



DEVIL'S RIOT MC TENNESSEE BOOK TWO

# NINES'S TIME



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

E.C. LAND

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BOOK TWO

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NINES'S TIME

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are all products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblances to persons, organizations, events, or locales are entirely coincidental.

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*To both my big brothers.*

*I don't know what life would have been like without you in it.*

*You taught me more than you'll ever know.*

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So many people to acknowledge, but first and foremost, my family. They always have my back and support me. My husband and kids are my biggest cheering team, and I couldn't ask for better.

Next, I'd have to shout out to all my readers for sticking with me and enjoying the world I've created.

Then there's my team, everyone who works alongside me to ensure that each book I release is ready to go when the time comes. I couldn't ask for better.



## TRIGGER WARNING

This content is intended for mature audiences only. It contains material that may be viewed as offensive to some readers, including graphic language, dangerous and sexual situations, murder, rape, and extreme violence.

Proceed with caution. This book does entail several scenes that may very well be a trigger to some.

Also, tissues are a must with other scenes.

Not for the faint at heart.

If you don't like violence and cannot handle certain subjects, then this is not a book you'll want to read.

**Check out Nines's Time's playlist.**

Did Me Wrong – Atlas, GAWNE, & Lexnour

Bourbon Scars – Seth Anthony

Bad Guy – Bryan Andrews

Silent Running – Hidden Citizens

Never Gonna Take My Soul – Joe Nester

Hold Her – Joe Nester

Shotgun – Sarah Ross

Aint No Fool – OverTime

Creature – Jelly Roll

Breathe – Hosier

# DEVIL'S RIOT MC MEMBERS

O – OL' LADY, C – CHILD

**Devil's Riot MC Franklin Charter**

Twister – Prez – Izzy – O

Leanna Mercy – C

Lark – C

Callum – C

Horse – VP – Kenny – O

Jason Cole (JC) – C

Kayla – C

Caden – C

Thorn – Sergeant at Arms – Lynsdey – O

William Michael (Bud) – C

Anna-leigh Cleo – C

Rage – Road Captain – Cleo – O

Reagan – C (deceased)

Rosaline – C

Devin – C

Dragon – Medic – Connors – O

Gadget – Tech – Connors – O

Logan – C

Kagan – C

Keegan – C

Hades – Enforcer – Emerson – O

Alec – C

Burner – Treasurer – Ally – O

Lincoln – C

Badger – Member – Jordan – O

Nico – C

K-9 – Secretary – Anabelle – O

Derick – C

Red – Member

Striker – Member

Brass – Member

Wolf – Member

Sabor – Member

Mace – Member

Chaz – Member – Bethany – O

Melody – C

Tanner – Member – Alexis – O

Lex – Member – Mackenzie – O

Hunter – Member – Annaleigh – O

Huntson – C

Mac – Prospect (Deceased)

**Devil's Riot MC Originals Charter**

O – Ol' Lady, C – Child

Stoney – Prez – Rachel – O

Horse (Scotty) – Stoney's C

Luca – C

Corinne – C

Sebastian – C

Talon – C

Tracker – VP – Victoria – O

Jamie – C

Jason – C (adopted)

Blaze – Sergeant at Arms – Raven – O

Matthew – C

Mark – C

Coyote – Road Captain – Tinsley – O

Cody – C

Chase – C

Bear – Former Road Captain – Momma B – O (deceased)

Rage (Travis) – C

Jane – C (deceased)

Nerd – Tech – Cara – O

Shadow – Enforcer – Luna – O

Daniel – C

Ranger – Medic – Harlow – O

Venom – Secretary – Amaya – O

Lincoln – C

Whip – Chaplain — Harper – O

Viper – Treasurer — Jade – O

Neo – Member – Harley – O

Cane – Member – Parker – O

Piper – C

Cyprus – Member

Kevlar – Member

Aries – Member

## **Devil's Riot MC Southeast Charter**

O – Ol' Lady, C – Child  
Hammer – Prez – Avery – O  
Tate – C  
Malice – VP – Willow – O  
Gates – C  
Gavin – C  
Gemini – C  
Axe – Sergeant at Arms – CJ – O  
Savage – Road Captain  
Gunner – Enforcer  
Delilah – C  
Cy – Tech  
Bruiser – Treasurer  
Dagger – Medic  
Rogue – Secretary – Rebel – C  
Brass – Chaplain  
Glock – Member  
Ruger – Member  
Blade – Member  
Colt – Member  
Carbine – Member

## **Devil's Riot MC Tennessee Charter**

O – Ol' Lady, C – Child  
Blow – Prez — Storm – O  
(C — Griffon, Talon, Phoenix)  
Nines –VP — Meadow — O  
Keys – Tech

Lucky – Sergeant at Arms  
Shiner – Enforcer  
Griz – Road Captain  
Surge – Treasurer  
Scorn – Chaplain  
Sniper – Member – Rain – O  
Nerd (Nick) – C  
Storm – C  
Flash – Member  
Switchblade – Member  
Torch – Member  
Fireball – Member (Deceased)

**Devil's Riot MC Colorado Charter**

Grinder – Prez  
Blue – VP  
Driver – Sergeant at Arms  
Flicker – Road Captain  
Wrecker – Enforcer  
Tic – Tech  
Beast – Treasurer  
Rock – Chaplain



## **Time Stands Still**

---

*The clock chimes  
Another minute passes  
A second goes by  
Following the hour  
The clock ticks by  
My heart beats with it  
Life passes through time  
Without either  
We have nothing  
Take a breath  
Listen to the chimes  
Stand and hear the ring  
The stillness that comes after  
Question is what comes next  
Time stands still  
Only when the chimes have passed  
~ E.C. Land*

# PROLOGUE

## NINES

Growing up, all I ever wanted to do was follow in my father's footsteps. To be the man he raised me to be. I don't know who my mother is. From what he told me, she took off after I was born and never came back. I didn't question him. He was all I needed when it came to parental figures.

Then, he died.

I'd been heartbroken when he'd died. In my grief I was a dick, and I took it out on those around me. I even hurt the ones closest to me with the way I acted. I was spiraling out of control. I even lost my seat as VP for six months. The club voted I needed to go Nomad for a while, and I did. I'd always thought I'd be the President of the Devil's Riot MC Tennessee charter growing up, but when Blow took the seat, I was pissed.

However, while I was out on the road, I realized why he got the title and I didn't. It's what my father wanted on his deathbed. He'd told Sniper, and a few of the other older members agreed with him, so they voted Blow in as Prez and me as the VP.

Looking back, I get the reason for this, and I wasn't the only one to be raised the same way and not follow in my father's footsteps. Stoney's son, Horse, is a VP and doesn't hold it against Twister for taking what I figured should have been his. But that situation was different since they were starting a whole new charter.

Foolish is what I guess you could say I was, but now, I understand.

I also know that Blow, being my best friend, didn't want to take the position from me, but in my grief-stricken mind, I didn't see it that way. During my time on the road, though, I cleared my mind and found I was blinded, and because of that, I was doing dumb shit.

I took my time to get my head together, and in doing so, I went to places my dad told me about growing up. The

different places that he'd gone to when he was younger. I even found out about the woman who gave birth to me and why she gave me up. Her name was Renee, and according to the old man who knew my parents, she was a wild child and did what was best by leaving me to my dad to raise. Said she wouldn't have been a good mom not when she wasn't able to take care of her own self without help.

By the time I got back to the clubhouse, I'd been from the west coast and back to the east coast. I spent a few weeks in North Carolina, in Buxton, staying in a motel right on the beach. It was peaceful and I'd given into the grief and moved on. I know I'll always miss the man who raised me, and he'd be disappointed to learn I let him down the way I did, but I'm back now, and I intend to do my job without making any more waves.

Or at least I wasn't intending on making any more.

However, life has a way of always fucking with us when we least expect it.

---

“What the fuck? Seriously? Cat shit? Fuck,” Lucky yells, dropping the diaper he'd had in his hand.

“She got you again.” I chuckle, grinning at my brother, knowing Chelsea was at it again. Glancing in her direction, I find her beaming mischievously. If it wasn't for Rain demanding all of us taking part in the games she planned, none of us would be caught dead playing baby shower games. But it's for Storm and Blow, so we all put up with it since Storm isn't just the ol' lady to the Prez, she's a club princess.

“I'm out of here,” Lucky grumbles and mutters under his breath that he is going to make Chelsea pay for her stunt.

I shake my head and move away from the table, not getting anywhere near the diaper game Chelsea put together for Rain. It's a good thing I knew she'd been helping otherwise I might have fallen victim to her pranks. I swear the woman is hysterical when it comes to this type of shit. When she first got

to the clubhouse, she'd fucked with a clubwhore—or, as the ol' ladies have dubbed them, a 'fallen harlot'—who Lucky was with at the time. I think she'd done something with honey and bees, and I believe she released her snake in the woman's room.

A few minutes later, Lucky rushes back inside, his face contoured with fury. "Brace, cops pulling up. A shit ton of them," he yells and looks straight to Blow, who rushes over to where Storm's sitting on the couch. "Raid."

"Motherfucker," I growl, right before officers wearing tactical gear rush into the clubhouse, guns pointed out in front of them as they order us to get on the ground.

Thankfully, the clubhouse is clean, we don't keep anything here on the off chance something like this were to happen. Calmly, I do as told, my brothers following suit. I keep my head facing the officers not wanting to be surprised by anything on the off chance something was to happen.

The front doors open again, and two other men come in dressed in suits that look to have seen better days, a badge clipped to their belts, a hand on the guns holstered at their sides. If I was in a position to make jokes, I'd say they're trying too hard to mimic one another or some shit like that. One of them speaks to one of the officers while the other scans over us until he locks eyes with mine and points in my direction as he speaks quietly to his partner.

They seem to agree about something and nod in unison. The one who I'm guessing thinks he's got the bigger dick steps toward me. "Brick Tucker. Stand up and put your hands behind your back."

Not wanting to cause problems when there doesn't need to be any, I do as I'm told, though I make a point to show them I'm none too happy about it as I demand to know what's going on. "What the fuck is going on?"

"You're under arrest on a count of sexually assaulting a minor," the other one declares.

Hold the fuck on. This shit ain't right. "I didn't fuckin' touch some minor. You've got it all wrong," I protest, not liking this shit one bit.

"Right, well, we'll see what you say down at the station." The one who moves behind me and slaps the cuffs on my wrist scoffs as the other starts reading my rights.

I look at Blow and see the murderous glint in his eyes as he meets mine. He knows me and knows I wouldn't have done anything that they've claimed I've done. There's no way I'd ever touch a minor anyway, and I sure as hell wouldn't have assaulted one. This has to be a setup, and I'm sure I can guess who's behind it, but it'll take a fuck load of time to prove it if given the chance.

I allow the officers to drag me out of the clubhouse and put me in the back of a squad car. I'm not going to fight them. I do that, I screw myself, and I'm not a stupid man, not by a long shot. My dad didn't raise me to be a fool. I'll bide my time until I get to the station and my brothers are able to get Markus there. Then I'll find out what they have and get this shit dealt with.

# CHAPTER ONE

## NINES

Pacing the length of my cell, I release a frustrated breath. I can't believe this shit. After getting to the station, I'd been processed and taken straight to a cell. No one has spoken to me since.

I want to demand they tell me what grounds they have for thinking I'd done something like assault a minor and when I had time to do that shit. I mean fuck, I've got enough going on that I don't need this to top the cake.

I'm sure my brothers are out there waiting to find out what's happening. This is total bullshit. I know it, and whoever the hell is behind this also knows it.

"Tucker."

I spin around at my name being called and glare at the man making his way toward me. "Adams," I glower, keeping eye contact with the other man.

"Markus is here. I'm taking you to an interrogation room," he announces, and steps close to the bars of the cell. "Sorry about this. I wish I could've stopped this all from happening."

"What from happening?" I demand, keeping my voice low.

"You being arrested."

"I didn't do it."

The door to my cell is unlocked, and Adams motions for me to turn around. I do as he says, not fighting him while he slaps the cuffs to my wrists. "I know you didn't. It's a setup, and a few of us are trying to figure out who's behind it. But there's a rumor that someone's none too happy with the club, and they intend to make you all hurt before it's all said and done with."

"Fuck," I grumble under my breath but am surprised by the information Adams shares with me.



“Come on, let me get you to the interrogation room. Detective Hanson has been chomping at the bit to speak with you but couldn’t ‘cause Markus called ahead of our arrival, stating no one was to speak to his client before he got here.”

“And yet, you’re speaking to me,” I snort, shaking my head.

“Yeah,” Adam chuckles quietly, “but only to give you a bit of information you need, so you know what you’re fucking dealing with.”

We fall silent as he takes my arms and guides me from the cell.

In no time at all, I’m in a small room with a mirrored window. Adams uncuffs my hands from behind my back only to re-cuff them in front.

“Go ahead and sit,” he says, motioning to one of the chairs facing the mirrored window. “Markus will be here soon.”

“Already here, Adams,” Markus announces his entrance as he stalks into the door. “You aren’t already starting the party without me, are you, officer?”

I chuckle at the man’s demeanor.

Adams turns away from the mirror and smirks to Markus. “Just updating your client on things I’m sure he’ll fill you in on. I will suggest getting him out of here as soon as you can and not taking any pleas they may try to get him to agree to.”

“Right,” Markus mutters, his lips barely moving with the one word. “Tell whoever is to come in here that I would like a few moments alone with my client before they interrogate him.”

“Will do.” With that, Adams leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Markus turns toward me and sighs. “This isn’t what I want to be doing right now,” he grumbles, coming to sit next to me. “I was in the middle of something highly important when I got

the call. Better be happy I dropped what I was doing and hauled ass here.”

“Let me guess, you were getting your dick sucked and got interrupted?” I quirk a brow, knowing the man far too well. I also know he goes out of town to get his pleasures taken care of, not wanting to deal with anyone locally. Markus tries to keep his private life away from those who could attempt to use it against him.

“Of course, I was,” he scoffs. “The bitch was trying to treat my cock like a Tootsie Pop and wanted to get to the center of it. Damn, the woman was good at it too. Just as I was about to blow ...” He grins as I chuckle.

“Well excuse me for being arrested while you’re out getting your rocks off. Next time do tell me and I’ll make sure to be a good boy until you finish,” I snark sarcastically.

“You do that.” Markus smirks before his expression changes altogether, and he asks me to tell him what Adams said along with what happened.

I tell him everything that happened at the clubhouse and what Adams said. Markus’s brows snap together, and I note the way his jaw clenches.

Shortly after, the door opens and I know whatever we’re about to hear them claim is going to seriously piss me off, and unfortunately, there’s nothing I can do about it. At least for the time being. However, when I get this shit taken care of, I’m going to find who’s behind it and make them pay in the worse way possible. I just need to clear my name first.

## CHAPTER TWO

## MEADOW

### *One Month Later ...*

I smile as I glance around me. After all the hard work I've put in, I can officially say I am finally the owner of a chic boutique. One day, I want it so that I only carry clothing designs that I create, but for now, I have other designers set out. I do have several of my own on display as well.

Growing up all I ever wanted to do was be a fashion designer. I dreamed of going to New York and getting my name out there. But that dream deflated with each year I got older. If my dad had it his way, I'd be nothing ... a nobody. See, when I was seven, my mom up and left me with my dad after one of their fights. They always fought, and she said she was done. I wish she'd taken me with her, but it seems I didn't matter to her, considering I haven't heard from her in years. Not a birthday card, Christmas, Easter, nada. She couldn't care less about me.

By this time in my life, I'd learned to stay clear of my dad as much as possible, but it didn't stop what was to come. When I turned ten, he took it upon himself to put his hands on me. If I didn't let him touch me, however he wanted, then he'd beat me. I figured the touching wasn't as bad as the beatings.

I shudder to think about the times he would put his hands on me. I wouldn't bring my friends over out of fear of him doing something to them. He was strict and I wasn't allowed to go anywhere unless he said I could. As I got older, he gave me a part-time job at the hardware store he owned. I didn't want to work there and dreaded every day I had to be there because it meant he touched me.

I lucked out that he never took it further than his hands on my body and inserting his fingers inside me. When I started at the hardware store, he'd force me to do things I didn't want, like touching him, stroking him, and worse, he had me put my mouth on him.

By that point, I was wishing my life was different in every way you can imagine.

It all changed when I was seventeen. I met Johnny. We started dating and I wasn't around my dad as much. I guess I should've known then that it was by his doing that I ended up with Johnny because it all came to a head on my eighteenth birthday when Johnny raped me in front of my dad who got to enjoy the show.

After that night, I ran away from home and hid as much as I could. I didn't need Johnny or my dad to find me. Not when they both swore ownership of me like I'm property instead of a person. My dad said I would never escape either of them, but I did.

I ran.

I ran as far as I could. I'd been saving every dollar given to me. I took my money and used it to get away from them all. I signed up for online courses to take my college classes while I worked under the table at a pool hall. I thought it a miracle the day I walked in and met Gavril. At first, he didn't want to give me a job, but he must have seen something in my eyes because he gave it to me anyway.

Gavril had only two rules for me. They were if I saw something I shouldn't I was to keep my mouth shut, and if my problems ever caught up to me, to tell him immediately.

I learned in the time I worked for Gavril what he meant about keeping my mouth shut. There were a lot of shady things that happened in the pool hall. I also found out that Gavril was a part of the Romanian mafia. Evidently, he took care of business in this area. I never asked him about it, either. Over the years, he became a father figure to me, protecting me in every way I could have imagined a father being. One night I ended up telling him about my dad and ex-boyfriend and ended up pleading with Gavril not to go and do anything. I didn't want to take any chances. Though Gavril reluctantly gave in, I knew if given the chance, he'd kill them.

When I finally had enough money saved and finished my courses, I moved here to Bullsgap, Tennessee. I'd told Gavril

my reason for picking this town and he made me promise that I would keep in contact with him as much as possible. He even said he'd be visiting.

Now, here I am, a business owner, and I couldn't be happier. I'm in a town where I'm as safe as I could ever be because I know my dad would never look for me in this place. I remember the stories of how he was never going to come back to this place, calling it a hellhole.

I shake off the thoughts that I best left sealed in the past. I'm safe where I am, and nothing will happen to me again.

## CHAPTER THREE

## MEADOW

Since opening my doors a month ago, I've already gotten quite a bit of business. I didn't expect to take off so well at first and I couldn't be happier.

During the day, I try to work on some of my new designs while open to the public. At night, I finish what I've started. Some of my customers who buy my clothes have even put in a request for things they want. I have a couple of gowns to make that will cost a mint. I mean thousands of dollars.

I find it crazy how everything is working out for me, and I'm just thrilled to be working.

I'm sitting in front of one of my mannequins working on the seams of one of the skirts I'd designed when the bell rings over the door announcing someone's arrival. I peek up over one of the racks and smile at my visitors.

"Hey, Storm, Chelsea," I greet them.

"How's it going, Meadow?" This coming from Storm.

"Hey yourself, chick-a-dee," Chelsea says at the same time.

The two of them were my very first customers and they'd bought several pieces each.

"What brings y'all in here this afternoon?" I ask and look down to what I'm doing to make sure I'm at a stop where I can drop the material without messing it up.

"Nothing much." Chelsea shrugs and starts looking through the racks. "Did you get any more of those off-the-shoulder tops in?"

"No, but I am in the middle of making a few myself."

"Sweet." She beams me with a radiant smile. "Your clothes rock."

"Thank you." I return her smile with one of my own and look to Storm to see her also smiling.



“We wanted to come by and invite you to a cookout at the clubhouse,” Storm announces.

“Clubhouse?” I furrow, not understanding what she’s talking about.

“The Devil’s Riot MC clubhouse,” she clarifies.

“Ahh, oh, okay.” I nod, now understanding. I forgot that she’d said her man was in an MC. I swallow not thinking it a good idea. I’m really not wanting to be around large crowds, especially men.

Sure, working at the pool hall, I had to deal with men, but I had Gavril with me, and he protected me. He’s not here to do that now, and I’m not sure I could handle something happening.

I also don’t want to seem rude by declining.

“Um, I’m not sure if I’ll be able to make it. When are you talking about having the cookout?” I ask.

“It’s Saturday. You just come over whenever you can. It’ll be going well into the night, though I must say the earlier, the better,” Storm answers.

Chelsea, on the other hand, snorts. “Yeah, ‘cause the skanks come out after dark. Which reminds me, I need to pick up some mousetraps.”

I cock a brow at her random reminder. “Why do you need mousetraps?”

Storm giggles as Chelsea grins as big as the Cheshire cat from *Alice in Wonderland*.

“I have to have my fun when I can, and I heard a certain harlot is thinking of screwing with us, so I intend to make sure she regrets that decision.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “And you’re going to do it with mousetraps?”

“Babe, it’s gonna be more than those. That’s just part of it.” She waggles her brow.

“Oh lord, do I even want to know what else you’re intending to do?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I were you,” Storm suggests. “I say come and see what happens.”

“I don’t know.” I nibble my bottom lip, wondering how to get out of this without being rude. I like Storm and Chelsea. I haven’t had friends in a long time. My phone chirps on the counter and I excuse myself to check to see who it is. I’m expecting a message from one of the ladies who wanted a gown to confirm an appointment I’d sent to schedule with her.

I pick up the phone and see it’s a message from Gavril telling me to expect him this weekend.

I sigh in relief to have a reason to miss the cookout.

“Sorry,” I mutter, turning back to Storm and Chelsea, waving my phone, “I just found out I have a visitor coming in this weekend.”

“That’s okay. Bring ‘em along if you want,” Chelsea says.

“I’ll see, but I’ll let you know one way or the other,” I say, hoping that will appease them both.

“Okay.” Storm nods and smiles. “Text me if you’re able to make it,” she says and checks the time on her watch. “I’ve got to get back to the clubhouse myself, Blow will be wondering where I am, and the triplets need to be fed.”

I smile as they turn to leave. I can’t believe Storm has triplets and looks the way she does. She’s beautiful with her stark raven-colored hair full of wild curls. I kind of wish that in some ways I was just as beautiful, but I’m nowhere compared in looks.

Growing up I was always this bright blonde-haired girl who was on the short end of the stick when it came to people picking on me and calling me a dumb blonde. I’ve heard every dumb blonde joke there is. The older I got, my hair went from nearly white-blonde to a darker dirty blonde. So many times, I’ve thought of just dying it, but then I rethink it and change my mind.

Needing to finish what I'm working on, I get back to work and push thoughts of anything else out of my mind. For now, it's just me and the clothes that I'm working on and that's all I need. The rest can wait.

---

“So, what do you want to do today?” I ask Gavril as I lift my coffee mug to my lips. He'd come in last night and taken me out to dinner.

I didn't realize how much I missed him until he got here. He reminds me of one of my favorite actors, Ryan Hurst, but I wouldn't let him know that. He'd scoff at the idea. Still, he has the graying beard and all. I don't understand why he's never been married or ever has a woman with him, though that's not to say I haven't seen women leaving his office when working at the bar.

“We're going out this afternoon,” he declares, eyes leveling a knowing look on me.

“Where?” I cock a brow in curiosity.

“I have business to attend to and will be meeting my cousin, Dorin Dragomir, at the Devil's Riot MC clubhouse. I've been invited to stay for the cookout to spend time with him and his family. I would like for you to join me as well.”

At his announcement, I spew my coffee back into the mug, thankfully not spitting it all over the table, and stare at him with wide eyes. “You want me to what?”

“You'll join me at this cookout,” he says, furrowing his brow.

“But I never go with you to attend business.” I set my mug down and sit back in my seat unsure if I should drink more out of fear of possibly choking.

Gavril sits forward, sets his own mug down, and reaches out to cup the side of my face. “You've been through a lot, *fiică mea frumoasa*.”

What does that mean?" I blurt out. It's not the first time he's said it over the years.

Smiling, Gavril drops his hand. "It means 'my beautiful daughter'. I've seen you as such from the moment you gave me those eyes asking for a job. Since then, I've taken it upon myself to treat you as one."

My heart stutters a beat, then another, before regaining composure, but it doesn't stop the tears from welling up in my eyes. "I wish you were my father as well," I inform him, my breath hitching.

"So, say you will come and meet the rest of your family then," he declares.

"I have a confession to make," I say shyly.

"And that is?"

"I was already invited to this cookout."

"By whom?" he demands, slightly stiffening.

"Two women that I've become friends with. They wanted me to come and hang out with them."

"Then you'll be able to spend time with them then." He grins and taps the table.

I nod, not saying anything further. I guess it looks like I'll be going to this cookout. Suppose I could make a couple of desserts or something. I used to make them all the time and take them to the pool hall. It got to the point that Gavril demanded I sell them if I was going to make them.

I haven't done any baking since being here. I could whip up some cupcakes or brownies, maybe even a pie or two.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## NINES

“We still don’t know who we’re dealing with,” Lucky says, releasing a harsh breath. “I’ve been working with Keys around the clock to figure out what the hell is going on.”

“Everything we’ve found so far leads us back to Storm’s biological father,” Keys adds.

I grind my teeth together and ball my hands into fists. I’d like nothing more than to beat the hell out of something ... anything. Since being released out on bond, I feel like I’m walking on a tightrope unable to do anything without my every move being watched. Hell, I’m damn lucky to even be out right now. From what the police have it definitely looks as if I’d done it, but I’m being set up and we all damn well know it, including the detectives doing the investigating.

“We need a fuckin’ break in this. First, the damn sleazy lawyer ends up in the ditch with my woman’s name carved into him and then the sperm donor shows up dead outside our gates. And to top it all off, Nines is arrested for a crime we all know he didn’t fuckin’ commit,” Blow growls, sounding close to as if he’s about to blow his lid.

“We also have Rain’s father and brothers coming in today to meet with us,” Sniper reminds us.

I’d forgotten the Dragomirs were coming. I knew my father was cousins with Dorin, but he’d kept a lot of information about the family a secret. I only learned most of it when he’d been diagnosed with lung cancer. He didn’t want me to be blindsided and said that it was imperative that I not speak with anyone other than those who know the truth.

“I know,” Blow grunts. “Dorin spoke with me yesterday of his cousin joining us with information that might help us in figuring all of this out.”

“Do we know anything more about this group called the Crimson Bloods?” I ask looking to Keys.

“No just that Douglas Mann was a part of it along with his brother, but no name for him is mentioned. We’re in the dark about who he is,” Keys answers, grimacing. None of us like the fact we don’t know what’s going on, and it’s not easy to deal with being in the dark.

“Keys, keep looking, maybe talk with Nerd, he might be able to help give insight,” Blow states, bringing the gavel down on the table. “Let’s get out there and see what’s happening.”

Meaning the man wants to check on Storm and the triplets. I still can’t believe they had triplets. Three boys at that. They’re just over a month now, and Blow is as protective over them as he is over his woman. Not that I blame him. If I had a kid, I’d be the same way.

Filing out of the room, Blow and I are two of the last to leave.

“You talk to Markus today?” he asks.

“Yeah, he’s meeting with Adams and another guy Monday about what’s going on,” I inform him and release a harsh breath. I don’t like to think about the bullshit I’m in right now. But more often than not, I find myself doing just that. Who wouldn’t, though? I’m being charged for a crime I didn’t commit. I’m being set up. I don’t like any of it and it straight up pisses me off that I can’t do anything about the charges right now.

On top of that, no matter my alibi which is airtight since they have me on video footage. The cops handling the case wouldn’t listen to either Markus or myself. They claim to have my DNA from the scene, but that can’t be possible ‘cause I don’t even know who the hell the girl is they’ve got saying I raped her. One of the detectives showed me her picture and I about puked in my mouth at the sight of her. She’s not only a minor but looks like a little kid, but evidently, she’s seventeen. There’s no way I’d have touched that.

“That’s good. We’ll get this taken care of and prove you didn’t do shit.”

“Just wish this shit didn’t happen in the first place.” I shake my head slightly as the main door catches my eye as it opens.

Stepping inside, I’m caught off guard as not only do Dorin and his son walk in, behind them is another man and woman. The woman is absolutely beautiful with her blonde hair falling over her shoulders. She’s dressed in jeans and open flannel shirt over a black tank top. And strangely enough she’s carrying a tray in her hands.

“Blow,” Dorin calls, getting my attention.

“Dorin,” Blow greets the other man.

“Where’s my granddaughter and great-grandsons?” Dorin demands, cocking a brow.

“*Tată,*” Rain yells from across the room causing Dorin to spin to face her. Behind her stands Sniper, his eyes glued to his woman as she makes fast work of closing the distance between her and her father.

Dorin was supposed to have visited before now, but business kept him from being able to do so. This is the first time he’s seen her in years, I suppose.

“*Fiică.*”

If I could leave, I’d suggest we give them a moment of privacy, but there’s no time for that. Dorin and his son are here for a reason. To provide us with information that he has on the Crimson Bloods.

“I better go get my woman and the boys,” Blow mutters. “Stay here and find out who the hell the other man and woman are.”

“You got it,” I grunt.

Not exactly what I want to do, but I’ll do it regardless. We don’t need any more surprises.

Before I have the chance to do as Blow asks, Storm and Chelsea step out of the kitchen. Chelsea stops dead while Storm smiles, their gazes on the new people that have come in.



Chelsea shocks me though when she calls out, “Meadow.”

The woman who came in behind Dorin and his son blinks and smiles brightly.

“I was starting to think you weren’t going to come,” Storm adds. “Where’s your visitor, did you leave them at home?”

“Oh, um, I . . . no,” Meadow says meekly and glances at the man next to her. “This is Gavril.”

“Ladies,” Gavril states, looking at them briefly before pressing a hand to Meadow’s lower back and saying something only she can hear.

Meadow nods and bites her lower lip before stepping toward Storm and Chelsea holding out the containers she’s carrying. “I brought goodies,” she announces shyly.

I don’t know what it is about her, but she catches my attention. Too bad this isn’t the time. Especially not knowing who she is to this Gavril and what he’s doing here in the first place.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## MEADOW

Tension, like any other, takes over my body. I swear if I could, I'd run home quicker than a person can say 'Cracker Jack'. Unfortunately, Gavril drove, and there's no way he'll be leaving anytime soon, considering we just got here. He hasn't spoken to anyone as we stand a few feet behind the other two men we'd come inside with.

But the moment Storm and Chelsea spot me, some of the tension eases from within me. Mainly because Gavril said I was safe here and safer than anywhere else I could think of being. I didn't understand what he meant by that, but I trust Gavril more than anyone.

"I brought goodies." I smile and hold the containers up for Chelsea and Storm to see.

"Awesome," Chelsea remarks.

"You didn't have to bring anything," Storm says, smiling. "Though goodies are never turned away. Come on, we'll put them in the kitchen for the time being until we're ready to set everything up outside. The guys will be grilling in just a bit."

"Oh, am I too early?" I glance from the two women whom I call friends to look around the room, mainly seeing all men and only one other woman who's standing in the embrace of what I can only assume is her father.

"Nope," Chelsea says, taking the containers from me. "Now, let's go see what you brought for us."

I love the way she seems to ignore the others in the room like they're not even there. I follow her as Storm states she'll join us in a few minutes.

"So, you're a Dragomir?" Chelsea asks.

"What?" I frown at the sudden question.

"You were standing with Storm's grandfather and his men. One of them spoke directly to you."

“You mean Gavril?”

Chelsea lifts a brow in curiosity and cocks her head slightly. “If that’s his name, then yeah.”

“I’m not related to him. He’s, um ... a friend.” I don’t want to get into my past right now.

“Right.”

Storm joins us before Chelsea has a chance to question me further and with her is the other woman whom I’m guessing is Storm’s mom, and I’m right when Storm introduces me.

“Meadow, this is my mom, Rain.”

“Nice to meet you.” I smile and stick my hand out for her to shake.

“Same.” Rain smiles.

I don’t know what it is, but being around her makes me nervous. Especially when a man comes into the kitchen and wraps his arms around her. But what makes my nerves spike is how familiar he looks and the reason for the similarities. It can’t be possible. God knows, I hope not.

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I spend the next couple of hours talking with Chelsea and Storm. The amazing part is meeting Storm’s three baby boys. I noticed right off that Storm’s man stuck close to her if not directly next to her the entire time.

The way he seemed to always keep an eye on Storm and help her if she needed it with the babies, I have to say is sweet. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man do that. Though when would I, considering what my life’s been like?

Gavril finally introduced me, after he met with the rest of the men, to the two we walked in with, Dorin and his son, Caturix. I thought it strange that his daughter was named Rain while his son is named after a god. When I blurted this out, I got a grin from all three men.

“I made a deal with my wife that for a son, I’ll name him, and she was allowed to name our daughter,” Dorin explains and lowers his voice. “However, I would appreciate you not speaking outside those who know about Rain.”

I nod, understanding his meaning, and end up rambling, “I know how to keep quiet. You can ask Gavril. I see but speak nothing of what’s before me, so I won’t do that to you. I mean, I like Rain and your granddaughter. Storm’s become a friend since I moved here.”

Gavril tucks me into his side and chuckles. “Calm down, little one,” he murmurs.

“Right.” I nod and swallow nervously before excusing myself.

A short while later is when I really feel myself on the verge of a panic attack. This is due to the man who looks familiar. I learn he’s Rain’s husband, and he sits across from me at a picnic table.

“Can I help you?” I ask, unsure of what else to say.

“Just curious as to where you’re from,” he says, keeping his eyes on me.

I divert my eyes and lick my lips drily while looking for Gavril. When I don’t see him anywhere, my panic starts to increase further.

“Um.” This is all I manage to get out. I don’t know what else to say. I’m scared of this man, and I don’t mean to be.

I can’t take it anymore and bolt out of my seat. Without making an excuse for leaving, I rush out of there, only to plow right into a wall. Well, not a wall but a well-built man.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out, looking up at the face of the man I’d just run into.

“What’s the hurry?” the guy asks, giving me a lopsided grin that I swear makes him even more gorgeous than he already is. I’d noticed him before while he was walking around.

I can't help but think about how beautiful of a man he is. I've always been a sucker for a guy wearing a hat and muscles, though I'd never been one to take action on that. I'm damaged beyond repair, and there's no way this sexy man would even really be looking at me if I hadn't run into him.

"Oh, um, it's just getting late, and I've got to go," I blather and step away.

"You're Meadow, right?"

"Ugh, yeah." I nod and bite my lower lip doing my best to keep my panic down.

"I'm Nines," he introduces himself, holding a hand out for me to take.

I tentatively but quickly do so and step away, ready to bolt. "Nice to meet you," I say and drop his hand. "But I'm just leaving so ... I'll, um, I'll see you later."

Before he can get another word in, I walk away, all but running.

From what I don't know.

Maybe it's because I've spent the day with people who are nice, and I haven't had that in a long time. Gavril was right, I felt safe here, but my panic kept me from relaxing.

Or maybe I'm running from the man who reminds me so much of the pain and anguish I've felt my entire life.

Though it could also now be due to the man who introduced himself to me.

Regardless, I'm out of here, even if I have to walk. I can't stay anymore. Otherwise, I'll embarrass myself more than I ever thought was possible in front of people who have been nothing but kind to me.

## CHAPTER SIX

## NINES

I start to go after Meadow, a sense of unease building in my gut. I didn't like the look in her eyes as she rushed out of here. I even turn to go after her, but a hand on my shoulder stops me.

"Let her go," Gavril commands.

During our meeting earlier, after the women left the room, I learned Gavril's Dorin's cousin, making him family to me as well since he would have been my father's cousin. Though I didn't know any of this until Dorin explained it. I swear the whole Dragomir family tree is a mind fuck to understand because of all their secrets.

Evidently, Gavril handles business for the Dragomir family where he lives. Blow asked him about the woman who came in with them that the girls seemed to know. Gavril explained that she was a woman under his protection and was like a daughter to him. He informed us that she'd decided to move here and open a boutique after finishing school and saving enough money to do so.

"Wanna explain what her deal is?" I demand, sensing the trouble that surrounds the woman. I watched her throughout the afternoon, thinking she was beautiful. I also saw how nervous she was around everyone, especially when Sniper sat across from her. From the way she bolted away from him, you'd have thought her ass was on fire. Then she ran directly into me.

"Only when the time is right will I reveal her secrets," he answers evasively.

I furrow my brows at the discrete way he spoke, barely noticing Sniper and a few others joining us. "What does that mean?"

"Is she who I think she is?" Sniper growls. His gaze directly on Gavril before the other man can answer me.



“Who might that be?” Gavril asks in return.

“A damn ghost from my fuckin’ past,” Sniper says, surprising the hell out of me.

“And who might that ghost be?”

Dorin steps between Sniper and Gavril keeping my brother from lunging at Gavril.

“Gavril, you can tell them and trust them,” Dorin remarks passively.

I cock my head slightly, watching Gavril closely as he nods, but Sniper speaks up before he can.

“Tell me that isn’t Libby’s daughter,” Sniper rasps, his voice grated with emotion.

Libby?

As in Nerd’s aunt?

That can’t be right.

Can it?

I was a kid when she’d been around with Nerd’s mom. The two of them seemed tight, and then both were gone. Nerd’s mom was found, but we’d found out that she just didn’t want to be a mom. At least that’s what I remember Nerd telling me.

“Are you talking about—” Blow starts, but Gavril interrupts him, breaking through my thoughts.

“Yes, and that’s the only answer you’re going to get from me. I made a promise to that girl, and I won’t break it. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to go make sure Meadow is okay.” Gavril doesn’t wait for a response from anyone as he walks in the direction in which Meadow has gone.

But I don’t watch which way he goes, instead, I focus on Sniper and the grave look on his face that takes over his features.

“Sniper, Libby was your—”

“Yeah.” Sniper doesn’t let Blow finish. “She was Nerd’s mother’s sister who disappeared years ago, and none of us

could find her.”

“But you found Nerd’s mom when she disappeared around the same time,” I mutter finding myself confused by this whole mess.

“Yeah, found that bitch,” Sniper sneers. “She didn’t want to be a mom to Nerd. Said she wanted to live free and be wherever the wind took her. Stupid move on her part. Found out she died three years after finding her.” He lets out a breath and shakes his head. “Libby, on the other hand, there was no reason for her to want to up and leave, and there have not been any signs of her anywhere. She all but vanished into thin air.”

“Fuck,” Blow mutters

“This means this girl is family,” I state the obvious. “We telling Nerd about her?”

“If it’s true, which I fuckin’ believe it is, then yeah, she’s family, and Nerd deserves to know he’s got a cousin.” Sniper nods and reaches up to rake a hand through his hair in frustration. “However, I don’t know what happened to that girl. What I do know, though, is she’s not only the spitting image of her mother, but she’s also got a ghost in those eyes haunting her. Damn girl couldn’t even stand to be around me without nearly jumping out of her skin.”

“I want Keys to look into her,” Blow says and looks to Dorin. “Do you know anything else about this girl?”

“I only know what Gavril has told me over the years,” he answers, his nostrils flaring. “And I agree with him. She is under the protection of the Dragomir family.”

“Right,” Blow grumbles, shaking his head and looks to me. “You talk to Keys. We’ve got enough going on with the cops and your shit. We don’t need more drama if we can keep that from happening.”

“I’ll talk to him. And hopefully, Markus will be able to get me out of this shit sometime soon,” I say, curling my lip upward in disgust at the thought of the shitshow I’m dealing with. “Chelsea’s been reading through those journals Douglas

had, and I'm going with my gut that all of this connects to what's in those journals."

"I agree with you," Sniper adds. "I read them myself, and Douglas seemed to be scared in the last entries about his brother. It's why he put everything in Storm's name. He knew she didn't want anything to do with the companies. When he came to the clubhouse, it was a front. I think his brother and the Crimson Blood Clan are behind this."

"Exactly my thoughts. We have to watch our backs and hope like hell this shit blows over and we get Nines out of trouble and keep them from causing more," Blow grinds out. "I've got a woman and three newborns, I don't need to be dealing with these bastards as well."

"You worry about those babies and Storm," I state firmly. "I'll handle the rest. It's not like you haven't handled things for me when I needed you to."

"Appreciate it, but we'll work on it together." Blow nods, meeting my gaze.

I nod, understanding him. He's got my back just as I've got his. But it makes me wonder about Meadow. Who has hers besides Gavril?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## MEADOW

Gavril left this morning to go back home after making sure that I was going to be okay. He assured me that if anything happens, he's only a phone call away. The man also told me that if I need anything and I couldn't get him, then I was to go to the Devil's Riot MC.

I promised him that I would, but I know there's no way in hell I can do that. I all but embarrassed myself in front of them when I ran away as I did. I could barely look at Sniper without being reminded ... I shake my head, shoving that thought back as far as I can. I don't need anyone to help me. I can take care of myself.

I decided after Gavril left to take a day to simply do nothing. Normally, I would be working on one of my designs or at the boutique. Today I'm not doing any of that. I spend time binging on Netflix, watching *NCIS*. I absolutely love Gibbs and Tony. Oh, and of course, Abby, she's smart and brazen to dress however she wants and the tattoos. If I could, I'd be just like her, but I couldn't do it. Not really.

After a while, I give myself a pedicure and open my Kindle app on my phone. I opened one of the new books I'd downloaded and started reading. As I get to one of the sex scenes, I find myself envisioning Nines doing what the couple in the book are doing to me. I clench my thighs together trying to add pressure between my legs where I need it most. I put the eReader down and close my eyes as I lean back against the cushions of my couch.

In my mind, it's as if he's standing right in front of me, giving me that sexy smirk. I run my hands down my body tweaking my nipples, leaving one hand to toy with them while I slip the other under the band of my shorts and panties. I gasp at how wet I am. I stroke a finger through my folds, enjoying the feel of them as I envision them being Nines's. I lift my hips slightly off the couch, moaning as I dip a finger inside my entrance. But in my mind, it's not mine. It's Nines's and he's

toying with me. Slow and easy. Teasing me until I'm begging for him to give me more. I add a second finger and wish I had a vibrator. Something thicker than my nimble fingers.

The orgasm that washes over me doesn't take away the need for something else, but it helps marginally.

Pulling my fingers from under the band of my shorts, I get up and go into the kitchen to wash my hands. I'm surprised I allowed myself to do something so daring. I've never done anything like daydream about a man I don't even know while touching myself. It's not who I am, but I can't say I didn't enjoy it. Maybe I'll do it again. Or better, I could order at least a bullet or something to make it even better.

Though I should probably not touch myself again thinking of a complete stranger. No matter how sexy he is.

I mean, technically, I can't even call him a stranger because I know his name and that he's a part of a club that I was told I could trust to protect me if I need them. As quickly as the thought pops into my head, I shake it away. I don't need anyone to do anything for me. And I definitely don't want my problems put on anyone else.

Drying my hands, I grab a snack and head back to the couch to binge more *NCIS* until I pass out. Tomorrow, I go back to work and, hopefully, I can forget about Nines and how good he looks. This shouldn't be hard considering I most likely won't see him again.

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At the sound of the bell over the door ringing, I glance up from the seam of a dress I'm working on to see who's entered my shop. My heart skips slightly at the sight of who my customers are. Well, I'm sure they're not here as customers. That is I know one of them isn't, and I don't think the other would like anything I sell here. Then again, who knows. But I didn't think Rain or Sniper are here to shop, not with the way Sniper is looking at me.

I drop the hem of the dress and stand, straightening the front of the chic top I put on this morning. “Can I help you?” I find myself asking as I swallow back my nerves not wanting to seem weak as I’m sure I did when I all but ran from this man in particular.

“Morning, Meadow,” Rain greets me with a warm smile. “The girls have told me so much about this shop, I decided I needed to see it for myself,” she says, glancing around. “Did you make most of these yourself?”

“Um, ugh, no,” I mumble and point toward the racks that contain my pieces. “These are the ones I’ve done myself. If there’s a certain one you’d be interested in and don’t see your size, I can always adjust or put an order in to make one for you. I try not to carry too many of the same things in my designs. I like to be unique in each of my pieces.”

“That’s fantastic.” Rain beams, grabbing hold of Sniper’s bicep, getting his attention. “I’m going to take a look.”

“Okay, sweetheart,” Sniper says, smiling and bringing his gaze back to mine as Rain moves away to look at the clothes.

“If you need anything, just let me know,” I state, intending to go back to working on the dress, but Sniper’s voice stops me from moving.

“Your mom’s name is Libby, isn’t it?”

Ice flows through my veins at the name. A name I haven’t heard in a long time. A very, very long time. “I don’t know who that is,” I whisper quietly, lying through my teeth.

“You look just like her,” Sniper says, cocking a brow. “From the way you froze at her name, I’m sure you do know who I’m talking about.”

“Don’t push,” Rain mutters, rejoining her man and placing her hand on his arm. “Remember, I told you to be gentle and calm about this.”

“Did ... did you know Libby?” I find myself asking before I can stop myself.

Both Rain and Sniper are looking at me now and I feel as if I'm under the microscope.

“Libby was a friend and my son's aunt. I was with her sister, Linda, when they both disappeared around the same time.”

At the mention of Linda, I feel myself paling. I met her a few times and I know she was nothing more than a whore. My father's favorite toy to play with when he wasn't hurting me. I try to shake the memory, but it's not easy. Not when this man stands in front of me seeming determined to bring up the past I've tried to forget about by running away.

“I don't know what you want from me,” I admit, licking my bottom lip and nervously clenching and unclenching my hands at my sides.

“I just want to know what happened to Libby,” he says gruffly.

“She died,” I answered without thinking. “A long time ago.” I turn away from him and close my eyes as visions of the past make themselves known in my head. The strangled screams of Libby crying out in agonizing pain. The images of her laying there, eyes staring sightlessly up at the ceiling, as my father yelled and threw things because she wasn't strong enough to do what he wanted. I shake my head at the utter defeat that I feel.

“You're her daughter?”

“Yes,” I breathe, lying to give him the answer he's looking for. Though in truth it's me I'm deceiving. I've told myself for years that Libby wasn't my mother. That the woman who had me ran away when I was seven and didn't ever come back. But in truth, that's when she died.

Sniper doesn't need to know all of this; it's why I keep it simple with a one-word answer and not go into detail about the past. It's not like he doesn't know for himself. There's no hiding the fact I'm Libby's daughter and I should have known it would be a bad idea to come to this town. Then again, I



thought no one would have remembered the woman who gave birth to me or the vile man who impregnated her.

“Fuck,” Sniper rasps gruffly, shaking his head before walking out the door, having gotten the answer he was looking for.

Rain comes forward and places a hand on either side of my arms. “Don’t worry child, you’re within family now.”

“No, I’m not,” I whisper giving her a look of denial. “Families are known only to hurt those they’re supposed to cherish and protect. I’ll never be within a family again. I have only me and that’s all I need.”

“The thought you think that you don’t need anyone, Meadow, makes my heart ache for you,” Rain says gingerly, reaching up to place the palm of her hand against my cheek. “No one should be without having those around who care for them. And I’ll tell you now, if my Sniper knew you’d existed, then he would have made sure to be a part of your life. To make sure you knew Nerd, his son. I’ll give you a heads-up, though, he’s most likely on the phone with Nerd now, so be prepared for your cousin to be coming to meet you.”

Before I can protest, Rain spins on her heels and rushes after Sniper, leaving me with her words ringing in my head.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## SNIPER

This is bullshit.

Complete and utter bullshit.

“Sniper,” Rain calls out, but I don’t have it in me to look back to my woman.

Never in my life have I loved a woman as much as I do her. I’d do anything for her, including dying. She’s my damn world, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t care for another. Not in the sense that I do for Rain. Nowhere near it, but I cared for Libby. She was my son’s aunt, and you could tell she adored my son. I want to think sometimes she loved Nerd more than even myself.

Libby and Nerd’s mom, Linda, were close, and we’d all grown up together. The two of them and several others, including a few members of the club. My family was somewhat dysfunctional, but mainly that had to do with my cousins, Adam, David, and Johnathan. They were a little out there, but still, they were a part of the group of friends we’d all been back then.

Of course, we all ended up going our separate ways for the most part. I’d been with Linda, and we ended up having Nerd. A few years later, Linda up and left and when she did Libby disappeared. No one knew where she’d gone. I was a part of the club, but I’d reached out to my cousins to ask if they’d heard anything about her.

Eventually, I gave up the search, figuring it was pointless. But now, I know the truth. She’s dead and something horrible had to have happened to her beforehand. There’s no other way to put it.

“Sniper, honey,” Rain murmurs soothingly.

Taking a deep breath, I glance down to the woman who holds my heart in her hands. “Rain,” I murmur, turning to pull her in my arms, feeling things for the girl who’s just entered

all our lives. She's scared out of her mind, that's surely something anyone can see with their own two eyes. But more than that, the way she seems to be haunted by demons of her own makes it even harder. I don't know what Meadow has been through. I don't think anyone will until she decides to let someone into that part of her life and trust them unconditionally with the truth of what's happened to her in the past.

"She'll be okay." Rain leans her head against my chest and holds me to her.

If not for this woman, I don't know what I'd do without her.

"Yeah, she will be." I nod, agreeing with my woman. "I'll make sure of it."

"She's scared."

"I know," I rasp, closing my eyes. I'd heard what Meadow said to Rain as I walked away. She thinks she doesn't need anyone, but she'll find out soon enough what having a family really means. She'll learn the difference between what she said when she gets to know the rest of us.

Meadow might not be my niece by blood, but I cared for her mother, and I'll make sure she knows she has nothing to fear here.

"I think you need to have Keys and Nerd look into her past and see what they can find out."

"Keys is already on it," I grumble. "He's coming up blank so far, but I'm sure he'll have something for me soon."

Nodding, Rain leans back and meets my gaze. "Then let's go home and see if I can't help you relax some," she says, giving me a suggestive look. I grin, liking the way she thinks.

If there's one thing about my woman, she's always got a way of making me get my mind off the troubles causing turmoil in my head, and those ways always include her and her sweet body.

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Hours later, I'm waiting on Nerd to get to the clubhouse. I'd called him and broke the news as only I could. Knowing my son the way I do, his ass hung up on me after saying he was on the way. I'm sure Cara, his ol' lady, will be with him. One thing about Nerd is he doesn't let that woman out of his sight if he can help it. I don't blame him, considering the bullshit they've been through in the past.

Sitting at the bar, nursing a beer I had one of the prospects get for me, I keep thinking about the past. Rain left earlier to go with Storm and Chelsea to get some things for Storm and Blow's house. To my surprise Blow even let them go, taking the babies with them. The damn man has become even more protective of Storm lately. I wasn't all that thrilled when he got with my girl, but only because she's my little girl. Maybe not by blood, but I raised Storm alongside Nerd, and she'll always be my daughter no matter what. It doesn't take DNA to make a family.

"Yo, Sniper."

I jerk my chin upward as I glance at Keys as he joins me. "What's up?" I ask, hoping he might have something for me.

"Was able to track down a little bit of information on Meadow," he informs me and motions to the prospect to bring him a drink.

"What did you find?" I clench the bottle in my hand and wait for Keys to answer me. From the look on his face, I'm not sure I want to know, but I need to, all the same.

"It wasn't much. Was born in a small hospital. Birth certificate confirms Libby as her mom."

"Does it say who the father is?"

"Yep, name on it is Johnathan Branch."

I feel my blood freeze in my veins at the mention of the name. "Come again?"

“You heard me. Johnathan Branch.”

Well, fuck me. This just got more damn fucked up. No wonder Meadow is so damn nervous around me. She’s Johnathan’s daughter, and he and I look damn near identical. Whatever her issues are, they stem from him. But when I saw Johnathan last, he didn’t have a kid. At least not that I knew of. Granted, that was years ago. After everything with Libby disappearing, everyone else pretty much parted ways altogether. Well, those not within the club.

Fuck.

“You have anything else on Meadow?”

“Not much other than she went to school. Made good grades and worked for her dad until she herself disappeared.” He shrugs and takes the beer the prospect sets in front of him. “I’ll keep looking, but I’ve got to focus on this shit with the Crimson Blood Clan and Nines.”

“Yeah.” I nod and finish my beer. “Don’t worry about it. Nerd’s coming, and he’ll help with both sides of things. We’ll get this dealt with and hopefully put a stop to the bastards.”

Nines doesn’t need this shit on him. He’s a good VP. He might have had his faults, but after he got his head back right, he’s not done a damn thing wrong where this club is concerned. One thing about the man is he always puts others before himself.

For a brief moment, I think about the way he looked at Meadow ... nope, not my business. I’m not getting involved, and I sure as hell ain’t pushing a brother on the girl who, for all intents and purposes, is technically my niece.

Then again, Nines being with Meadow would ensure she’s safe no matter what.

I swear my woman is rubbing off on me the older I get, and it’s not a damn good thing. Not one bit.

## CHAPTER NINE

## NINES

“So, what we have right now,” Markus grumbles, leaning his forearms on the table and glancing between Blow, Lucky, and myself. “The girl’s name is being kept out of things as they’re claiming her to be a minor. But from what I gathered together alongside Adams, the girl was paid off. A runaway who was paid a mint to make the claim that she was raped by Nines. The detectives are keeping her hidden.”

“They can’t do that, can they?” I demand, keeping my cool.

“If the situation calls for it ... yes. However, we know all of this is bullshit and what they’re doing is keeping me and the rest of you from finding her and getting her to admit the truth. Shit, for all we know, they could’ve killed her already, although I doubt it. I’m sure it’s not lost on them who I am and that I’ll demand all evidence, which I will. I’m just waiting on them to give me what I’ve not been given yet.”

“How long’s this shit gonna take to clear Nines?” Blow asks, leaning back in his chair and tapping his fingertips on the table.

“Don’t know, but I’ll get his ass free of this shit. Just need time to do it,” Markus states, meeting my gaze. “I’ll get your name clear, Nines. You can trust me on that.”

“I’m due in court in a week for an arraignment hearing,” I mutter. “Will we be having to go to court?”

“I’m working on it, but we’ll be pleading not guilty,” Markus informs me and glances down at the watch on his wrist. “Fuck, I’ve got to get going. Got another meeting. Hopefully, we’ll have good news soon, considering this next meeting is with a state representative who doesn’t seem to be taking too kindly to what I’ve told him so far.”

“This representative happen to be anyone we know?” Lucky smirks knowingly.



“Oh, you know him all right,” Markus grunts and looks at Lucky. “I’ll inform your brother you said hello.”

The smirk slips from Lucky’s face as he shakes his head.

“You’re involving Luka in this?”

“Of course, I am,” Markus snorts. “Why wouldn’t I get all the help I can? He’s in a damn good position to help and is willing to do so.”

“Fuck me,” Lucky grumbles.

Markus gets up and heads out without further delay, leaving the three of us to sit around the table at the bar we’d met him at. One that’s owned by the club.

None of us say a word at first. All of us are stuck in our own thoughts. This is complete bullshit, and I just want it over with. Everyone in this fucking town knows who the hell I am and knows I wouldn’t touch a minor. Hell, we got enough pussy coming and going at the clubhouse, I don’t need to even think of going there with anyone if I don’t want to. All I gotta do is snap my fingers and one of the fallen harlots, will drop to their knees and ask me how the hell I wanna fuck them.

Though I’ll admit lately, that shit ain’t happened. Not since the other day when I saw a certain blonde woman who caught my attention. Thinking of her, I glance between Lucky and Blow, clearing my throat. “Either of you talk to Sniper or hear anything else about the girl from the party?”

“I know Sniper and Rain went to see her at the boutique in town she owns. Keys was looking into her, but he’s keeping your shit main priority until we get you out of this shit,” Blow states cocking a brow. “You interested in her?”

“I don’t got time for that shit,” I retort, shaking my head. “Just wondering if whatever she’s hiding is gonna hit us.”

“Don’t know, but Dorin informed me that his cousin, Gavril, is very protective of Meadow and doesn’t want to see her hurt. But he also wants her to live life.”

“But what I don’t get is why,” Lucky says, furrowing his brow. “What is it about her that Gavril would be so protective of? It’s not like she’s Rain or Storm. She’s not from the Romanian family. I’ve checked into Gavril myself, and he’s one cold-blooded motherfucker.”

“I’m sure he is, considering he’s Dorin’s cousin,” Blow grumbles and raps his knuckles on the table. “Regardless, this girl is now under the protection of the club. No matter what Gavril’s connection is to her. She’s Nerd’s cousin, and that makes her family. But I still want to know more about her.” My Prez’s gaze comes to mine, and he jerks his chin up. “Why don’t you get to know her, see if you can’t find out what the hell her issue is?”

“What the fuck?”

Blow’s demand throws me off guard.

“You want Nines to get close to some chick? When he’s got this shit hanging over his head?” Lucky snorts. “Are you sleep-deprived or something?”

“Fucker, I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean for it to be said.” Blow casts Lucky a glare before focusing on me. “You need something to take your mind off the bullshit going on. Let Markus do his job, and you do yours. Take care of the club and find out who Meadow is and what she’s hiding.”

“Right,” I grumble, hiding the fact I do want to get to know Meadow. There’s something about her that calls to me. I’ve dreamed of her nightly, and I don’t know why.

The three of us finish up our beers and head out of the bar. I’m sure Blow’s ready to get back to Storm and the babies. Who can blame him? Three kids is a lot at one time. And I know he’s trying to be there for his woman and make sure she knows he’s not putting it all on her. I remember the stories he’s told me of his own dad and know that his reasons for being the way he is with his family stems from that. All in all, in my book, it makes him a damn good man.

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Instead of heading back to the clubhouse, I find myself riding around. I rode out, heading for nowhere, only to return to town and park right in front of Meadow's boutique. I stare up at the sign and smirk at the name of the place, 'The Chic Boutique'. Weird name, but from what Storm and Chelsea have said about the clothes she carries, they're awesome.

Without thinking, I drop the kickstand down and climb off the back of my bike. I start toward the building when my phone rings. I shove a hand in my pocket and yank it out to find it's Markus calling. Knowing he was meeting with Luka, I answer it quickly.

"Tell me you got something for me."

"Brother, you know I'm damn good at my job and always work my magic." Markus chuckles through the line.

"What did Luka say?" I demand impatiently.

"Well, considering at our meeting Luka not only had the DA with him but also the judge, who just so happens to be the ones you would be going against, I spoke with them and Luka about some very alarming things. The judge being a religious man, and not one who can be bribed by any means, decided that he would be inquiring on this himself. I handed him copies of our documentation along with the DA. According to him, he knew something wasn't adding up, but the detectives on the case were adamant about the who ordeal. They brought the information to my attention that there's a few dirties in the department that need to be weeded out, however, that's a whole other story."

Reeling from this information, I drop my head back and stare at the sky. "So, does this mean it's done?"

"I can't say for sure, but it's definitely looking that way, Nines," Markus states firmly. "But that doesn't mean that fucked-up group won't try to hit you in some other way. Keep watching your back, and I'll let you know for sure once I finish this up with the judge and DA. Luka also seems to be interested in this whole thing and has decided to join in and make sure the charges are dropped. Told the judge and DA himself that he knows you and knows the type of man you are."

Gave you praises and even mentioned you helping him out when he needed it back in middle school, of all things.”

I chuckle, knowing Luka would do that. He was a nerdy but cool kid. Not like his little brother, Lucky. Luka’s about two years older than us, but we were the popular crowd. Don’t know why considering we didn’t give a damn about any of the shit they tried. However, one time, Lucky wasn’t with me, and I saw a group of kids getting ready to jump Luka, and I put a stop to it. Told him to get into boxing or something, and he did, though I don’t think he ever told Lucky about what happened. Now, he’s still the nerdy dude, but he’s bulked up and is a powerhouse that deals in politics.

Finishing my conversation with Markus, I pull the phone from my ear and straighten my head to look into the boutique. I’m not completely out of the fire, but feeling somewhat better, I decided to do what Blow said to do. Get to know Meadow. But not because he said to do it. I want to know who she is and what she feels like. I can’t help but be compelled by her. Who wouldn’t? She’s shy and has that innocent vibe going on, and a part of me, a large part, wants to protect her in every way possible.

With a grin in place, I head for the doors, intending to find out what her deal is but also how to make her mine.

## CHAPTER TEN

## MEADOW

I'm just finishing up the dress I'd been working on for days when the bell chimes over the door. I glance up and my heart nearly skips a beat at the sight of the man who enters my boutique.

Holy smoking pins and needles.

He's far sexier than in my dreams and imagination. I swear since the cookout and meeting him I've not been able to stop thinking about how good he looks and that's not something I do. It's not who I am. However, Nines is definitely worth thinking about. What with his broad shoulders, beefy arms, and of course that hat he's wearing. This one black with a flag patch on it.

Standing, I wipe my hands along my corduroy pants and face him with a professional stance, hoping he doesn't see past the facade to the nervous being that I am at being near him. But with him, it's for totally different reasons. Mainly because he's him and I'm me.

I inwardly shake the thought away. He can't see the filth that coats my skin. Or at least I hope not.

"Can I help you?" I finally ask.

Since stepping into the boutique, Nines hasn't looked at me, he's been glancing around. Meaning when he brings his eyes to me and gives me an up-and-down appraisal, I feel my stomach clench, and between my legs aches with a need I've never known.

"Hey, Buttercup," he says, giving me that lopsided grin of his.

Buttercup?

"Um, hi," I mumble, completely unsure of anything in this moment.

"I was in town, figured I'd stop in and see what the rave was all about," he explains and closes the distance between the

two of us. I'm unable to move as his eyes have me frozen in place. His hands come to my hips, and he tilts his head keeping eye contact. "Sweet place you got here."

"I don't think anything in here would be your style," I blurt.

Nines chuckles and that grin gets wider. "You're probably right, but there's something here I wouldn't mind trying."

"What's that?" Damn it, why did I have to go and ask him that.

Smirking, Nines pulls me closer using his hands at my hips and I find myself flush against his chest without thinking of pushing away. I swallow and lick my bottom lip nervously.

"Tomorrow, I wanna take you out after you close," Nines announces, removing his fingers from my sides and reaching up to slide his hands in my hair, his thumbs stroking my temples. "We'll go out on the bike. I'll take you out to get a bite to eat and go from there."

"You want to take me on a date?"

"Yeah."

"But ..."

"No buts about it, Buttercup, you and me, we're gonna go out. No pressure. Just a ride and to get some damn good food. Okay?"

I find myself nodding before I can stop. "Okay."

"Good," Nines says, his head coming down until we're nose to nose. "I'm not gonna wait to kiss you though. I've been wanting to taste those lips since I first saw you." Without waiting for me to agree to him kissing me, his lips are on mine, and his tongue sweeps inside, claiming my mouth in a way I didn't know was possible. Just as quickly as he kisses me, he breaks his lips away, presses his forehead to mine, and lets out a harsh breath. "Fuckin' better than I thought it would be."

Oh my.

Nines steps away and drops his hands. His eyes lock with mine and that lopsided grin is in place as he pulls out his cell phone. "Give me your number, Buttercup," he commands, and I find myself giving him my cell number without thinking about the repercussions of doing it. A moment later, my phone rings and he waves his phone. "Now, you got mine. I'll text you later when you get off," he says and turns to walk away. At the doors, he glances back at me. "I'll see you tomorrow. Be ready and wear jeans and boots or sneakers. We're on the bike, meaning you cover that skin, baby."

I nod and glance down at what I'm wearing. I'm covering my skin, but I don't say anything about it. Maybe there's a rule that if you're on a bike you gotta be in denim. This is fine with me. I love wearing jeans. Any time I can wear them, I do so.

Finally, Nines leaves, and I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"Holy crap, what just happened?" I whisper to myself, pressing a hand to my stomach and the other to my lips.

I've been kissed before, but none of them were ever like the one he gave me. My ex, even in the beginning, was never able to kiss me the way Nines did.

I shudder to think of Johnny as memories slam to the forefront of my mind, breaking through the barrier.

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*"Please, Johnny, stop," I beg, trying to get away from him.*

*"You think you can do what you want and get away with it?" Johnny snarls, gripping me by my hair, and wrenching me backward. "I don't fuckin' think so."*

*I notice off to the side my dad come in the room, but Johnny doesn't seem phased by it. He just keeps up his assault and rips my clothes from my body.*

*"I'll show you, Meadow. You'll learn your place and know who you belong to," Johnny snarls, forcefully spreading my legs apart.*



*I beg and plead for my dad to help but he doesn't do anything but watch as Johnny violently enters me. To make things worse, my dad pulls himself out and masturbates while watching.*

---

I shake my head and squeeze my eyes closed.

“It’s the past. They’re not here and they don’t know where I am,” I tell myself. “They can’t hurt me anymore.”

Maybe I should just call Nines and cancel.

It would be the best thing to do. No matter how good of a kisser he is. Nothing can come of it. He needs someone with experience. Someone not broken as I am. He also should have someone not covered in a life worth of filth.

With my mind made up, I step around the counter, lift my phone up, and unlock the screen. I find Nines’s number saved under his name, pull up a message, and start typing. It takes me three times, but I finally get what I want to say right.

**Me:** I’m sorry but I don’t think I’ll be able to go out with you tomorrow. I do apologize.

Hitting send, I place the phone down and check the time. It’s close enough to closing time and I want to get out of here in case he decides to come back. I don’t think I can handle seeing him right now. Not when I know the feel of his lips against mine and that I’m not the one for him.

It doesn’t take me long to shut everything down and lock up. I head home. Just as I step through the doors, my phone pings with a message, and I hold my breath knowing who it’s from without looking. Slowly I get my phone and unlock the screen to find I’m right. It’s a message from Nines. I suck in a breath and read it.

**Nines:** Buttercup, we’re gonna go out tomorrow. Told you no pressure, baby, and I mean it. **BUT WE ARE GOING OUT.** After that kiss, I’m not letting you off the hook.

Another text comes in following that one as I stare at the screen.

**Nines:** Don't think you can hide from me either. I'll find you and then I'm still taking you out.

Um. Wow.

How do I get out of this predicament without making things worse?

**Me:** I think you can find another woman to go out with. I'm not worth the headache I'm sure I'll give you, and though the kiss was great. The best. I don't think we should do that again.

I hit send and regret doing so before changing my response.

Before I know it, my phone rings with Nines's name flashing at me like a big sign beckoning me to answer.

I close my eyes and swipe my finger along the screen. "Hello."

"I'm gonna fill you in on something, Buttercup," he says instantly, his voice sounding gruff.

"What's that?" I whisper, moving to sit on the edge of my couch.

"You could never be a headache. Not ever. I'm glad you think the kiss we shared was the best, but I intend to give you better," he states and keeps going. "Tomorrow we're going out and getting to know each other. If we go further, great. I ain't gonna complain. But we're gonna have a good time. And I don't want to hear any more about you not being worth me going out with."

"I didn't say worth," I blurt.

"No, but I'm sure from the context of the text you sent, you think that, and I'll tell you something else, Meadow, you are definitely worth more and more."

Wow.

Tears prick at my eyes, and my breath hitches as the first tear spills down my cheeks.

“Buttercup.” I hear him murmur, and I know he knows I’m crying.

“I have to go,” I whisper and pull the phone away from my ear, hearing him call my name as I do so.

Nines’s words ring in my head, screaming at me loud and clear. They clash with the past, and it’s all I can do to keep myself sane.

Curling onto my side, I pull my legs up and wrap my arms around them as I stare into nothing, thinking of Nines’s words. God, if only he knew the truth, would he still think that?

I’m not so sure, but he’s determined we’re going out tomorrow. Maybe I should run and keep myself from the inevitable heartbreak where he’s concerned.

I immediately shut the thought down. I need to stand my ground. I can’t know what will happen, but the fear in me is always there, making itself known, and I’m afraid of it and what will happen tomorrow. I should just tell him everything. He’s a stranger now. If he knows, then it won’t be so bad when he turns his lip up in disgust and walks away. It’ll be worse for me if I get to know him and he finds out. I don’t think I could handle the distasteful look he’ll have at knowing the truth of my life and what I’ve been through.

So, I’ll go out with him tomorrow, and while we’re out, I’ll tell him. Get it over with. Let him know the truth. This way, he’ll be done with me, and I won’t get hurt. Not by him or anyone else.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## NINES

I clench the phone in my hand, wishing like fuck I could jump through the damn thing and be in front of Meadow. I didn't expect her to hang up on me, but the way she did has my stomach twisting in knots. Especially with the knowledge she seems to think she's worthless.

If I could find out who the hell put that thought in her, I'd gut them and send them straight to hell. Seeing her in her boutique, looking at what she's done for herself, I know she's nothing but perfection, in my opinion.

But as much as I want to go in search of her, I'll give her tonight. Come tomorrow, after the boutique closes for the day, I'll have her all to myself and I intend to show her what I think of her.

Fuck.

Just thinking about her and those lips, I want more. My cock twitches in excitement at the thought of being inside her. However, I highly doubt it'll be anytime soon, but it will happen. I just need her to trust me. I get I'm gonna have to go slow with her.

Shoving my phone in my pocket, I head into the clubhouse, not surprised to find Nerd with his dad holding one of the triplets. His woman sitting at his side holding another, and Sniper's got the third.

I grin and head in the direction of where Blow's standing with a beer in hand, watching them with his kids and Storm in his arms.

"Where you been?" Blow asks, his attention coming to me when I get close.

"Went for a ride, ended up back in town." I grin, cross my arms over my chest, and jerk my chin in the direction of Nerd. "How long ago did Nerd get in?"

“About ten minutes ago, and he’s already claimed my babies.” Storm giggles, rolling her eyes. “He’s claiming he needs his uncle time with his boys.”

“If you weren’t family, I’d say something, but I don’t even want to think it.” I snort, focusing on the two of them.

“Brother, if I knew I had the time, that shit would be happening instead of me standing here,” Blow grumbles and pulls Storm fully into his side. “Anyway, you said you ended up back in town?”

“Yeah,” I nod, “stopped by Meadow’s boutique.”

“Hold on,” Storm speaks up. “You went to Meadow’s boutique? Why?”

“Yeah, told her that I was takin’ her out tomorrow after she closes the store,” I state though that’s all I say about it. I’m not about to inform anyone about the conversation over the phone with her.

“That’s so awesome. She agreed?” Storm gives me one of those beaming smiles of hers.

“Yep,” I say and turn to glance around the clubhouse.

“Sweet,” Storm says, sounding excited.

“Storm, your kid smells,” Nerd yells, getting to his feet. “I’ll hold ‘em, feed ‘em, and all the cool uncle shit, but I’m not doing diapers.”

Chuckling, I shake my head, knowing that’s complete bullshit. From the look on Cara’s face and the way she’s rolling her eyes, he’ll probably be doing that sooner than he thinks. But who the hell knows.

Sighing, Storm steps away from Blow just as Cara stands.

“I’ll help you with them,” Cara states, cradling the baby in her arms.

“Thank you,” Storm says, taking the one Nerd’s holding and looking at Sniper. “I’ll come get him in just a moment.”

“I’ll grab him and bring him to the room,” Blow says, moving from my side to help his woman.

Storm smiles at him brightly, and I guess I can see why he's got no problem helping out when he's rewarded with his woman's smile. She might be blood, but it's not hard to miss; she's a beautiful woman. Stunning really.

I watch on as the three of them leave the room and move to the table Nerd and Sniper are taking up. As I take my seat, I hear the sound of Lucky yelling.

"Fuckin' hell, woman. Keep that fuckin' snake locked the fuck up." He's loud enough for the entire club to hear him.

And I can only guess as to what's happened. Chelsea's python got out again. That or she put him somewhere.

"Excuse me," Chelsea snaps, coming into the main room with Lucky right behind her and the damn snake hanging around her neck. "I needed to clean Sassy's cage, and she needed to be somewhere secure where I knew she would be safe."

"Fuckin' hell, that's a big ass snake," Nerd mutters.

"Yeah, well, don't be putting that thing in my goddamn room. And you can tell me how you keep getting in there in the first place," Lucky growls, planting his hands on his hips.

"I picked the lock, of course." She smiles with that knowing look. We all know her brother, Driver, taught her everything he knows. Where Storm was this club's princess growing up, Chelsea was the Colorado charter's, and the two of them have always been thick as thieves.

"You ..." Lucky stares at Chelsea as if she's got two heads before narrowing his gaze further. "You picked the lock? Are you fuckin' insane?"

"That has yet to be determined, but we'll see," she says and turns on her heel to walk away. "I'm going to put Sassy up and get going. I have work that I need to attend to."

I furrow my brow at her announcement. Chelsea manages the company that Storm signed over to the club, and she's damn good at it, but why is she going in this late?

“Why is she going into the office so late?” I ask my concern as Lucky joins us.

“What?” Lucky looks at me with a cocked brow.

“Chelsea.” I nod in the direction she went. “What is she doing going to the office this late?”

Lucky furrows his brow and shakes his head. “I don’t know what the hell that woman is up to.”

Shaking my head, I let out a harsh breath and lean forward, bracing my forearms on the table, looking in his direction. “Think you should find out?”

“I’ll look into it,” he grunts, leaning back in his seat.

“Right,” I mutter and glance up as Blow rejoins us taking a seat between Sniper and myself. “Got news,” I inform him before anyone else can speak of what I know we all want to discuss.

“What?”

“Markus called.” I go on to recap what he’d told me over the phone about the judge and DA and how Luka is also involved with making sure this all goes away. “So, fingers crossed, this shit will be over soon, and we can put it behind us.”

“Doesn’t mean we still won’t have the Crimson Blood Clan to deal with,” Blow states, tapping his fingers on the table like he’d done at the bar.

“No, but it’s one less headache on our plates,” I retort.

“Yeah.” He nods and cocks a brow. “Now, tell me what you didn’t want to say in front of Storm.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Know you, Nines, something else happened with Meadow.”

“What’s this about Meadow?” Sniper demands.

“Someone needs to explain this whole thing to me about Meadow altogether,” Nerd commands. With him being from



the original charter, he technically can demand we do as he says by the bylaws. But he's not one for causing problems, and neither are we.

Sighing, I glance around the table and meet each man's gaze. "I'm taking Meadow out on the bike tomorrow."

"And?" Sniper urges.

"Her and I exchanged numbers. She texted me right as I got to the clubhouse and tried to cancel on me. I texted back, telling her we were going out tomorrow. She said something about me finding someone better, and it pissed me off. So, I called her and told her that she wasn't worthless, and I was going to prove it to her. She then hung up on me, but I could tell she was crying."

Sniper nods and braces his arms on the table. "Rain and I went to see her. I asked her if Libby was her mom. She confirmed that she was and that she was dead."

"She tell you more?" Blow asks.

"No, she didn't seem to want to talk about any of it," Sniper answers. "Keys was able to find her birth certificate. It's got Johnathan's name on it."

"Johnathan? As in your cousin?" Nerd quirks a brow, looking at his dad with a strange expression.

"Yeah." He nods and releases a breath. "What I don't get, though, is I asked Johnathan a long time ago if he'd seen Libby or heard from her, and he said he hadn't."

"Keys looking deeper into it?" Lucky questions.

"I'll look deeper into it. He's got y'all's other shit," Nerd states, clenching his teeth. "I've got my shit, and I'll find out what's going on. This is my cousin we're talking about, and I knew nothing of her existence until Dad called. I'm not leaving until I know what the hell happened."

I nod in agreement. "I don't know what she's been through, but from the haunted look in her eyes and the way Gavril seems to protect her, she's been through the fires of hell."

“She’s gonna be hard to break through to,” Sniper mutters, his eyes locking with mine. “Not gonna be easy taking her shit on.”

“I got all the time in the world.” I shrug, knowing it’s the truth.

Meadow’s not like other women. She’s special and has a vulnerability surrounding her that makes a man want to wrap his arms around her and protect her from the world. And I intend to be that man. I just have to show her that, and hopefully, she’ll know I mean what I say and do where she’s concerned.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

## MEADOW

I can't help but keep looking at the time. It's nearly closing, and Nines is picking me up to take me out on his bike. I've already looked in the mirror over a hundred times throughout the day, hoping what I'm wearing is okay.

This morning I picked a pair of super faded jeans that have rips at the kneecaps, the bottoms flared slightly but not drastically, and they perfectly conform to my butt and hips. The top I matched to it is a simple T-shirt with wings on the back that have a quote written along the spine. The front of the tee has a small emblem on the right side of my chest. I totally loved it at first sight and ordered it online. It's nothing like what I carry in my boutique though I've thought about doing something similar. The meaning behind the sayings always means something important and meaningful. I put on combat boots that I used to wear all the time at the bar working for Gavril.

I thought the entire ensemble looked great, but that didn't mean I wasn't nervous as hell about going out with Nines. I'm scared to death, to be honest. After what happened yesterday and hanging up on him, I don't know what to expect. Men don't like to be hung up on or ignored. I just don't want to be hurt by him when he comes to pick me up, though a part of me feels he wouldn't do anything to hurt me. Not with the way he spoke.

My phone chimes, letting me know I have a message. At the same time, I hear the sounds of a rumbling coming close to the shop. I've learned since moving here those sounds are a common thing. Those of the club pass through here often, and so do others who aren't part of a club and just ride for the fun of it.

I grab my phone and glance at the screen to see an unknown number on the display. I furrow my brow, a sense of dread overcoming me as I swipe my finger across the screen and open the message to read it. Fear consumes me at the

words, and I quickly close out of the message, shaking my head. I drop the device on the counter and step away from it. But the damage is already done. The words seared in my brain. This can't be happening. After all these years. Why now?

Trembling in fear, I try to get a hold of my breathing and don't hear the bell over the door or anyone coming into the boutique.

"Hey, Buttercup."

At the voice, I scream and nearly jump out of my skin as I whirl around to face Nines, my hand clutching at my chest.

"Jesus, Meadow," he says softly, eyeing me closely. "You okay? I didn't mean to scare you."

Swallowing back the fear, I take a deep breath and nod. "I ... I'm okay." I breathe through the words getting my bearings. Nines is here. I'm safe. Gavril told me I would be safe with those within the Devil's Riot MC. That they wouldn't hurt me.

Nines steps closer and reaches out to cup the side of my face. "You're not okay, Buttercup. I can see it in your eyes you're freaked. What's got you nervous? Me?"

I lick my bottom lip and shake my head in answer. I can't tell him yet. I made the decision I was gonna tell him so he knew I wasn't worth it, but I couldn't tell him about the message. He'll want to do something, and I can't let him be a part of it all. "I swear I'm okay."

Nines holds my gaze for a long period of time, seeming to assess my response. When he nods, I know it's only to appease me for the moment. "Right, baby," he says, pulling me flush against his front. The way he tilts his head downward forces me to tilt my back to keep eye contact. My lips part on a breath when he presses his nose against my own. "Before we go, baby, I gotta kiss you." His lips brush against mine as he talks and drops his hand down to cup my rear, holding me close.

Then he does as he said and kisses me. The way he slips his tongue in my mouth has my toes curling, and desire

courses through me. I love the taste of Nines and the way he holds me to him as he deepens the kiss further. By the time he breaks away from my mouth, I'm breathless and wish he would continue to kiss me.

Nines drops his hands from my butt and takes my hand. "Come on, Buttercup, let's get out of here. You got everything set to lock up?"

"Yes." I nod. I'd already made sure everything was straight before he was due to pick me up. I didn't want him to have to stand around while I closed down the boutique for the night. I'd have been too nervous and possibly screwed things up if I hadn't.

"Right." He grins and drops my hand. "Grab your stuff."

I turn toward the counter and snag my phone and the keys before making my way to the back of the boutique to grab my crossover bag. I put my phone inside and find the key I need while heading back to Nines. "I have to set the alarm," I announce, motioning toward the door.

Nodding, Nines heads for the door and stops to wait for me. I set the alarm and follow him outside into the cooling evening. I lock the door and shove the keys into my purse. "Ready."

I barely get the word out before Nines retakes my hand and guides me to his bike.

"Time to ride, baby," he says and hands me a black helmet with a tinted shield. On the sides, there's purple writing. Upon closer look, my breath catches as I read the simple word 'Buttercup'. "Got this for you today."

"Thank you." Slowly, I lift my gaze to meet his.

"Don't thank me, Meadow. You're on the bike, I want you safe." Taking the helmet back, he lifts it up and over my head. With easy movements, Nines shows me how to put the helmet on and tightens the straps. A few moments later, he moves to straddle his bike and points to a peg. "Foot here, baby, and swing a leg over."

I nod and put a foot on the peg. I go to swing a leg over and fumble somewhat until I put my hands on Nines's shoulder and use him to balance myself as I do as he told me. Finally, sitting behind him, I put my hands at his waist and wait for him to do whatever he has to do next. Instead of turning the bike on, though, Nines reaches backward, grips my butt without looking back, and pulls me flush against his back, then grabs my arms and wraps them fully around him. Giving my hands a squeeze, he cocks his head to the side.

"You always hold tight, baby."

"Okay."

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Nines pats my hands and motions for me to climb off. I do so and nearly fall on my ass due to my legs feeling wobbly. If not for Nines, I would have. With a hand still holding my waist, he climbs off and helps me with my helmet. The instant the thing clears my head, Nines reaches up and tangles his fingers in my hair.

"You enjoy your first ride, Buttercup?"

I don't miss the hint of amusement in his voice, but I don't care. "It was amazing."

"It's just the beginning," he says, releasing my hair only to wrap his arm around my shoulders and guide me into the building. "First, though, we're gonna go grab some food. This place has the best burgers and fries you'll ever find."

My stomach takes the opportunity to let itself be known and remind me that I hadn't eaten. It's loud enough for Nines to hear and, of course, to my dismay, he chuckles.

"Sounds like your stomach agrees with me."

"Um, I kind of forgot to eat," I murmur, feeling my cheeks heat.

"Then we better get inside and get you fed." Nines grins and opens the door for me to step through.

The inside looks like a typical bar. Pool tables. A dart board. A few tables scattered around. The bar top lining the side with a man standing behind it, taking care of a customer. He looks up, and I guess he knows Nines because he grins.

“Been a long time, Nines,” he says in greeting.

“Jacks,” Nines returns chuckling and ushers me to a table. I guess we’re not sitting at the bar. This works since I don’t want others to overhear what I intend to tell Nines. “Can I get two beers and put in for the special?” Nines calls over his shoulder.

“You got it,” Jacks yells back.

“Have a seat, Buttercup.” Nines pulls out one of the high-top chairs for me and touches my waist as I do as he says.

I watch as Nines takes a seat next to me with his back to the wall. Gavril once told me, a man always keeps his back to the wall and his eyes open at all times. You can’t be prepared for what’s to come if you’re not paying attention to your surroundings.

Nines scans the bar before bringing his gaze to mine and smiles, taking one of my hands in his.

“What’s the special?” I blurt the question, not meaning to ask, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“It’s a burger and fries,” he answers as Jacks sets two beers on the table.

“Best burger you’ll ever have,” Jacks adds and holds a hand out in my direction. “I’m Jacks, owner of this place.”

I take his hand and smile at him. “I’m Meadow.”

Jacks looks to Nines, cocking his brow. “She your ol’ lady?”

“Old lady? I’m not old.”

“Yeah, Jacks, she’s mine. Make sure to spread the word,” Nines answers him, ignoring my comment about them calling me old. But then again, he surprises the hell out of me by calling me his.



“Will do,” Jacks says, rapping his knuckles on the table. “I better get back to the bar. Those burgers will be out soon. Holler if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Jacks. Appreciate it.” Nodding, Nines brings his gaze back to mine.

“What does old lady mean?” I ask without thinking.

“Ol’ lady, not old. It’s what we call our women. The title holds a great deal of weight in the clubs and those associated within. You’re an ol’ lady and no one fucks with you without repercussions from the members of the club and that woman’s ol’ man,” he explains.

“Oh, okay, but he asked if I’m yours, and I’m not.”

“Buttercup, let me explain a few things to you,” he says, releasing my hand to brush my cheek, then sliding his fingers down my jawline and cupping the back of my neck. “I’m not a man who doesn’t know when he sees something he wants. I’m also not a man who can’t tell when a good woman is in front of him and worth claiming. We might not know each other. But we’re gonna rectify that. We’ll take things at your speed on certain things and mine on other things. But I’ll tell you now, I’m not giving up on what we can have.”

“You won’t think that when I tell you the truth about who I am,” I whisper and drop my gaze to the table. I reach for my beer and lift it to my lips. I down half of it and look to Nines once more. “My life has been nothing but hell. From my first memory to the time I escaped the monster who raised me.”

“Meadow,” Nines murmurs, but I shake my head, stopping him.

“No, you need to know this. I told myself I was going to tell you my story so you would know what you’re getting into with me. Or so you can change your mind because you’ll see I’m not worth it and that I’m nothing but a disgrace,” I state and look away from him to glance around the bar to get my bearings for what I’m about to do. Thankfully, Nines doesn’t say anything further, and when I bring my gaze back to his,

he's staring at me oddly. I don't know how to read his expression and not sure if I want to.

“My mother died when I was a kid, though I've always told myself she simply left me because I don't like to admit the truth. The monster who raised me killed her. He beat her and always blamed me for it. That or he would inject her with a drug and make her compliant to do as he wished. He made her have sex with him and his friends.”

“Jesus.”

I ignore Nines's muttering and keep going. “The older I got, the worse things became. My dad molested me for as long as I can remember. Before school. After school. The middle of the night. Whenever he wanted to touch me, he did. When I was old enough to work, he had me working at his shop and would do things there as well. I won't go into detail. You can probably figure out what all happened. But it wasn't until my eighteenth birthday that I realized there were more monsters out there. See, my dad let me date this guy. I didn't know that he was in on whatever vile things my dad was a part of, but that day I learned because my ex-boyfriend raped me right there while my dad watched on while touching himself.”

“Fuck, Meadow,” Nines growls, his hand at my neck drops away as he shakes his head and releases a harsh breath.

“I told you I wasn't worth it, and now you know. That's not even my whole story. That's just the synopsis of what I've lived through.”

“Meadow, look at me,” Nines commands, gripping my chin, forcing me to do as he says. When my eyes lock with his, I don't miss the fire burning in his beautiful eyes. “That's the last time you call yourself worthless. Yeah, you've lived through hell. You got dealt a shit hand in life, but you gotta get this, baby, you've taken that shit and made something beautiful with your life out of it. If anything, you're one hell of a woman to be able to live through that and still escape it intact.”

“I'm not,” I whisper. A single tear slips and rolls down my cheek.

“Might not see it that way, but you will,” he declares and releases my chin to palm the side of my face. “I’ll prove it to you, and I’ll also tell you, you’re not the only one with demons. We’ll get into that another day. Tonight is about us having a good night and getting to know each other. We’ve had the heavy shit, now let’s enjoy the rest of it with good food, some beer, and I’ll take you for another ride on the bike.”

My breath catches in my lungs, and I’m unsure if I can breathe properly even if I want to. I’ve just told Nines about my past and yet he’s not looking at me in disgust. A part of me wants to believe, but another part, the one that fears the world is scared it’s all a game and he’ll cast me to the side when I least expect it.

“I did like riding the bike,” I admit, shoving my thoughts to the back of my mind.

“Good.” He grins. “You’ll be on it every chance I get to put you there.”

Before I can answer him, two plates are set in front of us. I glance down, and my eyes widen at the sight of the food piled onto the plates. This is definitely a lot of food.

I snag a fry and bring it to my lips. On the first bite, I moan at how good it tastes. Nines wasn’t kidding about it being good.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## NINES

I walk down the hall from my room in the clubhouse, heading for the main room to get a cup of coffee. Anger courses through my veins as I remember Meadow's words about the past she's endured. It pisses me off that she lived through that. It took a hell of a lot to keep me from losing my shit in front of her, but regardless of what she thinks, what she did last night was give me a gift by trusting me enough to tell me the horrors of her past.

The rest of the evening, I made sure to make her comfortable. We enjoyed our burgers and fries. Her moans went straight to my dick, and I don't think I've been jealous of a damn food before in my life. After eating we'd spend some time at the bar, I had one more beer while she had two. I told her about some of the brothers within the club and the shit we've all gotten into. I also told her about the pranks Chelsea plays. I wasn't surprised when she tells me about mousetraps and something the other woman was planning. I at least knew to watch out for what was coming for whatever person fucked with Chelsea.

Making it to the main room, I go straight to the coffee pot and pour myself a mug. I didn't drop Meadow off until well after three this morning. I should feel guilty for keeping her out so late, but I don't regret spending so much time with her. I wanted to kiss her again, however, I figured I'd wait until I saw her again later today. There's no way I wasn't gonna see her. I simply was giving her a reprieve after all the shit she'd given me.

"You hear me, Nines?"

I lift my gaze at the voice pulling me from my thoughts to find Blow, Nerd, Lucky, and Sniper all sitting at the bar, mugs in their hands. I look to Blow and finally acknowledge him. "Sorry, still waking up," I say and lift the mug in salute to him before bringing it to my lips, downing a good amount.

“I asked how last night went with Meadow, but I’m guessing from your zoning out that it went okay,” Blow states.

I nod and drink some more of my coffee before responding. “Took her to ‘The Bender’,” I announce and move to lean against the bar across from Blow and glance at the others. “Not gonna repeat what she said, but we had only one hitch in the night. She thought if she told me her story, well a summarization of her past, I’d turn my back on her.” I shake my head, her story on replay in my head.

“And are you turning your back on her?” Nerd demands, narrowing his eyes.

“Fuck no,” I growl, shooting the other man a glare of my own. “After last night, I’m even more determined than I already was. That woman is mine, and I’ll be damned if I let anything else get in the way of it. Not even her past. Meadow’s been through hell, and I think she’s never had anyone except for Gavril protect her.”

“Did she say anything about Libby?” Sniper asks.

Sighing, I shake my head. “Yeah, brother, she did, but I can’t tell you what that is. I’m not trying to disrespect you by keeping it to myself. If it wasn’t for the fact Meadow trusted me with what she gave me, I’d tell ya.”

“Fuck,” Blow mutters, understanding what I’m saying without saying it. He knows that it’s got to be bad.

“Shit, it’s worse than I thought,” Sniper growls, balling his hands into fists in front of him. “You’d tell me if it wasn’t.”

Seems Sniper knows me just as well as Blow.

“Yeah, Sniper, I would, but this is Meadow’s story, and I’m not about to disrespect her by telling others.”

“I get it,” Sniper mutters, holding my gaze. “And I respect what you’re doing.”

“I’ve been digging,” Nerd speaks up. “Found out she left home, up and disappeared when she was eighteen. No one reported her missing.”

*Go figure. There's no way they'd report her missing. Not with what Meadow told me.*

“Find anything on why she disappeared?” Lucky asks.

“Nothing,” Nerd grunts and takes a sip of his coffee. “Seems she didn’t have any friends. She was a recluse. Though she had a boyfriend. Name’s Johnny and he’s got some ties that don’t sit well with me. Makes me wonder if she’s hiding because of him.”

“You got Johnny’s last name?” I demand, my lip curling in disgust at the mention of the motherfucker.

Nerd’s gaze comes to mine and narrows as he takes in the anger rolling off me. “I’m taking it that he’s definitely a part of her past that marked her.”

“Can’t confirm that for you, but if I get my hands on the motherfucker, I’ll rip his dick off and make him swallow it,” I snarl, knowing I gave away something I shouldn’t have. However, when it comes to what the bastard did to my sweet Meadow, I want his blood on my hands.

My phone beeps in my pocket, and I pull it out to find a message from Meadow. I’d told her when I dropped her off that she was to let me know when she got up this morning.

**Meadow:** I’m up.

I grin at the message all but hearing her sarcasm in the two simple words.

**Me:** Good. You sleep okay?

**Meadow:** I suppose. Gotta get to the boutique and open up. Have to finish a dress today.

**Me:** Got it. See you in a bit. We’re having dinner tonight again.

I shove my phone back in my pocket and ignore the message I’m sure she’s sent to try and tell me she couldn’t. But she’ll learn when I get to the boutique in a couple hours that I’m serious. I told her I’d prove it to her, and that’s what I’m doing.

“Looks like Nines is a goner.” Lucky smirks, leaning back in his chair.

At the smug look on his face, I grin myself and cock a brow. “By chance, you find any mousetraps in your room?”

Blow chuckles, and Nerd outright laughs at my comment.

“What the fuck do you know about it?” Lucky loses the smirk and narrows his gaze on me. “You weren’t here for that shit.”

Snorting, I shake my head. “So, I’m taking I missed the show?”

“Yeah, you can say that,” Blow says. “He and Stacy had a run-in with some mousetraps. Or I should say Stacy’s tits met the mousetraps.”

“And Stacy about bit my dick off while suckin’ me off,” Lucky grumbles. “That ain’t even the worst of it.”

“Having a bitch about to bite my dick off seems intense. What could be worse?” I cock a brow and try my best not to laugh in my brother’s face.

“Try going to your room to crash and lay down only to find out the entire bed is coated in molasses. You try getting that shit off your dick that’s already throbbing. Not fun having to scrub an aching dick.”

“You and that dick of yours,” Blow snorts. “We already know you and your dick can’t keep from getting in trouble.”

“Yeah, well, next time I see Chelsea, her ass is mine. I’m sick of her fuckin’ with my dick,” Lucky grumbles.

“Speaking of Chelsea.” Sniper clears his throat. “Has anyone seen her since she left yesterday evening?”

“Didn’t see her car when I got in,” I state, furrowing my brow. “Why?”

“Don’t know, but I think something’s going on with her. No matter her pranks, she’s got something going on in that head of hers, and she’s not sharing. Rain mentioned it to me.”



I furrow my brow and look at Lucky. “Did you see her last night after the prank she pulled?”

“No,” he mutters and seems to grow irritated by this. “I’ll look into it and find out what the fuck is going on.”

“Let me know when you do,” Blow grumbles. “Evidently, she’s dodging Grinder’s and Driver’s phone calls.”

“You got it.” Lucky taps the bar top with his knuckles and heads off toward the main doors.

“Those two need to get their heads out of their asses and just get together,” Nerd remarks.

“Couldn’t agree more,” I say in agreement as I lift the mug to my lips and finish off the rest of my coffee. “I better get going myself. Seems I’ve got a woman who forgets to feed herself while she’s working.”

“Let us know how she’s doing. I want to meet her soon, so see if you can’t get her to come to the clubhouse,” Nerd mutters, holding my gaze.

“Will do.” I give him a knowing look and head out myself.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## MEADOW

My phone chimes for a third time this morning, indicating a phone call. One I ignore. I've ignored it all morning after my initial text with Nines. Since then, the only one to call is the unknown number that I refuse to answer. The call ends, and I pick my phone up and turn the ringer off altogether. Because of the calls I've been getting today, I'm starting to freak out and don't know what to do.

Should I call Gavril? Tell him what's going on?

Go to the club? Let them help me?

Run away?

I feel that if I were even to attempt that, Nines would find me and bring me back.

Thinking of Nines, I can't help but remember last night and the amazing time I had with him. Other than touching my hand and brushing his fingers along my cheek, he didn't touch me as I thought he would. A part of me felt regret at the fact he didn't kiss me. Another part feels a bit of reprieve after what I'd shared with him.

One thing I know for sure is that I want him to kiss me again. Maybe more. My body feels warm, and between my legs aches for a touch I need only from him. This feeling though scares me. More than it should, but I can't help but think about his hands on me. His lips touching mine, and his hands holding me to him. God knows I want nothing more than to feel him against me and that really does make me nervous.

Leaving my phone on the counter, I head back to where I'm finishing up the dress I'd been working on. Since moving here, I've had women coming in here and putting in orders for custom dresses, and I love creating new designs set just for one person.

I close my eyes, suck in a breath, and pick up the band I use to hold my needles and wrap it around my wrist. I grab the thread and get back to work on finishing with the beads and sequins. Each part of the dress is hand stitched by me. I take pride in my hard work and sometimes pour blood over each article of clothing I create.

I lose track of time and barely hear the sound of the bell over the door chime. I lift my head and glance at the man coming my way. My heart skips a beat at the sight of him. I find it mysterious how excited I am to see this man after such a short amount of time.

“Hey, Buttercup.” He grins and moves in my direction, holding a bag up. “Brought us lunch.”

I barely get to my feet before Nines wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me flush against his chest.

I part my lips to say something, but he doesn't give me the chance. This is because his mouth is on mine, and his tongue slips inside and devours me with every bit of the passion I felt the first time he kissed me. If not more.

By the time he lifts his lips from mine, I can barely breathe from panting for more.

“Fuckin' love the taste of your mouth, baby,” he says, his voice raspy and all sexy-like.

I don't think anyone could sound as good as he does when he talks. For that matter, he's the hottest guy I've ever met in my life.

“Ugh...” I clear my throat and press my hands against his chest, though I don't actually push away from him. “You said lunch?”

Nines grins and reaches up to stroke the backs of his fingers over my cheek. “Yeah, lunch,” he says, his lips coming back to mine. “After, I figure I might hang with you the rest of the day.”

“You want to hang out in a woman's boutique?”

“When it comes with you being here, then yeah. Otherwise, you wouldn’t catch me anywhere near a place like this. Not my style.”

I can’t help but giggle at the way he wags his brows at the last part of his statement. “I can see that,” I say and take in what he’s wearing. Much like the other times I’ve seen him, he’s in his usual jeans and tee with his cut over it. And that hat he’s got on.

Nines steps away and moves to the counter, sets the food bag on it, and lifts my phone that was lighting up with a phone call. “Unknown number callin’ you, want me to answer?”

“No,” I say a little too quickly and move to snatch the phone from his hands, but he holds it out of my reach.

“You wanna tell me who this caller is?” he asks, eyes on me.

“It’s no one, but I don’t want you answering it either,” I snap in response and press myself into him, stretching to get my phone.

I don’t even realize I’m all but rubbing up on Nines in the process. That is, I don’t recognize this until Nines takes the opportunity to drop my phone back down and wrap both arms around my waist to hold me against his lower half.

“Fuck, baby,” he growls and grinds himself against me. “We’ll get to the phone call in a second, but I’ve gotta get rid of this first so I can focus on something other than getting my dick inside you.”

“You want to ...” I can’t even say the words, but I feel my cheeks heating as I lick my lips nervously. I wouldn’t mind at all. When it comes to him, I feel safe and know he wouldn’t hurt me. He’s proven that in the short amount of time I’ve known him.

“Meadow, don’t ask me something like that when I know you ain’t ready to take it there.”

I narrow my eyes and glare at him as I push away. Now, that little comment pisses me off. How does he know I’m not ready? “Are you a mind reader now? Can you tell what’s on

my mind? Because I'll tell you, that's definitely not it. You want to say I'm not ready, that I don't want you inside me. But you can't know that. If you actually knew what was on my mind, you'd know that I want nothing more than for you to take me. Show me what it can be like and not have it hurt. I want that and more. But like you said, 'You know'. Well, let me tell you, you don't know what I'm thinking."

Breathing heavily from my rant, I miss the change in Nines and the fact he's looking at me with eyes filled with lust.

"Our lunch plans just changed, Buttercup." The harsh tone of his voice sends a shiver down my spine as he lets me go and moves to the door. He switches the sign over to 'closed' and locks the door. My eyes stay glued to his every movement as he stalks back toward me, his gaze holding mine. Taking my hand, he leads me backward into the dressing area where I also have a couch and ottoman. Granted, the only times either piece of furniture have been sat on is when I'm meeting with a client to go over details of what they ordered.

Nines takes a seat in the middle of the couch and moves me to stand in front of him. He doesn't say a word as he runs his hands over my hips and lower stomach as he lifts his gaze to mine. "Not gonna fuck you here, but I'm going to ease some of what you're feeling right now."

Oh my. Lowering his hands down farther until he's able to grip the bottom of my corduroy skirt, he jerks it up over my hips. His eyes drop down to take in my panties, black lace barely covering my mound.

"Fuck, Meadow, you're killing me," he groans and rubs his hands against my inner thighs and nods. "Lay back on the ottoman."

My breath catches in my chest as Nines helps me. The moment my back hits the ottoman, Nines moves to drop down on the floor, his body separating my legs.

"At any time, baby, you need me to stop, you tell me, okay?"

“Okay.” I nod and lean on my elbows to watch him as he slides his fingers along my inner thighs.

I tremble ever so slightly at the feel of his fingers hooking in my panties and his breath blowing across my apex. Then when his tongue swipes along the edges, I nearly come out of my skin, it feels so good.

I close my eyes and just feel as Nines takes his time with my pussy. Never have I known something so erotic. I’ve read about it in my books but didn’t think I’d ever enjoy it. However, having this beautiful man’s mouth on me, his fingers pressing inside me. It’s a different story altogether.

The feel of Nines’s mouth and touch drives me insane with how he takes his time in devouring me. He takes me with his fingers and sucks my clit, nipping at the little bud.

My world shatters when he moves farther down and thrust his tongue inside my pussy and uses his fingers to hit just the right spots.

“Nines,” I cry out, my eyes opening as my orgasm washes over me. My gaze finds Nines and holds his as he continues to use his mouth to devour me.

Slowly, he pulls away and replaces my panties. Nines helps me sit up and lifts me into his lap when he moves to the couch.

“Swear to fuck, Buttercup, I think I’ll become addicted to that pussy of yours. Love the taste of you.”

I blush and bury my face in his neck. “What about you?” I ask feeling his shaft pressing against his jeans.

“Don’t worry about me. It’ll go down.”

I lift my head and meet his gaze, my brows creasing. “But you ... it’s not fair that I ...”

Nines grins and reaches up to cup either side of my face. “Meadow, not everything is about fuckin’.”

“But ...”

“No buts,” he says, stroking my cheek. “Something you gotta know about me, baby, is that I don’t take shit from anyone. And when I want something, I go for it. Do I want to fuck you? Fuck yes, I do, and I will, but not right now. Not at your work. Eventually, I will, however, it ain’t gonna be the first time I’m inside you. Me tasting that pussy of yours is definitely worth the blue balls I’m surely gonna have.” He gives me that smirk of his and drops his hands to rub them on either side of my thighs. “Now we’re gonna get our food, eat, and you can tell me about the unknown caller. Don’t think I didn’t miss the panic in your eyes at my asking you about it.”

Damn. I was hoping he’d forget about that.

Either way, Nines has to be the most amazing man I’ve ever met and I’m afraid I’m falling for him, even in the very short amount of time I’ve known him.

What was that saying my mom used to tell me a long time ago? The heart wants what the heart wants and knows it at first sight. Time holds no bars against what is fated and what will be.

I never understood what she meant considering she was with a monster and allowed him to be so cruel, and in the end, he took the last of her soul and ended her life. However, I somewhat get it now, and I hope I’m making the right choice in trusting myself to him.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## NINES

“What’s your real name?” Meadow asks and takes a bite of the pasta I’d brought for her from the local Italian restaurant down the road.

Chewing the food in my mouth, I swallow and answer, “Brick Tucker.”

“How did you get the name Nines?”

Grinning, I fork up a bit more of my own pasta. “My dad, Baller, he gave it to me when I was a teenager. He taught me to play poker and somehow, I always ended up getting a pair of nines. He thought it was funny and started calling me Nines.”

“Where is he? Your dad, I mean?”

“He died a while ago,” I answer, holding her gaze. “Cancer.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she whispers sincerely.

“Don’t apologize, baby.” I don’t want to be talking about this. I haven’t spoken about my dad with anyone and the way I acted after he passed away. When it comes to Meadow, however, I find myself wanting to tell her. “My dad was a good man. Good president of our club. He raised me himself and was always there for me.” I stop to clear my throat and look away. “After he died, I guess you can say I lost my way. I fucked up, pissed at the world for taking my dad from me. In the end, the club forced me to become a Nomad for a while. I did what I had to do to get my head straight again. Finally, I did that and realized how fucked up I was to those around me.”

“If your dad was the President of your club, weren’t you supposed to as well?” she asks.

“Bylaws for the Devil’s Riot MC say the club votes who the president is when something happens to the one holding the patch or they step down,” I answer and look back to her.

“That’s where I lost my way. I wanted to follow in my father’s footsteps, and on his deathbed, he told those within the club he wanted it voted on that Blow become the Prez and me the VP. I got pissed about it and, as I said, I fucked up.”

“I can understand your anger.” To my surprise, Meadow sets her food down and moves to curl her hands around my neck. “You lost your person. The man you thought would always be there for you. You had to grieve and didn’t know how when all you ever wanted was to be just like him. You were in the dark and lost to the world.”

Fuck me.

How the hell is it this woman can understand something so easily? I don’t deserve her. Not by a long shot, but at this moment, I know she’s got me. I already intended for her to be mine. Now, she’s more than that. She’s becoming my heart, and that’s something I never expected anyone ever to get their hands on.

I drop the fork in my hand into the container and set it on the counter next to us. Doing the same with Meadow’s, I hold her gaze as I reach out, tangle both hands in her hair, and close the distance between us. Meadow’s head tips back in order to keep our eyes locked with each other’s. I use my thumb to stroke her cheek and watch as her lips part.

“You’re something else. You know that?” I rasp.

“No, I didn’t know that,” she whispers, her words no more than a breath.

Leaning in, I claim her mouth with mine, keeping the kiss light. I don’t think I could do it any other way right now. Not after earlier. Fuck, the taste of her still fills my senses, and I want more. She surprised the fuck out of me when I found her pussy bare. I figured she wouldn’t do something so erotic with what she’d been through in life, and fuck if I didn’t find it hot. Then the way she lit up for me, damn, Meadow was beautiful as she came, giving me her release.

The sound of the bell over the door rings, breaking the moment and I pull away dropping my hands from her hair.

“We’ll finish this later.”

Meadow nods, licks her lips, and clears her throat as she turns her attention to the customer who’d come in the boutique.

While she helps the woman, I grab her phone off the counter and open the call log to find the ‘Unknown Caller’ had called multiple times. More than multiple. There’s got to be fifteen calls just this morning. I pull my own phone out of my pocket, pull up Nerd’s number, and ask him to look into Meadow’s phone, see if he can’t track the number.

It’s highly unlikely, but when it comes to Nerd, you can never be certain. The fucker is smart as hell and knows his way around electronics like no one else I know. Well, besides Keys, Cy, Gadget, and Flicker. I can’t say the four of them couldn’t do the damn job of getting to the bottom of who’s behind the calls. Keys might be our techy at the club, like Cy is for Hammer’s charter, Gadget is for Twister’s charter, and Flicker is for Grinder’s, but I’m sure Nerd would be pissed if anyone else handled it but him. They’re all damn good at what they do, and I swear, you put them all in a room together, nothing good can come of it. Well, not for those outside the club that fuck with us.

Nerd texts back that he’ll let me know when he’s got something. I shoot him one back, thanking him, before putting Meadow’s phone back down and picking my container up. I watch as she works while I finish my food. There’s a lot the two of us need to deal with, and I intend to do that soon. She talked to me, opened up about shit in her life, and now, I need to do the same. Meadow deserves to know what the hell’s been going on lately, so no one catches her off guard with the bullshit the cops are trying to pull with me. If I want something with her, then she needs to know exactly who I am. Hopefully, she’ll be able to understand that I didn’t rape some bitch to get my rocks off.

I’ll wait until she closes, then take her to my place. No one can disturb us there, and after we talk, I’ll take her to my bed and finish what we started earlier.

My cock twitches at the idea. Hell, the damn thing hasn't stopped throbbing since I kissed her earlier. But I'll suffer through knowing what will happen when I finally get inside her. I'll get to watch as she lights up and goes wild for me. And I know she'll go wild beneath me. I just fucking know it.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## MEADOW

“Where are we?” I ask, taking my helmet off as Nines switches off his bike and puts the kickstand down.

“My place,” he answers and taps my leg.

“Your place,” I repeat but climb off, handing him the helmet. He places it over one of the handlebars and swings a leg over, coming to his full height. “Why are we at your place?”

Nines pulls me into him, his hands cupping my rear. “I want us not to be interrupted by anything. No noises outside of nature or us.”

I stare at him in surprise, and I have to admit he’s definitely not going to get any type of sounds out here but the crickets and whatnot because there’s nothing around us. Nines lives in the middle of nowhere. Okay, that might not be completely true, but his house is set back away from the road quite a bit, with a row of trees in front of it blocking the view. It’s honestly beautiful out here.

“Come on, let’s get inside,” he says, stepping back to take my hand and guide me into his place. He doesn’t drop my hand until we hit the kitchen, and he goes to the fridge, opens it, and pulls out two beers. Twisting the caps off, he hands me one and takes a gulp of his own. I follow suit, but I only take a sip of mine as I watch him.

“Is everything okay?” I finally ask, seeing the tension building in him. It’s been that way since our moment was broken at lunchtime, and I don’t know what to think about it.

“Yeah.” Nines downs the rest of his beer and tosses the empty into the can before getting another. He takes the cap off it, grabs my hand, pulls me from the kitchen to his open space living area, and settles me on his couch with him next to me.

“You sure, you’re okay?”

With the way he’s staring at me, I don’t know if he is.

“You opened up to me the other night and gave me a lot of bad shit you’ve dealt with,” he starts, and I find it’s my turn to tense up at the turn of this conversation. “I told you about my dad earlier, but I want to give you something else. It’s bullshit, but you need to hear it from me before you hear it from someone else.”

“What is it?” I furrow my brow in confusion.

“Not long ago, I was arrested for rape and assault of a minor.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper and shift to face him fully.

Nines is saying he was charged with raping a minor and assaulting this person. Have I been wrong about him? No. I can’t be. I know monsters have a way of hiding behind kindness, but the way he is with me is different. He wouldn’t do something so vile to a woman. Not with how he acts around me. He’s possessive and protective. I saw it in his eyes when I told him about what I’d been through. If he were the type of man to rape someone, he’d have taken advantage of me already. Instead, he’s been nothing but sweet and genuine.

“I didn’t do that shit,” he scoffs, his lip curling in disgust. “Do I look like I need to force myself on a woman?”

“No.” I shake my head at his question. “But beauty doesn’t mean everything.” I swallow nervously, hoping he’ll understand. I stare into his eyes and go on. “However, in the short time I’ve been around you, I don’t think that’s something you would do. I don’t see the monster in you that is in the vile men who do that sort of thing.”

Nines jerks back slightly and stares at me as if I have two heads. “You know, Meadow, you fuckin’ surprise me more every day.”

“I’m surprising myself as well.” I give Nines a small smile and nod. “Go ahead and tell me what happened.”

Nines shakes his head, leans into the back of the couch, puts his feet on the coffee table, and starts talking. He tells me about the arrest and going to jail. About his lawyer doing everything to get the charges dropped, and that one of the cops



let them in on the fact it was all bullshit. He doesn't stop talking until he gets everything out.

When he finishes, he doesn't look at me, instead, he stares up at the ceiling. I don't miss the misery on his face. This man has been through hell, and he doesn't deserve it.

I twist to set my beer on the end table sitting next to the couch and turn back to Nines. I crawl across the short distance and straddle his lap. I've never felt so brazen in my life. Not even at the boutique earlier when he had his mouth on me. I grasp both sides of his face and force him to meet my gaze. Staring into the depths of his eyes, I know there's nothing I can do to take away what he's dealing with, but I can help him through it, and I want to.

Lowering my head, I lean in and press my lips to his for the first time. Never have I been the one to kiss anyone. It's always been them who started it, not that anyone had kissed me since Johnny, and that's something I don't want to think about.

Nines deepens the kiss, and everything seems to implode around us. My shirt is quickly stripped, along with my bra. Next, I find myself lowered to the couch, and Nines rips his lips from mine to kiss his way down until he's sucking one nipple in his mouth while massaging the other. I arch my back, wanting more of his touch as his tongue flicks across the bud and he nips at the tight tip.

After a while, Nines switches to my other nipple and continues to massage the one he left.

God, it feels so good.

"Nines," I moan, cupping the back of his head, and holding him to me.

Nines jerks his head up, his eyes leveling on me. "Want you using my real name, baby. My mouth on you, I want to hear you saying my name. My cock inside you, same thing. I'm not Nines to you, got me?"

I nod, totally okay with what he's saying. I love his name and have no problem calling him Brick.

“Good,” he says, getting to his feet.

I open my mouth to ask what he’s doing but don’t get the chance. This was due to him scooping me up and tossing me over his shoulder. “Brick,” I gasp when I find myself moving.

“Not fuckin’ you on the couch, baby,” he says, using his fingers to run up the inner part of my thighs. “Maybe the second or third time, but not the first.”

Oh my.

Not even a moment later, I find myself flying through the air and landing with a bounce on a plush mattress. I stare up at Nines and watch as he shrugs his cut off and sets it on the nightstand. His eyes stay locked on mine as he yanks his shirt over his head and toes off his boots. Next, he unbuckles his belt and shoves his jeans down his legs. I’m surprised to find he’s not wearing any boxers.

I’ll have to ask him later if he always goes commando.

Nines steps closer to the bed, grips both my legs, and gently pushes them apart in order for him to move between them.

“I’m gonna enjoy the taste of you again, Buttercup, then after, I’m gonna sink so deep inside you, neither of us will know where one starts and the other ends. You good with that?”

“Yes.” My answer is no more than a breath.

“Good, baby,” he says and bends down to press a kiss to my lips. His hands move up my thighs, and he grips the bottom of my skirt and pulls my skirt and panties at the same time.

“Brick,” I moan as he kisses his way down, driving me nuts with his touch. I didn’t know what to expect, well, somewhat after earlier, but it was nothing like this.

Nines grips my hips and dives in. His mouth latches on, and I instantly gasp due to the sheer pleasure of him devouring me in a way I’ve only ever read about. It doesn’t take long before he has me panting and crying out as my release washes

through me. Still, he doesn't relent in his lashes with the flick of his tongue. Instead, his fingers join in, and everything goes from pleasure to completely mind-blowing as a second orgasm sends waves of uncontrollable desire throughout my body. My entire body tingles at the sensations, and I cry out at the loss of Nines when he moves away.

But he doesn't leave me for long. Quickly, he moves over me and lines himself with my entrance.

"Fuckin' love the taste of your pussy, baby," he groans and slips an inch inside. "Gonna fuckin' love having my dick inside you just as much."

"Brick," I moan, arching enough that I take more of his cock inside me and gasp. "It feels so good. More. Brick, give me more."

"Hold on, Meadow, let me take this slow." He groans and slips out, only to shove forward another inch.

"No." I shake my head and dig my nails into his shoulders. "I want you to take me the way you would any other time. I want you hard, rough, fast, however you want to give it, just fuck me, Brick. I want you. You, for who you are ..."

I scream out as Nines slams inside me and does as I demand. He doesn't stop or let up on his thrusts. Nines takes me with such shameless passion. He pumps himself inside like a feral beast searching for something only I can give him. It's a beautiful sight, and I'm loving every moment of it.

Nines grips my legs, throws them over his shoulders, and grabs hold of my hips. His movements become harder, and with the new positioning, his cock feels deeper as it hits just the right spot. My release washes over me, and I scream his name at the blinding pleasure that takes hold and doesn't let go. It's as if I'm staying in the bliss of erotica before Nines joins me, roaring my name loud enough that I'm sure the animals in the woods surrounding the house heard him.

"Fuck me, baby, I knew you'd light up for me, but I didn't know it would be so damn good," Nines says, breathing raggedly.

“Mhmm, I didn’t think it would be like that either,” I admit, drawing my bottom lip between my teeth.

Nines rolls off and takes me with him. Laying on his back, me on top, he cups the side of my face. “Full of surprises, Buttercup,” he murmurs and leans up as he pulls my head down. Our lips touch, and I feel him twitching inside me. I don’t know how he moved us with him still inside me. For that matter, how can he still be hard after his orgasm? I thought men needed time to recoup before they could go again. But it seems that’s not the case for Nines as he starts moving again.

Looks like he’s gonna do as I said and take me as he wants.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NINES

Fuck me.

Never in my life have I experienced anything like I do with Meadow. She's beautiful, and the way she lit up for me last night ... fuck ... if she didn't rock my world.

After I took her a second time, I scooped her exhausted body off the bed, carried her to the bathroom, where I drew us a bath in the whirlpool tub I have, and held her to me as her muscles soaked in the warmth of the water. I knew she wasn't technically a virgin, but what she went through doesn't count. Besides that, she hadn't had any sexual experience since then, her body is probably still sore. I'll have to take it easy with her today. I don't want her overdoing it and then ending up hurting.

Yesterday, leaving the boutique, I broke one of my rules and that was letting her on my bike without covering skin, but I didn't want to leave her to get my truck and there was no way I wasn't going straight from there to my house. I wasn't going to go anywhere else.

Now, I've got to figure out a way to make it so I can have her with me all day and her not worry about the boutique and whatever she's got to do. I plan to take her to the clubhouse and then afterward take her for a ride, a long ride. First, though, I've got to get her something to wear. I might have broken my rule once, but I'm not about to do it again.

"Morning."

I glance over from where I'm standing on the back porch staring at nothing in particular, to my woman wearing one of my tees in the doorway.

"Hey, Buttercup." I turn fully to her. "You want coffee?"

"Please." Meadow sighs.

Grinning, I close the distance between us, wrap an arm around her waist, and lean down to press a kiss to her pouty

lips. “Coming right up, baby,” I murmur, no more than a breath away from her mouth. I’d like nothing more than to kiss her fully and take her right here, right now, but I’ve got to see how she’s feeling first. I’m not gonna be an asshole to her and think about my own needs.

I pour her a cup and hand it to her. “Do you use milk? Cream? Sugar?”

“No, black is fine.”

“You sleep okay?” I ask, leaning against the counter.

“It was heaven.”

“Good,” I say. “You have to open today?”

“No, I don’t have to. I honestly want to look for someone to work part-time to give me a break.”

“Why don’t you talk to Storm?” I suggest, knowing she wouldn’t mind helping out.

“I’m sure she’s got a lot on her plate with everything.”

I nod, knowing this to be true as well. Then I suggest someone else. “What about Rain?”

Meadow freezes, her mug nearly to her lips. “You want me talk to Rain about working with me?”

“Yeah.”

I focus on her expression, mostly her eyes, and notice the inner turmoil running through her mind.

“Buttercup.” I close the distance between the two of us, grip her waist and give her a squeeze. “Rain would be good with it. She’s got the time and would enjoy it. I’m sure of it. And honestly, baby, if you hire her full-time, you’d be able to work on your designs more without having to worry about interruptions.” I grin and slide my hands downward to cup her ass. “Well, some interruptions.”

Meadow sucks in a breath and nods. “You’re right. Would you talk to her for me?”

“How about you come to the clubhouse with me, and you can talk to her?”

“I ... I can't.”

I don't miss the tremble of fear in her voice at the denial.

“Meadow.” I bring a hand up to pinch her chin between two fingers, forcing her to look up at me. “You've got nothing to fear coming to the clubhouse with me. I wouldn't take you somewhere I didn't think you'd be safe.”

“It's not that,” she whispers.

“Then what is it?”

“It's just that ... just one of the men there ... he looks like the man who raised me. The one who was a monster and hurt me,” she admits forcing herself away from me.

Well, fuck me. I wasn't expecting that shit.

“Meadow, Sniper's not him,” I murmur, pulling her back into my arms. “I give you my word on that. Hell, Sniper is upset over just learning about you.”

“Why?”

“That's something only he can explain, Buttercup. Come to the clubhouse, hear him out. Talk to Rain, and after, I'll take you out on the bike again.”

Meadow watches me closely, and I give her time to think over what I've suggested. “You promise you'll take me out on the bike?”

A grin slips into place, and I nod. “Yeah, I'll take you out on the bike. We'll ride for however long you want.”

“Okay,” she concedes.

“Right, first though,” I say, “I'm gonna have my way with this weak body of yours.” Scooping her in my arms, I plant her ass on the edge of the counter and lean forward, capturing her mouth.

Meadow's fingers cling to my shoulders as she moans. I reach between us and cup her pussy only to find she's already



sopping wet.

Fuck yeah.

I quickly unzip my jeans and lower them down enough to free my cock. Lining myself up with her entrance, I thrust upward, causing her to gasp into our kiss.

“Fuck, Buttercup, you’re tight. Wet and so damn tight around my cock. Swear I could live inside your pussy.”

I take my time filling her a little more with each thrust. The sounds Meadow makes spurs me to take her faster. Deeper. Harder. And I give her just that wanting to feel her walls clenching around me.

There’s something about being inside Meadow that makes me feel whole. I need this and love every minute of it.

“Brick,” Meadow moans, breathing heavily. “It feels so good.”

“Yeah.” It feels damn good. Fan-fuckin-tastic.

Soon Meadow’s moans turn to cries and she throws her head back, screaming my name, her pussy convulsing around my cock. She’s tight enough I’ve got no choice but to come with her. Shooting my release deep inside, coating the walls of her pussy with my cum.

Breathing heavily, I lean into Meadow, reclaiming her mouth.

To say this morning has started great is an understatement.

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“You ready?” I ask, holding Meadow’s hand.

“No.”

I spin Meadow around to face me and cup the side of her face, using the other still holding hers to wrap around her lower back securing her to me.

“Remember, there’s nothing here that will hurt you. I promise you that. You’re safe here. I fuckin’ mean it.”

Meadow nods and licks her lips nervously.

“I’ve got you, Buttercup.”

“Okay.”

I claim her mouth in a kiss, keeping it short, otherwise we’d bypass everyone and head straight to my room so I can bury myself in her sweet hot pussy. First, I’d fuck her with my tongue again. The way she lights up for me is something I want to experience as many times as I’m able to. Fuck, I could be old and in a wheelchair and still want her pussy in my face.

As I pull away from Meadow, she leans in seeming not to want the kiss to end, making me grin. I step away and reach down to adjust my dick to make it not so obvious when we walk into the building. I don’t miss the way Meadow glances down and bites her lip.

“Yeah, that’s what you do to me. Every damn time.”

“I’m sorry.”

I frown at the way she apologizes for making me hard.

“Don’t be sorry, baby,” I say, releasing her hand and wrapping it around her waist. “You get to help me with it later on.”

“I can definitely do that,” she says, glancing up to look at me.

“Good.” I kiss her once more and guide her into the clubhouse.

I’d texted Blow, Sniper, and Nerd earlier when we’d stopped at Meadow’s place for her to shower, change clothes, and I had her pack a bag. As sweet as her place is, I want her at mine. It has better security and it’s secluded from the rest of the world.

The three of them are sitting around the main room, along with a few other club members laughing and joking about

something or another. Blow is the first to catch sight of us and grins.

“About time you got here, VP.”

“Sorry, was busy.” I grin and pull Meadow flush against my side. “You remember Meadow.”

“Yeah,” he says, dropping his gaze to Meadow. “Nice to meet you again.”

“Um ... you too,” she murmurs, giving them all a small smile.

“I’m Blow. This is Lucky, Shiner, and Torch,” Blow introduces and jerks his chin to the others sitting with him. “You probably remember Sniper. Next to him is his son, Nerd.”

“Meadow,” Sniper greets gingerly.

Meadow is tense, and I can feel her getting ready to bolt. Or that’s what I thought. Instead, she shocks me and steps forward. “Can I talk to you about something?” she asks.

“Anything, Meadow. Whatever you wanna ask, I’m here to answer.”

With a heavy breath, Meadow nods and allows me to guide her to the table.

“Here good, or do you want me to speak more privately?” Sniper asks.

“Here’s okay,” she says, glancing at me as if seeking my assurance.

“You’re safe. I’m here, and these are my brothers. And in truth, your family. Nerd’s your cousin.”

I watch as her eyes widen, and she turns her attention to Nerd. “You’re ... you’re Nick?”

“You know my name?” Nerd stares at her in shock.

“Linda would talk about you.” Meadow’s voice wavers, and her lip trembles.

“What?” he grinds out, leaning back in his chair.

Looks like we're all in for a surprise because the next thing I know, Meadow is opening up in a way I didn't think she would be able to do.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## MEADOW

Safe.

I'm safe with Nines. He won't let anything happen to me. I can be around him and know nothing will harm me in any way. He'll see to it. I saw it in his eyes.

Because of this, I feel confident in talking openly. It's not easy, but one look at Sniper and Nerd, and I know neither are like the monsters who hurt me.

"Yeah, Linda ... she, um, talked about you. Well, more or less screamed and threw things when Libby spoke about you," I answer honestly, giving him the truth.

Several murmurs of curses hit my ears as I cast my gaze to my lap, clasping my hands together. I have so many of my own questions and all of them scare me, but I need the truth.

"Meadow." Nines's soothing voice calms me, and I finally look up to meet Sniper's gaze again. "I don't remember much about Libby ... well, nothing but her screams. However, she told me a couple of things a long time ago, and I never understood them. She ... she said ..." I stop and close my eyes. "She would always say, 'The heart wants what the heart wants and knows it at first sight. Time holds no bars against what is fated and what will be,' and, 'Never underestimate those who surround you. That only when the time is right will you be released from the evil within.' I didn't know what she meant by that, and I honestly still don't. Not really. But the one thing I want to know now is what was she hiding and why would she allow herself to be where she was without trying to escape."

"Don't know, but can you tell me the truth about something else?"

"What?" I frown, unsure of what he's going to ask.

"Is Johnathan your father?"

“No,” I whisper, shaking my head as the voice of the man who raised me screams within my mind. Him yelling at me that Libby was supposed to be his and not someone else’s. That I was to pay for what should have been his. And that I was his property. “I don’t know who my real father is.”

“I have an idea of who it is then,” Sniper says.

Shocked, I glance up and meet his gaze with surprise. “You do?”

Nodding, Sniper looked to the others and let out a breath. “Libby was seeing someone, and the two of them were nearly inseparable. He left, for the military. They had plans, though, for when he got back. The two of them were gonna get married. It’s why he asked me to look out for her until he got back.”

“You talkin’ about who I think you are?” Nerd asks.

“Yeah. Meaning when he finds out, which he will, he’s going to lose his shit.”

“Umm, I don’t understand.” Confused by this interaction, I tense further, not knowing what to expect.

Nerd looks in my direction, his eyes filled with rage. “It’s gonna sound fucked up what I’m about to tell you, but it’s got to be said. Keys and I have been looking into your life.”

“What?” I swear, if my eyes could, they’d pop out of their sockets with how wide I open them. They looked into me?

“I wanted to find out what you’ve been through, so we can ...”

“You can’t fix it,” I whisper, tears springing up in my eyes. “Nothing can change the past.”

“Maybe not, but I’ve learned that the past always has a way of coming back to bite you on the ass when you least expect it. I’m not one for surprises, and I don’t want to be dealing with any more than I have to.” Sniper has this disgruntled look about him as he talks and when he does people listen. I listen and find myself understanding him.

I can definitely see his point since it seems that it's already happening to me. This morning, I woke up with several messages from the unknown number demanding me to answer them or suffer the consequences. I don't want to run again, but I have a feeling I will end up having to do just that.

"I've got a question," the guy introduced as Lucky speaks up, his gaze on me. "You knew this was where Johnathan and Libby were from, didn't you?"

"Yes," I confirm.

"Why'd you move here then?"

"It's the one place ... it's the one place he said he'd never come near again. That it's a hellhole he won't step foot within fifty miles of," I answer and glance around the table. "I never understood that."

"Probably because he knew I'd find out if he were here. He might be able to lie over a phone call, but I'd have seen the truth in his eyes," Sniper grinds out, slamming his fist on the table before lifting it to press against his mouth as he leans back in his chair. "I should have looked deeper into him. Should have went to him and questioned him in person. Fuck."

Blinking in Sniper's direction, I swallow, shoving back my nervousness, and blurt out a question that comes to mind. "If you know who my father is, can you tell me his name?"

Sniper winces and pulls his phone out of his pocket. "Better for you to see for yourself," he says and lifts the phone to his ear. A moment goes by before he speaks again. "Calyx, you should come to the clubhouse. We've got shit to talk about." He hangs up and tosses his phone on the table. "He'll be here. I give him maybe ten minutes or so and all hell is gonna break loose."

"Um, why?"

I don't understand why all hell would break loose when he gets here.

"Cause once he sees you, Meadow, he's gonna know right off you're Libby's daughter," Sniper retorts and cocks his head slightly. "And staring at you now, I can see Calyx in you too."



Well, I didn't expect any of that.

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Like Sniper said, all hell was about to break loose. But I did get the chance to speak to Rain within the time it took for this newcomer to arrive. I asked her if she would like a job at the boutique, and she agreed, saying she'd be in tomorrow to start.

Now, I hold my breath as Nines holds me close.

“Don't worry, Buttercup, remember I'm right here.”

I nod at Nines's assurance, but I just want to run and hide in a corner. If not for him, I think that's exactly what I would do. There's no way I'd be able to handle facing anything like this without him.

The doors are thrown open, and immediately, I feel the need to shrink as small as I can at the sight of the mammoth man who steps inside. He's nothing like I would picture Libby with. He's huge, standing at maybe six-foot-four with arms wide. He looks like a weightlifter on steroids.

“Calyx,” Sniper greets the other man, holding out a hand.

“Sniper.” Calyx clasps hands and grins. Thankfully he hasn't seen me yet, and I get a good look at him. Though he's huge, like a giant, I have to say he's a beautiful man, even with the scar running through his eyebrow. Calyx looks to Nerd and his grin brightens. “Damn, if it ain't my godson.”

“Calyx.” Nerd snorts and shakes his head while moving forward so they can embrace each other in a man hug. It's a beautiful sight. It really is. “Wish it was under better circumstances. Well, in some ways, it is. But ...”

“What's going on?” Calyx demands, the smile wiping away from his lips.

Sniper nods, and Nines urges me to step forward as he moves with me. Calyx's eyes turn in my direction, and I hold my breath as he stares at me, his gaze narrowing and his body tensing.

“What the fuck is this shit?” he snarls. “Who the fuck is this?”

“Libby’s daughter,” Sniper answers, “and yours.”

“The fuck she’s mine.”

I flinch and turn more into Nines at the harsh tone of Calyx’s voice.

“Calyx,” Nerd scolds, “a lot of shit has come to light, and you ain’t gonna like any of what we’ve uncovered. But look at her for yourself. You’ll see she’s Libby’s.”

“Maybe so, but if Libby were carrying my kid, she wouldn’t have fuckin’ run off and disappeared the way she did, now would she?”

I don’t miss the anguish and fury of those words. Libby’s words ring in my ears again. *The heart wants what the heart wants and knows it at first sight. Time holds no bars against what is fated and what will be.* Was she talking about this man all this time? That time held no meaning to the fact she gave her heart to this man. That she let herself become nothing more than a slave and toy to the monster who raised me in order to protect the man she gave her heart to.

A distant memory pops into my head, and I blink up at the infuriated man staring at me in rage. “She named me Meadow because that’s where you asked her to be yours. That’s what she said. That her heart was in a beautiful meadow where she would always be no matter where life took her. It was her mind’s safe place, a meadow filled with lilies and purple flowers. She told me about it, said it was where she’d go when the pain set in.” I stammer the words in no more than a whisper, but they could have been heard by everyone near me.

Calyx loses the look of rage and stares at me for a long moment, my words sinking in.

But as he stares at me, I find I can’t be here anymore. I need space. I need air. The room is suffocating me. My vision blurs, and I rip myself away from Nines’s arms and rush out of the clubhouse. Black dots pepper my sight, and I try to focus, but it’s not easy. I run, ignoring the sounds of my name being

yelled from behind me. I make it halfway across the parking lot to the gates when my knees collapse under me and everything goes dark.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

NINES

“What the fuck just happened?”

I ignore the question and lift Meadow into my arms. So much has happened in such a short amount of time it's got to be a lot on her. I wish I'd told Sniper to hold off on calling Calyx.

Fucking Calyx.

Everyone at the club knows who Calyx is and what he's into. The man runs a group of mercenaries for hire. They take whatever job comes their way, and they don't ask questions. The only rule they follow is the one that leads them in life. He and his men are not to be fucked with unless you want your throat slit.

And this man is Meadow's biological father.

“Nines, get her up to your room. I'll put in a call to get Scorn to check on her,” Blow says.

“She should be fine.” I turn with Meadow in my arms and meet his stare. “It had to have been too much for her.”

“Yeah, you're right, but we need to check out her head.” Blow motions to the side of Meadow's face.

“I'll take care of it.” And I will. When she collapsed, she'd fallen before I could catch her and grazed her cheek on the rock. “If I need Scorn, I'll let you know.” I don't want anyone else touching her right now. Not after that shit. She doesn't trust them yet, but she does me. And I'm not about to let her believe otherwise.

“Right.” Blow nods.

I make my way past him and the others, feeling their eyes on Meadow as I carry her inside and through the clubhouse. In my room, I lay her on the bed and clean her wound.

Someone knocks on my door just as I get a bandage on her cheek.

“Yeah,” I call out, letting whoever is on the other side know they can come.

The door opens and Calyx is standing there with Sniper and Nerd.

“She okay?” Calyx doesn’t take his eyes off Meadow.

“She will be,” I answer. “But Meadow’s been through hell. I guess today was just too much for her.”

Calyx nods and looks to Nerd. “What information do you have on her?”

“Nothing you’re gonna like.” Nerd runs a hand through his hair as a feminine voice comes from behind them, calling his name. Nerd steps to the side to show Cara standing there looking concerned. “Hey, babygirl, you okay?”

“Yes, but is Meadow?” Cara asks, moving to stand next to Nerd. “I heard she was here, I wanted to meet her, but I didn’t want to intrude. You know.”

“I know what you mean, babygirl,” Nerd murmurs, wrapping an arm around his woman. I’d heard some of what the two of them have been through, but I don’t know the full story. What I do know is that Cara had been kidnapped and raped before Nerd found her. “Why don’t you go relax in the room for a while? Don’t want you stressing yourself out. I’ll come find you when we’re finished here.”

“Okay.” Cara nods and leaves the room.

Nerd looks to each of us, then to Meadow, and back to me as if in question. I shake my head slightly. “Now’s not the time to talk about it. Not until she’s awake and I can make sure she’s good. It’s her story, her past. I can’t disregard the trust she put in me with the parts she’s shared so far.”

“What are you to her?” Calyx demands tersely.

I meet his gaze and square my shoulders. “I’m her man.”

“Her man?” he scoffs. “Since when? Weren’t you arrested for the rape and assault of a minor? Does she know what you did?”

“I didn’t fuckin’ do that shit, and you know it,” I snarl, taking a step forward. “I’m not the type of man who would lay a hand on a minor. And for the record, Meadow knows and she damn well believes me.”

“Brick,” Meadow calls out, barely more than a whisper.

Turning, I make my way to her side and cup the side of her face. “You okay, Buttercup?”

She looks past me and licks her lips nervously before bringing her gaze back to me and answering, “Yeah. Can we still go out on the bike?”

It shouldn’t surprise me that’s what she asks, but it does. It’s been a long and stressful day for her, and she’s been through hell and back. Yet she still wants to go out on the bike.

“How about we give it a little while to make sure your head’s okay first?” I suggest. “I don’t want you to end up being worse than what you are now.”

“I’m fine.”

“Meadow, you fell on your face, literally collapsed.”

“I’m fine now,” she says. “I just ... it was, I guess too much at one time.”

“You can say that again,” I grunt.

Meadow’s gaze goes back to the men still in the room. “Are you really him?” she asks, no doubt speaking to Calyx.

“I want to deny it,” Calyx growls, “but after what you said a bit ago, I can’t. However, I’ve got to ask a question that will seem personal. Do you have a birthmark on the back of your head at your hairline?”

“Um, I don’t know.” She frowns and shakes her head.

“Let me see, baby.” I motion for her to sit up on the bed. I brush her hair out of the way, and there it is. The mark Calyx is talking about. “Yeah, it’s there.” Twisting, I look to Calyx. “Why did you want to know?”

“The women in my family always have one there.” He shrugs.

Silence falls over the room, and I can't help but want to get the hell out of here and take Meadow with me. Unfortunately, Lucky pops in the room, his eyes locked on me.

“We've got a problem. Need you and Blow outside.”

“What?” I demand, getting to my feet.

“Detectives who arrested you are here,” he announces. “I've already sent a text to Markus.”

“Motherfucker.”

Can I just have a day where there's no goddamn drama? Just one. That's all I'm asking for. Fuck, is that too much to ask?

I glance back at Meadow, lean in, and press a kiss to her lips. “I'll be back. You stay here and relax.”

“I'll come with you.”

“No, you need to chill in here.”

Meadow stands when I do and shakes her head. “No. You've been there for me. I'm going to do the same for you. I told you I believe you, and I know you didn't do anything to whoever it is that's claiming you raped and assaulted them.”

Damn, how the fuck did I get lucky enough to find her?

“Thank you.” I wrap my arms around her waist and hold her close. “Let's get this over with.”

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“This is bullshit,” Blow scoffs. “You have nothing on Nines or anyone else here. So, what the fuck are you here for?”

“We just need to know where all of you were last night.” Detective Hanson smirks, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“That's none of your business,” Lucky snarks. “That is unless you're asking if I was fuckin' your momma, then the answer's a big ass fuckin' no. I wouldn't want to stick my dick anywhere near the pussy that you came out of.”



Detective Hanson takes a step forward, eyes narrowed on my brother. “I suggest you watch your mouth.” His partner steps in front of him, keeping him from lashing out at Lucky.

“Don’t make us go get a warrant. We just need to know where everyone was,” Hanson’s partner says, his gaze locking on me. “Especially need to know where you were.”

“What the fuck for?” I stiffen, not liking where this conversation was going. Nothing good can come of it. Not with the way Hanson is looking at me.

“Where were you last night?” Hanson’s partner asks.

“With me at his house,” Meadow speaks up softly, drawing the attention of every man near to look down at her as she curls closer to me.

I tighten my arm around her and squeeze her waist.

“And you are?” Hanson looks over Meadow as if she were a treat he could snatch up.

“She’s my daughter,” Calyx answers before Meadow can, “and if I were you, I’d carry my pussy ass out of here. I know who you are, and you should know that I know what you’re up to and that you’re not here on official police business.”

Hanson curls his lip and narrows his gaze on Calyx. “Didn’t think you had a daughter, Calyx,” he says. “But for the record, we are, considering our victim has turned up dead. She was also raped again before her death.” Meadow gasps. Hanson brings his attention back to her and sneers. “You know the man you’re clinging to was charged with raping this victim?”

“Those charges were dropped yesterday afternoon and you know this, Hanson,” Markus states loudly. None of us had heard him approaching, but with this news, he must have been on the way to give it to me in person. “As for asking my client about his whereabouts, I believe you should have waited for me before questioning him.”

“Seems his little plaything is giving him an alibi, so it’s nothing,” Hanson snarks.

I take a step forward, but Lucky and Shiner block my approach, keeping me from doing something stupid while Meadow tightens her arm around my stomach.

“Don’t,” she whispers, tilting her head back to meet my gaze. “Don’t let them provoke you.”

Sighing, I nod and take a breath.

“I suggest you and your partner leave,” Blow growls, speaking to Hanson’s partner. “I’d also say it would be best not to mess with this club. You can go back to your puppeteer and tell him, he wants a war, come face us himself.”

I’m not surprised by the fact Blow called them out and gave them a message to send. This shit needs to end with the Crimson Blood Clan, and in order for that to happen, we can’t do it blindly, trying to figure out what will come at us next. It’s time we got the upper hand.

Moments later, Hanson and his partner leave, and I look down at Meadow. “You ready for that ride I promised you?”

Meadow gives me a small smile and nods. “I’m more than ready, but what about everything else?”

“It can wait.” I drop my hand from around her waist and lace our fingers together. “I think we’ve both had enough for one day.” Looking at my brothers, I jerk my chin toward them. “Need me, call or text. I’m out of here for now.”

“Right,” Blow grunts. “We’ll have church tomorrow morning to discuss everything.”

Nodding, I guide Meadow to my bike, ignoring Calyx’s glare as I do so.

I get the man just got the shock of his life, but so did Meadow, and right now, she’s the most important thing to me. And Meadow and I still have a lot to talk about. I haven’t forgotten about those calls she was getting. I’ll give her today and tomorrow, let all of this sink in. After that, I’ll find out, and I’ll make sure nothing is coming.

However, I have a gut feeling something is, and I’m sure I won’t like it one bit.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

NERD

“What are you working on, son?”

I glance up from my laptop and meet my father’s eyes. The same eyes I have, and I wonder if the child Cara and I have will have ours or like his or her mother’s. After everything my woman’s been through, it scares the fuck out of me that she’s pregnant. She’s happy, and I won’t let her know just how much it affects me that she’s having our baby. I love my woman, and she’s the fucking air I breathe. If something happens to her, I don’t know what I’d do. Hell, you might as well put me in the ground with her because I won’t be able to live without her.

Cara chose me when she was scared shitless, and I’m doing the same with her.

Clearing my throat, I nod at the laptop. “Nines asked me to look into a number that keeps calling Meadow.”

“Find anything so far?”

“No,” I answer. “It’s got to be a burner, but I can ping a location for it, though it’s taking me longer since the transmission of the call is bounced from one tower to another.”

“You’ll figure it out.” That’s my dad for you. He might be a badass motherfucker when it comes to anyone else, but his family, not so much. Can’t say I blame him, either, and I always said I wanted to be like him growing up.

“Well, that’s only one thing, but I’ve found more on Johnathan, and you’re not gonna believe this shit.” I pull up the information I’d found not even twenty minutes ago.

“What’s that?”

I turn the screen for him to see it. “It’s a life insurance policy. One for Meadow.” My gut twists, and I have this sickening feeling of dread overtaking me. “Johnathan took out a policy on Meadow when she was seventeen, but that’s not all,” I say and change the screen to the next. “The boyfriend I

found out she had, she was sold to him. When she ran away from home, a bounty was put out to find her.”

“That’s got to be why Gavril refused to talk about any of this.” Sniper scoffs and leans back in his seat. “He was keeping shit quiet for her. It’s why he agreed for her to move her. That man is protective of her and has checked in with me and Blow several times to see how she’s doing. I’m willing to bet Meadow doesn’t even know about the bounty.”

“Yeah, I’m sure she doesn’t, but although the bounty is still out there, Johnnyboy isn’t. Someone offed him a couple years back. And I’m sure you can take a wild guess as to who.”

“Gavril.”

“You got it,” I grunt and return to the life insurance policy. “I’m going to do something about blocking out the bounty on Meadow, but we’ve got to do something about Johnathan.”

“What are y’all talking about?” Blow mutters, joining us, holding one of the triplets.

“Where are the other two?” I smirk.

“Storm has them.” He motions to the baby. “Phoenix was cranky and wouldn’t stop fussing until I picked him up.”

I swallow, nervous about the very thought of it being me soon enough, and I pray like fuck it’s not more than one kid. I don’t think I can handle it. Inwardly, I shake myself and shove the thoughts back before filling Blow in on what I’ve found so far.

“We need to fill Nines in on this,” Blow says, letting out a harsh breath. “He needs to know this shit.”

“Give the two of them today,” Sniper suggests. “After yesterday, they need a day of no bullshit. Tomorrow, we’ll call him and tell him, then get his ass back to the clubhouse.”

“Exactly. Until Johnathan is taken care of, Meadow needs to be protected at all costs,” Blow agrees. “I have a feeling that if something happens to her, we could all lose Nines.”

“Why do you think that?” I ask, cocking a brow.

“Because when he lost his dad, he spiraled. What do you think he’ll do if he loses his heart?”

Fuck me, Blow’s got a point. A man loses his heart, he’s nothing more than a shell, a soulless motherfucker who’ll kill anything that gets in his way. Like Calyx. I’ve heard about what he’s done to men who get on his bad side. He has no problem slitting a man’s throat and watching them bleed. Then again, knowing what my own woman went through, I don’t have a problem with it either. But I still have her whereas he doesn’t have his woman.

For Nines and Meadow both, we’ve got to find this motherfucker and end him before it’s too late.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## MEADOW

It's been a few days since we left the clubhouse and Nines has kept the two of us secluded away in his house. The other day, after everything, Nines took me out on his bike, and we rode for hours on end. When we got back to his place, I rode Nines in a completely different way.

I never thought a sexual experience could be as wonderful as the two of us share, but nothing's like it. Just this morning, I woke with Nines between my legs, his mouth devouring me. After, I returned the favor by going down on him. I didn't think I could handle doing it, however, Nines's pleasure spurred me on, and I enjoyed it.

Being just him and me in his house, he stayed in sweats, and I wore only one of his shirts. This meant Nines got to take me repeatedly on the couch, the floor, the shower, and definitely on the bed. My body aches in all the right places, and I can't help but crave more from him.

Unfortunately, that can't happen. I need to get back to my boutique and open it up. I also have dresses to finish, and Rain to show around. I'd already been closed for too many days. While making breakfast, I'd started to tell Nines when his phone rang. Since then, he's been on it, pacing around on the back porch. I haven't been able to hear anything, just muffled words.

Whatever's going on can't be good. It's my only assumption from Nines's stiff posture. My phone rings from its spot on the counter, and it dawns on me, I didn't put it there. Nines must have. Has he answered it? Does he know who's calling me?

I reach for it with a shaky hand and pick it up. I stare at the screen and then look out onto the deck. I suck in a breath and answer my phone, not wanting to but this has to stop. All of it.

"Hello?" I answer apprehensively in greeting.

"Stupid ... stupid ... whore."



I wince at the venom that all but pours from the other end of the line. I can almost visualize his face and the contorted anger that takes over his expression.

“Please leave me alone,” I whisper, my lower lip wobbling in fear.

“Now, why would I do that?” He cackles. “You thought you could come to my hometown and I wouldn’t come after you? Even after so many years? Like I said, stupid. Should have stayed hidden. Now, I’ll take you back to where you belong.”

“I don’t want to go with you.”

“Too bad, you either come with me willingly or I ensure that the man you’re with right now and everyone else in that clubhouse of theirs is blown to smithereens.”

“You can’t do that,” I protest weakly.

“No?” He snorts. “I can do whatever the hell I want. I fucking own your whore ass, and it’s time you do as your damn well told. I’ll give you until three to meet me down from the clubhouse. You don’t, I’ll blow the clubhouse and everyone in it. If you even think to tell anyone, I will kill everyone. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I whisper, my heart beating rapidly against my chest, feeling like it were going to erupt from my chest.

“Good, glad you can see reason. Now, do as you’re told, bitch. It’s time to get back to where you belong.” He disconnects, and I pull the phone from my ear and set it slowly on the table.

My stomach churns and it’s all I can do to keep from throwing up, but I can’t. I’ve got to figure this out. There’s no way I can let anyone at the clubhouse be hurt because of me. I was told not to tell anyone, but it doesn’t mean I can’t shoot Gavril a message and let him know I’m leaving. But I’ll have to do it right before I do so.

“Sorry, Buttercup, but we’ve got to get to the clubhouse,” Nines says, coming back into the house.

I nearly jump out of my seat, not hearing him open the door. I clear my throat and furrow my brow. “Is everything okay?” God, I hope he hasn’t already done something. He said he wouldn’t long as I did what he said, and he was giving me until three this afternoon.

“Will be, baby, but we’ve got to talk,” he says, coming to stand directly in front of where I’m sitting at the counter on one of the stools. He grips either side of my thighs and pushes them open before stepping between my legs. “I’ve given you time, but now we’re gonna talk about the unknown calls you keep getting and don’t answer.”

“What ... what about them?” I breathe.

“You know who it is, don’t you?”

I swallow and nod. “Yes. It’s why I don’t answer. I don’t know how he got my number.”

“Not hard to find a number, Meadow,” he says gently. “You can get it easily off the internet or if you know where to look.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, and now, I’m about to tell you something that will probably piss you off, but you’ll have to get over it because I’ll always do what I have to, to keep you safe. I had Nerd look into the unknown caller. We found out who it is. With doing some more digging, Nerd found out about a life insurance policy on you,” he announces, keeping his voice smooth, though I don’t miss the way his eyes flash with anger and harden. “Now, we’re gonna go to the clubhouse, and until we get this motherfucker dealt with, the boutique will stay closed. We’ll also be staying in my room there for the time being.”

I open my mouth to protest but remember I wasn’t going to be able to go to my boutique in the first place. It’s best I go to the clubhouse, find a way to slip out of there, and leave without anyone noticing.

Lowering my head in defeat, I lean my head against Nines’s chest. “Okay,” I whisper and close my eyes. The smell

of his body wash and cologne is intoxicating, and I just want him to make love to me here and now, but we don't have the time. This could be the last time I get to spend with him.

“It's gonna be all good, Buttercup,” Nines says, smoothing a hand over the back of my head, tangling his fingers in my hair, and tugging back, forcing me to look up at him.

“Promise, baby, I'll make sure it's all good, and he'll hurt for every goddamn thing he ever did to you. I will ensure he suffers to the point he's begging for me to kill him.”

I swallow, wishing that were what could happen, but it can't. Johnathan has already ensured his safety, and I know this because the man is not afraid to blow something up or to kill. He takes great pleasure in it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## MEADOW

By the time we got to the clubhouse, tension seemed to build higher in Nines. I could feel it radiating off him in waves as we rode from his house to the club. Something's eating at him and I don't know what to do about it. Granted, I'd give anything to be able to tell him what was worrying me and going through my head. But if I do that, everyone is dead.

I hop off the back of Nines's bike, and he follows suit taking my hand in his.

"Come on, Buttercup." He pulls me along with him inside.

"Nines," I murmur, deciding that I need to warn him, tell him about the phone call, let him take care of this. Maybe the members of the club can get everyone out of here and to safety before Johnathan realizes it and goes about doing what he said he would do.

"Give me a few minutes, baby. I've got to talk to Blow and the other members of the club about something," he says, letting my hand go.

"Okay." I nod and swallow back my nerves. I get he's got a lot on his mind as well.

"Don't go out of the clubhouse, okay?" Nines levels me with a look of determination.

Instead of outright lying to Nines, I nod in answer.

Nines leans in and claims my mouth with a kiss that leaves my toes curling. When he walks away, I make my way to one of the tables where Storm and Chelsea are sitting.

"Hey," I greet them as I take a seat.

"Hey, Meadow." Chelsea smiles and nods to Storm. "Chickadee here was just telling me about when she took off on Blow to get away from him when he tried to say they were on lockdown and she didn't want to be. I swear, the story never gets old."

“That’s only because it leads to me ending up driving all the way to Colorado.” Storm laughs.

“Wait, you got out of the clubhouse and grounds without anyone seeing you?” I stare at her in surprise.

“Oh, they knew I’d left, well not before I’d already done so. But yeah, there’s a part of the fence that hadn’t been fixed yet, and honestly, I should probably tell Blow about it and tell him he needs to fix it. God knows someone else could end up using it to cause harm to the club,” Storm explains. “So, anyway, how are you doing? Everything with Nines okay? It’s been a lot from what Blow’s told me.”

“It is, but Nines has been great about it all. The first time I saw him I didn’t take him for being sweet as he is.”

“Nines sweet? Ha, that’s probably because you’re in his bed.” Chelsea snickers. “Sure, he can be funny, but normally that man is a complete badass.”

I can’t help but giggle at the mere mention of Nines being a badass. I’ve seen him when he wasn’t sweet to me, but mostly he’s always sweet and gentle when he’s around me.

The three of us sit and talk for a bit longer before I excuse myself and head for Nines’s room. Inside I quickly jot down a note saying I’m sorry, that I had no other choice, I had to keep everyone safe. After I finish, I shoot a quick text to Gavril, letting him know I’m leaving and had no choice in the matter, using the code words he’s taught me to use. After I hit send, I make my way to the back of the clubhouse and out the back door. Not seeing anyone around, I rush to the fence line and follow it until I find the hole that Storm mentioned. Until she told me about it unknowingly, I didn’t know how I was going to get away without anyone seeing me.

It doesn’t take me long to find the hole in the fence. With a quick glance behind me, I duck through it, careful not to cut myself on the edges of the metal fencing. On the other side, I swallow down my fear of what I’m doing and wishing to simply go back inside the clubhouse. In such a short amount of time, those people have come to mean something to me. When I was scared out of my mind to be around them, they didn’t

push themselves on me, but made it clear they're here for me. Especially Nines.

I don't like leaving him, knowing he'll be furious when he finds I'm gone. He wanted me to trust him, and I do with all of my heart, but I can't risk everyone in the clubhouse. They're more of them than there is me. It's better to sacrifice one life than many. Quickly, I head in the direction I was told. I won't take the chance of the club finding me before I get to Johnathan. If they do, this will have all been for nothing, and I can't let that happen.

Sweat beads my forehead and streams down into my eyes the farther I get from Nines. I lick my lower lip and pick up my pace. Out of nowhere, I'm grabbed from behind and pulled flush against a pudgy body, and a hand covers my mouth. In front of me, Johnathan steps forward and grins at me like the evil monster he is.

"Hello, daughter of mine, it's time you get back to where you belong," he drawls and brings his hand down across my cheek when the person behind me moves his hand. He slaps me with enough force that it sends my face sideways. "Put her in the truck." He motions to the guy holding me. "We'll get her to the cabin."

"You got it, boss," the guy holding me grunts.

I don't speak or fight as I'm thrown in the trunk with enough force to jar my hip against whatever else they have in here. The lid slams down and I'm left in complete darkness.

---

There's something to be said about being in the trunk of a car ... it's not very pleasant. I felt every bump and turn they made, and I swear they made sure to hit each rut in the road or took a turn faster than needed. Before the car came to a jolting stop, my body already felt like it was being run through the mill. But I know it's nothing compared to what's coming. I'm not delusional as to the fact Johnathan will hurt me. He'll make sure I'm punished and hurt for running all those years ago.

I should have known you can't run from your past without it catching up to you. I've read that in so many of my favorite books, but I've seen it on TV as well.

The sound of doors slamming shut draws me out of my thoughts and I swallow back the anxiety wanting to take hold. It won't do me any good right now. I made my choice to save the others and I did it knowing what would happen to me in the process. A moment later, the lid to the truck is yanked open, and I'm instantly blinded momentarily by the bright sun beaming down on us.

"Time for you to meet your fate, Meadow," Johnathan sneers and nods to the man with him. "Get her inside and hook her to the chains in the middle of the room."

"Want her arms wide?" the other guy asks.

"No, over her head and lift her off the floor," he answers with a smirk and turns away from me.

I hear him on his phone and switch my focus to the guy doing his grunt work for him. It seems in the time since I ran away, Johnathan got himself an Igor, someone to do his bidding for him. Isn't it just lovely?

The guy reaches in and grips me by my hair, making me cry out in pain as he drags me from the belly of the trunk and into the cabin, where he does as Johnathan told him to and latches steel cuffs to both of my wrists. When he walks away, I shake my arms, wanting to rip the damn things off. The heavy weight of them is nearly too much for me, but I don't have much time to consider them before my body is jerked off the ground by my wrists, and I'm left suspended in the air a good foot or two off the ground.

My arms burn and I try to grab the chains themselves to attempt to pull myself up to help with the pain, but it's too much, and I know without a doubt this isn't the worst of it. No, the worst is yet to come.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

## NINES

My phone vibrates in my pocket for the third time since church started. I've tried to ignore it, but each time it's gone off, it's been back-to-back. I lean slightly to the side and stretch my leg enough to pull the damn thing out. I glance at the screen and see it's Gavril. I'd programmed in his number.

"I've got to take this," I mutter, interrupting church.

We'd come in here a bit ago and have been discussing what to do about the Crimson Blood Clan and what our next move should be. We still have more to discuss about them and get to the issue about Sniper's cousin, Johnathan, and the fact Calyx is Meadow's biological father.

"Who is it?" Blow demands, furrowing his brow.

"Gavril." I swipe my finger across the screen answering it. "This better be important. We're in the middle of something."

"I suggest you stop whatever the hell is so important and get your ass to Meadow," Gavril snarls through the line.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" My brow creases, and I glare down at the phone, already getting to my feet. "Meadow's here at the clubhouse."

"She's not there. I can promise you that," he snarks.

"And how do you know this?"

I look at my brothers while waiting for Gavril to answer.

"Because Meadow sent me a text message not long ago using the words, I'd told her to use when there's trouble," he answers. "I've tracked her phone and it's still at the clubhouse, but I guarantee you she's not."

My heart lurches, and my gut churns as I rush out of the room and head down the hallway to my room. I throw the door open and find it empty. On the bed sits Meadow's phone and a slip of paper.

I pick the paper up and read the simple words. She's sorry. That it's the only thing she could do, she didn't have a choice.

"What the fuck?" I snarl clenching the paper in my hands.

"Brother." Blow taps my shoulder and hands my phone back. I didn't realize I'd tossed until now.

"She's gone." The words vibrate against the walls as I yell the words harshly and take the damn phone.

"Told you this already," Gavril snaps through the speaker. "And I'll tell you, it had to have been a good reason."

"What did she tell you?" I demand.

"She used the code words I told her to use if she's ever in danger and the only reason for her to be in danger is if Johnathan has found her. And he has."

Motherfucker. I pinch the bridge of my nose and glance at my brothers standing in my room and in the doorway and hall. "We'll get her back."

"You will, and when you do, make that bastard pay," Gavril says venomously. "I will send you the coordinates of her location, and you go get her."

"You know where the fuck she is?" I demand, stiffing at the news.

"I do, but I'm not close enough to get to her, though I'm on the way," Gavril informs me.

"As much as I want to know how the fuck you have her coordinates and shit, just give them to me. I need to get to my woman before anything happens to her." My back teeth ache from clenching them in frustration.

I swear to fucking God, after I find her and make sure she's okay, I'll find out what the hell was running through her mind to think it was okay to run off the way she did.

"Sending now," Gavril says and disconnects.

"Better call Calyx," Sniper mutters, pulling his phone out as mine chimes.

“You call him, I’m heading out.” I start past them, looking at my phone. Sure enough, there’s a GPS location. “Looks like she’s out in the woods near the farm,” I announce and look between Blow and Sniper.

“My folks’ farm?” Sniper frowns.

“Yeah.” I nod.

The farm isn’t just any farm or Sniper’s folks. They’d passed away a while ago and left it to him. Since then, it’s been maintained by a friend of the club under the stipulation they can keep the profits from running the place, and we use it whenever we need. They don’t bat an eye at what we do. In fact, they help us with clean up. On the farm there’s a shit ton of hogs, a couple cows, and two horses.

Sniper narrows his gaze, his brows meeting in the middle. “Fuckin’ hell.”

“Fuck, he wouldn’t take her there, would he?” Nerd asks eyes on his dad. He’d intended to leave this afternoon after church, but that won’t be happening now.

“What?” Blow growls before I can. “Where are you talking about?”

Sniper’s gaze bounces between Blow and me. “The farm isn’t just about what’s being used by Tyler,” he says, blowing out a breath. “Back when my folks had it and those before them ... there’s a lot of land there.”

“What Sniper’s trying to say is, they didn’t just raise hogs and sell them, they butchered them in a cabin that they had near the edge of the land far from the farm itself,” Nerd finishes for his dad.

Fuck.

“Let’s go,” I grind out, more than ready to get to Meadow before it’s too late.

I can’t lose her. I can’t.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## MEADOW

After what feels like hours, but could only be a couple of minutes, Johnathan walks in, his eyes coming to me, eyes glittering with amusement. I don't know where his minion went after he hung me up in here. He'd left and never came back.

"Glad to see you hanging around," he sneers.

If my arms weren't throbbing from being shackled and raised above my head, I'd roll my eyes and tell him to go to hell, but then again, I know better and will end up beaten. Though that's sure to happen, considering I'm dangling here, so instead, I whisper the one question that's always plagued me. "Why?"

"Why?" he mimics. "Why what?"

"Why have you done all of this?"

"Because I can." He grins deviously. "Because everything that should have been was fucked from the beginning." The grin drops from his face and his features contort, making him look like the monster he truly is. "Because my life was supposed to be with the love of my life, and she ruined everything by falling for someone else."

"Calyx," I whisper the name. Johnathan whirls on me and smacks me hard enough that I taste blood on my lips.

"Don't you say that name to me," he snarls. "You should never have come here or learned that name." He starts pacing back and forth. "You forced me to come back here and take back what belongs to me."

"I don't belong to anyone," I declare, earning another blow to my face.

"You fucking do. You and Libby are mine. Mine. Mine. Mine. She and you. To do as I please."

I swallow down the bile that threatens to come up as I watch Johnathan.

He points his finger at me as he stalks over to the table against the wall in front of me. “You’ll finish paying for what your mother did. Soon you’ll be where you belong. You were supposed to go with Johnny, be his bride, it’s what he bought you for, but then he ended up dead. Now, you’ll go to his uncle. He’s due to pick you up in a couple hours. He doesn’t care what I do to you, long as I leave you breathing.”

He sold me to Johnny? Why didn’t I ever figure that out?

“What did Libby do?” I ask, unsure if I want to know.

“She got pregnant with you. She was going to marry that fucker, Calyx. She was mine, and she was going to leave me.” Johnathan shakes his head, looks down at the table, and picks up a knife before turning back to me. He stares at me with beady eyes. “If not for him, she would have been mine always. I would never have had to share her attention. I did what I had to and threatened her with killing Calyx, with paying someone off to kill him while he was away. She begged me not to go after him. Said she’d do whatever I wanted. She was already pregnant with you, and I told her you both would belong to me. She would become my slave, do as I told her.”

My stomach churns as I think of what he made her do. I don’t need him to tell me that part of his story. I already know.

“Anyway, you and her became my property. Linda wasn’t too happy about it when she found out, considering she was upset about me picking Libby over her, but she should have been happy, she had my cousin.” He snickers and comes closer. “So, you see, as my property, you were mine to do as I please, and now, you’ll be punished for the headache you’ve caused.”

When he gets within touching distance, he takes his time in cutting through my shirt and bra, leaving me exposed. Next, he palms the knife in his hand and unbuttons my jeans.

I kick at him to try and attempt to keep him from yanking them down, but he it doesn’t sway him leaving them alone. He laughs at me as he jerks them down. The movement causes even more pain in my arms, and I cry out as I feel both my shoulders pop out of place.

“You will be stripped and waiting for your new owner when he gets here,” Johnathan states.

“Please don’t do this,” I plead.

Laughing sinisterly, Johnathan drags the knife against my stomach hard enough to draw blood. He doesn’t say anything further. He just toys with the blade against my skin. When he lifts his gaze to mine, he smiles, and I know that smile. It’s one that he always got when he was about to make me do something I didn’t want to.

It’s hard to focus due to the pain of my arms but also the because of the blade. Because of this I don’t brace for what he does next. I don’t worry about the fact that he pulls the knife away from me.

“Enjoy the pain, Meadow, because we’re just getting started,” he says and plunges the knife directly into my stomach.

I throw my head back and scream as he buries the blade in me. Tears stream out of the corner of my eyes as I endure the pain. The knife in my stomach is nearly unbearable, and my vision becomes spotty.

The sounds of crashing and yelling are the last things I hear before I lose the battle and everything goes dark.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

## NINES

I kick the door in, and a film of red takes over my vision as I roar out my anger at the sight of Meadow with a knife stuck in her stomach. I rush the bastard, catching him off guard. I lose control and pummel Johnathan until he's knocked out and my brothers pull me away.

“Take a breath,” Blow orders calmly. “Breathe, brother, breathe. We've got to get her to the hospital.”

I nod and move to where my brothers have pulled my woman down from the chains. I jerk my cut off and hand it to Blow before yanking my shirt over my head and dropping down on my knees next to Meadow. I dress her in my shirt, shielding her naked body from the eyes of my brothers, they might not say anything because this shit is fucked, but still, I don't want them seeing what's mine. My beautiful woman.

“Prez, we got another man out here. Got him as he was coming out of the woods,” Torch announces from just inside the doorway.

“Take him to the barn at the farm,” Blow commands as Scorn makes his way in to check on Meadow. We know we've got to get her to the hospital, but we've got to make sure she can make it there without issue.

“I wanna pull the knife out and patch her up, VP, but I don't want to take the chance of the knife doing more damage than it already has,” Scorn says calmly. “I'm going to stabilize it for the time being until we get her to the hospital.”

I nod and watch as he gets to work while also listening to Blow ordering Griz, Shiner, and Switchblade to help Torch get the bastard outside and Johnathan to the barn. We'd deal with them later.

I would be sure of them being dealt with firsthand. I intended to make them feel my wrath for what they've done to Meadow. I'll be sure to take my time hurting them in every way possible there is for what they've done.

---

“Where the fuck is my daughter?”

I jerk my head in the direction of Calyx’s booming voice as he steps into the waiting room. Three men trail behind him, looking just as fierce as the man himself.

“Calyx,” I call out, getting his attention before he can make a scene with the nurses.

“What’s the word? I wasn’t able to get here faster due to a situation we were handling,” he explains.

“We’re still waiting on word,” I inform him and shake my head in frustration.

It’s been a couple of hours, and no one’s come out to tell us anything. The whole thing is fucked, and all I want is to make sure Meadow is okay. That she’s going to wake up and everything will be all right.

“Right.” Calyx narrows his eyes and looks around the waiting room before jerking his chin toward the men behind him. “This is Dallas, Brody, and Wyatt.”

I give them a chin lift and turn my attention straight back to Calyx. “What are you doing here?”

“I just got my daughter in my life, a daughter mind you I just fuckin’ found out about, and I’m not about to lose her,” he growls. “Where’s the fucker who put her in here?”

“Blow, Nines.”

I look past Calyx at the sound of mine and Blow’s names being called to find Gavril stalking in our direction.

“Fuck,” Blow mutters and greets the other man. “Gavril.”

Calyx twists to see the man joining us and Gavril eyes him as well.

Well, fuck me, this is going to be interesting.

Not.

I don't need the fucking headache I can feel coming on.

Gavril turns his attention to me and cocks a brow. "Word? How is she?"

"No word yet," I grumble and ask the question that I wanted to know the answer to now. "How did you know her location?"

"She has a chip in her shoulder," Gavril states bluntly.

"Come again?" I blink at him, wanting to make sure I heard him right. "She has a chip in her shoulder?"

"Yes." He nods. "Before she moved here, I wanted to make sure she would always be able to be found, so I'd told her that that it was the only way I'd allow her to move here on her own."

"Who the fuck are you?" Calyx demands, stiffening further.

Gavril turns his attention to Calyx again and curls his lip in fury. "You know who the fuck I am, and for all intents and purposes, I'm Meadow's uncle. I would say father since I see her as my daughter, but I know who her real father is."

"Uncle," Calyx scoffs, crossing his arms.

I shake my head and get back to the subject at hand. "You had a chip put in her shoulder, and she knew about it?"

"Of course." Gavril nods. "Meadow will always be *fiică mea frumoasa*, my beautiful daughter, no matter who her father is. I swore to protect her when I first met her, and I always will."

"Motherfucker, fucked-up world, the girl who was supposed to always be my little girl ends up living a nightmare and not only lands with a man in the Devil's Riot MC but has the protection of a Dragomir," Calyx mutters, letting out a harsh breath.

"She's right where she's meant to be," I grumble and turn my attention to the doors as they open.

The doctor glances around as he calls Meadow's name. I step ahead of everyone else and wait for what he's about to say, hoping it's good. If it's not, I'll lose my shit, and I can't. Not when I've got a plan on what I'm going to do to the motherfucker who put her here.

---

"Please don't kill me," the pudgy guy Torch caught outside the cabin Johnathan took Meadow begs. For the last hour, he's been crying and pleading for his life, but I don't give two shits about him breathing another second than he has to.

After the doctor came out to speak with us, he'd informed me that Meadow was in recovery. Both her shoulders had been dislocated, but they were able to pop them back in place. They were also able to fix the damage the knife had done to her stomach. Thank fuck it wasn't any lasting damage that would keep her from healing properly or take forever to get back to herself. I know she's not going to be happy about being unable to work for a while, but she'll get over it knowing she'll be back at it soon enough.

The doctor said she'd be in recovery for a little while before they moved her to a room. I asked to see her, and he took me back. Seeing her in that bed, it fucked with my head. I stayed with her for a couple of minutes and kissed her forehead, promising to be back. I was going to make sure she was safe and that meant taking out the fucker who caused her this pain.

I left Sniper and Rain at the hospital to be with Meadow in case she woke up before I got back, and Calyx left one of his men as well to keep an eye on her.

Now, it's time to make Johnathan pay for the shit he's done. Calyx and Gavril both want a hand in taking him out, but Meadow is my woman. Mine to protect and love. Mine to keep from ever being hurt again and I'll ensure it happens and it's happening now at my hands.

“Shut the fuck up,” I sneer at the fat fucker and turn my attention to Johnathan. I’d ordered Torch and Shiner to hang him as he’d done to Meadow.

Without a word, I move to where the tools we use are kept. Most of the time, it’s Shiner or Lucky who get their hands bloody, but not when it’s personal like this. This is my job tonight.

I pick up the jigsaw and grab the thing of black powder we keep here at the barn. I open the lid and carry it over to Lucky.

“You hold this shit and be ready,” I command and look to Blow. “Get the butane torch ready.”

“Fuckin’ hell, VP, my kinda party,” Lucky grunts.

“Let’s make this shit nice and slow for him,” Blow growls, grabbing the torch and already firing it up.

Nodding, I glance back to Calyx and Gavril staring with approval in their eyes. I switch my focus to Johnathan and see he’s staring at me with wide eyes and starts thrashing around when his gaze lands on the jigsaw.

“Don’t do this shit,” he says, speaking for the first time. “You’ll regret it.”

“And why’s that?” I ask, cocking my head side to side and popping my neck.

“Because I know people, and they’ll be coming for you if you kill me.” He goes on to blather on about someone coming, and the pudgy dude nods.

“Johnny’s uncle’s coming for her,” pudgy dude says.

“And who is Johnny’s uncle?” I demand, and Johnathan snaps his mouth shut.

Nerd steps forward and gets in Johnathan’s face. “You’ll be surprised to know that I already know who you’re speaking of, and I know they won’t give a damn about your ass. As for Mr. Rollins, he won’t be doing shit. I’ve already contacted my club, and they’ve sent people up to New York to handle the problem of him and anyone else.”

Johnathan's eyes widen, and he starts fighting the chains more and more. It's quite comical seeing the bastard like this. He should never have come here. Never put his hands on my woman.

I step forward and stare into Johnathan's eyes while I start the jigsaw. I grin as I reach down and take the saw to his kneecap. Johnathan's screams become music to my ears as I cut through the bone. Once the body part drops to the ground, Lucky moves in and cakes gun powder to the wound and Blow follows suit with the flame, cauterizing it to keep him from bleeding out while I have my fun.

I repeat the process with his other leg, and they follow right along. I don't go for his arms yet. I take an ear, then the other. And with a grin, I ask Griz to hand me a pair of pliers. I also order Torch and Switchblade to remove the bastard's jeans from him. Using the pliers, I clamp down on his shriveled-up dick and make him scream more as I cut it from his body.

Straightening, I dangle it in front of his semi-conscious before smacking him in the face with it. "Piece of shit," I snap and decide it's time to finish this. I place the blade at Johnathan's neck and cut into it, severing his head from his body.

The pudgy dude screams like a pig as the head rolls over to his feet.

I turn the saw off and look at the others. "I'm done. Finish that fucker off and clean shit up." Looking to Blow, I give him a chin lift. "I'm gonna clean up and get back to the hospital."

"Go, we'll take care of this," he says, nodding.

I look to Gavril and Calyx. "You two have one thing in common and that's Meadow. I know she loves Gavril like a father and that's what she sees him as. I also know she wants to get to know Calyx, so you two need to figure a way to both be fathers to her without her feeling tension between the two of you."

With that, I make my way out of the barn and head to clean up and change out of my filthy clothes.

The bullshit that has threatened my woman's life is now finally over, and it's time to put the past behind her and look to the future. One that's with me.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## MEADOW

Panic hits me the moment I wake up. My body hurts all over, and I can't catch my breath.

"Easy, sweetheart," Sniper says soothingly from next to me.

At the sound of his voice, I look in his direction to see it's just him and Rain sitting next to me. Rain gets to her feet and comes to sit on the edge of my bed.

"Take a breath, Meadow," she whispers, cupping the side of my face. "You're safe. I promise."

"Where ... where's Nines?" I rasp, leaning back into the pillow. I try and breathe and let the panic ease, but it's not easy. I want Nines. I want to tell him how sorry I am for not staying. I want him to know why.

"He'll be here soon. Nerd texted to let me know he was on the way. He was handling club business," Sniper informs me, but from the way he said business, I want to ask but I don't.

I nod and close my eyes.

"How are you feeling?" Rain asks, stroking my cheek.

"Horrible," I mumble, meaning it.

"I'll get the doctor so they can give you something for the pain," she says, moving away.

A moment later, I hear her step out of the room. I tilt my head slightly and look at Sniper. He's got his eyes on me, and he's frowning. "What?" I ask.

"How'd you get out of the clubhouse without being seen? It's not the first time and I forgot to ask my daughter when she did it."

"Um, a hole in the fence in the corner," I answer and cast my gaze to the sheets.

“Shit,” he mutters and lets out a breath. “I’ll make sure that gets taken care of. I don’t need another part of my family taken from me because of shit like this and us not knowing you ran off to do something you should have trusted to us.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Don’t be sorry, sweetheart,” Sniper says, and I hear him lean forward at the same time seeing his hand patting my leg gently.

Before I can say anything, the door opens and I lift my gaze to see Nines stalking into the room, his gaze finding mine instantly.

He seems to freeze in place, and I can’t help the tears that spill down my cheeks as I sob. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so, so, sorry,” I cry.

Nines jerks back and rushes to my other side, and leans into me, pressing his forehead to mine. “Shh, Buttercup, don’t cry.”

“But this is all my fault.” I sob, breath hitching as I try to suck in air.

“No, it’s not,” he murmurs.

“It is. If I had just told you about the threat he made about blowing up the clubhouse with everyone in it.”

Nines stills and lifts enough to meet my gaze. “What threat about blowing up the clubhouse?”

I do my best to try and keep it together and tell Nines about the threat and how Johnathan said he’d kill everyone if I didn’t come to him. I even told him what I told Sniper about the fence. Sometime in the middle of my ramblings, Sniper gets up and makes his way out of the room. I barely finish before there’s a knock at the door and the doctor comes in with Rain and a nurse behind him.

After a few questions and the doctor explaining what they had to do, he ordered the nurse to administer pain meds into my IV. Once they leave, Nines gets my attention again and cups the side of my face.

“I get why you did what you did, but I want you to promise me now, you won’t do that shit again.”

I look deep into his fierce gaze and nod weakly. “I promise. God, I didn’t want to. I swear I didn’t. I wanted to tell you, but I was scared. I didn’t want to think of so many people being hurt because of me.”

“Buttercup, it’s over now,” he says, swiping away a tear. “Just know that. It’s over. You don’t have to worry about anyone being hurt because of you again.”

I read between the lines and understanding washes over me. I get it. What Sniper meant about club business and that Nines was taking care of it earlier. He just didn’t want to tell me what was happening. But I’m glad to know that it’s over. That I don’t have to worry anymore.

I close my eyes and relax into the hospital bed, thankful. Not just for him defeating my monster, but for him being everything I ever wished for in my dark and shimmering knight.

Now, I can finally find the time to move forward without looking over my shoulder every second of the day. And I can do it with Nines by my side, protecting me from those who go bump in the night.

## EPILOGUE

## MEADOW

I stare down at the video on Nines's phone and can't stop laughing. It's been a few weeks since everything happened.

After leaving the hospital, Nines brought me back to the clubhouse to finish healing. The doctor ordered that I continue to take it easy and rest as much as possible. Nines took that to heart and made sure that I had everything I needed in his room. He also had a lot of help at the clubhouse, so I couldn't complain because it meant I had company a lot of the time when he wasn't with me.

Nines hasn't taken me back to his house yet, which I want more than anything, but he's been dealing with club business and doesn't want me there alone while I heal. This means I haven't gone back to work yet. And I honestly can't wait until I'm able to get back to work. I've enjoyed spending every chance I get with Nines. I can truly say that I've fallen madly and completely in love with the man. He's everything I've ever wanted.

A lot has changed since I first moved here. If not for Nines, I don't think I'd have had the strength to not run at the first hurdle, but he keeps me feeling safe and secure like no other. And that helps more now than ever, considering I've got Gavril and Calyx sticking around. It's strange, but it's nice. Gavril was the man who became like a father to me, and Calyx is the one I always wished I had.

To think, if not for Johnathan, my life would have been completely different than it is now. And as much as I hate to think of the past, it's what brought me here. To Nines. To the man who holds my heart.

"See, I told you this is nothing compared to what she's done before," Nines chuckles, pulling his phone away and breaking through my train of thought as I watch the video he was showing me.

“Yeah, that has to be a good one, but I haven’t heard what Chelsea did with the mousetraps,” I inform him just as Lucky plants himself in a chair next to Nines and shoots my man a glare.

“You tellin’ your ol’ lady the bullshit that Chelsea’s been pulling on me?”

“Showed her the video of when she put the bees in Kiki’s room.” Nines snorts.

“Not fuckin’ funny,” Lucky grumbles, shaking his head and reaching to cup the back of his head. “Anyway, I’ll ask since we’re on the subject of the queen of fuckin’ with me, you seen her lately?”

“She was here earlier, but said she had to head out and would be gone for a couple days,” I answer.

“She said what?” Lucky frowns. “Was leaving for a couple days?”

“That’s what she said.” I nod, feeling somewhat uneasy at the fury that suddenly rolls off Lucky. I don’t know what’s going on with him and her, but I figure it’s them fighting what they feel for each other. Then again, Lucky, a lot of the time, seems to hate Chelsea, where she seems to love him. But I could be wrong altogether.

The two of them need to have it out once and for all. Thinking more of it, I realize in the weeks since I’ve been here, I noticed Chelsea stays gone more than she’s here, and when she is, she ducks out the moment she spots Lucky. This makes me think that she’s moving on or trying to. Then again, other than with Nines, I don’t think I have ever understood things between a man and a woman.

Nines makes it easy, though. Granted, he’s definitely a hard ass when things don’t go his way. He’ll fight tooth and nail. I’ve seen it firsthand. He fought for me and saved me when I needed him most.

I watch him as he converses with Lucky, blocking out the conversation. I take in his features, loving the way he’s always wearing a baseball cap. It makes him just that much hotter.

Nines turns his attention to me and grins knowingly, having caught me ogling him. He hasn't had sex with me since I got home from the hospital, and I want nothing more than to have him take me to his room and touch me until we're both getting lost in each other's touch.

He must read my mind, 'cause the next thing I know, Nines is lifting me into his arms and carrying me through the clubhouse. Catcalls and whistles follow behind us.

In his room, Nines lays me on the bed and stares down at me. "You know I love you?" he asks.

"You love me?" I whisper back.

Nines climbs up on the bed and cages me underneath him. "Yeah, Buttercup, I do. More than you'll ever know. I nearly lost you, and I don't want to think of not having you in my life. The very thought guts me."

"I love you too, Nines. I'm madly in love with you." I wrap my hands around his neck as he leans in to kiss me. He then does other things. Things I look forward to doing for the rest of my life.





Dear Readers,

I hope you enjoyed Nines and Meadow's story. It was definitely a long time coming for this second book, but I promise the wait for book three won't be so bad. Lucky's Streak will be here in September, and I know you all will be chomping at the bit for Lucky and Chelsea to finally be together.

Or will they?

Let's see what happens with Lucky's luck—will his streak continue with her or someone else?

Sincerely,

E.C.

## ALSO BY E.C. LAND

### **Devil's Riot MC**

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Thorn's Revenge

Twister's Survival

Reclaimed (Devil's Riot MC Boxset Bks 1-3)

Cleo's Rage

Connors' Devils

Hades Pain

Badger's Claim

Burner's Absolution

Redeemed (Devil's Riot MC Boxset Bks 4-6)

K-9's Fight

Revived Boxset (Devil's Riot MC Boxset Bks 7-9)

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Protecting Blaze's Mark

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Their Redemption Boxset 1-5  
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Nora's Outrage  
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Their Salvation Boxset 6-10  
Pipe's Burn  
Faith's Tears  
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**Toxic Warriors MC**

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Reclaimed

Cleo's Rage

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Badger's Claim

Cyprus's Truth

*The truth comes in many ways.*

## CYPRUS

Taking full custody of my little sister, I have a fight on my hands. Not with her. She's still a little girl. If it weren't for the club, I'd sink, but I need help and can't rely on the ol' ladies to help all the time.

My Prez's woman put out an ad. I told her to handle it. She knew what she was doing. I trust her.

What I didn't expect was for her to hire the woman she did or the truths that come out along the way.

Brass's Surrender

*The past always finds a way back.*



## BRASS

Everything around the club is changing. Faster than any of us are ready for. There's a storm brewing and it's not gonna be easy to ride out.

When she comes into our lives it's not easy seeing her. She's a blast from the past, but there's more to it. But what that is I've yet to figure out.

One thing I do know for sure is she's here and history always has a way of repeating itself.

Scythe's Grasp

*Nothing is worth grasping unless it's something you'd die  
for.*

## SCYTHE

There's not much I care for in this life. My club. My brothers. My blood. All the rest of it blurs together. The only feeling I get is when I'm doing things, I'm not proud of. I'm stained and that's the way it'll stay. Nothing can change the past or present.

Not even her.

She's been around and I've seen her staring, but I refuse to go there. She's pure and innocent. She doesn't deserve what I have to give.

With the war we're dealing draws her in, I'll do what it takes to protect her and keep her out of the enemy's grasp.

She's mine whether I want her to be or not.

Brake's Intent

*Intending to do one thing doesn't always work out and you  
find yourself doing another.*

## BRAKE

Some things come to me easily, while others are much harder. I've come to terms with who I am. I'm a twin to my brother. A member of my club. A man who is different from others. I hold secrets no one knows, and I will do whatever it takes to keep them that way.

There's more to me than anyone can understand, and I won't have my brothers look at me differently.

I'm not surprised my secrets are brought to light the day she walks into my life again. Only can I stand judgment and the look in not just her eyes when I fight what's between us.

Danger surrounds the club, and I made my intentions clear. I won't let anyone else be pulled into the troubles.

# SOCIAL MEDIA

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