

GRAFFITI STREET RED LIPSTICK 

LEATHER & LACE



BRYNN HALE

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CONTENTS

DEDICATION

LEATHER & LACE INFO

RULES OF THE RED LIPSTICK MC CREW

1. REIGN
2. AVIEL
3. REIGN
4. AVIEL
5. REIGN
6. AVIEL
7. REIGN

EPILOGUE

Also by Brynn Hale

About Brynn Hale

DEDICATION

In the early 20th Century, red lipstick was associated with power and strength, especially during the Suffragettes movement. The Suffragettes believed in peaceful protest and chose to wear red lipstick as part of their uniform while fighting for the rights of women to vote. The red symbolized the bold and dauntless, yet feminine, women who dared to be powerful and champion for change. It was symbolic of strength while faced with opposition from those who were trying to strip that away from women.

The women of the Red Lipstick Crew of Graffiti Street have faced their own adversity. Many have climbed ladders previously meant for men, many have saved other women from fates that broke their spirits, and many take a chance to change the world one cause at a time.

I dedicate this series to all women who wear red lipstick. It's time to support each other in whatever we do, and go for your dreams, whatever your dream is.

Find your shade of red to wear today!

LEATHER & LACE INFO

Reign

I came to Kildare for work. It's all part of my plan.

But losing my job wasn't in the plans. And right before Christmas.

And now I'm going to be kicked out of my place.

I take up residence, secretly at the Twisted Sisterhood Sanctuary.

My pride is as big as my backside. And it's big.

But when Aviel, the head of security for the Hard Brake, attached to the Sanctuary catches me,

I can't help but want to be caught by him.

He offers me a place to stay... but does it come with strings?

Aviel

I don't know her story, but I'm ready to listen.

Reign's known for being the loud one at Red Lipstick, but I think it's a cover.

But for what? Pain? A past? Hard life?

When I try to get close, she pushes me away.

And the one time I let her go, she gets in an accident and almost stolen from my life.

I'll give up myself to save her.

There's no strings attached when it comes to my love.

Red Lipstick instalove, short stories are fast-moving, action-packed romantic suspense stories that will have you turning pages faster than the rotation of a motorcycle's tires. No cliffhangers. No cheating.

If you love short romances with steamy sex scenes and a suspenseful love story, then you'll love this book.

RULES OF THE RED LIPSTICK MC CREW

Rules of the Red Lipstick MC Crew

- 1. Club business stays inside the club. If you start opening your two lips, you'll be out before you know it.**
- 2. If you're in semi-trouble, call Slater of the Guardians at (333) 222-5555 and they'll send help. If you're in real trouble, call 911. Tell the police that you're with us and they'll wait for Gia to arrive. DON'T. SAY. ANYTHING!**
- 3. We take care of our own. If you are a member, you are expected to jump in and help when we need it. Everyone does chores. Everyone.**
- 4. We all have shit from our pasts. Share your past, but don't let that past dictate your future. You are more than the events and people who made you.**
- 5. You earn your place in the Red Lipstick MC Crew. What you earn, you can lose.**
- 6. Once a month we're all in a bad mood. Don't bring that mood into the MC or Hard Brake. You go at another Red Lipstick Crew member and you'll have bigger problems than PMS.**

1 REIGN

“WHAT ABOUT YOU, REIGN?” Gia Maldese rubs her growing stomach. “You have any resolutions?”

In my mind, there are two types of people who make New Year’s resolutions. Those who desire to make real changes and have the ability —money, time, resources— to make them, and those who want changes but find themselves stuck in some painful loop that they can’t get out of to make changes. I fall into the second category. I need a change. I want to fix what’s broken and have the life I dream of. But alas, there is no chalkboard of life and wiping the slate clean and starting over seems like a pipe dream.

Those aren’t the good kinds of dreams. Actually, it’s almost a nightmare.

I’ve hit rock bottom and all the resolutions in the world won’t change the shit I’ve been through or what might be ahead. And that’s part of the problem. My past is part of my present and future. I’d be dreaming if I thought otherwise.

And if I told people the truth about my circumstances, they’d look at me differently. So I hide behind leather and lace. Leather for an edge that seems to keep people away and lace for a softness against my skin to remind me that I’m more than resting bitch face. More leather, less lace.

Plus, as part of the Red Lipstick Motorcycle Club, leather isn’t optional. If you ride, you’re head-to-toe protected— it’s not a suggestion. Thankfully, we get more good days of weather in January in Nevada than bad ones, and I took the

bike out for a stroll through the town and outskirts today. Mostly to forget what's happening in life.

And at 180 M.P.H. speed takes away my cares. I know, I know... it also could take me away, but the risk is worth the reward to me, unlike many things in life.

And now back at Hard Brake bar, I'm nursing a craft brew from a local brewery, Two Twisted Brews. A nice heavy, winter stout with coffee and vanilla notes, and I'm surrounded by people. With these people my ability to guard myself is more a mesh net than a wall.

Maintaining space *was* working, until I found the Red Lipstick crew. They're the only people I've let into my inner circle— Gia, her sister Shea, Bree, Exie, and Taren. That's it. I don't talk to anyone else. Gia's boyfriend, Beck, has tried. Nope. Guys in the Guardians MC club next door have put forth a valiant effort. Not a chance.

Being kicked out at sixteen from my childhood home taught me to hold my trust close. It's not an infinite well. It's more like an inkwell and I dip into it occasionally, giving those who deserve access to the real me the ink and permission to write our story.

But do I even know the real me or my story? Seems more like a horror novel right now.

A hand lands on my forearm and I jump.

"Hey, it's just me." Gia's child is going to be one lucky baby. Her voice is so soothing.

I look around. Everyone has gotten up and are standing at the bar. We're alone.

"How long was I out?" I ask, my eyes staying fixed on my beer.

"Not long. They just know that when you don't answer, you're not going to and need time."

"Sor—"

"Nope. Sorry for cutting you off, but remember, only apologize for doing *wrong* to others, not doing *right* for

yourself.”

I blow out a long breath. “I don’t know what I’m doing, Gia.”

“I think you’re having a pint and enjoying dreaming of possibilities in a new year.”

If only...

“Not quite, but the pint is good.” I take another sip.

All I can think about is what I’m going back to after this.

A cold storage unit.

No one knows I lost my job as an assistant to a local lawyer, who was an über dick, last year and my savings dwindled quickly with a landlord who started being a dick, too. See a trend here all the men in my life tend toward the quality. He began raising my rates monthly since he wouldn’t do a year’s contract. And soon, I had to make a choice. Sell my bike, something I swore and still swear I’ll never do, or move everything to a storage unit, including myself, until I can find a new gig.

The front door of the bar opens. The bar’s bouncer, Aviel, comes in, and what I get a glimpse of outside makes me chill to my bone marrow. It’s not Aviel causing the feeling, he’s like the sun hot and sultry and every woman in the bar does a side-eye gaze, even the married ones can’t help themselves. He slicks his hair back, the black strands shiny and wet.

It’s raining outside and not a soft gentle rain, it’s a pounding pour.

Shit.

Riding back to the unit miles away isn’t going to happen.

“Is there anything I can do?” Gia asks as her boyfriend Beck comes out from behind the counter. He only works when needed. He’s more of the financial side now.

I shake my head as he nears.

He sighs but I don’t feel bad dismissing her offer. I can’t. I just can’t. My pride is bigger than my ass, and my backside

has its own zip code most days.

Beck grabs the top rung of a chair. “Okay. Aviel’s going to take the last cash run and then I think we should close up. Another cool front is coming through and they’re thinking iced or at least frosted roads by morning. I need to get my babies home.” He leans over and kisses Gia’s forehead and I swear she swoons in front of me.

My stomach curls inside of me. Partly because of how sweet Beck is, partly because the green-eyed monster who lives inside of me sees the scene, and partly because I need to find a place to stay where there are very few questions.

I watch Shea, the bar manager, hand over the money bag to Aviel. She used to have a crush on Aviel, but I think she’s seeing Guardian member, Snake, or at least flirting with him.

Shea flirts with everyone. It’s her protective bubble. We all have one.

Mine is my ability to not come clean. And my trust. And...

Fuck... I need to get my shit together.

Next door is a women’s shelter, Twisted Sisterhood Sanctuary. Gia runs the life-saving haven with proceeds from the bar and the help of the Guardians MC. And although it’s probably packed, there are cots in some of the storage rooms. I helped move them there. Or if they’ve been moved, I can probably find an empty room on the Guardians’ side to hide-out in. Hell, I’ll sleep in a bathroom stall for a warm place to stay at this point.

And this might be my chance. The locked door between the bar and shelter will be open for a few seconds, if I can just sneak in behind Aviel.

I check my pockets. Charger for my phone, check. Keys to my bike, check. My stomach growls. That beer really isn’t liquid food, but it’ll have to do for now. I ate lunch. I’ll be fine. Plus, cold soup out of a can is what’s waiting back at the storage unit. Not exactly five-star dining, but it’s filling and there are plenty with less.

Need to remember that.

“Gotta hit the head and then I’m heading out.”

“Hope to see you for Saturday’s ride,” Gia says as I stand.

I don’t answer and I’m across the room in seconds.

My bike is inside of the Red Lipstick garage, so it’s safe.

But am I?

2 AVIEL

THERE'S a new sound in the hallway. Behind me. It's in my blood to hear around me, everywhere. And Reign Starden's step is anything but quiet. She's carrying some massive backside weight and it makes her foot fall a little heavy, especially in those sexy AF black leather motorcycle boots. But even if I know the what of what's happening—that she's following me, I'm not sure of the why—why is she following me and why does she think it's a smart move?

It's not.

I make it to the office and split off. I leave the door open, and she slips past as if an apparition, not looking toward me. I lock up the last money bag of the night and become the stalker versus the stalked. She probably knows her way around having volunteered in the shelter-side many times.

I glance around the corner. Reign stops at a door. She looks up, her face tight, those bright red lipstick covered lips pursed tight—either stress or fear—and closes her eyes, as if saying a prayer. From the side, her leather riding jacket cups every dangerous curve of her luscious body, rising up to show the soft skin. She's safely covered and protecting that mind-bending body when riding and I appreciate that.

Personally, I don't ride. Not that I can't, but I've dodged death so many times that I don't need to be tempting fate.

She turns the knob and when the latch releases, she lets out a long sigh. The sound hits me in the chest. I've been there,

holding my breath, hoping for the best, and the feeling when the tension releases. Almost better than sex... *almost*.

But why is she happy that the storage room is unlocked?

She closes the door behind her, and I hear a chair slide across the concrete floor and go against the door.

Won't really do any good. The door opens in, but if it makes her feel better...

I remember that Gia needs me to lock up Hard Brake, so I head back to that side. I don't know if I'll ask her about Reign or keep it to myself. This seems like a play-it-by-ear situation.

I do a quick round of the shelter and check in with the front desk. Everything's clear. I walk back by the door to the storage room, a tiny streak of light sneaks from under the bottom edge. Like she has her phone on in the dark. I stop and lean to the door. There's a little noise and then a small giggle.

Videos? Movie? Writing with her boyfriend?

I've never seen Reign with anyone. She's quite an enigma. I'll often catch her smiling, but if she knows someone is watching her, she'll do everything to stop the gesture. And this woman's smile... it's special. Like a sparkling star in the midst of a cloudy night.

I decide to move on. She seems okay in there and sometimes giving people time is the best way to handle it.

Back at Hard Brake, I check the bathrooms for stragglers, turn off the lights, and double-check the doors. I take security seriously. When I'm not doing my other job, one that I can't say a whole lot about to anyone, I'm here. Hard Brake and the Twisted Sister Sanctuary are my home. I stay on the Guardians' side, but tonight I'm thinking I'll stay on duty.

Something is up.

I look out the front window and realize that the temps have plummeted. The road is shiny and there are tiny drips of ice hanging from the light outside. Black ice.

Maybe that's why Reign's here? She didn't think she could make it home. But she only lives two blocks away. I dropped

her off when her bike had a flat.

The quietest ride of my life.

Her need to be here is still a mystery and I'm not sure I'm going to figure out the truth tonight. It's been a long day and I'm ready to chill out with my latest book. I'm into the classics right now, Hemmingway, Steinbeck, Poe, Austen. I can read a romance once in a while. Plus, *Pride and Prejudice* is more than a romance. It's a man finding himself in the pursuit of a woman. I've tried to be the man that women want, but most can't deal with my side gig.

It's been a lot for me, too, lately.

I lock the door between the bar and the women's shelter. It's a long hallway.

And I should turn to the right and go to the men's side at the Guardians MC, but something has me turning left again and going to the shelter.

Maybe it's my training. As ex-Israeli military, *Sayeret Yahalom*, engineering Special Forces, my specialty was bomb disposal. Diffusing risky situations is perfect for the Hard Brake where a few patrons have an extremely short fuse especially when you add liquid courage to the situation. But this will take a finessing that even my skills might not be ready for.

My curiosity is worse than a cat's. I make my way to the storage room.

The door doesn't lock. I could open it, but I slide down the wall and wait. She drank a beer, sixteen ounces. If I know a woman, she's going to need to use the bathroom. The shelter manager, Maggie, is in bed for the night. The security guard won't think anything about me being in the hallway on the security cameras. And I often sleep sitting up, so if I sit here, it'll be no big deal.

Heck, sleeping standing up is my hidden talent.

That and having a heightened alert that's not healthy for anyone. Fight or flight doesn't exist for me. It's a part of my

past that has stuck around. I'm always on edge and what's normal for me, isn't normal for most.

And then I hear a sound.

I push to stand, leaning toward the door, my hands gripping the metal flashing of the door frame.

And there it is again.

My heart stops.

I hold my breath to make sure I'm hearing what I think I'm hearing.

The soft whimpers of someone who is in pain, whether physically or mentally or emotionally, pulls me closer to the door. I raise my hand to knock but think better of it.

I grab the doorknob and blow out a long breath similar to what Reign did before going in. I turn and push, the chair slides across the floor with an eerie creak.

In seconds, I'm in darkness and there's silence.

"Reign?" I breathe out her name.

But there's no answer.

3 REIGN

IF I STAY SILENT, maybe he'll go away. I'm barricaded behind some boxes on a cot. I try to calm my breathing. I lost my cool for just a moment watching one of those ridiculous videos of rescue dogs getting their happily ever after.

Everyone deserves their happily ever after.

But right now, I just need a happily for tonight.

“Reign, I know you're in here. You're not a ghost or a ninja.”

I huff. “But *you* are.”

Sometimes Aviel's both. He's so elusive and ephemeral in his presence. When he breaks up a fight at Hard Brake, it's like he comes out of thin air and yet, he was there all the time.

I should've known he'd see me. Clearly, he has eyes in the back of his head.

“Definitely have the training and experience to be both.” He chuckles a little and the sound has me relaxing a tiny bit. I'm probably not in real trouble, more the kind of trouble that's the *WTF are you doing?* type.

He doesn't turn on the harsh fluorescent overhead light and in lots of ways that's as comforting as a blanket. I don't want to look into his eyes and answer questions. The answers might not be as heavy or significant in the black of the room.

“Reign, what's *really* going on?” His Hebrew accent coats the “o”s with a roundness and he rolls the “R” of my name until I feel the rumble deep in my gut.

I sit up quickly. My stomach rides a rolling wave and then rumbles loudly, echoing the grumble into the small space.

He huffs. “Did you eat dinner?” He huffs again after a few seconds of no answer. “Reign, did you eat?”

“I had a beer.”

“That’s *not* dinner.”

His face lights up from his phone. His chiseled jawline is taut, and the black run of beard under his cheekbone to his neck only makes looks sharper. His hair is a little longer than I ever remember, like he hasn’t had time to get it cut. There was a period of about eight weeks where he wasn’t here. I figured he went home. He usually does once a year, but then he comes back from Israel with a pep in his step. This time he was sullen and withdrawn, but it was a short walk for him to be those things, so maybe it was just his new normal.

I’ve got one of those, too. Living in a storage unit or room. New, but not normal.

He moves closer and I sit straighter. He reaches out, his hand so big.

“Come. I make you something to eat.”

“But...”

“No one is in Hard Brake. It’ll be fine.”

For a man who could snap someone’s neck with his pinkie, he’s being awfully sweet.

And it’s a little uncomfortable.

“Just something small. I’ll... I’ll pay for it.”

I’ve still got a little cash to my name. Less than needed to rent a place, but I can pay. I just forgot to eat. It happens.

I slip my hand into his as his phone light turns off when he shoves it in his pocket. Aviel steps back, pulling me to stand. As I do, my boots tangle in my leather coat on the floor and I flail like a toddler toward him.

“Shit!” I grumble. My arms grab for purchase in his long sleeve Henley. My face plants into his abs, and his hand clasps my upper arm, keeping me semi-upright. His hold is secure but not crushing.

I go any lower and I'll be face to face with what I'm sure is bound to be as surprising as Aviel is.

“Sorry...sorry!” I mumble against a plane of hard human.

The sound I hear is something between the growl of a tiger and the whimper of a tiny kitten. I regain my footing and stand straight. Our bodies brush in the darkness. His hand slips to my waist, the rough pads of his fingers brush against the bare skin on my hip, his thumb strums against my hip bone.

I don't dare say something. Anything. I just want to be next to him. He's warm and I'm a little chilled.

The sound of boots in the hallway makes me tense.

“It's just security.” His voice surprises me right next to my ear. “I've got you, my poppy.”

I swallow and ask on a whisper, “Poppy?”

“It's the most beautiful flower in my home country. Called *calanit* in my native Hebrew tongue.”

My heart starts to pound and I swear he can hear the thudding. My ears echo with the whoosh whoosh.

His lips brush the curve of my ear. “You are beautiful Reign,” he whispers, his breath tickling my ear.

“You are surprising, Aviel,” my breath is heavy and breathy.

The scruff on his cheek rustles across my ear, sending shivers up and down my spine. “You have no idea.”

But I might like to find out.

4 AVIEL

SHE'S DEVOURING the grilled cheese like she hasn't eaten in days and that worries me. "Dang, Aviel, this is amazing, delicious."

"One of the few things I can cook that isn't falafel, hummus, bourekas, shakshuka, or shawarma."

"Never had any of those, but they sound delicious, too." She licks her fingers and my body rockets blood to my crotch imagining her tongue rounding a part of me.

"Then you haven't lived. There are spices for each and they make love to a person's palate."

She stills. "I guess I really haven't lived, at least not in the way you probably have." Her big brown eyes look into mine. "Tell me about how you've lived, Aviel."

"It would scare you," I say, trying to warn her off. "Probably not a good idea."

"Very little scares me these days."

"Okay, I will tell you."

Her face lights up.

I continue, "After you tell me why you were sleeping in the storage room."

Her face falls. "Long story."

"I'm not going anywhere..." I point to the door. "It's not safe out there."

“But is it safe in here?” her voice is a little huskier.

“You are safe with me, my poppy. Now... spill.”

She sighs. “Short version, I lost my job because my boss is a jerk. Then I lost my apartment because my landlord was a jerk. And I’m living in a storage unit, away from any jerks.”

My jaw tightens and I fear breaking my teeth. “What kinds of jerks were they?”

“Not the touchy kind... well, there was that one time with my boss... but more of the manipulative and ridiculously annoying kinds.”

I inhale a shaky breath. “No man should be a jerk.”

She rolls her eyes. “From your mouth to the gods’ ears.”

“But you live in a storage unit? That’s not good. There are rooms in the shelter—”

“I’m not taking a room from someone who is homeless because of domestic violence or even something worse. They *need* this place. I just have temporary crap happening.” She yawns and I can see the edges of her eyes droop.

I stand and clear away the dishes. “Now I take you to my bed.”

Her face contorts and she blurts, “Not a chance! I can’t believe you. Just like every other jerk. I thought I could trust you!”

I hear what I’ve said I repeat it in my head. “No! I mean, I have a bed—”

She hold a up a hand and stands, her arms cross on her chest. “I don’t know what you think, but you can’t just make a girl a meal—”

“No!” I get into her space. “Just no. Listen to me.”

Oh, geez, this woman is like dry dynamite. She’s ready to ignite into a flash fury in seconds.

I continue, “*You* shall sleep in my bed. *I* will go to the living room, read my book, and rest.”

Her gaze darts to the ground. “So you weren’t insinuating that we... should...”

I take the two steps to close the distance between us, lifting her chin. The broken woman inside of her wants so much, but she holds herself back from having it all. “Reign, if ever I earn the honor to make love to you, I will pleasure you like no man ever has. But until that day, my bed is yours to use... alone.”

“Thank you,” she whispers and a small shiver rolls through her shoulders.

It takes all my strength not to kiss this fireball of a woman.

But if I ever get the opportunity... will she be safe... will I?



“NO, I’M NOT DOING IT.” I pace in the garage where the Guardians keep their bikes. Shiny chrome, bounces the red “Exit” signs everywhere in the darkness. There is safety in the darkness.

“You have six months left on your contract, Zvi. You’re really not in a place to say no. I’ll remind you that your citizenship depends on it.”

“Fine. Send me the dossier and I’ll let you know.”

“We need a quick turn around. Starting tomorrow.”

“Of course you do. But, Agent Reva, if I do this, I’m done.”

There’s a long pause and muffling sounds, his hand’s over the mic.

A throat clears before someone comes on the line. “Agent Zvi, if you complete this task, you’ll fulfill your commitment to the Bureau and we’ll seal your case and your citizenship will be made permanent. But... you will not be allowed to return to Israel.”

My heart sinks. “Never?”

“Ever. There would be too big a risk to you and to our agents who are over there as you have been photographed with them as recently as two months ago.”

“I’m not allowed to see friends.”

“Not when you’re putting them in danger.”

I close my eyes and tip my head back, remembering how Reign did the same thing. Am I praying? No. Am I fearful? No. Am I regretting some life choices? Yes.

“Fine. I will not return.”

“And no contact.”

“So I’m going to be dead to my family, too.”

“It’s for their protection, Aviel,” Agent Pilea’s voice softens and it kicks me in the gut.

They’re right.

I sigh. “I understand. I’ll review the dossier and be ready to go tomorrow.”

“If there was any other—”

“There’s not, I know. But this is the last one, Pilea. Last.”

“Understood.”

I open my eyes and although there’s no light in the room, I can see the end of the black tunnel that is my life. The darkness will be no more and my duty to my new country will be paid. In full.

I was always taking a risk going back to my home country anyway. I had to plane into a close country and sneak my way in. They’ve probably protected myself from me.

Heading back into the Great Bin —living room of the Graffiti Street Guardians MC— I still when I hear bare feet padding down the hallway. I opened the door to my bedroom and let Reign in and then closed it behind her with a simple, “Goodnight.”

Nothing more. Nothing less.

Hoping to stay out of the “jerk” category that she’s amassing names in.

But as far as I know, there are no other women on that side of the building and none of the Guardians would come out without their boots on.

When she rounds the corner, she’s wearing one of my T-shirts— The Rolling Stones has never looked so sexy. She’s pulling the hem to cover her front, without realizing the move is exposing her backside beautifully.

“Reign?” I call out softly and she startles.

“Aviel... I... I can’t...” her chin quivers and my chest burns with a need to hold her. The light catches on her eyes and the swell of tears threatening to fall over.

I take long strides and I’m there in five steps. My arms wrap her up and I pull her to my chest. She’s shaking, her chest hiccupping, and tears stain my shirt.

“What happened?” I’m instantly on guard, my eyes darting the room.

“Bad...” she hiccups.

“Who?” *I will kill them.*

“Nightmare.”

My shoulders settle from their tense position and now my heart speeds. “Oh, poppy, it’s okay. I’m here.”

She snuggles in and then I notice that she’s not wearing a bra. My body reacts before I can stop it and I cuss at myself. *Jerk.*

But she doesn’t move away. If anything, she wiggles closer... and against me.

“Reign,” I warn, myself and less her. “What are you doing?” I look down and her mouth is open in a pert “O”.

“Wow, that’s... impressive.”

I chuckle lightly. “I think thank you. But I’m sorry. My body reacts to you. It wants you.”

“Do *you* want me?”

“I do, but I want you to be ready to be mine. You can trust me, Reign.”

She sucks in a quick breath like those words have a kickback. “I’m so messed up, Aviel. You wouldn’t want me to be yours.”

“I decide what I want and who I want. Your circumstances are changeable. Your heart is still beautiful. I saw you helping Shea clean up the Hard Brake this evening when you didn’t have to. I know you took meals to Gia when she was on bed rest. And I’ve seen you smile at children when you thought no one was looking.”

“Where were you? I don’t remember you being there any of those times.”

“I was there.”

“You’re like smoke, and I’m wondering when you’ll dissipate into the wild.”

I have to be honest with her. “Come with me.” I slip my hand into hers and head back to my bin— my bedroom on the Guardians side.

When we’re in the room, I motion for her to sit on the bed.

“You need to know something. Something that might change how you see me.”

She tips her head. “You look... and I can’t believe I’m going to say this... *scared*.”

“I am.” Admitting it almost takes me to my knees. “Reign, I have watched you from afar for months. My heart beats fast when you’re near. There’s something my body knows about you and I know you’ve been hiding so much inside. I can see that you struggle with being yourself and—”

“And *you* don’t?!” she bites back with a pained expression, and I can see that I’ve been a jerk. Relating to people is not one of my superpowers, but I’m trying here.

“I’m not saying that’s a bad thing, my poppy.”

“Don’t ‘my poppy’ me!” She stands and I stop her at the door. “I’m not sure why you brought me back here if it’s just to—”

I press my lips to hers and she whimpers. Her hands betray her anger as they rise along my stomach to my neck, making sure to keep our lips pressed together. Her tongue darts out asking for entry and I start to open my mouth, but I can’t let this get further. I need to tell her everything before anything can happen.

I break away. We both gasp for breath. “We both struggle to trust, Reign. I’m trying to tell you my story so you can decide if you’re okay with how *I* hide.”

She tips her head. “You hide?”

“In the open and in the darkness.”

The soft smile that covers her face encourages me. I motion to the bed and she takes a seat.

“For ten years, I watched dozens of my men become pink mist in the blink of an eye. For some reason, I was chosen by the gods to only watch them be disintegrated by unpredictable ordinances, bombs, and people who had only ill will in their hearts, and yet I never faced the same fate myself while part of the *Sayeret Yahalom*. The highest sector of the Israeli military forces. After years of enduring the torture of losing men who were my best friends, I couldn’t take it anymore and I tried to go after the people making and disseminating them by becoming a counterterrorism specialist, working with the United States CIA and MI6 and many other countries best ghosts, by infiltrating highest levels of terrorist communities.”

I lean back against the wall. “But I became compromised. I fell in love with the daughter of a terrorist, Tirza, and I couldn’t pull myself out without her finding out who I was. So I left Tirza behind and she killed herself when they found out that we had been together. Her family would’ve killed her anyway to make her an example. And again I had someone I loved taken from me.”

Her brow furrows. “I’m so sorry, Aviel.”

“And I thought I’d get out, but... the United States FBI needed my help here. The CIA offered me citizenship to save my life, *if* I dedicated time to helping bring down terrorist circles inside of the States. I didn’t want to. I just wanted the dying and pain to stop. I just wanted to live a simple life.” I crumple forward the brave face I try to keep ahold of at all times crumbling with me.

She stands and walks to me. Her hands cup my dropped head and lift. Looking into her eyes, I see understanding and maybe hope, but I never allow myself to feel that emotion. “You’re still working with the Bureau?”

“My last job starts tomorrow. I can’t say much more.”

“But after you’re done, you’ll be able to tell me? Release it all?”

“No.” I shake my head. “It’s hard enough to be a part of it, but to relive what I do is even harder. You’re the first woman I’ve admitted what I’ve done to. And I’m not proud of some of it. I can’t say that I’ll ever be okay, Reign.”

She steps back and I imagine that this is it. She’ll leave and I’ll go back to pretending that my feelings don’t exist.

But she doesn’t. She crosses her arms in front of her and lifts the T-shirt over her head. And if I thought she was gorgeous in the shirt, without it...

Fucking amazing.

“Reign?” I lose my cool, and that’s not me. My nostrils flare. I’m ready to pounce. “What are you doing?”

“Showing you that you can’t hide from me. I can see you now and I’m not scared. You’re right, my problems are challenges and they are changeable. But right now, I’m challenged by you and I want to see what you bring to the table... or bed, as it may be.”

“If I make love to you, I cannot take it back.”

“Loving me is hard, but if anyone can do it, you can.”

I walk to her and my hands cup her teardrop breasts, lifting the globes as I drop my mouth to lave my tongue over every

inch. I suckle at the nipples, my teeth grazing the raised peaks until she's whimpering.

“Pleasure and pain have a fine line, my poppy. You will tell me if you cannot take my love.”

“I can take it.”

“But if you can't, your safe word will be—”

“Poppy.”

“Perfect.”

5 REIGN

HIS HANDS DROP to my panties and he pushes them down my thighs, but he doesn't touch me. No, he's going to torture the fuck out of me in the best ways first. His lips return to mine, grinding and nibbling. His tongue slides along the split of my lips and I grant him access. We fight for top position, rolling and rubbing until I wonder where I stop and he begins.

I've allowed too many men to take advantage of me lately. No more.

I'm returning to my place as royalty of my own life. My name holds my place as queen and with Aviel's hands roaming my body, I feel worshipped.

He rolls my nipples between his thumb and finger, pebbling them until it's almost painful, but the zips and zings running through my core and I'm dripping down my leg.

"Aviel, touch me."

"All in good time, my poppy."

And that's when I realize, he's being the anti-jerk. He's not torturing me. He's respecting me.

And respect hurts so good.

I rub my thighs together, trying to get some relief. I moan at the pulsing.

"No, no, you will only come when I say so."

I shiver.

Oh yes...

This is the Aviel I know. Controlled. Almost un-earthly, part angel and devil. And raw magnetism.

He backs me toward the bed. I buckle back and fall to the soft comforter. My nightmares from before long forgotten. This is a sheer dream.

Trusting him with my body is one dip in the inkwell. He's writing his way into my heart.

He drops his jeans and his boxers in one motion, grabbing his cock in his hand and rocking along the length, pulling and massaging until I can see a pearl of juice hanging from the tip. I sit up and stick out my tongue. Nodding his approval, I take one lick from the base to the tip, collecting the saltiness on my tongue, leaving a light trail of red lipstick along the way.

"Oh, God, that's good," I moan through every word.

"Let's see how you taste."

I lean back and lift my feet to the bed, daring him to do it. His nostrils flare and his chest rolls like the hills I drive my bike through.

"So pretty. So fucking beautiful." His gaze holds to mine as he drops to his knees, and he doesn't break the connection even when he's face to face with my pussy. "How much do you want me to taste you?"

"I want it more than anything right now."

He gets closer. "And what about touching you?"

"Please, Avi... please."

"Oh, my poppy, your begging is not needed. I am here to please only you."

His tongue slips from my softness up to my clit and circles it and then again, same motion. And again, stopping to flick my hardened pearl. I lift my hips, rubbing his beard against my body.

His big hands slip below my ass and hold me up. I'm off the bed and he's feasting on me. His tongue darts into my body, and then out, then in.

My breathing starts to become erratic, choppy, and forcing oxygen deep into my diaphragm. A coil winds inside of me as he laps along the folds and sucks on my hard nub.

I reach down and hold him there. “Yes... yes... fuck!”

My body starts rocking with a burst of energy I’ve never experienced. It’s like I’ve exploded from the inside out.

He crawls up my body and planks above me. “And how was that?”

“Holy fuck...”

And that when I feel the head of his cock enter me. Surprise, in the best way. My back arches as I’m stretched to the absolute limit.

I grab his arms. “I’m not on the pill.”

He stills. “You do not understand. I am yours and you are mine now. I will protect you. I will take care of you, Reign. My body and heart are yours. What happens now will be our fate together.”

My chest burns. I’ve never once been revered like this man is. It’s as if he’s been waiting for me and his patience is being rewarded. And man he’s fucking hot and big.

So big.

I pull his mouth to mine as he slowly moves inch by inch of his long, girth inside of me. I need a distraction from the pressure and his tongue does the trick.

“That’s it, baby. Remember, if it’s too much...”

“It’ll never be too much. It’s just enough. It’s everything, Avi.”

“I love it when you call me that.”

“I love... you,” I breathe out the words.

“Oh, my poppy, I’ve loved you forever.”

His hips start to move and I lock my legs behind his taut ass. Dark eyes turn to midnight black, and I’m lost in him as much as he’s inside of in me.

The rhythm we create is like we've known each other's bodies for longer than a night. It's natural and has a calm to it that I'm not sure I've ever felt.

Never felt.

My body winds again. The tension burning in my lower belly and thighs. My heart pounds quickly.

“Aviel...”

“I've got you. Come now, Reign. Come for me.”

I will do anything this man demands.

And so will my body.

The scales tip and I fall off the ledge. My body rocks with long bodyquakes as he continues to pump. His hips drive deeper and harder. His head drops to my shoulder and he bites down as his grunts echo the room. His cock pulses as he plants deep inside of me, releasing what may be the start of a future I never thought I'd have.

A secret resolution that I can only hope will come true.

He raises his head. “Beautiful.”

And in his eyes and words, I find myself.

6 AVIEL

I LEFT MY ANGEL SLEEPING. We couldn't keep our hands off of each other and although I'm used to surviving on two to three hours of sleep a night, I can see she isn't.

Reign with a lack of sleep is probably a handful. Reign with sleep is handful. A delicious handful.

I stand. "I don't have time to claim her as mine today with the Guardians, but if she can stay over here for a few days, when I get back, I'll do that, and she can stay with me from now on."

Gia looks up from her place at her desk in the Twisted Sisterhood Sanctuary. "I'm so happy for you, but I wish Reign would have told me she was having these issues."

"She's a proud one. And feisty."

Gia laughs, pushing to stand and I help her up. "Let's go tell her the good news. She has a new home."

As we walk into the Great Bin, my lovely poppy exits from the hallway, freshly showered and wearing her leather pants again. So fucking sexy.

But when she sees us, her brow furrows.

Shit.

Her jaw starts to harden. And when Gia wraps her up in her arms, Reign's eyes narrow in on me.

Gia leans back and smiles. "Reign, I knew something was going on. We have a place for you in the Sanctuary, but I wish

you would have—”

“You told her?” Reign’s eyes pierce me.

“My pop—”

“No. I trusted you with that information. I can handle my situation and I was ready to tackle things today, but you went and tried to be the big man.” Her voice escalates and people start to look at us as they enjoy their lunches on the cafeteria-style folding tables around the edges.

Gia steps back. “Reign, you can stay with—”

“I don’t need your charity, Gia. I’ve been homeless before.” She shakes her head. “I know, shocker. Kicked out at sixteen, and never looked back. I’m fine doing my thing, my way.” Her eyes start to fill with tears.

I go to reach for her, but my fucking phone rings and when I look at who it is, I can’t ignore it. They will keep calling and they will escalate to other means. I have to get this final assignment done.

And be done.

“Reign, we’ll talk when I get back, but I have to go get this finished.”

My phone buzzes with a text: **9-1-1 CALL ME NOW!**

It’s from Pilea’s private number. *Weird.*

“No, *I’m* going to go!” She stomps out of the room, her black motorcycle boots thumping on the floor like pounding on a bass drum.

I run a hand over my hair. “Shit. I didn’t see that going like —”

Gia grabs my arm. “Aviel, you said it, she’s proud, and after hearing what she went through as a child, her trust is shaky, and we can’t blame her for that.”

“I didn’t know about the kicked-out thing.”

“I think Reign is going to need to come clean with all of us. We’ll see how we can build that trust, but sounds like you

have something you *have* to do?”

I don't think Gia knows what I do, but her hubby Beck does, so I suppose Gia might through partner-osmosis. It's common and I don't blame him. In my job, I'm a little bit of a risk for safety for anyone around me. He has things to lose, too.

“I'll at least try to get her to stay here...” I start backing away.

“Good luck!”

“Thanks!”

I head to the Red Lipstick garage where I'm sure Reign's bike is. The large metal building backs to the building that houses their lounge. I open the door and she's already on her bike, sliding the clip into the strap on her helmet.

“Reign, please, don't go.”

“You're going, so I'm going.”

“But where? You can't go back to—”

“I can go anywhere I want to.”

I try to stay calm, but this woman is making my blood pressure spike. My training is going out the window when it comes to her and I'm anything but composed.

I grab the handlebars. “Please, just wait for me. I'll be back in a few...”

She starts the bike and she rocks the bike away from me.

“You said you loved me!” I yell over the roar of the engine.

“And you said I could trust you and you broke that trust.”

“I was trying to help.”

“I didn't ask for it.” She slams her visor down and revs the engine.

“Reign, saving people is what I need to do. It's my destiny. Please... don't... go!”

Her eyes soften and I see a bit of reluctance. “I wish I thought I was worth saving.”

“You are!” I scream as she races out of the building.

I run after her and when I’m at the street my worst fears come to life when a black truck races by and I see a familiar face.

No... not them.

I head back into the garage, find the first bike with keys and a helmet and I’m out the door in thirty seconds.

I’m not losing another love...

7 REIGN

WITH EVERYONE TELLING me I'm not good enough, don't have enough, and I'm just not enough, I'm done. I'm going for one of those long rides, but there's one thing I don't think about...

The ice.

And the sound of trucks behind me and another bike revs its engine in the distance.

Why are those trucks so close? Bro, back off.

I keep my balance for about two blocks, but then I go to take a right toward the open road, and look in my rearview mirror...

And the truck is right on my ass.

My bike hits a patch of black ice and I do a shimmy shake to keep it upright, but I can't.

My leather pants grind against the pavement, but the frost keeps me from bouncing and I glide almost comically. But when my elbow hits the ground, it's not fucking funny.

I roll three or four times and come to a hard stop when I smack the curb with my back, and hit my head on the concrete.

I shake my head but there's a halo around everything. And everyone.

Aviel?

I can hear him screaming my name, but there's someone right in front of me.

“Look what we have here Zvi’s bitch, apparently.” They rip off my helmet, ripping my chin open when the latch catches, and my head jackhammers with pain.

My empty stomach rolls inside of me, acid forcing its way to my windpipe. I try to speak, but I’m frozen. Fear and flight holding my voice box hostage.

Probably better I don’t speak.

“Reign!” Avi’s voice hits my ears and I wonder if I’m dreaming.

Is this just the next nightmare in my life?

I thought I was on the road to finding what I want to do and be and have. But then I go and ruin it all. I should’ve stayed with him. I should’ve come clean with Gia and the Lipstick Crew. They deserve it as my best friends. I should’ve fought through the fear. I should’ve told Avi I love him, again, because I do, and now I may never get to say it.

The world starts to spin and an odd grey starts at the edges of my vision.

“Oh fuck...” My breathing gets choppy and I gasp for air.

And that’s when I hear sirens not far off.

“Let’s get her in the truck,” one of the voices around me says.

I can only make out figures. There are three of them and they are dressed in all black.

“Now!” another screams. “We need to leave. This bitch’ll be our leverage for making a deal if we get caught. If not, we’ll film her end and Zvi will feel the same pain as our father.”

I’m not becoming anyone’s pawn in life. I have enough shit to deal with.

I sit up and I start swinging. My arms don’t stop, the pain from my elbow almost taking me under the blackness. My eyes are closed, but I can feel when I connect with a soft

crotch, and then someone's pointy chin, and the side of a head and I keep swinging.

Cars slide to halts and the cacophony of sirens is like I'm caught in an evil vortex with my head pounding.

I hear, "Get down! Motherfuckers! Get down, hands behind your head."

So I do the same. I crumble into the fetal position and I hold my head while I hear grumbling and moaning around me.

"Baby! My poppy," his voice soothes so much that is wrong. Aviel pulls me into his lap and rocks me. "Reign, baby, please, please open your eyes. Please come back to me."

I try to open them but they're cemented closed. "Avi... I can't..."

My elbow beats with every thump of my heart. My head rings like a bell has been hit inside of it. And my ass, I'm going with the leather didn't cover everything, there's a burning so it's got some sort of issue that's not good.

"Oh, baby, we're gonna get you help. Medic! Call 9-1-1!"

There's chatter around me and reading of Miranda Rights but soon there's only the sound of the wheels of a gurney rolling on the pavement toward a running vehicle and I'm bouncing along on my back.

"They're taking her to Kildare General Hospital."

I'm loaded into the ambulance, wires brush over my body, and bags of liquids slosh and with a few pokes, I'm infused with some concoction that alleviates some of the pain but not all.

"I'm sorry sir, but only family—"

"She's *my* poppy, you are *not* taking her away from me," Aviel's voice is thick and I swear I hear it break in places.

I blink a couple of times my eyes opening. Someone grabs my hand, and I can feel a wetness coat the back as it's rubbed on someone's skin, the roughness of a beard tells me who it is.

My vision starts to come back and I find Avi crying next to me.

“Aviel, I love you. I’m so sorry.”

“I know, I know. Your fears *are* real, I know this. Ad you’re right. I shouldn’t have told Gia, that was your story to tell. We’re going to work through this together.”

“I never should have—”

“Shhh... save your energy. You took a hard fall.”

“How did you see me?”

He sighs. “I jumped on Gia’s bike and took out after you.”

“You ride?”

“Not until today.”

“Did you go down, too?”

He chuckles. “I probably could’ve run faster than I was driving that bike, so no. But maybe you can show me how to really ride, that is, if you’re still in for us.”

“I’m in. I’m all in. I don’t know why I wanted out. You’re the one I need in my life.”

He kisses my cheek. “I need you, too.”

I blink and the meds are really kicking in. I’m not feeling much but a calm, or maybe it’s just everything making itself right in my life. “But who were those men?”

“They were sent from my home country to kill me for what happened to Tirza, but they got to you first.”

“Oh, God... are you okay?”

“I’m good. And you... you are quite the fighter.”

I chuckle. “Words, fists, actions... I’m a ball of fury.”

“Maybe we can take some time to de-fury you.” It sounds quite sexual to me, and I’m all for it. I need a little bodyquaking to take me out of this pain.

He continues, “And me, too. I will find a new place of peace. I’m getting out of the Bureau. I’m done. I won’t do

another assignment and I will protect you.”

“What will you do?”

He leans down and whispers in my ear. “You, my poppy.”

And there it is. The man can ignite me from the inside out. He’s struck a match inside of me and it’s time to let the passion burn.

“You’ll stay with me?” I grab his hand and squeeze.

“Yes, I’ll stay with you.”

“I trust you, Avi. I really do.”

“That’s good, baby. Now you rest and we’ll figure it all out together.”

The inkwell is now tipped over. My trust isn’t limited. It’s infinite. Will I protect myself? Sure. We all have to, but I will be vulnerable with those who care about me and those I care about.

This is my new year’s resolution: *Trust without boundaries.*

And it’s one that I’ll be upholding.

EPILOGUE

Avi

“Deep breath, hold, and push!” I coach her through the pain and pressure. She’s bringing our first child into the world and nothing could be more beautiful.

“Aghhhh.” She grunts out as our baby’s head appears and then the rest become part of this world.

I look down. Figures that I would be surrounded by beautiful women in my life. “It’s a girl, baby.”

She looks down as the doctor holds our baby up for her to see. “And look at that head of dark hair. Wow.”

I kiss her damp forehead. We’re lucky that we made it to the Kildare General Hospital when we did. I thought our daughter was going to be born in the front seat of my truck. Reign had contraction on top of contraction and was ready to push when they put her on the bed. It was exactly how I’ve imagined our life would be— fast and furious.

But not on the back of a bike.

I did learn how to ride, the right way. But I still don’t find it comfortable or something I’ll ever do. And once Reign learned we had indeed created a life that first night, she stopped riding. And now our daughter will be good friends with Gia and Beck’s daughter. The sisterhood of Red Lipstick will never end.

Long live the women who make the path for love.

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Brynn's Amazon Page- <https://www.amazon.com/Brynn-Hale/e/B081QKR39W>

ABOUT BRYNN HALE



Brynn Hale a Midwest girl who can spot—and swoon over—a hard-working guy a mile away. She believes in winks across a crowded room, guys who do the dishes, a blue-collar alpha will always win a heroine’s heart, and a martini or craft beer is the perfect accompaniment to her stories.

You can visit her at <https://www.facebook.com/BrynnHaleAuthor>

