

A man with extensive tattoos, including a large tiger on his chest and a crown on his neck, is shown from the chest up. He is wearing a black leather jacket and looking off to the side. The background is a dark, stormy sky with a lightning bolt striking down, and a road leading into the distance under a dark, overcast sky.

DEVIL'S
HELLIONS MC

COCKY
perfect
STORM

HAYLEY FAIMAN

COCKY PERFECT STORM

DEVIL'S HELLIONS MC

BOOK TWO

HAYLEY FAIMAN

HAYLEY FAIMAN BOOKS, LLC

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Cocky Perfect Storm

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A bit of arrogance is nice every now and then.

— LEO SAYER

CHAPTER ONE

ROADKILL

WHEN SOMEONE YOU RESPECT BETRAYS YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY, it puts shit into perspective. It puts the past, present, and future at the forefront of everyone's mind. Especially the past and the future. That is exactly what happened with the Devil's Hellions Original Chapter.

Warden deceived us.

All of us.

Not just one person, not just one brother, but the entire Devil's Hellions organization. Warden betraying the entire club isn't the first time someone has been disloyal to me personally, though, and it probably won't be the last.

People can only be so loyal, I suppose. Greed, insecurities, or what the fuck ever, it becomes all-consuming, so their loyalty wavers and everyone else is left with the aftermath.

Life feels a bit odd at the moment. Uncertain. Legacy is the president, and I've been promoted from road captain to vice president. Both duties that neither of us ever desired—we were content to live our lives with a little power but few responsibilities.

However, at the same time, these things—power and now major responsibility—are now part of us, of who we are. The men we have *now* become. It's only taken us about forty years to develop into the men we need to be.

I'm not even sure I'm there yet, to be honest. But I'm trying.

It's been a year since Warden was killed, taken down by us—his brothers. Yet his stain, his *shit*, hangs above us all. Like a fucking fog that surrounds this entire club. It's a stink we can't quite get rid of. It's here, and it isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

We all just can't seem to shake it, no matter what we do or how busy we become. Doesn't matter what we add to our plate. It's fucking there, in the background. Sitting in the corner of every fucking room, watching us. Hovering over us.

At least right now, we are really fucking busy. Too busy to continue to focus on that fucking stain, on that fog, but that doesn't make it go away, and it doesn't mean you don't catch it out of the corner of your eye at times.

But thinking about Warden causes me to not so suddenly shift my thoughts from him to someone else who betrayed me. Another person who wrecked my whole goddamn world a decade ago.

I've been thinking about her a lot lately.

She's someone much sexier, younger, and prettier than Warden. She's come back into my thoughts, and I can't seem to shake her. I don't know why she's even in my mind. I don't want anything to do with her.

Right?

Maybe *she's* what is hanging above me like a fog. What if it isn't Warden? Possibly, it's just me and her. I haven't asked anyone else if they feel his presence, if they smell his stench, but I also don't see any of them appear as concerned as I feel.

Fuck, maybe it's just me.

They seem to be living their lives. A little more stressed and cautious than they were a few months ago but still going forward. I'm the only one who is at a complete standstill looking around and waiting for shit to implode around me.

Climbing onto my bike, I rev the engine before I start to back away, only pausing when I hear someone calling my name. Lifting my head, I look over at the clubhouse door and watch Thunder running toward me.

She's pounding the gravel parking lot, trying to get to me as quickly as possible. She appears panicked as fuck.

Arching a brow, I kill my engine before climbing off my bike. Quickly, I walk toward her, meeting her halfway. As I stand in front of her, I wait for her to catch her breath. She's panting, breathlessly gasping for air as she bends slightly.

"What's up, babe?" I ask on a chuckle.

She sucks in a breath, then lifts her gaze to meet mine before she speaks. "Phone call. Legacy. Emergency."

I'm not sure why he would be calling the landline for me when I have my cell in my pocket, but I don't ask her that. She wouldn't know either. Taking my phone out of my inner cut pocket, I look down to see if there are any missed calls or texts, but there's nothing.

No new notifications at all.

With a grunt, I walk past a still panting Thunder and back into the clubhouse. He's calling me here for a reason. Marching directly toward the wall phone, I pick it up and place it against my ear before I speak.

"Roadkill."

"Got a problem," Legacy announces without greeting me.

I don't say anything, wondering what the hell he's talking about. What the fuck else could go wrong at this point? I mean, sure, our club shit as far as work has been great, but that's about it. Well, his personal life is fucking spectacular, too, I suppose. He's got a woman, a wife. He's exactly where he wanted to be just months ago.

Legacy clears his throat, breaking me out of my thoughts about his life, and continues to speak. The next five words he says send me into a complete tailspin of confusion.

"Kiplyn is in the hospital."

My entire body jerks at his words. I don't know what to say, what to do. I am fucking frozen. So, instead of doing or *saying* a fucking word, I stand where I am, planted there, staring at the wall.

But he's not finished yet.

"I called you on this line because this phone is more protected than our cell phones."

"What aren't you telling me?" I demand.

"Stay where you are. I'll be there soon."

The call ends, and I'm stuck. My feet feel as if they're cemented to the fucking floor as I stare at the wall and hold a phone that actually has a goddamn dial tone.

What the actual fuck is going on?

Eventually, I shake myself out of my daze and hang the phone back up on the wall. Turning around, I lift my gaze, flick it around the room, and notice that Thunder is watching me. I think her real name is Tara or something, but we call her Thunder because she's got luscious thunder thighs. And that is all I can focus on right now because I cannot wrap my head around what he's just said to me.

"Are you okay?" she finally asks when we make eye contact.

Shaking my head, I lift my hand and run my fingers through my hair. One of my fingers touches the scar on my face, and I close my eyes.

Fuck.

Kiplyn caused that fucking scar. I hated her for so long. The sting of betrayal has been goddamn thick. The kick to my pride wasn't that great either. But to hear that she's possibly hurt? That makes my entire body ache. It seems fortuitous that this happened now, when I've been thinking about her for the past few weeks.

Walking away from Thunder, ignoring her, which I know is a dick move, I decide I need at least one shot to calm my rattled nerves. I wasn't planning on drinking. I don't know

what I was planning on doing, but it's safe to say that any type of plans I did have are now out the goddamn window.

The prospect behind the bar doesn't even have to ask. He slides a whiskey shot across to me, along with a beer, and I down the shot in an instant. Lifting the beer to my lips, I use my other hand to hold up the shot glass, waving it around slightly in an attempt to ask for another.

Before I can even lift the second shot to my lips, the door to the clubhouse opens. Legacy wasn't fucking around when he said he would be here soon.

Turning my head, I watch as he walks through the door, the sunlight bathing the dark room, his boots slamming against the floor with each step he takes toward me. The sound is echoing and deafening all at the same time. I focus on that instead of the sheer fucking stress that is flowing through my body at this exact moment.

Turning to face him, I lift my eyes to meet his concerned ones. I don't even open my mouth to speak. I know that look on his face. It's one where you listen, and you do not ask any goddamn questions.

"In my office," he murmurs.

Fuck.

This is bad.

He doesn't sound angry at all. Though, he does sound perplexed, maybe even more worried than anything else.

So, yeah.

This is really fucking bad.

Following him, I make my way into his office and close the door behind me. I reach to lock it, but before I can, it opens again for Volt and Hellcat to slip into the room.

Again, really bad.

Reinforcements.

They're here to make sure I don't completely lose my shit, which means this is going to be horrific. I just know it. I can

feel it deep in my bones, in my gut, down to my goddamn marrow.

I hear the lock flip into place with a distinct click. Volt and Hellcat slide up behind me. They're here to hold me back. They're going to ensure I don't take off and do something stupid, which I can't guarantee that I won't.

"Kiplyn is in the hospital," Legacy repeats from our phone conversation.

"You wanna expand on that?" I grind out, mainly because he's already said that shit to me, and I don't really need to hear it again. What I need is to know why, to understand it, and then also why it pertains to me.

He dips his chin in a nod, then he clears his throat, and I know he's trying to stall for some fucking time because he doesn't want to actually tell me what the fuck is going on. With each avoidance, with each passing moment, I become more and more upset.

There is something more to this than her being in the hospital. In fact, I think that if he didn't deem it necessary, he wouldn't tell me dick at this point. There is a lot more, and my body genuinely trembles with anxious energy.

"Her ex-husband beat the shit out of her."

My heart stops beating in my chest. I actually have no words. I have no thoughts. I have nothing in this moment. I am staring blankly, but it's that fucking fog that fills my entire head. That fog that's been in the corner of my eye for the past few months.

"He did more than that, too," he whispers. "Raped her..."

My stomach twists. It knots. And then it flips, and I wonder if I'm actually going to puke right here in the middle of Legacy's office. I think I just might.

"How do you know? How did you find out?" My heart starts beating again, but now it's racing against my ribs, pounding in my chest. My head is spinning, and all I see is the color red.

The color red.

Red fills my vision.

I know who her ex is, mainly because he's my own goddamn flesh and blood. My cousin, George. A guy I hung around with as a kid, but it didn't take me long to fucking hate the prick. He was one of those kids who would do shady shit, then blame it on me. I was the bad kid, from the broken home, the *bad* teenager—everyone would believe him, so it was me who was always taking the fall for his shit.

George was someone who always got what he wanted, the way he wanted it. He gave no fucks about what was right or wrong. About who he fucked over in the process. Not a single fuck. There was never any stopping him. Once he set his sights, he was going to do whatever it took—lie, cheat, and steal to get it.

He saw Kiplyn.

He wanted her.

I didn't blame him, really. She was what was good and pure in the world. I didn't deserve her then, but I wanted to keep her. George thought he could take her from me—he did... and whatever he said to her, it worked. He got what he wanted, and I was left alone.

Though, to be fair, at the time, I was not a man who deserved a woman like Kiplyn. Hell, I'm probably still not. She is definitely all that is good and right in the world.

Smirking, I remember her in all the glory of her twenty-year-old self. The good things, at least, before I ended up hating her. She would volunteer at the library and read to kids. She would even visit sick people in the hospital. When I think of old lady material, Kiplyn is the absolute last woman who comes to mind.

So, I knew she would be done with me sooner or later, but she didn't have to do what she did. She didn't have to marry my cousin. She didn't have to hide from me, refuse to talk to me, and tell me why she was fucking leaving me, so that George came out acting like Billy Badass. He didn't have to

use a broken bottle he'd been hiding behind his back and slash my fucking face with. But if she hadn't had him there, it wouldn't have ever happened.

Regardless, she's still a good person, even if I fucking hate that she did what she did. I don't deserve her at all. The women I should surround myself with, who are more my style, are the ones at FoxTrot. Those are the women for me. I don't deserve Kiplyn, but I'll be damned if I let George touch her. Never again.

"I was down at the hospital in Phoenix this morning with Henli. Her dad was having surgery, and I fucking saw her wheeled in. I was able to sweet-talk my way into finding out what was up with her."

"I'm going down there right now, and you're taking me," I demand.

My hands are trembling, and I don't think I can ride all the way there. The need to protect this woman, it flows through me like a living, breathing thing. Even though she isn't my woman, she married another man, she isn't my property—she will always be mine to protect. Hate or not, part of me will always be there for her. And right now, it's clear that she needs me.

He dips his chin, his lips twitching into a smile. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"I need to make a pit stop on the way."

Legacy's lips curve up into an even bigger smile. "I was *really* hoping you'd say that. It's been a long time coming."

"It sure as fuck has," I grind out. "It sure as fuck has."

KIPLYN

"Please, George. I just want to be free. Please leave me alone," I whimper.

It seems like I'm constantly begging him to leave me alone. That I've been pleading with him for almost a decade for that exact thing, and yet, time after time, he does the exact

opposite. In the past, I have been too scared to make him leave me alone—to at least try to make him.

But this time it's the end.

This time, I am done.

One year ago, I did the unthinkable. I filed for divorce and left. That divorce is now final. Court dates have come and gone. What little money there was has been demanded and divided. I was even able to buy a very small house on a really bad side of town, but I am free of him. Or at least I thought I was, but apparently, I'm not, as he's standing right in front of me.

We are over, though.

We are done, divorced, and I've been living in my own place for over a year, yet he's right here, demanding that I take him back.

That I listen to him.

That I accept his apologies.

Whatever it is he's demanding, I'm not quite sure. I can't really hear over him screaming in my face and the blood rushing through my ears.

"You will never, not ever, be free of me, *whore*," he grinds out.

I made the biggest mistake of my life when I let him seduce me. When I believed his bullshit. I was young, naïve, scared, and so stupid. I was so angry with Rusk. I still am, but this situation is all my fault. Being angry with him did not mean that I had to run to George.

George was able to get into my head, and it was because I'd just caught Rusk cheating on me. I knew George. He would make little comments here and there about Rusk always being a bad kid, always getting into trouble, and told me he was going to break my heart.

And he did.

With said broken heart, I ran to this man. This man, who swore he would take care of me. That he'd always loved me, that he would always love me, and because he seemed to be nothing like his cousin, I thought it would work.

I thought we could have a decent life. I didn't love him, but that didn't matter. I needed safety and security. I needed devotion and support. I needed someone who would be caring and faithful.

What I got was the exact opposite.

I should have stayed with Rusk, cheating or not, because I know he wouldn't have ever hurt me. He wouldn't hit me, he wouldn't force himself on me, he wouldn't have tried to use me over and over until there was nothing left.

Not in a million years.

George, though. This man who I thought was safe. This man who I thought would never hurt me. He is the exact opposite of that.

He is dangerous.

He is terrifying.

He is a monster.

When his fist slams into my face, I am brought out of my own thoughts as I cry out. "Shut the fuck up, or this is going to be much worse for you, Kiplyn."

I know what he means. Fighting back, crying out, anything other than acceptance earns much more of his anger than compliance does.

But I am no longer his wife.

So, this time, I fight.

It's probably the biggest mistake of my entire life, but I'm over thirty, and I am done being his punching bag. I am done being his plaything. I am done being his wife. I am just done.

I fight for my life.

CHAPTER TWO

ROADKILL

THE ONLY REASON I KNOW WHERE MY COUSIN, GEORGE Robbins, lives is because he is still at his fucking parents' house. Granted, they passed away a few years back, and since he was an only child, the estate was left solely to him.

As far as I know, he moved in the day they died, and shortly after that, he moved Kiplyn in with him. I haven't kept tabs on him, though. I have no fucking idea what he's been up to the past decade, mainly because I fucking hate him.

Legacy pulls the pickup truck up to the curb. I look over at him. His head is turned toward the house. Volt and Hellcat are in the back seat. Nobody said a fucking word the entire twenty-minute drive here.

I've lived in this town my entire goddamn life. Kiplyn too. But it's funny—in the past ten years, I haven't seen either her or George once. One would think I would have seen either one of them somewhere at least once, but I haven't.

Probably because I stick to the shadows.

I do my club business, and when I'm not at the club working or partying, my free time is spent at FoxTrot watching bitches shake their asses for dollars. Then I usually fuck one before heading to bed.

That has been my life.

Drugs, booze, parties, work, and bitches—in no particular order. Over and over on repeat. It's just who I am. Who I have always been. But at the same time, I know without a single doubt that I am missing a part of myself, and that part is Kiplyn.

Originally, I thought I could keep her as a citizen wife. I thought I could shield her from the club, from my life *in* the club. But I wasn't good to her, I wasn't there for her, and she caught me.

She popped by one day, at the small apartment I was renting in an attempt to keep her away from the clubhouse. Though, I have no doubt she was guided there by George him-fucking-self. And she saw a bitch riding my dick.

That was the end of us.

And the beginning of her and George.

That was when she decided she hated me. And when George attacked me and she didn't do shit about it, I decided I hated her, too. But mostly, I hated myself.

But that shit changes now.

He put her in the hospital, and that is not acceptable, not ever. Not for anyone. Even if it's been ten years since she was mine, she is and will always be mine to protect, no matter fucking what.

At the end of the day—Kiplyn was mine first.

Wordlessly, I open the car door and start to make my way to the front door, using the cement walkway. I remember walking up this exact cement path when I was a kid, but he's let this place go to complete shit. Every single part of the cement is cracked, no doubt by the large roots of the tree in the front yard.

The whole fucking place is unkempt.

George, for being such an uptight bastard, has not kept up appearances with his parents' home, and that surprises me.

Years ago, when visiting here as a kid, I was always in awe of the place. I always thought they were rich. His mom kept it

clean on the inside, almost pristine. And his dad always had the yard dialed in.

Right now, it appears to be abandoned. Everything has been completely let go, and the grass is too tall, something his dad would never have allowed. Each wooden step that leads to the front porch creaks. Looking to the side, I notice that the porch swing looks as if it's about to fall any given second as well.

My aunt and uncle would completely lose their fucking shit at the sight of this place. They've probably rolled over in their graves multiple times. Which considering they were kind of assholes, too.

It makes my lips curve up into a grin.

Lifting my hand, I wrap my fingers around the cold doorknob. I would knock, but fuck that. I'm going to take this asshole by surprise. He deserves not a single ounce of warning from me.

Turning the knob, I push the door open and move into the home as quietly as possible. I don't know what to expect. And I refuse to be caught off guard and suffer any more scars by this piece of shit.

The house smells when I walk inside the entryway. It doesn't just smell. There is a *stench*. It's obvious that he's allowed the inside to become as dirty and messy as the outside—maybe even worse so. There is a television on in the living room, the volume turned up a bit too high. I continue to move through the house toward the noise.

George is home. Sitting in an easy chair, watching something. What he's got on, I don't know, because as soon as I see him, nothing else in the fucking world exists. I could take my gun out of my shoulder holster and kill him right now. He'd never even know what happened.

He would just cease to exist.

But I'm too pissed off to be that reasonable. I need to take my anger out on him, and considering he's the most deserving,

that's exactly what I'm going to do. Moving into the living room, I walk in front of the television, blocking his view.

I watch as his eyes widen and his lips part. "What the fuck?" he growls.

I should have kept tabs on this fucker over the years. If I had, I would have been able to realize the absolute shitbag he has become. George sits in the filthy chair, his even filthier clothes covering his overweight and ungroomed body.

This is the man who had to have everything in his life perfect, to an anal degree. The best of everything—cars, clothes, and women. *Everything*. I've been on three-day benders and looked better than he does right now.

"I could ask you the same," I grind out, my gaze flicking down to his fists and seeing they're bruised and swollen.

He doesn't move. He stays in his seat, his lips curved up into a cocky grin. "You here because that little bitch went crying to you?" he asks. "I was wondering when she'd do that. The whore."

I should kill him right here and now. "Why don't you tell me what the fuck you did to her?"

Slowly, George stands. He takes one step toward me, and I almost puke. He smells fucking putrid. Tilting my head to the side, I refuse to even blink as I watch him, stare at him, wait for him to make a goddamn move.

"Do you want the details? Or the video?"

That's it.

I'm fucking done.

Reaching my arm backward, I ball my fingers into a fist, and I start to move forward with all my strength. Because when I hit this fuck for the first time, I'm going to send his fat ass onto the floor, then I'm going to beat the shit out of him.

Before my fist connects with his face, he decides to say something else. "She fucking loved it, too. Don't let her fool you. She was begging for more."

My fist connects with his fucking temple. He falls backward, but I don't let him land on his chair. Reaching out, I wrap my fingers in the dirty T-shirt he's got on and pull him back toward me.

I refuse to let him fall back onto something as comfortable as a fucking recliner.

Using my other hand, I make another fist and slam it into the side of his head again. Only then do I toss his body to the side and watch as he lands on the ground. He wasn't expecting me to start beating the shit out of him so quickly. I took him off guard, but I don't stop there. I won't stop. Just like he didn't stop on Kiplyn.

Straddling him immediately, I punch him in the face and sides of the head, over and over. I don't stop. I can't stop. The sound of my fist hitting his soft flesh eventually turns into the sound of his bones crunching.

Over and over.

Until I feel a hand on my shoulder, fingers squeezing it and shaking me gently.

"It's done, brother. If he ain't dead, he's gonna wish he was."

Looking over my shoulder, I tip my head back and look up at Legacy. Volt and Hellcat are close behind him. Shifting my attention back to the pile of flesh, fat, and bone on the floor, I almost wince at the sight of him

George is beat to fucking hell. Honestly, if he lives, I'll be surprised, and if he keeps both of his eyes, I'll be shocked. He's already swelling really fucking badly. Standing, I do one more thing. I probably shouldn't, it's petty as fuck, but I don't think I care at this point.

I spit on him.

Right in his ugly fucking face. Then I turn and walk out of the house. Legacy, Volt, and Hellcat silently follow. Tugging the truck passenger door open, I jump into the seat and slam it closed behind me.

Legacy climbs inside and starts the engine, then eases into the street, and we head straight toward Phoenix. A hand reaches for the radio knob, and I watch as Legacy turns the sound up. I still can't really make out the tune, the pounding in my ears louder than anything else.

Another car ride in silence, but I don't give a fuck.

KIPLYN

The beeping is the first thing I hear. Then there is a crash. Turning my head to the side, I open my eyes and see a blurry figure. I can't make it out. The room is dark, the smell turns my stomach, and I know I'm in a hospital.

"Listen, bitch," a deep voice growls. "I am not leaving, so you better get the fuck out of my way."

I don't hear what happens next because whatever medicine I'm on kicks in and my eyes flutter closed, no matter how hard I try to keep them open. I want to know who is here. My heart starts to race when I think it could be George, but it didn't sound like him.

And that is the last thought I have.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Forcing my eyes to open, I look around and am, for a moment, disoriented, then I realize where I am.

The hospital.

With a moan, I wish I could take back the past however many hours of my life and change it all. I wish I had run away as soon as the divorce from George was final. That I had hidden.

But I didn't.

I wanted to be brave.

I wanted to be strong.

I wanted to be fearless, and all it did was get me hurt—beyond hurt. Damaged. That's a better word. Although I've

been damaged for a decade, this is different. This wasn't because I stayed with him. This was because I was trying to be a better version of myself, and he didn't want that—ever.

“You're awake,” a deep voice rasps.

My body jerks slightly, and I flick my gaze down to the foot of the bed. There is a man sitting in a chair next to my hip. I didn't feel his presence immediately. I don't know how, but I didn't. That's not like me at all. I've been aware for the past decade. You fine-tune your senses when you're in the situation I was in. He's sitting there, watching me, and I know who he is as soon as my eyes land on his face.

There is a scar on his cheek.

I recognize it immediately.

“Rusk?” I ask on a whisper.

He smiles, and God, he's beautiful. Stunning, really. It's been ten years since I've laid eyes on him, and time has been good to him. Better to him than me, obviously.

“Don't talk,” he says, his smooth voice washing over me.

Then I feel his hand take mine. His grasp is firm, and his fingers are so warm as they wrap around mine.

Tears well in my eyes.

I don't know how he's here or why a part of me wants to make him leave, because even though I know he wouldn't have ever hurt me this way, he still cheated on me, and my heart is still very much broken from that.

“How?” I ask.

He shakes his head then dips his chin, and his mouth touches the backs of my fingers. “Sleep, honey.”

That word. I haven't heard it like that in a decade. *Honey*. I used to love it when he called me that, especially in bed. I loved everything about him. But he ruined us. He lied to me, he cheated, and I swore I wouldn't ever, not ever, allow myself to be with him again.

I told myself over and over that I hated him, and eventually, I believed it. So, I hate this man.

I'm not any better off than I was ten years ago when I left him, obviously, considering I'm lying in a hospital bed after my ex-husband violated and abused me. But that doesn't mean I want to be brokenhearted again with Rusk.

"Please leave," I whisper.

Instantly, he releases my hand, but he doesn't stand up to leave. Instead, he tilts his head to the side and watches me for a silent moment.

"No, babe. I don't think I will."

"Why are you here? Are you here to gloat?" I ask.

He blinks, staring at me, his mouth parted in awe. Never have I been someone who really said much. I am not one of those girls with a cute, sassy attitude, but I can't take much more happening to me. Even if it's emotional. I'm a mess, and I need to be alone.

"Gloat?" he asks. I have to give it to him. He genuinely looks confused by my question. "Honey, I'm here because you were hurt. Badly. I care about you. Always have."

Inhaling as deeply as I can, which isn't a lot because I think I probably have some damaged ribs, I let my breath out slowly. I try not to be a bitch. I'm feeling very upset right now, and I shouldn't take it all out on Rusk, but he's here, and I'm still very hurt and angry with him.

I still hate him for what he did to me all those years ago.

"You cared so much about me that you fucked other women while I was at home dreaming of white picket fences and babies. *Get out.*"

I can't scream, even though right now, I kind of want to. Rusk stands. He takes a step back from my bed, then I watch as his lips curve up into a grin.

"Fuck me," he mutters, his lips twitching into a smirk. "I like this attitude, babe."

Narrowing my eyes, as best as I can, I let out a snort, which hurts like hell. “You like the abused woman who is emotionally and physically exhausted and has just had enough? *Wow.*”

The smile on his face instantly dies. His eyes widen. He shakes his head once. “That’s not fair. And that is not who you are.”

It’s not. He’s right, but I’ll be damned if I admit it at this point. I say nothing. He takes another step backward, and then I watch as he slowly makes his way toward the door. He doesn’t open it, though. Instead, he turns his head and looks over his shoulder at me.

“I’m not leaving, Kiplyn. I’ll be right outside.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because I let you walk out the door once. I fucked it up, and I won’t let that happen again. I’m here, honey.”

After dropping his word-bomb, he opens the door then slips out, leaving me alone in the room. The tears that had formed just moments ago, they spill.

I try to keep myself from crying, but I can’t.

The entire last decade flashes before my eyes. Rusk and George, then George and his abuse. Then me wishing I would have stayed with Rusk but knowing he would have broken me just like George did, but in a different way. It doesn’t take long for me to completely wear myself out again and fall back asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

KIPLYN

TWO DAYS LATER

“THAT REALLY CUTE GUY IS STILL OUTSIDE YOUR ROOM. ARE you sure you don’t want to let him in?” the nurse asks me for the millionth time.

I almost ask her to take him off my hands if she thinks he’s so cute, but I would be really jealous if they both took me up on that, so instead, I just give her a smile and shake my head. I’m going home today.

Alone.

I don’t know if I can really walk into my house by myself, but we will find out. Or should I say, I will find out. Nobody else is going to be with me. The nurse clears her throat and tilts her head to the side with a sad smile.

“Are you sure you don’t want to have the police come here and take your statement?” she asks. “They already came and started the report, but it would be easier if they just interviewed you here.”

I appreciate her attempt to be helpful, I really do. But I don’t want to sit in this hospital bed and give any kind of report. I need to walk into that police station on my own two feet and make that report.

“I’ll do it in a few days,” I say. “I want to go down there. I need to.”

She gives me a look of sympathy, or maybe it's pity, I'm not quite sure, before she hands me a stack of papers. "If you ever need to call anyone, there are plenty of resources here. Please, don't hesitate. You're not weak if you need to talk to someone. It makes you stronger."

Her words are sweet. I'm sure she's just memorized a script, but it's sweet nonetheless. Giving her a smile, I dip my chin and take the papers, holding them in my lap. I grip them as if they are a lifeline.

When the door opens, my entire body jumps. A doctor walks into the room, looking down at my chart before he stops in front of me. He lifts his gaze, his eyes finding mine, and gives me a smile.

"All ready to go home?" he asks.

Nodding, I don't verbally say anything. I don't know what to say, really. I don't want to go home at all, but I also don't want to be here. So, I just give him all that I can, which is a nod and a tight smile.

Thankfully, he doesn't ask me any questions, but he does send a prescription to the pharmacy for some pain and sleeping meds to help.

"Now, remember these sleeping aids are not refillable."

Sliding my tongue across my still bruised and cut bottom lip, I nod again, my eyes finding his. "Thank you," I say, my voice soft.

"Take care of yourself, Ms. Robbins."

He leaves me alone then, the nurse being left behind. She clears her throat then gives me a smile. "Are you ready?"

"I am."

I stand from the bed wearing a pair of scrubs and some thick socks because my clothes were collected for evidence, along with my shoes. I have no bra and no panties. It's the weirdest sensation ever.

I don't know how I'm going to get home. It's not like I drove myself here. In fact, I don't even really know how I got

here. I'm just glad that I did. But home is an hour's drive, and I have no way to get there.

I'm not worried about that, though. If I have to pay a hundred bucks for an Uber, that's what I'll do. I'm going to go home, rest, and get the hell out of town—something I should have done a long time ago.

My parents don't live here anymore. My dad's company moved them to Northern California, and they loved it so much there, they've informed me that they'll never come back here. I'm an only child, so it should have been harder for them to leave me, but it wasn't. George had already isolated me by that time, so they left and haven't returned.

I've thought about visiting them a few times, but I feel as if we're irreparable. I've made too many mistakes. I'm still making them. *No*. I need to get my life together first, then I can work on friends and family... or rather just family, because my friends are nonexistent. Well... I have one friend—Reese.

I scoot behind the nurse as she moves toward the door. I can't believe I can still hardly walk. It's not just where I was raped that hurt. I'm used to that from George, unfortunately. It's my entire body—*everything*.

Even my hair hurts.

“Oh, *hi*,” the nurse cries in a really high-pitched squealy voice.

Turning my head, I look over and blink at the sight of Rusk leaning against the wall. He pushes off and takes a step toward me. He doesn't stop until he's directly beside me. As if that's where he belongs. And I have to admit, even though I really do not want to, I like him there. I gasp when he wraps his arm around my waist.

“Please don't,” I whisper.

He grunts. “Honey, you need help, and I'm not going anywhere.”

I open my mouth to tell him to screw off but decide against it, snapping my lips closed. I am proud, but not too proud to

admit that I really do need help. Even if it's just to the parking lot. The nurse doesn't speak as she guides us toward the exit of the hospital.

When we're outside, she turns to Rusk, speaking to him as if I'm not even standing here. "You know, if you need any help, feel free to call me. I put my cell number on the paperwork."

I don't bother responding to her, mainly because I know she's speaking only to Rusk and not me. What a bitch. She is seriously hitting on him right here in front of me. Not that we're together, but seriously?

The nurse bats her eyelashes, then turns and walks away. I assume she sashays, shaking her ass with each step. I can't turn around to watch. Honestly, I don't really care that much because I hate him.

Except that's a lie.

I really do care, and I want to pull her hair out, even though I don't have the right and I hate Rusk. I really hate him. And I decide that if I repeat it often enough, I'll forget how much I used to like—no, *love* him.

"Thank you for walking me out. You can go."

Rusk snorts. "The fuck you talking about, babe?"

"Thank you for walking me out, but you can go home now," I repeat.

His brows lift, then his lips curve up and he chuckles. "Nope," he states.

I open my mouth to tell him that he can go again, but he narrows his eyes on me and shakes his head once. "No more talking," he snaps. "Stay the fuck right here."

His words cause my spine to straighten. I don't know why, but I follow his orders. I watch as he jogs away and stay where I am mainly because it hurts too badly to move. I watch him move through the parking lot, then he slips into a red car and starts his engine. I hear it roar to life before he shifts it into reverse.

I can't take my eyes off the red machine. When he moves through the parking lot, I gasp at the sight of the car as it comes closer.

A 1970 Chevelle.

Red.

That same 1970 Chevelle he had when we were together.

My heart stops.

Just hearing the roar of the engine causes a million memories to flood my mind. I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I can slide into the passenger seat. I'm unsure that my heart can take it for even a second.

God, it's been a decade, and it's as if it were just yesterday that he was picking me up for dates in this machine. I want to cry. I want to scream. I want to forgive him even though he hasn't asked.

I want. I want. I want.

I want everything and nothing all at the same time.

ROADKILL

I'm sure I should say something, but I don't. No words at this point would make a fucking difference in anything. So, instead of talking, I drive. She's pissed off at me, and that should not make me smile. But it does.

It's been ten years, and yet I feel victorious.

I am the victor because of the simple fact that she is still pissed off at me after ten years. It means she still feels *something* for me instead of nothing. The silence envelops the space of the car, save for the radio playing low in the background—rock music, of course.

She clears her throat and asks me something I don't expect. "Why are your knuckles bruised and swollen?"

I probably shouldn't tell her the truth, so instead of lying, I say something else, changing the subject. "I'm assuming you

ain't livin' with George anymore. I don't know where you live. You wanna give me your new address?"

She doesn't answer me immediately. She shifts in her seat with a moan and lets her head slowly fall backward before she replies. When she does, my eyes widen at the name of the street she lives on.

I'm from Casa Grande, lived all over that fucking place, and I know where the fucking hood is. Then again, so does she. We grew up there.

"Babe," I grunt. "You're living in the fuckin' hood."

She lets out a laugh, though it sounds not the least bit humorous.

"Do you think I'm rich? Do you think I have any money at all? That house, on that side of town, is already a struggle for me to pay the mortgage on. It is literally the best I can have right now. George took everything from me and drank it all or shoved it up his nose. Maybe spent it on hookers. I have no idea."

If I could beat the shit out of him all over again, I would. Then I would make sure he was fucking dead before I left that house, something that at this moment, I regret. He could be dead or alive. I have no idea.

Gripping the steering wheel tightly, I hear a crack and release it, not wanting to fuck up my ride because of that asshole.

"You can't stay there alone," I bark.

Kiplyn doesn't speak. The silence fills the car yet again, but this time, I don't break it. I'm steaming fucking pissed off. Taking my phone out of my inner cut pocket, I find Legacy's number and touch the call icon before holding it up to my ear.

"You can't talk and drive. Arizona is a hands-free state now, Rusk," Kiplyn calls out from beside me.

Shifting my gaze to her, I shake my head once before I turn my attention back to the road, effectively ignoring her.

"Brother," Legacy gives his greeting when he answers.

“Need to find that fuck and drag him back into the clubhouse. Also need to have someone on Kiplyn at all times. Round the clock surveillance.”

“You know what this entails?” Legacy asks.

He needs to hear the words. I get it, but fuck, she’s been my old lady since the day I met her. I just wasn’t ready to say the words out loud. I thought I could keep her away, but after watching Legacy and Henli, I know it isn’t possible. Not if I want to have all of Kiplyn. Not if I want to keep her safe. Not if I want to protect her from the outside world.

There is only one way and one thing to do.

Claim her.

“She’s my old lady,” I announce into the phone.

“Not your citizen wife?” Legacy asks.

There is a moment of silence, one where I want to throw the fucking phone out the window and run it over because this asshole is being purposely frustrating to me.

“Already had that with her. Don’t want it again. I’m claimin’ Kiplyn as my old lady right here and now.”

“Then she will have all the benefits of being an old lady. I’ll get a schedule for the prospects right now.”

Ending the call, I don’t say thanks or anything else. I’ll talk to him in person later tonight. Right now, my focus is getting this woman home and cared for. Fuck. I don’t know who is going to take care of her. I know that I am definitely not the man for that job day and night. No way in fuck could I do it properly.

“Do I want to know what that conversation was about, considering you were talking about me?” she asks.

I don’t say anything right away, wondering if there is any delicate way I can put this without pissing her off, then I snort because that isn’t fucking possible. She’s going to be pissed off at me no matter what.

“I just claimed you as my woman,” I announce.

CHAPTER FOUR

KIPLYN

CLAIMED YOU AS MY WOMAN.

Speechless doesn't begin to describe how I feel in this moment. I don't know what exactly the emotions are that are moving through my body. But there is one feeling I cannot dismiss, and it's the only one I can comprehend and deal with—*anger*.

So, I choose to be angry.

"You have got to be kidding me," I seethe through gritted teeth.

He doesn't respond. Likely because he is indeed not kidding me. He is truly going to stake some kind of claim on me without even asking. He is just going to be the Rusk I've always known and do whatever the fuck he wants, when he wants, without giving a damn about anyone else around him.

"No, I don't accept," I state.

He chuckles, the deep, raspy sound filling the car, and I really hate myself for liking it, and for thinking that I actually missed his laughs. I need to get my shit and run far, far away from here, from Arizona. I need to hide somewhere where nobody would ever expect me to go.

Upstate New York. In the middle of nowhere. Maybe I'll live on a maple syrup farm amongst the trees. Those are a thing there, right?

Plus, nobody would ever expect me to live somewhere where it snows. I complain when the weather dips below sixty. That kind of snow would be unfathomable. But that's what I'm going to do. I form the plan in my head. I'll buy warm weather clothes when I get there, but I am not staying here.

I am done.

"You don't have a choice, Kiplyn," Rusk says, oblivious to my inner turmoil and decision.

Lifting my arms, I let out a frustrated noise from the back of my throat. It's almost a growl mixed with a scream. Rusk doesn't seem to hear me, or if he does, he really doesn't care. He continues to drive toward Casa Grande in silence, happy to dictate what will and will not be happening in my life.

"I'm not property, Rusk. I do have a choice now, and I refuse what you're claiming. You don't even know who I am anymore, and I sure as shit don't know you."

He hums but doesn't respond immediately. What he does do is slowly pull over to the side of the road, as far as he can off the gravel, and flips his hazard lights switch before he turns to me.

I watch as he takes his sunglasses off, then places his wrist on the top of the steering wheel, his glasses dangling by his fingers there, which is oddly hot.

"Honey, you think that this is because I want you as my property?" he asks.

"Isn't that what it means, to claim someone?"

He inhales a deep breath then lets it out as a sigh. "It does, to others."

"But you're different, right? How could I be so silly? Of course, you're so much different than any other man in the world."

My anger has built, and it's spilling out all over the place like ugly black sludge. I know he is not the sole target of said anger, but at the same time, he is the only one here for me to verbally assault.

“Never said I was anything, Kiplyn. But what I am going to do is not make the same mistake I made ten years ago. So, I’m claiming you in hopes that the club can protect you.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I snap. He chuckles again, obviously not taking anything about me or this situation seriously. “You know what?” I say. “I don’t care. Just take me to the pharmacy so I can get some pain and sleep meds, and then take me home. You do whatever the hell you want, but I’m going to take some pills and go to sleep.”

He nods once, dipping his chin, but his gaze stays on me. His eyes, they don’t go anywhere. He is focused on me and only me. It’s almost unnerving. It is definitely intimidating. I should be curled up in a ball in the corner of the car, but I’m not. Instead, I stare at him, waiting for his response.

Rusk’s lips curve up into a sexy smile, then he clears his throat. “Okay, babe. But just to add to your little rant, and we’ll call it good from there. I should have done this over a decade ago. I didn’t, and that’s on me. I was a dumb fuckin’ asshole. I mean, I’m still an asshole, just not as fuckin’ dumb.”

Pressing my lips together in a straight line, I refrain from being a smart-ass. It’s hard, though.

Extremely.

I don’t know where this attitude is coming from anymore, but it’s here, and I am not ready to give it up yet. I’m angry and hurt. I’m just plain exhausted. I’m ready to move to Upstate New York... *today*.

Like right this very minute.

Thankfully, he doesn’t ask me to respond to his words, probably because he knows I would have something to say, something he wouldn’t like. I feel like it’s all sitting on the tip of my tongue. I’m ready to give it all to him, but I don’t. I bite the side of my cheek and hope I can stay quiet and not cause any more drama.

“Honey, I know you’ve been through hell. Maybe one day, you’ll feel comfortable enough with me to unload some of

your shit. I got wide shoulders, and I'm willing to carry whatever the fuck you give me."

"Stop being nice," I mumble.

He puts his glasses back on, then flips the hazard switch off before he shifts the car into drive and eases back onto the highway. The rest of the way to Casa Grande is spent in silence, but Rusk wears a smirk on his face, seemingly permanently planted there.

Turning toward the windshield, I don't say anything else, my mind instead filling with thoughts of the snow, of little cabins in the woods, and maple syrup. I don't care if it's all impractical. That doesn't matter. This is a fantasy for me. I'm dreaming of a new life, and I'm going to make that happen. Maybe not in New York with maple syrup, but somewhere.

ROADKILL

Pulling the car up to the drive-thru pharmacy window, I give the person on the other side of the glass Kiplyn's name. Thankfully, everything is ready. Honestly, I don't know how I would react if the prescriptions weren't ready.

Kiplyn has started looking like she's in pain the last ten minutes of the drive, no doubt her other shit having worn off by now. I don't know when the hospital gave her her last dose. The pharmacist doesn't take long to bring the pills to the window, but he does stand there and go over the details of said pills.

When he's finished with his speech, I thank him and take the bag from the cubby before shifting the car into drive and heading straight for Kiplyn's place. The minute I turn down her street, I cringe.

This neighborhood is only about one step above the one I grew up in, and only because it's not a trailer park. Though, around here these days, some of these trailer parks are really fucking nice. However, the one where I was raised was not nice at all. Not in the fucking slightest.

I see her car in the driveway. It's a small old white Honda. I shake my head. When I met Kiplyn, she was driving a car her parents had given her as a graduation gift, a little mid-two-thousands convertible Mustang. That car was great. It fit her personality fucking perfectly.

This shit, though?

A white older Honda four-door? Absolutely fucking not. It's a fine car, but not for Kiplyn. It's not her personality or style in the slightest. Pulling up behind the white car, I look around at the house. This place isn't her style either.

I think about asking her what the fuck she's thinking, but she's already explained that this wasn't by choice or design. She is trying to build herself back up from the shit George shoveled at her all those years. I get it, but she doesn't have to do it putting her life on the line every goddamn day in this hood.

I'll be damned if she stays here one minute longer than necessary.

Killing the engine, I look over at her passed out asleep in the passenger seat, her brows furrowed, no doubt in pain, her lips pressed together, and her muscles all tight in her scrubs and socks.

Fuck that asshole.

I don't even like to look at her otherwise gorgeous face. It's so bruised and swollen, a dozen different shades of red and purple. Rage bubbles inside of me, and yet again, I want to kill that sonofabitch.

I'm going to, too.

George Robbins is a fucking dead man walking. I smirk. That's if he can walk after I fucked him up. Because I have a feeling he's reminded of my fist with each step he takes. That right there makes me laugh.

Lifting my arm, I reach out and wrap my fingers around the side of Kiplyn's neck, holding her firmly as I call out her name. I'm careful not to squeeze her delicate throat, unsure if that asshole ever hurt her that way or not.

“Wake up, honey,” I murmur. She moans, then her eyes flutter open before she lets out a whimper. “We’re home,” I say.

She frowns again then lets out a sigh. “I don’t want to go inside,” she says.

I don’t know what her plans were for coming here alone. I almost ask her that but decide against it. Instead, I clear my throat and flex my fingers against her throat before I drop my hand.

“I’m right here, babe.”

Shifting away from her, I open the driver’s door before jogging around the front of the car to open her side. I’ve got her bag of meds in one hand and open her door with the other. I watch as she shifts her legs over the side of the car, wrapping her fingers around my hand, then she slowly stands.

“I have to go slow,” she whispers.

“Go as slow as you need, honey.”

I’m trying really fucking hard to be patient. I don’t know much about that. I’ve never had to be patient at all, but this isn’t a normal situation. This is something I know is going to take some time for her to work through, and I have to be here, consistently, to prove that I’m not going anywhere.

As much as she hates me right now, I know I can get her to come around. She wouldn’t hate me if she didn’t feel for me in some capacity still. And I know she does. Just as much as I still feel for her.

Eventually, we make it up to the front steps, moving slowly just like she said she would. Kiplyn grips my arm, her nails digging into my forearm as she slowly climbs the three steps to the front porch. When we reach the front door, she’s winded.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m slow. It hurts.”

Shaking my head, I look at her and give her a smile. “Honey, if I could carry you, I would. But I think it would hurt you more.”

“Yeah,” she exhales. “*Oh shit.*”

“What?” I ask, looking to the side, wondering if someone is coming up who I don’t sense.

She clears her throat. “I don’t have my keys.”

“How did you get to the Phoenix hospital?” I ask. I realize that her car wasn’t there, and nobody took her there. It’s all clicking.

She slides her tongue along her bottom lip, then lets out a sigh. “I wasn’t really conscious when it happened, but the nurse told me the hospital here was afraid my injuries were too extensive and didn’t think they could help me, so they transferred me over.”

Reaching for the doorknob, I twist it. Nobody could have even locked the house, so the paramedics probably closed the door and walked away. Fuck, in this neighborhood, she’ll be lucky if any of her shit is still in the house.

Pushing the door open, I help Kiplyn inside. Without looking around too much, I guide her over to the couch and slowly help her to the seat. Straightening, I use this moment to look around her place.

It’s trashed.

Not because she’s messy or someone fucked it all up, but because she fought for her life here. My anger builds again, and I wonder if I’m going to have a heart attack from all of this up-and-down rage that instantly hits me every time I see or hear of something else this motherfucker did.

CHAPTER FIVE

ROADKILL

AFTER I'VE GIVEN KIPLYN HER MEDS AND SOME WATER, I grab a blanket from the back of the couch and watch as she lies down with her head on one of the decorative pillows. As I look around the room, I realize this is a hell of a lot for me to do all by myself. She doesn't just need the broken shit picked up and turned right side up again. She needs a bunch of shit hauled off, too.

It's too big of a job for just me, and honestly, I don't want to spend all fucking day doing this shit. I have an asshole to find and kill.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I call Legacy again. Before he can even answer with a greeting, I start to talk.

"It's me again," I announce. "I need some men to come down here to help me clean this place up. That jackass made a fucking mess."

There is a moment of silence, then he clears his throat. "How many men do you need?"

"At least three."

"Me, Volt, and Hellcat will be there in ten."

The call ends, and I look over my shoulder at her. Kiplyn is sleeping, her pills having worked their magic. She needs the rest. I placed her discharge papers on the table when I walked in here with her meds.

Sitting down at the small breakfast table, I thumb through the documents. There aren't any details or specifics here, but when I read that there is a follow-up doctor's appointment already set with her local doctor, I save the time and date in my calendar.

I'm going to take her to that appointment. I'm going to take her to everything. She is not going to do this shit on her own, even if she continues to hate me every step of the way. I am helping her. I am dedicated, and eventually, she will find her way back to me.

I'll make sure of it.

Leaving the papers on the table, I stand and walk to the fridge. I open the door and stand in front of it, the cool air washing over me as I stare at the contents. Or rather, as I stare at the lack of contents.

What the actual fuck is going on here?

I walk through the house. It's small, only a two-bedroom, one-bathroom. It's old, probably built in the thirties, but it's clean. As clean as it can be for the age. Moving through the space, I stop at the doorway of her bedroom.

I don't walk inside, not wishing to invade her privacy. Instead, I stand at the entrance and take in the space.

It's plain. The bedding white and fluffy. There are a few decorative pillows. There is no headboard or footboard. I assume the bed just sits on a frame and box spring.

My gaze flicks to the side, where I see a small nightstand. It isn't really a nightstand but more of a table with no drawers or anything. It's turquoise, and whatever paint covers it, it's chipped and scarred. It looks like more of a plant stand or something, but there is nothing else. There is no dresser, no television, no reading chair. Just a bed and a table. Pushing off the doorjamb, I turn around and walk back into the living room.

Kiplyn is still sleeping on the couch. I don't bother sitting down beside her. Instead, I start to work on finding trash bags

and begin picking shit up. Thankfully, I don't work for long before Legacy and the other men arrive.

Legacy is the first to walk into the room. His gaze moves through it, then his eyes flick back to meet my own. "This place is trashed," he murmurs.

"It is," I agree. "Which is just another reason why that motherfucker is going to die—*slowly*."

Hellcat and Volt don't say a single fucking word. I watch as they get to work, silently moving around the house. They turn furniture upright, gather trash and debris, pick up the house without speaking.

I watch them and wonder what the fuck I'm going to do here. This isn't quite what I expected. I was anticipating having someone keep an eye on her, maybe check on her here and there and make sure she's got her meds. But she needs more care than that. She needs someone to be here, and not some prospect hanging around outside.

"You got a line on any beds?" I ask.

"What?" Legacy asks.

"Need a bed for the guest room."

I don't feel like I need to explain my every move, but judging by the look of pure confusion on his face, I need to explain to Legacy why I want the bed.

"She isn't ready for me to sleep beside her. As much as I want to push that shit, I know I can't. Not yet."

He nods once, his gaze flicking to Kiplyn, who is still sleeping on the couch. He clears his throat, then shifts his attention back to me. "I know why you want the bed, but a bed you only sleep in one night?"

Shaking my head, I take a step backward with a chuckle. "She fuckin' hates me."

"Hate and love walk a thin line."

"She's been through hell," I point out.

He hums. "We all have."

“Not quite like she has.”

Thankfully, he drops it there and tells me that he has an extra bed in storage. He doesn't tell me why they have a random fucking bed in storage, and I don't really care. I'm happy to use it.

“Any other furniture with it, like a dresser?” I ask, though said dresser isn't for me. It's for Kiplyn, since she doesn't have one. Hell, she doesn't have much of anything here.

“Yeah,” Legacy murmurs. “We'll hook you up.”

Turning to Hellcat and Volt, I start to help them with the rest of the cleanup. Legacy joins in, and before Kiplyn even stirs or starts to wake up, the house is picked up and the men are gone to grab the bed and dresser.

I take that moment to put in an Instacart order. I don't do shit like that from my phone often, but I'm not leaving Kiplyn anytime soon to go to the store, and we need some fucking food in this house. Kiplyn needs some food. No way in hell am I going to let my woman starve—not ever.

KIPLYN

When I wake up, I feel completely disoriented. I hear a loud bang and open my eyes, glancing around before I realize I'm at home on my sofa. Pushing myself up to sitting, I whimper with each inch that I move. When I'm finally in an upright position, I am hot and sweaty and totally out of breath.

There is another loud bang that comes from the back of my house. I hear a man's deep voice. In an instant, my heart starts to race at the thought of George being back, but then I remember that Rusk drove me here.

Straining to hear, I don't make a move to stand. Not only am I too physically exhausted, but I also want to wait until I can for sure distinguish the man's voice. I'm still far too nervous to be comfortable in the fact that it's not George, because let's face it, he is completely unpredictable.

“You got that end?” Rusk's voice calls out, crystal clear.

My heart slows, and my breathing becomes even again. It's without a doubt him. But then I hear another voice, and another, and I realize he isn't alone. Frowning, I force myself to stand on shaky legs.

I'm still wearing the stupid grippy socks and scrubs from the hospital. I really need a shower and a change of clothes, but first, I have to know what is happening in the back of my house. Slowly, I make my way toward the men's voices.

It takes me so much longer than it should to walk through my very small home. When I finally reach the bedrooms, I stop in front of my once empty guest room. It's no longer empty, though. Not only do three men fill the small room, but there is also a bed there in the middle of the room.

"What on earth?" I ask.

All three men stop where they are, and I watch, almost as if I'm in a cartoon, their heads whip around and look over at me. Their eyes are wide, but it's Rusk who is smiling, then, almost as instantly as he smiles, his face turns down into a frown.

"Should you be walking around?" he asks.

Blinking, I focus my attention on him. "The nurse said it would be good to move around as much as possible without overdoing it," I explain.

He nods a few times. "We're almost finished here," he announces.

"Do you want to tell me exactly what it is you're almost finished doing?" I ask.

The three men, who all look like replicas of Rusk in their matching vests, blue jeans, and boots, dip their chins and look down at the old wooden floor as if it's the most interesting thing in the whole world.

"I'm putting a bed in here. The room was empty, so I figured you wouldn't care if I set up here," Rusk states as if he's being completely logical.

"What?" I ask on a gasp.

He nods then closes the distance between us. Maybe he doesn't want me yelling at him across the room with his buds here, but I'm not going to just stand here and accept whatever this is without some explanation.

"Are you crazy?" I hiss.

He smirks, and I hate that he looks so sexy when he does because I really am not happy about whatever this is. He thinks he can just move in here. He thinks he can claim me as his little woman and move in?

He's going to have a rude awakening.

It's one thing to drive me home from the hospital, but this is on a totally different level than that.

"You need protection, which I'll have outside the house, but you also need help inside. I can help you and eliminate a threat from inside the house if I move in for a while."

Move in.

Did he just say move in?

There is no way I heard that, but the way he's watching me, his lips curved up into a smile, his face all relaxed and sexy, that is exactly what he said and expects to happen.

"You don't dictate my life," I whisper.

He hums. "I know, honey. But you need help right now."

I wish I could tell him that I don't. But that would be a lie. So, instead, I press my bruised lips together, hissing because I force them down too hard. Releasing them, I let out a whimpered sigh.

"I'll get help," I lie.

He tilts his head to the side, then lifts his hand and comfortingly wraps his warm fingers around the side of my neck. His thumb glides up the center of my throat, his soft gaze focused on mine.

Right now, I could lean on him and fall in love with him all at the same time.

CHAPTER SIX

KIPLYN

THE DOORBELL RINGS, AND MY HEART RACES. I DON'T KNOW why I am terrified. Rusk is here still. In fact, he's sitting just a few inches from me, flipping through channels on the small television, trying to find something to watch.

"It's for me," he states, tossing the remote control onto the small, scarred coffee table in front of him.

I've showered and almost had to completely embarrass myself and ask for Rusk's help but was thankfully able to handle it all on my own. Although, I have to admit, I like the fact he was here in case something happened to me. I could have very easily fallen and been really hurt, especially with how badly my ribs still ache.

Turning my head, I watch as he wrenches open the front door. There is a man standing there, bags in his hand. His eyes widen when they land on Rusk.

"I'm here with your Instacart order," he squeaks.

I almost laugh, but I don't because Rusk can look really intimidating when he wants to. He murmurs something I can't quite make out to the delivery guy, then closes the door behind him, flipping the lock in place before he turns to me.

"Can't really cook, but I figured tacos tonight," he says.

Maybe it's supposed to be a question, but I know it's probably a statement. He's already made the plans and bought

the food. And unfortunately, he knows that I absolutely love tacos of any kind.

Smiling, I turn to look at him standing in the middle of my little living room-slash-entryway area holding four plastic bags of groceries.

“That looks like a lot more than tacos,” I point out.

He smiles, lifting the bags. “That’s because it is. You had nothing in your fridge.”

He turns from me and walks into the kitchen, where I hear him start to put things away. Slowly and gingerly, I stand before I shuffle into the kitchen. He’s putting things away, his back to me, and I know he knows I’m here, but he doesn’t turn around.

“I was going to go to the store before everything happened. It had been a busy week,” I say, defending my empty fridge.

It’s all a lie. My fridge kind of always looks that barren. I probably would have gone to the store had George not attacked me, but I wouldn’t have filled that fridge because I don’t have enough money to fill my fridge.

“It’s cool, honey. I’m here. I’m eating food, too, so I’m going to take care of it.”

His words cause me to slightly panic yet again. I don’t know why everything this man says and does makes my heart slam against my chest, but it does.

Although, I’m not scared or in turmoil. I’m just... panicked. Maybe it’s nervous anxiety. I am not used to him. It’s been so long, I never expected him to walk back into my life, yet here he is, when my life is at its worst and in a complete upheaval.

“I haven’t asked, what do you do for work?” he asks, not looking directly at me as he puts a small container of sour cream in the fridge before closing the door. Only when he’s finished does he turn to face me.

“You don’t know?”

He shakes his head slowly, his eyes focused on mine as he leans his ass against the countertop. He crosses his legs in front of him at the ankle, waiting.

“I’m a house cleaner,” I state.

His eyes widen. He wasn’t expecting that. He clears his throat. “How long have you been doing that?”

I know he wants to ask me why I’m doing that, but he’s refraining from it. Although, I’m not ashamed or embarrassed by my career one bit. George wouldn’t allow me to work, and he didn’t work either. Whatever aid we got, he drank.

So, if cleaning other people’s houses puts a few things in my fridge and pays the mortgage, then I’m more than happy to do it.

“Since I left George a year ago,” I simply state.

He doesn’t say anything, but then he dips his chin as he clears his throat. “How are you going to work now? You got any kind of insurance to cover you while you’re not working?”

Oh shit.

I hadn’t thought about that.

Really, I haven’t had time to think about what happens Monday morning when it’s time to go to work. But there is no way I can clean with my ribs this way, not to mention the way my face looks. My clients would be upset by my current appearance.

I don’t know what I’m going to do. I am the epitome of a person living paycheck to paycheck. My stomach drops then flip-flops at the thought of being broke. I’m going to be out of work for at least a few months, and I’m going to end up homeless.

“Honey,” Rusk calls out.

But I can’t even bother to lift my eyes to meet his. My mind is swirling, and I am beginning to truly panic again. Dammit, George. He screwed me over again. Not only did he hurt every single part of my body after spending years crushing my spirit, but now he’s ruined my future, too.

“I got you, Kiplyn. Don’t stress. I’m here to help, in every way,” he says.

“I can’t ask you to help me financially. We aren’t together. We are just two people who dated ten years ago. There is no way I can ask for any of this. In fact, you’ve already done too much.”

The look on his face serves as a slight warning that I’ve said the exact wrong thing. Because he pushes off the edge of the counter about two seconds later and marches toward me. It only takes him a few steps to make it in front of me.

Tipping my head back, I look up at him, but he doesn’t make me strain for long. Instead, he crouches down in front of me, his expression serious, his gaze focused, and his jaw clenched hard.

“You aren’t asking me shit, babe,” he grinds out. “I’m doing it. And you’ll figure it all out someday soon. Well,” he says, his lips curving up into a grin, “hopefully, soon. You are my woman. Always been, always will be. It’s time I help you. Especially since right now, you can’t help yourself.”

God, I hate hearing that, but he’s right. I can’t help myself. “I’ll pay you back every penny,” I say, my determination fiercely growing inside of me. I will have to heal quickly, because I know how fast bills add up, and if I’m going to pay him back for everything, I can’t be out of work for long.

“Won’t accept it, but we’ll see.”

I hate that answer, but I’m going to have to accept it right now, just like I’m going to have to agree to his help. The prideful part of me doesn’t want to accept anything, but the practical part of me knows I don’t have a choice.

He turns his back to me, gathers the stuff for dinner, and I watch as he cooks. I didn’t think this would be a scene I would ever witness, ever, in my entire life, but here it is, right before me.

George never cooked anything, not once. If there was food to me made, it was me who made it, and it didn’t matter how I felt. I can remember one time, I had the flu, and he decided

that night that he had to have lasagna. He without a doubt knew that I made my own sauce and didn't use jar sauce, so it took a bit longer. I made the lasagna that I was too sick to eat, pausing every fifteen minutes to throw up.

That was my life with George, and now his cousin, the man who grew up poor, abused, the man I left, is making me tacos. He's standing at the stove browning meat. He's grating cheese. He's doing everything.

Not for the first time, I wish I had made different choices in my life ten years ago.

“Who were those men who were here earlier?” I ask as I finish the last bite of my taco.

I'm seriously impressed with Rusk's taco-making skills. Although, he didn't do anything fancy—just tortillas, meat, cheese, sour cream, and some tomatoes. They weren't street tacos from my favorite vendor, but they were seriously amazing in a pinch.

He doesn't answer me right away. His gaze finds mine and holds it for a moment before he stands and walks over to the sink. I hear the water turn on and he rinses his dish off.

I'm grateful that the people who owned this house before me had a dishwasher put in, because right now, I would let that shit pile up. There is no way I can stand at the sink and wash dishes.

Rusk's back is still to me as my mind wanders off to dirty dishes, then he turns his head and looks back over his shoulder at me. “They're my brothers, honey.”

I know without a doubt that this man has no siblings. His parents could barely keep him alive, let alone have more. Although I didn't know he seemingly had a secret life while we were together, I do know that his parents were extremely poor. They were also abusive and addicts. George made sure I knew all the bad things about Rusk when we first started dating.

“You don't have any brothers,” I whisper.

Rusk completely turns around to face me, his eyes finding mine, and nods once. “Biologically, no. But these men, they’re my brothers. We are in a club together, and they’re the only family I have. We take care of one another.”

“So, you’re a gang?” I ask.

His brow arches, and he slowly shakes his head.

“No,” he grunts. “We’re a club.”

So, they’re a gang, but they don’t want to be called a gang—got it. “Those matching vests you wear are part of said... *club*?” I ask.

Rusk laughs softly. “It’s a cut, babe. And yes, we all have matching ones. Except we have different patches.”

“And you’re high up, I assume.”

“Vice president.”

Sliding my tongue across my bottom lip, I am totally grossed out by the rough texture of the scabs and dryness, so I tell myself I’m never going to do it again. Then I shift my wavering attention back to meet his.

“So, you’re a big deal,” I whisper. “You were in it when we were together.”

It’s not a question. It’s a statement. He nods, agreeing with said statement. “I was, and I wanted to keep you away from it because I thought it would be better for you.”

I don’t like where this conversation is going. Not at all. It’s going into a very gray area, and I don’t want any part of it. Honestly, at this point, I need to continue to hate this man for my own sanity.

“So, did they force you to screw other women? Or was that just something you did for fun?” I snap.

I expect him to become angry and defensive. He does neither. Instead, he tilts his head to the side, his eyes on mine before he speaks. But I can tell he is considering his next words. Careful not to spew them out of quick anger the way I just did, and that makes me feel guilty.

“That was something I did because it was not only easily available, but I was also a dumb kid with no fucking control. And not to make more excuses, but the club is full of drugs, alcohol, and women. I was three sheets to the wind every time I fucked someone other than you.”

Every time.

Meaning it wasn't just that one time. Which, honestly, I assumed it wasn't, but hearing the confirmation makes my heart sink. I should not care. It was a whole decade ago. But I do. I always will. I fell in love with this man when I was a teenager, and my heart will probably always belong to him, no matter what.

Even if I want to hate him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ROADKILL

AFTER DINNER, I GIVE KIPLYN HER MEDS, THEN HELP HER GET to bed. She's moving around a bit better tonight than she was this morning, but I can tell she's exhausted, physically and mentally. As soon as she is in bed and I slip out of her room, my phone buzzes in my pocket when I close her bedroom door.

Sliding my thumb across the device, I lift it to my ear. "Roadkill," I grunt.

I didn't even look at the caller ID and have no fucking idea who is on the other end of the phone. But if they've got this number, they are someone who knows me, because I don't just hand my cell out to anyone and everyone like some of the other brothers.

"We got him," Hellcat rumbles on the other end of the line.

There is silence. Looking over my shoulder toward the hallway, I wonder if I can slip out of here tonight and take care of that motherfucker right now, or if I need to wait until I can find someone to stay with her.

I am about to answer him when there is a knock on the door. I hear the prospect's deep voice, then I hear a woman's voice as well.

"Fuck. Hold him. I got something here to deal with."

He ends the call, and I take that time to make my way to the door. Tugging it open, I stand at the door and look around the porch, confused as fuck by what I'm seeing here in front of me. I've never seen this little fairy of a woman before, but she looks like she's about to rip off the head of the prospect who is standing in front of her, blocking her way to the front door.

"If you don't let me past, I'm going to knee you in the balls," she grinds out.

The top of her head practically only reaches his balls, so I don't know if she can lift her knee that high, but it would be fun to watch her try. I don't, though. Instead, I clear my throat. The prospect doesn't turn to look at me. He knows who is standing behind him.

"Can I help you?" I ask, looking around his shoulder.

She blinks then looks at the prospect before she looks at me. I watch as she starts to think about something. What, I don't know. Then she squares her shoulders before she gets ready to bark at me.

"Where the hell is Kiplyn?" she demands.

"Who the hell are you?" I ask.

Her tongue sneaks out, then it slides across her bottom lip before she lets out a sigh. "Look," she begins. "I don't know what is happening here. But what I do know is that I can't get ahold of Kiplyn, and now she's got Thing One and Thing Two guarding her door."

The prospect's brows rise as he looks at me. My expression matches his, then I turn to the little fairy girl, my lips curving up into a grin.

"Thing One and Thing Two," I murmur. "Cute."

"I'm not trying to be cute. I'm a concerned friend."

I have no fucking idea who this little woman is, but she knows where Kiplyn lives. I can't but wonder if she is truly a friend or if she was sent here by the ex-asshole. I don't ask her that. Instead, I cross my arms over my chest and tilt my head to the side, taking her in.

“We’re protecting her. You want to tell me your relationship?” I ask.

There is a moment of silence when she narrows her eyes on me, then her lips part as she lets out a breath. I watch her and wait for her to tell me who the fuck she is. But she’s processing what I’ve just said, and I know when it hits her.

“Wait, are you telling me something happened to her? What did that rat bastard do?” she grinds out.

I blink. “What the fuck do you know?” I ask.

There is another moment of silence. I can see the wheels turning in her head again. She is really thinking about her next words. I’m not sure what I expect her to say, but it isn’t what she actually does end up revealing.

“I’m Reese,” she states.

I continue to stare at her, because her telling me her name doesn’t really mean shit. I still have no goddamn clue who the fuck she is. She takes half a step toward me and the silent prospect. She sucks in a breath, then in a low voice, her once shrill, excited tone completely calmed down, she states, “I am her friend.”

“How?” I ask.

Not that I don’t think that Kiplyn can make friends. I just know that the fuck who was her husband damn sure didn’t allow her to have any. I don’t think she’s close with her parents anymore, probably my stupid fucking cousin’s doing, too.

“I met her right after she filed for divorce. I’m her hairdresser.”

Flicking my gaze up from her face to her hair, I smirk. She’s got a short hairdo that’s styled perfectly. Not a fucking hair out of place. And then there’s her makeup. It’s even more perfect than her hair.

I fucking believe her that she’s a hairdresser. I just wonder how a woman who had not one fucking thing in her fridge can afford to get her hair done. I start to ask that exact question,

but she must anticipate it because she begins to speak before I can say anything else.

“She came in looking for a cut and style. That’s pretty cheap, you know, and we got to talking. She was so shy, but she opened up to me a little. She needed work. I couldn’t give her much, but she sweeps my shop for cash at night. She hasn’t been in, and I got worried.”

I didn’t know that.

“Did he hurt her?” she asks.

She looks beyond a little worried now. In fact, she appears to lose all color in her face and wraps her arm around her middle as if she’s going to be sick. I watch as she looks down for a moment then slowly lifts her gaze up to meet mine.

“He hurt her,” she says when I don’t answer right away. Lifting my hand, I run my fingers through my hair, tugging on the end.

“He hurt her,” I confirm.

“Let me see her,” she demands.

Shaking my head slowly, I press my lips together and think about telling her to get the fuck off the property and not come back, but I decide against it. Instead, I let out a sigh. This is her friend, her only friend and someone who can possibly help her and me out a little.

“What’s tomorrow look like for you? She just got out of the hospital today. She’s already had her meds and is asleep.”

Reese nods, her gaze flicking between me and the prospect. She isn’t ready to leave yet. She has questions, and I don’t blame her at all. She may have questions, but she’s not going to get the answers she wants. Not from me and not tonight.

“I’ll be here as soon as I can. Noon?”

I almost snort. Noon sounds about as soon as I can do anything, too. Nodding, I bite the corner of my lip. “Yeah, babe. Noon.”

“I’ll bring lunch,” she announces, then her nose wrinkles. “You look like a burger and fries kind of guy.”

The prospect chuckles, mainly because I am a burger and fries kind of guy. “Double, with bacon. No cheese,” I say.

“And you?” she asks, lifting her hand to the prospect, extending her finger and pointing directly at him.

He turns his head, looking at me, searching for approval. Jerking my chin, I give him a short nod. His lips twitch into a smile.

“Yeah, babe. I’m a burger kind of guy.”

Her cheeks tint pink when he calls her babe, and I almost burst out laughing. Guessing he could tap that if he wanted to.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. Please, take care of her.”

“Will do.”

I watch as Reese turns around and walks away. I find it odd that she didn’t ask me who I was or anything much. Granted, she was probably so worried about Kiplyn that she didn’t think to really interrogate me. I’m sure she’ll have a list of questions by lunch tomorrow. She looks like the type who would make a fucking list like that.

KIPLYN

I’m not sure if a noise wakes me up or if it’s my own paranoid thoughts, but when my entire body jolts straight up, I cry out. Everything that could hurt, hurts at the jerky movement. My eyes glance around the room.

I’m home, in my bedroom, alone.

That is, until my bedroom door opens. The shadow in the doorway causes me to gasp, but when I hear his rough and sexy sleepy voice, everything inside of me instantly calms down.

“Honey, you okay?” he asks.

I slide my tongue along my bottom lip, a habit that hurts right now and yet I can't seem to stop. Although, I was startled awake and not quite thinking straight, so maybe I won't hurt myself tomorrow. But I doubt it.

“Kiplyn, are you okay?”

Gulping, I nod, then realize he can't see me in the dark. “I'm okay,” I breathe. “I'm okay.”

I watch as he takes a step into the room, closing the bedroom door behind him, and I smile. I forgot that about him. He always closed the bedroom door, whether we were alone or not. He said it was a second layer of protection. I didn't quite understand why, but I get it now.

He's dangerous, and he has enemies. He doesn't have to actually admit that to me, but I can tell by the way he acts. Something I should have noticed years ago, but it wasn't something I'd ever looked for before.

Silently, Rusk moves through the room. He sinks down on the edge of the bed at my hip. I feel his warm hand wrap around the side of my throat.

“Why do you grab me there?” I ask.

I can't see his eyes or his face—I haven't adjusted to the darkness—but his thumb slides along the column of my neck, and then he leans closer to me. I can feel his breath on my face, and I swear my heart stops beating.

“Honey, I touch you here because the last thing I ever want to do is hurt you, and you look like you hurt just about everywhere.”

God.

Just when I think I can continue to hate him, he says something like this. It's been twenty-four hours, and I want this man to keep trying. I want to forgive him. I want to be healed inside and out.

I want.

I want.

I want.

But I don't allow myself.

I can want all day long, but I cannot accept him into my life like that, not ever again. I'm going to heal, and then I'm going to run. Upstate New York. I'm gone—somewhere, anywhere, far, *far* away from here.

Sucking in a breath, I try to gather myself, but it is useless because Rusk's lips touch mine. It's a sweet, gentle, so gentle, kiss. Like nothing I've ever felt before. It's almost as if his lips barely brush mine. Like a warm whisper.

"Rusk," I exhale.

"I know, honey," he murmurs.

But he doesn't know. He has no idea. He thinks he does, he can guess, but the reality is that he doesn't know. Nobody could. The things George put me through, it's not something anyone else can know. Not even someone who has been in an abusive relationship. Because no two assholes are the same.

But I don't tell him that. I keep telling myself, *Upstate New York, maple syrup, and being secluded*—being alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

KIPLYN

EVERYTHING STILL HURTS. MAYBE EVEN MORE THAN yesterday. I hear a man's light snore and turn my head to the side. I don't know why I'm surprised, after last night, that Rusk is there in the corner of my bedroom, sitting on the floor, asleep—but I am.

Pushing up to sitting, I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out. Slowly standing up on shaky legs, I pinch my eyes closed. Taking one step forward then pausing to breathe. I take another step, then stop, then take another.

I'm almost to the door, wishing I had an en suite right about now and I didn't have to walk down my little hallway to the bathroom. Honestly, it's not that many steps, but every single one feels like a mile at this point.

Once I make it to the bathroom, I close the door, locking it behind me, and rest my back against the wood with a heavy sigh. I made it. But I made a mistake. What I should have done is brought meds with me. I could use some painkillers right now.

After taking care of business, once again, I move as slowly as humanly possible. I wash my hands and force myself to look at my reflection in the mirror for the first time. Pain slices through me at the sight of my face. How could Rusk have even come home with me? Why isn't he completely repulsed by me? Because I am without a doubt repulsed by myself.

My eyes are both swollen, my lips chapped, cracked, and swollen as well. My nose is bruised purple and... well, *swollen*. I have cuts all over my face, and I know that if I lifted my shirt, I would see more purple bruises and even more swelling all over my entire body.

Shaking my head, I turn around and slowly make my way to the door. I don't want to wake Rusk up. Tugging it open carefully, I slip out into the hallway. Inch by inch, I eventually find myself in the kitchen.

Coffee.

I need coffee.

Lots of it.

I start to reach for the cupboard handle that holds my pecan-flavored coffee that I love, but then pause as a stabbing pain slices through my ribs. My entire body freezes as I wait for the pain to subside.

“Kiplyn,” Rusk growls.

Looking over my shoulder, my arm frozen and suspended halfway in the air, I give him a small smile. “Morning,” I call out.

My small smile wavers, and my lips tremble as I watch him for a moment. He doesn't look impressed at all. In fact, he crosses his arms over his chest and tilts his head down, looking into my eyes.

I can't focus. In fact, seeing him standing shirtless in front of me, I just can't believe how inked he is now. He doesn't just have a tattoo or two, the way he did a decade ago. No, Rusk has a lot, dozens, and they're even traveling up his neck. They are sexy, too sexy.

As if something propels him forward, he drops his arms to his sides and marches toward me. I hold my breath for a moment, only letting it out when he is directly behind me. His arms slide around my waist, holding me so gently and loosely that it almost causes me to burst into tears.

“Want me to pick you up and carry you, or just help you walk to your couch?” he asks. “Then I’ll make you your coffee, get you some water, and give you meds.”

Tears well in my eyes. He’s being sweet again. He really needs to stop that shit. It’s hard to continue to hate him when he’s being sweet.

“Just help me,” I whimper.

He chuckles softly, and I can feel his chest rumble with it against my back. Slowly and ever so gently. I need him to act like a jerk really quickly, so I remember my plan, because right now, that plan is wavering in my mind.

“Your friend Reese came by last night,” Rusk announces as I hear my coffee maker begin to percolate.

Reese.

I haven’t thought about her much or thought about contacting her. With everything that’s been going on, I can’t believe I didn’t think to get in touch with her. She was probably worried sick.

Closing my eyes, I let my head fall back slightly on the cushion of the sofa. My one and only friend, Reese Nicholls, and I forgot about her.

“She was worried. I told her a little, but not everything. I wasn’t sure what was going on there.”

“I should call her,” I murmur, mostly to myself as I attempt to push off the couch.

I hear a cup slam down on the counter with a bang, then Rusk is in front of me before I can even blink. I watch as he sinks down and places his palms on my thighs, squeezing me firmly. I open my mouth to ask him what he’s doing, but the words don’t come out. Instead, he begins to speak.

“Stay right there, honey. She’ll be bringing lunch over, and you can talk to her then. Please rest, yeah?”

My mouth is still open, but now it’s hanging like that out of shock, and not because I’m going to say anything. I don’t

think actual words could leave my mouth at this point even if I had to say something to save my life.

“Okay,” I end up mumbling.

He gives me a smile, stands, *winks*, then walks away. I don't watch him go, but only because it hurts to turn my head. He's shirtless, his jeans zipped, but the top button is undone. I can't stop looking at his tattoos on tanned skin and wondering what they all are and what they mean.

Gosh, we really got together just a tad too early. We were both a bit too young. What I wouldn't give to have met him just a few years ago, and to have never met George. In fact, I wish I could erase George from my entire memory bank, as if he were a nightmare that never really happened.

What feels like just seconds later, Rusk is crouching in front of me, a cup of water in one hand and a coffee in the other. I really want the coffee, but I grab the water glass to take my pills with first instead. Pain overrides coffee needs at the moment.

He smirks, then turns and sets the coffee mug down on the coffee table. I watch as he stands slightly, reaches into his pocket, and produces some pills. “These are anti-inflammatories and painkillers. No sleeping pills until bedtime. You don't have that many, and you should try to make them last.”

He's right. I shouldn't be taking sleeping pills regularly. I don't even like to drink alcohol, let alone take a bunch of pills. So, it's better that I save them. Placing the pills on my tongue, I swallow them and drink as much of the water as possible. I need to hydrate, then coffee.

ROADKILL

Watching Kiplyn drink her coffee, I wonder when I can get the fuck out of here and go deal with George. I want that fucker to suffer... *now*. I want him to feel every fucking second of the pain I'm going to dish out all over again. I want him to beg for

mercy, then I'm not going to give it to him the same way he didn't give it to Kiplyn.

Sucking in a breath, I start to ask Kiplyn if she needs anything when there is a knock on the door that causes me to pause. I glance at the microwave clock, my brows rising. Reese is here... early. Nice. That means I can leave sooner to take care of my shit with George.

The front door opens, and the prospect sticks his head inside, his eyes finding mine before he speaks.

"Hey, Roadkill, the broad is back with burgers," he announces.

"Roadkill?" Kiplyn asks, her voice all soft and sweet. "What does that mean?"

Lifting my hand, I wave the prospect and Reese inside, my focus on Kiplyn. "It's my road name," I state.

She tilts her head to the side, then she sinks her teeth into her bottom lip. "I don't know what that means."

I let out a chuckle and close the distance between us, sinking down on the edge of the coffee table. Her coffee is still sitting there, and I assume it's because she can't reach over and pick it up quickly. Wrapping my fingers around the warm ceramic, I pick it up and pass it to her, taking the empty glass from her hand.

"Babe," I grunt, "you know my club? We all have road names. Mine is Roadkill," I explain as I lift my finger to the copy of the Devil's Hellions patch tattoo I have on my chest and tap on it.

Her eyes are wide as she watches me, then she smiles, but she still appears confused. "But why?" she asks.

"Because I fucking bit it on my bike when I was a prospect. My bike landed on top of me, and everyone called me Roadkill, so it's stuck," I say with a chuckle at the memory.

She bursts out laughing, but it turns to a whimper as she holds her middle. Smirking at her, I shake my head but don't

say anything because the living room is suddenly filled with a shrill scream.

Turning my head, I look at Reese, who is standing in the doorway screaming like a goddamn hyena. The prospect wraps his hand around her mouth, but it only muffles the sound slightly. I stand and march toward her. I know she is shocked at seeing Kiplyn, but she needs to get her fucking shit together.

Standing in front of her, I tip my chin down, my gaze on hers. She stops screaming instantly, her eyes wide as she stares up at me.

“You cool?” I ask.

She nods slowly, finally not shrieking any longer. Her eyes are wide, her gaze moving from side to side as she mumbles something, and the prospect curls his lip because she’s no doubt got spit on his hand. I jerk my chin toward him in a silent demand, and he removes his hand.

“What the fuck happened?” she hisses.

“You know what happened,” I murmur. “George got ahold of her.”

Reese’s eyes widen again. “What the fuck? I didn’t...”

I know she didn’t. Nobody could expect her to look like that, to be that fucked-up, but she is. He did a whole-ass-fucking number on her—mind, body, and fucking soul. I don’t tell Reese. That is all for Kiplyn to tell, not me.

“Go talk to your friend.”

Reaching for the paper bag of burgers, I take it from her hand and walk to the kitchen. The prospect follows me, no doubt feeling hungry as fuck. He grabs his burger and fries, then dips outside to eat them on the porch.

Finding mine, I place it to the side, then carry the girls over theirs.

“Can you get some plates?” Kiplyn whispers.

Dipping my chin, I walk back into the kitchen and grab a couple of plates. Reese hasn’t said shit. Her eyes are wide as

they flick from me to Kiplyn, then back to me. She looks fucking horrified, but I can't focus on that.

After delivering their food, I jog back into the guest bedroom and grab a shirt and my cut, then I pull my boots on and make my way back to the living room. My gaze connects with Kiplyn's, and I dip my chin, then shift my attention to Reese before I move back to Kiplyn.

"I'll be back in a couple hours. You good here?"

Kiplyn flicks her gaze over my shoulder to Reese, then turns back to me. "I am," she whispers.

"Prospect will be right outside the whole time. You need anything, holler."

"Okay."

Giving her a wink, I straiten and turn toward the door. I slip out and tell the prospect to be on his A-game, then climb into my Chevelle and head straight for the clubhouse. I know that motherfucker is there. He's waiting for me, and he doesn't know it yet, but I'm going to enjoy every second of this.

It doesn't take me long to drive to the clubhouse. The guard lets me in immediately. Giving him a flick of the wrist, I cruise forward. I find my spot, climb out of the front seat, then walk into the clubhouse.

We have a basement, although it's not used often. It was something we did for just these circumstances, these and a couple of holding rooms. The holding rooms, we've used a few times. The cement floor with the drain, we've used that *quite* a few times.

Legacy is sitting at the table drinking a bottle of water as I walk into the room. He lifts his head, his eyes finding mine. The expression on his face completely changes. I watch as his lips curve up into a grin.

"You ready?" he asks.

"More than ready," I say with a jerk of my chin.

He stands, lifting his bottle to his lips and taking a long drag, then sets it down on the table before clearing his throat.

“He’s totally fucked-up,” he murmurs.

“Thought he was already dead. This’ll be fun.”

Legacy chuckles. “It will.”

Together, just a president and vice president, we do something that we should probably have thought through a bit more, but I don’t really give a fuck. George Robbins is going to die, and it will be by my hand and my hand alone.

Fuck. Him.

Fuck him clear back to the time when we were kids, when he broke his parents’ window then blamed it on me, and my dad broke my fucking arm while beating the shit out of me for it. Fuck him for everything he did and blamed me for so that everyone thought I was a shit kid and treated me as such.

So yeah, this shit is a long time coming, and I can’t wait.

CHAPTER NINE

ROADKILL

WALKING DOWN TO THE BASEMENT, I HEAD TOWARD THE ROOM where I know George is being kept, for me and only me. Before I step inside, I feel Legacy wrap his fingers around my shoulder and give me a shake.

I turn my head and look back at him. “Yeah?”

He clears his throat, then his gaze finds and focuses on mine. “You don’t have to end him. You don’t have to *do* anything.”

Shaking my head slowly, I give him a smirk. “Yeah, brother. I do.”

I don’t explain my reasons. I don’t tell him that if I don’t end George right now, he’s just going to come back to Kiplyn and hurt her all over again, likely kill her the next time. I’m eradicating that next time from even existing. Enough is enough. She divorced his ass, and he is still coming after her.

Never again.

George Robbins takes his last breath on earth tonight. I don’t care if that makes me some kind of monster or not. If I am, then so fucking be it. I will not shed one tear for that fuck, and I doubt that anyone else in this world will either.

Opening the door, I walk inside, not looking around quite yet. I want to be fully in the room when I make eye contact

with the fucker known as my cousin, George. My own fucking flesh and blood.

“Fuck you,” he slurs.

Legacy closes the door. I hear it click, and only then do I lift my head. My eyes find George’s. His face is swollen. He’s even more unrecognizable than Kiplyn is right now. My lips curve up into a smile at that thought. I feel goddamn victorious.

“Hey, George. You look like shit,” I point out.

“You asshole,” he slurs.

Laughing, I walk toward him, staying a few feet back, and crouch down in front of him. He tries to move toward me but can’t due to the fact that he’s chained to the wall.

When we built this room, it was for this and only this situation in mind. There is a drain in the middle of the floor, and bars all over the room where cuffs and chains can easily be used.

George has his hands cuffed behind his back, and a chain runs through them and the bar on the wall. He can maybe move a couple of inches, but he cannot move more than that. It’s kind of sweet, considering he’s always thought he was Billy Badass.

He’s not.

Not that he ever really was.

George was always an asshole. He’s never been a badass.

“Yeah, well, at least I never abused a woman and tried to kill her the way you did.”

His lips attempt to move into a smile, but they’re so fucking swollen that they can’t, something that makes me smile.

“She loves it, Rusk. Don’t ever let her make you think that she didn’t. She would beg me to fuck her ass. To fuck her everywhere. She loves that shit.”

Taking the knife out of its sheath on my hip, I lean forward a little more. He can't really see everything I'm doing, his eyes way too fucking swollen for that. Holding it against his bruised cheek, I puncture the purple skin and watch as blood drains from him.

For his efforts, he doesn't scream as I draw blood, but I have a feeling his entire body is one throbbing, pulsing, swollen, bruised mess by this point.

Shifting the knife down to his throat, I think about just ending him right here and now, but I know that isn't what I want. So, instead, I move to his belly and start to stab him, but only deep enough to draw blood.

The knife slides through his fat belly like butter. That causes him to scream. Letting out a laugh, I ask him one simple question. The most important question of them all.

Just one.

"Do you like it?"

"No," he cries.

"Beg me for more," I grind out.

"Fuck you," he whimpers.

I let out a laugh. I know it sounds maniacal, but that is exactly how I feel right now. Like a fucking maniac. And I do not give a fuck. I shallowly stab him two more times before I give him another demand.

"Tell me you like it. Beg me for more."

He cries out in pain, and I watch as tears actually roll down his cheeks. I don't know why, but this makes me laugh some more. This fucking pussy. He can dish it out to a woman a quarter his fucking size, but he can't take it.

"You know?" I call out to Legacy, though I don't turn my head for more than just a second.

I know that George can't really do anything, and even if he got the knife from me, he wouldn't be able to fight back in any

kind of way, but still. I'm all about being cautious. I need to stay on my A-game. Always.

"Yeah?" Legacy calls out, though I can tell he's trying to hold back his own laughter.

"I think he wants to be fucked in the ass," I say.

There is silence in the room. Complete fucking silence. "*Brother*," Legacy mumbles.

"No, he said that Kiplyn begged for it. Loved it when he raped her there. I think we should give him the same beautiful experience he claims she had."

"Fuck you," George cries out, but it comes out more like a little whimper.

Sticking him one more time in the gut, I straighten my knees so that I'm standing above him. Looking down, I tilt my head to the side, taking in the asshole again. This will be my last look at him while he's breathing. What I do next will likely kill him, and if it doesn't, I'm going to let him bleed out until he's finally gone.

And he will be gone.

And it will hurt.

Flipping him over, I ignore his hurled words. He cries out as his arms are weirdly positioned, likely hurting like hell. Again, it doesn't matter. He won't live long enough anyway. Sucking in a breath, I use my knife and cut up one leg of his pants, starting at the ankle.

Legacy hisses when I reach the waist of the jeans. I do the same on the other side. George squirms and tries to get away from me, but he can't go fucking anywhere. He's stuck where he is. He moves around a bit erratically, causing the knife to nick his legs a few times.

Ripping his underwear down, I look back at Legacy, who only grimaces. "Beg for it, George," I demand.

George doesn't beg. In fact, he doesn't say anything because he's sobbing. I think about just shoving this knife up

his asshole but decide against it. I want to hear him beg for it the way he claims Kiplyn did.

“I have all fucking afternoon, George. I’ll wait. But you will beg for it, exactly the way you say Kiplyn did.”

The silence is deafening, but then I hear him say it. Though, it’s not loud enough for me to accept. Leaning forward slightly, I demand that he says it louder. He does, but again, not loud enough for my liking.

“Louder,” I bark.

He finally screams as loud as he can. “Fuck me, please.”

Laughing, I sink down to my knees. “My pleasure, you motherfucker. Enjoy eternity in hell,” I grind out as I shove my knife forward and right into his asshole.

I don’t do it just once. I take all my anger, my rage, out on him. He hurt Kiplyn. He took her from me, and he hurt her for years. I know I’m to blame. I played my part, but he never had to hurt her the way he did. He didn’t have to abuse her, and for that, I’m angry as fuck.

Guilt consumes me at the same time. I should have checked on her. I should have made sure she was okay, that she was happy. But I let my pride stand in the way. It’s my fault, too, for not checking on her, for not knowing she wasn’t okay.

“*Fuck you,*” I scream, stabbing him one more time. He says nothing, because he’s fucking dead.

Covered in blood, I stand and turn to Legacy. “That’s done now.”

“It appears to be,” he grunts. “Shower. And stay here, have a couple beers.”

“I should get home to Kiplyn,” I murmur.

He shakes his head. “Your adrenaline is going to go high, then crash. You don’t need to be around her when that happens. Stay here. She’s safe now, brother. You made sure of that.”

I did, too.

I made sure of that, something I should have done years ago, but it's done now. Hopefully, she can heal, she can move forward, and then she can admit that she's always been mine. She knows it just as much as I do. I see it in her eyes. She is without a doubt my woman, has been since the day I met her.

KIPLYN

“Oh shit,” Reese whispers. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not,” I say.

Sucking in a breath, she looks to the side, then shifts her attention back to mine. I’ve just told her everything that happened with George. I wouldn’t normally tell anyone those types of details, but Reese already knows everything about my marriage, about the life I left behind, or at least tried to.

“And who is that hot guy in leather who’s been here, road-whatever his name was?”

I could lie to her. But there’s no use in that. She’d probably figure out the truth anyway.

“That is Rusk Wilson, the first man I ever loved, and the first man who broke my heart.”

She leans back against the sofa cushions, tipping her head back, and lets out a growl before she straightens and looks me straight in the eye. She looks like she has something on the tip of her tongue. I watch her, waiting for whatever it is she’s going to tell me.

Then she shifts forward, placing her forearms on her knees, her face almost so close to mine that her nose could possibly touch my own. She whisper-yells her next words.

“They’re in a gang, babe. A real gang. Like illegal everything.”

My lips twitch into a small smile, but it’s not very big because my lips still hurt like hell. “I know,” I say. “Well, I

don't know everything, but he told me a little about the club thing."

"Are you going to get back with him? Because even though he's in a gang... he's hot as hell."

She's right. Rusk is hot as hell, and if there were someone I was ever going to get with ever again, it would definitely be him.

He's been so sweet the past couple of days, but at the same time, this is the man who cheated on me, who kept his whole life from me. I don't know much about who he is today, but at the same time, I don't think I need to learn.

He saved me, he's helped me, and I'm grateful for that, but I am not going to stick around here long enough to know if there could ever be more between us. Although, his few kisses have been really, *really*, nice.

"I'm moving to Upstate New York to live a life of solitude in the mountains and harvest maple syrup," I announce.

Reese blinks. Her lips part slightly, and she blinks again, and again. Then she snaps her mouth closed before it opens again and a burst of laughter escapes. Her shoulders shake with her laugh, and she can't seem to catch her breath.

When she finally does calm down enough to speak, her eyes connect with mine, and she lets out another small giggle.

"I'm sorry, Kiplyn, but New York? You wouldn't last the first day of winter up there. Arizona is your home."

"Maybe I don't want it to be my home anymore," I whisper.

She shakes her head before I feel her hands take mine and she squeezes gently. "I know that you're battered and bruised, both inside and out right now, but this is your home. Once you really think about it, you will realize this is where you belong. Besides, who is going to do your hair for free?"

It's my turn to let out my own laugh. Though it's not as hardy as Reese's, it's still a laugh, nonetheless. She does cut my hair for free, which I still don't understand, and it feels a

lot like charity. But I don't say anything, because right now, I'm not above charity. Every little bit helps.

"Plus," she whispers, "you're my best friend, Kippy."

Tears fill my eyes. I didn't know she thought of me as her best friend. I should have, though, because I think of her as mine. Leaning forward, I wrap my arms around her in an embrace.

"You're my best friend, too," I breathe.

She shifts backward, her eyes finding mine and her lips curving up into a wide smile.

"Then I refuse to let you leave," Reese announces. "You can find yourself here in hot-as-Hades Arizona. It is the way it's meant to be. Plus, even if you don't want to be his girlfriend or whatever, maybe have a really good sexual experience with him before you kick his ass out."

"Reese," I exclaim.

She shrugs a shoulder. "Not tomorrow or anything. Work through what you need to work through first. Then let him dick you down the right way. You deserve some really amazing orgasms."

She's right. I do. But I don't know if it's going to be Rusk who gives them to me or not, but judging by personal past experiences, he does give really amazing ones. Reese thankfully drops the sex talk. I watch as she grabs the remote control and turns on the television.

That's how we spend the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, watching movies and relaxing on the sofa together. It's everything and nothing all at the same time. It's the best day I've ever had, minus feeling like I've been hit by a Mac truck.

CHAPTER TEN

KIPLYN

I DON'T KNOW WHEN IT HAPPENS, BUT SOMEWHERE BETWEEN *Sweet Home Alabama* and *Hope Floats*, I fall asleep. Reese never even had to be told to check my meds on the counter. She just jumped up and gathered my pills and a glass of water, just when I needed them.

I fell asleep and only realize that I did because I wake up as soon as I hear the front door close. Opening my eyes, I shift my attention toward the door and see him. Rusk is standing in the middle of the entryway, his gaze sweeping the room before it lands on me.

He tilts his head then looks to the side. I follow his gaze. He's watching Reese, who is also passed out asleep. Although she did not wake up from the door opening and closing.

"You okay?" he asks.

Swinging my attention back to Rusk, I open my mouth to tell him yes, but then I realize he's wearing different clothes than what he left in. He's got on perfect-fitting jeans. Those might be the same, but the T-shirt isn't. He left here wearing a plain black T-shirt, and now he's wearing a *Rage Against the Machine* shirt, but the same black vest.

"You changed your clothes," I whisper.

His lips twitch into a smirk. He clears his throat, then rocks back on his heels. "Had some shit to take care of," he

announces.

I open my mouth to ask him what that means but decide against it, because it honestly doesn't matter. I'm going to be gone soon. Even if Reese doesn't think I'm going to move, my mind is made up.

I can't stay here. I never should have. What I should have done is left a year ago and never looked back. Arizona may be all I've ever known, but it does not mean I *have* to stay here.

I don't.

I am going to do something for myself for the first time in my life. I am not going to just lie down and accept whatever the fuck is going to happen anymore. I'm not going to run to the road paved with bullshit.

I am going to carve a new path. I'm going to have a new life.

"You eat dinner?" he asks, breaking my inner thoughts.

"No," I whisper.

He jerks his chin at Reese then turns back to me. "You need food."

I don't really need anything, except maybe sleep. "I ordered some pizzas."

I push myself up to standing. He doesn't move, his eyes still focused and connected to me. His jaw is clenched, his muscles twitching as I move toward him. I don't know why, but I feel like he needs something from me. What, I'm not sure.

Lifting my hand, I cup his cheek and feel his smooth cheek beneath my palm. He doesn't move, his eyes watching me, but nothing else. I'm the only person in the room, and so is he. Rusk lifts his hand, wrapping his fingers around my wrist and holding me firmly.

"You need to rest," he murmurs.

"I know. But I'm tired of sitting down. I need to move around a little," I whisper.

He clears his throat, releasing his grasp on my wrist as he does. He takes a step backward, his eyes fixated and never leaving mine. “You’re okay?” he asks again.

“Where were you?” I whisper.

He shakes his head once, then his eyes find mine. “It’s business, babe.”

“Rusk,” I exhale.

He turns away from me and walks into the kitchen. I watch as he opens the fridge and takes out a bottle of beer. He cracks it open before he takes a long drink. I stand in the middle of the living room, watching him. He sucks down the beer without saying a single word.

I move toward him, slower than I would prefer, but thankfully, he doesn’t run off. He waits for me. When I am close enough to touch him, I lift my arm and place my hand against the center of his chest.

“Rusk,” I exhale. “What were you doing?”

He doesn’t answer me at all. Instead, he watches me for a long moment. A silent moment. Then he gives me a smile, but I can tell it isn’t one that’s full of play or sex appeal. It’s more like a smirk.

“You don’t have to worry about George ever again, honey, and that’s all I’m going to say about the whole fucking thing.”

A million thoughts float around inside my head. I don’t know what to take away from what he’s just said to me. I don’t have to worry about George ever again. And while that statement terrifies me, it also relieves me.

I don’t ask him to go into detail. I’m not sure what that makes me, but I can’t ask him anything that I’m trying to avoid knowing. So, I don’t. I ask absolutely nothing. I let it all just ... fade away.

“What happens now?” I ask.

He chuckles. “We eat pizza, we go to bed. That’s that.”

Sucking in a breath, I hold it for a moment, and when the pain from my ribs overwhelms me, I release it slowly. Sliding my tongue along my bottom lip, I take a step toward him, then another until I'm close to him again.

"I don't know how I feel," I confess.

He nods once. "Yeah? You'll be okay."

"I will," I admit. "But that isn't what I'm saying."

He frowns, then takes a few steps backward so that his ass is leaning against the edge of the countertop. I want to wrap my arms around him and hug him. I want to kiss him. I want to do all the things with him, but I'm not ready for any of that—I may never be ready again.

"I'm happy he's gone, but at the same time, I'm really sad that it's you who made him that way."

His lips curve up into a grin. "Honey," he says, his voice deep and almost purring. "Don't be sad."

"But he was your cousin," I whisper.

He hums, pushes off the counter, and moves toward me. Rusk wraps his hands around my hips and gently tugs me against him. He sets his beer down on the counter, then wraps his fingers around my hips. He holds me there as his gaze focuses on mine.

"He was a piece of shit from the second he came out of his mother. Trust me when I say that I will not be losing any fucking sleep now that he's no longer breathing. Nobody will," he grumbles.

I open my mouth, but I have no fucking clue what the fuck I'm going to say. Thankfully, I don't have to speak a single word, because Reese wakes up and shuffles into the kitchen.

"Did I hear pizza?" she mumbles.

ROADKILL

Chuckling, I look over Kiplyn's shoulder to see Reese standing just a few feet away, her mouth no doubt watering at

the thought of pizza. I feel the same fucking way. Food is life. Good food should always be eaten and enjoyed. I can tell that Reese feels the same way.

“You heard pizza,” I state.

“Great. I’m starving.”

I don’t ask her anything. I’m not sure what she would even want to tell me, and honestly, I don’t give a fuck. She came here to spend time with Kiplyn, she took care of her, and it’s obvious they are friends and that Reese cares.

A sound of a phone notification goes off, and the three of us freeze. Taking mine out of my pocket, I look at the screen—it’s blank. I hear another notification. Reese holds up her hand, her palm facing us.

“I’ll go look. Where’s your phone?” Reese asks, her attention focused on Kiplyn.

“It’s in my bedroom, on the nightstand.”

Reese gives her a smile then walks away, leaving us alone again. When she is out of earshot, Kiplyn looks up at me.

“I shouldn’t be okay with what you’ve said you’ve done,” she whispers. “I know I shouldn’t, but you’re right. I feel like I can breathe easier.”

“But?” I ask.

She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, looking down for a brief moment before lifting her gaze to meet mine. I can see the tears building in her eyes. She definitely feels remorse for George. I, however, do not and never will.

But when she speaks, what she says, it’s not quite what I expect. “How many other men have you killed, Rusk? This was so easy for you. The look on your face tells me that it was simple.”

I could lie to her. I’ve done that more times than I haven’t. But this time, I decide I can’t. What is going to be built between us has to be real. She should have always been my citizen wife, but life happened, meaning I fucked that up. I’m

not going to tell her. That I killed him. At least I'm not going to come right out and say it, but she knows. She's not stupid.

"It doesn't matter, honey. I'm not a good man, never was. Even when I tried to be, it never tasted quite right. But this club, this life, it's who I am. That comes with a man who doesn't back down, and at the same time, that comes with business that just plain isn't yours to know."

"It was your phone going off, Kippy," Reese calls out.

She rushes over to us, her eyes finding Kiplyn's. "I don't know if I should give it to you," she whispers. "It was your work."

Taking the phone from Reese's grasp, I slide my thumb across the screen. It opens immediately. I can't believe she doesn't have a fucking passcode for this thing.

"You don't have a passcode on your phone," I point out as I find the text message icon and touch it.

"I don't. Nobody looks at it except me. I didn't think I needed one."

Shaking my head, I clear my throat, but it's Reese who speaks first. "You should always, always have protection, Kiplyn."

Lifting my eyes from the phone, I look across the kitchen at the little fairy woman, and my lips twitch into a smile. "Yeah, honey. You should always have protection," I say, repeating Reese's words.

Kiplyn's bruised cheeks flush, and her nostrils flare. I chuckle, flicking my attention back to the phone. When I see the four new text messages, I touch the name of the sender and instantly, my good mood is gone.

She's been fired for being a no-show-no-call. Fucking hell. I don't know if I should even tell her or not. Maybe I should try and talk to her boss first. It seems like they are in the dark about why she isn't at work. Once I inform them of what's happened, I know they'll be willing to hire her back.

Shoving her phone in my pocket, I decide to add this to my list for tomorrow. I'm going to take care of it, because no way in fuck does George get to take anything else from her. Not now, not ever fucking again. He's already taken enough.

There is a knock on the door. I push off the counter and walk past both Kiplyn and Reese to answer. The prospect opens before I can get there, sticking his head and half of his body inside, holding three boxes of pizza in his hand.

"C'mon inside and eat. Lock the door," I call out.

He nods. He doesn't say a fucking word, knowing that I am in charge here. Reese moves through the kitchen, and I hear her collect plates.

"Hey, honey, you wanna sit at the table?" I ask, turning my head to look over my shoulder at her.

Kiplyn's gaze flicks around. She appears as if she's confused. Maybe she doesn't know what to do with herself, or maybe she doesn't know what to do with me. The latter more than likely being the truth of the matter.

"Yeah," she says.

Though, she sounds distracted as she turns and slowly shuffles toward the table. The prospect doesn't say anything as he sets the boxes in the middle at the same time Reese places the plates at each seat.

We all sit down, and I watch as Kiplyn does it slowly, so fucking slowly that my heart slams against my chest imagining her pain. She lets out a sigh then looks around. She realizes that we're all staring at her, and that's when her lips curve up.

"Let's eat. I think I slept that whole burger off. I'm starving."

Nothing else is said, other than small talk. My mind is too focused on George, on Kiplyn's job. On anything and everything that isn't fucking Kiplyn, because even with her face the way it is, I want to be inside of her. And I can't. I'm an asshole, but I draw the line at being that kind of asshole.

So, I eat pizza, I small talk with the prospect and Reese. Kiplyn sits quietly and eats her food, and eventually, everyone except Kiplyn and I leaves. The prospect is relieved by another, and Reese leaves with a promise to come back Sunday and Monday to hang out.

I watch Kiplyn from across the room. She lifts her gaze to meet mine. It's too quiet in here. We're watching one another like that is a source of entertainment. It's not, at least not the way we're doing it right now.

"I need to go to bed," she whispers.

"You need to talk to me," I demand.

There are a lot of things she's not saying to me. A hell of a lot, and I want to know everything. At the risk of sounding like a complete fucking pussy, I want to know that this whole old lady thing is happening.

I can say it's happening all day long. I can claim her as my property, but if she wants nothing to do with me, it makes it hard to continue with that shit.

"I don't need to do anything, Rusk," she says. Her voice is low, but her tone is unyielding. "Except one thing."

"Yeah?"

She stands slightly, her gaze focused on me and nothing else. "I need you to leave me alone... forever."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KIPLYN

LYING IN BED, I STARE AT THE CEILING AND HEAR THE FRONT door open then close. There are men's voices, then the sound of a motorcycle engine roaring to life, then roaring away with what I can only describe as finality.

Finally.

I pushed him away.

Rolling onto my side, I stare at the wall in the dark and wonder why the hell this doesn't feel any better. It's exactly what I wanted. I've been trying for the past few days to get him away from me, and he gets it.

Except I don't feel happy or relieved or anything other than crippling sadness. Maybe even depression. I don't know what the hell I feel, but I hate it all. I pinch my swollen eyes closed. The tears start to fall down my cheeks, and I wonder if I've just made a big mistake.

He saved me.

He not only saved me, but he rescued me, and he ensured my safety, too. He killed George. Killed him. That should not make me smile, but it does. I feel heartless and horrible, but then I remember the look of rage and evil on George's face each and every time he hurt me. George was a waste of space, a man who did nothing for society and whose mere presence haunted me.

I know it makes me a horrible person that I am glad he's gone, and I can't stop thinking about that, but at the same time, I'll just have to be abhorrent, because it doesn't change how I feel. I'm glad the asshole won't ever hurt me or anyone else ever again.

Mostly, I'm glad that no other woman will ever suffer at his hands.

Eventually, I cry myself to sleep.

When I wake up the next morning, the house is silent. It's so quiet that it makes my stomach twist in knots. Slowly, I shift my legs off the side of the bed and stand on wobbly legs. Though I'm not as stiff and wobbly as I was yesterday. So, that seems to be a good sign that I am on the mend—hopefully.

Once I make it to the bathroom, I take care of business and look at my reflection in the mirror. I hope to find that I am less scary today, as opposed to yesterday, but that is not the case. In fact, I feel like I look a little worse for wear today. My bruises have changed colors yet again. I have a few that have turned a deeper purple, others that are more of a blackish color.

After I've washed my hands, I open the bathroom door and move through the space. I know without a doubt that I am alone. Completely and totally alone in this place. My heart cracks a little at that thought.

As much as I wanted Rusk to leave, there was a part of me that really loved having him here. I've been alone day in and day out, aside from work and hanging out with Reese, that it was nice to have someone around again.

When I walk into the kitchen, there is my phone sitting in the middle of the bar. Reaching out for the device, I take it in my hand and glance around for a note or any sign that he won't be back. But there's nothing.

Though, that shouldn't surprise me. Rusk doesn't seem like the note-leaving kind of guy. My phone buzzes in my hand, and without even thinking, with nothing more than hope filling my thoughts, I slide my thumb across the screen to answer it, knowing it's him.

“Hello?”

“Kiplyn, it’s Mary. Your friend came in and told us what happened. We are so sorry. We didn’t know. You just come back to work whenever you feel better. Your job is right here, hon.”

I open my mouth, then snap it closed, then open it again. I’m shocked, mainly because I didn’t know that I hadn’t had a job, but I don’t think that I can really blame anyone, because I didn’t call them to let them know what happened.

Except, someone has done it for me, and I know who that someone is. My insides get warm at the thought of Rusk going down to the maid service office to tell them what happened to me so I didn’t lose my job.

“I hope to be back next week,” I say, knowing that I cannot take more than a week off. To be perfectly frank, I can’t even afford to take a week off, but there is no way I can clean a house the way I am.

“You take your time, hon. Just send me a little text a few days before you come back so I can make sure you’re on the schedule.”

“Thank you, Mary,” I murmur.

She hums before she speaks. “You take care of yourself. Let me know if you need any help. I can pop ’round and help you out.”

I thank her again and end the call, then spin around in place as I look for any other signs of this man. Just when I’m about to go into the bedroom that he used for all of one night, there is a knock on the door.

Slowly, I hobble over to the door, noting that while it is a bit easier to move around, it is not comfortable yet, and at this rate, I wonder if it will ever be. I’m sure there will come a time when I forget the pain, this whole incident, but this isn’t that day.

Looking through the peephole, I see a man in a leather vest standing at the door. It’s one of the same vests Rusk wears, but it’s not him, and that is another thing that cuts me. Tugging the

door open, I give him as much of a smile as I can standing in a pair of sleep shorts and an oversized T-shirt... with no bra, something that I realized much too late.

“Roadkill wanted me to hand-deliver this,” he announces, thrusting his hand forward.

Looking down, I see he holds a white envelope in his hand. Taking it from his grasp, I lift my gaze to meet his. He winces at the sight of my face, as he should, because these bruises are downright hideous.

“Thanks,” I whisper, holding it in my grasp.

There is a moment of silence. I grip the envelope in my hand and wonder if I should open it now, but if I do, I might cry. So, I decide against it.

He stares at me for a moment too long, then takes a step back. “I’ll be here the rest of the day and tonight, but as of tomorrow, we’re relieved from duty. But you need anything, Rusk says you can just text him or call.”

He turns his back to me, then crosses his arms over his chest, his message delivered. I stand, staring at the devil horns on his back and the stitching that proclaims him a prospect for a moment too long.

Eventually, I step backward into the house, close the door, then make my way over to the sofa and sink down with the envelope. I’m scared to open it. I don’t know what is inside, and I’m worried it’s going to make me cry.

As soon as I see the contents, I suck in a breath. Cash. A whole stack. Pulling the green bills out of the envelope, I thumb through them.

They’re all hundreds.

One after the other, one-hundred-dollar bills. I don’t count them. There are too many to count without completely freaking out. So, I don’t. Instead, I stay on the sofa, staring at the envelope of cash as the sensation of guilt consumes me.

I don’t know what to do.

ROADKILL

Fuck that bitch.

Fuck her.

But at the same time... I understand her.

As much as it pisses me off—I understand her.

Reaching for the bottle of beer in front of me, I take a long drink. Then another, and another. I need to get into the chop shop and get to work. I need to get my hands dirty and my dick wet. Fuck me, I was right to walk away from Kiplyn. I don't deserve her, not in the fucking slightest.

Leaving the bar, I sway, unsure how many beers I've had. Lifting my head, I look around, then Thunder walks past me. I reach out, wrap my hand around the back of her neck, and haul her toward me.

Touching my mouth to hers, I force a kiss. My mouth slams against hers. She moves closer to me. Reaching down, I grab a handful of her ass and squeeze roughly, lifting my head to look down at her.

She gives me a lazy smile, and I let out a growl, then release her and walk out of the room. Nobody says a fucking word or tries to stop me. Not that they would. Climbing onto my bike, I start the engine and head to the one place where I know I can drown myself.

FoxTrot.

It doesn't take me long to get to the strip club. Pulling into my normal spot, I kill my engine and climb off my bike. I move toward the front door and tug it open, knowing they haven't started yet, but that the doors will be open anyway.

"Roadkill," Daisy calls out.

Lifting my hand, I give her a two-fingered wave as I make my way toward the bar, climbing onto a stool. One of the waitresses slides a beer over to me. Wrapping my fingers around the cold dark bottle, I lift it to my lips and take a long pull.

“You look like shit,” a voice says from beside me.

Turning my head, I give Daisy a smile. “Feel like shit, babe.”

She lifts her hand, extending her arm, her fingers sliding across the top of my hand. Flicking my gaze down to her fingers, I slowly lift it to look into her eyes. “Babe,” I grunt.

“I don’t work tomorrow.”

My lips curve up into a grin. “What are you offering, Daisy?” I ask.

She stands then leans over and touches her mouth against the shell of my ear. “Stay until closing, and you’ll find out.”

Daisy walks away. I watch her go, because she’s got a fucking body for days. A body that I’m going to enjoy watching on stage tonight, too. I lift my hand and silently order another beer. Clearing my throat, I take my phone out of my cut pocket and place it on the center of the bar top.

Watching the device, I will it to ring or at least give me a notification of a new text message. There is nothing, though. I know that the prospect has given her the money. I know that he’s only there until tomorrow morning. I know that she fucking hates me.

I know that I deserve it.

I’d just hoped she could see past it.

She couldn’t, though. I can’t blame her either. I’m not angry. I’m just fucking disappointed in myself. That I couldn’t stay. That I didn’t work hard enough to make her want more from me. I tell myself that I’m going to go back and try again, in a few months.

So, until then, I’m going to do what I do best and bury myself in booze, pussy, and work. That is going to be my life until Kiplyn has at least had a little time to heal. She’ll never be the girl she was when we were together all those years ago, but so far, I like the woman she’s become.

At least the woman I’ve been allowed to discover. There is more to her, and I wanted to get to know that. I wanted to

know every single square inch of her.

Daisy dances. I watch, though the enjoyment factor is just not there for me the way it used to be. Kiplyn has ruined strippers for me.

Fuck.

Kiplyn's ruined everything for me.

I let her. And I would let her do it again and again. I would fucking welcome it because Kiplyn is the only girl I ever loved. She's the only woman I'll ever love, too. There's nobody else, and I'll keep her claimed for protection until the day I fucking die—and beyond.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ROADKILL

THREE MONTHS LATER

DUTCH LAUGHS AS I PULL UP TO THE FRONT OF HIS clubhouse. It's not often that I come to their place or them to us, but we're business associates, and I would like to say we're friendly. I wouldn't call any of us actual friends, because this business doesn't allow for that, but we're all close enough. He's part of the Dead Phoenix, a club that isn't an MC but is just as dangerous if they want to be, maybe more so.

"You're laughing," I point out unnecessarily as I climb off my bike and make my way toward him.

He shrugs a shoulder. "Just surprised to see you here, is all. Not often a VP of a club makes his way to our door."

"I needed some air, and Legacy had some documents for you. I offered."

He jerks his head to the side before he walks into the building. It's their clubhouse, but I'm pretty certain they don't have the same jargon as we do. No doubt they call it something else, maybe safe house. I follow him, glancing at the bar before I follow Dutch back to his office. He lets out a grunt as soon as he sinks down on his office chair.

Walking to the large wooden desk, I place the folder of papers down. He takes it slowly but doesn't open it right away. Instead, he stares at me. I don't know what he's looking at or

why, but I stare right back, arching a brow as I wait for whatever it is he's going to say.

Whatever he sees, he must be satisfied with because he lets out a grunt and jerks his chin toward the chair behind me. He doesn't tell me what he was staring at me for or anything else and I don't bother asking.

"Sit," he demands. "Legacy tells me about you and your girl, says you claimed her as your own, but you let that shit just fade away," he murmurs.

"So, now we're gossiping like schoolgirls?" I ask. "I didn't know you and your club were a bunch of women sitting around chatting over knitting and shit?"

He lets out another chuckle. "Call it what you want, but you do that? You claim a woman then walk away? Not your side piece, not your female... just nothing?"

Standing, I decide that this conversation is finished. Legacy has been asking me the same shit, and now he's got someone else to do the questioning. I don't give a fuck. It's none of their goddamn business.

"I can wait here for you to read and sign, or I can go home."

He tilts his head back slightly, his gaze focused on mine for a moment before he lets out a sigh. "Go hang out in the bar. It won't take me long. This should be standard enough."

I could answer any of his questions, considering I helped draft the fucking thing, but I decide against it. I don't care that much... about anything, really. I want to go back to my original plans in life of drinking, booze, and partying. That's all. Women, old ladies, citizen wives, fuck them all.

The place may not be the same as our clubhouse, but it's close enough. It smells like weed, and I smirk at that familiarity, looking for the source. I usually have a blunt with me, but I didn't bring one today.

My gaze scans the room. There is a woman in nothing more than a bikini walking around the bar area with a rag and

spray bottle, likely their version of a Mama, taking care of shit for the men.

Then my gaze catches a guy in the corner, a halo of smoke surrounding him. Once I stop by the bar and grab a beer from the man tending behind the scarred bar top, I head toward the fog of smoke. Before I say a single word, I pull up a chair and sink down onto the hard wooden seat with a growl.

“What’s up, Devil,” the man says.

I could almost just get a contact high from all the smoke in the area. Almost. “You got any more?” I ask.

He laughs, then reaches into his pocket and tosses me a joint. Digging into my pocket, I take out my lighter and hold it up, striking it before I inhale and lean back, closing my eyes.

“Thanks,” I murmur.

“Name’s Weed,” he announces.

Opening one of my eyes, I let out my own chuckle. “Good name,” I say.

His lips curve up into a grin. “Earned it honestly. It’s how I got involved with this whole fuckin’ bunch. I was a dealer when I was a teenager. Livin’ on the streets. Rest is history, as they say.”

I hum. “Yeah, I’ve been part of the Devil’s Hellions since I was eighteen. Couldn’t wait to prospect,” I say.

That’s how I spend the rest of the afternoon, shooting the shit with Weed. Getting to know him and in turn, getting to know and understand the Dead Phoenix group. The afternoon turns to evening, then the club’s bar starts to fill with people.

I glance around, looking for any sign of Dutch, but he’s nowhere to be seen. “You lookin’ for Dutch?” Weed asks.

Swinging my attention back to him, I jerk my chin as my response. “Brother, he slipped out the back, like, three hours ago.”

“Why?” I bark, not really thinking that this man has the answer.

It's just my immediate reaction, and Weed doesn't get even the least bit pissed about my outburst. Standing, I'm just about to go in search of this asshole when I feel something cool and soft touch my forearm.

Turning my head, I look down and see a woman standing beside me. "Dutch sent me," she announces.

My brows rise. I'm surprised with all the relationship talk that Dutch would send a sweet butt over. Considering I'm pretty fucking certain that their group dabbles in the skin trade. We don't ask questions, and they don't tell us any fucking lies when it comes to that.

I take a step toward her, wrapping my arm around her waist before I tug her against my body. My lips twitch into a smile as she lets out a short gasp at the move.

"He said he would have the documents to you in the morning, but to enjoy your evening."

And I will.

You don't have to tell me twice.

And I do.

KIPLYN

There is a moment when I think that maybe I can do this all on my own without an ounce of help. Then, a split second later, I glance over at the envelope that still sits full of cash. That cash would be really helpful right now.

I haven't had enough money for food. Let alone to pay my bills. What groceries Rusk left are about to run out, and I don't know when I'll be able to buy more. In an effort to keep up with my bills as much as I can, I have been buying the absolute bare minimum and only eat once a day, but I don't think I can use his money.

In fact, I think I am ready to return it.

It's time. Sliding my sweaty palms down the front of my jeans, I walk to the nightstand and grab the envelope. I still

can't believe I'm going to give this money back. There are thousands of dollars in here. Five, to be exact.

I feel the weight of the envelope in my hand one more time, knowing it was never really mine and now the temptation will be out of the house. But I could disappear with this cash. I could walk away and start my life all over again in Upstate New York.

Nobody would ever know. I wish I could be that person. I wish I could run away and not feel guilty every minute of every day, but I can't. When I run, it's going to be with my own money that I earned.

And I will get there.

I will get away from here, even though Reese doesn't want me to, even though she says I need to stay here in Arizona, that this is all I know. I can't do it. I cannot be near Rusk. It doesn't even have anything to do with George. It's all about Rusk... and me.

That pisses me off more than anything. I can't live here because of Rusk. I thought I would be okay once he was out of my life again. I thought I would be able to move on the way I did all those years ago.

But the reality is, the thing that I have to actually admit to myself—I never moved on. Not ever. It's one of the many reasons why George and I never had kids, that and the fact that I had no desire to procreate with someone who abused me. I wasn't going to bring an innocent baby into that world.

Walking out of the house, I lock the door behind me. I turn around and am surprised to see a man on a motorcycle sitting in front of my house, his bike parked next to the curb. I think about stopping to ask him what he's doing but decide against it. Maybe he's just one of Rusk's men, here to do whatever it is they do. I don't question it, keeping my head down and my focus on my own business.

Climbing into the driver's seat of my car, I start the engine, back out of the driveway, and take off toward the salon. I've already worked my cleaning shift. My body is still sore, still

healing. It's been three months, but I have a feeling I'll have aches and pains for the rest of my life.

I've been all cleared by my doctor, but my entire body hurts every minute of every day, some days worse than others. This is a medium pain day, which is why I'm going to work at the salon tonight instead of skipping it the way I have been.

I need money, though.

I need something to eat. My two dollars and change in my bank account along with the empty shelves aren't going to get the job done. So, I'll work for a little cash tonight. It will be enough to fill a quarter of my gas tank and buy one cheap meal.

Pulling into my regular spot at the salon, I look behind me and see the motorcycle ride by. He doesn't stop. He continues to pass by without a glance.

What on earth is going on?

Slipping into the salon, I see Reese finishing up with her last client. I know it's her last one, because they're both drinking a glass of wine, something that I know she only does at the end of her evening.

"Hey," she calls out, waving her hand.

Smiling, I lift my hand and give her a wave, not wanting to interrupt her. Walking around the shop, I grab an apron, some cleaning rags, and a spray bottle of disinfectant. I usually disinfect all the surfaces, clean the bathrooms, then sweep and mop the floors last.

I'm working away, focusing on my task, when I hear Reese call my name what feels like seconds later. Except it's not seconds. It's been at least half an hour. Lifting my head, I look around and notice that we're alone.

"Girl," she says with a sigh. "Come and sit down. We need to have a talk."

Well, that's not good, not at all. Leaving the spray bottle on the counter, I walk over to her and sink down in the chair that

her client vacated. I can only assume she's going to tell me that she can't use my help anymore.

But she doesn't say that.

In fact, she shocks the absolute hell out of me. "I wanted to ask you a question."

I hold my breath, waiting for said question. I have no idea what she's going to ask. I can only think that it has to be something about Rusk, but she stopped mentioning him a month ago, so that can't be it.

"What's up?" I ask.

She lets out a sigh, then her gaze finds mine and her lips curve up into a grin. "Move in with me," she announces.

I press my lips together, my eyes widening. I don't know what to say exactly. Part of me wants to tell her no. The other part of me knows that I will be able to save up, to maybe even eat regularly.

"Why?" I ask.

She lets out a sigh, then tips her head back and looks up at the ceiling for a moment. I watch as she straightens. She looks at me, then takes a long drink of her wine.

"You need a change. You can't live in that little house in the ghetto by yourself. My house is safe, and you can sell yours and keep the cash left over, a little nest egg starter. Just say yes."

Sliding my tongue along my bottom lip, I think about independence and wonder if this would make me independent or dependent. Then I decide that there are lots of people who are independent and have roommates.

It would be amazing to not have a mortgage anymore. It was a stupid dream of mine. I shouldn't have even bought the house. It's too much for me right now, probably ever.

"Are you sure? I don't want to ruin our friendship or anything," I say.

She shakes her head, her eyes finding mine. “You won’t ruin anything. It would help me out a ton. You’ll have your own bedroom and bathroom.”

Sucking in a breath, I hold it for a moment, then let it out slowly. “I’ll do it.”

“Yay,” Reese calls out.

Instead of taking the money to Rusk, I stay with Reese, and together we make our plan. I’m going to put the house up for sale next week. I can’t believe that this is really going to happen. I’m going to move in with Reese. My lips curve up into a smile as I think about the future, about saving money, about starting over.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KIPLYN

ONE WEEK LATER

THE ENVELOPE BURNS A HOLE INTO MY PURSE. THE CASH begging to either be used or to go back to its owner. I refuse to use it, though. As stubborn as I am, I can hold out forever, but at this point, I just want it gone. Standing in the middle of my empty home, I decide that this is the day to take care of the envelope.

Turning my back to the house, I close the door for the last time. This is the final time. I am not coming back. I'll sign the papers once it sells, and that's that. It's already been listed. Today, they took pictures, and hopefully, it sells soon so I don't have to make any more payments on it.

Climbing into my car, I start the engine and realize that I have no idea where Rusk's place is. I haven't seen him since he walked away, but before that, I was stuck in the house. It's not like I could go for a ride there. And before... all those years ago, he never took me there anyway.

Pressing my lips together, I slide my phone out of my purse and decide to Google the club name. I can still remember the letters embroidered on his jacket.

Bringing up the search engine, I type in the name. Devil's Hellions. A bunch of articles pop up, things that I refuse to

read. I don't want to know. I don't need to know. I'm going to return the money and be done.

Finally, on the second page, I see it, an address. It's local, but I don't even know if it's the right one. Maybe whoever is there can help me, though. Throwing caution to the wind, I decide to go there.

The GPS guides me down a dirt road, in the middle of nowhere. There seems to be absolutely nothing around. I haven't seen a house or another car for a few miles. I've never been out here before. I didn't even know it existed. But when the GPS instructs me to turn right at the next road, that's exactly what I do.

It's not much of a road, dirt and gravel, but it's there, and I turn down. After a few feet, a gate appears. The sight of the gate, way out here by itself surprises me. Pulling up to the entrance, I shift the car into park, wondering how I'm going to get past it. And if I'm in the right place, or if I even want to go past the gate at all.

It's creepy. It's a gated piece of land, in the middle of absolute nowhere, with nothing else around it. Why? What is so important here? Maybe I'm in the wrong place. What if this is some kind of government facility that I've stumbled across? What if I'm not supposed to know that it exists? It is the Arizona desert after all.

Just as I'm trying to weigh the importance of giving the cash back or turning around and going back to Reese's—well, I guess it's now my place, too—there is a knock on my window that makes me jump.

Turning my head, I look over to see a man standing next to my vehicle, his head tipped down, his eyes focused on mine. Sliding my gaze to his jacket, I see that it says Devil's Hellions on the breast.

So, maybe I am in the right place?

I roll down the window, tip my head backward, and look up into his eyes. I don't recognize him. Not that I expect to,

but at least the stitching of his vest tells me what I need to know about him.

“I think you might be lost, babe,” he says.

“I’m looking for Rusk,” I announce.

His lips twitch into a smile and he shakes his head. “Don’t know anyone by that name. It’s probably best you turn around and head back to town.”

Oh shit. That name Rusk said they called him, his nickname. I search my brain, trying to think of it. It’s on the tip of my tongue, then suddenly comes to me.

“Roadkill,” I say, the word instantly entering my mind just when I needed it to. “I’m looking for Roadkill.”

His brows snap together. He looks up ahead at the road, then shifts his attention back to me. “Roadkill?” he asks.

Nodding, I give him a small smile. “Rusk Wilson.”

“Hold tight.”

I watch as he takes a step backward, then digs into his pocket and produces a cell phone. He touches some buttons before holding it to his ear. I strain to hear him, but he murmurs so softly that I can’t make out any of his words, then he takes it away from his ear and slides it back into his back jean pocket.

“President says you can drive on up to the clubhouse, but don’t go inside. Roadkill’s in there, and he’ll meet you in the parking lot.”

“President?” I ask.

“Yeah, Legacy.”

Oh, I’ve met him. I remember who that is. “Thank you,” I offer with a smile and a wave of my hand. He doesn’t wave back or smile. Instead, he walks to a little shack, and then the gate opens.

I shift my car into drive and head toward the long dirt and gravel road. I don’t go very fast, though, afraid to kick up a bunch of dust and create a cloud behind me. Also, I’m trying

to take as long as possible because I really don't want to do this. Every part of me wants to turn around and get the hell out of here.

When the building comes into view, I'm surprised to see so many motorcycles parked in the makeshift parking lot. There are a few men walking around wearing matching vests like Rusk's. Once I find an empty space, I shift my car into park, set the brake, and close my eyes as I inhale a deep breath.

Letting my breath out slowly, I grab my purse and push the car door open. I know that the man said not to go inside, but I'm not going to be sitting in my car waiting either. Climbing out of the car, my purse in hand, I slide my arm through the strap and start to make my way toward the door.

Legacy and a gorgeous brunette are walking past me. He lifts his hand, giving me a wave as I move toward the building. I don't go inside, not yet at least. I glance around the area and take it all in.

There is a metal shop type building to one side, pickup trucks and motorcycles everywhere else. Then there's the building I'm standing in front of. It's all concrete bricks. I've never seen anywhere like this place. Lifting my hand, I knock on the closed door.

Nothing happens at first, so I knock again. By the third knock, I'm about to just walk inside and find Rusk myself. That is, until the door flies open. There is a woman standing in front me, wearing nothing more than a bikini top and very short shorts, with the shorts' button undone.

Her gaze slides down my body, then slowly lifts to meet mine. I watch as her lips curve up into a grin.

"I think you could be in the wrong place, babe," she states.

Clearing my throat, I shake my head a couple of times. "I'm here to see Roadkill," I say, using his nickname, because it seems as nobody actually knows his given name anyway.

Her eyes widen. She takes a couple steps backward, then turns her head and looks into the room over her shoulder. I don't follow her gaze, knowing that she is likely looking

directly at Rusk. Then she turns back to face me, her eyes finding mine.

“He’s at the end of the bar,” she announces as she moves to the side.

Walking past her, I don’t look anywhere but at Rusk. He’s sitting in front of the bar, at the end, just like the woman said he would be. I can only see his profile, but he appears to be a bit worse for wear. He looks thin and tired.

Making my way toward him, I keep my focus on him and only him as I approach, then I stop a few feet away from him. He doesn’t turn to look at me. Instead, he lifts the bottle of beer that’s in his hand to his lips and takes a long pull.

Digging into my purse, I take the envelope in my grasp and slam it down on the bar next to him.

“I don’t want your guilt or pity,” I whisper. He doesn’t turn to me. He doesn’t even acknowledge me. “Enjoy your life here.”

Spinning around on my heels, I walk away from him. It’s obvious that he’s done with me. And that’s fine. This is the exact closure I needed. My anger is still simmering when it comes to him, but at the same time, I feel better about Rusk Wilson than I have in years.

ROADKILL

I slide my gaze to the item that Kiplyn slammed down on the bar, my brows rising at the sight of the envelope that is no doubt still filled with cash. I was supposed to go out into the parking lot and meet her, but I didn’t feel like getting off this stool.

I don’t want your guilt or pity.

Taking the envelope, I shove it inside the inner pocket of my cut and stand from the bar. I follow her, hurrying behind her. Reaching out, I wrap my hand around her bicep, curling my fingers there before I spin her around, then jerk her body toward mine.

Kiplyn gasps, tipping her head back as her wide eyes find mine. There is a moment of silence. A moment where the world around me goes silent. There is no music, no chatter, no fucking pool table balls knocking together.

There is just her and me.

Just us.

She tries to pull away from me, but I don't let her. Tugging her against me again, I bend slightly and shove my shoulder into her stomach then turn us around and walk toward my room.

She doesn't cry out, but she does squirm in an attempt to be free. As I walk through the bar, I ignore the shouts and catcalls. Making my way into my bedroom, I kick the door closed with my foot before I slowly set her down in front of me.

“You asshole,” she sneers. “What do you think you're doing?”

My lips curve up into a smile. Lifting my hand, I cup her cheek. Really looking at her face, I let out a sigh. “You look better, honey. Your face is almost healed. How is the rest of you?”

She winces, then looks down at her feet before she lifts her gaze up to meet mine. Her eyes narrow, and she slides her hands between us, pushing away from me. My hand drops from her face. I allow her to take a step back, but only just a step.

“I'm glad you like the fact that my face is healed, but that doesn't answer my question of—what are you doing?”

Arching a brow, I take half of a step toward her, my lips twitching into a smile. She is so fucking angry, and part of me loves that shit. Seriously fucking loves it. I want her to hate-fuck me right here and right now.

“You were going to walk away from me with the idea that I gave that money to you out of pity or guilt. Neither of which is true.”

“Then what is it?” she says, though it comes out as more of a sneer than anything else.

Her tongue slides across her bottom lip. Her teeth sink into the flesh there, and I can't help but imagine those pouty lips wrapped around my cock, sucking me fucking dry. It's been a hell of a long time since I've been with her, since I've had any part of her body wrapped around mine, and I want that again, even if she hates me.

“It's because I said I would help you out. That's why. It's because you're mine.”

“I'm not,” she says through gritted teeth.

Shaking my head slowly, I lift my hand again, wrapping my fingers around the side of her throat. The way I did when she was covered in bruises. Though you can still see the shades of bruising, the shadows, it's not nearly as bad as it once was, but at the same time, my hand is comfortable here.

“You are, Kiplyn. You always were. You're still fighting it. That's fine. Eventually, you'll come back to where you belong.”

She tries to shake her head, but it doesn't move enough, my grasp holding her firmly. “I am leaving Arizona as soon as I can. I am nobody's, not ever again. I belong to myself.”

My lips curve up into a slow smile, and I lean forward, ignoring her empty threat to leave. Touching my mouth to hers, I let out a single laugh, then press my lips firmly against hers. She gasps, then her body shifts closer to mine.

Breaking the kiss, I smile inwardly, knowing that her leaning forward proves her desire. She may be telling herself that she doesn't want me, that she doesn't want to belong to me, but that is not the way she truly feels inside.

Kiplyn is mine, and I'm not letting her go any-fucking-where.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

KIPLYN

HIS LIPS ON MINE. HIS HAND ON MY THROAT. HIS WARM BODY so close to mine that I can smell the oil and beer that surround him.

It's too much.

It brings back core memories. Things I thought I'd forgotten. I've never wished that I'd forgotten them, but right now I do, because it would make walking away from him so much easier if I didn't remember every single time he touched me.

If I hadn't dreamed of his hands on me throughout the years.

If I hated him as much as I am trying to pretend.

"Honey," he rasps against my lips, "you ain't goin' anywhere."

"I am," I lie.

He hums, his lips brushing mine again. "No, honey," he hisses. "You ain't."

When I try to pull away from him, his grasp tightens and his free hand slides around my waist, pulling me closer toward him. Then his hand slides down to my ass, and he grips me hard there. The hand around my neck drops, and he grabs my other cheek before he picks me up.

Without a choice, I wrap my arms around his shoulders and jerk my face away from his. “What are you doing?”

He watches me for a long moment in silence. “Are you going to answer me?” I exhale.

“No,” he grunts, his mouth resting against mine.

“Let me go.”

There is another long moment of silence before he releases his grasp on my ass, sliding his hands to my hips, and slowly glides me down his body. “You know what I’m doing, honey,” he mutters against my lips.

“Why?” I exhale.

He hums, his tongue slipping inside my mouth and tasting me. Arching my back, I shift closer to him, even though I shouldn’t be. I know that what is happening is wrong. I don’t need him. I hate him... don’t I?

I do.

I hate him.

He cheated on me.

“You also know why,” he murmurs against my skin.

His mouth slowly moves from my lips to my jaw, then down the side of my neck until he stops at the hollow of my throat. He shifts his eyes upward, his gaze finding mine and holding it as he watches me.

Rusk wants my reaction. He wants to see it, but he won’t like it. I want to run away. My heart is racing. My stomach twists and flips. It flops, and I wonder if I can run right here and now. Do I have to stay or live with Reese? Maybe I can just throw my things into my car. Everything is still packed up.

“I don’t want you,” I lie. “You’re a bastard,” I hiss.

He lets out a sigh, his lips turning up, his face looking so soft and beautiful all at the same time. I don’t want him to be sexy. I don’t want to think that he’s hot or beautiful. I don’t want him at all. I hate him.

He ruined me.

Didn't he?

He did...

Except he didn't.

He hurt me, but George was the one who ruined me.

George is the one who abused me and tortured me for a decade. It wasn't Rusk, and it wasn't his fault that I ran to George. It wasn't anyone's fault but my own that I was manipulated by him. That I was insecure enough to ruin my own life.

He lifts his hand, wrapping his fingers in the back of my hair and tugging my head back. His face is close to mine, his eyes focused on my own, then he finally speaks.

"I know I'm a bastard, honey. But you fucking love that shit."

Without another word, his mouth slams down against mine. His teeth clash against my own, the pain radiating through my body, his hand grabbing ahold of my ass in a tight clench. His tongue tasting my mouth.

Rusk's hand tugs my hair back, his mouth moving from mine to my throat again. His hand slips around my hip, then behind the waistband of my pants and cups my pussy.

"Rusk," I exhale.

"Tell me you're mine," he demands.

"Never," I grind out.

"Fuck."

When his fingers slip inside of me, my eyes slowly flutter closed. Nobody has touched me there in years. Not even myself. It's been so long since I've felt anything other than pain, that my entire body jerks at the soft sensation.

"I hate you, Rusk. Whatever happens here is only because I trust you not to hurt me."

He leans forward, his mouth touching mine before he speaks. His fingers move inside of me, making a come-hither motion, and my eyes roll to the back of my head, wishing him to never stop.

In fact, he could do this forever, and I would be okay with that.

His fingers move inside of me, his palm pressed against my clit, grinding down against it with every stroke. My hips move, meeting every one of his strokes. My head falls back, and for the first time in my entire life, I take.

I take from him. My hips moving and jerking, my body suddenly not my own as I find my release. I cry out, lifting my hands and gripping his biceps. I ride his hand unabashedly, unashamed until I find my release.

ROADKILL

When she comes, I let her wetness coat my hand, then I slip my fingers from between her legs. Unbuttoning her jeans, I yank them down as she slips her shirt off, tossing it across the room. Her bra is next. When she's finally naked, I pick her up by her waist and toss her onto the bed.

I climb between her legs and align myself with her center. Sinking inside of her slowly, I wait until I'm buried completely before I look into her eyes. I lift my hand to wrap my fingers around the front of her throat.

"Rusk," she exhales in a whispered voice.

"Kiplyn."

I pull out of her, then sink back inside slowly. Then I do it again. And again. "Wrap your legs around me," I demand.

She does, but her eyes narrow on me. "You're mine, Kiplyn."

"I am not," she snaps.

Letting out a low laugh, I continue to fuck her, rocking back and forth, making sure to grind my pelvis against her clit.

She gasps with each downstroke, then she lifts her hands, and her fingers grasp my biceps.

Flexing my fingers around her throat, I fuck her harder. She lets out a gasp but doesn't ask me to stop. I keep my gaze on hers, focused on her and only her, making sure she is okay. I know that George hurt her, and even though she hates me right now, I would never want to upset her.

She doesn't look scared. She doesn't tell me to stop. And then she comes. *Fuck*. Her cunt squeezes me so tightly that I swear to fuck my entire body convulses. She draws my own cum from my body.

My orgasm rushes through me almost violently.

Releasing my grasp on her neck, I stay buried, my cock twitching as I empty myself completely inside of her. Kiplyn lifts her hands, her fingers gripping my wrist at her throat. Releasing my grasp, I lower my torso and touch my mouth to hers.

"Rusk," she whispers against my mouth.

"Fuck, honey," I murmur against her lips.

Slowly, I pull out of her, then lie down beside her before I pull her body against my own. Her arm wraps around my waist. Out panting breaths are the only noises that fill the room. Turning my head to the side, I look down at her.

Kiplyn doesn't move. She is plastered against my body but frozen there. I lift my hand and comb my fingers through her hair before I turn my head and touch my mouth to the top of her head. She lets out a sigh.

Then, as if she realizes what she's doing, her entire body stiffens, and she jerks out of my grasp. I watch as she takes the sheet in her hand, pulling it up to cover her chest as she sits up. Her head turns, and her eyes find mine.

"No," she hisses. "We can't do this."

My lips twitch. "We already have."

I watch as she shakes her head. "No, Rusk. No."

Rolling onto my side, I bend my elbow and rest my head against my palm as I look across the bed at her. I lift my other hand and reach across the bed to her, slide my hand across her chest, then curl my fingers around the side of her throat.

“Rusk,” she exhales.

“You’re mine, honey. You want to admit that to the world or pretend you still hate me and use me to get off, that’s all on you. But you are mine to protect, and I am not going to fuck that up again.”

“I’m selling my house, moving in with Reese, and saving up to move out of Arizona,” she announces. “I went to the police last week, too.”

“The police?” I ask.

“I had to give them my statement. They seemed sympathetic, but I don’t think they seemed in much of a rush to look for George.”

Arching a brow, I watch her for a moment, unsure of what exactly she’s trying to tell me. If she thinks she’s going to pack up and move, she’s got another thing coming.

However, I decide not to say that—yet. I’ll wait until it becomes a reality, and if I work hard enough to get back into her good graces, it won’t be an issue at all.

“Okay, honey.”

She frowns, her brows snapping together. “Just okay?”

Nodding, I grip her throat tighter, then release the grasp, my hand slipping down her chest until my palm stops between her tits. I can feel her heartbeat against my hand. Leaning forward, I touch my mouth to hers.

“Yeah, Kiplyn. As of right now, okay.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

I hum. “Doesn’t matter yet.”

That is that. She doesn’t need the details. Whatever happens is going to happen. Between her, the club, and whatever else gets thrown our way, who the fuck knows what

next week brings, let alone when she has enough money saved for whatever her moving plans entail.

She gave me all my cash back, so it's clear to me she isn't in a hurry to get out of Arizona. Otherwise, she would have already been gone using the money to do so. But she didn't. She came here to the clubhouse, found me, and now she's beside me in bed.

Besides, there is no way in fuck after tonight, after the beginning of whatever the fuck we are, after I've made her come, after I *continue* to make her come the way I do, that she is going to just walk away from me.

She can't. She won't.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ROADKILL

I'M AWOKEN BY MY PHONE BUZZING SOMEWHERE IN THE ROOM. Sitting up, I look at the sleeping woman next to me.

Pausing, I smile down at her, unsure how this is real, then I laugh to myself.

Of course, this is real. She would never leave me in the middle of the night. She straight up won't ever be able to leave me again, even if she's still pissed at me. Kiplyn knows I am the man of her dreams, the only one who is for her.

Slipping out of bed, I grab my pants and dig for the phone in the pocket, then pull them on before I slide my thumb across the screen and walk out into the hallway, careful to close the door quietly behind me.

"Roadkill," I growl.

The voice on the other end lets out a laugh. "Brother, you sound hard the fuck up."

It's Dutch from the Dead Phoenix.

"I was asleep, but I'm not hard up for a fuckin' thing," I inform him, letting out my own laugh. "What's up?"

He clears his throat, then I hear some shuffling around. "Need you to do something for me."

This sounds suspiciously like a favor, and I am not in the habit of doing favors for anyone who isn't my own fucking

brother, but I decide to hear him out because it is not a bad thing when someone owes you something, especially someone as powerful as the president to the Dead Phoenix.

“I’m not sure what strings come with whatever it is that you want from me,” I say.

Dutch bursts out laughing, then clears his throat as he gathers himself. I’m not laughing, though, because I have been part of this life for far too fucking long, been betrayed by too many people to just do whatever the fuck he wants me to do without asking any questions first.

“Need you to get me some more shit before the scheduled time, like tonight. Like right fucking now.”

“Why?” I ask.

Silence.

This is a man who doesn’t like to be asked any questions. He is in charge. But that’s the thing. He is not in charge of me. Not in the fucking slightest. He may have a contract with the Devil’s Hellions, but I don’t owe him fuck all. He doesn’t have shit with me personally.

“Because I got a whole order that I did not expect, and they’re trying to blackmail me if I do not deliver. It’s a test.”

I don’t understand everything they do. The Dead Phoenix are seriously different than we are, run their business much different, and dabble in things that are nothing like we do. They don’t toe the line. They don’t sell some dope. They are on the darker side of the underworld.

“I have to go down to the warehouse, see what’s available,” I murmur.

“I need you to deliver it, too.”

“Dutch,” I growl.

He is silent, but he pants a few times. “My club cannot know that I’m being blackmailed like this. Raul cannot know.”

“I do not do lies,” I state. “No fucking way, man.”

“Fuck,” he curses on a hiss. “They can’t know because if they do, they would rather fight than accept the blackmail test.”

“You lose your balls?” I ask.

He chuckles, but it is completely without humor. “When it comes to this, yeah.”

There is more to this story. “I do this for you, you tell me the details, and you owe me.”

“It’s personal.”

I knew it. But I’m not letting it go. I will not just do some personal favor blindly. Even if he were Legacy, I would probably want to know exactly what the fuck is going on. So, I don’t just take blind fucking words for shit anymore. I don’t think any of us do.

“That’s nice. I’m still going to need to know. And also, how much shit do you want and what? I think I have one car that’s available the last time I checked.”

There is a moment of silence before he clears his throat. “I want one car worth delivered, snow if you have it. As much as you can get.”

“Brother, you know what we usually have on hand, and that is not it.”

“I know you have some.”

He’s not fucking wrong. I do have some. I have enough for one huge shipment to him. It’s also enough to land my fucking ass in prison for much longer than I would ever wish to be, though one day would be too fucking long.

“I’d like to be enlightened before I put myself in the middle of a crossfire,” I murmur.

There is a sound behind me, and I turn my head, looking over my shoulder at the woman whose sleepy gaze is focused on me. I give her a smirk. She smiles, her cheeks tinting pink, and I can’t help but turn around completely to face her. I want to see all of her, and I get a surprise when I do.

She's wearing my tee, and she looks downright fuckable in it, too. Her light brown hair is a messy mane around her elbows. Her eyes are a little glassy from just waking up.

"No crossfire, Roadkill. Just need the woman back, and this shipment gets me that. It's a trust trade."

"I don't think I want to know," I murmur.

"Probably not, but you demanded it, so you'll know. She was mine, I was stupid, then she wasn't anymore. I traded her for a business deal, and now I won't get her back unless I comply with their wishes."

"If you traded, then you don't get her back. Isn't that the way a trade works?" I ask.

My words register with Kiplyn, because her eyes suddenly lose their glassiness and widen. Shaking my head once, I quietly instruct her to stay out of it. She chews on her bottom lip, her gaze flicking around uncomfortably.

"Yes and no," he murmurs.

I figure I don't need to really know anything else. I already understand that his group dabbles in the dark and is way more fucked-up than we are.

"I won't go alone," I state. "I'm taking a brother with me for backup."

"Sounds good. I'll text you the address, and you must make it there before six in the morning."

I don't ask him why he didn't schedule this shit out earlier, why he's only giving me a few hours' notice. It's not my fucking business. Ending the call, I shove my phone into my pocket and close the distance between me and Kiplyn.

I lift my hand and wrap my fingers around the back of her neck, firmly gripping her there. Dipping my chin, I touch my lips to hers.

"I have some business to handle," I murmur against her mouth.

She lifts her hand, her fingers curling around my forearm, and jerks her face back as far as I allow her before she speaks. Her coffee-colored gaze searches mine for a long moment before she lets out a sigh.

“What is happening?” she asks. “I heard some things, and I am confused.”

My lips twitch into a smirk, and I lean forward, touching my mouth to hers again. “It’s not something I can discuss. Just know, whatever the fuck you heard, it really has nothing to do with me or any one of the Devil’s Hellions men. I’m going to do a personal favor for someone.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” she exhales.

“You’ll be here when I get back.”

She shakes her head and tries to pull away from me, but I don’t let her. Keeping my grip on her flexed and my gaze focused, I don’t let her go *any-fucking-where*. I keep her right here, in front of me, where I want her—where she belongs.

“I won’t,” she whispers. “This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have done this, and I shouldn’t have stayed.”

“No mistakes when it comes to me, honey. You know that.”

“You’re a cocky asshole,” she grinds out, but she looks anything except angry.

Her nostrils flare and her lips part. She looks like she wants me to kiss her, but I don’t have the time to fuck her right now. I have some business to handle. Tugging her body close to mine, I smash my mouth against hers in a hard, rough kiss.

She whimpers, and I swallow the sound before I shift my head backward, my gaze finding hers. My lips turn up into a small smile.

“Yeah, honey. I’m cocky as fuck. But you’ll be right fucking here when I get back, yeah?”

“I have a job,” she whispers. “I have to go to work.”

I hum, my gaze searching hers. “Need to know where to find you.”

“Do you think I would let you? This was my goodbye. Here’s your money, and bye.”

I burst out laughing. “No, honey. This is your hello. You’re my woman, and I’m never fucking letting you walk out on me. Not ever again.”

“You walked out on me,” she cries softly.

Leaning forward, I slide my lips across hers again. “You weren’t ready. You needed to heal, and you couldn’t do that with me there.”

Releasing her, I take a step backward. If I stay close to her any longer, I will fuck her again. She’s in my shirt, talking about turning her back. My cock wants to remind her about the orgasms he gave her just a few hours ago.

“Get some sleep, text me your address, then we go from there, yeah?”

“I don’t have your number,” she says, as if she’s pointing out some information.

“You do. Saved it as Rusk in your phone, honey.”

Her eyes widen. She lifts her hand to her lips. “You didn’t,” she whispers.

“I did. So you’d always be able to get ahold of me.”

Fuck me, but she’s adorable. I could stand here and blow her fucking mind with information all day, every day, just to see the sweet expressions on her face. But then I wouldn’t get this shit done for Dutch, and I wouldn’t be able to get my shit done as a vice president, so that would blow.

So, here we are.

I have to leave.

“I gotta go get dressed,” I murmur, walking past her and into the bedroom.

I grab some clean clothes and dress quickly, then shove my feet into my boots before I turn toward Kiplyn. I give her a grin and close the distance between us, lifting my hand, turning it over, and sliding my knuckles down her cheek.

“As soon as I get done with this, I’m yours,” I murmur.

Kiplyn lifts her hand, wraps her fingers around my wrist before she turns her head, and touches her lips to the palm of my hand. Then she straightens, her gaze finding mine before she sucks in a breath.

“I won’t be here. We cannot be together, Rusk. This was a mistake.”

My lips curve up into a smile. Letting my hand drop from her cheek, I take a step backward. “Keep telling yourself that, honey.”

Without another word, I turn and walk out of the room. I should probably be upset that she keeps telling me she hates me and doesn’t want to be with me, but I’m not. There’s no way in fuck that she’ll ever be done with me.

At the risk of sounding like a complete pussy, we are meant to be. It’s as simple as that.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KIPLYN

I HAVEN'T MOVED FROM THE EDGE OF THE BED FOR HOURS. I know that I need to get up and put on some clothes before I leave here and head home for work. But I can't move. I am frozen in my spot, thinking about everything Rusk said to me.

He is so sure that we're something. He is so cocky he makes me want to scream. But then there's the way he touched me, the way he made me feel. Every single touch, every stroke, it was beautiful, and I hate that I think that.

So, as I stare at my phone, I wonder if I should text him my new address or just ignore him altogether. I want to ignore him, but I also want to text him the address just as badly. I'm in a serious conundrum.

I want to hate him.

My whole being wants to hate every single part of him.

But I don't.

I love him. I've always loved him. Plus, I think he's better in bed than he ever was before. He's less selfish. I would say less sure of himself, but that would be a lie. This man is so full of himself, I'm surprised his head fits inside the building, let alone on his own shoulders.

Letting out a sigh, I open the text app and find Rusk's name. I start to write a message, then delete it, then start again

before I delete it. My final message is just two lines. The address, nothing else.

I touch send.

Flicking my gaze around the room, I take in the space. It's really dirty and messy. Really freaking messy. There are empty beer bottles strewn all over the floor and trash, too. It's just... everywhere.

Standing, I dress in my clothes from yesterday. At least I was dressed casually, so my walk of shame doesn't look so bad. It's not like I was dressed for a date or anything. Once I gather my purse from the floor, I slip out of the bedroom and move down the hall toward the bar.

It's oddly quiet in this place, especially compared to last night. There is no booming bass or clanking glasses. Nobody is playing pool. There is nothing but silence. Tiptoeing through the bar, I slip out into the sunlight and squint at the brightness.

My car sits exactly where I left it in the parking lot, not that I expected it to move at all. As I move toward the front of my vehicle, I hear a car's tires against the crunching gravel. I don't know why I stop and watch the approaching vehicle, but I do.

It's likely because I'm nosey as hell and I'm curious as to who could be driving down here in a car, because judging by the other vehicles around, if they aren't riding their motorcycles, these men are without a doubt climbing into a truck of some kind, maybe a vintage muscle car, but this is newer.

The car pulls up a few spots from mine, and I watch as that same gorgeous deep-dark brunette from yesterday with Legacy climbs out of the driver's seat. She's wearing a pair of nice pants and a blouse that looks like it's possibly silk. She points her designer sunglasses in my direction, then smiles and lifts her hand.

I watch, my lips parted in awe as she makes her way toward me. I don't move, unable to force myself into the car. I

don't know who this woman is, but it's clear to me that she has something on her mind, and that something has to do with me.

"I'm so glad I caught you. Brick said you would be around this morning, but he wasn't sure about the rest of the day," she announces.

I continue to stand stock-still, staring at her, unsure of what to say. She smiles widely, her perfect teeth on display. I don't move even an inch.

"I'm Henli, by the way, Brick's wife. Oh, maybe you know him as Legacy. I always forget about that," she says with a laugh.

My gaze shifts to the side. The place is still asleep. We're alone, and she's introducing herself. The least I can do is be kind back. Even if I don't plan on sticking around here for long at all. It isn't her fault that Rusk is an asshole. She's just trying to be nice.

"I'm Kiplyn," I say, lifting my hand and giving her a small wave.

"I'm glad to have someone else around. There aren't any other women in this place... except, you know... the girls who live there," she says, then wrinkles her nose.

I imagine the girls who I saw in the barely-there outfits and can only assume what their duties entail. I don't plan on asking, mainly because I don't plan on ever coming back here again. I start to tell her that when she continues.

"I tried to ask Brick about you yesterday, but he wasn't really into answering me. He does that sometimes, so I thought that coming straight to the source would be better. Do you want to go out for breakfast?"

Every part of me screams to tell her no. I shouldn't waste her time or mine getting to know her. I should let her know the facts. That I am not with Rusk no matter what he says, but the way she's looking at me, it's so inviting.

"I have to work this morning. I'm actually running behind," I say, which is not a lie at all. "But I get off around

three, if you wanted to go for coffee or something before I head to my second job.”

Henli’s eyes widen, and she blinks a few times. “Second job?”

“I’m a housekeeper, but for extra cash, I clean my friend’s salon in the evenings. This is my short day cleaning houses, so I have a bit of a break in between.”

I wait for the judgment to wash over her face, but it’s not there. In fact, there is nothing. Her smile doesn’t even falter at the news that I clean houses for a living. I expected the judgment, the arch of the brow, all of it, especially with her fancy clothes and car, but I don’t think she cares at all.

“Oh, that’s awesome. I’m an event planner. I can meet anytime, and I don’t have client meetings in the late afternoon, so I’m free,” she offers. “Let’s exchange numbers, and you can text me a place that’s convenient for you.”

“Why?” I ask on a whisper, the word slipping out. I press my lips together in hopes that she didn’t hear me, but she did.

Her smile falters, then her brows snap together. “Because I want to get to know another person in this group, especially the vice president’s woman.”

Shaking my head, I clear my throat. “I’m not his woman.”

Henli opens her mouth to correct me, because likely, Legacy has told her that Rusk claimed me, or whatever stupid language they use. But she doesn’t know that I don’t accept that claim. I want nothing to do with it.

“He keeps telling me that I am, but I’m not,” I say. It’s the only way I can really explain it.

Henli’s lips curve up into a grin. It’s almost knowing, and I wonder what the hell she thinks she *knows*, but she doesn’t tell me.

“We’ll meet for coffee,” she says. “Text me.”

Then, as if she only came here to ask me to hang out and for no other reason, she walks back to her car, climbs inside, backs away, and is gone down the dirt road. I stare at her

taillights, and once she disappears from view, my body jerks and I move.

Climbing inside my own car, I shift it into reverse, turn around, then move myself down the road and away from the clubhouse that is in the middle of nowhere. The entire drive to my new home, I can't help but think about Henli and what she was saying. That she wants to meet up, her knowing smile, all of it.

ROADKILL

Itch sits next to me, looking nervous as fuck. I don't blame him. I'm feeling a bit that way myself. Doing shit on the side, it's not something we usually seek out or even entertain. But the Dead Phoenix are our associates, and the way Dutch made it sound, this is an emergency.

“Legacy know about this?” Itch asks.

I snort. “Yeah, he knows. I'm not doing shit without him. No secrets fucking ever.”

He nods a couple of times, his head bobbing back and forth. Clearing my throat, I continue to drive, checking my rearview mirror every so often not just to make sure I'm not being followed, but to also ensure that a cop isn't behind me.

If whoever these people are, are the kind of men who test the fucking Dead Phoenix, then I know without a shadow of a doubt they will have no qualms about fucking me over in the process.

“We're almost there,” I announce needlessly, considering the GPS made the announcement just seconds ago that we would be arriving at our destination in half a mile.

When I turn right, the entrance gates are open, and I move down the street, surprised to see that it's a block of goddamn mansions. The houses have to sit on lots that are at least an acre, maybe two, large.

There are massive houses, manicured front yards, and if I had to guess, the backyards are a million times fancier than

what I see, and right now, I've never seen anything this nice in my life. I feel like the police are going to be called just because I'm driving a car that is about five years old, and although we made it look sweet on the outside, it is clearly not something anyone in this hood would buy.

Pulling into the circle drive, I park right in front of the steps to the front door. I look at Itch and raise my brows. He does the same. An unspoken expression of '*What the actual fuck?*' is shared between us.

Killing the engine, I push the car door open and throw my legs over the side. Itch does the same. I move ahead of him, he stays half a step behind me as my fucking backup, and together we make our way toward the front door.

When I lift my hand to knock, the door flies open, and I'm met with a man in a suit. Swear to fuck, I almost call him Jeeves but don't get the chance. He looks me up and down, his lip curves into an expression of disgust, then he steps to the side.

Instead of fucking with him, I brush past him. He obviously doesn't think much of me, and at this point, I don't give a shit. I am here to deliver the goods and collect the package in the form of a female.

I've already sent a message to Legacy to pick us up at this address, something he suggested we do, not only as reassured backup but also, if I give this fuck the goods, he's gonna have to figure out how to get it out of the paneling, and I do not want to sit here for hours and watch him do it and put it back together again.

The butler scoots past us, instructing us to stay where we are. I almost tell him to kick rocks, but I'm not really in a position to be rude, especially since I have zero ideas what to expect here. So, I do what I've been instructed to do, knowing that Itch is on edge and Legacy is on his way over.

There is a noise from the left, and I watch as a man in a three-piece suit makes his way toward me. He looks exactly like someone I would picture living in this mansion. He's got dark hair that's gone gray at the temples. His dark eyes find

mine, and his lips twitch into a smile that is not reassuring at all. In fact, it's almost frightening.

This guy is fucking evil. I can feel it just by his one look, before he even says a single goddamn word.

“You must be the men Dutch sent, yes?”

I dip my chin, my eyes never leaving his. “We are,” I agree.

“Good. You have my package?”

“You have mine?” I ask, arching a brow.

He lets out a laugh, though he doesn't sound amused, more like bored. He sounds as if he's forcing himself to have reactions that he considers normal, but maybe he doesn't really know what normal is because he's a fucking evil bastard.

I watch as he lifts his hand, then Jeeves appears from around the corner with a girl in his grasp. A very young girl. If she's fucking eighteen, I would be surprised. *Jesus Christ*, what the actual fuck is going on here?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ROADKILL

HOW IN THE FUCK THIS GIRL BELONGED TO DUTCH, I DO NOT know. In fact, I'm wondering what the fuck is really going on here and if I'm part of something that I definitely do not want to be part of. I open my mouth to ask this guy that, but then he speaks.

"Now show me yours," he demands.

Turning to the side, I motion toward the door. The man and the girl follow behind me and Itch. Jeeves skirts past me and opens the door. I lift my hand again and point to the car before I face him.

"What are you showing me?" he asks.

"The product is in the car. In the panels of the doors, in the seats, anywhere and everywhere it can hide, that's where it is."

His eyes widen, then he takes a step backward, his lips curving up into a smile. "Ingenious. I like it. I have a few men who will take it to the garage in the back of the house, just to ensure that it is as you say."

I almost tell him to fuck off, but as much as I don't trust him, he doesn't trust me either. "I don't have all day," I state.

He dips his chin, his lips twitching into a sly smile. "Of course, you don't. Once it appears to be good, you can take the girl and go. Would you like to have a seat in my office? Maybe have some drinks?"

It's five thirty in the morning. I don't want to have any goddamn drinks. I want to go and find my woman. I want to have never left her, but instead of saying any of that, I jerk my chin in the girl's direction.

"She doesn't leave my sight," I state.

I watch as his gaze shifts to the girl then slides back to meet mine. He nods and takes a step backward, his eyes focused and not leaving mine.

"Fair enough," he murmurs. "We'll go into my office, relax, have the chef bring something to eat and some drinks."

Looking at Itch, I clear my throat. "You make sure everything goes smoothly, yeah?"

"Will do, Veep," he murmurs as he walks out of the house.

The man walks toward the girl, curls his fingers around her bicep, and tugs her behind him. I take her in again, this time from behind. She's slight, her body wispy and obviously young. Her hair is waist-length, her clothes body-hugging and barely there.

We make our way into the office, the three of us. I watch as he releases the girl at the couch, then walks over to his desk and picks up his phone before he sinks down into his leather chair. I choose to stand, unable to relax across from this man.

When he's finished with his phone call, he leans back in his chair, appearing to be calm, though I can see the alertness behind his eyes. He's ready at any given second to do whatever the fuck he needs to do.

It will not get to that, unless he takes it there.

"So, do I get a name?" I ask in an effort to break the silence.

He tilts his head to the side, his gaze flicking to the left of me to the girl before he brings it back to meet mine. There is silence. He doesn't give me his name, and I have to assume it's because he's trying to keep his identity a secret.

"They call me Cyrus."

“Roadkill,” I say, introducing myself.

He hums. “Of course, your groups always have the worst nicknames. I will never understand them.”

I could be a smart-ass back to him, but I decide against it mainly because I don’t really give a fuck. I could lie and say that it’s for a million other reasons, but the facts are, I just don’t care. Inhaling a deep breath, I shift my attention to my boots and wonder how much longer I have to stay in here, when he speaks.

“Your group, it’s not the same as Dead Phoenix.”

His words seem more like an observation, but as I lift my gaze, I realize he’s staring at me expectantly, waiting for me to respond.

“It’s not. We’re an MC, a motorcycle club. Dead Phoenix is different.”

“You also do not do what Dead Phoenix and I do, with regards to women,” he murmurs.

Tilting my head to the side, I cross my arms over my chest. “I do not know the inner workings of either of your organizations. We do not do anything with women, unless they’re willing, and cash is never exchanged.”

“Never?” he asks, arching a brow.

“*I’ve* never exchanged cash,” I say, amending my previous statement with a chuckle.

He leans back in his chair, lifting his hand to his chin. I watch as he rubs it from side to side, as if he’s thinking about something. He leans forward, placing his elbows on the hard wooden desk with a thud, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Would you consider skin trade?” he asks.

Shaking my head, I take a step forward before I speak. “We don’t do that.”

“You’d make a killing. Everyone does.”

I think about the girl sitting on the couch behind me and how she’s probably not even eighteen, and if she is, only by a

day or two. I couldn't do that, sell her body to someone else for my own profit.

Sure, there are clubs that run the skin trade, but that's not us. It's never been us. I'll kill, I'll sell some drugs, I'll lie, cheat, and steal if I have to in life, but what I won't do is sell another person. It's just too goddamn haunting.

"Maybe so, but it's not who we are," I say.

"But you'd kill someone if I paid you?" he asks.

My lips twitch into a smile. "Perhaps."

He lets out a laugh. This time, it actually sounds genuine. I honestly don't give a shit. I am hoping to never see his ass again. This is creepy as fuck, and in the same breath, I will never do a favor for Dutch again.

Fuck the Dead Phoenix. We do our contracted jobs and nothing else. I'm going to stand firm on that. I am not his goddamn errand boy. Dutch only did this to attempt to set a precedence. He thinks that by owing us favors, all of this is somehow more appealing.

Not again.

"Rusk Wilson," the man calls out.

I'm staring off into space, thinking about Dutch and the Dead Phoenix in general. Until it registers that he is using my given name. I jerk my body, my attention swinging back to Cyrus. I open my mouth to say something, to respond, though I'm not sure what the fuck I'm going to say, but it doesn't matter.

There is a sharp pain in my neck, and then... *nothing*.

KIPLYN

Henli sits across from me, a bottle of water in her hand and a smile on her face. She's a much more jovial person than I am in general. I don't know what I'm doing here at all. I shouldn't have accepted this coffee date. I should have canceled.

But I didn't cancel, and now I'm sitting here across from her smiling face, wondering what the fuck we're going to talk about.

"I'm so excited to have another old lady in the group. I don't have a lot of girlfriends, and it's really lonely, especially since Brick is the president now. I mean, he comes home at night most of the time, and I tend to drown myself in work, but still. It would be nice to have some friends."

I don't have the heart to tell her that I am not the friend she's looking for. I don't plan on being Rusk's woman for long. In fact, I'm not really his woman at all. That was just a title he gave me and didn't even ask what I thought about it, not even once.

"You're not talking, and I think maybe you need to?" she says, her gaze focused on the yellowing bruises that still show in certain light on my face.

I think about lying to her, avoiding her concern, or maybe just ending this little tête-à-tête altogether. But I don't. Instead, I suck in a breath and decide I can't be mean to her. She hasn't done anything to warrant that.

"My ex-husband was abusive. He did this to me, not Rusk," I whisper.

Henli reaches across the small pub table and wraps her cool fingers around my wrist. "I know," she exhales. "I was in the hospital in Phoenix when you were brought in. My dad was there having surgery, and when Brick saw you, he lost his mind."

Her words are soft, sweet, and comforting. I can't believe that Legacy remembered me. It'd been a decade since I saw him, but he's always been close with Rusk, and even though I wasn't introduced to the life Rusk led, I did know Legacy.

"He went straight to Roadkill, who also lost his mind, and then Brick had to drive him to the hospital because he was so upset, Brick was afraid he would get into an accident," she finishes her story.

Every word she says, a piece of me already knew because Rusk told me how he found me, but at the same time, hearing it from her, it makes me feel... different.

I'm not sure what to say. I'm not sure what to do. I open my mouth, though no words come out, but I'm saved by the phone. Henli's phone starts going wild, and her eyes widen. She answers it, and I wonder if I can slip away, if she would even notice. Because to be honest, I'm not sure I want to think about anything she's told me, or think about the fact that no matter how many times I tell Rusk and myself that I hate him... I don't.

“What? Is everything okay? What do you mean?”

She sounds panicked. Her gaze flits around until it lands on mine, and then her eyes widen even more. I didn't know it was possible, but they look like they're about to bug out of her head. Her lips are parted, and she sucks in a deep breath.

“She's right here in front of me. Okay.”

I watch as she places the phone back down on the table, her eyes still very wide and fully focused on mine.

“There's been a problem.” Her voice is barely above a whisper, her lips trembling before she continues. “It's Roadkill.”

My heart skips a beat. I should not care. I don't want him. I hate him. I want nothing to do with him. I took my orgasms, and I was going to go. But when she says his name, her voice sounding so damn terrified, my entire body freezes at the same time my heart begins to slam against my ribcage, and I wonder if it's going to actually break through my body and land on the ground.

“*What* is Roadkill?” I finally ask.

My mouth dries out instantly. My words come out on a croak. I watch as her expression changes from panicked to almost pity. I don't understand the shift, but instead of screaming at her to tell me immediately, I decide to wait. Mainly because my mouth is so dry, I don't think I can say anything right now.

“Something has happened to him. Brick wants us down at the clubhouse right now for protection.”

Standing on trembling legs, I shake my head slowly. “No,” I whisper. “I don’t want this. None of it.”

“Kiplyn,” she calls out softly. “Whoever it is could come after you. They have him. They have him and Itch.”

I don’t know who or what Itch is, and I don’t care. When I hear the sound of a rumbling engine pulling up behind me, I turn my head. I see someone. The car is a black muscle car, the driver a handsome guy, but what causes me to pause is the fact that he’s staring right at me.

Turning my head, I look back at Henli, who is staring right at me with the widest eyes. She opens her mouth to say something when I feel a palm slide around my mouth. There is a hard body behind me, and I freeze.

I don’t know what to do. The fight in me is gone. There is no flight. There is nothing because this cannot be happening.

Then I’m dragged away and shoved into the car.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ROADKILL

OPENING MY EYES, I LOOK AROUND THE DARK ROOM. MY EYES don't adjust immediately, so I stay completely still, trying to figure out what the fuck is going on. I also feel drunk. My entire body is woozy, my brain is pulsing, and I think I might fucking puke.

When I can finally make out my surroundings, though only slightly, I realize I'm in a room. There are some dark shadows that suggest furniture, but I'm not quite sure. However, there is one thing that is very clear—I'm tied to a goddamn chair.

My hands are behind my back, my ankles tied to each leg.

Fuck.

I am truly fucking fucked.

Letting my head drop, I decide not to fight the binds. There is no reason to expend my energy at this point. What I need to do is conserve as much as I possibly can. I'm not sure what the fuck is coming, but whatever it is, I know without a doubt I'm going to fight like hell.

A door opens across the room. I watch as Cyrus slips inside. He flips the light on, ensconcing the room in brightness. I hiss, pinching my eyes closed as I attempt to once again adjust to the light.

Slowly, I force my eyes open and look directly at him. Jerking my chin in the air, I look down my nose at him. He

gives me a smile. It's cocky, and I match it because if there is anyone in this room who knows cocky, it's fucking me.

"You look awfully proud of yourself for someone who is tied to a chair," he says with a laugh.

Pressing my lips together, I think about telling him to fuck off but decide against it. He's got me tied up here for a reason, and I want to know what the fuck that reason is. If I piss him off right away, I won't find out.

"Should I be worried?" I ask.

He leans against the wall, his lips curved up into a smile. "You should," he says. "Maybe you shouldn't."

Inhaling through my nose, I wonder if my arms and legs are no longer numb. Clearing my throat, I stare at him, refusing to look away. He pushes off the wall and takes a step toward me, then another until he's just a few feet away.

"You have no idea who I am," he says, his lips still turned up as if he has the best joke in the world playing on repeat in his head. "But I know exactly who you are."

"Congratulations?" I ask.

He shrugs a shoulder, letting out a cough. "Killed your own cousin, your own blood, over some woman," he murmurs. "It's a shame. In my world, blood ties are the most important."

"In my world, brotherhood is the most important."

"The woman isn't your brother," he says, making a *tsking* sound.

I start to respond to him but decide against it. I don't have to say a goddamn thing to him. I don't have to justify shit. This is some psycho. A complete piece of shit who kidnapped me and has a girl who is barely eighteen whom he has taken for some kind of trade. I don't give a shit what the reason is that for taking me—he fucking kidnapped me... *me*.

"It seems like your club has a certain set of rules, much like my organization. Although yours are a bit skewed. I don't agree with them at all. Killing your own blood over a woman? It seems like your code isn't much of a code."

“I don’t understand why you give a fuck about me or my code,” I say.

He presses his lips together as he watches me, then lets out a sigh. “I have to explain everything, don’t I?” he asks.

“Apparently, you do, since I’m here doing a fucking favor and you kidnapped me.”

“Dutch is an idiot,” he announces. “He thought he could fuck me over, but he can’t.”

I close my eyes slowly, then open them again. I could beat the fuck out of this guy if I weren’t tied up. Goddamn this motherfucker.

“Man, I do not know what the fuck you’re talking about. I don’t know Dutch that well. I don’t know what he fucked you over on or not. You need to take that shit up with him, not me. I have absolutely nothing to do with that.”

The door to the bedroom opens, and another person walks in. It’s the girl. She’s still wearing the same small dress with the extremely high heels. She’s carrying a tray with her and stops right next to Cyrus.

“Leave it on the dresser,” he orders.

I watch as she carefully walks over to a dresser that is pushed against the wall and places the tray down. I keep watching as she takes a few steps backward, then finally turns around and walks out of the room.

“Stop,” Cyrus calls out, turning his head and calling out to her.

She stops, keeping her back to him. She stays frozen in her spot, her back to us and straight as an arrow. She doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t even twitch. I watch her, waiting for her to turn around, but she doesn’t. She is following his orders to a T. She is his to instruct.

Cyrus looks back at me then lifts his brows. “That is what I have a problem with. The fact that he gave me that, and now he wants to take it away.”

“Do you mean the girl?” I ask.

“The property,” he says, as if he’s correcting me.

I let out a snort. “Man, you are fucked-up. I knew some fucked-up shit was happening here.”

“You did not pass the test,” he says. He looks down at the food before he shifts his attention back to me. “So, hope you’re not hungry.”

He walks away from me, stopping next to the girl. He whispers something to her. She sinks down to her knees, then her hands as well. I watch as she crawls away, out of the room, as Cyrus walks beside her.

Fucking shit.

This is a goddamn mess.

And Dutch fucked me.

KIPLYN

The man beside me drives fast. He is heading toward Phoenix, and every part of my being is frozen solid. I try to come up with scenarios on how I can throw myself out of this fast-moving car and not die, but every time I think about it, I realize it will end tragically.

“My name is Dutch,” he announces.

I don’t respond.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

Turning my head, I look at his profile. “I think all kidnappers, rapists, and murderers say those exact words before they kidnap, rape, and kill.”

There is a slight moment of silence before he bursts out laughing. Not just a rumbling laugh either. He’s really living it up in the driver’s seat, as if this is the most hilarious thing he’s ever heard in his whole life.

I stare at his profile, wondering when the hell I became a comedian. Because he’s laughing like I get paid to tell jokes or something.

“I’m not here to kidnap you or any of the other things,” he says between his wheezing laughter.

He clears his throat a couple of times, then he decides to tell me a little more of what’s going on, but I still don’t believe him fully. He’s driving away from where I live, away from Casa Grande, and he literally grabbed me off the damn street.

“You realize you kidnapped me, right?” I ask.

He hums. I decide to commit his face to memory, just in case I get free and have to describe him to a police sketch artist or something. He has a strong jaw. It’s square and chiseled. His nose has a very small hook at the end, but it’s sharp. He has dark eyebrows and dark hair that is combed and slicked back with gel of some kind.

He’s dressed nicely in a pair of slacks and a button-down shirt with a tie. He looks absolutely nothing like Rusk or any of his men. I don’t know how he claims they know one another and why he needs to protect me from something, but I do not trust this man.

“There was something that happened with Roadkill today when he was doing a favor for me. If I don’t protect you, I’m not being a good associate.”

This must be the man he was talking to early this morning. I stare at him a bit longer, etching every one of his features into my brain, wondering how I’m going to get the front of his face memorized as well, but for now, the profile will have to do.

“Where is he, then?” I ask.

I decide I need to keep this man talking. I need to keep him busy so he doesn’t do whatever it is he’s intending to do with me. I don’t have a good feeling about him at all, and I don’t want to trust anything that he has as the truth. So, I’m going to question the absolute shit out of him.

“I don’t know.”

Pressing my lips together, I bite the inside of my cheek. I know that something happened to him. Henli told me that.

What, I don't know, but I'm going to find out, and I am also going to find him.

As much as I hate that man, the fact is that I love him more. I always have. Even when I went to George, I think I ran to him in hopes that Rusk would come and save me. That he would beg me to come back. I was so young, naïve, and stupid. I was playing games, and they backfired for a decade.

“But something happened,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

He jerks his chin as he puts his blinker on and takes an off ramp. I stupidly didn't look to read which one. I don't recognize my surroundings, but that's not surprising considering I don't come to Phoenix often. I usually don't have the gas money to drive here for fun.

“Something happened. Likely, the errand I sent him on, it wasn't exactly something that is easy, or rather, the man I sent him to work with isn't easy.”

I don't know what any of that means, but I don't bother asking. This is nothing I ever would have imagined being part of my life. When I met Rusk, he had that bad boy vibe, but he didn't really tell me much about his life. He kept me at arm's length. Aside from Legacy, I didn't know anyone else he associated with.

I always assumed it was because of the women. Which I'm sure played a huge part in why he kept me away, but maybe it was also to keep me safe. Because right now, I do not feel safe.

Not in the slightest.

“So, what happens now?” I ask.

Clearing his throat, he turns down a street, then another, but I'm stupid, and I'm not paying attention to where we're going at all. I'm watching him, waiting for the answer. And the answer doesn't make me feel any better at all. Not even a little bit.

“We wait.”

What the actual fuck?

“Let’s go inside,” he murmurs before he pushes the car door open.

My head swings around, and I blink at the sight of a house in front of me. It’s not a mansion, but it’s big, and it’s nicer than anywhere I’ve ever lived before. He jogs around the front of the car, then walks up to the front door. He doesn’t force me out. He doesn’t do anything. When he arrives at the door, he looks back over his shoulder at me, waiting for me to join him.

Why does it feel like I’m a lamb being led to the slaughterhouse right now?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ROADKILL

THE DOOR OPENS SLOWLY. I EXPECT TO SEE CYRUS WALK INTO the room again, but it isn't him. It's the girl. She's walking on her feet instead of crawling this time, but she doesn't look up. Her gaze is focused down on her bare feet as she walks toward the dresser, picks up the tray, then slowly makes her way to me.

I don't know what I expect, but it isn't her sinking down to her knees, then setting the tray down before she picks up the sandwich from the tray and lifts it to my lips, her eyes finally meeting mine when she does.

She holds it against my mouth, but I don't take a bite. "Please," she whispers.

"Is it poisoned?" I ask.

I'm half fucking joking, but I don't know this man and would not be surprised if he poisoned me. He tied me to a goddamn chair. I don't think he is above killing me. Sure, he wants to test something with Dutch, but I don't think he gives a flying fuck about collateral damage, which is exactly what I am to him.

"You must eat it, or I will be punished," she whispers. "He watches."

"Tell me what the fuck is going on here," I demand.

She looks up at the corner of the room behind me, then pushes the food a bit closer to my mouth. Reluctantly, I take a bite. She doesn't answer me right away. She continues to put food into my mouth, and I chew and swallow, waiting for a response.

The girl doesn't look physically abused in any way. I quickly scan her for bruising, even makeup-covered bruises, but I find none. She's thin but doesn't look sickly or anything. Clearing my throat, I ask her again.

"Babe, what the fuck is going on here?"

"I was supposed to be here temporarily. A good faith gesture, but now that Dutch wants me back, Cyrus doesn't want to give me back. He wants to keep me."

I knew this shit was going to get ugly, had that feeling going into this. I should have never agreed to this favor for Dutch. I wonder where Legacy is, and if he's going to try and fucking save me. I could use a rescue about now.

I'm thinking this is a situation where I won't be capable of saving myself. As much as I would like to think I am, this is without a doubt where I admit defeat and silently beg for help from my brothers.

"What happens to me?" I ask. "To you?"

Picking up the tray of food, she stands and takes a few steps backward, her eyes focused on mine, her gaze searching my own before she speaks. When she does, I am not surprised by her words at all.

"I don't know."

She spins on her bare heel and hurries out of the room, closing the bedroom door behind her and leaving me bathed in darkness. I close my eyes for a moment, taking in the space, inhaling deeply through my nose as I try to identify any scents. I don't know why, but I feel like these will be helpful.

They aren't.

I smell flowery potpourri and vanilla in the far distance, and there is a hint of chemical cleaner, but I can't tell what

kind, not that it matters. I curse myself. Itch. I should have asked what the fuck happened to Itch while she was here feeding me like a goddamn invalid.

I'm not sure how long I sit in this chair, but my legs are numb, and so are my arms. Dropping my head, I decide to take a rest, try to get some sleep, because I have no idea what is coming. I'm still sticking with needing to conserve all of my energy and strength for whatever the fuck is about to happen.

Eventually, I fall asleep. I don't know how long I stay asleep, but I'm awoken by the door opening again and the light pouring in. I lift my head, my heart slamming against my chest and every nerve in my body on high alert. Cyrus stands directly in front of me, staring at me.

"I didn't pass your test. Care to explain that shit to me at all?" I ask.

Cyrus looks down his nose at me. I don't give a fuck. He probably thinks I'm a giant worthless nothing. Maybe I am. But I'm a worthless nothing that wants to go home to my club and my woman when this is all said and done, so if he wants to play a game, batter the fuck up.

I do not care.

"It doesn't matter what it is. It's done."

I really hate this fucker. He talks in circles and tells me nothing. I'll be glad to see him dead. And he will die. Because I have no fucking reason to keep him alive once I'm free.

"Where's Itch?" I ask.

He hums, then he turns his head and whistles. Two men drag a body into the room. It's Itch, but he's been fucked all the way up.

"We weren't able to subdue him quite as easily and quickly as we were you. This one is definitely a fighter," Cyrus announces, then he barks toward the two men in the room to tie Itch up.

Fuck.

"Cyrus, tell me what the fuck you want from me."

“I want Dutch on his knees. I want him to apologize to me for sending his goons here with a car full of shit that I did not want.”

“You didn’t want product?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I wanted girls.”

My eyes widen. He turns and walks out of the room without another word. What the actual fuck was Dutch thinking? I don’t really know what the fuck he was doing messing with this guy, but now he’s got not only me in on this shit, but the Devil’s Hellions, too.

“Dutch is done,” I growl.

Itch moans. I look over at him. It’s still dark in the room, the blackout curtains doing their job a bit too well.

“You okay?” I ask.

He moans again but doesn’t answer me. We are not only tied the fuck up inside a mansion, but we’re also out the income on the product I brought with me. I will never do anyone a favor ever again.

I don’t care what kind of bullshit story they give me.

I am fucking done with this shit, and not only will Cyrus die, Dutch is basically a walking dead man, too. I don’t give a flying fuck what kind of bond Legacy has with the Dead Phoenix and one of their leaders in jail. Dutch fucked me over. He has to pay for that.

“Revenge,” I hiss.

Itch moans, then rolls onto his back. I stare down at him, wondering if there is an inch of his face that isn’t bruised, but it’s clear he’s one gigantic goddamn swollen mess.

Fucking hell.

Fucking, *fucking*, hell.

He is of no help to me. There is no way he’s going to be able to even walk out of here on his own, let alone fight his way out.

KIPLYN

There is a moment of silence. Dutch is sitting at his breakfast table, while I am standing in the middle of the living room, looking around the very normal-appearing home. Although, I can tell there is no woman living here. This is a bachelor pad for sure.

Sucking in a breath, I turn to him. “What happens now?” I ask.

He’s got his neck bent and his phone in his hand. “Relax, watch television, take a nap. Don’t care. Just don’t leave.”

My eyes widen, and I look down at my shoes, wondering if I could make a break for it and then realizing I have no idea where I am or where I would go. My phone is in my purse, which is hanging on the back of the chair at the coffee place.

The dark brown leather sofa is calling my name. It looks buttery soft. It looks comfortable, too. As much as I want to not sit down, not get comfortable, and figure out a way out of this, the leather looks extremely inviting.

I accept the invitation.

I slide my fingers over the soft leather. I was right. It feels like smooth butter. Sliding my tongue along my bottom lip, I let out a sigh before I turn my head to look back at him. Dutch hasn’t moved. He’s still got his neck bent as he stares at his phone, his thumb moving over the screen.

“Are you going to get him back?” I ask.

He lifts his head, his eyes finding mine from across the room. “Once Cyrus has you, there is no going back.”

“But you sent him in there to get something, to do something? You didn’t care, or you just didn’t want it to be you?” I ask.

“You don’t know what is happening. You couldn’t understand even if I told you. So, shut up over there and be grateful that I saved you, because his men are probably going after the MC right now as we speak.”

There are so many things I could ask him, tell him, inform him of, but I decide against it. I don't want him to *do* anything to me. I don't want to give him any ideas either. He seems pretty focused on his phone, and I'm trying to stay alive for as long as possible here. The last thing I need is for this stranger to lose his temper and do something to me.

Staying on the sofa, I look down at my lap. My fingers are twisted and moving around, shifting from side to side. I wonder when everything is going to come to a head. And it will come to a head. This situation no doubt has everyone on edge. I just don't know why.

I hear a man's murmur and lift my head, looking behind me to see that Dutch is on the phone. I hope like hell it's with Rusk or at least an effort to get him back from wherever he is.

"You cannot have her. I did not give her to you freely or to keep."

Her?

I stare at Dutch. His neck is still bent. I watch as he lifts his hand, wrapping his fingers around the back of his neck and massaging himself there in an effort to relieve the tension. Though I don't think he deserves to have tensions relieved if he's talking about giving and keeping women...

That cannot be good.

Shifting my attention back to my hands in my lap, I hold my breath for a moment. My entire body jumps off the cushion when I hear something crash against the wall.

I spin around and look back at Dutch. He is standing, and I watch as he marches over to the refrigerator, balls his hand into a fist, and smashes it into the door.

I gasp and look down at my hands again, wishing I could completely disappear. Tears fill my eyes and slowly roll down my cheeks. Trembling, I wonder if I can crawl out of here. This reminds me far too much of my life with George.

My hands quake. No matter how many times I wring my fingers together, they don't stop shaking.

“Kiplyn,” George... I mean Dutch roars.

Jumping to my feet, I spin around and stare at him, my eyes wide, my heart rapidly slamming against my rib cage with every beat. My knees knock together a few times as I attempt to stay on my feet, but I am seconds from sinking back down into the leather sofa.

Dutch’s gaze starts at my knees then slowly slides up my entire body. I can feel his eyes, almost as if they are an extension of his hand and he’s actually touching me. I shiver with a mixture of fear and disgust.

“You’re the only thing I can possibly trade,” he announces.

My fears, they’ve absolutely come true. I take a step backward, then another one. I wonder if I can turn and run out of this place. And if I make it out, will I be able to get help? I have no idea, but I’m also not going to stand here and let him do whatever it is he thinks he’s going to do.

I’ve been someone’s punching bag before, but I’m not going to be this guy’s... *trade*... whatever that is supposed to mean. I have absolutely no idea what it entails, and I honestly do not want to know.

“You’re a little old, but you’ll do,” he finally announces once his eyes find mine.

Nope. Nope. Nope.

I spin around and run. Fuck Dutch. Fuck everything about him. I should have thrown myself out of the car on the highway. That would have been a better choice. I should have risked being run over by the car.

My legs move as fast as they possibly can. My arms pump as I run down the street with zero clue of where I’m going—I also don’t care. I run.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ROADKILL

WHAT THE FUCK?

What the actual fuck am I going to do?

I try to get out of my binds, but it doesn't work. I knew it would be fruitless, but I had to at least try. Itch doesn't say anything, but I do see him blink every now and then in the darkness. The whites of his eyes are small, but they're there. I'm just glad he's still alive at this point.

The door opens. I watch as Cyrus walks into the room. He stops in front of me, then tilts his head to the side.

"Dutch wanted to save you, but when I told him he could trade for either *the* property or you, he chose her."

That doesn't surprise me. He sent me into this situation knowing I wouldn't come back. I open my mouth to ask who would be trading for the property, but I honestly don't want to know. I just want to get the fuck out of here.

Legacy better get his fucking ass here soon.

Just as I open my mouth, the words on the tip of my tongue to ask Cyrus who Dutch is trading for the girl, there is noise.

A loud noise.

A sound that only someone like Legacy could create. It's not just the nagging of a door against the wall. It's a gun blast,

it's a roar, all at the same exact time, coming from several different directions—it's my fucking club.

Finally.

Cyrus whips his head around, looking over his shoulder at the open door. I watch him as he shifts his attention back to me, his gaze finding mine. His eyes are wide, and I can see the panic wash over his face.

“What the fuck did you do?” he demands.

My lips twitch into a slow smile. “Me?” I ask as I move in my chair. It rattles, and it's obvious I'm still tied up. I tilt my head to the side, my lips curved up and smiling at him. The expression I wear is no doubt full of cocksure attitude, and I don't give a flying fuck.

I have a hell of a lot to be cocky about.

A hell of a lot.

Cyrus turns completely toward the door. He picks one leg up, taking a single step, then breaks out into a run before he takes off through the open door. He doesn't close it behind him, doesn't lock it.

I can only assume he has some secret way out of this monstrosity of a house. I know that without a doubt, if this place were mine, I would have some secret escape route... or five. I imagine him skulking around the depths of the earth like the fucking rat he is. That is the only way a man like him could go unnoticed, anyway. Through a fucking hole in the ground.

I hear a few more gunshots, then a woman's scream, then some more slamming and gunshots again before finally boots stomp up the staircase. Staring at the open door, I wait for someone to appear.

Anyone.

One of the Devil's Hellions.

Because there is no way this isn't them. The noise, the guns, all of it screams Hellions and only Hellions. Plus, there

is no way in fuck they're just going to leave me and Itch here to die. No way in fuck.

When I see the shadow in front of the door, then make out the body, I let out a heavy sigh. "Volt," I growl.

His eyes widen, and he takes a hesitant step inside, then another before his body jerks backward. I know he's just seen Itch, who is still drifting in and out of consciousness. "What the fuck?" he whispers.

"Not what you expected?" I ask.

He snorts "Not in the goddamn slightest."

"Mind untying me, maybe?" I ask. Though I'm not asking shit, he will be untying me because fuck that shit. I am not going to stay like this, like a fucking little bitch tied to a chair.

Volt moves. His body sways forward, then his feet finally start to shuffle toward me. I wait for him to untie me. He fumbles with the knots in the ropes, and I almost tell him to cut the fuckers off, but then he is finally able to release them, and they fall to the floor.

I don't stand, though. I don't think I can. "How long have I been here?"

Volt is on his knees, looking Itch over. He turns his head to the side, his eyes finding mine. "Two days."

I start to ask him what the fuck took them so long, when Legacy rolls into the room, appearing no worse for wear at all. His eyes slide across the room before they meet mine and widen. I don't say anything. I'm not sure what to even ask at this point.

They've known where I have been for two days, and they did fuck all to find me. Legacy's chin tips down, and he takes in Itch before his head lifts and snaps to me.

"What the fuck happened?" he demands.

I almost laugh in his face but decide against it. I'm not feeling humorous at the moment. Pushing myself up to standing, I reach behind me and curl my fingers around the warm wooden back of the chair.

Turning my head, I follow Legacy's gaze as I look over at Volt and Itch on the floor. "He still breathing?" I ask.

Volt doesn't look up at me but answers, "Yeah, he is. Barely. Need to get him to a hospital. They really fucked him up. "

Clearing my throat, I try to take one step forward. My legs tremble and my knees almost give out, but I refuse to fall. Legacy shifts his attention back to meet mine, and I ask him one simple question. There's only one question I have, though, the only one I need answered. Because right now, I am feeling very much as if I was betrayed by not only Dutch, but by my own club, too.

"What the fuck took you so long?"

KIPLYN

My feet hurt. They don't just hurt, they ache. My legs do, too. The sensation of pins and needles flows through my entire body. I don't know how long I've been running, but I stopped pumping my arms a while ago. My breathing still works, but I'm not sure how. At this point, I'm running off pure adrenaline and nothing else.

That is until I hear the distinct rumbling sound of motorcycles coming up from behind me.

I don't turn my head to look behind me, knowing that if I do, I'm going to without a doubt trip and fall. In this instance, I am not stable enough to look anywhere but straight ahead. I'm not even certain it's Rusk behind me, and until I know for certain, I'm going to keep going.

Where I'm going, I have no idea.

I haven't really taken in my surroundings, but what I can see are houses, lots and lots of houses. At this point, I'm just hoping to come to some kind of fork in the road so I'm forced to turn. I haven't been able to make myself turn left or right, too afraid I'll somehow end up back at Dutch's house.

When the motorcycle noise stops, I assume they've turned down a different road, but then I hear something. It's my name.

"Kiplyn," a voice booms from behind me.

I don't stop running.

I can't.

Though, I don't think that I'm actually moving very quickly. It doesn't seem like the scenery is flying by at all. In fact, I could be standing still at this time, and I wouldn't even realize it because I feel like my brain is in a fog.

Just when I'm trying to decide if I should stop and look back at the voice that's called my name more than once, two strong arms wrap around my torso and pick me up off the ground. I open my mouth to scream, but another man moves in front of me, his eyes find mine, and I recognize him.

"Legacy," I exhale.

"Fuck, babe. You were trying to run, weren't you?" he asks, a smile playing on his lips. "*Try* being the operative word. You were moving like a goddamn turtle in slow motion. It was kind of cute, though."

"Is Henli okay?" I ask.

His entire face softens at my question. I watch as Legacy lifts his hand and motions for the man behind me to release me.

When my feet touch the ground, my knees start to give out, my thighs trembling and shaking so hard I can't stay upright. He wraps his arms around my waist again. This time, he's holding me a bit differently, but still, he is holding me up so I don't fall flat on my face in the middle of the sidewalk.

"She's safe and sound. On lockdown but safe," he says in a murmur.

I don't ask him what lockdown means, mainly because I'm a bit scared, and also because it sounds scary and not at all safe, but that's not my business. I don't know much about this whole club-slash-group situation anyway.

“But you have given us a run for our money, babe,” he says.

“What?”

The man behind me chuckles. “First, we had to find where you were, then we had to find you because you got away. Babe, stressed us the fuck out.”

Turning my head, I wrinkle my nose. “I’m so sorry I worried all of you,” I snap.

He grins, not fazed by my snapping at all. “No worries at all, babe.”

Letting out a sigh, I decide not to argue anymore, because they obviously do not understand my annoyance. Shifting my attention back to Legacy, I sink my teeth into my bottom lip and start to ask about Rusk, but then stop. I don’t see him anywhere, which means the people who Dutch told me about still have him, and that worries me more than I want to admit.

“They’ve still got him. He’s next, babe. We know where he is, but we had to get you first.”

I don’t ask him what that means, but they don’t really let me either. So, there is that. I’m dragged toward a motorcycle and placed on the back of one, behind some guy I don’t know. He looks over his shoulder at me, his lips curving up into a grin.

“Name’s Hellcat. I’m the treasurer. Now, hold on, babe. I don’t wanna lose you.”

“What happened to Dutch?” I ask.

His smile widens, and he shakes his head once before his attention focuses on mine again. “You don’t need to worry about him.”

Then, without another word, the bikes are all revved, and as if they’re a well-oiled machine, they all move together forward down the street. Wrapping my arms around Hellcat’s waist, I hold on as he maneuvers the bike with the others toward Casa Grande—toward home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ROADKILL

“I’LL TELL YOU WHEN WE’RE BACK IN THE CLUBHOUSE. THIS place gives me the fucking creeps.”

Volt stands from Itch’s side and wraps his arm around my waist. I slip mine across his shoulders, and he helps me walk. I wasn’t able to see the house at all. I was completely unconscious when I was brought into the empty bedroom and tied to a chair.

I didn’t understand Legacy’s words about the house giving him the creeps, but I do now. Just one sweep of the room, and I completely understand the full-on fucking strange vibes. Because this place is not normal, not that I thought it would be normal. It *is* a mansion after all.

Slowly, Volt helps me walk down the stairs, but I can’t even focus on my steps. All I can see are the elaborate gigantic paintings that are framed on the wall. Five of them, to be exact. They take up the expanse of the entire wall. Floor to ceiling.

Paintings of girls.

Naked.

But not just naked. They’re dressed in BDSM wear, ball gags, chains, leather, all of it. That doesn’t creep me out too much. I can appreciate whips and chains and all that shit. It’s

the fact that every single painting has blood dripping from the eyes and down their cheeks.

Then I really take in the rest of the place. Everything has an element of blood to it. The carpets are red. The tables are black lacquer with red detailing. Everything is fucking red.

“What the fuck?” I whisper.

“This shit is fucking wild, yeah?”

Looking at him, I arch a brow. “Where is Cyrus?”

He shakes his head. “Weirdo that owns this place?” Volt asks. “Haven’t found him.”

Once we make it to the bottom of the staircase, I am forced to step over a body, then another. The men litter the floors. Blood circles around their heads. At least it matches the décor, if nothing else.

“What about the girl? The one Dutch made me come here for.”

“We got her,” he murmurs.

Volt’s voice is strained, as if there is something he doesn’t want to tell me. I open my mouth to ask him what the fuck is going on, but he continues to talk as we slowly make our way toward the door. I will be more than happy to leave this hellhole and wish I could sprint to the door, to the waiting truck, to Kiplyn.

“Dutch had Kiplyn,” he murmurs.

I falter and slip in someone’s blood but am thankfully able to catch myself. Looking down, I recognize one of the men who carried Itch into the bedroom and left him there beside me.

With a growl, I spit on his dead body. “Fucker,” I murmur. “Kiplyn?” I ask before shifting my attention to Volt and jerking my chin.

“Kiplyn,” he says. “We got her. She’s on lockdown in the clubhouse now.”

“Dutch?” I ask through gritted teeth.

His lips curve up into a wide smile, and he lets out a chuckle before he speaks. “He’s in the same holding cell as George.”

“Good,” I grunt.

I am satisfied enough with that answer. Together we start to move toward the door again. But once we reach the threshold, I don’t continue. I stop and turn back, looking over my shoulder. Taking in the whole house, I shake my head. This is a fucking hellhole, and I wonder how many nightmares have been played out here. How many lives were ruined.

“You didn’t find him, but is *anyone* looking for that cowardly piece of shit?”

“Legacy has Dice and Agony on the mission. They have been going through the house with a fine-toothed comb looking for him and anyone else.”

“Good.”

Nothing else is said. My attention is on walking and only walking, and then it’s on climbing into the truck, then on watching everything around me. I wonder if any of the neighbors have heard anything, but then I realize we’re so far away in this rich-ass estate, nobody will even realize what’s happening.

I’m resting, watching, taking everything in while Volt stands beside me, his gun now held loosely in his grasp.

“What did Dutch do to Kiplyn?” I ask, worried that she’s gone through even more abuse that was not deserved.

Volt is quiet, his focus straight ahead. “She was running away. When I say *running*, she was running through a neighborhood in Phoenix. She was scared, but as far as I know, he didn’t hurt her. She was having coffee with Henli when he pulled up to the café and just took her off the sidewalk.”

“I’ll kill him,” I grind out. “He deserves it just for taking her.”

Volt nods once. “Claims he did it to protect her from this creepy fuck.”

“I don’t buy it for one goddamn second,” I say.

“After seeing that house, after knowing he sent that young girl there as some kind of trade or some bullshit, neither do I. In fact, I don’t believe anything Dutch says at all, and I wonder if Duke over at the Hell’s Souls knows what the fuck is going on at all.”

“Half a mind to call,” Volt mumbles as Legacy and a couple of the other guys walk out of the creep show house carrying Itch, who looks like he’s a fucking corpse already, especially when the sunlight hits him.

They bring him to the back of the truck. I half expect them to throw him in the bed, but Volt opens the back truck door. The sound of the hinges squeaking makes my jaw clench. I can’t turn around. My body is stiff again, and I wonder if my muscles will ever relax from being tied to that goddamn chair.

Itch moans as they slide him into the back seat. I suck in a breath, letting it out as I lean back against the seat cushion.

“What happens to this house and all those dead bodies?” I ask, turning my attention to Legacy. He’s standing next to the car door, his hand leaning against the metal. He turns to look at the mansion, then shifts his attention to meet mine again.

“Burn it,” he says. “Once all our men are out, that is.”

I don’t ask him if he knows where Cyrus is. It doesn’t matter if he hasn’t found him yet. I’m going to make sure that I do because I have a feeling a man like Cyrus isn’t going to just disappear. This is a man with some serious control issues, and that’s coming from me, who has my own demons with control.

KIPLYN

Sitting at the small table, I lift my hand and run my fingers over the top. They stick and make a squeaking sound before I

stop. By the feel and the way this club is, I assume it's beer. Everything in this clubhouse and bar is covered in beer.

"They're back," someone shouts in the distance.

Lifting my head, I turn my attention to the door. It opens, the bright sunlight streaming in, blinding me for a moment, then the men start to filter in, covering the rays and glare. Then I see him.

My heart starts to beat hard and fast. It rises to my throat. I don't know what to do, where to go. What to say. So, I stay where I am. Nervous as hell and on the verge of tears. I don't know whether to slap him or kiss him. I don't know if I'm happy to see him or pissed off that I'm in this whole fucking predicament because of him.

I don't know how to feel.

And I hate that, because for so long, I've known exactly how to feel. The only sensation that has been flowing throughout my body has been fear. Now I'm feeling a million different things, and I don't know how to process them. Which is why I've kind of stuck with anger and hate toward Rusk.

But as he makes his way toward me, I wonder if I can hate him any longer. Because love and hate, they're so close that now I'm curious if I ever hated the asshole at all. Maybe I just loved all of him for a decade, nonstop. The reality of the situation being that I hate myself for it and it was never truly about him.

It was about me.

How narcissistic of me, too.

I hated him because I hated myself.

I'm the one who made the decisions I did, jumping into things in hopes he would beg me to come back. I got in over my head. I ruined my life. And while he hurt the absolute hell out of me, it's not his fault I ran to George.

My mind is spinning, my thoughts working overtime as I sit and stare at Rusk, who continues to move toward me. The

rest of the men are also walking around, hugging, slapping shoulders and backs, but he is focused on me and only me.

When he stops in front of me, I'm not sure what I expect, but I hold my breath as I wait for him to speak. He doesn't. Tipping my head back, I look up into his eyes, waiting for him. His full lips slowly curve up into a smile, and then he extends his arm, his hand palm up, wordlessly watching me—waiting.

My gaze shifts from his face to his palm. Hesitantly, I lift my trembling hand and slip my palm into his. Rusk's fingers curl around mine. They're strong and warm. He doesn't pull on me, tug me, or even make any other move.

He waits.

He's letting me make this decision. There is only one choice, though. It's him. It's always been him, and it will always be him, even if I want to hate him. Slowly, I rise, standing tall as I continue to look up at him, my head tipped backward, my gaze never leaving his.

Moving closer to him, I lift my free arm between us to slide my palm up the center of his torso and land on his chest. I keep it there. Feeling his heartbeat against my palm.

He doesn't say anything right away, still silently watching me, his eyes searching mine. Then he dips his chin, his gaze finally finding, holding, and focusing on mine before he jerks his chin and turns to the side.

My hand falls from his chest to my hip, swinging slightly from the release. His fingers grip my other hand tightly as he begins to walk with me trailing behind him. My feet move quickly to keep up with his stride. When he is in front of his bedroom door, I watch as he twists the knob and pushes it open.

Rusk doesn't pull me into the room, though. He releases his grasp on my hand as he crosses the threshold, then turns around to face me. His lips curve up into a small smile. It plays on his lips, and I don't know if I've ever seen him look so relaxed before. It's almost unnerving.

“I don’t know what happened to you, and I want to hear every fucking detail, because I am going to make sure that Dutch knows exactly how much in the wrong he is in this instance.”

Nodding, I clear my throat, then take one step inside, but not farther. I pause there, my gaze connected to his, never wavering. He dips his chin slightly, looking at me through his lashes, then he grins.

“I still hate you, Rusk,” I whisper.

“Yeah, figure that.”

Twisting my fingers in front of me, I suck in a breath before I continue. “But I’ve always loved you, Rusk, and between both of us being kidnapped, I realized that even though I’m angry with you. Even though you hurt the hell out of me all those years ago. Even though I ruined my life, I still love you.”

“Honey,” he rasps.

“No,” I say, holding my hand up and shaking my head. “Not yet,” I whisper. “I still love you,” I repeat. “I hate that I do. But I think I hate myself more than anything for ruining my whole life by going to and staying with George.”

“What are you telling me, Kiplyn?” he asks as he takes a step toward me, his hands balled into fists at his side.

Sliding my tongue across my bottom lip, I take a step toward him. But only one. “I’m saying that even though all of this terrifies me, even though I’m still not sure if I like you, I love you, and I can’t live a life without you, Rusk.”

He lets out a chuckle, then he closes the distance between us, finally tired of the space between our bodies. Reaching out his arm, he wraps his fingers around the side of my throat with one hand, then curls the other around my hip, his fingers squeezing me there.

“Pleased as fuck that you love me. I can work on the fact you don’t like me much as long as you’re here with me and not in... where was it? Upstate New York?” he asks, trying to hide his laughter.

I narrow my gaze on him, trying to look angry at him, but I can tell he doesn't believe anything about my expression. Instead of saying anything else, he dips his chin and touches his mouth to mine.

The kiss is long, hard, and wet. It's absolutely perfect. I don't just melt toward him. I melt into him. Hate? How could I ever think that about Rusk? I was completely naïve to think I could ever run to New York, that I could live by maple trees and be alone. That I could ever be away from him again.

Ten years was long enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ROADKILL

MY MOUTH IS ON HERS, MY HANDS WRAPPED AROUND HER. Whatever the fuck happened the past few days doesn't matter. All that matters is us. She is soft and warm, her body trembling beneath my touch, and I can't wait to have my mouth on every single part of her body.

Walking us backward a few steps, my mouth still devouring hers, I reach out and slam the door closed. Nibbling on her bottom lip, I lift my head, my eyes searching hers. Fuck me, but those coffee-colored eyes fucking own me.

Every piece of me.

Releasing my grasp on her neck and hip, I slide my hands down to her ass, grabbing two handfuls before picking her up. I squeeze her cheeks and give her a grin.

"Honey," I murmur.

She smiles down at me, her eyes searching mine. "Rusk?" she exhales.

"Yeah," I grunt. "Say my name just like that when you come."

She lets out a sweet laugh as I slowly climb onto the bed, my knees sinking into the mattress as I crawl toward the head of the bed, where I slowly lay her down until her head touches the pillow. Lowering my face, I touch my mouth to hers.

Kiplyn's lips part, accepting my tongue inside of her mouth, accepting me. I swirl my tongue, tasting her before I nibble on her bottom lip and begin to kiss down her throat.

Twisting my fingers in the hem of her oversized shirt, I glide it up her body, then over her head, leaving her in just her bra and pants.

My fingers curl inside the cup of her bra. I tug it to the side before I open my mouth wide and take her. Sucking her in deep, I flick my tongue against her nipple, my teeth sinking into her soft flesh.

Kiplyn's back arches as she pushes her breast closer toward my mouth with a whimper. Reaching between us, I flick the button of her jeans open, slide the zipper down, then tug them down as far as I can.

I lift my head and shift backward onto my knees, gripping her jeans again, wrenching them down the rest of the way, and tossing them to the floor. At the same time, Kiplyn lifts onto her elbows and releases the hooks of her bra.

Instead of climbing back up her body, I reach between her legs and grip her inner thighs, pushing them apart. She lets out a whimper again, but there is only one thing on my mind. Just one. And that is to taste her fucking pussy.

Shifting downward, I bury my face against her cunt. Flattening my tongue, I taste all of her. "Rusk," she exhales.

I smirk and lift my head. "Not yet, honey. I want to taste your cum."

I watch as her cheeks tint pink, then I return to where I was enjoying myself—between her legs. Swirling my tongue around her clit, I play with her there, over and over, tasting, taunting. Then I slip two fingers inside of her.

Kiplyn's fingers grip my shoulders, her nails scoring them as she lifts her hips, silently begging for more. I give her what she wants. Curling my fingers inside of her and making a come-hither motion while my mouth and tongue focus on her clit.

When her legs begin to tremble, I know she is close. Her panting breaths become louder and louder, filling the space of the room. Bouncing off the walls and swirling all around us.

“Oh God,” she whimpers. “Oh God.”

And then it happens.

It’s not a hard and fast release. It’s slow and rolls through her entire body. Her hands shift to my hair, where she grabs a handful, pulling my face even closer to her body as her hips start to jerk and buck against my tongue and hand.

When I hear my name roll off her tongue, it’s the sweetest gasp. It’s better than her whimpering, breathing, or moaning my name. It’s fucking perfect. I taste every single ounce of her, not stopping until she is completely boneless.

Only then do I lift my head and find her eyes. She is a sight. Flushed cheeks, flared nostrils, and her eyes are closed. She is outstandingly beautiful, and she is going to be breathtaking when I’m inside of her.

I take my clothes off and throw them to the floor to meet with hers somewhere, probably sitting in a pile of beer somewhere. I don’t know, and I don’t give a fuck. Right here, right now, it is only me and Kiplyn.

I climb up her body and allow my chest to slide against her entire body, feeling every fucking inch of her soft skin. Her legs widen, accepting my hips between them. Adjusting myself, I align my cock with her center.

With my eyes on hers, I sink inside of her—slowly, to the root.

I close my eyes and let out a sigh as I feel her cunt envelop me. Home. Fucking home. That is where I am. When her cool palms press against my cheeks, my eyes pop open and find hers immediately.

“Rusk,” she exhales.

Fuck me, but she sounds good when she exhales my name like that. If I never heard another sound in the entire world, I would be fine. Dipping my chin, I touch my mouth to hers.

Her hands slide down my cheeks to my biceps, and her fingers curl around them.

Lifting my head, I look into her brown orbs as I pull out of her slightly, then sink back inside. Then pull out, sink down inside of her—over and over. Her nails dig into my skin, and that only spurs me on.

“Harder,” she begs.

With a growl, I do exactly as she demands. I fuck her harder. Lifting my hand, I wrap my fingers around the side of her throat, my eyes never leaving hers. My hips roll, slam against her, and I grind my pelvis against her clit with each downstroke.

When it happens, her pussy flutters around my dick before she lets out a cry. Her entire body stiffens, and she squeezes me so fucking tightly that my orgasm is sucked out of me, like a fucking vacuum.

Slamming my mouth against hers, I kiss her hard as my balls empty inside of her, my cock pulsing and twitching.

KIPLYN

I am overthinking this.

I’m sure that I am, but I can’t help it. Rusk wraps his arms around me, pulling me against his side, but I can’t stop thinking. About him. About me. About the past. About us. About the future.

About.

About.

About.

All of it over and over on repeat.

“You want to tell me what that motherfucker did to you?” he asks, his voice deep and rough.

I think about avoiding this as much as I’m avoiding the overthinking in my mind. His arm muscles flex around me as

he gently shakes me, and I know he wants an answer. He's being nice about this, not bossy or demanding. He's being gentle, but I know it won't last.

"He didn't hurt me," I whisper.

He slides his hand up the center of my back, tangling his fingers in my hair before he tugs my head back slightly. I open my eyes and look up at him. His dark gaze searches mine, and I don't know what he's looking for, but he must find it before he releases his grasp.

"What did he do?"

Shrugging a shoulder, I lay my head on his chest again as I use my fingertip to trace the tattoos there. I inhale a deep breath, then let it out slowly before I start to tell him about my few hours with Dutch. It wasn't long, because I got the hell out there as soon as I possibly could.

"And that's how Legacy and the other guys found me, running."

"I'm going to kill him," he growls.

Lifting my head, I look up at him, my eyes searching his, and I decide to ask him what happened to him in an attempt to change the subject. I'm not sure I should have even asked, because I watch as a dark shadow passes across his gaze.

"It doesn't matter what happened," he murmurs.

Shaking my head once, I push up a bit more. "Yes, it does. If you want this relationship to be open, to be real, we have to talk to one another. We didn't do that last time. We were living completely different lives, and I don't want to do that again."

"I was given something to put me out. Something from a needle. Then I was taken into a room and tied to a chair. I was fed a sandwich and threatened over and over. I don't know what he was actually going to do with me, but I knew that Legacy was on his way."

My heart aches more with each word he says. Climbing across his lap, I straddle his hips and place my palms against

his chest as I look down at him. “That man is evil,” I whisper. “Pure evil.”

“He is,” he agrees. “I saw it in his eyes. He is fucking soulless.”

I don’t stop at that, though. Because I can’t. Because I have to make sure that Rusk knows exactly how I feel about him and the situation. Plus, there’s the fact that I’m terrified it will all happen again.

“And he’s someone I don’t think you should associate with,” I murmur. “I don’t understand why he did all of that if you were doing a favor for Dutch. I’m so confused. You didn’t do anything to him, yet he took you and did all of that.”

He reaches out, wrapping his fingers around my hips as he looks up at me. “There is nothing for you to be confused about, because there is nothing for you to worry about. I got this, honey. I’ll always have this.”

He doesn’t speak another word. His fingers grip my hips, and he shifts me upward slightly until I feel his cock against my center. Slowly, I sink down along his length and take him inside of me. I don’t know how he’s already ready to go again. As I start to rock back and forth, my body instantly craves more.

Leaning forward, I look down at him as I begin to move up and down along his length. His fingers grip my hips hard, then one of his hands slides across my flesh until I feel his thumb press against my clit.

“Rusk,” I whimper.

“Fuck me, honey.”

His words are all I need. My entire body breaks out into a shiver. It slides throughout my entire being, and I do exactly as he asks. I fuck him. And it’s sensual, beautiful, and full of ecstasy all at the same time.

All my past experiences, the past altogether completely melts away. This man, this moment, everything about him and us, it becomes everything. The present is all that matters. The present and the future are all I can see. The past has

completely washed away, and so do the hate, the anger, the hurt.

It's all nothing but a faded memory.

It's probably the stupidest thing I could let happen. Forgiveness, and also allowing the past to disappear from my memory banks, but I am not the girl from a decade ago, and I don't think Rusk is the man from back then either. If I don't forgive and forget, I will constantly be in a state of anger and hurt, which will never allow us to move forward.

I have to forgive myself, and in turn, I must also forgive him.

Forgiving myself is the hardest of the two.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ROADKILL

DUTCH STARES BACK AT ME, HIS EYES NARROWED. LEGACY stands behind me, a phone held out and on speaker. He's got Raul on the other end. Raul, who is still in jail but remains the official leader of the Dead Phoenix, and the man is pissed the fuck off right now.

“You want to explain to me why you kidnapped one of their claimed women, but before that, you sent one of their men on some bullshit test of an errand?” he shouts, the sound pouring out of the phone and bouncing off the walls around us.

My attention is focused on Dutch and only Dutch. His gaze flicks between me and Legacy as Raul's voice pours out through the speaker. He's been caught, and it's clear as shit that he didn't anticipate this.

“They were testing me. I needed to get Piper back, and this was the only way I could think of. He wanted product, and I wanted her back. I didn't expect it to go that way. I didn't think he wanted to keep her.”

Silence.

When Raul's voice sounds again, it's chilling. “You gave that man Piper?”

Dutch's eyes widen. He shrinks back, knowing he made a huge fucking mistake. I can't help but smile at the whole encounter. The whole situation should have never happened,

and it's clear to me that if Raul were here, it wouldn't have, and I have a feeling the rest of his group have no idea what transpired either.

Dutch came across as being someone who wanted to work with us and wouldn't put our club in the mix of the immoral part of their business, but it's apparent that he fucked up—big time. He stuck us right in the goddamn middle without a single fuck given.

“It was time, Raul,” Dutch rasps.

His voice is a whisper, and he sounds like he means it but doesn't want to say it for fear Raul is going to be even angrier, and he is absolutely correct in his thoughts. Because Raul isn't just pissed off, he isn't just angry... he is *done*.

“Did you get her back?” Raul asks.

“I did, yes,” Legacy says, interjecting for the first time since this conversation started.

There is another moment of silence, and I wait for Raul to give his orders. As much as I want to kill Dutch right now, I can't, and neither can Legacy. We are still in contract with the Dead Phoenix.

What we have is not a contract with Dutch himself but the whole group. We can't kill someone in their organization just because he's a dirtbag—even though we really want to, all of us, especially me.

“You've overstepped, Dutch, and as much as I want to let the Devil's Hellions end you right here and now, death would be far too lenient,” Raul begins. “They're going to call in our own people, who will deal with you through my instruction. As for Piper,” he begins, “she stays with Legacy and his men. You'll go to your grave knowing that.”

Legacy clears his throat but doesn't ask what the fuck we're supposed to do with a girl who is barely eighteen and has been through, no doubt, some horrific shit at the hands of Cyrus. Dutch calls out, screams for mercy, but Raul gives zero fucks.

Legacy and I walk out of the room with Raul still on the line. “What do you want me to do with her? We do not run a home for girls here, man,” Legacy murmurs.

Raul doesn't say anything immediately. I can tell he's probably a mixture of thinking about what to do with her and so fucking angry that he wants to reach through the phone and strangle Dutch himself, which I would be okay with.

“Piper is my sister,” he announces. I suck in a breath.

I don't know exactly what Cyrus did to her, but it was clear to me the man is unhinged, and considering his artwork, he likely did some BDSM sex shit with her. Something that I'm sure Raul knows he's into, and that is why he's so pissed off. As he should be. What the actual fuck was Dutch thinking?

“I want Cyrus brought to justice. I don't want to know the details of what he did, because I would probably extend my sentence here if I did. But I want him taken care of.”

That doesn't answer shit about Piper, but he's not finished. My eyes widen when he speaks the next few words. I cannot believe this is real fucking life. The whole thing seems like a movie, but then again, the way Cyrus took and kept me felt like a movie, too.

“Once Cyrus is dealt with, I want her with one of your men. The highest one who isn't already attached. A good faith show, and an apology for what Dutch put all of you through. I shouldn't have trusted him.”

Legacy looks at me, but I know he isn't asking my permission. He's already made his decision, and I know that when he tells Raul he'll take care of Cyrus and that Piper will be safe with us.

“Cyrus will be found and dealt with. Piper will be safe here. We'll get her working, but nobody will touch a hair on her head,” Legacy announces. I wonder if he can make such a promise.

Although she isn't for me, Piper is a pretty, young thing, and this club is full of men who want nothing more than a

pretty, young thing. I don't think Legacy can guarantee shit when it comes to her, the men, and the future.

"You're one in a million," Raul murmurs. "I'll have a couple men gather Dutch. Thank you for coming to me with this first."

"Always," Legacy says.

The call is ended before he turns to me. "Cyrus is yours. Dutch is the Dead Phoenix's hands now," he states.

"I'm good with that."

"Church in thirty."

Without another word, he turns and walks away from me. I stay where I am, wondering what the fuck is going to happen next. How in the hell are we going to find Cyrus, and where in the fuck am I going to live with Kiplyn? Because I'll be damned if I rent a room with her friend.

KIPLYN

"I'm okay, I swear," I promise.

"You better be. That scared the absolute shit out of me. I haven't been able to concentrate. You know I almost bleached Mrs. Snyder's hair? She would have lost her shit on me. I'm glad you're okay, though," Reese finally says.

"I'm sure my job is all but lost now. Disappearing twice in a three-month period? Yeah, I'm done for."

"Probably, but it was crap work, anyway. I feel like you should be working on a new career. This is the perfect opportunity," Reese says.

And just like that, we're good. I don't know why this surprises me, that she lets it go that I vanished. She did tell me that Henli told her what happened. It should surprise me that Henli did that for me and for Reese, but it doesn't. I feel like she is just good people all-around.

"It is, but I don't know what to do," I admit.

“Shit, get your phone out and Google or something. I fell into hair. I love it, but it’s not for everyone.”

Humming, I think about all the careers out in the world. There are a lot. But I have to remember that I’m thirty-two years old and broke. I can’t just throw caution to the wind and decide on some career that requires ten years of schooling.

“I need to do something with a quick degree,” I say. “And where I can work in Casa Grande.”

“Are you admitting you’re staying?” she asks.

I think about the last few hours with Rusk. I think about his fingers on my body, the way he touched me, kissed me, and the sensation of him being inside of me. I think about the fact that I forgave him.

“I’m staying,” I whisper.

“No more Upstate New York in the snow and maple trees?” she asks.

I let out a giggle then end the call with her, promising to come home soon. I haven’t unpacked one bag from my move in with her. We haven’t even shared a meal together as roommates. I was so excited for what was to come, and none of it has actually happened yet.

Before I can even set my phone down, it rings in my hand. I look at the screen and smile at the sight of my realtor’s name there. Sliding my thumb across, I answer it as quickly as I can, trembling slightly with excited anticipation.

“Kiplyn, we got an offer,” she cries.

I don’t say a single word in response. I’m both equally shocked and excited by her words. An offer. The little house is going to be gone, but at the same time, the reason I put it up for sale in the first place is now null and void.

“Is it a good one?” I finally ask.

She says yes, then goes over the details of the offer with me and asks if I would like to counter or accept, but before she does, she does offer a few suggestions. “Can I think about it?” I ask.

“I would love an answer by this evening, if possible? You can just text me.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Ending the call, I shove my phone into my back pocket and head downstairs. I’m wearing a pair of jeans that Henli let me borrow and one of Rusk’s T-shirts. I do need to head home today, if for nothing else than to be able to wear my own clothes. But Reese is right. This is the time to think about my future.

The bar is empty when I step into the room. There are no men loitering around. No women either. I don’t think I’ve ever been here before when it’s been this quiet. I don’t know where Rusk is or what he’s doing. He said he would come back to the room as soon as he handled some things, but it’s been a few hours, and he hasn’t returned.

I’ve already showered and picked up his bedroom. Which took me quite a while to do considering he’s kind of messy. But now I’m hungry, thirsty, and ready to go home. Just when I find the kitchen, I step inside and am surprised to see Henli and another woman leaning against the counter sipping cups of coffee.

“You’re awake,” Henli cries.

The other woman says nothing. She continues to drink her coffee. I recognize her, but I don’t know her name. I start to ask her who she is when Henli continues to speak.

“Do you want some coffee? I think there are some muffins over here still,” she says as she lifts her hand and points to the box on the kitchen countertop.

“Coffee would be nice,” I say with a smile as I walk toward the pink bakery box.

The woman reaches for the box and hands it over to me.

“Thanks,” I say, giving her a smile. “My name’s Kiplyn,” I offer.

She looks down at the box, then lifts her gaze up to meet mine. “They call me Thunder,” she says with a small smile.

I open my mouth to ask her why but decide against it and snap my lips closed before I part them again to tell her it's nice to meet her, but she continues to speak before I can get anything out.

"I'm one of the sweet butts," she offers. I snap my lips closed, pressing them together as I stare at her.

I don't know what to say, what to think, what to do, so I just stare at her. She smiles then lets out a nervous laugh, and I force myself to rip my gaze away from her. Walking to the small bistro table in the corner, I place the box of muffins on the tabletop before I sink down into the seat of the chair.

"There are a lot of different women who make this club work," she begins.

I continue to stare at the bakery box, wondering if I want to hear any of this at all. I don't like the sound of her name in the slightest, and I'm pretty sure I can guess what she means by it. Which means... Rusk.... *Rusk* and her. I don't want to know.

She doesn't get the hint, though. She continues to speak, and with every word, I hate myself for forgiving him and continuing to love him.

"Sweet butts are here for the purpose of being with the men in the club. It's a mutual thing. We're not forced to be here or anything. I had a bad life at home, the club took me in, and in exchange for protection, a place to live, and food, I do what they want. But trust me, they're always really good to me."

I want to throw up right here and now.

"Then there are Mamas. They usually run the clubhouse, cleaning, cooking, taking care of day-to-day things. Sometimes, they have sex with the men, too, sometimes they don't. We don't have one right now, so the prospects have been doing all that stuff."

"Okay," I whisper when she doesn't continue. Henli clears her throat, but the pink box in front of me has all my attention.

“Then there are old ladies, which is what you and Henli are. You are in the life, you’re their women, you’re their wife as far as the club is concerned, and in Henli’s case, she’s Legacy’s legal wife, too.”

Finally, I tear my eyes away from the box and stare at her. I cannot believe she’s just standing there casually giving me a lesson on all things biker babe. I want to scream, I want to cry, I want to run away to New York. I was stupid to just forgive him and decide that this was going to be such a beautiful life.

This is not beautiful, no matter what he claims. I look at Henli and wonder what the hell she’s doing here, too.

“But then there are citizen wives, and those are wives that are hidden from the club life.”

“That one I knew,” I whisper.

Only because that’s what I was, and Rusk no doubt loved that. He had his women here, and he had me. Puts a cramp in your style when your woman knows about all the ones here who are free and easy.

“Anyway, I just wanted to let you know. I know sometimes, these guys don’t really explain the life,” she says with a shrug as she pushes off the counter. I watch silently as she walks out of the kitchen, leaving me and Henli alone.

Henli sinks down across from me and slides a coffee cup in my direction. “I think she’s trying to be nice. Helpful even. But nobody wants to sit around and discuss that stuff,” she says softly.

“It’s really hard for me to think about all that stuff. It makes me want to run far away from here,” I admit.

I don’t know why I’m admitting it, but here I am. “If I’m being honest?” Henli says. “Me too.”

And with that, nothing more is said. Nothing more needs to be said. We’re two women in love with two men, and we don’t like a single thing about that part of their lives. Even if Rusk never even looks at another woman for the rest of our lives, I don’t think I will ever be comfortable with any of this stuff here.

“I don’t like it, but I trust my husband,” Henli whispers.

I don’t tell her that it’s hard for me to trust any one person. I’ve never had anyone in my life who I could trust, and while I’m forgiving Rusk, while I’m trying to move forward, that doesn’t mean I am going to blindly trust another human... ever.

With that, I text my realtor and accept the offer, then I text Reese and ask her to pick me up here.

I need to breathe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ROADKILL

“SO, EVENTUALLY, WE’LL NEED TO FIGURE OUT WHICH OFFICER who is not attached will claim Piper. It’s going to unify the Dead Phoenix and us in a way we could never do otherwise. Raul is entrusting his sister to us, and we need to make good on that,” Legacy announces.

All the men share glances between one another, then Itch stands up. I look at him, surprised he’s on his feet. He’s still totally fucked-up from the beating he got. I’m surprised he’s even here today. His face is all fucked-up, his insides a mashed-up disaster.

The doctor said he is lucky to be alive, but they only kept him for twenty-four hours, ran all the tests, and told him to go home and rest. He was released just this morning.

Itch is our road captain now, but he doesn’t add much to church. He is a go-with-the-flow kind of guy. He is quiet, loves working on the cars, and just does his own thing, so I don’t understand why the fuck he’s standing up right now.

“I claim Piper.”

If a fucking pin dropped, you would without a doubt hear it. Itch’s declaration has all of us staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the motherfucker. This is not a man who stands up and announces anything much at all, and now he’s saying he wants this woman for himself.

“Brother, you don’t have to. We can figure it out later,” Legacy murmurs.

“No,” Itch states. “She’s mine.”

Legacy looks at me. I raise my brows and give him a shrug. He clears his throat, and with the slam of his gavel, he declares that Piper is Itch’s old lady and nobody better fucking touch her—ever.

That is that.

Piper is Itch’s.

“Now, on to Cyrus. I don’t know his last name or anything about him, but we have to find him,” Legacy says. “We find him, we end him, and Piper stays.”

“We’ll find him,” Itch announces.

I believe him. He is for whatever reason determined to have this girl for himself. Although it should, he was there with her. She saw him at his worst and tried to help. She did what she could for him in that room, under surveillance. They likely formed a bond, and if anyone understands bonds, it’s me and Legacy.

“Yeah, we will,” Legacy murmurs. “Dead Phoenix are coming to pick up Dutch. They’ll deal with him their way. We’ll give them that respect, because that is what we would want as well.”

Everyone bobs their heads up and down a few times before we get back to business. There isn’t much to discuss. It’s not a regular meeting, but when the other shit is done, I stand up and clear my throat to get their attention.

“I just want to thank everyone for getting me out, but most importantly for finding and protecting Kiplyn,” I say. “I appreciate it.”

The men dip their chins. Thanks and apologies are about the same in our world. Hardly given, uncomfortably received. Legacy ends church, and that is that. Itch stays where he is seated. I walk over to him and sink down beside him.

“What is your plan?” I ask.

He looks at me, his swollen fucked-up face, and then his lips curve up into a smile. “We’re gonna talk to Piper. We’ll figure out everything we need to figure out about him, then we’ll hunt that fucker down.”

“Never been one for detective work, but I can’t deny I’m a bit excited about this,” I say with a chuckle.

“Brother, I am goddamn ecstatic.”

Together we walk out of the room, slowly. Making our way up to the bar. I call over the prospect and ask for a couple of beers. The other men are drinking, playing pool, and then the music gets turned up.

Eventually, the sweet butts start making their way out of the back room, and that’s when we finally all relax. We’re wound up. Ready to find this fucking asshole and end him. But we can’t start right this second. Besides, he won’t get far. The underworld isn’t as big as some make it out to be.

Thunder sidles up next to me, giving me a smile. “I met your old lady today,” she purrs.

Raising a brow, I lift my beer to my lips. “Yeah? And?”

She wrinkles her nose. I’ve always liked Thunder. She’s seemed like a decent girl, good lay, and she knows her place, but her talking to Kiplyn has me wondering what the fuck she’s up to. She knows the rules, and those rules include sweet butt’s not communicating with old ladies.

“I like her a lot. She seems sweet, although she’s a bit uptight.”

Standing, I take a step backward from her. I think about telling her that she is out of fucking line but decide against it. Ignoring her, I walk away and head to my room, where my woman should be. But I know before I even walk inside that she’s gone.

Leaving my bedroom door open, I look around the empty room and smile. She cleaned.

It should surprise me, but it doesn’t. She’s been through hell, again. She’s exhausted and probably wanted to go home

and get some clean clothes on. I was away longer than I expected. I know she has a life she is probably ready to get back to.

“Hey, Roadkill,” a voice calls out from behind me.

Turning around, I am surprised to see it’s Henli. She’s smiling as she watches me for a moment. “Hey, babe. You good?” I ask.

She nods, sinking her teeth into her bottom lip before she continues. “I’m glad you’re okay. I’m glad Kiplyn’s okay,” she murmurs.

“Me too.”

“I really like Kiplyn,” she needlessly says.

I nod, waiting for her real fucking reason for standing across the hallway from my room. Then she sucks in a breath, her gaze finding mine.

“She called her friend to come and get her. I don’t know. Thunder talked to her and tried to explain club life. I was there, and I don’t think she liked it all that much,” she says, wrinkling her nose.

“I would guess she wouldn’t like learning about sweet butt’s from an actual sweet butt. I knew something was up,” I say, murmuring my last few words.

“I’m sorry. We talked. I tried to make it better,” she says.

My lips twitch into a smile. Henli is a great old lady, and I know she loves the fuck out of Legacy. I hope Kiplyn and I get there soon. I want all this fucking shit to die down and show Kiplyn that life with me can be really fucking good—I’m going to prove it to her.

KIPLYN

Reese watches me as I stroll out of the bedroom, freshly showered and changed into a pair of leggings and an oversized tank top. She presses her lips together, then releases them as I sink down in the chair across from her. She’s lounging on the

sofa, sucking through a metal straw as she watches reality television.

As soon as my butt hits the cushion, she pauses her show and pushes up to a cross-legged position, facing me, with a smile on her face. I'm not quite sure what she's going to say, but I can tell she has something on her mind and her words are at the tip of her tongue, ready to go.

"The kidnapping thing was scary as hell. I mean, it was for me, so I'm sure it was traumatizing for you," she begins.

"It was," I say, the two words coming out slowly.

She leans toward me slightly, her smile playing on her lips. Then she finally speaks again. "Tell me everything," she exhales. "I want to hear every second of it. I know you were with him."

I think about denying it, but at the same time, Rusk and I are together now, so that would be dumb. Leaning back in the chair, I let out a heavy sigh before my gaze finds hers. "I love him."

"No shit," she scoffs. "Tell me something else."

"That place you picked me up from?"

"Their cool hangout?" she asks.

"Clubhouse," I correct.

She lets out a sigh, almost as if she is swoony over the whole thing. I roll my eyes then shake my head a couple of times. "Don't get all excited about it," I grunt. "It's not a glamorous place to hang out."

"Tell me everything, after you give me all the sex details."

Unable to control myself, I laugh. Reese joins me, and before we realize what's happened, we're full-on giggling and can't contain ourselves. When I'm able to catch my breath, I let out a sigh.

"Okay, I'll tell you everything."

And I do.

At least, I tell her as much as I can. There is no way I'm going to divulge the fact that Rusk killed George. Nobody else can know about that, ever. But I do talk to her about Rusk, about the club, and what that Thunder woman told me. She is grossed out as much as I am about the sweet butt thing, but then I watch as something goes off inside of her head.

"Kiplyn," she whispers.

"That look on your face. It kind of scares me."

She laughs then shrugs a shoulder. "I'd like to see it for myself, you know. If they're having a party, can you bring me?"

"I have no idea what the parties are like," I admit. "When we dated the first time, I wasn't part of that part of Rusk's life."

Reese shakes her head. "I can take it, babe," she announces. "I've always wanted to know what happens down there. I heard stories and rumors over the years, but I want to experience it, just once before I die."

"You are crazy as hell," I point out.

She laughs. "Yeah, but you're in love with one of them. I just want to have a little fun."

Reese is right. I am in love with one of those men. I'm in love with a man who killed my ex-husband for violating me and beating me up. I'm in love with a man who is without a doubt a criminal in more than just one way.

But I'm in love with him.

I always have been, and I need to give that to myself. He is the only person on earth who has ever made me happy. He was my yesterday, and he will be my forever.

Opening my mouth, I start to tell her that I'll ask Rusk when there is a party she can go to when there is a knock on the door.

Reese frowns before she stands and walks over to the door.

My heart starts to race at the thought of danger. I know it's not Dutch, but I also know they haven't found the person who took Rusk. I don't think I'm in danger at all, but there will always be that little part of me that is scared to death of something happening. Of someone showing up.

Reese opens the door, her spine straight, then she speaks, and when she does, her words sound funny.

"Oh my, come on in," Reese breathes as she steps to the side.

I don't know who I expect to walk through that door, but for some reason, it isn't Rusk. But that is exactly who makes his way toward me. His gaze is focused, his stride long and with purpose, and then, without a word, he picks me up into his arms.

"Where's your room?" he finally asks.

"Down the hall, last door to the left."

His boots stomp through the house. I hear Reese's voice call out before my bedroom door closes.

"I'll put on my noise-canceling headphones."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ROADKILL

THE HOUSE IS CUTE. TOO BAD SHE WON'T BE STAYING HERE longer than a few weeks. Setting her down on the edge of the bed, I glance around quickly before I stand up straight. The room is littered with boxes. I almost forgot that she didn't even spend a few minutes in her new place when she moved her things in.

"Don't get comfortable here," I announce.

She blinks at me, her eyes wide as she stares, then she licks her lips before she speaks. "What?" she asks with an exhaled sigh.

"Don't get comfortable," I repeat, arching a brow. She rolls her eyes to the ceiling, waiting for me to continue. "You're moving in with me, honey. As soon as we find a place."

She opens her mouth to argue with me about it, but I shake my head once before she snaps her lips shut. I do watch as she narrows her gaze at me, which causes my lips to twitch into a smile. Clearing my throat, I look from left to right, then at her again.

"You're going to move in with me, Kiplyn. We've spent far too many years apart not to continue forward."

"But right now?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

Nodding, I cross my arms over my chest and tip my chin down, looking into her eyes. “Yeah, honey, now. I know where I want you. That’s right beside me—always.”

“Why are you so sweet?”

“Sweet?” I ask. “Nothing about me is fucking sweet, babe. What I am is a man who knows what a good thing he has and isn’t about to fuck around dating and playing games. We’re buyin’ a fuckin’ house, and we’re movin’ in as soon as humanly fucking possible.”

She doesn’t answer me or respond immediately. Instead, she tilts her chin back, her eyes looking up at me, her lips parted widely, and she lets out a whimper.

“You didn’t just say that?”

“I did.”

Her eyes widen before she rises to her feet. She’s so cute trying to look bigger than she is. It doesn’t work. Not only is she almost a whole fucking foot shorter than me, but she also ends up looking fucking adorable, and I want to fuck her until she’s screaming my name.

“You are unbelievable. After everything, Rusk, you’re just going to announce what we are and aren’t doing solely because you are the man in charge, and I don’t get a say in anything.”

Fuck, this woman.

Fuck.

Dropping my hands from my chest, I lift my arms and cup her cheeks, slowly allowing myself to move closer to her until my forehead presses against hers. She closes her eyes immediately at the touch.

“It’s just you, Kiplyn. Always been, always will be. I’m ready to start this life. Right fucking now.”

“Okay,” she exhales. “Okay.”

Shifting my mouth, I touch it to the side of her ear. “I love you, Kiplyn. I always have.”

“I’m still scared,” she whispers.

Nodding, I slide my nose along her cheek. “Yeah, I know. Can’t make that feeling go away immediately. We just need to give ourselves some time. You do that for me, honey? Give me some time?”

“And in that, you want me to move in with you? Not date, just be together?”

I lift my head and look into her eyes, searching those beautiful golden orbs I’ve dreamed about over and over throughout the years. “Fuck dating, honey. Fuck it all.”

Without another word, I slam my mouth against hers. She lifts her hands between us, her fingers gripping my shirt as she pulls me even closer to her. Slipping my tongue into her mouth, I taste her.

Only thing that tastes better than her mouth is her pussy.

I nibble her bottom lip before I break the kiss, looking down at her as she shifts her gaze up to me through her lashes. Fucking *fuck*, she is downright fucking perfect. Not sure how I spent a decade pretending she didn’t exist.

“So, that a yes?” I ask.

“Rusk,” she whispers.

I’m giving her the moment to agree to me, to say yes, but I’m not really fucking asking. She is moving in with me. She is my woman. She is my old lady. Soon, she’ll be my wife, and after that, she will without a doubt be the mother of my children. However many she wants.

She sighs. “Yes, of course. Why the hell not.”

Laughing, I don’t ask her what she means by any of that, because honestly, I don’t give a fuck. She said yes. I don’t have to talk her into anything else. All I have to do now is make sure life is goddamn perfect for her, and I’ll do that until my last breath.

I reach for the waistband of her leggings and wrench them down as far as they’ll go. Shifting forward, I brush my lips across hers, then press them against her ear again. We’re going

to try something different. I don't know if she can take it or not, but I hope to fuck she can.

“Turn around.”

She lifts her hands, her fingers gripping my cheeks before she shifts her head backward slightly, her eyes focusing on mine. But I don't let her speak. Instead, I lift my hand and wrap my fingers around the front of her throat, careful not to squeeze her there. The last thing I want to do is hurt her in any way or scare her.

“If you don't like something, just tell me. I'll stop.”

Her lips curve up into a smile. It's soft and pretty, just like she is. She doesn't say anything. Instead, she turns around, looking back at me from over her shoulder, and like the fucking perfect woman she is, she bends over, her palms flat on the mattress, her ass in the goddamn air.

KIPLYN

Rusk wrenches my leggings down a little more. His fingers grip my hips before he tugs them back slightly. I feel his jean-clad pelvis against my ass. The denim fabric rough against my skin. One of his hands slides across my stomach before his palm cups my pussy.

“Rusk,” I exhale.

Spreading my legs apart a little more, he uses two fingers and slides them through my folds before he circles my clit. My thighs shake. My knees tremble before I push my hips back slightly. I need more. Two fingers slip inside of me, curling as his palm firmly presses against my clit.

My hips buck against him, moving closer with each roll of my hips to a climax. I suck in a breath, my head falling forward, my fingers gripping the sheets as my body moves and takes. The sensation consumes me, and then I come.

Trembling, my legs almost give out. But before they do, I feel Rusk against my center. He doesn't move slowly but instead slides inside of me with one thrust. One of his hands

leaves my hip and slides up the center of my spine before grasping my hair in his fingers, then he tugs my head back.

I cry out, my eyes closing for a moment before they open. He bends over my back, his gaze focused on mine as he starts to slowly move in and out of me. He's sweet in his movements. They aren't hard or fast. They are even and smooth.

But as the seconds turn to minutes, those movements become jerky and harder with each stroke. My belly is warm, sending tingling down between my legs. My breasts feel heavy, and I am so close, but not close enough.

Slipping one of my hands between my legs, I touch my clit.

"Fuck," Rusk growls. "Make yourself come, honey. Let me feel that sweet cunt squeeze the hell out of me."

His words send me over the edge. Two swirls of my fingers, and I come. The sensation slides throughout my body like a warm hug. My thighs tremble even more, my knees knock together, and I almost fall. Rusk's arm slides around my waist, holding me up.

His face is still hovering above mine, his gaze searching mine before he lowers his head, his lips touching my forehead. His cock twitches inside of me. I can feel my pussy pulsing around him.

He releases my hair, then folds over my back, his chest pressing against me, his lips against my ear before he speaks. When he does, a sensation of thrill and pain slices through me simultaneously.

"You're the best I ever had, honey," he murmurs.

I'm not sure how his words make me feel, but I decide to brush them off. I can't think about what they mean, the other women, or any of that. He's here with me right now, and that's all I am going to focus on.

He slips out of me, and I hear his belt clang and his denim rustle as he fixes his clothes behind me. I can't move, though. My eyes are closed, my lips pulled up into a small smile. I

stare at the bedding. The white background with little pink and yellow flowers has me mesmerized.

When he sinks down on the bed next to me, he doesn't say anything. Instead, he wraps his arms around me and hauls me against him, my ass sinking against his thigh. Wrapping my arms around his shoulders, I look up into his eyes.

"I'm going to get stuff all over your jeans," I whisper.

Before I realize what's happening, his hand slips between my legs and his fingers slide through my sensitive center. They dip inside of me and stay right there. Tilting my head back slightly, I let out a sigh as I look up at him.

"I don't give a fuck, honey. I love the way my cum feels inside of you."

"Rusk," I exhale.

He hums, then continues to move his fingers in and out, swirling them around my clit before he slips them inside of me again. My eyes roll to the back of my head. I start to pant as my hips roll and shift, silently begging for more.

My pussy is so sensitive, this feels like too much, and at the same time, the last thing I want him to do is stop. Thankfully, he doesn't, and his fingers continue until my hips start to move and search for release from the throbbing ache between my legs.

Rusk shifts his face to my neck. His lips touch me there, his breath heavy against the side of my throat as his fingers work between my legs. Then it happens. The orgasm slowly rolls through me like a warm coffee on a cold day. Soothing and sexy all at the same time.

I gasp, gripping his shoulders tightly as my entire body stiffens. He chuckles, nipping my neck gently before he leans back, his fingers buried inside of me, his eyes focused on me, his lids lowered.

"Best," he says, "I ever had."

He's repeating his earlier statement, and I know he's trying to be nice, but I don't like it. So, instead of stuffing that feeling

down, I decide I need to say something. I have to be a better version of the girl I once was and the woman I became. This is about change as much as it is about growth and love.

“I don’t like thinking about the others you had,” I admit.

His eyes widen, then his lips curve up before he lets out a chuckle. He slips his fingers from inside of me, and I don’t know what he’s doing, but what does happen, I do not expect. He lifts his hand, his fingers wet from me, then places them against my lips. He slides them across my lips as if he’s applying lipstick. I inhale a sharp breath, unsure of what to do.

“Suck.”

He slips his fingers inside my mouth, and I do as he demands. I suck his fingers. His eyes watch, and his nostrils flare.

“When I say that,” he begins, “when I tell you that you’re the best I ever had, I’m not thinking of anyone else, honey. They don’t fucking matter. They never did.”

He releases his fingers from my mouth. I try to ignore the fact that they taste like me, but I can’t. I’ve never done that before. It’s not like George and I played much in the bedroom. That was a chore I despised every single time I was forced to do it.

“I just hate the fact that there were others when we were together.”

He dips his chin, his eyes still holding mine before he lets out a chuckle. “Honey,” he calls out gently, “I was fucking stupid.”

“Is this stupidity still going to be happening? I know you have women down there.”

He hums. “There it is, baby. There’s the real issue.”

I open my mouth to tell him of course this is an issue, not just a real issue, but the realest, biggest issue of all. Except, I don’t get the chance to say that because he starts to speak.

“It’s you and me, Kiplyn. That’s all.”

“Nobody else, ever?”

He gives me a wink, then wraps his arms around me, pulling me against his chest. He doesn't answer me verbally. Instead, he holds me, his lips touching the top of my head. Maybe I should press him for more, but right now, this is enough.

It's me and him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ROADKILL

WHEN I WALK OUT INTO THE LIVING ROOM, I'M NOT SURPRISED to see Reese sitting in front of the television with her noise-canceling headphones on just as she said she would be. As soon as she notices me, she takes them off and gives me a smirk.

“Got something on your jeans,” she points out, lifting her hand and extending her finger to my thigh. I know what it is, and I let out a chuckle.

Clearing my throat, I open my mouth to reply with a smart-assed remark when my phone starts to buzz in my pocket. Digging it out, I look at the caller ID and frown at the name. I just left him a few hours ago. I don't know why he's calling me right now, but I slide my thumb across the screen to answer.

“Roadkill,” I greet.

“I need you to come with me. I might have something.”

Goddamn, this man is like a dog with a bone. I don't blame him, though. I want him dead just as badly as he does. I want Cyrus to suffer, and then suffer a little more before he suffers even more. And then I want to revive him so we can torture him a touch more before finally killing him.

That is what I want.

“When do you want me there?” I ask.

“Meet me at his house tonight.”

Fuck.

“Okay,” I grind out.

“Rusk?” Kiplyn calls out from behind me.

Shoving the phone into my pocket, I turn my head, looking over my shoulder at her. She’s wearing her leggings again, and I wish I could peel them off her all over again. But instead of doing that, I have to meet fucking Itch about an asshole.

I turn around fully to face her and give her a smile as I close the distance between us. “I have to meet Itch about some shit.”

“Itch?” she asks.

I could tell her the details, but I have no desire to do that. Instead of explaining anything, I just give her a smile and lift my hand to cup her cheek. Sliding my thumb across her bottom lip, I focus on her gaze.

“Itch, honey. Club business.”

She frowns, obviously not loving the fact that I just did a fuck and leave, but sometimes when the club calls, there’s nothing that can be done. And in this case, this is Itch, and he’s a wild card. He might try and do some shady fucking shit without backup.

Before I walk away from her, I lean forward and touch my mouth to hers. Letting my hand fall, I take a few steps backward, my gaze focused on hers as I watch her for a silent moment. I take in a sharp breath and let it out slowly before I speak.

“I will be back here as soon as I can. Could be tomorrow,” I say.

“Will you text me?”

Kiplyn’s voice is so small, almost as if she is afraid to fucking ask me that. Nodding once, I clear my throat. “Yeah, honey. I will. You’ll be okay here?”

“Yeah,” she whispers. “I will.”

With a wink and nothing more, I turn from her and walk away. I walk out of the house and toward my bike, but before I climb on, I hear my name being called from the house. It's not Kiplyn's voice calling out to me, but I still stop and turn around to face Reese, who is coming my way.

She stops a few feet away from me, tilting her head back to look up at me. I have no fucking idea what she is going to say to me, but I'm too curious to ignore and walk away from her.

"What's up, babe?" I ask when she doesn't immediately say anything.

"I just... you're going to be good to her, right? She's been through hell."

Reese doesn't have to tell me that Kiplyn has been through hell. I fucking saw it on her face. I put her through it myself. No way in hell am I going to continue to fuck her over, not purposely anyway.

"Gonna be the best I possibly can," I state.

I could try and be a badass, ignore her pleas, but I'm not that man anymore. I was at one point, but pride like that is for the young and fucking dumb. I'm not either of those anymore, so admitting that I love this woman, that I won't purposely hurt her to a friend who cares for her, that isn't something I can just ignore.

"Okay," she says with a nod. "I can accept that."

"Anything else?" I ask when she continues to stand in the middle of the driveway looking up at me.

"Can I come to a party down there sometime?"

I can't help it. I can't stop myself either. I burst out laughing at her question. I wasn't expecting it at all. Clearing my throat, I force myself to stop laughing and shake my head a couple of times to gather myself.

"Yeah, babe. You sure as fuck can."

Her lips curve up into a grin. She spins around, and I watch as she bounces on her toes and bounds back into the

house. Climbing onto my bike with a chuckle, I start the engine and take off toward Itch.

With the wind in my hair and on my face, for a moment, I feel absolutely free. I'm not free, though. Not sure that I ever was, really. I don't think that any of us are in this world. Everyone answers to someone.

No person is ever truly free.

It's all an illusion.

It doesn't take me long to get to him. When I see his bike parked outside of Cyrus's fancy-as-fuck neighborhood, I pull up beside him and kill my engine. Itch doesn't speak right away, so I wait. He's a man of few words, but I know he has something to share right now. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here.

He turns to me with a grin and lets out a low chuckle. "Hey, brother," he mutters.

"Hey," I say, but I don't ask him what's up.

I wait, because he's Itch, and I know he will tell me whatever it is he wants to say in his own time. But then again, we're sitting here outside of Cyrus's gated hood for a reason. I want to know what the fuck it is, and I really don't want to wait. But I do. For him.

"We start here."

"Start?" I ask.

"The house didn't burn down all the way," he says, his lips curving up into a smile.

I honestly didn't know that they burned down the house at all. Makes sense. A lot of fucking bodies to get rid of, and a fire is the easiest way to do that.

"You think it's being monitored?" I ask.

Itch presses his lips together, then nods once. "It is. At least by a busybody neighbor or two."

"How do you propose we look around?" I ask.

Itch glances at the gates, then back at me before he grins. “We’re going in the back of the estate. I was checking on the map, and there’s nothing but a little fucking block wall that we could climb no problem. Nobody will even know we’re there.”

“Then what?” I ask.

He clears his throat. “Then we get into the fucking tunnel and track that motherfucker down. Or at least, we know where he came out, if nothing else.”

That sounds like a plan. I wanted to do that shit when it all went down, but there were more pressing things happening, and I have a feeling that my suggestion was completely ignored. So now we’re here, and we’re going to do exactly what I wanted to do in the first place, which is fine. I’d rather do it myself anyway. That way, I know it was done right.

KIPLYN

“I need a career,” I announce.

Reese’s eyes widen as she watches me for a moment. She’s got a slice of pizza suspended in the air, her mouth open, her gaze flicking over to me.

“You do,” she agrees before she takes a big bite. “Any ideas?”

“None,” I admit with a sigh as I lean back against the chair. “I have no education, and I really don’t want to go to college for years. Plus, I don’t have the money for that anyway.”

Reese hums and takes another bite of her pizza before she closes her eyes. There is a moment of silence before she opens her eyes and sits straight up. I watch as she lifts her hand, her fingers sliding together in a quick snap.

“Nail tech,” she announces. “You could do hair, but I’m telling you a nail tech would be amazing in the shop. I get asked at least three times a week if I would hire one. I never really put much thought into it, but you could really do well there.”

Inhaling a deep breath, I let it out slowly as I think about that. Nails. I never thought about nails before. “How much is the school?” I ask.

She looks down at her lap, then lifts her gaze to meet mine before taking another bite of her pizza. She doesn’t say anything right away. That tells me all I need to know.

It’s expensive.

Shaking my head, I stand and turn from her.

I walk to the front window and let out a sigh as I stare out at the dark road. I don’t know what I expect to see, but I can’t look at Reese anymore. I don’t know why, but the pain that slices through me at the thought of not being able to get ahead with my career makes me want to cry.

“Aren’t you going to get some cash from the sale of your house?” Reese calls out from behind me.

I am going to get some money from the house having sold, but it won’t be much, and I won’t have a paycheck anytime soon. I also won’t be able to pay my credit card bills, my rent, or buy food.

“Not enough to pay my bills for six months,” I say.

“Will you let me help you?” Reese asks.

Inhaling a sharp breath, I look over my shoulder at her. “I couldn’t. You’ve done more than enough for me,” I whisper. “What if I could never pay you back? I wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

“Well, I can’t let you do nothing,” Reese murmurs. “You have your whole life ahead of you, and it’s your time to take control of it. You can’t do that if you don’t accept help.”

“I can’t accept money at all. You’ve already done enough.”

She shakes her head a couple of times. “You can, and you really should. I just want the best for you, Kiplyn. You deserve it.”

Oh, good, it’s a pity loan—that’s even worse.

It kind of makes me want to cry just thinking about it. But I don't. I'm not that girl. I need to get my shit together. At this point, I need to accept the help. If I had kept Rusk's money, I would be fine. I could go to school and pay my bills without even blinking an eyelash.

"I don't," I say.

"Do you want this?" she asks. "Do you want to be a nail technician?"

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I close my eyes slowly, then open them again. "I do," I confess. "I don't think I could do hair, but I could do nails, and it would be a real career."

"It would," she agrees on a whisper. "Let me help you," Reese calls out. "Please."

I almost say *no*, but then the word *yes* tumbles from my lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ROADKILL

ITCH AND I PULL AROUND TO THE BACK OF THE SUBDIVISION, walking our bikes up on the easement and parking them behind some bushes. It's obvious from this side of the neighborhood that they wanted to shield the real world from theirs as much as possible. This whole subdivision is an oasis.

There are run-down trailer homes with broken-down cars in the yards just across the street. An eyesore that these kinds of people would no doubt wish to believe didn't exist. So, they hide it behind brick walls and tall bushes and trees.

I've never been on the good side of the wall, always on the shit side that people want to pretend doesn't exist. The side where they like to talk *for* us, to make up fucking rules and shit they've decided helps us.

All while pretending we're just these poor creatures they have to take care of and we're too stupid to know they are pieces of shit in real life and wouldn't spit on us if we were on fire.

Yeah, I know these kinds of people for fucking real.

"Ready?" Itch asks. "If we go in this corner, nobody will see us from the street or those houses."

"Let's find this fucker," I say with a growl.

It doesn't take us long to climb over the wall, although as I'm doing it, I realize I am indeed not in my twenties any

longer. Fuck. I am also out of shape and smoke way too much fucking weed.

Itch lands on his feet with a grunt and a groan, almost simultaneously, and I'm not far behind, landing beside him making the same sounds. We don't go running toward the fucked-up, burned house. Instead, we stay exactly where we are and catch our breaths.

"I think I need to add cardio to my workout," Itch mutters.

Looking over at him, my own breath coming out in wheezes, I jerk my chin before I speak. "No fucking shit," I rasp.

We stay where we are for another moment, but because we can't spend all day here, we straighten and head toward the house. "If there was a way in, there was a way out," Itch mutters.

This is all shit that should have happened while we were being rescued, but my head was all fucked-up at the time. I couldn't give any orders, and I damn sure couldn't go on a fucking manhunt myself. So, here we are.

"My whole fucking body hurts. I should not have done that," Itch mutters.

"You probably shouldn't have," I agree.

He lifts his hand and flips me off but wears a smirk as we move through the rubble. The sun is still bright, but it's starting to set. A glint that no doubt bounces off metal somewhere catches my eye. Turning my head, I look down to see a small piece of metal on the ground. But it's not just any piece of metal.

"Itch," I hiss.

Stopping in my tracks, I turn my entire body slightly and see it there. There is a piece of flat metal on the ground. It's right where the kitchen was. There is a stove and an oven nearby, charred to fucking death, but their shapes are clear.

"We couldn't get that lucky, could we?" Itch asks.

Shrugging a shoulder, I take the few steps toward the piece of shining metal that is still catching the sun and practically blinding me. Crouching down in front of it, I move some big pieces of debris off, shoving them to the side.

Itch crouches down next to me and reaches for the handle. The metal looks like it's been through hell. It's all dinged and banged. He tugs it open and reveals a staircase. It's narrow and small.

"We need someone to look out for us. I don't want to go down there and not be able to get back up," I suggest.

Itch stands, and I watch as he digs his phone out of his pocket. He must agree with me, because the next thing I hear him say is that a prospect needs to get his ass here, immediately. He gives him directions on where to meet us.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I decide to do something I would have never done a year ago. Hell, maybe not even a few months ago.

I call a woman.

I call *my* woman.

Kiplyn.

"Hey, everything okay?" she asks, her words sounding rushed and her tone worried.

"I'm good. Just have a few minutes, so I thought I would call."

I'm an idiot. I should hang up right this fucking second, but I don't.

"A few minutes between doing what?" she asks.

I let out a chuckle, my gaze scanning the area around us. It's too bad this guy was a sick motherfucker, because even though this place is probably snooty as fuck, this is a really great piece of land.

It's stunning, really. Pool, cabana, pool house, the whole fucking deal. Then there are the trees and actual grass,

something you don't see much of here in the desert. Not unless you have money.

"I was talking with Reese," she begins. That breaks me out of my thoughts of landscaping.

Although, I wasn't really into the landscape, so the focus really doesn't need to be on that. What I should be is staying alert so if someone happens by, I can get the fuck out of here before I'm seen.

"What did you talk about?" I ask.

"Me becoming a nail tech. With the sale of my house, I think I can maybe swing it," she states. "Reese said she would help me out a little."

I don't say anything immediately. I'm not sure what she wants to do for her career. I know she needs to do something, for her, if nothing else. She spent a lot of years in a shit situation and deserves to have a life.

"You want to do that? Other women's nails?" I ask.

There is silence. The kind of deafening silence where I know I've hurt her feelings. I start to tell her I'll just talk to her later. I don't do feelings or crying women, but then she clears her throat and starts to speak.

"I realize, Rusk, that your life is exactly what you've always wanted it to be. I haven't had that luxury. I'm just trying to make a good choice for myself. I can't go to a big college and get some big degree. A technical school is about all I can do, and even then, I can't really afford that."

My woman has a little backbone now. This isn't the first time she's shown it to me either. I like it. A hell of a lot. "Okay, honey. Whatever you want to do, it's yours. And don't worry about the money."

"I can't take your money," she whispers. "I think I made that clear."

Lifting my hand, I run my fingers through my hair and let out a chuckle. "Honey," I murmur, "it ain't even my money."

"What?" she asks on an exhale.

“You’re my old lady. You’re my partner. It’s yours, too. You need school money, I’ll go down and pay your fuckin’ tuition. As long as you’re in my bed, it’s yours.”

There is a car that starts to head toward the burned-down house. I duck behind a tree. “Fuck. Gotta go,” I say, ending the call before shoving my phone into my pocket and scanning the area for Itch.

Thankfully, he saw the car when I did and is hiding behind the fucking stove. Jesus fucking Christ. We are a goddamn mess. Itch looks back at me, and I shake my head and lift my hand, pressing my palm down as if to tell him to stay down. He nods then pinches his eyes closed.

I watch the car approach and realize it’s not just nosey rich fucks moving around the hood to take in the scene of a burnt-to-a-crisp house. It’s the goddamn cops. I hold my breath, waiting for them to get out and walk around the grounds, but they don’t. They drive by, and then they’re gone.

Letting out a sigh, I close my eyes for a moment, then open them again to see Itch making his way toward me. He stops in front of me, frowning as he tilts his chin down slightly.

“The fuck?” he asks.

Laughing it all off like I wasn’t about to shit my pants scared, I shrug. “Rich neighborhood had a suspicious fire. They want protecting. That’s all that was.”

“Better be,” he mumbles. I hear someone shout our names and look up. The prospect is throwing his leg over the wall and falling flat on his ass. “Seems like our lookout is here,” Itch says with a snort.

“Seems like it.”

I jerk my chin, and we walk over to the metal door. “Let’s find out what the fuck is going on here and where that asshole is hiding.”

KIPLYN

“Have some more,” Reese urges with a slur as she attempts to pour another glass of wine.

A little of the red liquid sloshes over the glass and ends up on the coffee table, which is somehow the funniest thing I’ve seen all night. I start to giggle.

Then Reese starts to giggle, and before we realize what’s happening, we’re both laughing so hard we’re trying to catch out breaths. With a heavy sigh, I lie back against the chair, my glass in my hand, sticky stem and everything.

“Do you think you’re going to marry him and have his babies?” she asks on a whisper.

My eyes close slowly, but I open them almost immediately because the room starts to spin when they’re closed. I don’t think I’ve ever been this drunk before. Being married to an abusive alcoholic kind of turned me off the stuff. Plus, I always felt like I needed to be on my A-game when I was around George. And it wasn’t like I sought out to get drunk tonight. One glass of wine turned into two bottles.

“I don’t know. Ten years ago, before everything, I would have said yes, a million times *yes*. All I ever wanted was to be his, to have his dark-haired babies, to live a happily ever after kind of life.”

“But now?” she asks.

I hesitate only because I don’t know what to say or do right now. Part of me wants to say yes, without a doubt we’re going to get married and be perfect together forever. The other part of me is realistic and knows what life is like. It’s brutal and ugly. It is also extremely painful.

“I don’t trust him enough yet to make a lifelong commitment like children and marriage.” My words are the sad truth.

“Are you still angry with him?” she asks, her voice slurred, but then again, I’m just as drunk and completely understand everything she’s saying to me.

Am I still angry with him? I think I’ve asked myself that question about a million times and dissected it just as many

inside of my own head. I'm annoyed with it personally. Thinking about it, feeling it, all of it.

"I hate him," I confess. It's almost liberating to say it out loud, even still, even after everything that's happened. "But I love him, too. He knows that."

"I don't know what all of that means," she whispers as her eyes fill with tears.

Seeing her tears build makes my own do the same. Mine start to fall before hers do. She snuffles, and I watch as she lifts her hands to wipe the wetness from her cheek. I snuffle, too.

Lifting my hand to my face, I notice that my fingers are trembling when I hold them in front of me. That makes me giggle as I wipe the wetness from my own cheeks.

"Okay, stop crying," I demand.

"I can't. I just want you to be happy," she declares.

Bringing the wineglass to my lips, I take a sip. I can't even taste it anymore. I'm just drinking at this point because it's in my glass. Forcing my lips to curve up into a smile, I look across the room at my friend, who only arches her brow at me.

"Kiplyn," she calls out.

"I want to be happy, too. I am happy. I think right now, I'm the happiest I've ever been. I'm just going to live in this moment of peace. Rusk and I are good. I think we're finally being honest with one another, and I don't want to rush or mess anything up."

Reese bursts out laughing. "I'm sorry," she says between laughs.

She places her palm against her belly and lets out a whooshing sound before she lies back against the sofa. Inhaling a sharp breath, she lets out a sigh. "This whole situation is nothing but one gigantic rush. You know that, right? You people are moving at the speed of a damn bullet train."

Before I can respond to her words, the front door opens, and he is there. Standing there looking sexy as hell in his

leather vest cut thing. His jeans are dirty but molded to his body, and his T-shirt stretches across his strong, muscular chest. I also know that underneath that shirt are a bunch of absolutely mouthwatering tattoos.

“Fucking hell,” he hisses. “You girls are tanked.”

My eyes widen, and I shift my attention to Reese, who is smiling widely and goofily. We break out into a fit of giggles all over again. We really are tanked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

KIPLYN

MY HEAD HURTS. NO, IT DOESN'T JUST HURT, IT POUNDS. I moan as I try to roll onto my back, but the room starts to spin. So, I quickly roll back onto my side in hopes that the room will stop spinning, but that doesn't work.

The spinning does not stop.

Pinching my eyes closed, I try to gather myself, but I feel like I'm going to be sick... soon.

"You feelin' like shit, Kiplyn?" a deep voice roughly asks from behind me.

Whimpering, I try to open my eyes again, but I close them and groan. "Complete shit," I whisper. "Why did I drink that much?"

He chuckles, then I feel his arm slide across my hip to my stomach. His mouth touches the side of my neck. My stomach roils, not because of the kiss, but because of all that wine. Too much wine. So much wine. I don't know what I was thinking, but I hate myself for the person I was last night.

"Easy to do at the time. Tomorrow didn't exist yet."

"I hate myself for yesterday," I whisper.

He lets out a laugh behind me. "I'm going to go and get you some water and shit."

I don't have the heart to tell him that I don't want anything. I feel the bed dip, then shift, and he's already out of the room. I stay where I am, too afraid to move even an inch. I'm seconds away from throwing up all the wine I drank last night.

The door opens. I know because I hear the distinct soft creak from the hinges, except right now, they sound like they're amplified. My arms and legs are trembling. The bed dips at my hip, and I think about pushing myself up, but I don't think I can.

Then, without even asking, Rusk slides his hands beneath my armpits and tugs me up to sitting. "I'm going to be sick," I moan.

"Yeah, you probably are, but you need to drink some water, honey."

He holds a glass up to my lips. I'm not forced to drink, but at the same time, I'm forced to drink. It's the last thing I want to do right now, but Rusk is right. I need water. So much water.

I try not to drink it too quickly, but as soon as the cool liquid touches my tongue, I am suddenly parched. Rusk takes the glass away when he notices I'm starting to drink too greedily. He sets it down on the small nightstand, then looks down into my eyes.

"You need food, too," he murmurs.

"Rusk?" I call out.

He hums but doesn't verbally say anything as he waits for me to speak. I don't know why the conversation from last night feels so important right now, but it does. I have to get this out. I have to tell him what I'm thinking.

"I don't want children. I don't want to get married either."

His eyes widen, then he sucks in a breath before he lets out a small chuckle. His expression is one of surprise, though, his eyes widening and his lips turned up, but I can tell he doesn't know what to say.

He wasn't expecting this.

"I'm serious, Rusk," I state. "Reese and I were talking, and then I started thinking about it, and we haven't discussed that, but I wanted you to know before we moved together any further."

Rusk shakes his head once, his expression shifting from shock to almost peace. I don't know what he's thinking. I can't quite tell. He lifts his hand and cups my cheek, sliding his thumb beneath my eye.

"You don't want kids? I'm good with that, honey. You don't want to get legally married? I'm good with that, too. When it comes to the club, you're my wife, which means if something happens to me, they take care of you. That is all I ever need."

"You're really okay with not being married? With never having children?" I ask.

He nods, clearing his throat, his thumb sliding across the skin beneath my eye again. "I have you, Kiplyn. You're all I need. Never thought much about kids anyway," he says with a shrug.

I hate that.

His hand drops, and he snorts. "My childhood was fucking shit. Wouldn't know how to do it anyway."

"Yeah," I agree. "Mine was, too."

His arms slide beneath my body, and he picks me up and slides me across to his lap. My stomach does a flip at the sudden shift, but I tilt my head back slightly and look up into his eyes, and it's as if time is standing still for just a moment.

"I don't know what is right. I just know that a baby is the last thing on my mind, has been for over a decade," I whisper.

He hums, shifting forward slightly, then he rests his forehead against mine and lets out a sigh. "Yeah, honey. I feel you on that."

"Selfishly, I want to enjoy my freedom."

His nose slides along mine. He's warm and comforting. Rusk is my home. He always has been. And no matter how much I hate him or tell myself that I hate him, I love him more with each passing moment.

"Get that," he says.

"I need to get my life together," I whisper.

And I do.

I need to get some school done. I need to figure myself out. I need to just breathe for a minute or two. Marriage and babies would not allow that to happen.

"I got some shit to do today. I can't nurse you back to health. You and your girl gonna be okay?" he asks.

I open my mouth to ask him where he's going but snap my lips closed and decide it isn't my place to ask that. He wouldn't tell me anyway. But then he surprises me.

"I have to go down to the clubhouse and take care of a few things, then I have to do some work, too. But your girl wanted to party down there, and we can do that Saturday night. There should be a healthy amount of people there. We're celebrating."

"Celebrating?" I ask.

"Club shit, babe."

Letting out a sigh, I force myself to stand on shaky legs. "We'll be there," I state.

He grins, watching me as I begin to move toward the bathroom. I don't know if I'm going to make it. His eyes stay on me. I can feel them like a soft touch as I continue to move.

I can feel the bile in my throat, too, though. It's right there, but I tamp it down as much as I can. I refuse to puke in front of Rusk. At least not from wine and not right now. Thanking my lucky stars, I make it to the bathroom, slamming the door behind me before I lose all my cookies.

Every single one.

Even though I've just puked, all I can think about is the fact that we just had a serious conversation, and I feel great about that. The future is looking bright for me, for us. Despite how we started again, I think we're going to be better than we ever were.

As I lie with my head on the cool tile of the bathroom floor, I think about George. I honestly try not to think of him often, but sometimes, his toxicity seeps through. And right now, as I lie here with a horrible hangover from hell, after discussing my love for Rusk and our exciting future, that asshole has to make his way inside of my mind.

"You are a worthless fucking human. A waste of fucking space. Nothing but your cunt is useful."

Thump. The belt lands across my stomach, his fingers gripping my arm even tighter. He shakes me, his hand reaching back as he slaps the belt across my stomach again. Then my other arm. Then my thighs.

Over and over and over again.

"You are nothing, Kiplyn. Completely fucking worthless."

And I believed him. Someone says something enough times, you'll believe it. But now I have Rusk's kindness, his soft gaze, his tender words. His even more tender touch. The way he makes me feel. I went through all that hell with George to come out on the other side, and I have, because this life is the other side.

ROADKILL

Leaving Kiplyn's place, I head straight for the clubhouse. I have a meeting with Legacy this morning, then I'm going to spend the rest of the afternoon working on cars. I need to get my hands dirty and keep my mind busy.

All the relationship talk this morning got me all worked up, and that doesn't even include the bust that was the hidden tunnel we found. It just led to the other side of the street. A whole lot of fucking nothing. Cyrus could be anywhere.

Pulling up to the clubhouse, I park next to Legacy's bike and climb off my machine, then make my way into the building. There are a few bodies still littering the floor and couches—all naked. Must have been a party last night. Maybe I should have brought the girls here since they were all hot to party.

Moving through the room, I walk into the office and sink down in the chair across from Legacy's desk with a heavy sigh. The chair groans under my weight. I slide my hands down the arms of the chair, feeling the cool wood beneath my palms.

"You okay?" Legacy asks.

I lift my head, my gaze finding his, and press my lips together. Clearing my throat, I shift in the chair. I have to tell him the truth about it. How I really feel, and I'm irritated as fuck that I can't come here with the news that we found Cyrus and he's being dealt with.

"I want to find that motherfucker, and I haven't."

"You will," he murmurs, though I can tell he doesn't feel particularly confident about it. I don't blame him, because I don't either. This guy is goddamn dust in the wind, and he has enough money and connections to stay that way. "How's the woman front?"

Letting out a laugh, I shake my head. "I'm pretty sure she hates me a little less today than she did yesterday," I say. "She also got tanked last night, so she's nursing a serious fucking hangover."

"Progress," he murmurs.

"Progress," I agree.

"Might want to ask Chains about finding this guy," Legacy offers.

Arching a brow, I look at him with a serious expression. I have no idea why the hell I would talk to Chains about anything. He's down in Tucson, and I doubt he even knows what's happening up here. But I'm willing to listen to the reasoning.

“Chains and his men are a little more...” he pauses, trying to think of the word.

“Immoral?” I ask.

Although we are not delicate flowers or angels by any means, it’s clear we are not part of the deep underground of anything.

“Not quite that, but they know people, and they teeter on the line a bit more.”

“Could Raul or any of his men who aren’t Dutch help?” I ask.

Legacy shakes his head. “Dutch is long gone, but if they find Cyrus, they’ll deal with him themselves. You want that glory? You want that retribution? You’re gonna have to find him first. Plus, they’re busy reorganizing right now.”

“Chains it is,” I grunt as I push up to a standing position. “I’m going to be working on some cars with Itch this afternoon.”

Legacy dips his chin before he calls out. “Road?” Stopping, I turn slightly to face him. “You find him. You do what you gotta do, but after that?”

“Yeah?” I ask.

“You find your happiness with that woman, and you live your fuckin’ life. Something I know you ain’t been doing for quite some time. And I only know because once I found my own, it opened my eyes.”

I could tell him to fuck off, that he doesn’t know shit, but he’s right. I haven’t lived life in a decade. Not really. I’ve been partying. I’ve been with my brothers. I’ve been fucking random women and sweet butts, but I have not lived.

“That’s the plan.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

KIPLYN

AFTER NURSING OUR HANGOVERS, REESE DECIDES WE NEED TO first unpack my room, then secondly, we're going to get information on nail tech school, but I'm not sure. Rusk's words are rolling around inside of my head, and now I'm doubting yesterday's decision.

"You're wavering," Reese announces as she uses a pair of scissors to rip open the box.

"On two things," I confess.

"Two?" she asks.

Nodding, I sit on the edge of the bed. The mattress depresses as I sink down. I touch the sheet next to me, pinching the fabric before I slide it back and forth between my fingers. Sucking in a breath, I slowly turn to her.

"Rusk wants to move in together, like, as soon as he finds something, in a few weeks," I admit. "And then he started talking and said I didn't have to work, but then he said he wanted me to find something I wanted to do, and he kept questioning me on if this was something I wanted to do," I ramble.

Reese is quiet for a moment. She doesn't say anything as her eyes search mine. She's still half bent over the box, a pair of scissors in her hand. Then she does something I don't quite

expect. She stands, placing the scissors on the box before she makes her way toward me.

Slowly, she sits down on the bed next to me. She reaches out, takes my hand in hers, and squeezes gently. When her eyes find mine, she searches them for a moment before she speaks.

“I’m your friend no matter what you decide. But I think it’s been a long time since you’ve really made any decisions of your own,” she says, her lips curving up into a smile at her own words.

“This past year was the first time you’ve ever been able to live your own life, and you were in survival mode. Then he tried to kill you. I don’t know where he is right now, if he’s in hiding or whatever, but you’ve got a man here who would kill for you, instead of trying to kill you.”

“I love him,” I whisper.

“And you’ve waited a long time for him.”

“I have,” I agree.

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I shake my head a couple of times, trying to clear my mind, but it doesn’t work immediately. She watches me and I her before she lets out a long breath.

“What I’m saying is that if he makes you happy, don’t unpack this shit. If doing nails is going to make you happy, do it. If you want to do something else, do that. I don’t give a fuck at all. But I want you to be happy. So damn happy that you have to pinch yourself because you think you’re living a dream.”

“I don’t deserve any of you in my life. Especially you,” I exhale as tears well in my eyes.

She gives me a shaky smile, and water fills her own eyes. I start to ask her if she’s okay, but she doesn’t let me. Instead, she jumps up and claps her hands together.

“Fuck unpacking. You have clothes to wear for a while, right?”

We've already unpacked two clothing boxes and hung things up in the closet. I give her a nod, my eyes wide as I stare at her, waiting to see what she's going to say or do next. I don't think I could even guess what she's going to say.

"I have some clothes to wear," I say.

"Let's go out and get some information at the beauty school and the community college."

"Community college?"

Reese smiles. "Yeah, community college. They have tons of programs there. If beauty school isn't what you think you want to do, community college will have something."

My lips curve up before I stand. "Okay, let's do it. But I think that beauty school is where I need to be. There's nothing else that I can even think of. I've never had a chance to discover a passion. I need something for me, though, and I think that's what this can be."

"You don't have to do nails. There are other things, different certifications for different things. Let's look at all the options," Reese suggests.

Together, we gather our purses and start to head out of the house. Instead of just leaving without telling Rusk where I am, I decide to send him a text. My first text to him. I am still in awe that he called me today. This has to work. It is already better than I could have ever imagined it could be.

Heading to the beauty school to get information.

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I tug the door open to Reese's car and sink down in the passenger seat, putting my seat belt on before I stare at my phone and wait for a response. I don't know what I expect to hear back from him, but I can't look away in hopes that there is something.

RUSK: I'LL SEE YOU LATER TONIGHT. GET THE PRICES. I'M PAYING.

"That man... swoon," Reese says from beside me.

Looking over at her, I let out a breath. “I’m waiting for it all to crumble,” I whisper.

“We are all waiting for our worlds to crumble, babe. That’s the name of the game.”

She starts the engine, then shifts the car into reverse before she backs out of the driveway and turns her wheel as she eases out onto the street. We leave the radio on low, trying to keep our hangover headaches at bay.

“I’m serious, Kiplyn. We’re all just one moment away from losing everything and becoming a shell of a person. You just did your shell moment before most. Now you can live.”

“When was yours?” I ask, knowing she is speaking from experience.

I don’t know much about her personal life, but I know enough to notice when someone has been through hell at some point. She doesn’t say anything right away, her fingers gripping the steering wheel and her knuckles turning white.

“A long time ago,” she whispers. “But that doesn’t matter. Right now, I’m living vicariously through you, and your man said I could come and party there Saturday night. So, we’re going to get you set up with whatever you want to go to school for, then in a few days... party central.”

“You’re crazy,” I say with a laugh.

“I’m ready to live with you, babe,” she says, but there is a seriousness to her tone, and I think that she *is* ready.

I also make it a mission, now that my drama is done and over with, to find out more about her past. I know about her present, but I know practically nothing about anything prior to meeting her.

There is a story there, and she’s helped me so much with my own life that I want to repay that debt... if she’ll let me.

ROADKILL

Itch and I work for the rest of the afternoon. There is a sweet Cadillac we've just got in, and we're going to rip this fucker apart. Itch is focused on the task at hand and says absolutely fucking nothing the entire day, which doesn't surprise me, because he's angry that we haven't found Cyrus. I am, too.

“Want a water?” I ask.

He lifts his head, his welder in hand. “Yeah,” he says.

“You good, brother?”

He shakes his head once. “Not even close.”

Turning my back to him, I walk over to the cooler and grab a couple of bottles of water. He sets his shit down and walks toward me. I extend my arm, the bottle in hand, and he slips it from my grasp and untwists the top.

“Me neither,” I confess. “Legacy thinks we should ask Chains for help. Maybe he can have some of his guys dig around in the deep underground,” I murmur.

Itch's gaze finds mine, focusing on it and holding it, then he lets out a grunt. “Chains?” he asks. “Fuck that. We'll find his ass.”

“How?” I ask.

He shrugs, then he looks down at his feet before he shifts his attention back to meet mine. I hold my breath for a moment, unsure of what the fuck he's about to say. With Itch, sometimes you never know.

“I'm going to make this next delivery,” he states, not answering me.

“Itch,” I warn.

Itch shakes his head once. “Don't question me on it,” he says. “I'll be talking to the Dead Phoenix, and I'll find out what I need to find out.”

“I talked to Legacy about that, and he said not to do it. He doesn't want us to shake that already fucked-up balance between us and the Dead Phoenix. Also, they got enough on their plates with that Dutch shit.”

Itch's lips curve up, and he shakes his head once. "Sorry, but I'm going to have to say fuck that shit. You don't want to be involved, that's cool. But I'm not stopping until Cyrus is in my grasp."

As much as I want to pull rank on his ass, to tell him no, he can't do what he wants to do when it comes to this fuck, I can't do that. Mainly because I want Cyrus just as badly as he does. Leaning against the wall, I let out a grunt before I speak.

"I'm going to approach Chains this afternoon, see what kind of information he can dig up for me. You're taking this car tomorrow, right?" I ask.

He dips his chin in a nod. "If I find anything, I'll let you know," I say.

His lips twitch into a small smile, then he clears his throat. "Same."

The conversation surrounding the Dead Phoenix, Chains, and Cyrus is dropped. I help Itch get the car ready to load with the product. Tomorrow, he's going to be delivering something a bit harder than our usual weed and molly.

We were asked for cocaine, and while it's not something we would normally do, the people we buy from had a screaming fucking deal, so we are going to be able to deliver. And this deal, it's going to get Itch in there to ask some fucking questions about Cyrus. So, all in all, I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a good damn day.

Once I'm finished helping, the car is ready to load and a few guys are going to bring the shit over here in the middle of the night, the same way they do every fucking time we load up a new ride that's been modified and gutted.

"You need backup?" I ask, slipping my arms through the holes of my cut as I put it back on.

"I'm doing this on my own," he states.

Looking over at him, I arch a brow. "Cyrus fucked me up, too, just in a different way," I point out. "You are not the only one who wants retribution."

Itch jerks his chin. “Yeah, you’ll have your time. I just need to do this.”

I can both understand and respect that shit, without a fucking doubt I can. Lifting my hand, I wrap my fingers around the back of my neck and squeeze.

“You’ll get ahold of me at even the first fucking inkling that something is off?” I ask.

He jerks his chin in my direction, his eyes finding mine and holding them for a long moment before he speaks. When he does, I can hear the absolute rage in his voice. “That motherfucker isn’t going to be able to stop me, brother. I am ready to rip him apart limb from limb.”

“Yeah, but you don’t know what the fuck he’s got with him or who is hiding him. Could be dangerous. And to go alone...” I let my words trail off and shrug a shoulder.

“I’ll call you if I get into a situation or think I’m going to get into a situation.”

“You’re a good man, Itch,” I state.

He dips his chin, then turns around on his heels and walks back to the car. He’s going to wait for the product, and I have a feeling he’ll have this car ready to deliver the goods by morning.

I walk out of the warehouse, climb onto my bike, and start the engine. I have just one thing on my mind right now—riding my bike down to Tucson and talking to Chains. Except, as I sit at one of the stoplights, I think about the Hell’s Souls.

I think about Duke.

He helped us out once, but I have a feeling he might be someone who would know about Cyrus. Pulling my bike over in the nearest parking lot, I dig my phone out of my pocket and make a call, changing my whole route for the day.

CHAPTER THIRTY

KIPLYN

I HAVE THREE OPTIONS—HAIR, NAILS, OR ESTHETICIAN. ALL OF them are interesting. All of them are exciting. And at the same time, every single option gives me a chance to be able to take care of myself. However, the artistic qualities of the nails have me feeling a bit uneasy.

“I think I might do better in esthetician school,” I murmur as I look at my brochures.

“Why?” Reese asks as she pulls into a parking lot.

I’m not paying attention to where we are. My gaze doesn’t leave the brochure. I can’t look away. This is possibly my entire future right here on this glossy paper. The car comes to a complete stop. I can feel her gaze on me and turn my head slowly to find her staring at me.

“I’m not a great artist,” I whisper. “Face creams and all that stuff would probably be easier for me.”

Her lips twitch into a small smile, and she dips her chin. “If that’s what interests you, I say go for it, but I want you to know that you could without a doubt do the nail art.”

Shifting my attention down to the brochure again, I stare at the options. Two semesters, and I’ll be done. I’ll be certified. Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I shift my attention back up to meet Reese’s.

“I think I want to do esthetician school,” I confess.

“Then that’s what we’ll do, and we will figure out where to put you in the shop.”

My heart swells at her words. She’s too kind for me. She’s too good. “I can’t ask you to do that. You need a nail tech,” I whisper.

Reese lifts her hand and waves it around. “Who cares?” she says. “Whatever you do, I’ll find a spot for you in my shop.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Why?”

I nod once, my tongue peeking out, sliding across my bottom lip, wetting it. I open my mouth to speak, not sure what I’m going to say, but she goes first.

“Because you’re my best friend,” she whispers. “And since we won’t be living together after this man takes you away, and we really should have met when we were babies or something, it’s the only way I can see you every day.”

“You’re too much,” I whisper.

“I know,” she says with a wink.

Without another word, she shifts the car into drive and moves forward. Instead of driving home, I am surprised when she heads toward her salon. Then again, I can’t believe she isn’t working today. Granted, we were really hungover this morning, but it’s not like Reese to not work.

“Reese,” I call out as she parks in her normal spot in front. “You weren’t at work today,” I point out when she doesn’t respond to me calling her name.

Her fingers grip the steering wheel again, her knuckles turning white again. I can tell her entire body is stiff. She’s holding herself so still as I wait for her to spill her heart out to me, because there is obviously a problem.

But she doesn’t.

Instead, she turns to me, her lips curved up into a plastered-on bogus smile. I watch as all the tension slowly

melts away and before me is someone who is faking it. Really, really freaking faking it.

I should call her on it, but I don't, at least not yet. I'm emotionally and mentally exhausted. I don't know which way is up right now. So, I don't. Instead, I decide to buy whatever it is she's going to sell me, because what she's going to say next is assuredly selling me something.

"I took a few days off. I've had it scheduled for a while."

"You have?" I ask.

She nods, her eyes searching mine. "I do it every year. It's just these past few days, but I'm back to work tomorrow, regularly programmed schedule. Now, let's go inside and figure out where you're going to set up shop."

I open my mouth to say something, to ask her what the heck is happening, but she already has the car door open, closed, and is almost to the front door before I can even collect my thoughts.

Shaking my head, I open my own door, step out of the car, and slowly make my way to the shop door, wondering what is really going on with her and then realizing that I will probably never find out.

This woman is like a vault.

ROADKILL

Pulling up to the Hell's Souls clubhouse feels all sorts of wrong. Climbing off my bike, I look around and take in the grounds. Their place isn't much different than ours, although the way people have talked about them in the past, you'd think this place would be paved in fucking gold or something.

Duke walks out before I'm even completely off my bike. He stands just a few feet from the door of his clubhouse, his hands in his pockets as he watches me approach him. He doesn't quite know why I'm here. I was vague as fuck on the phone, but I know he will relax once I explain things.

“Got an issue. Think maybe you could help me,” I call out as I approach him.

He tilts his head to the side, though I can't see his eyes behind his mirrored shades. But he jerks his chin in a silent demand to go forward. Standing in front of him, my feet planted firmly on the ground, I begin.

He knows what happened to me and then to Kiplyn, but I give him a short reminder. I tell him about my search for Cyrus and how I am at a standstill, mainly because I don't know shit about this guy, aside from the house he was living in that we blew up.

Duke chuckles, but he doesn't respond any other way for a while. He clears his throat, then looks around shaking his head before he lifts his hand to his glasses and rips them from his face, his eyes focusing on mine.

“You do not want to mess with that sick fuck,” he says.

My lips twitch into a small smile. “I don't want to mess with him. I want to kill him.”

Duke inhales a sharp breath, then lets it out slowly, as if he's taking the moment to think. It doesn't surprise me. This Cyrus fucker is connected, he's powerful, and he no doubt has control over some serious fucking players in the world.

“You can't do it alone,” he murmurs. “I don't know where he is, but I know how to find him, and that is going underground, and it's fucking ugly.”

“He needs to pay for what he's done,” I grind out.

Duke dips his chin in a single nod. “He does. He actually has quite a bit to atone for,” he says. “But getting yourself killed in the process isn't going to help a single fucking person.”

Well, he's right about that. The last thing I want to do is get myself killed. I've just got Kiplyn back, and she's actually agreed to move in with me, even though half the time, she says she hates me, and the other that she loves me. It's a situation I love right now, and I'm not ready to let her go, not even if it's in death.

“Last thing I want to do is die right now,” I say, letting out a rough-sounding laugh. “But he needs to die, Duke. I can’t live life knowing he’s fucking out there. He took me so easily. Fucked Itch up. And what he did to that girl, and the fucking shit he probably did to dozens of others. How can I just pretend none of it happened?” I ask.

“You’re not going to let this shit go, are you?” he asks.

“I’m really fucking not. Now, you can give me the info you have, or I’ll just keep looking elsewhere.”

“Fuck,” he hisses, then lets out a long exhale. “Come on inside to my office. I’ll make a few calls.”

Reluctantly, he turns and walks into the clubhouse. I follow him, ignoring the bar and bitches who litter the place. My mind is far too fucking consumed with this shit, with Cyrus and whatever kind of deep shit he’s involved in. I’m also too focused on how I’m going to get to him to worry about naked bitches walking around a bar.

Moving down a dark hallway, Duke turns to the left, and I follow. The light is flipped on, and he makes his way to a desk, sinking down in the chair behind it. I decide to stand, my feet planted wide as I wait for him to make his calls.

He arches a brow, as if to ask me if I’m sure I want him to go ahead. “Go on,” I murmur.

“I’m just saying, brother. You do this, you stick yourself out there like this, it could come back on you.”

Walking toward him, I place my palms flat on his desk, tilting my head to the side, my gaze focused on his eyes and only his eyes. Then, with my voice as low as I can make it, I murmur to him, making sure my tone gets the point across.

“I do not give a fuck what happens as long as he ends up dead. That is the goal here, the mission, if you will.”

“And if that means you get fucked, your club gets fucked... your woman, too, in the process?”

“Think I can’t handle my shit?” I ask.

He shakes his head once. “This isn’t like anything you’ve ever been part of before, brother. You do not know what you’re messing with when it comes to these people. I’m talking big time government officials. People who can have you killed or at the least throw your ass in prison so you never see the light of day again.”

“Don’t give a fuck,” I lie.

I do give a fuck, a big one. The last place I want to be is prison. Duke arches a brow as I stand and take a step backward before I do something really stupid, like scream in his face. He shakes his head and reaches into the inner pocket of his cut to take out his phone.

The office door flies open, and there’s a Hell’s Souls member standing at the threshold. He jerks his chin toward Duke, then shifts his attention to me.

“This is Roadkill. He’s the VP of the Devil’s Hellions. He wants to know about Cyrus. Where to find him and shit,” Duke announces. “Roadkill, this is Bond. He’s my VP.”

“Cyrus?” Bond asks.

“Cyrus,” Duke confirms.

I’m two seconds from losing my fucking shit over this. I did not think this conversation would be so goddamn taxing, but here we are. Just when I’m about to tell both of them to forget it and walk out of here, Bond speaks.

“That asshole has whatever you’re going to dish out coming to him. Need any help?” he asks.

The room is silent for a moment, and I think about his words. Flicking my gaze from Duke to Bond, I arch a brow. I start to speak, but then Duke growls.

“Fuck, I was trying to talk him out of this shit,” he states.

Bond snorts. “Fuck that. Cyrus has done enough. It’s time to put his ass down.”

Duke jumps to his feet and starts to march toward Bond, brushing past me on his way, and stops just short of being so fucking close that their chests touch. They’re about the same

height, so he doesn't look down at him, rather straight across, and I can do nothing but watch the entire fucking ordeal.

“He could ruin everyone in this club. You know this.”

Bond crosses his arms over his chest, shaking his head once. “Fuck that. I'm done being a goddamn pussy, Duke.”

Duke looks over his shoulder at me, his gaze narrowing. “Get ready. It's gonna get ugly,” he snaps.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

KIPLYN

“I CAN’T BELIEVE I’M GOING TO DO THIS,” I WHISPER.

Reese turns around, her eyes finding mine, and her smile, this time not fake, takes over her entire face. If this didn’t benefit me at all, this school and the opportunity to work at her salon, I would still do it. I would still do it just for the smile on her face.

“This is going to be epic,” she says. “Seriously. The storeroom and the attached closet door can go. Once it’s opened up, it will be just enough room for a table and whatever else you need set up here.”

“That’s too much,” I whisper. “I couldn’t.”

Reese lifts her hand, waving it a few times, then smiles before she speaks. “It’s not too much. I have tons of storage in that back room. I just throw shit in here because I’m lazy.”

“But it’s going to cost money,” I whisper.

Reese grins. “I need a tax write-off anyway. Please, it’s going to be great. You’ll pay me rent when you get going, and it will all work out and be even soon enough anyway.”

Looking around the salon, I can’t believe this is all going to happen. It’s going to happen so soon, and I don’t even know how this is my life. Everything has changed drastically, and I sometimes find it hard to even breathe.

A year ago, I was newly divorced and struggling to keep my head afloat. I had my little house that I probably shouldn't have bought because I really couldn't afford the mortgage on my own, but I did it anyway.

And now I'm heading to school. I'm going to have an actual career. Then there's Rusk. I've found a love that I thought I had lost a decade ago. My life is not anything like the way I ever imagined. You can't really picture anything good coming out of your life at all. You're just trying to survive each and every day.

The bell sounds, and I spin around right as a man walks through the door. He's wearing a pair of dark-washed jeans and a button-down light blue shirt. His hair is clipped short, and his face is clean-shaven. He's handsome and probably about ten years older than me.

I'm unable to move, frozen stock-still at the sight of him, well, more at the sight of his badge that is clipped to his dark brown leather belt.

"Can I help you?" Reese asks, taking a few steps forward.

"I'm Detective Carlson. I'm here to speak with a Miss Kiplyn Robbins."

My lips part, and I suck in a breath. Instantly, I know that this is bad. I can feel it deep into the marrow of my bones, but I can't say a single word. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. My knees start to tremble, but still, I can't say a word.

I'm frozen in place as his gaze flicks from Reese to me. Then, as if he knows it's me, he takes a step toward me but doesn't speak right away. He clears his throat, tilting his head to the side.

"You're Miss Robbins?" he asks.

"I am," I finally whisper, though I'm not sure he can hear me. It's as if my vocal cords have been damaged. I don't know what to do or what to say. I just stand here in the middle of the salon.

He clears his throat a couple of times before he speaks. "I'm sorry. Your ex-husband has been reported missing," he

murmurs.

“George?” I ask. “By whom?”

Maybe I shouldn’t ask who is reporting him missing, but I’m trying to figure out who would care that George disappeared without a damn trace.

He nods a couple of times. “George Robbins was reported missing by his social worker,” he says. “Can you tell me when you talked to him last?”

I didn’t even know George had any kind of social worker, though that doesn’t surprise me. The man was always working an angle for cash. Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I take a step toward him with a heavy sigh.

“The last time that I saw him was when he beat me almost to death in my home. I spent several days in a hospital in Phoenix.”

His eyes widen. “Yes, I saw that report. Have you spoken with him since?”

Shaking my head, I inhale a sharp breath, holding it for just a second before I let it out slowly. “No,” I say. “I never sought out George. He always made it a point to harass me, but I never did him. When I finally worked up the courage to walk out of that marriage, I never looked back. Not ever.”

There is silence. You could hear a pin drop while the detective and I stare at one another, then Reese steps in between us with her hand lifted, placing her palm against his chest before she tips her head back to look up into his eyes.

“Kiplyn doesn’t know anything, *sir*,” she says, emphasizing the word *sir* with a heavy breath. “If there is anything at all that you need, we’d be more than happy to help you. It’s really awful that something happened to George, but he wasn’t that great of a human.”

The detective’s eyes search hers, and I swear there are sparks that fly all around them. I feel like I’m a voyeur watching them when I shouldn’t be. Then Reese rises to her toes and whispers something I can’t quite make out. He grunts

as his response before he lifts his head, his eyes finding mine over her shoulder.

“You’ll be available should we need to interview you?” he asks.

“I will,” I say with a nod.

He dips his chin, then he straightens his back and takes a step away from Reese. He turns around and walks out of the salon. Reese doesn’t say a word after the door closes. She turns and walks to the storage room door and stands in front of it.

“Reese?” I call out.

She doesn’t turn around. She is focused on the doorknob as if it’s the most important thing she’s ever had in her hand before. I call out her name again. On the third time, she straightens her back, her hand drops, and she turns around to look at me, her eyes wide.

“Yeah?” she asks.

“What was that about?”

Reese looks down at her shoes, then slowly lifts her gaze up to meet mine. She looks almost guilty. I don’t know what is going on, but there is something happening. She finally speaks, and when she does, I don’t understand what she’s saying.

“I just offered him something I know he wants.”

Taking a step toward her, I reach for her hand. “Reese, what are you saying?”

There is no way she offered this detective sex to leave me alone. And then I think there’s no way that this guy could have accepted the offer. But she presses her lips together and nods once before she gives me that fake smile from earlier.

“It doesn’t matter. He’s gone, but you want to tell me what is going on with George and why you didn’t look surprised at all?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, repeating her words.

“Okay, then,” she says. “Now, let’s move this stuff out to get a head start.”

And that is that. We don’t discuss anything else. I do exactly what she asks and together, we empty out the storage room and the closet and stick to conversations that are nothing more than superficial.

ROADKILL

Duke and Bond stare at me from across the table. We’ve moved into their meeting room, a place I would not typically be allowed to enter considering this is where they hold church and I am not a member of their club, but we need the space.

“Legacy and Itch are on their way,” I state, placing my phone down on the table.

“This is a big undertaking,” Duke states. “You’re sure this is what you want to do?”

I want to tell him that if he asks me again, I’m going to pull my gun out and shoot him in the fucking head. But I don’t. Instead, I let out a sigh and start to confirm that this is indeed what I want when my phone buzzes on the table.

Reaching for my device, I look down at the screen and frown.

KIPLYN: A police detective came by today. Said that George was reported missing. He acted like he thought I could have been involved.

Frowning, I bite the inside of my cheek.

“Problem?” Bond asks.

Shaking my head, I lift it and find Bond’s eyes. “My woman’s ex-husband wound up dead, and the cops were asking her questions.”

“You kill him?” Duke asks.

Shrugging a shoulder, I lean back in my chair. “He beat the shit out of her, left her for dead.”

My words are short, but that's because my blood is boiling beneath my skin. I am pissed the fuck off, but not at anyone but myself.

I should have burned the fucking house down.

I should have fed him to the pigs.

What I shouldn't have done was run the fuck off, but that's exactly what I did, and now I fucked my own woman over.

"But you didn't get rid of the body?"

"I was angry. I was heading to the hospital. Took care of it later, though. They won't find him."

Bond clears his throat, shifting in his seat, but it's Duke who leans forward. His eyes are focused on mine, connected. He lets out a heavy sigh, then stands, turning his back to me before he spins back around.

"I got someone in the department," he says.

I open my mouth to ask him how. His group hasn't been here for that long. Granted, we have some contacts in the police department, too. *Fuck*. Having this shit covered up is going to take more favors than I have saved up to cash in, which means I'm going to owe someone something, and I make it a point to never owe cops any favors.

"I'd rather owe you than the cops," I grunt.

Duke chuckles. "No fucking kidding. I don't blame you. We got a couple markers with them. Won't kill us to use one."

"I don't think I want to know how you got those," I say.

He grins. "Probably not."

Before I can say anything else, the door opens. Legacy and Itch waltz into the room. Itch has a smile on his face, but Legacy looks pissed. I watch as they greet both Duke and Bond, then Legacy lets out a grunt as he sinks down into the leather of the seat across from me.

"I talked to Raul," Legacy announces.

Placing my palms on the table, I slide my fingers across the polished wood, then let my hands fall before I lean back, my brows rising at the idea of him calling Raul.

“You want to elaborate?” I ask.

Legacy grins. “He gave me Cyrus’s last name and the address to his safe house.”

“How?” I ask. “I mean, how does he know where that damn thing is?”

Legacy takes a blunt out of his pocket, passing one to me, then to the others. “We don’t ask questions when we’re getting answers we want.” He laughs. The other men in the room join in, and I shake my head a couple of times.

Reaching for my phone, I decide to respond to Kiplyn’s message.

I GOT THIS, HONEY. DON'T WORRY ABOUT A DAMN THING.

KIPLYN: I'm worried.

Smiling, I sink my teeth into the inside of my cheek before I answer her.

DON'T BE. I GOT THIS.

When I place my phone back on the table, I slowly lift my gaze, feeling as if the entire room of men is staring at me. Looking around the room, I snort. “What?” I ask.

“You’re in love,” Legacy snorts. “Good to see you happy again.”

Lifting my hand, I flip them off before I shift forward. “Let’s focus on Cyrus and not who I’m fuckin’.”

“Lie to yourself all you want, but that’s not just fuckin’, brother.” Duke snorts. “But let’s get this shit handled.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ROADKILL

DUKE AND BOND KNEW A HELL OF A LOT MORE THAN THEY were admitting to about Cyrus and his operation. Cyrus, whose sole job was to get women, train them to be sexual slaves for high-powered assholes, then rent them out to high-powered assholes to abuse before eventually selling them off to different high-powered assholes, has been doing this shit for years.

Cyrus also has several houses all over the country for said sexual training. Phoenix was just one of them. Although, this was his home base and personal residence. The other homes are for training purposes only, and he only goes there when he gets a new girl in that area.

It was the Dead Phoenix's job to find women for him here. He would give them the type of girl he was looking for—their age, eye and hair colors. The rest would be negotiable. Those statics would not. Oh, and the girl either had to be in a position where nobody would look for her, or it would be easy to pay off the family.

I have never wanted to get the club on the up and up more than I do in this moment, hearing all this shit. Because while I don't mind killing someone, I don't mind trafficking drugs and guns, stealing cars doesn't bother me one fucking bit, but this, stealing girls, that I have a goddamn problem with.

“This fuck is dead,” I mumble.

Legacy grunts. “No fucking shit. If for no other reason than he could decide to get a wild hair and come after our women. I can’t have that liability. I didn’t realize...” His words trail off, and as much as I want to tell him that I told him so, I decide to stay quiet. Not even I knew he was quite this bad. So, I couldn’t have told him this much.

“Do we know where he’s hiding now?” Itch asks.

Duke clears his throat, shifting in his seat. “We don’t. He’s got a safe house in Phoenix. We have an address, but I doubt he’s still there.”

“Then let’s go there to be double sure,” I suggest.

Although I wouldn’t call it a suggestion, more like a demand. We are going there. There is no way around it. That is where we are going, and that is what we are doing.

If he is not at the safe house, we’ll go to the next place, and the next, and the next, until we track this fucker down. Unless he leaves this country, he will not be able to hide from me—from us.

“You want to walk in like an old western and just start shooting up the saloon?” Bond asks.

Standing, I place my palms on the wooden table and stare at Bond. He stares right back at me. There is no intimidating anyone in this room, and I’m fine with that. I would think less of him if I could intimidate him anyway.

“Sounds like a good enough plan to me,” I say with a shrug of my shoulder.

The room is silent, then Duke chuckles. “We can’t go in like that, although that would be fucking amazing. But I have a feeling he has heavy surveillance, and he is on edge considering you guys got the drop on him in his home that was heavily guarded.”

Duke is right. As much as I don’t want him to be, he is. Instead of telling him that, I decide to ask him a question. “What’s your plan, then?”

He smiles, his lips curving up, and dips his chin in a nod. “I’m so glad you asked. Now that we know where he possibly is, we need to do a stakeout for a couple of days. See how many people he has in there, who comes and goes and when. Then we regroup and devise a plan.”

“Fuck that,” Itch snaps.

“We get no help from the Dead Phoenix on this, remember that,” Legacy warns, his attention focused on Itch and only Itch. “That is the deal. Whatever we do, it has to be just us.”

Itch growls but doesn’t comment. He knows why the Dead Phoenix can’t help and what his reward is for that, but that doesn’t mean he has to like it. At all. He doesn’t, and frankly, neither do I at this point.

“Well, let’s get started,” I suggest.

Duke and Bond both give me a side-eyed look, no doubt assuming I’m going to go rogue, and they would be right. Although I doubt I’d be the only one. Itch is... well, *itching* to get this shit handled swiftly.

Standing, I pick up my phone from the table, shove it into my pocket, then jerk my chin toward the other men. “Ready?” I ask when they make no motion to move.

“I called in some backup,” Duke announces. “They should be here any second.”

Before I realize what’s happening, three men walk into the room, all dressed in police uniforms. “What the fuck?” I ask. Legacy growls at the same time Itch is on his feet, his hand in his cut, reaching for his shoulder holster.

The cops all raise their hands. One of them takes a step forward. “We are on your side,” they announce. “But we asked Duke to keep you here so we could talk to you before you fuck up our entire goddamn operation.”

This is fucked.

It’s fucked the fuck up, and I don’t like it one bit. “You want to start explaining shit really fucking quickly?” Legacy asks. He looks just as fucking pissed off as I am right now, and

the fact Duke and Bond don't look fazed at all is fucking ridiculous.

"They're going to help us," Duke announces.

"You got markers from them for Kiplyn and this, too?" I ask.

Duke shakes his head once. "Not quite. They've been watching Cyrus for months, and if we run in there our guns blazing, we're going to fuck up all their work."

Shaking my head, I let out a growl. "Nope, no fucking way. This asshole is not going to spend the rest of his life in some jail. No fucking way. I cannot believe you fucked us like this," I state.

The cop in front, the one who seems to be in charge, clears his throat. "You going to let us talk, or are you going to assume you know what the fuck is going on here?" he asks.

As much as I do not want to let any of these assholes talk, I decide I don't have much of a choice. But I also decide that if they don't tell me what I want to hear, I'm doing what I want anyway, all of them be damned.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I dip my chin and look down at him. He rolls his eyes to the ceiling before he and his two men walk over to some chairs and have a seat. "Sit your ass down. Jesus Christ, for criminals, you're a bunch of goddamn babies."

If I could kill them all right now and get away with it, I fucking would. Assholes. All of them. But we're not at the Devil's Hellions clubhouse, and I wouldn't make it out of this building if I started shit right now, so instead of posting up and trying to be a dead Billy Badass, I sit down and stare across the table at the three cops who waltzed in here just moments ago.

KIPLYN

Reese and I have perfected avoidance. Because after we finish cleaning up and moving things around in the salon, we grab

some takeout dinner, head home, eat, and watch a movie, all without bringing up George, her past, or the offer she made the detective.

When midnight rolls around, I take my ass to bed, knowing that this man isn't going to be coming back here anytime soon. He's doing whatever business he's doing. But that doesn't mean I'm okay with any of this. I'm worried, panicked even.

"Kiplyn," Reese calls out as I reach the hallway. Turning my head, I look back over my shoulder at her.

Reese isn't giving me a fake smile right now. She also has a worried expression etched across her face. I wait for whatever it is she is going to say, turning around the rest of the way to look at her straight on.

She clears her throat before she speaks. "George was a rat bastard," she announces. "If you did it, bravo. If you didn't and it was Rusk, then bravo. Not a single person will ever miss that asshole. He had no friends and no family. He was a worthless human. If I have to play a part for one evening to make sure that nothing happens to you, I'm good with that."

"Reese," I whisper, "I don't want you to do anything."

She shakes her head. "It's not the first time, and I'm sure it won't be the last. When you've been on your own as long as I have, you figure out how the world works, and sometimes, you have to play the game. It's no different than you and George and the shit you had to shovel with him."

"Except you don't have to do anything. Not about this. Please," I beg.

There is a moment of silence. One where I stare at her, silently begging and pleading for her to just forget the whole thing, but she doesn't. Instead, she tilts her head to the side, smiles, then lets out a low laugh.

"Babe. I got this. Trust your bestie."

I hate this. I won't be able to talk her out of anything, I can see that now, but what I can do is delay things. Maybe if Rusk can take care of this before she does anything, I can stop her

altogether. I don't want her to do this, and I also don't want it on my conscience that she felt the need to do this to save me.

"Give it a couple days?" I ask.

She laughs, her eyes searching mine before she speaks. "You're going to try and save this, aren't you?"

"Me?" I ask, placing my hand against the center of my chest. "I can't do anything, but I told Rusk about the detective, and I think he can maybe help."

She arches a brow, a question clearly on the tip of her tongue, but she doesn't ask it. Instead, she dips her chin in a nod just as my phone buzzes in my hand. I'm surprised to be getting any kind of notification at this time of night, so I quickly look down at the screen.

It's Henli.

I haven't spoken to her since I left the clubhouse, so I'm surprised to see her text.

HENLI: You might need to come back to the clubhouse for lockdown. There is talk about it. Brick texted me a few minutes ago.

Flicking my gaze from the phone to Reese, I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, debating on telling her what Henli said, then I decide she hasn't really told me any kind of secret, so I say it.

"Henli says they might be going on lockdown again. That I might have to go back there."

Her eyes widen, and her lips part. I hear her sharp intake of breath, then she lets it out in a whoosh. "What the hell is going on there?" she asks.

Instead of answering her, which would be a simple '*I have no clue,*' I decide to respond to Henli's text.

Do you know what's going on?

Biting the inside of my cheek, I watch my phone and wait for her to answer me. The three little dots bubble pops up, and

I can't look away. I have to know if this involves me, because honestly, I'm tired of being involved in things at this point, and the detective showing up today was just the tipping point.

HENLI: It's something to do with that guy who had Roadkill and Itch. I don't know, but now they're saying we could all be targets.

I'm reading the text out loud to Reese, who gasps. My phone starts buzzing in my hand, and I touch the little green circle to answer it because it's Rusk.

"Is everything okay?" I ask immediately.

He doesn't speak right away. He lets out a low chuckle, then clears his throat. "Old lady grapevine of two is already working, isn't it?" he asks.

He's not wrong, but I don't confirm that. "What is happening?" I ask on a hiss.

Rusk hums, then lets out a heavy sigh. "It's gonna be hairy here for a few days probably. I want you at the clubhouse just as a safety precaution. If you need to leave for any reason, one of the guys will be with you at all times."

"What about Reese?"

There is a scratching sound, then some muffled voices, and I realize he's covered the receiving end of his phone. I hear him murmuring to someone, but I can't make out any of the words, then the rustling sound happens again, and I hear him clear his throat.

"She can go, too. When she goes to work, though, I want you to go with her, and you'll have a prospect or brother with you the whole time at the salon. That way, you're protected together and in one place."

I think about telling him that I want to go down to the school to get all signed up but decide I can put that off for another week or so. The new semester doesn't start for a month anyway.

"Is everything going to be okay?" I ask on a hushed whisper.

“It’s all going to be good, honey. Just cleaning this shit up.”

“And the George stuff?” I ask.

“Also cleaning that up. I’m working on it. You pack a bag and be a good girl, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I whisper.

“Head over there tonight. They’re waiting for you.”

He ends the call. I lift my eyes to meet Reese’s. “Apparently, shit is going down, and we need to stay at the clubhouse. You’re coming, too. Pack a bag.”

She opens her mouth to argue but then snaps it closed. “Okay, then.”

I laugh. “Yeah, okay, then. I’ll give you all the details I have on the way there,” I inform her. She nods, then we both hurry to our rooms, and at midnight, we pack bags to live at this biker clubhouse for an indeterminate amount of time.

I should probably be scared, maybe even worried, but to be honest, I think I am okay with this. It’s safe there, and I know they’ll protect us.

The last thing I want to do is be kidnapped again.

No way, no how.

I don’t care if Dutch was pretending to protect me. It’s all a no thank you for me. So, I’m not going to argue and fight when Rusk tells me to go down to that clubhouse and hang out. I will just skip my ass down there—happily.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ROADKILL

“KIPLYN AND REESE ARE HEADED TO THE CLUBHOUSE tonight,” I announce, looking over at Legacy. He dips his chin, then clears his voice before he looks at Duke and Bond.

“We’re all good?” he asks.

They nod once, then shift their attention to the three cops. “We’re good?” he asks them.

Their gazes flick around the room before they dip their own chins in a single simultaneous nod. “We’re good,” they announce. “Let’s get this shit done.”

No other words are spoken. Weapons are on their way from Volt. They should be arriving any moment. There is a moment of silence where we all stand up and stare at one another, then Duke and Bond turn toward the door and begin to walk out. The cops follow suit behind them, and it’s me, Itch, and Legacy left.

We share glances with one another before we decide to follow them as well. As much as I want to say fuck them all and go rogue exactly like they think I will, I am not going to put Kiplyn and Henli in danger, and that’s exactly what could happen.

I want to play all of this safe. I want Cyrus to suffer, I want him to die, but not at the expense of the women’s safety. Priority is the club, and that includes the women of the club. I

also don't want to put the other brothers in danger, which, if this asshole's reach is anything near what they're claiming it is, could happen easily.

As much as I want to tell everyone to fuck off and do what I want to do, I have to remember that while we live free and easy, while we don't live under the normal rules of society, there are still rules.

Walking into the bar area, I look around and notice there are a lot more men here than a few hours ago when this whole thing started. Bond thrusts his hand toward me, a beer firmly in place. I jerk my chin, taking it from his grasp.

"We want Cyrus brought down as much as you do. The cops do, too. They don't give a fuck about Cyrus as much as they do his contacts. Retribution will be dealt. I just want you to know that."

Lifting the bottle to my lips, I look at him. "Like I said, my concern is Cyrus. Do I want the other shit to stop? Yeah, I do. But I am not here to be some kind of vigilante. I just want that asshole to suffer for what he did to me and Itch."

One of the cops appears in the middle of my sentence, but I don't stop speaking. When I'm finished, he decides he's going to say something. "He's yours, Roadkill. We don't want him. We don't want to know what happens to him. We don't give a shit."

"You just want the glory from bringing the big players down?" I ask.

His lips twitch into a grin. "Exactly," he agrees. "The bigger the player, the bigger the credit and promotion. Cyrus is big, but he's not who we want."

"I'm trusting you in this because Duke and Bond trust you," Legacy murmurs. "Hard for me, because I don't know a fucking thing about any of you."

The cop who has been doing all the talking, his lips pull up into a smirk, then he leans forward slightly, his eyes flicking from Legacy to me. "Heard a detective was asking questions about your old lady's ex-husband?"

Fucking hell.

I try not to show my surprise, but I'm sure I can't hide it completely. "Yeah?" I say when he doesn't continue immediately.

"He ain't looking for your woman or you. Case is closed. Fucker got himself beat up because he was a goddamn addict. Assuming his dealer beat the shit out of him because he didn't pay. Got rid of him somewhere undisclosed, too."

"Sounds like George."

He nods, then turns and walks away. That was him building trust. Can't beat that shit with a stick. Digging into my pocket, I take out my phone and send Kiplyn a text. I'm surprised to see there is a text from her already that I missed.

KIPLYN: We made it.

George situation is taken care of.

KIPLYN: Yay! When will you be back here?

Smiling, I sink my teeth into my bottom lip and quickly slide my thumb over the screen to respond to the text.

Gonna be a few days, honey. You and Reese use my room.

KIPLYN: Okay

The three little dots pop back up, but I shove my phone into my pocket as a woman wearing absolutely fucking nothing but a scrap of fabric she's trying to pull off as panties appears in front of me.

"Want to have some fun?" she asks.

Glancing around, I realize I'm standing by myself, the rest of the men having scattered off to other conversations, maybe even to grab a sweet butt for the night. We aren't going to do shit about this situation with Cyrus for a few more hours, so there's a bit of time to kill.

“I’m good, babe.”

She smiles, leaning forward slightly, her bare tits resting against my forearm. I look down then lift my gaze back up to meet hers as I arch a brow.

“You sure? Devil’s Hellions in the clubhouse isn’t something we get to see often. Thought you might like a treat.”

Normally, I would have already taken her up on that, bent her over, and been balls deep inside of her before she even finished her first sentence. However, Kiplyn made it very clear her anger and hatred for me stemmed from me fucking other women.

So, I’m going to have to decline the offers of sweet butts, especially when she’s ready and willing back at home. Taking half of a step backward, I jerk my chin toward Itch, whose back is facing me.

“That guy right there. He could use some fun. Name’s Itch.”

Without another word, I turn around and walk toward the pool tables, where I see Legacy hanging out.

“You turned easy pussy down,” Legacy announces, as if I don’t know what the fuck I just did. Thankfully, he doesn’t say that loud enough for anyone else to hear, because that would be a legit mark to my street cred.

“I did,” I agree.

“Good move.”

KIPLYN

Rusk doesn’t message me back, but I don’t mind. I’m sure he’s busy. Whatever it is that he’s doing, he has already done more than I ever could have asked of him. I look at Reese and give her a smile.

She frowns, sitting cross-legged in the middle of Rusk’s bed. We made sure to change sheets and picked up a few

things in the room so it was clean for however many days we'll be here.

“You don't have to go out with that guy. Rusk said it's all handled with him and the George situation,” I announce.

She looks down at her lap, then lifts her gaze back up to meet mine. “Yeah?” she asks, but she doesn't seem relieved. Maybe she is a little disappointed. I don't understand it.

Although, I didn't understand why she would try and sleep with him in this situation to begin with. She didn't have to, and I don't think it would have really stopped him from doing his job. He seemed pretty focused.

“Are you disappointed?” I ask.

She shrugs a shoulder. “I think I am. I was kind of looking forward to that,” she admits.

“I mean, you can do whatever you want with him,” I say, pointing out the facts. “If you want to go out with him, go out with him.”

She lets out a sigh, then lies back on the pillow and looks up at the ceiling. “I'm fucked-up,” she whispers. “I don't date because I like things to be dangerous, and a regular date just doesn't work for me. I can't get excited about someone if it's not in some kind of tumultuous situation.”

That is fucked-up, but also, I understand it. “So, that's probably some kind of trauma reaction or something, I'm sure,” I murmur.

“Without a doubt,” she says, agreeing with me.

“I understand that,” I whisper as I lie down next to her.

She rolls over to face me, but I stay on my back and stare at the ceiling. The darkness consumes the room. I don't know what to say to make this better, but at the same time, I don't think I really need to say anything either.

“I'll find my danger somewhere, but it's not in that detective,” she whispers. I choose to stay quiet instead of giving her my two cents. “Maybe one of these guys here will be just what the doctor ordered.”

“If there were dangerous guys anywhere, this is definitely where you would find them,” I say.

She laughs. “Yeah,” she whispers. “That’s why I’ve been dying to party here.”

We don’t say anything else about men and dating. I don’t think anything else really needs to be said. Instead, I shift over onto my side and close my eyes.

What I don’t do is fall asleep.

I start to think, and when I do, it’s about the one topic I have been avoiding thinking about for weeks.

George Robbins.

I imagine his dead body lying there in his shithole of a house that he no doubt didn’t take care of after I left him. I think about his parents and how they loved that house and would have been so angry to see it in the shape it was in.

I wonder what is going to happen to his house. I think Rusk is his closest living relative, and I doubt he wants anything to do with the place or the money he could get from it. I know I don’t want a damn thing to do with George.

Anger fills me at the memory of the fact that I allowed that man to hurt me, to almost kill me. I allowed it. I stayed with him for years. I feel weak all over again. I hate myself all over again.

Anxiety begins to fill me.

Memories and pain from the past, the self-loathing that I felt for years, it becomes almost all-consuming. My heart starts to race, slamming against my chest, and I throw my legs over the side of the bed as I stand.

Looking behind me, I glance at Reese to see if I’ve woken her up, but her mouth is open as she snores slightly. I smile and slip out of the room as quietly as possible, then I head down to the bar area.

The music is still playing softly. There are a few people walking around, but for the most part, the place is empty. I try not to look at anything that could be happening in the bar area,

considering when we came in here tonight, there was a girl completely naked and riding one of the guys.

Making my way into the kitchen, I open the fridge and grab a bottle of water, closing it with a sigh as I walk to the counter and lean my ass against the edge. I only have one sip of water down before the door opens and a very tired-looking and messy-haired Henli shuffles in.

She stops, looks at me, then smiles sleepily. “Hey,” she softly calls out.

“Hey,” I say with a grin. “Can’t sleep?”

She hums. “I don’t think I will ever get used to this stuff. Him being gone, me sleeping here. This whole lockdown thing. It’s foreign.”

It is. This is nothing like what I’ve ever experienced before, but having had nothing but trauma my entire life, aside from the time I was with Rusk when we were young, I can’t deny that I am a bit glad to have this foreign experience.

“I don’t mind it too much,” I say.

She smiles. “Yeah, it’s not horrible. Especially since they let us out during the day,” she says with a laugh. “I’d rather be here than anywhere else without him.”

“Yeah,” I whisper. “Can you tell me if it gets easier to trust them? All the women, and the secrets and running around to destinations unknown. I am having a hard time.”

She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, then releases the grasp and smiles. “It’s hard, right? Never really knowing. It’s not like we get a breakdown of their day, their nights, any of it. But I tell myself that he wouldn’t hurt me like that. And I think Roadkill knows it would hurt you.”

“He does,” I whisper. “It’s still hard.”

“It’ll take time. It has taken us a long time to get to where we are. It hasn’t always been perfect, and it never will be. Not with anyone, but especially not with these men.”

Henli is right. It will take time. But I want it all. Every minute of it. I want it to work out and be perfect. I want this

life with him. Every beautiful chaotic thing it brings us. I want to smile and laugh. I want to be happy.

And this man, even though I'm still angry, even though at times I hate him for what he did to me, what I allowed to happen back then, he makes me happier than I've ever been.

Happier than I thought I could ever be.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ROADKILL

THE SAFE HOUSE ISN'T MUCH OF A SAFE ANYTHING. IT'S completely in the open, just a little house in a middle-of-the-road neighborhood. Nothing special at all. On a quick sweep of the eves, I don't see any cameras.

"This can't be right," I murmur, looking at Legacy, whose eyes are shifting around as well. He doesn't answer me right away, his focus on the front door.

He lets out a grunt, then he jerks his chin toward Duke, who is standing a few feet away, having parked his bike down the street and walked up here. "It doesn't seem right. This can't be the super secure place they claim. Let's see what they say."

Duke slowly walks toward us, an expression of confusion plastered all over his face, and it's in this instant that I realize we're being played. He is just as confused as we are, and that shit does not sit right with me at all.

He opens his mouth, but instead of words coming out, I hear sirens nearby. "We've been fucked over," I grind out.

Turning my head, I look behind Duke, who is still standing in front of me with his lips parted in awe and his eyes open wide. There are four police cars barreling toward us. I can't run.

Even if I started my bike and took off in this exact second, I wouldn't make it. They would catch me. And if by chance I got away, those cops who were at the clubhouse tonight would know exactly where to find me.

"I had no goddamn idea," Duke announces.

This club is supposed to be this gigantic and huge badass club. They're supposed to be dangerous and more involved in the underworld than we are, and right now, the police are headed toward us because they trusted someone they shouldn't. I guess that shit can literally happen to anyone.

As soon as the police cars come to a screeching halt, it's as if they've already decided which ones are going to go after us and which ones are going to the house. Half head in our direction, their guns pointed at our bodies.

"On the fucking ground," one officer shouts.

We all do as we're told. We could fight them, we could possibly try to get out of this, but being on the run, being wanted, that's not who we are. I'd much rather be able to blackmail and walk free.

None of us says a fucking word—not Duke, not Bond, none of us. But I do hear Itch growl when he's cuffed and brought to standing. We're all shoved into police cruisers, three men deep, and driven away.

I assume we'll be taken to the county jail and that our bikes will be impounded. "What happens to our bikes?" Legacy asks.

He's sitting next to me. I can feel him trembling, no doubt thinking about the fact that this would be his second conviction if we're found guilty of whatever the fuck they're arresting us for. He does not want to go back there, not ever, but especially not right now, not now that his woman is having his kid.

"You'll get them back..." the driver replies ominously.

I may not know where the local jail is, but when we turn down a desolate, dark road that feels like it could be dirt and the car stops, every hair on the back of my neck stands at

attention. The car is shifted into park. I turn my head, noticing that the other police cars are behind us, so at least there is that.

The police all gather in the front of the lead car—ours—the headlights illuminating them as they chat. Then, from the other direction, several large SUVs come barreling toward us, out of fucking nowhere.

“What the actual fuck?” I hiss.

“I’m wondering the same damn thing,” Duke growls.

“Brother, these are your fucking friends. What the fuck is happening here?” Legacy asks.

Which I’m glad for, because I don’t have the words right now to ask him anything. If my wrists weren’t cuffed, there is no doubt in my mind I would be beating the absolute fuck out of Duke.

I am so fucking pissed at myself for even going to him. If I could have found this asshole without ever going to the Hell’s Souls, I wouldn’t be here right now. But I didn’t see any other way, and I’m being fucked over for lack of imagination and my inability to have patience.

“I wish I knew what the fuck was happening. Those cops I had at the clubhouse, they’ve never been a problem, and we’ve done more than one deal together. This shit has never happened before.”

The SUVs stop right in front of the cops who are gathered ’round chatting. I watch as a man in a suit exits the first one. I don’t recognize him immediately, but Legacy sucks in a breath beside me. I turn to him to ask him who the fuck that is, but before I can get any words out, the car doors are opened and we’re all hauled out of the car.

“Legacy,” a deep voice murmurs.

“Raul,” he says.

The cops walk around, unlocking our cuffs. I don’t understand what’s happening here. The last I heard, Raul was still in jail. Raul, the leader of the Dead Phoenix and the man

who was friends with Legacy when he was in jail a couple of years ago.

“I’m out. Good behavior,” he says with a wink.

“What’s with the dramatics?” Duke asks.

Both Duke and Legacy work with Raul for different things. Plus, there’s the fact that we handed Dutch off to them just a few weeks ago when I really wanted to kill that fucker for kidnapping Kiplyn. It’s a fucked-up web, and I’m just about tired of being part of it at this point.

“The Feds let me out to deliver Cyrus along with his associates to them. If you were there, you were going to get wrapped up in that shit. It was going down tonight. The officers who have been watching Cyrus had no fucking clue.”

Well, at least they had no idea, so we don’t need to kill a bunch of cops. There’s that.

“So, what happens now? Cyrus beats the fuck out of one of my men, almost kills him, kidnaps another, and sits in a cushy federal prison for the rest of his life?” Legacy asks. “I do not like the sound of that,” he adds.

Raul shrugs a shoulder. “You may not like it, but sometimes, we have to eat shit we do not like. I wanted you to take him out as badly as anyone, but the reason I’m standing here right now is because they came to me with a deal.”

“Why now?” I ask.

It doesn’t make sense to me. Why the hell would all of this happen right now? There is something that just doesn’t add up here, but I don’t want to stand around in the middle of the goddamn Arizona desert in the wee hours of the morning to discuss any of it.

What I want to do is get back to my woman—now.

“Can’t say,” Raul murmurs. “Maybe coincidence, maybe some planned shit, maybe divine intervention. All I know is that I couldn’t let my two partners get fucked in the process of whatever the hell the Feds are doing.”

Thank God for that.

“Piper?” Itch asks, his low growling voice coming from a few feet away.

Raul flicks his gaze behind my shoulder and stares at Itch. I watch his face, trying to read him, but I can’t figure out what he’s thinking at all. I hold my breath, wondering what the fuck he’s going to tell Itch. Because if he takes back what he said, I think Itch might actually lose his shit.

Raul lifts his hand, motioning for Itch to come over to him. He does, which surprises me because Itch isn’t really someone who would just follow someone’s command. The two of them walk away from the rest of the men standing around, and I watch as they bend their heads and talk.

“This is weird as fuck,” I murmur under my breath.

Duke snorts, but it’s Legacy who speaks. “It is. But I know Raul. He doesn’t always say what he’s doing. He works behind the scenes. He’s got something going on, and he is going to make sure we have what we want out of the deal.”

“I want Cyrus’s head,” I state.

“Yeah,” Duke grunts. “Right now, I’m thinking that isn’t going to happen right away.”

KIPLYN

There is silence. The club is quiet. Henli has gone to bed, but I can’t sleep. Staying in the kitchen, I stare out the small window above the sink. I wonder if this is really the life I should be living. Is this the life Rusk should be living? Doesn’t he deserve better?

Doubt creeps up, sliding into my throat and threatening to choke me. Not because I don’t want Rusk, but because I’m not sure if this is where I should be in my life. He deserves someone better.

Someone he can love wholeheartedly. Someone who didn’t hate him for a decade. Someone who didn’t marry his cousin out of some misplaced act of revenge. Someone who wants all his babies.

I'm lost in my thoughts, trying to figure out how I'm going to leave this man... again, when I feel fingers wrap around my waist. I gasp, my heart slamming against my chest, and try to figure out how I'm going to get out of this person's grasp. Try to figure out *everything* right this second, when I feel a pair of lips on the side of my neck and hear a sexy voice murmur against my skin.

"What are you doing in here, honey?"

"Thinking," I exhale.

He hums, his tongue sneaking out to taste my skin. "At four in the morning?" he asks as his hand slides around my hip and presses against the center of my lower belly.

"Yeah."

My words are breathy and rough. He moves his hand and slides his fingers beneath the band of my shorts, gently touching my stomach before he dives his entire hand between my legs.

He cups my pussy, holding me firmly there as his lips move up to my earlobe, sucking me there and nibbling on me.

"Rusk," I whimper.

Rusk's hand shifts, his finger hooking the center of my panties to the side so he has access to my bare skin, then he slips two fingers inside of me. He buries them there but does not move.

My own fingers grip the edge of the sink, the cool porcelain feeling as if it may crumble beneath my grasp.

"I'm going to fuck you in here, right here, right now, Kiplyn. Do you know why?" he asks.

My heart slams against my chest, over and over, threatening to fall out into the sink I'm now slightly leaning over, his hips pinning mine to the edge. I'm going to have bruises, and I don't care. I couldn't move even if I wanted to.

This is where I belong.

This is where I've always belonged.

Good or bad, hate or love, there is nowhere else for me.

With his free hand, he pulls my shorts and panties down, and without a single word of instruction, I tip my hips backward. I need to feel him inside of me right this second. His fingers aren't enough. I need to be stretched and filled like only he can do.

Rusk slips his fingers from inside of me but keeps his hand between my legs, his fingers touching my clit for a moment before he begins to rub firm circles there.

My eyes flutter closed. My fingers stop gripping the edge of the porcelain, knowing that if it's going to break, it's going to happen right now. I am without a doubt testing its quality.

I don't answer his question from earlier, hoping he'll just do what he said he was going to without any more talking because I can't form an actual thought right now, but he isn't finished speaking.

"Kiplyn," he rasps against the shell of my ear, "do you know why I'm going to fuck you right here and now?" he asks.

"No," I exhale.

"Because you're mine. *All mine*. You've always been mine, haven't you?" he asks, his fingers playing between my legs and his other hand wrapping around the front of my throat. I don't answer, but then he pinches my clit. "Haven't you?" he asks in a more demanding tone.

"Yes," I cry out.

Thankfully, he doesn't ask me anything else. He fucks me against the kitchen sink, and it's delightfully passionate. It's mind-blowing. I know that without a doubt, no matter where we are, if we're together... that is all that matters.

All my hesitations just... *vanish*.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

ROADKILL

ME, ITCH, AND LEGACY SHARE GLANCES WITH ONE ANOTHER, none of us really sure what the fuck to do now. Our plans of vengeance have been thwarted, though I should not be surprised.

It was Raul's men who hauled Dutch off to deal with him themselves. Why the fuck would they let us have Cyrus? It seems like they have some kind of hold on this shit, some plan, and they're not letting us in on it. Which is pissing me right the fuck off.

"What did he say?" Legacy asks, finally breaking the silence, his attention focused on Itch.

Itch clears his throat, then takes a step backward, lifting his hand and sliding his fingers through his hair. We all watch, every single one of us curious as fuck as to what Raul said to him in the desert just a few hours ago.

Their conversation was more than just a word or two. There was depth there, and we're all curious as to what it entailed. Not just because we've been on edge since Warden betrayed everyone, but also because Raul just fucking appeared out of jail and is running shit now.

"He asked if I was going to take care of Piper, treat her right and all that shit. I said I would, and he told me he would

ensure Cyrus received what was owed to him. That it was done now, and Piper was mine to take care of.”

Red-hot anger flows through me instantly at his words.

Hell no.

Oh, hell fucking no.

I open my mouth to say just that when Legacy speaks. “I’ll be talking to him.”

Snapping my lips closed, I decide to let Legacy handle this. He’s never let me down before. I can tell that his whole situation pisses him off as much as it does me, and he also looks uncomfortable as fuck.

“What do we do about the Feds?” I ask.

Legacy clears his throat but doesn’t say anything immediately. He looks down at his desk. Papers are strewn all around, and I’m sure there are some important things there, but I give no fucks at all about them. I’m ready to burn this whole bitch to the ground. I am pissed the fuck off.

“Nothing to do,” he murmurs. “They aren’t going to do shit to us. Raul saved our asses on that.”

Leaning forward, I slam my palms down on his desk, the solid surface of the wood unforgiving and stinging my hands.

“Bullshit,” I bark. “Duke and Bond, they sent us there to fuck with us, too, like Raul. Because that’s what the fuck was going on. We were fucked with and made to look like bitches. Like weak fucking bitches.”

Itch growls but doesn’t say anything. Then Volt, who has been leaning against the door since this little meeting started, pushes off it and walks toward us, his boots thudding against the floor with each heavy step he takes.

“We were made to look like bitches, Legacy,” Volt agrees, his voice low and even. “Bitches standing around holding our dicks. This whole situation Dutch put us in. It was bullshit to begin with. We should have been able to take his ass out, along with Cyrus. This Raul? His people? The Dead Phoenix? They’re untrustworthy as fuck.”

“They are,” Itch states. “I want this shit with Piper in writing. You make that happen?” he asks, arching a brow toward Legacy.

“This shit with the Feds makes me nervous as fuck,” I grind out.

“Yeah,” Legacy grunts as he leans back in his chair, his gaze flicking between us before it lands on me. “It makes me nervous as fuck, too, but the Dead Phoenix have more power than we do in a business I want no part of. They helped me out when Henli was on her own. I’m not going to fuck them over in any way.”

I understand where he’s coming from, and I want to agree with him because Raul and his men helped Legacy out in a time when ours couldn’t, or wouldn’t, whatever the fuck you want to call it.

But that isn’t now, and we’ve been selling and transporting product for them. It’s not like we haven’t been working with them on this fucking shit. But Dutch and Cyrus? There is no number of favors that should be allowed in this situation.

I don’t give a fuck what Raul did for Legacy. Our entire club did not agree to his shit, and there should be no goddamn free passes.

Dutch kidnapped my woman.

Cyrus beat the fuck out of Itch.

That supersedes anything else in my opinion, not to mention the fact that they had the goddamn Feds show up when we were there to get Cyrus.

He was in our grasp.

Shaking my head, I lean forward a little more. My hands still flat on the desk. “I don’t give a fuck what he did years ago. I give a fuck what he’s doin’ right now.”

Legacy lifts his hand, runs his palm down his face, then shakes his head slowly. “Fuck,” he hisses. “You’re right. We schedule a meet. Tomorrow.”

“And what?” I ask with a snort as I straighten, crossing my arms over my chest, looking down my nose at him. “What?” I ask again.

Legacy stands and places his hands on the table, assuming the position I just held. He sucks in a breath, then shakes his head once. His gaze lifts, and his eyes search mine before he speaks. His words come out slowly and with purposeful meaning.

“We just gotta see what he says. You think I don’t want an explanation? You think I like standing out in the middle of the street when a bunch of cops come barreling toward me? You think I want to look like a pussy out there? You think I wanted to be in goddamn handcuffs ever again?”

“What the fuck are we going to do about it?” Volt asks.

Legacy’s lips curve up into a grin. He straightens then clears his throat. “We’re going to meet with Raul, see what he has to say, then we’re going to nod, have him sign some papers about Piper, and we’re going to talk to Hell’s Souls.”

“Then we’re going to fuck them?” I ask.

There is a moment of silence before he lets out a laugh. “Can’t really fuck them, but we can make sure that Cyrus and Dutch meet their ends the way we want them to.”

“The Feds?” Itch asks.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there,” Legacy murmurs.

KIPLYN

“So, we’re just free to do as we wish?” Reese asks.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “We’re free.”

She looks around, then lets out a sigh. “Okay.”

Grabbing my purse, I slide my feet into my shoes as I make my way toward her. I stop next to her and turn my head, my eyes widening. “Ready?” I ask.

“I’m disappointed,” she announces. “I wanted a hot biker to follow me around,” Reese murmurs. “But I guess it’s okay, because whatever danger there was is gone now, right?”

“Right,” I agree, shooting her a smile.

Together we leave the clubhouse. The place is quiet, and I can’t decide if it’s because they’re still asleep or if they’re off doing something. I don’t see the sleeping naked bodies lying around that I did earlier this morning when I couldn’t sleep, so maybe they’re gone doing whatever it is they consider business.

We climb into Reese’s car, and she heads toward town. “Coffee, because I can’t handle whatever that shit was in that kitchen,” she murmurs.

“You went to the kitchen?” I ask.

There is a moment of silence... uncomfortable silence, and that is when she tells me something I truly wish she would have never said to me. I could go my whole life without knowing this tidbit of information. But Reese tells me anyway because that’s who she is.

“I saw your man fucking you down, girl. Hot.”

“Reese,” I cry.

She laughs as she speeds the car down the old dirt and gravel road, dust, sand, and rocks flying behind us like a rainbow. She doesn’t slow down until we reach town, but I don’t mind. I haven’t died from embarrassment, so maybe we’ll get in a wreck, and I can die then, so that I never have to live with the knowledge that Reese saw me and Rusk having sex.

“Don’t be embarrassed. Seriously, it was hot. And I didn’t watch long. I have to admit, I was surprised to see you, though.”

She turns to the left and straight into the coffee drive-thru line. My stomach growls at the thought of one of their streusel-topped cinnamon banana muffins.

They are to die for.

I also really need some good coffee. I didn't sleep at all last night, and I'm starting to get one of those too-tired headaches. So, instead of responding to her about the hotness, which I'm sure it wasn't at all, I decide to plead with her.

"I want this conversation to end and nobody ever to think about it or bring it up again. Is that possible?"

Reese turns to me, her lips curved up into a grin, and nods once. "I can see what I can do, but I make zero promises about the not thinking about it part."

Closing my eyes, I let out a heavy sigh at the same time she laughs. Of course, she laughs. We order our food, and I am so thankful the muffin is in stock. I don't think I could have handled it not being in stock—it's already been a damn day.

The shop comes into view, and I gather the food and coffee drink tray as Reese parks in her usual spot up front. I can't believe this is going to be my life. That I'm going to be working here, living this life day in and day out and not cleaning houses and buildings on a regular basis.

I'm lost in thoughts of the future, of the present, all of which I didn't think could or would happen this way as we walk up to the front door of the salon. I'm behind Reese, and when she stops, I run into her back and almost drop everything in my hands.

"What the—"

"Reese and Kiplyn," a deep, smooth voice purrs.

Looking around Reese's shoulder, I gasp at the sight in front of me. I was hoping to never see him again. Not that I did anything wrong, but I'm afraid he's going to find out that Rusk did, and there is no way that I want him to get in trouble for defending me.

Detective Carlson.

"Detective," Reese says, purring right back at him. I watch as his cheeks tint pink. He clears his throat, then stares at her for a long lingering moment before he shifts his attention to me.

“I don’t know how you did it or who you know, but I’ve been told to drop the case and that it is now closed.”

I don’t visibly show my relief, but inside I’m sighing, and my shoulders are sagging with pure relief that this situation is done. George is gone, he won’t be coming back to hurt me ever again, Rusk is safe, and I’m finally able to move forward.

I’m still waiting for that guilty feeling to take over about George, about his murder, but it doesn’t. I’m sure that makes me just as horrible of a person as he is, but at the same time, he tried to kill me. He wouldn’t have cared if I lived or died. He would have been happier if I had died.

Instead of responding to his words, I stay quiet and watch him. Sucking in a breath, I shake my head slowly and just stare at him.

He snorts, curling his lip in disgust, then shifts his attention back to Reese, and as if he’s a chameleon, I watch his entire face shift and morph. He gives her a sweet smile, then lifts his hand and slides the back of his palm down her cheek.

“What about that date this weekend? Friday night?” he asks.

I expect her to tell him to go to hell, mainly because I know she didn’t want anything to do with him in the first place, but she surprises me when she lifts her hand and wraps her fingers around his wrist before she whispers all breathlessly.

“Pick me up here. I get off at seven.”

His smile grows even wider. “I’ll be here,” he murmurs.

Then, as if all is right in his world, he takes a step back, spins around, and is gone. I open my mouth to ask her what the hell is going on, but she lifts her hand and shakes her head.

“Inside,” she hisses.

I do as she demands and slip inside the salon with her. But my first question is, without a doubt... “*What the actual hell?*”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

ROADKILL

RAUL, OF COURSE, CAN'T MEET WITH US THIS FUCKING minute, so instead of sitting around the clubhouse being pissed off at the situation at hand, I decide to go to the warehouse and work on some cars. I know that Agony, our enforcer, got a brand-new Ford Bronco in, and I've been dying to see the inside of those things.

Before I leave the club, I send Kiplyn a message. I can't stop thinking about this morning. Her in that kitchen, against that sink, it was fucking phenomenal. I'll never forget that, not in a million years.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I send her a text.

YOU DOIN' GOOD TODAY? CAN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT EARLIER.

She reads the message immediately but doesn't respond. I wait for a moment, watching those little dots in the message app, until she finally responds.

KIPLYN: Reese saw us this morning.

I burst out laughing. Holy shit.

KIPLYN: It's not funny.

HOW DID YOU KNOW I WAS LAUGHING?

KIPLYN: Because I know you, Rusk Wilson!

Smiling, I sink my teeth into my bottom lip as I respond.

I DID LAUGH, CAUSE THAT SHIT IS HILARIOUS.

She doesn't respond to me, and I have to laugh all over again, because she's fucking embarrassed about this shit, I know it.

Which I find not only funny but cute and sweet as well. She will always be the sweet Kiplyn she was when we met. Granted, she's been through hell since then, but her core hasn't changed, and that's why I love her.

YOU GOT YOUR SCHOOL SHIT HANDLED? WE'LL GO DOWN THIS AFTERNOON AND TURN IT ALL IN. I'LL PAY THE BILL.

Shoving my phone into my pocket, I start my bike's engine and take off toward the warehouse. I need to get my hands dirty. I need to blow off some steam. It doesn't take me long to get there. The place looks empty save for Agony's bike. I park next to him, kill the engine, then head inside.

Agony is deep into tearing the Bronco apart. He's got all the doors open, and half his body is inside of the damn thing.

"Where'd you get that?" I ask.

He stops, turning his head to look back at me, and gives me a grin. "Fancy as fuck shopping center in Phoenix."

"You better be careful doing that shit. Those places have fucking cameras."

He snorts. "I know where they all are, which is why I got this one parked toward the back corner and away from the cameras."

Shaking my head, I move closer to him. This isn't a stock-new Bronco at all. It's completely fucking tricked out.

“You know they got some serious computer shit on these newer cars, too. I don’t know why you guys keep grabbing them. Go for the old ones and then just Frankenstein them,” I suggest. “It’s not like we get to keep them. These are for work only.”

Agony shrugs a shoulder. “Yeah. We should probably have some more talks about that. But this one, it just looked sexy sitting out there,” he murmurs.

I don’t harp on him too badly, because I’ve stolen some pretty sick rides in my day. But I should make a mental note to bring that up in church after we deal with Raul. I feel my pocket vibrate and reach inside to take my phone out, my lips curved up into a grin.

KIPLYN: I’ll pay you back. This is so much.

YOU WON’T.

Walking over to the coveralls that are hanging in the corner, I grab a pair, put them on, then get to work. Agony and I spend the rest of the afternoon working on the Bronco and getting ready to load it up with product.

When four rolls around, I decide I need to leave and go get Kiplyn. “I’m heading out,” I shout over the welder.

Agony turns it off, lifts his mask, and looks over at me. “Already?” he asks.

“We’ve been working for at least five hours,” I say. “I have to take Kiplyn down to the beauty school. She’s enrolling.”

Agony shakes his head a couple of times. “You and Legacy, hell, even Itch, are crazy as fuck. I wouldn’t get a damn old lady, citizen wife, none of that shit. Not now, not fucking ever.”

“You don’t think so?” I ask.

He lets out a grunt, then flips his shield back on, fires up his welder, and gets back to work. I laugh, leaving the clubhouse knowing he’s probably going to be the next to fall. He is way too adamant about not.

As I ride to the salon, I can't wipe the smile off my lips. This is exactly what I never thought I wanted, and yet it's everything I need right now—forever. Kiplyn was always meant to be mine. I was just too fucking stupid to make it happen back in the day, but I'm not ever going to let her go now.

After parking my bike next to Reese's car, I make my way into the salon. There are a few women sitting around. Reese is waving her hands around as if she's in the middle of a good story, and then there is Kiplyn with a broom in her hand.

She looks up at me, her eyes finding mine, and a small smile instantly plays on her lips. She leans her broom against the wall before she wipes her hands on her black apron and makes her way toward me.

Before a single fucking word is spoken, as soon as she's close enough, I reach out and cup her cheeks with my hands before I bend my neck slightly and touch my mouth to hers. Her intake of breath, her fingers wrapping around my wrists, it's almost too much. A growl escapes from deep in my chest, and she swallows it.

Breaking the kiss, I rest my forehead against hers. "Hey, honey," I murmur.

"Well, that's the sweetest thing I think I've ever seen."

I turn my head to look at the woman who spoke. She's sitting in a chair with a bunch of tinfoil in her fucking hair. She looks like she's trying to get reception from a satellite in space. Holy shit.

"It's hair dye," Reese announces.

Jerking my chin in her direction, I give her a grin. "I'm good to take my girl to the beauty college and pay for her classes?" I ask.

Swear to fucking God, as soon as the words leave my lips, there is a collective swoon in the building. I don't look at anyone else, though. I watch Reese, waiting for her response. Her gaze shifts from me to Kiplyn, then back to me again. Her lips curl up into a smirk.

“Go on, get the hell out of here.” She shifts her attention to Kiplyn. “I’ll see you back at the house.”

KIPLYN

Wrapping my arms around his torso, I lean my cheek against the warm leather of his vest as he rides. I have paperwork in my purse. I am ready for this whole brand-new life. But a part of me is wondering when it’s all going to fall apart. There is no way I can be this happy forever... is there?

It doesn’t take me long to sign up at the school, and to his word, Rusk pays for everything. I don’t know why, I don’t know how all this is as amazing as it is, but I take it.

Every second of it.

Hand in hand, we walk out of the school. I can’t help but smile to myself. This is nothing but a dream come true, and I don’t care how cheesy that sounds.

We reach Rusk’s bike, and I start to climb onto the back when he tugs me back by my hand. Turning around to face him, I tilt my head to the side and look up at him in question. He grins down at me. It’s sexy as sin, and I realize this is why I’ll always stop when he tugs on my arm.

“What?” I ask when he doesn’t say anything immediately.

He smiles, his eyes searching mine before he speaks. “Love you, honey.”

“Rusk?” I ask.

His lips twitch, and he clears his throat. “I want the world with you. Want to own the world with you.”

“Me too, Rusk.”

He shakes his head, his eyes sparkling in the sunlight as it begins to set. He hisses, then chuckles as if he’s laughing to himself. Then he clears his throat before he speaks.

“Nah, honey. I want the whole fucking world with you. All of it. I know you don’t want kids and all that shit, but fuck, I think I do.”

I knew it. Tears fill my eyes. I don't know if I can give him that. But then he tugs me closer to him. I want to pull away, but I can't. I am stuck right where I stand, unable to move. His words shock me, fill me with surprise and awe—they fill me with heartache and pain.

“My mind hasn't changed in the past few weeks, Rusk. Nothing has changed.”

He releases my hand and takes a step backward. He looks behind him, then lifts that hand and runs his fingers through his hair, letting out a sigh.

“Yeah,” he murmurs. “I was hoping you would somehow change your mind. I just see you, see you taking care of yourself and all that. I love you, and having a baby, seeing a mini version of you, couldn't imagine anything better.”

“Rusk,” I exhale.

All his words. They make me want to want that with him. If there were anyone I would have a baby with, it would be this man. Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I look down at my shoes then lift my gaze back up to meet his.

I start to take a step backward, but I don't get far. Rusk reaches out, wrapping his arm around my waist before he hauls me against his chest.

“If you think I'm going to let you walk away because of this shit, you got another thing coming, Kiplyn.”

“This can't work,” I whisper.

Every single thing I thought just moments ago has flown out the window. I can't do this, not with him, not with what he wants. I can't be what he needs me to be, and eventually, he will see that, and he will resent all of this.

“I shouldn't have said anything,” he murmurs. “I didn't think. I just blurted it out.”

Pressing my lips together, I roll them a few times before I speak. “But it's what you really want, and I won't be able to give that to you.”

One of Rusk's hands slides up my back, his fingers twisting in my hair. He tugs my head back, and his lips touch mine before his tongue slips inside of my mouth, tasting me fully before he shifts his head back.

His eyes search mine, then he clears his throat. "Honey. Forget I said anything. One day at a time."

One day at a time.

"I don't want to lead you on," I murmur.

Lifting my hand, I trace the scar on his face. I remember when George gave it to him. It was because of me, and in this moment, I realize that we both carry the scars of our pasts. His are physical, mine emotional.

"You ain't, honey. I know what you want. I can't help how I feel, but I understand why you don't want them. I didn't think I did either."

"Until you did and now..."

"And now," he murmurs, shifting his head forward, his mouth touching mine with a brush of his lips, "I love you, and I'll always be happy it being just us."

"I don't know if I can believe you," I exhale.

"Believe me, honey," he growls. "Fuckin' *believe* me."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

KIPLYN

I TRY TO SHAKE OFF ALL OF THE BABY TALK AS THE WEEK GOES by. Reese has her date on Friday night with the detective, then the party on Saturday at the clubhouse, which I think she's the most excited about, but I'm not even sure because she is on top of the world talking and going on about both things.

I have spent my days with her at the salon, helping her out for a small bit of cash in my pocket while I wait for my classes to start.

The money from the sale of my house should be coming in any day. It isn't much, but it's enough to hopefully get me through classes. Although, Rusk continually tells me not to worry about that.

Money is something I will probably always worry about. I came from nothing, wasn't allowed to have anything in my marriage, and I still have nothing, so money is important. I need to be able to take care of myself.

It's not a want and hasn't been one since before I left George. And when I left him, I swore I would never be in that position again. I don't like Rusk paying my bills. I will pay him back, but at the same time, I'm grateful because there is no way I could do any of this without him.

It's Friday night, and this detective is going to be here any minute. Reese has given me the keys to her car. I'm supposed

to take it home for her, but I don't like the fact that she doesn't know this guy and won't have a ride.

"You'll text me if you need me to come and get you?" I ask.

She grins. "I will, but I won't need to."

Biting the corner of my lip, I nod, but I don't tell her what I really want to. I don't tell her that I wish she would open up to me. Maybe she will one day. It's not that I think things should be even, but I want to be there for her the way she is for me. She knows more about my life than anyone else on earth. I want to know more about her, too.

"Reese?" I call out.

She lifts her head, her eyes finding mine. I wait for her to say something, but she doesn't. I start to tell her that she doesn't have to go out, to say that she can cancel it all and go out for drinks and dinner with me and Henli, but before I can, the bell rings with an alert of someone entering the salon.

Turning my head, I watch as Detective Carlson walks through the door. He stops just a few steps inside, then gives me a grin with a wink. There is something off about him. I don't think he's on the up and up, but it's not my place. I've already told her that she doesn't have to go with him.

Taking a step backward, I turn my head and face Reese. She is watching the detective with a gleam in her eye, one that I don't understand and have never seen before. She shifts her attention back to me, and I decide to ask her if she's okay before I leave her here. I just want to make sure she's going to be safe.

"You're good?" I mouth to her.

"Yeah," she says softly in return. "Have fun with your girl."

Before I can respond, she brushes past me to this man and wraps her arms around his shoulders. I do not understand what is happening here at all. I don't question it either. Leaving the salon, I make my way to the car and slip into the driver's seat.

I start the engine. The lights shine into the salon, and I watch them for just a moment. They're kissing. His hand is on her ass, and she's got a leg lifted and curled around the back of his knees. I am completely lost as to what is happening.

Pressing my lips together, I leave them to whatever it is they're doing, no questions answered and filled with confusion. Pulling out of the parking spot, I head toward the restaurant to meet Henli.

We're going to try to get together again since last time, I was kidnapped, and after that, we hung out in the clubhouse for a little bit, but it's not the same as spending any real time together one on one.

I park next to her car in the gravel lot and look around, taking my surroundings in. This has become a habit of mine, maybe because of Dutch taking me and that other guy taking Rusk, but maybe just because I've noticed that Rusk takes in his surroundings no matter where we go.

There isn't much to see—a few cars, a few pickup trucks, nothing too exciting. Grabbing my phone from the cup holder, I look down at the screen and check for any messages from Reese that might have come through while I was driving.

Nothing.

I shove my phone in my purse, close the door and lock it, then head toward the front door of the restaurant. Slipping inside, I smile at the hostess and start to ask her where Henli is, but I don't get the chance because something catches my eye.

That something is a dark-haired woman waving her hand back and forth almost frantically. Lifting my own hand, I give her a wave, then hurry toward the table where she's seated. I sink down in the hard wooden chair across from her and greet her with a smile before I speak.

"I am so glad you were able to get away. I've been dying to talk to you and make sure everything is okay," she says on a whisper-yell.

Laughing, I reach for the water that's placed in front of my silverware and take a long sip. There is a moment of silence. I don't say anything right away. I'm not sure where to lead. I'm okay, but then again, I'm not. Henli seems like she could be a good friend, but I know you can't tell your secrets to everyone in life.

"I'm good as can be. You?" I ask.

She leans forward before she speaks, her eyes wide. "I haven't told anyone in the club yet, and I'm dying to scream it to someone. Only Brick knows," she states.

I can only imagine what she's going to say. I'm not sure what it could be, but if I dig down deep enough, I know I can't admit it to myself yet. Because her announcement is going to be something that has been at the forefront of my mind for an entire week.

"I'm pregnant," she squeals.

My entire body flinches, not because I'm not happy for her, but because this has been swimming around in my head every waking minute of every day since Rusk brought it up to me. Something that he wants even though I told him I never wanted it... ever.

I start to ask her how she feels about the baby, but I don't get the chance because she starts to gush with her excitement. My question is already answered. She is happy.

ROADKILL

Raul stares at me from across the table. He doesn't say a word as I watch him. He slouches slightly and looks completely indifferent. But when Legacy speaks, he sits up a bit straighter.

That I do not understand at all.

I wonder if he's got a hard-on for him or what the deal is. I don't ask. I wouldn't disrespect my president in front of mixed company.

"Where is Dutch?" Legacy asks.

It's the first time I have seen Legacy look like his father. I remember the man. He was goddamn terrifying when he wanted to be. Legacy can be that way, too, but he let Warden rule the whole club, thinking he left it in good hands, and it fucked everyone over.

Until now.

Warden's reign is now over, and we're still picking up the pieces from his deceit. Legacy is doing better than anyone ever could have imagined, especially him.

Raul shifts in his seat, the movement causing me to focus my attention on him. He doesn't say anything immediately, his gaze flicking between all of us, then it lands on me for a moment longer than anyone else's before he focuses on Legacy.

"Why do you want Dutch? I told you we would take care of him."

Legacy shakes his head a couple of times, letting out a grunt before he leans forward slightly. "The fact that you're speaking of that fucking asshole in the present tense tells me all I need to know," he says, letting out a growl.

Raul arches a brow but doesn't speak. There is a moment of silence where we all stare at one another, wondering who the fuck is going to break first. I could tell them all that Legacy will win, and he does.

"He's alive," he murmurs.

"No fucking shit," Legacy snorts.

Raul places his hands on the table, but he doesn't stand. He stays where he is, his body looking relaxed, but he is very much alert. He tilts his head to the side, his gaze focused on Legacy's. I watch as he slides his tongue across his bottom lip before he speaks.

"You know how these things go, Legacy. It's a lot of politics."

Legacy shakes his head slowly, clearing his throat before he speaks. "I don't think so," he murmurs. "Not when it comes

to Dutch, and especially not when it comes to Cyrus.”

Raul’s eyes widen, then he snorts. “Cyrus is in federal custody.”

Anger bubbles inside of me at Raul’s words. “Fuck that, and fuck you,” I shout.

I can’t keep my mouth closed. I can’t not say anything, because fuck Raul. Silence takes over the entire room. If a pin dropped, you would hear it bounce. Sliding my tongue along my bottom lip, I can’t decide if I’m going to scream some more or beat the fuck out of this man.

“Cyrus knows a lot of men. There is no doubt he will make a deal and will be out soon enough. I’m not sure what you want me to do about him now. Have some fucking patience,” Raul murmurs.

I try to keep my mouth closed, but I can’t. “Fuck you,” I grind out again. “I don’t give a fuck who Cyrus knows. I want his head on a goddamn pike.”

Clearing his throat, Raul doesn’t respond right away. He leans back in the chair, crossing his arms over his chest, tipping his chin down as his eyes shift toward me, staring me down. He is one hundred percent trying to intimidate me, and I am not having this shit.

“There will be no heads,” he states as his arms drop and he rises to his feet.

His gaze shifts from me to Legacy. He doesn’t say anything, but his intention is clear. He is focused on him, and I don’t know if he’s trying to relay some kind of secret message, but he is watching him and waiting. I’m seconds from laying this asshole down on the floor.

Legacy grunts before he speaks. “There will be heads, Raul. I’ve given you a fuck of a lot of leeway with this shit, but the fact is, you left us swinging that night, and you were supposed to take care of Dutch.”

“He was punished,” Raul announces.

Legacy shakes his head slowly. “Raul,” he warns, “that isn’t good enough, and you know it. He kidnapped one of our women. Now, we’re supposed to be partners of sort.”

“He was just helping.”

“Fuck. That,” I bark. “Fuck it straight to goddamn hell.”

Raul leans forward, placing his palms against the scarred wooden table. He appears to be ready to rip into our asses, but he doesn’t. Instead, he sinks down in his chair again, but this time with a heavy sigh.

“Yeah, fuck,” he growls. “I can’t just kill him.”

“Why?” Legacy asks.

He shakes his head once, then a second time, before he lifts his hand and runs his palm down his face.

“He is my brother.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

KIPLYN

“ARE YOU GOING TO TELL ME ABOUT YOUR DATE?” I ASK AS Reese stands in front of the vanity mirror applying bright red lipstick.

She doesn't turn her head, but her eyes find mine in the reflection of the mirror. “It was good,” she replies.

She doesn't elaborate, doesn't go any farther. It was good. And that is that. Except, I can't stand it. After knowing her for the past year, I don't think I can just shrug off her cool, uncaring response.

“Reese,” I call out softly.

I watch as she closes her eyes, then she opens them and turns around to face me. Her gaze reaches mine, searching before she lets out a heavy sigh. I regret even saying her name at this point, let alone asking her any questions.

But then she speaks.

“I have a thing with men, which is why I try not to date at all, because I choose the wrong ones. I want validation, and I sleep with them immediately. I'm aware of this trait, but it doesn't stop me from throwing myself at them. Which is what I did last night. It's what I do. And I'll do it tonight, too.”

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I look down at my feet, then slowly lift my gaze up to meet hers. “Don't you feel bad afterward?”

She shrugs a shoulder, but I can tell there is something behind her gaze that haunts her. There is no way she can't feel badly about being used, because even though she is using them in her own way, they are indeed using her as well.

"I feel more than bad, but it doesn't matter. I'll do it again tonight," she announces with a grin.

Although she smiles, it doesn't reach her eyes. I start to ask her some more questions but then decide against it. Reese is an adult. She can do as she wishes, and she wishes to go to this party tonight with the men of the Devil's Hellions. I am not going to judge her for that.

"You know, I'm here as your friend, if you ever want to talk about anything, right?" I ask.

She takes half a step toward me, stopping, then lifts her hand slightly and wraps her fingers around my wrist before she flexes them in a gentle squeeze. Her eyes search mine, then she clears her throat.

"I know you are, Kiplyn. You've trusted me with your past, and I know I can trust you with mine. I'm just not ready yet."

"But you will be?" I ask.

She dips her chin in a nod. "One day, but for today, let's party at the clubhouse."

Laughing softly, I dip my chin in a nod as she releases my arm. Taking a step backward, I decide to go ahead and finish getting ready. Reese is wearing a short black miniskirt and a bright red skintight bodysuit and black high heels.

I am not that flashy at all. In fact, I don't even own a pair of high heels. Grabbing a pair of a little oversized torn black jeans, I slip them on, then cuff the ankles before pulling on my white flat canvas shoes. Switching out my shirt, I decide to wear one of my many plain crewneck white ones to go with it.

"Ready?" Reese calls from the living room.

Looking myself over in the mirror one last time, I let out a sigh. My hair is done in beachy waves, something Reese did

before we left the salon this evening. My makeup is also done professionally by Reese. But the rest of me? I look like... a mom. Which is fine, because I'm at the mom age, except I'm not a mom at all, and I don't want to be.

Shaking my head, I make my way out of the bedroom and toward Reese. She presses her red lips together, her eyes looking up and down my body, not saying a word. Then her eyes catch mine, and she lets out a breath.

"I thought you were getting dressed?" she asks.

I look down at my clothes before I lift my gaze to meet hers. "I am dressed," I announce.

Her eyes widen, and she lets out a snort. I bristle from her reaction but decide that she's probably right to have it. I am definitely not dressed for a sexy anything. I don't think I even know how to be sexy.

I wonder what the hell this man is doing with me, anyway. Rusk can literally have any of those girls who prance around in their underwear, and he probably has, and yet... there's me. Reese hums, breathing my thoughts, and I bite the inside of my cheek as I watch her.

"Do not think badly about yourself. You've been through hell, and clothes were not at the top of your list. Let's go shop in my closet really quickly, and you can surprise the hell out of your man."

"I don't think I could," I whisper.

She scoffs, then walks past me and into her bedroom. I follow her mainly because I don't want to be standing around in the living room by myself.

Reese is already standing in her closet, riffling through the hangers, when she stops. She looks back over her shoulder at me, then, as if it happens in slow motion, her lips curl up into a smile and for the first time tonight, her eyes light up.

"What?" I ask when she doesn't say anything right away.

"I have this dress, but you need different shoes."

I can't imagine wearing a dress to this thing, but I do know that I need a change. Just thinking about the other women who are going to be there makes me feel sick to my stomach.

It's not that I think Rusk is going to see them and turn me away or anything. It's more that I know I'm going to be uncomfortable in my very comfortable clothes, and I'm going to feel like everyone is looking at me—judging me.

I shouldn't feel this way because Rusk has chosen me. He loves me, and I love him, but at the same time, I am nothing like the women he has been used to in the past decade. I am and will always just be Kiplyn.

Sinking my teeth into the corner of my bottom lip, I let out a sigh. "I don't have shoes," I say.

Reese takes the dress from the hanger and tosses it toward me. It's just a small rectangle scrap of fabric with two skinny strings for straps. My lips part, and I start to deny the ability to wear such a small dress, but Reese holds up her hand, her palm facing me.

"Just this once. If you never want to wear anything like this again, I'll never say another word."

Looking down at the black material, I lift my gaze to meet hers. "Okay."

ROADKILL

I look at my phone, checking for a notification from Kiplyn but also the time. She should be here already. The music is blaring, the drinks are flowing, the women are doing what they do on Saturday nights, and I'm standing next to a pool table, beer in hand, watching the door.

We're good, me and Kiplyn, but I know she's still thinking about the baby talk that took place a couple of weeks ago. I have to make sure she knows that it's up to her, that it doesn't matter to me... even if it does.

Thunder walks over toward me, a beer in hand. She thrusts it toward me, and I take it from her grasp with a thanks. She

gives me a smile, sliding her tongue along her bottom lip as she looks up at me.

She's got come-fuck-me eyes, but I'm not buying into it. There are a dozen or more swinging dicks in this place that would be more than happy to fuck her. I'm not the one. She makes a hissing noise when I don't say a fucking word to her or react to her gaze.

But she also doesn't move. She's got her bare tits hanging out and wearing nothing but a G-string with some clear plastic high heels. It's a bit fucking much, but she's a sweet butt, so what the fuck ever.

The main door opens, and my eyes find it immediately, then it's my turn to hiss because she walks through the door. Her friend is beside her, but I don't see anyone except Kiplyn. She's wearing a skintight fucking dress that is too goddamn short and a pair of white low canvas shoes.

She looks fucking amazing.

Out of this world goddamn amazing.

I don't move toward her, afraid I'm going to run and push everyone out of the way. She's mine, and I know without a doubt that she will walk straight toward me. Thunder calls my name, but I ignore her. I don't give a fuck about her. She's a nice enough girl, but I do not care.

The only woman I give half a shit about is walking straight toward me.

When Kiplyn is several feet in front of me, I take two steps toward her, lifting my hand and wrapping my fingers around the back of her neck before I gently pull her body against mine. Her chest presses against me, her soft tits making my dick twitch.

Touching my mouth to hers, I don't kiss her right away. I hold my lips against hers as I speak.

"You look sexy as fuck, but this dress is short, honey," I murmur.

She laughs, though I can't tell if she finds this funny or if she's pissed off. "Not as sexy as some people," she mutters.

I slide my tongue along her bottom lip, then back away slightly. Shaking my head, I look into her eyes. She isn't looking at me, though. She's staring at Thunder, who is behind me. And I let out a chuckle.

"You think I give a fuck about that behind me, when I got you right here in front of me?"

"What about when I'm not right in front of you?" she asks.

Instead of answering her, I bend slightly and shove my shoulder in her stomach before I stand up straight. She cries out, and I use my hand to cover her ass and pussy, which is no doubt on display for the clubhouse to see.

Although, I don't give a fuck about that, but I know she does. The clubhouse erupts in hoots and hollers as she slams her little fists against my lower back and tells me to put her down, which I don't do.

Walking out of the clubhouse, I slip into my bedroom before I slide her body down the front of mine. She tilts her head back, her eyes finding mine, her gaze holding my own. Lifting my free hand, I wrap my fingers around the side of her throat.

"You think I give a fuck about anyone else?" I ask.

Her eyes widen, her lips part, and I do something that I should have fucking done a decade ago. I drop my hand from her throat and sink down to one knee.

"Kiplyn, I fucking loved you before I knew what love was. Stay with me. Be my wife, not just here in the club, but in life."

She stares at me, her eyes wide. Then she nods once. I rise to my feet, cup her cheeks in my palms, and touch my mouth to hers in a hard kiss. She moans, her lips part, and I take the opportunity to slip my tongue inside of her and taste all of her.

Breaking the kiss, I nibble on her bottom lip as I straighten. "Now, get on the bed and show me what I'm

promising the rest of my life to,” I demand. “Leave that sexy dress on.”

Her cheeks blush, but she does what I demand. I watch as she climbs onto the bed. She’s on her knees, her legs spread slightly, her eyes for me and only me. Watching her, I slide my cut off, tossing it onto the dresser before I begin to unbuckle my pants.

Kiplyn surprises me. She reaches for my waistband as I move toward her. Dipping my chin, I watch as she unbuttons my jeans, then she slowly unzips them before she reaches inside and wraps her fingers around my length, shoving my underwear and jeans down with her other hand.

That isn’t all she has in store for me. She leans forward and wraps her mouth around my length, taking me as far down her throat as she can. My eyelids flutter closed as she bobs up and down on my dick. Every fucking nerve ending in my body stands on attention, and my balls tingle at the same time my dick twitches.

This fucking woman. I made the right choice by going to that hospital, by taking care of that asshole ex-husband of hers.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

KIPLYN

LOOKING AT HIM ASLEEP IN THE BED, I TAKE A STEP BACK, careful not to wake him up. He looks so perfect and peaceful there.

I need one last glance before I ruin it all.

ROADKILL

Waking up, I roll to the side and reach out for Kiplyn, for my fiancée. But she isn't there. Not only she is not there, but the bed is also cold, and the room feels empty.

Pushing up to sitting, I look around the room. I don't need to. I can tell that she's gone. Glancing over at the small nightstand that is next to my bed, I reach for the small white piece of paper.

Rusk,

You deserve more than the broken woman I am. You deserve a life and a family. I'm not able to give that to you, and I can't watch you waste your life. I've wasted enough of mine, and I know what it's like.

I'll always love you. Always.
There will never be another man for
me. It's always been you, and it
always will be you.

I'm sorry.

Love today, forever, and always,

Kiplyn

EPILOGUE

ROADKILL

SIX MONTHS LATER

I WATCH AS SHE WALKS OUT OF THE SCHOOL WITH A GROUP OF friends. They are all excited, carrying their little white documents that are their certificates of completion. I found a girl in her class, got some information about the courses and graduation timing and shit.

That graduation is today, and I watch from afar as I've been doing for six long months. She's laughing and smiling. I know it's just a front. I see the look in her eyes, see the vacancy there. I watch her around town, and I know she misses me.

She's trying really hard to be happy. Fake it till you make it, I suppose. But fuck that. She doesn't have to fake a goddamn thing, and I am right fucking here, ready to put the light back into her fucking eyes.

Sliding my tongue along my bottom lip, I decide that the time is nigh.

After she climbs into her shit car, she starts the engine and heads toward the salon. It's where she always goes after she finishes her classes. And it's where she would go with her new paper in hand.

Kiplyn and Reese have been working on her new esthetician room. Reese showed it to me when Kiplyn was in

class one afternoon. Reese. Fuck, that is probably the woman who is more my speed. She's free and easy, happy to fuck and move on with life.

She doesn't ask much, doesn't require much, and likes hanging around the clubhouse. A no-strings-attached hang-around piece. That is who I should be with, who I should want, but I don't.

I want someone I don't deserve.

It's not as easy as 'I want her, therefore, she's mine.' I wish it were. If she were any other woman, it probably would be just that. Except I can't demand and control Kiplyn that way. When it comes to her, I know she needs her freedom.

I want her to have that freedom. I'm just not sure that I can. After trying for six months, I've discovered that I cannot live without her. She is the one person for me. She is who I need. Who I want. Who I desire. She is who I want during the good, bad, and ugly at my side.

Starting my bike, I follow her at a distance. She doesn't need to know I'm behind her yet. It doesn't take me long to weave through the traffic until I pull up beside her parked car. Turning the engine off, I climb off the bike and head toward the front door of the salon.

The bell rings as soon as the door opens. I smirk at the sound, looking over at Reese, who is putting some shit on some tinfoil that she wraps around someone's hair.

"She's in her new room," Reese whispers.

Jerking my chin in her direction, I make my way toward the small room. The door is closed, but I know she doesn't have any clients yet since she just graduated today. Wrapping my fingers around the cool knob, I twist it before I tug the door open.

Kiplyn's back is to me as I step into the room. When the door clicks closed, she straightens her back and turns around to face me. Her eyes widen, and something clatters to the floor. I don't know what it is, because I couldn't look away from her gaze.

“Hey, honey,” I murmur.

“What are you doing here?” she demands.

Tilting my head to the side, I cross my arms over my chest and stare at her for a moment before I speak. “You know what I’m doing here,” I state.

She presses her lips together but doesn’t say anything immediately. “Rusk,” she exhales.

I watch her but don’t respond. Instead, I wait, knowing that she has something else to say. She very much has something on her mind, and I want to hear it all. Every fucking word she has to say, because I haven’t even heard her voice in six months.

“I don’t know what you’re doing here,” she whispers.

Sliding my tongue across my bottom lip, I fight the urge to rush toward her, kiss her, bend her over the table, and fuck her into oblivion. She whimpers, no doubt reading my mind. I would be surprised if she couldn’t.

“Love you, honey. You walked out and left me some fucked-up note. Maybe you thought I agreed with your note and didn’t give a fuck or something. That’s not the case. I left you to focus on your school, but that’s done, and now I want you to focus on us.”

I can see her trembling from where she stands across the room. She starts to move toward me, just a single step, but it’s all I need. Closing the short distance between us, I wrap my arms around her back and smash her body against mine before I slam my mouth to hers in a hard, owning kiss.

Because I do own her.

Kiptyn is mine, always has been. Six months apart ain’t fucking shit, and I gave that to her because I knew she needed it, but never again. Breaking the kiss, I stare into her eyes for a long moment. My arms are still wrapped around her, keeping her close to me.

“I love you, Rusk. But I just can’t.”

Giving her a smile, I shake my head once, then shift forward so that my forehead rests against hers.

It's time that I tell her the goddamn truth of it all. Keeping things to myself, it does nobody an ounce of justice. She needs to know, and I'm sure that once she does, we'll be able to move forward together.

"You can. You walked out on me because I mentioned babies. That is fucked, honey. I don't give a damn about babies if they aren't with you. If I don't have them, I'm fine. If we have them, I'm good, too. All that matters is that my days begin and my nights end with you."

"That's a really good speech," she exhales.

Letting out a chuckle, I shift slightly and run my nose alongside hers. "Yeah, I know it is, but it's also the truth. Marry me, Kiplyn. Kids, no kids, adopted kids, I don't give a fuck, but I do give a fuck if you aren't by my side."

"I should say no," she whispers.

"Probably," I agree. "But you won't."

Lifting my head, I search her face with my gaze and give her a smirk. The vacant look in her eyes is gone. She appears to be herself for the first time since she attempted to leave me. She doesn't agree or deny the question.

Instead, she just stares at me.

Then her lips curve up into a smile and she gives me a short nod. "I should say no," she murmurs again. "But you're right. I won't because I have missed you these past six months. It feels like a piece of my soul has been gone."

"That's because it has, honey. Fuck me," I whisper. "*Fuck me*, I love you, Kiplyn."

"I love you, too, Rusk. Every part of you."

KIPLYN

ONE MONTH LATER

I'm slathering creams and talking softly to my client about her beautiful skin when my phone buzzes in my pocket. When her latest treatment needs a few moments to set, I wash my hands and reach into my pocket for the buzzing device to check my notifications.

A month.

I cannot believe I've been officially *official* with Rusk again for a whole month. I also can't believe that I've been running my new business for that long. My lips twitch into a smile at the sight of the text message on my phone.

RUSK: MISS YOU. SEE YOU AFTER WORK FOR DINNER. BUT THEN I GOTTA GO RUN SOME ERRANDS.

Okay.

My response is short and sweet, but at the same time, he knows I'm not being rude or anything. I decide to add a little something to the conversation. I'm not really someone who sends sexy messages, but this just fits.

Do you have time for dessert after dinner?

RUSK: ALWAYS.

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I put my phone back into my pocket before I finish with my customer. I have three more clients before it's time to rush home so I can make a quick dinner and get ready for the best part of the night... *dessert*.

When I'm completely finished for the night, I slip out of my little room and give Reese a wave good night. She lifts her hand, returning the gesture with a smile. We spend all day off and on together, and she's at the clubhouse all night long every weekend. I don't go there often, though, not unless Rusk is there.

I still don't know anything about her past, about her life, other than she's now a regular at the clubhouse on weekends

and I've been a witness to her having sex more times than I would like to have seen.

Although, I find it interesting that she is having sex with the same guy over and over. I've never seen her with anyone else in the club. She likes to act like she has a problem. As though she just *must* have sex with any and every guy she goes out with who pays attention to her.

But the fact that she could have almost any of those men down there at that clubhouse, yet she's with the same one every single time, it proves to me that she's at least a little full of shit on that note. She won't admit it, though, and I have a feeling it's going to take some act of God to make her actually realize it.

Slipping into the driver's seat of my car, I head home. To the home that I share with Reese still. I haven't officially moved in with Rusk, even though he's been looking for a place to buy for the two of us. I'm just not there yet, and as patient as he is with me, he's definitely impatient about this.

Rusk wants to live together. He's ready to start our lives as one unit, and by still living with Reese, I am not doing exactly that. It doesn't take me long to drive back to the house.

The entire drive, I think about dinner and what I could make. I know I have stuff for tacos in the fridge, but I'm a bit burnt out on the quick and easy meal. I'm sure Rusk is as well. I just don't know what to make.

But all my inner thoughts cease.

As I pull up to the house, my eyes widen. There isn't room for my car in the driveway, but that's because there is Rusk's bike, but also a brand-new, *with paper license plates*, Land Rover parked in the driveway next to the bike. Rusk is standing right next to it, his lips curved up in a wide smile.

Parking my crappy car along the curb, I open the door, my mouth hanging open slightly mainly because I cannot believe he's standing next to this brand-new car. He has his red Chevelle, and he loves it. I can't imagine him buying a new car, let alone an expensive SUV.

“Kiplyn,” he calls out as I approach.

“Is this your new car?” I ask. “It’s gorgeous.”

And it is. It’s absolutely amazing. The color, that bronzy silvery color. It’s stunning is what it is. He clears his throat, takes a step toward me, and holds his hand out. Something dangles from his fingers, but I can’t look down because his eyes have me mesmerized.

“It’s yours, honey. Call it a combination graduation-slash-engagement gift.”

I shake my head. I don’t reach for the keys, which I know is what is in his hand because he shakes them, jingling them slightly. He laughs softly, shoving his hand into his pocket after realizing I’m not taking the keys from him.

Something else happens, something I don’t expect. He drops to one knee, and this time, it’s different. This time, he holds out a ring box. I’ve already agreed to marry him. He doesn’t have to do any of this, but tears fill my eyes when I realize he wants to do this.

“I should have asked you properly the first time. Hell, I should probably ask you in a better way than this anyway. But I’m not the best when it comes to this shit. But I’ll always strive to be the best for you, Kiplyn.

“I won’t ever intentionally hurt you. I’ll always support your dreams, no matter what they are. And after everything that happened, after every damn moment that I’ve been with and without you, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I will always love you. Marry me, honey.”

“Rusk,” I exhale.

His lips curve up into a smile, his eyes on mine, focused and intent. “Of course. Yes, a million times yes.”

He flips open the ring box, and that’s when my heart stops completely inside my chest. I don’t know what to do, where to go. I just stare at the gigantic diamond that winks in the setting sun’s light.

Rusk takes the ring out of the box, and it's as if my hand knows what to do. Automatically, I lift my arm. He slips the ring onto my finger, and I stare at it. The weight is almost consuming, the shine almost too bright, and I wonder how I deserve any of this.

When I lift my gaze from the ring to Rusk's eyes, he stands and wraps his arms around my back before he dips his chin and touches his mouth to mine.

"I love you, Kiplyn. You make me the happiest man on the fucking earth."

Before I slip my tongue into his mouth, knowing that I have to taste him right here and now, I murmur against his lips.

"I love you more today than I ever have, Rusk. I'm happy to marry you."

His mouth presses against mine, and in his fashion, he slips his tongue into my mouth and tastes me before I even get the opportunity. When he gently breaks the kiss, he lifts his head, his gaze searching my own.

I don't know if this is the right thing, if I'm being selfish by accepting this marriage proposal. But I love him. Every single part of him. There is nobody else on this earth I would rather be with, and selfish or not, I'm going to make sure he's the happiest person on this earth.

There is only him for me, me for him.

That is all that matters—*love*.

TABOO PERFECT STORM

A Devil's Hellions MC Novel

Book Three

CHAPTER ONE

PIPER

LOOKING AROUND THE ROOM, I TAKE IN EVERY ASPECT OF THIS place. It's nothing like the home where I was raised. The men here appear to be absolutely nothing like Raul's men or Cyrus and his, yet... they're the same in a lot of ways.

I'm not sure what the future holds for me, but it's clear that it is destined to be here, around these men in some capacity. I haven't been told what is going to happen to me, but there have been whispers, and I listen when I hear them.

A contract.

A promise.

Marriage.

Those are the things I've heard, and I have a feeling it's true. I know that Raul would have no problem handing me off for whatever advantage he could gain. Dutch, my other brother, had zero qualms about trading me, and on my eighteenth birthday, for whatever he got from Cyrus.

Allowing a man like that to do what he did to me.

My two brothers, the men who are supposed to protect me, they've both treated me like nothing more than cattle, but it shouldn't surprise me because my father raised them to be this exact way.

So, it wouldn't surprise me if Raul did the same thing Dutch did to me with Cyrus, but in a different way. I think that's what is happening here. I'm not allowed to ask any questions, though. I learned that a long time ago, and if I hadn't, Cyrus made sure to beat that into me in the short time I was with him.

Raul is in the room where these men hold all their meetings with the door closed. I'm not sure how long I stand against the wall, trying to blend in with the darkness there, when the door opens and Raul stomps out.

He doesn't leave, though.

He turns to me, his eyes wide, and then he closes the distance between us. Holding my breath, I stare at him, waiting for him to scream at me or hit me. Whatever it is he's going to do, because he looks really angry in this moment.

He does neither.

Instead, he clears his throat and turns his head to the side before he brings his gaze back to meet mine. "You'll be marrying one of the men in this club. You are his forever. Do you understand that?"

I don't know why he thinks I'm such an idiot. He should know that I'm smarter than most girls my age. He raised me after all.

"I understand a lot of things," I say, arching a brow as I stare at him, wondering if he's going to even say a fucking word about what Dutch did to me.

He grunts. I watch as he lifts his hand and runs his fingers through his hair. He almost looks upset about things, but I know Raul, and his heart isn't that warm. Business is business, blood doesn't mean anything, and female blood is nothing more than a bargaining chip.

"Don't fuck this up, Piper. We are on thin ice with them as it is. Dutch is done for. Don't let your blood spill next."

Without another word, he turns from me and walks away. I assume that this will probably be the last time I see my

brother. I have a million things I could say to him, but I decide against it.

I've been spending my last weeks of solitude forgiving myself. Also, I've decided to release my anger toward Dutch, Cyrus, and Raul for their hands in what happened to me. I am going to take part in my own destiny in my own life and become an active member of my future.

Once Raul is gone, I watch as the other men file out of the meeting room. They are mostly all taken and seem to be in love with their women. I haven't met any of them yet. I don't think they would want to meet me.

I'm just that slave-whore who was found crawling around on my hands and knees wearing scraps of fabric. I wouldn't want me around my husband either or to get to know me. I understand, and I don't feel any kind of bad blood toward them.

Maybe one day, I'll be able to have some friends. Maybe it will be them, but maybe not. I just have to wait and see what happens now that it's official. I'll just have to wait to see what happens.

I knew they wouldn't allow me to just stay here rent-free. I just didn't know exactly what the payment would be. I'm surprised that it's this, a marriage, and not one of the women who freely gives her body to any of these men who wish to have it.

However, nothing is free.

And as a woman who is valuable to a certain demographic, only a certain set of men, I am certainly not going to be staying hidden up in my room to be left to myself. I have value, and I'll be used for that.

I'll be the less than tacky glue that holds my brothers' organization to this one. Which seems to be falling apart at the seams if Dutch is done for. I'm honestly not sure how long I'll be alive anyway in my situation. I can't worry about Dutch. He made his own bed, and now it's time he accepts his damn fate. Serves him right.

I get a whiff of cologne mixed with leather and oil, then a shadow falls over me. Turning my head, I see the man who I thought was dead. The man who Cyrus's men beat to shit is standing right beside me.

He looks normal now. All healed. And the way he's looking at me, watching me silently, is almost unnerving. I don't know his name. I don't know any of their names, but I decide I should rectify that, especially since one of these men is going to supposedly marry me.

"I'm Piper," I say with a whispered breath.

He dips his chin but doesn't say a single word. Instead, he turns and walks away from me, bellying up to the bar. I stand against the wall, watching him for a moment before I decide to slip back into my room.

Their meeting is over, my fate has been decided, and it is not to go back with Raul. I now belong to the Devil's Hellions. I just hope they don't completely break me. I'm trying to heal and live a life.

It doesn't have to be the best life, just a good one. That's all I want. A sliver of happiness.

ITCH

Piper is fucking beautiful. She's too fucking young for me, though. I shouldn't have demanded that it was me who married her. I should have let one of the younger guys have her. There's something about her. I can't let the memory of her go.

She was so fucking caring in a situation where she didn't have to be, but it's not just that. It's that she appears as though she's lost. I've been lost my whole life. Looking at her, I see that same expression that stares at me in the mirror's reflection, except she's a much prettier, younger version than me.

Lifting my hand, I motion for a beer. The prospect delivers, and I wonder how in the fuck I'm going to make this

work with this girl. I sure as shit do not deserve her, that's for goddamn sure. But she's mine anyway. At least she will be in name.

"You sure you want to be tied down to this bitch who has zero fucking clue about this life? And with Dutch and Raul as her brothers, can she even be trusted?" Volt asks.

"Got no clue," I murmur. "On both points. If I'm sure I want to do this or if she can be trusted. I know she's too fucking young for me, too."

Volt snorts. "That part I don't worry about. Young just means you can have what you want. You can create your woman."

I don't tell him that sounds boring as fuck. I got no desire to have a breathing blowup doll. Standing, I drop the conversation. It doesn't matter. None of it fucking matters. She's mine, and whatever happens, that's what's meant to be. Fate or some shit.

"Itch," a sultry voice calls out.

I look behind me and see Thunder standing a few feet away in nothing but her signature thong, big tits and ass exposed to the whole room.

"Yeah?"

She grins, lifts her hand, and motions for me to come closer to her. I do. She places her palm against my chest, and without a single word, she sinks down to her knees in the middle of the clubhouse bar and reaches for my belt.

Lifting the beer to my lips, I take a pull from the bottle before I dip my chin and watch her suck my cock.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As an only child, Hayley Faiman had to entertain herself somehow. She started writing stories at the age of six and never really stopped.

Born in California, she met her now husband at the age of sixteen and married him at the age of twenty in 2004. After all of these years together, he's still the love of her life.

She now lives in East Texas with her family!

Most of Hayley's days are spent taking care of her two boys, going to sports practices, or helping them with homework. Her evenings are spent with her husband and her nights—those are spent creating alpha book boyfriends.



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