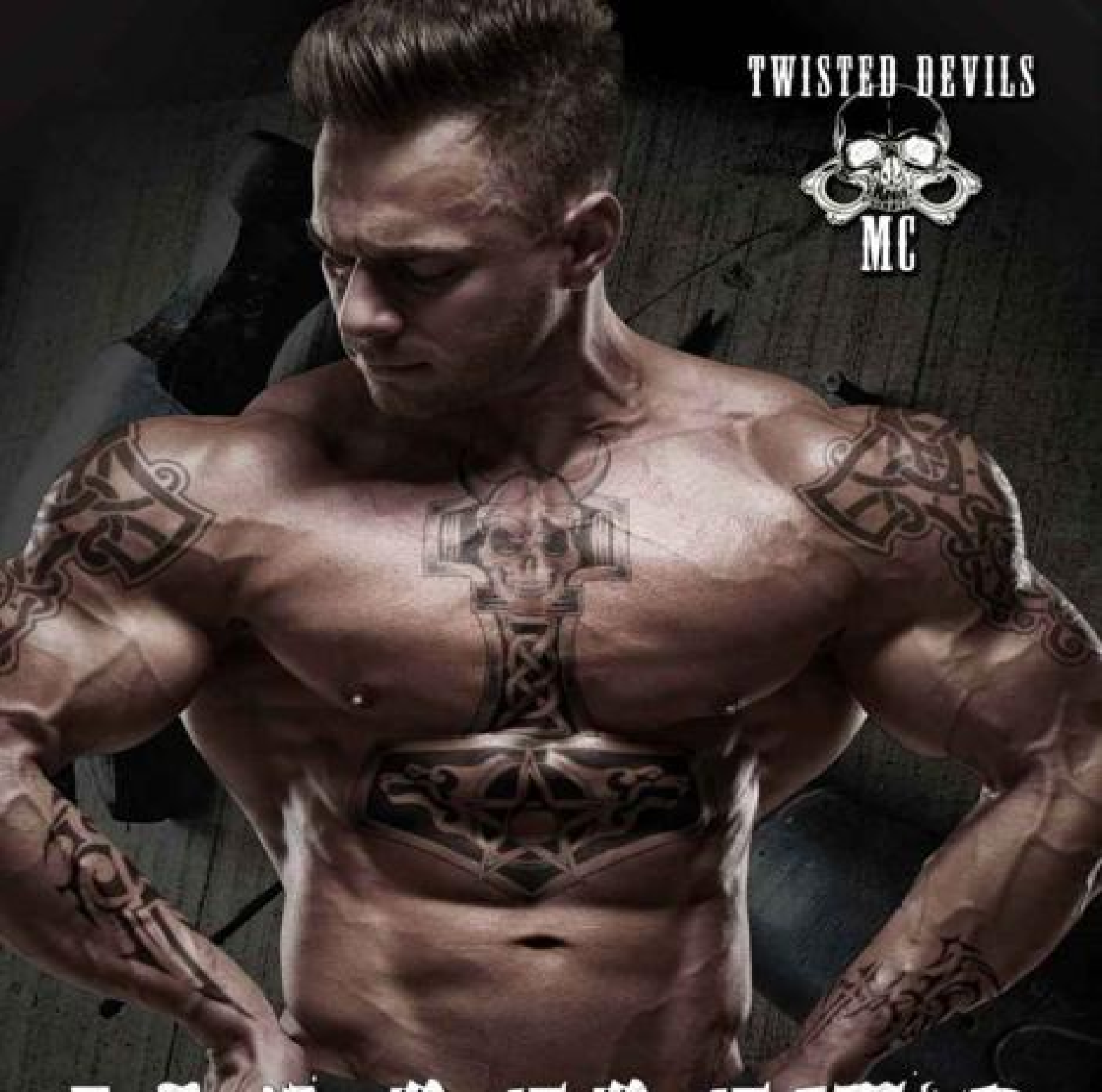
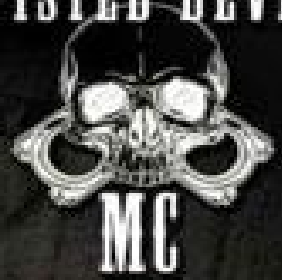


TWISTED DEVILS



HAMMER

ZAHRA GIRARD

Hammer

Book 16 in the Twisted Devils MC

Zahra Girard

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Foreword

Thank you so much for checking out my book. If you want the opportunity to score free advance copies of my books, or stay up on my latest releases and promotions, sign up for my Dirty List: <http://www.subscribepage.com/d9p6y8>

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Thank you,

-Zahra

Chapter One

Hammer

Breath dripping with smoky mezcal carries words to my ears and, behind each syllable, I can hear the agave as it chars and crackles in a crude pit oven.

“Let me tell you something that you’re not supposed to know. Get in close, look like we’re just having a good time, because I shouldn’t be doing this, and you can’t fucking tell anyone what I told you. Doing that would open up a fucking shitstorm for both of us, got it?”

“Got it.”

I lean in closer to Chains. This isn’t the first time we’ve broken laws, even club laws, for each other; our brotherhood runs old and deep to the marrow of our bones.

“I’m doing this because I consider you a brother, even though you haven’t been fully patched in yet.”

“What is it?”

Even though we’re so close we’re nearly kissing, Chains drops his voice so low that I can hardly hear and am forced to lean in even closer to his mezcal breath. There are a lot of ears around, ears that would kick our asses if they overheard the secret that Chains is about to tell me; it’s nearly time for church, and the only people in the clubhouse are the patched members of the Twisted Devils MC.

“They’re going to fill a gas tank. Fill it to the brim. And you need to empty it.”

“Empty a gas tank? What do you mean by empty it?” I shake my head, confused, then whisper as realization hits me, “You mean drink it?”

“Drink it. Every last drop. It’s the last part of your initiation.”

“And if I don’t?”

Because who the fuck drinks a gas tank? The health consequences alone are more than I want to think about, which, being an ex-Marine, means something. The stupid, dangerous shit I did in the service is the stuff of a drill sergeant's worst nightmare, yet most of it had a purpose... but drinking a gas tank?

What the fuck?

That's just being dangerous and dumb for the stupid sake of being dangerous and dumb.

Still, I can't write his warning off; Chains has been through this initiation, and he doesn't seem any dumber for it. Though maybe that means he's reached the basement floor as far as brains are concerned — once something's really broken, you can't break it anymore.

Maybe that explains why Havoc and Mayhem are the way they are, too.

Though I'd wager it's more than that — with those two lunatics, I'd bet their mother was sipping high octane while they were still in her belly.

“Trust me, Hammer, you'll want to drink it.”

“Can't think of an occasion where I'd find emptying a gas tank into my mouth the preferable option, brother. What'll happen if I don't?”

His face darkens.

His breath, somehow, gets more smoky. Smoky enough, I worry about getting second-hand lung cancer.

“The last person who didn't isn't around anymore, you understand me? Now, shut up and act normal. The initiation is about to start.”

* * * * *

The ceremony happens with as much pomp and circumstance as you'd expect from a dozen drunk men of various nefarious backgrounds; there's a lot of drinking, shouting, some speeches, and a handful of jokes so dirty my great grandmother is blushing in her grave.

Then it ends, with Bones and I standing at the end of the table, surrounded by our brothers, ready to receive our cuts and be welcomed as full patch members.

Rabid rises from his place at the head of the table and bangs his hand upon it.

“This is a long time coming. Glad to finally make you both a part of the brotherhood. Hammer, come forward and receive your cut.”

I do.

Rabid grins, hands me my cut, and then slaps me so hard on the back I nearly stagger.

“Congratulations, you jarhead son of a bitch,” he says. “Never thought you’d be smart enough to make it this far, but we are all glad you did. Now, stand aside, brother, so I can call Bones up here and marvel at the impossibility of that lecherous fucknugget making it this far.”

There’s applause. Hooting, cheering, and one person, Chains, jeering.

I flip him the bird and he flips me a grinning bird in return.

It’s good to have brothers.

Then I step aside and my eyes drift past everyone to a point in the distance. To a spot on the wall, where light from the setting sun filters through a half-full beer glass that rests on our club table and casts an amber-tinted rainbow.

The room is full. Filled with brothers, watching, waiting. Not just for my induction, but for what comes after — mayhem, drinking, chaos.

Yet as full as this room is, as much as this club will fill so much of my life with brotherhood, it all feels empty.

Because a void sits around my heart and makes even my proud smile feel like nothing more than a black scar on my face.

After they present Bones with his cut, after the applause dies down, Rabid comes to shake my hand.

“How’s it feel, Hammer?”

“Fucking grand, sir,” I say.

A swift smirk flashes across Rabid’s face. “Not a ‘sir’.”

I may be the first person to have ever called him that, but I can’t fucking help it at a time like this, when there’s a sense of ceremony, because once a Marine, always a Marine. That sense of ceremony was ground into my bones at an early age; I forged my no-good father’s signature on my enlistment papers and paid a girl in my Algebra class five bucks to sign as my mother, all so I could get into the Marines before I hit 18 and escape my terrible home life.

The Marines are part of who I am, just as much as any MC.

Yet, in all cases, I’m a man drifting from brotherhood to brotherhood, hunting something — *someone* — more.

“Old habits die hard,” I respond. Then I grin. “Brother.”

“That’s better.” Then he turns to face the room. “Hammer, Bones, you are now a part of our brotherhood. Every day you put this cut on, you are affirming your membership in the Twisted Devils MC. Every day you wear this cut, you are a brother among brothers. Every day you put this on, you represent us to the world. Be proud and know that, from this day forward, every single one of us will be proud to call you one of our chosen brothers in the Twisted Devils MC.”

All throughout this room, my brothers clap; Chains hoots, sounding like an owl with a megaphone, Mayhem whistles loud enough to make me flinch, and Tractor hollers the way only a hillbilly can. All are equally ear-piercing.

Yet even as that leather rests on my shoulders, and I am surrounded by their deafening welcome, I feel that emptiness again. Even this happiness is hollow; even this family feels lonely; among all these people, I’m still left with just myself.

Because, when the day’s done, and the ride is over, it’s still the same old quiet darkness waiting for me at home.

I want more. Crave it deep in my soul.

And what I want, I sure as hell can't get from Chains or Mayhem or Goldie.

Especially not Goldie, who rises from his place at the table and clears his throat.

"Savor the moment now. Really take it in. Breathe deep. Because tomorrow, you'll be feeling different," Goldie says. "You don't get the good in life without the bad. It's about balance, brothers."

"What the hippie fuck are you talking about?" Bones says.

"I'm talking about the next step. The final step. Molotov's in the bar, pouring your initiation."

"Pouring it? What unholy fuckery do you have planned?" Bones says.

"We all had to do it," Havoc says. "It's required. Don't worry, it probably won't kill you."

"Sometimes, I still dream about it," Mayhem adds wistfully. "Except the dreams aren't dreams. They're nightmares. And they always end with me puking."

Could Chains really have been serious about having to drink the gas tank?

I hope it's filled with fucking unleaded, at least.

"Should we tell him?" Tractor says.

Goldie nods. "Sure. Telling him won't change his destiny, and this drink is a part of it."

That long-haired blond bastard sounds like he belongs underneath a Bodhi tree, meditating with a giant fist up his ass. How the fuck can he be so serene about condemning us to this shit?

Rabid nods, then grins at Bones and I.

"When you get to the bar, you'll find a metal object waiting for you. It's a gas tank to a 1970 Harley XR-750. Inside that tank is a concoction, created according to Molotov's whim, and you must finish it by midnight. Every drop. Or else. So you better hope that Molotov's feeling charitable."

Bones and I trade a look.

It's real.

And it's going to fucking hurt.

"The gas tank to an XR-750? What's the capacity on that?"
Bones says.

"About two and a half gallons, give or take." Mayhem shrugs. "By the way, did you know it was the favorite bike of Robert Craig Knievel?"

"Who?" I say. "Who the fuck is this Robert Craig?"

"Also known as Evel Knievel. Obviously. Don't you know anything?"

"Why the fuck did you use his real name and not his show name?" Chains says. "Everyone knows his fucking show name, but no one gives a flying fuck about Robert Craig. Robert Craig sounds like the name of some motherfucker from Milwaukee who works in accounting and won't shut the fuck up about how hot the weather's been lately."

"I just don't like using the name that sounds like 'Evil' to describe someone who was so damn good," Mayhem replies. "Did you know that same bike model was also the winningest in AMA dirt track racing? And Harley essentially threw it together as a slapjob because the AMA changed their rules after the 1969 season. It's a marvel. You all should feel honored to suck fluid from its gas tank."

"Gross."

Bones clears his throat nervously. "And Molly can make this drink however she wants?"

I don't blame him for being nervous — he's been after Molly for ages and she's been clear about shutting him down; I've heard her use names that would make even the most grizzled Marine shit himself in shock.

"Within reason. We tell her to stick to the bottom shelf, except for special cases," Rabid says.

"Special cases? What happens to special cases?"

“She bought a few bottles of stuff with Chinese writing on it at a flea market. Might be drain cleaner, might be whiskey. You’ll find out later.”

“And if we don’t finish?”

“Oh, you better finish,” Rabid says. “If you fail, you’ll end up wishing you’d had the strength to slurp down the last of whatever’s in that tank. Failures have to go grocery shopping in Elmsburg tomorrow morning at sunrise.”

“That’s it?” I say. I’m not worried about the contents of the gas tank — Molly and I have a good relationship; I leave her the fuck alone and tip well — but I can’t conceive of two gallons of anything sitting well in my stomach. “How about we just skip the puking and do that instead?”

“This isn’t no ordinary shopping trip. You have to buy enough hot dogs, sausages, and pork butt for the club to throw a barbecue to feed the entire neighborhood. You have to walk there and back, as many trips as it takes, wearing only your skivvies and a sparkly tiara, which you will be provided.”

“Who the fuck thought that shit up?” Bones snorts. “Naked meat shopping? What the fuck.”

“What’s the matter, Bones? Worried about putting your meat on display?” Tractor says.

“Worried you won’t measure up to the little Vienna sausages in your shopping bag?” Chains snickers. “Because, from what I’ve heard, you should be.”

“Whatever. Like I’m supposed to be excited about walking twenty miles down the road with my junk hanging out and my hands full of meat?”

Rabid clears his throat. “Bones, no one on this earth is excited about the prospects of seeing your flaccid cock. But that doesn’t matter — what matters is that you get to the bar and you drink what we give you. Got it? Good. Now shut the fuck up and follow me.”

The laughter fades and, with a swirling motion of his hand, Rabid directs us all toward the bar.

It's in that moment of silence, walking down the hall from church to receive my hangover in a gas tank, that the old feeling returns — that all this is just hollow. That I'm hollow.

Then a hand slaps my shoulder, grips it, and returns my attention to the room.

“You look like you're heading to a wake. I thought you'd be happy now that we're riding for the same club,” Chains says.

I shake my head. “It ain't that. This is all great, but something's wrong. Missing. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I can feel it, you know?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. On the inside. You know what I mean?”

“More than you understand. When I look back on the last few months before Charlotte, I realize I was feeling the same way. Remember the wild shit I got into?”

“Remember it? I was the one who bailed your ass out of most of that shit. Figuratively and literally. I'm pretty sure you still owe me some fucking cash from getting your ass out of jail.”

“I'll pay you back later. Look, brother, all that shit was just me looking for something that I knew I needed, but had no fucking clue where to find.”

“If you're suggesting that I have a kid to solve some identity problem, I will punch you in the dick. No one should have kids to solve their personal issues.”

“Not suggesting that. Especially for you. The last thing this world needs is a little clone of your mopey ass running around.”

We step into the bar of The Noble Fir. I take in the room, my assembled brothers, and the impending hangover shining at me from the bar counter — a sparkling metal tank full of high proof alcohol, with a straw sticking out the top along with a little mini flag with ‘Hammer’ on it.

There's another one for Bones. Except, instead of his name, it says ‘Syphilitic proctitis.’

Bones lets out a dismayed groan. “Molly, what the hell does that flag mean?”

“It’s a medical term for a syphilitic lesion in the asshole. I want you to think of it while you pucker your lips and suck on what I give you. Enjoy your drink, you bastard.”

“Would it help if I apologize now for whatever it is you think I did?” Bones says.

“That you’re even offering such a shitty apology is enough to tempt me to dump a can of expired olives in your tank,” she says, smiling sweetly. “Now, Bones, sit down and drink up.”

I take a seat in front of my tank.

Chains sits down to my left, Bones to my right. He eyes his tank like there’s a bomb inside it.

Maybe there is.

Chains orders a beer and swivels in his seat to face me. “You remember those dumb rides you used to put together?”

“They weren’t dumb. They were charity rides. It was to make up for all the bullshit you pulled. Balance out karma in the universe or whatever.”

Chains snorts. “I call it giving away money to some guy who claims he runs a charity, but really, all we know about him is he used to be a buddy of yours in the Marines.”

“It’s a legit charity. It’s called Future Heroes. Mike sponsors kids, helps them go to school, get supplies, get mentoring, become better people so they don’t grow up to be like you or me.”

“Well, do you still keep in touch with Mike? He still running that charity?”

“Don’t know. It’s been a while. After all that happened in Spokane, with your sister and my cousin and...” I stop speaking for a moment, even talking about all the death of that day still chokes me up, so I gather my nerves with a sigh and move past it. “It all went to shit after they died and I let things slip.”

“Well, brother, I remember you always saying those rides made you feel you had a purpose. And, speaking as someone who is tired of seeing your ass mope around like you’re a third grader who didn’t get picked for the kickball team, maybe you should talk to Mike and see if he’s still around.”

“Sure. It’s been a while, maybe I’ll reach out, see what Mike’s up to.”

Even as I say it, it sounds right. Feels right, too.

This could be just what I need: reconnecting with an old friend.

“Reach out? No, don’t just reach out for a chat,” Chains says. “Make a ride happen. Call Mike, tell him you’re doing a charity ride, and then talk to Rabid. Ask for a vote. I’ll back you.”

Molly sidles up between us and catches my attention with a delicate drumming of her fingers on the bar. “You haven’t touched your drink yet, Hammer. Come on, I whipped you up something special. Try it.”

She winks at me.

I sip it, expecting something horrible — like congealed bacon grease blended with tequila.

Instead, something pleasant, bitter, and carbonated hits my tongue.

“Beer?” I say, raising an eyebrow at her. “Wait, I know this taste... Is it...?”

“Yes, it’s that IPA you said you like. I ordered it special for you. Welcome to the club, Hammer.”

Drinking two gallons of beer is still going to hurt like hell, but, as I look over at Bones and see him turning green in the face, I feel damn lucky.

“Thanks, Molly. What’d you make for the syphilitic asshole over there?”

“You ever hear of a cocktail called the Smoker’s Cough?”

Even the name makes me think of mucus, phlegm, and whatever else someone with a three-pack-a-day habit might hack up. Chains and I share a look. We're both grinning at Bones' suffering.

"No. Tell us," Chains says. "Please."

"It's Jaeger and mayonnaise." She rolls her eyes over at Bones, who is alternating between sipping his drink and making a wet hacking noise. "But I put a twist on it, since two ingredients can get a little monotonous. I added some Tabasco and some sparkling cherry soda."

"Oh fuck, that sounds horrible," Chains says. "Bones, brother, what's it taste like?"

"It tastes like the devil's unwashed taint. It's all congealed into this sticky mass. I need a spoon for this fucking thing," Bones says. "Seriously Molly, what the fuck did I ever do to you to deserve this?"

"You'd finish your drink before I finish listing off all your bullshit behavior, Bones," she retorts. Then she turns to me, graces me with another warm smile. "Enjoy your beer, Hammer."

I take a long drink of the gas tank of beer. It's heaven.

Grinning, I grab my wallet and slap a handful of bills on the table as a tip for Molly.

"You're serious about the charity ride?" I say to Chains. The more I think about it, the better it sounds. Not a perfect answer, but something close to it. "You'd be in if I put it together?"

"Brother, if you don't raise it with Rabid, I will."

"Really? You?"

"Yeah, me. And you know I'll do a terrible job selling it, too. I support you, brother, but I'm a shit salesman when it comes to charities that I still think might be scams."

For Chains, the charity rides were just something he had to suffer through so he could keep pulling jobs for our old MC; for me, they were something with meaning, a chance to claim

a small piece of redemption. Those rides put balm on my guilty soul after a lifetime of war; they didn't heal the wounds, but they eased the pain.

And right now, I need that.

After another long chug of beer, I stand up, spot Rabid in the crowd, and call out to him.

“Prez, come on over here. I got something to discuss.”

Chapter Two

Kira

“Babe, where’s breakfast?”

Sighing, I shake my head.

Don’t answer. Keep your attention where it needs to be. Focus on you. Believe in yourself and your strength.

For once.

I ignore the voice and focus on what’s really important — my hair.

There’s only fifteen minutes left before I have to leave for work and one particular part of my curly hair has decided that, instead of looking professional, it’d prefer to look like I’ve been electrocuted. Twice.

Normally, I’d just ignore how crazy my hair is. Cover it up with a hat or a beanie or a wrap. The dress code at the bookstore where I work, A Likely Story, is about as lax as one would expect for an independent bookstore in the hipster Mecca of Portland — but today’s a day where I have to look professional and presentable.

Because today I have an interview at Powell’s Books.

And not just any branch of Powell’s Books, but the biggest of them all: Powell’s City of Books, which is the largest independent new and used bookstore in the world. It’s an entire city block in downtown Portland’s Pearl District dedicated to one bookstore.

Over sixty-eight-thousand square feet and thirty-five-hundred individual sections of books. It’s beautiful. Sublime. Divine.

If I was a religious person, I’d worship there. Among the stacks and shelves, I’d worship, and I’d find serenity and enlightenment.

But, since I’m not really religious, I won’t worship.

Though I’ll hopefully work there.

And I can still find serenity and enlightenment — they're on the second floor, in the purple room, which is also where the books on philosophy, mythology, metaphysics, self-help, sports, religion, and yoga are. I've studied the map, studied the company, and I know the industry from Douglas Adams to Émile Zola.

I'm prepared.

I know my shit, I can do this, I say to myself in the mirror as I continue to struggle with the wayward hair. In a few hours, I'll be interviewing for an open manager's position during my lunch break at A Likely Story. To do that successfully, to get the job that I've dreamed about — though it's a job that is only a stepping stone to what I really want: a Master's degree in Library Sciences and a librarian position — I need to have professional looking hair, not homeless-looking hair.

Which means I do not have time to tell Tucker, my boyfriend, where he can find his breakfast.

"Babe, I'm not joking. Where's my breakfast?" He shouts from the other side of the apartment.

Shut him out, Kira.

Or, better yet, kick him out.

Oh, if only.

I ignore Tucker and keep my focus on where it matters: my wayward hair.

Any other day, any other time, I'd roll my eyes, sigh, and make him his breakfast just to stop the whining. His voice has that insidious quality of burrowing into my brain and poking more holes in my willpower than swiss cheese.

But not today.

I have to stay strong.

"Babe? Are you even listening? I need breakfast. *Now.*"

Keep cool, Kira. You can't go getting upset before you go in to work.

Then there's the sound of something breaking.

Probably something minor, a teacup caught in the fury of Tucker's impotent rage and weaponized incompetence, perhaps.

But that shattering teacup is enough to cut through my forced focus.

"Tucker, the milk is in the fridge and the cereal is in the cupboard where it always is. Figure it out."

"You want me to make it myself? What the hell? I got a lot of shit to do today. I don't have time for this."

"It takes twenty seconds. Please, I'm very busy."

"Babe... babe... *babe!* I *need* my breakfast."

My voice rises, as sharp as the sword of Athos, the eldest of Dumas's Musketeers. I have to cut his whining short, and I don't have any of the actual Musketeers here to show my manbaby boyfriend how to make cereal.

"Making your own cereal won't take any time away from your Call of Duty league or whatever the hell it is you're going to spend all morning playing instead of looking for a job."

He lost his job six months ago, just as he loses his tongue right now.

I can practically feel the sullenness of his silence permeate the air.

Then there's another smashing noise. Probably another teacup.

He wasn't always like this, I think as I finally get my hair right.

Though, in retrospect, maybe all the warning signs were there.

It seems like as soon as we got serious, he stopped putting in effort; stopped cleaning, stopped taking me out, stopped even caring for himself on a basic human level.

Once his job let him go, all his remaining vibrancy disappeared. Went down the drain like his motivation to get

dressed in the morning or make his own food.

Went down the drain like his bathing habits, too.

It's been two days since he's showered and he's as ripe as my grandmother Yulia's homemade pickled herring.

Satisfied with my hair, I grin in the mirror.

Today, it all changes.

I am going to rock this interview.

And that's just the start.

For too long, I've let life — and my nagging, possessive, slovenly boyfriend — keep me down. *I've been too timid, too scared of making waves, to really speak my mind and go after what I really want.*

Not anymore.

I head to the kitchen to pour myself a cup of coffee.

Tucker's sitting at the table, empty bowl sitting in front of him. There's a stupid, sad, scrunched-up look on his face.

At one time, his look would work on me.

And by 'used to be' I mean even as recent as yesterday.

But then I woke up to an email this morning from the owner of Powell's books asking if I was free for an interview today.

That woke something up inside me, too.

Pride, maybe.

Self-respect, sure.

Impatience with Tucker's bullshit, oh, most definitely.

“Breakfast, Kira.”

Two words, and enough petulance that any sane person would suffer a lifetime's worth of shame. But not Tucker.

He repeats himself. “Kira, where's my breakfast? What the hell?”

I ignore him. Let the annoyance wash off my shoulders like a whiny waterfall.

It used to be that I'd fear that look, that voice, and I'd put everything on hold to take care of Tucker's little needs. Just like I put aside my own ambitions because I've been trapped in a life that's like a set of golden handcuffs — I have a job I love, that pays just well enough to subsist on, with co-workers who are a lively and lovely part of my life — a life that's just a bit better than 'good enough,' even though it lacks challenge or opportunity for growth, it's enough for me to put my dreams on hold.

Everything was stagnant. Safe. Suffocating.

Then, a job application that I sent off on a whim — and thought had disappeared into the ether — gets a response.

Then my dreams wake up, too.

“Do we need to have a talk about this?” Tucker says.

As if he ever cared about talking.

How many times did we try to talk things out before?

How many times did he respond with 'nothing' when I asked him if there was something wrong?

How many times did he tell me he was 'handling it' when I asked him if he'd like any help to find a new job, or if there was anything I could do to support him through this depressing period in his life?

“No, Tucker, we don't need to have a talk. I'm through talking with you. Make your breakfast yourself — I've got more important things to do.”

I put my coffee cup in the dishwasher. Close it with verve. The coffee cups, dishes, and silverware inside all clink and clack and clap in applause at me finally telling my lazy-ass boyfriend to handle himself.

“You *what?*” He stands, dick hanging out of the opening of the same pair of threadbare boxers he's worn for the last four days. “Say that again.”

I smile at him to dispel his wounded pride — *though how in the hell does he have pride, looking and acting like he does?* — because I realize he'll be home alone with all my things

until I get back from work. The last thing I want is for him to go apeshit on my stuff, especially my books. Everything in this apartment is mine, except for Tucker's tatty clothes, his gaming console, and the oversize TV.

"Babe, you do not want to make me upset." Something in his look, something in his voice, does what it always does and my resolution crumbles.

Just like it always does.

And, just like I always do, I hold my tongue even though my heart wants something else. Even though my dignity wants something else.

I wish I was brave. Strong enough to speak my mind.

"It's nothing, Tucker. Don't worry about it, and I'm sorry for upsetting you." *No, I'm not sorry at all, but I know you're a little asshole who will try to ruin my things to reassert your ego.* Hurriedly, I pour him a bowl of cereal and give him a peck on the cheek. "Look, I have to get to work — there's really important stuff going on and I can't miss it — but we'll have a real talk when I get home and figure this out, OK?"

He nods, sullen but accepting. "Fine, babe. We'll talk later. Thanks for finally making the cereal."

"You're welcome. I love you."

I don't. Haven't for so long. But I don't have the strength to tell him, though I wish I did.

"But don't think I'm going to forget about this," he says, frowning his bushy brows, crossing his flabby arms, and sounding exactly as if I should be utterly terrified of the consequences of sitting across the table from such a paragon of manliness.

"Right. Well, have a good day, babe," I say, forcing myself to use that term of endearment. It sticks to my tongue like tar.

"Yup."

As I head to the door, I make several silent resolutions.

One: I need to ace this interview at Powell's. I need that boost, I need that strength, so that I can finally free myself from Tucker's suffocating embrace.

Two: I will be happily single for the rest of my natural life until I find a man who treats me how I want to be treated. With respect. With affection. With appreciation. A man who knows how to take care of himself, and me, without any prompting.

Three: even if my life extends unnaturally, like I'm bitten by a vampire or my mind is transferred into some Frankenstein's monster, I still won't compromise on who I'll be with. That is non-negotiable.

And, finally: my better, braver life starts today.

Today.

* * * * *

"Look at you, all cleaned up and looking fancy," my best friend and coworker, Deandra, says as she sees me step through the doors of A Likely Story. "One might say you almost look professional."

"Do I?" I say. I've put in the time, the effort, but I'm not used to dressing up like this — white button shirt, dark navy slacks, a dark navy blazer. In fact, I'm so unused to it I had to google 'interview clothes' and pour over pictures before going to the nearest thrift store. I found most of these clothes in a bargain bin. They're nice, the brand names are high end, but this is Portland and you're just as likely to find high quality professional clothes in a discount bin as you are to find tattered, shredded, and derelict clothes in a high end boutique; I once saw a homeless dude walk into one of those boutiques, sell his dirty jacket, and walk out with a thick wad of cash.

"You look great. Honestly. Do you feel ready for your interview?"

"I do. I mean it, I do. I've looked over everything, I know their company history front to back, I know books, and I have a file folder of letters of recommendation and references," I say, pulling from my tote bag a thick manila folder stuffed to the gills with letters.

“Talk about overkill. How many letters do you have, Kira?”

“Fourteen. One from everyone in the senior citizen’s book club I run, one from Dave, and one from my lit professor from my Junior year, Dr. Draper.”

“You know, out of all this, I really pity Dave.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s going to have to find someone to replace you and, honestly, you’re irreplaceable.”

“Stop it, D, you’re going to make me cry,” I say and I give her a hug.

“This place really is going to go to hell without you. I mean it. You know your book club will follow you to Powell’s. There will be no one good to fill in on the morning shifts, because I am not a morning person and Dave certainly isn’t, either. Plus, you’re the best at making chalk drawings for our sign. Everything I draw looks like a blind impressionist drew it.”

“D, are you trying to get me to stay?”

A pang of guilt hits me as I think about leaving this place behind, but that pang quickly drifts away beneath the flood of excitement I feel as I think about finally getting my dreams on track. It’s been several years since I finished my undergraduate degree and, after so many times saying, ‘Maybe next month, next quarter, next year,’ I’m finally making it happen.

“No. Sorry, I don’t mean it to sound this way. What I’m trying to say is that you kick so much ass and, if Powell’s doesn’t hire you, they’re a bunch of fucking idiots. You are going to do great in your interview, and I can’t wait to buy you a few drinks after work today to celebrate.”

I hug her again. Tighter. Less conscious of what a big bear hug might do to put wrinkles in my blazer.

“Thank you. I wouldn’t be able to do this without you. No, I mean it, having a good friend like you here has kept me sane. I love you so much.”

“Stop it. You’re going to make me cry. And then you’ll cry. And then your makeup will get all messed up. Which means you’ll have to go fix it, and I’ll have to deal with our morning customers all by myself. So, let’s stop, OK?” Deandra says, her voice shaking.

I sniff a little, break the hug, and nod. “Fine. But I still love you. And I’ll miss you.”

“You’re switching jobs, not dropping off the face of the earth. I mean, come on, what’s the worst that could happen?”

* * * * *

The morning goes by so fast and busy, which is our usual. Portland consistently ranks as one of the most well-read cities in the US and it shows in our clientele; people of all ages come in to start their day with a new book, though many of our customers this morning are on the younger side. Which isn’t a surprise — there’s a community college two blocks away in one direction and, in the other, a craft brewery and a park that hosts a frisbee golf league.

But after the flurry of activity subsides, it’s time for lunch, and I rush out the door to grab a vegetarian panini from a food truck across the street before I catch the bus that’ll take me across the Willamette River, and then the streetcar that’ll drop me off just in front of Powell’s.

I’m jittery the entire ride. Bouncing.

And not just from the holes in the road and the vibrations of the streetcar as it trundles along the tracks; my heart is thumping in my chest so loud it drowns out the sounds of midday traffic.

This is it.

I want to smile on the streetcar; I want to sing; I want to laugh. Though I keep it all to myself and keep a steady, bitchy look on my face because, sitting two seats away from me is a creepy-looking guy who will not stop staring at me, and I don’t want to give him any invitation to start a conversation.

Seriously, it’s like his eyes are laser-locked on me.

And, even though he's better-dressed than a lot of other creepy guys run into on the street, his suit and tie don't mask his piercing stare. Or his long scraggly hair.

Or his long, beak-like nose that reminds me of a carrion bird.

All of it combined gives him an aura of wicked malevolence.

So, I keep my face in check. Stare straight ahead. Ignore him.

Because I won't be distracted today.

Today is the first day of a new chapter in my life — a wonderful chapter, full of success, ambition, chasing my dreams.

Without Tucker.

At that last thought, I turn to the window and allow myself a small smile.

It feels good, knowing he won't be around much longer to drag me down. I'm going to get this job, I'm going to believe in myself, I'm going to stand up to him, and I'm going to kick his ass to the curb. Finally.

When we reach my stop, I hop up and step gaily off the streetcar.

The sun is shining; it warms my shoulders. The air smells fresh. Even the trees seem greener. I walk toward Powell's.

I'm here early. My interview isn't for another twenty minutes.

Which will give me plenty of time to peruse the stacks at Powell's; I might pick out a book that, hopefully, after my interview, I'll be buying with my employee discount.

Now I grin.

"New job, new chapter, new me, and a hell of a lot of discount books," I say to myself as I walk the half-block to Powell's. "You got this, Kira."

My footsteps crack with confident potency on the sunlight warmed sidewalk.

As I draw closer to the door to Powell's, I imagine myself doing this walk every day, entering those doors as an employee — no, a manager, because that's the job I'm applying for — and how accomplished I'll feel. It's the first step of my plan, a plan that begins with working at Powell's — for much more money — and saving that money until I have enough to afford to go back to school for my Master's degree in Library Sciences.

Then a gravelly voice slithers into my ear.

“You are Kira Marinova, yes?”

I stop.

I shouldn't.

In my heart, I know I should run. Should sprint with everything I have, should scream, should kick, should stomp, do everything in my power to make a scene.

But hearing my name — my full name — in that slimy, scaly voice freezes me.

“How do you know my name?”

It makes me sick, but I look over my shoulder and see him standing there. The dark, creepy man. With one gnarled hand in the pocket of his suit jacket, and the other loose and at his side, comfortable. He smiles at me. Some of his teeth are missing. One looks so black, I mistake it for a gap in his teeth before I realize it's just rotting to pieces.

“Because I have been following you. It is a long time that I have been looking for you, Kira. Now... I've found you.”

Dread clenches my throat. “Who are you?”

The man cocks his head and leans forward, giving a distinct birdlike impression. The dry, quiet cackle that leaves his thin lips even reminds me of a bird, a raven, maybe, cawing in triumph as it picks at some desiccated roadkill.

“You don't need to know. Come with me, please.”

“No. I can’t. Please, I have a job interview.”

“Don’t be stupid. Come with me.”

“I’ll scream.”

Tutting his tongue, he shakes his head.

“No, you won’t, Kira Marinova. Because I am not the only person with a gun watching you. Yes, I have one in my pocket. Now, look over there. To that hotel across the street. In an upper floor, there is a man with a rifle aimed at your chest. If you try anything stupid, he will shoot you and I will simply walk away. If he misses, I will kill you later. Gladly. Then I will go to your mother’s house, and I will show her a picture of your corpse and, as she cries and wails for her murdered daughter, I will rape her. When I am finished, I will give her to my men. We will spend a weekend with her. Then, when we are bored with her flesh, we will kill her. We will do the same to your sister, Nadia, and your best friend, Deandra. We will rape them, ruin them, and kill them. Now, are you going to come with me, or shall I tear apart the lives of everyone you love?”

I look behind me at Powell’s. It’s so close, yet so far. Just like my hopes for a new life.

I wish I had the strength to scream. To make a scene. To call for help.

Because, as scary as it is, that’s the best way out of this situation: make myself too much of a pain to kidnap and hope that, somehow, I can get to the police in time and they can protect me and my family from this psychopath.

That’s what a brave person would do.

But me?

With my heart in my throat, I meekly follow the man in black.

Chapter Three

Hammer

“Young man, when you are finished with your groceries, could I impose on you for help loading mine?”

A quavering voice pulls my attention away from my cart — stuffed to the brim with all of life’s essentials: cases of beer, chips, beef jerky, and more beer — and to my right.

The voice is as frail as its owner looks; an old woman of indeterminate age stares back at me with eyes that seem unnaturally large behind the lenses of her glasses.

She’s got a cart in front of her with a few things in it, including a box of Pediasure that looks heavy enough I’m surprised she could lift it into her cart in the first place, and a paper bag stuffed to overflowing with meds from the Pack ‘N Save’s in-store pharmacy.

“Not young anymore, but still happy to help, ma’am,” I answer.

“You have a lot of food. Are you planning a party, young man?” She says, ignoring my earlier statement. But she’s old enough that I’ll cut her some slack.

And she sounds lonely.

“No party, ma’am. Me and some of the other guys in my club are heading north on a ride for charity and these are snacks for the road.”

My voice brims with excitement as I say that. It only took five minutes for the club to organize and approve the vote on my charity ride the night they patched me in. Another five to call Mike, tell him to get his ass ready because I’m riding north to his charity’s HQ in Everett, Washington, along with my entire MC. And then five more to map out the route, which includes several stops at bars along the way, to patronize the places that have always served as supporters of this charity

ride, even back in the day when I rode with the Savage Bastards MC.

Ever since that night, my heart's been pumping with a vigor I haven't felt in years.

It's almost been enough to overlook the emptiness I feel whenever I come home to a dark, empty house.

Almost.

"Your club? What kind of club? Parcheesi, young man?"

"Motorcycle club. The Twisted Devils MC."

I push my full cart forward in the checkout line, load my piles of beer and snacks onto the conveyor. Behind me, the old woman pushes her cart closer to mine.

She's next up, and though I haven't told her yet that I'm going to help her out, I've already decided to stick around to load her groceries. Something about her reminds me of my grandmother. Though I don't have many memories of my grandma — she died when I was very young — I remember her eyes. This old woman's are the same: pale blue, foggy with age, but shining like a lighthouse with kindness.

That's how I remember my grandma. And if this old woman is anything like her, she deserves respect and reverence.

"So that's what the stickers on your coat mean," she says.

"They're patches. Sewn in. Club markers. And it's not a coat — it's a cut, ma'am."

"Because of the sleeves missing?"

"Exactly."

"Why did you cut them off? You'll catch your death of cold," she says, sounding very concerned about my thermal welfare. "Do you need a blanket? I have a spare in my car."

"Thank you for your concern, ma'am, but I'm just fine," I say. I pause for a minute when the cashier finishes ringing up my groceries so I can stick my credit card in the card reader. I'm paying for these groceries myself — they're a treat for my

brothers for joining me on this journey north. “Put hers on mine, too,” I say to the cashier.

The old woman’s eyes light up — which fills me with a damn fine feeling — but she shakes her head.

“Thank you, young man, but no. I am just fine with money. I’ll buy my own groceries. Oh, and this sweet treat, too.” She grabs a candy bar off the shelf next to the register and then gives me a wink. “Sometimes it’s fun to be naughty, isn’t it?”

Groceries purchased, I push my cart with one hand and pull the old woman’s with my other. She totters along behind me.

This little addition to my grocery mission is going to cost me time I don’t really have to spare — the club will roll out from the clubhouse soon — but I’m fine with being late. It feels good to do something good; it makes up for all those times when this life demands that I do the opposite.

We go to her car first.

It doesn’t take long to transfer the groceries into the back seat of her Buick. When I do, she hands me the candy bar that she purchased at the checkout counter.

“Thank you for your service, young man.”

I give her a brief salute. It’s a habit. Once a Marine...

“Happy to help. Though you can stop calling me ‘young man.’ I go by ‘Hammer.’”

“Well, I’m surprised I haven’t run into you at any of the hardware stores around town,” she says. “My name is Yulia. I wonder if I might ask another favor of you? It’s not often that you run across a man who looks like he can take care of himself like you do. Especially not one with a good heart.”

A good heart? Naïve, completely wrong, but a compliment that still makes me feel good.

I just nod rather than correct her. “Sure. What is it?”

“Are you and your friends passing through Portland, by any chance?”

“We are.”

We have several bars to stop at in Portland. Places run by old friends, places that I haven't had a beer at in a long time.

"Good, good," she says. "I want you to check on my granddaughter. She lives there."

"Your granddaughter? Me? Ma'am, it'd be easier for you to just call the cops, have them do a welfare check."

Then she takes a photograph out of her tiny white purse and hands it over.

I look at it. No, I *stare*.

Whatever she says next fades into the background as I'm rendered deaf by the rush of blood in my ears. There's a young woman in the photograph, younger than me by a good few years if this picture is at all recent. She's beaming. Beautiful beyond belief. Surrounded by family, a big birthday cake in front of her, a smile on her face that'd outshine the summer sun in the noon sky. Curly brown hair that looks meant for wrapping around my fingers cascades down her shoulders. Bare shoulders. Delicate, tantalizing things. A hint of skin in an otherwise conservative green dress, but even those bare shoulders are enough to make my heart race like the heaviest combat.

I don't care what this old woman is about to ask of me as long as I can meet the woman in this photograph.

There's silence.

More silence.

Yulia's not talking. She's just looking at me, expectantly.

"What was that about your granddaughter?" I say.

"She's in trouble."

My heart thuds. Assaults the inside of my ribs. It wants to go to her, to protect her.

I make a fist so tight that my knuckles pop. The rage that courses through me at the thought of someone — *anyone* — threatening this young woman is enough to make me forget about all my urges to be a better man. I'll kill anyone —

remorselessly, ruthlessly, relentlessly — all to make the world a safer place for her.

“She’s in trouble?”

“I think so, though I’m not sure. See, I haven’t been able to reach her on the phone all afternoon and she never misses one of my calls.”

“She could be busy.”

“My Kira always returns my calls. Or at least sends me a text message. She’s very good about that, and I’m so proud of her — she works so hard and she volunteers so much, she even runs a book club for women my age — but she may have gotten involved with some evil men. Not by her choice. No, she is an innocent. But other people in her family have made mistakes, and I don’t think it’s right that she suffers for them. That is why I need your help.”

As she speaks, I feel myself standing straighter, my posture tightening. The way it was in the Marines, when I lived for combat for a cause.

Now, I have a new cause. *I can’t let the gorgeous young woman in this photograph suffer because of what someone else did.*

It isn’t right.

But should a woman like Kira, someone good and innocent, spend time around a man like me and the others in the MC?

I hate to think that the club might change Kira’s outlook on the world, expose her innocence to the dark undercurrents of violence and corruption that swell just beneath the surface of society. That I might darken that beautiful smile is unacceptable. Criminal.

“Ma’am, the police — or even a social worker — might be better for this task...”

“No. I want you, not some policeman. I could tell by looking at you that you were a man with moral character. You held the door for me and two other people.”

I shrug. I don't remember if I did, but if I did, it was just habit; respect is in my blood.

“So what? Holding a door means nothing.”

“And I saw your tattoo.”

As she raises her arm to point at my tattoo, her sleeve shifts, revealing what looks like a few teardrops tattooed on her forearm. It's only visible for a moment before she adjusts her sleeve, so quick that I'm not sure I even saw it.

I slip my hand to my wrist, pull back my shirt cuff, revealing my tattoo.

It's faded with life's trials, with sun exposure, and with a scar from a bar fight that turned bad, but it's unmistakably the Marine Corps emblem.

This old woman is more observant than I've given her credit for.

“Yeah, I was a Marine.”

“Just the man I want to check on my granddaughter.”

“You're making it sound like it's dangerous.”

“A grandmother always wants to be prepared when the lives of her children or grandchildren could be at stake. Tell me, Hammer, if you were going on a mission and your officers told you this mission was safe, would you still bring your gun, or would you leave your weapons at home?”

“I'd take my gun.”

“You're the gun. My granddaughter is the mission. It should be safe. She should be safe. But I will not take chances.” She nods, sure of herself. “I will also pay you five thousand dollars. You are to call me when she's safe. I have to go out of town for a while, but here is the number to my cellular phone.”

She recites it to me, makes me repeat it thrice.

“Fine. I'll do it. You have an address for her?”

She flips the photo of Kira around and hands it to me.

On the back there's an address written in an elegant, looping hand.

"That's her address. I have been there once. It is not the best neighborhood, but it is all she can afford because she just works at a small bookstore. I have tried to send her money to get a better apartment in a nicer neighborhood, but she refuses. Says that I need the money more than she does. Which is just foolish, but that is my Kira."

Beautiful, kind, and with enough self-respect not to mooch off her grandmother?

I want to meet this young woman more than ever.

No, not just want. *Need.*

That emptiness I carry inside me fills with light at the thought of seeing her sparkling smile at the end of a long day.

"I know the area. It ain't great," I grunt. "But I'll do it. No need to pay me, either. Not for a job like this. I'll find your granddaughter. Keep her safe."

"Thank you, Hammer," she says, relieved. Then she smiles, and it's a sly smile, though she does her best to hide it. The rheumy, confused old lady look fades from her eyes, too. There's definitely more to this woman than she's letting on. "You had better be on your way, then. I am afraid I just added more work to the agenda for your road trip." With that, she turns and slips into the driver's seat of her Buick with an agility that belies her old age. "Take care. And thank you."

I hardly watch her leave. I'm focused on the photograph of Kira in my hands. Questions and answers race through my mind. Could she be the answer I've been looking for? Is this mission really dangerous, or is it simply the product of an old woman's worry?

Though I don't see how it could be dangerous. Not when all I'm doing is checking on some young woman in Portland who somehow makes my blood hotter than the fiercest combat.

It's simple.

Easy, really.

I've dealt with worse dozens of times.

And besides, what kind of trouble can a bookworm like her actually get into?

Chapter Four

Kira

“Where am I? What is going on? Why are you doing this? Who are you?”

That spitfire array of questions leaves my mouth even before I open my eyes. It feels like my head is full of fog — fog and cotton balls soaked in cement — and my mouth is as dry as Oscar Wilde’s wit.

“Relax. Be easy,” says the raspy voice that I immediately recognize as belonging to the creepy old man who accosted me outside of Powell’s. “If it helps you to be calm, some people call me Vulture. You can use that name.”

I’d rather not. It’s a ghastly name for a ghastly man. Even thinking that name — a creature that grows fat on death and rot — feels like a violation and I will not put any part of it in my mouth.

How the heck did he think that name would calm me down?

Then again, this guy definitely isn’t normal.

Memories flood back to me. Of following him, of fighting back a scream, of getting into a dark van, of a needle slipping into my arm and turning the world black.

“You drugged me.”

My eyes open. My vision clears.

I can see where I am now: some dank room. It’s dark. I’m handcuffed to an old iron radiator. There are men all around me, three men other than the older man who came to me like a nightmare on the day when my dreams were supposed to start.

“I did. I have learned it’s best not to trust people to cooperate, even when one makes threats. Fear turns people stupid. So I took matters into my own hands.”

He comes close. So close I can see his crooked teeth and smell the rot in his breath. It’s like his soul is oozing out of his mouth as a pungent cloud. There’s a necklace around his

throat, a tight necklace almost like a choker, made of beads and what, horrifyingly, looks like finger bones. Inset in that mantle of beads and bones is the picture of a young boy. Is it my captor as a child, or someone else?

“Why are you doing this? What do you want?”

My voice shakes. My heart is thrumming with mortal terror, thudding so hard the reverberations of my nightmare make my vision vibrate.

The older man grins. Kneels.

Looming closer, his tongue darts between his lips and slithers across their wormy thinness.

“It’s my job. And I have what I want: you.”

Some of the other men in the room chuckle. But they keep their dark laughter quiet, subservient. Then one whispers something to another. His hungry eyes say that he’d love to have me in a darker way.

A look over his shoulder is all it takes for this older man to silence everyone else in the room — smiles hide, eyes flee to the corners, laughter dies.

“Why me?”

There’s ink around his neck. Tattoos. An adornment as sick as the necklace of bones he wears; tattoos of skeletons and teardrops, crude drawings of weeping bodies, a woman’s face, half skeleton, half with skin. I’ve seen enough documentaries to identify prison ink.

How many people has this monster killed?

A smile parts his lips.

At least, I think it’s a smile. Though it looks too carnivorous to express joy. It’s a wrong smile. Looking at it and seeing the lack of light in his darkly luminescent eyes, a chill runs through me as I feel the full intensity of his sickness — the smile of a twisted man who draws their black happiness from ruining others.

“This is about a debt that must be repaid.”

A debt?

I would've remembered if my mother or my sister made any deals with bone necklace-wearing Russian psychopaths. My mom would never get within a mile of someone like this horror and my sister, well, while she might find someone like this visiting the club she dances at, she would definitely mention a creeper of this magnitude in one of our rare phone conversations.

What debt can it be?

Think, Kira, think!

“Look, I know I’m a little slow paying off my student loans, but I didn’t think this shit would get so real,” I say.

“Oh, so you’re a student, besides working at that bookstore?”

Too late, I realize I should keep my mouth shut. Being a smartass will not help me. And any bit of information I give him — deliberately or inadvertently — is just going to get me, or someone I care about, hurt.

Those black, beady eyes narrow. The smile grows. In size and putridity.

“If you’re worried you might reveal something that could put your family in danger, don’t worry. We’re well past that point.”

“What do you mean? Are they... dead?”

A chill runs through me. Chill and nausea, thinking of this monster visiting my mother, my grandmother, or my sister. They could be dead or dying right now, and it all happened while I was passed out and chained to a radiator.

I didn't even get to say goodbye.

Somehow, I manage not to cry.

Maybe it’s because I’m too terrified; I feel so alone, so frightened, I can’t even release any tears.

Maybe it’s disbelief; it seems impossible to lose everyone I love in the space of a day.

Or maybe it's revulsion.

Because that rotten man reaches out and touches my face. Gingerly. A stroke that slides across my cheek and traces the outline of my lips in the way that only a lover should. At once, I feel like he's both taunting me and sizing me up. Testing me.

Or maybe imagining cutting off a part of my body to adorn his necklace.

"Soon enough." His eyes penetrate mine with vicious intent, and the cruelty of his smile drips darkly over me. "Your grandfather is gone. Dead. He was the first. Your father, too. Your grandmother soon will be. The rest of your family... they will join you soon enough. Women are useful. The same way a vehicle or a plot of land is useful."

I look away from him in horror.

"What...?"

He can't mean what I think he means.

I want to say more, but he grabs me by the chin and squeezes. Hard.

I gasp in pain, and he forces me to stare into his eyes. Those black orbs drink in my misery and terror.

"You are to be sold. There will be an auction. Bidders. Many interested parties would love to own the granddaughter of the man who fucked with the Fedorov crime family. Especially a woman who is so beautiful. They will surely enjoy you."

Suddenly, I want nothing more than to be back in my apartment.

Even with Tucker.

Pathetic, directionless, incompetent Tucker.

Anything would be better than this.

I'd give up all of my dreams just to go back to my old life.

"I'm being... sold?"

It doesn't feel real. Doesn't sound real. It *can't be* real.

“Tonight, we will load you into a van. We will drive you north. That is where the auction will be held. You will be sold, the profits used to pay some of your family’s debt. I hope, for your sake, you are not seasick.”

“Why not seasick?” Creeping dread fills my throat, turns the words into a squeak.

Do I really want to know? Knowing may help my chances of survival.

Or it may make me wish I was dead already.

“Many buyers are from across the ocean. China, Hong Kong, Singapore, some Russian, and some from smaller countries — Thailand, Burma, Indonesia. Overseas is where most of those who are sold go. It seems few Americans have a taste for owning someone such as you. Whoever buys you, you will be shipped by sea. In a crate. It is safest that way. Airports — even private ones — are too nosy. And private jets in this country are tracked, too. So a boat it is. It is a long journey, but you will be provided with some food, a bucket, and even a mattress if your new owner feels generous — I suggest you put on a show.”

“A show?”

He chuckles and my stomach turns. “Fuck them well after they buy you. Give them everything they want with enthusiasm. Or with tears, if that is what they are into. Some are. Some want you to cry and scream and fight. Whatever they want, give it to them. It will make your life more comfortable.”

I shake my head so vigorously that the chains binding me to this old radiator clink.

This can't be real.

It can't.

I want to ask him more. There are so many questions on my lips. But then he jabs a syringe into my neck with expert precision.

Then warmth fills my veins.

My limbs turn icy cold. I feel dizzy. And distant.

The man called Vulture caresses my cheek again.

“When you wake up, your old life will be over. Nothing more than a memory. Soon, that will disappear, too. All you will know is what your owner gives you. Sleep now, Kira Marinova.”

Then he leaves me, chained to the radiator.

In the dark, the cold, alone.

I shiver as the drugs overpower my body. Shiver, and feel tears well at the corners of my eyes. My old life may not have been perfect, but I'd give anything to go back to it. To the quiet safety. To the enjoyment of plain days and mediocre accomplishments. To the simple ambitions of planning a weeknight dinner or handling the household chores after a tiring day of work.

But as drugged sleep takes me, I know there's no going back.

There's no escape.

Chapter Five

Hammer

We are two bars down on our ride, we've just hit the Portland city limits, and that photograph is burning a hole in my pocket.

It takes effort not to break it out at every stop and just look at it. Anticipating that moment when I knock on her door, see she's safe, and take her out. Dinner, drinks, a date like a fucking civilian, and then a ride. Something fast to ignite the liquor in her veins and wake up the adrenaline in that bookworm's life.

I can see it — see the night starting, see her shining that smile at me, see her beneath me in bed, see the look on her face as I make her forget about every man she's ever known before.

I want her.

Three simple words, but they ring in my soul like a divine calling.

I've never felt this way about a woman — but Kira Marinova has awakened something inside me that will not be quenched until I have claimed her.

“Semi truck incoming.” Chain's voice hits my ears as a shout, though barely above the roar of the road. I look up, swerve, narrowly avoid barreling into a fucking eighteen-wheeler while going seventy-five down the freeway into Portland.

Chains gives me a funny look.

I shrug and give him a thumbs up. Doubt he buys it, because he knows me better than anyone else in the MC except for Bones, maybe, but I still need to give the appearance that everything's fine. The last thing I want on my side-trip to check on Kira is a shadow.

It's at the third bar on our Portland stop — at a little place called Smitty's BBQ Shack, where the owner, Smitty, a former

Army grunt and a man who makes the best barbecue brisket I've ever tasted — that I make my getaway.

I slip into a back hallway, open the fire exit door, silently, because the fire alarm wired to the door hasn't worked since Smitty bought the place twenty years ago, and step out into the parking lot.

I don't have a shadow.

“Whatchya doin?”

I look up from my bike to see I have three shadows instead; the eerie twins — Havoc and Mayhem — and Chains. I don't know which of the two psycho twins spoke, so I answer while giving them both the same ‘fuck off’ look.

“Going to take a ride. That a problem?”

“You look like you're getting into trouble,” Mayhem says.

“We like trouble,” Havoc adds.

“Live for it,” Mayhem continues.

“Especially in Portland. This city is basically our second home, we love tearing it up.” Havoc says.

“And we haven't for a while. Not since we won that fighting tournament put on by that bum fights knockoff — Rumble in the Streets,” Mayhem says.

“We didn't know it was a bum fights thing. Those guys suck. We thought it was just an impromptu tag team fighting tournament. We were drunk, walking around, saw some guys rumbling, and joined in.”

“Once we found out they were exploiting the homeless, we kicked the film crew's asses, too.”

“And tracked down the owner to his home and set his car on fire.”

“He deserved it. Guy was a total dick. Had a nice car, though. Mercedes.”

“And it burned even nicer.”

Chains clears his throat. “Where are you going, Hammer?”

“Got a thing I got to handle. Should be back before everyone’s finished drinking,” I answer. Kira’s place isn’t far from here, a fifteen minute drive at most. “You guys go back inside. Smitty’s a good guy, a fellow vet, and he deserves our support.”

“No, if you’re getting into trouble, we’re coming with,” Havoc and Mayhem both say at the same time.

“You ain’t leaving me behind, brother,” Chains adds. “Got to keep an eye on my daughter’s uncle.”

“Fucking hell. Whatever, come on.”

I start my bike and all three of them are on theirs before I’m even rolling out of the lot.

This is not going how I expected.

And my chance to turn this little sideshow into a date is out the window.

Because how the fuck is Kira going to react to having four bikers — including two grinning twin lunatics — showing up at her door?

* * * * *

I knock harder than I have to. The door nearly shakes off its hinges with each resounding strike of my fist.

“How do you know this woman?” Chains asks.

“Or do you not know her? Is this a kidnapping?” Mayhem says. “Fun.”

“Would appreciate a heads-up next time you’re planning an abduction, brother,” Havoc says. “You’re lucky I happened to carry my balaclava today.”

Without waiting for an answer, pulls a black knit mask out of his back pocket and slips it on.

“As if you ever go without it,” Mayhem says, nudging his twin.

“What about you? You got one?” Havoc says. “Because I got one to spare, but, with your attitude, I’m not sure if I’ll

lend it to you.”

“What? You think I’d step out without my mischief mask? Who the fuck do you think I am?” Mayhem says, sounding hurt.

“Shut the fuck up, both of you. And take that off, Havoc,” I snarl, snapping my fingers right in his face. He obeys. Thankfully, their yammering stops. Some days, I don’t know how Rabid deals with these two without putting a round between their eyes. “You’re not wanted here. So, unless you shut up, you can all kindly fuck off to the parking lot and wait until I’m done.”

“Sorry,” the two say in unison. “We’ll be quiet.”

Chains just smirks at me.

After another knock, the door opens the length of the security chain, revealing the living embodiment of the phrase ‘feckless dipshit.’

He’s only wearing tattered underwear, and he looks like he just got out of bed, even though it’s well into the evening.

I crane my neck and look beyond him. I see a dirty kitchen table with a box of cereal sitting on it. There’s a bowl and spoon sitting out, too, unused, though the bowl of cereal seems to be full and well past the point of sogginess. On the floor, there are several broken teacups. Just what the hell happened here?

“Who are you?” Says the man.

“I’m looking for Kira Marinova. She there?”

“Why are you looking for my girlfriend?”

“Your girlfriend?” Those words come out dripping with disbelief.

Why the fuck would that beautiful woman in the photograph choose this two-legged slug?

“Why are we looking for some girl who dates a slob who lives in his fucking underoos?” Havoc says. “Dirty underoos, too. Jesus man, do some fucking laundry.”

“This isn’t trouble. There’s nothing fun about this. This is just sad,” Mayhem says.

“Seriously, what the fuck are we doing here?” Chains says. “We should get back to the bar.”

“She can’t be dating you,” I say. “Not fucking possible.”

The dirty land sloth grins.

“She is, bro. She pays my rent, does my chores, gives great head, too.” He leaves the door for a moment and walks back to the table, picks up a phone, and returns. After a few swipes, during which I see several pictures of other women dance across the screen, he holds up his phone. On it is a picture of him — more of him than I want to see — and Kira, nearly undressed. “It’s a sweet fucking deal, bro. And she’s not the only one that has me on the hookup. I am getting so much action.”

My teeth grind against each other and I force a breath to calm myself and keep from cracking my jaw.

“You’re dating these other women while you’re living with her rent-free?”

“Yeah, bro.” He grins like he’s proud of himself. “I just had this other girl over, met her on Tinder. She had the biggest titties I’ve ever seen in my life.”

He fucked another woman in her bed. Kira’s bed.

If I didn’t have something more important to do, I’d kill this filthy prick.

Smiling, I extend my hand. “I have to say, I’m impressed. You really are pulling in some serious ass. My name’s Hammer.”

“Tucker,” he says, taking my hand. “Hey? What are you doing?” His voice rises in alarm. High-pitched. Pathetic.

Probably because I’m not letting go. Instead, I squeeze. Bones and joints in his hand shift and pop. Then, with a surge, I pull his entire arm through the door. There’s a thwack as his face hits the heavy wood.

I twist.

His shoulder emits a wet, snapping pop, and he whines like a fucking bitch.

“I don’t like you,” I growl. “You aren’t a man.”

“Not much of one, anyway,” Havoc adds. “I mean, were you fully erect in that sex picture you showed us? It looked like a fucking toothpick sticking out of a wig stolen from an 80s hair metal band.”

“What... Ow. Why are you hurting me? Let me go,” Tucker whimpers.

I twist, harder. Things pop and stretch, audibly.

“This is her apartment, right?”

Tucker nods. “She pays for it all. She makes.. Ow... oh shit... decent... oh fuck, that hurts... money where she works. At bookstore called A Likely Story.”

“She normally home by now? Or does she work late?”

“She’s late. Usually she texts if she’s going to be late, but she hasn’t... She didn’t even answer when I texted her about what’s for dinner. Ow, fuck, please stop hurting me.”

Behind me, Mayhem lets out a chuckle and leans in toward his brother.

“A Likely Story? Get it? I love a good pun.”

“Me too. Hey Mayhem, why are writers so cold all the time?” Havoc whispers.

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Because they’re always surrounded by drafts.”

“Oh, I like it. Hey Havoc, why is the library the tallest building in any city?”

“I don’t know, Mayhem. Why?”

“Because it has the most stories.”

There’s a slapping sound behind me.

“Shut the fuck up, both of you,” Chains says. “I’ve heard better jokes from those old muppets, Statler and Waldorf.”

I ignore them. My attention is all on the manlet with the microdick.

“So she pays the rent... you don’t have a job... you contribute nothing... yet, you fuck around on her... does she know? Does she get to fuck around, too?” I say.

“Why are you so interested in my girl’s sex life?”

He’s defensive.

That’s all the answer I need.

I shove him backward while keeping my grip on his arm. Just as he’s about to fall flat on his ass, I pull him forward again, slamming him with brutal force into the door. There’s a loud snapping noise and several coffee-stained teeth go flying from his bloody mouth.

He howls.

But that howl cuts short quickly as I twist his arm until I hear a horrid wet pop.

Then I release and he crumples to the grown in a mewling heap, clutching his useless arm.

“If you were single, I’d almost have a shred of respect for you. Pulling ass like that while looking like you do, it’d be impressive. But she supports you, she pays for you, and you sneak around behind her back. You’re nothing more than a disrespectful, gutter-dwelling piece of shit. Be a man. Have some fucking dignity and get out of her life.”

Then I turn away from the door.

Chains nods, approvingly. I know that if I didn’t kick Tucker’s ass, he’d do it instead; in ten years, Charlotte will be dating on her own, and the last thing he wants is men like Tucker polluting the dating pool.

“Come on. We’re going to that fucking bookstore.”

* * * * *

“We are not the only guys in leather here,” Chains murmurs as we step through the door to A Likely Story. A small bell tied to the door with ribbon tinkles as we enter.

Not the only ones in leather by a long shot.

There’s at least twenty older men in dark leather outfits sitting in folding chairs in a semicircle around a comfortable leather chair. In that chair is another man, in his mid-50s, with an exquisite handlebar mustache, jet black hair with a steep widow’s peak, and a physique like he respects himself. He’s wearing glasses, black leather pants, a leather vest, and nothing else. He’s even barefoot.

“Your girl works here?” Mayhem says in a low whisper.

“Apparently,” I answer.

Looking around, I get the feeling these guys aren’t part of an MC.

“Now I remember this place. Jenny told me about it. She goes to college near here. They do a lot of author readings here. She came here once for a reading about chimpanzee sexuality,” Havoc says. “She said it was enlightening. Learned a few things.”

“That was this place? I’m still bummed I missed it,” Mayhem replies.

A woman about Kira’s age, with red hair, blue eyes, and short enough that she barely comes up to my stomach, approaches us. She’s wearing a deep green vest with pin saying ‘A Likely Story’ and showing a tumbling stack of books on it.

“Are you guys here for the reading? We have a couple chairs left, but you’ll need to take a seat quick. Keith Marks is just about to read a few chapters from his book *Daddy & Me*.”

“Hammer, do you need my help asking questions about your girl from the picture? Because, if not, I’d like to go to the reading. I love family stories,” Mayhem says.

“It’s not that kind of daddy, bro,” Havoc whispers.

“It literally says it in the title. What else can it be?” Mayhem replies. And, without waiting for an answer, he takes an empty folding chair and sits in rapt attention as the man who must be Keith Marks clears his throat and starts in on the reading. He has a deep, baritone voice and a confident presence. I can see how someone might call him daddy.

“Are you talking about Kira?” The woman says, eyes widening.

“Yeah. How’d you guess?”

“Because she’s been missing. She went to an interview at Powell’s at lunch. She was supposed to come back to finish her shift. But she never showed, and she isn’t answering her phone.”

Cold grips my heart; Kira’s been missing for hours. Whoever took her has one hell of a head start.

“Where’s this Powell’s?” I say.

“You don’t know Powell’s?”

“Yeah, you don’t know Powell’s?” Havoc repeats, with scorn. “Hammer, major faux pas in Portland. Or anywhere where people give a damn about the written word.”

“Shut up, Havoc. Go join your brother at the daddy fest,” Chains snaps.

“Powell’s is a bookstore. They’re big. They have several branches, but she went to the one called Powell’s City of Books. It’s on 10th and Burnside.”

I gesture to my brothers. “Let’s go.”

As I start to the door, the woman calls out, “If you find Kira, will you tell her to call Deandra? She’s my best friend and I’m worried about her.”

“I’ll find her. I promise. Don’t worry, Deandra,” I say. Normally, I wouldn’t make a promise like that — you never promise you’ll find someone who’s missing. Except, in this case, I won’t rest until Kira’s safe. No matter what it takes. Either she’ll come home safe, or I’ll die trying.

We're outside before Mayhem gets up and races after us.

"How was the reading, bro?" Havoc says as we mount our bikes.

"I am so glad our family dynamic wasn't like that dude's. My ass couldn't have survived all the spanking."

* * * * *

At our next stop, nobody wants to talk.

All the Powell's employees? Either they're blind, deaf, or just uncaring. How anyone could not notice a woman like Kira is beyond me. The only thing we get from them is that she never showed up to her interview.

The patrons? They don't give a shit. They complain about us enough that the staff kick us out of the store.

"What now?" Chains says as we stand on a street corner, regrouping after getting our asses kicked out of the bookstore by a five-foot-nothing man named Gregory who gave absolutely zero fucks despite his minuscule size and sweater vest. "You going to continue on this bullshit path or are you going to get back to the charity ride that *you* organized?"

"How would you feel if this was Charlotte we were looking for?" I retort.

"You know how I'd react. You were there when all that shit went down with that dog fighting ring. But this isn't Charlotte — this is a woman you don't even know. How the fuck did you get that photograph? Who the fuck is Kira Marinova?" Chains says.

"I met her grandmother in the Pack 'N Save parking lot. She asked for my help. Even offered to pay me five grand just to check on her granddaughter. I made her a promise."

"You dragged us all out here because of something some old woman told you in the parking lot of a discount grocery store? Fucking hell," Chains says. "Did you at least get the money?"

"No. Turned it down."

“We’re doing this shit for free? What is this Kira to you?” Chains says.

Grunting, I shake my head and give him a look that he interprets correctly — *drop it before we have a problem*. How I feel about finding Kira is as intense as anything I’ve ever felt before. I can’t explain it, except I feel this impossible-to-resist pull towards this woman. Those eyes, that smile, there’s an implacable need deep inside me to have them as a part of my life. Even if it’s just for a moment.

We have to do something, we can’t just stand here on the street corner with our dicks out like the homeless guy in the alley two blocks from here.

“Mayhem, you head east on Burnside Street. Havoc, you go west. Chains, go north following 10th. I’ll head south. Canvass, ask around if anyone saw anything suspicious here. Talk to business owners, employees, everyone. We know Kira never made it to her interview, so she would’ve been abducted around lunchtime. Talk to everyone.”

We split.

I have little hope starting this canvass.

Reality bears it out.

Repeatedly, I run into blank faces, shrugs, or muttered suggestions I ram my fist up my ass.

Half an hour passes and my resolve wavers in the face of a never-ending torrent of ‘I don’t know’ when I run into a man who catches my eye. He’s wearing a haggard duster, with a scraggly beard that reminds me of Forrest Gump on his ‘Run Across America’ adventure, he doesn’t respond the first time I call out to him. But then, he’s sitting on the ground, resting his back against a dumpster for a restaurant called ‘Pie in the Sky.’ Not exactly the model of alertness.

Still, something draws me to him.

“Hey old timer, how long have you been here?” I say to him. Raising my voice loud enough that he can’t ignore it.

“What’s it to you?” He says, stirring reluctantly. “I ain’t loitering. You can’t make me move. I know my rights.”

“Relax. I’m looking for someone. Maybe you’ve seen them. If you’ve got info, I’ll pay.”

That makes him stand. As he does, I catch a glint of silver around his neck. Dog tags. It breaks my heart to see someone who served living in such an undignified state. Happens too fucking often.

“How much you paying?”

I reach into my pocket and take out a fistful of bills. There’s at least a hundred in my hand. “Enough.” Then I hand him a twenty. “That’s for your service. There’s more if you have an answer for me.”

“You must be a vet. Cause they’re the only ones who give a shit about me. Name’s Morton.”

He and I shake hands. His grip is firm.

“Hammer. Look Morton, I’m searching for a young woman. Her name’s Kira. She would’ve been outside Powell’s around noon today. There may have been someone after her, someone who may have taken her. You see anything like that?”

Then I show him the picture.

He whistles. “Hard to forget her. Yeah, I saw this pretty lady.”

My heart jumps. “Yeah? What do you remember?”

“She came up on the streetcar, and it was like the sun was walking with her. The lady was just bouncing along, and she was dressed real nice, too. Looked real good. Pretty, but professional. With a jacket, stuff like that. But there was a man behind her, and you don’t forget a man like that, either. I’ve been in combat, but I wouldn’t mess with this one. Dark motherfucker. Not, like, dark complexion, but you could just feel it around him. The kind of man that, when you see him, you turn around, walk away, and hope he didn’t see you.”

“What happened? Did he hurt her?”

“They talked. Then she went with him.”

“That’s it?”

“She didn’t look happy about it, if that’s what you’re asking. Pretty thing looked darn near sick to her stomach and about to cry. But she left with him.”

“Did you see anything else? What kind of car they took?”

“No.” That glimmer of hope I felt at getting actual information disappears. Then Morton clears his throat. “It wasn’t a car. It was a van. Like one of those cargo vans you see all around the warehouse district by the docks and around the railroad station. Even had the same logos and markings, like the identification shit they paint on the side of delivery vans. For the rest of the cash in your hand, I’ll even give you the number.”

I hand over the cash without a second thought.

“Deal.”

Finally, a lead.

Chapter Six

Hammer

Smoke, smelted steel, stale diesel; this neighborhood has an odor that scorches the hair inside my nostrils and brings burning tears to my eyes.

“This place sucks. I’d rather go back to the Daddy convention,” Mayhem mutters.

“If you’d rather leave, fine. You can fuck right off if you’re too much of a coward to help a woman in need. But if you want to stay, then split up, circle the neighborhood, and call me as soon as you see the van matching the description we got from Morton.”

It doesn’t take long for us to find our target.

Twenty minutes in, I get a call from Mayhem and I’m at his location five minutes after that, staring at a warehouse in a darkened corner of the district. Two of the neighboring buildings are abandoned, the products of economic decay, and most of the streetlights in this area are out or shattered to pieces.

There are three vans parked in front of that warehouse, along with two sedans.

At the very least, we’re outnumbered.

At the worst... well, I don’t want to fucking think about that.

“I have to get in there.”

“You going to knock and ask if they’ve got an attractive young woman for sale?” Chains says, giving me a dry look.

“No. I’m going to park my bike over there.” I gesture to an alley a couple of blocks away. “And you guys are going to knock for me. Real hard.”

“Finally, we resolve this problem the right way: with violence,” Mayhem says. Somehow, in the space of time I take to breathe, he’s drawn both his pistols. Havoc, too. “Let’s go.”

My hand darts out and takes hold of his wrist before he can blink — I'm that fucking ready for either of them to fly off the fucking handle.

“Not yet. Let me get into position first.” After a moment's thought, I add, “And listen to Chains. He's in charge when I'm not here.”

Chains snorts. “Just great. I come here to help you out and you give me babysitting duty?” When I open my mouth to retort, he laughs and says, “I'm just fucking with you. We'll give you a minute before we make some noise and draw these bastards out.”

I'm off before he's even finished his sentence.

Forty seconds later, I'm parked and hauling my ass over a chain-link fence to drop by the back entrance of the warehouse where Kira's being held prisoner.

Then I crouch behind a dumpster that smells like old fish, and I wait for the signal.

Twenty seconds later, on the dot, there are a series of gunshots, followed by an ululating cry that gives me flashbacks to my deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Then more bullets.

Shouts of alarm come from the warehouse, and I hear slamming doors and the sound of vehicles coming to life, followed by the roar of motorcycle engines as Havoc, Mayhem, and Chains tear away to lead the kidnapers on a wild goose chase, their guns still firing bullets into the air and their voices still filling the air with ululating cries.

The perfect distraction.

Quietly, I creep to the back door.

I hesitate, my ears straining to catch any sound inside.

Nothing.

Another moment passes and then I break open the door with a heavy kick. It flies inward, ramming the wall with a loud crash, and I step into a perfectly still room.

It smells like ass in here.

Rancid, rotten, fishy ass.

It's a stench reminiscent of how some of my fellow Marines would smell after a long mission in the desert, when some of those idiots got it into their skulls that bathing was optional.

The stink doesn't faze me for a moment.

I step into the empty room, eyes scouring and ears scanning for any sign of Kira.

Then I go deeper.

The next room turns up empty, too, except for a handful of rats that hiss at me with exceptional menace.

It's in the third room I find her.

Cuffed, gagged, blindfolded. Still jaw-dropping beautiful.

She's wearing a dirty button-up, a tattered blazer, and navy pants. Her curly hair is a wild mess, and her makeup is tear-streaked and covers a full third of her face, making her look like the world's most feral mime.

I get in close, crouch until I'm close to her ear.

I whisper in what I hope is a calming voice.

"Stay quiet and stay calm. I'm here to get you out."

Then I remove the gag and the blindfold.

Immediately, she lunges toward me and, though she's constrained by her cuffs and the chains, she's still able to sink her teeth into my left hand.

It's not a quick bite. It's as if her teeth violently fuse to me, like she's a pit bull with a locked jaw.

"What the fuck?" I hiss at her, sounding just like the rats from the other room. "I'm here to get you free. Stop eating my hand."

It's a fucking nightmare of an effort to keep my voice low so I don't blow the element of surprise.

Then her eyes narrow, and she releases me from her jaws.

This is not the introduction I was hoping for.

“Who the hell are you, and why the hell are you dressed like that?” She hisses.

“My name is Hammer. Your grandmother, Yulia, sent me.”

“Hammer? What kind of name is that? Do you manage a Home Depot or something?”

“Just shut it, OK? I need to focus,” I mutter as I dig around in my pocket. There are several things I always keep on me: one is a knife, and the other is a bobby pin. Bobby pins are absurdly useful things and have the property of always showing up where you least expect them; I’ve never bought them, but I always find them in the strangest places — the cargo compartment of my bike, on the side of the road, even found one in the cushions of the brand new couch I bought when I moved into my apartment. They’re fucking mythical and incredibly useful for picking locks.

I take the bobby pin out and begin to bend and shape it.

“This is going to take some time. I haven’t picked cuffs since I was young and stupid,” I say.

My fingers shake with adrenaline as I bend the delicate metal until it’s the rough shape it needs to be. Fortunately, cuffs are one of the more simple locks to pick, and it’s not long until I’ve got the bobby pin inserted in the lock holding her left hand hostage.

“Hammer...?” She starts.

I ignore her. Focus.

“Quiet. Gotta work, Kira.”

“But, Hammer...”

So close. Just a few more twists until it’s there.

“No, no more talking until I’m done,” I say.

Then a flurry of motion catches my eye.

A pinprick touches my neck.

Hot and cold fill my veins.

My limbs turn to cement.

“Who...?”

I try to turn.

It's futile; I'm moving in slow motion.

Before my leaden lids shut, I see a hooked beak of a nose and eyes as dark as a starless sky perched above a malevolent grin.

Chapter Seven

Kira

When my eyes open, I'm in the back of a cargo van. The inside of my eyelids feel like they're coated with duct tape, sticking and gripping to my dry eyeballs. I wince with each blink. My mouth is as arid as savanna grass at the end of a long, hot summer.

I hope being drugged twice in the same day doesn't have any permanent aftereffects.

The van hits a bump and I wince as my brain bounces around inside my skull like the world's most swollen pinball.

The pain puts me in an even worse mood and I realize it doesn't matter if being drugged inflicts any permanent damage, because once I'm sold, every bit of damage is going to be permanent and my only realistic way to escape my terrible future is if I'm lucky enough to die.

It feels dark, morbid, and wrong compared to the outlook on life I try to keep to — I prefer beautiful sunsets and happy endings — but looking at my confinement, it feels accurate.

Should I try to savor these last moments in captivity because these are the freest I'll be for the rest of my life?

Something clatters — metal chains clinking — from the other side of the van, and it snaps me out of my dark thoughts.

I blink a few more times. My flaky dry eyes regain focus and I see him, my would-be rescuer.

He's seated across from me, chained to a support bar that's bolted to the side of the van. These bars are meant for strapping down cargo, but now serve to restrain the six-foot-three man-mountain who tried to rescue me.

But he's not just chained to the bar.

No, he's also chained to me; there's a shackle and chains running from his wrist to mine.

Oh, and I'm shackled to a separate bar, too.

As my senses further return, I realize I'm also nearly naked; I've got on a bra, panties, and, inexplicably, a pair of stripper heels. They're pink, sparkly, and would be really fun in the right circumstances, like anywhere but here and now.

These heels must be to accentuate the merchandise, I think grimly, before realizing that I'm getting way too fucking dark and I should never, ever think of myself as merchandise. The second I think like that, and not of myself as a person, I may as well just stamp 'vapid fuckdoll' on my head and give in to whatever person's going to buy me.

Still, one thing sticks out in my mind: *how can this really be happening?*

This is a nightmare.

No, worse than a nightmare; this is something I couldn't imagine in even my darkest night terrors after a marathon session reading apocalyptic grimdark fiction while listening to German techno music.

My old life is over. I've been ripped out of my little bubble of bookshops and book clubs and thrown into a world where people murder, buy, and sell each other.

It's scary as hell and I want no part of it.

Not of these men, no part of where they intend to take me, not even any part of my fearsome, violent, scary, supposed 'rescuer' of a trollish giant who goes by the tragic name of Hammer — the man who belongs in aisle six, next to the plungers, toilet brushes, and liquid bowl cleaners.

"Ah, she's awake."

That voice comes from the front passenger seat of the van. The back bucket seat of the van has been stripped out to make room for all the restraints and there are only two other people in this van, aside from Hammer and me: the driver and the guard in the front seat who has hair as long as mine and looks like he last bathed during the Obama administration.

I fumble for a sharp answer, something like a pithy 'Fuck you, you're dumb *and* ugly,' but Hammer gives me a stern look that makes me shut up.

Then, very deliberately, he blinks his eyes open and shut. Hard.

Is he trying to tell me something?

After blinking, he settles back and slumps his shoulders, eyes closed and breathing heavy.

He's faking it.

Maybe I should fake it, too.

Not like there's really much to see by staying awake. Well, nothing except for the greasy back of the head of the guy in the passenger seat, or the off-white mesh back of a trucker cap being worn by the driver. There's nothing visible through the windshield, either. It's dark out and the only thing the van's headlights illuminate is an empty stretch of road and the shadowy figures of trees whipping by as we speed down the road toward my auction.

I slouch back against the wall and release a deep sigh, as if I'm descending into sleep.

"You were wrong, Yuri," the driver says. "Not awake. Vulture said the drugs were strong, that they'd be out for hours."

"I guess so. Still, I swear I saw her move."

"People move in their sleep. It happens. But those two in back? They're not waking until we get to the auction."

Silence descends.

Time passes; seconds, minutes, hours, I don't know.

But after a while, I sense the slightest movement and hear the quiet tinkling of chains.

Opening my eyes a fraction, I see Hammer's awake.

First, he sneers toward the two men in the front and his eyes blaze like a gasoline fire. Utter confidence in his dominance.

I wish I had that confidence.

Our two captors both sit there, eyes forward, completely unaware.

Then, moving in slow motion, he slips his large fingers around one of the two bolts securing his restraint bar to the wall of the van. Gritting his teeth, he turns it fraction by fraction. It quietly yields to his ferocious strength until it silently pops loose into his mammoth hand.

Then he winks at me.

“Hold on,” he mouths silently.

There’s hardly a second for me to prepare before he grips the steel bar in his cuffed hands and, grunting like a rabid animal, rips it free of the wall and holds it in his hands like a baseball bat.

“Oh shit,” says the man in the passenger seat. “He’s free.”

Hammer doesn’t reply. He only grins at the man in the passenger seat.

Then, with one vicious swing, he smashes in the man’s head. Bone breaks, blood sprays, and a cry erupts from the driver as he sees his companion slump forward, now with nothing but a broken, bloody cavity where the back of his skull should be. The van jerks and the driver curses, fighting with the wheel while reaching behind his back. He must have a gun.

“Time for the fun part, Kira. Hold on,” Hammer bellows.

I can’t move. All I can do is watch in utter horror as Hammer swings again and the bar cracks open the back of the driver’s head like an over-ripe watermelon.

Time slows.

The van swerves to the side of the road.

We’re going to crash.

The world turns upside down and I’m thrown around the back of the van like I’m weightless, flying about while still chained to the bar holding me to the wall of the van. During the tumult, Hammer lets out a ferocious roar. *Is it pain? Is it anger? Is it gas? I have no clue.* Again and again and again we roll, I hit the wall, the floor, the ceiling, screaming at the top of my lungs as Hammer’s intense weight crashes into me when

the van careens into a ditch and then, finally, comes to a stop upright.

I taste blood and feel pain lash across my forehead. Intense, sight-blackening pain.

Then the world goes quiet, except for the shuddering cha-chunk of the van's dying engine and the tinkling chime of the emergency flashers.

Hammer is still for only a second. Then he hefts himself upright and looks at me. Something about his arm looks off — it's a little more limp than before. Did he hurt it?

"You OK?" He says.

"No, I'm very much not OK."

"You look fine enough to me. Anything broken?"

"Try my entire worldview."

"Funny. This isn't the time for an existential crisis, bookworm. Hold still, I'm going to take care of that bar that's keeping you down."

Repeating his maneuver from earlier — twisting the bolt with his bare hands and then ripping the bar from the wall like it's made of paper mache — Hammer frees me.

Then he kicks open the back doors of the van.

Fresh air hits my face. It tastes so sweet I can't hold back a joyous, manic giggle. It feels odd to laugh after such death and terror, but I can't help it. I see freedom in front of me.

Terrifying freedom.

Freedom where I'm shackled to a giant, blood-covered killing machine who just murdered two men with a metal bar.

I hate this.

I hate all of this.

I want my old life away from this madness, this psycho Hammer — all of this craziness.

I want to go home. I want to call my mom, my grandmother, and then take a bath with a book and a glass of something

strong, like bourbon.

Yes, a lot of bourbon.

“Away we go. No time to wait,” Hammer says.

“I don’t — I can’t...”

“No. No arguing. Because I sure as fuck ain’t going back to being a prisoner,” he says, jingling the chain that binds us at the wrist. “And we ain’t staying here to wait around for any more of those guys.”

Then, before I can respond, he heads toward the forest and the unstoppable force of his movement drags me along behind him. I try to fight it, even plant my feet and tug against him with all my weak might, but he just laughs and pulls a little harder, which sends me staggering.

“You’re stuck with me, bookworm.”

Then he gives me a warning glance over his shoulder.

“And if you want to live through this nightmare, you’ll stay stuck with me.”

Chapter Eight

Hammer

Kira goes docile after my warning. Still, she manages a petulant tug of the chains and I wince, unable to stifle a grunt of pain.

Fuck, my shoulder's dislocated.

I knew it the second everything stopped tumbling, but there was a part of me that hoped that maybe I'd just banged it up real bad. The rest of me believed that the adrenaline coursing through me would be enough to dull the pain until I can get us to safety.

Turns out, I'm wrong on both counts.

What I should do is stop right here and sort it out, but we don't have time to sit at the edge of the highway when any more of the kidnappers could show up. There have to be others. A pro like Vulture, he will have other cars on the road tailing us just to make sure we stay prisoners.

Which means we have to get far away and we have to do it now.

So I drag the nearly naked Kira behind me, where every tug of resistance she puts up makes me grind my teeth in pain.

Last time I hurt like this, I had a bullet lodged in me and I was carrying Mike away from the site of an ambush while he was bleeding out.

Which means I can do this, too. Hell, this is chickenshit in comparison.

I take a step, falter, and nearly trip over some loose gravel.

Except I was a hell of a lot younger, then. Not by so many years, but by mileage.

"Stop. Please, stop," Kira says once we enter the trees and the highway disappears from sight. "Please, just a moment."

Her voice takes on urgency. Fear.

I've heard it before. Mostly from shell-shocked green soldiers who get through the adrenaline rush that happens when bullets first fly and they realize '*Holy fuck, those people are shooting to kill me. I have to get out of here.*'

I give her a sideways look. "You going to behave?"

She snorts. "Behave? We're well past the point of behaving. I'm naked, in the forest, and chained to a giant man who just murdered two people."

"Not good enough of an answer. Try again."

"Do you think you can just order me around? Are you serious right now?"

"Very. We're not stopping unless I'm sure you're going to be calm. Panicking helps nothing."

"I'll be calm," she says, carefully.

Still, I eye her warily, considering. We're a decent distance into the forest, but not nearly far enough for my comfort; we have a long way to go before I'll be sure there's no one pursuing us.

But, after several seconds lost in her amber eyes, I nod. I could spend so much more time looking into those deep wells of thought, but there's a more pressing need at the moment.

"Fine. We'll take a break for a moment. But you need to calm down. Take a deep breath, let it out slow, try to get your thoughts together. I know you've probably got adrenaline and a bunch of frightening thoughts racing through you right now, but you have to get control over them. They won't help you. Listening to fear will only get you killed. If you want to survive this and get back home, you'll listen to me. Now, come over here a little, there's something I have to do," I say, pulling her closer to the trunk of a large tree.

I eye it up and down. It should work.

"What are you doing?"

"Surviving," I respond. Then I knock my dislocated shoulder into the tree, snapping my joint back into place.

Kira winces, and her face turns a sickly shade of green. “Holy shit. Are you crazy?”

“Need both my arms. This nightmare is a long way from over,” I say grimly. Then, seeing the fear that blooms on her rosy-cheeked face, I add, “But I’m going to get you back to your grandmother. You’re safe with me, Kira.”

“Who the hell are you, really?”

“Like I said, my name’s Hammer. Now, break’s over. Time to walk.” I say as I start deeper into the forest, dragging her along.

“Hammer is a sobriquet. A pseudonym. Not a name.”

“It’s all you’re going to get. Now, tell me what you know about your kidnapers. Anything they’ve said, any distinguishing markings, even the most insignificant detail could be important. We need to figure out who they really are and what they’re after.”

The thick forest thins a little as we climb. Ahead, by the light of the moon and stars, there’s the menacing outline of mountains. My ears vaguely catch the screeching of a gull. Mountains ahead of us and ocean behind, they must’ve been taking us north. Which means we’re heading east now. Where exactly we are is a mystery, but if we’re at all lucky, we may be somewhere along the route that the MC was going to take for the charity run.

That mean hope is more realistic than I was expecting. I quicken my pace.

“Kira?” I say, prompting her again.

“What? I don’t know anything.”

“They targeted you for a reason. Everything about them says that they’re professionals, which means they’re doing this for a purpose. Did they tell you anything at all?”

Kira snorts in disbelief. “Me? Oh, sure, the woman who works in a bookstore in Portland is tight with the Eastern European human traffickers. You got me, Hammer: they’re regulars in my book club. When they’re not out kidnapping

people to sell to gangsters, they're sitting in a circle with me, drinking chamomile tea, talking about our days and how much our lives would be so much better if we knew a Fitzwilliam Darcy."

"Who?"

"Really? You don't know *Pride and Prejudice*?"

"No."

"Of course not. Look at you — you don't look like an Austen fan."

I grunt, unsure if I like her tone. Still, I hold aside a thick branch that's blocking our path and let her through. "I never got around to reading her. Not one for fancy, snooty books. But I read *War and Peace*, though."

She blinks, impressed. "Seriously? No, you can't have."

"Had a lot of long days on deployment and few choices for books. But I read it. My favorite part was book four. I enjoyed reading about Pierre Bezukhov's doomed mission to assassinate Napoleon. Got a lot of sympathy for idiots who find themselves in over their heads on missions that seem absolutely insane. You might say I see a bit of myself in him, at least with that."

She stops so suddenly that it jerks me to a halt. I wince; my shoulder's back in place, but it ain't happy with me right now.

"Holy shit, you are the first person I've met who says they've read *War and Peace* and has actually read it." She stares at me for a second and it's clear she's collecting her thoughts. There's a look on her face that, even in the darkness, I can read as her being impressed. I like that look. It's flattering, coming from someone as smart as her. Then she says, "Still doesn't answer my earlier question about who you are, though."

"I can give you my life story later, bookworm, but now is not the time. There are others coming. We have to move."

"Bookworm? Come on, you can do better than that. And, as far as going further... No offense, but why should I trust you?"

I don't know you, outside of seeing you kill some people with a metal bar and then watching you wreck that van like you're the hulk. Now I'm just supposed to, what, let you drag me around like a rag doll?"

I love her fighting spirit. And I especially love the hint of a Russian accent that comes out when she gets fired up. *She is so much more of a feisty fighter than I gave her credit for initially.* It's tempting to put more pressure on her, just to see how she'll push back.

But we're only minutes removed from the heat of combat and we could be back in the shit at any moment. There's no time to think about how my skin feels so hot being so close to her, how my eyes want to drink in every nubile inch of her young body, how I want to take these chains that bind us together and put them to use in bed.

No, no time for it, as much as I ache to indulge.

"Yulia sent me. Hired me. I'll prove it," I say, and then I describe her as best as I can from memory. The detail that truly seals it and turns the disbelief in Kira's bright brown eyes into acceptance is my description of Yulia's teardrop tattoo.

"OK, say I believe you. Where'd you meet her?"

"In the parking lot of the Ironwood Falls Pack 'N Save grocery store."

"Seriously? My life is in the hands of some guy that my grandmother hired in the parking lot of a grocery store?" Kira snort-laugh. "A handshake agreement to break up a kidnapping made over a cart loaded with, what, bacon and some of the cheese that's on the weekly saver discount? Or, wait, were you working there? Are you one of those burly boys they send out to push those big lines of carts back into the store?"

That laugh. Like tinkling, crystalline wind chimes. It's delicate and raises a frisson throughout my body. Paired with her wide, heart-consuming smile, it's irresistible. Even here, even now, with grime and exhaustion on her face, she is a heart-stopper. When I first saw her smile in that photograph, it

resonated in my bones that her smile is the most beautiful thing I'll ever see in my life; now, seeing her up close, that photo is just a pale shade of her true beauty. She is stunning beyond belief.

Fuck, Hammer, get your shit together. You're a fucking Marine and you're on a mission. This is not the fucking time to lose yourself in some woman's smile, no matter how good it is.

"I was buying chips, beer, and beef jerky. Essentials. And I'm not a cart boy or whatever they're called. I'm part of a motorcycle club. Satisfied?" She snickers. I give her a moment to laugh at my expense and then I continue, "Now, be quiet. We got a long way to walk."

Grudgingly, she assents, and we trek on. Though she still snickers from time to time.

We come to a clearing after a time and something brings Kira to an immediate stop. Following the direction of her gaze, I see the sure signs of light pollution in the far distance. A lot of light pollution. There's a city in that direction. Or at least a small town.

She pulls.

I plant my feet.

She scoffs and tugs harder. "Come on, let's go. That way."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"The logical thing: we're going to go into town, find the cops, and have them help us."

"The cops? No fucking way. I'm covered in blood, I'm strapped to a kidnapped woman, and, at some point, the police will hear about a murder on that road back there, because those guys in the van are definitely dead. If we get picked up, I'll be going away for a long time and there'll be no one to protect you. I made a promise to your grandmother. I'm bringing you home safe. We're going that way." I point deeper into the woods, toward the mountains that loom like dark giants on the horizon. Moonlight ominously glints on snowcapped peaks. In the distance, a wolf howls.

Kira gulps. “Into the mountains?”

“Into the mountains.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“You don’t have a choice, bookworm,” I say, holding up the chains. This isn’t my ideal situation, either; Kira’s frustrating, stubborn, nosy, and squeamish. Definitely not the best person to be handcuffed to when your life is on the line.

Her mouth opens like she’s going to argue, but I’m not having any of it. Not one damn bit. Screw this arguing shit. I pick her up, throw her over my shoulder, and the only rebuttal she can manage is a startled yelp.

It’s cute, in a way. Except she does it right in my ear, and the sound and the motion of throwing her over my shoulder — which sets my recently-dislocated joint screaming — makes me wince.

“Be quiet,” I say, spanking her hard enough that she falls into stunned silence.

This is going to be a long night.

My eyes return to the mountains ahead of us, to the snow at the top of the peaks, and I shiver as a frigid wind blows down from their icy heights. Behind me, my straining ears catch the sound of raised voices, shouts carried from the far-away road by some echoing trick of geography.

Yes, this is going to be a very long night.

Assuming we survive.

Chapter Nine

Kira

I hate this.

Deeply, profoundly hate it.

With more hate that I mustered for that awful Joffrey Baratheon, or Dolores Umbridge, or even Nurse Ratched. Or all of them. Combined.

Hate.

When we started into the woods, I thought it would just be a short trek. A way to get away from the main road before going somewhere — anywhere — where there's civilization, so we can get help.

It seems like the logical thing to do.

Apparently, the hulking Hammer didn't get that memo.

Hulk. Hulking, bone-crushing troll.

He really is one. Especially with his anger. He looks disciplined, but there's something simmering beneath the surface. It comes out in flashes — like that sneering look he gave those guys in the van before he caved their heads in with that metal bar — and it is terrifying.

“Hey Hulk, do you know where we're going?”

He doesn't answer.

So I twist myself around on his shoulder and repeat myself right into his ear.

“Hulk, where are we headed?”

Freezing, he cranes his neck and looks at me. Snarls.

“Name's not Hulk. It's Hammer. And you know where we're going — into the mountains.”

I look around. The ground's pretty steep. Rocky, too. There are even a couple of boulders scattered about and the trees are getting thinner. So is the air.

“I think we’re already in the mountains. Do you know where exactly we’re going?”

“Deeper.”

Such eloquence.

He keeps going. And I’m carried like so much cargo.

“That’s not a very helpful answer. Can you tell me more, please?” I say, then the other questions that sit on my lips — like *what’s the plan* and *where are we going to rest* — disappear in a shiver as a chilly wind runs its wicked fingers across my bare back.

He stops. “You’re cold?”

“I’m not really used to mountaineering while naked.”

Grunting, Hammer lowers me to the ground. Then he looks me up and down, as if he wasn’t seeing me before. Briefly, hunger flashes through his fiery blue eyes, replaced in the space of a blink by concern.

And caring.

It’s shocking to see such a human, conscientious emotion in those blue pools, an oasis of humanity in his hellishly bloody countenance.

“Give me a second,” he grunts. Then he rips his shirt. In one smooth motion, it splits from the armpit of his cuffed arm to the bottom hem. Grimacing at the movement, he slips his cuffed arm through the torn opening and the rest of the shirt he pulls off and over his head.

Then he hands it over.

“Here.”

I pull it over my head. It’s huge. Like a tunic meant for a giant; it comes down below my mid-thighs.

It’s ugly and somewhat bloodstained, but warm.

And it smells like him. Musky, smoky, with an undertone of metal. Not unpleasant.

“Thank you,” I say, feeling shocked by his kindness; I’ve never heard of anyone literally giving someone the shirt off their back.

Then again, I’ve never been kidnapped, either.

Hammer appraises me for a second time, eyes looking over me not like I’m a person, but a problem to solve. He then removes his belt — I flinch for a second as he does; the sight of a man unbuckling his belt after everything I’ve gone through and the lifetime of sexual slavery that still sits in my potential future has me scared shitless of anything that even has a whiff of sexuality — and he hands it over. His pants stay up. In fact, they sit nicely tight to his waist, held up by strong thighs, and, from what I saw earlier, while dangling over his shoulder and staring straight down his back, his extremely nice butt.

“This too,” he says. “Here.”

“I don’t have any pants,” I say. “What am I to do with this?”

“Put it on,” he grunts, miming cinching the belt.

I do, looping it around the outside of the shirt and buckling it in the tightest hole. It doesn’t do much, but then I realize he probably gave it to me just to keep the shirt from billowing open. Purely for my modesty.

Is he bashful?

What is an enormous monster doing being so modest? So caring?

If it were Tucker here, he’d just tell me to ignore the cold and that soon I’ll forget about it. And that’s if he says anything at all. Half the time, he doesn’t even acknowledge my existence unless he wants something. Usually sex.

Why the hell was I ever with that slovenly excuse for a man?

Still, what Hammer’s done is odd. Brutal killers don’t act this way.

So why is he being kind to me?

“Fine,” I say, gesturing to my belt and my torn tunic-shirt; if it weren’t bloody and covered in dirt, it might actually be fashionable; I hear torn clothing is in this year. “Thank you. Now, will you answer my question? How much further?”

“You ever read *The Ritual* by Adam Nevill?”

I think. Rack that name and title through my brain. It’s familiar, but thinking is hard to do right now, even though I know most books by rote. Especially ones that were popular — I love my job, and it’s a part of my job to keep up on anything that might make it on A Likely Story’s ‘Book of the Month’ shelf. In fact, most of the ones that make it on that shelf are ones I’ve read. Almost all of them, except for the one time Deandra read *The Girl on the Train* before I got to it. Then she made the pick.

Suddenly, it hits me. Yes, I remember.

“The one with the hikers that go deep into the Swedish wilderness and bump into that crazy cult and the weird primeval goddess that’s, like, part goat and part human?”

And all cannibal.

A smile flickers on his face, extinguished faster than a candle’s flame in a windstorm. “That one.”

“I don’t like the connotations.”

A raised eyebrow is his response.

How can he not see it?

“Unsuspecting victims being ambushed in the remote wilderness and sacrificed to some bloodthirsty Norse god? By the way, I noticed your tattoos,” I say. *And how could I not notice? The man’s arms are impossible not to look at, not to mention the rest of him, now that he’s shirtless. This savage-looking Neanderthal should repulse me, with blood on his arms and muscles the size of watermelons, but I’m not. Instead, I feel... warm... all over. Is this what the onset of Stockholm Syndrome feels like?* “Giant hammers? How Nordic. Should I call you Thor?”

“No.”

“Hemsworth, then? Or Chris? Is your real name Chris?”

“Life would be a lot fucking simpler if I was a Hemsworth. I’d be rich. Live on the fucking beach. Not a care in the world except for when I want to surf, have a party, or take a nap in my goddamn hammock. Wouldn’t have to worry about some bookstore girl and the fucking Russian gang after her. I could nap all I want. And I could use a nap right now. It’s exhausting taking care of you and worrying whether my brothers made it out of that firefight safe, and how your grandmother’s doing — because if those Russians are tracking you down, they’ll go after your family, too. I don’t like to think about them going after Yulia — she reminds me too much of my grandmother, and I’d rather take a bullet than do anything that would make her worry.” He catches himself, and I realize that is the most he’s ever said by a lot. Not only that, but I may have misjudged him. Yes, he’s scary, but is he really worrying himself sick thinking about my grandmother? Surely someone that thinks like that can’t be all bad.

“So, we’ve established your name isn’t Chris.”

“Like I’ve said, just call me Hammer.”

I’m still not going to let him off so easily, though I smile at him to let him know I’m just teasing.

“Not Thor? Not Troll? Not Viking?” I say, finding simple joy in the look of consternation that sweeps his face. “Baldr? Odin? Ymir?”

“Ymir? What the fuck is a Ymir?”

“Ymir is a primordial giant god that was the very first being. The latter Norse gods, who are actually his children, killed him. His bones became the mountains, his blood the ocean, and his skull turned into the sky.”

“That’s badass. How do you know that?”

I blush. I’ve never been called badass before, especially for talking about something as nerdy as the Norse gods. And being called badass by someone like Hammer makes it matter even more.

Heck, I can't even remember the last time I received an earnest compliment from a man. Especially if I disqualify the one time last week that Tucker said 'Your tits don't look so bad today, babe,' when he was likely trying to neg me into sex.

All I can do is look down at my feet for a moment to hide that I'm actually flattered and try to think of a way to explain it that doesn't make me sound like the world's biggest nerd.

It isn't easy, because I'm a terrible liar and the truth is so nerdy that I can't sugarcoat it.

"When those comic book movies got popular, it got important for anyone working in a bookstore to brush up on Norse mythology. Because if you misquote something — even in the deep mythology — to someone who's a fan, it can get nasty. I made that mistake once when I accidentally called a 'Valkyrie' an 'Amazon' and I lost forty minutes of my life to some forty-five-year-old man with a terrible comb over."

"You're kidding. People get that serious about that shit?"

"They do." I feel like I could stop there, but Hammer is just looking at me with such earnest attention that I keep going. I can't remember a time that a man seemed so honestly interested in what I have to say. I just wish it wasn't about debating fictitious gods in the middle of a forest while being pursued by killers. No, this would be so much better if we were at a nice bar, with a bottle of wine between us and a candle giving us just enough light to read by, or for me to see the ruggedly handsome contours of Hammer's face; the man has a phenomenal chin, and good cheekbones, too. Not to mention his eyes... *Wait, what the hell am I thinking? Why am I imagining myself on a date with him?* "There was also this other time, once I knew my Norse gods, that I got into this long argument with this one guy over Loki's parentage. You know Loki, right? Tom Hiddleston?"

I can't believe I'm talking about Nordic Mythology with some troll-sized biker while wandering the mountains. Is this a deep cut from the Elder Edda?

"I know him. Good-looking dude."

“Of course. That’s a universal fact. He’s my favorite, and I remember when they gave him his own TV series. I took the entire weekend off, binged it, and I must’ve...” I pause, clear my throat. Too personal. He doesn’t need to know how many times I got off to Tom Hiddleston smirking and wearing a suit. It was at least nine times over that weekend. He wears a suit well. “Anyway, this guy thought he was an expert because he’d read all the Thor comics, seen all the movies, and I tried to tell him that those comics take huge liberties. He didn’t want to hear it. Got in my face, called me a shrill poser — I think just because I was a woman — but then I found this edge in the conversation, and I told him that Marvel even got Loki’s parents wrong. Laufey — who, in the movies, is Loki’s dad — is actually his mom in the actual books. His dad is Farbauti, the giant. Anyway, he didn’t believe me. Said I didn’t know shit. But the look on his face as I took out the *Prose Edda* — which is this really old Icelandic book — and showed him was just priceless.”

“Wow, you really like books,” is the totality of Hammer’s response.

I fall dumb. Did I just spend five minutes blathering about the parentage of a fictional giant to a really hot man who just wrecked a van with his bare hands and has spent the last hour carrying me through the woods?

What the fuck is my life right now?

Why did I think he’d actually care?

My cheeks turn beet red and as hot as magma.

All I want is to find a crack in the ground and sink into it.

Then Hammer winks at me. *Winks*. It’s strange seeing a terrifying giant like him be playful.

“So you held your ground and shut that bastard down? I respect that.”

“You do?”

Wait, why do I even care? Oh, that’s right: because it’s refreshing to actually have an attractive man give me some honest appreciation.

“Don’t be embarrassed for liking what you like. I like books, too. Darker stuff. See, I read a lot to my good friend’s daughter — her name is Charlotte, she’s almost six, and she loves books about fairy princesses — and I have to read the darker stuff as a break from the kiddie books. Like a palate cleanser.” Then he frowns. Shakes his head. How is he sexy even when he’s frowning? Oh, yeah, because he has that glowering, deadly giant thing going on. That, and the thought of a dangerous man like him reading a book about a fairy to a little girl is oddly heartwarming. “But anyway, *The Ritual*. I ain’t taking you into the woods for a sacrifice. What we’re doing is we’re going deep, like they did. Those men who took us weren’t amateurs. If we stay near the road, they will find us. I can’t let them take you again.”

“Thank you for explaining. And for saving me earlier.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you. I won’t let you get hurt, and I won’t let your grandmother down. Promise.”

There’s genuine warmth in his voice. Despite how he looks, it’s easy to believe he really cares. I’d never have expected it from him, he looks like a heartless monster, but, if today is anything to go by, life is full of surprises. One moment, you can have an unexpected invite to interview for the job of your dreams, the next you can be in the back of a kidnapper’s van.

And the next, you can be trudging through the wildness with a giant rescuer who has a heart of gold and a shocking affinity for books.

Wrapped up in my thoughts, I don’t realize I’ve reached out and put my hand on his shoulder until I see him looking at me. It’s an impulse, the result of the way he’s looking at me — part protectiveness, part possessiveness, all heat.

“Thank you,” I squeak out.

If he were to kiss me right now, I wouldn’t stop him.

Even in the middle of the freezing wilderness, wearing only a torn shirt, panties, and stripper heels, I would be all into kissing him all over that grizzled face.

And elsewhere.

He grunts something, shakes his head again. The simmering moment between us evaporates. “No more talking. Only hiking. We have to keep moving.”

Then he grabs my hand, lifting it off his shoulder.

I guess now he goes back to being an angry giant.

Though it isn't my imagination that, when he grabs my hand, he holds it longer than he needs to.

And the gentle squeeze he gives me?

That's not my imagination, either.

Chapter Ten

Kira

We walk side by side through the unending wild. For a long time, I struggle along beside him. Silent. Sullen. Increasingly sore. Not just physically, but in my attitude as well, because Hammer has decided he wants to march along like a grim mime.

Even though my legs ache, I'm determined to show this grumpy giant that I can handle myself. For what reason? Well, I'm not sure; I've known Hammer for just a handful of hours, and I have nothing to prove to him. His opinion shouldn't matter to me — yet somehow it does.

The hours and minutes tick by, on and on, as we trek through the wildness. On and on.

The moon rises higher in the sky, and we keep walking.

As we continue, the moon sets until the night is only lit by twinkling stars, the only sounds are our heavy breaths and the chirping of crickets, our only company each other, the rampant mosquitoes, and the coyote that keeps howling in the distance.

Still, we keep walking.

My feet hurt like hell.

Not just any hell, but ninth-circle, Dante's *Inferno* type hell. So painful, that on this steep terrain, they're likely to be unreliable.

It's almost enough to make me overlook how beautiful the night sky is.

Almost.

Then clouds spread across the heavenly tableau, obscuring the stars and dripping upon us like liquid darkness. A chill wind rises, shivers through me. Those puffs of liquid darkness dominating the sky open up. Wet.

A quote comes to my mind.

Sunshine is delicious, rain is refreshing, wind braces us up, snow is exhilarating; there is really no such thing as bad weather, only different kinds of good weather.

John Ruskin.

Idiot. Pompous, useless, foppish British dolt.

“Did you say something?” Hammer mutters.

“Nothing. Let’s just keep walking,” I say.

I rack my brain for something else to take my thoughts off how miserable of a hike this has become — wearing nothing but a bloody shirt-tunic, belt, and walking barefoot because I threw away those ridiculous stripper heels as soon as I could — and I settle on *[in Just-]* by E. E. Cummings.

“The world is mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful.”

I mutter it low. Quiet. Like a whispered prayer while the impossibly dark sky rains upon us and the coyote howls and the mosquitoes — which at first hid from the rain — reemerge and gorge themselves on my blood.

“You definitely said something,” Hammer says.

“You said, ‘no talking, only hiking,’” I reply, sharply.

“Since when do you listen to me?”

“Since I’m chained to you and I watched you smash two men’s heads in with that bar. Do you think that, maybe, I might be a little scared of you?”

Which is true.

Beneath my exhaustion and the adrenaline that somehow keeps me moving, I’m scared beyond conception. How else can I feel knowing that my entire life — everything I believe, everyone I love, every part of my identity — could be over in an instant?

I’m going to need therapy when this is over.

And it’ll be a long time before I feel safe when I try to go to sleep.

In fact, the more I think about it, I don't know when I'll ever actually feel safe again. Knowing that, at any moment, some wicked deviant could slink out of the dark and spirit me away.

I look heavenward. On the midnight canvas of clouds, I see painted all of my nightmares in vivid, violent detail — capture, servitude, violence visited on the ones I love. Tears creep from the corners of my eyes to join the rain of moisture dripping from above. Sniffles surface, too.

“Are you crying?” He says. Even his voice is warm with concern, like a welcome blanket.

Still, I shake my head.

“No. I'm fine.”

Though it's clear that I'm not and my voice shakes like an earthquake.

I try to walk faster, and soon we reach an even steeper incline of this awful mountain. The trees thin, and now it's clear that we are not just hiking toward a mountain, we're about to climb it.

Then my bare foot hits a rock.

Except, in a feat of monumental grace, I don't just smack my foot into the rock; I get a piece of it embedded in my foot.

I stumble, fall, cry out in pain.

Yet, before I crash to earth, he catches me.

Not by simply jerking the chain that binds us. Instead, he whirls. He catches me in his massive arms and gingerly lowers me onto a tree stump that is still relatively dry, sheltered by the branches of another.

“Hold on, let me look you over.”

“I'm fine,” I try to insist. “Let's keep going.”

“Nonsense. I said I'm going to take care of you, so just calm down and let me look.”

It's useless to argue with him. Even if I had the energy for it, he could probably restrain me using just the muscles in his pinky finger.

"Hold still," he says. And then I feel his hands touching my feet, probing.

Gritting my teeth, closing my eyes, I ready myself for pain.

And wait. And wait. And wait.

Then I open my eyes.

He's squinting, gently probing at the wound in my heel with fingers so deft it almost feels like he isn't touching me at all.

Then, with utmost care, he extracts the rock.

I hardly feel a thing at first.

Then the pain of the open wound in my foot hits me and I hiss.

"Sorry," he mutters.

"Did you just say 'Sorry'?"

Do monsters apologize?

Shaking his head fiercely, he says, "No."

"I think you did," I say. Maybe I'm in a pissy mood — *but who could blame me? I'm beyond exhausted, nearly naked, soaking wet, freezing cold, and wandering the wilderness like I'm enduring some biblical test from some particularly spiteful deity.* "You apologized."

"You heard wrong."

"Did not."

"Are you a child?"

"Do I look like a child?"

He gives me a glare so clear with intent, he might as well have raised his middle finger.

"Look," I say, deciding to defuse the situation instead of reminding Hammer how wrong he is. "Obviously, I'm in no

condition to keep going, and we've gone a long way, so, let's call it a night."

"Can't."

I want to pull my hair out. *How can he be so thick-headed?*

"Look, you might look like a golem, but I don't think your brain is made of clay. I think you're smart enough to figure out how to lie down on the ground and go to sleep. Let's do that before exhaustion kills us both."

I mean, for fuck's sake, the rain's almost stopped and we're right in a little copse of trees where there's actual dry earth. It's perfect for sleeping.

Hammer shakes his head. Then he picks me up so easily he might as well be hefting a fucking balloon.

Then he lifts me higher — he grips me by my thighs and holds me high in the air, like I'm some girl at a concert being hefted by her boyfriend just to get a better look at the lead singer of her favorite band. For a short way, he carries me into the open clearing, then turns around.

I have a clear view of the valley behind us.

"See?" He says.

Deep in the valley below, there are lights. Moving lights. Back and forth in a deliberate pattern.

I feel a chill, and it isn't the night wind.

"Is that...?"

"Them. Spotted those lights a couple miles back. They're moving in a deliberate search pattern."

I'm quiet for a second, stuck between exhaustion and fear of death.

"Well, we need to keep going, then. But I can't walk. You saw my feet. They look like ground beef."

"Your feet ain't that ugly. Actually, they're kind of cute," he says. *Did he just call my feet cute?* "We'll keep going. I'll carry you."

Before I can point out the fact that he definitely said I have cute feet — a statement that has my head spinning — Hammer hauls me over his shoulder and strides through the forest.

But his first few steps stagger.

“You can’t carry me like this. You’re exhausted.”

“Doesn’t matter. We have to keep going.”

“You’re not tired?”

“Oh, I’m tired as hell. But I learned a long time ago that, in times like this, that’s when you dig down deep and say ‘fuck it.’ I have to keep going, I have to be strong enough to get through this, because there’s no fucking way I want to stay trapped in this nightmare. It ain’t no magic trick, Kira, it’s just being too fucking stubborn to give up. Now, less talking, I need to save my breath for the fucking march.”

We resume our trek, while I both marvel at his strength — or stubbornness, whatever he wants to call it — and wish I had it. His strength... and something else.

Because two things dominate my vision from that point on: one great, one terrible, alternating with each bounce that shakes me as my hulking Hammer carries me over his shoulder.

Bounce.

First, I see the lights deep in the valley. My pursuers. The men who want to ship me off to a life that will make death seem like a blessing.

The only thing standing between me and them is this giant of a man.

In his arms, I almost feel safe.

Almost.

Another bounce.

Then I see a booty. A nice booty. A true, out-in-the-wild badonkadonk. Like a prime rump roast wrapped in denim, perched proudly atop two prime, muscular legs, shifting and flexing with each unfaltering step uphill.

Damn, what a view.

Maybe this isn't so bad.

It's just a walk in the woods with a handsome, muscular bodyguard, right?

And besides, when was the last time that Tucker carried me?

Never.

But Hammer cares enough to make sure that we keep going, even when I can't on my own. *When I falter, he carries me. Literally.*

Another bounce, and I see those lights behind us again. Death right on our tail.

Maybe it's not so bad having him in my life.

Right now, he's the only one who can keep me safe.

And maybe, once all this is over, we can see what happens between us. It'd be nice to be with a man who actually appreciates me. Not that anything real can come of it — Hammer's literally a bloodstained killer, and we have nothing in common... even if he makes me feel safe, even if he shows me more respect than Tucker ever has, even if he has an ass that makes me salivate for its shapeliness.

Shit.

No, Kira, no.

You *cannot* have a *thing* for a killer.

Another bounce.

My gaze drifts down.

But that ass, though...

Chapter Eleven

Hammer

There's a hornet's nest of pain forming in my shoulders, my legs, my thighs, my ass; every part of my body doesn't just want to give in and rest, it wants to make me suffer for the decision to wreck the van and then carry the bookworm through miles of mountainous wilderness.

What I want is a chance to rest, and that want is fast becoming an undeniable need. Never mind the fact that there's a pack of killers on our tail, I need to fucking sit or else I'm going to collapse.

But I can't.

If it were just me, I might take a chance. I'd find an ambush point, prepare a weapon — it doesn't take much to make an implement of death, not when you're determined to kill someone, fuck, even a rock or a sharpened stick can do the trick — and I'd take my chances.

But rest isn't an option.

Because I swore to protect Kira, and that oath I made overrides even the exhausted pain that's screaming through my body. I'm the only one who can keep us safe — that bookworm won't last a day, two at most, in these woods on her own — which means I have to keep going, no matter how much it hurts.

So I march onward with Kira on my back; we can't slow down, we can't stop, not until we have enough distance between us and them.

But, after another handful of hard-won miles, my body says it's had enough.

“Just a bit further,” I grunt. I say that for myself as much as for her, a faltering attempt at encouragement to keep my flagging feet moving.

It doesn't work.

I stagger.

“I’m fine back here,” Kira answers from my back. There’s a dreamy quality to her voice.

“Are you sleeping?”

“The bouncing is soothing. I feel like I’m being rocked to sleep like a baby. And the view is nice, too,” she says. Her voice goes heated for a second, then she continues, hurriedly. “I mean, looking down at the mountain. Nature is so beautiful at night.”

Something tells me she wasn’t thinking of rocks and trees, but I can’t think of anything else out here that she’d enjoy looking at. It’s too damn dark.

“We’ll rest soon. Find somewhere to hole up.”

Another klick on the trail and something looms in the distance that brings me to a halt and makes my aching muscles sigh in relief.

Shelter.

The building before us isn’t much more than a glorified hut, a ramshackle collection of boards and logs, with a roof that sags with age and the relentless beatings of the elements, but it’s shelter, nonetheless.

My pace picks up and I carry Kira the last hundred meters at nearly a jog. I can’t wait to sit down and let out that achy groan of relief that only comes with being older, and wise enough, to know when you’ve reached your limit.

A smile lifts my face as we get to the small porch at the hut’s front door and I see a weathered old rocking chair — bleached white by the elements — sitting outside the door.

“Oh, that’s it,” I moan in ecstasy as I set Kira to the ground and then my ass into the chair. “That’s the stuff. Fuck me.”

It creaks and groans, and so do I.

“Is it safe here?” She says.

Frankly, I don’t fucking care; this chair is everything.

“Hammer?” She says, nudging me with her elbow this time.

I grunt. It’s the best answer I got.

“You sure they won’t catch us here? And is it even safe?” She looks at the hut with open distaste. “It looks like a stiff breeze could knock this thing down.”

Determined not to move on from this restful sanctuary, I turn and look at the hut. It’s weathered, beaten by the rain, the snow, the wind, the sun, but other than looking older than I feel in this moment, it seems sound enough. At least for the night.

“It’ll be fine. It just looks ugly. It’s probably a hunting shelter, which means it’ll do the job, but don’t expect any nice amenities like you might be used to in your fancy apartment.”

“What do you know about my apartment?”

There’s a funny note in her voice, but I can’t quite place it. Surprise? Embarrassment? Shame?

“I went there when I was looking for you. Met your boyfriend, too.”

“You met Tucker?”

The tone turns clearer, tinged with embarrassment and a hint of anger.

Not that I blame her — Tucker is the human equivalent of finding a wart on your dick.

“I did. Interesting choice you made there.”

Her cheeks color. If we were talking about anything else other than the useless asshole who’s dating her, it’d be cute. As it is, it doesn’t dispel the fact that I want to look her square in the eyes and ask her: why the hell did you stick with a mistake like him when you so clearly deserve better?

Doubt I’ll be able to hold my tongue to that fact, either.

“He’s not really my boyfriend.”

“Oh, he’s not? That he was casually hanging out in your apartment, in his underwear, and bragging about the things

you do together means nothing?”

“OK, fine. We dated, we were living together, but I was going to break up with him. Last night, actually. Before all this happened.”

“Good. You deserve better than that piece of shit.”

“He wasn’t always like that,” she says, defensively. “He was charming in the beginning. Fun, and smart, and actually a decent guy. Then he lost his job, and he changed.”

“You sound like you’re trying to convince yourself of that as much as you’re trying to convince me. Hard times reveal a person’s true character. I served with a lot of guys that I thought were honorable, only to find out when we were in the shit that they were nothing but cowards or creeps.”

“In the shit?”

“It means being in the thick of it. Combat. How people deal with having their back to their wall shows you who they really are. Take Tucker — he’s been fucking around on you for a long time. Showed me pictures of him with these other women, even offered to show me some of him and you, too. He was proud of it.”

“You saw those?” She pauses, colors even more, and now I regret even mentioning it. I want to reinforce her idea that her boyfriend is a worthless piece of shit, but I want to do so without alienating her or making her feel embarrassed for the mistakes she’s made, because god knows, I’ve made plenty of fucking mistakes in my own life, too. “He said it was just for him. Said it would spice things up. We’d been going through a rough spot, and I wanted us to be closer. I thought it would make him happy.”

“Don’t hold it against yourself. Everyone makes mistakes, and the ones I’ve made make even Tucker seem like a fucking genius idea. Just know that you deserve better. A lot better. You are worth so much more than you give yourself credit for.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t die to save Tucker’s life. But, for to save yours...”

“You’d...?”

I lock eyes with her. I still see indecision and doubt in those amber pools, but it’s far less now than it was at the start of this little chat. Good. “Yeah. I’d die for you. That clear about how much you’re worth?”

“It was just... Being with Tucker was the easy option. And I didn’t want to deal with the conflict. Sometimes he has a temper, and I just didn’t have the energy or the strength to deal with all his whining and arguing.”

That catches me by surprise so much that I stare at her for a moment, my eyes wide as saucers.

She blinks. “What? What did I say?”

“You think you don’t have the strength? Tell me: what the fuck did we just survive? Kira Marinova, you are stronger than many of the men I served with. I’ve seen men wet themselves and break down into tears when they finally face someone with a gun and the fanatical will to put them in the ground. But you? That van fucking flipped, and you had the resolve to give me lip; you didn’t cry, you didn’t wail or go catatonic, you gave me attitude. And, when you had to, you kept going. That’s strength.”

Strength that I never would’ve expected a bookworm like her to have. But then, she’s full of surprises, and she needs to understand that she deserves so much more than that double-timing shithead, Tucker.

When I get her out of this mess and back to her family, I don’t just want her to move beyond that slovenly asshole, I want her to go after what she deserves: the best.

“You mean it?”

“Kira, we have killers chasing us and we’re chained together and I am so fucking exhausted I want to melt into this piece of shit rocking chair. Do you think I have the capacity to lie to you right now?”

I don't. Even if I did, I wouldn't. I can't lie to those eyes. Best I can do is to have the strength of will not to get sucked into them every time I look at her.

She stares at her feet for a long time, and it makes me doubt whether my words will soak in, or whether, like too many people, she won't believe in her own strength and her own value — some people get that beaten out of them, ground down by a shit job, a shit boyfriend, a shit string of luck in life.

Then she smiles.

A smile like that one from the photograph. Radiant. Blazing bright like the sun.

But different, too.

While that smile from the photograph was pure light, this smile of hers now has a trace of fire. This woman has a brilliance within her and, if she understands her self-worth and the strength of her passion, she could set the world on fire.

“Thank you.” There's a weight behind those words that has me smiling on the inside. Then she clears her throat and looks toward the hut's door. “So, Hammer, are you going to spend all night sitting on your lazy ass, or are we going to break this door down and actually go inside? Come on, this is no time to slack off.”

That's the spirit.

I grin at her. Stand. Salute.

“Yes, ma'am.”

* * * * *

Opening the door prompts a cloud of dust that sets us both coughing. But there's not even a trace of moldy smell. No rot. No ruin from the elements.

The inside is spartan. Spartan, ugly, and dripping in cobwebs from long-gone yesterdays, but it's serviceable. There's a bed, a table with a propane burner, a few small tanks of fuel, a pot, a cooking knife, and other kitchen utensils.

A circular search of the outside reveals a primitive latrine a distance from the hut. On the other side of the hut, a suitable distance from the latrine, is a hand-pump well. I grip the handle and test it. The pump grinds and groans the first few pumps, but after a few more, yields its reward: water. Lovely, life-sustaining water.

Those first few droplets from the old metallic spout bring a sigh of relief. We've been on the move for hours, and though I would walk until death to keep Kira safe, finding potable water means our chances of surviving this wilderness misadventure have increased exponentially. In a situation such as this, an average person can go at least a week or two without food. Without water, only two to three days; water is that vital.

And now we have as much of it as we can drink.

I test it. It tastes clean, pure.

"Drink up," I say, as I work the pump.

Kira cups her hands and slakes her thirst. After several handfuls, she looks at me, smiling. "Oh, it's so cold. And so good. Your turn."

She grabs the pump handle from me and I drink, filling my gut with that cold, sweet water. Then I take another handful, washing my face, then washing my chest and arms with the other. I'm sure it doesn't do much to help the fact that I probably reek like sweaty ass, but any bit helps.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying not to smell like rotten garbage."

"I think you smell fine. Nice, actually," she says, then she looks away quickly. "Anyway, if you're going to wash up, we should do it right."

It takes a second for what she's said to sink in. I smell OK? I've spent hours hiking and sweating buckets, so unless she...

Huh. She likes how I smell.

At least, for now.

She'll change her opinion after I've had some more time to ripen.

“What do you mean ‘do it right?’”

“I saw salt in the kitchen. And a few other things. Not much, but I think I can make it work.”

“Make what work?”

I'm intrigued. There's a light in her eyes, like someone flipped a creative switch, and I genuinely want to see what kind of alchemy she has in mind.

“I'll show you. Come on.”

We head back into the hut and she raids the small pantry, grabbing a pot, a bowl, a carton of salt, some cooking oil, a small tin of expired coffee — which she first sniffs warily, twice — and a bag of tea that she rips open and dumps into the bowl. Then she mixes the rest of the ingredients in the bowl, using mostly salt and a smaller amount of coffee, along with a carefully measured portion of oil.

I watch. This doesn't look like anything we could eat.

After mixing, sniffing, mixing, and balancing out the ratios of the ingredients, she finally nods, satisfied.

Then she grabs the bowl, and we head back to the pump outside.

“Take this,” she says, handing me the bowl. “Wet your skin, put some of this in your hand, scrub yourself. It's pretty self explanatory.”

“It is?” I sniff it. “What exactly is it?”

“It's a salt scrub. It exfoliates. Ideally, you're supposed to use it in a hot shower so it can really help open up and clear your pores, but we don't really have any way to do that. Even with cold water, it'll still clean you and make you smell nice.”

“Exfoliates?” I have no clue what that word means, but it sounds intimidating. Not like something I want to be doing to myself.

“It strips away dead skin cells. Think of using sandpaper to remove any residue or rough edges on wood. It’s kind of like that. It’s good to exfoliate often, and it’s great for your skin.”

“You sure about this?”

My reluctance seems to amuse her, but I don’t see what’s amusing about rubbing cooking ingredients all over my body. This isn’t the fucking Food Network; Guy Fieri isn’t going to come out of the woods and give me a Flavortown high five for my culinary wizardry — we’re in the fucking woods and I’m supposed to rub salt and coffee on my face and chest?

“Are you frightened?” Her lips quiver in a smile. Then, before I can even answer, she takes the bowl out of my hands, pumps some water into the pot, and then scrubs me. Hard. Vigorously. Getting her hands in every nook and cranny. “Fine, since you’re scared, I’ll scrub you.”

I cease doubting immediately.

Even though the idea of rubbing salt and coffee and tea over my body seems really fucking strange, the sensation of Kira scrubbing me down — even if this shit hurts a little like sandpaper and has me wondering just how women put all this junk into their daily routine — is really pleasant. As she runs her hands across my chest, her breathing quickens. There’s a flush to her cheeks. After a few more scrubs, her nipples harden, poking against the fabric of her shirt.

My breathing quickens, too.

And parts of me stiffen, growing hard as she runs her hands over every inch of my chest. Then down my chest to my lower abdominals.

I could get used to this.

Kira scrubs every inch of my chest and back, my arms, and then rinses the salt scrub away.

Finished, she looks me over, proud.

“That takes care of your top half... But the rest of you, um, you will have to do yourself. I can turn around, if you want.”

Do I want her to?

No.

After feeling her hands all over my body, after seeing the way her body reacts to touching mine, after feeling the way I react to her caress, I want to do more than just scrub myself down while she looks away modestly.

I want so much more.

I want to know how she tastes; I want to know how my name sounds coming from her lips in a moan; I want to know the way she shakes when she comes; I want to see her smile lit by the glow of the morning sun and the glow of the morning after.

I want it all. All of her. Everything she'll give me.

But now's not the time.

Not with what's on our tail.

Even if those men weren't trying to kill us or force us into captivity, even then I'd still restrain myself, because I know Kira's not the type to have a one-night stand and, with her, I know that once I got a taste, I'd never be happy with anyone else. It's her — all of her, for all my life — or nothing.

She looks at me; her question shining in her eyes and her smile bathing me in heat.

“So, Hammer... Shall I turn around?”

Chapter Twelve

Kira

“Shall I turn around?”

When I say it, I don't know how I want him to answer. Touching him was an experience; feeling his muscles, his strength, his scars, the marks of a life lived in danger as he risks himself protecting his country and the people he loves was revelatory.

Revelatory.

It feels strange to even use that word, but the way my body reacted is something I can't deny. I can't recall the last time I felt that way with Tucker, except maybe in the earliest days of our relationship.

Sure, there was a spark back then. There always is, even if it's a small one. An element of excitement. The way your heart beats faster when you're exploring a new partner, learning just how they want to be pleased.

With Hammer, though?

It's not a spark. It's a five-alarm forest fire.

Never have my fingers *craved* more. Never have other parts of myself reacted with such intent and desire.

Never have I felt the urge to lick salt and old coffee off another person.

Until him.

So much of me wants him to say 'no.'

I want to see him smirk, to hear him — his voice rife with biker bravado — tell me I don't need to hide my eyes because he's got nothing to be ashamed of.

And he doesn't.

Not from what I felt. Not from what I can see, either — because his erection's clear as day straining against the wet denim of his jeans.

It's amazing how revealing denim, or any clothing, becomes once it's wet; displaying not just how hard he is, but how every part of him is hard in just the right ways. He's not a bulky behemoth of muscle — there's a little love in his body and he must eat right.

“Yes. Turn around,” he says.

When I turn, I breathe a sigh of relief.

I don't know if I could've handled it if he'd said ‘no.’

Even so, I fight with all my willpower to resist taking a peek as he strips off his jeans and his boxer briefs. I don't totally succeed. I see little out of the corner of my eye, but I glimpse enough to make me bite my lip and send my eyes toward heaven.

Muscles, yes.

Tattoos, plenty.

Scars and signs of a life of danger, absolutely.

And, perched just below his back, supported by powerful legs, is an ass that's more than thick. It's thicc.

It feels wrong to be checking him out like this. Even more wrong to be using such an abuse of the English language, but I can think of no more accurate word than thicc.

He turns just a little and I see more than just the outline of his backside; part of his front literally swings — *or is it dangles? though dangle doesn't quite capture the heft and girth of it* — into view.

Then he washes himself, while I watch, deluding myself into thinking that checking him out of the corner of my eye is anything other than peeping. Hammer takes his time scrubbing himself. Whether he does it because he's never used a body scrub before — which I find endearing, almost cute — or he knows the effect he has on me, I'm not sure.

Once clean, he dresses.

“You can look now, Kira.”

When I turn around, he's holding the bowl of body scrub and he's refilled the pot with water from the pump.

"I believe it's your turn," he says. "You want me to turn around?"

Suddenly self-conscious, I freeze.

Do I?

I grab hold of the hem of my torn shirt and see that his eyes are on me, hungry. It surprises me that a man like him — who could have any biker chick he wants — would look at me with any sort of interest. For crying out loud, I'm a woman who loves her calm life working in a bookstore and who seems to fall neck-deep into trouble. He can't really be interested in me.

"Would you mind?" I say. My voice is hushed. Quiet. Timid. As if the deepest part of me wants him to watch me bathe. Yes, his life is scary, and yes, I've seen him do shockingly violent things, but they've been necessary things — actions required to protect me. And, when we've been alone, he's been respectful. When I talk to him, I don't just feel listened to, I feel *heard*.

And he's actually read *War and Peace* — *what the hell? Who is this man?*

Politely, Hammer turns away, his back military straight.

Though the way he stands would seem to deny it, I feel watched. Maybe it's just from the corner of his eyes, but it seems like he's checking me out.

Then an absurd idea takes me: I should try to have some fun. I mean, I could die tomorrow — or even tonight, because those kidnapers could catch us in hours or even minutes — so I might as well take a chance. Try to be sexy. Try to let loose a little.

I resolve to go for it, to put on a brief show.

Smiling, I remove my clothes.

Slowly.

In a way that's both driven by my desire to be sexy and because my body aches, my feet hurt, and my muscles are cramped from exhaustion. Also, there's the slim possibility that I do not know how to be sexy because I've spent way too many years of my life with a do-nothing boyfriend who doesn't inspire me to be sexy.

But I try.

And trying matters.

Until it makes me look like a clumsy weirdo.

"Shit," I mutter as I wobble while pulling off my panties, one foot caught in the leg opening. "No, no, no..."

Then my wobbling turns to falling.

"Oh fuck," I exclaim.

Instinctively, I reach out and grab hold of Hammer's arm to steady myself, except my general lack of balance, overall clumsiness, hurt feet, and falling momentum means that, instead of latching onto his arm and regaining my balance, I instead careen into him like a drunken rugby player.

While naked.

My tits hit his forearm, my face plants into the side of his abdomen like I'm trying to kiss his love handles, and then I fall, clutching at him, my face rubbing and smooshing its way down his body like I'm a dog mashing its face into a sliding glass door, with my smooshing-mashing fall ending with my face millimeters from his erect-through-his-jeans cock.

"Are you OK?" Hammer says, recovering in a millisecond and catching me before I hit the ground, slipping his hands under my arms and hauling me to my feet.

I'd rather be dead right now.

There is nothing sexy about this, and I was an absolute idiot to think he'd ever be attracted to a klutzy bookworm like me.

And now I am here, naked, embarrassed, caught in his arms after trying to mash my mouth into his manhood.

Way to go, Kira. Way to go.

“I’m fine,” I say, so ashamed that my tongue hardly works and the words come out slurred. “Sorry for rubbing my tits all over you and smashing my face into your... uh... your stomach.”

A stunned blink is his answer. One blink, one quick look to make sure there’s nothing else bothering me, and a sharp nod before his eyes point up at the night sky, giving me privacy to collect myself. Though that act seems a foolish thing to do, because moments before I was mashing my tits into his arm and I’m still naked.

I return to washing myself while feeling like the biggest idiot in the world.

He didn’t blink when he woke up drugged and handcuffed in the van. No, he smirked. But here and now? My tit-smashing clumsiness made that unflappable biker blink. I feel about as graceful as Anne Shirley on PCP.

“You sure you’re OK?” He says, attention pointed skyward.

“I’m sure. It’s just... there’s a reason I sell books instead of dancing ballet.” I gracefully remove my panties by kicking them off, which sends them flying into a puddle with a wet splash. My eyes linger on that puddle, wondering if that little pool is deep enough I could drown in. It seems a suitable way to go after everything else.

“Be more careful next time,” he says. He keeps his back turned, but extends his arm so I can hold on to it in case I lose my balance again.

Thankfully, I stay upright while washing myself.

And while getting dressed again.

Though I feel like an idiot having to wring puddle water out of my panties before putting them back on.

“I’m done.”

Absolutely done.

Just like any chance I had of ever having anything happen with this biker. How could he want me after this?

Not that I'm sure that I wanted it or if it was just one of those 'I could die at any minute, so maybe I should have sex with the hot guy who saved my life' fantasies. But it was fun to entertain the concept.

That's all over with, now.

"Can we go inside?" I say.

I just want to sleep and forget about this embarrassing event.

Because there's no way in hell this handsome biker will ever want me.

Chapter Thirteen

Hammer

I've had women throw themselves at me before, but what just happened with Kira is a first. Not only because she seemed just as surprised about it as I was, but because I've never had a woman literally tit-smash my forearm and dive open-mouthed into my groin.

Did she really fall, or is that her way of flirting?

Or is it both?

I am so fucking confused.

But as crazy as it sounds, it's refreshing; not the clumsiness, though that is endearing, but in how different it is. Yes, it was awkward as fuck, but it was genuinely *Kira* doing the flirting in a style that is all her own. Every other time in my life that a woman has shoved her tits at me, it's been the same routine: biker bar, a few beers in my belly, and a chick in leather with daddy issues or enough alcohol-induced courage to want a wild night. And that wild night is one night only. That's all I allow, because I'm not giving anyone any more of my time unless I think they're actually worth bringing into my life.

But that bookworm's soft tits being squished into my forearm while she face plants into my crotch and then has to hop-kick her way out of her panties while she thinks I'm not watching?

Wholly novel, surprisingly sexy, and completely charming.

And that sensation of her tits on my arm?

I'll never forget that.

"You're right — let's go inside," I say.

As hard as it is to move past her pressing her tits against me, I need to. We need to. Because today's been a hard day, and she needs food and rest if we are to have any hope of making it through tomorrow. I have to take care of her.

Which means I can't get distracted by the thought of her tits.

At least while we're awake. My dreams are another matter entirely, but I figure Kira is probably going to be in them, anyway.

I open the door for her, let her pass as much as I can before I trail behind her, both of us still bound at the wrist.

The first thing I do when we're inside is tend to Kira's food. Among the pantry items, I find a small box with a red cross on it. Thankfully, it's stocked with what I need, and soon I have her injured foot disinfected and bandaged. Then I set about readying our provisions. It isn't the easiest task with Kira chained to my wrist, but thankfully, it's made easier because there isn't much in the way of supplies to dig through. I look over what passes for a kitchen — a burner, some gas canisters, and some cans of food — and find a few that I test warily; they're old. Rust has overtaken the expiration dates, but a sniff and a taste tells me they're still good, even if all they are is beans and a salty chili con carne. It isn't much. It sure as hell isn't appetizing, but it's essential; we need fuel, and this meets that most basic requirement.

Supplies gathered, I move the gas stove and everything else over by the cot so Kira can rest. And, while I cook, Kira does her best to relax on the one piece of furniture in this old hut: a single fold-out cot. She dusts it, shakes out the blanket, and then stretches out, looking moderately comfortable.

"That smells... not horrible," she says cautiously as I stir the pot of simmering beans and chili. "Do you want any help?"

"No. You rest. Try to keep your feet elevated. Sleep, if you can. Tomorrow's going to be another long day."

"How long?"

She doesn't sound hesitant or petulant. There's toughness in her voice, like she's preparing to tell her body just how much more she needs from it. Never would've expected it from her on first meeting her, but she's stronger than she looks.

Before I answer, I step away from the bubbling pot and grab a bath towel that's hanging on the wall next to the cot. It's clean enough, and I shake it out and then fold it up into something approximating a pillow. Then I gently lift her feet and set the towel under it.

"What are you doing?" She says.

"Lie back. Rest. Take care of yourself. Elevate your feet."

"You really seem to care a lot about my feet. I know I hurt them earlier, but I'll be fine. You're not going to suddenly spring some foot fetish on me, are you?"

"Absolutely. I have a thing for injured feet. In fact, I planned this whole thing — the kidnapping, the car wreck, the hike — just to get you to this spot, so I could really enjoy looking at your swollen and mangled feet."

"OK, whether or not you're joking, it doesn't matter to me, because I don't want to think about you getting hard over my toes or my bruised heels or my..." She stops, though I know exactly what she was going to say next and it had nothing to do with her feet. "Anyway, you're dodging the real question: how long are we going to hike tomorrow?"

"It depends. We'll know when we get there."

"No clue? What about a hint — like, is it *War and Peace* long or is it *The Fountainhead* long?"

"*The Fountainhead*?"

"It's a book by Ayn Rand. It's only like six hundred pages, so not super long, but it's as exciting and epiphany-inspiring as staring at a chunk of granite that's vaguely shaped like a potato. When you read it, it *feels* like the longest book in human history.."

I shake my head and frown at her. Fucking Ayn Rand.

"Don't bring Ayn Rand into this. Our situation is fucking terrible enough without that bitch being a part of it." I sigh, soften my tone. "Look, prepare yourself to hike all day. We have to be stronger and endure longer than the men after us. When the sun comes up, we'll head further into the mountains

and then circle around south until we get to a road or civilization. Yes, I said south, even though the city lights last night were in the north. We're not going that way because that's the way they'd expect us to go." My words draw a sigh and a plaintive look toward the ceiling from Kira. I know what she's thinking. It sounds fucking exhausting — and it is. "If you need me to, I will carry you. But we have to bust our asses tomorrow, because I will not allow you to go back to those monsters."

"Thank you," she says. Then she sighs again. "I guess I'll eat this bean and chili mix and try to sleep. Tomorrow's going to suck, and my feet already feel dead."

"Tomorrow will suck. I don't want you to have any illusions about that. But we will make it, Kira. I promise."

Even if it costs me my life, I'm going to get her to safety. As a Marine, I risked my life for less-worthy causes; dying to protect someone like Kira would be far better than bleeding out into the desert sand of some far-flung country just to improve some company's access to oil.

After a few bites, she stops eating, her spoon held in a frozen hand. I know that look — she's getting lost in dark thoughts. Those won't help us.

"Focus on eating. That's it. Eating and sleeping. Because that's all we have control over. I know this is scary, Kira, but trust me, this isn't my first time in a situation like this. I will get you through it."

She nods, gets a determined look on her face, and we eat; it's beans, more beans, and mystery meat. Fuel, and that's it.

"Well, that was very edible sustenance," Kira says.

"We should sleep now. There's only a few hours of night left."

"Right, but there's just one problem."

Curious, I look at her. "What's that?"

To my mind, there's not a problem anywhere in sight; sure, the food sucked, but it had nutrients; we have a roof over our

heads and four walls around us; we have several hours of relative safety in which to sleep — none of that's a problem. Hell, there were plenty of times in the Marines where I didn't have any of those basic needs met.

Kira looks at me for a long moment, as if she can't understand why I can't see what she sees. "You don't see a problem?"

Did she not hear me the first time?

"No, I don't see any problem."

"There's only one bed."

Plenty of times I would've killed for a bed. Hell, I did; the sooner I killed the target, the sooner I got back to base, the sooner I could put my weary body in bed.

"And?"

"Well, are we going to share? It's a small bed. There's not much space unless we're really close together."

It's as she says it — and the way she says it — that makes it sink in. And once it does, it's all I can think about: being close to her, pressed against her, on that small bed, alone, in the dark, while we're both in varying stages of undress.

Fuck, she's right.

This is a problem. A big problem.

"Fine. Let me think."

And I do.

First, about the sensation of her tits pressed against me. About the surprised gasp she made as we touched. About how little there is in the way of clothes between us now, and how quickly they could be removed once we started kissing.

And, fuck, do I ever want to learn what her lips taste like.

No.

Get it together, Hammer.

Now is not the time to think about fucking this bookworm's brains out.

She wants no part of my world, and I don't want to be responsible for bringing her into it — it'd ruin her.

I look from the bed to the floor. I think I've found a solution, and it fucking sucks to admit it.

“You sleep on the bed. I'll sleep on the floor.”

“Seriously? The floor? That'll never work.”

“It's that, or we share the bed.”

“Fine. Sleep on the floor.” She huffs petulantly. *Does she really want to share the bed and she's just scared to admit it?*

That thought sends a rush of blood to my cock. “Just try. We need to get some sleep.”

“I'll try.”

Carefully, she curls up on the cot and I hunt for something resembling comfort on the cold, compact dirt floor.

This is going to be the night from hell, but we have to fight to make it work.

Because we both know what will happen if we share the bed.

Chapter Fourteen

Kira

I'm stretched out on an old cot, my chained arm draped over the side. A hulking, muscular man who is doing his best to sleep on the cold, hard ground beside me releases the occasional restless sigh.

It's not the most comfortable position to be in.

But what's even more uncomfortable is the way this man tries to put me at ease with the situation; how is it that a frightening man like him — a man that I saw murder several men while rescuing me — cares so much about my comfort?

Yet, here he is, doing his best to make me fine with this arrangement, telling me he's OK sleeping on the floor, with his arm raised awkwardly just so that I can lie in an even more comfortable position, even though we both know it would be easier for him to just climb onto this bed next to me.

That, and I want him to.

Deep down, in ways that I don't completely understand, I have this urge to have him next to me that is as strong as the soul-shaking terror I felt when he unleashed on our kidnappers.

Why?

Because this monster takes better care of me than my boyfriend ever did.

And, if he were to lie next to me, I'd want to make him comfortable.

In a way that we both want.

Because I saw how he reacted when I fell into him, I saw how he looked at me. I heard the heat in his voice. There's no disguising it. He has feelings that are at least as strong as mine, and probably just as confusing as mine, too; I know I'm not his usual type — I'm about as far from a biker chick as you can get — but there is something between us.

Something undeniable.

Though we're both trying our hardest to deny it.

"Are you asleep?" I say quietly after some time has elapsed in the dark, both of us laying in our respectively uncomfortable positions.

"Not yet. Trying. It'll be easier if you're quiet."

"How can you be comfortable like that?"

"How can you have the energy to talk?"

"Because sometimes my mind gets going, and it's hard to stop. It's one reason I love reading — I can sit down with a book and just keep going until I get tired enough to actually sleep."

Which is true. I finish most books after midnight, usually while Tucker is snoring or gaming.

"No books here. You should try to close your eyes and count some sheep. If you're not one for counting, there's an old trick they taught us early in training — you start at your toes, flex every muscle in your feet, and slog your way up your body until everything's been flexed and released. It'll help."

"My feet hurt like hell. I think flexing might actually kill me." I look up in the dark toward the ceiling. How can he think it would be so easy to just quiet my brain and go to sleep? I'm laying half naked on a bed next to a shirtless, sexy man who went hulking maniac on my kidnappers and has been literally carrying me through the wilderness, and I'm not supposed to be wired up? I don't even have a book; If I had a book, maybe I'd get to sleep. Or even something close to it. Oh, I know. "Do you know any good stories?"

"None you'd want to hear."

"What does that mean?"

"They're war stories. I got one about the time we were in a convoy and some IEDs hit the vehicle in front of me, and about three dozen enemy combatants ambushed us. The

shrapnel damage was intense — ball bearings, shards of metal, nails. There was so much blood...”

There’s probably more he could say, but I cut him off because the last thing I want is to have those images stuck in my brain playing on endless repeat on the canvas of the midnight dark ceiling.

“No. No war stories, please.”

“Kira, we’ve got no books, no stories, and we should have no more talking — because all we got are a few hours to sleep before the sun comes up and we have to get moving..”

But I can’t sleep. I’d love to, but it’s just not happening. Maybe it’s my overactive imagination, or maybe it’s the fact that I read once that sleep and dreams are the mind’s way of processing recent events and memories. If that’s even remotely true, the last thing I want is to spend time alone in my brain with that buzzard-nosed Russian and the pack of killers who work for him.

“I can’t sleep.”

“Sure you can, Kira. Just close your eyes, stop talking, and let what happens naturally happen.”

He sounds exasperated. He probably is. I’m not making this easy, but nothing about the last 48 hours has been easy, so why should this be?

But I decide to try. For him.

“Fine. I’ll try.”

So I close my eyes, take deep breaths, and try to empty my head of any thoughts of beak-nosed Russian kidnappers selling me into sexual slavery.

My breathing gets deeper. Slower. More relaxed.

So does his.

Maybe this will work.

Maybe I can sleep.

Maybe...

A snore as loud as a gun firing rips through the quiet night.

That snore is just a fluke, I reassure myself, and I try to ignore it. Hammer is, after all, sleeping in a very awkward position on the floor — half propped up, with his arm akimbo — all so that I can sleep more comfortably on my back; he's suffering to make this easier for me. The least I can do is ignore the occasional snore.

Then he snores again.

How the heck can a human being make a noise so loud?

Gritting my teeth, I search for serenity in the empty dark, but it eludes me as Hammer shifts ever so slightly, jerking my chain and pulling my arm outward like we're part of some horrible synchronized dance routine.

That does it. There's no way in hell I'm getting to sleep like this.

So I jerk the chain. Petulantly. A sharp tug that sets the links jingling and makes Hammer twist, turn, and grumble until he sits upright again, blinking.

“What was that?” He says.

“This isn't working.”

“I was sleeping. Weren't you?”

“No.” I pause, take another quiet deep breath. I'm about to ask something that has me as scared and excited as anything else that's happened in the last 48 hours. “Why don't you come up here? It'll be more comfortable for both of us.”

“I can sleep just fine down here.”

“But I *can't* sleep when you're down there,” I say, and even in the dark I can tell he's preparing some retort to tell me I'm not trying hard enough, or some other bullshit, when I decide to head him off with the truth. “Hammer, I'm scared. Really, truly scared in a degree that I never thought possible. I nearly lost everything that makes me who I am — my identity, my humanity — to some horrible monsters. And even though you saved me from that, I know those monsters are still out there hunting for us. I can't sleep like this. There's only one thing

that can help me... I feel safer with you next to me. You make me feel safe. *You*. So, when I ask you up here, it's not just because... well, it's because having you right next to me on this bed makes the dark a little less terrifying. So, can you please sleep beside me?"

"That really what you want?" He says in a way where it's clear we both know what lies behind the question; beyond my hope of feeling safe, there's the memory flush on my skin of pressing my bare self against him.

"It is."

Hammer turns his head toward me, his eyes shining with the moonlight streaming through the window. It may be my mind playing tricks on me, but I swear I see the ghost of a smile on his lips.

"Then scoot over, bookworm."

I slide over, and he climbs onto the bed beside me. It's tight. There's barely enough room for our two bodies lying side to side; his muscular shoulder touches mine; his powerful thighs rest against my leg; every deep breath expands his strength-corded chest, pressing his body closer to mine; every halting, heated breath of my own presses my quivering body into his.

"Comfortable?" He says.

"That's better, yes," I say.

My heart is thundering, pounding like it wants to climb out of my mouth. I can't believe I'm here, I can't believe this day, I can't believe I pressed my tits into him earlier, I can't believe I thought that this would help me sleep when, now that we're so much closer, I can feel the power in his arms, smell the clean, manly scent of his body, and hear the thoughts blasting through my skull telling me to climb atop my burly rescuer and kiss him, kiss him, kiss him, until kissing quickly becomes something so much more.

My heart, my mind, my body are clear — I want him.

"Good. Now try to sleep, Kira."

I try.

Really, I try.

Shut my eyes, try to shut out the thoughts, I do my best to slow down my racing heart and let dreams take me.

But those dreams that hover at the edge of my consciousness all lead back to my waking situation — being in bed with Hammer and wanting more, more, more.

No, I'm not sleeping.

Now, I'm just waiting.

Until one of us makes a move in the dark.

Beside me, I hear him struggling. Feel him, too; feel muscles in his arms flex as he clenches and unclenches his hand, as if wrestling with his desire; hear his breathing deepen, quicken, become urgent with *something* that wasn't there when he was on the floor but now is present and powerful once his body is next to mine — a fight, a struggle against the heat that now sits in the nonexistent inches between us.

In the dark, I move my hand. Touch his. Barely.

Then stay still, breathing, eyes closed, waiting for some reaction from him — either scolding me to go to sleep, or something more.

All I get is a deep breath in reply, a breath that might as well scream *come closer*.

Then I move closer still.

Slide my body on the bed until there's not even the space of a breath between us.

I wait.

There's silence. None of us dares speak, even though our hearts and bodies are screaming at us. *Do it, give in; you need this; you want this..*

So I do; I twist my hand, grab his, and give it the gentlest squeeze.

I might as well have taken a match to dynamite.

Because he squeezes me back.

Breathes in, deeper this time, then exhales slowly, as if preparing himself for something more.

Just as slowly, I take his hand and set it on my thigh.

Then I wait.

Wondering.

Will he take his hand away?

Will he tell me to stop, to go to sleep?

Will he remind me of the terrible day we're going to have in just a few hours?

Or will he do what I'm so desperately hoping he will?

He squeezes. Runs his hand higher up my thigh and raises a question in the silent, deafening dark.

"This is what you want?"

"It is," I answer. My voice is shaking with anticipation. "I think you want it, too."

"We shouldn't."

"Why not? We could die tomorrow."

"I'd never let anyone hurt you."

"Then why not?"

Silence from him. A deep breath. The sound of a man struggling with himself.

Why is he fighting it when this is what we both want?

"I swore I'd keep you safe. That means something, Kira. Someone like me, you make a promise, you keep it. Sometimes your word is all you have. This could make this complicated."

I hear the struggle in his voice. It's easy to imagine. How many times has they have sent him to hell, to violence, to death, and the only thing that's kept him going is the vow he made when he joined the Marines?

But this is different; the only war we're fighting is with our desires.

And I'm through fighting.

"Because I can't sleep. Because I can't stop thinking about what it would be like to kiss you. Because I really like the way you make me feel."

"The way I make you feel?"

"Like I matter. Like you respect me. Like what I want isn't silly. And that, when I need it, if I need it, you could..."

"I could what?"

I hesitate. "You could take care of me."

It's so hard to say that.

So hard to admit that I've spent way too long being the one who has to take care of my partner and that maybe, just maybe, I'd like to be with someone who could pamper me, who could carry me when I'm feeling low.

It's an admission that makes me feel guilt for all I've put up with. Guilt and shame.

Why did I stay with my crappy boyfriend for so long? Why did I put up with all his shit?

Was it fear of being alone?

Fear that I couldn't do any better?

Whatever it is, that admission is so hard to say out loud.

But it's like Hammer senses just how hard it was.

He moves his hand further up my thigh, squeezes lightly, and speaks in a low whisper fraught with heat.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting someone to take care of you every once in a while," he says. "Sometimes, I want it, too. I've been alone for a long time, Kira. I've been through hell alone. There have been nights over the years where I've come home after a day that seems as tough as any war zone, and all I've wanted is someone to help make me feel human again. For a long time, I never thought I'd find someone who could do that for me. Then I met you."

He says aloud what I've guessed at: his life has taken so much from him and, like me, he wants someone who — with a touch, with a warm word, with a kiss — can take the pain away.

“Then why don't we?”

“Why don't we what?”

“Take care of each other.”

I put my hand on his thigh. I give him a squeeze.

Then I get bolder.

Then I move my hand higher.

His body responds to my touch — his muscular thighs flex; his cock stiffens and presses against the denim of his jeans; his deep-in-his-chest moan vibrates the bed.

“We both want the same thing. There's nothing wrong with taking care of each other,” I say.

My hand moves higher, to the junction of his legs. The only thing between my fingers and his growing hardness — the full, pulsing length of him — is a scant layer of fabric and denim.

I brush my fingertips along his fullness.

He shivers, tenses in the dark.

I freeze for a moment.

I've never done anything like this, I realize. This bold, this forward, this blatant; this is about as far from my normal personality as it gets — *there's a reason I live vicariously through books* — but, deep in my heart, it feels right.

And besides, there's something to be said for being bold. Look at what happened with my life right before I got kidnapped — my job opportunity at Powell's only came about because I was bold enough to send a job application.

Yes, there's something to be said for being bold.

I reach for the zipper of Hammer's jeans.

He stays still.

It opens.

I reach inside.

Grasp.

Caress.

He breathes deep, while I undo the buttons of his jeans.

“Let me take care of you,” I whisper again.

A squeeze, a stroke, a shift of my hips, and I slither down his body until his cock sits just in front of my lips.

No, I’m never this bold.

Well, *was* never this bold.

But I am, now.

Now, I go for what I want.

And I want him.

A kiss, a lick, a look up his shirtless, tattooed, powerful body to see his eyes shining with moonlight down at me. Moonlight and desire.

The length of his lips curve in a smile.

“Why don’t we get these pants off?” I say.

A grunt, a lift of his hips — a motion that flexes his defined, chiseled abs and causes his pecs to flex and highlight the sheer, brute strength of him, is enough to make me moan — and then his jeans come down.

Yes, this is the new me; I see what I want, and I go for it.

I kiss his cock. Lick it. Wrap it with my willing lips and take the thick length of him into my mouth.

Then I go further. Not a simple deep kiss, but more.

I relax my throat and I swallow his cock as far as it will go..

It takes an effort. He’s much bigger than I’m used to.

He moans. “Oh fuck, Kira, that feels so good.”

Teasingly, I pull back. Hold his hard cock in my hands and trace lines of lust up and down his rigid shaft.

With my tongue, I write an ode to lust on his cock.

With my tongue, I explore the full length of his shaft.

With my tongue, I make him moan, drawing from the depths of his brawny chest deep, plaintive expressions of pleasure that make my toes curl just hearing them. Moans, followed by gasps, followed by deep, whispered words of encouragement.

“Suck it just like that. Keep going.”

I do, but I take my time to enjoy his moans, his deep, plaintive expressions of pleasure, his gasps — every sound that I can wrest from his muscular body with a simple lick, a slow suck, a steady stroke — rings in my ears like a validating chorus; I smile as I suck him. Find myself feeling flush, feeling wetness grow between my legs, as he growls, “Suck it deeper, Kira, please,” and his hands reach for the back of my head — at first surprising me — and then I relax, let him guide me, control me, own me, show me just how deep he wants me to take it, how fast he wants me to stroke him, and take heated pleasure in the sensation of giving myself over to him.

I give in to him in ways I never thought I would.

When his hips are pulsing in rhythm with my lips and hands, when his moans erupt at the stroke of my tongue, when the sucking sensation of my mouth makes him gasp, when his precum drips down my throat, and I hear and feel him approaching climax, I tighten my grip; I go faster, because I know what I want: him.

All of him.

I tighten my grip, feel him tighten his on the back of my head.

“Just like that. Keep going. Oh fuck, you feel so good. Oh fuck, you suck me right.”

His cock throbs, and I work faster, harder, stroking and sucking him until his hips are thrusting him deep into my mouth, fucking my throat, making me gag.

I want him to cum, *need* him to cum, so I'm going to *make him cum*.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fu — “ Hammer's words disappear into the depths of his moan as he erupts down my throat.

I swallow time and again to take all of him. Satisfied only when I lick the last drop from the head of his cock.

The old me never never do this, but the old me wouldn't have done any of the things I've done in the last few days, either; I'm changing, learning to be brave, to go for what I want — including Hammer.

When his thrusting slows, I take him from my mouth. I'm smiling.

And he's still hard.

“My turn to take care of you,” he says, with all the force of a command.

I don't argue as he grips me by the shoulders and spins me around, presses my back against the cot. He doesn't bother with removing my shirt, instead he voraciously reaches for my panties and pulls them off so fast I worry they're going to rip. Not that I'd mind right now. I crave the sensation of his tongue on my pussy, but I think I'd mind tomorrow — hiking commando wearing nothing except for a tattered t-shirt is not my idea of a good time.

But then thoughts of tomorrow fade, disappear in the explosive sensation of his lips on my pussy.

A moan slips out of me as his tongue caresses me. Explores me in ways I've never felt before.

His words hit my ears. “You taste so sweet.”

His tender tongue and fingers roam my body — each touch leaves fire, each touch makes me crave more — and he lavishes attention on me in ways I've never experienced; with hunger, with focus, with fervent desire to please me.

“How do you...?” I gasp.

How do you know how to do that? I want to ask, though my lips and brain can't put the words together.

But he gets the gist of what I'm failing to say.

He chuckles. “How? Because I want to see you cum, that's how.”

Before I can answer — *because, damn* — he returns his focus to me.

And I stretch back, rock my hips and grind my pussy against his face. Feel pleasure take hold over my entire body. Feel it grow. Swell with heat and electricity.

I could lay here forever. Lay beneath him and his tongue, my eyes shut and my body begging for a climax it both cannot wait for and yet wants to prolong — to live in this moment of being the center of his blissful focus — forever.

But I can't fight what his tongue is doing to me.

The rhythm of my body matches his tongue, going faster until my breathing comes in fitful gasps and my muscles clench as a tidal wave of desire grows within me.

Grows, grows, and then crashes upon me, intense, electric, overwhelming.

I scream.

Full-throated, scream at the ceiling as a shaking, body pulsing, thigh-clenching orgasm blasts through my eager body.

And still Hammer keeps his lips and tongue where they need to be.

I break.

Break into a million blissful pieces.

Then slowly return to the room.

Slowly feel sensation return to my fingers, my toes, my legs, my arms, my body.

I open my eyes and look down to see his luminous blues gazing back at me.

“I don’t... I’ve never felt like that before,” I gasp.

“No.”

“Never.”

“How the fuck can any man not want to see the woman he’s with have an orgasm?” He says, while he rises on his knees between my legs. “Watching you come is one of the hottest things I’ve seen in a long time.”

“Things were a lot more one-sided between me and my ex.”

It’s embarrassing to admit. *How the fuck did it take almost dying to have the first good, non-self-induced orgasm I’ve had in a long time?*

I’m so wrapped up in those thoughts that I hardly notice that the head of his cock as it presses firmly against my pussy.

Of course, when I notice, I sit up.

“Are you still hard?”

How? I know I finished him — I swallowed all of it — so how can he still be rock hard?

“How could I not be? Look at yourself, bookworm. You’re hot as hell.”

There’s such intense desire in his eyes that I look down at myself and, somehow, see what he sees. It’s empowering to see glimpses of that woman; that brave, beautiful woman who can turn on this dangerous, powerful man.

It makes me braver. Lets me ask for what I really want.

“Hammer, I don’t want you to fuck me like that,” I say, taking my hand and reaching between my leg to grab his ridiculously hard cock.

He stops. No protest, no whining — the second I express a want, he listens. “What do you want?”

“I want to be on top. I want to be in control.”

“You want control?”

He sounds like he’s just confirming he heard me right. I feel so strange asking for it I can’t help blushing.

“Yes. I didn’t get it much before. But I want it with you...”

My voice trails off.

“What kind of man doesn’t listen to what his partner wants? Fucking’s more fun if both people are enjoying it. Especially when your partner’s fucking hot,” he says, shaking his head slightly. “So, bookworm, our interests align here: you want to ride me, I want to fuck you. Tell me how you want me.”

I’m in shock. A man like him, I thought he’d want to be in control, to dominate me, but he just wants me.

That, and he called me hot.

Hot.

Me.

“Really?”

“Fuck yes, I’m ready for your orders, ma’am,” Hammer says. He manages a quick salute with his free arm.

“Lie back.”

He lays back; I climb on top, and feel powerful looking down at him — he watches me with rapt attention, his eyes and hands gliding over my body. He can’t get enough of me.

“Ready?” I say.

He nods. Smiles.

I lower myself onto him and a hot shiver runs through my body.

I plant my hands on his chest and ride. Slow at first, because I can pick the speed; I choose when to rock my hips forward, back, when to rise and do some swirl motion I think will feel good for both of us — and, surprise, it feels fucking amazing — and I choose when to grind his rock hard cock deep inside me.

I have control while he follows my lead.

It is novel, and it is ecstasy.

Fuck, it feels good to be brave enough to be selfish.

Changing the angle of my hips, I ride him so that his cock hits me in just the right spot. Oh, it's perfect; each motion sends blissful rays of heat through my body, each rise and fall of my hips draws a low moan from far inside me, each grinding motion brings me closer to another orgasm.

I ride harder.

Faster.

In desperate pursuit of that moment I crave, that sensation of breaking to pieces while I fuck the man who ignites my body like I've never felt before.

I'm close.

So close.

I shut my eyes. Feel myself propelled by pleasure, by desire, by this aching need.

His voice reaches my ear. Low. Fiery.

"I want to watch you cum on my cock. I want to hear you scream in ecstasy. I want to feel your pussy grip my cock while you shatter into pieces. Cum for me, Kira."

"Almost..."

"Do it. Cum for me, Kira."

That does it.

The moment hits me like a tidal wave that stretches on into infinity. It is perfection; hellish heat and divine thunder that scatters me into a million quivering pieces.

I cry out. Wordless. A moan that's a scream. A scream that contains one word: his name.

"Hammer, oh fuck, Hammer, I'm cumming."

Everything stops, and all I feel is my body's lack of solidity and his thick cock inside me, filling me; his heat, his pleasure, his desire.

When I come to, I open my eyes slowly, dreamily.

I see him smiling back at me. "I've seen some sights in my life, bookworm, but nothing holds a candle to how fucking

beautiful you look right now.”

“I feel... uh... good. Really, great. And you look, uh, good, too.”

It’s hard to form the words. In any other situation, my lack of eloquence would shame me — I read books for a living, I should have a functional vocabulary. But right now I feel too damn incredible to give a shit. Everything is vibrating in the most wonderfully cosmic way.

“How anyone could not want to see you like this every day of their life blows my mind. You are stunning.” He grins at me. His cock throbs inside me, his hands wander my chest, and then he grips my waist. I realize then I haven’t finished him.

“I...” I stop, collect myself with a deep breath and a smile. “I want to make you cum.”

“I ain’t going to stop you.”

His cock throbs again. The heat, the pressure, it’s so intense it makes me shiver; I can’t wait to feel it erupt inside me.

I lower myself, kiss him deep, feel his stubble against my cheeks, feel the forceful intensity of his kiss, explore his hungry mouth with my tongue and rock my hips. While I ride him, I keep my lips to his, find strength in my thighs and hips, and increase my speed until my ass is pounding into his thighs.

He moans into my mouth, pure, uncontrolled pleasure.

I can feel him growing, thickening, hardening.

I need to feel him finish inside me.

“I want your cum,” I whisper into his ear. “Right now. I want to feel you fill me. I want to feel it drip from me. I want it all. Give it to me. Give it to me right now.”

Our bodies collide faster, harder, desperate.

“I will make you cum, Hammer,” I moan.

“Holy fuck, here it comes,” he gasps.

A moment later, he lets go.

Moaning, I shut my eyes and lean back, arch my spine, feel him fill me, feel him shake and twitch and gasp beneath me like a man completely broken.

When I open my eyes and come back into my body, I have the biggest, dumbest grin on my face. It's embarrassing, until I see he's grinning the same way, too.

"Who the fuck are you, Kira?" He says.

I rise and then lie beside him on the cot. I'm soaked, full of him, but I don't give a damn.

The old me would give a damn. Hell, the old me would run for the pump to take a midnight bath, but the me I am in this moment exults in the sense that I completely rocked this man's world.

"Kira Marinova. I'm from Portland and I work in a bookstore. And you are?"

"Fucking amazed."

"Well, Fucking Amazed, it's nice to meet you."

He groans, this time not in pleasure. "Don't ruin the moment."

I rein it in a little, replacing bad humor with giving him a long kiss on the lips.

"That better?"

"Much." Then he stretches and sighs, the air coming from his chest in a heavy sigh. "We should get some sleep."

"Mmmhm," I say, hearing a smile in my voice. I want to capture this feeling and hold on to it as long as possible. "I think I can sleep now. What about you?"

My fingers toy with his chest, his chest hair, and run down his chiseled abs until I bring them to a playful stop just an inch or two away from his cock.

"I can. And I have to," he says, his breathing already slowing. "We got a lot of ground to cover. Those Russians can't be far behind."

He says it so casually, but it brings me so hard down to earth he might have well strapped an anchor to my neck and thrown me out of a plane; my carefree happiness fades as quickly as fog disappears beneath the strongest rays of sunshine. I return to the reality that I am in bed with a dangerous man and am the target of a gang of kidnappers.

I don't belong in this life.

Don't belong here, don't want to even be here.

Not even with a man like Hammer, no matter how good he makes me feel.

It's a thought potent enough to break my heart, because Hammer makes me feel like no other man has made me feel before.

But I can't live in his world. Not even with a protector like him.

We are too different. I work in a bookstore and love Atwood, Austen, and Agatha Christie, while he's part of a motorcycle gang and probably loves beer, bikes, and bareknuckle brawling.

It won't work.

Can't work.

"Oh," I say as reality deflates me. "Right. They're still after us."

Grunting the affirmative, he turns his head and kisses my cheek.

"Sleep. You're safe with me." A deep sigh from him and me. His is sleepy, mine is resigned. *How is he so relaxed knowing what is right behind us?* "I'll wake you at sunrise."

I close my eyes tight, pray that I can shut out the world and all the terrifying thoughts that now circle me in the dark. Thoughts about killers, thoughts about kidnapping, thoughts about being sold to some creepy gangster in a faraway country.

Sleep doesn't come easy.

Chapter Fifteen

Hammer

Kira stirs a lot in her sleep. It's a fitful, restless sleep full of gasps, of moans, of quiet cries of fear.

It's something I notice through the scant hours we have in bed to rest. Every sign that she's afraid keeps me awake and alert. Many times I roll onto my side and watch her, see the expressions of fear, of anger, that surface on her face. See them, and hate them.

I hate what's happening to her.

Hate seeing her afraid. Hate seeing her anything but happy.

And it's as I watch her I realize that there will be many more of these nights in our future together if she were to become my ol' lady.

Nights where it's my life — my work with the Twisted Devils MC and all the threats and danger that come with it — that cause her fear.

Can I really live with that?

Wait a fucking second... Ol' lady?

It takes everything I have not to sit bolt upright at the thought.

Where the fuck did that come from?

We fuck one time and I'm already thinking about claiming her? No fucking way. Despite my urges, I know she isn't fit for this life, and I will not let it strip the radiance from her smile.

We're too different, our lives are too different — it doesn't matter how incredible she makes me feel, nothing can ever happen between us. It doesn't matter that I could listen to her for hours about books I'll never read, or that her brown eyes are the most beautiful shade of amber I've ever seen, or that they turn into liquid gold when the light hits them just right.

None of that matters.

Because I'd die if there were to come a day where this life of mine had worn on her so much that the thought of some new release by some author I've never heard of didn't make her light up like a Christmas tree.

The second that happens, the world loses something indefinably good.

I can't let that happen.

There can never be anything more between us other than this mission: get her to safety.

Get her safe. Then get away.

Because she belongs in a book club, not a motorcycle club.

And I have to protect Kira from all threats... including me.

* * * * *

The sun comes as an enemy, ripping apart my sleep-laden eyelids and forcing a yawn so deep that it's painful. My jaw cracks, and as I stretch, my back does, too.

"Looks like someone slept well," Kira says. Most of it comes out as a yawn, echoing mine.

I take a moment to answer. The morning sunlight is shining through the window and turning her brown curls into ribbons of honeyed gold; it's the world taunting me with what I know I can't have, what I know I'd destroy with my love.

"Slept well enough," I say, feeling something sour rise in my throat. Yesterday, it was a pleasure being chained so close to her — every motion of her body was a chance to touch her — but now it's torture.

"You don't have to lie to me. You slept like shit, didn't you?"

"Never slept better," I reply. "You got a bobby pin on you?"

"What? Why? Do I look like I have a bobby pin? I don't even have any clothes."

"You do. They're on the floor."

“No, I don’t consider those clothes. Those are basically rags.” She sighs, shakes her head. “Sorry, I don’t mean to blow up at you. All that good feeling from last night wore off when I woke up and realized where I was and what we have to do today.”

Not like I can blame her for that; there’s nothing about our upcoming day that I’m looking forward to, except that she’s in it.

But even that thought irks me. There can be nothing between us.

“No bobby pin?”

“No, why?”

As an answer, I shake the chains connecting us.

“Need something to pick these. Get us some breathing room.”

“You don’t enjoy being so close to me? Did I do something wrong?” She says, and it takes me a moment — and her grin — to realize she’s fucking with me.

“Not funny. We’re going to want all our hands free just in case things take a turn and we need to...” I can’t help it, my hands close into fists and my knuckles pop. Her eyes widen, and I see her Adam’s apple work in a gulp. It doesn’t make me happy, but I’m never going to lie to her about the reality of the mess we’re in.

“We need to what?”

“Fight. Kill.”

“You neglected to say ‘get away’ or ‘run,’” she says.

“They’re scum, Kira. If I have half a chance, I will not let them get away. The second they hurt you is the second they decided their lives were forfeit.”

“You definitely woke up on the grumpy side of the bed this morning,” she says. “Let’s go try to make some coffee. Because you’re talking the way I feel when I try to start my days without caffeine.”

“Coffee comes second,” I grunt. “Let’s get these cuffs off first.”

“Fine. I may not have a bobby pin for you, but I have an idea.” Her eyes go to the floor where our clothes lie in a messy pile as we threw them off in our hurry to fuck. Grunting at the effort, she squirms and leans off the side of the bed, grabbing her bra off the floor. “How about this? Will this work for you?”

“I’m not wearing that.”

“No, that’s not what I meant, even though you’d look gorgeous in it. But we can use this. Here, feel.” She then hands me her bra, pointing at a spot just under the cup. “We can cut the wire out. I was planning on doing that anyway, because underwires suck and they’re uncomfortable. Do we have a knife around here?”

I grab one from the pantry. It’s an old steak knife and looks dull, but Kira snatches it, presses her finger against the tip and nods, satisfied.

“This will work.”

With her tongue pressed against the inside of her cheek, she carefully uses the tip of the knife to sever some stitches at the seam. Moments later, she extracts a long length of wire. She then repeats it for the other cup and hands one length of wire over to me.

“Will that work?”

I twist it, shape it. “It’s perfect.”

“Finally, a good use for an underwire,” she says.

“They really put this shit in bras?” I press my finger against it. It’s sharp. Who the fuck puts something sharp like this next to tits? Tits are beautiful, soft, meant to be protected, not stabbed with razor wire. “Why?”

“For display purposes,” she says. “I could tell you something about the patriarchy, about making women objects, but I haven’t had coffee and I don’t have the energy to deal with that societal bullcrap. Let’s just say they suck.”

“They do,” I agree, bending the wire until it’s in the shape I need. Working my tongue between my teeth in concentration, and squinting as my head pounds at the lack of coffee and sleep — it sure as fuck is not a great morning, except that I woke up next to Kira — I set about picking the handcuffs. It doesn’t take long, and soon I’m flexing my wrist and enjoying the sensation of freedom.

“Oh god, I can move independently again. This is incredible,” she says, smiling brighter than the sunrise and leaping from the bed to stretch. “I’m going outside to wash again. I think the cold water will help me wake up. But it’ll piss me off, too, so do me a favor — don’t come out for a minute, and if you hear me screaming, that’s just the temperature, we’re not under attack or whatever.”

“Knock yourself out. I’m going to see about that coffee.”

She leaves and I head to the tin. I pick it up and turn the tin around in my hands. Something stands out to me on its rusted surface, something I didn’t see yesterday. A word that makes my heart sink: decaf.

“It’s fucking decaf,” I yell out.

“Fuck me with a razor-wire vibrator. This is hell,” comes her reply. Then a wordless scream follows along with the rusty scree of the hand pump. “That was mostly the water. It got fucking cold overnight. Almost frozen. Anyway, give me a minute. I think I might have an answer for us.”

I set about exploring the pantry for something we can use while she does whatever she’s doing outside; I figure it’s on me to find a solution, though there isn’t much beyond moldy spices, a salt and pepper shaker set, and the decaf coffee tin. I don’t have high expectations for whatever Kira’s expecting to accomplish — she works in a bookstore, she’s not a survivalist — so when she comes through the door, dripping wet, naked, and carrying a handful of pine needles, I can’t help raise a suspicious eyebrow. There’s something else in her hands, too, but she keeps that concealed in a tight fist.

“What’s that for?”

“Boil some water,” she says. “We’re making tea.”

“From that?”

“Yes, from this.” She nods. “Pine needle tea. I saw a western white pine out there while I was dousing myself in that evil cold water and I remembered this book I read a couple of years ago about this guy whose plane crashes in the BC wilderness and he has to survive in the mountains. This was when foraging was getting trendy in Portland and our bookstore did a ‘Survivalist Month.’ The name of the book doesn’t matter, and I wouldn’t recommend it, anyway, because the author went on some weird diversion for several pages about the sexuality of bears. It just came out of nowhere, too; one minute you’re reading about building a lean-to, then it’s three pages of graphically describing bears fucking — including the average cock size of the North American grizzly, which, how the fuck does anyone discover that? — and the author really reached for it in using bear sex as some sort of clumsy commentary on gender dynamics. It was a terrible read, but that bear-fucking book taught me a few useful things.”

I marvel at her. Maybe I misjudged her in how well she can survive in the MC life — she might not care for the violence, but then no one does — if she knows all this random survivalist shit, she’s more adaptable than I gave her credit for.

Suddenly, it doesn’t seem so strange to listen to the ‘what if?’ in my heart — what if we were together? What if I came home to her at the end of the day?

This life would be less cold, less empty.

“You are one strange, marvellous woman.”

She rolls her eyes and gives me a cheeky grin.

“Because I like to learn things? Because I’m more resourceful than you give me credit for? Just because I prefer books to bashing in heads with metal pipes doesn’t mean I can’t take care of myself.” After she says that, she pauses, then repeats it in a quiet whisper, as if she’s trying to remind herself of that fact. How can she be so smart, yet not believe in her

own capabilities? That moment passes and then she continues: “Now, let’s boil some water — this tea will be good for us. They say the taste is supposed to be refreshing, which should help, even though it doesn’t have any caffeine.”

We boil some water, make the tea.

I take a drink. “This tastes like I’m being skull-fucked by a Christmas tree.”

Kira takes a sip, flinches, and then takes another. “It tastes awful. But I feel more awake now, which is good. Except I also feel like I hate life.” Sighing, she drains the cup in one long chug. “Oh, that was terrible, but better than savoring it. And I think it is working.”

I follow her example, chug it, and somehow manage to not gag.

“I’ve had expired MREs that tasted better.”

“I thought those things didn’t expire?”

“They say three years before they go, and that’s if you keep them at a normal temperature. But if you ask anyone who knows, they’ll tell you they taste expired from the second they’re sealed in the package.”

“Gross,” she says, making a cute, disgusted face. Then she smiles and proudly takes out the thing she’d been hiding in her hands. “I found this for you.”

It’s a rock. A black rock.

“Is this a comment on my intelligence? You going to switch from calling me ‘Hulk’ to calling me a Neanderthal?”

“Hulk, your intelligence requires no comment. But that’s not it. This is obsidian. I found it when I was collecting pine needles.”

“It is shiny, but now isn’t the time for a rock collection.”

“No, no, you knap with it.”

“I don’t have time to sleep.”

“That’s not what I mean. Here, let’s go outside, I’ll show you something.” Taking me by the hand, she pulls me along. I have little enthusiasm for whatever rock lesson she’s going to give me — I’ve just drank a cup of tree juice and we have a full day of hiking ahead of us — but I’m too fucking tired to resist her. Kira pulls me outside, sets the black rock on top of a bigger rock, and then grabs a palm-sized round rock off the ground. “This was also in that survivalist book. He went into great detail, and then I got curious and looked up a few videos on YouTube. I’m actually excited I get to try this out in real life.”

She’s bouncing as she positions her rocks to do whatever the hell she’s got in mind. Her enthusiasm for learning is endearing, even if playing with rocks seems pointless right now.

But I’ll humor her. Because I enjoy seeing her excited like this.

Then she strikes the larger rock into the black one. Repeatedly. Working with some plan in mind that I can’t decipher, while the black rock chips and flakes.

Eventually, a bladed shape reveals itself.

Holy fuck, she’s made a knife.

“Can you grab me a stick? Something about as wide as this rock, and however long feels comfortable for you to hold.”

I find the stick she’s looking for and bring it to her. Working with the knife, she peels the bark from the stick in strips, then uses those strips to tie the improvised knife to it.

“*Voila. A spear,*” she says. “I assume you know how to use this?”

Of course I know how to use a weapon. I’m about to answer, but then I stop; there’s a twist to her grin, like there’s something she’s begging to blurt out.

“No, how?”

“You stick them with the pointy end.” Then she breaks out cackling.

“I don’t get it.”

“No? You don’t know who I’m talking about? No Jon Snow or Arya Stark?” Pouting, she hands over the spear. “Here, take it. You know, I might just start calling you ‘barbarian’ or ‘philistine’ or ‘sweet summer child.’”

Taking the weapon, I run my finger along the blade. It’s sharp — even under the slightest pressure, I’d cut my thumb open to the bone.

“Call me whatever you like, as long as you give me weapons like this.” I marvel at the weapon even more. “You really are something else, you know that, Kira?”

“Thank you, Hammer,” she says. Then she stands and gives me a look — there’s energy in her eyes and pride on her face. “Well, we’ve done all we can here. Shouldn’t we get moving?”

“You’re ready?”

“Like you’ve said, we can’t spend all day sitting here. The sooner we get moving, the sooner I can get somewhere where I can take a shower and have an actual cup of coffee. That’s what I want. Oh, and a book, too. Come on, no more lazing around. Let’s go.”

I rise, keep a tight grip on my spear-thing, and follow her, marveling at the resolution and strength in her stride. I was wrong about her. She’s so much tougher than she looks.

She could be the one I come home to, the one that I can share my life with. Someone to talk to when I need to let my pain out. Someone strong enough that I don’t have to worry about this life breaking them. Kira could be the one.

Maybe I shouldn’t fight this any longer.

Maybe I can let her in.

Chapter Sixteen

Kira

We're nearly a mile into our hike when he calls us to a stop.

I look at him, unsure. He's acting alert, his ears nearly pointed up like a hunting dog at attention, but I hear nothing except for birds, feel nothing except the morning sunshine on the back of my neck, smell nothing except forest and the piney scent of my breath after that wretched tea.

“What is it? Something wrong?”

He shakes his head and holds his finger to his lips. I go quiet, and strain my ears, listening.

But I only find silence.

So I amuse myself by looking at Hammer. The more time I spend with him, the more I see him differently. There's a depth to him I wouldn't have expected from just looking at him, and his violence is something I can see as necessary — the way a guard dog will maul an intruder, but still be lovable with its handler. Except in this case, my guard dog is a six-foot-plus man with a chest the size of a small boulder.

And a shockingly adept tongue.

I shiver just thinking about it.

Finally, satisfied at the silence, he nods and motions to hike again. We're still going deeper into the mountains, which seems pointless to me, but my survival tricks mostly extend to the tea recipe that I learned from that book that was basically a manifesto on bear fucking and gender rights, so I'm not in any position to raise questions.

We're hardly a quarter mile down the trail when he stops again.

Hackles rise, muscles tense, eyes scan the woods like he's a wolf about to maul someone. He clutches that knife-spear I made him in his large hands.

I don't understand how quickly he's able to change; how he's able to go from someone who makes me feel comfortable, safe, secure, to a man who makes me feel like I'm a grunt standing at attention at boot camp, ready to receive my weapon and be sent out into combat, or whatever the hell they do; not that I've ever been to boot camp, except for the time I did a fitness boot camp for the first two weeks after New Year's a long time ago. Did it, then promptly dropped it because it sucked; getting yelled at by some wannabe Tony Robbins while you sweat your ass off before the sun's even up is not the path to personal growth. It's just a terrible time while some dude in spandex makes you feel like shit.

So I don't have much boot camp experience, but I saw *Full Metal Jacket* once, and I've read that it's pretty accurate.

"We can move," he says, gesturing again like we're soldiers going back on the march.

We continue hiking until we come to a point further up the mountain, a cliff overlooking the valley below — a perfect vantage point. I admire the wide view of the valley below and the sight of the ocean in the distance. It's serene. Meditative.

Hammer grunts, eyes looking deeper into the mountain range around us.

"I think I know where we are. That's Glacier Peak." He points at a mountain far in the distance.

"I'll tell you now, if you want to climb that mountain or whatever, my answer is no."

"We're not going to climb it." He turns away from the mountain, looking to the hills and valley below. "We're just using it as a reference point. The way we need to go looks clear. We'll circle around and try to get to the main road. Maybe we can hitch a ride south. I have a friend who lives in Everett. A good friend. If we can get to his place, I can call my club in for reinforcements."

"And then?"

"Like you said: shower, coffee, a book, whatever else you want. I'll get you to safety and then I'll keep you that way.

Then I'll take care of those Russians for good."

Even though he's ending his sentence talking about murder, my heart still leaps at the prospect of getting home and putting this mess behind me. And my body cries out for a hot shower. Every ache and pain that I've carried with me so far — some bad, like all the pain from hiking, and some good, like every good bit of tiredness from spending the night with Hammer — fades in the excitement that floods through me.

Smiling, I pick a direction that looks like it was where Hammer was pointing, and I start down the trail.

"Come on. What are you waiting for?"

* * * * *

We descend in a roundabout way. A very roundabout way. Still keeping to as much cover as possible, still stopping every so often for Hammer to do his alert guard dog thing, and still walking in the woods that never seem to end while the idea of a bed, a shower, a book, and a cup of coffee dances in front of me like a mirage.

Or maybe something with vodka instead of coffee, like a vodka tonic or a vodka lemonade. Or just an entire bottle of vodka.

We keep hiking.

It sucks. My knees ache, my feet hurt, the sun rises higher and I sweat. I can feel my skin tingle as the sun burns me, and mosquitoes circle me hungrily.

But then we reach a large clearing at the bottom of a valley.

The air feels different here.

It's peaceful; a small stream babbles through one edge of the clearing, a family of deer nibble at a growth of wildflowers, and birds sing at each other and flutter from branch to branch.

At the edge of the trees, Hammer stops.

I sniff the air.

He does, too. But probably for a different reason than me; I doubt he really cares about the fragrance of wildflowers in bloom.

The tightness in his shoulders is less now. I think I even see him smile. I smile, too.

This feels like the end. Or the beginning of the end.

“We just have to cross this clearing, make it through another couple miles of forest, and then we’ll be on the road. This is almost over, Kira.”

“What’s the first thing you’re going to do when we get out of here?”

He looks at me over his shoulder. He *is* smiling. It’s bright, relaxed, confidence-inspiring.

“I wish I could say something that’d impress an intellectual like you, bookworm, but I think I’m just going to have a beer and get clean. Might even take a bath. I know it sounds a bit frou-frou, big guy like me soaking in a tub, but you learn just how fucking good it feels when your body is aching like one big pounding knot. Then you don’t give a shit what anyone thinks. When you’re hurt, you take a fucking bath. Then I’ll call Chains, one of the brothers in my club, and I’ll ask him what the fuck happened to my bike. I ditched it when I snuck into that warehouse those Russians were using, and I’m worried about it.”

“Beer and a bath, that doesn’t sound so bad,” I say. He starts into the clearing and I follow him. “And I’m sure your bike is fine. Portland’s a good place, except for the small number of human traffickers and kidnappers. I doubt anyone messed with your bike.”

He laughs.

I like his laugh.

I enjoy seeing this side of him. The side that isn’t on the alert all the time. That isn’t stuck in the kill-or-be-killed mentality. This man doesn’t just make me feel safe, he makes me feel free. In my mind, I imagine how things might go different if we were to be together — instead of walking

through a clearing at the end of a long march through the wilderness, I picture us walking through one of Portland's parks, hand in hand, talking about our days, our triumphs, the latest books we've read, or where we want to go for dinner.

I reach out and take his hand. Squeeze it.

I want to turn the page in our relationship. To get closer to the man who makes me feel safe, who makes me feel appreciated for who I am.

He looks at me, eyes curious. "What's this?"

"I'm feeling good. Aren't you?"

He squeezes my hand back. "You know I am."

"After we get back and get human again, those drinks we were talking about... do you want to get them together?"

"A date?" He sounds both surprised and reticent. Am I pushing too hard? I'm honestly not sure.

On one hand, we've already had sex, so going out for drinks shouldn't be too much to ask, but on the other, I have no idea because sex may be a more casual thing among bikers than it is for a normal person like me.

Not wanting to scare him away, I decide to back off a little.

"Just drinks," I say, coolly. "To celebrate not dying in the woods."

As if fate is listening and wants to remind me of the folly of hope, there's a thunderous crack that splits the air and sends my heart surging into my throat. The ground in front of us explodes in a puff of dirt and splintered stone.

Hammer roars and grabs me by the shoulders. "Get down."

He drags me to the ground and feel I his weight settle on top of me, his massive bulk sheltering me.

I guess I spoke too soon.

There's another crack, just as close, and I feel a torrent of debris spray through the air.

Hammer's voice is a hissed whisper in my ear. "We can't stay here. We're sitting ducks. When I say go, you stand and run for the woods. Take shelter in the trees. I'll try to shield you with my body until we get there."

"And then what?"

I feel tension surface in his arms, the muscles flexing, the hand holding the spear tightening its grip.

"Then, if we're still alive, I take care of whoever's shooting at us. Now, go!"

There's no time for me to even think, much less argue. One moment, I'm huddled beneath Hammer's massive body, the next, he's heaving me to my feet and shoving me toward the trees.

In my ears, there echoes one word, and he screams it at the top of his lungs.

"Run."

Chapter Seventeen

Hammer

Somehow, we reach the trees without taking a bullet.

The second that I see Kira safely sheltered behind the fat trunk of an ancient fir, I change directions and stalk through the woods toward the shooter. I have no fucking clue who is shooting at us. My first thought is that it's the Russians, but I dismiss that thought as fast as I have it. Why would they shoot at the ground? Those were warning shots and they don't seem like the type to give me a warning. Kira, they'd save. Keep her alive. But me? I've killed several of them, and whatever reason they had to keep me alive, I ruined that the second I put two of them in the ground.

No, they want me dead.

But the person shooting at us? They've got something else in mind.

Who the fuck could it be?

I dart from tree to tree, my weapon ready, until I've reached the spot where the shots are coming from. It's on the far edge of the clearing, but it's empty.

There's nothing here but mossy stumps and a few shell casings on the ground.

Kneeling, I check the ground for footprints, signs of where the shooter may have gone, but the earth reveals nothing. Whoever was here knows what they're doing. That, and I'm no Daniel Boone.

Hell, I'm not even close to the bear-fucker in that manifesto Kira read.

Standing, I put my hands on my hips. I'm huffing, my heart pounding. Today's another fucking tiring day and I don't have the energy for this bullshit.

More than anything, I want to get out of here. Get home. Get cleaned up. Get a drink with Kira and see where it goes.

Fuck, I hope it's a date that she was talking about. The idea of seeing her at the end of all this — of her still being there, being around for me to talk to, to spend time with, to take into my bed — is what keeps me going even though my body's screaming at me.

“Where the fuck did you go?” I murmur as I scan the surrounding forest.

I toy with the idea of going back to Kira. She's the one I need to be protecting, but by going back to her, I could be leading the shooter right to her. That, and she shouldn't have to witness what I'm going to do to whoever has been firing at us. She's seen enough violence as it is.

I have to protect her from that.

Which means I have to find the shooter and take him out as soon as possible.

A slow circle, with my eyes scanning the forest, reveals no further clues. So I pick a direction that seems as likely as any other and start through the trees.

Not more than twenty meters in, I hear a metallic click.

It brings me to a stop instantly.

Weapon clenched in my hands, my muscles straining, I freeze.

Something cold and hard presses against the back of my head.

A voice as old and gravelly as the surrounding mountains mutters something in my ear. What, I have no clue — it's in a fucking language I don't understand.

But it doesn't matter to a dead man.

And, with a gun touching the back of my head, I won't be pulling breath much longer.

Chapter Eighteen

Kira

A million thoughts run through my head while I watch him stride through the forest in pursuit of whoever's shooting at us. I think about running. It'd be easy — I know where I need to go, we're not too far from the road, and I'm sure that Hammer will keep the shooter busy enough that I could get away. If I wanted, I could be free. Could go home. Could go back to my life and maybe even call Powell's and come up with some excuse that'll get me another shot at that job interview.

It wouldn't be easy, but I've dealt with more difficult things in the last twenty-four hours.

But as quickly as that thought rises, I get rid of it. Forcefully.

Because hot on its heels, my heart tightens in suspense as I watch Hammer go.

I hope he comes back to me safely. That hope rings true in my heart with all the strength of a prayer.

Hammer's more than some muscular bodyguard who's escorting me through the wilderness; he respects me; he intrigues me; the attraction I feel for him is stronger than anything I've ever felt before.

If I ran from him, even if I returned to my old life in Portland and salvaged my job opportunity, would my life ever seem as bright as it once did for those shining moments before I was kidnapped? No. I'd be forever haunted by that nagging question that turns my brightest days into nothing more than a sullen shade of gray: what if I stayed?

What if I didn't leave Hammer?

What if I was brave and took a chance on what we could become?

And, as the silence in the forest ticks on in seconds that become minutes, a different chilling 'what if' raises the hair on the back of my neck: what if something's gone wrong?

Carefully creeping and keeping to the sheltering shadows of tree trunks and scraggly underbrush, I slink after Hammer.

It takes a while. My feet hurt, my legs ache, and I'm scared that any noise I make could kill the man who's increasingly occupying a larger and larger space in my heart.

But then I push aside the branches of a fern and see him.

Him, and a man with a gun — pointed right at the back of Hammer's head.

There's no doubting the man's intention and, in a few seconds, he'll be decorating the trees with pieces of Hammer's brains.

He cocks the hammer on his rifle.

He says something. His voice reminds me of rocks grinding together; he sounds like he's spent every waking moment of the last twenty years smoking.

The words he uses aren't English.

And, when I get beyond his smoky voice, it hits me with freezing suddenness: he's speaking Russian.

Slowly, I creep closer, straining to hear what he's saying; Russian isn't my strong point, what I know I learned from my grandmother and an early quarter-life crisis a couple years ago, where I had a strong urge to connect with my roots and got really into vodka and Russian cooking, but the constant hangovers and heavy reliance on cabbage soups eventually killed my enthusiasm. Still, I know more than a little.

And I don't like what I hear.

He's calling him a criminal. A thug. A gutless, worm-hearted thief of raspberries. Though that last translation might be off, because I really only practice it lately when I talk to my grandmother and it's been too long since I've done that.

Still, the strength of his half-understood words and the conviction in his voice tells me the old man, though he's armed, and looks and sounds like a raving lunatic, may actually be a decent person.

He might help me. Help us.

Now, I just have to convince him not to blow Hammer's brains out.

To do that, I'm going to have to be brave.

I stand. Call out in Russian. *"Don't shoot him. We're not here to hurt you. Can you help us?"*

Hammer shouts, instantly. "Kira, what the hell are you doing? Get out of here!"

The old man turns, but only his head. And only partially.

He keeps the gun and half his attention squarely on the back of Hammer's skull. One wrong move and it's all over.

Braver, Kira. You have to be strong.

I leave the bushes and walk into the clearing, my mind scrambling my poor Russian vocabulary for what to say.

"We're friends. We're just lost in these woods and need help. Please, don't hurt us."

Something in my halting, garbled Russian strikes a chord with the old man and he gives me a strong look.

"What?" He replies. *"I don't have any animals here. Why would you ask that? Are you two deviants here to frolic in the woods and fuck animals? I know your type. I'm not putting my gun down."*

"Everything OK, Kira?" Hammer says through gritted teeth. "Seems like this guy has a lot to say and none of it sounds like 'I'm putting my gun down.'"

"He thinks we're here to fuck animals and dance in the woods. Well, I may have told him that. Sorry, my Russian isn't very good."

"No, it is very terrible," the old man says. "We speak in English."

"You speak English? Why didn't we fucking start there, old man?" Hammer says, his voice rising. I wish he would calm

down. “Fuck, we could’ve cleared all this up before you put a gun to my head and accused me of fucking deer or whatever.”

“You do not look like a man who could catch deer. Too big, not fast. Goat is more for you,” the old man says.

“You think I fuck mountain goats?”

“No. Mountain goats are too swift for you. I think fat, lazy, old farm goats are your type. You would not be the first. Some strange people come to these woods. I do not judge, but I will not have you here if that is what you want. I have several goats on my land, but they are for milk and meat, not for sex. So you stay away.”

Hammer gets red in the face and turns, but then the old man prods the back of his head with the muzzle of his rifle and clicks his tongue. Hammer grunts, and then gives me a helpless look. “Will you explain to him we’re just trying to get to the road and not into bed with his livestock?”

“*No animals. No sex.*” My Russian’s crap, but the old man nods. Then I switch to English. “We are lost. We’re trying to get to the road.”

He answers in Russian. Rapid-fire. I have to focus to make sense of it. I don’t blame him for using his native language — his grasp of English is slow, halting, and it probably takes him more focus than he’s comfortable with while trying to decide whether to murder Hammer by blowing open the back of his head with his rifle. “*Are you sure he’s helping you? You can tell me. I can take care of him. I was a policeman in Russia for many years. Back when that meant something.*”

I answer in Russian and hope it makes sense. “*He is a good man. I know he looks like a male Baba Yaga, but his heart is good. He’s taken care of me and protected me. We just need to get to the city, or even the road. Can you help us, please?*”

“You are hikers?” He says, thankfully in English.

“Sort of.” Hammer answers. His sentence ends with a grunt as the old man nudges him again with the gun. He tries to turn again, and the old man pokes him once more, though this time Hammer doesn’t stop. Hammer turns all the way and puts the

barrel of the gun on his forehead, leaning into it. “Fuck man, either shoot me or stop poking my head. But don’t keep fucking with my skull like you’re a child poking roadkill with a stick. God damn.”

The old man’s face goes red. I don’t blame him — Hammer is roaring like a man about to go to war and he’s about to get himself killed. I have to do something.

God damn men and their fucking machismo pride.

I step forward and put my hand on the old man’s shoulder.

“Please don’t kill my stupid boyfriend,” I say. “He saved my life and I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for him. I’d be somewhere bad. So I owe him a lot, even if he is a moron who has never read *Pride & Prejudice* or any other Jane Austen novels.”

“No Austen? No Darcy? It is a treasure. Even I have read it. You sure you want to save him? Maybe you would be better off if I...” He ends his sentence with a click and miming the sound of shooting. “No witnesses. We bury him and you find someone new. I have several sons. Two of them are single.”

“Kira...” Hammer says, his voice tense. “I don’t want to die over a fucking book.”

“It’s not just a book, Hammer. It’s a masterpiece,” I say, chiding him and rolling my eyes at the old man, as if to say ‘*See what I have to deal with?*’

“It is literary achievement,” adds the old man.

“It is. Beautiful, profound, inspiring — I’ve read it so many times. But I can’t let you kill my boyfriend because of it,” I say. That’s the second time in as many minutes that I’ve used that word. It slips easily from my tongue, and not just because I feel I need to use it to save Hammer’s life. “My babushka likes him. She asked him to watch out for me. She’d be terribly disappointed if he died on the job.”

“Boyfriend and bodyguard, yes? And your grandmother approves?” He says, thoughtfully. Then he lowers his gun. “I do it for you and her. Though I still believe you are making a mistake.”

A long, heavy sigh of relief leaves my lungs. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Hammer adds. “Now, who are you, old man?”

“My name is Bogdan. Who are you and why are you here? No lies, this time.”

“My name is Kira Marinova. I’m here because some evil men were chasing me and Hammer — yes, that’s my boyfriend’s name, I can’t help it — saved my life. We’re running from them. We just need to get to the nearest city. Hopefully Everett. Can you take us there?”

Bogdan takes a long moment to think. Then resumes speaking in Russian. *“Everett is a long way. I can’t get you all the way there. Too much traffic at this time of day. I would die of old age before we reach the destination. But there’s a bus station not far. I can take you there and give you bus fare.”* He pauses. Then he drops his voice even though there’s no way Hammer could understand, and says to me, *“Are you sure you want to leave with him? Are you absolutely safe? I can protect you.”*

This murder-happy old man is again offering me another way out. Another chance to go back to the life I knew; a life that now seems so gray and empty compared to the spark of a potential future with Hammer.

I don’t hesitate. I smile and put my hand on Hammer’s arm. I’m claiming him.

“He’s a good man and there’s no one else I’d rather be with right now.”

Chapter Nineteen

Hammer

I have no fucking clue what's happening, except a lot of shit's been said in Russian, I've had a gun pointed at my head for far too long, and I've narrowly escaped having a reputation as a fucker of fat old goats. But eventually, Kira and Bogdan agree and the next thing I know, she's claiming me as her boyfriend and then the old man is beckoning for us to follow.

“Come with me. I have a cabin. It is not far. You need to clean up. You both look very bad. I have clothes you can borrow — even you, Kira. I was married once. My wife was your size.”

“Thank you, Bogdan,” Kira says.

She gives me a pointed look. *Be kind*, it says.

I return her look with one of my own. *The old bastard wanted to kill me.*

Hers wins.

“Yeah, thanks, Bogdan,” I echo.

He leads us through the woods down a game trail until we come to a cabin. It's surrounded by a long wooden fence. Inside the fenced-in area is an animal pen containing a handful of goats. They're hairy, bearded, half of them have horns that look long, wicked, and sharp. They all bleat at us as we enter the compound, a chorus of warbling noises. None of them are sexy.

Bogdan looks at me over his shoulder and shakes his finger at me.

“Not for you,” he says. “No romance. Only livestock.”

“I'm not going to fuck your goats, old man,” I snap. “They're not even attractive to me. At all. In any way. They're like the least fucking attractive animals I've ever seen. Why do you keep thinking that?”

Something about living in the woods alone for so long must have addled this old man's brain.

Kira gives me a wry smile. "So, are you saying you've seen some attractive animals?"

"Don't twist my words, bookworm."

"She is not a worm. She is a brave woman who saved your life," Bogdan says. "I had my sight on you and your silly knife ever since you entered my woods. So many times I could have put bullet in your brain. Only thing that saved you is her."

The look Kira gives me is a mix of triumph and teasing — *you owe me one, goat-fucker*, it says, lovingly.

I roll my eyes at her. But when I speak, there's not an ounce of teasing in my voice. Instead, there's pride. I enjoy talking about her strength, her accomplishments.

"She is always surprising me. You know she made this knife, Bogdan? Knapped the flint and everything. That's not all — there's more, but I won't bring it up except to say that we've escaped a fucking horrible situation, several people have died, and through it all, she's kept going. She's more of a tough survivalist than you'd think," I say. As I speak it out loud, it sinks in even further that I've misjudged Kira. She might not like all the danger that's a part of my life, but then, who the fuck does? It sure isn't my favorite thing. There are so many times I'd rather be on my bike, or on my porch with a cold beer in my hand, watching the sunset while a steak sizzles on the grill. No, it doesn't matter that she likes the danger. What matters is she's shown that she can handle herself when it comes up.

"This does not surprise me. Look in her eyes — it is easy to see she is strong." Bogdan leads us inside his cabin. It's a homey place, with a thick rug covering the hardwood floor, a small kitchen with a tiled island sitting opposite the sink, and a large living area with a carved wood sofa adorned with thick cushions and a blanket. There's a closed door in the back that I presume leads to his bedroom. He ushers us to the kitchen area and pulls down three lowball glasses from a cupboard. Into them he pours a light brown liquor from an unlabeled glass

bottle. “Drink this. It will give you strength. Then you can wash up. There is an open structure out back, with a curtain. It is a solar shower.”

Then, with no further words, Bogdan grabs his glass, taps it to mine, and tosses it back. I do the same, and the liquid burns like lit gasoline down the back of my throat. It takes fucking effort not to erupt into a choking cough.

“Fuck, this is rough. What is it?”

“Applejack. I have a still. The forest has apples.”

Kira throws her back and sets the empty glass down with a smile. Hot, smart, and she can handle her booze. Why the fuck did I ever have any doubts? “Reminds me of the stuff my grandmother used to make.”

“Yeah?”

Bogdan just nods, as if he already gets it. “Samogon.”

“Samogon? What the hell is that?”

Kira smiles and her eyes light up at the chance to share something she knows. “It translates as ‘self-distilled.’ Basically, it’s moonshine. My sister and I would get a little sip of it whenever we went over to her house for a visit. Or whenever she was watching us and either of us got sick. But she wasn’t very good at making it. It was always so strong and there was this one period where she fell in love with the taste of juniper, so even a little glass would have you smelling like you’d taken a swim in a martini if you sweat. Can I have some more, Bogdan?”

The old man nods, and she helps herself to a full glass, downing it again just as fast as the first time.

“You two help yourselves. I have food in refrigerator, the shower is outside, clean up and I will get you some clothes for yourselves.”

I nod. “And then you’ll give us a ride into town? I saw you have a truck out there.”

As nice as it is to have somewhere to rest, even here, I don’t feel entirely secure. Not only because Bogdan was ready to

blow my head off fifteen minutes ago, but the other Russians may still be out in the woods. The sooner we can get to Everett, to my friend Mike's house, the sooner I can get into contact with my brothers. Then we'll be safe.

But until then, the mission is to get out of these woods as quick as possible.

"Yes, I give you ride to bus station. And money for bus. But not for free."

"What's it going to cost us for a ride and bus fare?"

My muscles tense. If this old man suggests anything sick, anything that'll put more stress on Kira, I won't hold back and I'll take what we need from his cold, dead hands.

"Firewood."

"Firewood?" I say, feeling the tension ease.

That can't be so bad.

The old man leans in toward Kira and whispers something in Russian. A long something.

Suddenly, I don't feel so at-ease anymore.

Kira clears her throat. "He says that because we're desperate, he gets to set the price. His son was supposed to come by yesterday and help him chop firewood, but he got sick. You need to chop and load ten wheelbarrows."

"Ten wheelbarrows for a few bucks in gas and five dollars in bus fare? Does he think I'm some kind of indentured servant?"

Kira relays my answer in Russian to the old man, who laughs and briskly responds in kind.

"No, he doesn't think that." She sounds hesitant.

"What did he say? Tell me," I say.

The old man whispers something to Kira, and it makes her giggle. Her face scrunches, dimples rise on her cheeks. It's cute, cute enough that I might overlook what this old man is saying about me. Might.

“He thinks you’re a big, dumb, desperate American who, in his limited intelligence, knows that arguing will not do any good and should just chop the wood to get it over with.”

The old man whispers something else.

Kira snort-laughes. Her cheeks go red. It’s a look I want to see more of. Every day of my life sounds about right.

Though I don’t think I’ll like what’s brought it on this time.

“What?” I prompt.

“I can’t,” she says.

“It’s fine.”

“You won’t hurt him?”

I raise my right hand, like I’m fucking swearing on a bible in court. “Promise.”

“He says if you do a good enough job with the firewood, he’ll throw in that goat he saw you eyeing.”

The old man busts out in peals of laughter.

Kira, too.

Doubled over, hands on her tummy, looking truly happy.

“I’m going to go cut that fucking firewood.” Then, after pouring and slamming another glass of the old man’s applejack, I storm toward the door, followed by Kira and Bogdan’s laughter. “Nothing else. I swear to god, Bogdan, I’m not a goddamn goat-fucker and if you keep suggesting it, not even that rifle of yours is going to keep you safe, you hear me?”

Chapter Twenty

Kira

After another couple glasses of Bogdan's applejack find their way to my tummy, and my body abuzz with alcohol and the pleasant memories of my grandmother's samogon, I shower. When I finish washing up in the solar shower shack outside Bogdan's cabin, I find a set of fresh clothes waiting for me; a flannel shirt, jeans that somehow fit perfectly, and a pair of comfy boots. It's strange wearing the clothes of Bogdan's wife, but it is so nice to be wearing something other than a tattered shirt, a bra, and panties. At least now I don't feel like some woodland nymph on a wild Spring Break.

Bogdan's eyes light up when I come back into the cabin.

"Thank you so much for the clothes. They fit perfectly," I say.

"It makes me happy to see someone wear them. You know, your eyes remind me of her, when she was young. Bright. Happy. Before cancer."

I pour us another round. "What was her name?"

"Carolina." His voice goes warm just saying her name. He smiles, raises his drink. "To my heart."

We share several more glasses. Make several more toasts. My grandmother always told me that, before each new round, one must always make a toast. At serious events, you make serious toasts; at parties, you can make funny toasts; and at funerals, you toast to the dead first, but you do not tap glasses. Not for them. You offer them respectful words and a moment of silence.

The second toast I make to my grandmother.

When we tap glasses, I offer a silent prayer that she's still alive.

I do the same when I make another toast to my mother and my sister, bringing my glass to Bogdan's with determination, like the ringing of my tinkling glass will keep them alive.

It's then Bogdan puts away the applejack and makes a pot of coffee.

Cup in hand, I head outside to watch Hammer.

Oh, how I watch.

Sipping my coffee, while steam from the hot cup warms my cheeks, which progressively turn red as I take in the sight of Hammer hard at work.

Hammer's shirtless. Sweaty. His chest flushed, his chest hair soaked in exertion, the muscles in his arms prominent with the work, veins popping.

And the muscles in his back.

Oh, those back muscles.

They flex, they tighten, and they do many other involuntary motions when he's resting, the head of his ax on the ground and his hands propped on the handle — a little muscular jiggle that's a tantalizing dance for my eyes.

I could watch him do this all day.

It's a pleasant distraction from thinking about Bogdan and his wife.

The bits and pieces of his story, told to me over drinks and through choked words, rings in my ears as loud as the thudding of Hammer's ax; a loving marriage; a life together up and down the coast of the Pacific Northwest; for years, he was a captain of a pilot boat, one of those little ships that guides larger cargo vessels through narrower, trickier waters so they can reach the safety of port.

Then, one day, Carolina felt not so right. Ill. And rest wouldn't chase that illness away. A trip to the doctor, then another, then a full array of scans — CT, MRI, X-ray — followed by a diagnosis.

Cancer.

Breast cancer that metastasized and devoured her with a wicked hunger. Ate her like a ravenous, growing parasite, determined to suck every ounce of light from her bright eyes,

to drink the happiness from her laughter, to devour the joy in her heart and drain the marrow of life from her bones.

This is where they came when they learned treatment was futile.

This cabin is the last place they had happy memories. They bought this place in their youth and would come here every summer. After Carolina's diagnosis, it became a retreat, a vacation they took in the months before she died.

A place to forget, to love, to laugh, before returning to real life.

To her death.

She died in hospice three weeks after they left this cabin.

She was a shell.

Now, he lives here. Lives in those memories. Alone.

He has several sons and daughters, but only one that lives nearby.

Otherwise, he has no one.

And yet, he says he's happy. Happy to have had someone that he loved in fullness, from the start of their relationship to the end of her life, someone to care for, someone that loved him back so fiercely that her bucket list wasn't some unreasonable trip, but to simply go somewhere where she could focus solely on the person who holds her heart.

I want that.

Someone that, even if I'm dying, the reason I'd want to live a little longer isn't because I've unmet aspirations, but because I want just a little more time with that special person who represents the best of me, the fullness of my heart.

I don't have that with Hammer.

Not yet, at least.

But he risked his life to save me, and he's already treated me with more respect and appreciation than I've had from any of my other partners.

That's a good foundation, I think.

His looks don't hurt, either.

"I see now why you didn't want me to shoot him," Bogdan says, as if reading my mind.

Well, I hope he's not fully reading my mind — Hammer's bent over, positioning some more wood before he cleaves it in two with the ax, and I have an incredible view of his butt in those jeans.

No, those thoughts are for no one but me.

"He is very useful with physical tasks," I answer in my halting Russian.

"That's one way of putting it," Bogdan replies with a chuckle. "I am lucky my wife isn't here to see. She would not have been able to sleep if she saw him, and I would have to endure days of her asking me why I don't look like that. But heaven help me if she were to ever think I looked at someone. Not that I ever did. Not once did my eyes stray. My heart, my eyes, my thoughts — they were all for her. Still are."

"I meant with chopping firewood. That's it."

Though even I can hear that I'm a crappy liar right now.

Bogdan just smirks.

"So, what is he to you?"

My eyes don't leave Hammer. Everything about him keeps my eyes locked to him — his strength, his looks, the manly grunting noises he makes as he swings the ax, even the passing thought of how nice he'll smell right after this, when his scent is fresh from all this work.

"Freedom. Safety. Hope."

"And you wouldn't rather go to the police? I could take care of him, then take you there. The police in this country do their jobs sometimes. Especially if they get the chance to use the big guns of theirs. You know, in my time, we had to use this —" he stops, points at his head. "Though often that was because there was no budget for guns."

“No. I want to be with him. He can do more than the police. I think he is the only one who can keep me safe.” I watch Hammer for a moment more before turning to look at Bogdan. “You’ve suggested ‘taking care of him’ several times now. Why?”

“Sometimes that was how we got things done when I was an officer in St. Petersburg. There were people that were connected, knew judges, people you could not convict, but they were a danger to the community. You had to find a solution. Sometimes you convinced them to leave, sometimes you had to do something more permanent.” He pauses. “Before, you looked like you were in very serious trouble, and sometimes people cannot speak the truth until they’re alone with someone who can help. I had to make sure you were OK.”

“I’m fine.” There’s a grunt I hear all the way across the glade that precedes the heavy blow of Hammer’s ax and the sound of split wood flying. “I like him.”

Hammer stops his chopping and approaches us.

“You look good,” he says, noticing my outfit, then he looks to Bogdan. “Chopped your wood. Ten wheelbarrow loads, like I said. But tell me something: how sick is your son? How long do you think he’ll be laid up?”

The old man shrugs.

“A long time. He is very sick. I may visit him after I take you to the bus.”

Hammer grunts, nods, thinking. “In that case, I’ll chop some more. It gets cold up here.”

He leaves and I sip at my coffee, watching him work while caffeine and the alcohol I had earlier heat me from the inside. This is definitely one of the better mornings I’ve had in a while.

And as I watch, I busy myself with thoughts of the future.

I can see days like this, times like this, in our future — no, maybe not Hammer chopping wood for some old man, but times where we’re experiencing things in life that we’ve never

done before, exploring, learning, growing together in our future.

Slowly, I take another sip of my coffee and smile at the thought.

* * * * *

“That should keep you set for a while, Bogdan. Kira, are you ready to go?”

“You don’t want to wash first?” Bogdan says. “We have plenty of water.”

Hammer shakes his head. “We’ve spent enough time here as it is, old man. If the people behind us are still looking for us, I don’t want them to find your place. You might be good with that rifle, but you’re not *that* good.”

“Fair enough. Let us go,” he says.

Bogdan leads us to a rusty beige truck that looks nearly as old as my grandmother. A crow perched on the hood caws at us as we arrive. Bogdan shoos it away, and it caws at him again, irritated. Inside, there’s just one seat — a bench seat with tattered upholstery — and the three of us make a tight fit.

This close to Hammer, I’m happy with his choice not to wash. I’m sure I might regret it later when his sweat sours, but right now, he smells like *him*. Fresh, masculine, with an undertone of wood and sap.

I breathe in and smile at him.

He gives me a funny look. “I smell that bad?”

“No, not bad at all.”

Bogdan chuckles, then turns the key in the ignition. “I can stop at hotel instead of bus station, if you prefer.”

My cheeks turn so red, so hot, I can feel them radiating my embarrassment. “The bus station, please.”

“If you say so,” Bogdan says. “Put on seat belts, please. The road is very bumpy, very bad, until we get to the highway. It will be some time.”

He's right. The minute we leave his driveway, it feels like we're riding a roller coaster run amok. Not half a mile from Bogdan's cabin, we hit a deep pothole that sends the truck bouncing, and Hammer throws his hand out, grabbing me and steadying me in my seat.

I smile at him and take another deep breath of his scent; I just can't help it. Because, yes, the road might suck, but the ride is nice, and I have another hour in the seat next to him.

Another hour.

It passes fast. Too fast, honestly. There's something sublimely peaceful about riding next to Hammer as we leave this forest behind, something about feeling his presence beside me and knowing that he'll keep me safe. He will see that I get home, that my family stays safe; I trust him, and in that moment, I relax and rest my head on his shoulder, letting the rocking of the road lull me to sleep.

I dream deep.

Visions of a good life pass behind my eyelids — me, with a new, better job, and him beside me, respecting me, supporting me, loving me — and when I wake, I feel a lingering smile on my lips. For a second, I try to keep my eyes closed, try to return to that dream.

“Wake up, Kira,” Hammer says, with a gentle shake of my shoulder. “We're here.”

“The buses come often,” Bogdan says, handing over the money. “Every half hour, maybe, you should be able to catch a bus to Everett. That money will cover your tickets and a little more. It is not a long ride. The bus should get you there soon. I will be nearby. My son's home is not far outside of town. But I ask that, if you see me, you say nothing. Our business is done, and I do not want to be a part of whatever trouble you are involved in.”

And then we exit his truck, my hand in Hammer's, and we head toward the ticket office. Seconds after we shut the door, Bogdan speeds away. I watch him, feeling grateful we had his help, even if he was a little strange.

Hammer and I quickly purchase our tickets and find our way to the right bus, which is already waiting with a rumbling engine and a driver out front, smoking a cigarette and playing on his phone.

As we board, Hammer extends his hand to help me up the step.

“You ready for the next chapter, bookworm?”

Something about this moment makes my heart light, joyous. It could be the sense of approaching safety, the prospect of a bath, a book, a bottle of wine.

Or it could be his presence.

The chance to enjoy time with him, without the worry of impending death or sexual slavery; you know, the little things that make life worth living.

“That depends. Are you in it?”

“Until you’re safe — yes.”

“And what about the ones after that?” I ask as I climb the steps and walk down the aisle. We’re the first passengers on the bus and the driver climbs on behind us. “How many chapters do I get with you?”

The driver gives Hammer a sideways glance when my question brings him to a stop.

“What are you saying?”

He still hasn’t moved. Has what I’ve asked him shocked him so much?

Or is it something else that has him stuck in place?

Either way, I can’t let him block the aisle, because the bus driver looks like he’s about ready to get out of his seat.

So I grab Hammer’s hand, pull him along with me. He comes willingly.

“Sit,” I say, as I usher him into the seat — pushing him in first, which I suppose is trapping him, but I ease the blow by planting a kiss on his cheek as soon as I settle into the seat

beside him — I add, “I like the chapters that have you in them the best.”

“You sure about that, Kira?”

I squeeze his hand, strive to settle any doubts with a kiss that requires me to stand and turn to put my lips on his properly. It’s a kiss that lasts for seconds, seconds that turn into many seconds more, and only ends when the bus driver yells from the front of the bus, “Hey, that’s enough.”

I settle back in my seat. “Hammer, I know it could be dangerous, but I feel safe with you. Why don’t we see where this story takes us?”

He sighs. I can tell he’s still reluctant.

What is it?

Is it how crazy his life is?

It’s not like mine is some bastion of sanity. Besides, I’ve proved I can handle myself. I’ve saved his life, I made a spear, and I made tea from fucking pine needles. I can handle this.

“You think you might like the story, but the ending may not be a good one, bookworm,” he says. “I don’t think I can do that to you.”

But I tighten my grip on his hand; I’m not giving up.

Not by a long shot.

I put every ounce of determination and courage that I’ve learned over the past few days into my voice, because the person I’m becoming is someone who believes in her own strength and, when there’s something I want, I fight for it.

“Hammer, I’m not the type to let fear of a bad ending scare me away from an unfinished book.”

“Is that so, bookworm?” There’s a silent second where he sizes me up with his piercing blue eyes. A moment of steely consideration. My doubts surface. My stomach roils in anticipatory fear. I swear I see a ‘no’ in those liquid blue eyes of his, a ‘no’ that’ll come with a reprimand and a reminder that I have no clue how dark his life really can be.

And then he speaks.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kira

He answers with an all-consuming kiss that leaves no doubt in my mind and makes the bus driver yell at us again.

“How’s that for an answer, bookworm?”

“I think I get the gist of it. But it really feels like it’s the *Cliffs Notes* version. I’d like the full story tonight.”

“Once we’re safe, we’ll do that and all its translations.”

“Translations, too?”

“Greek, maybe.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Wow. Maybe I’ll let you watch the video adaptation with some lotion. Alone.”

“Worth a shot,” he says.

“And not totally out of the question. Just play your cards right instead of suggesting it on a public bus.”

He laughs, full, rolling belly-laughter, and the bus engine fires to life. It’s loud, a full chug that gets even louder as the bus backs away from the terminal and chugs toward the road. Soon, we’re flying down the highway southbound toward Everett.

We arrive not long after.

Hammer finds a busted payphone that barely works and takes one of the spare quarters leftover from our bus fare to call his friend Mike. It’s a quick call and, nearly as quick, Mike is there in a faded green SUV with a ‘Marine Vet’ emblem on the rear window, a heavy dent in the front bumper, and a disabled parking sticker on the back bumper. As he pulls into the nearest parking spot, he stops too close to a tree for a flock of crows resting in its branches and they caw down at him.

Hammer grunts at seeing the handicapped sticker. “Must’ve been someone else’s car before Mike got it.”

I keep my mouth shut. I can see the man behind the steering wheel and there's something about his complexion that tells me the sticker might be accurate.

When the door opens, the man that gets out seems a shell of the man Hammer described to me on the bus. He's nearly bald. He carries a cane in his right hand and walks with a shuddering limp, like the weight of the world sits on his shoulders. The crows caw louder, and the man spares them an amused grin before returning his focus to us and spreading his arms wide as he approaches.

"Look at that lost son of a bitch. As I leave and breathe, I never thought I'd see you again," he calls.

"Hey Mike," Hammer calls out.

He leaves my side as soon as the man's feet hit the ground and he runs to his friend, giving him a hug that looks surprisingly gentle.

Mike returns his hug with vigor, but his face is pale when they separate. There's sweat on his brow and his chest huffs with exertion. He gives me a passing, curious look, and then returns his attention to his friend.

I stay back to give them a moment alone.

They settle into a conversation that I can't hear at this distance, but can tell from their body language; easy, relaxed, familiar. The time and distance between their last meeting melts away in the face of familial love.

But I can see something in Hammer is tense. Off. He's doing his best to fight it, but it's there. Suddenly, I feel this longing to comfort him, this connection. I've always heard near-death experiences can hasten relationships, which, if it's true, the multiple near-death experiences we've had over the last couple days means I'm further along than I've ever been with another man.

I approach.

"Mike, this is Kira. Kira, this is Mike. My oldest friend."

“Damn, Carter, she’s even more beautiful up close than she is at a distance. What sort of shit have you gotten into now that you’ve crossed paths with a stunning woman like this?”

I blink. “His name is Carter?”

Hammer nods. “It is.”

I smile, feeling warmth rise inside me, like I’ve learned a secret. Something special. Something that brings the two of us even closer. “Carter what?”

Hammer grunts. “Carter Hudson. Only a few people call me that. This man, Mike Watson, is one of the rare ones who doesn’t call me by my road name.”

Mike laughs. “Only because your road name would’ve gotten your ass busted by every single CO in the Marines. No, ma’am, I know this big lug as Carter. Sometimes he got referred to as Jarhead Dipshit, ‘that fucking Marine’, and ‘the most braindead asshole to ever hold a rifle.’”

“That was all Sergeant Mills. He was always riding my ass,” Hammer laughs. “Fuck, I miss that old bastard.”

“He doesn’t miss you, that’s for fucking sure,” Mike says. “You were always breaking the rules. Though I really enjoyed his nickname for me.”

“The perpetrator of limitless fuckery?” Hammer says.

“That was it. I loved that old son of a bitch.” He pauses, looks from Hammer to Kira and back to Hammer. “So, really, what sort of shit are you in now?”

“Nothing I can’t handle. But you? Mike, what happened?”

“Got a haircut, that what you’re talking about? I had doubts, but my barber said this was the style.”

I stay quiet. This is between Mike and Carter. I haven’t known either of them long enough to insert myself into this conversation. The best I can do is offer comfort after, because just looking at Mike tells me that Hammer will not like the news. Though I stay silent, I reach out and put my hand on Hammer’s arm, just to let him know that I’m still here.

Hammer shakes his head. “Mike, I’m serious.”

“You mean you want to know why I look like I’m doing an impersonation of the Crypt Keeper?” A smile dances on pale lips. When he smiles, it stresses the hollowness of his face, his wan complexion, and his cheekbones stand out like razor blades contained beneath paper-thin skin.

“That’d be it. Talk to me, please.”

“It’s cancer, buddy. Started in my prostate, spread before they could catch it. Spread to my colon, parts of my intestines, all over down there. Yep, that’s right — I’m literally being fucked in the ass by cancer.”

Hammer sways and staggers. I tighten my grip on his arm to help keep him upright.

When he speaks, his voice is weak. Drained. As if all the life and vigor has left him.

“Is it... There’re treatments, right?” He says.

“You’re looking at the handsome face of treatments, buddy. But they’re only buying me time, not a get out of jail free card.” Mike coughs, a heavy, wheezing thing. “Turns out my ability to pull off a great escape expired the second I left the military. If I had known then, I wouldn’t have tried so much shit. Maybe put off that time we snuck off base in Kuwait. What the fuck did we even do that for, anyway? I just remember being profoundly disappointed and that the punishment way outweighed the reward.”

“We snuck out because Private Dickweed told us he’d heard there was a party out in the desert with a lot of women. Don’t you remember what happened?”

Mike shrugs, looking uncomfortable. “A bit. Chemo messes with my brain sometimes. Refresh my memory.”

“There were no women at the party. Dickweed got the word for ‘Camel’ and ‘woman’ mixed up. It was just a fucking barbecue with a bunch of Bedouins who were really fucking confused about why we brought a box of condoms with us to the party. Good barbecue, but not worth the month of bathroom duty.”

“That’s right,” Mike says. A bone-wracking cough overtakes him and he sways momentarily. When his coughing fades, his face looks green and he wheezes.

“Mike...” Hammer’s voice seems so strangely small compared to his imposing size. “How long?”

Mike smiles ruefully. “A couple months, maybe. Maybe a few more, if I’m lucky. Doctor says a few, but he’s also a fucking Raiders fan, so that tells you his intelligence level. That, and he sucks at curing cancer. They just put me through another round of labs, some scans, to get more information and I should find that out soon, but either way, it ain’t long. Makes me glad you called me. It saved me the trouble of looking your ass up so I could send you an invitation to my funeral.”

“How can you talk like that?” Hammer’s voice breaks. He takes a step away from me, breaking our connection. “You’re one of my best friends. You can’t die like this. Not like this, Mike.”

“Well, you know me. I always enjoyed defying expectations. Remember that time in Iraq where they told us we absolutely could not go off base and anyone who did would wind up getting punishment so severe it’d make their grandfather’s balls shrivel to raisins?”

Hammer chuckles. It’s a pained chuckle. “I remember. You got caught, and they made you rake the desert with a comb for two months. What did the sergeant call it? Grooming the land?”

Mike nods. “Yeah, it sucked. But when I got back, I checked — my grandfather’s balls were just as big and dangly as I remembered from all those times he took me behind the barn for what he called our ‘special together time.’”

“Still got your sense of humor, huh?” Hammer says, trying to smile. It mostly doesn’t work, but I don’t blame him. There’s pain all over his face.

Mike though, he grins and laughs.

It's clear he's accepted his death. That, or he's severely in denial.

“Cancer took my hair, my strength, my ability to taste spicy things — which has been a benefit, I've won five hot wings eating contests in the last two months, it's done wonders for my sex life because the ladies love a winner — but I gotta enjoy the time I have left. And I can't do that if I'm moping around all the time.”

“Why didn't you call me sooner? Why do I have to find out now, so close to the end?”

Hammer's questions sound like a prayer, like he's not just talking to Mike, but he's asking whatever god is listening why he's rediscovered his best friend only just in time to have him taken away for good.

Mike shrugs. Casual, dismissive, and he pats Hammer on the shoulder. It's a gesture that is at once both comforting and silencing.

“After all that shit went down with your old club, you dropped off the map, brother. Like a ghost. Not that I really blame you, I would've been wrecked, too, if I suffered through the losses you have. But when I went through my personal crisis, I learned I didn't have the time or the inclination to hire someone for a seance. Figured if I wanted to talk to a ghost, I'd just wait until I passed on and catch up with you then.”

Hammer goes mute, and I realize he has no way of responding to his best friend's chiding remarks. He's facing a problem he can't defeat with his strength. As reluctant as he has been about our relationship, he needs me and I won't let him down; where his strength has failed him, I'll carry both of us.

I step closer to Hammer, knot my fingers in his, and give him another squeeze. Then I look directly at Mike, who has a flippant grin on his haggard face.

“Mike, take us out of here, please. We're in trouble and we can't spend all day talking here in the parking lot.”

Before, it was Hammer's job to protect me.

Now, it's my job to protect him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Hammer

On the walk to Mike's SUV, her hand touches my back and welcome warmth floods me. It's not the heat I felt before when sharing that bed with her in the cabin, with both of us doing our damndest to resist what we knew was going to happen, instead, it's comfort, it's compassion, it's loving strength that dulls the gut-wrenching pain inside me and strengthens my worn and weary heart.

My oldest, closest friend is dying.

Dying much sooner than he should; dying in a way more degrading and dehumanizing than anyone deserves, even a bastard like him; dying after we faced so many situations that should've killed us and yet we survived. That this — his own body betraying him, killing him, doing the job that so many battles, so much fucking idiotic hijinks, so many angry drill sergeants couldn't do — feels like some sort of sick joke.

With every friendship, every instance of brotherhood that came after, they were all compared to my friendship with Mike. His was the friendship that defined in my mind what genuine friendship was.

Was, because he's dying and my fucking brain is already thinking of him in the past tense.

His death is going to kill me.

I feel another squeeze, look over, and see a smile that soothes my angry, aching heart.

It will be painful, it will be misery, but it won't be unbearable.

Because she's here.

It's when she touches me in that moment that I know she's the one I've been waiting for; she doesn't take all the pain away, but she brings enough relief that I know I'll make it.

“So, do you want to explain why I’m out here at a crappy bus terminal, picking up my old buddy and his — what? Girlfriend? Friend? Babysitter? — and you both have no money, no phones, and look and smell like you’ve spent the night in a latrine?”

“The smell’s mostly me, Mike,” I reply. Then I see a warning flicker in Kira’s eyes; I’m not used to this relationship stuff, and from the way she makes me feel, from the things she’s said and the things my heart is telling me, I have a relationship on my hands. “I mean, the smell is all me. I was chopping firewood for an old Russian man in the woods.”

“Is that a sexual thing? Like that thing that Sergeant Benavidez was always talking about? What was it?”

“Pounding dough with a Turkish bull,” I answer.

Kira speaks up. “What’s that?”

I shake my head, trying to warn her.

“Better you don’t know. Because once you do, you can’t erase the memory. The human body isn’t meant to do some things,” Mike says. “Were you up to some deviancy with some old dude in the woods?”

I breathe deep, and it’s like Kira can sense my agitation. She squeezes my arm again and rubs her other hand up and down my back.

How is it that my best friend can be so callous about dying?

How can he joke and laugh like this?

“It ain’t like that. I really just chopped firewood for an old man in the woods this morning in exchange for a ride to the bus station,” I add.

“And why were you cavorting in the woods with no money, phones, or id? This reminds me of that time we went off base to that place that Lieutenant Jameson said was a hookah bar...”

This time, I can’t help it; I grin, recalling the memory.

“And it turned out it wasn’t hookah, it was hash. Fuck, I still can’t remember what happened to my pants.”

Mike laughs. “You don’t remember? Carter, you climbed a statue of some prophet and put them on his head. You thought he looked cold.”

“I was only trying to be helpful. Besides, putting pants on a statue beats trying to pee on the sergeant’s shoes. While he was wearing them.”

Mike’s skinny pouch of a belly shakes as he laughs. “In my defense, I legitimately believed they’d caught on fire. I was trying to save his life.”

“And you kept going, even though he told you to stop.”

“Well, that was because I’d had a lot to drink and it was like this dam broke inside me. No way I was stopping the flow. That’s just a fact of nature, Carter.”

“He was screaming, ‘Marine, holster your cock and quit pissing on my boots.’” I stop for a second as laughter overwhelms me. The memory’s so vivid I can see everything — a drunken Mike, and a pissed-as-hell officer screaming at the top of his lungs as urine soaks his boots. “Fuck, I’ve missed this. I’m sorry it’s been so long since I’ve reached out, Mike. Life got heavy.”

Mike grins. “I know all about that. And how long it’s been doesn’t matter. I’m just glad to see you again. That’s the only thing that matters, Carter. That I see my best friend at least one last time before I...”

I hold up my hand to stop him. It’s so hard to talk to him, to go from reveling in the adventures of our past to experiencing the dark, death-filled heartbreak of the present. I am glad Kira’s here, because I don’t know if I could handle this meeting alone.

“Don’t say it, Mike.”

“What? That I’ll die of cancer? You know we don’t sugarcoat that shit, Carter. We’re Marines — we face that shit head on. I tried chemo, radiation, and I have no regrets, except

the radiation didn't give me any fucking superpowers. I even went out and let a spider bite me, no dice."

"I still can't believe that you're — " My words fail me. Mike can laugh about it, but I'm not ready. The last memory I have of my best friend, from our last meeting years ago, we were downing beers in a roadhouse after a ride, angling to either get in a fight with a couple of assholes that were clearly cheating at pool and trying to rope us into a rigged game, or pick up some chicks from a bachelorette party that'd just come in; we did both; we were young, we were alive, and after everything we'd been through, we felt like nothing could keep us down.

"Believe I'm still this handsome after all this time? Yeah, I amaze me, too." Mike says, then gestures to his SUV. "But enough standing around like we're a couple of green enlistees who don't know our cocks from our rifles, you two didn't come to Everett to see our scenic parking lots. Let me get you back to my place and you can call your club. Oh, and take a fucking shower. Because Jesus, Carter, you stink."

We get in the vehicle, and the ride passes in silence. Even Mike ceases his happy prattling. It's not a long ride, thank fuck, but it feels endless. And loaded with weighted silence. My best friend is dying, and all I can think of are all the times I failed in our friendship; the things I should've done, should've said, before we reached the point where we're at now — where whatever I say or do is going to be fucking tinged as some sad-sack, bucket-list bullshit where I'm making amends with my friend before cancer eats him alive.

I hate myself right now.

Mike's too young to die.

Too good of a person, too.

He runs a charity; he helps kids; he risked his life for this country; how does life repay him? By filling his guts with cancer.

Kira leans in to my ear when I'm in the darkest of my thoughts.

“I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. Lean on me.”

When we park at Mike’s, Kira hops out like her ass in on fire and she’s waiting outside the door when I get out. Me, I’m still wrapped up in darkness, hating how things are and hating that my closest friend is facing an enemy that we can’t fight, an enemy that’s going to kill him no matter what.

Right now, I’m so fucked up in the head, I don’t know what I want.

When I look at Kira, it’s like she can read what’s in my mind before I can even say it.

“I’m here because I want to be. And I’m staying because I want to. For you,” she says, and graces me with a kind smile. “With no expectations, except that you know that I’m staying here for you.”

“Why?”

“Because sometimes, whether or not you actually end up talking to them, you need someone *there*. Simply there. Do you know who told me my grandfather and father both died? That creep, Vulture. I wasn’t close to either of them — I’d already thought my dad was dead, because he’d run off a long time ago, and I never knew my grandfather because he’d stayed in Russia for some reasons my grandmother would never say — but it still fucking sucked to have to process that on my own. When I finally see my mom, my sister, or my grandmother, I’m going to have a lot to say and have the chance to grieve, which is important. And I can do that because I have them. I can talk to them. But I don’t know if you have anyone in your MC that you can go to if you need an ear. So, if you don’t, I’m here.”

I’m silent for a moment, looking at her, losing myself in her honeyed eyes that overflow with compassion that I don’t deserve. How lucky am I to have her now in my life?

Mike’s at the front door, watching.

He probably knows what’s going on. I’ll bet he’s grateful that Kira’s the one doing the talking — he sure as shit has been terrible at it so far.

“Got a few people,” I say. “One, in particular.”

“Yeah?” Kira says, raising an eyebrow. “That’s good.”

I drop my voice and it comes out as a low grumble.

“Her name’s Charlotte. She’s a good listener, smart and kind. But she’s six. Probably can’t help me much with this.”

Kira hugs me, then. Tight. A hug that’s more than a hug — it’s an embrace. Warm, comforting, caring. Then she kisses my cheek. Then my lips. In our embrace, she carries me the way I carried her before. She senses my pain, my need, and she puts it on her shoulders. All with a hug, a kiss, and a smile.

“That’s why I’m here.”

I can’t think of an answer. A ‘thank you’ feels inadequate, but the words that feel appropriate, those syllables that truly capture how it feels to have her around when I’m in so much pain, don’t feel right to say so soon.

Three little words.

But they’re there.

In my thoughts.

On my tongue.

In my heart.

And I’ll speak them soon enough.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kira

“I only have one spare bed. There’s a couch, too, but it isn’t the comfiest. I got it off Craigslist, which you’d expect should mean it’s soft as shit, broken in by a million fat asses sitting on it, but it ain’t. It’s more like a collection of chunky cushions, weird metal poles, and other people’s farts. Not saying I haven’t farted in it, too, but not as much as you’d expect; one of the funny things about going through chemo and radiation like I have, my tastes have changed. Don’t like none of the things that used to give me gas — beans, nachos, pickled eggs — and I’m sure my intestinal flora has been blasted to hell by all the chemicals, too. So I’ll leave you two to divide up the sleeping arrangements, but Kira, if he tries to make you sleep on the couch, you have my permission to kick his ass.”

Mike’s doing his best to be glib, and maybe that’s all that Hammer can see it as, but I can hear the pain in his voice. There are brief moments where words shake, little tremors, the same way my grandmother would get around Christmas when my sister and I were much younger and we’d ask her about grandfather. She’d tell us about him with a smile on her face, loving light in her eyes, but a tremble in her voice that comes from when someone you treasure is forever beyond your reach.

We soon learned not to ask about our grandfather.

I look to Hammer; he shouldn’t be alone tonight. Not after the news he’s received.

Even if Mike wasn’t so sick, I wouldn’t want to be alone, either. I want to be with him. I want to be with him, and I want to be what he needs me to be.

“I’m fine sharing the bed. If that’s OK, Mike? It’s your house. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

Mike laughs. “This close to dying, I’m well past giving a shit. As long as you two don’t start fucking in my living room, I’m good with it. Not that I want to stand against having fun,

but the smell and the cleanup would just make me nauseous. To be honest, Kira, I'm surprised to see you with a lug like Carter. You want to know the nickname we had for him his first month of boot camp?"

Hammer grunts, opens his mouth in protest. There might be a hint of blushing on his cheeks, though it's hard to see beneath the stubble he's grown these last few days. "She doesn't need to know that, Mike."

"I'd like to hear it," I say, taking more delight in the embarrassment on Hammer's face than actually caring about his nickname. I just want something to take his mind off his friend's situation, and if embarrassing him a little is what it takes, so be it.

"Crunchy Sock Carter. Though often we just shortened it to Crunchy."

Hammer turns as red as a stop sign. "Mike..."

I frown, thinking. "I don't get it..."

What happened to his socks? Did he starch them?

Mike tries to continue his story, but Hammer cuts him off.

"It's OK, Mike, she doesn't need to — "

"No, no, Carter, she's got to hear it. It'd be rude of me to leave the story unfinished," Mike says, speaking over his friend. "His socks were crunchy on account of him masturbating into them most every night. Some nights, he'd do it at least twice. I think that dumbass, Private Devin Harrison, said he once clocked you at four times in a night, but Harrison's an unreliable bastard and there were no other witnesses. Plus, that may have just been him fantasizing. He always seemed to watch you pretty keenly in the showers."

"Wait, so you were just in your bunk, masturbating into your socks? With everyone around?" My voice rises in pitch to settle somewhere between *holy shit, that's gross* and *boys never surprise me*; it's part disbelief, part disdain, all laughing gross-out.

“There’s more to it...” Hammer tries to keep talking, but his words die off in embarrassment; it’s such a change seeing him with his friend, seeing this new side of him; instead of an indomitable force of nature, he’s authentically human.

That, and he looks cute when he’s blushing.

Even though it’s coming at the expense of his pride, I love seeing this other side of Hammer. Seeing the man I might joke around with myself, some day. The man that I might share inside stories with, or learn his funny little foibles.

It draws me even closer to him.

Mike clears his throat.

“To be fair to Carter, there ain’t much to do being in boot camp. You often have to take matters into your own hands. Literally, in his case,” he says. “The only actual crime he’s guilty of was not washing his socks often enough.”

Hammer shrugs, grunts, regaining his composure.

“No women for miles, nothing to do... I wasn’t the only one who did it, by the way. It wasn’t just me, alone, jacking it into a sock.”

“No, we all jacked it from time to time. But you were the only one who used the same sock. Hardly ever washed the damn thing, too. The way he earned that nickname is, one day, our sergeant saw the sock during a routine bunk inspection. Knew right away what it was. You should’ve heard him yell out, ‘Who the fuck’s bunk is this? Who the fuck created this cum-starched violation of humanity?’ Then he lined us up, cum sock in his hand, and he marched in front of us. He sure as fuck knew it was Carter’s, but he wanted him to admit it. So he just stalked back and forth in front of our line, ranting about bio hazards and how, if the military isn’t allowed to use biological or chemical weapons in warfare, that sure as fuck means its soldiers aren’t allowed to create them, either. Sergeant Collins was on the warpath and he would not stop until the man who created the sock came forward.”

“I owned up to it,” Hammer says, regaining his composure. “I didn’t hesitate.”

“That’s true,” Mike says. “As soon as Sergeant Collins let anyone get a word in, Carter opened his mouth and took responsibility, just like a man. Then he took one in the face when the Sergeant smacked him with his own sock. It was the crunchiest smack I’ve ever heard in my life. White flakes flew all over the place like dandruff from god’s dirty dick.”

“Oh, he whipped me ragged with that thing,” Hammer says, laughing. “It was so starched and rough, it scratched my face.” He gestures to a spot on his cheek. I squint and lean in to see what he’s pointing to. “Hard to see beneath the beard, but it even gave me a scar.”

“That why you grew that thing on your face? To hide the scar from your cum sock?” Mike says. “I have to say, covering up sure is an improvement.”

“Don’t go there, Mike. Remember when we first got out of boot camp and you tried to do Movember? Remember what Sergeant Collins called you?”

Mike howls with laughter, then descends into a fit of hacking coughs.

“Private Pubestache! Oh, I miss that old bastard. He hated everyone and everything and made you better for suffering his hate. Whatever happened to him?”

Hammer grins. “Retired. I heard through the grapevine he got into baking. His pies win awards at the state fair in New Hampshire. Someone sent me a picture of the old guy, wearing an apron and holding up his prize-winning pie with this big fucking grin. You would not believe it’s the same person.”

“You’re fucking kidding me. I wish I wasn’t dying like some fucking loser. I’d share a pie with that crotchety son of a bitch.”

“Maybe someday, Mike. You never know, sometimes the doctors, they get things wrong.”

Mike looks like he’s going to say something, then shakes his head and looks at me.

“Hey Kira, I don’t want to be rude, but do you mind if Carter and I have some time to catch up? This asshole

disappeared off the face of the earth for years and he owes me a few stories over some beers. The spare bedroom's down the hall, there's a shelf full of books — I know I don't look like it, being a fucking jarhead and all, but I love me a good story — and there's a desk, a computer, no password on it, so you can use it for whatever you want. Even porn. There's a mini-fridge with some snacks, too. One day, I thought I'd turn that room into a full office, write my life story. Course, plans change and life stories turn out to be shorter than you planned. But the guest room's all yours. It's got its own bathroom, too. With a shower.”

Books, a bed, and a fridge of snacks?

And a shower. Oh sweet heaven, a shower.

“I'll let you two catch up,” I say. “Thank you, Mike.”

It takes effort not to skip down the hall.

It feels like finally I'm able to leave this entire kidnapping nightmare behind me.

Me. Alone.

With a shower.

With a bed.

With *books*.

* * * * *

After several showers and a beer, I feel refreshed, relaxed, and human for the first time in what seems like forever, though it's only been a few days. It's amazing what washing yourself in almost scalding water can do for your state of mind.

For the moment, all the trauma feels distant. Like it happened to a different person, not the Kira who's got a towel wrapped around her head and a pilsner in her hand, but some other Kira.

No, this Kira, all she has to worry about is the man in the other room who's going through an emotionally taxing conversation catching up with his best friend. And, as much as I want to be there for him, I know he has to go through this

part alone. There are things he and Mike need to say to each other that they can only say to each other. Me, I just have to be here for the aftermath. To listen to Hammer as he processes his friend's impending death.

But that comes later.

Right now, I have more pressing business.

After my shower, I find a bathrobe — plain white, a little big, but soft and fluffy — and I put it on. A sigh of sublime contentment escapes my lips.

Then I sit in front of Mike's computer and check my email.

My family's probably worried about me. I need to check in with them.

In my inbox, I have two new emails that aren't offers for extended warranties for my non-existent car. There's one from my mom and one from my sister, both wondering where I am and why I haven't been answering my phone.

I'm not surprised I've got an email from my mom. In her own way, she's a wonderful mom; solicitous and loving, which helps compensate for her choosing terrible partners, like my father.

Though my father's dead. No longer a problem. Murdered by that butcher, the Vulture.

I still don't know how I feel about that.

He left when I was young, stole from the family and left to go indulge himself in the addictions he never really attempted to kick — gambling, drugs. Addictions that led to him gifting my mother bruises whenever they'd fight, and receiving threats from my grandmother, threats that, now that I'm older and recall their specificity and tone, make me realize they were more than threats. They were promises.

I read through my mother's email. Her concern is clear, and her mentioning that she's sorry that I missed my interview at that bookstore, though, according to her, I shouldn't be too sad because it never would have lead anywhere — *except to my dream career, mom* — and that it isn't too late to go back to

school and get a degree in something like nursing, where there's an actual career path, is clearly her; that's my mom, always loving, yet always pushing at the same time.

There's something else buried in my mother's email: a hint that she knows about what's going on with Vulture. A suggestion that I be careful these next few days.

My grandmother must've warned her.

No, I'm not surprised to hear from my mother, or that my grandmother is doing her best to protect us all.

But I am surprised that my sister's reached out. Nadia Marinova isn't known for her consideration, her empathy, or her ability to manage her finances. She takes after our father that way. Last I'd heard, she was headlining one of Portland's many strip clubs, raking in cash, considering an OnlyFans, and teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

I answer my mom.

I let her know that I'm alive, that grandmother sent someone to take care of me, and soon will be going somewhere with a man who will watch over me until the coast is clear.

Then I read Nadia's email.

It's... different.

Probing.

But also unaware in a mystifying way. There's no mention of any danger; my sister just wants to know where I am and why I haven't answered my phone lately. The email ends with here saying 'Love and miss you.'

I can't remember the last time Nadia said that.

She must be having an episode. I wonder what she's on now?

Ecstasy?

Still, I fill her in.

Then I settle on the bed with a book, a Wild West historical fiction. It isn't my usual type, but it's the best of what Mike

has in his bookcase, which otherwise contains a bunch of biographies of famous men, business books, a coffee-table book on tables, and a surprising amount of pornographic magazines.

So, cowboy book it is.

I'm halfway through the book when the bedroom door opens.

Hammer enters, his face white and his eyes downcast.

I sit up and leave the bed, hugging him before he's even shut the door.

"You look exhausted. You should rest."

"Only emotionally. I've never felt so... empty. In a good way."

"How so?"

"I never told it to his face, but I've always thought of Mike as my canary."

"The bird the miners took down to warn them of poisonous gasses?" I say.

"Yes. I saved his life back in the day; we got ambushed on patrol, he took a bullet in the gut, he was bleeding out, and I did the stupidest fucking thing — the thing they warn you against on day one of combat training — I charged into live fire to get to him. Alone. Didn't even think about it. All I knew was that my best friend went down, and I was going into hell to get him. It made our friendship unbreakable; we were more than just brothers, we were tied by all the blood from that day. When we got out of the Marines, he started his charity, I joined an MC, and we never lost touch. That bond was made unbreakable by all the times we saved each other, the shared bloodshed, the shared suffering. I felt like, because we were so close and he was doing so much good, it helped make up for the bad shit I was doing. And every year, I'd organize a run with the MC to help his charity. We'd raise money, we'd bring gifts for the kids, we'd do something positive. At the end, Mike and I would talk. No holds barred. We'd have these long conversations where I'd catch up on his

charity work and he'd find out what I was up to and, as long as he didn't rip my fucking head off, I knew I was doing OK. But now...? Now, I'm going to lose that. I'm going to lose that. And all I'm left with is this empty feeling inside. Kira, can you tell me: how do you replace the irreplaceable?"

"I'm sorry, Carter." I pause, giving him a moment for the pain that sits clear in the azure mirrored windows to his soul. "I don't know how you'd replace someone like that. You're a good man to even care that you're doing the right thing. That has to mean something, too."

"It does, but you need to understand that I'm not a good man, Kira. The things I've done. Fuck, there are things that haunt me. Things I'd never want Charlotte to ever find out about. And now, without Mike... it's like I'm fucking lost without a map or a compass."

"You know, you could try listening to your conscience."

"It doesn't work like that."

"What do you mean? You hear that little voice in your head that says you shouldn't shoot someone and you listen to it." I smile at him, hoping to bring a little levity to what I'm about to say. "Don't tell me you have voices in your head telling you to kill people?"

"The voice in my head cares about one thing — keeping the people I love safe and happy. If someone was threatening the life of someone I cared about, and the best way to keep them safe was to kill the other person, I'd get my gun. If someone hurt you, I'd do whatever I have to do to keep you safe, because I..."

His voice trails off, but I don't need his words to finish the sentence.

"You care about me?"

It feels like I'm outside my body when I say that; like some bolt of lightning struck me and zapped me outside my physical form. Even though Hammer hasn't said those words out loud, they're written all over his face. In bold faced font. All caps.

And with a font size large enough that even Ray Charles could read it.

Hammer looks about as shocked as I feel.

“I do. The truth is, Kira, I’m a Marine and I’m used to fighting, to beating whatever it is in my way, and now I’m learning the lesson that there are so many things I can’t fight. I can’t fight what’s happening to my best friend. I can’t fight how it’s tearing me up inside. And I can’t fight how I feel about you. You mean something to me. Something powerful, something undeniable.”

“You don’t have to fight all the time, Hammer. Not with me, not ever. This is a time for you to put down your weapons, and just let me take care of you, however that needs to be. You can talk to me, I can listen, or if you want to just sit together, we can do that, too.”

“What I need is to take a ride. Clear my head. Thinking about losing my best friend has me all screwed up. You look worried, too, like you got something on your mind. You want to come?”

The invitation sounds hopeful.

“A ride? But you don’t have a motorcycle here.”

“Mike gave me his keys. He’s got one in his garage.” His voice breaks as he says that.

“What’s wrong?”

“He said he’s given up riding. He doesn’t have the strength for it, and his doctor told him he shouldn’t. It’s been over a year since he’s been on it. Kira, how could I let it come to this?”

I hug him. Hug him deep, strong, as tight as I can squeeze him; I channel all of my fervent desire to help him into that embrace. He leans into my hug and the weight of his worry settles onto my shoulders. It’s so heavy, but I bear it.

“You didn’t make any of this happen. You’re not responsible for what’s happening to Mike. And that’s not what matters. What matters is that you care and you’re here, now,

and Mike knows it. But let's forget about all that for the moment. Let's focus on what matters in the here and now — you and me. Let's go take that ride." I pause, considering, and then I'm struck by an impulse — some of my most rewarding experiences working with books have come when I've helped people find new books to read, books that have taught them things, enriched their lives, changed the way they see the world around them; it's profound the way books can do that. It's why I love them; teaching, growing, learning — it's a form of love. "Maybe you can even teach me to ride?"

Worry and pain disappear from Hammer's chiseled countenance, replaced by an excited grin. It's like he's come back to life. "Yeah? You'd like to learn?"

"No, I'd love to."

I'd love to learn.

And I love something else, too.

Or should I say someone else?

But those words sit on the tip of my tongue, unspoken, though I know I'll speak them soon enough.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Hammer

It's incredible, the things she can do.

With a smile, with a few words, with her touch.

Taking her hand, I lead her to Mike's garage, feeling the weight of pain slough off my shoulders.

Mike's garage is dirty, dusty, in disarray, and not a surprise, though hard to see all the same. Just another reminder that my friend is slowly dying, slowly losing the capacity to keep his own house in order, and that — much sooner than I'd like — his house will be empty. All these things of his will be nothing more than relics left behind by a man who used to be alive, who used to make me bust a gut laughing with his stories, who used to keep me on track, keep me from going too far gone. A man who used to be alive, but who will always be my best friend.

When he dies, these things will do nothing more than gather dust and spark memories both pleasant and painful.

“That's his bike?” Kira says as I pull the tarp off Mike's cherry red ride. “What kind of bike is it? Can you tell me about it?”

I know she doesn't know the first thing about motorcycles, probably hasn't spared them a thought before tonight. She's asking this for me, for my benefit, and I'm grateful for it.

It gives me something to hold on to.

She gives me something to hold on to.

“It's a 1970 Triumph TR6 Trophy. Steve McQueen fucking loved these. Raced them, and they used them in *The Great Escape*.” My voice goes warm as I run my hands along the frame. Memories flood into me, and my heart feels so full it could burst.

“Is it fast?” She says, eyes wide. Her attention isn't really on the bike, it's on me. To her, it doesn't matter what kind of

bike this is, it could be a fucking Suzuki crotch rocket or an easy riding Harley Superlow. It makes no difference — her interest would be the same; I'm what she cares about, and that's what makes these memories easier to dig up.

Because she cares, I'm not wallowing in them, longing for days gone by; I'm sharing them with someone who actually gives a damn.

I pat the bike, as if consoling it for what I'm going to say.

“Not really. Compared to what they sell today, it's not going to win any races, but it's fast enough to do what we need it to do. Mike bought this bike for a couple hundred when he got out of the service. It was a beat-up piece of crap when he got it, but then, so were we. We put another grand in parts into it, spent a lot of time scouring scrapyards to get what we needed, and countless hours of sweat and blood and profanity into getting it running. But it's a good bike, good riding, and it'll treat you right as long as you respect it.”

“So, are we going to ride it, or are you just going to stand here petting it?”

It's exactly the nudge I need.

All my worries disappear the second I throw a leg over the bike.

When she gets on behind me, life feels good again.

Those feelings of the good old days — time with my best friend, fixing a bike that maybe wasn't worth restoring, but then again, it never was just about the bike. It was about having *something*, a goal, a project, an objective after years of hell. It was as much about fixing ourselves as getting this rusty piece of junk looking good and running right.

“You ready?”

“Yes. What are you waiting for? Let's go.”

I fire the engine. The bike responds with a rumble that's at once foreign and familiar; how long has it been since I've been on this bike? A decade? Longer? Not since we first restored this mess of steel, shocks, and pistons. Not since we spent

blood, sweat, and a dictionary's worth of profanity in getting it running.

But, goddamn, did we build something beautiful.

"Hold on," I call over my shoulder. Then I twist the accelerator. And I smile.

The bike screams in joy at letting loose.

Behind me, Kira's voice erupts in a bright mix of fear and joy as we speed out of the garage and whip down the road. For the first mile, every turn, every straightaway — where I crank the accelerator and let the bike open up after so long in storage — she laughs and screams and yells for me to go faster, faster, faster; I know she's scared as hell, she's probably thinking — wishing — to go back to her books, but she wants me to live this moment, to step back to that time where life was simpler, easier, less heavy with pain and the knowledge that everything can be cut painfully short in an instant.

"Why so slow?" She yells.

"You want faster?"

"This is a motorcycle, right? Not one of those motorized carts at a grocery store old ladies ride around in?"

I can't help but smile at her. "You sure you can handle that?"

"Try me."

"Then you better hold on, bookworm."

I give her a second before I let it rip.

Immediately, Kira drops all pretense and screams like a girl experiencing her first drop on a roller coaster. Every nerve in my body lights up in the best way hearing that sound — I feel alive, my heart soaring high in my chest.

And fuck, does it feel great.

What a woman she is to make me feel this way.

That some day, I'll be free of this hurt.

Because of her.

When we finally stop at an ocean side bluff far, far from town, she leaps off and her legs are so wobbly it's like she's never walked before. She stumbles, staggers, teeters and totters like Jell-O and I catch her.

There's laughter. Hers and mine.

Staring up at me, eyes wide, the first words out of her mouth are, "Why'd we stop? You scared?"

"You want more?"

She smiles. Devilish, devious, daring.

"You know what? Actually, I want to drive it."

I chuckle. "It's *ride*. If you're straddling it, you're riding it. But sure, let me show you."

"Oh, you've seen me — you know I can ride." It comes out so fast, so free, that she doesn't realize what she's said until those words are hanging in the air. Then she laughs, and her cheeks turn bright red.

It is fucking beautiful.

"Let's get you on the bike before I change my mind."

"Change your mind? Why ever would you do that?" Her eyes dance in the evening light, mirth and temptation.

"You get any more beautiful and the only thing I'll let you ride is my cock."

"That so?" She taunts. Then her lips find mine. Hungry, relentless. Our tongues flicker together in a dance that sends my heart racing. Then, just as fast, she pulls away, smiling deviously. "That comes later. First, teach me."

"Oh, I'll teach you something."

"Yeah — how to ride a bike."

With wild enthusiasm, she throws her leg over and sits her fine ass in the seat. She does it all wrong. So wrong I forget about how good her ass looks, how deeply I want to bury my face in it, make her shiver and shake with my tongue.

“Hold up, bookworm. Let me show you,” I say, and I adjust her seating, her hands, her feet. Finally fixed and sure she won’t kill herself immediately, I run over the basics with her. Crank this, squeeze that, keep your hands here, keep your legs here, keep your ass here — not on my face, not yet — and everything else she needs to know.

She nods her head as I explain, paying rapt attention.

“Give it a quick spin. Take it to that tree and back,” I say, pointing at a spot in the distance.

“You think I’m ready?” She says, sounding unsure.

“You got a better briefing than I did when I was starting out. I had the worst fucking instructor, but I’m still alive.”

“Who taught you?”

“I’m self-taught.”

Her confidence wavers again, and I keep her from saying something stupid and self-doubting by pressing my lips to hers, diving into her mouth with my tongue, gripping her firm ass. “Stop questioning yourself, bookworm. It’s simple: go to that tree, turn around, come back, don’t die.”

“You just had to add that last part, didn’t you?” She says.

“Don’t want you to die. Kind of really fucking need you in my life right now.”

It doesn’t hurt to say that. Not even a little. Which surprises me because, before now, thinking about Mike dying would’ve felt like taking a knife to the heart, but knowing that I have her tells me that things are going to be OK.

“You do?”

“Just ride. We can philosophize later.”

She listens. She rides. Perfectly. She’s a fast learner; figures she would be, book-smart like she is. Book-smart and beautiful, what a deadly combination.

Twice more she goes back and forth, even doing a figure eight on the second try.

“Time for the next step,” I say, slipping my leg over the back and climbing on behind her.

“Both of us? What if I crash? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re not going to crash.”

Soon, we’re cruising down a straightaway.

First at the speed limit, then a little faster. Edging forward, the engine growling, then roaring, then screaming. Then my heart fills with pride when she calls out, “Can I crank it?” And before I can even answer, she yells, “I’m going to crank it. Hold on.”

Then we’re speeding.

Faster, faster, so fast my heart is ramming into my rib cage at full-force, my entire body vibrating with speed and the strain of the bike’s engine.

I tap her on the back. Can’t believe I’m doing this, being the cautious one. “Whoa, whoa, slow down.”

She does, guides the bike to a graceful stop on the shoulder. We slip off.

Then, pulling off her helmet — her dark brown hair a crazy mess of curls, a windblown rat’s nest, beautiful and sublime and wild — she grins at me from ear to ear.

“What’s the matter, Hammer? Was I going too fast for you?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grin at her. This feels right; at some point during our screaming race down the road, I left the last of my troubles behind. It’s just me and her now. “That’s good, but I sure as fuck didn’t want to go flying when you tried to take that turn.”

“I think you’re exaggerating. I had everything under control.”

There’s a challenging set to her jaw. A brightness to her smile. A fire in her eyes. She’s more fierce than she realizes. Not just some mousy little bookworm.

Maybe she never was.

Maybe this was always inside her, something she held back because, for some crazy fucking reason, she didn't believe in herself.

What a fucking waste it is that there are so many people who grow up believing they have to hold themselves back. That women like her are taught they have to be subservient, appeasing, when they can be so much more.

When I see Chains next, he and I are going to have a talk — I don't want Charlotte to ever think that she has to be that way.

“You know what? I believe you. Let's just leave it at that, shall we?”

“Fine. You know, it's OK to admit if you're scared.”

“I'm sure as hell not scared.”

Maybe I am a bit. Not scared, exactly, but cautious — aware of my fucking mortality — because she's new at riding, but she's already acting like she's ready for the fucking Motocross.

“Seems to me that once we got going fast, you were yelling at me to stop.”

“Shut up,” I grin.

“I knew it.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep it up.”

“No, I knew it. You were scared. I had you scared,” she says, pushing me with her words. Her eyes sparkle and her finger finds its way to prod into my chest. “I had you. I'll bet you've never ridden like that before.”

“Plenty of times,” I say, feeling irritation riding inside me. What the hell is she playing at?

She slaps the bike, taps the handlebars, and grins at me, tauntingly. “Then show me.”

“Show you what?”

“Show me what it's like to be scared on this thing. Come on, Hammer. Take me for a ride and make me scream.”

An urge to ride to her challenge, to truly let loose, surfaces inside me — and I rise to it. I get on the bike and she gets on behind me.

“You sure about this?”

“Show me.”

So I do.

Tires smoke, engines scream, gravel sprays and we tear off the shoulder and down the blacktop highway, the midnight air whipping by our faces, the entire world a blur of speed and adrenaline — I push the bike to its breaking point; we bend around turns; we turn straightaways into nothing but pulse-pounding, scream-inducing moments of sheer terror.

And I fucking love it.

Behind me, Kira screams like a banshee with a bullhorn.

I roar into the wind, giving vent to every frustration, every bit of anger, every pang of regret; I don't tamp those emotions down beneath the contentment of taking Kira for an evening ride. At ninety miles an hour, I rip them from my chest and hurl them into the wind.

It's catharsis.

Catharsis on miles of blacktop.

Catharsis in the screaming dark.

Catharsis through adrenaline, through horrific speed.

Everything leaves my chest

When I finally stop the bike at another bluff — the motor spitting a steaming hiss of gratitude at finally getting a break — I leap off and I howl at the moon. The pain leaves my chest. All that agony. All that fear. All that regret.

All of it.

Gone.

In the distance, there's the serene sound of the sea smashing into the shore, a sound nearly as deafening as my heart in my chest.

When I turn, she's looking at me. Smile on her face, the night stars shining in her eyes.

She knows.

“Do you feel better?”

“How'd you know?”

“That you needed to let it out? I just knew. Maybe it's different for other people but, for me, you're not a hard man to read, Hammer.”

“That so, bookworm?”

In this moment — lit as she is by the stars above, smiling as she is bright enough to make the moon look dim, after all she's done for me to heal the wounds I carry inside — she's never been more beautiful. I felt something for her the moment I saw her picture. An indefinable pull, a sense that I *needed* to get close to this woman, to learn more about her. But now, what I have for her is more than a feeling. It's as real as my need to draw breath.

What I feel for her is love.

“You know what I'm thinking right now, Kira?”

She grins. That smile turns heated, enticing, as irresistible as gravity. “I might.”

I close the gap between us. My lips seek hers. Kiss hers.

My heart quakes at her touch.

At the words waiting to spring forth.

We kiss. Long, deep, breathtaking.

The moment we part, I long to kiss her again. Crave it.

But I fight that urge, look deep into her eyes.

“Do you really know?”

“You can tell me. You can tell me anything, Hammer.”

Her mouth sits half-open in anticipation, for the truth and a kiss.

“I’m thinking I shouldn’t have held back. Shouldn’t have stopped myself from saying what we both know is true. You know I care about you, Kira.”

“I care about you, too, Hammer.” She pauses, peers into me, reading me even more. The truth is there, in the hesitation in my voice, the words that I really want to say that linger on my tongue because I’ve never said them to another woman. “But I don’t think that’s all you wanted to tell me.”

How does she know?

Because we have a connection, something that neither of us can fight, something that pulls the truth from my heart and makes me speak.

“Kira, I love you.”

She smiles so brightly the moon doesn’t have a chance.

“I love you, too, Carter.”

Leaning into me, she brings her lips to mine. Kissing me. Moaning as she does, her hands and mine exploring each other’s bodies, driving new, desperate energy into our hungry kiss.

“Why do you think I did that thing with the motorcycle?”

“What thing?”

“Driving... no, *riding* it. It was fun, but it was so scary I thought I was going to throw up.” She makes a face — an eyes scrunched, tongue out expression that makes me chuckle and pull her tighter to me. “I think it will be awhile before I ride like that again.”

“You were a natural at it.”

“Maybe,” she says, pursing her lips, kissing me. “But when it comes to doing things that come naturally, I’d much rather do this...” Then she kisses me once more — deep, intense, overwhelming — and her hands go right for my belt buckle. “And there’s a different kind of riding I have in mind.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kira

“You sure, bookworm?”

But before I can even answer, his kisses overwhelm me and his hands wander my body with hunger while his moans draw echoes from inside me.

“I need to have you,” I gasp.

“Right here?” He doesn’t sound hesitant. I’m sure he’s done something like this plenty of times. He only sounds like he wants to be sure, wants my consent.

“Fuck if I care,” I say. I’ve never talked like this before, but I’ve learned to be brave and go after what I want. And, right now, I want him. “I don’t care if anyone sees.”

“If anyone sees, they’ll just be jealous. If they say something, I’ll rip their throat out. Nothing else matters. I have to have you. Right here, right now.”

“Yes. Here, now,” I moan as he rips my pants and panties down. In an effort to be helpful, I kneel to the ground, my knees touching soft dirt and grass, yet hardly noticing. What I notice is in my hands — filing my hands with swelling heat — as I guide it to my mouth. “Let me suck you.”

Hammer doesn’t answer — he only moans as I take him between my lips, pump his cock to rigid fullness, and relax my throat before swallowing him to the hilt.

Oh, how I love taking his cock deep down my throat.

“Yes, Kira. Yes, suck it. Just like that,” he moans.

He grabs me by the head, locking a grip on my hair. I look up at him and meet his eyes. They’re so intense, burning with passion. In that moment, communication passes between us wordlessly — I’d never let anyone else grab my head like this, possess me, control me, use me, but I *want* him too.

My eyes meet his again in the moment before he shuts them, overwhelmed with pleasure, and he reads exactly what’s

on my mind; he knows what I want him to do, and he's ready to give me what I want.

Use me, I urge him.

I want to give everything I have to him. I want it. Want him to grab me, to use me, to hold me, to fuck me.

Use me.

Fuck my throat, control my head, make me take it deep until I'm choking, gasping, drooling, until I'm seeing stars, until I'm begging for you to cum so I can swallow every drop and lick your cock clean.

Use me.

With the stars watching, he releases a feral growl and his cock twitches and throbs deep in my throat.

This is it.

Overcome, he releases my head and leans back. He erupts in my mouth, and I take him in hand, stroking the shaft as he cums, licking and sucking and milking every drop from his thick cock.

Standing, I keep hold of his dick, still smiling as cum drips from the corner of my mouth.

Playfully, I wipe it off onto a finger and then suck it clean.

My heart is pounding with excitement and anticipation. He's still hard and we're not done by any means.

In the distance, headlights appear and grow closer.

As they pass, I wave cheekily, a little cum still on my fingertip and the corner of my mouth.

They slow. Hammer and I trade a wary look.

Are they going to stop?

Do they think I'm in trouble?

Then Hammer flips them the bird, and I do the same; our gestures are followed by the sound of an engine accelerating as they speed away.

“No interruptions,” Hammer says. “I want to make you feel good, as good as you make me feel.”

I don't have time to react before he takes me in his arms and bends me over his bike, his hands sliding down my body, spanking me, startling me before his tongue tastes my pussy from behind. I shiver and pound my hands on the seat of his bike in surprise at the sensation; one moment, I'm looking into his eyes, seeing contentment mixed with intense desire, the next, he's taking total control of me, his tongue exploring me in ways that make my eyes flutter and pull moans from deep inside me.

“Oh shit, Carter,” I groan.

There's a momentary pause, then the sensation of his finger sliding inside me, stroking me, and I gasp. That sensation grows, intensifies, as his tongue and finger work in tandem, teasing me and pushing me higher into the swirling, heavenly heights of a fucking amazing orgasm. His tongue twitters against me, darting from my pussy to my ass; his finger touching me at just the right tempo, just fast and firm enough to slowly edge me higher.

From behind me, he moans low in pleasure.

“I love the way you taste. I love every part of you. I could eat you every morning, every day, every fucking night and be a happy man.”

I want to answer, but my tongue isn't my own. It belongs to him, just like the rest of me.

His finger goes deep, presses into this spot that sends fireworks of pleasure erupting behind my eyelids. An exclamation bursts from my lips, a wordless cry of sheer bliss.

“I'm going to break you, bookworm. Break you in the best way. I want to make you moan and crumple to your knees.” His tongue does *something*, and his finger hits that spot again with just the right pressure, and my body begins to shudder and shake like a seizure, the tension building unstoppably. Gasps and moans erupt from me, wordless encouragement for him to keep going. He continues, stopping his tongue only

momentarily to say, “And when you drop to your knees, I’m going to pick you up, and then I’m going to fuck you. I’m so hard for you, so fucking hard. I can’t wait to feel your pussy around my cock. I want you like I’ve never wanted anyone. I need you like I’ve never needed anyone. I love you like I’ve never loved anyone.”

I dig my nails into the seat of the motorcycle; I bite my lip. A strident moan breaks free and I shatter into a sublime, shaking mess.

But already I want more.

“I need you to fuck me,” I moan. “Right now. Right now. Please, just grab my hips and fuck me like you own me.”

I never talk like that.

Or never used to.

But I’ve learned to be a little more impulsive. To demand the things I really want.

And right now, as my body is a quivering mess after this thunderous orgasm, I need to feel Hammer’s thick cock inside me. I need to ride this cascading waterfall of a post-orgasmic glow with the sensation of him, with our bodies joined, with his hands on me, with his hot breath in my ear, with his cum filling me.

“Fuck, you’re going to wreck me,” he says as he enters me. “So tight?”

“Just like you wrecked that van?” I say, winking at him over my shoulder. Or trying to. Everything’s such a blur of pleasure I’m not sure if my eyelids are working right to even manage a wink. Or if the words I try to say actually come out intelligible; my body is aglow like I’m radioactive.

He tightens his grip on my hips and I rock my ass back into him.

“God damn,” he whispers. I can feel it coming. Feel it, hear it, sense it.

I look over my shoulder — I want to see his face as he cums inside me.

First his eyes shut; I like to think he's concentrating, focusing, trying to hold on as long as he can — I love that I make him so hard, make him feel so good.

Then the tension in his chest. Tightness. All his strength going into holding on to enjoy me just a little longer.

His abs flex.

Oh, what a sight. There's so much power in his body.

A moan.

Another follows — deeper, stronger, louder.

His fingers grip my hips even tighter. It doesn't hurt, but I may have bruises in the morning, lovely reminders of tonight.

Then he shatters.

“Oh, Kira.”

He slumps forward, so flooded with sensation that he can't keep himself upright.

I lean back a little, let out a moan of my own as his cock brushes somewhere divine inside me. God damn, I love this man's dick.

“That van was nothing,” he moans as he slides out of me. “But you? You could kill me.”

Laughing, I turn and embrace him. Kiss him.

“Funny, because I feel you've brought me to life.” Then I hesitate a moment, thinking — the way my body is thrumming like someone has plucked a hundred harp strings inside me — and I realize that's not quite true. “Well, I haven't felt this way in a long time. There was that one time with EL James and then with Gillian Flynn.”

“I don't need to hear about your exes, Kira. That doesn't matter to me. You're what matters.”

“What? Ex-boyfriends? No, no, no...” I giggle, full-on giggle in a way I haven't since I was young, and pat his cheek with my hand. “They're authors. Gillian wrote *Gone Girl*, which was a huge, huge smash, and she actually did a book

signing and Q&A event at our store. I got to meet her and it was a wonderful experience overall. She brought in so many people that became long-time customers of our store. And then, well, EL James... I met her once at a coffee shop and she and I shared a table. We talked. It was... well, do I even have to explain?"

"Who is she? Or he? Who are they?" Hammer says.

"I do. I do have to explain," I say, feeling for a microsecond a passing sensation of doubt. *He doesn't even know who EL James is?* "She wrote *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Another book that did tons of business for bookstores."

"Oh. Good for her."

"Are you really the man I'm in love with?"

"I'm the man who would give his life to keep you safe," he says.

A question flies off my tongue, it feels glib, but it's one that's been buzzing around inside my head ever since we made it to Mike's home and the concept of 'after' dared to become real. "What about our relationship when all this is over?"

"What about it?" He blinks, and for a second my heart leaps into my throat in fear over how casual he sounds, as if there's some foregone conclusion to our time together. I have no idea how things work among bikers. Does him telling me he loves me mean much beyond the here and now? Or is it something that naturally terminates when all this is over? I feel like I could vomit in despair. "I don't want to lose this."

I breathe out the breath I'd been holding in for way too long. "You don't?"

"Why would I want to lose something that makes me feel like I've never felt before? No. No fucking way. When Vulture is dead, when you're safe, we will figure this out. I won't lose you, Kira."

"Promise?"

So much of who I have become has happened since I've met this man; the change that started in me that fateful morning,

when I finally woke up and realized I need to fight for what I truly want, has only accelerated since he saved me from the clutches of that monster. Sometimes the idea of being with Carter has scared me, but those fears have faded beneath the strength of our growing love and the resolute knowledge that Carter will do everything in his power to keep me safe.

I want him to say yes.

I want him to make that promise.

“I love you. I won’t let anything or anyone take you from me.”

I seal his promise with a kiss. A slow, lingering kiss that fills me with warmth.

Part of me longs to stay here by the side of the road, together, and kiss until we fall into each other’s arms again, but an icy breeze rises from the ocean and makes me shiver.

“We better get back,” Hammer says. “The club will be here early tomorrow and you need rest.”

Though I hate it, he’s right; we have to leave.

I’m hopeful as I pull on my clothes and climb onto the bike behind Hammer. In the engine’s rumble and the sound of the wind around us as we speed down the roads, I hear promise — we’re through the worst of it and we will make it together. In the end, all that will be left is the opportunity to build a life together — a life that we both want.

Several miles further, as we veer away from the ocean and turn onto a road that will take us back toward Mike’s house, Hammer slows the bike.

There’s an unfamiliar smell on the wind. A different promise. Dark, acrid, smoke.

As we slow, I look toward the source of the smell and see the flicker of flames not far away. They’re coming from the remains of a truck that looks more than passingly familiar.

“Is that...?”

Hammer gives me a look that makes my heart drop.

“Should we stop? We can help him,” I say.

Hammer shakes his head. “He’s already dead.”

“You don’t know that.”

His blue eyes tell me all I need to know; this is a sight Hammer has seen more times than I can count — at war and with the club. He knows what he’s talking about. If he says Bogdan’s dead, he’s dead.

“Who do you think...?”

“Vulture.”

We pass the burning wreck. Not far from the truck, I see other flames leaping in joy, dancing in the night as they consume. I see them through the windows of a house set at the end of the same driveway in which the truck burns.

Nausea overtakes me as I realize it isn’t just a truck that’s burning, or a house, but the people inside. Beneath the acrid scent of burning rubber and gasoline is the smell of roasting meat. Roasting, charring, meat.

I turn away, fighting down the urge to vomit and the tears that blur my vision.

We need to go faster. We have to get out of here.

I tap Hammer’s shoulder and he turns the accelerator, pushing the bike to speed us away from that nightmare. It doesn’t feel right to leave so quickly, despite the smell. But then I remind myself that, even if we stopped, we wouldn’t find anything in that house except death and ashes.

Still, I watch it fade in the distance, craning my neck to catch the last moments of the fire dancing against the horizon before the night swallows it whole.

Intense guilt washes over me. Guilt and a fear so strong it feels as if someone is strangling me; Bogdan didn’t deserve to die. Neither did his son. Bogdan only wanted to help us and his son had no part in it, except to be related to the man who showed us kindness when we were lost in the woods. This is the monster we are dealing with. A heartless, demented beast who will kill without remorse.

It feels like I can't breathe the rest of the ride back to Mike's home, and even when we stop in the driveway and Hammer pulls me into a hug, it does little to quell the fear and the remorse that chokes me.

How could I let myself believe that I'd be able to live some dream life with Hammer when the nightmare I'm stuck in isn't even over?

How do I know this won't happen again, with some other criminal in the violent world that man I love lives in?

"It isn't your fault, Kira," Hammer whispers, tightening his hug as if he could shelter me from the darkness.

"Isn't it? He wouldn't be dead if he didn't help us. That makes it our fault. My fault."

"Bogdan wasn't a stupid man. He knew the risks, and he chose to help us."

"How did they find him?"

"The people after you — after us — are professionals. And they're not going to stop. Not until they have you and kill me." Hammer places his hands on my cheeks, holding my gaze right into his eyes. "But I will not let that happen. I promise you, Kira, you're safe with me." A great sigh fills his chest and he breaks his gaze away from mine to look up and down the street, scanning every shadow for a threat. "You should get inside and get some rest."

"And you? Will you sleep with me?"

Without hesitation, he shakes his head, his eyes still grimly on the horizon.

"I won't be sleeping tonight."

And I know I won't either.

Even now, when I blink, I see Vulture's cruel face, his hardened eyes. In the wind that shakes the branches of the trees in Mike's yard, I hear the viciousness of Vulture's whisper and his promise to find me, to sell me into slavery, to butcher my family.

On that same breeze, I smell the scent of Bogdan's burning body.

Alone, in the bed, in the dark, I see in my nightmares the totality of everything Vulture visited upon Bogdan and his son simply because the old man helped us.

Is this what it costs to have Hammer in my life?

* * * * *

The next day, Hammer's club arrives.

They wake me out of a fitful sleep that came upon me like an ambush in the night, a stranger that snuck from the shadows to pull me into a nightmare; in the dark, I saw a potential future — Hammer and I living together, happily, until his life caught up with him to kill him — and the horror of that vision sticks with me as I wake up to the sound of a dozen motorcycles crowing in the distance, shaking the windows and vibrating my bones with their oncoming power.

I slip out of bed, still dressed in the same clothes from the night before; I didn't want to undress in case the Vulture found us and attacked. The idea of running naked doesn't appeal to me.

On the way out of Mike's bedroom, I stop to grab a cup of coffee, my tired body crying out for some relief. Hammers in the kitchen, too, holding a rifle that looks like a military weapon.

"Mike's old service rifle," he answers, noticing my look because it's not every day you see your boyfriend holding an assault rifle. Bags hang beneath his blue eyes, and even his voice bears the heavy weight of exhaustion.

I put a hand on his chest and he closes his eyes and heaves a sigh, leaning into me; I can't imagine the fatigue he's carrying.

"Don't tell anyone I've still got that old thing," Mike says. He's sitting in the living room, steaming cup of tea in his hand. Somehow, he looks more alive than yesterday, as if he managed to get some sleep last night. How, I don't know, because Hammer must've told him about Vulture. "The

amount of shit I could get in if anyone in the military heard I've still got my old rifle is beyond colossal.”

“Why do you have it?” I say.

Mike grins. “Sometimes you get attached to the dumbest shit. When I think about it, I don't know why I have that ugly instrument of death around — sorry, Hammer, I'm talking about my rifle this time, not you — but I got attached to that thing. It saved my life a few times. And then, well, someone owed me a favor, and that someone was able to pull a few strings and get that gun to me; officially, that rifle was lost in an ambush; unofficially, I keep it in a locker under my bed and only take it out every once in a while to clean it and stroke it in memoriam of times when I was younger, more alive, and able to use it for what it was meant for. Much like another part of me...”

“*Mike,*” Hammer says, cutting his friend off.

“Yeah, yeah, you and your modesty, Carter. You know, I don't remember you being such a prude back in the day,” he says, sipping his tea and casting a look out the living room window. “Looks like the leather boys you run with are finally here. You want to get out there and tell them to turn their engines off before they shake loose all the fillings in my teeth?”

With his rifle in one hand and the other on me, Hammer leads me to the door.

“Come on, let's go greet my club.”

“Both of us?”

I'm reluctant, suddenly scared to step further into this world. A world that these men live in, a world with consequences I saw on grim display last night with Bogdan's burning truck. I cannot forget that simply choosing to take the smallest step into this world cost a kind old man and his son their lives.

“Both of us. That's usually how introductions are done. Is something wrong?”

“No, no, I’m just tired.” I hide my reluctance behind a long drink of coffee.

It’s not just fatigue.

It’s the knowledge that I keep hurtling forward into a scary place, a lifestyle that’s wholly unlike anything I’ve experienced.

And one that, good or bad, can only end one way: with someone’s murder.

Love is pulling me forward, closer to Hammer, but there is so much fear pulling me in the other direction.

“The prez is here. I’ve got to get out there. Come as soon as you can, OK?”

“I’ll be right behind you,” I say, and I retreat again behind the coffee cup. Over the rim, I see Hammer turn and head outside.

I meet eyes with Mike. There’s a knowing look in that gaze — am I that obvious?

He shakes his head. “I had that same look on my face when I first found out Carter had joined an MC and all the shit that meant. And, if you’re looking for answers or wisdom or whatever, I’m just a fucking jarhead, I ain’t got them for you. All I can tell you is this: you’ll either fit in and love it, or you’ll wish you’d never met any of them.”

“Which one are you?”

“I’m Mike. The one who’s dying.” He chuckles, then gestures to the door. “Ain’t no use avoiding it. They’re out there waiting for you. Any delay is just going to look fucking weird. Get out there.”

I head to the door. Through the window, I see a large group of men. Armed men. Scary-looking men. Men who raise doubts and questions in my mind.

The fear that meeting these people — *my protectors*, I try to remind myself — represents just another step closer to the killing that waits in my future *holds me back*. *That, if things work out how they should*, there’s still going to be so much

murder — killing the Vulture and his men. Somehow, that thought doesn't ease my conscience much. I'm not sure if I'll ever be comfortable with murder.

As I grip the door handle and prepare to face the MC, I wonder...

Can I really live this life?

Chapter Twenty-Six

Hammer

“Glad you’re safe, brother. When Chains told me what happened, and when we found your bike abandoned, fuck, we feared the worst.” There’s genuine concern in Rabid’s eyes, which is an expression that still takes me some getting used to; there’s a reason my previous club, the Savage Bastards MC, fell apart — it’s because we didn’t share the same sense of brotherhood that unites the Twisted Devils. Each man here, regardless of his faults or insanity, would lay his life down for the others.

It’s a feeling I know from the Marines, but in an MC? It ain’t always the case and, when you find it, you fucking hold on to it.

Right now, I’m surrounded by it. It comes from every man in Mike’s driveway — from Chains and Bones to Havoc and Mayhem, even Tractor, who’s driving one of Ranger’s old trucks instead of his usual Harley. In the back of the truck, there’s a pair of bikes concealed under a tarp.

“Didn’t expect to run into a guy like Vulture. Had hoped I would’ve been springing Kira from some amateurs.”

“Who is this guy? Chase couldn’t dig up shit. He’s been calling all his contacts and they ain’t giving him nothing. Not even the FBI.”

“A spook. A holdover. I have no fucking clue. I got Old Testament, Cold War relic vibes from him. Kira says he has organized crime connections, and that he was taking her to some auction up north.”

“Auction?”

“Selling people.”

Rabid grunts and spits into the dirt. “Fucking monsters.”

“Fucking monsters,” I echo. “You guys see anything strange on the road coming in?”

“Aside from Mayhem’s new haircut? No.” Prez inclines his head to Mayhem, who’s shaved lightning bolts into one side of his head and, in the other side, flames.

When he sees me giving him a look, he grins like a loon.

“I swear, it makes me faster. There’s a measurable difference in my speed before and after this cut,” Mayhem calls out.

I just roll my eyes. “Prez, you sure you saw nothing?”

Rabid’s eyes narrow, the warmth drops from his voice. “What are you referring to?”

“Old man who gave us a ride to the bus station, we found his truck on fire last night.”

“How long?”

“How long what?”

“Between when he dropped you off and when you found the burning truck?” Rabid’s voice is clipped, focused, the soldier in him coming to the forefront — to him, it’s about time, about tactics, about planning for an attack.

“Eight, maybe ten hours. Didn’t check my watch, and we were busy before.” I can’t help looking over my shoulder. Kira’s watching from the window, her nerves clear on her face. I hate that she’s feeling that way, I hate what these last few days have put her through, yet, I’m damn grateful for them bringing her into my life.

“Then he’s close. Imagine he got some intel off that man who helped you, too. He may even have scouted this location. We’ll have to adapt. I’ll put in a call back to Ranger and Goldie will call Alessia, we’ll make sure everyone has eyes on the back of their fucking heads and is ready for a lockdown.”

Just then the front door opens, and Kira emerges.

“This her? She must mean a fucking lot to you to step into a hell like this. You love her?” Rabid says.

Those words silence everyone — from Havoc and Mayhem, who are loudly arguing about whether the 70s or the 80s were

a better decade for motorcycle engineering — and everyone fucking looks at me.

Me and her.

I answer without hesitating. Couldn't conceal how I feel about her if I tried.

“Yes, I love her.”

Kira freezes. Her face blooms red.

“Brother, I hate to tell you this, but it looks like your feelings ain't reciprocated,” Mayhem says.

Havoc shifts in position on his bike, turning an intense glare at me.

“Is this relationship coerced? Is she just having sex with you because you're keeping her alive? You better fucking hope that's not the case. Consent fucking matters.”

“No means no, Hammer,” Mayhem says, reaching for his gun. “Did you hush her ‘no's in the forest? Did you imply she wouldn't be safe unless she gave you what you wanted?” He slips off his motorcycle, his eyes on fire, a weapon in his hand. “Did you? Because there's nothing sexier than a ‘yes,’ but a ‘no’ is final.”

“Your silence is speaking volumes, man,” Chains says, adding fuel to the flames and grinning like a madman. He knows what he's doing, that motherfucking bastard; he also knows I'm not a forest rapist. “How could you prey upon that young woman? You monster.”

“No one coerced me into sex in the forest. No one hushed my cries for help,” Kira finally yells, halting Mayhem just as he's about to raise a knife right in my face. “I did it willingly. I love him.”

“You sure? It's safe, you can tell us the truth. If he hurt you, we'll get rid of him,” Mayhem says.

“Oh my god, you're all insane. Don't kill Hammer — I really love him.”

“It’s not insane to take this seriously. We have a younger sister, and if anyone hurt her, we’d make them pay,” Havoc says.

“Pay in pain,” Mayhem adds. “Just to be clear.”

Havoc snorts. “The pain is implied. It’s not like you can put a monetary value on suffering.”

Mayhem shakes his head. “No way. You see the news today? The courts put a dollar value on it all the time. Look at all the cases that get settled for cash.”

“The courts suck. There’s no justice in the justice system. It’s all about perpetuating the current social order and—“

“I swear to fucking god, if you get on another one of your classist rants, I will send you back to Ironwood Falls right this fucking instant,” Rabid snaps. “Kira, it’s clear Hammer isn’t hurting you. Welcome to our dysfunctional family.”

“Not too late to back out,” Chains says.

I flip him the bird. Asshole.

Rabid then gestures to Tractor to get out of the truck. Both he and Chains move to the back, where they throw down the tailgate and strip off the tarp from the bikes inside, revealing my old Harley Fat Boy, the first bike I bought once I left the Marines, and Tractor’s bike.

Chains gives my old Fat Boy a pat. “The bike you rode to Portland took some damage before we could get to it. I think some kids found it in the alley you left it in and used it for target practice.”

For a moment, I feel as if I’m the one who’s taken the bullet and not my bike. There’s a heavy weight on my chest as I picture my bike and all the damage a bunch of shit teenagers could do.

“They shot it up? Who the fuck does that?”

“Didn’t just shoot it up. They painted the biggest damn penis on there that you ever did see,” Tractor says. “It coiled around the whole thing from front to back. Sucker looked like an elephant cock on Viagra.”

“Elephant cock? On my baby? Oh fuck me, that’s just fucking rude.”

Chains shrugs. “One of the many reasons I worry about the state of things today. But I called Aurora and she and Sage went by your place, loaded up your old bike onto a truck, and Sage drove it up here. He’s the one who drove your trashed bike back to Ironwood Falls, too.”

“Damn, I owe Sage a fucking drink,” I say. “Where is he?”

“I’m sure he’d appreciate that. Or you can give him a ride on that beard you’re growing. He’ll be needing it, too. He and Aurora got a lot going on at the rescue — the Mayor’s dog had a boatload of puppies and someone dropped them off ‘anonymously’ at her front door. Sage got a call and had to catch a train back as soon as we got here.” Chains snorts. “Motherfuckers.”

“Just dropped off a bunch of puppies? Who the hell does that?”

“I’ll tell you who does it: a man who doesn’t have the common decency to get his dog spayed. Y’all hear the rumor that the mayor’s dog has had at least ten litters? It’s a wonder our town isn’t overrun.” Tractor says. “Dogs go into heat every six months or so, which means for the last five years, she’s just been flooding our town with puppies. I wonder how many dogs that is?”

“About seven thousand six hundred and twenty, give or take,” Mayhem answers without missing a beat.

“Excuse me? How the fuck did you get at that number?” I say.

“I made a couple assumptions. One: that each litter was five puppies, with two of the dogs being females and three males, because statistically, females produce more males in a litter as they get older and I know the mayor’s dog is getting up there. Two: that all the dogs lived and reached breeding age at six months. Three: that all females mated every six months, had litters of two females and three males, and that all dogs lived. Then you just extend it out over ten generations, calculate the

growth, and it comes out to about seven thousand six hundred and twenty. Well, twenty-one, if you count the alpha dog, the Mayor's Sandra Worthington the third. Which, I admit I am making a lot of assumptions regarding the offspring, but you have to. Plus, it isn't that big of a deal since we're mainly talking about a dog that always seems to be DTF."

"Holy fuck, who the fucking shit are you?" Chains says, open-mouthed.

Mayhem shrugs. "Math is important. If you want to build a bike that can go really fucking fast, it isn't just about putting the biggest engine you can fit in the frame, you need to understand drag, friction, torque, tons of physics. It all comes down to math."

"I say again: who the fucking shit are you?" Chains says.

"Mayhem." Mayhem steps in closer, squints, suddenly looking very concerned. "Chains, are you suffering from prosopagnosia? It's also called face blindness. Answer me: do you know my face? Do you recognize my voice?"

Chains squints, his voice comes out like an elderly whisper — soft and weary. "Who... who is that? Come closer."

Mayhem leans in until he's nearly touching noses with Chains.

"Is this better? Chains, I hope you can recognize me."

Then, quick as lightning, Chains puckers his lips and delivers a quick kiss to Mayhem's mouth. "I know who the fuck you are, you lunatic."

Mayhem doesn't move a muscle, except to nod. He's still nose-to-nose with Chains, who now is looking decidedly uncomfortable that his kiss didn't even phase Mayhem.

"Good. I had to check, because it'd be OK if you didn't know who I was, but what if you'd forgotten Charlotte?"

"You think I could ever forget my daughter's face?"

"Look, if you two are done making out, we got business to discuss," Rabid snaps. "Hammer, we need to talk about the charity run."

“What about it?” Tractor says. “We’re here, we got the money, we donate to Hammer’s buddy, Mike, right? So we just go inside and hand the money over. Seems like the end of it to me.”

“It can be, but seems to me that things are different from when we started and Hammer needs be a fucking man and speak up on it,” Rabid says. “Stop dodging the fucking issue that anyone can see is weighing on you like a fucking Abrams tank.”

The man is too fucking perceptive. I’d hoped no one would notice.

But even if they’d noticed, I’d wanted my brothers not to say anything. The less I have to talk about Mike dying, the better. My throat tightens even thinking about my best friend turning into a rotting corpse. He deserves better than that. He deserves to die at the ripe age of ninety-five, with a big happy family to be there for him at the end, and maybe a buxom wife to smother him with her tits.

Not like this.

“Mike’s not got much time left. What he’s got, how long he’s got, I’ll leave that to him to tell you or not tell you. But I don’t think this ride ends here. I want to do something for him. Honor him. He’s helped a lot of kids grow up to not be like me, and he deserves recognition for that. I want the club to throw a party in his honor when we get back, something to really celebrate him. To show him he’s a part of our family. At least he can have that before...”

“What do you need us to do, Hammer?” Rabid says. “You know all of us are here for you.”

“I got some savings, I can give more to his charity. It’s his life’s work — hell, I’ll give every dime I can spare. But it still doesn’t feel like enough.”

Rabid’s quiet for a moment. “Can he still ride?”

It’s an innocuous enough question, but somehow, I can hear weight behind it.

What is the prez probing at?

“He says his doctor told him he shouldn’t, and that he hasn’t been on it in a while. But, after taking his bike for a spin, I’m not so sure he’s been listening. I think he could ride if he had to.” When Rabid nods, something flickers in his eyes and it startles me. “You really thinking what I think you’re thinking?”

“We’d have to put it to a vote,” he replies.

Tractor clears his throat and interrupts with his trademark drawl.

“What the hell are we talking about?”

“Is your brain just stuck in the cornfields or whatever? They’re talking about making Mike an honorary member of the club,” Mayhem answers. How the fuck is he so crazy and yet still so sane sometimes? “Seems right, if you ask me. He does the world a hell of a lot of good and he’s already brothers with Hammer. Plus, I looked at his bike and it’s a classic, even if it’s a British machine. The TR6 Trophy was Steve McQueen’s bike in *The Great Escape*, Clint Eastwood rode a Triumph Bonneville in *Coogan’s Bluff* and.. Oh yeah, and the Fonz had a TR5 Trophy.”

“How the fuck do you know that shit and still manage to be a complete fucking lunatic?” Chains says.

“I pay attention to the important stuff. It’s a talent.”

“You sure you’re OK with this, prez? We can bring this up for a vote?” I say. As good as it’d feel to have Mike be a part of my family, I can’t forget that not that long ago that I was being patched in. I don’t want to use my shit situation to overstep my rank.

“Based on what I hear, a vote hardly seems necessary. Unless one of you assholes wants to deny a dying man an honor?” Rabid says, surveying all of us with a level, frigid gaze.

No one opens their mouth to object.

“Thank you,” I say to my brothers. “I’d have to sell him on it. Even as an honorary member, he might have some

objections to being in an MC. He wasn't always happy with the shit I did for my past club. But I think he'll accept."

It's easier to smile in that moment than it has been in a long time. With Kira by my side, with the chance to do something for my friend that will be truly meaningful, then even though there will be pain in my future when Mike passes, it'll be tempered by the good times in between.

"He might object, but you can tell him that times have changed," Rabid says. "The club's changed. Hell, we've all changed."

"True, I ain't that same person. Got my head on straight," I say.

"And you've gotten fatter," Chains says, laughing.

Grinning, I reach out and punch him in the shoulder. "You fucking ass."

Even though he's right — I ain't in boot camp shape anymore. Still, it feels damn fine to have things going in the right direction. With Kira in my life and a chance to make Mike a part of my club, I might have finally found a way to fill that emptiness in my heart.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Kira

When the morning sun ascends the sky, it isn't just the heat of its rays that warms my body, it's the look Hammer gives me; it's a look that says everything that happened earlier — publicly declaring his love for me, and his club declaring me a part of the family — wasn't just for show, it's for real; there's a family being woven around me with every passing moment, tight and warm. I may have my doubts, but it feels divine to be wanted and accepted.

From that point on, it's a flurry of activity for us to get ready, and then we're back to the driveway, with Hammer sitting astride his bike, looking at me with eyes deep with love.

He pats the seat of his bike. "We're riding south. Taking the long way. You ready, bookworm?"

My cheeks flush, and a grin overtakes my lips. It isn't just the freedom at the end of the journey that has me smiling, it's the idea of taking this long ride with him. There's something about being so close to Hammer on the road and being a part of his unchained element that is so intensely satisfying.

"I am."

I slip onto the bike behind him. It's surprising how easy the motion is now; I've just taken to this life. How things have changed. One minute, I'm happy as a clam behind the counter at a small independent bookstore and dreaming of a better life working at the biggest bookstore in town, the next moment I'm using my hands and thighs to clutch tight to the man I love while we hit the road with a caravan of bikers and with a killer on our trail.

It's strange how just the right circumstances can spur such growth — can take me from agonizing over my crappy boyfriend to bravely facing death and trusting my life to a man who stands head and shoulders above all others.

"You packed? You got everything?" Hammer says over his shoulder.

As if I have anything to pack.

“I have everything I need right here,” I say, squeezing him.

The vibrations of his chuckle rumbles through his chest, a thrumming sensation that compliments the rolling thunder of the bike’s engine. He turns and I lean forward to meet him. Our lips find each other.

“We got a long ride ahead of us.” He kisses me again, his stubble tickling my face. I lean into him. He smells good, fresh, and it pulls me to him like a magnet. “Got to take the long route home, keep out of sight. You good for that?”

Am I good for that?

For more time with Hammer?

How is that even a question?

“Yes, I’m good.”

“Then let’s go, bookworm,” he says.

He signals to his club that we’re ready to ride. Everyone — even Mike, who’s on his old Triumph, looking excited, energetic, exhausted, and sickly at the same time — starts on the road and soon Mike’s place is nothing pinprick on the horizon behind us.

It’s a long ride, a snaking path east of Everett and through the mountains. We stop at little towns along the way; at bars that barely have a name because their signs are so faded, and diners that look weather-worn and ramshackle on the outside, but brim with hospitality and warmth on the inside. And no matter how remote a place we stop at, it seems someone always knows *someone* in the club — Chains and Hammer especially. But the entire ride through Eastern Washington, then south across the mighty Columbia River, further through northeastern Oregon, and then west across the mountains and toward Portland and then on to Ironwood Falls, it doesn’t matter where we stop; it feels like an extension of home.

I’ve never felt like this before, so far from the places I’m familiar with, and yet, no matter how small the bar, how small the town — if some of the minuscule collections of buildings

we stop at could even be called towns — I'm always greeted like a dear friend, like family, like, if I needed it, this place could be a home for me, no questions asked.

It's a strange experience, but a welcome one.

At a small diner in Ellensburg I eat a piece of pie that could best be considered a religious experience, given to us by a waitress who earns a glare from me when she tries to get a little too friendly with Hammer; in tiny Toppenish, we stop at a brewery run by someone Chains knew from his life with his previous MC, and I make the mistake of trying a beer without asking what type it is, which leads to me taking a sip of an IPA so bitter it feels like it's ripping the enamel off my teeth; and in The Dalles, Hammer and I share barbecue from a little shack run by a transplant from South Carolina, and I eat enough that I feel like a bike isn't necessary, I could just roll back to Portland under the power of my portliness.

It's a trip of new experiences, a break from the terror behind us and a chance to step into a different world.

And then we reach the aptly named community of Zigzag, Oregon, a bare assemblage of buildings in the shadow of the volcanic Mt. Hood.

We stop in the parking lot of a roadhouse and I hop off the bike, stumbling, my ass sore and thrumming with the numbing vibrations of hundreds of miles. It's a wonder I can walk at all.

"You need anything?" Hammer says, heading for the door, along with most of the men in the club.

"A cushion, maybe? I don't know how I'm walking right now. Everything is *numb*."

His eyes flicker down, visually caressing my hips and thighs, and his lips quirk up.

"I don't know. I'd say you got just the right amount of cushion. Wouldn't change a thing."

I roll my eyes. "I'm going to take a walk, see if I can get some feeling back in my butt."

"I can help with that, if you need."

“I’m sure you can,” I answer, walking toward the back of the roadhouse, where the parking lot gives way to mossy old growth forest. The air is so fresh here, and simply breathing it in brings life back to my body.

Hammer disappears into the roadhouse, and I continue to walk the edge of the lot, lost in thoughts that mostly dwell on how good it feels to experience life with him. Then, as it always does, my mind wanders further — to what happens once we get to Ironwood Falls and put the Vulture behind us. They’re happy thoughts, enticing possibilities, like building a life with Hammer, somehow. Maybe there’s a bookstore in Ironwood Falls I could work at, because anywhere where most sane people live, there’s usually at least *something* resembling a bookstore. If not, maybe I could find something bookstore-adjacent to do, like working for a library or a school, something where I’m surrounded by people who like reading and learning. It wouldn’t be my ideal, but it wouldn’t be that bad, either. Not as long as I’m with him.

I’m so lost in my head that I don’t hear Mike’s voice at first, not until I’m nearly upon him. He’s on the phone with his back to me. His voice is low, urgent, and his eyes are focused squarely on the door to the roadhouse.

“How long?” There’s a pause, one pregnant with tense anticipation. I slow. Stop. Feel both guilty at listening and loath to interrupt by announcing my presence. “You’re sure? And the radiologist concurs? Fuck. No, I’m sorry, I’m not directing it at you. Just at fucking life. Or lack of it. Yeah, things have felt different lately, weaker. Things don’t work like they used to, but I never would have guessed it spread that far, that fast. What’s that? You want to know where I am?”

I look around, wondering if I can sneak away. I shouldn’t be overhearing this conversation. Wish I wasn’t overhearing it, either. This is big, painful news and I’m just the unlucky fool who stumbled into it.

Mike pauses, looks to the sky, his shoulders rise and fall with a sigh.

I can hardly breathe. I know I shouldn't be listening, I shouldn't be here — this conversation isn't meant for me, this is for Mike and his doctor alone — but I can't move without giving myself away. And, if I do that, how would Mike react? Would he be angry? Would Hammer be forced to pick a side, to choose between me or his dying best friend that he considers a brother?

I don't want to find out how that choice would go.

And I don't want to put Hammer through that pain, either.

“No, I'm not at home. I'm on the road with some friends. A road trip. My last one, apparently. No, I know I shouldn't do this shit. I've been crunching meds like fucking Pez just to keep up, but I'd rather go out doing something I love than sitting in a bed waiting for my organs to fail and for that dignified moment where I sloppily shit myself.” He stops, chuckling, a laugh that descends into a hacking cough. Finished, he wipes blood from his mouth and listens to his phone for a moment. “Yeah, I know. I'll call you when I get there. Maybe I'll even make it back to Everett. Though who knows? I mean, less than a month left? Likely just a week or two? Fuck me. Don't write my name on the appointment calendar in pen, cause I'll probably be dead before then.”

A month.

Mike ends the call and slips his phone into his pocket, swaying as he does so. His shoulders slump, his posture, too, all sense of military rigidity gone.

Slowly, he runs a forearm across his face and then another ripping cough doubles him over. Wheezing, gasping, clawing at this throat, he crumples.

I waver.

What do I do?

I shouldn't give away that I'm here, but I can't just stand here while he literally coughs up a lung.

While I stand in indecision, the cough continues, stretching into seconds, until he's got his hands on his knees and looks as if he's about to fall over.

I can't stay away any longer, so I go to his side and put my hand on his back, trying to comfort him as best as I can.

It amounts to patting him between the shoulders and feeling incredibly awkward.

Then he reaches out and grabs me by the leg, clutching to me for support.

Not knowing what to do, or if there's anything I can do — *what do you do for a man who knows he's going to die?* — I just stand there, patting him, while convulsions wrack his body and he squeezes my knee.

After nearly a minute, he finishes.

Face gray, breath rattling in his throat, he straightens himself and looks me in the eye.

His are bloodshot, the veins standing prominent from the lung-wracking exertion.

“You heard.”

It's not a question.

“I didn't mean to.”

“Didn't want you to, either.”

“I'm sorry, if that helps. Both for overhearing and for... you know...”

“That I'll be dead in a week?”

“Yeah, that.” I shift on my feet, feeling awkward, wishing I knew what to do, what to say. “Are you going to tell Hammer?”

“That I may be dead by the end of the week and, if not then, definitely before the end of the month? No, I'm not planning on it.”

“You're not?”

How can he not? They're best friends. It seems to me an incredibly shitty and selfish thing to not tell your friend that your death may interrupt the upcoming party they're throwing in your honor.

Either I'm too open, or Mike is skilled at reading faces, because he looks like he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"No, I'm not. If any of the luck I had in the Marines is still around, I'll last long enough to be patched in to my best friend's MC and go out with a cut on my chest," he says, tapping his hand to his heart. He breathes, straightens, forces the military form back into his posture. "And I will not ruin everything they have planned by telling anyone that my tumors are squeezing my insides tighter than a hug from creepy uncle Earl at the family Christmas party. And if I die before the party, well, what the fuck does it matter to me? I'll already be dead. You can think what you want, Kira. This is just how it is."

"He should know, Mike. You can't keep this a secret from him. It'll crush him. He deserves to know the truth."

"Deserves? I know he's trying to make up for how things were, Kira, but Carter dropped off the face of the fucking earth for years. If he gets hurt, oh well, that's just fucking karma. And besides, it's my life. I'll decide who deserves to know what, and when they deserve it. But I'm not going to tell Carter anytime soon, and you aren't, either."

"I'm not?"

Hammer saved my life, I owe him so much, and the least I should do for the man that I love is try to spare him from the pain that Mike may end up inflicting on him.

"You're not. You're not going to tell him, and you're going to swear to me right now that you won't, or else you won't like the consequences."

I take a step back. "What are you saying?"

Mike takes a step forward and looms over me. Even on the verge of death, he's still a scary figure.

"You won't say a fucking word. Let me put it to you like this: I ain't got nothing to lose, Kira. But you got plenty to lose. So, if you try to undermine me on this, if you go behind my back, I will burn your life to the ground. Your life, your

relationship with Hammer, every fucking thing I can ruin, I will. Are we clear?”

I swallow. My eyes return to the roadhouse doors, to the safety that isn't coming, and then look at the man in front of me: a man on the verge of death, determined to die on his own terms, even if that means hurting the man I love.

“I won't tell him.”

Just then, the doors to the roadhouse open and the club comes through.

Mike turns, grinning, all smiles, as if he wasn't just threatening me. His voice booms, showing no trace of the hacking weakness that dominated him before.

“You ladies finally done with your piss break? Come on, we've got a party to get to.”

Hammer laughs and calls out something in reply.

I hardly hear the voice of the man I love, my heartbeat is deafening — all I can think about is how now I'm stuck keeping a secret that's like a time bomb.

And the second it goes off, it will blow apart everything I love.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Hammer

There have been few days in my life as happy as today.

Today, I've had my bookworm on my bike for most of the day, her hands on my waist, her legs clutching me tight, as close as we can be without taking our clothes off, all while the road rolls by at eighty miles an hour. On its own, that'd be enough to have me smiling in a way that'd make Mayhem ask me if I'm losing my mind, or Chains telling me that there's something stuck in my teeth just so I'll look like a fool checking myself out in the mirror.

But that having Kira on my bike also comes with Mike riding at my side means today is a day that has few equals in terms of happiness.

There's been a lot of death in my life, but having these people with me makes it all fade into the background.

Today's just that good.

And, if recent events are any sign, these good days won't be so rare anymore.

With Kira, I have what I've always wanted: someone to come home to, someone that makes it all worth it, someone that I can take care of, but that can just as easily take care of me when I need it; a true partner.

When we roll into the parking lot of The Noble Fir, I'm off my bike whooping like I'm a green Marine fresh out of boot camp graduation — the world seems bright, the shit seems behind me, and maybe I'm just too fucking ignorant to know the hell that waits in my future, but, for the moment, I'm fucking happy.

My whooping gets me a few looks.

I glare a challenge back at the staring eyes.

“Can't a guy be happy without people looking at him like he's lost his fucking mind?” I say.

“You were laughing like that evil clown,” Havoc says.

“The Joker?”

That wouldn’t be so bad. Heath Ledger played the shit out of that role, and Jack Nicholson, too.

“No. The clown that lives in the sewers and eats babies.”

“Who? Fuck, Havoc, are you high right now? A baby-eating sewer clown?”

“I’m not high. I’m talking about the trans-dimensional clown and enemy of the space turtle, Maturin. From *It*. Read a book or two, Hammer. Especially Stephen King. The man’s a genius.”

Confused — because it doesn’t matter how many times they say shit that somewhat makes sense, I’ll never consider Havoc or Mayhem literate — I look to Kira.

“He’s right,” she says. “About the clown. Not about your laugh, because I like your laugh. And I’m not so sure about Stephen King.”

“Oh, come on, King is brilliant,” Mayhem says, sticking up for his brother. “The stuff that came out of his cocaine-addled mind in the 70s and 80s was not only brilliantly horrifying, but incredibly human.”

Havoc nods. “Thank you, bro. King brings his characters to life, he gives them frailties and wants and desires. They try and they fail and they try again, and you can’t help but root for them. I mean, take *The Dark Tower*, for instance. There were some broken people in that book, but they formed such a powerful family. You’ve read it, right?” Kira nods, and Havoc continues, “You can’t tell me there weren’t moments where Roland Deschain and his *ka-tet* didn’t make you cry.”

“I don’t know...” Kira looks too confused by Havoc and Mayhem to even put a thought together.

“For someone who works at a bookstore, you really need to brush up on your literature,” Mayhem says. “Are you even telling the truth about that? Or are you just trying to catfish Hammer?”

“Who are you?” Kira says, taking a step backward.

The brothers trade a look.

“Just two guys who love our ol’ ladies, bikes, books, and blowing shit up. You got a problem with any of that?”

Kira glances at me.

Help me, she mouths.

God damn it. The last thing I need is to lose her to the insanity that is Havoc and Mayhem. I take her by the arm. “Come on, Kira, we’ve got stuff to do.”

I pull her with me into the safety of The Noble Fir.

Inside, it’s just how I remember it, and there’s something comforting about that, something comforting even in the passive, yet aggressive, glare I get from Molotov Molly behind the bar. Something’s got her pissed, but whether it’s something I did or something else, I have no idea. Either way, it feels like home.

I take Kira to the bar. I figure she could use a drink right about now.

“Two vodkas on the rocks,” I say, skipping the usual introductions because Molly looks ready to bite someone’s head off and I don’t want to give her any openings.

“No rocks for me,” Kira says. “It just dilutes it.”

“I’ll make it three,” Molly says, and she lines up three glasses, only one with ice, and fills them each with a solid amount of vodka. Then, without waiting for us to even pick up ours, she pounds hers down and then pours another.

“Are you OK?” Kira says, giving her glass an anxious swirl.

“Stress. So much stress. I’ve had moments where I just want to...” Her voice trails off. “Moments like earlier today, when I stepped out for breakfast after getting the terrible news about this big party that I have help put together with such short notice, and I look at the person in the fast food restaurant who’s throwing my hash browns and sandwich into a paper bag, and I see them smiling and laughing with their co-

workers, and I think to myself, ‘why can’t that be me?’ And then I realize I’m jealous of some seventeen-year-old kid wearing golden arches on their cap, and it just makes me even more pissed off. What the fuck is going on in my life?”

Another slug of vodka goes into Molly’s glass, then down her throat just as quickly.

Where other, saner people would keep their distance, Kira instead reaches out and takes Molly’s hand.

“I’m sorry you don’t feel appreciated. If it helps, I appreciate what you’re doing. I know that may not mean much since I’ve only just got here, but I am looking forward to celebrating with you as a part of this family,” she says. Kira pauses, then leans in and drops her voice. “This is going to sound like an odd question, but when you’re feeling stressed like this, do you ever have fantasies about burning the place down? Or anything like that?”

Molly doesn’t hesitate. “Yes. All the time.”

“Just that, or anything more detailed?”

I watch as Molly leans across the bar to whisper in Kira’s ear. It’s an animated whisper, full of gestures, chopping motions and, for a long several seconds, a vibrating sound from her lips that is either a growl or the sound of a machine gun.

Kira listens to it all, then she reaches across the bar to grab a napkin and a pen, scrawls a few lines, and then hands it to Molly.

“What’s this?” Molly says.

“A reading list. When you want to vicariously live out leaving your job in a blaze of glory, get one of these books, draw a bath, pour a drink, whatever you need to be really good to yourself, and read. It’ll help. I promise. I think you’ll like the third one on that list, especially. The main character kind of reminds me of you — she’s smart, beautiful, brave, but unnoticed by those around her — and I think you’ll really appreciate how it ends. Her journey is cathartic.”

Molly pockets the napkin, looking genuinely touched. “Thank you.” She pours another drink for herself and refills Kira’s glass. All she gives me is a pointed look with fiery eyes. “Hammer, I like you, but I like her more. If you do anything to hurt her, I will poison you. It might not be right away, it might take days or even weeks, but one day, I will slip poison into your drink and then it will all be over for you.”

“Shit, Molly.”

“Molly, he’s one of the good ones,” Kira starts.

Molly nods. “He is. Until he isn’t. So never forget that I’m watching you, Hammer.”

I make a note to pour my own drinks for a while. And to tip my bartender like my life depends on it, because maybe it does.

I drain the last of my drink, pour myself another, and nod toward a booth far away from the bar.

“Kira, we’ve got more business to attend to and we need to go somewhere a little quieter to take care of it.”

Quieter, and a little less hostile.

“We do? What?”

“We have to call your grandmother.”

Her eyes and face light up at the mention of her family. It’s beautiful. The same smile from the photograph, the same smile I can’t wait to see greet me each night when I come home. It lights me from the inside, makes all the darkness of my life seem a distant memory.

Before I can help myself, I kiss her.

The effect this woman has on me is like nothing else.

Kiss over, she takes my hand and pulls me into the booth.

The room’s quieter here, thanks to the sheltering walls of the surrounding booth.

“We’re going to call my grandmother?” She says, hope in her voice.

“She gave me a number to call when I got you safe. Considering where we’re at, I’d call this pretty safe. Wouldn’t you agree?”

A nod and a beaming grin is her answer.

I can’t wait to see what she looks like when I’ve gotten her grandmother on the line. The more I see Kira happy, the happier I want to make her.

And talking to Yulia means that we can finally figure out who Vulture is and what that evil bastard is after. One of the first lessons I learned in the military is that understanding your enemy is the key to beating them. So the sooner I can take care of Vulture, the sooner I can claim Kira Marinova for myself.

Taking out my phone, I dial.

I’m ready for the next chapter of my life with Kira. The chapter that has the Vulture dead and her and I discovering what it means to be in love with no complications..

What I’m not prepared for is a message that turns our world upside down.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Kira

As soon as he finishes dialing, he hands the phone to me and it rings in my sweaty, shaky hand.

In my head, I can hear my grandmother's voice already, still strong for her age, like she's got iron in her bones. I can feel the warmth of her love even though I haven't even said hello.

It rings again.

I imagine how it will feel to reconnect with her after all this horror. To have her to listen to me, to comfort me, to remind me that everything will be all right in the end. It's times like these where I long for my family the most, and that they haven't been here — and that they've all faced dangers and trials of their own — makes the longing even stronger. I just want this to be over, so that I can hug my mom and my grandmother and roll my eyes at my crazy sister like none of this viciousness with Vulture ever happened.

There's one more ring.

Then nothing.

Voicemail.

But it's not a normal voicemail. There isn't even my grandmother's voice, it's just beeping.

There's a pattern to it, but other than recognizing a pattern, I'm baffled.

“What is it, Kira?” Hammer says.

I hand him the phone.

He makes a face — focused and perturbed.

“The fuck?”

Then it changes. There's comprehension and alarm.

He takes the phone from his ear and scans the room, his eyes settling on a rough-looking man with a hobo beard in the corner. The man's talking to a woman who looks like his exact

opposite — well-kept, well-dressed, like a professional on a lunch break instead of a man just stumbled in from forty days wandering the desert.

“Ranger, get over here. Now.”

The man rises and rushes to our table. “Hammer?”

“Listen to this.”

The phone trades hands. The man listens to it, face screwed up in concentration.

“Morse code,” he says. His hands tap a rhythm on the table. The man — Ranger — works his lips silently along to the tapping.

“It’s just two words,” he says. “Over and over. ‘Danger’ and ‘hide.’ What the hell is this, Hammer? A prank? Or will I need to take Donna to my bunker?”

Hammer and I trade a quick look. Then he nods at his friend. “Nothing to worry about, Ranger. Thanks for your help.”

Ranger glances at him like he doesn’t believe him.

I clear my throat. “It’s my grandmother. She’s from Russia and she has a funny sense of humor.”

Ranger nods and grunts. “Ruskies, huh? Figures.”

He doesn’t even wait for me to respond before leaving; my grandmother might’ve grown up in the Soviet Union, but there’s nothing Soviet about her. I got plenty of stories when I was younger about how great it is not to have to stand in a bread line, or live off beets and cabbage, or be forced to make vodka in your bathtub.

Granted, my grandmother still made vodka in the bathtub, but that was *her choice* and not a result of being forced by circumstances. She just had very particular tastes in alcohol.

“Danger?” I say to Hammer once Ranger is out of earshot. “Hide?”

“Vulture.”

My blood goes cold.

I know he's after my family — my mother and my sister — even so, my grandmother has always seemed a step ahead. She's sly, crafty, and, as I've gotten older and thought back on some of the seemingly innocent stories she told me when I was younger, incredibly dangerous.

That my grandmother is running scares me to my core.

“What now?” I say, suddenly feeling breathless and overwhelmed.

Then Hammer reaches out and takes my hand.

It brings me back to the room, away from thoughts of being kidnapped all over again.

And, despite the gravity of the situation, Hammer looks calm.

Maybe it's because we're here, surrounded by his club, or maybe it's his combat experience, but either way, it makes me feel calmer, too.

I couldn't do this without him.

I believe in myself, in my strength and resiliency, but I know that I'm so much stronger having Hammer in my life.

“There are two things that are certain, Kira. First, you're going to be with me for a while. That shouldn't be a surprise. We knew that you'd be here until Vulture's taken care of, and I hope it isn't unwelcome. I enjoy having you around. I love you. The second thing is: we're going to have to be even closer than we first thought, because you shouldn't be alone. Not even for a moment.”

“What are you saying?” I ask with trepidation.

“I'm saying you should move in with me.”

“Move in with you?”

There's moving fast in a relationship, which seems like a logical thing when you're about to die, because there's a necessary level of trust you need to have with someone who literally holds your life in their hands, and then there's... this.

Moving in with Hammer.

After knowing him for only a few days, after experiencing near-death several times, after being threatened by his closest, dying friend that they will burn your life to the ground if you reveal their secret.

Holy shit, it's enough on top of everything else to take me from feeling crushed to absolutely hyperventilating.

Which is embarrassing — I composed myself well while escaping from the van on the way to the human auction, and also while wandering through the woods while being pursued by bloodthirsty killers — that now, of all times, the thing that makes me breathe like I have a peanut allergy and someone just shoved a spoonful of Jif into my mouth, is that, holy shit, Hammer wants me to move in with him.

“Yes.” He looks like he's going to leave it as simple as that — *damn taciturn men who think huge emotional decisions are so simple and straightforward* — but then his eyelids narrow, concern fills his baby blues, and he opens his mouth again. “I understand this is a lot to ask. Normally, you could always stay at the clubhouse, but it's not as secure as I'd like. There will be too many people coming in and out getting ready for the party.” He takes my hand in his. “You're too important to me, and I don't want to risk anything happening to you, Kira. I love you.”

Well, fuck, when he says it like that.

Before I even realize it, I'm nodding my head in agreement. No, not just agreement — anticipation, excitement, absolute readiness to spend even more time with this rugged, gorgeous man who makes me feel not only lusted after and loved, but valued.

“Yes, I'll move in with you.”

Chapter Thirty

Kira

Hammer doesn't wait after I agree to move in with him to get moving. Within minutes, he finishes his drink, has a passing conversation with Mike, then grabs something that looks like a connected set of duffel bags and takes my hand and leads me outside.

Turns out, those weird duffel bags get slung over his bike and become some sort of cargo bags.

“Saddlebags,” he says as he notices me watching.

The explanation is simple enough, so I nod, appreciating the ability to add more pockets to something. If only...

Then ready, he and I both climb aboard and ride off.

It's not long before we reach our destination. But it isn't his house. It's a bookstore that's across from a very busy bakery-slash-coffee shop called Sweetcakes.

“The Book Nook?” I say, looking up at the sign. Sure, I can appreciate that it has a welcoming name that really fits with the brick construction and the cozy corners and couches I can see through the large windows, though I prefer bookstores that have puns in their names. “Why are we here?”

He chuckles and gives me a look as if the answer should be self explanatory.

When I give him a replying look — one that says, *I am very confused* — he says, “I'm an ex-military biker, I live alone, my home isn't the most welcoming or well-decorated place. We don't have time right now to put much effort into redecorating, like putting holes in the wall, hanging up pictures, whatever. The least I can do is get you a few books so that my place feels somewhat like home for you.”

“So you're taking me shopping?”

A nod. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a thick wad of bills and peels off what must be a couple hundred

dollars. Being a biker pays more than I thought. I wonder where he got all that money? Or what he had to do to get it?

Quickly, I shove that thought away because I don't want the possibility of straying into darker territory.

"Sort of. You'll shop, but I've got to check in next door. The manager at Sweetcakes is Mayhem's ol' lady, and she makes the kind of cakes that'll make you think that getting diabetes might just be worth it. I've got to order a cake for Mike's induction ceremony and, since she's only getting a few days' notice, it's going to take some polite cajoling."

At the mention of Mike's name, I get uneasy and my eyes dart to the bookstore, seeking the inherent comforts I know lie inside. I hope Hammer takes it as me just eager to get shopping. I hope he doesn't press me, because I'm not sure I can lie to him.

"I should get going," I say, eager to escape before Hammer mentions Mike again, or asks me why my face probably looks so screwed up every time he says that name. "It takes me a long time to shop for books. I once spent an hour deciding what to buy at an airport convenience store and their book selection was only Dan Brown, John Grisham, David Baldacci, and James Patterson. Oh, and there was one Lee Child book and two Vince Flynn books, too."

Sometimes the best concealer for a lie is the truth and, in this case, it's true that I spent that amount of time trying to decide which book to get; I ended up settling for an outdated copy of People magazine and a miniature bottle of rosé. I still feel confident in that decision.

Hammer thankfully just hears me rattle off a list of authors and grunts, because, well, I'm the bookworm and I sound like I'm about to go off on a book tangent, and he has more urgent things to do, like ordering that cake.

"I'll come find you when I'm done. If you notice anyone suspicious, you make a hell of a lot of noise and I'll come running."

On face value, it should sound silly — *me? Scared in a bookstore? No way, that's my element* — but his warning rings in my ears as loud as a gong struck by a speeding semi.

I nod and head to the bookstore, as nervous as I've ever been to spend time around my favorite thing in the world: books.

On the way crossing the street, my wary eyes spot a dark car parked at the curb. Tinted windows, some kind of fancy German sedan — well, maybe German, I know more about motorcycles than I know about cars, and I know practically nothing about motorcycles, except that I enjoy riding them, both alone and with Hammer, even if they scare me.

A tingle goes up my spine.

Is it suspicious? It certainly looks out of place among all the pickups and family cars that line the streets of Ironwood Falls.

I hesitate, but only for a moment. There are new books waiting for me.

A little bell attached to the door by a piece of ribbon rings my arrival and a friendly woman standing behind the counter, on which is perched a small "For Sale" sign, looks up and greets me with a smile.

"Welcome to The Book Nook," she says. "Can I help you find anything?"

A shake of my head is my only answer. My voice feels trembly in my throat, and my heart is pumping with adrenaline as I scan the stacks, looking for non-existent threats.

There can't be any danger here, can there?

No, no way. The Vulture can't have caught up to us so quickly. The club took the long way here, so there was no chance we were being followed. And besides, how could he even know where we were going?

It's just my imagination, that's all.

Though that car out front looked awfully suspicious. Too expensive, too out of place for a small town like this, where

everyone else seems to ride motorcycles, trucks, or family four-door sedans. It could be him...

Kira, stop it. You're here to look for books, not reasons to freak yourself out.

Deciding that I need to go for something that'll help calm me down, which rules out thrillers, romances, mysteries and, honestly, most modern literature because I adore reading, I wander the stacks with a destination in mind: management and business best practices.

Might as well learn something practical for when I get back to Portland and, somehow, convince Powell's to give me another shot at that interview.

Besides, it's not like I won't get some fun books later, but right now, I need something boring and dry that'll keep me grounded.

Professional books it is.

Because most modern management philosophy books are the equivalent to literary morphine.

I quickly find the aisle and soon I'm surrounded by snoozers about Stoicism and its application in the tech industry, my head already feeling foggy with the numbing self-indulgence of these 'modern philosophers', when I notice motion out of the corner of my eye.

I look up.

There's a woman standing at the end of the aisle. Blocking it.

She's professionally dressed. Suit, slacks, a fashionable purse and sunglasses perfectly perched on her nose.

And she's staring right at me.

"Kira?" She says. I don't know her. So how does she know my name? Why is she blocking the aisle, trapping me?

It wouldn't be beyond Vulture to have women in his crew, to have people who don't look like hulking Russian agents of

death to blend in among regular people and help him catch and kill those he's after.

My heart leaps against my rib cage, and I turn the other way.

There's another woman there. Also blocking the aisle. She has long dark hair, darker skin, eyes also focused right on me, like I'm a target.

"Kira," this other one says. Her voice is steady, like she's trying to calm me. Or warn me not to make a scene.

I turn again, looking for a way out, but I'm trapped in this aisle. There's no way out unless I want to go through someone.

There's not a shred of doubt in my mind that Vulture's found me and this time he's using two women to capture me. It makes sense. These two stick out much less than his typical goons.

But how did Vulture catch me so quickly?

The well-dressed, professional-looking woman reaches into her purse, probably for a weapon.

I take a step back and snatch a hardcover copy of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* from the shelf, hoping it won't be just an effective tool for personal development, but also for self defense.

It's two against one and I'm sure at least one of these women is armed.

I suck in a breath.

If I scream, can Hammer get here in time to save me?

Chapter Thirty-One

Kira

“Are you okay?” The darker-skinned woman says, her voice flooding me with a sense of compassion and warmth. “Kira, do you need to sit down?”

She takes a step toward me, her hand out in a calming gesture.

My scream dies in my throat and the rest of me nearly experiences a seizure, I’m so startled by her demeanor.

She knows my name, yes, but she sounds way too nice to be someone who wants to kidnap me and sell me into sexual slavery. Experience tells me those people have terrifying voices, ice-cold killer stares, and, usually, creepy Russian accents.

This woman sounds... kind.

Somehow, I stay in place and keep myself from screaming while she comes closer. A gentle hand touches my arm and her warm eyes look into mine.

She smiles at me.

“I’m so sorry to have startled you. I’m Valeria Perez, Havoc’s ol’ lady. I should’ve known you would be wary because of everything you’ve been through.”

Taking a deep breath, I nod and force a smile in return. My heart is still racing, but I’ve got enough of my wits about me to know I should be polite and not smash her over the head with the book in my hands.

I put it back on the shelf.

“Hi. Sorry for nearly freaking out on you.”

“We didn’t mean to alarm you,” comes the other woman’s voice behind me. “I’m Claire. Claire Thompson.” She extends her hand and I wipe my sweaty palms off on my pants and then shake hers.

“Hi.”

One word is the best I can do; I still don't have my head fully together, and Claire isn't as warm or welcoming as Valeria. With her, I feel like I'm being sized up, judged, even though I'm sure the impression is unintentional.

"We were just shopping. Claire helps me buy school supplies from time to time, because the school's budget for supplies is shorter than *Candide*."

That's a book's title. I know books. I like books.

I shake my head clearer. Not completely clear, but clear enough that I don't feel like I'm swimming in a fog of panic.

"You like books?" I say. Wow, that was dumb. *Guess my head isn't totally right.* I clear my throat and chastise myself for sounding like an idiot. *Of course she likes books, she's shopping in a bookstore.* "Sorry, my head is still all messed up."

She smiles in return.

So does Claire, in a more restrained way.

"Don't worry about it," Valeria says, dismissing my weird mumbling with a genuine laugh. "Yes, I love books. Absolutely love them. I'm the high school's English teacher. And, although there's never enough in the budget for supplies, such that I often have to depend upon the kindness of others, like Claire, in order to have basic things like notebooks, pencils, and whiteboard markers, and the kids can be all sorts of challenging, it is my dream job."

"That's nice..." I take a breath, recover more of myself, and feel even more at ease. I like Valeria, not just because she loves books, but her smile instantly makes me feel more comfortable with myself. "I love books, too. All types. I work at *A Likely Story* in Portland and, just a few days ago, I was due to have an interview at Powell's. That was before all this craziness went down. It was going to be my stepping stone to my dream job, which is to get a Master's in Library Sciences and then be a librarian."

Her eyes light up. "A librarian?"

Valeria gets it.

God, it feels so good to talk to a kindred spirit. Someone who loves books and hears ‘librarian’ and actually seems interested, instead of ready to take a nap.

“Yes,” I say, and my voice quickens so fast my tongue can hardly keep up. “Everything they can do, from helping people find the books or information they’re looking for, connecting people with job resources, and even the way they stand up for the freedom of information and protecting people’s rights to privacy, it’s all so... *brave*.”

“It is. It’s another side of the first amendment, guaranteeing people’s freedom to receive information. We studied several cases in law school from the early 2000s when librarians were fighting back against government intrusion that was, ostensibly, to root out terrorists but was, in reality, and pardon my French, complete and utter fucking bullshit. It really is brave and admirable,” Claire says, startling me with the ferocity in her voice. I’d thought her withdrawn and only passively interested, but maybe that’s not the case.

“Thank you, but I’m not there yet. And won’t be there for a long time if I can’t pull off getting a job at Powell’s, which looks like it will not happen, considering they probably think I ran away instead of being kidnapped. Working for an independent bookstore just doesn’t pay enough to afford a Master’s, and student loans, well... that’s an option, but I just don’t feel like being in debt for ninety years.”

Claire gives me a look that steadies me. “You’ll make it. You’ll get the job.” I sigh, because as much as she’s trying to comfort me, Powell’s still probably thinks I just ran away, shut off my phone, and dropped off the face of the earth because I couldn’t handle the pressure. “I know people. Rabid knows people. In the police, in the courts, in other... less savory avenues... when this is all over, he and I can make some calls and make sure that the people in charge at Powell’s understand what really happened.”

Even though she’s not the warmest person I’ve met, she’s doing her best in her own way. I appreciate that.

Though I'm not sure if I'll actually take her up on her offer, because I don't know who the motorcycle club is actually connected to, and I suddenly have visions of very scary men ambushing the not-scary management of Powell's. I'm not sure if that would actually help my chances.

Still, it's not the action itself that matters — it's the intent.

To both these women, I'm part of their extended family; I'm included, I'm valued, I'm worth something.

"Thank you, Claire," I say, giving her a hug that feels way too short for me, but is probably way too long for her. "It feels so good to be welcomed by everyone."

We separate and then Valeria gives me a much longer hug, and when that one ends, her eyes light up. "So, you are here book shopping, right?"

"Yes, I am."

"Let me guess: Hammer's asked you to stay with him and his place is... um... very 'guy' in terms of decor, right?"

"How'd you know?"

"Trust me, I live with Havoc. And, while his case was a little more extreme — it was literally like moving into a machinist's shop that'd been hit by a nuclear bomb — I've seen how most of these guys live and it's like they're savages. No decor, nothing other than the basics and maybe, just maybe, something that might fit the definition of art if it were a scrawl on the wall of a Neanderthal's cave. Anyway, if you really want something to be excited about, come with me. I have something special to show you."

"What is it?" I say, very much intrigued. If it excites a fellow bookworm like Valeria, it has to be worth it.

"I know the owner, and I know where he keeps all his author-signed copies, among other things. He used to work in publishing, so he's got a lot of unusual stuff kicking around. Not just signatures, but early editions with author's and editor's notes, stuff like that. Most of it's for sale, too. Do you want to check them out?"

My eyes couldn't get any wider, and Valeria laughs.

“I'll take that as a ‘yes.’”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Kira

My arms laden with books and my heart full in a way that is refreshing and new, not just with love — which I get plenty of from Hammer — but with this familial, deep sense of friendship and appreciation from people other than the man I so deeply love, I step out The Book Nook to find Hammer casually sitting astride his bike, waiting for me.

There's a knowing look on his face.

“Get everything you want?”

“No, mainly because I want everything in there. You should've seen the shelf of first editions they have. And the rare books. Oh, I could spend a week just sorting through them. It'd be heaven.” Beaming, I hold up a random signed first edition, one of several that I bought at an insanely low price. I don't even know the author. I just read the jacket, loved the story, and got caught up in the fun of buying books. “The owner is a friend of Valeria — I met her and Claire, they're both great — and he's retiring soon. Health reasons. He's even selling the shop...” I pause, an idle thought pulling my focus away. “Anyway, he has all these wonderful books for sale at these ridiculous prices. I hope you don't mind, but I spent all the cash you gave me.”

Most of it got spent on books. Plus, I used a little to buy some supplies for Valeria's class to say ‘thank you’ for her connecting me with The Book Nook's owner.

Hammer grins. “I don't mind. It makes me happy to see you happy.” Then he pats the saddlebags and flips them open. “Let's load these up and get you back to my place. Or *our place*, for the time being.”

Our place.

Yes, it's temporary, and yes, it's only come about because of the very dire circumstances of me being the target of a professional criminal who wants to sell me away to a life of hell because of some offense my grandfather — who I don't

even know — committed against some criminal I've never heard of, but I'm not going to over-analyze it.

No, I'm going to enjoy it.

“Our place?”

There's a note of excitement in my voice. Well, *more* excitement, considering I'm already very ecstatic about the treasure trove of books in my hands, and that note may raise my exclamatory question to a seriously high pitch.

In fact, it's less an exclamation and more like a squeak, really.

But I'm not even embarrassed, because Hammer nods.

Nods, and his grin widens.

“Our place. We're living together, ain't we?”

“Yes, we are. So let's get home.”

In a hurry, I load my books into the bags and there's just barely enough space to accommodate my haul. There's an idea taking hold. A sense of something else I need to do to really make this town feel like home, even if it is a temporary home.

“Why the rush?”

The look in his eyes — a glance that both pulls me into a warm embrace and then strips my clothes off with irresistible desire — seals my resolution.

“Because there's something we have to do. Now.” I climb up onto the bike behind him, strapping on my helmet and slapping his back to express the urgency and strength of the idea that's taken hold of me.

Hammer, however, takes his time. Gives me a wry look over his shoulder. It's like he knows what I'm thinking. Which wouldn't surprise me. I know I have a very readable face.

“Got something in mind, bookworm?”

“Yes.”

He starts the bike, the rumble between my legs serving only to amplify my thoughts. Casually, languidly, he pulls us away

from the curb and into the street. We ride at a pace that is both glacial and continental — the planet has realigned itself faster than we cruise down main street.

“What could that be?” He says when we reach a stoplight, and he stops with way too much intent to stay stopped.

I slap his back again, hard, twice. “Will you just get us home faster, please?”

Grinning, he revs the engine for a moment — the vibrato roar of the bike intensifying my body’s needs and make that idea in my head something more urgent than a simple idea, like some horny genie has popped out from nowhere and put a sexual geas upon me. He knows what he’s doing, the tease.

“Why the rush? You don’t like Ironwood Falls? Look at the Main Street, look at some of these buildings. They’re old. Some go back to the late 1800s,” he says, moving his hand in a slow, sweeping arc of the old brick buildings that make up the charming downtown of Ironwood Falls. I’m sure I’d enjoy them, if my brain weren’t totally consumed with the idea of getting Hammer home, pushing him on a bed, and then mounting him. Probably his face, first, and then his cock.

Maybe I’ll sit on his face for a long while, make him wait to fuck me the same way he’s making me wait.

That could be fun.

Way more fun than looking at a stupid red brick building that has an old timey ‘General Store’ sign out front and a window display featuring saltwater taffy. Who eats that stuff? And why is it here? There’s no saltwater around for miles.

Besides, I don’t want to suck on taffy or a candy cane; I want to suck on Hammer’s cock.

“Old buildings. Great, how charming,” I say, trying to sound appreciative and absolutely failing. Hammer chuckles, and I smack the back of his head this time, hoping that will spur him into action.

“It is,” he says, pulling to the sidewalk and letting us idle there. Another sweeping wave toward the old buildings that I absolutely do not give a single shit about. “Took me a while to

appreciate it. Scenery's different in Eastern Washington, out near Spokane, which is where I'm from and where the Savage Bastards operated. It's all arid flat land, rolling hills, and farms and wineries as far as you can see. Especially when you get away from the river. It's amazing what people can get out of the land, isn't it? But here, it's all so lush, so green, sometimes I still can't believe it."

He goes on.

On and on.

God damn.

He's droning like that one old guy from the old TV show that was infamous for his monotone voice, and from that ancient movie where he monotonizes 'Bueller, Bueller...' and for his later, ultra-repressive political views which led to A Likely Story not carrying any of his books.

Thinking about that weird old man who wants to control my body makes the heat inside me dim.

I can't take this much longer.

So I hit the back of Hammer's head, hard.

"Listen, Hammer, I love you and, right now, I feel really great. Blissful. Happy. Ecstatic. Because all the bad stuff in the world seems so distant, and all the good things seem right around me. Now, what I want to do is pull you into bed and make you feel at least a little bit as good as how you make me feel. But, and this is a considerable 'but,' that feeling is going to fade and disappear if you keep being such a fucking tease and thinking I want to look at buildings and trees when, really, the only wood I care about is the one in your jeans."

To emphasize, I reach around his waist and place my hand right over his crotch. Yes, it's in public, and no, I don't give a damn; I've learned to be bold in going after what I want.

It works like a charm.

"Oh damn," he says.

The engine roars and we leave burnt rubber behind us as we speed away from the curb.

It's not long before we're pulling into the driveway of Hammer's home, an old one-and-a-half story craftsman, with a gorgeous bay window in front that looks made for reading on cozy autumn and winter days.

This is my home. For now, and maybe longer...

"Well, bookworm, we're here," he says. "You want to hear the history of this home? It's quite a story."

Fuck him, he knows what he's doing.

Even has a big ol' shit-eating grin on his face as he launches into his boring tour guide voice.

Well, I will not let him win.

I'm going to win this interaction.

So I go to play my trump card; I reach around his waist and grab his cock again. Firmer, this time.

Then, with my grip still held tight to his rapidly swelling cock, I rise a little and bring my lips to his ear.

"This can go one of two ways, Carter. Either you can sit here and tell me the history of your house, the neighborhood, and just why the house across the street is such an ugly color of green, or you can fuck my brains out in *our* bedroom. Which do you want?"

Sometimes you have to be firm.

And, in this case, Hammer is, too.

Very firm.

I give him another squeeze and he lets out a low moan.

"OK, bookworm. Inside. *Now.*"

Chapter Thirty-Three

Kira

We don't climb off his bike normally. Not this time. I latch onto his back like a feral monkey and he carries me, piggy-back style, to his front door while I nibble at his ears and whisper to him — well, more like talk at a regular volume that I'm sure the old woman in the yard next door, who is watering her ficus plant and staring right at us, can clearly hear — about how I *need* to have his cock batting about the little dangly thing at the back of my throat, and how I want to feel his cum spilling out of me, soaking my inner thighs.

Yes, I've become a lot more forward since meeting Hammer.

And, if the present is any indication — as he slams the door behind us, yanks me off his back, and presses me against the wall, kissing my neck with wild fervor while he rips my shirt and pants off me — I'm going to like where it leads.

His mouth is on my tits now; kissing, licking, sucking, pleasure surging from my breasts throughout my body.

I moan, clutching his head to my chest.

“Your body drives me fucking wild,” he says. Then he grips my shoulders, spinning me around so fast I gasp. His fingertips slip in the waistband of my panties, pulling them down. He follows them to the ground, landing on his knees, burying his face in me from behind. His tongue dances between my holes, teasing, licking, tasting. I shudder, overtaken by surprise and just how amazing it feels, and bang my hands against the wall. “But there's something else about you that gets me so hard, harder than your tits, harder than your ass, harder than your pussy...”

His voice trails off and I'm so lost in the sensation of his tongue going to town on my ass and pussy — *no, it's not just going to town on them, it's entered the town, taken up residence, and won the mayoral election, his tongue is the*

mayor of my ass and pussy — that it takes me some time to realize he's waiting for some kind of response from me.

So I manage an elegant, "Hwah?"

He chuckles and I shiver, then his tongue returns to its work. For being face-first in my ass, he's able to enunciate incredibly well. "What I've always wanted is someone to come home to. Someone special. Someone that makes the hard days feel worth it, someone who makes this empty place feel like a home. I've searched hard, Kira, but I've found no one who even comes close to you. You're it."

Why does he have to choose the time when he's eating my ass and making my toes curl so tight the knuckles are about to pop to tell me just how deeply he loves me? I mean, yes, I fall more in love with the man each moment that we spend together, but, damn, I can't even respond except to moan like I'm a zombie with a rabid hunger for brains while he tongue-fucks my asshole.

Which makes him chuckle.

Which makes me shiver with glorious vibrations soaring up my body from all the pleasure centers down below.

"You know, I don't think we can make it upstairs," he says.

Somehow, I crane my neck and look down at him. He's smiling up at me.

"Why?" Though it comes out more as *hwhyay?* And it's punctuated by me shutting my eyes, moaning, tossing my head back, and my knees wobbling as he swirls his tongue and does an incredible sucking motion on my clit.

I'm on the verge of falling when he catches me, bracing me by placing one of his hands firmly on my ass.

Then his thumb circles my asshole. Probing.

I'm all for it.

Except I don't have the words to tell him.

"Because my bedroom's upstairs. And I can't wait that long to fuck your brains out."

Another pause.

Is he asking for my permission to fuck me senseless in his entryway? Or is he looking for an alternative location and he wants a suggestion?

As much as I want him to fuck me right here, being fucked senseless right next to a shoe rack containing one seriously muddy pair of boots and a sheathed combat knife hanging from a coat hook isn't my idea of romance.

"Bay windows," I say, my brain grasping at the semi-romantic image of lazy afternoons spent reading by the windows, looking out as autumn colors overtake the yard and the air smells fresh with the chill crispness of recent rain, feeling content while indulging in the heated memories of what Hammer and I have done in that same spot; quiet afternoons reading... Thinking about that time I bent over the window ledge while Hammer ate my ass and fucked me until my eyes rolled in their sockets like pinballs run amok.

"Windows it is," he says.

Then he grabs me by the waist and hauls me to his living room. I hardly note the furniture because, as soon as we enter, he throws me into the pillow-cushioned nook that's surrounded by the three large bay windows.

He flips me onto my stomach.

Then his tongue returns to making me moan.

Moan while I stare at the outside world through the windows. The curtains aren't even drawn. Then again, I'm well past giving a damn and I doubt Hammer cares, either.

I stare at the outside world through half-lidded, fluttering eyes, sighting heaven amongst the hedgerows while Hammer tongue-fucks me from behind.

So close.

"Keep going, oh that feels so good," I say between gasps.

"No way I'm fucking stopping," he replies. "Nothing's going to stop me until I've made you cum."

Head thrown back, back arched, hands banging at the pillows, smacking the windows as a particular motion of his tongue sends me teetering over the edge. I lose myself in the perfection of what my man can do with his mouth.

God damn.

I lash out again, smacking the glass so hard I flinch and a momentary thought bursts through the force of my ecstasy — *I hope I don't break the windows* — then I shut my eyes, shake off the thought, and let myself float away on the tempestuous tide of my orgasm.

He shatters me.

Moaning, shaking, holding onto the nook for dear life, I crumble while my body floods with heat.

This is everything I want.

Filling this house and our time together with memories. Hot, hot memories.

I can't wait to spend every day reading here, thinking about this moment... and reliving it every chance I get.

Hammer twirls his tongue and, even though I'm floating down from that place in the clouds where he sent me, the sensation sends my hand lashing out and I smack the window again.

Just once.

But then there's an answering tap.

And another.

My eyes fly open, hunting for the source of the noise.

A wizened set of green eyes stares back at me through the glass and a pair of thick-rimmed glasses.

The neighbor.

She's squinting, concern on her face. Concern and curiosity.

"You're making an awful racket," she calls through the window in a warbly voice. I can barely hear her through the rush of blood that surges to my ears in embarrassment. "Is

everything OK? You're hunched over and your face is flushed. Are you having a stroke? A heart attack? My husband, Earl, had one of those, you know. Just sit tight, honey, and have an aspirin if you have one on hand. I'll call 9-1-1."

Slowly, she reaches into the pocket of her plush red robe and pulls out a cellphone.

Thank god she can't see everything, I think at first. Relief washes over me that she just thinks I'm dying. Then her words settle in. She's going to call 9-1-1? What the hell am I going to say to the paramedics? Sorry, my boyfriend is just damn good with his tongue?

The old woman has her phone to her ear when I gather my wits and smack the glass.

"Don't call the paramedics," I shout.

Behind me, against my ass, I can feel Hammer chuckle.

Damn him, he knows what's going on and he's not doing anything about it. That bastard.

"Are you sure? You were screaming really loud." That phone is still against her ear and the 9-1-1 operator must have picked up, because the old woman says into her phone, "Hello? 9-1-1, I need to report a medical emergency."

It's then that Hammer stands up from behind me, and looking over my shoulder, I can see a big grin on his face.

"Hey Orlene," he says. "There's no medical emergency here."

"Were you...?" She says, her voice trailing off.

"Yes, ma'am."

Orlene slips her hand over the phone for a moment, considering. Then she puts it back to her ear. "Sorry, I was wrong. There is no emergency. Thank you for your time."

Then she hangs up.

"Sorry about everything. Didn't mean to alarm you," I say, feeling my cheeks turn red hot as the old woman fixes me with a very knowing look.

She shakes her head. “There’s nothing to be sorry about, dear. I didn’t mean to be so nosy and interrupt your fun.”

“We’ll try to be quieter,” Hammer says. “Didn’t mean to make you worry.”

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m just going to go back to my gardening and I’ll keep my eyes where they belong. But, Carter, can you do me a favor?” Orlene says.

“What do you need?”

I can’t believe he’s indulging her by actually responding, but then again, Hammer’s always been a lot more open and shameless than me. It probably comes from spending years on deployment and living with no sense of privacy the entire time.

“Can you talk to my Harold for me? Maybe convince him that there’s nothing wrong with doing what you’re doing, because I sure could use a little of that in my life,” she says, a sheepish grin coming over her wrinkled face. “Sometimes you want a little spice, you know?”

“I’ll bring over a few beers and Harold and I will have a chat,” Hammer says. “But now, I need you to do me a favor, Orlene. Can you get back to your gardening?”

“Sure, sure, I don’t mean to be a bother. You kids have your fun,” she says, then gives us a final, definitive nod and turns to toddle back to her yard.

When she’s far enough away, Hammer stands up and so do I.

“You up for finishing in the bedroom? Or somewhere away from the windows?” He says.

I smile at him and put my hands on my hips. “I don’t know. You sure you don’t want to wait for Harold to come out here? Maybe he could watch and learn a few other things from you. I’m sure Orlene would be pleased as punch.”

“Sometimes the quickest way to get someone out of your hair is to just agree with them and get it over with. I’ve seen Orlene argue. She’s got the patience of a stone. Saw her at the

post office once arguing about the price of a stamp. She wore the postman down and saved herself three cents. Took her thirty minutes.” He ends his statement by wrapping his hands around my waist and throwing me over his shoulder, then smacking me hard on the ass. “I don’t have time to argue with her. Can’t wait thirty minutes until I fuck you. Come on, bookworm, let me show your ass to our bed.”

Our bed.

Between that and the spanking, which sparks some *fierce sensations* inside me, any inclination I have to tease him goes out the window.

He carries me upstairs.

With an effortless toss, he throws me face-down on the bed. I land among bedsheets and pillows that smell like him and, for a blissful second, I breathe him in. His scent, his musk, it fills me, relaxes me, and, momentarily, I imagine falling asleep surrounded by the scent of him.

I bliss out.

But only for a second.

Because, no sooner have I landed and taken that deep breath, realizing that I could lie like this in utter contentment for a very long time, then his tongue returns to exploring me and I arch my back, moaning, grinding myself against his face.

Oh, that’s right, we’re here to fuck.

“Lick me right there. Right there,” I moan. “Harder. Faster.”

And, like a Marine should, he executes my order with expert precision.

Frenetic, fantastic heat builds to a roar inside me and I clutch for dear life to another rising flood of an orgasm.

“How...”

I start, but that’s all I manage before I finish, my words turning into a labored cry of beautiful, searing joy. Shaking like I’m in the middle of my own personal earthquake, I dig

my fingers into the bed and hold on while the world spins and rocks around me.

Holy crap.

I love when he eats me out.

“Keep holding on, bookworm, because I can’t wait any longer.”

That’s all the warning I get before I feel him press against me.

Slowly, I exhale and relax as he eases his thick cock inside me.

Oh god, I’m so tight.

No, that’s not it; he’s just that big.

And I am a little tight. Tense. Part of me is still half expecting Orlene to somehow knock on these second-story bedroom windows and ask when, exactly, Hammer is going to enlighten her husband about the benefits of eating ass.

Focus, Kira.

Don’t think about that old woman when you should enjoy how good it feels to have your man’s cock inside you.

I breathe out again, slower, seeking that deeper relaxation while he fills me.

Then his hands settle on my hips. Grip me, guide me into position and he hits a spot inside me that’s never been hit before, a spot that makes me moan before I realize what I’m doing.

It’s pressure that brings release, and, when he thrusts into me again, it hits that same spot and suddenly I’m wildly bucking against him with each thrust, pressing myself into him in order to put more pressure on *that spot* because, holy fucking shit, it feels so good.

I’ve never felt that before; that spot inside me that makes everything go haywire.

“Easy, bookworm,” he growls at me.

As if that's going to make me calm down.

He might have me bent over his bed, he might have more than a hundred pounds of muscle on me, he might be almost a foot taller than me, he might have years of combat experience, but I have something he doesn't — in this moment, I'm just a little crazier than him, a little more determined, and I know what I want: to ride him until he's gasping and begging for me to stop; I want to control the way his dick hits inside me, and there's no way I'm taking anything but total obedience as an answer.

“No,” I growl, pressing back against him. “I want to ride you.”

“Not yet.”

I rock my hips back, press into him, then I reach between my legs and grab him by the balls. Gently. This will not turn into something weird and nasty, where I squeeze his balls in some form of torture — I want to win him to my side, and to do that, I have to convince him he *wants* to agree with me.

I coax them; I massage them, my fingertips gently work them in a way that has him throw his head back and turns whatever arguments are on his lips into nothing more than a gasp and an eagerness to please.

“Are you sure?”

Then I rock my hips, flex my kegels, and work his cock until I can feel him twitching inside me, just a stiff breeze away from release.

“If you let me ride you, I'll make you come so hard you'll think you've died.”

He groans. “When you talk like that, how the fuck do you think I can disagree? Where do you want me?”

“Over there. Lie down on the floor.” I make a motion and he moves. Just like that, he's putty in my hands.

Well, a *very hard, very thick* putty.

Not putty at all, really.

Either way, I climb atop him, look down into his dazzling deep blues, and take him inside me. My hands rest on his chest and, beneath my right palm, I can feel his pounding heartbeat. He grins at me, and I grin back.

Then, in that moment, as much as I lose myself in the sensation of riding and pleasing my man — in working his cock with my hips, my pussy, with reaching behind my back and fondling his balls in a way that I've quickly learned makes him moan in an incredibly deep bass that's so intense it nearly gives me heart palpitations — I lose myself in the vision I have of the near future, where all of this, everything from the sex all over his house, the cute reading nook, the bed that smells like him, the sense of finally sharing a home with a man who loves and values me, and being part of a community that welcomes me completely, will be a reality.

He climaxes inside me, and I arch my back, orgasming just as much from the feeling of making my man cum as I do from the thought of how blissful my future here could be.

“Fuck, bookworm, you weren't lying when you said you might kill me,” he gasps. His face is flushed, his eyes are wild, and I nearly break out giggling at how intensely *done* he looks. “Not a bad way to go, though.”

With that, we both stand up. For a moment, all I can do is keep my hands on my hips while my chest heaves with exertion.

“You need a break, bookworm,” Hammer says, and then he wraps one of his great arms around me and pulls me into bed. Tight against his body, I drift into an easy slumber. Thoughts about making this feeling — of belonging, of being loved, of being supported — a part of my day-to-day life raise my lips into a smile just as sleep takes hold.

I have everything I want here.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Kira

Flashing red wakes me from the best dream I've had in a long time; I'm working for myself, running my bookstore, while also having the time to study for a degree and have a relationship with Hammer. The best, most surprising, part of my dream isn't that I have everything I want, but that I have the energy to actually do everything I want to do in life.

How great would that be?

Heck, even if I manage two of the three, I think I'd really be living my dreams.

But then that red light comes.

Flashing, flickering, pulling me from happiness and into the waking world. Beside me, Hammer is still asleep. Momentarily, I smile at that fact. Normally, he's always alert. That he's still asleep even with his — *no, our* — bedroom lit up like some kind of dance club is a testament to the fact that I really did almost kill him.

So as not to wake him, I get up carefully.

Then I walk to the window. There are emergency vehicles in front of the neighbor's house. Orlene's house.

Police cars and a pair of ambulances.

Hurriedly, I dress.

I think about waking Hammer, then decide against it. He doesn't need to be woken up if it isn't an emergency, and it very well might not be; Orlene is old, and her husband, Harold, probably is old, too. At a certain age, death happens naturally. Well, it happens naturally at any age, but especially at an older age.

Trepidation makes me hesitate at the front door. There's a sense inside me that opening it and crossing that threshold will take me somewhere I don't want to go. A few steps could take me from dreaming in my man's arms to living in a nightmare.

Do I want to know how someone died? Do I want to wake from this dream?

But how can I not know?

I step outside.

Bare feet on grass wet with the remnants of rain.

I'm surrounded by the sounds of the gathering, chattering neighbors and the occasional shouted orders from one police officer to another. Unease fills me. There's too many police, too much urgency, for this to be anything natural.

Then I walk forward, as far as I can, until I'm stopped by yellow police tape and a male officer intercepting me. He has a nauseous color to his complexion and there's a strained, shocked look in his eyes.

"I can't let you go any further, ma'am. This is an active crime scene."

"Crime? What crime? Are Harold and Orlene okay?"

His silence answers me.

Still, despite his presence, I try to push by the tape. I don't just want to know what happened to them; I want to *see*. Not out of morbid curiosity, but I can feel a chill in the air. An icy breeze that feels like frigid fingers on the back of my neck, circling it, waiting to squeeze the life from me.

A warning.

The officer tries to interpose, but I hurriedly step around him, run closer.

At that same moment, the front door of Orlene's house opens and two gurneys come out, bearing black bags and being wheeled by medics with sickened faces.

Through the door, I see a tapestry of crimson painted on the walls.

And on the floor, there's something else — a shapeless hump of moist, red visceral matter.

The blood, the organs, the entire tableau of murder looks almost playful, as if the one who did it wanted it to be found, as if they knew that at some point I would be drawn to the scene and would see exactly the death they've wrought upon our two elderly neighbors.

You're not safe anywhere, it says. I am always watching, always close, and I will get you. This is your future.

"You need to get back where you belong," the male officer says. And though I see his mouth form the words, it's someone else's voice that I hear. A raspier, bloodthirsty voice that lurks at the darkest edges of my consciousness. A voice that turns the last remnants of the dream I held onto while asleep in Hammer's arms into a chilling nightmare.

He did this.

He's close.

Vulture.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Hammer

When I wake up, she's in bed beside me, her body pressed to mine, her eyes staring into space, distant.

I check my phone.

It's late. For as long as I've been out, this wouldn't qualify as a nap. This is a full fucking night's sleep.

I can't remember the last time I've slept this long or this well. For me, sleep is a fitful thing — something grabbed between bad memories of war, of danger with the club, of the lives lost to this lifestyle.

But next to her — *thanks to her* — I've slept so long I can hardly believe it.

Kira knows how to take care of me.

So why does she look like she needs me to take care of her?

What I see lurking deep in her eyes is the same expression I saw in the mirror too many times when I was on deployment. An expression born from the repeated lesson that everything good in my life could be ripped away in one fiery second.

“What's wrong?” I say.

She blinks, as if just now realizing I'm awake and stirring next to her.

“Nothing,” she says. Then she rolls over, away from me.

“You sure?” When she doesn't answer, I take her shoulder and turn her to face me. “What are you hiding?”

I'm just moments from the best, most restful sleep I've had in years, I'm still basking in the peace that comes from having the woman I love in my home — her scent is in my bedsheets, now, and every time I climb beneath the covers, I'll think about this moment, this time where I had her in my bed for the first time — and the moment's already shattering.

Because she's lying to me. Why?

“Nothing. It’s nothing,” she repeats. But I don’t relent looking at her. Boring into her with my eyes for the truth. Mike’s party is approaching. I’ve just put together all the pieces that fix the holes in my heart, and I can’t deal with losing it so soon. Finally, she sighs and relents. “I saw ambulance lights out the window when you were sleeping. They’re gone now, but it scared me. It’s silly, I know, but I still feel so jittery. Which is just ridiculous, because I feel as safe with you as I’ve felt ever since this ordeal started. I love you, Hammer, but those lights and the thought of someone being hurt just took me back to a bad place, that’s all.”

There’s such vulnerability in her eyes. On the one hand, I hate she felt such fear. I want to stand between her and the darkness in the world, keep her light safe from evil. But I love that she trusts me enough to tell me the truth, to be open with me.

Inclining my head, I kiss her. Pull her back into my arms.

Strange as it seems, I feel like I could sleep again.

My body must have a lot of true rest to make up for.

“I’ll keep you safe, Kira. Always. I love you.”

Another sigh. Somehow, she feels distant. More distant than even just hours ago. “I love you, too, Hammer.”

But I tell myself it’s just my imagination. My eyes shut, and I feel sleep taking hold, content. I could live in this moment forever.

Because life will try to rip this feeling away from me at some point. Experience has taught me that, but for now, I’ll hold on to it — *and her* — as tight as I can. As tight as it takes.

But is it enough?

Because even now, I can feel it slipping through my fingers.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Hammer

It's the day before Mike's party.

A sunny Thursday, with clear skies, a chill breeze, and enough chirping birds on the way to The Noble Fir that it seems like my life this morning is straight out of a fairy tale. Tomorrow, we present him a cut, we patch him in, we give him a fat check to take home to his charity so that he can make the lives of more disadvantaged children just a little brighter.

In a way, it's too little, too late. All these years I should've done more to mend my relationship with my best friend, to support him, and I still haven't forgiven myself for not being there when he was diagnosed, but at least I've come around before the end and I can honor him like he deserves before he dies.

I stop in the parking lot of The Noble Fir, sit on my bike with the engine dead, and just breathe the cool morning air like I'm a normal person with a happy life, and not some ex-marine with a lifetime's worth of trauma and regret. I know I'll never have a normal life, I know I'll never leave all the trauma behind, but I know that, with the choices I've made lately, and with Kira in my life, moments of happiness won't be so few and far between.

It feels good.

Not just good — it feels right. Right in the way that resonates in your bones.

During the worst of times, it was imagining a day like today that kept me going. It seemed like an impossible promise back then, but, now that I have it, I feel like all the pain and suffering of the years before means I can appreciate this for what it is: a chance to make amends.

Inside, the club's alive, a handful of patrons at The Noble Fir's bar, and the club's old ladies and employees working to prepare for tomorrow's event. Valeria and Molly are prepping decorations, Stacy's carrying armfuls of baking flour into the

kitchen, and Alessia's on the phone with a distributor delivering the third degree.

"No, that is unacceptable," she says, her voice strident enough to make me flinch. I pity whoever's on the other end of the line. "A deposit was paid, promises were made. You are going to deliver, or you are going to learn what happens when you don't. Trust me, I know you don't give much of a shit about learning lessons — that's why you work for a beer delivery company, isn't it? — but you will not enjoy this one."

A moment of silence. Alessia's face contorts into a mask of rage.

"No, don't you fucking dare. Do you know who I am? Karen? Who is Karen? That isn't my name. My name is Alessia Marchetti and if you don't find that receipt for our order and deliver the beer like you agreed, I will shove my foot so far up your ass the doctors will be extracting my Hermès sandals from your fucking throat."

I sidle up to the bar, curious about what's going on, but knowing enough to give Alessia a wide berth. Molly sets a beer down on the counter.

"It's going to be a long wait. She's been on the phone all morning with vendors. Most of them have been on their shit, but this one... They're getting all her pent-up rage."

"What's the problem?"

Molly shrugs. "They crossed Alessia Marchetti and, whether they know it now or not, they're going to die soon."

"She wouldn't go that far," I say, knowing she probably would, but hoping that by denying it, maybe I can change the reality that the ol' lady of our club's VP is going to murder someone over beer.

"She wrote their names down, Hammer. On a separate piece of paper. In pen. Underlined."

"Fuck."

"Yeah, fuck. Anyway, she'll be awhile. You want to help us put the decorations together?" Molly says, gesturing to the

banner they're working on, which is covered with the faces of kids from Mike's charity.

"All these kids are so cute. Hammer, I had no idea that you were in to helping kids like this. Or that your friend ran a charity," Valeria says, holding up a picture of a young boy in a softball uniform with the logo to Mike's charity — Future Heroes — on his chest. "I wish I had known. I would've loved to have gotten involved."

I shrug, turning my gaze to my beer. Valeria means well, but for however much she means well, she's just revealing one of my biggest shames: that I let things so fall apart with Mike. There's no way I could've told Valeria about Future Heroes because, for so long, I wasn't involved; Mike and his charity were just a ghost from my past that I did my best to ignore.

And now I'm realizing just how wrong that was. My best friend is dying and I'm feeling the weight of all those missed years.

"There was a lot going on," I say. By the look on Val's face, she knows I've got no good excuse, but she's smart enough not to push the issue. All that'd accomplish would be making me feel like an even bigger ass.

"You sure that's the stance you want to take?" Alessia's voice rises above all others and her fury is deep enough to drown in. "You're absolutely positive, Keith? Even after I can recite to you by rote fucking memory everyone I interacted with, even though I have a receipt for payment, you're just going to tell me the order isn't in your system and the only remediation you can offer me is to deliver the beer that I ordered *next week*, when I don't even fucking need it? Think carefully, Keith, because the next words out of your mouth will go on your tombstone."

Whatever Keith says, it ends with Alessia hurling her cellphone across the room and it landing in my beer.

"Fuck," she screams.

I drink around the cell as she storms across the room to retrieve her phone.

“I need that. Please,” she says when she gets to the bar.

“Give me a second,” I answer, then I tilt the glass back and drain all the beer before dumping the phone into my palm. I hand it to her. “What’s the problem with the beer?”

“There was some specialty beer Keith wanted to serve at our party tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Western Wet & Wild Hazy IPA, what about it?”

It’s a beer Mike and I have both loved since we got out of the Marines. It’s a beer that brings back memories of restoring bikes, of laughing together, of times where my best friend wasn’t being eaten by a disease.

“We can only get it from some shitty distributor up in Portland, and they’re claiming they don’t have our order in their system and that we can’t get it delivered until next week.”

“That’s unacceptable,” I say, anger surging through me. Everything about this party has to be perfect. If I’m sending off my best friend, I’m going to do it right. “We need that beer.”

“Oh, it is absolutely unacceptable. I’m already planning on calling my ol’ man. We’re going to get this straightened out.”

“Tell him to meet me here. I’ll call some of the others. We’re going up to Portland and we’re coming back with that fucking beer.”

* * * * *

“You got it in you to ride?”

Mike hardly stirs when I approach his table. His face is gray, his eyes tinged yellow, and my insides turn to fucking soup just looking at him.

“Got breakfast to eat,” he responds, shuttling a bite of scrambled egg around his plate.

“You know that’s not how you eat, right?” I say, sliding into the seat across from him. It’s hard, but I force a smile, like I’m

not noticing how my best friend looks like he has just a handful of hours left.

“It ain’t? Maybe I need you to feed me. Here, stick the eggs with this fork and make some fucking airplane noises while you stick it in my mouth. That’ll make everything all better, mom.”

“Mom?”

“Yeah, no, you’re right, you’re not the mothering type. You wouldn’t feed me. You seem more the type to want to bend me over your knee and spank me for not cleaning my plate.” Mike gives me a look that, coupled with the venom in his voice, shuts my damn mouth. He’s just gotten here and somehow he’s turned into a gigantic asshole. Maybe Bishop got to him. “What do you want, Carter?”

What do I want?

What I thought I wanted was to take a ride north with my friend and get into some shit together convincing a beer distributor to honor their word and serve up the beer we ordered for our party, to recapture some of the hellraising we got into when we were younger. Now, though...

Now I just want him to be his old self. That’ll never happen. The coughing that turns his yellowed eyes bloodshot and the red he spits into a napkin reassures me of that fact.

“You aren’t good to ride, are you?”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Rode down here, didn’t I?”

Then he sways in his seat and me in my decision.

“You did.” I breathe in, out, shake my head. “Look, we got to head to Portland for a while. Got some club business to take care of. Won’t take long. We’ll be back before tonight and then we’ll do the final setup for your party. Hang on until then, OK?”

“What do you mean by that? I’ll be hanging on long after you’re gone, buddy.”

“Sure you will.”

Rapping the table in resignation, I stand up, turn away from my friend to hide the pain that's creeping over my face; I don't know what's worse — that my best friend's dying or that he's doing me the disrespect of lying about how he's feeling straight to my face; not that I care about getting deep into our feelings, but I thought our brotherhood would at least earn me some fucking honesty.

I meet eyes with Mayhem across the room. A nod is all it takes to tell him to get ready, an unspoken conversation taking place in a glance. Same goes for Tractor, who's halfway through a plate of biscuits and gravy. By the time the three of us make our way outside, Goldie's pulling up on his bike and Havoc is as well, driving one of the club's trucks. Goldie's eyes are wide. He's frowning, and it's clear his usual placidity is going to be far, far away in dealing with these assholes in Portland who disrespected his ol' lady.

Still, pissed off or not, he gives me an appraising look.

“You all good, Hammer?” He says.

“Yeah.” I keep it short, hoping he'll take the hint.

“You look like you got something unpleasant going on upstairs. You want to talk about it, exorcise those bad vibes?”

That hippie bastard is always too fucking perceptive for his own good; I give him a look that I hope communicates *back the fuck off*.

“I think that's just Hammer's face. It's always been like that,” Mayhem says, trying to be helpful. “It's always been... what does momma say... oh, yeah, *distinctive*.”

I give him a different look, one that says, *who the fuck you calling ugly?*

He just shrugs in response. “Her words, not mine.” Then his eyes narrow. “But if you think of saying any shit about her, we'll have a problem.”

“Hammer, you good for this? I don't want this job getting any bloodier than it needs to be. We're going to get ourselves some kegs of beer, not arrest warrants.”

I nod. "I'm good. Everything's good."

"All right, let's ride, brothers."

But everything ain't good.

Because all I can think about is that my friend's lying to me.

Just what is he hiding?

And how bad is it that'd he'd lie to my face?

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Hammer

That question haunts me the entire ride to Portland, it puts power in my fist when I knock the shift manager at the brewery unconscious, and it lingers at the forefront of my brain the entire ride back, victorious, toting four kegs of Mike's favorite beer in the back of our truck.

I should feel good right now.

But all I feel is this creeping sense that something is about to go very wrong.

Mike's never lied to me before when it comes to the real important shit. It's something you learn not to do when you've faced down death with someone countless times in the trenches. Lying gets you killed, and the truth can save your fucking life.

So why's he lying?

I'm stuck in the swamp of my mind when I get off my bike in my driveway.

The light is on in the living room. In the upstairs bedroom, too.

And every other room in the house.

It's odd. Odd enough that I give a quick scan of the neighborhood and see nothing else out of place except that Orlene's lights are out and there's a bit of caution tape dangling from a ficus in her front yard. It weakly flutters in the breeze, as if greeting me. Or waving at me to leave.

A crow caws from a nearby tree as I dismount and approach my front door.

Inside my home, I'm drowned in light and the mouthwatering smell of meat roasting in the oven. Beneath that, there's the smell of potatoes, garlic, butter. Music and the sound of clattering cooking utensils emanate from the kitchen.

“Kira?” I call out. Thoughts about Mike, about the strange caution tape, fade into the background as I realize I’ve come home to a home-cooked meal.

“Yeah, in here,” comes Kira’s reply.

I follow the sound and my nose to the kitchen.

She’s got her phone set upon a counter, playing old standards from the old days, Dean Martin, Sinatra, and Tony Bennett. There’s a salad on the table, already made. Next to it sits a loaf of bread, crisp, toasted, glistening with melted butter. A pot of mashed potatoes is cooling on the stove, Kira standing over it, with a spoon and a thoughtful expression on her face, tasting and adjusting seasoning.

“I cooked,” she says, answering my glance.

“You did,” I respond, disbelief in my voice — this doesn’t feel real. Not that I’ve never seen food before. Fuck, I love eating, but that I’ve never had *this*: to come home from a hard day with someone I love preparing a meal for me. “Wow, you did all this?”

She blushes, her reddening cheeks accompanied by a megawatt smile that could jolt my heart back to life like a defibrillator.

“I had a lot of time on my hands and couldn’t just stay here cooped up all day, so I got inspired, got a ride to the grocery store from one of the bikers you had watching me, and then, well, this took a lot more work than I’d like to admit, since I don’t normally cook, but you can learn anything from YouTube nowadays, so…” Her sentence trails off into an adorable grin and a spastic wave of her hand at the table. “I hope you like it.”

“It’s perfect,” I say, and it is. It’s everything I could want. I come in close to kiss her. She stares back into my eyes — there’s flour on her nose and I gently wipe it off. “I needed this.”

And not just today. I’ve needed this for so long.

“Hard day? I’ve got just the thing for you.” Then, turning from me, she reaches into the refrigerator and places a cold

beer in my hands. It's a welcome gesture and, on any other day, I'd love it, it's be another part of all of this — this dinner, her, a cold beer, everything I could want — but it doesn't have entirely the effect I'm sure she intends; beer makes me think of all the shit I went through today with Mike. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. This is great," I say, turning from her and heading to the table.

"You say it's great, but you look like I just served you a skinned puppy on a platter."

I flinch at the brutality. "Really?"

"Well, you don't look happy. Is it something I did?" Her gaze flickers to the stove. "Do you not like roasts? Is it too traditional, too on the nose?"

I force a smile and shake my head. "No, no, this is perfect. I would've been impressed with a frozen pizza and warm beer; all I really need is you. It's just... today."

She reaches into the fridge and grabs herself a beer, then gestures for me to take a seat and she joins me. I'm a damn lucky man to have her here to talk to. This is what I've been lacking for so long — a partner to share my life with, not just the good parts, but someone to be here for me during the bad parts, too. "Talk to me. The roast won't be done for a while, and I have all the time in the world for you."

"It's Mike. He's dying."

"We already knew that, remember? That's why we're here, why we're doing that party tomorrow."

Despite myself, I chuckle. "Yeah, I know he's dying. It's how he's dying. Well, not exactly *how*, but *when*."

Her eyes flutter. For a second I see a flash of something — *regret? Pain? Something else?* — behind them. Is she upset because of something I've said? Or is it something else that's bothering her? Then she smiles and places her hand on my shoulder, easing my doubts. "What do you mean?"

“He looks bad. So much worse than even when we left his house. Haven’t you noticed?”

Stunning me, she shakes her head. “I haven’t noticed anything.”

I may have poor hearing from spending too much time around guns and screaming motorcycle engines, but even I can hear that lie.

What the hell is going on today? The two closest people in my life, lying right to my face.

“You haven’t? Are you sure?” I lean forward. It doesn’t feel right to press her, but then I remind myself that she shouldn’t feel comfortable lying to me, either. “Think about it, Kira.”

The color of her face changes ever so slightly, that once-loving blush goes a shade whiter.

She swallows. Takes a breath.

Then opens her mouth as if to answer. I can see the words posed on the tip of her frozen tongue as she readies herself to speak. The truth, I hope.

Then the timer on the oven goes off and she sighs in audible relief, slipping free from her chair and scurrying to the oven like a criminal fleeing the cops.

“The roast is ready.” She’s a bustle of forced activity, her eyes avoiding mine as she puts together a plate and places it in front of me. “Enjoy.”

For her sake and all the effort she put into it, I stuff some food in my mouth. It helps to keep back the words I want to say. Words that will shatter this idyllic illusion I’ve built.

I know she’s lying.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Kira

I spend the night in my man's bed, in his arms, in a place where I should feel more safe than anywhere else in the world. Yet the night passes in dread, the dark above me looming, suffocating, while the hours tick by and I view the approaching sunrise with horror.

In my head, a chorus of questions that ring out like malicious taunts.

Why hasn't Mike told him yet? Will he ever?

When Hammer finds out, will he blame me?

Why am I such a coward when it matters the most?

Those thoughts sit on my chest like a night terror, resting right above my heart, pressing upon it through my ribs.

I wish I were braver. I wish I had the strength to risk what I have to tell the man I love what he needs to hear.

But I'm not.

At some point in the night, when Hammer rolls to his side and his loving arms release me, I pick up my cellphone and I send a text to Mike.

You need to tell him. You can't keep doing this to Carter. It will only hurt him more.

And the heartless bastard replies in a heartbeat.

Tell him, and I'll tear it all down.

When the sun fully climbs through our window and Hammer stirs from his slumber, I haven't slept a minute. Somehow, I hide everything behind a mug of coffee and a smile.

Not that Hammer's looking at me too closely; he's distracted, too. Today's the big day. The party starts this evening and will run well into tomorrow. All his attention is

on making sure the party happens and that his best friend dies with a big family around him.

Sickness swirls in my stomach as we pull into the parking lot at The Noble Fir. Things are already filling up here. Everyone in the club arriving early to set up and throw a party for one of their own.

Already, I feel myself breaking. Those words I so want to say — the truth — sit on my lips, screaming for me to speak, and only held back by Mike's promise: to tear down everything I love.

I hope I can hold on through today.

Hold on to the truth, hold on to my relationship with Hammer. I don't just want to spare myself the pain of a nasty breakup; I want to spare myself the pain of losing a relationship that I know, deep in my soul, could last a lifetime. This could be it.

Hold on, Kira.

Hold on just a little longer.

* * * * *

“Where's Mike?”

Hammer's voice — propelled by his massive lungs in his mammoth, muscular chest — rises above the din of a bar already packed with people conversing, working, eating, drinking, preparing for a party the likes of which I've never seen; at one end of the bar, someone's set up a stage area, replete with both musical equipment, like microphone stands and amplifiers, and a stripper pole that suggests another kind of performance entirely; a keg of beer sits at the base of the stage area, already tapped by a dozen greedy hands to fill a dozen thirsty glasses, and the thirteenth set of hands only draws out a glass of foam, which leads them to call out for a second keg; on the bar, there's a lineup of meats in foil containers that a young woman working the front desk, who sees me staring in surprise, tells me is called 'breakfast barbecue' and it's being served by a large man with a chest-

length beard who looks like he stepped out of one of those sepia-toned photos of Teddy Roosevelt wrestling bears.

Hammer's voice rises above it all.

Heads turn, including mine.

Though mine turns away, scanning the room, looking for Mike, praying he'll be standing somewhere, chagrined look on his face, ready to finally come clean and spare me this unending agony.

I need to escape this hell of deception.

"Mike? Get out here. You're going to miss your fucking party."

"He's still in the back apartment, sleeping. You know, I was talking to him last night, and if you ask me, we should call him a doctor," says the dour one they call Bishop.

I want to say something, but I can't even pry my fearful lips apart.

"Didn't ask you," Hammer answers. Then he declares, "He's probably still sleeping, that's all. I'm going to go get him."

He's gone before I can even manage a breath.

The door to the back apartments slams behind him and I stand, transfixed, like my feet are rooted to the floor. Hardly breathing, my chest slamming against my insides, wanting to run, to flee this place. Dread gnaws my guts and I know I could vomit if only I could open my mouth.

But I can't.

All I can do is stand here, frozen, so afraid, watching with wide-open eyes as fate readies to hammer my relationship to pieces.

Then it comes.

A pained scream from the back hallway. Impossibly long, incredibly hurt.

Part name, part indescribably cry of anguish.

I want to go to him, to put my hands on him, to comfort him as I know any decent person would — a person who isn't a lying, cowardly bitch who keeps a secret like this from the man she loves, the man who saved her life.

But I don't move.

I don't advance, and I don't retreat, because even running is too much for a coward like me.

Because I bear some fault for Hammer's misery, and I know I won't be able to contain the truth any longer.

Instead, I stand there, watching as the door to the back apartments is kicked open and Hammer reemerges, carrying his best friend's body in his arms.

"Help me," he calls out. "Please, somebody help me."

His cries bring the room to a momentary standstill while his eyes scan the crowd in desperation.

Then they lock with mine.

My facade crumbles. Though I don't open my mouth, all the words that I know I should've said are written clearly on my face.

I knew.

I knew, and I did nothing because I was afraid.

I hurt the man that I love with my cowardice.

And now he knows.

"Kira...?" He says.

Bishop and Rabid both approach and they take Mike from Hammer's arms, setting him on the floor, though, from the look on Bishop's face, Mike's condition is a foregone conclusion.

But Hammer hardly seems to notice.

He comes toward me, pushing his way through the crowd, his eyes ablaze and veins standing out on his neck and forehead.

I stay still. Unable to run, unable to approach him, frozen by my fear, with a confession of my cowardice and lies written on my too-readable face.

“You knew.” He stops in front of me. Stares down at me, agony and anger swirling in his eyes.

What I should do is reach for him, hug him, kiss him, comfort him, do whatever I can to assuage his pain and convince him that, despite my transgression, I had only his best interest at heart. Even if it’s too late, he needs to know the truth. The whole truth.

That’s the only thing that can save me.

Save us.

Instead, coward that I am, I only nod.

“Why?” Hammer breathes deep and then, with a heavy fist, he pounds himself in the chest. “Why would you do that, Kira? If you love me, why would you keep something like this from me?”

“I don’t... I can’t...”

Even now, I don’t have the strength to speak the truth, even though the man that I love is staring at me with wide, agonized eyes, begging for me to do it.

Turns out, Mike doesn’t need to be alive to ruin my relationship with Hammer. He’s doing it well enough as a dead body on the barroom floor.

“I did so much for you, risked everything... and this is what you do? You lie to me about my best friend? If I had known, I could’ve been here for his last moments. I could’ve been here so he wouldn’t die alone.” His words cut me deep and I cower, flinching in shame. If only I could crawl into myself right now, disappear into a black hole of shame. “I loved you, Kira. And I thought you loved me. Why would you do this? Why?”

So many times in my life, I’ve wished I was brave. I’ve wished I was brave enough to leave Tucker earlier; I’ve wished I was brave enough to pursue my dreams sooner. And now, I wish I was brave enough to speak the truth to Hammer.

But all I can do is stand in front of him, mute and fearful.

He reads my silence as an admission of everything terrible — of guilt, of betrayal, of a heartless rending of his love. It's the truth.

“You need to go,” he growls.

“Go?” I say.

“I don't want to see you. Get the hell out of here. *Now.*”

Tears in my eyes, I turn and I run. Run through the parking lot, run down the streets, run to Hammer's home.

This is the end of us.

I'll collect my things, I'll go back home, I'll try to rebuild a life after losing that which I love the most. Maybe I'll manage. Maybe I'll stop hating myself.

Maybe.

The one thing I'm certain of is that I can't see Hammer again, not after what I've done to him.

I throw open the door to his house. His. This house is no longer ours.

And, in so doing, I come face to face with a monster sitting in his living room.

Long nose, dark eyes, and even darker intentions.

“Kira Marinova, how good to see you again. You didn't really think you could escape me, did you?”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Hammer

I watch her retreat from my words, from the mournful fury that erupts from my chest.

The door slams behind her, Kira disappears, running down the street, and I stand, surrounded by my family in the MC, bereft of all that I've loved, all that I've wanted.

I am alone.

It feels like I'm frozen, a statue, staring at either the doorway through which my betrayer ran, or staring at the dead body of my best friend, who — I am certain to the depths of my shattered soul — kept his true condition from me.

They both lied.

They betrayed, and they broke me.

And now they're both dead to me.

All around me, the club springs into action while I stay frozen; Molly leaps over the bar to run to my side, her comforting hands on my shoulder, doing little to still the agony roiling my heart; Rabid on the phone to Officer Alvarado to get police and medics here ASAP, even though it's a lost cause; Bishop riffling through Mike's pockets, which momentarily snaps me out of my statue-like trance to snarl at him, only to get a reasoned response, "Easy, Hammer. I'm checking for his phone. We have to contact his family, his friends."

There are so many lives Mike's touched through his charity — and we will break all of their hearts soon enough. The man who helped pay for their schooling, their books, who gave as much as his big heart would allow, all to help kids have better lives than the one he had, is dead. That man made the world a better place, but who ripped my world to pieces with his final act.

Another set of hands touches me.

Then another.

And another.

My shoulder, my back, my hands.

Alessia, Claire, Chains.

“Let’s get you a chair,” Molly says.

“I’ll get you something to drink,” Claire adds.

To which I shake my head. “Not in the mood for beer.”

“Tea,” Alessia says. “Goldie’s got some good stuff in the kitchen. I’ll get a cup.”

They surround me; they guide me; they help me sit down because I’m sure I couldn’t do it on my own. I hardly know how I get my legs to work in the moment, my mind can only do two things, and they are: think about how Mike’s last act was to lie to my face, and how Kira, the woman I love — no, *loved* — was complicit in this.

“Here, drink this,” Alessia says, setting the steaming mug in front of me. “But give it a second first, OK, Hammer? It’s hot.”

It’s rare to hear her so... kind.

It’s just further proof of how fucked up my life is — that Alessia Marchetti would feel so much pity that she’d actually be kind to me.

The tea sits on the table in front of me, undisturbed, while I stare at my dead best friend.

Former best friend.

“You want to go see Charlotte later? I could get her out of school early. We could go get ice cream, catch a movie, whatever you want. I’m sure she’d be thrilled to see you. You know she always is,” Chains says.

I shake my head.

He’s doing his best, but I don’t want to be around Charlotte right now. I’d only bring her down and leave her wondering just what has me so fucked up, and I never want to lie to her

— so I'd tell her the truth and she'd lose some of that innocence that makes her such a bright spot in my life.

There's only one person in my life that I'd want to be with in a time like this, only one person I've ever felt comfortable truly letting in. Kira.

And that's over, now.

“We need your help with unlocking his phone.” Bishop unceremoniously places Mike's cell on the table in front of me. For a doc, his bedside manner is total shit — I'll bet most of his patients died when he was on deployment. Probably from taking their own lives just to escape him.

I pick up Mike's cell, try one set of numbers — his birthday. It has a good chance of unlocking his phone. Mike's not the most technical guy.

It doesn't work.

But the next one, the date we were discharged, works.

Mike's home screen pops up, replete with a background that includes a big-breasted woman holding an assault rifle and doing the one-finger salute. Some things never change.

There aren't many icons on his home screen, which I'm sure Mike did deliberately so as not to obscure the gigantic cleavage of the rifle-holding woman. The only thing suggesting a contacts list is his messenger icon, which I figure I can use to track down his family, friends, and coworkers. There's so many people I'll have to tell.

Doing this takes me back to the time where I delivered this news with a folded flag and cap in hand.

I open his messages.

And sitting right at the top is a message from Kira.

One I can't help reading.

One that makes my heart seize with regret.

How wrong could I have been?

“Take care of this,” I say, handing the phone to Chains. He eyes me like a lunatic — which he should, because he has no fucking clue about Mike’s life — and then he passes the phone to Claire, who takes it with a resigned sigh.

“I’ll handle it,” she says. “You boys go do whatever the hell it is you’re going to do. Just promise me you won’t make too big of a mess for my man to clean up.”

But I hardly hear her, and I wouldn’t make that promise even if I had. Not when it comes to Kira. Whatever it takes, I have to get her back.

I stand, race toward the door.

She tried to protect me. She’s innocent, and I fucked her over like a goddamn fool.

Maybe there’s still time.

Maybe I can catch her before I leaves.

Maybe I can right this wrong before it ruins my life for good.

“You ain’t doing whatever the fuck it is you’re planning without me.” Chains’ voice hits me just before my motorcycle screams to life.

“Don’t count me out, either.” Bones is right behind him. Somehow looking like a smug jackass even though he’s here to help.

“Got to catch her before she’s gone.”

Chains grunts. “Well, I know all about catching ‘em. Got tons of experience. I mean, my Aurora — talk about one hell of a catch.”

“Not fucking around here, Dylan,” I say.

This isn’t the time for Chains’ eye-rolling dad jokes.

“We using real names now, Carter? You think this shit is that serious and not just a relationship tiff that you can smooth over with an earnest apology, some roses, and a few enthusiastic trips downtown?” Bones says.

“There are some problems that can’t be fixed with oral sex, Bones,” Chains says.

“Really? Name one.”

“War.”

“You kidding me? The world would be a much better place if people would solve their problems with blowjobs instead of bombs. Fuck man, make it harder, at least.”

“That’s what she said.”

“Shut up, both of you.” I shake my head. Vulture’s ugly face surfaces in my mind. He’s still out there, still hunting the woman I love... and I just let her run away on her own, like a fucking fool. “There’s more to it than a bouquet of flowers and a few orgasms. A lot more. Are you both carrying?”

A smirk, an inclination of his head is Chains’s answer. “Of course.”

“Do you even need to ask?” Bones adds.

“Good. Because we’re going to need it.”

Chapter Forty

Kira

A droplet of water wakes me.

It hits me right between the eyes. It's disturbingly lukewarm and leaves a sticky trail down my nose. I'm uncertain it's entirely water.

I stir, already hating consciousness for the pain it brings. Not only the pain in my heart from all the hurt I caused Hammer, a pain that radiates from my core to every fiber of my being, but literal pain throbbing from a massive bump on my head.

Ouch.

I try to move my hand to feel the lump on my head and am greeted with the tinkling of chains. I'm cuffed. Again.

Man, fuck these guys.

I look around the room and see that I'm in a basement somewhere. It smells like mildew and urine, it's dark, and the walls are made of crumbling concrete. The floor is the same, with a small pool of water near my feet from the dripping pipe.

"You will live," comes a familiar voice from the darkness. I try to follow the sound with my eyes, but it's too dark and my head hurts too much to focus. All I get is a blur in the shadows, which, on some level, I suppose I'm grateful for; the Vulture is an ugly man and my brain hurts too much to accommodate his nastiness at the moment. "Or, I should say, the head wound will not kill you. That is something I will do once you have served your purpose."

"Why are you such a malignant anal canker?" I say. "Who hurt you? Fucking seriously."

This head wound and my headache have me so distracted there's no fear to put a filter on my words. Vulture's a piece of shit, and if he's going to kill me, he's going to kill me, but at least then I won't have to live with all this pain.

So I guess there's an upside to everything.

“This is only a job, Kira Marinova. Or it was until you made it personal.”

“Only a job? This is my life that you're ending, fucking seriously. Why shouldn't I be pissed off at an oozing genital wart like you?”

“Different lines of work come with different consequences. You have your grandfather to thank for yours. How well do you know him?”

“Not well. He lives in Russia.”

“Used to.”

“Oh, that's right. You killed him because you're a pathetic, scum-sucking asshole.”

“Don't be stupid. I know you are smarter than that. Honestly, I tell you I had hoped for the simple solution instead of all this mess. But your grandfather was uncooperative and now he is in a shallow grave outside Moscow. Well, his torso is. His head is wherever Vladimir Fedorov put it. It is unseemly. A man's head is not a trophy I would care to take, but it is not my place to judge — he is my employer. A *Bratva* by birthright.” I don't really know the word, but the dark emphasis he puts upon it cuts through the fog of pain and makes me shiver.

“What did my grandfather do? Why did you hurt him?”

I don't know why it hurts. I hardly knew of my grandfather, except for my grandmother's stories and a few old photos she kept around her house — but still the loss hits me. It's just loss piled atop more loss; my family has gone from being so incredibly large, counting all the people in Hammer's club, to shrinking to my sister, my mother, and my grandmother, if any of them are even still alive.

Which is a big 'if', I realize, with a sharp pang that stabs my heart.

“Years ago, your grandfather stole some things from Viktor Fedorov, the father of my boss, Vladimir Fedorov. These

stolen things were precious jewels that used to belong to the princes of Novgorod. In their place, your grandfather put fakes. Replicas. Nearly perfect. *Nearly*. And, because I can see it in your eyes, I can tell you why: Viktor was not the most generous boss, and your grandmother had just gotten pregnant. Life in the underworld is no place for a loving wife and a baby. So he needed money. To get it, he stole from Viktor and used the money to send his wife and unborn child here. And, as he told me just before he died, he sent some of Viktor Fedorov's property with his wife, too. A safety net, as they say."

"How did he find out? After all these years?"

"Well, Vladimir Fedorov is involved in a very costly war — a very foolish war one, too, one that is very dangerous for him — and he tried to sell these jewels. Which is how he found out they were fakes. There is only one person who could have stolen them, and so he will only be satisfied with his property, his money, and your blood."

I blink, absorbing this metric fuckton of information — a bunch of old Russian dudes fighting over decades-old grievances and trying to win a dick-measuring contest.

Then I shake my head; nearly dead, I'm long past giving a fuck.

"So, I'm in all this mess because my grandfather fucked some old Russian guy?"

"Yes."

At least he's honest with me. Despite him being a murderer, I have to grant him that; I can't say the same for some other people I know.

Or knew.

Fucking *Mike*.

He had to ruin everything I had with Hammer, even though I kept his secret.

That thought drags me back to the present, to Hammer.

My heart twinges, vibrant, vivid pain surging through my body.

He has to be suffering so much right now.

Despite his rejection, I don't want him to suffer any more than he already is. No one deserves that — especially not a man like him. He tried his best to help me through this miserable situation, to support my dreams despite the world around me turning to darkness, and it's cost him so much. Our relationship, his best friend... even if his best friend isn't as good of a man as he seemed.

“I know what you're thinking: what comes next?” Vulture says, his wormy lips peeling back from his crooked, yellowed teeth.

Duh.

What else am I going to think about? When Jennifer Lynn Barnes is going to put out another book and how quickly I'm going to devour it?

Probably pretty quick.

But that fun book thought only distracts me from my present hell for half a second.

I roll my eyes at the Vulture. “Wow, you must be a psychic, besides being a festering, puss-filled boil.”

His answer is swift and wordless. Pulling a knife from his pocket — with a blade that menacingly springs free at a push of a button — he crosses the room, shoves his fingers into my mouth, and seizes my tongue. Pulling so hard that I scream in garbled agony, he extracts it from my mouth until it's extended its full, painful length.

The sharp edge of the blade kisses my tongue.

I can taste the metal.

Then, with a slow, careful slice, he cuts my tongue ever so slightly.

“Where I am sending you, you do not need to speak. They will have other uses for your mouth. And that is if I even send

you at all. That is up for debate. I may just kill you slowly and tell Vladimir that you died in the struggle. As I have said, this is a job for me, but you have been so very aggravating.” He sighs, thankfully taking the knife away from my tongue and letting go of my mouth.

Closing my mouth, I suck my wounded tongue like a child sucking its injured thumb, tasting blood and wondering whether it’d be better to shut up and be compliant to spare myself the pain, or if I should provoke Vulture into killing me in order to spare myself a life of hellish servitude.

Fuck me that this is even a question that I have to consider.

“Are you going to behave?” He says.

I nod. Maybe I’ll change my mind, but I’m in no hurry for him to cut my tongue off.

“Good. Until I decide what to do with you, you will be bait for that man, Carter Hudson. We know he loves you, that you’ve been sleeping with him, and we know he’ll come looking for you.”

“He won’t...” I say, then my voice cuts off before I can finish. It’s painful to admit out loud that there’s no one coming to save me. I have no one left. After a heavy breath to still my forlorn heart, something else strikes me. “How do you know all that?”

“We’ve been watching you all this time, Kira. For a short time, we were in the house owned by that old woman, Orlene, and her husband, Harold. It was a great vantage point to watch you two.”

I shiver, recalling the open window as Hammer and I had sex. *Did Vulture see?* I can’t read any kind of answer in his cold features, but, deep down, I know he probably did. If he had us under surveillance, he wouldn’t fail to take advantage of a window with its curtains open. “You killed them.”

“We did. But we did not count on them being missed so soon. I thought we would have several days’ use of their house before someone noticed they were dead. Unfortunately, they

had grandchildren who call them often and get worried when they do not answer.”

Unfortunately?

I can't fathom the heartless, dark depths that exist in place of Vulture's soul.

Or express how pathetic I feel that one of the first sensations that overtakes me at hearing about Orelene's fate is that I'm jealous. She has a family who loves her, who cares for her, and me... well, my family is either dead, soon-to-be-dead, or hates me. I have no one.

If I weren't such a coward, I'd provoke Vulture into killing me. I know my crude American manners could do it. And, if I really wanted a quick death, I vaguely recall a few choice phrases uttered by my grandmother from the time she stubbed her toe and thought I couldn't hear. Phrases that I later translated with wide-eyed amazement. They were so vulgar they were almost poetic.

I furrow my brow, trying to remember fully. *Something about jabbing the festering thumb of a lesser god up your dickhole? No, that's not quite it.*

Then my eyes go wide.

I remember it now.

But Vulture speaks before I can.

“He is already looking for you. Hammer is going to find the evidence we left for him, evidence that will lead him here. Then we will take him, and you will have the pleasure of watching the long process of cutting him to pieces. I learned many things from my time in the KGB, Kira Marinova, and I can promise you that a man like him, a man full of health and vitality, will live and suffer for many days before he expires. You will hear every scream, you will taste the blood, and you will be here for that moment that air leaves his lungs for the last time.”

Chapter Forty-One

Hammer

It isn't hard to find the trail. A scrap of evidence in my home that leads to a neighbor's home, that leads to another, and a last clue that points me to a home at the end of a quiet, wooded street. An abandoned building surrounded by overgrown shrubs and with an askew 'For Sale by owner' sign out front.

This has to be the place.

The only question is: did they want me to find it? Or was that man they call Vulture just careless enough that I could track him?

Raising my hand, I shield my eyes from the afternoon sun as I survey the house. In the end, I suppose it doesn't matter whether he meant to lead me here. He's going to die either way.

Because Kira has too much light inside her to be stuck in whatever darkness Vulture has planned for her. The second I saw her smile I knew that there was something pure, something good, about her, and I'll be damned if I let anyone extinguish that light. I love her too much for that.

Even now.

"You know this is a trap, right?" Chains says to my right. "I mean, this entire neighborhood is fucking quiet, like everyone *knows* that shit is about to go down."

"Last time it was this quiet, I took two bullets in the ass. And I consider myself lucky that's all that happened," Bones adds.

"I don't remember you ever getting shot in the ass," Chains says. "When the hell did that happen?"

"It was an ex, but she wasn't an ex at the time. She and I were heavy into it, and I thought we'd had an arrangement. Though my interpretation of our arrangement may have been a little flawed. Anyway, I came home from being out and she

was waiting for me in the living room with her daddy's old-ass revolver and that question no one wants to hear: 'Just where the hell have you been?'" Bones raises his voice to a feminine pitch as he mimics his ex. "Well, I was drunk enough at the time to be honest and, well, I had a higher estimation of my running speed. She didn't like my answer, waved that gun in my face, and I realized I needed to get the fuck out of there. She shot me twice in the ass as I ran to my bike and I drove myself to the ER bleeding from my buttocks."

"So, what you're telling me is you have experience stepping into traps and making it out alive, and you want to volunteer to go into that house first?" Chains says.

"What I'm saying is: 'Fuck you, Chains. I'm through with getting bullets in my ass.' It's one of my best features — everyone says so — and you can explain away two bullet scars with an interesting story, but once you get to three or more bullet scars in the butt, you just run out of any explanation that doesn't make you look like the world's biggest dumbass."

"Shut up, both of you," I say. The entire time, I haven't taken my eyes off the house. My bookworm's inside, and there's no way I'm not getting her out.

"Fine, but I think Bones is making a salient point offering to go in there," Chains says.

"Fuck you, Chains. I'm not going in."

"Right back at you, brother," Chains says. "But the idea of volunteering Bones for a suicide mission is a million times better than anything else I've heard. On the one hand, if he succeeds, you get Kira back. On the other hand, even if we don't get her back, we still get rid of Bones, which is almost as good."

"You can gargle my sweaty, wrinkled ballsack, Chains. I am not going in there alone to get my ass shot," Bones says, indignant. "Still, what the fuck kind of plan do you have, Hammer?"

Truth is, I can squint at the damn house as much as I want, play the strong and stoic type, but that doesn't mean some

miracle plan is going to manifest in my brain. Vulture's smart enough that he's probably got a gun trained on Kira at all times, and the second shit goes sideways for him, he'll splatter her brains all over the wall.

How do I get her out alive?

Do I go in alone? Try to buy him off?

As if I have enough money to make that happen; I'd gladly give everything I own just to buy Kira's freedom — even my life — but I've killed several of Vulture's men already. That's made this shit personal.

Then my phone rings.

I ignore it at first and let it go to voicemail, but then it rings again moments later. A second attempt to ignore it results in only a brief bout of silence and then more ringing.

"Might be the club, Hammer," Bones says. "Maybe Rabid's on the way, which means we can have even more people watching while you stand here holding your dick when you should break in that door and getting your woman free."

"Lick my asshole, Bones," I retort, then I answer the phone without looking. "Yeah?"

"I'm not very impressed with your work so far, Hammer." An aged voice, weary and disappointed, answers.

"Yulia?"

"I hired you to look after my granddaughter, but you have done a very poor job of things. How could you let her be taken like this?"

"How do you have any idea about what's going on?"

"When you didn't answer, I called your club, and they told me. And now I hear indecision in your voice, which tells me that, for all your qualifications, you were a very poor choice to look after my darling granddaughter."

"It's more complicated than that. But I'll fucking handle it — I'll get her back."

"Will you?"

“I swear on my life, whatever it takes, I will get her away from Vulture. She means everything to me — I love her, and I’d rather die than see her hurt. I don’t care if she takes me back—“ there’s a hitch in my voice as I say that because, deep down, I care. I want that bright, shining woman back in my life. I want to see her smile at the end of the day, and I want to wake up next to her each morning, feeling like the luckiest damn man alive. “All that matters is that I am going to get her free.”

“I respect your sentiment, Hammer, but this is another case of never sending a man to do a woman’s job.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, I’m on my way to clean up your mess.”

Chapter Forty-Two

Kira

“They’re outside.”

Those whispered words come from one of Vulture’s men. They’re followed by a nod from Vulture and the man’s hurried departure.

Those words descend over me like a shroud, turning everything darker, as if my body and soul know that soon, the world will have less good in it.

“It won’t be long, now,” Vulture says to me, his grimy wide smile heightening the beak-like appearance of his nose.

Five words are enough to give me visions of the future — suffering, blood, death. All while I sit here, powerless to save anyone I love from the dire fate I know is just minutes away.

No, maybe not entirely powerless.

I still have my voice.

With dread and desperation bubbling in my chest like a kettle ready to overflow, I open my mouth as wide as I can and let loose a scream.

Vulture cocks his head sideways, looking even more alien and birdlike, but doesn’t do a damn thing to silence me. Until he lashes out suddenly, striking a glancing blow to my throat.

When my scream dies, he says, “Finished?”

But I’ve only stopped to take another breath. Though my throat shrieks at me in pain, I let loose another warning, hoping that somehow my words — *It’s a trap, please, just leave me, just leave me* — reaches the right ears.

I’d rather die alone than be responsible for Hammer’s death, or anyone else’s.

Because at least then I can do something good before the end.

“He will not leave,” Vulture says when I pause. “Do you think he would have come so quickly to find you if he didn’t love you? Do you think he would be out there with only two men to back him up if he wasn’t ready to risk everything just to get you back? A man only does that for love. Now, unless you want me to cut out your vocal chords, you will shut your mouth.”

Those words have their intended effect — my heart crumbles along with my last bit of resistance; Hammer still loves me, I still love him, and now I’m going to watch him die.

What’s the point of fighting?

It won’t change a thing.

Hammer’s going to walk right into this trap because of me, and he is going to die — because of me. As if I haven’t hurt him enough by concealing Mike’s secret from him.

Vulture leaves my side and slips over to a small rectangular window looking out from the basement, his hands clenching and unclenching in anticipation as he watches what can only be Hammer’s inevitable approach.

How much time do I have left before I’m face to face with the man I love, watching him die?

But then something happens; Vulture’s hands freeze, locked in a clawlike grip, and a small, frustrated exhale escapes him.

“Why is he stopping? Why is he waiting?”

Then a sound. A knock. A regal rap that echoes through the house.

And a voice I know from my warmest childhood memories calls out, clear as a ringing bell on a perfect spring day.

Clear and full of a fury that makes me shake in my chair.

“Vulture, you pathetic fiend, you have made a terrible mistake. You know, when I spoke to my friends in Russia and they told me that Fedorov had sent you, I could hardly believe that he would trust a such disgusting, slimy mongrel to come after me and my family. But that doesn’t matter. It’s done, and

so are you. You have my granddaughter, and I have what you came here for — let me in and let's end this nightmare.”

I sit up straight, hope blooming in my chest in equal measure with fear.

My grandmother is here.

She's here, and she is angry.

* * * * *

There's a moment of silence as Vulture processes my grandmother's words, his hands working themselves into a clawlike shape that reminds me of a predator toying with its prey.

That, or it's wary that its prey may not actually be prey.

Struck by indecision at this sudden change in events, he gives me a curious look.

“This may surprise you, but I did not want things to get so messy,” he says, his voice a mumble, almost as if he's talking to himself as much as he is to me, and to whatever god might be listening. “If I am being truthful with you, I did not so much want this job at all. But I have a son myself. He is a teacher in Yaroslavl, a small city northeast of Moscow. My son hates me, of course, and wants a career as different from mine as possible, a quiet life. He has it. But despite his hate, I care for him, not only because he is my blood, but because he has worked very hard to get to his position in life and, though we speak little — he thinks he is out of my life and safe from my work, but he is not — he is important to me. I am proud of him. Fedorov knows where he lives and I do not have a choice.”

His words fall into a quiet room.

A room suffocating in a heavy, unbalanced silence where I feel that, with the right words, maybe I can tip him in the right direction, maybe I can change things; he has a kid; he has a family; that means that, maybe, he has a heart.

Forcing what I hope is a comforting smile, I speak in a soft voice.

“Go talk to my grandmother. If she has what you’re looking for, maybe there’s a way to get out of this without it being so messy. What’s the worst that could happen?” That question of mine makes his eyes flicker with cold warning — *don’t presume to tell an expert what is and is not dangerous*, it says — and I correct myself. “You still have me as a hostage, and my grandmother is coming to you, so you hold all the advantages here. If things go wrong, you can just take her hostage or...”

I can’t finish the ‘or’ because my voice chokes out. It’s not a possibility I want to even vocalize, but I’m pretty sure he understands how easily he could kill an old woman like my grandmother.

Pretty sure he’s killed many people.

But, if my grandmother is actually here, I’m also pretty sure that she has some plan in mind.

That, or she loves me enough that she’s willing to sacrifice her life for mine.

The likelihood that it’s that last option hits me and feels like there’s an entire apple lodged in my throat.

I swallow.

It doesn’t do much except make Vulture grin, like his spindly talon fingers have reached into my brain and plucked out my innermost fears.

Vulture stalks up the basement stairs, his hurried steps making his lanky, greasy hair bob, and he pokes his head out the door, voice shaking with eagerness as he calls out, “Let her in.”

Somewhere in this house, a door opens and slams shut.

She’s here.

She’s here because of me.

I wish I had the courage to call out, to warn her, to tell her to run away and not come back. Because, despite whatever she might think, her coming here can only end one way, and she doesn’t deserve to die.

And I don't know if I'd want to keep living, knowing that I was the reason someone in my family died.

Just as I open my mouth to cry out, a furious clamor breaks out upstairs; shuffling sounds, footsteps pounding on the basement ceiling, and then my grandmother's voice, "You have patted me down once already, anything more, little man, and I should tell you that you are too young for me. I need a man with experience. And grace. I can tell by how stiff your shoulders are and how little you use your hips when you walk that you could not provide me with a pleasurable experience."

She sounds in control, but I can hear the slightest shiver in her voice. I've known her so long, I can tell when she's afraid.

More muffled voices upstairs. The men she's dealing with aren't used to a woman like her.

Then again, who could be?

It doesn't matter that they have guns, or that they have me hostage; whatever the circumstances, my grandmother is always in command.

"You can have what Fedorov wants when I see my granddaughter. What is the term they use? Proof of life? Yes, give me that and get out of my way. She's downstairs, I take it? The basement? I'm going there right now, and you can go walk off a cliff if you don't like it."

Moments later, the door opens, and she appears, surrounded by a halo of light.

Gracefully, she descends the stairs.

There's a briefcase in her hands and a loving smile on her face.

At the base of the staircase, she stops. But only for the time it takes for her to give the room a disappointed look — as if it is disgraceful that anyone could think to put someone in our family in such a damp, drab basement as this — and then she approaches me. Vulture appears in the doorway behind seconds later.

“Kira, you are alive,” she says. It’s half question, half statement of surprise.

“Hi grandma,” I say. “I am.”

Briefly, she caresses my face. There’s such loving light in her eyes.

“They have not hurt you, have they?”

I shake my head. “Except for tying me up and for the things they have said, no.”

“They are such pigs, aren’t they?”

“Yes, grandma.” My eyes drift over her shoulder to Vulture, who looms like an enormous shadow atop the stairwell; the light from above refuses to touch him. “Vile pigs.”

She gives me a hug, a long hug, the tightest she’s ever embraced me, and then kisses my forehead. There are tears in her eyes. “Do not worry, Kira, I am going to take care of this and take care of them. For you, for your mother, for your sister. Whatever happens, do not forget that I love you with all my heart. I am so sorry that you got caught up in the mistakes your grandfather and I made. We really tried our best, but sometimes that is not good enough. I love you, and I am so proud of you.”

Whatever response I want to say is silenced as she puts her finger on my lips and gives me a stern look. Then, regally, she turns and lifts her chin to Vulture, who still lurks atop the staircase.

“I see you there, you shadowy cretin. Impatient to get what you came here for? Well, gather your men and let us go into the living room so I can give it to you. And then you can let my granddaughter go.”

At the base of the stairs, she spares me one last look.

It’s long.

Heavy.

Why does it feel like goodbye?

I want to say something, to tell her I love her and will miss her, but fear keeps my tongue still. I can't risk saying any of that and ruining whatever it is she has planned.

My grandmother ascends the staircase, back into the light, and I see the Vulture's grinning visage as he slams the door after her.

Darkness fills the room.

There's silence, but only for a moment. Then Vulture's muffled voice, which causes footsteps above to converge on the living room from every corner of the house. Of course, who wouldn't want to see the stolen jewels that once belonged to one of Russia's foremost criminal overlords?

Imagine how they'd shimmer. How they'd shine. How the jewels would look so large that they must be fake, yet somehow, those glimmering, gold-draped gems are real.

Silence again.

A tick.

Then shouting. So much shouting. The sounds of fear ripped from the overconfident throats of a dozen vicious men.

And one man's scream rises above them all — fear and rage.

That scream is followed by something that twists my insides with primal terror: an explosion. A roar of fire and splintering wood. A roar that shakes the house, that fills the air with smoke, that shakes dust and plaster from the ceiling, that makes my heart leap into my throat and rips a forlorn cry from deep in my chest.

Because, if I survive this, I know what my life and my freedom costs.

And, seeing the love in my grandmother's eyes, feeling the comforting warmth of her touch against my cheek — those same hands that held mine at every graduation, that would clap for me and my sister every Christmas, both insistent and supportive, as she'd cajole and bribe us with cakes and cookies to sing some of the Russian carols she'd taught us when we

were young — and knowing I'll never see that love again, that I'll never hold her hands, I wonder: is my freedom worth it?

Am I worth it?

Because, who am I? I'm just some woman from Portland who's lost her grandmother, her job, the man she loves. What do I have to live for?

I sob.

And to answer me: nothing but silence and the creaking cracks of a home catching fire.

Chapter Forty-Three

Hammer

She can't be serious.

When she arrives in a late 60s Buick station wagon, a car so old and outdated that it is elegant in its ungainly ugliness, and she holds up her briefcase and, with a resolute voice, tells me her plan, I think she has to be bluffing.

But then she says, with utmost seriousness, "Be ready. You'll know when it's time."

Then I know. My suggestions, my questions, my doubts, they all fall on deaf ears.

To her, this is the plan, this is how it will be, this is what it costs to get Kira free.

But, as I watch her walk to the door, I take a step forward, determined to catch her before she can make this fatal mistake.

Because, if anyone should die saving Kira, it's me.

My temper chased her away, my impatience, my rage. They all put her into this monster's clutches.

So why should my mistake cost Kira her grandmother?

But the moment I take a step forward, Bones grabs me by the shoulder.

And Chains by the other.

"Don't," he says.

"I should be the one going in there." She's nearly at the door and my heart is seconds from shattering. All I can think about is the pain Kira will feel if Yulia's plan works and she loses her grandmother. I don't want to imagine her suffering anymore, but I feel powerless to stop any of it; our only option is Yulia's plan. Charging in, engaging the enemy in a direct firefight, will end with Kira getting shot. But this? This plan of Yulia's? This will hurt her, too, hurt her deep, and she has suffered more than a lifetime's worth of trauma. "I put her in

this mess. I should be the one that pays the price to get her out.”

“They wouldn’t buy it, brother,” Chains says. “That you could suddenly pull whatever it is they’re looking for out of your ass and be able to march right up their door to hand deliver it? Fuck no. They’d shoot you and then they’d shoot her just because they seem like the type of heartless dickbags to take it out on an innocent woman. Besides, Charlotte needs her uncle around. I need you around, too, brother.”

I look at Chains, ready to shoot him down because I’m still not fucking sure that I shouldn’t charge forward and take the briefcase from Yulia, pay the cost myself, when Bones smacks me on the back of the head. Hard.

“He’s fucking right. Stop thinking with your heart for a fucking second and think with your fucking brain. That Vulture piece of shit would take one look at you and know that the only jewelry you’re likely to have is your fucking dog tags or whatever shit you win out of a fucking gumball machine. Then he’d kill you and Kira. But Yulia? Look at her — she’s got the goods. Jewels, poise, and even a great ass for her age. He will not turn her away. He’ll be interested.”

“Did you just comment on her ass?” I say, ripped out of the moment by the utter confusion of Vulture hitting on Yulia. “You know she’s got to be at least pushing seventy, seventy-five, right?”

“Good genes, man. What can I say?” Bones lets out something between a low growl and a groan of appreciation, a sound that I refuse to analyze further. “I mean, look at it — the shape, the firmness. No, really, Hammer, look at it. Those genes are part of Kira. They’re a preview of what her ass is going to look like when she’s the same age. Now, even better, have you seen her mom?”

“Bones, what the fuck? There’s a fucking real chance Yulia is losing up her life here.”

“Her nobility and self-sacrifice only make her hotter.”

“Fuck you, Bones,” Chains and I both say in unison.

Yulia yells something at the house. It sounds like a challenge. A proclamation. Moments later, she knocks.

The door opens.

Yulia doesn't hesitate as she enters the house. She steps inside with all the courage that I've seen lacking in so many men in wartime; Yulia knows how this is going to end — she knows it, and she welcomes it, because she knows she's truly doing something good.

We wait.

But we don't wait long.

In less than a minute, she sends us the signal to move in — the living room windows explode outward, shattered glass scatters across the lawn; the front door falls from its hinges; smoke fills the air, screams of pain, too; there's a flicker deep in the house, an orange that grows until it consumes the entire room; punctuating it all is a primal, despairing scream of thwarted triumph. Vulture.

I turn to my brothers. Stony faces and steely eyes stare back at me.

“It's time.”

Chapter Forty-Four

Kira

There's a man screaming his heart out upstairs, while I weep in the dark for my dead grandmother. There's something wrong with his scream, like some part of his throat is messed up and I try to tune it out because I don't want to picture anyone — even one of my captors — as they are right now: bloody, shredded, screaming on the floor as their life flows out of a thousand wounds, the result of my grandmother's final act.

I tune it out and focus on myself.

Everything hurts.

Not with a physical pain, but the pain that comes from knowing an indelible part of your life has been taken from you and it's all your fault.

She died because of me.

And making it worse is hearing that man's screams upstairs because, deep in my heart, I know it's Vulture. I am sad, in a way that makes me ashamed, that my grandmother did not kill him when she took her own life. There's a chance that Vulture may survive this catastrophe, because if there's one man to slip out of death's cold clutches, it's him.

Then more footsteps join the sounds above. Heavy, angry footsteps.

More of Vulture's men? Men who may have been upstairs during the blast? Or outside?

A sob tears apart my throat, clawing deeper than the others because I can feel in my chest that's the case. Some of Vulture's men survived and they're coming down here to finish the job. They're going to kill me, or take me to that horrid place where I'll be sold and live the rest of my life wishing I was dead until I work up the courage to actually kill myself.

My grandmother risked so much, and in the end, it wasn't enough.

The screaming stops. Then the outline of a body darkens the top of the stairwell.

Then two more behind it.

Footsteps begin their descent, and I shut my eyes. I don't want to see these men. I don't want to see the faces of the ones who are going to drag me, whimpering and weeping, off to my awful fate.

A hand gently touches my face, and I cringe, shrinking away from the horrid sensation.

That hand then wipes away my tears.

A voice follows. "Kira?"

I recognize that voice, but shake my head violently — it can't be him. It has to be a trick of my imagination. My body's last attempt to give me the sense of something happy before I have only memories to cling to while I long for death.

Movement, the sense of the man in front of me lowering himself to his knees.

Another touch on my face, and his voice comes again. "Kira, it's me. I'm here. We're going to get you out of here..." He pauses. I hear an audible gulp, a shake in his voice. "I am so sorry. For everything. For everything I said before and everything it's cost..."

I open my eyes. Even in my most vivid imagination, I can't imagine Hammer being so remorseful. But when I do open them, I see him there, pain written on his face. Pain and regret.

"Hammer? You're really here?" It's so hard to speak. My throat feels raw, ragged, and each syllable hurts.

"I am. I'm going to get you out of here, get you somewhere safe. It's over, Kira. It's all over." His eyes look me over, concerned. "Are you hurt?"

I shake my head. "They didn't really hurt me. They were going to, but then..." Guided by some misbegotten hope, my

eyes drift toward the staircase and the open door at the top of the stairs. “Is she really...?”

It’s hard to say those words, and I feel so stupid doing so — of course I know what’s happened to my grandmother — but part of me feels like I have to know. I have to have it confirmed. And I don’t know that I have the strength to go up there and see for myself.

“Yes,” he says, then he wraps his arms around me. I wish I was free so I could hug him back. Hug him, and hit him; I’m so heartbroken over what I’ve lost, what’s been taken from me, and Hammer is strong enough that he could take that pain. Hitting him wouldn’t hurt him, but it would make me feel something. Not better, no, but it’d give me a distraction from the sense of my heart ripping itself in two, fiber by fiber. “I’m so sorry.”

One man with him, Bones or Chains, I don’t know, it’s hard to see through my tears, says, “We’re going to go upstairs. Take care of that fire and check through the rest of the house for survivors.”

“Thanks, brother,” Hammer grunts. He doesn’t take his eyes off me as he speaks. There’s so much compassion in his eyes — compassion and pain.

When they leave, I find more of my voice.

“Vulture? What happened to him?”

His voice lowers. “Do you really want to know?”

I nod.

Hammer clenches his hands, flexing them, and veins stand out on his forearms. Even in the dim light, there are splotches of red on his hands, smeared, like they were hastily wiped away. “He was still alive when we came in. The blast hurt him, but it didn’t finish him. He’s dead now. I made sure of it.”

Despite how I know that should make me feel, all I can do is nod again.

Part of me still doesn’t believe that Hammer’s here.

And the rest of me is consumed by the angry emotions that swell inside me, emotions that take over and guide my tongue.

The me who I was before I met Hammer would never have the strength to say to him what I want to say. But I've grown since I met this man. I've found my strength, and partly because of his help.

I love him still, but I need to speak my truth if I'm to have any hope of moving on beyond this trauma.

So I dig deep. Into my anger, my pain, the confluence of emotions that make my heart hurt so much, and I let them out.

“Why did you chase me away? Why did you do that to me? You were supposed to protect me.” My words hit him physically, and he flinches, but I'm not done. Because all of this — my imprisonment, my dead grandmother — is something he shares some responsibility for. “You screamed at me. You chased me away when I needed you to keep me safe.”

“You're right, Kira. I'm sorry—“

But I'm not through. I only stopped talking to take a shuddering breath, because speaking my mind to the man I loved — *no, still love, as much as it hurts, as hard as it is to believe* — is the most painful thing I've ever done. Whether or not we stay together, there will always be a part of me that loves this man. A part that remembers just how good he can be, just how good he can make me feel.

“No, don't gloss this over with a quick apology, as if simply saying ‘Oh, I'm sorry’ will make everything better. Don't even try it. Look at me. Look into my eyes. See my tears. See my pain. Look around us. Look upstairs at my dead grandmother. *You had a part in this.*” Shaking, I pull in another breath. It calms me, slightly. “Can you let me out, please?”

A nod is his answer, followed by the flash of a knife.

Once free, I stand, pull back, and unleash a slap that hits him square in his jaw and leaves my hand ringing. It is viscerally satisfying. But it isn't enough.

I make a fist.

And then I use that fist.

The pain resounding up my arm loosens my tongue even more.

“That felt good. Real good. Oh my god, it shouldn’t, but it does.” I’m smiling, which I think is a product of adrenaline going through me as I finally release these feelings inside me. “Hammer, it hurts me so much because I love you. I trusted you completely. My life was literally in your hands. And when you chased me away because of something your friend did — *something that I tried to stop* — you hurt me in a way that’s so deep that it may never heal.” I stop again, choking up as the image of Hammer’s face, contorted with rage and agony, surfaces in my mind’s eye. “I wish I had the courage then to tell you the truth, but Mike made all these threats. The scariest thing for me was that I might lose you. Loving you, being with you, has not only saved my life, but it’s made me become the braver person I have always wished I could be. When you chased me away, you left a mark on my heart that may be there forever.”

As I speak, this imposing, dangerous man crumples before my eyes until all that is left is a man stricken by grief and remorse.

A man who clasps his hands as if in prayer.

“You are right, Kira. You are right, and I am so sorry. I couldn’t believe Mike would lie to me like that. All I wanted to do was something good, something that could make up for all the years that I was such a shit friend. He was dying, and I wasn’t there. That is something I’ll have to live with. But what hurts me the most is that I put you in this danger. That I hurt you. I still love you — wholly and completely — and, if you’ll let me, I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you. But, if what you want is to never see me again, I’ll learn to accept that. If you want to go back to Portland and never see me again, I will take you there and never go back to that city. If you want to live in Ironwood Falls without me, I will pack my things and move on. Forever. More than anything else, I want you to be happy.”

He swallows. Looks at me with eyes shining with sincerity.

I stay silent and let him continue. I need more.

He does.

“I knew the second I saw the way you smiled you were truly special. The world is a better place with your smile in it, Kira. That’s all I want. So you tell me what you need — my home, my bike, my cut, my life — and I will give it to you.”

He stays there, on his knees, at a distance that is both too far and so close, waiting. Honest, sincere, repentant.

And I believe him.

Believe that he truly wants me to be happy.

That knowledge springs from my heart as much as my brain, and I decide that I still want to be with him. I love how I’ve grown with him; I love how he makes me feel — special, respected, wanted — and, as much as anything, I can understand how much pain he must have felt to have lost his friend and believe that I’d betrayed him.

“If you ask, I think I can forgive you.”

“You want me to ask you for forgiveness?” He says. His voice isn’t questioning, it’s tinged with hope. As if he was truly prepared to sacrifice his community, his home, his city, should I ask for it.

“I’m not telling you what you should do. This isn’t me ordering you like you’re a Marine, Hammer. This is me telling you that, if you want me to forgive you, and you honestly ask for it — more than just saying ‘I’m sorry’ — then I think I can.”

“I love you, Kira. You know that. We both know that I did you wrong. It’s a pain I will carry with me for the rest of the life, and spend all my energy until my dying breath trying to make up for. Can you forgive me?” An inclination of his head takes in the room’s scope and the nightmare above.

“I love you, too, Hammer. And yes, I can.” I stand and I take his clasped hands and pull him to his feet. He doesn’t really need my help, and even catches me as I sway a little —

being tied to a chair for a while means I have wicked pins and needles coursing through my legs — but, now that I've forgiven him, I crave his touch. The sense of him against me. We embrace, and then I look at the open doorway atop the stairs. "Can we get out of here?"

Slipping his arm around me, he steadies me, as I know he always will.

I smile at him, resolute in forgiving him. And loving him.

"Yes, let's go home."

"Our home?"

"Our home."

Epilogue

Kira

Of course, it isn't as simple as saying something in order to make it so, not even when it's something you want with all your heart.

My home with Hammer isn't my home yet.

There's a lot I need to do.

First, I have to go back to my first home. In Portland.

First, I have to say the things to Tucker I always wanted to say, but only now am brave enough to. Words that make him pout, make him raise his voice, make him level toothless threats that evaporate into so much nothing with only a glare and a firm, 'No, now I want you and your shit out of my apartment.'

Tucker leaves right after that and takes most of his shit with him.

He doesn't own much; it goes quick.

There's a moment where it looks like he wants to argue, or that he may even get violent, but then I point to the patch on the jacket I'm wearing — a leather jacket with the sleeves cut off, and a patch that marks me as being the woman lucky enough to have Hammer as a partner — and his mouth closes with an audible clack. The cut helps, sure, but I think what silences him most of all is that I'm not afraid of him anymore.

The moving out goes easier after that.

Silent, even.

Which is a blessing with an idiot like Tucker.

Still, he mutters something on his way out the door with his last box of his things, a box stuffed to the gills with dvds and video games. Words that I don't catch, but still fully understand.

"What was that? You want to speak a little louder, Tucker?"

That little man sprints the last of the hallway, bric-a-brac falling from the box in his hands — a video game cartridge, a can of energy drink, an unused pair of weightlifting gloves.

He doesn't look back.

I resist the temptation to follow. Or pick up his things and throw them after him. The less I have to do with that jerk, the better.

The door slams shut behind him.

I heave a sigh. Smile. Take out my phone and prepare to send a text to the man who's waiting around the block. He wanted to come in with me, to be here when I kicked Tucker to the curb — and I appreciate his protectiveness — but this is something I had to do myself. Tucker ran my life and practically had me subservient for far too long. He needed to see firsthand that I'm not his servant anymore.

I smile seeing Hammer's name on my contacts list. I love that he's back in my life and that he's letting me do things in Portland my way.

Hey, he's gone. Want to come on up and I can make you dinner?

Hammer answers.

Is everything good? Your ex is down in the parking lot, crying like a baby that just broke their toy.

I grin. Both at the image of Tucker crying and at the thought that Hammer is hovering around, ready to come to my aid if I need it.

Everything is great. I'm free. I'm about to wash the bedsheets and start cooking. When the sheets are done, want to make the bed ours?

There's only a second before I have his response on my screen. Before I even read the words, I know what his answer will be.

I'm on my way.

* * * * *

A few weeks later, I'm standing in the doorway of A Likely Story. The Portland air is brisk this morning, with the faint smell of bagels from a bakery down the street. Deandra is at my side, crumpled tissues in her hand and her other arm around my shoulders, and parked at the curb is a Uhaul truck loaded with my things. It's a small truck, barely more than a van, but it contains my entire world. Mostly books.

"I can't believe you're leaving," she says. "I mean, I can, because I've seen your boyfriend and I would move across the country for a butt like that. And those muscles, too. Even so, I can't believe that Kira Marinova is actually leaving A Likely Story. And not just this shop, but Portland, too."

"I am." My eyes drift from my crying friend's face to the driver's seat of the Uhaul, where Hammer is waiting patiently. "I never thought I would, but I am."

"No more Powell's? No more aspirations of running that place while you get your Master's degree?"

"No to Powell's. But I'm not giving up on the degree just because I'm moving out of town. There are distance programs, even for a Master's in Library Sciences."

"Are you sure they have education outside of Portland? I mean, some of those little towns, Kira, they're so... meager."

"Ironwood Falls has a lot," I say, smiling at Hammer and giving him a little wave. "Plus, it's not that far. You can still drive down and visit me."

"Leave Portland? Surely you're joking."

"Fine, I can commute up here. Maybe I can take you out for a bike ride."

My mind drifts to back to the first time I rode with Hammer and my smile widens.

"Bicycles? No, thank you. I've been practicing with my unicycle lately. And I've been putting away a little from each paycheck to save up for a penny-farthing. They're trending."

"What are those?"

“Those bikes with the giant front wheel and the teeny tiny back wheel. They’re cute.”

“They’re ridiculous. And I’m not talking about bicycles, Deandra, I’m talking about motorcycles.”

She lets out a small gasp. “You ride those? Kira, they’re dangerous.”

“Only if you don’t know what you’re doing.” *Or end up on the road with some asshole in a car or a truck who doesn’t pay attention.* But I leave that part out to avoid scaring Deandra off. “I’ve been learning. I could teach you, too. It’s fun. The speed, the freedom, it really feels good.”

“Motorcycles, a biker boyfriend, moving to the suburbs—“

“—Ironwood Falls is not a suburb,” I remind her. “It isn’t. It’s a small town, almost a city in its own right.”

“Leaving Portland, then. You’ve changed, Kira.”

“I know. I have. And it feels good.”

It feels even better to have my closest friend acknowledge it.

“So, other than practicing making babies with your burly biker boyfriend and studying for your degree, which I’ll grant could take up most of my day, if I were in your position — especially the first activity — what the hell are you going to do in that little backwater of a town?”

“Well, I thought I’d take up farming and start wearing overalls, denim, obviously, and maybe learn to play the banjo, perhaps get into taxidermy...”

Deandra stops sniffing long enough to feign vomiting.

“Seriously, Kira.”

“Carter and I are going to make a home. We have a lot to work through, both of us...” Which is true, we both have our trauma — individual and shared — that will take time to get through. But it’s not all difficult, there’s a part of me really looking forward to making a home with Hammer, like doing silly things like learning how to cook and how to merge our

different decorative styles, which mainly means doing as much as I can to redecorate his entire house and give it an actual, cozy style. “And there’s something else, too.”

I hesitate. As much as I feel like I’ve gotten stronger, more willing to embrace my dreams and my strengths, there are some things that are still intimidating, some things that are much bigger than telling the man I love that I love him and I forgive him.

“My grandmother Yulia left me some money when she died,” I say. Not just some money, grandma had much more money than she let on, and she left some for my sister, my mother, and me. She didn’t leave a note or any explanation about where it came from, but I’m sure it came from her old life in Russia. Her’s and my grandfather’s. There were some gold coins among the things she left me, coins covered in Russian writing and with the Tsar’s face on them. And not the last Romanov Tsar, either, but some Tsar from the mid-1800s named Alexander the Liberator, which took me forever on Wikipedia to figure out. I don’t know how I’ll sell those. Or if. Part of me is scared that if I try to sell them, I’ll set off some *National Treasure*-style misadventure involving Tsarist loyalists and Russian mercenaries all gunning for my head because they think I have the emperor’s lost gold. So I might keep them and think of her every time I touch that old Russian man’s golden face. “And there’s this bookstore in Ironwood Falls that’s up for sale. I think I’m going to buy it.”

“Working for one independent bookstore wasn’t enough to teach you to stay out of the business?” She says, wryly. But with love. Deandra’s a lifer in the world of books as much as I am.

“No, it made me love it more than ever.”

“Good.” She turns and hugs me. “That’s fantastic. Because you are great at this and I would be so sad, even more sad than I already am, if you stopped sharing your love of books with the world.”

I squeeze her back. “Never, Deandra. You know I could never do that.”

“I know. Really, I know. But I’m just so messed up in the head because I never thought today would come. I’m really, really going to miss you,” she says, breaking our hug and into tears again.

“I’m only an hour, hour and a half away. You can make the drive.”

“Ninety minutes, and a universe away. People are strange down there. Rural.”

She says the word like it’s the deepest of profanities.

“Don’t be an ass. Visit me. I promise I’ll visit you, too.”

“Fine, I will occasionally mount an expedition to the uncivilized territory in which you live. I love you,” she hugs me again. Tears get on my shoulder. Just like my tears wet hers. This isn’t the end of our friendship, just the beginning of a new chapter. Still, it hurts to turn this page.

“I love you, too.” When we part, I look back at A Likely Story. “I’m going to miss this place.” My eyes take in the carefully organized shelves and the whimsical front display — this one with a picture of Sir Mix-a-lot, a table set up with books over five hundred pages, and a placard saying ‘We Like Big Books and We Cannot Lie’ — and I get hit with a wave of preemptive, bittersweet nostalgia. “I am really going to miss it here.”

Deandra pats me on the back, and along with the pat, there’s a very slight shove toward the waiting Uhaul.

“You know you have to do this.”

But it’s not just the gentle shove that moves me toward my Uhaul, it’s seeing Hammer in the front seat, watching me, a smile on his face and pride in his eyes.

“I got a text from your mother. She and your sister are already in Ironwood Falls, ready to help you move in. You good to go?” He says as I shut the door and slide into the front seat.

Wiping a tear from my eye, I nod. It’s a shaky nod. My heart is running haywire in my chest. The world ahead of me

looks so big right now, big and frightening. “I’m ready. I’m scared — I mean, running my own business... what if I fail?”

One hand leaves the steering wheel and takes mine. “You’re going to do great. Think of what we’ve been through, Kira. Think of what we’ve taught each other. Whatever comes up, we can handle it. Because I got you, and you got me. Always.”

My hand squeezes his tight. My tears have stopped falling, and I’m smiling now.

I’m still scared, but so much less than before. I can’t wait to see what my next chapter brings. Pain, laughter, love — it doesn’t matter what comes, though I hope it’s more of the latter; I’m sure everything will work out in the end, as long as I’m here. With him. Together, we’ve grown and I’ve learned to be brave.

With all we’ve been through, there’s nothing that can tear us apart.

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*****The End*****