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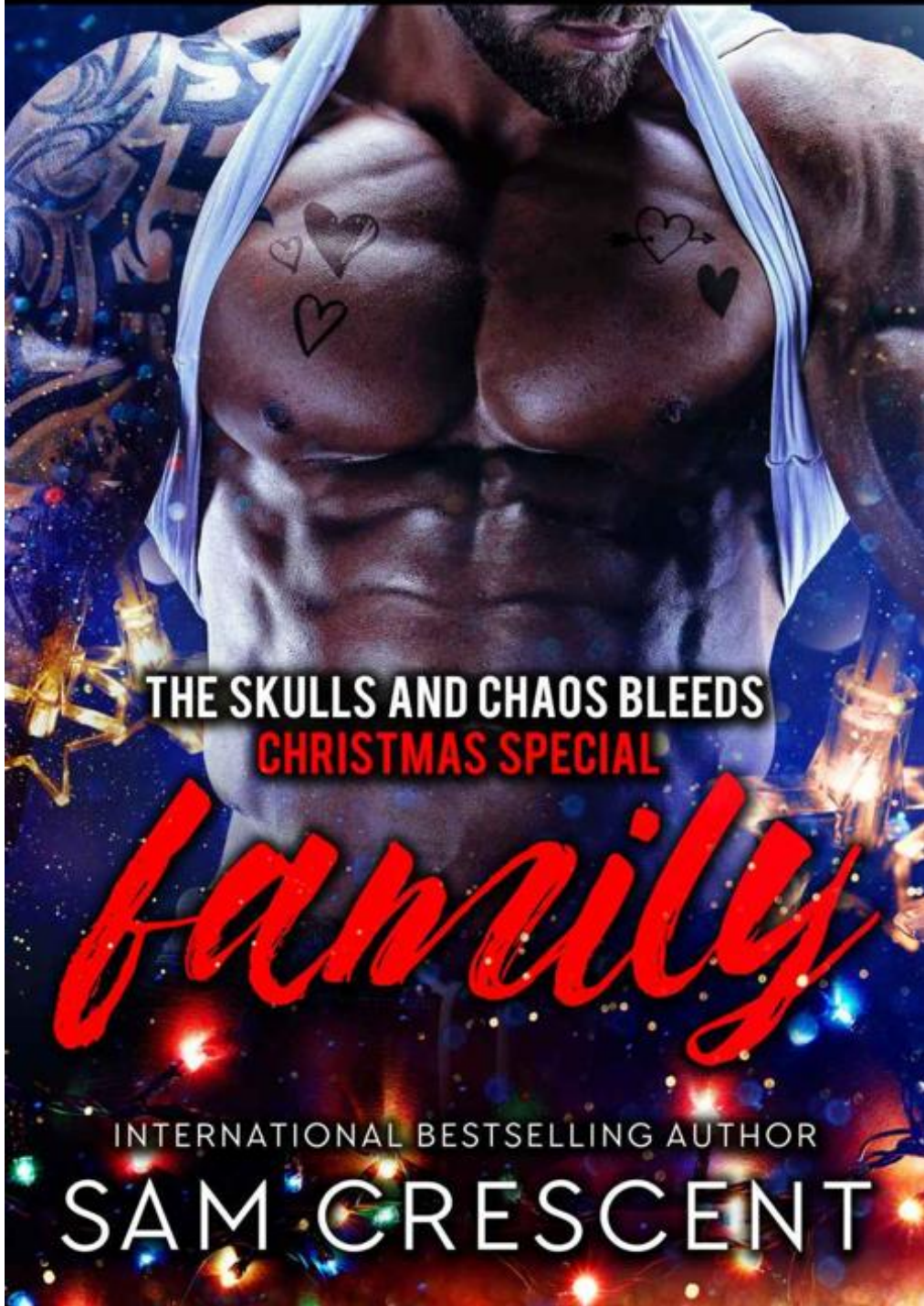
THE SKULLS AND CHAOS BLEEDS
CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

family

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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DEDICATION

To all my amazing readers.

Thank you so much for this incredible journey.

FAMILY

The Skulls and Chaos Bleeds Christmas Special

Sam Crescent

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Chapter One

“Are you sure about this?” Lash asked, wrapping his arm around Angel as he stared up at The Skulls MC clubhouse.

Angel giggled and spun around in the snow, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing a kiss to his lips. “Yes, hell, yes, and totally yes. I’m completely one hundred percent sure about this.”

From the look on Lash’s face, he clearly doubted it.

“Come on, Lash. This is going to be fun. You’re going to love it.”

He pressed his lips together and shook his head. “Nah, I don’t see it. We could have a sweet and quiet Christmas. Away from everyone and everything. I could take you away.”

Angel shook her head. “No, no, and even bigger no. Come on, Lash. I think this will be good for us all. Our family. The club. All of it.”

“Why?”

“Because a lot has changed over the years. We’ve lost so many. Tabitha’s in Piston County now, and I think it would be good if we invited Chaos Bleeds over, to you know, help.”

“This is about Anthony, right?”

She sighed. “Yes, okay. This is about our son and the fact that something is clearly going on with him and with Daisy, and I just want to make it right.”

“Why not just invite Simon and Tabitha?” Lash asked.

“I don’t want to just invite Tabitha. I’d like Lexie and Natalie, and Paris, and Judi, Mia, Sasha—”

Lash held his hand up, stopping her. “You know it’s a lot of work.”

“Yes, I know it’s a lot of work.”

“We’ll have to arrange for hotels, beds, the works.”

“Yes. I know all of this, and I still want to do it. Come on, please, please.” She could have easily started the arrangements, but seeing as Lash, her husband, was Prez of The Skulls MC, it was only polite to ask.

Lash always gave her what she wanted. Never did she have to argue or fight to get what she wanted. Pressing her lips together, she waited.

He rolled his eyes. “You do know a lot of the guys are going to be pissed about this. We don’t always want the Chaos Bleeds crew breathing down our necks.”

“Lash,” she said, cupping his face. “Chaos Bleeds is like family. We always take care of family, and besides, it has been a rough year, you can’t deny that.”

Tabitha had given birth to baby Skye, and then there had been the adoption of Jade, which had occurred before they’d been able to save the little girl’s mother.

She knew the deal The Skulls and Chaos Bleeds had with the Billionaire Bikers MC wasn’t an easy one. The legal path Lash had taken the club down had been the right choice, but now, she saw more violence and hatred in other people. In women, children, and sometimes men.

Abused, used, tired, hurting people who just wanted a chance at a safe and happy life. Seeing young children flinch away from an extended hand was heartbreaking. Not to mention the nightmares they experienced. She knew from experience after listening to them at night, when they stayed at the clubhouse.

Pulling out of her morbid thoughts, she looked at the clubhouse, and she’d been toying with the idea for some time. So long as she made the necessary arrangements and handled the food and decorations, she didn’t see a reason that this couldn’t go by without a hitch.

“What about the beach? We can find somewhere sunny where it is just us.”

Angel shook her head. “I don’t want the beach. I want a family and extended-family Christmas.”

Lash sighed. “Fine. I’ll bring it up in church, and so long as the guys agree, I don’t see a reason why not.”

“Can I ask the girls?” Angel asked.

He stared at her, and she tried to keep a straight face. “Angel, baby, why do I get the feeling that you’ve already gotten the girls to agree?”

“Well, I might have suggested it to Tate, who then spoke to Eva, and then it kind of just took off on its own. I have no idea how it happened. It just did.”

Lash burst out laughing, brushing her hair off her face. “Fine, I will make this happen on two conditions.”

“Name them.”

“One, you have fun, and you don’t do anything that you don’t want to do.”

“That’s easy.”

Lash rolled his eyes.

“I mean it, I can do that.”

“Babe, you’re soft at heart and people have a tendency of making you do stuff you don’t need to. Everyone will pull their weight. This will not be you in the kitchen for the whole event. Everyone pitches in. Turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, the works. Everyone will be given a job.”

“Apart from Lacey,” she said.

“Yes, that woman can handle the drinks and the kids.” There was no way they would still have a clubhouse if Lacey got involved in the kitchen. That woman had already burnt down her own kitchen in her house, not once either. A couple of times.

Lacey had her skills though.

“What’s your second condition? You said you had two.”

He pushed some of her hair out of the way. She had stopped dying it a few years ago, and it had reverted to her

brown color, along with a couple of gray hairs, but she didn't mind them.

“That you're my present.”

“Huh?”

“You, wrapped up in a big red bow, Christmas Eve, Christmas day, and leading all the way up to New Year.” He put his hands on her hips, and she let out a little gasp. With them hosting Christmas, they'd be at the clubhouse, which meant babysitting duty was always shared.

“Yes, I can do that.”

Lash ran his hands down to her ass, giving the flesh a little squeeze. They had been together for over twenty years, and she still couldn't believe it. The love she had for Lash never diminished. It only got stronger.

Also, her attraction to him. Lash as a young man was amazing, but now, as an older man, he was irresistible.

“There's no one around right now,” Angel said.

He took hold of her hand and moved her away from the clubhouse, away from the backyard, and all the way past the sheds until they came to a small, secluded area where he moved her up against a tree.

“You're right, no one is around to interrupt me.” He slid his hands into her sweatpants, and the moment he touched her clit, Angel gasped. There was no messing around with his actions. The way he touched her set her on fire.

Reaching for him, she touched his large dick, feeling how hard it was in the tight confines of his jeans.

Another moan escaped her. She just couldn't help it.

Lash stroked her clit, and she stared into his eyes, knowing he wouldn't take her against this tree. As she sank to her knees, he had no choice but to pull his fingers away, and she quickly opened up the button of his jeans and then slid the zipper down.

He wore black boxer briefs, and he constantly refused to wear white. Gripping his stiff dick, she eased it out and then, without waiting for permission or to make sure that he was ready, she wrapped her lips around his length, sucking him into her mouth.

“Oh, fuck, baby. Fuck yeah, that feels so good. Take it all.”

She did so, sinking him to the back of her throat, just to the point of where she might gag. Then she stopped, pulling away and pressing a kiss to the tip before taking him back in again.

This time, she created a steady pace, sucking on him.

Lash wrapped his fingers in her hair and helped to guide her how he wanted his dick sucked.

She felt how close he was, and when he gave a growl of warning, she took him deep. When he started to come, he was at the back of her throat, and she swallowed him, drinking him down.

“Oh, fuck, that felt good,” he said. He helped her to her feet after she put his dick away. Lash was never to be outdone, and his hand was back between her legs, teasing her.

“Come for me, Angel. Scream my name as you do.”

Lash made his way inside the clubhouse and clapped his hands to gather all the guys’ attention. For those who weren’t present, he’d make sure they got a text or an update.

“This year, we’re going to be celebrating Christmas at the clubhouse,” Lash said.

Angel was by his side. No one would even think to know that he’d had his dick down her throat a few minutes ago, or that he had her screaming his name not long after.

“I’m also going to be calling our good friends Chaos Bleeds and inviting them to share in the festivities.” He expected a round of grumbling, but instead, everyone seemed to be overjoyed at the prospect.

After the shit that went down a short time ago with the Monster Dogs MC, his boys had been tense. They all had been. Lash knew deep in his core there wouldn't be retribution. They should count their lucky stars that he allowed them to live. The only reason he did was because of the deal he had with the Billionaire Bikers MC, as well as Michael Granito, who had once been married to Kelsey. He didn't even want to think of that drama, seeing as Kelsey was happily married to Killer.

“Angel will be in charge and assigning lists of chores. Let's make this happen, people.” He clapped his hands.

“Don't worry. We're not starting today, but tomorrow, please be here early, and we'll get this place set up. I'll be sure to make hot chocolate, pies, and cookies for everyone.”

Angel had started to lose the guys' interest at the prospect of doing any work tomorrow, but of course, his wife's cooking always won them over.

Lash nodded at his wife that he'd be in his office, and Angel waved him away. He had to make a couple of phone calls.

Stepping into his office, he took a moment to look at the place. It wasn't an overly large room. Not like their church, and many years ago, before the place was burnt to the ground, this had been all Tiny's.

With the rebuild and restructuring, this office no longer resembled anything Tiny had done. This was all him. No one else had any influence over what he'd done. When he first took over from Tiny, he had felt so far out of his depth, but he also knew, Tiny couldn't be their Prez. The man had been like a father to him, and in his own way, offered him guidance.

He moved behind his desk and lifted the receiver, pressing the speed dial button that would send him straight through to Devil's cell phone. There was a time he'd had the man's clubhouse on speed dial, but Devil was rarely at his desk. He was always moving around, and Lash had to wonder if that was how he'd stopped himself from growing old.

Devil was a similar age to Tiny, but where Tiny had handed over the reins of The Skulls MC, Devil had yet to do that with Chaos Bleeds. Tiny and Devil had a whole lot of history that had started long before The Skulls and Chaos Bleeds existed. He didn't see Devil letting go of Chaos Bleeds anytime soon. Even with Simon returning and bringing in more men, and seeming to appear all normal and shit.

Simon had killed someone. Not that Lash could blame him. Tabitha, Simon's wife and all-around sweetheart, was raped when she was young by Ryan, a kid from the Monster Dogs MC.

Lash pushed all of this to the back of his mind. He thought about his own two sons, Anthony and Connor. There was going to come a time when he was going to have to make a decision: Miles or Anthony.

Anthony was his son, but Miles was Tiny's son, and the twin brother to Tabitha.

He ran a hand down his face, but he didn't have to dwell on any possible decision soon as Devil answered.

"Please tell me this is good fucking news," Devil said.

"It's good fucking news."

"About fucking time."

Lash snorted. "Well, it depends on how you look at it. How would your old ass be able to handle a trip to Fort Wills?"

"Why?"

"Come on, man, it's Christmas. Angel's wanting a whole big family get-together."

"And she sees us as family."

"Don't be like that. You all know that she does. We're all the shit and tight and all that."

Devil chuckled. "Why didn't you get Tiny to call?"

"Because he wouldn't want to. Dude's getting older by the day, and besides, it's my club."

“Fine. Fine. I’ll talk to Lexie and call you back.”

“She is probably already on board with it. Angel has been talking to the women.”

Devil’s chuckle turned into a big old laugh. “No kidding. That explains why Lexie’s been talking my ear off about having some fun down in Fort Wills. Fuck me, that explains it all.”

“How is Lexie doing?”

“Still cancer-free, and I thank my lucky fucking stars for it.”

“Good news.”

“Right, I’ve got to go and guilt a woman, bye.” Devil was never the kind of guy for long, intense chats.

After putting the phone down, Lash stared at it for a couple of minutes before making up his mind, dialing Butch at Vegas.

The Vegas chapter of The Skulls was doing really well. Putting Butch as Prez had been a damn good idea. The men there were loyal as fuck as well.

Butch answered after the fourth ring. “What’s up?” Butch asked.

“It’s that time of year, my friend,” he said.

“Christmas. Tell me about it. Cheryl’s got the club whores helping her decorate and shit. It is a whole big thing.”

“Oh, okay, Angel’s wanting to do a big family get-together. I figured I’d put the call out.”

“Sorry, man, can’t make it this year, but maybe another year, or you guys head down here for some fun.”

“That would be good, man.” There was a sudden scream, and Lash chuckled. “I’ll leave you to deal with whatever that is.”

Butch grumbled but hung up.

Leaning back, Lash wasn't too excited about the prospect of having all the guys from Chaos Bleeds over for Christmas, but with that many people around, it meant he'd be able to be with his woman, and they'd get to sneak off to have some much-needed fun time together, and that was no hardship.

Chapter Two

Angel watched as Adam, their British patched in member, grunted as he placed the final box of Christmas decorations down at her feet. He'd been grumpy for the past couple of weeks, and she had no idea why.

"Thanks, Adam," she said.

"Whatever."

She opened her mouth about to ask him what his problem was but realized this could be a whole hot chocolate and cookies affair, and she decided to wait. When it came to the clubhouse, she liked to make sure everyone was good and there were no problems. In theory, talking to Adam should be Lash's job, but she had long since learned that wasn't possible.

Her man did not talk to other men too often about their feelings. That was a topic he wouldn't venture into.

So, she did. She made sure the men and women were all good, were all on the same page. It was important to her to do so.

Opening the box, she saw an abundance of tinsel. She always liked to decorate the clubhouse. Some of the guys who didn't have families stayed at the clubhouse. They were never alone though. Even if they had separate Christmases, invites were always open for those that didn't have family.

Like, Drew, Adam, Fighter, and recently Wicked had returned after being on the road with the Nomad Chapter of The Skulls. Then there were Ice, Wayne, and Gym, and they had settled into the clubhouse fine. They often had men from the Nomad Chapter coming to live with them. Every now and then they liked to come to Fort Wills, to see if they were ready to settle down, or just wanted the open road.

She didn't mind. She had always wanted a big family.

There were times that Lash seemed nervous about it, but he clearly didn't understand she wanted this as well. To be surrounded by family and friends.

The holidays were a special time of year. For a long time, during her early years of being Lash's wife, their world was filled with enemies and death. Having a relaxing Christmas had been hard. Since Lash had taken the club in a different direction, there were far more opportunities for all of them, and that, she loved.

"Okay, so I've got Lacey on tree duty with Whizz and their kids," Tate said, coming toward her.

"Awesome." She loved Lacey, but the other woman wasn't much of a decorator. Unless it involved women's hair and faces. Also, she didn't want any of the decorations breaking, and there was a risk with Lacey. Not that she didn't love her, she did, but picking a tree was what she needed Lacey to do.

Once that was done, she had a couple of other jobs for her.

She'd already been on the phone with Lexie, and her other idea was coming along swimmingly. She couldn't wait to see them, and Lexie was just as excited as she was.

"What do you need me to do?" Tate asked.

"You're on tinsel duty," Angel said.

"You got it."

Millie, Baker's wife, was on present duty. The other woman owned a toy shop, and Angel wanted there to be a gift for everyone.

She was a little upset that Butch and his club wouldn't be making it, but she wasn't going to dwell. They were going to be a full house without the Vegas Chapter.

Glancing around the main clubhouse, she smiled as she saw Sophia and Eva organizing the tables so there would be room for more people. Charlotte, Prue, Emily, and Kelsey were organizing the beds and places to stay, including for the kids, and of course, grandkids.

It was up to Rose, Sunshine, and Angel to organize local hotels and stays for everyone. Angel had been on the

phone and arranged for one place to house them, so long as Chaos Bleeds promised not to fuck over their property. She'd already spoken to Lexie with the view of keeping them in line. At least, she hoped so.

Everything was going swimmingly.

Darcy and Sally were helping with the decorations.

This was going to work.

She didn't know why it was so important to her. It wasn't like this wasn't their first-ever Christmas together. In the twenty-plus years she'd known them, they had spent many Christmases together, as well as many apart. This was different though; it felt different to her.

Angel moved toward the front door, and there outside, shoveling snow, were Daisy and Anthony.

Daisy was Lacey's adopted daughter, and Anthony was her son. Her eldest living son. Before him, she had been pregnant, but— She cut that thought off. That had been a dark time, and she wasn't going to dwell on the past.

The power of looking forward and positive thinking, that was what she planned. It was what she always did.

Staring at the two young people, she couldn't compare them to her or Lash. They had a completely different start compared to her and Lash. First of all, they had grown up together. She and Lash didn't have that luxury.

From the moment she and her husband were together, there was never any chance of anyone else being with her. Lash owned her, body, mind, heart, and soul. She didn't have a problem with that.

Considering she'd been kept due to a debt with her father, it had soon turned into something magical. Sure, they had their moments, but didn't all couples?

Lash had never once strayed, and neither had she. She wasn't even tempted.

With Anthony and Daisy, she didn't understand what was wrong with them.

Her son had been smitten with the girl since they were kids. Angel remembered them sitting together. How Anthony would sit and listen to Daisy read. He rarely picked up a book himself, but the moment Daisy had one in front of her, he'd sit, listen, and he was completely enraptured by her.

She knew they'd gone on a couple of dates, but from all appearances, that hadn't turned into anything else. She had to wonder what the problem was. They were an amazing couple.

Even now, Anthony was making sure Daisy didn't hurt herself shoveling the snow. He was working twice as hard as anyone else, building up speed.

"Why are you spying on our son?" Lash asked, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"I don't know. I'm just trying to think of ways to help them, you know?"

"You've got to give them time. That is, in truth, all they need."

"Aren't you worried?"

"About Anthony, no."

"What about Daisy?"

"No," Lash said, laughing. "First of all, our son is a damn hard worker, and trust me when I say this, he knows what he wants."

"And Daisy?" Angel asked.

"She's got all of us. Lacey, Whizz, and of course she has Anthony."

"What do you think went down between the two of them?" Angel asked.

"Have you ever considered the fact that they might just be private?" Lash asked. "That they are in fact together, but they don't want to deal with their parents butting into their lives?"

“Is it butting in when you’re trying to make them happy?”

Lash laughed. “No, it’s not butting in, if you consider that rare condition, but come on, babe, give them time. You and I, we wouldn’t want anyone meddling in our life.”

That was true.

She sighed, resting against him. “I love you, you know that?”

“I don’t doubt it. I’m the most loveable fucker in here.”

“You’ve been hanging out with Adam for too long.”

“That is the truth. Before long, I’ll be telling people to bugger off and to make me a cup of tea.”

Angel laughed as Lash made a British impression of Adam. “Do you happen to know why he’s so grumpy?” she asked.

“Not a clue, babe. I never know what’s going on in that head of his, but I’m not going to make it my mission to find out, either.” He kissed her temple. “Just something for you to enjoy doing.”

“How do you know I enjoy doing this?” Angel asked.

“Simple, you enjoy helping people and fixing their problems. It’s what you always do.”

That wasn’t wrong. She hated seeing people hurting or in any kind of pain. Over the years, she had heard many people describe her as a doormat or a waste of space, and plenty of other adjectives to describe how weak people saw her. This was purely because she wouldn’t hurt anyone. She didn’t think violence was necessary. As far as she was concerned, there was already so much horror in the world, and she wasn’t going to be a person to help it. Instead, she fought against it, and she always tried to find the good in everyone.

Much to Lash’s annoyance.

Lash climbed out of his truck with Anthony, stepping into ankle-deep snow. He was pleased he had thought ahead to putting snow chains on his tires.

“Lacey and Whizz already got a tree,” Anthony said.

“I know. They got one for the clubhouse, but we both know your mother. She would like a tree for the house as well.” Lash was used to his woman wanting to be completely immersed in all things Christmas.

From December first, she would change her sexy pajamas for all themed ones. Reindeers, snowmen, even little quotes that said *Merry Christmas* and all that. The house was always decorated, and she’d change their cutlery to be that of a Christmas theme. The house would smell amazing for the entire month. Actually, his house always smelled good, but at Christmas, the scents were slightly different.

Just thinking about a mince pie was making his mouth water.

He’d left Chloe and Connor at home. His other son had a chest infection, and as much as Connor wanted to come out and wield an axe, he couldn’t have his son getting sicker. As for Chloe, she had become her mother’s little shadow, helping with the baking and organizing.

When he truly took the time to think about it, he was one lucky fucking bastard. Never a day went by when he wasn’t grateful for all that he had.

“True,” Anthony said. “She’s spending a lot of time at the clubhouse.”

“Yep.” And Lash didn’t have a problem with any of that. Why would he? His wife was with him all the time, and he happened to love seeing his wife.

When all of the kids were young, he hated the long, hard days when Angel would be so tired and they wouldn’t get two minutes to call their own.

Now, he got all the moments.

Lash locked up the car, and together, he and Anthony headed into the Christmas tree lot. Whizz and Lacey had scored a big one, and it had taken Angel two days to get the thing decorated. It was huge and took up a nice corner of the clubhouse. Killer had been the one to put the angel on the tree. He was the biggest fucking giant they had.

He still couldn't believe Kelsey and Killer had given birth to small kids. He had no doubt the time would come when those little shits were just as big as their father.

There weren't many people in the lot, and Anthony stayed by his side, pointing at random trees.

Lash would know the right tree when he saw it.

"So, do you want to tell me what is going on with you and Daisy?"

"Nothing."

"Your mother is worried," Lash said.

"Mom's always worried. You know that."

He and Anthony had a good, strong relationship. He was very much aware of his son's darkness and what he was capable of.

Lash didn't need to bring up the fact that Anthony had killed Daisy's dad, or that he'd hurt anyone who had ever dared to hurt Daisy.

The club thought Tabitha's intervention with Michael was what put Alex's son on the right path.

It wasn't.

He was no fool. Michael had called Daisy fat a few years ago and even implied that she didn't have a place in The Skulls because she was adopted. That Lacey and Whizz had felt bad for her, but they didn't love her.

Michael's face hadn't been bruised or given any indication or sign that anything was wrong with him.

Lash had seen how he walked.

Anthony had struck where it was hard to see.

Not that Lash could blame his son. When it came to the kids, unless it needed adults to take care of it, he left them flesh out their own arguments. Oftentimes, it was a load of bullshit that didn't need a grownup to deal with.

“Well, I'm not telling you that I'm worried.” Lash stopped and turned to Anthony.

His son had shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Talk to me.”

Anthony stared at him for a long time. Lash wasn't like the boy his son was used to. Lash had seen darkness, and hell, and he'd dealt with beasts that would make his son shit his pants.

“She's worried about Tabitha. That's it.”

“What is going on with the two of you? Are you two together or not?”

“Why do I have to answer that?” Anthony asked.

Lash took a step toward his son. “Because I know you. You can give your mother the fake smiles and play the bullshit role. You do it very well, but I do know you, and I know you've got a lot of shit to work out. I can't have that spilling into my club. I can't have anyone doubting you as a potential leader.”

“We know that's supposed to go to Miles,” Anthony said.

“Not necessarily. When the time comes, it will go to the person who deserves it.”

Anthony sighed. “I've been thinking about heading out with the Nomad Chapter.”

This was news to Lash. “You have?”

“Daisy needs space, and while I'm here, I can't give it to her. She has to, I don't know, get her shit together, I guess. I'm not sure. I love her, Dad. I love her so much it fucking hurts to see her in any kind of pain.”

He didn't want Anthony going with the Nomad Chapter. There were still many risks. The Skulls' reputation was cemented long ago, and the thought of his son being in the thick of it didn't feel right to him.

But from the look on his face, Lash knew he had no choice.

"We'll talk after Christmas." He held his hand up, as his son was clearly going to dispute it. "After fucking Christmas. That is final. You don't leave. You don't make any final decisions until I say so."

"Did you allow Tiny to make those kinds of decisions?" Anthony asked.

Lash smiled. "Son, why do you think I'm standing here right now? I knew when to be a wiseass, and then I knew when to shut the fuck up and be a man. I suggest you do the same."

Chapter Three

Angel stepped back and looked at the tree in her living room. It was a deep green. Lash and Anthony had picked well. There was something going on between her husband and their son. Anthony looked even more miserable than usual.

She kept a smile on her face, as even Connor looked pissed. He loved going out and picking trees. His glare came and went in between coughs. Poor boy. Her children, no matter how old they got, would always be her kids, her babies. She loved them all so much.

Chloe, her daughter, sat on the sofa. "It's a pretty one," she said.

"Who would like cookies and hot chocolate?" Angel asked.

All three kids raised their hands.

She gave Lash's hand a squeeze and then made her way into the kitchen. Lash wasn't far behind her. She poured out the milk into three mugs, and then looked at him. "Want one?"

"Yeah, I do."

Angel chuckled. Her hot chocolate even worked on her husband.

With five mugs measured out, she poured the milk into a saucepan and placed it on a gentle heat.

"Do you want to tell me what is going on with everyone?" she asked.

"It's nothing."

"You and Anthony picked a beautiful tree and now won't stop glaring at each other. That tells me that something is going on." She grabbed her Santa spatula and stirred the milk in the saucepan to keep it from scalding. She'd already made a batch of fresh chocolate chip cookies, and they were once again in her themed jar.

She really did love this time of year. Having Christmas all around her filled her with so much joy.

Lash looked behind him and then turned toward her.

“Anthony is thinking of joining the Nomad Chapter.”

“Oh,” Angel said. “He is?”

“Yes. Don’t worry, I’m going to talk him out of it.”

Angel felt disappointed. She loved her children so much. She looked toward the doorway and sighed. “But what if he needs it?”

“Angel, come on, babe. You and I both know that’s not what he needs.”

“True, but he feels like he needs it.”

“You want him to go away?”

“No, definitely not. He’s our little boy, but ... what if this is something that he needs?” She could quite easily be selfish and get Lash to talk Anthony out of it, but that didn’t feel right to her.

Lash sighed. “You do know there’s still a lot of danger out there. The Nomad Chapter has to deal with The Skulls’ reputation.”

“I get that. Trust me, I understand, Lash.” She sighed. “I just want the best for them all.” She forced a smile to her lips.

Lash groaned and moved toward her. He stood directly behind her, and just having him close was a comfort to her.

“Tell me what you want,” Lash said.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I do. I can’t have you sad on me.”

She leaned back against him. “There are some things in this world that you’re not going to be able to fix, Lash. I know you.” She rested her head against his chest. “We’ve got to allow him to grow and to do his own thing, even if it does go against everything we want for him.”

“Did I ever mention that I think parenting sucks?”

“You love being a daddy.”

“Yeah, and that’s why I know what is best for our babies.”

Angel rubbed his chest. “Do you think he can’t handle it?”

“I know Anthony can handle it. That kid can handle anything. That’s not the problem.”

“Then what is the problem?”

Lash opened his mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. She knew she had to be patient.

“I don’t want him to go,” Lash said. “He’s my son. I don’t, he’s mine. I don’t want the Nomad Chapter to have him.”

Angel cupped his cheek and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I love you.”

“I don’t quite love myself right now.”

She went back to stirring her milk as she saw the heat rising. “There is only so much we can do for them. At least we both know we’ll be there for him if he decides to go.”

“I don’t want him to go.”

She didn’t want Anthony to go either, but like his father, he could be pretty damn stubborn.

Angel removed the milk from the stove and made her way into the pantry, finding just the right chocolate chips as well as the vanilla.

Lash stayed by her side, touching her back, her shoulder, her stomach. Whenever he was like this, when he wasn’t happy about something, he often came to her. She had no problem with him being close. This was how they were, strong together. Always together.

After adding the chips and vanilla to the pot, she put it back on to heat and gave it a quick taste. It was so good, but it

needed a little more sweetness.

She rushed to the fridge and pulled out her maple syrup. Once back to the milk, she added a little and gave it a taste. Perfection.

Angel wasn't done yet though. Nope. Pouring into their mugs, she rushed back to the fridge, put the maple syrup back inside, and then grabbed the cream from a can, some marshmallows, and some sprinkles.

After giving each mug a nice generous squirt of cream, a few marshmallows, and some Christmas sprinkles, she was all set. She placed them on a tray, and Lash carried them through to the kids. Angel grabbed her cookie jar and followed him.

Connor was already eating the cream as she opened the jar. He took out a cookie, as did Chloe, and then Anthony. She sat beside Lash on the sofa, leaning against him for support, and watched her kids.

Anthony sat on the floor, his hot chocolate on a coaster. Chloe held hers and took delicate sips. Connor, well, she didn't even know if he got to taste his with how fast he was eating and drinking.

“Can I have another cookie, please?” Connor said.

Angel laughed. “Dig in.”

Even if they ate all the cookies tonight, it wouldn't be any hardship making a whole new batch.

“Are you hiding in the attic?” Nash asked.

Lash turned to look at his brother.

“No, I'm not hiding. I'm looking for something.”

“Peace and quiet.”

“Shut up.”

“Chaos Bleeds is set to descend on our doorstep in a few days. Angel has the clubhouse decorated like a freaking

advertisement, and you're up here, looking for what?"

"I don't know. I'll know it when I see it."

There was a lot of shit boxed up. They had moved a lot of stuff between the basement and the attic.

Nash heaved himself up into the space.

Lash could barely stand tall as it was. "What brings you up here?" Lash asked.

"It's Christmas. My brother's wife is going a little cray-cray, and I figured I would check in with him. You know, see how it's hanging and all that."

"You're here to avoid work," Lash said.

Nash winked. "That too. Angel's moving on to grocery duty. We all know how she gets with that shit." He shook his head.

"You mean my wife likes to organize everything and you always have a specific time and place of where to be." Lash knew Angel, and there had been a time she was terrified of being his old lady. Especially when he took over as Prez.

She had been scared of appearing weak or making him look vulnerable. He had known from the start that she was a better person than him. That between the two of them, they were going to make this work.

"Damn, you guys are still like that first time, aren't you?"

Lash stared at his brother. "Are you trying to tell me that there is trouble in paradise?"

Nash shook his head. "Nah. Sophia and I are great, you know. She does worry about me all the time."

He could understand that. There was never a day that went by when he wasn't worried about his brother. Years ago, Nash had succumbed to drugs, and it had very nearly killed him. Lash remembered those days and how fucking hard it was. With Tiny as Prez, Lash had worried that Nash would be completely kicked out of the club.

That time was now past, but that didn't stop Lash from worrying about his brother. He would always worry about him.

Nash chuckled. "She's loving the fact you're bringing everyone here. I take it that was Angel's idea."

"It could have been mine."

"No, it couldn't. You and I both know that when it comes to Christmas, you're a family man. Spending time with your woman is what is important to you."

Lash sighed. "She wants a big family Christmas. I can't deny her that. She has put up with so much."

"So have you."

"Yeah, but I'm the cause. Think about it, if Angel had found a nice man, one that wasn't involved with an MC, she would never have, she'd never have lost a baby, been shot at. Nearly killed herself."

Nash grabbed his hand. "Don't do that shit to yourself."

He couldn't help it. There were moments, like now, where he had to wonder if Angel would have been better off without him. The whole thought process was mute. There was no point in even thinking about it, but he couldn't help but wonder if she would have been better without him.

Gripping the back of his neck, he tried to stretch out the muscles.

"Angel wouldn't have wanted anyone else. You know what else, no other guy would have respected her the way you do. There are some evil bastards out there, and they would've walked all over her. You know that. I know that. Angel is a kind soul, but we all know in this club that she is easily taken advantage of."

"Tate makes sure that doesn't happen, and besides, Angel is better now than ever before."

"Agreed. She doesn't fall for every single sob story she hears."

Lash sighed and sat down on the dusty attic floor. “I’m looking for some of Anthony’s baby clothes. In particular, the leather cut. You know, the one I got specially made for him.”

“You mean the one that Tabitha and Miles had?”

“Yeah.”

Nash looked around. “Why would they be up here?”

“I’ve already checked at home, and other than a few baby trinkets, Angel donated his clothes, or what could be donated. She refused to get rid of the leather cuts. I figured they’d be here if anywhere.”

“Okay, well, let me help.”

He searched for the boxes, but some of the shit he didn’t even know what it was. The attic had become a dumping ground, and he didn’t like it.

“Is this it?” Nash asked, picking up a small box.

They moved toward the small circular light Lash had fixed up there. After pulling out his knife, he scored it across the tape, and they opened up the box to see the leather cuts, neatly folded. This was Angel’s doing. She loved things to be tidy. He fucking loved that woman.

“Do you want to tell me why you’re getting out old memories? Anthony ain’t going to fit in that.”

“Shut the fuck up. I know he’s not, but I don’t know, I feel like I need it.” Lash sighed. “He’s planning on taking some time with the Nomad Chapter.”

Nash winced. “Are you sure he’s ready for that?”

“Hell, no. He’s my son. I know some men would be thrilled for their kid to be going on an adventure, screwing everything that moves, but I don’t want him to go.”

“You do know it has been a long time since there was an attack on them,” Nash said. “The worst could be over.”

“I know it could, but would you risk it?” Lash asked.

Nash paused as he was about to answer.

“See,” Lash said.

“You know, all of this shit seemed fine when we were growing up,” Nash said. “You know, the danger and the chance of getting killed. Learning to fire a gun. Beating the shit out of people who said a bad word about The Skulls. Doing drugs runs, the gun runs. Earning our patch.”

“And now with kids, it scares me. I mean, I’ve got Connor, who seems to have a bit of a psycho phase at the moment. He’s always watching horror movies, and don’t even get me started on his fascination with the axe. Then you’ve got Chloe. My little girl, and I know guys are going to want to be dating her. There’s no fucking way she’s having a boyfriend or a girlfriend. She’s grounded for life. Then there’s Anthony. Miserable, broody little shit that he is, and his fascination with Daisy. Fuck me, when did life get so fucking domestic?” Lash asked, holding on to his son’s old leather cut.

“I’d say right around the time that you started to make changes, but they’re changes that needed to be made.”

“They still come with risk though.”

Nash laughed. “Everything in life comes with risk, Lash. We make a difference now more than ever. There was a time that I would think about getting high. To just lose myself in the drugs, but I don’t because I know there’s a chance I’m going to be needed. That you’re going to need me, and I can’t let you down.”

“You don’t let me down.”

“Not now, but I have.”

“Don’t feel guilty for that shit.”

“It’s not about feeling guilty. It’s about making amends. You fought for me then, and I’m fighting for you now. Having that patch.” Nash pointed at the *Prez* that was sewn onto his leather cut. “You deserve that more than anyone else, and you never should forget it.”

Chapter Four

Angel couldn't sleep.

It was nearly three in the morning, and she had slept for an hour. She had gone with Nash, Murphy, and Steven to grab some of the groceries. They had been terrified to go. She had a shopping list nearly as long as her arm, but she had everything ready. Turkeys were in the freezer, and she'd get them out the day before, then there were the cuts of meat as well. She had a list of pies to make.

Everything was coming together. Lexie would be arriving very soon, as would the rest of the Chaos Bleeds ladies.

She missed them.

Glancing over at Lash, she saw he was sound asleep. She didn't have the heart to wake him. He'd be pissed if he knew she couldn't sleep. He always wanted to be there for her.

He worked so damn hard to make the club right and to keep all the guys in check. She hated the idea of feeling like a burden to him.

Easing out of the bed, she took her time. After sliding her feet into her novelty slippers with cute little Christmas trees on them, she left the bedroom quietly, so as not to disturb him.

What she needed was her hot chocolate. A nice hot mug of the stuff.

Making her way downstairs, she came to a stop when she saw Anthony sitting at the kitchen counter. She smiled as she entered the room. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No. Of course not."

Anthony sat in one of the pajama sets she had purchased for him last year. They looked a little tight across

the chest, but they just about fit him. “I’ll have to get your size to get another pair.”

“They’re comfy.”

Angel knew her son wasn’t much of a talker, but he did always make the effort with her, which she appreciated. Over the years, she had heard people referring to her son as the oddball, the weirdo, the serial killer waiting to happen. Whenever she heard them, she would give them a piece of her mind.

Anthony wasn’t weird. He just didn’t like to talk or share much of his feelings. She knew deep down inside that he was a good person. It was in his eyes. Anthony was many things: loyal, loving, and an amazing man combined. She wasn’t a fool though. She knew there was a darkness within him. A rage that he kept in check. Just like his father.

Lash would often have long, quiet spells. She knew what he was capable of. How he’d been strong enough to snap a man’s neck with his bare hands, and he’d done it, several times.

“Would you like some hot chocolate?”

“Is Dad up?” Anthony asked.

“No.”

“He’s not going to like you being up on your own.”

Angel rolled her eyes. “I’m not alone, am I? I have my son with me.” She moved about the kitchen, grabbing some milk once again. “Do you want a drink?”

“Yeah, I’ll have a drink.”

She got to work on her hot chocolate, leaving the silence to mingle between them.

To her, it wasn’t uncomfortable. She had learned, with Anthony, to give him space. When he was ready, he’d talk.

“You’re not going to try to convince me to stay home?” Anthony asked.

Angel turned toward him.

“We both know that Dad told you what I had planned. You two tell each other everything.”

“I know what you’re talking about, but no, I’m not going to try to convince you of something like that.” She shrugged. “It’s your life, honey, and there is only so much that I can do.”

She finished stirring the pot of milk. The chocolate had already been added, as had the vanilla. She didn’t mind the taste of it, and so she got to pouring. With how late it was, she didn’t bother with the cream or marshmallows. She didn’t actually like marshmallows, but seeing as her family did, she just ate them.

As she took a seat beside him, Anthony sighed. “I think it’s for the best.”

“What is going on with you and Daisy?”

“I-I don’t know. We’re, I don’t really know what we’re doing at the moment, or why it’s so hard.”

Blowing across her cup, she listened to Anthony. “Is this because Tabitha has moved away?”

“I know Daisy misses her, but I think she’s planning on moving to Piston County.”

“Oh,” Angel said. This was news to her. “Has she told Whizz and Lacey?”

“No, she hasn’t even committed or said anything that suggests that’s what she is going to do. I don’t know what she has planned.” Anthony lifted his mug and took a long sip.

It was still piping hot, but that didn’t seem to bother him.

“Do you think you could talk to her?” he asked.

Angel looked at him, a little startled. “Anthony, you know I can’t convince her to stay if that’s not what she wants.”

“She won’t be happy there,” Anthony said. “She loves Tabitha and misses her, but I know Piston County isn’t for her.”

Angel reached over and put her hands on top of his. “Then you’ve got to be the one to talk to her. Tell her how you feel. Convince her.” Daisy and Anthony’s relationship was complicated, at least it was to her. She never knew what to say to him.

She had seen his infatuation when they were kids, and it had only gotten stronger as they grew up.

“I should talk to Tabitha.” He finished drinking his hot chocolate. “Thanks, Mom.”

Angel frowned, not exactly sure if she helped or not.

“Do you need me to stay up?”

“No, it’s fine. Go back to bed. Get some sleep.”

Anthony moved toward the door, then stopped and walked back to her, giving her a hug. “I do love you, Mom.”

“I love you too.”

She watched Anthony leave. He was growing up way too fast.

“Christmas music is on repeat,” Adam said, coming into the gym.

Lash looked up from his punching bag. “I hear.”

Tiny chuckled. As did Nash, Killer, and Whizz.

“Don’t you think you should tell her to stop or at least put other music on? I don’t think I can hear the same old songs another day.”

Lash sighed and looked at Adam. Lately, he had been grumpier than normal, and considering he was the most farting and cheering one of them all, that was saying something.

“You love Christmas. You’re always into the festive season. What’s the deal?”

“I’m older and wiser. Christmas sucks. It is a tradition to remind those of us that don’t have families that we’re old.”

“Ouch,” Tiny said. “Now that hurt. I thought we were all family here.”

Whizz agreed.

“No, you can go home to your nice, hot wife, your kids, and your family. What do I get? A lonely bed with a different-faced pussy every night.” Adam moved over to one of the benches and slumped down with his head on his fist.

Damn.

“What happened to that chick you wanted to see?” Lash asked.

“The mechanic,” Nash said.

“A dead end. She doesn’t want to settle down with an MC guy.” Adam pouted.

“Well, maybe Devil will have some new ladies.”

Adam glared at him. “You do know that it will be all the taken women. You’re all rubbing it in my face that you’re all happy.”

“Dude, you were on the road for years,” Whizz said. “You had a chance to settle, and you didn’t take it.”

“And now I’m dried up and old. I get it,” Adam said. “I’m not loveable.”

“So because you’re in a mood because one chick didn’t want you, you expect me to make my woman suffer?” Lash asked.

“I’m not in the holiday mood.” Adam crossed his arms across his chest and slumped down.

Lash didn’t recall ever being this moody when he was single.

“Is that what you did in front of her?” Whizz asked. “Because, no offense, no woman wants a full-grown baby.”

“Shut up.”

“Did you?” Nash asked.

“I— She wouldn’t even go on a date with me. Said that she liked fixing cars but that was it.”

“So, she wasn’t the right woman. That doesn’t mean you’re not loveable,” Killer said. “For a long time I didn’t think I was, but look at me. Married to an amazing woman.”

“Who works for a dentist,” Adam said.

Killer sighed. “Can I just say, my teeth are amazing, and I haven’t had a single dental problem? So, yeah.”

Lash chuckled, as did Nash, Tiny, and Whizz. Kelsey made sure they all kept their dental appointments. She also made sure their kids weren’t afraid of the dentist, and even got them to all brush their teeth. He never had to bribe or argue with his kids once to get them into the bathroom.

“You just got to get back out there,” Lash said.

“Dude, our clubhouse is surrounded by women. They know women as well,” Nash said.

“No, they know all the taken women. There is not a single woman available.” Adam’s pouting lip appeared to be getting bigger.

Lash was fast losing his patience. “There are other women who are not members of this club. Stop moping around. If you want to have a woman and a family, then you’ve got to put in the hard work. Nothing comes for free in this world. We all know that.” He slammed his fist against the bag, allowing his rage and aggression to release into it.

“You’re right. I’m not a guy to sit on my ass and do nothing. Can I use your women to practice on?”

“Practice on?” Tiny asked.

“Flirt. Show them my moves?” Adam put his hands behind his head and began to thrust his hips.

“Hell, no,” Lash said, without a second’s hesitation.

The rest of the guys joined in.

“Fuckers. Fine. I’ll have a woman, and I’ll knock her up as well. That will solve all of my problems,” Adam said.

“Wait, hold up,” Lash said. “How the fuck will that solve all of your problems?”

“Simple, get a woman to fall in love with my dick, don’t wear a condom, knock her up, and she can’t leave.”

“I’m disturbed right about now,” Whizz said.

“You’re not doing that,” Lash said.

“It will all be legit. Trust me.”

Lash watched as Adam went, and he saw Anthony standing in the doorway of the gym. His face was blank, but something in Lash’s gut told him he needed to nip this in the bud.

He stepped away from the bag and then moved toward Anthony. “Follow me.”

He made his way out of the gym, across the main clubhouse, toward the kitchen, and then out into the freezing cold air.

The club was a hum of activity. There was no place to go to have a private conversation.

“No, and hell, no,” Lash said.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t give me that shit, Anthony. I saw you, and you’re not going to do that to Daisy. Adam talks a good game, but that’s all it is. He won’t go out and do it.”

“And you think I will?”

“Tell me you weren’t considering it.” Lash folded his arms across his chest and stared at his son. Anthony went to open his mouth. “Don’t fucking lie to me either.”

Anthony didn’t say anything, he merely stared.

“I know you want her, Anthony, but trust me, forcing a child on her isn’t going to come without consequences either. Do not make any rash decisions based on conversations you hear. Adam is always talking shit, and farting. That should be enough to know what I’m talking about.”

He looked at his son, who was clearly struggling with this. “Are we done?”

Lash wanted to tell him to get some fucking sense, but he knew Anthony. His son understood, but now it would be a waiting game to see what happened.

“Yeah, we’re done.”

He breathed out a sigh when Anthony left. What happened to his little boy who just liked to be near him?

Chapter Five

“You talked to Adam?” Angel asked, watching as Lash kept appearing and disappearing past their en-suite bathroom. The kids were all fast asleep. It was late and she was tired, but she also had the sense to know that Lash wanted to talk.

“Yeah, I talked to him.” Lash appeared in the doorway. He turned out the light, and Angel just stared at him. He wore only a pair of pajama bottoms, his heavily inked body on full display.

Her pussy grew slick from just watching him. “And?” she asked.

“And he’s a dick. He’s got plans to knock a woman up, or at least he thinks so, just so he could keep her.”

“Sounds horrible.”

Lash stopped at the bottom of the bed.

Angel stared at him.

“Come here.”

She pushed the blanket out of the way and crawled toward him, going to just her knees when she was close to him.

Lash cupped her face, staring into her eyes. “I can read your mind, dirty girl.”

Angel chuckled. “No, you can’t.”

“Oh, yes, I can. You’re looking at me like you want to eat me. Like you want my dick deep inside your pretty pussy. Am I right?”

Heat filled her cheeks, and Angel didn’t have it within her to lie, so she simply nodded.

“Tell me, Angel.” One of his hands moved from her cheek, going down toward her breast, until he finally cupped her. She gasped as his finger found her nipple and he stroked back and forth.

“I want you, Lash.”

“Exactly how do you want me?” he asked.

“All of you. Inside me.”

He pinched her nipple, and she moaned. Deep down, she knew he wasn't going to give her exactly what she wanted until she said the words he wanted to hear. “I want you to fuck me. I want your dick inside me, taking me.”

He slammed his lips down on hers, and Angel wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him in close. His hands moved from her face and breast, going around to her ass, and then down to her knees, where he tugged, making her fall back to the bed.

She laughed but then moaned as he pulled off her pajama pants.

Angel saw the outline of his dick as it pressed against the pajama bottoms. He was rock-hard, and this was what she loved about him, along with many other things. She had once been told that there would come a time when Lash didn't want her. He'd use her until he had his fill but then would find another woman. A younger woman. She'd be nothing but an old lady, and she'd never see him again. Not once had Lash ever pushed her to one side.

He grabbed her knees and spread her legs wide. “There's my pretty cunt. All mine.” He ran his hands down the inside of her thighs, moving toward her pussy. She gasped as he spread her lips open and then without any warning, his mouth was on her. His tongue lapping at her clit, heightening her arousal, making her hungry and desperate for more.

She wanted all of him.

Lash took her clit between his teeth and started to score, creating just the right amount of pleasure and pain, making her beg him to not stop and yet, to keep on going. She was so close. The start of her orgasm began to build, and she moaned his name, filling the air with the sound, and then she remembered she had to be quiet.

The kids were home.

As if he realized how hard she was struggling to contain her pleasure, he reached up and placed a hand over her mouth, helping her to stifle the sound of her release.

His fingers pressed inside her, turning right toward her G-spot, and Angel couldn't contain her pleasure anymore.

She came, hard.

Lash pressed his hand to her mouth, covering the sound. The pleasure was intense, and even before it was over, Lash was between her thighs. She felt the hard, bulbous head of his dick as he thrust between her pussy lips. She cried out as he hit her clit, and then she groaned as he slammed balls deep inside her.

“Oh, fuck me, yeah, that feels good. That's my pretty pussy wanting my dick, like a good girl.”

She loved it when he talked dirty. As she ran her nails down his back, Lash responded by slamming hard and deep within her, going fast as he did, taking her breath away.

“I'm going to fill your cunt, Angel. I want you to come all over my dick,” he said.

Angel knew what he wanted, and she reached between them, touching her clit, and he growled.

With each stroke to her clit, she felt herself tightening around him. Lash didn't stop though. He kept on fucking her, making her his, over and over. His cock pounded inside her, and Angel didn't think it was possible to be close to another orgasm. Then one flooded her body, taking her by surprise as she came hard.

Lash joined her, and she felt his body pulsing, filling her with his cum. Afterward, they collapsed on the bed.

“I cannot wait for everyone to be available in a few days,” Lash said.

“And why is that?” she asked.

“Because I will get you all to myself and then it won't be a rushed fuck.”

She went to argue with him, but they both froze as they heard footsteps out in the hall.

“Fuck!”

Angel chuckled. “I hope we didn’t wake them.”

“Yeah, you did,” Chloe said, raising her voice to be loud enough. “So gross. Why can’t you guys hate each other like normal parents?”

“Go back to bed,” Lash said. “Don’t make me come out there.”

“So gross,” Chloe said.

They burst out laughing as they heard their daughter go back to bed.

“We’re not normal parents,” Angel said.

“Clearly not. I can’t get enough of my wife. I’ve never been able to have my fill of her, and that is never going to change.”

Lash stared at the arriving guests. As always, Devil was the first to arrive. He climbed out of his car and immediately went to Lexie’s side. It had been a couple of years since Lexie had survived breast cancer, but Lash understood the man’s concern.

Lexie swatted at Devil and went toward the back while urging him forward.

“I have to say, I was surprised to get the invite,” Devil said.

“I don’t know why. We’ve hosted Christmas many times before.”

“Yeah, exactly, and you hated it, so I’m guessing this is all Angel’s idea.”

Lash stared at the man.

Devil laughed and held out his hand. Lash took it, and then they each pulled one another in for a hug. Slapping him

on the back, Lash was actually fond of Devil. The man was a good father, an amazing prez, and an even better ally to have in a crisis.

“Thanks for inviting us,” Devil said.

“It’s going to be a pleasure to have you all. As usual, you guys can opt to stay here or to take up the spare rooms at Tiny and Eva’s,” Lash said.

“We’ll head to Tiny and Eva’s. That will give Tabby, Simon, and their little group to stay here and to catch up with the others.”

As if on cue, Simon arrived.

Daisy had been working alongside Angel in the kitchen and was already outside waiting.

The moment Tabitha climbed out of the car, Daisy was there, throwing herself at Tabitha, who held her friend tightly against her.

“I figured Tabitha had been missed,” Devil said.

Miles was next, as were Eva and Tiny, and her little brother Luke.

Lash knew it wouldn’t be long before a couple of other visitors would appear. The kids who were attempting to make a play at being prospects in his clubhouse. The kids who hung around with Tabitha and the others.

Angel stepped out of the kitchen and immediately went to Lexie.

Along with Lexie, Phoebe, Judi, Mia, and Jessica had arrived. There men didn’t stop them as they rushed toward Angel. Lash watched his woman as she was embraced by the Chaos Bleeds women. They were all laughing, hugging, and just being friends.

Natalie arrived, and she held a book, which he imagined was full of fashion designs, seeing as she was one of the lead designers at Lexie’s clothing shop back in Piston County.

“It never seems to get old, does it?” Ripper said, coming in for a handshake.

He shook Curse’s, Butler’s, Dick’s, and Slash’s hands as they came toward him. Each of them slapped him on the back as they did so.

Lash hadn’t been looking forward to this. There were a lot of them all together. He couldn’t help but feel a little apprehensive. He always did, but he never told anyone how he felt. This often came because of how they had been attacked. So much death had occurred when they were all together.

But you’ve got to remember the good times.

The good times did far outweigh the bad.

It didn’t take long for people to be frozen off their asses and wanting to head inside. The families that were staying at the clubhouse were shown to their rooms. The families like Devil, Lexie, and the kids, were heading home with Eva and Tiny.

Lash made his excuses as it started to get loud to head to his office. He had about ten minutes before there was a knock at the door.

He was tempted to stay quiet but knew there was no chance of him being left alone, so he called for whoever it was to come on in.

Angel was there.

“Babe,” he said.

“I figured you’d be hiding in here.”

“I’m not hiding.”

“Right.” Angel rounded the desk and leaned against it. She took hold of his hands and locked their fingers together. “Something is going on with you. What is it?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Come on, Lash. This is me you’re talking to. You think I don’t sense it?”

He stared at their linked hands, and he pressed a kiss to hers before pulling her into his lap. Wrapping his arm around his woman, he breathed her in.

She helped to ground him.

“I ... don’t know. I guess with the guys all around, and everyone here, the clubhouse full, I guess it is reminding me more now than ever before all of those we’ve lost.”

“Oh,” she said. “I had no idea it would do that.”

“Don’t be sad. It’s just some stupid shit that’s going on inside my head. I love that we’ve got everyone around us for Christmas and the kids home still.”

“You’re worried about Anthony, aren’t you?”

“It’s not easy.” He sighed.

“We’ve lost so many.”

“True, but look at what we have.”

Angel cupped his cheek and forced him to look at her. “But you’re right. We never should forget those that we lost. It has been one hell of a rocky journey to get here.” She slid her thumb back and forth. “I love you, Lash, so damn much.”

“You don’t think about how easy it would be without me, without us?”

“Shut up. No. I don’t. I don’t want to ever think about a world where you’re not in it. I love you, Lash. The way I feel about you, it’s not—you’re everything to me. You always will be.”

He pulled her in close and kissed her hard, not wanting to let her go.

She was his rock.

Lash kissed her hard, feeling her warmth surround him. There were times that he truly believed he’d been sent his own personal angel. She was his very reason for breathing, for fighting to make the club a safer place, and of course, for putting up with so many fucking assholes in one place for the holidays.

They pulled away as they heard yelling.

“And so it begins.”

“All families have a few hiccups. This is just one of many.”

Chapter Six

Anthony stared out across the cold, snow-covered ground. It was cold, and he was freezing his ass off, but he'd rather be outside than in.

"You know, Lacey just nearly set fire to the clubhouse," Tabitha said, appearing in front of him.

She wore a pair of jeans and a thick jacket. She still looked freezing cold.

"Not hard to do. She burns down most things."

"It would certainly put a wrench in Angel's Christmas plans." Tabitha stepped forward and sat down next to him. "Do you want to tell me what is going on with Daisy?"

"Three kids," Anthony said. "And I remember when you were panicking with one."

"Shut the fuck up and answer the question."

"Hate to break it to you, but you're a Chaos Bleeds woman now. I don't have to tell you shit."

Tabitha sighed. "So because I picked the love of my life over the clubs, we can't be friends anymore?"

"Didn't say that."

"So stop trying to bullshit me. Tell me what's going on with Daisy."

"I don't know."

"Please, I leave you two alone for like five minutes—"

"Let's go along the lines of months, if not years," Anthony said.

"And you're planning on joining the freaking Nomads and Daisy is, well, so fucking lost. What the hell is going on?"

Anthony stared out across the snow. He didn't have any answers. He and Daisy were working stuff out.

“How’s life in Piston County?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Damn it, Anthony, tell me.”

“I don’t fucking know, okay? I don’t know, and if you want answers, talk to Daisy. I’m not the one with the problems, she is.”

“You want to join the Nomads, and you think there isn’t a problem with you?” Tabitha asked.

“You got a problem with the Nomads?”

“We both know they’re fucking fearless. You’d fit right in, but you’ve never been one to leave Daisy alone, so something has to give.”

“Because she needs fucking space!” Anthony growled, standing up. “She needs space, and while ever I’m close to her, that’s not going to happen, because I can’t do it. There is no fucking way I’m going to Piston County to cool off, and the only other place I’ll fit in is with the Nomads because they won’t want fucking anything from me. I conform. I do as I’m told here, at home, by my dad, who is my prez, but that is it. I don’t answer to no one else, and I never will.”

Tabitha was pissed off.

Daisy was avoiding her, and Rachel, well, she was also not very talkative. They stood at the kitchen counter peeling potatoes. As part of the agreement for the whole Christmas dinner hosting, they all had jobs to do.

Devil had come to her and asked for her help. He didn’t want Lexie hosting another Christmas this year. He wanted her to have more time to rest, so, he had accepted the invitation to Fort Wills.

The kids were at least having a blast. Skye, Nathan, and Jade were all blending in well. This was what she loved about being part of an MC, the family. The unity.

“Can I ask you a question?” Rachel asked.

“Sure, go ahead.” She was Nash and Sophia’s eldest.

“How did you know that Simon was the one?”

Tabitha laughed. “You’re joking, right? You saw Simon and us together. It wasn’t one of those split-second decisions. He’s been mine since we were kids.”

“Yeah, I know, but, er, did you ever have any doubts? You know, when he disappeared?”

“None,” Tabitha said.

“Right, of course, right.”

Tabitha turned toward Rachel and frowned. “Why?”

“No reason.”

She was about to ask more questions when Adam came into the kitchen carrying a large sack of potatoes.

“Sorry to do this to you ladies,” he said, placing them on the floor. “I don’t think you have to peel the whole bag, and this is just for dinner tonight. A full house, or so I’m told.”

Rachel had gone silent and immediately looked away, which had Tabitha suspicious.

No, there was no way.

Adam smiled, tapped them both on the shoulders, and left.

“You have a crush on Adam?” Tabitha asked.

“It’s nothing.”

“Rachel, you do know he’s older than you.”

“Shut up. It’s fine. It is nothing. Absolutely nothing. It’s not like he ever sees me. I need to use the bathroom.” Rachel dropped the potato she’d been peeling and wiped her hand on the towel.

What was going on with The Skulls? Tabitha felt so far out of the loop.

Later that night, after Angel had helped to settle everyone who had arrived, she stood in her bathroom doorway, looking at Lash. “Come on, say it,” she said.

“I’m not going to say anything.”

“You hate this.”

Lash held up his hands and shook his head. “I don’t hate anything. Everyone is here. It’s going to be a lot of fun.”

Angel finished with the moisturizing cream for her hands and walked to the bed, sliding in beside Lash. “You’re sure?”

“Don’t get me wrong, having them here is crazy and it’s a risk, but it’s what you wanted.”

“Why is it a risk?”

“That many guys. Do you know how many fights I’m going to have to break up?”

“First of all. Not everyone is here, and second, they’re grown men.”

“Which is going to make it worse.”

She sighed. “You love it. I can tell.”

“A house full of bikers, or you alone on a magical beach, I don’t know. I think I’d take you, us, alone.”

She rolled her eyes. “We wouldn’t be alone.”

“We’ve got some prospects, babe. Trust me, I’d have some of the guys on babysitting duty, and you and I would be alone.”

Angel was tempted to let him have his little fantasy, but she knew her husband. “Okay, so you would allow for us to be alone, just the two of us, for Christmas. You wouldn’t get to see our babies opening their presents, or enjoying a feast, hanging out, getting completely bloated on too much cake and chocolate?” Lash loved his Christmases with his kids and family. She knew it was always important to him.

He cupped her cheek. “You know what I think?”

“What do you think?”

“That you have the best ideas.”

She burst out laughing. “Is that how you’re going to save yourself?”

“I wasn’t thinking about everything else.”

“So, you’re happy they’re here?”

He groaned. “Okay, maybe *happy* is too strong of a word. I’m not sad that they’re here, but you, know, I’m waiting to see what happens.”

Angel pressed a kiss to his lips. “Why don’t we stop worrying so much? This is going to be an amazing Christmas.”

She stared into his eyes and waited to see what he’d say.

“You’re right.”

“Are you just agreeing with me so that I’ll shut up?”

“No, I’m agreeing with you because you’re right, and they’re family. Chaos Bleeds is family. Tiny told me today that Ned isn’t going to make it.”

“Ned’s sick?”

Ned Walker was Eva’s dad, but he also ran an illegal fighting ring. Angel liked the older man, but he wasn’t fond of the direction the clubs had taken. She didn’t know the full details, but she was aware that Ned was responsible for the drug and gun runs the club used to take. Lash had put a stop to it. As had Devil.

“No. That dude is fucking immortal. He’s not coming back. Sticking around Butch and the club.”

“How do Tiny and Eva feel about that?” she asked.

“I think it’s a good thing. Whenever he’s around, it doesn’t always end well, and it’s Christmas. None of us need that kind of bullshit right now.”

She stared down at his chest and couldn’t help that sick feeling that swirled in her gut. “Do you ever miss it?”

“Miss what?”

“Being on the road.”

“I’m always on the road.”

“Working for Ned.”

“No, I don’t.” Lash didn’t hesitate.

“This is the life you grew up with, Lash. You’re sure you don’t miss it?”

“My parents died because of this life. I’ve lost a lot. All of the guys, and all of you ladies, we’ve all lost a lot. So no, I don’t miss any of that. I’m not into thrill-chasing, Angel. Do you know why?”

She shook her head.

“Because you’re my thrill.”

“That’s corny.”

He took hold of her hand and placed it over his heart. “You feel that?” She felt his beating heart. “I get a thrill out of seeing you. Out of watching you every single day. Knowing I’m coming home to you, that is what I love, it’s what I enjoy. Not being on my bike. Not riding with the risk of being killed. Besides, we both know what I do is still dangerous. Only this time, the law is on my side.”

Tears filled her eyes.

“I’m not good with words. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“You didn’t make me cry, Lash, and we both know you’re perfect at what you do and what you say.”

Chapter Seven

Lash stood in his office doorway and listened. He couldn't make out a single distinctive conversation, but there was noise. Even the music that Angel insisted should be playing all the time, he couldn't hear it. Not a single Christmas note.

He was tense, waiting for some testosterone to say the wrong thing. Chaos Bleeds had been at his clubhouse for twenty-four hours. So far, nothing had been broken or smashed, and no one had been injured.

This was a plus.

Folding his arms across his chest, he waited and spotted his son. Anthony stood with Daisy. He watched the two and wondered what they were fighting about, or if they were even arguing. With Angel, he'd never been so reserved in his feelings.

Daisy and Anthony. He had to watch them to see that they were in fact together. His son had always been so secretive.

"It's hard to see them grow up, isn't it?" Devil asked, coming to stand beside him.

"Do you feel that way about Simon?"

"I feel that way when little babies are calling me Grandpa."

Lash laughed.

"Don't start with me."

"Where's Tiny?" Lash asked.

"Shopping. Something wasn't on Angel's grocery list, and he and Eva made their escape."

"And you haven't?"

"Like you, I'm waiting to see which of my assholes kick off first."

Lash turned to Devil. “You’re worried?”

“Always. Our men are like children. We have to keep them entertained, otherwise, shit hits the fan.”

Lash chuckled. “Pretty much said the same thing to Angel, but she told me to stop worrying.”

“That’s because she has everything organized. As for us men, we just...”

Lash looked out across the main clubhouse. It was full, but the noise wasn’t that of arguing, it seemed jovial. Whizz and Lacey sat with Lola and Sinner. He saw Whizz and Lola looking at a cell phone and were clearly talking all things tech while Sinner and Lacey pretended to have a clue about what they were talking about.

Tabitha and Simon were with Sally and Steven, Darcy and Ink. Slash, Spider, and Dick stood with Nash, Murphy, and Killer.

Conversations were being had. Some of the women were huddled together chatting.

It was family.

“I don’t think we’re needed,” Lash said.

“We’re always going to be needed.” Devil cleared his throat.

Lash snorted. “You didn’t want to come, did you?”

“I, er, I wanted to thank you, actually.”

This made Lash turn to Devil. It was rare for the man to say anything like that. Thanking him, being happy to be at Fort Wills. They were two strong, independent clubs that had been thrown together through all of their troubles. They were family, but it was a complicated family. One full of love but also with the knowledge that there was a hell of a lot of shit under the bridge.

“Why?”

“Lexie, she wanted a full family get-together, and after all the treatments and stuff...”

“She’s still clear, right?” Angel hadn’t told him if Lexie had gotten cancer again. She beat it once.

“Yeah, she is all clear. We keep up-to-date with all of her check-ups and stuff, but I worry. It is so easy for her to just do everything for everyone else.” Devil stopped and cleared his throat. “You know what it is like to have a woman who is better than you. Lexie is better than me. I know deep down she deserved a lot better than me.”

Lash watched him and saw him looking at Simon.

Simon wasn’t Lexie’s son. The whole of Simon’s life, up until he was eighteen, he had thought Lexie was his mother. Devil had been with Lexie’s half-sister first, Kayla. Trying to escape Chaos Bleeds, Kayla had stolen a bunch of money and had given the child she’d been carrying that was Devil’s to Lexie. From what Lash knew, Lexie ended up stripping to try to keep him to be able to survive.

“She could have sent him to care. Put him up for adoption. Fuck me, she could have sold him, but she didn’t. She loved that boy like he was her own. She loves me, and she gave me more kids. I know I’m a lucky son of a bitch, which is why I’m not going to take my eye off the ball again. Lexie loves being around family. She loves you guys, and if I’m honest, I do as well. We’re two clubs, but we’re one and the same. Always will be.”

“It’s good to have you here, but I should tell you, I was against it. I had this crazy idea that Angel and I would enjoy a Christmas alone, but that’s never going to happen. I love being around my kids.”

Devil chuckled. “Strange, huh?”

“Yeah, strange. I have to wonder if—” He stopped.

“What is it?” Devil asked.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.” He slapped Devil on the back.

All of this talk about not deserving women was hitting too close to home for him.

“I’m going to make sure the women aren’t taking over from the men and pulling each other’s hair out.”

Lash knew they were not in the kitchen, but had taken up residence in the gym. Angel had told him they were working on something.

The guys had been kicked out of their own gym, but his wife had prepared for everything, so she had made sure there were a gazillion cookies waiting. The kind that had all the men thinking about their stomachs rather than their peckers.

He made his way toward the gym and stopped in the doorway.

Angel stood and gave a twirl, and he just stopped and stared. His wife was fucking beautiful.

There were a couple of times over the years when she had asked him if he would love her when she was old, where parts of her would head south, and she would have wrinkles. She didn’t seem to understand that he loved her more and more every single fucking day.

He never got tired of her. The love he felt for her was absolute, consuming, and one he never wanted to forget.

His wife, his soul mate, stood in the center of the room, surrounded by the clubhouse women. The dress was beautiful, molded to her tits, and then it seemed to flare out as it hit the ground. Natalie was kneeling beside her with a couple of pins in her mouth, and then she stepped back after she did something to the bottom.

Angel spun around, and Lash’s heart fucking soared.

It was her Christmas dress.

A deep, festive red.

Lexie clapped her hands.

“This is exactly what I wanted,” Angel said.

Lash cleared his throat, and the women turned toward him.

“You look stunning,” he said.

Angel smiled. “So, you like?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Her cheeks went bright red.

“I wanted to make sure you’re all doing okay in here?”
He stared at his woman and just couldn’t believe how fucking lucky he was.

Daisy was aware of Tabitha looking at her. She tried to ignore it, but as she washed the dishes from the night’s meal, it was getting tiresome.

“What?” Daisy asked.

“Wow, since when did I get that kind of attitude?”

She rolled her eyes and looked toward her friend. “I know you and you have no qualms about giving me the what for. So come on, out with it.”

“Anthony.”

“Anything but that.”

“Come on. I tell you everything.”

“Tabitha, you’ve been gone a long time already. You’ve got Nathan, Skye, and Jade. Also, Simon is back. Trust me, you don’t tell me everything.” She ran her cloth across the plate, wanting it to be the end of the conversation.

“I so do. Trust me, I tell you everything.”

Daisy turned to her friend. “Can we not do this, please?”

“Look, I get it. You and Anthony are complicated and shit, but this is me we’re talking about. I’m your best friend.”

Daisy sighed. “You are my best friend, which is why I can’t talk to you about this.”

“Wait, what?”

“Will you be staying all the way to New Year’s?” Daisy asked, trying to change the subject.

She didn’t want to talk about Anthony or everything that was going on, not that there was a whole lot going on.

“Don’t do that. You think after all of this time, I don’t see what you’re doing? We’ve got to talk about this because Anthony is thinking of joining the freaking Nomads, Daisy. You do know that.”

He’d told her today that all she had to do was say the word and he’d be gone.

“Yeah, I know.”

“And that doesn’t bother you? Come on, there is no way I believe that you don’t care. You have to care. This is Anthony we’re talking about, and I know you’re not blind to the fact he doesn’t need any help in not caring. The Nomads are fucking crazy.”

Daisy slammed her hands against the sink. “And maybe that’s where he needs to be.”

She was getting tired of having the finger pointed at her like this was her fault. It wasn’t.

Tabitha stopped.

“Yeah, Tabby, I know all about what he plans and that he— Trust me, if he needs to blow off steam, then the best place for everyone is him in the Nomads.”

“Daisy, what the fuck is going on?”

She sighed. “Nothing.”

“You’re lying. Stop lying.”

“Look, it’s Christmas—”

“Screw the fact that it is fucking Christmas and tell me.”

“He wants to kill them,” Daisy said, finally snapping at her friend, but she made sure her voice was lowered so no one heard.

Tabitha went silent, as Daisy knew she would, but it wasn't going to be over. No way would it be over.

"Kill who?" Tabitha asked.

"Who do you think?" Daisy asked.

"Monster Dogs?"

"Yeah, the entire club. Anthony wants to take them out. Kill them all. He is even convinced that Miles is on his side. He plans to. He is making a decision about going to Lash or just handling it himself." Daisy shrugged. "And he wants me to accept that."

"Oh."

"So, in a way, it all comes back to you." Daisy gritted her teeth and tried not to cry. She refused to shed another tear.

"Daisy, I have, this is, I don't know what you're talking about."

And she wouldn't tell her best friend that she was a little jealous of her. No, scrap that, a lot freaking jealous, and she hated herself for it. Anthony and Tabitha had always been close, and she knew deep down that they were just friends, but a part of her had to wonder if Anthony was in love with her.

"Anthony believes the whole club has to go. The fact we've had any kind of association with them in the past few years, he doesn't like it. What he doesn't know is if his dad is in agreement. Each time he sees Luke, he wants to kill him. That's why Anthony and I are not doing well at the moment." Because it was all that he talked about. He wanted her to help him plan it, and she refused.

Daisy had tried for a long time, a very fucking long time, to ignore a part of her. The side of her that didn't mind getting her hands dirty. She could fight. She wasn't afraid of hurting people, and that scared her.

She had to wonder if the few years she spent with her parents were the cause, or if this was just who she was, which was why she fit in with The Skulls. In the past few months

though, she had to wonder if Michael was right. She was an outsider. That she'd never fit in.

“He doesn't think I'm being a good friend to you by not wanting to kill a whole bunch of people.” Daisy glanced at the dishes, but she needed some fresh air. “Excuse me.”

Chapter Eight

Angel stood at the edge of the main clubhouse and smiled. Everyone was having fun. She spotted Lexie and Devil dancing, as well as Tiny and Eva. Lacey and Whizz were also wrapped around each other.

In fact, pretty much all the couples were on the dance floor wrapped around one another.

So far, there had been no arguing. No crossed words. No jibes. Just a bunch of people having fun. The kids were dancing as well, which she liked.

She noticed Daisy wasn't around, but Anthony was. He sat at the bar, glaring at everyone and everything.

Hands wrapped around her waist, and the scent of Lash surrounded her.

"Hello, beautiful," he said.

"Are you hating it?" Angel asked.

"No, and you can stop asking me that. I'm not going to hate this. You were right."

Angel sighed. "I'm always right."

"Yeah, you are. It's good to have everyone here. Just wish there were some that were still here."

She nodded, feeling a sadness envelop her.

They had lost a lot of people along the way. Some they had never even gotten the chance to meet. She placed her hands on top of Lash's where they rested on her stomach. Their very first child. She had not been able to bring it to term. The club had been under attack at the time.

"Don't," Lash said.

"I know. Don't worry."

"I can never lose you," he said.

"You're not."

She looked around the room, seeing Anthony first, then Chloe, and finally coming toward Connor.

Her three babies. Their children.

“Can you believe we made them?” Angel asked.

“When they’re behaving, I think they’re yours through and through, but when they’re not, they’re all mine.”

She couldn’t help but giggle. Spinning in his arms, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “You always claim to be a bad boy, but you and I both know you’re not.”

He shook his head. “And you, babe, are far too trusting. Have you forgotten how I finally won you over?” His brow was raised.

Angel chuckled. “I think showing me who you really are did that. You being you is what made me fall in love with you.”

“Ah, but you see, you wouldn’t have seen me if it hadn’t been for *him*.”

She knew the *him* he was referring to. Her father. Lash had killed him because he was going to further put her life in danger.

Moving up to her tiptoes, she pressed her lips against his. “Thank you.”

“For what.”

“For wanting me.”

“Angel, babe, you do not have to thank me for wanting you.” He ran his hands down toward her ass, drawing her in closer. She felt the hard ridge of his cock as it pressed against her stomach. “Wanting you has never been the problem.”

She gasped, feeling her own arousal speed up. All Lash ever had to do was touch her, and she was on fire in his arms. That had never once diminished.

She was about to suggest they step back into his office, but all of a sudden, chairs were thrust out of the way.

“Oh, shit,” Lash said.

Angel turned to see Killer and Dick standing toe to toe, which was the only part of their bodies that matched up. Dick was tall, but Killer was known as a giant.

“You got something to say?” Killer asked.

“Yeah, I want to know if I can take you in an arm wrestle. I want to know if all that is for show.” Dick then slapped both of his hands against Killer’s shoulders.

“Oops,” Angel said.

Lash let her go and immediately rushed toward the two men.

“I bet Killer squashes him,” Nash said.

She turned to glare at her brother-in-law. “Not helping.”

“What? Come on, we all know that Killer is the winner here. Dick is all mouth, and Killer is all muscle.”

Devil was there in the mix. “Dick, I told you to be on your best behavior.”

“And I am. Totally am.”

It wasn’t long before Martha, Dick’s wife, was there, putting her hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to do this,” Martha said.

Dick looked around.

Everyone was tense.

She saw him roll his eyes.

“Dudes, seriously, you think I intend to mess up Christmas?” Dick asked.

There were a few shrugs from the Chaos Bleeds side, along with a lot of suspicious looks from The Skulls. The truth was, none of them could rule it out. Not when it came to Dick. He didn’t have the best reputation when it came to a peaceful approach. Hence his name, Dick.

Angel wasn’t so sure this was all innocent either.

Dick growled, and she noticed Killer smirking. “This is what happens when you’re known for being a dick.”

“Then tell them,” Dick said.

“We’re making agreements about dish duty,” Killer said after a moment’s hesitation.

Dick turned toward the room. “Lexie just told us that the ladies are doing all the cooking and the dudes are doing all the dishes, so I’m making sure I got the job I want. That’s it. Killer always cleans up the dishes, so if I win, I take his job from him.”

“You do know it’s supposed to be a group effort,” Angel said. “We’re all contributing.”

“Yeah, and I know Killer would clear everything into the kitchen, and then we’d have no choice but to pick up a towel and start.”

“Wait?” Martha asked. “This is what all this is about? You don’t want to do some dishes?”

“Duh.”

Martha turned toward Killer. “Crush him.”

“Excuse me, wife,” Dick said. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“Yeah, and you got me doing the dishes for life over a stupid bet, so let’s not get into that.” Martha stepped up to him and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I love you, Teddy Bear, but trust me, I so want him to kick your ass.”

Angel couldn’t believe this, but sure enough, there was a roomful of agreeing Chaos Bleeds men. They wanted Killer to take on Dick and win.

Angel didn’t bother to stay and watch. Seeing two men compete just for dish duty wasn’t her idea of fun.

Killer won. It wasn’t an easy fight though, much to Lash’s surprise.

Of course, Dick wasn't quite happy about losing once, so he went for best out of three, then best out of five, before they got to ten, and both clubs got bored.

Lash sat behind his desk, going through a bunch of paperwork from their businesses. It was getting late, and he wanted to go spend some time with his wife. She had decided to sleep at the clubhouse tonight.

He got up about to turn off his desk lamp when Devil appeared in the doorway.

"You got a few minutes?"

"Yeah," he said, taking a seat.

Devil stepped into the room and closed the door.

"You okay, man?" Lash asked.

"I'm getting old."

"I thought that was something you didn't agree to."

"I don't." Devil ran a hand down his face. "Trust me, I don't, but I'm at the age when I'm looking at my son."

Lash leaned back in his chair. "Simon's turned into a good man." He had witnessed the young man and the way he was with his children and with Tabitha. Considering he spent a lot of time on the road after killing the son of one of the Monster Dogs MC for raping Tabitha, he hadn't turned out so bad.

"Yeah, he has, and I know he will be ready soon. Not yet, but soon, and he's who I'm going to be handing my club over to. I've watched him, and he has what it takes to run Chaos Bleeds and not into the ground."

"Why are you telling me?" Lash asked. "It's your club business."

"Because I also happen to know that as much as we both claim to be independent clubs, which we are, we're also a family," Devil said. "We're close, and I know nothing is going to change that."

"You're right."

“So, I need to know who you’ll be putting in charge of The Skulls,” Devil said.

“You can’t ask me that question.”

“I think I can. I trust you, Lash. I know you’ve got to make a choice when the time comes.”

“Dude, I’m not as old as you,” Lash said. “I’m going to be in this seat for a long fucking time.”

Devil laughed. “Trust me, I know, but like me now, I know my days are numbered. I’ve got a lot of years left in me, but the club is going to need a fresh pair of hands. Even if you don’t step down until twenty, thirty, or forty years after me, there is going to be someone to take your place.”

Lash sat back and looked at Devil. “You know who I’m going to give it to.”

“Good,” Devil said.

“Anthony will get this club.”

Devil nodded. “That’s a good choice.”

“But it is also a risky one,” Lash said.

Devil had started to get up, but after his words, he lowered his ass into the seat. “Why?”

Lash hadn’t told anyone about this. There was no way he’d worry his woman. Angel didn’t need that kind of stress on her mind.

“What I say doesn’t leave this room. It doesn’t make its way to Michael Granito or the Billionaire Bikers MC,” Lash said.

Devil nodded.

“Anthony wants to take out the Monster Dogs MC.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Devil said.

“No, I’m not.”

“How do you know this?”

“I know my son,” Lash said. “I know he has a grievance with everything that went down and all the details after. There’s a rage building there, and the truth is, I don’t know if I should burn it out or let it flourish.”

“You’d put both clubs at risk.”

Lash smiled. “And I can tell you don’t have a problem with that.”

“They hurt Tabitha.”

“One kid hurt her, and Simon put him in the ground.”

“But in my opinion, they used that opportunity to take the piss, and for that, it’s unforgivable. They should be killed because of it.”

Devil closed his eyes and held his hand up. “But it’s not the deal we have in place.”

“Exactly.”

If they went back on their word with Michael Granito, it would mean a great deal of shit for their clubs. Not that the law had anything concrete, but it would mean they’d immediately be breathing down their necks. Then Lash had to think about the women and children they were currently helping, as well as men.

The Skulls and Chaos Bleeds MCs were more about revenge. They were more than making it right. People relied on them, and Lash couldn’t allow that to just be for nothing.

“You’ve got to burn it out,” Devil said. “We both do.”

“Simon feeling the same way?”

“Yeah, he is.”

Lash could imagine he was. If it had been Angel, Lash would have felt the same way. Even though Tabitha wasn’t his kid, she was still club, and the truth was, Lash had been so fucking angry.

Angel had spent many nights with him after he made that deal with the Monster Dogs MC. Lash’s natural instinct

had been to take the war to them. To kill them all. To show them that The Skulls had no mercy when it came to them.

He had to consider the club's position, their deal, their arrangement.

Michael was able to handle the death of Ryan so it didn't blow back on Simon, but that was all. The rest, Lash had to handle, and it had fucked with his head for a long time. It was why when the opportunity to put them in their place rose, he took it. Since then, whenever they reached out, he did what he could to fucking squash them.

They were the enemy. There was no way he'd accept them on his turf, and to help matters, he had even made sure that if one of them set foot in Fort Wills wearing their leather cut or riding their bike, he could call his good friend Michael and make their lives a living hell.

It was as good as it got for now.

Deep down, it was all he could allow his son to do. There was a bigger picture, and he couldn't allow Anthony to fuck that up. There was a lot his son had to learn.

"We raised good kids," Devil said.

Lash laughed. "Oh, I know, I just hope they can handle gritting their teeth while they get through their shit."

Chapter Nine

“You talked to Daisy,” Anthony said.

He sat on the bench in the freezing cold and stared at Tabitha.

She had a jacket wrapped around her body, looking half-frozen.

“Yeah, I talked to Daisy, and it seems to me that you’ve been avoiding me.”

Anthony stared at her. It wouldn’t work. It never did. Tabitha was downright stubborn and a giant pain in the ass.

“Not avoiding you. In case you didn’t know, it’s Christmas, and there’s a lot to do.”

“And I know you, Anthony.”

He rested his elbows on his knees and stared at her, waiting. There was no reason for him to start this conversation. This was all on her.

He waited.

“Damn it, stop being a dick.”

“You’re the one outside in the cold talking to me. I’m not the one bothering you.”

“So I’m bothering you now.” Tabitha shook her head. “You know what, I’m happy. You get that? I’m in Piston County, I’ve got three children, a family, a place, and I’m happy. I’m over it. I’ve gotten through it, and you need to do the same. You’ve got to focus on Daisy. She is what’s important.”

Anthony held his hand up. “You think this is about you?”

Tabitha frowned. “You want to get rid of the Monster Dogs because of what they did.”

“True, but it’s not about you. You left. You’re not a Skull anymore, Tabitha. You’ve just told me. You’ve moved

on. You've got a family. You're happy, but what about me?" He glared at her. Tabitha would always be one of his closest friends, but that didn't mean he was happy with what she'd done. He knew the truth. Neither Tabitha nor Simon did.

He did.

Nathan wasn't Simon's kid, and Anthony would take that to his grave. He would never ruin the family he saw. He was happy for Tabitha and Simon.

Their lives weren't supposed to go that way. They were supposed to have had it easy. To have been with each other without the shit that went down. Without Simon having to disappear. That was what should have happened, but it didn't.

Everything was fucked up. And he'd had to sit back and watch as it did, and he hated it.

"I will always be a Skull, Anthony."

"The leather cut you're wearing says otherwise. You're not a Skull anymore. You're Chaos Bleeds."

"If this isn't about me, then what is it about?"

Anthony stepped off the table and took a step toward her. "I was the one who fucking found you. I saw you. I saw what that piece of shit did to you, and Simon got to be the one to kill him. I was there to pick up the pieces, and they're close to my Daisy. They're fucking next door to my woman. To my reason for breathing. I saw what they did to you, and do you think I can let any of them breathe after that?"

Tabitha opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again.

"Yeah, I guess you were too busy thinking about yourself to think about other people."

"That's harsh, Anthony."

"It's the truth though."

"You can't take out the Monster Dogs MC. The club has so many deals in place. Arrangements and agreements. It's

not about me or you, or Daisy. Think of the bigger picture. Lash will never allow you to do it.”

Anthony smiled. “Who says he needs to know?”

“They won’t attack you.”

“You know, I seem to recall thinking the same way, and look what happened to you,” Anthony said.

Tabitha slammed her foot into the snow. “You’re going to risk losing Daisy for this.”

“I’m doing what I can to protect her. There’s no way in hell I’m trusting a club that would do that. They have to go. I’m not the bad guy here, they are.”

“Luke’s not a bad guy.”

“He was that piece of shit’s friend,” Anthony said.

“It was a long time ago,” Tabitha said.

“Clearly for you, but not for me. Not when I have to see them all the fucking time.” He growled at her and then stormed off. He didn’t want to talk to Tabitha anymore. He needed to see Daisy, to know she was okay.

The dresses were all perfect. The food had all been purchased, and Christmas was just a few days away. Angel had gone over all the gifts with Millie, and they were prepared for the big day. Everything was working.

The clubs hadn’t killed one another, which was once again a massive bonus as there did seem to be a huge risk of that happening.

Everything was coming together, which was why she had gotten up early Sunday morning. To make up for all the guys’ hard work, she had started to make some waffles. Seeing as the club loved it when she cooked, she had three waffle irons to speed the process along. She put the oven on low, dolloped out the mixture using a measured cup, and closed each of the lids.

Two trays of waffles were already in the oven to keep warm. Once all the waffles were made and she had enough, she'd move on to the syrup and sauces.

The kids always picked chocolate sauce, which she liked to make rather than buy. Then everyone loved warm maple syrup drizzled on top. It was one of her favorite ways to eat it.

She loved cooking for everyone.

"I should have known you were in the kitchen," Adam said, coming in to sit down. "The clubhouse always smells welcoming when you're around."

Angel smiled. "Good morning."

"Is it a good morning?" Adam said. "It's covered in snow. It's a cold and frosty morning, like my life."

Lash had warned her that Adam had been in a depressed mood. "I made coffee."

"Ah, the hot substance that will awaken my mind and remind me how lonely I am."

She'd poured him a large cup and stepped toward him, but now she hesitated. The last thing she wanted to do was to make him feel lonely.

This was hard. What did she do?

"Enjoy the coffee, Adam. You like it."

"I prefer tea. I might as well drink it weak."

She tutted and moved away to open up the waffle irons. "You're wallowing."

"The last time Michael was here, he told me I should consider a will. You know, someone who I can leave all of my money and personal belongings to, and you know what I decided?"

Angel turned toward him after easing the waffles onto the baking tray. "What did you decide?"

“I have no one to give my belongings to. I should get a cat or dog, but then they’d probably just leave me.”

She put the baking tray in the oven and then dolloped out more of the mix. “Adam, you have got to stop,” Angel said.

“It is easy for you to say. Look at you. You are loved, adored by the hundreds. People would miss you.”

“And you will be missed at this club, but you can’t just give up. So the mechanic thing didn’t work out. That doesn’t mean there aren’t other women out there. Women who adore you and all of your quirks.”

“I don’t have any quirks. I’m a fossil.”

She sighed. After opening the oven, she grabbed one of the waffles and used some kitchen tongs to pull it out as it was being kept warmed and she didn’t want to burn herself. After easing it onto a plate, she moved toward Adam and placed it in front of him.

“Eat.”

“There’s no warm syrup,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “You are getting one waffle before everyone else in order to cheer you up. Do not make me take it away from you.” She went to reach for the plate, but he took it back.

Angel nodded at him, moved back to the counter, and checked on the other waffles. She had a little time left. Taking a seat opposite him, she put her hands flat on the table. “Now, tell me what is going on,” she said.

Adam took a bite of the waffle.

“I can’t help you unless you start talking.”

“I should go back to the Nomads.”

She held her hand up. “No!”

He frowned.

“You have been moping around here because you want to settle down. You want to find a woman that you love and start a family, right?”

He nodded.

“Going on the road isn’t going to achieve that. You’re going to be miserable. Even more so than you are now, so trust me, that’s not a great idea.” She couldn’t stop her son from joining, but she wasn’t going to allow Adam to concede defeat. “One woman said no, and you’ve had a lot of bad dates, but that’s how it works. People have a hard time finding the right person. Have you considered that the right person is out there, but you just haven’t been looking in the right places?”

“Where should I look?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know, but perhaps rather than being miserable, keep an open mind. There are a lot of women out there who would absolutely adore you. You’ve just got to be patient, and if you truly want to settle down and have a family, then you’ve got to stop being depressed because women don’t usually find that attractive. Eat your waffle.”

Adam finished eating his waffle. “Why are you not giving me the sympathy talk and making me feel better?”

“Because you’re way past that now. You’ve been moping to everyone and everything, and people are getting a little bored of it. It’s Christmas, Adam. Enjoy life. The woman of your dreams is out there.” She put a hand over his.

“You believe in the good of everything and the kindness of everyone.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” she asked.

Adam opened his mouth and then closed it. “I guess not.”

“I prefer to look at the good in people and to be nice because I know this world isn’t always a nice place to be. I refuse to add to it.” She put a hand on his. “Enjoy.” She got up and removed the waffles from the waffle irons, then started the whole process again.

“You’re a good person, Angel,” Adam said.

She turned toward him and smiled. “Thank you. I do try.”

“I doubt you even have to try.”

“I can’t believe you did it,” Tiny said.

Lash turned to the man who’d been like a father to him. When his parents were killed, Tiny had taken them in and treated him and Nash like his own two sons. They had grown up with Tate, and she was more of a sister to them.

“I cannot take credit for all of this.” Lash stood outside, amazed at what Angel had gotten organized. The two clubs had come together and there were decorations set out outside. Carolers stood just inside the gates.

He couldn’t recall carolers ever coming to The Skulls’ clubhouse, but the two clubs were outside, wrapped up in jackets, listening to them sing.

Angel had done this as well. His wife was well-respected and adored in Fort Wills. It had taken her a long time to build up trust and support.

She wanted the best for the club at all times.

Lash saw the men, women, and children, all standing and listening to the carols as they filled the air. Fairy lights twinkled in the background. It was a truly beautiful sight to behold. He loved it.

Lash didn’t have a clue what Angel had to arrange to get this, but he was glad that she had. The club needed the boost. Christmas cheer was all around them. The scent of baking filled the clubhouse, even though it wasn’t long before they’d have dinner.

Angel had also kept to her promise of not allowing Lacey anywhere near the kitchen.

So far, no one had gotten food poisoning, which was a bonus.

There hadn't been any fighting. Nor had there been any calls from the Billionaire Bikers MC or Michael Granito. It was a slow month.

"This was all Angel," Lash said.

"That woman is always surprising me," Tiny said. "I always thought she was a weak woman."

"Angel's not weak. She's strong." He wanted to hold her.

"You know, in the beginning, I thought you were making a mistake with the club. The Skulls has never been the kind of club to follow the rules. We've always made up the rules to suit our own needs."

"The club would have died," Lash said.

Tiny held his hand up. "Let me finish. You've done one hell of a transformation. You—I know this isn't easy for you at times. Especially with everything that went down with Tabitha. I know it's hard to keep that level head. You were one of the biggest hotheads around. Doing whatever the fuck you wanted, when you wanted." Tiny laughed. "At times, you and your brother were giant pains in the ass. I thought it would be easier with two boys, but fuck me, it was hard."

Lash looked at Anthony and Connor. He had to agree. Chloe was even worse. His little girl, his little baby, he didn't even want to think about her dating. It was going to happen. He couldn't kill the boys who came knocking on his door.

"I've never been good with words or knowing what shit to say, so I just want to tell you." Tiny put his hand on his shoulder. "I'm proud of you, Nigel." It was rare for Tiny to use his real name. He preferred to be called Lash. He hated his real name.

"And I know that if your parents were here, they would be damn fucking proud of you as well."

Lash gritted his teeth, and Tiny gave his shoulder a squeeze.

His previous Prez stepped away and went to Eva and his family.

Lash looked at the carolers, at the club, and he had to take a moment. He tried not to think of his parents. Always kept that pain buried deep and never allowed it to rear its ugly head. It wasn't a good feeling. It was never a good feeling.

He stepped into his office and moved toward the far wall, putting a hand flat on the surface and another on his heart. He took in deep breaths.

He should have known that she saw him. Angel was always watching him. Always alert. She wrapped her arms around him and held him.

"I'm fine, babe."

"I know you're fine, but I want to hold you."

Lash turned, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her in close. He pressed his face against her head and breathed her in.

"What did Tiny say?"

"He told me that my parents would be proud of me."

Angel pulled away and smiled up at him. "They would," Angel said. "I know they would."

"This is all because of you," he said.

"No, this is all because of you, Lash. This is your club. This is your heart. This is everything. You're a good man, and I know. I'm so proud of you."

Chapter Ten

Christmas Eve

Angel was never going to admit to this being a bad idea. Having two club houses under one roof with all the kids was a good thing. At least, it had been before Adam came back from the long lines at the supermarket and unleashed a lot of candy.

Since then, it had been chaos. The kids were pretty much bouncing off the walls.

Angel knew some of the club was pissed at Adam, and that was her fault. She had taken him out of his depressed mood, and in doing so, he'd found his holiday spirit. Now the kids were just screaming, charging everywhere.

Fortunately, not all their children were too young. Daisy, Anthony, Miles, Rachel, and Markus were all helping. Sally and Darcy as well. There was so much activity, and then Adam had to suggest a game of hide and seek and everyone had to join in.

Angel made her way up to the loft to try to have a few moments away, and that was where she found Lash.

"Well, well, well, what do I have here," he said, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her in against me.

"You're hiding up here?" she asked.

"No."

She looked at him. "I haven't seen you all morning. Not since Adam returned with the candy. You're not playing hide and seek. You're literally just hiding."

"I cannot say that I know what you're talking about."

"The lofts are all off-limits to hide-and-seek games," Angel said.

Lash looked around and then turned to her. “You’re right. So why are you here? Is it my wife needs a tiny break?”

She nibbled on her bottom lip. “It’s ... nothing. Everything was going fine.”

“Until you throw candy into the mix.”

She nodded.

Lash pressed a kiss to her neck. “As it happens, there is space up here for you, and the kids will crash soon.”

“I’m a bad person.”

“For wanting two minutes away from kids filled with sugar?” Lash asked.

“Are you wishing for the beach right about now?”

Lash chuckled. “You would think that I am, but I’m not. I’m glad we did this. You, me, the clubs. All of it.”

“You are? Then why are you up here?”

Lash let her go and she watched as he reached for something. It was a photograph album.

“I was looking at past memories.”

“A lot of stuff had gotten destroyed,” Angel said.

“I know. A lot of it was destroyed or lost, but there are a few treasures and recent memories.” Lash grabbed the light and shone it on the book as he flicked open the pages.

Angel looked at a picture of Tiny and Mickey. They had lost him all too soon. Tears filled her eyes as Lash flipped through the pages. Pictures of her, of the club, Tate and Murphy, Tiny and Eva. Anthony’s birth. Tabitha and Miles’s birth. So many memories. She saw a picture of Happy, who was also no longer with them.

“Why did you come up here?” Angel asked.

“I was looking for something a little while ago, and I noticed this at the bottom of the box. I didn’t have time to look at it, but I was curious, and I know the kids would all be

falling asleep soon with the candy. I figured now was a good time to look. We lost so many.”

“I know,” Angel said.

“This is why I do what I do,” he said. “And I don’t want to ever forget that.”

“Lash, what’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on. It’s a good thing not to forget why we’ve all changed. Why we’re all here now. Why we’re all doing what we need to do to make this right.”

Angel knew there was more to this, but she wasn’t going to push. She would never push when it came to him.

At the sound of a bike filling the air, Angel turned toward him. “Are you expecting someone?” Angel asked.

Lash shook his head. “No.”

They had no choice but to climb out of the attic, and she noticed Lash held the photograph album underneath his arm as they climbed down.

Angel waited for him, and Lash took her hand as they walked down the stairs. They made a quick stop at his office, where he put the album on his desk. She wanted to ask him more questions, but she heard the game had come to an end as people moved toward the biker.

Lash took the lead, still holding her hand, and they headed outside into the snow. Another layer had fallen in the last few hours, and soon the roads would be too dangerous to travel on.

At first, Angel didn’t recognize the biker. His hair was long and tied back at the neck.

It was only when she saw Natalie move in to hug the large man that it had all fallen into place.

Lucius.

The biker who had been part of the Chaos Bleeds Nomad Chapter. The man who had lost his best friend to

cancer and hadn't been able to stick around because of the pain of losing her, Roxy.

It had happened so long ago. Lucius hadn't wanted to be found. The only person who had been able to remain in contact with him had been Natalie.

"I'm so pleased you could make it," Natalie said.

Lucius nodded.

She turned toward them. "I er, I hope this is okay. I texted Lucius about us coming here for Christmas and that it might be good for him to join us."

"I can leave," Lucius said.

"Don't be silly," Angel said.

"There's always room," Lash said, giving her hand a squeeze. They had all experienced loss in their lives.

One look at Lucius, and she saw that he was still struggling with losing his best friend. She leaned against Lash, hoping she never had to feel what Lucius must be feeling.

Anthony gritted his teeth as, for the hundredth time, Daisy ignored him. She treated him like he didn't exist, and it was starting to piss him off.

"Are you just going to pretend I'm not here?" he asked.

Daisy stopped. She had stepped a few feet behind him. He saw her hands clench at her sides, and he had to wonder what was going on in her head.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked. "Is that it? You want me out of your life so I stop causing you so much trouble?"

She turned toward him. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to fucking talk to me."

"I'm talking to you, Anthony, or am I talking to a brick fucking wall? Is that it?"

"You're not talking to me, and you know it."

She took a step toward him. “I don’t think I am. I think I’m talking to a guy who is so blinded by something that he cannot see what he risks. The lives he puts in jeopardy.” She turned her head left and right and kept her voice lowered so only he would hear.

“They don’t deserve to live. You know that and you agree with me.”

“And what about everything else? It’s not as clear cut as they’re the bad guys and should be killed, Anthony. There are more lives at stake, and you’re not seeing that. You’re too damn blinded by your love for Tabitha and righting the wrong that happened to her to see clearly. Maybe you should consider your place in this club and follow her like the loving little puppy that you are.”

Anthony frowned as he looked at Daisy.

His love for Tabitha?

Loving little puppy?

Righting the wrong?

What the fuck was Daisy talking about?

Yes, he cared about Tabitha. She was his friend and had always accepted him for being different. She hadn’t tried to force him to be different to fit in, or to appear *normal*. They were close. Always had been, and he had no doubt they always would be. He wasn’t in love with her.

Not even close.

Loving little puppy? The only person he had ever followed around with complete and utter devotion like a loving fucking puppy was the woman right in front of him. Daisy was his world.

She was everything to him. Since they were kids, he had loved her. There was no one else. It was always Daisy. Always her. No one else.

He grabbed her arm as she went to walk away, but all of a sudden, his name was called.

Anthony saw his dad standing there.

“My office, now.”

He looked toward Daisy, and he hated that she looked relieved at the interruption. Not good. Pressing her up against the wall, he slammed his lips down on hers, kissing her hard and deep, feeling her hands as they moved toward his chest, but she didn't push him away. He would've stopped if she tried. It would have been hard for him to do, but when it came to Daisy, he would do anything.

“This is not about Tabitha. This is about you and me.”

He took a step away, and he couldn't look back. Walking away from Daisy was not what he did. Not ever.

Lash stood in his office, leaning against his desk, arms folded. “Close the door.”

Anthony did and then stepped a few feet into the room.

“Take a seat.” Lash pointed at the sofa, and Anthony lowered himself to it.

Lash grabbed a couple of items off his desk and then moved toward him. “I don't want you to say a word. I know you hate conversations, so we're going to keep this short and sweet. I'll be the one to do the talking, and you can just listen.”

A small leather cut was placed on his lap. Anthony recognized it as his young boyhood cut. The one they all had gotten as kids as a present. He'd loved the cut. It had made him realize at a young age that he'd wanted to be like his father. A member of The Skulls, earning his patch. Being a fully fledged member. He didn't care that it meant his life would potentially be in danger or that someone was going to want to kill him all the time. None of that had mattered to him.

None of it had. All he'd cared about was being a Skull.

It had taken him some time to grow out of the leather cut, but it had happened. They had all been given new ones, marking them as one of their own.

Anthony didn't touch the jacket. On top of it, Lash slid a photograph album across his lap.

“Open it, look at the pictures, and I want you to really see them.”

Anthony didn't want to do this. He knew exactly what his dad was trying to do, and he wasn't going to be surprised. The Skulls MC had grown more than just being a club intent on revenge.

He opened the book and stared at the pictures. A lot had been destroyed when an attack had happened on the clubhouse. The few pictures had been saved by sheer miracle.

Some of the people, Anthony had never gotten to know. They had lost people on both sides.

He saw a picture of Murphy before he got his scars. Anthony knew even his own mother, Angel, had gotten scars of her own. She hadn't come out of any of the attacks unscathed.

Lash didn't speak, and Anthony turned the pages. It wasn't an overly large book, but inside, he saw the memories as well as the pain.

By the time he got to the last page, silence filled the room. He waited for his dad to talk. To say something.

Lash took the book, put it on the coffee table, and then gripped the leather cut in his hands. “I remember when you were just a boy and you got this. Your mother could never take it off you. You wore it with your head held high. You were so proud of what it meant. You were my firstborn son. I knew the moment you put this on, you were going to follow in my footsteps.”

“Dad?”

“Shut up,” Lash said. “You listen, I know you're good at that. Do you think I don't know what's going on in your head? That I'm too stupid to see what you want to do?”

Anthony stayed silent. He hadn't thought his dad was stupid, just busy dealing with everything else. “Do you think

that it's not something I want to do as well?"

Anthony turned to his dad, a little surprised.

Lash was always levelheaded. Always seeing the bigger picture. Putting the club first before his own needs. It was what he did all the time.

"Yeah, I can tell you that from the moment I learned the truth of what happened, all I wanted to do was kill." Lash held his hands open. "It's what I'm good at. It's what I'm used to doing." He pointed at the book. "Back then, I wouldn't have even hesitated. I would've been on my bike, and all of them would have been dead. No questions asked. The whole club would have. They hurt one of our own."

For the first time in his life, Anthony wanted to speak. He wanted to reason with his father, but knew he had to be silent.

Gritting his teeth, he fucking hated this. Staying silent was his fucking armor. It was easy. Now all he wanted to do was argue, to make his dad see reason.

"I know it's what you want to do. You want to make the Monster Dogs nothing more than a fleeting memory. All of them dead and gone. It can happen. I've seen it."

Anthony knew of the Savage Brothers MC. It had been done. There were other clubs as well, but none had been done quite as well as the Savage Brothers MC. The only surviving members of that club were Butch and Lacey.

"Every single person in that club would have to die," Lash said. "The men, the women, all the kids. All of it would have to go, to be wiped out. None of it could come back to The Skulls. You may see me as a weak prez, Anthony, and to be honest, I don't give a fuck if you do or not. I've known true loss. I've looked death in the face more times than I can count, and I've had to bury brothers as well as women. You were a kid. There is a choice here. The right one and the wrong one. You want to take on the Monster Dogs MC, and I know you do, but doing them the wrong way will cost in the long term. Imagine a life where Daisy doesn't exist."

Anthony's hands clenched.

“I've sat by your mother's bedside too many times and had to think about that. I've lived through her attempting to take her own life. Trust me, Anthony, when I say this. I will make sure you never see Daisy again before I let you take the club down a path that I know will destroy us all. This isn't about you. It isn't about Tabitha, and it isn't about revenge. This is you and me, and you will either fall in line or I will have to make a choice. Do not make me make that choice. You will not win. Not against me.”

Chapter Eleven

Lash sipped at his hot chocolate. He probably should have had a hard whiskey, but Angel had presented him with her famous hot chocolate, and he wasn't going to deny himself the treat.

This was what he loved about Christmas. Angel didn't need a sad moment to bring out her hot chocolate. It was pretty much a given during the festive season.

The kids were in bed. The candy rampage they had been on had brought them all crashing down very early. Angel had been able to get some dinner inside them, and after a carefully organized shower and pajamas, a Christmas movie had been played. Half of the kids had fallen asleep and had to be carried to bed.

It had been a good day.

He looked across the room and saw his son. Threatening his son on Christmas Eve wasn't what he wanted, but he also knew Anthony was stubborn.

The boy was a law unto himself, and Lash needed to make sure he kept him on the right path. Lash knew all too well how easy it was to fall down that rabbit hole of revenge. It never ended well. There were always consequences. His time at The Skulls had taught him that.

He watched as Daisy moved toward Anthony. She placed a hand on his back, and the two left the room. He refused to worry about that. Daisy was responsible. She was levelheaded, and she often made the right decisions when it came to Anthony.

Finishing his hot chocolate, he walked to the kitchen. It was empty, but the kitchen counters were full of preparation for tomorrow. He washed his cup, knowing someone would be pissed at him for not doing it. The women had certainly found a way to keep their men in line. He couldn't help but smile when he looked around at everything.

There were potatoes soaking in large bowls full of water. He saw the stuffing already prepared and waiting to go in the oven.

He couldn't resist taking a little look inside the fridge, and sure enough, an abundance of food greeted him, just as he knew it would.

His wife had everything under control. Like always.

This Christmas was going to be a good one. He felt it.

Lash looked outside to see snow falling once again. He couldn't resist as he took a moment to step outside. As soon as he did, he was on high alert, which quickly evaporated as he saw it was Lucius having a smoke.

"I didn't want to be rude, smoking indoors," Lucius said.

"Some of the guys still do it. Just not when the kids are around."

"That's what I figured." Lucius placed the cigarette to his lips and took a deep inhale. "I always promise myself that I'll quit, but then I figure, what the hell. I'm going to die someday. Might as well enjoy it."

Lucius's chuckle was forced, and it didn't sound particularly happy.

"It was good to see you come," Lash said.

"I don't know why I did. My life isn't part of any of this anymore. It's not with the Nomads, either."

"You're breaking away?"

"I've been away on my own for so long now. The road is the only salvation I've got."

"Dude, this is not what your ... friend would want."

"Roxy." Lucius laughed. "She's not here to tell me how to live, so I'm going to keep on doing what I do."

Lash looked at him. "You know, this is guilt talking. Abandoning your club because you don't feel part of it. Riding

away. Not hearing a word from you. The way you only truly talk to Natalie. What did you do?"

Lucius dropped his cigarette into the snow and pressed his foot into the ground before he turned to Lash. "You'd do anything and everything for your woman, right?"

"Yes," Lash said without any hesitation.

"Exactly. You'd do whatever she wanted. Even if she begged. Even if she pleaded. Even if her days were numbered but she was crying because the pain was getting to be way too much that she couldn't stand it. That she'd beg you repeatedly and even tell you that they wouldn't keep a dog alive in this much pain."

Lash knew. "Roxy begged you to end her life."

Lucius stared at him, and everything fell into place. On the day Roxy died, Lucius was the last person with her. He spent the day with her, if Lash's memory served him well. This was a long time ago, and looking at the man now, it made a whole lot of sense.

"You did what she begged," Lash said.

"Doesn't make it right. I killed my best friend, and that kind of shit, you don't come back from. Ever. I don't deserve to be in the club."

"And you think this is what Roxy would want?" Lash asked. "Do you think she would have wanted you to disappear after asking you to do that?"

"It doesn't matter what she wants anymore. She's not here, and Death, he's going to come for me someday. When he does, it's not going to hurt the clubs."

Lucius walked back into the clubhouse, and Lash shook his head, knowing he shouldn't get involved with this kind of shit, but also knowing he had to tell Devil. Lucius wasn't a Skull, but he was family.

Christmas Day

The kids had woken up way too early.

Angel didn't mind, but she'd stayed up all night waiting for Lash to arrive. The moment he'd gotten to bed and saw she was up, he'd apologized, explaining he'd gone to see Devil. He hadn't delved into any more of an explanation, so she figured it was club business and hadn't asked more questions.

She'd fallen asleep in Lash's arms only to be woken up by screaming kids, telling everyone that Santa had been here. Her own children, who were not young anymore, came and got her and Lash up. Chloe joined in the fun with Connor by jumping on the bed like they used to as kids. She couldn't help but burst out laughing.

The kids did all the rounds on all of the parents, and seeing as this was a full family get-together, there were a lot of people to get up.

She made her escape to the bathroom before heading downstairs, still in her pajamas, and got to work on filling the kettles, and of course, working the coffee. A lot of people would be needing coffee.

The presents were already under the tree in sacks labeled with their kids' names. Everything was coming together. She got the toaster set up as the kids just wanted a bowl of cereal to start their day.

Personally, she needed a slice of toast or something. She quickly pulled on an apron over her pajamas and got to work on the preparation, and it wasn't long before she was joined by Tate, Eva, Lexie, Natalie, and the rest of the women. Lacey came into the kitchen and helped pour coffee.

Once the preparations were underway and everyone had breakfast, it was time for the presents. She sat on Lash's lap as she watched the kids grow giddy with excitement. Each time they opened something, they'd run to their parents, hugging them.

"Do you think we should have another baby?" she asked.

Her children were way too big now, but another brother or sister would be a nice addition to the mix.

Lash growled. “Staying up all night with a screaming kid?”

“We still do it now when we offer to take care of them.” She sank against him. “Come on, it wouldn’t be so bad.”

He wrapped his arms around her. “We’ll see about that big bow I get to unwrap tonight.”

She felt an answering arousal, which she quickly curbed because there was no room for it on Christmas morning. With all the gifts taken care of, it was agreed that all the kids could stay in their pajamas for Christmas, including dinner.

Of course, some of the older kids asked if they stayed in theirs, would they get out of helping? Angel agreed, so several of the older kids stayed in their pajamas.

After all the presents, she made her excuses and went to get changed into the outfit Natalie, Lexie, and the Chaos Bleeds women had arranged.

She loved it.

Lash was in the bedroom as she came out of the bathroom, and she gave him a little twirl.

“Do we even have to have dinner?” Lash said. “I can undress you like this.”

Angel chuckled. “You’re going to eat this food that I spent a long time preparing.” She pressed a kiss to his lips. “But tonight, I will be all yours, and perhaps we can make a baby or two.”

Lash groaned.

She had no choice but to pull away. Dinner would burn, and she wanted everything to be perfect.

For the next three hours, she and the ladies, along with Baker, all prepared dinner. Kids would randomly run into the

kitchen to show off their latest toy. Millie would guide them out.

Once they were about half an hour away from everything being cooked, tables were pulled together, and cloths were placed over the top. Christmas themed, of course. Angel had made sure to gather enough cutlery to serve everyone.

Lexie helped to prepare the table, and Angel began to serve the food into the bowls. One by one, they left the kitchen and made their way out into the main clubhouse where the men had rounded up the kids and gotten them and everyone to the table.

Lash came into the kitchen, as did Devil, and they carried out the turkeys to be carved. Everything had come together so nicely. There were, of course, vegan alternatives for Dick and Martha, as well as anyone else who wanted the choice. Angel liked to cater to everyone. She watched and waited while everyone began filling their plates, passing them down to be filled with meat or vegetables, or both.

When everyone was about to start, Angel sat up and used her spoon against her glass to gather everyone's attention. "I know we're all starving and we just want to dive right in, but I would like to say a few words, if that's okay." She waited to see if people were happy for her to, and as they all agreed, she smiled.

"First, I want to thank you all so much for being here. I know at times it can seem pretty stressful. Two clubs coming together for the holiday season. I also want to thank everyone for being so welcoming and accommodating to each other. We're two clubs and we've shared our differences, but the truth is, we're family. Family takes care of one another. We're always there when the other needs it most. Throughout my years of being at The Skulls, as Lash's wife, his old lady, I know that whenever we've needed help, Chaos Bleeds has come running to us. You've helped us, just as we've helped you when needed. We're a family. I know that I love you all, and it's a pleasure to see everyone here. I wish more people could have made it." She took a second to think of Butch in

Vegas. “And then I think about the people who should have been here. Our fallen family members. The ones that couldn’t make it today, and I would like to take a moment for us all to think about them.”

She looked around the table to see tears in each of their eyes.

Mickey, Happy, Gunn, Ashley, Roxy, and so many others. They had all been killed. Lost their lives way too soon. They were family.

“I love you all, and thank you so much. I hope you enjoy the meal.”

Devil stood. “Thank you for inviting us. I know we’re all happy to be here.”

Everyone raised their glass, including their kids.

“To family,” Lash said.

“To family,” the whole room called out, and then, dinner began.

Daisy fidgeted with her hands. She was so nervous, and she hated feeling this way. The past few days she had thought on it, lost sleep over it.

Angel’s speech had really hit home for her. Family. Anthony was family as much as he was a complication to her. Tabitha was family.

She turned toward Anthony as he stepped into the supply closet. It was the only place that didn’t have anyone around.

“Daisy?” Anthony asked.

“You can’t go,” Daisy said. “I know you think you have to leave and maybe you’re right, but I ... will agree. I’ll help you bring down the Monster Dogs MC, but I have one condition.”

“What?”

“You’ve got to tell me the truth.” This was what had been breaking her apart for a long time. For years. Tabitha had always said that Anthony had a thing for her, that his feelings were so clear to see, but not to Daisy.

“What?”

Saying the words was harder than she’d thought, but she needed an answer, and she needed it now.

“Are you in love with Tabitha?”

Epilogue

Later that night

Angel stood in the bedroom, waiting.

Lash had offered to help to put the children to bed, and now all she had to do was wait. Dinner had been amazing, and so had the hours afterward. They had all played games and had a lot of fun.

Chaos Bleeds had asked to stay until the New Year, and Angel was excited. This was why she made the preparations to have enough food to feed them all.

Her heart raced, and as Lash entered the room, he came to a stop.

She had already asked for Tate not to disturb them.

Lash closed the bedroom door and flicked the lock into place. She still wore her Christmas dress, but this time, she had wrapped herself in a large bow.

“I didn’t give you a present,” she said.

He moved toward her, and within seconds, he grabbed the bow and tore it from her body. “You know I’ve never been patient when it comes to you,” Lash said, and he proved his words true as he stripped the dress from her body.

She gasped as it fell to the floor, and she stood in her red lace lingerie. His favorite.

“Fuck me, Angel, I fucking love you so much.”

“And I love you, more than anything.” She cupped his face. “There is no one else I could ever want. No place that I would ever want to be. I know you struggle at times. That you worry, but you have given me everything I have ever wanted. A loving husband, a best friend, and above all else, you have given me a family. You’re the only person I ever want.”

Lash slammed his lips down on hers as he moved her back toward the bed. Not only was this Lash’s present, but it

was hers as well.

The best end, to a very Merry Christmas.

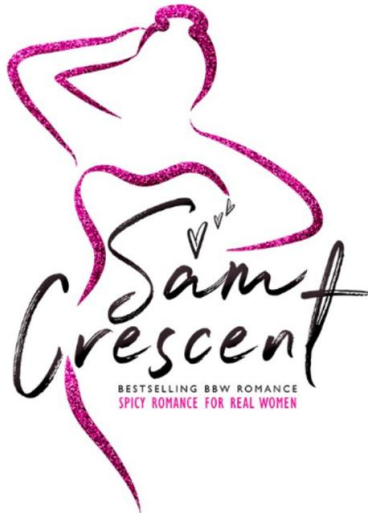
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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

LOST CAUSE

Killer of Kings, 8

Sam Crescent and Stacey Espino

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Sample Chapter

Priest lifted the edge of his sleeve and checked his watch. Things were about to go down in four minutes and seventeen seconds. His jobs were meticulous. He'd been staking out this hotel for the past six days, and today he'd get the job done.

Boss had strict instructions for this hit.

He expected Priest to make an example of Marcus Olivieri, to send a message to the rest of the mafia family not to conduct business in their city. They were into human trafficking and prostitution rings, and Boss wouldn't tolerate it. Neither would Priest.

His legs were cramping up from his crouched position, but he had the perfect vantage point to see the asshole getting off the elevator. He checked the sights on his 9mm, loving the feel of the cool metal in his palm. Priest could still remember

the first day he held one, nineteen years ago. The weeks following had been a blur.

He was a different person today than he'd been all those years ago.

Keeping his mind in the present was the only way to ensure his sanity.

One minute and thirty-three seconds.

This contract was going smoothly. Too smoothly. As soon as the fucking maid began pushing her cleaning cart down the hallway, Priest checked his watch again.

"Fuck."

Any second and his target would be stepping off the elevator with the barely seventeen-year-old girl he planned to force into their prostitution ring. He'd fuck her, beat her close to death, pump her full of drugs, and then send her to their whorehouse for grooming.

As soon as the maid swiped her keycard on the room where he planned to carry out this hit, he ground his teeth down hard, his mind going through all the possible scenarios. He didn't want an innocent to get killed on his watch, but that bitch had some bad timing.

The elevator door opened with a ding, and an obscenely drunk young woman stumbled out, attempting to hang off his target. She giggled as he led her to his hotel room. Why was the maid in the room? The room had already been rented and pre-paid for two weeks. It had been cleaned at 9:44 that morning, so there was no fucking reason for the maid to be there. The maid assigned to this end of the floor tonight wasn't even a blonde.

Once he heard the door close, he stood up and kept tight to the wall as he moved in closer to room number 4423. He kicked open the door as planned, his pistol in his outstretched hand. Priest scanned the room. The girl was already crashed on the bed, the bastard unbuckling his belt. The man froze in place with the red dot dead centered on his forehead. Where the fuck was the maid? He'd watched her

come into the room, and her cart was still just outside in the hallway.

Whatever. This contract needed to be finished or Boss would be on his case tonight.

“You like little girls, motherfucker?”

Marcus shrugged nonchalantly, so Priest brought him down to size with a bullet to the kneecap. His screams were much louder than the shot with his silencer securely in place.

“Shut the fuck up.” He moved in close and stripped him of all his weapons and his cell phone. “Take off your clothes.”

He kept his gun in his target’s direction as he did a rough search of the luxury room. Marcus wasn’t going anywhere, too busy bleeding on the carpet. Where was the maid? He couldn’t leave a witness behind. Killer of Kings demanded every hit be clean. And he wouldn’t let Boss down, not after he’d saved Priest from self-destruction almost a decade ago.

She was nowhere to be found. He even checked under the bed.

Priest returned to Marcus Olivieri. He was in his underwear, not looking too suave now with snot leaking down his face. The man whimpered and begged for his life like a little bitch, but he wasn’t leaving this room alive regardless.

“Underwear too. Then get on the bed.”

The girl had passed out. Priest grabbed her by the ankle and yanked her unceremoniously off the bed. She barely came to. He reached down to the ground and pulled her up to her feet by the back of her hair. “Go home to your mother. Understand? Stop drinking. Don’t talk to fucking strangers.”

She nodded repeatedly. He opened the room door and shoved her out into the hall where she fell to her knees. Then he tossed a wad of bills from his pocket onto the carpet outside. “Go home!”

Once alone in the room with Marcus again, he went to work, slitting the man's throat to shut him up. Priest held his palm to Marcus's chest to keep him from thrashing as the blood drained from his body. Then he reached down and cut off his balls in one clean stroke, shoving them into Marcus's mouth. When his men found him, one of their high-ranking soldiers, it would send a message loud and clear not to fuck with Killer of Kings. Boss was systematically bringing down their numbers one by one.

He washed his hands in the bathroom, the blood mixing with the water and swirling down the drain. His mind almost went back to those weeks of carnage so long ago, but he stopped himself before slipping into oblivion. When he heard a barely audible snuffle, he knew his maid was hiding in the linen closet.

Priest was fairly certain she hadn't seen his face. Not that his identity meant a thing. He was hard to miss with half his face covered in ink. It was the complication that pissed him off. It would be so easy to end her life like most hitmen would do without a second thought. For Priest, it wasn't so simple. He shouldn't care, but he couldn't bring himself to kill an innocent.

He almost pulled out his cell phone to call Bain because he knew he was working nearby. Anyone else on his team would take the shot. But he refrained, not wanting to look incompetent. He checked his watch. Fuck, he should have been out of there by now. He knew Chains had taken a hostage at one point, trapping her in his basement rather than killing her. Boss had been pissed off to a new level. Priest had no intentions of following the same route but couldn't figure out what to do with her.

He tucked his gun into his holster and opened the closet door. Priest crossed his arms over his chest as he looked down at her on the bottom shelf. He was surprised she'd managed to squeeze in there at all.

“Get out.”

She didn't hold back the sniffing now as she spilled out onto the bathroom tiles from her cramped position. She stayed on the floor in the fetal position.

“Get up.”

Inch by inch, she stood up, her hands clutching her apron. Her knuckles were white, her face blotted and tear stained. “I didn't see anything.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

Priest scoffed. He grabbed her by arm and tugged her into the main room where the white sheets were soiled red, the body sprawled out in the most unflattering position. She gasped and slapped her hands over her mouth.

“Now you see.”

She shook her head back and forth. “Please no.”

His curiosity got the better of him. “Why were you in this room after hours?”

“The last shift forgot to replace the toilet paper. She asked me to check before I left.”

His day had gone to the shitter because of toilet paper? He'd never live this down.

“Well, you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I'm sorry to say your life will never be the same.”

Cleo couldn't breathe. Her body felt like lead, her feet frozen in place.

She didn't want to look at the crime scene, but she also couldn't look away. Now her nightmares would be rooted in reality. The murderer had found her, and she was going to be next on his kill list.

Her mind whirled with thoughts, her life flashing through her mind like a person on their deathbed. What had she accomplished? What dreams had she seen through to fulfillment? She was only twenty-four. Cleo hadn't achieved

anything of significance in her life, and now it was over. It wasn't fair. She was going to die because of toilet paper.

"I won't say anything. I promise." She was desperate, begging, and didn't care how pathetic she appeared. If there was something she could do to prolong her life, she was going to do it.

"I've heard that before. Usually right before I pull the trigger."

She dared to sneak another peek at the murderer. He was the scariest man she'd ever seen. His face was covered in tattoos, his eyes dark and empty. And damn he was huge. He could break her in two with no effort at all. She was completely at his mercy.

"I'll do anything you ask. *Please. Please. Please,*" she chanted.

"Stop talking. I need to think."

Was he considering letting her live? A tiny ray of hope brightened inside her. He'd let that other woman go free, so why not her?

"Give me your identification."

"My purse is in the locker downstairs."

He groaned, an angry sound that sent a shiver up her spine.

"Name."

"Cleo Bennet."

"We're going for a ride. If you open that pretty little mouth of yours, you won't make it out of the building alive. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Push your cart down to your locker. Don't make eye contact with anyone. Don't do anything stupid."

He opened the door first, looking both ways down the hall before motioning her to get out. She held her breath,

grabbing her cart like a zombie. She didn't feel like herself. Maybe she'd wake up and discover this was all a nightmare.

Cleo wondered if she'd get a chance to escape. Maybe they'd come across other guests or a manager and the killer would slip up or get nervous. Who was she kidding? She doubted this guy was afraid of anything, and she knew he was capable of murdering her in the grisliest way imaginable.

He took position behind her, prodding her when he seemed to consider her pace too slow. Her nerves were completely on edge. She swore she'd shatter into a thousand pieces at any moment. Once in the elevator alone with him, she pushed the basement button and stood still, watching him through the reflection of the mirrored walls.

Was it stupid to notice his sex appeal? The man was a sociopath, probably some kind of serial killer. But his shoulders were broad, and she could tell his entire body was hard judging by what she saw through his unzipped jacket. He wore all black with gun holsters hidden under his lapels. His hair was black and roughly pushed back off his face. His lips...

He noticed her staring, and she immediately diverted her attention, her heart jolting.

"Eyes forward."

She bit her bottom lip. Fortunately, the doors opened on the basement level, and she pushed her cleaning cart off the elevator. She continued on to the locker room. At this hour, there weren't too many on shift, just some floaters.

When she got to her locker, she undid her lock and opened the door. He pushed her aside, immediately rummaging through her purse. He pulled out her wallet, dropping everything not of interest to him.

"Cleo Bennet," he read.

"I already told you that. I wasn't lying."

He glared at her and continued rifling through her personal stuff.

“What are these for?” The killer held out a bottle of pills, giving it a shake, and she felt her entire face turn hot and red. She felt nauseous. “They’re diet pills,” she whispered. She didn’t need to be told they didn’t work. She’d tried everything, and those were her last resort next to getting her stomach stapled.

The world seemed to stop spinning. He looked her up and down, inch by fat inch, then tossed the pills over his shoulder.

“Hey,” she said.

He ignored her, and she didn’t push her luck. This man had just sliced up that man upstairs and he could do the same to her.

“Who do you live with?” He examined her driver’s license. It was expired. She just didn’t have any free time to get things done. Rent was expensive, so she took every extra shift she could, like tonight.

“Nobody.”

“You’re lying.”

She shook her head. The threat in his voice made her eyes start to water again. “I swear. I don’t even have a pet because of my allergies. It’s just me and my ... fish.”

He cocked his head.

It was the dumbest thing, but she worried about who’d feed Fred once she was dead. No one would check on Cleo, no one would care. A wave of sadness washed over her as the reality of her situation really hit home. Not a single person would remember her.

“I just want to go home.” Tears traced down her cheek.

“Who’ll notice you’ve gone missing?”

“I don’t want to go missing,” she said.

“Answer the question.”

More tears fell. She wasn’t sure if she was more sorry for herself or embarrassed. If he knew the truth, he’d have no

reason to keep her alive.

“Lots of people,” she managed to squeak out.

When he cocked an eyebrow, she tried her best to keep herself in check. Did he know she was lying?

“Who? Names.”

“I-I don’t know...” She busied herself collecting the contents of her purse from the floor before standing up again.

“We’re done here.” He spun her around. “Back to the elevator. Hit P3.”

Oh God, this was it. He was taking her to a second location, the number one thing to avoid in the emergency handbook for women. Would he rape her? Chop her up? Or slit her throat like that poor man upstairs?

“Good night, Cleo,” said one of the maintenance men from the other end of the hall.

“Good night, George,” she replied.

The elevator door closed, and any hope of rescue was gone.

The parking garage had never been this foreboding. Her kidnapper blended into the shadows, and her white uniform stood out like a target. He stopped at a black car and opened the passenger door.

“Put your seatbelt on.” He slammed the door shut behind her.

The car had a deeply masculine scent. It must be his scent. She wanted to hate it but couldn’t. A few seconds later, he sat in the driver’s seat, his large frame rubbing up against her arm.

His cell phone went off as he drove out of the parking garage.

“Yeah. It’s done. Message sent loud and clear.”

He tucked his phone away.

The night was dark, growing darker as they distanced from the city center.

“What are you going to do with me?” Part of her didn’t want to know, but the other part felt she may as well know if she couldn’t change anything.

He didn’t answer her, which scared her even more.

A few minutes later, he spoke, the deepness of his voice a sharp contrast from hers. Everyone always told her she had a baby voice, and she hated it.

“That man in 4423 wasn’t worth his skin.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“He was a human trafficker. That girl was his next victim, one of hundreds in their prostitution ring. The younger they are, the more money they can get out of them.”

“And you let the girl go?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t there to kill her.”

So, he saved her? That made her angry. “Why don’t I get to go free, too? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You’re a witness.”

“So was she.” She was bargaining, reasoning, using every tool she had to get free.

“She was plastered. God willing she’ll return home and straighten out her life.”

Cleo was confused. Was this guy a serial killer or a saint? How could he slash a person up and also have a moral conscience? It didn’t make sense.

“What about me?”

“I haven’t decided yet. You’re an unfortunate complication that thoroughly fucked up my entire night.” He turned onto the freeway, heading farther and farther from everything she knew. “I want to kill you, you have no idea how much. It would be so easy to dump you out here in the

ditch, end your life with a bullet to the head. Or maybe I'd just snap your neck and save my ammo."

She opened her mouth to breathe. A full-blown panic attack was brewing.

"But even though you're a hotel maid with no family ties and no pets but a goldfish, you haven't done anything wrong besides being an inconvenience to me."

"So you'll let me go?"

"No, my boss would never approve of that. I'm stuck between killing you or keeping you prisoner for the rest of your life. And that sounds like a lot of responsibility on my part."

"There has to be another option."

He pulled to the side of the road. With no lighting way out here, it was complete blackness. As soon as the car began to slow to a crawl, she opened the door and rolled out onto the ground. Immediately, she started running blind. There was still some light from his headlights and the moon, but once she got far enough, it would be impossible to see. She didn't care.

The man was going back and forth from one horrible scenario to another. He offered no outcome where she came out on top, so she had to take a chance. She hoped he'd see her as too much trouble and would drive off rather than traipsing through the mucky fields after a hotel maid. When she didn't hear footsteps in pursuit, a little smile pulled at her mouth. Cleo kept running, needing as much distance between them as possible.

Maybe she'd wait in hiding for an hour after he left, then try to hitch a ride back to the city. No one could be worse than him.

Then everything went dark, and she was falling, her breath stolen from her lungs. Strong hands shackled her wrists.

It was him. He was straddling her body, and the shadows playing across his features made him look like the devil himself.

“You’re a naughty girl, Cleo Bennet.”

End of sample chapter

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