

DEVIL'S HANDMAIDENS
MOTORCYCLE CLUB



O'Meara's REVENGE

• JARRETSVILLE, MD CHAPTER •

THE DEVIL'S HANDMAIDENS MC
CALIA WILDE

O'MEGA'S REVENGE

A Devil's Handmaidens MC Romance Novel

by

Calia Wilde

OceanofPDF.com

O'MEGA'S REVENGE

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Chapter One

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK!” I tossed my keys at the farthest wall as I entered the rambling farmhouse the club owned. My helmet would have been next, except I’d paid too damn much for the custom Predator modification and didn’t have that kind of money to burn.

The peanut gallery, aka two road sisters from the Devil’s Handmaidens MC — MC being short for motorcycle club — had to comment on my distress.

“What’s got your panties in a wad now?” Missile, god love her, had no filter. At least Quick did.

“What’s wrong, Tits?” And no, she wasn’t being vulgar—that was my road name. I’d shown up on the DHMC doorstep years back with nothing except a lot of trauma and a rack that turned heads. It didn’t help that my real last name, McGee, was a walking bullseye with a soundtrack to match.

“The bastard.” My other name for the boyfriend. The girls knew.

“Oh.” Quick nodded as if she already knew what my on-again, off-again, sort-of-on, lover had done to get me angry this time.

“What’s the big bad wolf done now?”

Did I mention he had a road name, too? Of course not. Wolf wasn’t the type of guy you idly gossiped about. Point one, I didn’t indulge in such things, at least when it came to the quagmire that was my sex life with Wolf, and two, the less I talked about Wolf, the better everyone in earshot was. He ran with another motorcycle club, but walked on the other side of the line between good, not so good, and really really awful.

See, a long time ago, there was no difference in the clubs. All riders could belong, and they mostly got along. But there was this teeny-tiny percentage, one percent, maybe, who couldn’t get along. They broke laws and broke heads. They

loved doing both. It gave the rest of the riders bad reputations. Therefore, the American Motorcycle Association disavowed the raucous one percent, and a new breed of alpha-hole was born.

They took pride in being one-percenters.

Something that probably wasn't good to talk about around the non-initiated. But brass tacks? There are good people, not good people, and all sorts of shades of folks in-between. The DHMC was for the most part, good people. But we also were the type of good that took on the downright evil people. Those predators that took their enjoyment out on the helpless or the weak. Horrible sorts like pedophiles and rapists. Being in this rarefied circle of women who rode, and had reason to kick ass once in a while meant walking a very gray line between being truly good and fucking up someone's shit.

Wolf, on the other hand, could technically be counted in the "not so good" people category, but at least he kept his illegal shit away from the areas my sisters and I hit hard. But being where he was, doing what he was, he rubbed elbows with some real dubious elements. When he did, and if they pissed him off, he told me. In turn, I told the girls, and we handled it. That part of our relationship worked. It worked really well.

Also, the chemistry between us rocketed off the charts. I swore that man could blink and make it look sexy as sin. It was like he had hardwired me to be tuned into all things *Wolf*.

But...

He lived in central Pennsylvania, over an hour away, and ran with a club where the old guard insisted that women had three places. Position one was on their knees, sucking anyone with a dick off. The "gash" they used like tissue. Then there were "mamas" — women worthy of consideration as breeding material. And finally, "old lady." The explanation of that term could take forever because it all depended on the biker, again, a man, to define it. Some of them claimed it meant something revered. The Yin to their Yang. The cream in their coffee, the sugar to their spice, etc. But some of them treated their old

ladies like dirt. In truth, the only difference between gash, mama, and old lady was how much money divorce court was going to cost you.

I wasn't gash. And I would never be someone's mama. That meant the only place I'd fit was in the last category, which would never, ever happen. See, in order to be an old lady, I would have to give up the DHMC.

That wasn't possible. With my past, I needed these women, their mission to save women and children from traffickers, the sisterhood who understood how broken I was yet let me rant at stupid things.

Like not being invited to a biker party.

"Their VP is retiring, and I'm not invited."

"I thought they liked you," Quick said.

Missile wasn't as nice, and spoke over Quick. "Those bastards. I bet they ordered a bunch of hookers, and Wolf doesn't want you finding out."

Did I mention her broken filter? The trouble was, it was exactly what I suspected was going on. Being in a long-distance relationship was hard. Too many opportunities to cheat.

At least on his part.

The last proposition I had was from an angry motorist who made fun of my bike, then asked me how much I charged per hour. It took every ounce of self-control not to scrape a groove down the length of his Beemer. Instead, I quite succinctly told him, "You couldn't afford an hour with me."

Despite the fancy car, he didn't have "it." That defining aura that signaled "ultra-rich" rather than "nouveau rich." Something about the hair, the clothes, or the quality of his veneers spoke to humble roots and deep debt rather than a foundation of wealth that could buy and sell humans like commodities. I'd seen that strata once.

It left me scarred and hateful. A deep-seated anger that never left because it made me realize that there is no such thing as “society” or “social conscience.” There are people out there who make a mockery of compassion.

“He wouldn’t do that.” Quick defended Wolf, breaking me out of my mental nit-picking of trauma.

“He runs a strip club, for fuck’s sake.”

“And does he ever take advantage of those girls? No.” Quick continued to pick apart Missile’s assumptions.

“We don’t know that for certain,” Missile pointed out.

I whistled to get them to stop. “Enough. Is there any scuttle on that missing girl?”

We’d been working a kidnapping case. A young girl, fourteen. Trouble at home, a history of acting out, and just enough questions about the circumstances to make the police think it was a runaway situation, not a kidnapping. But her father was persistent. Our chapter president, Trot, kept good communication with the local law enforcement society, so she got the referral.

So far, nothing stood out, and we’d been unable to find her. None of the local pimps had her. I’d checked with Wolf, and he hadn’t heard any rumors about his or any of his rival’s clubs getting a minor. Which meant either she’d been relocated outside our region, or she was possibly dead.

“Trot reached out to Jersey and the mother chapter to get them on it.”

We weren’t the only chapter. There were Devil’s Handmaidens all over the place. That helped in cases like this. But the longer she was missing, the more likely the outcome wouldn’t be pretty.

“Any new jobs?” I needed to keep active. My day job was interesting, but sporadic. Repossessing cars with defaulted

loans was mostly a lot of driving from place to place and waiting for the right opportunity. It was my string of days off, and I needed Wolf.

Getting turned down hurt, but I thought it was “biker business,” which happened. But then Sprout’s wife, a sweet girl named Danielle, texted me to find out what I was wearing to the retirement party the club was throwing tonight.

I hadn’t replied.

Instead, I threw a hissy fit in front of my girls.

“None. So we have plenty of time to go fuck with Wolf.”

“You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking,” Quick beseeched Missile. Her mouth hung open because Missile was rubbing her hands together like a cartoon villain.

“We need sequins, and tequila, and...”

“Who is getting fucked up?” Trot joined us from the back. Following her was our matron, Margaret Wheade, a seventy-plus widow who never quite left 1974 behind. She still wore her hair in long braids and only dressed in organic materials. She sold us the farm we called home, and then moved into a converted bus that hadn’t moved in over three decades. It sat near a line of brand-new greenhouses where we grew legal pot. It was an easy leap as soon as Maryland legalized growing it. Margaret’s late husband had a decent crop established, and a huge clientele who were happy to finally pay taxes rather than worry about being busted.

Wolf’s MC and Wheade Farm went way back, illegally.

“Sequins?” Quick asked.

“Maybe even those fancy fake diamonds.” Missile had stopped cackling long enough to pull up her phone.

“Definitely need the spike heels tonight and bling. Lots of fucking bling.”

Trot groaned. She looked to me for answers.

“Wolf’s MC is throwing a retirement party for their VP.”

“And he forgot to invite us,” Missile added.

“Whoa, we can’t just crash a Destroyer party. There’s rules about that shit, you know? Do you want to start a war?”

Trust Trot to be the voice of reason.

“You don’t have to come.” Missile pointed her phone at me. “You have a skirt like this, don’t you?”

Said skirt was a micro-length hot pink bodycon number that I wore once, with tights. It went back into my closet, probably under my last pair of tactical boots that had worn out.

“Lemme see.” Trot stole the phone from Missile’s hand and scrolled through the photos, landing on a look she approved.

“I’m not forty.”

“Careful, now,” Quick warned. Trot was getting close to the big four-oh, so Missile was on dangerous ground.

“If you’re wearing something that shows your coochie, we’re going to need bail money.”

“Hell yeah! The only way to party.” Missile held up her hand for high fives all around. I guessed it was now up to me to be the voice of reason since Trot had succumbed to Missile’s insanity.

“We weren’t invited.” I wasn’t even invited. That grumbling I kept to myself. No one needed to know how much this cut me.

“All the more reason we need to make an appearance. No one fucks with us. We’re bitches who do and go wherever the fuck we want.”

Missile was going to get us killed one of these days.

She turned to Trot.

“Prez, listen, we let these guys think they got the upper hand, they won’t respect us anymore.”

“They don’t respect us now,” Quick pointed out.

“Oh, now there’s where you’re wrong.” Trot straightened her posture and held up a finger.

Margaret stepped in, “Hold on to that. I’m making a call.” She pulled out her cell phone and scrolled through her contact list. As she waited for the recipient to pick up, she glanced at me to ask a question.

“Kush is retiring?”

I nodded.

“That means Wolf is going to be VP.” She let that bombshell drop as whoever she was calling picked up.

“Hey, Jelly? What’s this I hear the Kushman is giving up the road? He get the arthritis or something? Does he need some of my magic carpet mix?” She listened for a moment and made a few nods with accompanying sounds.

“No, probably needs the heavy shit then. Too bad it makes your pecker limp.”

Another pause. We all waited as Margaret laughed at something Jelly said.

It was a trip watching her work. Knowing exactly which carrots to dangle to get answers the rest of us mere mortals would never pry out of such an insular group like the Destroyers. Jelly was one of the old ladies I’d mentioned. Her man was cool. Barely did a thing without Jelly on the back of his bike. It probably helped that she still rocked corsets and leather like a twenty-something.

“Sure thing. I’ll send a couple of my girls up with it. Tell sweet Kushie to get his ass down here and dust out my cobwebs when he sobers up.”

She laughed at something Jelly said and said her goodbyes.

“You’re in.”

Missile whooped and tried to get high fives again.

My stomach twisted. What if I showed up there and Wolf was already paired up with one of the girls the club kept

around? Or worse, what if he was with a hooker?

Another thought made me want to vomit. What if he hired the hookers?

I didn't want to think about that.

Missile dragged me upstairs, and we found the hot pink skirt. Luckily, it didn't have mud on it. I pulled out a pair of black riding leathers.

"You are not wearing those."

"Yes, I am." I wasn't going to court road rash for the sake of fashion.

"Wolf doesn't have easy access in those. Wear the chaps with those tear-away panties and give your girls a boost. Not that they need much boosting."

On the contrary, big boobs meant major issues with sagging. Back pain, looking twenty pounds heavier than anyone your same size, and lots of unwanted attention.

"I am not wearing tear-away panties to a Destroyers party." Oh hell no. I liked sex, but only with one guy, not a whole room full.

"Live a little." She wiggled on the pink skirt. It fit her a hell of a lot better than it did on me. It actually covered her ass and the fact she wasn't wearing underwear.

"You are going to wear underwear, right?" My doubts about this whole operation were growing by the second. She'd layered the hot pink skirt with a chain mail crop top that was accented with rows of differently shaped mirrors. Missile was a walking, talking disco ball with bits of her deeply tanned skin peeking out of places they shouldn't be peeking out of.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a prude?"

"I'm a realistic woman. Underwear keeps certain things from getting sticky."

"Sticky is good. Dripping wet and slippery is even better." She licked her lips and wiggled her hips. The movement

reflected light from the mirrors and I was temporarily blinded.

“You know, I didn’t invite you.”

She laughed at me.

“I know, I invited myself. You can carry the weed.”

Great, felony transport of narcotics across state lines. I marveled at my resume some days.

“How are you going to ride your bike with those?” She “borrowed” a pair of my silver thigh-high boots that had chain fringe wrapping from top to stiletto heel. I could barely walk in them, and certainly couldn’t ride. The heel messed with shifting.

“We’re not riding. Trot’s going to drive us.” She tossed a grommet-laced corset at me. It had a flounce of black lace around the bottom which accented my curves. The last time I wore it, Wolf threatened to cut it off me if I didn’t take it off by the time he was naked. I’d managed to save the outfit and the memories. Was it hot in here? I fanned myself and tried to keep up with Missile’s flurry of conversation.

“Is she now?”

Missile nodded. Then she stopped dead in her tracks and snapped her fingers. “Almost forgot!” She texted someone and got back to the job at hand, which was dressing me like a goth hooker.

“Do you own anything a bit more revealing?”

“I’m wearing a corset.” My boobs were practically at my chin. I shoved them out at Missile to drive both points home.

“On your ass, I mean. You got a nice ass.” She bent to the side and ogled me.

Now, I love my sisters, and I put up with a lot of shit from them, especially Missile. So, I knew this was all in good fun. When shit goes down, Missile is the one right at my side,

knocking down doors and kicking ass. She was Trot's right hand, with a fist and a gun. I was a demon on a mission, and between us we put a huge black spot onto any creep's agenda.

"I'll wear the leather booty shorts and my pinstripe stockings, okay?"

"With these." She pulled out the lug-soled boots I got online. They had too many buckles to be practical in shiny black patent leather and silver chrome. With my bleached hair and pale skin, I was a study in black and white.

In contrast, Missile was color and tan and curly black hair. She went heavy on the colors around her eyes and painted her lips three different neon shades. Then glued little mirrors to accent the point of her eyeliner and fake eyelashes. Then she ruined the look by strapping a large slouch back over one shoulder.

"That doesn't match." I pointed out.

"But I need it for condoms."

"You need a purse, not a suitcase. How many bikers do you intend to fuck tonight?" Hopefully, no one with an old lady. I would never be able to look any of my friends there in the eye again.

Maybe I needed to put down some ground rules.

"Sprout is off limits."

"Duh. Danielle would have my lady balls if I touched him."

She wouldn't do any such thing. The woman was as cute and meek as one could get. Now, Sprout's ma was a different story. She was a real biker's old lady. The kind that carried a truncheon and chewed bubble gum. Just in case she needed to kick ass and chew gum. Too bad her husband was dead and she had Sprout dead set on making little sprouts with Danielle. That woman would be kicking ass and out of bubble gum well into her nineties.

"And please don't tie up Skinner." The poor guy would have an aneurysm.

She added handcuffs to her big bag of shame.

“You going to grab the kitchen sink on the way out?”

“Yup, and Trot’s bringing a shotgun and the long rifle. Bring your .22, and I’ll get more knives.”

Probably overkill if we were going any other place. But this was a Destroyers’ party. That meant loud music, whiskey, and blood. Not generally in that order. Frankly, Missile was traveling light.

I stuffed the pistol into my little black backpack that matched the boots. Then grabbed my butterfly knife and extra ammo.

So much for not starting a war.

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Chapter Two

“Password.” The prospect at the junkyard gate stopped us from waltzing in. The Destroyers’ clubhouse was walled off inside the secured junkyard. *Terrible aesthetics*. Not where you’d expect a raucous party. But the sounds and smells gave it away. That, and the smoke from the outdoor grills. Yes, plural.

“Hog roast,” Missile quipped. Then she nudged me to pull out the weed.

I dug in my cleavage and pulled out the baggie of prime herb. The speck tried to grab it, but I pulled my gun and pointed it at his nose. “No one but Kush touches it. Margaret sent it.”

“Shit.” His eyes were bugging out on the short little barrel of my gun, and he fumbled in his pocket for a phone.

Missile shrugged at me.

“Yo, man, got Tits and some other chick out here with a bag of chronic. They say it’s for Kush.”

He listened while Missile cleaned under her fingernails with a knife.

“Yeah, they’re packing.”

He glanced from the gun to my tits.

“Yeah, she’s got a gun on me right now... okay.” He hung up and told us to wait.

“I don’t wanna wait. What will it take, a blow job?” At Missile’s question, the kid’s eyes bugged out.

I turned to Missile and said, “Are you nuts?”

“Yes.” She dug inside her big bag of junk. I waited for her to pull out a gun. Instead, she put away the knife.

“Who’s coming out?” I asked the prospect. He was new enough that he hadn’t earned a nickname yet, so I didn’t have leverage to us on him.

The speck remained silent. That meant one of two things, he was smart, or it was one of the high-ranking Destroyers. Probably Wolf or Jackson. I braced for Wolf. At least I wouldn’t be catching him with his pants down.

Instead, Sprout came outside. And he was angry.

That meant Danielle was probably inside, unsupervised, and he was in a hurry. I held up the weed and dropped Jelly’s name.

He rolled his eyes.

“Come on.” He led us past the speck and through the maze of junked cars. There were more bikes than usual. The bonfire sparked high into the air.

“Don’t you ever worry about all the gas and oil catching fire with that blazing in the middle of this shit?” Missile pointed to the fire. There was a huge crowd of men and very few women. Almost all the men had “Destroyers” patches on their vests. The bottom rockers weren’t all Skillettsville, either. I swallowed a lump of fear.

This was why Wolf didn’t want me here.

Kush was well-liked, but not someone ever tapped to go farther than VP of bumfuck Skillettsville, PA. Nationals were here. I glanced at Spout, who had lines between his eyes. Rightly so. His wife was worth millions. Maybe even a billion by now with compound interest. She’d inherited a fortune from her late grandfather. Add to the pile that she was sweet, biddable, and cute, and Sprout probably wished he’d put his foot down and made her stay walled up at their lake house.

Missile nudged my arm. She tipped her head at someone she’d picked out of the crowd. Sure as shit, the Destroyers’ acting national president was holding court at the fire. Their actual president was doing life in prison on multiple charges, including, murder, arson, racketeering, conspiracy to commit

murder, and at least one ATF violation regarding explosives. Until he died, there wouldn't be any change of regime. But everyone knew who would step into his shoes.

I'd met the replacement. He wasn't a good man.

My heart beat faster. I kept my head tilted away from the light without making it appear obvious that I was hiding. Missile had no such problem though. She glared at him as we skirted the outside of the crowd. My sisters knew all about my life immediately before arriving at Margaret Wheade's farm.

"Don't look now, but Wolf has clocked us."

"Shit."

We got to the door of the clubhouse before he mingled his way through the crowd and caught up to us.

"Sprout?" Of course, he addressed his brother in leather before me.

"Weed for Kush — a peace offering." Sprout had interpreted Wolf's question and given him the most pertinent details so he wouldn't blow his shit in front of the guests.

"Make it quick." He guarded the door and crossed his arms, glaring into the darkness.

Of course, it wasn't the welcome I'd expected. But at least he wasn't getting mauled by some slobbering bike bunny. I took a quick peek at my phone. A message from Danielle was on top. It read, "*Sorry, not going. Sprout says no. Party here?*" It was a little too late now. I answered her with a quick "yes," then shot off a text to Trot. Maybe a little revenge on the boys was in order?

The contrast of night to the sweaty clubhouse was mostly in temperature and mood. Outside was raucous and testosterone-fueled with a scent of hunger to the mood. Inside, it sounded like a strip club and smelled like a brothel. It felt like lust and smelled like pot.

Jelly was right. Kush was in no shape to go anywhere soon. He was tied up on a St. Andrews Cross and getting a blow job

by one hooker while another hooker fed him her tits. Two more stood ready with smoke and drink. He took hits off a pipe between swigs of alcohol, and then they'd shift the cross for the next girl in line to take a turn.

I did not feel sorry for him one bit. I felt sorry for the girls, but they seemed to be enjoying the fun.

Sprout snapped his fingers. "Hand it over." I dug the weed out again and handed it off. Missile was too busy watching the floor show to notice or protest.

Around the edges of the room, the club positioned mattresses still covered in their storage plastic and boxes of condoms spilled out by each one. The party was in full swing. A couple of the girls the club kept were on their backs. But that didn't account for all the mattresses. I tried to ignore the activities and keep my eyes trained for threats.

One approached us as Sprout hung out at Kush's side, waiting for the right moment to interrupt.

The girl had a bright blue and purple cosplay wig and leather straps that could be considered clothing, but they didn't cover anything. "Who brought in the trash?"

She wasn't asking the big guy flanking her. He wore no colors, but he had a certain set of rings I was all too familiar with. My brain flashed back to some terrible memories.

"No one calls the Devil's Handmaidens trash." Missile shot her mouth off before I could stop her.

The bodyguard raised an eyebrow and flexed his fingers.

The girl cocked her head. "Devil's who?"

I slapped a hand over Missile's mouth before she could give away everything. "Friends of Kush. We brought a gift for his retirement."

The bodyguard relaxed slightly.

The girl eyed me.

Missile pushed at me to release her.

“What gift?” She took in my outfit, then Missile’s. The struggle had bared her crotch. She wore underwear, thank God. But they were neon pink with the words “Eat me.” Written in sequins on the front.

“Pot. Ask around. It’s the best in the region.” I supplied. Hopefully, that’s all they’d remember and not dig deeper.

Missile made a noise of protest and crossed her eyes at me, but I’d locked her down with one arm barring her chest and the other across her mouth. She breathed angrily through her nose, spewing snot on my hand. I didn’t dare let her go.

The girl pointed at Missile. “Control this one. No freebies. We’re getting paid by the head, and I expect the payday to not be shorted by some skank-ass party girl looking for a new daddy.”

Missile began to struggle violently. She was spitting mad. I locked down on her harder, expecting bruises I’d have to apologize for later. I whispered in her ear, “Trot is outside.” Then added, “vulnerable.” And that settled her ass right down. I let go of her carefully.

“That bitch called me a skank.”

She pulled out her phone and snapped a picture of her before I could stop her.

The bodyguard caught the motion and snapped a picture of his own.

“Shit.” My reflex was to turn my head, but I knew it was already too late. I arrested the motion, dropped my chin low, and turned to Missile and took her phone. Then I marched her out the door. Wolf was there, waiting, still glaring at the night.

“We’re good.”

We still had a whole gauntlet of Destroyers to walk past, and I couldn’t drag Missile out by the ear like I wanted to.

“Look around, Tits,” Wolf growled.

“I know,” I told him.

He wouldn't let it rest, however.

“This ain't a party for old ladies and hangers, babe.”

“I know, Wolf.”

Missile chimed in, “Who is the bossy bitch-ass whore inside?”

Wolf looked confused.

“The madam with the bodyguard,” I clarified.

His nostrils flared like they usually did when I caught him in a lie or getting ready to lie.

We were interrupted, however.

“Who are these beauties?”

Double fucking shit. If I remembered my hierarchy well enough, this guy was number three or four in line. He owned a share in a brothel out of Nevada. Was it Henderson, or Tahoe? I couldn't remember. Not that it mattered much—he was scum. Stinky, mangy, overweight, hairy scum. He drugged his girls and didn't care if their johns used condoms or not. He was a sicko responsible for at least seven incidents the DHMC had intervened on in the last four years.

“Normies,” Wolf answered, “and leaving.”

He grabbed me by the arm. Maybe he knew better than to grab Missile or thought I was the greater threat.

“Who you calling normal?” Missile fired off her big mouth.

She flashed her tits at the guy, and his eyes lingered, taking in the dark nipples and her perfect skin.

He lost interest quickly and landed on my cleavage. “Those are some big ones. Show me.”

It wasn't a request.

Wolf's face turned to granite. His normally easy-going attitude disappeared. “No.”

I kicked his shin to shut him up. “Sure thing, sweetheart.” I tugged the corset down and flashed my pink nipples. It took a hell of a lot more effort to squash them back inside.

“Wait a second, lemme see those tats.”

I had the undersides and my rib cage covered in colorful tattoos. There were none on the parts of me that showed to the outside world, just places that plastic surgery hadn’t been able to fully fix. It was my armor when I had none.

Under each boob was a wolf. Their jaws reached up to hover, open-mouthed and slavering under each nipple. Each wolf reached upward and clawed around the outer curve of my breasts, leaving a trail of torn skin in the wake of the claws.

It was a matched pair, for Wolf, chosen by him, and approved by me to cover one of the worst injustices I’d ever experienced.

But I refused to hide. Wolf won me fair and square. Then paid for and mended the damage done to me. It wasn’t his fault he hadn’t kept me. That was on me. My nature to remain free even if it killed me. I pulled out the better of the pair and showed him as much as possible.

Wolf covered my nipple with a hand.

“You see that? It’s a wolf.”

His voice was like gravel, and sharp edged with malice.

“Your girl?”

“Yes.”

That warranted a moment of study. Not my tits, my face.
“Well.”

His eyes shifted to Missile, who hopefully had caught on that we were in dangerous waters, and lifted an eyebrow.

“Who is she then?”

She smiled. “Name’s Missile. Spelled just like you think it sounds. I’m a right-ass bitch who loves to cut things. Pleasure

to meet you.” She stuck out a hand like this was an everyday transaction.

He scanned her outfit, from sequined underwear to a knife hilt sticking out of the garter just above her boot top. “I’m charmed. They call me Crete.” He didn’t sound charmed.

“Cool. Yo, Tits, we leaving?”

Now I remembered the rest of the story. Crete as in concrete. As in cement shoes and the bottom of the lake. *Shit-shit-shit-shit*. “Yeah.”

But as I answered, Crete insisted that we stay. Then turned his sights on me. “You’re Wolf’s girl. You must be here to find out if he has had his turn inside. He hasn’t, yet. And this party is for him, too. Isn’t it?”

My stomach hit my toes and rocketed back up to my throat. I smiled despite the desire to barf on this man’s boots. “Congratulations, baby.” I knew Crete was referencing his imminent promotion.

Wolf threw an arm over my shoulders.

The act of possessiveness wasn’t lost on our audience.

Whether it was planned or not, my eyes drifted to the fire. The man standing in the center of it all watched it all like a play. This amused him.

One invisible tentacle of control stretched out, ready to nudge the stage into motion.

I blinked, remembering a whisper from another time. *“Those who now smile upon and embrace, would affront and stab, each other, if manners did not interpose.”* This culture was like a French Court or political game, but with only a few rules, especially one of brotherhood. Ruthless men like the one I locked eyes with, and the one standing near, knew when to drop the mantle of camaraderie to ostracize a member and demote a brother to an enemy.

Missile and I were outnumbered, vulnerable, and definitely would not win any friends if we fought our way out.

Submission to this mob was likely a horrible choice, as few were willing to stand up to the circle of power. Of those that would— be it out of friendship or love— we'd ruin their position in the club.

The part of me that wanted to fight even to death didn't like the direction of my thoughts. But there were too many forces at work here. Jackson was appeasing the powers above him by throwing this lavish party for his outgoing VP. It would help him later if someone complained the club wasn't paying enough. He could point to this night and say, how can you say such a thing when you drank my whiskey and fucked twenty whores on my mattresses?

If Wolf had just told me, I would have understood and stayed away. But now we were in deep with no good exit. And there were other ways to fight, even when powerless. I turned to him and stroked his shoulder, avoiding the vest that stood for his position in the club. "It's too early to give you your present, isn't it?"

He glanced at the man by the fire, then tried to figure me out.

"Too early? It's never too early." Crete slapped Wolf on the back and laughed.

There was a code we'd worked out long ago. Wolf pulled my hand from his shoulder and wrapped his much larger hand around it. As he wove his fingers in and out through mine, he hooked my pinky with his. A promise to never hurt me no matter what. His finger tightened almost to pain. He would do what it took, but he would never hurt me.

This was my choice. And as such, meant I embraced whatever the results were.

I dropped to my knees and unbuckled his belt. Before I went further, I stroked his erection through his jeans. Wolf went from semi-aroused to fully aroused. His mouth parted ever so slightly, and his breathing increased.

“Now that’s the way to celebrate, my man. Make sure she sucks you good.”

He gave Wolf’s back another slap and walked back to the fire, uninterested in seeing more.

I could have let it go, gotten up, dusted my knees off, and walked out with Missile, but now that I was down at eye level with Wolf’s erection, I couldn’t stop. I locked eyes with his and saw the desire in them. The focus on my lips inches from his dick.

“You all need to get a room.” Missile took off in the direction of the gate. I brushed my fingers over the ridge in his pants again before getting up and tugging him with me into the dark.

We stopped against an old pickup truck. Wolf worked a hand into my shorts and stroked my clit with his finger. With each circle, more of his hand slid inside and was freer to brush my seam, toy with my labia, and press against my mons. I reciprocated by unzipping his jeans and getting his erection free. Then I lavished it with slow strokes from tip to root and back.

“What the fuck were you thinking, Tits?”

“Kiss me.”

He complied, catching my tongue with his and nearing brutality with the urgency. When he broke free, he asked again.

“Position of power, Wolf. You couldn’t look weak.”

My breathing was too fast to talk coherently. I tried again. “When the king passes by, a wise servant will bow deeply and fart silently.”

He laughed and gasped as I squeezed his erection hard.

His finger slipped inside, and he tightened the pressure from inside to out.

“A dangerous game.”

“Gives us a chance to talk.”

“Fuck talking.”

He dipped low long enough to pull my shorts and panties down past my knees. They got caught on the buckles of my boots, but I was freed from their confines. Like Missile wisely said, dripping and slippery was much better. I turned and planted my hands low on the truck’s running board, presenting Wolf with my bare ass.

He stroked my skin and then ran his dick through my wet pussy.

I spread my feet as much as I could, even though they were constrained and felt the stitches of my underwear’s elastic give way. With an arch of my back, he slipped home, and a wave of bliss slipped through me. This was mine. No one else coerced or forced me to give and receive the pleasure I experienced with Wolf. He was the right fit, the right blend of dangerous and thoughtful—the perfect partner who gave me as much pleasure as he took.

His dick planted in deep, and he paused there, filling me up. The pressure from his powerful hands trapped my hips in place. Then he flexed, gaining just a bit more ground and pressing upward. His balls and legs added pressure to my clit, which was trapped in place by my closed legs and the angle of our lovemaking.

Eventually I would have orgasmed with only that pressure. But he knew me better. As he drew out, he rocked forward, causing the friction to press against my clit from the inside. Back in, rocking upward to catch the outside and each time, working more quickly and violently. Soon it was primal and frantic. I added slight cants of angle to match the speed and friction, giving him better access to the right spot inside.

He thrust deep and tensed. I risked slipping a hand between my thighs to press hard on my clit.

I cried out, unintelligible and urgent.

My pussy spasmed as he twitched once, then froze before letting out a shuddering groan of pleasure. His dick pulsed deep inside, and he rocked against my ass, trying to prolong his orgasm.

“Oh Meghan, Fuck, you’re beautiful. Fuck you’re my...”
The next word was a groan instead of anything verbal. But a million words could fit. All of them pleasurable. We fit, he and I.

He was power, and I was —

Was it something I’d been created to be? Or was it who I already was? Sometimes fear made me wonder if I’d been warped into someone else’s vision. But that woman wouldn’t revel in a hard fuck in the middle of a junkyard. Nope, that was all mine. I owned this. I’d picked Wolf as the man to share pleasure with, and with that choice, I gave him every ounce of courtesan skill in whispered secrets and fantastic lovemaking. He was becoming the man he wanted to be. And I was in his shadow, building the balustrades and strengthening his foundations. What I asked in return was as simple as two pinkies finding each other in the firelight.

A promise. That’s all.

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Chapter Three

“About time you finished.” Jackson leaned against a stripped Explorer. He took a drag on his cigarette and carefully studied the stack of cars in front of him, instead of looking in our direction.

“Shit.” Meghan hurried to pull up her shorts, but they were tangled on the buckles of her boots. I stood between her and Jackson and got my shit tucked in a whole lot easier than she did. She cussed the entire time. It was cute as fuck, and I was about two seconds from telling Jackson to fuck off when she did a last little jiggle to get her boobs settled properly in her corset. Looking at her, I got distracted.

“Sprout will escort them bitches to the lake house, so they can keep his wife company. Ain’t letting Nationals know about her if I can help it.” Jackson ground out the butt under his boot.

“I’ll head up with— ”

“You ain’t going nowhere. Least not anytime soon. Their little stunt got attention. You gotta prove to me that this shit you got going won’t interfere.”

Meghan slipped her hand out of mine and took off toward the gate. I followed her progress and met Jackson near the main path, so I could watch as Sprout, Missile, and my girl got gone.

“She’s trouble.” Jackson lit another cigarette.

“The best kind.”

“You sure about that?”

I tilted my head to study his expression. He wasn’t angry, more distracted than anything. “What’s got you spooked, Nonno?”

He bobbed his head, as if acknowledging I’d read him properly, but kept his secrets close to his vest. “Winds of

change are blowing, Wolf. That's all."

He was right. I tipped my head in understanding.

Then he had to go and ruin it.

"That was some fuck, wasn't it? All hot with her ass in the air like that."

"Sure was. You like watching my ass or something?"

"Fuck you." He slowly pulled in smoke and let it go, stalling, or trying to get me to hang myself by talking too much. What was it Meghan said once? Right, "Always say less than necessary." The biggest problem with that approach is the assumptions made. If I wanted to be a good second in this club, I needed open communication with Jackson. That was something severely lacking between him and Kush. The show was all Jackson's and no one else's. I aimed to fix that because we were weak if he played island. This brotherhood worked best when all the men moved in the same direction.

Herding cats was easier, if I had to be honest about it.

Just the transition from last year to this year was a bitch. Long ass story in short form, we'd been done dirty by the mayor. She saw the error of her ways and put us in her will. To the tune of millions in property. Good honest, money-making businesses. More than enough to keep each and every Destroyer in Skillettsville rolling in steady dough for a lifetime. Maybe longer.

She had a sharp mind, that bitch. Cut us right off. Doing all of the illegal shit wasn't as much fun now that our men had houses and three squares. Sprout saw it first. A way out of running drugs and sticking our necks out. He was set up for the long haul with Danielle. Building up the town, making money hand over fist with new houses and businesses, keeping low, and making bank. Getting every single Destroyer a piece of it, if they worked.

Then Nationals caught wind of it. That's why the sudden interest in Kush's retirement. The subtle nudge to throw a big biker bash to celebrate.

We were stuck. Jackson more than everyone else. Our accounts were good, but there was much more to being a Destroyer than paying your monthly dues. Things moved. Like ghastly, hungry sharks in murky water. Drugs, guns, and yes, sometimes people. Jackson knew where we'd land if our men got too soft. I knew it, too. This life we'd chosen could disappear because of the simple crime of outshining the wrong people.

Christ.

Tits and Missile stepped right into the fucking middle of it. Tahoe and Buffalo, right in our back yard, and both presidents salivating over my girl like fucking dogs. And both with more power than our entire club at the snap of the fingers. "One of us needs to go hold court with those fuckers."

"Nope. Both of us need to hold court."

"Shit." He was right.

"Well," he slapped his thighs, "let's get back. Your girl gave you head while I fucked her ass, understand?"

"Jack, lies got a way of fucking you over. Best say you jacked off while watching us fuck. That's closer to the truth."

"Ain't no way I'd jack off watching your pasty ass."

"Lies, man. This ain't exactly private." I nodded at the shadowed figures of people milling around the edges of the party. We had port-a-potties set up, beer on tap, the girls in the club, and food on the grills. It wasn't a stretch to believe more than just Jackson saw Tits and I go at it. Hell, Sprout probably got an eyeful as he walked past to meet Missile at the gate.

Wouldn't be the first time someone caught us fucking, and it wouldn't be the last. When Tits got me revved up, nothing stopped us.

"Fine, I cussed you out for letting your gash in the gate."

"She's not gash."

He blew me off and started back to the fire. I followed, because it was what I had to do. There were two ways to live this life. I could be like Sprout and play stupid and harmless, and let everyone tell me what to do, or I could step up. Get into a position where I told people what to do. I saw my path early, real early.

As soon as I got my cut, I stepped up. And kept stepping up until Jackson noticed.

He finally had. And with Kush stepping down, I was going to get one more rung higher.

One day, Jackson would screw up. He'd get caught, gain too much attention, or piss someone off above him. I'd be there when that happened. I didn't mind being second, but first wasn't out of the equation either. It was part of the game.

And I loved games.

We settled in our respective places. Jackson wedging himself right between Crete and Nonno. I set up a lawn chair slightly to the right, two bodies down from Nonno, picking my spot nearer to the real leader rather than the poser. Sure, Crete was a dangerous man to piss off, but I knew who called the shots. And it wasn't him. I signaled to the speck running beers to bring three. I handed one to Jackson, then offered one to the man on his right. Probably did that out of order, but even that was calculated.

It showed that I valued my president, took care of his needs, and I wasn't afraid to piss off the shot-caller to do it.

Jackson smiled and said something that got the men next to him laughing. Nonno turned and motioned for his guy to move so I could sit beside him. "Whatever came of that girl I sold you?"

"Sold? I won her fair and square."

Crete leaned in, "I thought I heard you cheated."

I laughed. "Hell no. Was supposed to lose that hand."

Jackson pointed at me with his beer. “Told him, better fucking lose. And the asshole pulls a two and a fucking five. Nonno here had a King, and what the fuck was that card?”

Nonno smiled. “King and a queen. Then pulled a seven. Fucking shit.”

“Wolf here gets the three. A whole mess of suits, so he’s got shit, but the possible straight, so he tosses his balls on the table and shoves everything into the pot, including all the shit he won off me, because I know better than to fucking win when playing Nonno here.”

“Naw, you’re just a shit player,” Nonno pointed out.

Jackson didn’t miss a beat.

“So, Wolf goes and pushes everything in, including the keys to his fucking bike. Who was it, Ice? Yeah, that’s right, the fucking Iceman, never seen him blink or say boo, is waving his hands and shaking his head behind Nonno’s back, telling Wolf he’s got a pair of kings, and Nonno here, he doesn’t give a shit, tosses his bike key into the pile.”

“That was a sweet ass Heritage,” I said. Knowing full well that Jackson was telling the story much better than I could have.

“Well, shit gets tense. Nonno drops the two kings, the lady, his fucking seven, then holds up the last card and lays down a queen. Sweet set, right?”

I smiled, remembering the rush of that night. But it wasn’t because I was enjoying myself. Nope. It was because I’d been in the game. The real game. Win or lose, I had a goal in mind that wasn’t winning Nonno’s bike. Tits was hanging in the middle of the Buffalo clubhouse in a fucking birdcage. Human-sized, but still a fucking cage. She’d been abused and dripped blood on the floor. Not enough to warrant immediate attention, just a macabre stain that turned my stomach.

Ice and I were just a year, maybe a year and a half out of the prospecting phase. He had gained a reputation as a shooter, and I had begun enacting my upward move. Both of us took

one look at the blood, the girl, and the number of men who would kill us seven ways from Sunday and did that thing that drove the nurses at Walter Reed nuts when we both were down there for rehab. It started with a look, then a nod, and Ice held up two fingers. I put up three. We walked around the room, scoping out every exit, listening to the talk, figuring out weaknesses, and planning.

Exactly three hours later, I was the last man at the poker table against Nonno himself. Ice put on a show, protesting my stupidity, but he'd also fed me an ace from the table two hands before. I had the two, a three, and a five. The mate to the ace stared at me from the card I picked up, and I was either resigned to plan B or wouldn't have to cheat at all.

As the last card was dealt, Ice shook his head. He didn't see what I had.

The weakness. Nonno and I shared a passion for games. Odds meant nothing, and attitude was everything. Nonno wanted to win, but he also wanted to be challenged. That was what made him happiest. An opportunity to live on the edge of losing everything. There he thrived. I threw my key in, letting the crowd crow over Nonno's hand. Dealt with the laughter and the crude comments about my shitty hand.

Nonno stared into my eyes and tried to read the game there.

I didn't even look down when I flipped the card.

Ice's ace fell to the floor in the ruckus, and the hollers grew as someone counted off my straight. It didn't matter. What really mattered was that I'd challenged Nonno. He smiled.

"Whatever you want. Name it. But you can't ride two bikes home."

I tossed his key back at him and left the cash on the table. That's when I pointed at Meghan and made a decision that changed my life. "Her."

The room fell silent.

“And then the son of a bitch points at this hooker in the cage and says, ‘her.’ Mother fucker left Nonno’s Heritage and about seventeen grand in cash sitting on the table.” Jackson laughed along with everyone else.

“Was she worth it?” Crete asked, his tone holding innuendo.

Nonno stood up abruptly. “You crude mother-fucking son of a bitch!” He took a step and cocked his arm back to catch Crete in a wild right hook. I caught his arm and started talking low in his ear. Jackson stepped between Nonno and Crete and began placating his guy.

Meanwhile I said a lot in Nonno’s ear. “I got her cleaned up. Stitched up. Sent her to some folks so she could disappear, like you asked, man. She wasn’t supposed to come back. But she did. It wasn’t me, swear to God, it wasn’t me. She did it all on her own.”

He clutched my arm and bent his head to mine. “I’m a fucking dead man ‘cause of you. You know that?”

“No one knows, Nonno. No one.”

“She was supposed to die, Wolf.”

“I know, Nonno. But you know she couldn’t, right? She had too much fight in her. She wouldn’t die.”

His eyes locked with mine. “If I could have, I’d have let you have the Heritage.”

It was just barely above a whisper. My own reply was just as soft. “I know.”

He straightened with a laugh and slapped me on the back then made a good show of trying to egg Crete into a fight. They had a good time baiting each other. Jackson and I shared a nod. It was all a game. We’d just avoided a war that no one needed.

“This calls for shots. Where’s that fancy scotch Sprout promised?”

Jackson led Nonno to the clubhouse.

As Crete passed me, he paused. “She worth it?”

I wasn’t nearly as adept as Nonno at this game yet, but I was learning. “Who?”

“The girlie with the white hair.”

“Excuse me?”

“The bitch you won from Nonno.”

“Oh, I see where you got things mixed up. That chick with the white hair? She’s with a group that grows good weed south of here. Real party chick, you know?”

“I thought she was Nonno’s. What happened to the chick in the story?”

“That bitch died. Come on, let’s get inside before Nonno drinks all the good shit.”

Law two, never put too much trust in friends. Learn how to use your enemies. I slapped Crete on the back and led him inside.

I might have told Jackson not to lie, but that didn’t stop me from doing it.

Kush was propped up against the bar, practically a puddle, but still standing. I helped him stand by wrapping one arm under his in a brotherly hug. He was weaving something fierce. I got a younger member to take him outside so he wouldn’t embarrass the club in front of our guests. Jackson lined up the drinks and poured me the last glass. Nonno lifted his glass into the air.

“Raise hell.”

“Or die trying,” we all answered back.

Twenty-three-year-old scotch wasn’t meant for slamming home in a rat hole of a biker club in the middle of a junkyard. Then again, not everything was always what it seemed. Years we’d scraped by, living low, moving stacks of cash through the

strip club and tattoo parlor. But last year changed some shit. When you see six zeros behind a bank account balance, suddenly seventeen grand in pocket seems like chump change. Our little group of four men was likely worth as much money as Sprout's wife. But not a one of us flaunted it.

Trouble is, bitches smell that shit on you.

The combination of money and power is an aphrodisiac for the kind who flocked to biker parties to get laid and paid. One such woman set her sights on our group. Where one went, others followed. Pretty soon, Nonno, Crete, and Jackson were taking turns on the mattresses. I sipped my scotch and kept a close eye on what was and wasn't happening. Sometimes you can do both, and sometimes there's someone hell-bent on getting in your way.

"You're not partaking?"

The woman was a looker, I'll give her that. She also was the conductor of this orchestra. "I notice you're not either."

"Business before pleasure. What is your excuse?"

"Same."

"Liar."

The drink I had poised at my lips hung precariously at an angle.

"What did you call me?" I used the tone I usually reserved for assholes and prospects.

"A liar. I heard you took pleasure earlier."

That I had. Not that it was any of her business. "If you know that, then why are you being a fucking bitch about it?"

"Charming. Tell me, are all bikers bred from Neanderthals, or did I happen on the dregs of the gene pool?"

She spoke awful fancy for a hooker. I suppose some men got off on that.

I grunted in answer. Sometimes it's best not to say a goddamn word.

But that only got her more interested. Lucky me.

“Cat got your tongue, Wolf?” People use your name to create a false impression of intimacy. You're supposed to be honored they know who you are. But men like me don't want to be remembered. The more incognito you go, the better.

“Go bother someone else.”

“Why? When it is so interesting to bother you?” Her fancy lips went into a little moue as she sipped her drink and eyed me from top to bottom. There was a calculating gleam in her eyes I didn't like. Then she licked her lips in an attempt to be seductive. Ask any guy, and they'll tell you that shit doesn't work. It's the ones that light up from inside when they talk to you that get your dick hard. Not some dead-eyed bitch with an agenda.

Maybe she thought she had some sort of immunity because she was the lady getting paid tonight. But the way I saw it, once she walked in that door, she became an employee of the Destroyers, even if temporarily. And as such, I was one of many bosses tonight.

My drink hit the bar and I motioned to the speck behind it to take out the trash. It was done wordlessly. A brush of finger against the nose, a command he'd have to obey if he wanted to earn his patch. As soon as he said, “Ma'am, you have to leave,” I was in motion.

Three fingers in the air, our boys on the door, and five of my brothers nearby, we had her bodyguards neutralized almost instantly. Every single one of them had a man tagged to them. We rotated every fifteen minutes to avoid their suspicion. One made a fuss as he went down.

Blood flowed. Can't say it was the wildest party we ever held, but there's nothing like a good fight to get the heart pumping.

“You’ve made a grave mistake!” the bitch kept screaming all the way past the bonfire.

The rest of the ladies began to panic, without their boss-lady in sight. I whistled through two fingers to get their attention.

“Yo, listen up! Any bitch hooking gets 100% of the take for the rest of the night. You wanna leave, go for it. The rest of you, well, enjoy the fuck out of your stay.”

The music went back up, and not a single girl walked out the door.

Mistake, my ass. It’s a free country, and if people wanna work, they don’t need someone taking a percent off the top.

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Chapter Four

““Oh fuck.” Sprout took one look at the line of bikes in the driveway and groaned.

“What the hell, Trot? Did you invite the entire region?” I gaped at the range of bikes. I knew my sisters’ rides, but there were more here than we owned. Near the end, my rat bike held down a spot, looking like a pile of rusted garbage next to a bright pink sportster with kittens on the gas tank.

“I might have mentioned it.”

“Wolf is going to kill me. Shit, sorry Sprout, I didn’t plan this.”

He took in the range of rides. A crooked smile on his face. “Every one of these is ridden by a bitch? Cool. Danielle is going to want one. Fucking-A.”

The man had motor oil for blood and exhaust for brains. Newly wed and determined to bring his very shy wife into the biker fold as fast as possible, he was also a third-generation biker. His grandfather and father living and dying for the Destroyers.

He hopped out and held the door open so we could file inside. Biker-mama trained her boy right.

The lake house was a 3000-square-foot spread with two levels. As you entered the top level, you looked through a couple of glass walls surrounding a sculpture atrium to the deck beyond. Past that, the hill sloped down to a man-made lake. Danielle’s grandfather bought the entire end of the lake and built a modest mansion. It was her grandmother who insisted on the hoity-toity shit. Story is, he built it, then dumped her for the interior decorator. He died before her bastard was born, and Danielle’s grandmother rode the money train into the mayor’s chair.

When her grandmother was murdered, Danielle and Sprout landed together. A pampered princess and a biker. Weirdest

combo ever. But I saw them fall in love right before my very eyes and knew it wasn't wrong. Danielle had been a frightened recluse, and Sprout, well, he needed her to offset his sweet stupidity.

Danielle held court with Sprout's mom in the entertainment lounge to the right of the sculpture room. There were three clubs' worth of DHMC in attendance. Damn. I slipped through, not interested in making conversation. Trot followed me, with Missile on her heels, leaving Sprout in the mob. Last glimpse I had; he was lifting his shirt.

"What's this shit about mattresses?" Trot must have gotten the low down from Missile when I was with Wolf. Damn it. I should have been the one reporting that. I swallowed.

"Eight," Missile pointed out.

"Jesus. How many women?"

"Over twenty." My voice was even.

"All club girls?"

What Trot was asking was, "were they all bike bunnies who hung around the Destroyers for the sex or were any of them hired?" The question made me cringe.

"Well?" Missile prodded.

"Two club girls. They normally have five or seven hangers on. I'm guessing only two were down for a mob scene."

Trot straighten to full height. "And you did nothing about the others?"

My back went straight, too. "They were getting paid."

"It's illegal, Tits."

I glanced at Missile. "Duh." Not that it needed confirmation. The Destroyers did a lot of illegal things in their clubhouse. I only reported on the worst of it. Those times they crossed the line into harming others without reason. In my five years with Wolf, that happened exactly twice. Any other

scuffle was unquestionably provoked. Missile and Trot would be total hypocrites if they got upset every time there was a fistfight.

Trot had that “thinking” look on her face. Her eyes met mine.

“Were you scared?”

Waking up scared me. Going to sleep alone scared me. The only time I wasn’t scared was when I was in Wolf’s arms. That was no lie. Life taught me early that there are people whose sole mission was hurting people. But that wasn’t what she was asking.

“I wasn’t first on the field.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Missile scowled.

“She means, the Destroyers had men in place.”

“Sure, I mean, there were plenty there,” Missile rambled on about the situation. The number of club rockers she saw, and the way we were outnumbered.

Meanwhile, Trot studied me. She held up a hand to quiet Missile. “Well?”

“Two on the door, another five in various positions around the room. There were men positioned on the escort’s bodyguards, and if I’m not mistaken, seven were wearing body armor under their cuts.”

Understanding dawned on her face as she heard my report. “They were waiting for trouble.”

I nodded slowly.

“From the madam.”

Her sharp intake of breath meant I’d shocked her.

“A woman was running that shit?”

“Equal opportunity,” I reminded her.

Trot opened her mouth to speak but stopped herself before saying anything.

“What?” I prompted.

She blew out a long exhale and hesitated. “Did you recognize her?”

It was my turn to take a moment to collect myself. “No.”

“Do you mean that bitch that got snippy with us by the door?” Missile asked.

“Yes.”

“Huh. I thought she was just one of the club women. They’re mouthy.

Sometimes. The thing is, I got along better with most of the Destroyers’ club girls than the women the bikers married, or called “ol’ ladies.” The three exceptions being Danielle, her mother-in-law, and maybe Jelly. The jury was still out with her. I think she tolerated me because I didn’t hit on her old man.

“Multiple clubs?”

“Shot caller from Buffalo, Tahoe president, two Chicago muscle, I think. I don’t know who they were protecting. Hagerstown, Pittsburgh, and Akron.”

Missile added her list. In all, over eleven clubs were represented.

“I don’t get it. Why the fuss over a local VP?”

Trot’s question got a shrug out of Missile. But I had an idea why.

“Create compelling spectacles,” I mused.

“Ward, there’s something wrong with the Beav.” Missile laughed at her own joke.

“She’s quoting Machiavelli.”

Wrong. It was likely Cleopatra, or P.T. Barnum.

“Jackson is wooing the brass.” He was using the retirement of his VP to plead his case to the leaders of the Destroyers. That case being to let them slack on the illegal shit because

they were bringing in legitimate money. At least, that was my theory. Skillettsville's leader wasn't an idiot. He must have seen the writing on the wall. When you're pulling in good money, why screw up and risk jail time, or worse? The biggest problem, one Wolf once pointed out to me when we were cooling down one night in this very house, was when other people think they are owed a piece. They'll feel they deserve it through association. And, since the Destroyers were a very large association, only a strong man or a team of strong men could hold off the scavengers. Their former VP didn't fit that description. I swore Jackson chose Kush because he would never challenge him for the top spot. Wolf, on the other hand, was strong. He was the ideal person Jackson should pick to present a strong front against the leadership. And it was an "us versus them" situation.

Trot picked up the thread I dropped. "Can you find out why?"

I shrugged. Wolf didn't talk about the politics of the club, except his desire to be VP. That I knew about even before I went to live on Wheade Farm. He once told me if he had the second spot, things like buying girls would stop under his watch. On occasion, he complained about the way the strippers he employed were treated. Under his watch, they had it better than most. That made him well-liked by both his men and the girls. Willing and happy women are much more congenial than abused and angry ones. The latter could kill you.

A smile crossed my lips at that thought.

"Thinking of the wall-banger you just had?"

"No, murder." I was dead serious.

Of course, they thought that was funny. Why? No clue. Maybe because I'd hidden that portion of my history from everyone. Almost everyone.

"Don't kill Wolf until you get the information for me, deal?" Trot slapped me on the shoulder, but paused to add,

“But if you could, try to get him to stop hiring hookers, please?” Her head tilted toward the party. “Some chapters wouldn’t like the association.”

She didn’t mean it as a personal attack, but a long-buried part of me took offense. I hid it with my silence. But inside, that bitch was screaming at the injustice. It wasn’t long ago that I’d been one of those women. Willing or coerced, it didn’t matter. You were lumped into that same shitty bucket of descriptors. Marginalization begets solidarity.

“The proper term is escort.” I dared her to contradict me with my raised brow.

“Hit a nerve, didn’t I?”

“Whoopsie. I’ll be over there if you need me.” Missile swung away from our little meeting to hang near the door where she could monitor both the party and her president.

“A nerve? How about a thousand nerves. One for every day I didn’t have a choice.”

Her chin worked as she digested my words. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Then she ruined it.

“It’s just that you’ve been better for so long— ”

“Better? You mean I was somehow less because I was trafficked?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“I. Don’t. Care.” I spoke slowly so she would get my point. My blood was pumping through my body, making it hard to think. This was important, so I took my time to get it out.

“What I was is still a part of me. Who I was then influences who I am now. There is no escape from that. I am not going to pretend that what happened didn’t just because I’m on the other side now. What I was made me want to fight this fight, and if you don’t respect that, then I don’t know how to ...”

How to continue? How to abide with knowing I was being judged? How to stop the pain from leaking out? It tumbled around in the mess I'd buried deep inside.

"We have your back." Trot was sincere. She made certain to let that statement sink in.

"My back also includes my past."

"Yes. Yes, it does." Her hand dropped on my forearm and squeezed hard. Wisely, she'd avoided my wrist or hand. Or even the power position of my upper arm.

Hours later, Wolf showed up with a couple of men from the local club. Their arrival was met with catcalls and whistles. Like Sprout did before them, they ate it up.

I slipped out, unwilling to get angry at my sisters for having fun. Down the hill, there was a long dock attached to a fancy boat house. Sprout added a sweet runabout early this summer. Before then, the building had sat empty for years. The lake was calm with barely a ripple. The surface looked like deep blue-black glass. The glow from Harrisburg lit the skyline to the east. Directly above my head, the sky shimmered with stars. Night sounds bounced around the valley. Frogs, crickets, strange nocturnal calls I couldn't identify. This far from the party, nature threw its own. Fireflies danced in the deep grass of the meadow that skirted the property's edge.

Heavy footsteps warned me that Wolf had made it out of the zoo. I glanced back to confirm.

"Why aren't you inside?"

"Thinking."

He settled in an arm's length away. If someone looked at us, they'd have no clue he was inside me earlier. That's just the way we worked. Apart or touching to abandon. There was no in-between.

"Who are you planning to kill?"

The corner of my mouth went up. "You." It was our little game.

“Mind telling me how this time?”

I paused a second to land on a method that would be both effective and humiliating. The forest that ringed the view gave me an idea. “Deer attack. I’ll rig a musk bath, then let loose a dozen rutting male deer.”

“Bucks. The males are called bucks.”

“I spaced on the word. Thanks.”

He shifted a few inches closer. “You mad at me for tonight?”

It took a ten-count before I could talk through the tightness in my throat. But the hesitation didn’t help. If anything, the invisible fist closed harder.

“Yes.”

He exhaled heavily. His face twisted.

“I’m not going to blame it on Jackson. I was just as much a part of the planning as he was.”

“I bet you picked up the mattresses.”

“No, that was Hickey.”

One of his brothers.

“You know how it looks for me, right?”

He spit into the water near his feet. “Yep.”

I waited.

Each second he didn’t elaborate or defend himself was a wound on my heart. The lump in my throat got so large I had to swallow. The pain bubbled up. To distract myself, I worked on Trot’s request.

“Did Jackson score points with the bigwigs?”

“That’s what you think was going on?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No, what’s obvious is your fishing expedition. You know I won’t tell you what’s going on inside.”

Of course not. We weren’t that kind of couple. Sure, from the outside, it appeared that I was using him for information. But it was so much more than that.

And yet, here we were with a huge wall of silence between us.

A tear dripped from my lower lashes. It fell free and disappeared into the darkness.

“Next time I don’t tell you about a party, don’t take it personally. And, a warning, never bring your club with you. That shit wasn’t cool.”

“No? I’m supposed to walk into the viper’s den unprotected?”

“You are never unprotected with me.” He practically growled as he spoke. To emphasize his point, he stood up and towered over me.

I tipped my head away, so he wouldn’t see the damp trails of moisture on my cheeks.

“Who’d you hook up with after I left?”

His weight shifted and his hands balled into fists before landing on his hips. “The whole fucking mattress crew, want details?”

My heart skipped, and I worried that his sarcasm was a lie. I bit my lip to stop from saying something even more hurtful. This was my Wolf. The man who saved me.

Or maybe I’d inflated a good deed into something more. “I want peace. And while I’m at it, a million dollars in a retirement fund gaining compound interest while women are elected for top leadership globally.”

He snorted. “A woman would fuck things up.”

I glanced at his face. He frowned, deep in thought.

“Are you mad at me?” I tossed his question back at him.

“Yes. You were supposed to be home. Safe with your sisters and off the fucking radar of — ”

His words cut off.

“Of Nonno.” I finished for him.

“Fuck.”

It was my turn to scowl. “He recognized me.”

“No shit.” Wolf walked the length of the dock and back as he cursed under his breath.

“I’m tired of hiding, Wolf.”

He stopped abruptly. “Hiding was smart. What you did tonight was fucking dumb. Who the fuck thought it was a good idea to waltz into our club and swing your invisible dicks around? Was it Missile or fucking Trot?”

I stood up and stuck a finger in his face.

“Not one word about my sisters.”

“And you do the same about my brothers, capisce?”

“One night with mobsters and you’re mimicking them? What happens when they take you to the cocaine orgy? You can’t just roll around in their shit. You get fucking dirty that way.”

“I’m not a saint,” he warned through his tone.

“Neither am I. And because of that, I saw the absolute worst side of power. Did you forget that?” My voice raised to the point where it echoed against the water. I stepped back, realizing I’d gotten too close.

“I will never forget that. You won’t fucking let me.”

My spine stiffened. “There’s a solution for that.”

“My untimely demise due to a musk bomb?” He had the nerve to laugh.

“No.” I turned toward the house with the intent of walking straight through and getting on my bike. Once there, I would ride. To where was a crap shoot. Maybe home to Maryland, or maybe just keep rolling until my money ran out. Hopefully, that would be somewhere in Mexico or maybe Argentina. Somewhere a long fucking way from him and his club.

“Tits, wait.”

I walked faster.

He caught up with me before the sliding door on the bottom floor. The party overflowed into the downstairs home gym that also held a pool table. Someone set up a keg on the concrete skirt under the wooden deck above.

“Listen to me, woman.” He grabbed me by the wrist.

With speed created by many hours working with Missile and Trot, I broke his hold with a quick twist and downward stroke. I followed through with the heel of my free hand to his chin. He barely blocked it in time.

That caught the attention of the women downstairs. They circled the skirmish, ready to jump to my aid.

But I didn't see it. I was stuck in my emotions. The same dark need drove me that fired up nightmares every night.

I was trapped. When Wolf blocked my strike, he wrapped up around me.

In the background of my internal scream, his words buzzed like white noise. I kicked and elbowed until I was free. Then I ran. I made it to the doors before getting foiled by a sister. I have no clue who it was, but they paid for the mistake of trying to hold me.

Wolf, on the other hand, was fighting his own fight. His sharp yell of my real name broke my haze. I turned to where he was being constrained by four Handmaidens.

“Say the word, we make him disappear.”

“Let me go.” Wolf twisted and got an arm free for a second before more women stepped between us. He towered over them. His expression was frantic.

In contrast, I was glacial.

“We’re done,” I whispered... or yelled. Or maybe I just said it in my mind. I don’t know. But he heard. Either he saw it in the dead light of my eyes, or in the blankness of my face. All the pain would go away if he wasn’t there to make me remember.

Quietly, I slipped through the crowd. At the bar next to the back stairs, I grabbed an open bottle and walked out the side door. I made it as far as my bike.

“Some night.” Quick jingled her key ring and stared at the sky.

I glanced at the bottle in my hand and at my bike. I couldn’t do both. She followed my gaze.

“You going to drink that whole thing by yourself?”

“Maybe.”

“Give me your keys.” She snapped her fingers and held out her hand for them.

The urge to defy her was strong. It was just another trap after all.

Chapter Five

It took the tequila—a sure sign she'd had enough of me.

Once the DHMC's hen party's feathers were unruffled, I snagged a bottle for myself. It was one of Sprout's premium Kentucky bourbons. I carried it to the dock and sucked on it for an hour or more.

Sprout joined me. He stretched his legs out. They outmatched mine. He had more height in his legs, but I beat him in the torso. Both of us compared our Viking ancestry once. Turns out we might be related a few centuries back. All that to say, we both topped six feet by more than a couple of inches.

He talked about things. People. Danielle. Chatted while I drank.

"She leave?" I finally asked the question burning in my brain. Please let my gut be wrong.

"Last I saw, Quick had her keys, so no."

"Good."

He shook his head at me.

"What?" My irritability shone through the single word.

"Ma says that when, I mean if, I argue with Danielle, I should just apologize right up front and wait to ask what the fuck I did wrong later."

I angled my head to gawk at him. "She said that?"

"Yup."

Fucking deep. And bullshit.

He picked up a rock and threw it toward the deep water. A bullfrog croaked to the night. An answering call came from the western edge of the marsh. He returned it, to show the interloper who was boss.

“That’s fucking stupid, man.”

“Ma’s never steered me wrong.” He picked at the cracks between the boards. The gravel tracked up onto the dock no matter how often he bitched at the guests not to tramp through the gravel around the edge.

“She practically married you to Danielle after the first night you slept together.” Then Jackson put the hammer down and ordered him to do it. Sprout took his damn time making sure Danielle knew it was really his idea, not anyone else’s.

He held up a finger. “All we did was sleep.”

That was a damn lie. I told him that.

“Scout’s honor.” He made a crossing sign over his chest.

“That ain’t how you do it.” I slapped his hand down. He deflected it.

“Sue me. I was never a Boy Scout.”

Truth. Then again, Sprout was a much better person than I was, and I fucking made it past Webelos. Loved the woods, hated listening. But I was getting side-tracked.

“So, your ma tells you how to handle Danielle?”

He made a face. “Naw. And yeah.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

His face puffed out as he let out a long gust of air. The stupid on his face was replaced by shocked introspection. “So, she tells me stuff.” He waved a hand to stop me from making fun of him.

“But I don’t fucking listen to her. I mean, shit.” He gave me that face that said, “*What kind of idiot do you think I am,*” but it really proved he thought deep down he was an idiot.

“So?”

“So, then I fuck up, and yeah.” He tossed another rock. It landed with a little plink.

“Your ma, she’s a good one.”

“Best biker bitch you’ll ever meet. Worth a hundred of those fucking DHMC bitches.”

“To Destroyer women.” I raised the bottle in toast and drank deep. His ma was the shit. Widowed over twenty years. Maybe even twenty-five now. Never remarried and never strayed from the club. She was more of a Destroyer than half the guys I called brothers. Then there was Sprout. Legacy son. Born to be a biker. Had every reason to leave and stuck it out.

“Why do you stay in the club?”

He glanced at me before studying the lake. Finally, he spoke. “It’s home.”

“But with Danielle, you don’t need us anymore.”

“The fuck I don’t.” His words were fast and decisive.

“Well, I stand corrected.”

He turned toward me.

“Wolf,” he didn’t continue. His face held a million words. And if I was patient, I might have unlocked a cosmic secret. Opened the gates to wisdom from bikers a generation or more past. But I was a drunken asshole.

“It’s my name.”

He blew a raspberry.

“You’re a fucktard.”

That was more like it. I laughed.

“What did you fight about this time?” he asked.

I shrugged.

Maybe I knew, maybe I didn’t. I wasn’t a fucking mind reader. She was angry about the prostitutes. But it wasn’t because of who they were or what they were doing. It was more about her past than anything. I should have minded that better.

In some ways, she was like glass. Heartbreakingly beautiful when the light hit her just right. Clear, pale skin and the hint of

blue veins where she was most delicate. And in most ways, she was steel. A blade honed to razor precision. A thing worthy of the word, covet. A man would pay anything to possess such duality in the flesh. Both were a product of her past. She'd been broken and folded and forged and beaten over and over again until the result was something that begged for a new meaning. Infinitely feminine and yet stronger than any man. Because deep down, any man would have broken under what she went through. Even me.

But even through it all, she glowed. Her captor taught her philosophy and tactics, brutality, and refinement. She was, in theory, perfect.

And wild. Running like a feral thing in the darkest of wildernesses. That called to me the most.

"I don't know what to do, Sprout." I loved her. Had loved her since I caught the fight in her eyes, even hanging in a cage bleeding.

"Dude, you are so fucked up. Are you asking me for advice?"

I held up the almost empty bottle as proof of my state. And since, yes, I'd admitted there was a problem with Meghan and I, then I'd stooped as low as to ask the class clown for advice so... But sometimes, the fool is the wisest person.

"Yeah."

"Marry her."

I laughed in his face.

"You asked."

I had. Shit advice. I stood up.

The world swayed around me, and it wasn't from the dock. In an act so stupid, I knew it was wrong but did it anyway, I slammed the rest of the liquor and prepared to throw the bottle as far as I could.

Somehow, Sprout not only snatched the bottle out of my hand but steered me uphill. That took a bit. For every step forward, I swear I staggered five steps back. Gravity was not my friend.

“Take me to Meghan.”

“I’m so surprised she hasn’t killed you yet.”

“She loves me.” I dropped onto my heels, which spun into two more steps backward as I reeled from the realization.

“Sure, she does. That’s why she broke up with you. Yeah, ha-ha.” Sprout didn’t sound convinced.

“She does. See, she wants ...” I trailed off. Meghan only wanted to be free.

“A big ass Wolf dick, yeah, you told me a million times. Still not buying it.”

“She wants to be free.” I rocked in place.

“That’s why she broke up with your dumb ass.”

He wasn’t being helpful.

“No, she won’t ask me to be something she doesn’t want to be. That’s why.”

“Dude, you are so fucked up right now. I wish I had a camera.”

“Did I ever tell you about the guy she killed?”

Sprout glanced around. “Wolf, situational awareness, bro.”

He had a point. But we were in the middle of fucking nowhere, and there was a lot of noise coming from the house.

“She was kidnapped at fifteen.”

“Aw fuck. We’re going there?” He blew out a puff of air and put on his dumb face. Eyes wide and a goofy-ass smile as vacant as you can get. But that was his act. I watched him assemble it right in front of Jackson. He was the court jester playing the fool while hearing every dirty secret.

“I know you’re not as dumb as you look.”

“Heh, tell that to my ma.”

I poked him in the chest. “You got your father’s brain.”

He sobered, the grin dropping and his eyes going cold.
“Thanks, I think.”

His dad was a murderer. I had secrets of my own to keep for the club. Shit. That’s where I was fucking up tonight. Fuck.

“Find me an empty room, and get Tits, so I don’t choke on my puke, okay?”

“Sure thing, boss.”

He wrapped under my arms and half-carried me up the hill. A good brother, in every deed and word. But goddammit, one of these days he’d snap, and we’d see his father’s genetics take over. Lord help anyone in the cross hairs of that.

I landed on the mattress of the third guest room. The one with the good lock and the en suite bathroom attached. The room wound around me as he tugged off my shoes.

“When I leave, lock that.” He pointed to the door.

I saluted him, as if he were one of my drill sergeants back in the day. “Sir, yessir!”

“Fuck.”

“Meghan?”

His heavy sigh was the last thing I remembered.

Lights out.

My tongue was glued to the top of my mouth. There was eight-grit sandpaper under my eyelids and two hammers clanging away on my brain.

“Mother fuck.”

Something pasty stuck to my cheek. I swiped it away, mostly and stared at the smear of blue gunk on my hand.

I blinked multiple times to figure out whether I was seeing shit, or it was fucking blue. My cheek itched so I used the clean backside of my hand to wipe at it. That, too, came back blue.

“What in the fuck?”

I glanced at the bed beside me. No Meghan.

The pillow where my head was had a glob of blue and bits of hair stuck to it.

Immediately, my hand went to my head.

My heart stood still as I felt stubble.

I left the service over a decade before and swore I’d never cut my hair again. But sure as shit, there was a familiarity to the velvety section I’d swept my hand over.

The blue one.

“God dammit!”

I stumbled to the bathroom, swerving because of the hangover, and shock.

When I got a good look in the mirror, I started cussing every word and word combination I knew.

“Those god damned bitches.”

“Hey Wolf, Ma made coffee—oh shit.”

Sprout’s mouth hung open.

“Your hair.”

Yeah.

He whistled. “It’s blue.”

I turned on the shower and started scrubbing my hands before I took off my clothes. “Is it on the vest?”

I’d fucking kill every last one of them if they got dye on my cut.

“Hold still. Let me get it off you.” Sprout helped me get the vest off and wiped the glob of dye off where I’d smeared some.

“Luckily, black leather hides a lot of shit.”

The water was hot as fuck, but I didn’t care. I scrubbed and adjusted the water.

Sprout held a hand up to shield his eyes. “Jesus-fuck. You tell anyone I saw your dick this morning, and I swear I’ll sic Ma on you.”

“Promises, promises. Hand me the Vaseline.”

“Jesus, God, Wolf, I am not watching you jack off.”

“The petroleum will help lift the color from my skin.” I hoped. Meghan told me the hairdresser did that to her scalp once. I couldn’t remember if it was before or after the dye. Whatever, I needed this shit off.

“The cleaning service is going to fucking flip shit when they see this. Dude, send another couple hundred my way to cover this.”

“Get the fucking DHMC bitches to cover it.”

A smile spread across his face.

Mother fucker.

It got bigger.

“What?” I squinted at him, so I wouldn’t get shampoo in my eyes. There wasn’t much hair left on my head, but I doubled the amount of soap and kept scrubbing.

“Bet they took photos.”

“Jesus-mother-fucking Christ.” I stopped scrubbing and let the water run over me. It was getting clearer with each rinse. That was a good thing.

“Where the fuck were you?”

“Fucking my wife.”

I glared at him.

He shrugged and smiled happily. “I bet I get laid more than you or any of the brothers. Fifty bucks.”

I wasn’t taking that bet. Danielle and Sprout fucked like rabbits.

Instead, I cranked up my middle finger and asked, “Like looking at my junk?”

“Gah, fuck you.” He slammed out of the room bitching the entire way.

After two more shampoos and scrubbing with every product I could find in the medicine cabinet — FYI, rubbing alcohol. Burns like a mother fucker, but takes it off in one swipe, mostly — I tugged my jeans back on and threw my shirt in the trash. My vest got examined for residue, and I made small touch-ups with the alcohol before sliding it on. Then I went upstairs to find Sprout and a Henley I could borrow.

At the top of the steps, some of the last DHMC ran out the door when they saw me. Standing just outside was Missile. She held up a blue braid and laughed. Then she took off with her sisters leaving just Sprout, Danielle and his mom behind.

“Dude, grab me a Henley or some shit, bro?”

“Got ‘cha covered.” Sprout tossed me a navy-blue shirt. I traded vest for shirt and then put the vest back on. Danielle walked out mid-change, turned bright pink, and shielded her eyes.

She had so far to go before she was a biker chick. Despite that, I had to admire Sprout’s choice. A better woman, his mom excluded, you couldn’t find. Sweet, rich, cute, and nicely soft around the edges. If I weren’t gunning for a seat of power, she would have gotten a second look. But a woman like that would crumble under the pressure if paired with a man in power. Thank God Sprout didn’t have aspirations. They paired nicely. Sweet girl, slacker biker.

Ma, on the other hand pointed her spatula at me and laughed. If she were thirty years younger, or not Sprout's ma, or ... well, not the Jolly Giant's widow, well? Yeah. Too many ifs for comfort.

On principle, I had to flash a middle-finger at her for a second. She returned the gesture times two. Not easy while flipping pancakes.

"Your hair looks like shit."

That's what Sprout led with. His mom hit me with the boomerang retort.

"Looks like you lost a weed whacker war." She sipped her coffee and smirked.

"Did you help?" I asked, as politely as I could.

"Son, I know better."

That was good.

But I was curious.

"Who did it? I know Missile was in on it." Even without words, she'd held that braid like a scalp. Crowed over it. Hell, she would probably mount it on her damn bike as a trophy.

She scoffed. "They *all* did it. Never seen such solidarity. Makes you boys look like pussies."

"Gee, thanks, Ma." Sprout made a face into his coffee.

I motioned to him to hand me a cup. He fixed it with the fancy shit Danielle liked.

To be honest, I liked it, too. Between his ma adding a splash of the hair of the dog, and the scraped organic vanilla sugar Danielle liked, the Joe elevated from needful to elite. I hovered over the first sip, letting the smell of sharp whiskey and vanilla mix with the robust coffee tones. Best damn cure for a hangover.

"Started when Quick poured Tits into someone's truck, and she came in all fired up. Never seen that girl angry at a god-

damned soul. What the fuck did you do?”

And there it started. I looked at Sprout. He mouthed, “apologize” to me. I flipped the bird at him.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t you ‘nothing’ me. I know how bad someone can fuck up. I raised Sprout, didn’t I?”

He protested. But she ignored him.

“Did you cheat on her?”

That cut. “No.” Meghan accused me of the same damn thing. I wasn’t no cheat.

Ma’s face flashed through a couple of emotions before settling into a sharp study in “none of my business, except I’m making it my damn business” — a look I’d seen before.

“You broke her heart then.”

Maybe Sprout got his court jester wisdom from his mother’s side of the family.

Sprout mouthed “apologize,” again.

“Advice?”

She skewered me with a sharp look. “Would you take it?”

“Maybe.” Never reveal your cards until it is time.

Sprout raised his eyebrows, as if to say, “apologize.”

She took her time setting up a plate for Sprout, then carefully poured out batter for two more pancakes.

“She’s hurt. Needs a place to land. Those bitches are bound and determined to be that for her. You get there too late, and that’s what she’ll cling to, not you.”

I took it in, worked out the logistics. This woman was brilliant. Too bad she didn’t lead our club. Then again, we’d be scraping vanilla sugar into our fucking coffee every morning when we should be kicking ass. Not going to happen.

My phone buzzed at my hip. I didn't have to look at it. With a sixth sense, I knew it was Jackson calling us to the table. Kush had to be replaced. A second later, Sprout's buzzed.

"Can't. Got shit to do here."

I stood up, traded my mug for a to-go cup, and swung my head toward the door, telling Sprout we had to get moving.

"Vote's happening." Sprout checked his message.

His ma frowned. "Bad timing."

"Dude, you're not going in looking like that." He pointed at my head.

The DHMC cut off locks of my hair. Every. Single. One got a piece. Someone carved a "M" so deep my scalp showed through. Despite that, long hanks of hair dangled in random pieces.

Danielle saved the day. "I'll get the clippers."

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Chapter Six

“Hey Tits, wakey-wakey.” *Ugh*, Missile sounded too chipper to deal with. I pulled a pillow over my head.

Wait a minute, I cracked one eye to peek out from the gap. I didn't recognize the room. My head pounded and my mouth was dry. I lifted the edge of the pillow a bit higher to see the nightstand. A takeout coffee cup sat on it. Venti-sized.

“Is that coffee?”

“Yup, vanilla and chocolate.”

Maybe I wouldn't kill her.

“Where are we?” Thank God, she was with me. Otherwise I would be freaking out right now. After sitting down to drink with Quick, the night got hazy. I remember climbing into someone's SUV, but not much else.

“Hotel-no-tell time. The party got a little out of hand.”

“How out of hand?” I crawled toward the coffee and tried not to move my head much.

“Well, Sprout did a striptease on the deck, right down to his tighty-whiteys, Wolf passed out, and Danielle decided she wanted to prospect. I hooked her up with the PA President, Quinn.”

“That doesn't sound awful.” I held my head while I sipped the coffee.

It was too quiet from Missile's side of the room.

“What did you do?”

“Uh, we all did it.”

“*All?*”

“Well, not you and Quick and that speck who drove you two here, but everyone else. Oh, and Danielle was already off

fucking Sprout, and his ma— she didn't because of her connection to the chapter there and shit.”

This did not sound good.

“More.”

“More what?”

“I need more information before I lose my shit on you.”

“Yeah, well, don't get mad, but...”

“Oh fuck. Nothing ever turns out good when you start it that way.” I set the coffee down carefully so I wouldn't spill it, then propped myself against the headboard.

She scrolled down the photos on her phone. “Here.”

I blinked. Was that Wolf?

Wait a minute.

I flipped forward and back to make sure I wasn't missing something, but it was obvious they'd fucked with him in his sleep. Most of the photos were too close, or the light was too dim. But the one Missile showed me first was bad. Really bad.

“You cut his hair.” My voice was small, wounded. It didn't sound like the woman I'd worked on becoming.

“Well...”

“And dyed it blue? Missile.”

“That was Fell's idea. It's temporary dye. It will come out in a couple of washes.”

I counted to ten. Then twenty. Then decided I should use the box-breathing method to stop my meltdown. It wasn't the hair, even though that did bother me. It was the fact that all those women were in the room with my man when he was helpless.

The breathing trick didn't work.

“You're taking this pretty well.”

I held up a finger to silently ask her to stick a pin in it for a second. Then I had a better idea.

“Is Trot still in the area?”

“Nope, she went straight home. I stopped by to get Quick and get your bike back before checkout so you wouldn’t have to go back and see that asshole ever again.”

Asshole. Yeah, I kind of did call him that name last night when bawling my eyes out to Quick.

“Is Quick here?”

“Nope. She took off. JR got lonely.”

At least someone had a normal relationship. As I stalled, Missile dug in her saddle bag. She pulled out a blue and blond mess of a braid. “For you.”

I didn’t move to take it. She wavered in place, carefully laid the braid on the cheap hotel comforter, and backed away. “A peace offering?”

No, it wasn’t. Whether it was because of the braid, or because I’d gotten to the end of my patience, I started talking.

“When I was fifteen, I hung out at the mall with my friends. We would smoke outside the food court doors. The security would chase us away every day.”

“I did that, too, but it was pot.”

She could have that. I had points to make.

“One afternoon, like so many before it, we got chased away. All of us went in different directions. I circled around the back of the mall and started for home.”

She settled into a hotel chair and cocked her head to listen.

“That was the day I was abducted. The middle of the afternoon. Friends really close, you know? But not close enough.”

Her face flinched. “We wouldn’t let that happen to you again.”

I met her eyes.

“Wolf had Sprout there, and not really anyone else.”

“He’s a grown man, and we didn’t— ”

That tied it. I jumped out of bed and got in her face. “How is it different? You all took from him while he was helpless. Drugged or drunk, it doesn’t matter. You fucked with him, and he couldn’t fuck back!”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Don’t.”

“Tits...”

“No, he was helpless.”

“Wolf is not helpless.”

I picked up her phone, slammed it on the table next to her, and pointed to it. “In those pictures, he was.” My hand shook.

“It’s just hair.”

“It’s *consent*. Don’t you get it? You did something to him *without consent*.”

Missile kept shaking her head, trying to deny what I was saying.

“All of them, you said? Every single sister?”

Her nod was almost non-existent, and her eyes were wide.

“People who dedicate their lives to stopping abuse and trafficking took advantage of a drunk man. I’m disgusted with the whole lot of you.”

“It’s just hair!”

“It’s just sex. She was asking for it.” I fired back at her.

“That’s not fair.”

“What you did to him was not fair.” I enunciated every word clearly so she wouldn’t misunderstand.

“He broke up with you.”

“And that makes it okay? That’s lame. It’s like saying, she asked for it because she was wearing a mini-skirt, or got drunk. It is the same damn thing!”

“It’s not.”

This was going nowhere. I grabbed my gear from the room and checked to see if I had everything. My keys were on the table next to Missile. That meant I had to hear her protests and denials as I moved past her. But I tuned it out. I was afraid I’d lash out. That was what I was trying to avoid.

“Don’t go.” She scrambled to follow me out the door but got sidetracked by trying to grab her shit. That gave me a head start to get to the lobby. My bike was parked right outside, just past the little porte-cochères traffic circle. She was just coming out of the building as I left the lot.

By the time I hit Danielle’s lake house, I’d broken over a dozen traffic laws.

“He’s not here,” she told me from the doorstep.

“Club?” I asked but was already moving. Of course, he was at his club. They had to vote on his VP patch today.

“You shouldn’t go there,” Sprout’s mom yelled.

The echoes of it were left in the dust I kicked up leaving.

By the time I neared their clubhouse, I’d had a minute to think. Sprout’s ma was right. I couldn’t go barging in. I parked the bike behind a warehouse a few blocks west and approached on foot. There were no tall buildings in this area of Skillettsville. The trees were either too small and weakly clinging to life or choked with wisteria to the hazardous point. Even the light poles were covered in the shit. The vines crawled out along the lines and mixed with the garbage in the alleys.

I found a spot on top of a flat roof that offered a sight line of the gate. Anyone leaving or coming would go in through

there. I found a hair tie, attached a small make up mirror onto a conduit, and laid down on my back to spy. That way, my head wouldn't be seen over the low lip of the building.

About an hour later, I noted a string of four cars. Two black SUVs, a van, and a fancy luxury car— maybe a Mercedes. I couldn't tell. I risked exposure to get a better look at the parade stopped in front of the junkyard gate.

The speck at the gate didn't open up. And a man got out of the lead SUV to bang loudly on the corrugated aluminum shielding the entrance. He banged harder, and another joined him.

His shaved head made the tattoo snaking from temple to neck clearly visible.

I dropped back out of site. I knew that tattoo. Hadn't seen it in years. But it was one that I never would forget. My chest pumped in and out because I couldn't calm my breathing. In the mirror, I noticed two armed Destroyers who came out and talked with the group. I couldn't make out much, given the tiny little view, but whatever went down seemed to satisfy the entourage. There was a handshake and a "wait here" motion from a Destroyer. The gate crawled open, and the party went in. One bodyguard was deposited outside the gate with a semi-automatic rifle.

With a slight adjustment of the mirror, I was able to see the Destroyers who joined him. They weren't Skillettsville men. I knew the entire crew and most of the boys from Maryland, too. My best guess was these were Buffalo's guys.

Was it a coincidence? Or could it be bad luck that I'd found one of my tormentors? This was something I should run past my sisters. But I wasn't feeling very cordial with any of them right now.

"Fuck it."

I collected the mirror and rolled off the roof. Once I retrieved my bike, I holed up at the most likely route

eastbound. If I missed the entourage, I missed them. But I was hoping they'd head back toward Philadelphia.

Sure as shit, their parade of vehicles drove past and hour later. I fired up the bike and followed, keeping a casual distance behind.

At an intersection near the freeway, I rolled up next to the van and tagged the back bumper with a tracker. Then I revved through the red light and took off. I'd need gas and other shit for a proper tail. With an idea of where they'd go, I hit a discount store for extra gear, including a camouflage blanket, a phone charger, and a pair of binoculars.

Then gassed up twice before getting a faint hit almost due north of Philly.

It was dark before I found the place. I'd circled the area twice before realizing the blip was tucked inside a sprawling equestrian ranch. The barn was larger than a football field. There was even a racetrack. I blinked at the logistics of securing a location like this. There was no way the entire estate was monitored.

I traded out my boots for a pair of over-sized, generic, work boots. If someone found my tracks, there would be a million other pairs of shoes like this that would foul a match. I added two pairs of socks to keep them from sliding around. Then, very carefully, I walked the fence line.

Twice I was forced off by terrain. So, I found a likely game trail and slipped under the fence. That dumped me near the back of the farm. There was an attempt at a garden, but it was overgrown. The gate was hanging off its hinges, and it seemed out of place with a multi-million-dollar facility just a couple hundred yards away. The farmhouse was lit up. The barn was as well. I checked the location of my tag and slipped around a smaller pole barn. The van was right there. I reached under the bumper and pulled the tag off. Then took a photo of the plate. From there, I worked around the lot and took pictures of any

other vehicle I found. There were almost a dozen. Some shitty, like the van, and some fancy as fuck. A light flipped on, and I tucked behind a utility vehicle.

The guard walked around the lot, checking on the cars, jiggling locks on the outbuildings, shining his flashlight into nooks and crannies. He worked his way closer to me. I wedged under the little truck and found a good spot to tuck my body into any cranny I could. I balanced on one hand and a knee, hoping he wouldn't shine the light directly under the vehicle. He swung the beam by the tires. The shadows stretched out on the dirt. He moved on, not noticing anything amiss. I didn't dare breathe, let alone let anything relax, until he moved on to the horse barn. My foot got caught in the wedged space I'd tucked it into. That cost me precious minutes working it loose without making noise. Eventually, I slipped my foot out of the shoe, then retrieved the fucking thing.

Once it was back on, I fought for calm, taking careful, slow breaths.

The yard light flicked off, and I closed my eyes to readjust my vision. I blinked a bit to make things move faster. Finally, I listened to the night. Nothing. Just normal noises.

I was much more careful returning to where I'd stashed my bike. Even then, I was reluctant to fire it up. As I debated whether I should or shouldn't make noise, I checked my phone.

The number icon next to my message app stated I had forty voice mails. Those could wait. I switched to my text message list and ignored any from a sister.

Danielle left me a message. It was sweet of her to ask if I was okay.

Nothing from Wolf. *Damn.*

Fuck it.

I tucked the phone into a secured pocket and fired my beast up. I tore out of there and straight to the interstate.

The ride sucked. Traffic sucked. Going south sucked. Waffle House didn't suck. Pecan Waffles with a side of maple bacon and sweet tea at four A.M. was the stuff that heaven wished it could be. I was about twenty minutes from the farm and stalling. That counter badge next to my voice mail was much higher now. Instead of reading my text messages, I deleted them.

I loaded the license plates into the search app I used for my job repossessing cars. Took notes on the owners listed, addresses, and any other detail I could glean from the information.

Three were attached to businesses in the region. Two had private addresses, and the van wasn't in the database at all. That was strange. I chewed on a bite of waffle I was too stuffed to swallow and wrote a note by the plate numbers I'd scribbled in my journal.

"You going to eat that?"

Missile slipped into the booth opposite me.

I shoved the plate toward her. The waitress stopped by to take her order for another side of bacon and a coffee.

"Mmm, pecans. Best shit ever." Her mouth was full, and she poured more syrup on the half I hadn't eaten.

It was a moot point to ask how she found me. My bike was distinctive, and the restaurant a must-stop after a long ride. The whole chapter ate here at least once a week.

"What 'cha working on?"

"Repo."

"Oh." She shoved more sticky food into her mouth. Why was I lying to her? I had no clue, except for the invisible wedge that lay between us.

"So, I talked to Trot." She paused to take a sip of her coffee.

I kept reading my notes and looking at the photos I'd taken. I worked out the rough outline of my trail tonight and sketched the image of the farm boundaries I found online.

"She says you're right."

I set my pen down to give her my attention.

"Well, you know. I uh... wanna say some shit, and you know how it is."

"No, I don't know. What do you want to say?"

"The stuff Trot said."

Missile was a horrible conversationalist. "What did Trot say?"

"She said we should apologize to you and Wolf." Her hand flapped in a circle, and she made a face when she said Wolf's name.

"I don't think you want to say anything. I think you're being asked to say something you don't feel."

Her fork landed on the plate with a clatter. She pushed it to the middle of the table.

"You're right. Again. I don't want to say I'm..."

"You can't even say it." *Jesus.*

"What you said." She picked up her coffee mug again.

I stared out the big windows to the night beyond. Traffic was beginning to perk up as farmers and early workers got about their day. The hours I'd been awake caught up with me, and I wished more than anything that I could just hop on my bike, go home, and sleep. But I knew I would toss and turn all day long. Maybe not sleep at all. My home wasn't my home anymore. The feeling of safety I thought I had was stripped away because of some stupid ritual of solidarity.

Going back to Pennsylvania to find Wolf wasn't an option, either. I'd walked away. Tossed aside years of intimacy because I was too wounded to forgive. That was on me.

The whispers of doubt that swirled in the dark recesses of my brain made me look down at the sketch under my hand. The Destroyers were involved with my kidnapping. Peripherally, but involved. The circles had overlapped again, and I didn't trust it.

"I'm sorry." Missile spoke quickly as if ripping off a Band-Aid and braced for pain.

"For?"

"For fucking with your boyfriend."

The waitress who filled Missile's coffee, lifted an eyebrow, overhearing her admission. She shook her head.

I decided to play with that. "How can I forgive you? You know how much that hurts."

She glanced at the stranger in our mix and gave me a bug-eyed scowl.

"You cut me deep." I sipped on my tea.

"I didn't mean to!" Missile held her hands in the air.

"You come in here and half-ass apologize, and then say you didn't mean it? Fuck you. Apology not accepted."

"Tits," Missile started to protest.

"You broke the woman code. She shouldn't forgive that." The waitress cleaned up some of the mess from the table and huffed off.

"I fucking walked right into that. You bitch," Missile hissed.

I started giggling. If you can't fuck with a sister, who can you fuck with?

Chapter Seven

A long time ago, some biker had club business on a Sunday. Since no one was supposed to know, I'm sure he lied and said he was going to "church."

The lie stuck. Decades, maybe even a century later it didn't matter if it was Sunday or not, bikers held church. A sacred meeting where brothers decided the next historic change as one unit. Skillettsville gathered for a vote to make me vice president. Until that vote concluded, there was always the chance fortune wouldn't favor me.

Nonno pulled Jackson aside right before we shut the doors for the vote. Since it was putting a hold on my future, I paid attention.

Their heads were close, voices too low to hear the words Nonno spoke into Jackson's ear. During the one-sided conversation, Jackson looked up and locked eyes with mine. There was no reading his face. No smile, no assurance, no anger, no frustration. Just practiced blankness. That told me there was a problem.

Nonno let him go with a slap to the back.

I let Jackson enter before I shut the door. As I did, I glanced at the room outside. Nonno stared at me. He shook his head. Just a quick movement spelling my doom. In answer, I shut the door, blocking him out.

Jackson shifted to his affable self. He worked the room as he took the seat of power at the far end of the table. I mirrored his work but didn't make him wait. We took our seats almost in sync. The rest of the club followed suit, and the friendly banter quieted down. He pounded on the table with his fist to start the meeting.

The room grew quiet.

"I know we got one candidate, Wolf here, but I was reminded that this needs to be a choice. Anyone else want to

put their hat in?”

My brothers glanced at each other in confusion. Sprout, however watched Jackson. When no one spoke up, he cleared his throat. “Never stopped us before.”

Trust him to know the club’s history.

“What about you? Don’t you want to make your father proud?”

“My father’s dead. Ain’t nothing I can do about that.”

Shit. In all my dealings with Sprout, I’d never heard him talk like that. Serious as fuck and almost mean.

The tension spread through the ranks. Men shifted in their chairs. A cough and a mumbled apology. Through it, Sprout kept staring at Jackson. I glanced at my president, getting a read on his mood. And suddenly, it was clear what Nonno had said. Maybe not the exact words, but he’d put doubts in Jackson’s mind. About me, or about Jackson’s position with the National leadership, whatever it was, he was trying to walk a knife’s edge.

“It’s gotta be a unanimous vote, boss. You can always veto it.”

He broke eye contact with Sprout to look at me. “That I could.”

“It would make you look like an asshole if we all vote for Wolf,” Sprout observed.

A ghost of a smile crossed Jackson’s face. He schooled his expression quickly. “Okay, we fucking vote. Start it off, Sprout.”

“Wolf.”

His confidence in me was admirable. The men up and down the table followed in voice and spirit. Finally, Jackson pointed at me. “You’re turn, but before you say anything, I gotta tell you that Nonno hates your guts. And while I can look like an asshole if I veto this vote, you could pull your hat out.”

Fucker. Giving me both my own noose and wrapping it around my neck.

“Question for you before I say anything.” I waited for Jackson’s nod before continuing.

It gave me a moment to look up and down the table.

“Nonno doesn’t run the club. Sure, he is all but national president in every way, but he ain’t. So, I gotta ask, what does it gain him to divide us?”

One of Jackson’s brows lifted. Then he smiled. “We all know what he’d gain. In case anyone is curious, Hickey, what’s our balance sheet look like this month?”

“As in the exact amount?” He had a thing for details. It made him a great treasurer.

“Ballpark it. So, we all know what national gets if we dissolve.”

The last word made a ripple of protest go around the table, except Sprout. He sat back, crossed his arms, and his face twisted into a smug smile.

Hickey cleared his throat to talk over the noise. Jackson slammed his hand down hard, “Quiet.”

“Just a bit over six million in growth, with the properties and investments. That’s not including the petty cash fund.” Petty cash was a euphemism for the illegal money we had moving around. That was a good million and a half at any given time before this all started. But we were being more choosy about our activities now. Not being forced to deal with every bit of bullshit made it grow in value. Funny how that worked.

We’d been very busy in a year.

None of us were shocked by the number. In any other club, they’d probably give their nuts, firstborn, and maybe their favorite bike to be in our shoes. The strip club I managed pulled in a solid two-hundred grand a year, but that was gross, not net. There was overhead, upkeep, stock, and payroll that

ate up a good bit. Hickey was doing much better with his investment in a web-cam subscription service. He was on track to pull in almost double that in net profit in a year.

Our little band was populated with near millionaires. Sprout was a certified one.

“Well, Wolf, are you going to pull your hat, or should I vote now?”

“It’s in your hands, boss.”

Sure, that was an asshole move, but if I didn’t flinch as a new Destroyer when my bike and seventeen grand were on the table with Nonno, there wasn’t hope for me now. Whatever the cards held, I didn’t care. Jackson knew vetoing his men’s votes would make him lose the faith of his men. If he voted yes, we’d be solid, but still catching grief from the vultures trying to get a piece of our fortune.

There was a knock on the door. We all stood up.

The prospect at the door poked his head in. “We got a problem.”

Jackson held up a hand. “Be right out. Shut that damn door.”

The prospect closed the door and before anyone moved, Jackson looked at me and said, “Congrats, VP Wolf. No one says a fucking word about this, got it?” He winked, and then we filed out.

The scene in the main room was bizarre. Nonno’s men were circled around a dozen men in suits. In the center of the room, Nonno knelt in front of an old man in a wheelchair.

None of these men were familiar. But the gold signets that graced their pinky fingers were. I moved closer to Jackson to present a solid front. Sprout joined him on the left, flanking our president and letting him lead.

He strode up, not letting the scene intimidate him. “Did anyone offer drinks yet?”

The guy in the wheelchair looked up. “We won’t be long.”

Nonno’s eyes were wide. This looked to be his problem. These assholes were on Destroyers’ soil. If they wanted to shoot us up, they’d die.

“Any other man would be dead doing what you did, Nonno.”

Wisely, our national leader didn’t say a word. He just bowed his head. The old man, whoever the fuck he was must be near the top of the food chain. Shit, even weakened, the bastard oozed power. It was just damn odd none of us knew who the hell he was.

But Nonno did.

“Bring her to me, and I’ll spare you.” He laid a hand on Nonno’s head and held it there for a long minute— like a priest granting absolution. Then he scanned the crowd. “She said he had long hair, like a Viking.” His eyes landed on Sprout and passed over him, dismissive. They lingered on Jackson for an uncomfortable moment. But Jackson kept his hair normal.

They passed over me to the men of our club. He frowned.

“Which one of you is Wolf?”

I stepped forward, heart in my throat. His eyes were black and evil sharp.

“My girl says you threw her out last night.”

“Yup.”

My brutally short response insulted his bodyguards because they tensed.

“Why?”

I paused a moment and pointed at the room, creating a wide swath as I indicated the entirety of it. “This is our house. Guests shouldn’t insult their hosts, and servants even more so.”

Behind me, Jackson snickered.

Nonno noted the sound.

“How were you insulted?”

I smiled. He modulated his tone to be curious, but quietly condescending. The game was afoot. He’d made it clear with his little display of power, making Nonno kneel, that he was important. Powerful men never entered a situation like this without a plan. By doing so, he’d caught us flat-footed, too.

“She called me a liar and a neanderthal.”

“You’ve been called worse,” Sprout muttered.

Dumb shit. When fighting a cobra, don’t call attention to yourself. I took another step forward, setting my feet wide as I noted his bodyguards getting nervous. “Your girl? Related or owned?”

Success. His attention was once again on me. He scratched his chin. “You are a smart man, aren’t you?”

For a second, I debated taking a trick out of Sprout’s bag and pretending to be a fool, but since it was a thing I’d never practiced, I dismissed the thought. “I’m certain there are smarter men, but I ain’t no slouch. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be in this club.”

The reminder being this was a brotherhood. Go after one of us, you go after all of us.

His beady eyes scanned my brothers.

“At least you aren’t stupid. I will reprimand the help.” He motioned for Nonno to get up. “Three days, Nonno. The debt is still owed.”

With that, his entourage collected their leader and maneuvered their exit through the junkyard we called home.

“Who the fuck was that?” Jackson asked as soon as the coast was clear.

Nonno blinked as if waking up from a trance or being caught in the middle of a deep thought. His eyes drifted to mine as he spoke two words.

“The Surgeon.”

It was a title, and I’d heard it before. I locked eyes with Nonno.

Jackson’s mocking tone was lost in the background noise. Nonno saw the recognition on my face.

“She spoke of him?”

I staggered back, my knees turning liquid with shock and fear. Sprout caught me by a hand to the back.

“Who? And what the fuck is this shit, about a surgeon? Is that supposed to sound scary? Because it doesn’t mean shit.” Jackson smirked.

“They’ll cut your entire family apart,” I muttered. It was something she said.

“Wolf, bro, you okay?” Sprout caught the back of my neck and squeezed. It helped ground me.

Nonno motioned to our meeting room. “Let’s talk.”

He included Jackson in the invitation. Sprout followed us to the door, but I shook my head when he made to join us.

Once again, the door shut out the outside world. But this time, no one sat. Nonno paced. Jackson leaned against the wall to watch.

I stood still, numb with shock and full of racing thoughts. In the middle of them was a crazy idea to get Tits and run. She’d fight me tooth and nail. And I couldn’t tell her why either. If I did, she’d turn right around and barrel down the maw of the beast in a fucked-up pursuit of revenge.

Hell, if I’d known who the guy was a mere hour ago, I would have tried to enact my own revenge. That idea also swirled around in the mess of my head.

“Alright, let’s first fill me in on who the fuck this surgeon is.” Jackson led off the discussion.

“You just met him,” Nonno pointed out.

“Wasn’t formally introduced,” Jackson shot back.

“Be glad you weren’t.” Nonno’s voice went cold.

“He’s old school mob.” One of the guys that moved in the dark edges making things work for the ones in power. Amassing respect rather than money. Never demanding a moment in the spotlight. Nope, the Surgeon was like the Wizard of Oz. Pulling levers and creating illusions so others could pretend the world wasn’t built on seedy little lies told by greedy little men.

Nonno pointed a finger at me. “Not just old school, old country.”

“Funny, he didn’t have an accent.” Jackson crossed his arms.

Nonno stopped pacing and addressed him. “He’s been an enforcer since the early eighties. Had a specialty with knives. That changed when he got involved in prostitution and the cocaine trade in the eighties. This guy, his partner, rolled to the cops. He found him while he was awaiting trial. Cut him up into pieces. Then went after the guy’s family. Broke all the rules, but it sealed his reputation.”

“Now he’s some fuck in a wheelchair.”

“That fuck in a wheelchair has more power than the fucking president. Shit, he’s probably got blackmail on the guy. One snap of his fingers, and we’d be fighting a war for him and never even fucking know it.”

“He used underage girls with the politicians.” I let Jackson in on a bit of history.

“Tits?” He knew some of the story. Hell, he was right there when I won her.

“And others,” Nonno confirmed. Then he expanded on things. “When he took that guy’s family, he castrated his sons, sold the daughter to one of his pimps. Cut the guy’s wife open and took out her lady parts. Then went after the guy’s brother and his family. The man was thorough. Not a single member of his family was left untouched.”

“Shit. Effective. Almost impressive.” Jackson wasn’t one to pace, but he did drop his nonchalant stance.

Jackson had some fucked up morals.

“Okay, he’s probably not the only guy in history with a bunch of blackmail in his safe. Why the fuck are you so whipped that you were fucking kneeling at his feet?” he asked.

Nonno hung his head.

“Probably has shit on him, too.”

The man fixed a laser beam intensity glare on me.

Bingo.

“What the fuck?” Jackson’s volume went up. “Our next fucking national president owned by the fucking mob?” His fists balled up. “You going to sell us out?”

That pissed off Nonno. “Listen up, you fucking idiot. You know this isn’t a game. We’ve been in good for a long fucking time. Keeping a psycho like that happy is worth swallowing a bit of pride once or twice. And think about that blackmail angle. He’s had a long time to build up his power. We deal with men like this all the time. And it’s been this way for longer than you’ve been alive, boy.”

“What did you just call me?” Jackson puffed his chest out.

I stepped between them and got in his face. “History, man. The club and mob? Working together since Capone days.”

He blinked and then laughed in my face.

“We aren’t lackeys. We’re Destroyers.”

“And as such, we aligned with some powerful families. A little scratch here, a bit of muscle there. They look away at our enterprises and don’t ask for a cut. And we act the thug when they ask nicely.”

Nonno put his finger on his nose, indicating I’d nailed it.

“Think bigger, Jackson,” Nonno said.

That wasn’t an understatement. Crime ignored borders almost as much as it ignored propriety. You get someone pulling strings, and voila. Teamsters moving product. Bikers providing muscle and security. Mobsters providing capital, product, and connections. Their money moving back and forth, buying both silence and cooperation from the law and the lawmakers.

On the other side, groups like the Destroyers monitored the streets where the dealers and the pimps worked to distribute the product to the masses, keeping a layer of grit between the filth and the veneer. Nice and tidy in symbiotic anarchy.

Bigger. As big as the whole world. Power. What kind of a person reached that far?

“You fucking knelt at his feet.” There was more than scorn in his expression. If I had to describe it, I might even say, hurt. Finding out your gods have clay feet did that.

“I don’t have to explain myself.”

Surrender before you’re defeated. I played the scene back in my memory.

“He wants Tits,” I concluded.

“Yes. How fast can you bring her to me?”

At my hesitation, Jackson ruffled what was left of my hair and chuckled. “Might be a bit. Bitch broke up with him last night, and her girls counted coup on his head.

“That’s what happened? Here I thought you lost a fight with a lawnmower.”

Their amusement was at my expense. I could laugh it off to throw Nonno off, play a game with them both by letting them think I'd sell out. But Jackson was right in calling Nonno out on his weakness.

“They’ll close ranks on her.” Jackson ran through the logistics out loud.

“Even if Wolf could effectively lie to her and those bitches, he still has to get her trust back. And that ain’t happening after last night.”

“You losing your touch with the ladies?” Nonno asked.

“More like caught feelings, didn’t you?”

Jackson wasn’t helping. He was right but had handed Nonno my weakness right in front of me. Some brother he was.

Nonno sighed and pulled out a chair. “Plan B then.” He drummed his fingers on the table.

I pulled up a chair and prepared to listen hard. Because I had to steer both men toward a plan that kept Tits miles, maybe even a whole world, away from the guy she thought she murdered.

Chapter Eight

I nstead of sleeping in my room, I hiked across the fields to Margaret's old school bus. She was getting started with her day, picking blackberries from the tangle of bushes near the tree line and singing along with some old song I had never paid attention to.

"Do you mind if I crash here?"

She stopped what she was doing. "Oh, Meghan. You look terrible."

"Stayed up all night."

Margaret scanned my dirty clothes from top to bottom.

"Looks like you rolled around in the dirt, too. Or was that the tequila's fault?" She chuckled and picked another berry or three.

"Shit. You heard."

Her tongue clicked, and she sighed. "Missile came by yesterday. She was worried."

Funny, she didn't look too beat up about it a half hour ago. Having to pay my tab probably hurt her worse. "Hard to believe."

"That she'd come by, or that she was worried?" Margaret shook her head and continued before I could talk.

"You had us all worried. Trot came here first, then Quick, Missile, and every single sister here. I think as soon as Trot tells the ladies in the other chapters, you're going to have them all coming here to apologize."

I made a face. The last thing I wanted was a fucking apology. I wanted them to apologize to Wolf. But that would happen right about the same time as Hell froze over, so I'd just have to suck up my dashed emotional machinations.

She pointed in the direction of the bus. “Go ahead. Don’t forget to turn the heater on for the water. You know it isn’t warm first thing in the morning.”

There was a whole process to taking a shower on the bus. We’d run a couple hundred feet of clear hose through solar panels on the roof to heat water. It was more cost-effective than running the propane water heater JR built in a little shed next to the bus, but it didn’t hold heat well. That meant it was another hour of turning knobs, getting clean, and turning off knobs before I could finally crawl into the queen size bed in the back.

I woke up sometime in the late afternoon. Margaret was outside the bus. “I’m really sorry about what the girls did.”

A low rumble of words responded. I recognized the speaker, though. Wolf was here. Immediately my libido responded, even if my head wasn’t fully in the game yet. I sat up as he ducked his head under the low arch of the door.

“Hey.” Despite the mess of his hair, he looked good. Really good. I thought he was sexy before, but this look was broody and screamed danger. He was a very well-built man. With long hair, he resembled a Viking god. Without it, drool-worthy and mercenary-style deadly. The scar on his cheek was more evident against the darker tone of his roots. Or maybe that was residual dye coloring it darker? Whatever it was, I wanted him.

I bit my lip. Should I apologize for my sisters? “Hey.”

“I know we didn’t get a chance to talk.”

I slid over and patted the bed. He eyed it like it was a trap.

“I won’t bite or cut things. Promise.”

“Don’t promise not to bite. I like it when you get crazy.” He smiled, remembering so many times we both got crazy.

Just like that, I forgot what I was upset about. He had a way of doing that. Maybe it was his smell, the combination of leather and fresh air mingled with a slight hint of expensive

aftershave. Or it was the way he moved. I don't know. The simple fact was— I was keyed to him. No other man offered me the same sensations.

“Okay, no cutting things.”

He ran a hand through his hair. It stood on end and looked like he'd just climbed out of bed. I touched it as he settled in next to me.

“I'm sorry about this.”

“Wasn't your fault.”

“But it was on my behalf. That's what Missile gave me for her excuse.”

“That woman doesn't need an excuse to fuck with me. I'm sure she's wanted to do it for a long time.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Told you, it wasn't— ”

I put my fingers on his mouth to shut him up. “I'm sorry.”

“Babe.” His eyes got soft. Then whether it was a trick of light, or the trauma of my past tainting my perception, they suddenly weren't.

We started talking at the same time.

I motioned for him to continue.

“You need to disappear for a while.”

“What?” Of all the things I expected him to say, that wasn't it.

“Just what I said. Right now, I got about five of my brothers searching the farm for you.”

My heart sped up. “Why?”

He shook his head. “Just get your shit together. I came to warn you.”

“But...” I couldn't figure out why I was trying to argue with him. Maybe it was because I didn't want things to end

with him. Even though I had planned on it earlier.

“Nonno.” He offered as an explanation.

“Because he saw me with you?”

I brushed my fingers down his vest. The officer patch above his road name had been removed. “Wait, did you get elected or not?”

“Tits, we don’t have time for this. Just get going. I’ll run interference. Sprout has the others searching the house and the other end of the farm. Jackson is in the grow lab with Margaret. We got to get you gone.”

“No.”

“Meghan.”

“No, we’re going up to the house and talking to my sisters. I’m not just going to take off.” I did enough of a disappearing act yesterday. Which reminded me, I needed to loop them in on the operation I saw.

“You have to.” He interrupted my racing thoughts.

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do. I’ve fought too hard to be my own person to have someone take that away.”

“Which is exactly why I need you to disappear!”

“You are not making sense.” I poked him in the chest.

“I’ll give you sense.” He grabbed for me, but it turned into a wrestling match that put me under him.

Suddenly his hot breath on my neck changed. He inhaled against my skin. My legs wrapped around his waist, and I clutched at his neck. I groaned because I needed to feel good. My hips tilted and rubbed against his erection. “Wolf.”

“Shit. We really don’t have time for this.”

“Yes, we do.” I kissed him.

Our tongues tangled. No one kissed like he did. I’d kissed my fair share of people. Most were too forceful, or too soft. Some didn’t like French kissing, which proved itself when

they didn't know what to do. Others thought they liked it and yet slobbered like a bulldog in hot weather. But Wolf's kisses were an extension of his soul. They were an opportunity to crack open the parts of him he kept closed off. In return, I gave him everything I had inside me, except for the awful parts. Those disappeared around him.

His belt hit the floor. A thump later, one of his boots joined it. "Baby."

"Shh." I kissed harder.

He reached into my panties and rubbed my clit. His fingers slicked through my pussy and homed in on a perfect rhythm of stroking and circling.

I arched into his hand. "I need you, Wolf."

"Shit." He rested his head against my neck. I put both hands into his shorn locks and dug in. I needed him badly.

"Please, Wolf. Please."

"I'm going to Hell for this."

"Silly, we're already there." I nipped his neck to show I was joking.

At least partially. This was torture. The wanting and the waiting, the gaping empty desire growing to epic proportions. It felt whole when he was inside me.

And then he was. All the light and sunshine in the world couldn't replace the feeling of rightness I had in his arms.

Our bodies glistened in the dusty rays of sun that crept into the bus. His powerful body dwarfed mine, but I wasn't afraid. This was my haven, my refuge. His strength became my own as he fell apart in my arms. I held him close and kept us safe until he crept back from our shared insanity.

"I didn't mean for it to go that far." The breath of whispered confession hit my ear.

His words hurt. I shoved him off me. "Go. Join your asshole buddies."

“At least stay hidden. Does Margaret have any compartments in here that are well concealed?”

“Get off.” I shoved him again.

“This is important. You need to hide.”

“I am sick of hiding,” I replied.

He blinked. His shock allowed me to crawl out from under him and grab my clothes. I borrowed one of Margaret’s button-downs and quickly covered up. Then tossed his boots at him.

That got him motivated. “Let me go out first.”

I scowled at him. “Why the paranoia?”

“Nonno needs you.”

My eyebrow quirked up in disbelief. “The fuck he does.” Wolf’s Destroyer buddy didn’t need anyone. Especially not me.

Wolf brushed past me and peeked out the front door. “Coast is clear. Go through the woods. Got a speck on the road. Avoid him. Don’t stay out in the open. Understand?”

No. I didn’t.

“I told you, I’m not leaving. We’re going to the house.”

“It’s not safe.” He grabbed my arm, but I broke free and started across the dirt roads. Margaret and Jackson emerged from the grow lab, and he yelled something at Wolf.

Then, all hell broke loose.

The dirt exploded near his feet. The sharp report of a long-range rifle echoed against the trees. Another shot sounded, and Margaret fell into the dirt.

Behind me, Wolf cursed as the tree near his head splintered. He pulled his gun and tackled me.

The farm trail was too exposed. Wolf dragged me into the brush at the side. Jackson started barking orders, and motorcycles fired up. More shots rang out, and I could hear

Trot marshaling the girls. A van sped down the path toward us. Wolf opened fire on it, and it turned to bounce through the field before it jostled into the road. I'd poked my head up just long enough to catch the make, color, and last two numbers on the plate. It matched the one I'd followed yesterday. I pushed up to take chase, but Wolf dropped on top of me hard.

“Stay down!”

He fired at the vehicle again, but at the speed it was going and our distance, it would have been a miracle for him to hit it.

“Where's Nonno?” Jackson was breathing heavily as he dropped down by us.

“Back at the house, I think.”

“Fuck. One of the girls is with Margaret. Get her. Plan B, brother. Plan B. Sorry.” He rushed away, gun in hand, and was stopped dead in his tracks by Quick and Missile. Both had weapons trained on him.

“Drop it, asshole.”

Wolf cursed under his breath and stood up. He had his gun trained on Quick. “Drop it or you're going to lose your favorite sister.”

Quick had a shotgun. She hesitated, seeing me by Wolf. “Take cover, Tits.”

I stepped in front of Wolf, putting my body between his gun and Quick's. “Everyone, knock it off.”

“Can't do that. They led those fuckers right to our doorstep.”

“You're fucking high,” Jackson said, still not dropping his gun.

“All of you are wasting fucking time. Margaret's been shot.” I pointed to the greenhouses. There was a mix of Destroyers and my sisters clustered there. No one seemed to be moving quickly enough. It was then I realized why.

With a cry, I ran.

Margaret's body was not moving. The blood mingled with the dust and soil. I dropped beside it, feeling for a pulse. Trot shook her head. "She's gone."

The wound hit high, almost a direct hit to her heart. Anguish like I've never known cut through my own heart.

"She can't be." I kept trying different places to feel a pulse. Wishing and trying to command her eyes to open and that soft smile she had to grace her lips.

But they were slack. Her weathered skin was pale.

"You can't be dead, you can't."

Wolf's hand brushed my hair. That broke my fugue of shock. "Why?" I wanted to scream it, but it came out as a whisper.

He chewed on his lip and shook his head.

"This wasn't us." Jackson had his hands up. The gun he held was carefully displayed.

"Bullshit." Missile aimed down her rifle.

This time, Trot stepped between and barked an order to stand down. Missile reluctantly agreed. Good thing, too. Over half of the Destroyers had hands on their weapons.

"Let's go." Wolf held a hand out.

"No."

Trot and Missile were at my side in an instant.

"Haven't you done enough damage?"

Trot frowned at Missile. "She's not going anywhere until we get answers. Why the fuck are you here, and who is the asshole who killed Margaret?"

She didn't give anyone a chance to answer before she added, "And if no one will tell me, I'm taking this asshole out first." Her gun didn't waiver at Wolf's temple.

He froze.

“Well, well, well. You were right, they can protect their own. Somewhat.” Nonno strode up, flanked by another half-dozen men. These I had never met. I guessed they were his bodyguards. His eyes lingered on Margaret’s body.

“Who killed Margaret?” Trot asked.

Nonno glanced up at Trot from the body. “Not us.”

Missile raised her rifle; the bodyguards instantly raised their weapons. That didn’t stop her, or Quick, or any other Devil’s Handmaiden who had grabbed guns from adding their arms to the party.

“We’re all friends here,” Jackson started.

“The hell we are,” Trot replied.

“Alright, not friends. Not outright enemies, either correct?”

He and I were about the only ones not holding a fucking gun in that moment. His eyes met mine. “Tits, your call.”

Enemies or friends? I glanced around the circle. Sprout stood off to one side. His handgun held lax at his side. I counted his wife as one of my friends. He’d never done anything to tip the scales away. The speck at his side once offered to paint my bike.

My eyes slid to Jackson’s. He was a wild card. I couldn’t trust him at all. But Wolf gave him his loyalty, so he must have a redeeming quality somewhere under his skin. Then I looked at Wolf, kneeling at my side with Trot’s gun to his temple.

“Not enemies,” I answered Jackson’s question.

“Cool.” He motioned with his hand and every Skillettsville chapter member tucked their weapons away.

Then he addressed Trot. “I don’t know who shot her.” His eyes dipped down, and I could have sworn regret crossed his face. But the mask he usually wore slipped back into place quickly. “We will help you find out who though, right, Nonno? I mean, they fired on us, too.”

He glared at his in-all-but-name-only boss.

“Right, Nonno?” He prompted when the answer didn’t come fast enough.

“You bet. It will get handled.” He nodded at Trot sealing the pact.

“I want to handle it,” she pressed her gun harder against Wolf’s temple.

“Understandable. And you have our offer of help.” Nonno spoke as if he could control the circumstances.

Trot put the gun away and brushed her hand against her leg. Wisely, she didn’t say she was taking or denying the offer. “Tits?”

“She’s coming with us,” Nonno ordered.

“The fuck she is.” Trot’s words were drowned out by Missile’s.

“I still got a gun on you, asshole, so don’t go talking out of your ass.”

“Leash your bitch.”

That was the wrong thing for Nonno to say. Sprout winced, and Jackson’s eyebrow rose.

Trot’s face dropped into a deadly, empty glare. “No. See, unlike you, I don’t believe in empty orders. She’s got every reason to plug your ass. The only reason she hasn’t is because she’s waiting for me to tell her it’s okay.”

One thing about Trot, she didn’t lie. I admired that about her.

“Threats will get you dead.” One of Nonno’s boys spoke out of turn.

He shushed them with a raised hand. “It’s best this way.”

“Oh, hell to the no,” Missile glared and adjusted her aim. Her finger hovered over the trigger.

Trot began to speak, but I stood up and wiped the blood from my hands onto my jeans.

“I remember your hospitality. I didn’t like it.”

“See? She ain’t going.”

Ignoring Missile, I continued. “Give me assurances I, or any of my sisters, won’t be treated like that by you or your men or anyone in your circle, and I’ll go.” I could handle Nonno.

“Tits,” Trot warned.

“No, the sooner this gets figured out the sooner you can ...” My throat closed. I was going to say, “Help Margaret,” but she was beyond anyone’s help. We all knew it. I finished with a lame, “clean things up around here.” My heart broke. What was left of my good side crumbled and got torn into pieces. A beast rose inside me. I would take them all down. I would work from the inside and eat at them like cancer until their entire world was ashes.

Because my own world was already there. If I was going to linger in this hell, I’d take every one of my enemies down with me. And to do that, I needed to be close. Knife blade close.

Wolf stood at my back. “It ain’t going to go down like that anymore.” His hand squeezed my shoulder.

“Told ya he caught feelings.”

Nonno frowned at Jackson.

“She is making the bargains here.” He addressed me to continue bargaining.

“For your cooperation, not one of mine will cage you, hurt you, or treat you with anything but respect. Jackson, that extends to your men.”

Jackson nodded with a short dip of his head. Then he ruined it. “Wolf, that means you, too.”

“Fuck you. She’s not going.”

“Like she’ll listen to you. But I had to ask, you know?”

I didn't want to think of Wolf. So, I spoke up. "Deal. Why do you need me?"

Nonno smiled. "The Surgeon is back."

My heart dropped to my feet. That couldn't be true. I'd killed him. He was dead.

"Bullshit," I whispered.

Wolf's hand tightened too much, and it hurt.

I turned on him. "You knew?"

His face was a study in torment. "Yeah."

"Who the fuck is the Surgeon? Some boogeyman? Are we supposed to be impressed or scared or something?" Missile laughed and lowered her rifle.

"Sounds like a bad villain name to me," Quick quipped.

"Personally, I'd go with something scarier like 'the dentist' or some shit," Trot added her two cents.

They didn't know.

"He was a plastic surgeon for the mob, and an enforcer."

My confession stopped the jokes.

Nonno dipped his head. "Also, their clean up man."

"You mean like the kind of guy that goes around and dismembers corpses?" Missile asked.

"Not always corpses."

Nonno's admission created a vacuum of silence.

Trot glanced at my chest. They all had seen my scars and the tattoos I'd chosen to cover them up. None of them knew exactly how they'd happened.

Some secrets didn't stay dead, did they?

Chapter Nine

The cavalcade of bikes moving north was divided into two distinct groups. At the head, because Nonno was too proud and Trot was smart, the Destroyers tucked Wolf and I into a neat pocket of protection. For once, I was at his back. He kept my left hand captive every moment he could. At stops, during long stretches of road, all of it. He'd pull it from wherever I'd drop it and wrap it up around his waist, then clamp down on it with his own.

Once, he went as far as to bring it to his chest, right over his heart. And the spot where his road name graced the Destroyers' colors he wore. My own colors were in his saddle bag. *Rules.*

We didn't talk. Couldn't. There was no privacy to rant, scream, cry, or fix the rifts that threatened to swallow us.

Trot followed with the officers from our chapter. Quick and her man stayed behind to bury Margaret. I wished they were the ones guarding me, but I'd stupidly agreed to cooperate with Nonno.

Jackson led us to a wooded lot. There was a hunter's road that led us deep into the property. An oversized garage sat at the road's end. We stopped and gathered in the clearing. Hickey unlocked the door and let us in.

"This is your plan B?" I strolled around the space, trying to walk off the road miles.

"Not my plan." Wolf frowned and kept his gaze busy by quartering the room and monitoring the people who joined us.

"To be clear, any bargain you had with Tits extends to us." Trot was at Nonno's side.

Missile followed on her heels, fighting her way through Nonno's bodyguards. "Looks like a cage to me." She scanned the blank walls.

“We couldn’t take you back to the club. It’s being watched.” Jackson strode in and poked Nonno in the shoulder. “Yours is too.”

“You have men on my club?”

“Fuck you. And yeah.”

I caught Wolf’s quick smile. They made a good team. I’m certain this had been discussed somewhere between the decision to come get me and the actual act. Or maybe it was accomplished during the long ride north. He noticed my scrutiny and gave up trying to play tough.

He walked to me and wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, tugging me into his chest. His lips met my hair, and he captured my ass to pull the rest of my body tight with his. Then he sighed. “Ain’t giving you up. Ever.”

I looked up at him in disbelief. “You pick now for that kind of bullshit?”

His face tightened in amusement. “Yeah.”

Then he got serious. “Marry me.”

“No.”

He rolled his eyes and stared at the gathering crowd. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Do with me? What am I going to do with you? Knucklehead, a proposal is supposed to be from the heart and not in some lame attempt to protect me.” I poked at his ticklish spot near his hipbone, knowing he’d flinch.

“It *was* from the heart.” He lowered his voice so we wouldn’t be overheard. Whether it worked or not, I didn’t check.

The words scared me. Suddenly my world was much bigger. I had more to lose. More people who would mourn if I didn’t come back. I didn’t want that. There was too much to do.

The Surgeon was back.

He knew I was alive.

He knew Nonno had let me live.

And Wolf? Shit. He was my weak spot. The Surgeon had an uncanny knack for using leverage against you. I knew my sisters in the DHMC would be targeted, too. But the one place he could hurt me worst was right here holding me close. And, if I pushed him away? All I would accomplish was doing more damage than the Surgeon ever could.

Call it an epiphany, or a tactical decision, but it was no secret that I wore my solitude like armor. And it was killing me. That's why I sought out Wolf in the first place. I was tired of being alone but couldn't trust anyone else with my secrets. He knew them and was somehow a safe choice to burden with my insecurities. In the process, I'd created a weak point in the walls around my heart.

And that had to end.

With no walls around my heart, there were only weak points. Too many to exploit, and too many to protect. Yet, in that was a strength. Love isn't a weakness. Sisters and brothers in our circle of found family were the greatest assets one could marshal. If they weren't fighting each other.

The more I thought about it, the more certain I became. Families were the same around the world. Brothers picked on brothers, sisters fought each other wickedly. But if an outsider threatened your sibling? There was no question where your loyalty lay. I saw it in Wolf and Jackson's men. To a bit lesser extent, I saw it in Nonno's men. They quickly were on board with protecting their fellow Destroyer.

Such a thing was worthy of love.

"I have intel on a property." Several, if the businesses I found were owned by the Surgeon or his associates.

"Sorry?" Wolf wasn't prepared. But it was time to stop this and take control.

"Follow my lead, babe."

His expression darkened.

“Jackson, I have a full plate for you on that van. I also got the sedan and entourage that visited your club yesterday. There were more at the destination. I’ve traced the vehicles to four businesses in the Philly region. There are a few left that I haven’t cracked locations for the shell companies yet.”

I dug in my messenger bag and pulled out the journal I’d been taking notes in.

“I’ll have Skinner run ‘em.” He took it from my hand.

“We need to talk to Trot,” I told Wolf as Jackson took off with my book.

“When did you follow the van?” His tone was sharp.

Inhale, exhale, stay focused.

“After Missile dumped a blue braid on my lap yesterday. I went to the lake house then your club. I needed to check in on you to see if you were okay.”

He ran a hand through my hair and smiled. “I’m fine.”

“You woke up and found out you were violated.”

He froze at my words.

“And I needed to see for myself that my sisters hadn’t messed with you too badly.” My tone was pointed and direct. Robotic? Maybe. Robots didn’t have feelings to hurt.

He caught on and captured my face in his hands, tilting my head so he could study it. “I can see your point. And, yeah, that shit isn’t cool. I’m good, though.”

I nodded, still not convinced. The wounds I carried were too deep for that. So, I talked.

“When you wake up after being vulnerable, it’s hard to not blame yourself. Really hard not to think you somehow did something wrong. And...”

His grip on my head tightened. “It’s on *them*. All on them.”

“Yes.”

His gusty exhale ruffled through my hair.

“It’s on them, on him,” he muttered.

“Yes.” He understood, probably better than anyone in this room why I needed control of this situation.

“I got to go talk to Jackson. Are you okay?”

Was I? Yes. I had work of my own to do. “Nonno’s going to be a wild card. Keep him clueless.” My tone still hadn’t warmed. I was in protective mode, but kept the walls down as best I could. My hand tightened on his belt, trapping him a moment longer.

He needed another answer from me.

“That question you asked? Yes, but not now.”

He scrunched up his face in question. Then it cleared, and he laughed. “Damn, Sprout’s ma is a fucking genius.”

What the fuck?

Before he could get too far, I had to even the score. If he could knock me off axis, that deserved retaliation. “One of these days, you’re gonna wake up dead.”

He just laughed and whipped me the bird without looking back.

“I love you, too. Ya big oaf,” I said it as quietly as I could while double-birding him back.

“Good to see you’re taking this well.” Trot didn’t sound happy. I wouldn’t be, either.

“We need a back up to a back up plan.”

“Maybe four or five back up plans,” she mused as we both watched Wolf capture Jackson’s attention.

“Stop looking at my man’s ass.”

“Busted. You know, the hair was a distraction.”

“From?”

“From everything else that boy’s got going on.”

I shoved her. “Knock it off.”

Her quiet chuckle died quickly. “I put in word to Quinn. Got Fell doing some calls. Missile is doing recon on the room, and Quick is...” She blew out a breath.

Both of us knew where that line of logic ended. “Grieving, but handling it for us,” I finished for her.

“Yeah. We gotta kick ass soon, babe. Otherwise, it’s going to catch up to us, too.”

I had to break the bad news to her as painlessly as possible. “It already has. What we’re doing is holding onto a stage of it. As long as it takes. Then, we’ll let the anger go.”

“Why is Fell my VP and you aren’t?”

“Because I hate power, remember?” Power was a horrible thing. The pursuit of it caused so many people to behave badly. But no matter your reason, be it trying to protect your family, or to gain wealth, nothing good ever came out of it if you had to hurt people who didn’t deserve it. In some twisted logic, that was a weakness. Yet societies all over flourished better when people remembered how to be kind. Even Machiavelli conceded that the wise prince took care of his people and obtained power from them through that act.

But he was also the asshole so many evil men quoted.

“I need to tell you about our enemy.”

“Do I need Fell in on this?”

Felonious was her VP and a bitch of a woman. Her whole life revolved around the MC, and doing the dirty work was a badge of honor for her. In ways, she obtained power through treating her people well. Taking on their burdens and the hardest parts of the work so we didn’t have to do it. She was going to work herself into an asylum someday. Of the girls, she was going to take Margaret’s death hardest. I was already detaching from it, knowing it would hit me again someday

long from this one. But even in that, I knew I could come out the other side. I'd weathered much worse. "Yes, she needs to be prepared."

We made maps in the dirt floor. Dug up long-buried memories. I gave any insight I possessed to my club.

Sprout settled next to us, cross-legged and listening hard. He was the right choice to infiltrate our circle. The girls liked him. In return, he gave them goofy compliments, but swore undying loyalty to his wife, rendering himself harmless in our eyes. I stared through him, seeing the dynamics play around me. Jackson, Nonno, Wolf, Sprout... they were part of this game. My eyes landed back on him. "If you could go home to Danielle, would you?"

"In a fucking heartbeat." He swallowed immediately after speaking, the goofy grin replaced with deep emotion.

"How is the security there?"

"It's shit. Ma's putting her on lockdown somewhere else."

I didn't need to know where, just that his family was safe. "Good."

Trot's eyes bounced back and forth between Sprout and I. "Fell? Tell Quick and JR to get their asses south." Code for "*hole up with our sister chapter.*"

Fell got on her phone and quickly asked, "how long?"

One day would be good, but I knew it wouldn't be that easy. "A week?"

She relayed the info and notified the chapter they'd be staying with.

Wolf strode up. "Okay, Nonno's got two days to deliver you. We're tracking the plates and addresses from your book." He tossed it to me.

"Expect the timeline to change. He's aware we're together."

"Maybe."

I shook my head. “We can’t underestimate him.”

“He’s in a fucking wheelchair,” Wolf replied.

My breath caught. My fist curled, holding an imaginary knife. The first wound was to his back, through his kidney, and the second into his spine. I cut his throat after that.

“Whoo-hoo, Earth to Tits.” Trot waved her hand in front of my face.

“That was creepy,” Fell commented.

Wolf stepped over Sprout’s legs, messing up our map and crouched in front of me. “You did that.”

I smiled. “Yeah. I thought he was dead, though.”

He kissed my forehead. “He will be, soon.”

Reason number five hundred and something I loved him.

“Stealing her from you all.” He picked me up and jostled me until I was in his arms.

Then he strode out of the building.

While we’d been planning, the club had been busy. The prospects erected several tents and parked two RVs near the out-building. Wolf dropped me to my feet in front of one of the tiny tents.

“We’re camping?”

“We got the trail monitored, men around the perimeter and a dozen look alike tents set up as decoys or for the girls to use. Whatever. This one’s ours.”

“We’re camping.” I shook my head in disbelief. It was dark, and a fire was going on at the far edge of the building.

“Get in the tent and stop bitching.” He slapped my ass.

“I’m not bitching.”

“Woman?” His word held a note of warning.

“Fine.” I crawled in and made room for Wolf to get his body through the tiny opening. I took off my boots and

brushed the dirt and grass from the two sleeping bags double-zipped together.

“This is stupid,” I told him as he closed out the night and copied me.

“Next time, I’ll make sure there’s a house here.”

“And a pool,” I insisted jokingly.

“A pool would be nice. I’ll get right on that. After you stop bitching.”

“Told you, I’m not bitching.” I crossed my arms like a little kid who wasn’t getting their way.

He crawled over me and began kissing my skin. My hands, my wrists, my neck.

Damn him. He knew I was a sucker to the way his whiskers tickled my neck. I flinched but didn’t move to stop him.

It took some maneuvering to get out of our pants and into the sleeping bag, but soon we were nose to nose in the dark. A wave of grief knocked my breath away.

I stopped Wolf’s onslaught by putting a hand over his lips.

“He killed Margaret.”

Wolf caressed my face and down my neck. “Was wondering when it would hit.”

I tightened my fingers on his skin. “It hurts.”

I felt his nod, acknowledging my pain.

He’d found my weak point and made certain we were alone, so I could cry. And he held me through it.

Maybe hours later I whispered my fear to him. He listened to that, too. “We’ll get him.”

He promised it over and over again.

“At what cost, Wolf?” I finally asked.

“Any.”

That wouldn't work. "Promise me you will do this smart, please?"

"There's no smart way about it. You aim for the king; you better not miss. I know that. What we're planning here is taking down a major player. There's going to be hell to pay for it."

"Let us do it." The DHMC had sister chapters with ties. We might be able to weather this war. Then again, I knew in my heart we weren't ready. We'd been eating around the edges and ignoring the bigger picture. That needed to change. At the very least, it needed to change for our little chapter. We were a good club but damn naive. We had hotheads like Fell and Missile who didn't know how quickly their energy could be snuffed out. There were chapters out there with families. Children who could be used as collateral. Holes in the walls that would be exploited by people with no moral compass.

"Sweetheart, listen to yourself."

I didn't need his reminder. I was listening. Trouble was, I didn't like what I was hearing. "He needs to die, Wolf. I can't hide any longer." Going back to being scared all the time wasn't an option. Margaret had been my safe place. Wolf was a safety net, but my heart was rebuilt in that stupid bus through tears and berry-picking sessions. I relearned how to trust and love there. Wolf got that version of me. But it hadn't been his work. He only helped water, feed, and nurture the seeds Margaret planted. There wouldn't be another like her.

Instead of answering, he kissed me. Kissed my lips, my head, my hair, my wet cheeks, and nuzzled my neck, trying desperately to keep me with him. I could feel his pain as keenly as my own. He needed me to bend to him, rely on his touch.

But I wasn't going to let him walk that path.

"You need to be strong, too." I patted his chest, where his VP patch should be. Where his "enforcer" patch used to sit.

He stopped my hand, held it against his heart. “They voted me in.”

Whoa.

“Why aren’t you wearing it?”

His toothy grin glinted in the low light. “Jackson has a plan.”

“Really now?” The skepticism dripped from my words.

“Not exactly sure what it is, but I trust him.”

“You’re a fool to trust him.”

“He’s my brother.”

“So is Nonno,” I reminded him. There was one man I would never trust, again.

His laugh was short. “Yeah, well, there’s that.”

“Remember what I said about not trusting friends?”

“Do you trust your girls?”

I ruffled his hair in answer. But added, “No.”

“Touché.”

He did have a point. “That doesn’t mean I don’t love them. Jackson is a snake. But he’s really good at being a snake. If you trust that, then we’re on the same page.”

That got another chuckle from Wolf. “Aw, babe. You say the damndest things.”

“I say the truth.”

He grunted but didn’t have a comeback for me. Instead, he kissed my neck again and lured me out of my clothes.

Camping wasn’t awful. But I could do without getting mosquito bites on my ass.

Chapter Ten

“Get your asses up, we got a problem.” Jackson’s voice was one of the last things I wanted to hear first thing in the morning.

Beside me, hell, half on top of me, Meghan stirred. “What does *he* want?”

Our naked bodies slipped against each other as we tried and failed to find the right way out of the cocoon of sleeping bags.

Jackson started scrabbling for the zipper to the tent.

“Gimme a second, will ya?” I yelled.

“Shit.” Tits grabbed the nearest shirt she could find, mine. I snapped my fingers, and she ignored me, throwing me my pants instead.

“Woman, give me my shirt.”

Jackson stuck his head in. “Yeah, give him the shirt.” He grinned and ogled her breasts, unbound and poking through the thin fabric.

“Eyes north, asshole.” I tugged on my pants, being careful to not expose any of her skin to my president.

“Trot got a call, and so did Nonno. I haven’t checked in with Animal yet.”

“What kind of call?” Tits found my socks and her underwear. She handed the socks off and shimmied into her panties. I paused a moment in my own struggles to run an admiring hand over her ass.

“Quick and JR had company. They fucked with his shop. Luckily, they were in the tunnels under the lab. Since when do you chicks need drug tunnels?”

“Residual from Margaret’s husband.” She coughed to cover the way her throat clamped down. I pulled her in and kissed her head.

“Sorry, baby,” I told her.

“Well, they came in handy. Nonno’s club got hit. He’s pissed.”

“Hit?” I asked.

“Drive by,” Jackson clarified.

“Casualties?”

“Luckily, no.” Jackson handed me my boots. “Get moving. We’re checking all the bikes for trackers. Quick found one on Tits’ bike.”

“Oh my god.”

I checked on her. She had gone pale as a ghost.

“They tracked me from the facility.”

“You don’t know that.” I rushed in to try to keep her from blaming herself. But it did make sense. She’d gone after them with no back up. No one there to stand watch, and no one to get her out if they’d have caught her. Suddenly, I was more than a little angry with her. I wanted to rail at her about not going off on her own. However, that would only get her worked up and mad at me. Then she would do something equally or more stupid. I shoved my feet into the boots. “Let’s get moving.”

She slipped out of the bag and tugged her jeans on. Jackson watched until I shoved his ass right out of the tent and barreled out on top of him.

“Watch it.”

“Oh sorry, maybe you didn’t see me trying to get my ass out of that tent because you were staring at my girl.” I used his shoulder as a prop to push myself to standing.

“About that.”

“Go fuck yourself, Jackson. I’ll make it official if you want, but you and I know where I stand.”

“Wasn’t talking about that. Talking about the shit we got going down around our heads, because of *your girl*.” He emphasized the last two words with a sharp double stab of his fingers into my chest.

“Knock it off, you two. The Surgeon is going to escalate, and you don’t need to be fighting amongst yourselves. What’s that saying? A house divided?”

“We know what he wants.” Jackson stared at her ass.

“He ain’t getting it,” I growled.

She turned her attention to me. “You don’t get to make that decision, I do.”

“*Our* decision. *Our* house.” I stressed the first words.

She blinked. Yeah, that’s right. Saying “yes” last night meant we were in this together.

“Ours.” I touched her face to remind her.

Slowly, she looked up into my eyes. There was genuine fear in them. The kind that used to haunt her in the middle of the night after bad nightmares. “I can’t do this if you get hurt.”

Her voice was barely a whisper. The haunted look on her face didn’t disappear.

“We’re heading to the club. You got everything?” Jackson was talking to me. I reached inside the tent and grabbed my saddle bag. Tits’ coat was next. I handed it off to her, and we left the campground behind.

The ride to the junkyard was quick. The thunder of our bikes tore through town. More than one Skillettsville cop watched as we rode with the DHMC bitches staggered through our numbers. Every Destroyer was strapped with our weapons on display. They could have been assholes about it and tried to stop us, but I’m certain they didn’t have a death wish.

At the yard, Sprout and a prospect waited at the gate. Sprout had a long-range assault rifle slung over his shoulder. It

looked all wrong on him. As I rode through, I slowed and yelled, “Are Danielle and your ma okay?”

He nodded, just one sharp nod. His eyes were hard. Gone were the ones dancing with mirth. Tits squeezed my waist, and I gunned the bike to get through the rows of cars and scrap metal. I lined up my bike right by Jackson’s. The brothers left the spot open for me. Saying without words where I stood with them. Jackson walked his bike into place, and I followed suit.

Nonno parked his just down the line from us. He noted the position I took with a frown.

One of his men came out holding a box.

“We checked it. No bomb or shit.” They handed it to Nonno.

He pulled the envelope off the top and checked the words written on it. “Fuck.” He opened the box and peeked inside.

It was one of those fancy store boxes. Foiled outside, velvet ribboned, and huge.

The lid got tossed into the dirt. He tugged the fabric inside and shook it until the contents spilled out.

Tits sucked in a breath.

The dress inside was blue silk. The kind that gets named.

Nonno checked the label. “Fucking Dior.” He tossed it at Tits, who caught it.

The matching blue underwear were in the dirt. I picked them up and tossed them into a fire can next to the door. “You ain’t wearing those.”

Her lips thinned into a line. I leaned into her face.

“You ain’t.”

“It would make raping me easier without them.”

I roared and kicked the ash can into the yard. My hand cocked back to hit something, but Tits dropped the dress and

grabbed me before I did something stupid like break my hand on the wooden post that held our porch up.

“I didn’t mean it, baby. I didn’t. Please, Wolf. I didn’t mean it. Don’t hurt yourself, please?”

Instead of raging, I grabbed her and held her close. Probably too tightly, but she didn’t complain. She wrapped her legs around my waist and dug her fingers into my neck. Her lips kept whispering into my ear as she peppered my jaw with kisses.

“Get her inside.”

Nonno was right. Even if there wasn’t a good sight line from anything nearby, we were vulnerable in other ways out here. I kicked the dress away from my feet and carried Meghan into the club house. I wasn’t going to put her down or let her go. Any man who tried to separate us would die. I know I wasn’t thinking right but hearing her be so matter-of-fact about what she faced broke something in me.

Nothing would make me accept that fate for her. We’d been through too much, spent too many nights fighting those demons. She was strong, but maybe I wasn’t.

That was a weakness I hadn’t expected, and I needed her skin on mine to be reassured the worst wasn’t going to happen, yet.

Jackson motioned for me to take a seat next to him. Trot was at the table, and Nonno filled out the final seat. Meghan tried to shift off me, but I pulled her back onto my lap and growled into her ear to be still. She settled in, fitting into me perfectly. Two pieces, finally whole.

Nonno put the note onto the table. It was one of those fancy invitations. A handwritten note accompanied it.

Trot pulled it to her and read it, then translated it for the rest of the table.

“Looks like Tits has an engraved invitation to a party. Nonno, too.”

“He wants to make the hand off tonight. There’s a fancy fundraiser in Philly. She’s supposed to be my escort.” He made a face.

“What’s his game? This is a public place.” Trot tapped her finger on the text. She motioned to Fell to look up the information.

“Got a hit on the party. It looks legit. A fundraiser for the children’s hospital.” She whistled. “A senator and the mayor are expected to attend. That’s one hell of a guest list.”

“Probably a few representatives from the family will be there.” Nonno motioned to one of his men. “Call Angelo. See who we’re dealing with.”

“Again, what’s his game? He attacks our businesses, shoots at your people. Why this?”

“He’s showing power,” Tits answered Trot’s question but kept her eyes on Nonno.

He squirmed under her scrutiny.

Jackson began speculating. “He knows you gotta show because you’re related to at least one of those assholes, right?”

“A third cousin, maybe even an uncle.”

Trot’s eyebrows went up. “A biker related to the mob?”

I snorted. It wasn’t the first time that happened. “Not uncommon.”

She tipped her head. “Well, we got our relations, too. Fell, get A.C. on the phone. Let them know what’s up. Harlow is going to be pissed.”

Nonno groaned. “You do not want to get them involved in this.”

“Give me one good reason not to.”

He pointed at Meghan on my lap. “She’s dead if you do.”

“You don’t know that.”

“The fuck I don’t. I grew up hearing stories about this man.” Unexpectedly, he turned to Meghan and blurted out, “Tell them *why* you couldn’t go home.”

Her eyes went wide. “No.” She shook her head violently. I pulled her close and let her hide her trembling against me. It was my turn to step up.

“I’ll fucking answer that. Her parents are dead. Happy?”

Nonno’s eyes went wide. “Did she tell you how?”

Meghan tensed. I shifted her so she wouldn’t slip out of my arms. “Yeah.”

Trot flicked her attention back and forth between us. “Someone talk.”

Nonno filled in the story.

“Her father owed money. Just some gambling debt. He didn’t want his family to know. But he got cocky, thinking he could work out a deal. They took Meghan as collateral.”

I cupped her head and tightened my hold. She squirmed. Her voice was rough as she spoke. “When he didn’t pay on time, they took pictures.”

Nonno’s face tensed. “Then they took his son. Killed him outright. Dumped his body in the middle of the school’s parking lot. Made it look like an overdose. The wife took off to Florida. Her fingers showed up first. Then other pieces. They framed her father for it. He got shivved on the inside waiting for trial.”

Meghan shook off my hold. “When that happened, they put me with him, the Surgeon. I was shown how they did it. Told if I didn’t cooperate, I’d join them.”

She leaned her head against my shoulder. “I didn’t want to die. But I did run. Twice.”

“The second time, she left him for dead.” Nonno added. “Everyone thought he was, so we didn’t know what to do.”

“Wait a minute, what do you mean, you didn’t know what to do?” Trot asked.

Jackson kicked his legs out, knocking the table leg out as he did. “Are you that fucking naive? Do you need it spelled out?”

“Yes, I do. What the fuck does he mean by that?”

“The bikers do the dirty work, and the mob makes the deals.” Tits sat up straight and pulled the invitation toward her. She shoved the handwritten note away as she did, a look of cold hatred flashed through her expression. I knew her well enough to see the quick flinch and the tightness near her right eye. Then it was gone. A mask of calm indifference replacing any emotion.

“Do you mean to tell me you’ve been sleeping with the enemy this whole time?” Fell shoved her two cents into the conversation, not helping things one bit.

“There’s a saying. The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Her finger traced the raised script on the ivory paper.

“That’s fucked up.” Fell dumped her vitriol and started pacing.

“So, when he lived, what happened?” Trot asked.

Jackson snorted.

“What?” She skewered him with a glare.

“Nonno didn’t know he lived.”

Our shot-caller pretended to ignore Jackson’s truth bomb.

“Nonno never would have given her to me if he knew.” I played back that night in my head. My thoughts had been primarily on Tits. Or on the challenge I’d seen in Nonno’s eyes. But now I dug into the conversation. The strange way everyone was ignoring the girl in the cage. It was as if she was a proverbial elephant in the room everyone knew was a problem but didn’t know what to do with. When I swaggered in, still stupid and young, it was a solution that gave them plausible deniability.

“Bingo.” Jackson picked up a finger to emphasize his win.

“I was supposed to be returned. But with no one to return me to, it didn’t really matter.” Tits dropped a hand to my leg and absently stroked the denim.

“A week later, one of his goons came for her. I told him she’d died. He shrugged it off. I thought that was the end of it.” Nonno shook his head. “You couldn’t let her die, could you?”

I brushed a hand through her hair, not an ounce of regret in my decision to nurse her back to health. “Nope.”

She leaned into my touch. Eyes closed and trusting me to keep her safe.

“This is why he can’t be your second, Jackson. He doesn’t follow orders well.”

“That’s exactly why I cast the final vote to make him my second, Nonno. Someone’s got to use their brains around here. I’m sick and fucking tired of yes-men.”

The older man slammed his hand down on the table. “Revoke it.”

“Nope.” Jackson reached into a pocket and slid the VP patch to me. Everyone watched as I picked it up and tucked it into my inner pocket.

“Crete told me he lied to his face. You don’t do that to a brother. Especially not one in his position.”

Jackson shrugged. “His fault for believing it. Don’t give a fuck, Nonno. Crete ain’t you. Never will be.”

Nonno’s anger faded at Jackson’s praise.

“So, this guy, the evil villain asshole, he wants Tits, but for years everyone thought he was dead. How in the hell did he maintain that kind of power without anyone knowing he was alive?” Trot had a hell of a point.

“Plus, he’s in a fucking wheelchair. That’s gotta be a shit image in the family.” Jackson studied his fingers.

“He had five bodyguards and maybe a stable of twenty women. Hardly where he was when I stabbed him.”

“How many times did you get him?” Jackson leaned in, a new gleam of admiration shining in his eyes as he stared at Tits.

“Mine, remember?”

“Right.” Jackson licked his lips and leaned back, a big smile on his face.

I added my own speculation, “The point is, he’s weak. Pretending he’s strong by demanding we play his games. Making us go to this fancy party when he’s hitting our businesses, our people. No matter who is at this party tonight, some of them will have forgotten his reign of terror. If he’s counting on that to keep people in line, he might be making a mistake.”

“Look strong when you’re weak,” Tits muttered.

“And vice versa.” I stroked down the soft curve of her neck and back, making her shiver as I trailed a finger under the waistband of her jeans.

“Does that mean we’re going to this party?” Trot asked.

“Hell yeah, I’m wearing that fucking blue dress.” Missile ran outside to retrieve it from the dirt.

“What you gonna wear, Tits?” Jackson asked, licking his lips.

She looked at me. “I’m sure Wolf’s got something I can wear.”

Most of the shit I bought her was in the form of fancy underwear. But as the owner of a strip club, I knew a lot of women. Some of them had great taste.

She smiled and leaned in. Her breath caressed my ear as she whispered, “Make sure it’s long enough I can hide a knife, okay?”

I nodded, inhaling her skin. My lips brushed her cheek as she straightened. That feral look was back in her eyes. I wanted to savor that wildness, drink it down and drown in it as we fucked each other blind. But there was a presentation to orchestrate. A delicate dance that moved our pieces onto the game board in the presence of folks who constantly underestimated us.

We were just bikers. Thugs. The hired help. But we were invited to the ball, and it was our turn to prove there was a reason we were feared. This woman, my woman, she was aware of the danger we walked into.

I checked on the excited plans being made around us. Trot watched with the practiced patience of a leader. Felonious sharpened her knife as she talked. Revenge glittered in her eyes as she swept the blade across the stone.

Jackson appeared relaxed, watching me. His eyebrow went up, a tiny fraction. His eyes slid to Nonno, as if to tell me to look.

I did.

He was an island in the commotion. A king lost to the workings around him. A wild card who didn't like me, hadn't supported my rise to power when he had every reason to shore up his defenses. I couldn't underestimate him. He'd risen to the second in command position by will and savvy machinations. There were others out there, just like him, biding time, planning alliances, working brother against brother, so they would need a strong man to tell them what to do.

Maybe that's why he hated me. He couldn't control me. Or my girl.

Chapter Eleven

The Philadelphia skyline at night hid a lot of its flaws. The private event reserved the top floors of One Liberty Place. Access to the observatory was restricted, but the view was still spectacular.

Of course, that wasn't the view I was interested in.

Tits wore a sleek metallic dress. The fabric draped from her shoulders, concealing her front from collarbone to ankle, but wide open to expose her back. The smooth expanse was only broken by a single chain that snaked down from the Y above her shoulder blades and deposited a tiny diamond drop that drew the eye down to her peek-a-boo ass-crack.

The dress cinched closed just a finger width or maybe two below the indent to preserve the guests' modesty.

The plunge dared me to place a possessive hand there. Show everyone that this woman was mine. Prove to them I could touch somewhere so intimate on her, and everyone else could only look.

But she was on Nonno's arm. For a man more comfortable in leather and denim, he played the part of mobster well. His suit was new, coming from a shop Sprout owned. All that money was doing its work for us. Sprout looked the part, too. His suit was tailored, though. No tell-tale sagging or bulges. His wife insisted on coming, pulling strings with her rich uncle, who had been invited. They remained in their group, not hinting to anyone they were affiliated with Nonno's entourage.

Jackson and I played the part of security since we both owned suits. This was something that Sprout's wife insisted on for our public events. And since we had the scratch, it was easy to buy the best. We wore matching dark jackets in Italian silk, simple dark ties with matching dark-colored shirts, and relegated to following two steps behind. The position gave me ample opportunity to watch Tits' ass sway back and forth.

“You pay more attention to her ass than the room,” Jackson grumbled.

He had a point. “Like you haven’t tried to sneak a peek?”

“Sneak?” He snorted. “Hate to break it to you, but I got a full lunar landscape view about five minutes ago.”

“When was that?”

He ignored me. “Check it out. Number three and the head of the 623.”

Sure as shit, the Teamsters and the mob were back together. Or maybe just playing nice for the night. There were more celebrities than them in attendance. I noted at least one rock star. She was an up-and-coming singer who’d hit the charts in the last year. But we weren’t here to gawk. I scanned the crowd, trying harder to ignore my girl. “No sign of the asshole.”

“Look for escorts. I think I saw that brunette I fucked at Kush’s retirement party.”

“Really? Where?”

“Toward the food.” Jackson curled his index finger and wiped it over the tip of his nose, using the leading edge to indicate the direction. I followed the invisible line and spotted a dark-haired chick in a slinky black and silver number. She laughed and turned away. Her face was now in profile.

“Confirmed. How was she?”

Jackson shrugged. “Good, not great. Speaking of...” He indicated Missile, making a splash and drawing stares in the bright blue Dior gown Tits was supposed to wear. On her arm was Fell, dressed in a skimpy white halter dress that crisscrossed above her tits, leaving a nice keyhole to admire her cleavage through. They touched in PDAs not suitable for the event, but, by doing so, were sufficiently ignored by most of the guests. No one asked them to leave, so the act worked.

They kissed each other like they were inhaling their very last breath.

“I’m hungry for a sandwich,” Jackson mused.

“Now who needs to be reminded to watch the room?”

He laughed.

I scanned the crowd and left him to the floor show. The escort had disappeared, but I saw another woman who fit the term “escort” walk across the room toward an exit covered by two goons. The men were easy to make, wearing almost identical uniforms to the one I had on.

“Watch Tits for a bit. Going to check on something.”

“With pleasure,” Jackson’s eyes dipped to my girl’s ass again. I slapped his hand as I passed, warning him to keep his eyes higher.

I worked across the room, heading for the catering corridor, near the exit. Wait staff hustled in and out giving me visual cover when I moved closer to observe. I picked a glass of wine off a tray and sipped at it, turning away from the exit, but keeping a good visual of it in the reflection on the triangular glass windows that traveled from floor to ceiling. The exterior angled oddly as it traveled upward, a product of the chiseled angles of the building’s peak. The windows overlapped in patterns that fooled the eye. It made the space appear as if it extended into the space outside.

Letting my eyes unfocus, I overlaid the outside view with the reflected one. Bright tubes of light edged this building and mirrored the shape of the twin building next door. The door opened behind me, and I watched the escort and her date go in. I squinted. My eyes must have been playing tricks on me because I could have sworn the stout guy that had her arm was Crete. But he’d left over a day ago after Kush’s party. I stopped a passing waitress and asked her what was upstairs.

“The observatory.”

“That’s two floors up.”

“Oh, there are private suites and offices are between, but that’s not open to guests.”

“Are you sending food up there?”

“I don’t think I should tell you that.”

She looked nervous.

“I’m checking security holes. Part of my job, you know?” I adjusted my cuff as if I had a microphone there. I didn’t, and no self-respecting guard talks into his sleeve, but the movies get that shit ingrained into people’s minds.

“Oh! That’s a different staff. I wasn’t cleared for that party.”

“Aw, that’s a shame. Anyway, thanks for that. It puts my mind at ease. I appreciate your help.” I smiled at her, giving her the nice one, not the big bad Wolf one that said, “I’d like to eat you from pussy to rear.”

Although, the blush that crept up her neck meant maybe a little of that one leaked out.

A sharp jab to my upper arm made me flinch. Reflex had me striking out to catch the offender with a back hand, but Missile was too damn quick, even in high heels.

“Ouch.”

“Stop flirting with this poor woman.” Said woman snickered and took off to her tasks.

I scowled at her. “Wasn’t flirting.”

“Tits saw you.” The tiny firebrand Missile was, she looked me up and down and then made a face that showed her distaste for me. It was the same expression I’d seen on a cat once. How can something small look down on you from below?

“Let me repeat myself, I wasn’t flirting.” And so what if Tits saw me? She never minded it before. As long as I didn’t touch, and I didn’t.

“Gotcha.” She laughed quietly at her joke.

“Bitch.”

That earned me another poke. This time I managed to intercept it before she did damage. “Only my sisters get to call me that.”

“If the name fits...”

Her eyes narrowed. “Suddenly, I don’t like you as much.”

“I call bullshit on that. What’s up?”

Missile and Fell weren’t supposed to connect with Tits during this party. Sure, the dress was a dead giveaway, earning those two their own security team, but the goal was to keep any watchers very busy trying to track all the moving parts.

“Tits needs to go to the bathroom.”

My eyebrow crept up. I could feel it stretching the skin as it climbed higher. “And?”

Missile’s face morphed into an evil grin. “And she’s feeling lonely.”

That was a different story. I straightened to full height and looked across the room to where my girl was poised on Nonno’s arm. Our eyes met, all the way across the room and her placid face flickered into a secret smile.

“Clear the ladies’ room. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Done.” Her eyes dipped lower.

“What?” I glanced down to check I hadn’t spilled on the suit.

“She said you did, but I didn’t believe her.”

“Said I did what?”

“That you look good in Armani.”

“What man doesn’t?”

“Nonno.”

I couldn’t help it. The snort slipped out before I could stop it. Missile had me there. “Thirty seconds to clear that bathroom. Tick tock.”

Her smile was brilliant. I could get used to having partners in crime. Which reminded me— I swept the room again. Nothing amiss. Tits worked her way down the same path Missile took. I set the drink down and took a different route to the interior.

Missile stood two doors down from the ladies' room. She leaned against the wall, arms crossed.

There was no one in the area. I frowned.

“Get your ass back where Jackson or Fell can watch you.”

“Bossy.”

“You're a target. Stop acting like one.”

She stuck her tongue out at me, then kicked the door behind her before taking off. I made certain to track her progress until she cleared the corner of the main event room.

The door she kicked cracked open.

“Get in.”

Tits was on the other side. The room was an office of some sort.

“How'd you get this unlocked?”

“Fell. She has a lock pick.”

“Where?” That white dress didn't leave much to the imagination.

“A girl never tells the really good hiding places.”

I backed her into the room and let the door click shut behind us. The light fabric of her dress was barely sufficient to cover her, and I could feel her curves under my palms. No panty lines at all because there were none. “Missile says you're lonely.”

“Shut up.” She grabbed my ears and tugged my head down to hers.

Our mouths met, and I pushed her against the wall.

She shoved at me to get some space between our bodies.

I stepped back, confused.

“On your knees,” Tits demanded.

Well. That was not confusing at all. Especially when she rucked up her dress, being careful not to crush it.

As it cleared her thighs, I nudged her legs farther apart. The high heels on her feet were delicate little straps with a gilt padlock dangling from the ankle strap. The temptation to wrap my hand around her delicate feet and play with that lock was great, but my need for her was stronger. I lifted one leg, put it over my shoulder, and braced her other leg with a possessive hand that crept higher up her thigh until it met the round curve of her ass. I licked the slick little trail of her arousal and found the source easily.

She groaned as I sucked on her clit. “I need that.”

My tongue pressed hard to give her enough delicate pressure to feed her pleasure.

“Oh, Wolf, please.”

“Please, what?” I growled with a mouthful of her pussy.

“Do that again.” She shivered.

I made a noise that vibrated against her slick skin.

The shiver turned into a tremor of clenching pleasure. My tongue found her hole, and I dove in, licking her inside and out.

“Fingers.”

I paused just long enough to speak. “Say, please.”

“Wolf.”

I bit her thigh for that disobedience.

She cried out, and then put her wrist to her mouth to stop from screaming.

“Say, please, Meghan.” I gave her ass a tiny slap. It wasn’t nearly enough to hurt, but warned her that I could get wilder.

“Please, Wolf.”

I growled.

“Please put your fingers inside me. Please?”

That was more like it. I slid the hand that cupped her ass into the crack that had taunted me all night.

She jumped in shock as my middle and index finger brushed her puckered hole. “Not that—oh,” she gasped as I rimmed the opening and slid another finger into her pussy.

The change in her was beautiful. She dripped poise and grace outside, but now she was a study in pleasure that stripped away all the cold tension and transformed into a molten sex kitten as I played with her inside and out.

The skin of her wrist got teeth as she tried to control her volume, but I wasn’t having it. I pushed her harder, giving her as much as I could with my hands and mouth.

“Inside me,” she chanted.

I obliged, but her hips danced away from my touch. That meant I had to control her. Both hands caught her hips and held them as still as they could.

“Dick, please.”

She did say please, didn’t she?

I gave her one last good swipe with my tongue before standing up and digging a condom out. I doubted she’d want me dripping down her leg all night. She touched me, making it difficult to get sheathed quickly.

But as soon as I got it rolled down to my root, I lifted her, wrapping both lovely legs around my waist. Then slid home.

Her inhale stuttered with pleasure. “That.”

I slid out and back in, holding her close at the apex. “This?”

A flex of her hips that made our bodies a fraction closer and my dick just that much deeper inside her almost did me in. “You’ve been driving me crazy all night.”

“Ditto, big guy.” She braced herself, using my shoulders as leverage to arch her body and move on my dick.

I helped, getting a feel for the rhythm she set. She was so responsive and sweet as she ground down with a moan each time I hit the limit of her depths.

At the slow pace, I had a moment when my eyes focused on her face. This was her in all her glory. A woman who trusted me completely. The realization crept past all my defenses, accompanied by a slow dawning of fear.

Our pace quickened, driven by need, fear, pleasure, and time. I caught her right before she tipped over the edge and forced her to look me in the eye. “Promise me.”

“Anything.” Her head fell back against the wall as her body curved to take me as deep as possible. “Anything, Wolf.”

I pressed harder. “Promise me you won’t go alone.” I needed this. I knew what she was planning. A sacrifice. Her body for our lives. “I need you.”

Whether I meant it as, “I need you to promise me,” or as it hung in the air between us, it didn’t need clarification. I did need her. I needed her always, but tonight, I needed more. I wanted forever with this woman. I needed it like a man needs air to breathe.

“Promise.” She took control, clamping her legs around me and clawing my neck.

That was what I needed. I spilled into the condom with gasping triumph. As I did, I let slip one more fear into the dark. “I love you.”

Her body tensed. She dug her nails into my scalp, trying to get me to move my head so she could look at me. But I wasn’t

going to give her that. I needed to be as close to her skin as possible so there would be nothing between us. “I love you,” I whispered it into her neck and again into her ear.

The sharp pain from her fingernails bit deeper. This time I obliged and looked her in the eye. “Not walking it back.”

Her mouth was open. The feral look was gone, replaced by something so lost and afraid, I was tempted to apologize.

But then she floored me. “I’ve loved you ever since you put me on your bike that first night.”

“Yeah?”

I knew which night she meant. She was a wild thing, rightfully afraid of the biker who won her in a card game. I unlocked the cage and carried her outside. She tried to run but didn’t make it far. Her lack of clothing was one problem. Her injuries were another. But she tried to get up over and over, no matter how much damage she did to herself or how many times she fell.

Eventually, she crawled. I followed, like the wolf of my namesake, biding my time until she collapsed.

But instead of pouncing on her, I covered her with my t-shirt, then my jacket. Then I dug in my saddle bags and found a smelly thermal I’d shoved there months before. The size difference between us made it easy for me to slip it over her bottom half. With those make-shift clothes on her, getting bloody and dirtier, I carried her to my bike and explained every step of the way. I promised her a bath, rest, food, and a doctor.

At that last suggestion, she fought me. Even broken, she was terrified of him. It was my buddy, Ice, who suggested she probably had issues.

I remember saying something sarcastic back at him. But he was right.

In that dark parking lot, I held up my pinky and made a promise to her. She took it with understandable hesitation,

allowing one weak moment to trust another person, even despite the lessons of her past. She shook as our fingers locked.

That was then. This time when she held up a pinky for me to promise something different, her nerves were calm. I took her vow and added my own.

“I promise to love you as long as I can. Not because of some fucked up sense of ownership, but simply because you’re the strongest woman I know.” I meant every damn word.

Her nod indicated we were good.

I slipped out of her and tied off the condom. That got shoved into a bin for recycled paper amid a crumpled stack of sheets.

She put her dress to rights and let me wipe her down with my handkerchief.

“Not too bad of damage. You ready?” She smoothed a line where we’d crushed the silk between our bodies.

I kissed her forehead. “Go first so I can make sure you get to Nonno okay.”

She nodded and slipped into the hall. I followed, moving slower, and watching that damn drape of silk brush her ass as she moved. Distractions are terrible things. But beautiful. A man would be lucky to have that image burned into their brain. Such things carry you through the hard times.

Chapter Twelve

“**Y**our girl is gone,” Nonno whispered into my ear almost the moment I rejoined the party. His hand clamped onto my elbow.

A short distance away, Felonious was whispering hard into Jackson’s ear. He had his phone to the other ear as he directed his men.

I searched the room for Missile’s splash of blue but came up wanting. “Do you think he has her?” My heart sped up. The very last thing I wanted was for my sister to go through the same trauma I had. The fact that Missile volunteered for the job didn’t make me any less nervous about her odds.

Instead of answering, Nonno reached for his own cell phone. The screen was lit up with an incoming call. He didn’t even get a moment to answer when his gaze went to the ceiling. “Understood.”

He put the phone back into his pocket. His frown at Jackson was all the confirmation I needed to know that my fears were justified. “We’re being summoned.”

As in all of us. I searched the room for signs of Wolf, but either by design or choice, he wisely remained out of sight.

My nemesis having Missile was one thing. Two hostages would be more than I could manage.

Nonno, Jackson, Fell, and I paraded to the guarded elevator. Inside, one of the henchmen joined our party. *We could overpower him*, I thought, but shoved that urge to the side. Tonight was fact-finding and yes, slightly dangerous, and possibly criminal depending on the next moves. I counted on the Surgeon’s obligations to his leash keepers as my safeguards. He wouldn’t dare commit quadruple homicide at a party in the middle of their power seat. That would be gauche. His words, from a long time ago. There were rules in his world. Ones that he wisely obeyed.

Killing a henchman would gain me nothing and make too many enemies I couldn't afford. I knew better but the urge for retaliation was strong. I glanced at Fell to see if she was as conflicted as I was. If the way she stared down her nose at him was any indication, maybe conflicted wasn't the proper term. Murderous was more likely. Luckily the ride was very short.

The doors opened to a slightly smaller, but no less spectacular view like the one a floor below. My enemy and his court were posed in the center of the tableau. Contempt welled in my heart. Along with a surprising note of pity. What was supposed to be a display of power twisted into an arrogant perversion. The boogeyman of my nightmares was a frail man. Or was it staged to only look that way? I shook off the urge to focus solely on the Surgeon.

There were surprisingly few people present. A handful of bodyguards, a couple of lackeys, and three women. One being Missile, who looked ready for murder. She looked far from helpless despite being constrained.

Near the Surgeon was the woman from the other night. His current madam du jour. On her left was her clone, but younger. I remember he preferred classy brunettes. One of the main reasons I dyed my hair as white-blond as I could. I'd go bald rather than any shade of brown, especially the fake deep brown he demanded of his favorites. Unfortunately, that put Missile in his sights.

"Nonno, such a good man, bringing my favorite back to me." The Surgeon clapped his hands once as if he was enjoying a play.

A farce would be more accurate. We were all playing roles here.

The madam at his side frowned at his word choice. Interesting.

"Tits, swear to God I'm going to kill this bastard." Missile ranted as she struggled against the hold of the two men flanking her. She made quite a show of it.

“Did he hurt you?”

“He didn’t, but these fucking apes tore the dress, see?”

She flashed me a leg where the slit had extended well up her thigh.

That was a good sign. You had to know her to understand she was making a joke. She couldn’t care less about the dress. Knowing her, she was probably angry because she hadn’t caused the damage herself.

“Enough! It is bad enough you wore the wrong dress, but to add your coarse yowling to the presentation is beneath even you. I hope.” The Surgeon’s guards shook Missile into submission at their master’s outburst.

“And you. Shameful.” He perused my form. “I’d hoped you matured in your absence, but I see a spoiled, soiled child.”

I thrust my tits out as if daring him to call me a child again. The woman at his side rolled her eyes. The other girl nervously watched the action and the exit.

The Surgeon motioned to Nonno to present me. “Maybe I need a closer look.”

Ew.

I stepped forward, shaking off Nonno’s guidance, and stood wide-stance and defiant. The tape on my dress worked overtime to keep things in place because I hadn’t tested this pose. “I’m here. Say your peace.” He obviously orchestrated this night for his own benefit.

“Still a fighter. That is a shame.” His face soured as he studied me for any sign of weakness.

He’d tried many times to break me. When he couldn’t, he had others hurt me, or the ones I loved, and then he pretended to save me, so I would willingly give my gratitude to him. The game worked well. Most of the women he directed had some weird attachment to him.

But not me.

All I saw was a horrible person who would cut up a child's mother, sew her back up, and send the pieces to her estranged husband. All the while pretending to be a good man or a faithful servant to his mob bosses. I was young, but not naive. The Surgeon didn't want to serve. He wanted to control. That was his number one motivation for any action he took. It was why he targeted a made man to cement his reputation as ruthless.

My father was a piece of shit. A low-level scrabblor for a piece of the mob's favor with an addiction to gambling and hookers. He'd done someone a favor at one point. That earned him a modicum of respectability despite his flaws. The Surgeon exploited my father's fall from grace to move into the inner circle. He embraced the adage, "it is better to be feared than loved," on his path to power. He was obsessed with it.

Removing my father was a minor victory. Removing the whole family? A coup de grace.

He orchestrated the entire act like an artist. Setting my father up to die in prison, and killing my brother, who was almost as big of an asshole as my father, was probably too easy. But the way he tortured my mother? She didn't deserve to die as she did. The mob thought her death was clean, but it was far from it. No, that little show was to affect his final victory. Making me his pawn. He used her to control me. And when it didn't work, her usefulness was over.

The kicker was this man told me her death was my fault. My fault for running away, as was the damage his hired men inflicted on me.

His grab for power turned into the stuff that horrible legends are born from. Every time he paraded me in front of his mob bosses, they were reminded of what a monster could achieve. A monster who, he reminded them, could not be appeased by flattery or money.

Only power mattered. In the short time it took for my teenage years to end, he moved from obscurity into legendary status. His brutality and cunning had no equal. His climb was

destined to be unparalleled in any modern time. He controlled the men who controlled the mob. His stable of willing women seduced and compromised men who had their fingers on half the world's wealth. He befriended thugs and rapists, and employed killers, but never any who could match his thirst for blood. Instead, he trained the women in his brutal care for that role. We sat at his knee, soaking in the laws of power, using it to twist others to his will, and loved him for it. At least most of them did.

When I ran the second time, I vowed I'd die before getting used by him again. So, why was I here? Ah, yes, revenge. "You are acting like a petty thug. Pretending strength with your little show here. Why no witnesses? Were there no senators available tonight?" I looked around the room. Obviously, there were witnesses. But none that mattered. Every single person in this room was expendable to him. From lackey to guests.

"Perhaps I want to keep your little fit of disobedience quiet."

"It's been five years," I reminded him.

"Timelines are irrelevant."

"Weakness," I pointed out.

"There is no weakness in revenge," he hissed.

On the contrary, revenge made you very weak. The emotions evoked in the act were the downfall of many. Remembering that made me cold when I should be molten hot with anger.

"So, you waited. I wonder why?" Five years was a long time to nurse wounds. I looked at the man behind me. "Uncle? Did you tell him I was dead?"

"Quiet, child," Nonno whispered.

If you could drop a pin in the room, it would have echoed. My mom may have been an innocent caught in the Surgeon's web, but her stepbrother was a piece of shit. Nonno and I

didn't share blood, but family remembers family. It was always my plan to run to him. I knew he couldn't kill me outright. But my presence had been a problem he couldn't solve. Until Wolf showed up.

"I see now. Nonno, shame on you for keeping secrets."

My uncle's nostrils flared. The gentle scolding grated on his pride which was evident on his face.

Missile gaped at me like I'd grown two heads. Fell reverted to stoic Amazon mode. A sure sign she was readying for violence. Jackson smirked. "Light. Bulb." He sing-songed and scratched his nose.

"Now you know," Nonno stood his ground in front of the Surgeon and ignored Jackson.

The Surgeon shook his head. "I knew of your relation to her then. Do you think I pick my targets at random?"

"You know, it's too bad Tits didn't kill you. It would have saved us a night of fucking boredom." Jackson broke off from our crowd to get a drink from the side bar.

The Surgeon snapped his fingers, and three goons drew weapons on Jackson. He carefully held the glass and kept both hands in plain view as he poured a couple of fingers worth of whiskey into a crystal tumbler.

"You fucking moron, you're supposed to wait for the signal." Missile talked with her hands, pulling on the hold her captors had on her.

"What signal?" Jackson filled his mouth with a canapé and chewed open-mouthed.

"You know, the bat signal." Missile didn't sound so sure now. "Right?"

Fell started giggling.

I smiled at my former captor. "You try to think everything through, don't you? Did you ever think that not everything or everyone is controllable?" My head betrayed my pity.

“I’m certain with the right leverage, everyone is controllable.”

“I should ask what you mean by that, but I really don’t want to know.” I examined my nails like I, too, was bored.

“You were so compliant when your mother was alive.”

My hand dropped as if a dead weight. “About that.”

He held up a hand, and, *damn him*, still held enough sway over me that it made me stop talking. “And she died because of you.”

“Nice try. She died because her husband was a piece of shit who crossed the wrong mobster while you were trying to find a way to impress folks. If it wasn’t her, it would have been some other woman.”

“On the contrary. I had grown quite fond of her. She was my favorite experiment. Those scars were beautiful, no?”

I resisted the urge to rub my own scars.

“Jackson’s right. This is boring as fuck. Bat signal any time, folks.” Missile wiggled and caused one of the lackeys holding her to watch her hips. She caught him watching and blew him a kiss.

He looked to his boss for a sign.

We all waited for the Surgeon to signal his men holding Missile to do something. Why else stage things so? Our little standoff got uncomfortably grim.

In that silence, I noticed a few things.

First was the palsy that spread down the Surgeon’s left side rendering him practically immobile. It was evident in how his fingers curled inward and didn’t grip the handles of his chair. It showed, too, in the frail lines of pain near his eyes. And in the fragile, sagging skin under his chin. This was a man on his way out. I might not have succeeded in sending him to Hell five years ago, but I certainly set the mechanics of death into motion. I took a step forward and knelt in front of him.

“You wanted me to be like you, didn’t you?”

I gripped his legs to feel the muscles that were no longer strong. The right side out sized the left by a fraction. He didn’t flinch as I dug my thumbnails into the tender skin next to the knee. In my mind’s eye, I remembered each cut I gave him. My first knife stroke caught him in the back, missing the kidney and getting hung up on the spinal cord. It had been difficult to pull the blade out. I’d made a mess of it, twisting and turning the blade to loosen it.

This close, I could see the scar where I’d cut his throat. Too far forward to kill. A rookie mistake. One I should have avoided.

Plunging the knife into his heart should have killed him. But I doubt he had such an organ. I’d been young, filled with rage, scared shitless, and stupid. The death I’d longed to give him wasn’t fast. Instead, I got something sweeter. Years of tortured agony that weren’t yet complete. I smiled.

“On the contrary, I made you into what you are. So beautiful and so ruthless. I can see it in your eyes that you are just like me.”

“I’ll give you that. You definitely put that in there.” I stood, making the goons relax a fraction.

“I would have made you into a queen. Anything, anyone you desired, it could have been yours.” He snapped his fingers soundlessly to illustrate how simple it would have been.

“Anyone?”

“Anyone. Even a future king if you wanted it. I can still make it so.”

I took a step back and motioned to Jackson to regroup. “I’ll start with Margaret Wheade.”

His brows furrowed. “Who is that?”

“The woman you killed two days ago,” Missile sputtered.

“Old lady, on the farm. Bit the bullet, literally.” Jackson grabbed another tiny bite of food and a bottle from the table.

The Surgeon looked at the henchmen. “Is this true?”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t know. Your goons came down to Maryland and shot up the place.” Missile’s furious hiss turned deadly. Jackson kept rummaging in the food, and Fell stepped behind me.

Only Nonno remained still. His attention was not on the game but on the star players. There was more than one in the room. His smile widened. “Looks like you can’t control your own house.”

The Surgeon made a fatal mistake then. He glanced at the woman at his side. The madam who had treated Missile and I with such contempt.

I shook my head. “Instead of focusing on the past so much, you should have paid more attention to your present.”

Her gasp of outrage was lost on me. I didn’t care. I focused my entire attention on the Surgeon. “I pity you. I know that’s not what you want from me, but it is all you’ll get. We’re taking Missile with us, and you can go fuck yourself.”

“Not so fast.” Nonno put an arm on mine. He didn’t hesitate before he addressed the Surgeon.

“You fucked up. Your, or your hench-woman’s, little stunt upstate got attention. They don’t trust you to stay dead now that they know you’re back. I called it in, and it was agreed that you’re a problem. This little show?” Nonno motioned at the room.

“It only proves you got in over your head. Which means if any of you and yours come sniffing around my business again, all of my business, it’s war. And I already got approval from above to carry it out.”

“Right-o mate.” Jackson affected a poor accent to voice his agreement. He stepped away from the buffet, arms swinging and guns drawn.

Fell came out of my shadow with her knife. She grabbed the madam as a shield pushing the edge against the delicate flesh of her throat. Unlike my ill-fated positioning, Fell's blade pressed right over the pulsing arteries.

Missile stomped on one of her captor's shoes with her stilettos and broke the hold on her. In a flash, she caught one in the groin, causing them to double over, and the other quickly followed him to the floor, clutching his junk in pain.

Jackson had two guns trained on the guy by the elevator, uncaring of the Mexican standoff that had set into motion with the remaining staff. Nonno begrudgingly pulled out his own gun and pointed it at the lackeys trained on Jackson.

But the lynch pin in this was the small gun Wolf had slipped me while we fucked. I held the tiny weapon on the Surgeon.

“My demands are simple. Forget I exist. Forget your plans and stay dead. Otherwise, I will finish what I started. Nonno isn't the only one with an army. You made an enemy of the Devil's Handmaidens. And there are more than just a handful of us. So, forget.”

The anger inside me made my voice hard. It strained my throat to finish.

His grin was macabre. “I see you remember *everything* I taught you.”

The echoes of his cackle haunted me as we took the elevator to the ground floor. Jackson recalled his men as Fell gave Trot the green light.

“I don't see why we couldn't kill him.” Missile tossed her shoes into the SUV and ranted about how easy it would have been.

“Did you get a good look at him? He is on his way O.U.T.” Fell slipped in beside me, sandwiching me between them. Jackson took the driver's side, and Nonno took the passenger seat after surveying the street as if it were a kingdom he ruled.

But someone was missing.

“Where’s Wolf?”

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Chapter Thirteen

“Son of a bitch! No one saw it.” Jackson paced as he waited for the next check-in from his men.

“Good news, Sprout got the tracker on the Surgeon’s van.”

“Where is it now?” I tried to contain my nerves by running through scenarios and checking statuses. All while keeping a running list of details chugging through my thoughts. Anything to distract me from the empty hole gouged into my heart.

Fell pulled up the digital map of eastern Pennsylvania. I’d already marked all the company properties and residences connected with the plates I caught at the equestrian center. That property had also been traced and mapped with blue pins rather than red. I wasn’t certain if the company that owned that location was truly connected or not. The property was still operating during the day while the auction company sorted out an estate sale. The caretakers were from a reputable firm. One that would take forever to trace to any one client. We focused on the most local properties available as short-term rentals and of a certain class that the Surgeon appreciated.

My knowledge of his former habits, compared with the information from Nonno’s network populated too many choices. Ones we’d weed out as soon as we got a fix on the van.

“Gladwyne,” one of Jackson’s men confirmed.

“Either the postmodern tri-level or the Normandy estate,” I said, scanning the listings within that section.

Both had impressive gardens boasted in their descriptions. A must for any property the Surgeon used as a residence.

“Shit. The tracker stopped moving.”

“Where?” Jackson leaned over Fell’s shoulder crowding her.

“Dude, back off. I’m gay. You poke me with that boner in your pants again, and I’ll cut it off.”

“I can see who the top of the sandwich is.” He glanced between her and Missile, who hadn’t stopped pacing since we arrived at our hotel.

“Leave me out of it. I do men, too,” Missile popped off.

“Oh sweetheart, I definitely don’t plan on leaving you out.” Jackson held a hand over his heart.

Her hand went to her sidearm.

Jackson refocused his smile on Felonious, who saw through his bullshit.

“Fuck off.” Fell pulled up the plans for the estate first. “Here’s an aerial of the gardens. Do you see what you’re looking for?”

I scanned the photos quickly. “No.”

“There’s no photos of the other one, only a bunch of sculptures.”

Sprout perked up, “Danielle, can your uncle get his mom on the phone?”

His wife came in from the other room with said uncle. He wasn’t old enough to be her uncle, being born mere months before Danielle.

“What do you need to know?” Danielle peeked over Fell’s shoulder and whistled. “Is that a Neutra house?”

“That’s my woman, a connoisseur of both fine art and architecture.” Sprout high-fived his wife.

Her uncle shrugged. “I can’t stand that shit. Bad Freudian issues from my mother.”

I kept my thoughts to myself. I remembered the rumors about how his gold-digging interior designer mom fucked

Danielle's grandfather to death. It made for a messed-up family tree, but at least they made it work now that the older generations were gone.

"Well, shit. Looks like we won't need his ma. What do you know about it?" Fell gave her attention to Danielle, pausing briefly to glance at the tits in her face but focusing on the problem at hand.

"It's one of six homes commissioned in the region while he taught at the university. California cedar ceilings and local stone accents."

"What about the garden?" I asked.

"What about it?"

"Water features, wells, holes?" I listed off the must-haves.

"A reflecting pool."

"No well?"

She searched her memories and shook her head.

"What about a basement, any hidden tunnels or shit?"

She kept shaking her head. "It was a signature residence. Pretty similar in style to his West Coast architecture. I would say no tunnels. He's not known for that kind of thing."

"The Normandy." I called it. Just to be on the safe side, I asked Trot to send the local DHMC crews to the modern home. We needed the larger team anyway because there were over thirty-two acres to cover with this monstrosity and all its outbuildings. More than enough to make our team of seven handmaidens and twelve Destroyers overwhelmed.

"What if they aren't there?"

Trot voiced my deepest fear. "Plan C." I could hear Wolf's voice in my ear, begging me not to go in alone. Not to give myself up. But the racing of my heart overruled my pinky promise to him. Besides, I wasn't alone. I had twenty people helping. That's hardly alone, isn't it?

I searched the gardens first.

As I suspected, they sprawled around an aviary and a man-made water feature that doubled as a pool. I crept through the dark searching for the signature dip in the earth, a cluster of bushes hiding a private well, or even a stone structure that would disguise what I was searching for.

“Are you sure about this?” Fell was at my side.

I nodded despite something telling me this was all wrong. Then decided to admit the truth. “I don’t know, Fell. I can’t feel him.” I clutched at my skin-tight black clothes near my heart. “I should feel him.”

“Sweetie. Keep looking. Let the men deal with the house.”

At her comment, I stopped to silently question her.

“I know you want to kill him. I could see it in the way you glared at him.”

“Are we talking about Wolf or —?” I couldn’t say a name. I never could. To me, he was always, “the Surgeon.” A man responsible for so much pain in my life.

“You know who. Your Voldemort.”

Shit. She nailed that descriptor.

She broke into my reverie. “Why are we out here?”

I sucked in my fear. “He kept my mother in an oubliette.” That wasn’t all, but I wasn’t completely willing to let it come out. I was extremely afraid I wouldn’t be able to stop the outpouring of pain and then be useless.

“Like those funky French pits of despair?”

“Good description. Usually, it’s a dry well. Sometimes there is a set of spikes at the bottom, so the captive is impaled as they’re cast in. You drop ‘em in and forget ‘em while they rot.”

“That’s sick.” Her words were an understatement.

My phone buzzed. “Jackson found him. Let’s go.”

I pulled up the message and showed Fell the directions. We wove through the main house to the wine cellar in the basement. Jackson and Nonno had the Surgeon tied to a chair. From the looks of things, they'd already started beating him.

“Motherfucker is wearing diapers. Do you believe that shit? Can't even get the satisfaction of him pissing his pants because ...fucking diapers.” Jackson rubbed his hand. The knuckles were bruised, and a small pressure cut graced his index joint.

“Where is my man?” Nonno tried again.

“Better question, where is everyone else?” Fell looked around.

“Took out two of the goons in the foyer. Sprout and team are trying to locate the rest.” Jackson filled her in.

“And the women?” I asked.

Fell wiggled a finger in the air. “On it. I'll catch Trot on the sweep.”

Nonno ignored us and hit the Surgeon with a practiced fist. “Talk, asshole.”

The Surgeon didn't. Instead, he stared at me. “Forget.” he whispered.

“Oh, that's fucking creepy. My turn.” Jackson rolled a cask closer to the chair and picked up the wine maker's logbook. “Hold his arm over the edge.”

Nonno pulled the man's frail right arm over the barrel. His wrist joint balanced on the edge.

Jackson slammed the book down.

The screams didn't cover the sound of breaking bone.

“Now, the other one.”

Instead of moving the barrel, Nonno spun the wheelchair around.

The Surgeon tried to maintain eye contact with me as he did. “She knows how to forget. He’s forgotten!”

The book came down. He screamed again, this time reduced into a blubbering mess as both arms hung limp at his sides. “Forget. I forgot you, I forgot her, forget.”

“He isn’t making a goddamned bit of sense. What do you want us to do, Tits?”

I was lost in my own thoughts. A tear traced down my cheek, but I barely felt it. Memories of my mother slowly dying in that hole bombarded me. I could vividly remember the rotting stitches and her broken bones. My own body was just as broken. Bruised, humiliated, cut, and shackled. I shivered, remembering the cold most. “Kill him.”

“Not so fast.”

The madam had a gun pointed at Nonno.

She must have slipped past Fell and Trot who were out looking for her.

“He’s a dead man, even if you kill one of us.” Nonno held up his hands.

In contrast, Jackson dropped the book, making a booming echo that drowned out the old man’s blubbering and panting.

“Want your boss?” Jackson’s question was almost manic. He spun the chair so hard, that the Surgeon flew out. His broken wrists did nothing to brace his fall. Instead, the additional pain made him moan loudly as he crashed to the stone floor at her feet.

She was sufficiently distracted that her shot at Nonno went wide, splintering into the racks and spraying red wine and glass on us all.

“Motherfucker, you’re insane!” Nonno dove under the heavy oak table.

She trained the gun on me, recovered from her distraction.

“He’s mine.” I couldn’t hear the words, but I saw them on her lips. Her body language echoed the sentiment as she straddled the broken form below her.

At that moment, Jackson squeezed off two shots. The acrid burn of gunpowder hurt my nostrils and stung my eyes. I couldn’t hear anything but the ringing whoosh that follows close-quarters gunfire.

On the floor, the madam sprawled over the Surgeon’s body. Both were dead. Jackson’s shots landed a bit too true.

“You idiot, you killed them both.” Nonno crawled out from under the table.

It didn’t matter. I walked over to Jackson and held my hand out for his gun. He reluctantly handed it over and braced for some flash of insanity. Instead, I warned, “Cover your ears.”

I shot both bodies in the back of the head, confirming they would not get up and walk away from this murder scene.

Nonno spit out a string of curses. “Are you crazy?”

Jackson began making calls gather the troops and weed out any stragglers.

I left them to it.

My bike was parked on a dirt path that wound through the estate. I fired it up and took off.

She knows how to forget.

The words pestered me, following me through the miles of road northbound. They bombarded my memories and blurred together in one torturous cacophony of taunting horror. The Surgeon’s pain-filled words were nonsensical unless you understood his methods. His logic.

The odd way he coveted things. His obsession with torture and mind control.

I parked my bike in the scrub and skirted the fence line. This time, there was no doubling back to find the game trail. It

stood out in the moonlight. I followed it under the fence to the back of the estate. The garden still looked forlorn and neglected.

It should. It had been over five years since anyone used it. The horse barn and buildings were all new. That's why I didn't recognize it before.

This wasn't where he'd held my mother. My first escape foiled that location. But I remembered. The threats, the eerie joy in the Surgeon's voice as he threatened me with the same death as my mother's.

I traced my steps to the well. A cold wind found a gap in my layers of black. I shivered.

"Wolf?"

My voice was quiet, almost broken.

I listened to the wind, the ghostly whistle of it against the wet stone.

"Meg."

His voice was hoarse. But he was alive. Relief washed through me. I'd found him. My gut told me where he was and led me right to him. It knew where the broken piece was and homed in like a magnet.

I flipped open my phone to call Trot. The light from it blinded me, and I blinked at it before finding her contact listing. "I'm at the equestrian ranch. He's here. Check the maps I left." Then I hung up on the message, not wanting her to pick up or to hear her complain about how I'd taken off alone.

Most of all, I didn't want to waste any more time away from Wolf. I leaned over the lip of the well, trying to see him in the moonlight. I couldn't, but I could smell the wet stone, the rich mold and rotting leaf smell of dirt, and a faint tinge of iron. Blood. "Going to get you out."

"I'm afraid that's not going to happen." I looked over my shoulder. Crete stood there with a gun trained on me.

Wolf's soft curse was barely audible. I gave him a moment of my attention. "I love you."

"Babe, don't do anything stupid." His voice was pitched with pain.

"Don't worry, I won't." My voice was soft, like night.

Darkness kissed with all things evil can be soft, deceptively so. It can wield power like a blade, severing nerves and drawing life blood. Creating torture that spans years and slowly drives the victim insane. It's the absence of horror and only the promise of it. It's quiet, stealthy, subtle— like a woman.

Revenge isn't cold. It is hot, like life. Like love. Like anger. Like a man.

What I felt was not revenge. It was acceptance. Duty. Clarity. I wasn't angry.

"Did she promise you part of the business?"

I'd followed Nonno's logic. There was a new player in town, and it wasn't the Surgeon running things. The puzzle began to make sense.

"Part? Try all. After getting stiffed on that payout, she practically begged me to take over."

"Why hurt Wolf if you had it?" My question came out light, with no malice.

"Can't have loose ends. Besides, he's a liar."

"We're all liars."

"They may do it differently in your bitch club, but you don't lie to a brother."

"No? Did you always tell Nonno the truth? Or Jackson? He needs to know if you're running an escort service in Pennsylvania. It's his state."

"Not when it is *my* country."

Oh, that's where he was going with this. "How would you get rid of Nonno?"

Or the in-name-only president? Well, that one was more easily arranged. Accidents happen. Especially when the poor victim has many enemies.

"I got time."

I shook my head, staring at the wet stones that glistened in the moonlight.

"Everyone thinks they have time. Do you hear that, Wolf? I'm not waiting anymore. When I get you out, we're moving in together."

Crete snorted. "You're not getting out of this one, Tits. It's a shame, I could make a mint on you."

"No one is making money on me."

"Your funeral."

"Yes."

"Now, put your hands where I can see them." Crete stepped closer. I could hear the tall grass break under his boots.

I pushed up slowly. Ignoring his command.

"I'll shoot—"

Stupid man. Don't talk about what you're going to do, Just do it. The echo from Jackson's gun bounced back from the tree line and rang in the circles of the well.

"Tits?"

"I'm just fine, baby." I sat on the well's edge, waiting for Crete to get up so I could shoot him again. But he stayed down. *A shame.* Maybe I was a little angry.

I pulled my knife and walked over, wary but still calm like the earth that someday swallows us all.

His body was already growing cold, but I sliced his throat from ear to ear anyway. Then found his kidney and twisted the blade deep.

I rolled him over. The hole where his heart didn't beat was small. But my aim was true. I felt for any flutter of life. There was none. The farm was deathly quiet.

Not even a cry from a guard, or a warning from a dog. Only empty night and the whistles of wind circling a forgotten well.

The roar of motorcycles killed the silence. Soon there was a commotion and barked orders.

In the chaos, Nonno pulled me aside.

"I owe you."

My bloody hands shook. "How?"

He dipped his head at Crete's corpse. "You took out the competition. Thanks."

God spare me from another ambitious man. I didn't have it in me to stab another asshole tonight, family or not.

Trot stood by me as they sent Jackson down the well to retrieve Wolf. "You good?"

I stared at the blood on my hands. "Got anything to wipe this off with so I can hold Wolf?"

"Got you covered." She walked back to where the bikes were parked and returned carrying a bag of baby wipes.

My expression of disbelief had her answer, "Gets shit off, so must work on blood. They are also a good makeup remover in a pinch. But cleanser is best."

I took them from her and tore through the package, making a pile of the used ones.

By the time my hands were clean, Wolf was being hauled over the edge. Jackson hovered, one hand on the tourniquet tying off a deep wound on my man's leg.

"We gotta take him in. Doc can't fix that."

"How do we explain it?" Sprout asked.

"Fell into a hole. Got skewered by a root or something, I guess. It was dark, and he was drunk. We were lucky we found

his dumb ass.” Jackson walked over to his bike and pulled out a dusty bottle of brandy.

“Did you steal that from the estate?” Fell gaped at him in disbelief.

“Yup. That was a lot of good booze that bitch shot up. Had to liberate this one on principle. Bottom’s up, Wolf.”

“Fuck. Tits?” He called for me, and I was at his side almost immediately.

“Right here, baby. I’ll drink with you.” I kissed his head. He was scraped up, and the wound on his leg looked awful. I tried to ignore it and the way my stomach turned over because he was in pain. I smoothed down his hair that was sticking up. “Right here.”

“Don’t let your sisters shave my head again. I want some hair left, got it?”

I wrapped my pinky around his. “Promise.”

“I ain’t promising shit.” Missile shook her head.

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Chapter Fourteen

A long time ago, before I joined the Destroyers, I was in the Army. While in, I got shot in the leg. Same damn one that caught a rotten wooden spike through it. Jackson's cover story was nearly the truth. The doctors didn't question it. They worked hard to repair the damage and clean the wounds.

But nasty things live in the dirt.

Ask any soldier, and he'll tell you that if it isn't the water trying to kill you, it's the dirt. I'd met a good friend in rehab my first time around. Now he sat at my bedside while they discussed things like "prosthesis" and revision surgery.

"Fixed the shifter to work from a hand lever." Ice rambled on about the modifications the club was making to my bike so I could ride. All of it was overwhelming.

He slapped my chest. "You listening?"

"No."

"Heh. Payback's a bitch. Remember busting my balls at Walter Reed?"

He'd lost a damn promising career as a sniper due to a leg injury. At that time, a bad jump ended things and almost ended him. If it had happened two years ago, instead of ten, he'd be out there yet today, happily picking off all enemies— foreign, but not domestic. Instead, we got a damn fine enforcer. Because I didn't let him give up. I told him about the club back home. About Sprout, his dad, the connection to a family that didn't give a shit about rules and regulations. Someplace not Army he could call home. Now he was here, not letting me give up. Talking me through the worst of it. Being a good brother.

"They find anything else?" I was referring to the safe on the estate where Tits and Jackson offed the Surgeon, aka Luke Barresi. A low-level hood who climbed the ladder all the way to the top circle, but not a soul admitted to it. Nope, they were

just grateful to Nonno for “recovering” more than one safe full of compromising photos. We kept some of the better shit in reserve. Stuff we didn’t have to hand over that might turn useful down the road.

Ice let the surprising shit fall into a friend’s hands. That guy had connections with the Pentagon and FBI. As long as the Destroyers weren’t anywhere near those investigations, we could afford to do our civic duty and expose the naughty little habits of a group of slimeballs sending our friends off to war.

“Some missing girls. The DHMC is tracking down the parents to give them closure. I hear they found one they’d been looking for recently.”

“Jesus.”

“How’s Tits?”

I smiled just thinking about her and her newfound sense of freedom. “Happier. And a pain in the ass. You just missed her.”

“If she’s already riding your ass, you are all set for the next obstacle, dropping a ring on that bitch.”

“She’s not a bitch.”

Ice leaned in and got in my ear like he was going to impart a deep secret. Instead, he whispered. “Married life ain’t all that bad. You should try it.”

I glanced at the black band on his finger. “Yeah?”

He leaned in a bit closer. “Sex. All the fucking time.”

He was so full of shit. As I prepared to razz him about lying, fear struck me. It would creep up like that. Laughing one second, the next paralyzing doubt about the future. My breath caught, and I had trouble getting the next one in.

“Shit. Stay with me, bro.” Ice clamped his hand around mine and talked me through box breathing. Then rambled on about his wife’s therapy and the diverse ways she had learned how to focus on staying in the moment.

“It gets better.”

God, I hoped so. “I don’t know how she does it.”

“Who? Killer? She’s tough.” He called his wife, Killer, cute. The girl was afraid of her own shadow.

“I meant Tits.”

Ice tried to hide a smile. “Heard about the head shots from Jackson. Your girl’s practically a legend.” He gave up trying to hide it and chuckled. Then sighed.

“Women are tougher than men. Face it.”

I gave him a side-eye, waiting for him to follow up with something stupid.

“Your girl was missing what, four years?”

“Five. Tortured. Watched her mom die.”

“Jesus. See? Tougher. You or I, shit, we would have caved month one.”

“Maybe you,” I teased.

“Did Jackson really break an invalid’s arms?” He kept his voice low. Admiration crept into his tone despite that.

“You didn’t think he had it in him?”

“Jackson? Hell no. He always struck me as the guy who doesn’t do his own dirty work. Finding out he does, well...”
Ice tipped his head in begrudging admiration.

“Nonno’s off his ass, at least.”

“Yeah, that was a fucking miracle. Life’s going to get a bit more complicated when he takes over.”

I heard voices in the hall and lifted my head to try to see out the door. Ice went a step further and checked. “Aw fuck, it’s those bitches from the MC. Later, dude.”

“Hey, don’t leave me alone with them.” I called out to his retreating back, but he disappeared faster than you can say, “ghillie suit.”

Sure as shit, Missile led the brigade.

I closed my eyes and waited for the worst.

The buzz of clippers made me peek one eye open. “Don’t.”

“Just a trim. You’re getting scraggly.”

“Touch my hair, and I swear to god I’m gonna— ”

“Oh, hey, Tits.” Quick sounded the alarm so the girls could hide their torture devices.

My girl grabbed the clippers from Missile. “No more M’s in the scalp.”

“But it’s growing out.”

“I mean it. I’m sick of seeing your brand.”

“It ain’t my brand. Your name starts with an M, duh. I can’t help it if Missile also starts with M.”

It was almost worth putting up with Missile’s shit to see my girl freeze in freakout mode like that. But she recovered quickly. “He’s growing it out.”

Long, short, I’d wear it any way Tits wanted. As long as she stayed at my side.

It was the one bright spot that pushed away all the rest of the bad shit.

My position as VP or even a spot as an active member of the Destroyers was in question and at least on hold until I could adapt to my prosthetic. My foot and part of my shin were gone. I was facing at least one more surgery that would decide whether I had a knee left when things were all said and done, and I was sick and tired of staring at hospital walls. I wanted that sex Ice hinted about. The tingles that preceded a panic attack started to work their way back in.

Without thinking, I captured Meghan’s pinky and wrapped mine around it, finding balance through touching her. Maybe she was my focus point? I never panicked if she was around.

Somehow all her certainty and softness leaked out and washed all the fear away. It was when she was gone that my mind began to whisper lies into my brain. “Thanks for rescuing me.”

She gave me a little frown that didn’t last. The love there pushed it into a happy smile. “Always.” The finger around mine tightened, and I knew she was referencing so much more than just her pushy road sisters.

“Doc says four weeks if the stump doesn’t swell.” Missile popped a bright pink bubble as she talked and chewed.

“Your rehab is going faster than expected, you got this,” Quick added.

Even Trot got in on the action.

“Can’t keep a good man down.” She glanced at my crotch.

“Damn it.” I covered my junk with a hand. Can you blame me? Tits had that effect on me.

“Whoo-hoo, Wolf’s got a woody.”

“Out.” Tits pushed Missile, and the other girls followed without much complaint. Trot was last in line.

“I’m just going to shut this and keep the nurses busy for a bit. Hint, hint.” She pretended to look innocent, but her smirk betrayed her.

“I traded insane brothers for a bunch of crazy ass women, didn’t I?” I asked the ceiling, not knowing whether Tits would take offense or not.

“They’re not all crazy, only the good ones.” She kissed my lips and carefully avoided the cast.

“Are you seducing me?”

She hummed in a non-answer. The bed sheet slipped down, and my hospital Johnny crept up. Her lips circled my dick, and I let out a sigh of relief. “Damn, that feels good.”

I stopped her mumbled reply by grabbing a fist full of hair and keeping her in place. “Don’t make me move.”

She let go of me with a little pop. The sound sent tingles through my balls. “That’s right, don’t move.”

Her lips circled my cock once more and worked me from tip to where her hand wrapped around the root. I brushed her hair aside to watch and kept stroking it away just so I could see the way she flushed. “Babe, get on me.”

“No.” She gave me a defiant glance.

“Please?” She stopped and bit her lip as she studied me.

“Are you going to move and hurt yourself?”

If I lied and said no, would she catch me on it? I hedged around the truth. “I’ll try not to.”

She shook her head but climbed out of her jeans and got on top of me again. This time, angling my erection into her slick channel and taking me in slow rocking movements that only allowed the tip to slide in.

“You’re killing me.” The sensations of her pussy and the desperate need building inside to take control drove me to the edge of my promise. “I’m going to move.”

“No, you’re not.” She let more of me slip inside and masterfully kept rocking my world as she played with her clit.

“You’re so beautiful.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only you.” I meant that. Strippers were pretty, hot, or wore the perfect outfit, but Tits? She wore her beauty deep.

She gave me a wild grin and took me in another inch. Then she ground against me, keeping her sexy rhythm moving and taking me higher. Sex was different now. More connected, not as urgent, but still amazing. We fit.

“I love you,” I panted, breathless from fighting the urge to drive into her.

“Love... you...” She was close, the combo of working her finger on her clit and grinding on my dick, getting her there.

“Look at me.”

Her tempo faltered, and she opened her eyes. She was so close.

“You’re mine.” I captured her hips and tried my damndest not to put pressure on the cast but get her seated tight. “Say it.”

“I’m yours. All yours.”

“I’m yours. All yours,” I echoed, holding her eyes as I said it.

The pulsing of her orgasm started faintly but grew in intensity. I let go of her gaze and concentrated on feeling her around me. The sweat on my brow found a path to trickle down into my hairline, and I let go of the fight I was losing. Soon I was pulsing right along with her, coming into her, and riding that floating edge of bliss and mindless floating.

“You didn’t move.”

“I tried.”

“I know.” She leaned over and kissed me. The sweetest kisses were hers just after sex. In all my life, I never found better.

“Ice says we should get married.”

“We need a house more than a piece of paper.”

Hum. That could be arranged. “I know a few guys in the construction business.”

“Sprout? You’re going to make Sprout build our house?”

“He’s not that bad.”

She shook her head. “He’s got contracts booked through next year. We’ll never get it done. What about a prefab?”

That could be arranged, too. “You in a hurry?”

“Yes. Single level, compact, open floor plan, a pool...” She thought about her demands a moment longer. “And a big deck for grilling.”

While she was listing particulars, I added my own. “Bike parking, and a shed. No garage.”

Her nod of agreement was encouraging. “Just us, though. I don’t want wild parties like Danielle has to put up with.”

“Babe, Destroyers. Bikers don’t do quiet parties.”

She sighed. “You’re right. The Handmaidens get crazy, too. Can we elope? Maybe get an RV and ditch them both?”

It was my turn to shake my head. “Package deal. Two bikes, two clubs.” I brushed a lock of hair that stuck to her face, so I could admire her skin.

She groaned and looked at the door. “At least they’re useful.”

“Can honestly say, I’ve never fucked in a hospital before.”

“Me neither.”

I caught her as she lost her shit on my shoulder. Her giggles were contagious. Of all the shit we went through to get here, knowing she was finally free from her demons did it for me. Seeing the joy come out, despite her sadness. That was important. It proved she was moving on, and, best of all, taking me with her.

Ice was right. Quick and the others were right. I had this. Those doubts that crept up on me were a temporary glitch. They were my body’s way of processing. It might take time, but I’d adjust. We’d adjust. Meghan and I were finding a new baseline, one that held promise.

Nothing would stop my wild woman from grabbing onto life and living it the way she was meant to. Free.

If I was right behind her, or at her side, she was still free. Of all the promises I made, not to hurt her, not to leave her, not to fucking die, they weren’t nearly as lasting or as important as the one I gave her when I dropped her off on Margaret Wheade’s bus. I told her that she was free.

Then she sought me out, testing me each time she walked away without any guarantees. Until finally, we couldn't walk away anymore. It took me a long time to figure out that love wasn't a trap. Whatever the future brought, we were going to be free, together.

Four weeks later, the swelling was down, and they'd saved the knee. I had a temporary prosthetic while I waited for the rest of the leg to build up strength and heal.

I was mobile, not fast, but at least useful.

Jackson called me down to the club. I drove in, still not trusting my balance on the bike. It didn't matter what kind of mods Ice slapped on it, I needed to heal fully first. Doctor's orders.

I hobbled in, taking in the line of bikes flanking the covered porch. One bike stood out from the chrome and glossy paint. Tits' beast of a rat bike was parked next to the end. She mounted a blue braid onto her handlebars. That thing was going to get tossed into a fire pit one of these days. But I let her parade it around for now. The noise of a party blasted me when I opened the door.

"Little pig, little pig, let me in!" The big, bad Wolf was back.

My brothers greeted me first, except Jackson, who hung back, orchestrating the madness. Missile almost knocked me over with a hug and a wet smooch on my cheek.

"She smeared lipstick all over me, didn't she?"

"Red is not your color." Tits wiped it off, then got up on tip-toes to greet me properly. "Missed you."

"It's been two hours."

She shrugged and indicated the party. "Welcome back, VP."

Nervously, I checked Jackson's reaction. He smiled and pulled my vest out from behind his back.

“That’s where the fuck it went.” I grabbed it, giving it a second to sink in. The VP patch was right where it should be.

“Blame your girl. She stole it, not me.”

“At your request,” Tits argued.

“Guilty.” Jackson slapped me on the back and led me to the bar. “Time to get drunk VP.”

“You invited the Handmaidens to my swearing-in party?”

“Fuck yeah, they’d just crash it if I didn’t.”

I laughed because he was right. Not getting invited hadn’t stopped them before. “Think Missile hid her clippers in that outfit?” Said number was a tight leather tit-squisher and even tighter leather pants.

“Don’t care as long as her and Fell make out again.”

“Still hungry for that sandwich?”

“Always.” He leaned around me to admire the view.

Tits slid in next to me laying her head on my brand-new patch. I let her listen to my heartbeat and soaked in the life around me, grateful I hadn’t lost her or any of my brothers. I kissed her head, thinking of Margaret. “Love you.”

She looked up and smiled. “Love you, too.”

Jackson whistled to stop the noise for an announcement. “Listen up, assholes and bitches.” The groans and complaints fired back. “Whatever, I got shit to say. Trot, get your ass over here.”

Trot poked a finger at Jackson. “Just to be clear, this is a joint announcement. You ain’t the boss of me.”

“Back at ‘cha. Bitch.”

“As asshole here was saying, we have an announcement.”

“Seeing as Tits is a fully-patched member of the bitches—
”

“And Wolf is a certified idiot *Destroyer*— ”

Geesh, no love lost there. Tits hid her giggles against my chest.

“We can’t exactly recognize them officially as a couple.”

“Oh, shit.” I pushed Tits away so I could stand up without falling on my ass. I made it, and Meghan wrapped around me, giving me added support.

“Got you worried, didn’t I?” Jackson laughed at my expense.

“Shut up, you dick. Let the woman handle this.” Trot pushed between us.

“No property cuts for either of you, but once he’s back on wheels, he can ride with us.” She practically choked on the words.

“And the bitch can ride with us, *no* colors.”

“Ditto,” Trot added.

I looked at Tits to see how she was taking this. A slow grin grew on her face. “My rat bike?”

Jackson made choking noises. “That piece of shit better start.”

“Are you giving me shit about my baby?”

“That thing you call a baby is an abomination,” he fired back.

I settled back onto my chair, knowing they would settle this with minimal bloodshed. Trot took Tits’ place, sneaking a one-armed hug, being careful not to show her soft side. I wrapped an arm over her, pinning her in place. “Thanks.”

“Thank you for bringing her to us. Giving her space to heal. It was what she needed. Now, it feels like I’m losing her.”

Her fear was not without merit. But I knew Tits would always be a Handmaiden in her heart. “You’re not losing her. You’re gaining brothers.”

“Oh god, spare me. The blood, the drunks. Don’t I have enough headaches without having your guys adding to them?”

On cue, Missile took a swing at a Destroyer. I pointed and told Trot, “Tag. You’re it.”

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Want MORE Bikers?

Read on for an excerpt from “The Town Princess”
and discover how Sprout and Danielle met.

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The Town Princess

A Destroyers Short Story

Philadelphia - the law offices of Shenk, Gohram, and Whitney, specifically, the office of Connor Whitney, ESQ, executor of the estate of the late Mayor Elizabeth Ann Laurel-Jenkins.

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[Sprout]

What is it with walnut and law offices? The swanky ones, that is. I'd seen enough plastic and fake paneling in the cheap ass ones over the years to know the difference between pressed particle board and the real shit.

This was definitely the real shit.

To think, I almost threw the second letter away. Ma intercepted it, as it was addressed to both of us. She also knew the hometown lawyer on the return label.

"It's about your father, no doubt."

Indeed. Dad died in '99—motorcycle accident.

Cough—*bullshit*—cough.

An accident was probably better than being shot by deputies and dumped in a ditch somewhere. At least, Ma got enough insurance money to pay for a funeral, and what a hell of a funeral it was. Over three hundred Destroyers rode in from almost every state in the nation. This little podunk town in Central Pennsylvania shook in its proverbial shoes for a fucking week. At eight years old, seeing that kind of turnout for a piece of shit whose two claims to fame were riding a motorcycle and raping the town's richest family's daughter did something to twist my sense of right and wrong.

It's wrong Dad was murdered. It was also wrong I missed the last three years of his life because he was framed for raping a teenager. Lastly, it's just wrong to grow up knowing the whole town is against you. From that point onward, I was known as the half-brother to the newest princess of the town.

Ma knew different. Which was why I was sitting here staring at the real walnut walls. She told me to figure this shit out. Put it to rest once and for all.

"Mr. Nielsen, thank you for waiting. I apologize for the delay." He had his hand out to me, palm up. Friendly sort of lawyer-guy posture. Gray hair, polished smile, tanned in a soft manufactured tone you don't get from sunlight. In other

words, just about everything I wasn't. I took the hand, squeezed it as much as I dared without getting booked for assault. To his credit, he squeezed back and didn't flinch when he gave me his name. "Connor Whitney. I represent estates."

He motioned to a chair near the conference table. I took a seat and waited as a cute assistant delivered a stack of leather-bound folders. Shit, the damn things had more heft than my riding leathers. Another assistant dropped off six more. Double shit.

"What is this? The lawyer Ma contacted wouldn't say."

Connor sat down and smiled at me. Nice veneers. "I'm here to explain and help." His smile grew a bit, and he nodded at me. That's a tactic to get you to nod back. No fucking way was I going to agree to anything in this pit of vipers.

"So, explain."

"A man of action. Good." He picked through the piles, opening at least two binders before selecting one he opened in front of me.

A shit-ton of words. Most of them I couldn't pronounce, let alone understand. My name.

I scanned the page and froze.

That bitch.

Ma figured this was about what Dad got blamed for. "Why is the estate of Mayor Jenkins suing me?" I almost said, "Mayor Bitchkins," but managed to spit out the real name with a grimace.

"Oh, you have that wrong. These folders," he stopped to indicate the stacks, "represent the assets controlled by the revocable trust set up by the late Mrs. Jenkins. She has named you, and the," he scanned the papers, taking a second to clear his throat of a filthy lie, and continued, "riding club you are a member of, as the beneficiaries."

I had to blink. And remember to shut my pie-hole before a fly took up residence.

Mayor Elizabeth Jenkins had made it her life's mission to "clean up" the little borough of Skillettsville, Pennsylvania, and bring it into the greater sprawl of gentrification, which crept like cancer out of Harrisburg every year. My hometown was known for a few notorieties—a river, a battery factory, a Walmart, and the Central Pennsylvania chapter of the Destroyers MC. We were the scourge of the burg. Mayor Elizabeth's nemesis. The reason her daughter fell from grace. And if rumors were true, the parentage of her granddaughter.

There was no way would she give the Destroyers money. "What's the catch?"

Connor Whitney smiled and held up a finger, as if to say, 'you got me there.'

"There are stipulations. I'm glad you asked." He opened two more folders. "First, the assets in trust constitute a small portion of the real estate holdings in and around the Skillettsville area, not the family's separate and substantially greater personal estate holdings. You and your club must provide all upkeep and management as necessary. I would suggest continued employment of the management firm Mrs. Jenkins used before her passing. They are familiar with all the properties, renters, and tax preparation needs.

"Second, there's the protective order."

I groaned. I knew it. She wanted us run out of town on a rail. She died before she could accomplish that but somehow managed to stick a knife in our back on her way out. "Who, or what, do we have to avoid?"

"Oh, no, you have that inverted. You need to protect her granddaughter. Your sister."

I almost opened my mouth to say, 'she ain't my sister' but kept a lid on that shit. "*You and I both know she ain't your father's daughter, but you keep that quiet until we can prove it,*" Ma warned me repeatedly. I settled for saying, "Dad was acquitted for that rape."

The lawyer looked uncomfortable. He scanned the documents. “Mrs. Jenkins did mention that.”

I’m sure she did. I could picture her sour puss and hear her voice. The diatribe on how it was a miscarriage of justice and the how *that man* should have rotted in prison. But thank the fates he’d splattered all over the state highway, so he couldn’t rape and pillage his way through another of the town’s innocents.

“So, the deal is, we manage some businesses, and watch the kid. Is that right?” We managed businesses. A few more couldn’t be that difficult.

“In very vague language, you could likely assume that.”

My lip curled. Lawyers never say things straight. If you ask, ‘Do you know if the judge will accept the plea bargain,’ they say a bunch of shit that isn’t yes, no, or maybe.

“Why don’t you tell me what I should assume?”

Connor closed the folder in front of him and folded his hands, inhaling deeply. “I’m familiar with the rumors, and the criminal case, which makes this highly unusual.” He looked me in the eye. “To be honest, I advised the late Mrs. Jenkins to reconsider her request.” He had some nerve. “Eventually, I understood why she felt this was necessary.”

He shifted in his chair. “Are you aware that the deceased’s granddaughter is not the late Mr. Jenkins only heir?”

Despite my Ma’s warnings and numerous nights at the poker table, my eyebrow went up like a flag. He expected a response. “Uh, no.”

He smiled nervously. Taking some papers from the first folder, he tapped them on the table to collect them neatly. “In the last year of Mr. Jenkin’s life, he fathered another child.”

Wait a minute, “I heard about that. He had a heart attack on his yacht with a mistress. She was knocked up?” Oh, the fucking irony.

Connor opened and closed his mouth. “Yes, the illegitimate child was born posthumously.”

I couldn’t help it. My snort bubbled out, and my shoulders shook at the fancy-ass way of saying the dumb bitch mistress fucked around and found out. My dad wasn’t the only cheating bastard out there. “So, the old guy had a kid... let me guess, a son?” Yeah, that would be some cute little shit-flavored sprinkles on this soap opera sundae.

“You are astute.”

I laughed. It died in my chest. Suddenly, it wasn’t so funny. “This kid, he wants the rest of the money, doesn’t he?” Jenkins, the dad, sold some sort of fancy dot-com company before the bust. The transaction spiked his net worth to six-hundred million dollars. His widow rode that wealth onto the town council and eventually to the mayor’s office. Scuttle was, she could have bought the entire town thirty times over.

Connor lifted his eyebrows briefly in an acknowledgement. “We are reviewing that matter. It should have been settled when the boy’s mother agreed to the trust and child support.”

“What’s the trap?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“How long do we have to protect—” I stopped what I was saying because something washed over me. Biologically, she wasn’t my half-sister, but a part of me was damn mad. No one threatens me or mine. At some infinitesimal fraction of a second in the last few minutes I’d accepted the role of big brother. I couldn’t pinpoint it, but it was there. Something in my heart said she was mine. I cleared my throat to continue. “How long do we protect my half-sister?”

We, the Destroyers MC, an international network of motorcycle brothers who didn’t give a shit who bled or died because they messed with what was ours. Whether little Danielle Elizabeth Jenkins knew it or not, she now had a biker family. Blood or not, she was gonna to be known as ours.

Fuck. Ma was gonna to be pissed.

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