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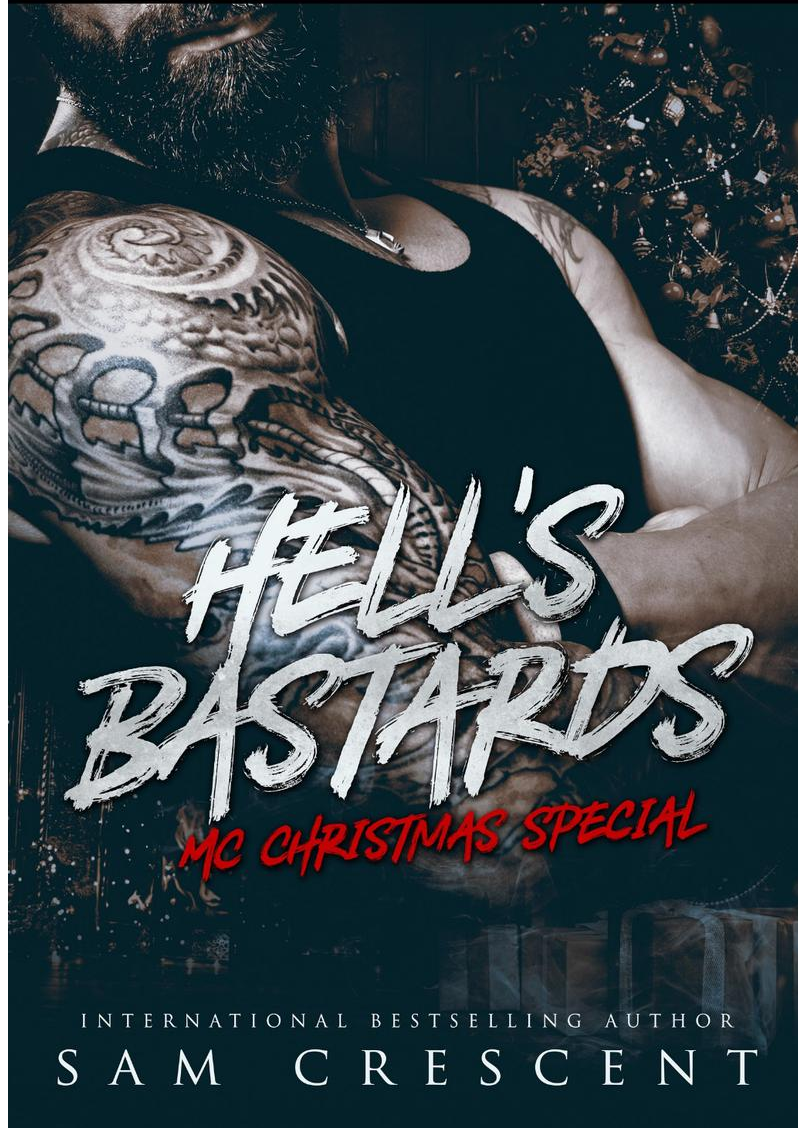
HELL'S BASTARDS

MC CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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EVERNIGHT PUBLISHING®



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S A M C R E S C E N T



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HELL'S BASTARDS MC
CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

Hell's Bastards MC, 4

Sam Crescent

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Chapter One

“We’re all going to fucking die this holiday,” Hunter said.

“Hey!” Ugly Beast growled. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

There was a chorus of laughter around the church table, and Smokey wasn’t entertained. In fact, he was mightily pissed off. This hadn’t been a decision he’d come to lightly.

With the shit that went down with his woman, and then Raven, he was struggling. He wasn’t a romantic man, nor was he a man used to feeling so fucking useless when it came to women.

Ava had certainly shown him that he had a thing or two, or a fucking thousand, to learn. When it came to his woman, he was always fucking up.

“Dude, Hunter’s right. We love Abriana. You know we do, but come on. That woman needs to be banned from the kitchen. She has given us all food poisoning,” Big Dick said. “I think she has chipped my sister’s teeth a few times as well. Harlow will not even think about helping her to bake. Your woman is a disaster in the kitchen.”

Smokey couldn’t agree more. Abriana was a lovely woman. Her love for Ugly Beast surprised him. Their marriage had been an arrangement with the Garofalo mafia. After discovering the Boss was nothing more than a pedophile, intent on destroying the Hells Bastards MC, he’d been taken out. The mafia was now run by Carlos Santiago, who happened to be married to one of their own, Raven.

Smokey adored Abriana. She was good for Ugly Beast, who had turned into a somewhat reasonable human being. He was a good guy. A nice guy, but of course, anyone who said that to Ugly Beast would hurt for days afterward.

“Abriana doesn’t have to cook, and if she does, I’m sure Ava can fix anything she does,” Smokey said.

“So let me get this right,” Kinky said. “You want us to host Christmas here at the clubhouse. We’re to get the women to dress properly, or not appear, and we’re to what, embrace Ava?”

Smokey ran a hand down his face. His men were being purposefully obtuse dickheads.

“Smokey, dude, you’ve got to let that shit go,” Brick said.

He looked around the table at the club.

“He can’t let it go,” Raven said. “He can’t bring himself to stop thinking about it, right? I get it.”

“Ava has forgiven us all,” Kinky said.

Smokey slammed his hand on the table. “I know she has forgiven us all, but I want more than that. I want her to have memories of this fucking clubhouse that extend past a few pleasantries. This is going to be a place where she comes all the fucking time. Where I want our kids to come to. This is my clubhouse, and I don’t want her to constantly remember my betrayal of her.”

At times, Ava was so hard to freaking read. She no longer seemed to be having the nightmares, which was a welcome relief, but he couldn’t help but feel guilty every time she was at the clubhouse. Even when Ava didn’t realize he was watching her, he saw how she sometimes jumped or flinched. She hid it with a laugh or a sudden movement. He spotted it. He noticed it.

The club hadn’t, but he had. And it drove him fucking crazy. So crazy that he had spent a great deal of time thinking about how he could make this work.

He needed to wipe out her memories and create new ones. It was simple. Thanksgiving, they’d enjoyed alone with their son, Umberto. It had been a quiet affair, and after he’d

put his son to bed, he'd spent the whole night making love to her.

With Christmas coming, he knew she loved this holiday. Her bakery was already full of the Christmas treats she wanted to serve. Mince pies, mint candy cane cookies, the works. She had even taken Umberto back to work for a couple of days a week so she could get into the festive mood.

Her shop was also full of decorations. Tinsel and fairy lights in the shop window. A tree in the corner, more tinsel and lights around the shop. It was a wonderland.

He'd known this about his woman. And he didn't mind it. In fact, he loved to see her joy, but at the clubhouse, it was a pit.

No tree.

No tinsel.

No lights.

Nothing.

He looked toward Ugly Beast. "Do you want to spend Christmas with Abriana's cooking?"

"I want to spend Christmas with my family."

But he saw the clenching of Ugly Beast's jaw. A couple of Christmases ago, he hadn't been able to make it to their church meeting because he'd been puking his guts up and shitting himself every two minutes. That was Abriana's cooking.

"So Ugly Beast is in," Raven said, chuckling.

"What about you?" Smokey asked.

"I, er, with Ava..."

"You two are solid, Raven. I mean that. If you're not around, I know it will upset her." Ava was always asking about Raven. His woman cared about this woman. Ava had heard the

true darkness of Raven's past, and since then, Ava had made every effort to become best friends with the woman.

"I'll talk to Carlos. I think he was hoping for a quiet Christmas."

"Tell him he can stay home, but you and your kids, they're welcome here."

Raven snorted. "Yeah, like he's going to like that."

Motherhood had been good for Raven. She was still as mouthy and hard-assed as ever, but she looked good. She looked happy, and Smokey was grateful for that. Raven was another woman he'd nearly fucked up with.

He'd made a lot of mistakes over the past couple of years, and he was determined not to make any more.

Hunter sighed. "So, I guess we're all going to do this. What exactly do you need?"

The truth was, Smokey didn't have a fucking clue what to do, but he wanted it to be perfect for his woman.

"Damn, everyone is flocking here today," Harlow said. "My poor feet haven't had a chance to rest. Your cookies though, the bomb."

Ava smiled at her only employee. She absolutely adored Harlow, especially as she had her seal of approval of the brand-new vegan Christmas cookie she'd brought out. It had been a challenge learning new skills in baking, but it had certainly paid off.

She kneaded the dough for her cinnamon rolls, loving the feel of the smoothness of the dough. This was what she loved about baking—being hands-on and getting involved in the process. It was always fun using the machines or allowing technology to do its thing, but the real joy was in creating something by hand. That was what she loved. Smokey had taken Umberto for the day so she could come into the bakery and help Harlow set up.

She didn't have any troubles with Harlow, and in fact, the young woman had proven to be an amazing baker, and also a wonderful friend.

"Not that I'm complaining or anything, but what brings you into the bakery right now?" Harlow asked.

"I miss it."

"You miss the early mornings? The kneading? The hard work?" Harlow asked, giving her a wink.

Ava chuckled. "It's just being here. Don't get me wrong, I love being a mother, but this shop is my baby."

"Hell yeah, it is. And you can totally tell, mama bear. You know, I never thought I'd love baking quite as much as I do, but it is so much fun."

The sound of the doorbell had Harlow leaving, and Ava knew if she continued to work the dough, it would no longer be utter perfection. She quickly oiled a bowl and placed the dough inside before covering it with a damp towel.

These were not for the shop, but for her to take to the clubhouse. The very miserable clubhouse.

She couldn't believe Smokey hadn't even bothered with a tree for the festivities. The only part of the clubhouse that was dressed up was the women. And that wasn't saying much seeing as they were mostly naked.

Ava quickly dealt with her mess, cleaning up the kitchen as Harlow came back.

"It's closing time. I've already locked up the shop, and we've just had the last of the products bought," Harlow said. "I'm going to get everything cleaned up."

Ava followed her out and gathered the trays, helping Harlow carry them back to the sink. They both got to work cleaning.

"Harlow, did you ever visit the club, you know, before I was around?" Ava asked.

“Nah. My brother wouldn’t allow it. My parents wouldn’t either. Apparently, I was too young and impressionable, and they already feared I was going down the wrong path. I mean, seriously. You should have seen the way they reacted to my veganism.” Harlow shrugged as she dried up one of the trays. “Why?”

“I didn’t know if ... well, you know, they rarely had a tree?”

“Oh, I think sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t. I don’t know to be honest. I have nothing to do with the club. My brother won’t let me.”

Ava smiled. She knew Harlow loved her brother, Big Dick, a club member, dearly, but it didn’t stop the two of them from bickering like crazy.

“What do you and Smokey have planned for Christmas?” Harlow asked. “Anything sexy? Hot? Grovelly?”

Ava rolled her eyes. She might have complained a time or two about Smokey’s constant need to make things right with her. She refused to even think about what went down with Raven.

Yes, Raven had hurt her, and for a long time afterward, it had been bad, but Ava had seen how sad and guilty Smokey was. Even now, he was trying to make up for everything. All the club women who’d been involved in her attack were gone. He’d completely removed them from the club.

She also noticed that he only ever sent the guys who hadn’t been there to drag her back to the clubhouse.

It was sweet. There was no way she could say otherwise, but it was also a little upsetting. He wouldn’t allow Brick or Kinky near her, not for long periods of time. Even when she went to the clubhouse, she’d started to realize he wouldn’t allow them alone with her either. He’d be guiding her elsewhere, far away from the basement, and from all memories.

He still felt his guilt. Ava had gotten over it, or was certainly attempting to get over it, but this couldn't be healthy for either of them.

"I don't know. I think we're going to have a private Christmas, maybe? I'm not sure."

"Do you want a different kind of Christmas?" Harlow asked.

"I know it's probably going to make me sound crazy or something, but I ... I've always wanted a big family, you know. Big and full of people. Feeding people. I love cooking, and the more the merrier, as far as I'm concerned."

"You want to spend time at the club?" Harlow asked.

"Yeah, no, I don't know. Maybe. I think so. I'm not sure. I know it's part of Smokey's life, and I want to be involved in his life, you know." She didn't just want to be the woman he came home to or the person who randomly dropped by sweet treats to the guys. It was her peace offering. Trying to show the whole club that she had forgiven them.

It had been a long, hard road, but she was much better now. Raven had also taken the time to discuss the difficulties of the club with her. Mainly because Ava had forced her to. Ava had wanted to understand why that image was so important that day all those months ago. And she completely understood why Smokey had reacted that way. Sure, she was pissed that it was her, but once she was able to take herself out of the equation and put in another woman, and a few other details, it made a lot of sense.

Smokey had been betrayed one too many times, and she had been a different kind of woman to him. He hadn't realized he could completely trust her.

Chapter Two

Smokey had never known true love in his life until he'd been with Ava. Then, of course, Umberto had been born, and he'd come to understand complete and utter devotion unlike anything else.

He fucking loved his son. Worshipped his woman. They surpassed the club on every single level. On all levels.

There was nothing else he wanted more than to be with his woman and his son. Of course, he had no choice but to deal with the club because he certainly wasn't stepping down as their prez. No fucking way.

Lifting his son, he stared at Umberto and then pulled him in and hugged him. Not too tight as he didn't want to hurt his son, but holding him just enough to give him the comfort and love he needed. He was no longer a tiny baby but well on his way to being a toddler. The time had gone by so fast.

"I love you so damn much. I'm going to teach you everything, and hopefully, you won't piss off Ugly Beast and have a thing for his girl Bella." Smokey shook his head. "Nope, you can't be chasing any of the brothers' children. Not that there's many right now, and no matter what, you cannot hurt your mother. You've got to be a good kid. You can piss off everyone else. I'll deal with teachers and stuff, but not your mother. You've got to be a good boy for her. Always." He kissed his cheek and then held him close as he stood up. "Your dad was a total asshole, you see, so she needs to know that there is some good inside me, and that is you."

He moved toward the window and looked out over the parking lot. A fresh layer of snow had fallen, and as far as he was concerned, Ava wasn't going to be driving in it, not tomorrow. He'd deal with Harlow if he had to. His woman was not going to put herself in danger.

As if thinking about her had conjured her up, he saw her car pulling into the lot and taking the last available parking

space.

Most of the guys were at the clubhouse. They didn't have any business to deal with, but that was because the holidays were always slow. It was one of the few times of the year, that they could just relax.

He watched as Ava climbed out of the car and opened the backseat door of her car. She pulled out a couple of baking trays and then started to walk toward the main clubhouse.

He spotted Brick outside, headed toward her, and Smokey quickly left his office and went toward the doorway.

Brick had already taken the two trays from her, and they were close to the door.

Ava chuckled. "I figured you guys could use a sweet treat."

"You're not wrong. Smokey's starving us." The smile on Brick's face disappeared when he caught sight of him.

Smokey had warned him to keep his distance.

"She brought us cinnamon rolls," Brick said.

"I made them especially for the club," Ava said. "It's why I took a long time. I had to frost them." She was still smiling at him. "You don't mind me stopping by, do you?"

"No, of course not." He didn't realize he'd been glaring, but it was mainly at Brick for disobeying him.

Would you have preferred Ava to carry the baking dishes on her own?

No, he wouldn't have, so being pissed at Brick wasn't going to help.

Ava reached out for Umberto, and Smokey released his son. He watched as Ava pressed her face against his head and then kissed him. "I missed you. How was he today?"

"Perfectly fine," Smokey said. "Barely a peep out of him. Until he crapped himself and then he let the whole club

know that daddy was cleaning shitty diapers.”

Ava chuckled. “Oh my, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He’s my son, and he’s a joy to have.”

“Ava brought cinnamon rolls,” Brick said, calling out to everyone.

Like a stampede, he saw the guys rushing toward the kitchen. Brick had already taken two large rolls and was currently stuffing them in his mouth.

“I hope I made enough.”

“Probably not, they’re like vultures.”

“Can I come inside, or would you like me to leave?” Ava asked.

Smokey wanted her to come to his office, to sit with him, but any work he had could wait until tomorrow.

“Come on, let’s head out. There’s no reason to see them looking like animals.” Smokey opened the main door, and he saw Ava’s shoulders slump.

“Sure, you’re right. Let’s head home. I’m going to be cooking some dinner. Yes, I am. I’m feeling a little tired, so I think some pasta with tomato sauce, what do you think?” She continued to talk in a baby voice as they got to her car.

Smokey took Umberto and secured him in the car seat.

Ava was always worried when they traveled, so she took the seat beside their son, and Smokey climbed behind the wheel.

“Do you think you’re going to get some decorations for the clubhouse?” Ava asked.

“I don’t know. I had to throw the last ones away because they were burnt and covered in alcohol.”

“Oh, how did that happen?”

“The guys thought it would be funny to have a food fight at the clubhouse while the decorations were still

hanging.”

Ava chuckled. “You don’t sound very impressed.”

“Trust me, I wasn’t. It pissed me off.”

“From what I heard, that’s not hard to do.”

He looked at Ava in the mirror, and she winked at him and had this huge smile on her face.

How could he have thought for even a second that she was guilty? Ava had proven time and time again that she was loyal. She hadn’t deserved what he did. He was a fucking monster, and he sure as shit didn’t deserve her now.

Smokey didn’t fuck her anymore. Not that she was complaining or anything, even though it sounded like it, but he didn’t. No, he always refused to.

They made love all the time, and Ava loved it. He was an expert in making love. In fucking, in being together, but he never went too far. He was always careful with her. The sex was amazing, but she knew deep down he was holding himself back.

Again, just another reason to be a little more annoyed.

Smokey treated her like fine china. She wasn’t going to break so easily if he just had a little fun with her.

Ava rolled out of bed without waking him and made her way down toward Umberto’s room. Her son was fast asleep. He was a good kid. She loved him so much, but she checked the time and saw it was a little after five. She wasn’t going to break her son’s routine or patterns.

Ava walked down toward her kitchen and grabbed the coffee pot, getting it ready with the beans and then putting it to work.

It wouldn’t be long before Smokey woke up. Years of waking up early had gotten her into a routine where she was

alert by five most mornings, if not sooner. Only when she was sick did she sleep in late.

With the coffee pot on, Ava checked her fridge. She needed to head to the grocery store soon. She grabbed a pen and started to make her shopping list, which also included a few items that would get her ready for Christmas.

She loved Christmas.

Her previous partner had hated it, and they had often fought over it. He'd always told her that Christmas was an excuse for her to get even fatter than before. That all she did was eat, and he would describe her as a cow in a field of grass.

Shoving those memories to the back of her mind, she reminded herself that he was an asshole, which was why she'd divorced him. Once she had left him, she had promised herself that her Christmases would be filled with joy and friendship. They had never invited friends around because he'd told her how embarrassed he was for anyone to see her.

"Stop it, Ava. Stop it." She didn't need to remember that kind of crap. It was all negative and all in the past.

Her Christmas with Smokey was going to be a lot better. Fun. Enjoyable.

Writing out her list, she felt a little better. She made a note to call Abriana and then Raven to see what they had planned for Christmas.

The coffee pot was finished. She grabbed it, poured herself a nice large mug, and then sat down at the counter. She was just blowing over the surface of her drink when Smokey arrived.

"Morning, beautiful." He kissed her head. "Don't get up. I'll grab my coffee."

He was half asleep and looked so cute. She had to wonder if the guys at the clubhouse had seen him dressed in his pajamas. Smokey hated the cold, and it had been so cute to watch him picking out a pair of fleece pajamas.

No one would guess of the heavily inked biker beneath.

“Morning,” Ava said.

“I don’t know how you do it.” He poured himself a large mug. “I feel it needs to be injected into my eyeballs.”

Ava chuckled. “You don’t have to get up so early.”

“You’re up.”

“So, I’m used to getting up.”

“I don’t think you should go into the bakery today.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why not?”

“Another layer of snow. I’ll drive you.”

“Smokey, you do realize that I’m capable of driving myself?”

“Yeah, I know it, but you don’t have to.” He poured himself another mug, and she was shocked that he’d drunk one mug already. “But you don’t have to. I’ll take Umberto today. The guys have all said the shop is busy.”

“The Christmas selection has been a success. We’ve even been asked if we would do a Christmas selection hamper style, and I’ve got several orders.”

“Will you do it?”

“It sounds like fun, and I’ve already got the details, so I don’t see why not. Harlow is happy to help.”

“Have you figured out your Christmas opening hours?”

She wrinkled her nose. “That would be easy, wouldn’t it? I keep thinking Christmas Eve will be our last day and then perhaps open a few days before New Year’s. Then I think maybe we should close on Christmas Eve, but I feel that will be one of our biggest days.” Ava sighed. She had already talked to Harlow, and the other woman was having the same trouble as her.

“Babe, do what you want.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“Technically, it is easy. It’s your shop, so open up when you want to. Not when others tell you to.” Smokey took a long swallow of his coffee.

“I was wondering if you would get down my Christmas decorations from the attic?” Ava asked. “I want to start decorating the house.”

“You love Christmas?”

“Yeah, I do. I know it’s lame and all of that, but I love it.” She shrugged. “Do you not love it?”

“I do, for you.” He reached out, taking her hand. “We’re building our own traditions, right? Making shit right and all of that.”

“You’re right.” What she wanted, though, was for him to at least enjoy it, but also to be honest about it. “Smokey, I love you.”

“I love you too, babe.”

He leaned in close and kissed her.

It was a chaste kiss, and Ava smiled.

Everything was fine.

Chapter Three

“You know I don’t answer by special request,” Carlos said, standing in Smokey’s doorway.

Smokey looked up from his desk toward the mafia man. Carlos, like ever, was wearing a designer suit, and he looked pissed off. The only disruptive parts of the whole asshole image were the little girls he held in both of his arms, Winter and Summer.

That must have meant Carlos had come to pick up Raven. Being married to Carlos meant she had no choice but to divide her time between the club and his mafia world as his woman. It had been a transition, but Raven had handled it. He made sure to keep a close eye on Raven because he didn’t want her to ever feel alone or left again.

She had been through so much already. He wouldn’t fuck up again.

“What do you have planned for Christmas?” Smokey asked, putting down his pen.

“I did originally plan for a nice long Christmas with my wife, my two girls, at my private island. Lots of sun, a few nannies to help us. Spending all the time with my wife.”

“Originally?”

“Raven will not spend Christmas where it’s hot. That’s what she said. She likes her festive season to be freezing, with the chance of snow, and she has also informed me that we’re going to be spending it here.” Carlos looked at the office with such disdain.

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re a snob?”

“Many times, and see how I don’t give a flying fuck.” Carlos pressed a kiss to his daughters’ heads. “So, tell me, Smokey, why am I spending Christmas here?”

“You don’t have to, but I know my woman would like to have Raven for Christmas. You’ve got a lifetime with Raven.”

“And you’ve got a lifetime with Ava.”

“You didn’t fuck up with your woman.”

“Wrong, I did fuck up with my woman, which is why I have no choice but to make up for it now. It’s why I will be spending Christmas here, and I’ll even be happy about it.”

“Good.” Smokey wasn’t too pleased to have the mafia man.

“But a little warning, there is a chance Sebastian Drago might also be joining us, but again, I will add him as our plus-one.”

“This is not a fucking hotel.”

“I know, trust me, this would be the last place I’d pick, but this is Raven’s home, and she does love it here.” Carlos shook his head. “My woman is a fucking queen, and she wants to stay here.”

“Again, she could stay without you.”

“Not happening. Where my woman goes, I go. It’s as simple as that.”

One of the babies started to make some noise, a little gurgling sound, and Smokey smiled. He adored Winter and Summer. Raven’s daughters were so incredibly sweet.

“They are the best part about you,” Smokey said.

“At least something we could agree on.” Carlos nodded at him and then left.

It wasn’t long before Hunter arrived in his office. “Slow day. Slow week. Anything you have for me?” He took a seat opposite him.

“Yeah, I need you to arrange to have all of this stuff delivered to the clubhouse within the next week.”

Hunter reached out, taking the list. “Wreathes, tinsel, baubles, twinkle lights. Seriously, Smokey, is this some kind of joke?”

“I’m going to keep Ava away from the clubhouse for the next couple of weeks. I want the clubhouse decorated, and the only way to do that is to buy the stuff.”

“Then get one of the sluts to do it.”

“No!” Smokey slammed his hand down on the desk. “I want you and the guys to do it. Not the bitches who don’t give a shit about my woman.” He wanted this to be a surprise for his woman, not for her to get involved or to think there was something else going on at the club.

“I’m sorry, man. You’re right, and I’ll get to this right away. Do you have any preference?”

“Shit has to be festive. That’s all I know.”

“Have you thought about asking Ava? She would know what she’d like more than us.”

“I want it to be a surprise.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “For her, she deserves to have a Christmas to remember, and for this place to stop being the horror show it is.” He had thought about burning the place down to the ground and building it back up, but that was a lot of fucking work.

What he needed to do was have new memories. Not old ones.

Ava needed to love this place.

Hunter nodded and then got up. “I’ll get this arranged.”

“Could you reach out to Harlow?” Smokey asked.

“How would I be able to reach out to Harlow? She’s not my kid sister. I have nothing to do with her. Not a thing, other than when I see her at the shop,” Hunter said.

“Then would you send Big Dick in?” Smokey asked.

“Yeah, that I can do.”

Smokey sighed. Hunter was a good VP, but at times, he was a pain in the ass. He was good at what he did, and that was the main thing.

Big Dick arrived at his door five minutes later. “Hunter said you wanted me.”

“Yeah, I want you to call your sister and ask her to come and meet me.”

“Sure, no problem. You do know her number is on speed dial on your phone, right?”

Smokey frowned. “Why is it?”

“I, er, I added it to all of the brothers’ phones. With her working for Ava, it kind of puts her at risk, and seeing as she’d been hurt before, I want the club to know that she’s an important person to take care of. She’s my kid sister.”

Smokey pulled out his cell phone, and sure enough, there was Harlow’s name. “Right.”

“Also, there’s something else I wanted to ask about,” Big Dick said.

“Ask away.”

“Harlow being a vegan, it kind of puts a little ... tension at home. I know she hates going home, and I was wondering, could she be my plus-one here? I can handle all the vegan-alternative shit. She’s my sister, and I know it can be tough going home. Our parents mean well—”

“Invite her. Ava loves her, and I want Ava to have the best Christmas.”

“Awesome. Thanks, Prez.”

“I think Ugly Beast is scared,” Abriana said.

Ava smiled across the table at her friend.

Harlow snorted, and she shot her other friend a quick warning look. “Sorry, my bad. Why is Ugly Beast scared?”

“It’s Christmas. I’ve asked him if he wants me to organize the food, and he has told me not to worry. He’ll figure everything out.”

“You cooked a turkey before?” Harlow asked.

“Define *cooked*,” Abriana said, wincing. “It looked cooked, and I didn’t think there was any blood coming from it, but it, er, I had used one of those frozen turkeys and I didn’t realize you had to defrost it.”

Ava and Harlow both winced.

“I am so bad at this.” Abriana frowned.

“You’re not bad, you’re just not well trained.”

Harlow started to choke on her coffee, and Ava glared at her.

Abriana’s cell phone started to ring, and Ava pointed toward her office. Once the other woman was out of sight, she turned to Harlow. “What is the matter with you?”

“The matter is that girl is a disaster. Honestly, she cannot cook anything. Food is frightened of her. I swear, potatoes see her coming and literally shrivel up. I love Abriana, but trust me, she cost me a fortune in dental care.”

“Ugly Beast paid.”

“I still had to go to the dentist. We cannot allow her to cook her own Christmas meal. I’m surprised Ugly Beast isn’t glowing with the shit she’s fed him.”

Ava tried not to laugh. The truth was, Abriana was a terrible cook. The worst kind of cook. The poor woman had the heart and desire, but nothing ever went right for her. Ava wasn’t going to give up on her. “I’ll talk to Smokey. I might prepare all of Abriana’s food in advance.”

“That sounds like a great idea.”

Harlow's phone began to play a Christmas tune. Ava was used to Harlow's phone changing with the seasons. At Halloween, it had a spooky tune, Thanksgiving was a classical piece.

"Er, I've got to take this," Harlow said. "I'll be right back."

Ava glanced over and saw it said *Asshole Prez* on the front.

Smokey.

Smokey was calling Harlow? That was strange.

The doorbell rang, so Ava got to her feet and headed toward the main counter. After lunch, it was always a lull. They would get a few customers up until around dinner, and then they'd sell out.

Ava saw it was Larissa. The sweet young girl who worked at the library. Larissa always had a smile on her face. Today, she was wrapped up in a thick winter coat, a hat, a scarf, and her cheeks were bright red.

"Larissa, are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I'm always so cold around this time of year."

Ava didn't need to see that the young woman was probably in a dress and wearing tights and boots. She couldn't ever recall seeing Larissa in anything different.

"I was hoping to have some cinnamon rolls to take home to Dad," Larissa said.

This was a surprise to Ava as Larissa often cooked for her father.

"Sure, sure. How many would you like?"

"Would it be possible to have four?" Larissa asked. "I haven't had a chance to make them."

There was a quiver in Larissa's throat, and Ava frowned. "Is everything okay?" She looked at Larissa and then saw the tears in the woman's eyes.

Ava couldn't stand to see such a sweet woman crying. She rushed around the counter and pulled Larissa in for an embrace. "It's okay, sweetheart. I've got you."

"I'm so sorry. I don't usually cry so easily. It's fine. It is so fine."

It clearly wasn't fine.

Larissa wrapped her arms around her, and Ava hugged her tightly, not wanting to let her go, to help her feel safe and warm.

"Come on, come around the back," Ava said.

She guided the other woman toward a seat.

Abriana and Harlow still hadn't returned. How odd.

Pushing her concerns out of her mind, she focused on Larissa, who pulled her hat off her head.

"I'm sorry. It is so silly, but I absolutely love my job. I love working at the library, and they have to make cuts." Larissa sniffled. "They let me go. My dad already knows and he says it's fine, but I don't know what I'm going to do. I have to work."

Ava wanted to offer her a job, but between her and Harlow, everything was working out fine, and she didn't have a place for her.

"You know what, I'm pretty sure we can come up with something," Ava said. "I promise you, you won't have to worry for long."

"No one is hiring, and I don't want to go to the city." Larissa's lip wobbled. "This is home, you know." She sniffled. "I'm so sorry. You don't need to hear about my troubles."

"They're not troubles. Would you like some coffee or hot chocolate, or tea?"

“A tea would be nice,” Larissa said.

“Right.” Ava moved toward the kettle, and as she did, she looked into the office where Abriana stood with Harlow. They were close to Harlow’s phone, nodding into it.

They looked up, and Ava looked away, focusing on the cup of tea she was making for Larissa.

What were Abriana and Harlow up to?

Chapter Four

“And the library has let her go because of budget cuts, and I don’t know what to do. I suppose I could give her a job at the shop. Is there anything you can do, Smokey?”

Ava looked so damn sad, and the truth was, Larissa was such a sweetheart that he didn’t want to see her struggling. He didn’t understand why Jonah hadn’t come to him already.

Taking hold of Ava’s hands, he pulled them up against his lips and pressed a kiss to each one. “Please, don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of everything. I swear.”

“You have a job for her?”

“It can be at the clubhouse, I think.”

Ava nibbled on her lip. “You know Larissa’s not like those other women that hang out there.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll talk to Jonah first and see what’s going on. I will protect Larissa. She is a good woman.”

Ava breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you. I don’t— She is so sweet. Seeing her crying today. That was horrible.”

He could imagine. He didn’t even want to think about little Larissa crying. He’d seen that young girl grow up, and she always had a smile on her face. She was a breath of fresh air, and he did feel protective of her.

“I’ll handle it.”

“Thank you.” Ava sighed and once again, he saw her nibbling on her lip. He had to wonder why.

“So, you called Harlow today.”

Shit.

Fuck.

He’d called Harlow and he’d asked for the conversation to be kept private. Abriana had also been there, and he’d

talked to both women about his plans for Christmas. Both of them were excited and more than happy to help out.

In fact, Harlow had already been grocery shopping and had stopped by that evening to start dropping stuff off.

What he didn't like was the fact Abriana had said she would attempt to cook a pumpkin pie. How she had found a recipe and knew she could do it.

Smokey had to wonder where his balls had gone that he couldn't tell the other woman to stay the fuck away from the kitchen. No wonder Ugly Beast was constantly going to the toilet. The poor bastard didn't know when to tell his woman how bad she was at something.

"It was nothing. Something for Big Dick, I can't remember."

He let go of her hand, hating lying to her but knowing the surprise would be worth it.

"Is Big Dick not in town?"

"Oh, he is, but he was busy doing something for me. Club stuff." It wasn't a total lie.

He twirled his fork into his spaghetti and shoved it in his mouth. He also reached out for a piece of garlic bread and shoved that in too. His mouth was full to bursting. Lying to his woman was fucking horrible. He had never cared this much about anyone in his whole life.

Ava was his world. His reason for fucking breathing.

"It's fine. Did you manage to go up to the attic?" Ava asked.

"Nah, it's on my list of jobs to do. Don't worry, I'll get it done."

"Do you celebrate Christmas?"

"Yeah, of course, I do."

Ava nodded. “With everything going on, between Umberto’s birth, and then Raven, it has been a rushed affair, and I normally get everything ready. I had to wonder.” She kept pushing her food around her plate, and he wanted to tell her everything he had planned, but that would spoil it.

All the guys were working hard to make this work for him.

“How was the bakery?” he asked.

“Great. Apart from Larissa, everything else is fine. We’ve put a date for the last of our orders, and Harlow and I have agreed on how we’re going to decorate the baskets and stuff. It’s going to be fun. We’ve even made one up and placed it in the shop window so customers know what they’ll be getting. We had multiple orders today.”

“Do you think you’re doing too much?” Smokey asked.

“No, of course not. Trust me. When it comes to Christmas, nothing is too much.” He was starting to see that with his own plans.

He finished his food, and when Ava got to her feet, he took hold of her hands and pulled her in close. “No, you’re going to go and take a nice long bath. I’ll do the dishes.”

“Why don’t we put the dishes in soak, and you come up and join me?”

“Babe, I know you by now, and I’m not having these precious hands dealing with them first thing in the morning.”

It was bad enough that she always woke up before him. He hadn’t been able to serve her breakfast in bed or even make her a mug of coffee. Ava was an early riser.

“Okay,” Ava said. She kissed him. “But don’t be long. I’ll be waiting for you.”

He kissed her hard and felt his cock thickening. It never took long for him to be aroused by his woman. She was fucking irresistible.

He watched her go, admiring the full cheeks of her ass as she disappeared around the corner.

Smokey hated doing the dishes, but he also didn't like the idea of Ava doing them when she woke up either. He carried them through to the kitchen and got started on them. There weren't a lot of dishes. He noticed whenever Ava was tired, she always did a pasta dish. Her food was always delicious.

Was she doing too much?

He didn't want her to get ill or exhausted. Giving birth was not a picnic. It was fucking hard work.

Pulling out his cell phone, he texted Harlow.

Smokey: Is Ava doing too much?

He pocketed his cell phone and was amazed when it buzzed less than a minute later. What was it with young people constantly on their cell phones?

Vegan Brat: I won't let her. I do everything, but she is always wanting to bake stuff for the club. She is a true mama bear.

Smokey sighed. He had tried to get her to stop worrying about feeding the club. Ava needed to take it easy.

Smokey: Don't let her do too much. She needs her rest.

Vegan Brat: Tell her that. She's my boss and I'm not going to get my ass fired. I'll do everything I can. Tomorrow I'll be bringing the turkeys. Kisses.

He glared at the phone.

Stupid kisses.

Harlow did that to get him to stop texting.

Ava lay in the bath with anticipation, hoping Smokey would come to her. What she had to wonder was if he got the

message of what she wanted.

The two of them, alone in the tub.

She nibbled on her lip as she glanced down at the bubbles. They covered her body, with just her shoulders, head, and feet out of the water. She'd pinned her hair back. It wasn't too long as she hadn't allowed it to grow back to its original length.

Whenever she did have an appointment with the hairdresser, Smokey kept asking her to cancel.

She didn't.

Ava paused as she thought about Smokey. Raven had been the one to chop off her hair at his demand. Before she met Smokey, she used to have long hair, the kind that touched her ass with the length.

Did it upset him whenever she got it cut?

She hadn't thought about it from Smokey's perspective. Only from her own. Yes, part of her didn't want the chance to go through that again. There was no denying that, but also, she happened to like having shorter hair. It was easier to style, at least for her, it was. Also, it made life easier when it came to working at the bakery.

Running her hands through the water, she tilted her head back when Smokey opened the door.

Umberto was still sound asleep.

She noticed Smokey had already removed his leather cut, and as he stepped into the bathroom, he didn't strip off his clothes. He moved toward her and knelt beside the side of the tub. "Hello, beautiful."

"Smokey, there is more than enough room. Come and join me." She had no choice but to sit up. The copious amounts of bubbles helped to conceal her body. "Or, would you like to go to bed?"

"Is my woman horny?"

“Are you not?” she asked.

“For you, always.”

She wanted to ask him if that was really true, that pesky insecurity rearing its ugly head. Instead of saying a single word, she merely smiled as if she knew a secret that he didn't quite understand.

“I want you, Smokey.” She ran her hand down the front of his body, tracing toward his dick, but he captured her hand and lifted it to his lips, kissing her knuckles.

“And you'll have me.” He stood up, and her mouth went dry as he removed his clothes. Every act from Smokey was like a seduction. He revealed his heavily inked body, and fuck, he looked so fucking tasty. She wanted to lick every single part of him, and then some more.

She felt an answering pulse between her thighs, and it was like a hunger building inside her. A desperate need for him.

After he removed his boxer briefs, he stepped into the bathtub behind her, and Ava cursed herself internally because she had wanted to face him.

Seduction was not her forte.

Smokey wrapped his large hands around her, and as she leaned back, she felt herself relax against him. He felt so good.

He pressed a kiss to her head and then to her shoulder. His hands slowly started to tease up toward her breasts, and as he captured them in his palms, she released a moan. He knew exactly what to do to make her hungry for him. Need flooded her pussy, and as he began to tease her nipples, an answering quake built.

“I fucking love your tits. I think they've gotten bigger, baby.”

He pinched her nipples, but he didn't stay teasing her for too long before he began to caress down her body, going between her thighs.

She sank her teeth against her lip, a whimper escaping as he finally touched her pussy.

“Oh, baby, you’re so wet for me,” he said.

He stroked her clit, and each touch to her nub set her on fire even more. Smokey slid down, plunging his fingers inside her core, and another whimper escaped her. She just couldn’t help it. The pleasure was out of this world.

She wanted him so badly. All the time.

“Come for me, baby. Let me hear you scream my name.”

Ava let go and flew over the edge, embracing her orgasm. His name spilled from her lips as it always did, and Smokey prolonged her release for as long as possible.

He stopped the moment she couldn’t take it anymore, and as he did, he pressed a kiss to her shoulders.

Coming down, Ava knew she had him in the bath, and as she tried to turn around, he banded an arm around her waist and grabbed a sponge.

“Smokey, what about you?” she asked.

“I’m going to make love to you in the bedroom, baby. First, I’m going to wash you.”

Ava opened her mouth, closed it. He wouldn’t see what she was struggling with right now. Again, he was put off by fucking her. It was always making love and yeah, that was fun and great, but she wanted it to be dirty, to be hard, to be fast. She wanted to feel desired and damn it, wanted.

No words fell from her lips.

Instead, she let Smokey wash her body. At least he was touching her, and she felt like such an asshole because he *did* want her. She knew he did, but it wasn’t like before Umberto, or even since the attack.

What did she have to do to make him take her? To make him want to fuck her like before?

She wasn't broken, and she had forgiven him.

What was it going to take?

Chapter Five

“You cannot embarrass me if you’re here,” Big Dick said.

Harlow rolled her eyes. “Believe it or not, I have no intention of embarrassing you.”

“You’ve got to learn to use your filter.”

This was coming from a guy called Big Dick in an MC club. She had to be the one to use a filter. No one could say his name out loud without there being some sort of strange looks. She hated it when he was like this.

“Fine, George, what else do you need me to do? Do I need to wear my best dress, and pin my hair back? Maybe be spoken to and act dumb?”

He glared at her, and she glared right back.

“I’m doing you a favor.”

She stuck her tongue out.

“Do I need to separate the two of you?” Hunter asked, coming into the clubhouse’s kitchen.

Harlow continued to glare at her brother. “No, that’s fine. Don’t worry, *George*, I’ll be on my best behavior. No sudden outbursts from me.”

Her big brother glared at her again, but he didn’t say another word as he turned on his heel and left.

“You do know he hates his name.”

“Don’t care. He wants to go telling me to have a filter while he’s walking around with a stupid, and quite frankly, gross name.” She wrinkled her nose.

And now she was alone with Hunter. The Hell’s Bastards VP. The one close beside Smokey but also the one guy out of the whole freaking town that seemed to get under

her skin without much help, and it was so frustratingly annoying.

She glanced at the fridge and then checked the freezer, very much aware of the fact he was still in the kitchen. Still close by.

“Do you have everything you need?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’ve bought Abriana a pumpkin. She said there’s this recipe that is amazing, and she wants to try it and feels like she won’t mess it up.”

Harlow picked up the large pumpkin.

She had to wonder if she should feel embarrassed for the pumpkin or not. She hoped Abriana knew what she was doing with this thing.

Harlow finished putting away all of the grocery shopping and turned toward Hunter.

He stood close. Maybe a little too close.

She hadn’t been alone with him for a long time. Did he ... like her? She wasn’t so good at reading these kinds of things, and she didn’t know for sure if she was just trying to find something that wasn’t there.

“So, er, are you a big fan of the holidays?” she asked.

“No.”

“You’re not?”

“It’s a waste of time and money.”

“Okay, wow, remind me not to even bother putting you on my Christmas card list.”

“I doubt I was even on it.”

“Oh, well then, I guess, you’re in for quite the surprise.” This wasn’t flirting. Was it? Hunter stood close. Why did he have to smell so good?

He reached out, and before she knew what was happening, he stroked her hair behind her ear. “I have a feeling

when it comes to you, I will always be in for a surprise.”

“What kind of tree do you want?” Hunter asked.

Smokey stared at the allotment of trees, and the truth was, he didn't have a fucking clue. Trees didn't matter to him, at least, he didn't think they did, but now as he looked at the impressive lot before him, he had to wonder.

Running a hand down his face, he tried to think. What kind of tree would his woman prefer? Would she like something small or big? Plain green, or with fake snow, real tree, or plastic?

“Dude, you look like you're going to be shitting your pants. Don't you think this is all a little extreme if you're stressing out?”

“I want this to be perfect.”

“And my guess is it will be. You've just got to give it time. Have you thought about asking Ava what she wants?”

Smokey glared at his VP.

Hunter held his hands up. “I'm just thinking, you've made mistakes before. What if the only thing she wants is to spend time with you and her son? She might not want to be around the whole club.”

He ran a hand down his face, a little exasperated. “This isn't about spending time with the whole club. It's about changing the memories she has at the clubhouse.”

“And being around the whole club. How do you expect to do that when you won't even allow Brick or Kinky to be anywhere near her?”

“Why did I bring you along?” Smokey asked.

“My charming personality, but in truth, I was the only one not busy.” Hunter rested his hands on his waist. “Fuck me, I don't give a flying fuck about trees or Christmas.”

Smokey started to look at the trees that were available while also thinking about his woman and trying to imagine which one she'd love.

"So, er, what is Harlow doing around the club all the time?" Hunter asked.

"She's spending Christmas with us."

"Seriously, you want the mouthy vegan at Ava's bakery?"

Smokey looked at Hunter. "Let me guess, you're not a fan of Harlow."

"I don't think about the woman at all."

"Then it won't bother you that she's going to be at the dinner. From what Big Dick tells me, she has a rough time of it at home through Christmas, and seeing as she works for my woman, having her at the clubhouse will be good for Ava." And this was about making Ava feel welcome. Wiping out those fucked up memories once and for all.

It's going to take more than a Christmas to do that.

He had New Year's, Valentine's Day. Pretty much every single time she came to the clubhouse. He was determined to make this work.

"What do you think of this one?" Smokey asked.

Hunter came to stand beside him. It was slightly taller than him and was full.

"It's fucking big."

"You're being a pain in the ass, Hunter."

"Fine, if you ask me, she'll love it. Not that I know Ava, but seeing as I hate this time of year, it'll be my luck that she does."

Smokey made a note to never hang out with Hunter while attempting to plan an awesome Christmas. "Next time,

I'm bringing Raven," he said, making his way over to the owner.

Within twenty minutes, the tree was loaded up onto the truck, and Smokey climbed inside with Hunter by his side.

"So Big Dick's not going home for the holidays?"

Smokey frowned and looked toward Hunter. "Is something going on with you and Harlow?"

"Hell no, man, nothing. I'm just making conversation."

Something was off, and he wasn't quite sure what. "Harlow is young, and she's also Big Dick's little sister. Don't make me remind you what kind of shit that will cause."

"Dude, there are enough chicks for me to get my dick sucked. Trust me. I don't need no bratty bitch. I was just trying to make conversation is all. Damn, you're touchy."

Smokey still wasn't convinced, but right now, he didn't have time to follow up with Hunter to make sure he didn't do anything stupid. He was a grown man and Harlow was certainly a woman who knew what she wanted, and he wasn't going to get in the way of either of them. Every single part of him said he needed to keep an eye on what was going on, but for now, he had to focus on his own woman.

After they arrived back at the clubhouse, Elijah, Ortiz, and Brick helped him to unload the tree. They carried it into the main clubhouse.

Now that he had the tree, there was no way he was going to be able to allow Ava to come here until after everything was set up.

Raven arrived a few minutes later, Carlos following with a couple of boxes of decorations.

"Holy shit, Smokey. That's amazing."

"I got you a big tree," Carlos said.

Smokey shook his head and smirked as Raven moved in close to her husband. "I know and I love it."

“Do you think Ava’s going to like this one?”

“She’s going to love it. You’ve got no problems there.”

He stared at the tree, and in the back of his mind, he saw Ava tied to that fucking chair. The look of pain and betrayal on her face as she stared at him. He’d fucked up big time.

Gripping the back of his neck, he walked to the boxes. He reached out for something to do with his hands and then started to pull out decorations.

Decorating for Christmas wasn’t his strong suit, but for Ava, he would do anything.

“So, er, I’ve got to head out early today,” Harlow said.

Ava smiled at the customer as she handed him his change before turning back to Harlow. “You have?”

“Yeah, er, do you think you can close up here?”

“Of course. It’s my shop. Is there anything exciting you have planned?”

“No.”

Ava frowned at Harlow’s abrupt response.

“It’s nothing. Boring crap that you don’t need to worry about.”

“Is everything okay?” Ava asked.

“Sure, yeah, everything is fine. In fact, you know what? I do need to head out kind of now. I hope that is okay.” Harlow was already removing her apron and heading near the exit before Ava could say anything.

“Your bag and coat are in the back,” she said as Harlow opened up the door.

“Right, right, of course. Yes. I’ll go and grab those things.” She chuckled. “Sorry. Head’s full of stuff right now.”

Ava couldn't help but be suspicious. Harlow had been acting weirdly ever since Smokey had called her, and she couldn't for the life of her think why.

The other woman was never so jumpy or so strange in acting. What was she hiding?

Harlow held up her hand in a wave and then left.

The shop was empty.

Abriana had taken Umberto for the day, along with Summer and Winter. Standing behind her shop counter, Ava reached out and tried to straighten ... nothing. Everything was perfectly fine.

The lunch rush had already happened. Arrangements for the special Christmas baskets had already been made. She would start them at the end of the week, and collections were due very soon. For the next couple of hours, she served customers and cleaned up trays that were empty.

She missed her son. She loved working at the bakery, but she did miss being with Umberto. Just before closing, Abriana arrived, complete with Umberto and her own daughter, Bella.

"Hey, Ava," Abriana said. "How was your day?"

"It has been pretty busy. Can I ask you a question?"

"You sure can."

"Er, do you know anything about what Smokey wanted with Harlow?" Ava asked.

Abriana's face went bright red. "What? No. I don't, er, I don't know." She wouldn't look at her. "Umberto has been an angel today, like always."

Was Smokey ... having an affair?

Harlow was younger than her, definitely more beautiful.

Pain sliced through Ava, and it made her take a step back. She felt tears fill her eyes, but she quickly gritted her

teeth and rushed around the counter to pick up her son.

“Thank you for taking care of him,” she said.

“Anytime. Ava, are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” Ava looked outside of her shop window and saw that Ugly Beast was already waiting for Abriana and Bella. “Ugly Beast is waiting for you.”

“Ava, I ... I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine, Abriana, I promise.”

She didn’t want to think about what Smokey was doing.

Abriana hesitated, and Ava forced herself to look at the other woman and smile. “Everything is fine. I promise.”

The other woman didn’t look convinced, but Ugly Beast chose that moment to press on his horn.

“We’ve got to go. We’re Christmas shopping. We’ll talk soon.”

“Yes, of course.”

Ava turned away from Abriana and made her way behind the counter. Umberto snuggled against her chest, and love exploded inside hers at being near her son. She loved this little guy so much. He was her world.

Smokey is having an affair?

She couldn’t even bring herself to picture Harlow and Smokey together. Ava tried to think of their interactions over the past few months. It was rare for Smokey to come to the shop. Harlow was always her buoyant self. Was that why Smokey had stopped coming to the shop as much?

He didn’t want her to find out that he was cheating on her?

“I think I’m going a little crazy, little man. There is no way Harlow and Smokey are having an affair. It just . . . no.”

Ava still thought she was losing her mind after she cleaned up the shop, closed it for the night, and then after loading Umberto into the back of the car, she found herself heading to the Hell’s Bastards MC clubhouse.

She didn’t pull into the parking lot.

There wasn’t a lot of light, but as she was about to drive off, she saw Harlow coming out of the clubhouse with Smokey. The two stood at the main door, and right in front of her eyes, she watched as Harlow hugged Smokey and then stepped away.

Chapter Six

“Thank you so much for seeing me, Smokey. I do appreciate it,” Larissa said.

Smokey sat back in his office chair and looked at Larissa. He had already told her that anything she saw within the clubhouse, she couldn't tell Ava about. Seeing the confusion, he explained to her that he was planning a surprise for his woman and didn't want it to be spoiled.

At which point Larissa promised him that her lips were sealed.

“I'm not going to lie to you, Larissa. I don't have much in the way of work. In fact, all I do have available at this time is that of a cleaner, and I don't think your dad is going to appreciate you cleaning this place up.”

“It's work, and my dad believes in hard work.”

“Even at the clubhouse?”

Larissa nodded. “I know you and my dad are friends in some kind of way. He loves Ava, Abriana, and Raven. He knows you're all good people.”

She was way too trusting.

Smokey knew that if he took her on as a cleaner, he was going to be fucked. He'd have to put a protective mark on her. Let all of the club know she was untouchable. This didn't sound like fun to him.

There were plenty of women for the boys to enjoy.

“I'm a good cleaner,” Larissa said. “In fact, it was one of the roles I had at the library. I'll be good, and I promise I won't get involved with anyone. I know what I'm doing.”

He didn't believe that she did. She was a good person. The club had its run of bad shit. This was fucking wrong. The clubhouse was better than sending her to the fucking porn studio. At least here, he could keep an eye on her.

“How about we have a probationary period?” Larissa said. “I work for you for, say a month, and if you don’t like my work ethic, you can fire me.”

“Look, it’s not about your work ethic. I know you’re a good kid. This club, we’re, it’s...”

“Smokey, I’m not a fool. I know that your club might not be quite above legal at times. I’m not blinded by that. I get that there is a lot of sex that goes on, and parties.”

He was going to burn in hell for hearing Larissa say the word *sex*.

“I also know that something bad has happened to Ava here. Again, I don’t know everything, but a lot of people talk and there are a lot of rumors.”

“And you’re not terrified?”

“No,” Larissa said. “You have only ever been nice to me. Why would I be worried or troubled by that? Rumors can be fake, Smokey. I never trust gossip or the whole *he said, she said*.” She shrugged. “That’s how lives can be destroyed.” She stood. “I can see having me here makes you uncomfortable, and I honestly don’t want that.” She held her hand out. “Thank you for giving me the opportunity.”

“Larissa, I’m not saying no, okay? I will gladly have you on for a month, and if after then, you haven’t been scared to fucking death, we’ll talk.”

He didn’t need to hire her. There was no reason to help her, but she was Jonah’s kid, and a nice one. It was Christmas, and losing a job and struggling to find another was bad enough. He couldn’t just let Larissa go.

Larissa smiled. “Thank you so much. I promise, you won’t be disappointed.”

“Your job starts after Christmas.”

“Oh, well, I saw all the boxes and glitter on the floor. I know you want this to be a surprise for Ava, but I can help

with that. Trust me, I know how to decorate.” Larissa gave him an encouraging smile.

He had a bad feeling about this. “Sure, your probation starts now.” Smokey got to his feet. “I’ll show you where everything is.”

The clubhouse was full of the brothers. He wasn’t going to embarrass Larissa now, but he texted Hunter to put a message out that Church would be happening tomorrow morning. No excuses. The sooner he put the warning out, the happier he’d feel.

This was already turning into a Christmas from hell. So much glitter. He pretty much sparkled just by walking out of his office.

Harlow had already stopped by with the last of the food prep for the freezer, and of course, she had been more than happy to help organize the tables as well.

She was a good kid, and he’d noticed Hunter lurking around. He had seen her out of the clubhouse and Harlow, being the strange one that she was, had simply thrown her arms around him and thanked him for inviting her for Christmas, for being part of this surprise with Ava.

All he wanted was for Ava to be happy. For her to see this clubhouse as an extension of their home.

While Larissa got stuck in helping decorate and cleaning up the mess, he messaged Hunter to send out the alert that he wanted everyone in church. He checked around the clubhouse and saw that his presence was no longer needed, and the only place he wanted to be was at home.

Umberto had been with Abriana, and she’d dropped his son off with Ava at the bakery, so he’d ridden his bike to the clubhouse.

Leaving the main clubhouse, he went straight to his bike. With the snow, there was no way for him to enjoy a ride, so he had no choice but to head straight home. There would be time to enjoy a ride once the weather had calmed down.

He loved the snow, but he also didn't have a death wish. Riding home, he made sure to take care. Pulling up to his home, he saw they were the only house on the street without any decorations up. He'd purposefully done this because he wanted Ava to be pissed at him, but also to see the effort he'd put in at the clubhouse.

Climbing off his bike, he headed home, only to find that the house was quiet, so very quiet.

"Ava," he said, raising his voice. "Babe? You home?" He tensed up as he felt something bad had happened. He still had many enemies, and Ava was a weakness, which was why most days, he had one of the club brothers on her ass so he knew she was okay.

Nothing could happen to her.

Ava came out of the kitchen. "You're going to wake up Umberto."

"Shit, babe, I fucking panicked then," he said, moving toward her.

"Why?"

He went to kiss her, and Ava turned her head, presenting him with her cheek.

Smokey paused.

What the fuck?

Ava didn't know what to do. She had driven home, and for a good half an hour, she stayed in her car with the engine running. Should she go indoors and pretend nothing was going on? Should she go back to the clubhouse and confront him?

Smokey was surrounded by semi-clad women all day long, but she had never felt threatened by them, at least, apart from the obvious. Smokey had shown them no interest. Harlow was different. She was her employee.

He'd always been there for Harlow, and she had assumed that was because of Big Dick.

Ava was tempted to just leave. When it came to Smokey, it seemed that she had to constantly settle for the chance of heartbreak, and she didn't want to go through with that.

The thought of him cheating hurt so damn badly. She didn't want to even think about it. Not even for a second. Not even for a single moment.

Staring at him now, Ava still didn't know what to do. She hated being this way and detested not knowing what to do.

"Ava, babe, what's wrong?" Smokey asked.

"Oh, it's nothing." Ava stepped away without him kissing her. She disappeared back into the kitchen, where she'd been doing nothing but cleaning. That was all she did. Clean. She hadn't been able to handle food.

In fact, she hadn't even cooked them both food. She felt sick to her stomach.

Was this why he never wanted to fuck her? He was getting his kicks elsewhere? She wasn't sexy enough for him?

Not good enough in any way.

"Ava, what's going on?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm not feeling too good," Ava said.

"Are you doing too much?" He took a step toward her, and Ava immediately stepped away.

"It's nothing. I think I just need an early night." She tucked some of her hair behind her ear and glanced around the kitchen. "I didn't make you anything to eat. There is food in the fridge or you can order takeout."

"Ava, what is going on?" Smokey asked.

"You didn't pull the decorations from out of the attic," Ava said.

"No, I, er, I got busy."

“Right, of course.” *You were screwing my friend?*

She didn’t even want to say the words out loud.

I saw them hugging. Is that really proof?

“Do you know if there is anything going on with Harlow?” Ava asked. This time, she forced herself to look at him, to see if he gave any signs that he was lying or keeping secrets from her.

His jaw ticked. It was just slight, but she saw it.

“She works for you.”

“I know, but she, er, she said she was out running errands or something today. Did you see her? Did she seem ... odd to you?”

“No, I haven’t seen her.”

Ava gritted her teeth. “You didn’t see her? Not even in passing?” He was lying! Why was he lying?

“No, I didn’t see her. Besides, isn’t she odd to begin with?”

She looked at him and wanted to beg for him to stop whatever he was doing because it was breaking her heart.

Smokey was lying. Ava wanted to scream at him that she saw the two of them together, but the words never left her lips. She didn’t say anything to him. “I-I’m sorry,” she said, taking a step back.

Tears stung her eyes as she left, heading back toward the stairs.

“Go and take a long hot bath. I’ll be up in a minute to wash your back, and I’ll take care of you.”

“No, that’s fine. I’m just going to go and lie down.” Ava didn’t look back. She rushed upstairs, but rather than go to her bedroom, she eased herself into her son’s bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Smokey would come to their bedroom, and there would be no hiding. Sleep wouldn't come to her, not easily.

There was a small night light in their son's bedroom. Ava tiptoed toward his crib, not wanting to wake him but to see him. To look at her son and to feel the love that consumed her so quickly and easily when he was born, and that had only continued to grow with every passing month.

Umberto was fast asleep. His little mouth was slightly open, and his hands were at either side of his head, looking so peaceful and relaxed.

Her perfect little boy. He was so beautiful.

She thought about Harlow hugging Smokey.

Could she be reading too much into a simple hug? Harlow had lied to her, as had Smokey. Why would they lie?

"I think I'm going insane," Ava said. She stepped away from the crib and moved toward the chair, curling up on it and grabbing the quilt that had been given to her as a present. She wrapped it around herself. When she heard Smokey walking up the stairs and coming close to Umberto's room, she closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep.

It was the cowardly way out, but she couldn't face him. Not now.

He wouldn't fuck her. Only ever made love to her, and was that all because of him having an affair? Wanting a newer model?

Tears filled her eyes, and this time, she allowed them to fall and didn't even bother to wipe them away.

Hunter was close to losing his shit. Harlow shouldn't even be at the clubhouse, and yet in the past few days, she'd been there constantly.

There was no way to get away from the annoying little woman.

Damn it. He wanted to think of her as a girl. A child. Not as a woman. She was far too young for him.

Why was the main clubhouse quiet? Where was everyone?

And why was Harlow on her hands and knees, with that delightful curvy ass in the air, begging for his hand to smack it?

This was pure temptation, and it was starting to piss him off.

Running a hand down his face, he watched as she wriggled out, pushing some of her hair out of her face, and then she turned toward him. The smile on her face changed, just slightly. He saw the surprise in her eyes.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Er, Smokey asked me to be here to help, and in case you didn’t know, grumpy, I’m invited for Christmas, so trust me, you’re going to be seeing a lot more of me.”

He took a step toward her, then another.

Harlow didn’t take it as a threat. She didn’t step back or try to create a distance between them. No, she just stood in place, not threatened, and he didn’t know if that aroused him more or angered him.

He quickly closed the distance between them, and then, once he stood right in front of her, not touching, but it was freaking close, he stared into her eyes. He’d been with many women over the years. Being the VP of the Hell’s Bastards MC was like a calling card to getting his dick sucked. He didn’t even have to click his fingers. All he ever needed was to look lonely, and there was some woman ready to worship his cock.

Why did this woman, an untouchable woman, have to even register on his radar? She was a club brother’s little sister. So young. Too fucking young.

And yet, he couldn't bring himself to slake his lust with another woman. He'd lost count of the last time he fucked another woman. It had been too damn long. He was going crazy with blue balls. Even now, with every single one of his senses filling up with her scent and her presence, all he wanted to do was pick her up in his arms, take her to his room, and show her how a real woman deserved to be fucked.

He had to wonder if the sex had been ruined because of some bumbling idiot. It wouldn't surprise him. Boys didn't have the first clue what they were doing.

"Is there a reason you're being all threatening?" Harlow asked. "Trust me, growing up with brothers, this isn't scary to me. If anything, this is hilarious. If you've got a problem with me being here, talk to Smokey. I'm only following orders so that Ava has one hell of a Christmas." She chuckled. "Hell of a Christmas, see what I did there?"

Why was he attracted to this woman? Hunter took a step back. "You shouldn't be here. This isn't the place for you."

His words hurt her. She pressed her lips together.

He wanted to smash any desire he had for her to smithereens. Hunter had seen firsthand what fucking up meant. How it could push women away, and now, he wanted Harlow as far away from him as humanly possible.

"Don't worry, I'm here for my best friend, not for you."

Chapter Seven

“What exactly are we looking for?” Raven asked.

“The perfect gift.” Smokey looked in the jeweler’s window at the variety of rings, bracelets, and necklaces on display. There was also an abundance of earrings, but none of them screamed at him that they would be perfect for Ava.

“You know, isn’t this the kind of thing you should have asked Carlos for advice, or maybe even Hunter, and the guys? How should I know what a guy is supposed to get a woman for Christmas?”

Smokey stood up. “Do you know what Carlos has gotten you?”

Raven frowned. “Why would Carlos get me anything?”

“It’s what married couples do unless they want to have a shit relationship.” He shrugged.

“You’re wrong.”

“If you say so.” He wanted Ava’s gift to be just perfect. A necklace, that was personal. He thought of her pretty neck, and he moved toward the door.

The man behind the counter clicked a button that allowed him to enter.

Smokey had never been to this jeweler’s before, and seeing as he was wearing his leather jacket, the man looked like he was shitting himself.

Judgey.

It was a good thing he’d bought some cold hard cash with him to pay.

Raven tutted. “What’s that supposed to mean? He’s given me himself and a couple of kids, Smokey. What more of a gift is there to give?”

“You think Carlos is a gift in himself?” Smokey asked, turning toward her.

Raven shrugged. “Don’t you think it’s a gift having Ava?”

“Yeah, I do. The fact she picked me is a fucking miracle after ... everything.”

“The guilt?” Raven asked.

Smokey ran a hand down his face. “I want this to be perfect, and I asked for your help because you’re a club brother, and also, you’re getting close to Ava, and you know what she likes.”

Raven rolled her eyes. “Seriously? Are you having doubts about your ability?”

He glared at her. “Now I’m starting to regret bringing you along.” He didn’t want to bring Hunter as his VP was moody of late and continued to ask him why he invited Harlow, and now Larissa to Christmas.

Speaking of Larissa, he made a note to stop by to talk to Jonah. It was only fair to invite her father around for Christmas dinner. Ava liked the two.

It would help to create the memories he wanted to be a buffer between the club brothers, and to show that people could enter the clubhouse and not be fucked up by the experience. The clubhouse was coming along really well. Admittedly, there was way too much fucking glitter for his liking, but that was Christmas.

“Sir, is there anything else I can help you with?” the salesman asked.

Raven sighed. “We’re not here to steal shit. He’s looking for something for his woman. He wants her to know that she’s one of the most important people in his life. That he loves her and wants everything to be perfect between them. He wants a long and happy life with her. Have you got something like that wrapped in one package?”

He turned to Smokey, and Raven shrugged. “That’s what you’re looking for, right?”

He couldn’t deny it.

“We have just the thing,” the salesman, Charlie, said. Smokey had finally caught sight of the nametag on his chest.

Smokey waited as he pulled a set of keys from his pocket, released the lock, and then pulled out a sleeve of necklaces. They were all delicate with jewels in them.

“Nothing says love more than diamonds. Depending on your budget, diamonds will help to deliver any message.”

Glancing over the necklaces, he kept coming to one that caught his eye. Tiny little diamonds, with a scalloped edge. It would decorate Ava’s neck to perfection. “This one.”

Charlie gave him the price, and Smokey already had the amount in cash. He wanted an expensive gift for his woman, and he made sure it was gift wrapped and finished with a nice neat bow on top.

The salesman checked each bill to make sure it wasn’t fake.

Smokey was used to this kind of behavior. It wasn’t like he could blame the kid. He wasn’t a good man, and if it wasn’t for Ava, he would have hurt the kid long before now. Maybe the festive season was finally getting to him. He wanted to do good deeds and all that shit.

Once the necklace was gift wrapped and the money was taken, he got a receipt and left the shop.

“Do you think she’ll like it?” Smokey asked.

“It’s Ava, Smokey. She’s going to like any crap you give to her.” They walked toward his parked car. He’d wanted to go on his bike, but the snow was too hazardous. He wanted to survive Christmas, not run the risk of going to war with Santiago because he might have accidentally killed his wife because of snow.

Carlos was very protective of Raven. It was why Smokey had no problem with the two being married, or for Raven to continue to be a member of the Hell's Bastards MC. She had earned her patch. Nothing was ever going to take that shit away from her.

He climbed behind the wheel, turned over the ignition, and headed back to town.

"I've got to make a quick stop at Jonah's. Do you want me to drop you off?"

"I'll go see Jonah. He is asking about Summer and Winter all the time."

"Motherhood has been good to you."

Raven laughed. "I'm fucking terrified of screwing everything up. I ... I wish my mom was here. You know, to tell me when I'm messing up or when I'm getting it right."

"They have books for that kind of thing."

"The books aren't my mom."

Smokey grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze. He and Raven were not in the habit of being overly affectionate people, but when it came to Raven, he found that he cared a great deal for her. She was a friend, a sister, and someone he wanted to always protect.

"Have you and Ava talked much this week?" Smokey asked.

"I've avoided her, to be honest. I know that's not good, but with everything going on, I didn't want to ruin your surprise. Why? Is something up?"

"No, nothing is up." But she had slept in their son's room last night. In the morning when he woke up, the coffee pot had been on with a note asking him to get the decorations out of the attic, but no sign of his wife or son.

Was Ava pissed off with him? He couldn't help but think about how she pulled away from him last night, or the fact she

had given him a cheek to kiss.

Just a cheek.

Nothing else.

What the fuck did that even mean?

Why did he only get a cheek?

“Something is up,” Raven said.

“Nothing is.”

“You’re scowling.”

“Could you stop by and perhaps talk to her or something?” Smokey asked.

“I can try. I don’t want to lie to her though. This surprise is stressful.”

Smokey groaned. “It’s nearly done. Just a couple more days.”

Raven sighed. “You do know Ava has forgiven you, right?”

“This isn’t about that.”

“I know you want to wipe out the memories, but one thing I’ve come to see is that you can’t force that. Trust me. The memories are always going to be there. The only difference is how everyone deals with it.”

Smokey glanced toward her. “That kind of talk does not fucking comfort me.”

She chuckled. “I’m keeping it real.”

They arrived at the church to see Jonah outside. He wore a thick jacket and was carrying a brush, wiping away the snow from the previous night’s fall.

After climbing out of the car, Raven matched him step for step.

“Raven, Smokey, this is a pleasant surprise.” Jonah put the brush down and shook his hand, then Raven’s.

“It’s good to see you, Jonah,” Raven said, and then surprised Smokey as she hugged the other man.

Jonah patted Raven’s back, and then took a step back. “I want to thank you,” Jonah said, looking toward him. “For Larissa. I know with her losing her job at the library, it truly upset her, and she was worried, even though I’ve told her she has no reason to be.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her, Jonah.”

“We all will,” Raven said.

“Thank you. Is there anything you need?”

Smokey wasn’t used to this, asking people to be part of a Christmas celebration, inviting people.

This is for Ava.

All of this is for Ava.

“Actually, I don’t know if Larissa told you, but we’re having a big get-together at the clubhouse. I’ve invited her, and I wanted to extend the invitation to you.”

“It’s for Ava,” Raven said.

“Ah, so that’s what all the fuss is about.”

“Fuss?” Smokey asked.

Jonah chuckled. “The town has been whispering rumors about what the MC is up to. Some of them are more elaborate than others.”

“No one has said anything to Ava?” He didn’t give a shit what people said about him. He was used to the lies spoken about him and the club. It had been happening for years, but his woman was different.

No one could hurt his woman. It would piss him off.

“Not that I know of. I think everyone is terrified of you, and of course, Ava being yours, they know she’s protected by you.”

That should have filled him with joy, but if anything, all it did was annoy him.

No one should be afraid of Ava. She was a good person. No one should ever make his woman feel like he was a problem.

Smokey clenched his hands into fists. All he wanted was to create this surprise for his woman, and every single way he turned, it was all getting fucked up.

“I would love to come,” Jonah said. “I know Larissa is excited as well. She will help keep everything all neatly organized.”

Smokey shook Jonah’s hand. “I look forward to you coming.”

He knew Jonah would have other commitments with the church, but he was always welcome at the clubhouse. Jonah was a good man. A nice man.

Heading back to the car, he looked down the street toward his woman’s bakery.

“You want to go see her?” Raven asked.

Smokey thought about her presented cheek last night. Did he want to risk that kind of rejection with Raven watching?

“She doesn’t want me ruining shit.” He climbed behind the wheel and took off, heading back to the clubhouse where his clubhouse was beginning to look like a neon sign for Christmas.

Sure enough, Larissa and Harlow had joined forces and were making his wishes come true.

Chapter Eight

Ava was used to being happy.

Baking.

Serving customers.

Christmas music.

Festive lights and tinsel.

All of it filled her with joy. Or at least it did before she thought of Smokey having an affair. No matter how hard she tried to come up with many different excuses, nothing worked.

Harlow had called in sick. Ava knew it was a lie. The fake cough and her constantly changing her voice when she forgot that she was sick were all telltale signs.

She had also noticed that some people kept looking at her and whispering behind their hands, which was a little disconcerting.

“Are you okay?”

Ava had been so off in her own little world that she hadn't even noticed Abriana stepping into her shop. Shaking her head, she forced a smile to her lips, but it was hard. “Abriana, hey.”

“Are you okay?” Abriana asked. “Do you need to go to the emergency room?”

“I'm fine. Trust me.”

“You didn't even see me come in, or hear me say hi. I was talking to you, Ava.”

“I'm sorry. Is there anything I can get you?”

“You can tell me what is wrong.” Abriana frowned.

“It's nothing. Trust me. I'm just, this is all nothing.” She wanted to sob, but she held the tears back. Tears didn't accomplish anything.

Abriana frowned. “Ava, please, don’t lie to me.”

Ava stared at her friend, and she didn’t know what set the waterworks off, but she couldn’t handle it anymore. She had kept the tears in all morning. Customers didn’t want to be served by a sobbing woman. Ava also didn’t want to ruin the reputation she had built up a second time after Smokey had nearly destroyed her. Her bakery had taken a huge hit, and once the Hell’s Bastards MC had made it clear to the town that she wasn’t the enemy, she’d slowly built up her clientele again.

Ava stepped away from the counter as the first wave of tears started to fall.

Umberto had been restless all morning, but he’d finally settled down for a nap, and he was lying in her office, in his car seat.

She rushed to her office, pressing her palm against the far wall, trying to compose herself.

Abriana had followed her. She sensed the other woman in her office.

“I’ve locked the door,” Abriana said.

Ava hadn’t even thought about the freaking door.

“Do you need me to get Smokey?” She was talking softly.

Ava sniffled. “No.”

She reached for some tissues and took several, pressing them to her eyes in an attempt to stop the pain and tears. No matter how often she dabbed at her cheeks, they continued to fall. She hated crying so damn much.

Abriana stepped toward her. Ava closed her eyes hard as she put a hand on her shoulder.

“Ava, I think I should get Smokey. If someone has hurt you, then you need to tell him.”

“Smokey has hurt me,” Ava said.

“What? Smokey? How?”

Ava turned toward her friend. Her world felt like it was breaking.

Abriana had been so lucky. Ugly Beast adored Abriana. Ava had watched the two and saw how close they were. How much they loved one another. Ugly Beast wasn't afraid to show his woman how he truly felt. They were the dream kind of couple.

“He's having an affair. Smokey's cheating on me with ... Harlow.”

Abriana's mouth opened and then closed, and then she completely shocked Ava as she burst out laughing. The other woman slapped a hand over her face, trying to hide the fact that she was laughing, but she was clearly struggling.

“I'm sorry. This is not funny. It is not funny at all.” Ava wiped at her tears.

Abriana stepped out of the office and laughed.

This wasn't helping Ava.

“Smokey is not having an affair,” Abriana said.

“I saw them together. I saw him hugging Harlow, and then they lied about it.”

Abriana winced and then bit her lip. “Look, I love you, Ava, and I swear, I cannot tell you what is going on, but I promise you, Smokey and Harlow are not, and will not ever be having an affair. I swear it. I don't even know how to tell you completely, but they are not, nor will they ever be having an affair.”

It didn't matter. “I'm just being silly. I see that.”

The other woman moaned and rushed toward her, giving Ava no choice but to accept the hug she offered.

“I'm sorry. I'm a horrible, horrible person, but Smokey loves you, Ava. He wants to make everything perfect for you,

and there is nothing going on between the two of them. You're who he loves."

Ava didn't want to talk about this with Abriana. "You're right. I'm just being silly." She gave her friend a quick hug. "I better get back to the shop."

Abriana followed her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." Ava sighed. "I think it is just the holiday season. I clearly misread something that looked so obvious."

"I handled that badly. I've seen the way Smokey looks at you, Ava. He is in love with you. There is no one else that he wants. Just you. Always only you."

"I think you've mistaken your husband for that," Ava said.

"I know Ugly Beast loves me, and I love him, but it's different. It's always so different."

Ava didn't want to talk about this, and she quickly went to the door where she saw people waiting. She wanted the distraction of customers.

"Ava?"

"Abriana, I get it, he loves me, and I love him. You're right. I was seeing all the wrong things."

Larissa looked at the large tree and smiled. This was going to be the perfect surprise for Ava. She pushed some of her hair out of the way and looked at her handiwork.

She loved Christmas. Always had.

Her dad always allowed her to decorate the tree. When she was a kid, it would look like a jumbled mess, but in recent years, since seeing the beautiful magazines and catalogs, she had created a masterpiece.

"It's looking good," Harlow said.

Larissa nodded. "I hope Ava likes it. I don't know what color scheme she'd like."

"It's Ava, she likes anything. Trust me, Smokey is going to get some serious sex once we're done." Harlow winced. "Crap, am I supposed to say those kinds of words to you?"

She burst out laughing. Being the priest's daughter certainly came with its interesting interactions. For the longest time, she had noticed how nervous everyone was around her. "I know what sex is, Harlow. Please, don't worry about it."

She wasn't a prude.

A lot of people seemed to see her as some kind of weak, innocent, young girl they needed to protect. They didn't.

She had lived alone with her father, had helped to take care of him. Had learned a lot about being a young woman on her own. Where other girls were getting advice on tampons and being guided by their mother, she had the mortifying experience of everything being told by her father. He'd been so embarrassed as he didn't have the first clue.

Of course, he'd been so horrified by how little he knew, he drove them out of town when she was twelve, and they had to have the conversation with a woman in a pharmacy. Larissa had done her research and told her dad not to worry.

This was why she never had a boyfriend. No one wanted to do anything with the priest's daughter. She had a big fat cross right across her person. Larissa had to wonder if there was a cross that she couldn't see.

"I'm sorry. I open my mouth and it just vomits words."

Larissa laughed. She adored Harlow. She was the only person who didn't worry about what she said or hold back. Of course, she always apologized, but that was after the fact.

"That's my bread," Larissa said when her timer went off.

She wanted to fill the air with homely scents. Not the smells of cigarettes and beer. Homemade bread was always a winner. It certainly helped to make her mouth water. After

stepping away from Harlow, she made her way toward the kitchen. She grabbed a pair of oven mitts and slid them onto her hands, opening the oven and then pulling out two, large loaves.

They looked so good. She placed them on top of the stove, closed the oven, and then eased each one out, giving them a quick test before placing them on a cooling rack.

“You bake bread!”

Larissa turned to see Big Dick sitting at the kitchen table.

“Yeah. Ava loves bread, and I think it will be nice for her not having to make anything this Christmas.”

“She owns a bakery.”

“Doesn’t mean that she has to do all the cooking when she comes here.” She didn’t know exactly when Smokey was going to finally share all of his plans with Ava, but the longer he left it, the bigger the surprise, she imagined.

Larissa smiled at Big Dick and then moved toward the door. There was a lot to do. She had several loads of laundry to fold and a bathroom to clean. She had also offered to organize Smokey’s office, but he wasn’t too interested in that.

She knew he had already given the men the hands-off speech. All of his club members had been different toward her after twenty-four hours of her working here. She imagined it was down to his respect for her father. They were always looking out for her, not that she needed it. She wasn’t any of these men’s types. She’d seen them all around town with the women who lived at the club. Not that she’d seen a lot of the women in the last few days. It was like they had all but vanished.

“You know you shouldn’t be working here,” Big Dick said. “This isn’t the place for someone like you.”

“You don’t know me, so I wouldn’t assume anything.” She held her skirt out, it was a full circle skirt, which she

loved, and then she bowed down in a curtsy.

Harlow was pissed off at Hunter.

He'd been avoiding her, and he wasn't going to say some mean shit to her and then move away like it meant nothing.

Nearly all of her work was done. Big Dick hadn't given her a chance to become truly acquainted with the club. She was there as a guest, but she would never be a member. Not that she ever wanted to be a member of the club.

No, but Hunter was just plain rude.

The guys were all milling around, doing odd jobs, or enjoying a beer. Larissa was cleaning up after everyone.

Even Harlow was amazed at how fast she'd been able to clear away all the glitter, the pine needles, and the stray pieces of tinsel. The woman was a machine. Harlow couldn't believe the library had let her go. She would never step foot in that place as there was no way it was going to be clean. Certainly not up to Larissa's standard.

No one was paying her any attention. Hunter was at the bar though, nursing a beer. And he looked freaking miserable. This was the time of year to be happy. Not to be moping into his beer.

She felt the anger start to build inside her. Stupid, infuriating man.

With her hands clenched at her sides, she closed the distance between them and stepped up close toward him. Harlow liked him, a lot. Being up close and personal with Hunter was a heady experience.

He's a mean asshole.

Do not be attracted to this man.

He's also best friends with your brother.

Maybe best friends was a bit of a stretch. They were club brothers.

“What do you want?” Hunter asked.

Damn it. He shouldn't have gotten the first word in.

She pressed a finger to his lips. “No, you don't get to speak to me right now. I'm the one that is going to speak.” Hunter glared at her, and she shouldn't see that as sexy, but damn it, her female parts did.

He was a good-looking man. Dangerous and sexy.

“I don't know what I've done that you don't like, but I am here for Ava. I am here for the club, and until I do something to seriously piss you off, then you don't get to be moody with me.”

That wasn't what she wanted to say, but she couldn't think of anything better to say. Stupid men. Stupid, hot, sexy, dangerous Hunter.

Chapter Nine

Smokey had everything in place. The clubhouse didn't need to have anything more added, and if they did, then it was going to be impossible for them to move. He was amazed at how well Larissa had cleaned up after everyone. The woman was a working machine.

Running his fingers through his hair, he got to his feet and made his way to his office doorway where he could look out over the clubhouse and see his plans working.

This was good. Everything was coming together.

He turned toward the main door and watched as Abriana and Ugly Beast came into the clubhouse. Abriana looked around at the clubhouse. She was nibbling on her lip, and then Ugly Beast tapped her shoulder and nodded toward him.

Smokey waited as Abriana rushed toward him. "You have got to tell Ava, like, right now."

He looked at Ugly Beast, who shrugged. "This is all news to me."

"Ava thinks you're having an affair with Harlow!"

"What?" Harlow asked, snapping out the word.

Smokey had seen that she'd been having some kind of conversation with Hunter. He didn't know what that was all about, but he made a note to keep an eye on everything.

"I've just been to see Ava, and she's, she's losing it. She thinks you're having an affair, and she was crying, and she said that she saw the two of you hugging and all of that," Abriana said.

Harlow burst out laughing. "She thinks Smokey and I are having an affair?"

"I'm not joking. I-I laughed. I promise. I think Ava is hurting, Smokey, and I don't, I didn't want to spoil this, and I

promised her that you weren't doing anything. I swore it to her.”

“No, there's no way this is possible,” Harlow said. “Ava knows I would never do that.”

Smokey didn't want to hear another word. He stepped around Abriana and headed straight to the door. Once again, he had fucked up.

Damn it. Why was he always fucking up?

He rushed out of the clubhouse and went straight to his car. He wanted to get on his bike for it to be faster, but he had no choice but to use the car. He had to get to Ava.

She needed to know that he wasn't doing this because he was cheating, but because he loved her.

After climbing behind the wheel, he drove all the way to her bakery and was surprised to see that the shop was closed.

Tapping the wheel, he growled. She had gone home. Once he'd reversed the car, he took off, heading toward their home. Their very vacant and dull-looking house because he hadn't got the fucking decorations out of the attic. Instead, he'd been planning a secret fucking Christmas for his woman.

He pulled into the driveway. After climbing out of the car, he found the door locked.

“Shit, fuck.” He shoved his hand into his jeans pocket, pulled out the key, and let himself into the house. At least she hadn't changed the freaking locks.

“Ava, baby. Ava!” He called out her name. She wasn't in the kitchen or the living room. He checked the whole downstairs, and she was nowhere to be found.

He made his way upstairs and found Umberto in his bedroom. His son was playing with some of his teething rings in his crib. A few teeth had come through, but more were still to come.

He saw the camera was turned on, and he quickly moved toward the bathroom, and sure enough, there was Ava.

She was sitting up in the bath and already wiping her face. “Smokey,” she said.

He went to her, sinking to his knees beside the tub and touching her face. “I am not, I swear to you, Ava, I am not having an affair.”

“Abriana came to you.”

“I’m pleased she fucking did.”

“I—look, I want to take this shower and then I’m going to go decorate the house. I got the decorations from the attic.”

“No, fucking no,” he said. “Damn it. I didn’t go into the attic on purpose. I don’t want us to have Christmas here. I want—this was supposed to be a surprise, but I’ve got everything at the clubhouse.”

Ava frowned. “At the clubhouse.”

Smokey ran a hand down his face. “I was hoping to make this wait for as long as possible, but I know how important the bakery is, and I was trying to make this work for you, and instead, all I’ve done is mess it up.” He shook his head. “I’ll grab Umberto, and we’re going to the clubhouse. I’m not keeping it from you.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Yeah, I do. You need to see that I was trying to make this right with you,” Smokey said. He kissed her lips, loving their plump feel against his.

Smokey fucking loved this woman. It took every single ounce of his strength to get to his feet and walk away. His very naked woman was a turn-on, but those tears were crushing to a man’s ego. He didn’t want his woman to cry.

It was nearly Christmas, and he’d somehow messed up something that was supposed to be magical and turned it into a freaking nightmare. What kind of asshole did that?

He did, clearly. He was a fucking asshole.

Smokey returned to his son and eased him out of the crib. At first, Umberto was not happy about being disturbed. He hummed to his son, kissing the top of his head, and he reached out to grab the bag filled with diapers, along with a change of clothes, and anything else that his son might need. He was no longer the small boy but growing by what felt like the hour.

He wanted to go check on Ava, but instead, he went to the kitchen to grab a couple of the prepared milk bottles Ava had already expressed. Placing them in the bag, he had everything ready as Ava came down in a pair of sweatpants and a shirt.

Her hair was a mess, and her eyes were bloodshot. “I think it’s best if I stay here.”

“No, I want you to see.”

He went to her, taking hold of her hand, and then walked outside toward the car.

It was so freaking cold, and he got his son strapped into his car seat. He made sure to cover him with a blanket as he didn’t want him to catch any kind of cold.

Once he was happy, he saw that Ava had already climbed into the front seat.

This wasn’t how he wanted the surprise. He had planned a whole big elaborate plan, where he picked her up from the bakery and claimed that he needed to head back to the clubhouse for some business.

Everyone was going to be waiting, and once he brought her in, it would be like a surprise. It sounded so perfect in his head, but now, it didn’t. Now, it fucking sucked.

He was such an asshole.

Ava continued to sniffle, and he reached out, grabbing her hand.

“Abriana shouldn’t have come to you.”

“I’m glad she did. I had no idea you even thought I was having an affair. I promise you, Ava, I will not cheat on you. No woman even compares to you.”

“Smokey, you’re surrounded by women. You cannot keep that kind of promise.”

“I can. I know what I want, and I know who I want. It is you. It will always be you.” She tried to pull her hand away, but he wouldn’t let her.

His heart was racing. He couldn’t press on the gas as he wanted to get them all there in one piece, and not in pieces.

The car was silent, apart from Ava’s sniffles. When he saw the clubhouse up ahead, he was relieved.

After pulling into the parking lot, he parked the car, climbed out, and grabbed Umberto.

Ava was still in the car. With Umberto in his arms, he rounded the car to her and crouched down.

“Ava, I’ve never been good with words. I know this. I know when it comes to you, I fuck up all the time, but I swear to you, I have not cheated, nor will I ever cheat.” He took her hand and pressed it against his chest. “This beats for you and you alone.”

Ava sighed and reached out to cover Umberto’s ears. “How do you expect me to believe that when all you do is make love to me? You don’t fuck me anymore. You don’t desire me.”

“Are you crazy?” Smokey asked.

“Don’t call me crazy,” Ava said. “I know what I feel.”

“Then you should know that I make love to you because I want to take my time with you. I want to explore every single inch of your body. You drive me wild being with you. Every time I’m with you, I want you naked, spread out, and I would take you, again and again, and again. With Umberto, he has

put a hold on how badly I want to fuck you in every single room of that house. On every single surface. You were baking some cookies the other week, and all I wanted to do was spread those juicy thighs, bend you over, and fuck you.”

“Why didn’t you?” Ava asked.

Smokey growled. “He was asleep in the next room, and as I was about to do exactly what I said, he decided to wake up. He is a serious cock block.”

Ava chuckled.

“I love you, Ava. I love you and only you. Come with me, let me show you.” He held his hand out.

This time, she didn’t hesitate putting her hand within his.

He helped her out of the car, and together, side by side, with Umberto in his arms, they walked toward the clubhouse.

Harlow stood in the doorway, rubbing at her arms. “I’m not cheating. I swear, Ava. I would never do that with you. Besides, Smokey is gross, and he’s like my brother’s boss, and did I mention gross, and like old,” Harlow said. “I wouldn’t do that to you. I would never damage our friendship, but he needed help in putting all of this together, and he invited me for Christmas. I think it’s so that I can give you some happy memories or something like that. He might just feel sorry for me because my family isn’t the best at understanding. Well, they’re understanding to a point, but Christmas can be amazing and sucky at the same time.”

“Harlow, I want her to see what I was planning.”

“Oh, right, the wonderland. I hope you love it. I did half of it. Larissa and Raven are in there as well. They did a whole bunch of it. It was a team effort. I made sure to get all of your favorite food. If there is anything we’re missing, just let me know and I will go and find it.”

Smokey felt sorry for the guy who would eventually fall for this woman. He had to wonder if there was going to be a time that she would ever take a breath.

“Right, right, shut up, Harlow, so you can take her in to see everything. See, I know what you’re going to say next.”

This time, Harlow moved out of the way so he could take Ava inside.

The moment they stepped through the doors, he heard her gasp, and he turned to look at her.

Ava’s lips were slightly parted, he hoped in shock, but in a good way of shock.

She looked at him. “You did all of this for me?”

The guys were there, and so was Larissa, who had her hands clasped together.

“Smokey wanted this to be the best Christmas for you,” Larissa said.

“Don’t even get me started on the presents,” Raven said. She held one of her daughters in her arms, as Carlos held the other.

Smokey didn’t even know when the mafia man had turned up, but he wasn’t going to complain if they all made Ava feel happy and welcome.

He kissed his son’s cheek as Ava turned toward him.

“I’m, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I can’t believe you did all of this for me.”

Smokey looked toward his men and saw that Big Dick was closest. He placed Umberto in his arms and turned toward his woman. Sinking to his knees in front of her, in front of the whole club.

“Yes, Ava, I did all of this for you. I know ... what I did. I know how badly I fucked up, and I am going to spend the rest of my life making up for it. You are the love of my life, and I’m so sorry that you thought I was having an affair. There is no woman in this life, no one that would make me stray from you.”

“Smokey, get up. You don’t have to do this.”

“The club is my witness. I love you. The women who are here, they are nothing to me. They’re here for the men, not for me.” He took her hand and placed it over his heart. “This beats for you. Only for you. I do not want to live in this world without you, Ava. The very thought of you leaving me, I can’t, I can’t function. I love you more than anything, and I never for a second thought I would love anything but this club. You, I love.”

“I love you too, Smokey.”

Chapter Ten

Ava couldn't believe this was happening.

The clubhouse looked completely different. Everywhere she turned, it was decorated with some form of Christmas décor. The whole club had outdone themselves.

As for Smokey, she couldn't believe what he had said to her. In front of the club. On his knees, for her. She tried to pull him up, and he got to his feet and turned to Big Dick. "Take care of him," Smokey said.

Ava didn't have time to ask any questions as she suddenly was shoved over Smokey's shoulders. He held her in place, and she let out a squeal, aware Raven, Harlow, Larissa, and even Abriana were present.

There was no mistaking what Smokey was doing, especially as he didn't go toward his office but toward the main corridor that took them toward the bedrooms.

"Smokey, what are you doing?" she asked. She gripped his pants near his ass. They were a little baggy, and she grabbed a generous handful.

"I am taking my woman up to our bedroom where I am going to prove to her that I fucking want her. I'm going to fuck her pussy until she cannot remember her freaking name."

Even with all the tears and sadness, Ava couldn't deny the arousal that washed over her entire body. "Smokey, everyone knows what you're doing."

"Exactly, so they know not to disturb me until I come out of my room. Umberto will be taken care of, and I can finally have my wicked way with my woman." They climbed the stairs, and Ava was terrified that he was going to fall back. She hadn't lost much of her baby weight.

"Smokey, put me down. I can walk."

“Nope, not going to happen. I’m carrying you all the way to my bedroom, and then I’m going to have my way with you.”

She kept trying to reason with him, but she should have known how stubborn he could be. Smokey did not put her down until they had entered his bedroom and he’d closed the door. She heard the lock flick into place, and then he placed her on the bed.

She didn’t get a chance to say a word as his mouth was on hers. This wasn’t a gentle kiss, but a consuming one. Smokey kissed her mouth hard, and he took her bottom lip between his teeth and nibbled.

A moan escaped her lips. She felt on fire with need. It consumed her. Set her ablaze.

She didn’t want it to end. Not for a single second.

“I want you all the fucking time, Ava.” He took her hand and placed it over his dick, on top of his pants. “Do you feel that? That’s how hard you make me.”

Smokey grabbed the bottom of her shirt and tugged it over her head. She had no choice but to stop touching him as he got her naked. It didn’t take him long to have the shirt and sweatpants off. She couldn’t believe she had arrived at his clubhouse looking like a mess.

He released a growl, and Ava couldn’t contain her moan as he cupped her tits.

“I’ve missed these,” he said, pressing them both together. His tongue teased across each nipple. He traced around the mounds and then flicked the tip before taking each one into his mouth.

Smokey sucked them hard, and it sent an answering heat straight to her clit. Sinking her teeth into her lip, she tried to contain her sounds.

“You don’t need to control yourself here. Umberto will not hear. We’re all alone. It’s just the two of us. No one else. I

want to hear how much you want this.”

He pressed a hand between her thighs, and this time, she cried out as he grazed her clit.

“You’re so wet.” He sank a finger knuckle deep inside her.

She felt a second finger inside her, and he pumped in and out.

“This pussy is mine, Ava. All mine. So fucking pretty.” He pulled his fingers from her pussy and then stroked them over her clit, each touch setting her aflame.

“You know what, this isn’t enough. I want to taste that sweet cunt of mine.”

She loved the growls he did, but within seconds, he had her pressed to the bed, her thighs spread open, and his mouth between her legs.

Ava looked down and saw him licking between her thighs. He teased her clit, sliding down toward her entrance where he circled, but then, he plunged inside. Another moan left her, and she felt the stirrings of an orgasm as it started to build. It was slow at first but soon gained speed.

She was so close to her orgasm.

Smokey was an expert at using his tongue, his hands, all of his body.

The orgasm crashed over her, startling her with its intensity. She couldn’t control her reaction and Smokey didn’t stop. Not even after she came. She wanted to tell him to stop, but he lightened his strokes, and it made each of his touches even more bearable.

He was pushing her toward another orgasm. It was so close. Smokey knew exactly what he was doing, hurtling her into a second orgasm. This time, he didn’t wait around. He didn’t linger, he moved up her body, and she knew he’d somehow gotten naked. She didn’t exactly know when

because she still floated high on her orgasm, and nothing was going to take that away.

Smokey pressed his rock-hard cock against her core, and she whimpered, begging for more as he slammed balls deep within her. Each thrust seemed to hit her deeper than before.

“Oh, fuck, baby, you are so fucking perfect. I fucking love you. I swear, I love you, only you. This is the only body I want. The only cunt I want to sink balls deep inside.” He took possession of her lips, and Ava wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him back, wanting him more than anything, and to never let him go.

Smokey didn't make love to her, no, he fucked her. Exactly how she wanted to be taken.

Each thrust pushed her higher and higher. His dick was so hard, and before he'd even reached an orgasm, he pulled out of her.

Ava went to complain, but he moved her to her knees, and within seconds, he was back inside her, fucking her. His grip was tight on her hips, and she moaned his name, not wanting him to stop.

“I'm never going to stop, Ava. Not with you. Not fucking ever with you. You're all mine.” He pounded inside her, and this time, she felt the change within him as he pounded her pussy.

Smokey didn't stop. He was going for an orgasm.

Ava felt it, and as he came, she felt every single pulse as his cock filled her to the brim with his cum.

Smokey traced a finger down her arm. Ava was curled up against him.

“You planned all of this for me?”

“Yes. I wanted it all to be perfect for you.” He held her chin and pressed a kiss to her lips. “Did you seriously think I'd

cheat on you?”

He saw her cheeks go red. “I don’t know what I was thinking. You were so distant, and the way Harlow was behaving. I drove past the clubhouse, and you lied about seeing her.” She shrugged. “I’m sorry. I should have asked you properly.”

“Don’t be sorry. This is on me.”

“Stop that,” Ava said.

“Stop what?”

“Acting like that. You don’t need to feel that way, Smokey.”

“After everything I did, I’m still trying to get you to love the club.”

“I do love the club,” Ava said. “Look, I’m happy that you got rid of the club women. I wouldn’t have felt comfortable with them, but you’ve got to understand that I do see this ... differently. Sure, when I think about it from my own point of view, it hurts, but this isn’t just about me. This is about us, and I know that you’re never going to do that to me again. Never ever. You’ve got to stop carrying around this guilt. You’ve also got to let me be near Brick and Kinky. You’re always creating this distance.”

“I still see you, Ava. I see the pain in your eyes, the betrayal—”

“Stop!” She pressed a hand to his lips. “Don’t you get it, Smokey? I am here. I’m not going anywhere. I’m in love with you. No one else. I can’t believe that you have transformed your entire club for me to help me make memories. You’ve invited, Harlow, Larissa, and Jonah, as well as the club. This is going to be an amazing Christmas. This is a wonderful gift, and you’ve got to stop doing this. I want to grow old with you. Have brothers and sisters for Umberto. You’re not going to get rid of me that easily.”

Smokey silenced her with his lips, and she didn't have a problem with that. As he pressed her to the bed and slid between her thighs, she was already ready for him.

“You want more kids?”

“Yeah, don't you?”

“Fuck yeah, I do. I want a whole fucking load of them. Eleven. Does that sound good?”

Ava snorted. “Why don't we start with maybe three, possibly four? How does that sound?”

“It sounds like I can convince you to have more than four.” He kissed her down to her neck and she giggled, but then she moaned as he reached between his thighs and held his cock.

She gasped as he pressed the length of his dick between the lips of her sex, bumping her clit with every thrust he made. Each stroke heightened her arousal.

He did this over and over until she was close to orgasm, but not quite reaching it. Just when she was about to, he pulled away, and she growled his name, to which he chuckled.

Smokey thrust inside her. “Touch that pretty pussy,” he said. “I want you to come while I'm still inside you.”

Ava slid her hand between their bodies and touched her clit. She didn't think it was going to be possible to orgasm for a third time, but as usual, Smokey knew what he was doing.

A few strokes over her clit, and she was ready to come.

She screamed his name, and Smokey didn't hold back. He pounded inside her, fucking her harder than before, taking her breath away.

He held on to her shoulders, keeping her in place as he had his way with her, driving harder, deeper, and she knew he was so close. When he came, Smokey looked into her eyes, and he hoped she felt each pulse. “We're going to make another baby. I'm going to fill you with my kid, Ava.” He

wrapped his arms around her, and the truth was, this was exactly what he wanted.

He knew Ava wanted a big family. She had told him many times that her dream was to have children running around her skirts while she baked.

Smokey didn't realize how much he wanted this as well. To have a family with Ava. He wanted to grow old with her. And he hoped it never ended.

She had forgiven him, but now, he realized, it was time for him to let her heal, to not worry all the time about her running away.

Ava was strong. Stronger than he'd given her credit for. There would always be the guilt, the pain, but he wasn't going to let her know or feel it.

Ava was what was important, not him. Everything he did, it was for her.

Chapter Eleven

Big Dick was not a kid-loving guy.

He'd taken care of his brothers, and even Harlow, but he'd done so while also vowing to never have kids of his own.

Little Umberto was cute. As was Abriana and Ugly Beast's, Bella. She was a cute kid.

This was different. He held on to Umberto like his life depended on it, and in truth, it did. None of the other brothers would even go near him.

He sat at the bar and held a squirming Umberto. The kid was starting to let off a stink, and that terrified him.

"You need to change his diaper."

He looked up to see Larissa.

Why did Smokey have to give her a fucking job? The very thought of it annoyed the crap out of him. "I know what I'm doing," Big Dick said.

Larissa shrugged. "He's stinking, and if you don't change him soon, he's going to scream the whole place down. And he might also get a sore bottom."

"I'm not going to smack it!" He glared at her.

Larissa laughed. "I don't mean from that. I mean from the fact you haven't cleaned ... his bottom. That is all."

"Oh," Big Dick said. "Right, sorry."

She held her hands up. "But what do I know? I don't have any children of my own, and I don't have a clue what I'm talking about."

She went to walk away, and Big Dick realized he might be able to use this opportunity.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said. That wasn't a total lie. It had been years since he cleaned a diaper.

Larissa turned to him and smiled. “Then I’ll help.”

“How can you help if you don’t even have kids?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve volunteered at the baby care unit at the local hospital. I’ve helped a lot of moms that have been terrified. They go through some training for you to help.”

“You’re just a goody-two-shoes, aren’t you?” he asked.

Larissa put her hands on her hips. “I was trying to figure out exactly what I wanted to do with my life. Not all of us know what we want to be when we’re old.”

Big Dick looked at Larissa. “Did you just call me old?”

She didn’t answer him. Instead, she reached out and took Umberto from him. “Hello, little guy. Oh dear, you do smell quite badly, don’t you?” She pressed a kiss to his cheek. “You’re so cute. Come on, we’re going to teach, Uncle Big, er, George, Uncle Big George, how to clean your diaper, so that it’s nice and clean, and you’re not having to cry.”

She held Umberto close. The little guy reached out for her hair and began playing with it.

Big Dick looked at her, a little taken aback. There was no way she was supposed to look so ... natural.

And why do you suddenly want to be the one to put a kid inside her?

Hands clenched at his sides, he refused to think about impregnating the priest’s daughter. This would piss off Smokey. His life at the clubhouse would be a nightmare. No, he couldn’t allow that to happen.

“Is everything okay?” Larissa asked.

“Yeah, it’s fine. I’ll let you deal with the shitty diaper.”

“Don’t be silly. Come on, you claim that you don’t have a clue, even though I’ve heard you bragging about how much you remember from taking care of your sister. It’s time for a little crash course in remembering.”

Big Dick couldn't believe it. She had known he was lying.

He rubbed the back of his head. "I, er, I don't know."

"And it's about time to be taught, especially with what all the women say in town."

He tensed up. "All the women?"

"You're famous, George. Your name precedes you, and a lot of women like to talk about how good you are."

Shit. Fuck. This wasn't good. "No one should be talking about me."

Larissa laughed. "It's fine, but I imagine with how many women you ... date, it's only going to be a matter of time before you're a daddy of your own."

This wasn't a good conversation.

She started to walk toward the changing rooms, but Big Dick was pissed off. The women he was with shouldn't be talking about their time with him. They should be learning to keep their mouths shut. It was none of their fucking business who he spent time with.

Anger raced down his spine, but he quickly pushed it aside. Larissa didn't deserve his anger. She hadn't done anything wrong.

The women he'd been with, they were to blame.

Following behind Larissa, he couldn't help but look at her ass as she walked in front of him. She always wore freaking dresses. The kind that rarely molded to her body. She never showed off her body, even when she wore the dresses, but he knew she had a stunning body. Full tits, ass, and hips. He'd even caught sight of her thick thighs. On a particularly windy day, the wind had lifted the skirt of her dress up, and he'd seen how sexy they were. He'd also thought many times about how good it would be to have them wrapped around his body.

Get your head out of your ass.

This is the priest's daughter.

She isn't yours.

She will never be yours.

He was going to have to listen to himself because a part of him wanted her to belong to him.

Harlow was annoyed.

In the drama of Abriana and Ugly Beast arriving, then of course, Ava, Hunter had made his escape. She was so irritated by him.

At least the finishing touches had already been in place for Smokey, so he didn't need to worry about the perfect gift for Ava. Harlow, Raven, Abriana, and Larissa, along with the club, had done everything Smokey asked.

She was so impressed with what they'd gotten done. It looked amazing. The tree was stunning.

Larissa had done wonders with the baking as well. The fresh bread she'd cooked had been gone within minutes. The guys were begging for her to come to the clubhouse to make it regularly.

Harlow looked around the kitchen, but there was no sign of Hunter. She made her way around the clubhouse, even going toward the games section, but he was nowhere to be found.

She had noticed many of the men were giving her a wide birth, and she figured that had something to do with her brother. Not that she cared about any of the men. Nope. She wanted to figure out Hunter.

Who you should leave.

This isn't a good idea.

You need to leave.

He's not for you.

She made her way back to the kitchen, but this time, she saw some dishes mounting up near the sink.

Raven had warned her to not even attempt to get into the dishes, as the guys would take full advantage of it. She hated the mess though. After rolling up her sweater sleeves, she shoved her hands into the water and started to do the dishes.

As she did, she happened to look up and cried out as Hunter was on the other side of the window, staring at her.

Her heart raced. Fuck, that was freaking scary.

Pulling her hands from the water, she was not laughing. She didn't find that funny.

After drying her hands, she looked around for a jacket, and of course, nothing was around. It was freezing outside, but this needed to happen.

She had to figure out what Hunter's problem was, even if it meant freezing her ass off. Stepping outside, she gritted her teeth.

It was snowing again, and normally, she loved it when it snowed. Growing up, she had spent many hours sitting beside her window, watching the snow fall.

Hunter had moved away from the window and was toward the corner.

“What the hell is your problem?” she asked.

She had every intention of playing nice. Of trying to figure this out in a nice and friendly manner, but now, she was pissed. No, scrap that, she was infuriated.

“I wondered who was in the kitchen.”

“And you don't even knock. You just stand there looking at me, like a psycho?”

“I didn't realize how easily afraid you were. Next time, I will be careful. That I promise you.”

Harlow took a deep breath. “Next time. You can’t stand having me around, why don’t you cut the crap in attempting to make me afraid, okay? I get it, this clubhouse is yours. You already feel it has been taken from you because Smokey wants to have this sweet, nice Christmas with his woman.”

Hunter took a step toward her. “The clubhouse doesn’t bother me, little girl. It will always be ours, regardless of the glitter and sparkling lights.”

“Then what is your problem?” she asked.

He took another step toward her, then another.

Harlow didn’t feel threatened. She refused to admire his muscular body.

“You need to go inside. You’re going to get cold.”

“Stop telling me what to do. I can handle the cold. I want to know what your problem is.”

“You want to know what my problem is?” he asked.

She growled. “That is what I just freaking said.”

He leaned down so his lips were next to her ear. “You’re my problem, little girl. You’re fucking everywhere I turn. You, and your vegan fucking mouth and body. You need to stay the hell away from me. You’re Big Dick’s little sister, and with you always around, I can’t be the good guy everyone wants me to be.”

Okay, this had taken a dramatic turn. She shouldn’t have asked, but then, he didn’t pull away.

“What do you want to be?” she asked.

He banded an arm around her waist and pulled her in close.

She looked up at him, a little taken aback by just how good it felt to have his arms on her body.

Was this a big mistake? It sure didn’t feel like it.

She knew without having to ask her brother, that if he knew what was going on, he'd be pissed.

She had a feeling her brother had put a big-ass *do not touch* sign on her.

Hunter pressed his face against her neck. "I want to be so fucking bad and see just how sweet that mouth of yours is. To know if your cunt is as tight as I figure it would be, and your ass, I want to know if you want to be dirty with me as I take your ass."

She gasped.

Hunter lifted his head. "Fuck it." He slammed his lips down on hers, and the truth was, Harlow had never been on a date. She had never been kissed by a guy. This was a first for her.

At school, she was often given a wide berth unless it was by the girls who wanted to date her brothers. This was different. Hunter wasn't a boy, he was a full-grown man, and she knew this was fucking dangerous. He was defying the rules of the club just to kiss her.

What the hell did this mean?

Epilogue

Ava didn't go home.

She, Umberto, and Smokey stayed at the clubhouse. With the big secret out, there was no reason for Harlow to hide, so her employee came with her to handle all the Christmas orders.

She did open for a few hours on Christmas Eve, but by two o'clock in the afternoon, they were at the clubhouse.

Larissa was there, cooking dinner for everyone. Smokey was also helping out. Raven and Carlos were babysitting the kids. Abriana was baking a pumpkin pie, which was ... going to be interesting. So far, no nasty smells, but Ava knew the club was a little apprehensive about it.

Christmas tunes were playing. The guys were drinking.

And she felt truly content. This club, these men and women, were her family.

Jonah was going to join them after his Christmas service.

While Larissa put the finishing touches to the potatoes, as well as the vegetables, Ava made her way into the main clubhouse, where all the guys had put several tables together. She started to set the table and couldn't believe Smokey had gone to the effort to buy enough cutlery for everyone.

No chipped plates or bent forks.

She pushed some hair off her face and giggled as the man himself came to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Merry Christmas, baby."

"Merry Christmas to you."

"Do you love it?" he asked.

She spun in his arms and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I more than love it. You have outdone yourself." She

kissed his lips. “This is everything.”

He pulled her in close. “Good, you can expect this every Christmas if that’s what you want.”

Ava laughed. “Let’s get through this one. I have a feeling some of the guys might want their clubhouse back to being their manly place.”

“They’ll do as they’re told. I’m the boss.”

“That you are.”

She finished setting the table, and Jonah arrived as they put all the food on the table. Everyone was having fun, and Ava couldn’t deny how amazing it felt.

When it came time for dessert, Abriana was so excited, and Ugly Beast followed his wife to the kitchen.

“This is it, people, this is when the food poisoning hits,” Brick said.

Ava didn’t even attempt to defend Abriana. She had seen firsthand just how bad of a cook the woman was. She certainly tried so freaking hard.

Ugly Beast came out of the kitchen, carrying the pie, and the look on his face wasn’t good. The pie was placed in front of Smokey.

“What the fuck is that?” Smokey asked.

“It’s pumpkin pie.”

Ava was too curious not to look, so she peeked. “Er, Abriana, why did you use the seeds?”

“The recipe said you needed pumpkin filling.”

“Yeah?” Ava asked, not quite sure.

“So I purchased a pumpkin and removed the filling.” Abriana smiled. “Don’t worry, I didn’t discard the pumpkin. I know you love to use it in soup, Harlow.”

“Er, you used the seeds?” Harlow asked.

“Yep, pumpkin filling.”

“I think it meant the filling from a can of pumpkin puree, Abriana,” Ava said.

“Huh?”

“I’ll have some,” Ugly Beast said.

Ava looked at him, and she knew without a doubt that he loved his wife. Smokey cut the pie into small pieces, and everyone attempted to eat the pumpkin pie.

This was what family did, after all.

And the Hell’s Bastards MC had become her family.

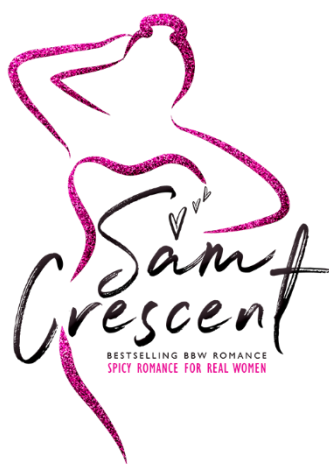
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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

LOST CAUSE

Killer of Kings, 8

Sam Crescent and Stacey Espino

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Sample Chapter

Priest lifted the edge of his sleeve and checked his watch. Things were about to go down in four minutes and seventeen seconds. His jobs were meticulous. He'd been staking out this hotel for the past six days, and today he'd get the job done.

Boss had strict instructions for this hit.

He expected Priest to make an example of Marcus Olivieri, to send a message to the rest of the mafia family not to conduct business in their city. They were into human trafficking and prostitution rings, and Boss wouldn't tolerate it. Neither would Priest.

His legs were cramping up from his crouched position, but he had the perfect vantage point to see the asshole getting off the elevator. He checked the sights on his 9mm, loving the feel of the cool metal in his palm. Priest could still remember

the first day he held one, nineteen years ago. The weeks following had been a blur.

He was a different person today than he'd been all those years ago.

Keeping his mind in the present was the only way to ensure his sanity.

One minute and thirty-three seconds.

This contract was going smoothly. Too smoothly. As soon as the fucking maid began pushing her cleaning cart down the hallway, Priest checked his watch again.

"Fuck."

Any second and his target would be stepping off the elevator with the barely seventeen-year-old girl he planned to force into their prostitution ring. He'd fuck her, beat her close to death, pump her full of drugs, and then send her to their whorehouse for grooming.

As soon as the maid swiped her keycard on the room where he planned to carry out this hit, he ground his teeth down hard, his mind going through all the possible scenarios. He didn't want an innocent to get killed on his watch, but that bitch had some bad timing.

The elevator door opened with a ding, and an obscenely drunk young woman stumbled out, attempting to hang off his target. She giggled as he led her to his hotel room. Why was the maid in the room? The room had already been rented and pre-paid for two weeks. It had been cleaned at 9:44 that morning, so there was no fucking reason for the maid to be there. The maid assigned to this end of the floor tonight wasn't even a blonde.

Once he heard the door close, he stood up and kept tight to the wall as he moved in closer to room number 4423. He kicked open the door as planned, his pistol in his outstretched hand. Priest scanned the room. The girl was already crashed on the bed, the bastard unbuckling his belt. The man froze in place with the red dot dead centered on his forehead. Where

the fuck was the maid? He'd watched her come into the room, and her cart was still just outside in the hallway.

Whatever. This contract needed to be finished or Boss would be on his case tonight.

"You like little girls, motherfucker?"

Marcus shrugged nonchalantly, so Priest brought him down to size with a bullet to the kneecap. His screams were much louder than the shot with his silencer securely in place.

"Shut the fuck up." He moved in close and stripped him of all his weapons and his cell phone. "Take off your clothes."

He kept his gun in his target's direction as he did a rough search of the luxury room. Marcus wasn't going anywhere, too busy bleeding on the carpet. Where was the maid? He couldn't leave a witness behind. Killer of Kings demanded every hit be clean. And he wouldn't let Boss down, not after he'd saved Priest from self-destruction almost a decade ago.

She was nowhere to be found. He even checked under the bed.

Priest returned to Marcus Olivieri. He was in his underwear, not looking too suave now with snot leaking down his face. The man whimpered and begged for his life like a little bitch, but he wasn't leaving this room alive regardless.

"Underwear too. Then get on the bed."

The girl had passed out. Priest grabbed her by the ankle and yanked her unceremoniously off the bed. She barely came to. He reached down to the ground and pulled her up to her feet by the back of her hair. "Go home to your mother. Understand? Stop drinking. Don't talk to fucking strangers."

She nodded repeatedly. He opened the room door and shoved her out into the hall where she fell to her knees. Then he tossed a wad of bills from his pocket onto the carpet outside. "Go home!"

Once alone in the room with Marcus again, he went to work, slitting the man's throat to shut him up. Priest held his

palm to Marcus's chest to keep him from thrashing as the blood drained from his body. Then he reached down and cut off his balls in one clean stroke, shoving them into Marcus's mouth. When his men found him, one of their high-ranking soldiers, it would send a message loud and clear not to fuck with Killer of Kings. Boss was systematically bringing down their numbers one by one.

He washed his hands in the bathroom, the blood mixing with the water and swirling down the drain. His mind almost went back to those weeks of carnage so long ago, but he stopped himself before slipping into oblivion. When he heard a barely audible snuffle, he knew his maid was hiding in the linen closet.

Priest was fairly certain she hadn't seen his face. Not that his identity meant a thing. He was hard to miss with half his face covered in ink. It was the complication that pissed him off. It would be so easy to end her life like most hitmen would do without a second thought. For Priest, it wasn't so simple. He shouldn't care, but he couldn't bring himself to kill an innocent.

He almost pulled out his cell phone to call Bain because he knew he was working nearby. Anyone else on his team would take the shot. But he refrained, not wanting to look incompetent. He checked his watch. Fuck, he should have been out of there by now. He knew Chains had taken a hostage at one point, trapping her in his basement rather than killing her. Boss had been pissed off to a new level. Priest had no intentions of following the same route but couldn't figure out what to do with her.

He tucked his gun into his holster and opened the closet door. Priest crossed his arms over his chest as he looked down at her on the bottom shelf. He was surprised she'd managed to squeeze in there at all.

“Get out.”

She didn't hold back the sniffing now as she spilled out onto the bathroom tiles from her cramped position. She stayed

on the floor in the fetal position.

“Get up.”

Inch by inch, she stood up, her hands clutching her apron. Her knuckles were white, her face blotted and tear stained. “I didn’t see anything.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

Priest scoffed. He grabbed her by arm and tugged her into the main room where the white sheets were soiled red, the body sprawled out in the most unflattering position. She gasped and slapped her hands over her mouth.

“Now you see.”

She shook her head back and forth. “Please no.”

His curiosity got the better of him. “Why were you in this room after hours?”

“The last shift forgot to replace the toilet paper. She asked me to check before I left.”

His day had gone to the shitter because of toilet paper? He’d never live this down.

“Well, you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I’m sorry to say your life will never be the same.”

Cleo couldn’t breathe. Her body felt like lead, her feet frozen in place.

She didn’t want to look at the crime scene, but she also couldn’t look away. Now her nightmares would be rooted in reality. The murderer had found her, and she was going to be next on his kill list.

Her mind whirled with thoughts, her life flashing through her mind like a person on their deathbed. What had she accomplished? What dreams had she seen through to fulfillment? She was only twenty-four. Cleo hadn’t achieved anything of significance in her life, and now it was over. It wasn’t fair. She was going to die because of toilet paper.

“I won’t say anything. I promise.” She was desperate, begging, and didn’t care how pathetic she appeared. If there was something she could do to prolong her life, she was going to do it.

“I’ve heard that before. Usually right before I pull the trigger.”

She dared to sneak another peek at the murderer. He was the scariest man she’d ever seen. His face was covered in tattoos, his eyes dark and empty. And damn he was huge. He could break her in two with no effort at all. She was completely at his mercy.

“I’ll do anything you ask. *Please. Please. Please,*” she chanted.

“Stop talking. I need to think.”

Was he considering letting her live? A tiny ray of hope brightened inside her. He’d let that other woman go free, so why not her?

“Give me your identification.”

“My purse is in the locker downstairs.”

He groaned, an angry sound that sent a shiver up her spine.

“Name.”

“Cleo Bennet.”

“We’re going for a ride. If you open that pretty little mouth of yours, you won’t make it out of the building alive. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Push your cart down to your locker. Don’t make eye contact with anyone. Don’t do anything stupid.”

He opened the door first, looking both ways down the hall before motioning her to get out. She held her breath,

grabbing her cart like a zombie. She didn't feel like herself. Maybe she'd wake up and discover this was all a nightmare.

Cleo wondered if she'd get a chance to escape. Maybe they'd come across other guests or a manager and the killer would slip up or get nervous. Who was she kidding? She doubted this guy was afraid of anything, and she knew he was capable of murdering her in the grisliest way imaginable.

He took position behind her, prodding her when he seemed to consider her pace too slow. Her nerves were completely on edge. She swore she'd shatter into a thousand pieces at any moment. Once in the elevator alone with him, she pushed the basement button and stood still, watching him through the reflection of the mirrored walls.

Was it stupid to notice his sex appeal? The man was a sociopath, probably some kind of serial killer. But his shoulders were broad, and she could tell his entire body was hard judging by what she saw through his unzipped jacket. He wore all black with gun holsters hidden under his lapels. His hair was black and roughly pushed back off his face. His lips...

He noticed her staring, and she immediately diverted her attention, her heart jolting.

"Eyes forward."

She bit her bottom lip. Fortunately, the doors opened on the basement level, and she pushed her cleaning cart off the elevator. She continued on to the locker room. At this hour, there weren't too many on shift, just some floaters.

When she got to her locker, she undid her lock and opened the door. He pushed her aside, immediately rummaging through her purse. He pulled out her wallet, dropping everything not of interest to him.

"Cleo Bennet," he read.

"I already told you that. I wasn't lying."

He glared at her and continued rifling through her personal stuff.

“What are these for?” The killer held out a bottle of pills, giving it a shake, and she felt her entire face turn hot and red. She felt nauseous. “They’re diet pills,” she whispered. She didn’t need to be told they didn’t work. She’d tried everything, and those were her last resort next to getting her stomach stapled.

The world seemed to stop spinning. He looked her up and down, inch by fat inch, then tossed the pills over his shoulder.

“Hey,” she said.

He ignored her, and she didn’t push her luck. This man had just sliced up that man upstairs and he could do the same to her.

“Who do you live with?” He examined her driver’s license. It was expired. She just didn’t have any free time to get things done. Rent was expensive, so she took every extra shift she could, like tonight.

“Nobody.”

“You’re lying.”

She shook her head. The threat in his voice made her eyes start to water again. “I swear. I don’t even have a pet because of my allergies. It’s just me and my ... fish.”

He cocked his head.

It was the dumbest thing, but she worried about who’d feed Fred once she was dead. No one would check on Cleo, no one would care. A wave of sadness washed over her as the reality of her situation really hit home. Not a single person would remember her.

“I just want to go home.” Tears traced down her cheek.

“Who’ll notice you’ve gone missing?”

“I don’t want to go missing,” she said.

“Answer the question.”

More tears fell. She wasn't sure if she was more sorry for herself or embarrassed. If he knew the truth, he'd have no reason to keep her alive.

“Lots of people,” she managed to squeak out.

When he cocked an eyebrow, she tried her best to keep herself in check. Did he know she was lying?

“Who? Names.”

“I-I don't know...” She busied herself collecting the contents of her purse from the floor before standing up again.

“We're done here.” He spun her around. “Back to the elevator. Hit P3.”

Oh God, this was it. He was taking her to a second location, the number one thing to avoid in the emergency handbook for women. Would he rape her? Chop her up? Or slit her throat like that poor man upstairs?

“Good night, Cleo,” said one of the maintenance men from the other end of the hall.

“Good night, George,” she replied.

The elevator door closed, and any hope of rescue was gone.

The parking garage had never been this foreboding. Her kidnapper blended into the shadows, and her white uniform stood out like a target. He stopped at a black car and opened the passenger door.

“Put your seatbelt on.” He slammed the door shut behind her.

The car had a deeply masculine scent. It must be his scent. She wanted to hate it but couldn't. A few seconds later, he sat in the driver's seat, his large frame rubbing up against her arm.

His cell phone went off as he drove out of the parking garage.

“Yeah. It’s done. Message sent loud and clear.”

He tucked his phone away.

The night was dark, growing darker as they distanced from the city center.

“What are you going to do with me?” Part of her didn’t want to know, but the other part felt she may as well know if she couldn’t change anything.

He didn’t answer her, which scared her even more.

A few minutes later, he spoke, the deepness of his voice a sharp contrast from hers. Everyone always told her she had a baby voice, and she hated it.

“That man in 4423 wasn’t worth his skin.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“He was a human trafficker. That girl was his next victim, one of hundreds in their prostitution ring. The younger they are, the more money they can get out of them.”

“And you let the girl go?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t there to kill her.”

So, he saved her? That made her angry. “Why don’t I get to go free, too? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You’re a witness.”

“So was she.” She was bargaining, reasoning, using every tool she had to get free.

“She was plastered. God willing she’ll return home and straighten out her life.”

Cleo was confused. Was this guy a serial killer or a saint? How could he slash a person up and also have a moral conscience? It didn’t make sense.

“What about me?”

“I haven’t decided yet. You’re an unfortunate complication that thoroughly fucked up my entire night.” He turned onto the freeway, heading farther and farther from everything she knew. “I want to kill you, you have no idea how much. It would be so easy to dump you out here in the ditch, end your life with a bullet to the head. Or maybe I’d just snap your neck and save my ammo.”

She opened her mouth to breathe. A full-blown panic attack was brewing.

“But even though you’re a hotel maid with no family ties and no pets but a goldfish, you haven’t done anything wrong besides being an inconvenience to me.”

“So you’ll let me go?”

“No, my boss would never approve of that. I’m stuck between killing you or keeping you prisoner for the rest of your life. And that sounds like a lot of responsibility on my part.”

“There has to be another option.”

He pulled to the side of the road. With no lighting way out here, it was complete blackness. As soon as the car began to slow to a crawl, she opened the door and rolled out onto the ground. Immediately, she started running blind. There was still some light from his headlights and the moon, but once she got far enough, it would be impossible to see. She didn’t care.

The man was going back and forth from one horrible scenario to another. He offered no outcome where she came out on top, so she had to take a chance. She hoped he’d see her as too much trouble and would drive off rather than traipsing through the mucky fields after a hotel maid. When she didn’t hear footsteps in pursuit, a little smile pulled at her mouth. Cleo kept running, needing as much distance between them as possible.

Maybe she’d wait in hiding for an hour after he left, then try to hitch a ride back to the city. No one could be worse than him.

Then everything went dark, and she was falling, her breath stolen from her lungs. Strong hands shackled her wrists.

It was him. He was straddling her body, and the shadows playing across his features made him look like the devil himself.

“You’re a naughty girl, Cleo Bennet.”

End of sample chapter

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