, agreed to everything he demanded, and didn't interrupt. I didn't ask questions, not of any substance, even though I was dying to pick his brain. I wanted to understand their motivations, but also how this all came about. How much planning it all took, when they started.

Intellectually, I was stimulated, but I fought it. My brain would do me no favors here, my cunning and my calculation would only draw more suspicion.

Instead, I compiled a mental list of all the things that lit my fuse and sparked my plugs.

Instead, I was docile and accepting.

I felt a little dirty, but I also like breathing so I sucked it up and acted impressed with the man more than the kingdom they were building. I let admiration creep into my gaze, let it heat up. Licked my lips. Pretended I was more interested in the shape of his mouth than the words coming out of it.

And at the end of it, he sat back on my bed, propped up by those inked-up arms that looked so good wrapped around Plum's body, and studied me with those electric blue eyes.

"So what do you think?" His expression gave me nothing, but since mine was as genuine as a blow-up doll, I didn't judge

him for it.

“I think that this is way more than I ever expected to find at a motorcycle club,” that at least was true, “and you’re an incredible leader.” Eh. Close enough. I’d give him all the credit if it got me through this situation, even though I knew it was a collaboration.

He looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “They were right. You’re fucking good at this.”

“Huh?” *Fuck.*

He sat up, facing me with the tiniest, barest hint of a smile, and a knowing gleam in his eye that got my heart beating double time. And I wasn’t totally sure it was fear.

“I didn’t get, and *keep*, this position by being naïve. I also didn’t get it by surrounding myself with idiots or ass kissers. I’m not blinded by arrogance, and stroking my ego doesn’t keep me from seeing right the fuck through you. Not you, personally. That was more of a general *you*, because *you*, I think, don’t do anything without having your next six moves already planned out.”

I clamped my mouth shut and leaned back, suddenly wishing there was more distance between us. He continued talking.

“Ran into Komo and Jelly on our way back. Had an interesting conversation with them. Seems you made an impression, Mouse. Jelly told me that I should be careful and I should put down my guard dog before she decides she doesn’t need her master anymore. Komo told him to shut the fuck up, and then told me to put on a property patch on it and lock you down, or he’d be coming back for you.”

I began to choke, caught between a laugh and I don’t even know what. I think I even threw up a little in my mouth.

He waited until my coughing died down, studying me like a bug the whole time. Once I was calm again, he stood up, and rested his hands on his hipbones, his head turned to look out the window.

After a time, after an awkward eternity of silence, he turned back to look down at me. “Did you know that Tesla is asexual and aromantic? Did you know that Loki doesn’t usually talk, let alone smile or laugh?” He shook his head, huffing out a breath. “Adèle has to be forced to eat downstairs, and throws violent tantrums daily when she gets frustrated. It’s been twelve hours since you met, and Rasputin wants you to meet his mom. Oh, and Caliban hasn’t had sex in years. Not since his pregnant wife died from Janus.”

“Holy fuck,” I whispered, horrified.

“Who are you, Mouse? And what the fuck have you done to my club? No— no. Don’t bother trying to answer. Nothing you say is going to matter compared to what I see. And I’ll be watching.”

He sauntered to the door, with the natural swagger of a man who knows he’s the hottest fucking thing in any room. “Club room, every night,” he reminded me, then left, shutting the door carefully behind him.



I DIDN’T STICK AROUND WAITING for the next person to come looking for me, I went looking for Caliban.

He wasn’t in the kitchen, but there were two other patched-in members among the workers, and they made sure to give me shit for “banging the boss.” Someone had heard us, someone walking by the bakehouse heard us going at it. I let them know that whatever repercussions it had with Human Resources, it was completely worth it because the boss was even better at fucking than cooking. When no one took me up on my fist-bumps, I continued onto the basement.

He wasn’t in the bakehouse, the man prepping dough was the smirker from earlier and he thought it was hilarious I was trying to find Caliban. He was one of the normal “workers” which usually meant no real interaction or conversation; those who weren’t in the club, or club girls, just didn’t talk much to anyone else. They took orders and did their jobs, but stayed in

their wing of the hotel and didn't seem to interact otherwise, even having their own dining room off the other side of the kitchen and eating the same food but separately. It was kinda weird, but I gotta say, I preferred the wall of silence over the shit he was giving me. I didn't need to be the exception.

I didn't think he would answer me at first, but I let him get all the jokes out of his system and then rolled high on my Persuasion check. I can be super charming sometimes. Eventually he admitted that Caliban was doing inventory in one of the store rooms, on the condition that I never talk to him ever again because I made it "creepy." Rude.

I found Caliban in the fourth storeroom I checked, counting jars of pickled beets.

"Uh, hey," I called out as I made a bunch of noise at the doorway, not wanting to startle him.

He glanced around a row of shelves, smiled at me tightly, and then disappeared back behind the floor to ceiling shelving.

I slunk through the door and hovered around the next rack over, behind him, watching him mark numbers next to items on the clipboard in his hand. He finished the section he was working on then sighed, setting the clipboard on top of the jars and letting his arms drop to his side, with his back still to me.

"No chance you're just dropping by to say hi, for no reason whatsoever, right?" His shoulders slumped when I didn't answer. "Someone told you."

"Yeah."

"Fuck."

"Yeah..." I came up behind him and slid my arms under his, wrapping them around his waist and hugging him tight, but not suffocating-tight. It was a solid hug. I braced my forehead between his shoulder blades and didn't move.

"Mouse..."

"Shut up, Caliban. This hug is for me, not you, so that I stop feeling like the worst fucking person in creation."

His hands settled on top of mine. “You aren’t the worst person in creation. Not even in the top five.” I squeezed lightly. “Probably the top ten though.” I squeezed super tight, for just a second, forcing the air out of his lungs. “You’re just proving my point,” he coughed.

“I’m sorry I’m such an asshole.”

“It’s okay, I know you can’t help it.” I didn’t squeeze him for that, as tempting as it was. Thing was, I *could* be less of an asshole, but it would just end up hurting me more in the end. “Hey, I was just kidding. I don’t think you’re an asshole.”

When I didn’t say anything, he turned in my arms, and I dropped them down once he was facing me. I looked up into his handsome face with his bright blue eyes, framed by all that wavy strawberry blonde hair and that impressive beard, and wished I hadn’t been the first person he fucked since his wife died. I was not made for that kind of responsibility, or that kind of gift. I didn’t know what to do with it.

“Honey, whatever you’re thinking, just stop.” He reached up and pushed my hair back off my face, tucking it behind my ear. “I don’t regret any of it. Not even fighting with you afterward, because that let me get all pissed off and sad at you rather than myself. Which sounds selfish when I say it out loud, but then again, you were right there poking the bear.”

“Technically you were the one poking things.”

“True. And I enjoyed it. A lot. Kinda think I want to do it again.” He ran a fingertip along my jaw and over my chin, then used it to tilt my head up.

I couldn’t decide if kissing him right then was the best idea ever, or something I should avoid at all costs. It didn’t matter though, because he owned my mouth and I enjoyed letting him. I turned off my brain and we made out like teenagers for a time, keeping it to just kissing and some over-the-clothes petting.

Eventually, I got my brain back online and functioning. Still hanging onto him, I looked up into those blue eyes with the crinkles at the corner, and let him in a little more. “I don’t

regret it either, but you should know that I really could be less of an asshole, but that's me being selfish, protecting myself. And it's not really something I'm going to stop."

"You don't have to. I like you, Mouse. Prickly, rude, short-tempered, stubborn, and everything—"

"Wow, you really know how to sweet talk a girl."

"—because you're also a burst of sunshine after years of rain. You're the lightning before a storm, exciting and dangerous." He held my face between his palms, tilting it back and forcing me to look him in the eye. "You remind me that I'm still alive, and that everything can change on a fucking dime, good or bad. Every day, you do or say something unexpected, and I never even realized that I'd been drowning in nothing but the same predictable shit. Be an asshole if you need to, because I'm here for it."

Something snapped inside me. Something that was stretched thin and taut, holding closed my heart. I didn't want it gaping open, just sitting there vulnerable to whoever came along and decided to fuck with me, but the momentary sting of the bond loosening felt a little like relief. It felt like I'd been bracing myself for an onslaught that never came, and I could finally relax.

"Caliban..." I whispered, and he smiled down at me sadly.

"It's okay, Mouse. This is my choice. Mine. You aren't responsible for how I feel, only how you feel. And that's *your* choice, no one else's. You be you, and I'll be me. We don't have to do anything different. Understand? I can feel however I want, and so can you, and no one has to regret anything. You don't owe me anything."

"Caliban..." I repeated, my heart aching for him. He studied my face, like he was memorizing it, and then leaned down and kissed me gently on the forehead, letting his mouth rest there against my skin.

"You aren't mine, honey, and I'm not yours. But we both could use some pleasure in our lives, so don't ever hesitate to throw yourself into my arms and kiss me like your life

depends on it. I'll never turn you away. I'm not interested in anyone else, and I don't think I will be. Not anytime soon. So when you want me, you come find me, okay?"

I nodded, feeling his lips brush over my skin, then tilted back farther so my mouth could reach his. I kissed him, long and hard, tender and sweet, with my fingers buried in his hair, and his in mine. Then I released him, and I walked away, pretending the wetness on my cheeks wasn't there.

If my heart was open, if it had room for anyone inside it, then he'd be there. And I probably wouldn't ever be able to leave, so it was better that it remained sealed tightly shut.

Really, it was better.



AFTER I LEFT CALIBAN, I didn't feel very well. My insides felt hollowed out, like something was missing inside me. I told myself I was just overtired, that I'd been up way too early, and the emotions had wrung me out. I told myself breakfast had been uncomfortable, and then interrupted, and that's why my stomach felt sick.

It wasn't because I regretted walking away from him, or letting him reduce himself to a casual fuck for me. It wasn't because I saw he was hurting and didn't do anything about it.

It wasn't because I was a raging asshole and one of the top ten worst people in creation.

It was simply indigestion.

I tracked down Hazel, and she agreed to keep Addie for the whole day, then shut myself in my room with the lights off and the curtains drawn.

It was a dark day, and I needed to ride it out.

I curled up under the covers of my bed, and let the sadness wash over me, wiping away anything else in its path. I let myself give up. For the rest of the day and night, I was



allowed to give up. In the morning, I'd start over, and try to be better this time.

In airplanes, they tell you to put your own oxygen mask on first before trying to help others. This was me, trying to keep breathing, so that I could save everyone around me.



MUCH LIKE MY first night here, trays were delivered to my door at mealtimes, but this time I didn't get up. I couldn't. My leaden limbs weighed me down and my head felt inside-out.

They left me alone. They respected my privacy.

That almost made it worse.

If they'd been assholes, forced their way in and insisted I conform to their wishes, I could justify resenting them. But this was another nail in my coffin, proving that I was the only true asshole here. I was the selfish one. I was the monster.

I curled up tighter, listening to the echo of my heartbeat in my covered ears, as I told myself *This too shall pass*. I'd been here before, and came out the other side of it.

It wouldn't be like this forever.

*Just keep walking.*

*This too shall pass.*



AT MIDNIGHT, I made my way up into the attic. I needed the night sky to remind me how little anything mattered, that I was a speck of dust in the scheme of things.

I stared down the long expanse of the dark arcade leading up to that closed door.

I remembered being at the hospital when Janus first hit, and the endless corridors of rooms filled with the dead.

Nothing could reach me in my ventilation shafts, but here I felt *exposed*. Vulnerable.

And then I did the worst thing of all: I thought about Beast. But not like a few weeks ago, I thought about *back then*.

I went into my mind palace, into the darkest corner of the basement, and I flung open the door that I swore I'd keep locked until the end of my days. He was there, inside that room, covered in my parents' blood. Unable to look at my face.

Another rustle and thump from behind the door, and I scrambled to my feet, running full-tilt for the trapdoor, climbing down so quickly I got splinters in my palm, not one or two but *dozens*. I didn't breathe until I'd pulled the wooden hatch closed behind me.

There wasn't any lock, though. I had no way to secure it from my side.

On shaking legs, I moved the armchair back to the corner where it belonged, shut the closet door, and moved the desk chair over to wedge under the doorknob.

I slept that night fully clothed, under the bed, listening for the sound of something trying to get through that door. I dreamt about the mailbox, waiting for the truck, not knowing if they'd take me or leave me behind to die.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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IN THE MORNING, once I deemed it was a reasonable, non-suspicious hour, I showered and dressed in record time, then flew downstairs to Doc's office. He wasn't there, but the lights were on, so I figured he'd gone to an early breakfast. It took me twenty minutes with a magnifying light, tweezers, and a scalpel, but I dug out all the splinters from my palm. I left behind a pulpy mess of shallow cuts and broken skin though, and disinfecting it hurt like a bitch, so I ended up covering my whole palm in gauze and wrapped a flesh-toned bandage around it.

I cleaned up my mess, disposed of the sharps, and snuck back out of the office. I planned to get some food then maybe find someplace to hide for a few hours and nap, since I wasn't on Addie-duty until lunch.

Unfortunately, my sense of time must've been *really* off, because the dining room was already half-full; Tesla was at the big table next to Addie, cutting up her breakfast as Hazel sipped her coffee and watched with a poorly hidden smile. Loki was in the food line looking rode hard and put away wet.

I winced internally at my own stupid metaphor, shooting him a weak smile when he noticed me. He gestured for me to join him farther up in the line, and I would've resisted but the guys in between us made faces and pointed me forward, telling me it wasn't like they were going to run out of food if I got served before them.

Apparently none of them had ever seen me eat.

Loki handed me one of the big plates without even asking, and took two for himself again. I peered past his shoulder, saw it was French Toast Day, and took a second plate for myself too; regardless of portion size — and I loved me some french toast, so that was also a factor — it was important to maintain the integrity of the home fries and breakfast meats, as they should never be touched by syrup.

The guy behind me laughed. “Did we make a tactical error letting you go in front of us?” he asked, still sounding friendly enough that I couldn’t just pretend I wasn’t hearing him.

I smiled weakly over my shoulder, noticing he was a decent looking fella not much older than me, with light brown hair clubbed back in a ponytail. And a full beard. Did I even need to mention the beard when cataloging the appearance of any of them? Tesla and Magick were the only men that were clean-shaven, in the entire club. Every other one of them was vying for Lumbersexual of the Year, or, at the very least, Hipster Biker of the Month. This bearded gent had a wide smile on his face, and held out his hand to shake mine but I had plates.

“You’re the new nanny, right?” he asked, and I nodded. I felt it was important to differentiate between *governess* and *nanny* to Silas for some reason, and really only him, possibly because he was being a douche. “My name’s Gonzo. I usually stay out at the farm, but with Mags and Raz back, it’s all hands on deck this morning for Church.”

“Hi, I’m Mouse,” I said, tucking one of the plates under my arm and shaking his hand. “You said you stay at the farm?”

“Yup, in the farmhouse. A bunch of us have rooms out there. It can get a little lonely, but we take turns coming back to the main house for a few nights a month unless there’s something going on, like during harvest, or something’s giving birth, or—”

“She doesn’t give a shit, Gonzo,” Loki growled, and I looked up to see him giving the man a death glare. “And she already knows.”

“That’s not true at all,” I sputtered, elbowing him in the gut. It was like elbowing an oak tree. “I’m *very* interested. And Addie has been begging to go visit the animals, so I was planning to take her sometime in the next couple days. I’ve been out to the farm already,” I assured Gonzo, “but it wasn’t like I was listening to everything Loki said as he rambled on and on, talking my ear off.”

I was really just teasing Loki, trying to defuse the situation, but ended up annoyed at the way everyone around us laughed like it was so improbable to have a conversation with him. Especially since I could see that it bothered Loki, he was getting defensive and uncomfortable.

Gonzo wasn’t laughing though, he just beamed at me. “I love when Adèle visits, that kid is adorable. We’ve got a heifer about to give birth any day now, so you might even have a cute little newborn calf to cuddle...” Gonzo trailed off as Loki made a weird rumbling sound in his throat, then finished weakly, “and there might be lambs as well, but I’d have to check with Silas. He’s our vet.”

I ignored the grumbling giant behind me. “I’ve met him. I was surprised to find out you all have an in-house vet.”

“Of course,” Gonzo gave me a weird look. “We’ve got a lot of animals, plus all the dogs and cats—”

“*There are kitty cats?*” I squeaked, looking at him in shock, and his eyes kept darting over my shoulder at Loki like it was no big deal and my reaction was crazy. Loki was still making threatening rumbles, but I ignored him in favor of baby animals and kitty cats.

Salem didn’t have *anything*. I tried not to think about all the pets that people had had around town before Janus. Nope. Nope. Nope.

“Haven’t you seen any around here? There must be ten of them living in this building alone, plus the ones out by the greenhouses, and of course at the farm we have a whole colony...”

I spun on Loki, only vaguely aware that he was dark red and scowling, and demanded “Why didn’t you tell me about the kitty cats? Where are they? *And why haven’t I seen any dogs yet?! This is unacceptable!*”

“Baby, I haven’t had time to take you to the kennel, but I promise I will—” Loki was giving me sad eyes, but all I could hear was that word: *baby*.

“What’s my name, Loki?” I snarled at him, and he blanched.

“Mouse, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

I stalked past him and loaded my plates with food since we’d been holding up the line but no one had spoken up. I ended up balancing them down my arm like an expert waitress while I filled two mugs with coffee, then stomped to the center table. I slammed everything down on the sliver of table between Tesla and Addie, growling at him to scooch over.

He peered up at me, looked at the five empty seats at the table, and then back to me.

“I don’t want to sit next to Loki, he’s on a time-out,” I growled, “so scooch the fuck over.”

He blinked at me, set his silverware on his plate, and slid it and his coffee cup in front of the chair next to him. He was preparing to get up and switch seats when he asked, “What did he do?”

“He fucking called me fucking *baby* again,” I hissed, feeling like my face was somehow stiff and bloated from all the blood currently flooding it. Tesla stopped what he was doing and sat back down, sliding his plate and mug back. “What the fuck—?”

“It doesn’t mean what you think it means,” he said, unfurling his napkin onto his lap again. “He doesn’t talk to any of the women, let alone call them pet names.”

It was the same damn thing Magick had said, that Loki doesn’t talk, and I didn’t understand where that was coming from since he’d been talking to me almost constantly since the moment we met. “What do you mean he doesn’t—?” I barely

got that out before Loki was slamming his plates down on the table across from Tesla, radiating anger and hurt. Tesla looked up at me again and cocked up one eyebrow.

I sighed, rolling my eyes, and slouched around the table to the seat next to Loki.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you,” I mumbled, pulling out my chair. He ignored me, violently stabbing his fork into a wedge of french toast, stuffing a huge piece into his mouth and chewing. And it was *angry* chewing. “It was wrong— *I* was wrong. It hurt my feelings when I thought you called me by the same generic bullshit name as the rest of your women, but Tesla just said—”

He dropped his fork and glared at Tesla, who continued eating and ignored us.

Hazel and Addie were both watching the spectacle with big eyes and open mouths, occasionally taking another bite of their food but mostly just enjoying the show. And it wasn’t only the dramatics Addie was watching, she totally understood all of it. Little shit.

“It’s fine, Mouse,” Loki finally ground out from his clenched teeth, and resumed eating.

“No, it’s not,” I mumbled softly, then leaned in closer hoping no one else could hear. “When I was young, someone that used to be important to me— he called girls that, but always called me by name. And then at the end, I knew I didn’t mean anything to him because he started calling me that too. I hate being called that word, it makes me feel like *nothing*. But it’s weird because I really liked it when you called me *babydoll*, and it’s really not that different, but somehow it is.” I shrugged, my eyes focused on the table. “Either way, I shouldn’t have reacted to it, but I had a rough night, okay? And it’s not a good excuse but I barely slept and had terrible nightmares, and it’s made me a little on edge. I’m sorry I took it out on you.”

He leaned slightly closer and said, out of the corner of his mouth, “Whoever it was, I’m not him and you aren’t nothing. Apology accepted, and I’m sorry you slept like shit. Want to

talk about it, babydoll?” He used that word deliberately, and my eyes darted up to see him smiling. Legit and genuine. I almost wilted in relief; I was forgiven. “We can go someplace after we eat.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I agreed, suddenly exhausted and thinking how nice it would be to talk to a friend about even just one of the things weighing on me, but then I realized there wasn’t a damn thing I could actually tell him about without it creating a whole mess of complications. “No, it’s okay, Loki. I’m fine. Just tired. I won’t take it out on you. I’ll torment Tesla instead.” I said that last part louder on purpose, and got a raised eyebrow from the man in question although he never looked up from his screen.

Loki made noises like he was about to say something when plates hit the table on either side of us, and Rasputin greeted the table with a hearty “Good morning,” while Magick grunted and picked up the biggest mug I’d ever seen, sipping from it.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked him, almost frantic with need. “All I’ve ever seen are these tiny things,” I gestured at the two mugs sitting in front of me. “I need one of those, where—”

“That’s Mags’s *special* mug,” Rasputin stage-whispered at me, holding his hand by his mouth like he was imparting a state secret. “Which was once called a *cereal bowl*.”

“With a handle!” I insisted, jabbing my finger at it. “That makes it fair game, it’s like the tramp stamp of the dish world.”

Magick choked on his coffee as Rasputin cackled, and Loki and Tesla both sighed. “Welcome to breakfast with Mouse,” Tesla said to no one in particular. “Go ahead and mark the *slut-shaming the stoneware* square on your Bingo card of inappropriate topics. That center square, talking dirty to her coffee, is a freebie since it seems to be like some kind of ritual, she can’t drink it until she’s—”

“Made it hot and wet? Do you fucking *blame* me? You don’t need sugar if you sweet-talk that beautiful, bitter bitch.” To prove my point, I snatched up my first mug and whispered



“I’m going to fill my mouth with you and swallow it all down,” then sucked back a mouthful with an exaggerated moan of satisfaction. “See? *Delicious!*”

“What else is on the Bingo card?” Rasputin asked, choking back a laugh, as Magick regarded me with narrowed eyes.

“Off-topic quotes, confusing non-sequiturs—” Tesla stated.

“Unicorns, dogs, topical quotes from *The Princess Bride*, *Aliens*, or *Firefly*,” Loki contributed.

“Boobs,” Hazel piped up and stuck her tongue out when I shot her a dirty look.

“Cryptids,” Tesla continued, without looking up. “Specifically squares for Bigfoot, chupacabra, the Mothman, or fresh water sharks in the lake.”

Her head was tilted towards her plate, but I could see Addie’s lips move, trying out the new word she’d heard from Tesla. Watching her little mouth shape the syllables — choo-puh-kah-bruh — well, it was one of my finest moments.

Raising kids, teaching them the shit that mattered, was so satisfying.

“Mine has something called a Sheepsquatch on it, but I’m not optimistic for that one,” Loki mumbled, frowning. “It sounds made up.”

Ignoring the weird statement Loki just made — the Sheepsquatch is *very* real — I focused on the important part. “No one can prove they *don’t* exist, the sharks are absolutely a threat. There’s video footage—” I turned on Tesla, the fucking traitor, not expecting the next attack to come from behind.

“Conspiracy theories, both general and specific. An unnerving, almost sexual appreciation for pastry and desserts,” Caliban added, sliding into the final empty seat. “*Moaning over muffins* is my favorite. And I still think there should be a square for her using three or more plates for the meal. Nacho night warranted four.”

“Yeah, because I’m not a savage. Nachos require a staging plate, and then you also have to keep all the ingredients separate and assemble each chip *à la minute* or you don’t get consistent proportions of protein, queso, beans, vegetables, the different salsas and pico, sour cream, and guac. You end up with some chips that are almost bare, or worse, blow your entire guac load on like three chips while the rest do without. Seriously, you call yourself a chef?”

“There it is,” Loki crowed in delight, pulling out a folded piece of paper from the pocket of his jeans and smoothing it out on the table, cupping his arm around it protectively as I tried to see. All I could make out was a grid of squares with some writing in them. A stub of pencil magically appeared in his hand, and he made two X’s on the paper. “I think that counts as *pathological obsession with food* and *insulting a club officer*.”

“It was really more like a backhanded compliment. She acknowledges Cal’s talent in the kitchen.” Tesla eyed me as if waiting for something.

“*Only if he’s on his knees—*” I blurted out, physically unable to keep something like that in, and I saw a gleam of satisfaction in Tesla’s beady little eyes, the rat. He set me up.

Caliban winked at me as Loki made a sound of triumph. He added another X, holding up the paper so the rest of the table could see but not me. “You’re my witnesses, *objectifying a club officer* gets me the row.”

“Wait, you were being serious? There’s actually Bingo squares for the crazy shit I say? Just how bored are you people?”

“Goldie has them at her desk, or you can ask at the security desk in the lobby for the latest game board. She changes them up every couple days, and has a box with a bunch of prizes to choose from. Just small stuff, but a win’s a win, you know?” Hazel explained, grinning at me as I blinked at her. “I won a bottle of silver glitter nail polish when you told Brandy-Lynn that her nipple tattoos were so realistic that they made you

salivate like a greedy baby. You hit three squares with one sentence: boobs, tattoos, and insulting children.”

The men were laughing but I felt tears building up behind my eyes, the pressure like little spikes of warmth and affection stabbing into my brain, and I blinked wildly, looking up at the lights.

It was like I could hear the chant underlying the conversation that continued around me, the one that was celebrating the shit that usually annoys people.

*One of us. One of us.*

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they hadn't been the ones keeping me at a distance after all.

When I looked down again, Magick was watching me closely, that tiny wrinkle between his brows the only sign that he might've noticed anything. We stared at each other, neither willing to give, until I very slowly stuck my tongue out at him. He clamped his mouth shut and jerked slightly, like he'd held in a laugh, and I felt a surge of triumph knowing I'd won.

“So all this is great — *hahahaha, crazy Mouse has a potty mouth!* — but you still haven't answered the damn question,” I groused as the laughter died off. I pointed at Magick's treasure, demanding, “Where do I get a coffee mug like that?”

The corner of Caliban's mouth twitched, a couple times. “I'll see what I can find for you.”

“Thank you. *Gawd,*” I huffed out, rolling my eyes, then I had a different idea and got excited, bouncing in my seat. “Unless there's a pottery studio here? Huh? I could learn how to use a wheel, throw some pots? Yeah? Is that a thing? I've always wanted to know how to do that, it seems like a really useful skill—”

“Sorry, no,” Magick said, interrupting my excited ramble and I wilted. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone I didn't even know at the next table, mark off a square on the piece of paper sitting in front of him. I realized that I'd been seeing that a lot recently, people hovering nearby wherever I was and whipping out sheets of paper to write on, without

even registering it might be weird or wondering about it. I felt like I was losing my edge of paranoia, and wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

"It's an interesting idea," Tesla intoned, typing into his phone. "By that, I mean producing pottery or possibly ceramics ourselves, since there are many applications in engineering and power generation as well. Not Mouse having access to something with that much potential to make a mess."

"Hey!" I was totally offended. Okay, not really. He wasn't wrong. But he also wasn't going to stop me from finding a way to access this future pottery studio— and then I stopped that train of thought.

I pretended that the immediate swell of regret didn't happen.

I looked up and found Loki watching me, and when our eyes met, he gave me a tiny smile that didn't offset the worry in his eyes. I blanked my expression and blinked at him. His smile made a downturn. I think he knew that I was planning to leave.

I felt another stare on me and leaned back in my seat. Rasputin was studying both of us, me and Loki, smirking when he saw I noticed.

"I can get my own sheet at the front desk, you say?" He asked no one in particular, and both Hazel and Tesla replied in the affirmative. I glared at him, pinching my lips together. "After breakfast, do you want to go meet the dogs?" He tilted his chin up and eyed me with a gleam of obvious and deliberate manipulation in his narrowed gaze. His eyes were so dark they appeared black, but they were so bright and sparkly, like polished onyx gemstones, that they drew me in like he had a continuous inner monologue, laughing at the world, and I wanted in on the joke.

Plus, *dogs*.

Dogs.

This could possibly be the greatest day ever.

“Yes,” I said, so much emotion contained in that one word that conversation at the table paused momentarily. I nodded my head, eyes wide, refusing to say anything more because I might either start crying, or telling them everything about my all-time favorite dogs in no particular order because **THEY’RE ALL GOOD DOGS, BRENT**. Twelves out of ten, across the board.

“Well alright then,” he grinned, nodding back. “Bring Adèle, she loves them too.”

I nodded, speechless with anticipation, and glanced over at Addie who had folded her lips in and was sitting on her hands, like she knew what we were saying. Because she did, the little shit. That sneakiness and her obvious love for dogs just cemented what I was feeling, and I was overcome with a surge of affection for her.

She was a Mini Mouse in training, but the kid had a streak of evil in her that I never had. I was an angel, and she was a little demon.

Seriously, an angel. Everyone always said so.

*Kid* echoed in my brain, in Beast’s scratchy voice, and I swallowed back nausea.

“What happened to your hand?” Magick asked in a deliberately casual tone, as he took another sip of coffee, watching me over the rim.

I looked down at the bandage, trying to remember because dogs can distract me like nothing else. That’s what I was thinking about, dogs. Nothing else.

“Oh, uh, nothing really. Got some splinters in my palm, and I tore it up trying to get them out.”

“Where’d you get splinters?” Loki asked, concern lacing his voice and I remembered he was in charge of the construction crew. Before I could effectively hide it, he had my hand gripped in his giant bear paws, peeling the bandage off. “Jesus, Mouse,” he swore, staring at my palm in horror. “What the fuck? How many splinters were there?”

I yanked at my hand but he didn't release it, holding it in place as Magick leaned over and looked, then began to curse as well. Only then did I get my hand away, burying it in my lap.

"There was like a dozen," *or two*, "but I messed up a couple when I was removing them, I'm not so precise with the scalpel with my off-hand." I looked down at my palm and grimaced, but it really did look worse than it was.

"Scalpel?" Tesla inquired neutrally at the same time that Magick asked "Why didn't Doc remove them for you?"

"Uh, he wasn't there?" I replied lamely. At Tesla's sigh and Magick's stony look, I shrugged. "I'm used to taking care of things myself, I didn't want to bother him. It's all just surface stuff."

"That's not how things work around here," Magick said quietly, but there was a tension underlying it that let me know this was serious. "We don't fuck around with injuries or illnesses — I don't care if it's a splinter or a paper cut or a sniffle, you get medical attention. You can lose your hand from a goddamn splinter if it gets infected."

"You know I'm a medical professional, right? I realize my palm looks like ground meat, but it's all superficial and I followed proper procedures. I also know what to look for as far as infection." He absolutely knew my credentials, and I felt pretty strongly that he was overstepping in this case so I wasn't about to back down.

*My fucking body.*

*And my fucking job.*

"So I've heard, but from the looks of your hand, I'm questioning just how competent you really are now. Get Doc to look at it, fix whatever damage you've done," he said, his fucking lip curling up just enough to trigger the Hulk-Mouse need to *SMASH!*

*He's the prez*, I repeated to myself, over and over, to keep from replying. *He's the prez, and this is a public place.*

*You can't jab him in the throat.*

*You can't table-flip.*

*Walk away.*

I pushed my chair back from the table, got up, and walked towards the stairs leading out of the dining room.

“You better be heading to Doc’s office,” Magick’s voice sounded across the room from behind me. I paused, needing to make a concerted effort not to do something really fucking foolish (and violent!) and kept going out of the dining room, in the general direction that led to Doc’s office. Just long enough to get out of his view, then kept walking.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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“I DIDN’T KNOW,” Magick said from behind me, subdued and quiet. Almost sounding tentative.

My back stiffened, my shoulders rising a bit from the strain of the adrenaline now surging through my system seeking an outlet. I hadn’t heard him approach, too caught up in my drama. He startled me, and when it comes to “fight or flight?” my body prefers to ask “why choose?”

Why not attack, suddenly and violently, doing as much damage as possible before retreating and going to ground?

That’s how I survived adolescence, after all. All those years — even when I was incarcerated and there were fewer places to entrench, I found a way. Cupboards, heating vents, under furniture... when you were as small and flexible as I was, you could make yourself fit in a plethora of unlikely places.

I was too busy keeping my instincts in check to respond. Not even to question what he didn’t know, since that seemed endless. Fucking Jon Snow as MC president, right here.

I felt him shift closer and everything in me screamed to *move*: go on the offensive, flatten myself to the ground, run, turn and attack... fall to my knees, hugging myself and crying.

I wondered how he found me.

After I left the dining room and kept walking, I ended up wandering through a maze of corridors and up and down staircases, not paying any attention to where I was going and blind to everything around me. I couldn’t retrace my steps if I



wanted to, I didn't even see half of my surroundings. When he spoke, I'd been considering whether I should try to find an exit to the outdoors since I wasn't sure I'd be able to find my way back otherwise.

I'd ended up in a massive, t-shaped room tiled in a mosaic of mostly intact squares of pale blue, mint green, and white, with soaring ceilings punctured by skylights. One side of the crossbar had a collection of smaller, sunken spas, fitting anywhere from one person to at least eight, interspersed with tiled columns and tattered screens disintegrating in place. The stem of the T had an Olympic-sized swimming pool set into the floor, empty of water, filled only with broken furniture, trash, debris, and filth. The other side of the crossbar had a smaller pool, shallower, also crowded with junk.

I sat on the edge of the big pool, near the deepest part — a ten-foot drop into piles of rubbish and a table listing to one side on a broken leg — my feet dangling down, contemplating what this room must have looked like decades ago. So lost in my thoughts, I didn't hear or see him enter the room and creep up behind me like a fucking creepy creeper.

I looked down, doing the math as to what damage might occur if I jumped down from where I was.

“Don't,” he commanded, firm enough that he guessed my thoughts. “I mean it, Mouse. Do not jump.”

I shrugged, keeping my back to him, though it was hard.

He edged towards me, cautiously, taking a seat a few feet away, letting his own legs dangle down.

“How'd you find me?”

“It wasn't easy.”

“That's not an answer.”

“Well, it's the only one you're going to get.”

I shrugged again, losing interest fast. I assumed Tesla had cameras installed throughout the complex. That seemed like a thing he'd do, and it just required examining the feeds until they spotted me.

It's what I would do.

"After you left..." he started, then trailed off, unusually hesitant and uncomfortable. I peered over at him from the corner of my eye. I didn't know him well enough to interpret the expression on his face. He stared down at his hands clasped on his lap. "They told me— I didn't know what happened. With Doc," he finished in a rush, and I realized he hadn't known any of it.

No one had told him.

Tesla, Loki, even Doc — they'd respected my privacy. All of them.

I kinda wanted to cry even more now.

"I get why you might not want to go to him for help," he said, his voice infused with something— disappointment? Disgust? "What they did... it was a violation. And I understand why they did it, and to be honest, I would've made the same call T did, but I also get your perspective. Loki told me what happened when they took you back to see him, what you said to Doc. And... I get it."

I laughed because none of it was remotely funny. "No. No, you don't. You really fucking don't."

He didn't say anything for a long time, and that was good. I was calming down. But then he went and opened his stupid fucking mouth again. "No, Mouse. I get it, I understand—"

I didn't let him finish, didn't let whatever moronic mansplaining of my emotions he was about to attempt, because I wanted to respect the guy.

"No, Magick, you don't. But *I* understand why this must confuse for you. You hold a position of power, especially now in our current unprecedented times. Doc also holds a position of power, one of great responsibility. And I would guess that it's hard for you to comprehend why a medical exam might cause such a violent reaction when medical treatment is a luxury that can't be bought. Doctors, nurses, almost anyone working in the medical field... first responders in a highly contagious, lethal pandemic? Cannon fodder. And to think we

used to worry and fuss about things like insurance and *privacy*. So I imagine it's mind-boggling to you why any of this is a problem— given the circumstances, all of that says I should be grateful, right? I guess I have to give five points to Gryffindor for you showing up here, like this, having deduced that I believe I have a legitimate complaint and you want to appease me or make peace or whatever, but I think you've *misunderstood*."

He made a noise that I was going to assume was an apology for his blatant overstepping and ignorance, but I chose to continue explaining, anyway. Because I needed to drive my point home.

"Speaking as a medical professional, one who interacted daily with *other* medical professionals — and, full disclosure, one who routinely engaged in sexual relations with medical professionals — there's a certain attitude, perpetuated by said medical professionals — doctors, I'm talking about doctors — but also by those they treat, that we should all be grateful for their attention. That they deign to honor us with the pearls of fucking wisdom they wish to impart. I'm used to dealing with doctors who think nothing of violating their patients in the name of science, but this attitude isn't new. It existed long before Janus. Since the pandemic, though, it's become unmanageable. But here's the truth, Magick: Doctors are smartie-pants, no question. They showed up for a lot of classes, memorized a lot of facts, learned a bunch of stuff that helps them diagnose and treat illness and injury, but most medical treatments are a process of elimination. They're responses to the information a patient provides, through their symptoms and tests the doctor orders, then working through a process of logical deduction based on their knowledge and experience. And if they missed a class? Zoned out during a lecture? Didn't consult the right journal or run the right test? Or didn't fucking listen to the patient because they think they know the answer without ever hearing the problem? Then they are no different than monkeys flinging shit at a wall, hoping it will stick. Educated guesses might be educated, but they're still guesses. Now, you took the time yesterday to sit with me and go over your rules and expectations, what it means to be a

part of your community. I respect that, and I appreciate you taking the time, I really do. I listened to what you had to say, and I don't presume to understand things I can't. I didn't question your beliefs, or your methods, and I won't. Your club, your community, your choice, right? Well, *my* body, Magick. My body, *my* choice. My decisions are just as informed as his, even more so because I'm not just speculating."

I peered over at him. He stared into the middle distance, brow furrowed, but his mouth was relaxed. I think he might've been legit considering what I was saying, not just dismissing it. *Listening*. And that... that was something I couldn't resist. I leaned in, holding my hand up to shield my mouth.

"I'm going to tell you a secret, Magick, the biggest secret you'll ever know: the person who discovered the Janus vaccine wasn't a doctor. Didn't even have a four year degree! And worse, no one even fucking knows why it works, *still!* Oh, God— your face!" I erupted into painful laughter, because *this shit wasn't funny*, but how could you do anything but laugh? It was fucking absurd! "I wish I was joking, but I'm not," I sputtered, my giggles dying off. "Yeah, so, whatever. My point is, doctors aren't nearly as impressive as you all seem to think. They're human beings, and they're fallible, but they cover it up better otherwise people panic. They make bad decisions all the time, they don't listen to what their patients say, and they do shit without considering anything other than what it means *to them*. That's the problem with what Doc did, and in general, Doc doesn't impress me. He might be all you have, and he might be good at his job, but Caliban is pretty fucking good at his job too. He manages to do that job, which keeps dozens and dozens of people alive, and doesn't expect every decision he makes to be accepted without question. More importantly, he doesn't *violate* traumatized people while doing his job. Do you get that? No, don't answer, because I don't think you do."

He did try to answer. Stubborn bastard. But I grew up surrounded by men like him, and frankly, the world was filled with men who think they can talk over women just to shut them up. That doesn't work for me, and thinking about all the

women that Doc treats regularly? I cut Magick off, because his voice might be deeper, but I'm louder. Hear me fucking roar.

“No, not your turn to talk.” To his credit, his mouth snapped shut at the venom in my tone. “Here’s why you can’t understand my position here: you’ve never been unnecessarily sedated so strangers could stand around your naked body while you were unconscious and unaware, discussing your health and wellbeing as if they had any say over it. Discussing your body as though their opinions mattered. To speculate about your past, whether you were abused. You don’t get to empathize until all your defenses have been stripped away and you’ve been literally laid bare in front of strangers who are calling it *science*. And not unless you’ve had very private things, things that you yourself haven’t even been able to verbalize to the people you’re actually close to and love, discussed openly among strangers. When you’ve been forced to talk about deeply personal experiences when you don’t want to — the most humiliating, shameful, and painful parts of your life — and you’ve been badgered or coerced into discussing them with fucking strangers to appease their curiosity. *Then* you might understand. Doc can make all the justifications he wants for sedating me and carrying out that exam, but I’m a medical professional too, and big words don’t impress me. Know what does? Respect. Even in a fucking pandemic, we can treat each other like human fucking beings worthy of respect. So tell me, *do* you understand? Have you ever, in your life, been that vulnerable, or that exposed? Have you ever been made to feel so weak? Has a stranger speculated about your family abusing you? Or used knowledge of your BMI and a visual exam to question whether you had an eating disorder? Have any of those things happened to you? Even one?”

His head jerked in a negative.

“Didn’t think so. You have no - fucking - clue. And it’s insulting that you think you do.”

I didn’t want to jump down anymore. I wanted to push him. And maybe jump down after and club him with a two-by-four a few times. I inched away, giving us more space so I couldn’t reach him, but he misread it.

“I’m not— I’m not going to hurt you—” His brow furrowed, and he looked appalled. “You don’t have to—”

“Not. You.” My fists clenched as tight as my jaw and every other muscle in my body. “I’m— not feeling generous right now,” I gritted out through a throat closing up from the strain. “You should go.”

“Mouse, I came to apologize, not make things worse.” He ran a hand over his face, shaking his head. “I’m sorry. I was out of line at breakfast, and I offended you. And then I came here and made it worse. I don’t know what to say or do to make this better.”

“Not forcing your presence on me when I ask you to leave is a good fucking start,” I snarled, fighting every impulse towards violence that I kept buried inside me. “You want to make it better? Get the fuck away from me *right now*, so I don’t do something that will require a response or retribution. Do you fucking understand? This isn’t about *you*, and if you don’t shut the fuck up and get away from me, I’m going to lose what little control I have—”

To his credit, he got up from his seat and walked out.

Once he was gone, I flung myself off the wall into the bottom of the pool, and went crazy, destroying every single thing that had ever fallen or been thrown into the pit. Furniture, planks of wood and broken pallets, bottles, metal cans, plastic buckets... I ended up with a metal pipe, slamming it down on anything in my path, until a metric fuck-ton of refuse in that empty pool had been reduced to shards. My hands and shoulders cramped up as my legs shook, my bruised ribs aching.

I tasted copper in my mouth. My throat was completely shredded when I tried to swallow, and I began to cough.

I’d been screaming without even knowing it.

A hand appeared with a bottle of water, a familiar hand with tattooed knuckles. I took the bottle from Tesla. He’d already loosened the cap for me, and I took a mouthful, letting

it trickle down my throat and coat it before I took a proper drink.

“Gonna add you to the demolition team.” Loki’s voice drifted over from a distance, and I shuddered, turning around. Tesla was right behind me, studying me. Loki was up on the edge of the pool, surveying the space with wide eyes and a neutral expression.

“Just us,” Tesla informed me, answering my unspoken question. “Cal is on the lunch crew, Mags is in his office, and Raz is out at the kennels with Adèle, waiting for you whenever you show up.”

“I should probably—” my voice cracked, and I sucked back more water before I started coughing again.

“Later,” he said after I’d finished drinking, shaking his head. At my skeptical grimace, he shook his head again. “You aren’t required to make nice with anyone here, you know that, right? It’s not on you to soothe egos and ruffled feathers. Mags knows he’s in the wrong, even if it started as a teachable moment about the splinters, and a valid point. And he shouldn’t have approached you until you were open to talking to him, but he felt terrible and isn’t used to being patient about shit. So he done fucked up royally, and it’s not on you to fix it.”

I stared at him, my mouth hanging slack, perplexed.

A man in a leadership position who doesn’t need ego-stroking or ass-kissing? An authority figure who feels genuine remorse and admits to making mistakes rather than deflecting or placing blame on someone else?

A biker who doesn’t lead through intimidation and alpha-posturing bullshit?

*Who were these men?*

“I don’t understand.”

Tesla’s face cracked in two with one of those rare grins that transformed him from just handsome into something otherworldly, a darkness-kissed nerd-god.

“I know,” he said, “but you’ll catch on, eventually.”



TESLA AND LOKI dragged me to Doc’s office, where I grudgingly allowed him to look at my hand. He made faces and grumbly noises at the condition of it, but agreed that the steps I’d taken were the right ones to clean and protect it after doing the equivalent of taking a cheese grater to my palm. He then cleaned and bandaged it again since my spree of destruction had messed it up.

After it was all done, and I was preparing to hop off the table and flee the area, Doc stopped me by standing in front of me close enough that I’d bump into him if I tried to move. He knew I’d avoid that, the a-hole, and the guys had wandered off, so I didn’t even have Loki to intervene and stop me from brutalizing the man.

“Mouse, I hope we can get to a point where you’ll trust me enough to come to me with things like this and not try to handle them yourself.” He took a deep breath and flattened his lips together, waiting for my reaction. I blinked at him.

Our stand-off lasted far longer than I expected before he sighed through his nose and turned away, frustrated. But what prompted me to say something was that he wasn’t annoyed too, or deflecting it back on me. There seemed to be genuine regret.

“I have a legitimate issue with that exam, and you know that. What you did was a violation, and I think you’ve gotten lazy here.” He’d been nodding, but then balked at my last statement. Too bad. “You’re the only doctor in the area. You treat a lot of patients. You’re an authority, but you’re taking it for granted, thinking it excuses you from having to answer for your decisions. And when you were called on it, you went off about having a responsibility and a right. But that’s bullshit. You don’t have rights to my body or *any* body, unless they’re granted to you. Unless I consent to treatment if I’m able. I was able. If you hadn’t sedated me, I would’ve been able, and I



probably would've consented, but we'll never know because you decided to violate my person. Unfortunately for you, I'm not the type to let that go, so consider this a teachable moment. The next time you violate someone like that, they may not give a fuck that you're the only doctor around, and you have lots of patients to treat. They might just respond in kind, because we all have to answer for our decisions, eventually. Spoiler alert: if it's me, I can guarantee you won't like my response." I gave him a minute. He nodded. "Great, I'm glad we're on the same page."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm truly sorry. A lot of bad choices were made that night, mostly by me. My loyalty to the club doesn't supersede my oath as a doctor."

I let out a dramatic sigh and threw my hands up in the air. "Fucking finally! You finally get it, and all by yourself!" I smirked at him, patting him on the shoulder. "I'm proud of you. It would've taken Addie a lot longer to learn a lesson like that. You get a gold star."

"God, you're a pain in the ass," he chuckled, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, I get it. I'm an arrogant asshole who overstepped. Stop being so fucking self-satisfied about it. Don't you know righteousness is a turn-off?"

"Lucky for me I'm not trying to get in your pants, Doc. Now that Brandy-Lynn is a different story..." I trailed off, winking at him. He hid his grin by pretending there was something vitally important for him to look at in my chart. "So in terms of my hand, I've been taking care of myself and everyone around me since long before the pandemic," I explained, getting back to business and throwing him a bone, and about six other clichés at the same time. "It's not in my nature to ask for help. I'm used to doing everything myself."

Doc perked up, recognizing the out. But instead of taking it and letting my subject change happen, he studied me for a few moments before saying, "You're fucking hell on the ego, Mouse, but I admire how you let shit go when you feel it's settled. You did the same with Tesla, and I appreciate that. It isn't always easy to tell with him, but he ended up pretty fucked up over what we did to you. You didn't have to be so

gracious about it, and it means something, how you handled it.”

It was my turn to flush and look away. That was the kind of compliment that landed like a barbed arrow, one that would stick. The kind that you end up trying to live up to, to be that person they saw you as. Fuck.

He ignored my obvious discomfort and settled back against the counter, setting my chart aside and implementing his own subject change. “Thank you for explaining about your hand. That makes sense. We operate differently here, out of necessity because of the way the world has changed, but also out of a conscious strategy and planning for this community. No one stands alone here — I’m sure you’ve heard variations on that theme a million times since you arrived, but it’s legit. Magick has very strong opinions on how this community should operate.” He glanced over at the door, then back, and I assumed Tesla and Loki had returned. “We’re an incubator, a proof of concept for the rest of the Apocalypse Riders’ chapters.”

I’d heard those ideas repeatedly, but on some level, I still assumed it was just lip-service. It never occurred to me they might actually do the work to reach the goal, and I was at a loss for words.

“We’re not just self-sustaining ourselves, we’re working towards providing services and resources club-wide, and from there to surrounding communities. Like the dogs, for example — I’ve heard you’re fond of dogs and I can tell by that look on your face that *fond* isn’t quite accurate. They’re Rasputin’s passion as well, and he’s building a resource for rescuing, rehabbing, and training dogs for different jobs like guarding or hunting. They’ll be placed at the chapters where they’re most needed, or where they’ll most benefit the surrounding community. We also do medical and veterinary consultations. Brandy-Lynn, Silas, or I provide them online, and I’ll travel in a pinch — especially to chapters without direct access to local doctors or facilities. We’ve identified several areas where different people have valuable expertise, whether here or at other chapters, and are compiling a library of resources,

starting with videos teaching basic concepts. All of it is available to anyone affiliated with the club, not just members but in the communities too. We're trying to offset the loss of so much knowledge and skills."

I blinked at him, overwhelmed. It was like he took me by the hand and led me to a door, and on the other side was everything my life had been leading up to, in ways I'd never even considered. But then I had to close that door and walk away, because it wasn't just about me and what I wanted, or a future I could believe in and get excited about.

It was about Azzie, and how much more important she was than I will *ever* be.

And it was about Beast. Because my past made everything on the other side of that door impossible.

It felt like every day — every *hour* — gave me more reasons to stay here. I was getting comfortable, and that was bad. Feeling appreciated? Even worse. And if I didn't leave soon, there was a possibility that I may not find the strength to walk away. If I got any more invested in this place, or these people, I was doomed.

"There's something I wanted to talk to you about," Doc continued, as if he hadn't just tossed a grenade at me like it was a game of Hot Potato. "In terms of medical consultations, you were a phlebotomist, right? Before the pandemic, and for some time during—? Are your skills still pretty sharp?"

I resisted the urge to brag and nodded. "Yeah, I'm not out of practice."

"I have a patient here — have you met Dell? Old timer, grayer than me—"

I shook my head. I hadn't paid that much attention to anyone who hadn't inserted themselves into my path, and so far no one that fit that description had, but I wondered at the name. And if it was the same *Dell*. Tesla's uncle.

"Not surprised. He's old school. Not much use for womenfolk," Doc said that with a curl of his lip and eye roll, "but he's great at what he does. Problem is, old Dell abused

the fuck out of his body over several decades in the club, but kept going until just recently. His kidneys have started failing. When he approached end-stage, ESKD, I put a fistula in and we started work setting up a dialysis station in one of the old clinic rooms on the lower level. The whole setup is pretty damn cool. Tesla did some creative things with the water tanks and filtration system. Anyway, we could keep going as-is with him, but I was wondering: are you familiar with something called the buttonhole technique—?”

“Dude.” I interrupted him, holding up my hand. “Dude. I’m the fucking queen of creating buttonhole AV accesses in fistulas. You have no idea— seriously. *The queen*. How many are you thinking? I like having at least three to rotate out if needed, and in case of injury to his arm or something.”

“So you’re willing to help?” he asked, chuckling and glancing over to where Tesla and Loki were so quiet, I’d forgotten they’d returned.

“Yes, just point me at him. I love poking needles into old misogynists. It’s like my second favorite thing in the world. Do you have the supplies to sustain them once I’ve got them created? It’s much better to use rounded or dull needles once the scar tissue has formed, so there’s no chance of veering off track—”

He looked over again, then looked back and nodded. “Whatever you need. You just give me a list and we’ll get it.”

“Can I see the dialysis station? I’m curious.” I bounced a little in my seat, looking over at Tesla to see if it was allowed, but he wasn’t there. Magick was in the doorway, watching me with a blank expression.

“You can see whatever you want,” he answered, then shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I was, uh, hoping I could talk to you for a minute when you’re done here? If that’s okay? Loki will be back to take you to the kennels whenever you want, but I was hoping...?”

“Yeah, sure,” I shrugged, focusing back on Doc. “When do you want me to start with Dell?”

“What are you going to need, supply-wise?”

“It can be done with just dialysis needles — sharp to start then dull once the buttonhole forms, but they can be created faster if you can get ahold of these little plugs, made of silicone or something like that. BioPlugs or maybe BioHole plugs? I can’t remember the name, but damn if it still doesn’t make me giggle every time I say it. Despite the unfortunate similarity to butt-stuff, the plugs cut down on clot and scab formation while you’re creating the tunnel.”

“I find myself glad that I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Magick muttered, and when I glanced over at him, he looked a little sick to his stomach. It made me smile, because I’m petty.

“We’ll get you whatever you need,” Doc repeated, grinning at me. “I’ll send word once we figure everything out, and I’ll talk to Dell about the plan.”

“Sounds good.” I hopped off the table and gestured at Magick. “After you.”

He nodded, then walked down the hall, glancing back a few times to make sure I was still behind him. That kinda made me grin evilly inside, but I maintained a blank expression for him.

I’d been in his office the day before, but since it was the morning I’d hooked up with Caliban and it was *about* hooking up with Caliban, I hadn’t been paying much attention to the décor. It was a good-sized space, with a couch against the wall opposite the door, a handful of chairs scattered around, and one of those big steel desks that weigh a million pounds and take up a lot of space, yet never seem to have room for anything in their drawers. There was a huge brown leather executive chair behind it, the high back worn and raw at the seams. The walls were blank except for a page ripped out of one of Addie’s coloring books. The picture — a real mess with very little attention spent on shading or color accuracy — was pinned to the wall right where he could see it. It was the kind of quality you’d expect from a four-year-old, that devious little minx.

“Grab a seat, wherever you want,” he said, closing the door behind us. I shrugged and moved over behind the desk, plopping down in the big chair. It was pretty comfortable.

He stood in the center of the room, hands on his hips, and stared at me while I stared back, using my foot to swing the seat back and forth.

“Tesla told me I wouldn’t have to do this right now,” I said, crooking up one eyebrow in challenge. “Made a big effort to explain it wasn’t on me to make nice, that I could deal with you on my own terms.”

“*Fuck!*” he spat out, covering his face with his hands then dragging them up through his hair. “He fucking told me to wait — *again* — but I didn’t listen — *again*—”

“Is it impatience, or are you just that arrogant that you think I’ll forgive you for anything because you’re so pretty?”

He froze in place, hands gripping his hair, and scowled at me. “I don’t like what happened at all. I don’t like that you’re so mad at me about it, you went on a rampage with a lead pipe.”

“Arrogant it is,” I muttered, then louder, “Ever consider it had nothing to do with you?”

“Nope,” he said, popping the p, and then taking a seat in the chair closest to the desk. “I’m the center of the universe, being so pretty and all. It’s always got something to do with me.”

He faced me with such an earnest, serious expression, but the corners of his mouth kept twitching like David Rose observing any conversation ever, prompting me to say, “Ew, Magick” in Alexis’s voice. Then I kicked off the desk, doing a couple of 360 degree spins in his chair. I was hoping it was the kind of chair that was like a giant screw, and I was raising or lowering the seat in a way that he could never reproduce perfectly, and it would annoy the shit out of him for a long time to come.

“Mouse?”

“What?” I stopped the chair, irritated and now a little dizzy too.

“Can we talk this out?”

I shut my eyes and pounded my head against the back of his chair. “Can’t we just bury this down deep inside and pretend it never happened, yet harbor inexplicable resentments against each other that we don’t fully remember the root of, but feel no need to resolve? That seems much more doable.”

“Mouse.”

“Magick.”

“I don’t want you to resent me. I don’t want you to be mad at me.”

“How about you stop insisting I come to the club room every night, and we call it even? All will be forgiven. I’ll even throw in a free pass for a future infraction.”

“No,” he said firmly, and I cracked my eyes open — not moving my head from the seat back and my view of the ceiling — narrowing my eyes and scowling. “I want you there. Every night.”

“Then we shall remain at an impasse, with me harboring silent resentment and you trying to will it out of me by the sheer force of your devastating masculinity.”

“How about instead of that, you acknowledge I was only trying to be a little bit of a dick, not the massive, gaping asshole I ended up being as things spiraled? And I apologize for the small, intentional infraction, as well as the huge, hurtful infraction because I regret both things. Deeply. And then we hug it out and you go play with puppers and I’ll see you either at dinner or in the club room tonight. Dressed a little more appropriately...?”

“You didn’t find the overalls playful and delightfully unexpected?”

“Do I need to respond to that?”

I grumbled and then waited. After about fifteen seconds, he said, “I’m really sorry, Mouse. I’m sorry for giving you shit

about your hand and insulting you as a professional, and for forcing you to confront terrible memories that you're trying to put behind you. I know it wasn't me, but I'm sorry you had to endure that violation to begin with, and I'm sorry for being so insensitive and making you conform to my schedule for resolving our differences. Twice."

"You need to apologize to Tesla, too."

"I can do that."

"In the dining room, in front of everyone, at dinner. You need to say *you were right, and I was wrong, Tesla, and I will heed your advice going forward. And also, you're definitely more like Pinky than The Brain.*"

"I'm not saying that last part."

"It was worth a try."

"You know he's going to be pissed if I embarrass him in front of everyone, right?"

"Mmhmm," I nodded, grinning maniacally. "Two birds and all."

"You're kinda evil, aren't you."

"Was that a question? Because that didn't sound like a question."

"More of an observation."

"Fair enough."

"Will you tell me what happened before you came here? I only got a very abbreviated explanation from Tesla and Doc. And a lot of angry ranting from Loki."

"Nope," I said, popping the p.

"I would really like to know who then, so I can take action —"

"It's done, Magick. There's nothing to be said about it."

"So whoever was involved is dead? Because that's the only way—"



“*Done*. Do you understand? I’m not talking about this again with you.”

“Fucking *hell*, Mouse.”

“I appreciate your concern.” With that, I got up from the chair and made to leave, but then he was standing in the aisle way between the desk and the wall, blocking my path. I stared up at him, a little hesitant, and he wordlessly opened his arms and bobbed his head, gesturing with his chin. When I didn’t respond, he sighed.

“We need to hug it out. That’s part of the process I outlined, directly after the apology but before you go see the dogs. C’mon, you agreed to it when you glossed over everything and went right to the overalls.”

He was right. I didn’t perform my due diligence and now had to pay the price. With a dramatic sigh, I stepped into his arms — which wrapped around me in a very restrictive manner — keeping my own arms folded against my chest. “You may hug me since you trapped me by using my wardrobe to distract me, but I’m not hugging you back,” I grumbled, trying hard not to breathe in whatever dark magic made him smell that *good*, and he chuckled into my hair.

“That’s fair.”

After a time, I got impatient and uncomfortable, but then that feeling passed and I started liking it. He was warm, and solid, and smelled delicious, and I felt... safe. Again. Like with Loki.

“Would you hug me back if I told you I found you a coffee mug even bigger than mine?”

“Dude, what the fuck? *Why would you bury the lede like that?!*” I hollered into his chest as I snaked my arms around him and squeezed, so tight he grunted so I relaxed my hold just a smidge, but nuzzled my face into his chest. “It’s really bigger?” I asked, giggling over how sweet this badass man was being to me.

“Oh, it’s bigger, doll,” he muttered, pressing his pelvis against me and— yep! It sure was. “Want to see it?”

“I want to put my mouth on it, and suck down everything inside.” I whispered, grinding against him, but *subtly*. I’m sure he didn’t even— he groaned.

“Fucking hell— I think— I think if you don’t go now, I might—”

“Roger that,” I said, releasing my hold and ducking around him, heading towards the door. “I’m just going to go ahead and close this behind me,” I called back to him without looking. “Want me to send Plum?”

“What? No,” he groaned, and I couldn’t help but peek at him over my shoulder. He still had his back to the door, his head bowed, and his hands were on his hips again. “I’m a grown-ass man, Mouse. I can be patient.”

“Okay, then, cool...” I wasn’t sure why anyone would sit around with blue balls when there were a dozen horny, willing, and beautiful girls available, but his discipline and dedication to his job was pretty admirable. I mean, he wasn’t a banker or a scientist, he was the president of a motorcycle club, so it wouldn’t be *that* inappropriate to get some oral action during the work day, but whatever. He was an enigma.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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LOKI WAS WAITING for me in the lobby, leaning against the front desk talking to the same guy I'd seen there before. I approached them before Loki noticed me coming, and lurked like a creeper just behind him, smiling at the guy.

My original assessment was “big, burly, lumberjack beard” and I wasn't wrong, but his beard was actually neatly groomed and he was big but he was young — younger than me for sure, with a baby face under all that hair. He smiled back at me then focused on Loki, who was looking at something on the monitor screen turned towards him.

“I'm heading to the kennels as soon as Mouse gets here,” Loki said, distracted by the video feed I couldn't see. “I'll let Raz know, he'll look into it.”

The man's eyes flickered towards me and I held up my finger over my lips.

“Mouse? That's the new girl, right? The nanny?” He shot me a careful wink as Loki focused on him fully.

“Governess,” he grunted, sounding annoyed.

“She's super cute,” the man said, biting his lip. I grinned widely, mouthing *thank you*.

“Stay the fuck away from her,” Loki growled, looming over the guy who leaned back, his eyes getting wide.

“Sorry, I didn't realize—”

“Nothin' to *realize*. She's off-limits. Spread the word.”

“*Hey!*” I cried out, poking my finger into his kidney.  
“That’s not your decision.”

“The fuck it isn’t,” he growled, turning on me. He didn’t seem terribly surprised to find me behind him, or maybe he was too angry to— “You think I didn’t see your reflection in the screen? I knew you were there, flirtin’ with him.”

“I wasn’t!” Was I? I didn’t think— maybe I was? “Much!”

“Off. Limits.” Loki was ignoring me, glaring at the guy again who was nodding, no trace of a smile anymore.

“Oh, this is some *bullshit!*” I spat out, jabbing my finger at his face. “You got fuckin’ bitches hanging off you everywhere we go, and I’m not allowed to even talk to—”

“*No!*” Loki roared, looming over me like I was going to back down just because he was twice— three times my size? No fucking way! I was not going to be intimidated just because he could yell louder and snap me like a toothpick.

“Fine! Then watch your back, you hypocritical asshole. I see you fucking around, I’m going to take a goddamn firehose to you and whatever bitch you’re banging.” I slammed my fist into his gut, getting a satisfactory grunt out of him, then spun on my heel and stormed away, shouting “What the fuck are you looking at?” at a laughing Caliban in a chef’s coat, wiping his hands on a towel. He threw up his hands and took a step back, eyes and mouth comically wide, and I muttered “Yeah, you better fucking back off” as I passed by.

Magick was standing outside his office, confused, and I veered towards him. “Where the fuck are the kennels?” I demanded, stomping closer, and he looked back over my shoulder with a carefully neutral expression then pointed down the hallway past Doc’s office.

“Down the stairs, keep going straight. There’ll be another set of stairs on your right, and a hallway running underneath them. Door at the end of that hall. Go left on the path, stay on it. It’ll curve, go around a greenhouse. Kennels are past that.”

“Thank you,” I said, with great dignity.

“Did I just see you punch Loki?” he asked, folding his lips in as he waited for my answer.

“Yeah, I’m sorry for that, but I fucking hate when tall people — *especially* guys — try to use their size to intimidate or silence me. I don’t care how big you are, I don’t care if you’ll win the fight, you won’t walk away unscathed. I will fuck a bitch up even while shuffling off this mortal coil, you feel me?” I grabbed my own elbows — self-soothing for the win! — and shifted in place, suddenly uncomfortable and looking around at all the people watching us. Watching *me*.

“I feel you, Mouse,” he said gravely, a spark of something in his gaze when he looked down at me. “People often want to punch Loki. Few do. You’re going to be a bit of a hero now.”

I looked back at the man in question over my shoulder, expecting to see resentment. Maybe even hate. But he was standing there with one hand on his gut, watching me with something that looked very much like hurt on his face.

*Fuck.*

“Are you coming or what?” I shouted at him. “I’ll get lost on my own. This place is a fucking maze.” His face lit up, but he schooled his expression, nodding once and crossing over to where Magick and I stood.

“Well played,” Magick muttered just before Loki arrived, and I shrugged, not looking at him. So what if he knew I was a soft-hearted bitch? He’d also heard what I could do with a lead pipe, so I wasn’t too worried about it.

“I’m s—” Loki began and I shushed him.

“I may have overreacted, it’s been a trying day,” I said, looking pointedly at Magick who grimaced and looked at anything but me. “Of course, you kind of overreacted too, since I wasn’t flirting with him intentionally. I was trying to sneak up on you, you big jerk. He was helping me.”

“Sure, we’ll go with that,” Loki glowered, looking back at the baby-faced biker in question, who stiffened in his seat, his face paling and eyes darting around as if looking for help.

“Stop it,” I growled, smacking his arm lightly. “He’s just a kid, he’s going to piss himself if you keep that up.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Magick asked, laughing in disbelief, as Loki stared down at me with wide eyes. After a few seconds, his face cracked open and he began to sputter with laughter, shaking his head and clutching his gut, waving his other hand in front as if to stop me from saying more.

I enjoyed *the fuck* out of watching Loki laugh.

“What? That beard isn’t hiding anything, he’s gotta be—twenty? If that. He’s a fucking baby! I can’t believe you accused me of being a cougar.”

“You’re right, I was out of line,” Loki wheezed, wiping his eyes. *Adorbs*.

“*Thank you*,” I huffed out an exasperated sigh, rolling my eyes. “What’s his name anyway? I feel like I should know it since I got him in trouble and all.”

“Pumpkin,” Loki said, voice getting growly again, and I made a face at him.

“Let me guess, his real name is Jack?” They both nodded and I snorted, rolling my eyes. Fucking *bikers*. Then I realized where I knew that name from. “Wait, that’s Hazel’s man?” I looked between the two of them and they both seemed pretty confused by how outraged I sounded. “And from what I understand,” I said slowly, “they have something *exclusive* going on. You think he was flirting with me when he’s with her? Is Mouse gonna have to cut a bitch? And also, you’d be okay with that?”

“Flirting isn’t fucking,” Magick informed me in that pedantic way he had that made my fingertips itch to jab him in the throat. Who cares that I’d just gotten one of my all-time top hugs from the man, he was asking for it.

“Flirting with your woman’s friends is almost worse than fucking a stranger,” I explained in a tone that should’ve been a warning all its own. “That’s a betrayal. It’s disloyal. It’s choosing someone else over her, and even worse that it’s someone she knows and has to deal with on a regular basis.

Someone she might trust as much as you. Nothing about that is acceptable, it's undermining not only your relationship but your woman's friendships and for what? To feel super manly for like five minutes? To feel like this other chick wants to bone you? And somehow that's more important than your woman's self-esteem and confidence? Or her trust? Hope it's fucking worth it, because you've just lit the fuse on your relationship and it's only a matter of time before the whole thing detonates." They stared at me with furrowed brows and slack mouths, like none of this had ever occurred to them before. I rolled my eyes.

I couldn't believe I had to explain this to grown-ass men.

"This is exactly why I don't do exclusive relationships. Penises can't be trusted to understand the implications of their actions, and you all count on them for way too much advice on how to act around women. They are leading you astray. Stop for five seconds and consider that their sole priority is to shove themselves inside something warm, snug, and wet, and they are practically single-minded in pursuit of that. Does that sound like something that understands interpersonal communications? They have an agenda that conflicts with any other goals or aspirations, and most definitely your woman's best interest." I thought for a moment, tapping my finger against my bottom lip. "You know, if you have to ask a body part for advice, consider your liver. It spends most of its time protecting and cleaning up after you, it doesn't want to have to deal with more of your bullshit when you fuck up your relationship and drown yourself in alcohol. That just makes its job harder. Your liver won't steer you wrong, not like that penis will."

Magick's mouth worked a few times like he was trying to get something out. Finally, he managed to eke out, "And you think your liver will answer?"

Adorable. Seriously.

"No. Not at all. But while you stand there like a dumbass waiting for your liver to toss you pearls of wisdom, the woman your penis was steering you towards — in direct conflict with keeping your relationship on solid ground — is going to think

you're insane. Especially if you explain what you're doing. At that point, she'll take the decision out of your hands." He folded his lips in and widened his eyes like he was resisting proclaiming to the world that I was a font of arcane lore regarding relationships. He shouldn't have fought it, more men should talk to me before they're allowed out in public. "Any woman who doesn't, who thinks that's reasonable, should be avoided anyway. And if you don't, then you deserve each other, and the girl you're betraying is better off."

Nothing. Silence. The two of them just stood there and blinked at me like I'd been speaking in Polish the whole time, but I did see two men nearby making Xs on pieces of paper, making me scowl. They'd have been better off taking notes rather than trying to win gummy worms or vibrating cock rings. Yeah, actual prizes come to find out.

Finally, I lost patience with their slack-jawed yokel impersonations.

"Alright, all this bullshit is keeping me from dogs, Loki. *Dogs*. I think I've waited long enough. Deliver me to the promised land, sir!" I swung around him and hopped onto his back. I had to kick off the wall to get some momentum, so I didn't choke him out while getting enough height, and I was super glad when he caught my legs up and tucked them under his arms. He hitched me up even higher. I waved my arm around triumphantly in a circle, shouting, "Did you hear something, lads? Ah, fresh meat for the dogs! Attack, kill them all! Release the hounds!"

Loki started trotting down the hall, bouncing me against him, and I threw up the devil horns with the arm not wrapped around his neck. I yelled back over my shoulder, "See ya, Magick, we're off to love some puppies!"

I appreciated his response. He shouted back, "Godspeed, brave warriors! Enjoy the dogs!" and his fake accent was adorable.





LOKI CARRIED me all the way to the kennels, even though I told him multiple times that he could set me down. He just grunted in that articulate way he has, and kept walking.

We rounded the corner of the greenhouse, another place I needed to see, but I forgot all about it once we came in sight of the Elysian Fields.

Goddamn paradise.

The whole space must've been three acres at least, fenced in, with a few trees scattered here and there through the grassy field. It was *swarming* with dogs, more than a dozen of them at least, all healthy and happy and living their best dog lives. Tesla and Rasputin were both tossing tennis balls out into the distance as full packs were racing to get to them first followed by the winners trotting back, triumphantly, with the saliva-drenched balls in their mouths. Hazel and Addie were lying on a blanket in the sun, Hazel reading out loud from a book, surrounded by napping puppies.

There was a long, low building tucked back in line with the greenhouse; except in the center, where a set of double doors provided access to the fenced-in field, the entire exterior was lined with individual pens with their own entrances back inside. A couple of the pens had rope toys laying out on the ground, but all of them had dirt and gravel surfaces showing rake lines, devoid of refuse.

“Training grounds on the other side,” Loki explained, gesturing with his head. “This is the play area.”

“This is *amazing*.” I was breathless, itching to get over the twelve foot fence and into paradise. “If you get close enough, I can climb over the fence from here,” I advised Loki, who looked back over his shoulder and made a face at me.

“Um, no. We’re going inside first.”

I wanted to argue with him, but I couldn’t, not knowing what wonders awaited me inside.

“I hope it’s puppies! Is it puppies? Is it? Is it puppies? I bet it’s puppies!”

I hoped it was puppies.

I must have been loud because four sets of human eyes and countless canine all turned in our direction, and the fence was soon swarmed with yapping, happy dogs going crazy over the new people. I was reaching for them as Loki backed away, ignoring my inarticulate sounds of longing and my grasping, grabby hands.

“You’re keeping me from my people,” I wailed, heart breaking at the disappointment on all those furry faces as he walked me over to the building, leaving them behind. “There better be puppies,” I grumbled, staring back over my shoulder with wistful longing.

So close. If I just could’ve reached the fence, I’d be with them now.

“No puppies,” Loki confessed, walking me through a beautiful kennel with a dozen generously sized pens on each side, all with different sizes and types of beds, loose blankets and towels, favorite toys, constant-flow fountains supplying fresh water, and exits to their outdoor spaces. “Treats for you to woo them with.” He set me down in a small vestibule area and pointed at open bags of what looked like homemade doggie cookies.

His attempts to distract me from the most recent betrayal were failing. Only puppies would save him from my wrath.

“You don’t think my love and devotion will be enough?” I snarled, filling my pockets with a couple handfuls of the smallest treats. “I shoulda been able to prove myself by scaling the fence for them.”

“Being obsessive and weird isn’t going to be nearly enough. Not for the dogs,” he replied, smirking at me. “They can sense evil, you know?”

I stared at him, open-mouthed and stunned—the—the *audacity* of the man! The *slander*! Finally, I gritted out from a jaw so tense, I was grinding my molars to dust, “*Dogs love me.*”

“Mmhmm,” he fought a smile, looking around randomly like— like he was just humoring me!

“Dogs love me because they know I love them,” I insisted, more upset than I probably should’ve been, but whatever. “And then I love them more, in an endless circle of love!”

“Hakuna matata,” he murmured, then folded his lips in, staring at me with sparkling eyes and a smile oozing out from his stupid, stupid mouth.

“That’s the circle of *life*, jerkface,” I snapped, reaching for the door but his hand stopped me.

“You call me a lot of names.” I looked back over my shoulder to see him furrowing his brow.

I tilted my head, narrowing my eyes. “You told me that it didn’t matter, I could hit you, call you names, whatever, and you’d never retaliate.” I sounded really accusatory, like I expected him to go back on his word or something, but I wasn’t angry at all, I was feeling desperate. It was something I counted on more than I realized, and I was edging towards panic anticipating him telling me—telling me what? That I had to treat him more respectfully? Because... because that would mean I wasn’t any different than anyone else. And neither was he.

For some reason, I think I was expecting him to turn his head, look away before walking away — I was so sure that was what he’d do, that it surprised me when all that happened was the corners of his mouth curled down a little.

“It’s true, you’re always safe with me. Doesn’t mean I like it.”

I was hurting his feelings. This massive, *violent* biker really was easily wounded. By *me*, though. It only seemed to be by me.

I touched his arm, then curled my fingers around it and held on. It felt, in a way, like he was tethering me there, keeping me from drifting away on the regret I felt over treating him poorly. He was trusting me to do right by him, and I was being self-absorbed. Selfish. And sometimes spiteful.

I didn’t like that, at all.

I sucked in a deep breath and let it out, not liking the catch in it, how it wobbled a bit. “I’ve got a lot of rage in me, Loki,” I tried to explain, my eyes stinging, “and if I let it out around you, it means I do feel safe. But you’re right, I need to be better. You should feel safe with me too.”

He rested his hand on my shoulder, cupping my neck, and it didn’t even set me off at all. I really did trust him — everything in me, even the scared animal that was always one unexpected movement away from going feral, trusted this man. No rhyme or reason to it, just something in him spoke plainly to something in me, saying *you’re safe with me*.

His eyes were soft when he finally spoke, his voice steady, but low and warm. “I just need to know that you don’t think I’m a dumb asshole or like whoever hurt you. I can handle your rage, got a lot of my own, just don’t hate me because of them. Don’t look at me and see *them*.”

He got it. He understood.

And I didn’t like that those fuckers in Illinois were making me into a worse version of myself because of all the emotions locked up inside me, all the frustration and anger I felt. They didn’t get to win. They didn’t get to *ruin* me, make me into a petty, mean little asshole like them. Or make me weak, make me regress back to being *Janie*. So I gave him something precious to me, so he’d know how much I trusted him; I gave him honesty, the stuff that makes me weak and vulnerable. I rolled on my back and bared my belly, trusting him not to slice me open like a Tauntaun.

“I’ve got a friend, back where I came from. She’s my best friend in the whole world, but I also kinda raised her, at least since Janus began. She’s important, and not just to me, but for a lot of reasons. I would kill or die for her, even if she wasn’t — my friend.” I stopped myself before I said *way* too much, secrets that might get either one of us killed. I reached up and ran my hand over his cheek, stroking his beard. “I don’t have a lot of friends in this world, Loki, not like that. I don’t let people get so close because... because there aren’t any lines with me. There aren’t any boundaries I won’t cross for someone who means that much to me, and Janus has only

made it worse because now I can get away with it. No power in the 'verse can stop me, ya know? And that's just how I am, I'm all-in for the people who matter to me — sometimes they don't even know it, what lines I cross." I gave him a small smile, cupping my hand around his jaw. "So I hope you understand what it means when I say that I legit think of you as my other best friend. I realize it's sudden, we haven't known each other that long, but I just feel it. So I'm not ever gonna hate you. And I don't think you're dumb, I never have and I never will, so don't fucking say that shit again. The names I call you, they're like my version of *babydoll*, but not as nice, and I need to be *better*. Because you're not dumb and you aren't an asshole, and I need to make sure you always know how important you are to me. I'll fucking burn the whole world to ash for the people that matter to me, and you're one of them."

"Fair enough," he rasped out, leaning into my hand and shutting his eyes.

"Chill out around Pumpkin, yeah?" I teased, scratching him with the fingertips resting behind his ears. "And anyone else. None of them are you."

We stood there for a few moments, me petting his face and carding through his hair and beard, and him letting me. Eventually, he turned his mouth into my palm and deposited a light kiss there before opening the door and ushering me into the play yard.



"AND THAT'S KIMMY," Rasputin pointed at the fawn-colored pit currently rolling in the grass. "She think she cute," we both said at the same time, his face lighting up with glee when I got his reference, and we bumped fists before I turned back to the main event. But after he'd named off McNulty, Bunk, Kima, and Avon Barksdale — *could there be a more perfect dog's name?* — I caught on to his naming convention. "Kimmy" was a deep cut, but I'd watched all five seasons of *The Wire* a bazillion times.

I sighed in bliss, surveying the field. I'd gone through all the treats I'd brought within a minute, but just like I told Loki, I didn't need them. Dogs loved me, because I loved them and I accepted them for exactly who and what they were. After chasing the runners, wrestling with the tusslers, smothering the lovers in kisses, and gently smoothing the coats of the delicate flowers content to lay in the sun, I was finally getting names to put with faces and temperaments. And it just made my burgeoning crush on Rasputin sit up and beg for a treat.

I pointed at a particularly square-headed pit with massive shoulders and asked "Herc?"

Rasputin's head swung around, and he nodded, eyes wide and a grin lighting up his face.

I looked around, spotting a lean hound sniffing the air, alert and curious. "Bodie? Or Namond?"

"Bodie," he said with a delighted chuckle, pointing to a younger hound nipping at Wee-Bay. "That's Namond Brice."

"So all the guard dogs are named after the cops, and all the hunters are named after the drug dealers?" I wanted confirmation on my deduction, and he held up a hand gesturing for a high five. I obliged, unaccountably pleased with myself.

"Best fucking show ever," he sighed, and I nodded. It didn't require confirmation from me, after twenty-five years, that fucker still held up.

"Not a lot of female names though." I tilted my head, peering at him out of the corner of my eye. "How do you get around that?"

"Bubbles, Bunny, Wallace, and Marlo are all bitches," he laughed, and I nodded with a grin, satisfied with the compromise. "And Stringer Bell is actually B-E-L-L-E." I cackled. *Perfect.*

"Which one is Lester Freamon?" I wanted to see who merited the name of the best character on the show, and Rasputin's shoulders drooped. I felt an unaccountable sadness for a dog I never even met.

“He died last year. He was the one aberration — old-timer Beagle that got a cop’s name because he was a stately gentleman and wicked smart. He was my boy.” Rasputin’s voice caught, and without even thinking about it, I reached for his hand.

Like any proud parent, he wanted to tell stories, and I was here for it.

“Lester was a pain in my ass from day one,” he chuckled, looking out over the training course and wiping at his cheek without one thought about it. “We use operant conditioning — positive reinforcement — and the second he figured out what the commands meant, he’d run through them one after another without either of us saying a word, just to get to the treats. Seriously, the second we’d get out here, he’d gallop twenty feet away and start going through the sit-stay-come drill like it was a goddamn dance routine, with two beat pauses between each action, until he was right up on my legs for his treat delivery. He’d get so frustrated with me if I tried mixing it up, giving me this *attitude* like I was being an idiot. It took me a couple times to realize he considered himself to be my little teaching assistant, his job was to show the others what they were supposed to be doing, and he expected to be paid his salary for it. Fucking diva about it too. Goddamn, do I miss him.”

“What happened?” I didn’t want to make it worse by asking, but I needed to know. My heart was in my throat about it.

Rasputin turned to me, his eyes red and leaking down his face, and grinned. “He died of old age. Can you believe that? Worldwide pandemic, and my boy lived to sixteen years old — that’s what we estimated — died in his sleep, curled up in the middle of my bed, with a belly full of french fries and gravy. Cal started cooking special for him when he started losing his appetite, that’s when we knew the end was close. How many others out there you think get to say that? I can’t regret one second of it, he went out like a beagle *boss*.”

I giggled through my own tears, imagining that. Wishing I’d known him too. “You’ll show me some pictures later?”

He nodded, and we stood there without another word, hands clasped, watching the babies cavort around us. It was so peaceful, so... *right*. Being with dogs again, feeling this way — not letting any bad thoughts in. I focused on the moment I was living, on the feel of the sun, the smell of the grass and fresh air, Rasputin next to me as we watched a field full of happy dogs live their best lives. One or more would occasionally swing by for some pets or encouragement before taking off again, and I was happy that some of them came to me; Bodie, in particular, seemed to like the cut of my jib. That meant more to me than most of the people's opinions.

Finally, I broke the comfortable silence.

"I think it's obvious I love dogs," I said, soaking in this gift that Rasputin had given me. "Most animals, really—" except fucking *chickens*, "—but especially dogs. I haven't been around any since Janus started, the place I'd been living didn't allow pets of any sort, at all. And I knew I missed them, but I really didn't realize just *how much* I missed them until this; it feels like a phantom limb has somehow regrown, one I hadn't even noticed had been removed, only that there had been an ache that was now soothed. And to see all of them so *happy* and healthy... I'm kinda crushing on you big time right now." I squeezed his hand. "Don't let it go to your head though, I'm a fickle bitch."

He didn't say anything, and I was too chicken to look at him even though he'd partially turned to face me. After a time he said, in a low, low voice that sent a tingle down my spine, "It's an honor just to be nominated."

I nodded, biting back my smile. "Cool."

"You're welcome to visit the, uh, dogs whenever you want," he said, crouching to accept some doggie kisses without ever releasing my hand. "My rooms are up there," he gestured to windows near the roofline of the kennel, and I realized there was a second floor up there. He even had a little balcony looking out over the yard; it had a single chair with a crate sitting next to it, perfect for kicking back, maybe with a beer, after a long day in the trenches.



“Are you the only one up there?” I asked, curious about how the space was allocated— okay, I was really just being nosy because there were a lot of windows up there, and some of them had curtains. Flowery curtains.

“Nope, Silas and Stacy both have rooms. Silas is our vet, he splits his time between here and the farm unless something is going on at either place. And Stacy is my training partner.”

I pictured Stacy, Sporty Spice at Brandy-Lynn’s shindig. She was the rockabilly princess with six-pack abs and arms I’d kill for — despite being superhero-strong, my arms were kinda frail looking. Like every other woman here, she was beautiful and sexy and confident. I could see her running alongside Avon Barksdale through an agility course as easily as I could picture her bent over Rasputin’s balcony railing, taking him from behind. They were an attractive pair in my pornographic brain movie.

“She’s a smoke show,” I smiled at him. “Brandy-Lynn had a little gathering of a few of the girls to introduce me, before you and Magick got back, and I remember her. Wish I’d known she worked with the dogs, I might not have been quite so awkward and anti-social with something to talk about.”

“She and I, we aren’t a couple or anything,” he explained earnestly. “We’re training partners.”

I narrowed my eyes at him skeptically. “So you haven’t tapped that?”

His immediate discomfort was pretty clear. His eyes darted around, and he shifted in place. “Well, I wouldn’t say that...”

I wanted to laugh, but I really was inherently evil. “So you *are* a couple? That’s so sweet that you work together too,” I cooed in a saccharine voice. Loki or Tesla would’ve recognized right away that I was just giving him shit, but Rasputin and I had barely talked at all in the two days since we’d met, so he thought it was *real*.

“No, I mean, we’ve hooked up, but only casually—” he then stuttered out a few more attempts at mansplaining casual sex to me, while I worked at maintaining a straight face, right

up until he said, “You have to understand, I had a pretty unconventional upbringing and—”

“Rasputin, seriously, *relax*.” I laughed, giving up on the ruse. His explanation cut off abruptly, and he narrowed his eyes at me, his jaw clenching as I giggled helplessly. “I’m sorry, but it was just too easy to fuck with you. It’s all good.”

He frowned. “So you’re not really upset?”

I shook my head, still cackling into my hand, but my answer didn’t seem to appease him. Instead, he was openly scowling, and my laughter died off. “Why are you mad? I wasn’t being judgey or anything, what you do is your business —”

He turned and walked away— no, he *stormed* away, whistling for the dogs in a very aggressive manner, and I swear a few of them glared back at me as they trotted after him, like I did something to put him in a mood.

“What the fuck just happened?” I muttered to myself, not expecting an answer.

“It takes a lot to upset Rasputin.” Tesla’s voice came from behind me, and I jumped, spinning around as my heart pounded and I fought back the surge of panic that hit me. “Well done, Pinky.” His monotone was pure sarcasm, and irritation replaced my sudden fear.

“Fuck off, I didn’t even say anything bad to him.” I glared up at the man who stared at nothing over my shoulder, his own scowl less pronounced but still obvious. “What’s your problem?”

“No problem,” he said, looking at my ear.

“Bullshit.” I moved so he was looking at my face, and his eyes shifted. “What did I do now?”

He frantically nipped at his lip ring, ignoring my question and looking back at the others.

“If you don’t answer me, I’m going to hug you. Maybe not right this second, because you’re prepared now and will dodge, but when you’re least expecting it. I’ll get right up in

your bidness, rub my cooties all over you, and fight you when you try to push me away. It will be traumatic for both of us. So just tell me what I did to upset you and save us both the emotional scars.”

He huffed in a breath and stared down at me, right in my eyes, biting back a smile I know was fighting to get out.

“Give it up and just release the kraken,” I made a threatening gesture with my arms out like I was going to embrace him, and it worked: Tesla smiled. It was small, and it was short, but it was fucking *there*. I did a super embarrassing victory dance, and he rolled his eyes. “Well?” I asked, letting my hip-shimmying peter out as I cocked up my eyebrow at him.

“I don’t even remember anymore, my mind has gone blank. Your hip gyrations and arm flapping are like the motions of a master of hypnosis casting their wicked spell on my mind, and I’m getting sleepy. Too sleepy to continue this conversation.”

I amped up my seductive chicken dance, advancing on him with a determined frown. “I’m going to count backwards from ten, and as I do, you will slip deeper into a trance. When I get to one, you will reveal to me all your darkest secrets and fears, even knowing that I will go out of my way to exploit them for my own benefit. Ten. Nine. Eight—”

“I’m a slave to your will, Mouse the Magnificent. Truly you have mesmerized me.” His tone was flat, deadpan, but his mouth was twitching wildly as I bore down on him, the intensity of my physical display clearly intimidating him.

“I’ll try to be gentle, Tesla, for I am a benevolent master. Seven. Six. Five. Four—”

“Please, please, stop doing that with your legs... I really can’t— you look ridiculous—”

“Do I, Tesla? Do I look ridiculous?” I asked, bringing my knees up higher and then arching them out with each step as I continued to shimmy and flap and move my head like an Egyptian goddess, my eyes locked on his. “Or am I the most

spectacular creature you've ever seen? Because you can't seem to look away, can you? No, you can't. You're mine now, Tesla, I control your every thought and action, and I demand... macaroni pictures."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Pictures. Made from macaroni. Glued to the paper. Possibly with glitter sprinkled on them. Yesssss," I hissed out, approaching even closer as he stopped backing away from me, staring at me with a furrowed brow and tilted head. "Yesssss, I demand glitter."

"We don't allow craft herpes on the compound, Mouse."

"I - demand - vampire - dandruff."

"Not even for you, Mouse the Magnificent." He shook his head, his expression stern. "We used to search club girls every time they returned from shopping, just to make sure none of them brought back stripper dust."

"I. Want. Bejizzle!"

"No." He stated, backing away from me another few paces.

"Give me fairy bukkake."

"Unicorn queef is a banned substance on the compound. You can keep up this weird dance all you want, you won't be getting anything coated in raver scabies from anyone here."

"You will bring me some clown jizz."

"I'm not breaking the rules—the rules *I* made. You aren't getting any glamthrax as long as you're living under my roof."

I stopped my captivating movements, eyeing the man with a mounting sense of glee. "Young lady."

"What?" His brow furrowed and his eyes darted at me, as he scraped his lip ring into his mouth. He knew he screwed up.

"You forgot to say *young lady*," I repeated. "The full statement is *as long as you're living under my roof, young lady*. And then I answer, *but Daddy!*" I bit back the urge to snicker as his face flushed and his eyes got wide and a little

wild. “Then you threaten me with some kind of discipline. Grounding me, maybe, or—”

“Don’t say it.” He shook his head, holding up his hands.

“—a spanking!” I crowed in triumph as he sucked in a pained breath. “Yeah, you’re supposed to threaten to put me over your knee, right in the middle of the club room, so everyone can see what a bad, bad girl I’ve been.” I kept my tone steady and business-like, carefully neutral, as if I couldn’t possibly be talking about anything sexual since that would be inappropriate. He bowed his head and let out a long, painful sigh.

“You’re the devil, Pinky,” he groaned, rubbing the spot in the middle of his forehead as though a headache was forming. I only felt a little bad.

“What? You’re the one who said—”

“I know what I said.”

“I just didn’t want you to lose this opportunity to threaten me. It’s been a long time since you got to mention the shallow grave in the woods. See? I’m helping!”

He tilted his head just enough so he could look at me over the top of his glasses, his warm brown eyes locking on mine. I fought the shiver tracing up my spine. “When you finally give me enough of an excuse to truly discipline you, Pinky, you’ll wish it was just a reddened ass in the club room. Which I know damn well isn’t your kink anymore than it’s mine.”

Fuck, I really should learn not to taunt the asexual biker. This was quickly turning on me; except for mild irritation, he was completely unfazed, and I was standing here with weak knees, damp panties, and the inability to take a deep breath.

A smirk bloomed on his face as he kept eye contact, one that quickly evolved into a full-blown grin, dark and wicked. “No,” he said softly, shaking his head, “when I’ve reached my limit with your smart little mouth, I’ll make sure we’re somewhere no one will disturb us.”

I gulped, finding it hard to breathe through the thickness in my throat.

He bit down on his bottom lip, scraping his teeth over it, before promising in a low voice, “And then, brat, I’ll teach you a lesson you won’t ever forget.”

With that mic drop, he jammed his hands in his pockets as he turned and sauntered away. He headed back to where Loki stood with his phone out but completely forgotten, an odd expression on his face. Rasputin had rejoined them at some point, recovered from his bad mood judging by his beaming smile, with Addie by his side and her little hand tucked into his. I was too far away to hear what was exchanged between the three of them as Tesla approached, but it resulted in all of them looking over at me at the same time, including Hazel and Addie. But it was Rasputin’s cheeky grin, Tesla’s focused gaze, and the heated stare Loki fixed on me, that caused a riot of butterflies to start up a mosh pit in my gut.

The thumbs up that Hazel flashed me didn’t help one bit.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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AFTER MY DISTURBING conversation with Tesla — who'd either threatened to legit torture me or just negotiated a super hot BDSM scene, and I had no idea which — I was naturally a little out of sorts. Rather than dwell on everything that had just occurred, starting with Rasputin's mood swings, I told Hazel that she could have a break and I'd hang out with Addie before dinner.

I was determined to find the library that I'd heard mentioned several times, but took a wrong turn — possibly four or five of them — and we ended up in the basement under the east wing, which had been cleared out but not renovated. I think we were near the abandoned swimming pool, because the whole floor seemed to have super high ceilings and our voices echoed even in the hallways. We'd found a completely round room at the very end of one hallway branch, at least forty feet in diameter with a vaulted ceiling and arched windows high up on the walls. The entire thing was tiled, and in the very center of the room was an eight by ten rectangular pit at least six feet deep, with a narrow set of stairs leading into it, cut into the floor at one end. Benches were built into the sides around the entire thing, except for where the stairs opened up, and there was a drain in the center. I thought it was an old-fashioned jacuzzi, for medical rather than recreational purposes, but there weren't any jets or obvious sources of water. The whole room was just a huge, echoing, goldenrod-and-white tiled dome with a small pit in the middle for no discernible purpose, and that made it creepy as fuck. Why the drain?

Why all the empty space surrounding it? What the fuck kind of liquids needed to be washed down it? Was the whole floor sloped towards the pit in the center?

*Why the drain?*

“This room is scary,” Addie whispered in Polish, gripping my hand. It *was*, but I fronted like it wasn’t, not wanting her to have any fears about her home. I knew too well what that was like.

“You know you don’t have to worry about anything like that, not ever. Right?” She looked up at me with a flattened mouth and raised eyebrows like I was the little kid spouting nonsense in our partnership. I rolled my eyes at her. “Think about it, you’ve got all these tough bikers looking out for you. And you’ve got me and Hazel. Nothing is going to want to mess with me, let alone her.” She seemed to consider that point, but I could tell by the little wrinkle between her eyes that she wasn’t fully convinced.

I crouched down in front of her, eye to eye, still holding her hand. She frowned at me, her brow lowering. I resisted the impulse to roll my eyes at the stubborn little monkey currently channeling Tesla’s determined skepticism, the same look he gets every time the subject of cryptids comes up.

I needed to start calling him Scully.

That genius plan needed to wait, because I had a little girl to educate. “Okay, so forget about all the people here who would throw themselves in front of one of the raging trolls that have been spotted in these mountains. You’re right, we’re not *always* around. But she is,” I pointed at her constant companion. “Nothing in this world is as scary as that doll you carry around.”

Addie lifted her arm up to examine the horrific demon-toy she never went anywhere without, despite all my attempts to hide the thing and replace it with a nice stuffie. A nice, unhaunted stuffie.

The doll had clearly been through some shit. She was an old-fashioned thing, a good eighteen inches tall, with strategic



porcelain parts: her head, hands, and arms below the elbow, her legs below the knees, and her feet. Foot. Whatever.

The rest of her body was stuffed, but not soft like a pillow, I think the muslin form that made up her torso, and the top halves of her limbs, was stuffed with coils of straw or something similar. It had a little bit of give but not very much, and when any of the “stuffed” parts were compressed, it made a faint crackling sound before springing back into shape. On top of her mystery innards, which sounded disturbingly like tiny bird bones snapping every time Addie hugged her, the doll’s porcelain face had cracks, and one of her feet had been broken off near the ankle, leaving behind a blade-shaped stump. She also had eyelashes and hair that I suspected were human, and her blank, glassy stare was frighteningly realistic.

In a word, terrifying.

“Seriously, Addie, she’s super creepy. I don’t understand how you can be afraid of anything yet sleep with her in your bed every night.” The little girl smiled down at her nightmare waiting to happen, and I shuddered. Leaning in so I was right up in Addie’s bidness, for her ears only, I whispered, “She’s evil, Addie. Look at her. Pure evil.”

“She doesn’t like you either,” Addie replied at full volume, and I twitched, glancing down to see if the doll heard. There was no reaction, so I hoped she didn’t understand Polish. “She told me,” the smug little shit smiled, holding the doll up.

I scowled at both of them, sitting back on my heels. “That’s right. See? You’re just making my point. Nothing in this place is as scary as you, either. I’m pretty sure you’re a changeling, left by the bad fairies. The real Addie — the sweet child you replaced — would never say something like that.”

“So monsters and ghosts need to fear me?”

“Exactly. You’re terrifying.” I shrugged, warming up to my subject, wanting to impart this wisdom to the next generation. “All children are, really. You’ll figure that out as you get older. You’re all just a bunch of sociopaths hiding behind big eyes and Kool-Aid stained mouths. Like that old saying, *the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world*

*he didn't exist.* Immature humans understand how to survive, by convincing the world you're helpless and innocent. Devils, the lot of you."

"Shouldn't you be afraid then?" she asked in an unnecessarily low and creepy voice. "I know that you know my secret."

I glared at her, speechless. This was why the nose goblin was so scary: she was too fucking smart. The machinations taking place behind those big eyes and round cheeks, were more of a threat than any ghost or Sasquatch.

"Nah," I said, hugging her to me with true affection, and a tiny bit of wanting to prove I could physically overpower her. "You still need me. And I trust you." I kissed the top of her head. "You might be a monster, kiddo, but you're my monster. I know you're loyal as long as you still need me. But your doll —" I shuddered, looking at that demon-spawned slice of nightmares dangling off to her side.

Addie reassured me by whispering in my ear, "I hug her tight all night so she can't leave to go look for you."

I swear one of those cloudy glass eyes just fucking winked at me.

I released her from the hug — I didn't actually push her away from me, despite what it might've looked like — and stood her in front of me, my hands resting on her shoulders. I gazed steadily into her big blue eyes, so much like Magick's down to the cold calculation within them, and made my deal with the crossroads demon he'd spawned. "Promise you'll always keep her with you, and I'll always share my bacon with you."

"Cake too."

I pursed my lips together. This was going too far. Then the doll swayed in place, on its own, because I would've felt it if Addie had moved her arm. I tried not to look directly at it, not wanting it to know that I *knew*. "Fine. Cake too. But you keep that thing locked up at night."

"And ice cream."

“Don’t push it, kid.”

The little shit giggled, lifting up her free hand to boop me on the nose. “Don’t make me mad. I’m a monster, remember?”

I scowled at her, furious with myself for giving her that ammunition in a moment of sentimentality. There was no room for weakness when dealing with devils-in-training.

“You see this?” I pushed up my sleeve and showed her the writing inked on my arm, near my elbow, in letters resembling an old fashioned typewriter. It had really been done too small, the lines were already feathering a bit, making it fuzzier and blurrier than was easily legible, but I knew what it said and that was all that mattered. “Can you read it?”

She stared at my arm, her little brow furrowing, then glared up at me. Addie hated to be reminded that she didn’t speak the same language as the rest of us, she got frustrated and on the verge of full-on tantrums when it was thrown in her face like this, but that was part of my strategy. It made her forget that I hadn’t agreed to the ice cream extortion.

I pointed at the letters, sounding it out for her in English, then repeated the quote in Polish: “Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.”

Her scowl smoothed out a bit as she thought about what I’d said, and I kind of hated that it resonated with her too, that her whole face relaxed as she nodded in agreement.

I knew her history. Her mom figured out she was pregnant and continued to party at the club until she began to show. She disappeared for almost a year before she started showing up again, but didn’t tell anyone where she’d been or that she now had an infant that was living with her parents, Addie’s grandparents.

Grandparents that only spoke Polish at home.

It was strangely similar to my own origin story, but it wasn’t actually that unusual. I was from southern Illinois, but Addie came from the Chicago area, which had a huge Polish population. But unlike me, who went to public school and had

interactions at my dad's club to get me speaking English regularly, Addie had been homeschooled and essentially kept hidden. No one knew why, and we'll probably never know if it was her mom or her grandparents that kept her from the club.

Hazel told me that about seven months ago, a car dropped her off at the gates of the ARMC chapter outside the city. All she had were the clothes on her back and two letters, the first from a neighbor that explained that a crying Addie had shown up on her porch with the second letter. The second letter was from Addie's grandmother, written in a wobbly and old-fashioned cursive script, and it said that Addie had been outside in the backyard when her mother came home, visibly sick with "the Janus." Her grandmother immediately locked the house, keeping Addie out in the yard, and passed her this note under the door to take to the neighbor. She stressed, multiple times, that Addie hadn't been exposed, and that the neighbor should take her to the Apocalypse Riders' chapter near the Joliet airport, and tell them that Adèle was the daughter of Ian Byrne. That was Magick's name, but also his dad's, and Addie's grandmother didn't specify junior or senior.

It didn't matter to Magick, who basically lost his mind when he heard about the girl and saw the picture they sent. The five of them were on the road in a matter of hours, and two days later, Addie met her new guardians. Magick then had to borrow an SUV and trailer for his bike, because they'd left so fast he hadn't considered how to get her home. That drive back from Chicago was legendary, because Addie cried and screamed at him in Polish the entire way, only interrupted by a couple naps, and none of the other guys would trade off driving with him.

That story probably shouldn't make me laugh, but it did.

I ran my hand over my tattoo, and explained my point to Addie using my teacher voice. "This is something a really wise man named Stephen King once said. He was a writer in the Before Times, and I heard a rumor that he still lives with his family somewhere in Maine, but doesn't publish anymore because the world caught up with his books. But he would've written a whole book about you and your doll, because you're

his favorite kind of monster, the kind that's scarier on the inside." I hugged her tight, but not enough to crush her, just enough so she felt the threat of it. "You're the devil in an innocent little girl's body. Don't ever forget that. The rest of your life, people are gonna see those big blue eyes and pretty face, and think you're a good person because of it. Either that, or they'll think you're dumb and weak. But you'll know the truth: inside, you're the scariest monster in any room. So terrifying that even creepy, haunted dolls obey you."

I made her repeat the quote, in English, as many times as it took until she was tracing over the words on my skin along with the right sounds. She repeated it in Polish too, until the truths were imprinted on her young, elastic brain, forming new pathways.

Finally, she gazed up at me with those wide, innocent eyes, and said, "That's right. I'm the thing hiding under the bed or in the attic, waiting to kill you in your sleep."

I froze, horror infusing my veins with icy needles. Why would she say something like that? Why would she even put that out in the universe? What the fuck is wrong with her—? No.

No.

She was just teasing me. She had to be.

She got up on her knees and hugged me this time, wrapping those little arms around my neck— no. She was just a little girl.

"Don't worry, Mouse," she whispered loudly against my hair, not quite making it to my ear. "As long as I get your bacon, and cake, and *some* of your ice cream, you're safe."

I gently pushed her off me, shooting her side-eye as she smugly giggled to herself. Evil.

"I want to be mad at you, kiddo, for being so diabolical, but it really just makes me proud." I snuffled back a bit of congestion, blinking away the dampness in my eyes. Damn allergies. I was also going to pretend she never said that stuff about under my bed and the attic, because I wanted to be able

to sleep at night. “But just in case you think you can take me, I’m going to tell you some stories about when I was your age, because you might secretly be an evil fairy devil-spawn who commands an army of possessed toys, but I’m a secret ninja unicorn assassin, and I’m way sneakier than you are. And I have big blue eyes too. You see, I grew up in a place kinda like this, but so much worse. My bikers weren’t nice like yours, they didn’t have honor, so I spent a lot of time crawling through the heating vents...”

Sitting with our feet dangling over the side of the empty pit, with my words reverberating and echoing off the sides of the vast, hollow dome above us, I told her some of my mid-level stories of spying on Beast, and my dad, and the rest of the club. I left out all the sex and drugs, and most of the violence. Despite her own upbringing that didn’t shelter her from the reality of living here, and despite everything I’d reassured her of, Addie was still more little girl than evil changeling. I wanted to keep her that way as long as possible. She could come into her own dark powers once she was a tween, that was time enough for rumpus and ruin, murder and mayhem. For now, I could still give her a little bit of protection from the big, bad world huffing and puffing at her door.

As we headed back to the civilized areas since dinner time was approaching, Addie clinging to my back with that horrific doll thwacking into my shoulder blade with every step, I considered Mr. King’s wisdom. She was about the age I was when I started reading his books, and I contemplated what the best “gateway drug” would be. It definitely needed to be old skool, something pre-millenia. Not *It*, she needed to be at least twelve before starting that one.

*The Stand* was a little too post-apocalyptic for these days, and *Cujo* might make her worried around the dogs and that wasn’t acceptable.

The perfect book was *The Shining*, of course, a cautionary tale every little girl should read, but that was a little too on the mark here. She was already growing up in an abandoned resort in the middle of the mountains, she didn’t need to worry about

narcissistic writers who abused their families showing up to destroy her home.

*Carrie* should wait until she was a teen, and needed guidance on how to deal with her peers.

*Cycle of the Werewolf* or *The Talisman* were solid contenders, but the protagonists were little boys, and Addie needed a powerful girl hero to emulate. Once I realized that, the choice was obvious: *Firestarter*. It had all the elements that Addie needed to understand this world and how to survive it: a vulnerable young heroine cared for by a devoted father(-figure); a shady government agency using deceit and trickery to promote its agenda; and medical experiments that inadvertently created a superhero.

I missed Azzie right then, with a powerful sadness that felt like a fist to my gut.



MY LONG, weird day full of extremes, both high and low, kept going through dinner and into the night.

The meal was lovely, if by “lovely” I meant next-level. A bunch of people had gone fishing in the river, bringing home a metric fuck-ton of trout that Caliban pan fried and served with a garlic-lemon-butter sauce, grilled asparagus, and new potatoes. But the food wasn’t even the best part. During the meal, Magick presented me with a novelty oversized bowling trophy removed from its stand.

Two handles, all mug.

I might’ve kissed him right there in front of everybody, but I was too busy talking dirty to the sweet mana from heaven that my loving cup had been filled with.

Late in the evening, after Addie had been washed, brushed, and tucked in for the night, I prepared to report to the club room as commanded. I enjoyed, maybe a little too much, getting dressed in the clothes that Magick and Rasputin had brought back for me. It felt like putting on a costume, since

apparently they'd decided to dress me like a sixty year old spinster from half a century ago instead of one of the club girls, or, you know, a normal human woman.

The showpiece had to be the polyester crepe, long-sleeve, powder pink blouse with a bow at the neck like a built-in scarf taking the place of a collar. Or perhaps the pink and orange sweater vest made out of some kind of acrylic, complete with shoulder pads that I cut out, because *shoulder pads*. The bow hung out over the top of the sweater vest and I kept forgetting it was there and getting startled, thinking a face-sucker from the *Alien* franchise was stuck to my boobs.

I ended up opting for a knee-length, burgundy corduroy skirt over salmon pink tights, because all the pants they bought me were high-waisted, pleated slacks with pegged cuffs, which somehow managed to have both a saggy crotch *and* give me camel-toe. It was a feat of sartorial engineering not seen since the '80s, and I was having flashbacks to sitcom reruns from my youth.

Of all my footwear options, the least offensive were a pair of Keds, which I abhorred on principle. But better a personification of middle class, suburban privilege than rounded-toe pumps meant to be switched out under my desk for Reebok aerobics shoes for my commute. I was now the proud owner of three pairs of those kitten-heeled boner-killers, in black, navy, and *taupe*.

It's like they started fucking with me before even meeting me.

To compliment the overall look, I put half my hair in a high ponytail in a hot pink scrunchie I borrowed from Addie's stash, leaving the rest long, and debated whether to give myself bangs. It seemed like an extreme move, but the ability to tease a fringe of hair into spiral-permed spikes jutting out from my forehead, was almost too tempting to resist. If I'd had the time and chemicals to do the perm, I would've been all over it, but alas, I had to settle for backcombing a bump of hair at the front of my head, which was really more early aughts than '80s, but whatever. I added some pale blue eyeshadow, shiny pink lip gloss, and applied navy blue eyeliner so thick,



the stripper who originally taught me her mad makeup skillz would've been proud.

Tesla was the first to notice me.

He was sitting sideways against the wall at the very end of the bar, about ten feet from the room entrance, almost like he was waiting for me. I was still mostly behind the front desk as I approached, really only my head was visible and bobbing along above it as conversation seemed to die in my wake, and as soon as he saw me, he got up and headed over. I rounded the corner of the desk, fully revealed in the doorway of the club room, and he stopped dead in his tracks.

“What the fuck are you wearing?” he demanded, with no need to narrate the level of annoyance he was feeling because it was pretty damn obvious.

“What? You don't like it?” I gave him a little spin, enjoying how the A-line skirt was so stiff that it didn't flare even a millimeter. “But it's a special outfit! Picked out for me special, by Rasputin and Magick! So, so special,” I mumbled, flicking the bow back into place because the synthetic fabric made my chin itch every time it touched.

He sucked his lip ring into his mouth, a sure sign of agitation, but it made him look adorably like he was biting his bottom lip. “Are— are all the clothes like that?”

“Oh no,” I confided, stepping closer and holding up my hand to hide my mouth from anyone who might be watching. “This was one of the least offensive outfits. I only had to remove one set of shoulder pads, there's no built-in decorative belt with a gold-tone seashell buckle to cinch around my waist, and I'm not sporting camel toe. That you can see,” I amended. “And these shoes were better than the lady executive pumps — oh! I should've worn one of the peplum blazers too. Dammit. Missed opportunity.”

“You can't wear that here.” He was eyeing the crowd, almost panicking, and I noticed that some of the men at the bar and surrounding tables were staring at me. I didn't see any of the girls yet, I must've gotten ready much faster than them.

“Gotta,” I said, dismissing him with a wave of my hand. “His majesty commanded that I be here, and that I dress appropriately. These are my fanciest duds—”

“Borrow something—”

“No.” I was making a damn point here, and if I wanted to get out of forced socialization, then Magick was going to need to see how uncomfortable everyone was around a middle-aged mother figure. “Look, as soon as I make sure his majesty sees me here, I’m going to sit in the corner for a half hour or so, then sneak out, okay? But if I go upstairs to change, I’m not coming back down again. I’m tired, and it was a long day—”

“Okay.” He let out a huff of breath. “Magick is playing pool. I’ll... escort you.”

He started walking, elbowing his way through the crowd with excessive force when the guys were just checking out the substitute teacher, and who could blame them? I looked like I was at a costume party. I waved at a few of the men that I had met, like Gonzo — he was staring at me with a dazed expression so he must’ve already downed quite a few — but Tesla wouldn’t let any of them close enough for even a polite chat. Maybe, once I settled into a corner, Gonzo would come talk to me again. If he could bear to be seen with me in this getup.

I almost rammed right into Tesla when he stopped suddenly, at the last pool table in the line. Magick lined up a shot while Loki waited, and Rasputin was drinking beer out of the bottle on a stool off to the side. He saw me first, and the bottle dropped away from his mouth as if in slow motion.

“What the—”

“Heya, Rasputin,” I chirped, smiling brightly. “Never got a chance to thank you for the clothes, but as you can see, you have *excellent* taste.” I emphasized the *excellent* so much, even closing my eyes and jerking my head in an arc as I said it. A wide grin broke over his face as he studied me, licking his lips like he was eager to say something, but Loki interrupted.

“*What. The. Fuck?!*” he bellowed, and suddenly the area around us had emptied out. I totally got it, no one wanted to get sucked into any drama.

“What? You have a problem with my outfit?” I did a series of quick fashion poses, fluttering my lashes at him. He was on me before I’d even finished, half-carrying, half-dragging me to the other side of the table and getting between me and the rest of the room.

“What the actual fuck,” he swore, staring at me in horror.

I knew the clothes were bad, but this was getting hurtful. I gave him a death-glare and straightened my sweater vest, my hands resting at my hipbones, fingers curled around the ribbed hem of the acrylic horror show.

Magick appeared next to him, staring at my outfit with a furrowed brow and frown, and I dislodged just my middle fingers, straightening them out to rest against my hipbones. “As you can see, I’m *super* thankful for the new clothes. I feel like I fit right in.” His eyes were fixed on my fingers, and a slow smile crept over his face as he dragged his gaze up to meet mine.

“I’m taking her to town tomorrow,” Loki growled.

“She doesn’t need to go,” Magick informed him, not once breaking the staring contest we were engaged in. “These clothes are fine.”

“They are not!” Loki sputtered out at the same time as Tesla said, “She looks like a barely legal teen trying to break into the lucrative field of MILF porn. These clothes are going to get her in trouble.”

“Wait, *what?*” I shrieked, glaring at Tesla in outrage, my mouth hanging open in shock.

“Yeah, that’s not helping one bit,” Rasputin muttered, shifting in place. “Are those, uh, pantyhose?” he asked, staring at my legs.

“Tights,” I ground out from between clenched teeth.

“Still not helping,” he groaned. “Maybe if you took that bow off your neck—“

“It’s built into the blouse,” I snarled, yanking it away from my face, again, because it was sticking to my chin.

“Maybe if you were wearing a longer skirt,” he began, and I threw up my hands and shot him with double-barrel birds.

“The skirt hits my knees,” I snapped, “which makes it twice as long as any other skirt around here, and it’s *corduroy*. There’s nothing remotely sexy about this outfit, you bought me clothes my *grandmother* would consider dowdy. What the actual fuck, indeed.”

“I think it’s just the combination,” Magick said, still grinning and running his eyes all over me. “The hair, the shiny lips, that fucking bow...”

“I’m. Wearing. A. Sweater. Vest. And. KEDS!”

“It’s sexy as fuck though. I never would’ve imagined—”

Apparently Loki had reached his limit. With a string of guttural curses, he bent down tossed me over his shoulder, carrying me away from the table. I lifted my head up to see Tesla, Magick, and Rasputin in a row, watching us go with expressions I couldn’t identify. I popped up both middle fingers and held them up until we were out of the room and heading towards the stairs.

“You can put me down now,” I said, wiggling a bit. The hand clamped down on my thigh squeezed, then rubbed the place he squeezed like he was worried he’d bruised me.

I was too afraid he’d drop me on the stairs and I’d crack my skull open while simultaneously breaking my neck, so I stopped moving once it became clear he wasn’t going to set me down. And for whatever reason, being carried like this by him wasn’t triggering any sort of panic or anything, so I let myself enjoy a few quiet minutes of being draped over the shoulder of my favorite chiseled man-mountain. I even traced the Apocalypse Riders’ colors on the back of his cut with my fingertip, an act of blasphemous rebellion. It was that or smack

his ass, and I wasn't sure if we were at the ass-smacking level of friendship yet.

We reached the third floor, and the hallway outside my room, and a big, paddle-like palm hit my butt cheek with a muffled crack before he lowered me to my feet. Apparently we'd leveled up. I rubbed my hand over my bruised posterior and glared up at him. "What was that for?"

"Bein' difficult," he grumbled back, stepping in closer so I had to tilt my head way back to maintain the scowl. "I'm trying to be patient, Mouse. I'm giving you time."

"I didn't realize I was being evaluated," I answered stiffly, dropping my eyes to focus on the center of his chest so he couldn't see my hurt. "I'm never going to fit in here."

"You fit with us fine, babydoll," he rumbled in a softer tone, less annoyed, and I peered up at him again.

He was looking at me like— like something other than a friend. Butterflies fluttered in my belly, and my mouth went dry.

"I'm not used to waiting, but I will, because I know you aren't ready for what I want. You take whatever time you need." He leaned down and pressed his lips against my forehead, holding them there for a few seconds, then strode off down the hallway back towards the stairs like he hadn't just fucked me up beyond compare.



I DECIDED I'd fulfilled Magick's command for the night, and stayed upstairs after changing into regular clothes.

The outfit I'd been wearing was in a heap on the ground. I glared at it from my seat on the foot of the bed, like I was waiting for it to sprout legs and scamper around like a giant spider. Part of me wanted to burn those clothes. Part of me liked the way all of them looked at me in those clothes. I wasn't sure what to do with that feeling.

My childhood fucked me up. Most of the time, I didn't want attention, but sometimes I craved it. From certain people especially. But it also made me feel... *bad*. Like there was something wrong with me for wanting it.

I had to remind myself that there wasn't anything wrong or bad with wanting to feel something good for once. I was allowed to want affection, and not just sex. It was okay to care and be cared for. It didn't make me weak; trusting someone, being vulnerable, wouldn't destroy me. Not every time.

What happened in Illinois set me back. Not just the violence, that was just a few hours at the very end, but before that, spending all that time with Beast. I became someone I thought I'd killed, or at least left behind.

Janie.

And Janie, she was weak for him. He was her everything.

The hardest part of being hurt— *violated*—

*Use the word*. Raped.

The hardest part of being *raped* that night my parents died, was *him*. I never thought, not once, that he could hurt me like that. Not just physically, but— but the *rejection* afterward. The way he made me feel like I was nothing, no different from all the others he'd been with, if not less. Everything that I'd believed in, that I'd never doubted once, was just lies. I wasn't special; I wasn't worthy. I was a needy, inconvenient pain in his ass, and he'd finally gotten what he wanted and could be done with me.

All those things I'd dreamt about were nothing but the fantasies of a pathetic, needy child, and that I shared them with him... I was humiliated. Shamed. Thinking about him telling Rosemary or one of the others, laughing about the stupid little girl, it broke something in me.

For a long time afterward, I saw everyone as a threat. I couldn't trust anyone, especially if they claimed to be on my side or trying to help me. It had to be a setup. Juvie made everything worse, and calling half of it a "residential facility" or a hospital didn't change what it was: it was still juvie. It

was still a prison, one with more meds, and group therapy with girls who scared the fuck out of me. Like my first roommate, who'd killed her little brother because he stole one of her Oreos.

When I left there, I twitched and jumped and jerked at anything unexpected, any noise or person getting too close. On my own with the world aligned against me, I couldn't find enough walls to keep my back against. I'd made a plan, a lot of plans — making plans got me through the night on the inside — but I didn't anticipate how difficult it would be.

I couldn't stomach the thought of being touched by anyone for any reason. Good or bad, but *especially* good, because there was no good. If I thought it something was good, I'd misread the situation. Again.

No one was going to stick, not to me. That was for other girls, ones who weren't... me.

I couldn't let myself believe in the good, I didn't think I could survive it a second time. The bad I got, that made sense, and I knew I could survive it, so I wasn't afraid of it. That's the most fucked up part. My brain was a propaganda machine, spitting out false narratives. It told me that anything that felt good needed to be avoided at all costs, but rape was okay because at least it was honest.

I knew I could handle being forced, because it had already happened.

About a year before my release, they hired a new CO. I can't really remember exactly when, if I was sixteen or seventeen, and it feels like I should be able to remember that, but I can't. Regardless, he *hated* me from day one. I knew immediately that my dad, or the club — or my dad *and* the club — had done something fucked up to him or someone he loved. And having seen some of the thing they did, and hearing about others, I couldn't blame him for wanting revenge. It wasn't me who did it, but I was the one he could get to.

It wasn't even that bad at first. He smacked me around a bit, then made me give him head. Said some terrible things,

but that was just his grief talking. Afterwards, while he fixed his uniform, I said I was sorry for whatever had happened, whatever they did. *That* was a mistake. I should've kept my mouth shut because it almost got me killed; that's when he really hurt me. He told them in the infirmary that I got jumped in the shower, hurt with an object. I kept my mouth shut, and he never touched me again, never even looked at me after that, but it didn't bother me with him. Because on some level, I deserved it.

Whoever he grieved for was innocent, and someone had to pay for what they did. Back then, I thought it was okay that it was me.

After, I knew I could survive a stranger. I didn't plan on ever having to again, I'd gut any motherfucker who tried, but it was good to know.

Once I was out, the fear held me back for sure, but so did knowing how messed up my head was. For the longest time, all of it piled up to keep me hiding in the shadows and terrified of attention. Any kind of touch repulsed me, but I craved it too. I knew this wasn't something I could fix on my own.

The one-on-one therapy in the "residential facility" sort of helped me deal with my parents' murder. That first year, their initial goal was for me to accept responsibility for it, which I wasn't about to do, but I still benefited from the work I did. Once I was off the meds, after Beast took control of the situation and I only saw the main doctor, things improved even more, I think because the doctor knew I hadn't killed them. Not that he would do anything with that knowledge, but he redirected the course of my therapy. It was why I didn't hate the man: we were both trapped and being manipulated, but he ended up helping me in whatever ways he could. We were both just puppets being held by strings, with nooses around our necks.

But because I knew my doctor wasn't acting on his own, I didn't tell him a lot. He knew I held things back, but he didn't need to carry it all on top of whatever Beast was already doing to him, so he didn't push and I didn't talk. Maybe it would've helped to talk to him about shit like what happened with that



CO. Maybe I wouldn't have been so messed up for so long. I'll never know.

After I was released and out on my own, it took time, but I finally recognized how fucked up my head was over sex and relationships — of any kind, no matter how superficial — and how it crippled my ability to function. I avoided interacting with classmates or co-workers, paranoid about their motives: the Professors and my classmates all believed I didn't belong there; my landlord knew I used fake credentials and would turn me in... to someone. Every job I had when I first moved to Michigan ended with a tantrum and rage-quit because I believed I was being set up to fail. That part was totally clear.

I made some mistakes early on. Mistakes in judgment.

Then I recognized that all I'd done was exchange one kind of hell for another, one of my own making, and it wasn't something I could work through on my own. Despite my brain advising I stay frosty and keep everything locked up tight inside, experience told me therapy could be effective, so I went looking for help.

I had access to resources through my school. The deeply discounted, short-term counseling wasn't perfect, and it was fucking *hard* to take the leap, but it kept me off the ledge. It took me three tries, three superficial intakes with cautious hints at deeper issues, before the third counselor impressed me. It didn't work out; after two months, she told me my problems were outside her comfort level and the scope of the program, but she gave me a referral to someone in the community who'd accept what I was paying.

Fourth time was the charm.

It wasn't easy for either of us. I'm sure I frustrated the hell out of her. For one thing, I wouldn't even consider taking meds, not after what I'd been through. Being a zombie like that, kept sedated and passive, left me vulnerable; I was slow to react, and took more physical damage in that first year of juvie than the last three and a half combined, even counting the CO in my last year. Things were a lot more difficult without pharmaceuticals fixing the chemical imbalances in my

brain, but my therapist understood it was another trauma on a long list, and we worked around it.

I kept a lot back. I had to. I couldn't risk anyone finding out who I was and it getting back to the club or Beast, so I glossed over most of my childhood shit. As far as she knew, it all started with the night a stranger killed my parents. I was pretty sure she didn't buy any of it, but if she pressed me, I'd be gone.

It took a long time, but I found myself. I mended some of the broken parts, propped up the unfixable ones. I learned things to counter panic attacks and flashbacks, and how to recognize when they were incoming. I followed my plan and accomplished my goals.

I got past it, all of it. I learned how to fake being brave until I *was* fearless, until I knew I was the one who could survive anything.

I got past it. I got *over* it.

I became Mouse.

And I got laid. A *lot*.

LEOs. Firefighters. Fellow EMTs. Even doctors and nurses at the hospitals we frequented. Post-Janus, it was soldiers, easy enough when the meat market called Salem went through condoms like an Olympic Village. Hookups only, one and done, and I had a type: big, often burly, and aggressive. Full of testosterone, disciplined in every other aspect of their lives but bordering on violent in the sack. I liked it rough, and then I liked it over with. I lived for the walk of shame back to my tricked-out Humvee, preferably with a limp.

I wasn't just surviving, I thrived. I had Azzie, the bunker, my lab, and the game store. I had an endless supply of alpha peen willing to fuck and forget.

When McNamara delivered me back to the club, he didn't just take my freedom or my peace of mind, he took my name. I wasn't Mouse anymore, fearless and wild, I was Janie. They only knew me as Janie, they expected Janie. I had to struggle

not to regress to being a young teen again, losing all the work I'd put in to get over my past.

But I wasn't Janie anymore, I was motherfucking *Mouse*.

I rescued myself before, and I did it again. I survived, and no one was going to shame me for wanting a physical connection or affection. Not even myself.

At midnight, when I heard sounds in the hallway, I looked out through the peephole. Caliban was at his door, his room across the hall and down the way. I debated for a few minutes, then went across the hall and down the way, and knocked. He opened the door without looking, already stripping his shirt off. He was surprised to see me but not unhappy, and invited me in.

Hours later, after I rode his face, after he fucked me hard from behind with his beard brushing the skin of my back as he kissed and licked every inch with an open mouth and slick tongue — after he'd flipped me over and emptied himself on my breasts and belly, painting my skin — I slipped out of his room with a soft kiss and murmured "Goodnight." I returned to my bed and drifted off to sleep with a smile.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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“ASS OUT OF BED, PINKY.”

My sleepy brain registered Tesla’s command at the same time the covers were ripped off me, and knowing what he’d see, I didn’t bother turning over or saying anything. It wasn’t like I was hiding it.

“What the—”

Okay, that wasn’t Tesla, that was Rasputin. *Now* I was a little self-conscious because I barely knew the man and he checked every box for me, even ones I didn’t know I had.

“I overheated last night,” I mumbled into my pillow, flailing my arm around looking for the edge of my blanket. “And since my door was locked and no one else had the key, I thought I was safe.”

“Uhh, yeah, sorry about that,” Loki sounded a little apologetic so I guess that was something. “You didn’t come down to breakfast so...”

“Because I had the morning off. Isn’t that what we agreed? I get one morning off a week,” I was still face down in my pillow but I’d propped myself up on my elbow — the other arm still searching for my blanket in vain — so my mouth was free and I knew they could hear me. “That means it’s my time to do what I want, and I want to sleep, so give me back my fucking blanket.”

“No,” Tesla said.

“Quit wiggling around,” Loki growled, “we’re looking at your back.”

“Fine,” I sighed, and collapsed back down, curling both arms under my pillow and leaving my full back exposed to them. I thought about what they were seeing, how it would appear to them; I’d only ever seen it in photos, or contorted views in the mirror.

A frame of intricate whorls of blue-gray scrollwork — resembling curled leaves, sometimes feathers, or even stylized waves on the ocean — stretched from the tops of my shoulders down to my ass, peeling back from the center to reveal graceful folds of fabric, swathes of red silk as photorealistic as a Flemish still life painting. Loops of gold chains set with rubies and strings of pearls criss-crossed the area; a single, giant, cabochon-cut ruby set in gold filigree captured all the strands together in the center. The gems glowed with their own inner light.

From out of the finery, burst a massive, slavering she-wolf’s head, with her lips peeled back and fangs bared. Amber eyes glowed from my shoulder blades, and the ruby pendant sat directly between them, like it was the only thing left holding her back, and she was about to tear right through every strand of pearls and every bejeweled chain. You could count each hair on her snarling face, every tooth in her saliva-slicked gums; see the texture on her tongue, it looked rough to the touch.

It was a fairy tale, a story of beauty masking deadly violence. It was a warning not to be tricked by what appeared on the surface.

I hid in plain sight — my nature, my capabilities, even my identity — but I wasn’t a wolf in sheep’s clothing, I wore my savagery on my skin for all to see. My tattoo was a threat: the shinies and the pretties might be distracting, but they can’t restrain the monster underneath. My wolf, like me, was a vicious, deadly predator barely contained by the trappings of civility.

I wondered what they saw in it, what message they read.

I was resigned to not going back to sleep, but the longer the silence lasted, the more self-conscious I became. I tilted my head and peered back at them through one eye; all three of them were standing near the foot of the bed staring down. Loki noticed me looking and met my eyes, his expression unreadable.

“How far down does it go?” he asked, clearing his throat.

“It ends at the top of my ass,” I replied, “but picks up again right above my knees, just enough to show her paws. I’m wearing boxers, you can pull the blanket down farther if you want to see the claws — it’s pretty impressive how he designed it, they’re flexed and they look like they’re biting into my skin like she’s bearing down and preparing to pounce. Fair is fair though, I get to examine all your ink too.”

“Anytime you want, shawty,” Rasputin said, slow and soft. I felt the blanket slither down farther, exposing my butt and thighs, and I looked back over my shoulder to find he was reaching for my leg, his face blank like it was an unconscious response. I had one of those full body twitches as I tried to instinctively jerk away and roll into a protective ball, but fought it.

“No touching,” I rasped out through my suddenly dry mouth, feeling like my airway was closing. He yanked back his hand, looking at me apologetically.

“When you arrived— when you were being examined,” Tesla’s neutral, flat timbre helped in this instance, the clinical tone keeping me removed from the memories. “I caught a glimpse of the feathers along your ribs before I turned my back, and Doc never mentioned— the detail is extraordinary,” Tesla muttered. “How long did it take?”

It took me a long time to respond. I’d assumed that Tesla had watched my exam, not just been in the room for it, and that changed—

Doc said he stayed in the room for it, and I never let either of them explain. I’d felt violated and my mind immediately went to the worst-case scenario, but it was Tesla. I didn’t need Magick’s comment that he was asexual to understand,

practically from the moment we met, that he felt no attraction to me in that way and was uncomfortable with my reactions to him. It may have started as a way to punish him, but I continued to harass and pick at him in part out of annoyance that he didn't see me the way I saw him, and that he never would.

But I'd never rethought that examination, even after getting to know the man; instead I carried anger about it, and hurt. And shame. And it was all deserved and valid, because I had been violated and another trauma had been added to my already extensive collection, but... but what if he stayed out of a sense of responsibility to watch over me? Like a chaperone?

It didn't exonerate him, that whole shit-show was a series of bad decisions on their part, but it changed *me*. My perspective. My feelings of being exposed and judged, which had exacerbated all of it, made it more difficult for me to get past the negative, self-punishing thoughts that plagued me.

Eventually, I realized they'd left me alone with my thoughts, but were still waiting for an answer. I had to think back over what the last question had been.

"The full piece? Felt like thousands of hours, and it cost more than my car at the time," I answered, grateful my throat had relaxed and I could breathe again, but I wasn't comfortable looking away anymore. I watched them cautiously over my shoulder. "I'm just grateful those fuckers didn't destroy it," I mumbled, thinking about my arm and feeling sick.

"What are you talking about?" Rasputin asked, but no one answered him. I was too embarrassed at running my mouth, Tesla was staring down at my legs with an increasing amount of tension in his jaw and neck, and Loki looked like he was about to hulk-out and go on a rampage.

"How could anyone— fucking hell, how could anyone do anything—" Loki trailed off, his face flipping through expressions like one of those weird dolls with the rotating heads, except instead of happy, sad, mad, etc., he was rotating through disgust, rage, and what kinda looked like despair if

that made any sense. His outrage on my behalf gave me the same feeling as when the numbing salve first touched my burns: exquisite relief from an agony I thought would never fade, leaving behind a sensation of peaceful exhaustion.

“You’ll tell us who they are eventually,” Tesla said decisively, in his quiet monotone, but I sensed more than determination behind it; there was a kind of cold resolve, like he’d go full-throttle John Wick on their asses if given the opportunity.

“Who?” Rasputin demanded, and we all continued ignoring him.

“Probably not,” I said softly, “but I appreciate your intentions.” Tesla’s eyes locked on mine, and there was emotion there far beyond anything I would’ve ever expected from him.

Tesla wanted to *protect* me. Tesla— Tesla *liked* me.

He blinked, but he didn’t look away, and I couldn’t either.

A shiver ran down my spine.

“Mags needs to see this,” Loki muttered, breaking the spell, and I flinched. “Cal too.”

“No, that’s not necessary,” I informed him, sitting up and dragging my pillow with me to cover my boobs and soft underbelly. There wasn’t any single part of me that felt it necessary to mention that Caliban had not only seen it, he’d traced over every line of it with his tongue.

I hadn’t taken my shirt off to sleep because I was hot, it was because I didn’t want to lose the sensation of his mouth on my skin.

I sat facing them, knees up, with my arms wrapped around the pillow holding it in place, concealing the residual bruising on my ribs. My hair covered my shoulders and tops of my arms, hiding my decimated Aesli tattoo and the still raw-looking burn marks on my upper arms, shoulders, and torso that wouldn’t fade yet for awhile, but I still had the really ugly bruises on my knees, forearms, and elbows. Bone bruises.



I hoped that the rest of my ink, the various bits of text inscribed on my arms and torso, would be of more interest than my war wounds, but nope.

“What the fuck?” Rasputin stared down at my damaged legs and arms, the pillow doing nothing to hide them. His eyes flared open wider than I’d ever seen before, he usually had a sexy, half-lidded gaze that was like warm syrup on my skin. I realized Loki and Tesla hadn’t told him about me, that I showed up on their doorstep still recovering from getting the shit beat out of me.

“Babydoll—” Loki whispered, his voice thick like he was hurting — for *me!* — and I felt so exposed.

“Can you all please leave now?” I asked in a small voice. Rasputin dragged his eyes up from my battered limbs and focused on my face. He nodded, lips pursed together — and I realized that he may not have known before, but he was about to hear everything they knew.

“We’re taking you into town to get clothes,” Tesla informed me, his momentary slip into a maelstrom of emotion had righted itself once more. “You’ll have tomorrow morning off instead. You have twenty minutes to get downstairs.”



I DIPPED into Addie’s playroom before I went downstairs, needing to get a hit of Ornerly Nose Goblin before leaving for who knows how long. And I told her exactly that, which got me a huge supply of the very stuff I wanted.

Little kids can be so dumb.

Hazel wasn’t thrilled, since I was leaving her with a crankypants, but she liked my suggestion that maybe Magick would want some quality time with his ward. The two of them walked downstairs with me — if by walk, I meant me piggybacking the little shit down all those flights while she pulled on my hair to “direct me” to avoid potential detours that

I had no intention of taking. Her excuses for yanking my hair a million times were thin, we both knew it was retaliation.

God, I love that kid.

My own passive-aggressive response was to talk to Hazel about boring things while ignoring Addie trying to get my attention by chattering in Polish. She hated being left out, but she'd have to give up the ruse of not understanding, and that wasn't happening anytime soon. So I talked about her in English, specifically about picking up some clothes for her that I knew she'd *hate*, like a pretty dress so she could play ballerina. I thought her head was going to explode. It was incredibly satisfying.

I did learn from Hazel that the town was pretty big, and most of the original residents had survived.

I met the three of them in the lobby, and almost did a double-take. None of them had their cuts on, and I was curious about that but got distracted from asking by their "civilian" looks. It was such a huge and confusing difference without their colors, even though it was literally the way they dressed every day I'd known them. Tesla and Loki both had on jeans and Rasputin was wearing the long-ass shorts he seems to like, and that wasn't any different from normal. Tesla had on Converse high tops and a black hoodie on over his t-shirt; Loki's choice was heavy motorcycle boots and a long-sleeve thermal shirt in a heathery gray, tight over his chest and arms but hanging looser around his waist and hips. Rasputin was also wearing a black hoodie over a t-shirt, but he had combat boots on that he only laced halfway up like Azzie always did, and I felt a twinge of sick longing. It passed when he moved and his hoodie flapped open, revealing his machete and a massive hunting knife hooked to his belt. I looked closer and found Tesla's shoulder holster, and Loki's piece was holstered at his lower back.

Loki and Rasputin had both pulled their hair back off their faces. Loki's thick, sun-streaked, chestnut waves were clubbed back in a man-bun but a few shorter pieces had slipped out and framed his face; Rasputin's sheath of black silk was bound into a partial top-knot, and I had to dig my fingernails into my

palms to keep from touching the length that hung down his back.

They all looked so *different* somehow — not bad or anything, just... younger. And like strangers in a way.

The three of them stopped talking as I approached. Tesla was stone-faced, as usual, and Loki carefully schooled his features, but Rasputin was right on the edge of losing his shit. He kept reaching for his machete and then dropping his hand.

He hit me with what felt like an accusatory glare, and I narrowed my eyes as I crossed the lobby towards them, shaking my head, communicating silently.

*Don't even start that shit with me.*

He glared. *You should've told me yourself.*

I rolled my eyes. *It's none of your beeswax.*

He sucked in a deep breath, flaring his nostrils. *I'm pretty sure there's a Big Foot living in the woods a half mile from here.*

I was positive that's what he said.

Tesla turned to him as I rounded the edge of the fountain, speaking too low for me to hear, and Rasputin stormed away, cursing loudly.

I figured out why they weren't wearing their cuts once we got outside. A large SUV was idling out in the stone-paved courtyard, Rasputin pacing in front of it looking crabby, and I found myself strangely disappointed.

Acknowledging that disappointment kinda messed with my head. Maybe I'd been vocal about hating motorcycle clubs and bikers in general, but I hadn't exactly been planning my escape route or stockpiling food for the road, and I had to face up to growing comfortable with the situation. I'd accepted things. I hadn't made one complaint about riding with Loki to the farm— then again, that trip had sucked at the end when he dumped me at the front door and took off again, and I spent the rest of the night seething with... irritation. Yeah, he was super annoying, disappearing like that!

Fuck. I'd been so fucking jealous, it was embarrassing.

And knowing bikers like I did, I was thrilled and totally looking forward to the trip when all three of them would be twitchy and agitated from being trapped inside a cage. Joy.

There were other people out here, moving between buildings and working on their motorcycles in the early spring sunshine, but they all seemed to be working hard to avoid us. That only reinforced my concerns about taking the SUV, because clearly everyone knew to stay away from wild animals about to be cornered and ready to lash out. Then I forgot about my concerns, and almost shed a tear when Rasputin whipped out a black knit beanie and yanked it on over his head, hiding all that shiny black satin from view.

I pouted as I followed Loki around to the driver's side, not even able to enjoy him boosting me up into the backseat as much as I could've. He got into the driver's seat, and there was some arguing from the other two before Tesla got into the front, and Rasputin climbed in next to me.

He sat with his back to the passenger door, staring at me and fuming. He had one arm resting on the back of Tesla's seat, one arm on the back of his own, and one foot up on the cushion with his leg bent so he could face me fully. I ignored him, strapping on my seatbelt and looking out the side window as Loki maneuvered the vehicle out the front gates as a security person opened and then closed them behind us, tapping on the vehicle's rear panel as we rolled past.

"Look at me," Rasputin growled. I gazed up at the roof of the car, then met Loki's eyes in the rear view mirror, before finally turning my head and meeting Rasputin's baleful glare.

"I'm not telling you shit—"

"I grew up in a brothel," he interrupted, stunning me to silence. "My mom's side of the family was originally from Tibet, ended up in Afghanistan after fleeing the communists. My dad's side was Uyghur from a totally different part of China, a region that was Islamic, and *they* ended up in Afghanistan after fleeing the communists. Both families prospered, a few married locals, and a generation or two later,

my parents met at university. I was born not long before my entire family was killed by the Taliban, including my dad.”

Holy. Fuck.

“My mom managed to get temporary asylum in the U.S. She was twenty-four, all alone in the world with an infant, with religious zealots attempting to extradite her back to the country that had just massacred... everyone. Both sides of my family. I’m not going to get into the details of everything that happened, but there was someone who was supposed to help us, and instead he stole what money we had and beat my mom up. She was desperate, and ended up at a cathouse outside Henderson, Nevada, where the Apocalypse Riders have a chapter, and where she met Cain. Magick’s dad? Okay, you’ve heard of him. Anyway, my mom is a very smart woman with a degree in economics, she speaks five languages, and she’s unbelievably beautiful, so it surprises no one to hear that whenever he was in town, he visited her. She had many regular *customers*, but over time, she and Cain became very good friends as well. She trusted him, more than anyone else since my father. When he offered her backing to open her own house here, with ulterior motives as far as the club was concerned, my mom didn’t hesitate. We were on the road within days. I don’t remember much about Nevada because I mostly grew up here, living and working in my mom’s house. Up until I patched-in and eventually took over as Road Captain, do you know what I did?”

*Holy. Fuck.*

I shook my head. The car was silent, and even though he was speaking in a somewhat low voice, every word seemed to resonate inside the metal box we were riding in. He was sitting very still, hands gripping the seat backs, leg pulled back as if poised to launch himself at me.

“I protected women from exactly what those animals did to you, what that useless piece of shit did to my mom. I would’ve done it for free, but the house paid me to watch over the girls and make sure no one broke the rules or strayed from what had been negotiated. And if they *did*, it was my *pleasure* to show them the error of their ways. Now tell me their fucking names,

Mouse. Tell me their names, so that I can track them down and do to them what Cain did to that piece of shit in Vegas.”

His voice never changed throughout, it stayed perfectly calm and reasonable sounding even as his face flushed a deep red, and his eyes burned like two pits of blackness promising hell and damnation. By the time he finished his story, his whole body was strung tight with tension, a vein pulsing in his neck, and he looked as if he was going to detonate like a bomb.

I choked, unable to breathe. It was so startling, catching me off guard. All of it, every time... These fucking men never do or say what I expected them to. It was knocking me off kilter.

I undid my seatbelt and crawled over to him, up on my knees on the seat between his legs. I forcibly wedged my arms around him before burying my face in his chest. After barely a heartbeat, his arms were squeezing me tight against him as if he could absorb me into his body, becoming my armor against the world.

I listened to his heartbeat as it gradually calmed, and the whooshing of my own breath in the cocoon of his arms and hoodie. His hair draped around us as he rested his cheek on the top of my head.

“Tell me,” he whispered into my hair. “Let me make them pay.”

“I can’t,” I said, so softly that I wasn’t sure he even heard me until he let out a gusty sigh, his breath warm and slightly minty

“Why not?”

“It’s more complicated than you could possibly imagine,” I confessed, giving him more than I’d given anyone else up until that moment. “If it was just thugs in an alley, I would’ve told Loki everything the first time he asked.”

“We need to do *something*, you have to let us do something.” His hands found my shoulders and he pushed me back so we were face to face. His eyes darted around, studying

me, looking for any clues I might give away. My hair was caught in his beard and mustache, and the long hair hanging down beneath his beanie, fine blonde strands tangled with his black, like gold thread against inky silk. I reached up and brushed my hair free of his, and he caught my hand and held it against his cheek. “Whatever you’re caught up in, we can handle it. You’re one of us now, and we take care of our own.”

Loki had said the exact same thing to me not very long ago. At the time, I’d been filled with bitterness and resentment, astounded by their naïveté. Now, all I felt was a tender regret. They believed this to be true, these men believed their club to be a haven in the dark for its members and those it claimed for its own, and I had no desire to strip away his innocence.

I stroked his cheek, his beard soft and smooth under my hand, and shook my head without saying a word. His brow furrowed, a frown creasing his mouth, but he didn’t push me away; instead, he tucked me against his chest again, pulling me fully against his body. He wrapped one arm around my shoulders, the other around my waist and hips, and rested his chin on the crown of my head.

We rode like that until Tesla called out “We’re here,” and I remembered there were more people in the car than just Rasputin and me. I peeled myself off him, feeling almost *guilty* for some reason, and wouldn’t look at anyone. Not even Rasputin, who smoothed my hair away from my face and tried to get me to meet his eye.

“Hey,” Loki called from the front seat as he spun the wheel and worked the gear shift, parallel parking the giant SUV in front of a row of brick shops. My eyes flickered up and found him half-turned in his seat, looking over his shoulder at me, and I didn’t want to meet his gaze but I wasn’t fast enough and he caught me. He didn’t look angry or upset at all, which I guess was good, though not gonna lie, there was a tiny twinge of disappointment that he wasn’t all caveman over me. Before my brain could properly compartmentalize everything, he derailed me. “Don’t go acting weird with us now because you had sex with Cal and now cuddled with Raz,” he shook his

head at me. Tesla turned around in his seat to stare in my direction too. “And don’t start getting pouty either, you’ll get your turn with the rest of us.”

My eyes darted between him and Tesla as a wide, mocking grin spread across his beautiful face, basically just asking to get punched. *Smart ass*. I tried again to get my shit sealed back up in its comfortable little boxes, but was knocked completely off my game as a stone-faced Tesla caught my eye and very deliberately winked at me.

*What the fuck just happened?*

“What the fuck just happened? Did you just *wink* at me?” I was open-mouthed and wide-eyed, looking back and forth between them, not even registering that Rasputin was wiggling around, positioning himself behind me in the seat. He folded me into his arms and between his legs, capturing me, resting his chin on my shoulder as he baited the other two.

“Nope, she’s my cuddle buddy,” he informed them, leaning back and taking me with him. “I’m not sharing.”

“We’ll see about that,” Loki grumbled, as he put the vehicle into gear and switched it off. “Dibs on tonight.”

“You can’t call dibs on tonight,” Tesla informed him, “you don’t get to claim her for the whole night. It’s standard shotgun rules, you can’t call it unless all competitors are present and within sight of the goal. Mags and Cal aren’t here.”

Wait, what?

“I get her in the club room,” he argued, and Rasputin wiggled underneath me, pressing farther back into the seat as if a few millimeters would keep Loki from reaching us.

“Nope,” Rasputin declared, going all kraken-esque around me with his tentacle arms keeping me contained. If I really wanted to get away from him, he’d let me go without any hesitation, I knew that. I was safe. Once more, I was safe with these men. “She’s mine. All day and night. My cuddle buddy,” he cooed, nuzzling my cheek. “She chose me.”



“She fuckin’ hugs me all the time, we’ve cuddled on her bed!” Loki exploded, starting to look genuinely pissed. I began to panic a little, feeling like I was driving a wedge between these friends without even meaning to, and Tesla backhanded him in the chest.

“Dude, chill the fuck out.” Tesla pointed at my face. “She thinks you’re really mad.” I stared at him like I’d never seen him before and one corner of his mouth curled up. “Don’t worry, Pinky, daddy and mommy aren’t really fighting. Especially because Loki just admitted he’s gotten his cuddle time and can’t call dibs again until next round.”

Next— *what?*

“Just so we’re clear, *I’m* daddy and he’s mommy,” Loki groused, then focused back on me. “Right, babydoll?”

“What the fuck is happening right now?” I whispered to no one at all, because clearly I had slipped into Wonderland and everything was tripping caterpillars and grinning, hallucinatory cats.

“What’s happening is that Loki is all put-out because you chose me as your cuddle buddy—”

“Stop calling me your *cuddle buddy*.”

“—and he’s getting super possessive but trying to cover it up by tricking you into choosing his side,” Rasputin continued, ignoring me and nuzzling at my neck. “But you chose *me* to break the *public* cuddle barrier with, so I’m claiming you, and they’ll just have to suck it.”

“No, seriously, what the fuck is happening?”

“Nothing bad, Mouse,” Rasputin whispered into my ear, too soft for the others to hear, then louder and directed at them, he said, “Give us a minute.”

Tesla and Loki exited the car, sliding pandemic masks into place, and stood on the sidewalk next to the vehicle talking to each other. Rasputin loosened his hold on me, just enough so that he could turn me around, flipping my legs up over one of his so I was full-on curled up in his lap with his arms around me.

And then he proceeded to remind me that I'm a silly, stupid girl who makes assumptions, and not everything means something.

“Loki, Tesla, Mags, Cal, and me, we're the top officers for the club along with Doc and Silas. You know what that means.” It wasn't a question, but I still nodded. “We're not just in these positions because we're good at our jobs, or because we're smart, or more deadly than our competition. The five of us earned our places at the top by doing whatever needed to be done, for the good of the club. Magick has our loyalty as leader, but every patched-in member of the club has our loyalty as our brothers.”

He kept talking then, about what they were willing to do to protect their own, how far they were willing to go for anyone the club had claimed, but I stopped listening at *every patched-in member has our loyalty*. That, right there, was part of the problem. That was the heart of the biker-boy's-club mentality that kept me silent about my past, because when it came down to it, it would always be bros before ho.

“—very protective of our own, and that's why you need to tell us who hurt you. But we also get that you need time, all this is really raw for you right now. We want you to trust us and know we're going to protect you. We will take care of you, we're all trying to show you that, but we're also following your lead. With everything. I want to be sure you know that you're in control.”

I nodded, the pleasure that had liquified my limbs fading to numbness as I realized what he was saying: they were just doing their jobs. Taking care of a dependent.

The logical part of me, the side that stood outside myself and confronted every challenge with reason and rationality, understood. It made sense that their attention served a purpose. Their affection felt so good and pure and *clean* for a reason, it came from the best intentions. I knew I wasn't *just* an employee to them, but at the same time, I'd almost forgotten that I *was* an employee. All the little things they did to make me feel whole again, bleeding off the rage inside me — I

could only ever be grateful for them. But fixing me wasn't their job.

I couldn't lie to myself, it stung, and it was my own fault. In my desperation, I sought out what I needed, and willfully ignored the source. All they did was respond to my cues and offer me the support and reassurance I was practically begging for, and it had to have been annoying. On some level, my neediness had to be a burden, even with the load divided across so many.

It wasn't anything more than that, nor should it be.

Almost two decades ago, I did the same thing to Beast. I was a lonely, neglected little kid who needed *someone*. Even though it wasn't in his nature to be a caregiver, I made him into what I needed, but it wasn't a normal relationship. And it fucked both of us up.

I survived, I found a way to live with what happened, but he didn't. He didn't ever get over it. The man I ran from weeks ago was stuck back in that hallway of my dad's house, when he became a monster because of me.

The second night I was back in Illinois, he told me about the nightmares right after we'd fucked. We were lying in his bed in the dark, skin still slick with sweat, my body tucked up against his in a way I'd once dreamed of. He became emotional as he confessed how that night haunted him, his fears of almost being "too late," and I cried.

I could read between the lines. What he regretted was *me*. Finding me, needing to protect me; having it become something different. He made bad decisions, made mistakes because of me; he'd fucked things up, and the consequences had been terrible. He wouldn't tell me what, though.

That he'd done these things *for me* was unspoken. That night, he'd hurt me, but I'd *ruined* him.

After he told me about his nightmares, and I was left alone in his bed while he went back out into the club room to drink, I cried *for him*. I cried for all those wasted years and his tortured

life, and for what could've been. But it didn't change a fucking thing for me.

Beast loved me, and in the beginning, there was nobility in his love for a poor, abandoned kid. He told me he still loved me, and I believed him. I told him the same, and he believed me, but I was lying. I didn't love the man he'd become.

I didn't want to be there but I wasn't allowed to leave. In those circumstances, fucking him hurt me, but I couldn't let it show. I let him because I thought it would keep me safe, and it made him happy, for a time.

He might love me, but he would always be the monster that haunted my nightmares, no matter how tightly I might cling to him in the night. He was still the architect of the shuttered wing of my mind palace, the haunted corridors leading to rooms of torture and despair: an oubliette in the basement, resembling my cell in juvie; a Princess Room in the attic, filthy and crawling with vermin.

I could listen to a million regrets, and it wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't change what he did.

What any of them did.

I could never go back and flip any one switch, press any one button, and alter the course of my life. I could never be a grown-up version of Jane Skala, a regular girl with a weird and shitty childhood, but a whole world of opportunities in front of her. Everything that happened changed me.

But everything that happened shaped me into the person I became. And that... that wasn't a bad thing.

I might've wished that others could see beyond the mask, know *me* and not just the roles I played to get by in the moment, but I wouldn't ever choose not to be *Mouse*.

Mouse was fearless. Mouse was strong. Mouse was a goddamn hero: a savior of young girls, the creator of the vaccine. She was capable and smart and she had an ass you could bounce quarters off of.

If Beast had told me everything that night, what fears plagued him, *Mouse* might've had it in her to understand the

hard choices he had to make. Mouse might've even been able to reconcile what he did, and find a way to still love the man who saved Janie from a childhood that might've killed her. But he didn't explain, and Mouse recognized that the man he could've — *should've* — been, died with Janie in her bedroom that night. And both of them were just walking corpses until Janie became Jayne, and then Jayne became Mouse.

I was the one who survived. *I* was motherfucking *Mouse*. And I had a best friend waiting for me a thousand miles away, and a goddamned world to save.

That was *my* job, and I couldn't ever forget that.

These men, they considered taking care of their people to be *their* job, and I couldn't ever forget that either.

Rasputin's speech, in the backseat of the vehicle, made it clear that there needed to be boundaries. Regardless of whether he came to talk to me organically or recruited as a mouthpiece to remind me of my place, he was right. I owed them those boundaries. I wouldn't ruin them for wanting to protect me, not like I ruined Beast.

"I understand everything," I finally said, interrupting the silence that had overtaken us. "And I appreciate all of it. I really do. But as you said, this is a little difficult for me right now," I pulled away from him forcing him to sit back and release me so I could get to the vehicle door, "and sometimes what feels good at first turns out not to be a good idea after all. I think— I think I might've reached my limit on the cuddling for today." I smiled back at him brightly as I cracked open the car door. "Baby steps, you know?"

He nodded, brow furrowed, watching my every move with a slightly confused expression. "Mouse, I'm not sure I explained myself right—"

"Nope. I got it. Good talk." I patted his knee and then descended out to the sidewalk, donning my own pandemic mask and looking around.

We were parked in front of a row of shopfronts, brick and lumber facades painted in different colors, each with a

coordinating awning hanging out over the sidewalk. The town square was across the street from us with a large, white gazebo dominating the center; on the edge of the square opposite us, there was a multi-story stone building with *Kingston Town Hall, est. 1918* carved into the stone lintel over the grand entry.

It was a Thomas Kincade painting of some idealized small town.

It was the thing that Salem was a caricature of, and my hackles immediately rose up. Then I looked closer.

The sidewalks had cracks in them, a lot of cracks. The paint was peeling on the wood trim of most of the shops, and the windows were dirty. The colorful awnings were splitting at the seams, mended in places with duct tape. The gazebo was sinking on one side, and there were bricks missing from the foundation of the town hall. There were people out and about, but not that many; in the slightly overcast gloom of an early spring day, there were very few lights on to combat the dim gray light.

This was not like Salem. This was nothing like Salem.

This was a town that survived, not a façade slapped over a corrupted heart, an illusion of the past to placate those locked inside.

Tesla pointed at the shop we loitered in front of, and I realized it was a clothing store: “Sam’s New and Used” was emblazoned across the picture window. There was a display of blank, faceless mannequins of both genders, with different heights to suggest age range, dressed mainly in denim and plaid.

“Orders from the boss, we’re supposed to make sure you get everything you need.” Loki lightly touched my shoulder to guide me towards the door. “Stuff for wearing during the day while you’re working, and for at night in the club room.”

I balked at that, stopping in my tracks. “I’m not— don’t even—” I stammered my way through, shaking my head almost frantically, before spitting out, “I won’t dress like a

hoochie mama.” I glared at all three of them. “I don’t care what he says.”

“You aren’t expected to,” Tesla stated mildly, not even looking up from his phone screen, “but surely you can find something more appropriate than either a preteen boy’s bibbed overalls, or the MILF outfit.”

I grudgingly agreed that those were not my best looks.

I pushed open the door, entering the store in front of my entourage.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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TESLA STUCK CLOSE to me in the store, mostly holding things for me and providing his opinion — which I never asked for, didn't want, and ignored for the most part, but I think he expected that and never seemed very upset about it. Loki and Rasputin had disappeared. I wasn't sure if they ever even came in.

I ended up putting together a massive stack of clothes — including a couple things for Addie and Hazel but the guys didn't realize that — and except for a few key items, all of it was used and fairly cheap. Even the brand new stuff wasn't very expensive: underwear, bras, a pair of purple Chucks, and the powder blue alpaca onesie I dug up, a miracle find. The club would be spending just shy of \$200 on a completely new wardrobe for me, and I had no qualms about spending their money.

The way I saw it, I'd be here for some amount of time to be determined, then I'd return to my responsibilities in Salem. At that time, I'd send Magick a crap-ton of vaccine, like I did with Tai's mom. The assortment of jeans, t-shirts, hoodies, and a faded denim jacket was a fraction of the street value of one dose. They may not know about it yet, but it felt fair to me, and Tesla didn't seem inclined to argue anyway. After we'd paid for everything and stuffed it all into brown paper grocery sacks that the store provided, we exited the building and immediately peeled off our pandemic masks. Rasputin and Loki stood next to the truck with a crap-ton of bags of their own, ones that were a little fancier in a pretty purple color with handles, and they had "SweetTart" printed on the side in candy



pink script. I eyed those bags suspiciously, but the rest of them ignored me as Rasputin checked his phone then began to curse. Loudly.

“Somehow,” he stated, glaring at the clerk through the window. She looked out, saw him, then started fussing with shit behind the counter, deliberately ignoring him in a completely obvious way. “*Somehow*, my mom got word we were in town. She expects us for lunch.”

Loki grunted, Tesla shrugged, and Rasputin eyed my current outfit: All-Stars, dead kid jeans, one of Addie’s t-shirts, and a cable-knit cardigan sweater from the MILF collection. Sweater sans shoulder pads, though I’d been tempted to leave them in.

“Unless you want her to ask a lot of uncomfortable questions,” he advised me, “you should probably look more like a club girl. We picked up some stuff for you. Go back into the store, go to the dressing room, and strip. I’ll pass you something appropriate.”

“Yeah, that’s not happening,” I shook my head, absolutely determined not to cave on this.

“If you wear what he gives you and don’t fight us on anything, I’ll get you a night off from the club room.”

“Tonight?” I eyed Tesla suspiciously.

He shrugged. “Probably not. But soon.”

I narrowed my eyes until I was squinting at him. “How soon is soon?”

“How soon is now?” Rasputin mumbled in the background then began to make warbly synthesizer noises with his mouth while Loki began to sing in a passable Morrissey impersonation.

“Soon is soon,” Tesla replied, with a quick and almost imperceptible eye-roll but I totally caught it.

“Pinkie swear,” I demanded, holding up my digit. He stared at my hand, nostrils flaring, then wrapped his own long, blunt, almost square-tipped digit around my baby finger that

now looked like a child's next to his. After a few seconds of squeezing and tugging on my part, he straightened his finger and slid it out of my grip.

“Isn't every pact with you a Pinky swear?” he asked, but I ignored him and his super clever word play, holding my finger back up.

“You didn't say the words. It isn't valid unless you say the words.”

He looked like he was going to argue but Rasputin interrupted his synthesized hums and bobbing back and forth to back me. “It's true. You have to make the promise while the pinkies are locked together. Those are the rules, T.”

The eye-roll was far more pronounced this time, but Tesla grabbed my pinkie with his — rougher this time, which greatly appealed to me — and muttered, “I pinkie swear that if you wear what we give you and behave at the house, I'll get you a night off from hanging out with us in the club room.”

“Deal,” I said, and used my kung fu pinkie grip to hold his hand up in the air and waggle it around, and he didn't even resist. “Yessss, Pinky, that's it. We shall open a boutique and sell ladies' clothing and pollen.”

He tilted his head back and stared towards the sky as if in pain. “Brilliant plan, Pinky! Oh, no, wait. What if we want to use a plan that works?” He dropped his head back down and tried to tug his finger free, the corner of his mouth curling up. “It's adorable that you keep trying, but you're indubitably Pinky. Pinky.”

I squeezed tighter — and I have a ferocious grip-strength so he wasn't escaping my finger cuffs — and went through a series of impressive Mortal Kombat poses that clearly intimidated the man since he couldn't take his eyes off me. “You are.”

“As much as I would love to keep watching this bizarre mating dance the two of you are constantly engaged in, we've got an appropriate outfit ready, and my mom is waiting,” Rasputin interrupted, tugging me back against him with his

arms around my belly. I initially stiffened but then relaxed against him, the ever-present panic lurking on the fringes of my brain asking *Is it my turn? Am I on?* then getting grumpy when the answer was no. It might have been lingering, residual comfort with him after our epic cuddling sesh on the drive here, or it might just be because of the dogs, but my body trusted Rasputin instinctively even when my brain was elsewhere.

Besides, we had boundaries now. I knew none of it meant anything, it was just affection for comfort's sake. Reconditioning me, even.

Tesla had a constipated look, no doubt from the mating ritual comment, so I took the opportunity to make him even more uncomfortable. I wagged my brows at him, making obscene gestures with my mouth and tongue that he concentrated on with a laser-like focus. His eyes flicked up to meet mine, and he started chewing at his lip ring. I smiled sweetly, if a little smugly, and let his finger go. "Cool, cool, cool. Let's go slut me up."



I STARED into the dressing room mirror and wasn't sure how to feel about the outfit they picked out for me. It was unmistakably biker-girl chic, but also, somehow, *me*.

The faded jeans were straight-leg, fitted but not like a second skin, and the black tank top with the stylized white skull on the front was the same: not baggy but not tight, and long enough to drape at the top of my thighs. There was a cropped, plain black leather motorcycle jacket with it, and buttery-soft black leather ankle boots with what looked like a four inch block heel that I wouldn't normally be caught dead in, but the boots had silver metal plates riveted over the heel and toe cap, and buckled straps wrapping the ankle that were covered with silver studs, and silver studs wrapping the sole, and they were... they were *magnificent*. I felt like a goddamn goddess in them, and the whole look required a smidge more effort on my part.

Sticking my head out of the curtain, I hissed for Loki's attention. "I need makeup." I know I was making a weird face at him, it felt strange to ask my big biker dude for cosmetics, but I knew he wouldn't fail me. "Maybe some black mascara and eyeliner, and some lippie? Like a dark burgundy color."

"I take it you approve of the clothes?" He had the most self-satisfied smirk on his face and I grinned at him.

"These boots... you did good, babydoll. They make me want to get all prettied up so I can strut more effectively."

"You don't need makeup to look pretty, Mouse," he was closer now, leaning towards me, his voice low and humming along my nerves leaving shivers in its wake. He was staring down at me with so much intensity, I was suddenly burning up. He ran his fingertip along my jaw, circling my chin just under my bottom lip, his breathing harsh. "You're fuckin' beautiful with or without it."

I— I believed him. He wasn't just coming onto me or trying to stroke my ego, he meant it, I know he did. I stared up at him all wide-eyed and girlie-feeling, my heart galloping in my chest, and had the sudden urge to drag him into the changing room and climb him like a fucking tree. "Wanna fool around? With me?" I asked in a hushed, almost husky voice, and his eyes widened, somehow getting darker. His gaze on me was heavy, heated, and causing my pussy to wake up and smack her lips together in sleepy anticipation, gathering moisture as if it had been a prolonged dry spell. As if I hadn't fucked Caliban last night.

"Yes," he replied, reaching for the curtain with his free hand, but that motherfucking *cockblocker* Rasputin shoved himself between us.

"No can do, chief," he snapped, pushing Loki back a few feet. "As much as I'd like to aid and abet your changing room romp, my *mom* is waiting. We do not want her to come looking for us, you know I'm right."

Loki sighed, rolling his head around and shaking out his arms. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever," he grumped, and stalked out of the store mumbling about makeup.

“Okay, my little temptress, let’s see,” Rasputin turned on me, sweeping back the curtain before I could stop him. He surveyed my body from top to bottom, grinning widely. “Fucking *hot*,” he muttered, edging closer, and I stood straighter, arching my back unconsciously.

“Yeah?” I asked, fishing for more compliments, but dammit I looked *fine* and I hadn’t felt pretty like this in a long, long time, not without an underlying feeling of guilt or shame or some other negative emotion ingrained like muscle memory. This was pure. This was *healthy* even.

“Gorgeous,” he confided, reaching for my braids. “A true biker babe.” I stood still while he removed the elastics and finger-combed my hair out. “Your hair is so soft,” he had both hands buried in it now, scraping his fingertips against my scalp as he fluffed my hair out into a messy, rippled mane. “Why do you wear it up all the time, you’ve got killer hair, and the blonde is natural, isn’t it? Fuckin’ gorgeous,” he repeated, stroking individual locks between his thumb and fingertip, admiring the way the light was hitting it.

“Yup, the color is natural. And I usually wear it down, you just haven’t seen it as much because you only met me three days ago,” I reminded him, taking advantage of the moment and my four inch boost in height to reach for his beanie, yanking it off, and getting my own hands into *his* hair. Silk, just like I knew it would be, smooth and cool and flowing like liquid over my fingers. “Been wanting to do this since the first moment I saw you.”

He grinned at me. “Same, girl.”

“Could I— could I brush it sometime?” I asked, feeling like I might be approaching creeper territory, but his grin only got wider and he nodded enthusiastically.

“I would *love* that,” he confided in a low voice. “Seriously. I love getting my hair played with.”

“Me too,” I whispered, head bobbing in an excited nod, and we both just stared at each other, stroking each other’s hair, until Loki burst back into the store and I jumped back a few inches, feeling suddenly weird.

Not even ten minutes before, I was ready to jump Loki in the very same changing room I was now feeling up Rasputin's hair in, and it felt wrong. Mainly because it felt so fucking *right*.

Rasputin winked at me and backed away, letting Loki in to hand me a plastic bag filled with way more than the three items I requested. I peered in to see at least a dozen different kinds of lipstick, lip stain, and gloss in a variety of dark reds and a few neutral pinks. There was a "smoky eye" palette of shadow, liquid and pencil eyeliners, some pale foundation that would work for my skin tone, two kinds of black mascara, and even a bottle of black nail polish. There were things I didn't even recognize or know what to do with, despite my extensive makeup lessons growing up with club girls. I giggled, picturing Loki deliberating over matte or gloss lipstick while a store clerk hovered nervously.

"Dude, this is way more than a tube of mascara and some lippie," I reached up to pat him on the cheek but realized he was mesmerized by my outfit, frozen in place with his mouth slightly agape. I gave him a little twirl, looking back over my shoulder to make sure he was checking out my ass because these jeans made it look *phenomenal*. He was. "You guys did good," I repeated to him. "Yeah?"

"Fuck yeah," he breathed out, reaching for me but pulling his arm away, then backing out of the room. "You gotta—we need to go—*fuck*—" he stammered out, then spun on his heel and stomped away and out the door.

"I agree," I murmured, watching him flee. It filled me with a sense of power, one I could get addicted to.

Rasputin, still lingering right outside the changing room, chuckled as he watched his friend exit the building, then turned his bright, happy gaze back on me. "How long do you think? I need to give my mom an ETA or she'll send out scouts."

I was starting to wonder about his mom — I mean, even more than I already was after finding out she was a successful madam — because all three of these arguably intimidating

men were falling all over themselves to follow her orders. It was cute, and quite sweet, and gave me the warm fuzzies. “Five minutes,” I assured him. “I’m not going to go all out, just need my face to live up to these clothes and my foofy sex hair.”

He laughed, eyes lingering on my hair again, then blew me a kiss as he followed Loki outside. I rapidly applied some necessary cosmetic enhancements, happy with the smudgy eyeliner effect I achieved, and how that and a bit of mascara made my eyes pop. I swiped on some matte burgundy lip stain, supposedly kiss-proof as if I could be that lucky, and called it good enough. In less than five minutes, I was shrugging on my new jacket and waving at the clerk — who seemed to be slightly awestruck at my transformation — on my way out the door with my old clothes in the bag with the makeup.

I’m not gonna lie, I really was full-on strutting as I hit the sidewalk, the heels of my boots striking the concrete with a satisfying thunk. They were hanging out on the sidewalk in front of the vehicle, Rasputin smoking a joint while he and Loki talked and Tesla tapped away at his phone, but all three of them froze in place and watched me approach with matching intensity. I spread my arms out and did a full, catwalk-style twirl, tossing my hair at the end, and they were appropriately stunned by my awesomeness.

“Your shopping efforts are appreciated,” Tesla muttered to the others, not taking his eyes off me, “as is Magick’s insistence she join us at night.”

“Agreed.”

“Fuck yeah.”

I grinned, walking right up into Loki, and hugged him tightly. “Agreed with the first part. Not so much the second. But I guess any excuse to wear these boots...”

“Those are good boots,” Tesla agreed, his normal monotone disrupted by the slight emphasis on *good*.

“Agreed, and fuck yeah,” I mumbled, nuzzling Loki’s chest and breathing in his spicy musk. “We should probably

get going though.”

“Mmhm,” Loki hummed, arms securing me in place. “In a minute.”

“Audible sigh.” Tesla pushed past us and climbed into the driver’s seat, gesturing to the back. “You can hug her on the drive,” he grumbled as Rasputin circled the vehicle at a trot and threw himself into the passenger side.

Loki dragged me into the backseat with him, contorting to fit his big frame into the small space without having to release me, and we ended up half-reclined on the bench seat, his shoulders back against the passenger-side door. Not too dissimilar to the position I was in with Rasputin on the way to town, except less emotionally fraught; all I wanted to do was somehow sink into Loki, maybe have him absorb me through osmosis or something, and bask in his unfettered affection. Possibly there could be some smashing involved.

He seemed inclined to the same, squeezing me against him and stroking up and down my back with one hand.

I wiggled my way farther up his body, so he could reach more of me. When he didn’t take the hint, I peeled one shoulder up and reached around, grasping his hand and dragging it farther south to my ass, before releasing it and moving my arm back to where it had been. He chuckled, chest vibrating pleasantly underneath me, and cupped one cheek, squeezing and kneading at it. I made happy, approving noises as he groped me, and his dick got rock-hard, poking against my belly. I wiggled again, enjoying the friction and the noises he was making beneath me.

“What’s going on back there?” I cracked one eye open up to see Rasputin peering over the seat at us. “We’ll be there in less than a minute,” he chided, shaking his head in mock disapproval. “Are you two going to behave yourselves in the warehouse or am I going to need to separate you?”

“You can try,” I threatened, but the effect was sort of ruined because my mouth was still pressed against his chest, making it a little difficult to enunciate clearly.



“Challenge accepted,” Rasputin winked again, and I felt a tiny bit of alarm at the gleam in his dark eyes.

And blocked out memories of glittery black eyes that watched me with the same possessiveness.

*Nope.*

I looked up at Loki through my lashes. I needed— I needed *something*.

I needed more.

I didn’t want to be just a job to him, a responsibility. I wanted to know I mattered.

His mouth found mine. His lips, dry and slightly chapped, moved over my lips, insistent and firm. I felt his tongue trace the seam and I opened to him, letting him in. Hot velvet tangled with my tongue, licking into my mouth. Owing me with just a kiss.

I melted into him. His hand gripped my ass, pushing me down into him and I ground my hips. He was so big, and so hard— all of him, everywhere, but especially his cock, and I was losing my mind imagining him splitting me in half.

“*Mouse,*” he groaned against my mouth, the sound almost painful, and I reached down to fumble with his belt buckle—

“Okay, that’s enough of that,” a cheerful but determined voice pierced through the haze in my brain as a hand grasped *my* belt and the back of my jeans, lifting me up and off Loki and dragging me over the seat, ass-first. I sprawled across the front of the vehicle, one foot hitting the steering wheel and the other Tesla’s head as he hissed curses and batted me away, trying not to swerve off the road. “Good thing you’re tiny,” Rasputin chirped, manhandling me into a sitting position on his lap. “Makes it so much easier to keep you in line.”

“Fuck—” Loki groaned again from the backseat, and I peered over Rasputin’s shoulder. His eyes were clenched, one hand scrubbing down his face and over his beard as he adjusted himself with the other.

He didn't look upset that we were interrupted. He looked

—  
Relieved. He looked relieved. Like he'd just been saved from making a terrible mistake.

Logically, it was probably a response to almost fucking me in the backseat of a vehicle with two of his best friends in the front, when there were time constraints and people waiting on us. Emotionally?

I felt like he dodged a bullet.

He hadn't reached for me. Hadn't tried to keep me with him. He let me go, without any resistance. And now he wiped his face like he was cleaning the sensation of me off his skin.

I turned back around and faced out the windshield, tucking everything away into rigid little boxes, closing the lids, and stacking them on a shelf.

Rasputin's arms were loose around me, like he knew I wasn't going to fight him.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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THE SUV SLOWED to a halt less than a minute later, with Tesla expertly gliding into a parallel parking spot as smoothly as Loki had earlier. I wasn't sure what was up with that, did they take classes on parking like a boss or something? It was *unnatural*.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Loki sit up. I concentrated on climbing off of Rasputin and exiting the vehicle without hitting my head or kicking Tesla again, although the sour look on his face certainly warranted one.

“You know you look just like Addie right now,” I commented, standing in the open door and blocking Rasputin as I pointed at Tesla. I didn't want there to be any question about who I was referring to. “I call that her *yuckyface*, it's the one she gets when I force her to eat broccoli.”

He turned a baleful glare on me.

“Oh, that one is just like her stubborn face, when she's about to throw a tantrum. You should probably stop hanging around her so much, before the two of you—” A memory hit me like a freight train, a photo that Beast had framed and hung up in his office, amongst all the other photos of club members past and present.

We'd been sitting at the bar next to each other, when I was maybe ten or eleven. He was drinking a beer, me a rootbeer, and the photographer had captured us with our bottles raised up in the same position, sitting in the same position, with the same scowl as we turned to face the camera. I didn't remember

the picture being taken, but I remembered noticing that photo hanging on the wall alongside his desk, close enough that he could see it clearly any time he looked up. I had a copy of it too, back at the bunker. Something about that picture...

I don't know why that memory, in particular hit me so hard, but pain ricocheted in my chest, stealing my breath. It wasn't even a memory of the event, but the memory of the *photograph* that fucked me up, of realizing what people saw when they looked at us. Saliva flooded my mouth, and when I gasped, I began to choke, drowning on my own spit. My ribs began to throb as my throat tightened, stars bursting behind my eyes. I fell back, away from the car, as I tried to take in oxygen but my body wasn't cooperating, not until a firm hand on the back of my neck forced my head down, bending me in half.

I wheezed and sputtered, my eyes sparking with tears, but my lungs expanded with deep breaths. I was on my ass on a scrap of lawn alongside the driveway, my head held between my bent knees as my fists clenched handfuls of grass like it was the only thing anchoring me to the earth. Pain exploded along my spine as a dinner-plate sized paw smacked me, and I began to cough again.

"Overkill," Tesla's calm voice chided Loki. I knew it was his hand that hit my back, just as I knew it was Tesla's on my neck, for no reason that made sense. "She was getting her breath back."

"Sorry, I— didn't know what to do," he trailed off, sounding worried.

Without looking up, I waved a hand, letting them both know I was fine. And I was. Even my coughing was beginning to calm down, by then it was just that annoying *wet* feeling in my throat like I'd been dunked unexpectedly while swimming, and breathed in water. Speaking of...

"Here." Rasputin thrust a bottle of water under my face, the cap already off, and I took it from him with a hand that was inexplicably shaking.

Maybe they'd just think I'd breathed in spit by accident, made worse by my injuries—

“That was a panic attack, Pinky,” Tesla intoned, as I peeled the bottle away from my lips. He shoved his hands into my armpits from behind and hoisted me effortlessly up to my feet. “I suspect a flashback. Care to explain? No? Didn't think so.”

I scowled at him over my shoulder, ignoring the other two with their crinkled brows and worried frowns.

I deliberately ignored all of them as I straightened my clothes, brushing non-existent dirt from my ass and craning around to make sure I didn't have grass stains on my new jeans. If I did, they were faint. A door opened somewhere nearby, and I heard the scrabbling of claws on wood as a pair of furry behemoths came bounding across the expanse between the front porch and us. I half-crouched, opening my arms in anticipation, but Rasputin barked out a command and the slavering, drooling, excited canines screeched to a halt at his feet, staring at me with so much doggie-longing that my heart ached.

“Gentle,” he warned, and they crept forward, two giant mastiffs with wrinkly jowls and foreheads, one brindle and one a light tan, both with black muzzles, ears, and masks surrounding their eyes. I swooped down, crushing them both against me, one in each arm — absolutely the worst thing to do with a strange dog but nothing about them or their approach screamed wariness or aggression. I fell backwards again, right back onto my ass, as two two-hundred pound sweeties vied for my love, which I gave to them, unconditionally, giggling under the onslaught of affection.

“So much for guard training,” Tesla muttered, the jealous dick.

“They're good dogs, Brent,” Rasputin chided, and I snuggled the pups since I couldn't hug him. *Fuck yeah.* “Time to go inside though,” he gave almost no warning before reaching between the puppies and hauling me up, *again*, despite how I clung to my new furry BFFs.

At right around six feet, Rasputin was the “smallest” of them all, and wiry, but apparently really fucking strong because I’d seen him lift Loki up from his seat before too. So he was kinda like me. Between that and the hair play, it was like we were twins separated at birth! Except, you know, a few years apart and him being Tibetan and Middle Eastern — which was not only a weird (but apparently gorgeous) combo, but how often does one meet someone who’s *Tibetan*? And the sheer beauty of the man...

I was crushing hard.

*Fuck.*

Let’s face it, I was crushing hard on all of them, including Magick who was a bit of a dick and didn’t seem to like me at all, and Tesla who had absolutely no interest in me and didn’t even have feelings like that. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

I needed to get laid again, and soon, and I didn’t think using Caliban as a booty call was the right move. Even though it was kinda his fault I was becoming a slave to my puss-ay — who was *also* getting a bit of attitude lately, what with salivating over mean boys and the untouchable. That wasn’t my normal; if a guy wasn’t interested then I cut ties and moved on, there was no sense dwelling on missed opportunities.

It was never worth the effort to try to change anyone’s mind about me. If they didn’t appreciate me and find me attractive as I was, it would never work out. Attempting to change to suit them wouldn’t fix anything because it took way more effort and attention than I was willing to spend, and sooner or later, all the Mouse-osity within would still burst out all over the place, like personality bukkake. Instead of feeling angst and shame over failing to meet whatever standards someone else was imposing, I wanted to spend my time basking in my own fabulousness and getting dick that was happy to be inside me.

Anyone who’d regret me need not apply, because there would always be dick happy to be in me. I was awesome. And pretty fucking cute too.

I was a tasty, fun-size snack with an ass like a figure skater.

My furry minions followed me to the vehicle where I yanked the side mirror out far enough to check my reflection, making sure my coughing-slash-choking fit hadn't ruined my makeup. My lashes were a little spiky, but didn't look bad, and nothing else had budged, not even my lip stain. I smoothed my hair down, picked a leaf out of it, then turned back towards the men watching me.

Today was shaping up to be a great day: beautiful new doggy friends, and I was about to enter a brothel for the first time.

It was ridiculously exciting. I wanted to see *everything*.

I wondered if there would be an orgy room? What does an orgy room look like? Was it just a giant bed in the center of the room, or maybe stacks of pillows and cushions like a dirty-sexy pillow fort? Was there a BDSM dungeon? Oh, *oh! Were there theme rooms?!*

“Is there some reason that you're bouncing up and down and yanking on my hand?” Rasputin asked as he led me up to the relatively normal entrance — because most front paths have forest green canopies stretching over the length of them — to a lovely Queen Anne-style Victorian mansion, with cream clapboard siding trimmed in black and emerald green. It seemed like every square inch was dripping with gingerbread accents or wrought iron spindles, and most of the downstairs windows had stained glass set into the multi-pane, leaded windows. It was gorgeous and pristine, down to the manicured shrubbery lining the circular driveway we were parked in, and the Venus deMilo reproduction in the still-winterized flower bed the driveway looped around.

“Theme rooms!” I blurted out, tugging on his arm with both hands now. “ARE THERE THEME ROOMS?”

He glanced back, grinning at Loki and Tesla behind me as I half-skipped, half-bounced beside him up the path. “You'll just have to ask for the tour,” he teased, but if he thought that would deter me, he obviously didn't know me - at - all.

“*I can get a tour?*” I, admittedly, shrieked, leaning into him so I could better study his face and see if there were any signs he was lying to me. “You better not be mocking me right now because I *need* a tour. Like, you don’t even know how much I need a tour. Do I get to watch some of the sexing? Is that a thing? Are there, like, observation rooms?”

“Uh— actually, yeah, there are a couple,” his eyes were really wide and he glanced behind me again like my enthusiasm was disturbing to him, but I guess if you grew up here, it wouldn’t have the same novelty. “For clients into voyeurism. Or exhibitionism.”

“Oh MY GOD!” I shrieked again, but softer, burying my face in his bicep so it wasn’t so ear-shattering. “You don’t even understand... this has been on my bucket list since forever. Well, technically *Go to a sex club* is on my list, but this counts, right? I mean, I think this is even better than a sex club?”

“You’re so fucking *delightful*.” Rasputin wrapped me in his arms and swung me in a circle, laughing as I whooped and giggled.

“This must be the new girl,” a husky, slightly accented voice spoke from the dim, shadowy entrance to the converted mansion. I peered up at her, ignoring the elaborately carved woodwork, mosaic tile floor, and the jewel-like stained glass windows set into the heavy oak doors, depicting a knight-slash-courtier with a drawn sword on one door, and a blushing maiden on the other — okay, I couldn’t quite ignore them, this place was amazing — but the woman, herself, was more impressive than the architecture.

I knew immediately that this was Rasputin’s mom. She was quite possibly the most beautiful woman I have or would ever see, hands down, and cancelling out any other time I’ve made that statement before, and I’d thought the club girls were the pinnacle of feminine beauty.

She was petite and elegant, wearing a white linen sheath dress with no discernible wrinkles in the fabric (or her skin!) and red-soled nude stilettos, with delicate gold jewelry and a



diamond-encrusted wristwatch. Her long, sleek, dark brown hair had amber highlights, and her makeup was on point and impeccable: deep brown eyes rimmed in thick slashes of black liner, lashes long and curled, eyebrows shaped to perfection, and her full mouth was painted with dusky peach matte lipstick. I felt messy and low-rent, but the guys were right to insist that I change clothes because if hadn't, I'd have felt even more like a bum in my old outfit.

“This is Mouse,” Rasputin answered, lunging up the stairs two at a time to reach her and give her a kiss on her cheek, but unfortunately dragging me with him. I tripped on the top step and would've collided with her if Loki hadn't caught me and kept me upright. Rasputin was completely oblivious, but his mom saw everything, including the blush staining my cheeks. “She's Adèle's new nanny. Well, governess. Apparently there's a difference, Loki keeps insisting. We were in town buying her clothes because she showed up with almost nothing and Magick makes her come to the club room like every night, and if left to her own devices, she dresses like a librarian character in a hardcore porn movie. She wore a blouse with a *pussy bow* last night, Mom, you would've died. I mean, it was *adorable*, but the girls were in leather catsuits and Cheetah print micro minis, and Mouse was wearing *corduroy*. It was hysterical, and frankly, way hotter than I would've ever expected. You should consider that for one of the girls — Jolenna would rock that look.”

“Take a breath, Rinchen,” his mom chided, but she was smiling and it was genuine. She rested her hand on his cheek with a warmth and fondness that felt like a needle in my heart. I'd never known that kind of open affection from any maternal figure, and my grandparents weren't the touchy-feely types either. No wonder Rasputin was such a hugger.

“Rinchen means *treasure*,” he smugly informed us, and his mom shook her head in loving exasperation at her six foot, heavily tattooed, machete-wielding biker-scamp of a son. “Mouse, this is my mother, Fatima Shahzad.”

She looked at me with some consternation as she delicately shook my hand, hesitating but finally asking, “Is, um, *Mouse*

your given name?”

I folded my lips inward to keep from laughing at her concern. “No, ma’am. My real name is Jayne Stone, Mouse is just a nickname. I used to be an EMT attached to a fire department, and the fire fighters started calling me that because I could squeeze into places they couldn’t get to, and the name stuck.”

“Interesting,” she said, straightening her already ramrod-stiff posture, and assessing me again. She took my hand, squeezing it gently, and in her prim and proper, lightly accented voice, she said, “Please, call me Fatima. Only special clients call me ma’am, and I believe my son would prefer we not have that relationship.”

My eyes got big as she bit back a smile. Rasputin reacted like an embarrassed teen, shouting “Mom!” and making a disgusted face at her. Loki began to chuckle behind me, and I even heard something resembling an utterance of humor pass from Tesla’s lips.

I couldn’t help it, I needed to make it worse. “That’s really a shame, Miss Fatima, because you’re gorgeous, and I can definitely appreciate a fine lookin’ cougar like yourself. Your special clients are very lucky.”

“If things don’t work out with Rinchen, please feel free to pay me a visit,” she replied without missing a beat, winking at me as Rasputin threw up his hands and began to pace in a circle, shouting about how unfair it was that his mom was trying to steal his girl. I felt myself blushing; I knew it was a joke, but it still felt a little uncomfortable for him to declare that to his mother.

Then Loki compounded it by wrapping an arm around me from behind, pulling me back against his chest so my hand slipped out of Fatima’s, declaring “*Our* girl” in a somewhat threatening tone.

I gaped at Fatima’s amused expression as Tesla muttered “Collectively,” then stepped forward and kissed her on her other cheek. “Hello, Fatima.”

“Jamie,” she replied, touching his hand lightly. “Kerry-Anne will be so disappointed.”

He snorted but didn’t respond, stepping back to be replaced by Loki. “Thanks for inviting us for lunch,” he said awkwardly, leaning down to kiss her upturned cheek. “You look beautiful, as usual.”

“Thank you, Atticus,” she replied, reaching for his arm and stroking it from elbow to wrist. I watched with no small amount of fascination.

Fatima wielded physical contact like a weapon, knowing exactly how much and what to do to draw the men in — hell, *anyone*. When she held my hand, I felt compelled to do anything she asked. “Please, come in,” she gestured to the entrance. “As a guest of my son, I will take it on faith that you’re Janus-free and able to go without a mask...?”

She let the statement linger, and I realized why we’d stood out on the porch for so long. It wasn’t just from eagerness to see her son as soon as possible, Fatima was also checking for obvious signs of infection before she allowed me to enter the house. I looked up, seeing the heat scanners to read temperatures tastefully hidden in the beams of the porch, the cameras observing every move, and the door that had been firmly shut behind her.

I heard myself mumbling I was immune, and Tesla backing my play, as I wondered if it was normal for Fatima to greet guests, or if someone else usually took the risk? I didn’t like that idea one bit, and as I debated whether it was rude to ask, Rasputin jumped in as if he knew what I was thinking.

“Guests have to call ahead and make appointments,” he explained as he keyed something into the pad next to the door handle — I purposely looked away — and pushed inward as it softly buzzed. I followed him through the beautiful doors with their vibrant windows, admiring how security measures had blended into the decor: the ribs of the stained glass were actually thick iron bars, and the doors themselves had steel cores. I suspected the windows were the same. “And no one gets past the foyer without being tested.” He pointed at an

antique table right inside the door, with a large silver bowl sitting on it filled with sterile, single-use Janus tests. “If the results are inconclusive or the person shows symptoms of anything, doesn’t even need to be J, they are directed to the cabins in back where they can quarantine for four days — at their expense, of course — and then try again. Three of those cabins are reserved for our use, the ones we use for out of town visitors or to quarantine before returning to the compound.”

“Wait, I thought the compound stocked the cabins—?”

“We do. We send supplies to the house here regularly. It’s a symbiotic relationship.”

I suppose it was. I mean, besides the club girls, that meant they had unfettered access to a house full of prostitutes. And if Fatima was any indication, the women had to be beautiful. And classy.

Tesla picked up the thread of conversation before I could dwell on what a “symbiotic relationship” could mean, but not because I was jealous or anything, that would be silly, I was just—

“You know that our location is kept confidential as much as possible. Only chapter presidents know where we’re located, and they only have a rough idea unless they’ve had to come to the compound on business. The Ranch acts as our public face here in town, and most of our meetings with outsiders take place here. They provide the quarantine cabins for our use and for anyone we need to meet with, as well as their own clientele. And they receive large deliveries for us. In exchange, we provide medical services and supplies. Symbiotic.”

I nodded. That sounded like a good arrangement—

“Anyone who wants to be a client has to pay like anyone else, although some girls have favorites and don’t charge anything, like Christie with Loki, or myself and Kerry-Anne. But we don’t take advantage, either bringing a gift or—”

“Perhaps you’ve made your point?” Fatima interrupted, eyeing me carefully.

I smiled at her, and shrugged, proud of myself for not flipping my shit and demanding to know who the *fuck* Kerry-Anne was, since Tesla was supposedly asexual. “Bikers, amirite?” I managed to get out calmly.

“Even so,” she frowned, and I realized that the big show they’d just made about “our girl” was confusing her. *Same, girl.*

“All joking aside,” I assured her, “I’ve been working for them for less than two weeks, and was already familiar with the biker lifestyle. I’m not looking for a relationship either.” She didn’t look convinced, and that bugged me. A lot. Especially after what happened with Loki in the backseat, I didn’t want any of them thinking that I had *expectations*. Maybe that’s why he was so relieved when Rasputin stopped us, he’d gotten lost in the moment and wasn’t sure if I’d be mature about it? I held her gaze when I stated, as firmly as I could, “I won’t deny I enjoy their attention and their company, but what they do, and who they do it with, isn’t any of my business. And vice-versa.”

She continued to study me, tilting her head back and to the side. After an eternity of me blinking at her and trying not to fidget, she hummed out a dismissive little sound then glanced around at the three men — Rinchen, Atticus, and Jamie, apparently — whom I was currently ignoring in favor of getting my point across. “I see,” she finally said, her brow slightly puckered, but then she seemed to come to a decision, and smiled at me warmly. “Since we’ve established you’re virus-free, please, come join me in the parlor and meet some of my employees.”

She gestured for me to enter an archway on the right, and I found myself in a fancy room with warm oak wainscoting, hand-painted silk chinoiserie wallpaper, and furniture made for lounging around on while sipping expensive champagne from crystal flutes. Even in the middle of the day, the room felt decadent and charged with sexual tension. Or that might’ve

been the women and men scattered around on the plush furnishings.

There was a petite redhead with green eyes and massive tits who squealed “Tesla!” and tottered towards him on six-inch platform heels, and I thought I did a good job hiding my wince. A gorgeous, wholesome-looking blonde with brown eyes and freckles was headed towards Loki, and there were at least three girls crowding around Rasputin, all of different ethnicities and styles, but all equally gorgeous and radiating sex. I stood awkwardly in the center of the room, watching the shenanigans, wondering if there really would be lunch involved or if it was going to be some other kind of eating.

I was grateful, again, that Rasputin insisted on the semi-makeover, because I really felt like my boots were on par if not superior to all of their stilettos and platforms and thigh-high boots.

And really, a girl can hold her own in any crowd if she’s got the best shoes.

“Mouse, I’d like you to meet someone,” Fatima summoned me with a warm smile and outstretched hand, and I found myself standing in front of what could only be a male model. He was tan, sufficiently muscular (though not at Loki-levels of ripped), with dark brown hair cut short but not so short that he didn’t have curls, and a dusting of scruff along his cheeks and chin. He was dressed in dark washed denim jeans, a blue chambray button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, with a black tie knotted loosely around his neck. He smiled at me, a gleaming white smile that lit up his face, his eyes hot and hooded as they trailed from my ruffled hair down to my killer boots. Apparently he liked what he saw, because he reached for the hand Fatima was holding, and took it away from her to subtly pull me closer. “This is Daniel. He also works here. And he, too, can have favorites. Daniel, this is my new friend, Jayne, but she goes by Mouse. Mouse earned her name as an EMT capable of contorting into the most cramped conditions. She’s very flexible. Isn’t that interesting? She now works for my son and his club, but is very new to the area. Perhaps you can tell her your favorite places? And I

understand she would love a tour of the house, if you have an opportunity.”

“With pleasure,” he purred, his eyes never leaving my face as he moved closer, and the most delicious scent like fresh water and sunlight filled the air; I found myself inhaling lungfuls of it like it was two hundred years ago and I was chasing the dragon in an opium den. He tilted his head and leaned toward me, the space between us feeling shrouded in intimacy as his fingers played with mine. “How long were you an EMT, Mouse? What was your favorite part of the job?”

Before I could answer, there were three shapes hovering on the edges of my peripheral vision, intruding on the little cocoon of privacy that Daniel and I had established together.

“Hey, buddy,” Rasputin greeted Daniel in a suspiciously chipper tone that had an edge to it. “How’s it hanging, man? Haven’t seen you in awhile. What’ve you been up to? Great, glad to hear it. So, I see you’ve met Mouse. I need you to take about twenty percent off’er there, Squirrelly Dan, because she’s with us.”

Daniel’s eyes met mine, and he smirked as if we had a private joke between us before straightening up and stepping back about three inches. Malicious compliance for the win, since he still had my fingers threaded with his.

“It’s good to see you too, Rin,” he said in a blandly friendly tone, but his eyes were locked with mine. “Tesla. Loki.”

Loki grunted. Tesla didn’t bother responding. Rasputin moved closer. “You do not want to piss me off, Daniel. Your clients seem to like that pretty face of yours, and I’d hate to have to destroy your money-maker, yeah?”

Without shifting his gaze away from me, he smiled wider — less of a smirk, and with a warmth that stirred things in my belly. “I’m not sure that it wouldn’t be worth it,” he said and winked at me.

“Rinchen, please don’t cause a fuss,” Fatima scolded her son, placing her hand on his arm. He immediately backed

down, but the quick glance I shot him showed he was *fuming*, like steam-billowing-out-of-his-ears furious. Loki and Tesla weren't much better. I wondered what kind of bad blood they had with Daniel, they looked ready to kill him, and I didn't want to be caught in the middle of anything.

I smiled wanly and extracted my fingers from his. "It's nice to meet you, Daniel, but I'm not a fan of drama and that seems to be the direction this is headed. Whatever alpha-posturing bullshit this is between you..." I gestured in a circle to encompass all of them, "just leave me out of it, okay?" I wasn't sure why there was so much confusion, I thought my request was pretty clear, but I directed my attention to Fatima. "I would love a tour, if one of the girls is available."

There was a short pause as Fatima studied me — *again* — then smiled. "After lunch, dear. Shall we adjourn to the dining room?"



I WAS uncomfortable and feeling awkward, at first, but once lunch was underway, I began to have a good time.

I was seated to the left of Fatima with Loki across from me. Next to me was a lovely girl named Alicia, a statuesque Black woman — and by that I mean she was at least six feet tall *without* heels — wearing a side ponytail that brushed my cheek every time she leaned in to make a snarky comment (which was often) and I didn't even care because she was so fucking hysterical. The only thing I didn't appreciate was her calling me "Lollypop" — as in "we represent The Lollypop Guild." That was unnecessary.

The girl I'd identified as Kerry-Anne was next to Loki, and sure, she was super pretty in a quirky, cute, *busty*, carrot-top kinda way, but I didn't see the appeal. So what if she was sweet, and friendly, and funny? I bet she never wooed Tesla with a seductive chicken dance. Not that it worked but whatever, I was playing the long game.



Then again, apparently she didn't need a chicken dance to seduce the supposedly asexual man.

Okay, I wasn't completely ignorant, and I immediately regretted that thought, which came from bitter, unjustified jealousy. I knew that sexuality and orientation were a spectrum, as was asexuality, and no one was any one thing all the time, in every situation. People's wants and desires were allowed to fluctuate, and it wasn't anyone's business but theirs, just like it was no one else's business why they chose to identify a certain way. Just because Tesla identified as asexual, didn't mean that he couldn't want or need sex, and his reasons were his own. A lot of people who considered themselves asexual still wanted intimacy, or wanted to share something with their partners, or may have found the one person that revved their engines in the entire world, and it didn't mean they had to defend their identity. To *anyone*.

But knowing all that, and believing it, and willing to go to the ground to defend anyone's choice, didn't change the sick feeling in my gut. The one that had flared to life when I felt Loki's rejection, and was only growing bigger and heavier with Tesla's. Even when I knew it was just a fucking fantasy, not anything I could ever really have, it still hurt to have it shoved in my face.

Daniel was next to Kerry-Anne on her other side, and his attention was like a soothing balm on my ego. He kept smiling at me every time Alicia and I would start cackling, and I didn't encourage it but I didn't *discourage* it either. He was super hot, and a girl has needs. If things got over-complicated back at the compound, it would be nice to think that I might be able to hitch a ride down here and— and I guess *get a ride* here as well.

It was probably a much smarter, and kinder, choice than continuing to use Caliban, regardless of him wholeheartedly encouraging it. Even if I wasn't leaving, he deserved better than someone who continued to lust after his best friends, pushing herself on them like a shameless hussy.

I really, really wanted to have sex with my new biker buddies. I was crushing on them, *hard*, but I also didn't want it

to impact my job, my living situation, or my other relationships. So far, things with Caliban hadn't gotten awkward but I wasn't sure if that would continue, or if it would be the same with all of them. I wasn't a jealous person, not normally, but they were making me a little crazy, and I wasn't sure how I could handle sharing *them* even though, by necessity, it was the definition of *open* and *casual*.

All of these things, along with the churning lump in my gut and the itchy feeling inside my chest, was why going any farther, with *any* of them, was a bad idea. At the same time, I hadn't felt this alive in years, and I had a really hard time resisting the fantasies that ran through my head.

Fantasies of being with each of them.

Being with *all* of them.

Being with all of them at the *same time*.

"What was that noise you just made?" Alicia whispered to me out of the side of her mouth. "It sounded... *fun*."

"Just imagining banging five bikers at once," I whispered back. "Is— is that a thing you've done? And if so, got any advice?"

She giggled, giving me a wicked side-eye. "No, hoochie mama, I have *not*. Multiples aren't my jam, and definitely not *bikers*. Have you not guessed my specialty? Damn, I'm losing my touch. They call me Lady Pain around here, Lollypop. I'm a *domme*."

I felt my eyes get anime-big at that as I straightened in my seat and leaned in, whispering, "Will you be my best friend and teach me how to be a whip-wielding badass?"

"Girl, I would love to teach you how to crack a bullwhip, it's a skill every woman should have."

"What was that?" Tesla interrupted from all the way across the table and like three people down, and I have no idea how he managed to zone in on what we were murmuring back and forth, but he was looking at us like he'd been part of the conversation and just missed that last part.

I gave him *such* a glare. “Mind your beeswax, nosy,” I mean-mugged, gesturing with my chin. “Eat your lunch, and quit eavesdropping. What, are you reading our lips? That’s not at all creepy.”

“Yes, I’m reading your lips,” he said impatiently, like that was just a thing one did when rude people tried to talk too low for you to hear. “I don’t think you and a bullwhip are a good idea—”

“Wait, what’s going on?” Rasputin piped up from the far end of the table, gesturing for the women around him to quiet down so he could get in on the action. “What are you talking about?”

“Something about a bullwhip,” Loki supplied helpfully from his seat across from me. “Alicia was agreeing to teach Mouse, I think.”

“That’s not happening,” Tesla said decisively, and I opened up both barrels of my most intimidating glare, putting my hands on the table as I got to my feet and leaned in.

“What did you say?” I asked slowly, daring him to repeat himself.

“That’s not happening,” he repeated. “You’ll hurt yourself, or you’ll hurt someone else. Or worse, you’ll decide you want to show Adèle your new skill and end up scarring her for life. And I mean that literally, you’ll catch her in the face and she’ll lose an eye, and you’ll blind a little girl all because you make poor life choices.”

“If this wasn’t Rasputin’s mom’s house of ill repute, I’d be leaping this table right now to punch - you - in - the - throat,” I growled out, my voice cracking from the force of my anger.

“As much I think he could’ve phrased that better,” Loki conceded, still looking alarmed, “he’s not completely wrong.”

“You don’t know me well enough to make that call!” I shrieked, causing everyone around me to wince. “Sorry for my pterodactyl impersonation, Fatima, but this is bullshit.”

“I agree,” she said firmly, shooting a pointed look at both Loki and Tesla, and ending on her son. “This is not any of

your decisions. This is Mouse's decision to want to learn, and Alicia's decision to teach her—”

“I wouldn't argue with you like that,” Kerry-Anne murmured to Loki, her hand on his arm, “making a scene in public. And especially not when you just want to protect me. She's ungrateful. And disrespectful.”

I watched, in stunned disbelief, as his hand came down on top of hers, tapping it lightly as if in appreciation.

She wasn't even his *special friend*, she preferred Tesla.

I stared at their hands: hers on his forearm, his on top of hers. It may have only been a matter of second before he moved and shrugged hers off, but it was long enough. Long enough to burn the image into my brain. Long enough to feel it, like a knife wound in my heart. Or my back.

I kept staring at his arm long after their hands had moved, long after the discussion had awkwardly shifted to other topics. Long after I should have reasonably sat back down and resumed eating lunch.

I stared at his arm remembering what it was like to be a team with someone, to know without question that that person was on my side, ride or die. I remembered what it meant to be loved unconditionally, and trusted, and not have to wonder if that person sought relief from my presence with others. To never be *too much*.

To be just enough, always enough. Always.

And I remembered what it felt like to realize it was all a lie.

In my head, a movie played out: Rosemary on the back of Beast's bike, his hand curling back to grip her leg, as he rode through the gates. By the time they passed by, it was Loki and Kerry-Anne.

The fleeting thought rippled through my brain — fading instantly but not before the damage was done — wondering what kind of person's relationships peak at *thirteen*.

I sat back down in my seat heavily, my body and mind exhausted, my hand finding its way to my ribs, feeling the phantom sensation of a boot striking me, trying to crack through my sternum to crush my heart.

“I’m sorry,” I said absently into the void. “Will you excuse me?”

I didn’t wait for an answer, I got back to my feet and walked blindly from the room.



FATIMA FOUND me several minutes later. I was sitting on the porch, on a wicker loveseat with a pale blue and white striped cushion, staring out at nothing. I’d left my jacket inside, but I wasn’t cold. I didn’t feel much of anything at all.

She took a seat next to me, and didn’t speak for the longest time, until I felt compelled to politely fill the silence.

“I’m sorry for disrupting lunch and—”

“Hush,” she commanded, placing a hand on my thigh.

“A lot of people must talk to you about sensitive topics,” I said, after another few minutes of silence — not strained, not uncomfortable, but not soothing — and I could see her nod in the corner of my eye. “Do you keep their secrets?”

“Usually,” she replied with a shrug. “Unless I have reason not to.”

I nodded. That made sense. And her son was reason enough, so despite the overwhelming urge to confess my sins, I couldn’t.

“Do your secrets pose a threat to my son and his family on the mountain?”

I shook my head. “Only to me,” I lied. My voice was thick and I had to strain to get the words out around what I couldn’t say, but she didn’t challenge me and nothing in her face or the way she held her body changed.

She traced a fingertip over the tattoo on my wrist, the words that provided comfort and pain at the same time, her manicured nail lingering over the last word. The burn on my arm throbbed.

“Are you a survivor?” she asked, and I began to laugh so hard I was choking, and then the laughter became tears and I was folding inward, holding myself away from any contact, even the tip of a fingernail. It was so important not to be touched, it could shatter what little control I had.

“I’m the survivor that all others spring from,” I finally gasped out, my head pounding from the force of everything I held back. “I’m the secret no one wants to keep, the problem they don’t want to solve. A nuisance they can’t be rid of. I’m only good for saving little girls and disrupting everyone’s best laid plans.” Bitterness crept into my voice, syrupy, dark, and corrosive. “I pay for others’ sins, but not my own.”

“You’re welcome here,” she finally said, not trying to touch me, with no flirtation underlying the words. “You’re welcome in my house. You could find a place here, you could make a life here. I know it’s not your first choice, but— but you’re welcome here if you need it. A haven.” The words sat between us, carrying so much weight on their back. “From one inconvenient survivor to another, you are welcome in my house.”

She patted my hand, briskly, and got to her feet, disappearing back into the house with a click of her heels and a wisp of perfume.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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WE DROVE BACK up the mountain in silence. I stared out the side window, considering what Fatima's offer meant. Whether I could live that life, even if just for a few weeks or a few months.

I needed more time before I returned to Salem, to dull the sharp edges and reinforce the brittle parts on the verge of cracking, and I needed a place where I felt safe. I'd had way too many bad thoughts and dark days, one after another, to feel like I was ready to go back.

Fatima's operation was small, and the building and property appeared genteel and civilized, but it was a damn fortress. I noticed these things, given my experiences, and saw the little details that meant they could lock that place down in a heartbeat. Her people could handle Beast, and if not, Rasputin would raze the earth to get to anyone who threatened her and his family there.

I'd felt safe on the rez, but I was a burden to them. I ate their food, used up their water supply; I knew how much work it took for them. And even though the risk was minuscule, there was still a chance that Beast would track me down, and I couldn't bring trouble like that to Vernita's doorstep, even if she had some kind of connection to the NNC like I suspected.

As capable and formidable as the NNC could be, there was still a hundred vulnerable citizens for every soldier they had.

In Salem, I would be a fugitive staying in the bunker 24/7, and I had to be able to smile and reassure Azzie that

everything was going to be okay and under control. She had to believe that our plan could succeed, and she wouldn't get any healthier if she was constantly worried and stressed out because of me.

I knew my disappearance couldn't have been easy as far as stress and worry for her, but I also knew that Vernita would've told them I was fine when I left there, probably as soon as my ass exited her car at the bus station. And that non-specific worry was a hell of a lot easier on Aez than watching me slipping into fugue-states in front of her, the kind where I woke up in the middle of a goddamn cow pasture not knowing how I got there. She didn't handle my dark days very well, and right now, that's all I had to give her.

For however long it would take to put Operation: GTFO into play — if Azzie was even healthy enough to leave the base at all, which— *nope*.

No. *Fuck* no.

For however long it took to put Operation: GTFO into motion, I was going to need to stay underground and hope Pete and Sarah Chaney and all of the others that I was trusting, could do their part. Tai and his brother had to be on board, because even without the debt I owed Vernita, Tai was one motherfucking *capable* dude. I couldn't imagine his brother was any different.

I just wasn't ready yet. Yet.

Because recent events were dredging up shit from my childhood that needed to stay buried.

My therapist in college used to react to all the terrible shit I revealed to her by saying “there's a lot to unpack there” right before we'd start digging into the layers, peeling them back to expose the raw center. That phrase signaled the pain that would follow, and the days it would take to recover, spent huddled up to protect the soft parts. Over time, I realized that no, I absolutely didn't need to unpack anything. In fact, I needed to box it up and file it away, on a dark shelf, in a remote storage area.



I wasn't completely delusional. I knew that bottling everything up could eventually kill me, in one way or another. I'd read somewhere that depression was internalized anger, so I did whatever it took to get the anger out. Sometimes that meant not getting out of bed for a few days, sometimes it meant taking a steel bar to a swimming pool full of broken furniture and piles of refuse. Sometimes it meant hate-fucking a cocky soldier who thought he could dominate me.

My biggest problem, I felt, was that new events were stirring up old memories, like recent things had locked onto my past and snapped into place, forming a connection. As if my memory palace wasn't a palace at all, but a swamp, and things that should've been lost forever were being dragged to the surface. Something triggered a memory and a hook was lobbed into the murk, the attached chain getting winched up without my control, and my past getting scooped up from the mire in my head. Each piece of detritus was one more thing that I'd hoped was gone for good, but instead it gradually surfaced, covered in slime with filthy water draining out.

Things best forgotten. Repressed.

If not for McNamara delivering me to Beast, I might've been able to go the rest of my life without having to deal with any of it, just letting it all sink deeper and deeper into the muck as the brackish waters seeped in and covered over everything, but I just wasn't that lucky. My head was getting dredged out: all the abandoned vehicles and discarded trash, all the bodies and murder weapons thought hidden forever; all of it was being yanked free from the mud and dragged out into the sunlight. All because the past couldn't stay there.

If my life history was a swamp, then it was populated with as many scary and dangerous creatures as any bayou in real life, maybe even as many as Australia. For every beautiful bird, there were a bazillion annoying insects buzzing around, making things uncomfortable. For every adorable frog singing at twilight, or slow-moving turtle basking in the sun, there were poisonous snakes and stinging eels, and piranhas that could strip the flesh from a creature in minutes. There were

alligators lurking just under the surface, their slitted eyes watching for vulnerable, inattentive prey.

I had a lot of alligators in my past, camouflaged as rotting logs floating innocently by, until they'd coil back to strike. They tried to drag me under in their powerful jaws, to hold me beneath the surface, helpless, until I drowned or bled out, but I escaped them and I survived. Every time.

I survived my father, and my mother. I survived the club. I survived juvie, even having a target on my back for years because of my name. I survived Janus and those who would use Azzie like a blood boy; I survived Kane's intentions and McNamara's machinations. And I survived...

Nope.

*Lock it the fuck down.*

I needed time to get my head straight, to break the chains and shove everything back under water. I needed time to let things settle into the muck, for the waters to cover over, and the frogs resume chirping at twilight. Then, I could return to Azzie and move forward, without fear of falling apart unexpectedly, at the most inopportune moment. Because back there, it would be waking up in the middle of a cow pasture to discover a battalion of soldiers surrounding us.

But nothing said the time I needed had to be spent *here*.

Adèle didn't really need *me* after all, she understood everything that was being said around her. Most of what I did was kick her in the butt to force her to communicate — but not really kick her, because kicking children was wrong.

Something I need to remind myself of, on some days more than others.

And if Adèle didn't need me, what exactly was keeping me here? Besides the potential opportunity to hate-fuck cocky bikers who keep giving off the worst mixed signals.

But when I thought about leaving, it was like iron bands squeezing my chest.

Whatever I told myself about Adèle not needing *me*, I might actually need *her* in all her cranky, obstinate glory. I'd been at the compound for a couple weeks, and spent hours a day with that kid — more time than I'd spent with any one person, ever. Besides Beast. And my cellmate back in the day, but she was a fucking violent cunt. Not relevant. Point was, I was a fool to think I wouldn't get attached.

*Goddammit.* I wasn't going anywhere.

Not until I had to.

After we returned from The Ranch, I made excuses that shouldn't have been necessary given it was supposed to be my day off, and went to my room. I was exhausted, and my head hurt. I don't know what Tesla told him, but even Magick left me alone.

Once it was dark, I went up to the attic. I'd started to enjoy the rush of adrenaline every time the ghosts or monsters, or whatever, rustled their papery membranes behind that door. It started to feel reassuring, like they were letting me know that I could always join them if things got too hard.

I stared up at the stars and tried not to get twisted up by all the things weighing on my mind. I didn't want to think about the past, but thinking about Salem was extra pounchy in my head, and dreaming about a future that couldn't happen was extra achey in my chest.

He put his hand on hers. He wiped me off his face like Tesla asking for extra bleach, then he put his hand on hers.

It was such a little thing, to inflict so much damage.

I was up there a long time, then I crawled back through the hole, being careful of splinters, and went to sleep. I had an early morning on Addie Duty, and we were planning to go exploring.



“WHAT IS THIS PLACE?” I asked in Polish, staring down at the little girl I was so fond of despite my best efforts. Because

this. Because she was leading me into a place that resembled *hell*, like some demon child in a horror movie, and I was following her because— because I trusted her.

Addie was a weird kid, a little too adult in some ways, but completely innocent in others. Like my parental neglect, I think the language barrier enhanced her survival tactics, making her a little sneaky and strategic when other kids would be oblivious to things. Just like I was, back in the day.

I followed her into an area that would normally make me uncomfortable, a place she seemed at ease in, because I wanted to see how her devious little mind worked. I didn't think she was trying to hurt me or anything, it was almost like she was letting me in, in a way. I was going to see a side of her that she kept hidden from everyone else, and I really felt honored more than anything.

Okay, and a little creeped out, but who the fuck knows what kinds of things lurked in these neglected parts of this abandoned Victorian sanatorium? This was the perfect place to shelter ghosts, or a dogman like the one in Michigan, or any number of creatures. *Particularly* the undead. Maybe a wendigo!

She looked back at me over her shoulder and finally answered with a shrug. "Someplace scary. We're not supposed to be here. We'll probably get in trouble."

I snorted. I wasn't scared of th— okay, I was a little. At least Tesla. And Magick. Probably Loki too, just because he could sit on me and crush me without even realizing it. And certainly Rasputin and Caliban, though it was for different reasons.

Fuck. I was avoiding *all* of them for the same reason.

Rather than admit I was a coward, I focused on her. "So why come here if it's scary?" I thought it was a reasonable question.

She made a face at me and then flashed her eyes down to her doll pointedly. Her creepy-as-shit doll that I swear was possessed and wanted to kill me.

I could picture it: me, innocently sleeping, while the soft thump-scrape sound of her footsteps gradually got closer, the pointed end of her jagged, broken-off foot leaving a line in the carpet like the wake of a boat. She'd pull herself up onto the bed, her painted face frozen in a single expression that did nothing to reflect the horror within, only the constant flutter of her glass eyes and eyelashes — made from Real! Human! Hair! — betraying the agitation behind the mask. I'd make some soft sound in my sleep, dreaming of kittens or baby owlbears, or something else adorably cute and precious, as the doll stared down at me with hate seeping out of her stitched body, like the stuffing out of ripped seams. She'd lift her leg, the sharp dagger of broken porcelain catching the light, and plunge it into my—

“Why are you making that face? The doll isn't *alive*, Mouse.”

“Says you,” I muttered in English, a chill running down my spine. In a mix of mostly Polish and some English, I asked, “So why are we here if she didn't demand it? Wait, am I some kind of human sacrifice? Are you going to push me into a pit or something because your doll overlord demands human blood every full moon? I knew it! I knew—”

“It's where I found her, okay?” She stomped her foot at me, like I was the unreasonable one. When she pursed her lips, giving me a disappointed frown so reminiscent of Magick's, I wanted to dunk her head in a toilet and flush. But I wouldn't. Because she was a child.

And wouldn't do it to him either, because he was like twice my size and would totally see me coming and stop me.

No, when I finally paid him back for all the bullshit attitude I get from him all the time, I was going to have to be stealthy about it, hit him when he wasn't expecting it. Come in sideways—

“You're getting crazy eyes again.”

“What do you know about crazy eyes?” I glared at her. She flared her nostrils and stared back, unblinking and

expressionless. “That’s what I thought. Little Polish-speaking monster,” I said in English.

“I can understand you,” she said slowly, in an accent so thick that I wanted to roll her up in a pancake and eat her with sour cream. I think that’s Polish? Eastern European, whatever.

“Good. Then my work here is done.”

She glared at me. I glared back.

She got this look. This look of pure malice and evil incarnate on that chubby-cheeked little baby face, and I knew... I knew something awful was going to come out of that wicked little mouth, and that no one would ever believe me.

“I found her here, you know,” she crooned in a sing-song voice, looking down at her doll. “And she likes to come back to visit.” The corner of her mouth twitched. She looked up at me through her lashes, but there wasn’t anything innocent in that child, and what she said next just proved it. “Because this is where her soul came from, from the little girl who died here.”

I stared at her dumbly. I’d been expecting something horrible, but I was *still* unable to believe what just came out of her mouth. She was holding hands with the doll, letting it dangle, and she began to swing it. Slowly at first, then faster and higher, and I knew she was going to throw that fucking thing right at—

“CUT IT OUT!” I shrieked, and flung myself backwards, away from her and towards the door, waving my hands in front of my face to stave off the attack.

The little shit was laughing so hard she was doubled-over, clutching her middle, and I vowed right then to pay her back.

...and that was why I couldn’t help but love her, because she was as dark and twisted as an eight year old could possibly be, and I had nothing but respect for that.

I stomped over to her and scooped her up, ignoring all her shrieks about how funny my face was, and how dumb I was because dolls couldn’t have souls, and carried her all the way back to Hazel’s room as she giggled to herself the entire way.

When Hazel answered the door, I brushed past her and dumped the little monster on her bed.

“She’s yours. Sorry. I thought I could handle her, but she’s pure-fucking-evil and threw a haunted doll at me. Then laughed— you’re still laughing, you little—”

Addie began to shriek again as I attacked her, determined to tickle her until she peed herself — it wasn’t *my* bed — but Hazel pulled me away. I had to be satisfied with just threatening her as she continued to cackle like the Baba-Yaga-in-training that she was. Yeah, I could see her as a twisted old crone living in a hut bouncing around on a giant rooster leg, a sweet reminder of her revenge every time she looked at it.

God, I loved this kid.

How was I going to leave her, and never see her again?

I did a full-body shiver, shaking off the surge of the feels, and let the resignation wash over me. It didn’t matter, this was never forever. But we had right now, and this kid needed me.

Nobody else would appreciate her being core-fucking-evil like I would, and until it was time to return to Azzie, I’d make her feel wanted. I’d make her feel loved, and appreciated, and worthy.

I stayed with her until lunch, hanging out in Hazel’s room. She’d been knitting, of all things, and she tried to teach us until eventually giving up. Addie and I ended up playing with her massive collection of yarn instead, sorting it by color and texture, before heading down to the dining room.



AS IT TURNED OUT, I didn’t have to dread seeing them again, and how they’d act around me after our disastrous lunch at The Ranch, because they’d left.

All of them.

They’d left without saying a word.

To me, I guess, because Hazel seemed really surprised I didn't know, as did Brandy-Lynn who sat at the big table with us.

I questioned them, as subtle as I could, but all Brandy-Lynn could tell me was that something big had happened.

Doc told her that an old lady had been taken from a club in Ohio by some government assholes, and was being held in a hospital. That club had called for reinforcements, and even though they were semi-rivals with the Apocalypse Riders, Komo had taken a contingent from his chapter down there to help.

Magick wasn't about to let Komo create personal allies with other clubs; when he found out, Tesla got word out to every chapter east of the Rockies to send at least a few men, then all the officers but Silas rode out first thing that morning. They took a dozen other men with them, all armed to the gills and bringing extra weaponry, along with the small trailer Doc used for medical consultations. They hoped a show of support from the mother chapter might keep Komo's ambitions in check.

Silas normally spent his time at the farm or the kennels, rarely eating meals in the dining room or going to the club room, but with all the other officers gone, he made his presence known in the common areas. That was how I learned that Silas wasn't just a dick to me, he was an asshole to everyone. Or at least all the women.

When I tried asking him for information, he dismissed me with barely a grunt, not acknowledging that I even spoke. After that, I didn't bother.

I went about my routine; I ate meals at the big table, as fast as I could shovel the food in, and did all my shifts with Addie and then some. We spent time in the gardens, the kitchen, and at the farm, reinforcing vocabulary.

We visited the dogs, hanging out with Stacy, and Rasputin's name never came up — not that I cared, because I didn't — and I bonded with the meanest bitch of them all, the rescued pibble called Stringer Belle. At first she didn't want



anything to do with me, but I wore her down until she'd accept my cuddles. Much to Addie's dissatisfaction, Belle ignored or tolerated her like she was a silly puppy. It was a more satisfying victory than any battle I'd fought with dice or fists, and my preoccupation with earning Belle's trust kept me distracted.

I began to create Dell's buttonhole access points in his fistula. I avoided being alone with him, knowing he was Tesla's uncle, and as much a crotchety old bastard as Silas. I avoided being alone with *anyone* but Addie or Belle, begging off from Girlie-Girls Nights, and girl talks with Hazel, and anything else that reminded me of what I once had and lost, what I tried to regain in moments of weakness.

I stayed away from the club room.

I wore my new clothes, the ones I picked out, and left the rest in my closet along with my new boots.

I was polite, if guarded. Friendly, if distant.

I went up to the attic every night and stared up at the stars, pretending to be oblivious to the papery rasp from beyond the door.

After two weeks of sinking deeper into myself every day, watching life pass by as if I was on a train traveling through the countryside, separated from the events taking place beyond my window, *they* returned home.

And they dragged me back from the abyss I gazed into, before it gazed back.



I WATCHED the convoy roll in from Addie's playroom, counting the Harleys as they cruised to a stop in the courtyard below. Eighteen revving engines, eighteen exhausted men... and a few women.

They didn't leave with women.

A strange chill overcame me, and a sickening sense of disappointment. One that didn't make any sense.

“Can we go downstairs?” Addie asked, and I was saved from having to answer by Hazel. It wasn't until later that I realized Addie had spoken English, and Hazel had responded without thought.

“You'll see them at dinner.” She hugged Addie against her. “Such a long ride-out, they need to hold church first, check in with the men. Tell them what happened and what to expect going forward. And find out the news from Silas, what happened here.”

“They could just ask Mouse,” Addie pouted, “she knows everything.”

I started laughing hysterically at the look on Hazel's face, coughing as I swore that I never once coached her to say that, but I wasn't about to argue either. Addie didn't even know why she was getting so many hugs and kisses — and from the yuck-face scowl, she wasn't much into them either — but *Jesus*.

That kid.

She was certainly suspicious when I asked her to repeat that to Tesla, first chance she got — my request was in Polish, of course, so Hazel didn't know what I was up to — and I knew it wouldn't happen. Obstinate little shit.

Addie went back to playing with her dollhouse, bored with us already, and I resisted as long as I could but finally gave in. “So is it normal for them to bring back women from these things?” I asked as casually as I could.

“Hmm?” Hazel was texting someone, barely listening. “Not really, but it's happened before.”

“Oh.”

She looked up, studying me with a little wrinkle between her brows. “Is something going on with you and— anyone in particular? You haven't been yourself recently, not since...” she paused, her eyes drifting to the side as I squirmed and started picking up toys and reshelving books. It was a job that

Addie was supposed to do, so she gave me a pleased nod like she was proud of my initiative. Little queen in the making, that one. “Not since you went shopping in town.” I’d actually forgotten I was avoiding Hazel and her nosiness until she spoke again, I was too busy making faces at Addie who was pretending she didn’t see me. Oh, but she saw me.

“Hmm?” It was a good strategy, pretending not to listen. Or care. “When was that?”

“Right.” She huffed out a breath. “So I guess you won’t mind taking Addie for the rest of the day, right? All the way through bedtime?”

I realized that Hazel had her own concerns with the new women, since Pumpkin had ridden out with them over two weeks ago, and we’d had radio silence ever since. Wherever they’d gone, it was imperative no one traced back any communications to this place, or made any connections, so all we’d had were two announcements from Silas that they’d arrived where they were going, then ten days later that they were a day out from going into quarantine. Even if she didn’t have to wonder about the four days spent bored in the quarantine cabins with brand new toys to play with, there was the rest of the trip and all the stops at clubs along the way. And they were still claiming their thing was casual because of the rules, so nothing was stopping him; I understood the reasoning, but it was all fun and games until someone’s dick slipped, and someone else was left wondering what they might have done differently.

Not that I was wondering about any of that myself.

That would be stupid of me.

Really fucking stupid.

I needed to just accept that I had painful crushes on men who wouldn’t ever be what I wanted, let alone what I needed. I couldn’t choose between them, so why would any of them choose me? No, if not these women, then others, and what could I expect? I knew more than anyone else about the biker lifestyle.

Besides, I was carrying way too much baggage for anything remotely healthy with anyone, not to mention the expiration date.

No, it was better this way.

And if I kept repeating all that, someday I might get past this feeling of loss.

“Hey, kiddo.” I poked Addie in the side after Hazel split, leaving us with vague promises that she’d take Addie for the whole day tomorrow. The goblin in question scowled at me, jerking away like I was pestering her when I knew she just couldn’t admit how ticklish she was. So of course I had to do it a dozen more times, until she was giggling helplessly in a pile of little-girl-goo on the floor. “What’s say we blow this joint? Wanna do a sleepover at Stacy’s place? We can make pizza in her kitchen, and watch movies?”

“With the dogs?”

Girl after my own heart. “Yup, she said we can fit six of them if we take all the cushions off the couch and build a giant pillow pavilion on the floor. Sound like a plan?”

I wasn’t running away. For realz. I was just... strategically retreating.

For the kid. All the excitement and new people was bad for the constitution.

Grumpy, anti-social Stacy was the best beard of all, since she had her own studio apartment over the kennels, right between Silas’s and Rasputin’s, although the one spent most of his time at the farm, and the other... well, I had no idea where Rasputin spent his nights after he left the club room. Or who with.

It wasn’t any of my business.

And if I dreamt that night that a handful of disgruntled bikers tracked us down, and muttered to themselves about having had “just about enough of this shit” as Addie and I snuggled deep within a pile of contented canines, it was all in my head.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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I MANAGED to avoid them all day.

Addie and I ate breakfast at Stacy's, then we helped her with the dogs, getting them fed and watered and medicated as needed. Addie didn't even make much of a fuss when we worked together cleaning out some of the kennels, she understood that sometimes accidents happened, even for puppies. No need to embarrass the dogs by making a big deal out of it.

We returned — not *snuck back in*, like Addie claimed — to her room in time for Hazel to meet us for lunch, and I got a pair of disappointed head shakes when I informed them that I wouldn't be joining them. I needed a shower, after all, and was still full from a big breakfast and—

Yeah, and no one was believing that shit. Addie promised to sneak something out “past the guards” for me. When she showed up with a container filled with two quesadillas smothered in pico and Caliban's world-class guac, I knew where it came from.

Hazel didn't even need to communicate the order, I'd be going to dinner.

As I looked in the mirror, psyching myself up for seeing them again and possibly discovering one or more had met someone more suitable than me — not like that was ever an option or I ever thought anything could happen — I tried to remember that once upon a time, I was fearless. I was brave.

I'd outsmarted the U.S. Military, and several branches of the government.

I'd saved one young girl in a hospital teeming with the Janus virus, and one young girl—

*Nope.*

I saved young girls, and more importantly, I saved myself.

I looked down at my wrist, and reminded myself that I was dangerous, because I knew I could survive.

It wouldn't be the first time my heart was broken, nor the worst, and I'd survived that. Plus, incarceration was a far worse outcome than awkward meals and stilted social interactions, so this was nothing.

I shuffled out of my room and down the stairs, every step feeling like it brought me closer to doom.

Every seat at the big table was occupied — I think every seat in the dining room was occupied. Hazel had mentioned that yesterday had been chaos, that the men had been in church until late and even worked through dinner, so tonight was the celebration. A couple people had gone out first thing that morning, bringing back some venison to roast, and there was spring onions, Addie's nemesis (carrots), and new potatoes. It was a feast. The meat was cooked and seasoned perfectly, because *Caliban*, and I'd never been a fan of eating Bambi before, but I'd never realized how delicious he could be. I was starting to wonder if Thumper might be worth trying too.

Everyone was in a good mood, there was plenty of delectable food, and it was definitely starting to feel like winter was completely over.

God they looked good. Every fucking one of them.

I stood in line at the buffet, trying not to stare, but it wasn't easy. For me, at least. Those fuckers had no problem pretending I didn't exist, not a one of them looked in my direction even when Gonzo had shouted out my name and waved from across the room.

They were too busy chatting up the pair of redheads crowding the table.

I guess I had my answer.

I filled two plates and went looking for an open seat elsewhere, only to be thwarted by a command from his highness to sit my ass down in the empty seat between Hazel and Tesla. If it seemed weird that Addie was seated between the ginger bitches, I wasn't going to say anything, especially nothing snarky like "I guess Addie's got new mommies" or something like that. No need to upset Hazel, who might be losing her job too.

Magick told them I was Addie's governess, and that I was to thank for her new-found grasp of English, which she got out of the habit of disguising while they were gone. I nodded and smiled politely as the women gushed effusively over her language skills, too busy hating them with the fiery hot passion of a thousand suns, and hating myself for being such a cliché.

Even if there had been something for them to disrupt, it wasn't their fault. But there wasn't, so my jealousy was just pathetic and weak.

I wasn't Janie. I wasn't trapped in a situation where I had no control.

Addie didn't need me anymore. I could leave with a clear conscience.

I kicked up the speed at which I absorbed my dinner, cursing myself for having to consume two full plates despite how goddamn delicious it all was, wanting to get my ass out of there. Boundaries were needed, big, thick, impenetrable ones, but my efforts were thwarted.

"So you made *ice cream*?" Rasputin asked Caliban with a necessary amount of skepticism. Counting the workers, there were over a hundred people living here. That was a lot of ice cream.

"Technically it's sherbet," he replied, stabbing a potato glazed with butter and speckled with chopped parsley, staring

at it distractedly as he explained. “Not enough milk fat in it to be ice cream, but there’s some so it isn’t a sorbet. Therefore, sherbet.”

“Ginger-beet sherbet. It sounds disgusting.” Rasputin made a yucky face, and it was kind of adorable.

“Then don’t eat it,” Caliban shrugged and ate his potato.

“I’m gonna eat it — do you know me at all?” Rasputin was now looking put-out, and I couldn’t resist muttering “that’s what she said” under my breath. Loki barked out a laugh that he covered with a cough, and Tesla rolled his eyes. Caliban and Rasputin ignored me. “What does it taste like?”

“Gonna go out on a limb and say ginger and beets?” Magick supplied, and Rasputin glared at him but kept talking to Caliban. The women watched the interplay with fascination and no small amount of amusement. I tried to focus on them, so I wasn’t staring longingly at anyone else.

“I mean, is it sweet? Or does it taste like vegetables?” He screwed up his face like he was already tasting it and it was disgusting. “Why would you want to ruin ice cream like that?”

Caliban deliberately looked at me while saying, “No reason.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Rasputin and I asked at the same time, equally annoyed, and he shot a grin over to me while Caliban bit his back. I remained irritated.

“Mouse likes ice cream,” he finally said, after the intensity of my glare ramped up to military-level conditions.

“So?” Rasputin and I answered at the same time, *again*, and he sputtered out a manly giggle while leaning over Tesla to backhand me lightly on the arm. I ignored him.

“She likes ginger too, if the noises she makes over the gingerbread and gingersnaps are any indication.” He was focused on cutting his food and not paying attention to me. I sat back in my chair, crossed my arms, and scowled.

“SO?” I demanded. My gaze darted over to the women, wishing I’d listened to their names, because they had almost



gleeful expressions on their faces and I wanted to make up terrible, disgusting puns on their names in my head, since I'm so damn entertaining.

When he didn't answer, Rasputin asked "So?" in a much less combative way, and then smirked at me when Caliban answered. "Mouse likes ice cream and sweet things, and candied ginger and beets are sweet but not overpowering. She also likes weird foods and unique combinations. And I like Mouse and want her to stick around for dessert, so therefore..."

"So therefore you ruined ice cream?" Rasputin accused him. "She would've stayed for chocolate cake too."

"Except that's *your* favorite," Caliban responded, stabbing a chunk of carrot and chewing it thoughtfully. "And she'd tell herself that I made it for you instead of asking why there was chocolate cake or why I *ruined cake*—" he made finger quotes there, "—and I wouldn't get to explain my reasoning."

"So you wanted me to ask you why you made it?" I wasn't scowling as much as confused. I never questioned Caliban's cooking choices, I just ate whatever he made without question, it - was - that - good.

"Oh, are you talking to me now?" He cocked up one eyebrow and tilted his head, setting his fork on his plate and folding his hands together. "It's been awhile. How've you been, honey?"

I huffed out a sigh, rolling my eyes and scratching my nose with my middle finger. "Just peachy, Caliban," I cooed sweetly, my jaw clenched. "Yourself?"

"Been alright," he nodded, narrowing his eyes. "Little lonely though. Long trip, and no one waiting to greet me when I arrived."

"There's always like two dozen people back in the kitchen who can't get enough of you," I grumbled, ignoring the rest of what he said. "You're hardly alone."

"Or six. But they're working. They aren't there to talk to me, or try to guess what I'm making for dinner, or try to steal

tastes like when you visit me. It's not the same thing."

"So, what? You miss *me*?" I jutted my chin out defiantly, making a face.

"I do, I miss you a lot," he said, not fazed at all by saying it, and no one immediately started giving him shit about it.

I stared down at my plate, completely losing my appetite, and at a loss with how to respond to that.

"Me too." *Fuck!* That was Loki's voice, and I realized I hadn't heard it at all up until that moment. A couple weeks away, and if I could believe what Magick said, he'd reverted to the way he was before I showed up.

My eyes darted up, finding his, and I felt a twang in my chest like something that'd been stretched beyond capacity, had finally broken. The sharp snap of pain was immediately followed by relief as I took a deep breath. My first in a long time.

"I've been remarkably productive," Tesla added, staring off to the side. "No interruptions. At all. Super boring."

*Twang.*

"Don't know what happened when you went to town with Raz, T, and Loki, but whatever it was, it's between you and one or more of them." Caliban waved his fork in a circle. "They're assholes, I get why you might be pissed, but be pissed at *them*. Not me. Not sure why you've been punishing me or Magick along with them—"

"I'm not punishing anyone," I snapped, *super* annoyed now, even more so when all five of them turned to stare at me with an array of raised eyebrows and exasperated expressions. "I'm not," I muttered, glaring down at my plate.

"Even I don't buy that," Hazel mumbled, folding her lips in and fussing over Addie as I gazed at her with horror at her betrayal. Is there no Girl Code around here? What the fuck?

One of the women whispered to the other behind Addie's back, their eyes gleaming as they turned back to watch, small smiles on their faces. But those smiles weren't mean or

triumphant — I would recognize that kind of reaction anywhere — they looked... eager? And maybe *happy*.

I was confused, but also maybe onboard the ginger train, until the one next to Magick whispered something to him, causing a blush to spread over those razor-sharp cheekbones.

Then I just fucking hated those bitches.

“Loki’s the fuck up,” Tesla informed the table, interrupting my murder-rage fantasies, “so Raz and I should be immune too.”

“I’m not a fuck up,” Loki growled, “she’s reading too much into shit.”

I lounged back in my seat, staring up at the ceiling and biting my lip. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to crawl under the table and die of embarrassment, or grab the edge of the fucker and flip it, then storm out.

“What’s she mad about?” Magick asked. I could feel his eyes still on me but I didn’t look. “None of you fucks ever explained.”

That felt contrived. That felt *rehearsed*. Like this public humiliation had been *planned*, forcing a confrontation. In front of strangers.

If that ginger bitch rested her hand on his arm, and he held it, I was going to stab him in the neck.

“Kerry-Anne,” Loki spat out but didn’t clarify or explain.

Speak of the other fire-crotch devil! If Azzie wasn’t a natural ginger, I would’ve been questioning whether all those soulless cunts were my natural enemies.

“Kerry-Anne?” At least Magick’s confusion warranted eyeing Loki instead of watching my reaction. “I thought she was Tesla’s fuck buddy? Why were *you* with her? Why were you with anyone?”

“She is,” Tesla responded. “Was. Whatever. And he didn’t fuck her, he sat next to her at lunch.”

“I’m so confused.” Caliban stared between all of us, all the parties involved, and I felt torn. He was a ginger too, kinda. I couldn’t curse them all without potentially hurting him, and he was one of the good ones despite his hair.

“There was a bit of a... situation at lunch,” Rasputin supplied, and ignored me even though I was now staring at him in horror, willing him to shut his fucking mouth. The entire table had stopped eating, even the kid, and were all looking at him. “Actually, it started earlier than that. My mom was meddling, trying to fix Mouse and Daniel up—”

“Wait, what?” Magick demanded. He and Caliban were both now sitting forward, visibly pissed.

“Fucking hypocrites,” I hissed, then clamped my mouth shut again when their glares turned on me.

“It was fucked up—” Rasputin continued, ignoring me, “—but harmless. It never would’ve gone anywhere, Daniel’s smarter than that. But Mom’s heavy-handed tactics worked, we were practically pissing on her leg—”

“So Mouse told us to keep her out of our drama — I’m sorry, I meant to say *alpha-posturing bullshit* — and requested a tour from one of the girls,” Tesla finished, and I swear the bastard was laughing even though he was as stone-faced as usual. I could just tell, his mousey little whiskers were twitching and his ears were trembly, the rat.

“Mom put her next to Alicia at lunch. You know, *Lady Pain*?” Caliban and Magick both nodded. “And she and Mouse were whispering and giggling back and forth all through the first two courses.”

“Alicia was calling her Lollypop after the munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz*. It was amusing. Then Mouse asked her for advice about banging—”

“DO NOT FINISH THAT SENTENCE!” I hollered, jumping up to my feet, and my chair fell over behind me, causing the entire room to go silent as everyone turned to look at me. My face was beet red at this point, like sherbet-red I assumed, and I was absolutely mortified to have everyone’s

eyes on me, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it would be if Tesla finished that sentence and told the room that I asked Alicia for advice about banging five bikers at the same time.

Tesla stared at me, consideringly.

Around us, people whipped out pieces of paper and traded pencils, marking Xs in boxes.

After a full minute of me alternating between fury, panic, and humiliation, he jerked his head in a nod. "You owe me, Pinky."

"Fine!" I shouted, and awkwardly regained my seat, taking deep breaths in relief. "Take it to the grave, and I'll owe you two. Or one body part. You can't take both kidneys."

"I don't want your *kidney*," he explained patiently, like it was some kind of secret message that I had a decoder ring for, but seriously, it wasn't any better if he went for an eye. Or my liver, with fava beans and a nice chianti. "Anyway," he continued, somewhat disappointed after I failed whatever test he was giving me, "Alicia explained she was a *domme* and Mouse asked for lessons. Specifically, *will you be my best friend and teach me how to be a whip-wielding badass?*"

"Do you have a photographic memory or something? Er, or phonographic? Is that a thing? Do you remember everything you hear?" I demanded, now seriously worried and trying to recall everything I'd ever done or said around Tesla, given he could also read lips. The replay wasn't pretty.

"I remember everything."

"Everything you hear?"

*"Everything."*

"Yikes," I whispered, suddenly feeling incredibly sad for him. "That really sucks, Tesla."

He cocked his head, blinking at me. "That's not the typical response."

"Then they aren't thinking clearly. Some things... some things we need to be able to forget. Or the pain would never dull."

He nodded. My eyes stung, and I blinked it back. That was one of the most awful things I'd ever heard.

“So what happened?” Magick interrupted, which was timely because I was on the verge of crying on Tesla's behalf, since he wouldn't. Of course, the answer to that made all the sympathy I had for the man evaporate into smoke, and I had no problems speaking up.

“The patriarchy reared its shaved and tattooed head and forbade me from learning how to crack a bullwhip,” my smile was the fakest I think I'd ever managed, my perky tone dripping with disgust and outrage. “And butthead decided to weigh in too,” I gestured at Loki without looking at him. I'd somehow managed not to look at him much at all over the meal, despite wanting to so bad it hurt. It was still too raw. “Then he accepted condolences for having to deal with my obnoxious and embarrassing ass, from someone who doesn't even fucking *know* me but chose to flap her gums and talk shit about me, and Loki lapped that shit up. And *that* is why I've been keeping to myself. I obviously presumed too much about my place here, but I've adjusted my expectations. I'm not fucking pouting or *punishing* you, I'm fucking *adapting* to the situation. But thanks for making it into something petty and childish, and embarrassing me in front of strangers, I really appreciate that.”

I couldn't look at any of them, I chose to stare at the table, the walls, the ceiling — wherever there weren't *faces* — during that entire speech, and when I finished, I continued staring off at nothing, breathing like I'd just run a marathon, and rocking in place as I tamped down my emotions. Reliving it wasn't any easier.

“That's— not what happened,” Loki said slowly. When I scoffed — still not looking! — he sat forward. “No, Mouse, no. That's not what happened *at all*. Yeah, she was talking shit about you, which I was dealing with, but I wasn't *accepting her condolences* — she's not supposed to fucking touch me and she knows that. She put her fucking hand on my arm and was about to pet me or some bullshit, and I stopped her but I couldn't exactly knock her away like I wanted to. I wanted to

but I couldn't, so I kept her hand from moving and tapped it to remind her of the rules.”

I blinked at him, really *seeing* him for the first time in weeks, and reading the truth in his face: he wasn't lying.

Maybe— just maybe... *maybe* I projected some of my own issues on the situation.

“If that's what you thought— no wonder you looked like I'd slapped you across the face, but that's not what happened. Then you just went blank, staring right through me, and walked away. Fatima asked us to let her talk to you, but when she came back—”

“She'd been crying,” Rasputin supplied, unusually subdued, his brow furrowed. “Whatever you said to her— my mother doesn't cry. I've seen...*things* happen to her, and she never broke. Whatever you told her, she broke. She told us to leave you alone, give you time, but not too much time or you might not come back from whatever dark place you were in. So we gave you until now.”

“And then I made sherbet,” Caliban said softly.

“And tonight, we're all getting wasted,” Magick announced, holding up a hand to stop whatever protest I might make. “It's an order, Mouse. We're going to relax, cut loose, and have some fun for once, yeah? More fun than usual, I mean.”

“I'm hoping she'll dance for Tesla again,” Rasputin whisper-shouted from behind the hand held up to his mouth, his eyes sparkling as he bounced in his seat.

“What's this?” Caliban asked, perking up.

“Hit play,” Loki said, passing over his phone. Tesla got up from his chair to circle around behind Caliban to watch. I put my head down.

“What the fuck is she doing?” I heard Magick ask. “Why have I not seen this before?”

“It actually gets even more elaborate.” Loki was so helpful.

“Oh my GOD!” Caliban began to cackle, and I gave up and crawled under the table.

Despite the humiliation, I swear I heard it like a radio playing off in the distance: *One of us. One of us.*



THE SHERBET WAS FUCKING DELICIOUS, and Caliban gave me an extra scoop to make up for laughing at me, and then showing everyone around us the video of me aggressively “wooing” Tesla with my Sparklegasm Dance, as it was now being called. Addie wanted in on the game and slipped under the table to join me, as the phone apparently got passed around from table to table, and a shit-ton of squares got marked off on Bingo cards. We ate our sherbet together, sitting on the floor between everyone’s knees.

It was pretty damn tasty too.

I was blocking out the fact that those two ginger bitches had so much more material to pity and mock me for, because whatever. I was feeling better than I had in weeks.

And I felt even better when Hazel mentioned *they* were taking Addie for the night, and Magick explained — apparently again, but I hadn’t been listening the first time — that the women were old friends of her mom’s from the chapter outside Chicago, and were visiting for a few days to spend time with Addie. They came specifically to be able to tell her stories about her mom, now that she could understand them, and they were thrilled to meet the woman — me! — who made it possible.

There are many times in my life where I’ve felt like an idiot. The last twenty-four hours added several to my top five. I wasn’t even sure if their hair color was natural, probably because one of them mentioned wanting to dye it back, so maybe they weren’t so bad after all.

I went up to my room after dinner, with the understanding that I would be joining them in the club room promptly at



eight, or Magick would come get me and carry me, kicking and screaming, if necessary, down to the party. I wasn't going to risk it.

And I'd decided I wanted to dress up.

The time since our lunch at The Ranch had been long and trying; I hadn't exactly felt good about myself for most of it, and I was a little fragile. It wasn't a night where I wanted to be self-conscious and underdressed, and by that, I meant wearing *too many* clothes. And I wanted to wear my new boots. Magick had said "cut loose and have fun" and to me, that meant dancing. Crazy, inappropriate dancing, probably with Hazel or Brandy-Lynn, and maybe I'd show them how an ex-firehouse resident, who grew up with strippers as role models, works a pole.

I took a long shower, put my hair up into french braids, and channeled my tween years as a junior club girl with my makeup. I wanted to kiss Loki for the sack of products he bought me in town. And only for that reason. Really.

Whatever.

I went full-throttle on the face paint, doing the cat-eye liner highlighted with white, and a classic deep red lip. I put on a pair of shiny silver skinny jeans the guys had picked out for me, that hugged my ass like they were long lost cousins. On top, I wore a vintage Harley Davidson halter top, black leather with a V so deep it reached the waist-cincher-style band around my midriff. It left my entire back exposed, so I'd be showing off my beautiful she-wolf to the entire club for the first time. Add some killer boots with silver metal plates riveted to them, and I was a chromed-out cutie. My stripper ancestors would be proud.

My boots wouldn't help much with gripping the pole, but I had my freakish upper-body and core strength to make up for that.

I felt good. Except for the brief period between the store and arriving at The Ranch, I hadn't felt good about myself in a long time. Maybe I could even get lucky tonight.

There was a knock on the door. I checked my ass one more time in the mirror — and it was stellar — before answering. Loki was hovering right there, resting his weight on his hands on either side of the doorframe, practically filling the thing up. When he saw me, he kinda lost his balance and stumbled a step forward before he caught himself, then he moved back a few paces into the hallway, running a hand over his beard while he checked me out. I leaned against the doorframe, cocking my hip out and pouring on the sass. “Well? Do you approve?”

He didn’t say anything for the longest time, looking at me through his lashes, his eyes scanning up and down my body, until they finally settled on my face. “What?”

“I asked if you approved,” I smirked. I’d spent that same time checking him out, and he certainly had my approval too. He was wearing a faded Guns N’ Roses t-shirt that strained over his biceps and the width of his chest, his beautiful, full-sleeve irezumi tattoos on display. Jeans hugged his thick thighs with the bottom cuffs rolled up, and he had on well-worn boots with frayed laces. A thick leather belt circled his waist, wallet chain hanging down, and he had on his colors, of course. His beard was neatly trimmed, his hair pulled back on top with the rest hanging down past his shoulders.

He was so fucking *manly*, and the way he towered over me, even with my four inch heels, I felt little and delicate. I liked it. I’ve always liked it.

“Nope,” he shook his head, snapping me back to attention. “You’re going to stir up all kinds of shit in that outfit. I’m going to have to stick to you like glue, keep all those fuckers away.”

“Is that why you’ll be shadowing me? Protection?” I bit my lip, and turned around. “Or will it be because of this ass?”

“God. Damn.” His voice was a soft rumble, and I peeked back over my shoulder to see him running his fingers over his mustache, eyes glued to my posterior. “Both.”

“Good.” I said, and turned back, planning to exit my room, but he didn’t move out of the way.

“I’d actually forgotten about that tattoo,” he muttered under his breath, staring down at me before backing up a step. “So fucking gorgeous. So fucking *perfect*.”

It was. That tattoo was killer in every way.

I turned from locking my door and found him watching me with a worried expression, and my heart stuttered over how weirdly potent the mix of anxiety and pure lust was.

“Mouse, are we okay?” he asked, the anxiety winning out.

I considered it for a few moments, taking his question seriously, then I nodded and shrugged at the same time. “Yeah, we are. I get now that what I thought was going on, wasn’t really what was happening. But how it made me feel... I didn’t like that. I don’t like—I don’t like *caring* that much, that I could be so devastated to think you were choosing her over me. It scares me that I’ve become so... so *attached*, that I could feel that betrayed.”

“I get that that could scare you,” he said slowly, “but I’m not sad at all that you’re that attached or that you care that much.”

I scoffed. “Of course you wouldn’t mind that, all kinds of bennies for you—”

“You think I’m not attached?” He reached out, running a fingertip along the neckline of the halter top, down to where the corset lacing started. “You think it’s not scary for me too?” He toyed with the ends of the laces, twining one around his finger, then looked up to lock eyes with me. “I’d never choose anyone over you. I’d never betray you. You’re—” He stopped, shaking his head, finally saying. “I’m attached. Trust me, I’m attached.”

He must’ve realized the intensity of the moment was making me uncomfortable because he gave me a small smile, and reached for my hand. “C’mon, it’s time to go show off your new duds. I’m not sure if I verbalized this already or not, but you look fucking incredible.”

“Did you say I look fucking *edible*?” I asked as I slid my key into my pocket and started walking.

“No, *incredible*,” he assured me.

I sauntered down the hallway a few feet in front of him, tossing back “I like my version better” over my shoulder.

He chuckled, cursing softly, letting me walk in front so he could watch my ass, but still holding my hand. “That can be arranged.”



“LEMME GO FIRST,” Loki requested as we approached the club room doors. They stood open, loud music and louder voices pouring out into the lobby area; the scents of sweat, booze, and weed; darkness punctuated by flashing lights and scattered reflections off of mirrored signs decorating the walls and the glittery dresses of the girls.

It wasn't any sufferance to follow behind him, hiding in the wake of his size and presence. I passed unnoticed through the crowd, led by his rough hand clenched around mine, and the lure of his tight, muscular ass framed in those jeans.

I was so hypnotized by watching the flex of his muscles — those thighs... ngnngh — as he walked, that I didn't realize we'd arrived. When he stopped, I plowed into his back. With our hands caught between us, I used it as an excuse to grope him, and had no issue when his fumbling touch found my boob. I might've even leaned into it.

When I looked up, he was watching me over his shoulder with heavy eyes and a dangerous grin. I smirked as I tucked my tits back into my halter top, making sure they were positioned properly in the leather. At my look, he nodded his approval, the girls were covered appropriately. Then he moved to sit down, leaving me standing at the edge of a cluster of couches and armchairs surrounding a low table, where four out of five of the hottest men in creation stared at me with glasses and bottles frozen in place, wherever that place might've been.

“Glad I had a minute or ten to adjust,” Loki chuckled as he took a seat on the other end of the couch that Tesla was

camped out on. “Go on, give them a twirl, babydoll,” he advised, “show off that edible ass.”

“I knew you’d see it my way,” I teased as I raised my arms out to my sides and gave a slow rotation, stopping when my back was to them. I arched, just a smidge, and looked back over my shoulder. “He tried insisting it was only incredible,” I fake pouted, “but clearly this ass is verging on spectacular. Wouldn’t you agree, Caliban?”

“As someone who has vowed, numerous times, to fuck that ass until you’re screaming my name, I can attest to both it being spectacular, and you being a naughty tease who needs those cheeks reddened.” He winked at me over the rim of his glass as he took a deep swallow, and I blew him a kiss.

It wasn’t that I wasn’t game for the butt stuff, we just hadn’t gotten around to it. He was more of a boob man, and had failed to save against my pussy’s Charm Person spell, so ass play usually didn’t come up until we were both spent and exhausted, with me trying to trade anal for a tray of pancakes delivered to me in bed.

And maybe I was getting past the need to run away the minute we were done.

A lot had changed when they were gone. Even more changed in the moment I saw them again and I realized it was too late, I’d already lost the fight.

And after that dinner, when I truly understood this wasn’t all one-sided? Done-zo.

“Way to rub it in that you’ve already gotten the girl,” Rasputin hissed at Caliban, flicking a bottle cap at his head. “Dick.”

“Way to plant images that will haunt me,” Tesla frowned, and my spine stiffened. Haunt him? Like sex with me was a horror show? That— “I’m already having issues with unexpected and unwelcome erections, at very inopportune times, I don’t need to picture spanking that ass with a paddle every time she pisses me off. It’s frequent, you know that. The consequences here are dire.”

Wait, what?

“Happy for you, Cal. Now shut the fuck up.” Loki scowled at him but turned a soft smile on me, and I knew he wasn’t really mad about any of it. We’d been on a slow train to Fucksville since the moment he ate asphalt at my feet on an empty road, on a dark and stormy night. I smiled back, beginning to complete my turn, but a hand on my hip kept me in place.

“Not done yet,” Magick informed me, his grip gentle but anchoring me in place. A finger brushed lightly down my spine, following the path of the she-wolf’s snoot, and I realized he was just admiring my ink and that was fine—

The finger kept going, becoming a hand once it passed over my jeans. A hand that cupped my cheek, squeezing lightly, as hot breath drifted over my neck. “*Spectacular,*” he sighed, both hands on my hips now as he held me in place, pressing his body against me from behind. “Truly. I appreciate it when you make an effort.”

Oh, that *dick!*



“WHY DO you make me come down here?” I grouched at Magick, slumping in my seat.

After he finished groping me, getting me all hot and bothered, and then *insulting* me — my hair is *always* cute! — he told me to sit down in the armchair he’d been occupying, and went to get us all a round of drinks from the bar. I stomped to the chair and threw myself into it, seriously cranky and frustrated, ignoring how the others exaggerated flinching away. Rasputin had even lifted his legs out of my path with a mock look of terror. By the time Magick was back with a bottle and six shot glasses, I was working on a full-on vendetta against the man for being a clit-tease *and* a jerkface. After two rounds of shots and a full-bodied cider with a hint of peach that Caliban said came from peach nectar — delivered to the table with another round of beers by what appeared to be a

waitress? There was waitstaff now? — I was inhibition-free. At least as far as my temper goes.

I glared at the man with annoyance. He was across from me, looking all— all sexy and aloof. With that stupid smile on his stupid, beautiful face every time I found a new reason to bitch at him. He watched me, attentively and patiently in a way that made me want to punch him, because I knew my fury entertained him. One eyebrow cocked up, and I shook my head, teeth clenched, wanting nothing more than to provoke a fight.

“I don’t know if you realize this,” I expressed, with my own patience and in a tone any mansplainer would approve of, “but Addie’s a bit of a handful. I’m tired at the end of the day. When you force me to spend time in here, it’s always filled with smoke which hurts my throat, and the smells of liquor, sweat, and sex cling to my skin and clothes so I have to take time to shower before I can sleep, making my night longer. And anything I wear here has to be washed before I can wear it again, producing more work in the laundry.” These were good arguments, I was making good points! Right up until Missus Tequila derailed me, sending me off on a tangent. “The music is usually terrible, too. Seriously, how many times a night do they have to play that Buckcherry song? We get it, she’s a crazy bitch *and* a good fuck. Move the fuck on.”

Magick lounged back in the low-slung armchair across from my own, a bottle of beer in his hand. He’d already shooed away about six dozen girls who tried to plant themselves on his lap. Sadly, I appreciated what a dick Magick could be *to other people* on a regular basis, it was basically part of his charm to me now.

“I’m not in charge of the sound system,” he said, tapping a finger against his bottle in time to the beat, occasionally mouthing the lyrics as he watched me idly. At least it was a decent song — AWOLNATION’s *Not Your Fault* — and maybe my own hips were wiggling and hands tapping out the beat too, but that didn’t cancel out the endless cycles of hair bands, good ol’ bro country, and DMX. Always DMX. Don’t get me wrong, I love me some *Ruff Ryders Anthem* like any

other right-minded person, but I missed Eminem. And Die Antwerp. These club girls didn't know what they were missing out on without *Daddy* in their repertoire.

The song ended, another one started, and Magick stood up and held out his hand. "Dance with me."

The sheer absurdity of his words snapped me to attention, and I waited patiently for the punchline, which never came.

He smirked, waving his extended hand again. "I'm serious. Dance with me, and I'll explain why I make you hang out with us. Those are my terms."

My eyes shot between the others looking for any kind of explanation, but they weren't any help. Tesla and Loki were both eyeing Magick, perplexed and irritated in turn, while Rasputin was staring off at nothing barely trying to hide his grin, and Caliban was watching me. I made a terrifying face at him, seriously intimidating, but he didn't even flinch. Magick waited with his signature patience, ignoring my attempts to fuck with Caliban.

"This isn't dancing music," I said, finally focusing back on him. It wasn't exactly true, there were a half dozen girls grinding and writhing to the Machine Gun Kelly song, but that would've been true regardless of what was playing. It just wasn't my thing.

"That's not a no." The corner of his mouth curled up. "I'll handle the music."

I shrugged. "You're super pretty, Magick, and your body is banging'. It wouldn't be a hardship to grind up on you for three and a half minutes."

"No grinding," Loki snarled, glaring at me now. "You're classier than that."

I checked behind me for who he was talking to, because that made no fucking sense. "Have you met me? I most certainly am not classier than that. I'd go so far as to say that grinding my ass against Magick's junk would be a step up for me as far as dancing with dignity goes. Remember passing around that video a few hours ago?"



“Dude, she’s not wrong.” Rasputin didn’t have to agree with that, so I glared at him.

“Out of context, it may have looked a bit insane, but I assure you that from Tesla’s perspective, it was fucking hypnotic.”

The man in question shook his head, face expressionless, but chose not to spout his lies and denial in public. Smart man.

“C’mon,” I growled at a still-smirking Magick, he wasn’t even trying to hide it, and he took my hand to pry me out of the chair and lead me towards the bar. I stood off to the side while he spoke to Dickface — a dude with an unfortunate facial tattoo — but couldn’t hear what he was saying. He stepped back when Dick nodded, then we moved together towards the open space where the girls often congregated to show off their sexy moves for the appreciative men.

The current song cut off and there was a few seconds of silence before the slow, rolling percussion, subtle bass, and twangy guitars of Lord Huron’s *When The Night Is Over* started to play. I looked up at Magick with the biggest fucking grin. “I love this song,” I breathed, and he murmured “me too.”

There were still a few feet between us. He stepped forward, just a couple inches, his eyes tracing over my body from my boots to my face, a smile curving up his lips. I tilted my chin up and eyed him back, liking what I saw.

He stepped closer, and I held my ground. His smile spread; he studied my face as I looked up at him. Again, closer. My eyes were locked with his. My hand was in his, but I don’t remember how.

We were so close that his breath stirred my hair.

He stepped into me, cradling my hand against his chest and wrapping his other arm around my back.

With a sigh, I gave into the perfection of the moment, gripping the back of his neck with the fingers of my free hand and laying my forehead against his shoulder, swaying along with the hypnotic beat. I tried my hardest not to read anything

into the lyrics I sang along with, and the answering vibration in his chest as he did the same.

His cheek found the top of my head, and he rested it there as we swayed in a circle, oblivious to the rest of the room. With his hand tracing abstract shapes on my bare back and his raspy voice singing that he hears the river say my name, in that moment I felt like I knew why he made me join them every night.

The song ended and Breaking Benjamin was up next. We broke apart, both of us glaring at a smirking Dickface. He saluted me with a bottle before taking a swig, and I decided right then that I would get him back.

I didn't know how, or when, but Dickface was now on my list.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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“ONE MORE SHOT,” Loki pointed at me, his finger wiggling. His face was all red, flushed by the liquor, and it made his eyes glow like molten amber. Like I could imagine a mosquito flying into his eye right now and getting caught in it and preserved there for a million years.

I batted at the air, not wanting Loki to get a mosquito in his eye, that would suck.

Could mosquitoes bite your eyes? I mean, not sure why they’d want to, it wasn’t an obvious source of blood, but what if they were trapped in a box against someone’s eye and that seemed like the only obvious way out? Would they drill in, trying to make an exit?

I bet a stirge would. You wouldn’t even have to ask twice.

Were stirges real? Or just in D&D? Were they in the depths of the rainforests in South America? Did native tribesman have legends about them? Could stirges be added to the ranks of known cryptids?

Loki pushed my hand away from his eyes but didn’t let it go once I wasn’t swiping at them, not right away.

After our weirdly wonderful, but confusing, dance, Magick and I returned to the cluster of couches and chairs where the others were waiting with a selection of liquor bottles, and I ended up on one end of the couch with Loki on the other and Tesla between us. Rasputin and Caliban were lounging in either corner of the other couch, and Magick was back in his armchair between Caliban and me. Bottles and shot glasses

were scattered across the surface of the low table in the center, all of them significantly less full than they were when we sat down.

I think I was drunk.

No, not— okay, yes.

“I’m drunk,” I said, carefully enunciating so as not to slur, and then I started giggling at the annoyed look on Tesla’s face. “I haven’t been drunk in y— okay, a long time. Tipsy, yes. Baked out of my mind, yes, but not drunk. I thought the loss of control would make me anxious but I can see the appeal to this. But I don’t think I should get more drunk because I’m not sure Tesla appreciates us thumb wrestling so close to his face.” I smiled at a grimacing Tesla, then scowled when Loki’s massive bear-paw digit crushed mine *again*. Thumb wrestling against giants was seriously overrated. “No more shots,” I declared, “only sober can I grind your bones to make my bread.”

“Another giant joke. Lovely.” Loki made a face I didn’t like, one that made him less pretty, and I realized those kinds of jokes bothered him. Now I had to come up with more of them, to desensitize him. He only had himself to blame. “One. More. Shot.” Loki growled the words like he was being all forceful and alpha, and it was fucking adorable. Sometimes I just wanted to cuddle the big guy, treat him like a stuffie. Like Princess Glitter-Moon Stardust—

*Nope.*

“Would you quit trying to crawl over me?” Tesla griped, pushing me away. Again. But at least it was a distraction from memories of— “That chair is unoccupied, right next to him, why don’t you move there? You can have open access to him, all you want.”

“Nope,” I shook my head at Tesla sadly. I felt a little bad for him since I’d accidentally clocked him in the face twice already, fucking around with Loki, but he was the one who sat between us. Okay, he was there first, but once I squeezed in between him and the arm of the couch, he moved over closer to Loki all on his own, and there was still that open chair. Or

the spot between Rasputin and Caliban, which was much bigger because they were on the much more spacious couch. Point was, he could move, and he had to know this would happen because Tesla always took the best spots where there was a wall behind us. He only had himself to blame.

Hmm.

I seem to blame people a lot for not agreeing with their personal likes and dislikes. They should really work on that. Do some self-reflection.

I released Loki from battle and patted Tesla's face. He glared at the ceiling like it had talked shit about his mother. I poked his cheek, wondering what it would take to get a little eye contact. He grabbed my finger and squeezed — not tight enough to hurt me, but enough for me to be very aware of his grip — and shook his head, but his eyes were still directed forward instead of at me. So I poked him in the tummy with my other hand.

Wow. It was like poking brick, really solid and— “Hey, that's not fair!” I spun my head to glare back at Magick, who had pulled my free arm away from feeling up Tesla's abs. That's when I noticed Loki had a hold of Tesla's other arm, which is how I had unlimited access to him to begin with, and I shot the big guy a quick smile before turning back to resume glaring.

All the head spinning and swaying was making me a little carsick. Couch sick? Nauseous.

No, nauseated.

Wait, which was the proper word?

“Maybe you should stop while you're ahead,” Magick advised, gesturing at Tesla, who I now noticed was turning a bit red and straining against Loki's hold. “Lok? Let the man go.”

Loki made a sound that, with anyone else, I would have classified as *petulant*, but that seemed unlikely from the club enforcer. My favorite man-stuffie, though? On brand.

Adorbs.

“He’s fine,” Loki growled, but let Tesla go. Magick pulled me back, as if giving Tesla space to move now that Loki was pouting on his end of the couch — his arms were even crossed — but Tesla stayed put. He was still holding on to my finger with his other hand too. I *knew* he liked it.

I grinned over my shoulder at Magick, triumphantly, capping the victory by sticking my tongue out at him. He rolled his eyes and sat back with a sigh, releasing me.

Yeah, that’s right, Tesla *liked* the attention!

I knew I’d break him eventually.

I’d gotten up on my knees with my body facing Tesla and Loki, but I still had my head turned towards Magick, and that wasn’t helping my couch sickness one bit. I got a little dizzy, but was able to keep myself upright by bracing on Tesla’s thigh.

Wow. He was really way more muscle-y than I realized.

I shook my head at him, my neck feeling amazingly rubbery and my head seemed to bob all over the place in the course of denying him. “Denied! D. Nied.”

His brow furrowed. I saw his brain tracing back through the inputs over the last few minutes, trying to figure out what I was responding to, and not finding an appropriate log entry. Then he realized I was fucking with him again, and he sucked in a harsh breath. I straightened my spine and puffed out my chest, smug-mugging, and whispered *Gotcha!*

He let out the breath in a defeated sigh.

“I think she definitely needs one more,” Rasputin suggested in the very smooth way he has, like he was just giving me permission to do what I already wanted, but that wasn’t true at all. I didn’t want to get drunk like this, not with the five of them just sitting around mostly sober — all except Loki — looking like they looked and being all— all *them*. Surrounded by all this beautiful manliness, one more shot and I’d start acting inappropriately.

“Nuh-uh,” I replied, sitting back on my heels and closing my eyes, now kinda enjoying how the room was moving

without any effort from me, doing all the work. Good room. Well done.

Something wet poked my shoulder, then my cheek, and not gonna lie, my first thought was “someone’s got their dick out, and not being at all subtle about it,” but when I cracked one eye — not the one above the dick cheek, the other — and peered at what was poking me, it was just Loki’s hand waving a shot glass full of liquid in my face. *Disappointed...*

“G’way,” I mumbled, cranky now because I wasn’t getting dick after all, yet also impressed by just how long that man’s arms were. He had to reach all the way past Tesla to poke me, and I was even sitting back now, and I shut my eye again.

“One. More. Shot.” Loki repeated, just as slow and demanding as before, but this time I giggled, opening both eyes to see him sitting back and legit glaring at me now for laughing at him.

I lunged forward across Tesla to rub my palms all over his cheeks and beard. “You - are - so - fucking - cute - when - you - order - me - around.” I giggled again, swaying a bit but using Tesla’s shoulder to brace myself. “You get all grumpy and growly, like— like a cute little Ewok! Or a Porg! Porgs are the new Ewoks,” I cooed, balancing against Tesla and petting Loki’s cheek again. “I used to follow a Porg on Instagram, you know?” I said to no one in particular. Those were good times.

Loki tried looking all pissy and mean-mugging at me, but I could tell it was all an act. I rolled my eyes at him and huffed out a breath, then focused on Tesla, who was trying so hard not to react.

“Thank you for not recoiling away from me in horror,” I muttered out of the side of my mouth at him. “You might want to burn this t-shirt, my cooties will have permeated the fabric by now.”

His brow furrowed and he stared at me — *finally* directly at me — tilting his head. I patted his arm, only squeezing his bicep a little, and slid my hand back up to his shoulder. Dang. He had some nice, firm biceps and shoulders.

It took a lot of concentration, but I didn't give in to the impulse to keep stroking him like a cat.

But his arm was *really* muscular, so I should be commended for self-control. I mean, next to Loki, he looks so much scrawnier but he's not. It's all lean muscle." I realized I was narrating my inner monologue and beamed up at Tesla.

"Did you just call me scrawny?"

I blinked at him. "No? I mean, next to Loki everyone looks scrawny, but you aren't. That's what I said, that you *aren't* scrawny. You should totally flex for me right now."

"I'm not flexing for you."

"Scrawny!" Loki bellowed with laughter, pointing at Tesla. "She said you're scrawny!"

"I did not!" I shouted at him, furious that he was making Tesla feel bad.

"I'll flex for you," Rasputin interjected, leaning across the table and tugging on my arm. "Hey, I'll flex for you—"

I batted at his hand, too angry at Loki to be distracted. I tilted forward again, bracing one hand on Tesla's thigh, and jabbed a finger in Loki's face. "Don't hurt his feelings, that's not right. You heard what I said, he's *not* scrawny. Like at all! I can barely squeeze this thigh, it's so firm and solid."

Loki, that cheater, grabbed my finger and tugged, overbalancing me so I fell towards him, almost landing across Tesla's lap. I managed to catch myself by falling sideways against Tesla's chest, rather than face-planting across the two of them and ending up eye-to-eye with Loki's crotch and the hammer of Thor he was packing in there.

Huh. This was really nice. Super comfortable, once he had his arm around me, holding me steady. I nuzzled into his neck and sighed contentedly. Just resting my eyes for a second.

Then I remembered him tackling me on his bed when I thought he was going to shoot me. I remembered Sienna and the bleach, and how filthy I felt—



“Hey,” Tesla shook me, squeezing a little, but not letting me move away like I was trying to. I tilted my head back and cracked one eye open. He was looking down at me, right in the eye, and wasn’t blinking or wavering one bit. “You think I don’t want you touching me?”

I clamped my eyes shut then opened them again, but he was still there, looking right at me, waiting for an answer. “Uhh... yeah?”

“Why do you think that?”

I stared at him, language deserting me. Images flashed through my mind of his face when I jumped on his bed, the way Sienna sneered at me, the disgusted look he gave me when he told her to use extra bleach. I felt all the feels all over again, my gut roiling and churning.

Tesla must’ve seen something there because he released me. I reared back, planning to sit back upright and then maybe escape to the bathroom, but he grabbed me by the hips before I could. He lifted me up and settled me down on his lap so I was straddling his thighs, face to face.

“There’s a really good chance I might be sick,” I warned him.

He shrugged. Without breaking eye contact. “I’ll take my chances. Explain.”

“Do you or don’t you hate being touched?” I narrowed my eyes at him, jutting out my chin.

“Depends,” he hedged, his eyes sweeping over my face before returning to lock with mine, which happened to be in the midst of rolling at his non-answer.

“Fine. Subjective. Did you not freak the fuck out when I jumped on your bed?”

“She jumped on his bed?” Rasputin asked the air, sounding shocked.

“I’m weird about my bed.” He blinked, rapidly, a sign he was agitated. Despite the dim lighting, being this close was like going from watching a movie on a tablet to seeing it in a

theater, on the big screen. Every nuance of expression was laid bare to me. And I guess to him, as well. “I might have overreacted.”

“*Overreacted?*” I scoffed, then when that wasn’t enough, I did it again but also dramatically tossing my head back while doing so. “You went looking for a gun.”

“No, I didn’t.” He looked genuinely offended. I glared at him while I reconsidered the course of events. Running, jumping, landing... rolling... him tackling me, reaching under his pillow—

“You were feeling around under your pillow for a weapon,” I accused, convinced I was right. I tried to jab my finger in his face since it was so effective at driving a point home, but apparently my hands were trapped in his, between us. Huh. Weird.

“Is that what you thought?” His eyes flicked towards Loki then back, his lips flattening, jaw incrementally tensing, in the way that signaled distress. It forced me to reevaluate.

Slowly, but getting there.

*C’mon, brain, you can do it!*

His tooth scraped along his lip and piercing, his brow furrowing. Visible signs of agitation increased the longer it took for me to respond, and my body released a shot of brain-adrenaline — or was that just adrenaline? — to ramp up my processing speed.

I didn’t like it when he was upset. No. Not true. Clarification: I didn’t like it when he was upset *with himself*, I kinda enjoyed when he was upset with me. Because then I had his attention.

*Wow. Stop with the truth grenades, brain! You’re overcompensating.*

Apparently there’d be one more mini-truth-explosion to throw my body on: I might’ve, *maybe*, been convinced at the time that he was going for a weapon, because nothing else made sense in the weird brain-space I was in way back then. It

was like a month ago! That was a long time, and I was doing so much better now. Usually.

Sometimes.

“Based on the confused and appalled expression on your face, I realize now that my perception of said events might’ve been — *maybe* — *possibly* — incorrect,” I conceded, with a magmanimous... manginamous... no, *fuck*, what’s that fucking word? “Benevolent. I can be generous. Sometimes. You’re welcome. ”

Ignoring the obvious boon I’d just granted him, like a sparkly silver fairy godmother, he scowled at me by pinching his lips almost imperceptibly, and narrowing his eyes microscopically. He was really mad now. “I was dragging the fitted sheet off the bed corners and pushing my pillows out of the way,” he monotonally — is that a word? It should be a word — growled, speaking very slowly, “while you were wiggling around like a manic puppy.”

Rude. But look at me, being magnanimous— oh! *Yes!* There it was, I knew I could say it. “Oh.”

“That all you got?”

No. Because that led to the real crux of the matter, the thing that hurt my feelings so much. “You told *Sienna*,” I accused, because yeah, *her*, “to use extra bleach on your bedding, like— like—” My voice broke a little as I choked on a chunk of shame.

“Like I’d just been on my bed with shoes on?” The slight furrow on his brow altered from irritation to confusion, his eyes darting back and forth between mine. “What did you think I meant?”

I shook my head, unwilling to say it out loud.

He glared at me; I knew it was a glare because his eyes narrowed a hairsbreadth. He tugged on his lip ring, then his eyes widened slightly to project pure horror. “Pinky...no,” he finally ground out, agonized, and my eyes flooded.

I tried to cover my face, ducking down to bury it in his neck, but he didn’t let me. He caught hold of my shoulders and

forced me to stay upright, facing him, even though I was done with this eye contact thing and ready to subscribe to the Tesla school of staring sideways at all times. He squeezed and released one shoulder then cupped my cheek, holding my face still as he studied me.

Like the coward I was, I tried lowering my head again, but his huge banana hand stopped me. He leaned in and touched my lips with his. Soft. Gentle. More than a peck, but less than I wanted. He sat back again, releasing my cheek, and waited with his hands resting on my thighs, gripping them possessively.

I blinked, trying to process what just happened. “You kissed me.”

“I did. And before you ask, it’s because I wanted to— *have* wanted to. Many times. Almost as many times as I’ve wanted to throttle you, and usually at the same time. You’re incredibly frustrating to me.”

“You’re no prize yourself,” I hissed at him.

“I’m a fucking catch,” he scoffed, hand skimming up my leg to grip my hip. “You’ve got me all kinds of fucked up, Mouse.”

“What do you mean?” I wrinkled my nose, not understanding. Next thing I knew, he’d booped it, but so fast that I hadn’t even seen it coming. The corner of his mouth twitched in an upwards trajectory as I mean-mugged him for that.

He got all serious again. “I’m ace, did you know that? Aromatic too. Ambivalent. Completely uninterested in sex or relationships for the most part, except the occasional stress relief. I get off, but it’s always transactional, therefore I don’t have to think or talk about it afterward. Or react.”

I blinked, completely confused. I glanced over at Loki hoping for some help, but he merely watched me with a careful expression that I couldn’t imagine interpreting in Tesla-mode, when everyone else’s expressions seemed exaggerated and unnecessarily dramatic. I gave up fighting to

see past all the noise and reverted to Mouse-mode, the greatest mode of all, and took another look at Loki.

The best I could tell was he was...solemn? But somehow, I don't know... hopeful?

Gawd. Mouse-mode might've been superior for ignoring all the extraneous stimulus, but it was terrible at identifying and interpreting micro expressions. Or maybe that was the alcohol. Regardless, I attempted something experimental and highly dangerous, something that had only been theorized about in a laboratory setting: I turned the dial halfway.

Half-Mouse, half-Tesla. All Brain.

My penetrating beam of pure, undiluted genius focused on Loki.

This was important to him, something serious, but he was optimistic—

Optimistic because it was happening at all. And that meant great things were possible. Things he'd barely allowed himself to dream about.

Loki desperately wanted this for his best friend. And Tesla too.

I giggle-snorted but inside, to myself. *Fuck*, I was one clever mofo.

"I can see you're unaware," Tesla continued, drawing my attention back to him. "And self-satisfied with whatever nonsense your inner monologue is— oh yes. It's as plain as day. What comedy gold. Audible sigh. I command you to focus on me now, Pinky, the game does not conclude until the woman with the eating disorder ululates. Yes, now I have your attention, you can't resist my hypnotic monotone. As I was saying, I can see that you're unaware of my orientation. Of course you are. Because that's not how I've been with you."

By this point, my brow was so furrowed that I could barely see as I tried to align what he was saying with the last few weeks. "No, I knew you're ace, but— is this not how you are normally? I mean, have you been acting differently? I just assumed... I assumed you've just been fucking with me, since

you're so open about your orientation. Acting possessive— or whatever— emoting the opposite to keep me off-kilter. Just like *emoting* in general is out of character, so I can't predict —” I trailed off, feeling distress.

If he wasn't just fucking with me, then his behavior, his *mood swings*... it was all so inconsistent and confused if it wasn't deliberate. It would've frustrated him to be so out of control.

*He's been struggling with it*, I realized.

“Like everything else, it's a spectrum,” he interrupted my train of thought before it could reach the station, the one called *It's All Your Fault He's Been Suffering*, I could merely see it off in the distance. And now we were holding hands with our fingers threaded together, resting on my thighs, and I wasn't even sure how that happened. “I've believed myself to be on one end of it for my whole life, but it turns out I was more towards the middle of that spectrum than I thought. Apparently all it took was a few weeks with you.” The corner of his mouth twitched, betraying a smirk, and he squeezed my fingers. “I gotta rethink my whole identity for you, Pinky, adopt a new label. Demisexual, I guess.”

I rotated my head just so I could give him side-eye, because that was what was needed. “Are you fucking with me?”

“Not yet,” Loki muttered at his hands, the ones busy peeling the label off his beer bottle.

“Ten bucks on tonight,” Rasputin drawled, and I whipped my head around to find him grinning at me, lazily, and biting his bottom lip.

“I'll take that action.” Caliban clinked his bottle against Rasputin's, and I realized they all had beers. Loki and I were the only ones doing shots, and he's like three of me. Sonuvabitch...es. Sonuvabitches. That didn't sound right.

Jerks.

I shook my head like a dog, trying to sober up, but apparently it didn't work like that. Tesla gripped my chin in

his long fingers — really my whole face because when my chin rested between his thumb and forefinger, his finger tips reached almost to my ears and *that* thought gave me shivers — and forced me to focus on him.

“Ignore them,” he advised, the one finger stroking my cheek. “Nothing is going to happen tonight, and not just so that Raz loses the bet.” His eyes flicked over my shoulder before coming back to mine. “That’s just a bonus. No, even if you weren’t drunk, this kinda thing takes time. It’s just a spark right now, and if we push things too fast, it’ll flare and burn out, and I don’t want that. I want something that lasts.”

“Like a methane fire at a landfill?” I suggested, being helpful, but expecting an eye roll or smirk, or something else to indicate how preposterous this whole conversation was.

Instead, I got back, “Like a coal mine fire in West Virginia.”

I’d heard about the fire he was referencing, read about it while researching the Sheepsquatch that was native to that region; it had been burning since the 1960s. That was... wow. “That’s a long time.”

“That’s what I want.”

Loki let out a gasp that would normally indicate pearls being clutched.

“And just how long have you been thinking about this?” I asked, still a bit suspicious.

Don’t get me wrong, I knew I was growing on Tesla. He was way past just tolerating me, I was certain of that at least, but this? It seemed farfetched to me, and I used to be a regular contributor to the Cryptipedia. Meaning I believed in a lot of things that others didn’t, those who lacked imagination or a healthy fear of the unknown. And the outdoors. And basements.

Basements sucked.

Not the one here, which I associated with sexing up Caliban so it was good, but regular ones.

“You seem skeptical.”

I studied his face as he continued to focus on my eyes. The eye contact alone should've been enough to convince me, and it might've if I was sober, but I wasn't. I'd have to review all of this later for anything I missed, because of course I'd remember all of it.

I better remember every second of this.

He looked the same as he always did. I couldn't believe I ever thought he was inscrutable, he was a snarled mass of micro expressions. He was telegraphing his emotions so freely that I was almost embarrassed for him, I'd never realized he could be so mushy. Or so raunchy.

The lower lid of his left eye tensed at the same time his breath hitched, and I blushed. Dirty fucker.

“You need to stop that, you're being nasty right now,” I whispered, making a face at him. “You're moving too fast, you've gone from barely tolerant to giving me sex eyes, and I can't keep up.”

He bit his lip ring, and I squirmed, feeling an uncomfortable wetness in my girlie region.

“How does this happen?” he asked, his voice a husky rumble that had me wanting to clench my thighs, “You read me like an open fucking book.”

“You aren't that mysterious,” I rasped out, my mouth dry, finding it hard to take deep breaths. He still had my hands clenched in his, but I realized I was rocking forward and back on his lap, seeking some kind of relief. All of it seemed like an excellent idea to me at that moment, as Drunk Mouse threw out every concern she'd ever had and focused solely on instant-gratification. Drunk Mouse didn't even care that they were bikers anymore, all of that just made them hotter.

Drunk Mouse was a horny idiot, but she was all I had right then, so I was going with it, and I reached for the fly of his jeans. His hand detached from my hip and landed on it, stopping me from lowering his zipper. “I'm not ready for that



yet.” He blinked, and I felt the sincerity of his apology, his frustration, and his regret.

Drunk Mouse might be down to fuck, but Tesla really did want to take things slow, and I respected that.

I respected him.

I leaned forward and kissed him delicately, a bare brush of my lips against his. “I like that *yet*,” I murmured, my mouth hovering close to his but not touching, his breath mingling with mine. “I can be patient too.”

“You don’t have to be,” he smiled, a real one. A happy one. He looked past me, eyes darting from man to man, then leaned a bit closer in a conspiratorial manner. “You can scratch that itch with one of them if you want.”

I thought about it. Well, I pretended to think about it but my head was still kind of spinny, so I gave it like two seconds of thought then just held still until things calmed down. “Nah, I’m good here,” I whispered, rolling my hips to drag against him. “If this is okay?”

He gave me a slow, slow blink. “A little faster than I intended, but I’m having a hard time coming up with any reason to say no.” Both hands were on my hips, gripping hard, probably leaving finger-sized bruises. I found myself really hoping that he did mark me like that, as he dragged my hips forward again, pressing down at the same time.

I rested both arms on his shoulders. I wanted to lean in and kiss him while dry-humping him until I came, but there was a size differential that couldn’t be ignored. In order to kiss him, I had to sit up far enough that I lost contact with the denim-clad ridge between his legs that felt so very, very good.

But I wasn’t the only one who wanted this to happen. I wasn’t pushing myself on a disinterested party who wasn’t going to make things easier on me, he *wanted* me. In his own way, he wanted me, and he was proving it.

Tesla slid down on the cushion and spread his knees out, forcing my own legs wider so I was losing height, but gaining surface area. He curled his upper half forward at the same time

he yanked me tighter against him, so my knees were touching the back of the couch, and he was eye-level with me.

I became aware, suddenly, that Portishead was playing in the background. *Glory Box*. Fucking *fantastic*.

I rolled my hips again, biting my bottom lip, keeping my mouth just out of range of his. He dragged at his lip ring, his eyes heavy.

My arms snaked up as I writhed against him in time to the slow beat, working my hips to grind down as his arms went limp and he groaned, his eyes fluttering. I arched back, closing my eyes as I ran my hands over my body and up to my face, his grip on my thighs tightening as soft, damp lips trailed over the exposed tops of my breasts. I rocked against him, getting the pressure I needed from him and the seam on my jeans, feeling the orgasm start to build.

*Give me a reason to love you...*

His hands were on my back, holding me up, keeping my upper half in place for his lips, his tongue, as I continued to grind down rhythmically.

I stared up at the beamed ceiling of the club room as Tesla mapped my skin with his mouth and hands, tasting me, and I got distracted looking for something. Something was missing, but my head was spinning, my body tensing, and I couldn't—I couldn't place what was off.

*This is the beginning of forever, and ever.*

The orgasm hit, sharp and sudden, sneaking up on me when I wasn't paying attention. I bucked against his hold, an almost agonized moan forcing itself out of my throat and through my lips, as my body shuddered and my empty pussy clutched at nothing, tremors reverberating through it. Tesla groaned into my neck, guttural and thick, as he buried his face between my shoulder and throat, and I felt his cock twitching as a wet patch formed on the front of his jeans.

My orgasm subsided into occasional tremors as the thought crossed my mind for a bare second that the vents were missing from the ceiling, before I heard, as clearly as if

someone had spoken in my ear, “*none of that now*” and the memory disappeared completely. It left me disoriented and wondering what just happened, what I’d been thinking about before my brain stepped in and made it go away.

*For I’ve been a temptress too long.*

“Fucking hell, Mouse,” Tesla growled into my neck, clutching me against him so tight that my still-tender ribs were beginning to ache, but I was too fucked up over what had just occurred, and how frustrated I felt over not being able to *remember* something that felt like it was on the tip of my tongue, that I didn’t protest. “I’ve never— ever...” he mumbled, breaking off, then tracking soft, wet kisses up my throat to my ear. He bit down on my earlobe, gently, then whispered, “I’ve never felt so *normal*,” as if...

As if before I got him off with a drunken lap dance in the club room, he hadn’t been.

I wrapped my arms around his head and shoulders, holding him against me, safely hidden by the veil of my hair. “That’s weird,” I whispered back, “because you *are* normal. A pain in the ass, sure, but still just a regular, *normal* megalomaniacal genius outlaw biker with a God complex. I mean, demisexual just means super high standards, right? Regardless, I’ve never thought of you in any other way, but I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. I did too.”

“I’m going to carry you upstairs now,” Tesla murmured, kissing a spot behind my ear that made me shiver, “but I need to leave you in your room while I go to mine. If you can stay there for a little while before returning—”

I cut him off with a less-gentle bite on his earlobe — managing to sneak the tip of my tongue into the gauge hole like I’d been wanting to since the first day — and cut him off. “I think I’m done for the night too. No need to explain, Pinky. I gotchu.”

He chuckled. “As you wish.”

He stood up without displacing me at all, a show of strength that thrilled my girlie bits. I wrapped my legs around

his waist and held on, continuing to love on his neck and ear as he carried me out of the room and up the stairs.



I WAS SITTING on the end of my bed, sipping water, when someone knocked on my door.

I'd been thinking, deep thoughts, as deep as one could get while still inebriated enough to have things go loopy when I looked to the side, so I wasn't making much progress trying to tease out what had happened in the club room.

I came on Tesla's lap, and my brain made me forget something that was upsetting, like there was someone else in my head alongside my normal Mouse-ness. Like both Pinky and The Brain were real and inside my head. Possibly triggered by orgasms. It was a disturbing thought.

The knock came again, soft but determined, and I shook off the confused feelings that were haunting me. I opened the door to find Loki, and backed up at his gesture to let him in.

He stood so close that the tips of his steel-toed boots were touching the riveted plates on mine, gazing down at me with a soft expression that I refused to analyze. "Tesla in his room?" he asked, and I nodded. "That bother you?"

I crinkled my brow and shook my head, wondering why it would.

"Shoulda known," he chuckled under his breath. "I told them it wouldn't, but Mags sent me up anyway to check on you, make sure you weren't causing a fuss—"

"First off," I interrupted, getting a little heated by all this absolute *bullshit*, "it's none of any of your business what goes on between Tesla and me. Just like it wasn't any of your business about what happened with Caliban. And that's a collective *your*, not just you. I realize all of you *made* it yours, but I'd hoped you all had learned your lesson. Apparently you had not. Again, collective *you*."

“Mouse—” He tried to interject but I was having none of it.

“No. Shut it. Second, thanks very fucking much for thinking so little of me that I would cause problems for him after we shared something so fucking incredible together. You all can fuck right off for that—”

“No, Mouse, really—”

I held up my hand, shaking my head, and he fell silent on his own. “And third, if it *had* been your business — which, let’s be very clear, it was *not* — then you would’ve been part of the conversation he and I had about what was going to happen tonight, and what wasn’t. And you could’ve saved yourself some gossip, you clucking hens, and saved yourself the effort of climbing the stairs.”

By that point, I was getting my rage on, and I was all ready to explode and go MOUSE SMASH! on Loki when he slapped a hand over my mouth. “Stop. Please. You’re right.”

I shrugged one shoulder and rolled my eyes, not bothering to attempt to move his hand.

“Okay,” he agreed, “and that’s valid for the rest of them, but give me some credit here too. I said that I told them it was fine, but I still agreed to come up here and check on you for a reason.”

I waited, my brows halfway to my hairline, as he studied me, even moving his hand away to see the whole thing. Eventually, he sighed. “I saw your face.”

“Huh?”

“When you came, babydoll. I saw your face. There was something wrong, but then the two of you were huddled up together, and I couldn’t tell if you were upset or whatever, so I wanted to come up and check on you. Okay? I know you, I know you wouldn’t fuck with Tesla after hearing everything he said to you about being ace, and that you wouldn’t try to pressure him for more. I agreed to come up here to check on you because I saw your face and something happened.”

“Oh.” I slumped in place, letting my head roll back. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Soooo...?” he trailed off, and when I didn’t answer right away, he traced a callused finger along my jaw. Like he couldn’t help it, he had to touch me, even though he was really waiting for me to explain. It was sweet, in a way that made my stomach drop but my brain twinge. Sweet, gentle, tender — these were all things that I couldn’t handle right then.

“Yeah,” I finally forced out, then moved away to sit back down on my bed, ignoring his disappointment. “Something happened but I don’t know what. I had a memory but it went away really quickly, before I could focus enough on it to identify it. I blame the alcohol, Mr. One More Shot,” I fake glared at him, trying to distract.

It didn’t work, not really. He examined me with a furrowed brow, ran a hand over his chin and stroked down his beard, then reluctantly nodded. “Yeah, okay. We’ll let it go this time.” I didn’t bother pretending that I didn’t know what he meant: he was letting me distract him. And in the spirit of being one of the best people I knew, he smirked at me. “So, have fun tonight? Seemed like you did.”

Motherfucker made me blush.

“Yes.” I stuck my tongue out at him and he laughed. “It was unexpected and awesome, and I’m going to torture that man with PDA from now on. Fucker opened the door, I’m barreling through.”

Loki chuckled again as he toed off his boots and settled on his knees in front of me, going for the laces on my ass-kickers. “He’ll pretend he hates it, but you and I both know that he’s going to secretly be thrilled by every terrible thing you do to him.”

“Oh, I’m aware.” I watched, bemused, as Loki removed my boots, giving each foot a gentle knead before setting them down flat on the ground, and then he had me by the hips, lifting me to standing while he remained kneeling.

“Go on, get ready for bed,” he gestured with his head at the bathroom behind him. I walked towards it in a weird daze, feeling off somehow. “And make sure to brush your teeth, boozy,” he called after me, softly, and the feeling of disorientation only increased.

I walked through my bedtime routine on auto-pilot, not even turning on the light. Feeling like it needed to be dark in the bathroom as I voided my bladder, washed my hands, and brushed my teeth. I cleaned the makeup off my face while thinking that I *should* floss but somehow couldn't. I looked around for pajamas before realizing that I didn't bring any in with me. And also, I don't wear pajamas.

I opened the door, and the sight that greeted me wasn't what I expected, but I don't know what I was thinking would be there.

The overhead light was off, but the bedside light was on, letting off a soft glow that seemed to make the red walls throb. The spread was pulled back, and Loki was under the covers, shirtless, rubbing his face until he looked up, brow furrowed, to find me still standing by the bathroom door.

“Nothing's going to happen,” he repeated, misunderstanding my hesitation. I didn't even understand it. “Our time is coming, babydoll, but you aren't ready yet. Tonight, I'm just tired, but I want to stay, so I'm going to pretend you're drunker than we both know you are. Obviously I need to be here to make sure you don't choke on your own vomit.”

I eyed him, waiting for the weird feelings to pass, and eventually they did. “Okay.”

I undressed with my back to him, removing my jeans and halter top but leaving on my panties. After I pulled a t-shirt on over my head, I picked up my clothes and folded them neatly, setting them on top of the low dresser, before turning to the bed. Loki was still sitting up, watching me, with a painful longing on his face that I could see clearly even in the dim light.

“Nothing is going to happen tonight,” he repeated, again, and I wasn’t sure who he was talking to.

I shrugged and made my way over, crawling into bed next to him, and tugging the covers up. “I know,” I replied, even though he wasn’t waiting for my answer, and turned on my side with my back to him, bunching up the pillow under my head. I shoved my ass back, forcibly burrowing my whole body into his thigh and side, and let out a deep sigh. “You can cuddle me now.”

Some part of me expected him to get up to piss, and then need to be reminded to wash his hands. I didn’t know why I was so sure that was coming that it felt odd and wrong when, instead, he scrunched down so his head was on the pillow, and curled up around me. He reached across my head to switch off the light, then settled down with a sigh that rivaled my own.

“Goodnight, Loki,” I murmured.

“Thank you for letting me stay,” he rumbled back, tucking his forehead against my shoulders, right in the middle, with one arm under the pillows and the wrist of the other resting on my hip. His fingertips curled down to touch my hipbone and stayed there. “Next time, I’m little spoon.”

My body went liquid, but my eyes stayed open, staring into the darkness at nothing, long after his breathing deepened and the occasional snore vibrated against my back.

Eventually I fell asleep, though I have no idea when, or why I dreamt of snow that night.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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I JERKED AWAKE, feeling like something was off. I knew I wasn't going to be alone in my bed, but I expected... *bulk*, for lack of a better word.

I expected a large mound of muscle and heat spooning me, possibly with a hand on my boob and some morning wood poking my ass. I expected to feel like I was inside a furnace, or being slowly absorbed by a giant, sentient teddy bear. Regardless, I would be burrito'd up and possibly on the edge of the bed as I'd tried to get clear of grabby-hands-Heat-Miser.

Instead, I woke up half-starfished, sprawled out on my stomach across the width of the bed, with one arm straight out to my side. The other arm was curled under my pillow, with my face buried so deep that I was kind of lightheaded from lack of oxygen. And someone was playing with my hair.

I lifted my head up with a gasp, appreciating that sweet sip of oxygen, and a fistful of hair was lifted off my back and yanked, gently but purposefully, before being allowed to spill out over my bare skin.

Pretty sure I had a t-shirt on when I went to sleep.

"Loki had an emergency early this morning," Rasputin's smooth voice crooned from behind me as fingertips and fingernails lightly abraded my back. "And I am neither confirming nor denying that I created said emergency to lure him out. No one can prove it."

I rotated my head to face him without moving any other part of my body, and found him lying on his side next to me,

his head propped up on one hand. His chest was bare, and the covers were pushed down to our hips.

“What?”

I wasn't a morning person, okay?

Rasputin chuckled, and scraped his nails up my back again, leaving a trail of shivery goosebumps behind. I moaned, closing my eyes, hoping he'd do it again.

He did, but only one nail, and not nearly as hard. Tease.

“I said I tricked Loki into leaving so that I could have you to myself,” Rasputin explained again as I blinked a few times before focusing on his smiling face, his eyes heavy-lidded. He licked his bottom lip, tucking it under his teeth.

“Did he remove my t-shirt or you?”

“Pretty sure that was you, angel.”

I grunted. That tracked. I did tend to remove clothes when I got too warm. I let my eyes fall shut again when another pass of nails down my spine gave me shivers. “Keep scratching and I'll let you see my boobs,” I offered.

I immediately got a series of harder scratches across my back, making me want to purr. Before I could turn over, the covers were displaced and he was straddling my upper thighs, both hands curled up and resting on my lower back. “I can do better than that,” he promised, “and you can decide what it's worth.”

Before I could even agree — but let's be real here, I was totally going to — he had brushed my hair to the side and was laying on top of me, running his tongue over my skin.

As he laved lines and circles, swirls of sensation that made my nipples ache to be touched and the floodwaters of my pussy rise, I eventually realized that he was licking the outline of my tattoo. Every part of it, working his way over my ink one color at a time, his own hair trailing over my skin like feathers of silk in the wake of his mouth. His beard and mustache, slightly coarser, gave me the scratchy sensation I needed. If all that wasn't enough to distract me, my brain had

short-circuited when he laid down on top of me and I felt his hard cock press in from the tops of my thighs well into my lower back.

Top of thighs. To lower back.

And I felt it all, every hot, hard inch of him, because I was naked below the waist too, and so was he. *That* was not something I did when I overheated, but I was having problems getting mad about it because I. Am. A. Size. Queen.

“Is that real?” I finally mumbled, forcing out coherent words in between the gasps and moans.

“Hmm?” The question vibrated against my skin, sending a shiver out from that point to make a beeline straight to my greedy pussy. My thighs clenched, another moan escaping.

I stammered out the question again — at least I think I did — then finally gave up trying to form a complete sentence and dragged my arm back to feel up his package, starting at the apex of my thighs where his balls were apparently nestled in tightly, and then along the shaft cradled between my ass cheeks, and up to the spongy mushroom-shaped head that was sitting pretty close to my she-wolf’s salivating mouth.

Same, girl.

“*Holy fuck,*” I breathed out, feeling over it again to make sure it was real. Rasputin groaned above me, and long fingers twined between mine, keeping me from continuing. “How— how big?”

“Fully erect?” he asked, and I glared at him out of one eye for asking the dumbest question I’d ever heard. He grinned at me, his face lighting up, and burrowed in to kiss me. After a good number of mind-blowing kisses involving his hand cupping my throat and arching me back to reach his mouth as he ground the shaft of his cock against my ass, I finally got an answer. “I’m not quite in the league of my namesake, but it’s about eleven to twelve inches. Give or take.”

I’m not sure what words came out of my mouth, but they got a deep chuckle out of Rasputin. “So, can I take that to mean you’re interested?”

“Uh huh,” I said weakly, trying to push myself up to flip over, but he stopped me.

“No, stay just how you are.”

I watched through one eye as he reached over to the nightstand behind where he'd been lying, and picked up a square of shiny gold foil. My eyes drifted shut as there was a ripping sound, and a rubbery-squishy sound as he forced the air out of the tip and rolled it on. He moved farther down my body then, running his hands up and down my back with a bit of force like the start of a massage, as he took position by my knees and clenched my ass cheeks in both hands, kneading them. Spreading them roughly, fingers dipping down to stroke me from clit to starfruit.

“You are soaking wet, woman,” he said admiringly, dipping his fingers into every crack and crevice as I squirmed and tried to open wider for him. Eventually, after torturing me for several long minutes, he rested his weight on one knee and helped me move one leg out from between his, guiding my knee up to be parallel with my hip. I felt cool air on the slick between my legs before his hand was back, two fingers ramming in, then three. The stretch and slight burn made me beg for more.

Four fingers pushed in, the tip of one pressing down on the front wall right where it needed to be, and I felt things begin to tighten in anticipation as an orgasm built. He dragged them out slowly before driving them in, fast and hard, repeating that motion until I was crying out, begging him not to stop, and he tucked one arm around my waist, dragging me into position up on one elbow, then guided my other arm beneath me.

“Rub your clit,” he commanded, and I was almost frantic, working it with two fingers as he pushed against my ass cheek, forcing me wider open, as almost his entire hand pressed into me. “Tell me you want me to fuck you,” he growled, pumping harder.

“Fuck me, *please*,” I whimpered, straining to rub my clit as fast as I could as the orgasm swelled inside me and erupted like a volcano of molten pleasure. On the crest of it, I could

hear myself begging for his cock, begging him to fuck me, and my body shook with aftershocks as he moved up to cover me. The head of his cock slid up into my cleft as he coated it in the wetness flooding from between my legs, then it was pushing against the entrance that his hand had barely stretched.

Four fingers weren't nearly enough to take him.

It would only work because size was one of my kinks; feeling like I was going to be split in two was my happy place, when the stretch was so tight that it burned like I was a virgin. As keen as I was on self-reflection, I refused to contemplate why that did something for me.

“Jesus, woman, you're still too fucking tight,” he groaned as he slid another inch inside me, then dipped out, and slid back in slightly farther. His hand circled around to reach my clit as I braced up on both arms, and he lifted me up with an arm around my waist until I could get my knees up underneath me. “I thought I could keep you flat on the bed, but I'm gonna need some traction here,” he growled, half amused and half apologetic, continuing to see-saw in and out as he tried to force himself farther in. He cursed, right before a stinging slap hit my ass and I jerked, realizing only then that I'd been clenching my muscles so tight that he was struggling to get inside me. The moment I relaxed, he slid six inches or so deeper, and I gasped and then released a guttural moan. “I don't think you'll be able to take me.”

I couldn't stand the thought of disappointing him, so I pushed back. *Hard*. “Oh, I'm going to take you,” I growled, as he slid deeper with a grunt. “Keep fucking trying, you slacker.”

He began to push in relentlessly, applying more pressure. His demands that I relax and let him in were punctuated by smacks to my ass cheeks when I tightened up again, unused to having something that could fill me so completely. When he finally, *finally* bottomed out, he stilled, holding me in place against his hard chest with his long, silky hair draping around us. “Now you can squeeze, angel,” he hummed against my cheek, kissing me lightly. “Clench on me like a fist.”

I did. My muscles clamped down so hard that he cried out, then began to ride me, barely thrusting, the pressure and friction driving us both to new heights, and I heard nonsense spilling from between my lips, an obscene glossolalia.

His fingers continued to play with my clit as he rocked against me, and the orgasm that was building felt like it was being constructed out of smaller orgasms, each one a bright, sharp burst of sensation before continuing to build onto the next one, getting more and more intense. I was whimpering, begging, clawing at the bed sheets as he worked me over, sweat slicking between us as he made his own noises — wordless growls and garbled speech that I was incapable of following — until everything went white as my body *detonated*, the orgasm so intense that I lost all connection to my limbs. I would've collapsed against the bed if he hadn't still been holding me around the waist.

Freed from the clench of my muscles, since every single one had turned to jelly, he began to piston into me, hard and fast, milking the spasms into a continuous, unending wave of pleasure, stroking it along with every slam into me. So deep.

So. Fucking. *Deep*.

I hung there, boneless in his arms, as he made the hardest thrust yet and cried out my name, then rocked again, shallow and slower, as he came deep inside me. We both crashed down onto the mattress with him on top and buried deep.

*So deep.*

One fuck and I was an addict.

Time passed as we laid there, tangled together, aftershocks delivering occasional spasms in my pussy that caused his slowly deflating cock to jerk and stiffen up before continuing to soften. Finally, he pulled completely out and cold air hit my sweat-dampened skin, giving me a chill. I had barely worked up the energy to reach for some kind of covering before he was back, sliding half underneath me and pulling the thick comforter over us.

I found myself draped over one side of him, my head resting on his chest, and he dragged my leg up over his until my knee was pushing up under his dick — damn impressive even when flaccid. I tried to adjust, in case he was oversensitized, and he stopped my movement by gripping my thigh and holding it in place where it pressed down on his balls and up on the shaft. “Leave it,” he grumbled, squeezing. “In case you didn’t notice, I like pressure on my junk, even when I’m soft.”

“Well that works out nicely,” I mumbled, relaxing against him.

“It really, really does, doesn’t it?” he said softly, in a tone that made me drag my head back to be able to peer up at his face.

He was smiling at me, in a way that made my stomach flutter and my brain panic; I called what I saw *affection* in my head, to head off the fight or flight response bearing down upon me. He was just appreciating the sex, maybe a bit more fond of me, and rocking a post-orgasm bliss.

Whatever face I was making caused him to chuckle and shake his head. “Okay, we’ll keep this low-key,” he said in a way that I was having trouble glossing over, but his long, strong arms locked me in place before I even started to struggle. “I’m sorry,” he chided, holding me against him, “I didn’t— it’s fine, Mouse. You’re fine. It was all meaningless, okay? Does that help?”

“Not when you say it like that,” I growled, and he laughed again, still pinning me against him.

“Fine. Just ignore me. I’m too fucking blissed out to be making any sense, alright?”

I relaxed again, glad I didn’t have to try to make my muscles work, and he began to pet me, smoothing over my arms and back with long, gentle strokes.

“You know my history, angel,” he finally said, just when I was on the cusp of wonderful unconsciousness, and I made an affirmative grunting sound against his chest. He had beautiful,

pale skin; he was hairless and smooth, with hard muscles so defined I could shove a finger in the creases between them. He continued talking, completely demolishing the mellow mood I'd been in with every word. "Then you know that I've been with a lot of people. A *lot*. And I can honestly say I've never had better than you, than what we just did. Game-changer, angel."

"Goddammit, just *shut up*," I hissed, giving him a hard pinch when he continued to lock me in place against him, and he gasped and jerked like I'd stabbed him, the fucking baby.

"No," he cried out, grabbing for my hands before I could pincer another fold of skin, and forced me onto my back while he covered over the top of me completely. He looked down into my eyes as I glared, furious, with that beautiful hair veiling us from the world. Making it feel like a moment out of time, set apart from reality. "No, I won't shut up," he said, voice soft and quiet and so filled with tenderness that I was having trouble catching my breath. "You'll deny it, and you'll fight it, just like with the others, but I'm not going to back down like they do. I'm not going to pretend not to feel shit because you can't accept it, I'm gonna desensitize you like you keep insisting you're doing to Tesla. This is happening, Mouse. I caught fucking feelings for you, and it's not about the incredible sex we just had. From the moment you came barreling into me with Adèle on your back, and tried to knock me onto my ass over the machete, I haven't seen anyone but you. You fucking fascinate me, you charm me, and you—you fucking *light up my goddamn world*, and I'm not going to pretend differently."

I opened my eyes that had drifted shut all on their own, and found him still there, still with that *look* on his beautiful face, the one that I kept seeing on Loki. The one that Caliban tries to hide from me, knowing it was too much. The look that I could read in a very specific wrinkle between Tesla's brows, and an increase in tension in his jaw.

"I'm not—" Ready. Capable.

*Worthy.*



“You are,” he said, and his mouth was on mine, making me forget there was ever a time when it wasn’t. Making me *feel*, when feeling was too hard to bear. He kissed me, held me, twisted everything into knots I wasn’t sure I could ever unravel, and then he got up and left. He walked out, bare-ass naked with his clothes in his hands, telling me to get some more sleep and he’d see me later.

Leaving before I had time to formulate any other protests.

I rolled to my side, burrowed under the blankets, and welcomed oblivion. I needed my brain to turn off because Rasputin had just fucked up all my carefully cultivated denial.

Asshole.



I MISSED BREAKFAST, which was typical when I had time off from Addie Duty, and I had the whole day to myself. If I wanted.

But since I loved that kid despite her being a bad seed, and legit enjoyed her company, I eventually found myself in her playroom fueling up with a trophy-sized cup of coffee and an egg sammich that I regretted taking the time to make.

The entire time I was in the kitchen, while the egg cooked and the bread toasted, Caliban stood near me with the biggest shit-eating grin on his face and kept asking if I’d seen Rasputin lately or if I knew where he was. I ignored him, which apparently made it even more hilarious every time he asked, until he was practically doubled over from laughing at me.

Once my egg, cheese, and spinach sammich was assembled and wrapped in paper to stay warm until I got it upstairs, I headed for the door giving him a gentle kick to the shin in passing, and he jumped back with a cry like I’d shivved him in the yard or something. The big baby.

I sat at Addie’s hobbit table to eat while she and Hazel assembled a puzzle on the other end. When I finished scarfing

down my breakfast, we all decided to go to the kennels for the morning, despite my suggestion that maybe the farm would be a nice change, or we could go exploring, but I got vetoed. But since I wasn't avoiding Rasputin or anything like that, it wouldn't be weird or awkward at all. Not even a little. Not even when we arrived and he was putting Stringer Belle, my favorite girl, through her paces on the agility course, her fawn-colored coat rippling over one hundred and twenty pounds of pure muscle. He stopped in the middle to come trotting over, giving Belle a chance to collapse onto the ground and pant.

If I hadn't been so blinded by the sight of him — all sweaty and breathing hard, jogging towards me in slow motion with the wind whipping through the hair that had fallen loose from his topknot — I might've been able to dodge him, but instead I ended up with his hands manhandling my hips to drag me against him, and his mouth on mine, pliant but demanding.

Okay, I didn't fight it that hard.

"Hey sweetheart," he finally greeted me, his forehead pressed against mine as I caught my breath and steadied my wobbly knees. "Nice— onesie? Are you a lamb?"

"Blue alpaca." I gave him a *duh* face because it was pretty obvious.

"Right, of course," he nodded, "I see that now." We drifted into silence but didn't move, still forehead to forehead. Eventually, he murmured, "Wasn't expecting to see you this morning."

In the background, Hazel was teaching Addie the *Sitting In a Tree* song as they both giggled, but I ignored them. "Dogs," I managed to get out, which seemed enough of an explanation to me.

"Dogs," he agreed, kissing me again, soft and sweet this time. "Have I mentioned how happy it makes me that you dig the puppies?"

I shrugged. It was a nice added bonus, but dogs would be important to me regardless of what anyone else thought about

them, because dogs were better than people. With only a few exceptions. A very few. Like a half dozen or so, including my present company. “Okay.”

He chuckled, leaning in to tug on the zipper of my onesie, and press his mouth right up against my ear so Hazel and Addie wouldn't be privy to his graphic description of how we'd be celebrating dogs later by engaging in some doggy style shenanigans. When he suggested inviting Caliban to join us, my face heated up as my thigh muscles clenched, and I ended up hanging onto him to stay upright. “Yeah? Does that sound like fun?” he murmured, his voice low and raspy, and I nodded. Because it did, it sounded amazing. And I was having a hard time thinking about why it might be a bad idea or any good reasons why I hadn't been banging Caliban with friends all along, once the seal was broken. “He'll be over the moon hearing you're cool with us sharing you, Cal loves to watch.”

“Wanting any of you has never been the issue,” I confessed, closing my eyes and burrowing my face in his neck, but feeling so fucking brave at that moment. “It's been so hard to fight it.”

His arms tightened around me as he sucked in a breath, stilling for a few moments as if waiting for me to take it all back or qualify it somehow. When I didn't, he was almost tentative. The cocky, confident man who'd just talked about double penetration with his BFF, was now hesitating. Finally, he blurted out, “And my past isn't an issue? My family?”

It took me a minute to realize he wasn't talking about his great-grandparents fleeing Tibet or his mom fleeing the Taliban, he meant his *current* family, and his history of being hung like the Mad Monk while living and working in a brothel. “Uh, no. I *wish* I had your family, mine is shit. Truly. I got in some trouble as a kid and they basically abandoned me, and the one time I've seen them since then... it wasn't good.”

*Wasn't good.* That was the very definition of an understatement.

He let it all out in a long, contented sigh. “Fuck. *Fuck.* You just... you make me so happy,” he finally said, his voice light

but full somehow, solid and determined. Confident, and excited. I fought back the anxiety it was causing me, focusing on being honest in that moment, no matter how much my brain wanted to retreat. What was the point anymore? Why was I resisting so hard against these feelings, when I knew they were fixing things inside me.?

I could feel things changing inside me.

The five of them had been gone for over two weeks, and that whole time I had spent questioning everything and doubting them and myself. Feeling like nothing had been real, and even if it had been, none of it mattered because I needed to leave. Leave this place, leave them. Give up whatever fantasy I'd been living in.

Then they came home, and all it took was seeing their faces again to know I'd been lying to myself.

It was easier to believe none of it was real, that the connection I had to each of them was all in my head. It wasn't. I couldn't say the words yet, not out loud, but I've never been a coward before when it came to self-reflection; I could admit to myself that I had feelings.

I loved them. All five of them. And I was pretty sure they all had feelings for me, even Magick, who I'd spent the least time with and was the hardest one to read. But they came as a package deal, I understood that now, and despite our lack of direct interaction, I'd learned a lot about the man that was worth loving.

I didn't know what any of it was going to mean for the future, because loving them and being loved didn't change our situation. It didn't make Azzie, and my responsibilities back in Salem, any less vital — far more important than my own needs — and it didn't change their responsibilities either. They were needed here. What they were doing, in their own way, was just as important.

Azzie and I were going to save people, we were going to give them a future, but that future wouldn't matter if the world was sunk into chaos and despair, if civilization deteriorated around us and left us in some kind of savage dystopia. Magick,

Rasputin, Caliban, Loki, and Tesla were creating a new world order out of the remains of the old, they were using their club and resources to build a social infrastructure that could survive the gradual decline of the civilization we had known. It might be harsh, sometimes brutal, but their vision was *sustainable*. I saw it in the way the compound operated, but I also saw it in the town of Kingston, and in The Ranch: their club was providing a foundation for a community, whether it was the field workers or the townies or the whores, and doing more than just helping people survive. They were giving people *options*.

Wars had been fought, movements had risen and fallen, all for the chance to choose, it's all any of us ever wanted: a life where our choices were our own, good or bad, and not taken by the whims of others. Not made *for* us because it suited someone else's philosophy or agenda.

What the powers-that-be were doing to Azzie was wrong. Without her knowledge and against her explicit wishes, they were slowly destroying her health by not controlling her disease with medication; they were putting her through constant blood draws, something that was hard on her body and wearing it out, in order to create a vaccine they weren't even distributing. And they were using it to control other people, to take away *their* options, and it was wrong. Fundamentally wrong.

She and I had a duty, we had a responsibility to take away the power they got by using her. We might only be able to inoculate a small number of people before she— *nope*.

*No.*

We were going to leave Salem and do whatever we could to fix things. The work we had to do was worth all of this struggle, all of the pain and the loss. It was worth everything. And maybe telling them the truth would make it easier.

I loved them, but I had to leave them here, to keep going. All of us needed to keep going.

“Hey, hey, what's going on?” Rasputin's squeezed tighter, rocking me side to side, his voice thick with concern. “You

were with me, then you were gone again, but not— I said you make me happy and you got sad, angel. Why are you sad?”

I curled against him, breathing him in. The mingled scents of clean sweat, musk, and dog intoxicated me, and I felt safe. I felt... wanted.

Cherished.

I hadn't felt like the center of someone's world since I was a kid, and this was even better because I trusted it. I trusted *him*. This feeling wouldn't be taken away for no reason, I wouldn't be left floundering and drowning in confusion and fear.

He wouldn't turn on me, I felt sure of that. Not even if I told him the truth. And that made everything different.

I pushed against him, gently, until he released me and let me take a half step back to look around. Hazel and Addie must've gone inside without me, leaving us alone with Stringer Belle, on her back and basking in the sun a few feet from us. We were alone, no one would hear me.

I took his hand and held on, gripping it with both of mine. He waited for me, holding on just as tight. Eventually, I calmed the chaos in my mind, and figured out a course through the maelstrom, one that seemed straightforward and secure despite the obstacles.

“I have feelings. I'm not going to deny that. But everyone has secrets, Rasputin,” I finally said, my voice cracking, “and mine are big. Maybe too big. But I think it's time you all knew some of them, before... before things get too— before we collide with an iceberg because there's no way to stop our trajectory or redirect, ya know?”

He narrowed his eyes at me with an amused little grimace. “Titanic references? Really? As love story analogies go, that's kinda dark.”

I mean-mugged him and kicked a rock at his foot in lieu of giving him the finger, since I wasn't letting go of his hand for anything. It was the tether keeping me secure, the stupid wooden door that we'd both fit on, and I'd make damn sure we

stayed afloat. “Yeah, a Titanic reference because when I had an impulse to deny, run, or deflect, I realized *that ship had sailed*. It’s too late to back out of this, so I just need to keep going and hope you... hope *all* of you can understand.”

“So tell me,” he shrugged, squeezed my hands, and smiled at me with the most tender expression. That same fucking *look* that scares the bejeezus out of me but I couldn’t get enough of it.

“All of you,” I finally answered, once my chest stopped aching so much and I could talk without my voice breaking. “You need to all hear it at the same time, because I can only—some of it, I can only say once. And even that is going to feel impossible.”

He nodded, and reached into his pocket, pulling out his phone. One handed, he unlocked it, went into a group chat that I saw my name in just briefly before he tilted the screen away from me, and painstakingly typed something with his thumb. Something he could only do because he had big man-hands and long fingers, it would’ve been a nightmare of typos and autocorrect if I’d attempted it. After a minute and a few more messages, he put his phone away.

“The only time we’re all free at the same time is tonight after nine,” he said, making a face at me. “Dinner was a possibility but Tesla has a conference call at seven, and Cal never knows when he’ll be able to take a break to eat. So we’re going to meet in the club room, and T is going to get there as soon as he can, then we’ll go to Mags’s office or something. Will that work?”

I nodded, already starting to feel a little sick in anticipation. By nine, my stomach would be a twisted up, churning ball of acid, but I needed to do this. I needed to tell them.

I stepped into him and rested my forehead against his chest. “I’m terrified right now. And I’m already trying to figure out how to get out of doing this, so I’m gonna need you not to let me, okay?”

His lips touched the crown of my head, then his cheek rested on it as his free arm circled me and held on. “Like you said, Mouse, everyone has secrets. Whatever it is that scares you this much, we’ll deal with it. *I’ll* deal with it, no matter what. Even if some of them can’t, I promise you that I am here to stay.”

*But I’m not.*

“Yeah, okay,” I snuffled into him again, breathing in some security.

I wasn’t sure how I was going to make it through the rest of the day with this hanging over me. I would probably end up hiding under the covers, sick with dread. But the second that I admitted my feelings, I knew this had to happen. I couldn’t put it off no matter how hard it was going to be.

The rest of the day was going to suck.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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I WAS QUIET AFTER THAT, so quiet that Addie said I was making the dogs sad and then I made her lunch cry, but really she was just dripping water on her carrot sticks because she hated carrots. She didn't like them any better when they were wet.

I couldn't get out of my head, so when Hazel took the booger up for her "nap," I decided to go down to the river to sit. Flowing water always calmed me. I didn't even know why, but it was really comforting and... hopeful. It always made me feel hopeful. In the bunker, I used to sit in the aquaculture room whenever I felt particularly bad about life, near the tanks with the strongest current. I had a whole lounge area set up, a very tasteful one, of course.

When I got to the riverbank, to the wooden bench I'd found tucked away by a chestnut tree, Magick was already sitting there. The branches hung low, obscuring him from sight of the sentries on duty but also from my approach, until it was too late for me to strategically retreat. He stared down at the water with an aura of melancholy surrounding him, and I felt bad for disturbing him.

He craned his neck, turning slightly towards me, and once again, I was struck dumb by the sheer beauty of the man. That black hair and those electric blue eyes were my downfall. Beyond the physical, though, he had a powerful magnetism that drew me closer; an eighteen charisma, for sure. Possibly even a twenty.

He saw it was me and turned back around, patting the bench next to him. I pretended that the invite was just to sit and not anywhere in particular, so I moved to the end of the bench and sat hugging one knee, letting the other foot dangle down.

He made a face at me, but since I wasn't looking at him directly, I chose to ignore it. It wasn't as easy to ignore him repositioning closer to me, but I did my best. We both knew he made his point.

It was nice, the silence. Nothing but the sound of the water flowing by, the wind through the trees, and all that other Nature stuff. Not silent at all, really — we might not have been talking, but the longer I sat there, the more aware I became that the outdoors was noisy as hell, a cacophony of birds, insects, the water, the trees... seriously, take it down a notch! I was trying to think!

I almost forgot he was there, so wrapped up in my surroundings, but then he let out a deep, vocal sigh. Clearly the man wanted some attention, but since I was an asshole, I was going to make him work for it.

“Hey, I’m sorry for disturbing you,” I said, getting to my feet, “you obviously want to be alone. I’m gonna—”

“Stay.” The melancholy was now tinged with irritation, and with underlying amusement. We both knew damn well what was going on, and he took advantage of me standing up to reach over with his long arm — they’re all so fuckin’ *tall* — and snag the pocket of my jeans, dragging me closer. I barely even fought against it, finally plopping down within a foot of him with an annoyed grumble. Totally for show, it was a legit butterflies moment.

“Guess I’m staying.”

“Yup.” He grinned in the direction of the river, with a palpable air of self-satisfaction.

*Oh no! Please don't force me to sit closer, Mr. Gorgeous Motorcycle Club President!, this is the worst!*

“What was that?” he asked, and I realized I’d mumbled at least some of that out loud, so I began to cough and pound my chest, but then I accidentally inhaled spit and really did start choking in a super sexy way.

After a minute of hacking up parts of my respiratory system, and a few slaps to my back that were completely ineffectual and kinda hurt, I finally managed to rasp out, “Bug flew in my mouth. Big one. Huge.”

“Didja swallow?”

“Subtle,” I smirked, kind of enjoying how my husky coughing voice was making his pupils dilate and his nostrils flare. Like a red flag with a bull. Noted. “But no, I spit this time.”

“Mmhmm. Okay.” He nodded, eyes heavy. “Go on. I’m listening.”

I let that go, taking a breather to let things settle, and getting all my coughs out. Once I thought I was reasonably safe from another coughing fit, I posed a very important question.

“You know how the eagle is the symbol for freedom or sometimes victory, and the dove is the symbol for peace?” I asked casually, and he nodded. “Do you know what the symbol for true love is?”

I could tell by how long it took him to answer, and how much effort he was putting into it, that he thought it was a legit question.

“Not sure. I’d guess maybe the swan, given how they’re used with weddings sometimes. We can look it up later though —”

“No need,” I interrupted, “it’s the swallow.”

I sat back and enjoyed the view, smacking him on the back a few times when he didn’t seem to be breathing.



EVENTUALLY, once he got himself back under control, he was eyeing me a little too closely, with a little too much affection in that gaze for my comfort, with what I had to tell them hanging over my head. Apparently telling him a mildly dirty joke tipped the scales in my favor or something, and I was annoyed with myself for crossing that line. I reached over and pushed his face to look back towards the river.

It was a bold move. Unlike Loki, I'd never really initiated contact with Magick, and I was curious how he'd take a show of dominance.

He stayed facing the water, but gave me some strong side-eye with a rueful grin.

We lapsed back into silence, but eventually I got another dramatic sigh.

I rolled my eyes and made a show of turning towards him. "Seems like you've got some heavy thoughts weighing you down there, chief. Want to talk about it?"

He shook his head. "Nothing worth talking about."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and squeezed my eyes shut in a classic "Lord, give me strength!" gesture before shrugging. "Okay. Cool. I was enjoying the quiet anyw—"

"Just thinking about my dad," he interrupted, with another sigh but this one felt genuine. For all our fuckery, that feeling of melancholy when I first arrived wasn't my imagination, and now shit was getting real. "Heavy is the crown and all that," he finally finished, trailing off with a shrug.

"He was Prez before you?" I prompted, knowing some of the story but letting him tell it.

He shook his head, gaze on the water, so I focused on the river too; sometimes it's easier to talk without eye contact. "Not a direct line of succession. He died in January of 2020. His VP took over and would've stayed in charge, but the dumbass and most of the old timers insisted on going to Sturgis that August, during the height of the COVID outbreak, and didn't mask. They'd been to Daytona Bike Week in March and nothing had happened, so I guess they felt invincible or

something. After he got sick and passed, there was talk of the mother chapter moving to a different location, but there weren't a ton of the old timers or originals left anywhere, not after that."

That was all new information to me, and I almost felt like offering him some shortbread to go with the tea he was spilling, but I didn't want to risk him clamming up. Instead, I made a generic noise of agreement and let him talk without interruption.

"The younger generations knew me, knew Tesla. A lot of them were struggling to keep their clubs together and lead them when they'd just been officers or regular members before, and they depended on us for help. And a lot of them knew we were the ones who had started *diversifying*, as T calls it. They voted to keep it here."

"That's crazy," I huffed out a breath and shook my head. "You're so young to be prez of the whole thing, especially back then."

"I was raised to be though," he shrugged again. "At least this chapter, if not the whole club. I also had Tesla and Loki backing me, and they'd been preparing for it just as long as me. We'd always known the three of us would rise up together, whether here or somewhere else—" *Wait, what?* They would've gone to a different club? "—and then Rasputin and Caliban prospected and patched-in a year or two later, and everything just came together after that. It was kismet, the way it all worked out. We weren't doing shit by the seat of our pants despite calling it that, we'd had concrete goals and a vision of the future we saw for the club since the three of us were kids, it all just became a lot easier with Cal and Raz on board. They were down with the plan, so we were all working towards the same goals. Men I could trust implicitly at my back. Anyway, we'd gotten everything back on track after all the COVID shut downs and the various crises, everyone was settled into that *new normal* that followed, and then fucking *Janus* hit. Like a freight train, you know?"

Oh, I knew.

I almost said something right then, almost told him about living at ground zero of a potential extinction event, and about me and Aesli in the hospital in Salem, holed up in a single room in the ICU as the town died around us. I almost told him about her disease, and the vaccine, and what happened after. But I didn't, because I wanted to wait until I could tell all of them, and I didn't want to derail the conversation. I wanted to hear his story.

It wouldn't have changed anything anyway.

"I don't know what it was like in New Mexico—" New Mexico? ...for a second there, I'd forgotten my own cover story. How embarrassing. "—but we immediately took control of the town because of The Ranch, to protect Raz's family and the club's interests. That ended up creating a security net around the area. Between Doc and Silas, we were able to keep almost everyone and *everything* alive, so we didn't have contaminated water or all the secondary diseases and outbreaks from dead bodies or animal carcasses piling up. The few we lost..."

He trailed off, shaking his head, and I realized immediately that he was talking about Caliban's wife and unborn child. If the whole area had been battened down like Magick described, with so few deaths, then any losses would've been magnified. It wasn't like other places, where so many died that there wasn't anyone left to mourn, or those left behind were wrung dry by shock and grief, numb to the loss. Somehow, that made her death worse.

I realized then... I had it easy. I've never let myself get close to very many people, so I lost co-workers, fuck buddies, and some casual friends, but I didn't lose Aesli. That little girl was the one person I truly cared for back then.

Not then, and not even later, did I think about anyone back in Illinois or wonder about them. Aesli — *Azzie* after that point — lost everyone, but I still had her, and that was all that mattered to me.

Maybe my parents did me a favor when I was a kid, teaching me not to get attached to anyone. If I had, I might not

have even had that job or met her, or been at the hospital by her side when all hell broke loose. There might not even be a vaccine, at least not one as effective.

Maybe all of that, everything I went through, had a purpose. *Everything*.

And maybe it was okay, then, not to feel bad anymore like I'd brought it all on myself, or it happened because I was the problem. Maybe... maybe all of it made me into the person I needed to be.

It didn't excuse either of them, they were still fucking assholes — shit parents and shit human beings — but maybe I was okay. I had bad stuff happen, but *I* wasn't bad. And I survived it all. Now here I was, sitting next to a river with a man who could be someone to me, and I could be someone to him, and everything I'd done leading up to this was... well, it was pretty fucking *epic*.

I was going to tell them everything, and I truly believed they would be the ones to finally see *me*. Not a fantasy or a projection, a puppet they could control, or the smoke and mirrors I hid behind. Me.

And maybe I'd be enough. Enough, and not too much.

We'd both lapsed into silence, but Magick picked back up with his story like I hadn't been shaken to my very core, had all the puzzle pieces realign to form a very different picture than what I thought I'd been working with.

“Tesla was always the tech side, that's been his passion since we were little kids, taking shit apart and putting it back together. He didn't do well in school, so it's all self-taught through research and experimentation, but he's fucking *good* at it. Loki was always good at school and he liked it, so he did some college before COVID made things too difficult. He'd been working on construction sites before he was even legally allowed to have a job, and luckily for us, he jumped right into his civil engineering classes without doing the general requirements. Even without finishing, he learned a lot of useful shit. Between the two of them, we had infrastructure

covered. Like I said, shit just worked out sometimes like fucking magic.”

Imagining them almost ten years younger, driven but struggling to make their mark, was a welcome distraction from my dark thoughts. Neither of us acknowledged the heavy weight that had settled down around us, thinking about those first months as Janus spread unchecked. It was helping to look back farther—for him, at least. And I was frighteningly curious, myself; it was like that scene in a book when the love interest meets the parents and baby pictures start appearing out of nowhere. Magick reminiscing was the equivalent of naked babies on fake fur rugs and first birthday cake explosions.

“Caliban came to us with his military background and a culinary school degree in sustainable food systems, and he’d been working with Silas and a few others to get the farm up and running during the COVID shortages. Between the crops and animals there, all the farms and ranches in the area, and hunting and fishing, no one starved those first couple years. It got tight at times, sure, but we had enough for everyone. We set a policy of mutual support between all the chapters, including their communities in the plan, and we held strong.”

His pride was palpable, but it was also *justified*. Motorcycle clubs like the Apocalypse Riders had filled the vacuum left by the collapsing infrastructure and decimation of law enforcement. Those that stepped up had created territories that weren’t just about supply lines or illegal trade — be it drugs, or weapons, or flesh — they were more like the city-states of old. The spread of the Roman Empire suddenly came to mind, if the conquering armies were a virus.

“We protected our territories, and it brought the smaller clubs to us, the independents and support clubs, and almost all of them patched over. Our territory expanded exponentially, we were *welcomed* by some of the towns, treated like kings. It was half planning and half dumb luck, but sustaining it, let alone building on it, required meticulous organization and...” his voice trailed off. When he spoke again, he was quieter, but unwavering. There wasn’t any apology, let alone remorse, and certainly not *shame*... but I’m not sure he wanted to tell me



these things. “It required ruthlessness. No mercy. Brutality at times. We were never kings, we were warlords, but it was about survival of the whole, never an individual.”

It was like he was compelled to confess something and couldn't lie, even by omission. Like he had to explain their actions even though I might think less of them.

It was cute that he still thought I was a good person. A moral person. I kinda liked it, so I cut him a break.

“Sounds like you think I'm gonna judge you, Magick. You have no idea what I've had to do to survive...” I trailed off myself, unable to say the words. Hoping I'd be able to say them later. I needed to change the subject. I needed him to stop looking at me like he understood, like he— like he *admired* me. “Not just to survive either,” I finally admitted.

“Like what?”

If he'd been patronizing about it, if he'd given any indication of humoring me, I wouldn't have said a word. But it was just curiosity in his voice, and I wanted someone to know. I wanted *him* to know me.

“When I was eighteen, I had everything planned out, knew exactly what I was going to do to become a paramedic. There was a school that had a great program, with a lot of practical, hands-on learning, and I could actually afford it. I had some money but not a huge amount, just a few grand to cover my first semester while I got settled and found work. And the money represented—” Almost five years of my life, my teenage years. Physical assault. Sexual assault. Abandonment and neglect. *Betrayal*. “Let's just say that sacrifices had been made for that money. I'd *earned* it, and it was my future. But when I first arrived, I didn't have a place to stay and shit was expensive. I didn't want to burn through all my money while looking for a room or cheap apartment, so I was crashing at this really shitty motel that did weekly rates, not realizing they also did hourly rates, if you know what I mean.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah, it was pretty bad, but it wasn’t going to be for long, and I was fresh from— a bad situation. I could take care of myself. The room next to mine had this couple in it with a kid, a little girl. No idea how old she was, but she wasn’t a baby. Young toddler, maybe, but could’ve been older. I think she was developmentally disabled or something. Neglected, definitely. She cried continually, probably because the couple were addicts and forgot to feed her and change her diaper. They were on meth, pills, whatever they could get — I could hear them through the wall arguing all the time. Anyway, they apparently thought I was weak or something, because I came back one night and found my room trashed, my shit was everywhere, and some of the money I’d hidden in the room was gone. And the couple next door was celebrating, flush with cash and living their best lives. I was so angry, Magick. And I was so tired of being fucked with. I went after them. They never considered me a threat, and I didn’t hesitate. I saw my room tossed and my money gone and didn’t hesitate. They were fucked up, the kid was screaming, the TV was blaring, and I... I *didn’t hesitate*. They didn’t expect that. I fucked them up bad, both of them. They were still breathing when I left but I can’t guarantee after that.”

“Did you get your money?” He eyed me with an expression I couldn’t place.

I shrugged, chuckling humorlessly. “Hah! No. It was gone. Knew that before I went over there. I just wanted revenge. I fucked them up, trashed their place, and flushed most of their drugs, but left enough to make it look like they got jumped for their supply. Left their gun lying out too. Then I packed up every single thing in that room related to the kid, even pulling diapers out of the garbage, left no trace of that kid anywhere. I took everything to my room, got her cleaned up and some food in her. While she slept, I got myself cleaned up, bagged up all the trash, the clothes I’d been wearing, and anything left in my room that I couldn’t salvage. Made the room look like no one had been staying there before loading the kid and everything else into my car. Drove a couple hours to a bigger city, and dropped her and all her stuff off at a safe-surrender location. Tossed the garbage bags in dumpsters along the way, then

drove back and parked in a place nearby. I called the cops and reported hearing gunshots and screaming from their room, it took the cops over an hour to respond, and I left as soon as they showed up. I'd decided that I didn't want to see if they called an ambulance or the morgue. Slept in my car after that, until I could move into the place I found." I stared out at the river, thinking about that little girl, wondering if she made it. She'd be about twelve now, if she'd survived her childhood and the twin pandemics. "Moral of the story is that a couple addicts stole my shit, so I beat them — possibly to death — and disappeared their kid. I took their fucking kid. And that's not even the worst thing I've ever done. I'm not gonna judge any of you. Any moral ground I've ever had was in a flood plain, and it sunk below the waters a long time ago."

"What I just heard was you saved a little girl's life when you were eighteen."

I mean, that was how I always saw it, but I'd never thought anyone else would see it my way. It made me smile. Looking out over that river, watching the water flow by, I felt accepted. Peaceful.

It was nice. More than nice.



"HOW'D YOUR DAD DIE?"

We'd been sitting in silence for a long time after I told my story about the first little girl I'd saved—

Second, I guess. I'd saved myself first.

The question might've been abrupt and perhaps a little... personal, but we were alone, and he was in the mood to talk. I wasn't going to waste this opportunity by asking about his favorite snack foods or movies. The river flowed endlessly by, the branches of the chestnut tree dipped low around us, frosted in the pale green of early spring buds, and we were in a cocoon out of time and place. This was a chance to ask questions and get real answers, and I was taking it.

I'd hated Cain, for so many years. He gave the orders. After I got out and got away, I lost track of any goings on. When Loki told me it was the mother chapter, I was sure I'd have to face him, and I still don't know what I would've done. Instead, he'd been dead for a long time, and despite Magick's obvious pain, I couldn't be sad.

Magick stared out at the water for a long time, so long that I wasn't sure he was going to answer me. I *almost* changed the subject again, but something told me to just be patient, like he needed to talk about it. Or I needed to hear it.

I saw the mask slip into place, the one Magick wore to keep his emotions out of the equation, but it wasn't solid enough. Or maybe I was immune, because I could feel the anger pouring off of him, no matter how cold and distant he sounded.

“One of our guys was double-dealing. Got involved with a cartel and trafficking, which is not something the club has ever sanctioned. It's like the one line we won't cross but there's a lot of money to be made, and this guy was a greedy fuck. We ended up in a war that lasted years because of him. Lost a lot of good people. One day, my dad was in town, talking to some civilians on the street, and a car approached. They opened fire, shot him and hit four other people, just regular people walking down the street in the middle of the day.”

I felt a cold weight in my belly, a weight I'd been carrying for so many years I no longer noticed it.

And then the mask broke completely, and the weight became burning hot, acidic, as he struggled to get the words out. His voice changed, the anger and bitterness straining his already fucked up vocal cords, his painful swallows making the scar on his neck even more prominent. When he finally found his words, he sounded younger, like a teen newly cursed by the Fates and puberty, his voice cracking. “That fucker betrayed the club. He was selling women and kids, and the club stopped him. Permanently. My dad was trying to fix the shit he got us tangled up in, and he got shot in a drive-by.”

I didn't know what to say, how to respond to that. Magick was hurting, and I hated that, but any gesture I made would be empty.

He shook it off on his own, even stood up and paced a bit, circling around and swinging his arms. I watched, and I wasn't going to lie, I admired. Magick was a damn fine looking man. Another time, another place, he could've been a model. Maybe even a movie star, with that pale skin and those ridiculous cheekbones under electric blue eyes, all of it framed by coal black hair. He had a face made for posters and marquees, one to be projected onto screens ten stories high. Unearthly, up close.

Goddamn intimidating. Or he would've been, if I hadn't grown up with Beast.

I might've been fucked up in any number of ways because of Beast, but there were a few benefits. I'd been an after-thought before him, a nuisance, and that could've made me awkward. After a few years with him, it felt perfectly normal to be the center of the universe for a man that commanded attention everywhere he went. *Everyone* wanted him, but he only wanted me, and that gave me confidence. His attention meant that I could ignore everything else.

Magick didn't intimidate me, he didn't make me nervous or self-conscious despite being so far out of my league. It didn't even surprise me that he was attracted to me, I was a fucking *snack*. If a man like Beast couldn't look away, then I was worth seeing.

Even after Beast betrayed me, even after he threw me away and treated me like I was nothing to him, he couldn't erase those years when I'd been his whole world, not completely. It made me question and doubt, but some things had already become so ingrained that him suddenly being an asshole didn't cancel them out. I don't know what it was inside me that made the difference. I sometimes look back and think of all the ways I could've given in, all the times that I chose myself when it would've been so much easier to fold, to change to please others. It was stubbornness, maybe. Or pride.

I once mattered to someone else, and then I mattered to me. No one else's opinion could change that.

Magick sat down on the bench, right next to me, like he was determined to ignore the pain of talking about his dad and everything that had gone down. Like he could be an impenetrable fortress against it, and I would just respect those armaments, and not try to bring them down.

It was like he didn't know me at all.

Before he could continue, I leaned towards him and flung my leg over, positioning myself on his lap, straddling his thighs like I'd done with Tesla the night before. I ignored his tentative grip on my waist, the way he hesitated like his arms didn't know what to do, and rested my forearms on his shoulders, my fingers sifting through his hair.

When I saw the cracks begin to form, I pulled his head down to rest against my shoulder, my arms wrapping him up like the tentacles of a kraken. There was no escape.

A man like Magick thought he needed to be Atlas all the time, with the world balanced on his back. He had no natural resistances against someone like me, who wouldn't care if the world came crashing down; I'd probably give it a kick when it landed, just to watch it bounce. A man like Magick didn't know what to do when his impenetrable fortress was breached, when someone else took control of his fortifications, turned his weapons against him.

A man like Magick didn't expect to be hugged.

I felt damp, warm breath on my neck, and held him tighter. "Tell me," I murmured. "I've got you."

"While my dad was still in the hospital with a bullet in his back, we took out a contract. The club didn't know, they thought the cartel backed off after my dad was shot but lived. That wasn't what happened. Tesla had contacts, found out who ordered the hit. All those years, all those deaths on both sides, and it was one fairly low-level dude who felt wronged by one greedy fuck in our club that had stolen from him. We paid a fuck-ton of money, had his whole family taken out. Every

member, and all his soldiers. Even the kids, so they wouldn't become future enemies. After that, the war ended. The rest of the cartel was done with us, none of them cared to keep the vendetta going. As far as the leaders were concerned, we'd taken care of a problem for them. It didn't save my dad though, he went into a depression. I didn't see it, I was too busy getting revenge, tearing apart the club my dad had spent twenty-five years building. Every decision his VP made, I ignored or fought, not caring what it was doing to my dad, how fucking helpless it made him feel. How *useless*. He killed himself because of it all."

I had him. For what it was worth, I had him. He could set the world down, or let me carry it. It would still be there when he was ready.

After a time, he took in a deep, hitching breath, and I held on even when I felt a trickle of dampness on my skin. I gave him a safe place to get it out, letting him grieve. Being his armor against the world.

In a matter of hours, he'd learn my secrets. He could cast me out for them. He could send me to a shallow grave in the woods. He could turn his back on me, refuse to look at me, and walk out the door, and I still wouldn't regret this.

Even a man like Magick needed to be hugged sometimes, given comfort. Have his burden lifted if only for a time.

"Your mom?" I eventually asked, my voice strained.

"She died when I was a teenager." Nothing changed in his voice, but the very air seemed to feel heavier. Sadder.

"Both my parents are dead too," I confessed, choking on the thing in my gut that was trying to worm its way up, seal my throat. Keep me silent.

"Janus?"

I shook my head. "They were murdered when I was barely a teen. Shot. I was asleep down the hall."

He jerked like he'd been struck, his whole body reacting to my words. He pulled back and my arms fell away, resting on

my thighs with my palms facing up. My eyes drifted away, staring off into nothing over his shoulder.

It changed the dynamic, telling him that. I could feel it. The cocoon broke open, the contents spilling out before they'd completed their metamorphosis, lying broken on the ground, some half-formed thing that couldn't survive. What had been between us was shattered by my confession, he would—

His fingers dug into the flesh at my waist as he rested his forehead against mine. "I'm so fucking sorry. Was it a robbery?"

He didn't know.

I couldn't speak for the longest time, anticipating the moment when he'd figure it out, but it never came. Eventually, he guided *my* head down to *his* shoulder, and I realized he wouldn't figure it out either. It would never occur to him that my dad was the greedy fuck whose death brought down the wrath of the cartel on them.

I didn't know it was trafficking that my dad had gotten involved in, Beast didn't tell me that, not even after McNamara engineered our reunion. He said the hit was ordered by the club. The murders that I served time for.

A better person than me might've felt responsible for what my dad did, felt like my sentence was penance for his sins, but I'd never aspired to martyrdom. And no one in the Apocalypse Riders Motorcycle Club could justify casting any stones; my dad might've been a higher tier of asshole, but he was still one of them. His crimes were most assuredly *club business*, they had fuck all to do with me.

I used the opportunity to extract myself from Magick's lap, his care was suffocating me. I sat close, but separate. And he let me, because despite everything, he was a good man who wanted to give me what I needed, too.

"Not a robbery. And I've always wondered if I was supposed to die too, but that's not what happened."

"It was *planned*? Someone was hired to kill them?"



“Something like that,” I shrugged, concentrating on the trees on the opposite bank of the river. Some part of me wanted him to figure it out so I wouldn’t have to say the words later. Even if he condemned me for it, even if he threw my lifeless corpse into the river because of it, I still didn’t want to have to say the words.

I would, because I owed them the truth. And they owed me their acknowledgment, regardless of the outcome. But having him figure it out when we were alone and far from anyone else, would save me the dreadful anticipation I was feeling, and having to see the rest of their faces when they realized the woman they were all trying to get with, represented one of the darkest chapters of their club’s history.

It’s funny how their past was coming back to haunt them, just like mine did when I got dumped off on Beast. I guess that meant I could blame everything on McNamara?

“That fucking sucks.”

“It does,” I agreed softly. “For both of us.”

He gave me a minute, long enough that I was sure we were going to change topics. Instead, he asked, “Why did he kill your parents?”

I winced, then deflected, getting cranky. “I don’t know. I was thirteen, and I was asleep.”

“Fair enough,” he said, patiently. “What happened to you after? Did you go live with relatives?”

I blinked, staring out at nothing. “Something like that.”

I could lie like I did with Azzie, tell him my aunt and uncle took me in and I grew up in the suburbs. A bit of a hellion, with lots of anger issues. I fed Azzie stories about fantasy high school years where I was an antisocial nerd, instead of having been tossed aside by the only family I knew, and forced to fend for myself in hostile territory.

Or I could tell him the truth: I spent my teens slowly drowning as the rest of the world floated by on rafts and boats, inflatable lounges with fruity drinks bearing paper umbrellas. They enjoyed the passage of time instead of just enduring it.

No one who hasn't been chronically ill or locked up can understand the endless monotony, the obsession one gets with time. How torturous it is to measure out the endless minutes, hours, days, while simultaneously despairing over how fast everything was slipping by.

I could talk about how I thirsted for anything new to learn. For years, I lived inside my head, creating worlds and alternate lives to escape the one that failed me. By the time I'd left, I'd read every book in the library, even the outdated and obsolete text books, and I'd filled notebooks and old legal pads with maps and drawings of places that had never existed. I'd had to leave them behind when I got out, my discharge was so covert that I couldn't bring anything with me.

On the inside, instead of turning over to face the wall and giving up, I used my time as best I could. I created my plan. I earned my GED and college credits I'd never be able to claim.

But all that reading — all that *knowledge* — didn't matter, when the most important lesson I learned was that anything can be a weapon, if you shove it in hard enough.

I could say all that, but instead, I asked, "Did you like high school?"

"High school was a long time ago for me, but I guess...? I remember I loved History class, especially American history, and Government. I always knew I was going to take over the club someday, and those seemed important. Same reason I took an Accounting class. I focused on the things that would help me be a good leader and run the club. Played football and baseball too, just to learn how to work in a team and understand the dynamics. Got lots of shit for that at first, from the club and my dad, until I explained my reasoning."

"That's— oddly strategic for a dumb teenager."

He cracked a smile at that, a little one and mostly just half of his mouth, but it was real. "You know, looking back, I don't even know how I came up with those ideas. It wasn't some carefully thought-out plan or anything, I was just trying so hard to keep an open mind about what could help me live up to my dad's expectations that I saw shit that I wouldn't have

otherwise — like realizing the mentality of team sports isn't too far off from a motorcycle club. Plus it irritated the fuck out of my dad at the time, which was like the frosting on the cake.”

I smirked, not buying all that for one second. A teenage boy thinking of team dynamics? “And here I thought the proximity of the cheerleaders would've been the frosting on the cake.”

He grinned, looking down at his feet almost— almost *bashfully*? I've never once thought about Magick and the word *adorable* at the same time, but he totally was. Fuck, I was in trouble here. “Okay, you ain't wrong, the combination of jock and rebel was like catnip for pussy.”

I tried picturing him fifteen years younger, and realized he would've been almost otherworldly back then. He was *now*, but time and responsibility had hardened him in ways that made him intimidating and knife-edge sharp, and that bashful smile spoke to a younger, softer boy, full of charm and mischief in equal measures. Combined with that face and those eyes? “How many teachers?” I asked, studying him.

He glanced over, surprised, then I swear to God that Magick blushed. He fucking *blushed*, and it was like a water balloon exploded in my skivvies. “A couple,” he mumbled, turning back to face the water. “How'd you know?”

I shifted in my seat, squeezing my thighs together, and thanking whatever higher power that girls didn't get boners because I'd be rocking obvious wood right now.

What the fuck was *wrong* with me?

I shrugged, playing casual. “Tried picturing you as a teenager, realized what you must've looked like. I mean, you're awful pretty now and you're like *ancient*, so back then? *Jesus*.” I giggled — *giggled* — at his outrage as he sputtered and blushed an even darker red.

Because I'm Mouse, and I'm disgusting; I'd like to make low-budget adult films with my employer.

“Ancient? *Ancient?*” he shouted at me, but it was playful, and I didn’t even try to dodge when he wrapped an arm around my neck and pulled me into a headlock. “I’m fucking thirty-five, you little shit! I’m not *ancient*.”

“You’re kinda ancient,” I mumbled against his arm, laughing too hard to put up much of a fight. “I think I was in elementary school when you were banging teachers.”

“Nah,” he said, “you were in junior high.” After a minute, he released me but didn’t move away, then he admitted, in a quiet voice like it pained him to say it, “Lost my virginity to the art teacher.”

Junior high. While he was banging teachers, I was holding Beast’s hand while he was banging club girls. I started junior high living at the club, where my role models were strippers, criminals, and Beast, and ended it living by myself and stealing drugs from my mom’s purse to get food. My childhood was so fucked up.

I had an impulse to confess to him, confess everything. I wanted to tell him who I was, what happened to me; I wanted to tell him how I spent high school locked up after taking the blame for my parents’ deaths. I wanted to tell him about Beast, and all the awful shit that happened to me as a kid, because I thought maybe he’d understand. Not like he’d been through something similar, but because he understood what it meant to grow up in a club, as the president’s kid, because the club is always first before everything else.

But I didn’t say anything, and the moment passed. And all I could hope is that when I told him everything later, when everyone else was around, he’d find it in him to forgive me.

“How about you?” he asked, and I stared at him blankly, not remembering what we’d been talking about. “Your virginity—?” he prompted, and I made a face. “C’mon, it can’t be that bad. Let me guess, prom date? Cheap hotel room? Two-pump chump?”

“Ehhh, no. The dude who killed my parents fucked me afterwards.”

I don't know why I said that. I don't know why the fuck I would ever say that out loud, to *anyone*. I could feel him staring at me so I kept my eyes on the river. Eventually, I shrugged. "I knew the guy, he took care of me a lot, from the time I was nine. He, uh, worked with my dad. It's pretty fucked up."

"I don't even know what to say," Magick muttered, and he sounded— angry? I glanced over, and his eyes and his fists were clenched, his face red and a vein pulsing in his temple. He was— he was furious. Over me. And I sat there like a lump, blinking, at a complete loss at how to respond to him. I stammered out something — I don't even know what — but mostly we just sat there in silence, until he managed to grit out some words. "There's so much wrong with that— you said you were *thirteen*?"

His face was getting redder, and part of me really didn't like what was happening. I didn't need a champion. Not now. But here he was going into a rage over what happened to me, when it was his dad who ordered it. Not all of it, not the sex part, but the rest. It was his precious club that threw me away like trash— no, like the bucket of bones and scraps that Caliban tosses to the dogs, for them to rip apart and devour.

I couldn't stop myself from talking, not when I was finally feeling some vindication. If he'd known who I was, he'd be backpedaling right now, or maybe even adding "shallow grave in the woods" to his To Do list. But he didn't know, so finally, *finally* I was getting one of them to admit that the club did something terrible to a little girl who didn't deserve any of it. Even if he didn't realize what his outrage meant.

"Yeah, every awful thing you can think of, plus a few things that would probably never even enter your mind," I added, acid churning in my gut. "Worst part? He got away with it. *All* of it."

Magick was livid, but the anger, the feeling of self-righteousness, drained out of me all at once. I was vilifying Beast, and that wasn't totally fair. He'd explained some of it to me, why he did what he did, and even though it was one of the stupidest rationalizations I'd ever heard, I *knew* him. He hadn't

wanted things to happen like that, and he did something awful, but he'd been trapped in the situation and couldn't think of what else to do. He made terrible choices, and had been punishing himself for it ever since. He loved me, and in one night, he destroyed everything we'd had between us and lost everything that mattered to him.

And if a little voice reminded me that it didn't take him long to find tiny blonde Janie-replacements, or father a couple kids with them, the pragmatic part of me shut that bitch down. He was a biker. And it wasn't like he'd been faithful to me up until that night. We'd never gotten to have that kind of relationship, to actually *be* together.

We never got to live up to our potential together, and that was a tragedy, but it wasn't like either of us was living in a cave under a vow of celibacy.

“It's complicated, okay? There were extenuating circumstances. And he'd never fucked me before that, but we'd been... *close* for a long time. Not always in a healthy way, but it was really good for a long time. He took care of me, he'd been looking out for me since I met him, since the day I met him— know what? I'd really prefer not to talk about it. It's really messed up, and it took me a long time to get past it, but things weren't all as bad as they sound.”

Eventually, he nodded, even though it was obvious he wanted to argue with me, to pry details out and possibly hunt down this mystery man that had ruined young Mouse in his eyes. But this time, he didn't push me when I wasn't ready to talk, and we sat in silence for a long time watching the river roll by. He must've realized, though, that I really needed a distraction because he wrapped his arm around me again and gave me a side hug.

“You'd be hell on my ego,” he said as though I hadn't just been struggling with trusting someone with one of my truths for the first time since I was thirteen. He loosened his hold but didn't let me go. “If you hadn't just admitted how hot I am.”

“I didn't say that,” I protested, looking up at him. He was facing forward, so damn smug. And so - fucking - pretty.

“You absolutely did. You said I’m *ancient*,” he growled that word again, and squeezed me like another headlock was imminent, but then relaxed again, “but still unbelievably handsome and sexy.”

“I never—”

“A fucking god among men.”

“That’s not even close—”

“Hush,” he cooed, tightening his hold so he could slide his hand over my mouth. “Blindingly beautiful, I think were your exact words. So I can’t be too upset about the age comments. Besides, you’re just a child yourself — are you even out of your teens? Your whole perspective is skewed by being so young.”

“I’m twenty-seven,” I mumbled into his hand, but he ignored me.

“Just a little brat,” he continued, his raspy, fucked-up voice getting somehow thicker, even deeper. “I should put you over my knee for your insolence.”

I tilted my head up to look at him, his hand no longer tight over my mouth, instead it was cupping my chin. His thumb scraped over my cheek in a rough caress. He was looking down at me, the oddest, most intense expression on his face. Studying me, his eyes darting around everywhere, from my eyes to my lips, to where his thumb continued to trace my cheekbone. Back to my eyes, a question in his, and maybe he saw an answer because he focused on my mouth then, and his finger was resting against the seam of my lips, pressing firmly between them. They parted on their own, without my permission, letting the edge of his finger enter my mouth.

“You gonna let me kiss you,” he asked, but it wasn’t a question. I didn’t protest, and he dragged that finger over my lips, wetting them with my saliva, then his palm was sliding back across my cheek, over my ear, moving my head where he wanted it. He leaned down, capturing my lips with his, the tip of his tongue tracing back the same path his finger had, finally slipping between them to touch my own tongue.

His free hand was on my knee, then my thigh, dragging my leg over his so I was straddling him again. Both hands moved up my body, taking my shirt with them, then one cupped my breast, squeezing it gently as the other traced a line down the bruises still painting my ribs. I gripped his bicep, my other hand snaking up under his cut to scratch against his t-shirt, and he groaned in pleasure at the scrape of my nails over his chest. I pushed at his shoulder and he leaned away, resting back against the tree as I sat upright and whipped my shirt off, over my head with a grin, before diving back in.

Hands— hands everywhere. On my back, my ass over and under my jeans, unclasping my bra and scratching the skin under the straps until I moaned and stretched into his pets like a cat. Hands on my shoulder blades holding me steady as he tilted me back, his lips sliding down my neck and my chest, sucking at the skin on my breasts, first one nipple, then the other. His tongue flicked and lapped, teeth nibbling, lips sucking, as I begged him to fuck me with the hard cock straining against his jeans. He chuckled into my skin, looking up through his hair and lashes, grinning with my nipple between his lips then releasing it with a pop.

“You want me to fuck you, little girl?” he asked, that harsh voice sending chills down my spine. I shivered, nodding, wanting to ride his cock while he growled filthy things in my ear with that broken voice. My hands tugged at his shirt, frantic to get our clothes off, get him inside me. He laughed again, humming, “Impatient. So impatient.”

“I’m so wet for you, Magick. Sopping fucking wet,” I promised him, leaning back to get my hands on his belt. “You’re big, so it’s good I’m so wet. You’ll still have to push hard to get inside me, but it’ll be so worth it. I’m tight, my fun-sized pussy is going to squeeze you like a vise, you might have to force your cock into me. Once it’s in, I’m going to fucking *ride you* until your eyes cross—”

“*Fuck,*” he swore, lifting me up to my feet so he could tear my clothes off me — not literally, but only because my pants were loose enough to fall off my body when my belt was undone, and I shimmied out of my panties while he was



leaning down to get my shoes. He looked up, saw my bare pussy in front of his face, and went to town. Lips, tongue, teeth, he was all up in my business, *worshipping* my little pussy with his mouth.

He had me on my back on the bench, legs over his shoulders, thighs crushing his head as he fucked me with his tongue, slipping a finger in as he lapped and sucked my clit, me holding my hands over my mouth to keep from wailing and moaning like a degenerate. Two fingers, then three, stretching me out, licking and sucking on all my parts, bathing my clit with his tongue like we were fucking animals going at it.

I started coming, starbursts behind my eyes, back arching, legs squeezing as I tried to crush him to me, panting, “Never stop, never stop, never stop” until my clit was pulsing, oversensitized, painful, then it was “Too much, too much,” and I was pushing at his shoulders.

He looked up from between my legs, blue eyes electric, hair all over the place from my grasping fingers, face glazed with my juices, and he grinned, happier than I’d ever seen him.

“I think you might’ve cracked my skull, pretty girl,” he kissed the inside of one thigh then the other, then swiped his tongue over my clit again with a wicked smile as I jerked and hissed, laughing at him for being a jerk.

“I think you broke my clit, pretty boy.” At his glare, I amended it with, “man. I meant *pretty man*.”

“Better,” he mock-scowled, flexing his fingers to dig into my ass.

“You gonna fuck me now? I’m all stretched out and ready.” I pointed at my cooch. “Clit might be broken but my girl is hungry for more.”

He made a sad face. “No condom, sweet Mouse. But I wouldn’t mind at all if you wanted me to keep going— maybe ride my face? Let me get deep in you—”

“Fuuuuck,” I breathed out, incredulous. “Seriously? No condom? And you call yourself a biker?”

He grinned again, nipping at my thigh hard enough it would probably leave a little bruise, and I squirmed and wiggled to get away but he held me still, legs still resting on his back, his hands cupping my ass and spreading me open for him. “I keep one in my wallet like any other responsible *gentleman*,” he scolded and I giggled at how fucking filthy my gentleman looked right now after I came on his face, “but my wallet is in my room since there’s no reason to wear it unless I’m leaving the compound.”

“You need a special condom pocket in the arm of your t-shirt,” I advised, flicking at the sleeve. “I’ll sew one on every shirt for you, so you can fuck me whenever you want.”

His eyes lit up like that was unexpected, me wanting easy access to him, but I still felt a sudden stab of vulnerability like he was just about to tell me this wasn’t going to happen again, or that would be convenient for fucking club girls.

“That’s a fan-fucking-tastic idea,” he said, biting down on my inner thigh again, leaving a ring of shallow teeth marks behind. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve wanted to bang you against a wall, or on the couch in the club room. The other night with T? Fucking agony. I wanted to take you right there on the dance floor, give them all a show. On the dining room table after Hazel takes Adèle off to bed. You riding me in my office, or sitting on my desk so I can eat you out. Fuck, Mouse... make sure the pocket can fit more than one so I don’t have to keep running upstairs to restock.”

I nodded shyly, smiling so hard my cheeks hurt. “Okay.”

He gazed down at my pink little pussy, all kiss-swollen and spread open for him, and began to lick me again, slow and leisurely, taking his time to savor me. My orgasm built up, rolling over me like gentle waves finally cresting, radiating through my whole body and going on and on and on as he carried me through it, keeping me afloat to ride it out.

I didn’t know an orgasm could last that long, could be so soft and pliant, muscles lax and whole body throbbing as it

ebbed and flowed through me. Even after he finished, I kept going for a bit, rippling and arching as he watched me, blue eyes glowing and smiling with satisfaction.

“Tonight, we’ll hang out for a bit in the club room, then you’ll come back to my room with me,” he said, and I nodded even though he wasn’t asking my opinion on the matter, he was just stating a fact. “Any night you aren’t with one of them, I want you with me. Yeah?”

I stuck my bottom lip out and his brow shot up, the tiniest bit of indecision showing like he thought maybe he overstepped but didn’t know how to back out of it. I took mercy on him. “Does that mean it’s only ever you and me alone those nights? One of them can’t come over to play?”

His mouth slowly curled back up into that satisfied grin. “Maybe in the future. I don’t want to share when I’m with you, not yet. And I don’t want you getting distracted by too many dicks to play with.”

Damn. He really did know me too well. How the fuck did that happen?

“You’ll be tired of me in a week,” I teased, but I half-meant it, and I knew I was wearing my insecurity openly, like a onesie with a broken zipper trapping me inside until snugly warmth became oppressive heat.

“Never,” he swore, gentle sincerity and a kind of startled recognition on his face, like he’d said it without thinking only to realize it was true. When I didn’t say anything else, he asked, “Do you doubt me?”

“Entirely,” I pouted.

“You have no faith in me?”

“None.” I made a grumpy face, shaking my head, and he bit me until I squealed, confessing I believed him but wanted the reassurance, and he planted a soft kiss on the skin below my belly button, smiling up at me.

“No one else gives me as much shit as you do. No other woman has ever sassed me like you, treating me like an equal and not someone above or below them. I don’t have to wonder

if you're using me, or manipulating me, or scared of me. Do you think I'd get tired of the first honest relationship I've ever had?"

I couldn't respond to that, the afterglow had faded, and I was suddenly choking on the lies between us. Not understanding my silence, he laid his head down on top of my stomach, clutching my body to him, and whispered, "Don't worry, it scares me too."

After a time, he helped me straighten my legs out and sit up, then dressed me since my legs were jelly and I was orgasm-drunk and fumbling, clumsy with the effort of pretending I could be what he thought I was. He kissed me, long and slow and deep, and after awhile, it was like I began to believe it, like I forgot everything I was hiding from him.

I climbed back on his lap to kiss and lick his face clean, alternately nuzzling his neck and chin while I smoothed his hair and stroked his skin. He cuddled me against him, pressing soft kisses on my hair and face, and Magick without the weight of the world on his shoulders was a sight to behold. All that responsibility aged him, and in that moment he looked ten years younger, happy and relaxed and playful.

I liked it. I liked that I brought this out in him. I thought maybe being with me could be good for him, regardless of the ghosts that haunted us. Like with Rasputin, I had hope.

And hope is a dangerous thing.

"We should go back," he finally whispered against my hair, but didn't move. "I don't want to, I want to stay here forever, but I think it's about to start raining and this tree won't protect us from a storm."

I leaned back in his arms and arched, looking at the sky upside down to see it was as dark as if the sun had gone down. I shivered at the sight of the roiling clouds and flashes of lightning.

By the time we got to our feet, the first drops had started falling; we raced hand-in-hand towards the door, getting soaked along the way. Just inside the archway, he swung me

up into an embrace, kissing me desperately like we'd just escaped a rabid Sasquatch and not a spring downpour, and I would've teased him except there was a loud crack of thunder like a gunshot overhead, and we watched out the door as a bolt of lightning hit the chestnut tree, splitting it down the middle and singeing the leaves black and desiccated around the edges.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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THAT NIGHT, I dressed for Magick for the club room.

I wanted to be pretty, so pretty that he wouldn't be able to look away, even as he listened to my story. I wanted him to *see* me, and like it so much that he couldn't stop thinking about what we did by the river. So he *couldn't* forget.

Hazel lent me a pair of black-and-white striped silky shorts, high-waisted and loose enough to pass for a skirt, but they barely covered my ass cheeks. I wore them over fishnets, with a molded leather bustier with narrow shoulder straps, and a pair of shiny red Mary Jane platform heels that added about five inches to my height. I added a black velvet choker around my neck, a studded leather belt around my waist, and roses made of ruby red velvet pinned into my hair, the front braided back to roll into a sleek chignon. With red lipstick, dark eyes, and a goddamn swagger in my step, I strutted into the club room and brought my men to their feet.

I saw Rasputin's mouth form the words "Holy fuck" when I appeared, the first to see me, then he was leaping over the back of the couch and halfway across the room before any of the others noticed I'd arrived. He stopped about five feet back, circling the air with his finger, and I gave him a twirl, giving him plenty of time to appreciate how lush my ass and legs looked in these shorts, and admire the seam of my stockings running down my legs. "Holy fuck," he repeated with reverence in his voice, and I held my arms out to my sides.

"Yeah? Can I pass for a club girl?"

“Baby, you’re what club girls aspire to. You’re gorgeous, you know that, right?” He was so earnest about saying the right thing, but he didn’t need to be; I saw the truth of it in how his eyes dilated, his face flushed, and his breathing picked up. Maybe I wasn’t just a pretty face, but sometimes it was nice to be nominated.

“I do now.” I smiled coyly, feeling my cheeks heat up as the others drew closer.

Magick prowled towards me like a panther sighting his prey. Tesla’s face was a mask, but the tension in his hands, the way he tugged at his lip piercing— a quick glance beyond him showed he’d left his phone where he’d been sitting.

I don’t think he could’ve given me a bigger compliment.

Caliban’s face flushed, his eyes glowing, as he held back and let the others reach me first. You could see it as being gentlemanly until you understood how much he wanted to watch me with one or more of the others. Fucker was probably hoping I’d get spit-roasted right there in the middle of the bar. I can’t say I’d resist too much if the offer was made.

And Loki? Loki was taking deep breaths. Loki was watching me with a determined expression on his face. Loki was about to plow through everyone else, fling me over his shoulder, and carry me off to somewhere private.

And I woulda let him, but Rasputin grabbed my hand and dragged me towards them, and then past them. He led me back to the cluster of couches and chairs that had become our private sanctuary in the midst of all the revelers. “No time for any distractions,” he called back over his shoulder to them. “One drink, and then we go to Mags’s office to talk.” In a softer voice, only directed at me, he explained, “Tesla rescheduled his conference call so we wouldn’t have to wait for him. I know you’re nervous, and they won’t be focusing on anything but that ass in those shorts for a bit, so let’s get some liquid courage in you before the big talk.”

One drink, I could do that. I could sit still and have one drink without losing my goddamn mind.

I was going to tell them *everything*.

I had it all planned out. First, Salem and Azzie, to get that out of the way. Just the basics, just the facts: since the pandemic started, I'd been living on a secret military base where the vaccine came from. I had access to the vaccine, because it was made by processing the antibody-rich magical unicorn juice that my best friend produced from her fucked up body, all because of a rare disease. I needed to go back there for a time, put some things into motion, but I'd come back with her. And then we'd stay, if they wanted.

And they might not. Not after the rest of it.

But I had to tell them about Azzie first, so they'd know that killing me was a bad idea. They'd miss out on vaccine if they went all Joffrey Lannister to my Ned Stark. Henry VIII to my Anne Boleyn? Whatever. If they let paranoia and old hatreds get in the way.

I'd understand if they hated me after knowing who I was, Magick especially, or because I've been lying to them this whole time. But I couldn't forgive them if they killed me. That was a deal-breaker.

"Babydoll, you're shaking," Loki whispered in my ear as I perched on his lap, curled up against him, holding a glass in both my hands. It had lipstick on the rim — I hadn't even noticed I'd been drinking it, or where I'd been sitting. He handed his own glass to Tesla, next to us on the couch, and wrapped me up in those thick slabs of muscle that he called arms. "Whatever you tell us, it ain't gonna change anything, I promise."

"You can't promise that." I took another wobbly sip from my glass, careful not to spill it all over me. The brown liquor burned on the way down, but the warmth helped. And hey, my throat had healed enough that I didn't even cough!

"Okay, fair. Then I promise that my feelings for you won't go away, no matter what secrets you've been keeping. I've known from day one you had them, and it never stopped me. Not once. I won't promise nothing'll change, but we'll find our way back." He leaned in even closer, his warm breath



tickling my ear, making sure I'd be the only one who could hear. "We're end-game, Mouse, and—"

Phones chimed around me, five of them letting off the same grating tone, interrupting. Loki scowled, not bothering to reach for his.

"Visitors." Magick was grim, taking my drink and setting it on the table as Loki rose up effortlessly, even with me cradled in his arms. He pivoted and set me down on Rasputin's lap, on the couch across from where we'd been sitting, and Rasputin cuddled me against his chest while I stroked his hair off his face. I watched over Rasputin's shoulder as Magick and Loki loped after Pumpkin towards the door, but he assured me it was fine.

"We got word that the prez and VP of one of the chapters were staying in the cabins," he said, petting the silky fabric of my shorts, teasing the hemline and the leg beneath it. "Their ninety-six hour quarantine ended an hour ago — we didn't think we'd see them until the morning, but I guess it was important."

"This particular prez is a little... impulsive. I've seen teen pregnancies planned better than some of his operations," Tesla contributed, glaring at his phone screen with a furrowed brow. "That's odd. Fatima says he wasn't interested in any of the girls. In the past, he's been all over the blonde— not Christie, but the other one."

"Liza?" Rasputin asked, and Tesla nodded. "You didn't meet her," Rasputin explained. "She was with a client when we were at the house. She's cute as hell and tiny, kind of like you, with light blonde—"

"Janie?"

Time stopped. Everything stopped. My heart *stopped*.

That voice. That scratchy voice, saying my name.

I could *feel* him, on the other side of the couch at Rasputin's back, radiating heat and desperation and disbelief.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe.

“What the fuck— *here? You came here?*” he shouted, desperation transforming into rage. He always did have a short temper. “You came here to these fuckers? *You fucking bitch!* Was this your plan all along? What the fuck are you wearing? *Are you their goddamn whore now?!*”

Fist in my hair, dragging me backwards off Rasputin’s lap, off the couch, over the side and onto the floor. The look on Loki’s face... he must’ve gotten stopped by someone because he was far away now, across the room, not close enough to get to me, but he roared like a lion going in for the kill. He barreled towards me as I flopped on the ground, fighting against these goddamn five-inch heels to get back on my feet. Rasputin lunged over the couch after me, Tesla up on the table and diving towards us. Caliban fought to get past someone— Why was *Beast* here? Why now, just when things were good for me—

Why wouldn’t he be here now? Things were good. Things never got to just be good.

I didn’t even see Magick, I didn’t even realize— he laid out Beast with one brutal hit to the temple, but Beast’s fist didn’t release my hair as he went down, it just tore a little as he tried to physically pull my body to him by a shank of blonde tangled in his grip.

I sprawled out beside Beast, my body twisted into painful contortions, my hair ripping out from my scalp. I looked into his black, black eyes that blinked and juddered from the force of the blow to his head, and saw my doom right before his lips crashed down on mine.

Once again, he took what wasn’t his.



CHURCH.

I was inside the room where church was held, the space off-limits to all but patched-in members in good standing. Even the walls seem to radiate disapproval.

I sat at the table, about halfway down from where Magick presided. Shoes off, I'd pulled my feet up so my heels were pressed against my butt, my knees protecting my chest and belly. I was wrapped in a blanket that Brandy-Lynn had found for me, my hair half undone, torn from the pins and clips that had held it up. It was sticky with blood from my scalp. The roses were long gone, my makeup smeared — my lipstick was a slash of red staining my cheek from Beast's rough kisses, but they wouldn't let me go fix it.

They wouldn't let me go anywhere. Or talk.

Beast sat across from me and he wouldn't look away even though I wouldn't look at him.

Magick, Caliban, and Tesla sat at the head of the table, Loki and Rasputin standing behind them like grim sentinels. Silent. All of them silent. Staring at me.

Condemning me.

The gavel sat on the table in front of Magick's clenched fists.

"Explain," was all he said, his raspy voice like the lid of a sarcophagus scraping open to reveal the horrors within. It was hard to believe that only hours ago, he held my naked body against him and told me he wanted to stay with me forever. I should've known. I should've known that meant the end was coming.

"I told you that someone important to me, important to the *club*, was missing," Beast answered without looking at him. "I've spent the last month — five weeks? — trying to track her down but it's been...difficult. I asked you for—"

"What?" Magick interrupted him, brows drawn together in aggravation. "What did you ask *me* for? I have a distinct memory of having to pay a visit to your club to find out why you'd been approaching other presidents, asking for help. So what exactly did you need from me? What did you *ask* for?"

"Nothing," Beast growled, sounding petulant. "You already slapped my fucking hands for *overstepping*, Magick. But I guess I'll say it again: you're right, I didn't go to you and

ask. I panicked and started making calls to clubs nearby, because she fucking *disappeared*, okay? And I needed help looking for her, to bring her back home.” He looked over at me, frustrated but... but affectionate. There was pride there, as much as there was anger. And there was fear that he tried to cover up. “You always have been a pain in my ass, kid.”

“What do you mean *always have been*?” Magick asked slowly, the tension in the air ratcheting up, the pressure on my chest keeping me from taking all but the most shallow breaths.

And there it was, the challenge. The thing Beast never could walk away from, especially when it came to me. I watched it unfold like I was in a bad dream, the kind where you scream and scream but never make a sound. When your feet are stuck in place as you try to run.

“Oh, she didn’t tell you?” Beast smirked, finally looking Magick dead in the eye. “This is Janie Skała, John Skała’s kid — you remember Preacher, right? My former president that your old man had me kill along with his old lady? This is the club princess we framed for the murders. I’ve known her since she was just a little girl. Took most of her firsts, the ones that count.” I didn’t understand that taunt, why he said it, or why he just had to keep going. “And even just weeks ago, I was fucking her on the regular.”

The horror on their faces. The disbelief.

The betrayal.

He knew. He did that on purpose, said it like that, made it sound like *that*.

And the worst part? I couldn’t dispute a damn thing he said.

But I guess I’d forgotten the conversation we’d had earlier, underneath that chestnut tree. I’d compartmentalized all of it, locked it away in my mind palace to gather dust and cobwebs. But Magick hadn’t.

“How old was she?” His voice was hollow, suspiciously calm. His fists even unclenched, his fingers spread out on the tabletop. I couldn’t stop staring at his hands.

“When? When I popped her cherry?”

“When you met her. How old was she when you joined her dad’s chapter?”

His fingers were long, the nails blunt. His tattoos ended at his wrists, so his hands were bare. He wore a heavy silver ring on one index finger. It must not have been one of the fingers he fucked me with, I would’ve noticed if that ring had been in play.

“She was nine,” Beast said decisively. He knew how old I was. He remembered every single thing about me. The first person to pay attention to me, to listen to me — to *remember* me when I wasn’t in the room, and make me feel like I existed.

Nine years old, just a year older than Addie. Could she meet someone a year from now and fall so helplessly in love with them that they became her whole world? Every day since then, he’d been in my head, even when I didn’t realize it. How was it possible to be so young, but have those feelings? They were *real*, what I felt was real. What he felt for me was *real*.

I looked up, my eyes meeting his. Black, glittering like they were lit from within. He stared at me with so much love and remorse, so much guilt, and pain, and hope. There was still hope.

His lips formed the words “I’m sorry” and I whispered “I know” as the bullet from Magick’s gun entered his forehead and burst out the back, and the light in his eyes was gone.

His body collapsed backwards, the chair tipping from the force, hitting the ground. I felt as if I was in a wind tunnel, I couldn’t hear anything but a loud roar in my ears, as I stared at the empty space that had just seconds ago contained the man I’d loved since I was nine, and feared since I was thirteen.

I couldn’t look away.

I couldn’t move, I couldn’t think, I couldn’t even breathe.

Everything was moving around me in slow motion.

Time stopped flowing. It jumped, from second to second, each moment freezing in place: I was on my feet; the chair hit

the wall behind me; I was crawling over the table; I was falling to the ground; I was staring down at his empty eyes, those black eyes that had watched me.

The first eyes to *see* me.

I was screaming, begging him to come back, begging him not to leave me alone. *I needed him*. Animal sounds, keening sounds. Wordless sounds. And then the world went dark.

# PART 3

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# JANE

*Damaged people are dangerous. They know they can survive.*

JOSEPHINE HART



## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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THEY'D TAKEN a blowtorch to my arm, to burn my tattoo off.

Three men held me down as the heat blistered my skin, the pain so sharp and agonizing that I stopped feeling it. It became numbness and nausea, but I knew it was still there.

Beast was dead.

I twisted to the side of the bed, racing for the bathroom to empty my stomach.



HOLLOW.

Empty.

Every muscle clenched like a fist as I fought it, cramping from the strain.

How could my body hurt so bad when there was nothing inside me?

I heard the noises a wounded animal makes as it convulses in its death throes, blind to the pitiless world. Someone should put it out of its misery, it couldn't recover on its own.

It would be a mercy.



I WOKE up in my bed, still wearing my clothes from the night before. The clock said it was four a.m.

I woke up in a world where Beast no longer existed.

I wanted to roll over, pull the blankets up, and sleep until the pain stopped. Three days without water, that should do it. That should be all it would take.

But I didn't. Because *Azzie*.



THE WATER in the shower was just below scalding, and I scrubbed at my skin until it was raw. My scalp burned when the water hit it, and I clawed through the matted mess of hair until I found raw, bloody patches where it was ripped out. I washed it twice. I brushed my teeth for five minutes, unable to get the taste of copper and salt out of my mouth. I dragged a comb through my hair, brutal and unflinching, needing the pain to feel alive.

He'd apologized to me right before— right before. Up until I got here, no one ever apologized for anything. I wasn't used to it. I didn't expect it. I didn't ask "For what?" when I had a chance.

I couldn't think about him, not right now. I needed to keep control of myself.

I got dressed in my old clothes, the ones I brought with me. I stuffed anything else I'd brought into my Barbie backpack, all the clothes from dead kids from the reservation, and a few precious things that I'd gotten since. Things to help me remember.

Beast was— *nope*.

Looking around the room to make sure I didn't miss anything, my eyes got stuck on the closet; I couldn't leave without knowing what was behind the door in the attic, whether it was a threat.

I dragged the chair over and climbed up on it like I had many times before, crawling up through the hole in the ceiling and into the close, musty space. It looked different in the hours just before sunrise, when the darkness was absolute. Spookier. Dust floated in the air, cobwebs hung from all the ceiling beams; the dirt and debris spread everywhere made it feel like the hotel was, at its heart, an abandoned building always trying to regain its isolation. There was nothing welcoming here. It felt as threatening as wandering lost in uncharted wilderness where Nature had no use for you and would give you no quarter.

The attic felt like being in the presence of some alien intelligence, cold and distant, squatting on top of the building considering how it might dispose of me without too much trouble. An elder god, ancient and immutable. I felt watched, but not acknowledged; I was intruding on the silence.

I crept down the length of it, towards the door, the rustling sounds getting louder as I approached.

I stood at the door, listening with my ear pressed close to the wood, sure that the thumping sound wasn't mine but the attic's heartbeat pulsing through the plank walls and floor, echoing in the wooden door.

The knob was iron, it felt cold in my hand. I tried to twist it, carefully and quietly, but it groaned against its iron mooring, the mechanism stiff with disuse. I ended up having to wrench it harder than expected, and the metal shrieked as the catch released.

The rustling sounds increased, almost frantically.

I pushed the door inwards the tiniest bit, trying to peer through the crack, catching sight of movement on the other side.

I wanted to slam the door shut, turn and run, but I couldn't. I had to know. I had to know what was on the other side or the specter of the unknown would follow me wherever I went, haunting my dreams with visions of what horrors waited behind a flimsy wooden panel.

I couldn't live with myself if I left with a potential danger so close to Addie, so close to *them*.

The door creaked open, agonizingly slow, my heart galloping in my chest as something moved towards me, and in a burst of reckless bravery — okay, stupidity — I flung the door open in one frantic heave and burst into the room, confronting...

Myself. In a dirty mirror.

And a fuck-ton of pigeons.

The small room looked like it was once staff or servant's quarters. The plaster walls still showed traces of faded floral paper. There were two other doors leading off of it, both of them shut, with iron keys poking out of the locks. The one window had a pane broken out of it. Across from where I stood, a mirror streaked with filth hung on the wall. The ceiling beams above, the rotting wardrobe, and even the sagging mattress on the narrow iron bed frame, were all covered in carefully arranged heaps of debris with small pin feathers stuck to them, where there weren't annoyed birds staring at me in confusion. Pigeon shit covered the floor. Covered *everything*.

It was, in a word, *disgusting*.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," I growled at the disinterested pigeons, flicking my middle finger at them and then the mirror, my lip curled up into a snarl. "This is what was so freaking scary? Fuck you, pigeons!"

I slammed the door on my way out, not caring if anyone heard me, cursing as I stomped back to the hole in my closet ceiling. I dropped back down and closed it up behind me, then put the chair back.

Backpack in hand, I took one last look around the room, filing away my regrets for later. Coasting on my residual anger.

Fucking *pigeons*.

Stepping out into the hallway, I looked down the corridor at Addie's door. I turned away without going to her to say

goodbye, feeling a pressure in my chest that crushed down, causing me to gasp for air. But I kept walking.

Down the stairs, through the empty lobby. In the dining room, I looked through the cupboards for a bottle, some kind of container I could use for water. I couldn't find anything except the ketchup and hot sauce bottles, which were too small to be of much use, but I knew I could find something in the dish room. Worst-case scenario, I could dump out something into a bowl and rinse the container, but if I was going to walk down a mountain, I was going to need water. I slipped through the door into the dark kitchen.

“Where're you going, honey?”

The voice — *Caliban's* voice — came from the shadows on the far side of the room. I crept closer, found him sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, a half-empty bottle of whiskey in his hand.

“I've gotta leave, Cal.”

He shook his head, a humorless chuckle on his lips. “You finally call me *Cal* on the day you leave me? This whole time, you kept your distance, kept it formal, but now you can call me Cal? I don't get it.”

I shrugged. “You were introduced to me as Caliban— not even introduced, just mentioned to me in passing. Every one of you, all I was given was your full names, and never invited to use any other. What would you have me do?”

“*Claim me,*” he said, then slumped down, all the force draining from his voice. “I'd have you take what you wanted, not wait for permission. But I guess you were never ours, and we were never yours. *He* was always there between us.”

“Don't—” I warned, my voice cracking. “Don't think you know—”

“You should've told us,” he interrupted me, then took a deep swig from the bottle, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “But you didn't. And that tells us everything.”

“What should I have told you?” I hissed, advancing on him. “What secrets of mine do you think you had any right

to?”

“Who you were— are— whatever. Your fucking *name*. That your dad was in the club, that you knew who we were. That you were fucking—”

“Don’t say it.” I stopped him, the bitter acid in his voice letting me know who he was going to condemn me for fucking. “You think you deserved my name? I changed it to Jayne Stone the day they released me from juvie after serving four years and seven months for my parents’ murders. I was in a residential facility for dangerous youthful offenders with mental illness, because they decided I killed my dad in a psychotic break because he was fucking me. That’s how they explained what Beast did to me that night, because their narrative didn’t work otherwise. It had to be my dad, because if anyone else was there, then they couldn’t convict me for the murders. They locked me up for four and a half years, after the club turned its back on me and let me swing. So you think you deserve my name? You think you deserved to know who my dad was, my affiliation with the club? I had no affiliation with the club. I was *done* with this club. Almost ten years, I was free.”

He stared at me, his alcohol-soaked brain processing what I’d just told him. I should’ve left then, gone without the water, taken my chances, but I was so angry. So fucking angry.

All my life, no one gave me a chance to tell my truths, to defend myself. Everything was secrets and lies; it was more important for me to be quiet than safe. And never, ever happy.

All my life, I’d been the one to suffer in silence. I was supposed to just take it.

“My dad never wanted a kid. I was forced on him. After my grandparents died, I lived in the clubhouse for years because my dad couldn’t be bothered to take care of me. The only person who did was Beast. He made sure I had real food to eat and not just crackers and potato chips. He bought me new clothes when I grew out of the old ones. I was living in a room that had a mattress on the floor and a box of toys meant for toddlers in the corner, and he bought me furniture so I

could live like a human being, sit at a table to eat food. He bought me sheets for my bed, so I wasn't sleeping on a bare mattress. He took care of me, and protected me, made sure my door locked and I wasn't walking the two blocks from the bus stop alone. We didn't have a normal, healthy relationship, but we had each other. I could always count on him, always. Until the club told him to kill my dad."

I collapsed down like a puppet with its strings cut, sinking down onto the ground and sitting where I landed, my legs no longer able to support me.

"I didn't know why he did what he did that night. Until then, he'd never touched me like that. I saw things, but he never touched me. What we had between us wasn't *normal*. I knew it even back then, even if I didn't understand— it was sexual, but there was some unspoken rule that nothing would happen until I was older. Then I woke up to the sound of gunshots, and he came into my room covered in their blood. He kissed me like I was precious and fragile, then he fucked me like he hated me. Like I wronged him or I was forcing him. It was angry and violent, a punishment, and he couldn't even *look* at me. He gave me some bullshit instructions for dealing with my parents on his way out the door. After years of being the one person I could always count on, the one I *trusted*, he destroyed everything in one night and left me to hang for it. Because of the club. Because that's what he was told to do."

"Those weren't his orders, Mouse—"

"*Then why did the club let me burn?* You let me dangle from the noose. Let me drown. I was railroaded into a conviction and kept sedated on drugs for over a year. Then I'm being weaned off the meds and he shows up one day, and it becomes really fucking obvious my doctor is terrified of whatever Beast did. And I was supposed to carry out the rest of my time, then Beast would be there to take me home. That's what he called it, *home*. Like it was some *reward* for doing the time. So I made a plan to get away, and I did. I disappeared. I moved hundreds of miles away, changed my name, and got an education. Got a job. Got a *life*. I did things— I've done some miraculous things, Cal. I *save* people. Me. I get called a

fucking *hero*, and all I see in the mirror is that pathetic little girl who keeps getting thrown away.”

The unwanted kid, the broken girl. The woman who hides in plain sight, behind fake names and masks and a manic persona. It didn't matter that no one wanted me, that they discarded me like trash, because I was stronger than all of them. I was smarter. Everyone tried to keep me down in the dirt, and instead, me and a sick little girl named Aesli saved tens of thousands of people and it could've been more. It should've been more! And we were still saving them, one drop of blood at a time, when Janus could've been our extinction event.

But we could save millions of lives and still no one would know *my* name.

“You're judging me for fucking him. Knowing all that, you're still judging me, I can see it in your face. Want to know why I was back with him? Six weeks ago, I found out something I shouldn't have. They needed to get rid of me, so they delivered me back to Jackson. I was there for eleven days, with this man I'd loved most of my life, and he treated me like his whore *because he already had a wife*. He once swore to me that he'd only ever love me, and despite everything, like a fool — like a *child* — I believed him. It's like I blocked it out, let myself forget what he did, only remembering the good things. Times when I thought I couldn't ever survive, I held that in my heart: no matter what he did, *he loved me*. But it was a fucking lie. For eleven days, I had to live in the same place as his *wife* and *kids*, treated like a home-wrecking whore by the entire club because he was fucking me every chance he got. And maybe you hate me for saying this, but I didn't fight him— no, I *let* him, because I'm a goddamn survivor, and nobody else is going to save me. There were no superheroes or knights in shining armor riding to my rescue, there was me and my snatch to keep me alive, so I let him make me his whore while his evil cunt of a wife found every way possible to torture me for it. She looks just like me, did you know that? He legitimately married her, ceremony and all, this discount, counterfeit version of me.”



A rougher facsimile of me at eighteen, the last time he saw me. She was older than me, made up to look younger to keep the similarity, frozen in time. Vindictive, manipulative. Uneducated but clever, devious and calculating. He bound himself to this cheap rip-off in front of God and the club, and then he let her hurt me; she got his ring and his support, while I served his time and got his back as he turned away when I needed him.

“My whole life, no one wanted me except him. No one wanted to keep me around, not the real me. I had to become someone else to find my place. But he *saw* me when I was invisible. He knew me and he loved me. I know he did. But when I tried to protect myself, *save*— FUCK. It doesn’t matter. The rule is *blood in, blood out*, right? So they made me bleed — beat me half to death, took a blowtorch to my tattoo— it isn’t even club colors, it’s something I *earned* all by myself. I did something no one else could, and I *earned* it, but they burned it off my skin anyway. But I got away. I saved myself. Again. And then... and then I got this job. And I thought that maybe *here*— maybe things would be different. But fool me fucking twice, because this club? *Your* club has taken everything I’ve ever had away from me, now even *him*. And now I’ll never know— I’ll never know *why*.”

Tears were running down my face, my vision blurry and head aching. My throat was tight, my gut churning; there was a fist was inside my chest, squeezing.

Caliban could’ve been asleep, passed out. I couldn’t even tell because he didn’t say anything and he’d stopped moving. I bowed my head and let the tears flow.

“You asked me where I’m going? Away, Cal. I’m going away. Because I never should’ve even been here. That ad should’ve been for a job working for a rich dude with a crazy ex-wife, with a kid by his mistress that may not even be his. Not working for the Apocalypse Riders’ mother chapter. Not after all you did to me. Because eventually this club is going to get tired of just ruining me, and it’s going to actually kill me. I’m not sticking around for that day to come, because the one thing I do well is *survive*. And whatever I thought I had here...

Magick showed me with one bullet, it could all be taken away without any questions asked.”

“There’s a car out in the garage. Take it and go.” Magick’s voice, raw and harsh, came from the shadows on the other side of the room. I jerked, startled, not realizing he was even there. I heard another sound by the door, and when I glanced over, it was still swinging after someone passed back through it. Whoever it was, they didn’t want me to see them. “Go and don’t ever come back.”

Like I could stay? Like they’d want me to?

“Why’d you kill him? Why did you have to put him down like a dog.? What you did— *why?*”

There wouldn’t be any redemption for Beast, no penance to absolve him. He wouldn’t give up his sight or his health, surrender his power, to make up for his past sins.

Beauty came home to the castle, but instead of breaking the curse, a rabid Beast was put down with a single bullet.

“You’re why he stayed there. For years. He strung us along for years because of you.” Magick pointed at me with the hand holding the bottle, talking nonsense. Did he mean Beast? He wasn’t supposed to stay in Jackson? “My dad was shot because of you.”

I hunched my shoulders, holding my hands up, trying so hard not to scream out of sheer frustration. I had no fucking idea what he was on about, and it wasn’t like I could ask Beast, because he was dead.

Beast was dead.

Beast was fucking *dead*, and I was getting blamed for another asshole taking a bullet almost a decade ago?

I shook my head, done with all this bullshit. “Maybe that’s true. Maybe your dad was shot because of me, but I wouldn’t know. Club-fucking-business, right? What I do know is that *my* dad was killed because the club wanted him dead, and I took the fall for it. Even if what you say is true, we’re still not even. It still doesn’t compare. So don’t point fingers and expect me to clutch my pearls and beg your forgiveness. I was

the only one innocent in this fucking scenario, and I was the only one who paid for it. If anything, you owe me, and I want answers.”

“You said it yourself: you’ll never know why. I mean it, Janie, take the fucking car and go, and don’t ever come back.”

“Don’t call me that name, Magick. You don’t have the right to call me that name.”

“Fine, don’t call me anything. I don’t want my name in your mouth. You’re not a part of this club, you never were. Your father was a traitor, and you’re *nothing* to us. Now go, before I change my fucking mind and shoot *you* in the head.”

So I left.



TESLA WAS WAITING in the courtyard. I nodded at Hammerhead, perched on his bike near the gates. I didn’t realize he was here, in the area, but I guess it made sense that Beast wouldn’t have come alone. They must’ve called him, after—

They must’ve called him to go over the succession plan.

It was like he’d been waiting for me, like he knew I’d be leaving. He rolled forward, exiting through the gates that slid shut behind him. I wondered if I’d see him again.

Tesla wouldn’t meet my eye. We were back to that again. He pointed at a sedan that Pumpkin was backing out of the outbuilding that housed the mechanic shop. I nodded, feeling that crack in my heart widen.

We watched Pumpkin climb out of the vehicle and look over at me, shaking his head in disgust, before he disappeared back into the darkness inside the bay.

“I never forget anything.” He said that as if I’d understand, as if there was some deeper meaning, but he still wouldn’t look at me. “But there were so many missing pieces, and I

didn't trust you." He turned towards me, eyes fastened onto my chin. "You have so many secrets."

"You think all those times I demanded to leave were some kind of trick?" I hissed at him, unable to fathom how fucking stupid they all were. How goddamn narcissistic: always the heroes or the victims, never the villains. "You took my shoes to keep me here, I didn't want to be here!"

"It could've been a ploy," he said lamely, "you gave up fighting so quickly."

I began to laugh, so bitter and harsh that my throat burned. "You think— you think I was playing the long game, Tesla?"

He scowled at the ground, and I knew what he was doing. He needed to let me go, and it was easier this way.

Fuck *him*. I was tired of making it easier on everyone else. All it ever did was bring me pain.

"You really think that I'd been sitting around hoping for a global pandemic to strike, for Magick to take on a ward that only speaks Polish, so that you would advertise for a governess to come work at your secret biker compound? *Are you fucking kidding me?*" I shouted at him, forcing him to acknowledge me, to give up his ridiculous conspiracy theory. To feel the loss.

He shook his head, eyes locked on my feet.

"Look at me," I snarled, commanding him to face me. He raised his gaze up but only as far as my chin. "I came here covered in bruises and burns. All you saw was the aftermath, I'd had over two weeks to heal, and all of you were fucking horrified by the bits that still remained. Do you think I faked that? Don't cringe away, you fucking listen to me. You listen to *me* now," I cried, tears clogging my throat and blinding my eyes.

He faced me, but his eyes looked past me. *Pussy*.

"I *told you* shit was complicated. I told you I didn't want to be here. That moment when Loki's bike stopped in front of the gates and I realized— I realized I'd just been delivered to the gates of *hell*. This club... you motherfuckers... I never did *shit*

to any of you, all I wanted was to be left alone to live my own life. Instead, I got threats of a shallow grave in the woods, and I was still going to tell— FUCK!” I screeched out, frustrated beyond words. “And I *still* fucking stayed, because Addie needed me.”

He swallowed, visibly, his throat working and the tattoos rippling. And then he went cold. Remote.

Mechanical.

I was suddenly exhausted, and overwhelmed with feelings of loss. I’d tried so hard to earn their respect, their trust, their *affection* — I never fooled myself thinking they’d feel what I did, but I’d hoped they’d feel *something*. If they’d cared, wouldn’t it be harder for me to walk away? Wouldn’t Loki be out here? Rasputin? Instead, Magick banished me, and Tesla was reverting back to the machine I’d first met, to make it easier to deal with the problem I’d become.

I was alone again. But the one thing I could try to do, was not leave absolute destruction in my wake.

“I’m sorry, Tesla. I’m sorry I wasn’t who you thought I was. I was going to tell you everything.”

He turned his back and walked away.

I got into the car and slammed the door, getting myself together enough to put it in gear, but before I drove away, I rolled down the window.

“Burn him,” I croaked out, my throat raw from keeping all the pain inside, calling out to the man who waited at the door. His back was to me, his hand on the latch, waiting like he needed to know for sure that I was out of the gate and their lives before he could go inside. It was his job to make sure the problem was gone. “He wanted to be cremated. Send his cut to his wife like he died with honor. Give him that, please. He deserves that.”

For all the years he took care of me, he at least deserved that.

I saw Tesla’s head jerk in a nod out of the corner of my eye. I rolled up the window then let the car drift forward,

through the gates.

## CHAPTER FORTY

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HAMMERHEAD SAT ON HIS BIKE, engine off, watching me approach from the side of the road a mile from the compound. There was a curve there, and a graveled shoulder jutting out from the pavement, like it might've been a scenic turn-out in the Before Times. He was alone.

I crossed the lane and pulled in behind him, the hood of my vehicle facing the three foot-wide gap between the two low barriers on the rim of the drop-off, concrete pillars all of a couple feet high with a curtain of curved steel stretched between them, the only thing between the road and the edge of nothingness. After I stopped, I cranked the wheel so the tires pointed back toward the road, just in case, and stepped out of the car, approaching him warily. As I got close, I realized Beast's cut was strapped to the seat behind him. I couldn't stop staring at it. Tesla had given him that, without me even asking.

Hammer waited, silently watching me. I finally looked up and met his eyes.

"I'll never forgive them for what they did."

He looked away, but I'd swear I saw the corner of his mouth twitch into a smile. By the time he turned back to face me, his expression was solemn.

"Where are you going now?"

I shrugged. It was my turn to look away. "Back to where I came from, before I got dumped on your doorstep. I have responsibilities. People waiting for me."

“Come back with me,” he demanded, gruff and somber, like he was trying to be some kind of authority figure to me, ordering me around like he cared. Like he was trying to be my dad.

Not like my real dad, but one of those clichés one might see on television.

“Yeah... no.” Even if I hadn’t just escaped from there after being tortured, or there hadn’t been so much history gumming up the works, that place was *toxic*. With or without Beast. It would be worse without him.

My gut churned, thinking about what it would be like there without him.

*Fuck.*

I needed to deal with some shit before returning to Azzie. It couldn’t wait.

“Janie,” Hammer said in a tone that should be reserved for those sitcom dads of the ’80s and ’90s, and I sensed I was about to get a lecture of some kind, one loaded with folksy wisdom. Instead, I got lunacy. “He’d want you to be with family.”

Like all that shit from before never happened. Like they didn’t pull a “blood in, blood out” on me not even two months ago. Like Beast’s wife wasn’t a raging psychotic; like the club wasn’t a dysfunctional nightmare of such epic proportions, the Lannister family took notes.

“Once upon a time, *he* was my family.” I was proud of myself for pulling that off, for keeping my voice steady with just the tiniest hitch in it. For not losing my mind completely and collapsing under the weight that was trying to suffocate me.

Something changed then, what I said or maybe how I said it; whatever it was, it forced Hammer to reevaluate his approach. He studied me, his brow furrowed, like he was trying to figure something out. After a few moments, I looked away and wiped at my cheeks, scraping off the moisture that



wouldn't stop leaking from my eyes, but I could still feel the weight of his stare on me.

“Did you know that your grandparents were wealthy?” he finally blurted out, apropos of what-the-fuck?

“What?” I jerked back, not needing to fake the shock at what he was saying, let alone that that's what he'd settled on after all that observation.

“Your grandparents were wealthy,” he repeated, nodding his head. “Like stupid rich. Your grandfather's family owned a business in Chicago. He sold it for a lot of money when your dad was a young teenager, because John, your dad—” like I didn't know my own father's first name, “—was getting involved in a lot of bad shit in the city. Moved down to the middle of fucking nowhere to live modestly, thinking it might keep his kid out of jail, but he was sitting on a huge pile of cash. And ironically, your dad still found trouble no matter where he was.”

I scowled at him, not sure why the fuck he needed to tell me any of this *now*. “Great. Thanks for giving me some insight into my family—”

“Keep in mind, some of what I'm telling you, I know from being friends with your dad for so long, and some of it I only figured out later. You know who Cain was?”

I nodded, keeping my face blank. Magick's dad.

“Cain suspected John had gotten involved in shit behind the club's back, involving a cartel out of Mexico, so Cain recruited Beast from the San Diego chapter. They had a lot of experience holding their territory against the cartels, and Beast's uncle was their SAA and an old friend of Cain, so he trusted Beast. He asked Beast to go nomad, make his way to Illinois, and infiltrate our chapter to figure out what level of shit Preacher was up to. Try to minimize blowback on the club.”

He watched me, carefully, and I made sure I looked appropriately shocked and betrayed. I mean, I knew *most* of what he just told me: where Beast came from, who his family

was, and that he was recruited specifically to come to Jackson. Magick said his dad's shooting was retaliation after the club dealt with a member trafficking for a cartel, and I knew it was my dad even without Magick naming names. The only things I didn't know was that Beast had history with them, or that he was sent to investigate my dad or how fucking *important* that job was, since it was the stuff Beast would've considered club business.

I wanted to shake the man for keeping that from me, then I remembered that he was gone, and I didn't have to fake the small breakdown I had. I didn't care about Hammer right then, but all of it seemed to assure him that I had been completely oblivious.

“So Beast joins us, and time passes. Your dad had done some shady shit for bad people — people far worse than any of us — and he got in deep with them, then he got into *debt* with them. Your dad needed money, and he couldn't get it from the club. Your grandfather wouldn't give him any money, but your grandparents' untimely deaths should've solved his problems. He was counting on that money. He *needed* that money, except he wasn't the one who inherited. *You* were.”

I could hear my therapist's voice in my head, saying “There's a lot to unpack there.” Sometimes it made me think of moving boxes, stacked up in the hallways of my memory palace, needing to be emptied out and their contents distributed around to various rooms, thinning out the impact of each by separating it from the whole. Sometimes, it made me think of my brain as a cheap suitcase lying on the nylon bedspread of a rundown motel, filled with stacks of folded up memories that I could pull out and shove into drawers, then leave behind when I moved on. Maybe housekeeping would find a use for them, or maybe it would all just get bagged up and tossed in a dumpster, but either way, it was someone else's problem.

But the truth bombs Hammer just hit me with? There was a *lot* to fuckin' unpack there, and I wasn't sure I could ever leave it behind.

I understood what he was implying about my dad, and my grandparents. And me.

I opened the lid on that box, and the air was filled with clouds of parasites, an infestation of sin and corruption that scattered out into the world to plague humanity forever after.

I stood in the garden and bit down on the apple, and what little innocence I had left was stripped from me by a flood of knowledge and understanding, truths I was not prepared to hear.

How could anyone, ever, be ready to hear such evil?

I stared at Hammer, unable to make any response to the fresh hell he'd delivered me to. A bug flew into my mouth, and I began to cough and choke, trying to get it out; the feeling of legs and papery wings lingered in my throat long after I'd spit it onto the ground. He waited patiently.

"You good now?" At my nod, he continued. "You inherited their house and all their money, and it was all put in a trust until you were eighteen, so your dad couldn't touch any of it. And basically, he was fucked. Big time fucked."

I thought back, remembering how my already distant father became an adversary after my grandparents died, going from benign neglect to what felt like loathing. I hadn't been crazy or reading too much into things, he legit *hated* me. And I realized what Hammer wasn't saying, not out loud: my dad was my next of kin.

Hammer hid his eagerness, and his sick pleasure at thinking all of it was breaking me, but not nearly well enough. It was pure emotional manipulation, especially his fake-ass sympathy and stoic determination to give me the *truth* regardless of the consequences.

Unfortunately for him, he didn't stop talking when he should've.

"But Beast was there, and he protected you from John and Lulu. I knew he would. I'd figured it out, of course, knew from the moment Beast arrived because I knew his people,

where he'd come from. I guessed he was there for Preacher, and he wouldn't let anything happen to you."

Right then, I get a feeling, like something cold and slimy brushed against my skin. What he said, the way he said it... his tone. He wasn't trying to get credit in retrospect, claiming he knew something all along when he'd been just as blind as the rest of them.

People have an impulse to brag. To seem important, or just feel important, so they reveal shit that they shouldn't, not realizing what else they're giving away. It's the evil mastermind's monologue, the supervillain's origin story. It's the compulsion to *connect*, when you think you have all the control, so someone else might appreciate your genius. Someone who isn't a threat.

Someone tiny, with big blue eyes and an innocent face. Someone you still see as a child, even though they've never been one.

Hammer knew who Beast was but he kept that knowledge from Preacher *and* Cain, betraying his brothers and his club. He knew why Beast was there, which meant he knew what Preacher was doing. All along, he knew what my dad was involved in. My dad, and my mom.

The missing pieces.

The picture revealed.

He didn't understand — didn't *anticipate* — that one kernel of truth would draw back the curtain and expose everything. He handed me that fucking apple hoping a bite would break me, and the fallout would ruin everything and everyone around me, but what it did was open my eyes. Patterns came into focus, motives became clear.

It wasn't a garden I was expelled from, and I wasn't cast out naked and terrified, left to survive on my own. That had already happened, more than once. I wasn't being processed out from incarceration, either, and made to walk out that long corridor between fences and guard towers not knowing what was waiting on the other side. Back then, freedom was just a

dull flicker of hope trapped deep inside me, since anything good had always been spoiled or taken away.

But I didn't leave unprepared on my eighteenth birthday, and I wasn't unprepared now. I had a lifetime of experiences that led up to this moment, to guide me forward. I had skills, and I had instincts that I could trust.

I knew I would survive.

I opened the box, releasing sin into the world. I bit the apple, destroying a paradise of ignorance that masqueraded as innocence. That's where *those* stories end, but not my version.

The stories say that Pandora slams the lid shut, trapping hope within, leaving the world to suffer from her poor impulse control without the one thing that could ease their suffering. In my story, instead of sealing hope away from the people, Pandora *protects* her in any way she can. She nurtures hope, teaches her how to survive. Pandora makes hope strong and capable. Hope may be driven to right all the wrongs of the world, and willing to sacrifice herself for the good of others, but she has Pandora at her back to keep her grounded.

Men of God say Eve introduces Adam to disobedience, gets them both kicked out; she was her own person making her own choices in the garden, but after the expulsion, she's nothing more than uterus used to *begat*.

*My* Eve uses the knowledge she's gained to persevere, even as everyone around her blames her for their downfall. For having the audacity to make her own choices, her punishment is pain and sacrifice, but from it, she builds an empire. Her descendents are the root of human civilization. They learn from her how to navigate the world after the Fall.

I was made for this world. Men like Hammerhead think they're the apex predators, but they're the sheep — maybe rams, nominal leaders of the flock, but still sheep. I was the shepherd *and* the she-wolf. I was Eve and Pandora, and the thing that goes bump in the night.

Hammer's humble-brag was his downfall. He wanted me to know my dad's sins and his intentions; Hammer wanted to

watch me unravel while he savored his control. He'd known all of it, all these years, and it made him feel powerful to suggest that my survival as a child depended on his silence.

What he hadn't intend to reveal was that he'd undermined Beast since the beginning, using him to distract everyone else away from the truth. He proved himself disloyal to the man I'd once loved, and the men I still loved.

I loved them, but I'd made my choice, and I was going to live with my punishment for it because the world needed hope. Because there were so many girls who needed to learn they can survive.

I set aside everything, boxing it all up for later, and focused just on the gut-feeling I was getting in that moment, ignoring everything else that had come before. I packed it all away, until it was like we were two strangers meeting for the first time, and I let my survival instincts off the leash.

I locked up Janie, who had history with the man, and let out Mouse.

*Dangerous.*

Adrenaline surged through my system, my limbs tensing, the urge to act like an itch under my skin that I could never relieve. I forced myself to relax.

*Predator.*

The need to flee was as powerful as the desire to strike out, to crush him. To tear him limb from limb, render his face into a mass of pulp.

I fought it. I faked it. I hunched inward as though his words had struck a physical blow, my body trembling from the effort it took not to react. My stomach churned, roiling, and I felt light-headed.

He wanted my pain.

I gave him what he wanted.

I unraveled in his arms, giving him the barely-healed scars and the still-open wounds, the soundtrack of shame and despair. I cloaked my grief inside my old trauma, pouring both

of them out in one river of suffering; Janie came out to ride those rapids, while Mouse made sure we'd be a Last Girl.

I clung to him for comfort, disguising how it made my skin crawl to feel his touch; I sobbed in his embrace.

And I did what I had to, to survive.



I SAT IN THE DIRT, my back against a tire, holding Beast's cut. Hammer's dried nearby, spread out on the gravel in the weak sunlight and crisp air.

I salvaged whatever seemed useful from him and his belongings, then sent everything else rolling or tumbling over the cliff. It was a shame about his bike, but it was too big for me and I needed the car.

My brain was busy formulating a new plan: calculating outcomes, figuring out logistics, making lists. Enjoying the silence.

Everything else was numb.

And then I heard something thump in the trunk of my car.

After a moment, after my brain shuffled through every possible ghoulie, ghostie, or long-legged beastie that could be hiding inside, I got up and opened the driver's side door, reaching inside to hit the latch to pop the trunk. I circled around to the back and raised the lid, unable to believe what I was seeing. I'd been ready for almost anything else, except for what I found.

*"Goddammit, Addie, What the fuck are you doing?"*

The little girl, and the pit bull she was wrapped around, both raised their heads up and blinked at me.



“I’M SERIOUS, I’m going to beat your ass into next week as soon as we get there,” I threatened the little girl glaring at me in the rearview mirror. She was strapped into the seat with her one hundred and twenty pound pitbull guardian sitting up next to her watching the scenery pass by with a big doggie grin. She made a face at me, and I threw up my hand. “Well at least you’ve stopped pretending like you can’t understand every goddamn thing I say,” I huffed out, glaring at her again. “I knew from day one, by the way.”

“I know you did,” she muttered with her adorably thick accent, looking cross. What an ornery little shit — face and hair like a china doll but the attitude of a middle-aged biker. “Good thing too, your Polish is awful.”

“Fuck off, it is not!” I half-turned in my seat to burn her with the wrath of my laser eyes, and she made a motion for me to watch the road like a smug little a-hole.

God I was going to miss her.

Fucking hell.

“It is bad. But I still knew what you were trying to say,” she shrugged, petting Stringer Belle and pretending I wasn’t still mean-mugging at her in the mirror. “Where are we going?”

“Where we *should* be going, is right back up that mountain,” I snarked but then shook my head. “But I’m not any kind of masochist, so I’m talking you to Rasputin’s mom —”

“NO!” She kicked the back of my seat as she yelled at me, reaching her little T-Rex arms out like she was going to shake some sense into me.

“Yes,” I said, feeling utterly defeated. “I can’t take you away from them, Addie. They love you like—”

“They love you more,” she interrupted, her little face scrunched up and turning dark pink, “and you’re taking *you* away. I want to go with you. I don’t want to be there anymore.”



Not willing to argue with an eight year old over whether her guardians loved me or not, I fell silent and let her think she'd won the argument, right up until I pulled the car up in front of The Ranch.

And then I sat there, staring out at nothing, as that little angel had a tantrum that would power a city block for an hour if they could harness all that rage. A bunch of motorcycles passed by us, but since I knew instantly they weren't my men, I didn't even register anything past the group of men with one woman riding bitch, and the stab of regret that made my chest tight. I didn't even think to look at whether they were Apocalypse Riders, or what chapter was spelled out on the bottom rocker, habits that had been ingrained in me since birth.

Once Addie had exhausted herself, I got out of the car and opened her door. I lifted out her limp and passive body, carrying her to the front door of The Ranch with Stringer Belle trailing behind us. I knocked on the door, and Rhonda answered, taking one look and swinging it wide, pulling her mask down.

"Maude," she called out, "Get Fatima! Raz's girl is here with— Raz's other girl. I guess? I don't know how to address you people," she grumbled, closing and locking the door behind the dog. "Damn bikers and their weird titles."

I smirked, taking the opportunity to kiss Addie's head. Pretty soon, I wouldn't be able to ever again, so I needed to get my hits in now.

"You can sit in her office," Rhonda continued, leading us down the hallway all the way to the back, although she was eyeing the dog suspiciously. "That thing won't pee everywhere, right?"

"No, she's a good bitch," I winked at Rhonda who huffed and flounced off, leaving us alone in Fatima's lush office. It looked so much like her: pale cream silk wallpapering the walls; delicate, light cherry furniture with tasteful touches of gold and gilt scattered around. An abundance of plants and natural light made the room feel bright and fresh and

welcoming. I sat down on the subtly striped cream-on-cream loveseat with the ornately carved legs and rosettes, with Addie passed out on top of me, and Belle laying at my feet.

It was good just to hold her.

Fatima was there within minutes — almost too quickly — looking as if she had just stepped down off a catwalk during fashion week, rather than having been hanging out at home on a weekday afternoon. I wanted to be like her when I grew up, so elegant and graceful. She closed the door behind her and took a seat in one of the spindly looking chairs that sat in front of her desk.

“Hello, Mouse. This is a bit of a surprise,” she said in that honeyed-sex voice of hers, with the faintest trace of a Middle Eastern accent.

“Hi, Fatima. And yes it is. I’m... leaving the area,” I said, wincing at the emotions passing over her face: surprise, concern, regret, and a determination that made me very nervous. “I need to go, Fatima. I see that look — please don’t meddle here. Rasputin will explain everything soon enough, I’m sure, but you need to believe me when I say that this is necessary.”

“Bullshit,” she said, shocking the piss out of me because I never thought to hear a curse word pass over those perfect, scarlet-painted lips. “You cannot leave my son, Mouse. The others, feh. I’m less concerned with them,” she waved an elegant hand in a dismissive gesture, “but my son needs you.”

“To say it’s complicated is like calling the ocean a pond,” I said, my shoulders slumping. Addie stirred against me, curling tighter. “Whatever I feel about your son, or him about me, I have to leave. It isn’t just about us, there are more important things at stake.”

“Nonsense,” she waved that hand at me now, before placing her elbow on her crossed knees, and resting her chin delicately on her fist. “Fine. Convince me.”

I never got a chance to tell them my secrets. After agonizing over it for so long, I had no control over the

revelations that came out. The compulsion to confess to Fatima was overwhelming, and I was feeling reckless.

I knew she'd eventually tell them, but I also knew she'd use the information strategically, and I owed her for her kindness. For her understanding. From one inconvenient survivor to another.

I checked to make sure Addie was really asleep. Since she was drooling, I thought it was a pretty good sign.

“The place I’ve been living in since the pandemic started, it’s where the vaccine comes from. I’m... let’s say *involved* with its production. I need to go back there, because someone there needs me. And above and beyond that, I need to send the vaccine to your son. And— yes. Yes,” I decided, right then and there, “I’m going to send the package to you. When you receive something from me, open it and vaccinate your people — *all* of them — before giving the remainder to Rasputin. There will be enough for everyone, I’ll make sure of it.”

She was frozen in place. Halfway through my rambling, she'd straightened in her seat and her mouth had dropped, and now she was staring at me with eyes so wide, I could see the whites like a panicking horse.

“Something happened last night,” I explained, swallowing back the thickness in my throat. “And now I need to leave, more abruptly than I had intended. Once I was almost down the mountain, I discovered this stowaway and her little dog too. I couldn’t go back. I just couldn’t. I thought I could leave her here, with you, and ask you not to call them and tell them where she is until after I leave. I don’t want them to panic and search for her longer than necessary, but I really need to be—”

“Yes, of course,” she interrupted as I edged closer to losing my shit, in a hushed voice limned with sadness and concern. “Of course, I will respect your wishes. And I won’t say another thing about you staying. I’m so sorry, Mouse. I can see how hard this is for you, but I am also selfish, and the promise of immunity is too precious to give up.”

I nodded. “I know. Believe me. I took it for granted for a long time, but since I’ve been here... I’ve lived in fear for

those I came to care for, and every day as that number grew, so did my fear. Knowing how fragile—" I couldn't help it, my eyes drifted to Addie and that fear was cutting off my air, spots dancing before my eyes. I leaned forward, resting my head between my knees, until it passed.

When I finally regained some control, when I locked that fear away again, I found Fatima watching me with tears in her eyes. She stood up, abruptly, and smoothed her hands over her skirt. "I want to give you something, a memento. Say your goodbyes and wait for me in the parlor, will you please? I promise it won't take but a few minutes, and then I'll let you get on your way."

At my nod, she took herself gracefully from the room, and left me with my little girl.

She was mine. And now I was giving her up.

I fought back my tears and stroked her hair until she stirred, raising her head up and blinking at me.

"Mouse?" she was confused, but then she shook it off and looked around. Her face fell, and her beautiful blue eyes gathered moisture in them, ready to let loose a cascade of tears.

"Addie, I need to go. I can't take you with me. Where I'm going isn't safe, and Belle wouldn't be able to go with us. The place I'll be living in is underground and she would never be able to go outside and get any fresh air or sunshine, and neither would you."

"But you need that too!" she cried in a whiney voice that I both loved and hated. It reminded me so much of Azzie's voice when she was recovering from Janus, and realized her family was dead. It broke my heart and filled me with love at the same time.

"Not like the two of you," I said, hugging her tight against me. "Addie, I love you. You're my little girl, you'll always be my little girl, and I'm going to miss you every single day for the rest of my life. But I *have* to go, and you *have* to stay. I need you to take care of them for me, okay? Magick, and

Tesla, and Loki, and Rasputin, and Caliban. All of them. And Hazel, and Doc, and Brandy-Lynn... there's so many good people there who love you, and they need you too."

"They love you—"

Not enough to forgive me.

"I know, baby. But what I need to do... I'm the only one in the whole world who can do it. If it wasn't as important as it is, I'd find a way to stay close, but I can't. Do you understand?"

She didn't. Of course she didn't. She was eight years old, and she'd lost everyone back in Chicago; she was uprooted and moved here, and no one spoke her language. She'd been isolated, not getting the attention and connection she needed to survive let alone thrive in her new home.

I pulled her into my lap and held her as tight as I could with her still able to breathe. "Someday, kiddo, you're going to rule the world. And I'm going to tell everyone I meet that you weren't always a ruthless dictator, that I knew you back when you were a stinky little shit that hated brushing her teeth, and couldn't figure out shoelaces. And then your enforcers will come for me, and I'll be like *dude, she blew her nose into my hand once because we didn't have a tissue, you think I'm afraid of her?* And they'll let me go because you'll know it's true: I love you enough to touch your snot."

"I'd touch your snot too," she sobbed, breaking my heart all over again.

"Snot buddies for life, kid."

*Kid.*

We locked pinkies and sobbed like the badass club princesses we were, both of us feeling the loss of the person who'd made that crown fit. She collapsed against me, tucking her head under my chin. "Don't go."

I tried so hard, but I just wasn't fucking strong enough. I gasped, the pain so powerful and acute, I wasn't sure I'd survive this goodbye.

“I’m going to miss you, more than you’ll ever know until you have a little girl of your own.”

She pressed deeper against my neck, unconvinced and rubbing more snot into my skin and clothes, while more damn tears streaked down my cheeks.

“I’m going to put you down on this fancy couch now, and I need you to take a nap. Magick or Rasputin will be here to pick you up soon, I’m sure you’ll be home in time for lunch, okay? But I have to go.” I stood up with her in my arms, gave her a squeeze, then laid her down where I’d just been. “Love you, kid,” I said, smoothing back her hair.

“Love you, Mouse,” she mumbled through a giant yawn, and I leaned in and kissed her forehead like I’d done every night since I met her, and felt something tear open inside me. Something that would *never* heal.

Her eyes shut as the emotional upheaval put her to sleep, and I watched until her breathing was even and deep, and the tears had stopped leaking from her eyes. I opened the door and gestured to Belle to stay. She did, but I’ve never seen a more conflicted dog in my life.

I cleaned myself up in the bathroom. It took longer than it should, but I was a damn mess. When I was done, I made my way towards the front door, and Fatima stepped out from one of the side parlors as I approached, gesturing for me to join her. I ducked into the room and stood there, shifting from foot to foot as she crossed to a small table and picked up a square box the size of a cell phone. A regular cell phone, not a Tesla-sized one.

It made tears prickle in my eyes, so I thought about the sight of him walking away from me, across the courtyard. That made it a little easier.

“Open it later,” she advised, placing the box in my hands and then holding them in hers, keeping them clasped around her gift. “It won’t be easy, but— you shouldn’t forget.”

I nodded, incapable of squeezing words out of my throat. She released my hands, then lifted hers up, staring at one of

them blankly.

“Fatima? What’s wrong?” I asked, growing concerned.

She focused on me, her eyes flat and face cold. She’d gone from warm and loving to a viper ready to strike, in seconds.

“Mouse,” she said in an arctic voice, her face a deadly mask, “why is there blood on your sleeves?”

I winced, looking down at my hands. I’d left my coat in the car when I got out to talk to Hammer, and I’d thrown the hoodie I’d been wearing over the side, but I’d apparently missed that the cuff of my shirt had gotten soaked on the edge, and it had brushed against her skin, leaving a telltale smear behind. Addie probably had it all over her too, and Belle, and it was possibly on Fatima’s furniture—

“Answer me.”

I glanced up at her, and she had a small pistol pointed at me. I realized that she assumed the worst, that I had hurt one or more of *them* on my way out, and my protests wouldn’t convince her otherwise. She gestured, and I backed deeper into the room. Without taking her eyes from me, circled around until she reached the archway leading to the hallway, then slid the pocket door hidden in the frame shut, locking it. Her phone appeared in that hand, and I sank down onto the nearest seat, a velvet tufted ottoman, as she spoke to her son.

“Rinchen, is everything alright there?” There was a pause, then, “Yes, I understand. Anything else I should know?” Another pause, not very long. “Of course, club business. But everyone is fine—?”

I don’t know what he said, but she tucked her phone back into her pocket.

“My son assured me everyone is fine and accounted for,” her voice had warmed slightly, taken on an edge of fond exasperation. “Given the little girl asleep in my office, I find myself questioning his powers of observation, but not his sincerity. None of *them* are injured, but there are others— Where is the blood from, Mouse?” She asked as she moved to

an armchair in front of me, settling down and crossing her legs, letting the delicate little .22 rest on her knee.

I swallowed back my momentary hurt that my absence wasn't worth mentioning, or the concern that creased her face. She understood, quite well, what it feels like when you're just a dent in the sand as the tide comes in, erased from all memory in seconds as life goes on without you. "On the road down here, a man from my past was waiting. He was a danger to the club," I explained dully, as I concentrated on folding my cuff back until I could deal with the blood. It kept me from having to see her pity. "I did what I had to do, to protect us all." She huffed out a breath of disbelief, her hand tightening on the grip of the pistol, her finger moving to the trigger. I rested my hands on my knees.

"And how can I be sure you didn't forcefully take Adèle when you decided to leave, but came to your senses on the road?"

I pictured what damage it would take for Hazel to let someone take Addie away; she'd have to be unconscious and bleeding out before she'd give up. The only reason she hadn't already put out an amber alert, was that it was her morning off and she'd disappeared with Pumpkin well before Beast had showed up.

"There are two cuts on the passenger seat of my car, parked out front," I finally explained, knowing if I didn't, Fatima would call Rasputin back and tell him I was here with Addie. I was afraid they'd come here and try to stop me from leaving; I was equally afraid they wouldn't. "You can send someone out to look at them, at the names and the locations. I won't try to stop you, but please pick someone who won't gossip about what they see. It's important no one knows yet. You can call Rasputin to ask about the men, but please don't tell him anything, not yet."

"Beast and Hammerhead," she stated calmly, "those are the names on the cuts?"

I'd forgotten. The Ranch and the club and their symbiotic relationship. The cabins out back, used to quarantine visitors,



*all* visitors. She knew them — not just *of* them, she *knew* them — and now?

“A man from your past, but two cuts,” she mused, her hand relaxing. She studied me, something like recognition in her eyes. “And you, an inconvenient survivor. Tell me, Mouse, was Jayne Stone always your name?”

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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“I WAS friends with Cain for a very long time. Almost twenty years, before he died.”

After my initial shock had worn off, I remembered everything Rasputin had shared about his mom and his childhood, and how they came to be in Kingston, so I nodded.

“Rinchen and I moved here in 2003 to open this house, but I’d already known Cain for several years before that. When he killed himself, it devastated me, but I understood. There was a lot of weight on his shoulders, a lot of regrets. Many things that we talked about, when he’d come see me to get away for a time. After he was shot and paralyzed below the waist, he became severely depressed, and he stopped visiting, stopped allowing me to visit him, until just before... I thought he was feeling better. He seemed lighter, when I finally saw him again, but it was just the relief of having made the decision. All of the things he’d learned to live with had come back on him, and he could no longer stomach the guilt. One of his greatest regrets was what he did to Janie Skąła. What he allowed to happen to you.”

I don’t know what she saw in my face, what noises I might’ve made or how my body reacted, because I wasn’t conscious of anything in that moment, except the sound of her voice.

“He didn’t kill himself because of you, *that’s not on you*. He was a man used to power and control, who now felt powerless and helpless, and his past made him question his worth. He lost any hope for the future, believed himself

nothing but a burden, and his recovery gave him too much time to dwell on the past and live in his own head. He could no longer justify or ignore his decisions that he knew were wrong.”

“How— how do you know this?” I managed to get out through the thickness in my throat.

“As I said, we were friends.” Her tone ended that line of questioning, and she took a moment to set the gun aside and smooth imaginary wrinkles from her skirt.

“Magick doesn’t know,” I whispered, feeling my heart break for the man despite how angry I was. “You need to tell him. Everything you just told me. He doesn’t know,” I repeated as she paled, her ageless beauty transformed by a grimace of pain and guilt, betraying her years. “He believes in other reasons instead. He blames himself for it. You *have* to tell him what you know.”

She nodded, looking down at her hands. “I didn’t realize that. I will find an opportunity to tell him everything. I’ll *insist*. He’s always stopped me from talking about his mother and father, but I didn’t realize— I will insist he lets me speak.”

I nodded my thanks back to her, even though she couldn’t see. His *mother*? Jesus. Magick was going to need—

Not my place. Not my circus, not my monkeys.

Maybe Plum can— no.

“What— what did Cain do to me?” I finally choked out, ignoring the sick twist of jealousy in my gut and focusing on Fatima. She took a moment to move to a cabinet set into the wall, returning with a chilled bottle of mineral water. I uncapped it and gulped down half as she resumed her seat.

I think I expected to hear how he engineered my arrest and all of the machinations it took to convict me and send me away. How he protected his club brothers at the expense of a little girl, even after ordering the killings I’d be charged with. I wanted to hear that, wanted to be able to blame him, and by extension, blame *them*. Blame the whole club, for that matter.

Have her justify all these years of hate, but what she confessed was even worse.

“He left you with your father,” she said, looking away. “Even knowing what Preacher was capable of.” I wondered if she knew about my grandparents. “He left you at that club with Preacher and Lulu. And even after seeing—” she trailed off, and the placid mask she wore was disturbed by the wrinkle between her brows, and how her lips flattened. It made her uncomfortable, what she knew. “He left you with Beast.”

“I don’t— what? What are you talking about? Seeing what?”

“He talked about you, talked about the incident many times, when he was dwelling on the past and came to me to lighten his burden. There was a Memorial Day party, at your father’s chapter, after the annual ride-out. When you—” She paused, shaking her head, but wouldn’t look at me. “You were at the party, mixed in with the club girls. He didn’t see you, not until you danced with Ian. Beast caused a scene— it got ugly. It was then that he recognized you, realized who you were. How *old* you were.”

“What?”

I remembered that night. Of course I remembered. It was my twelfth birthday, it coincided with the annual ride-out, and the party— It was the night the girls treated me like one of them: they dressed me up and did my makeup, shared drinks with me, and encouraged me to dance with them outside, by the bonfire, instead of hiding in the corner. I danced with a prospect from another club... I’d thought he was a prospect, he wasn’t that much older than me, his face smooth. It was dark, and I was upset. Beast had a girl on the back of his bike for the ride-out, and I was sick with jealousy, so when the strange boy moved his body against mine in the crowd, I closed my eyes and let him. He—

Oh God. It *was* Magick.

It was Magick, and he’d kissed me, and Beast saw. He sent me upstairs to wait in his room. He brought that girl up with

him. And then later, he'd kissed me for the first time on the mouth, but he told me it was because he needed to get that other man's taste off my lips.

My first real kiss had been Magick. And I'd been punished for it, I'd had to watch Beast with that girl.

But... it got ugly? "What do you mean it got ugly? I got sent away right after—"

"Cain never knew what happened exactly, Ian wouldn't tell him except that Beast was... possessive of you. All he knew was that there was a fight. There was always bad blood between the two of them after that, and Cain realized you were in the middle of it. He never told Ian who you were, didn't want him to have one more thing to hold against Beast, but he — he blamed you for it, even knowing you were just a child. He blamed you for the conflict between his son and his old friend, someone he trusted. And he realized then why Beast hadn't resolved the issues with Preacher yet, that it was because of you."

I wiped my hand over my face, trying to scrub away the absurdity of the situation. Because she was done, I knew that. That was all she had to say.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I whimpered, rolling my eyes and feeling absolutely exhausted. Defeated.

Un-*fucking*-believable.

"That's what he felt guilty for?" I let out a sick chuckle, a pathetic sound. "For leaving me with my dad?" I didn't have to see her nod to know it was true, but she did nod. Cautiously. Like *I* was the ticking bomb here, not the fucking body it was strapped to. "Not for having them killed? My parents? Not for having Beast show up at my house in the middle of the night, shoot them, *hurt* me, and then put the full power of the club behind setting me up to be charged and convicted for the murders? Did you know about that? Did he ever talk about that? Explain why? Why they couldn't just make everything disappear, why there needed to be someone to take the blame, and how they stripped away all the protections of the club

when they did so? Do you know what happened to me in juvie, when the club turned its back?"

My voice had risen, strained and high-pitched, and she was eyeing me like I was— like I was hysterical. Like I was losing my mind.

"Janie," she said kindly, placing her hand on my knee in some kind of reassurance, like what she was about to say was helpful. "That wasn't him. That wasn't the club. Beast needed you put away, that was his payment for the hit. Whatever you did to them on your way here, he deserved it. He wanted you to be blamed for the murders, he set you up, and then he took over your father's club."

I didn't want to believe it. I didn't want to believe her. She had to be lying.

She had to be.

He wouldn't do that to me.

He wouldn't hurt me—

I needed to leave. I needed to get out. I couldn't be here anymore, I couldn't be anywhere. I couldn't be near people. I needed to—

I needed to shut down.

Stop feeling.

At least until I was away from this place.

I would leave. I would leave and then I would find a place to pull off the road, and I would fall apart then. I'd find a place where I could let it out, where I could take a lead pipe to a swimming pool full of trash, and not stop until everything was dust around me.

That's what I'd do.

I got to my feet, and I moved away from Fatima, who didn't try to stop me. It took a few tries, but I unlocked the door and slid it back, heading blindly into the hallway and towards the exit.

Someone began to knock, loudly, and my instincts screamed that it was one of them. I cursed myself for leaving the car out front, because now I couldn't sneak out the back and pretend I wasn't here.

I froze in place, in the middle of the entrance hall, staring at the door blankly as the pounding continued. Jessica scurried past me to answer it, shooting me a confused glance. And I was still there, frozen, when she opened the door and instead of Magick or Rasputin, I saw *Tai*.

It was Tai.

Tai was in the doorway in a cut, asking Alicia if she'd ever heard of a girl named Mouse. Or if someone could give them directions to the Apocalypse Riders' clubhouse in the area.

*Tai.*

"Tai?" I asked, my voice cracking, and his eyes shot up, peering into the dim hallway from the brighter outside.

"*Mouse?*" he cried out, pushing past Jessica. He rushed down the hall towards me, shouting, "MOUSE? Holy fuck! Holy shit! What—you're here! You're really here! We've been looking for you—" He grabbed me up in a tight hug and swung me around, shouting, "Azzie!" while walking both of us toward the door. "*Azzie, she's here!*"

And that's when Jessica threw the door shut, slammed the locks in place, and shook her head. "Not sure who the *fuck* you are, but you aren't taking her anywhere," she snarled, reaching behind to pull a gun from the waistband of her snug cigarette pants, and pointing another dainty .22 right at him. Did every employee have their own super-cute weapon? "Step away from him, Mouse. None of them are masked, and there are Hellspawn out there. This is some kind of trick! *Fatima, call Raz!*" she shouted, motioning with the gun. "Back the fuck away from her, I don't care if you know her or she knows you. Back - the - fuck - away."

"Jessica," I held up my hand, stepping more fully in front of Tai. "It's okay. This is my friend. Jesus... Azzie's outside, these are more than friends. Jessica, please put the gun away

and open the door, let her in. All of us are immune, I promise you.”

“What is going on?” Fatima asked from the parlor doorway, a phone in her hand.

“Please don’t call him,” I begged her, shaking my head. “What I was telling you before, about where I’m from? This changes things. Please don’t call him, not yet. Not until I know what’s going on.” She studied me, then Tai, a frown wrinkling her brow. She focused on his hands, still on my shoulders from when he foolishly attempted to move me behind him when Jessica pulled the gun, and I shook my head. “It’s not what you think.”

“Ma’am, please listen to her. We’re Mouse’s friends, we’ve been trying to find her for months... please let our friends in, my girl is probably having a seizure out there trying to get to us,” he said in that rich, soothing voice of his, the low rumble that makes women want to purr like kittens.

“Wait— *your girl?*” I stared at him in shock then threw up my hand for a high five. “Fan-*fucking*-tastic! I can’t believe you got to her before those damn triplets—”

“Uhh,” he snapped his mouth shut, looked around at the crowd of scantily clad women gathering around us from every doorway and the stairs, and shrugged. “Why should she choose? She’s got us all. My brother too.”

“FUCK YEAH!” I shouted, rushing for the door, pushing Jessica and Alicia out of the way. Jessica tucked her gun back into her pants, rolling her eyes, while Alicia just shook her head and leaned back against the wall with her arms crossed. I started slamming locks around and tugging at the doorknob, hearing voices on the other side of the door but unable to make out what was being said, until Alicia took mercy on me and pushed my hands away, flipping a few dials and then twisting the knob. The door popped open, revealing my bestie, looking better than I’ve seen in *years*.

“Triplet sex has done wonders for your health,” I stated after we just stared at each other for an eternity, my eyes finally darting around the four men surrounding her. Jesus.



They were... *hot*. I mean, not like some men I knew, but still. "Is it really an orgy if they're basically the same person but duplicated? You must be Tai's brother," I said, eyeing the handsome devil. "Bumblebee, right? Like the Transformer?"

Not sure why, but that caused Sev to bark out a laugh and poke his stern looking counterpart, whose cheeks tinted pink even as he glared at his brother.

"Sure is, Hamster," Tai's brother replied, smirking at his cleverness.

I gave him a chin-tilt of acknowledgment for his sick burn before turning on the only other one I knew. "Hi, Five Stars, how's it going? Still a firm handful? I'm gonna need to compare it to your brothers, see if you're *really* identical triplets."

"Fucking hell, Mouse," Azzie shook her head at me. "Can you stop sexually harassing my boyfriends for five seconds and *hug me*, you evil gash?"

"Always a lady, amirite?" I managed to get out before I burst into tears, and dragged her into the house and into my arms.

In my defense, she was sobbing just as hard.



IN A PERFECT WORLD, I could've stayed there with my best friend.

We could've caught each other up completely, on everything that had happened in the last two months, and figured out where to go from there. We could've sat down, maybe had a meal together, and she could've told me how any of it was possible, how she was in Colorado with five men that we'd suspected were enemies but were clearly completely gone over her.

How they could possibly be so close, so in tune with each other, that the six of them seemed to anticipate every need that each of them had.

She didn't need me anymore.

Not for protection. Not for companionship. Not for— not for anything.

She'd moved on.

Everyone moved on, leaving me behind. The only one that couldn't move on, *wouldn't* move on from me... he'd be nothing but ashes within a day or two.

They were together, all of them. There was no room for me.

I cried a little, but there wasn't much left in me to give. I held her while she cried, but it was just out of relief. She was calm again, fast.

She was so happy with them. She was happy, and healthier, and free.

I couldn't take that away from her.

I couldn't ruin it.

I couldn't dump all my pain on her.

*I can't. I can't do this.*

"I have to go," I gasped, pulling back from her. My chest hurt and breathing was hard, but I forced myself to keep doing it. "I can't— I have to go."

"What?" She was so confused. So angry and so hurt. No matter what I did, I was ruining it. I was fucking up, but I couldn't stay. It hurt so bad.

It hurt so bad to realize I wasn't necessary after all.

"Please let me go," I begged, and her face crumpled, the anger draining out of her.

"What happened?" She wouldn't let go of me, she was forcing me to tell her something. "What did they do to you?"

I wanted to ask who, then I realized all she knew was that I disappeared from Salem.

I wished it could be all she ever knew.

“I can’t talk about it, not right now,” I amended, seeing that stubborn jut of her chin. “Please. Give me time. I’m not—I wasn’t ready for this. I wasn’t ready to see you yet.”

She frowned, her face flushing. “Were you ever going to come back? Or just disappear for good? I know you’ve been lying to me!”

“I swear I was coming back. I swear it. But there’s something I have to do first now, something important—“

*And I can’t be here with you. I can’t see how much you don’t need me anymore. It might kill me to have to see how thoroughly I’ve been replaced.*

I didn’t say that out loud, because I couldn’t be weak. She’d only let me go if I was Mouse.

Fearless. Unfeeling. Cavalier.

“Seriously, Aez,” I shook my head at her, making a face. “Five of them? I need some time to wrap my head around *that* if nothing else.”

I ignored Alicia’s snort. God, I was such a hypocrite.

And a little voice inside my head spoke up, saying of course she got to have — and *keep* — *her* five bikers. Of course she did. She deserved all the good things.

And I deserved to be alone.

It was his payment for the hit, after all, for me to be cast off. So he could be free of me.

“I need to go.” My head was a jumble, my chest was in a vise. I think she was trying to talk to me, but it was taking everything in me just to keep from falling apart. “I can’t do this,” I whispered, bowing my head, hugging myself with shaking arms. “I can’t. This hurts so bad.”

“Mouse,” she begged, “talk to me. Tell me—”

“Someone I love was killed.”

“Oh God,” she covered her mouth, eyes impossibly huge and filling with tears. For me. Because she cared. “What can I do? I feel so helpless but—”

“Go up the mountain,” I interrupted, my voice stronger. Determined. “After you vaccinate everyone here, especially—there’s a little girl. She’s—“ *Mine*. She’s fucking *mine*. “—important to me. Take care of them here, please do that for me, then go up the mountain. Fatima will take you. Please, vaccinate them all. Everyone. Make them take you to the farm, get everyone from the fields. Please do that for me. I need to know they’re safe. I just want them to be safe. They’re—*important* to me.”

“Who?” I must’ve looked panicked because she instantly back-pedaled, assuring me it would all be taken care of. “Everyone, I promise. Here, and up there, wherever that is.”

“Thank you,” I gasped out, my breath hitching, so grateful to know I wouldn’t have to be so afraid for them, not anymore. They’d all have options, every one of them. “Thank you.”

“Mouse, please don’t leave—”

“I have to, Azzie. There’s something I have to do, it’s important. Something nobody else will.” Because no one else knew. Because no one else would believe what they’ve been doing. I didn’t even understand, not until Hammerhead. And it was more important than even what Fatima told me. I couldn’t fall apart, not yet. “There are loose ends that I need to tie up.”

“I’ll go with you, we’ll help you. Mouse, please—!”

“Jane,” I interrupted her again. “My real name is Jane Skala. Tell them— tell them—” I looked around the crowded hallway, at all the faces watching the drama unfold, the ears listening.

And what I had to say was club business.

Alicia found me some paper and a pen, rolling her eyes and muttering about secrets. I wrote out my note to Magick, and folded it up. Azzie put it in her pocket, and I knew she wouldn’t read it, and that she’d give it to him immediately.

I gave her another hug, taking a moment to feel how different her body was: still thin and a bit frail, but not nearly what it had been. She’d gained weight, she was stronger.

They were good for her, better than I had been.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

When they met her, once they understood, they could let me go. And I wouldn’t have to see them turn from me, I wouldn’t have to know when they moved on. They would forget me long before I could forget them.

What was there had been built on lies and secrets, and the truth was that I would become a stain on their souls. No matter what they thought now, I would become the regrets that haunted them, the past they couldn’t get out from under. There was too much to overcome.

I’d played at a future that was impossible; it was only ever a beautiful dream.

I left her there, running down the steps and away from the porch without stopping, not when she yelled for me, not when they all poured out the door to watch me run away. I was in the car and pulling away from the curb when Belle pushed past the crowd of people spilling off of the porch and raced across the lawn after me. I slammed the brakes, pushing the cuts off the seat to the floor as I threw open my door, and leaned back enough that the buck twenty of muscle and sinew could sail over me and stick her landing on the passenger seat.

After that, we were nothing but a memory.



TWO HOURS LATER, when I’d gotten some kind of grip on myself, when I thought I could get through a few minutes of conversation without breaking down, I pulled over to the side of the highway and reached for that ancient, shitty burner phone I’d carried with me off the rez. Tesla must’ve ordered it to be left in the car, along with the box of supplies and blankets on the floor of the backseat, and a couple full gas cans in the trunk where Addie had been hiding, something I couldn’t even think about.

He didn’t want me dead, only gone. I respected that.

I dialed the only number stored in the contacts. “Hi, is Vernita there?”

“Mouse?”

“Vernita? Hey. You sound different.”

“I’m on the sat phone. They finally returned it to me, and I forwarded the other number to it, just in case. What’s up, squirt? Everything okay?”

I hesitated, finally stammering out, “No, I’m— No. But I can’t right now, okay?”

There was silence for a long time, then she asked, “Are you in trouble?”

“No, nothing like that,” I let out a pained chuckle. “I’m just sad.”

“That’s just a different kind of trouble, Mouse. What can I do?”

“Nothing, not for that. But I do need a favor. I’ll make it worth your while, if you can put me in touch with the right people.”

“Talk to me.”

# EPILOGUE

*Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too.*

*They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.*

STEPHEN KING

---

## CALIBAN



WHEN I LOST my wife and my unborn baby, I died with them. The best parts of me died with them.

I lost my ability to laugh, or feel humor or joy. I lost my ability to hope, or see any future except an endless expanse of gray. I lost my ability to care.

Caring about anyone or anything meant feeling connected to them. It meant feeling as though anything had a connection to me. For the longest time, it was better— safer— no. No, *comforting* to think that I was a pebble tossed into an ocean: I could die and life would bear the tiniest ripple before I disappeared completely, like water closing in to fill the hole as if I'd never even passed through.

Within a year, I was back to a version of my old self. Between Raz, Adèle, and the club, I connected; I had inescapable bonds of family.

Mags was my silent drinking companion, working through his own grief and anxieties, never pressuring me, but not leaving me alone to slip beneath the surface. Loki was a wall to beat against, working out my rage on his flesh in the ring. Tesla... T was the best thing for me because he acknowledged my loss but didn't recognize anything had changed; he treated me exactly the same as ever. Raz was my grief, but T was my normalcy, letting me see no matter what happened, I was still Caliban. I was still myself.

Just a different version.



Not a man Elise would even recognize. Not the man who loved her, with a future with her and our family. I was still myself, but I was a man who'd lost everything and kept going.

I was a survivor.



MOUSE CAME HERE as a fully formed person, not needing to be molded or shaped into a woman who'd fit here with us. From the moment she arrived, she was the sword that pierced into the center of the stone, and what seemed immutable realigned around her. We reshaped our world to fit around our new center, the heart that we hadn't recognized was missing. What had seemed so impenetrable gave way and opened to her as if we'd been waiting, all of us — *all of us* — all our lives, for her to take her rightful place.

And she found her place here. I know she did. Impossibly, the blade sheathed itself within solid rock, as if finally coming home after years of wandering. After years of being used by other hands, for other purposes, but now it could rest in the one place it would always fit.

The Caliban I'd become, recognized her. The man who understood loss, who learned how to live again after everything good had been stripped away, knew her.

One survivor to another.

I saw the weight she carried with her, always, so familiar she no longer notice it. I saw how it pressed down on her, how it shifted with every move she made to always keep her off-balance. It pushed the air from her lungs, forcing her to her knees where she'd struggle to keep breathing. It settled over her at night, like a blanket made of lead and thorns.

She needed to be here with us. We'd slowly, day by day, break off pieces of that burden she carried, until one day, she'd be free of it. One morning, she'd wake up and realize that she could breathe without pressure, and she could move without thinking carefully about every step.

I thought that, given time, she'd settle into place and let the stone reform around her, holding her within and letting her rest, suspended — carried — by her new home. A thousand men could come to wrest her from us, but she'd be secure within the impenetrable bedrock we'd formed, a foundation to build cities and empires upon.

I thought that the hope that sparked inside me against the bakehouse wall, lit up a landscape around us now saturated with color. Even if she still struggled to get to it through the fog, she felt it too.

But what we had, it wasn't what I thought.

Her burden wasn't ours to lift. All we could do was add to it.

We weren't her home, we were her prison, trapping her shining steel blade away in the dark. We weren't protecting her, we were suffocating her, blocking any air or light. Steel wasn't meant to find a home in stone, it wasn't meant to be hidden away and kept static; swords must be wielded, their beauty and their purpose inextricably bound.

One can't exist without the other; unused blades become rusted and dull. They cause more damage than good.

I didn't want to see it. I'd thought—

It didn't matter, I'd been wrong.

If I hadn't been, then one man couldn't simply step up to the stone, place a hand on her, and tug her free.

A man we then took to his knees, rested his neck on the stone, and used the blade he'd just loosened to execute him.

My brothers didn't understand what it meant to lose everything. They grieved for friends, parents, even siblings, but not all hope and any future you might've had as the person you'd just been, a person now gone forever. You became a new version of yourself between one heartbeat and the next, one that needed to relearn how to navigate through a world so empty, with the weight on your back so heavy.

It didn't matter that she'd run from him. It didn't matter that it had felt, to us, like the piece that had always been missing finally slipped into place. Their story was still being written, and it wasn't for us to end.

I knew why Magick took the shot. I knew it was because of Adèle, and all the little girls he couldn't protect from the monsters dissatisfied with staying under the bed. It was because of the past, who Beast was, and the pictures Tesla took of her when she arrived, lying unconscious on Doc's table: the bruises and cuts, the burns— the X-rays showing all the healed breaks.

And I knew it was because no one else had ever reached inside Magick's chest, took his heart in her hand, and treated it like a fragile gift that needed protecting. She challenged his mind, excited his body, and crushed his ego. He didn't stand a chance.

And even though his was the finger on the trigger, it could've been any of us. It *would've* been any of us. He got there first.

Beast was dead the moment he called her name — a name *none* of us knew — and she looked at him with that soul-crushing fear, that heart-breaking hopelessness, and all - that - love.

It was the love we couldn't live with, and we were so fucking stupid.

We'd let ourselves forget the sword didn't grow and take shape within the stone. She came to us as a fully formed person. She fit into the space we made for her, she didn't change to suit what existed here. She had a history, a life before us, and she'd come to us already carrying the weight of the world on her back.

He called her name and we stopped him from taking her from us, in the one way guaranteed that we'd lose her forever.

She couldn't stay here, not after that.

My brothers didn't understand that the Mouse we knew and loved was gone now. The person who left wore her face,

had her name, but wasn't her. It was a different version of her, one we didn't have ties to. None that were good, at least.

She had to relearn how to navigate this world with so much more weight on her shoulders. It would be a miracle if it didn't destroy her, press the life out of her like the stones they piled on a witch's chest.

She had to decide who she was willing to be now, whether there was room for anyone else in what was left of her heart. Whether she could stomach any connections, and what they might be. I didn't think they'd include us.

I'd hated the man long before I knew who Beast was to her, because of who he was to us. It was ironic, in a way, that the death of a person I'd despised could hit me almost as hard as the death of my wife and child.

Because once again, I was left in an endless landscape of gray, all hope and joy disappearing from my life the moment his heart stopped, and the Mouse I knew died with him.

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TESLA



I NEVER FORGET. I never forget anything.



THERE COMES a time in every man's life when he must choose. Right or wrong. Good or bad.

Bros or hos.

Club... or everything else.

My mother chose: she left.

I was twelve years old. She was tired of my old man beating on her, so she split. I didn't blame her, but it sucked. It sucked for me, especially, because my old man— well, he needed someone to beat on.

My old man chose: first her, then me. I was an easy target. I came up during a time when they still slapped labels on people like me, and that's all my old man needed to justify anything. That, and a club at his back.

The club chose. As always, it chose its own.

My father beat me into a coma, because the club dictated that a man's family was his business. The club ignored all the signs until my brain was swelling in my skull.

Loki— still Atticus then. He chose. Ian chose.

They chose me.

Ian held Uncle Dell back while Atticus beat my father close to death.

Once I was able, I chose to end him.

We weren't club yet, so the club couldn't answer. When Dell called for retribution, Ian clapped back: a man's family is his business.

I didn't want to patch in, not to a club that would keep to the sidelines and let a man beat on his woman, his kid. Ian and Atticus asked me to stand with them, said together we'd change things. We'd be a club worth choosing, or we'd walk away.

I chose, but it wasn't the club. I chose them.

We'd been playing the long game up until then, when everything was still theoretical. Once we were in, the game was afoot. The club was changing in a thousand small ways every day, because we were *making* it change, and none of them even knew. We worked in the shadows — and by that, I mean, we worked electronically. Most of them were still stuck in the past, had no idea what we were doing. We could talk about it openly and they couldn't follow.

Not that Cain was bad, he wasn't. He just came up during a time with labels, when loyalty to the club meant following orders blindly. Doing things the way they'd always been done. He didn't know any better, not until we showed him.

But it was too late for Janie Skała. No one had chosen her.



I NEVER FORGET.

Not anything.

I knew her the moment I saw her face. I'd seen her once before. Just a child, but that face... I'd know her anywhere.

She showed up on our doorstep, and I thought it was for revenge.

At first.

If not revenge, then why? *How?* All of it seemed so unlikely.

But all of it... It was her, and she was terrified, and I knew it wasn't a trick. The impossible became the possible.

And she— she became *everything*.



KOMO WAS THE CLUB LAWYER.

He remembered her too. How could he not? He'd handled all the logistics: the bribes, the intimidation, the alibis.

He gave her to the system, and the club gave him Detroit.

I saw his face when she sat down at the table, so focused on her plate of food that she didn't notice his skin go pale, his eyes darting between us. I buried my attention in my phone, let him think I didn't see.

I wanted him to wonder. I wanted him to guess.

I wanted him to think we didn't know, because *we* didn't.

*I* knew.



THERE COMES a time in every man's life when he must choose, and he doesn't realize it, but the decision changes everything. It sets him on one path or another. What happens after— in hindsight, it's all inevitable.

Beast made his choice fourteen years ago, and every moment after that led to the bullet in his skull. He followed orders, he demanded his price, and he turned his back.

He let her fall into darkness for *years*.

The club chose to tie her to the stake and watch her burn for the sins of her father. Anyone with a grudge — against

him, against us — they knew she was fair game. I saw the X-rays; all those broken bones.

But she survived. She flourished, even. She had a life far removed from her past, free from the ghosts that could haunt her, and then one night, she showed up at our gates with Loki riding bitch behind her. And far from a trick, she was a *gift*.

I'd like to think that we chose better.

I'd like to think so, but we didn't.

We didn't choose her.

Last night, we didn't choose her. I hope, for our sakes, it wasn't the decision that would cost us everything. I hope it was just one small decision among many, that our path had already been set for us, because *we didn't choose her*.

And I still don't know why.



“I'M SORRY, *Tesla*. *I'm sorry I wasn't who you thought I was.*”

She wasn't wrong. She was so much more.

She said she'd been delivered to the gates of hell when she came here, and I guess that made us devils.

She wasn't wrong then either, that's what we are. And to those that cross us, this was hell. This was where they come to suffer for their sins.

The only thing she missed was that we're also *hers*.

*Hers*, until the day I die, and then I'd continue to haunt her like one of the creatures she's convinced lurk in the shadows.

Silly, precious girl.

My Pinky.

I walked away because I knew it wasn't the time. There was work to be done first. I had to explain things to them, things they didn't understand about the past. Magick would



need motivation to get over his issues, as would she. Preparations needed to be made. Work would have to continue while we were gone, hunting down our wayward love.

I touched the screen of my phone, pulling up the tracking app. I watched the dot representing her vehicle leave Kingston, heading north.

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# LOKI



NEVER SAW the point in talking much until Mouse. Other people fill the air with unnecessary words, just to hear their own voice it seems, a thousand words to make a point when they only need one or two. The right words.

Then she came along, and lord knows she liked to chatter, but it wasn't useless sounds. Even when she spoke in code to Tesla, in the language only they understood, it wasn't idle or pointless. Her words connected to him, tethering him to her; tethering him to us, in ways he didn't fight. She filled the air between them with her chatter and he couldn't resist responding in kind.

She heard me, gave me a reason to talk. She heard him, gave him a reason to connect. We had T's presence in a way that we hadn't in years: at every meal, even in the club room at night.

When no one else listened, she did. In her own way. Turned out to be what we were missing.

I told her again and again that I could be patient. From the moment I hit the pavement and she crowded up on me, ready to bring me back from the dead if necessary, we were end-game. Reckless in her lack of fear, but it was her lack of judgment — not common sense, but judging others — that made her ours. Everything we threw at her, she responded with “and?” like it was all just... okay. Nothing worth fussing over.

Mouse was my — *our* — future and I gave no fucks about her past. It weighed on her, those secrets she kept. Whatever

happened to her was more than any one of us knew, but not more than we all knew collectively. Each of us carried a part of it, one part of the whole that burdened her. Each of us understood one part of the weight that crushed her, and that's why she needed us, all of us. We'd fix what we had a hand in breaking, we'd hold her up when it all tried to drag her down.

She'd see, when we brought her home. We'd make her understand she doesn't have to carry any of it alone. One of us will always be there to share it with her. She wasn't ready before, to understand it in her bones, to trust it, so I waited.

If I gotta crack a few skulls to let some sense in— namely Magick bein' a little bitch, and Cal thinking their grief was the same when *it wasn't* — I got no problem with that either.

I was done being patient.

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## RASPUTIN



SHE LEFT.

Cal said she was planning to sneak out, not say anything to anyone, but he and Mags were in the kitchen getting drunk when she went looking for a bottle for water. She ripped their hearts out and stomped them into dust on her way out the door.

She loved *him*. Beast.

If Mags hadn't shot him, I'd been five seconds away from using my machete, and I didn't even understand what everything meant like he did. I didn't know that the question he asked confirmed what that fucker had done years ago, I was going to kill Beast for what he did *now*.

She came to us weeks after she got away from him and she'd still been limping, ribs tender, with a second-degree burn on her arm. I met her even later, and bruises still covered her body.

She loved him. How could she love him? He was her *abuser*.

She was a year older than Adèle when she met him, and he insinuated himself into her life. Growing up how I did, I knew fucking *grooming* when I saw it; he figured out what she needed and made sure he was the one who gave it to her. Made her dependent on him. And she called it love.

I would've happily chopped him up into bits and fed him to my dogs.

And afterwards, I wanted to go track her ass down and drag her back here. I'd lock her in a fucking kennel if I had to, because she didn't get to leave. She doesn't get to leave us.

She loved him, but *we* love *her*.

Mags was all fucked up at the moment because of his dad, but he'll be on the same page soon enough, once he stopped reliving the horror show. I couldn't fucking believe it was her dad that started the war with the cartel. Preacher betrayed the club and put everything in motion. We all knew about Beast and Preacher, and the hit, and how Preacher's kid took the fall, but we didn't *know*. We didn't know about the whole fucking mess or what happened to her. And it shouldn't matter who it was, but it does. It matters that it was her that went to hell for our sins.

We couldn't ever make it right. We couldn't go back in time and take her away from Preacher, put her someplace safe where she could grow up happy and cared for, never thinking she was trash to be thrown away. We couldn't protect that little girl from Beast, but we could protect the woman — *our fucking* woman — and we did. She was hurting now, but she'd figure it out, because she was *smart*.

My woman was so fucking smart.

My phone vibrated in my pocket *again*. It had to be my mom because the only other people who contacted me were sitting in the empty club room around me, trying to figure out what to do. Mags was still in denial, telling us to let her go, but not a fucking one of us was listening to him, not even him. He was fucked up now, but he'd be even more fucked up later if he let her slip away, and he knew that deep down. Despite having to relive everything with his dad, he still knew she belonged here with us.

Well, Tesla wasn't talking. He was staring at his phone screen. I tried to see what was on it, but he moved it away. I thought it was a map.

This was the third time Mom had contacted me, and I'd sent the second call to voicemail, but this was a text and not a call. I'd been a little abrupt with her before and then ignored

her, but I'd been in the middle of a crisis. I resigned myself to calling her back to make nice and slipped my phone out to check the message, doing a double-take and checking it again. Stared down at the screen like the words were going to reassemble themselves into something that made sense.

"My mom is coming," I said, interrupting one of Cal's long-winded monologues about traffic cameras and infrastructure, whether local law enforcement still existed and what we could tap into. Security stuff. Didn't seem like the time.

"Not today," Mags growled in a tone that informed me I was an idiot, something I didn't appreciate one bit.

"She's bringing Addie home," I said, giving him my middle finger. "The little shit tried to leave with Mouse—"

"Don't call her that," Cal said automatically, and I shrugged.

"Which, Addie or little shit? Know what? Doesn't matter. Mouse calls her both names, and Addie prefers them, so that's what I'm calling her. Fuck off if you don't like it, I don't care. Also, my mom is bringing guests."

"The fuck?" Mags wasn't hungover. He was still drunk, and he was giving me that look he gets that makes me want to ruin his pretty face. "No. NO! Not today, not—"

"They're already here, okay? And she says this is important. My mom doesn't fucking come up the mountain for nothing, you asshole, so shut the fuck up and let's go figure out what's going on."

We moved, en masse, to the front courtyard, spreading out so as not to make such an easy target. Loki signaled to the man on the gate, who kept looking at our guests, then us, then back again. On the other side of the solid steel barrier, I heard the rumble of multiple Harley engines.

My mom better not have Addie on a bitch seat.

The gate peeled back, and... and nothing fucking made sense anymore.

I looked at my brothers. They were as confused as I was.

There were two men out front in fucking Apocalypse Riders cuts, two men we *didn't* know. They had full-face helmets on, but we knew everyone who wore a cut — *everyone* — and we didn't know these men or their bikes. Presidents had to submit full dossiers with photos to Tesla, who instantly memorized everything about them, for every man who even hinted at becoming a prospect, let alone patched in. These men were patched in, but their cuts lacked identifiers. Only members of *this* chapter went without identifiers.

And behind them, between them and my mom's massive SUV, were three other men — fucking *Hellspawn*?

“What. The. Fuck.”

The five bikes rolled forward, into the courtyard, the men engaging the kickstands, shutting them down, dismounting. Removing their helmets.

We *did* know them. All of them. The two in front, in our cuts, were the Native American twins we met in Ohio, Tai and Spider. Big fuckers, both almost as bulky as Loki, but shorter. And *young*. Ten years younger than us, I'd guess. After the time we spent with them, they'd be welcome in the club, but— but somebody jumped the line here, and I had a feeling I knew who it was.

Only Komo was this— this *audacious*. Arrogant prick.

It took me a few deep breaths, but I got my temper under control and looked to the three Hellspawn, I did a double-take. *The triplets*.

“Is that the fucking *Hellspawn Triplets*?” Caliban hissed beside me, disbelief warring with concern in his tone. But... yeah. It was.

We'd met them too, but they weren't around as much. Too fucking antsy and volatile, so Justice kept them busy.

Cal and I had spent more time with Tai and Spider when we were there, so the triplets were still kinda interchangeable for me. The three fuckers were tall, almost as tall as Loki, but

gangly like T. All wiry muscles like me — or like Mouse — where you might underestimate just how fucking tough they were. Blonde, blue eyed Viking fuckers, and the one with the long hair grinned like we were the best thing he'd ever seen.

But they didn't say a word. They stood between us and the SUV as the doors cracked open, and my mom climbed out from the driver's seat. She opened the back door, helping Addie down. The passenger door opened, and one of the triplets — sides of his head shaved up like T does, with his hair pulled back in a knot — that one was hovering around the passenger door like he was waiting to escort the queen up a red carpet.

A girl got out, resting a hand on her side while she smiled at her courtier. *Young*. Just a teenager. Dark red hair like merlot on a white tablecloth. Like fresh blood on snow. Pale. Skinny. But she carried herself like a goddamn boss.

I recognized her, but I couldn't remember her name. It was a weird name.

She moved towards us, through the five men with her like she knew they'd let her by and reform behind her. Her eyes ranged back and forth over the five of us, studying us. Assessing us. I watched her glance around, taking everything in. Examining her surroundings, cataloging them. Just like Mouse.

She knew Mouse. Somehow, I understood that they were close.

What were the fucking odds?

She kept walking, approaching us without a moment's hesitation. A girl— no, a *woman* accustomed to being the center of everyone's attention. She moved like she was sick or favoring her side, but she moved like she *mattered*. And everyone better get on the same page with her.

I hadn't paid attention to her before, but now? I liked her *immediately*. She was just like Mouse: not in-your-face beautiful, on first glance, but her presence... she had an aura about her, she glowed bright and warm like sunshine while



Mouse was cool and soothing like the moon. I bet the two of them together were a thunderstorm, all noise and chaos and anticipation.

“Which one of you is Magick?” Red asked in a deceptively husky voice. *Jesus*. If not for Mouse, I’d be panting to hear this woman moan my name. I hoped she was legal, or I’d be regretting that thought. “I know we’ve met, but everything is a bit of a blur.”

Mags took a step forward, hands resting on his hips. He surveyed the six of them, evaluating, as my mom led Addie around the edge of their group. I wasn’t positive, because her accent was thick and she was mumbling, but I was pretty sure Addie called Tai a *butt nugget* as she passed, and the big man’s lips twitched but he ignored her. Addie noticed Mags and launched herself at him, babbling too fast for us to follow in a mix of Polish and English, and then began to cry.

She kept repeating, “Mouse left. Mouse left without me,” over and over, about making my heart break all over again. Mags lifted her up into his arms — the first fucking time she allowed him to hold her — and she buried her teary, snotty face in his neck. He held her like he’d been waiting for this moment his whole life. Again, I could swear she said something, and I might’ve thought I misheard a Polish word or phrase, but Addie had been Mouse’s charge for weeks so I’m almost certain I heard what I heard: Addie and Mags were now “snot buddies.”

The look on his face... I wanted nothing more than to have Mouse with me so we could cackle over how simultaneously grossed out and excited Mags was to be snot buddies with his baby girl. It hurt, in my chest, that she wasn’t here.

“That’s a solid endorsement right there,” Red said, her voice warm with humor and affection as she looked at Addie. “That’s a special little girl.”

Addie peeled her head back and glared at the woman. “You poked me with a needle,” she accused, and at full volume her thick little accent was the most adorable thing I’d ever heard,

so it took me a second to realize what she'd said. All of us stiffened, anger building, when my mom intervened.

"They vaccinated her," she interjected loudly, stepping forward, ever the diplomat. "They vaccinated *all* of us." I'd never heard my mom sound like that before, a mix of disbelief and giddiness, like she couldn't fucking believe what she was saying. She covered her mouth with one hand as her eyes pooled with tears.

Red reached out a hand and awkwardly patted her shoulder. Like she had to do this a lot, but it never felt comfortable.

"And we'll vaccinate all of you too, on one condition..." she informed Magick, stern like she was the adult and he was the teenager. "I have a note to give you. I don't know what it says, but I know it's important. You're going to read it. Then you're going to stop being an asshole and go get my best friend back. Ideally, before she does something stupid and impulsive, and gets her crazy ass killed." She half-smiled, half-grimaced. "Whatever happened, she's going to forgive you. You know that, right? She probably already has. She cares about all of you, a *lot*, and she won't hold a grudge." He stared at her, face blank, and she tilted her head, examining him. "Oh, I see," she said, with an edge of distaste.

He didn't take the bait, but I did. "What? What's that about?"

"Tell me I'm wrong. You blame her. For whatever happened that got someone killed," she said, voice flat. "Whoever it was, she loved him. That means you're victim-shaming, and that makes you an asshole."

Magick looked up toward the sky. "You don't fucking know what you're talking about, so please stop judging what you don't understand."

She balked, paling then flushing as anger offset her embarrassment. "I'm pretty sure I know Mouse better than *you* do, so don't even try to say I don't understand. You have no fucking idea what it's been like for us, and if this guy gave her comfort—"

“Her abuser? Gave her comfort?” Magick scoffed, disgust dripping off him. “He was fucking grooming her from when she was as young as this one,” he said, gesturing at a sleepy Addie with his head. “Some biker looks at her and thinks *good girlfriend potential*, I don’t fucking care how many meals he feeds her, I’m going to put that fucker in the ground and she shouldn’t be crying over him—”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Red whispered, horrified, her gigantic eyes almost taking over her face. “How would she have known him— she grew up outside Detroit, in the suburbs—”

Magick shook his head, looking at her with pity. Caliban pinched the bridge of his nose, a sign he was getting a headache. Loki planted his feet and crossed his arms, scowling at something in the distance. Tesla took a deep breath and breathed it out, his hands on his hips. I reached for my mom and gave her a side hug.

“Mouse didn’t grow up in the suburbs, or even Michigan.” I said, feeling bad at the look on her face, the looks on all their faces. Only the twins seemed neutral, expressions blank and bodies stiff, in a similar stance to Loki. “Mouse grew up in a chapter of the Apocalypse Riders, one in southern Illinois. Her mom abandoned her and her dad neglected her. He was the president of the chapter. She lived in the clubhouse for years, and the only person who paid any attention to her and took care of her during that time was a man called Beast.”

“Oh my *God*,” she whispered, arms wrapping around her middle like she was trying to keep from being sick. “And you killed him?” She turned those giant eyes on Magick, who nodded. “Before I wanted to kick you in the nards, but now I want to hug you.”

“No touching,” a triplet grumbled, moving up behind her like he was ready to restrain her. “You’re always hugging strange bikers, luring them in with your wiles... these fuckers are off-limits, you hear me?”

She closed her eyes and shook her head like she’d had about enough of his shit. “I’m not *always hugging strange*

*bikers*,” she said in a high-pitched, squeaky impersonation of him, “just your dad.” And then she started giggling, bent over and holding her gut, gasping for air, as the Hellspawn Triplets looked equal parts horrified and pissed. Tai and Spider bit back their own laughter, attempting to keep straight faces.

“She’s got a weird thing for their dad,” Spider rumbled in his Johnny Cash voice, with his flat Western accent. Not even just Western, but that cadence you hear on the rezzes. I’d spent a week hanging with him and his brother, and every time the sound threw me off. I reckoned it was good they didn’t talk much, it was disconcerting. “Pretty sure it’s because he was mean to her at first. She’s a little twisted that way. But anyway, we pretend she doesn’t flirt with him and call him *Daddy Justice*.”

“*Be that as it may*,” his twin threw out there, talking over the puppy pile forming between Red and the triplets as they fucked around, all thoughts of Mouse’s hellish childhood forgotten, “I don’t think we should underestimate Mouse. If she asked for time to deal with her issues, we should respect that. She’s more than capable of taking care of herself.” He had so much pride and affection for *our* girl that I bristled.

I was jealous! That’s what this pinched, irritated-but-sick feeling had to be.

These fuckers knew Mouse, and I wanted to kill them for having a part of her we didn’t. They clustered around Red, ignoring us.

“Think about everything she’s done,” Spider assured her, calming her but pissing *me* off. What do they know that we don’t? “The plan, the bunker. Everything she’s taught you.”

“She taught you to shoot, to fight—” a random Hellspawn supplied.

“Hotwire cars, pick locks.” That was another Hellspawn. Or the same one. I couldn’t tell and they kept shifting around like a human three-card monte.

“All the medical training she has.” Tai rested his hand on the back of Red’s neck and she relaxed. “She’s going to

fucking outlive us all, and you know it.”

I couldn't look at my brothers. This was too much.

We knew so little about her.

Red rested her head against Tai's chest for a moment, nodding, but pulled away and straightened herself. “I hear what you're saying, but she also likes to sneak around places in ventilation shafts and blow shit up. I get she's capable, but she's also reckless. But that's on her.” She wiped her hands over her face, did a whole-body shake, and turned back to face us. “I don't know why she was here, or what her relationship is with any of you, but I know she cares about you. She made me promise to come up here and vaccinate all of you, said you're important. That's good enough for me.” She made a face then, so much like Mouse I felt a stabby sensation in my gut. Fuck. *Fuck.*

“I mean— I kinda want to know what the fuck's been going on,” a Hellspawn piped up, talking to her but eyeing us. “I get that you're very trusting, honeybee, and will just blindly spread around the good stuff without questioning Mouse's request, but there's a lot we don't know. She could suffer from Stockholm Syndrome. These fuckers could've kidnapped her and brainwashed her into being their love slave. We just don't know.”

I barked out a laugh as Tesla muttered “audible sigh” and Loki growled in the back of his throat. Cal rolled his eyes, and I didn't give a fuck what Magick was doing or thinking, because he was on my shit list.

Red pinched her mouth shut and shrugged. “Yeah, okay, he's right. We'll still vaccinate you because I already said I was going to and I'm not going to be a prick tease — because needles, get it?” That caused way more hilarity among their group than seemed warranted by the joke, but hell, if Mouse had said it, I'd be rolling on the ground. “—but maybe you can motivate me to move faster on that if you fill in some blanks for us.”

“We know she wasn't kidnapped. Mom told us that much,” Tai rumbled at her. “This was some kind of job she took. What

happened between Salem and the rez is the mystery.”

Tesla made a weird sound next to me, like he was being strangled or something. When I looked over at him, his face was red and his eyes were wild, wide and darting all over. I worried he was having a seizure. “Dude— are you having a stroke?”

“Rez,” he choked out. “Vernita—”

“What was that?” Spider called out, voice sharp, as all the hubbub died down. I glanced away from T for a second to see the six of them were no longer relaxed and calm. Rather, the opposite. “What did you just say?”

“Vernita,” Tesla choked out, pointing at him. “You’re Vernita’s sons. She said Mouse was friends with her son, but never said your name.”

Tai nodded, posture stiff.

“You said *rez*,” T continued, his voice almost shrill. His hands trembled, his body practically vibrating. I’d only seen him like this when he was about to lose his shit over something, usually his bed. “*Vernita Fox*,” he proclaimed, and our guests froze, the hostility rolling off so thick that a spark lit up in my happy place. Shit was about to get *aggressive*.

My mom glided over behind us, taking Addie from Magick and moving towards the door.

Tesla jabbed a finger at them again. “You’re Vernita Fox’s sons. Mouse’s friend, the one that helped her, is *Vernita Fox*. One of the founders of the Native Nationalist Coalition. No information is known about her whereabouts, but sources believe she’s still the active leader of the NNC.”

Tai and Spider glanced at each other, relaxing almost imperceptibly. Spider motioned with his hand, and the others backed down too. “You sound like a Wikipedia page,” he remarked.

Tesla froze, meeting Spider’s eyes with a frown, then he huffed out a sigh. “We all have our secrets,” he replied. “Mouse has more than most.” I swear I heard my brother chuckle, but that was impossible. The man didn’t do such

things. “There was only one contact in the shitty phone Mouse showed up with, labeled *Vernita*. The number didn’t trace back anywhere, so I called it and talked to the person who answered. I’ve called it every week since Mouse started working for us, to check in with Vernita and let her know how Mouse is doing. It never fucking occurred to me that the woman fussing over Mouse, making sure she’s getting enough to eat and recovering from her injuries, was Vernita *Fox*. Your mom is a real ball-buster when she’s worried, and now I feel like I should’ve taken her threats more seriously.”

...and then it was like nothing at all had happened. They were all relaxed and fucking around again as if we hadn’t just been poised to shoot each other not seconds ago. “You’re Nikola,” Tai frowned. “I get it, for the inventor. Mom said you were checking in, but you wouldn’t tell her much. Basic shit only, nothing about Mouse’s recovery—”

“You’ve got five seconds to explain what the fuck you’re talking about, Taiowa Chandler, before I break kneecaps. What *injuries*? What *recovery*? *What the fuck haven’t you told me?*” Red was shrieking by the end, pounding a fist against the man’s chest, and so many emotions crossed over his face.

She caught that fucker, he’d been keeping shit from— oh! They all were! I could see it in their faces.

Damn, I wanted some popcorn.

“Mouse got delivered to the rez through the mail,” Tai winced, and his expression became almost pleading. “She was naked, covered in stamps, with my mom’s address written on her. They beat her, and she had burns, but wouldn’t tell anyone what happened and she spent two weeks at the rez before accepting a job as a nanny. Here, I guess. Mom said she needed to get her head together before coming back to Salem. Mouse was messed up, Az.” *Az. Azzie! That was it.* “Deep depression, nightmares, PTSD flashbacks, panic attacks, all of it. She didn’t want to come back to you until she had it under control because she worried what the stress would do to you. Mom didn’t know we were out until after she had already left, so Mouse didn’t know. She didn’t know about Rachel, or that you were healthier now, or we’d left Salem, or anything else.”

“Why didn’t you fucking tell me?” The girl had tears coursing down her face now, and damn... I felt that. The betrayal of it all.

“You know why!” That was agony in that man’s voice, but she was on the verge of exploding again and—  
“Cheeseburger! I call cheeseburger.”

Umm, what?

“Fuck that!” she spat, pounding her fist against him again.  
“You don’t get to safe word out of this.”

“I gotta, sunshine.” He motioned with his head over at us, and now she remembered we were standing here, listening.

“Fucking *fine*,” she grouched, glaring at us.

“That was Mouse? The one who mailed herself?” It was sort of a question, but Tesla—he sounded sick. Even worse than before. Tai eyed us again, hostility returning, as Spider nodded slowly.

“T?” Magick’s voice grated out, low and deadly. “Mind explaining?”

“It was a rumor.” Tesla’s voice was dead, and when I looked at him, so was he. No life left in the man; a shell of a person. “It was just a rumor. Beast was going to all the chapters, drumming up recruits to help him chase down something that went missing from his club. He told them it was a *package*, he needed help following the Mail Carriers that wouldn’t let it go. He wouldn’t say what it was, but there were *rumors* it was a girl. You went there to calm his ass down, put a stop to the chase. It’s why you were gone when Mouse arrived. I figured— when you didn’t say anything, I figured it must’ve been bullshit because someone would’ve talked if it had been true. I didn’t have any other details. The rumors didn’t say the girl had been fucked up, or I would’ve connected it to Mouse’s injuries when she arrived.”

“Remember what she said?” Loki’s voice startled the fuck out of me. The man hadn’t spoken a word since Beast— Mouse— church. That whole mess. “Right after she arrived, in



the hallway when she was calling herself Dobby and jumping around like a lunatic.”

Tesla’s face went blank. His eyes focused on nothing as he rifled through his brain banks, searching for whatever Loki was talking about. These were the moments that got him the “robot” label, by people who didn’t realize just how special he was. From what Cal told me, Mouse never even blinked. No, instead she used his superpowers against him, that saucy minx. And the first time she did, that was it. He was hers even if neither of them knew it. Cal and I had a whole bet board set up for their peculiar milestones, and so far, I was winning.

*“If you must know,” Tesla stated as though he was reading off of a script. “I was caught breaking into a secure research lab on the secret military base I lived on, and I saw their nefarious plans so they had to do something with me but I was too important to kill, so instead they delivered me to my mortal enemies a few states away who tortured me for revenge and because I fucked with their nefarious plans. I escaped, of course. Because I am a diabolical genius.”* He took a deep breath. That was a lot to get out in just one. “She was telling the truth, wasn’t she?” He stared at them, waiting. I was watching T so I hadn’t paid attention to their immediate reactions, but it was fucking obvious from the looks on their faces *now: nerves had been struck.*

It was then that the Hellspawn changed.

The three of them had been relaxed, purposely so. If you weren’t paying attention, like I knew we were, you might’ve missed it: the way they moved around like restless, squabbling puppies, yet were always surrounding the girl; how they tracked every movement we made; how they kept eyes on the roof, on the windows, and on the guard tower, always making sure one of them was between the girl and any threat. They fucked around, making jokes and comments, but were following every word spoken.

That all ended. Not being able to tell them apart, that ended too.

The long-haired one had to be Pike. Everyone knew of Pike, he was the fighter. The other two... one of them was Saint and the other Darwin, and Saint was Justice's heir apparent, blah blah blah, but until that moment, they were interchangeable. And then it was so obvious, it was almost disturbing.

Darwin would be sporting a mohawk if they hadn't been helmeted; there were rumors about him that Tesla planned to investigate. He and Pike somehow faded into the background, and Darwin went still, all playfulness dissolving. The ruse had ended. One corner of his mouth twitched up like he sensed violence in the air and *couldn't wait*. But he wasn't the one that had our attention. It was the other one.

Saint.

He appeared older, somehow. He stood *taller*, planting his feet. His spine stiffened, his arms crossed over his chest, and his head tilted to the side like he was trying to come to a decision. Like all of our fates were resting in his hands.

He had that *thing* that Magick had, that natural authority. The patience to watch and wait, learning what he needed to before striking; the underlying edge of violence tempered by cold calculation. He was all the more of a threat with his brothers at his side, falling into place as if choreographed, waiting for his judgment.

I would've put money on Tai leading their unusual pack — and we still hadn't addressed the cuts that the twins wore, *our* colors — but it was Saint.

He was the leader. I expected him to step up, right then, to take charge, and I was preparing for the clash between him and Magick. Everyone was. My brothers went still, and tense, and *ready*.

Not one of us expected it to be the girl.

Protected, of course, and maybe placated, but not deferred to. But I should've known, because Mouse.

One second the five men were primed for a fight, their hackles up, squaring off on their side of the imaginary line

between us, and then Azzie was stomping across the divide with a death glare aimed at Tesla.

“Yeah,” she nodded, right up in T’s grill. “Yeah, she was telling the truth. What the ever-living *fuck*—?”

Not sure why I thought one of the men might intervene, pull her away and circle back around her, but I should’ve known. We wouldn’t have dared to try that shit with Mouse, either.

I’d heard about it, that day Mouse faced off with Komo and Jelly. Everyone else was trying to keep Loki from bringing down the building, and Mouse stepped up on them, scared the fuck out of them, then turned around and manhandled Loki out of a blackout rage. I heard what T and Cal had to say, and Pumpkin told me his take on it. But I also had Cutter’s version. He was watching the high-def cameras in the security room. No audio, no way to tell what words they exchanged, but no mistaking their body language or expressions, or how fast those two fuckers fled the room.

And no mistaking what Komo and Jelly said when me and Magick saw them on the road a day or so later. She’d intimidated Jelly, and he’d covered it up with bluster and rage, but Komo had just shaken his head with a laugh. He said that if he’d continued to fuck with Loki, Mouse had threatened to show up in Detroit and murder him in his sleep, but not until he’d gotten complacent. Then she expanded it to include all of “her” people, called herself Magick’s guard dog when he was away. Komo advised Mags to put a property patch on her, or he’d be coming back to collect his prize. We hadn’t even met her, and I was already half in love.

“You know what?” Azzie continued, not even giving Tesla enough time to answer her questions. “I don’t give a *fuck* right now about how she got here. She disappeared weeks ago. What I want to know is why she spent five minutes sobbing in my arms like her goddamn world had ended, then informed me she couldn’t stay and needed more time. Then - fucking - *drove - away*. But only after making me swear to vaccinate everyone, make you take me to some goddamn farm and fields even.” That security breach was a little concerning, but I guess

when we're talking proportion of secrets, having access to the vaccine was a fair trade. She paused for a second, then seemed to get even angrier, which I wouldn't have thought was possible. "And THEN told me her real-fucking-name was Jane Skala, writing this fucking note for *you*, which I didn't even read even though I could've, because she said *club business*." She tossed a glare over her shoulder at her men. "Fucking *bikers*," she hissed as Pike blew her a kiss.

She turned back and jabbed Magick in the chest with a folded up piece of paper. He took it from her, unfolded it, and read it. Then he passed it to T.

It took less than a minute for it to reach me, but by then I was almost shaking in place, though I stood still and confident, like a good soldier.

In spiky handwriting I'd never seen before, the note read: "*Hammer was part of it all along. I took care of him for you. Stay the fuck away, Jackson is mine.*"

*She'd underlined "mine" twice.*

*She'd written more underneath that, but her handwriting had gotten sloppier. "Talk to Fatima about your dad. She knows shit you don't, way more than you realize. Also, we've met before."*

Oh, fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Dead silence. None of us could look at him, knowing he'd be right on the edge, but I could feel it resonating in the air. So much anger. So much fucking *rage*.

And then he turned towards my mom.

I swung around, ready to knock a gun from his hand, but he was just staring at her, eyes hollow pits and mouth slack. All the blood drained from his face like he'd just seen the dead rise up and start chowing down.

I handed the note to my mom, who barely glanced at it before she broke. My stoic, unemotional mother had actual tears running down her cheeks. She hadn't cried since we were

back in Nevada, but Mouse had made her cry twice in less than a month. “I didn’t know, Ian. I didn’t know what you believed. I would’ve talked to you about him years ago if I’d known, I swear. I think my guilt and grief blinded me to yours. I never knew what—”

Magick turned and walked away, heading toward his bike. We watched, paralyzed and silent, as he mounted up, rolled it back, and then drove out the gate. It slid shut behind him.

I didn’t understand, but I knew it was bad. Tesla’s head bowed, his fists and eyes clenched, taking a series of deep breaths. Loki was staring at the gates that Magick had disappeared through, his brow furrowed. Caliban and I looked at each other, at a loss. My mother straightened her spine, wiped her cheeks, and stared off into the distance as she held Addie’s hand.

No one, not a one of us, moved or spoke, not even *Addie*. After some time, Cal cleared his throat. “Well, that just happened.” He folded his lips inward and shrugged, gesturing at the doors. “I guess come inside. It seems we have a lot to discuss.” He looked over at my mom with a soft smile. “Fatima? This is club business. Do you mind staying with Adèle until we can resolve a few issues?”

My mom nodded, still speechless, and disappeared through the doors with an exhausted Addie dragging behind her.

“Do you know what that’s about?” Cal asked me, but one look at my face and he turned to Tesla. “T? Do you know?”

“I think I might,” he ground out.

“Care to enlighten the rest of us?” Loki scowled at him.

“No,” he bit out, straightening from his slump and shedding all those pesky emotions. “But I will. And you’re going to be pissed at me, but it wasn’t anything you needed to know.”

“I’d like to know,” Azzie informed us in a strident tone, her hands on her hips. “And I suggest you start talking, because I know damn well that you’ll try dealing with shit behind closed doors, keeping secrets and calling it *club*

*business*, and that will not fly. You want the vaccine, I want answers.”

I wasn't gonna say it, but I agreed with her. I didn't care that there were outsiders here, even ones from a rival club. No more secrets, and no more lies. Especially not anything that would fuck up what we have with Mouse, because she's our end game. To quote my favorite childhood movie, she's our *density*.

“Fourteen years ago, Cain was the president of the club. He sanctioned a hit on the president of one of our chapters who'd betrayed the club by engaging in a sex trafficking operation for a cartel, mainly underage victims or young women,” T explained to our guests. “The hit looked like the cartel was tying up loose ends, or at least that was the intention. The target of the hit was called Preacher, but his real name was John Skąła. Janie Skąła was his daughter. Beast was the hitter.”

I looked towards Cal to find him looking back at me. Connections we didn't want to make flared to life. An awful sense of inevitability settled between us.

It was like we'd been shooting down an open road going a hundred and five, only to have a wire rise from the dust in front of us at a height we couldn't escape, at a distance we couldn't avoid.

“His wife and daughter were in the house. The wife wasn't an issue, she was as involved as he was, if not more. The daughter was... innocent. We never connected her to a girl we'd met a year before, a girl Magick had— let's say, *shown interest in*, at a club party.”

The sound Loki made was indecipherable. And nothing human.

“And that— that was Mouse?” Azzie asked with a squeak, all the blood draining from her face. “She would've been *young*...”

“Thirteen at the time of the hit. Twelve when we met her.” Tesla blinked, his mouth flattening. “The club girls had

dressed her. She didn't look *twelve*. She didn't act twelve." He swallowed. "We were nineteen, Mags, Loki, and I. It was bad, but not— it was dancing, and one kiss, that was all, before Beast intervened and sent her away, then he and Magick got into it. We didn't— we were young. She looked sixteen or seventeen at least. We assumed it was the typical bullshit, and we never got her name, she was just some biker's jailbait that got caught up in club drama. Never had reason to think she was Preacher's kid. After the hit on Preacher and Lulu, the club set up the daughter for the murders and she went to juvenile detention. None of us followed the story or knew the details, it wasn't something we were much involved in, and there was no reason to believe it was the same girl because Preacher's daughter was only *thirteen*, except— except we knew Beast was the hitter. He'd been so territorial over that young club girl that caught Magick's eye. Maybe we should've figured it out, I don't know, but only three men knew all the details or decisions, and two of them are dead. Beast and Cain. The third was the club's lawyer, who made all the arrangements."

Fucking *Komo*. Goddamn. I wondered if he realized the girl he wanted to claim, was the girl he'd framed for a double murder.

"You knew," Caliban said, voice brittle, glaring at Tesla. "You knew who she was."

T inclined his head. "I recognized her immediately. And then there was her name, *Jayne Stone*. *Skała* is rock in Polish. I went back, looked at the club and court records for that time, and I found her mugshot. It was the same girl as the party, same girl that was... here, somehow. I thought she wanted revenge, but she didn't, it was all just a strange coincidence. I had no reason to connect her to the recent problems with Beast, and he was always having issues about one thing or another. Janie *Skała* had disappeared so long ago, and none of us knew how things had been... Beast was territorial over her at the party, but that didn't mean anything. She was the club princess, or maybe he just didn't like Magick, or he was drunk and feeling aggressive. There were a lot of reasons for how he

acted over her, why would we think it was more? Why would we think there was still something going on between them?”

Or he didn't want to make the connection. Because ignoring all of that? That wasn't T.

“Mags—”

“Needed to know her as a person first, or he could never accept her.”

“What Magick said earlier, about the grooming, that was true? He was abusing her from when she was little?” I'd forgotten that outsiders were witnessing our fuck up, but Azzie's face—

The four of us exchanged glances, not sure what to tell her. Mouse had gone off on Magick about Doc and T, and things being discussed about her she'd never told the people she cared about most. It wasn't our place to tell her best friend about—

“Yes, although calling it *grooming* might be misleading.” Tesla stated. “He wasn't grooming her for sex work or labor, or any of the traditional purposes, and I'm not sure it was even intentional. At least not in the beginning.” Tesla paused, gnawing on his lip ring. He made a decision, because some of the stiffness left his posture and he ran a hand over his face. “Cain sent Beast to investigate Preacher for a reason, he trusted the man. Knew him, knew his family, going way back. Trusted him to handle a delicate situation. I've spent the last twelve hours poring through club records related to Preacher, Beast, and Janie Skala, trying to make sense of what happened, how everything went so wrong. Cain hadn't kept anything that might incriminate the club, but he'd made notes that read differently, given new information. And there was coded correspondence between them. From what I've pieced together, in the beginning it was about protecting her. Beast was worried, given how Preacher treated her, that she was a candidate for whatever trade he was doing with the cartel. Cain offered to remove her to a safe house, re-home her — he made the offer repeatedly, but Beast always made excuses and refused, even though her safety was an issue for him. He kept



her with him, despite everything. Cain's note said *He won't let her go*. Beast's worries grew more intense and erratic leading up the killings, until he rushed the hit because Cain wasn't moving fast enough about something that he thought was critical, and it was a fucking shit-show. Then, after all that, he wanted her out of the way. Locked up. It didn't make sense. It *wouldn't* have made sense, without seeing them together. Without the things Mouse told Magick before he knew who she was, or what she was talking about. She called it an unhealthy relationship. *Inappropriate* at times, but nothing physical until he killed her parents and raped her. If he was grooming her, it was to keep her for himself." He said it so matter-of-factly that it didn't sink in right away.

Azzie didn't know about the rape.

The devastation on that girl's face... She shrank in front of my eyes, going from a bad-ass babe in charge to a broken little bird, hands fluttering like wings that no longer worked. Tai reached for her and she stiffened. She didn't pull away, not obviously, but she put distance between herself and everyone around her without moving an inch. Jagged spikes of emotion radiated from her, and his hands dropped to his sides — not sad, or defeated, or angry at the rejection. Accepting her. Giving her what she needed.

I don't know what I expected from her men, maybe some further attempts to comfort or console, but they gave her space. They worried, no question about that, but they didn't put that on her, and after a time, she pulled herself back together.

I thought about Mouse, watching it play out as Azzie processed the new information. We'd only known Mouse a short time, at least at a personal level and not just a name from a dark time in the club's history, and she was going through some shit. It was obvious, even without seeing the bruises; she was so good at hiding the pain, but it was always there under the surface, if you took the time to look. What wasn't so obvious was whether it was a short-term situation, recovering from that one incident, or something bigger, and it turned out to be so much more than I would've ever imagined. I couldn't

see an end to it, a point where she could turn to me with a smile and say “I feel good. I’m happy. The future is bright.” But looking at Azzie emotionally implode, and the way her men responded, it struck me that I was thinking about it all wrong.

Mouse wasn’t a game, our relationship wasn’t a game. There wasn’t a finish line to cross, or a final boss to fight. Mouse would never be free of her history, and thinking we needed to fix her or save her was the absolute wrong approach. Thinking we didn’t “win” until her past wasn’t relevant any longer was just a guarantee that we’d never be satisfied, and more pressure piled on top of her.

She didn’t need to be anything but what she was, right now. Mouse was enough.

She would always be enough, no matter what changed, or if nothing ever changed at all.

I wanted what they had. I wanted to stand behind my woman and give her the space to deal with her shit. I wanted to know she’d always turn back to me in the end, and I wanted her to know I’d always still be there.

The need to tell Mouse everything I’d just figured out was overwhelming. She was out there, in the world, and she didn’t know that nothing had changed between us. Or that I would always give her what she needed, even if what she needed was space, or distance, or time, as long as she kept coming back.

Mouse wasn’t a game, but she was a prize, and I’d won her fair-and-square. I’d be damned if I was giving her up now.

Azzie did her thing, got her brain back from the abyss, and turned to her men. Quick touches and small smiles passed between them, reassurances going both ways. It was sweet like poison to watch, wanting what they had, the bitter soothed by knowing that Mouse had a hand in it. Azzie said it herself: Mouse taught her how to survive.

Survival was more than just physical longevity.

Survival was a little girl who took everything the world threw at her, and said “Bitch, is that all you got?” Survival was

that little girl, all grown up, throwing shade like “A pandemic? Really? Bitch, I said *challenge* me.”

Survival was Azzie getting her happily ever after, apocalypse-style, because Mouse decided to be besties. How the fuck did they meet? Was it after Janus, or before?

“Gonna need a minute to reflect on all that,” Azzie said, interrupting my life-changing realizations. *Same, girl.* “Regardless, everything I’m hearing, it sounds like she was the victim. So where the fuck does Magick get off storming out of here like that?”

“Investigating Preacher was supposed to take a few weeks, a few months at most,” Tesla continued, his voice betraying an uncharacteristic exhaustion. “Beast stretched it out over *years*. Cain didn’t question it for a long time, and he persistently hesitated to act against abusive fathers within his club. I needed Mouse’s story to understand Cain’s notes were talking about Preacher neglecting his kid, the fucked up rumors about Beast and Janie Skala, and how their *relationship* caused all the delays. By the time he confronted Beast, it was too late. Beast rushed the hit, starting a war with the cartel that lasted six years. Because of that war, Cain was shot and eventually died. Cain was Magick’s father.”

Technically... yes, he died because he got shot. But this was a point that I think Caliban and I would argue. We were outsiders even though I’d known the man for years through his friendship with my mother, and Cal’s family was connected to the club; we didn’t have the same emotional investment with Cain’s injuries and recovery, and his eventual decline. But the fact remained that, no matter how Magick or Tesla tells the story, Cain didn’t die because of the bullet that hit his spine and paralyzed him, he died from the bullet he shot into his own head, and he did it at home where he knew Mags would find him. And that’s what fucked Magick up the most.

“So? That still doesn’t make her responsible!”

“It may be unreasonable, and Magick is the first to admit it, but he needed an outsider to hold responsible for Beast’s actions because we still had to deal with the man. Magick has

always blamed Janie Skala because she was just a name to us, and Cain's willingness to frame her made her seem guilty of *something* in his mind. But none of us knew the entire story about Beast and Mouse, something Mags also admits, and he's had that information for less than twenty-four hours. He won't keep blaming her, but he's spent years believing something that wasn't true; it's gonna take him a minute, but he *will* adjust his thinking. Anyway, whatever happened about six weeks ago caused the people who had her to need to get rid of her, and they took her back to Beast."

"If that fucker wasn't already dead, I'd kill him myself."

"Beast?" Pike asked, concerned and wrapping her up in his arms.

"McNamara," she spat, pushing him away and clenching her fists. "I need to fucking break something, I need to beat something—" She reached down and picked at the side of her leg, then suddenly she was flicking a hot pink tactical baton to its full length. She stormed over to an unfortunate tree, and laid into it, beating it with some skill and force. Her men watched with varying degrees of concern, and the appreciation we typically see Mouse direct at desserts.

"Lead pipe," Tesla said, exchanging a look with Loki.

"Swimming pool," he replied with a nod.

Shit, now the two of them were talking in non-sequiturs like T and Mouse.

After watching her for a time, Saint turned back to us. "She and Mouse have been friends since Azzie was eleven or twelve. Mouse was keeping a lot of secrets from her, but I can understand why when I consider Azzie's age when they met. And she'll figure that out too. Eventually." He sighed. "Hearing it all is difficult, but it just makes it even more incredible. Mouse overcame a fuck-ton of bullshit no kid should have to deal with, and to go from that to who she is now? What they did— really what *Mouse* did, is extraordinary. They started planning from the moment she found the vaccine, and by the time—"

“What do you mean *found the vaccine*? Is that how you got it? Did they find a shipment or something?”

He looked at me, curiously, tilting his head as he studied me, glancing between the others. “You have no fucking idea, do you? You have no idea who Mouse is.”

“We know enough,” Caliban growled, stiffening up. Saint looked to his brothers, then the twins, and they all laughed.

“Holy shit! Holy fucking shit!” Pike crowed, taking off at a run to Azzie, and leading her back to us, talking under his breath. Her head jerked up, eyes huge and darting from one of us to the other.

“Now I don’t feel so bad for not knowing about her shitty childhood,” she said, voice mild. “But I understand, everyone has their secrets, things they don’t want to share. Sometimes it’s that you have a huge crush on your teacher—” Darwin reached out and bumped his fist against Spider’s shoulder; he rolled his eyes but was suppressing a grin, “—and *sometimes* it’s that you aren’t an eighteen-year-old high school student, but a twenty-one-year-old biker god.”

“And sometimes you discover the vaccine and save a bajillion people,” Pike piped up, grinning wildly. “And you live on a secret military base but have an even more secret underground bunker, travel the town in hidden tunnels right under the military’s nose, run a game store, work on creating a synthetic vaccine in your spare time, and drive around town in your pimped-out Hello Kitty humvee in your unicorn onesie, jamming to old school rap.”

“The unicorn onesie is only for gaming,” Azzie explained with the patience reserved for talking to children, “she wears a dragon onesie for cruising around town.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Gaming?” Tesla asked with a sudden, but not unexpected, intensity.

“Is all that for real?” Loki asked, and six heads nodded, solemn.

“Mouse doesn’t think five, or ten, or even two dozen moves in advance, she’s already onto the next game before her opponent moves their first piece,” Azzie said, her smile proud but her eyes sad. “She saved me, over and over. She saved *us*,” she gestured at her men, who all nodded, “with a plan that outsmarted some of the most calculating minds in the government and military. Mouse created the first vaccine, and she’s been working towards a synthetic version for a few years. I have copies of her research, I’ve been distributing it everywhere I can, hoping it will get to someone who might understand it.” She shook her head, her eyes welling up with tears. “*We* need her. The world fucking *needs* her. Whatever she says about me, *she’s* the one who can save us all.”

She wasn’t just smart, our woman was a fucking *genius*. Legit.

When I got my hands on her again, she wouldn’t be leaving my bed for a month and in between fuck sessions, she was going to tell me *everything* she’d ever done or thought. In smallish words, because I have a particular set of skills, and medical research wasn’t one of them.

“So where the fuck is she?” I asked, looking around.

“Maybe a better question is, where the fuck is she going?” Caliban asked, running a hand over his chin and beard.

“She told me she had loose ends to tie up,” Azzie supplied, eyes glued to Spider, until they slid over to T. “Does that mean anything to you?”

T glanced over at me. “Jackson?”

I nodded.

“Care to explain?” Azzie asked, muttering “better not say *club business*,” under her breath.

“Jackson, Illinois. Where Mouse grew up. There were always *questions* about that chapter and what went on there, even after Preacher was gone. Cain trusted Beast, despite him fucking up the hit, and he installed Beast as president. Magick told me that Cain once expressed doubts that the trafficking operation had ended with Preacher and Lulu’s deaths, but he

knew that Beast would never allow it. Not if he knew about it, and no one has found evidence to support any of it, not when Preacher was alive and not since, and that suggests someone actively covered it up. The repeated pandemics haven't helped .”

“Mouse’s note,” I groaned, pointing out the obvious. “That’s what that means. Hammer was involved, it’s been going on this whole time.”

“*Oh God,*” Azzie wheezed, covering her mouth. She stared at me with the biggest, roundest eyes, swimming with tears. “She was going there to do something no one else would do,” she whispered, her voice crackling with fear. “Do you think she’s going after this Hammer person? Or the club? *Or the cartel?*”

“Whatever she’s going to do, she’s going to need weapons and supplies, right? She’ll have to go back to the bunker first, to hit up the armory, unless she’s got some other access to a rocket launcher and landmines,” Darwin added. “We can catch up to her there, if you want to. Or we can let her do what she needs to and not meddle and fuck it up. She can handle herself. Besides, a cartel these days isn’t like the U.S. government, and she bested *them.*”

Her secret bunker had an *armory*? A fucking *rocket launcher*? Of fucking course it does!

“She took care of Hammer already,” I repeated what the note said, but it didn’t seem to reassure her.

“She wouldn’t go after the cartel, not right away,” Tai supplied, wrapping an arm around her and distracting her from further questions about Hammer. “Mouse is too smart for that, she doesn’t have any intel.”

“If she grew up in the club, though, wouldn’t she see them as family?” Saint asked, brow furrowed.

*Family.* She told me at the kennels that her *family* was shit. Her *family* abandoned her. And I realized that the “one time” she’d seen them since her childhood, would’ve been the

incident that left her covered in bruises and burns, mailing herself to the head of the NNC.

...Vernita *fucking* Fox. Jesus. Only Mouse. But I could ponder her Forrest Gump-like timing later. She was absolutely going after the club.

“She is absolutely going after the club,” I informed them, halting all other conversations. “*They* aren’t her family, and they were the ones who beat and burned her. She mailed herself to get away from *them*, not Beast. Or not only Beast. With him dead and now Hammer— I don’t know why that changes things, but it does. I know it does. That’s where she’s going.”

Tesla consulted his phone, grunting. “Very possible,” he commented, sounding cagey. “She’s stopped about twenty minutes outside Cheyenne right now, has been for over an hour. She could be planning to take 80 all the way to 39 in Illinois—”

“Wait, you’re *tracking* her?” Azzie asked, in a mix of horror and delight.

“Of fucking course I am,” Tesla stated, with what Mouse would describe as a duh face.

“Yeah, Azzie, of fucking course he is!” Pike crowed.

“You just earned yourself some bonus vaccine, mister,” she declared, tearing up. “You just tell me who to send it to.”

“About that.” Tesla tucked his phone back into his pocket and crossed his arms, focusing his attention on her. “Mind telling us how you have access to enough vaccine to inoculate The Ranch, the almost two hundred people we have on the compound, and now a dealer’s choice bonus amount? Follow-up question: why are you willing to part with it at Mouse’s request, like it was giving away apples in an orchard?”

“Oh fuck!” Pike shouted, gleeful and bouncing forward to tug on Azzie’s hand. “Give the speech! Give the speech!”

All of them relaxed. Azzie made a face at Pike, an expression I’d seen on Mouse a million times, as she shook



him off. “Not the time, Luka,” she hissed, but the others seemed to provoke her with nudges and whispered taunts.

“C’mon, do it!” Darwin stage-whispered, “You know you want to.”

“Please, Az?” Saint cajoled, smiling at her with so much affection that I was embarrassed to witness it. And so was she, judging by the blush.

“Fine,” she muttered, leaning into Saint for a moment before glancing back at us, a weird look on her face. Almost... embarrassed?

“This never gets old,” Spider muttered to his brother, as Tai elbowed him and told him to pay attention, hissing “I don’t wanna miss the looks on their faces.” All the men grinned, studying us avidly.

“Here we go,” Pike whispered, “make sure to watch their faces. Ten doughnuts says the big one cries.”

“Twenty marshmallows on the ginger, and not the minis or generics, I want your full-size Stay-Puft,” Spider whispered back, winking at Cal. They knew damn well what our names were, we spent almost a week with the bastards in Ohio.

Azzie stepped backwards, edging away so she could see all of us, and they moved with her, forming into a half circle behind her. She stood, shifting her weight from foot to foot, with one hand holding the other elbow. She rolled her eyes, pinching her mouth shut, and reached behind her to slap at Darwin’s hand as he poked her in the back.

Taking a deep breath, she focused on Tesla, and chirped, “Hi! My name is...”



END OF BOOK FOUR

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you didn't see it at the very beginning of the book, the second half of the dedication was to the "one out of five women and girls who are also not liars."

In the United States, "one out of five" is a controversial estimate, the statistic frequently cited regarding sexual assaults against women on college campuses. It's also the statistic you find on the NSVRC site (all resources cited are linked below) for the number of women of any age who have experienced "completed or attempted rape" in their lifetime.

RAINN reports it as "one in six" American women.

The CDC says "one in four" women have experienced completed or attempted rape, and half of all women in the U.S. have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact. That bears repeating: for every two women, one has experienced "sexual activity when consent is not obtained or freely given," including groping, harassment, molestation, etc.

The World Health Organization (WHO) lumps together intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual violence, and their number is "one in three" across the globe.

And everyone just accepts that we'll never have actual numbers or truly representative statistics, because all of them are gross underestimations. They use very narrow or specific definitions, or rely solely on data from *reported* cases of rape and sexual assault, when it is *also* understood that these are crimes that go unreported upwards of 60% of the time.

And none of these numbers begin to cover the day-to-day reality that many, if not most — if not *all* — women and girls live with. It describes a crime that can be prosecuted, not the petty indignities, minor assaults, borderline-violations, groping, uncomfortable stares, verbal harassment, unwanted

touches, or the exploitations of a child's innocence, confusion, and need to be acknowledged and loved.

It doesn't encompass generation after generation of women who are taught not to make trouble, stir things up, cause a fuss, or *be dramatic*, so they internalize the abuse and live lives of quiet, impotent, simmering rage. It doesn't address the damage left behind, or the broken pieces inside when the abuser is someone significant to them, or who uses their role to gain access and complicity.

It doesn't address the culture that allows this.

And neither do I.

Because that book would be three times longer than this, and it wouldn't gloss over Janie's rape at 13, or the coercive "sex" that re-traumatized Mouse at 27. It would focus on the direct aftermath, the amount of work and therapy it would take for her to recover, and the journey to reclaim her sexuality. It would dig into what factors and early relationships contributed to her resiliency. A book like that would be a completely different story than what I set out to write, and only including allusions to her experiences is not intended to diminish the crime, the trauma, or the recovery process.

What I *hoped* to accomplish with Mouse's story was to show one experience of abuse from the inside. How it becomes normalized when it's happening, and especially when it's happening to a kid: you only know what you know, and every experience can only be measured against your understanding of "normal." Janie understood that her dad neglected her because she could see examples of other parent/child relationships, but she didn't have a gauge to measure her relationship with Beast. It wasn't "bad" until it was *really* bad, but she still had no reason to reflect on what came before and see it any differently.

Our brains are wonderfully elastic things. A brain can form "truths" around what it understands, by putting experiences into the context it knows. If everyone around you behaves as though nothing is wrong, then apparently nothing is wrong, and if you feel as if something *is* wrong despite that, than it

must be *you*. Daddy hitting you because you've been bad is comprehensible; Daddy's shitty childhood, feelings of inadequacy, and daily frustrations with his unappreciative boss that result in him lashing out, then suggesting it's your fault to justify his behavior so he can live with the asshole he's become, isn't. Not from the inside.

When your love or your trust is violated by someone who is supposed to be on your side, who is supposed to love you, support you, protect you, and care for you — and may still claim to do so — that is not your fault. They can still be decent or good in other ways, and it does not absolve them of their actions. And you continuing to love and trust them, even after they do horrible things to you, does not mean you want it, you're asking for it, or you're stupid or weak or gullible. It is *not* your fault, and it is not your choice. It is not a judgment on you, an indelible stain on your soul, nor a scarlet letter on your chest. And sometimes it takes a different perspective to realize that, such as a therapist; there's nothing quite like having a neutral third party validate your experiences and emotions to lessen the burden.

In this sense, I took liberties. The amount of therapy and work necessary for someone to overcome experiences like Janie's, no matter how resilient she might be, would have explored the time and relationships leading up to it, and given Mouse a different perspective. No professional in the field would've glossed over those factors, as I suggested Mouse's therapists did, particularly when she was incarcerated. I was lucky enough to be able to speak at length with two people who treat offenders at the juvenile and adult levels, and the care, compassion, and empathy they extend to their patients is extraordinary. I can't imagine anyone "in the system" who has been victimized would receive less, regardless of the situation, funding, or outside influence, if only because of the dedication and compassion of those professionals. And certainly not with our robust social safety net and health care system! Circumstances that I've described, in which so many individuals throughout the judicial and penal systems could be influenced and corrupted by a criminal organization or the self-serving personal agendas of those in power, must solely

be the work of my own imagination. Such a world would be intolerable.\*

In polite society, we are taught to tolerate rude behavior, which is not the same as welcoming it. Surviving rape, sexual assault, harassment, or molestation is not the same as welcoming it, but it is in your abuser's best interest that that distinction remains unclear, because predators are like viruses: they'll do whatever they need to, even adapt their nature or destroy their host, to survive.



\* Some reviews have expressed dismay at a suspected “political agenda” in my books (while reading a series about government conspiracies during a pandemic...) because of the familiarity of some aspects of the post-apocalyptic hellscape that the characters are navigating. This suspicion bothers me, because it tells me that I've been too subtle, so I want to make sure my motives are clear: there is absolutely a political agenda here. Azzie's body autonomy has been a running theme from book one, page one, and I kinda thought I was being super obvious. Since I wasn't, let me correct that and be totally transparent: I strongly believe a person's identity, sexuality, health, or whether they carry a pregnancy to term, *should not be politicized*. And decisions about identity, sexuality, health, or pregnancy sure as fuck shouldn't be made by a politician or by committee. The fact that we're regressing as a society to this extent is unfathomable to me, so consider this confirmation that you nailed it, I'm absolutely using my writing to express my beliefs.



#### RESOURCES

[CDC Fast Facts](#): Preventing Sexual Violence

National Sexual Violence Resource Center ([NSVRC](#))

Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network ([RAINN](#))

World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) fact sheet for violence against women

I want to draw special attention to a couple resources recommended to me when I was researching grooming and sexual abuse:

[Polaris Project](#) is a charitable organization for the U.S. and its territories, working to combat human trafficking and assist survivors. Their website is an incredible resource for facts, statistics, calls to action, warning signs, and a guide for how to factually portray human trafficking in a non-exploitative way. The section on “[Love and Trafficking: Grooming, Exploitation, and Control](#)” was an important resource for me, and the survivor accounts are soul-crushing.

They also operate the [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#) to report or seek assistance if you or someone else is being controlled “for the purpose of engaging in commercial sex acts or soliciting labor or services against his/her will,” using force, fraud, or coercion.

[amaze](#) has a ton of resources — including guides, videos (with playlists by topic!), coloring books, and age-appropriate materials — to help parents and educators communicate with children and adolescents about puberty, reproduction, gender identity, personal safety, relationships, sex, and sexuality. Their slogan is “More info. Less weird.”

The [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) has information about effects, interventions, fact sheets, and resources for a wide range of traumas experienced by children, including bullying, natural disasters, community violence, domestic violence/IPV, the COVID pandemic, medical trauma, sex trafficking, and sexual abuse. That’s only maybe half the list. It also links to a Learning Center offering free online continuing education certifications.



Anyone who has talked to me about anything in the last two years (including asking if I want fries with that), knows this

book was hard to write. The subject matter is intense and even darker than just a pandemic, a chronic and debilitating disease, and government conspiracies against the population it is supposed to protect and serve; the book itself is ambitious in its structure and themes — one could say it's reminiscent of another “Jane” with a last name that sounds elemental.

For those of you not in my readers' group on Facebook, *The Steam Tunnels* (shameless plug!), the next book (five) is Azzie's adventures during the exact same time period as the second part of this book. As of right now, I think I can wrap up Azzie and Mouse's story in six books with a spin-off. That's my plan, at least.

So speaking of *The Steam Tunnels*, and my incredible readers (whether in the group or not): thank you. Thank you for your patience as I missed every deadline I'd set for myself multiple times. Thank you for your reviews on Amazon, Goodreads, and elsewhere. Thank you for enthusiastically embracing my fucked up little world (that's somehow actually becoming reality in some cases) and recommending my books to unsuspecting suckers who might have overlooked them because of the covers, the title, the subject matter, pandemic fatigue, the blurbs that don't say nearly enough (blurbs are hard, okay?!), and all the other ways I've managed to make them small, plain, obscure, and unnoticed.

Thank you for loving these characters so much that you've lost sleep, ignored chores and your families, taken time off of work, talked about the books for hours in a bar until everyone around you told you to shut up already, and reread them over and over and over (sometimes up to ten times??!!!), while you patiently waited for me to get over myself and write this - *fucking - book*.

Thank you for telling your friends, your family, complete strangers, and users of TikTok. Thank you for the DMs I get that tell me how obsessed you are with the characters, how hard you binged the books, how you spit out your beverage from laughing, how you ugly cried, how Azzie and Mouse are your spirit animals, and how much you hate me for not writing faster. Your love keeps me going whenever I lose my

confidence, think the subject matter is going to destroy my career, get scared of failure (and success), wonder why the fuck I didn't start out with something simpler, or lighter, or less ambitious, and just generally doubt myself and everything I do.

And thank you for sharing your stories. Thank you for validating my choices (personally and artistically), reinforcing where I got shit right, and sharing your most personal challenges, heartaches, and tragedies. I've wanted this to be my purpose and my job since I was a little girl, and you've given me not just the opportunity to connect — “Only connect!” — but feel like I have things worth saying and people are listening. That is... *incalculable*.

A few people warrant special thanks because they gave me the gift of their time, experiences, expertise, and often their friendship:

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In many cases, you were already pimping my books all on your own (you shameless hussies!), before we recruited you for a formal role, and your efforts on my behalf are so very appreciated. All of you go above and beyond to help me distribute the Kool-Aid and convert the non-believers.



Thank you to my arsenal of secret weapons, my alpha and beta readers, because you make me look *good* (and even mostly professional!):

Liza, Roxie, Destiny, Kaitlyn, Tory, Jeni, Rebecca, Jessica, Kittriona, Nessie, and most especially, Michele Patten, proofreader extraordinaire.

I'm sorry if I traumatized you.



Thank you to everyone in my group who complained about “name under-representation,” about never seeing their names in books unless the character was a hooker, stripper, “trailer trash,” raging bitch/mean girl, or evil Other Woman — and who enthusiastically embraced being the namesakes of hookers, strippers, and biker sluts. You're welcome.

Thank you to all the people who reached out at various times to check on me, and who still continue to check on me regularly (Sylvia! Nessie!) because of my bad habit of ghosting for months at a time. The cats have not yet eaten my cheeks.

Thank you to Destiny, who put up with a lot of my shit for a long time as my PA before she finished school and became a frighteningly overworked nurse. And thank you to Liza, who stepped in to take over, and has made valiant efforts at things like “enforcing deadlines” and “setting goals,” you adorable

minx! I appreciate you. I don't always listen, but I appreciate you.

Thank you to Roxie, as ever, for putting up with me.

Dave, I don't even know what to say at this point. You're still here, despite everything. Thank you for not smothering me with a pillow. I'm "sorry" about my obsession with creepy dolls and for how many of them watch us sleep. I am *legit* sorry about the spiders though, and for constantly referring to it as "immersion therapy" like it's something that you should be thanking me for.



The story continues in *Book of the Blood: AZD 1480*.

# PLAYLIST



## **TRUE LOVE IS VIOLENT**

The Playlist for *Book of the Found*

shared on [Spotify](#).

Unlike previous playlists which may have loosely followed the course of events, this list has at least one song per chapter, sometimes up to three.

### **PROLOGUE**

The Night We Met — Lord Huron

I Lied — Lord Huron with Allison Ponthier

### **PART 1: JANIE**

Atmosphere — Joy Division

Samson — Regina Spektor

I'm On Fire — Low

I Will Possess Your Heart — Death Cab for Cutie

Bad Things — Machine Gun Kelly with Camila Cabello

The Dirt — Tor Miller

Pursuit of Happiness — Lissie

Your Power — Billie Eilish

Dead of Night — Orville Peck

True Love is Violent — Allie X

**PART 2: MOUSE**

Dry the Rain — The Beta Band

Desperado — Rihanna

E-GIRLS ARE RUINING MY LIFE! — CORPSE,  
Savage Ga\$

Flaws — Bastille

Oxytocin — Billie Eilish

She's Lost Control - Joy Division

Nothing Else Matters — Metallica

Hurricane - MS MR

The Perfect Fit — The Dresden Dolls

I Won't Back Down — Johnny Cash

Agora — Bear Hands

Paradise Circus — Massive Attack

Victoria's Secret — Jax

Fineshrine - Purity Ring

Special Death — Mirah

Not Dead Yet — Lord Huron

Bad Blood — Taylor Swift

Survivor — Destiny's Child

Cry Me A River — Justin Timberlake

Woman — Karen O & Danger Mouse

Play With Fire - Nico Santos

I Love You, But I Need Another Year — Liza Anne

The Curse — Alice Obel

Something I Can Never Have — Nine Inch Nails

Use Somebody — Kings of Leon

Stars — The xx  
Daisy — Ashnikko  
1940 — The Submarines  
Get Down, Make Love — Nine Inch Nails  
Love on the Brain — Rihanna  
Cake - Melanie Martinez  
Issues — Julia Michaels  
Something Just Like This — The Chainsmokers &  
Coldplay  
Come With Me Now — KONGOS  
Dark Times — The Weeknd, Ed Sheeran  
Meet Me On The Battlefield — SVRCINA  
Possession — Sarah McLachlan  
Waiting Game — BANKS  
Need You Tonight — INXS  
desperate — Ashlynn Malia  
Wanting — Moev  
How Soon Is Now? — The Smiths  
Reflections — MisterWives  
Kings & Queens — Ava Max  
Lost Cause — Beck  
My Body Is A Cage — Arcade Fire  
Creepy Doll — Jonathan Coulton  
Let Me Down Slowly — Alec Benjamin  
After Dark — Mr. Kitty  
Not Your Fault — AWOLNATION  
When the Night Is Over — Lord Huron  
The Diary of Jane — Breaking Benjamin

Glory Box — Portishead  
If I Didn't Know Better — Sam Palladio, Clare Bowen  
Do I Wanna Know? — Arctic Monkeys  
Believer — Imagine Dragons  
River — Bishop Briggs  
Come To Me — Björk  
Teardrop — Massive Attack  
#1 Crush — Garbage  
The Night We Met — Lord Huron ft. Phoebe Bridgers  
I Went Too Far — AURORA

**PART 3: JANE**

Numb/Encore — JAY-Z, Linkin Park  
Landfill — Daughter  
Nightmare — Halsey  
Into Dust — Mazzy Star  
Hurt — Johnny Cash  
when the party's over — Billie Eilish  
Roads — Portishead

**EPILOGUE**

The Cut That Always Bleeds — Conan Gray  
Troy — Sinéad O'Connor  
The End — JPOLND  
Somebody That I Used To Know — Gotye & Kimora  
Thunder — Imagine Dragons

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

V.E.S. Pullen is a believer in truth, sheepsquatch, and the Oxford comma. She lives in southeast Michigan with her family: husband, three needy cats, and a truly spectacular canine. She enjoys playing warlocks, collecting creepy dolls, and yelling at kids to get off her lawn.

You can follow her on Facebook if you want to be ghosted for months at a time, then overwhelmed with walls of text. She still hasn't gotten that website and only lurks on other socials; she remains lazy, it's cold outside, and there are still wolves after her.

Join her Facebook group, [The Steam Tunnels](#). From that group, you can join "Spoilers, Sweetie!" and vent about what a monster she is.



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