

A.J. DOWNEY

MOONSHINE

lullabies



MOONSHINE LULLABIES

THE VOODOO BASTARDS MC

BOOK 3

A.J. DOWNEY

 Second
Circle
Press

CONTENTS

[Moonshine Lullabies](#)

[BOOK THREE](#)

[COPYRIGHT](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Also by A.J. Downey](#)

[About A.J. Downey](#)

MOONSHINE LULLABIES

Voodoo Bastards MC

Book III

by A. J. Downey

BOOK THREE





Published 2023 by Second Circle Press

Text Copyright © 2023 A.J. Downey

All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by an electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. The names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner and are not to be construed as real except where noted and authorized. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events are purely coincidental. Any trademarks, service marks, product names, or names featured are assumed to be the property of their respective owners, and are used only for reference. There is no implied endorsement if any of these terms are used.

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with or sponsored by the trademark owners.



Editing & book design by Maggie Kern @ Ms.K Edits

Cover art Dar Albert at Wicked Smart Designs

DEDICATION

To the unrelenting shitshow that is online dating. It's a special kind of hell being a single romance novelist, but you give me so much inspiration every day for what women don't want that it allows me to extrapolate and build heroes for my readers like Collier... but still, fuck you. Do better.

PROLOGUE





Collier...

“Watch y’self, now,” Cypress said, and he took a very large step over a log in front of him.

“Now how the hell you expect me to take a long ol’ step like that?” I demanded. “An’ what am I watchin’ myself for?”

He hitched a laugh and said, “Big ol’ Moccasin right there, brother.”

“Oh, hell no – fuck you! Y’all are on your own!”

Hex and Cy laughed at me, but I didn’t do snakes. Especially not a venomous one that swam like lightning.

“You better be fuckin’ jokin’ now,” I grated, and that just made ‘em laugh harder.

“He’s not. You got your waders on and thick-ass jeans on up under ‘em. Quit your cryin’ and go around that a way.” Hex pointed, and I kept a wary eye on the dark snake that blended near perfect with its surroundings.

“I tell you fellas, it’s about fuck-this-shit o’clock. We runnin’ up against snakes and shit today.”

“Ain’t much farther, you big pussy.” Cy was grinnin’ at me, and I scowled.

“Pussy my ass,” I muttered.

“Well, I reckon,” Hex declared, swatting at a mosquito on the side of his neck. “That is what the porn sites call a man-pussy or whatever.”

“Dude, what you lookin’ at that type of porn for?” Cy demanded before I could.

Hex shrugged. “You fuckers accidentally come up on it yourselves – don’t pretend like you don’t.”

I exchanged a look with Cy, who shrugged.

“I ain’t ever,” I declared.

“Me either,” Cy said, but his big grin was giving him away.

“Fuckin’ liars.” Hex’s shoulders shook with his laughter as Cy held out his hand to me. I tossed him the rope he was after and he pulled the sled thing we’d fashioned toward him, the pile of metal parts on it rattling under the pile of fishin’ net we put up over it to hide it from plain view.

We were trudging through the muck, along a path only Cy could seem to see with a whole ass still lookin’ to get it set up. It was the fourth one of its kind we’d built out here and we were tryin’ to get it goin’ where it wouldn’t be found by the law.

So far, so good on that – we was hopin’ our luck would hold.

My papaw was an old Shiner like Hex’s daddy’d been. They were friends, my papaw, and Hex’s daddy and when I’d fallen on hard times and somehow gotten into mining coal; up there in Tennessee, up there in one of the small operations on the Cumberland Plateau... well, my papaw didn’t like that one bit.

He knew the mines was a sure way to shorten a man’s life expectancy. He’d seen fit to reach out to a friend of his who reached out to another friend who reached on out to Hex. I’d agreed to come on down when Hex’d got a hold of my old papaw and said to send me on down this way.

I didn’t really have any regrets about it. I was makin’ enough money through the club to send back home to keep the family holler in the family and my papaw and them comfortable. It sure beat grubbing around in the dark, comin’ out black as pitch and hackin’ up more black shit every night.

I was a lot less tired and didn’t hurt so damn bad, either. Coal mining was hard on the body. So was Shinin’, but not near as hard as minin’.

Sure, the life I was livin’ now was hard too, just in a different type of way. But I tell you what. I’d much prefer

takin' a bullet and dyin' quick than to be buried alive or die a slow death of the cancer or black lung or whatever.

“Collier, you got it?” Cy asked, and I lifted up on the back of the sled, up out of the sucking mud as he hauled forward.

He nodded once in thanks and we kept pushin' deep into the swamp but stayin' out on the edge before the water, makin' our way to this raised spit of land that stayed well up outta the tide, with enough canopy cover to keep the still hidden.

We worked our asses off, getting it done – well, mostly Hex and I did. Cy wandered off to catch something or other for on our way out, in case we encountered anyone on up there on the road where Hex's truck was parked and Cy and my bikes were stashed.

We was just putting our tools 'n shit in the back of Hex's truck, the sun dipping down past the horizon but the sky still stained some with orange, when Cy's phone started trippin'. He pulled it on out of where it was screamin' bloody murder, some soundtrack from some horror show or movie, and he answered it. “What's up, Tater?” Cy asked by way of greeting and his fourteen-year-old nephew came over the line barely loud enough for me to hear – but I heard him just like Cy did.

He said, “Nuckie, you gotta come quick! They's some men at the house here and they're threatenin' me an' Mamma, wantin' to know where you's at!”

I looked at Cy, who looked grim, and then my eyes bounced to Hex to see if he'd heard. But he was already shutting the tailgate of his truck and thrusting his chin at me to get on my bike. I gave a curt nod and went for it, at the same time Cypress went for his.

“You hang in there, Tater. Me an' some of the boys is on our way.”

The first time I saw Cypress' sister, Jessie-Lou Gaudet, was the day I'd pulled up in NOLA outside the clubhouse of the Voodoo Bastards.

She was a slender, almost delicate looking woman, and ethereally pretty, the way you'd picture some elf or spirit of

the wood. Or she would be, if it wasn't for her hard expression and eyes that I swear sparked like two flints clacking together to make a fire.

I wasn't sure, the story behind the fire in those eyes that were just about the only thing she shared with her brother. Well, that and the light brown color of her long, long hair – but the strength she exuded was something a fella had to admire. She had a presence that commanded a room for as petite as she was, and I remembered that. My eyes drawn to her slender and lithe frame unbidden.

It'd be a fuckin' shame if anything happened to that pretty face of hers. An even bigger one, if anything added to that hidden cache of pain that lived behind those eyes of hers, turning that personality of hers into such a sharp-edged firebrand, making her who she was.

As we rode with purpose in the direction of Cypress's place where Jessie-Lou and her son, Cy's nephew, Tate, lived – I wondered if this had anything to do with the club, or if this was baby daddy drama, or what we were getting into.

Couldn't say I much worried about it. Whoever it was and whatever it was, was fixin' to be run off fast.

CHAPTER ONE





Jessie-Lou...

I sat in what used to be the old sunroom porch off the back of the house that I'd spent a lot of time and effort making into my studio for my art. I wore protective eye wear and a heavy-duty mask; the kind that looked like I was in some post-apocalyptic zombie movie as a part of the damn government come to save the day.

My boy, Tate, liked those movies; would watch them with my dumb older brother, John-Paul, come every Halloween. They loved that zombie television series, too. Watched it over and over again even as it neared like its tenth season or its eleventy-billionth final episode.

I couldn't completely say my Tate didn't get it from his momma. Not as I sat here taking Dremel to bone on an old steer's skull, making something beautiful from death.

I looked up, taking a break from creating the intricately carved loops and whorls out from the center hole I'd cut in the forehead of the heavy skull. The hole for a chunk of labradorite I'd picked up at the rock shop in the city. I listened over the softly playing music back here and the loud thunder of explosions and gunfire in the living room where my kid played his uncle's console game.

The rapid fire and explosions had ceased and the knocking at the front door had come again, just as Tate appeared in the doorway to the windowed room back here.

"Someone's at the front door," he said and I got up, setting my Dremel down and peeling my mask and goggles off my face, bone dust sifting off my flannel and apron to the floor.

"Get behind me," I told him, and he frowned.

"I'm not a little kid anymore!" he tried to argue, and I cut that shit off with a stern look. He quailed and nodded, and I felt slightly guilty. He was such a good kid. I honestly didn't

deserve him. Still, ain't nobody around these parts knocks on our front door. Not if they knew us, anyhow. Only time anybody knocked at the front door was if they were sellin' religion or something else – or worse – they was the cops lookin' for J.P. for some damn thing he'd gotten up to.

I went past Tate and through the open kitchen and dining area. The four-person round oak table on my left; the kitchen, neat and tidy and open to my right, a window over the sink looking into the workspace I'd created beyond, framed in hanging plants.

“This living room is a mess,” I declared as I went past the coffee table covered in wrappers and crumbs with several open pop cans on its surface.

“Sorry,” Tate said, trailing behind me. I gave him a sharp look, and he stayed back.

Like I said, no one ever came to the front door of this house. Not without us knowing they were coming and even then, all our guests and visitors just naturally gravitated to the back door, into the kitchen through my workspace on the one side and my little coffee and reading nook on the other.

J.P. had given me the heads-up that he was having some troubles with the poachers last year, and that trouble had spilled into his club's life and to be cautious. Someone knocking on the front door was out of the ordinary, and so out of an overabundance of caution, I waved Tate back into the hall where he could do what we'd planned should something go south an' head on up into the attic to hide an' call for help.

I went to the door and cracked it, fully expecting law enforcement. I was more 'n a little taken aback and immediately had my back up when I saw men clad in worn riding leathers on the other side of the door.

“What d' you want?” I demanded, not recognizing any of them to be Voodoo Bastards.

“Lookin' for your brother,” the man on the other side of the door grunted.

“Ain’t here,” I said quickly, and equally swiftly, I tried to shut the front door, but it caught on his big boot that he’d thrust forward into the crack.

“Get your foot out my front door,” I demanded coldly. “I told you, he ain’t here.”

I was vaguely aware of Tate doing the right thing, moving down the hallway, back toward the bedrooms. He had to pull down the ladder and get on up into the attic, so I needed to buy him some time. I resisted the men at the door an’ tried to keep them talking.

“Well, I don’t suppose you’d mind us coming in and having a look ourselves now, would you?” he asked with an oily smile and a glance up and down of what he could see of me as I glared up at him.

“I said he ain’t fuckin’ here. Now you need to leave because you ain’t comin’ inside my home.”

I kicked the dude’s boot out of my doorway with my own steel-toed boot and slammed the door, throwing the bolt.

I backed off and turned. As I came even with the hall, the door shuddered in its frame with the first kick. I looked down the hall just in time to see my boy Tate pull the ladder up behind him and the hatch to the attic shut.

“Call your nuckie!” I ordered quietly, knowing you could hear everything in the damn house as I took several steps back, the door shuddering in its frame and bouncing in, a peek of the twilight coming around the top corner. I pressed my back to the wall by the archway into the kitchen.

“*Get on outta here, now!*” I shouted just before the door blew off its hinges, the frame shattering. The angry biker stalked into my living room. I pressed back, knowing there wasn’t time to grab for any guns nearby – I didn’t like ‘em anyway. I was a bow hunter when I hunted. I preferred the crossbow hanging up overhead, unfortunately, out of my reach, above the archway leading into my kitchen. I didn’t like it being out of reach – and Tate was honestly old enough now,

but that hadn't always been the way. And now? Well, it was a little too late now.

The biker grabbed me by my face, tilting my head way back, his eyes boring into mine as I gritted my teeth and stared up at him in defiance, as he painfully pressed me back into the wall behind me, his knee between my thighs.

He jerked his head down the hallway and the other two left him with me like I wasn't a threat – which wasn't that cute?

“Where's your old man at, huh?”

I frowned and squeezed out through my mashed face, his thick fingers digging into my jaw painfully. “I ain't got an old man. It's just me, my brother, an' my kid. They ain't here.”

“Whatever, cunt. Where's your brother at then?” he demanded.

“Behind you,” I lied. Predictably, he looked, and that's when I unsheathed the knife on my belt, and without hesitation, I plunged it hilt deep into his side. I felt it glance off bone and go deep and he unsurprisingly dropped his hand from my face as I ripped the blade from his side and plunged it in a second time. The second time, it didn't go as deep, glancing off a rib. He dropped his knee, and I slid an inch or two to where my boots were back on the floor.

While I had him distracted, worryin' about the blood pourin' between his fingers, I brought my knee around his leg and up in between 'em. He dropped and howled. I slid out from between him and the wall as he bellowed like a wounded bull on the carpet. His buddies dropped what they were doing, tearing through the bedrooms in the back and spilled into the hallway.

I didn't stick around.

I knew my boy was up in the attic and I needed these Neanderthal dumb fucks away from my kid. I took off out back through the kitchen and my workshop, stumbling out the back door an' down the back steps, makin' a run for my truck.

I jumped into my little pickup that I always parked out back, closer to the kitchen, and cranked on the key. It was so

old and such a piece of shit, I didn't bother taking the key to it in the house. I left it in the ignition when it was parked anywhere. Ain't nobody took it yet. That's the way it usually was out here. Didn't hurt the Voodoo Bastards decal in the corner of the back window.

Unfortunately, I was pretty sure that fuckin' sticker was what had me and my boy in this trouble right now. Damn my brother to hell.

I pressed the clutch to the floor and threw the shifter into reverse. Letting up with my left foot, I felt the gear catch and pulled back as my right foot finished crashing down on the gas. The two men that I hadn't stuck piled out the back door, taking aim.

I ducked as the gun in the first one's hand popped off. Ramming the clutch pedal to the floor again, I shoved the shifter into first and took off as bullets pinged against the faded red-orange of the oxidized paint of the bed of my truck. As I fishtailed on the grass, the back window shattered out.

I screamed and drove blind, bouncing over the rough grass and gravel of the side yard between the house and the garage, possibly clipping the edge of one of my garden beds as I tried to make it around the side of the house to the road. I made it, fishtailing on the pavement one more time as more booms and cracks emanated from the side of the house my way.

I sat up and risked a peek to make sure the men followed me, and sure enough...

My phone started going off in my apron pocket as I worked pedals, shifter, and wheel, picking up speed and tearing down the cracked and sun-bleached asphalt of our street that didn't even have a center line.

When it was safe to do so, I pulled the phone out of my apron pocket, my hand slippery and I realized coated in blood. My kid's face was on the screen as I tried to get it to answer and finally, "Mamma! Mamma, you alright?" came out of the speaker as I hit the symbol for speakerphone and it turned green.

“I’m alright, Tater – you get your nuckie on the line?”

“Yeah, he’s on his way,” he said and sniffed.

I told him, “Don’t you cry now, Tater – not yet. I’m leadin’ ‘em away, baby. You be strong. You be brave for me and stay in that attic, y’hear me, boy?”

“Yes ma’am – but Mamma, one of ‘em is still in the house. I hear him moanin’ and groanin’ down there.”

“You let him. You stay where you are. I stuck him good – shit!” I could hear the roar of the motorcycles catchin’ up to me and I short shifted my little truck and pushed it for all it was worth.

I shot forward and Tate hissed into the phone, “Mamma, you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine!” I said, and I knew I sounded annoyed, but I couldn’t help it. I was.

Dammit to hell, John-Paul, you draggin’ my family into your mess! I thought savagely, but I knew what to do. I was drivin’ for the city – goin’ for the clubhouse, but I honestly didn’t think for one minute I would make it all the way there.

“Think, Jessie-Lou, *think!*” I demanded of myself.

I shifted gears and picked up speed, but it wasn’t like my little old 1980s Datsun was going to outrun them. One pulled up next to me and pointed a gun at my head, and I ducked and swerved in his direction. I heard the bike drop a gear and disappear and I risked peeking up over the dash to see where I was going. Screaming, I slammed on the brakes, jerking the wheel off to the side of the road and bouncing along the grass shoulder, my little truck leaning precariously in the ditch.

White knuckling the steering wheel, I prayed through gritted teeth, “Don’t go over, don’t go over, don’t go over!”

I heard my son yell, “Mom!” through the speaker of my phone as it skittered along the dash as the truck careened onto its side. The passenger window went greenish-yellow, then dark, as the rich earth churned up past it, as my mirror snapped off and disappeared on the other side of the spider-webbed

glass. I was honestly amazed my brain processed that, let alone that I wasn't being crushed or something else stupid – mostly because I hugged the wheel with everything that I was worth and clung to it like a little spider monkey.

The world stopped moving, and I let go, cursing as my boots hit the inside of the window down below me. I accidentally stomped on my phone, cracking the screen, and watched it go all fuckery even as my son practically screamed, “Mom, what happened? Mom! Mom! Are you alright?”

“I'm alright!” I hollered at him. “Calm down, I'm alright,” I said, as I crouched in the narrow, sideways cab of my truck, which was much more cramped than it had been just a moment ago, looking for something, *anything*, that would make a good weapon. The motorcycle engines roared up on approach, coming to a stop.

Fuck!

I think I nearly sagged with relief when I heard John-Paul's voice scream out, “Jessie-Lou! Tater!” and it took me only a fraction of a second to realize that the motorcycles that'd pursued me were going back the way they came. Back to the house...

“Tate!” I cried at my broken phone, just as the damn thing quit on me. I screamed in equal parts rage and frustration. A long loud sound that ain't worth much in the grand scheme of things but fuck, shit, dammit! I'd earned it.

“John-Paul, get me outta here!” I demanded, and shoved at the inside of the door over my head. I braced my head and shoulders against it and tried to shove it up out of my way with my back, even as metal bent and flexed under the weight of someone or something crawling around up on top of the side of my truck.

“Duck down!” he hollered at me and I crouched with my head bowed, arms over my head as he struck the driver's side window above me, busting it out on his final try. I reached up, hands grasping mine, and he pulled me effortlessly through the broken portal, my thick and heavy apron taking the brunt of the jagged glass left in the window frame.

“Go, go! Go get, Tater! Go!” I screamed. “He’s at the house! They went back to the house!”

“Shit!” John-Paul swore, and I was passed to another set of hands, a voice rich in timbre and heavy with that smoke that just *mm...* well, it declared out loud to another, “Take my bike, I don’t care. I’ve got her.”

I leaned back, and he jerked me forward and warned me, “Whoa there, no need to go leaning against the underside there. You’ll burn yourself on the exhaust.”

I looked up at Collier and said, “My son!”

“C’mon, now, I got ‘cha.” He towed me toward a big sleek and much newer RAM pickup and I went, putting one foot in front of the other and going for the passenger side. He let me go and, fueled by mama bear determination, I got myself up into the cab, even though I didn’t feel quite right. Like I was outside myself and the world felt a little off-kilter like. I didn’t know why, but it wasn’t too bad and so I very nearly slapped myself, demanding that I focus.

All I knew was that when this was all over, I was fixin’ to kick my brother’s ass. I didn’t care how much bigger ‘n taller he was than me.

CHAPTER TWO





Collier...

She was unsteady, her light brown eyes wide and dazed and her face shock white and pale, which made the blood stand out on her hands and at the side of her head all the more. She was determined to march forward and get into Hex's truck in front of us, no matter how much I tried to slow her down and get her to stop so I could get a look at her. It was like she didn't even hear me. Just kept screaming her son's name and determined the only way a mama bear could be to get to her child.

I wasn't fixin' to stand in her way on that.

She got into the running truck and I got in too and kept right on going the direction the two mongrel mutts had fucked back off in when they seen us comin' up the road.

We pulled into the front of Cy's house and before I could even turn the dial to put the truck in 'park,' Jessie-Lou was out the passenger door, hit the ground runnin' and was headed right for the smashed-in front door, screamin' her head off for her boy Tate.

To his credit, Tate didn't make his momma wait. He come pourin' out the front door as I hit the ground myself. The kid was ungainly as fuck, all knees and elbows, reaching for his mom to wrap her up in a hug as much as she clung to him.

I threw chin at Hex, who come out the door and he jerked his head at me to leave Jessie and Tate to their hug-fest and to come on over to where he was at.

"They fucked off," he growled. I looked past him onto the front porch, inside where Cy was on his burner.

"Yeah?" I asked.

He gave a nod.

“The boy was the priority. He did good. Didn’t come down until his uncle gave a codeword. Stayed quiet as a church mouse up there. Nearly gave me a heart attack, thinkin’ they’d got ‘im.”

I looked back at Jessie, who’d been all fire and brimstone right up until she got her kid back. Now she was cryin’ somethin’ fierce, but she was absolutely no less pissed.

She looked up at her boy and smoothed a hand over the side of his face, demanding if he was alright and lookin’ him over as he tried to pry her off of him. Red with embarrassment, he shot a sideways look in mine and Hex’s direction.

“Let your mamma have this, boy. Don’t matter how big y’ get – you’ll always be her baby,” I called out to him. He met my eyes and straightened up some and gave a nod in my direction. Hex and I turned and went into the house, through the shattered door just as Cy hung up the phone.

“She stuck him good,” Cy remarked, and I looked at the spatter of blood on the carpet between the living room and the combined kitchen and dining area. The blood was smeared on the tile of the kitchen floor, footprints – small ones – beatin’ feet in the direction of the back door.

“Jessie?” I asked.

“Fuckin’ right,” Cy said as a point of pride, but it was short lived as his sister came through the shattered door like a fuckin’ thunderhead, muscles coiled and eyes sparking lightning.

Her voice crashed into us about the same time she crashed into her brother as she shoved him violently and beat her small fists against his chest and screamed at him, “This is all your fault!”

Hex and I parted like the red sea before her onslaught. Neither one of us *dared* crack a smile. Nothing about this shit was funny.

“You and your fucking bullshit brought them into my house! I can’t believe you, John-Paul!”

“Easy, stop it! I ain’t playin’ Jessie-Lou, I said *stop!*” He shoved her back off of him and bellowed, “Go take your ass in the shower and get cleaned up! I’ll fuckin’ handle it!”

“You’re goddamn right you’ll handle it, you fucking prick!” she shrilled, and he raised his hand like he was gonna backhand her. She flinched but stood her ground.

I couldn’t help myself. I stepped in at that point and caught my brother by the wrist and looked up at him with a cold, hard glare.

“Go take a shower, honey,” I urged her calmly. “But go an’ get me your first-aid kit first. I need you to go get cleaned up to figure out how much of this blood is yours. We’ll get you fixed up after you calm down, yeah?” I only turned my head to look at her when Cy’s eyes told me he had his shit together and his temper under control.

I went to let go of his wrist, but he jerked it out of my grasp, irritated with me. I didn’t much care about that. Let him have his little mini tantrum. He knew I was right. Hex raised an eyebrow in my direction and gave me an imperceptible nod.

I gave him one back.

Tate’s shaky voice came from the doorway to the front yard and said, “Mamma, how bad you hurt?”

Hex waved him into the house and said, “Come away from that door, huh?”

Tate followed Hex’s direction even as Jessie-Lou told her son, “I’m not, baby. It’s not my blood.”

“Some of it is,” I told her gently. “Now go on and get me your first-aid kit, get yourself cleaned up, and let me have a look at you.”

“Do what Collier says, then pack your fuckin’ bags, the both of you. You’re gonna stay in the city.”

Jessie-Lou puffed up at that and said, “The fuck we are, big brother. This is our home and we’re stayin’ in it. Get that down for me.” She thrust her chin at the crossbow over our heads.

“Go on and do what you gotta do,” I said. “I’ll stay with ‘em.” I pulled my gun out of the back of my waistband and checked it while Cy lifted down the crossbow and handed it to Jessie.

“Thanks,” he grunted.

“You better fucking go get ‘em,” she told him and stalked up the hall, making a disgusted noise at the mess. They damn sure had tossed the place.

“Back as soon as I can,” Cypress muttered. He turned to his nephew. “Sorry, buddy, but why don’t you go on and get your room put right? Don’t make your mom have to nag you about it.”

Pale faced, Tate nodded rapidly.

“First-aid kit?” I asked no one in particular, knowing Cy or Tate would answer.

“Under the bathroom sink,” Tate said just as his mom went into the bathroom.

“Go on and get it for me,” I told him.

He nodded, went to the bathroom door and called out, “Mom, don’t shoot me – I’m comin’ in.”

Cy nodded. Hex handed me the keys to my bike and gave me a nod, too. I called out, “Bring back the shit to fix that front door.”

“Measure it for me,” Cy called back.

“You got it,” I shot back and the two of them disappeared through the broken door into the gathering dark.

I sighed and Tate slipped back out of the bathroom and brought me the first-aid kit.

“She’s gonna be in there a while,” he said. “She don’t know I know, but the shower is where she cries it out. She hates it when people see her cry.”

I nodded and told him, “Secret is safe with me.”

He nodded, but didn’t so much as crack a smile.

“Let me get this set up in the kitchen and then I’ll come help you,” I told him, and he nodded at me from his bedroom doorway.

“Thanks,” he said.

I winked at him. “I got you.”

He disappeared into the portal of his bedroom and I sighed, the false bravado dropping off my face as I let the worry set in, staring for a long moment at the bathroom door where his mamma had disappeared.

The Bayou Brethren sure opened up a can of whoop ass on themselves with this one. They were a wildcard, for sure, and didn’t seem to get it that timing was everything. We were a different breed, calculated. It might take us a minute, but when we struck, it was with precision and against the man that deserved it. This...

I looked around at the blood all over the damn floor and covered my mouth with my hand, rubbing across my lips and goatee.

This was bullshit, and even against the outlaw code.

You didn’t go after women and children... we had been warned, but somehow with Cy’s place bein’ way on out here? We didn’t think they’d fuck with anybody in their own backyard or fuck with the Cajun people.

Shit.

This was bad.

Looked like we needed to reevaluate some things.

CHAPTER THREE





Jessie-Lou...

I spent a long time in the shower, letting the hot spray beat the tension outta me, and when the adrenaline wore off? I took my time bawling my eyes out some more and letting the spray wipe my tears into oblivion.

All I could keep telling myself was my son was okay, he was fine, and I was fine too – or I would be.

I just hoped I'd killed the son of a bitch and sent a message that we ain't to be fucked with. I shuddered like I was cold, but under this scalding spray, I was anything but.

Am I alright? I wondered briefly.

I mean, I had to be. I didn't have a choice in the matter. I always had to be fine, hold it together, and figure it out on my own. That was just the cards life had dealt me. Yeah, it was a shitty hand, but there wasn't no sense in cryin' about it.

A ridiculous little laugh bubbled out of me and I winced, hoping that no one out there in the rest of the house heard it. The walls were thin enough as it was in this old rambler.

I tried waiting out the blood running down my drain, but the pink kept right on coming. I winced, and the longer I stood under the spray, the more things started to sting. Eventually, I had to admit defeat and get out, drying off and wrapping my hair up in a towel while I threw on my oversized tee that I liked to sleep in and shrugged into my scruffy but comfortable robe for modesty's sake.

I had a feeling Cypress had fucked off, leaving one of his stupid club brothers holding the bag where Tater and I were concerned. That ticked me off to no end. I took care of us before they showed up. I could take care of us now. I'd loaded my crossbow before I got into the shower and I hung it from my shoulder now before exiting the bathroom.

If I was a betting woman, I'd put even money that Collier was the one out there. He seemed eager to stick around and Hex was too high up in the club's food chain to pull sitter duty for a brother's loser sister and her illegitimate teenage son.

I looked myself over in the mirror before I went out and winced at the drip of blood already trying to work its way down the side of my face from my hair at the side of my head. There was already a stain at the edge of the towel and I didn't like the look of it. I was hoping I wouldn't need stitches.

"Son of a whore," I muttered. Heaving a sigh, I went out into the hall.

I could hear Tate moving around his room and I went across to check on him. He was picking shit up and putting trash in a garbage bag.

Sure as shit, Collier was halfway up the ladder of my boy's loft bed, making it.

"You alright, son?" I asked Tate, and he looked up, his lips thinning down into a grim and resolved line as he gave a nod.

"He's doing good," Collier remarked evenly, turning to fix me with a plaintive look before saying, "What about you?"

"Head won't stop bleedin'. I'm about to have a look."

Collier stepped down off the ladder. With both him and Tater in the room, it made it look small. I swear my kid got my brother's genes through me somehow. Not that his daddy wasn't tall.

I'd had Tate when I was fourteen. My family had been quick to judge, blaming me and my little boyfriend at the time for being irresponsible. The comments about me being the family disappointment never stopped coming since. They helped, but damned if I didn't hear all about it, and the help when it came was grudging.

They didn't know shit about it – not like I could tell 'em when they already had their minds made up.

It was only after Tate was born and had started growing that the truth I'd dreaded came to life. It was a truth I'd take to

my grave. Made me wonder how any of ‘em didn’t know. It was plain as day to me just lookin’ at my son.

“I’m okay,” I told my boy evenly. “I promise. Only thing that matters is that *you’re* okay.”

My kid’s shoulders dropped, and he looked so sad in that moment, but Collier stepped between us and put a hand on my shoulder. A gentle hand that I immediately shrugged off.

“Come on,” he said, paying me no never mind. “Let me have a look at you, see if we can’t get you fixed up.”

He was a handsome feller, with light blue eyes that reminded me of a husky. Bright and brilliant beneath his mop of dirty blond hair. He had a scraggly goatee that I could have lived without, but it had its own charms. At least he didn’t have just a ‘stache like a bunch of the men around here, including my daddy’s best friend. I couldn’t abide that. It looked so horrible.

“Fine,” I said and Tate looked like he was about to follow. Collier turned to him and said, “You keep up the good work in here. I’ll come back and finish helping in a minute.”

Tate nodded, but I had a feeling my boy was gonna try and sleep with his momma tonight. Truthfully, I wasn’t upset by that thought at all. He was gettin’ to where he was definitely too old for that kind of thing, but at the same time, I’d take it any chance he would give me. Those days were numbered by God.

I went down the hall and stopped in the archway to the kitchen. One, there were towels on the floor over the bloodstains in my carpet, and two, the first-aid kit was unpacked and laid out on the table neatly, with near surgical precision. If there had been any blood on the tile, it’d been mopped up. The smell of cleaner still hung in the air, and my floor in the kitchen and dining area sparkled under the dim light from over the stove.

“Sit for me,” Collier ordered gently. Usually I’d have some smartassed thing to say at being ordered to do anything, but his tone was... nice.

As in, he'd asked nicely.

Don't get any ideas.

I sat in the chair he'd turned out from the table and he went and hit the switch on the wall to turn on the dining room light. I flinched and blinked, the light an almost assault on my eyes. He stilled and scowled slightly.

"I'm no professional, but I'm gonna do my best here," he said. I jerked back when he tried to put two fingers under my chin.

"Just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it, but I'm fine," I spat out.

"Yeah, well, afraid I'm going to have to be the judge of that, honey. I'm gonna shine a light in your eyes."

I rolled my eyes, but I looked up and cooperated as he shined a pen light in my eyes and judged for himself that I wasn't fucked up – which I could have already told him.

"Pupils are equal and reactive, but that doesn't mean you don't have a mild concussion," he said. "The light hurt your eyes?" he asked.

"A little," I answered honestly. "But I'm fine, really."

"No headache?" he asked.

"Only from you asking so many damn questions and fretting over me like I'm some kind of toddler."

He chuckled and took the towel from my head, putting the light in his mouth and sucking on it as he trained it on the area the blood was dripping from. He tilted my head, his hands gentle on my face, and I let him if only so he'd stop fussing quicker.

"Mm," he mumbled around the penlight between his lips.

"What?" I asked reflexively, and he chuckled and took the light from his mouth.

"You got some glass in there," he answered. "I'm gonna go wash my hands and shit. Stay right there."

He went to the kitchen sink and used the anti-bacterial hand soap to scrub up like a damn surgeon.

“You act like you done this before,” I said.

“A time or two,” he confessed. “Most of this shit is just common sense. My papaw is a man ahead of his time, smart as a whip and what a lot of the folks up in the Appalachians would call a folk healer. He learned most of it from my memaw who was a Granny Woman. A lot of the superstitious type of healing. When she died, folks around started coming to my papaw. The man did make the best cough syrup around with his shine and my memaw’s recipe.”

He shook his hands off in the sink after turning off the faucet with his elbow.

“I can treat small things, like a gash or fishing broken glass out of a cut, maybe a stitch or two. I can make a mean cough syrup and I know a fair bit about some other folk remedies. I could probably do a fair bit more ‘n that, even – but some things I like to leave to the real doctors. This? This I can handle, but it might not be something you like much. You want, I can take you someplace they can give you a numbing shot. You might need a stitch or two, but I’m pretty sure I can get away with a couple of butterfly bandages if you don’t mind me shaving a patch of hair.”

“You can stitch me up just fine if it comes to it. You ain’t cutting my hair,” I told him. “I don’t need none of that fancy shit, either. A couple of stitches ain’t worth all that.”

“Tough as nails, you are,” he said, coming back over.

“It’s the Cajun way,” I said.

“You know, you ain’t always gotta do things the hard way,” he said.

I gave a smile that was more a baring of teeth than anything else and told him the truth, “There ain’t nothin’ easy – the only way is the hard way.”

He pursed his lips and stalked over to me – that’s the only way I can describe it. His stride and that sway of his lean hips

was hypnotic, and I couldn't help but think to myself, *damn, has it been that long?*

Shit, yeah, it'd been too long – but yeah, no, I definitely didn't need any more drama in my life. My brother had brought enough bullshit into my house and looking up at Collier in his uniform of worn denim and equally worn black leather, those ice-blue eyes piercing mine like he could see right on down into my soul? No. No, no, no – I didn't need another “bad boy” or another man at all, really, in my life. Not until I was doing the empty-nest thing and could ensure that my boy wasn't going to go down the same path of trouble and debauchery my brother did.

I never understood that. How John-Paul, with all his bullshit and arrest records, getting into fights and everything else under the sun – how he remained the golden boy. But me? I make one “mistake” in their eyes and I might as well bear a scarlet letter for the rest of my life.

“Hold still for me,” Collier said gently, and I huffed out a breath.

“Just hurry up,” I said.

“If I hurry, it'll hurt more. Just hold still and let me see. Let me do it right.”

I gritted my teeth and didn't say anything. I mean, he was being nicer than my ma or my daddy would've been, so there was that, I guess.

“Okay, breathe,” he mumbled around the pen light that was back in his mouth, the beam trained on the side of my head as he took up the tweezers he'd sterilized and made ready.

“You okay?” he asked, and I made an affirmative noise from behind my gritted teeth as he probed the small wound.

“Got it.” He put the bloodstained piece of glass aside on a folded square of paper towel.

I sighed out and sniffed. *Good Lord, that hurt.*

“Now for the fun part,” he said, taking up a bottle of antiseptic spray.

I groaned.

“Sorry, darlin’,” he said in that mellow accent of his, and I tried not to wriggle in my seat too much.

“One... two...” he sprayed it and I yipped and sucked in and out several breaths as I clutched the seat of my chair and tried to hold still.

“That’s it, you’ve got it. Hold still for me, now.” He pressed some gauze to the side of my temple and said, “You’re a good patient.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“You feel anything else in there?” he asked, massaging it some, keeping the pressure on.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, the good news is, I don’t think you’ll need a stitch or two after all. Let’s see if I can get the bleeding to stop and what we’re dealing with in a minute or two.”

“Okay,” I said, my head immobilized by his gentle yet firm touch.

“Have you fixed up in no time,” he murmured. Despite my best effort to resist the lulling nature of his smooth and melodic voice, I relaxed marginally.

“Thanks for fixing me up,” I murmured.

“You’re welcome.”

It was the best peace offering he was gonna get from me, but he seemed just fine with it.

CHAPTER FOUR





Eollier...

I finished doctoring her up and I could tell she wasn't alright – but she would be. She was tough, this one. As country as you could make her. There was something about a strong woman that I liked, and Jessie-Lou was a firecracker for sure.

“Gonna help Tate with his room, then I'll come help with yours,” I told her as I worked to clean up and put away the first-aid kit.

“I can take care of things myself,” she said.

“I'm sure you're perfectly capable but let me help you, anyway.”

She stopped in the doorway in her ratty robe and thick socks and turned back to me.

“Why?” she asked.

“I'm a helpful guy,” I said back with a shrug.

“What if I don't want your help?” She raised an eyebrow, and I smiled.

“You really do gotta do everything the hard way, don't yah?”

She huffed out a frustrated breath and said, “Guess you weren't listening the first time. The only way is the hard way, every time.”

Seemed to me she was her own worst enemy in that regard, but discretion being the better part of valor or whatever, I deigned to keep my big mouth shut.

She wandered off up the hallway and stopped and exchanged some words with her son. I couldn't hear what, but then again, it wasn't none of my business.

I finished throwing out the trash from my doctoring of the side of her head and packed the first-aid kit back up and zipped it closed. I'd been lucky it was a fairly extensive kit.

I went on down to Tate's room, his mamma gone to her own room by then, and held up the kit.

"Where's this go again?" I asked.

"Under the bathroom sink," he replied. He was sitting at his desk, up under his loft bed, a game paused on his computer screen.

I gave a nod and looked around his room, which was all back together.

"You got some plastic or something we can tape over the front door for tonight?" I asked.

"Yeah." He got up.

"Is it outside?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Wait for me, then."

"Alright."

He sat back down and I turned and nearly crashed into Jessie.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Crossbow," she answered, and I turned sideways in the hall so she could go past me and retrieve it from the kitchen. I went across and put the first-aid kit away. When I turned to go back out into the hall, we met again.

"Gonna have Tate help me tarp off that front door," I said.

She nodded. "Okay."

"It's not that cold yet, but it'll get there."

She nodded. "There's stuff out in the garage."

"I know where it's at," Tate piped up.

"You do what Mr. Collier says, now. Y'hear me?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

She nodded curtly and disappeared back into her room.

I jerked my head at Tate to follow me and he gave a nod and took me out the ruined front door and around the side of the house to the detached three-car garage on the property.

We worked to tarp off the front door with this shit that was supposed to be used to temporarily insulate windows. I liked it better than hanging a blue tarp because it was clear and I could see through it. We put the stripping up and around the top and two sides of the door, kidding some with each other and cuttin’ up.

He was coming out of his fear and loosening up some. I was glad for that.

“So, uh, are you staying?” he asked, and I looked up and nodded.

“Yeah. I’ll be right out here on the couch,” I told him.

He seemed relieved and nodded a little too quickly.

“You did good,” I told him and he swallowed hard.

“I’m not a kid anymore and I hid like a little kid,” he complained.

“You’re right,” I told him. “You’re not a little kid, but you *are* a kid still. But after today? You just had a hard introduction to being a man, and we’re all proud of you.”

He swallowed hard and nodded but looked like he was trying really hard not to cry when he said, “I’m old enough now that I should be the one to protect my mom – not the other way around. And she got hurt and—”

“Hey,” I cut him off. “Your mom is a strong lady, and she went full mamma bear today. She ain’t got much time left to do that. In fact, this was probably the last time, right?”

I gave him a pointed look, and he straightened up, picking up what I was putting down. A look of resolve overcame his young face, and he gave a hard nod.

“I’m gonna talk to Uncle Nuckie,” he said. “See if he’ll teach me how to fight and how to shoot. I mean, I already know how to shoot. I just mean... shoot a human, you know, if I have to.”

I gave a nod. “Well, I hope you never have to,” I said.

“Me too, but I mean... yeah. I will!” he said quickly. “To protect myself and definitely to protect Mom.”

I sighed and said, “Don’t tell your mom I told you this, but shooting a person? It ain’t really no different from the mechanics of shootin’ an animal. You just point and shoot – it’s hard, believe me, and it’s loads different after the moment, but really, in the moment? Right when you go to pull the trigger? Just like with a buck, or an angry gator, you just have to commit and know that it’s you or them and that it *has to be you*. You have to be the one to walk away and live. For your mom, and your friends, and your uncle.”

He nodded, then asked me the question that I knew was coming. “You ever shoot anybody?”

I sighed and reached into the front of my tee shirt and pulled out my dog tags.

His eyes widened as the tags clacked together and dropped against my chest.

“I did exactly as I was told by our government,” I said. “But yeah, that means I had to shoot some people.”

He swallowed hard and I think I swallowed harder. What I didn’t tell him, and what he was too young to know, was that I’d followed orders alright, and I’d been thrown right under the bus by my immediate command and got bounced right the fuck out of the military. It was a sore spot, and when I’d gone home, I’d only been able to get work in the mine through an old friend. Then, right after that, I’d been here, and let me tell you – living this life, the club life? Man did it ever fuckin’ appeal after the bullshit and lies of this so-called governing body.

I digress, though. That was another life, and this life? This life of freedom and fuck the fucking man? This was damn sure

the life I wanted to live after all that.

“You think you an’ me can go shoot someday?” he asked.
“You know, like practice.”

I nodded. “Absolutely.”

He looked a little more grounded after that and the plastic billowed in as a breeze went by outside.

“Your mom got a hair dryer?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’ll go get it.”

He went and found it. We used it on the plastic to tighten it up. It wasn’t perfect, but it would help ward off the chilly night some, which was coming and in that case? Something was better ‘n nothing.

“You got school tomorrow?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, and I nodded.

“Not a word about any of this to anyone. Not even your friends, okay?”

He gave me a look like “don’t be stupid” and I huffed a laugh. “Yeah, sure, okay – forget I even said that.”

He nodded and said, “I know what’s up.”

I nodded and sighed tiredly.

“Yeah, I know you do.”

“I’m gonna go say goodnight to Mom,” he said and I nodded.

“You do that.”

“Night,” he said to me, and I handed him the hair dryer.

“Night, Tater.”

He gave me a crooked smile and disappeared into the dark maw of the hallway. I pulled out my burner and shot a call through to Cypress.

“Yeah, everything good?” he answered.

“Yeah, man. Everything’s as good as it’s gonna get tonight.
What’s up with you?”

CHAPTER FIVE





Jessie-Lou...

“G’night, Mom.” I looked up from the broken things in my lap at my teenage son, in the doorway to my room.

“You good, Bubba?” I asked him.

“Yeah, I’m good,” he said, and I hoped my smile appeared more convincing than it felt. To me, it felt brittle and thin.

He smiled back, and I asked him, “You good to stay in your room or do you want to stay in here?”

“I can stay in my room,” he said, and it broke my heart even as I swear it swelled with pride.

“Okay, baby.”

He hit the side of the doorframe with the heel of his hand twice and took a deep breath. I thought he was going to slip off to his room with nothing further but he pleasantly surprised me by coming in and leaning down to hug me.

I hugged him tight, and he said, “I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Me too, kiddo. Me too.”

I gave him a squeeze and he let go. I had to watch my baby grow up a lot more. He smiled at me and waved and said, “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too,” I told him. I had to heave a sigh when he slipped out my door and I heard his door shut.

I could hear Collier faintly talking out in the living room, and I got to my feet and dumped the broken pieces of one of the first skulls that I’d carved, into the trash in the corner. My room was back to rights from where the men had thrown things around, my closet door closed on its broken closet rod and the mess of clothes sliding off into the bottom.

I was sure John-Paul's room was a wild mess, but it was his to clean up.

I was just shutting the armoire I had against one wall when a light knock fell at the edge of my door. I turned and the line of sight between me and Collier was electric for just a moment. Those light blue eyes of his skated over me head to toe and there wasn't anything sexual at all about it, and yet...

...and yet...

I hugged myself and asked him, "You need something?"

He shook his head.

"Just wanted to check on you." He tore his eyes from mine almost reluctantly and looked around my room. "It's nice in here. I like the vibe."

"What? Swamp Woman?" I asked. I glanced up to the potted plant, the vines of it trailing off the top of my armoire. It'd been knocked off and there was still some dirt in the area rug beneath my bed. I would vacuum it up tomorrow.

He gave me a crooked smile and said, "I like the skulls." I had quite a few of them hanging on the walls in here, all carved and inlaid with semi-precious stones.

"Thanks, I carved 'em myself."

He looked impressed and said, "I'd like to see how you do that sometime."

I raised an eyebrow at that. Not the usual reaction I got.

"You need anything?" he asked.

"Maybe some aspirin or somethin'," I answered.

"Where's it at?" he asked.

I huffed a laugh and said, "I can get it." I shook my head.

"No, go on and get yourself into bed. I'll get it for you. You want some tea or something? Saw an electric kettle in the kitchen."

I swallowed hard and decided what the fuck, why not?

“Yeah, there’s some stuff in glass jars on the countertop. Looseleaf. The jars are labeled, just... surprise me.”

He gave a nod, and hand clutching his fist absentmindedly, he backed out of my room and went on down the hall.

I mean, I’d never had anyone do anything nice for me without the catch of wanting in my pants attached. I sighed, tired under the weight of that constant and exhausting thing. I honestly didn’t think this was any different but hey, I’d take it until the other proverbial shoe dropped to ruin it.

I took off my robe and hung it off the hook set on the side of my armoire for it and got into bed. I took off my socks and tossed them into the open laundry hamper in the corner of the room and arranged the blankets over my lap. It felt... strange, trying to wind down after such a crazy set of events. I didn’t quite know what to do with myself.

Woodenly, I took my book off the end table by my bed and set it in my lap, folding my hands atop my book. I stared at them, replaying all the things over and over in my head but thankfully, I was all cried out and had a firm grip, so no more of that nonsense.

“You got some nice cup and saucer sets,” he murmured and I startled out of my reverie and looked up.

“Thanks,” I murmured and reached for the steaming cup. I didn’t like the way the cup rattled on its base as I took it.

“Mm.” I breathed in the aroma of my favorite elderberry tea.

“I saw your honey pot and added a little. If it’s not to your liking, I can get some more.”

He sat on the edge of my bed, the blankets drawing taut over my lap. I stiffened but tried to act natural. I sipped tentatively, and it was as close to perfect as you could get without having made it myself.

“It’s good, thank you.”

“Had to guess it was your favorite. It was the lowest of the lot of ‘em.”

“How very observant of you,” I said dryly.

He bowed his head, some of his hair falling into his face artfully as he harrumphed a clipped laugh.

“I try,” he said, holding out two tablets to me.

“Thanks.”

The silence was awkward for me as I popped the pills and swallowed them down with another sip of tea.

That finished, I asked, “You talk to my asshole brother yet?”

He nodded and said, “I did.”

“I don’t like secrets in my house,” I declared.

His lips twitched, but he didn’t smile. I raised an eyebrow.

“From here on out, it’s club business, honey,” he said and at least had the foresight to sound apologetic.

I swallowed a sip of tea, the liquid still a bit too hot to drink and said, “I was the one attacked. My son was in danger. I have a right to know and I can keep a secret with the best of ‘em.”

He scoffed a laugh and said, “I thought there were no secrets in your house.”

“Not from me,” I declared.

“No dice. I wish I could.”

I searched his face and was surprised to find that I believed him about that. That he really wished that he could.

“I’ll get it out of J.P. one way or another,” I said.

“Well, now *that* ain’t none of my business,” he declared.

“What do you think your business is?” I asked.

He heaved a sigh, and I jumped slightly when he put a hand on my knee and gave it a firm squeeze.

“Tonight? My only business is making sure you and that boy are alright.”

I nodded slowly and said, “We will be, eventually. I mean, I’m alright. Really, I am. And Tate’s a good boy. Strong. He’ll be okay, too.”

He nodded, looked me in the eye, and said, “I know that. He’s just like his mamma after all.”

I couldn’t keep the smile down if I tried at that and his answering smile stirred things in my chest.

He changed the subject by picking up the book out of my lap.

“What ‘cha readin’?” he asked me.

“Some book I got at the library,” I said. “I ain’t that far into it.”

He checked the cover. “*The Sinner and His Saint*, by Timber Philips. Huh.”

“You read?” I asked, and I knew I was coming off like a bitch but I didn’t know a lot of fellas who read around here.

“Sometimes,” he drawled, but he was focused on the back of the book I’d borrowed.

“What do you read when you do?” I asked.

“Oh, I like spy and thriller shit. Mysteries – action and adventure. I like the ones about that big Marine bastard that never stays in one place for too long. Walks everywhere or rides the bus. Needs a change of clothes, he hits the Goodwill. Smart and sees things most folks don’t. Nobody thinks he’s smart because he looks like a big brute.”

“You know all that about him but you can’t remember his name?” I asked, and he looked up from my book and over at me, grinning.

“What can I say? My mind works weird like that.” He handed my book back to me and I set it back down in my lap.

“Thanks for the tea,” I murmured when he stood up and stretched.

“Sure thing. Try and sleep, yeah?”

I nodded, and he slipped out my door and disappeared.

I looked down into the rich purplish liquid in my cup and felt my eyes grow hot, my vision blurring. I looked up at the ceiling and dashed at my eyes and wondered to myself, *what in the world?*

I couldn't tell myself what was stuck in my craw, but something certainly was. I felt shaken by our little interaction just now, and I couldn't begin to understand why.



“OH, SHIT!” I pushed up and shuddered as panic ripped through me. That visceral reaction of *oh, God, I'm late!*

A light hand fell at my back while the other set a steaming mug of coffee on my nightstand.

“Calm your ass down, you ain't late for nothin'. Tater got himself off to the school bus just fine this morning.”

I scowled and pushed myself up, turning over and sitting up. J.P. wasn't makin' it easy with how he trapped the blankets tight around my legs by sittin' his monstrous ass on 'em and I found myself vaguely disappointed it was him and not Collier.

“Why are you being so nice?” I demanded, suspicious.

He hung his head and brought it back up.

“May or may not have had some sense talked into me some,” he said and he brought a box up from beside his hip and handed it to me. I blinked and looked at the new phone.

“Some of the fellas got your truck out the ditch before the police could find it and we got it on a dolly and dragged it back home. Sorry to say, there probably ain't no fixin' it so we're gonna have to find something different. I'm sorry about that a lot, actually, Sissy. I know how much you liked that truck.”

“Only 'cause I bought it and fixed it all by myself.”

He gave me a grin and said, “Fixed it all by yourself, huh?”

I punched him lightly in the arm and said, “Okay, you may have helped.”

His grin got wider. He sighed and said, “We lost ‘em, but it ain’t no thing – you know us. We’ll find ‘em again and make it hurt.”

“Shit,” I swore softly and took in a deep breath, holding it and letting it out slow.

“What about my front door?” I demanded.

J.P. scoffed and rubbed at the back of his neck that I swore was somehow wider ‘n his fat head.

“*Our* front door,” he corrected me. “An’ some of the boys are here to fix it. I just thought I’d try to wake you up a little nicer ‘n a bunch of bangin’ and shit. Deliver this here peace offering.” He picked up and shook the phone box and set it back down. “And this...” he reached into his front jeans pocket and extracted and handed me a big wad of cash.

I scowled.

“What’s this for?” I demanded, taking it, and automatically counting through it.

“That’s about twenty-five hundred dollars. Figured you could take the day and get your new phone set up and find you a beater out there somewhere just until we can afford to get you something better.”

“Would love to, but what time is it?” I asked. “I’m supposed to be down at the butcher shop today.”

“Nah, already been by there an’ told ‘em you’re sick. Don an’ them say ‘feel better, it’s a nasty stomach bug goin’ around these parts.” He sniffed. “I let ‘em think that’s what it was. You can make up whatever you’d like. Just let me know an’ I’ll stick to it.”

I snorted and said, “Wrecked the truck tryin’ to avoid a stray dog in the road. You know I like animals more ‘n people. Everyone around here’ll buy it.”

He nodded, and I bowed my head and nodded at the cash in my hands. “You thought of everything but that, didn’t yah?”

“Even got you a ride for today to do all your stuff,” he said. “Collier’s gonna take you all the places you need to go. I give him the keys to my truck.”

I sighed and asked him, “You tryin’ to matchmake or some shit?”

He snorted. “Fuck no. He touches my sister, brother or not, I’ll kick his fuckin’ ass.”

I snorted and laughed and shook my head.

“Whatever happened to bros before hos?” I asked, and he snorted and shook his head, ignoring that one.

“I love you, Jessie-Lou, and I’m real sorry how they come lookin’ around here for my ass. I’m damn proud of how you handled it, though.”

I sucked my teeth, took another sip of my coffee, rich with chicory, and swallowed, sighing out.

“Yeah, well, when it comes to violence, I learned from the best.”

My motherfucking brother gave me a cheeky-ass grin and got up, going for the bedroom door, and going out, called down the hallway, “She’s up. Let’s make some noise and get this door fixed, yeah?”

About a minute later, another man appeared in the doorway but it wasn’t Collier. It was the president of the Voodoo Bastards himself, ol’ Lenny, now LaCroix.

“Hey, Len,” I said and his face didn’t move a muscle except for those creepy inky eyes of his. He’d been so handsome when he and my brother had been kids. An older boy that I’d admittedly crushed on some, and I shuddered inside at how he’d changed. The older he’d got and the nastier his daddy’d got to him, he just wasn’t ever the same. It was a shame him goin’ to the state pen like he did. That’s what’d changed him the most. His damn daddy’d deserved that beating Lenny’d given him – a culmination of all the whippins

he'd put on his son. Ain't none of us felt sorry for Lenny's dad but we all sure felt for Len when he'd been sent away.

"How you doin', Jessie-Lou?" he asked in that deep voice that resonated, remindin' me of an old church bell in a haunted-ass church. Something southern and Gothic. I was pretty sure ol' Lenny had some bats in his belfry from too many hits to the head but at the same time? Deep down, he was still that boy. He was still the same ol' Lenny who'd nick a candy from the corner store just for me an' it was that Lenny who stood in my doorway now.

"Oh, I'm doin' alright," I said honestly, and he gave a singular nod, as though he'd just needed to see for hisself.

"Good to hear it," he said, before he backed out the door and went on down the hall, in the direction of the sound where wood cracked and splintered as they tore apart the frame around the front door. The old one had to go so they could reframe it and put a new one in.

How did I know?

Wasn't the first front door needin' replaced.

My ex had kicked in the last one but me an' Tate hadn't been home. John-Paul had been, though, and I ain't never seen or heard from that guy again. That'd been six or seven years ago now, though. Shit... make that nine now that I stopped to think about it. Tate'd been just a little guy back then.

I finished my coffee, got up and made my bed, and was just laying out my clothes when Collier appeared in the doorway.

"What?" I asked.

He shook his head and gave me a little smile and said, "Just seein' if you fell back asleep."

I rolled my eyes. "With all that goin' on out there? Please. Am I holding you up from doing other shit today?"

He shook his head.

"Nah, it's just me and you, babe." I straightened up from where I'd laid down a shirt and turned to look at him.

“Is that what we’re doin’ now? We flirting?”

“Only if you’d like,” he said casually and I barked a laugh.

“Git on outta here. I’m getting dressed.”

His smile grew, and he pushed off from where he leaned his shoulder against the doorframe and left me to shut it. I shut my door and swiftly got dressed, taking both my coffee cup and the cup and saucer from the night before with me, out to the kitchen.

Seemed like most of my brother’s gang was here. Hex and Chainsaw were making measurements and marking off the doorframe with pencil, Cy and La Croix standing nearby. It made for a crowded living room and I just managed to squeak by Collier without touching him to get into my kitchen where I found all four of my kitchen table’s seats occupied by Axe, Bennie, Louie, and Saint.

“Well shit, the whole gang’s here,” I declared to a round of chuckles.

“Did you honestly think one of our own’s family gon’ get attacked and we wouldn’t be?” Axe asked.

“Didn’t think Tater an’ I meant anything to the lot of you,” I said honestly, stopping at my kitchen sink to wash my dishes.

“Well, you’d be wrong,” Saint declared, leaning back in his chair against the wall.

“You fuck up my wall an’ you’ll find out just how much I care about *that*,” I said, pointing at him. There was a smattering of laughter as I finished up with my cups and put them in the drain board. If the house had a dishwasher, it was me. It was built before all that fancy shit and hadn’t been upgraded to accommodate it.

“Make sure y’all wash your cups,” I declared. “Y’ still here when I get back, I’ll cook.” I caught J.P.’s eye, and he lifted his chin.

I nodded back, and he said to me, “Don’t you worry about Tater, now. We’ll be here when he gets off the bus. You just take care of your business.”

I nodded and jerked my head at Collier who pushed off from the doorframe.

“Col,” J.P. called out and Col turned his hand, flashing out as he caught the keys my brother tossed him from where he scooped them off the living room table. “Take my truck. It’s too cold and wet for my sister on the bike but don’t let her drive.”

“You act like I give a damn about all that,” I said, rolling my eyes and lifting down my coat at the back door. “I hate driving your truck.”

“I know you don’t give a damn,” my brother called. “But *I* do. Don’t let her drive my truck but do take care of her ornery ass. Take her wherever she needs to go.”

Boy, he was really tryin’ to make up for almost whacking me one last night.

“Uh-uh, fuck you, thanks, big brother!” I called back over my shoulder and went out the back door. Collier lingered, staring off to his left and into my workspace for my bone carving for a minute. He finally followed me out the back door, shutting it behind him. It *was* cold and damp as hell and I huddled in my coat a little more.

Collier huffed a laugh at me and we traipsed through the wet grass and the yard that was turning to mud, heading for the garage bay that held my brother’s truck.

“Shit, I forgot the damn new phone.”

“I’ve got it,” Collier said. “Where’s it at?”

“Left it on my bedside table.”

He nodded, and I got into the truck but he didn’t turn and go back into the house right away. He got in the driver’s side and started the big ol’ beast of a Ford and swung the fully restored, glossy black door shut before he jogged back across the yard and went back into the house.

Curious.

He was almost treatin’ me like a lady and wasn’t that laughable?

Kind of hard to be a lady when you were poor swamp trash knocked up at the age of thirteen.

I heaved a sigh and checked my coat pocket for my wallet and found I'd at least had that on me, but then my eyes wandered to the back of the backyard and stopped on my poor truck.

John-Paul was right... it was lost to me. Even if I did manage to straighten it out, I knew the likelihood of sourcin' the parts for it was nigh on zero. Dammit to hell.

The back door clapped in its frame and I watched Collier bounce down the back steps and stalk across the grass, head bowed and lookin' thoughtful as the wind ruffled his hair.

He stopped outside the truck and shrugged off his cut. When he opened the door, he passed the new phone in its plastic wrapped box and my old, shattered phone atop it to me.

"You never know, they might be able to save the pictures and your contacts and shit and transfer 'em over." I nodded and took the vest as he passed it to me next, laying it on the seat between us as he hopped up and got settled.

"Phone first and then I can try and figure out the car situation, I guess."

He nodded and pulled down on the shifter to put my brother's truck in gear, switching on the heat which was rare for Louisiana but certainly not this time of year.

I was mulling that over some, the thoughts tickling my brain when it struck me.

"They knew J.P. – sorry, I mean Cypress, wasn't home. They weren't after him, they were just there to terrorize us and send a message to y'all, weren't they?" I asked.

He glanced over at me and asked, "How do you figure?"

"Hell, it's Mardi Gras season. If ever there was a time to do it, it's now. All the cops from here to kingdom come are tied up with parades and shit."

Collier sighed, and it didn't sound happy.

“Y’all figured that out already and I’m late to the party, huh?”

“Yeah,” he said, a muscle in his jaw tightening as he gave a curt nod.

“What’s your beef with them?” I demanded.

He looked over at me and met my eyes as he rolled up to the stop sign at the end of our street. I met them right back even though I wanted to look at where I’d gone off the road.

“We didn’t have one until they started it,” he said. “Started when some of their members poached some of your brother’s gator traps, then they pushed things harder when they started encroaching on our territory.”

“I see,” I muttered and turned to look out the window, down at the tracks from my little truck from where it’d careened off the road. I was so busy focusing on the one, I’d missed the other’d got ahead of me up in the road. He’d been stopped and taking aim, and I’d either go off the road or risk being shot, tryin’ to take him out. I’d gone off the road right on past him. My only saving grace’d been the boys comin’ up the other way, and they’d seen ‘em and fucked off back to the house to get their guy I’d wounded.

“Glad you understand it,” he said and took in a shuddering breath. I huffed a laugh.

“I’ll never understand what men do,” I said. “Y’all tend to make life way more complicated than it needs to be, yeah?”

He was quiet for a small time and then said, “Can’t argue with you there.”

I turned back to him, but his profile was rigid.

“You an’ my brother have some kind of come t’ Jesus or something?” I asked him.

He nodded and said, “Or something.”

“I kinda figured you maybe had a hand in this.” I held up the phone.

He smiled and asked, “Why is that?”

“Hm. J.P. don’t think about the details, Cher. That’s what I’m for.”

He laughed at that and said, “Touché Ms. Gaudet. Touché.”

“Aw, you can fuck off wi’ dat Ms. Gaudet shit. It’s Jessie-Lou or just Jessie.”

“How about Jess?” he asked, and I smiled.

“Well now, that’s okay, too.”

“Alright then,” he declared and we sort of just settled into a smiling and comfortable silence.

CHAPTER SIX





Collier...

I don't think Jessie gave her brother enough credit. I mean, when he'd come in the night before, long after she and the boy had gone to bed, and even after I'd fallen into a light dose, the first thing that he'd asked me about was her. That was after he'd swatted the toe of my boot and scared the shit out of me, waking my ass up.

I'd told him I'd nearly shot his dick off, and dismissing that right away, said that she was doing alright.

I'd sat up and he'd dropped onto the seat cushion beside me and we'd had a long talk. Mostly after he'd opened it up by apologizing to *me* for nearly clocking her. I'd shook my head at that and told him I ain't the one he needed to say he was sorry to. That, and if he ever did somethin' like that in my presence again, I was gonna throw down with him, whether I got my ass kicked or not, because that shit ain't right.

He'd made a pot of coffee and we'd talked it out. We were cool, for now, but honestly, that all depended on how he treated the woman from here on out in my presence.

When he'd gone into bed in his room and I'd laid back down on the couch to get some sleep for real, I'd found myself lying awake an' wondering just why the hell I honestly cared so much.

I still didn't have an answer, other than I was liking Jessie-Lou and her company, no matter how acidic or sharp-edged she could be. I could tell she had a good heart, and she cared, and that those things ran deeper than deep. She wasn't no shallow or insipid woman. Another thing I could tell was she had secrets.

I liked that. She presented a good challenge. She wasn't boring, not by half. That intrigued me and had me thinkin' that she'd honestly been in plain sight for *years* by now, but she'd had a boyfriend here or there before. They were trash, granted,

but I'd been a prospect for a good portion of the time we'd been around each other, which meant I'd been preoccupied too. Then when I'd earned my colors, we'd been busy enough as a club, and mine and her spheres hadn't crossed paths so much anymore. I kind of wondered what could and would have been by now if they had.

I was kind of wanting to learn everything I could about her. I was kind of low key pissed with myself that I just hadn't been payin' attention.

Well, there was no time like the present to change that up than now.

We went to the phone carrier first to get that shit changed over. Then I took her to get some lunch – just a drive-thru, nothing fancy – and we parked in the lot while we ate and she perused used cars nearby, lookin' for a beater to drop some of the cash in her hip pocket on.

She sighed frustrated, and I asked her around a mouthful of my Po Boy, "What're you looking for?"

"A small pickup, around the same size as my old one, but nothing near this big. I need it for when I go moving my bones around and pickin' up roadkill."

I nearly choked.

"You pick up roadkill?" I asked, and she laughed at me.

"Cheapest and easiest way to get my skulls," she said proudly. "I chop off the heads and toss the rest out in the swamps for the gators." She shrugged. "Or just leave it for the road crews."

"You're something else, you know that?" I asked.

She shrugged again, more pronounced and took another bite of her sandwich.

"So, how do you get 'em so clean?" I asked a minute later after thinkin' about it some.

"Oh, I got a spot in the garage, a big ol' tank of these beetles – strips the meat clean off of 'em in five days or less."

“That’s morbid as fuck,” I said. “But totally fascinating at the same time.”

Her slight frown melted away as soon as I amended myself, and she looked over at me, searching my face to see if I meant what I’d said. I did, even if I did still find it unsettling.

“Tate had a real problem with it when I started,” she said with a shrug. “Then we watched the *Addams Family*, and he loved it. I guess it made a whole lot of sense to him after that and he thought it was cool too.”

“How old was he?” I asked.

She laughed. “Seven. That was the first year he got to go deer huntin’ with my dad and my brother. He was so proud when he came home with his first buck. My dad wanted to get it taxidermied but not Tate. He near had a full-blown fit and wanted to feed the beetles and have me carve it for him.”

“Is that the skull up on his wall in his room, there?” I asked.

She nodded and smiled. It was a little wan.

“I don’t know what I would do without that boy. He’s been my biggest cheerleader in just about everything I do since he could talk. Believin’ in me when no one else on this planet thought I could do it.”

I gave a nod and said, “Well, after what I saw out of you yesterday, I believe you’re the kind of woman that’s not to be underestimated.”

She finished taking another bite of her sandwich and chewed thoughtfully before saying, “Thanks.”

I gave a nod and opened up my phone and asked, “What’re you on? Marketplace? Craigslist?”

“Just Google for now,” she said.

I nodded and opened up my phone to look with her.

“We don’t find nothin’ today, it’s no big deal,” I said.

She snorted. “Until somethin’ happens and J.P. changes his mind.”

I smiled to myself and said, “He won’t.”

“You sound awful sure of yourself, there, buddy,” she said, and I laughed a little.

“I am.”

She tried to suppress her smile, but I caught it.

I do believe she was loosening up around me.

We struck out on findin’ a truck today, but we did go look at at least one. It was too rusted out and wasn’t what she was lookin’ for anyhow, so we went on back to the house so she could cook.

The front door was giving the boys fits and still wasn’t done, but that was alright. Ain’t none of us have nothin’ but time for this.

When we did get back, Alina and Corliss were here, Cor’s car parked out front, the girls on the covered front porch laughing about something.

“Oh, hey, haven’t seen Alina in a while,” Jessie said when she spotted the redhead.

“You even meet Cor yet?” I asked.

“That Hex’s new girl?” she asked.

“That she is. Nice girl, a schoolteacher.”

“Oh, nice,” she said. “I volunteered at that cookout and ride y’all had around Christmas, and I saw her there, but I never got introduced.”

I rolled to a stop near the front of the house and asked, “You wanna get out here?”

“Nah, I got these few things to bring in that need to go to the kitchen,” she said, and I gave a nod and rolled on through to put the truck back in the shop.

When we got out the truck, Alina popped out the back door with Corliss right on her heels.

“Jessie, hi!” Alina called, waving. Jessie smiled and waved back.

“Hey, what’re you doin’ out this way?” I asked them.

“Oh, you know – it’s not a party until the girls arrive,” Alina said breezily and Jessie laughed.

“I know that’s right,” she responded.

“Jess, this is Cor, Cor meet Jess. She’s Cypress’ sister.”

“Nice to meet you,” Corliss declared and held out her hand.

“You too,” Jessie said and took it, giving it a firm shake.

“I’ll leave you ladies to it,” I said and Jess gave me a nod.

“Thanks for the help.”

“You bet.”

I left the girls chatting and trailing in behind me, feeling a little like an asshole for not carrying the groceries in, but they’d divvied them up between ‘em and I didn’t want to interrupt their talkin’.

Inside the house, some of the boys were gettin’ rowdy over a video game and Hex threw me some chin to come on over and talk to him.

“Feel like takin’ a ride with me and checkin’ still number one?” he asked.

“Ain’t no rest for the wicked,” I told him. “Hell yeah, let’s go.”

He nodded, and I asked, “Tate home?”

“Yeah, he’s in his room. I think he’s worried his mamma’s fixin’ to kick his ass.”

I raised an eyebrow at that and asked, “Aw yeah, and why’s that?”

“Got himself after-school detention for scrappin’ in the hallway today,” he said.

I frowned.

“One of them Bayou Brethren’s boys picked a fight, and he finished it,” Hex said, grinnin’.

“Jesus Fuck, ain’t they got any code or morals?” I demanded.

“Fuck nah. Why you think we’re beefin’ to begin with?” La Croix grumbled.

I swore softly. “Well, you wanna head out now or we got a few minutes?” I asked.

Hex eyed me and said, “We got a few.”

I nodded and waited to see how this was gonna unfold.

I mean, shit – wasn’t it enough that this shit spilled into the kid’s home but school too?

Damn.

CHAPTER SEVEN





Jessie-Lou...

“Mom, can I talk to you?” Tate’s voice was nearly drowned out by a loud cheer and laughter from the living room and I turned from where I was at the sink, peeling onions to get to choppin’ ‘em for my holy trinity of Cajun cookin’.

“Yeah, what’s goin’ on, Bub?”

“Please don’t be mad,” he said, and I set things down and dusted off my hands on the front of my cookin’ apron.

“Before I open this,” I said, thinkin’ before I lit off in his ass about whatever it was. “I want you to tell me what happened.” I took the envelope he’d held out to me.

He swallowed hard and said, “I got in a fight.”

“Okay, who hit first?” I asked.

He heaved a big sigh and said, “I did.”

“Ah-huh.” I heaved a big sigh of my own and he waited, cringing.

Finally, he asked me, “You’re not gonna yell?”

I wanted to, boy howdy did I want to – but I’d lost my cool last night and he didn’t need more of that.

“I might yet, hold on.”

I read over the letter from the school, tellin’ me I’d need to pick him up an hour after school ended the rest of the week, that he’d be missing the bus to serve his in-school detention.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and let out a breath.

“An’ just how am I supposed to do that with no car?” I muttered. I lit off in a string of cursing in Cajun French and looked at my boy.

“What made you lose your cool?” I asked and most of the house had fallen quiet, watchin’ our interaction. I didn’t much

like bein' the center of attention like that, and Tater sure didn't either as he squirmed in front of me.

"It was that kid Tommy," he finally confessed. "He had a bunch a shit—" I raised my chin and he flushed and said, "Sorry, stuff, to say about our door gettin' kicked in last night and me hidin' like a – sorry again, Mamma but I'm just tellin' you what he said. He said hidin' like a pussy to let my mommy fight for me, so I popped him right in his mouth."

The men around us put up a cheer, and I hollered, "Alright, now! That's enough! Knock it off!"

"An' so you hit him in front of the teacher?" I demanded.

"Yeah." He hung his head.

"I say goddamn, boy, you gotta be smarter den dat!"

He flinched and looked about ready to cry. I sighed and told him exactly what I thought.

"You had every right to pop that little cocksucker in the mouth but you need to *wait* an' do it where you ain't get caught! Then he runs and tattles, *he's* the snitch!"

I was surprised to see Cor, a teacher, nodding her head, and thought to myself, *well, alright. She ain't bad. She passed the vibe check...*

"I don't know how I'm gonna make the rest of this week happen," I said, huffing a sigh. "I gotta work, and—"

"Relax!" J.P. called. "We'll figure it out, we always do," he said and I couldn't help but throw up my hands.

"No, *I* figure it out, J.P.! An' right now, this is a little beyond me!"

"I'll get you to work," Collier said from where he sat at the dining room table. "I assume Cy is on whatever list there is to get Tate from the school?"

"Yeah," Tate piped up when I just stared at Collier wordlessly.

"Alright then, we all here... can we agree that we look out for our brother, that he gets his ass to his nephew's school on

time every day to pick him up and bring him home the rest o' the week?"

The guys all looked from one to the other and nodded. "I'd say you just took us to church on this Col, and it's a good call." Lenny rapped his knuckles against the coffee table in the living room and I sighed.

"See, it's all good, Honey. Just breathe."

I nodded and turned back to the onions I was working with, to get 'em peeled.

"So... we cool?" Tate asked.

"Your homework done?" I asked.

"All except my reading," he said.

"Well get that done and we'll be cool," I told him.

"Yes, Mamma—" and that's when Corliss jumped in and asked him what his reading was.

They started talkin' but it was about school, so I let it slide for now, an' after a minute, I realized she was helping so I said no more.

"We're goin' out to check one o' the stills," Hex murmured to Cor a moment later, stopping to bend and give her a kiss. She nodded and he and Collier went out the back while Chainsaw cursed over by the front door, shakin' a hand, and suckin' a knuckle while Axe laughed at him.

I exhaled. The sheer amount of people and the cacophony of sound that came with the rowdy bikers living it up in the living room and their video games was getting to be a lot. Alina came over and leaned back against the counter, putting her hand over mine where I held the kitchen knife as I sliced through onions.

"You okay?" she asked, and I sniffed.

"Yeah, I'm cuttin' onions."

She laughed and asked, "I get that's why you're cryin' *now* but I mean, with everything. You alright?"

I nodded. “Yeah, ain’t nothin’ out here. Family’s had wars with poachers and other fishermen before.”

She took her hand away and said, “Yeah, but last night was a little different.”

I nodded and then shook my head. “Yeah, but no, at the same time. Out here in the country, it’s just a different way of life, is all.”

She nodded but still looked worried and I could appreciate that.

“I’m fine,” I told her. “Just worried about Tate. Always knew this day would come, eventually. God forbid our parents ever find out.”

“They won’t. Tate ain’t stupid and neither are we,” John-Paul said from behind me, making me jump. He opened up the fridge and got out a beer.

“Yeah, but the kid he popped in the mouth knows and that means it’s on the wind and you know these parts.”

“Shit, I didn’t think of that,” he said, pulling the tab on the can.

“They find out, they find out. Ain’t worth borrowin’ trouble that ain’t happened yet.”

“True dat,” he said, taking a drink and wandering off back into the living room.

“Anything I can do to help?” Alina asked.

“You know how to make a roux?” I asked.

“Ah... I either under do it or overdo it. I can’t seem to perfect it.”

I smiled. “Well, then, you gonna learn. Get that butter over there to meltin’.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said with a grin just as Tate wandered off back to his room.

“Oh, I’ve got to learn this,” Cor said, and she went to stand between me and Alina.

“More the merrier,” I said. “But you in the kitchen, you gonna work,” I declared a little louder and chased Bennie right on outta here where he was closing the fridge from grabbing a beer of his own.

CHAPTER EIGHT





Eollier...

I was draggin' ass by the time we got done with the still and makin' sure everything was doin' what it was supposed to be doin'. After, I had to make some decisions on whether it was worth it to have Hex run my ass past a store to pick up some fresh clothes or whether I should ride all the way back into the city to throw some of my shit into a bag.

I opted for the former and ran into a big box store to grab some fresh jeans, a pack of socks, a pack of boxers and a pack of tee shirts. I was good for the whole damn week and then some for a little under a hundred bucks. That shit worked for me.

I mean, it wasn't anything special, literally just a six-pack of black, gray, and maybe a blue tee shirt in there, a pack of six boxer briefs, and a ten pack of socks, but that was more than enough for me. I even grabbed a pair of sweatpants on clearance to serve as something to sleep in.

Hell, it was probably more than all the shit I had put together back at home. I was something of a minimalist like that. The jeans I had on were definitely still serviceable, but the tee I had on was old and had holes. Anybody else would probably call it iffy but to me it was still good.

By the time Hex and I pulled back up at the house, there was a new front door but Cor's car was gone. So was La Croix, Saint and I couldn't tell who else's bike, but it had to be somebody's because the pres wasn't supposed to go anywhere without at least a two-man wrecking crew with him.

"Looks like the boys finally got things squared away," Hex said, and I nodded.

"Reinforced the shit out of the frame?" I asked.

"Fuck yeah. Good luck kickin' that shit in without hurtin' yourself."

“Should do the back door next,” I said. He looked over at me and nodded.

“That’s tomorrow’s project.”

I huffed a laugh.

“You laugh now, motherfucker, but you’re the one here so you’re the one doin’ it.”

I felt my face fall, and it was his turn to laugh.

“Your unemployed ass is comin’ to help, right?” I asked, grinning.

“Oh, yeah.” He nodded.

“Man, I’m fuckin’ starving,” I muttered, and he nodded.

“Me, too.”

We went inside the house to a round of cheers from the rest of the boys and a salute with fresh beers. I asked, “Where the fuck is mine?”

There was some laughter and Chainsaw handed me his that he’d just cracked, coming in from the kitchen.

“Smells fuckin’ good in here,” I said.

Axe lifted his chin and said, “Pot on the stove in the kitchen, brother.”

“Good deal.”

I wondered where Jessie-Lou was, but she had to be in her room. I dropped onto one end of the couch, stuffing my face with her killer-ass gumbo, watching the boys play through rounds of some first-person shooter.

“You stayin’ here tonight?” Cy asked.

“Yup, surfing on your couch the rest of the damn week or until your sister gets a vehicle, whichever comes first.”

He gave a nod and said, “K, ‘cause I’ll be fucked if she’s drivin’ my truck.”

I shook my head, and he laughed. “She wouldn’t drive it anyway. She hates that thing. It’s a temperamental beast just

like you,” I told him.

He laughed and said, “You noticed that, huh?”

“Hard not to,” I said.

I finished my food, joking and cuttin’ up with the guys and finally got up and said, “Any of you assholes need to take a piss, do it outside. I’m takin’ a shower.”

Nobody said anything as I took up my bags of clothes I’d just bought and took my ass down the hall and into the bathroom.

I dumped my shit in front of the door and got the shower started. I leaned on the counter, looking into the mirror above the sink, and, dude... I knew I looked about as wrecked as I felt. I needed some fuckin’ sleep.

I was glad Tate had himself handled with getting onto the bus in the morning but I wondered what time Jessie-Lou had to get in to work, doing whatever she did. I think she said she worked at some kind of a butcher.

I didn’t know where or what time, so I would have to ask her after I got out of the shower. I got in under the hot shower spray and told my own damn self the truth. I didn’t really need to ask – I just wanted to see her and talk to her some more.

She was beautiful, for one. Strong featured and elegant all at once. Sharp in personality and soft with her curves. She was an intriguing dichotomy, and I was all for it and still kicking myself in the back of my mind for not seeing what was right in front of me much sooner.

I admit I spent a long time under that hot shower spray. It felt good, nice and warm, my muscles loosening up. I shut off the water after I was sufficiently clean and stepped out, snatching a towel off the bar, and ran it over my hair to keep it from dripping on me.

I dried off and pulled on a pair of boxers out of the pack. I tore the tags off the sweatpants and peeled the size sticker off the leg, tossing them back in the bag it all came in. Finally, I pulled on a pair of the thick crew socks I’d bought.

I stopped before opening the bathroom door and realized the noise from the living room had stopped. When I went out, it was just Cy and Axe still talking. Everyone else had left.

I dropped my shit at the end of the couch and Cy looked up.

“Your sister still up?” I asked.

“Fuck if I know, why?”

“Need to know what time I need to get my ass up.”

“I don’t keep track of that shit. Go ask her,” he said with a shrug.

Axe was laughing. “You’re such a dick,” he said, and all Cy did was shrug. I was grinning, I couldn’t help myself.

I went back up the hall and stopped outside Jessie’s closed door. The light was on underneath, so I knocked.

I heard her lilting voice but I couldn’t make out what she said, so I figured it was safe to assume it was something like “come in.”

“Oh, hey,” she said, lowering her book into her lap. She was on one side of her queen-sized bed, propped up and sitting with a pile of pillows behind her. She was beautiful with her hair down like that, fanning out around her face and over her shoulders.

Stunning, actually.

She stared at me brown eyes, wide and lookin’ like – I don’t know what. Almost like a deer in the headlights, I’d say.

“You alright?” I asked.

She fumbled her bookmark out of the back of her book without taking her eyes off of me and shoved it unceremoniously in her place.

“Fine! I’m fine,” she said a little quickly.

I took a couple steps into her room and crawled up onto the unoccupied side of her bed, dragging a pillow under me and clutching it comfortably under my chest to prop me up.

“What time I need to be up tomorrow?” I asked.

She folded her hands on top of her book in her lap, so prim and proper, and I realized that it was what she did when she was nervous.

“I don’t have to be at work until ten, so like nine or nine thirty. It ain’t but fifteen minutes away.”

“Ten?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Ten to four. It’s only a part-time thing in the off season like it is.”

“Oh, well shit. Not gonna lie, I’m glad to hear that.”

She smiled. “You look tired.”

I nodded and laid my head down, looking over at her. We were quiet for a time and it was nice. I was struggling not to doze off. To keep myself from doing it, I reached over and took her book. She let me pluck it from her lap and I opened it up.

I read out loud...

I sat up, panting and sweating from the most terrible dreams. Dreams of falling, down, down, and down. Of fire and grotesque creatures, twisted and hateful. Of fighting, endlessly fighting, and the sense that I was fightin’ for something a lot more ‘n just this war. Through it all I was haunted, haunted by a pair of solemn green eyes spitting flecks of golden sparks.

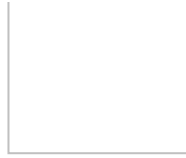
I clutched the thin blanket around my shoulders and sat up. It was cold, my breath fogging the air and little eddies of steam a risin’ up from my exposed skin. I held my hand in front of my face and blinked.

I stood up, too fast I think, because the next thing I knew, something cold and hard was pressed against my face.

“Easy there, Captain! We gotcha now...”

CHAPTER NINE





Jessie-Lou...

His voice was soothing, melodic, and gentle with just a hidden depth and just a bit of husky rasp that had me sinking into it like a place of comfort. Hell, I could listen to this man read the contacts outta my phone or a grocery list or something.

Still, something about him reading my book to me was, well, *something*. He wasn't trying to make fun of me or making me feel dumb for reading what I liked. He simply picked up my book and read to me and it was... sweet... soothing. I liked it.

I simply settled back in my seat, closed my eyes and listened. Within a few moments, I think I slept, or he stopped. I was so comfortable in that state, just before drifting off, I didn't notice that he'd stopped.

It was tranquil and relaxing, so of course, my brother had to ruin it like any doting sibling.

"Hey, what're you two doing?" J.P.'s voice demanded and Collier jumped beside me.

"Ah, I just started reading and I think we both dozed off," he said. He marked the page he left off on and gave me a wink that my brother couldn't see, handing me my book and stiffly getting to his hands and knees to crawl backward off the bed.

"Weird, but whatever," J.P. declared. I rolled my eyes and set my book aside.

"I'll see you in the morning," Collier said, and I nodded. He went out and into the living room.

"You crushing on him?" my brother demanded with a devilish grin. I pulled a pillow out from behind my back and threw it at his big dumb head. He caught it, laughing at me, and threw it back before walking out the door and going across into his room and shutting the door.

I sighed. Setting my book aside, I clicked off my bedside lamp to sleep.



I GOT up with my alarm the next morning to make sure Tate got up and ready for school, quietly passing the couch and going into the kitchen to make some breakfast for the boys and coffee. It bothered me how my eyes wanted to linger on Collier's well-muscled back and I felt damn foolish when my insides turned to liquid gold at the sight of the light freckles spattering his skin along the tops of his shoulders, fading as they got down past his shoulder blades.

I didn't know what it was about that, but good Lord, did it rev my engine and I needed to *stop*.

It was a damp and foggy morning out there and as cold as a cucumber, fresh out the icebox. I stared out into the open space and through the windows on the other side of my workbench and leaned back in my seat going limp with defeat at the sight of my truck out there now.

I needed to stop by the school before work to have a talk with the principal over Tater's little tiff the day before. The letter he'd brought home had said they'd tried to call me, but it was before I'd gotten my phone fixed. I was sure I was going to go on up in there, lookin' like the bad mom everyone liked to claim I was from bein' so young.

The truth was I tried my best, but my best just weren't never good enough, and that always frustrated me and made me so damn sad.

I sure as hell wasn't ready to have Tate when I did. I didn't want him at first. Didn't want to carry him but I had to. My folks didn't believe in abortion and they were so damn mad, they wanted me to be punished. And I was, right up until he was out and the doctors set him in my arms. I took one look at his little face and I knew...

It weren't his fault. Not that he'd been conceived, not that he'd been born, and I'd be damned if I'd treat him like it was.

I sure as hell didn't deserve it and he didn't either. The second I looked at him, I decided I would be the best damn mamma that boy could ask for and I tried like hell to do just that.

I just hoped it were enough.

I got the coffee pot to brewin' and was gettin' water in a measuring cup to make up some oatmeal when an arm reached around my shoulders and lips touched the side of my head.

"Mornin', Bubba," I said and a sleep-gruff voice said, "Mornin'," but it wasn't Tate's.

I startled slightly and turned. Collier gave me a little squeeze and was gone from me with this little smirk before I could register what just happened.

"What in the hell?" I murmured as I heard the bathroom door shut and my kid let out an exasperated noise in his doorway. I smirked, and he came around the corner.

"Beat you to it, huh?" I asked as he stood there doin' a little dance like he had ants in his pants.

"I'm goin' outside," he said, and I rolled my eyes.

"Not right by the back door!" I called, and he waved me off and bounced down the back steps just as the bathroom door reopened.

Collier came around into the kitchen again and pulled out a chair, dropping into it. I glanced over and demanded, "An' what was that about?"

He gave a shrug, lookin' all innocent, and said, "What was what about?"

"Uh-huh." I was about to say more but the back door opened and my kid came back in from his wee.

I asked him in Cajun French if he wanted breakfast, to keep him up with the language. He tried to say in English, "Yeah, you making oatmeal?"

I chastised him lightly, and he grinned sheepishly and answered me back in our local dialect. I smiled at him and nodded approvingly.

Meanwhile, Collier had helped himself to the coffee and had gone to sit down at the table.

“What about you?” I asked him. “Breakfast?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

I nodded and fixed up a big pot of oatmeal, knowin’ it was J.P.’s favorite too, as far as a quick breakfast went, even though he preferred protein. Still, on a cold damp day like this, oatmeal was a good stick-to-your-ribs warm breakfast.

We ate, Tate got himself off to school, and J.P. wandered out to drop into a seat to be served. I set a bowl in front of him and a cup of coffee and did the dishes from the rest of us while he and Collier chatted.

“What’re your big plans for the day?” Collier asked him.

“Gotta get back out on the boat,” J.P. muttered.

“Daddy been gettin’ up your ass?” I asked.

“Mm-hm. Can’t wait for gator season an’ for us to get this whole Moonshine distillery thing goin’ so I can get off the open water. I don’t like it out there.”

“I feel that, brother.”

“What about you?” he asked.

Collier grunted. “You know me. I pick up what I can where I can and I do alright.”

J.P. nodded.

“You gonna be able to pick up Tate from school or should I figure something else out?”

“Aw, hell,” J.P. muttered. I sighed and ditched the silverware into the drainboard with a clatter.

“Now why you agree to pick up your nephew when you know you couldn’t do it?” I demanded, frustrated at being ditched and left to figure it out on my own all over again.

J.P. grumbled something about my bitching in Cajun French and I lit off in his ass right back. He got up, chair scooting across the kitchen floor, hands balled into fists at his

sides as he yelled back. I threw up my hands and went down the hall to my bedroom to get out of my robe and slippers and into some clothes for the day.

I should have known I wasn't actually gonna get any help, and that I just needed to figure it out on my own in the first place. Damn it to hell.

I knew better than to call my mamma, with the lectures and the bullshit about responsibility when I kept the bills in this house paid, did all the cookin' and the cleanin' and the fixin' and the gardening and the canning and everything else you could think of.

Granted, the place had been left to both me an' John-Paul by our granddaddy, but it was mine before his. I was the one that was always here takin' care of the damn place.

A light knock fell at my door as I pulled on my vented Cabela tan shirt over my tank top and buttoned it up.

I turned to look at Collier irritated and said, "Y' shoulda known your plan wouldn't work – he ain't never here when it counts. Always out there workin', which I can't fault a man for that, but the rest of the time? Always out there runnin' around with you lot, and can't get him to do a goddamn thing around here."

"I get it," Collier said coolly, leaning a shoulder against the doorjamb and crossing his arms over his chest. He'd gotten dressed too, and I liked the way his fresh black tee hugged his chest and shoulders a little too much.

"The club's a big commitment," he said. "On top of doin' what a man's gotta do to put food on the table."

I snorted. "He don't even do much of that," I said. "Hell, I do more huntin' than him!"

He nodded and looked thoughtful a minute.

"You need a man you can rely on," he said, and I shook my head. "I mean I get it, he's my brother, not my man – but he likes to walk around here with his chest puffed out, claimin' to be the man o' the house when he ain't never here or do nothing and it pisses me off!"

He had the nerve to smirk but what he said doused the fire of my rising anger. “He’s still a young buck and ain’t got his priorities straight.”

“Ain’t that the fuckin’ truth?” I sighed and dropped onto the end of my bed to put my boots on. He came over and sat down next to me.

“You ain’t ever had a man who wanted to, have you?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“What about Tate’s daddy?” I stiffened and just pursed my lips and shook my head.

“He ain’t have nothin’ to do with him past the age of like three,” I said. Collier cocked his head as I told him, “No child support, nothin’. I don’t want or need his help. He’s all up into drugs and all that.”

“You been doin’ really great with him,” he said and I looked at him. “Now I mean that.” He sighed. “You gotta go to the school anyway today, how hard is it we go in and you put me on the books as an emergency contact or whatever? Get it so I can pick him up the rest of this week? I’m gonna be around anyhow.”

“You’d do that?” I asked, frowning.

“Hell yeah,” he said. “I’m here anyway and as much as you’re annoyed with your brother and his always bein’ around the club, I don’t think you realize the club’s family. We’re supposed to be here for you as much as he is. So let me do that. Let me help.”

I thought about it and said warily, “Sounds too good to be true an’ I ain’t got much reason to be the trustin’ sort.”

“Hey, I get that,” he said, spreading his hands. “But I want to, so I will. Let me do it and take some of the load off you.”

I nodded and said, “Alright, then.”

He beamed a little. “Okay.”

I tried to calm myself down, knowing at least today was taken care of – maybe. We would have to see. I couldn't tell you the number of times a man told me he would do something then conveniently “forgot” the moment something shinier came along.

We went to the school and I got things squared away in the office. I told the principal I wasn't mad at my son for poppin' his bully in the mouth and that they needed to keep that kid away from my kid. I knew they wouldn't do anything. They never did nothin' to protect me when I went to that school and Macy Robinette wouldn't leave my ass alone. I could see nothin' about that pattern had changed in all these years.

Next, Collier dropped me off at my job where I pulled off the helmet I'd worn and handed it over. He took it and said “Go on an' have a good one. I'll come by and pick you up after I get Tate home from school.”

I nodded and said, “What you gon' do the rest of today?”

“Don't you worry about me, none. I'll find some shit to get into – but hey,” he called when I looked away and I looked back. He met my eyes with those ghost blue eyes of his and promised me, “I'll be where I'm supposed to be when I'm supposed to be there for you an' for Tate today and the rest of the week.”

I nodded. I wanted to believe him, believe me I did, but I would just have to wait and see what happened there.

“Okay,” was all I said. I didn't know what else to say. I mean, anything else might start a fight and I really didn't want to fight with him for some reason.

“Okay.” He reached out and gave my hand a careful squeeze and I jerked it out of his grasp on reflex.

I did the only thing I could do and walked away into the family owned, big-and-small-game butcher shop to start my day.

CHAPTER TEN





Collier...

I went into the city to the clubhouse. I was making good money with the city parks department but I was on vacation this week for a variety of reasons. One, I had enough vacation time built up that I had to use it or lose it. Two, Hex and the club needed my help in getting this ‘shine operation up and running as next to Hex, I was the only one with any experience doin’ it.

I had the rest of this week and halfway into next week free and we had two more stills to get going out there to maximize our chances of getting something made to completion that was decent.

The stills we were runnin’ weren’t all that big. Probably get five or six gallons of shine out of each of ‘em, if we were lucky. That was by design, though.

One of the things that was a fun part of Moonshining history was that it was the birth of stock car racing. Fellas back in the day would soup their engines up to high heaven and strip the inside of the car down to nothin’ to cut weight. It gave rise to some of the fastest cars on the road meant to outrun the law if they caught on to what you were doin’. We didn’t have that out here, but what we did have was the bikes. We could put the shine in smaller batches into the saddlebags of our bikes and make a pretty fast getaway if need be. That was just the way it had to be for right now as we perfected our recipes.

What we were doin’ was still highly illegal, and any an’ all money above and beyond our meager cuts that we come down on was goin’ into the new operation. It’d be awhile until we reached phase two of this operation and boy howdy – were we playin’ with fire, startin’ this shit up in the middle of a goddamn turf war that was heatin’ up but good. Hell, that was just how things were, though. We could handle it, but to say

we were a bit stretched thin with all the goings on was a fuckin' understatement.

I went to the house I was rentin' a cheap-ass room out of to grab my toiletry kit since I was going to be spending some days out at Cy's. I could put off brushing my teeth for a night or two but that was about my fuckin' limit on how gross I wanted to get. I took it out to the bike and locked it into one of my saddlebags after availing myself of its uses and went to the clubhouse next.

La Croix was around and I filled him in on what was happening on the home front with Jessie-Lou and Tate. He listened and said, "Turn off your phone," pulling his out and doing the same.

He told me what was gonna be covered in church, asked my thoughts, took my vote by proxy, and absolved me of havin' to be around for the next one so I could take care of Jessie-Lou and her kid.

"Thank you kindly, boss. I sure do appreciate it," I told him and got up.

"Leavin' already?" he asked. I turned on my phone and looked at the time.

"I maybe got some time for some lunch, but then yeah. I gotta pick up Tate, get him home and then see about pickin' up Jessie."

"You got a thing for Cypress' sister, don't 'cha?" he asked.

I didn't lie to him. La Croix wasn't someone you did that to.

"I do believe I'd like to get to know her some, yeah," I said.

"Sit down," he said and kicked the seat next to him.

I sat my ass down.

He ordered us up some food from a shack down the block and once that was done, leaned back and said, "I don't want this leadin' to fights inside this club, so if you go down this route you better be fuckin' serious. You feel me?"

I nodded and said, “I ain’t lookin’ to disrespect Cy’s sister like that. I know how it goes, man. It ain’t like that. I genuinely would like to get to know her. I hope she’ll let me.”

He searched my face with his unnerving blacked-out eyes and finally gave a nod.

“You discuss it with Cy?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I ain’t gonna do that. Jessie-Lou is her own person and capable of making her own decisions. Cy doesn’t get to say what she does and does not do, and that’d just torpedo anything before it could get started if she found out.”

His eyes narrowed, and it looked like he was doing some internal calculations.

“Y’all end up fighting about it, then you squash it right then and there. No lingering bullshit or I’ll deal with you both.”

I nodded. “I hear you P. Loud and clear.”

“Alright, last I’m gonna say on it for now.”

I nodded.

“Fair, that’s fair.”

We had lunch, I said my goodbyes, and then I hit the road to head to Tate’s school for the second time today. I was sittin’ out front when he came out the doors.

“How’d it go?” I asked, and he huffed a sigh.

“Boring,” he declared.

I handed him a helmet and said, “C’mon, I gotta take you home so I can pick up your mom.”

He grinned. “What, this thing can’t carry three?”

I laughed and shook my head. “No it cannot.”

I took him home and got him started on his homework at the kitchen table before I took off to go get his mom.

She was waiting for me, purse slung across her chest and lookin’ natural and as down to earth as they came. Just

somehin' about just how damn pretty that she was, with a makeup-free face and hair all wild as she pulled it down from its ponytail, I don't know, it just did it for me.

"Well, howdy," I called when I pulled up.

She called back, "Well, how do?"

It was misting and threatening to rain again and I was already cold and soaked from passing through a rain squall on the way back from the city.

"Ready for a hot shower, how about you?" I asked.

"Ready for a hot meal," she said, settling on the back of the bike with me.

I liked the way her arms went around me and how she held on.

"Well, alright then. Let's make us both happy," I said, and I pointed us back toward her place. When we went into the house, Tate was still at the table, strugglin' with whatever.

"I'm gonna hop into a hot shower and change into some dry clothes," I said. "If that's alright with you."

"Yeah, yeah," she said. "Go on, now. Just save me some hot water."

"You bet," I told her.

She hung up her purse and jacket by the back door and rolled up her sleeves as she went for the kitchen sink.

I left 'em to their conversation about what was for dinner while I headed on back with my stuff from the bike and my freshly bought clothes for the bathroom. I didn't think we was going anywhere for the rest of the night so I went with the sweats and a clean tee. Put some clean socks on my feet, and when I opened the bathroom door was hit with some delicious smells from the kitchen.

Gotta love a woman who can cook, I thought to myself as I rounded the corner just as Tate put all his homework back in his backpack for tomorrow.

“Can I play a video game?” he asked his mom, and she nodded from where she stirred something in a skillet at the stove.

“Sweet! Collier, you wanna play?” he asked me.

I gave a nod. “Sure. I can play a round or two.”

It was a pretty low-key evening and a nice one. Played games with Tate, had a good dinner, and jumped in towing Tate along with me to clean up and do the dishes before Jessie could.

“No way,” I told her. “You cooked, we clean. Go take your shower, honey, and *relax*.”

She gave Tate a look like she was impressed and I told him as soon as she went around the corner, “You know, you’re old enough to pitch in more around here, right?”

“Yeah,” he said kind of sheepishly and I gave him a look. He stopped and asked, “What?”

“Your mamma is stressed and pressed doing it all by herself. She’s a strong woman, but everyone has their breaking point an’ we don’t want to see her go through that kind of pain, do yah?”

He swallowed hard and said, “No...”

“You do your own laundry?” I asked.

“No.”

“You know how yet?”

“No.”

“Well, you’re gonna learn, alright?”

He nodded, and I smiled and said, “Atta boy.”

“I wash, you dry?” he asked.

“Sounds mighty fine to me,” I replied, and I took up a dish towel off the handle on the oven door.

He grinned at me and got the dishes going in the sink. We talked strategy for our next mission on the game we were playing while we worked.

He was a good kid, and I think he was just a little starved for some male attention and definitely needed a good example in that department. I loved Cy like a brother from another mother but where his nephew an' sister was concerned, he was layin' down on the job some. I could see Jessie-Lou just quietly pickin' up the slack. Not because she wanted to, but because she was expected to.

My momma had been the same way, and it took her to an early grave when I was seventeen. That left my papaw and memaw to pick up the slack and my papaw? He was an extraordinary man. A man ahead of his time, that was for sure. He treated my memaw like a queen, and I never forgot it. Taught me quick that a real man looked after his family, and he always made a good example and had learned me good. Ain't never steered me wrong.

I always wanted to be that for a kid, mine or not, it didn't matter. Some lessons were just meant to be passed on.

We finished up the dishes pretty quick and had everything put away. I set up the coffee pot for the next morning so it'd be one last thing Jessie-Lou had to do, and by the time I was done with that, her hair dryer had started up down the hall, steam billowing out from the bathroom in the light of the open doorway.

"Alright, Tate! That's enough!" she called out midway through drying her hair. Tate looked like he was going to do the typical thing and call for five more minutes, but he caught my look and raised eyebrow, and called out, "K, Mamma!" instead.

"It was good playin' with you," I said. "Tomorrow night, same time?"

He grinned.

"Yeah!" he said, and I gave a nod.

He went on into his room after giving his mamma a hug and I stretched out on the couch to catch up on things on my phone.

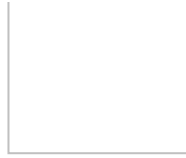
A minute later, the dryer cut, Jessie sighed, and the light from the bathroom switched out. She slipped out, looked down the hall at me, and wordlessly, went into her room. Her bedside lamp clicked on and I waited a while so she could get settled before I went on down.

I'd liked our little chat the night before and I wanted some more of that.

Hell, I wanted more than that, but for now, just the closeness and conversation would do.

CHAPTER ELEVEN





*J*essie-Lou...

I sat up in bed and used my hand cream to treat my chapped hands from working in the freezer and washing them up so much in a day working at the butcher. I had a sack full of rabbit heads I'd forgotten to bring home to have my beetles clean off for me. It was rabbit trapping and hunting season and nobody had the use for the heads, which meant more for me to carve up and lay with semi-precious stones to put up on my online shop.

I stared off into space and worked the lotion into my sore hands and relaxed some, letting my mind drift to the night before and the play of golden light from my bedside lamp over the pale skin of Collier's shoulders and back, and that damn smattering of freckles like the stars in the sky that painted his skin.

I didn't know why I found that so hot. That and the play of his absolutely shredded muscles beneath that skin. I liked 'em lean, boy... and he was the right kind of lean.

A knock fell on my doorframe and I jumped, startling right out of my impure thoughts.

"Hey, you alright?" he asked.

"Huh? Yeah! Yeah, I'm good. Just daydreaming, I guess."

"Yeah?" he asked, stretching out and sliding along the top of my covers, lying on his stomach and capturing the pillow as he had the night before. I'd never been so jealous of a lump of feathers in my life, I'll tell you what.

"Yeah," I said with a nervous laugh, knowing I'd painted myself into a corner and that the question was coming and by God, I didn't have a good answer on deck and ready to go...

"About what?" he asked.

...and there it was.

Shit.

“Aw, nothin’,” I said. I couldn’t stop the blush if I wanted to, bringing my book off the end table and into my lap in hopes that he would make a grab for it again.

It was a peculiar thing, this man with his Moonshine ways and strange lullaby voice. I liked it... I think I liked him, but I didn’t think I could trust him.

Ain’t no one ever picked me in all my years, short as they were at twenty-eight, for anything good. I’d started to believe I wasn’t destined for anything right. The way things were supposed to be.

Collier almost had me fooled. Almost had me wanting to believe...

He stared me in the eyes and I was transfixed, unable to look away if I wanted to.

“You sure about that?” he asked and all I could do was swallow hard and stare back into those icy blue eyes that searched mine out. I couldn’t find my voice. I couldn’t lie to him. I didn’t want to...

“It’s alright, honey, you ain’t gotta tell me your secrets,” he murmured, and his voice had taken on that same soothing quality as last night when he’d read my book to me.

Without thinking, I nodded, and he smiled some.

“Someday, I’d like to know them,” he said and my mind, it was like it glitched on me and I’d lost myself in his eyes and had forgotten what we’d been talking about.

“Know what?” I asked.

“All your secrets,” he murmured. He reared up, adjusting himself and the way it jostled the bed snapped me out of whatever kind of spell he’d had me under.

I choked on a laugh and said, “I don’t have any secrets.” I managed to look away, down into my lap at my hands, stiffly folded on top of my book.

“Oh, now we both know that’s a lie,” he said, his voice changing to lighter in tone, teasing in its chiding.

I frowned slightly and when I looked at him, my anger at being questioned disappeared. It was unnerving, how he saw right through me. How he saw more than anyone else.

“Trust me when I tell you, ain’t none of what I’m holding inside worth knowing,” I said, and just letting that little bit off my chest felt... nice.

He smiled, and it held an edge of something undefinable to me and he nodded once, slipping my book out from under my hands and opening it at the beginning, ignoring the bookmark in its pages.

“Now we gonna do this, we gonna do it right,” he said. “I think I’d quite like to start at the beginning.”

He cleared his throat and started...

“Agony lanced through me at even intervals. Rhythmic, plodding, grating fiery fucking agony as broken bones ground against each other and I watched as the red, red, blood pattered against the freshly fallen snow.

I stared at it dripping off of my limp fingertips as my arm swung with the jostling steps of the horse whose neck I hung over. I tried and failed to pull in a full lungful of frozen Virginia winter air to no avail.

I struggled to breathe and to push myself up and failed at both completely miserably.

“Hang on now, sir. We almost got you there. Just a few more steps now,” Tobias – fucked if I could remember his last name – but he was a man out of Tennessee, a good one. One of my men, and he was leading the mount I was draped over along the snow-lined edge of a muddy tract. I didn’t understand that... how he could be leading me. I should have been leading, I was their leader... but something – I tensed as another haze of pain washed through me and my poor broken mind tried to scramble at the slick surface of my pool of memory that’d suddenly become as hard as glass.

What’d happened to me?

I was only vaguely aware of the screaming, and further off, the crack of rifle fire and the sound of round shot buzzing through the air with the reverberation of angry bees.

The war was raging on out there – but what had happened to me and my men?”

I smiled some and settled back, closing my eyes to listen to him read the prologue of my book and the part of Cain Golden, a supernatural civil war soldier on the front lines of a story that was a sort of parallel history to what was real life.

It was nice, and he stopped at the end of the small chapter. When he turned the page, he said, “Oh, hey now... looks like it’s your turn.”

I opened my eyes and smiled, and said softly, “Maybe tomorrow night. I find myself more ‘n a little sleepy.”

He nodded and moved the bookmark to the front at the first chapter and asked me, “Alright with you if I stay in here?”

I thought about it and let the confession slip from my lips... “I think I’d like that. It’s, um, it’s been a long time since I’ve slept next to anyone but Tater.”

He nodded and his lovely eyes roved my face. He said with conviction, “That’s all it needs to be, you know. For now. Just sleep. I honestly can’t think of anything better to be honest, than sleeping with a beautiful woman in my arms.”

I snorted. “No need to lay it on so thick,” I said, and he shook his head, his expression dead serious.

“I ain’t laying anything on, and sure as hell if I was, I wouldn’t do it thick. You’re not that type of woman.”

“What type of woman?” I asked dryly, raising an eyebrow.

“One to suffer fools or fuck bois gladly,” he said without missing a beat.

I had to bark a laugh at that.

“No, no I am not,” I agreed.

He reached up carefully and touched the side of my face. I knew I lost my easy smile as, even though I was clothed and pretty ordinary at that, I felt nude and stripped bare all just with that one touch and the look in his eyes.

“I ain’t lying or laying anything on thick, Jessie-Lou. I think you’re beautiful.”

Well hell... what did you say to something like that?

“Thank you,” I said, my voice cracking and my mouth suddenly dry.

“Ain’t never have to thank me for telling the truth,” he said, and I was completely lost for words at that.

CHAPTER TWELVE





Eollier...

I handed her book back to her, and she set it aside on the bedside table. She didn't turn out the light, but I didn't want her to, not yet. Instead, I put the pillow I had myself propped up on up in front of me and beat it some into a comfortable position for my head and turned on my side to face her.

"Come on down here," I murmured, and she scooted down further under her blankets and lay down on her side, tucking her hands beneath her cheek like an angel. Wasn't lost on me that she was a bit stiff and her arms were in front of her chest, a bit defensive. Not for the first time, I wondered who had hurt her.

"You sure you're good with this?" I asked, smoothing a hand over the warmth of her tee-covered shoulder.

"If I wasn't, I would have told you to get out," she said, and I had to laugh at that because she was right. She wasn't afraid to speak her mind and tell a fella to get fucked. That was one of the reasons I liked her.

She searched my face from inches away and took her topmost hand out from under her cheek and reached out, hesitating.

"Go ahead," I told her and she took the permission and ran her fingers through my hair some, scraping it back for lack of a better term, out of my eyes.

"Yeah, I either need to cut it or soldier on until I can pull it back," I said wryly. She smiled, but she wasn't looking me in the eyes anymore.

"Don't cut it," she said softly. "I like it longer." Then she blushed as she realized what she'd just said.

"Duly noted," I murmured, and I inched closer. "I'm not a fan of the shears anyway. I think the last time I just buzzed it

off because it was cooler, then I burned my damn head so bad I wasn't about to do that again."

She laughed slightly and nodded, and I sucked in a breath. Her smile, when it was genuine like that, turned her whole face into something else, I'll tell you what.

Her fingertips trailed along my face and settled on the side of my neck and gooseflesh erupted all over me.

"Get under the covers if you like," she murmured. "I don't want you to be cold."

I did as she asked, wiggling and wriggling to get the blankets out from under me and slid in between the sheets with her. It was definitely warmer under here than out there and with all the motion, it put me in a better position to take her into my arms, which I did with a gentle, "C'mere."

She was a little reluctant at first, and I didn't make any sudden moves, just opened my arms and let her scoot closer. I wrapped them around her and buried my hand in the back of her silken hair, pressing her face into my chest and breathing her in. She smelled so good, like cypress and rainwater, her breath warm against my neck where she sighed out.

"That's a girl," I murmured as she relaxed. When I kissed her forehead, I swear she went boneless in my arms, the tension going right out of her. I would have to remember that about her, for future use.

"There you go," I murmured, and I held her close. She shuddered in my arms and sighed in something that sounded like contentment. In a few moments more, I think we were both just soaking up the comfort. I didn't have a clue who passed out first, her or me, but I didn't think it took long at all for either one of us.

We didn't even turn out the light.



THE ALARM from her phone the next morning was at least melodic with how it shattered my peace. She stirred in my

arms and I didn't think either of us had moved an inch in the night. She moaned and mock-sobbed against me and I reluctantly let her go so she could shut it off.

"Breakfast?" she murmured.

I smiled at her and said, "Sure. What can I do to help?"

"I don't know, yet. Let's see what we've got out there."

"Sounds good."

I grunted as I turned onto my back and stretched as she threw back a triangle of blankets and rose.

My morning wood twitched in my sweats when she reached up to take down her robe. The hem of her oversized tee she slept in rode up, giving me a glimpse of her perfectly rounded ass cheeks, peeking naughtily out from under the cover of her simple white-cotton panties and *damn* was that hot. Hotter than fucking lace and expensive sheer hose. Hotter than a garter or a teddy or whatever lingerie that you could think of... not that I would complain if she ever got to a point that she would wear those things for me. I'd like that, too. There was something about the simplicity of what she wore now. The fact that she could and would look good in anything... *Mm*.

She put on her robe and tied her belt, stopping in the bedroom doorway. Looking back, she asked, "You coming?"

"Yeah!" I said, "Right behind you, just uh, gimme a minute here."

She smirked back at me and said, "You know I have a fourteen-year-old kid and I've clearly had sex before because of it. I've seen erections before. I'm not that big of a prude."

I laughed some and nodded before shaking my head as her smirk grew into a grin. One that she bit her bottom lip to try and suppress.

"Keep doing that, it ain't fixin' to go down anytime soon," I told her.

"Would if we had more time before Tate got up," she remarked plainly before disappearing up the hall.

You little minx, I thought as I got out the bed and made it up right quick, noticing it was something she liked to do in the morning.

I made a pit stop in the bathroom on the way to the kitchen, which she'd hit up first, leaving the light on for me.

It was a bit chilly in the house, but not too bad. There was a small woodstove between the dining area and the living room and I asked her, "You want me to get a fire going? Knock the chill out?"

She stood up from where she'd bent to retrieve eggs out of the fridge and said, "Uh, yeah, if you don't mind makin' the coffee first so I can get some eggs and some bacon going."

"Ooo, sounds good, and you bet."

I made the coffee. She and I pretty synchronized moving around the kitchen, talking quietly about the day ahead as I went through the motions of loading the coffeemaker up to do its thing while she cracked and beat some eggs while the bacon got going in a pan.

"Okay, let me get this fire going," I said, and I went to do just that.

I hadn't realized how much I fuckin' wanted this. The domesticity. The peace of having a good woman to come home to and a family. How much I wanted what I'd watched growing up that my papaw and memaw had.

Did I know that this might not work? Yeah. I did. Jessie-Lou wasn't wrong about club life and the way it'd crashed into hers and Tate's life like it had. That the danger was always a moment away and wasn't as always on the periphery as we liked to believe and that some of us dumb fucks livin' that life had fooled ourselves into believing.

Nothing in life was as free as we liked to believe. Everything had its cost. I just firmly believed that life was all the sweeter when you carved out times like the ones I was sharing now – the happiness that much more rich, vibrant, and makin' this life that much more worth living, making all the bullshit worth it, you know?

We had breakfast together. Talking and joking, Tate and I makin' plans to game again that night while I traded furtive looks with Jessie-Lou about *after* that. Talking without words, saying with eyes and meaningful looks that *yes*, there would be more of that. Of the intimate little moments that were building between us and the peace that they seemed to bring with the understanding of who each of us were on the deepest level.

I loved learning who she was when she wasn't wearing the mantle of "mom" or "sister."

Tate got himself out the door, a piece of toast in his mouth, hustling his ass to the bus stop out front just in time to make it on.

I locked the front door behind him and turned to find Jessie-Lou staring at me with a sparkle in her warm brown eyes, her smile hidden by the rim of her coffee mug.

"What?" I asked.

"You're good with him," she said.

I gave a shrug, kind of at a loss for what to say about that.

"I wish I could say somethin' like I've always been good with kids, or something like that to sound cool or whatever, but I'm glad you think so. I ain't have much practice."

"Well, you get it from somewhere," she said.

I sat back down at the seat at a right angle from her and took up my cup of coffee and said, "Probably my papaw. After my mom passed, he and my memaw took me in and took care of me. He was the only example of a daddy I had and I have to say, he was a damn good one."

She nodded. "On that, I would have to agree," she said. "He still living?"

"Aw yeah," I said. "Memaw went a few years back, but he's still goin'. Older 'n dirt and still livin' up there in the holler."

"When was the last time you seen him?" she asked.

“Prolly a year or two back, now.”

“That’s rough,” she said, and I nodded. “Lost my gran when I was seventeen an’ Tater was, oh I guess two an’ a half. I was glad she got to meet her great grandchild. She was my mamma’s mom and my last livin’ one. My biggest champion.” She huffed a laugh at a fond memory and it was like the clouds chased the sunshine of it away. “World’s a darker place without her in it.”

She sighed and leaned back.

“This here was her place. Her an’ my granddaddy left it to me an’ John-Paul. We moved in when she died to take care of it.” She sighed and said, “Well, *I* take care of it. You’d be amazed at what you can learn on the *YouTube*.”

I chuckled and said, “Guess between huntin’, fishin’ an’ the club, Cy ain’t around over much.”

She shook her head.

“I can’t blame him on the first two. The bayou is in our blood. Livin’ off the land is just how we are. I know I love it... but sometimes I really do need him around here. When it’s somethin’ I can’t fix on my own, it drives me crazy I can’t rely on him – you know?”

I nodded.

“A man lives someplace, he’s the steward of his house. His home is his castle. Should be up to him to take care of it.”

“Ah, I guess I can’t blame him too much. He hates this house. Not real sure why he just ain’t never loved it like I have.” She shrugged, and I filed that away for later, figurin’ it’d be worth askin’ him.

She got up and started clearing the table. I made a noise like “Ah!” and gave her a reproachful look.

“You wash, I’ll dry ‘em?” she asked, and I smiled and gave a nod.

“Now you’re catchin’ on, honey,” I said.

“Oh, I heard what you told my boy last night. I hear everything in this here house.”

I chuckled and said, “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN





Jessie-Lou...

The more Collier was around, the more comfortable I was becoming and the more I liked him. He took me in to work and had been so careful with his hands and his touches up to this point, it was honestly startin' to drive me a little crazy. I just wanted him to kiss me.

I got off the bike and turned to hand his helmet back to him. He took it and leaned it on his hip and looked up at me. I made my decision.

“You know, it’s nice you bein’ respectful an’ all, I like that – I like it a lot... but you don’t kiss me soon, I’m liable to think you’re not all that into me as I’d like to think you are,” I teased. I turned to go, and he caught me by the hand and jerked me back. I fell a little off balance but he caught me against his chest and my mouth just naturally found his.

I kissed him back against a grin I just couldn’t keep off my damn face and giggled against his mouth. He backed off me and helped me get my feet up under me. With a light smack on my ass, he said, “Go on, now. You don’t want to be late.”

I marched for the big bay door to the butcher where we took in the game but smiled over my shoulder at him, watching him watch me until I made it inside. Wasn’t ‘til I was out of sight that I heard him put his bike in gear and ride on outta there.

It was a busy day, processin’ rabbit catches for some of the ol’ timers around these parts whose hands were gnarled with age and their arthritis hurt ‘em too bad to do it themselves.

I got me a lot more to add to the bag from yesterday. I ended up with a nice big bag of heads to take home with me to clean the skulls in my beetle tank. Whew-ee! I was glad it wasn’t summertime because the stink could be unreal sometimes.

When Collier came back to pick me up, he put an arm around my waist from his seated position on the bike.

“House smelled so fuckin’ good,” he told me as I slung the tote of rabbit heads over my shoulder and climbed on behind him. I’d set dinner to cook in the slow cooker before we’d left that mornin’ and he’d helped me cut things up while we’d talked. It’d been nice, and I was lookin’ forward to not havin’ to deal with a whole lot of cleanup or work when I got home.

“Think y’all can wait until I get a shower to eat?” I asked. “I feel frozen to the bone today.”

“Absolutely,” he said. “I’ll make you some hot tea while you’re in there.”

I smiled and couldn’t seem to stop all the way home. If it wasn’t so damn cold, I’d probably have bugs in my teeth from it, but it was the right time of year to avoid that.

When we got off the bike, I asked, “You wanna see me feed these rabbit heads to the beetles or can I give ‘em to Tate to dump in the tank?”

“I would very much like to see how all that works, but let’s get you warm. I can always come out here with Tate and have him show me.”

“You ain’t wrong,” I said. “And I rightly appreciate that. I was in the damn freezer a good part of today, takin’ inventory for the front counter and I just can’t seem to warm up!”

“Let’s get you on into a hot shower, then.”

We went into the house and Tate was hard at work at the kitchen table again, which was different. Usually, he did his homework at the desk in his bedroom, but I wasn’t complainin’. It was nice to see my kid. He was a teenager now, and it wasn’t as cool to hang out with his mom.

“Hey, Tate,” Collier said, taking the tote from me. “How about you show me these beetles and help your mom out with feeding ‘em these rabbit heads?”

“Oh, cool! You’re gonna love this,” he said getting up from his seat eagerly.

The boys piled back out the back door and I sighed in contentment.

This was nice. This was real nice.

I hung up my purse and my coat and went on down to my room to get undressed and put on my robe.

The shower was luxurious. I was hungry, and Collier had been right, the venison stew I had cookin' smelled amazing. Hot stew was just what the doctor ordered when it came to finishing up warming up from the inside.

I threw some garlic Texas toast on a pan from the freezer and got it nice and crisp under the broiler to go with it. I went to switch my electric kettle on to get some tea going only to find it was piping hot and a cup and the things to fix it up were ready to go.

Collier slipped in my way and shooed me off to finish makin' me a cup like he promised. Boy, didn't that hit the spot for me?

Dinner was lovely, the boys going for a round of video games. I went on in and put on some old clothes and took myself out back into my little art studio. Putting on my apron, I masked up. Sliding the safety glasses over my eyes, I turned on my lamp and took up my Dremel to work on the skull I'd put down when all hell had broken loose the few days before.

I jumped slightly when I went to quit and realized that Collier had taken up my seat, over in my reading nook to watch me.

"That's pretty impressive," he said when I pulled off my ventilator mask.

"I don't know how or why I got started doing it," I confessed. "But there's just somethin' about makin' something beautiful from death."

"Looks elegant," he said, coming over.

I smiled and asked, "Want to see somethin' real cool?"

"Hell yeah," he said. I took up my light and stuck it under the skull and turned it on, the incised loops and knotwork

glowing faintly.

“It gets brighter once I get the stone in there,” I said.

“What stone you got picked out for this one?” he asked.

I handed him the gray-green chunk of labradorite with its deep blue iridescent shimmer when you tilted it in the light just right.

Collier gave a low whistle. “That’s somethin’ else... damn.”

“Costs a pretty penny for the stones sometimes, but it’s worth it,” I said.

“There’s this place back home,” he mentioned. “Big ol’ knife store but it had a load of rocks like this down in the basement part. I always remember ‘em being pretty cheap at that place.”

“Really?” I asked. “Have to bring me some the next time you’re out that way.”

“Hell, next time I go out that way, maybe you ought to come with me, huh?”

I stared at him for several heartbeats, trying to decide whether he was serious.

“I’ve never been out the state of Louisiana,” I said and he cocked his head.

“Now that’s a right shame,” he said. “Should see at least some of this great country. It is, by far, the most beautiful I’ve ever seen.”

“You’ve been out of the country?” I asked.

“With my unit. Deployed once. Didn’t make it all the way through before my ass was sent home and bounced right out of the military on some bullshit. Found myself expendable to cover some ass higher up in the chain of command.” He sounded bitter and I couldn’t say as I blamed him.

I wanted to ask where he’d been, but at the same time? I didn’t. I didn’t want to poke the bear on something that might’ve been painful. I didn’t much care about what a man

done in his past, or what he might have done. I knew a man was capable of change and what I cared about was how he was now an' how he treated me an' my son. Still, it wasn't like I ignored red flags altogether. I listened to what he said, and while I had no reason to disbelieve him, I also took it with a grain of salt.

“You gonna keep going?” he asked when we were both quiet for too long, just looking at one another – me sittin' with the big skull half in my lap, half propped against the old desk I worked from, and him standing next to me, lookin' down at me and my work.

“I think it's late enough that we should start windin' down,” I said, swallowing hard.

He nodded and said, “I'd like to hear what happens next in your book. It's your turn tonight.”

I smiled faintly at that. “You aren't really gonna make me read it out loud, are you?” I asked.

“Turn about *is* fair play,” he answered.

I skeptically asked, “For real? You wanna read this book with me? You know you ain't have to to impress me or nothin'. You already do plenty of that already.”

His smile split into a wide grin and he said, “Well that's good to know, but I ain't doin' it to impress you. I like a good story, and I think you picked a good one with Hettie and Cain.”

I moved the skull off my lap and onto the desk where it was safe and stable. No way it could fall off and break on me.

He held a hand down to me and helped me up onto my feet. I took off my apron and one of J.P.'s old flannel shirts to keep the bone dust off of me and switched out the lights, trailing him lightly through the house and down to my room.

It hadn't gone unnoticed by me that he'd made my bed that morning, and it was much appreciated. There was just something nice about getting into a nicely made bed in the evening.

I switched on the bedside lamp and got in, pulling off my socks so my feet wouldn't get too warm and tossing them on top of my boots to wear tomorrow. They were clean. I'd put 'em on fresh after my shower.

Collier had gotten into bed first and when I got in and took up my book, he pulled me back against his chest to snuggle in and read with my head propped against his shoulder. He shifted, an arm around me, and I asked him, "You good?"

"Yeah, just let me get another pillow back here to lean on," he said. He leaned back after stuffing one behind his back.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Yeah, let me get this shirt off. Can't stand sleeping with one on." He hauled his tee off over his head and tossed it down on the foot of the bed.

We settled, and I opened the book to the marked page and began...

I staggered back, blinking, and one of the physicians of the field hospital caught me.

"Easy now," he said, then called out, "You, boy! Get on over here and help Ms. Rogan to sit down."

I shook my head as the fire inside subsided and forced myself to my feet, but it was like they just didn't want to cooperate, my legs refusing to hold me up anymore.

A wooden chair was thrust up under me and I sat, heavily. I swallowed hard and someone brought me a canteen, pressing it into my hands. I brought it to my lips, shaking as I was, and took a drink, then another, before passing it into an unseen pair of hands.

"You're alright now." Doc Hutchin's patted my shoulder.

"Go." I waved him off. "I'm fine."

"Now, Ms. Hettie," he fretted.

I barked at him, "Go! There're men dyin' that need you a damn sight more 'n me!"

He backed away, flustered, and Hal, the boy who helped me most of the time, said, "Doc was just tryin' to help, Ms. Rogan. We all are... we's worried."

"I'm fine," I said.

"You don't look fine, Miss," Georgina Robbins, a field nurse like myself, stammered out.

I looked up at them both and Georgina went on, "We ain't seen nothing like that afore, Miss." She indeed sounded scared, scared of me...

"What are you talking about?" I asked wearily, adjusting my skirts. "Been doing it for weeks now."

"N-n-not like that," Hal countered, and I shook my head, my vision trying to waver on me.

"Not like what?" I asked. My voice sounded hollow and far away. I tried to stand, to walk it off, but I suddenly felt jerked left of center and then I was falling, falling for what felt like forever through clouds and gossamer curtains.

I swear, it was like I was falling through worlds... and I didn't know what to make of that...

CHAPTER FOURTEEN





Collier...

I listened to her read and she was good at it. A little uncertain to start, but then the story caught her as much as it'd caught me and she read from the point of view of a civil war nurse with some kind of faith healing power to her. About how she'd healed Cain Golden but how it'd took too much out of her and she passed out cold. Of the dream she had of her dead husband, executed for bein' a Union spy, but surprise, surprise! Hettie was too.

I wasn't quite sure where the story was going, not fully, but this Philips woman knew how to spin a tale and I was genuinely lookin' forward to finding out.

She finished Hettie's short chapter. I picked up Cain's and found it was the chapter from the first time I'd taken the book from her and I was glad to be caught up.

Seemed ol' Cain had some kind of mystical powers of his own, but everyone – from us to the characters themselves – weren't sure why for or what all was goin' on. Not yet, anyway, but I was for sure lookin' forward to findin' out.

I only made it a little way into the chapter before recognizing she was deeply asleep against my chest, her breath soft and warm with its even cadence, the rise and fall of her back and ribs beneath my arm as telltale a sign as any. I hugged her a little tighter and pressed my lips to her hair, breathing her in and relishing the feel of the soft strands against my lips.

I closed my eyes after marking the book with my finger and let the sound of her soft breath lull me some. It was nice, but I couldn't sleep sitting up like this. I mean, I *could*, but I would pay for it like a motherfucker the next morning. She stirred when I marked the book proper, and took my arm from around her to set it aside, back on the table behind her.

“Shh, you're good,” I murmured. “Everything's all good.”

She went limp with relief against me and I strained a bit to reach behind her and switch off the lamp. She sat up and let me scoot down and adjust the pillows so they were beneath my head comfortably.

“Come on back now,” I whispered in the dark and pulled her down to lay her head and her hand back on my chest.

It was a sweet type of torture having her so close and yet not knowing if it was too soon or if it'd be alright to touch.

She threw one of her legs over mine, her thigh along my waist, and I couldn't resist, dipping my free hand beneath the blankets to palm the outside of her thigh.

She moaned out softly, and I felt her push off of me, and then her petal soft lips were on mine.

Fuck, she tasted amazing – earthy and sweet from the tea with honey she'd drunk earlier. I gripped her thigh firmly with my hand and I knew that if it didn't telegraph my desire for her to her, the fact that my cock jumped and filled with blood, pressing hard and hot through my sweats to the inside of her thigh certainly would.

I didn't expect her to push up off of me, tearing her lips from mine, just so she could adjust and straddle me completely. My hands slipped along her hips, over her panties, beneath the hem of her tee. Her lips found mine in the dark again, only this time she kissed me with more intensity, her tongue flicking against my lips, begging for entry.

I let one hand leave her hip to cup her face and hold her long hair back from our faces on one side. I opened my mouth to her, and she boldly plunged her tongue past my lips and teeth into my mouth.

I thought I would lose my mind from that alone but then she ground her hips and I let out a shuddering groan that she swiftly swallowed, a sweet, answering moan of her own entering my mouth and causing me to rock my hips up to meet her next downward grind.

Fuck, she rendered me breathless with how lithely she moved in the dark above me and I was just about to make a

move, my hand already sliding up under the back of her shirt and down the back of her panties to grip her ass, when across the hall and down, we both heard Tate's bedroom door open.

It was like a bucket of cold water was thrown over her and she rolled off of me to one side just as the bathroom door shut.

We lay close but not touching, each trying to gasp for breath silently. A minute later, the toilet flushed, the sink turned on, then cut off and light spilled into the hall from where he opened the door, right before it switched out and we could hear him shuffle across the hall and back into his room – the door shutting behind him.

I felt her head turn on the pillow beside mine at the same time I turned mine toward her and we both busted out in a fit of giggles, both of her hands flying up to cover her lips which I had to imagine were swollen from my kiss.

I wheezed, trying to suppress my laughter and keep it from getting too loud. She hissed “*Shhh!*” and I doubled my efforts to keep it quiet.

I reached for her and she rolled into me, putting her head back on my shoulder as I held her tight. Sighing out, I kissed her forehead, and she did that thing where it was like every muscle in her body just went lax.

I loved that for her. Loved it for me, too, that I could do that for her.

The mood was definitely ruined but not completely. Instead, it shifted to one of a comfortable and contented silence.

She pressed her lips against my chest in a chaste kiss and held me back and fuck... we'd only kissed, what? Twice now? But it didn't matter, I knew it, probably before she did or maybe ever would.

Holding Jessie-Lou Gaudet like this felt just like coming home... a feeling I'd had yet to get since moving to Louisiana.

“You're not upset, are you?” she whispered a minute later, and I chuckled.

“Not at all, sugar. Not at all. I like this just fine. Hell, even better than fine. We got all the time in the world as far as I’m concerned.”

She gave a contented and happy sigh, relaxing against me.

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” she said, and I dipped my chin, turning my head to press my lips against her hairline again.

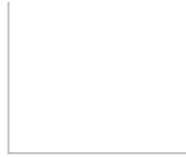
“I’m glad you’re happy,” I told her and I felt her lips curve against my chest into a smile that’d like to make the Mona Lisa jealous.

“I am,” she said, and that made me smile.

“Me, too,” I said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN





Jessie-Lou...

The rest of the damn week was a frustrating series of misfires. The next night, John-Paul was home for a night and several nights early – the boat he was out fishin’ on with our dad needing a repair. That kept Collier out on the couch and me one very sleepless and restless girl. We didn’t get to read, and I was a little frustrated by that, too. I didn’t want to skip ahead, so I just tried to settle down early but ended up restless and awake into the wee hours.

Collier didn’t look like he slept none too good either the next morning.

Thursday, we caught a bit of a break, or at least a light at the end of the tunnel when at dinner, Tate asked me, “Hey, Mom, can I spend the night over at Bertrand’s house tomorrow night?”

“You got detention at school?” I asked.

“Yeah, but it’s my last day... please?”

“Alright, but you need to come home and have supper first, and only if his mom says it’s alright. You have her send me a text.”

“Alright!” he crowed and took his phone out of his back pocket.

“Hey!” I barked lightly, and he looked sheepish and handed it over. I set it down on the other side of my plate.

“Sorry,” he said.

Collier raised an eyebrow, and I said, “No phones at the dinner table.”

“Ah.” He nodded in agreement. “Good rule,” he said and Tate deflated a little, sulking. I hid my smile with another bite of food. I could tell he was hoping Collier would take his side on that one and let him text his friend.

As soon as dinner was over, I handed him back his phone and he excitedly sent a text.

Collier had cooked dinner tonight, much to my surprise, so I got up to do the dishes. “I wash, you dry,” I called to Tate who was just setting down his phone.

“I like to wash!” he cried.

“Too slow,” I said. He grumbled, but he took up the dish towel and waited for me to get started.

I was just wiping down the counters after Tate headed for his room when Collier came up behind me, pulling me back by my belt loops before he thrust his hips forward and pinned me between himself and the counter.

I smiled, slowing, and stopping, closing my eyes as his lips closed on the shell of my ear and he traced the edge with his tongue, his breath hot and sending goosebumps down my opposite side as he growled and breathed into my ear.

“Tomorrow night, nothin’s gonna stop me from making you scream my name,” he said in a low purr and I swear my insides turned to liquid heat that pulled somewhere behind my clitoris.

I thrust back against him, pushing hands against the counter to put a little extra oomph behind it. He stepped back marginally, but it was enough to get me turned around to face him. I put my hands to his face and dragged his mouth down to mine even as he thrust a knee between mine and pressed the top of his thigh hard up against my pussy.

I moaned quietly into his mouth and he chuckled darkly into mine and backed away with a little bit of a warning look. I nodded. He was right. I didn’t want to move too quickly and get caught by Tate. John-Paul I wasn’t worried about when it came to me... I mean, I was an adult, and he was back on the boat already so there wasn’t any concern there. I did low key worry about how he might take it where Collier was concerned, though.

Actually, come to think of it, I didn’t know if he’d put bros before hos... and I know getting pregnant with Tate at thirteen

had branded me with the mark of the ho according to our daddy and our mamma. Hell, Daddy still let it be known how much of a disappointment I was in his own way to this day.

I tended to stay away from him unless it was a family gathering. Still, he doted on Tate, him bein' his first grandson and all.

It was confusing and hurtful a lot of the time and so I did what I did best anytime anything got either confusing or hurtful. I shoved it away and just tried not to think about it.

No sense in cryin' about it, just like there weren't no sense in borrowing trouble afore it happened.

My phone chimed, and I went and looked. It was a text from Bertrand's mamma sayin' things was all good. She even said she'd be happy to pick 'im up bein' that my truck was totaled.

"Damn, news travels fast around these parts," I told Collier, showing him the text. We'd gone to look at a truck or two yesterday but neither one of 'em had been right, dang nab it.

Collier had said we should look the other side or even closer to the city and I was thinkin' he might not be wrong. I'd just had yet to expand my search.

Tate was occupied with some video game on his computer with his friends and so Collier and I settled on the couch to watch a movie. Or really, a movie played while we were each on our phones, lookin' for something that would work for me truck-wise.

We got a couple of promising prospects on the other side of the city, but it would have to wait for the weekend before we could go look at them.

Finally, it was time for my favorite part of the day... the part where we settled down for bed and got to read a little.

I stood in the bathroom and brushed my teeth while he stood in the doorway and watched me in my thick socks and just a long tee. The way he looked at me was like I stood there,

hair and makeup perfect, and in the finest lingerie... but it wasn't how I was used to being looked at by a man.

I mean, I was used to bein' looked at as an object of lust. A distinctly *wrong* or *uncomfortable* nuance to the male gaze on me.

This wasn't that. He looked at me like he saw the whole of me. Like he looked past my skin and bones, staring me right into the soul and that he liked what he saw.

I couldn't help but blush some as I finished swishing my toothbrush in my mouth and bent over the sink, holding my hair back to spit.

"What're you lookin' at me like that for?" I asked and his softly painted smile on his lips grew.

"Can't help *but* look at you," he said, stepping in and sliding a hand along my lower back, curving his hand around my hip. He stood behind me, facing me toward the mirror and I met his blue eyes in our reflection.

"Just look at you," he said, and I did but I didn't think we were seeing the same thing.

I looked at me and what I saw didn't amount to a hill of beans.

"What stole your smile, honey?" he asked me gently, and I leaned my head back against his chest and closed my eyes until I was sure I wouldn't cry as I fell into the deep well of my feelings. When I opened them, his eyes were fixed on our reflection.

"I was just thinking I don't think we see the same thing when I look at myself in that mirror."

He kissed my temple and yet he didn't take his eyes off of me in the mirror.

"There you go with your secrets again," he murmured just above my ear.

"I suppose I do have a few," I confessed softly.

“That’s okay,” he said. “Someday, I’ll earn that trust and when I do, I hope to never break it.”

I stared at us for a little while and finally said, “You mean that, don’t you?”

He smiled at me and said, “Every word.”

“You look tired,” I murmured, changing the subject, and he let me.

“Very. I’m lookin’ forward to a good night’s sleep.”

“Me too,” I said.

“Why don’t you go on an’ get settled. I’ll be in as soon as I brush my teeth.”

I nodded and slipped from his light grasp and out into the hall, past my boy’s closed bedroom door, his music playin’, and around into my own. My bedside lamp glowed, a warm golden light spilling across the neatly made bed that was suddenly callin’ my name.

I hadn’t slept none too good myself the night before. I had a feeling we wouldn’t get any readin’ done tonight.

I got into bed and he came and joined me not a minute later after I got myself settled. He slid between the sheets on his side of the bed, pulling his tee off over his head and his socks off his feet, putting them on the bottom corner of the covers to rest like a sleeping cat.

“Shut that light out and c’mere,” he said, and I smiled and did just that, cuddling into his side, his arms around me, and laying my head on his chest. He circled me with his arms and pulled the blankets up over us, sighing into the dark in contentment.

I rubbed my face to take care of a random itch and settled.

“Talk to me, baby,” he whispered into the dark.

“About what?” I asked.

“About why you feel the way you do, lookin’ in the mirror like that.”

I sighed. I didn't want to, but I knew he expected something so I said, "I don't want to..."

"Okay. Can you tell me why?"

I thought about it, trying to decide whether I should or not, then finally relented.

"I'm afraid if I did, you wouldn't want me anymore," I said.

He let out a slow and measured breath and held me tighter.

"I somehow doubt that very much," he said. His hand came up and pressed my head to his chest, his fingers tangling gently in my hair as he turned his head toward me and pressed a kiss to the top of my hair.

Problem was, I couldn't be so sure, and I wasn't ready for this to end. So why risk it?



BECAUSE I WAS LOOKING FORWARD to my time alone with Collier on Friday night, I figured that the next morning, afternoon, and evening would drag. In fact, it was quite the opposite. It was a whirlwind of activity, from breakfast, to fixin' up dinner in the slow cooker, to getting out the door to get to work on time, all the way through the workday. I was so busy, the day positively flew by and with every hour that ticked by, I was equal parts excited and nervous.

Dinner was good, dishes were a breeze thanks to the liner things I bought for the crock pot. Before too long, I was being hugged by an excited teenager and he was out the door, hopping into Liz, Bertrand's mamma's, minivan to go off with his friend. I waved from the front door and sealed it up, locking it tight at both the knob and the deadbolt.

Almost immediately, Collier's arms were sliding around my waist, his nose buried behind my ear as he breathed me in and cuddled me back against himself. I leaned back, reaching up and cupping the side of his neck and jaw with my hand as I offered up my lips.

He kissed me eagerly and held me close, and it was nice. Wonderful. Sweet and slow despite how we both practically vibrated with how eager we were to take this further.

“Come to the bedroom with me,” he whispered against my lips. I couldn’t help myself but simply nod and turn in the circle of his arms, raising my lips to silently beg he kiss me again, and for real this time – the positions of our bodies facing one another much more conducive to it.

He made a sound like I was irresistible and held me close, his hands gentle where they held me at my lower back and caressed the side of my neck, which gave me chills radiating all down my side.

His lips were warm and soft against my own, his hands strong and firm but gentle where he held me. I couldn’t help myself but step closer into him, plastering my body along the front of his, needing him as close as possible in the moment.

“C’mere, baby,” he whispered against my mouth and he dipped slightly, pulling at the outside of my thighs, encouraging me to jump.

I leaped eagerly into his arms, wrapping my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist as he hitched me up higher, his hands at my thighs, sliding to my ass, as he turned to march us through the living room and down the hall to my room.

He didn’t toss me on the bed, which I wouldn’t have minded, it could have been fun. He laid me down carefully, pressing himself against me through the layers of our clothing until I gasped with the feel of him hard and straining against his jeans.

“God, I want you so bad.” His voice was guttural with his restraint and I felt my blood heat and zing through my veins with that extra little pizzazz that got a girl excited.

I toed off my boots behind him and dragged his mouth back to mine with my hands nipping his bottom lip and saying breathy and not meaning to entirely, my voice coming out seductive and low, I said, “Feeling’s mutual, so c’mere.”

He pulled back just enough to drag his shirt over his head, and then came back to me, his mouth moving against my own, his warm hand disappearing up under my shirt to touch my skin and *oh*, how I shuddered, my pussy growing from warm to hot in my jeans and tingling in that right way that I so loved and hadn't felt in a real long time.

He pulled the snaps of my blouse apart and pushed my tank top out of his way. He bowed his head and pressed his lips to my stomach. I gasped and arched into the touch of his lips, tangling my hands in his hair, and pressing his mouth good and close to my body in a damn near frenzy to get *more*.

He chuckled lightly against my skin and the sensation of it made me shudder with delight. He kissed me sweetly, flicking his tongue against my stomach as his long-fingered hands worked the button through its loop on my jeans and lowered the zipper. When he hooked fingers into my waistband and let up with his kisses, I followed his silent signals and bucked my hips up off the bed for him to peel my pants off me like helpin' a snake shed its skin.

He looked down at me, and the look in his hooded bright blue eyes made my breath catch even as I sat up and struggled my way out of my blouse while he went for his belt to undo it.

I stripped myself down to my bra, shrugging out of my snap-button plaid-pattern country-fit blouse and peeling my white tank off over my head.

He kicked off his boots and peeled off his socks and then mine. When he straightened up from that, it was my turn, my hands at his waistband, slipping his button out of his loop and looking up the lean long like of his naked torso into those intense eyes as he watched me undress him.

His cock was fucking beautiful, long, and sleek – taking my breath away with just how perfect it was. I flicked my tongue out along my lips to wet them and jerked my head up at Collier's sharp intake of breath.

He watched me, almost frozen, waiting to see what I would do. I couldn't tear my eyes away from his face even as I took the hot velvet length of him into my hand, stroking him

from root to tip, paying extra attention to his thick head, working my palm across it in a circular motion in a gentle touch.

He groaned and the naked desire in his face served to turn me on that much more as I kept my eyes on his and took him into my mouth.

He was... shit, I don't know how to describe it – but it was heady, intoxicating, and an absolute delight to have him there. The feel of the head of his cock sliding over my tongue, against the roof of my mouth, the way it felt to suck him and press the insides of my cheeks against his shaft as the head of his cock lightly nudged the back of my throat – Lord, it was erotic and with every feral breath and little groan he let out, it encouraged me to do that much more to him.

There was nothing like making love to a man with your mouth and having it do all the right things and *be enough*.

He reached out and gathered my hair, but he was good about it. He didn't pull it or hold my head to thrust. He just watched me and concentrated on his breathing as he reveled in what I did for him. I felt *appreciated*.

It was nice. It was beyond nice... and I just couldn't get enough.

“Oh, fuck that's so good,” he cried at one point and threw back his head, giving himself over to the feeling and I loved that. I loved watching him and I couldn't get enough of the sounds that he made.

I was almost disappointed when he begged me to stop.

Pulling my mouth reluctantly from his cock, I wiped my lips with the back of my hand and he came down without hesitation to kiss me fervently, at the same time his hands went behind me to unhook my bra.

I let him take the article of clothing, my arms just sort of automatically going to cover my breasts and he caught them, going completely to his knees in front of me and winding them around his neck and shoulders.

“Don’t ever feel like you have to hide from me,” he whispered against my mouth and I parted my knees to let him closer.

His fingertips trailed lightly down my back, from the base of my neck to part some to trace along my shoulder blades and *oh my God...* it’d been so long since anyone had touched me like that. So light, so full of care, it was like my nervous system disconnected from my mind and my mind went flinging off somewhere at the back of the house and out into the swamp. I didn’t care if I ever got it back.

I wanted to live in the bliss of that light touch forever. The skin of the plane of my back sensitive and probably my biggest erogenous zone I had that literally no one had ever paid attention to it before. But Collier... Collier was like a hound that’d scented blood and he was on the trail – boy, I’ll tell you.

“Scoot up on the bed,” he told me and I planted my hands by my hips to comply. He hooked his fingertips in the waist band of my panties as I did it, taking them from me as I scooted back up on the bed.

“On your stomach for me, baby,” he ordered, and I twisted and laid down on my tummy, pressing my thighs together and crossing my ankles out of shy reflex.

He stood back there a moment, and I was vaguely aware of him discarding my panties on the floor as he breathed, “God you’re fuckin’ beautiful.” He pressed a light kiss at my Achilles heel.

I gasped and gripped the covers beneath me as he worked his way slowly up my body with his lips, touching my calves, lingering behind my knees, and breathing me in all along the way.

His body heat radiated from his chest over my legs, warming me and sending tingles through my entire body even as my pussy positively ached for his attentions.

But no, he wasn’t quite there yet.

He was determined to drive me absolutely insane with desire and lust before he slipped inside of me. I felt a heady mixture of want and at the same unnerved by how he went about doing it.

I wasn't entirely sure I liked not being able to see him, but it wasn't so overwhelmingly unpleasant for me to want to change my position, especially with how good he was making me feel. Instead, I just gripped the covers and lay with my eyes squeezed shut and tense as he chose where to touch and where to tease next.

"Relax, baby," he whispered against my hip before lightly nipping my ass cheek, making me yip and jump. I laughed nervously and forced my tense muscles to relax beneath him.

He pressed his lips against the base of my spine at my low back and crawled up my body incrementally, and *oh yes*, I loved his lips on my skin. The way he hummed in appreciation against me, the way he would occasionally flick his tongue out to taste me, and how he would blow on the wet spot to evoke yet another delicious sensation.

I wriggled and jerked, sometimes evoking light chuckles from him as his warmth crept up my body and his jutting cock touched the seam of my thighs from time to time. Every time that happened, I felt my pussy clench with want, until finally he settled over my back, his arms hugging me tightly as he kissed behind my ear and asked, "You want me to find your tight little pussy and fuck you right here right now, just like this?" he asked. It was so hot, so deliciously dirty, I couldn't stop the whimper and moan that escaped me.

His breath was hot and so sexy in my ear as he let out a satisfied little, "Hm," at my reaction to his attentions and pressed his cock to the crack of my thighs.

"God, yes," I whispered. He grabbed a pillow from the top of the bed and pressed it beside my hip, encouraging me to raise them. I did, and he stuffed it beneath them, raising them off the bed *just so* to get the right angle.

"There we go," he breathed, and his body pressed to mine, his chest to my back, he reached down in between us to guide

his cock to my entrance. I did my best to part my thighs, uncrossing my ankles and raising my hips up and back to meet him as the tip of his cock pressed blindly at almost the right spot.

“Down a little,” I guided him and *oh yes!*

He pressed forward and grunted, groaning in pleasure as he parted my pussy lips and pressed into the wet heat of my core.

I gasped and arched, trying to hold still as he pressed in further. I swear it was like he went on forever and he went so deep as he pushed his way into me.

“Oh, yeah!” he breathed into my ear, his body nearly going limp for a moment above me, pressing me deeper into the bed beneath us.

I cried out, too, as he pressed deeper still and woke a hunger inside of me that I hadn’t realized had been there for so long.

“Oh!” I cried and bit my bottom lip as I very nearly came from the emotional intensity of our connection, as much as the very physical one that was happening between us.

God, the sounds he made turned me on. The way he sucked in a breath through gritted teeth and the way he said *Mm!* with the satisfaction of a man who’d finally been sated after so long with going without...

Golly gee, I didn’t know where this would end up, but only one deep stroke in, this was already the best sex I’d ever had!

“God, yes,” he moaned into my ear. “So good...”

He struck a slow and sensual rhythm and I couldn’t do anything but honestly relax and go limp beneath him, closing my eyes and concentrating on nothing else but the feel of him over, around me, and inside of me as he moved so sweetly.

He gave a rolling thrust of his hips in an almost side-to-side motion while driving down, and I swear my eyes very nearly rolled to the back of my head when he did. A throaty moan flew from my lips unexpectedly as he held me tight and

asked me, “Ooo, you like that? Was that good?” before he did it again.

Oh, yeah, I liked that. I liked that very much, the feel of it getting me dangerously close and riding that fine razor’s edge and oh, did it feel so good – but it wasn’t quite enough. It was just missing something, that last, final little touch to send me reeling; to send me flying off into the sun where I’d surely burn to death – and enjoy every moment of my demise.

Lord, how I craved that release, but by the same token, I was content to enjoy this ride for just about forever, too.

I didn’t know how long he fucked me from behind like that, but it was just about the purest bliss. When he lifted off of me to get me to turn over so that he could take me from a different angle, we’d been at it long enough that I mourned the loss of his warmth a little before he pulled the pillow from beneath my hips and put me onto my back.

He reentered me, hooking an arm beneath one of my knees and moving his hips back and forth to get as deep as he could. My hand automatically drifted between us and to the top of my sex.

“That’s it, touch yourself,” he demanded of me and it wasn’t a difficult ask from him. Hell, I was desperate for it. I needed that explosion of pleasure throughout my body like I needed the very fucking air to breathe by this point, and he was determined to help me get there.

“That’s it, baby – so tight, so good,” he moaned. His eyes slipped shut and he turned his head as though the feral panting that fell from my lips was the sweetest music he’d ever heard.

Fuck, every expression, every sound he made, every time he licked his lips, every breath he took, as he availed himself of my body and shared his with me was the hottest thing I think I’d ever experienced. It was so lovely, an exquisite sight, and something I swear I would have burned into my memory forever as the sweetest experience I’d ever had to date sexually.

I sucked in a breath and held it, let it out with passion, and drew in another as my body grew as taut as a piano wire. He hooked an arm below my lower back and drew me up as he thrust and I completely fell apart in his arms.

It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced, a wrenching cry escaping my throat as I came and my vision swam with stars streaking at the edges of my vision. I squeezed my eyes shut as he picked up his pace, my pussy rhythmically gripping his cock as my body spasmed around him. He cried out, driving so deep he bottomed out, sending me spiraling down with another orgasm to rock me. I swear to God, I'd never known such an intense bliss as I knew right then in Collier's arms.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN





Eollier...

My favorite part of making love to her was lying in the sticky aftermath of it on our sides, her leg up over my hip, my cock softening inside of her and slipping free with a little shudder from her as we kissed.

“I didn’t wear a condom,” I said. While I wasn’t worried one bit about disease – I knew I was clean and I trusted Jessie’s character enough that she would have stopped things if she wasn’t – what I was surprised about was that I wasn’t worried one bit about a surprise little one if it happened. Watching her with Tate, I didn’t think I could have picked a better mother for my child if I wanted one.

“I’m clean,” she whispered immediately. “You?”

“Absolutely,” I whispered. “I wouldn’t do that to you... I was sayin’, you know...”

She bowed her head and pressed her forehead against my chest and said, “I can’t anymore. One of the hazards of getting knocked up at thirteen an’ havin’ a small body,” she declared. “Had Tate when I was fourteen but the doctors said he would be my last. I hope the scar—”

“Hush now,” I said, caressing her cheek with my thumb and kissing her forehead. She had a seam of scar tissue right above her pubic bone from hip to hip – a Cesarean for sure, but I didn’t give a flying fuck about that. She was beautiful to me no matter what, and I told her as much. “You’re so fuckin’ beautiful, it hurts to look at you sometimes.”

She scoffed a laugh and said, “I don’t know how that could be.”

I leaned back and looked her in her golden-brown eyes that reminded me of a shrewd bird of prey.

“Jessie-Lou, I get hard to the point of pain just thinkin’ about you. There are times I see you, it damn near doubles me

over.”

She blinked, dazed as what I said sank in and she touched the side of my face and put her lips against mine. When she drew back, she said, “Well, by all means, the next time that happens, if the situation allows for it, make sure to take some relief. I can’t tell you how wet you make me when I catch you lookin’ at me the way you’re lookin’ at me right now.”

Fuck, my cock started stirring all over again.

“You’re a deep woman, Jessie-Lou Gaudet,” I murmured, staring into her eyes.

She blinked, one long slow blink and her jaw worked as though she tried to gather her thoughts but nothing wanted to come out.

To spare her the need to say anything at all, I covered her mouth with mine and rolled her onto her back, pressing her back into the bed. She giggled against my mouth and the heavy that’d been between us the moment before lifted into something light and fantastic.

We showered together, riding high on the drunk or drug of each other before settling back into bed to cuddle and speak softly in the dark.

We made plans to travel together someday. Take a long ride together back to Tennessee to see where I came from and take the thrill ride that was the Tail of the Dragon.

She wanted to take me bow hunting and talked of gardening and canning – a couple of things she loved to do but hadn’t had the time or the help in recent years.

Eventually, our voices grew softer, our bodies grew lax, and the conversation turned to quiet as sleep overtook us.

It was all shattered when I got dropped back in a war zone – the crack and boom of gunfire all around us as Jessie screamed, and I held her down flat to the bed.

It took me a damn minute to realize that I wasn’t dreaming, and that I wasn’t drowning in heat and sand. It was

gunfire without the accompanying explosions of rocket-propelled grenades and improvised explosive devices.

It took a moment further for my ears to stop ringing and for my locked-up muscles to realize that Jessie wasn't screaming wordlessly and that she struggled valiantly to get me off her as her sleep-addled mind was locked on one thing and one thing only...

"Tate!" she wailed beneath me as she struggled to get out from under me. Something I couldn't let her do. "Tate!" she screamed with worried and fearful heartbreak that only a mother could. I rolled us off the bed and pinned her to the bedroom floor as the cacophony of sound continued and her son's name turned to wordless agonized screaming. I tried like hell to remind her, he wasn't here. He was safe and at his friend's and she was okay. That I had her, and everything would be okay.

The gunfire subsided after what seemed like an age and the roar of motorcycles departed, echoing off the deep night, pressing on the outside of the house.

"Let me up!" she cried. "Let me up!" she screamed. I struggled to get up off of her, grateful we was both moving and able to move.

"Let me see," I demanded, checking her over, but she pushed me off, thrust me away, and threw herself against the door to her bedroom.

"Jesse, wait!" I cried, taking up my gun from the bedside table and going after her into the hall – both of us stark-ass naked.

She stopped in the hall which hung thick with dust and stared in horror at the holes riddling Cypress's bedroom door.

She turned to Tate's and stepped carefully over the debris-scattered hallway carpet and pushed open Tate's door. Her kid's bedroom was a ruin of broken glass and shattered plastic from the window and his chewed-up computer monitor, feathers drifting down from the ceiling from his shot-up pillow and goose down comforter.

“It’s okay, he’s not here. He’s okay,” I reminded her, as she slipped devastated to the bedroom floor.

She didn’t cry right away, just gripped my arm where I crossed it over her bare chest, as I crouched behind her and pulled her back into the shelter of my arms.

“Why is this happening?” she whispered horrified. Then the sobbing came, as the silence rolled in, deafening in its stillness in the aftermath of the fucking carnage.

“You’re gonna be okay,” I promised her. “I’ve got you. It’s all gonna be okay...” But by the way she trembled in my arms, I couldn’t tell if she believed me or if she even heard me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN





Jessie-Lou...

I sat in my robe, wrapped with a blanket around my shoulders, in the back of an ambulance while they repeatedly took my blood pressure and other vitals and asked me all kinds of obnoxious questions. It was starting to get old. My front porch light was out, and the front of my house looked like Swiss cheese with all the holes in the wood-shake siding.

One of the medics was cleaning up my legs and putting band-aids on the cuts in my knees while the red, white, and blue lights strobed my front yard and the front of my house which was blocked by a sea of emergency vehicles.

I couldn't tell you how many of the Parish Sheriff's cars and SUVs were out here. All I could do was stare at Collier standing aside as cool and collected as he could be, his arms crossed over his bare chest, his feet bare and his jeans barely hanging onto his hips after he'd hastily pulled them on.

I was waiting for the Sheriff's office to bring me my baby when John-Paul pulled up on his motorcycle, our daddy right behind him in his truck. My momma stood nearby, tears streaming down her face, and she went to my daddy. I'd asked the ambulance crew to keep her away from me for right now. I didn't want to be touched and fussed over anymore than what the ambulance crew was doing – unless it was by Collier.

He was just about the only *not*-overwhelming thing in the midst of this shitshow.

“Jessie-Lou!” J.P. called out, and he was headed my way. I sighed and struggled to my feet, the medic trying to get me to sit down. But J.P. was comin' at us like a freight train and I knew the medic was liable to get hurt if he got in my brother's way.

“Where's Tater?” he demanded.

I said immediately, “He’s fine! He’s at his buddy Bertrand’s tonight. The cops went on to go git ‘im.”

J.P. did something that surprised me next. He pushed past the medics, hauled me onto my feet and crushed me in a hug, his chest heaving.

“We’re all okay,” I comforted him and I hugged my brother back.

He looked over at the house and the ruin through the bullet-riddled front door, then over at Collier, then back to me.

You could call my brother a lot of things – an oaf, a redneck, or a big fucker – but you couldn’t call him dumb. He looked down at me and something passed behind his eyes. I pointed a finger in his face and demanded, “Don’t you start. This ain’t the time or the place.”

His mouth thinned down in a grim line and he asked me, “What do you wanna do?”

That was the second surprise of the night. Usually, he didn’t give a good goddamn what I wanted. Like our daddy, he just made a decision and the rest of us were expected to tow the fuckin’ line.

“I don’t wanna stay here – and I definitely don’t wanna go to Daddy’s. Figure it out,” I told him quickly as our mother and father headed this way. He gave me a curt nod, and we turned to face our parents. The third surprise of the night was J.P. didn’t let me go. He kept his arm around my shoulders and me tucked right on up into his side protective-like.

What ensued gave me the biggest headache as J.P. and I had to argue it out with Mom and Pops over how we were gonna handle things from here. It only got worse when Tate arrived with the Sheriff’s deputy and my mom started her hysterics and hollerin’ about her baby, while my kid, who was already pale and frightened, was trying to get past his mimi to his mamma who he knew had actually *been here* when this whole thing had gone down.

It didn’t matter how much or how often I was put aside and ignored for other people and their feelin’s and shit to come

first, it still hurt every time.

I turned my face away as tears gathered. I breathed through that hurt and caught sight of Collier's ghostly blue eyes fixed on me from all they way where he stood and something changed for me in that moment.

A strength was telegraphed through the look he gave me and the tears dried before they could spill. I found myself able to stand a little straighter. He gave a nod, and I knew that he wanted to come to me. To be the one to hold me and to comfort me, and to be my pillar of strength. But we both knew that right this minute, it would just cause more drama for the lot of us with my parents carryin' on like they were.

Collier's eyes left mine, bouncing up, and I turned and looked up at my brother who was lookin' his club brother's way. I could tell there would be another headache in my future and that a reckoning was comin' mine and Collier's way.

I don't think J.P. was gonna like how it would end, because as much as I loved my brother in that moment, he was gonna be sore after this conversation. I wasn't about to let Collier go.

J.P. let me go to my son who was upset and cryin' and I led my boy away from all the hootin' and hollerin' from his grandmother.

"Are you okay?" he asked me, tears leakin' from his eyes and his voice cracking with emotion.

"I'm alright. Right as rain, an' everything is gonna be okay," I promised him.

"What happened?" he asked. I shook my head and gave him a look. He nodded swift, knowin' just what I meant. He straightened up, my brave boy, as yet another truck pulled into the front yard and cut its engine and lights.

It was Hex's fancy RAM, and he got out of the driver's seat, Saint getting out the passenger side, both of them sans their cuts as they stalked across the grass in Collier's direction, stopping when one of the Sheriff's deputy's put a hand on Hex's chest.

Hex gave the man a wicked look, like he'd just cursed him where he stood, but the deputy was askin' questions. He was either brave or stupid, just carryin' on with whatever he was sayin'.

Hex thrust his chin in mine an' Tate's direction and said something to the deputy. When the deputy looked my way, I raised my chin and nodded.

Hex came my way, but the deputy stopped Saint.

I left J.P. dealin' with our parents, and Collier answerin' all the questions. I sighed, putting on my emotional big girl panties to deal with what may come from the vice president of the Voodoo Bastards.

He put a hand to my shoulder and his other on Tate's and gave 'em a squeeze. To his credit, he didn't ask if we was alright – instead he said, “As soon as they let us, we'll gather up some of your things and we'll take y'all someplace safe. Alright?”

I swallowed hard and gave a nod, and he tightened his grip on my shoulder imperceptibly and nodded.

“Alright,” he affirmed, and he stood and waited with me an' my son, keepin' any and all comers away from us.

Finally, Collier came over, the cop questioning him letting him go.

“You good, brother?” Saint asked, also having been given leave to come over.

J.P. had our parents over between Daddy's truck and our mamma's car and was tellin' 'em somethin' or other. I didn't care. I really didn't need their bullshit on top of everything else right now. Lord knows, this was all on J.P. and this club of his, but knowing my mother and my daddy, they'd somehow make it all my fault.

I closed my eyes and swayed a little on my feet, letting the bitterness wash over and through me and dissipate for now. The same thing I did anytime I got angry at the injustice of it all. I swear, if I'd been born a boy, I wouldn't catch half as much shit from my dyed-in-the-wool old-world God-fearin'

family as I did. Made me grateful Tate was Tate and not a... a... a Trish or somethin’.

He too seemed immune to my family’s bullshit, having both been born a boy and their first grandchild...

He hugged me tight and Collier put a hand on my back to lend more strength as though he was an inexhaustible wellspring of it.

I suddenly felt guilty as I hadn’t even heard his reply to Saint’s question of if he was good or not.

Damnit.

“Soon as they let you back in the house, pack your bags,” Hex ordered me. “Pack for a good long while. We’ll get this place boarded up for you, an’ take you on outta here for a while.”

“How long is ‘a while?’” I asked and was a little frightened at how emotionless my voice came out. I guess I should have expected that we couldn’t come back for a while, but... *goddamnit this wasn’t fair!* I wanted to scream that. Scream it in all of their faces how unfair it all was but then that hollow voice inside of me came through loud and clear in my head, toneless and with the reality of the situation – *Life’s not fair; Jessie-Lou. Never has been for you, and may well never be...*

“As long as it takes,” Collier said, and I turned to look into those pale blue eyes and saw nothing but a cold and cut-throat determination in them. A silent promise that he would get us back to our lives as soon as possible from this.

I nodded once, slowly, and out of every damn one of ‘em standing around, felt like he was the only one without his thumb up his ass.

It felt like an age before we were allowed back inside. I made Tate stay out with his grandparents, while I went in and got dressed, packed some things for him and for me, and nearly lost it all over again when I picked up his bullet-riddled backpack off the back of his desk chair in his bedroom.

I swallowed hard and refused to lose my mind on a bunch of what-if's that didn't amount to a hill of beans.

If he had been home, he woulda been shot. J.P. too. Their rooms were in the front of the house where the most damage had been done.

I froze when I went into my room.

At the feathers on the bed from the pillows piled at the head. At the three shots across the television on the dresser. They'd apparently ridden back here and had taken some shots at the back of the house, too – but Collier'd saved my life by shoving us both off the bed and onto the floor.

I shuddered at the thought of how close... of how he could have been shot, could have died... all to protect *me*.

I turned to find him standing in the doorway and I startled, taking several deep breaths sawing in and out of my chest as the realization hit me harder than a freight train and knocked my soul clean out my body.

That man loves you...

No other words or actions could prove it any harder than the way he looked at me now, with empathy and... and I don't know what you would call it. But it was there, and it was real. As real as I'd ever seen or felt anything in my whole life.

This man loved me, and he didn't want anything from me... not a thing.

“No, no, hey,” he said as I slipped to my knees right there on the floor, my legs not able to hold me up anymore. He got down on the floor with me and pulled me into his arms and held me tighter ‘n tight. All I could do was cling to him back and focus on breathin’ so I didn't lose the fragile hold that I had left on my sanity.

“That was too close,” I said with cold dread in my heart.

“Yes, it was,” he said, putting a hand to the side of my face and making me look at him. I tried to let my eyes stray back to the television but his other hand joined the first and my eyes were drawn back to his.

“It was close, but you’re here. I’ve got you.”

“You’d’ve taken a bullet for me,” I said and my voice trembled.

“I would’ve taken ‘em all,” he said solemnly and I could see he meant it. I swallowed hard and took a deep breath, held it, and let it out slow.

“You promise me y’all put a stop to this,” I said. “I don’t care if you have to kill every last one of ‘em.”

“I’ll swear that to you an’ more,” he declared.

I swallowed hard and said, “An’ you promise me, if there’s anything, anything at all that I can do to help – you’ll tag me in.”

His mouth crushed down into hard lines and he shook his head.

“Collier...” I know my voice held threat and warning but he simply shook his head harder.

“I need to know you an’ Tate are good at all times if I’m gonna get through this,” he said, and I cocked my head as he took his hands from my face.

“I know it’s only been so very short a time, baby – but you an’ that boy are my peace, and I need you both safe.”

I swallowed hard and made a snap decision.

“I know this ain’t the right time but I need you to listen, and I need you to know somethin’. Somethin’ about me, an’ about Tate...”

He went very still and swallowed hard.

“I knew you had a secret,” he said.

“Only like the biggest secret ever,” I told him. “And you have to *swear to me*, you’ll never tell.”

He stroked a thumb across my cheek, swiping it back and forth, and dipped his chin in something not quite a nod but very well like it.

“If something happens to me, you can’t let Tate know, but you have to protect him.”

“Protect him from what?” he asked.

I swallowed hard. “His real daddy. I don’t want him to have nothin’ to do with that man.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN





Eollier...

She wasn't making sense, but I could see it in her eyes, in the set of her jaw and just how tense she was, that whatever she meant by that – it was big. A pit opened up in the bottom of my gut and yawned, waiting for whatever awful truth that was gonna come spillin' off her lips like pure poison.

“When I was fourteen, and Tate was born, I was too scared to say nothin' and so I just went right along with what everyone thought,” she said, her voice trembling. She jumped when Cy made a noise over in his room as he gathered up some of his shit.

I glanced at the doorway and contemplated getting up and closing it, but the way she gripped my forearms made me stay put.

“What did everyone think?” I asked her quietly, my voice pitched low.

“That my little boyfriend at the time was Tate's daddy.”

“The one that ain't seen him since he was three?” I asked. “He's not?”

She shook her head and looked positively ill. A grim reality started creepin' its way in like one of them eldritch horrors.

“When I was thirteen, my daddy's best friend... he... he came in my room, put a hand over my mouth and did the deed.” She swallowed hard. “I always used a condom with my boyfriend. We was always careful... but ol' Uncle Hampton...” she looked like she was gonna be sick and I just nodded quickly so she knew she needed to say no more. I pulled her to me, kissed her forehead, and wrapped my arms tight around her.

“Trin's name is on the birth certificate, but I think he's always known. If something happens to me an' he does a

DNA test, I don't want Tate anywhere near his real daddy. I don't, so you have to promise me—”

“I promise you, ain't nothing going to happen to you. Nothing. Not in the next four years until Tate is eighteen, and not ever.”

“Never say never,” she said, and it chilled me to the fuckin' bone.

We drew apart, and I touched her face and said, “Thank you for trusting me with your biggest secret,” I said. “It's safe with me...” What was more... I wasn't gonna lie. A rage so deep and so cold permeated every fiber of my being. A rage so deep and so cold I was perfectly calm as I silently vowed to my woman that she would have some fuckin' justice. That this wrong of the last almost fifteen years would not go unanswered.

She swallowed hard and nodded. I fucking watched as the burden lifted from her shoulders, as they dropped and her posture eased visibly and her breathing slowed.

“Let's get some of your things packed up, honey. Get 'em out to the truck and take you and Tate someplace safe, yeah?”

She nodded, and she was calm again. The thing that made Jessie-Lou Gaudet a formidable woman, who was tough as fucking nails, was back in her light brown eyes.

“Collier,” Hex called from out in the living room, and I checked with Jessie. She nodded, and I got to my feet.

I reached down a hand and helped her to her feet and she murmured, “Go. This club got me an' mine into this mess, but I'm well aware y'all are the only ones to get us out of it. So go do what needs doin'.”

“Yes, ma'am.” I gave her a salute and left the room, going out into the living room where Hex stood with Saint and Cy.

Cy gave me a hard look and said, “We get my sister an' my nephew safe, you an' me? We're havin' what they call a come-to-Jesus meetin',” he declared.

I gave him a hard look right back and told him the God's honest truth, "You're goddamn fuckin' right we are, but, brother? That conversation ain't gonna go how you *think* it's gonna go."

Saint looked from me to Cy and back to me. I caught his mane of long hair movin' in my peripheral vision, but my eyes remained locked on Cy's, though.

Hex put a hand to my shoulder, smart enough to know where the real threat lay before anyone else in the room, and he said, "That may be, but for right now? We need to stick a pin in it, fellas, an' get Jessie an' Tate someplace where the Bayou Brethren can't and won't get at 'em while we sort things out."

"Ain't nothin' to 'sort out,'" Cypress declared. "Every last one of those honorless motherfuckers are goin' down for this." He spit right there on the carpet, his chest heaving beneath his cut and Saint put his hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

"You need to keep your fuckin' head," Saint growled low from between gritted teeth.

"Agreed," Hex said, dropping his hand from my shoulder, sure that I was in control. "You can't be sayin' shit like that out here in the cornfield." He met Cypress's eyes and without moving his head, glanced at the wide-open, shot-to-shit open front door of the house.

"You get dressed," Hex ordered me. "We're gonna get to boarding up the house as best we can."

Saint pulled on Cy's shoulder and Cy violently shrugged his hand off.

"This ain't over," he declared at me and I nodded my head.

"Not by a fuckin' longshot," I agreed, and I fucked off back down the hall to find my clothes and my boots and make sure Jessie was makin' good progress.

She was dressed, a duffel bag open on her bed as she haphazardly folded and threw clothes from her dresser and armoire into it.

“Everything good?” she asked, as calm, capable, and in control as I’d ever seen her. I was damn proud of her, and grateful that she realized I was a safe place for her to be fuckin’ vulnerable for once in her life.

I nodded and said, “Keep pulling shit together, baby. I wanna roll on up outta here inside ten minutes if we can.”

She nodded and sped up her packing.

I threw clothes on and glancing over my shoulder made sure to pick up our book from her side of the bed, tucking it into the back of my pants and letting my tee and my cut fall over it. I put my gun back there with it and sighed.

“Just need to grab clothes from Tate’s room,” she said.

I took the duffel from her and said, “I’ll do it. You had it hard enough with his school backpack.”

She nodded and hefted the frayed and hole-filled pack onto her narrow shoulder.

She went with me back to her kid’s room and helped me pack his shit anyway, her face impassive and shuttered as we did it together.

When we went out into the living room, Cy had a bag of his own and Hex and Saint were standing with him.

“Where’s Tate?” she demanded, alarmed.

“Out with our parents,” Cy declared.

“Goddammit, J.P.,” she muttered with consternation and she went out the front door, her shoulders dropping with relief when Tate’s voice filtered in past her calling out, “Mom!”

She’d been right to be annoyed. I guess her mamma’d been up Tate’s ass to go home with her and his papaw.

Her mother was extra, clawin’ at Tate and puttin’ up a hell of a fuss but Jessie-Lou ain’t back down.

“He’s comin’ with me tonight, Ma, and that’s final! He’ll be at your place come Sunday night so he can go to school on Monday, but I ain’t bein’ separated from my son over the whole damn weekend and I ain’t stayin’ with you!”

“Watch how you talk to your mother!” her daddy shouted at her and then the whole family broke out screamin’ at each other in Cajun French, Cy comin’ out the door to wade into the fray and get everybody separated into their respective corners.

Jessie-Lou won her way, but I could tell it wasn’t without a cost. She looked exhausted and frayed as she and Tate piled into the back seat of Hex’s truck.

I went over to my bike to load it up and snorted out a disgusted noise.

“The matter?” Saint called.

“It’s all shot to fuckin’ shit, too!” I called back. “Ain’t sure I should turn her over.”

Cy threw the keys to his truck to Saint and said, “You guys take my truck, load the bike onto the dolly. We’ll get it back to the club and sort it all out from there.” Saint gave a nod and he and I both went jogging out to the garage.

“What was he doin’ here without you here?” I heard his mother demand, and I heard Cy let out an exasperated noise. Saint and I traded a smirk and a grin but hurried the fuck up, getting things situated.

Jessie and Tate watched from the truck, Tate having moved to the front seat for a better view, Hex sitting behind the wheel as we loaded my bike onto the trailer.

“Damn it to hell,” I muttered at the rich smell of gas wafting off the bike as we rolled it up onto the dolly.

Cy had finally gotten his parents to fuck off, and sat on his bike nearby, his headlight trained on us along with Hex’s truck lights so that we could see what the fuck we were doing in the dark.

It took us a while, but the bike got loaded and some of the Sheriff’s men, in deference to Jessie, helped us board up the house. Cy and I kept our cool in front of the cops. We would be settling it later, but for now, there was a bunch of shit to be done.

By the time Saint and I were on the road, following Cy on his bike, I was tired and we were both surprised and not surprised the cops let me take the bike.

“You know they ain’t gonna do shit about this,” Saint declared and I nodded.

“That’s crystal fuckin’ clear,” I said, lookin’ out the back window of the truck at the gleam of the chrome of my bike in the red taillights.

“At least they weren’t assholes about me takin’ her with me.”

“Fuck of a silver lining there, brother.”

I snorted.

No, that was in Hex’s truck, far ahead of me, finally realizing she had someone in her corner. That was the *real* silver lining out of this whole clusterfuck of events.

We pulled through the gate at the club around an hour or so later. The boys were almost all here, piling out of the lit doorway of one of the garage bay doors to look at my bike and help bring it in to where we could assess the damage and likely could start tearing it apart for its rebuild.

For once, I had something more important than my bike to worry about. I got out of the truck and immediately called to Hex, “Where’d you stash my girl?”

He pointed up and across the street and I followed his pointing finger.

Sure enough, Jessie’s unmistakable silhouette was staring down from on high.

“La Croix took Alina an’ my Cor out to his place for safekeeping before we even got back,” he said. “I knew she’d put up a fight an’ didn’t much think you’d like the thought of her bein’ out of your sight longer ‘n a few minutes.”

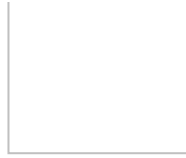
“You’d be right on all of that,” I said and started heading that way.

“I’ll call you when La Croix gets back this way for church,” he called at my back and I threw up a hand to wave my thanks.

Jessie saw me comin’ and disappeared from the window, the door downstairs buzzin’ by the time I got to it to let me in.

CHAPTER NINETEEN





Jessie-Lou...

“Hey,” he said, coming through the door and hugging me tight.

“Hey, yourself,” I said.

“You okay, bud?” he asked, looking to Tate on the couch who was still pale, his face pinched, but I knew my kid was alright just as soon as he opened his mouth.

“Am *I* okay? I wasn’t even home. Y’all are the ones that were shot at. Are *you* okay, or have you done lost your mind?”

I couldn’t help but laugh and Collier joined me.

“Well, I reckon you’re right and yeah, yeah, we’re alright. Ain’t we?” He jostled me a bit, and I nodded.

“I keep tellin’ you,” I said to my boy, and he looked at us skeptically.

“So, uh, does this mean y’all are a thing?” he asked, waving a hand to take us in.

“If it’s alright with you,” Collier said gently and Tate looked at me. I smiled and nodded. He studied us for several seconds more.

“I mean, it ain’t up to me,” he said. “But yeah. Yeah, it’s alright with me.”

Collier and I smiled, and I left Collier’s embrace and took his hand to keep from breaking contact completely, leading us further into the room. I sat down on the middle cushion of the couch next to my kid and Collier took a seat on the other side of me, putting a hand atop my thigh and giving it a squeeze.

It was a cozy and well decorated little one-bedroom apartment, but it wasn’t home, and I didn’t think I’d ever feel safe again let alone in the city.

“Hex said we’d be safe up here,” Tate said. “That even if someone was stupid enough to take shots at the club, we’d be up above it all up here.”

I nodded.

“He ain’t wrong,” Collier said.

“I’d still keep away from the windows,” I told him uneasily.

“I’d still rather be here than at Grandma’s,” Tate said, rolling his eyes and I couldn’t help but smirk.

“They love you and they’re just worried about you is all,” I told him.

He sighed. “I wish they cared about you half as much as they cared about me,” he said and I blinked, shocked, while Collier just tilted his head and didn’t say anything.

“I don’t know what to say to that, kiddo,” I told him and he looked sad.

“Me either,” he said with a shrug. “Do you think they know what a disappointment they are?” he asked and I snorted. I couldn’t help it. That was some funny shit.

I think Tate realized what he’d said because he grinned at me. Collier cut in then and said, “Ain’t nobody know how you feel about ‘em ‘til you tell ‘em.”

“I don’t wanna hurt anybody’s feelings,” Tate said. “Not like they hurt my mom’s... but I don’t really think they know they do, you know?”

“They don’t,” I said with a shrug, meaning “they don’t hurt my feelings” which I knew was a lie – but Tate didn’t need to know that. He took the other meaning.

“Well then, maybe you should tell ‘em.” He looked at me plaintively, waiting for my response.

“Yeah, well, maybe I should,” I said, and I sighed. We were all silent for a long time and I finally took a deep breath and said, “Boy, I can’t get nothin’ past you, can I, kid?”

He looked a little sad and a little proud at the same time and said the sweetest thing, “Well, I am my mother’s son and ain’t nobody get anything past you, can they?”

I glowed a little with pride at that and said, “You’re goddamn right.”

He grinned and we all just sort of sighed and sat in some introspective silence, winding down from all the excitement.

A little while after that, Collier asked, “You want to stay in the room with your mom while I take the couch?”

Tate shook his head and said, “Nah, I’ll take the couch. You guys go ahead.”

“I love you,” I told my kid. Hooking my hand around his neck, I pulled his head into my kiss.

“I love you, too, Mom.”

Collier and I wound up in bed a little while after that, the bedroom door wide, the blue from the television screen flickering along the ceiling and through the doorway as Tate watched something quietly in the other room. By the time we all got to sleep, I didn’t think a single one of us would get up before one in the afternoon the next day – or rather later today, with how late the hour had gotten.

I sighed heavily and Collier kissed my forehead in the dark.

“You trust me?” he asked.

“You know I do,” I replied in a chastising tone. Like, how could he even ask me that after everything?

“I’m going to handle everything,” he said. “I promise.”

I nodded against his shoulder because I could trust Collier. I could trust him and I believed him – until he gave me a reason not to, and I didn’t think he would ever do that.

He smoothed a hand over my shoulder in its oversized tee and I sighed in contentment, cuddling close and made him promise me, “Just be careful when you do. I feel like I only just found you and I feel like I’d die if I lost you.”

He pressed yet another kiss to my forehead, and I didn't think I would ever get tired of that.

"I'll be more than careful," he said. "I reckon I have no intentions of doin' to you what you been handed your whole life."

"An' what's that?" I asked carefully.

"A raw fuckin' deal," he answered. "An' those days are over."

He said the last with so much finality that I couldn't help but believe him.

I closed my eyes and sighed out, "Thank you." He squeezed me a little closer.

It felt good.

We were woken up the next day by his phone buzzing across the bedside table. I groaned and glared at it but the glare smoothed to something like surprise when I spotted our book, just sitting there like it'd been there all along.

I hadn't even thought to grab it.

"Yeah," Collier answered the phone. A low voice came through it, but I couldn't make out what it was saying.

"Yeah," Collier answered it. "I'll be right down." He hung up the phone, and I groaned.

"Duty calls, baby," he murmured.

I sighed and grumped out, "Be careful."

He tipped my chin up and kissed me soundly.

"I promise," he told me and then he fled the nice warm bed.

I listened to him pull on his clothes and go out the door, waking up Tate on the couch to come lock the door behind him.

I sighed out, frustrated, but I knew the drill.

The club called, he answered. It was the way of things. I'd seen it with my brother for years.

CHAPTER TWENTY





Collier...

“I hear you an’ Cy may or may not have beef,” La Croix called by way of greeting when I got across the street. He spit on the ground from his perch on top of the picnic table and eyed me with his creepy inked-out eyes.

I nodded and asked, “Who came runnin’ to Daddy, first?” I asked. “Hex or Saint?”

LaCroix stared at me and finally, when I didn’t relent, he said, “It ain’t like that an’ you know it. We’re all on the same side, or did you forget that?”

I bowed my head, stuffing my hands into my jeans pockets and shook my head. “Nah, I ain’t forget... an’ the shit between me an’ Cy ain’t the end all of be all’s,” I told him. “But there’s sure to be a fight. There *needs* to be a fight.”

He nodded and said, “Make it fuckin’ quick. We can’t hold these dumb fucks off and keep our girls and families safe if we’re fighting each other.”

I nodded. “Might need to remind Cy of that,” I said, and he raised an eyebrow. I shrugged and said, “We’ll see.”

“Don’t think I won’t,” he intoned, and I worked my jaw back and forth to loosen it up. After what he’d just told me, I only had one conclusion I could reach.

“I reckon you would,” I said, and he got up, trailing behind me as I went to the clubhouse door and hauled it open.

“How long it take for you to start fucking my sister?” Cy demanded, and I didn’t give him any fuckin’ quarter.

“Why? Not like you give a flyin’ fuck about her unless she’s doin’ something’ for you. You an’ your whole trash fuckin’ family with the way you treat her!”

“You son of a bitch!” he seethed, and he came at me.

Boy did it cause an uproar with the rest of the guys, but I didn't much mind that. What I minded was makin' damn sure that if I was fixin' to get hit by one o' the ham hocks Cy called his fists, that I was gonna get some fuckin' licks in first.

"Real fuckin' sweet of you to all of a sudden care about her now," I grated as he let fly. I dodged back, once, twice, a third time, and I came on up on the inside and buried my fist in his gut.

He oofed, but it didn't slow his tank ass down.

He popped me right in the mouth and I spit blood. He stood, chest heaving, and I flashed back on her face the night before, her private pain bubbling to the surface, the poison feelings of hopelessness and isolation, and her deepest and darkest secret pouring from her lips like the blood I spat now. All her pain and all that hurt from the internal injuries she carried for *years*, all because her own fuckin' family had failed to foster an environment where she felt safe enough to fuckin' tell 'em anything.

I tackled him and took him right off his feet into the coffee table and it crashed, collapsing under our combined weight right to the area rug underneath it.

I let fly with a bunch of jabs to his ribs as he tried to get some purchase, elbowing me in the back. It hurt, but I was too pissed to let up.

"She can't trust you for shit!" I shouted.

"I'm her fuckin' brother! Who the fuck are you to her?" he demanded.

"The man she can rely on in a pinch when she couldn't count on you her whole fuckin' life!" I screamed, as hands pulled me off of him. He worked at getting up and I let fly with my foot, catching him in the fucking mouth with the steel toe. He jerked back, his lip splitting wide and his hands going to his mouth to cover it.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Tate's father, you judgmental fuck!"

“What about that weasley little drug-addicted fuck?” he demanded.

“Goddamn! You’re so fuckin’ *blind!* All of you makin’ up your fuckin’ mind, putting the weight of the fuckin’ world on her shoulders, and teaching her she ain’t trust none of your asses for shit!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” He was calmed down, his confusion taking over even as my rage just amped up that much more.

“You all painted her right into *fuckin’* corner, pregnant and thirteen. All of you just fuckin’ assuming and judging, and not one of you – not you, your mom, or your fuckin’ daddy on her side! She’s been carrying this shit, this load for almost *fifteen fuckin’ years* until last night when she fuckin’ *begged me* to make sure if somethin’ fuckin’ happened to her, that I make damn sure nothing happened to Tate, that he not go to his fuckin’ dad and that there’s no DNA test done.”

“What?”

“She said Trinity ain’t the kid’s father – that your daddy’s grown-ass man of a best friend Hamblin is!”

“Wait, is this *Maury* or *Jerry Springer?*” Axeman asked.

La Croix pointed at Axe and shouted savagely, “Shut up!” I could see it in the boss man’s face – the calculations, the connections he was making in real time.

Our president turned to me, the rage on his face a match for my own. Calm and quiet he told me, “You say that again.”

“She begged me not to say anything to anyone, but she said Hamblin came into her room one night, put his hand over her mouth, and he raped her. That she always used a condom with her boyfriend and they were careful as fuck, but this slimy fuck named Hamblin didn’t.”

Cypress staggered back against the pool table and put his hands out to catch himself. He grabbed onto the cue ball and bellowing in rage, he threw it against the cinderblock wall on the other side of the big room.

It got quiet after that. Real quiet.

“The rest of you fuck off to the chapel,” La Croix ordered. “Cy, you an’ Collier stay right here...” and it hit me.

La Croix knew the Gaudet family. They all grew up on the same bayou and waterways together. This was as personal to him in its own way as it was to me an’ Cypress at this point. The rest of the guys gave us the room, all except for Hex who stuck around and made eye contact with me. I gave a nod.

He was a cooler head, outside all of this without a personal dog in this fight. By the same token, he was the closest thing that I had to kin out here – both of us growing up in neighboring hollers, stomping through the same parts of the Appalachian forests. We were of the same people and had the same upbringing. That lent its own support.

“Hex,” La Croix intoned.

“All due respect, my brother, cooler heads prevail in a situation like this. I reckon it might be a good idea I stick around.”

“Not that,” La Croix said. “I was gonna say, you mind getting the three of us a shot of bourbon?”

“Hell,” Hex declared. “I do believe after a bombshell like that, I’d right like to join in on that drinkin.”

La Croix nodded.

“Belly up to the bar, boys,” he ordered me and Cy.

Not sure I’d ever seen Cypress lose that cocky gleam in his eye or look so uncertain. Not sure if that made my ass feel sorry for him or if it just served to piss me off more.

I slid up onto one of the bar’s stools, La Croix on up next to me, and Cy on the other side of him.

Hex got behind the bar and brought out four shot glasses, bringing down the bottle of La Croix’s good shit.

“Can’t wait for the fuckin’ ‘shine to finish,” I grumbled, taking the proffered shot and downing it. It burned, sure, but it

ain't that *good* burn of my papaw's shine. I craved that like a motherfucker right now.

"I don't understand," Cypress said, pushing his emptied shot glass toward Hex for another pour.

I could see the gears in La Croix's tatted bald head turning.

"This ain't a club thing," he said. "This is a family thing... but if y'all want our help..."

"No," Cy said, shaking his head. "I don't wanna believe it." He downed the next shot and looked green around the gills and I scoffed.

"Your *family*..." I said the word with as much derision as I could muster. "Y'all ain't deserve Jess."

Cy buried his head in his hands, scratching at his close-cropped hair at the top of it as I could tell a whole bunch of shit replayed in his thick skull.

"I need to talk to Jessie-Lou," he said, standing up.

"Well hold on now," Hex declared, holding out a hand to me to settle in my seat as I'd almost got up to rock Cypress' shit all over again.

"I think your sister's been through quite enough at the moment," he said. "I do believe much more, and she's liable to break. We don't want that."

"What are you thinkin'?" I asked.

"I've got an idea or three," Hex declared and I knew he might... he always did... "But right now, I do believe we need to prioritize some things."

I leaned forward, past La Croix, and Cy did too, each of us looking at each other, glaring bloody murder at the other.

La Croix put his hand on Cy's chest and looked him in the eye.

"I'll tell you the same thing I told ol' Collier outside," he said. "We can't fight the Bayou Brethren and keep your sister and your nephew safe if we in here too busy fightin' each other."

Cy wiped blood off his chin and glared down the bar at me but begrudgingly nodded.

“I’m pissed at you,” I told Cy. “But I am in deep with your sister, and I just want better and what’s best for her. She’s gonna see it as an ultimate fuckin’ betrayal me even tellin’ you at all, let alone like this, but goddamnit, I can see how this has been killin’ her. She’s all but dead inside with how y’all fuckin’ treat her.”

“An’ just what the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Cy demanded, fire sparking off in his eyes, which were just a shade or two darker ‘n his sister’s.

“Shit,” I sneered. “You ain’t even see it, not even now,” I said.

“Hey, stop it, the both of you,” Hex scolded.

“No, make your point, y’ fuckin’ know it all,” Cypress demanded.

“Not constructive!” Hex called out.

“Cy, you know Jessie-Lou better ‘n anyone,” La Croix said quietly. “Would she make something like this up?”

“No,” he said immediately.

“Do you not believe her?” La Croix demanded.

Cy cleared his throat. “I don’t *want to* believe her, no... but that ain’t the same thing. I believe somethin’ happened, yeah...” He looked uncomfortable as fuck and I wanted to tell him, *that. That right there. Welcome to how she’s felt the last almost fifteen goddamn years since that pedo stole into her bedroom.*

“Easy enough to get some definitive proof,” Hex said judiciously.

“How, without tipping this fuckin’ pedo off that we’re onto him?” I grated.

“This Trinity guy, he’s still around, yeah?” Hex asked.

“Yeah,” Cy answered.

“I’ll order up some of them genealogy DNA kit things you can take and send in online,” Hex said.

“Ain’t that playin’ with fire?” La Croix asked.

Hex sighed and leaned against the bar from the other side.

“We give one to the guy you thought was the baby daddy this entire time,” Hex said. “And yeah, it maybe is a little bit, because that means we gotta give one to Tate, too, but when the results link up and shows his baby daddy ain’t the father, you’ll have your answer, won’t you?”

I frowned. “How is this playin’ with fire for Cy?” I demanded.

“Shit,” Hex said. “Law Enforcement is all up in those genealogy sites, arrestin’ fellas that ain’t take no test based on the DNA their relatives turned in. They’ve caught all sorts of killers for unsolved homicides from the ‘70s and ‘80s and shit based on the DNA their kids and siblings turned in to learn if the fam is really from Ireland or not.”

Cypress shook his head and said the first decent thing I think I’d heard when it came to his sister thus far.

“I don’t care,” he said. “If it’s true... well, fuck, when we prove it’s true... shit!” He pounded his fist on the bar and let out a frustrated snort. “I don’t want Jessie-Lou to have to carry this shit by herself anymore and I damn sure want retribution when it comes out that it’s true.”

“Your daddy ain’t gonna believe shit if their ain’t irrefutable proof,” I said and Cy looked at me.

“Yeah,” he said, and he nodded his head.

“But in order to fix this and fix it once an’ for all, an’ the right way...” La Croix declared, and we all sat with that a minute.

“Our people are the most stubborn people I know,” La Croix said.

Hex and I exchanged a look, and I said, “We Appalachian folk and you Cajun folk are pretty cut from the same cloth where that shit’s concerned.”

La Croix and Cy both nodded.

“Priorities,” Hex reminded us all gently.

“As much as I hate to say it, this is important – but it ain’t what shot up your house last night.”

“Nah, but this call is comin’ from *inside* the house,” La Croix said. “They’re both equally important, just in different ways.”

We all sort of just stared at our president and I asked, “Did you just commit to a pop culture reference?” I asked.

“A movie reference, innit?” Hex asked.

“What?” La Croix scowled.

“I didn’t think you watched movies,” Cypress said and La Croix’s scowl deepened.

“I watch movies,” he said, and he sounded almost defensive.

The rest of us broke into wide grins and even chuckled a little bit.

“We consider this quashed, for now?” La Croix demanded.

Cy and I traded a cautious look and both sort of just started nodding.

“Alright, then. I feel like we just got took to church, but, gentlemen, let’s divest of your phones and let’s go to church,” Hex declared.



“YOU FELLAS wanna fill us in on what the fuck that was all about out there?” Chainsaw asked, spinning a quarter on the top of the table in front of himself.

“No,” Cy declared.

“Figured it was pretty obvious,” Axe declared, grinning, and La Croix growled without saying a word. Axe, who didn’t always know when to quit, leaned back in his seat and just

grinned from ear to ear. I think it was just because he thrived on chaos. It energized him the way it wore a regular man the fuck out.

“Suffice to say we all need to tread careful from here on out before any of us catch a charge,” Hex declared.

“Look,” I said. “I been outta the loop – just what the fuck is going on?” I asked. “Why did they show up at Jessie’s door in the first place and why would they risk a power play like they did last night?”

Hex sighed and said, “Near as I can figure, this beef all started back durin’ gator season, yeah?”

“The TL;DR is that some of these Bayou Brothel sons were poachin’ Cy’s gator lines. Cy an’ his daddy ended up beefin’ with ‘em about it, and it didn’t have shit to do with the club. Then these fuckin’ twats decided to start encroaching on Bastard’s territory and so we thought we’d kill two birds with one stone some weeks back, and use it as an opportunity to give them a clear signal to fuck the fuck off, and get ourselves a get-into-jail-free card for the weekend to take care of the little problem that was sparing Hex’s woman a shitload of drama – am I right?”

Hex inclined his head to Chainsaw who was the one speaking.

“Somehow, someway, even though none of ‘em ended up spending the weekend in jail, the Bayou Brothel sons got their fuckin’ thongs jammed so far up their ass, they decided that Cy was the problem and that they needed to escalate things. They landed on Cy’s doorstep, and the honorless bastards that they are, got Cy’s sister involved.”

“Unfortunately,” La Croix piped up. “That’s where things sorta went off the rails. Jess stabbed one of these fuckwits in self-defense in her own fuckin’ home and while he and his shitty ass brothers got away, he didn’t end up making it. Now they’re real pissed because one of their bodies dropped and it really is an all-out war.”

I swore and Cy looked like a proud pappa, but he still said, “Don’t tell Jess. I know she’s tough as nails and shit, but I don’t know how she’d feel if she knew she killed a man.”

I snorted. “He came into her home and threatened her and her kid. She’d be as proud as you are now,” I said and I knew in so much as I knew that the sky was fuckin’ blue and water was fuckin’ wet.

Now if she’d killed someone innocent, by accident? Shit, she’d rip herself apart.

“Now at first, we think they had some kind of a deal with the cops, a promise that if they gave the po-po enough reason or an excuse to get us all off to prison, then they’d be able to move in on our territory and that’d be that, an easy way to expand their operation,” Hex said.

Axe snorted. “They couldn’t hold our spot if they wanted to. They ain’t have the guts.”

A rowdy cheer went up around the table and the boys knocked and pounded fists on the top, but I had a sinking feeling in my gut.

“If he didn’t make it, what kind of trouble is Jess in with the law? And how come they didn’t bring it up last night?” I asked. Cy was trading a worried look with me.

“Far as we know, dude died at the hospital but he wouldn’t say how he got stabbed,” Hex said.

“I mean, what’s he gonna say?” Bennie asked. “Oh yeah, I forced my way into this house and the woman who lived there defended herself?” He shook his head. “Citizen cops have no fucking idea what happened, and it behooves the Bayou Bitch Boys to keep their fuckin’ mouths shut. They were squarely in the wrong from a legal standpoint and ain’t shit happen to Jessie if the LEOs did get wind of it.”

“I mean, it’d be a headache for sure, but no – we think Jess is in the clear for now and we don’t wanna borrow any more trouble than we’ve already got in our hands at this point,” Hex declared and I nodded.

It was a good point, even if the whole thing still left me uneasy.

“So, what do we do from here?” Cypress asked.

“I say they wanna go low, we go lower,” Axe declared.

“That’s the old way, under Ruthless,” Hex declared and we all sat with that for a minute.

“I ain’t goin’ after their women or children,” La Croix declared. “We’re better ‘n they are and we’re better than that... but not by much. You wanna go absolutely feral, Axe, we can do that, just not on anybody’s woman or kid. Even under Ruth, that wasn’t our way. It ain’t ever gonna be our way, either.”

La Croix’s voice was firm, and all heads were nodding along in agreement.

“We need to prioritize and mobilize boys, but we need to be smart about it,” Hex said. “We got a lot at stake out there with the stills an’ tryin’ to go legit.”

“Start pickin’ ‘em off one by one?” Louie asked.

“Or all at once.” Axe grinned.

“How do you figure on the all at once?” I asked.

“Man, ain’t none of you talk to the cotton ball out with them Florida boys?” he asked.

I vaguely remembered who he was talking about. One of their guys had basically a platinum-blond fro.

“Wasn’t his name fuckin’ Pyro?” I asked.

“Yep,” Axe declared.

“I imagine he got the name playing with fire,” Chainsaw said.

“Right again,” Axe said. “Except he was less a firebug and more a, likes to blow-shit-up kind of a fella.”

“I’ve seen the kind of damage an improvised explosive device can do,” I said. “But I couldn’t really tell you how they’re made. Still, I know one or two guys that do, and they

still talk to me. They know how bogus my discharge was. They were there.”

“Might be worth makin’ a few discreet calls,” Hex mused.

I shook my head. “Nah, I would ride on out there,” I said.

“Not alone you won’t,” LaCroix declared. “In fact, none of us rides alone with colors and if you *do* need to ride alone, you do it incognito for right now.”

Hex was nodding along with what La Croix was saying while the rest of us just kind of stared a little shell-shocked.

“Excuse me, but did you just say what I thought you said?” Bennie asked.

“They went after Cy’s sister. I wouldn’t put shit past these motherfuckers,” La Croix declared.

“I don’t like it,” Chainsaw said.

“We’re the Voodoo Bastards, not a bunch of pussies,” Axe agreed.

“We ain’t gon’ be shit, they start picking us off one by one,” Hex said.

“Exactly why no one sports their colors or rides alone in their colors until we can start picking *them* off one by one,” La Croix said. He turned to Axe and said, “We need to send a message, a flashy one at that. Not only to the Bayou Brethren but to any an’ all that support them, that doing so is hazardous to their health. What you learn from that Kraken boy?” he asked.

Axeman’s grin was a feral one. “We dropping bodies with this message or just a building?” he asked.

La Croix thought about it. “We don’t want the city an’ surrounding area turnin’ on *us*,” he said. “Let’s start with a building and go from there.”

Hex was nodding along with everything La Croix was saying, a slow and measured bobbing of his head that made me wonder just how much of this was pre-rehearsed between

the two of ‘em or if they was just that on point and in tune nowadays.

“We got a particular building in mind?” Chainsaw asked, his eyebrows raised.

“What about that bar inside our territory that keeps hostin’ ‘em?” Saint put in.

“Swamp Daddy’s was the name of the place,” Cy said and his grin was real unfriendly.

“Owner got real shitty after our little throwdown up in there,” Axe recalled and I frowned.

“Define shitty.” Bennie raised his eyebrows and traced the rim of his rocks glass with a fingertip.

“Said we was banned for life and took up for them fucktards, knowin’ full well they was in our territory,” Saint said and La Croix leaned back in his seat at the head of the table.

“Hex, correct me if I’m wrong headed in my thinkin’ here, but it’s been long enough now that should an... accident occur, it wouldn’t look all that suspicious, now would it? As in nothin’ should readily come back on us.”

Hex rubbed his chin and looked thoughtful, as though he was mathin’ it out.

“I do believe we’d be skirtin’ the edge but we’d be alright unless somethin’ overtly put us there.”

“I do believe it would be a real headache if somethin’ was left behind at a crime scene like that,” I declared and a bunch of the boys were smirkin’ around the table.

Leave it to Louie to be the one. “I don’t get it,” he said out loud.

“That’s alright,” Hex said. “The less that know, the better it’ll be if the law comes knockin’.

“Shouldn’t come knockin’ on *our* door,” Chainsaw muttered.

“Never know,” Axe mused. “NOPD might grow half a brain sometime this century.”

We all had a laugh at that. We knew that where they weren't bumbling, absolute inept fools – they were massively corrupt an' just about firmly in our pockets.

“Right... Axe, it was your idea. You an' Chainsaw feel like figurin' it out?” La Croix asked.

“Oh, I think we might have a recipe or two to try out,” Chainsaw said and he and Axe traded a goofy look that said they were all about it.

“Alright then, that's settled. Magic make it happen.”

I sat back and thought about it. Blowin' up Swamp Daddy's after hours when no one was there was definitely a departure under what we would have done if Ruthless was still president of this operation. He would have done something wild, something reckless as shit, which would have seen all of us doing prison time. Especially at the end of his reign o' terror. I was only a little bit conflicted on this course of action.

On the one hand, after livin' through so many extremes under Ruthless, it didn't seem like enough – especially after what was done to Jess an' Tate. On the other hand, it was a more 'n fair warning shot across the bow. They wrecked Cy's house, but it was fixable.

I spoke up. “Just make sure whatever you do to the place, it's grand. I mean, reduce it to a pile of fuckin' matchsticks, no repairs. They gonna have to rebuild.”

“What's your reasonin'?” Hex asked curiously.

“We can fix Cy's place, but escalation of force dictates they gon' have no choice but to *rebuild*.”

There were a lot of nods around the table.

“Speakin' of Cy's place,” Chainsaw put out there. “Anything we can do to help with whatever little talk show drama y'all had goin' on out there?”

“No,” Cy and I both said in unison and Bennie's eyebrows shot up. He gave a low whistle.

“Okaaayyy,” Chainsaw said.

“You need help, you just holler. Y’all know we got your backs,” Hex reminded us like we needed it.

“Appreciate it,” I said.

He nodded.

We covered a few smaller things and went over the Moonshine operation before adjourning.

I got up along with everyone else, ready to head across the street to check on my woman and her boy when Saint asked me, “You ready to come an’ check out your bike?”

Fuck.

“Yes and no,” I said, and he nodded.

“I feel you on that one,” he said.

Cy said, “I’m goin’ to talk to my sister.” I caught his arm before he could go by. He shook me off and scowled at me and said, “No, not about that!” and I gave a nod. He swore and stalked out of the room and down toward the common room of the clubhouse.

I sighed and raked a hand back through my hair and said, “Lead the way.”

Saint shook his head and declared, “Way too much fuckin’ drama around here lately for my liking.”

“You and me both,” I agreed.

It was already a long day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE





Jessie-Lou...

“Well, your uncle is comin’,” I said, looking up from the random book I’d pulled from one of the shelves up here. I was sitting in the window seat overlooking the clubhouse down below as John-Paul looked both ways before crossing the street.

“Okay, tell me when!” Tate was eager to be the one to buzz him in through the door downstairs.

“I can’t tell,” I said. “Just wait for him to hit the bell or whatever.”

A buzzing sound filled the apartment and Tate grinned like a fool and hit the intercom button and in an overly feminized voice called out, “Who is it?”

I heard Cy laugh through the box downstairs and he said, “Buzz me in, buddy, I need to come up an’ talk to you an’ your mom.”

I couldn’t say I liked the sound of that. It always filled me with a sense of dread when anyone said anything along the lines of “we need to talk” without any kind of warning ahead of time. It almost was never somethin’ good.

“Unlock the door,” I told my son when he tried to fool around when J.P. made it on up here.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, geez,” he said, and J.P. ruffled his hair as he came through the door.

“She knows, buddy. That’s just how your mom is when she gets stressed. Always goes super serious on us.”

I raised an eyebrow and gave my brother a cold look, demanding, “What happened to you?” His bottom lip was split and swelling like mad and he had some blood on his white undershirt which was peeking over the collar by a good bit of his black overshirt.

He touched his lip and gave a one-shouldered shrug, sayin', "Fundamental difference of opinion with your new boyfriend."

I set the book I had in my hands aside on the window seat and practically leaped to my feet and said, "John-Paul Mercy Gaudet!" using his first, middle, and last name the way our mamma always did when we was in trouble.

"Oh, crap," Tate muttered and went pale behind my brother. My son looked this way and that, and said, "I have to go to the bathroom." He went in and shut the door tight.

"I swear to the good lord above, you hurt him, I'm gonna kick your ass!"

Always infuriating, John-Paul just chuckled at me and said, "Relax! He's fine, I'm fine – not that you're too worried." I gave him a look like he was bein' damn stupid because he was. Ain't nothin' out there alive could hurt my brother in a hand-to-hand fight. But then what he said next surprised me, "An' besides all that, your boy won."

"What?" I narrowed my eyes.

"Hell yeah, you heard me, he won. An' there you are standin' there all worried about him. Ow!"

His ow was from me pickin' back up the hardback book and me chuckin' it at his big dumb head.

"Why you always gotta be throwin' shit?" he demanded.

"An' get inside your reach, you big dumb ape?" I crossed my arms. "An' just what was you fightin' about anyway?" I demanded.

"You, of course."

I rolled my eyes. "I don't need you defendin' my virtue," I told him. "Besides that, in case you ain't noticed, you're close to fifteen years too damn late for all that!"

"I know," he said, giving me a look that damn sure did look like he was a whole lot of sorry, which took me aback.

Did Collier...? I dismissed the thought almost as swiftly as the suspicion had formed. He wouldn't. He wasn't like that. Besides, if he had, even dollars on the fact that Cy wouldn't be able to contain himself about it. He'd be up here yellin' at me somethin' awful about sayin' anything like that about Hamblin. Ol' Nuckie Ham Bone as we'd always called him could do no wrong as far as my daddy an' my brother was concerned and it wouldn't be a leap for either one of 'em to go from slut to liar where I was concerned.

Cypress saw somethin' on my face, I guess, because he dropped his head and looked at the floor, his mouth twistin' like he was tryin' to make a big damn decision on what the right thing was to say in this moment.

"I'm sorry, Jess," he said.

"For what?" I asked as he bent and picked up the book, closing it; but not before makin' sure the pages was alright. Looked like I'd managed to teach him a thing or two. Every once in a while, somethin' did manage to get through that thick skull of his.

"I can't make it up for not bein' around so much, an' I damn sure can't make it up to you fer those jackals shootin' up our house," he said and he sort of shrugged a little helplessly and continued with, "I don't know where to even begin on tryin' to make it up for you an' for Tater. All I can do is tell you, 'I'm sorry' an' I know it ain't enough an' I don't like that."

I sighed and dropped back down onto the window seat and said, "I love you, you big dumb ox."

I turned and looked down on the clubhouse across the street, at the small knot of brothers. It looked like Axe, Chainsaw, and Louie, down inside the fence, smokin' and drinkin some beers, talkin' and laughin'.

I sighed, and he said behind me, "But?"

I shook my head. "Ain't no 'but,' brother. I just love you, but you sho' don't make it easy sometimes."

I sniffed, my eyes welling, and he sighed and came over, sitting next to me and taking up most of my field of vision. He looked down at his hands and scratched at a thick callous at the base of his fingers on his palm.

“Ain’t a single Gaudet alive that makes it easy to love ‘em,” he said, and I had to smile at that.

“Y’ ain’t wrong there,” I said.

“Y’know there are rules to this life, right?” he asked, and he looked out the window with me down on the club and his brothers down there.

I shook my head. “I don’t, really. That’s always been your thing and you ain’t talk about it much.”

“That’s because it’s a dangerous life, an’ you can’t get in any kind of trouble should the law come knockin’ if you ain’t know anything.”

I blinked and had to confess to myself that I ain’t never thought of it that way.

“But there are rules, Jess. Rules like you got a fight with a man, that fight is *with that man*. You leave his family out of it. That’s always been the rule – an’ these Bayou Bitches, they ain’t followin’ the rules like we never seen.” He shrugged.

“So what you goin’ to do about it?” I demanded.

“Stuff,” he said slowly. “An’ things... bad ones. But we’re keepin’ the fight with them.”

“I don’t much like the thought of me an’ Tate bein’ collateral damage in a fight that ain’t have nothin’ to do with us in any which way,” I said.

“I know,” J.P. said, nodding.

“Well, they started it, yeah?” I asked.

“Yeah, they did,” he said with dead certainty.

“An’ y’all fixin’ to finish it, am I right?”

“Oh, yeah,” he agreed. “An’ we’re all fixin’ to do our absolute best to make sure ain’t a damn thing happen to you,

to Tate, or none of the club's other ol' ladies."

"Yeah, well, I can look after m'self and for Tate." He nodded at that, his eyebrows going up and I felt a savage little self-satisfied smile cross my lips. "You just make sure when you finish it, you do it in such a way you put the fear of God into the people around these parts. You feel me?"

His expression was a sober one when he met my eyes and nodded.

"How about you, me, an' Tate go do somethin' today?" he asked. "As a family. We ain't done somethin', the three of us in a while."

Of course that was when Tate poked his head out the bathroom. "What about Collier?" he asked, and I could tell it surprised ol' J.P.

"You really like him, don'tcha?" J.P. asked my son.

"Hell yeah," my kid said. "He listens to me an' explains things and we play video games together. He doesn't just tell me, 'because, that's why' an' doesn't act all bossy an' shit."

"Language," I said and raised my eyebrow. I was gonna let him get away with the "hell" but the "shit" was pushin' it just a little too far. "What's the rule?" I asked.

"I can say whatever I want when I'm eighteen," he said and rolled his eyes.

J.P. smiled and nodded. "Fair, that's all pretty fair," he said. "We can ask him, but I think he's gonna be pretty occupied with gettin' his bike back up and runnin' today."

"Is that what he's doin' down there?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Well, why don't we go on down an' see if we can lend a hand," I suggested. "An' if'n we can't, we can see what he wants for lunch an' see about bringin' it back for 'im."

"That sounds good," Tate said, perking up.

"Go on an' get some warmer clothes 'n what you got on yer body an' find your shoes," I told him. He nodded eagerly

and took off, goin' around and doin' what I said.

J.P. put his hand on my knee and gave it a squeeze.

I looked at him and he said, "I'm gonna try an' do better, Jess. Be around more or take Tater out fishin' an' huntin' with me more."

I nodded and said, "You can start with fixin' our house. A lot of useful skills you can teach 'im with that."

He nodded and said, "Think it might be safer hirin' some of that out – at least until some of this wildfire dies down."

I swallowed hard and said, "I got a lot to think about when it comes to how I'm gonna be gettin' Tate to an' from school an' me to and from work and the like."

"You can take my truck," J.P. said and handed me the keys.

I took them and looked down at them in my hand.

"You hate me drivin' that thing," I said.

"Almost as much as you hate drivin' it when you have to," he agreed, and I laughed.

"I ain't hate drivin' it as much as you think. I just hated how much shit you give me."

"Well, now – ain't gonna give you any shit no more. I mean it. I'm glad you're okay. Scared my soul right out my body when that radio call come into the boat last night."

"I figured y'all would be worried about Tate," I said.

He knocked his shoulder into mine and said, "You're irreplaceable too."

"Didn't think y'all would miss me much until it came to cookin' your food and washin' your clothes."

His shoulders dropped, and I looked away afore I started cryin'.

"Shit, Jess... I ain't got no one on this planet to keep me in line but you," he said. "You go, and my conscience might as well go with you." He sniffed and looked away and said,

“You’re the only thing I think that’s ever made me a decent man.”

“Man?” I joked. “I dunno if I’d go that far but the rest? Yeah, that sounds about right.”

He laughed then and leaned over into me, pushin’ me over, and I laughed too.

“I love you, too, little sister.”

Yeah. I needed the reminder.



COLLIER’S BIKE WAS FUCKED. Like, absolutely fucked. As in probably needed an entire engine tear down and rebuild and that wasn’t even to mention a new gas tank and some other cosmetic repairs. It was gonna be laid up for weeks.

“Good think we got the rat bike for you to use until you got yours up an’ runnin’,” La Croix said and jerked his head against a back wall of the garage. We all followed his gesture and Tate was the one to say it, “Ugh, that thing’s ugly.”

The men around us laughed and chuckled. “That’s your first bike, little man,” Chainsaw declared and Tate looked indignant.

“Nuh-uh! Nuckie, can we start buildin’ one now so when I turn eighteen I can ride with you?”

“You can get your driver’s license when you’re sixteen,” Hex said.

Tate said, “Yeah, but my mom says I can’t ride anythin’ but a dirt bike or four-wheeler until I’m eighteen.”

“That’s right,” I declared.

The guys all looked at me like I’d said something gross, and I shrugged ‘em off.

“I’ll work on her,” Collier said casually, and he winked at me.

“Gonna take a lot of convincing when it comes to my baby,” I told him coolly. “He’s the only one I got an’ the only one I’m gettin’,” I reminded him.

“I’m takin’ my nephew and my sister out to lunch, maybe walk around the Quarter, you feel like comin’?” he asked.

Collier looked surprised.

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “Ain’t much I can do here without parts an’ I’d wanna start at the bone yard for that.”

“Tomorrow,” J.P. declared.

“Sure,” Collier nodded.

“You an’ Jess can use my truck,” my brother said.

“I gotta find a truck of my own,” I groaned and sighed.

“Let’s start with lunch,” Collier said. “I’m starved.”

“Y’all have fun. Leave your cuts here at the club where they’re safe,” La Croix declared.

Both men nodded and that was that. We all went out and crammed into J.P.’s truck. Me an’ Tate sandwiched between him and Col.

Collier held my hand atop my thigh as we bounced on the stiff suspension of the classic pickup and headed toward downtown.

Parking, as always, was a mint – but J.P. didn’t even bat an eye, let alone bitch about it.

We had lunch at a little hole in the wall place that was pretty damn good. Good old fashioned Louisiana soul food. After lunch, we decided to walk, which I was grateful for. Especially after such a big meal.

“Oo!” I stopped in front of the rock and gem shot as we strolled by on Decatur.

“Let’s go,” Collier said and towed us in the doors.

“You guys go ahead, Tater an’ me are goin’ to the ice cream shop – you know the one, Jess?”

“I surely do,” I called out and waved over my shoulder letting them go. Collier laughed and gave my hand a squeeze.

“I do believe they think they’ve tossed me to the wolves,” he said.

I chuckled and said, “They think it’s boring.”

“That’s fair,” he said. “I happen to like rocks.”

“Yeah?”

“You know what a collier is?” he asked.

“It’s a thing?” I asked.

“Sure is,” he said. “A collier is a coal miner, or sometimes a ship that transports coal.”

“Really?” I asked. “I did not know that.”

“Well, they say you learn somethin’ new every day.”

“You ever find any cool rocks why you was down there?” I asked.

He nodded, “Would find a lot of cool quartz points sometimes,” he said. “I still got a couple of the cooler ones I found. They’re small bein’ as I moved down here on my bike and could only carry so much, but my papaws still got a couple of my bigger, cooler finds.”

We slowly wandered around the shop and I picked up several pieces and put them back down, but several more, smaller, stones in the cheaper ranges I kept, thinkin’ about the rabbit heads bein’ cleaned up in the beetle tank in the garage back home.

I sighed and Collier stopped me, a hand on my hip to turn me to face him.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“Thinkin’ I don’t know when it’ll be before I can get back to my art,” I said. “I don’t know how long it’ll be before I can get back to carving and here I am buying yet more stones. Feels kind of dumb, really.”

“No, not dumb at all. Hopeful is a good way to be. It can’t rain all the time, darlin’ and it’s sure to get better. You got enough land back there behind the house, maybe it’s time to put out a shop or a shed big enough to do all your art in, away from the house some. Your own space for you.”

I smiled and laughed a little. “Things like that cost money I don’t have,” I told him.

“Yeah,” he said. “But you never know. Things might pick up, new opportunities might present themselves, that’s the nice thing about hope – it’s endless and dreamin’ is free. Costs nothin’ at all.”

I smiled at him and leaned in and kissed him soundly.

“You know, you’re absolutely right.”

“It’s been kind of heavy lately,” he said. “Sometimes we just need a reminder is all.”

I nodded, and we finished up in the shop and I bought my things. We headed to the ice cream shop and found J.P. and Tate eating their ice cream at a four-person table. He slid a cup of my favorite at me, only slightly melted and I smiled.

“Ain’t know what you want, bud but it’s on me,” he handed Col a twenty.

“Well, thank you kindly,” Col said and went up to order himself something.

“So, Tater an’ I were talkin’,” Cy said casually, and I raised an eyebrow and looked at my kid. He had a weird expression on his face and I was immediately suspicious.

“Aw, yeah?” I asked. “What’s goin’ on, bud?”

Tate lowered his ice cream cone and said, “Nuckie said he and Grandy would take me out on the boat tomorrow, but it means I gotta go with him to Grandy and Mawmaw’s tonight,” he said.

I had to smile, and I said, “Well I don’t see anything wrong with that,” I said. “You love the boat, and you know how much Mawmaw and Grandy want you there.”

“Yeah, but... what about you?” he asked.

“Well, I got a place to stay here in the city,” I said, “an’ for now I’d rather be there until I can figure out what all needs to be done at the house. But if you’re askin’ me if I’d be okay if you went early so you could have a good time, then yeah Bubs. I’m more than okay with that. You’re gonna have to stay with my folks to go to school anyway.”

“You’re sure?” he asked and I smiled.

“I’m sure, baby. I want you to be happy an’ have a good time.”

“I want you to be happy too,” he said, and I felt my smile grow.

“I know.”

“Can I think about it some more?” he asked J.P.

“Sure Bub, you think about it as long as you like until I gotta go on an’ head that way.”

That seemed to satisfy Tate, and he nodded happily and took another lick off his ice cream cone.

Col joined us with a cup of his own a minute later and handed over J.P.’s change.

“What’d I miss?” he asked.

J.P. and Tate filled him in while I caught up on my melting ice cream.

By the time we’d finished our dessert, Tate had made up his mind to go tonight and Collier and I traded knowing looks for just what that meant for us.

Another night alone together? I think we were both on board with that. I didn’t know what the rest of the week was going to bring, but I did know I was going to have a hell of a long commute and I wasn’t sure it was going to be worth it in J.P.’s gas guzzling truck.

It was a problem for another day, likely tomorrow, but for today, I just wanted to enjoy the time I had with my brother who was *not* being a shithead for once, and my son who I was

still honestly pretty worried about. I mean, I was his mamma, and I knew just how many of my feelings I was burying over this whole stressful clusterfuck. I worried Tate was doing a lot of the same.

We had a good rest of the day; I did end up calling a couple of the guys sellin' their small trucks and set up a time to meet them the next day while Tate and J.P. went through Tate's things to pick out enough stuff to take in his backpack and on the bike to get through the day of fishin' tomorrow and through the first couple of days of school the next week.

Finally, it came time for my baby and my brother to hit the road and I wasn't at all surprised to find that I was *not* okay – but I hid it, and I hid it well, so I wouldn't stress Tate.

I watched them go across to the club's parking lot and get on J.P.'s bike, my kid waved up at me and I smiled and waved down, and in a blink they were gone up the road.

I didn't like him taking that long of a ride, but I would need the truck here, so there was that.

I sighed and tried to settle in but being alone just... it just wasn't it.

I knew Collier was down in the club's back garage workin' on tearing apart his bike and making a list of parts and decided that I could be of more use there than up here – so I headed on down.

Hopefully, he wouldn't feel like I was crashin' his bro time or whatever.

Hopefully, I wouldn't make him sick of me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO





Collier...

She came around the garage not long after Cy and Tate had taken off, I guess. I was sitting on a rolling stool, my bike on the lift, and was working on taking it down to the frame. It was a job and a half, and some of the guys had offered to help, but they wanted to grab a bite first and were up front in the common area waiting for their food to be delivered. I'd ordered myself and Jess each a po' boy sandwich, but I hadn't planned on callin' her until it'd got here.

"Hey," I called out, and she grabbed a stool and rolled it on up to the other side of the lift across from me and sat down.

"Hey," she said, and she sounded sad.

"You doin' alright?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah," she said and smiled a bit ironically. "Just in my feelings. Parent shit, you know?"

I smiled at her and said, "I mean, I ain't a parent – not like you, so I don't know, but I can empathize I guess."

She smiled and asked, "What can I do?"

"You know anything about small engines?" I asked.

"I'm used to workin' on cars an' trucks, but I've worked on a four-wheeler or two in my time. I figure you know what you're doin' and can just tell me faster 'n what I can look up on the internet."

I chuckled and shook my head at her and said, "Boy there ain't no stoppin' you, is there?"

She smiled back and shook her head a little, "I figured out a lot on my own just watchin' my dad teach J.P."

"Yeah? I bet you pissed your brother off a lot out doin' him without even the benefit of bein' taught firsthand."

I had to grin at that, “You bet your ass,” she said. “An’ what about you, humblin’ him like you did today?”

“How’s that?” I asked, pulling out a bolt and dropping it in the container I’d found for ‘em.

“He told me you won your little tussle,” she said. “Not many guys can say they kicked my brother’s ass. Especially none that’re half his size.”

“Hey, now – I’m five foot seven, I’d say that’s more ‘n half his size.”

She laughed at that, high and bright and I handed her the ratchet I’d been working and she took it. Still laughing to herself, shoulders shaking and smile bright, she started turning the socket wrench competently and only had a little trouble bustin’ things loose.

“You really ain’t afraid to get your hands dirty, are yah?” one of the guys called out from behind her, and I leaned over to look around the frame of the bike at Chainsaw comin’ up behind her.

“Food here?” I asked.

“Ah, damn – I’m gettin’ hungry again,” she said and I smirked.

“Got you a po’ boy an’ a soda,” I said, and she smiled at me.

“You’re a keeper,” she said and I laughed.

“Well, good. I like the sound of that.”

We worked on the bike a little bit more, went in and washed up for dinner, and joined a bunch of the boys out at the bar.

Some girls had come in for a good time, and before long it was turning into a party. Jessie and I weren’t interested much in all the goings on, and we went back out into the garage to work on getting my baby broke apart.

Bennie came out along with Hex and we chatted while we worked, Hex helping bust a few tight bolts beyond Jessie-

Lou's capability off.

Overall, despite the loud music and raucous laughter from the main part of the club, it was a low-key evening that I could appreciate.

We had her mostly tore down by the time we were done, and the night had descended from the sky a while ago.

"We'll see y'all later," I hollered when Axe tried to get us to stay, and before long we were arm in arm trotting across the quiet road to the lobby door of Alina's apartment.

Once she shut the apartment door behind us and I had her to myself, I snatched her right up. Pulling her hard against me and letting my mouth positively devour hers.

Her lips were so damn soft, and just the memory of her golden-brown eyes looking up at me as they were wrapped around my cock sent me into overdrive.

God, I couldn't believe that had been just last night... I mean, it had been just last night, hadn't it? So much happening in such a short amount of time had me so fucked for any kind of time sense.

She whimpered against my mouth, the sound resonating through our twining tongues and I gathered her closer.

I don't remember going for the bedroom, or losing our clothes along the way – that part was a fuckin' blur, but one I didn't care about one bit. All I cared about was getting her naked, and getting my mouth on her, and making her scream my name in her ecstasy.

I laid her on the bed and crawled over her, kissing her, and holding her hair back from her face. I couldn't get over how soft her hair and her skin was. She was like a dream come true beneath me and the way she held my face back, the way she wrapped her legs around me and writhed against me, sliding her pussy lips up and down my shaft, what I'd intended to do and what I ended up doing were two very different things.

I'd intended to kiss all the way down her body and to taste her. To make her come with fingers and lips until she was

nervelessly quivering beneath me – but that’s not what happened.

As soon as she started rubbing me with her sex, I lost my fucking resolve and just couldn’t wait to be inside her. I half pinned her, half cradled her in my arms and worked myself against her warm and inviting body until I found purchase and *oh, fuck...* the sensation of sinking inside of her was unreal.

The feel of her snug, wet heat tightening up on me and drawing me in almost indescribable. I mean, there weren’t words man invented to tell you how good she felt and it was a struggle for me to maintain my control in the onslaught to my senses.

She tasted sweet, her tongue rubbing against mine, her teeth nipping at my bottom lip. Her soft lush body felt incredible where it molded against mine. The sound of her little moans would like to drive me crazy, and as I broke the kiss and drove into her deeper, the sight of her against the covers, her long hair in a wild halo around her head – she looked like a goddess fallen to earth, and all of it held me spellbound as her scent wrapped around me and tied the whole package in a neat little bow.

Rich and earthy, with a hint of waters that held ancient secrets. The smell of cypress and secrets wafting off her skin and I felt some type of way that she’d trusted me with her biggest secret of all. A secret that’d pained her deeply for a lot of years, and if I had anything to say about it – would remain intact from the person that mattered to her the most; her son, while it pained her no more.

I would be her knight, I would bring her justice, and it would be of the darkest sort.

The thought, while a deep one, slithered back into the dark as her light shone bright, her cheeks aglow from the loving I put in and on her.

The way she held me, her hands drifting over my heated skin soothed the rage and pain I felt for what she’d been through and brought me out of the past and into the here and now.

She didn't need me there, she needed me here, and here I would be.

I hooked an arm beneath her knee and eased in harder, putting our bodies as tight together as I could get them and the sweet cry of passion that she let out was music to my ears. The way her nails bit gently into my arms encouraging me to get a little more passionate with her, to let go a little more and get a little feral on her.

I tensed and drove into her, panting with my effort in both to pick up my pace and to hold off on coming too quickly myself before I'd gotten her off at least twice.

She reached between us and I encouraged her, "Oh yeah, baby. Touch yourself," I said between gritted teeth. I grunted and demanded of her, "Come for me."

She touched herself, fingertips pressing into her pussy over her clit and the sight was a visceral one. One that drove me fucking wild to see it, and I had to close my eyes for a moment to try and pull myself back from the brink.

She panted and gasped and her voice when she moaned and cried out from her pleasure was a lilting and lyrical thing that I just fuckin' adored. I loved the sounds she made, and her vocality encouraged me to let go and just be and make my own noises. Ones of relief, release, pride and pleasure and I don't know what – but it sure seemed to do something for her. She took it up a notch her hips rocking, her breath panting and I couldn't help but get more and more excited along with her.

I was sure I looked like a nerd havin' a fuckin' seizure, or getting electrocuted or some shit once I finally came just a few moments after she did, but I didn't care. Her pleased laughter, and the way she put her arms around me and cradled me to her? It was the best and blessed, only place I wanted to be.

God damn, she was a good woman.



I WAS DRIFTIN', my ear over her heart, listening to it tick beneath and between her perfect breasts as she lightly ran her fingers through my hair, over and over, scratching along my scalp lightly with her nails as I kept her warm and we cuddled in the deepening dark.

She hugged my head and kissed the top of it and it broke me out of my pleasure-induced fugue state where I swear to God, I was here, but I was out of body at the same time. The kind of disassociation that came right along with the best fuckin' sex of your life.

I sucked in a sharp breath and lifted my ear from over her heart and felt kind of bad about how we were both kind of... well... I hate to say it, but there weren't no better word for it, but *moist*.

"You good?" I asked.

She smiled up at me, perfectly at ease and relaxed and said, "Mm, better than good, but I really do need to pee."

"Oh, shit," I tried to push myself up but moved a little too quick and I was afraid my arms and legs were still kind of wet noodle consistency. I half slid along the covers, the palm of my hand going right out from under me, but I caught myself before I collapsed onto Jess completely.

Thankfully, she found my trials amusing and was giggling her head off, and I had to admit, it sounded mighty fine her bein' so happy.

Eventually, I sort of just keeled over, careening off to one side, and dropped to the bed as she sat up beside me and gave my thigh a squeeze on her way by as she scooted off the bed. She was a sight, the long nude line of her back, the perfect hourglass curve of her body into some ample hips and an ass I just wanted to grab and haul her up my body to get her lips on mine all over again.

She turned into the bathroom, the light flicking on and then immediately dulled as she shut the door behind her.

I let myself fall back to the bed, turning on my back to stare at the white ceiling and drumming a nonsensical tattoo

on the center of my chest with my fingertips. I settled and went limp and just closed my eyes and basked in the glow some more.

I could still smell her on my skin and I loved that. I wished I could carry it forever like an indelible mark, you know? I liked the idea of being hers and I knew she felt some type of the same when she came back to me and immediately snuggled into my side, her head on my chest now, and her breath sighing out along my skin in utter contentment.

I held her close, rubbing one hand up and down her back and the other along her arm. She was cooler to the touch than she'd been before she got up and I asked her, "You cold?"

"A little," she confessed.

"Well hell, let's move under the covers, then."

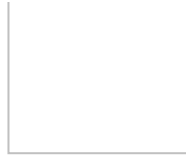
She nodded against me, and we did just that and it was almost instantly better.

I kissed her forehead, neither of us needing to speak, both of us just as content as could be, and I think we both slept the best sleep either one of us had gotten in our lives. I know it was that way at least for me.

Wasn't a single doubt in my mind that I loved this girl, and come what may, I wanted to make it work if she'd let me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE





Jessie-Lou...

Coming up out of my sleep the next morning was like the slow rise of a monster gator out the bayou. Where they come up, up, and up, and all that pokes above the brackish water was their eyes and their snout. I think I gave a long, slow blink, like they were wont to do, too. I was snug as a bug in a rug, tucked up tight against Collier, his arms around my back, his hand resting over mine where it rested on his chest, which rose and fell in the deep and easy rhythm of sleep.

I closed my eyes and just enjoyed listening to the cadence of his breathing and how he held me fast, even as he slept, as though I was his most precious and treasured thing.

I'd never felt that way before with no man.

Like they cared about *me* an' not just what I could do for 'em.

It was something I could love him for, and I lay in the quiet of the early morning hours and tried not to panic when I realized that it was too late – my heart was already involved and that I *did* love him.

It was scary.

I'd loved so freely and so often before without really having that love returned that it'd like to break my heart a thousand times over.

I didn't know what I'd do if he broke me. I didn't think it could break anymore to be honest.

I mean, what did you do when your heart had been smashed so many times that it might as well return to the sand the glass was made from in the first place?

Collier sucked in a deep breath, and startled awake and I looked up at him even as he looked down at me with the expression of a man that'd been freshly woken from his sleep.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as his eyes cleared and his thoughts came back online and I realized my own thoughts must be worn on my face plain for all to see... it was a good thing that ‘all’ in this case was just him.

“Nothin’” I tried to lie, but then he took his hand off from the top of mine and touched the side of my face in that sweet way of his. The way that he looked at me when he did that sent my whole heart bouncing from my chest to my toes and back up to my throat. It was the only excuse I had for how it’d like to choke me up.

“You don’t need to lie to me to spare my feelings, honey. I can take it,” he said.

...and how did he know exactly the right thing to say? The thing I needed to hear the most, when I needed to hear it? It was like this man held some kind of voodoo magic where I was concerned and I couldn’t help the hopeful whispering voice out of the back of my mind that said, well maybe that’s because it’s meant to be... Maybe you’ve finally found your person.

I swallowed hard and took the leap of faith that he wouldn’t reject what I had to say out of hand and I said, “I think I love you... so damn much that it scares me.”

He gathered me just a little tighter to him and asked me, “An’ why does it scare you?”

I felt the tears already threaten, my vision beginning to blur as I said, “Because I don’t think my heart could take it if you didn’t love me, too.”

He smiled, and it was kind and full of empathy as he hooked his hand at the back of my head and pressed his lips against my forehead. I closed my eyes and melted into that touch as I always did, the feel of him in front of and around me and the calm set of his body telegraphing without words that I was *safe*.

“You ain’t gotta worry about that, Jessie-Lou,” he said, voice gently chiding. “I love you for just who you are, darlin’. You’re the most wonderful thing I think that’s happened to me

an' I honestly been kickin' myself for knowin' you as long as I have without really seein' you afore now. Feels like so much time wasted."

I swallowed the thick feeling of threatening tears that was lodged in my throat and pushed up, throwing a leg over his lean hips, and settling on him, bringing my lips down to his.

He held my hair back from our faces as he kissed me back so tenderly and I couldn't help but move my hips, the arousal I felt for him swirling in my veins pleasantly, rising like a wisp of smoke, and where there was smoke there was fire.

When he reached a hand down to grip my hip and encourage movement out of them, urging me to slide my pussy against his hard cock trapped between us, that wisp of smoke kindled up into a flame and within seconds that flame grew and I fucking *burned* to have him inside me.

The feeling was mutual when I tore my mouth from his and straightened up. He took his hand from my face and put it to my other hip, then took his first off of me to stand himself up so that I could take him into me.

I slid down onto him, my eyes slipping shut at the sheer exquisite feeling of taking him in, inch by inch.

When our bodies met, he grunted and let out a satisfied groan and *God*, I loved the noises he made with me. I felt so powerful knowing that this beautiful man desired me and that I made him feel so good.

I bit my bottom lip and rocked my hips slowly and *oh my*, I had to say, this position with him did things for me. Quite a few things... the pleasure radiating out from my center and rolling through me like a fine mist. One lit and turned to a pleasant glow by the first light of day that was comin' through the blinds.

"Take your pleasure, baby," he murmured up at me. "I wanna watch you... I love to watch you come."

Fuck, that was hot. I was growing wetter by the second, and I gathered some of that wetness on my fingertips and pressed them to my clit. I put my other hand to his chest and

closed my eyes as he grunted when I put my weight on it, but his hands were on my hips, fingers digging ever so slightly and I threw my head back and let out a throaty gasp.

He felt so good, and I took him at his word, that he wanted to watch me, but me? I was being selfish. I was all about what I was feeling. The feel of his hot length inside me, the feel of my fingertips teasing that bundle of nerves waking up and the way the pleasure from those combined things effervesced through my bloodstream.

I kept my eyes squeezed shut and shuddered when my own hair tickled my lower back and the top of my ass cheeks and the sensation, that heavy feeling, gathered in my womb.

“Oh, God, I’m close!” I half groaned before the feeling stole my breath away making ‘close’ come out breathy and slightly insecure.

“Mm,” the sound he made was like a man who tasted something satisfyingly delicious and it made my body twitch with an ecstatic electrical impulse to hear it, that sound alone very nearly sending me over the edge.

“That’s it, baby, that’s a good girl,” he grated out, and *oh, my God, yes!*

I threw myself forward, and he caught me, cradling me to him, a hand at the back of my head, the other a steel band behind my back as he bucked his hips and took over for me as the orgasm rolled through me like the tide rushing in. The way he kept at me made me cry out, piercing, shocked, and amazed as I quickly became over stimulated. Still, he was beautifully relentless, grunting and losing rhythm right when I didn’t think I could take anymore.

“Oh, God!” I cried, and he chuckled, kissing my cheek through the curtain of my hair as another shudder racked through me and I trembled above him.

“I love how you call me that,” he joked and I burst out laughing as he held me tight.

God, I loved how this man could make me smile and I loved how he loved me even more.



THE DAY WAS A PRODUCTIVE ONE. We took my wad of cash and went and looked at a truck. Again, it wasn't for me, the body too rusted and way too many miles on it to be worth it to even try and fix it up.

We went on out to the old bone yard for motorcycles and started going through a bunch of shit looking for things on the extensive list of parts for Collier's motorcycle. We hit some pay dirt and spent a good long while breaking apart a couple of bikes to salvage what we could for his.

During our time out there, we got to talkin' to one of the salvage yard employees and the subject of my truck came up. He said he knew a guy looking to off-load his mid-1990s little Chevy S-10 pickup at another scrapyard on up the way. Said the thing ran and drove but it had a few problems, but dude was keen on throwing in the parts needed to fix it up if we were interested in a little something that required some sweat equity.

I was all for it, and after we finished with getting what we needed into the back of my brother's truck, we lifted the tailgate and looked at each other and Collier said, "Well? What d'you reckon?"

I smiled and said, "Let's go."

We went on up the road a ways, missed the damn turn, had to backtrack on down to the turnoff and eventually found our way a ways back in the wood at yet another pull-a-part place and sure enough, there was a primer gray truck with a pile of metal parts in the back of it sitting out front with a 'for sale' sign in the windshield.

"Price is right if all the parts we would need are in the back there," Collier remarked.

"Less than a thousand bucks, with the parts? Y' can't beat that," I said.

We went and investigated, talked to the guy, and found out he was a young feller, kind of inexperienced and just done had it with the truck givin' him fits on fixin' it. Was it a pretty big job? Yeah, but it wasn't real hard, and so money traded hands, I got me a bill of sale, and we set off with Collier following me juuuust in case.

It was a good thing we stuck together, because my new little truck gave up tryin' about a block and a half from the club.

We was gonna hook up my brother's truck to tow it the rest of the way, but didn't need to. A couple of the guys from the club jogging down the street to pile in behind it and push. I steered, and we got it up inside the gate around the club's compound.

"Gonna have to do this the hard way all the way around back," Chainsaw called out and Louie and Bennie came out from the club and got behind the little truck to help.

We got it down the side of the building and around to the big bay doors that La Croix opened up from the inside. Once the door was open, he came out and helped get me pushed inside. Took a hell of a lot of back and forth to get the damn thing positioned right to get it up on the one car lift they had back in here, but we did it.

"What's wrong with it?" La Croix asked, eyeing the pile of parts in the bed.

I told him and he nodded.

"Fellas, let's get this shit unloaded so we can get this up on the lift," he said.

"Thanks," I murmured and he nodded.

"Help your man with his shit," he ordered, and it wasn't a big deal – I was both happy to have these guys recognize that Collier was mine before anyone said I was his. There was just something about that, I don't know... guess it made my inner feminist happy. Hell.

By the time Collier, Louie, and I had the back of my brother's truck unloaded and all the parts dragged on up to the

motorcycle lift and the workbench nearby to start workin' on things, La Croix and Hex had my little truck comin' apart to fix the clutch and check the transmission.

"Hell, you might not even need to swap these trannies out," Hex called. "Might be able to save this one as a spare."

"Or sell it," I called. "We got the space," La Croix called. "The more time wears on, the harder these kinds of parts are gonna be to come by."

"Fair point," I conceded.

Beers came out and there was just as many club members standing around as there were club members workin'.

I stuck with my man learning small engine repair and the like since I already knew everything goin' on with my truck. That was just same shit, different model.

By the end of it all, we had a good day and plenty of the work was put in. Neither vehicle was up or running, and after talkin' it through, it was decided that I'd take J.P.'s truck, drop Collier off at his job, then take myself on in to mine. I'd be late getting back to the city to pick up Collier, but Hex had waved us off on that sayin' he'd pick him up and they'd go check the stills and whatnot.

I guess the Moonshine operation wasn't a secret to be kept, which I thought was strange, but I was comfortable with all that. I was sure there was plenty more the boys kept well away from us girls and my kid that I wouldn't be so keen on, but that was the way of this life.

Today had been a nice reminder that there was more to it than all the dark shit and skulking around the law. That if one of the boys or their family needed help, that help was given no questions asked an' no expectations in return.

It was some food for thought for me, but it was also hard to rub two thoughts together when Collier and I found ourselves alone together back at the apartment that was my temporary home.

We showered together, made love, and then had to shower some more.

It was when we were settled, alarms set for the morning and the magic of the day and the weekend winding down that he took up our book to hand to me.

I guess it was my turn to read in the ballad of Hettie and Cain.

Before I started, though, I had to ask: “Where’s your place?”

“Pardon?” he asked, and I looked up at him as he looked down at me, his one hand massaging my scalp, fingers working deep into my hair – which was thoroughly distracting.

“Where do you live?” I asked with a little chuckle.

He smiled this crooked little smile and said, “I rent this room at this flophouse over yonder,” he said and pointed in a vague direction.

“It’s not someplace I would ever want to take you,” he said honestly. “Most of the other guys in the other rooms around me aren’t the right type of guy. A bunch of addicts and sex offenders and shit.”

I frowned, “Then why do you live there?” I asked.

He shrugged and told me, “It’s cheap as fuck and allows me to send more money back to the ol’ homestead in Tennessee.”

“Is your family home not paid for?” I asked then immediately said, “Sorry! That’s none of my business and rude as fuck to ask.”

He chuckled and gave me a little squeeze, and kissing my head he said, “Nah, it’s paid for and it’ll be goin’ in my name once my papaw dies, but no – I send a bunch of money back home to make sure the old man’s taken care of. He needs a home nurse an’ that shit gets expensive even if she only comes in once or twice a week. I also hired a cleaning lady.”

“Ah,” I nodded in understanding.

“Anything that don’t get spent I know my papaw’s puttin’ up in a mattress in the house somewhere. He’s like that.”

“You’re a good man,” I told him and he kissed me again and said, “It’s nice to hear you say that, but the truth of it is? I’m only so-so.”

I laughed and shook my head and told him, “Another thing I love about you. How humble you are.”

He laughed at me then, and we settled in to wind down and to read to each other.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR





Eollier...

The week went by pretty uneventful. The stills were workin' fine, my day job was goin' fine, and my night times with my woman were the best part of my day. We'd have dinner, watch some television, or make love, and best of all, we made progress in that book we were reading.

It was a good story. A sort of supernatural alternate timeline where shit went sideways during the days of the Civil War. The main characters turnin' into bounty hunters in the Wild West and fighting creatures that used to be legend but turned out to be all too real. A real wild ride, like *Tombstone* meets *Supernatural* with some really hot sex thrown in as the cherry on top.

I'd be lyin' if I said that some parts of that book didn't lead to some sexy times of our own.

The only thing better 'n reading about how Cain felt about Hettie was how much I felt for Jessie-Lou myself.

Tate talked to his mamma nightly, and Cy came around mid-week for a night and crashed on the couch. He an' their daddy was buttin' heads – but other than that, we fell into a good sort of rhythm and even got to talkin' and makin' some plans for the near future on fixin' up the house.

Somewhere in the conversation with her brother over dinner Jessie-Lou sighed and said, "I just want to go home," and the toll of all the drivin' back and forth and the bein' in a strange place was etched into the lines beginning to bracket her mouth and the slight dent of worry in her forehead between her eyes.

"Just means I need to get workers to the house and workin' on it pronto," Cypress said and Jess looked over like he was mental.

“We can do it ourselves,” she’d countered, and he gave her a look back that was a little too kind for her liking and just set her on edge.

“Pretty soon, we’ll have plenty left to work on, but no reason we can’t hire out for them to at least put in all new windows,” he said and after thinking about it a moment, she relented.

“I know, baby,” I murmured, and covered her hand with my own.

She smiled at me, and Cy leaned back in his seat and took us in.

“Y’know, as much as I hate to say it, y’all look good together.”

Jessie snorted and he looked indignant, “What?” he demanded.

She raised an eyebrow, and he sighed and finished his thought, “Still, you hurt my sister, I’ll hurt you back.”

I laughed and shook my head and said, “Alright, man. There it is, and I expect nothing less.”

Jessie just rolled her eyes.

While she was in the shower, Cy and I had our real talk.

“Well?” I asked.

“Talked to my daddy,” he said, and he looked none too happy.

“Let me guess, he took up for his buddy.”

“At first, but I was smart about it and did it while we were out on the boat where he does his best thinkin’.”

I nodded and asked, “And?”

Cy sniffed and said, “Gonna be a tough few months, comin’ up,” he said. “For my daddy, not for Jess or Tater,” he amended quickly.

“How’s that?” I asked, frowning.

“My dad’s the one determined to do it,” he said quietly, and I cocked my head. “Huntin’ season is in the fall. My dad an’ Hambone go every year. Sometimes I go, sometimes Tate goes, but this year Tate’s gonna have to stay home.”

“You cuttin’ me out of this huntin’ accident?” I asked quietly.

He shook his head.

“Hell nah, brother.” He leaned way back in his seat. “You best get your huntin’ license, though. We don’t fool with those game wardens, I tell you, boy.”

I nodded.

“Then a hunting we will go.”

He opened his mouth to say something when the water had cut off and simply nodded instead.

Now it was Friday night and the club was poppin’ and here come Cy and Tate who was more ‘n excited to see his mom and hang with the fellas as we drank, fucked around playin’ games like darts and pool, and Cy pitched in with La Croix an’ Hex on workin’ on Jessie’s truck while Jess, me, and a rotating group of the fellas worked on the bike.

It was a low-key night, wasn’t a whole lot of our usual crazy going on, and even though it didn’t go unnoticed by many of us when it reached the wee hours of the morning and Chainsaw and Axeman disappeared, no one said a goddamn word.

Alina and Cor came on over to talk to Jess at one point and Hex caught my eye and threw me some chin.

There was something in the air, and I wanted to know what it was, but I’d have to wait. It would only be a matter of time before it all came out in the wash, but I’d been given the silent signal to roll with it, and so I would.

Jessie-Lou wandered back over and sat down next to me and I glanced over.

“Everything alright?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Something funny just happened.”

“Funny, ha ha, or funny weird?” I asked with a faint smile.

“Funny weird,” she said and raised an eyebrow.

“Talk to me, baby,” I said, and she sighed a frustrated sound and finally after gathering her thoughts she told me, “Alina and Corliss just invited me and Tate out to La Croix’s place for a crafting and art weekend the rest of this weekend.”

I nodded, “And that’s funny weird, how?” I asked.

“I ain’t ever have another girl ask me to do nothin’,” she said, and she curled her lip like it was so out of place she was genuinely disturbed by the notion.

I laughed and shook my head, my grin firmly affixed to my face as I said, “Things are different, now, babe. You’re in a different hierarchy now.”

“I ain’t changed zip codes,” she said, crossing her eyes and then laughing and saying, “Much.”

“Nah, but you ain’t just Cypress’s little sister no more, either,” I said, and she started some, her eyes going a little wide as she leaned back in her seat.

“Well, I don’t know how I feel about all that,” she said. “I ain’t a different woman just because you give good dick.”

I lost it, dropping my wrench and fuckin’ laughed until I fuckin’ cried at that one.

“What?” she asked with a zany grin that lit up her whole face.

I shook my head, and declared, “You know, you’re comin’ up on a time when you’re much more ‘n just Tate’s mom, or Cy’s little sister, or my very own champion dick rider.”

I caught her at just the right moment as she took a drink of her beer and some shot out her nose.

She smacked me in the shoulder and I laughed until tears leaked all over again, knowing full well we were gettin’ an

audience. I handed her my shop rag to mop up the sleeve of her hoodie she had on as she shook her head.

“I cannot believe you just said that,” she said and I winked at her.

“Anyhow, what you gonna do in the next few years when you got an empty nest?”

“Love you,” she said with a shrug.

“Baby girl, you need some friends and they’re tryin’ to be your friend.”

“You sayin’ I should go?” she asked with a grin.

I nodded and said, “I’m sayin’ you should go.”

“I’ll need to go by the house and pick up a few smaller skulls and stones and my portable Dremel setup,” she said.

“We can make all that happen,” I said.

“Well, alright then,” she said, and I had to chuckle and throw in the towel on what we was doin’ so I could do that for her.

Make it happen.

We rode as a group on out to the swamp, stopping at the house briefly to grab some things for Tate and for Jessie-Lou to do for the next day. I hated that we were in the truck and not on a bike, even if it was on the colder side out there tonight. I was already missing riding and I couldn’t wait to get my damn bike back together.

Tate seemed excited enough and wasn’t being a teenage drag about it at all, which was nice.

Jessie gripped my hand on the seat between us, and I could tell she was having a hard time after seeing the house again. She’d picked up her big skull she’d been working on to finish it, and snatched up her travel Dremel, a big batch of batteries for it since it was cordless, as well as a box of bits for it.

Tate had grabbed a fishing pole and a tackle box, and we’d pretty much been on our way.

We ended up taking a couple of boats on out to La Croix's and when we got to the tiny house on its barge, both Tate and Jessie were suitably impressed by the whole thing.

The house was fuckin' crowded with all of us on up in it but it wouldn't be for long.

La Croix, Hex, and myself had to kiss our women goodbye, but it was the best thing to be honest. Swamp Daddy's was about to go up in a big way and we wanted them well away from the clubhouse if there was any kind of swift retaliation. Out here was as safe as they could get.

At the last of it, I found it hard to step away and leave Jessie-Lou behind.

"Gonna miss you," I told her as we stood on the barge deck, taking a moment alone, away from everyone else.

"Yeah?" she asked, sounding a little surprised. "Thought you might be gettin' sick of me by now."

I touched the side of her face and she turned her cheek into my hand, nuzzling it like a cat with such a beauty and feline grace it made my damn heart twist in my chest.

"Never," I breathed, breath fogging the night air between us. She leaned in, going to her toes and kissed me and I sighed a happy man and held her tight to me. She giggled against my mouth as La Croix and Hex came on outta the little house and let herself down to the barge deck.

"Y'all should just bring another one of these out here and put a still on it," she remarked casually and Hex and La Croix exchanged a look.

"Ain't nobody but a stray fisherman or gator hunter come out this far, an' they don't care about that none."

"It's a thought," Hex said looking thoughtful.

"Put it in a shed, maybe? Make it look like another houseboat?" I said.

La Croix grunted and said, "Have it start lookin' like a whole ass village out here before long – sort of defeats the purpose of gettin' the fuck away from people."

“I see your point there, Lenny,” Jessie-Lou said with a shrug.

“Anyway, we gotta go,” I said, and she nodded and gave me another quick kiss.

“Y’all be careful out there, now. Y’hear?” she said, and I winked at her.

“As careful as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rockin’ chairs,” I told her and she laughed.

“First time I’ve heard that sayin’ put that way.”

“We’re leavin’ the skiff,” La Croix said, “but if you end up comin’ on shore try to keep it to my daddy’s house.”

“What ‘cha doin’ with it?” Jess asked.

La Croix grunted, “Should burn it and the memory that goes with it, but I don’t know, yet. Haven’t really been inside.”

“Sorry I asked, Len.”

He shook his head.

“It’s fine.”

“One more,” I said leaning down and smacking another kiss on her lips and she smiled, giggling at me, and stepped away, back toward the house.

It was hard getting onto the boat and even harder watching the dim porch light disappear into the swamp the further away we got from the place. The place where my heart and happiness lay, because that was what Jess was becoming for me. Didn’t have no place that felt like home the way she did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE





Jessie-Lou...

I took a deep breath and let it out in a rush as the small boat the three men left in turned a corner around a copse of cypress. I squared my shoulders and turned to face the door, still feeling hella weird and out of place out here. Like, I know the whole point of this exercise was to make friends with the other women associated with the club, but at the same time – I don't know, I'd never been one to make friends easy or have a lot of 'em.

Most women my age were either child free like Alina and Cor seemed to be, or they had babies or infants on their hips and I'd already been through that phase with little to no desire to do it again, really.

I went into the house and found Alina, in the kitchen, and Cor talking with Tate about school at the little four-person table behind the couch.

“What're y'all up to?” I asked, but I'd caught enough of the conversation to know that Cor was enthusiastically trying to get my kid interested in some of the Greek myths he'd been complaining was comin' up next in his classes right after the upcoming spring break.

“Oh, just making a pot of tea to wind down with, I think I'm getting too old for these late nights travels,” Alina said yawning.

“I mean, why can't we study something cool like the local myths and legends 'round these parts. At least that would be *useful*,” Tate was complaining.

“Like what?” Corliss asked grinning enthusiastically.

“Like what about the Roux Garou?” Tate's voice dropped to a whisper at the creature's name and I went to the door and locked it.

“Boy you know better ‘n to talk about that kind of thing at night,” I scolded him gently.

“Okay, then, maybe over breakfast we can pick this up,” Cor said, and I nodded my thanks. There were just some things you didn’t fuck with out here in the swamp and the supernatural and my kin folk’s superstitions were definitely at the top of the list.

“Tate, go on an’ brush your teeth and get ready for bed, son. I don’t need you sleepin’ ‘til the afternoon and getting’ all fouled up for the school week. Plenty of time to stay up as late as you want come spring break.”

“Yes, Mamma.” He got up and was wise enough not to say anything else about it and not for the first time I counted my lucky stars.

I told him with pride, “I don’t know how I got so lucky to have such a great kid, but I’m damn sure grateful and proud of you for it.”

He grinned at me and went on back to the spare room we’d been given to get into some sweats and find his toothbrush and some paste.

“I think his mamma raisin’ him right has somethin’ to do with it,” Corliss commented getting up and going into the kitchen to help Alina doctor up some mugs of tea.

I sighed and slid into Tate’s vacant seat.

I shook my head. “Nah, some of it’s just plain Tate. I was just a dumbass kid raisin’ another kid... what did I know?”

Alina and Cor exchanged a look.

“My mom was young when she had me,” Alina disclosed and I cocked my head. “She got heavy into drugs and pretty much dumped me off on my Boomer grandmother.”

“Same here,” Cor said, “Except my mom hung onto me and tried. By the time she died, my grandparents were so infirm with their own health problems I ended up permanently placed in the foster care system until I aged out.”

“Well hell,” I said. “Sounds like out of the lot of us I had it good.”

“No, I’m not saying that at all!” Alina said shaking her head almost violently. “Sorry if I gave that impression. That wasn’t my intent at all!”

“We all have our damage,” Corliss said coming around to the table with two steaming mugs and setting one down for me. “Here, give that a try. I made it how Alina and I like it but if you hate it, I can try again.”

I took it up and blew on it and took a careful sip.

“That’s damn good,” I declared. “I like it.”

Tate went past us and into the bathroom down here, shutting the door.

Alina came and sat down with me and Cor, and she was grinning pretty big. I smiled.

“What is that, anyway?” I asked.

“A vanilla rooibos tea sweetened with rock sugar.”

I nodded, “That’s nice. Where’d you get it?”

We talked tea and the warm liquid worked its magic. About a half an hour after my boy had gone in to bed, I was ready to call it quits.

“I sure look forward to seeing your art tomorrow,” Alina said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Cor said. “It sounds really cool.”

I chuckled. “Collier tellin’ stories?”

They exchanged a look. “Nah, Cypress showed us some pictures a while back,” Alina said.

I raised an eyebrow at that. “My dumbass brother?” I asked and they traded another look and giggled.

“Yeah,” Cor said. “You know he’s really proud of you.”

Whaaaaat?

“Yeah,” Alina agreed.

“I’m dreamin’ or there’s somethin’ in that tea,” I said and both of them laughed.

“As Hex likes to say, let’s stick a pin in it until tomorrow,” Cor said.

I nodded. “G’night, y’all.”

“Night!” they chorused, and I went into the closet of a guest room and shook my head at my kid who was sprawled out across the whole damn bed. With a sigh, I changed quietly into some leggings and one of my oversized tees and shoved him over. He groaned but made room and I fell asleep with a smile on my face thinkin’ yeah, he was definitely gettin’ too old to share a bed with his mamma...



THE NEXT MORNIN’ ain’t none of us get up on the early side. It was more like brunch than breakfast, but that was alright.

I set myself outside in the weak winter sun, and it was chilly and damp, but alright. I didn’t want to blow bone dust all over the inside of the house.

Tate got his fishin’ pole and tackle and took the skiff out a ways into more open water. I called out to him to stay within’ hollerin’ distance, just because this wasn’t a part of the bayou that we was familiar with.

The girls were inside cleaning up after our meal but insisted I get on out here and get going so they could see what it was I did. When they came out, I looked up from behind my goggles and making sure the dust was settled, pulled my mask away to tell ‘em not to get so close as to breathe anything flying.

They backed off some but stayed closed enough they could watch.

They asked a million questions, and it didn’t take long for me to go hoarse from hollerin’ through my mask and over the

grinding and the whining of my carving tool.

When it came time to take a break and give my hands a rest and have a drink of some hot tea we all were sittin' around when Cor said wistfully, "Wouldn't it be so rad if we could open a shop in or near the Quarter and sell Jessie's skulls as art and home décor along with Alina's paints and paintings and other cool witchy and pagan shit?"

Alina and I traded a look, and I said, "I would be down for that."

"What else would we sell, though and would anyone really want to buy any of my paintings?"

I lifted one shoulder in a shrug and said, "I do a pretty brisk business in my online shop. This one's already sold as soon as I finish it. I'm lucky it didn't catch a bullet or get damaged and I can finish it."

"How did you get into this?" Alina asked. "I mean, it's absolutely beautiful."

"That's kinda the whole point," I said with another shrug that I ended up turning into rotating my shoulders and twisting my neck to loosen tensed muscles.

"I took one of my daddy's trophy skulls he was gonna throw away 'cause the antler broke and asked if I could do something with it. I didn't really have a plan for it, but I was in art classes at the high school, and we were sculpting in clay an' I dunno, I just saw a potential there. I kinda had an aptitude with cutting things away and doin' things and so I gave it a try, scraping at it... then I found my daddy's old Dremel in his tool box out in the garage and did my first one. Just a tribal design kind of thing. Won a blue ribbon in the school competition for it. It's still in a glass case there. Made me think I could do more."

"Most people think death is scary, or ugly, but there's been so many times I wished for it that I figure there's a certain beauty in death... I wanted to make something beautiful so I tried."

“I think we’ve all felt that way sometimes,” Cor said softly.

“Have you ever thought about painting them, or adding color beside the stones?” Alina asked, shifting on her seat a little uncomfortably.

I thought about it. Not just what she said, but about her friend a little over a year, comin’ up on two... I looked down at my current project and asked, “Like what?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged and said, “like maybe lightly etch some trees in it and I could try and paint it – like lay paint into the grooves.”

“Would your watercolor work? I mean, wouldn’t it just wash off?”

She opened her mouth just in time for Tate to yell out, “Hey, Mamma!”

I looked over and he held a good-sized Alligator Gar fish up on his line. “I caught dinner!”

“Well, that’s a mighty fine Alligator Gar, son! Good job! Bring it on in an’ clean your catch!”

I turned back to Alina and she said, “Well, we could lacquer a clear coat on it, and see if that’ll protect it. There are a couple different kinds, a glossy or a matte. I mean, I know these skulls are hard to come by – or I imagine they are...”

I barked a laugh and said, “Not for me. My crazy ass’ll stop on the side of the road and bring an opossum, or a raccoon home. Sometimes I get lucky and get a deer head off the side of the road. I keep a machete in my truck for it.”

“Okay, that’s a bit much for me, I’ll admit it,” Corliss said laughing. “Even bein’ from Texas that’s... wow.”

I shrugged with a grin and said, “Most of ‘em I get from where I work part time at the wild game butcher shot. Got a whole mess of rabbit skulls it bein’ the season for huntin’ an’ trappin’ ‘em. I get all kinds of skulls from there. The game wardens, when they confiscate a poached critter, they bring ‘em to us to process for the local food banks and shelters. I get

all kinds of deer an' nutria – whatever else all year 'round from that.”

“Wow, sounds like a good deal.”

“The hard ones to get are the steer an' cow skulls. I have to go to farms and places like that. Every once in a while, I get lucky an' get some goat but I usually have to buy 'em.”

“You got anything else with you or just this one?” Alina asked. “Because now I really want to try.”

“I got some rabbit skulls with me. I could try an' do what you're thinkin' on one of them.”

“I'd love to give it a go,” Alina said. “If I drew on it with pencil could you carve out the lines pretty shallow?”

“Well yeah.”

It was about that time my kid moored the boat to the barge and I asked him, “Hey Bubba, you think you can go on in the house and get me one of the rabbit skulls I brought with me for Miss Alina?”

“Sure thing!” he said. “I gotta get me a good knife anyhow, Miss Alina, you got one?”

“I believe I do,” she said, and she got up to go with him.

“I wonder what it would take to really make a shop like we were discussing, like a real brick and mortar place,” Cor said. “I'll be right back, I want to grab my laptop and start dreaming a little.”

I gave a nod, and she got up and went in, too. Alina came back out with Tate right behind her and held a rabbit skull and a drawing pencil in her hands.

We sat and worked all four of us on our own things for a while, all of us in a silent sort of harmony and it was nice. Eventually, I straightened up from my big skull about the same time Alina straightened up from her rabbit skull.

We looked at each other and laughed a little and she handed it over.

I set mine aside and eyed her vision, examining it closely.

“Huh,” I nodded. She’d drawn pine trees and dots in the sky above them, the smaller dots looking like divots needed for stars, a bigger circle gave me an idea.

“You know, I could carve the moon out and put a moonstone in there, that would look mighty fine if this works.”

“Ooo, yeah!” Cor cried, and she smiled.

I nodded and started working asking Alina a few questions, like if she needed me to get the lines etched for the trees and if I should rough up the sky to take a blue if she wanted. She agreed and it didn’t take me but no time at all to rough out the little skull and hand it back.

“Moment of truth,” she said blowing on it and dusting it off with her fingers. “Let’s go in the house.”

We went on in, and she went into the room to the right across the living room which was a sort of cross between an office and an art studio – the one wall of shelves filled with jars and bottles of powdered this and that.

“What’s all this?” I asked.

Cor was talking to Tate who was in the kitchen filleting his Gar fish up for me. He’d cleaned it out outside and tossed the guts into the water. Circle of life an’ all that.

“Mom, this is almost ready,” he called.

I poked my head out the door and said, “You know how to fix it like I like. You go on and chop it up and season it. Get everything ready and we’ll fry it up together. You see we’re busy, son, an’ you know this is all stuff you’re gonna have to know. I ain’t sendin’ you out in the world or to a future wife not knowin’ how to pull your weight.”

“Yeah, no! I know,” he said. “I was just tellin’ you where I was at. I know the rule about hot oil.” I smiled and nodded.

“Comin’ up quick that you’re gonna get past needin’ watched for that,” I said and he grinned at me.

“What ‘cha makin’?” Cor asked him.

“Gar cakes, they’re like these fried fish cakes and they’re so good. They’re my favorite.”

I smiled and went back in where Alina explained her process for extracting and making her own paints and the like. I was impressed.

She worked on water coloring the skull, which took some trial and error.

“I think I’m gonna take some of this silver paint pen to the stars, and maybe around the moon, what do you think?”

“Might look mighty fine around the eye sockets, too,” I said, and she nodded.

“Mom! Oil’s ready!”

“Okay,” I went out into the kitchen and Corliss said, “I watched him heat it, he was safe about it.” I nodded.

“Okay,” I said crossing my arms and leaning a hip against the counter. “You watched me enough, you know what to do so go on, now.”

My son cooked us a good dinner, Cor and I helping out by cutting up a fine salad of mixed greens and makin’ up some dressing. Alina came out and traded spaces with us in the kitchen as my boy an’ I set the dinner table. Alina made a fresh pot of tea and we had a fine supper.

“I think this is gonna work,” Alina said. “All we have to do is seal it and set your stone. You wanna list it in your shop and see how fast it goes?”

“I nodded and said, “Yeah, I can do that. Wanna split it 60/40? You did most of the work so I’d say sixty for you not me.”

Alina smiled and nodded happily and whew! We put that sucker up and it was gone in minutes!

“Think you priced it too low?” she asked.

I shrugged, “Make another one tomorrow an’ see?” I asked. “I mean, it went at fifty-five whole dollars like it was nothin’.”

“It didn’t take any time at all to do, really. I mean, it was only an hour’s worth of work – but fifty-five dollars? That had to be a fluke.”

“Let’s do it again,” I said with a shrug. “I just priced it like I would a regular ol’ carved skull that size.”

“How many you have with you?” Alina asked.

“I brought five,” I said.

We looked outside, the light was too poor to carve, now – but that didn’t stop her from drawing in here tonight so I could carve them tomorrow.

So that’s what we did. We sat around the table and talked and crafted and talked while Tate was a good kid and brought my stuff inside the front door and set up my batteries to charge.

It was a good day, and I felt pretty good that we were on to something.

“It’d be kind of nice to be self sufficient in case something ever happened to the boys,” I said and caught Cor shifting uncomfortably in front of her laptop at the thought.

She sighed and said, “Ain’t that the whole point of getting the distillery up and running for legal income and all of that?”

Alina nodded, and I said, “I didn’t mean anything by it. I guess I just learned I can only ever really depend on myself for some things.”

“Oh, no, I get it,” Cor said swiftly. “I’m pretty hyper-independent myself.”

“We all are,” Alina said raising her golden red eyebrows, her eyes wide and her mouth drawn down as she kept her eyes fixed on her drawing. “Thanks, trauma,” she said, and we laughed at that; because fucked up? Yeah. But the God’s honest truth just the same.

“I have to say, the idea of a store is pretty cool, but how would it work?” I asked. “I mean, for real.”

“Well, now *that*, I think, is my strength here...” Corliss declared. “You guys focus on the art and keeping us in stock and mailing orders out. While me? I’ll have the fun of keeping the books, and managing inventory on the things like candles and stones, and other things that aren’t your art pieces. Things like letting you know when we need more of what type of paint etc., Alina – and I think we can all magic make this work if we really wanted to go for it. I mean, start-up funds and things would be interesting but that won’t take much to figure out, either.”

“I mean, you’re already going to fund the distillery out of your settlement – how could we do this too?” Alina asked.

“If we do this, we should do it our damn selves with sweat equity,” I said. “No offense, Cor but you been through it an’ that money is yours an’ I wouldn’t feel right, y’know?”

“Are we doing this?” Alina asked.

“Let’s talk about it,” Cor said. “Like for really real talk about it.”

We all three looked at each other and I was feeling it.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s talk about it...”

And so, we did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX





Eollier...

“Man, I wish I could have been there,” I said wistfully as I worked on my bike. It was in the official phase of rebuild and I was listening to Axeman who was grinning ear to ear like the psycho he was.

“What ‘cha talking about?” La Croix called over when he came back into the garage area from the bathroom.

“Swamp Daddy’s Grill fell down after going boom,” Axe called. “It’s all over the news. Got a whole five alarm blaze going on over there.”

“Preliminary guesses are a gas line explosion,” Bennie said scrolling along his phone screen scanning some kind of an article.

“Man, that’s too bad,” Hex said grinning like a fool where he changed out the socket on his wrench.

Yeah, it was a little silly of us talking like we had no idea what’d happened but then again, we were a bunch of paranoid fucks and the phones were always fuckin’ listening.

We all had a good laugh about it. We’d come back here and crashed the night before. I’d used Alina’s place since I was pretty much already staying there with Jessie. La Croix had crashed at Hex’s last night and we’d met up here to finish her truck and get some work done on my bike. Man, my shit was in for a long haul when it came to this rebuild. Some shit had to go for resurfacing and powder coating. My heads were getting resurfaced at the machine shop and shit but the rest? Well, the frame was solid, there were some ricochet marks, and the paint had shattered in places, so I’d stripped it and repainted it using the paint booth we had in the back corner.

I kind of dug the dents to it, though. Saw ‘em as a badge of honor, so I’d kept those. Now it was just running electrical and

starting to build her back better, so that's what I was working on.

The weekend was mostly just fixing truck and bike and running out to the stills to tend 'em, much like the post-day-job work week had been.

I did miss Jesse something fierce, and I hoped she was having a good time.

"Hey Col," Hex called at one point.

"Hey, what?" I asked.

"What sort of trouble you think our women are getting up to?"

I snorted, "Knowing Jesse-Lou, she's grinding away on her bones an' happy to do it," Cypress said before I could answer.

"Unless she's out there makin' some bones," I said.

He grinned and said, "You know my sister. She's a grade-A trapper an' hunter."

"All she can talk about is me gettin' my huntin' license to go with her," I said.

Cy barked a laugh.

"I hate huntin' with my sister, so better you, than me."

"That's only 'cause she's prolly a better shot," La Croix remarked.

Cy laughed, "You've met, I can tell," he said sarcastically. "Aside from that, when it comes to deer, she's obnoxious as hell. All bossy an' shit. Do you know she washed my huntin' gear in those damn scent beads one year 'cause she was pissed off at me?"

"Oo! That's cold," Chainsaw declared, and we laughed.

"I was pissed," Cy said and took a swig off his beer.

"Ah, yeah – my question is what'd you do to piss her off?"

"Fuck if I know, *everything* pisses her off," he muttered, and I had to tell myself that I needed to remember to ask her.

“You need somethin’?” I asked when Cy lingered around me a little too long.

“Yeah, man. Actually, I do.”

I stopped what I was doing and gave him my full attention.

“I need you to come out to my folk’s place, have a talk with me and my daddy. Make some huntin’ plans if you know what I mean.”

I nodded slowly, mulling it over, and said, “When and where, brother?”

“How about dinner?” he asked. “Tonight.”

I nodded, “At your folks place?” I didn’t know where that was.

He shook his head.

“Nah,” he said.

I nodded, and he gave a nod too. “I’ll come back an’ get ‘cha. We’ll take the truck.”

“Alright, sounds good.”

I’d be lyin’ if I said I wasn’t worried about meetin’ Jessie’s daddy. I mean, his children were somethin’ else, but the pain that Jess harbored made me worry about what kind of man I’d find on the other side of the table from me.

Cypress came back around and I went and washed up. We took his truck to this place out in the bayou. It was almost just a shack of a bar on the side of the road. A place we’d ridden out to and had some down-home Cajun cookin’ including fried alligator and nutria on the menu.

We went on in, and Cy immediately threw some chin to a man in a booth around the bar area who’d raised his hand. I recognized him from the night the house had got shot up the night Jessie an’ me were in it, but I hadn’t seen him too good in the chaos of flashing lights and a haze of adrenaline.

I went over with Cy and sat across from him and didn’t know how to feel really when Cypress got in next to me effectively pinning me in.

It struck me again, how the man across from me wasn't what I pictured when it came to Cypress's daddy. For one, he wasn't a big dude at all. He was small, like Jess.

He had a serious and unreadable expression on his face, and that face? There was *no* mistaking that Cypress was this man's child. They were spittin' images of each other, there.

I looked from him to Cy and back again and tried for a little humor to break the ice as he stared at me with a hawk's eyes from beneath the curved bill of his baseball cap.

"All due respect sir, but what the hell you feed your kid to get him this way?"

The joke worked, I think. His lips twitched into some kind of smile but they quickly flatlined, as he looked me over.

"I wish we'd met under better circumstances, boy," he said and I didn't take any insult at how he'd called me 'boy.' I was seeing his daughter, to him I was a boy. He had the look of a man who'd had his whole damn world rocked, but also, a fire in his eyes that was a cold one, I tell you. The ice-cold fire of calculating revenge.

"Can't really say we met back at my daddy's house. A lot going on that night."

"I surely do myself," I said nodding and he nodded himself.

"My boy says you got my Jessie-Lou to open up to you the way she ain't never opened up to me or her mother, an' I'd like to know how you did that."

I folded my hands on top of the table between us, unconsciously mirroring how he had his hands on it first and I don't know. It felt like it was an unspoken signal that we was past any kind of pretenses an' we was just layin' it out. All cards on the table.

It was a raw and uncomfortable feeling, and I wouldn't flinch if he wouldn't.

I reckon that if he was here an' askin' he was willin' to hear it, and the least I could do was be just as bold and bald

faced an' tell the fuckin' truth.

Still, I did so as respectfully as possible.

“All due respect, sir, I reckon you ain't one for any bullshit an' ain't here fixin' to bullshit you. By the same token, I ain' t always best at comin' off all gentle like, an' so I say this with absolutely no disrespect, and no ill will in my heart, but, sir? All your daughter ever wanted from her family was to know she was loved... an' she doesn't. Feel loved, that is.”

The man in front of me bowed his head, and rightfully got emotional, pressing his finger and thumb into his eyes and when he'd gathered himself some, he looked up at me.

“I don't know where I failed her so much as her daddy that she didn't think she could come to me,” he said.

I shook my head, “I can't speak truth to power on that, sir. I can only tell you what I reckon, and what I reckon is only guessin'.”

He nodded. “All I did was listen,” I said. “A little patience, a little quiet, and I guess I loved her an' she felt it. That, an' I confess, as strong as your daughter is, at the time that she told me, she was scared.”

He nodded and I went on.

“She just got woke up and in that place between asleep and awake, she done forgot where Tate was, and I guess when she'd calmed down, she got to thinkin' and all she could think was that if somethin' happened to her, that her ex would get Tate and she knew an' her ex knew... he ain't that boy's daddy.”

She was afraid he'd reject Tate and ask for a DNA test and that'd be it. She didn't want that for Tate and she *really* didn't want her rapist to have custody of her kid.

“I don't know a judge in his right mind that'd do that,” Cy said, and I looked up at him.

“Really?” I asked. “Ain't you watch the news?”

Cy scowled, and he shook his head.

“Wasn’t but this past year a judge ordered custody of a woman’s teenage daughter to the man that’d raped her mamma when she was sixteen an’ he was thirty. Then ordered that woman to pay her rapist child support.”

Cy an’ Jess’s daddy made a disgusted noise and closed his eyes shaking his head, lighting off in a string of Cajun French that could only be a string of muttered curses.

“No way,” Cy said, and I pulled out my phone and opened it up, did a search and handed him the first article that came up.

“Weren’t but two parishes over. On up there in Tangipahoa,” I said.

He swore off in a similar string of choice words that I couldn’t understand and dropped my phone like it was a snake that’d bit him after reading the screen.

“I don’t know what this world’s comin’ to,” Cy’s daddy just kept slowly shakin’ his head.

“You want revenge, or I wouldn’t be sitting here,” I said after I made a point of turning off my phone. I looked at Cy and he said, “Left it in my truck.”

We both looked at his pappy and he set an old-school flip phone in front of him.

“I only need the damn thing to make calls,” he said, and I had to laugh. He opened it up and turned it off anyway.

I nodded.

“You think you can be cool all the way to the Fall?” I asked. “Cy here mentioned a huntin’ accident might be in order.”

His daddy nodded, “It’ll be hard,” he said, “but if my daughter can do it for fifteen years, what’s a few months of pretendin’ everything’s fine?”

I nodded. It was a good way of lookin’ at it.

“Alright then,” I said. “I do believe that’s all that needs to be said on that for right now.”

“I don’t know how I could ever make this up to her,” her father said, and I shook my head.

“I don’t know that y’ can, and I don’t say that to be cruel. I say it because I can’t fathom it either.”

“I appreciate you helpin’ me,” he said, and I nodded.

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna need your help, too. Jessie-Lou begged me not to tell a soul about all this but I’m a firm believer that y’ can’t just ignore an infection. Not a physical one, an’ not one in the soul, neither, an’ just expect it to heal on its own.”

“You want from me?” he asked. “Just say it an’ it’s yours.”

“Just the first time we meet up in front of Jesse-Lou, shake my hand like you meetin’ me for real for the first time. Like this meeting never happened. I know we saw each other at the house, but we ain’t never been properly introduced.”

He nodded and said, “I can do that, if you tell me anything I might need to know on how to even begin to try an’ fix this thing with my daughter.”

“That goes without saying,” I said nodding. “I don’t want to see her hurt anymore. I just want to see her happy.”

Her daddy nodded eagerly and said, “I’d like the same. A man only wants that for his children and somehow a long the way I messed up. I was so focused on making them independent and dependable, I forgot there was more to life than just efficiency an’ hard work.”

He looked at Cy.

“I’m sorry for that, son.”

Cy shook his head, “We all fucked up where Jessie’s concerned. I’m workin’ on it, too.”

His dad nodded, “Good, that’s good.”

“I think I need a beer,” I said, and the mood lightened some as Cy’s daddy raised a hand in the air to summon the waitress.

“So, tell me ‘bout you, son. I’d like to know the man my Jessie-Lou’s taken a shine to.”

I smiled some, it was a very dad thing to say and I could tell, Jess and Cy’s daddy had a problem with pride. A big enough one that it’d gotten in the way of his relationship with his kids. Still, he was a good man underneath and had a heart. That was good. It may never be perfect between the lot of them, but it could and would be better with some hard work – an’ you could tell by lookin’ at him, he weren’t no stranger to hard work.

“Well, first of all, I love your daughter very much, and I’m excited to see what a life with her an’ Tate could be like.”

He nodded and looked to Cy who I caught nodding out of the edge of my vision.

“What else?” he asked. “You hunt? You fish? You got a good job an’ can provide for my girl?”

I laughed and nodded to all of those things but at the last I said, “I can do all of those things, but I’m pretty sure if I tried that last one? Jessie-Lou would take offense. She ain’t the type to be a kept woman.”

He grinned with a savage pride at that and I didn’t give myself away but I couldn’t help but think; *yeah buddy, way to run face first into the point while simultaneously missing it completely on that one...*

Still, I wanted peace for my woman and so some things were better kept to myself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN





Jessie-Lou...

We all turned in our circle of seats at the sound of the boat motor comin' our way the next early afternoon. Tate stood up in his boat out there where he was fishin' and put a hand over his eyes to peer out in the swamp before turning an' crowin' at us, "It's Nuckie an' the rest of the fellas!" excitedly.

"Ah, Nuckie?" Cor asked, and I grinned.

"That's what Tate used to say instead of 'uncle' when he was a baby. It just sort of stuck," I explained.

"That's absolutely adorable," Alina said and laughed.

"So, he calls *Cypress*, 'nuckie?'" Cor asked, and I nodded as she shook with silent laughter that she tried to keep to herself.

"I don't know why I find that so funny!" she cried, and I grinned.

"Whoa, hey!" one of the men on the incoming boat called out, and I looked over. They were talking to Tate, Collier stepping out of the skiff and onto Tate's boat, Cy, Hex, and La Croix himself manning the outboard turning in our direction after Collier was safely away and settling on the seat opposite my boy to talk with him.

"How goes it, ladies?" Hex called out to us as they approached.

"Oh, fine, just fine," I called back, and I bent over the second to last rabbit skull I was working on to carve out the design that Miss Alina'd put on it.

She sat next to me, a small TV tray table set up next to herself with a cup of water and some of her paints out. She was bent over a skull carefully loading and layering on her home-made watercolor paint to build up the pigment in one of the grooves.

She and Cor had been talking about how Cor was trying to learn how to bind Alina's home-made paper into pages and the like for journals. How she'd had some experience back in Texas with a friend in college who worked leather and how she was hoping to learn how to form and bind her own books.

She was just getting into it, though and we were talking about how if we wanted to start all this with hand crafted everything and only a minimal amount of mass-produced shit, how we'd need to spend a year, maybe even two, building up stock. That was a tall order to my mind, but could be done. It'd require a fair bit of dedication but I had that, and with Col doing what he did for the club an' him an' J.P. disappearing for long hours to do it, I would have the time.

I didn't always like it, but that was a part of this life, and I knew there wouldn't ever be askin' him to leave it.

All I could hope for was that some day the plan would work out to fruition and that more time would come available.

"Oh, wow – love it when a plan comes together," Hex remarked looking over Alina's shoulder and going over to Cor to give her a kiss. She looked up from where she was stitching together a stack of paper with a thick, waxy kind of artificial sinew using these wood forms to press them together and keep 'em stable.

Laughter brought my attention back to the little boat out in the swamp that held my two loves. Collier was holding Tate's fishing pole while Tate loaded some bait onto another one. I smiled and a sense of contentment swept through me at the sight.

I was glad that Collier wasn't trying to be my boy's daddy and that he was just focusing on bein' his friend first. I'd worried for a minute back at the house when Col had gotten a little bossy with my boy, but by the same token, I'd appreciated the lessons he'd been instilling. They seemed to be finding a balance, and I was grateful for it.

"What 'cha think?" Alina asked, bringing my attention back to her and Len standing over her.

“I think it’s nice,” he said, his big ol’ mitt tenderly on the back of her neck down low where he could pinch at the base and rub the tension out if he so chose. His touch was tender and it made me smile.

Despite his reputation for being hell on wheels all around the little bayou community we shared growing up, I always remembered Len as a kind boy with a gentleness to him that not a lot of other boys possessed. Granted, he was older ‘n both me an’ even J.P. by a couple years, but we’d had plenty of occasion to cross paths at folk gatherings around these parts.

He had a deep and abiding mean streak to him, sure; the apple didn’t fall from his daddy’s tree with that. But unlike his daddy, who was a mean fella all the time it seemed, Len reserved it only for those that earned it.

“Got a surprise for you,” J.P. said, dropping onto his ass by my chair. I glanced over at him and raised an eyebrow beneath my eye protection. He grinned up at me and said, “You’ll see when we get back to th’ shore.”

I nodded and nudged him with my foot, not bothering to holler from behind my mask.

“Oh, shit. Sorry,” he said, and he got up and moved off as I hit the switch on my Dremel to finish these last two skulls up afore we had to leave.

When I’d finished the last two designs for Alina to paint, I handed them over, where she set them in a neat row on her little table and then I finally felt like I could come up for some air.

Alina and Cor were excitedly chattering about all the ideas we had and John-Paul was peering at me funny from where he stood several paces away.

“What?” I asked as soon as my mask and goggles were off.

“Did you actually make some friends?” he asked deadpan and I looked for something to throw at him as he laughed his head off at me.

“Asshole,” I finally settled for muttering when there wasn’t anything at hand.

“Tate!” I called out, “C’mon in, now! Time to pack our things and get ready to go!”

“Aw, man!” he complained, “Col just got here!”

Collier said something like he was makin’ a deal with my kid and Tate nodded, pulling in his line and they moved about the boat to bring it on in.

“Hey baby,” Col said as he stepped up onto the barge and came right to me to kiss me.

I smiled and said, “Hey yourself. Get a lot done?”

“I surely did,” he said with a nod and I grinned.

“Good, me too.”

“Tate was tellin’ me you guys have a whole ass wild business plan made up. I can’t wait to hear it,” he said, and I felt my heart perk up and a smile bloom on my face.

Nice! I thought to myself.

It felt good that he cared and that he wanted to hear.

“Go on an’ take the skiff,” Len told us when we were fixin’ to leave.

“Y’all stayin’ here, then?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Hex declared and he gave me a hug. We all went from person to person hugging and sayin’ bye and before long, we were in the skiff with all our stuff and heading out into the swamp for shore.

“Well, I’ll be!” I declared as we drew close. “You got it drivin’!”

J.P. grinned at me and said, “Surprise!” as we pulled up to the doc. Collier held out the keys to my truck, and I leaped out the skiff onto the dock and did an excited little dance.

J.P.’s truck was there, too and Hex’s fancy RAM truck.

“Go on,” J.P. said. “We got this stuff.”

“You be careful with that skull!” I called back at the boys and I went to check out my new ride.

Tate came over with me with his poles and his tackle box and put ‘em in the back as I started ‘er up.

“Nice,” he said grinning and nodding at me, and I was grinnin’ with pride and a nod too.

“Y’all done a good turn for me, now!” I called out. “I’m blessed to know you!”

“Wish we could take credit, but it was mostly La Croix and Hex!” Collier said putting the skull in the back. J.P. bringin’ our bags over and tucking ‘em around the freshly carved piece.

“C’mon, Tate. Let’s go for a ride,” I said and my kid eagerly jogged around the front of the truck and got in on the passenger side.

Col leaned in the open door and kissed me soundly and shut me in.

“Right behind you, Sis!” J.P. called out and the two bikers got into my brother’s truck.

“We going to the city?” Tater asked and I shook my head.

“No, kid – it’s back to your granddaddy and your grannies for you,” I said with a sigh.

“Aw, man!” he complained. “Dang it!”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“It’s not so much fun over there, they make me go to bed at like *seven*,” he complained and I snorted and had to laugh at that.

“Why so early?” I asked.

“That’s what I asked!”

“What’d they say?”

He rolled his eyes, “Because I said so!” he declared in a mocking voice.

I laughed, and I said, “You know the rules,” and he made an exasperated noise and said, “I know, I know, it’s their house

so they make the rules!”

“Darn right, but I’ll still have a talk wit ‘em and see if I can’t get it up to your usual nine,” I said.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said.

“You’re wee, buddy.”



BY THE TIME we got to my folks my nerves were in full swing. I was worryin’ about all sorts of dumb things.

About my parents meeting Col in a more official capacity. If Col was offended that I’d had Tate ride with me – which I was sure was just me, but I hadn’t wanted my momma givin’ me a ration of hell. She so would if I pulled up havin’ Col ride shotgun rather than my kid who was supposed to be my whole world in all things to the point it was unhealthy. Sometimes, it was just easier to think ahead an’ head that type of shit off at the pass.

I worried about how my daddy’d receive Col... mostly because he had no faith in my choice in men and hadn’t liked a single one of my boyfriends before.

I don’t think my dad had any faith in any of the decisions I made, so I couldn’t say for certain that it had much to do with the guys. I couldn’t say it didn’t, either... but I’m pretty damn sure that it had more to do with me than not.

I let out a breath as we pulled into my parent’s driveway in front of the house that I grew up in and J.P. pulled around up next to me and into the grass, parking on the side of the house.

“Hopefully, granny’s cool today,” Tate said mildly and I turned to look at my boy and ruffled his hair. He said as he got out the truck, “I don’t know how you did it sometimes.”

I laughed, and thought *out of the mouths of babes*, and got out the truck myself feeling oddly comforted and validated by my boy which made me worry on a whole other track.

I knew it wasn't my fourteen-year-old's responsibility to emotionally fulfill me. It was a fine line to walk sometimes, though.

I had to stuff all my worries away and put on a brave face as I got out the truck. The front door to my parent's place opened up and my daddy stepped out and I put on a false brightness and waved. He crossed his arms over his chest lookin' all hard like he usually did and called out, "Hey there."

"Hey, Daddy," I called back. I lifted Tate's tackle box out of the back of the truck as Tate finished hefting his gym bag and his backpack out.

"Go on, then. I got your fishin' gear." I told him.

"Thanks, Mom," he said, and I smiled and gave him a nod.

"You should have seen it," I called out to my dad. "Tate caught himself a beautiful big Alligator Gar out the swamp out by ol' Lenny's place yesterday. Made himself up some mighty fine Gar cakes for the four of us out there and put on a fine dinner."

"Is that right now?" my daddy asked, his interest piqued.

"Yeah," Tate put down his gym bag and held out his hands and said, "It had to be this big!"

"He ain't lyin'!" I said. "It was a mighty fine fish."

"Well ain't that just the Gaudet way?" my dad declared. "I'm proud t' hear it, son!" He gave Tate a rowdy hug and palming the back of his head gave it a shake, pushing him past him toward the front door.

"Head on in there, boy. Your grandmamma's been bakin' cookies for ya, lookin' forward to you comin' back."

"Cookies!" I cried. "Boy you are spoiled!" I declared.

My dad grinned and I had to smile. My mamma may be a lot of things rough around the edges, but one thing she had down pat was bein' a home maker and her baking. She was the envy of the church come holiday time and the bake sales they put on.

“Where you want this stuff, Daddy?” I asked him holding up the tackle box and the couple of rods Tate’d brought with him.

“Oh, right here against the garage is fine for right now,” he said.

I gave a nod and set them there as J.P. made proper introductions for Col.

“It’s nice to meet you in an official capacity sir,” Collier said and I drifted over to put my arm around his waist and he didn’t hesitate to put an arm around my shoulders.

“Oh!” my dad’s eyebrows disappeared under the bill of his cap. “Y’all are like that, now, are yah?” he asked, and he looked at me with a strange look and gave a nod.

I blinked, and wondered what that was about, as I don’t think my daddy’d ever met a man that I was with without makin’ some kind of snide or off comment.

“It’s nice t’ meet ‘cha then, Collier,” he said. “Now is that yer name, or is that what the club calls yah?”

“Oh, the club, sir... I used to work the coal mines up there on the Tellico Planes in East Tennessee. My papaw didn’t much like it an’ so he got in touch with the son of an old buddy of his that was livin’ out here and I made my way down. Been here a fair few year now, an ain’t looked back much. Sorta kickin’ myself for not seein’ what was right in front of me by way of your daughter much sooner ‘n this.”

I looked over at Col who was lookin’ at me, his lips curving into a gentle smile, his blue eyes which were such a cool blue warm beyond reason.

“Well, heck, when you put it like that, come on in, son. I’d like to hear more,” my dad said and I swear I blanched while J.P. laughed next to me. I reached up a hand out of reflex and smacked my brother in the chest and he coughed.

My daddy looked at me and gave me a nod like he was impressed and held open the door for us to go on inside.

“Oh, I didn’t know we was havin’ a guest!” my momma called from the kitchen and I ignored her fussin’ in favor of the delicious smells coming from the platter of cookies on the counter. I went over and snatched one, sticking it in my mouth even after she smacked my hand and held one out to Col.

He took it, but he was focused on my mamma sayin’, “It’s a pleasure to meet you under better circumstances, ma’am.”

“Oh, I thought you looked familiar,” my mom, said. “Jessie-Lou, honey, set an extra place at the table for J.P.’s friend.”

“Actually, ma’am, I’m seeing your daughter,” Collier corrected gently and leave it to Mamma...

“Oh, an’ why would you wanna do a thing like that?” she asked and I turned from the cabinet, plate in hand, and scolded, “Mamma!”

“Actually, no, I’d like to answer that, honey,” he said to me and he done squared up with my mamma and I swear to you, *he read her to filth!*

“Your daughter is a fine woman, Mrs. Gaudet. A good mamma to her boy, and always thinkin’ of people other than herself. She works hard, is independent, and can take care of herself, but I hope the more we get on that she’ll realize she don’t have to do it all by herself no more an’ she’s got me to depend on if she needs to.”

I think I stood there catchin’ flies with my mouth. Tate was comin’ back from the bathroom or his room when he stauttinge, and was grinnin’ the fool havin’ heard what Col just said.

“Well, now,” my daddy said, nodding with approval. “Jessie, honey, I do believe you’ve finally brought a man home I can approve of.”

I looked at J.P. for help and he just grinned at me and asked, “What’re you lookin’ at me, for?”

I shook my head in disbelief an’ leaned against the counter and told the God’s honest truth, “I think I’m gonna faint.”



IT WAS SOMETIME AFTER DINNER, which had been pleasant enough, when the dishes had been done and everyone was doin' something to relax. Mamma had gone in to lay down, takin' to her airs and graces, proclaiming she had a headache when really, I think she was still embarrassed and just wanted to be alone and wait us out on leavin'.

Tate was in his room, playin' some game on my brother's old Nintendo from when he was a kid, which still worked.

I stepped out onto the back porch with a big Mason jar of sweet tea in my hand while my dad, J.P. and Col stood around the lit firepit tellin' stories and cuttin' up. I admit, I was still feelin' outta sorts and kinda shell-shocked.

"Hey, baby," Col called out, and he waved me over to his side. I smiled and went to him, and he tucked me into his side with an arm around me and a hand on my hip.

The guys kept talkin' and I just sorta did what I did which was passively stand by, sipping my tea and enjoying the fire.

It'd been a real good couple of days, and I was just starting to feel at peace, and so of course, that meant that somethin' had to come along and ruin it, didn't it?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT





Collier...

“Well, hello there!”

Jessie-Lou immediately stiffened at the sound of the voice comin’ from the side of the house, walkin’ in our direction back here and that only meant one thing.

“Yo, Ham Bone!” her dad called out and there was nothin’ about her daddy to say anything was amiss. Jessie-Lou, either. Her expression maybe a little wooden, but hadn’t changed a bit. I tightened my hand on her hip where it rested imperceptibly and she looked up at me and smiled, but it was there in her eyes. A haunted sort of fear, buried deep, and something you wouldn’t notice at all unless you knew to look for it.

“Col, this here’s my daddy’s best friend,” Cy said. “Ham Bone, meet Collier. One of my brothers and Jessie’s new squeeze.”

“Nice to meet you, man.” I hated taking my hand off her to hold it out and shake with this fuckin’ pedo. I wanted to pull my piece out the back of my waistband and blow his pudgy face out the back of his fuckin’ skull so bad – but all I could do was smile.

He grinned from beneath his Chester the molester ‘stache and said, “Nice to meet you too!”

He peered past me at Jessie-Lou and licked his bottom lip in a way that was too fuckin’ insidious, too fuckin’ intent as he said, “Jessie-Lou.”

She forced a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes, but boy was it a million watts, as she greeted him back. “Uncle Hammy, good t’ see you.”

“What ‘cha doin’ out this way?” her dad asked, scratching the back of his arm.

“Bringin’ back them tools you lent me,” he said and eyeing the bottle in his buddy’s hand asked, “Y’ got a spare one of those for me somewhere?”

“Aw, yeah! Jessie-Lou, why don’t you go on an’ get ol’ Ham Bone a beer out the fridge.”

“Sure thing,” Jess said, and she detached from me and went on by into the house.

“Thank y,’ cher,” Ham Bone said.

I traded a quick glance with Cypress who was behind the way Hammy was facing and his look was a familiar one. Cold and predatory.

“So, what ‘cha all talkin’ about?” Ham asked.

“Huntin’.” Cy said and took a pull off his beer. It took a fair bit not to laugh at the cold calculating look in his eyes, the fire pit glintin’ in ‘em like the fires of Hell that was comin’ for ol’ Ham Bone. This motherfucker was livin’ on borrowed time and didn’t even know it.

“Only just about my favorite pastime,” Hamblin said, slappin’ his knee. “When’re we goin’?”

“We were just gettin’ to that. I was just about to invite ol’ Col’ here deer huntin’ with us come the fall.”

“Aw yeah?” Hamblin eyed me.

“Can’t ever remember you invitin’ one of Jessie-Lou’s boyfriends along for the hunt.”

“Col’s different,” Cypress said. “He’s my brother in the club before he’s Jessie’s new beau.”

“Ah, I get it,” Hamblin said as Jess slid out the back slider. He leaned forward over the fire and said, “I’d never say it about my favorite niece but, I think you know where my mind went.”

Yeah.

Bros before hos.

I got it.

Made me want to smash his fuckin' face in even more.

Cy and his daddy just laughed along but I could tell it was forced. Hamblin seemed oblivious, though.

Jess handed him his beer and she was sans her tea jar. I should think about gettin' goin'," she said, and I nodded. My beer was almost through and it'd been my only one. I'd been nursin' it a minute.

"You're probably right, I got work in the mornin' and the city is a drive."

She nodded and Hamblin was like, "Well, hell! I feel like I just got here an' you're goin' already!"

"Ah, you know how it is," Jessie's dad declared. "Workin' for the man."

"I sure do," Hamblin said and he reached out for Jess who shied away.

"Aw, I forgot, you're not a hugger anymore," he said.

"Yeah, no, sorry." She laughed nervously, and I passed my bottle to Cy who took it.

"Awright, now," I declared. "I'll see *you* later," I said to Cy and we clapped hands like we was gonna wrestle arms and gave it a shake.

I went to her dad and did the same, as we was family now, after all. Not much binds two men closer than plotting a third man's death.

"It was good to meet 'cha," he said. "Don't be shy now, y'all come back now, y'hear."

"I surely do."

"Wanna say bye to Tate?" she asked, and I nodded.

"Of course, I do!"

"Alright, drive safe, baby girl," her daddy said and she looked back his way with a slightly puzzled look as we went back into the house.

I shut the door behind us and she said, “He ain’t called me that in *years*.”

“Must be feelin’ nostalgic after all those old huntin’ stories,” I said.

“Maybe,” she murmured.

“You alright?” I asked as we headed Tate’s way and she quipped, “I’m fine!”

We said bye to her son and gave him hugs and once we were out the front door, she let out a deep cleansing breath.

“You want me to drive?” I asked her.

“Yeah, if you don’t mind.” She handed me over the keys and I went around to open her door for her. She got in the truck and I shut her in double quick, intent on getting her the fuck outta here.

She reached over and gripped my hand tight where it rested on the seat between us. I pressed a thumb over the backs of her fingers and said to her, “You got options.”

“What?” she asked.

“One? You can scream, cry, do whatever it is you need to do right here and right now. Two? You can just sit there and breathe and wait ‘til we get home.”

“How about option three?” she asked, staring out the window of the truck, her face turned away from me.

“What’s that one?” I asked.

“I get back to the apartment and take a shower hotter ‘n hell and just wash it down the drain. No sense in fussin’ and all that carryin’ on for nothin’.”

I nodded and took in a slow deep breath and said, “Ladies choice, baby. You deal with it however you need to deal with it – just know you ain’t gotta deal with it alone no more. Okay?”

She turned her head in my direction and stared at me, eyes a little wide and it was as though she was turning the implications of what I’d just said over and over in her mind. I raised her hand off the seat, and she froze, jumping and

resisting slightly in reflex at first, but then she acquiesced and relented and I pressed a kiss to her hand.

Her eyes grew a little misty from what I gathered from the stolen glances I could make while drivin' us down the road and finally she sniffed and turned her face back to the night darkened glass.

I just held her hand and let her be for now. Let her sort her feelings.

The drive felt twice as long as it usually did. I didn't turn on any music or nothin'. I didn't want her to think I was being insensitive. I figured if she wanted music, she would turn it on... but she didn't. She just kept a death grip on my hand and stared sightlessly out her window lost in her thoughts the whole way back.

I pulled up to the curb in the loading zone in front of the apartment lobby door and let her out. I went to the back of the truck and helped her get it inside behind the front door and said, "Wait here. I'm gonna park this thing and help out carry it all on up."

She nodded, and I did just that and once inside the apartment, I helped her stack things by the door that she wanted to take across to the club later, and the rest I helped her put away where she wanted it. When we were done, I didn't even try to touch her. I just did what she said she wanted and turned on the shower for her, cranking it up so it'd get warm.

"You want to shower on your own or can I join you?" I asked turning to find her in the doorway, shoulder leaned against the jamb and her arms crossed below her breasts.

"I'd like for you to join me, if you don't mind," she said softly and I smiled.

"Don't mind at all, just want to do what's right by you and I'm trying to learn what that is."

"Kiss me, please?" she asked, and her voice broke slightly on her tremulous please.

I went to her and took her into my arms and kissed her gently, slowly, building up to our usual fervor. I wasn't one

hundred percent sure what was up. I wasn't sure if she needed to know that I still wanted her, or if she wanted to use my touch to erase the ugly inside of her head... I didn't know if this was an attempt to overcome insecurity or to reclaim her agency. I just didn't know. Whatever went on in that pretty little head of hers was a beautiful fuckin' mystery to me and that was okay.

She stepped into me and I touched her lightly over her clothes, plucking at an article at a time and asking, "Okay if I take this off?"

She sighed out contentedly and answered me without words, yet still in the affirmative: "Mm-hm."

I plucked each piece from her and asked each time, and didn't say a word when she covered herself with her arms. I knew I'd seen it all before, and she knew it, too... but it wasn't about that right now. It was about keeping her comfortable in her vulnerability which I knew she wasn't used to. Either being vulnerable, nor being kept comfortable in it.

As soon as she was nude, I pulled back the shower curtain and helped her on into it.

"Two seconds and I'll be right there with you," I murmured and kissed her lightly and quickly before whisking the curtain shut.

I stripped down quick and made good on my promise, stepping in behind her and gritting my teeth slightly when I stuck my hand under the spray to test it.

"Too hot?" she asked and I forced a smile and lied.

"Nope."

I would deal.

After that, there were no more words. Just thought and feeling.

I cupped her face between my hands and tilted her face up to mine and kissed her softly, and she kissed me back. Her back soaking up the heat of the spray, her arms going around me.

I stepped into her and cradled her gently and she very nearly sagged into me with relief.

When she shuddered with the first little bubbling sob I pulled back and whispered, “You just let it out, baby. I’m here, I’m right here.” I crushed her to me and she broke, crashing into me like a wave into the rocks and the tempest just fucking *raged*.

I tilted my head back and stared at the ceiling a moment, my vision blurring with my own rage and pain at just the sheer *woundedness* of her condition before I closed my eyes and tilted my head forward to press my lips to her hair, redoubling my efforts to be strong in the face of her heartache and just give her a safe place to just *be*.

I think she needed that more than she needed anything else right now, and if I could do nothing else right now, then dammit, let it be this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE





Jessie-Lou...

The shower was scalding, I turned it down just a bit to get used to it and cranked it back up, like boiling a frog. I stood under it, thrusting my face beneath the spray, and holding my breath. Turning around and tipping my head back to soak my hair.

I opened my eyes when the shower curtain hooks rasped and rattled against the rod and Col stepped in. He stuck his hand behind me and other than the barest flinching around his eyes, there wasn't anything to tell his discomfort. Still, I asked, "Too hot?"

He forced an obvious smile and said, "Nope."

I couldn't help but smile back. Genuinely, though, I knew it was weighted with my sadness.

He cupped my face with his hands and kissed me and we stood for a little while, the spray hitting my back and simply kissed.

When the kiss broke, naturally just reaching its conclusion, I stepped into him and wrapped my arms loosely around his waist and he pressed me to his chest, kissing my forehead.

The hot water had done some of the work in easing the tension out of my muscles, but that kiss to my forehead? It seemed to do the rest. It was like a signal flare lit off in the dark, guiding me home and his arms going around me? Pure unadulterated *safety*.

I felt safe to my bones, to the bottom of my soul, and I couldn't help it. I couldn't stop it if I wanted to. All those emotions that'd I'd kept locked away and bottled up rose like a leviathan too long ignored from the deep; and I mean *impossibly* deep, and I wept.

I think I wept like I had never wept before in my whole life, and Collier was the rock that I hid against and behind

from the worst of it.

He held me, and rubbed my back, massaging the back of my head while I let it out and he was the first person in a very long time if ever that I felt alright crying in front of.

When the tempest had passed, which felt like an eternity but was probably only a few minutes, he took a half step back and brought my face up to look at him with gentle hands that smoothed my wet, clinging hair off my tear-soaked cheeks.

“Better?” he asked.

I nodded, not trusting my voice to speak, and he smiled at me so sweetly.

He took up the shampoo and washed my hair, kneading my scalp and down my neck with gentle fingers, turning me around, front to the spray to work on my super-heated muscles of my shoulders and traps, and after a long weekend of carving? Good Lord did that feel divine.

He painstakingly washed me clean and when I tried to return the favor said, “Nope. Any other time, but not tonight. You need someone to do something for *you*.”

He washed up at lightning speed and when he shut off the tap, he said, “Wait right here.”

I waited while he got out first and dried off, wrapping a towel around his waist, and tucking it. He opened up another one and held it open for me and I quickly stepped into it.

He dried me off, at points making me giggle, and it was a losing battle with how my hair dripped.

“Here,” I said and took the towel from him, bending forward and wrapping it up.

“Ah, there you go,” he said and pulled another towel off the rack and dried me off the rest of the way, wrapping me up under the arms and tucking it.

He gathered up the hair dryer from under the sink and asked, “You wanna sit or stand?”

“I can stand,” I said, and he stood me in front of the mirror.

He warned me, “I’ve never done this before – so bear with me.”

“I can do it,” I said and reached for the hair dryer but he made chastising sounds to the contrary and lifted it high out of my reach.

I laughed at our reflections and put my hands down, clutching the towel so I wouldn’t lose it as he took the towel from my head and let it drop to the floor and he started up the dryer.

He worked through my thick mane, carefully combing through it with my wide-toothed comb for tangles as he hit it with the warm air of the dryer and I just stood and soaked up the love.

I’d never had anyone do anything for me half as nice, and I couldn’t remember feeling so calm or so tranquil.

By the time my hair was dry his was just damp, and he turned the dryer on his own self to get most of the rest of the wet out so we could go to bed.

I was looking forward to that part.

In the bedroom, we dispensed with any pretense of putting anything on and simply slipped between the crisp sheets, nestling up to each other.

I raised my face for a kiss and he gave it to me, the slow build enticing, and before I knew it, I was straddling his hips and he let me. His hands were gentle as they ghosted over my skin and my blood heated to the level of the scalding shower we’d taken earlier.

God, I loved the way he smelled; fresh clean man, straight out the shower just did something to a woman, you know?

I moved above him, my pussy slick with arousal where it was up against his shaft. He groaned into my mouth, my body pressed tight over his, and it was a strange thing to get worked up over, but I loved the way my breasts molded to his chest.

“Fuck,” he whispered into my mouth as I worked my hips to where he penetrated me. I whimpered into our kiss as I took

him into me, painstakingly slowly.

When he was fully inside of me, he rolled me, lightning fast, onto my back, and I didn't resist one iota. I loved it, in fact, but that didn't stop him from pausing and asking me, "Is this okay?"

"Mm," I moaned into his mouth and captured his face between my hands pulling him to me, wriggling my hips to get him going and he gasped.

"Goddamn, baby. You feel so good," he murmured and sucking a breath in between gritted teeth, he started to move.

I threw my head back and gripped my tits, rolling the nipples between forefinger and thumb, determined to just leave the world behind for a minute and feel *good*.

He thrust in an even and sure cadence while both of our breathing became impassioned in steady deep gasps in counterpoint to his movements. He raised one leg of mine over his hip, but then he did something new, he put this sort of side-to-side roll in his hips and I swear, it drove me *wild*.

I'd never felt anything like it before, the sensation like cold champagne on a sultry night. The waves of pleasure building, lapping at my shore at first gently, before building into a swell that threatened to swamp me and drown me completely but instead of fearing it, *I wanted it*. I was *desperate for it*. I desired this man like I'd desired nothing else in my entire life for myself.

"Oh, Col, *yes*. Right there, right like that!" I breathed and he grinned above me, a savage baring of his teeth in his pride at what he did to me.

It was one of the hottest looks...

"Mm!" I arched, my back bowing off of the bed as the pleasure racked through me and I shuddered losing complete control of myself.

I was vaguely aware of Collier crying out on top of me and then I was pressed into the soft bed beneath us and he held me close, hands in my hair, mouth on mine, kissing me sweetly until the trembling stopped.

“God, I love you,” he whispered in my ear and I smiled, twining my arms around him and holding him close.

“I love you, too,” I whispered, and he breathed out and delved his arms beneath me to hold on to me tight.

A few moments later I couldn't help but whisper, “Thank you.”

He made a ‘humph’ sound and kissed the side of my neck and settled into me, sighing out contentedly.

“Any time,” he declared and I smiled.

CHAPTER THIRTY





Eollier...

“Well, moment of truth,” I said and Jessie-Lou took a giant step back.

A bunch of the guys, myself included, started cuttin’ up and I shook my head.

She’d been right there with me rebuilding this bike for the fuckin’ most part. I wasn’t worried one bit but clearly... “You sayin’ you lack faith in my abilities here?” I asked with a wink.

“Nah, I’m sayin’ I lack faith in mine,” she said, and she was dead serious.

I grinned and said, “Well I have faith enough for the both of us, ‘til I can restore yours just like we did my other girl, here.”

I thumbed the switch and twisted the throttle and a cheer went up through all of us when she started up like a fuckin’ dream.

“What d’ you say, honey? Take a ride with me?” I called over the burly chug of the engine.

“Hell yeah!” she called and she was grinning with pride and excitement.

We went for a ride, just her and I, and while I felt naked without my colors, it didn’t much matter. Not when she had her arms wrapped tight around my waist and was so snug against my back.

We rode out the way of her and her folks place.

We stopped in at her place first, to check on the progress of the contractors and shit, putting her an’ Cy’s place back together.

Cy turned around when we pulled into the front yard, and he had a grin from ear to ear.

“Well, alright now! Look at you!” He clapped his hands. “That’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

“She works!” Jessie-Lou called as she got off from behind me and I heeled down the kick stand.

“Of course she works, she had a Gaudet’s hands on her!” Cy put an arm around his sister’s shoulders and shook some damn sense in her.

“Y’all don’t mind, I’m gonna go check my tanks,” she said and both Cy and I shook our heads. She handed me her helmet and wandered off around the side of the house toward the detached garage.

“She’s excited about the fox skull,” I said and Cy turned to me and raised an eyebrow.

“Where the hell she get one of them?” he asked.

I raised my eyebrows and said, “Spotted a dead one week before last on the side of the road. Must have been hit by a car or something. She pulls her ass over, I shit you not, grabs a machete out of the back of the truck and a pair of gloves out her pocket, chops the damn thing’s head off and comes running back across like she just picked a damn flower outta the ditch.”

Cy’s shoulders were shaking with laughter and I shook my head.

“She had me get the hell out of the truck and help her with a damn dead deer the week after.”

“Leave it to my sister.”

“Right? Couldn’t pick me a woman who just liked shiny stones out of a creek bed. No, I gotta pick the one with a fascination with bones.”

Cy doubled over, laughing his ass off as I just sat there and shook my head.

“So, how’s it going around here?” I asked.

He sighed and said, “Well, most of our furniture and shit is out there.” He pointed to the garage and I looked over. Only

the third bay door where Jess kept her big glass tanks and crates of bones was open. Cy's truck was parked outside the garage along its front side out here.

"I was wondering what was up with the new arrangement over there."

Cy shook his head.

"Got it tore out to the studs in here, makin' sure none of the electric took a bullet to start a fire and shit. Might as well do it all right."

I nodded and looked over the house from out here. The windows were replaced and whole swaths of the shake exterior siding.

"How's the back look?" I asked.

He jerked his head in the direction of the house and said, "Come on in and look."

I gave a low whistle when I went on in the front door. It was a definite, almost total gutting in here. The only wall that wasn't ripped out to the studs was the one facing longways from the door, separating the living room from Tate's room. The wall that the television and entertainment center had been up against.

The carpet was gone and the padding that'd been up underneath and I looked at the hardwood floors.

"They covered this up with carpet?" I asked a little incredulous.

"I know, right?" Cy demanded. "Gon' ask Jessie-Lou what she wants to do about that."

He made a tsking sound out the side of his mouth.

"Damn shame, I tell you. One of my kin, either my great grandpappy or my granddaddy built this place with his bare hands. Not sure why they would go on and cover it up like that."

"Whoa."

Jessie stopped short just inside the front door and peered around.

“Crazy, innit?” Cy asked.

“Look at these floors!” she exclaimed.

“We know!” Cy and I exclaimed at the same time and then laughed.

Jessie looked around. “What’re you thinkin’, big brother. Should we keep ‘em?”

“I was just fixin’ to ask you what you wanted to do.”

“Heck, I’d just as soon keep ‘em and get a nice area rug,” she said. “Maybe a runner up the hallway.”

“Well, that settles that, then.” He put his hands on his hips.

Jessie nodded.

“Kitchen’s untouched,” she said with relief.

“Ah, yeah.” Cy followed her in and she went out onto the back sun porch or whatever the damn thing was that held her craft spot.

“No replacing the windows?” she asked discouraged.

“Nah, not those ones...” Cy said, and one of the workers came up the hall and I nodded, distracted, and went over to head him off from interrupting their discussion about what to do with the sunroom area.

“Yeah, man, what’s up?”

It wasn’t good news. He was coming to talk about the bathroom subflooring, showing me where it was rotted and how the floor had too much bounce to it.

“Hey, Cy! Jess!” I called out because this *would* need their attention.

We ended up around the firepit in the backyard with beers discussing.

“Well, we have our choice, we can have ‘em fix the bathroom and can take on your spot in the back ourselves, or we can have ‘em deal with your spot and do the bathroom on

our own later on and hope we don't fall through the fuckin' floor afore we can get to it – but we ain't got the money to do both right this minute,” Cypress said.

Jess hung her head and let it bounce with her defeat.

“Fuck, it ain't much of a damn choice, is it?” she asked. “I *need* my space to work on these skulls. The work I been doin' with Alina, I can't get my online shop – it's gettin' crazy. I have to be able to work.”

Cy nodded. “Yeah, it sure is turnin' into way more 'n just a hobby, ain't it.”

“You're goddamn right there, buddy,” she declared.

“I'm also sick of bein' a weekend parent to my own kid,” she said. “It's stressin' me out an' I think Tate's ready to lose his shit on our mamma.”

Cy took a contemptuous drink off his beer.

“Maybe somebody oughta lose their shit on Mamma. Might be good for her.”

Jess grinned and said, “You too, huh?”

“If I wasn't on the boat with Daddy as much as I am, then yeah.”

Jess shook her head ruefully. I'd about lost my shit when I found out that Cy had a room still at their folks' place and they'd made a room for Tate, but that Jess's old room had been turned into her mom's sewing room.

That was a real “what the fuck” moment for me.

“Right, so what I'm hearin' is we'll stay the course and worry about the bathroom later when your turnin' a fair profit on this witch shop thing,” Cy said. Jess nodded.

“It'll be a trick, for sure, but that's the best I got.”

“You're doin' great,” Cy said.

Jess said to him, “Be doin' a lot better if you would stop callin' it a witch shop in front of Mamma! You big asshole.”

Cy laughed and I had to, too. It was such a big damn brother thing to do but yeah, it was givin' poor Jess all kinds of fits.

"Guess that just leaves one thing," Jess said and Cy and I both looked her way.

She looked up and asked bold-faced, "When the place is done and we can move back in it, would you have a problem with Collier movin' in with us?" then she fixed those golden-brown eyes of hers on me and asked, "Would you wanna?"

"Fuck yeah, I would wanna," I said.

Cy looked at the ground then back up and said, "I ain't got a problem with that, so long as I don't have to listen to you fuck my sister."

I laughed and Jess rolled her eyes.

"Well good, that's settled then, ain't it?" she asked.

"I guess so," Cy said.

I smiled and nodded slowly.

"So, when's the fence go up, then?" I asked and Cy looked over.

"Starts next week."

I nodded.

"Awesome."

I held out my beer over the fire neck out and Jess and Cy leaned in and we clicked bottles.

"Still don't like the idea of puttin' a fence around the house and a gate at the end of the driveway, but I can't deny it makes sense," she said.

"Keep 'em from getting so close, the fence is a lot less expensive to replace than all this bullshit, that's for sure," Cy reminded her and she nodded.

She heaved a sigh and said, "I can't wait to come home."

"I know, baby. Just a little while longer."

She smiled up at me and no, taking a drink of her beer.



IT ONLY TOOK a couple of weeks and Spring had sprung. Summer was comin' in like a lion if the heat and humidity of the right now was to be believed. With the changing of the season, I was just reminded we were that much closer to the sweet vengeance that would be settin' ol' Ham Bone up to die.

Thankfully, we'd managed to avoid the son of a bitch since that one night he'd dropped by Jess's folks' place when we'd been there.

The first batches of 'shine was done, they'd been mediocre at best, but serviceable to get the lot of us messy drunk one night at the club. None of us had gone blind, so that was something.

The new batches were going, the recipes accordingly tweaked, and the house was finished. The new fence was up around the property and the sturdy gate was in place. It was fancy, needing a garage door clicker thing to open it automatically when you arrived home and it was sturdy as fuck.

Cy and I had fronted some money, and Cy and his daddy had fronted a lot of the seafood to do a big crawfish boil to entice the rest of the club and the folks around these parts to help put the house to rights with us. Moving everything in from out in the garages.

A sort of ceasefire or unspoken truce had gone up between the Voodoo Bastards and the Bayou Brethren after Swamp Daddy's had gone up in fire and vengeance and come rainin' back down in the form of matchsticks.

I had a feelin' it would kindle some other form of retaliation but for now, things had cooled off an' we had bigger fish to fry.

"This looks nice!" Alina cried at the back porch and Jess glowed with pride as we passed them up with Jess's armoire

for the bedroom.

Jess had the idea of replacing the curved panel window things with piecemeal reclaimed windows that'd been carefully nailed, glued, and in some places welded together by some of the boys. It wasn't pretty in places, but that was part of its charm.

It ended up saving money and was way cheaper than the custom window job we'd been quoted, and we'd been able to *at least* take care of the bathroom floor.

It was a long day of work bringing everything back in the house, including the new used furniture for Tate and for Cy's room that'd been carefully brought together off of places like secondhand apps and social media marketplaces by Jess.

Tate liked his new digs, and so did I. We gave each other a high fived once it was all in place, both of us red-faced and dripping sweat.

"I'm getting too old for this," I said. "What's your excuse?"

"Grandma's cooking," he said, patting his flat stomach.

Jess died laughing out in the hallway, having overheard us on the way back to our room with a box of stuff.

It was a good day with good food, family, and friends – which unfortunately, by late afternoon, included Hamblin for a hot minute. Jess's dad and brother mostly kept him corralled and Jess stayed the hell away from him, sticking with the women in the kitchen and in her spaces with Cor and Alina working on stuff.

She and Alina were becoming thick as thieves and Cor was in on that, too but she was fixated on some friend of hers from Texas coming out for a visit in the near future.

Finally, the house was cleared out except for a few brothers passed out on the couch or in a hammock in the backyard.

"Shower?" I asked my girl, and she rolled her eyes gratefully.

She said, “I thought you’d never ask.”

“Am I going to lose my skin?” I asked with a grin and a wink and she laughed at me.

“Not this time,” she said, coming in and wrapping her arms around my waist. “Ain’t nothing fixing to bring me down today. Thanks for checkin’ on me, though.”

“Always,” I said and kissed her.

“Gross,” Tate said, coming around the corner and Alina pulled back, rolling her eyes.

“You’ll be doing it in no time, too,” she said and her tone was exasperated.

“Mom, I’m *fourteen!*” he cried and she brought her chin down and glowered at him.

“An’ I’m twenty-eight, what’s your point?” she demanded.

He dragged his head back and gave a confused look and said, “What’s that have to do with anything?”

I laughed. “What’s twenty-eight minus fourteen, bud? C’mon, now. You can do that math.”

He worked it out in his head and his eyes went wide and Jess and I couldn’t help but laugh at the look on his face.

“Well, whatever. I gotta go, my rideshare’s here.” He grabbed a soda out of the fridge and went right back to his room.

“Rideshare?” I asked and Jess wiped tears from her eyes.

“I guess it’s something the kids say nowadays. I don’t know.”

I shook my head, jostled her a bit and said, “C’mon.”

We showered and dipped around from the bathroom into our room in only our towels and swiftly shut the rest of the world out and *damn...* was this a fine way to live.

“God, it’s good to be home,” Jess declared, echoing my sentiment, and ditching her towel in the laundry hamper. I

followed hers up with mine as she slid onto the bed and sprawled on her back, saying, “Oh! And my *own bed!*”

“Mm.” I looked her over, nude and perfect in front of me and said, “Bed? All I see is a buffet.”

I growled and lunged and she let out a high peal of laughter, giggling and playfully resisting as I wrestled her into place and went down on her.

“Oh!” she cried, her fingers tangling in my hair and her knees falling open. I cradled her ass in the palms of my hands, fingers digging in as I pulled her into my face, lapping at her center and plunging my tongue inside her as far as I could get it to go.

“Oh, fuck!” she cried out.

We heard Cy yell outside the door, “What did I tell you?” before we heard his door shut.

Jess fell out into laughter and I gripped her ass and teased her clit with my tongue to remind her just what it was she was supposed to be concentrating on.

“Mm!” She flexed under my attentions, grinding her pussy into my face, and I loved that. She was always so fucking enthusiastic about it when I went down on her.

I worked her up pretty swiftly, her body responding beautifully. It always made me feel so fucking on top of things and the world how wet she got for me, and when I slipped my finger inside her to really set her off, it was smooth as fuckin’ satin gliding on up in there.

“Oh, shit!” Her voice was high and tight as she let go of my hair to grip the covers at her hips, fisting them tightly as she trembled uncontrollably, her pussy gripping my finger and I knew she was right on that explosive edge of coming. I wanted to feel that around my cock, though. There wasn’t any singular better feeling than when my woman came around my cock, so I kneeled up, pulled her swiftly in my direction, and entered her swiftly.

She cried out in the best way, and I kept the pressure on, rearing up and pressing my thumb to her clit, working it back

and forth as I worked my dick in and out of her tight, sopping wet pussy.

“Oh, Christ, oh, God, I’m gonna come!” she warned and then it was too late. She was over the edge and falling fast.

Shit, yeah, the feel of her rhythmically tensing and releasing around me, I bowed my head and breathed steady, breathing my way through it but I didn’t stop. I *did* take my thumb off her clit, but there was no way I was letting up fucking her until I’d wrung at least two or three more orgasms out of her for my enjoyment.

I loved to watch her come for me, almost as much as I loved the feel of her when she did it. She was a wild thing that I could never in a million years hope to tame, but when I made her lose herself and lose control it was just a brief taste of what it felt like to be this big damn conquering hero. I fuckin’ lived for that fleeting moment where I could pretend that she really was *mine*.

I slowed down for her but didn’t stop. I let her gather her wits and bent over her and tasted her lips and she was both spicy and sweet at the same time.

I loved the way she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and neck. The way her hips lifted unbidden from the bed to meet my slow and languorous thrusts.

The way she cooed softly in my ear with satisfaction; my signal to start picking up my pace to bring her up to that pinnacle all over again.

Over and over again, I made her come for me, until she begged me to take my own satisfaction and to give her a break. I gathered her close to me, shoved into her hard and deep, my pace fast, losing myself completely in the sight, sound, smell, taste, and feel of her and God *damnit*, whenever I came with her, I always had this fleeting thought that I could die a happy man just for having been with her even for this short of an amount of time.

“Mm.” I kissed the side of her neck. “That was a damn good welcome home.”

She laughed and said, “One room down...”

I had to laugh and told her, “I’m totally down to fuck in your brother’s bed, but I’m leaving Tate’s room alone.”

She busted up and held me tight and I thought about it and realized that yeah. Since moving here, it finally did feel like I’d found a place that *fit*. I finally felt like I’d found a place I could call home and I looked forward to all the life I had to live for once, bein’ that I had her to share it with.

I kissed her lips and helped her to her feet and said, “Think we need to rinse off.”

“I think you’re right,” she said with a grin and she plucked her robe off the armoire. I think I was gonna need one of those. For now, I just picked up my towel off the top of the laundry hamper and put it back around my waist.

“Don’t make fun of me, now,” she said as she led me back toward the bathroom.

“Why would I?” I asked confused.

She plucked a shower cap out of a cabinet and twisted her hair up in it and it was only when she crossed her eyes that I lost my composure and laughed. She laughed with me, and it was a damn near perfect end to a close to perfect day.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE





Jessie-Lou...

I pulled into the lot at my kid's school and I was heated. He'd been having problems with one of the little bastards of the Bayou Brethren's all last year and it was something I was hoping wouldn't follow his ass into sophomore year. Alas, here it was, barely into the school year and I had been summoned to the principal's office.

I ground my teeth as I pulled into the high school's parking lot, rolling to a stop in the damn bus lane as the parking lot was full.

I shut off my truck, pressed down on the parking brake and got out.

It'd been a lot of years since I'd been in this school myself, and I'd honestly hoped I'd never have to come back.

I'd never finished. I'd gotten my GED. I'd had to. My mamma'd put her foot down that she would *not* be babysitting my kid while I went to class. That I'd laid down and spread my legs and I'd needed to deal with the consequences. Get a job and man up quick.

I'd been bitter when I'd realized that Tate would go here and that bitter flavor returned to my mouth with every step I took toward those doors.

"Excuse me," I said, interrupting the secretary's chatter behind the front desk. "I'm here for Tate Gaudet."

The secretary looked me up and down with something like disdain and said, "I do believe we need his parent here – not his sister."

I gave her an unfriendly look, raised my voice, and said, "Bitch, I *am* his mamma, not his sister. Now where the fuck is my kid?"

She gasped, shrinking back in her seat, and the principal's voice called from his office door, "Ms. Gaudet."

I turned and gave him a look that spit fire and marched that way. He shut the door behind him and I looked at Tate, sitting in one of the chairs in front of Mr. Hunter's desk a bloody wad of tissues pressed to his nose.

"Oh, God," I muttered, and I tilted his head back, admittedly a little roughly and got a look at him. Both his eyes were swelling shut and I asked him, "How's the other kid look, son?"

"I didn't stand a chance, Mamma. They's three of them on just me. I got a few good licks in, though."

I nodded. "Good boy, c'mon and git up. We'll get you to the urgent care."

"Ms. Gaudet, there's the matter of Tate's punishment."

I turned on the principle and the words he'd been about to speak died on his lips.

"You better think long and careful about what you say next," I said. "Because from where I'm standin', you let three other boys, *three of them*, beat the brakes off my son. Right now, you're lucky I ain't call a lawyer *and* report you and this *whole fuckin' school* to CPS!"

My voice gradually got louder until I was all-out screaming at him.

"These boys have been bothering my son since last year. They've spray painted our fence, they've poked fun, hit, spit, pinched slapped, hit, and now beat my son to the point he needs medical attention, and what have you done? Huh? So I'm gonna need you to put all that in your mental basket of BINGO balls and roll it, and when you're done, you *better* come out with the right number!"

He didn't say anything, his mouth opening and closing like a landed fish.

"Now where the fuck even are they?" I demanded.

"I can't—"

“Yeah, you can’t do anything, you ineffectual impotent little man. So what? What exactly were you planning on punishing my son with for defending himself against three other boys?”

“Nothing, but I think it may be a good idea that he stays home tomorrow. We’ll see him back on Monday.”

I nodded once curtly and said, “I know that’s the right number. Good boy. Now what about the other boys?”

He swallowed hard and said, “It’s against school policy to discuss disciplinary matters when it comes to other—”

“Mm-mm! Wrong answer! Try again.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Or do you think I’m foolin’ you about callin’ the state?”

“One week suspension,” he muttered and I nodded.

“Happens again, CPS and my lawyer’ll be calling. I’m not playing. My son deserves a safe learning environment.” I raised my hand to cut him off before he could speak. “And before you give me some line of fucking bullshit about those little cockbites having a right to an education over my boy, you save it. They’re abdicating their right to shit like that with every act of violence they put on my son!”

He shut his trap and all he could say was, “Language, Ms. Gaudet.”

“Suck my left tit!” I snapped, and I jerked open his office door.

“Go on, now, son. Let me get you looked after.”

Tate preceded me out, and I slammed the door shut behind me.

“Now we know where he gets it from,” I heard the secretary mutter behind my back and I stopped, back straight, and turned around slowly.

“Mamma...” Tate tried, but I looked at her and she went pale.

“Today is not the day, and I am not the one,” I said, my voice cold and shaking. “You wanna go on and say that again?”

She forced a smile and said, “Say what?”

“That’s what I thought,” I said, and I grabbed my son by the arm and marched him out to my truck. “Shit, you look awful,” I said, and tried to fuss over him.

“I feel real bad, Mamma. One of ‘em kicked me in the head real good.”

“Okay, baby, come on.”

I rushed him into urgent care and told ‘em what happened. They didn’t waste any time and got him right back to see a doctor.

He ain’t have no broken bones, according to the x-ray, but the doctor said he for sure had some kind of a concussion and that I would need to take him to the ER for further imaging. I didn’t like the sound of that at all. I called Collier and J.P. and told them to meet us there. The doctor wrote me up a bunch of information and handed me a sheaf of papers off the printer and off we went.

We were in a room waiting for the results of his CT scan when Col and J.P. got there.

“You should have seen her Nuckie,” he told J.P. “I ain’t never seen her so mad and she tore into Principal Hunter like he was wet paper.”

“She did, huh?” J.P. asked, his hands on his hips.

“Yeah.”

Col was standing by my chair, an arm around my shoulders giving them a reassuring squeeze.

“Yeah, well, he deserved it,” I said. “An’ you oughtta know by now I’d walk through hellfire for you, son.”

“No, I know,” he said.

I nodded once, sharply.

The doctor came in after that and said, “Well, good news, Tate. Your scans look good and I can send you home, I do think you have a low grade concussion, though so I want you to take it easy for the next few days.”

“What?” Tate asked, pulling the ice pack off the bridge of his nose. “No, I was supposed to go hunting with my family this weekend!” he cried.

“Afraid not, son. You need to rest. I’m givin’ you Friday and Monday off from school...”

The rest of what the doctor had to say was a bit of a blur honestly. All I’d heard was all I’d needed to hear – my boy was going to be okay.

“Oh, hey, don’t cry!” Tate said, but it was too late. I rubbed a thumb across the back of his hand where I held it and sniffled.

“He’s okay, Mamma,” the doctor said kindly and he held out a box of tissues to me. I plucked one then two out of it and mopped at my eyes.

“He’s okay, baby,” Col said, and he wrapped me up in his arms and held me tight.

“I know, I’m sorry, but you’re my *baby*,” I told Tate and I squeezed his hand. He squeezed it back and J.P. had sense enough to take over and get all his discharge paperwork and the like.

“You gonna be okay to drive?” Col asked me while we waited on the other side of the curtain just inside his Emergency Room’s bay door.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding.

“I’m thinkin’ pizza tonight,” J.P. said.

I nodded then shook my head and said, “Just what is wrong with these fucking *people*?” I demanded.

“They ain’t got no fuckin’ home trainin’, clearly,” Collier said.

“I mean, ain’t none of us *start* this!” I sputtered. “We just stand our fuckin’ ground.”

“Hush.” J.P. looked around and I nodded miserably.

“Let’s go on home, order some dinner, and get you right,” Col consoled me.

“Alright,” I agreed.

So that’s what we did.

We went home, J.P. ordered some pizza for pickup, and I made sure Tate was cleaned up and resting comfortably on the couch before I did anything else.

“Come on out here a minute, babe,” Collier called from the back door just as soon as J.P. came back in from calling in our pizza order from out front.

“Okay, but you come get me before you leave to go anywhere,” I said to my brother.

“I will,” he said.

“What?” I asked when Col shut the back door behind us.

He held up a joint and stuck it between his lips.

Ah.

“You need to relax,” he said around it as he brought his lighter up to light it.

I nodded. I wasn’t about to argue that fact.

I took it from him and inhaled the green tasting smoke and held it. I looked at the joint and nodded my respect at the roll job.

He said around his pent-up breath, “Hell, I ain’t think I seen you take a hit since Fourth of July weekend.” I nodded and he let out a plume of fragrant earthy smoke.

We’d gotten high in our room as the fireworks went off. He didn’t like them. I just didn’t like the holiday. It was the weekend that Tate’d been conceived.

I’d turned fourteen in August, and he’d been born the following April... barely. He’d been a couple of weeks early

and had just squeaked by being a March baby. I was just glad he hadn't been born on April first. That would have been a cosmic joke of some kind. I was glad the universe had spared me.

We'd talked about it that night, both of us sharing private pains and details that we held bottled up. Me about that night, and him about some of his time overseas.

I think it'd helped and brought us closer.

We stood in the back and listened to the swamp together and got around halfway through the joint together when J.P. popped out the back door.

"Ah," my brother said. "I gotta go get y'all's munchies."

I giggled at that and Collier smiled at me. He said he loved how I got the giggles when I got high.

"Ok," I said, and I went back in.

"Y'all back there smokin' the weed?" Tate called as I hung up my jacket.

"What's it to you?" I called back.

"I can smell it!" he complained. "And drugs are bad, mmkay?"

Col laughed a little and hung up his jacket and cut beside mine.

"Damn right, for you!" I called.

"I know, I know," he said. "Twenty-one for alcohol and twenty-five for weed."

"That's right," I said in a singsong voice.

"Wait, why twenty-five for the gange?" Col asked.

"Because your brain doesn't finish developing until twenty-five and it's bad for you until then."

"Oh, shit, well I fucked up," Col said and I started giggling like a lunatic again.

"Oh, God," Tate said and he let his head fall back. "You're so annoying when you're high."

I went and sat down next to him and stuck my tongue out at him and said, “Well you’re annoying when I’m not,” and he laughed at me and held out his fist for a fist bump.

“Sick burn.”

“What do you want to watch?” I asked.

“Duh, more *Walking Dead*,” he said.

I said, “Fuck yeah. Daryl dies, we riot.”

“That’s right,” Col said, flopping down on the other side of me. He’d taken off his boots and propped his feet onto the ottoman.

J.P. returned with the pizzas and salad without incident and said, “Whoa, hey, you started without me?”

“Sorry,” Tate said, but his grin said otherwise.

I got up to dish up our food onto paper plates and took a minute to look over so much of my love gathered in one room.

I was grateful, but things had been ramping up again. Lines cut, gators lost, all season long, our new fence tagged out front, and now this... I was wondering what and when something would give.

Col looked over at me, winked and blew me a kiss and I smiled.

I had every bit of trust we would all pull through this and things would get better. Hell, since Col everything already *was* better. Tate was happier, and things were better than they’d ever been with John-Paul.

Sometimes, the universe just had its way of hoofin’ me in the front butt, was all. It just felt like the stakes were higher ‘n ever now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO





Eollier...

J.P. let me know that with Tate out of commission for hunting on Saturday, that we were moving the timeline up. Said his daddy was over the moon to put the rabid hog that was his former best friend down.

I was over the moon that Tate wouldn't ever have to be around the disgusting fat fuck ever again. We'd done a big cookout at Jess's folks for her birthday in August. There was a point when Jess and Tate and I had gotten into a water fight with some of the other kids hangin' around from the neighborhood and he'd come 'round the corner from wherever and had snatched her right on up and spun her, holding onto her, and hollerin' for the kids to get her.

She hadn't had a fun time after that, and I'd had her in hand the rest of the time. She'd cried something awful when we'd got home and had some really bad nightmares that night.

It wasn't something I ever planned on repeating with her, ever again. She just wasn't gonna go through it if I could help it.

I'd learned to hunt for gators that summer. Cy an' his dad had been falling behind when it came to fillin' their tags. So, I'd gone out with Cy in his boat while Renaud, Cy's daddy, had gone out with Ham Bone.

Truth be told, I was kind of amazed that ol' Ham Bone hadn't fallen in and been eaten by a gator – of course, ol' Renaud was smarter 'n that.

“Man, I wish I was going tomorrow,” Tate said on Friday night.

“I know, buddy,” Cy said.

I looked over an' Tate looked wistful with his impressive pair of raccoon eye shiners.

“Wish it was summer an’ we could go back to gator huntin’, I wanna go more ‘n just the one weekend next summer. I’m old enough.”

Cy smiled and said, “Oh, you will, buddy. Grandy and ol’ Ham Bone are gettin’ too old for that shit.”

“Well, maybe not Grandy,” Tate said, grinning.

“Ain’t he an’ Ham Bone the same age?” I asked.

“Yeah, but ol’ Grandy ain’t fat,” Tate declared, and Jess snorted against my chest where she lay her head.

Cy guffawed and shook his head.

“Don’t you let ol’ Grandy hear you disrespecting your elder like that, man. He won’t like it,” Cy chided, more for show for Jess.

“Yeah,” Tate said. “I don’t know, though – something about ol’ Ham Bone weirds me out. Guy gives me the creeps an’ always has.”

Jess lifted her head and looked her son’s way.

“What you talkin’ about?” she demanded and even I went very still under her.

“The way he talks about girls.” Tate shrugged. “Not women, but *girls*... like my age an’ sometimes even younger. It ain’t right.”

Cypress shifted in his seat in his recliner and asked, “What you mean? Like gimme an example, bud.”

“Like Tracy-Lyn, the girl my age,” he said.

“Ol’ Jerome Pardeux’s kid? The mixed girl?” Cypress asked.

“Jerome’s her Grandy,” Tate said, “And yeah – he was all talkin’ about her chest in her bathing suit. It was gross.”

“Why ain’t you tell someone? Before now?” Jess demanded.

“I did! I told Mawmaw. She told me to pay ‘im no never mind. It was just how he was talkin’ outta turn when he’s

drinkin'. She acted like it was normal and said he ain't no harm."

Jess laid her head back down, and I felt her go limp and broken with defeat.

"Next time you ever hear a grown-ass man talk about a little girl like that, you come find *me*," I said.

"Or me," Cypress said. "I'd knock his damn teeth in if I heard it myself. That's not okay."

He glanced at me and Jess, but she simply lay with her eyes shut, no doubt blocking it out.

"Hell, you go on an' slap the taste out his mouth in front of God an' everyone, son. You know we have your back. Ain't no disrespecting a man that talks like that enough."

"Ain't no disrespecting a man like that period," Cy said. "He ain't no man. That's a devil plain as."

Jess sighed, and I felt it in my bones... I knew she was silently wishing her brother had been paying attention.

I understood it.

A man like that *talks*. Hell, ol' Ham Bone barely ever shut the fuck up, his mouth was constantly runnin'. I was damn sure what he'd said about that girl at Jess's birthday party weren't the first time.

The mood considerably dampened and both Cy and I eager for tomorrow, we called it a night shortly after that.

"I hate this," Jessie confided in the dark of our bed that night.

"I know, baby," I told her and I kissed her forehead.

"I don't believe there is a God," she said. "Not after all that's happened with..." She sighed. "In fact, I know there isn't. If there was, he would have answered my prayer a long time ago to strike that fat fuck down. A heart attack, a huntin' accident... something."

Oh, the fuckin' irony of those words, I thought.

All I could do was hug her, and kiss her forehead, and try as I might to fall asleep. I didn't until she did. I couldn't let her lay awake alone.



“COLLIER!”

I jolted awake.

“Yeah?” I called out.

“Get dressed brother, let's roll,” Cy called through the bedroom door.

Jess groaned and pushed off of me.

“Gimme a second,” she moaned. “I'll make coffee.”

I chuckled as I sat up.

“Fuck that. You sleep, baby. I'll get my own coffee.”

She sighed and settled back down and I smiled.

I got dressed in the dark, all my brand-new hunting gear already laid out for me. As soon as I was all geared up, I went around to Jess's side of the bed, smoothed some of her hair back, and kissed her temple.

I met Cypress in the kitchen who was making a pot of coffee.

“Fuck yeah, my dude,” I said and sniffed.

“Put a bowl of oatmeal in your face or somethin',” he ordered, and I hitched a laugh.

We ate, swilled down coffee strong enough you could stand a spoon up in it, and got out the back door headed for Cy's truck about an hour or so before first light.

We rode over to his daddy's house. Renaud and Hamblin' standin' in his daddy's driveway.

“About fuckin' time y'all got here,” Ham Bone said.

“Can’t shoot nothin’ before first light anyhow,” I said and he had the most annoying fucking laugh.

We all four piled into Renaud’s much more modern truck with its front and back seats after we checked to make sure everybody’s weapons were empty, our huntin’ licenses were on us, and we had everything inside regulations.

Cypress wasn’t kidding. His daddy was a stickler for bein’ on fish & wildlife’s good side.

We drove on out to their preferred huntin’ grounds and got out there just as the sun began to rise.

We traipsed out into the woods, and at a certain point, let Hamblin get ahead of the rest of us.

Renaud gave a hand signal and we all three looked at each other and nodded.

Renaud would be the one to do it. It’d already been decided. He’d made a convincing argument. He was older, it was his daughter, and he’d been the one to invite the predator into her home. If something were to go south, he wanted to be the one to go to prison with the expectation that Cy would take care of his mom and sister with my help.

They were all reasonable points, but damn if we all wanted our pound of flesh and pint of blood for what he done, and for the last *fifteen years* of fear and heartache that Jess had to endure. For the lifetime sentence of what he’d done hanging over her head.

Dead or alive, it didn’t matter. Not really. She would always have to live with the trauma and the scars.

“Hey, get down! What’s that?” Renaud whisper-shouted.

Ol’ Ham Bone fell right into it. He got down behind a fallen log and Renaud fired off a shot at the imaginary deer. When Ham Bone shot up asking, “Did yeh git it?” Renaud took his second shot and bam – it was lights out. Hammy’s head blew apart like a melon.

We all three stood over his body sprawled out in front of us and Renaud sniffed.

“Yeah. I got him. You piece of fuckin’ shit.”

Cypress went over to his dad and hugged him, and it did something to me to watch Renaud cry.

“Who’s callin’ it in?” I asked.

We hadn’t discussed that.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE





Jessie-Lou...

It was late morning my mother called me in hysterics. I couldn't get it out of her what'd happened, and I piled Tate into the truck with me and made what was normally a ten-minute drive from our place to my folks' in less than three.

When I got there, my mother spilled out of the house, her usual careful makeup a ruin down her face and she lunged right for Tate clinging to him and carrying on. There was a police SUV in their driveway but no sign of the cops until one stepped out the front door.

I was shaking my mother and screaming at her, "What's happening" but she was as useless as a pair of tits on a fuckin' bull.

"There's been a hunting accident, miss. I'm sorry to tell you, but your family's friend Hamblin Wright has died."

"Oh-ho, God!" my mother wailed and Tate was looking at me with sheer panic and white as a fuckin' sheet as she clung to my fifteen-year-old child for comfort.

"Mamma, get in the house," I ordered, and dragged her to the front door that the officer held open for me. "I said, get in the house!" She tried to collapse on the driveway.

Jesus, God, almighty – you'd like to think it was Daddy'd died the way she was carrying on.

I swallowed hard and dumped my mother off on the couch.

"Tate, do what you can please while I talked to the officer?" He nodded and sat down with my mother.

"Thank you," I said, and he nodded again looking up at me wide-eyed.

"What happened?" I demanded.

“Your family is on their way now. They took their statements at the scene. I’m just here to follow up.”

I nodded and wiped a hand over my sweating upper lip as a wave of nausea crashed through me.

“Can, uh, can I make you some coffee?” I asked weakly.

The officer looked sympathetic and said, “That’d be mighty nice of you. Thank you.”

I nodded and mechanically went to work fixing a fresh pot of coffee.

My mother was still wailing while the cop and I sat awkwardly with our coffee mugs nearby when my daddy come through the door.

My mamma looked up from Tate who grimaced and she practically lunged at my dad.

I looked to Collier who came through the door next and stood up. He looked solemn, but other than that? His expression was unreadable.

John-Paul came in after Col and his expression was just plain neutral the only way my brother could do. His poker face unbeatable.

“What happened?” I demanded. “Is he really gone?”

My dad passed my mom off to my brother and came over to me. He put his hand on my shoulder and I dropped back into my seat and giving it a squeeze, he said, “He’s really gone, baby girl. I shot him.”

I stared at my dad, my eyes wide, and only by the grace of *some* higher power did I manage not to laugh as my vision blurred with tears.

Right on the heels of the near-miss inappropriate reaction due to the sheer *relief* I felt did the horror come rushing in about what my daddy’d just said.

“What?” I asked and my voice had this strange hollow quality.

“I killed him, baby girl,” he said, and he pulled me into a hug as I started to sob. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry,” He gripped me hard and started to cry too.

I had never, not once, my whole twenty-nine years on earth, *ever* seen my daddy cry. Not about *nothin’*.

I hugged my dad, and we cried together, and I knew... I just knew deep on down in the pit of my gut, neither one of us was cryin’ over ol’ Ham Bone.

Collier’s hand touched my back, and he rubbed it in useless but comforting circles as my family crumbled and fell apart, all of us for different reasons.

I looked to John-Paul who hugged our mother, and even he’d worked up tears from somewhere. I looked to Tate, my son, who cried because he was a sensitive soul, and my heart broke a little for his pain.

Collier kneeled with me and my dad and murmured sweet platitudes while this poor cop just sat uncomfortably while we all carried on, staring into his coffee cup.

Welcome to the shitshow... I thought at him, and it was honestly all I could muster right then, because, *what the fuck?*



IT WAS DECLARED A HUNTING ACCIDENT. I’d sat with my daddy while he’d told his story. About how he’d shot at a buck, and how Ham Bone in his excitement had stood right up as he’d taken a second shot and the horrifying accident it all was.

The police officer relayed, after taking all their statements again, that everything about the scene matched the boys’ story, and that it was likely going to be ruled an accident and not to worry – that someone was over at all Ham Bone’s with Arlene, his new widow.

I’d excused myself then and had gone out to the back porch for some air.

I put my hands on my knees and took in so many deep breaths trying not to get sick and damn it was hard not to throw up.

After a minute, Tate came out to check on me.

“You okay, Mom?”

“Yeah, buddy. I just... I just needed some air.”

“Can I get you anything?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Glass of ice water from the refrigerator, please?”

“Okay.” He moved so quickly to comply and help out, bless his heart.

I sat back down on the back porch swing and sighed, hanging my head between my knees.

The back slider opened, and I heard ice rattle in a glass.

“Thank you, baby,” I said and I looked up, my hand out to take the glass but it was Collier who handed it to me.

“Welcome, baby,” he said, and he cautiously asked. “Can I sit?”

I took the glass from him completely and I nodded. “Always,” I said.

He came around and sat next to me, threading his fingers between mine and squeezing my hand. I sipped the water and closed my eyes as it went down.

“You... you, uh, tell ‘em?” I asked and I opened my eyes.

He nodded, “Uh, yeah...” he said. “I did. A while ago, actually. Please, I know you have every right to be mad—”

“I’m not,” I said quickly, and then I sat up a bit more, nodding and saying a little stronger, “I’m not.”

“You’re not?” he asked, cocking his head.

I shook my head.

“You didn’t do it for the wrong reasons. You did it to help me.”

He nodded eagerly.

“No more secrets in your house, baby,” he said, raising the back of my hand to his lips and kissing it.

I rolled my eyes and said, “Well, maybe from my mother...” He snorted and put a hand over his mouth before he could start laughing.

“Yeah, okay, there’s an exception to every rule,” he said, and I couldn’t help but smile at that.

I swallowed hard and asked, “So, uh, is it how my daddy said it happened?”

He nodded and put his arm out and I tucked myself into his side.

“Yeah,” he said.

“You promise to tell me everything?” I asked, and he nodded.

“Anything you want to know,” he said.

I nodded, and he heaved a big damn sigh and kissed my forehead. I closed my eyes and didn’t even bother opening them when the back slider opened again.

“Can I sit out here with you guys?” Tate asked and without missing a beat, both Col and I slid over.

Tate sat down next to me.

“You sad, Mom?” he asked, and I sniffed and nodded and switched my glass to my hand closer to Col that Col had relinquished to put his arm around me. I gripped my son’s hand and I cried again because I was sad.

Sad for my daddy, and for my whole family and how their hearts hurt right now.

“Are you sad?” I asked my son, and he sighed.

“I’m sad for you, and for Nuckie, and Grandy. I think I’m sad for Mamaw, but I don’t know... she’s... not very nice to you and she’s kind of selfish sometimes. I know that’s bad to say right now, but...”

“It’s okay, kid. You’re entitled to feel however you wanna feel,” Collier said, leaning forward to look at my son. I nodded in agreement.

“Is it selfish...” he swallowed hard. “Is it selfish to be glad I wasn’t there?” he asked quickly.

“No,” Collier said unequivocally.

“Not at all,” I agreed.

“I’m really glad you weren’t.” Collier spoke almost before I finished. “As a man, you might see a lot of bad things in your life. No need to start that shit this early.”

My boy nodded and said, “I’m sorry you had to.”

“Thanks, bud,” Col said. “Don’t feel too bad for me, though. I’ve seen worse, and I’ve had a lot of time to learn how to deal. Okay?”

Tate nodded and said, “Okay.”

I squeezed his hand and said, “Thank you for wrangling Mamaw for me.”

He nodded.

“Not like she gave you a choice,” he said with a sardonic little laugh.

I nodded.

“No, she never does, does she?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“No, she never does,” he agreed.



BACK AT HOME, everyone just sort of drifted off to do their own thing. I meandered into the kitchen and put tea on. Tate dropped onto the living room couch and asked his uncle to play something.

“Maybe not, like, a shooter, but like *Mario Kart* or something?”

“Yeah, sure thing, bud. I think I’d like that,” J.P. said and dropped onto the couch next to him while Tate fired up the proper game system.

“Col, you in?” Tate called hopefully.

“Well, I’m in,” I called. “If you’ll let your *mom* play.”

Tate lit up and Col smiled at me and nodded. “I’m game. I wanna see if I can kick your ass.”

“Oh, oh-ho! You have no *idea* what you’re in for!” I said and leaving the electric kettle to go, I went into the living room.

Shit, we played that stupid fucking game until *late*, and we had *so much fun* doing it.

It was like we all gave ourselves the grace to just forget about it for a while.

Tate was actually the first one to call it quits. He came and hugged me and said, “Goodnight, Mom.” He clasped hands and tapped shoulders with Col and J.P.

“Goodnight, man,” Col said, and Tate went and shut himself into his room. I let out an explosive sigh and leaned back into the couch.

“You okay, sis?” J.P. asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah, you know, I think I’m alright. Just tired mostly. Like *really* tired.”

My brother nodded. “You should get good sleep tonight,” he said.

I sighed. “Guess no deer this season, huh?”

I looked from J.P. to Col as they looked at each other and shook their heads.

“No, I mean, your dad may not wanna, but we can get back out there before the end of the season,” Col said and I nodded.

“Need to fill up that freezer out in the garage. We’re gettin’ low.”

Cy nodded. “Yeah, we do,” he agreed.

“Well, you’re used to one per household, right?” Col asked.

“All we really need,” J.P. answered.

“We keep a gator or two every season, too so that helps.”

Col nodded. “Well, if your dad doesn’t want to go out, when we bag mine, we can give it to him. Jess needs the skulls anyhow.”

I nodded. “Yeah I do,” I agreed.

“Shit, I didn’t even think of that,” J.P. said.

“Need to fill up those bins out there y’all built me.”

They’d built me bins out of plywood and old pallets to store my bones since things had gotten crazy with them and we knew we would need a lot more.

“Yeah, I got the call out to all the local families around these parts,” J.P. said, stifling a yawn. “We’ll get you some skulls.”

I nodded. “I been gettin’ more from work and fish and wildlife’s been gettin’ em for me. Gonna need to get more beetle tanks and more beetles at this rate, too.”

“God, the smell back there is gonna get *whew!*” J.P. complained. I shrugged.

“Got Cor carvin’ too at the club. Alina makin’ stencils. She got the idea when she went with ol’ Len to one of his tattoo appointments.”

“Nice.” Collier nodded.

“If anybody can do this crazy business thing, it’s you girls,” J.P. said.

“Aww,” I said, wrinkling my nose like I thought he was cute and he grinned at me.

“He’s not wrong, baby,” Col said, and I felt myself start to genuinely blush.

“Okay, stop it, you two.”

They chuckled at me and Collier patted my thigh, gripping my leg through my jeans.

I heaved a big sigh and asked him, “How you feel about taking me for a ride?”

“What, now?” he asked.

I nodded. “Sure.”

“Fuck yeah, where you wanna go?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “Maybe the city? Find a bar or a club somewhere and have a drink, listen to some music? I just want to get out of my head, you know?”

He nodded at me and said, “Yeah.” He looked to J.P.

“You cool with that?”

“Tate’s old enough to look after himself but yeah, no, I get it. You guys go. I’m headed for bed myself. Maybe watch a movie or some shit.”

I nodded and said, “Thank you.”

“Not a problem,” he said.

So that’s how we found ourselves riding for the city at like ten o’clock at night. The wind on my face as I hugged myself to Col’s back was freeing. It felt... different. More alive, somehow. The world more vibrant and my soul jubilant – and I had zero guilt or fucks to give about that.

We ended up at a little bar with some live smooth jazz quartet playing. We weren’t particularly dressed nice enough for it, but we didn’t care. We had a drink, danced for an hour or two, then I went to the bathroom. When I got out, Col took my hand and said, “C’mon.”

We walked along the street at a leisurely pace and rode to the club. It was a pretty low-key night, and we didn’t go in.

Well, I didn’t.

Col had me wait while he went in and he came back out with a small jar of the new ‘shine.

He came and sat up on the picnic table out front with me and spun the ring off the jar that was only like a third full. He flicked off the lid and it went skittering into the dark while I laughed.

He took a sip and gave a satisfied, “Ah!”

I took it and sipped but I coughed, like a pussy.

“Holy hell, but that’s good shit,” I said.

“Isn’t it?” he asked with a rakish grin.

“It is,” I declared. “But if we get fucked up, where we gonna stay?”

He winked at me and pulled the keys for Alina’s place out of his pocket.

“I checked. They’re at La Croix’s daddy’s ol’ place and started cleaning it out. Guess he decided it’s finally time to do something with it.”

I nodded. “Poor Len. He’s had a rough row to hoe, and it ain’t need to be that way,” I said with a sigh.

“Just like any of us, I think” he said and took another sip of the Moonshine.

“You trying to get me fucked up so my clothes fall off?” I demanded, and he laughed and nodded.

“Something like that,” he said, handing the jar back.

I drank, and sighed, tossing my head back to look at the moon high above us.

“Such a pretty name for such a wicked drink.” I held up the colorless liquid to the moonlight, watching it shine through it.

“You’re so fuckin’ beautiful,” he said out of nowhere and I looked back at him, laughing and asking, “What?”

He grinned and said, “You heard me just fine, Jessie-Lou Gaudet.”

I snorted and shook my head and it turned into a nod.

“Yeah, I did,” I agreed.

“You gonna drink that?” he asked, and I laughed and took another sip and passed it to him.

He sipped and leaned over knocking his shoulder into mine and I smiled.

“You know,” he said. “Ain’t no universe where you’d be someone’s property in the traditional sense of the word... but you know that’s not what it means to men like me an’ your brother, right?”

I looked at him and reached for the jar. He handed it over and I took a bigger swallow than the previous ones and asked, “Are you askin’ me what I think you’re asking me?”

He huffed a laugh. “That depends on what you think I’m asking,” he said.

“You asking me to be your ol’ lady?”

He nodded. “Yeah. That’s exactly what I’m asking you,” he said.

I swallowed hard and took another drink and he said, “Whoa, slow down,” and took it from me, taking another sip of his own.

“I mean, if you’re serious and – and you really want that, then *yeah*,” I said.

He shook his head and chuckled. “Hell yeah, I want it, but the question is do *you*?”

“Are you kidding me?” I demanded. “Yes! Yes, oh my, God!”

He nodded and said, “Good, because you’re the last woman that’s ever gonna be on the back of my bike. Period.”

He took a sip and passed the jar and I shook my head a bit incredulous and asked, “Can we take this to go?” and I held it up.

“Hell yeah,” he said. “Ain’t no one and nothing stopping us.”

“Good,” I said. “You need to take me upstairs and fuck me to seal this deal.”

He threw back his head and laughed and laughed, but he slipped off the table and put boots to the ground and held out his hand to me.

I took it and got to my feet and he twirled me under his arm like we were on our own private dance floor.

I giggled, and we went across the street and up to the apartment, letting ourselves in.

We shared sips of Moonshine and started kissing, abandoning the mostly empty jar on the kitchen counter on the way to the bedroom.

We took our clothes off, tit for tat, leaving them like a breadcrumb trail back to reality for the next morning – but for now, for the rest of tonight, we were deep in the woods of each other and feelin' alright.

He kissed me, backing me up to the bed, his hands smoothing down my skin along my body over my hips and he stopped us just short of where I'd hoped he'd throw me down on the mattress and he simply kissed me.

We were both feeling that 'shine, I could tell, but I didn't mind. I was safe with Col like I'd never been safe with anyone else and that knowledge was almost as intoxicating as the liquor in my blood.

“Hmm,” he hummed a light and satisfied sound, pressing his forehead to mine and gently swaying with me to a song in his head. I smiled and just reveled in his presence. In the warmth of his skin, of the joy we both shared, and I danced with him, nude, full of Moonshine under the light of the moon that streamed through the slats of the blinds here in the bedroom window.

“Oh, Jessie-Lou, Jessie-Lou, what would I do without you?” he sort of sang and I smiled and even though it didn't rhyme or whatever I spoke the truth from my soul as I touched his bottom lip with my fingertips, my other arms still around his neck as we danced.

“Hopefully, you'll never have to know, baby.”

He took this deep, deep breath and tilted his head as though that'd been music to his ears and tightening his arms around me and pulling me in tight, he kissed me sure and true.

We wound up on the bed, hands roaming and exploring, lips trembling against the other's, kissing deeply, holding tightly, and our mutual arousal for each other simmering gently for the time being.

He held my hands with his, twining his fingers through mine, and let his lips have free rein.

I breathed out gently and closed my eyes, tilting my head back as he laid sweet butterfly kisses all down my body, his breath warm and the faintest touch along my skin that made gooseflesh sweep after each one. I bit my bottom lip and tried to hold still, even when some of those touched tickled me something fierce and the titillation was almost too much to take.

His hands eventually left mine to capture my hips and along my ribs to hold me in place while he continued the gentle march of his lips ever lower.

My anticipation and excitement grew with each touch and with each incremental movement lower, my breath gradually deepening, becoming fuller, dragging in slower and exhaling quicker. My fingers gripping at the covers beneath me as he moved over my stomach, across my hips, a groan of frustration escaping me as he *didn't* pay attention to where I supposed he would go, but instead made his way all the way down my left leg.

He kneeled on the floor, off the bed, and pressed his thumbs into the sole of my foot, his long fingers creating counter-pressure on my instep and I moaned but it ended on a drunken giggle. He only worked my foot with his hands for a moment or two before he moved to the right one and gave it the same treatment for a few seconds before he went back to his kissing. Slow, exquisitely torturous, he made his way up my right leg, but maddeningly he diverted his kisses up the *outside* of my right thigh starting at the knee.

I groaned, a whining thing, and thought to myself, ‘*oh come on!*’ but he wouldn’t hear it. He was determined to make this last and there was a certain magic in what he was doing. I felt so loved, and what he was doing was nothing short of worship, and that made me feel so *powerful*.

He finally, *finally*, once back to my hip, started on a path to what I *really* wanted. He looked up my body, as I gazed down the length of it at him, and the heat in those icy cold blue eyes of his was electric. He closed his mouth over my clit and sucked and I nearly came up off the bed.

He threw a forearm over my hips and pressed me back down onto the bed and let his absolute onslaught begin.

I shuddered and cried out as he assailed every one of my senses, twisting the throttle on my arousal so suddenly that I left this very plane of existence behind for another one of dark and tranquil beauty where I was left suspended and floating, quicksilver replacing the blood in my veins.

I was vaguely aware of him easing up my body with damp, light touches of his lips and then I was lost to the haze once more as he entered me, kissing me along the side of my neck, exploiting that sweet spot as he looked for the one inside of me.

I wrapped my arms around him and held him close and lost myself to his careful treatment of me, and it was sublime.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR





Eollier...

“I don’t like it,” Jessie said and put her hands in her back pockets.

“I like the idea of you meetin’ with this Tommy kid’s parents even less, and it ain’t my call, babe. It’s been decided, majority rules, and La Croix’s the one with the final say.”

“Yeah, but both you *and* my brother? Maybe I should talk to Len myself...”

“Hey, no.” I caught her by her upper arm and stopped her and she closed her eyes and her shoulders sagged.

“Right, sorry...”

My heart rate decelerated marginally when sense overtook my woman. She knew I wasn’t even supposed to be telling her *any* of this, but there were no more secrets in our house.

Hell, Cypress would put my face out the back of my skull with one punch if he knew *half* of what his sister knew.

“It’s gonna be fine,” I said gently.

“Both sides are meetin’ under a banner of truce on neutral ground. It’s been carefully arranged.”

She shook her head. “They don’t honor the fuckin’ rules in the first place, what makes you think this is gonna be different?” she demanded in a harsh whisper.

I hooked a hand behind her head and kissed her soundly and she melted into me and sighed out.

“Cheater,” she murmured against my mouth and I chuckled.

“I can’t help it if it gets you every time, you know a fair few tricks yourself, you little minx.”

“Okay, you’re not wrong, but still – I don’t like this.”

“Duly noted,” I said. “But y’ can’t change it. Now you have your choice,” I said and she made an exasperated noise.

“I’m not Tate, and I know... either I can quit kickin’ up a fuss or you’re gonna stop tellin’ me things.”

“I don’t say it to be mean,” I said and cradled her face in my hands, pressing a kiss to her forehead knowing it dropped her blood pressure like thirty points any time I did when she had herself worked up like this.

“Oh, you’re pulling out *all* the stops,” she said and she sighed.

She had her hands on her hips and she sighed out harshly, looking out behind Len’s daddy’s old place, staring into the swamp.

She turned back to me and poked me sharply in the chest and said, “You or my big dumb brother get yourselves killed, I’m fixin’ to come after you and make sure you’re takin’ your licks in hell.”

I threw back my head and laughed, hands on her hips and drawing her in to hug her tight.

“I mean it, now!” she declared in my ear and I nodded, pressing a kiss into the side of her neck.

“I believe you would,” I declared, and she nodded.

“Damn straight.”

The girls were cleaning up La Croix’s daddy’s place and working on turning it into something useful for themselves and the club.

The bottom floor they were turning into workspaces for their online sales stuff and makin’ their skulls and paints and shit.

Upstairs, they were workin’ on making bedrooms and shit useful again, in case some of the boys needed to stay out this way for the stills out there in the swamp.

“Everything alright over here?”

Jess and I both jumped slightly and turned to look at Saint who stood nearby with his arms crossed.

I nodded. "Yeah, all good."

Jess nodded too when Saint looked her way.

"We're fixin' to leave," Saint declared, jerking his head back the way that the bikes were parked.

"Where you headed?" Jess asked, without missing a beat nor without sounding one bit like she was shinin' Saint on.

"Club business," he said and he gave a nod. "Sorry, Jess."

She smiled and shook her head. "Nature of the beast," she said and she didn't need to fake her disappointment. Still killed me to hear it.

"I love you, and we'll be back before you know it, baby," I told her.

She kissed me and let me go reluctantly. "Okay," she said.

"Let's roll," I said to Saint and adjusted my jacket and cut on my shoulders.

We rode out to the appointed meet, which was in neutral territory up there in Tangipahoa Parish... and no, the irony was not lost on me.

We sorta literally met in the middle, both clubs pulling into the parking lot of the chosen sports bar in the middle of a busy strip that was sure to be under the watchful eye of the local pigs.

We were all on our best behavior to see if each side could come to some kind of agreement on mounds of territory and whatnot.

By the looks on some of these motherfucker's faces, I was *not* getting my fuckin' hopes up.

Jesus.

The president, Rebel, was an ugly ass motherfucker. Just, *fuck*, the best way I can describe him is rode hard and put up wet. He wasn't exactly a super big dude, but he wasn't small

either. He was supposed to be in like his thirties, but shit, he looked a lot older. His face was weathered and craggy and he smoked like a fuckin' chimney. He had a do-rag on his head and plenty of brown hair around and in a tight, but stringy tail behind him. No tellin' what he had going on up top, but if I had to guess, not a whole lot.

His teeth were fucked up, and he was missing a front one, but at least they weren't that telltale green or blue that screamed meth addict.

His vice president honestly looked more capable of running the show. Tall, strong, and put together better 'n Rebel looked. Took me a minute to see the family resemblance but once it was seen, it couldn't be unseen. I wasn't sure if they were brothers or what, but they looked like father and son – which mathematically speaking if Rebel *was* in his thirties, wasn't possible and just plain couldn't be a thing.

“You're little bitch killed my best friend,” a dude called out to Cypress.

“Viper, put a sock in it,” Strychnine, the VP for the Brethren called out.

“Actually,” I corrected. “She's my woman, his sister,” I said, jerking my head at Cy. “Thank your friend for me. He got us together.”

“Col,” Hex said genially. “We ain't here to poke the bear.”

Viper, a bald-headed guy, probably about six-foot, spit on the ground and glared at me and Cy in turn. I looked to Cy who looked at me and we barely kept it together. Dude was laughable. They all were, now that we had faces to name flashes.

“Sorry, sir,” I said to Hex. “Someone takes a shot at me and mine, I tend to return fire.”

“We all know that's a lie,” a dude at the back of their pack called out.

I couldn't make him out, but Rebel called out, “Fuckin' shut it!”

His crew shut up, but it was a good dig. The night of the drive by I *didn't* return fire. I was too busy making sure Jess was alright. You know, what a real man does and not a fuckin' pussy.

"Let's hear it," La Croix said, and I knew he was trying to manage these fuckwits expectations.

"Hear what?" Rebel asked. "Now y'all started this like a bunch of snitches when that one snitched." He thrust a middle finger in Cypress's direction. "Y'all could have handled that like men, but since y'all wanted to be a bunch of pussies..." He held his arms open like "bring it on."

A bunch of us traded looks and it silently passed between a lot of us that these dudes clearly weren't playing with a full fuckin' deck, because *what?*

Hex laughed silently and put one hand up from where he had his arms folded over his chest to pinch the bridge of his nose. He raised his eyebrows like he was gettin' a headache. "Now what makes you think this club has anything, anything at all, to do with his daddy's business?" Hex demanded.

"Doesn't matter, he's one of yours, ain't he?" Rebel demanded. "Then his sister goes an' kills Zero, an' well – it's on."

"Zero was in her *house*. What d'you dumb fucks think is gon' happen you break into a motherfucker's house? Hell, even a citizen court would'a said he done fucked around and found out with that one. I doubt she'd even been charged!" Hex declared.

"Well, we ain't a civilian court, and we make the rules on what we say is a slight against us," Strychnine said.

"Are you fuckin' serious right now?" Axe shook with laughter and was leanin' on Chainsaw. "You sound like a B-grade comic book villain, man!"

"That's enough!" La Croix bellowed, and we fell in line.

Yeah, this was not going well... but then again, these sons of bitches were seriously fuckin' clueless. They didn't want anything but to stir up trouble. They didn't really have an

endgame. This whole thing was *what the fuck* to the point that they didn't know it, but they were literally standing across from us digging their own fuckin' grave.

We wasn't gonna put up with much more. This was... *wow*.

"Here's how this is going to go down," La Croix said, with a grunt of consternation. "You're going to keep your fuckin' territory to the fuckin' bayou and out of the city. Likewise, we'll keep to the city and out of your bayou, however my people who live in the bayou country including family are grandfathered in for safe passage. We lived here for generations, but this stupid petty ass shit dies here or bodies really gon' be dropping, son."

La Croix had spoken, and nothin' out of his mouth was one bit unreasonable.

"From here on out boys, we're willin' to truce. One side or the other breaks that truce and well..." he scratched the side of his cheek with the back of a nail. "Well, it's on like Donkey Kong and we ain't stopping. There won't be a last man standing."

Rebel hitched a laugh, and then he started braying like a fuckin' donkey. The rest of his merry band of fuckwits joined in and we just waited them out – because for real?

"Whew, I needed a good laugh," Rebel declared, wiping a fake tear from his eye. "Seems to me your place is the one that got shot up. You really wanna be threatening me?"

"Seems to me your team is the only one with a man down. You really wanna play with me?" La Croix demanded.

"Don't count when you send your women to do your dirty work for you," that same voice called from the back and a hand hit me in the chest when I took a step forward unbidden. I looked over and up at Saint who wordlessly checked me with a look. I nodded once, and he nodded back and he dropped his hand.

"Looks like you touched a nerve, Malice."

"Why thank you, Spite."

I rolled my eyes.

“Far as I’m concerned, we ain’t got nothing left to talk about,” Rebel declared.

“I don’t suppose we do,” Hex agreed.

“Autobots roll out?” Chainsaw asked.

“Autobots roll out,” Hex confirmed.

We mounted back up and they did too. We didn’t want them at our backs so we let them go first.

La Croix gave the signal to roll back to the club, and we did. I could understand the need for church after that. That was... enlightening, but at the same time, I think we all felt fuckin’ dumber for having gone.

These dudes weren’t bikers. They were barely biker cosplayers!

Like, holy shit, what the fuck, pass the Moonshine, I’m too sober for this!

Back at the club, we ditched phones and filed into the chapel and took our places around the table.

“What in the fuck did I just witness out there?” Saint demanded.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Hex said, taking in a deep breath and letting it out exasperatedly.

“Guys, I don’t even know what to fuckin’ say,” Cypress said and I shook my head.

“These guys ain’t right, bro. They’re lookin’ for any excuse.”

“Love how they’re trying to blame Jess for their one guy getting himself perished,” Chainsaw said, leaning way back in his seat, head back and peering at us all from beneath his ball cap.

“Like who in their right mind thinks they can break into someone’s house, they get stabbed or shot by the fuckin’ homeowner and that constitutes murder and not they fucked

around, and they found out?” Bennie asked, and he shook his head, lookin’ like his brain was in hyperdrive turning this madness over in it.

“I have no fuckin’ idea, but what I said sticks. Guarantee they gonna break this truce, but I don’t want to be the one to do it.”

“It’s dangerous,” Louie said, and he looked up. “Not just for us, but for Tate and the girls... these guys don’t care and I don’t want to see your families get hurt.”

“He’s got a point, Boss. Something happens to one of them, you ain’t gonna be so keen on staying your hand,” Saint said. I found myself nodding.

“As a man with serious skin in this game bein’ as these fuckers are hellbent on hurting my woman and a kid who might as well be my son by now... I don’t like waiting around until something happens, either.”

“As the man whose sister and nephew are in the line of fire and have been twice, I’m with Collier on this one. I’d rather be proactive than reactive at this point,” Cy said.

La Croix was nodding.

“I see your point, boys, and I feel the same but I did just give my word.”

Hex harrumphed and said, “An’ they spit right on it as far as I’m concerned.”

“We go lax on these fuckers it’s liable to blow up in our faces in a big way, bro. I say we stop playing. Our connections in the city catch wind, they might start getting ideas and fuck if we ain’t outnumbered,” Axe said.

“Get outta my head, bro,” Hex said and eyed Axe down the table.

La Croix nodded.

“Let’s put it to a vote,” he said.

It was a quick vote. We were unanimous in that the Bayou Brethren had fucked around and needed to find the fuck out

that we were all done playing.

“Man, I think we all need a fuckin’ vacation,” Bennie said, sighing after the decision. It was a good change of subject.

“Shit, when was the last time we rode anywhere?” Hex asked.

“Florida, like summer before last,” Chainsaw said, staring off into space.

“I’d really like to go back to East Tennessee, do the Tail of the Dragon,” I said.

“What’s that?” Axeman asked.

“Three hundred and eighteen curves in eleven miles on a stretch of highway between East Tennessee and North Carolina,” Hex said.

“That sounds fucking awesome!” Louie declared.

“Hell yeah, it does,” Chainsaw said, grinning.

“It’s a dangerous stretch,” I mentioned. “A lot of deaths.”

“Even better,” Axe declared, but he was definitely a danger junkie so he would say that.

“Road Captain, oh Captain,” Chainsaw called, his hand up to his mouth like he was trying to make the call go the distance.

Cypress nodded. “I don’t know nothing about it, but I can do my homework.”

“Shit, I know everything about it. I’ve got you, brother.”

“So we need to take another vote on this for making it our next club vacation or whatever?” Louie asked.

We all looked at each other and got loud, fist pumping and cheering and La Croix cracked a smile.

“Looks like that’s unanimous, too, boys.”

Another loud cheer went up and we finally got to settling down.

“Well, boys – we all got day jobs to get to tomorrow. I say we call it a night,” Hex declared.

“Pfft!” Saint blew him off.

“Says the guy without an actual day job,” Bennie said, his shoulders shaking.

“I don’t know what the fuck you talkin’ about, boy – my full-time job is getting this fuckin’ distillery going so we can *all* have jobs if we want to.”

“Fuck yeah,” Louie said. “I fuckin’ hate my job.”

“I know that’s right,” Saint declared.

“Alright, let’s get the fuck out of here,” La Croix declared.

We adjourned, made an offering to the Baron by shot of our drink of choice and leaving a shot of rum for him untouched on the alter in the corner on the way out. I didn’t know shit about fuck when it came to actual voodoo, just that our club logo was the Baron Samedi and one of their Loa, or gods.

“Let’s go the fuck home,” Cy muttered, and I nodded. With as much as those pricks were talking mad shit about Cy and our family at home, I was feeling uneasy.

The ride home was uneventful, everything there looked in place when we rode through the gate. We parked around back and went in the back door which *had* gotten replaced and reinforced like a motherfucker.

Jess had locked the doors and Cy and I nodded about that. We were both happy with her, but I was silently upset about it too. Not that she had locked the door, but that she felt like she had to in an area where people still didn’t...

“Well, that went about the way I thought it was gonna go,” Cypress said, handing me a beer. I twisted off the cap and nodded.

“Ah, yup,” I said.

“Tell me about this dragon road thing,” he said.

“It’s a trip, man. I fuckin’ love it. I wanna take Jess with me up that ‘a way anyway to meet my papaw and take her to this place where she can go nuts over the rocks and get a bunch for her skulls or whatever.”

“Cheap?” he asked.

“Stupid cheap,” I confirmed.

“Think it’d be good for Tate to go?” he asked.

“Hell, yeah! There’s a shit ton of stuff for him, too. Got cabins up there in Gatlinburg, go tubing and float down the fuckin’ river. I think we need it. We all been workin’ hard and keep forgettin’ to play hard too.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Let’s come up with a plan and have it by next church. Figure out then when we can do it.”

“Sounds good,” he agreed.

We both sighed and took a drink of our beers in unison and almost had foam come out our fuckin’ noses.

“We been hangin’ around each other too damn much,” he declared and I nodded.

“Fuck, you got that right,” I said.

“I’m wondering if I should start stayin’ at La Croix’s old place instead of here,” he said after a minute.

I shook my head. “Won’t really make a difference,” I said. “They got a hard-on for Jess, and I’d still be here. All it’d do is take us down a man to defend this place.”

He nodded and looking bleak, he said, “You’re right.”

“I’m sorry, man. I wish I wasn’t,” I said. He nodded.

We finished our beers in silence and finally I got up as he drained his and held a hand out for his bottle. He handed it over and I took it into the kitchen to throw them in the recycling.

“Alright, man, goodnight,” he declared.

I nodded and said, “Goodnight, brother.”

He went down the hall first and into his room. I hit the head before I went down to mine and Jess's.

I couldn't resist. I looked in on Tater on the way. He was sprawled out on his sleeping bag on the floor and I sighed but didn't wake him up. If it made him feel safer to crash on the floor rather than up higher in his bed after what happened, who the fuck was I to say different? In fact, I was thinkin' it might be time for a futon or something.

I shut his door, stopped in front of mine, hung my head and took pause. God, I loved them both so fucking much.

Tate was my kid, as far as I was concerned and I needed to figure out a way to help him. I felt like shit that either him or his mom was having trouble comfortably sleeping in their own home.

All I knew, for better or for worse, I was in it to win it and would protect them to my dying fucking breath.

I was glad the vote had gone down the way it had tonight. Proactive sounded so much fucking better than reactive. I also knew once it started that these yahoos would go underground and taking them out to the point that they wouldn't even dream of coming at us again would become infinitely harder from there on out.

When I went into the bedroom, it was to find Jess sound asleep. The tees she wore to bed these days fit her way better than the ones she'd used when I met her. That's because she tended to steal *my* tees anymore.

The bedside lamp was on, and glowing on the latest book we were reading together. It was another Timber title, but I don't know – nothing seemed to hit the sweet spot like Hettie and Cain did from that first book.

I got undressed quietly, and got into bed behind my woman, reaching up to switch out the light. When the light clicked off and I went to settle in is when she stirred.

“Mm?” she made a sleepy query, and the noise was adorable.

“Just me, baby. Go back to sleep,” I whispered.

“Mm!” She didn’t like that answer, and turned around so she could put her arm around my neck and nestle close. She wriggled and fidgeted until she could kiss me, and I chuckled into her mouth.

“You miss me?” I asked once I’d kissed her breathlessly.

“What do you think?” she asked, her voice sultry in the dark as she plunged my hand into her panties with her and I felt around her until I could dip a finger inside her.

I sucked in a sharp breath when I found her wet, hot and wanting under my touch and she lifted her leg over my hip, turning my mouth to hers once more.

Fuck.

I loved it when she did this kind of shit. It made me instantly hard.

“Mm!” she cried out into my mouth as I rolled her onto her back and pressed my cock against her damp panties, rolling my hips and rubbing myself against her.

Her breathing became a near-silent impassioned plea, and she didn’t have to beg. I was all for giving her everything she wanted and more.

I rose on my knees and hooked my fingers in the waistband of her panties, stripping them from her in one smooth movement. She raised her hips and kicked the offending garment off the side of the bed to the floor.

I didn’t even break my proverbial stride, grabbing hold of my cock and lining it up with her entrance, shoving my way in probably just a little sooner than was good, but she didn’t complain aside from a sharp intake of breath and to wriggle her hips provocatively, her hands grabbing for me to pull me in tighter to her body.

I leaned way over her, bracketing her head with my arms and drove into her deep.

She let out a throaty gasping noise that I swore was rich and decadent like a robe of chocolate for my sense of hearing.

“Like that?” I asked her.

“Mm, yeah,” she breathed and she wrapped her legs around my hips and her arms around my back and my shoulders.

“Mm,” I groaned in satisfaction next to her ear as I smoothed her hair away from the side of her neck so that I could attack it with my lips and teeth with kisses and light nibbles.

She made a happy girl noise that told me just how much she liked that, and I smiled and worked my hips back and forth.

That gave me the happiest of happy girl noises and my heart not only soared, it did a fucking impressive ass barrel roll and climbed even higher.

I kept at it with that movement, even if it did get my lower back to tightening up and made the tops of my thighs fucking scream.

I wasn't about to give up until she came around my cock, and yeah, I knew it was a longshot, that I didn't always make her come like this and usually I needed to tease her clit to get her there, but sometimes, just every once in a damn while, this sets her off and when it did, God *damn* was it good.

“Oh!” she cried and her voice was light and breathy. It was a familiar sound and clued me in that I had damn well better not stop. I kept at it, struggling to keep it together as her pussy tightened around me and my balls tried to tighten right along with it.

Mm-mm, no way, not yet, I scolded my body silently.

Not yet, not yet, not yet, became my inner mantra as she went closer and closer to the damn sun, and I was right there with her.

“Ah!” she cried, and she convulsed beneath me, shuddering. Her body worked my cock rhythmically and I went right on over the cliff with her.

“Oh, fuck yeah!” I groaned, and I lost my synch and did everything I could to get my uncooperative muscles and

trembling arms to hold me up just enough so I wouldn't crush her.

She laughed between her breaths and pulled me down on top of her, crooning, "Don't be stupid, relax."

I laughed and at least tried to go off to one side and that pulled me from inside her and *oh crap, too much!* I made the sound that every man made when they realized they'd overdone it and were too sensitive and did the thing anyway that provided yet more stimulation.

I got over her leg and laid down on my side and dragged her against my chest.

It wasn't like she resisted, quite the opposite in fact, cuddling into my side and resting her head on my shoulder.

"I needed that," she said on a sigh a moment later after our breathing had returned to a normal rate of speed.

"Hmm, me too," I said and kissed her head.

"Love it," she declared.

I chuckled and swept my hands over her soft skin at every point that I could reach it.

"So how'd it go?" she asked after a while.

"Hmm, it was a shitshow," I told her honestly.

"I figured," she said. "Just based on whoever kid Tommy is." She turned and rested her chin on her hand on my chest.

"Yeah."

I recapped everything that'd gone down at the meet and she snorted.

"Goddamn, you'd like to think their drug of choice is literally stupid, and they've been mainlining that shit."

"Pretty much sums it up exactly," I said.

"So, what does this mean for us?" she asked, and I knew she meant our household.

"Well, it means war for the club, but for here? It's pretty much stay on high alert and don't let your guard down before

we get a chance to handle it.”

“Okay,” she said carefully, and I kissed her forehead.

“It shouldn’t be over long, baby,” I said. “Club is gung-ho that these idiots have fucked around enough, we were more than fuckin’ reasonable. They wanted to find out, they’re gonna. Party’s over.”

She nodded.

“Anything *good* come out of tonight?” she asked and I chuckled.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Clubs in the early stages of planning a vacation back home for me. Families included, giving you and Tate the chance to meet my papaw and to go to that rock place I told you about.”

“Really?”

She shot up at that and I said, “Really. The otherwise pristine cherry on top of a night that was mostly a shit sundae.”

She laughed and said, “Ew, gross, don’t ever use that one again.”

I chuckled and said, “Then come up with something else for me.”

“I’ll do my level best,” she said and rolled her eyes. She settled back down against me and said, “Just promise me you’ll be safe.”

I nodded. “Damn right I will,” I said. “You ain’t gotta worry about a thing, baby. Everything’s gonna be alright.”

She nodded against me, her light brown hair awash in the shine of the moon coming through the window behind us.

“I fucking love you, Jessie-Lou,” I said and she looked up at me and smiled.

“I love you too,” she said, and my heart melted in my chest.

“I promise you, whatever happens next? This family is gonna come out of it strong as hell. You, me, your folks, your brother, and our – Tate, too.”

“You can say it, you know...” she said.

“Say what?” I asked.

“Our kid,” she answered.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Mm-hm,” she answered.

I kissed her forehead.

“He already asked me if I would mind if he started callin’ you ‘dad,’” she said and I think my heart fuckin’ stopped. “I told him it wouldn’t bother me none, but he would have to talk to you.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Yeah?” she asked, lifting her head to look at me.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think I’d like that.”

She smiled, and it was serene and I swallowed hard.

I don’t think my heart had ever been so full.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I don't make it any kind of big secret that I am also Timber Philips. If you liked what you read from *The Sinner & His Saint* and feel like dipping your toes into paranormal romance, you can find all of my works, including *The Sinner & His Saint* at www.timberphilips.com That's Timber Philips, with one 'L' in Philips. I don't get around writing titles under this pen name often enough, but I'm really proud of the titles I've produced under it.

Happy reading, I hope these titles bring you joy in their 'otherness' as much as they bring me joy to write them when I can.

ALSO BY A.J. DOWNEY

The Sacred Hearts MC

- [1. Shattered & Scarred](#)
- [2. Broken & Burned](#)
- [3. Cracked & Crushed](#)
- [3.5 Masked & Miserable \(a novella\)](#)
- [4. Tattered & Torn](#)
- [5. Fractured & Formidable](#)
- [6. Damaged & Dangerous](#)

The Virtues

- [1. Cutter's Hope](#)
- [2. Marlin's Faith](#)
- [3. Charity for Nothing](#)
- [4. Stoker's Serenity](#)
- [5. Justice for Radar](#)

The Sacred Brotherhood

- [1. Brother to Brother](#)
- [2. Her Brother's Keeper](#)
- [3. Brother In Arms](#)
- [4. Between Brothers](#)
- [5. A Brother's Secret](#)
- [6. A Brother At My Back](#)
- [7. A Brother's Salvation](#)

Sacred Hearts MC Novella

[Christmas with the Brotherhood](#)

Indigo Knights

- [1. Her Thin Blue Lifeline](#)
- [2. His Cold Blue Command](#)
- [3. A Low Blue Flame](#)
- [4. His Wild Blue Rose](#)
- [5. Her Pained Blue Silence](#)
- [6. A Cold Blue Call](#)
- [7. Her Reluctant Blue Cavalier](#)
- [8. Forged Under Fire](#)
- [9. Under A Blue Moon](#)
- [10. Sound of Blue Thunder](#)

Sacred Hearts MC Pacific Northwest

1. Over the High Side

2. Wind Therapy

3. Apex of the Curve

4. Low Sided

5. Eating Asphalt

6. Hammer Down

7. Only Fool Riding

The Voodoo Bastards MC

1. Bourbon & Blood

2. Whiskey Shivers

Paranormal Romance (with Ryan Kells).

1. I Am The Alpha

2. Omega's Run

3. Hunter's End

Indigo City Darker (with Jared KingPacal Lain).

1. Triple Threat

2. Double Shot

Standalones

Synchronicity

ABOUT A.J. DOWNEY

A.J. Downey is a Pacific Northwest girl living in an East Tennessee world who finds inspiration from her surroundings, through the people she meets, and likely as a byproduct of way too much caffeine. She specializes in real and relatable romance stories featuring that real-life kind of love that everyone craves.

Stalker Information:

Website

www.ajdowney.com

Sign up for her newsletter at

<http://eepurl.com/dkQilH>

Facebook Group - AJ's Sacred Circle

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/authorajdowney/>

